III

ANGLO-SAXON MORALITY

Christian morality, as we have seen, is developed from the doctrine of good and evil which was dogma by the time of the nominal conversion of the English. But an examination of Anglo-Saxon morality, as expressed in that literature not overtly Christian, reveals that the English code of behaviour was shaped as much by the Germanic inheritance of the folk as by Christian ethical thought.

This should come as no surprise, yet the critical view of Anglo-Saxon literature has too often been based upon an implicit assumption that the Anglo-Saxons were somehow incapable of reaching moral conclusions without the assistance of Christianity. Keiser has cautioned against this, pointing out that "In spite of assertions to the contrary, there can be no doubt that many heathen peoples have a fairly clear conception of good and evil in their general aspects".[1] However, as he then observes, the difference between Christian and heathen morality is that the former considers every offence against the moral code to be an offence against God. As this chapter will show, much Anglo-Saxon morality is based upon social considerations, with no reference to God at all. This is the consequence of the fact that, like most societies, the Anglo-Saxons evolved a moral code from the need to maintain order. Offences against the social

1. A. Keiser, The Vocabulary of Old English Poetry, p. 198.

order were serious, and because they were conducive to the anarchy inimical to society, were regarded as evil.

Despite this fact, there has been a tendency to dismiss all native Anglo-Saxon social life as somehow crude, uninformed, or brutal. This view is expressed by several critics, who use it as a platform for a Christian reading of Beowulf. Thus, Betty Cox argues that the "cultivation" and "sophisticated behaviour" in Beowulf "delineates this poem from Northern folklore"[1]; Geoffrey Hughes suggests a contrast between "the loyal, stable, God-fearing kingdom of the Geats and the unstable, incipiently treacherous quasi-heathen kindom of the Scyldings."[2] Klaeber believes that the tone of the poem is "predominantly Christian", and that "the sentiment has been softened and purified".[3]

Similarly, Adelaide Hardy observes a difference between the traditional blood-revenge demanded by the Germanic code and the behaviour of the characters in Beowulf, which she imputes to Christian "restraint and forbearance"[4]; Kaske argues that the subject of Beowulf is an exemplification of the Christian virtues of sapientia and fortitudo.[5] For both critics, these virtues (one can call Ms Hardy's "restraint" temperantia) positively identify the poem as Christian. However, even the most casual reading of comparative ethics reveals that the Platonic cardinal

1. Betty Cox, Cruces of Beowulf, p. 107.
2. Geoffrey Hughes, "Beowulf, Unferth and Hrunting", p. 390.
3. Beowulf, Intro., p. xlix.
4. "Historical Perspective and the Beowulf-Poet".
5. "Sapientia et Fortitudo" But cf. Robert Kindrick, "Germanic Sapientia and the Heroic Ethos of Beowulf".

virtues, which the Christians adopted via the Stoics, Ambrose and Jerome$_1$ appear independently throughout the world. All four Platonic cardinal virtues are, in fact, expressions of the morality upon which society depends for order. It should not be surprising that the Germanic tribes evolved a set of virtues which paralleled the Platonic system, and the existence of restraint, wisdom, courage and justice in the Anglo-Saxon ethical system does not point unerringly to Christian influence at all. This is the view of Malone on the morality of Beowulf:

> "The hero is a virtuous pagan.... His virtues can be explained quite naturally as growing out of the heroic ideals of conduct traditional among the English as among the other Germanic peoples"[2]

The indigenous morality of the English is masked in most of the literature of the period, for this literature is permeated with Christian moral sentiment. But very importantly, the Christian practice of relating all evil to moral turpitude, to the Augustinian doctrine of sin, is clearly spelled out in Christian literature. Therefore, we can examine that literature which does not specifically relate evil to sin or Satan in the confident expectation that such literature does not represent a specifically Christian morality. Such literature as the maxims, the charms and the riddles, as well as Beowulf itself, yields considerable information on the value-system of the pre-Christian English.

Moral statements are closely connected to both the key institutions of Anglo-Saxon life, kinship and the comitatus. As

1. See J.E. Cross, "Oswald and Byrhtnoth".
2. Kemp Malone, "Beowulf", p. 162.

well, the events of a normal life - sexual relationships, warfare, old age, death - attract moralising comments without any overt reference to Christian sentiment.

Kinship is vitally important to the folk, not only because it forms the basis for law, but because the clan is the identifying organisation for an individual. That is, Beowulf is not only a Geat, he is the son of Ecgtheow, of the Waegmundings. Father and clan "place" this warrior in the minds of those to whom he is introduced, so that the reputation of the individual is enhanced by the collective fame of his forebears and tribal contemporaries. Throughout Beowulf, the characters are given additional identity as part of a bloodline. Thus, Hrothgar is traced back to the mythical founder of the nation, and his own stature as king is enhanced by the mana of the names of the mighty men from whom he is sprung.

As Anne Marie Malefijt has pointed out, lineage is particularly important in societies in which the general belief is that man has been born of the gods:

> The first human offspring of the gods are the sacred ancestors, founders of the clan, sib, or lineage. Such beliefs not only influence man's view of his own person, but, more important, they validate and sanctify kinship among members of the group. Consequently, these views are most often found in small, homogeneous, kinship-based societies. However tenuous the claim of blood relationship may actually be, a postulated common descent from common gods and ancestors acts as a powerful impetus toward group integration, the more so because rituals are communal, directed to the common ancestral supernaturals.[1]

1.   Religion and Culture, p. 165.

Thus, the notion of kinship has a dimension which is metaphysical, as well as practical.

If kinship has this identifying, ritual function, it also has the legal function of regulating behaviour. It carries an obligation to revenge injury to a blood-relative, the commission of which revenge is positively good, the omission evil. Thus, in Beowulf, the lament of the father of the hanged felon (2444ff.) is coloured by the previous description of the kin-slaying which must be unavenged ("feohleas", 2441). For both Hrethel and the anonymous father, the death of the son is made more poignant by the evil circumstances which make revenge impossible.

But kinship is not as important to Anglo-Saxon thought as it might have been had history been different. In an illuminating study, Loyn has shown that kinship was arrested as the primary social bond in England by the rapid emergence of the centralised authority of the kings.[1] The institution of the comitatus transcends kinship, since it is seen by the law as the primary group. Certainly, Anglo-Saxon literature is far less concerned with the dilemmas of revenge than, say, Norwegian or Icelandic literature, in which kinship is enormously important. But, at the same time, it is clear that kinship was viewed in a moral sense, in that blood-relationship produced moral obligations which it was evil to deny.

1. H.R. Loyn, "Kinship in Anglo-Saxon England". This is also the view of J. Morris in The Age of Arthur, pp. 484ff.

The comitatus functioned across clan boundaries in Anglo-Saxon law because the primary duty was to the lord. Thus blood-duty is superseded by the moral duty to obey the king. The tensions between the two duties are clearly displayed in Beowulf in the section in which Beowulf forecasts to Hygelac the outcome of the Ingeld-Hrothgar feud (2047ff.). Here, the warrior who taunts Ingeld by referring to the death of Froda breaches his obligation to abide by his lord's decision by his provocative speech; yet his morality in terms of the blood-feud is faultless.

The development of the comitatus system was accompanied by a corresponding development in the strength of the moral sentiments attached to the bond between man and lord. In secular verse and in law, the morality of this bond is spelled out unequivocally. Fidelity to the spirit of the comitatus was morally good, and transcended the bonds of kinship; faithlessness was probably the most evil thing of which the Anglo-Saxon retainer was capable.

In Beowulf the prime example of the evil attendant upon breaches of the lord-retainer bond is Heremod. He is the epitome of the evil king, whose failure to follow the moral obligation to be munificent is singled out for criticism. This breach of faith reflects the importance of the hringþege ritual to the Anglo-Saxons; Heremod's tight-fistedness is the opposite to the generosity of the ideal king.[1] The hringþege ceremony has

1. See L.L. Schucking, "The Ideal of Kingship in Beowulf", and J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, Early Germanic Kingship.

obvious ritual significance, and the worth of the goods distributed by the lord is enhanced by the ritual.[1] The goods are in a sense symbolic; they represent the pledge of reciprocity made by the lord on the acceptance of a man into the gedryht. The king pledged roof, food and protection to the warrior in return for service.

Thus Heremod's fault is not mere stinginess, but a breach of faith which negates the comitatus relationship. The tenor of the comments upon his behaviour is, I believe, the factor which has led critics to regard this conduct in terms of the Christian sin of pride. Klaeber comments that "our author has infused into the Heremod story a strong spirit of Christian moralisation"[2], but the morality here is by no means exclusively Christian: kingly munificence is not the sole prerogative of the Christian faith. Thus Klaeber's approach, based upon his general impression of a Christian morality and reinforced by such remarks as his translation of "hine fyren onwod" (915b) as "sin entered Heremod's heart"[3], is quite misleading.

Similarly, Blake translates lines 902ff. as "He was seduced (from God and consequently) dispatched into the power of

1. But cf. Rosemary Woolf, "The Ideal of Men Dying with Their Lord", who maintains that often the goods distributed included such extremely valuable items as tracts of land. This article also includes a discussion of the behaviour of the thegns in the Cynewulf-Cyneheard episode of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry for 755a.d., in which "The heroic values are also clear: to a thegn death is preferable to ignobly entering the service of the murderer of his lord." (p. 70)
2. Beowulf, p. 164, note to 901ff.
3. Ibid., p. 166.

devils, among the giants. He was racked by painful surgings of fire forever".[1]

Both Blake and Klaeber suggest that pride was the specific sin of Heremod. But this is not clear from the poem at all. Heremod is guilty of a breach of custom, "nallas beagas geaf / Denum æfter dome" (1719b-1720a), but the reason for this breach is not made clear, beyond a general comment that he became bloodthirsty and savage in lines 1709ff.

The function of the Heremod story is clearly to warn Beowulf of his obligations, and to provide a yardstick whereby both Hrothgar and Beowulf are measured in terms of kingly behaviour. With the terrible example of Heremod before us, we are led to conclude that both characters are good kings, by Germanic standards. It is this standard which we must apply, rather than a Christian moral judgement.[2]

Gnomic poetry is also very clear on the subject of the lord-retainer bond and the treasure ceremonies pertaining to it. Maxims I alludes to the various aspects of the bond, using the

1. N.F. Blake, "The Heremod Digressions in Beowulf", p. 285.
2. The view that Beowulf is an ideal king is specifically rejected by Margaret Goldsmith, who regards it as one of the "false assumptions" made of the poem. See "The Christian Theme of Beowulf", pp. 81ff.

method of image association which typefies this poetry.[1] Thus,

the king "anwealdes georn " (58) is the spark for the discussion

of land tenure ("leof se þe mare beodeþ"(59)and the reference to

his eagerness for power (58) leads to the battle scenes of the

next lines (60-63) in which it is the duty of the infantry to

stand firm, "fæste feþa stondan " (63). Lines 63b-70 seem to

portray the scene in the king's hall after the successful battle;

after a brief piece of moralising on the conduct of women in

public (63b-65), the poet describes the various aspects of the

hringþege ceremony. In line 66, the coward, "sceomiande man",

sits in the shadows, whilst the hero has his place in the light.

The treasure stands ready for distribution; he on the gifstol

(here, "heahsetle", 69) is ready to distribute it; the

prospective recipients are "gifer" (eager? greedy?) to receive.

The general tenor of these verses is one of approbation: this is

the way it should be, this is admirable, this is correct.

The opening line of Maxims II reminds us that " Cyning

sceal rice healdan", then elaboration of this rather prosaic

observation is given in lines 28b-29a: "Cyning sceal on healle /

1. " The poems are not simply lists but mnemonic arrangements in
    sequences built up by multiple association of ideas, either
    through meaning or sound. " R. MacGregor Dawson, " The
    Structure of the Old English Gnomic Poems", p. 15. Lynn L.
    Remly, in "The Anglo-Saxon Gnomes as Sacred Poetry", shows
    that that the Maxims are a blend of folk and Christian
    wisdom. "The gnomic utterances spring, first of all, out of
    an ancient and universal experience which conditions their
    form as well as content. With the...growth of civilization,
    the gnomes change accordingly, turning their attention first
    to the re-creation of a primary experience, then to
    moralizing commentary of facets of human society, and
    finally to rational consideration of the demands of a
    personal God." (p. 158)

beagas dælan ". The role of the warriors in the ascent of the aspiring ruler is likewise expressed: it is the duty of good companions to urge the nobleman to good deeds: "Geongne æþeling sceolan   gode gesiþas   /byldan to beaduwe and to beahgife " (14-15). The good deeds are, as we can see, acts of courage and generosity; the two being inseparable in the poet's mind.

The Wanderer gives further evidence of the importance of the hringþege ceremony to the Anglo-Saxon. One of the principal components of the lament of the exile in the poem is t' set of reminiscences which the speaker has of the affectionate relationship with his lord; he dreams that he

                        his mondryhten
            clyppe ond cysse, ond on cneo lecge
            honda ond heafod, swa he hwilum ær
            in geardagum   giefstolas breac. (41b-44)

In lines 19-35 he describes his search for the lost joys of the hall, the love of his lord, and the protection of his "goldwine " (22); for evil days have come upon him, and "Wyn eal gedreas " (36).

Thus, for the Anglo-Saxons, the relationship between king and follower was vitally important to society, as well as to the individual. Any breach of that relationship was an evil, since it brought misery and insecurity to those concerned, or

disgrace to those who wittingly breached that bond.[1]

The state of mind of the Wanderer leads us to one of the most profound evils which could befall an Anglo-Saxon - exile: in my view, it is his position as an exile which explained Grendel's attacks on Heorot to an Anglo-Saxon audience rather than any suggestion of <u>demonic</u> envy or rage.[2]

The state of exile or outlawry, as an examination of the laws and the literature of the period shows very plainly, was a truly evil condition for anyone to be in. Not only was every hand turned against the outlaw, so that he lived in fear of his life in the literal sense, but all the institutions which were vital to his happiness were denied him. He was cut off from the

1. Thus it is that in <u>Juliana</u>, the miserable state of the devils is accentuated by the collapse of the relationship in Hell; the men who drown with Eleusius will suffer this along with the other pangs of Hell:

   Ne þorftan þa þegnas   in þam þystran ham
   seo geneatscolu   in þam neolan scræfe
   to þam frumgare   feohgestealda
   witedra wenan,   þæt he in winsele
   ofer beorsetle   beagas þegon
   æpplede gold.   (683 - 688a)

2. Betty Cox has considered the envy motive as well, but argues that it "must not be eagerly snatched upon as a possible means of humanizing Grendel and thus render him less Satanic, for the Middle Ages...hated envy precisely BECAUSE [sic] it was a devilish characteristic." <u>Cruces of Beowulf</u>, pp. 92.93.
   Leaving aside the propriety of treating <u>Beowulf</u> as the product of the Middle Ages, Grendel's envy of the Danes is not Satanic unless we also are prepared to argue that Deor is prompted by demons to envy his successor, a position manifestly absurd. Moreover, envy is not confined to Satan at all: it is a human characteristic, one of the Seven Deadly Sins, which Satan sets in the hearts of men. Thus an envious man may be spiritually corrupt, but he is not Satan; nor, on the other hand, is he an object of sympathy, for his envy explains, but does not condone, his actions.

ceremonies of gift-giving, which, as we have seen, were an integral part of his life. Moreover, his daily existence was miserable: he was exposed to all the perils of a harsh climate and a still untamed land, in which bears and wolves were no figments of the poetic imagination, but real menaces to his life. He became a non-entity, forced to leave behind him everything — king, kin, family — which gave him identity.

These sentiments are no exaggeration: as I have shown in an earlier study, the position of the exile, most particularly the exile from the sort of tightly-knit society which Germanic society represented at this period, produced emotional, physical, and psychological stress upon the individual which must have been intolerable.[1] The Anglo-Saxon exile would doubtless have thought that the Romantic celebration of isolation was the plain symptom of gross insanity.

The importance of exile in Anglo-Saxon thought has been seriously underestimated in discussions of Beowulf. Typical of the dismissal of the plight of the Grendel kin as outlaws (for the Anglo-Saxon poets use the term "wrǣcca" fairly indiscriminately) are the comments of Emerson:

1.   A Fugitive and a Vagabond. For critical evaluations of the exile in Anglo-Saxon literature, see J.F. Baird, "Grendel the Exile", Stanley Greenfield, "The Formulaic Expression of the Theme of the Exile in Anglo-Saxon Poetry", and Frank Bessai, "Comitatus and Exile in Old English Poetry". The exile or outlaw was regarded as a "non-person", since he had lost all the relationships by which people were identified, and outlaws were fair game as far as the law was concerned.

> That we should be told that this man-eating monster was
> inspired to assail the Danes by envy of their happiness
> rather than by hunger for human flesh seems
> ridiculously insufficient.[1]

On the other hand, Winfred Lehmann argues that the conception of

the outlaw is beyond the imagination or experience of the <u>Beowulf</u>

poet:

> Though modified by Irish and Oriental conceptions of
> monsters, Grendel may be the best known Germanic
> outlaw.....the position of a Germanic outlaw is so
> remote from the <u>Beowulf</u> author's Christian conception
> that he must be refashioned as a monster, the <u>wearh</u>
> Grendel; his mother, the <u>wyrgen</u>, in contrast to the
> <u>sekr</u> of the family sagas, belongs not to the society of
> Heorot, but to a totally different race.[2]

In my specific discussion of Grendel, I will show that in fact

Grendel is not, primarily, satisfying his hideous appetites in

raiding Heorot; as for the arguments of Lehmann, I believe that

there is ample evidence that the outlaw was a very familiar

figure to the Anglo-Saxon people, even at a relatively late

date.[3] Whilst it is true that there are no Grettir figures in

the English literature, Anglo-Saxon laws contain numerous

provisions for the treatment of outlaws, as well as for the

process of outlawry.

A reading of Anglo-Saxon law reveals that the general

position of any solitary man in England was precarious; the

impression one gets is of the suspicion with which tightly-knit

1. "Grendel's Motives in Attacking Heorot", p. 115.
2. "Germanic Legal Terminology",pp. 229-231.
3. A view confirmed by Mary R. Gerstein in "Germanic <u>Warg</u>: the
   Outlaw as Werwolf": "In fact, far from being remote, the
   idea of being cast out as a hideous beast, the most terrible
   punishment known to [Germanic] society, is still current and
   immediate enough to provide an essential thematic link
   between Christian theology and pagan ideology..." (p. 145).

communities viewed all outsiders, a suspicion which meant that all strangers were treated as potentially hostile. Two laws particularly illustrate this point - Wihtred 28 and Ine 20. The first of these provides that foreigners (i.e. any stranger to a district) must stay on the road ("wege"), unless they signal their intentions by blowing a horn. If they fail to do so, they will be treated as thieves, "oþþe to sleanne oþþe to alysenne".[1]

Ine 20 is almost identical, adding only the phrase "geond wudu gonge" after "wege".[2] Similar sentiments probably lie be ind the caution in Ine 25 to chapmen to do all business before witnesses in foreign parts of England.[3]

The laws for harbouring fugitives were most severe. Ine 30 provides that a man found guilty of doing so shall pay a fine equivalent to his own wergeld ; Ine 36 rules that a man who has had a thief in his custody shall pay a fine of his wergeld should the thief escape.[5] Alfred 4 decrees the death penalty for those who harbour outlaws.[6]

IV Aethelstan 3 is a long explication of the processes of exile, directed against those who are so rich or powerful that they cannot be restrained from committing crime or giving sanctuary to outlaws (a law, therefore, with obvious applications

1. Gesetze Angelsachsen, p. 14.
2. Ibid., p. 98.
3. Ibid., p. 100 cf. Alfred 3 (G.A. p. 68) which implies that traders may be mistaken for a band of marauders.
4. Ibid., p. 102.
5. Ibid., p. 104.
6. Ibid., p. 50. This also decrees the forfeiture of all property to the crown.

as a political tool) they and their entire household shall be exiled from their native district, never to return. If they are caught in that region, they shall be treated "as a thief caught in the act" ("sit mamquam in manus habens fur inventus") - that is, liable for instant execution without wergeld. The sub-capitals of this law also forbid others to harbour these exiles.[1]

Thus these laws (which do not represent all the pronouncements on outlaws) show that the position of such men in Anglo-Saxon times was very invidious. The outlaw, whether escaped convict or habitual thief, political exile or murderer, would have found no hand willing to help him, for fear of the legal consequences. He would have been forced to remove himself to the forests or moors to avoid the possibility of capture and execution, there perhaps to link up with others in the bands of marauders mentioned in several laws. And, since there is evidence of a deep-seated suspicion of all strangers in these times, even innocent travellers could find themselves suffering summary execution on suspicion.

We should also bear in mind that the jolly life of Sherwood Forest is a literary production, rather than a reality.

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1. Ibid., p. 171. The second capital of this law makes it plain that it is directed against political enemies, those who "iuramenta et uadia, que regi et sapientibus suis data fuerunt, superinfracta sunt..."(loc. cit.).

We cannot doubt that conditions of life for the outlaw were

miserable in the extreme for most of the year, and that the wolf

and the bear were very much alive in early England.

Thus I would argue that the figure of Grendel as

exile/outlaw in Beowulf was perfectly comprehensible to the

Anglo-Saxon audience, and that his anger and envy are naturally

conceived responses to his deprivation and the Danes' happiness.

Living in the cold wilderness, a forsaken place of strange

beasts, Grendel is set squarely against the light, warmth and

camaraderie of Heorot:[1]

> Grendel's essential purpose, then, must be what he in
> fact accomplishes: he empties the hall. He breaks
> down the doors of the little enclosed world, puts out
> the light, lets in the cold, and, himself the
> embodiment of chaos, preside: in darkness over Heorot,
> the construct of order.[2]

So bitter was the woe which exile brought upon the Anglo-Saxon

that the state of exile was regarded as one of the evils

principally lamented by Satan in Hell. As Betty Cox points out,

the Old English Satan

> has three prominent characteristics which have
> absolutely no Biblical basis: they are his envy of the

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1. See Herbert Wright, in "Good and Evil...in Beowulf" for an analysis of these contrasts.
2. J. Halvorsen, "The World of Beowulf", op. cit., p. 602. Irving (Reading of Beowulf) does not elaborate the plight of the exile, but comments: "he is the rebellious exile...[who] refuses to be brought within the framework of social order by force of arms or rule of law." (p. 93).

creative powers of God, lament of his joyless and
unhappy state, and his envy of man for his place in the
favour of God.[1]

"The joyless and unhappy state" of Satan is expressed, not only
in terms of the pains of Hell, but in the fact that he is an
outcast from the Anglo-Saxon model of the society of God. This
is the case in <u>Christ and Satan</u>, 11.176ff., where the fiend
contrasts his former state, with the "sciran driht", to his
miserable existence in darkness. It is the "ecan dreamas" of
communication with the Lord which most torments him. This lament
concludes with the formulaic complaint that he is now doomed to
wander on the "paths of exile", "sorhcearig". The
inappropriateness of the formula when applied to a captive in
Hell does not concern the poet.

