

# The second is the exegetical or neoaugustinian

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Our work is a literary analysis of `Beowulf` that focuses on the literary work but not history of the poem. It's going to be research how the story could be viewed as heroism with the death of the hero. But at first we should review critical writings. Two main critical approaches have dominated the field in the last thirty years. The first is the application to Old English verse of the oral-formulaic theory that Milman Parry and Albert Lord developed out of their study of contemporary South-Slavic oralpoetry.

1 The second is the exegetical or neoAugustinian form of interpretation associated particularly with the name of D. W. Robertson in the area of medieval English literature. 2 A major reason for the popularity of the first two theories is that they seem to offer structured approaches to a poetry that for many modern readers lacks any clear and familiar structure. Imagine for a moment the naive first reactions toBeowulfof a reader hitherto accustomed only to modern literature (i. e. , literature in Modern English, since Shakespeare).

Such a reader will respond quickly and positively to some of the poem's descriptions of violent action; will find curiously attractive some of the exotic atmosphere of mead-hall and dragon-mound; and may experience familiar emotions when reading a few highly lyrical passages. But surely he or she will find large sections of the poem imaginatively inert -- slowmoving, redundant, didactic, often simply opaque. Such a reader -I might as well confess that this devil's advocate I have in mind is myself at a very early stage -- may wonder why in the world the poet has chosen to direct his attention where he does.

Why does he keep tirelessly making the same points and telling the same kindsof illustrative stories over and over, yet spend so pitifully little time on the literary things we have been taught to think important? On characterization, for instance, with its problems of development, complexity, clearmotivation; on richness of detail in the natural and physical background; on informal, natural, and " real" interactions between people; on a broad or " rounded" or ironic view of the world the poet presents.

If we judge Beowulf by novelistic standards, it shows us a cast of ornately dressed and stuffed (or stuffy) mannequins, always ready to restate the obvious, acting out rituals as obscure as they are strenuous. The importance of Beowulf in establishing, from a literary-critical viewpoint, the definitive epic style in Old English poetry cannot be exaggerated. Beowulf and the Waldere fragments were held to constitute 'the only narrative poems in an old Teutonic dialect that inrespectof their scale can be compared with the epics of other lands'.

3 For most readers today the epic quality of Beowulf is not in doubt. 4 Since Beowulf was obviously 'epic', it must be an originally orally composed poem to which Christian colouring was later added. 5 Now look more closely at the strange text of Beowulf. On written pages, written (at least in this sole surviving manuscript) about the year 1000, though probably copied from earlier versions, 6 we find a text largely composed of formulas. A concrete instance may serve to illustrate this idea of limitation. That highly conventional beast the dragon is a simple example.

If a dragon, a wrym, a draca, appears in a given passage, we can be sure that the terms applied to it and the actions it performs will all lie well within

a small compass of convention. In what follows, the numbers in parentheses indicate my rough count of the "formulaic" epithets and phrases applied to various aspects of the dragon in Beowulf. The count can only be approximate, since there is much overlapping. It will be noted at once that some aspects are copiously, even redundantly, exemplified and restated.

Though there is ample variation within each of these tight clusters of patterns, and though this variation indeed forms a striking feature of the style (admittedly one our novice reader will need some time to appreciate), the examples of variation never range far outside a drastically restricted number of fixed bases. We might call these bases normal expectations. Oral poetry as we see it in Beowulf is precisely, almost forbiddingly, the poetry of normal expectations. They appear in all its patterns.

More specific terms for some of these patterns (though my use of terms will lack the rigorous clarity of definition the theorist demands) include the following: epithets habitually attached to characters or objects (eccc drihten 'eternal lord' or eald sweord 'ancient sword', the attributes riveted tight to their nouns); type-characters (the gracious mead-pouring queen Wealhtheow); traditional narrative sequences (voyages, gift-giving, fights); gnomic assertions of permanent ethical values (swa sceal man don 'thus should a man [always] do'); certain heavily symbolic objects (weapons, ships, halls, barrows); stock settings and props (benches to sit on, cups to drink from); habitual use of contrast to highlight and define (the pairing for effect of good Sigemund and wicked Heremod); certain recognizable emotional tones or attitudes (boasting, the "elegiac" tone), with their own characteristic vocabularies. Such a catalogue is only an incomplete outline,

and in any case is deficient because it cannot show the complicated interweaving of these separate constituents that is so fundamentally typical of the verse.

