

SIR ISRAEL GOLLANCZ MEMORIAL LECTURE

Beowulf and Perception

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THE STORY OF *Beowulf* is well known, even to those who have never read the poem.¹ It concerns a courageous young warrior from Geatland (in southern Sweden) who travels to Denmark to confront a monster that has been ravaging the hall of the Danish king Hrothgar for many years; after successfully destroying the monster, the hero is obliged to destroy the monster's mother, which he does with somewhat greater difficulty; and finally, in his declining years back home in Geatland, his confrontation with a marauding dragon proves fatal for him and, by implication, for the Geatish people. The story of *Beowulf* has been well studied for a century or more, to the point that (for example) we are well informed, and perhaps over-informed, about analogues in many languages to each of the three confrontations, but also about the poet's design in contrasting the hero's youth with his old age, about pervasive themes in the poem such as kingship and the nature of early Germanic society, and so on.² But what has not been well studied is the *way* the story is told, the poem's diegesis or narrative discourse, to borrow a useful term from the French structuralists.³ For the story is told in anything but a straightforward

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¹ I quote throughout from the edition of F. Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1950), but without reproducing Klaeber's diacritics (macrons, italics, etc.).

² The most relevant analogues are translated by G. N. Garmonsway and J. Simpson, *Beowulf and its Analogues*, revd. edn. (1980); for general discussion, see the still indispensable compendium by R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf: an Introduction to the Study of the Poem with a Discussion of the Stories of Offa and Finn*, revd. C. L. Wrenn (Cambridge, 1959). There is an excellent conspectus of *Beowulf* scholarship in *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. R. E. Bjork and J. D. Niles (Lincoln, NE, 1997).

³ The distinction between *l'histoire* and *discours* goes back to E. Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris, 1966), p. 238; see discussion by J. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*:

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manner. Although the poet was undoubtedly able to narrate a story in a straightforward linear manner (as he does, for example, when recounting through Beowulf's mouth the story of Ingeld, lines 2024–69), his characteristic method of narration is oblique and allusive. The principal character himself is introduced when first he hears of the monster (line 194) at home in Geatland, but we are not told his name until he has reached Heorot, the Danish king's hall, some 150 lines later (line 343). The story of Hygelac's last and fatal raid is alluded to on several occasions, but never sequentially recounted. The account which the narrator gives us of Beowulf's accomplishments at Heorot differs strikingly from that given by Beowulf himself when recounting his adventure to King Hygelac back in Geatland. And these are only some of the many unsettling discrepancies found throughout the poem. The narrative looks forward and back, now moving rapidly, now moving at a snail's pace. Friedrich Klaeber, one of the poem's greatest editors, gave one section of his Introduction the title 'lack of steady advance',⁴ and Kenneth Sisam, in one of the earliest Gollancz lectures (1933), observed that, 'if *Beowulf* is a fair specimen of the longer secular poems, the Anglo-Saxons were poor story-tellers, weak in proportion and too ready to be distracted from the regular sequence of events'.⁵ One great critic of the poem—J. R. R. Tolkien, in another Gollancz lecture delivered to the Academy in 1936—even denied that the poem *is* a narrative.⁶ The non-linearity of *Beowulfian* narrative discourse is a feature of the poem which no reader could miss, but, as I have already

Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature (1975), pp. 197–8. Subsequent critics distinguish between story, narrative discourse and narrating: see, for example, Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: an Essay in Method*, trans. J. E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY, 1980), pp. 27–32, and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction, Contemporary Poetics* (1983), pp. 3–4. For present purposes the binary distinction between story and discourse will suffice.

⁴ Klaeber, *Beowulf*, pp. lvii–lviii: 'The reader of the poem very soon perceives that the progress of the narrative is frequently impeded . . . Typical examples of the rambling, dilatory method—the forward, backward, and sideward movements—are afforded by the introduction of Grendel, by the Grendel fight, Grendel's going to Heorot, and the odd sequel of the fight with Grendel's mother. The remarkable insertion of a long speech by Wiglaf, together with comment on his family, right at a critical moment of the dragon fight (2602–60) can hardly be called felicitous. But still more trying is the circuitous route by which the events leading up to that combat are brought before the reader.'

⁵ K. Sisam, 'Cynewulf and his Poetry', *PBA*, 18 (1933 for 1932), 303–31, at p. 312, repr. in his *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford, 1953), p. 14.

⁶ J. R. R. Tolkien, 'Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics', *PBA*, 22 (1936), 245–95, at 271–2: 'We must dismiss, of course, from mind the notion that *Beowulf* is a 'narrative' poem, that it tells a tale or intends to tell a tale sequentially . . . the poem was not meant to advance, steadily or unsteadily. It is essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings.'

said, it has been very little studied.⁷ In what follows I shall argue that this non-linearity was wholly intentional, and is a reflex of the poet's concern with the mental processes of perception and understanding. But my first task is to demonstrate that the non-linearities are intentional and not the result of separate lays being stitched incompetently together: in short, that the form of the poem as we have it was essentially that which left the poet's pen, and that its narrative design is his.

I wish to begin this demonstration by considering a passage which occurs near the middle of the poem (lines 1785–1802). But before coming to the passage in question, it is well to remind ourselves about certain general aspects of the poet's narrative technique. The action of *Beowulf* proceeds as it were in pulses: things go well for a while, but then disaster strikes; when the disaster has passed, things go well again, *until* the next disaster strikes, and so on.⁸ The focal point of the narrating is the moment of reversal, what the poet calls an *edwenden* or *edhwyrft*. Thus Beowulf tells the coast-guard that he has come to help Hrothgar, if ever Hrothgar is to experience an *edwenden* in his misfortunes (280); Hrothgar himself later refers to the onslaught of Grendel as an *edwenden* (1774: 'Hwæt, me Bæs on eBLE edwenden cwom'); and the narrator later describes Beowulf's defeat of Grendel—which proved so decisive a turning-point in the hero's career—as an *edwenden* (2188–9: 'Edwenden cwom / tireadigum menn torna gehwylces'). The poet uses the adverbial construction *oð Ææt*

⁷ For example, there is no chapter devoted to narrative in *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. Bjork and Niles (though the article by T. A. Shippey, 'Structure and Unity', pp. 149–74, contains much incidental discussion of how the story is told), and the chapter devoted to '*Beowulf* and Contemporary Critical Theory' by Seth Lerer (pp. 325–39) contains no mention of narratology. Exceptions include L. N. De Looze, 'Frame Narratives and Fictionalization: Beowulf as Narrator', *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 26 (1984), 145–56, and E. G. Stanley, 'The Narrative Art of *Beowulf*', in *Medieval Narrative: a Symposium*, ed. H. Bekker-Nielsen (Odense, 1980), pp. 58–81. Stanley expresses awareness of structuralist criticism (p. 65: 'I do not wish to make use of modern critical theory, such as is practised especially in France, partly because I am not sufficiently knowledgeable about the theory, partly because I have not read many of the novels on which the critics expend their subtle art'), but contents himself with quoting the definition of narrative given in the *OED* (p. 58). One of the most sensitive studies of *Beowulfian* narrative is Clare Kinney, 'The Needs of the Moment: Poetic Foregrounding as a Narrative Device in *Beowulf*', *Studies in Philology*, 82 (1985), 295–314.

⁸ See discussion by A. Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf* (Berkeley, CA, 1959), p. 51 and esp. T. M. Andersson, 'Tradition and Design in *Beowulf*', in *Old English Literature in Context: Ten Essays*, ed. J. D. Niles (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 90–106, esp. 96–102 (repr. in *Interpretations of Beowulf: a Critical Anthology*, ed. R. D. Fulk (Bloomington, IN, 1991), pp. 219–34, at 225–30): 'The organising principle in operation throughout the poem is mutability . . . No sooner is one mood established than it is superseded by its opposite. Hope gives way to disappointment, joy to grief, and vice versa. It is not just a question of occasional tonalities; the main lines of the poem as a whole can be analyzed according to this alternation' (p. 96).

(‘until’) to mark the point of reversal. Bruce Mitchell has helpfully discussed the use of *oð Aæt* to ‘mark the termination or temporal limit of the action of the main clause and a transition in the narrative.’⁹ It is this usage, to mark a transition in the narrative, that is especially characteristic of *Beowulf*,¹⁰ as two examples will illustrate. Near the beginning of the poem, the poet describes the joyous life of the retainers in Heorot, *until* the monster began to wreak havoc:

Swa ða drihtguman dreamum lifdon
 eadiglice, oð ðæt an ongan
 fyrene fremman feond on helle (99–101)

[Thus the noble retainers lived in joy, blessedly, UNTIL one began to perpetrate crimes, a fiend from hell.]

Later in the poem, when Beowulf had returned to Geatland, he ruled that land as a wise king *until* a dragon began to wreak havoc on dark nights:

wæs ða frod cyning,
 eald eBelweard—, oð ðæt an ongan
 deorcum nihtum draca ricsian (2209–11)

[[Beowulf] was then a wise king, an old guardian of the people, UNTIL one began to rule on dark nights,—a dragon.]

The repetition of this phrase (*oð ðæt an ongan*)—a phrase which occurs only in *Beowulf*—to mark a turning point at two crucial points in the narrative, can hardly be a matter of coincidence.

We may now return to the narrative, to the point where Beowulf has arrived in Denmark, has been introduced to Hrothgar’s court, has bested Unferth in a verbal flyting, and has reassured everyone that he means to deal straightway with the problem of Grendel. This statement restores confidence in the hall and calls for a round of drinks. Momentarily, happy times have been restored to Heorot:

Ba wæs eft swa ær inne on healle
 Bryðword sprecen, ðeod on sælum,
 sigefolca sweg, oB Bæt semninga
 sunu Healfdenes secean wolde
 æfenræste; wiste Bæm ahlæcan
 to Bam heahsele hilde geBinged,

⁹ B. Mitchell, ‘Old English *Oð Aæt* Adverb’, in his *On Old English* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 256–63, at 256; and cf. idem, *Old English Syntax*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), §§ 1885, 2743–74, esp. 2751–4.

¹⁰ See E. B. Irving, *A Reading of Beowulf* (New Haven, CT, 1968; repr. Provo, UT, 1999, with preface by K. O’Brien O’Keefe), pp. 30–41. There are also some brief but interesting observations by L. C. Gruber, ‘Motion, Perception and *oAAæt* in *Beowulf*, *In Geardagum*, 1 (1974), 31–7.

siððan hie sunnan leoht geseon ⟨ne⟩ meahton,
 oB ðe nipende niht ofer ealle,
 scaduhelma gesceapu scriðan cwoman
 wan under wolcnum. Werod eall aras (642–51)

[Then once more, as of old, within the hall brave words were spoken, the people joyous, [there was] sound of victorious folk, UNTIL presently the son of Healfdene [Hrothgar] wished to seek his nightly rest; he knew that the monster had determined to attack the lofty hall as soon as they could no longer see the sun's light, or night darkening over all things, shadowy outlines should come gliding forth, dark beneath the skies. The company all arose.]

Even at this early point in the poem we have learned that a momentary period of happiness and calm is likely to be followed by a reversal: and on cue, as it were, the monster comes, gliding through the night like a shadow,¹¹ and bursts into the hall. Beowulf confronts him and tears off his arm and shoulder, inflicting thereby a mortal wound. Grendel escapes, and calm and happiness are restored (again) to Heorot: 'Bær wæs sang ond sweg samod ætgædere' (1063), says the narrator, recalling the 'hearpan sweg' (89) that had resounded through Heorot years ago, before the monster's first assault. Here—for reasons which will become clear in due course—we must try to put ourselves in the position of the original audience, who did not know what might happen next, but who by now had internalised the poet's perception of the transitory nature of human happiness, with periods of tranquillity inevitably punctuated by reversals. Predictably, on the following night, out of the darkness comes another monster to Heorot, the advance of this monster (who turns out to be Grendel's mother) marked by diction that recalls Grendel's earlier attack (1279: 'com Ba to Heorote'; cf. 720: 'com Ba to recede'). This one's attack is a terrifying reversal (*edhwyrft*) for the Danes who—thinking danger has passed—have returned to sleeping in the hall:

Ba ðær sona wearð
 edhwyrft eorlum, siBðan inne fealh
 Grendles modor (1280–2)

[Then there was, immediately, a reversal for the men, when Grendel's mother burst in.]

She kills one of the men (a thegn of Hrothgar named Æschere) and drags his body to the ghastly mere which she inhabits; the following morning

¹¹ These lines describing Grendel's advance (702–3: 'Com on wanre niht / scriðan scadugenga') are in turn an intentional repetition, or retroaction, of the diction describing the onset of night (649–51), quoted above.

