Hero and Exile

The Art of Old English Poetry

Stanley B. Greenfield

Edited by George H. Brown

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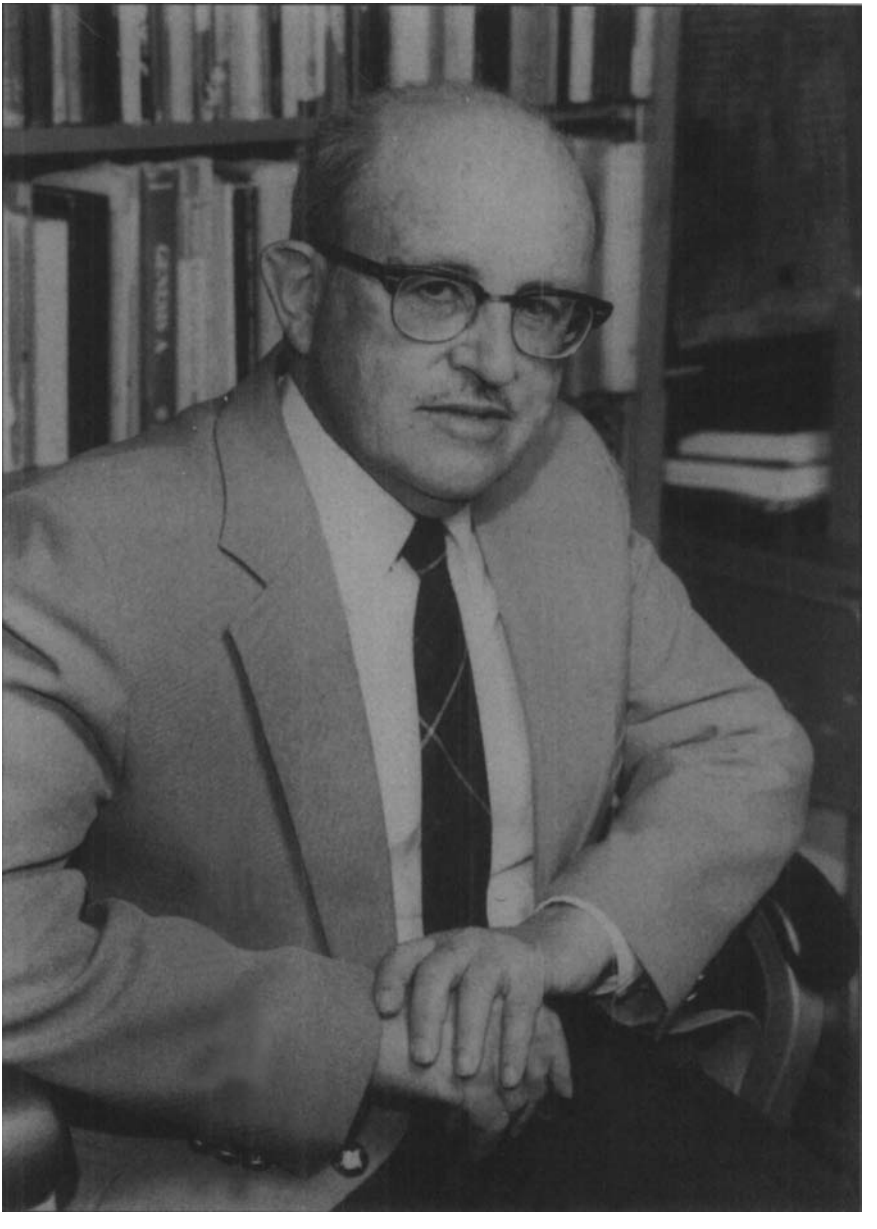

STANLEY B. GREENFIELD

(1922-1987)

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INTRODUCTION

After a distinguished career as teacher, scholar, bibliographer, and literary critic, Stanley Brian Greenfield, professor of English at the University of Oregon, one of the founders of the annual *Anglo-Saxon England* and of the International Society of Anglo-Saxonists, died at age 65 in 1987. Throughout his career, from 1951 to 1987, he wrote primarily on Anglo-Saxon topics, though he was well versed in later English literature as well, particularly poetry. His death is a major loss to Old English studies, though his notable contributions form a consoling legacy.

