

Beowulf and Perception

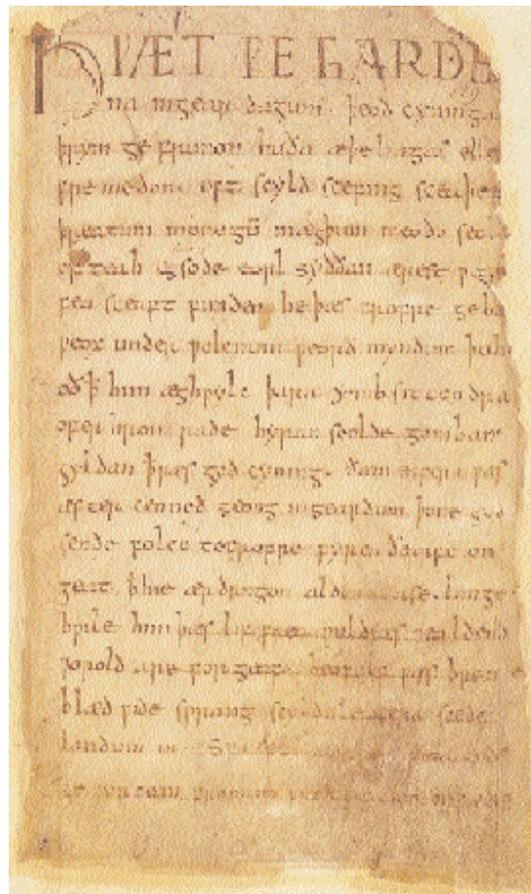
Professor Michael Lapidge FBA, *Notre Dame Professor of English at the University of Notre Dame*, delivered the *Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture at the Academy on 12 December 2000*. His theme was the narrative and intellectual sophistication of the *Beowulf* poet, and in the extract below he introduces one of the elements in his argument.

The story of *Beowulf* is well known, even to those who have never read the poem. 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. 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. For the story is told in anything but a straightforward 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, rubricated one section of his Introduction with the title 'lack of steady advance', 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'. 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. The non-linearity of *Beowulfian* narrative discourse is a feature of the poem which no reader could miss, but, as I have already said, it has been very little studied. 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

In 1924 a Biennial Lecture on English Studies was endowed by Mrs Frida Mond. The series deals with 'Old English or Early English Language and Literature, or a philological subject connected with the history of English, more particularly during the early periods of the language, or cognate subjects, or some textual study and interpretation'.

The inaugural lecture was given by Sir Israel Gollancz in 1924 on 'Old English Poetry'. The lecture series was named after Sir Israel on his death in 1930.



The first page of *Beowulf*.
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the British Library. MS
Cotton Vitellius A.xv. f. 132r

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. The focal point of the narrating is the moment of reversal, what the poet calls an *edwenden* or *edhwyrft*. Thus Beowulf tells the coastguard 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 þæs on eþle 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 þæt* ('until') to mark the point of reversal. Bruce Mitchell has helpfully discussed the use of *oð þæt* to 'mark the termination or temporal limit of the action of the main clause and a transition in the narrative.' It is this usage, to mark a transition in the narrative, that is especially characteristic of *Beowulf*, 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 eþelweard – , 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:

Þa wæs eft swa ær inne on healle
þryðword sprecen, ðeod on sælum,
sigefolca sweg, oþ þæt semninga
sunu Healfdenes secean wolde
æfenræste; wiste þæm ahlæcan
to þam heahsele hilde geþinged,
siððan hie sunnan leoht geseon <ne>
mehton,
oþ 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, and bursts into the hall. Beowulf confronts him and tears off his arm and shoulder, inflicting thereby a mortal wound.



This example of a historiated initial R from the frontispiece of a 12th-century manuscript of St. Gregory's *Moralia in Job* closely resembles the dragon fight of Beowulf and Wiglaf. Collection Bibliothèque municipale de Dijon, France, Ms 168, fo 4v, cliché F. Perrodin.

Grendel escapes, and calm and happiness are restored (again) to Heorot: ‘Ðær 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 þa to Heorote’; cf. 720: ‘com þa 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:

Ða ðær sona wearð
edhwyrft eorlum, siþðan 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 ghostly mere which she inhabits; the following morning 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 snotra heht.
Ða 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. 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: *Ða 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 þa rumheort; reced hliuade
geap ond goldfah; gæst inne swæf,
oþ þæt 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 *oþ þæt*, anticipating a reversal; and the appearance of the black raven – one of the traditional beasts of battle and slaughter – also suggests imminent carnage. 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? Why not a meadowlark, 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’. 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.