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"Seamus Heaney's splendid verse translation and bilingual edition of *Beowulf* bring the poem into focus again as a work of the greatest imaginative intensity. . . . *Beowulf* has an elemental grandeur, a ruthless beauty, and an incandescent dignity that belong only to the greatest poetry."

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"Heaney's *Beowulf* is a rhythmic masterpiece. He employs a wonderfully malleable 'sprung' or 'broken' tetrameter. . . . Heaney gleefully mixes the stresses, creating a thundering battle of anapests, iambs, amphibrachs and other accents as explosive as Beowulf's brawl with the monster Grendel." —John Mark Eberhart, *Miami Herald*

"Credit for this surge of interest should rest squarely on the marvelous language that Heaney has found to set this old warhorse of a saga running again. . . . Heaney's poetry makes eloquently persuasive the hero's tragic stature. . . . [A] newly burnished treasure." —Paul Gray, *Time*

"Heaney's alliterative translation marches to an ancient beat that drives the poem forward. . . . It's hard to miss [Heaney's] own flair, his grasp of language at once earthy and other-worldly, his bold descriptions and his loud exclamation. *Beowulf* is exciting again." —Deirdre Parker Smith, *Salisbury (N.C.) Post*

"Heaney has transformed *Beowulf* into a hit—a vivid, gripping tale written in an elegant flowing style. . . . Heaney's version is flawless . . . And [his] marvelous introduction . . . is alone worth the price of the book." —Eve Claxton, *Time Out N.Y.*

"How powerful the oldest, most archetypical literary works remain, especially when newly rendered by so accomplished a hand. . . . A new standard for versions of the old epic." —*Booklist*

"*Beowulf* is a fantastic, crackling good yarn. . . . [An] astoundingly warm, briskly paced, blazingly readable reworking. . . . Thanks to Seamus Heaney, [the] tale feels as fresh today as it must have felt all those years ago around the campfire." —Dave Ferman, *Star-Telegram*

"Both casual readers and serious academics should find this new *Beowulf* extremely exciting. A great translation of a great poem must give us glimpses of the original's greatness—but it must have its own particular kind of greatness. And Heaney's does." —Ron Smith, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*

"Looking back, I wish I had been able to read a translation like Heaney's. It has persuaded me that the poem is indeed a masterpiece." —D. M. Thomas, *Toronto Globe and Mail*

"[Heaney] has given us a grand, noble, and sorrowful book from a far distant world. To give ourselves up to that world wholly for the length of a concentrated reading can be a spiritual voyage that is profound and unforgettable." —Peter Neumeyer, *San Diego Union Tribune*

"Heaney's 21-page introduction shines with characteristic clarity and freshness—and should well equip the unfamiliar reader to make a romp, if not a study, of the work itself. . . . [The] translation is utterly enchanting." —Micheal Pekenham, *The Sun*

"[Heaney] renders the poem in vigorous, fluent lines that read with the directness and ease of good prose. The result is a fresh work, moving and vivid. . . ." —Fritz Lanham, *Houston Chronicle*

"[A] stunning new translation . . . [that] makes this northern *Gilgamesh* gripping and racy, startlingly contemporary." —Cynthia L. Haven, *San Francisco Sunday Examiner & Chronicle*

"Heaney is inspired. . . . His introduction [is] itself a profound essay on the poem, and an immediate classic. . . . [A] brilliant millennial *Beowulf*." —Dan Chiasson, *Boston Book Review*

"An extraordinary accomplishment." —*Newark Star-Ledger*

"Heaney's Introduction does everything it should. . . . The abiding impression is one of devotion and enthrallment. We end the Introduction sensing that Heaney might have found a great poetic ancestor, and touched hands with him across the centuries. And he has—no question."

—Andrew Motion, British Poet Laureate, in *The Financial Times*

"Thanks to Seamus Heaney's marvellous recreation—in both senses—this dark and gloomy work finally comes out into the light." —*The Economist*

"Heaney has turned to *Beowulf*, and the result is magnificent, breathtaking. . . . Heaney has created something imperishable and great that is stainless—stainless, because its force as poetry makes it untouchable by the claw of literalism: it lives singly, as an English language poem." —James Wood, *The Guardian*

"The translation itself rides boldly through the reefs of scholarship. . . . *Beowulf*, an elegy for heroism and a critique of feud and fratricide, is alive and well." —Michael Alexander, *The Observer*

"Heaney's excellent translation has the virtue of being both direct and sophisticated, making previous versions look slightly flowery and antique by comparison. His intelligence, fine ear and obvious love of the poem bring *Beowulf* alive as melancholy masterpiece, a complex Christian-pagan lament about duty, glory, loss and transience. . . . Heaney has done it (and us) a great service."

—Claire Harman, *Evening Standard*

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BEOWULF

A NEW VERSE TRANSLATION

SEAMUS HEANEY



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In memory of Ted Hughes

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Introduction

*And now this is 'an inheritance' —
Upright, rudimentary, unshiftable planked
In the long ago, yet willable forward*

Again and again and again.