Greenfield was renowned for his fierce loyalty to the literary text; he insisted on 'the necessity of going back again and again to the text as the source for interpretative strength' ('*Sylf*, Seasons, Structure, and Genre in *The Seafarer*', p. 183). He carefully noted and deeply explored the Old English poetic corpus, pointing out important meanings and qualities that had gone unnoticed. His literary interpretations are marked by their insightful, sane, and sensitive readings; and his writing is remarkable for its clarity, wit, and sureness. Indeed, his devotion to the literary work of art, his love of truth, and his forthright honesty sometimes caused him to be sharply critical of interpretations and methodologies that he perceived as straying far from the text (this is particularly true of his book reviews). Typical of Greenfield's impatience with theory not grounded on the text is the statement in '*Beowulf* and the Judgement of the Righteous': 'But as with the exegetical critics' approach, this view finds no confirmation in the text; it rests on *our* sense of the poet's perspective, on unproven and unprovable ironies that may well be more modern than medieval' (p. 81). Although he did not himself wander from the text, he also did not hesitate to correct his own earlier incomplete understanding and interpretation. Thus he remarks in the same essay on *sylf* in the *Seafarer*, 'Convinced though I am of the absolute rightness of my new analysis, assurance in such matters, I am now also convinced, is a snare and a delusion' (p. 175). He constantly reconsidered his beloved *Beowulf* and the Old English elegies, so that his later essays build upon and augment the earlier ones. He always found more and deeper treasures in the Old English works.

Most students of Anglo-Saxon literature have become acquainted with Greenfield's writing through his widely acclaimed and popular *A Critical History of Old English Literature* (1965), now superseded by *A New Critical History of Old English Literature* (1986), co-authored with Daniel G. Calder, and with a survey of Anglo-Latin literature by Michael Lapidge. More advanced students know Greenfield's *The Interpretation of Old English Poems* (1972) and his *Bibliography of Publications of Old English Literature*, co-authored with Fred C. Robinson; and students of *Beowulf* have a beautiful translation of the poem in his *A Readable Beowulf* (1982).

This collection brings together from his many other writings his most important essays. Corrections have been made to original misprints.

The 'hero' part of *Hero and Exile* focuses on *Beowulf*. In '*Beowulf* and Epic Tragedy' (chapter 1), Greenfield examines the use of the adjective 'tragic' as applied to the genres of epic and drama and insists that the two are distinct. Whereas epic stresses the hero's achievements made futile by death, drama probes man's endurance in defeat; the former elicits poignant wonder, the latter, compassionate admiration.

'Geatish History: Poetic Art and Epic Quality in *Beowulf* (chapter 2) is a sensitive analysis of the artistic reasons for and functions of the historical digressions in Part II of *Beowulf*.

The next selection (chapter 3) is an investigation of *Beowulf*, lines 207b-228, which describe Beowulf and his companions embarking and sailing; Greenfield argues that the narrative is properly sequential but also artfully cumulates detail and perspective.

'"Gifstol" and Goldhoard in *Beowulf*' (chapter 4) shows that within the heroic ethos of the poem the treasure hoard serves contrary functions, both positive and negative.

A major contribution to a critical evaluation of authorial stance and Christian significance, 'The Authenticating Voice in *Beowulf*' (chapter 5) points out the poet's methods of historicizing and distancing narrative events and characters, and elsewhere of contemporizing elements of the story, and also of commenting on the morality of various actions, and of stressing the limits of human knowledge and capabilities. The voice of the poem authenticates a literalness of meaning, discouraging a symbolic and allegorical reading of the poem.

The clever investigation into the symbolic relationship of bodily parts, 'The Extremities of the Beowulfian Body Politic' (chapter 6), demonstrates that references in the poem to the literal physical extremities of hands and feet reinforce the concepts of service and thaneship, and that Beowulf's three great battles, in which his opponents function as anti-thane, anti-avenger, and anti-king, move literally and emblematically from hand to head to heart.

'A Touch of the Marvellous in the Hero, or Beowulf Re-Marvellized' (chapter 7) counters Fred C. Robinson's essay, 'Elements of the Marvellous in the Characterization of Beowulf', by questioning

Robinson's readings and insisting on the hero's superhuman qualities.

Greenfield's statement on the complex question of Beowulf's moral rectitude finds its final, carefully considered form in 'Beowulf and the Judgement of the Righteous' (chapter 8). He believes the poet looked with a kindly eye on the heroic world of *Beowulf* and presented his hero humanely. At the end, despite his superhuman powers, Beowulf fails in judgement, his only flaw, and that failure makes him human like ourselves.

The second part of the book contains two sections, first on the genre of elegy (two essays), followed by six essays on individual elegies, and then a section on the theme of exile, comprising four essays on *Christ I* and one on *Riddle 39*.

In the often cited 'Old English Elegies' (chapter 9) Greenfield defines the genre of elegy, which years later in *Interpretation of Old English Poems* and still later in *A New Critical History* he considerably qualifies and expresses doubt about; however, the essay remains suggestive if no longer normative, and much of what he says about the individual poems is truly insightful.

'The Formulaic Expression of the Theme of "Exile" in Anglo-Saxon Poetry' (chapter 10) reveals that the Anglo-Saxon poet was concerned primarily with four aspects of exile: homeless status, deprivation, depressed state of mind, and movement in or into exile.

The first of the considerations of individual elegiac poems, on *The Wanderer* (chapter 11), polemically insists on the unity of the poem, in which the *eardstapa* becomes *snottor on mode*.

