THE BEATING HEART OF ENGLISH PHILOLOGY

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Scholars usually date the composition of the *Beowulf* manuscript to the late tenth or early eleventh century. Of course, there has been much debate about it, and some of them have asserted that the first decade of the eleventh century is the most suitable candidate to occupy such an honourable post. To get to these conclusions it is necessary to apply difficult and complex palaeographic tests to the manuscripts. But it is not that difficult to know that the year 2007 has been witness to the release of the *Beowulf* movie by North American director Robert Zemeckis – actually, a quick glance at cinema magazines is more than enough. Both events are separated from one another by what at first sight could seem an unbridgeable period of time: an eleven-century gap. Despite this fact, the distance lying in between has been saved, and that reveals the vitality and vividness of the Anglo-Saxon[i] poem *Beowulf*. Thus, the main aim in this article is to highlight that significance and to reconsider the way the poem is usually approached by English Philology students.

In order to do so I would like to refer to one of the most important 20th century *Beowulf* scholars: J.R.R. Tolkien, and to his most renowned academic essay "*Beowulf*: the Monsters and the Critics". Tolkien was the first scholar – or, at least, the first who was listened to – in doing justice to the poem by putting it at its right place. All throughout the 19th century, the poem had been prey to a great variety of different specialists: historians, archaeologists, theologians, anthropologists, sociologists, etc. They all began the search of their different objects of study: evidence of historical and archaeological hypothesis, chronological accounts of events, lists of Norse gods and systems of beliefs, among others. Not surprisingly, they were disappointed at not finding them, or at finding less than they would have liked, and condemned *Beowulf* to the void of academic oblivion. The reason why they did not find what they were looking for in the poem is because *Beowulf* is precisely that: a poem. As such, it had to be treated, read and studied as a piece of art. We must assume that the serious thing for a poem is poetry, and poetry is the core of *Beowulf*, so that that serious thing is placed at the very centre, whereas historical facts are sometimes just touched on the surface – in a literary work, they are not as central as poetic features. As Tolkien says, the author of *Beowulf* cannot be held responsible for the fact that more historical documents from the Old English period have not been preserved. It is this artistic quality that we are referring to: what has kept *Beowulf* alive over the centuries.

Thus, literacy or *literaturnost* – using formalist terminology – inherently pervades the work. Its literary attributes are made manifest in the accomplished and inventive fusion of an old pagan and a new Christian tradition. Such coalescence is possible thanks to the precise use of the imaginative elements – the monsters being most important – and how they correlate with the theory of courage. Moreover, this inventiveness reflected on merging traditions has a marking and potent effect on the structure, style, tone and form of the poem.

Now, we will consider these ideas in a more detailed manner. In Norse mythology, both gods and heroes are doomed to die, fighting against monsters at the end of Time. Although not much has been preserved in texts about pre-Christian English mythology, we must suppose that it followed the same development as in Scandinavia. This mortality of the gods is a characteristic feature which clearly differentiates Norse from Greek mythology, in which divine beings are far from fearing death. It is in this context that we must understand the theory of courage: a peculiarity of Northern literature consisting of the extolling of valour for valour's sake – without the hope of an eternal life. This is the sort of courage manifested by Beowulf at his determination of undertaking the fight against the dragon, after which they die.

So far, the idea is completely pagan, but here is where the junction point makes its appearance: the monsters with which Beowulf must deal are continually referred to as the adversaries and enemies of God, the progeny of Cain. Therefore, they are seen as the antagonists of supreme Goodness. By doing so (transmuting them into pure evil), the author is providing those imaginative elements which are the monsters with a universal reference. In other words, they begin to play a universalizing function within the whole structure of the work. The enemy Beowulf must face is not a mere prince, warrior or human being, but a genuinely wicked creature: symbolism is thus displayed. Hence, ancient pagan concepts – already old to the Anglo-Saxon audiences of the late Old English period – were presented under the new light of Christianity. And it is, so to speak, the chemical reaction produced by the contact between Christian and pagan imagination that allows this brand-new and so far inexperienced consideration to take place – and that is poetry.

According to this view, what critics of the past considered to be something irrelevant, as we said above, now proves to be of essential importance: the Northern dragon, with its attached universalizing symbolism, is making the whole system of the poem work. Such symbolism, bestowed on the monsters by the Christian connections the learned author is able to make, presents the youth and maturity adventures of Beowulf as something that everybody will have to endure: setting after rising, age after youth, death after life. Consequently, the poem is lent a strong contrastive character, which has a clear reflection on its structure. Such a reflection consists of the lacking of a steady narrative. This factor was regarded as a flaw by some critics of the past (and maybe by some out of date critics of the present), and therefore *Beowulf* was considered a bad conducted epic. The truth is that this lack of a long, stable narrative hints at a different literary nature: it should not be considered a bad epic, but rather, a good elegy, as Tolkien points out. The irreducible literary meaning or thematic base – using modern grammatical terminology – is elegiac. The poem mourns for the fugacity of vitality and strength, and that mourning is articulated by means of a clear opposition between two exciting but isolated periods of the protagonist's life. In that sense, the dire for Beowulf gains a special interest, since it could be regarded as the formal expression of that semantic irreducibility in the poem. The elegiac theme is accurately balanced by the dual structure: deeds of youth, success and vigour are opposed to deeds of age, defeat and death. In between, there is just a considerable gap of time – and it is far from being within the scope of the poem and the purpose of the author to cover it.

