PERSISTENT MYTHOLOGIES: A COGNITIVE APPROACH

TO *BEOWULF* AND THE PAGAN QUESTION

by

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This dissertation employs recent developments in the cognitive sciences to explicate competing social and religious undercurrents in *Beowulf*. An enduring scholarly debate has attributed the poem's origins to, variously, Christian or polytheistic worldviews. Rather than approaching the subject with inherited terms which originated in Judeo-Christian assumptions of religious identity, we may distinguish two incongruous ways of conceiving of agency, both human and divine, underlying the conventional designations of *pagan* and *Christian*. One of these, the *poly-agent schema*, requires a complex understanding of the motivations and limitations of all sentient individuals as causal agents with their own internal mental complexities. The other, the *omni-agent schema*, centralizes original agency in the figure of an omnipotent and omnipresent God and simplifies explanations of social interactions. In this concept, any individual's potential for intentional agency is limited to subordination or resistance to the will of God. The *omni-agent schema* relies on social categorization to understand behavior of others, whereas the *poly-agent schema* tracks individual minds, their intentions, and potential actions.

Whereas medieval Christian narratives, such as Bede's *Life of St. Cuthbert* and Augustine's *Confessions*, depend on the *omni-agent schema*, *Beowulf* relies more heavily on the *poly-agent schema*, which it shares with Classical and Norse myths, epics, and sagas. While this does not prove that the poem originated before the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons, it suggests that the poem was able to preserve an older social schema which would have been discouraged in post-conversion cultures were it not for a number of passages in the poem which affirmed conventional Christian theology. These theological asides describe an *omni-agent schema* in abstract terms, though they accord poorly with the representations of character thought and action within the poem. This minimal affirmation of a newer model of social interaction may have enabled the poem's preservation on parchment in an age characterized by the condemnation, and often violent suppression, of non-Christian beliefs. These affirmations do not, however, tell the whole story.

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For my grandmother, Oreatha Saterfiel Luttrell Bond.

Bona mea instituta tua sunt et dona tua, mala mea delieta mea sunt.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: WHAT WOULD BEOWULF THINK?

A recent trend in literary criticism has adopted observations from cognitive and evolutionary psychology as an approach to analyzing the production and consumption of literary texts. In particular, this approach views literature as the product of the human preoccupation with learning about others, understanding how particular people think, empathizing or condemning them based not only on their actions but also their motivations. The ability to take another's point of view is such an integral and frequently employed aspect of human cognition that it might seem deceptively simple. The reason it seems simple is that the human brain has evolved with large neural networks dedicated to keeping track of our fellow humans and figuring out their intentions, trustworthiness, limitations, and power to affect our own lives. Other animals share our ability to observe behavior. The dogs Ivan Pavlov used in his pioneering behavioral conditioning experiments could learn to expect one of Pavlov's actions to follow another. They might expect his ringing of a bell to be followed by his delivery of food. However, this does not require that they recognize Pavlov's purpose in either action, or even that he has a purpose. Pavlov's dogs may be aware, at least to some degree, of their own desires and how they intend to pursue them. That is to say they have a *first-order intentionality*. Only higher primates have the capacity to go the next step and imagine that behind an individual's action lies another thinking process. To investigate, or even to speculate about another's motivations requires a *metarepresentation*—a mental

representation of another person's mental representation relevant to the action or situation at hand. This ability to *metarepresent* another's thought process (*second-order intentionality*, also called *mindreading,* or *theory-of-mind*) depends on specialized cognitive architecture resulting from evolutionary selection. Of course, like most aspects of human cognition, it can be cultivated by social interaction. However, social interaction does not create the natural human fascination with other humans. If we did not have such a predisposition, we would not be able to learn much at all from others. Research with people with autism, whose ability to engage in metarepresentation is impaired, has taught us as much about this ability as the observation of its use in social interaction. Because it is so foundational to conscious thought, we might not even realize that it existed at all if it did not occasionally fail to develop.