Although medievalists are perfectly familiar with flat type-characters of the kind we find in *Beowulf*, such characters may present some problem to readers more accustomed to the subtleties of characterization in later literature. Traditional types -- the venerable and wise old king, the intensely suffering woman, the hero oddly and remotely wrapped in his sacred violence, the ravening monster from hell, the "twisted" young king unceremoniously pitched headlong off Fortune's Wheel -- these types can seem childishly simple. Exactly: they are indeed the archetypal folk characters of our fairy-tales. Let us first consider the case of Unferth, a character who has constantly been made more interesting than he really is, obsessively rounded by the critics into more complex and pleasing shapes.

If Unferth really is a traditional type-character in medieval literature, then variants of the basic type should help us find the proper category for him. Some classifications that have been suggested would label Unferth as Evil Counsellor, or All-Licensed Fool, or Official Court Guest-Tester, or Tolerated Coward (like Sir Kay in some Arthurian tales), or Raw Youth (like the rustic Perceval), perhaps in need of the guidance of a seasoned warrior-mentor who will polish his manners and heighten his courage. Yet Unferth seems to wander across the boundaries between these categories in a confusing way. He may be some new type unrecorded elsewhere, a combination of several types, or even no type at all but a new invention of the poet, though this last is unlikely.

The major stumbling block to critics, of course, has been the disparity between the fact, on the one hand, that Unferth is shown not only as failing the explicit test of heroism at the mere's edge (1465-71a) but as being sharply condemned by Beowulf (in the heat of the flyting, 581b-94) not only for cowardice but for having killed his own brothers, and the fact, on the other hand, that he evidently retains a place of honor at Hrothgar's court and generously lends Beowulf his sword, an act for which the hero warmly thanks him. In terms of the dominant heroic values of the poem, how can Unferth thus show himself to be both bad and good? Unferth has important role as a spokesman for the community of Danes. Beowulf's notable tact in his successive parleys with the Danes he met as he made his way to Heorot seemed to be evidence for his own awareness of this potential tension.

The Danes must determine whether the Geat is nothing but a wandering showoff and braggart, coming *fordolgilpe* and *forwlenco*, out of foolish boastfulness and pride. If he is, it would be truly humiliating for them to betray their own desperate need for help by treating such a heroic charlatan with respect. Thus, even if Beowulf's very well-chosen words had placated some of the Danes, it is likely that not all were ready to embrace the visitor. Unferth's sharp challenge of Beowulf may thus dramatically fill a psychological need for the Danes as a whole. At the least, taking Unferth as the spokesman for many Danes obviates any necessity to explain why they show no disapproval of his challenge to Beowulf. Unferth does not stay around in the hall long enough to be killed by Grendel.

But seeing him as one of these boasters over the ale-cup would explain later references to Unferth as a braggart. We should remember that we do not

ever hear Unferth bragging, though the poet tells us (499-505) that Unferth dislikes hearing any warrior praised as being any better than he is, an attitude consistent with being a braggart. But his only speech, the challenge to Beowulf, is no brag. There Unferth makes the charge that it is Beowulf who is an empty braggart with a low heroic credit rating, whereas Breca, Beowulf's competitor in the swimming-race, is not. Later, when Unferth gives the sword Hrunting to Beowulf to use in the mere-fight, the poet tells us that the Dane does not remember what he had said when he was drunk (1465-68a).

What must be referred to here is not the occasion of his attack on Beowulf which we witnessed but some boast we never actually heard (but can infer from Hrothgar's description just quoted), since the poet's remark is immediately followed by the statement that Unferth himself did not dare to risk his own life in the mere. This is not a very distinctive failure. Neither did any other Dane. In this, Unferth once again seems merely representative. But only if he had been a conspicuous braggart in the past would his behavior now be considered reprehensible or even noteworthy. That the poet sees Unferth as representative Dane may, however, find some additional support elsewhere. It should be noted that Beowulf himself takes Unferth's attack on him to be a Danish attack, one that requires a counterattack as much against the whole nation as against Unferth individually.

