"BEOT", *HYBRIS*, AND THE WILL IN *BEOWULF*

1. PRIDE-WORDS IN *BEOWULF*

Why is Aeschylus' Prometheus punished for his daring, why is Beowulf praised for his? Codes of conduct prevalent in the respective cultures make it necessary that the culture hero's foremost deed of courage should be sanctioned by the community in the Anglo-Saxon text, but condemned (though sympathized with) in the Greek. Those codes concern, among other things, the propriety of certain human attitudes towards society and the cosmos, and towards the gods, forces, or principles that are thought to rule these. The poem *Beowulf* is infused with an ethical code which governs the conduct of king, retainer and *comitatus*, and central to which stands the issue of pride and its various manifestations.

The semantic field of 'pride words' in *Beowulf* contains the following[1]:

ahliehhan	to laugh, exult
begylpan	to boast, exult
beot	boast, threat, vow, pledge; danger
beotian	to threaten; to boast, vow, promise
deall	proud, famousd
dolgilp	foolish boasting, foolhardiness
gal	lust, luxury, wantonness, folly, levity; gay, light, wanton; proud, wicked

[1] Only those words are included of which at least one sense relates to the semantic field. Thus *mod* belongs in because in at least one sense, 'pride', it belongs in our field; *stip-mod* ('stout- hearted, firm, resolute, brave, stubborn, stern, severe') is excluded because no sense given it by the dictionary belongs. For the rest, this is an open semantic field which drifts into other fields such as those of terms for speech, for various states of mind, courage, anger, exultation; glory; power; wealth; promising; and so on.

galnes	frivolity, wantonness, lust
galscipe	excess, luxury, lasciviousness, wantonness, pride
gielp, gilp, gylp	glory, ostentation, pride, boasting, arrogance, vainglory, haughtiness
gilpan, gylpan	to glory, boast, to desire earnestly; exult, praise
gylp-cwide	a boastful speech
gilp-hlæden	covered with glory, proud
hremig	clamorous, exultant, lamenting, boasting, vaunting
hyge	pride; thought, mind, heart; courage; disposition, intention
mod	soul, heart, mind; courage; mood, temper; greatness, magnificence; pride, arrogance
modig	of high or noble spirit; bold, brave; proud, arrogant
modpracu	impetuous courage, daring
oferhygd	pride, arrogance; proud
onmedla	arrogance, presumption
wlencu	pride, arrogance, haughtiness, glory, pomp, splendour; bravado; wealth; daring
wlonc	proud, high-spirited, bold

In addition, the following, though not found in *Beowulf*, are important within the semantic field of pride-words in OE:

bælc	belch; pride, arrogance
bælcan	to cry out, *vociferari*
hreman	to boast, exult, call out in exultation or lamentation; lament, murmur
hygeteona	deliberate injury or offence, insult
hygepryp	pride of heart or mind, insolence
modignes	pride, arrogance; magnanimity
ofermetto	pride, arrogance, haughtiness

ofermod	pride, insolence
pryte	pride, haughtiness, pomp
upahefednes	elevation, uplifting; pride, exultation, presumption, arrogance

Most of these denote emotions, attitudes, propensities, states of mind. Two nouns, *beot* and *gylp*, differ from the rest in that they designate speech acts (both are characteristically spoken) and not only convey attitudes but also entail illocutionary force (obviously the verbs carry speech-act connotations where some of the corresponding nouns do not; in the case of *bælc, bælcan* the verb seems to lack the pride-sense that is found in the noun). This is particularly clear in the Bosworth-Toller entry for *beot*, where three main senses are distinguished:

I. A threatening, threat, command, menace

II. Peril

III. A boasting, boasting promise, promise.

Of these, I. and III. constitute speech acts while II. shifts the semantic emphasis onto an entailment of 'threat'. What we intend is to examine these two terms and show what the community's and the poet's disposition towards their respective speech acts reveals about the status of the individual's will in *Beowulf* and, by extension, in the Anglo-Saxon culture that produced the poem. We shall then compare our findings with the semantics of Greek *hybris*, and draw an inference as to the different cultural attitudes towards the forces that are thought to shape and govern the universe in each case. From this an argument will be produced to situate *Beowulf* in the light of Christian and pagan standpoints regarding the will.

2. GYLP

Let us begin by examining some instances of the use of *gylp*. After Beowulf's death Wiglaf upbraids his cowardly retainers with the following words:

2873-4 'Nealles folccyning fyrdgesteallum

gylpan porfte'

The people's king had no reason at all to boast about comrades in arms[1].

In the context, this means 'They failed him miserably'. Similar sentiments are conveyed by the poet as he surveys the *scop*'s account of the fight at Finnsburg, where Hildeburh lost both son and brother to the Jutes:

1071-2 Ne huru Hildeburh herian porfte
Eotena treowe.

Indeed, Hildeburh had no cause to praise the loyalty of the Jutes.

In other words, 'they betrayed her and hers'. *Herian porfte* belongs with *gylpan porfte* in a pattern made up of an infinitive followed by a form of *purfan* and occupying one half-line, and here we have an instance of formulaic language. This is not the place to enter the very complex and by no means resolved discussion of the formula, but a word on the subject will be necessary for our purposes. In a ground-breaking study of Homeric epic composition, Milman Parry (1930) defined the *formula* as "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea" (1930: 80). The epic singer, he argued, does not memorize his long song, but neither does he 'create' it on the spot. Rather, he is able to compose a version of it because he structures his themes into one-line and half-line formulas -- into a highly codified language which preexists his text, and within which alone he frames his narrative. Subsequent researches led Lord (1960) to the additional concept of the *formulaic* half-line, defined as one which "follows the basic patterns of rhythm and syntax and has at least one word in the same position in the line or half-line in common with other lines or half lines" (1960: 47); Lord conceived the formulaic half-line as a more 'relaxed' version of the formula whereby the singer employs a familiar structure but varies some of the words by selecting them from what he called a *system* of options (and which might also be labelled a *paradigm*). Seeking to transpose these insights onto Anglo-Saxon epic poetry, other scholars since Magoun (1953) have questioned both the definition and the scope of the formula, and the latest consensus position seems to be that, whereas the