BEOWULF: THE POEM

The poem called *Beowulf* was composed sometime between the middle of the seventh and the end of the tenth century of the first millennium, in the language that is to-day called Anglo-Saxon or Old English. It is a heroic narrative, more than three thousand lines long, concerning the deeds of a Scandinavian prince, also called Beowulf, and it stands as one of the foundation works of poetry in English. The fact that the English language has changed so much in the last thousand years means, however, that the poem is now generally read in translation and mostly in English courses at schools and universities. This has contributed to the impression that it was written (as Osip Mandelstam said of *The Divine Comedy*) "on official paper," which is unfortunate, since what we are dealing with is a work of the greatest imaginative vitality, a masterpiece where the structuring of the tale is as elaborate as the beautiful contrivances of its language. Its narrative elements may belong to a previous age but as a work of art it lives in its own continuous present, equal to our knowledge of reality in the present time.

The poem was written in England but the events it describes are set in Scandinavia, in a "once upon a time" that is partly historical. Its hero, Beowulf, is the biggest presence among the warriors in the land of the Geats, a territory situated in what is now southern Sweden, and early in the poem Beowulf crosses the sea to the land of the Danes in order to clear their country of a man-

eating monster called Grendel. From this expedition (which involves him in a second contest with Grendel's mother) he returns in triumph and eventually rules for fifty years as king of his homeland. Then a dragon begins to terrorize the countryside and Beowulf must confront it. In a final climactic encounter, he does manage to slay the dragon, but he also meets his own death and enters the legends of his people as a warrior of high renown.

We know about the poem more or less by chance because it exists in one manuscript only. This unique copy (now in the British Library) barely survived a fire in the eighteenth century and was then transcribed and titled, retranscribed and edited, translated and adapted, interpreted and reinterpreted, until it has become canonical. For decades it has been a set book on English syllabuses at university level all over the world. The fact that many English departments require it to be studied in the original continues to generate resistance, most notably at Oxford University, where the pros and cons of the inclusion of part of it as a compulsory element in the English course have been debated regularly in recent years.

For generations of undergraduates, academic study of the poem was often just a matter of construing the meaning, getting a grip on the grammar and vocabulary of Anglo-Saxon, and being able to recognize, translate, and comment upon random extracts which were presented in the examinations. For generations of scholars too the interest had been textual and philological; then there developed a body of research into analogues and sources, a quest for stories and episodes in the folklore and legends of the Nordic peoples which would parallel or foreshadow episodes in *Beowulf*. Scholars were also preoccupied with fixing the exact time and place of the poem's composition, paying minute attention to linguistic, stylistic, and scribal details. More generally, they tried to establish the history and genealogy of the dynasties of Swedes and Geats and Danes to which the poet makes constant allusion; and they devoted themselves to a consideration of the world-view behind the poem, asking to what

extent (if at all) the newly Christian understanding of the world which operates in the poet's designing mind displaces him from his imaginative at-homeness in the world of his poem—a pagan Germanic society governed by a heroic code of honour, one where the attainment of a name for warrior-prowess among the living overwhelms any concern about the soul's destiny in the afterlife.

However, when it comes to considering *Beowulf* as a work of literature, there is one publication that stands out. In 1936, the Oxford scholar and teacher J.R.R. Tolkien published an epoch-making paper entitled "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*" which took for granted the poem's integrity and distinction as a work of art and proceeded to show in what this integrity and distinction inhered. He assumed that the poet had felt his way through the inherited material—the fabulous elements and the traditional accounts of an heroic past—and by a combination of creative intuition and conscious structuring had arrived at a unity of effect and a balanced order. He assumed, in other words, that the *Beowulf* poet was an imaginative writer rather than some kind of back-formation derived from nineteenth-century folklore and philology. Tolkien's brilliant literary treatment changed the way the poem was valued and initiated a new era—and new terms—of appreciation.

It is impossible to attain a full understanding and estimate of *Beowulf* without recourse to this immense body of commentary and elucidation. Nevertheless, readers coming to the poem for the first time are likely to be as delighted as they are discomfited by the strangeness of the names and the immediate lack of known reference points. An English speaker new to *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey* or *The Aeneid* will probably at least have heard of Troy and Helen, or of Penelope and the Cyclops, or of Dido and the golden bough. These epics may be in Greek and Latin, yet the classical heritage has entered the cultural memory enshrined in English so thoroughly that their worlds are more familiar than that of the first native epic, even though it was composed cen-

turies after them. Achilles rings a bell, but not Scyld Scēfing. Ithaca leads the mind in a certain direction, but not Heorot. The Sibyl of Cumae will stir certain associations, but not bad Queen Modthryth. First-time readers of *Beowulf* very quickly rediscover the meaning of the term “the dark ages,” and it is in the hope of dispelling some of the puzzlement they are bound to feel that I have added the marginal glosses which appear in the following pages.

