

Vaughan was sent by Cardinal Manning, himself only a few months away from death, to call on him and deliver this message (here given in Suffield's own account of the visit):

1st. Affectionate and sympathetic interest and greeting.

2nd. Earnest entreaty to rejoice people all over the world by my return to the Church.

3rd. That the Holy See is prepared to concede the fullest powers of absolution and dispensation to the Bishop of Portsmouth, so that the conditions required would be adapted to render any reconciliation to the Church as easy to myself and as little trying as possible.

4th. The Bishop wishes me to know that he will gladly come to me on any day I may propose.

The whole conversation was conducted with the finest courtesy. Of course, I begged His Eminence to accept my sincere appreciation of his kindness, his motives, and his communications, but at the same time I expressed in the most emphatic language possible that return to the Roman Catholic Church was to me an utter impossibility.'

After his visit, Kenelm Vaughan wrote:

'It was a real consolation to have seen and had so full and friendly a talk with you. I have been thinking of you ever since, and affectionate sympathy moves me irresistibly to pray much for you, and positively to believe that you will, in the end, have grace and courage to do what the Cardinal and your Catholic friends so ardently desire and pray for. With this strong hope in me, "for nothing is impossible with God",

Believe me, dear Father Suffield,

Your old friend,

KENELM VAUGHAN.'

A few days later, Suffield was visited by a Dominican who had been a novice 25 years before, and had been to him a son before he was a brother.

After these two visits, the sick man was no more disturbed. He died on 13th November 1891 in Reading, and his body was cremated at Woking.

Beowulf and the Limits of Literature: 1

by Eric John

I am not concerned in this paper to talk about *Beowulf* for its own sake. I want to take *Beowulf* as an example of a more general point that seems worth making about literature and in particular about

literary studies. It is a point I cannot make directly because if I expressed it in a series of propositions I should be misunderstood. I want to take a number of questions raised by *Beowulf*, some of which have been discussed in their own right by a series of scholars and with some of which I shall have to take issue: I am *not*, however, concerned with this or that interpretation of the poem but much more with pointing out certain difficulties in the way of understanding it that do not seem resolvable by conventional methods. I do not believe that these problems are confined to *Beowulf* but that they are part of the necessary business of understanding any literary work. The difference lies in this: *Beowulf* is a marginal work from the frontiers of literacy and the beginnings of English society, unlike the works most of us get worked up about which are much more central to our language and our way of life. We must beware of committing what the late R. G. Collingwood called the fallacy of precarious margins—that is arguing from marginal cases as though they were central, but it does seem that marginal situations—as the late Ludwig Wittgenstein has so brilliantly shown—have a power to point to things we take for granted without questioning in more central, more ‘normal’ situations.

Wittgenstein has taught us that language is a mode of life. The literature on *Beowulf* shows us what happens when a piece of linguistic activity is cut away from the study of its world. What is *Beowulf* about? Very few people ever read it, even in translation, except Old English scholars: most of them claim to enjoy it but they do not seem to be agreed about just what it is they are enjoying. The story is not in itself very exciting. It is all about, or it seems to me to be all about, a young nobleman called *Beowulf*, who it is eventually revealed was thought to be ‘somewhat slack’ in his home country, and who set out with a band of companions, on the make like himself, to prove their worth. He went to the court of a neighbouring king, Hrothgar, who was troubled by a grim spirit called Grendel who appeared in the evening and dined off Hrothgar’s favourite retainers. Beowulf took on the monster single-handed, rejecting the use of a sword, when it arrived at the hall and tore off its arm, sending it fleeing into the night. The company in the hall apparently slept through the proceedings. There followed rejoicing, the plentiful bestowal of gifts, a banquet and the appearance of another monster, Grendel’s mother, seeking vengeance. Beowulf goes off to attack her in her lair. This time he takes a sword and defeats her in a fight of ineffable tedium: at least it seemed so to most of its readers until Professor Tolkien told us how mistaken we were because it was a very exciting and important fight, and moral into the bargain, since when the splendours of Beowulf’s fights have become an academic article of faith. In the second fight Beowulf’s sword fails him and he only wins by seizing a ‘giant-made’ sword that happens to be around. According to the poet, Grendel’s mother was less terrible and less