In his reply (starting at 581b) he begins by addressing Unferth quite personally indeed, pointing out that, while he knows evidence that Unferth has killed his own brothers (a serious charge of fratricide later validated by the poet, 1167-68), and perhaps by treachery, if the phrase *peah pin wit*

though 'though your wit is keen' (589) implies some clever plotting, there is even more sensational evidence, twelve whole years of it, that Unferth has not been giving Grendel any trouble whatsoever. But Beowulf then moves on at once to broaden the charge to include all Danes. Eower leode (596) is a plural really addressed over Unferth's head to the listening Danes, and it is followed by the plural terms Sigescyldinga, leode Deniga, Gardenum.

None of these people, though they may not be brother-slayers, have ever given Grendel any trouble either. It will take a Geat to do that. Unferth is then a symbol of national rather than merely private inadequacy. The closing lines of Beowulf's reply modulate out of mockery and into reassurance. Here Unferth may well stand for the Everydane who, the hero promises, will be able to go happy and safe to his morning mead in Heorot next day, after Grendel has been taken out of the way. But before we speak further of comradeship, we must deal with Beowulf's devastating assertion that Unferth will be damned for killing his brothers. The remark is made in the context of a Germanic flyting or word-battle.

Unferth's challenge follows close on a long boasting speech by Beowulf (407-55) and Hrothgar's description of the failure of the Danish hall-boasters to survive their encounters with Grendel. This combination of speeches sets up a testing situation. If the Danes' many boasts about defeating Grendel could never be carried out, and if Beowulf's boast about beating Breca in the swimming-contest could never be carried out, why then should anyone expect that the hero's present boast offers any promise of fulfillment? Such is the gist of Unferth's speech, but its tone is even more important. It is full of the taunting terms of hot heroic competitiveness: wunne 'struggled'; ymb



sund flite 'competed in swimming'; he ? e ? t sunde oferflat 'he beat you at swimming'; h? fde mare m? gen 'he had greater strength'.

All this language is couched to stir the quick anger of any proud and touchy rival. Even though brother-slaying can be viewed as a terrible crime, as it certainly is by Beowulf when he wants to be accusatory, it can also be mentioned rather neutrally and casually, as I think is done here. Unferth's virtue of great courage or spirit is in the main clause, and he is granted amnesty for fratricide in the subordinate clause. Critics have not generally accepted this particular subordination of importance, but I see no reason not to take this passage as straightforward and without any bitter irony, even though the poet himself may be more critical of Unferth's murderous past than the Danes seem to be.

But this does not mean that the text here contains a patronizing allusion to the Danes' lamentable and inexplicable blindness to Unferth's real and rotten nature; it merely shows that they are not presently engaged in a flyting with him. A flyting would be the appropriate occasion to dredge up and bring forth such bits of past scandal, but the duration of a flyting is limited and time-bound. Yet, though Unferth is thoroughly beaten in the flyting and proved to be inferior to Beowulf in heroic achievement, he does not seem to be especially humiliated in this scene, partly because the poet's eye is, as always, on Beowulf's greatness and partly because Unferth as a Dane must accept the evidence that only a nearsupernatural hero could have made any mark on Grendel.

The Danes would much rather have saved their own great hall themselves but plainly they could not. So now they cheerfully set to work restoring

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Heorot to order (991 ff. ), and, though nothing is said about it, one would not be entirely surprised to hear that Unferth was turning to and joining in the task. If then we see the argument between Unferth and Beowulf as coming to a full stop here, it seems most unlikely that Unferth's later loan of a sword to Beowulf for the fight with Grendel's mother is to be construed as a reopening of hostilities, or as a malicious act reflecting ill-feeling and resentment. It has been surmised that Unferth might know Hrunting to be a defective weapon. 7