Still, in spite of the sensation of being caught between a “shield-wall” of opaque references and a “word-hoard” that is old and strange, such readers are also bound to feel a certain “shock of the new.” This is because the poem possesses a mythic potency. Like Shield Sheafson (as Scyld Scēfing is known in this translation), it arrives from somewhere beyond the known bourne of our experience, and having fulfilled its purpose (again like Shield), it passes once more into the beyond. In the intervening time, the poet conjures up a work as remote as Shield’s funeral boat borne towards the horizon, as commanding as the horn-pronged gables of King Hrothgar’s hall, as solid and dazzling as Beowulf’s funeral pyre that is set ablaze at the end. These opening and closing scenes retain a haunting presence in the mind; they are set pieces but they have the life-marking power of certain dreams. They are like the pillars of the gate of horn, through which wise dreams of true art can still be said to pass.

What happens in between is what William Butler Yeats would have called a phantasmagoria. Three agons, three struggles in which the preternatural force-for-evil of the hero’s enemies comes springing at him in demonic shapes. Three encounters with what the critical literature and the textbook glossaries call “the monsters.” In three archetypal sites of fear: the barricaded night-house, the infested underwater current, and the reptile-haunted rocks of a wilderness. If we think of the poem in this way, its place in world art becomes clearer and more secure. We can conceive of it re-presented and transformed in performance

in a *bunraku* theatre in Japan, where the puppetry and the poetry are mutually supportive, a mixture of technicolour spectacle and ritual chant. Or we can equally envisage it as an animated cartoon (and there has been at least one shot at this already), full of mutating graphics and minatory stereophonics. We can avoid, at any rate, the slightly cardboard effect which the word “monster” tends to introduce, and give the poem a fresh chance to sweep “in off the moors, down through the mist bands” of Anglo-Saxon England, forward into the global village of the third millennium.

Nevertheless, the dream element and overall power to haunt come at a certain readerly price. The poem abounds in passages which will leave an unprepared audience bewildered. Just when the narrative seems ready to take another step ahead into the main Beowulf story, it sidesteps. For a moment it is as if we have been channel-surfed into another poem, and at two points in this translation I indicate that we are in fact participating in a poem-within-our-poem not only by the use of italics but by a slight quickening of pace and shortening of metrical rein. The passages occur in lines 883–914 and lines 1070–1158, and on each occasion a minstrel has begun to chant a poem as part of the celebration of Beowulf’s achievement. In the former case, the minstrel expresses his praise by telling the story of Sigemund’s victory over a dragon, which both parallels Beowulf’s triumph over Grendel and prefigures his fatal encounter with the *wyrm* in his old age. In the latter—the most famous of what were once called the “digressions” in the poem, the one dealing with a fight between Danes and Frisians at the stronghold of Finn, the Frisian king—the song the minstrel sings has a less obvious bearing on the immediate situation of the hero, but its import is nevertheless central to both the historical and the imaginative world of the poem.

The “Finnsburg episode” envelops us in a society that is at once honour-bound and blood-stained, presided over by the laws of the blood-feud, where the kin of a person slain are bound to exact a price for the death, either by slaying the killer or by re-

ceiving satisfaction in the form of *wergild* (the "man-price"), a legally fixed compensation. The claustrophobic and doom-laden atmosphere of this interlude gives the reader an intense intimation of what *wyrd*, or fate, meant not only to the characters in the Finn story but to those participating in the main action of *Beowulf* itself. All conceive of themselves as hooped within the great wheel of necessity, in thrall to a code of loyalty and bravery, bound to seek glory in the eye of the warrior world. The little nations are grouped around their lord, the greater nations spoil for war and menace the little ones, a lord dies, defencelessness ensues, the enemy strikes, vengeance for the dead becomes an ethic for the living, bloodshed begets further bloodshed, the wheel turns, the generations tread and tread and tread. Which is what I meant above when I said that the import of the Finnsburg passage is central to the historical and imaginative world of the poem as a whole.

One way of reading *Beowulf* is to think of it as three agons in the hero's life, but another way would be to regard it as a poem which contemplates the destinies of three peoples by tracing their interweaving histories in the story of the central character. First we meet the Danes—variously known as the Shieldings (after Shield Sheafson, the founder of their line), the Ingwines, the Spear-Danes, the Bright-Danes, the West-Danes, and so on—a people in the full summer of their power, symbolized by the high hall built by King Hrothgar, one "meant to be a wonder of the world." The threat to this gilded order comes from within, from marshes beyond the pale, from the bottom of the haunted mere where "Cain's clan," in the shape of Grendel and his troll-dam, trawl and scavenge and bide their time. But it also comes from without, from the Heathobards, for example, whom the Danes have defeated in battle and from whom they can therefore expect retaliatory war (see ll. 2020–69).