The motif of the devil on the path of exile ("wræclasta ")
also occurs at line 119ff.:

Forþon ic sceal hean ond earm   hweorfan þy widor,
wadan wræclastas,   wuldre benemed,
duguþum bedeled,   nænigne dream agan
uppe mid ænglum....   (119 - 122a)

1.   <u>Cruces of Beowulf</u>, p. 83. Ms Cox argues that Grendel and
     Satan were therefore indissolubly linked in the mind of the
     Anglo-Saxon audience. But the last two characteristics are
     perfectly comprehensible in non-Christian terms as the
     normal sentiments of the outlaw, the first of these from the
     exile motif, the second from the fact that the outlaw loses
     his place in the <u>gedryht</u>. I am not entirely convinced that
     Satan clearly envies God's "creative powers" from Ms Cox's
     examples. Therefore I would argue that the OE Satan
     acquires these characteristics from the OE outlaw figure, -
     e.g. Grendel - rather than vice - versa (as suggested in the
     comment (p. 93) that the latter is "theologically
     conceived").

Throughout vernacular poetry, the Anglo-Saxons used the theme of exile as an expression of profound evil in the moral sense. <u>Guthlac</u> is based on the voluntary exile of the saint, which throws him into spiritual danger[1] and on the conflict with the spirits of the fens who are continually referred to as exiles of the most miserable kind. The saint himself taunts the devils with their outcast status on a number of occasions:

> "Sindon ge wærlogan,   swa ge in wræcsiþe
> longe lifdon,   lege bisencte,
> swearte beswicene,   swegle benumene,
> dreame bidroren,   deaþe bifolene,
> firenum bifongne,   feores orwenan,
> þæt ge blindnesse   bote fundon."
>
> (623 - 628)[2]

Exile also appears as a part of the woes of the speaker in <u>The Seafarer</u> (12b-17); <u>Deor</u> opens with a reference to the woes of exile suffered by Weland; the <u>scop</u> in <u>Widsith</u> compares his wanderings to the state of exile indirectly in lines 51b-53. <u>The Wife's Lament</u> begins with an elaborate statement of the psychological stress of exile:

> Ic þis giedd wrece   bi me ful geomorre,
> minre sylfre siþ.   Ic þæt secgan mæg,
> hwæt ic yrmþa gebad,   siþþan ic up weox
> niwes oþþe ealdes,   no ma þonne nu.
> A ic wite wonn   minra wræcsiþa ...
> ...ic me feran gewat   folgaþ secan,
> wineleas wræcca,   for minre weaþearfe.
>
> (1 - 10)

1.   Cf. lines 81-88a, which point out that Satan torments the "anbuendra" (88a). The exiled spirits themselves warn Guthlac that physical discomforts such as hunger and thirst add to the miseries of the solitary life. (11.274ff.)
2.   Cf. lines 296ff.; 505ff.; the poet adds comments on the exiles' woes in lines 200-241 and, as a consequence of their second exile at the hands of Guthlac, lines 214-232.

loyalty to the chief. The warrior's gift was his service to the lord and the folk so that as Malone remarks, "Beowulf would not have been a hero if he had not had a people to die for".[1]

Nevertheless, some of the poetry deals with the evil attendant upon war in terms of the social consequences of battles won or lost, the "hearmdagas" (Beo. 3153) which battle brings.

The prospect of captivity – a form of exile – was one of these evils. In Beowulf, the gloomy prognostications after Beowulf's death contain allusions to the evil state of the prisoner; Wiglaf prophesies:

> "(mægþ) sceal geomormod,   golde bereafod
> oft nalles æne   elland tredan"
> > (3018 -3019)

The price of Germanic valour is often borne by the women. Thus in Beowulf the figure of the sorrowing Hildeburh is an emblem of all women who suffer the loss of sons or husbands: her condition of wretchedness foreshadows the grief likely to come to Wealtheow in the subsequent struggle for the Danish kingdom. What is evident in the discussion of the conflict of Finn with Hengest is that Hildeburh is treated as the innocent victim:

> Ne huru Hildeburh   herian þorfte
> Eotena treowe;   unsynnum wearþ
> beloren leofum   æt þam lindplegan
> bearnum ond broþrum...
> > (1071 – 1074a)

In much the same way, Wealtheow is destined to grieve, when the feud between Hrothgar and Ingeld comes to fruition.

1.   "Beowulf", p. 172.

If war enables the warrior to display his heroism, it also brings out the cowardice of false retainers. Cowardice is, for the Anglo-Saxons, one of the worst moral blemishes, since it is a betrayal of the trust placed in a retainer by his lord. Two famous examples of cowardice dealt with in vernacular verse are the flight of Byrhtnoth's retainers, Godric, Godwine and Godwig at the battle of Maldon, and the similar behaviour of Beowulf's retainers in the dragon fight.

The cowardice of the three brothers at Maldon is particularly evil. Not only do they betray their duty to Byrhtnoth, but when they go they take with them a number of sorely-needed warriors. The account of the flight of Godric (187ff.) is larded with editorial comments which stress the abject treachery of his behaviour. He forgets the gifts of horses he has received, he takes Byrhtnoth's own horse and gallops to the woods to save his skin. His brothers follow him, giving no thought to their moral duty to fight. The poet comments that Offa had once warned against entirely trusting those who boasted of their courage.

To add to the calamity, a number of the Essex fyrd mistake the fleeing eorl for the king (since Godric is on the king's former horse) and follow the fugitives. The resolute speeches of Aelfwine, Offa, Leofsunu and Dunnere are all comments upon the base behaviour of Godric and his brothers - the bravery of those who fight to the last heightens the treachery and cowardice of those who fled. It is not a matter of courage alone - what the poet stresses in all this is the moral duty of the

retainers to fight. Thus "hit riht ne wæs" ((191b) for Godric to take the horse and flee; it is not fitting ("mæþ") for the warriors to forget their duties.[1]

Aelfwine recalls his boasts, made in peaceful times, and vows: "Ne sceolon me on þære þeode þegnas ætwitan" (220); similarly, Leofsunu refuses to save his life to suffer the taunts of the folk of Sturmere (249). And even the hostage fights with the men of Essex. Though all of the warriors die, yet the poet comes down firmly on the side of valour and faith, so that, at the death of Offa the poet can say: "he læg þegenlice þeodne gehende" (294); and Byrhtwold's celebrated speech too, closes with the restatement of the moral obligation to die with the lord:

> "Ic eom frod feores;   fram ic ne wille
> ac ic me be healfe   minum hlaforde,
> be swa leofan man,   licgan þence"
>
> (317 - 319)

The cowardice of Beowulf's retainers is quite as clear-cut as the craven behaviour of Godric and his brothers, and Wiglaf has no hesitation in branding them all as cowards and ingrates. The issue is slightly complicated by Beowulf's injunction to his companions to stay out of the fight - "gebide ge on beorge..." (1529) - but since, instead of coming to the king's aid when the dragon is plainly winning, they flee to the woods, there is no legitimate excuse for their behaviour (2596ff.). Wiglaf's fight is regarded by the poet with frank

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1.   Cf. Maxims II : "Treow sceal on eorle / wisdom on were".
      (32b-33a).

admiration : the poet calls him an "andlongne eorl" (2695) who

shows the courage and daring "swa him gecynde wæs". (2696).

Wiglaf's verbal attack upon the cowards encapsulates

all the sentiments of the Anglo-Saxons on the virtues of courage

and the vice of cowardice. The cowards are 'unleofe' (2863):

they have betrayed the trust of the king, taken his gifts under

false pretences, shamed the Geats throughout the world, and

proclaimed to all and sundry that Beowulf's thegns are cowards:

he echoes the basic tenet of the warrior code as he concludes:

"Deaþ biþ sella / eorla gehwylcum   þonne edwitlif" (2890b - 2891)

The state of war was thus morally neutral, so far as

the Anglo-Saxons were concerned. It was the conduct of the

individual in combat which attracted either approbation or

condemnation. Steadfastness was a major virtue, the natural form

of behaviour of any thegn as his part of the comitatus bond.

Through his courage and refusal to yield, he gained dom, the one

treasure which survived his death.

Cowardice was therefore totally reprehensible; death

was infinitely preferable to life branded as a coward. The

strength of these sentiments is increased when we consider that

they are developed without any notion or expectation of

post-mortem reward. As I shall show in subsequent discussion,

this is one of the most important distinctions between Christian

and pagan heroism.

War enabled man to gain dom, a reward which was made

more urgent by the belief that nothing else survived death:

> The pagan pessimism accepted the transitoriness of
> life, the passing away of greatness, and, in narrower

> sphere, the certainty of one's own appointed death...
> but in spite of this, knowledge, it edged [sic] man on
> to die with his back to the wall....[1]

Thus, whilst Huppe argues of the dying words of Byrhtnoth that they are "appropriate to a Christian martyr", and that "it is the spirit [of the leader's final speech] which most completely illumines the whole poem"[2], he is under-rating the speeches of the men who vow to die for the sake of the judgement of <u>human</u> posterity. Offa and the others do not speak of the Christian consolation at all - I would suggest that it is, in fact, Byrhtwold's words which summarise the theme of <u>The battle of Maldon</u> best. The link between the faithful retainer and the martyr is very tenuous indeed. As Cross puts it:

> we may note that no hagiographer would ever speak of the possibility of earthy glory [as here] in battle, and that he is most pleased when an active leader is to gain heavenly glory by <u>not</u> fighting, as does St Edmund in imitation of the model of non-resistance, Jesus Christ.[3]

Therefore, even though Byrhtnoth and his men are fighting in what Augustine would have called <u>iustum bellum</u>, the poet does not at all emphasise the Christian virtues of such a war, but the secular virtues of courage and faith.[4]

1. B.J. Timmer, "The Poem and the Poet", pp. 124-125.
2. B.F. Huppe, <u>Doctrine and Poetry</u>, p. 238.
3. J.E. Cross, "Oswald and Byrhtnoth", p. 99.
4. Aelfric specifically applied the notion of the just war to combats with the dreaded Norsemen: "<u>Iustum bellum</u> is rihtlic geofeoht wiþ þa reþan flotmenn oþþe wiþ oþre þeoda þe eard willaþ fordon."
    <u>Lives of Saints</u>, ii, 114. However, I think it fair to say that in terms of the wars in <u>Beowulf</u>, the defence of the homeland is not a particular virtue, except as it merges with the duty of the thegn to fight with his lord. Indeed, most of the battles we hear about are the result of feuds or raids into neighbouring territory (the latter usually from the invader's viewpoint) which hardly qualify any of the participants for the title of <u>militia Christi</u>.

In reality, there was little difference between Christian and pagan attitudes to warfare. The record of the patriarchs on the theory of the 'just war' shows that the views taken of war were pragmatic.

Augustine had taken this view virtually unintentionally: his arguments for the use of violence were based upon legal rather than moral considerations. In De Civitate Dei he gives instances of situations where killing is lawful according to the laws of God and man. God sanctioned the punishment of heretics and other wicked men[1]; if a man refused a lawful order to kill, he was guilty of treason[2] - and so on.

But as Russell points out, Augustine's "tendency to shift imperceptibly from the legal to the moral order would later endow the just war with the purpose of punishing sinners of any strife...his just war...defended the whole moral order".[3]

Russell goes on to show how Augustine's arguments were used, as in the spurious Gravi de pugna, which "assured Christians...that God was on their side and would grant victory in a just battle"[4]; or in the hands of Gregory the Great, who "was convinced that rulers could count on divine aid in performing military tasks at the behest of the clergy, while he insisted that their refusal to do so rendered them liable to punishment inflicted by ferocious enemies".[5]

Therefore, we cannot conclude that Anglo-Saxon militarism as reflected in Beowulf is evidence for the pagan

1. De Civ. Dei I, xxi; P.L. xli, 35.
2. Ibid.,I, xxi, xxvi; cols 35, 39.
3. Frederick H. Russell, "The Just War in the Middle Ages", p. 25.
4. Ibid., p. 26.
5. Ibid.,p. 28.

basis of that poem, nor would I essay that opinion. We may

observe that the wars detailed in Beowulf are not "just wars",

even in the Gregorian sense of that term. I think that we need

to view the raids and counter-raids which fill the poem's

historical framework as being designed for an audience for whom

war was a legitimate social activity, not necessarily justified

by appeals to "right". But this is as far as the militarism of

the poem takes us.

Where military imagery is employed in other works, such

as Judith or Andreas, we may argue that the use of such imagery

is the consequence of the Germanic tradition. But such arguments

yield only tentative conclusions, for as Margaret Bridges has

asserted of the hagiographical verse of the Anglo-Saxons:

> 'Neither the representation of the apostles as warriors
> and retainers, nor the ensuing battlefield
> metaphors....suitable as they may be for the epic situs
> terrarum, are the exclusive privilege of the Germanic
> heroic tradition... Pauline milites Christi imagery
> make[s] it unnecessary to interpret them as deliberate
> attempts at Germanizing and heroicising the apostolic
> subjects. More pertinent is the observation that the
> heroic imagery serves the panegyric intention of the
> exordium by disposing the audience favourably to its
> subject.'[1]

Death is the natural consequence of war, but since the

Anglo-Saxons valued honour more than they feared death, mortality

is not viewed with outright terror in this early period. For, as

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1. "Exordial Tradition and Poetic Individuality", p. 366. Of
   course, the "panegyric intention" is fulfilled precisely
   because the audience valued military prowess.

yet untroubled by the idea of a post-mortem punishment for sin, the pagan Anglo-Saxons could regard death with somewhat more equanimity than the later English. But death brought about its own particular evil, the deprivation of kin or lord, which was unameliorated by notions of the Resurrection of the dead, unallayed by reflections that the deceased had gone to a better world. We recall the defiant words of Guthlac to the demons to kill him if they may, since they will only bring him to a better life. Certainly, for Guthlac, the body which is doomed anyway is irrelevant. Only the soul, the eternal part of man, has any weight in his moral deliberations - the rest is mere vanity.

Whilst the Christain had such consolation in approaching death, provided he had kept the faith, no such optimism could enlighten the pagan mind. Thus the poetic portrayal of grief for lost kin is tinged with the sadness of eternal separation, and, of course, with the entirely selfish consideration that kin or lord were indispensable to future security. Anglo-Saxon law hinges upon the functions of kin, friends or lord in preserving the legal rights of the individual; group responsibility in some respects transcends personal responsibility, as in the wergeld system.

Though death was inevitable, and one of the abiding aphorisms of the Anglo-Saxons was that 'lif is læne', still the sorrows of loss were evil to the bereaved. It is this philosophy which produces some of the most beautiful of all Anglo-Saxon verse, for the Anglo-Saxons were keenly conscious of the fact that time will sweep away all human endeavour, a view which finds expression in the popular ubi sunt? theme.

This sentiment is particularly useful to Christian propagandists anxious to contrast the eternal bliss of Heaven with the fleeting (and hence less valuable) joys of the mundane world. Yet we can detect, in such poems as The Ruin, a sentiment not obviously alloyed with Christian moralising, in which the handiwork of time is evil. Although the poem is, perhaps, incomplete, what does survive does not betray the mark of Christian exegesis, but rather a thoroughly secular lament for the beauties of the past, swept away by the inexorable years:

> Hryre wong gecrong
> gebrocen to beorgum, þær iu beorn monig
> glædmod ond goldbeohrt gleoma gefrætwed,
> wlonc ond wingal wighyrstum scan;
> seah on sinc, on sylfor, on searogimmas,
> on ead, on æht, on eorcanstan,
> on þas beorhtan burg bradan rices.
> (31b - 37)

This seems to me to be unequivocally positive description : the vision conjured up of the city in its hey-day, and of the proud ("glædmod") warrior gazing around at the wealth and beauty of his home does not suggest that all of this should be taken as an injunction to spurn earthly riches. The similar sentiments of Beowulf (2247ff.) and The Wanderer (92ff.) have the air of highly traditional set-pieces, which, whilst paralleling such moralistic passages as Rhyming Poem (59ff.)$_1$ which also deal with the transience of earthly joy, yet manifest an indisputable nostalgia for the glories of the past.

1. Cf. Solomon and Saturn; where man's life is compared to a leaf:
> Lytle hwile leaf beoþ grene
> þonne hie eft fealewiaþ, feallaþ on eorþan
> and forweorniaþ, weorþaþ to duste...
> (314 - 316)

The Anglo-Saxon was keenly aware of time and its attendant evils, old age and death – and though time might bring wisdom (Maxims II, 11b-12), in the end, it shall take even that away.

What is very evident from this brief survey of Anglo-Saxon folk belief is that the common stock of moral and ethical opinion existed independently of the imported Christian values of the Mediterranaean, and that these values continued to dominate the behaviour of the English, and their thinking, for many years after the nominal conversion had been accomplished. We know, for example, that in very late times, the Church and Christian kings had to legislate against pagan religious practices (variously labelled witchcraft or 'þone deofles cræft" why should we imagine that Christian morality should sweep away the ingrained folk-beliefs in a matter of mere centuries? On the contrary, we can observe that the beliefs of Christianity blended with, rather than replaced, the native morality of the English. So it is that the Germanic militarism, applied to Mediterranean hagiography, transforms the originally pacifistic martyrs into aggressive saints eager to go to war with Satan. So, too, pagan wyrd co-exists, often with unfortunate literary results, with the omnipotent Christian God:

> It is one of the forces which help to order the chaos, but it is itself the force which often brings chaos into the world. As a force in both the realms of chaos

1. Grendon provides, a comprehensive list of laws against witchcraft, heathendom and charm – magic, op. cit., pp. 10-12. (The list is not, as Grendon states, complete – he omits Wihtred 8 & 9 which forbid devil worship and sacrifice).

and order, and as an omnipotent power at that, it dominated the pagan Anglo-Saxon Weltanschauung.[1]

To be sure, Christian proselytisers had been advised by Gregory to accomodate indigenous beliefs to Christian ethics[2] but this was never at the expense of dogmatically held opinions.

> Missionaries were to strive to end all traces of paganism, including those which tended to slip into religious practice under the guise of Christian worship. The worship of old gods, respect for old shrines, trust in omens, reliance on lots, resort to pagan healing practices, the continued use of ancient insignia and pagan incantations...were all to be extirpated from the lives of the new converts.[3]

What may be concluded from this brief survey of Anglo-Saxon morality is that the literature of the Anglo-Saxons contains much moral sentiment which bears no direct relationship to Christian ethics. To argue that every moral statement is informed by Christianity flies in the face of history and commonsense.

Morality exists precisely because every society needs to develop a code which regulates group behaviour; every group is a group because it shares a common set of beliefs. The pagan Anglo-Saxons had a highly developed morality which was directed

1. J.C. Kasik, "Wyrd in Beowulf", p. 128. Kasik's view is based upon the same premises as mine, in that he argues for "an intermediate stage in the transformation from the pagan to a totally Christian worldview" (p. 130). Cf. Bertha S. Philpotts, "Wyrd and Providence in Anglo-Saxon Thought" and B.J. Timmer, "Wyrd in Anglo-Saxon Prose and Poetry".
2. "Fana idolorum destrui...minime debeant; sed ipsa,quae in eis sunt, idola destruantur; aqua benedicta fiat, in eisdem fanis aspergatur, altaria construantur, reliquiae ponantur..ut dum gens ipsa eadem fana sua non videt destrui, de corde errorem deponat, et Deum verum cognoscens ac adorans ad loca, quae consuevit, familiarius concurrat." (Cited by Grendon, Anglo-Saxon Charms, p. 13).
3. R.E. Sullivan, "Carolingian Missionary Theory", p. 290.

to the preservation of such vital institutions as kinship and kingship, and which emanated from their Germanic heritage. Mediterranean Christianity, which promoted the morality of individual salvation, and developed the concept of specific sins, in fact ran counter to some of these beliefs. In broad terms, Anglo-Saxon morality treats of the individual as a part of a system. The moral obligations on the individual are to submerge personal identity in the needs of the larger group. The Anglo-Saxon, as clansman or thegn, is important as an individual only so far as he is important within the group. There is no hint, in this system, of an individuality of salvation. Nor is there any direct evidence that Christian sins were particularly appropriate ways of describing breaches of the Anglo-Saxon ethic. Heremod is not specifically accused of pride, but of breaching the obligations of the king. The cowards at Maldon are not accused of any particular Christian sin, because no such sin exists in the military code which is so vital to the Anglo-Saxons. Cowardice is not one of the Seven Deadly Sins, but it is one of the most abhorrent accusations which can be levelled at the Anglo-Saxon.

Anglo-Saxon morality developed from social rather than religious beliefs. Because of this, any critical attempt to link this morality with Christian ethics is wide of the mark. The English had a lively sense of social evil, generated from the need to protect that society against disorder. As in many other pagan societies, it is order which is the prime good, and disorder the worst of all possible evils.

The essence of the system of moral good and evil of the Anglo-Saxons thus remained at the level of folk consciousness. This essence is inarguably bound up with the key beliefs of pagan cosmology which, as I have shown, are that the world is caught up in a struggle between order and chaos.[1]

The evidence which survives indicates that such a system, however dimly perceived, shaped moral opinion. The goods of this society are those which pertain to order and the regulation of human endeavour – the tangible goods of this order are *pace* Augustine, precisely those of the City of Man. The English pagans exult in the emblems of prosperity, in the very stones of the cities and towns they build. They regard wealth, not as emblems of *cupiditas*, but as tokens of success and power. Human society is valued with more weight – friendship, kinship, the *gemutlichkeit* of the *gedryht* – these are the great joys of the folk, which treasure cannot replace – as I shall demonstrate, it is the solitariness of Grendel which most shapes his actions, and the folly of the dragon in cleaving to the treasure in solitude which symbolises its evil rather than any *cupiditas*. Treasure is for giving, people are for loving.

The great powers of chaos in this schema are war, death, old age and time. These are the forces which are at work in the cosmos all the time, eating away at the society of man,

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1. God sceal wiþ yfele,   geogoþ sceal wiþ yldo,
   lif sceal wiþ deaþe,   leoht sceal wiþ þystrum
   fyrd wiþ fyrde,   feond wiþ oþrum
   laþ wiþ laþ   ymb land sæcan.

   (*Maxims ii*, 50-53)

bringing his cities to ruin, diminishing the kindred, transforming the strong, the brave, the beautiful into the old, the withered, the impotent. These are the true evils of the Anglo-Saxon pagan world, more real than the Christian devil, perhaps more powerful than the new God.

IV

HELL AND THE HAUNTED MERE

The literary representation of evil embraces not only
the conflict between good and evil forces and personalities, but
also the convention of the abode of evil. In Christian
literature, this motif has found its expression in description of
Hell, as that place in which are embodied all aspects of evil in
the Christian cosmos. On the other hand, in non-Christian
literature, the motif has resulted in the convention of the evil
landscape, the place where chaos has maintained a foothold in the
created and ordered universe. Both conventions are, naturally
enough, shaped by the philosophical and ethical constructs of the
particular society from which these imaginative realms spring.

Therefore, Christian Hell is not chaotic, in the sense
of non-ordered: God, whose ordering influence permeates the
cosmos, maintains the same control over the place of evil [always
recalling the remarks of Augustine, cited above, that even the
eternal fire is not evil of itself]. We find, in descriptions of
Hell, the same concern for regulation and order that is found in
the physical and celestial realms. Hell is particularly ordered,
in fact.