Anthropologist Robin Dunbar ("The Social Brain Hypothesis") has argued that metarepresentation was a leading factor in the evolution of human consciousness. With the recognition that other people have intentions and limitations similar to our own comes the realization that they can be deceived. With the emergence of deception, the individual must learn to spot and second-guess such deception attempts. The deceiver who learned to fool even these second-guesses stood a greater chance of dominating resources and procreating. The ability to track these increasingly complex levels of intentionality are the result of a cognitive arms race which took place over the course of hominid evolution. The preoccupation with social self-promotion and capacity for intrigue implicit in social cognition has led some ethologists to dub it *Machiavellian Intelligence* (Byrne &

Whiten). Dunbar has further suggested that the survival benefits afforded by social intelligence (forming alliances, deceiving rivals, etc.) led to the development of language and the human preoccupation with gossip (*Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*). These last two factors contributed, at last, to the emergeance of the human art of story-telling. After all, there are benefits to hearing and remembering untrue stories, especially if we do not know which information we hear is true. The individual who can recall and compare multiple versions of a story has a better grasp of actual affairs. We may hear stories about people we will never meet and whose actions will never directly impact our lives. Even in these cases, we are offered models of human interaction which inform our own actions and refine our own theory-of-mind.

Dunbar observes that the communication of narrative from one person to another requires third-order intentionality (two metarepresentations, e.g. "I *know* she *thinks* he's *hiding* something"). He further points out that literature, as an art form, requires at least fourth-order intentionality (e.g. "The reader *understands* that the author *represents* the protagonist as *naïve* of the antagonist's true *intentions*"). In her exploration of the function of metarepresentation in literature, *Why We Read Fiction*, Lisa Zunshine traces the levels of metarepresentations which communicate to the reader how characters imagine each other. While she points out that modern authors such as Virginia Woolf and Vladimir Nabokov construct high orders of intentionality, she underestimates the extent of such mindreading in some earlier works.

An example of a work of fiction that does not (and perhaps could not, due to material realities of its time's textual reproduction) play with multiply embedded levels of intentionality the way Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway does [is the] Old English epic *Beowulf*. *Beowulf* may never be able to embed more than three levels of intentionality, but it still engages our Theory of Mind in ways that vary—within certain parameters—from one moment to another and from one reader to another (73).

While I agree with Zunshine's cognitive approach to literature, I believe that she heavily underestimates the use of metarepresentation in *Beowulf*. She devotes a short section to an explication of the mindreading between Beowulf and Unferth. Unlike Dunbar, Zunshine cuts the author out of the levels of intentionality, which might be justified. Readers do not necessarily factor in the author's thought process as they read. However, limiting this interaction to only the third level of intentionality fails to account for the fact that Beowulf knows Unferth's intent. We know that he knows Unferth's mind because he adjusts his speech and his self-representation to the Danish court. These two engage in a complicated dual of representation in which each not only understands the other, but re-represents the other before an audience. In other words, Unferth wants Hrothgar's court to think that Beowulf is overconfident—that Beowulf thinks he is more ready for the fight with Grendel than he really is. Beowulf recognizes what Unferth wants the court to think that he thinks and begins to redescribe himself before the Danes. This, however, is not the most complex demonstration of metarepresentation in the poem. Later in the poem, Beowulf tells Hygelac a story about Hrothgar's hopes for a peace with the Heathobards. To ensure peace, Hrothgar bequeathed his daughter to

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Ingeld, his former enemy. Beowulf weaves a story in which one Heathobard provokes another to violence by metarepresenting the intentions of their new Danish allies. The number of minds which must be read to understand the import of this story-within-a-story cannot be reduced below six, which Dunbar suggests is likely the maximum number of intentional levels any person can keep in mind at one time. Zunshine uses *Beowulf* as the primitive first cultural product in a historicist progression, demonstrating that theory-of-mind, though it might have evolutionary roots, requires local historical development. While it is true that culture cultivates nature, scholars in the humanities are frequently predisposed to overestimate the causal power of culture in human thought. While a particular society may cultivate an evolved trait, it cannot create it. Nor should we expect that human social cognition was waiting for Wolfe or Nabokov to light the way to the sixth level of intentionality.

