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Cycles and Change in *Beowulf*

In our postmodern world appreciation of literary style, structure, and theme involves more than a confidence that art recreates in microcosm a Christian God's creative ordering, patterning, and hierarchizing and more than a pessimism grounded on a belief that really there is no God, no order, no pattern and that hierarchies are always artificial and oppressive. For many the reader's responsibility to construct a "sensible" interpretation or read a text with or against critical fashion has displaced authorial prerogative. One especially important effect of reader-centered theory's ascendancy has been critical awareness of the profound impact a reader's own knowledge base and beliefs have on their interpretive acts. Thus a critic's condition of existential angst may lead him to see similar suffering in literary characters; one of the great powers of literature is to reflect the world as we would have it be. More specifically, readers experiencing a sense of futility and doom in the face of late 20th-century political and social turmoil have often valued the epic *Beowulf* for its skill in creating a powerful sense of futility and doom, believing Beowulf's death signals the end of a Heroic Age. This essay argues that a fuller understanding of some cultural systems contributing to medieval spirituality in the early middle ages, transmitted to us for the most part through patristic writings, opens up different possibilities for late 20th-century readers' interpretation of the cycles and change in *Beowulf*, especially the poem's ending. Competing

with the apocalyptic view is the possibility that dramatic reversals continue--for better **and** for worse--beyond Beowulf's death, beyond the end of the poem, beyond the poet's death, the audience's death, and the reader's death--until the end of time--in ways that seem meaningless unless readers provide their own understanding of the patterns.¹

In the early middle ages, cultural systems, including spirituality, were far from monolithic; nevertheless, Gregory the Great is generally named as the original expositor of a distinctly medieval spirituality, a dubious honor in the eyes of those who prefer to skip over the "dark ages." Typical of this mode is Robert Barr's account of theology's "wane and demise" in the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries in Western Europe: Barr credits writers of the late-patristic era at best with compilation and transmission.² In contrast, more recent scholarship, notably Carole Straw's *Gregory the Great*, explores with great care and respect the ways in which Gregory builds on earlier theologians, departs from some and returns to others, and the important ways he has contributed to modern spirituality.³

Particularly relevant to a study of cycles and change in *Beowulf* are Gregory's papal achievements and his writings about ways in which the divine expresses itself in the world of mortals. Straw writes,

As pope, Gregory attempted to accommodate the Church to the world and yet to purify the Church from secular corruption. Even as the Papacy assumed greater responsibilities in the secular realm--maintaining the supplies of food and water, paying soldiers, negotiating treaties, administering estates, and systematizing charitable operations--Gregory still sought to preserve the Church from the pollution of secular values.⁴

His policies responded to the immediate needs in Italy, where political and economic changes resulting from the dominance of the Germanic kings, especially the arrival of the Lombards in 568, manifested themselves in a kind of social revolution: “the rapid formation of a new military aristocracy that came to dominate society at the expense of the civilian senatorial aristocracy, the conflation of civilian and military authority and administration that eventually enhanced the military elite.”^v He urged, “Age quod agis!” [Do what you can do!] and never abandoned an ideal of Christian empire uniting disparate peoples.^{vi} According to Straw, for Gregory

Reaching the other world is much simpler now because it is so immediately present.

Union with God is eminently attainable: one can even cling to the light inwardly at the same time one is busied outwardly in secular affairs. As the spiritual and carnal boundaries are broken for body and soul, this world and the next, so too the boundaries between the self and others weaken, the social unity is intensified. Each individual exists only as a member of the larger, transcendent body of Christ, which is political and social as well as religious; a delicate hierarchy preserves the right order and harmony of the universe.^{vii}

Gregory apparently saw beyond simple binary oppositions of pagan and Christian, good and evil, to more complex relationships that simultaneously offered greater opportunity and greater responsibility for each human individual.

Theological beliefs such as Gregory’s go a long way toward helping 20th-century readers see the cycles and change in *Beowulf* from a Christian as well as a pagan perspective and thus appreciate more fully the *Beowulf* poet’s commingling of Christian and pagan elements.^{viii}

Gregory’s theology especially challenges a wide-spread belief that Christian doctrines expressed

in other Anglo-Saxon writings contribute to *Beowulf's* sense of futility because all non-Christians, no matter how virtuous or heroic, were damned. Much late-antique theology supports the argument for damnation. By the late fourth and early fifth centuries, Peter Brown shows, "In the Christian church, the spiritual dominance of the few was made ever firmer and more explicit by a denial of ease of access to the supernatural that would have put 'heavenly' power in the hands of the average sinful believer." Augustine, Brown points out, wrote in book ten of his *Confessions*, "surely all life on earth is a temptation," and Abba Poimen passed on Anthony's saying, "The greatest thing that a man can do is to throw his faults before the Lord and to expect temptation to his last breath."^{ix} This ascetic world view, already evident in the papal renunciation of Origen's belief that God's grace was sufficient even to save Satan himself, was fundamental to calling heretical Pelagius' belief "man could take the initial and fundamental steps towards salvation by his own efforts, apart from Divine grace."^x Such a grim reality for Christians suggests futility for pagans.