strong than her son, being only a woman, but the fight is closer and longer when it comes to the point. The sword with which Beowulf killed Grendel *mère* melted in her hot blood. Beowulf, loaded with gifts, returns to his kinsman, King Hygelac, whereupon we have to endure the recital of Beowulf's adventures once again. Beowulf now buys his lord's favour. The poet is quite clear about this, though it is a passage not much touched on by the commentators. Beowulf had not been thought much of and had received few gifts; now he has come back with a reputation and valuables to prove it, he is given a great estate, a hall, and the rank of a chief. In the course of time Beowulf succeeds as king of his people, the Geats, and reigns fifty years, the course of time being passed over in a few lines. The reader will not be surprised to meet yet another monster, a dragon with a treasure to guard this time. Beowulf insists on fighting the dragon single-handed and again his sword is inadequate. He receives a fatal wound, but though many of his followers abandon him, a young kinsman stands firm and together they kill the dragon. Beowulf, mortally wounded, makes a dying speech and is then buried with considerable pomp. So much for the plot, but what was the point?

A modern reader faced with those inadequate swords and oedipal monsters might be tempted to think it a sort of Freudian day-dream: indeed the poem would bear investigation by someone competent in psycho-analytic theory. But even if it is possible to apply these categories in a society which did not know the monogamous, nuclear, family for which Freud established his method, the poet must have had an ostensible purpose and an audience he could expect to understand him. To elucidate this purpose and recover what the poet could take for granted is closely related to establishing the mode of life of the poet and his times, and this is not easy. We may almost certainly date the poem to the eighth century, and less certainly to Northumbria, a generation or so after the conversion of the Northumbrians to Christianity, but is it a Christian poem?

Until the nineteen-thirties it was widely assumed that *Beowulf* was a pagan poem with a superficial veneer of Christian allusion. The poem begins and ends with detailed accounts of pagan funeral rites which would have been devil's rites to men like Bede or Alcuin. It contains at least seventy indubitable allusions to Christian things but only four references to the Bible, all to the early part of Genesis: the Creation, the Flood, and Cain and Abel twice. There is no explicit reference to the New Testament, no mention of Christ, the Holy Ghost, angels, or the Trinity, all themes attractive to Anglo-Saxon vernacular writers. The best defence of the pagan view of *Beowulf* is still H. M. Chadwick's pages on it in the *Heroic Age*. He points out that the theology is 'of a singularly vague type' and that a pious Jew would have no difficulty in assenting to all the explicit religious references. Since Chadwick wrote, however, in the discussion

sparked off by Professor Tolkien's fascinating, but to my mind misleading, essay on *Beowulf and the Monsters*, a considerable reaction has set in. It is now argued by most experts that *Beowulf* is a Christian poem in which the poet, anticipating *Lear* by a millenium, deliberately created a pagan setting for a deeply religious purpose. What that purpose was seems to vary from scholar to scholar.

The most prolific school is that which supposes the *Beowulf* poet was a learned Christian who knew his Fathers and especially his Gregory the Great. These Fathers, especially Gregory, made free use of the allegorical method of interpreting the Bible. It is supposed that the poet of *Beowulf* did the same. His pagan prince and his fabulous monsters are types of Christian themes. At its worst this method cannot see reference to a tree without claiming the Cross is meant and it furnishes the poem with an array of chalices and liturgical symbols that Burns Oates in their heyday might have envied. More moderately, as in Margaret Armstrong's recent book *The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf*, it presents a serious case, which, if it raises more problems than it solves, is none the worse for that. Without question *Beowulf* derives the descent of Grendel and his mother from Cain. This descent is mentioned twice and in each case the poet mentions Cain was cursed for slaying his brother. But the other biblical meanings and connexions have to be read into the poem. Now almost all the commentators who take this line are much more interested in Old English literature than they are in Old English society. The famous Miss Tuve on *Allegorical Symbolism* features in more than one book-list. It seems to me that the allegorical school are almost totally mistaken: they are almost the one group of interpreters of *Beowulf* one can be reasonably sure are wrong.