Focusing on levels of intentionality poses a challenge to the rule of literary criticism that a reader should not treat characters as if they were real people. Because metarepresentation is so integral to human consciousness, it does not require conscious reflection. As a result, it takes very little to provoke what philosopher Daniel Dennett calls the *intentional stance*. When we adopt the intentional stance, we instantaneously interpret ambiguous stimuli to indicate a human or anthropomorphic agent with specific desires, limited beliefs about the world, and "enough common sense to do the rational thing given those beliefs and desires" (Dennett, 110). The reflection that the thing we instantly treated as a person is non-existent comes only after we have gone a long way in defining the

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intentional agent. We may think of reading a book like listening to gossip. If the gossiper is a trusted friend, we process the story as true. Afterward, if confronted with contradictory information, we might remind ourselves that our trusted friend might not have his facts straight or might have particular prejudices or motives for his representation. In other words, we remember that the gossiper is actually a link in the chain of intentionality. Before that, however, we likely imagined the story by making inferences based on the information presented.

In their study of reader inference, "What Belongs in a Fictional World?" psychologists Deena Skolnick Weisberg and Joshua Goodstein point out that no story could be transmitted without a huge number of inferences on the part of the reader or listener. Most of these are so basic that it would seem ridiculous to point them out.

> All stories are necessarily incomplete. For example, the Sherlock Holmes stories never fully describe Holmes' appearance or anatomy. Yet it would absurd to assume that Holmes can walk through walls, lacks a lung, or digests food through his circulatory system just because the stories have left these matters unspecified. Readers of the Holmes stories automatically assume that he is solid, has two lungs, and has a functioning digestive system even though there is not enough explicit information in the text to draw these conclusions (69).

In other words, we cannot read a text without reference to information outside the text. We do not leave Holmes' anatomy to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's caprice. If we read that Holmes had an octopus tentacle where his left hand should be, we would expect an explanation. If Doyle failed to explain the anomaly, and if it had no

relevance to the plot, the reader's ability to disregard the author as author is disrupted, and the extended levels of intentionality are broken. We are left wondering, not what Holmes thinks of his octopus arm, but what Doyle is thinking. However, as long as the story fits the majority of the reader's expectations, the author is less prominent in the levels of intentionality. Though the particular rules governing reality may differ in works recognized as fiction, even fantasy stories depend on an internal reality that is not left to the author's caprice. Our expectations of reality extend to social realities. Not surprisingly, Weisberg and Goodstein found that test subjects remembered stories which depict familiar thought patterns, emotions, reactions, etc., are far more than they did those which violate their expectations. While, obviously, many social expectations vary from one cultural context to another, those which do not (i.e. those which are constrained by evolved predispositions) possess an intuitive edge. Thus, a reader may claim that an author doesn't understand his character, even in a work of fiction. In such a situation, a literary critic should be interested in both the author's motivation and the reader's expectation. In other words, a critic would metarepresent the author's metarepresentation of a fictional character and then compare this with a metarepresentation of the reader's metarepresentation of that character.