Beowulf actually predicts this turn of events when he goes back to his own country after saving the Danes (for the time being, at any rate) by staving off the two "reavers from hell." In the

hall of his "ring-giver," Hygelac, lord of the Geats, the hero discourses about his adventures in a securely fortified cliff-top enclosure. But this security is only temporary, for it is the destiny of the Geat people to be left lordless in the end. Hygelac's alliances eventually involve him in deadly war with the Swedish king, Ongentheow, and even though he does not personally deliver the fatal stroke (two of his thanes are responsible for this—see ll. 2484–89 and then the lengthier reprise of this incident at ll. 2922–3003), he is known in the poem as "Ongentheow's killer." Hence it comes to pass that after the death of *Beowulf*, who eventually succeeds Hygelac, the Geats experience a great foreboding and the epic closes in a mood of sombre expectation. A world is passing away, the Swedes and others are massing on the borders to attack, and there is no lord or hero to rally the defence.

The Swedes, therefore, are the third nation whose history and destiny are woven into the narrative, and even though no part of the main action is set in their territory, they and their kings constantly stalk the horizon of dread within which the main protagonists pursue their conflicts and allegiances. The Swedish dimension gradually becomes an important element in the poem's emotional and imaginative geography, a geography which entails, it should be said, no very clear map-sense of the world, more an apprehension of menaced borders, of danger gathering beyond the mere and the marshes, of *mearc-stapas* "prowling the moors, huge marauders / from some other world."

Within these phantasmal boundaries, each lord's hall is an actual and a symbolic refuge. Here is heat and light, rank and ceremony, human solidarity and culture; the *duguð* share the mead-benches with the *geogoð*, the veterans with their tales of warrior kings and hero-saviours from the past rub shoulders with young braves—*þegnas*, *eorlas*, thanes, retainers—keen to win such renown in the future. The prospect of gaining a glorious name in the *wael-raes*, in the rush of battle-slaughter, the pride of defending one's lord and bearing heroic witness to the

integrity of the bond between him and his hall-companions—a bond sealed in the *glēo* and *gidd* of peace-time feasting and ring-giving—this is what gave drive and sanction to the Germanic warrior-culture enshrined in *Beowulf*.

Heorot and Hygelac's hall are the hubs of this value system upon which the poem's action turns. But there is another, outer rim of value, a circumference of understanding within which the heroic world is occasionally viewed as from a distance and recognized for what it is, an earlier state of consciousness and culture, one which has not been altogether shed but which has now been comprehended as part of another pattern. And this circumference and pattern arise, of course, from the poet's Christianity and from his perspective as an Englishman looking back at places and legends which his ancestors knew before they made their migration from continental Europe to their new home on the island of the Britons. As a consequence of his doctrinal certitude, which is as composed as it is ardent, the poet can view the story-time of his poem with a certain historical detachment and even censure the ways of those who lived *in illo tempore*:

*Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed
offerings to idols, swore oaths
that the killer of souls might come to their aid
and save the people. That was their way,
their heathenish hope; deep in their hearts
they remembered hell. (ll. 175–80)*

At the same time, as a result of his inherited vernacular culture and the imaginative sympathy which distinguishes him as an artist, the poet can lend the full weight of his rhetorical power to *Beowulf* as he utters the first principles of the northern warrior's honour-code:

*It is always better
to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning.*

*For every one of us, living in this world
means waiting for our end. Let whoever can
win glory before death. When a warrior is gone,
that will be his best and only bulwark. (ll. 1384–89)*

In an age when "the instability of the human subject" is constantly argued for if not presumed, there should be no problem with a poem which is woven from two such different psychic fabrics. In fact, *Beowulf* perfectly answers the early modern conception of a work of creative imagination as one in which conflicting realities find accommodation within a new order; and this reconciliation occurs, it seems to me, most poignantly and most profoundly in the poem's third section, once the dragon enters the picture and the hero in old age must gather his powers for the final climactic ordeal. From the moment *Beowulf* advances under the crags, into the comfortless arena bounded by the rock-wall, the reader knows he is one of those "marked by fate." The poetry is imbued with a strong intuition of *wyrd* hovering close, "unknowable but certain," and yet, because it is imagined within a consciousness which has learned to expect that the soul will find an ultimate home "among the steadfast ones," this primal human emotion has been transmuted into something less "zero at the bone," more metaphysically tempered.

A similar transposition from a plane of regard which is, as it were, helmeted and hall-bound to one which sees things in a slightly more heavenly light is discernible in the different ways the poet imagines gold. Gold is a constant element, gleaming solidly in underground vaults, on the breasts of queens or the arms and regalia of warriors on the mead-benches. It is loaded into boats as spoil, handed out in bent bars as hall gifts, buried in the earth as treasure, persisting underground as an affirmation of a people's glorious past and an elegy for it. It pervades the ethos of the poem the way sex pervades consumer culture. And yet the bullion with which Waels's son, Sigemund, weighs down the

hold after an earlier dragon-slaying triumph (in the old days, long before Beowulf's time) is a more trustworthy substance than that which is secured behind the walls of Beowulf's barrow. By the end of the poem, gold has suffered a radiation from the Christian vision. It is not that it yet equals riches in the medieval sense of worldly corruption, just that its status as the ore of all value has been put in doubt. It is *læne*, transitory, passing from hand to hand, and its changed status is registered as a symptom of the changed world. Once the dragon is disturbed, the melancholy and sense of displacement which pervade the last movement of the poem enter the hoard as a disabling and ominous light. And the dragon himself, as a genius of the older order, is bathed in this light, so that even as he begins to stir, the reader has a premonition that the days of his empery are numbered.

