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1 Old English Literature

Beowulf

Sometime between the year 700 and the year 900 the epic poem *Beowulf* was composed. It tells the story of Beowulf, a warrior prince from Geatland in Sweden, who goes to Denmark and kills the monster Grendel that has been attacking the great hall of Heorot, built by Hrothgar, the Danish king. Grendel's mother, a water-monster, takes revenge by carrying off one of the king's noblemen, but Beowulf dives into the underwater lair in which she lives and kills her too. Returning home, in due course Beowulf becomes king of the Geats. The poem then moves forward about fifty years. Beowulf's kingdom is ravaged by a fire-breathing dragon that burns the royal hall. Beowulf, aided by a young warrior, Wiglaf, manages to kill the dragon, but is fatally wounded in the course of the fight. He pronounces Wiglaf his successor. The poem ends with Beowulf's burial and a premonition that the kingdom will be overthrown.

When we read a Shakespeare play, a poem by Wordsworth, a novel by Dickens or most other works of literature, we usually know something about the author, something about the period in which the text was written, and, perhaps most importantly, a good deal about the conventions of the genre that the writer has chosen to employ. It is such knowledge that helps us arrive at conclusions about the meaning and significance of a literary text. In the case of *Beowulf* and other Old English texts, however, we have relatively little information to work from. We know nothing about the author of *Beowulf*, or who transcribed the poem (which exists in just one fire-damaged manuscript copy). Nor do we know the exact date of its composition. There are, too, other problems we face: not only is the text historically remote from us, involving ideas that seem to

bear little resemblance to our own ways of thinking, but it is written in a form of English (sometimes called Anglo-Saxon) that displays little similarity to English today:

Ða com of more under misthleoþum
Grendel gongan. Godes yrre bær.
Mynte se manscaða manna cynnes
sumne besyrwan in sele þam hean.

[Then from the moor under the misty slopes
Grendel came advancing. God's anger he bore.
The evil ravager intended to ensnare one
Of the race of men in that lofty hall.]
(*Beowulf*, ll. 710–23)

Not surprisingly, most readers are initially going to feel at a loss in trying to establish any kind of hold on *Beowulf*, even if they encounter it in a modern translation.

As is often the case with a literary text, however, a good deal can actually be determined from a summary alone. Structurally, *Beowulf* is built around three fights. Each of these involves a battle between those who live in the royal hall and a monster; the monsters, it is clear, are dangerous, unpredictable and incomprehensible forces that threaten the security and well-being of those in power and the way of life they represent. When we have established this much, we have detected a pattern that is specific to the Anglo-Saxon period, but which also echoes down through the whole history of English literature. Time and time again, literary texts deal with an idea, or perhaps just an ideal, of order. There is a sense of a well-run state or a settled social order, and, for the individual, a feeling of existing within a secure framework; this might be the comfort provided by religious faith, the certainty associated with marriage and economic security, or perhaps just the happiness associated with being in love. In *Beowulf*, a sense of security is linked with the presence of the great hall as a place of refuge and shared values; it is a place for feasting and celebrations, providing warmth and protection against whatever might be encountered in the darkness outside. Over and over again, however, literary texts focus on threats to such a feeling of security and confidence. There might be an external threat, such as a monster or a

foreign enemy, or an enemy within, such as the rebellious noblemen in Shakespeare's history plays who challenge the authority of the king. But the threat might be more insidious; for example, in a number of eighteenth-century works, there is a sense of chaos overtaking society, and the collapse of established standards of behaviour. Or there might be, as is the case in nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts, a feeling that the world is moving so fast and changing so much that all steady points of reference have been lost. In short, we can say that the most common pattern in literature is one which sets the desire for order and coherence against an awareness of the inevitability of disorder, confusion and chaos.

This recurrent pattern is, as might be expected, felt and expressed in different ways as time passes, the world changes, and people face fresh problems. In the four or five hundred years before the Norman Conquest of 1066, England was a sparsely populated country that had experienced successive waves of invasion. The invaders included, between the late fourth and seventh centuries, different groups of Germanic peoples whose descendants came to be known as Anglo-Saxons. The history of this period is documented by the historian Bede (673–735), a monk whose Latin work *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*), completed in 731, provides us with much information about the era. Thanks to Bede and a number of other sources, we know a surprising amount about the government, administration and legal system of Anglo-Saxon England. The impression is of sophisticated mechanisms of social organisation, primarily associated with the king. But the monasteries were also important in this period, in particular as centres of learning; the texts in Old English that survive from Anglo-Saxon England were all probably transcribed during the tenth century by monks, who were both establishing and preserving a native literary culture. Government, administration, a legal system and a literary culture: all these things suggest a regulated, well-ordered and peaceful society. But this is only half of the story.