However, other currents of thought coexisted with the Christian awareness of the enormity of human sinfulness. Thus Brown concludes *The Making of Late Antiquity* with the remark,

Throughout that debate [on the holy], we meet men and women who held doggedly to an obscure intuition, with which they grappled in a language top-heavy with the presence of the supernatural: in a poignant search for some oasis of unalloyed relationships between themselves, they made plain that what human beings had marred only human beings could put right.^{xi}

Similarly, R. A. Markus warns that readers must "look deeper than Augustine's more polemical

statements on secular history and its writers” to understand Augustine’s complex understanding of the relationships between secular and sacred history.^{xii}

Augustine’s writings present not only the grim view that humanity had entered an unregenerate old age just prefatory to the second coming; he also, according to Markus, saw “a more fundamental duality between the period of promise [the prehistory of Christ] and that of fulfilment [after Christ’s incarnation].”^{xiii} Moreover, as W. F. Bolton has shown, four centuries later Alcuin’s writings incorporate complex attitudes toward secular and Christian history. Thus Alcuin’s admonition “If your forefathers . . . because they did not hope as it was right to hope, suffered what we read in the history . . . and perished in the desert because of hardness of heart; much more [*multo amplius*] are such things as befell them to be feared by you” is in a sense balanced by his exclamation,

‘But even in the histories of the ancients it is read that almost everywhere in the cities there was asylum as a refuge for criminals. And this was among the pagans! How much more among Christians, for the sake of mercy, should the churches have their honor in the rescue of fugitives?’

Pagans function as positive *and* negative examples for Christians. Bolton goes on, “So also the poem asks *quanto magis*--if Beowulf was virtuous, how much more should Christians, in the grace of the new covenant, strive to be so.”^{xiv} As Bolton suggests, Beowulf’s heroism and virtue are only negative when compared to Christ’s heroism and virtue in a reductive way. I will build on Bolton’s discussion of Alcuin and *Beowulf* to argue that awareness of human virtue as well as of sin contributes to the poem’s world view. To downplay the textual evidence that the hero Beowulf has achieved something beyond a pagan, hopeless, eschatological end--a lesson

in futility--is to deny a large part of what makes the poem great and what made Christianity attractive to many during the Anglo-Saxon period.^{xv}

Gregory the Great, writing and working in circumstances very different from Augustine's fourth century and Alcuin's eighth century, expresses belief in a world whose "invisible reality exists alongside the visible reality it sustains and determines."^{xvi} According to Straw,

Gregory is apt to spell out just what God's possibilities are: good fortune and prosperity can mean either election or abandonment; but then so can misfortune and adversity. In any individual case, the outcome of God's actions may be unknown, but the general principles of God's dispensation are known, and proper human action can be prescribed. In so labeling the possible meanings of God's dispensation, Gregory systematizes the unknown and draws a clear map to guide the pilgrim's return to his homeland.^{xvii}

These Gregorian ideas are fundamental to the sixth-century Christianization of Britain undertaken by Augustine of Canterbury and to Bede's understanding of it expressed in his *Ecclesiastical History*. Both the sense of futility associated with knowledge of human sinfulness and Gregory's confidence that virtuous human action can be directed and understood in light of the general principles of God's dispensation are pertinent to an understanding of *Beowulf*. Tempering the indisputable elegiac tone of the poem is a Christian confidence that virtuous behavior can alter the course of events in the world for the better while Christians await the second coming. In this light, diction and theme relating to cycles and change in *Beowulf* suggest more than the tragic end of the Heroic Age.

The poet says early on that the Danes know only the "hæþenra hyht" (179) ("hope of the heathen"), and specifies,

Metod hie ne cuþon,
dæda Demend, ne wiston hie Drihten God,
ne hie huru heofena Helm herian ne cuþon,
wuldres Waldend. (180-83)^{xviii}

[They knew not the Lord,
the Judge of our deeds, were ignorant of God,
knew not how to worship our Protector above,
the King of Glory.]^{xix}

However, immediately after specifying the futility of pagan practices, the poet contrasts the fire's embrace with God's embrace:

Wa bið þæm ðe sceal
þurh sliðne nið sawle bescufan
in fyres fæþm, frofre ne wenan,
wihte gewendan! Wel bið þæm þe mot
æfter deaðdæge Drihten secean
ond to Fæder fæþmum freoðo wilnian! (183-88)

[Woe unto him
who in violent affliction has to thrust his soul
in the fire's embrace, expects no help,
no change in his fate! Well is it with him
who after his death-day is allowed to seek
the Father's welcome, ask His protection!]

The futility emphasized by critics interpreting the final section of the poem, especially Beowulf's death, and the prognostications of doom for the Geats, is carefully contextualized by the poet for an audience that has been taught the benefits of Christian faith and revelation.^{xx} An examination of structure, theme, imagery, diction, and character--especially of Beowulf and Wiglaf-- reveals that the poet's treatment of change, especially reversals in fortune, creates an undercurrent of confidence in the potential for individual choice and virtuous behavior to counteract forces of destruction, both natural and supernatural, much as Christianity offers postlapsarian mortals the opportunity to reverse the effects of sin through a combination of faith and good works.