[1] All translations are taken from Swanton 1978.

concept of the formula itself is too narrow, the notion of formu laic language makes a great deal of sense.[1] The poet (I abstract here from the thorny issue of whether we are discussing an oral or a literate text) composes according to a formulaic principle of 'systems' from which he selects items to fill the slots provided by the formulaic (half-)line. This principle offers him not only metrical and rhythmic but also ideational and thematic frames within which an endless number of narrative performances can be fitted; the specific combinations of words that result may (or not) be 'new' ('original', felicitous, striking), the line and half-line structures are not.[2]

In this perspective, *herian porfte* and *gylpan porfte* above constitute variations on a formulaic half-line that pivots on a verb *porfte* on which depends the infinitive that precedes it. Additionally (and this goes beyond the notion of formulaic half-lines, but still merits the label of 'formulaic language'), both clauses depend on an earlier negation *-nealles, ne-*. We find another example in

> 2363-4: Nealles Hetware hremge porfton
> fepewiges
>
> The Hetware had no cause at all for exultation in the conflict of troops.

The general idea is 'They failed of their purpose (to defeat the hero)'. Here *purfan* is in a plural past form, and the predicate it governs is an adjective rather than an infinitive; for the rest, the negative element is a constant, and *hremge porfton* remains within the confines of the half-line. A further instance of formulaic language occurs in the following statement by Beowulf after his successful expedition to the mere:

> 2005 ff. 'Ic pæt eall gewræc,
> swa begylpan ne pearf Grendeles maga
> […] uhthlem pone'

[1] See O'Brien O'Keefe (1996) for a survey

[2] No reduction or demeaning of the poet's 'creative' power is to be inferred, rather the strategy seems not to differ much from what the average English poet has been doing since the Renaissance when composing (whether *extempore* or through laborious writing and revising) in iambic pentameters; the pentameter operates as a framing device which does not so much constrain the poet as give him both rhythmic and semantic, even thematic, possibilities.

> 'I avenge everything, so that none of Grendel's kin […] will have cause to boast of that predawn clash'

In other words, Grendel and his race have failed dismally. In these negative contexts, *purfan* functions as an implicative verb, its negation having connotations of failure, of 'not living up to standards';[1] and such connotations attach, negatively, to *herian, hremge* and *(be)gylpan*: as the non-fulfilment of a boast amounts to failure, so reference to an imaginary boast is used similarly in a litotes to disparage the fact that such a boast was not and would not have been possible. He who fails to live up to his pledge, or he who cannot achieve what he might have wanted to boast of, are open to contempt; while he who fails to receive the support he might have wanted to praise or boast of is to be pitied. Both contempt and pity denote clearly negative attitudes, on the part of Wiglaf, the scop, Beowulf and the poet himself, towards individuals who cannot fulfil their boast or who are not even in a position to utter it. Though we have surely moved beyond the boundaries of the formulaic half-line, at least in so far as the construction *swa begylpan ne pearf* is differently ordered, has a different tense, and adds *swa*, the whole remains familiar; if not formulaic, it still displays a strong cohesion between the three key elements: a negation, a form of *purfan*, and a dependent predicate of boast, praise or exultation. To consider this cohesion, let us look at a different type of example. If the narrator's was a disparaging view in the previous cases, it changes when the boaster achieves his purpose, as is shown by cases where *gylp* appears in predictable correlation with specific verbs:

> 828-9 Hæfde East-Denum
> Geatmecga leod gilp gelæsted,
> swylce oncyppe ealle gebette […].
>
> The prince of the Geatish men had fulfilled his boast to the East Danes, and so remedied all the distress […].

The verb *gelæstan* occurs elsewhere with other nouns taken from a paradigm of things-that-can- be-fulfilled:

[1] The idea recurs in a simpler construction in which *gylpan* is employed without an accompanying *purfan*: 2583-4 *Hrepsigora ne gealp / goldwine Geata; gupbill geswac / nacod æt nipe, swa hyt na sceolde, / iren ærgod.* Said of Beowulf when his sword proves unable to wound the dragon, the sentence carries the same connotations of failure (the weapon's) and the same implicit regret on the narrator's part.

1706-7 'Ic pe sceal mine gelæstan
freode, swa wit furpum spræcon'.

'I shall fulfil my friendship towards you, just as we spoke together a short time ago'.

2989-90 He pam frætwum feng ond him fægre gehet
leana mid leodum, ond gelæste swa

He accepted the trappings and courteously promised him rewards among the people, and fulfilled it thus.

One fulfils one's friendship towards another; one carries out one's boasts and promises. Whereas there is nothing formulaic about the last three examples, they exhibit a strong degree of cohesion between words of pledge (*gylp, gehetan*; indirectly, *sprecan*) and the verb *gelæstan*. Though not formulaic, this verb is at any rate a *collocate* of those terms. Hoey (1991: 154) defines "collocation" as designating a type of textual cohesion consisting in the frequent co-occurrence of two -or more- lexical items (the 'node' and its 'collocate'). The argument is that we do not learn and produce words in isolation but as part of contexts within which alone their meaning is generated; this is to say that we learn and produce language in 'chunks' rather than in single units. On the different level of poetic production, this was precisely Parry's and Lord's claim for the art of Yugoslav epic singers (see Lord 1960: 35 ff.). It follows that formulaic language, and the formula as a special instance of this, are themselves special (poetic) instances of collocation, instances in which cohesion is close to reaching an upper limit; they are still flexible in that they allow for paradigmatic variation, the upper limit being probably found in the proverb or the cliché, which admit of practically no variation. The point is important: uses of node terms like *gylp, gylpan* with collocates like *purfan* or *gelæstan* evince supra-personal attitudes towards the values expressed by these collocations; in a way somewhat comparable to that of gnomic utterances, they convey aspects of a standard, socially-sanctioned value-system: boasts are to be fulfilled; not doing so amounts to failure. This -the collocative constructions are saying- is a matter not only of public knowledge but of universal validity.