Beowulf pursues her into the mere and, after a struggle, kills her. So peace and tranquillity are yet again restored to Heorot. Hrothgar praises Beowulf and offers him some wise advice. Beowulf—and everyone else—is happy. Then occurs the passage to which all this preamble has been leading:

Geat wæs glædmod, geong sona to,
setles neosan, swa se snottra heht.
Ba wæs eft swa ær ellenrofum,
fletsittendum fægere gereorded
niowan stefne. — Nihthelm geswearc
deorc ofer dryhtgumum. Duguð eall aras . . . (1785–90)

[The Geat [Beowulf] was happy; he went at once to take his seat, as the wise one [King Hrothgar] commanded. Then once more, as of old, a feast was splendidly spread out for the hall-retainers, one more time.—The shadow of night grew dark, black, over the men. The company all arose . . .]

Let us (again) try to place ourselves in the position of the poem's original audience.¹² Such an audience could not anticipate what would happen next, but could only reflect on what had already happened. The audience is encouraged, by the poet's repetition of earlier phrases, to recall the scene in the hall on the night before Grendel's first attack: then, too, all was as it had been before (642: *Aa wæs eft swa ær*); there, too, the shadow of night crept over everything (with *nihthelm* here cf. 650: *sceaduhelma gesceapu*); there, too, the company all arose (651: *werod eall aras*). On the eve of Grendel's assault, there was joy in the hall *until* Hrothgar got up, anticipating the monster's assault. Here Beowulf rests peacefully, *until* a black raven . . .

Reste hine Ba rumheort; reced hliuade
geap ond goldfah; gæst inne swæf,
oB Bæt hrefn blaca . . . (1799–1801)

[The magnanimous one took his rest; the building towered up, gabled and gold-bedecked; the guest slept within, UNTIL a black raven . . .]

How did the first audience (or indeed: how do we) know that there is not a third monster, or an unending supply of monsters, lurking outside in the shadows of night, ready to attack the hall? That disaster might again be impending is hinted by the poet's characteristic use of *oA Aæt*, anticipating a reversal; and the appearance of the black raven—one of the

¹² The concept of the 'original' audience is highly problematical (and ultimately unknowable); I use the term here and throughout as a mere shorthand to refer to any audience hearing or reading the poem for the first time, without having any knowledge of its content.

traditional beasts of battle and slaughter¹³—also suggests imminent carnage.¹⁴ The tension builds to this point, and then is swiftly dissipated by the b-verse: ‘until the black raven . . . happily announced the joy of heaven [i.e. bright day]’. The question is: why did the poet choose the black raven to announce the joy of the coming day?¹⁵ Why not a meadow-lark, or a cheery robin? As far as I know (from the advice of ornithologists) ravens have at best a very dubious ‘dawn song’: *The Handbook of British Birds* describes ‘a sort of liquid gargle, like wine poured from a long-necked decanter, uttered with bill pointing upwards’.¹⁶ But the carefully-drawn parallel with the earlier passage suggests that the *Beowulf*-poet had in mind a narrative design irrelevant to the exactitude of ornithology: the raven was chosen because of its sinister associations with death and carnage, teasing the audience (as it were) with the anticipation of yet another slaughter-attack, and then dispelling the tension by allowing the raven, improbably, to announce the light of day. This design could only be successful if the poet could expect the audience to recall the first passage while hearing or reading the second. The narrative repetition, in other words, must be intentional.

The use of repetition to inform and encourage the reader’s re-interpretation of the text is a literary technique which the structuralist critic Michael Riffaterre has called ‘retroaction’,¹⁷ namely the process by which a reader is induced to reflect on what has proceeded, so that the text becomes the object of progressive discovery, of a dynamic perception which is constantly changing. That is to say, the reader’s understanding of

¹³ See M. S. Griffith, ‘Convention and Originality in the Old English ‘Beasts of Battle’ Typescene’, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 22 (1993), 179–99.

¹⁴ Cf. the comment in *Beowulf: a Dual-Language Edition*, ed. H. D. Chickering (New York, 1977), p. 344: ‘It is hard to imagine that the poet who also used the ominous *oððæt an angan* (100b, 2210b) would say *oððæt hrefn blaca* ‘until the black raven’ here without intending to awaken a sense of impending carnage.’

¹⁵ This question has exercised many students of the poem. S. H. Horowitz, ‘The Ravens in *Beowulf*’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 80 (1981), 502–11, associates the present raven with that sent out from the Ark, hence understanding it as an omen of future corruption; and M. Osborn, ‘Domesticating the Dayraven in *Beowulf* 1801 (with some Attention to Alison’s *Ston*)’, in *Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period*, ed. H. Damico and J. Leyerle (Kalamazoo, MI, 1993), pp. 313–30, associates it with the quasi-domestic home ravens found nowadays on farms in Iceland.

¹⁶ H. F. Witherby, *The Handbook of British Birds*, ed. F. C. Ticehurst and E. G. Tucker, 5 vols. (1938–41), I, 322.

¹⁷ M. Riffaterre, *Essais de stylistique structurale*, trans. D. Delas (Paris, 1971), p. 58: ‘*retroaction*: le sens et la valeur de certains faits de style déjà déchiffrés sont modifiés rétrospectivement par ce que le lecteur découvre à mesure qu’il progresse dans sa lecture. Tel mot répété, par exemple, est mis en relief du fait de la répétition.’

a text is reflective and retroactive.¹⁸ In *Beowulf* the process of retroaction works not only in microcontexts (as Riffaterre would call them),¹⁹ that is at the level of repeated words and phrases, but also in macrocontexts, by which I understand the repetition of episodes. Macrocontextual repetition is one of the most unusual features of *Beowulfian* narrative discourse. Three such repetitions require comment: the accounts of Beowulf's swimming match with Breca; Beowulf's own account of his experiences at the Danish court; and the several allusions in the poem to Hygelac's last raid.²⁰

First, the swimming match. After Beowulf has arrived at the Danish court and been introduced to King Hrothgar, he is challenged abruptly by the court spokesman, Unferth, concerning a youthful swimming match between Beowulf and his friend Breca. In Unferth's account of the events (lines 506–28), Breca won the contest because, after a week in the water, he was washed up among the Heatho-Ræmas (in Norway?), from where he eventually made it back home, thus apparently obtaining victory. (It is obvious that Unferth's account of the story derives, however indirectly, from Breca.) In his reply (lines 530–606), Beowulf gives us a different version of the events: that after five days' swimming together, he and Breca did indeed become separated, and after separation Beowulf was heavily engaged in killing sea-monsters (nine of them), before being washed up in Lapland.²¹ On the face of it, neither of these accounts is

¹⁸ Riffaterre, *Essais*, trans. Delas, pp. 327–8: 'le texte est l'objet d'une découverte progressive, d'une perception dynamique et constamment changeante, où le lecteur non seulement va de surprise en surprise mais voit change, à mesure qu'il avance, sa compréhension de ce qu'il vient de lire, chaque nouvel élément conférant une dimension nouvelle à des éléments antérieurs qu'il répète ou contredit ou développe. Prendre conscience d'un de ces échos, c'est donc lire deux fois telle partie du texte, la deuxième fois rétroactivement.' Cf. also C. F. Tosi, *La ripetizione lessicale nei poeti latini* (Bologna, 1983), p. 17.

¹⁹ Riffaterre, *Essais*, trans. Delas, pp. 68–9.

²⁰ There are of course other examples of narrative repetition in the poem, a feature which greatly puzzled Klaeber: 'Furthermore, different parts of a story are sometimes told in different places, or substantially the same incident is related several times from different points of view. A complete, connected account of the history of the dragon's hoard is obtained only by a comparison of the passages, 3049 ff., 3069 ff., 2233 ff. The brief notice of Grendel's first visit in Heorot (122 f.) is supplemented by a later allusion containing additional detail (1580 ff.). The repeated references to the various Swedish wars, the frequent allusions to Hygelac's Frankish foray, the two versions of the Heremod legend, the review of Beowulf's great fights by means of his report to Hygelac (and to Hroðgar) and through Wiglaf's announcement to his companions (2874 ff.; cp. also 2904 ff.) are well-known cases in point' (*Beowulf*, ed. Klaeber, pp. lvii–lviii).

²¹ The discrepancies between the two accounts of the swimming match are well discussed by F. C. Robinson, 'Elements of the Marvellous in the Characterization of Beowulf: a Reconsideration of the Textual Evidence', repr. in *Beowulf: Basic Readings*, ed. P. S. Baker (New York and London, 1995 [first printed 1974]), pp. 79–96, at 86–92.

wholly true or demonstrably false: they simply report the incidents from differing perspectives.²² Only after hearing Beowulf's account can we understand, in retrospect, Breca's reasons for having claimed victory.

More puzzling is the repeated narrative of events at Hrothgar's court. These events are told at length by the narrator, from the time of Beowulf's arrival in Denmark (line 224) until his departure from Denmark (line 1903) and arrival back home in Geatland (line 1913): some 1700 lines in all, including the account of Beowulf's struggles with the two monsters, and his leave-taking of King Hrothgar. When he is safely back home and is relaxing over a drink with his uncle, the Geatish king Hygelac, he supplies at Hygelac's request a lengthy account of his adventures at the Danish court (2000–151). Beowulf's account covers much of the ground the audience has already been over, but strikingly includes many significant details which were not included in the narrator's earlier telling: the presence at Heorot of Hrothgar's daughter Freawaru, who had been promised in marriage to the Heathobard king Ingeld in order to end the enduring feud between Scyldings (Danes) and Heathobards (lines 2020–69); the fact that the Geatish warrior who was killed by Grendel on the night of the first attack was named Handscio (2076–80); and the fact that Grendel carried with him a *glof* or sack made of dragon-skin, into which he stuffed his victims (2085–90). Subsequently, in handing over to Hygelac the treasure he had been given in Denmark, Beowulf observed that this treasure included battle-gear which had belonged to Hrothgar's brother Heorogar, a striking fact—given the text's concern with military heirlooms—which was not mentioned in the narrator's previous account of Hrothgar's gifts to Beowulf (2158–9). Why such striking discrepancies? As I mentioned, earlier commentators have seen such discrepancies as a structural weakness,²³ and have taken them as evidence that the poem has been stitched together, crudely, from originally separate lays.²⁴ But the

²² It is usually assumed that Beowulf 'won' the contest because he presented a truer account of the events, but there is nothing in the text to support this assumption; rather, as Peter Baker has shown ('Beowulf the Orator', *Journal of English Linguistics*, 21 (1988), 3–23), the palm goes to Beowulf because of the excellence of his rhetoric.

²³ e.g. Tolkien, 'Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics', p. 272: 'But the only serious weakness, or apparent weakness, is the long recapitulation: the report of Beowulf to Hygelac. This recapitulation is well done. Without serious discrepancy [*sic!*] it retells rapidly the events in Heorot, and retouches the account; and it serves to illustrate, since he himself describes his own deeds, yet more vividly the character of a young man, singled out by destiny, as he steps suddenly forth in his full powers. Yet this is perhaps not quite sufficient to justify the repetition.'

²⁴ For example, L. L. Schücking (*Beowulfs Rückkehr* (Halle, 1905), pp. 9–15, with stylistic and metrical evidence set out in the following chapters, pp. 16–74) argued that the episode known as

lines in question represent Beowulf's own perception of his experiences in Denmark,²⁵ and the poet clearly expected the audience retroactively to compare Beowulf's account of events with the narrator's.

Most puzzling of all the repetitions in the poem is the repeated reference to Hygelac's last raid. Given the facts of Beowulf's intense loyalty to Hygelac, and of the disastrous train of events which Hygelac's death precipitated, one might expect that a detailed description of the event might form the central focal point of the narrative.²⁶ Instead, that phase of Geatish history is passed over in a stunning ellipsis of two lines: 'Eft Bæt geiode ufaran dogrum / hildehlæmmum, syððan Hygelac læg' (2200–1: 'It came to pass in later days / through battle-clashes, after Hygelac lay dead').²⁷ Hygelac's raid is never narrated directly, but is alluded to on four separate occasions. On each of these occasions a variant account is given.