In 55 BC Julius Caesar landed in Ancient Britain. Colonisation and Christianity followed as Britain became part of the Roman empire. In 407, however, the Roman legions were withdrawn to protect Rome. Meanwhile, Picts invaded Roman Britain from the north. The British

king Vortigern, like Hrothgar in *Beowulf*, sent for help, but the Jutes who came soon seized Kent. Other pagan Germanic tribes, the Angles and the Saxons, followed, driving the Celtic inhabitants into Wales, Cornwall and Scotland. The result was that a number of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms emerged, and, almost inevitably, this led to military conflicts and shifts in power. During the sixth century, it is important to note, a process of re-Christianization began, but in 793 a further period of disruption was initiated, with Viking incursions that led, amongst other things, to the sacking of monasteries.

What becomes apparent from this brief summary is that in this period we are dealing with what is essentially a warrior society, a tribal community with people clustering together in forts and settlements, fearing attack. The land is farmed, and there are centres of learning, but the overwhelming fact of life is invasion by outside forces. It should be becoming clear by now that *Beowulf* reflects and expresses the anxieties that would have dominated such a society, but it also offers a sense of something positive. We know from historical evidence that Anglo-Saxon kings such as Alfred (871–99), Athelstan (924–39) and Edgar (959–75) contributed to the forging of one people and one state. This is echoed in the way that Beowulf, as a warrior, stands as a beacon, unselfishly going to the aid of the Danish king and then later, as king, facing the dragon in order to win its treasure for his people. And although he dies without an heir, there is also something impressive in the way that the baton of command is passed on to his successor, Wiglaf. The period before the Norman Conquest used to be referred to as the Dark Ages; the term clearly does less than justice to the achievements of this society, but, if we do accept the description for a moment, we can see how a poem such as *Beowulf*, with its ideas about leadership and loyalty, stands as a source of illumination in the darkness.

What we also need to recognise in our critical thinking about the text, however, is that a poem like *Beowulf*, engaging as it does with contemporary concerns, does not spring from nowhere. *Beowulf* belongs to a tradition of heroic or epic poetry; this tradition can, indirectly, be traced back to Ancient Greece and Rome, and there is something of a parallel tradition in Scandinavian culture. An epic is a long narrative poem (there are 3,182 lines in *Beowulf*) that operates on

a grand scale and deals with the deeds of warriors and heroes. As is the case in *Beowulf*, while focusing on the deeds of one man, epic poems also interlace the main narrative with myths, legends, folk tales and past events; there is a composite effect, the entire culture of a country cohering in the overall experience of the poem. *Beowulf* belongs to the category of oral, as opposed to literary, epic, in that it was composed to be recited; it was only written down much later as the poem that exists today, possibly as late as the year 1000.

In epic poetry there are always threats and dangers that have to be confronted, but even more important is the sense of a hero who embodies the qualities that are necessary in a leader in a hierarchical, masculine, warrior society; the text is concerned with the qualities that constitute his greatness, the poem as a whole amounting to what we might regard as a debate about the nature of the society and its values. Central to those values is the idea of loyalty to one's lord: the lord provides food and protection in return for service. He is the 'giver of rings' and rewards, and the worst of crimes is betrayal. This impression of a larger purpose in *Beowulf* is underlined by the inclusion of decorous speeches and passages of moral reflection, and by the inclusion of quasi-historical stories of feuds and wars that echo and support the main narrative. The fact that *Beowulf* exists within a literary tradition is also apparent in its use of the alliterative metre, which is the most notable feature of Germanic prosody; in *Beowulf*, as in Old English verse generally, there are two or three alliterating stressed syllables in each line, reflecting the pattern of speech and so appropriate for oral performance. The effect is to link the two halves of the lines into rich interweaving patterns of vocabulary and idea. The convention may seem strange to the modern reader, but in its distinctive way it serves, like rhyme, to reinforce the poem's theme of the search for order in a chaotic world.

In the end, however, it is not a simple opposition of the desire for order and the threat of disorder that makes *Beowulf* such an impressive poem. Indeed, if we talk about order versus disorder, the formulation might suggest that literature can convey a static and unchanging ideal of order. But this is never the case. A society is always in a state of transformation. One thing that we know about the period in which *Beowulf* was produced, and which is apparent in

the poem, is that pagan values were in conflict with, and gradually yielding to, Christian values. Values and ideas are constantly changing, but the most interesting works of literature are those produced at times when there is a dramatic shift between one way of thinking about the world and a new way of thinking about the world. The most obvious example of this is found in the works of Shakespeare, who was writing at a time when the medieval world was becoming the modern world; part of Shakespeare's greatness, many would argue, is explicable in terms of how his poems and plays reflect this enormous historical shift. In the case of *Beowulf*, we can sense a conflict between a way of looking at the world that focuses on the heroic warrior and, on the other hand, a Christian perspective that is not entirely at ease with some of the implications of the warrior code.