3. BEOT

Much the same emerges from an analysis of *beot*. Consider the scene where, seeking to humiliate Beowulf, Unferth taunts him with a biased account of the already legendary bet between the hero and Breca, when each vowed to out-swim the other on a tempestuous (and monster-infested) sea:[1]

506-24 'Eart pu se Beowulf se pe wip Brecan wunne,
on sidne sæ ymb sund flite,
pær git for wlence wada cunnedon
ond for dolgilpe on deop wæter
aldrum nepdon? […]
[…] Beot eal wip pe
sunu Beanstanes sope gelæste'

'Are you the Beowulf who contended against Breca, competed in swimming on the open sea, where in your pride you two explored the flood, and risked your lives in deep water for the sake of a foolish boast? […] The son of Beanstan in fact accomplished all he had boasted against you'.

The main point here is that, whatever Unferth's motivations, and however distorted his account of the events, he is right in claiming that, whereas the two young men engaged in a "foolish boast" (*for dolgilpe*), yet it behoved them to carry it out; he thus approves of Breca's fulfilment of the boast, even if the latter was initially unwise, and berates Beowulf for not living up to it. This is confirmed by the *beot-gelæste* collocation, as by the fact that Beowulf, too, in rising to the challenge and turning the tables on Unferth, acknowledges that the boast had to be fulfilled, and that they both honoured it:

535-8 'Wit pæt gecwædon cnihtwesende
on gebeotedon -wæron begen pa git
on geogopfeore- pæt wit on garsecg ut

[1] We need not go into the function of this scene, which is a clear instance of flyting, or of Unferth himself -- he fulfils the role of the trickster, raising strife much as Loki does in various Scandinavian texts (see e.g. Snorri Sturluson's *Edda: Skaldskaparmal* 1, 33; see Simek 1984: 193 ff.), much as Efnisien does in *The Mabinogion: Branwen Daughter of Llyr*). A complementary view would hold that Unferth is the Donor who, in fairytales, tests the hero before giving him the help or magic object he is in need of (here, the sword Hrunting which Beowulf is to receive from Unferth just before his battle against Grendel's mother). On the fairytale structure of the poem and on Unferth's Donor-like status, see Barnes 1970.

aldrum nepdon; *ond pæt geæfndon swa'*.

> 'As boys we two came to an agreement and boasted -we were both then still in our youth- that we would risk our lives out on the ocean; *and we did just that*',

even while admitting (twice in three lines: *'cnihtwesende'* (lit., 'we being boys'), *'wæron begen pa git/ on geogopfeore'*, 'we were both then still in our youth') that they were very young at the time, i.e., that the boast was indeed a foolish one. As the *Wanderer* poet puts it (70-2):

> Beorn sceal gebidan, ponne he beot spricep
> op-pæt collen-ferhp cunne gearwe
> hwider hrepa gehygd hwerfan wille.
>
> A man must wait before he utters a pledge until that person of bold spirit is fully aware which way his mind's thinking wants to turn (Bradley).

A boast must not be uttered hastily or lightly, for it is a weighty thing. The gnomic nature of this assertion conveys a definite attitude towards boasts on the community's part. They, as much as the narrator, expect the boaster to carry out what he has pledged himself to do. This emerges from the early scene where Hrothgar vows to build a great hall where he shall rule and give riches away: the hall erected, *He beot ne aleh* (80), 'He did not neglect his vow'; here *ne aleh* is another implicative, equivalent to *porfte*, and the action of dispensing riches is viewed with approval by the poet and later contrasted, by Hrothgar himself, with the miserly conduct of Heremod, who ended up sharing his wealth with no-one (1709 ff.). *The Battle of Maldon*, too, speaks of Eadric as acting rightly when he stands by his lord ready for battle: *beot he gelæste* (*Maldon* 15), 'he fulfilled his vow', which is of a formulaic piece with *gilp gelæsted* (*Beowulf* 829); and again, when Byrhtnoth falls, one of his retainers harangues the rest, urging them to make good their oath (*Maldon* 212-4):

> 'gemunap para mæla pe we oft æt mædu spræcon,
> ponne we on bence beot ahofon,
> hælep on healle, ymbe heard gewinn'

> 'Let us call to mind those declarations we often uttered over mead, when from our seat we heroes in hall would put up pledges about tough fighting' (Bradley).

Thus the important thing about *beot* is not that it should not be uttered but that it must be honoured. Warriors who fail to do so are contemptible; warriors who would utter a boastful pledge must reflect before doing so not because boasts are not agreeable to God or some other superhuman power, but because of the burden of having to comply with them. And if an enemy utters *beot*, it is not the gods' responsibility to punish him, but the hero's alone to make him eat his words, as we learn from *Waldere* (I, 26), when Hildegyth praises the hero's sword and urges him on against his antagonist:

> '[mit] þy þu Guþhere scealt
> beot forbigan'
>
> 'with it you shall put down the boasting of Guthhere' (Bradley).

The thrust of my argument so far is that the sympathies of characters and society may lie on the side of caution in the utterance of a boast, but, more importantly, on the side of fulfilment once the boast has been uttered; while contempt or pity characterize their reaction towards failure or refusal. Likewise, the attitudes of narrator and audience in *Maldon*, in *The Wanderer*, in *Beowulf* are essentially in harmony with those of their fictional heroes and societies: the audience are expected to agree with the sentiments expressed or displayed by the characters, and this is borne out by the collocative bond between *beot*, *gylp* etc. and verbs of fulfilment like *gelæstan*, *geæfnian*, or *ne aleogan*, as by the collocative bond between *gylpan* and a negated implicative like *þurfan*; by the ethical consensus entailed by statements such as *Wanderer* 70-2; and, in general, by the sorrowful or contemptuous attitude displayed towards failure in living up to one's boast.