The author's authority in the composition of a narrative is tenuous enough in modern fiction. In the age of oral transmission, it would have been even more so. Such is the case in which we find ourselves in relation to *Beowulf*. While it is natural to refer to the poem as the work of a poet, as nearly every *Beowulf* scholar does, we have no way of knowing if it was the work of one or multiple minds in its current

physical, linguistic, or narrative forms. The story, at least, almost certainly had an oral prehistory. Whether the majority of the verse structure had such a prehistory is open to debate. Oral-formulaic theorists such as Francis Magoun have employed theories of ethnographers such as Albert Lord to argue that the majority of the poem could have existed in oral form for centuries before it was committed to parchment. In this light, we are forced to admit a gap in our chain of intentionality. We may construct a designer based on our own appraisal of the design. However, this is metarepresentation. In fact, it is a much more tenuous metarepresentation than imagining the characters as actual people. We need not assume than an author in Anglo-Saxon England had ideas of human thought which would be incomprehensible today. Though the objects which trigger greed, joy, or loyalty differ, no reader or audience would accept a character who was enraged to boredom or baffled by monotony. An author could portray a character who repaid kindness with revenge, but she could not expect any reader in any culture to read of such an act with approval, at least not without extensive explanation. Metarepresentation functions similarly across place and time, though the trappings may change slightly. This is why our own metarepresentations of the characters in *Beowulf* is not only permissible, but unavoidable. In a parallel argument to that posed by oral-formulaic theory, we may observe that stories can be transmitted and retransmitted with relative fidelity insofar as they resemble the expectations of the individuals who transmit them. Though the objects and associations that trigger human intentionality may change, those that do not may be so obvious that we forget them.

This is not to say that culture cannot change the way an individual employs cognitive predispositions. A key tenet of the current argument is that culture can profoundly influence cognition, but it cannot eliminate or create cognitive biases which have no grounding in evolved, task-specific, mental mechanisms. Culture, as cultivation, must work with what nature provides. Moreover, culture does not originate outside of nature but is constituted by the aggregation of individuals acting on inherited cognitive predispositions that have been honed through interaction in their lived environments (Pinker; Cosmides & Tooby). The model of social intelligence that underlies the interactions in *Beowulf* has clear analogues in small-scale societies as distant in culture and time as modern hunter-gatherers. It exploits cognitive predispositions which are, statistically speaking, species universals. Contrary to Zunshine's appraisal, *Beowulf* illustrates extended and complex levels of metarepresentation. Like like its Germanic and Norse analogues, the story represents characters who metarepresent other characters as a matter of necessity in a society not governed by social institutions large enough or strong enough to enforce pro-social behavior in all of its population. The world depicted in the poem and its analogues is a world in which the individual must protect himself by forming alliances, guarding against deceit, assessing and outwitting violent rivals, and negotiating peace agreements which are enforced by nothing other than the perceived self-interest of those involved. While these characteristics are not unfamiliar today (especially since the cognition that enables them is universal), we do not have to employ this kind of thinking to avoid theft and murder on an individual level today due to strong centralized governments which are able to

investigate and prosecute violence and exploitation. When we speak of peace

negotiations today, we nearly always refer to negotiations between nation states, a

level of human organization which is not subject to any higher authority. Within

each nation state, peace is not negotiated but enforced. Enforcement is

asymmetrical in that implies recourse to an infrastructure with far greater agency

than any individual or component group. In the world depicted in *Beowulf*, the

highest level of social organization is not a state or even, strictly speaking, a

monarchy. While Hrothgar and Hygelac are designated as kings (*cyning, hlaford,

dryhten*), the authority they exercise is not immanent or unassailable. They must

manage a complex social network of warrior retainers which remains in a state of

flux due to the retainers' capacity for defection, usurpation, and self-motivated in-

group hostility. In such populations, lacking recourse to higher authorities, the

ability to know what an ally or enemy knows that you know serves as a clear

survival skill.

As these small-scale societies were eventually absorbed into larger units,

individuals could no longer keep track of the intentions of their fellow group

members. The limits of social intelligence were stretched beyond the breaking point.

Because people in larger populations can exploit their own anonymity to avoid

retribution for the abuse of others, metarepresentation as a means of avoiding

exploitation became less effective. These congealing populations were still

centuries away from the sort of criminal justice infrastructure which could enable

the level of law enforcement taken for granted today. The political structure of early

Iceland, in many ways analogous to that depicted in *Beowulf*, could do little more to

punish murder than to designate an individual as an outlaw. This allowed others to kill the outlaw without worrying about further retribution, but this strategy could not guarantee the capture of the individual or that the outlaw's kin would not succeed in reprisal for his death. Somewhere between the emergeance of inter-group anonymity and the establishment of Scotland Yard, a social strategy was required that would encourage pro-social behavior between individuals who were complete strangers.