The chaotic landscape, however, is best described as
the place of "un-order": it is seen as an area in which the
normal rules of the Creation are held in abeyance by the

perverting influence of evil.$_1$ In modern literature, this theme

has found its most prolific expression in the "haunted house"

motif so dear to neo-Gothic writers. In this convention, the

atmosphere is chill, irregardless of outside temperatures;

thunder peals in a clear sky: that is, all the normal phenomena

of nature are disrupted as a consequence of the presence of evil

supernature.

The motif of the landscape of evil has particular

relevance to Beowulf. As we shall see, many critics have seen

the description of Grendel's mere as somehow connected to the

description of Christian Hell. It is my contention that the mere

description springs, in reality, from a well-established

convention of the landscape of chaos, a convention found

throughout the world, and particularly well represented in

Teutonic and Celtic folklore. Thus, the object of the chapter is

to establish the difference between those Hellscapes created by

patristic and Anglo-Saxon writers, and the haunted mere in

Beowulf: differences which throw serious doubts upon the

"Christian colouring" of the scene.

Christian Hell is depicted as the antithesis of

Paradise; as Hughes neatly puts it:

1. The identification of evil beings with the areas in which
    they are deemed to reside is explained by Levi-Strauss, who
    argues that the primitive mind "does not separate what a
    thing is experienced as being, from the place where a thing
    was experienced as being." Cited by M. Dames, The Avebury
    Cycle, p. 37.

> Artists and poets...evolved another set of images [for
> Hell]...they were the negative images to Hell's
> reality, doubling it, parodying it, like hallucinatory
> reflections in black water...out of this system of
> correspondences and analogies rose a terrifying world,
> complete in itself, with its own rulers, laws, ecology,
> population, substances and weather. Thus Hell took
> shape.[1]

The shaping process was gradual, beginning with the vague references of the early Judaeans and reaching, in the Middle Ages, a peak of grotesque surrealism. The informing principle throughout was, as Hughes suggests, that Hell should be organised and ordered, as the rest of Creation was.

The earliest Testamental discussions of a place of post-mortem punishment are those describing Sheol. In Genesis (35,37), Ecclesiastes (9,10), Job (10,21) (etc.), Sheol is visualised as a realm of darkness deep within the earth. It corresponds roughly to Greek Hades with which it was to become synonymous. Sheol was a place in which the dead received some measure of punishment.

Aldwinckle describes the process of transformation as follows:

> (1) the dead are no longer shades in whom life has
> been reduced almost to vanishing point. They are
> spoken of as souls or spirits and survive as
> individual conscious beings;

1. R. Hughes, Heaven and Hell in Western Art, p. 157. The discussion of the development of Hell which follows is drawn from the CDT, iii, 3ff.; P. Deamer, The Legend of Hell; M. Pontifex, "The Doctrine of Hell"; D. Walker, The Doctrine of Hell, and J.P. Martin, The Last Judgement in Protestant Theology. Throughout this discussion, the word "Hell" is used to signify the place of punishment corresponding to "Gehenna" or "Tartaros".

(2) Moral obligations appear in Sheol. There the good and bad receive their deserts.

(3) Sheol is divided up into several compartments according to the moral and spiritual condition of the souls which go there.[1]

The rationale behind this development is described by Emmet:

> The growth of the belief in Hell was largely due to a very intelligible indignation at the cruelty of the persecutors [of the early Church] and a desire to stem heresy.[2]

Thus the topography of Hell was gradually elaborated: for example, to the darkness of Sheol is added the undying fire (Isaiah, 46,24) which will sear the souls of the damned for all time. There was some debate about this point. Hippolytus believed that: "Hades is a place in the created system, rude, a locality beneath the earth in which the sun of the world does not shine...[where] the angels are stationed as guards, distributing according to each one's deeds the temporary punishments...[and there is also] a certain place set apart by itself, a lake of unquenchable fire into which we suppose no one has ever yet been cast...'[3]

Part of the change in the idea of Hell comes from the fusion with Sheol of the characteristics of Gehenna. This was, in reality, a gorge near Jerusalem (modern Wadi er-Rababeh), which had been used by the worshippers of Moloch as a sacrificial

1. R. Aldwinkle, Death in the Secular City, p. 109.
2. C. Emmet, in B.H. Streeter (ed.), Immortality, p. 204. Cited by Aldwinckle, op. cit., p. 104.
3. Hippolytus, Against Plato, A-N.F. v, p. 221.

place: later, it was a rubbish dump, "where fire burned constantly and where worms feasted on the garbage, and these images were transferred to the never-ending punishment of the rebellious."[1]

By the time of the Incarnation, therefore, Jewish literature had a firm tradition of a place of punishment characterised by eternal darkness and fire. At this point, however, it was not clear whether this place was occupied: Hippolytus [above] thought not. The position appears to have been that all the departed, except the elect, such as Mary, Enoch, and Elijah[2], would proceed to purgation in Hades, whence they would be sent to their final destinations on Judgement Day. This is the view taken in the Gospel of Nicodemus, inter alia. Indeed, this was the theory until the papal bull of Benedict XII in 1336, which stated that all the sinners proceeded immediately to Hell. On Judgement Day, therefore, these evil-doers would have their sentences confirmed, and would possibly glimpse the beatific vision, from which they would be henceforth excluded: this would increase their sufferings. They would then return to the Abyss.

The New Testament writers further embellished the topography of Hell. Mark (9,43) confirms the statement of Isaiah (63,24) that in Hell the undying worm will gnaw at the tormented spirits, an image inspired, no doubt, by the grave worms of this

1. NCE vol. vi, p. 312. cf. iv Kings, 23, 10; Jeremiah 32, 35; Isaiah 66, 24 etc.
2. See Gospel Nicodemus 2, 9.

world. This was to become one of the most favoured subjects of
medieval iconography.

Matthew (8,12; 22,13; 25,30) alludes to the cold of
Hell in the imagery of the exile of the damned from the light and
warmth.

Patristic eschatology took up these ideas with some
fervour, embellishing the description of Hell with what the
Catholic Dictionary calls "robust realism" (iii, 9). Tertullian
likens this fire to lightning$_1$, Minucius Felix describes it,
likewise, as a searing, but non-consuming fire, explaining this
phenomenon by analogy with volcanoes, which emit lava and flame,
but do not diminish.$_2$

The Apocalypses contained in the Apocrypha of the New
Testament$_3$, which were widely read in the early Christian period,
set the tone for much subsequent description of Hell: throughout

1. "Ita longe alius est qui usui humano, alius qui judicio Dei
    apparet, sive de terra per vertices montium eructans; non
    enim absumit quod exurit, sed dum erogat, reparat, Adeo
    manent montes semper ardentes et qui coelo tangitur, salvus
    est, ut nullo jam igni decinerescat..." Apologeticus
    Adversus Gentes, xlviii; PLi, col. 9.
2. "Nec tormentis aut modus ullus, aut terminus. Ille sapiens
    ignis membra urit et reficit; car, it et nutrit, sicut ignes
    Hennei montis et Lesui montis [i.e. Etna and Vesuvius] et
    ardentium ubique terrarum flagrant, nec erogantur ita
    poenale illud incendium non damnis ardentium pascitur, sed
    inexesa corporum laceratione nutritur." Octavius, PL iii,
    col. 35.
3. These are contained in M.R. James, The Apocryphal New
    Testament.

them, there is a sense of almost sadistic pleasure in the description of the torments suffered by the damned. Each torture is carefully selected to suit the sin: thus, in the Apocalypse of Peter, fornicators are strung up by the genitals; slanderers and doubters gnaw their tongues whilst red-hot irons sear their eyes; women who have had abortions are cast into a lake of filth whilst the children they should have borne pierce them with thunderbolts. In a grotesque aside, the author tells us, "The angel Ezrael shall bring children and maidens, to show them those who are tormented."[1]

This Hell swarms with creatures, other than the damned and the demons: "evil, creeping things", "worms like clouds of darkness" and "flesh-devouring birds". Were this litany of horrors insufficient, a foul stench pervades the Abyss, from a lake of putrid matter, "a great lake full of flaming mire"; "a strait place, wherein the discharge and the stench of them that were in torment ran down."

The Apocalypse of Paul[2] continues in the same vein, although we are given some additional details, such as the fact that it takes five hundred years to fall to the bottom of the abyss.

Hell was designed by God as the place for the punishment of Satan and the rebellious angels who fell with him,

1. Ibid., p. 517.
2. Ibid., pp. 525ff.

(Matthew 25,41), but there is considerable confusion as to whether or not those beings were actually in Hell before the final day. Some accounts suggest that in fact they are already in Hell, others that they are in the atmosphere: still others, such as Suarez, maintain that they are in both places, taking, as it were, tours of duty tormenting the damned in Hell or hovering in the air around mankind. In the latter periods, they still suffer the pangs of Hell "by virtual contact".[1]

The writers of the Apocalypses confuse the issue further, since they do not agree whether the visions of Hell are contemporaneous or futuristic. The Gospel of Nicodemus, which was influential in Anglo-Saxon times, places Satan in Hades, which place is personified, speaking with the arch-demon and ultimately bearing him off to torment.[2]

In Anglo-Saxon descriptions of Hell both the aerial and the subterranean demons occur, as in Guthlac and Genesis B respectively, the latter also providing an example of the powers of demons to move from the subterranean to the ethereal zones, though not without difficulty.

The Apocalypse of Paul contributed to the belief that

1. NCE, iv, p. 755.
2. An apparent fusion of Classical underworld rulers and the Judaeo-Christian idea of Hades. A detailed discussion of the development of the descent theme is given by M. Werner, op. cit., pp. 95ff.

there is cold in Hell$_1$:

> ...I beheld there men and women with their hands and
> feet cut off and naked, in a place of ice and snow, and
> worms devoured them....(39)
> I looked [west] and saw there the worm that sleepeth
> not...and I saw there men and women in cold and
> gnashing of teeth...and I inquired and said: 'Lord, is
> there no fire nor heat in this place?' And He said
> unto me: in this place is nothing else but cold and
> snow...even if the sun rose upon them, they would not
> be warmed. (42)

In general, the Anglo-Saxons dealt with rather more restraint
with the description of Hell than the writers of the Apocrypha:
it is not until quite late that we return to the grotesque
description of these works: (as in Sawles Warde, which is dealt
with below).$_2$

Nevertheless, several of the Anglo-Saxon writers
produce graphic descriptions of Hell. Even Bede forsakes his
customary circumspection in his vision of Drihthelm (Eccles. Hist
V, 12). In this account, Hell is divided into two parts - the
first of these is Hades-like, with the dual torments of fire and
cold. Drihthelm is taken further to the East where he comes

1. Bede, for one, believed that the cold of Hell was alluded to
    in Luke 13,28; "Ibi erit fletus et stridor dentium...". In
    his commentary on the passage, he wrote: "Fletus de ardore,
    stridor dentium solet excitari de frigore. Ubi duplex
    ostenditur gehenna: id est nimii frigoris, et intolerabilis
    esse fervoris." (Comm.Luc, xiii, PL xcii, 509). It is
    perfectly logical that Hell should also be a place of
    unbearable cold, given that all those conditions which cause
    discomfort are variously located in Hell. The idea is by no
    means exclusively Christian: see M.D. Conway, Demonology
    and Devil-Lore i, pp. 82ff., on the Hells of Tibet, and
    demons of cold from Nova Scotia, Greenland and China (etc.);
    and i, pp. 84ff., on cold Hells in Teutonic lore.
2. See also, for Apocrypha not included in James' translation,
    his Apocrypha Anecdota, and The Gospel of Esdras, A-N.F.
    v, pp. 571-574.

upon a great wall, beyond which intolerable flames blaze. In

these the spirits of men are whirled about willy-nilly.

> Cumque hac infelici vicissitudine longe lateque, prout
> aspicere poteram, sine ulla quietis intercapedine
> innumerabilis spirituum deformium multitudo
> torqueretur, cogitare coepi quod hic fortasse esset
> infernus, de cujus tormentis intolerabilibus narrari
> saepius audivi. Respondit cogitationi meae ductor, qui
> me praecedebat, "Non hoc" inquiens "suspiceris; non
> enim hic infernus est ille, quem putas".[1]

Thus forewarned, but utterly terrified nonetheless, Drihthelm is

taken further and left alone. He continues:

> At cum iidem globi ignium sine intermissione modo alta
> peterent, modo ima baratri repeterent, cerno omnia quae
> acendebant fastigia flammarum plena esse spiritibus
> hominem, qui insta favillarum cum fumo ascendentium
> nunc ad sublimiora projicerentur, nunc retractis ignium
> vaporibus relaberentur in profunda. Sed et foetor
> incomparabilis cum eisdem vaporibus ebulliens, omnia
> illa tenebrarum loca replebat.[2]

The demons of the pit are particularly active in this account,

their laughter, 'risum daemoniorum', mingling with the shrieks of

the tormented. They are equipped with fiery tongs, with which,

presumably, they seize the damned.

The key elements in this description, which were to

become the dominant aspects of the Anglo-Saxon view of Hell, are

the darkness, and the fire which gives no light.

1. P.L. xcv, col. 248.
2. Ibid., col. 249.

In Felix's <u>Life of St Guthlac</u> (written between 713 and 749), the hermit is taken by a troop of demons to Hell, where he sees a fiery abyss, in which eddies of flame mingle with showers of hail, and where hordes of demons are engaged in torturing the souls of the wicked. It is interesting that Hell in this account is in the North, as in the vision of St. Paul (see below), although in various accounts of visits of Hell, compass bearings differ without apparent reason.

A survey of later Anglo-Saxon prose writings reveals that few, if any, of the authors departed from the pattern already established for descriptions of Hell. In the <u>Blickling</u> homily for the fifth Sunday in Lent$_1$ the description is absolutely conventional. In the writings of Aelfric, whilst there is an undoubted vividness of description consonant with other writings of the great churchman, there is little which has not been traced to earlier Church writings.$_2$

Despite the emotional tone which characterizes Wulfstan's homilies, the bishop's treatment of the subject of Hell is generally subdued, lacking the relish for detail which is emblematic of other descriptions: when he deals with the torments of Hell, he does so rather briefly. In both "Sermo ad Populum" and the homily on "Secundum Lentum", he lists the torments of Hell as eternal fire and cold and the ministrations

1. R. Morris, <u>Old English Homilies</u>, pp. 55ff.
2. See, for example, the "Vision of Furseus" (Warner, p. 114); "De Auguriis" (Skeat, ii, pp. 364ff.) and "In Octavis Pentecosten Dicendus" (Pope, pp. 407ff.). The edition of Pope gives a detailed account of Aelfric's sources at the foot of each text.

of the demon horde, but his main object is to provide a list of malefactors doomed to torment. For Wulfstan, Christ was the turning point in the history of Hell: after Christ, man was able to choose his eternal destination through the exercise of the will, but before the redemption:

> næs ænig man on worulde swa mære þæt he on an sceolde to helle, swa he heonan ferde, swa forþ ahte deofol geweald ealles manncynnes eal for ure yldrena gewyhrtan.[1]

Later homilists were not to be so restrained as Aelfric or Wulfstan. The iconography of Hell in Morris' collection of tenth and eleventh century works shows considerable development. The principal features of this development are the accretion of detail, the tendency to deal with the Hellscape as an architectural landscape, and the emphasis upon the social organisation of Hell. The movement towards depicting Hell as an edifice is traced in the illustrations provided by Hughes in Heaven and Hell in Western Art. Possibly the addition of more and more detail to the Hellscape is a groping towards verisimilitude, employing the familiar scenery of the burgeoning Anglo-Saxon towns.

The late homilies are far more detailed, especially in terms of the description of physical torment, than the earlier treatments of Hell.

In the homily "In Diebus Dominicis"[2] the Satanic hierarchy is represented by:

1.   Sermo ad Populum, 11.32ff.
2.   R. Morris, op. cit., pp. 41ff.

xii meister deoflen swilc ha weren kinges to pinen
þer wiþinnen þa earming saulen þe forgult weren;
and heore agene pine neure nere þe lesse þah heo
meistres weren. (pp.42-43)

The organising principle of this Hell is the mystical number
seven: as well as the burning trees, ovens or wells, there is a
Sea of Hell with seven waves (snow, ice, fire, blood, adders,
smoke, stench); the centre of Hell is divided into seven
enclosures; seven flames heat the fiery oven in which sinners
roast.

The description also has an element which is perhaps
most characteristic of these later versions of Hell: that is,
the supply of details which have little bearing upon the
development of the theme of punishment, but which provide an air
of the grotesque. In the Sea of Hell, strange beasts swim,
apparently without purpose:

sume feþer fotetd, summe al bute fet: and
heore egen weren al swilc swa fur, and heore
eþem scean swa deþ þe leit among þunre...

(p.43)

The "Poema Morale"₁ continues this practice of
including a menagerie of grotesque or repulsive ⁿimals amongst
the denizens of Hell: 'eisliche wihte' (281); 'eueten and frude'
(273) which 'tered and freteþ þe uuele speken, þe nihtfulle and
þe prute."(273-274).

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1. Ibid., pp.159ff.The phrase 'eueten and frude' is translated
   by Morris as 'newts and ferrets' although the Middle English
   Dictionary has, for 'frude', 'frogs'. The latter is more in
   keeping with the amphibia and reptilia favoured by the poet,
   although ferrets would not have been out of place in the
   catalogue. The Mustelidae were generally regarded as
   offensive and unlucky, cf. Origen, Contra Celsum, iv, 93.

The zoology of Hell would make a study in its own right. Beginning with Isaiah's "undying worm", other repulsive beasts have gradually been included in this grotesque menagerie. But of all the hybrid beasts which throng the Abyss, the most numerous are undoubtedly the breed of serpents. As underground dwellers anyway, there was probably a natural reason for iconographers including them in Hell, but when to this was added the account of the serpent in Genesis, then the reptiles were clearly "Hellish". It is worth pointing out, howev , that the snake was at times regarded as a suitable symbol for Christian spiritual rebirth. Augustine used the snake's ability to shed its skin as an allegory of the moral regeneration urged by Paul$_1$; and Aelfric used the same argument in his sermon for "Dominica X Post Pentecost", although he added a warning reminding the audience that the serpent was the wisest of all animals, and had been used by Satan in Eden.$_2$

The last prose work we shall consider before turning to the Anglo-Saxon poetic description of Hell is the late 'Sawles Warde'$_3$ which represents the zenith (or the nadir) of Anglo-Saxon prose eschatology. It is the natural outcome of the traditions, developed for four centuries or more by the Anglo-Saxon Christians, of Hellscapes: it relies for effect upon the detailed description of physical torments, from the heat, cold,

1. Sermones de Scriptoris lxiv (P.L. xxxv); cf. his Quaestionem in Evangelium i, 8 (Ibid.).
2. Other religions were not so averse to the serpent family. Grimm points out that in Germanic mythology and folk-lore the "snake then comes before us as a beneficient, inviolable creature, perfectly adapted for heathen worship." (op. cit., ii, p. 687).
3. In R. Morris, op. cit., p. 251.

stench and darkness, as well as the attentions of devils and monstrous animal life. One extract will serve to convey the tenor of the work: the writer tells how the damned are devoured by devils and "long-tailed" dragons grisly as demons: ant to echen hare pine þe laþe helle wurmes, tadden ant froggen, þe freoteþ ham ut te ehnen ant te nease gristles ant snikeþ in and ut. Naddren ant eauraskes nawt ilich þeose her (but) ah hundret siþe grisluker et muþ ant et earen ed ehnen ant ed neaule and ed to breoste holke as meaþen ifforotet flesch eauergete þickest. (p. 251)

Finally the author himself wearies of the litany of horror: "Ichabbe biguunne to tellen of þing þat ich ne mahte bring to eni ende, þah ic hefde a þusent tungen of stele". (p. 251)

In contrast to the prose descriptions, the poetic treatment of Hell is, in general, much more restrained. The reasons for this are probably many: the sources from which the poets drew their materials; the generally abbreviated and compressed treatment of description in Anglo-Saxon poetry; the temperament of the individual poets - these alone, or in combination, may be behind the difference. Whatever the case, no poetic description rivals for detail the prose accounts of Hell.

In Christ, the poet describes Hell in the closing section, dealing with doomsday, when he consigns the sinful to the "grimne grund" (1526). The depiction of Hell is orthodox:

```
Ne mæg þæt hate dæl      of heloþcynne
in sinnehte      synne forbærnan
to widan feore,      wom of þære sawle,
ac þære se deopa seaþ      dreorge fedeþ
grundleas giemeþ      gæsta on þeostre,
æleþ hy mid þy ealdan lige      ond mid þy egsan forste,
wraþum wyrmum      ond mid wita fela
frecnum feorhgomum      folcum scendeþ.
```
                                                    (1541 - 1548)

The poet specifies the evildoers who will suffer these torments: "aþlogum" (1604); "þeofas ond þeodsceaþan / lease ond forlegene (1609-1610); "mansworan" (1611) and so on. These sinners

> "bræcon cyninges word,
> beorht boca bibod; forþon hy abidan sceolon
> in sinnehte, sar endeleas."

> (1629b -1631)

This picture of torment is contrasted with the joys of the blessed in Paradise, where:

> Nis þær hungor ne þurst,
> slæp ne swar leger, ne sunnan bryne,
> ne cyle ne cearo.

> (1660b - 1662a)

The 'prison house' motif is also part of the depiction of Hell in The Descent into Hell: Christ:

> helle weallas
> forbrecan ond forbygan, þære burge þrym
> onginnan reafian...

> (34b - 36a)

The picture of the warrior Christ shattering the locks of Hellgate is familiar in Christian literature, and probably derives from the Gospel of Nicodemus. This conception of Hell involves a transmutation from Hell as a prison for Satan and the demons to a fortress held by Satan, ineffectually, against Christ. Thus the captives of Hell become a "treasure" which the warrior-Christ reaves from Satan:

> The vividness of the metaphor as well as its mere
> presence in Scripture virtually guaranteed that the
> Fathers would take it up. They did so to the point of
> finding its meaning, Christ depriving the devil of
> mankind, foreshadowed in such Old Testament passages as
> Isaiah 49. 24-25 and 53.12 or Psalm 67.13.

Eventually the metaphor found its way into Old English, where it is echoed in some of the poems and in several homilies. In the Exodus poem, however, it is not too much to say that the metaphor is central; the narrative might almost be summarized as the transfer of treasure from t`e devil to Christ.[1]

In Christ and Satan, Hell is located "under nessas in neowlan grund "(90), a description which, whilst reminiscent of the cliff of the Blickling Homily Hell, cannot be with certainty attributed to that source.[2] The key features of the scene are darkness and fire; as in other Hells, the breed of serpents is found in great numbers. It is described as being sealed by gates which are guarded by dragons, "hate on reþre" (98) – here the serpents do double duty, both as tormentors and gaolers. The general tenor of the description gives the impression that Hell is visualised by the poet as a vast building beneath the earth: Satan calls it a "sidan sele" (130), a "windiga sele" (135), a "werigan sele" (331). Throughout, the abode of the demons is developed descriptively by the use of contrast with Paradise, particularly the contrast between the light of Heaven and the darkness of Hell. One of the reasons for the architectural nature of Hell is doubtless part of this contrast, for Heaven is clearly visualised as a vast city of light: "Beorhte burhweallas" (294); "cestre and cynestol" (297); an "uplicne ham/byrhtne burhstyde" (361-2).