'Beowulf's Homecoming' (1888–2199) was an editorial confection created to link together two originally separate poems; and this was also the view, somewhat modified, of K. Sisam, *The Structure of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 44–50. But Schücking's linguistic evidence has been shown to be inconclusive, and Janet Bately has argued powerfully for the poem's linguistic consistency: 'Linguistic Evidence as a Guide to the Authorship of Old English Verse: A Reappraisal, with Special Reference to *Beowulf*', in *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England: Studies presented to Peter Clemoes*, ed. M. Lapidge and H. Gneuss (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 409–31. The oral formulaicists have seen 'Beowulf's Homecoming' as evidence of the poem's oral composition: F. P. Magoun, 'Beowulf A: a Folk-Variant', *Arv*, 14 (1958), 95–101, and, more recently, J. M. Foley, 'Narrativity in *Beowulf*, *The Odyssey* and the Serbo-Croatian "Return Song"', in *Classical Models in Literature*, ed. Z. Konstantinovic, W. Anderson and W. Dietze (Innsbruck, 1981), pp. 296–301. Cf. also idem, 'Beowulf and Traditional Narrative Song: the Potential and Limits of Comparison', in *Old English Literature in Context*, ed. Niles, pp. 117–36, at 136: 'And if we find narrative inconsistencies in Homer and *Beowulf*, we should consider the possibility that they arose from an amalgamation of stories which once existed (and perhaps still did exist at the time of the composition of *Beowulf*) as individual tales.'

²⁵ Cf. Chickering, *Beowulf*, p. 353: 'Beowulf's long speech to Hygelac has been important to criticism for two contrary reasons. First, it is Beowulf's own perception of events in Denmark, given out in free form without the constraints of chronological sequence. Secondly, it feels awkward.' See also R. Waugh, 'Competitive Narrators in the Homecoming Scene of *Beowulf*', *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 25 (1995), 202–22, who (improbably) sees the two accounts as a poetic competition between Beowulf and the narrator.

²⁶ On Hygelac's central role in the poem, cf. the important discussion by Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf*, pp. 79–86.

²⁷ Cf. Brodeur's treatment of the ellipsis, and what it omits: 'Beowulf's gallant stand in Frisia, the slaying of Dæghrefn and his escape, his refusal of the crown, his protection of the boy-king Heardred, and his expedition against Onela. This is God's plenty . . . How much more, then, might he have made of the hero's deeds in those middle years, from his valiant fight in Frisia through his magnanimous service to Heardred, and his retaliation for Heardred's death! He preferred to present them in a summary of intervening action; and this must have been his deliberate choice' (*The Art of Beowulf*, pp. 72–3).

1 lines 1197–1214 (related before the event by the narrator): Hygelac was wearing a neck-torque similar to the famous *Brosinga mene* (a legendary torque) when he went to attack the Frisians; he was killed; his body fell into the hands of the Franks, as did the neck-torque.²⁸ Bodies of dead Geats littered the battlefield.

2 lines 2354–66 (related after the event by the narrator): Hygelac was killed; Beowulf escaped by swimming away with the armour of thirty warriors. The Hetware had no reason to exult: few of them came home.

3 lines 2501–8 (related after the event by Beowulf himself): Beowulf slew the Frankish champion Dæghrefn with his handgrip, apparently as Dæghrefn was getting ready to strip the corpse of Hygelac. After killing Dæghrefn, Beowulf helped himself to Dæghrefn's sword (called Nægling).²⁹

4 lines 2913–20 (related after the event by Wiglaf): Wiglaf, reflecting on the implications of Beowulf's death, says that when it becomes known to the Franks and Frisians, there will be inevitable conflict. The conflict with the Hugas was in fact initiated on the occasion of Hygelac's raid, when the Hetware defeated Hygelac in battle. Unfortunately, Hygelac fell without paying the Merovingians, and Merovingian support has been denied to the Geats ever since.

By the end of the poem, the audience has managed to glean a relatively clear notion of what happened on Hygelac's raid: Hygelac, accompanied by Beowulf and other Geats (thirty of these?), supported by the Merovingians acting as mercenaries, confronted an alliance of Frisians, Franks, Hetware and Hugas. Hygelac was killed by the Frankish warrior Dæghrefn; when Dæghrefn tried to strip him of his armour (and the neck-torque), Beowulf killed him, took his sword and thirty suits of armour (belonging to dead Geats?) and swam home, apparently as the sole survivor of the raid. But this knowledge of the episode can only be acquired retrospectively: only after Beowulf himself has been killed,

²⁸ The neck-torque is problematical, because Beowulf subsequently presents it to Hygd, Hygelac's queen, when he returns to Geatland (2172–4). How, then, did Hygelac come to have it? We must presume that Hygd gave it to him, and that he wore it on his last raid, though the poet makes no mention of such an exchange. Klaeber thought instead that 'the poet entirely forgot his earlier account (1202 ff.) when he came to tell of the presentation to Hygd (2172 ff.)' (*Beowulf*, p. 179). Klaeber adds that this explanation 'is the more probable one, especially if we suppose that at an earlier stage of his work the author had not yet thought at all of queen Hygd' (ibid.). As I argue, the *Beowulf*-poet did not work in so careless a manner.

²⁹ A very different interpretation of these lines is given by P. Cavill, 'A Note on *Beowulf* lines 2490–2509', *Neophilologus*, 67 (1983), 599–604.

many years later, do the implications and facts of Hygelac's raid emerge (and still many questions remain unanswered).

These repetitions or retroactions are far from being the only unusual aspect of *Beowulfian* narrative. It is often asserted that the story of *Beowulf* derives from folk tales.³⁰ But the narrative mode of the folktale is linear and chronological; and *Beowulfian* narrative is anything but linear and chronological. Sometimes, it is true, a story is told straightforwardly, in correct chronological sequence, as in the case of the story of Ingeld (lines 2024–69);³¹ on other occasions, such as the account of the wars between the Swedes and the Geats, the story is narrated, confusingly, in very nearly the reverse order from that in which the narrated events took place.³² Throughout the poem the narrative looks now forward, now backwards; proceeds at one moment at a snail's pace, at another so rapidly that the events of fifty years are recounted within a few lines; and is sometimes told from the point of view of the narrator, sometimes from that of the characters. The narrative order, pace and point of view vary drastically throughout the poem. In his classic study of narrative discourse, Gérard Genette elucidated these principal features of narrative discourse—order, pace and point of view—and it will be helpful to keep

³⁰ The classic study of the folktale elements in *Beowulf* (especially the so-called 'Bear's Son' motif) is by F. Panzer, *Studien zur germanischen Sagengeschichte*, I, *Beowulf* (Munich, 1910), pp. 1–245; see also T. A. Shippey, 'The Fairy-Tale Structure of *Beowulf*', *Notes & Queries*, 214 (1969), 2–11; D. R. Barnes, 'Folktale Morphology and the Structure of *Beowulf*', *Speculum*, 45 (1970), 416–34; and B. A. Rosenberg, 'Reconstructed Folktales as Literary Sources', in *Historical Studies and Literary Criticism*, ed. J. J. McGann (Madison, WI, 1985), pp. 76–89.

³¹ Cf. Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf*, pp. 158–9: 'The poet has adopted a direct and consecutive manner of narration quite different from that which characterizes most of the legendary episodes of Part I; the contrast with the manner in which he deals with the legend of Finn and Hengest is striking.'

³² The events of these wars take place in the following chronological sequence: 1. Hæthcyn the Geat accidentally kills his elder brother Herebeald (2435–40); 2. King Hrethel, the father of Hæthcyn and Herebeald, dies of grief (2462–71); 3. after Hrethel's death, Ohthere and Onela, the sons of Ongentheow, king of the Swedes, attack the Geats at *Hreosnaburh* (2472–8); 4. Hæthcyn retaliates by attacking Ongentheow in Sweden (2925–7); 5. Hæthcyn is killed by Ongentheow at *Hrefnawudu* (2927–35); 6. Ongentheow surrounds the remaining Geatish warriors, but Hygelac comes to their rescue (2936–45); 7. Hygelac's retainers Wulf and Eofor then kill Ongentheow (2961–82); 8. Hygelac is killed on a raid in Frisia (2915–19); 9. Hygelac's son Heardred then becomes king with Beowulf's support (2373–9); 10. Heardred offers hospitality to the sons of Ohthere (who are also the grandsons of Ongentheow), Eamund and Eadgils (2379–84); 11. for this reason Onela, now king of the Swedes, attacks and kills Heardred (2384–8); 12. Eadgils subsequently returns to Sweden and kills Onela (2391–6). If, following the example of Genette (*Narrative Discourse*, pp. 35–47, and see below, n. 34), we designate the chronological order of these twelve events with the numbers 1–12, and then designate the order in which they are narrated with capital letters A–L, the narrative anachronies immediately become clear:

A9—B10—C11—D12—E1—F2—G3—H8—I4—J5—K6—L7.

his descriptions (and terminology) in mind when trying to isolate the characteristic features of *Beowulfian* narrative.³³

First, order, that is to say, the relationship between the temporal order of succession of the events in the story and the pseudo-temporal order of their arrangement in the narrative.³⁴ Genette distinguishes between what he terms analepses (roughly: flashbacks) and prolepses (or anticipations³⁵); and for each of these he further distinguishes between those which refer to events external to the story (heterodiegetic or external analepses or prolepses), and those which refer to events internal to the story (homodiegetic or internal analepses or prolepses). Much of *Beowulf* is taken up with analepses and prolepses of one kind or another. For example, the narrative of Sigemund (874–97), or of the fight at Finnsburg, or Beowulf's account of Freawaru and Ingeld, or the two references to Heremod's disastrous reign, are heterodiegetic analepses. On the other hand, Beowulf's report to Hygelac of his adventures at Heorot is a homodiegetic analepsis; furthermore, because it fills in, after the event, some earlier gaps in the narrative, it is what Genette would call a 'completing analepsis'. The recollections by Beowulf and Wiglaf of the events of Hygelac's last raid are also, in this terminology, completing homodiegetic analepses, as are the 'Lay of the Last Survivor' (2236–70), and indeed the entire narrative of the Swedish wars. By the same token, the poem contains a number of heterodiegetic prolepses (such as the anticipations of conflict between Hrothulf and Hrothgar's sons, or of the burning of Heorot), and also homodiegetic prolepses, such as the various anticipations that Beowulf will meet his death in combat with the dragon.³⁶ The

³³ Genette's terminology has the merit of precision, unlike that which is found in earlier *Beowulf* scholarship ('main story', 'subplot', 'digression', 'Leitmotiv', etc.).

³⁴ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 35: 'To study the temporal order of a narrative is to compare the order in which events or temporal sections are arranged in the narrative discourse with the order of succession these same events or temporal segments have in the story.' See also the brief elucidation by Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, pp. 46–51.

³⁵ Analepses or anticipations have been discussed by earlier critics—they are an obvious feature of the poem—such as A. Bonjour, 'The Use of Anticipation in *Beowulf*', *Review of English Studies*, 16 (1940), 290–7; Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf*, pp. 220–8; and G. I. Berlin, 'Grendel's Advance on Heorot: the Functions of Anticipation', *Proceedings of the PMR Conference*, 11 (1986), 19–26.

³⁶ Beowulf's own death is foretold in 2341–4, 2397–2400; 2419–24 and 2573–5. Genette also describes the narrative technique of what he calls paralipsis (ibid. p. 52), the side-stepping or omission of a given element which is later filled in. In *Beowulf*, an example of paralipsis in the Genettian sense would be Hrothgar's recollection, after the fact of Grendel's mother's assault on Heorot, that land dwellers had seen two monsters walking the moors, of which one was in the likeness of a woman (1345–53).

narrative focus in *Beowulf*, in other words, is always shifting, and moves continually backwards and forward in time.³⁷

Then, secondly, the question of narrative pace.³⁸ In theory, a narrative might proceed throughout at a steady pace, without acceleration or deceleration; such a narrative would be described by Genette as ‘isochronous’, and is to be found (more or less) in epics of classical antiquity. In *Beowulf*, by contrast, there is wild variation in narrative pace.³⁹ The narrative is ponderously slow, for example, in the description of the interrogation of the newly-arrived Geats by the Danish coastguard (229–319), or the subsequent account of their arrival at Heorot and interrogation there by Wulfgar (320–404). Elsewhere it progresses steadily, as in the description of Beowulf’s encounter with the dragon, where the narrated events take place within a span of twenty-four hours. The most rapid pace of all is described by Genette as ellipsis, where story time is passed over so rapidly that it is in effect omitted or elided. When the period of time passed over is specified, Genette describes the ellipsis as explicit. There are several explicit ellipses in *Beowulf*: the twelve years during which Grendel ravaged Heorot and the hall stood empty (144–9); and, most striking of all, the fifty-plus years during which the kingdom of the Geats was taken over by Beowulf and ruled by him into his old age (2200–9). This is one of the most stunning ellipses in the whole of English literature.