Because this model of social interaction was rooted in evolved predispositions, it could not simply be discouraged by a society in which it no longer functioned. It had to be replaced with another sort of social intelligence equally grounded in the evolved psyche. This shift in cognitive models of social interaction is evident in the shift of religious conceptions from those of polytheism to those of monotheism. The fact that the spread of Christianity in Northern Europe originated with missions from Rome, or that alliances between Anglo-Saxon and Norse kings with the Roman and Holy Roman Empires coincided with conversion to Christianity, hints at an underlying compatibility in the way centralized religious and political institutions cultivate their constituents. Conversion to Christianity and the growth of centralized monarchial states both reduced the need for extensive metarepresentation as a means of insuring trust and cooperation. The use of metareprentation in duplicity may have even led those societies to discourage its use.

This is not to say that religion causes the political amalgamation of tribes into empires or that political amalgamation causes monotheism. Rather, each originates independently, but when they emerge in the same social group, each bolsters and reinforces the other. Obviously large scale populations emerged under centralized leaders while remaining polytheist, just as monotheism has existed in small autonomous socities. Following the sack of Christian Rome by the Visigoths, many remaining polytheists blamed Christianity for the Empire's dissolution. However, though the unity of the political empire faded, the unity of Christendom replaced it as the highest level of social organization. Though Christendom lacked the level of political and economic infrastructure enjoyed by the Roman Empire, especially in its ability to enforce pro-social behavior between individuals or factions, it had recourse to a deterrent against anti-social behavior. If an individual believed in divine reward or punishment, he might be less likely to abuse his fellow Christian, even if he had never seen that fellow Christian or formed any other personal bond with him. This hypothesis, argued by psychologists Azim Shariff, Ara Norenzayan, and Joseph Henrich (*Birth of the High Gods*), helps to explain the religious and political transformation of Northern Europe over the five centuries between the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England and the conversion of the furthest reaches of Scandinavia. *Beowulf* depicts a society on one side of this double-conversion (the historical Hygelac dating to the early 6th century; Bjork & Obermeier). The lettering used in the manuscript dates its production to the first decade of the eleventh century (Dumville), within a decade of the violent conversion of the last

Scandinavian polytheists. As a result, the poem offers a glimpse at a society in the

midst of the process of centralization of political and theological social structures.

The shift from a polytheistic to monotheistic explanation requires more than

the exchange of one creed or one god for another. Mark Kleiman, Professor of Public

Policy at UCLA and former Director of Policy and Management Analysis for the

Criminal Division of the US Department of Justice, as well as an independent Hebrew

Bible scholar, in an interview with *Evolution of God* author Robert Wright, offers an

unconventional appraisal of the different social intelligence schemas espoused by

polytheism and monotheism:

> I was taught in gradeschool a kind of folk anthropology of religion that said,
> "Back when people were stupid, they believed in many gods. But now we
> know there's one God, and that is ethical progress." It seems to me that a
> religion that acknowledges that there are multiple forces in the universe that
> are superior to you and possibly beneficent towards you and to whom you
> owe a kind of reverence, and acknowledges that they might come into
> conflict with each other—that your service to Aphrodite or Dionysus might
> exceed the mean and might lead you to violate the principle of justice and
> therefore piss off Zeus—that seems to me a more grown-up set of beliefs
> than the belief that there is a single father in the sky and as long as you are
> right with him, everything is fine. And your entire moral universe consists of
> doing what he wants. (Interview, "The Evolution of God: Jewish Edition")