1.   J.F. Vickrey, "Exodus and the 'Herba Humilis'", p. 30. Vickrey sees the Egyptians of Exodus as synonymous with the demons.
2.   The location of Hell beneath "cliffs" is also found in Guthlac 563 and Metres Boethius, 9, 43; it is three times stated in Christ and Satan: 31,90 and 134. It seems to be a motif derived from an image of Hellmouth as a hole at the foot of a chasm, rather than (necessarily) a hole beneath waters overlooked by sea-cliffs.

For the Christian Anglo-Saxons then, Hell was a place of punishment for all sinners, a place in which all the torments which the mind could conceive were stored. More than that, however, it was seen as a separate kingdom, ruled by Satan, and organised along the lines of a feudal community. The lesser devils were detailed to torment the damned, whilst they themselves suffered the pangs of hellfire and the loss of Paradise. But above all, Hell was strictly organised and regulated : it was a part of the grand design of the macrocosm, created and supervised by the Almighty - as regulated and ordered as the rest of the Creation: therefore, the evil which existed in Hell was the consequence of this design.

Quite distinct from the Hell of the Christians, there exists in world folklore and myth a tradition of the irruption in the ordered cosmos of evil landscapes, in which the forces of chaotic evil dwell. The landscape of evil is the consequence of ideas about the nature of the creation, id as which suggest that the cosmos was wrested out of the control of chaos and organised by the creative powers which had vanquised chaos.

The landscape of evil is the consequence of the return, or the continued existence, of chaos beings in remote areas of the world. Their presence is indicated by breakdowns in the ordered and predictable course of Nature: burning bodies of water, sentient forests, moving rocks, chill atmosphere - these are the symptons of chaos. Throughout world folklore, the idea of the 'un-nature' is reiterated.

The chaotic landscape shares some of the features of "normal" wilderness: that is, areas which are untamed, but still recognisably natural. Both zones are the characteristic <u>locus</u> for heroic activity since the reality of primitive society was that the wilderness, that area outside the pale of settlements, was intrinsically dangerous. It was from jungle and desert that predatory beasts emerged to raid; it was to forest and mountain that outlaws, and the residue of defeated aboriginal populations retreated.

While Old Testament literature still retains vestiges of earlier cosmologies, of the chaotic landscapes of Babylonian or Sumerian myth little remains. Isaiah provides the clearest examples, in describing the wastelands of Edom and the fate of Babylon. As can be seen, these landscapes contain two distinct strands: the first is what one could call 'natural', a depiction of the desert familiar to the peoples of Asia Minor; the second an imaginative landscape, in which evil beings of myth inhabit the ruins. Thus, in Isaiah 13, we are told:

> And that Babylon, glorious among kingdoms, the famous pride of the Chaldeans, shall be even as the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.
> ...Wild beasts shall rest there, and their houses shall be filled with serpents: and ostriches shall dwell there, and the hairy ones [satyrs?] shall dance there, And owls shall answer one another there, in the houses thereof, and sirens in the temples of pleasure.
> (19-22)

In Isaiah 34, the author describes the wasteland of the people of

Edom, whose lands were destroyed by the Lord, to become a burning, haunted wilderness:

> Night and day it shall not be quenched: the smoke thereof shall go up forever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste: none shall pass through it for ever and ever.
> ... And thorns and nettles shall grow up in its houses, and the thistle in the fortress thereof: and it shall be the habitation of dragons and the pasture of ostriches.
> ... And demons and monsters shall meet, and the hairy ones shall cry out one to another. There hath the lamia lain down and found rest for herself.
> (10, 13, 15)

In general, the Biblical wasteland is not treated as a landscape of chaos, although the desert was the repository for evil: as in Leviticus (16, 10-21; 19, 7), where the polluted sparrow and the scapegoat are to be driven out into the waste. Similarly, in the New Testament, where Christ is tempted by Satan in the wilderness, the landscape is of little importance, and is not detailed, although one would expect, in non-Christian literature in which evil makes its appearance, that aspects of the landscape would reflect that evil.

The point is, of course, that for the Judaeo-Christian, the entire creation was ordered by God, and was good. It was not possible for evil to change the landscape. Where supernatural phenomena appear, as in the burning bush or the pillar of flame, they are the handiwork of the Creator. For this reason, the fear of the wilderness prominent in pagan literatures is almost absent from the Bible. The desert contains real dangers, such as wild animals and thirst, but it is also the home of the prophets, and, in eremite literature, provides a sanctuary from the social evils of town life: the demons driven out by Anthony and his fellows

may dwell in the desert, but they are also found in the cities, and they do not affect the landscape, which is always naturalistically described.

Therefore, when we encounter a description of landscape in which natural features are warped or perverted, it is a sign that we are dealing with literature of pagan origin. This fact is complicated by the survival, in Christian countries, of antique beliefs among the folk concerning particular locales, beliefs which Christianity has not succeeded in completely obliterating. Thus, throughout European literature, caves, lakes, groves, mountains, and other natural features still retain vestiges of early occupation by supernatural beings whose presence has left in these locations traces of evil.

Thus the monsters of myth and folklore have their domains in the remote and hostile parts of the earth. The djinn of Asia Minor in the sandy wastes, the yetti of the Himalayas on the most inaccessible peaks, the trolls of the Teutonic north in the depths of the forests: these beings and their counterparts throughout world literature dwell in the regions of chaos, where the ordered world has little sway. The "distinctive habitation" of monsters is discussed by Burke: "[it] represents an appropriate scene-agent ratio, the principle of artistic consistency whereby characters are given their proper setting."[1] In keeping with the nature of the inhabitants, these regions are often characterised by phenomena which are unnatural. Thus, in

1. K. Burke, Myth, Poetry and Philosophy, pp. 286-287. Burke elaborates upon this view in his Grammar of Motives.

the Chippewa myth of the hero Wenebojo, the great ogre Okakwan

lives in a lake "like tar": when the hero slays this being, the

waters of the lake return to normal.[1] In Norse myth, the abodes

of the giants are unnaturally hot or cold: "The frozen north is

a familiar feature of ancient Norse tales, being the home of the

jotuns - who serve as a constant foil to the activities of the

gods."[2]

A recurrent motif is the evil reputation of lakes and

rivers in folklore, bodies of water haunted by demons and

undines. North American Indian myth is, as we have seen, one of

a number of mythologies in which the forces of evil dwell in

mysterious depths. The belief in haunted waters is ancient. It

is present in Australian Aboriginal myth in the celebrated

bunyip'. In Arnhem Land, the bunyip is the great serpent-man

Kaitjalan, who lives in a cavern beneath a large lagoon.[3]

In the earliest Hebrew myths too, "Waters are closely

connected with darkness, and both those above and below the earth

form the habitation of monsters."[4]

In Psalm 68 the psalmist prays:

1. V. Barnouw, Wisconsin Chippewa Myths & Tales, pp. 76ff. Cf. N. Morriseau, Legends of My People, the Great Ojibway, pp. 31-38. This is a parallel to the cleansing of Grendel's mere, which is discussed below.
2. R.T. Christiansen, Studies in Irish and Scandinavian Folktales, p. 221.
3. See W.S. Chaseling, Yulengor, pp. 143ff. The popular works of A. Roberts and C. Mountford (e.g. The Dreamtime Book) give numberous other examples of haunted waters in Aboriginal myth.
4. ERE, vi, 153.

> Draw me out of the mire, that I may not stick fast: deliver me from them that hate me, and out of the deep waters.
> Let not the tempest of water drown me, nor the deep swallow me up: and let not the pit shut her mouth upon me. (15-16)

The same combination of waters and darkness is found in the Manichean vision of the kingdom of the "Prince of Evil":

> 'The realm of Darkness, so Mani teaches, is cut up by deep gulfs, abysses, pits, quagmires, dikes, fens and pools, into expanses of land divided and split up by long stretches filled with thick forest interspersed with vents which from region to region and from dike to dike send up a smoky exhalation; while far off, from region to region and from dike to dike arise columns of fire and smoky cloud. One part of it lies higher, the other lower. The smoke that goes up from it is the poison of Death. It rises from a pit whose bottom seethes with turbid mud covered over with a layer of dust, the receptacle of the elements of fire, of the heavy and dismal elements of Wind, of the elements of turbid Water.'[1]

In Arctic myth, deep pools and lakes are the homes of the demons: it is these bodies of water which form the connection with the underworld, and through them the <u>shaman</u> must pass to collect his magic[2]; the same idea is found in the cognate Finno-Ugarit mythology.[3] The entrance to the Shinto Hell lies through a chaotic lake with prodigious waves, infested with repulsive serpent-demons: through these perilous waters must pass the worst sinners.[4]

1. Trans. from K. Kessler, <u>Mani</u>, pp. 397-398. Kessler's source is the Manichean text of Ibn an-Nadim.
2. <u>Larousse World Mythology</u>, p. 438.
3. <u>Ibid.</u>, pp. 426ff. See also M. Kuusi et al, <u>Finnish Folk Poety: Epic</u>, especially Poem 57 (p. 279) and Poem 58 (282); and <u>Mythology of All Races</u> IV (Finno-Ugric, Siberian), pp. 191ff.
4. <u>Larousse, op. cit.</u>, p. 331.

The Lithuanian demon-god Velnias, a cruel and capricious figure, haunts the dark lakes of the Baltic lands:

> His kingdom is the depths of swamps and lakes...
> he lures people into swamps or lakes and drowns them...
> disguised as a person, or a drake or some strange bird
> he lures and calls a person into the deep...[1]

In the British Isles, virtually every river or lake is populated, in the folk imagination, with resident genii, all more or less inimical to man: in the Ribble, it is the spirit of the drowned Peg O'Nell; Jenny Greenteeth haunts the Lancashire streams; Peg Powler draws children into the Tees and devours them. As Spence summarises:

> Hundreds of instances might be adduced to show that primitive man believed, and still believes, that water holds within itself an elemental spirit.[2]

In Ireland, the sea was the province of the demonic Fomhoire:

> Champions of the sid they remain in the background throughout, constantly associated with the sea and the islands. They are only vaguely depicted, and their chief features are their unformed or monstrous appearance...and their hositility to the established order.[3]

Typical of the behaviour of the Fomhoire is that being who appears in the story Feis Tighe Chonain (The Hand and the Child), in which a great giant ("fomhoir fairge") seizes his human wife's

1.   Marie Gimbutas, "The Lithuanian God Velnias", p. 91.
2.   Lewis Spence, op. cit., p. 38. Spence's list of these beings is extensive: see pp. 10ff. See also, for other examples of British water demons and haunted lakes: K.M. Buck, Water Trolls, K.M. Briggs, A Dictionary of British Folk Tales, passim; Mythology of All Races iii; M. Summers, The Geography of Witchcraft, pp. 72ff.; W. Sikes, British Goblins, esp. Ch.iii: and Motif Index of Folk Literature, Vol. ii, p. 52; iii, 154 and 196, which citations indicate the prevalence of the motif of haunted lakes in folk literature generally.
3.   A. and B. Rees, op. cit., p. 40.

children: he is f·nally defeated when the "Strong Man",

companion to Fionn, t irs his arm off.[1]

The Irish believed that water had beneficient qualities

as well, but in general they were wary of bodies of water, since

the power which dwelled within these was often equivocal at

best.[2]

In Germanic folklore, the waters of springs, wells and

streams are also the homes of elemental beings, although Grimm

records few examples of hostile spirits. The principal examples

he cites are the beings inhabiting whirlpools and waterfalls -

the fossegrim. Grimm records the sacrificing of animals, no

doubt in propitiation ceremonies, to these spirits.[3] Further

examples of water-demons are given in the custom of spitting when

crossing a river by ferry or bridge, ·nd of the dangers

associated with attempting to plumb the depths of lakes.[4]

That the Anglo-Saxons believed, at a relatively late

date, in the existence of water elementals is testified by the

number of canonical and legal condemnations of

water-worshippings:

1. J. Carney, Studies in Irish Literature, op. cit., p. 377.
2. C. Plummer, Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae, i, cxlviii. Plummer
    discusses in his introduction the survival in Irish
    hagiography of pagan beliefs, and shows that the latter were
    often incorporated with minimum modification into Christian
    literature. The Christianisation of pagan practices is
    described by Grendon:
         "Water-worship and vigils at wells, when under Heathen
    auspices were ... rigorously forbidden. But when a saint
    replaced the elfin genius as patron of a stream or well, the
    interdicted practices were winked at or flatly approved by
    the clergy, and were thus carried on even until recent
    times." F. Grendon, Anglo-Saxon Charms, p. 144. Grendon's
    remarks apply equally to Irish and Anglo-Saxon practices.
3. Grimm, ii, 592.
4. Ibid., pp. 596-597.

> Each brook, river and stream was supposedly haunted by a spirit, who might be helpful or harmful, and must be flattered and propitiated by sacrificial offerings... The decrees of numerous church councils, the testimony of historians, the laws of the Anglo-Saxons and the Scandinavians, and passages from the 'Poenitentiale' all prove that well and water worship was a deeply-rooted institution among the Teutonic peoples.[1]

For many folklores then, the waters of earth were places of evil, regions where, as in the myth of the great chaos-demon Tiamat:

> The brood of chaos, composite creatures who belonged to the first, imperfect creation, continued to exist in the dark underground, which was also the dwelling place of the ghosts and demons of the night.[2]

We need not seek too far to find the source of all these myths about evil waters: obviously, lakes and rivers were, and indeed still are, places of intrinsic danger for the unwary. Even as late as the nineteenth century, Slav peasants still sacrificed poultry to appease lake demons.[3]

What is important is that in so many of these myths, the waters are unnatural, as a consequence of the presence of these evil beings. We have seen, in the Chippewa myth cited above, how the lake of the demon was "like tar". In the Shinto hell myth, the waves are preternaturally large. In Finnish myth, the terrible Maelstrom was caused by the presence of the sea monsters who guarded the entrance to the underworld.[4]

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1. Grendon, op. cit., pp. 120-121. Amongst the laws he cites to show the survival of pagan practices (pp. 140-142), the Canons of Edgar 16; The Laws of Cnut, 5; and the Poenitentiale of Ecgbert ii, 22 and iv, 20 all proscribe water-worship.
2. ERE, iv, p. 129.
3. Larousse, p. 413.
4. Kuusi, op. cit. Poem 57, lines 28-29 and Poem 58, lines 45-51.

The haunted pool through which the Irish hero Froech

swims is so dark it is called "Dublind", the "Black Pool".[1]

In view of the frequency with which waters are invested

in the popular imagination with evil, it comes as no surprise

that the abode of Grendel and his dam in Beowulf should be a

chaotic lake, which bears the unmistakeable features of the

folklore conventions of such a place.

What does surprise, given the antiquity and ubiquity of

the motif, is that critics of the poem should find in Beowulf

such unmistakeable evidence of Christian Hell in the description

of Grendel's mere. The critical view that the mere is an

allegory of Hell is widespread. Klaeber says of it:

> manifestly, conceptions of the Christian Hell have
> entered into the picture as drawn by the poet.[2]

and, whilst Dr Goldsmith can see the mere as:

> a part of the real world, a world deformed by the
> presence of evil as Grendel and the rest of Cain's
> progeny are deformed by the evil which is in them.[3]

she moves from this view, with which I am in full accord, to an

elaborate allegorical interpretation of the poem as a whole. In

this, she finds support from a number of critics, most notably

McNamee, Cabaniss and Robertson.[4]

1. "The Tain bo Fraich", in James Carney, Studies in Irish Literature, pp. 7ff.
2. Klaeber, op. cit., note to 1357ff., pp. 182-3.
3. The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf, op. cit., p. 116.
4. M.B. McNamee, "Beowulf - an Allegory of Salvation?" op. cit. 59; A. Cabaniss, "Beowulf and the Liturgy", op. cit., 54 and D.W. Robertson, "The Doctrine of Charity in Medieval Literary Gardens", op. cit., 26.

It is my view that we do not need to look for allegorical significance in the description of the mere, but rather to the convention of the chaotic landscape to which Grendel's mere properly belongs. Indeed, it is very difficult to note where, precisely, the mere resembles Hell at all[1] outside of the Blickling Homilies, which is dealt with below. As we have seen, the Anglo-Saxon Hell was quite different from the landscape presented to us in Beowulf. The characteristics of Anglo-Saxon Hells are almost entirely absent from the description of the mere.[2]

Klaeber himself does not specify in his note which characteristics of Hell have entered into the poem. If he is referring to the Blickling Hell, then we should consider the comments of Wrenn, whose belief is that the Blickling piece is indebted to the Beowulf passage.[3] This, both in terms of the probable respective dates of composition and the tenor of the descriptions, seems to me to be the case. As Wrenn points out, the Blickling homilist had no known source for his interpolation

1. For example, the sea-monster shot by Beowulf is clearly mortal, not infernal; the mere is neither exceptionally hot nor cold; Grendel's dam is obviously not a demon, being mortal; and so on. The allegorical interpretations seem to me to be far too selective in the details of the mere – those which do not yield a ready allegorical interpretation are often overlooked in favour of those which do.
2. I cannot agree with the argument of Hildegard Tristram, who, in "Stock Descriptions of Heaven and Hell" argues that the Beowulf passage is "wholly traditional and probably borrowed from homiletic writings" (p. 111). A number of crucial aspects of the mere scene are completely overlooked.
3. C.L. Wrenn, Beowulf, p. 150.

of the Hellscape in his homily, other than the echoes of the

Beowulf passage: yet, as I have shown, the Beowulf poet had what

was, undoubtedly, a widespread folk motif upon which to develop

his idea.

However, even though there exists no clear precedent

for the Blickling description of Hell, we need to examine the

critical views which have presented the allegorical

interpretation of the passage.

Thus, Cabaniss writes:

> We may notice the following points in the section about
> Grendel's mother. First, the mere in which Grendel and
> his mother lived and into which Beowulf plunged is
> identified by the poet as hell (lines 852, 1274), an
> identification of the Apocalyptic "lake which burneth
> with fire and brimstone: which is the second death"
> (Rev. 21:8, 19:20, etc.); and that it is a habitation
> of sea-monsters and sea-worms (1425-30, 1510-12; cf
> Mark 9:44, 46, 48; Isa. 66:24).[1]

Cabaniss proceeds from this to an allegorical reading of the poem

in which the mere becomes the evil waters of the liturgy of

baptism. There are several weaknesses in this identification of

the mere with hell. The reminiscence of the lake in the

Apocalypse is at best faint: the lake of Beowulf is not a lake

of brimstone, and its fire burns at night, not eternally. The

Isaiah reference is not to sea-worms, but to the undying worm

which gnaws at the dead - moreover, Cabaniss' term "sea-worms" is

misleading - "sea-serpents" would be much closer to the spirit

of the Beowulf passage. The same worm is the subject of the Mark

passages about hell "Where their worm dieth not, and the fire

is not quenched" (Mark 9: 44, 46, 48)

1. Cabaniss, op. cit., p. 195.

This is quite different from the "worms" of the relevant <u>Beowulf</u>

lines:

> sellice sædracan   sund cunnian
> swylce on næshleoþum   nicras licgean
> þa on undernmæl   oft bewitigaþ
> sorhfulne siþ   on seglrade,
> wyrmas ond wildeor.

> (1426 - 14306)

In line 852, the mortally wounded Grendel is "received (or taken)

by Hell" ("þær him hel onfeng"): it is difficult to see this

statement as being an identification of the mere with hell, since

the sense of the section seems much clearer if we understand the

line to mean that Grendel died at that place and time.

Similarly, the term "helle gæst " of 1274 can only indirectly be

seen as a relating of the mere to Hell: its more obvious meaning

is that the characteristics of the monster were Hellish.

Thus Cabaniss's attempt to link the mere and Hell does

not convince: there is little in the connection, as he explains

it, to support his claim that "the mere is identified by the poet

as hell". It is only, at best, a tenuous link, and cannot be

seen as supportive of Cabaniss's thesis that the entire poem is

underpinned by an allegorical reference to baptismal practices,

or an allusion to the Harrowing of Hell. Indeed, the frequency

of the folklore motif of the descent of the hero into water to

combat a demonic adversary, a motif found amongst a number of

cultures which have absolutely no connection with Christian

baptismal practice, should serve as a <u>caveat</u> to this particular

line of interpretation.[1]

McNamee, whose argument is that <u>Beowulf</u> is an allegory of salvation, also sees the mere as an allegory of Hell and Beowulf's dive as a symbol of baptism:

> To an audience familiar with this symbolic meaning of immersion into and emersion from waters infested by the powers of hell and purified by the powers of God, it would have been natural to see in Beowulf's descent into the serpent-infested mere and his triumphal ascent from those waters purified of their serpents a symbolic representation of the death and burial and of the resurrection of Christ, and, in the purification of the waters, a symbol of the redemption of man from the poisonous powers of evil.[2]

McNamee admits (p. 199): "I have long suspected that the mere...represented to the Anglo-Saxon imagination hell itself but have had no particular evidence for such a view." He then proceeds to discuss several manuscript illuminations which depict Hell as a lake infested with monsters and dragons: however, the fact that these date from the eleventh century does not help his case.

The purification of the lake upon the death of Grendel's dam may well be seen as a symbol of redemption: but it also fits into the motif of the corruption of nature by the presence of evil[3] which we have seen as a part of the order-chaos

1. See <u>Motif-Index of Folk Literature</u>, iii, 196 (motif F691.0.1) An example of this is the Jicarilla Apache tale of the culture-hero's descent into Lake Taos to defeat the monster "He-Who-Holds-in-the-Water", a demon whose practice it is to seize and swallow those who come near the lake. See M.E. Opler, <u>Myths and Tales of the Jicarilla Apache</u>.
2. McNamee, <u>op. cit</u>., p. 197.
3. Cf. the Finnish poem "Metso" ("The Forest") in Kuusi, <u>op.cit</u>., p. 325, when the trees of the forest wither and die when evil is committed there.

motif. When the source primarily responsible for the perversion

of nature is removed the area will revert to natural conditions:

Christian rituals of exorcism are founded upon this pagan belief,

ironically enough. Nevertheless, we must admit that the

possibility exists that the purification of the waters has

baptismal and ritual significance, if we are assured that the

Anglo-Saxon audience of the poem were absolutely familiar with

the processes of Christian baptism. Both McNamee and Cabaniss

have attempted to demonstrate that this is so, but that there are

major flaws in their arguments has been admirably demonstrated in

Halvorsen's article "Beowulf and the Pitfalls of Piety".[1]

One of the reasons for the allegorical interpretation

of the mere and the events which take place there is, as I have

said, the similarity between the Hell of the Visio and the

descriptions of the lake in Beowulf.