4. BEOWULF'S DOUBLE BOAST

Let us now examine one particular instance of *beot*. Twice does Beowulf boast that he will fight Grendel without weapons. The first of these two pas-

sages runs from ll. 433 to 441; lines 440b-1 do not actually touch on the boast, but will be relevant to the discussion later on:

433-41 ‘Hæbbe ic eac geahsod pæt se æglæca
for his wonhydum wæpna ne reccep.
Ic pæt ponne forhicge, swa me Higelac sie,
min mondrihten, modes blipe,
pæt ic sweord bere oppe sidne scyld,
geolorand to gupe; ac ic mid grape sceal
fon wip feonde ond ymb feorh sacan,
lap wip lapum. pær gelyfan sceal
Dryhtnes dome se pe hine deap nimep’.

‘Also, I have heard that in his recklessness the monster disdains weapons. Therefore, so that my leader Hygelac may be glad at heart on my account, I scorn to carry sword or broad shield, yellow disc, into battle; but I shall grapple with the enemy with my bare hands and fight to the death, foe against foe. He whom death then takes must trust to the judgment of the Lord’.

The hero claims that ‘he has heard’ -and no-one in the audience gainsays this- that Grendel ‘disdains weapons’, and therefore he himself will scorn to carry sword or shield. The second passage runs from line 675 to 685a, but again I will include the closing lines 685b-7 for reasons to be given later:

675-87 Gespræc pa se goda gylpworda sum,
Beowulf Geata, ær he on bed stige:
‘No ic me an herewæsmun hnagran talige
gupgeweorca ponne Grendel hine;
forpan ic hine sweorde swebban nelle,
aldre beneotan, peah ic eal mæge.
Nat he para goda, pæt he me ongean slea,
rand geheawe, peah pe he rof sie
nipgeweorca. Ac wit on niht sculon
secge ofersittan, gif he gesecean dear
wig ofer wæpen. Ond sippan witig God
on swa hwæpere hond, halig Dryhten,
mærpo deme, swa him gemet pince’.

Then before the great man got on to his bed, Beowulf of the Geats spoke vaunting words: ‘I do not reckon myself inferior in warlike vigour, for deeds of battle, than Grendel does himself; therefore I will not put him to sleep, take away his life, with a sword, although

> I easily could. He knows nothing of such noble matters -- that he might strike against me, hew at the shield -- renowned though he may be for hostile deeds. But in the night we both shall dispense with the sword, if he dare seek a fight without weapons. And then may the wise God, the holy Lord, assign the glory to whichever side seems to him appropriate'.

Again he utters 'some vaunting words' (*gylpworda sum*), claiming for a fact -and again no-one contradicts this- that Grendel knows nothing of weapons, and so he will dispense with them too, so as to make it a fair fight.

Over 200 hundred lines later, while Beowulf is slowly wrenching Grendel's arm out of its socket, his men rush to his aid, only to discover -what they did not know before- that Grendel has become invulnerable to swords through magic:

> 801-5 pone synscapan
> ænig ofer eorpan irenna cyst,
> gupbilla nan gretan nolde,
> ac he sigewæpnum forsworen hæfde,
> ecga gehwylcre.
>
> no war-sword, not the choicest of iron in the world, would touch the evil ravager, for with a spell he had rendered victorious weapons, all blades, useless.

Now this is an extraordinary coincidence: in an entirely innocent manner the hero had hit upon the one way of defeating Grendel. Granted that this is a familiar motif in folklore: the hero, often a simpleton, unerringly performs the one unlikely action which can overcome his supernatural adversary.[1] But the specificity of the condition -Grendel can only be defeated by brute force- and the inconsistent reasons Beowulf gives for his decision -Grendel disdains weapons; Grendel knows nothing of weapons- cast a large shadow on this 'coincidence'. The bare-handed combat and the monster's invulnerability to swords are related. The hero does not know (in fact, he remarks that he will use no sword to slay the monster, *peah ic eal mæge* (680), 'though I easily could') -- all the more praise to him, then, for his daring choice. But can the poet have been ignorant of the causal link between the two facts? Can he

[1] And is there not one more shred of evidence here to support the hypothesis of folk-origins for the poem?

have been ignorant of the traditional motif of swords that fail before a numinous adversary?[1]

The motif reappears in 1522 ff. After Beowulf dives into the mere with the sword Hrunting, he comes face to face with the ogress, and as he hacks at her he realizes Hrunting cannot avail him. He then trusts in his own strength, which nearly costs him his life, until he manages to get hold of *her* sword; this is presented as *ealdsweord eotenisc* (1558), 'an ancient sword made by giants', and with it he easily beheads both her and her (already dead) son. It becomes clear that the Grendel-kin cannot be wounded by man-wrought iron, but are helpless before swords of a non-human origin.

The motif reappears once more in 2575 ff. There the hero faces his third and most formidable enemy, the dragon, and as we saw above, on this occasion he cannot boast of a glorious victory because once more his sword (Nægling) fails *swa hyt no sceolde*, 'as it should not have done'. Just then, Wiglaf rushes in wielding a sword described as *ealdsweord eotenisc* (2616); and while Beowulf's blade actually shatters against the dragon's head, Wiglaf's sinks easily somewhere below the head. We can say that all three monsters share this characteristic, that they are invulnerable to human swords but can be killed by non-human weapons. The author uses the motif explicitly and deliberately twice. We can therefore not claim that he was ignorant of it. Now to return to the first fight: he has the right ingredients, he twice makes the point about his hero's not using weapons against Grendel, and he must have known that a causal link exists between the monster's invulnerability and the need for a hand-to-hand combat. In other words, the motif *is* there, in a submerged manner. Why did he not avail himself of it? Why did he choose instead to let Beowulf opt for a wrestling match? As was said earlier, all the more glory to the hero who decides to go unarmed into the fight on the claim that his enemy scorns weapons *or* knows nothing of them.