Nevertheless, the dragon has a wonderful inevitability about him and a unique glamour. It is not that the other monsters are lacking in presence and aura; it is more that they remain, for all their power to terrorize, creatures of the physical world. Grendel comes alive in the reader's imagination as a kind of dog-breath in the dark, a fear of collision with some hard-boned and immensely strong android frame, a mixture of Caliban and hoplite. And while his mother too has a definite brute-bearing about her, a creature of slouch and lunge on land if seal-swift in the water, she nevertheless retains a certain non-strangeness. As antagonists of a hero being tested, Grendel and his mother possess an appropriate head-on strength. The poet may need them as figures who do the devil's work, but the poem needs them more as figures who call up and show off Beowulf's physical might and his superb gifts as a warrior. They are the right enemies for a young glory-hunter, instigators of the formal boast, worthy trophies to be carried back from the grim testing-ground—Grendel's arm is ripped off and nailed up, his head severed and paraded in Heorot. It is all consonant with the surge of youth and the compulsion to win fame "as wide as the wind's home, /

as the sea around cliffs," utterly a manifestation of the Germanic heroic code.

Enter then, fifty years later, the dragon. From his dry-stone vault, from a nest where he is heaped in coils around the body-heated gold. Once he is wakened, there is something glorious in the way he manifests himself, a Fourth of July effulgence fire-working its path across the night sky; and yet, because of the centuries he has spent dormant in the tumulus, there is a foundedness as well as a lambency about him. He is at once a stratum of the earth and a streamer in the air, no painted dragon but a figure of real oneiric power, one that can easily survive the prejudice which arises at the very mention of the word "dragon." Whether in medieval art or in modern Disney cartoons, the dragon can strike us as far less horrific than he is meant to be, but in the final movement of *Beowulf*, he lodges himself in the imagination as *wyrd* rather than *wyrm*, more a destiny than a set of reptilian vertebrae.

Grendel and his mother enter Beowulf's life from the outside, accidentally, challenges which in other circumstances he might not have taken up, enemies from whom he might have been distracted or deflected. The dragon, on the other hand, is a given of his home ground, abiding in his underearth as in his understanding, waiting for the meeting, the watcher at the ford, the questioner who sits so sly, the "lion-limb," as Gerard Manley Hopkins might have called him, against whom Beowulf's body and soul must measure themselves. Dragon equals shadow-line, the psalmist's valley of the shadow of death, the embodiment of a knowledge deeply ingrained in the species which is the very knowledge of the price to be paid for physical and spiritual survival.

It has often been observed that all the scriptural references in *Beowulf* are to the Old Testament. The poet is more in sympathy with the tragic, waiting, unredeemed phase of things than with any transcendental promise. Beowulf's mood as he gets ready to

fight the dragon—who could be read as a projection of Beowulf's own chthonic wisdom refined in the crucible of experience—recalls the mood of other tragic heroes: Oedipus at Colonus, Lear at his "ripeness is all" extremity, Hamlet in the last illuminations of his "prophetic soul":

*no easy bargain
would be made in that place by any man.*

*The veteran king sat down on the cliff-top.
He wished good luck to the Geats who had shared
his hearth and his gold. He was sad at heart,
unsettled yet ready, sensing his death.
His fate hovered near, unknowable but certain. (ll. 2415–21)*

Here the poet attains a level of insight that approaches the visionary. The subjective and the inevitable are in perfect balance, what is solidly established is bathed in an element which is completely sixth-sensed, and indeed the whole slow-motion, constantly self-deferring approach to the hero's death and funeral continues to be like this. Beowulf's soul may not yet have fled "to its destined place among the steadfast ones," but there is already a beyond-the-grave aspect to him, a revenant quality about his resoluteness. This is not just metrical narrative full of anthropological interest and typical heroic-age motifs; it is poetry of a high order, in which passages of great lyric intensity—such as the "Lay of the Last Survivor" (ll. 2247–66) and, even more remarkably, the so-called "Father's Lament" (ll. 2444–62)—rise like emanations from some fissure in the bedrock of the human capacity to endure:

*It was like the misery felt by an old man
who has lived to see his son's body
swing on the gallows. He begins to keen
and weep for his boy, watching the raven
gloat where he hangs: he can be of no help.*

*The wisdom of age is worthless to him.
Morning after morning, he wakes to remember
that his child has gone; he has no interest
in living on until another heir
is born in the hall . . .*

.