The "Vision of St Paul" as it is given in Morris'

edition of the homily To Sanctae Michaheles Maessan is:

1. For example, Halvorsen rejects the "evidence" put forward by
    Cabaniss to support his "allegory of baptism" theory. He
    quotes Cabaniss' argument:
        "If we can place the compilation of Beowulf within the
    generous period A.D. 650-825, it is worth recalling that the
    rite of baptism was of peculiar importance. First, during
    the seventh century it was being very frequently performed
    in England, often under impressive circumstances and often
    upon massed numbers of converts. Second, during the eighth
    century there was a like situation among the Continental
    kinsmen of the Anglo-Saxons." These generalizations have
    the following winning support from documents: "The
    Venerable Bede (died 735) does not supply any notable
    occasions of the administration of baptism, but he does
    afford record of some remarkable conversions which
    apparently imply the use of the full ritual and
    cermonial..." "Nor do we find in the record of St.
    Boniface's life (died 754) any actual accounts of baptism,
    but we do find instances of dramatic conversion which were
    presumably followed by impressive baptismal ceremonies...."
    What can one say? If the tone were not so sincere, one
    would assume the article to be a parody. pp. 272-273.

Swa Sanctus Paulus was geseonde on norþanweardne þisne middangeard,
þær ealle wætero niþergewitaþ, ond he þær geseah ofer þæm wætere
sumne harne stan; ond wæron norþ of þæm stane awexene swiþe
hrimige bearwas, ond þær wæron þystro genipo, ond under þæm stane
wæs niccra eardung ond wearga, ond he geseah þæt on þam clife
hangodon on þæm isigean bearwum manige swearte saula be heora
handum gebundne; ond þa fynd þara on nicra onlicnesse heora
gripende wæron , swa swa grædig wulf; ond þæt wæter wæs sweart
under þæm clife neaþan, ond betuh þæm clife ond þæm wæter
wæron swylc twelf mila...

The Beowulf passages are:

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                         Hie dygel lond
warigeaþ wulfhleoþu,      windige næssas ,
frecne fengelad,       þær fyrgenstream
under næssa genipu     niþer gewiteþ,
flod under foldan.     Nis þæt feor heonon
milgemearces,        þæt se mere standeþ;
ofer þæm hongiaþ       hrinde bearwas,
wudu wyrtum fæst       wætere ofer helmaþ.
Ðær mæg nihta gehwæm       niþwundor seon,
fyr on flode.    No þæs frod leofaþ
gumena bearna,      þæt þone grund wite.
Ðeah þe hæþstapa,        hundum geswenced,
heort hornum trum    holtwudu sece,
feorran geflymed,     ær he feorh seleþ,
aldor on ofre,    ær he in wille,
hafelan beorgan;     nis þæt heoru stow!
```

(1357b — 1372)

and:

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Ofereode þa      æþelinga bearn
steap stanhliþo,     stige nearwe,
enge anpaþas,    uncuþ gelad,
neowle næssas,     nicorhusa fela;
... he færinga     fyrgenbeamas
ofer harne stan    hleonian funde,
wynleasne wudu;    wæter under stod
dreorig ond gedrefed...
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Flod blodeweol    -    folc to sægon    -  ,
hatan heolfre...
Gesawon þa æfter wætere    wyrmcynnes fela,
sellice sædracan    sund cunnian,
swylce on næshleoþum    nicras licgean,
þa on undernmæl    oft bewitigaþ
sorhfulne siþ    on seglrade,
wyrmas ond wildeor.
```

(1408 - 1430a)

I have emphasised the princ al points of similarity.

Whilst the Blickling passage has the conventional devils, here in the guise of sea-monsters ("on nicra onlicnesse"), who attack the damned souls, there is no mention of that Hellfire which is the principal characteristic of Anglo-Saxon Hells. But the darkness ("þystro") beneath the cliffs and the blackness of the waters are part of the conventional darkness of Anglo-Saxon Hellscapes. The icy trees which overhang the abyss have a remote connection with such groves as that in the homily "In Diebus Dominicis"[1] where sinners hang upon burning trees, or the trees in the Apocalypse of Paul[2] which grow outside the Celestial City and are emblematic of the proud of heart. But the motif of trees overhanging waters is not restricted to Hellscapes: it is found,

1.   R. Morris, pp. 41-47.
2.   James, op. cit., pp. 538-539.

for example, throughout Celtic literature[1]; and Hughes discusses the trees in medieval iconography as a part of what he calls "primitive forest fears".[2]

Moreover, whilst significant details are missing from the Blickling Hellscape, there is a difference in the overall quality of the piece from conventional descriptions. The vision is, despite a certain grandeur of scale, essentially naturalistic: when compared to the engineered, architectured Hells of other writers, with their bridges, chambers, wells and gates, the Blickling piece is quite obviously different. The grey stone, the dark waters, the frosted trees, are all more or less natural. Even the demons which infest the scene are described naturalistically: they grip the hanging souls "swa swa grædig wulf". Finally the waters beneath the cliff are,

1. Cf. the rowan tree growing over the pool Dublind in _Tain bo Fraich_ (Carney, op. cit.); Plummer, op. cit., p. clxxix says, of Irish myth: "Very frequently a tree overhangs or grows by the sacred fount." An interesting parallel occurs in Jicarilla Apache myth, where: "[the departed spirit] comes to the brink of a steep incline at the north end of the world. There a wild plum-tree is standing...if he chooses to taste the fruit, and he is represented as having the choice, he slides down the slippery slope to the underworld." M.E. Opler, "Myth and Practice in Jicarilla Apache Eschatology", p. 134.

2. Of the Dark Wood theme, Hughes says: "The medieval Italian experienced a sharp contrast between the city and the chaos of uncultivated nature for which the Dark Wood was the most vivid symbol. Landscape was wild in the same sense that Hell represented Chaos: it was not a mass of unformed potential, but a complete and hostile anti-world...an extraordinary range of malevolent forces and incidents...was incorporated into medieval forest fears." Hughes, op. cit., p. 70-71. See also Northop Frye, _Anatomy of Criticism_, pp. 147ff. - esp. p. 149.

despite their darkness, clearly water. This is absolutely

atypical of Hellscapes. Througout the descriptions of Hell in

Testamental and patristic writings, Hell is waterless, even

though it is said to contain ice, hail or snow. The lakes and

rivers of Hell are, as we are constantly reminded, fiery: or

they are bodies of lava, or effluent, or blood. Water, along

with any other feature which might provide relief from Hell's

torments, is absent.[1]

I suggest, therefore, that the Hell of the <u>Blickling</u>

<u>Homily</u> draws from the <u>Beowulf</u> passage rather than from a

specifically Christian source. The correspondences with <u>Beowulf</u>,

together with the dissimilarities between this and any Christian

Hellscape compel this view. Therefore, when Klaber argues:

> manifestly conceptions of the Christian Hell
> have entered into the picture...[2]

he is not supported by the evidence available. Closer to the

truth is the comment of Gummere:

> So far as Germanic fancy pictured an underworld of
> sorrow and gloom - not, of course of pain or of
> punishment - it was a world of cold and cheerless
> waters: a water-hell men have named it....[3]

1. Whereas visions of Heaven emphasize the copious rivers of pure water: cf. Hughes, <u>op. cit.</u>, Part I, <u>passim</u>.
2. <u>Beowulf</u>, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 183.
3. F.B. Gummere, <u>Popular Ballad</u>, p. 36, cf. Grimm, II, xxv, p. 804. See also Rhea Workman, <u>op. cit.</u>, whose thesis establishes the Teutonic influence in the early Anglo-Saxon descriptions of Hell. Morris, <u>op. cit.</u>, in his introduction to the <u>Blickling Homilies</u>, believes that the scene is "a direct reminiscence" of the <u>Beowulf</u> scene (p. vii). It is true that the waters of the <u>Blickling</u> scene are unhealthy, yet they are so by virtue of the sea-beasts below. This is quite different from the foul waters of Hell: "It is quite fitting for [the rivers of Hell] to be filthy, turbid, boiling or burning, because they are the boundary rivers of hell itself, the barriers between earth and paradise, into which man must fall if his virtues cannot carry him across." H.R. Patch, "Medieval Descriptions of the Otherworld", p.639.

Thus, the <u>Blickling Homily</u> scene is unique in Anglo-Saxon Hellscapes; it does, of course, bear obvious resemblances to the mere of <u>Beowulf</u>. Whilst we need to proceed with caution in the matter, since some of the similarities are perhaps accidental[1], the absence of any source for the <u>Blickling</u> passage, and its unique qualities, suggest rather that the <u>Blickling</u> piece derives from the <u>Beowulf</u> rather than vice-versa. Certainly, had the <u>Beowulf</u> poet intended to make the mere scene clearly reminiscent of Hell, he could have drawn upon a firmly established, conventional iconography, rather than a unique, naturalistic landscape.[2]

Evil in the Blickling passage is manifest. The demons in their monstrous guises, the souls suspended upon the trees – these are clear tokens of evil. But in <u>Beowulf</u>, evil is <u>deduced</u> from the corruption of the natural world: the poet provides the audience with manifestations of the perversion of natural phenomena, such as the mysterious fire which burns upon the water at night. This is as clear a token of chaos as an audience could be given: for if water can burn, what else might not happen?

1. For example, the "harne stan" of both passages is possibly a commonplace: the phrase occurs four times in <u>Beowulf</u> (887, 1415,2553,2744) and in <u>Andreas</u> 841 and <u>Ruin</u> 43, – but see below.

2. The only other close parallel to the Blickling scene is that cited by Bolton in his discussion of the mere: after stating that: "Grendel's mere is obviously a <u>locus certaiminis</u>, like the one in which the hermit pits himself against the devil" he goes on to cite Alcuin's landscape of evil in his <u>Carmina</u> (I, 1318-28), which concludes: "guide [the soul] over the blue, among the monsters of the ocean and among the rocking waves...there is a spot surrounded by tossing waters, girded about with threatening crags and a steep cliff, in which the mighty warrior Balther, while in the earthly body, frequently vanquished the hosts of air which varied their hostility in many forms". W.F. Bolton, <u>Alcuin and 'Beowulf'</u>, p. 126.

In discussing this point, Klaeber refers to the study
of Becker as evidence for the Christian colouring of the mere.[1]
But, as his note suggests that the 'fire on water' motif is not
specific to Christian belief at all, we are again asked to select
only those possible antecedents for this idea in Beowulf which
support an argument for Christian origin, ignoring the distinct
possibility that it may derive from other sources. Indeed,
Ford's study of the motif[2] has shown that it occurs in Vedic,
Iranian and Celtic myth independent of Christianity.

The phenomenon of supernatural fire, then, is not to be
t ken as a sure sign of Christian origin. It is, on the other
hand, a certain token that evil is present in supernatural form,
an idea also found in the Germanic belief, recorded in both
Grettissaga (XVIII) and Hervarar saga (IV), that balefire may be
seen over old burial mounds and treasure troves.[3]

1. Klaeber, p. 183-184, referring to E. Becker, The Medieval
   Visions of Heaven and Hell, p. 37.
2. P.K. Ford, "The Well of Nechtan and 'La Gloire Lumineuse'".
   I have not, in my reading of Biblical, apocryphal, or
   patristic hellscapes, encountered a clear instance of the
   burning water motif. Whenever the "lake of fire" is
   referred to, it is generally clear that the "lake" is
   composed of brimstone or some unspecified, lava-like
   material, rather than water. As I have pointed out
   elsewhere, water is the one element consistently specified
   as being absent from Hell, except as hail or snow.
3. W.D. Hand, in "Will-o'-the Wisps", discusses the merging of
   the traditions of marsh lights and lode-lights.
   Will-o'-the-Wisps "hover near marshes, swamps and bogs,
   often benighting the wayfarer, or luring him to his watery
   doom..." (p. 229) This tradition becomes fused to beliefs
   in "lode lights and the luminous essences emanating from
   mineral deposits and buried treasure" (p. 231). It is very
   likely that this tradition lies behind the light above
   Grendel's haunt.

The "harne stan" of the Blickling homily should not be seen as a part of the evidence for a link with Beowulf. The phrase occurs six times in Anglo-Saxon poetry: The Ruin, 43; Andreas, 841; and Beowulf, 887, 1415, 2553, 2744., and it may well be a poetic commonplace.

What is interesting about the use of the term is that it occurs, with only one exception (The Ruin), in descriptions of landscapes of overt evil. In Andreas, it is part of the description of Andrew's first sight of the city of the Mermedonians. In Beowulf, it is used once (1415) as an item in the mere landscape, and on the other occasions as a part of the lairs of the dragons of Sigemund (887) and Beowulf (2553, 2744). Stone reappears in the compounds "stanbeorh" (Beo. 2213, of the dragon's barrow) and "stancleofu" (Beo. 2540, again of the lair of the dragon.)

The use of terms referring to stones at these points in each work can hardly be coincidental. On the contrary, the terms are evidently intended to act as elements of a description generating an atmosphere of evil. There is ample evidence to confirm this belief. We know, from the evidence of Anglo-Saxon law and church records, that stones were connected with pagan rituals and thus linked with the devil by Christians.[1]

1. See Grendon, op.cit., pp. 10-12. Wentersdorf, in "Guthlac A and the Battle for the Beorg", notes that the Synods of Cloveshoe (747) and Celsythe (786) legislated against such pagan practices (p. 137). He believes that "the conversion [of the English] was little more than a grudgingly or sceptically undergone formality". (p. 136). This evidence, with that of the later laws, shows that paganism resisted Christianity for many years. This confirms my opinion that those critics who appear to believe that Anglo-Saxon England was thoroughly Christian are mistaken.

The English landscape is dotted with huge megaliths, with spectacular rock outcrops, with the ruins of Roman masonry and the stone markers of ancient cemeteries. These may well have been the inspiration for pagan worship as evidence of the power of the gods and the vanished giants of old.

It is hard to imagine how such massive works as Stonehenge or the Avebury stones could fail to excite awe in those who view them. Indeed, as late as 1325, the church promoted organized attempts to destroy the Avebury stones as the works of Satan.[1]

No doubt the pagan practice of inscribing cryptic symbols in prominent rocks contributed to the awe with which such objects were regarded. The old solar worshippers who carved the "cup-and-ring" designs in the Ilkley stones[2]; the Danes who inscribed stones with the name of Thor or his symbol of the reversed swastika[3]; the Picts and the men of Cumberland who used serpentine patterns to decorate boulders[4]; all ensured that later observers would view their handiwork with bafflement and awe.

1. M. Dames, The Avebury Cycle, p. 114. Descriptions of megalithic remains in England, and accounts of folklore which surround these, may be found in The Victoria County History series. See also A. & A.S. Thom, Megalithic Remains in Britain and Brittany; J.E. Wood, Sun, Moon and Standing Stones; E. Hadingham, Circles and Standing Stones and Nora Chadwick, Celtic Britain, pp. 125ff. Hadingham provides a map of megalithic sites in England, Scotland and Wales on pp. 58-59, which demonstrates the enormous number of such monuments.
2. See the Yorkshire volume (1, pp. 381ff.) of the Victoria County Histories.
3. See E.V. Gordon, Introduction to Old Norse, pp. 257ff.
4. See Dames, op. cit., pp. 82ff., and Nora Chadwick, op. cit., pp. 125ff and Plates 35 and 42.

Apart from these mysterious stones, Anglo-Saxon England

was dotted with stone cairns and markers connected with

inhumation practices, as the detailed survey of burial sites by

Audrey Meaney shows.[1] In her introduction to this survey, Dr

Meaney cites the comments of James in describing the probable

attitudes of the Anglo-Saxons to these places:

> The general attitude displayed in the cult of the
> dead... is that usually adopted by primitive people in
> the presence of any ambivalent sacred object, namely a
> combination of the fear, respect and reverence shown to
> a being who is half-god and half-devil, or perhaps god
> and devil by turns.[2]

All around the Anglo-Saxon were the remains of

mysterious and powerful races — the great stones, the "enta

geweorc", the " wrætlic weallstana geweorc" (Maxims 11, 2, 3)

were reminders of powers which far exceeded those of contemporary

1. A Gazetteer of Early Anglo-Saxon Burial Sites.
2. Ibid., p. 20. Dr Meaney is citing E.O. James, Prehistoric
    Religion, p. 122. Dr Meaney supports the view of James with
    her observation, (p. 20), that a number of burials have been
    found near natural boundaries of a territory, concluding
    that this is the result of a desire to remove the potential
    threat of the walking spirits of the dead by isolating them.
    This certainly seems to be true : Girard, op. cit., has
    noted the practice of conducting ritual sacrifices of humans
    on territorial boundaries to obviate the return of vengeful
    spirits. The positive side of the supernatural powers which
    concentrate at tombs and graves is attested by the motif of
    the miracles associated with the burial sites of martyrs and
    saints: on this motif see Andre Jolles, Einfache Formen,
    pp. 23-41. Many folklore tales of ghosts are based on the
    motif of the wandering spirit of the person who moved a
    boundary stone. In these tales the spirit is doomed to
    wander until it can replace the stone in its original
    position.

men.[1] They were the focal points of power, as well as the sites of demonic rituals and the repositories of rich, but accursed, treasures.[2]

It is no wonder, then, that stones became an appropriate image in the landscapes of evil, for we can conclude with some assurance that such is the case in the poetic descriptions cited above. The image of the grey stone is a particularly powerful descriptive device in the literature of the Anglo-Saxons; it conjures up the supernatural awe surrounding the pagan deities, the giants and the dead. Thus Grendel's mere, the city of the Mermedonians and the lairs of dragons are all endowed with an additional dimension of fear by this brief, but potent, descriptive epithet.[3]

Further evidence that we have before us a chaotic landscape is provided by the anecdote of the hunted deer which elects to die on the brink rather than seek safety in the haunted mere. To an audience acquainted with the behaviour of deer from experience, with the deer's capacity for swimming and its powers

1. Cf. P.J. Frankis, "The Thematic Significance of the enta geweorc", who notes that the force of the term is retained in Modern Danish "jottestuer" ("giant-rooms"), i.e. "dolmens".
2. As L.V. Grinsell observes in "Barrow Treasure in Fact, Tradition and Legislation", p. 12.
3. In The Ruin the term, (43) whilst not specifically evil in connotation, operates as an emotive term in the context of the poem. Here, it seems to refer to the walls of the ruins, rather than to an individual standing stone or even a cairn: but its use as a suggestion of antiquity, parallels the mystery which emanates from the stones of the mere, the dragon's lair, and Hellmouth.

of survival, such behaviour must have been remarkable indeed. This is an instance of the wide-spread belief that animals could sense the presence of the supernatural.[1]

Far from being a reference to a Biblical hart[2], the deer is offered to the audience as another proof that the lake is intrinsically evil. Only evil creatures, such as the sea-beasts seen by the Geats and Danes, will dwell there: normal animals, creatures of the ordered world, sense the evil which permeates the area, and shun it.

Finally, the fact that the lake is purged of evil when the resident monsters are both dead is a proof that it is from these beings that the corruption emanates. Were the lake Hell, then the death of the Grendels would not abate the evil which is present. Although there is a vague similarity in this cleansing to a Christian exorcism, there are closer parallels in folk literature, and fairy tale, as in the Chippewa myth of Wenobojo and Okakwan cited above.

Grendel's mere, therefore, is an imaginative landscape, in which the poet has woven several aspects of the chaotic landscape in order to produce a suitably evil arena for the

1. See Grimm, II, xxi: "It seems worthy of notice that dogs can see spirits...In our legends, birds converse together on the destinies of men, and foretell the future." The gathering of wolves and ravens before battle is a commonplace in Anglo-Saxon literature, although it is not clear whether these creatures sense impending death, or are motivated by the sight of armed men.
2. Thus Robertson "The Doctrine of Charity", pp. 33-34, where the deer is evidence of Christian colouring through an allusion to Psalm 42, 1: "As the hart panteth after the water brooks..." There seems to be little resemblance to the Biblical hart seeking water to drink and the hunted deer of Beowulf.

endeavours of the hero. The effect of the landscape is largely emotional. This fact explains the discrepancy in the descriptions of the mere given upon the first and second visit of the Danes, that is, lines 841-852 and 1345-1376 respectively.[1]

In the first visit, the prevailing mood is lighthearted: the relieved Danes follow the track of the mortally wounded Grendel through a landscape which is absolutely unexceptional. However, on the second visit, when evil has been found to be still alive, in the shape of Grendel's dam, then the mood returns to that of Grendel's visit to Heorot.

The fact that the Danes do not recall that there were two monsters until after the second assault on Heorot is not emblematic of moral blindness[2], but part of the process of manipulation of tension employed throughout the poem. When Grendel's mother is introduced, therefore, the tension is restored with considerable force. No doubt it would have made good dramatic irony had the audience been aware of the existence

1.   D.A. Evans, in "The Lake of Monsters in Beowulf", argues that the discrepancy is the result of a fusion of two stories in the Beowulf version: "our author has somehow confused his story by now embracing a different version in which a second monster seeks vengeance for the first; and only in consequence of this second attack does the hero's descent to the underwater den take place. The result is of course that the first expedition is left hanging in the air and indeed becomes an embarrassment to our appreciation of Hrothgar's account of the sullen and ominous scene" (p. 153). Even were this correct, it would support my view that the landscape is tailored to the mood of lurking evil as Beowulf prepares to dare the waters. Cf. the remarks of Reidar Christiansen, op. cit., p. 33: "[a traditional motif] often taken as a sure indication of Irish or at least Celtic origin, is the subsequent encounter [after the slaying of a giant] with the giant's mother, a horrible creature, more dangerous even than her sons."
2.   S. Bandy, "Beowulf - the Defence of Heorot", passim.

of two monsters before the Danes, but this is not to the poet's purpose.

The hybrid nature of the mere has been discussed by Lawrence, inter alia, and his conclusion that the scene is drawn from several sources supports my view that the mere is an imaginative construct, composed of a selection of details contributing to the mood of the scene.[1]

The audience of the poem has been told that the second monster is weaker than the first. We should expect that the hero would have less difficulty in defeating this new antagonist than he did the first. If this were so, then the tension before the second fight would be less as well. In order to avoid this undesirable effect, the poet delays the introduction of the second fight with an admirably contrived emotional buildup: after the elaborate description of the evil of the mere, the audience is prepared to forget that Beowulf's victory is harder won than expected. Further, the brooding atmosphere of the scene tacitly suggests that the mother of Grendel will be no easy victim, in her home element, with the evil ambience of the mere lending her strength and weakening the hero.[2]

1. W.W. Lawrence, "The Haunted Mere in Beowulf". See also, for a supporting view that the poet is attempting to develop a state of mind in the audience, J.R. Hulbert, "A Note on the Psychology of the Beowulf Poet".
2. The conflict and its implications are discussed in the chapter " Grendel,Heorot and Hrothgar".