The poem's structural intricacy provides an appropriate context for the thematic and theological complexity. Theodore Andersson writes of the poem,

The *Beowulf* poet, located between the spiritual limitations of the heroic lay and the new doctrine of salvation, resolves the conflict by putting the heroic life in perspective against the promise of a future reward. The structural problem confronting him is how to illustrate the futility of this life as a background for the permanence of the next.^{xxi}

Andersson traces a series of reversals to conclude, "the larger reversal from bad to good in the monster segment is subject to another reversal from weal to woe in the dragon segment. The dragon brooding over his treasure is an apt emblem of the latent menace that broods over the history of kings and heroes."^{xxii} Nevertheless, the reversals in the poem's structure contribute to other patterns as well. The poem's bipartite, tripartite, and episodic, or digressive, qualities invite readers to think about parallels and contrasts between characters, for example Sigemund/Heremod, Hama/Higelac, and Hroðgar/Beowulf, and to compare the most important characters to nearly every other character introduced. Thus toward the end of the poem, the

account of the dragon's hoard as the material remains of a long-dead civilization, especially the elegiac "Lay of the Last Survivor," anticipates Wiglaf's and the Geatish survivors' anxiety concerning their dismal future prospects. However, the introductory account of Scyld's arrival provides a very different context for understanding the Geats' situation at the end of the poem. Scyld's kingly behavior, the narrator avers, resulted in a remedy not only for his own destitute arrival but also for the Danes' leaderless condition.

Balancing--or at least in tension with--the mysterious and tragic end of the last survivor's civilization, and the anticipation of a similar end for the Geats, is the power of individual heroic behavior to create a greater civilization than had been previously known. James Earl writes, "The fall of the Geats is symbolic of the death of a civilization, just as the founding of Denmark is symbolic of its birth. When the hero dies, civilization as we see it in the poem will die with him."^{xxiii} But this interpretation depends on the beliefs that "*Beowulf* takes place in an age between myth and history," that "The Heroic Age mediates temporally between this world and the other," and that the "Heroic Age always reveals the fallen nature of the present age by contrast."^{xxiv} According to Earl, the hopeless eschatology of its pre-Christian culture led the Anglo-Saxons to emphasize apocalyptic themes of Christianity, with one result being that "*Beowulf* focuses on the collapse of the heroic world, a collapse that results in the world of history as we know it and at the same time displays the essential nature of history as collapsing, falling, eschatological."^{xxv}

Not all world views, however, understand the essential nature of history to be quite so gloomy. Both Bede and Eusebius articulate in their Ecclesiastical Histories guarded hope that virtuous action in a world blessed by Christ's incarnation can result in great human

accomplishment. Both historians were grappling with the reality that the apocalypse and new Kingdom of Heaven were not as imminent as the first Christians believed. Thus the waiting for salvation could/should be grounded not only on faith but also on works. Eusebius' history, which recounts events from the Apostolic Age to his own, ends with the union of Christianity and the Roman empire under Constantine, a time of great hope for Christians. Similarly, Bede sees both ups and downs in the history of Christianity in England, but he concludes Book V, chapter 23, saying,

This, then, is the present state of all Britain, about two hundred and eighty-five years after the coming of the English to Britain, but seven hundred and thirty-one years since our Lord's Incarnation. May the world rejoice under his eternal rule, and Britain glory in his Faith! *Let the multitude of isles be glad thereof, and give thanks at the remembrance of his holiness!*^{xxvi}

What we call the Golden Age of Northumbria and the later 10th-century Gregorian reform in England both attest to cycles characterized by reversals in fortune rather than a steady decline. Well before the Anglo-Saxon period in England, Christians had experienced many events suggesting futility in the face of what appeared to be the end of human civilization. In the year 70 the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, in the 6th century the Roman Empire fell to Germanic militant tribes, and, perhaps even more significant, controversies over doctrinal issues threatened the Christian community from within. Nevertheless, the original impulse driven by the Acts of the Apostles to spread the word of God to all the nations had, by the time *Beowulf* was written, resulted in a new Christian civilization in England.

In addition to having a poetic structure emphasizing cycles, changes, and reversals, some

of the poem's images contribute to the theme of cycles and change. Two important images the poet uses to depict this theme are the exchange of treasure and sleep after feast. To a very large extent heroic behavior is defined in this poem by the giving of treasure. Thus Heremod is not heroic because he is stingy and hoards his treasure rather than distributing it generously. Hroðgar, Hygelac, and Beowulf are generous with their treasures and thus earn the loyalty of their retainers. The frequent exchange of gifts, often weapons and armor--either at a celebratory feast or unwillingly on the battle field--contributes both to plot, character development, and to theme. Sometimes the exchange of weapons is later the motive of revenge; sometimes an exchange is later insufficient to prevent further outbreaks of war; sometimes the exchange of weapons is part of a great warrior's duty to protect his people. But the exchange of gifts emphasizes simultaneously the splendor and greatness of treasure and its uselessness if it is hoarded. Thus the poem suggests the treasure that accompanies Scyld on his burial ship is not wasted. Similarly, the poem depicts the burning of treasure on a pyre with heroes such as Hnaef and Hildeburh's son as sign of heroism and right behavior.

However, the poem presents conflicting attitudes toward the Dragon's treasure at the end of the poem. Beowulf believes that winning the dragon's treasure and leaving it to his people is a compensation for his death. He says to Wiglaf,

“Bio nu on ofoste, þæt ic ærwelan,
goldæht ongite, gearo sceawige
swegle searogimmas, þæt ic ðy seft mæge
æfter maððumwelan min alætan,
lif ond leodscipe, þone ic longe heold.” (2747-51)

["Go now in haste, that I may see
the golden goods, have one full look
at the brilliant gems, that by its wealth
I may more easily give up my life
and the dear kingdom that I have ruled so long."]