Even from a non-Christian perspective, there are reservations that might be voiced about the heroic life; for example, joy, youth and life will inevitably give way to sorrow, age and death, leaving past glories behind. And there can seem something slightly absurd about the quest for glory; even the greatest warriors might strike us as vainglorious, and as fighting for no real purpose. But the added level of complication that can be sensed in *Beowulf* is the possibility that there is a Christian critique of heroism implicit in the poem. We may well feel that values in the poem that are remote from modern experience – things such as blood-feuds and the celebration of violence in what professes to be an elite society – combine rather awkwardly with a story that might be regarded as a Christian allegory of salvation. In the same way, we may be struck by a gap between the Christian elements in the poem and the stress on a pagan fate that determines human affairs. It is, however, just such instability and indeterminacy in the poem that makes it an important work of literature, for this is how texts function in the period of their production, expressing conflicting and contradictory impulses in a culture. The kind of complication that characterises the best-known literary texts is a matter of how they not only reflect but are also the embodiment of a society caught up in a process of transformation and alteration, of collapse and formation, and of old and new ideas.

'The Seafarer' and 'The Wanderer'

The validity of this last point should become clearer if we look more closely at the Anglo-Saxon period. At such a historical remove, our natural impulse is to think of a static, perhaps rather primitive society. *Beowulf* might actually add to our misconceptions as, superficially, it conveys an impression of a society that is characterised exclusively by violent fighting. We need to understand, however, that the three monster fights in the poem conform to conventional story-types, rather than being in any way a realistic expression of lived experience. We also need to understand that England at this time was certainly not a primitive society. As we noted above, the Anglo-Saxon period runs from the invasion of Celtic England by Angles, Saxons and Jutes in the first half of the fifth century up till the conquest by William of Normandy in 1066. Around the seventh century, there was a period of conversion to Christianity. Even today, we still recollect saints from this period, such as Aidan, and monastic foundations such as Lindisfarne, Whitby and Ripon. The existence of religious orders, the architecture associated with the monasteries, and the scholarship of these learned communities all provide an idea of the sophistication of the society at this time.

In the reign of King Alfred, who lived from 849 to 899, we encounter a leader who established the English navy, reformed the army, promoted education and saved England from the Vikings. During Alfred's reign and in the years that followed, England also developed a system of national and local government, law courts and mechanisms for tax-collecting, all of which were amongst the most advanced in Europe. It is often pointed out that the *Domesday Book* (1086), a great survey of England commissioned by William I, would have been impossible to produce without the Anglo-Saxons' flair for administration. The *Domesday Book* is one of our sources of information about this period. Another is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a history of England from the Roman invasion to 1154. It is, in fact, a series of chronicles written in Old English, and begun in the ninth century during the reign of Alfred. As with everything else that informs us about the period, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* conveys an impression of a complex society, a society that was constantly changing, adjusting and evolving.

It is not surprising, therefore, that a vigorous vernacular literary culture existed, although we will never know the precise extent of this because so much has been lost or destroyed over the course of time. In addition to *Beowulf* – and there were probably other epic poems – there was a considerable body of lyric poetry. Most of this is anonymous, although we do know the names of two poets, Caedmon and Cynewulf (the former from the seventh, the latter from the early ninth century), both of whom focused on biblical and religious themes. Probably the most accomplished of the lyric poems is 'The Seafarer'. The poem falls into two halves, and features a speaker who relates the hardship and isolation of a life at sea, at the same time lamenting the life on shore he has known and of which he is no longer a part; there is, paradoxically, both nostalgia for the past and a deep love of the sea despite its loneliness:

> Þær ic ne gehyrde   butan hlimman sæ,
> iscaldne wæg.   Hwilum ylfete song
> dyde ic me to gomene,   ganetes hleoþor,
> ond huilpan sweg   fore hleahtor wera;
> mæw singende   fore medodrince.
>
> [There I heard nothing but the roar of the sea,
> the ice-cold wave. Sometimes, the song of the swan
> I had for entertainment, the cry of the gannet
> and the sound of the curlew in place of the laughter of men;
> the seagull singing instead of mead-drinking.]
> ('The Seafarer', ll. 18–22)

In the second half of the poem, however, the speaker moves in a fresh direction, imposing a homiletic gloss upon his recollections. He presents the call to a life at sea as a call to the Christian path of self-denial; life on earth is transient and insignificant in comparison with the idea of heaven.