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The topography of the mere has been linked with the Aeneid[1], although as Wrenn points out[2] the links are not entirely convincing. If there is a similarity between the two works, it springs from the one poetic principle: the description of the evil landscape as an atmospheric and emotional device to generate tension. That this process was familiar to the Anglo-Saxons is attested by Barbara Raw:

> In narrative poetry the gnomic idea that everything has its appointed place is extended to create a landscape which springs from the characters and their actions. The fenland of Beowulf...is necessary because it is the natural habitat for monsters such as Grendel and his mother...[3]

Haber's analysis of the scenery is inconclusive. On the "gloomy description" he offers the comment:

> It may be that the lack of agreement a. to what kind of lake or swamp we have to deal with indicates that the poet himself did not have in mind a very clear picture of the monster's home, or else did not attempt to harmonize some incongruous details in his portrait of it. It impresses one as a piece of description put together from a number of books: possibly there were conflicts in the poet's lay material. (p. 94)

1. See T.B. Haber, A Comparative Study of the 'Beowulf' and the 'Aeneid' and A.S. Cook, "Beowulf 1408ff" (comparing Catullus and Seneca). The relevant passages are Beo. 1368-1372 (cf. Aen. vii, 479-504); Beo. 1409-1410 (Aen. xi, 524-525), and for minor elements of the mere scene, Aen. vi: 131ff., 237-238, 323, 369, 438; vii: 801-802, 567-571; xii: 204-205 etc. See also Klaeber, op. cit., note on 1357ff., pp. 182-183; and G. Sarrazin, "Neue Beowulf-Studien (vii, Fyrgenstream)", esp. pp. 4ff.
2. Wrenn, Beowulf, op. cit., p. 54.
3. Barbara C. Raw, The Art and Background of Old English Poetry, p. 48. Ms Raw links the mere scene to the references to the abode of evil in Maxims I and II.

Whether this is correct or not, the evidence for borrowing from the _Aeneid_ is inconclusive. Indeed, there seems to be little evidence that the poet intended the mere to be understood as allegorical for Hell. On the contrary, comparison of the Anglo-Saxon Hell with the mere of _Beowulf_ suggests that the two locales are quite distinct, both in origin and in detail. We do not need to look for allegory in the scene if we understand that the mere derives, in fact, from a well-attested convention of the landscape of evil, the realm of chaos. In this context, the mere is the fitting location for the home of beings whose very nature puts them in opposition to the ordered world. In Grendel's mere, the natural world has been perverted and polluted, until the phenomena of nature themselves are twisted out of recognition.

V

SAINTS AND HEROES

We have seen how, for the Christian Anglo-Saxons, the great struggle in life was to preserve the individual soul against the attacks of Satan. In all things, the Christian was urged to safeguard himself, through faith, against the unceasing efforts of Satan to deprive him of salvation. For Christian writers, then, the hero was that man or woman who retained the faith in the face of the most violent attacks - on the spiritual plane - of the forces of evil. This view of Christian heroism is expounded in the stories of the Apostles, or of the hermits and virgin martyrs who took up the challenge of spiritual evil.

The keynote of these stories is the individuality of the heroic struggle. The writers stress that it is the personal soul which is at risk: with the exception of the Jewish legends which made their way into Anglo-Saxon literature, (for example, Exodus), the heroes of the Anglo-Saxon Church are individualists, whose victory over evil is the maintenance of individual faith.

Such a view is the logical consequence of the teachings of the Church on the problem of evil in the universe. The real struggle was always at the individual level, since it was the individual who was at risk; the cosmos itself was never threatened with evil, since it was ruled by an omnipotent and unchallengeable force. Although Satan may have been prone to self-delusion, as when in Genesis he is made to say: "Wa la, ahte ic minra handa geweald / and moste ane tid ute weorþan / wesan ane winterstunde, þonne ic mid þys werode..." (368 - 370)

there is no reality to these threats: they are empty posturings, typical of Satan,whose speeches throughout Anglo-Saxon literature are the ramblings of a spiritually blind egotist.

On the other hand, the heroes of dualistic mythologies confront an evil which is essentially moral in its effect: that is, the monsters of chaos, the chaos-demons who are at large in the cosmos, affect all of human society by their depredations and demands for sacrifice. These beings do not threaten the individual hero in the same way that Satan threatens the individual Christian. Rather, their presence in the world threatens to disrupt the normal operations of society: individual destruction at the hands of these beings is thus almost an accident. The chaos powers have no particular interest in individual men.But the individual Christian is singled out by the spiritual Enemy. In this conflict, life itself is of secondary importance, for death is neither an obstacle to spiritual triumph nor the end of all things .

Thus, the idea that the Eternal City awaits the virtuous Christian after death produces in much early Christian literature the passive hero, whose fight against evil is conducted against an aggressor. We have seen that the classical posture of the Christian "warrior" is defensive.He is advised by the homilists and fathers to arm himself with the shield: opposed to this are the weapons of aggression, specifically the spiritually fatal

darts and arrows of Satan.[1] St. Anthony passively resists the assaults of the demons: the martyrs of the arena do not struggle against the beasts sent to rend them. In his conflict with evil, the Christian hero is, as a rule, cast in the mould of his Master - humble, passive, and absolutely certain of the success of his fight. It is, as we shall see, a relatively late development that produces the image of the Warrior-Christ, an image which flourishes in the warrior societies of the Germanic folk who took up the Christian faith as an extension of their historical militarism.

On the other hand, as the victory of order was uncertain in the long term, so was the fate of the warriors who strove to protect that order on earth. The pagan hero moves through an uncertain world to an uncertain end.

It is the fear of final annihilation which haunts Gilgamesh after the death of Enkidu; fear which leads him on the quest for the secret of eternal youth and immortality: and although Valhalla awaits the fallen heroes of the Norse mythos, Ragnarok awaits at the end of time. Fenris is but drowsing.

1.   The defensive posture of the Christian warrior is paramount: hence his weaponry is that of defence. Hardison comments, in his analysis of the Lenten agon: "As the prayer [the Credo] continues, the imagery of spiritual conflict, the Lenten agon, is introduced. The Creed is a kind of armour. It is "invincible against all attacks of the enemy; it should be worn by the true soldiers of Christ. Let the devil...find you ever armed with this Creed.", O.B. Hardison Jr., Christian Rite and Christian Drama, in the Middle Ages, p. 108. The idea of the prayer as a weapon forms the thesis of the discussion of the Pater Noster in the Old English Solomon & Saturn: the letters used in that prayer are weapons against the devil.

It is the conception of death which is the signal difference between the Christian and the pagan stories of heroism. Death for the Christian hero means rebirth into the second and eternal life in bliss, where death is not. Guthlac can gibe at the demons who threaten him:

> "Deah þe ge [my body] sarum forsæcan ne motan ge mine
> sawle gretan,
> ac ge on betran gebringaþ. Forþan ic gebidan wille
> þæs þe me min dryhten demeþ. Nis me þæs deaþes sorg.
> Deah min ban ond blod bu tu geweorþen
> eorþan to eacan, min se eca dæl
> in gefean fareþ, þær he fægran
> botles bruceþ."
>
> (377 - 383a)

For Guthlac, and the other Christian saints, this was true, and the consequence of the truth was that death in the tales of the Christian saints is an occasion for rejoicing. The individual soul has triumphed over the attacks of Satan, and in the literature of saints, the ascension of the victorious soul to Heaven, usually conducted by angels, is a set-piece.

But for the pagans, death was an enigma at best: it was against the inevitability of death that the warrior matched his strength to achieve fame. Death for Gilgamesh is the worms which seethe in the body of Enkidu; for Achilles, it was the dim melancholy of Hades; for the Viking it was the transient bonhomie of Odin's festive halls, then the holocaust. The coffin is sealed; the burning boat drifts off into the night; the pyre dies down - and that is that. All that is left is the name of the warrior, on the lips of the men who sing his fame to posterity.

That the quest for personal renown was no mere literary fiction may be judged from a study of historical warrior codes, and the military customs which emanate from those systems of behaviour, customs which, although displaying cultural differences, yet bear consistent hallmarks. The taking of trophies, for example, is a widespread custom amongst warrior societies; trophies which are tangible evidence of the individual's participation in a military exploit. Many of the favoured trophies have no intrinsic worth - as arms and armour have - although they may have ritual significance; the main point of taking such trophies as scalps, ears, heads and so on is that these objects can be displayed as proof of prowess.

The deliberate cultivation of pride is a feature of several historical warrior societies. The Plains Indians developed an elaborate system of coup:

> Each man's display of courage in combat and the performance of certain deeds were highly esteemed and added to his prestige. The counting of coup...the taking of a horse, a scalp, a gun and the killing of an enemy were honorific accomplishments. Individual warriors strained to become the recipients of these honours.[1]

Another aspect of personal pride among the Indians, which is shared by many other cultures, is the practice of wearing distinctive marks, such as war paint or some heraldic device, to identify the individual warrior to both friend and foe. The individualisation of armour or the person ensures that the deeds

1. B. Mishkin, Rank and Warfare Among the Plains Indians, p. 2.

of the wearer will be manifest to all involved in a battle. No doubt Achilles or Gawain would have been perplexed by the drab anonymity of the twentieth century soldier.

Military pride had its most extreme expression among two widely separated cultures, the Spartan and the medieval Japanese. For the Spartan, loss of pride was the worst which could befall the individual. At the battle of Thermopylae:

> of two men recovering from acute eye inflammation, one insisted...on being placed in the forefront of the battle. The other, however, stayed behind, and was cruelly boycotted by his fellow-Spartans until he wiped out his disgrace at Plataea...Pantites, unavoidably absent on liaison duties...found himself in such bad odour...that he committed suicide.[1]

Across the world, and a thousand years later, the Japanese samurai developed the hara-kiri ritual as a method of expunging loss of pride:

> Since the earliest recorded period of Japanese history, a warrior's self-destruction was accepted as a release from shame, an act of honour and courage, and an ultimate proof of integrity.[2]

Naturally, excessive pride had its drawbacks: Achilles nearly ruins the Greek campaign at Troy through his wounded pride; as the Anglo-Saxon poem Battle of Maldon records, it is ofermod which brings about the defeat of the East-Saxons[3]; Roland brings about his own death at Roncevalles by refusing to use the horn to summon aid until it is too late.

1. P. Green, The Year of Salamis, p. 141.
2. I. Morris, The Nobility of Failure, p. 15.
3. Lines 89ff.

But in general heroic literature does not see the quest for reputation as dangerous; on the contrary, it celebrates the heroic desire to win fame. In many stories, the hero states that the only thing which lives beyond death, and thus the only worthwhile acquisition, is renown.

This is the case in the Tain, in which the hero Cu Chulainn is consistently motivated by his belief that personal reputation is the highest good: as he says -

> "If I achieve fame, I am content, though I had
> only one day on earth."[1]

Throughout the story of Cu Chulainn's exploits, this desire to achieve fame, and to defend against the lessening of that fame, is a principle by which the hero lives and dies. Thus, when the boy-troop is slaughtered during the hero's three-day sleep, Cu Chulainn feels that his honour has been lessened - but he is told by the sidhe, Lug mac Ethnenn: "There is no stain on your good name, no slight on your courage" (p. 146). Again, when Cu Chulainn is in danger of defeat, the taunts of his charioteer (which taunts he has been ordered to deliver by the hero), spur Cu Chulainn on to victory:

> "From this day onward, my devilish little half-sprite",
> Laeg said, "you have no right or claim or title to
> great deeds or daring."[2]

Cu Chulainn is, in this respect, not exceptional: throughout the tale, the desire for fame and the protection of reputation motivates numbers of warriors. For example, when Mebd wishes to

1. The Tain, trans. T. Kinsella, p. 85. Cu Chulainn even kills his own son rather than yield his honour, or lessen his renown.
2. Ibid., p. 195.

force Ferdia into the fight with Cu Chulainn, she does so by

sending to him:

> poets and bards and satirists to bring the blush to his
> cheek with mockery and insult and ridicule...in dread
> of being put to shame by these messengers, he came back
> with them.[1]

The quest for fame which motivates Cu Chulainn is also part of

the Germanic heroic ethos. As Caie points out:

> The decision to choose correctly and avoid evil is
> graphically illustrated in heroic and Christian verse
> by the domgeorn man's defeat of evil monsters, spirits
> or human enemies. It was the hero's duty to fight
> alongside his lord and gain dom by courageous acts
> against evil forces....[2]

Caie's study of the term dom reveals how basic to heroic

motivation is the desire to achieve fame. In the Old Saxon

Heliand, Christ's comitatus is urged by Thomas to follow their

lord to death, in order that their reputations will live on after

them:

> ".... that is thegnes cust,
> that hie mid is frâhon samad fasto gistande,
> dôie mid im thar an duome. Duan ûs alla sô
> folgon im te theoroferdi: ni lâtan ûse fera uuiþ thiu
> uuihtes uuirþig, neɓa uui an them uuerode mid im
> dôian mid ûson drohtine. Than lêɓot ûs thoh duom after,
> god uuord for gumon."[3]

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1. Ibid., p. 168.
2. G.D. Caie, The Judgement Day Theme in Old English Poetry, p. 232.
3. Heliand, ll. 3996-4002. Caie cites this passage (pp. 12 & 47), and with others uses it to show that the glory motif is as much Christian as pagan. I would contend that personal glory is not remotely as important to Christian heroics as it is to paganism, and indeed may open the hero to the sin of superbia. Cf. the comments of St. Syncletice (Ch. 1, p. 25), "When [the devil] cannot win by scorn and mockery, he tries praise and flattery."

In the <u>Havamal</u> the obsession is explained:

> Deyr fé, deyja frændr,
> deyr siálfr   it sama
> ik veit einn, at aldri deyr:
> dómr um   dauþan hvern. [1]

Caie, from whose discussion of <u>dom</u> this passage is taken, points out that the concept of reputation or renown to which the term here refers, is a consistent motivation of heroic action.[2] Similarly, in Eddic verse, reputation is vital to the concept of the true hero: thus, when in <u>Atlamal in Groenlenzko</u> the heroes Gunnar and Hogni die in battle, the <u>skald</u> comments:

> The peerless men died.
> It was quite early in the day.
> By their last acts they made
> their prowess live.   (64)[3]

The danger involved with the quest for renown is that it may lead the warrior to over-reach himself, to attempt what is beyond him: in Christian terms to fall into the sin of presumption. But the penalty for presumption in pagan tales has a far more immediate penalty than post-mortem condemnation - the penalty for attempting the impossible is death.

Nonetheless, for many heroic societies, fame was the ultimate goal, transcending, not merely treasure or lands, but the survival of the self. The idea of fame is not, of course, confined to pagan literature, since fame accrues as readily to a Guthlac or a Juliana as to an Achilles or a Gilgamesh. But the search for danger from which fame may be wrested seems to me to

1.   Hollander, <u>The Poetic Edda</u>, p. 25.
2.   <u>Op. cit.</u>, <u>passim</u>.
3.   Ursula Dronke, <u>The Poetic Edda</u>, p. 90.

be typical of the pagan hero, whose stated belief is so often that fame is the only enduring reward: a belief obviously inimical to the Christian position that the only good is personal salvation - the fame of Guthlac and his peers is only a by-effect of the triumph over Satan. It is this tension between the heroic drive for fame and the Christian exhortation to submerge the self in God that produces, in a Christian poem like The Battle of Maldon, a rebuke for misplaced pride.

Anglo-Saxon Christian literature celebrates the heroes of the faith, heroes in the mould of the martyrs and saints of the early Church. When we examine the nature of Christian heroics, we discern the gulf which yawns between pagan stories of heroism and the legends of Christian saints and martyrs. The Christian hero moves in a world in which the heroic virtues are passivity and endurance, faith and steadfastness. He owes no allegiance to any earthly comitatus, and even the bonds of family are of secondary importance; his duty is to Christ, whose dominion overshadows earthly kingdoms. Although we shall find evidence of attempts to see the Christian community as a comitatus, such attempts sit uneasily on a philosophy which stresses the individuality of salvation.

We have seen this passivity in the tales of Andrew and Guthlac, discussed in the previous chapter, and that between spiritual good and spiritual evil, whilst expressed in terms of military campaigns, is in reality conducted almost exclusively upon the spiritual plane. But the use of imagery drawn from physical warfare is important, because it is the seed of the

later medieval traditions of knighthood. The piety and fortitude

of saints like Guthlac are an integral part of figures like

Galahad who combine purely physical prowess with intense

spiritual ardour: although, as Markale argues, even the paradigm

of Christian militarism is coloured by earlier pagan motifs:

> Galahad's journey, then, is part of the myth of
> mother-son incest which underlies the concept of
> imposing order on the world. The Grail mother goddess
> which is solar [the son being feminine for the Celts
> and Germans] is withering in the fire. Her dryness and
> sterility will cease when the son who is lunar, [the
> moon being masculine among the Celts and Germans]
> brings his fertile moisture to her. For he has been
> separated from her by the accident of birth, the cause
> of the most terrible disasters. In this sense, the
> story of Galahad is close to the story of the prodigal
> son.[1]

In all the stories of saintly heroics, the figure of

God is near: he watches Anthony's "wrestling" with interest,

only appearing to the saint when the bout is over.[2]   Similarly,

1. Celtic Civilisation, p. 271. The disasters to which Markale
   refers are the social and elmental upheaval in Britain which
   surrounds the Grail Quest (ibid., p. 270). I do not wish to
   enter into a prolonged discussion here of the Freudian
   interpretation of myths, except to say that many of the
   interpretations given of myth figures do not stand prolonged
   scrutiny. For a modern statement of the Freudian approach
   see Clyde Kluckhohn, "Myth and Ritual"; G.S. Kirk, in his
   Greek Myths, discusses a number of what he calls
   "monolithic" theories of myth, pointing out that none
   satisfactorily accommodates all types of myth (pp. 38ff).
2. Thus, in Athanasius' Vita Beati Antonii Abbatis
   P.L.lxxiii, col.132 , the saint asks, after his struggle has
   ended, "Ubi eras, bone Jesu? ubi eras?" and is given the
   reply: "Antoni, hic eram, sed expectabam videre certamen
   tuum. Nunc autem, quia dimicando viriliter non cessisti,
   semper auxiliabor tibi, et faciam te in omni orbe nominari."
   The promise of fame is, of course irrelevant here - Anthony
   neither seeks, nor desires fame.

angels hover over Guthlac, or close the mouths of Daniel's lions, or put out the flames in a number of furnaces. So effective is this angelic protection, that in many tales the martyrs remained unharmed until finally dispatched with the executioner's sword. Physical combat is the exception in Christian heroic literature until the middle ages:

> At times the heroic figure engages in actual physical conflict or war, as in the case of Abraham against Orlahomor or Judith against the Assyrians, but this is relatively rare, and even in these two examples the spiritual and theological overtones are what count thematically. On the whole there is an unmistabable "functionary" quality to these heroes and heroines, intimately connected with the fact that they seldom commit any deed in a self-motivated way...[1]

That combat should be so rare no doubt is a consequence of the basic view of the Church that the body was more or less irrelevant in terms of the struggle between good and evil: irrelevant in the sense that the real threat to man lay in the spiritual assault mounted by the demons. Further, the dogmatic development of the notion of the dichotomy of body and soul leads ultimately to a downgrading of the perceived worth of the body altogether. The abuse of the body by the hermits, and the scorn heaped upon the body in such poems as the Old English Body and Soul, testify to the tradition that the body was the point of weakness in the armour of the Christian: it is the triumph of

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1. A. Lee, The Guest Hall of Eden, pp. 115-116. Lee's views are echoed by A.D. Nock, who argues that the individualistic Germanic hero forms a category of his own, which "represents no more than an aggregate of individuals, each having his own story, habitat or function, and neither like the Olympians, constituting a divine society, nor, like the Christian saints attaching themselves to it." "The Cult of Heroes", pp. 142-143.

the spirit which is attested in the horrifying details of tortures which are integral to Christian martyrology. This also forms part of the pattern of the soldiers turned pacifists or spiritual warriors, like Guthlac. There are a number of these saints, who scorn to defend themselves against their persecutors, like the celebrated Theban legion; or who turn from the sword to lives of ascetiscism, like Longinus, the soldier who lanced Christ, who became one of the first bishops of Cappadocia.[1]

The careers of the hermits and the records of the martyrs, both involving the deliberate mortification of the flesh, are evidence of the desire among the devout to act in imitation of Christ; but they also show how deeply entrenched in the Christian mind was the rejection of the struggles of the corporeal life in favour of those of the spiritual world. The key symbol of early Christian behaviour was the Lamb, the favoured sacrificial victim of the Old Testament, and the emblem of Christian passivity in the New.[2]

1. See S. Baring-Gould, Lives of Saints e.g. Pachomius (May 9); Theban Legion (Sept. 22nd), Martin of Tours (Nov. 11); Emilian (July 18); Polyeuctus (Feb. 13); Alexander (May 3); Florian (May 4); Archilleus and Nereus (May 12) etc. Whilst all these stories are slightly different, the basic motif in each is the renunciation of militarism, at least on the physical plane.
2. See Leviticus 3,6; 4,27; 5,6; Exodus 29: 38-42; Numbers 28,11; 16-19; Isaiah 11,6; Luke 10,3; etc, etc. James, op. cit. p. 35, cites Epistles of Clement II, v, 2-4: "For the Lord saith: ' Ye shall be as lambs in the modst of wolves.' And Peter answering saith unto Him: 'If then the wolves tear the lambs in pieces?' Jesus said unto Peter: 'Let not the lambs fear the wolves after they are dead. And do not ye fear them that kill you, and can do nothing unto you, but fear him who, after ye are dead, hath power over body and soul, to cast them into the hell of fire.'"

The popularity of virgin-martyr cults testifies to the particular appropriateness of this type of legend to Christian thought, and a study of the patterns of these legends reveals much about ideas of heroism in early Christian literature.[1]

In these legends[2], a young virgin, usually beautiful and often of noble birth, becomes the object of the attentions of a man, usually an official of the Empire, but if not, of high birth. His attentions are refused, since the girl has made a vow of virginity as an emblem of her spiritual marriage to Christ. Two motifs are then common: the suitor, incensed at her refusal, denounces her as a Christian and she is then given up to torment; or the suitor attempts to force himself upon the girl. Sometimes, the attempt at rape being repulsed, denunciation follows. The passion which follows is also conventional: the girl refuses to recant although she undergoes a number of gruesome tortures, and is finally beheaded, nearly invariably with a sword - a motif with interesting Freudian implications. The miraculous is evidenced in several ways. The girl is able to

1. See Prete, op. cit., passim.
2. Legends of the virgin martyrs are found throughout Anglo-Latin and Anglo-Saxon literature, often in a number of manuscripts from different periods, for example, Bede's Martyrology, and Aelfric's Lives of Saints, as well as the poetic Juliana. A complete calendar is available in S. Baring-Gould, Lives of Saints, op. cit., or in more condensed form in Omer Engelbert, The Lives of Saints. Legends from which the typology outlined above are drawn are those of Agatha (Feb. 5); Agnes (Jan. 21); Apollonia (Feb. 9); Bibiana (Vivian) (Dec. 2); Catherine of Alexandria (Nov. 25); Denise (May 15); Dorothea (Oct 30); Juliana (Feb. 16); Justina (Sept. 26); Lucy (Dec. 13); Susanna (Aug. 11) and Victoria (Dec. 3).

undergo the most vicious tortures without visibly suffering; at times, her torturers are converted by the example of her steadfastness, at others they suffer violent retribution from angelic guardians; finally, post-mortem miracles are seen in connection with the relics.

In all this, the element of passivity is paramount. The heroine who physically resists death is rare (Judith is the most notable example), as, like all martyrs, the virgins approach martyrdom with joy.