In this view, polytheism recognizes contingency and conflict in the natural world

which even abstract monotheism, such as Deism, has difficulty explaining. Kleiman

uses the term *reverence* to describe polytheism. Its cognates in monotheism—

devotion, obedience, *Islam* ("submission"), faith—imply a much stricter

subordination of man to god. *Faith* requires a more absolute, *all-or-nothing* regard

for a god, whereas we may *revere* those who surpass us while still acknowledging

their flaws. As a social marker, faith evokes a binary between the faithful and the

infidel "faithless." Fewer crusades have been waged against the *irreverent* than

against the infidel. Kleiman contrasts "grown-up beliefs" with "single father in the

sky." Father-child imagery permeates monotheistic literature, referring to God as

"the Father," and advocating "faith like a child" (Mark 10:15, Luke 18:17) in its

adherents. This metaphorical schema evokes the sense of personal security that

children feel in the presence of parents. However, it also isolates the moral compass

in a single entity other than the believer. As Kleiman says, "as long as you're right

with Him, everything is fine." The idea that one mind, the mind of God, establishes

Right and Wrong, is a source of comfort in the faithful. This source of comfort is,

however, a problem for Socrates in Plato's *Euthyphro*. If goodness is the result of

divine will, is it not arbitrary? Socrates' charge of arbitrariness depends on an

understanding of a god as psychically human—having a human understanding. It is

an example of metarepresentation. Polytheism allows for the metarepresentation of

unseen powers. Whether a polytheist actually believes in an anthropomorphic

agent or simply imagines ambiguous phenomena *as if* it was work of an unseen

agent, the diversity of gods or phenomena require the individual to deal with

ontological variability. Even a polytheist as zealous as Euthyphro must confront the

Socrates' division between objectivity and divine will. If the polytheistic city council

of Athens was cold in forcing Socrates to choose between exile and hemlock, the

papacy's response to Giordano Bruno's philosophy may have been warmer, but it was hardly preferable.

Kleiman's description carries a value judgment in a modern context. The modern world values an openness to other individuals that requires the development of metarepresentation. However, metarepresentation enables deceit and selectivity in pro-social behavior. Monotheism propounds a universalism which promotes cooperation among strangers, turning believers into imagined brothers and sisters as children of the same divine father, however genetically heterogeneous they may be. Then again, this universalism requires the whole human universe to not only cooperate, but believe. Enforcing universal belief turns out to be an ugly business. To ensure universal brotherhood under God, mere reverence does not suffice, and questioning the reasoning process of divine and human authorities threatens the belief which makes the system work. Conversion is very different from inclusion. The history of the conversion of Northern Europe to Christianity is full of initial confusion on this point. Christian missionaries brought the faith to polytheistic kings, and these kings mistakenly offered reverence. Reverence for one god does not decrease the reverence offered to others in a polytheistic schema. Over five centuries, the reverence first offered to the Christian God as one among others was replaced by exclusive faith, sometimes by the peaceful admonition of missionaries and apologists such as Augustine of Hippo and Augustine of Canterbury, sometimes by the sword of jingoist despots such as Charlemagne and Olaf Tryggvason.

Beowulf originated somewhere during this transition from reverence to faith. For two hundred years, scholars have contended over the "Pagan Question"—the debate as to what extent elements of the poem express the pre-Christian world of the poem's characters or the Christian world of the manuscript's production. Nearly every edition and book about the poem published in the 20th and 21st centuries has addressed the issue, but nearly all of these have employed expectations about "religion" and "paganism" that originate in Christian apologetics. This frame sends a scholar searching for non-Christian parallels to values and beliefs espoused in Christian orthodoxy. We expect that all religions have creeds, that individuals identify themselves by these beliefs, that they distinguish these beliefs from more mundane beliefs and practices, and, above all, that they devote themselves to gods. However, anthropological and cognitive research with modern people from a variety of cultural backgrounds and worldviews reveals that these expectations are frequently absent from beliefs and practices we normally call religious. Religion is not fundamentally distinct from the rest of our social intelligence. The way we imagine each other is connected to the way we imagine other entities. The social cognition underpinnning monotheism differs from that underpinning both polytheism and secular social intelligence. If we look at the interaction of humans and gods in literature from or reflecting Classical and Norse polytheism, we see that all characters have similar minds, similar desires, and similar limitations. Gods and humans alike are subject to metarepresentation. The thoughts and actions of humans originate largely within themselves. Though gods may provoke or oppose human thought, their power of influence differs in degree but not in kind from that

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of mortals. Most importantly, no single intentional agent acts as the moral absolute.