But there is something more. For had Beowulf known that Grendel could not be hurt by iron, the decision as to the proper manner of fighting would have been taken out of his hands, and he would have been *forced* to wrestle him; as it is, Beowulf freely *chooses* to wrestle him without being aware of a reason for having to do so. In replacing the conventional motif with a heroic

[1] On this motif, see Garbáty 1961, Lüthi 1975 (1987: 48).

boast, the poet enhances the strength and confidence of his hero; he lays the ground for a gradual erosion of this confidence in subsequent battles (see below); above all, he highlights the function of the will: in providing merely *ad hoc* motivation (and an inconsistent one, to boot: does Grendel scorn weapons, or does he know nothing of them?) for his hero's repeated boast, the poet makes sure we grasp the utterances in 433-40a and 677-85a as issuing from choice, not necessity. He stresses the arbitrary nature of the pledge; he replaces a deed that would be merely *imposed* upon the hero with one which is *willed* by him.

The double boast becomes a token of an outrageous arrogance: it pulverizes the notion of measure, of human limitations, of decorum; it is *excessive*. Yet its excess does not rate censure but commendation on the part of his hosts. The poet, too, sanctions this excessive language, and we know this because we know that he sanctions boastful speech (see above), but also because in both instances he is careful to wrap his hero's vaunting words in discretion by having him, immediately after his boasts, humbly appeal to the judgment of the Lord in 440b-1, to God's will in 685b-87. These religious references, by juxtaposing *beot* to a socially accepted system of values (Christian ones), leave us in no doubt as to the poet's attitude towards his hero's boast.

Beot is a freely performed act: it is *willed*. It conveys a determination to achieve some difficult thing against all odds, and thus entails an exertion of the will. When *beot* consists in a pledge of loyalty, it places no less than the individual's life on the line. At its most dramatic, *beot* is an outrageous challenge against the order of things. It thus entails some manner of opposition, a disposition to disrupt some convention, to run a risk, to perform some excessive deed, to forgo some safeguard, or just to step beyond what is commonly feasible or acceptable, thus committing the speaker to an action which will place him beyond some accepted limit: a transcending, or a transgression.

Furthermore, *beot* carries important moral connotations: it must not be uttered lightly, but once uttered it must be honoured; society sanctions fulfilment and frowns upon renuence or failure. We may conclude that the culture for which *beot* is an important part of the accepted code of conduct is a culture existing in a considerable degree of tension between the established order of things and a determination to transcend that order.

5. HYBRIS

In an impressive, and exhaustive, study (*Hybris* 1992), Fisher argues that the Greek term *hybris*, whether appearing in literary or non-literary texts, primarily stems from juridical discourse. He opposes the 'traditional' view, according to which

> *hybris* is held to be essentially an offence against the gods […]; it is the act, word or even thought whereby the mortal forgets the limitations of mortality, seeks to acquire the attributes of the gods, or competes with the gods, or boasts overconfidently (*Hybris*: 2),

and argues instead that the term concerns notions of transgression against another's honour:

> *hybris* is essentially the serious assault on the honour of another, which is likely to cause shame, and lead to anger and attempts at revenge. *Hybris* is often, but by no means necessarily, an act of violence; it is essentially deliberate activity, and the typical motive for such infliction of dishonour is the pleasure of expressing a sense of superiority, rather than compulsion, need or desire for wealth. *Hybris* is often seen to be characteristic of the young and/or of the rich and/or upper classes; it is often associated with drunkenness. *Hybris* thus most often denotes specific acts or general behaviour directed against others, rather than attitudes (ib.: 1).

> The most extreme types of *hybris* are seen as behaviour essentially antithetical to and threatening the fundamental bases of, civilized living in communities; […] excessive love of violence and war, failure to respect the obligations towards kin and friends, or to control oneself at dangerous social occasions, especially those involving drink […]. [Such behaviour was often attributed] to a variety of mythological or putatively 'historical' figures who oppose,[1]

[1] The text says "who operate", but this does not make sense, and Fisher's book is unfortunately plagued with misprints and omissions.

> from the margins or from 'outside', the divinely appointed social order (ib.: 500).[1]

In fact, twenty years before Fisher's study, Pierre Chantraine's *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* (published in 1968 and reprinted in 1984) had already recognized just this fundamental legal sense of the word:

> *Hybris*: violence injuste, provoquée par la passion, violence, démesure, outrage, coups portés à une personne, le terme ayant une valeur juridique […] *Hybris* est un terme important pour la pensée morale et juridique des Grecs. Chez Homère, il caractérise la violence brutale, qui viole les règles (1150).

Thus Prometheus commits *hybris* when he steals the fire of the gods and gives it to humankind, and again when he shouts defiance against vengeful Zeus. On the other hand, in a play such as Aeschylus' *The Persians* no amount of ingenuity can erase the fact that it is Zeus who "chastises thoughts which are too proud" (*Persians* 827-8), or the fact that Xerxes' crime consists not merely in dishonouring the Greeks but in "harming the gods with overbold and reckless deeds" (ib.: 831-2). And our problem becomes how to reconcile this undeniable offense against the gods with the juridical notion of honour; is it perhaps the *honour* of the gods that is outraged? I believe the answer is to be obtained elsewhere. Fisher acknowledges that hubristic behaviour was lavishly attributed to invaders, and thus not only the Persians but also the Seven against Thebes, as well as the Giants and Titans who sought to overrun Olympus, are credited with *hybris* (Fisher 503); he also points out that the central image of *hybris* in *The Persians* is that of the yoke: the yoke of slavery threatened on Greece and intimated by that "major symbol of improper 'yoking' throughout the play [which] is the attempt to erase the natural boundary between Europa and Asia, 'to yoke' the sea at the Hellespont" with a vast pontoon (Fisher 257). And one point which time and again crops up in discussions of Greek tragedy and of *hybris* is that the two are bound up with the commission of "acts of the greatest dishonour against men and, in Xerxes' case, against gods *and the natural order as well*" (Fisher 261), with "brutal violence *which violates the rules*" (Chantraine),