In the next article (chapter 12), Greenfield offers his interpretation of the often and diversely interpreted *Wife's Lament*.

In 'Attitudes and Values in *The Seafarer*' (chapter 13), he attempts to establish the intellectual coherence and the tonal unity of the poem, within its sustained complexity of attitude and diction (especially wordplay).

In the companion pieces, '*Mīn*, *Sylf*, and "Dramatic Voices in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*"' (chapter 14) and '*Sylf*, Seasons, Structure and Genre in *The Seafarer*' (chapter 15), Greenfield first gives his reasons for asserting a single speaker in each poem and then develops a 'psychological-illuminatory-conversional interpretation of *sylf*' in *The Seafarer*. The latter study moves from philological considerations to a profound psychological interpretation of the poem – one of Greenfield's most mature and impressive efforts.

The section on elegiac poems ends with a new interpretation of the puzzling poem, *Wulf and Eadwacer* (chapter 16). After supplying a modern translation that strives to retain the verbal ambiguities in the original, Greenfield, finding other modern interpretations wanting, suggests that there are only two characters in the poem, the speaker and Wulf, instead of the four usually posited, and urges that the Old English *Frauenlieder, Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament* are truly poems of

love-longing, 'all passion pent'.

Next follow five articles on the theme of exile, four of which deal with a poem much admired by Greenfield, *Christ I*, also known as the *Advent Lyrics*. The first piece (chapter 17) investigates the theme of spiritual exile, noting that in the poem there is a logical and progressive development of the story of man's exile from the Garden of Eden to the present, and that the Joseph and Mary *passus* also has the theme, all of which is transformed by the joyous promise of 'the homeland where man never before has come'.

'The Petitions of the *Advent Lyrics* and the Question of Unity' (chapter 18) notes various grammatical (e.g. use of the subjunctive and imperative moods) and rhetorical (e.g. repetition and variation) devices that the poet employs effectively.

Two notes (chapters 19 and 20) about phrases from the *Advent Lyrics* display Greenfield's critical sensitivity and care for detail.

The last piece (chapter 21), 'clear and visible' in its insight and method, represents Greenfield's astute solution to a riddle, dealing to some extent with exile, that has vexed Anglo-Saxonists for 130 years.

This collection of essays attests to Stanley Greenfield's long and fruitful engagement with Old English literature; it also manifests his intelligent and evolving understanding of its depth and beauty. He was acutely aware of the ongoing process: 'The psychology of this moment of perception,' he wrote in '*Sylf*, Seasons, Structure and Genre', 'so well invoked poetically by the author of *The Seafarer*, is profoundly true to life. Any reader of this essay will recognize from his own experience that some slight shift in perspective is all that is needed to make us aware of an understanding we were but a moment ago struggling towards in vain' (p. 179). Earlier in the same essay, he remarked about the meaning of the Old English poem *Resignation*: 'This interpretation is not only true to Christian doctrine but also faithful to human psychology; that is, although one may be aware that all humans are mortal, it is not until some personal incident or contact, such as discovering that one has cancer or coming under the influence of a powerful preacher, that one can really make the application of that knowledge to oneself and for oneself' (p. 177). Stanley Greenfield experienced those epiphanies more deeply than most literary critics, and he has shared them with us.

George Hardin Brown
Stanford University

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Stanley Greenfield was very pleased to learn in the months preceding his death that the Hambledon Press, which has established itself as distinguished and meticulous, would publish his essays. Professor Thelma Greenfield provided the photograph of her husband and warmly supported this enterprise. Professor Sarah Higley of the University of Rochester, who illustrated Professor Greenfield's *A Readable Beowulf* and other works, produced and donated the drawing of the Anglo-Saxon boat with whale for the dust jacket.

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Christ', *Modern Language Notes* 67 (1952), 238-40; Medieval Academy of America, for 'The Formulaic Expression of the Theme of "Exile" in Anglo-Saxon Poetry', *Speculum* 30 (1955), 200-206; Modern Language Association of America, for '*The Wife's Lament* Reconsidered', *PMLA* 68 (1953), 907-12; Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., for 'The Old English Elegies', in *Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English Literature*, edited by E. G. Stanley (1966), pp. 142-75; Max Niemeyer Verlag, for 'Old English Riddle 39 Clear and Visible', *Anglia* 98 (1980), 95-100; Oxford University Press, for '"Beowulf" 207b-228: Narrative and Descriptive Art', *Notes and Queries* n.s. 13 (1966), 86-90; *Philological Quarterly*, for 'The Theme of Spiritual Exile in *Christ I*', *PQ* (1953), 321-28; University of North Carolina Press, for 'Attitudes and Values in *The Seafarer*', *Studies in Philology* 51 (1954), 15-20; Seminarie Voor Engelse en Oud-Germaanse Taalskunde, Royal University of Gent, for 'The Petitions of the *Advent Lyrics* and the Question of Unity', *Studies in Honor of René Derolez*, edited by A. M. Simon-Vandenbergen (1987); Swets and Zeitlinger bv, for 'A Touch of the Monstrous in the Hero, or Beowulf Remarvellized', *English Studies* 63 (1982), 294-300; University of Toronto Press, for '"Gifstol" and Goldhoard in *Beowulf*', in *Old English Studies in Honour of John C. Pope*, edited by Robert Burlin and Edward B. Irving, Jr. (1974), pp. 107-17; Wolters-Noordhoff bv, for 'Geatish History: Poetic Art and Epic Quality in *Beowulf*', *Neophilologus* 47 (1963), 211-17.