The third of Genette’s categories concerns the text’s modality, or the way the narratorial point of view is expressed or ‘focalised’.⁴⁰ Genette distinguishes between third-person narratives by an omniscient narrator, which he calls ‘non-focalised’ narrative, and which is the characteristic form of most ancient classical narrative, and, on the other hand, narrative

³⁷ The question of the temporal framework within which events of the poem are situated in relation to the narratorial present is immensely complex, and has been helpfully discussed by J. D. Niles, *Beowulf: The Poem and its Tradition* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), pp. 179–96; see also J. M. Hill, ‘*Beowulf*, Value and the Frame of Time’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 40 (1979), 3–16; Kinney, ‘The Needs of the Moment’, pp. 299–307 (on verb tenses as part of the narrative design); H. Chickering, ‘Lyric Time in *Beowulf*’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 91 (1992), 489–509; and R. J. Schrader, *Old English Poetry and the Genealogy of Events* (East Lansing, MI, 1993), pp. 76–9.

³⁸ In *Narrative Discourse*, Genette referred to this feature as ‘duration’ (pp. 86–112); after some reflection, he suggested using the term ‘speed’ or ‘speeds’ in his *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. J. E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY, 1988), pp. 33–7. See also Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, pp. 51–6.

³⁹ Cf. the interesting remarks of A. L. Harris, ‘Techniques of Pacing in *Beowulf*’, *English Studies*, 63 (1982), 97–108, who, however, confines her discussion to the use of variation (in the sense defined by F. C. Robinson: see below, n. 67) to retard or accelerate the narrative.

⁴⁰ On focalisation, see Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, pp. 189–98 (with further reflections in his *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, pp. 72–8) and Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, pp. 71–85.

which is expressed through a character in the text, and which therefore may be said to express that character's point of view. Such narrative is, in Genette's terms, 'focalised' through the character, and is described by him as 'internal focalisation'. Much of the narrative in *Beowulf* is recounted through the poem's characters: mostly through Beowulf himself, but also through Unferth, Hrothgar, Hrothgar's scop, and Wiglaf. I have already referred to the episode of Hygelac's last raid, which is recounted once, proleptically, by the narrator and hence is non-focalised, but is then focalised, analeptically, through Beowulf himself (twice) and then through Wiglaf. Genette refers to this technique as 'multiple internal focalisation'.⁴¹ Multiple internal focalisation is an extremely rare and unusual narrative technique, and is not found in the narrative literature of classical antiquity. In order to illustrate the form, Genette points to epistolary novels of the eighteenth century, and in particular to Browning's long narrative poem *The Ring and the Book* (1868), which relates a criminal case as perceived successively by the murderer, the victims, the defence, the prosecution, and others. More striking examples can be found in two novels of William Faulkner. *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) consists of three separate recollections (or: homodiegetic analepses), recorded long after the event and focalised through the male children of the Compson family (a southern white family from Jefferson, Mississippi) concerning certain dramatic events of their childhood, especially the circumstances surrounding the loss of their sister Caddy's virginity (the recollections are, in order, those of Benjy, a thirty-three-year-old idiot with the mind of a three-year old; Quentin, whose recollection is in effect a suicide note written at Harvard on the last day of his life; and Jason, the self-righteous but apparently sane brother). Only after reading all these recollections do the youthful events assume some clarity; but, as in the case of Hygelac's last raid, certain details concerning Caddy never emerge. There is no truth; only—in each case—independent perceptions of a searingly memorable sequence of events. By the same token, Faulkner's next novel, *As I Lay Dying* (1930), concerns the death of Addie Bundren, and the harrowing (and often comical) journey taken by her husband Anse and her various children—Cash, Darl, Jewel, Dewey Dell, and Vardaman—to return her corpse in its coffin, during a hot week in July, to Jefferson, Mississippi, whence she had come. There is no extradiegetic narrative; the novel consists of a series of brief personal observations by Anse and the children, as well as by various neighbours,

⁴¹ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, pp. 189–90.

as the stinking coffin makes its way to its final resting place. Faulkner's interest in the perception of events led him to create a wholly new narrative vehicle, seen in slightly different experimental forms in these two novels.⁴² I am suggesting that the *Beowulf*-poet's interest in perception led him to make a similar experiment in narrative form.

For the *Beowulf*-poet's deployment of these narrative devices there is no satisfactory model in antecedent western literature. One can point to individual, isolated features in the earlier narrative verse of Roman poets arguably known to the *Beowulf*-poet.⁴³ Consider Vergil's *Aeneid*, for example.⁴⁴ Like the Homeric epics which Vergil was imitating, the narrative of the *Aeneid* is characterized on the whole by 'calm, steady development . . . in a single direction';⁴⁵ only rarely is the overall progression interrupted by analepses (such as Aeneas's account of the sack of Troy in book II, or that of Deiphobus in VI. 509–34)⁴⁶ or prolepses (such as Anchises's prophecy concerning the future of Rome in VI. 752–892). Vergil occasionally shattered the narrative calm by describing an abrupt reversal (known in Aristotelian criticism of the drama as a *peripeteia*):⁴⁷

⁴² A further experiment is found in his *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), where the murder of Charles Bon by Colonel Henry Sutpen is narrated thirty-nine times by various narrators; see S. Rimmon-Kenan, 'From Reproduction to Production: the Status of Narration in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*', *Degrés*, 16 (1978), 1–19. This aspect of Faulkner's narrative technique has (oddly) been very little studied; for a general discussion of the models which inspired Faulkner's experiments in narrative, see A. F. Kinney, *Faulkner's Narrative Poetics: Style as Vision* (Amherst, MA, 1978), pp. 38–67 and, for Faulkner's interest in perception, pp. 15–24.

⁴³ On Roman narrative in general, see K. Quinn, *Texts and Contexts. The Roman Writers and their Audience* (London, 1979), pp. 48–119 ('The Poet as Storyteller'). I omit from discussion Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which, although they may well have been read in Anglo-Saxon England (probably by Aldhelm and Bede), consist rather of brief episodes rather than extended narrative on the scale which we encounter in *Beowulf*.

⁴⁴ The question of whether the *Beowulf*-poet had read Vergil is complex, and there is no scholarly consensus on the matter. The principal discussions are: F. Klaeber, 'Aeneis und *Beowulf*', *Archiv*, 126 (1911), 40–8 and 339–59; A. Brandl, 'Beowulf-Epos und Aeneis in systematischer Vergleichung', *Archiv*, 171 (1937), 161–73; T. B. Haber, *A Comparative Study of 'Beowulf' and the 'Aeneid'* (Princeton, NJ, 1931); and T. Andersson *Early Epic Scenery: Homer, Virgil, and the Medieval Legacy* (Ithaca, NY, 1970), pp. 145–59.

⁴⁵ R. Heinze, *Virgil's Epic Technique*, trans. H. and D. Harvey and F. Robertson (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1993 [originally publ. in German, 1915]), p. 254; cf. also pp. 251 ('Virgil intends us never to lose the feeling that the action is *moving forward*' [Heinze's italics]) and 301.

⁴⁶ The narrative of Deiphobus, who was killed treacherously during the sack of Troy and who as a shade in the underworld relates his experiences to Aeneas, is a good example of what Genette calls a completing analepsis, and is comparable in this respect to the completing analepses of *Beowulf* described above.

⁴⁷ Heinze, *Virgil's Epic Technique*, pp. 254–5. Elements of tragedy (as defined by Aristotle) in the *Aeneid* are well discussed by P. Hardie, 'Virgil and Tragedy', in *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, ed. C. Martindale (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 312–26; for *peripeteia*, see p. 313.

thus at one moment in book IV Aeneas is seen, after the consummation of his affair with Dido, happily at work building houses in Carthage (IV. 260–1); but then Mercury appears to him and reminds him of his Roman destiny, and he suddenly ‘burns to be gone and to leave these sweet lands’ (IV. 281: ‘ardet abire fuga dulcisque relinquere terras’); or again, in book V, at the height of celebration of the funeral games in Sicily, Fortuna engineers a *peripeteia* (V. 604: ‘hic primum Fortuna fidem mutata novavit’), and the next minute the entire Trojan fleet is in flames. These Vergilian reversals might be said in some sense to correspond to the *Beowulfian edwenden*. But in fundamental respects, Vergilian narrative is palpably different from that of *Beowulf*. The story of the *Aeneid* is related almost wholly throughout by an extradiegetic narrator, who is presumably identical with Vergil himself; the narrative is only focalised through one of the characters on rare occasions.⁴⁸ It is true that in recent times Vergilian scholars have begun to respond to the challenges of structuralist criticism: Gian Biagio Conte has identified in Vergilian narrative what he calls ‘point of view’,⁴⁹ and the late Don Fowler has described the same phenomenon as ‘embedded focalisation’.⁵⁰ For example, in the line which was quoted above, *dulcisque relinquere terras* (IV. 281), the lands of Carthage are only ‘sweet’ because at that moment they are perceived by Aeneas to be so.⁵¹ Examples of embedded focalisation such as this can be found in *Beowulf* as well,⁵² but they are wholly different in scope and scale from the multiple internal focalisation which is also found in *Beowulf*.

Vergilian narrative, then, cannot easily be invoked as a model for *Beowulfian* narrative. Nor is the situation any different with respect to

⁴⁸ One such occasion occurs at the very end of the poem (XII. 908–17), where Turnus’s terror as he steps forward to confront the ferocious Aeneas is described in terms of his mental perception. I have discussed this passage in the context of *Beowulfian* narrative in ‘The Comparative Approach’, in *Reading Old English Texts*, ed. K. O’Brien O’Keeffe (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 20–38, at 31–3.

⁴⁹ G. B. Conte, *The Rhetoric of Imitation. Genre and Poetic Memory in Virgil and Other Latin Poets*, ed. C. Segal (Ithaca, NY, 1986), p. 154. As Conte quickly points out (*ibid.* n. 10), his use of the term ‘point of view’ here differs from that of the narratologists such as Genette.

⁵⁰ D. P. Fowler, ‘Deviant Focalisation in Virgil’s *Aeneid*’, *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, 36 (1990), 42–63, and *id.*, ‘Virgilian Narrative: Story-Telling’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, ed. Martindale, pp. 259–70.

⁵¹ This same line is discussed by Conte, *The Rhetoric of Imitation*, p. 156, and by Fowler, ‘Virgilian Narrative’, pp. 266–7.

⁵² Instances of embedded focalisation (though of course he does not call it that) are discussed by Peter Clemons, ‘Action in *Beowulf* and our Perception of It’, in *Old English Poetry: Essays on Style*, ed. D. G. Calder (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1979), pp. 147–68, esp. 155: ‘[the poet’s] descriptive adverbs . . . have to do primarily with the doer’s attitude to the action, his involvement in it, not with the impression which this action makes outside as a movement.’

other epic narratives of classical antiquity which might have been known to an Anglo-Saxon poet. For example, Lucan's *Bellum civile*, an account of the civil war between Caesar and Pompey (49–48 BC), follows historical chronology in that it proceeds throughout in a linear direction,⁵³ from Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon (book I), to the first naval encounter off Marseilles (book III), to the first meeting of the armies in Spain (book IV), to the mighty battle at Pharsalus on the plains of Thessaly and the destruction of Pompey's army (book VII), to Pompey's flight and death in Egypt (book VIII), and the aftermath of Caesar's victory (books IX–X). Lucan delays and expands his narrative by means of various lengthy *ekphraseis* (the account of Thessalian witches in book VI, the catalogue of African snakes in book IX, etc.)⁵⁴ and by the occasional analepsis (the aged Roman citizen's recollection of previous civil war: II. 68–232) or prolepsis (the prophecy of Figulus: I. 638–72). Scholars have recently turned their attention to peculiarities in Lucan's narrative, especially his presentation of the poet (himself) as narrator;⁵⁵ but on the whole his narrative proceeds in chronological order, retailing (if often distorting) the events of recorded history. The same may be said of Statius's *Thebaid* which, although its story is drawn from mythology rather than history, proceeds in linear fashion.⁵⁶ It concerns the internecine strife between the brothers Eteocles and Polyneices, sons of Oedipus. Because

⁵³ For an overview, see P. Grimal, 'Le poète et l'histoire', in *Lucain*, Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique, 15 (Geneva, 1970), 51–117. Lucan's account of the civil war was framed by his own fierce republican, anti-imperial sentiments, which account for many of the historical distortions in the poem; for helpful comment, see F. M. Ahl, *Lucan: An Introduction* (Ithaca, NY, 1976).

⁵⁴ On Lucan's *ekphraseis*, see the methodical survey by L. Eckardt, *Exkurse und Ekphraseis bei Lucan* (Heidelberg, 1936).