Just as the tradition of epic poetry informs *Beowulf*, so 'The Seafarer' also draws upon a poetic tradition. Like the other notable Old English poem 'The Wanderer', 'The Seafarer' is an elegy: a complaint in the first-person on the hardships of separation and isolation. In 'The Wanderer' the speaker is an exile seeking a new lord and the protection of a new mead-hall. The poem conveys his sense of despair

and fatigue; like 'The Seafarer', the poem employs sea imagery to convey an idea of exile and loneliness, of a hostile universe where human beings are battered and tossed about aimlessly. In the second part of 'The Wanderer', the poet moves from his personal experience to the general experience of humanity, how people suffer in a world characterised by war and the ravages of time. As in 'The Seafarer', comfort can only be derived from the hope of heaven.

Both poems are elegies dwelling on death, war and loss. By the mid-seventeenth century the term elegy starts to acquire a more precise meaning, as a poem of mourning for an individual or a lament over a specific tragic event. In 'The Seafarer', as in 'The Wanderer', however, there is a more general perception of life as a struggle, though one rooted in the poem's culture: the speaker is bereft of friends, but also lordless and so forced to live alone in exile from the comforts and protection of the mead-hall. As in 'The Wanderer', fate and the elements seem to conspire against the solitary human figure. Like *Beowulf*, 'The Seafarer' conveys a characteristic Anglo-Saxon view of life. There is a sense of melancholy that suffuses the poem, a sense of life as difficult and subject to suffering; and that, however much one displays strength, courage and fortitude, time passes and one grows old. There is, too, a stoical resignation in the poem; the kind of response, in fact, that one might expect to encounter in a hard, masculine culture. But the surprise is the delicacy and skill with which the poem reflects upon these matters. Such a poem can still communicate with us today because of the manner in which it articulates both the pain of existence and the search for comfort.

What 'The Seafarer' offers by the end is the idea of religious consolation. It would, however, be a minor, and forgettable, poem if it just offered a Christian answer. The subtlety of the poem lies in the manner in which it is caught between its awareness, on the one hand, of the pain of life and, on the other, its awareness of the comfort provided by religion. But not just that: there is almost a sense in the poem that religion is in some respects a self-consciously adopted literary and ethical frame that is imposed upon an intransigent reality. As with *Beowulf*, we see again how a substantial work of literature is always the product of a society in the throes of change. Indeed, the way in which 'The Seafarer' falls so clearly into two sections suggests two ways of looking

at the world that do not quite combine together. It is this ambivalence of the poem, how it looks to both the past and the future as the poet moves between an old, pagan, view of life as a perpetual battle and new values associated with Christianity, that gives it its resonance.

Battle Poems and 'The Dream of the Rood'

Wherever we turn in Old English poetry we encounter two impulses: on the one hand there is a sense of a harsh and unforgiving world, and on the other a sense of Christian explanation and consolation. But there is always the impression that the message of religion is being articulated by poets who are conscious of this as a new discourse, even a kind of novelty. There is also the point that our perception of the literature of the Anglo-Saxon period has been affected by the fact that the poems that have survived were transcribed by monks, and therefore endorse the argument for Christianity. This is less true of some poems than of others. There are, for example, battle pieces, commemorative historical poems, such as 'The Battle of Brunanburh', a poem relating how Athelstan defeated the invading forces of the Scots and Vikings. A poem such as this conceives of life as an armed struggle, and, although composed towards the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, clings on to the traditional values of strength and courage. Much the same is true of 'The Battle of Maldon', which deals with a heroic, yet disastrous, attempt to oppose Viking raiders.

By contrast, other Old English poems are overtly Christian. 'The Dream of the Rood' is a dream-vision poem in which the poet encounters a speaking Rood or Cross. The Cross tells us about the Crucifixion, how it was buried, and then resurrected as a Christian symbol. It thus acts as both a witness to the Crucifixion and as a parallel to Christ, who throughout the poem is compared to a heroic warrior.

> Rod wæs ic aræred. Ahof ic ricne Cyning,
> heofona Hlaford; hyldan me ne dorste.
> Þurhdrifan hi me mid deorcan næglum; on me syndon þa dolg gesiene,
> opene inwidhlemmas; ne dorste ic hira nænigum sceððan.
> Bysmeredon hie unc butu ætgædere. Eall ic wæs mid blode bestemed
> begoten of þæs guman sidan siððan he hæfde his gast onsended.