I BEOWULFIAN STUDIES

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1

BEOWULF AND EPIC TRAGEDY

TRAGEDY and epic have been much discussed as separate genres, but critics have not hesitated to designate certain characters and events in epics as tragic. For the most part, they have assumed or explicitly asserted an identity between epic and dramatic tragedy. Tillyard, for example, remarks that "even in *The Odyssey* . . . two at least of the characters who most have our sympathy [Penelope and Telemachus] are subjected to suffering sufficiently acute to rouse their deep passions and to force them like the tragic sufferer to consider their own predicaments in the total world they inhabit."[1] Bowra, while believing most epic calamities to be untragic, finds "an authentically tragic case" in the death of Hector and pointedly compares the characters and deaths of Turnus and Dido, and the fall of Adam in *Paradise Lost*, with personae and catastrophes in Greek tragedy.[2] Sandars comments of the Babylonian epic: "If Gilgamesh is not the first human hero, he is the first tragic hero of whom anything is known."[3] Of *Beowulf*, Wrenn writes: "A Germanic hero is a tragic hero, who shows his highest greatness not alone in winning glory by victory, but rather by finding his supremely noble qualities especially in the moment of death in battle. *Beowulf*, therefore, must be a tragic poem."[4] More recently, Professor Brodeur, in his very perceptive *The Art of Beowulf*, makes a similar comment:

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[1] E. M. W. Tillyard, *The English Epic and Its Background* (London, 1954), p. 8.

[2] C. M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (London, 1952), pp. 75-78; *From Virgil to to Milton* (London, 1945), pp. 47-56, and chapter on "Milton and the Destiny of Man."

[3] N. K. Sandars, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1960), p. 7.

[4] C. L. Wrenn, *Beowulf* (London, 1958), p. 41.

Beowulf is a tragedy. The tragedy of the hero becomes explicit in Part II; in his own death and in the destruction of his nation made inevitable by his death; it is implicit in Part I, in the fall of Hygelac and in the consequent failure of Beowulf's expressed intention to give aid to Hrothgar and to protect Hrethric. It resides in the imminent outbreak of internecine war among the Danes, and in the heartbreak in which the hopes of Hrothgar and Wealhtheow must end.[5]

The question insinuates itself: Is there only one kind of *tragic?* Or do epic and dramatic tragedy have real and differing qualities to which we respond in distinct and separable ways? Might not the failure to suggest any distinction be partly responsible for the denomination of *Beowulf* variously as an epic, heroic poem, heroic elegy, heroic tragedy, and monodrama?[6]

In the following pages I should like to explore the possibility of differences between epic tragedy (that is, the tragic in epic) and dramatic tragedy, and their consequent effects, paying particular attention to *Beowulf.*[7] I am aware that generalizations on genres are temerarious and that theories of tragedy are as numerous as their critics. The attempt is nevertheless worth making.

Lest the reader assume from the previous citations that only writers on the epic equate tragedy in the two genres, let me quote from a recent book on dramatic tragedy:

The *Iliad* is the primer of tragic art. In it are set forth the motifs and images

[5] A. G. Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf* (Berkeley, 1959), p. 117.

[6] The critical hesitation to call *Beowulf* an epic is discernible as early as W. P. Ker's *Epic and Romance* (London, 1908): "... most of them [Teutonic heroic poems] seem to be wanting in breadth of treatment, in amplitude of substance, that are proper to epic poetry" (p. 116); Ker feels even *Beowulf* falls short, though a page later he calls it "a complex epic poem." Tillyard feels *Beowulf* lacks "touches of ordinary feeling" that give "the true epic amplitude"; he also sees no inner conflict or motivation of character (p. 122). *The Art of Beowulf* should refute these objections, but Professor Brodeur himself, following J. R. R. Tolkien in "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," *PBA*, XXII (1936), 275, prefers to designate the poem an heroic elegy. So too does Margaret E. Goldsmith in "The Christian Theme of *Beowulf*," *MÆ*, XXIX (1960), 84; she also calls it an heroic tragedy (p. 101). John A. Nist, *The Structure and Texture of Beowulf* (São Paulo, Brazil, 1959), p. 22, applies the term *heroic-elegiac monodrama* to the poem. Bowra treats it simply as an heroic poem. Maurice B. McNamee, in *Honor and the Epic Hero* (New York, 1960), considers it a Christian epic. And so forth. This is no occasion to adjudicate among such designations, nor to consider the oral-written controversy that rages around the poem. It will become sufficiently apparent in this paper, I believe, that *Beowulf* aligns itself in important features with other poems we do call *epic*, whatever their particular type.