The poet of *Beowulf* has an intimate knowledge of patristic theology and exegesis? Unfortunately in the two explicit references to the story of Cain and Abel, the name of Abel's brother is given wrongly as Cham. It seems to me that no one who really knew much about the Old Testament could mix up Cain with Cham any more than he could Adam and Eve with Dathan and Abiron. The fact that other Anglo-Saxon authors, including the great Alcuin, made the same mistake only confirms, it seems to me, the dangers of overestimating the speed and ease with which the Biblical stories were assimilated by the early English. Someone in King Alfred's day translated Augustine's *Soliloquies* into English: the result hardly suggests much familiarity with the subtler reaches of the Saint's thought. Yet a group of commentators would have us suppose *Beowulf* was a painless means of preaching the great Augustinian themes. It is true Gregory the Great was always allegorizing the most trivial anecdote and the results were received early in England. But were they understood? Dom Wansborough has recently shown how the most intimate details of the Benedictine story—for which Gregory the Great is the only begetter—have been distorted by confusing Gregory's allegories

with literal facts. Thus St Scholastica and St Benedict's dealings with her are not meant as a literal account of Benedict's dealings with a real sister, but an allegorized version of Benedict's contemplative habits. It is evident that much of Gregory's allegorizing simply misfired when it reached the world that produced and perhaps enjoyed *Beowulf*.

If *Beowulf* is a Christian poem in the sense that T. S. Eliot is a Christian poet, then what of its hero? *Beowulf* is at least as much about Beowulf as *Hamlet* is about Hamlet, another prince of Denmark. Some scholars take Beowulf as a type of Christ, pagan burial rites or not; what then of Beowulf's dying speech? He expresses no hope of heaven or fear of hell. He gives thanks to 'the King of Glory, the everlasting Lord', but what for? '... the treasures which I here gaze upon, in that I have been allowed to win such things for my people before my day of death! Now that I have given my old life in barter for the hoard of treasure, do ye henceforth supply the people's needs.' Nothing in the poem suggests that the treasure means anything other than literal, material goods. We may compare the poem's opening: 'Often Scyld scefing took the mead benches away from troops of foes, from many peoples. He terrified the nobles . . . throve in honour, until each one of those who dwelt around, across the whale's road, had to obey him and pay him tribute.' The end of the poem in any case implies that Beowulf's dying wish for his people was for material prosperity, not salvation, since we are told of the enemies that will attack them now the King is dead. There is no suggestion that Beowulf's merits can help them once he is dead. Beowulf's last wish is for a splendid funeral and a permanent cenotaph that will preserve his memory as Beowulf's Barrow.

Not all scholars who have argued it is basically a Christian poem have laid much stress on the patristic *Beowulf*. The most serious defence of this view is that of Dr Whitelock in her *Audience of Beowulf*. Dr Whitelock points to references, perfectly clear ones this time, to Christian customs and institutions that take them very much for granted. She points out that *nones* is for this poet so familiar a rite that he can use it as a simple time-reference like tea-time. There are many others that prove beyond doubt that the poet's mode of life was expressed in a language deeply infected by Christian usage. But what exactly does this signify? I may live in a bungalow, sit on my verandah, wash down my mulligatawny with a cup of char without ever having been near India in my life or even being aware that these words are part of what used to be called our imperial heritage.

In some sense *Beowulf* is a Christian poem. But what kind of Christian context does the poem belong to? I do not think that this fundamental question can be solved from the words on the page, from the poem itself. We are here, I think, near to the explanation of why the Leavis school of critics is so unsatisfactory for medieval

literature. If this question is to be answered we need, I think, to forget what *we* mean by Christian and Christian poetry and ask what *they* meant. We must look to the society, as well as the audience of the poet. It is obvious on first reading, though scarcely commented on, that the feud is almost as much harped on in the poem as the monsters. The poet has a horror of feuds within kindreds. A little reading in the literature of social anthropology will show how important the feud is as a social institution for the cementing or loosening of social bonds in societies that rely on it for the protection of the individual. A society which has the feud is a society in which the bonds of kinship are strong and demanding. Feuds within families can have devastating consequences that affect the whole of society, because society has no means of coping with them. Is it surprising in a poem for which the killing of kinsmen gives rise to some of its most emotional passages, that Cain should be singled out from the Bible with special horror? We need, I think, to look at the eighth-century way of touching the traditional forms of pagan kinship with a Christian leavening, if we are to understand the poet's religion or his purpose. But that is not my problem.