[1] Tantalos, Ixion, Sisiphus, Salmoneus, Odysseus' Cyclops and Penelope's suitors are given by Fisher as among those *hybris*-led figures who oppose the divinely established order.

with acts such as "*crossing limits beyond which there is danger*" (Ewans[1]), with acting "*outside the bounds* by which all human activity should be limited" (Dihle 1982: 188) (my emphasis). *Hybris* in this light constitutes a transgression of the appointed order, whether social, natural, divine or cosmic; and though the term may have originated in the realm of juridical discourse -the etymology of *hybris* is obscure-, its use in epic and drama often transcends a purely legal sense and, without in the least excluding the latter, enters the moral and religious dimensions where the fundamental concept is that of the boundary transgressed.

In other words, *hybris* is not simply excessive pride but a transgression of the social, natural, divine, or cosmic order, and hence an act which must be countered by the forces of order, not only by way of punishment but equally in prevention of greater evil. *Hybris* is a violation of *kosmos* -in all the senses of the Greek word: 'order', 'form', 'universe', 'social world', 'arrangement', 'ornament', 'honour', 'glory' (Chantraine)-, thereby attracting upon itself a moral retaliation, *Nemesis*, because it threatens to plunge the world into chaos.

Several similarities can be found between *beot* and *hybris*. To begin with, both are actions. The one is a speech act, the other a deed which may be verbal: of Capaneus' boast (*The Seven Against Thebes*) that he will sack the city "whether god wants it or not" (426-7), we are told it "exceeds the power of mortal thought" (425), and we are further advised that his words "swell like waves and spatter Zeus" (443). This is a description of perlocutionary language, of a language which affects reality. Of Astakos, a champion sent against proud Tydeus in the same play, it is said that "he hates all words that go too far" (410). The notion of transgression is there in both instances, and attached to a language which exceeds the limits imposed by the powers governing a proper relationship between human and god. In the second place, both are acts to the performance of which the *will* is central: they are voluntary deeds. In the third place, both involve -factually or by intention- a transcendence or transgression of limits, a going beyond some pale. As a result,

[1] "Precisely the tragic dimension of Xerxes' position -and of Agamemnon's- is that in pursuing the goals which an *agathos* had to pursue *qua agathos*, they were obliged to cross limits beyond which there is danger (crossing the Hellespont, sacrificing Iphigeneia to Artemis), and chose paths which led to disaster" (Ewans 1996: xxii).

both expose the agent to dangers arising from this going beyond the pale.[1] The major difference between them lies in the attitude the community exhibits towards the agents. The Greeks consider it a moral duty to refrain from *hybris*, and the *hybristes* is urged -however much sympathy he may deserve- to retreat from his position lest he bring Nemesis upon himself and his. The Anglo-Saxon culture, on the other hand, may chide the utterer of *beot* for lightly engaging in a weighty pledge, but expects him in any case to carry it out. *Hybris* consists in a manifestation of the individual's will which involves the violation of a set of norms and which must therefore be curtailed: it is a moral duty to refrain from *hybris*. *Beot* consists in a manifestation of the individual's will which has as its intended result a transcending the expected run of things, *and* which must be fulfilled. In the case of *hybris*, proper behaviour demands the repression by the individual of his inclination. In the case of *beot*, proper behaviour demands care in the vow, but fulfilment once the vow has been uttered.

Hybris is seen to be destructive, not so much because it denotes arrogance or because it defies the gods, but because it challenges the accepted order: *stability* is under threat by *hybris*. By contrast, in the case of *beot* there is a conviction that the order of things is inimical to the individual's purposes, and a conviction that the individual's will may be legitimately employed to modify it. Thus challenging Breca means defying both the natural elements and the limitations of human nature; facing the dragon means engaging an enemy no-one has dared face before; determining to fight Grendel without weapons means freely giving oneself an unreasonable handicap. Both *beot* and *hybris* constitute a defiance against the order of things. To the proposition 'The world is thus and thus', the agent in both cases replies: 'I challenge that'. But whereas *hybris* entails punishment and a welcome restoration of equilibrium, *beot* receives the sympathies and encouragement of *comitatus*, poet and audience alike. Whereas the Greek outlook tends to respect the order of things and fears to upset it, the Anglo-Saxon sees with satisfaction attempts at modifying it, regrets or condemns failure to do so after the promise has been made, and

[1] Furthermore, *hybris* is associated with drunkenness; and it is worth noticing that *beot*, too, is often uttered over drinks; whether this link is significant will largely depend on the degree of symbolism we are willing to attach to drink, the cup, the drink-bearers, the drink-benches and so on in the Germanic and Classic traditions (see Aguirre 1996).

views disparagingly those forces which seem to thwart such aspirations. And this is where the notion of Fate becomes central to our enquiry.

6. WYRD

Scholars have for some decades sought to render OE *wyrd* as 'event', 'deed', 'fact' and to minimize destinal readings. Few of us want to be caught arguing for a concept of 'Germanic fatalism' which was fashionable until the nineteen-twenties (Stanley 1964). No such concept need be appealed to, however, by a translation of *wyrd* as 'fate', and in many instances this is the only sensible translation. As I have argued the point elsewhere, I will limit myself to stating without proof that *wyrd* means "fate", and that, whether we read it or not as personification (a goddess of Fate), it occupies a central place in *Beowulf*.[1]

Let us for a minute return to Beowulf's boast to fight Grendel single-handedly. Were he to arm himself against Grendel, and were his sword to fail him in his hour of need, this fight would not differ from the second one, and a sense of progression towards disaster would not be created. By altering the inherited motif in the first fight while respecting it in the second and third, the poet allows himself an initial image of a supremely confident Beowulf acting out of an indomitable will and awakening our admiration. But this supreme confidence is going to be subsequently whittled down by stages over the next two fights, gradually eliciting from us a very different kind of reaction: not so much admiration for the unconquerable power of the hero's will as for his desperate courage. The will does not weaken, its effectiveness does. One way to look at the poem is in terms of this growing futility of the heroic that will in the face of a power beyond the hero's control -- the power of Fate.