[7] Little attention has been paid to the subject, so far as I am aware. Of particular value is Richard B. Sewall's "The Tragic Form," *EIC*, IV (1954), 345-358, to which, as footnotes will indicate, I am much indebted; also, Thomas Greene's "The Norms of Epic," *CL*, XIII (1961), 193-207, which I saw in manuscript after the bulk of this paper was written. Since epic as a form is of little importance after *Paradise Lost,* I have ignored the question of modern tragedy.

around which the sense of the tragic has crystallized during nearly three thousand years of western poetry: the shortness of heroic life, the exposure of man to the murderousness and caprice of the inhuman, the fall of the City . . . the fall of Troy is the first great metaphor of tragedy . . . The burning of Troy is final because it is brought about by the fierce sport of human hatreds and the wanton, mysterious choice of destiny.[8]

This identification of the tragic in epic with a universal Western tragedy associated with drama could not be clearer. But the very motifs Steiner cites in connection with the *Iliad* are, as I hope to demonstrate, peculiarly the property of epic.

Bowra, like Steiner, suggests that the fall of a city is *echt* tragic. In discussing Hector's death, he comments on its special tragic poignancy —so much depends upon it: "the fortunes of his old parents, his wife and small son, and the whole existence of Troy . . . It is as if with his death the whole of Troy shakes to its foundations."[9] Now, however valid this insight is into the "sense of the tragic" in the *Iliad*, I question its pertinence to tragic drama. The poignancy in the association of the hero's death with the city's downfall, with the destruction of his nation and loss of a way of life, does not reside there. To clarify this point, let me touch on the relationships between the epic and dramatic heroes and their societies.

W. P. Ker has called attention to the fact that in epic the hero and his people have a community of interests.[10] Though his individual talent and stature loom large, though he may in the end like Hector stand alone,[11] the epic hero nevertheless has strong ties with his people and their tradition—he is their "hope." Gilgamesh is the builder of the walls of Uruk, Hector the pillar of Troy, Turnus the champion of the Latins, Roland the *sine qua non* of the French, Arthur the presider over the Round Table;[12] more expansively, Milton's Adam is the fountainhead of all mankind. The values of these heroes reflect the fundamental beliefs and aspirations of their peoples. Beowulf, too, though he fights in isolated glory against the monsters, is in Part I the good right arm of King Hygelac and in Part II king himself of the Geats. His bond

[8] George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New York, 1961), p. 5.

[9] *Heroic Poetry*, p. 77.

[10] *Epic and Romance*, p. 7.

[11] G. R. Levy, in *The Sword from the Rock* (London, 1953), writes: "The protagonists of heroic epic, even if fighting among comrades and watched by the gods, could shape their lives and deaths once only, and therefore, ritually considered, in isolation." In a footnote she continues: "Consider the terrible solitude of Hector, who goes to his last battle separated in turn from his comrades, his city, his parents, the deceptive figure of his brother, and the gods" (p. 96).

[12] Malory, says Tillyard, is akin to tragedy rather than epic because of "the timeless passions and the logic of destiny." *The English Epic*, pp. 177-178. But Malory's work, especially the Death of Arthur, is more in the spirit of epic tragedy.

with his community is further signalized by the comitatus relationship and by the lengthy historical digressions, which place him in his nation's tradition. He has ever been the hope of his people.

In the world of tragic drama, on the other hand, though the hero may be a king and concerned for his people, he is in important ways isolated from them in his values and goals. Between his aims and society's yawns a gulf of doubt and uncertainty.[13] Hamlet from the start of the play, in his suit of sable, opposes the tenor of life in the new Denmark; to Ophelia and the court, his is a noble mind o'erthrown. Macbeth's mind, too, moves in a rarified atmosphere from the beginning, and he isolates himself till "that which should accompany old age, / As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends, / I must not look to have" (V, iii, 24-26). In the *Bacchae,* Pentheus, in opposition to Cadmus and Teiresias, refuses to accept the new religion of Dionysus. In Sophocles' play, Antigone rebels against the social edict disposing of her brother's body; and Creon finally discovers the shortcomings of the established social laws.