Later Beowulf thanks the Lord of all for allowing him to see the treasure before he dies:

"Ic ðara frætwa Freat ealles ðanc,
Wuldurcyninge, wordum secge,
ecum Dryhtne, þe ic her on starie,
þæs ðe ic moste minum leodum
ær swyldæge swylc gestrynan." (2794-98)

["I give thanks aloud to the Lord of all,
King of glories, eternal Ruler
for the bright treasures I can see here,
that I might have gained such gifts as these
for the sake of my people before I died"].

Significantly, the poem places Beowulf's comments on the dragon's treasure immediately before Beowulf gives Wiglaf his rings and armor (*beah ond byrnan* 2812). Each of these passages suggests a positive valence for treasure. Wiglaf, however, expresses some ambivalence. He is eager to show the others the splendor of the treasure ("Uton nu efstan oðre [siðe],/ seon ond secean searo[gimma] geþræc,/ wundur under wealle" 3101-03 ["Let us hurry now, make a second [journey]/ to see the hoard, bright-[gemmed] gold,/ the marvel in the cave."]), but he says,

“hord ys gesceawod,
grimme gegongen; wæs þæt gifeðe to swið,
þe ðone [þeodcyning] þyder ontyhte” (3084-86).

[“The hoard has been opened
at terrible cost. That fate was too strong
that drew [the king of our people] toward it.”]

For Wiglaf the treasure seems to signify not only the greatness of his lord’s accomplishment but also the enormity of the loss.

The narrator presents a different point of view, saying that the treasure, after its burial, is as useless as it was before (“þær hit nu gen lifað,/ eldum swa unnyt” 3167-8 [“where it lies even now, as useless to men”]). The word *unnyt* occurs one other time in the poem, when Beowulf tells Hroðgar he has come to Denmark to help because he had heard that Heorot was standing empty and useless to all warriors (“þæt þæs sele stande,/ reced selesta rinca gehwylcum/ idel ond unnyt” 411-13 [“that this great building,/ brightest hall, stands empty, useless/ to all the warriors”]). Many critics see these details as evidence of the failure of heroism, extending the sense of the treasure’s uselessness to a sense that all human deeds are useless and material goods offer only illusory value. Linda Georgianna sees in the deferral and delay of Beowulf’s final speech a poet “intent on disengaging his audience from the forward movement of the heroic story in order to suggest the limits of heroic action and perhaps of heroic narratives as well.”^{xxvii} I argue that Beowulf’s attitude as he approaches each of his battles with monsters exemplifies a more nuanced stance. Beowulf knows “witig God/ on swa hwæpere hond halig Dryhten/ mærdō deme, swa him gemet þince” (685-87) [“mighty God,/ the Lord wise and holy, will give

war-glory/ to whichever side He thinks the right”], but he knows that good deeds are important as well. Thus after being informed of Æschere’s death, he reminds Hroðgar,

“Selre bið æghwæm,
þæt he his freond wrece, þonne he fela murne.
Ure æghwylc sceal ende gebidan
worolde lifes; wyrce se þe mote
domes ær deaþe; þæt bið drihtguman
unlifigendum æfter selest.” (1384-89)

[“Better it is
for every man to avenge his friend
than mourn overmuch. Each of us must come
to the end of his life: let him who may
win fame before death. That is the best
memorial for a man after he is gone.”]

These pagan values, vengeance and fame, bring Beowulf close to a Christian understanding of the choices available when humans are faced with the mysteries of loss and death. One might even see evidence of belief that knowledge of God is possible without revelation, though expressing such a Pelagian belief might lead to accusations of heresy.

Nevertheless, Charles Donahue has traced in Irish writings what he calls an “Insular Mode” of Christianity which survived the Augustinian stamping out of Pelagianism, following writers like Irenaeus and Origen, instead of Augustine and Orosius, by reading in St. Paul’s letters evidence of “natural good,” and “natural knowledge of God.”^{xxviii} Morton Bloomfield

interprets *ofer ealde riht* [“the Eternal Ruler”] in line 2330 as evidence that

pre-Christian moral law of whatever origin was considered something of a unity before the time of the *Beowulf* poet. The tendency to assimilate the best part of paganism to the Old Testament is one way converted pagans could accept the New Law and still maintain pride of ancestry.^{xxix}

Perhaps even more important, though, is the evidence of Pope Gregory’s instructions to the missionaries in England. Bede presents in book I, chapter 30, of his *Ecclesiastical History* the text of Gregory’s letter of instruction:

“when by God’s help you reach our most reverend brother, Bishop Augustine, we wish you to inform him that we have been giving careful thought to the affairs of the English, and have come to the conclusion that the temples of the idols among that people should on no account be destroyed. The idols are to be destroyed, but the temples themselves are to be aspersed with holy water, altars set up in them, and relics deposited there. For if these temples are well-built, they must be purified from the worship of demons and dedicated to the service of the true God. In this way, we hope that the people, seeing that their temples are not destroyed, may abandon their error and, flocking more readily to their accustomed resorts, may come to know and adore the true God.”