Not only do we not yet know what the poem's point is, we cannot translate it. I do not mean this in the sense that any poem is untranslatable but something much deeper. The best translation, from which I have quoted, is the Clark Hall version revised by Professor Wren. Professor Tolkien, who introduces this version, justifies the stuffy and Victorian Gothic of the rendering as follows:

'If you wish to translate, not rewrite *Beowulf*, your language must be literary and traditional: not because it is now a long while since the poem was made, or because it speaks of things that have since become ancient; but because the diction of *Beowulf* was poetical, archaic, artificial (if you will), in the day the poem was made.'

It does not seem to me to follow that because the poet's vocabulary is not that of the common-speech of his day, this justifies recourse to the vocabulary of the educated parson of Queen Victoria's day, nor that the inflated rhetoric of sub-Gladstones will indicate what the poet was trying to say. I might cite almost any passage of *Pilgrim's Progress* to show that a deliberate assumption of an archaic style of speech can produce a very different result from this rendering of *Beowulf*. I shall cite a less familiar and very extreme example:

'At the Angel Inn the fable of the new birth had its believers, for, indeed, in Mr Bunce's parlour folk became new-born and wore a cloth of another colour, for even Mr Grunter's boots took a new hue to them, and the caked mud upon them became humanized. The hand that held the mug to the gross lips was changed. It was no more a work-ridden hand that had delved with spade all the hours of the day: the hand had a higher calling now, it served at a festival.'

The archaisms are as prominent in this passage as they are in *Beowulf* but no one would doubt it was written between the wars because the language is the language of our common experience. Any critic could without much trouble locate the passage more precisely by the simple process of making comparisons with other things he had read in the period. Both *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Mr Weston's Good Wine* might be loosely described in Professor Tolkien's words, but what a difference in precise bearing and point: the extraordinary exaltation and profound religiosity—in the best sense—of the one and the bitter irony of the other. I am not saying we should translate *Beowulf* in the manner of Bunyan or T. F. Powys. I do not know what the idiom of the *Beowulf's poet* was, but I know I do not know, which is something.

(The second part of this article will appear next month.)

The Experience of Group Prayer by Simon Tugwell, O.P.

The only way to find out about the experience of a prayer meeting is obviously to take part; all I can do in these pages is to drop a few hints, in the hope that they will stir a chord or two, so that something will get across.

People sometimes talk as if prayer were a purely human act; but this is not Christian doctrine. Prayer is the act of *the believer*, the one who says 'I live now not I but Christ' (Gal. 2, 20). It is only in Spirit and Truth that we can offer prayer to the Father (John 4, 23). It is because Christ prays, that we, in the same Spirit, can pray. Prayer is a divine activity in which we, by grace, participate. (On all this, see Herbert McCabe's very lucid account in *Doctrine and Life*, August 1970.) It is always 'the Spirit and the Bride' who prays (cf. Apoc. 22, 17); we can only pray because God himself gives us prayer (as the Lord taught St Catherine expressly). All prayer, in so far as it is true prayer, is 'infused'; the contemplative is the one who *knows* it by experience. In our prayer groups, therefore, we aim to pray with the prayer that God himself gives us.

Now as we become more and more sanctified, our prayer too becomes more and more attuned to the prayer of Christ. That is what we aspire to. But we must avoid two antithetical traps. On the one hand, we must not assume forthwith that anything we utter at a prayer meeting is automatically underwritten by God; we may on occasion get a 'witness' of some kind to assure us that our prayer is truly willed by him, but that is a different matter. The other trap