> [I was reared as a cross. I raised up the powerful King,
> the Lord of heaven; I did not dare to bend.
> They pierced me with dark nails; on me are the wounds to be seen,
> the open wounds of malice. I did not dare injure any of them.
> They mocked us both together. I was drenched with blood
> poured out from that man's side after he had sent forth his spirit.]
>
> ('The Dream of the Rood', ll. 44–9)

The poem ends with a religious homily in which the poet speaks of his contrition and hope for heaven. One impulse, after registering the ingenuity of the basic conceit of the text, might be to think that this is an almost formulaic poem of Christian comfort. But what is so powerful is the way in which the speaking Cross conveys a sense of its humiliation and terror as it was chopped down and made into a device for the punishment of Christ as criminal. This is, however, more than compensated for by the pride the Cross now feels in the part it has played in the Christian story. This move from a negative to a positive feeling is echoed in the poet's response at the end of the poem; a life of torment and sin is transformed into a message of hope for the future. But what matters in the poem just as much as this vision of heavenly reward and triumph is the powerful immediacy of the sense of pain and the agony of death.

The sophistication of the conceit in 'The Dream of the Rood', together with the assurance of the poet's craftsmanship, return us again to a fundamental contradiction of the Anglo-Saxon period: that this was a harsh, military society, a society where survival to old age was rare, but also a society in which art and learning were valued, and which had created complex systems of social organisation. In such a culture, however, we are always going to be aware of the fragility of the hold of order over the potential for disaster in life. The sense of a changing and unstable world is evident in the very language out of which Old English literature was created. A language is a culture's most precious possession, for it is the existence of a language that enables a nation to express its own distinctive identity. If a country's language is destroyed or suppressed, something of that nation has been lost forever. Old English is a language that was dominant in England for several hundred years, but it was also a language that was imported, evolved and then, at least in its original form, died.

Old English Language

Old English was spoken and written in various forms for eight centuries, from the fifth to the twelfth century. It derived from several West German dialects that were brought to Britain by invaders. For literary and administrative purposes it always existed alongside Latin. None the less, by the eighth century it was spoken throughout England, albeit existing in four distinguishable main forms. And it never stood still; by the ninth century, for example, there was a considerable Danish impact upon the language. But even if it was an imported and constantly changing language, it was also an extremely powerful and successful language. No other country in Europe at this time could claim such a strong vernacular literary culture. From our modern perspective, however, we cannot help but be aware of the existence of the older Celtic languages that Old English drove out. Old English was, in this sense, the language of the usurper, the invader and the interloper.

And as we look at Old English in a longer time scale, we become more and more aware of a curious combination of strength and vulnerability in it as a language. It displaced the Celtic languages, but with the Norman Conquest the strongest vernacular written culture in Europe would be overwhelmed and absorbed by another language, or, to be more precise, by two languages. After the Conquest, English became subordinated to Latin as the language of learning and religion, while Norman French became the language of the court and government. Old English continued to be used in some monastic centres through to the twelfth century, but, existing in isolation, a standard literary form of the language could not be sustained (Old English, however, it should be noted, still underlies much of the everyday vocabulary of modern English, for example in words such as 'brēad' for bread). After 1066, therefore, we enter a rather strange period of hiatus in the history of English literature; for almost two hundred years there is very little in the way of a vernacular literature. When English texts begin to appear again, there is, for one thing, a shift from alliterative measure to rhymed metrical verse. From the point of view of the modern reader, however, the more significant development is that the new post-Conquest English texts are written

in a form of English that, unlike the Germanic-influenced texts of the Old English period, clearly has some continuity with the English we use today. In a word, Old English is itself replaced by Middle English.

When we look at Old English literature in this broader time scale, we can see a degree of vulnerability in the language. Its strength and success during the period of its ascendancy cannot be denied, but there is always something that pulls in the opposite direction. In literary texts that deal repeatedly with wars, violence and incursions there is perhaps an awareness that it is only wars, violence and incursions that have brought Old English as a language into existence in the first place. In addition, the various dialects of Old English emphasise how the country remained divided. After the Norman Conquest, by contrast, there is a growing recognition of the English language, albeit a language that has evolved and changed considerably (with Old English, French and Latin words integrated into it), as the native tongue that can be asserted against the Norman French of the new invader. The sense, however faint, of Old English as the language that has displaced the older Celtic languages contributes to the dominant elegiac mood in Anglo-Saxon literature: that life is transient, that time passes, and that all earthly things, including perhaps language itself, are insubstantial and subject to change.

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