After more specific instructions Gregory justifies his instructions saying,

“It was in this way that the Lord revealed Himself to the Israelite people in Egypt, permitting the sacrifices formerly offered to the Devil to be offered thenceforward to Himself instead. So He bade them sacrifice beasts to Him, so that, once they became enlightened, they might abandon one element of sacrifice and retain another.”^{xxx}

Gregory is drawing on the theological idea of correction-and-fulfillment, an important part in the earliest Christian theologians' appropriation of Jewish law and Old Testament scripture.^{xxx1} The record of pre-Christian pagan rituals in the Old Testament, now understood figuratively rather than literally, allows later Christian missionaries to use pagan practices as vehicles for the conversion process.

Thus the *Beowulf* poet need not have seen Beowulf's confidence in the power of good deeds as simply antithetical to Christian truth. Beowulf may also illustrate a belief that the step to Christian belief was "natural" for Anglo-Saxons, since so much of their culture could be read with the idea of correction-and-fulfillment. Roberta Frank finds evidence of this attitude in the 9th-century Anglo-Saxon paraphrase of Orosius and King Alfred's translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*.^{xxxii} Indeed, Frank points out that King Alfred's *Boethius*, unlike the original work, insists that wealth, power, and temporal possessions all can be used for good purposes in a Christian world.^{xxxiii}

Similarly, the image of sleep after feasting, associated with many of the important reversals of the beginning of the poem, simultaneously underscores the transitory nature of human existence and firmly grounds heroic behavior and mortality in everyday situations.^{xxxiv} In doing so the poet highlights some of Christianity's attraction for the Germanic pagans. As the speaker in "The Wanderer" understands, mortal life is like a winter storm; Christian eternity offers the only sure haven. So pagans may feel secure in times of peace and sleep, warm in the hall, but that security is bound to fail. Christians acknowledge eternal salvation as incompletely revealed but the only sure comfort. So Æschere, sleeping peacefully, is vulnerable despite Beowulf's heroic deeds. Furthermore, this poet is not content simply to depict heroic action in

situations where everyone knows what is expected--on the battlefield or in a siege. He also depicts the vulnerability of humanity when seemingly safe, especially through Æschere's death.

Perhaps most significant to my argument concerning the *Beowulf* poet's insistence on the individual's responsibility for right action is the use of the word *edwenden*, change or reversal, in lines 280, 1774, and 2188, and its close relative *edhwyrft* in line 1281. *Edhwyrft* and *edwenden* in one occurrence denote change for the worse; in the other two, *edwenden* denotes change for the better. That is perhaps significant in itself, but a closer examination of the passages is yet more revealing.

In the first passage Beowulf is speaking to the coast guard, identifying his reason for landing on the Danish coast. He says,

“Ic þæs Hroðgar mæg
þurh rumne sefan ræd gelæran,
hu he frod ond god feond oferswyðeþ--
gyf him edwenden æfre scolde
bealuwa bisigu bot eft cuman--
ond þa cearwylmas colran wurðað;
oððe a syþðan earfoðþrage,
þreanyd þolað, þenden þær wunað
on heahstede husa selest.” (277-85)

[“From a generous mind

I can offer Hrothgar good plan and counsel,
how, old and good, he may conquer his enemy,

if reversal of fortune is ever to come to him,
 any exchange for baleful affliction,
 cooling of care-surges hot in his heart;
 or else ever afterwards through years of grief
 he must endure terrible suffering,
 so long as that hall rises high in its place.”]

Beowulf's description of Hroðgar's situation reveals a youthful optimism in our hero, for he not only uses *edwenden* to represent something similar in meaning to *bot*, "remedy"; he also acknowledges only two possibilities in Hroðgar's future: stasis, as depicted in the parallel static images--Hroðgar forever suffering and the hall forever standing tall--or change for the better. The possibility of change for the worse is completely absent from the speech. Beowulf's point of view here--and later when he promises Hroðgar and his men safe sleeping in Heorot (1671-76)-- contrasts sharply with his later prophetic account to Higelac of the disastrous results of Freawaru's marriage to Froda's son (“Oft seldan hwær/ æfter leodhryre lytle hwile/ bongar bugeð, þeah seo bryd duge!” 2029-31 [“But seldom anywhere,/ after a slaying, will the death-spear rest,/ even for a while, though the bride be good.”]).

The second instance of the word *edwenden*, in line 1774, also contrasts sharply with the first. Hroðgar is speaking rather than Beowulf, he uses the word to denote change for the worse, and he uses it in a context specifically concerned with convincing Beowulf of the inevitability of change--for the better or worse depending on circumstances.

“Swa ic Hring-Dena hund missera
 weold under wolcnum ond hig wigge beleac

manigum mægþa geond þysne middangeard,
æscum ond ecgum, þæt ic me ænigne
under swegles begong gesacan ne tealde.
Hwæt, me þæs on eþle edwenden cwom,
gyrn æfter gomene, seoþðan Grendel wearð,
ealdgewinna, ingenga min;
ic þære socne singales wæg
modceare micle. Þæs sig Metode þanc,
ecean Dryhtne, þæs ðe ic on aldre gebad,
þæt ic on þone hafelan heorodreorigne
ofer eald gewin eagum starige!” (1769-81)

[“Thus, fifty winters, I ruled the Ring-Danes
under these skies and by my war-strength
kept them safe from spear and sword
throughout middle-earth-- such rule that no one
under the heavens was my adversary.
And look, even so, in my homestead reversal:
my nightly invader, our ancient enemy.
I bore great heart-care, suffered continually
from his persecution. Thanks be to God,
the Eternal Lord, I came through alive,
and today may look at this huge bloody head

with my own eyes, after long strife!”]