Futility is here meant, of course, in the sense of practical results obtained. Morally, Beowulf's conduct is impeccable, his courage never slackens. But *Wyrd*, Fate, does not appear as a moral agent, rewarding appropriate conduct or punishing the transgression of some divine law -- *wyrd* is no providential principle, rather it constitutes an impersonal, blind force acting according to

[1] See Aguirre 1995 and Aguirre (forthcoming).

pre-established patterns and moving inexorably towards destruction; *wyrd* is not divine justice, but sheer inevitability. And the only thing which may avert Fate, we are told -and only temporarily at that- is either the will of God or the will of man, as manifested in a display of courage:

> 572-3 Wyrd oft nerep
> unfægne eorl, ponne his ellen deah.
>
> Fate will often spare a man not yet destined for death, when his courage is good.[1]
>
> 1056-7 […] nefne him witig God wyrd forstode
> ond pæs mannes mod
>
> […] if wise God and the man's courage had not averted that fate.

But of course, ultimately, not even the will of man will be enough. For just as it is not human action that brings about a retribution -as it still is in Aeschylus and in the *Iliad*-, so it is not human action that can effectively alter the course of *wyrd*. In contrast to Nemesis, which is an explicit agent of moral retribution, *Wyrd*, the force which leads all to dissolution in the Anglo-Saxon poem, is simply in the nature of things -- almost another term for it is entropy; this is why no moral law stands in the way of the individual's transgressing an abstract order -- but equally, no moral law guarantees success as a reward to the heroic exertion.

An act of courage which averts that which was preordained is precisely what the utterer of *beot* intends. The extreme, most dramatic kind of *beot* we have been considering here is a challenge entailing, in principle, some such deed as will alter the foreseeable and the certain, the conventional and the acceptable. But in spite of several glorious victories, the poem is so constructed as inexorably to lead the hero, and his people, to failure and disaster.[2] Failure, let us insist, not because Beowulf's bravery or determination waver, but because his self-sacrifice fails to obtain the desired result. Not only is he abandoned by those he sought to protect, but the last word is on the side of hopelessness, as the Geats bury the treasure he had tragically

[1] On the view that *fæge* is used in an effort to divest *wyrd* of some of its attributes, see my forthcoming "After Word Comes Weird".

[2] On the notion that the poem's structure contributes to establishing the presence of overwhelming Fate, see Bonjour 1950: 33-4, 42, 44-6, 69, passim.

striven to obtain, thereby -in spite of the noble king's effort- surrendering to their fate. And disaster: Wiglaf's forebodings of doom as a result of the warband's inability to hold to their central oath of loyalty (another *beot*) are followed by the Geatish woman's predictions of defeat and captivity on the occasion of Beowulf's funeral; her words of mourning for a dead hero are also a dirge for his doomed nation. Courage is then one key to alter that which was ordained; yet in spite of great exertions, courage eventually proves not enough. It will be resorted to, by the bravest, to the last, perhaps because there is nothing else. But in the end the best of efforts will not halt the run of things: *gæp a wyrd swa hio scel* (455), 'Fate will always go as it must'.

The drift of my argument is that this poem strives towards a transcendence of *wyrd*. This is the reason so much emphasis is placed, here as elsewhere in Old English heroic poetry, on the individual's will, as manifested in his *beot* and in subsequent acts of bravery against some unspecified but overpowering order of things. M.Swanton makes this point explicitly for *Beowulf*:

> Beowulf dismisses his *comitatus*, but continues to act in the light of the ethical requirements of that group. He believes for an instant -the instant of *beot*- that he *may* overcome the dragon, that he *may* peserve the way of life they all know. The hero defies his fate, but in a spirit of resignation: fate will go always as it must; a man can achieve so much, and no more; he cannot, after all, live for ever. His decision may seem to be brought about by pride but, unlike the classical *hybris*, it is external and clear, not what he but society expects (Swanton 1978 (1990: 27)).

And E.V.Gordon put it lucidly in a statement on the Germanic epic:

> [For the hero of Old Norse literature] the heroic problem of life lay primarily in the struggle for freedom of the will, against the pains of the body, and the fear of death, against fate itself. The hero was in truth a champion of the free will of man against fate […]. As it happens, however, the most definite statement in Germanic literature of heroic doctrine is not in Norse but in the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Battle of Maldon*. The old retainer, Byrhtwold, making his last stand, exhorts the survivors who are with him: 'The mind must be the harder, the heart the keener, the spirit the greater, as our strength grows less' (Gordon 1927 (1990: xxx f.)).

'Do I dare disturb the universe?', asks T.S.Eliot's Prufrock. Beowulf and Byrhtwold dare the universe every time they utter a boast. *Beot* is not simply a matter of swearing to do something, but of a significant, sustained, and tragic (because of its ultimate futility) effort to push the borders of the established order further and further away from us, and to assert the individual's will at the centre of an all-too-ordered cosmos.