⁵⁵ See J. Masters, *Poetry and Civil War in Lucan's Bellum Civile* (Cambridge, 1992); P. Hardie, *The Epic Successors of Virgil* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 107–9; and M. Leigh, *Lucan: Spectacle and Engagement* (Oxford, 1997), esp. p. 4: 'The mediation of narrative through the point of view or focalisation of a character involved encodes responses to the action often very different from those expressed by the primary narrator. The importance of this concept to modern evaluations of the ideology of the *Aeneid* from Heinze to Conte and on is well known. What is striking about Lucan is that, while his narrative responds to the same fundamental analysis as that of Vergil, it does so in a manner almost diametrically opposed to that found in the *Aeneid* . . . Lucan's internal audience repeatedly transforms into spectacle and seeks an admiring audience for a civil war which the primary narrator affects to abhor.'

⁵⁶ Cf. the remarks of D. Vessey, *Statius and the Thebaid* (Cambridge, 1973), p. 320: 'His [Statius's] epic, full of variety and contrast, with frequent changes of tempo and mood, presses onward through a series of episodes towards its final denouement . . . Each major part possesses its own self-sufficient value and unity, and all integrated into the stream of narrative by symbol, image and theme; but that stream is never dammed or obstructed in its flow'; and id., *Statius: Thebaid*, trans. A. D. Melville, introd. D. W. T. Vessey (Oxford, 1992), p. xi: 'There is a distinct and ordered progression of events, though some licence for discursiveness.'

they have neglected him in his blind old age, Oedipus curses them and consigns them to perpetual rivalry, whereby the governance of Thebes will be shared in alternate years between the two brothers. Polyneices draws the losing lot and goes into exile at Argos; in his absence, Eteocles rejects the agreement and claims the Theban throne in perpetuity, thus precipitating war (all this in book I). The remainder of the epic concerns the exile of Polyneices in Argos with King Adrastus; the willingness of Adrastus to support his cause, and the expedition of Polyneices and Adrastus, accompanied by five further heroes and their troops (hence the 'Seven against Thebes') to confront Eteocles at Thebes and to reclaim the kingdom. With the exception of one lengthy homodiegetic analepsis (the narrative of Hysipyle, who shows up from Lemnos in book V), and several pauses in the forward movement (the funeral games at Nemea in book VI, for example), the narrative proceeds in a steady and linear fashion, with one or other of the Argive heroes being killed until finally, in book XI, Eteocles and Polyneices confront and kill each other (book XII concerns the aftermath and establishment of concord at Thebes through Athenian intervention). In short, even if it could be shown convincingly that Statius's *Thebaid* was read in Anglo-Saxon England, it could scarcely have served as a model for *Beowulfian* narrative. And although other Latin epics have survived from classical antiquity, such as the *Argonautica* of Valerius Flaccus⁵⁷ or the *Punica* of Silius Italicus, there is no evidence that these were read or studied in Anglo-Saxon England, and so are not relevant to the present enquiry.

What was studied in Anglo-Saxon schools was the Christian-Latin 'epic' verse of late antiquity.⁵⁸ Three such epics are in question. The *Euangelia* of Juvenius follow the synoptic gospels' version of the life of Christ, from His birth and childhood through to His crucifixion; all is told in one narrative voice, and there are no analepses, prolepses or internal focalisations. The *Carmen paschale* of Caelius Sedulius also treats the life of Christ in chronological order; and although the typological significance of each event in Christ's life is amplified through

⁵⁷ In any event, the *Argonautica* were left incomplete at the author's death, and it is therefore perilous to interpret e.g. prolepses in light of what might or might not have been included in the finished work; see D. Hershkowitz, *Valerius Flaccus' Argonautica: Abbreviated Voyages in Silver Latin Epic* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 22–4.

⁵⁸ On the way that biblical narrative was rendered in verse in these Late Latin poems, see M. Roberts, *Biblical Epic and Rhetorical Paraphrase in Late Antiquity* (Liverpool, 1985); on the way that they were studied in Anglo-Saxon England, see M. Lapidge, 'The Study of Latin Texts in Late Anglo-Saxon England' in his *Anglo-Latin Literature, 600–899* (1996), pp. 455–98 and 516 (addenda).

collocation with Old Testament events, the progression of the narrative is not interrupted with analepses or prolepses, and the entire poem is told in one narrative voice. Arator's poem, the *Historia apostolica*, is concerned with events in the lives of SS Peter and Paul; and although the poet devotes his greatest energy to explaining the figural significance of these events, rather than the events themselves, the poem otherwise contains no departures from linear narrative.⁵⁹

These, then, are the narrative poets—Vergil, Lucan, Statius, Juvenecus, Caelius Sedulius, Arator—which an Anglo-Saxon poet writing no later than the mid-eighth century could reasonably be assumed to have read; and the narrative discourse of none of them bears any resemblance to *Beowulf* in anything other than minor details. Poets later than the mid-eighth century do not come into consideration because, as palaeographical evidence unambiguously indicates, a written text of *Beowulf*, which was the ultimate ancestor or archetype of the sole surviving copy, existed by no later than *c.*750.⁶⁰ One could even say that no extant medieval poem—in Latin or the vernacular—composed before *c.*1100 bears any resemblance to *Beowulf* either in its structure or in its narrative discourse.⁶¹

That is why, in trying to illustrate the unusual nature of *Beowulfian* narrative, I drew an analogy with the novels of William Faulkner. In fact many aspects of *Beowulfian* narrative have closer analogues in the modern novel than in ancient epic. Mikhail Bakhtin has helpfully clarified the distinction between the narrative of the epic and of the novel (by which he refers not merely to modern 'novels', but to prose narratives of classical antiquity, from Plato through Petronius and Apuleius and

⁵⁹ The narrative itself is contained in prose summaries which precede sections of verse in which the figural significance is expounded. On the form, see M. Lapidge, 'Bede's Metrical *Vita S. Cuthberti*' in *Anglo-Latin Literature, 600–899*, pp. 339–55, at 348–50; on the figural meaning of the poem, see Richard Hillier, *Arator on the Acts of the Apostles: A Baptismal Commentary* (Oxford, 1993).

⁶⁰ See M. Lapidge, 'The Archetype of *Beowulf*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 29 (2000), 5–41.

⁶¹ By *c.*1100 vernacular poets were beginning to experiment with narrative structure. The *Song of Roland* with its *laissez similaires*, for example, is apparently an experimental form in which consecutive *laissez* or strophes recount the same incident in nearly identical, but significantly varying, wording: Roland sounding the oliphant (str. 133–4), Roland striking the stone with his sword Durendal (str. 172–3), etc. See G. J. Brault, *The Song of Roland: An Analytical Edition. I. Introduction and Commentary* (University Park, PA, 1978), pp. 78–9, as well as (briefly) E. Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance* (Oxford, 1971), p. 7 ("Repetition with variation", to which there is no exact parallel in our modern method of exposition). A similar phenomenon, described here as 'double narration', has been noted in the *Poema del mio Cid* by J. Gornall, 'How many Times was the Count of Barcelona offered his Freedom? Double Narration in the *Poema del mio Cid*', *Medium Ævum*, 56 (1987), 65–77.

others).⁶² There is no doubt that *Beowulf* would be classed by Bakhtin as epic, in so far as it deals with a ‘national heroic past’, one which is ‘separated from the contemporary reality (that is, from the time in which the singer and author and his audience lives) by an absolute epic distance’;⁶³ but there are nevertheless many features of the poem which associate it strikingly with the Bakhtinian novel, especially its ‘radical transformation of temporal coordinates’.⁶⁴ Bakhtin argued that the genesis of the novel is to be found in Plato’s Socratic dialogues, where a ‘speaking and conversing man is the central image of the genre’, and that the characteristic feature of this ‘speaking man’ or narrator is his *apomnemoneumata* or ‘recollections’, which serve to link the past with the narratorial present, to bridge (in effect) the ‘absolute epic distance’ which separates the narrator of epic from his subject. (Bakhtin’s ‘recollections’ would be described by Genette as homodiegetic analepses.) I have suggested that *Beowulf* is structured by ‘recollections’ of a similar sort: Beowulf’s recollections of his swimming match with Breca, of his activities at Heorot, and of his participation in Hygelac’s last raid. Interestingly, Bakhtin went on to suggest that, ‘when the novel becomes the dominant genre, epistemology becomes the dominant discipline’.⁶⁵ Bakhtin’s remark is pertinent to *Beowulf* because, on my understanding of the poem, one of the poet’s principal concerns was epistemological: the processes of acquisition and evaluation of knowledge, of the mental perception of an event rather than the event itself, and the arrangement of these mental perceptions in a narrative structure.

The narrative mode of *Beowulf* is retrospective rather than prospective.⁶⁶ Events and action are defined and redefined through subsequent perception, through what Riffaterre called retroaction. The process of perceptual redefinition, of movement from the vague to the definite, takes place at all levels of the poem’s narrative. At the microcontextual level it

⁶² M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin, TX, 1981), pp. 3–40 (‘Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel’). See also the important qualifications pertaining to Bakhtin’s knowledge and understanding of medieval narrative, especially of medieval French romance, by Cesare Segre, ‘What Bakhtin Left Unsaid: the Case of the Medieval Romance’, in *Romance: Generic Transformation from Chrétien de Troyes to Cervantes*, ed. K. and M.S. Brownlee (1985), pp. 23–46.

⁶³ *Ibid.* p. 13; and cf. discussion by Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*, trans. W. Godzich (Manchester, 1984), pp. 88–9.

⁶⁴ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 11; Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, p. 88.

⁶⁵ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 15.

⁶⁶ F. C. Robinson, *Beowulf and the Appositive Style* (Knoxville, TN, 1985), p. 7: ‘Few readers would deny that *Beowulf* is a profoundly retrospective narrative.’

is a pervasive feature of the poet's diction. A clear example is found in lines quoted earlier concerning the first ravages of Grendel: the Geats lived blessedly 'until one began to perpetrate crimes, a fiend from hell' (100–1: 'oð ðæt an ongan / fyrene fremman feond on helle'), where the ambiguous and unspecified *an* is subsequently qualified by the phrase *feond on helle*. Or consider the description of the Geats' departure for Denmark:

Fyrst forð gewat; flota was on yðum,
bat under beorge (210–11)

[Time passed; something was floating on the waves—a boat, beneath the cliffs.]

Here a vague term (*flota*) is qualified by a precise, defining term (*bat*): a device which Fred Robinson has called 'clarifying apposition'.⁶⁷ On the macrocontextual level, the same movement from vagueness towards clarity of perception characterises the poet's narrative discourse. I mention (briefly) two examples: the presentation of Grendel and that of Beowulf himself.

When first the monster is mentioned, he is described vaguely as an *ellengæst* (86)—if the text is sound here⁶⁸—, then successively as a fiend from hell (101), then a grim spirit, a notorious wanderer in marchlands (103) who was called Grendel, then a wretched man (105: *wonsæli wer*, the first indication that the monster is in human form), then a *wiht* or 'creature' (120), then an *aglæca* (159), a difficult word implying at least the creature's terrifying nature, then a 'dire solitary' (165: *atol angengea*); and so on. By the time this terrifying creature comes to attack the hall occupied by Beowulf and his men (702–21), the audience knows nothing precise about its appearance, save that it is in human form. Of course subsequent events allow a much clearer perception of this humanoid monster: that he was bigger than a man (1353), so big that it took four men to carry his head (1634–9), that he had fingernails like steel (985), that a terrifying light shone from his eyes (726–7), that he was invulnerable to iron weapons (802–3, 987–9), that he carried a *glof* or dragon-skin sack into which he stuffed his victims (2085), and that he bit off their heads and drank their blood like a

⁶⁷ Robinson, *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*, p. 63; cf. also Robinson's earlier discussion of the same phenomenon, which he then described as 'clarifying variation', in 'Two Aspects of Variation in Old English Poetry', in *Old English Poetry: Essays on Style*, ed. Calder, pp. 127–45, esp. 130–7, where the following examples from *Beowulf* are cited: 1121–4, 1143–4, 1368–9 (the vague *hæðstapa*, 'heath-stalker', is clarified as *heorot*, 'hart'), 1522–4, 1745–7, and 1829–35.