*Alone with his longing, he lies down on his bed
and sings a lament; everything seems too large,
the steadings and the fields.*

Such passages mark an ultimate stage in poetic attainment; they are the imaginative equivalent of Beowulf's spiritual state at the end, when he tells his men that "doom of battle will bear [their] lord away," in the same way that the sea-journeys so vividly described in lines 210–28 and 1903–24 are the equivalent of his exultant prime.

At these moments of lyric intensity, the keel of the poetry is deeply set in the element of sensation while the mind's lookout sways metrically and far-sightedly in the element of pure comprehension. Which is to say that the elevation of *Beowulf* is always, paradoxically, buoyantly down to earth. And nowhere is this more obviously and memorably the case than in the account of the hero's funeral with which the poem ends. Here the inexorable and the elegiac combine in a description of the funeral pyre being got ready, the body being burnt, and the barrow being constructed—a scene at once immemorial and oddly contemporary. The Geat woman who cries out in dread as the flames consume the body of her dead lord could come straight from a late-twentieth-century news report, from Rwanda or Kosovo; her keen is a nightmare glimpse into the minds of people who have survived traumatic, even monstrous events and who are now being exposed to a comfortless future. We immediately recognize her predicament and the pitch of her grief and find ourselves the better for having them expressed with such adequacy and dignity and unforgiving truth:

Hwæt wē Gār-Dena in geār-dagum
þēod-cyninga þrym gefrūnon,
hū ðā æþelingas ellen fremedon.

Oft Scyld Scēfing sceaþena þrēatum,
monegum mægþum meodo-setla oftēah;
egsode Eorle, syððan ærest wearð
fēasceaft funden; hē þæs frōfre gebād:
wēox under wolcnum, weorð-myndum þāh,
oðþæt him æghwylc þāra ymb-sittendra
ofer hron-rāde hýran scolde,
10 gomban gyldan: þæt wæs gōd cyning!
Ðām eafera wæs æfter cenned
geong in geardum, þone God sende
folce tō frōfre; fyren-ðearfe ongeat,
þæt hīe ær drugon aldor-lēase
lange hwīle; him þæs Lif-frēa,
wuldres Wealdend, worold-ære forgeaf;
Bēowulf wæs brēme —blæd wīde sprang—
Scyldes eafera, Scede-landum in.
20 Swā sceal geong guma gōde gewyrcean,
fromum feoh-giftum on fæder bearme,
þæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen

So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by
and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.
We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.

There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes,
a wrecker of mead-benches, rampaging among foes.
This terror of the hall-troops had come far.
A foundling to start with, he would flourish later on
as his powers waxed and his worth was proved.
In the end each clan on the outlying coasts
10 beyond the whale-road had to yield to him
and begin to pay tribute. That was one good king.

Afterwards a boy-child was born to Shield,
a cub in the yard, a comfort sent
by God to that nation. He knew what they had tholed,
the long times and troubles they'd come through
without a leader; so the Lord of Life,
the glorious Almighty, made this man renowned.
Shield had fathered a famous son:
Beow's name was known through the north.
20 And a young prince must be prudent like that,
giving freely while his father lives
so that afterwards in age when fighting starts

The Danes have legends about their warrior kings. The most famous was Shield Sheafson, who founded the ruling house

wil-gesīþas, þonne wīg cume,
lēode gelæsten; lof-dædum sceal
in mægþa gehwære man geþeōn.

Him ðā Scyld gewāt tō gescæp-hwīle,
fela-hrōr, fēran on Frēan wære.

Hī hyne þā ætbæron tō brimes faroðe,
swæse gesīþas, swā hē selfa bæd,
þenden wordum wēold wine Scyldinga,
lēof land-fruma lange āhte.

Þær æt hýðe stōd hringed-stefna,
īsig ond ūt-fūs, æþelinges fær;

ālēdon þā lēofne þeoden,
bēaga bryttan on bearm scipes,
mārne be mæste; þær wæs mādma fela
of feor-wegum, frætwa, gelæded.

Ne hýrde ic cýmlīcor cēol gegyrwan
hilde-wæpnum ond heaðo-wædum,
billum ond byrnum; him on bearme læg
mādma mænigo, þā him mid scoldon
on flōdes æht feor gewītan.

Nalæs hī hine læssan lācum tēodan,
þeod-gestrēonum, þon þā dydon,
þe hine æt frumsceaftē forð onsendon
æne ofer yðe umbor-wesende.

Þā gýt hī him āsetton segend gyldenre
hēah ofer hēafod, lēton holm beran,
gēafon on gār-secg; him wæs geōmor sefa,
murnende mōd. Men ne cunnon

secgan tō sōðe, sele-rædende,
hæleð under heofenum, hwā þām hlæste onfēng.
Ðā wæs on burgum Bēowulf Scyldinga,

steadfast companions will stand by him
and hold the line. Behaviour that's admired
is the path to power among people everywhere.