In all this, there is no question of a 'fatalistic strain' in Germanic thought. What may happen is that, as the Christian doctrine emerges with a viable formulation of the human existence in terms of free will, dispersed or rarified tendencies in that direction on the part of the Anglo-Saxon culture may acquire impetus and a focal point: perhaps for the first time, a firm leverage is obtained against the traditional view, and dissatisfaction with this view grows in direct proportion to the possibilities of a viable alternative. At a certain point in this process, the culture concerned may begin to speak of Fate -under whatever name- as of a force which thwarts human aspirations. Whether it may turn out that 'fatalism' is an important cultural concept only in those societies which have (recently) embraced Christianity, is beyond the scope of this article to elucidate. My point is that *Beowulf* represents a glimpse into a new way of thinking -- a way of thinking not clearly formulated -- one which Christianity is to foster but which in *Beowulf* cannot quite be sustained. The stupendous notion that the future depends on individual acts and not on some pre-established pattern, that it is possible to modify the individual's destiny by acts of will -- this notion had been developed by the fifth century, and seems to be getting hold -whether or not under Christian influence- of the Germanic culture of our poem. Its concern with freedom of the will places *Beowulf* squarely in the middle of a current of thought which runs parallel to, and at points merges with or is influenced by, Christian tradition since Augustine. In the work of this philosopher, especially in *De libero arbitrio*, the design of a Christian model which enshrines the triumph of the will is virtually complete, and will not be challenged for over a thousand years. Christianity was aware that the only way of transcending the earlier, myth-bound culture was to extol the individual will and thus the possibility for endless innovation and modification of the human universe.

Beowulf is not yet there: the poem has not made the transition -- for if it had, it would be aware of a purposeful order of things arranged providentially for the benefit of the human cause. There is no sign of Providence in the

poem except where translators choose to render *wyrd* as "Providence" -- a choice which (mostly) reads modern notions into an ancient text. In its outlook vis-à-vis Fate, *Beowulf* is not quite a Christian poem but rather represents a liminal stage in the struggle between a mentality which accepts preestablished patterns (such as is conveyed by the term *hybris*) and another which seeks to emancipate itself from such patterns (as manifested in the Christian fostering of the will). In between these two, the mentality evinced in the concept of *beot* cherishes the individual's will yet succumbs to the preestablished. And so the poem is shaped by a tragic combination of acceptance and (ultimately failed) revolt.

7. A LITERATURE OF THE WILL

There is no such concept as free will in the *Iliad* or in the plays of Aeschylus. This statement does not mean that determinism rules Classical Greek texts, merely that the will does not exist as a separate category of the human mind. "The notion of will has no corresponding word in either philosophical or non-philosophical Greek" (Dihle 1982: 18).When the physician Diocles (+ 300 B.C.) sought to define the psychological aspects of an empty stomach, he referred on the one hand to the animal instinct of hunger, on the other to the reasoning leading to a decision to eat:

> Our term "will" denotes only the resulting intention, leaving out any special reference to thought, instinct, or emotion as possible sources of that intention. Greek, on the other hand, is able to express intention only together with one of its causes, but never in its own right (ib.: 24).

That is, the will appears to the Greeks as the culmination of either a rational process or of instinct, which for them is the irrational. And so the discussion of the will is fundamentally bound up with issues of the intellect, knowledge, epistemology:

> The twofold psychology that explains human behaviour on the basis of the interaction of rational and irrational forces and has no

> room for the concept of will prevails throughout the Greek tradition from the time of Homer onwards (ib.: 27).

> In early anthropological theories, the Greeks tended to attribute tenacity and stubbornness, that is to say qualities of the human will in the modern view, to the irrational part of man's personality (ib.: 177).

This explains why Xerxes' decision to invade the Hellas is blamed by Darius and the Queen on a) ignorance, b) a daimon's influence and c) a sick mind (*Persians* 274-51). Against such an ideological background, *hybris*, understood as "acting outside the bounds by which all human activity should be limited" (ib.: 188), is attributed to *ignorance* of one's real position. If, for us, the will is involved in *hybris*, for the Greeks the intellect is central to it; and tragedy ensues because the characters cannot make decisions that will effectively change the course of events:

> In a Greek tragedy everything that could have been otherwise has already happened before the play begins, and it is impossible at any point in the play to call out to the hero, 'Don't choose this, choose that'. He is already in the trap. In an Elizabethan tragedy, in *Othello*, for example, there is no point before he actually murders Desdemona when it would be impossible for him to control his jealousy, discover the truth, and convert the tragedy into a comedy (Auden & Pearson 1950 (1977: xxix)).

We may well speak of two historically differentiated types of literature in medieval times. The first is a literature of memory, or of ritual, which fundamentally repeats pre-established patterns and does so according to pattern; action is in it pre-programmed, outcomes are known in advance by the audience, much material is repeated, extensive use is made of formulaic language; this literature may be best represented by the early epic or the fairytale, and is reflected in the medieval historian's preoccupation with 'inventing' nothing and appealing to ancient authority instead. The second is a literature of the will, or of action, in which the individual's decisions shape his own destiny; the ballad, the later European epic (e.g. the Spanish *Poema del Cid*) and the romance are easy examples of this; repetition and formulaic language may abound here too, but the central concern is with the hero's

ability to assert his purposes and carry them out against all odds, culminating in success. No literary class or genre is 'pure', and we need not expect any given text to accommodate itself to either type. But if one were to venture sweeping statements, it would make much sense to say that the Middle Ages, especially after the 11th century, witness the flowering of a literature of the will, manifested in the romances, in the love poetry of the troubadours, in the lais of Marie de France, as well as in so many texts of direct Christian inspiration (hagiographical narrative, Dante's *Commedia*, Mariological texts, and so on).

Classical Greek literature (again with all kinds of restrictions) is by and large associated with the first type. The difference between the two types becomes clear when we compare e.g. Achilles and Gawain. The options confronting Achilles -to die young and famous, to live long in obscurity- are redolent of fate: he does not so much decide upon a course of action as accepts one or other destiny. Sir Gawain's choices only lead him to further choices: at every turn a new course of conduct is open for him to follow or reject. Furthermore, it is never his long-term destiny that is at stake, nor will he die at the end of the standard Gawain-romance, for the narrative stops at the point where the hero succeeds (or, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is chastised), in a celebration of the will. *Beowulf* occupies a middle position. It has advanced beyond the first type in its recognition of the importance and value of the will in shaping the individual's destiny; it falls short of the second type in its failure to shake off the trappings of ritual, of a formulaic reality, of a cosmic fate.

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