In the light of these dissimilar communal relationships, we should expect the falls of epic and dramatic heroes to affect their societies differently. They do. As Susan B. Taubes observes: "In the background of the tragic [i.e., dramatic] agon only the murmur of human society is heard, the chorus of prudent and pious public opinion. This represents man's small sheltered life and survives the hero."[14] The fall of Oedipus is not the fall of Thebes; the city is, rather, cleansed by the hero's "sacrifice." Nor, *pace* Steiner, is the fate of that city involved in the doom of Pentheus.[15] Hamlet's death, with its attendant train of deaths, purges Elsinore, and Denmark resumes its way of life—however diminished—under Fortinbras.[16] Though families and houses may be enmeshed in the hero's fate, the catastrophe of tragic drama is individual; the city or nation regroups its forces and retains something of its identity.[17]

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[13] See Sewall, "Tragic Form," pp. 355-356. I am not suggesting any sort of Hegelian thesis-antithesis concept of tragedy; there is too much ambiguity about values in tragic drama, as William G. McCollum, *Tragedy* (New York, 1957), pp. 46-47, has observed.

[14] Susan B. Taubes, "The Nature of Tragedy," *Review of Metaphysics,* VII (1953), 205.

[15] Steiner, p. 9.

[16] See Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theatre* (Princeton, 1949), Chap. 4, *passim.*

[17] Richard B. Sewall, in *The Vision of Tragedy* (New Haven, 1959), comments on *The Scarlet Letter*: "Hester humanized the community that would have cast her out, even put her to death. She forced it to reassess its own severe and absolute dogmas, as Antigone forced a reassessment in Thebes, or Hamlet in Elsinore, or Prometheus on Olympus" (p. 90). Sewall, it should be observed, makes no dis-

It is otherwise with epic tragedy. There, I suggest, the fate of the hero implies the end of the city or the passing of a way of life, not a cleansing or a re-formation. The dependence of Troy upon Hector is manifest. Though the Latins with whom Turnus is identified are not to be completely submerged in the stream of Aeneas' conquest—there will be a fusion of Latin and Trojan, of the new peace-loving spirit of Aeneas and the old heroic spirit of Turnus[18]—still, with the flight of Turnus' shade to the underworld, the Latins lose their racial and spiritual character. The death of Arthur carries in its wake the end of the Round Table and the way of life it symbolized. The fall of Adam, with its loss of "the blissful seat," has inevitable consequences for his progeny. Gilgamesh and Roland might seem exceptions. Uruk is not threatened by Gilgamesh's death, and Roland's fall ironically ensures Charlemagne's and France's complete victory over the Saracens. But after Gilgamesh's one-hundred-twenty-year reign, his descendants rule a more normal span of human years—his death, as it were, entails a new mortality. And with Roland the flower of French chivalry lies dead in Roncesvalles, the world nevermore to see its like.

What about *Beowulf*? Although at Beowulf's death the protector's mantle descends upon the vigorous young Wiglaf, it will not fit well enough to sustain the Geats for long. The Messenger's speech makes plain the fate reserved for Beowulf's people when news of his death reaches the traditional enemies, the Franks and Swedes. Then will come fighting, defeat, and exile; no more ring giving; the beautiful maiden

> . . . sceal geomormod, golde bereafod
> oft nalles æne elland tredan.

The Geats will vanish as a nation (the poet, from his historical vantage point, knew they had been absorbed by the Swedes); they will have no further tradition.

The speech of the Geatish Messenger raises a second and larger consideration in the two kinds of tragedy—the role of what Steiner, in referring to Troy's doom, has called "the wanton, mysterious choice of destiny." For the Messenger's harangue has something in it of vatic wisdom which, coupled with the poet's foreshadowings of Beowulf's *wyrd* and the accretion of historical dooms, impresses us with a sense

tinction between tragedy in novel or dramatic form, and his concept of reassessment seems more applicable to Greek than to Shakespearean tragedy. We might bear in mind A. C. Bradley's contention that the surviving forces, represented by "a Fortinbras, a Malcolm, an Octavius," are less dear than the defeated hero to the heart of the universe. *Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), p. 39.

[18] Bowra, *From Virgil to Milton*, pp. 73-74.

of destinal force. Although all epics do not present an identical relationship between man and cosmic forces, they reveal a hero who, however much he may, like Gilgamesh and Adam, rebel, is conscious of his bond with and sometimes bondage to those forces. Destiny seems to brood over the vast abyss of epic life and subsume human will to its purposes. Tragic drama, on the other hand, while informed by a cosmic sense, denies, it seems to me, an intimacy between the universe and its hero. The hero's rebellion is against unknown or immeasurable powers. Coleridge recognized this distinction with a slightly different emphasis: "In the epic poem fate is represented as overruling the will, and making it instrumental to the accomplishment of its designs . . . In the drama, the will is exhibited as struggling with fate."[19]