This passage is part of the speech generally called "Hroðgar's Sermon," in which the older, more experienced Hroðgar warns the young Beowulf of the dangers of pride and complacency. Unlike the Beowulf of the first part of the poem, Hroðgar knows there is no stasis in this world; he knows halls and other human artifacts seem perpetual representatives of mankind's achievements but in fact decline and decay are inevitable sequences to prosperity and growth.

Hroðgar's speech makes several important points about change. He brings together his own pattern of success followed by decline followed by a new prosperity, Heremod's pattern of success followed by decline, and the inevitable eventual decline of all mankind--mortality. But the use of *edwenden* comes ten lines from the end of this eighty-four line speech, just before Hroðgar modulates to his heartfelt thanks to God for his survival of the years of strife and his invitation to Beowulf to share in the feast of celebration. Hroðgar as much as says he, too, at one time thought that all change was for the better, but he has learned otherwise through experience. Thus Hroðgar insists on the inevitability of change, that "the glory of this might" is temporary, transitory, fleeting, but within the dominantly optimistic atmosphere of Beowulf's superhuman achievements and the Dane's recovery, after years of suffering. This is similar to the narrator's use of *edhwyrft*--when Grendel's mother came into Heorot, she brought reversal of fortune to the men there.

The third occurrence of *edwenden* comes toward the end of the poem, this time in a narrative comment on Beowulf's youth. Here it emphatically denotes change for the better: Beowulf in his early years was not very promising--an *aeðeling unfrom*--but “Edwenden cwom/ tireadigum menn torna gehwylces” (2188-89) [“A change came to him,/ shining in victory, worth

all those cares”].

The second of these passages is the most important to an understanding of cycles and change in *Beowulf*. Hroðgar's sermon is about the inevitability of change and death, yet it ends on an optimistic note. The theme and structure of the speech can perhaps be seen as a paradigm of the poet's world view. Man's powers and glory, even in a heroic world, are finite and fleeting, yet despite the Heremods and Grendels of the world, despite man's mortality and potential for evil, true virtue is powerful, and each falling action can be succeeded by a rise. The bad times as well as the good times are finite. Especially important is Hroðgar's insistence that one blessing of mankind is his control over his own behavior. Heremod failed as a king not because of any tragic flaw beyond his control but because he allowed pride to rule his actions. Even more suggestive is Hroðgar's own situation, since he suffered despite his virtuous actions; nevertheless, his suffering did not turn him from his kingly responsibilities.

Significantly both Hroðgar and Beowulf attribute the happy resolution to a combination of heroic behavior and divine grace. Both evoke a Gregorian sense that individual acts of virtue can alter the course of events in a post-lapsarian world and an Augustinian sense that one inhabits the City of God or the City of Man by choosing to turn toward or away from God. Though the pagan Hroðgar, like his Christian brothers, cannot perceive a fully revealed salvation, he, like his Old Testament brothers, can imagine something better than the pagan inevitability of destruction. Thus he has confidence that Beowulf, although young and perhaps naive, can learn from Hroðgar's experience, history, and his own experience and therefore can avoid some of the dangers that accompany possession of power in a heroic world. Beowulf's account to Hygelac suggests he has indeed learned the lesson of Hroðgar's sermon. The *Beowulf* poet

knows about Christian apocalypse as an alternative to pagan eschatology. The poet may suggest that his virtuous pagan characters, like some of the Anglo-Saxons Augustine encountered in his missionary activities in England, have a natural attraction and openness to Christian truth.

Does this convergence of a pagan and a Christian poetic world view apply to the second, more elegiac, part of the poem? I believe it does although the differences in tone, pace, and structure between the two parts of the poem are striking. In the first part, the main plot moves forward fairly steadily with the episodic subplots very much in the background, slowing the progress but not really disrupting it. Though success, prosperity, and joy are constantly interchanged with failure, decline, and sorrow, the positive predominates. In the second half of the poem we see a reversal of this structure: the main plot is often subordinated to the complicated, frequently unchronological account of the Swedish-Geatish wars. The chronological narration of the Dragon's rage and destruction and Beowulf's final days takes up much less space in the second half of the poem than do the historical subplot, the passages recounting the background of the treasure, and the other "digressive" material. When the tone of sorrow at man's mortality and the transitoriness of all things human briefly lifts, as when Beowulf asserts "Ic eom on mode from,/ þæt ic wið þone guðflogan gylp ofersitte" (2527-28) ("My heart is bold,/ I forego boasting against this war-flyer"), the effect is, as Joseph Harris notes, "peculiarly unsettling."^{xxxv} The pace of the main action slows as it is constantly interrupted by the rapid narration of the major historical events of the last three generations, matter which is full of action, violence, and power.^{xxxvi}

But is the end of the poem concerned not only with the death of a great hero, but also of a great heroic age? Is the "second part of the poem. . . dark with the shadow of ineluctable doom"

as Professor Brodeur has argued?^{xxxvii} Does the phrase “dom Godes” (2858) convey only the modern meaning of “doom,” with its post-Christian, existentialist sense of futility, or does it retain the pagan sense of judgment, discretion, choice, even glory? Is there evidence that a heroic society might prosper again after Beowulf’s death? James Earl suggests that the poet has chosen the Geats as Beowulf’s nation because legend and history presented them as a nation of great heroes that had been annihilated.^{xxxviii} Other critics, however, trace Mercian kings back to the Geats, suggesting Wiglaf migrated to England after the destruction of his people. Some details in the text suggest that Wiglaf has the potential to be to the Geats what Scyld was to the Danes at the beginning of the poem.