Some are more selfish and deceitful than others, but they are praised or condemned

by moral imperatives external to any particular god. In this schema, the division

between human and god is relatively fluid. In the Eddas, a god is not more divine

than a jotun; nor is a Homeric titan more so than an Olympian. This schema, which I

will hereafter refer to as the *poly-agent schema* of social intelligence, underlies

poly*theism*, but it is not limited to theology.

Its alternative is the *omni-agent schema*—an imagined social cosmos in

which all intentional agents are seen as orbiting a central omnipotent, omniscient,

omnipresent God who is wholly other in all of his aspects from any other agent in

that cosmos. In Christian literature, such as that of Augustine of Hippo and the

Venerable Bede, God's mind is off limits. His actions are representable, but his own

representations are not open to metarepresentation. We may know his will, but

only through his own deliberate communication. We may not second-guess Him.

Furthermore, since God, as the omniscient and omnipotent punisher of wrongs,

stands to replace extended social intelligence as a guarantor of social harmony, the

interest in metarepresenting other humans is diminished in Christian narrative.

Human will is reduced to the single choice of obedience or disobedience. Even an

author as renowed for introspection as Augustine, who metarepresents his former

self in all of the desires, sensations, frustrations, and emotions, nonetheless

dismisses these intricacies and reduces them to various forms of human sinfulness.

God, as Creator, Prime Mover, Heavenly Father, and arbiter of human moral

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imperatives, by his omniscience and omnipotence, necessarily reduces the agency

and intentional complexity of other agents in His world.

      Beowulf demonstrates a preoccupation with action, reaction, self-promotion,

social maneuvering, and a genuine understanding of intricacies of the human mind

in terms irreducible to sin or faith. It shares this focus with Classical and Norse

myths, epics, and sagas to a far greater extent than it resembles the dualistic

categorization of *Christian* and *heathen* which defines the majority of medieval

Christian narrative.   The world of the poem resembles the world of polytheism

insofar as it, in Kleiman's terms, "acknowledges that there are multiple forces in the

universe that are superior . . . and possibly beneficent . . . and to whom you owe a

kind of reverence [but which] might come into conflict with each other." However,

the five centuries from the time of the poem's setting (6th century) to that of the

manuscript's production (11th century) saw a confluence of institutions (religious,

political, and literary) structured on the omni schema. If the poem can be shown to

persist in its coherence with the poly-agent schema, this would indicate that it

preserved much more pre-conversion thinking than has been previously

acknowledged.   At the time of the manuscript's production, even the Scandinavians,

whom the Christian Anglo-Saxons collectively derogated as "heathen Danes," were

facing the choice of baptism or death at the hands of ascendant Christian monarchs

in their own lands. The survival of Norse myths in this cultural climate was due

largely to the clever use, by Snorri Sturluson and others, of the frame of euhemerism.

In this frame, the gods were thought to be mythologized memories of historical

figures that excelled their contemporaries in political and occult power. This was

enough of a reduction of the gods' former agency to permit their preservation in the relatively inclusive cultural world of Iceland. It is possible that the inclusion of overtly Christian assertions of God's omni-agency, which are sprinkled throughout *Beowulf*, served a similar function for the poem which would have otherwise stood out as quasi-mythical in the near superhuman agency of some of its characters. In opposition to scholars who have argued that *Beowulf* is a deeply and inexorably Christian work, I argue that it preserves a myth incompatible with a belief system structured around divine Providence.