An Anglo-Saxon verse example of the virgin-martyr legend, Juliana celebrates the martyrdom of Juliana of Nicomedia in the reign of Galerius Maximianus, and her legend runs true to type. She was the daughter of a wealthy nobleman and had resolved to remain a virgin for Christ:

Hio in gæste bær
halge treowe,   hogde georne
þæt hire mægþhad   mana gehwylces
fore Cristes lufan   clæne geheolde.

(28b - 31)

Eleusius, the man to whom Juliana is betrothed is, we are assured, not only a heathen, but a wicked one at that, he is "firendædum fah" (59), a proud and violent man. Africanus, her father, is not much better, inflicting various torments upon his daughter to induce her to change her mind. The conflict for Africanus is between his loyalty to his daughter and that to the state, represented by Eleusius: he sees her refusal as a breach

of the fealty due to the overlord, as well as a renunciation of the traditional gods, and these are the arguments he puts to Juliana:

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gif þu unrædes      ær ne geswicest,
ond þu fremdu godu     forþ bigongest
ond þa forlætest     þe us leofran sind,
þe þissum folce     to freme stondaþ
þæt þu ungeara     ealdre scyldig
þurh deora gripe     deaþe sweltest...
    ...             Micel is þæt ongin
ond þreaniedlic     þinre gelican,
þæt þu forhycge     hlaford urne.
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(120 - 129)

The conflict has now shifted from the physical refusal of the girl to marry, to her spiritual refusal to worship the traditional gods: it is this apostasy for which she is now tortured. The details of her torture accord with those of many comparable martyr legends: scourging, hanging, racking and so on. Again, though typically the saint is in physical pain, she retains her spiritual calm.

We can omit the sections of the poem which deal with the devil's struggle with Juliana, which has been dealt with above, turning instead to the miracles which accompany her martyrdom. Again, these are typical of events which surround these legends. Thus, when the prefect attempts to incinerate her, an angel arrives to extinguish the flames (563 - 568).

When a bath of boiling lead is prepared for the girl, the molten metal erupts,

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                Hæleþ wurdon acle
arasad for þy ræse.    Ðær on rime forborn
þurh þæs fires fnæst     fif ond hundseofontig
hæþnes herges.
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(586b - 589a)

The saint, however, remains totally unscathed. Finally, it is determined that she will be beheaded. She is taken out to the 'londmearce'$_1$, where, after a customary valediction, she is put to death. Finally, and again typically, her persecutor suffers a swift retribution: he and a number of followers are drowned, and their souls pass to Hell, where, the poet reminds us with typical Anglo-Saxon understatement, there is no need to look for the traditional pleasures of the comitatus relationship. On the other hand, the citizens of Nicomedia bear the holy body back into the city, where it becomes the focus of a cult.

As we look over the details of Juliana, we see that the key to the legend is an understanding that heroism is the ability to maintain faith, despite physical suffering, and that passivity is the essence of martyrdom. Juliana at no stage makes an attempt to resist her tormentors, and she is only active when she seizes, at God's behest, the devil who has been sent to her. I am not implying that the passive acceptance of suffering and death are less heroic than an active attack upon an evil adversary: the point is that the Juliana legend provides us with a clear account of how Christian heroes were expected to behave. The virgin-martyr who dies for her faith does so with as much panache as any pagan hero: it is the nature of the engagement that differs.

1. Line 635. In this apparently gratuitous detail, there no doubt lies an element of ancient beliefs in the driving out of the scapegoat, and in the cognate practice of conducting ritual violence outside the town or district boundaries, as an effort to keep the pollution which is consequential upon such violence from affecting society. This practice is discussed at length in Rene Girard, Violence and the Sacred, passim; e.g. "The surrogate victim is generally destroyed, and always expelled from the community." (p. 267)

Typical of all the legends is the interweaving of the mortal and the divine in the martyrdom. The divine intervention of the angel in the two episodes described above; the arrival of the demon to take part in proceedings; the swift retribution upon the heathens: these elements of the legend show the relationship between the divine and the human in the Christian mythos. God is omnipresent, and whilst His actions may be somewhat inconsistent to human eyes (why, for example, is Juliana allowed to die by the sword but not by fire?)$_1$, at least the Christian can be certain that He is waiting to receive the steadfast soul.

The passivity - even docility - of the virgin-martyrs and their male counterparts is in striking contrast to the characteristic aggression of the pagan warrior-hero. Heracles, for example, is a violently aggressive character, whose aggression recoils upon his own head when, in a berserk state, he kills his own children. Grettir is almost pathologically violent, and his love for violence leads to his proscription as well as to his affliction by the eyes of Glam. Gilgamesh too shares the predilection for violence.

1. I suspect that the answer to this problem lies in the feeling that the natural forces, such as fire or water, and the creatures of God (lions, etc.) are conceived of as refusing to comply with the designs of evil, or that God Himself refuses to allow the thing of His creation to be put to such impious purposes. The motif is often expressed as an angelic interference, but also appears as a failure of natural forces to have any effect, without specific angelic intervention, as in the legend of St. Blaise (Feb. 3) who is thrown into a lake, upon which he walks. Such is not, of course, invariably the case: Sts. Perpetua and Felicitas were "wrapped in a net and delivered to a savage cow" (sic, Engelbert, op. cit., p. 92).

Now undoubtedly there is, in the nature of physical combat, an important advantage in being able to generate the berserker rage of an Heracles or a Grettir, and it is therefore not surprising that such should be the nature of these great heroes. Yet pagan myth and legend was also at pains to point out that this aggressive rage had its drawbacks, both social and individual. The celebrated incident in which Grettir kills the berserker Snaekoll$_1$ is an example of one instance in which aggression can lead to self-destruction. I think that the tale of the death of Baldur is also in some respects an allegory of the dangers of violence: after all, the game that the Aesir are playing when Baldur is killed by the mistletoe is a particularly childish and aggressive affair. There is no doubt that for some myths and legends at least, the violent hero is a decided social misfit when the danger of evil has subsided and order reigns again:

> [the hero is often] a source of violence and disorder during his sojourn among men, [but] appears as a redeemer as soon as he has been eliminated, invariably by violent means.$_2$

However, the necessity for violent action means that in most confrontations with evil in myth the man who emerges as hero has the physical capacity for violence on the grand scale, and this violence is coupled with an aggressive, if not belligerent temperament.

1. Grettissaga, xl. Snaekoll is working himself up to a berserker rage, chewing upon the rim of his shield and howling like a wolf. Grettir takes advantage of this state of unwariness, and kicks the rim of the shield up through the skull of the berserker.
2. Girard, op. cit., p. 87, referring particularly to Oedipus.

There is some connection between the ferocity of the hero and the chthonic powers which he confronts. The hero requires this aggression and ferocity if he is to overcome the equivalent rage of the adversary.

> The Greeks were always keenly conscious of [the heroes'] harsh and violent side...Many of the traditional tales dealt with very violent events in which the heroes' conduct cannot be reconciled with normal expectations of what is right and proper. Heroes were often regarded as creatures of excess; their potential for excess, in fact, was often regarded as a significant factor in their heroization...heroes regularly possess abnormal appetites, qualities and characteristics which ally them to the sub- or super-human forces against which they were often seen to contend.[1]

Margaret Arent notes the same quality in the character of Scandinavian heroes, pointing out that "berserkir and ulfheþnir functioned as protectors of the tribe, but also embraced demonic qualities"[2]

In Celtic myth as well, figures like Cu Chulainn are endowed with qualities which link them to the demonic: Cu Chulainn is a shape-shifter when his rage is upon him, he generates heat like a demon of fire, and his battle scream is like a fiend's:

> He flourished the sword and gave the warrior's scream from his throat, so that the demons and devils and goblins of the glen and fiends of the air gave reply, so hideous was the call he uttered on high....[3]

1. C. Fuqua, "Heroism, Heracles and the Trachiniae", p. 8.
2. A. Margarent Arent, "The Heroic Pattern", p. 185.
3. The Tain, p. 141.

Thus, whilst the Christian hero is characterised by passivity, violent action is the hallmark of the pagan hero, whose milieu is war:

> Because the membrane which separates order from chaos is so thin in times of war, because the subject of war is so plainly death with no disguise, many of the world's greatest myths and mythic heroes are creations of battle.[1]

But this warfare need not involve battle with other men: very frequently, the war is a struggle between the forces of good, as represented by the ordered society of the hero, and those of chaos, whose champions are the monsters of c os. In this context, heroic action is that which brings about the restoration of the order:

> The gift of the hero is salvation of the community or the tools or symbols of that salvation.[2]

It is curious that the pagan hero, who is so often a "lone wolf", should be a benefactor of society, yet it is so. The point is that the enemies of the hero are, by their nature, threats to the rest of mankind; their destruction, whilst it might yield treasure or fame to the hero, brings universal peace. So it is that outlaws like Grettir, or doom-bringers like Oedipus, are also saviours:

> It happens that the hero, while remaining a transgressor, is cast primarily as a destroyer of monsters...A lone individual, who may or may not have been guilty of some past crime, is offered up to a ferocious monster or demon in order to appease him, and he ends up killing that monster as he is killed by him.[3]

1. B. Butler, The Myth of the Hero, p. 7.
2. Ibid., p. 10.
3. R. Girard, op. cit., p. 87., with an obvious application to Beowulf, although the offering is voluntary and only tacitly an act of appeasement.

It is true, however, that Beowulf does not share the capacity for unrestrained violence which characterizes heroes like Heracles, Grettir, or Cu Chulainn. Indeed, compared to these men, Beowulf is a model of self-restraint - we would not imagine Cu Chulainn calmly responding to the gibes of an Unferth.

When the supranormal aspect of Beowulf's character emerges, that is, his strength, it does so only briefly, in the fight with Grendel. Nevertheless, he holds within himself the potential for violence on a massive scale, a potential implicit in the destruction of Grendel and the hero's very name:

> Under his self-possessed and well-minded demeanour lives the 'mood' for terrible violence evident in the tone and substance of his first address to Hrothgar and his reply to Unferth. ...However domesticated and benign the bear-son has become, his presence in the hall adds a touch of uncertainty to the general uneasiness communicated by the poet in his account of the gift-giving ceremony.[1]

That this power is not released in the poem, except in the service of society, is a consequence, not only of changing heroic ideals, but also of the individual virtue of the hero:

> Beowulf's strangeness attaches to his being, not his consciousness, which is singular in a more familiar manner: he is ethically the best of all possible men.[2]

The taming of the bear-son figure in Beowulf is seen by some critics as part of the evidence for the Christianity of Beowulf. Adelaide Hardy argues:

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1. H. Berger, Jr. and H.M. Leicester Jr., "The Limits of Heroism in Beowulf", pp. 59-60.
2. Ibid., pp. 60-61. On the problems of the Unferth episode, see D.E. Martin Clarke, "The Office of þyle in Beowulf"; J.L. Rosier, "Design for Treachery"; and Geoffrey Hughes, "Beowulf, Unferth and Hrunting".

> forgiveness and forbearance must have seemed strange
> alternatives to the fierce satisfaction of bloodshed in
> return for injury. In Beowulf traditional veneration
> for the active virtue of courage is tempered by respect
> for the passive attributes of restraint and
> forbearance.[1]

It is, however, by no means certain that the curbing of violence

in Beowulf is as evident as Hardy suggests, nor that any traces

of forbearance are of necessity the result of a Christianisation

of Germanic life.

Although I have described the violence inherent in the

heroic figure of Heracles or Cu Chulainn, it is apparent that the

heroic ethos had undergone considerable change by the time of the

compostion of Beowulf, although vestigial traces of the hero's

mythic origins remain in the poem. The essential qualities of

the Germanic society in which the hero lives are such that

unrestrained violence is undesirable. That is, we have moved

from the purely mythic figure of the hero, with all the apparatus

of the miraculous events which surround him, to a social hero

whose functions are modified by the obligations of his social

existence.[2]

1. "Historical Perspective and the Beowulf Poet", p. 436. For
    a comparable view of the modification of the sagas by
    Christian ethics see Marlene Ciklamini, "The Concept of
    Honour in Valla-Ljots Saga", esp. pp. 303 and 316-317.
2. However, the function of the hero remains essentially the
    same - only the enemy is different. "The crushing of the
    political enemy was another instance of creating and
    wresting the known order from the destructive and hostile
    forces around it...thus, warding off the tribal enemy was
    seen as a re-enactment of the mythical struggle against the
    chthonic monster." Margaret Arent, op. cit., p. 141.

One of the features of this movement in myth is the development of the social function of the hero, as the protector and saviour of the folk: not indirectly, in the destruction of monsters incidental to a quest for treasure, but deliberately as a part of social responsibility. It is obvious that the growth of society and the changing requirements of that organisation will also change the notion of the hero. The older mythical heroes, like Heracles and Cu Chulainn, who for all their faults (in particular their ambivalent violence) are celebrated as folk-heroes, are gradually superseded by men who fit more or less comfortably into society, so that by the time of the Arthurian legends, the hero is a paradigm of social comportment.

Beowulf is somewhere along a line which connects the mythic hero and the courtly champion. Traces of his mythic origins still attach to his portrait but he has been modified by conceptions of the need for social life.

Thus, whilst Beowulf is keenly conscious of protocol and functions in the poem as the redeemer of society, he is not an entirely "safe" figure, as Berger and Leicester have argued (see above). His great strength is accompanied by a certain ferocity which, although turned against the enemies of society in the poem, is latent in his character. On at least three occasions (ll. 769-770; 1539-1540; 703-709) the poet refers to his battle rage which seems to transcend normal fury.[1]   In his

1.   These lines are discussed by Martin Puhvel in "Beowulf and Irish Battle-Rage"; see also Thomas Pettit, "Beowulf: the Mark of the Beast".

wrestling match with Grendel, and the fight with Daeghrefn, the hero is more bear than man, relying on brute strength and ferocity and rejecting weapons.

But these aspects of the hero are played down in the poem. Instead of tearing the sneering Unferth to pieces, Beowulf answers with calm composure.

But none of this is firm evidence of Christianity. We cannot imagine that the Germanic ethos celebrated violence used against social order, even though violence had its part in the social system itself, especially in the feud. We know that very early in the development of such Germanic groups as the Anglo-Saxons and the Norwegians, legislation had been developed to regulate the feud by the wergeld process.[1] The feud is potentially a most destructive force in society, because of the responsibility for vengeance in the kinship bond. But the comitatus bond was promoted at the expense of kinship, and the development of centralised authority had to be made at that cost. Feuds in Beowulf are deplored, but seen as somehow inevitable.[2]

Germanic society, therefore, demanded of its heroes a social responsibility to maintain the peace - men like Grettir are outlawed precisely because their heroic gifts are also social liabilities if misused. The powers of the Germanic hero to disrupt society are also limited by the process of demystification which the hero undergoes:

1. See Gesetze der Angelsachsen, passim; L.M. Larson, The Earliest Norwegian Laws, passim; etc.
2. As in the prophecy made by Beowulf on the Ingeld feud, where kinship and its obligations for revenge overcome political considerations.

> A Germanic hero may occasionally be expected to kill sea-beasts and dragons amongst his other adversaries...but he is not expected to display grotesque or super-human powers like a Cu Chulainn.[1]

Similarly, Kindrick argues that it is Germanic society which has modified the hero rather than the Christian ethos:

> Christian concepts of wisdom and kinship must certainly have influenced the poet's political and ethical thought...[yet] it is simplistic to assume that non-Christian elements appear primarily in the heroic code with its commitment to prowess, generosity, loyalty, individualism and revenge, and to assume that these ideals are modified in the poem only by Christian humility, charity and hope.[2]

We should keep in mind the fact that the Germanic people had a home-grown ethical system which required that man should behave according to quite rigorous moral standards, which as I have shown, include the cardinal virtues in a Germanic form. The Germanic folk were keenly aware that the virtues of courage and aggressive maintenance of rights could be destructive. Throughout the Germanic world, the figure of Eormanric was held up as the model of strength and purpose gone mad, of the virtues of kinship turned into vice by bloodlust. The vilification of Eormanric attests the developed sense of the need for morality in

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1. James W. Earl, "Beowulf's Rowing Match", p. 285. Earl is arguing for a normalisation of the hero - for example, he claims that the swimming match with Breca is really a boat race. But his analysis of the Germanic expectation of the hero as man rather than superman is relevant, since it implies that the social hero is not as dangerous as the mythic type because he lacks the power to cause such social disruptions as, for example, does Cu Chulainn.
2. Robert L. Kindrick, "Germanic Sapientia and the Heroic Ethos of Beowulf", p. 10.

the powerful, but a morality based on social need rather than religion.[1]

In such a context, there is obviously a celebration of the hero who acts altruistically for the benefit of others, even though there is a strong tradition of the hero whose attack upon the monster is a consequence of the former's desire for treasure. Yet even when this is the apparent result of the combat, it often transpires that the treasure quest is not in fact undertaken for personal gain.

In the adventures of Heracles, for example, the treasures which he wins as a result of some of his Twelve Labours - such as the Girdle of Hippolyte, or the Apples of the Hesperides, - are turned over to Eurystheus, who has commanded the Labours in the first place.

Similarly, Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece is undertaken, not for personal gain, but as a result of the treachery of King Pelias.

Therefore, even though the notion of gaining a fabled treasure may lead a hero off to a confrontation with some monstrous being, more often than not the acquisition of treasure

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1. The brutal king is a by-word in <u>Beowulf</u> (1198-1201), in <u>Widsith</u> (9), and <u>Deor</u> (21-26). His activities are detailed in <u>Hamþismal</u>, <u>Þiþrek's Saga</u>, <u>Dietrichs Flucht</u>, <u>Volsunga Saga</u>, <u>Snorri Edda</u>, <u>The Quedlinburg Annals</u> etc. With his evil councillor Bikki, he represents the complete perversion of all the virtues which the Germanic folk held dear, a consequence of his ruthlessness and bloodthirsty nature. These citations are given by Ursula Dronke, <u>The Poetic Edda</u>, i., pp. 217ff.

is quite peripheral to the real motive for action.[1] There is

a thread of altruism running through heroic legend which

modifies the emphasis on personal aggrandizement and the

acquisition of fame, although the social benefits of his

activity may not be uppermost in the hero's mind. This is so

because the deeds for which praises are sung coincide with the

needs of the society in which the hero moves.

Thus, whilst Grettir seeks to confront the ghost Glam

as a personal challenge, the destruction of that spirit provides

Thorhall and his folk with relief from the terrors of the

haunting. Again, when Cu Chulainn fights an entire army to

protect Ulster, his constant concern for the preservation of his

renown, which he offers continually as the reason for his heroic

stand, must be measured against the fact that his single-handed

defence enables the Ulstermen to recover from their period of

incapacity and finally defeat the invaders.

1. Even where the hero sets out to win a treasure for himself,
    as is the case in a number of Celtic legends, the treasure
    itself may bring benefits to all men:"Like Bran, Brennus
    sets off in search of treasure, but it is an ambivalent
    quest. For, just as the alchemist is attempting to
    manufacture a material substance and to construct a
    spiritual structure, so the Celt is motivated by the hope of
    acquiring both base, worldly riches and the fabulous
    treasures of the Other World. This theme recurs continually
    throughout Celtic epic, and is manifest in the Quest for the
    Grail, if not in its definitive fashion, then at least in a
    version comprehensible to the Western mind of today". J.
    Markale, Celtic Civilisation, p. 75.

The enemies of the pagan hero are, as I have suggested, typically monstrous, and many have supernatural characteristics. Their mode of operation, however, has little connection with the demonic hordes which are in action against the Christian saint. Whilst demonic assaults are almost invariably spiritual, the conflict between the monster and the hero is physical, even though there may be some facet of the combat which requires some form of supernatural assistance to enable the hero to win. Death in this form of conflict is physical, not spiritual.

So, whilst the Christian hero is celebrated for that quality - faith - which guarantees success in spiritual combat, the pagan hero is acclaimed for physical strength, and for physical beauty which is often seen as concomitant with that strength.[1] The exaltation of the physical man of heroic literature is absolutely alien to early Christian literature: it is not until the two traditions are precariously welded in medieval romance that the Christian hero is described as physically beautiful. This is, of course, excepting the virgins of the virgin-martyr tales, who are almost invariably portrayed as beauties.

If, then, the Christian hero's chief asset is his faith, coupled with qualities of temperament like humility and patience, the greatest attributes of the pagan hero are physical:

1. As is particularly evident in Celtic heroic literature, e.g. the description of Froech in the Tain bo Fraich, or the eloquent descriptions of beautiful warriors throughout the Tain of Cu Chulainn.

strength, as in the case of Heracles; cunning, as in the case of Odysseus; or martial skill, as is possessed by Achilles. This emphasis upon the physical and mental powers of the hero stems from the fact that his trials are physical, not spiritual.[1]

We can summarise the differences between the pagan concept of heroism and the Christian idea as follows.

Firstly, the Christian hero wages a spiritual battle, in which the goal is the preservation of faith in face of the temptations placed in the way of that faith by Satan. On the other hand, the pagan hero wages a physical war on physical powers, and although the stated goal may be the acquisition of treasure or fame, the result of success is the deliverance of society from evil powers which threaten to disrupt that society.

As a consequence of the nature of these combats, the qualities of the two classes of heroes are quite different. The Christian hero succeeds because of his faith - all other personal attributes are quite irrelevant to this success; but the pagan hero, as a man engaged in physical struggle, is praised for his physical power and the beauty which often accompanies that power.

For the same reason, the emphasis in pagan tales upon weaponry, especially magical weaponry, is quite different from the Christian idea that the weapons of the struggle are both defensive and spiritual. In this context it is, of course,

1. Except, of course, for those moral qualities particularly valuable to the hero in his warrior function: "War, valour, service, liberality, contempt of death and love of fame: these are the constants of truly heroic verse". Gwyn Jones, Kings, Beasts and Heroes, p. 52.

particularly appropriate to the Christian view that the great Jewish warrior, David, should be armed with a sling, the weapon of a peasant. There is not, until the advent of romance literature and weapons like Excalibur, any parallels in Christian literature of Heracles' club, Thor's hammer, or the famous swords of Germanic legend.[1]

Whereas the Christian is endowed with, or must learn the humility and patience which particularly fit him for his struggle, the heroes of pagan literature are qu te frequently extremely violent men, whose chief characteristics seem to be a ready temper and a delight in violence.

Finally, the results of success for both groups are quite different, as are the results of failure. When the Christian hero succeeds in his struggle against evil, he receives his reward in the after-life, and though he may become famous because of the miracles he works, this fame is absolutely irrelevant to his personal salvation. If he fails in the test, he is doomed to eternal punishment, although it is worthy of note that in a number of cases the hero makes minor breaches of the faith, but is allowed to expiate them before the end. On the other hand, the personal results of victory for the pagan hero are limited to the earthly life: he may win a treasure or a bride or a kingdom; his fame may reach the farthest corners of the globe - but these things are no guarantee of immortality. Yet, if he fails, then so long as he makes the effort against

1. Famous weapons are named throughout early heroic legend, e.g. Durendal, Gram, Tyrfing, Skofnung etc.

evil to the limits of his strength, no blame will accrue to his reputation. Since he faces death anyway, his success or failure is only a matter of personal survival - and for many heroes, this was merely an irrelevance.