First, Wiglaf’s behavior during the dragon fight is impeccable. When Beowulf says this is my fight alone, Wiglaf does not argue--he obeys. But when Naegling fails, changing the entire situation utterly, Wiglaf uses his head, assesses the danger that results from the transient nature of all human artifacts, and acts honorably. Despite the obvious significant danger to himself and the seeming hopelessness of the situation, he leaps out to help the greatest man living without a moment’s hesitation. In effect, he follows Gregory’s advice and does what he can do. His behavior contrasts sharply with his cohorts’ passive helplessness. Moreover, the narrative information that his wooden shield is immediately consumed by flame and the later observation that Wiglaf could only strike the dragon lower than Beowulf did highlights Wiglaf’s courage. Ironically it takes this man of lesser stature to reach the dragon’s vulnerable spot. Perhaps Wiglaf’s success even parallels Beowulf’s success in overcoming Grendel by fighting without armor or sword.

Second, Wiglaf behaves thus--bravely, intelligently, humbly, giving all of himself--in

his very first battle. This contrasts sharply with Beowulf himself, who rose to glory after an unpromising youth. If Beowulf in his youth was *sleac* yet he became such a remarkable leader, what great potential must Wiglaf have, when we see him behaving so well in his first test?

But a great leader perhaps is not enough. Does the Geats' behavior at the end of the poem suggest any possibility of recovery? The messenger unequivocally portends disaster. But one can imagine a messenger bearing the tale of Hygelac's or of Heardred's death having a similarly gloomy view of the future. When Beowulf had to get home across the sea by himself with those thirty suits of armor, surely the Geats were in as dangerous a situation. After Hreðel died of grief and his son Haeðcyn was killed by Ongeneow, surely Geatish messengers foretold times of sorrow to ensue. Inevitably the Swedes will attack, for the death of any king results in political instability, but Geatish loss is not inevitable. Nor is the end of the Heroic Age necessitated by the ending of the poem. The Geats' response to Beowulf's death is something like the early Christians' response to Christ's crucifixion. Christ's death only seems heroic after the resurrection or in light of revelatory prophecy. In its mode of correction-and-fulfillment the Christian era invites a reexamination of values but it also demands of Christians the vision to see, albeit dimly, the possibility of new kinds of heroism. Thus Bede depicts in Coifi's speech to Edwin a recognition beyond Coifi's of the shortcomings of any material or worldly reward, and a new awareness of apocalypse as opposed to eschaton.^{xxxix}

In acknowledging they have no right to the treasure Beowulf has rightfully won, the Geats, Wiglaf in particular, evince a mature understanding of right behavior-- precisely the kind of behavior that was the subject of Hroðgar's sermon. They also express a distrust of material goods that coincides with Christian belief. They should not take pride in their king's victory, for

they, excepting Wiglaf, have behaved abominably. But by acting as though the battle with the Dragon has been an outright loss, by mourning the loss of a king rather than celebrating his victory, they are perhaps ready to begin the reestablishment of a new political stability by infusing heroic ideals with a Christian realism that simultaneously acknowledges postlapsarian instability and the secure promise of divine grace.

At the core of the heroic ideal in *Beowulf* is the belief that great deeds of men do not die with them, that they are immortal. The final lines of the poem demonstrate that Beowulf's great deeds do live on in the memory of his people; they remember that he was "wyruldcyning[a]/ manna mildust ond mon(ðw)ærust,/ leodum liðost ond lofgeornost" (3180-82) ["of the kings in this world,/ the kindest to his men, the most courteous man,/ the best to his people, and most eager for fame."]. Just as Beowulf has been guided by honor and his love for Hygelac, Wiglaf and his followers may go on to new times of prosperity. Suffering, sorrow, pain, like joy, happiness, and prosperity, will inevitably change. As the Deor poet says, "Þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg!" Beowulf, in his youth, could imagine a stasis--an unending sorrow--but the maturer vision of the poem epitomized by Hroðgar's sermon insists that all of human life--sorrow and happiness--is transitory. The *Beowulf*-poet, like Gregory, seems to have envisioned a physical world contiguous with the spiritual world beyond, a world in which Christian revelation emphasizes the power of virtuous behavior. This confidence in man's ability to alter the world for the better if he chooses right behavior is a large part of what makes *Beowulf* more than a Germanic pagan epic.