The bond between human and suprahuman in Homer and Virgil expresses itself visibly in the gods, who constantly intervene, in one or another form, in mortal affairs. More than allegorical figures or parts of a mechanical epic machinery, the gods define man's position in the universe; by their immortality, they emphasize man's mortality.[20] But even the gods acknowledge Fate, whether that Fate be "wanton," as with Hector and Troy, or purposive, as with Aeneas and Turnus. In *Paradise Lost*, God and his angels take not only a providential but almost a personal interest in the fall of Adam and Eve. Roland and his warriors live intimately with God; Roland's bond is personalized by Gabriel's seizure of his outstretched glove and by the ascent of his soul to Heaven. King Arthur's world has been duly God-conscious, especially in the Grail Quest; and destiny plays over Arthur's passing, with the hand rising from the lake, the mysterious barge and its wailing ladies, and the REX QUONDAM REXQUE FUTURUS epitaph. Beowulf has been cognizant of God's role in his accomplishments; he credits Him for his victories over Grendel and his dam. Even if, as has been recently argued, he becomes presumptuous in his successes in Part II and fails to acknowledge God's providence in human achievement,[21] God and Wyrd still preside over the dragon fight. The many historical allusions and digressions contribute, furthermore, to the impression of historic destiny that binds human activity to its wheel.

Though dramatic tragedy also "assumes man's connection with some supersensory or supernatural, or metaphysical being or principle, whether it be the Olympians, Job's Jehovah or the Christian God; Fate,

[19] *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Thomas M. Raysor (London: Everyman, 1960), I, 125.

[20] Bowra, *Heroic Poetry*, p. 90.

[21] See Goldsmith (above, note 6), pp. 92 ff. For a contrary view, of Beowulf as the ideal Christian epic hero, see McNamee's chapter on "Beowulf, Christian Hero" (above, note 6).

Fortune's Wheel, [or] the 'elements' that Lear invoked,"[22] its concerns are different. It depicts an aesthetic distance between the cosmic powers and the bare, forked animal that is unaccommodated man. It preserves a mystery that epic abrogates. It may present Heaven as "ordinant,"[23] but its tragic world is "uncommitted as to questions of ultimate destiny."[24] Human destinies may be involved, but not Destiny. No hand rises from nor barge appears on the lake; no Michael or Gabriel descends to assure the angelic touch. It is Horatio, stoic and skeptic, who *hopes* that flights of angels will sing Hamlet to his rest. The witches of *Macbeth*, testifying to the mystery of the universe and to the ordination of events, are simultaneously a snare and a delusion, as ephemeral as their foul and filthy air. The gods of *Lear* ride on the wings of the unnatural, natural storm. The universe presses in upon man, clings to him, and is involved in his actions; but it also leaves man free to act and locks its mystery in its inhuman heart.

Do such Greek plays as the *Eumenides* and the *Bacchae*, with their visible gods, refute this thesis? I think not. In the *Bacchae*, the new Dionysian religion is antagonistic to the rational world of Pentheus. Dionysus is not Destiny; his own words at the end to Cadmus deny the destinal sense: "had you learnt the ways / Of wisdom, as you would not, prosperous today / You would be living in alliance with the son of Zeus" (Birkhead translation). Yet the irrational and excessive punishment meted out to the house of Cadmus preserves the mystery of man's relation to the cosmos. In the *Eumenides*, though he had enjoined revenge upon Orestes, the god Apollo must himself plead for his client at the bar of justice. That he pleads not exceedingly well[25] and yet wins his case hints, too, at the irrational mystery of the universe. In *Oedipus*, prophecies lend inevitability, but they and the gods, while attesting to cosmic powers, are peripheral to the tragic action.[26] Moreover, as McCollum reminds us, the inevitability of tragic drama is not "an absolute fatality" but more a representation of "man's accountability to his own consciousness."[27] Hamlet may come to believe that "there's a divinity that shapes our ends," but *Hamlet* reveals man rough-hewing them as he will. In tragic drama, "human agency seems

[22] Sewall, "Tragic Form," p. 350. Cf. Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Modern Temper* (New York: Harvest Books, 1956), pp. 88-89.

[23] H. D. F. Kitto, *Form and Meaning in Drama* (London, 1956), p. 332.

[24] Sewall, "Tragic Form," pp. 349-350.

[25] See the Introduction to *The Oresteian Trilogy*, ed. Philip Vellacott (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1959), pp. 34-35.

[26] I find it difficult to accept Bowra's statement that "the activity of the gods is an essential part of *King Oedipus*." *Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford, 1945), p. 167.

[27] *Tragedy* (above, note 13), p. 71.

to confound itself through the workings of some cosmic design";[28] but this design is not the Fate, Wyrd, or Providence of epic tragedy.