From the preceding discussion, it is evident that Beowulf is a hero in the pagan tradition, and that there is little in common between the destroyer of Grendel and the saints of the Christian church. Moreover, the combats which he wages have nothing in common with the struggle of men like Guthlac or Anthony against the demonic powers, apart from the superficial resemblances produced by the use in Christian hagiography of military metaphors. His adversaries are, as I have shown elsewhere, in no way to be regarded as demonic or spiritual antagonists: they are creatures of flesh and blood, whose connection with the Satanic forces can only be made by the processes of ingenious logic.

Beowulf's functions in the poem are, as I will show in my discussion of the evil brought about by Grendel, purgative. His role in the action is to cleanse Heorot of the polluting influence of the monster, who has brought the order of Danish society close to destruction. His second victory, over Grendel's mother, is the final act in the purgation of the Danish kingdom. His fatal encounter with the dragon, too, is a cleansing of his own kingdom of the baleful power of the ancient serpent who is the enemy of all men, and the incarnation of chaos.[1]

1. The dragon is treated separately in the chapter entitled "The Serpent of Chaos", although a brief discussion ensues below.

The moral evil which each of Beowulf's adversaries represents is social disruption. Grendel's attacks upon Heorot have the effect of disrupting the processes of Danish life, particularly the functions of king and comitatus, functions integral to the maintenance of society. Whilst the threat posed by Grendel's dam is not allowed to develop to the magnitude of her son's, she has the potential to continue the evil which her son began. The dragon, who typefies chaos, threatens the total destruction of Beowulf's realm. Its powers, even more dangerous than Grendel's, are manifested in its avenging flight through the realm, which creates havoc amongst the Geats.

For each of these beings, the awakening of their potent evil is the fault of man: however, this fault is not to be understood as corresponding to Christian sin. In the course of his mundane activities, man may unwittingly provoke the powers of chaos. We know, for example, that Grendel had long existed in the mere before the noise from Heorot attracted his attention and rage. His mother does not appear on the scene until her son is killed, and she seeks vengeance for his death. The dragon, too, lies in slumber in his barrow for three hundred years, until his horde is rifled. Evil, therefore, may be dormant in society, but it is still present, ready to break out at the slightest provocation. It is not a personal evil, aimed specifically at the hero - his confrontation with it is as representative, a champion of the social order. Whereas Guthlac, Juliana, and the other saints fight a personal battle for personal salvation, Beowulf fights the dragon in the dual role of hero-king. On the outcome of the battle depends, not his personal soul, but the future of the Geatish folk, for the old king is fighting

for a whole kingdom.[1]

Beowulf is physical man, not spiritual man: in the poem, it is his physical prowess which is most celebrated. His three great monster fights, his war exploits, the swimming match with Breca: all of these accounts of his deeds are a celebration, in the truly heroic manner, of the warrior. This is not to say that the hero is not endowed with attributes of moral and ethical behaviour which make him a paradigm of the Germanic gentleman: indeed, this aspect of his character is an important departure from the boorish behaviour of other heroes such as Heracles, Grettir, or Gilgamesh.[2]

Beowulf's moral dimensions are social rather than spiritual. He is praised for his generosity, his courage, and his observance of protocol, and in these areas he is a fitting example for the Germanic audience to imitate. But there is only

1. It is true that the consequences of Andreas' liberation of Matthew include the conversion of the Mermedonians, but this is markedly different from the results of Beowulf's defeat of Grendel. Similarly, whilst Guthlac cleanses the marshes of demons, this is only a residual benefit of his personal search for salvation. If there is a parallel to the social hero of secular literature in ecclesiastical legend, it is perhaps to be found amongst the exorcists like Benedict, for whom Gregory reserved much of his most spectacular material, as shown above.
2. Beowulf does not fit the pattern of the outlaw-hero, or the violent hero: that is, his social conduct is beyond repoach. But he is, first and foremost, an aggressive, confident, Germanic warrior, whose social value is his ability to kill: "The influence of the Ancient Germans and their descendants is also noticeable [in Old Finnish verse] in fundamental changes in attitudes towards life...the world became a battlefield, the hero had to have an opponent — either a rival or an enemy." Kuusi, op. cit., p. 49: under discussion is the shift in hero-types from culture heroes (Vainamoinen, Ilmarinen) to warrior heroes (Kaukamoinen).

the most rudimentary resemblance between the qualities displayed

by the hero and the modes of conduct exemplified by Christ and

extolled by the Christian Church. He is aggressive, proud, and

resolutely self-reliant. If there is anything in him to warrant

the epithet of "a type of Christ"[1] it is in the fact that his

activities redeem the folk from peril. But this is also true of

dozens of non-Christian heroes from all over the pagan world: it

is much closer to the truth to say that Christ is a type of the

redemptive hero:

> [the elaboration of] the descent tradition had created
> a short Christian epic showing the divine conquest of
> the powers of darkness. The pattern is age-old, and
> many pagan mythologies have stories of a hero visiting
> the world beyond the grave and returning to earth with
> its spoils.[2]

Danielou has traced the development of the myth of the Harrowing

of Hell from the early Jewish Christian period. He shows that

the myth has its origins in the Apocryphon of Jeremiah, in which

the earlier ideas, that is, that Christ went to the place of the

dead to proclaim the fulfillment of the Salvation, is fused with

the idea of a battle to redeem those worthies who died before the

Incarnation. The object of the descent of Christ into Hell had

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1. e.g. "There is sufficient evidence that to the very end
   Beowulf is the Christ-like hero pitted against demonic
   powers that constantly besiege a society based on kinship."
   Willem Helder, "Beowulf and the Plundered Hoard", p. 324.
   Helder's thesis is that Christ's struggle with Satan and his
   liberation of the captive souls is figured by Beowulf's
   battle with the dragon - hence Beowulf's fight with the
   dragon or the taking of the hoard cannot be seen as a
   condemnation of the hero. Whilst I agree with the latter
   sentiment, I am unconvinced of the Christ=Beowulf equation.
2. D.D. Owen, The Vision of Hell, p. 9.

thus become the resurrection of the patriarchs and saints of the

Old Testament. Danielou points out that this descent

incorporated the motif of a descent into water, a descent which

is involved in the baptismal liturgy.[1]

By the time of the Odes of Solomon, then, the two ideas

are firmly bound together:

> Christ's combat with Satan has for its primary object
> his own deliverance in the Resurrection, and the theme
> of the fight between Christ and Satan in Hell has
> become more precise; it is already mors et vita duello
> conflixere mirando....Christ's actual coming out of
> Hell is continued sacramentally by baptism, which
> liberates the Christian from Hell by giving him a share
> in Christ's deliverance. The descent into and ascent
> from the water are a sacramental imitation of the
> descent and ascent of Christ which bring about the real
> effect of the sacrament.[2]

The details of the combat with Satan are never fully spelled out,

which is logical considering the implications of an adversary

with the power to resist the irresistible majesty and might of

the Almighty. Where poets and writers do describe the advent of

Christ into Hell, it is in terms of this irresistible power: in

Barnabas (ii, 4), Christ is able to "crush gates of brass, and

break in pieces bolts of iron". The forty-second Ode of Solomon

implies the power of Christ in the line: "Sheol saw me and was

overcome" (15). In the Gospel of Nicodemus, from which so much

of the imagery of the Anglo-Saxon Christian epic was to be

derived, the forces of Satan and Hades are quelled by the mere

speaking of the Word. The Anglo-Saxons, with their

characteristic use of military imagery, attenuate the conflict,

1. Danielou, Jewish Christianity, pp. 233ff.
2. Ibid., p. 245.

but never suggest that the struggle is more than one-sided: in

Christ and Satan, the arrival of Christ at the gates of Hell

produces total panic among the demons:

> Ða him egsa becom,
> dyne for deman,   þa he duru in helle
> bræc and begde...   (378b - 380a)

The combat is not detailed, except that we are told that Christ

himself overthrew the fiend (402): the confrontation between the

forces of Good and Evil, characterized by the opposition of light

and darkness, is no real contest:

> þis wæs on uhtan   eall geworden,
> ær dægrede,   þæt se dyne becom,
> hlud of heofonum,   þa he helle duru
> forbræc and forbegde;   ban weornodon
> þa hie swa leohtne   leoman gesawon
>
> (463 - 467)

Similarly, in the poem *Christ*, the details of the conflict are

given in the broadest terms, with the accent upon the might of

the Lord and the complete impotence of the demonic enemies:

> "Hafaþ nu se halga   helle bireafod
> ealles þæs gafoles   þe hi geardagum
> in þæt orlege   unryhte swealg.
> Nu sind forcumene   ond in cwicsusle
> gehynde ond gehæfte,   in helle grund
> duguþum bidæled,   deofla cempan.
> Ne meahtan wiþerbrogan   wige spowan,
> wæpna wyrpum,   siþþan wuldres cyning,
> heofonrices helm,   hilde gefremede
> wiþ his ealdfeondum   anes meahtum..."
>
> (558 - 567)

In contrast therefore to the depiction of the Warrior Christ subduing the power of Satan with absolute ease, the fight which Beowulf has with Grendel's dam is protracted and difficult: yet the descent of the Geat into the mere has been seen both as an allegory for the Harrowing of Hell and for the Christian rites of baptism.[1]

The difficulty with such interpretations is that they ignore the probability that the Beowulf fight takes its form from any of a number of similar conflicts of pagan origin. But more importantly, the allegorical interpretation of the descent has to overlook several important aspects of the fight which do not yield readily to such a reading.

For example, Beowulf's mission to the mere is not a redemptive one, except in so far that the death of the monster grants final peace (from that particular threat) to Heorot. Beowulf is no saviour. His fight with Grendel's dam is undertaken, just as with her son, in order to acquire fame. Secondly, Beowulf is impelled to act as a consequence of the obligations of the heroic code of which he is the paradigm: the blood-guilt for Aeschere is on his head, as the counsellors death is the consequence of the slaying of Grendel. Since this

1. A caution to the whole critical approach of liturgical paralleling with Beowulf is sounded by Milton McC. Gatch, in "Old English Literature and the Liturgy". Gatch points out that since so little is known about the liturgy of the period, and that the nature of the liturgy was dynamic and flexible, it is hazardous to link the two forms of literature, except in very tentative fashion.

function is fulfilled with the death of the monster, and the extinction of the clan, Beowulf's mission is over, and I suspect that it is partly for this reason that he leaves in the cave the treasures hoarded by the Grendels, with the exception of the hilt of the giant-sword. Christ's descent into the underworld bears certain general resemblances to Beowulf's underwater fight, it cannot be denied, but on a number of important specific issues, there are great differences.

Similarly, Beowulf's confrontation with the dragon bears only rudimentary resemblance to Christ's defeat of Satan in the shape of the serpent, a defeat which takes place only in the symbolic sense, since the Satan of the Harrowing of Hell is in angelic, not reptiliar orm. There is no wrestling match between God and Dragon in orthodox lore. Rather, Beowulf's defeat, and death, would suggest that the hero is hardly a "type of Christ" at all. It is clear, indeed, that the Beowulf episode is part of a well developed Aryan tradition of man-serpent combat. Included in this tradition are such combats as typify the creation legends of the battle of the sun-god and the demon of darkness and storm: Indra and Ahi; Mithra and Ahriman; Apollo and Python; Perseus and the sea serpent; Sigfried and the dragon; Sigurd and Fafnir; St George and the dragon, and a number of others.[1]

1.   See Fontenrose, Python, op. cit., passim; M. Smith (ed.) The Dragon, esp. pp. 58ff.; Lewis Spence, British Mythology, pp. 129ff. and see infra, "The Serpent of Chaos". Richard Bauman, in "A Sixteenth Century Version of the Dragon-Slayer", points out that there are over 1100 separate folk-tales of the dragonslayer type in the Western Hemisphere.

When Beowulf enters the arena, he does so, not out of any desire

to achieve personal salvation, but out of the urgings of his

spirit for fame$_1$. He tells Hrothgar:

> "Ic gefremman sceal
> eorlic ellen,   oþþe endedæg
> on þisse meoduhealle   mine gebidan"
>   (636a - 638)

and it is this which he achieves in his victory over Grendel.

The praise of Hrothgar must be as sweet to the hero, even more

so, than the gifts with which he is showered:

> "þu þe self hafast
> dædum gefremed,   þæt þin dom lyfaþ
> awa to aldre."
>   (953b - 955a)

The importance of reputation runs through the poem like a

refrain : not only in positive terms, as in the praise of

Beowulf, or the example of Sigemund (885ff.), but also in the

negative examples of men who are models of infamy, as in the case

of Unferth (1465ff.) and Heremod (1709ff.).

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1.   It is true that he also comes to cleanse ("fælsian ")
      Heorot: but the bulk of his introductory speech is taken up
      with either his boast of past victories and the renown they
      yielded, or his boast of the glory he hopes to achieve. The
      modern myth hero, the gunfighter, operates in exactly the
      same way as Beowulf does: he is drawn, as if by magnetism,
      to pit himself against the opponent whose victories have
      accumulated enormous renown for him. If he wins, the renown
      of the vanquished accrues to him - not only would Beowulf be
      "better" than Grendel, he would also be "better" than all
      Grendel's victims. For an examination of the modern mythic
      hero, see B. Butler (op. cit., passim.) who points out that:
      "The measurement of a hero, his definition, is his
      confrontation with an antagonist." (p. 18) This is, no
      doubt, one of the reasons that in Germanic literature, the
      hero seldom faces an anonymous figure, but a character
      visualised as a renowned champion - like Daeghrefn or
      Snaekoll.

In the world of Beowulf, there is little room for self-effacement: for all men, the acquisition of fame is the prime good.

> Ure æghwylc sceal   ende gebidan
> worolde lifes;   wyrce se þe mote
> domes ær deaþe;   þæt biþ drihtguman
> unlifgendum   æfter selest.
> (1386 - 1389)

Fame also accrues through the other pole of heroic verse, liberality.

> As the poet sees it, the heroic is a characteristic of warrior societies consisting each of a warlord (dryhten) and a body of retainers (gedryht). Heroic munificence is incumbent upon the dryhten...The arms and the rings he distributes ceremoniously at feasts are of practical use to his warriors and they convey status (weorþ). The warrior is bound in honour to make a countergift of his military services and all that they bring...[1]

Because of the king's position, and probably as a surrogate for the fame of martial exploits denied to the old, liberality replaces valour as the praiseworthy feature of a man. (Although some old kings, like Beowulf and Ongentheow, fight to the last.) Failure to behave with generosity leads to acrimony, as is the case with the tight-fisted Heremod. Thus the gifts of a grateful lord reinforce the warrior ethic and the search for fame by providing the warrior with the visible emblems of his military skill: rings, arms and armour.

1.   Charles Donahue, "Potlatch and Charity", p. 24. As Rosemary Woolf points out in "The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lord" such gifts and service are not always seen as requiring self-sacrifice on the death of the lord in every circumstance. Her argument stresses, however, that personal survival must be achieved honourably.

As the life of the hero draws to its close, with the imminent battle against the dragon, Beowulf's courage remains undimmed by his age. Yet he is old - he has ruled fifty winters - and he is not the man he once was: we should keep this firmly in mind when we come to consider whether or not his death in battle with the dragon is a failure, a punishment for presumption, or a victory.

It is the fate of the kings in <u>Beowulf</u> that they should die violently. Hrethric is killed by Hrothulf, who is in turn slain by Heoroweard. Finn perishes in his own hall. Hygelac dies on the battlefield; "wyrd fornam / syþþan he for wlenco wean ahsode / fæhþe to Frysum." (1205b- 1207a) Haethcyn is slain by Ongentheow, who is in turn killed by Eofor and Wulf.[1] In this context, it is hardly surprising that Beowulf should meet a violent end. Like heroes, which many of them are, Germanic kings seldom die in bed.

Yet the end that Beowulf meets is in every sense honourable and fitting. Once the dragon has brought evil down upon his people, the old king must go forth to meet it. There is no question of a deputy taking his place in the battle, even though he would expect his thegns to stand by him: his thoughts on the matter are unequivocal:

> Oferhogode þa   hringa fengel,
> þæt he þone widflogan   weorode gesohte,
> sidan herge;   no he him þa sæcce ondred,
> ne him þæs wyrmes wig   for wiht dyde,
> eafoþ ond ellen,   forþon he ær fela
> nearo neþende   niþa gedigde... (2345 - 2350)

1.   i.e. "Boar" and "Wolf": appropriate names for warriors, but also very apt for the forces loosed upon society by such disruptive feuds and raids.

We know that Beowulf is an old man, and we suspect - a suspicion which is subsequently confirmed - that this is to be his last battle. Yet he goes out to meet his new adversary with the resolution which has characterised him throughout his life. Is this presumption, the attempt of a man to achieve what is beyond his measure - or is it the sort of courage which we would expect from Beowulf?₁ The answer to that question must lie in the view we take of the poem as a whole: if we see the final act as sheer pride and the folly of an old pagan who puts his faith in himself rather than in God, then naturally we believe that Beowulf's death is the wages of presumption.

Beowulf is, above all else, a hero, and it seems to me fitting that he behaves as a hero to the end of his days. He is not the same sort of man as Hrothgar (good king that the latter is, as the poet often reminds us) who will permit others to undertake what he himself cannot. Indeed, there is no reason for Beowulf to believe that he cannot defeat the monster, but he acknowledges the possibility of defeat in truly heroic terms:

> Nis þæt eower siþ,
> ne gemet mannes,   nefne min anes,
> þæt he wiþ aglæcan   eofoþo dæle,
> eorlscype efne.   Ic mid elne sceall
> gold gegangan,   oþþe guþ nimeþ,
> feorhbealu frecne   frean eowerne.

(2532a -- 2537)

1.   "...a man may think he has gifts which he has not, or he may unreasonably seek to be esteemed above others. Such cases of pride, though always harmful to a degree, are not generally seriously sinful... [Pride] is a capital sin because it is the foundation for other sins such as presumptuousness, which inclines the proud man to attempt what is beyond his powers." NCE, xi, 766. The problem is that presumptuousness may only become apparent with failure.

These lines, and his refusal to offer an unqualified boast before the battle, are an indication that Beowulf does indeed fear that he shall not win. This is not the sin of presumption. Beowulf does not go into the fight believing that he is invincible. What he does believe is that it is his duty to attempt the deed; he is the king of his folk, and must pit himself against the evil which has descended upon them.

The dragon fight, and Beowulf's subsequent death, bring into sharp focus the problem of the heroic code which Beowulf embraces. As hero, he has the obligation to throw down the gauntlet to the forces which threaten society: as king he has the duty to maintain continuity of rule, and hence order, over the folk. If he acts as hero, and dies, then his death is a factor in the subsequent suffering of his rulerless people. Yet if he shrinks from the encounter which he believes he could win, then he no longer can lay claim to the fame which he has accrued over his lifetime. Age is not an excuse for failure to do one's duty. Therefore, Beowulf, because he is both king and hero, takes the risk and dies.

This is not presumption on his part, but a clear recognition of the duty which lies before him. He alone must take on the fight, since he believes that he alone has the strength to overcome the dragon : he is wrong in this belief, but it is the code he has lived by all his life, and he will not change it now.

Beowulf's death is celebrated in truly pagan terms. There is no sign in the concluding lines of Beowulf to suggest that the poet really believes that the hero has died anything other than a noble death.[1] For while the Geatish society may well crumble in the years to come, there is absolutely no way in which the aged hero could be held to blame for future events. In my view, the dire prophecies which are made by Wiglaf are thoroughly pagan, in that they are the view of a man whose idea of the cosmos is of an accelerating entropy, when the forces of chaos, which loom always around the pale of society, will rise in triumph and engulf the world. To Wiglaf, the Christian consolation is totally irrelevant: moreover, it is totally alien to the tenor of the litany of slaughter which he recites over Beowulf. The portrait of the world which Wiglaf develops is one of chaos, where warring men fight to the death over ancient wrongs, and heroes bleed their strength out in mutual destruction.

His sentiments are echoed in the grim words of the woman, who:

> hearmdagas hearde ondrede
> wælfylla worn, wigendes egesan
> hynþo ond hæftnyd.   (3153b - 3155a)

1. Cf. Kemp Malone, "Beowulf the Headstrong": "Many great men have died in bed but for heroic story Beowulf's way of dying is as it should be: fighting to the utmost against an evil foe of his people, a foe stronger than he...Beowulf dies as he had lived, a "folces weard" indeed." (p. 145) George Clark praises Byrhtnoth in the same way: "Had Byrhtnoth let the moment of decision and the opportunity for battle pass, he might well have died ingloriously in bed and lain in unsuing oblivion to the end of time. He chose battle, lost, won the heartfelt praise of his own and later ages, and deserves the praise of ours." "The Hero of Maldon", p. 282.

Is the ensuing destruction of the Geatish society, then the fault of Beowulf for risking his life in the dragon-fight? Commonsense would say no.

Beowulf is mortal, and he is old. He is doomed to die, as are all men, and his death will signal the end of the peace which his renown and his leadership have bestowed upon the people. No comparable power will rise in the land, simply because the hero has no equal – not even Wiglaf, his kinsman and the last of the Waegmunding clan, shares the power of the old king. Thus, the chaos which will descend upon the Geats is inevitable: it is part of the pattern of disruption which follows the death of the king, an important component of the world-view of Beowulf, which reflects the position of the king in the cosmic order.

For example, the death of Hrothgar will lead, as Beowulf tells Hygelac, to a period of internecine strife in the Danish kingdom, as the heirs of the king fight for power; in the ensuing chaos, Heorot, the great symbol of order, will be destroyed, just as that which it symbolises crashes in ruins.

Similarly, the death of Hygelac in the fight against the Frisians, brings about the succession of Heardred and the war against the Swedes, a war foreseen by the widowed queen Hygd:

> bearne (Heardred) ne truwode,
> þæt he wiþ ælfylcum eþelstolas
> healdon cuþe, þa wæs Hygelac dead.
>
> (2370 – 2372)

It is not, then, the defeat of Beowulf in the dragon-fight which brings about the chaos in the Geatish kingdom forecast by Wiglaf and the old woman. This chaos is the natural result of the loss of the king certainly, but it would have come about no matter how Beowulf died.

The view of the Geats, that chaos is coming, is the natural outcome of the world-view of the Germanic societies portrayed in the poem: a view that chaos is never fully defeated, and that order is secure only so long as the king or the hero is alive and capable of defending that order against hostile powers — whether human or superhuman — which are always prowling outside the pale. The function of the Germanic hero is to give his life, if necessary, for the social good.

The rewards for that heroism are the gifts bestowed upon the warrior, and the praises sung by the scops: but only the latter is durable. As life itself is transitory, so too are the trappings of that life. The treasures of the dead folk guarded by the dragon are as useless to Beowulf in his death as they were to the dragon; all that the hero can hope for, and indeed, what he receives in his death, is the continuation of his fame in song and story.

This is no Christian consolation. Beowulf's soul leaves his body to seek the "soþfæstra dom": but it is not escorted to the heavens by the choiring angels which come for Guthlac or Juliana. Beowulf dies as he has lived, a pagan hero whose life exemplifies Germanic heroism; "manna mildust   ond monþwærust / leodum liþost   ond lofgeornost."   (3182 — 3183)