⁶⁸ Like many editors, I suspect that *ellengæst* here is a scribal slip for *ellorgæst*; cf. lines 807, 1349, 1617, and 1621.

vampire (742–5). But none of these descriptive details of the monster's nature was known to the original audience when Grendel was described as approaching Heorot. I have suggested elsewhere that it was part of the poet's narrative 'design for terror' to describe the monster in intentionally vague terms, so that what approached Heorot was the unknown, and was evoked by the poet in terms suggestive of a nightmare.⁶⁹ Here I wish simply to stress that it is only in retrospect that we can form a visual perception of the monster; in prospect, the original audience could not have done so.

Similarly, it is only in retrospect that we learn who Grendel's great adversary is to be. As the fame of Grendel's depredations spread abroad, a thegn of King Hygelac learned of them:

Bæt fram ham gefrægn Higelaces Begn
god mid Geatum, Grendles dæda (194–5)

[Then, from home, Hygelac's thegn, a good (man) among the Geats, learned of Grendel's deeds.]

Of course we know, with the benefit of hindsight, that this thegn is Beowulf himself; but the original audience could not have known this. This audience may well have heard of Hygelac, who is attested in contemporary records such as the *Liber monstrorum* (a text composed, on my understanding of the evidence, by a colleague or disciple of Aldhelm at Malmesbury in the early eighth century);⁷⁰ but the audience cannot have known of Beowulf since, as we deduce from Scandinavian analogues, Beowulf is a fictional character created by the poet and inserted into a known legendary context. So the anonymous thegn of Hygelac sails from the land of the Geats to Denmark, where on landing he and his men encounter Hrothgar's coastguard, who asks them what sort of warriors they are (237–40). He is told that they are Hygelac's thegns, and that their leader's father was called Ecgtheow (262–3). Again, the audience is

⁶⁹ M. Lapidge, 'Beowulf and the Psychology of Terror', in *Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period*, ed. Damico and Leyerle, pp. 373–402. As I demonstrate in this article, the OE word for 'nightmare' was *nihtgenga* (literally 'night-traveller'); and although the poet does not use this word, he evokes it by describing Grendel as *nihtbealwa mæst* (193), *sceadugenga on niht* (703), and *angenga* (165, 449).

⁷⁰ M. Lapidge, 'Beowulf, Aldhelm, the *Liber monstrorum* and Wessex', *Studi medievali*, 3rd ser. 23 (1982), 151–92, repr. in *Anglo-Latin Literature, 600–899*, pp. 271–312. The attribution is confirmed by links between the *Liber monstrorum* and the Canterbury glosses: see P. Lendinara, 'The *Liber monstrorum* and Anglo-Saxon Glossaries', in her *Anglo-Saxon Glosses and Glossaries* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 113–38; see also A. Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 86–7.

probably none the wiser for this information, since the name Ecgtheow does not occur in surviving sources or analogues outside the poem. Only when the troop of Hygelac's thegns reaches the hall and they are interrogated by the hallguard (Wulfgar) does the audience learn the leader's name: *Beowulf is min nama* (343). Wulfgar reports this name to King Hrothgar, and Hrothgar is able to situate Beowulf in a genealogy and to explain who Ecgtheow was. But it has taken nearly 150 lines for the audience to discover the name and kin of the warrior who has set out to confront Grendel.

This pattern of perception—the retrospective movement from the vague and unknown to the qualified and defined—animates the narrative structure of the poem. It is clear that the poet was fascinated by these processes of perception and understanding, and it is for this reason, I think, that he frequently describes events in the poem not from the point of view of an extradiegetic narrator but focalises them through the characters' own perceptions of the events.⁷¹ For example, the mental perceptions of each of Beowulf's three adversaries are described at the outset of the respective encounters. Thus when Grendel bursts into Heorot and seizes hold of Beowulf, he immediately perceives (*onfundu*)⁷² that he has never previously encountered a stronger grip:

Sona Bæt onfundu fyrena hyrde,
Bæt he ne mette middangeardes,
eorBan sceata on elran men
mundgripe maran. (750–3)

[Immediately he perceived, the keeper of sins, that he had never met, in any corner of the earth, in any other man, a stronger handgrip.]

Similarly, as Beowulf swims down through the ghastly mere to confront Grendel's mother, she immediately perceives (*onfundu* again) that someone is invading the abode she has inhabited for a hundred seasons:

Sona Bæt onfundu se ðe floda begong
heorogifre beheold hund missera,
grim ond grædig, Bæt Bær gumena sum
ælwihhta eard ufan cunnode. (1497–1500)

⁷¹ A similar observation is made by Kinney, 'The Needs of the Moment', pp. 308–9.

⁷² The verb *onfindan* is Class III strong, with regular preterite singular *onfund*. The form *onfundu* was created on the analogy of weak verbs; see A. Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford, 1959), § 741. Campbell surmises that *onfundu* is a West Saxon form; attestations in the online Corpus of Old English tend to support Campbell's observation: the form is found in *Christ I*, *Beowulf*, Alfred's *Pastoral Care*, the OE *Orosius*, the *Boethius*, Wærferth's translation of Gregory's *Dialogues*, the OE *Bede* and other later texts, including *The Battle of Maldon*.

[Immediately the one who occupied the waters' expanse, bloodthirsty, for 100 seasons [= 50 years], angry and fierce, perceived that some man was exploring the monsters' lair from above.]

And when, at the outset of the chain of events which will bring the poem to its tragic conclusion, the dragon's lair was burgled, the dragon immediately perceived (*onfand*) that someone had tampered with his treasure:

He Bæt sona onfand,
 ðæt hæfde gumena sum goldes gefandod,
 heahgestreona. (2300–2)

[He immediately perceived that some man had explored his gold, his excellent treasure.]

It is clear from these examples that the *Beowulf*-poet used the verb *onfindan* to describe the mental process of perception and intellection: realisation, in short. However, the poet carefully distinguished this mental activity from the physical process of perception, for which he normally used the word *ongi(e)tan*. In other words, from the extensive Old English vocabulary of perception, the poet has privileged these two words: *onfindan* and *ongi(e)tan*.⁷³ Whereas the mental act of perception and intellection was connoted by *onfindan*, the physical, mechanical process of perception through the sense organs, especially seeing or hearing, was connoted by *ongi(e)tan*, as some examples will illustrate. First, when Beowulf and the Geats returned home, the boat proceeded to the point where they could 'see' (*ongitan*) the headlands of Geatland:

fleat famigheals forð ofer yðe,
 bundenstefna ofer brimstreamas,
 Bæt hie Geata clifu ongitan meahton,
 cuBe næssas (1909–12)

[The foamy-necked [ship] sailed over the waves, the bound-prowed [boat], across the currents, until they could see the cliffs of Geatland, the familiar headlands.]

Or in describing the behaviour of the sea-monsters in the ghastly mere when they 'heard' the sound of the battle-horn:

Hie on weg hruron
 bitere ond gebolgne; bearhtm ongeaton,
 guðhorn galan. (1430–2)

[They rushed about, furious and enraged; they heard the sound, the battle-horn wailing.]

⁷³ See below, Appendix I (pp. 89–93).

Or, again, when the Geatish warriors were surrounded in Ravenswood by Ongentheow, they ‘heard’ the sound of Hygelac’s battle horn coming to their rescue:

Frofor eft gelamp
 sarigmodum somod ærdæge,
 syððan hie Hygelaces horn ond byman,
 gealdor ongeaton, Ba se goda com (2941–4)

[Help came for the weary ones at daybreak, when they heard Hygelac’s horn and battle-trumpet, when the good man arrived.]

Many such examples could be quoted. In any case, the poet’s distinction between the physical act of perception and the mental process of intellection is a subtle one, not easily paralleled elsewhere in an Old English text.⁷⁴

In fact the distinction and interaction between the physical process of perception and the mental process of intellection is one which occupied the philosophical schools of antiquity, particularly the Epicureans and Sceptics, and it is worth at least posing the question of whether the *Beowulf*-poet’s distinction between *ongi(e)tan* and *onfindan* could have been informed by antique philosophical thought.⁷⁵ For practical purposes we may omit Greek philosophical texts such as Plato’s *Theaetetus*, the *locus classicus* of ancient epistemology, since no-one in Anglo-Saxon England—with the exception of Archbishop Theodore and his colleague Abbot Hadrian—could have read them.⁷⁶ Of Latin texts, Lucretius’s poem *De natura rerum* contains at one point (IV. 478–85) a brief discussion, based on Epicurus, of the validity of sense-perceptions; but the evidence that Lucretius was studied in Anglo-Saxon England is very slight, limited to the quotation of a single line by Aldhelm⁷⁷ and some ‘rather doubtful’ parallels of diction between Aldhelm’s poetry and that

⁷⁴ A similar distinction is drawn, but using different vocabulary, in King Alfred’s translation of Augustine’s *Soliloquia* where, in explaining the process of learning, ‘Augustine’ explains to Gesceadwisnys that learning takes place first through the eyes and then with inner thought (*ingeþanc*), since it is the eyes which communicate that which is seen to the inner thought, whence understanding results (‘ac siððan ic hyt Ba ongyten hæfde’) (ed. Carnicelli, p. 61). Note that Alfred’s use of *ongi(e)tan* here differs significantly from that of the *Beowulf*-poet.

⁷⁵ See below, Appendix II (pp. 93–7).

⁷⁶ On Theodore’s philosophical training at Constantinople, see B. Bischoff and M. Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries from the Canterbury School of Theodore and Hadrian* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 255–9.

⁷⁷ *Aldhelmi Opera*, ed. R. Ehwald, MGH, Auctores Antiquissimi, 15 (Berlin, 1919), p. 165, line 10 (quoting *De natura rerum* II. 661); note also Ehwald’s observation (ibid. n. 1) that Aldhelm very possibly derived the line indirectly from a grammarian such as Nonius Marcellus.

of Lucretius.⁷⁸ A more extensive treatment of the distinction between physical and mental processes of perception is found in Cicero's *Academica priora*, where a distinction is drawn between *visa* ('things seen, perceived by the senses') and *comprehensa* ('things understood by the intellect'): in other words, precisely the distinction between *ongi(e)tan* and *onfindan* drawn by the *Beowulf*-poet. But there is no evidence that Cicero's *Academica priora* were ever read in Anglo-Saxon England. By the same token, Augustine's treatise *Contra Academicos*, which is based extensively on Cicero's *Academica priora* and which reproduces much of its argument concerning sense perception, does not appear to have been known in Anglo-Saxon England: there is no surviving pre-Conquest manuscript of the work, and no certain quotation has yet been identified.

I cannot think, in short, that the poet had a literary model for the terminological distinction which he drew between physical perception and mental realisation. Rather, the terminological distinction should be understood as a reflex of the poet's interest in narrative perception: the recording and subsequent interpretation of past events, as in the cases of the swimming-match with Breca, or the events at Hrothgar's court later recounted in Geatland, or the varying reports of Hygelac's disastrous last raid. As I have stressed throughout, knowledge in *Beowulf* is always a matter of retrospection and re-interpretation. Present action, heroic or otherwise, is therefore always framed in the awareness of transience, as in the poet's fundamental assertion, repeated by him three times, that Beowulf was the strongest of men 'on *that* day of *this* life' (197, 790, 806: 'on Bæm dæge Bysses lifes')—the implication being that, at a subsequent time, on another day of another life, the situation will inevitably be very different. Events in a hero's life, or indeed in any life, pass quickly, and we are left with nothing more than present perceptions—recollections—of past events. Hence the tone of nostalgia and elegy which pervades the poem. Even our recollections are fragmentary at best, like the varying reminiscences of Hygelac's last raid. I therefore take as a statement of grim and intentional irony the poet's comment, that 'understanding is always best, forethought of the mind' (1059–60: 'Forþan bið andgit æghwær selest / ferhðes foreBanc'). *Forethought* or *providence*—*foreAanc*—is the property of God alone; for man, knowledge can only come, in retrospect, from the re-interpretation of events perceived.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ A. Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 130.

