Beowulf and the Limits of Literature—II

by Eric John

Let us now move more intimately into the vocabulary of *Beowulf*. It is well known that Anglo-Saxon poems, including *Beowulf*, go in for a device of repetition in varied form of key words and phrases, presumably to get the point across without boring an audience listening to the poem. No device gives the scholar more headaches. Some of these synonyms concern weapons. A lot of different words have to be rendered flatly in modern English by 'sword', 'spear' and so on. It seems to me this is more serious than many commentators have taken it to be. In *Beowulf*'s world, swords and sword-play were the very matter of survival. My instinct tells me that the mysterious and fallible swords Beowulf used in his fights have an important significance not yet elucidated, but I do not think we shall ever know what it is. It was pointed out to me by one of the greatest scholars of the last generation that many of these so-called synonyms were in fact words for different types of weapons. It is obvious from the archaeological evidence that the Anglo-Saxons had a variety of swords and spears of different types and it takes no great guessing to think they had different names, different functions, and different, quite socialized and common-place, emotions attached to these names. Let me give an example to make clear the point I am making: Consider this piece of deathless prose:

> 'A young deb was standing outside the Hilton watching a bird who had just come out of a public bar and was adjusting her C and A modes. An E type drew up outside the pub and the bird got in it. Just then the deb's escort turned up in a Beetle. She took one look at him, flounced her Mary Quant's, and swept back into the Hilton.'

Suppose a translator had to work on this who was unfamiliar with our way of life and knew not the internal combustion engine: further, his potential audience had an entirely different set of status symbols. He has only his word for motor-car, a word quite without emotional charge in his language, to render E type and Beetle. The relation of the species deb to the genus bird is alien to his world, which does not know the difference between a pub and its denizens and a Hilton and its. The point of the episode, obvious enough to us, would completely escape him, unless he knew the status symbols of our society: this must mean he could only get the meaning across to his audience by what was in effect an added commentary.

If I may quote Wittgenstein again we must ask the use of words not their meaning and that is what we cannot do with *Beowulf* until we are more familiar with its world. It seems to me that most commentators have missed the *mafiosa* character of *Beowulf*'s world. Professor Tolkien, defending the practice of rendering *Beowulf* in a

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manner some consider suitable for the Arthurian legends, says: 'If there be any danger of calling up inappropriate pictures of the Arthurian world, it is less one than the danger of too many warriors and chiefs begetting the far more inept picture of Zulus or Red Indians.' He has I think got it precisely the wrong way round. No-one who has read the detailed accounts of the battle of Lechfeld, certainly more than a century nearer the world of medieval chivalry to which Tolkien thinks *Beowulf* almost belongs, will fail to be struck to the likeness of the Hungarian way of life and mode of fighting to the Indians of the classical Westerns. The famous story of *Cynewulf and Cynweard* in the Chronicle is about as far from the Arthurian attitude towards courtly love as one could get. Hrothgar, Scyld Scefing, Hygelac, and so on, as the poem makes amply clear, were not kings in the manner of George VI or the late King Farouk. They got where they were at least partly by fighting for position. Whatever their family they inherited nothing if 'slack'. If successful they stole their neighbours' property and exacted tribute. Beowulf would have been far more at home in the H.Q. of *Cosa Nostra* than he would taking tea at the Palace—and no doubt would find the religion more to his taste. It does not matter if the reader accepts this view on the mode of life of *Beowulf*'s audience on my say so or not. (Although it is seriously meant and could easily be defended.) The point is that if it is right the parts of the poem combine in a different way to make a different poem, as they would do on any alternative set of assumptions about the poet and his world.

I should like now to abandon *Beowulf* and draw some general implications from the argument.

Every society so far studied, either by historians or sociologists, has status groupings whose outward and visible signs are status symbols. These are to a large degree both constitutive of the status group and in themselves conventional and arbitrary. It will not do to argue as Michael Banton does in his textbook on *Roles* that status is not conveyed by symbols but by signs:

> 'A big car is not a symbol of anything else; it is itself a sign that its owner is rich or enamoured of big cars.'

He goes on to say that status signs are related to status like flat tyres are related to punctures. I think he does this because he writes from within a society in which big cars are accepted as status symbols, to others similarly located. Because everyone knows this, it seems that a big car is a sign not a symbol. But in Malaysia yellow motor cars, not big ones, are the supreme status symbol, because they are confined to members of the princely families. No-one from outside would see yellow cars as a status sign at all—he would regard their relative scarcity as largely a sign of colour preferences until he tried driving one and encountered the effect it made on garage proprietors and the police. Or take the case of the Venetian gondolas all painted black by ancient sumptuary laws, except for one painted gold and

owned by the Coca-Cola Company. The point would be obvious to most of us, but to explain it to anyone brought up in a world without either coca-cola or American capitalism would mean embarking on a course of explanation of degree length and standard.

When I first produced a version of this argument in a Downside symposium some years ago, I was immediately accused of committing the ethical fallacy. If my argument is right what the study of *Beowulf* shows is that it is the aesthetic, value-free, approach, that is fallacious. It seems to me that every work of literature belongs to a way of life, that it is a piece of socialized, human, behaviour, whatever else it may be. It therefore makes no more sense to study works of literature as the product of gifted individuals having inspirations in garrets at midnight than it would to break a piece of prose up into individual words and discuss whether they were beautiful or not. (I remember as a schoolboy being invited by an English textbook to discuss the question whether syzygy was the ugliest word in the English language.) But the study of socialized behaviour is always raising extra-mural implications. Even the most committed sociologist of the value-free tradition would not deny that his approach was not self-evident and would offer arguments. In any case value-free sociology only works as long as the socialized behaviour under examination can be studied 'scientifically' in a laboratory-like detachment. This is just what one cannot do with a work of art.