The distance between man and the supernatural serves to focus on the mystery that is special to tragic drama, the mystery of evil in the universe.[29] This evil is Hydra-headed. Not just Claudius but poisoned Denmark and time out of joint contain the evil that opposes Hamlet, and the prince himself ultimately is infected. Macbeth, infected from the first, spills toil and trouble upon the whole kingdom.[30] H. D. F. Kitto argues that this "complexive" evil, general rather than specific, differentiates Shakespearean from the more "linear" Greek tragedy.[31] While there is much truth here, I believe Greek tragedy to be more complexive than Kitto allows. In *Agamemnon*, for example, we have a simultaneous awareness of the evil that inheres in Atreus' line from earlier crimes, of Agamemnon's own vicious mole of nature that has caused him to sacrifice Iphigenia, of Clytemnestra's embodiment of a spirit of revenge harboring the spirit of evil. But, even granting only a linear extension of evil in Greek dramatic tragedy, the extension is still foreign to epic.

The tragedy of epic does not necessarily involve evil. Though Gilgamesh in one adventure overcomes the evil Humbaba, the poem's tragic center lies in his quest to conquer death, man's natural heritage. Hector and Turnus do not confront and succumb to the mystery of evil; their opponents are other heroes in collusion with destiny. When evil does appear in epic, however great and terrifying, it is formally confined in Roland's Paynims, Arthur's Mordred, Adam's Satan, or Beowulf's dragon. The epic hero knows his opponent and the source of his strength, though this knowledge avails him little.

To suggest an overriding destinal element and a recognizable configuration of evil in epic is not to deny the epic hero, or the people he represents,[32] responsibility for his or their downfall. We can briefly analyze this responsibility in terms of the hero's critical decision, its bases and its consequences.

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[28] Harry Levin, *The Question of Hamlet* (New York, 1959), p. 83. Cf. Susan Taubes' comment: "Human action becomes tragic wherever the divine order loses coherence so that man, misreading the signs of heaven, becomes the instrument of his own destruction." "Nature of Tragedy," p. 195.

[29] Sewall, "Tragic Form," p. 350.

[30] I have always found Othello to be the least convincing of Shakespeare's great tragedies. Perhaps this is because the evil therein is confined almost exclusively to Iago who, however much Othello may come to think him a "devil incarnate," still narrowly—too narrowly—focuses our impression of the evil in the universe.

[31] *Form and Meaning*, pp. 334-337.

[32] The responsibility the Geats have for their downfall in *Beowulf* is stressed in the Messenger's speech.

Sewall suggests that "the epic hero . . . deals with emergencies rather than dilemmas," that he chooses and acts in the light of an accepted ethos. "But the tragic hero," he continues, "sees a sudden, unexpected evil at the heart of things that infects all things. His secure and settled world has gone wrong, and he must oppose his own ambiguous nature against what he loves."[33] He must steer his course blindly, with no stars or landmarks. Hence, the dilemma of tragic drama. True, the aged Beowulf faces an emergency more than a dilemma; he has little choice but to fight the dragon that believes in a scorched-earth policy and has already destroyed his *gifstol.* Gilgamesh's search for eternal life has urgency, but is it even emergency? Hector, on the other hand, can sally forth or seek the protection of Troy's walls; Turnus can submit gracefully and honorably to Aeneas; Arthur can wait out the fatal day; Adam can eat or not eat of the forbidden fruit. Are these not as tragic dilemmas as ever confronted heroes of drama? Of Roland, Tillyard writes: "there is the entirely adequate irony that if Roland had blown his horn earlier he would not only have saved his fellows but spared bursting his own brains. Here is the true spirit of tragedy."[34] Is it? It is *a* spirit of tragedy, that of epic. The irony of Roland's decision is not the cosmic irony of tragic drama that leads its heroes, in their blindness and insecurity, to their self-destruction. The consequences of Roland's choice are clear; he and his epic fellow-travellers act in the light of their societies' ethical patterns. Roland may be stubborn and a poor mathematician, thinking he can gain unalloyed victory by killing thousands when one hundred thousand oppose him, but he follows standards of French heroic nobility in his proud determination. In the teeth of Destiny Turnus abides by his heroic code. Adam, Arthur, and Hector make their choices in the expectancy of Fate, but they too wish to preserve the heart of their way of life—and for an instant they believe they can, and care not for the consequences. The irony of their decisions is not that of Hamlet's in the prayer scene or of Creon's in imprisoning Antigone. The epic hero may defy augury, but his defiance is at the same time a resignation, a recognition that man can achieve so much and that no man lives forever. *Beowulf* also has this spirit; though the hero feels Wyrd to be immeasurably nigh, he acts as if he could achieve victory in the dragon venture. And he, like the others, moves into the best of all possible afterworlds accorded by the "accepted unconscious metaphysic" of his age;[35] his spirit, the poet assures us, seeks the judgment of righteous souls.

[33] "Tragic Form," p. 356.

[34] *English Epic,* p. 131.

[35] The phrase is taken from Tillyard (p. 13), who takes it from Lascelles Abercrombie. Tillyard believes it to be one of the criteria of the epic spirit.