⁷⁹ Cf. the interesting remarks on this subject by L. C. Gruber, 'Forethought: the New Weapon in *Beowulf*', *In Geardagum*, 12 (1991), 1–14, esp. p. 4: '*Beowulf*'s subject is that of the limitations of

My argument, in a word, is that the *Beowulf*-poet's mental orientation was philosophical and epistemological,⁸⁰ and that this orientation is the explanation for the eccentric and unprecedented nature of the poem's narrative structure. There is no doubt that the poet intended the audience of the poem to reflect, retroactively, on the narrated events and their relationships, during the course of the telling. There can be no doubt, either, that the sophisticated and unprecedented narrative structure of the poem is the work of a highly literate and meditative poet and not the product of impromptu composition by a *scop* or the result of stitching together originally separate lays.⁸¹ For various reasons, however, it is difficult if not impossible for a modern audience to respond adequately to the intention lying behind the narrative structure. The poem's diction is difficult and allusive, and for this reason it is most accessibly taught in excerpts, in situations where the teacher has the opportunity of explaining the context of each excerpt before translation begins: with the result that apprentice-readers usually know what happens in a particular episode before they begin to read it. The only (hypothetical) modern reader who could respond adequately to the poet's intention would be one who had absolute mastery of Old English, but in the process of acquiring this mastery had somehow never heard of *Beowulf* and who, on beginning to read the poem, did not know who or what Grendel was, or who was the thegn of Hygelac who went to Heorot to confront him: a reader, in short, who lacked *foreAanc* of the poem's events. Of course there can no longer

human knowledge, of rational and receptive mentality, of human understanding and bestial instinct.' The distinction between *providentia* (God's foreknowledge of events) and *fortuna* (man's limited understanding of them) is Boethian, and scholars—in my view—are right to see Boethian influence in the poem; see, for example, W. F. Bolton, 'Boethius and a Topos in *Beowulf*', in *Saints, Scholars and Heroes: Studies in Medieval Culture in Honour of Charles W. Jones*, ed. M. H. King and W. M. Stevens, 2 vols. (Collegeville, MN, 1979), I, 15–43.

⁸⁰ Cf. the interesting remarks on the poet's concern with epistemology by R. Butts, 'The Analogical Mere: Landscape and Terror in *Beowulf*', *English Studies*, 68 (1987), 113–21, esp. 114 and 118.

⁸¹ The distinction between oral and written composition is sharply defined by W. J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York, 1982), p. 148: 'the writer can subject the unconscious inspiration to far greater conscious control than the oral narrator'; and cf. pp. 141, 145 and 150 ('the very reflectiveness of writing—enforced by the slowness of the writing process as compared to oral delivery as well as by the isolation of the writer as compared to the oral performer—encourages growth of consciousness out of the unconscious'). It is my argument that the *Beowulf*-poet exercised *conscious* and demonstrable manipulation of the text, as illustrated by the infratextual references in lines 1785–90 (discussed above, pp. 66–7), as well as by the overall structure of the narrative, however unusual this structure might seem by comparison with earlier narrative verse.

be such a reader. But if, as modern readers, we make the effort to keep constantly in mind the way the events of the poem are meant to be perceived, then the design behind the complex and sophisticated structure of the poet's narrative will become more easily comprehensible.

Appendix I

The verbs *onfindan* and *ongi(e)tan* in *Beowulf*

Old English verbs of perception constitute a rich and varied field for semantic analysis, but they have in fact been very little studied. Two lengthy essays published a century ago present the raw material for analysis by considering Old English terminology within the wider context of the Germanic languages: that by Adeline Rittershaus⁸² provides helpful analysis, much of it etymological, of various verbs for perceiving as they are encountered in various texts, among them *Beowulf*; whereas that by Samuel Kroesch⁸³ is organised much like a thesaurus entry, with various aspects of perception accompanied by lists of words (without reference to the texts in which they occur) in ancient and modern Germanic languages. A century later, the *Thesaurus of Old English* can provide similar lists of Old English words for the various aspects of perception,⁸⁴ again without reference to texts; but such references can easily be located by means of the Toronto *Dictionary of Old English* online Corpus of Old English.

From these several sources, one can compile the following list of verbs which broadly encompass the activity of perception, that is, of finding or discovering through experience or feeling: *afindan*, *agietan*, *aparian*, *arasian*, *begietan*, *cunnian*, *(ge)fandian*, *findan*, *gemetan*, *inbegietan*, *onfindan*, *ongemetan*, and *ongietan*. Some of these words do not occur in *Beowulf* (*afindan*, *agietan*, *aparian*, *arasian*, *inbegietan* and *ongemetan*) and may be eliminated from the present enquiry. Of the remaining verbs, *cunnian*⁸⁵ is used by the *Beowulf*-poet five times (508, 1426, 1444, 1500, 2045), always

⁸² *Die Ausdrücke für Gesichtsempfindungen in den altgermanischen Dialekten. Ein Beitrag zur Bedeutungsgeschichte*, Abhandlungen herausgegeben von der Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache in Zürich (Zürich, 1899).

⁸³ 'The Semasiological Development of Words for 'Perceive' etc. in the Older Germanic Dialects', *Modern Philology*, 8 (1911), 461–510.

⁸⁴ *A Thesaurus of Old English*, ed. J. Roberts and C. Kay with L. Grundy, 2 vols. (1995), esp. I, 507–8 (no. 11.03.01.03); cf. also pp. 72, 489, etc.

⁸⁵ See Rittershaus, *Die Ausdrücke*, pp. 66–8.

in the sense of ‘to explore’, ‘to test’, as in the phrase *sund cunnian* (1426, 1444). Similarly, *(ge)fandian*⁸⁶ is used twice to mean ‘to explore’, ‘to search out’ (2301, 2454), as when the dragon realises that someone has ‘searched out’ his gold (2301). The verb *findan*⁸⁷ is used fourteen times in *Beowulf* (118, 207, 719, 870, 1156, 1267, 1378, 1415, 1486, 1838, 2270, 2294, 2789, 2870), almost always to denote the simple physical act of finding or discovering something, as in ‘to find the treasure’, rather than to discover something through mental activity.⁸⁸ The verb *gemetan* is used three times with the similar connotation of ‘to find’, hence ‘to meet with’, ‘to encounter’ (757, 2592, 2785), always in a physical sense. Two further verbs which elsewhere in Old English can have the connotation of seizing or grasping something mentally, are used in *Beowulf* solely to express the physical act of seizure: *geniman*⁸⁹ is used thus six times (122, 1302, 1872, 2429, 2776, 3165), for example when Grendel seizes thirty thegns in their sleep (122: ‘on ræste genam / Britig Begna’) or when Grendel’s mother seizes her son’s dismembered arm (1302: ‘genam / cuBe folme’). Similarly *begietan*, which can elsewhere connote the act of grasping something mentally, is used six times in *Beowulf* solely to express the physical act of seizure (1068, 1146, 2130, 2230, 2249, 2872), as in expressions such as ‘terror / fear seized them’ (1068: ‘ða hie se fær begeat’). In short, whereas these words can elsewhere in Old English have connotations of mental activity, the *Beowulf*-poet uses them almost exclusively to denote physical processes.

This leaves the verbs *ongi(e)tan* and *onfindan*. Of these, *ongi(e)tan*⁹⁰ is a reasonably common word in Old English (there are at least 800 attestations, judging from the online Corpus of Old English, and probably many more).⁹¹ It is clear from this large corpus of attestations that *ongi(e)tan* was frequently used by Anglo-Saxon authors to denote the mental process of knowing and understanding. In texts of various dates

⁸⁶ See Kroesch, ‘The Semasiological Development’, p. 475.

⁸⁷ See Rittershaus, *Die Ausdrücke*, pp. 54–6.

⁸⁸ The sole exception is line 3162, where exceptionally clever men were able ‘to devise’ or ‘fashion’ Beowulf’s cenotaph (‘swa hyt weorðlicost / foresnotre men findan mihton’).

⁸⁹ For Germanic cognates, see Kroesch, ‘The Semasiological Development’, p. 469.

⁹⁰ See Rittershaus, *Die Ausdrücke*, pp. 58–9; Kroesch, ‘The Semasiological Development’, p. 464.

⁹¹ The figures cannot be precise, because it is difficult to identify every possible orthographical variant. I obtained the following results: *ongitan* (153×), *ongietan* (63×), *ongytan* (118×), *ongeat* (321×, including *ongeaton*, etc.), *ongiten* (42×, including *ongitenne*, etc.); but it will be seen that these searches do not include forms with the prefix *an-* or *and-*, nor spellings with *-get*. Nevertheless, a sampling of c.800 attestations should provide a representative picture of how the verb was used.

the word is used to mean ‘to realise’, as in *Genesis A* (1474: ‘Ba ongeat hraðe / flotmanna frea Bæt wæs frofor cumen’) and *Genesis B* (334 (‘fynd ongeaton Bæt hie hæfdon gewrixled wita unrim’), or ‘to understand’, as in Alfred’s *Soliloquies*: ‘ic wolde ongytan eall and witan hwæt ic nu sang’ (ed. Carnicelli, p. 56) and in numerous tenth-century homilies, such as Vercelli VII: ‘eac ðu meahst Be bet ongytan Bæt ic Be soð secge’ (ed. Scragg, p. 136) or prose works such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (979 DE: ‘Nu we magon ongytan Bæt manna wisdom’). The *Beowulf*-poet uses *ongi(e)tan* some twelve times, and in every case, with one exception, it denotes the physical process of perception—seeing or hearing—rather than the mental act of intellection and realisation: 14 (God **sees** the distress of the Scyldings: ‘fyrenðearfe **ongeat**’), 308 (the Geats advance until they can **see** Heorot: ‘oBBæt hy sæl timbred . . . **ongytan** mihton’), 1431 (the sea-monsters in the ghastly mere **hear** the sound of the battle-horn: ‘bearhtm **ongeaton** / guðhorn galan’), 1484 (Hygelac will **look on** the gold which Beowulf has won: ‘mæg Bonne on Bæm golde **ongitan**’), 1496 (time passes before Beowulf can **see** the bottom of the haunted mere: ‘ær he Bone grundwong **ongytan** mehte’), 1512 (Beowulf **sees** that he is in some sort of hostile hall: ‘ða se eorl **ongeat** / Bæt he in niðsele nathwylcum wæs’), 1518 (Beowulf then **sees** Grendel’s mother: ‘**ongeat** Ba se goda . . . merewif mihtig’), 1911 (the Geats sail over the sea until they can **see** the cliffs of their native Geatland: ‘Bæt hie Geata clifu **ongitan** meahton’), 2748 (Beowulf asks to **see** the ancient gold he has won from the dragon: ‘Bæt ic ærwelan goldæht **ongite**’), 2770 (Wiglaf proceeds into the dragon’s lair until he can **see** the floor’s surface: ‘Bæt he Bone grundwong **ongitan** meahste’) and 2944 (the embattled Geatish warriors **hear** the sound of Hygelac’s battle-horn coming to their rescue: ‘Hygelaces horn ond byman gealdor **ongeaton**’). The one exception to this pattern of usage occurs in Hrothgar’s sermon, where the old king urges the young Beowulf to ‘learn manly virtues’: ‘gumcyste **ongit**’ (1723). But in all other cases the word refers unambiguously to the physical process of perception.⁹²

For the mental process of realisation and intellection, the poet employs the verb *onfindan*.⁹³ The verb is much less common in the Old

⁹² The use of *angeat* in line 1291 is problematical, for it seems there to refer to physical seizure: ‘Ba hine se broga angeat’ (‘when the terror seized him’). Elsewhere in the poem the poet uses the word *begietan* to describe this kind of physical seizure (1068: ‘ða hie se fær begeat’; 2230: ‘Ba hyne se fær begeat’, etc.), and one is obliged to wonder whether the transmitted *angeat* here is an error for *begeat*.

⁹³ See Rittershaus, *Die Ausdrücke*, p. 56, and Kroesch, ‘The Semasiological Development’, p. 476.