All in all, movies inspired by *Beowulf* have obviously tried to fill in this narrative absence. The English Graham Baker (1999), the Icelandic Sturla Gunnarsson (2005) and Zemeckis (this year) have released their respective lengthened

and therefore epic movies. The motivation for this padding is crystal-clear: they need some half an hour of filming or more to make a movie. But while the latter two still remind us of the poem and keep some of its essence, there is only one meeting point between the former's and the original: the protagonist's name as title – and not even that, for the poem did not originally have a title. My opinion is that a short movie would be the most appropriate filmic expression to maintain the nature of the real *Beowulf*, according to what has been stated above concerning its mood and structure.

As for the form of the poem, it is necessary to remark on the alliterative lines which make it up. Each line is subdivided into two different halves, separated from each other by what is called *cæsura*. The first half has one or two distinct sounds which alliterate with their respective equivalents in the second. Thus, there can be even two alliterative relations within a single line. To exemplify this, we will take a look at the famous first two lines: *"Hwæt, w* ***G*** *r-Dena in ge rda****g****um/ odcyninga rym gefr non".*[i] The letters marked in bold stand for the alliterative sounds. The sound corresponding to the first letter "g" in *ge rdagum* does not alliterate with that of *G r-Dena* because it had a palatal rather than a velar pronunciation, due to the presence of the adjacent high front vowel "e".

It is then easy to appreciate that the Anglo-Saxon line was clearly contrasting. It was precisely the contrast between the two halves of the lines (related to each other by alliteration) that provided words with a poetic quality. Therefore, there is a perfect match between form and content in *Beowulf*. As we said before, its contrasting theme is articulated upon a contrasting structure, which lacks a steady narrative and thus presents an opposition between two different moments in life. But, in addition, the literary information finds its formal manifestation in the alliterative array of its 3182 contrasting lines. The artistic quality behind *Beowulf* becomes apparent.

As follows, the reading of the poem leads to a deeper comprehension of such a culturally and literarily important feature as alliteration is. It is present in writers belonging to all the periods of English literature: the anonymous author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Chaucer, Stevenson, Pinero, Caxton, Shakespeare or Thackery, to mention just a few. Moreover, C.S. Lewis emphasizes the importance of this rhetoric figure in his essay "The Alliterative Metre". Hence, the study of English literature must necessarily pass through the consideration of alliteration. This consideration must be diachronic, and that perspective can only be achieved by examining Anglo-Saxon literature in general and *Beowulf* in particular.

So far, we have considered all those elements which make of *Beowulf* a vivid piece of English literature: the amalgamation of pagan and Christian elements, its corresponding universalizing symbolism and the perfect combination of content and form, manifested in the use of alliteration as the main literary figure. It is because the poem is still an influencing element in culture that it is compulsory to study it in almost every English degree across world's universities. Now, I will focus on how this piece of Anglo-Saxon art should be approached by students of English Philology.

Formal features play a significant role in the process of understanding any poem. In *Beowulf*, the importance of its formal characteristics gains a special weight due to that symmetric combination between continent and content mentioned above. Those characteristics can only be appreciated in Anglo-Saxon. Thus, it would be preferable not to lose the original language when studying it in an academic and philological context. Philology is supposed to be the perusal of a culture by means of the texts it produces, and the only way to really comprehend a text is to examine it in its original language. Along these lines, I recommend students to approach Anglo-Saxon before dealing with the elegiac poem. Of course, this is far from being immediately accessible, but nobody said it was easy to win Dame Philology's heart. In the same manner as there exists a cultural blending at the very core of the poem, literary and cultural courses of an English degree should converge with those based on historical linguistics for learning's sake. The main reason why I think so is that literature is, overall, language. The former

has been defined as a function of the latter, and thereupon, it is only on these terms that an effective understanding of *Beowulf* is reached. Literary studies must necessarily pass through the consideration of the linguistic raw material which constitutes the texts.

There are several books and guides which make it easier to understand the language of *Beowulf*: *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Primer*, edited by Norman Davis, *An Old English Grammar*, by Randolph Quirk and C.L. Wrenn, *A Guide to Old English*, by Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson. These, if studied properly, provide the reader with the linguistic competence necessary to read the text (or texts) in the original. The morphological, syntactic and phonetic levels of the "so-called Anglo-Saxon tongue" (Tolkien, 2006: 5) are accurately described. Particularly, Quirk and Wrenn's grammar was especially devised and addressed to students of literature. As for the edition of the poem which should be used, I find it most appropriate to read that of George Jack: *Beowulf. A Student Edition*. As the title reveals, it was written thinking of students. This annotated edition is full of commentaries which try to solve all the possible difficulties and complexities that could arise for an undergraduate student while reading it.

Thus, I hope to have shown that, far from being a forgotten work, *Beowulf*, due to all the reasons stated above, is still a living literary influence in English and European culture – and, probably, one of the best reasons to learn Anglo-Saxon. Although there has been debate about its literary genre, Tolkien's thesis, exposed and summarized in this paper, remains consistent. Furthermore, many of the themes and poetic features of the literature written in the Old English period, such as alliteration, have never since abandoned the history of English literature. *Beowulf* is continuously pumping imaginative blood into the textual arteries of the English language, and thus, it can be regarded as the beating heart of English Philology.

Notes

[1] In this article, as well as in the rest of my current work, I follow the indications of my tutor, Professor José Luis Martínez-Dueñas, and therefore use the terms "Anglo-Saxon" and "Old English" distinctively: whereas the former refers to both a people and its language, the latter makes reference to the historical period in which the people lived and spoke that language (see Martínez-Dueñas, 2008: 37).

[2] *"Indeed we have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes, of the kings of that people in former times"* (Translation is by Jack, 1994: 27).

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