Endnotes

1. Some important studies of style, structure, and theme in *Beowulf* are Edward B. Irving, *A Reading of Beowulf* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1968), esp. 31-42; Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur, *the Art of Beowulf* (Berkeley: Univ. Of California Press, 1971), esp. 51, 60, 71-87; Theodore M. Andersson, "Tradition and Design in *Beowulf*," *Old English Literature in Context*, ed. John D. Niles (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1980), 90-106, and George Clark, "The Hero and the Theme," *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Lincoln: Univ. Of Nebraska Press, 1997), 271-90. A very different kind of analysis also in *A Beowulf Handbook*, Seth Lerer's "Beowulf and Contemporary Critical Theory" concludes: "[theoretical approaches] may reveal what in the end may be the truly human quality of Beowulf: its recognition that the open-endedness and ambiguity of language mark us as creatures of the historical moment and that such a language gives voice to the social worlds in which our literature is made and understood" (339).

2. Robert Barr, S. J. *Main Currents in Early Christian Thought* (Glen Rock, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1965), 110.

3. Carole Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1988).

4. Straw, 5.

v. Straw, 4.

vi. Straw, 2-3.

vii. Straw, 10.

viii. See Philip B. Rollinson, "The influence of Christian doctrine on Old English poetry," *Anglo-Saxon England* 2 (1973), 276-80, for an overview.

ix. Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1978), 98-9.

x. *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* 3rd ed., s.v. "Pelagianism."

xi. Brown, 101.

xii. R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1970), 14.

xiii. Markus, 18.

xiv. W. R. Bolton, *Alcuin and Beowulf: An Eighth-Century View* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1978), 175-77.

xv. In *Thinking about Beowulf* Earl distinguishes between the eschatological and the apocalyptic: "The eschaton (Greek 'last thing') is the end of the world"; "An apocalypse, according to its Greek derivation, is an uncovering, a revelation, a revealing of something hidden. The idea of an apocalypse, then, depends upon a prior sense that something is hidden--something we know, insofar as we know it is hidden; but something we do not know, insofar as it is hidden from us" (43; 41).

xvi. Straw, 10.

xvii. Straw, 10.

xviii. Citations of *Beowulf* are from Fr. Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1950).

xix. The translations are from Howell D. Chickering Jr., *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition* (New York: Anchor Books, 1977).

xx. In “The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in *Beowulf*,” *Beowulf: Basic Readings*, ed. Peter S. Baker (New York: Garland, 1995), Marijane Osborn argues, “The poet controls his two perspectives [pagan and Christian] simply by distinguishing between the natural wisdom possible to pagans and the revealed knowledge he shares with us” and cites Augustine as a patristic model the *Beowulf* poet may have drawn on, 121.

xxi. Andersson, “Tradition and Design in *Beowulf*,” 95.

xxii. Andersson, 103.

xxiii. Earl, *Thinking about Beowulf*, 46.

xxiv. Earl, 45.

xxv. Earl, 46.

xxvi. Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price, rev. R.

E. Latham (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 332.

xxvii. Linda Georgianna, "King Hreþel's Sorrow and the Limits of Heroic Action in *Beowulf*," *Speculum* 62 (1987): 829-30.

xxviii. Charles Donahue, "*Beowulf* and Christian Tradition: A Reconsideration from a Celtic Stance," *Traditio* 21 (1965): 55-116.

xxix. Morton W. Bloomfield, "Patristics and Old English Literature: Notes on Some Poems," *Essential Articles for the Study of Old English Poetry*, ed. Jess B. Bessinger, Jr., and Stanley J. Kahrl (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, 1968), 66.

xxx. Bede, 86-7.

xxxi. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, vol. 1 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), 14ff. Pelikan notes that even before the Gospels were written, the idea that the Old Law will be confirmed but superceded by Christ's incarnation, that the Old Testament's purpose was to prepare for and prefigure the New Law of Christ, may have been recorded (16).

xxxii. Robert Frank, "The *Beowulf* Poet's Sense of History," in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1982), 58-9.

xxxiii. Frank, 62.

xxxiv. See Howell D. Chickering, Jr., *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition* (New York: Anchor Books, 1977, 302-3, for an overview.

xxxv. Joseph Harris, "Beowulf's Last Words," *Speculum* 67 (1992), 26.

xxxvi. See Stanley B. Greenfield, "Geatish History: Poetic Art and Epic Quality in *Beowulf*" in *Hero and Exile: The Art of Old English Poetry*, ed. George Hardin Brown (London: Hambledon Press, 1989) for a discussion of the way "historic destiny, in a centrally significant way, universalizes and makes epic this Old English heroic poem," 26.

xxxvii. Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf* (Berkeley: Univ. California Press, 1971), 83. Greenfield also argues "the epic hero's fate awakens in us a poignancy, a pathos, akin to but different from the pity or compassion we feel for the suffering hero of drama. It springs from epic's presentation of man's accomplishment against the background of his mortality, from the implications the hero's fall entails for his people, from a sense of futility in the splendid achievement, a resignation and despair in the face of the limits of life," "*Beowulf* and Epic Tragedy," in *Hero and Exile*, 16.

xxxviii. Earl, 47.

xxxix. Earl argues that the contrast of apocalypse and eschaton contributes to the *Beowulf's* "dark Christian vision," 45. I suggest, in contrast, that an Anglo-Saxon poem about Geatish history may suggest the poet sees in English history, as Bede did, the possibility of a Christian empire uniting disparate peoples.