Shield was still thriving when his time came
and he crossed over into the Lord's keeping.
His warrior band did what he bade them
when he laid down the law among the Danes:
they shouldered him out to the sea's flood,
the chief they revered who had long ruled them.

A ring-whorled prow rode in the harbour,
ice-clad, outbound, a craft for a prince.
They stretched their beloved lord in his boat,
laid out by the mast, amidships,
the great ring-giver. Far-fetched treasures
were piled upon him, and precious gear.
I never heard before of a ship so well furbished
with battle tackle, bladed weapons
and coats of mail. The massed treasure
was loaded on top of him: it would travel far
on out into the ocean's sway.

They decked his body no less bountifully
with offerings than those first ones did
who cast him away when he was a child
and launched him alone out over the waves.
And they set a gold standard up
high above his head and let him drift
to wind and tide, bewailing him
and mourning their loss. No man can tell,
no wise man in hall or weathered veteran
knows for certain who salvaged that load.

Then it fell to Beow to keep the forts.

Shield's funeral

lēof lēod-cyning, longe þrāge
folcum gefrāge; fæder ellor hwearf,
aldor of earde. Opþæt him eft onwōc
hēah Healfdene; hēold, þenden lifde,
gamol ond gūð-rēow, glæde Scyldingas.

60 Dām fēower bearn forð-gerīmed
in worold wōcun: weoroda ræswan,
Heorogār, ond Hrōðgār ond Hālgā til;
hūrde ic þæt wæs Onelan cwēn,
Heaðo-Scilfingas heals-gebedda.

þā wæs Hrōðgāre here-spēd gyfen,
wīges weorð-mynd, þæt him his wine-māgas
georne hūrdon, oððþæt sēo geogoð gewēox
mago-driht micel. Him on mōd be-arn
þæt heal-reced hātan wolde,
70 medo-ærn micel : men gewyrcean,
þonne ylðo bearn æfre gefrūnon,
ond þær on innan eall gedælan
geongum ond ealdum, swylc him God sealde,
būton folc-scare ond feorum gumena.

Dā ic wīde gefrægn weorc gebannan
manigre mægþe geond þisne middan-gearð,
folc-stede frætwan. Him on fyrste gelomp,
ædre mid yldum, þæt hit wearð eal-gearo,
heal-ærna mæst; scōp him Heort naman,
80 sē þe his wordes geweald wīde hæfde.

Hē bēot ne ālēh, bēagas dælde,
sinc æt symle. Sele hlīfade
hēah ond horn-gēap, heaðo-wylma bād,
lāðan līges; ne wæs hit lenge þā gēn,
þæt se ecg-hete āþum-swerian
æfter wæl-nīðe wæcnan scolde.

He was well regarded and ruled the Danes
for a long time after his father took leave
of his life on earth. And then his heir,
the great Halfdane, held sway
for as long as he lived, their elder and warlord.
He was four times a father, this fighter prince:
60 one by one they entered the world,
Heorogar, Hrothgar, the good Halga
and a daughter, I have heard, who was Onela's queen,
a balm in bed to the battle-scarred Swede.

The fortunes of war favoured Hrothgar.
Friends and kinsmen flocked to his ranks,
young followers, a force that grew
to be a mighty army. So his mind turned
to hall-building: he handed down orders
70 for men to work on a great mead-hall
meant to be a wonder of the world forever;
it would be his throne-room and there he would dispense
his God-given goods to young and old—
but not the common land or people's lives.
Far and wide through the world, I have heard,
orders for work to adorn that wallstead
were sent to many peoples. And soon it stood there,
finished and ready, in full view,
the hall of halls. Heorot was the name
he had settled on it, whose utterance was law.
80 Nor did he renege, but doled out rings
and torques at the table. The hall towered,
its gables wide and high and awaiting
a barbarous burning. That doom abided,
but in time it would come: the killer instinct
unleashed among in-laws, the blood-lust rampant.

*Shield's heirs: his
son Beow succeeded
by Halfdane,
Halfdane by
Hrothgar*

*King Hrothgar
builds Heorot Hall*

Ða se ellen-gæst earfoðlice
 þræge geþolode, sē þe in þystrum bād,
 þæt hē dōgora gehwām drēam gehyrde
 hlūdne in healle; þær wæs hearpan swēg,
 90 swutol sang scopes. Sægde sē þe cūþe
 frumsceaft fira feorran reccan,
 cwæð þæt se Ælmihtiga eorðan worhte,
 wlite-beorhtne wang, swā wæter bebūgeð:
 gesette sige-hrēþig sunnan ond mōnan
 lēoman tō lēohte land-būendum,
 ond gefræt Wade foldan scēatas
 leomum ond lēafum; lif ēac gesceōp
 cynna gehwylcum, þāra ðe cwice hwyrfaþ.
 Swā ðā driht-guman drēamum lifdon,
 100 ēadiglice, oððæt ān ongan
 fyrene fremman fēond on helle.
 Wæs se grimma gæst Grendel hāten,
 mære mearc-stapa, sē þe mōras hēold,
 fen ond fæsten; fifel-cynnes eard
 won-sæli wer weardode hwīle,
 siþðan him Scyppend forscriften hæfde
 in Caines cynne— þone cwealm gewræc
 ēce Drihten, þæs þe hē Abel slōg.
 Ne gefeah hē þære fæhðe, ac hē hine feor forwræc,
 110 Metod for þy mæne, man-cynne fram.
 Panon untýdras ealle onwōcon,
 eotenas ond ylfe ond orcnēas,
 swylce gīgantas, þā wið Gode wunnon
 lange þræge; hē him ðæs lēan forgeald.
 Gewāt ðā nēosian, syþðan niht becōm,
 hēan hūses, hū hit Hring-Dene

Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark,
 nursed a hard grievance. It harrowed him
 to hear the din of the loud banquet
 every day in the hall, the harp being struck
 90 and the clear song of a skilled poet
 telling with mastery of man's beginnings,
 how the Almighty had made the earth
 a gleaming plain girdled with waters;
 in His splendour He set the sun and the moon
 to be earth's lamplight, lanterns for men,
 and filled the broad lap of the world
 with branches and leaves; and quickened life
 in every other thing that moved.

So times were pleasant for the people there
 until finally one, a fiend out of hell,
 100 began to work his evil in the world.
 Grendel was the name of this grim demon
 haunting the marches, marauding round the heath
 and the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time
 in misery among the banished monsters,
 Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed
 and condemned as outcasts. For the killing of Abel
 the Eternal Lord had exacted a price:
 Cain got no good from committing that murder
 110 because the Almighty made him anathema
 and out of the curse of his exile there sprang
 ogres and elves and evil phantoms
 and the giants too who strove with God
 time and again until He gave them their reward.

So, after nightfall, Grendel set out
 for the lofty house, to see how the Ring-Danes

Heorot is threatened

*Grendel, a monster
descended from
"Cain's clan,"
begins to prowl*

*Grendel attacks
Heorot*

120

æfter bēor-þege gebūn hæfdon;
 fand þā ðær inne æþelunga gedriht
 swefan æfter symble— sorge ne cūðon,
 wonsceaft wera. Wiht unhælo,
 grim ond grædig, gearo sōna wæs,
 rēoc ond rēþe, ond on ræste genam
 þrītig þegna; þanon eft gewāt
 hūðe hrēmig tō hām faran,
 mid þære wæl-fylle wīca nēosan.

130

Ðā wæs on ūhtan mid ær-dæge
 Grendles gūð-cræft gumum undyrne;
 þā wæs æfter wiste wōp up āhafen,
 micel morgen-swēg. Mære þēoden,
 æþeling ær-gōð, unblīðe sæt,
 þolode ðrýð-swýð, þegn-sorge drēah,
 syðþan hīe þæs lāðan lāst scēawedon
 wergan gāstes. Wæs þæt gewin tō strang,
 lāð ond longsum. Næs hit lengra fyrst,
 ac ymb āne niht eft gefremede
 morð-beala mære ond nō mearn fore,
 fæhðe ond fyrene; wæs tō fæst on þām.
 Þā wæs eād-fynde þe him elles hwær
 gerūmlīcor ræste sōhte,
 bed æfter būrum, ðā him gebēacnod wæs,
 gesægd sōðlice sweotolan tācne
 heal-ðegnes hete; hēold hyne syðþan
 fyr ond fæstor sē þām fēonde ætwand.

140

Swā rīxode ond wið rihte wan
 āna wið eallum, oðþæt īdel stōð
 hūsa sēlest. Wæs sēo hwīl micel:
 twelf wintra tīd torn gēpolode

120

were settling into it after their drink,
 and there he came upon them, a company of the best
 asleep from their feasting, insensible to pain
 and human sorrow. Suddenly then
 the God-cursed brute was creating havoc:
 greedy and grim, he grabbed thirty men
 from their resting places and rushed to his lair,
 flushed up and inflamed from the raid,
 blundering back with the butchered corpses.

130

Then as dawn brightened and the day broke
 Grendel's powers of destruction were plain:
 their wassail was over; they wept to heaven
 and mourned under morning. Their mighty prince,
 the storied leader, sat stricken and helpless,
 humiliated by the loss of his guard,
 bewildered and stunned, staring aghast
 at the demon's trail, in deep distress.
 He was numb with grief, but got no respite
 for one night later merciless Grendel
 struck again with more gruesome murders.
 Malignant by nature, he never showed remorse.
 It was easy then to meet with a man
 shifting himself to a safer distance
 to bed in the bothies, for who could be blind
 to the evidence of his eyes, the obviousness
 of that hall-watcher's hate? Whoever escaped
 kept a weather-eye open and moved away.

140

So Grendel ruled in defiance of right,
 one against all, until the greatest house
 in the world stood empty, a deserted wallstead.
 For twelve winters, seasons of woe,

*King Hrothgar's
 distress and
 helplessness*