English corpus than is *ongi(e)tan*, having fewer than 100 attestations. In various texts the word is used in the sense of ‘to discover’ or ‘to find (out)’, as in the OE *Orosius* i. 4: ‘ac hi Creacas Bær onfundon ond hi mid ealle fordydon’ (ed. Bately, p. 23) or the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* s.a. 755 ACDE (‘ær hine Ba men onfunden Be mid Bam kyninge wærun’); in this sense it frequently translates or glosses Latin *invenio*. The *Beowulf*-poet, too, occasionally uses *onfindan* in this sense: 1293 (Grendel’s mother wants to escape from Heorot once she has been **discovered** there: ‘Ba heo **onfunden** wæs’), 1890 (the coastguard **discovered** that the Geats had returned: ‘landweard **onfand** / eftsið eorla’), 2288 (the dragon **discovers** a footprint: ‘stearcheort **onfand** / feondes fotlast’) and 2841 (no-one would dawdle with the treasure if he were to **come upon** the dragon in his barrow: ‘gif he wæccende weard **onfunde** / buon on beorge’). But the verb can also denote the mental act of realisation,⁹⁴ and the *Beowulf*-poet uses it in this sense more frequently than any other Anglo-Saxon author. It is thus used some ten times in the poem: 595 (Grendel has **realised** that he need have no fear of the men in Heorot: ‘ac he hafað **onfunden** Bæt he Ba fæhðe ne Bearf’), 750 (Grendel quickly **realised** that he had never met a stronger adversary: ‘sona Bæt **onfunde** . . . Bæt he ne mette . . .’), 809 (Grendel **realised** that his body was failing: ‘ða Bæt **onfunde** Bæt him se lichoma læstan nolde’), 1497 (Grendel’s mother **realised** that someone was exploring her lair from above: ‘sona Bæt **onfunde** . . . Bæt Bær gumena sum / ælwihta eard ufan cunnode’), 1522 (Beowulf **realised** that his sword wouldn’t bite: ‘ða se gist **onfand** / Bæt se beadoleoma bitan nolde’), 2300 (the dragon **realised** that someone had been tampering with his gold: ‘he Bæt sona **onfand** / ðæt hæfde gumena sum goldes gefandod’), 2269 (the dragon **realised** that Wiglaf was a resolute adversary: ‘Bæt se wyrm **onfand** / syððan hie togædre gegan hæfdon’) and 2713 (Beowulf **realised** that the dragon’s poison was welling up within him: ‘he Bæt sona **onfand** / Bæt him on breostum bealoniðe weoll’). Two further (possible) occurrences are relevant. In 2219 the manuscript is damaged, but was restored conjecturally by Grein so as to read ‘Bæt sie ðiod **onfand** . . . Bæt he gebolgen wæs’, ‘the people **realised** that the dragon was enraged’; and in 2226, the passage containing the corrupt form *mwatide* has been conjecturally restored by Dobbie so as to read, ‘sona **onfunde** / Bæt Bær ðam gyste

⁹⁴ For example, *Riddle* 27 (9: ‘sona Bæt onfindeð, se Be mec fehð ongean’; cf. *Beowulf* 748–50); *Judgement Day I* (73: ‘he Bæt Bonne onfindeð, Bonne se fær cymeB’) and *The Battle of Maldon* (5: ‘Ba Bæt Offan mæg ærest onfunde’); and cf. also the entry in the ‘Harley Glossary’, C 1293: ‘comperit .i. intellexit cognouit inuenit didicit onfunde’ (ed. Oliphant, p. 87).

gryebroga stod', 'he quickly **realised** that dire terror stood waiting there for the visitor'.⁹⁵

The crucial point which emerges from this evidence is that the *Beowulf*-poet uses *ongi(e)tan* and *onfindan* in wholly complementary senses: the former to denote the physical act of perception, the latter to denote the process of realisation and intellection. Unlike other Anglo-Saxon authors,⁹⁶ he never mixes these distinct usages. It is the very complementarity of the usages that indicates strongly that the *Beowulf*-poet had meditated deeply on the process of perception and the nature of human understanding.

Appendix II

Hellenistic theories of perception

The cardinal and defining discussion of perception (Greek *aisthesis*) in ancient philosophy is found in the Platonic dialogue called the *Theaetetus*. In the first part of this dialogue, the theme of which is the definition of knowledge, the teenager Theaetetus—later to be distinguished as a famous mathematician—propounds the view that knowledge *is* perception, a view which had previously been articulated at length by the sophist Protagoras, and for which (in Plato's dialogue) both Theaetetus and Socrates express admiration. Protagoras's doctrine, as reported by Plato (as a sophist Protagoras left no writings), maintains the *relative* truth of all appearances: 'however things appear to someone, things *are for this person* just the way they appear, and if they appear different to someone else, then for *that* person they really and truly *are* different'.⁹⁷ The proposition is illustrated by Socrates (*Theaetetus* 152B) saying, 'sometimes, when the same wind is blowing, one of us feels chilly, the other does not; or one may feel slightly chilly, the other quite cold.' Protagoras had summed up his relativism in the well-known aphorism, 'Man is the

⁹⁵ E. V. K. Dobbie, 'Mwatide, *Beowulf* 2226', *Modern Language Notes*, 67 (1952), 242–5.

⁹⁶ Cf., for example, the OE *Bede* iv. 1 (describing Ebroin's realisation that Abbot Hadrian was not acting as a spy): 'Ac Ba he Ba soðlice onget ond onfand, Bæt hit swa ne wæs' (ed. Miller, p. 256), where the author characteristically uses near-synonymous doublets to render the single Latin verb *comperisset*.

⁹⁷ Myles Burnyeat, *The Theaetetus of Plato* (Indianapolis, IN, 1990), pp. 7–8; also id., 'Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's *Theaetetus*', in *Epistemology*, ed. S. Everson (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 39–59.

measure of all things.⁹⁸ On analysis, the proposition is not as simple as it seems at first, and could imply: (a) that the wind in itself is *both* cold and warm (in which case you feel only the cold whereas I feel only the warmth); or (b) the wind is *neither* warm nor cold, and has no properties that are perceptible; the sense-objects only exist in the mind of the perceiver when the act of perception takes place.⁹⁹ The likelihood is that Protagoras held to the first of these propositions. But his adherence raised in turn the question of the criterion of truth: if you say the wind is cold and I say it is warm, there is no external criterion for determining which of us is right—or indeed for knowing what constitutes reality. Plato himself was clearly deeply dissatisfied with this proposition, and in the sequel of the *Theaetetus*, Socrates proceeds to demolish the position of Protagoras as advocated initially by Theaetetus.

Protagoras may be said in some sense to stand at the head of the entire western tradition of empiricism, the doctrine, that is, that all knowledge has its source in sense-experience.¹⁰⁰ In the Hellenistic period, empiricist positions were held, on the one hand, by Epicurus (341–270 BC) and the Atomists, and, on the other, by Pyrrho (360–270 BC) and the Sceptics. Epicurus developed the Atomist theories of Democritus, which explained that sense-perception took place as a result of streams of atoms emanating from the sense-object and striking the sensory organs so as to create an appearance (*phantasia*) on the soul.¹⁰¹ The soul then processes these *phantasiai*, whence arises knowledge. This theory carries the implication that all sense perceptions *must* be true;¹⁰² differences in perception—the wind is hot for me and cold for you—arise from the way the ‘appearances’ are processed by the soul. (But this was a problematic area of Epicurus’s epistemology, and one for which he found no satisfactory answer.)¹⁰³

The difficulty of explaining conflicting perceptions was what animated the Sceptics.¹⁰⁴ The first Sceptic, Pyrrho, left no writings, and the principal

⁹⁸ See G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 86–93.

⁹⁹ See F. M. Cornford, *Plato’s Theory of Knowledge* (1935), pp. 33–4.

¹⁰⁰ There is helpful general discussion in A. Musgrave, *Common Sense, Science and Scepticism: a Historical Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (Cambridge, 1993).

¹⁰¹ See, in general, E. Asmis, ‘Epicurean Epistemology’, in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. K. Algra, J. Barnes *et al.* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 260–94, at 264–76 (‘Perceptions’), and S. Everson, ‘Epicurus on the Truth of the Senses’, in *Epistemology*, ed. Everson, pp. 161–83.

¹⁰² Julia E. Annas, *Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1992), p. 169.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* pp. 170–3.

¹⁰⁴ See J. Brunschwig, ‘Introduction: the Beginnings of Hellenistic Epistemology’, in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Algra, Barnes *et al.*, pp. 229–59, esp. 241–51 (‘Pyrrho’) and 251–9 (‘Cyrenaic Epistemology’).

figure of the school was undoubtedly Aenesidemus of Cnossus (first century BC), who articulated the ‘Ten Modes’ (or ‘Tropes’) of Scepticism—ten principal arguments against the possibility of knowledge, as ways of ‘inducing suspension of judgement’.¹⁰⁵ Most of the ‘Modes’ consist of a collection of examples chosen to illustrate the existence of conflicting perceptual impressions. We are relatively well informed on these ‘Ten Modes’ because of the full treatment by Sextus Empiricus (second century AD), himself a Sceptic;¹⁰⁶ the gist of his account is that the same things produce different impressions in different creatures; it is impossible to decide which impressions are correct; hence we can say how the underlying thing appears to us, but we must suspend judgement as to how it is in nature.¹⁰⁷

The problem, from the point of view of Anglo-Saxon epistemology, is that the texts which transmit these theories—Plato’s *Theaetetus*, the *Kyriai doxae* and Letters of Epicurus, and the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* of Sextus Empiricus—were in Greek and were therefore almost certainly inaccessible to an Anglo-Saxon audience. Furthermore, very few Latin texts present the arguments in such a way that their coherency could be appreciated. In his *De natura rerum*, the Roman poet Lucretius at one point gives an extensive account of Epicurus’s theory of sense-perception. Like Epicurus, Lucretius argues that all sense-perceptions are true:

invenies primis ab sensibus esse creatam
notitiam veri neque sensus posse refelli.
nam maiore fide debet reperiri illud,
sponte sua veris quod possit vincere falsa.
quid maiore fide porro quam sensus haberi
debet? an ab sensu falso ratio orta valebit
dicere eos contra, quae tota ab sensibus orta est?
qui nisi sunt veri, ratio quoque falsa fit omnis. (IV. 478-85)¹⁰⁸

Lucretius then goes on to discuss examples of sense perceptions which are at variance, proceeding methodically through all the five senses: why, for

¹⁰⁵ Gisela Striker, *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 119.

¹⁰⁶ See *The Modes of Scepticism*, ed. J. Annas and J. Barnes (Cambridge, 1985), which provides translations of relevant passages from Sextus Empiricus with helpful commentary.

¹⁰⁷ Striker, *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics*, p. 120.

¹⁰⁸ ‘You will discover that from the senses first has proceeded the knowledge of the true and that the senses cannot be refuted. For that which is of itself able to refute things false by means of things true must from the nature of the case be proved to have the higher certainty. What then must fairly be accounted of higher certainty than sense? Shall reason founded on false sense be able to contradict them, wholly founded as it is on the senses? And if they are not true, then all reason as well is rendered false.’

example, is that which to some tastes is nauseous and bitter is to others sweet (IV. 633–72); or why can some creatures smell different things from other creatures (673–86), etc.

The Epicurean argument set out here by Lucretius is treated at greater length in Cicero's dialogue *Academica priora*, where the speaker Lucullus refuses to accept the Epicurean doctrine that all sense-perceptions must be true. He does, however, acknowledge that the greatest truth derives from the senses (ii. 7. 19: 'meo autem iudicio ita est maxima in sensibus veritas'); he then goes on to draw a distinction between things perceived by the senses (*visa*) and things understood and processed by the mind (*comprehensa*). Accordingly, the apparent differences in perception, such as the warm and chilly wind in Plato's example, are explained in terms of mental comprehension:

Atqui qualia sunt haec quae sensibus percipi dicimus, talia secuntur ea quae non sensibus ipsis percipi dicuntur sed quodam modo sensibus . . . Animo iam haec tenemus comprehensa, non sensibus. (ii. 7. 21)¹⁰⁹

Lucullus subsequently explains the mechanism by which the mind processes sense-perceptions in order to obtain knowledge:

Mens enim ipsa, quae sensuum fons est . . . naturalem vim habet quam intendit ad ea quibus movetur. Itaque alia visa sic arripit ut iis statim utatur, alia quasi recondit, e quibus memoria oritur, cetera autem similitudinibus construit, ex quibus efficiuntur notitiae rerum . . . Eo cum accessit ratio argumentique conclusio rerumque innumerabilium multitudo, tum et perceptio eorum omnium apparet et eadem ratio perfecta his gradibus ad sapientiam pervenit. (ii. 10. 30)¹¹⁰

It will be seen that the distinction drawn here between sense-perception and mental intellection corresponds closely to the distinction drawn by the *Beowulf*-poet between the verbs *ongi(e)tan* and *onfindan*. Passages such as these in Lucretius and Cicero *could* have prompted epistemological reflection in an Anglo-Saxon poet obviously interested in the

¹⁰⁹ 'But then whatever character belongs to these objects which we say are perceived by the senses must belong to that following set of objects which are said to be perceived not by actual sensation but by a sort of sensation . . . This class of percepts consists of comprehensions grasped by our mind, not by our senses.'

¹¹⁰ 'For the mind itself, which is the source of the sensations . . . has a natural force which it directs to the things by which it is moved. Accordingly some sense-presentations it seizes on so as to make use of them at once, others it stores away, as it were, these being the source of memory; while all the rest it unites into systems by their mutual resemblances, and from these are formed the concepts of objects . . . when thereto has been added reason and logical proof and an innumerable multitude of facts, then comes the clear perception of all these things, and also this same reason having been by these stages made complete finally attains to wisdom.'

workings of the mind. There is not (as yet) sufficient evidence to affirm or reject the possibility that these texts were known in Anglo-Saxon England. Until such evidence is forthcoming, it is well to leave the question open.