Where the critic belongs to the same world as his literature, that is, where he shares a set of assumptions about status and status symbols, ethical values and so on, he can proceed with the most Leavis-like detachment. His great tradition will include no *Beowulfs*, or if it does they will be relegated to the margin. When a sort of *Beowulf* arises, Joyce, Sterne, they will be dismissed, and quite naturally in moral tones but not for moral reasons. They are in effect being blackballed, they do not belong to 'Cambridge'. But in a very important way these works do impinge on our world, as *Beowulf* might if we could recover it; they belong to a different world than Dr Leavis' Cambridge and some would say none the worse for that. I do not deny that Dr Leavis' Cambridge stands for something important and it does not seem to me to matter if Dr Leavis follows his taste and experience and excludes what he feels is not for him. After all his great tradition is a *a* great tradition even if it is not *the* only tradition. But it does seem to matter if allegiance to it is prescribed and it is turned into a set of standard authors for all times and places. It is precisely the *Beowulf* point that literature has a margin and the location of that margin depends on the location of the reader and is variable. Dr Leavis has got a good territory it seems to me but he prescribes the margins for literature once and for all and that will not do. What is more this kind of critic reads his own margins into his authors. The poet of *Beowulf* was not at fault

because in our world he makes problems: to accuse him of obscurity and alembicated procedures because of our difficulties with him would be silly. It seems to me equally silly to suppose that because Joyce and Sterne lie on the margins of 'the great tradition' they did this deliberately, to be way out and outrageous. It seems better to understand where they thought they stood and in what ways they can enlarge our experience. In the eighteenth century it is obvious that for so intelligent a reader as Dr Johnson, Shakespeare lay well on the margin of his experience. Largely through the efforts of great critics, Wilson Knight must be named here, he lies well in the centre of our world. He has been recovered to our enormous gain but it was not done simply by studying the words on the page; it was done by freeing the poem from a wrong context. He can also be lost again.

Freeing a work from a wrong context involves putting it in a right one. What is expressed here by the general and neutral word 'context' will, in many works and these the most valuable, mean matters of value, moral and religious, political, what you will and all social in that they involve relations between persons and the attitudes of groups. There is nothing wrong in making the extra-literary questions a point of departure, as Marxist or Freudian critics do, provided that the critic reads the book and doesn't re-write it in the way allegorizing scholars do *Beowulf*. If the work of art is a serious one it seems to me it can hardly fail to provoke a strong reaction where it is understood. Naturally the strongest reactions will be religious reactions. Why ever not?

In the sixteenth century many deeply religious men turned round with fury on the Gothic cathedral, burning and destroying where they could. They did not do this because they were vandals but because they were not aesthetes and saw the point. They attacked the Gothic cathedral because they read it correctly. The Gothic cathedral turns the permanent setting of Catholic worship into a status symbol. Look at a great Romanesque church like Vézelay: no doubt the monks who built it had status in mind, but it was controlled. The centre of the church is a small, in itself unobtrusive altar, given a central meaning and emphasis like a brilliant understatement in a sophisticated poem. In Gothic great churches it is quite different. There is no central altar. There is a high altar fenced off from *hoi polloi*, high because of its status. It is the altar at which the owners of the church—the canons, or whatever, I mean—did their private celebrating, along with such favoured and noble patrons as they wanted to flatter or fawn on. The side altars were there for the piles of relics and became treadmills of private masses by which the clergy acquired funds to go on adding to their decorations. Consequently the rich were made to feel that if they could not take it with them they could at least invest in an influential testimonial and a season ticket eternally valid.

The Gothic cathedral stands in the margins of the most damnable

heresy and it is not surprising, and entirely laudable, that men who rejected the heresy should detest the architecture that expressed it. In the reformers' world it is not surprising that so long as the reforming protest retained its connexion with its origins, Gothic was anathema. When the Methodists tried to make everybody behave like nice lower middle-class people back came Gothic into Protestant churches: it is after all a style ideally suited to religious buildings for religions about status.

It seems to me that understanding a work of art is part of the process of understanding the world that produced it, and vice versa. Not to see what Gothic architecture is about is not to understand medieval religion: to understand medieval religion is to read Gothic architecture like a book. The aesthetic fallacy, as it seems to me, would divorce the one from the other—after all its theology may be naughty but it is pretty. It is the view of a man who, offered a choice of the works of Shakespeare in a paperback (rather hastily printed) or the complete Enid Blyton sumptuously bound in red morocco with gold tooling down the spine, preferred the latter. What I think I am trying to say is that without doubt Macbeth is better than Noddy, but which matters more in our world is in doubt, and the investigation of the problem is not of concern only to literary critics.

Signs in the Wind
by Rosemary Haughton

If the Spirit speaks to the listening people of God in the events of history, as well as in Scripture, then the events of this time seem to indicate that a renewed search for the springs of Christian spirituality is probably the most urgent task placed by the Spirit before the churches.

The visible church is the listening people. It is not all the people who listen, but it is an identifiable collection of those people who are supposed to be listening to God and acting on what they hear, and who indeed have pledged themselves to do so—though in some cases rather casually, or with extensive reservations. The people must listen to the breathing of the Spirit, even if the message be only whispered, but at this time it rises even to thunder.

At any time in the history of Christianity it would be taken for granted that the personal pursuit of holiness, or the imitation of Christ, or the experience of the Spirit, are indispensable to the Christian life. The emphasis is different under these three headings, but all definitions of how Christians deepen and increase their

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