CHAPTER II

THE PAGAN QUESTION

Unity of Scholarly Consensus

If there was a single poet responsible for the poem and written text of *Beowulf*, we don't know anything about him (or her). We don't know for sure in what century he lived. We do not know what stories, poems, or traditions were extant in oral or written form before the poem's commitment to the Cotton Vitellius A. xv manuscript, or to what degree the written poem replicated or redacted that material. Still, Anglo-Saxonists for the majority of the 20th century have dutifully affirmed that the poem could be nothing other than the work of a singular poetic genius. Kevin Kiernan (1981) notes that the manuscript's handwriting changes at line 1939 and the page shows signs that portions of text were expunged and written over in a different script. Though he argues that the poem was not only written but probably composed by at least two authors, he rushes to assure us that "the essential unity of Beowulf is not in question here. . . . Beowulf as it has come down to us is now unquestionably unified" (250). Kiernan knew from scholarly precedent that his palimpsest theory risked the label of *liedertheorie*. This was the term adopted by 19th century scholars who, following methods originating in Biblical and Homeric criticism, suggested *Beowulf* could have resulted from the redaction of separate preexisting heroic lays by unknown authors in unknown centuries. Since the beginning of the twentieth century when such theories fell out of academic favor,

this same term has been used to condemn any similar criticism. Of *liedertheorie*, Kiernan continues:

> These arguments are systematically rejected by other scholars almost as soon as they are made, and it is safe to say that the theory is generally repudiated by Beowulfians as a group. Those who have argued for multiple authorship of the poem are characterized as "dissectors" usually with some justification (Kiernan, 250).

Kiernan's argument does not support this affirmation of unity, and the reference serves less to compare his argument to specific interpretations than to accord it with the predispositions of "Beowulfians as a group." As Arthur K. Moore observed in 1968,

> Since the decline of *Liedertheorie* the unity of the poem has been repeatedly proclaimed, but on the basis of very different relations. The seeming agreement between such statements as "The unity of Beowulf has long been taken for granted" and "This question of artistic unity need no longer be debated" is small agreement indeed, for these affirmations refer to different and doubtfully compatible readings (291).

This perception of agreement seems more characterized by what it opposes than what it claims.

Nowhere is this opposition more polemical than when *liedertheorie* is employed to attribute the poem's production to an era before the Anglo-Saxon conversion to Christianity. The story the poem conveys does not seem to require the divine agency which various lines add to the description of the action. Beowulf, who we are told has the strength of thirty men and a track-record as a monster

slayer before he arrives at Heorot, uses his unarmed strength to defeat a monster that, unbeknownst to the Danes, was protected by magic from weapons. Grendel would have continued to wreak havoc upon the Danes "nefne him wītiġ God wyrd forstōde /ond ðæs mannes mōd" (*had not wise God and that man's courage overcome that fate*, 1056-7, Klaeber, 4th ed., my translation). If it is not immediately clear that Grendel's defeat resulted from the dual agency of God and Beowulf, or God via Beowulf, the next lines remind us, "The Measurer ruled all mankind then as he does now" (*Metod eallum wēold / gumena cynnes, swā hē nū ġīt dêð* 1057-8). Several passages in *Beowulf* similarly encase intuitive structures of cause and effect inside counterintuitive interpretations deferring agency from the actor to *Metod*, the Measurer, as if action was a commodity meted out by a central distributor. Early scholars suggested that the addition of this interpretation could have come by the addition of the lines that articulate it when one or more pre-Christian poems were transcribed by Christian monks into the manuscript we have today. The extent to which these Christian references were integral to the poem would indicate, for scholars, whether or not the poem could be attributed to a time and a culture before conversion and therefore contain lines of thought that did not otherwise survive in written form.

As a result of the decline in popularity of this sort of reading, Old English scholars today spend a lot of time and ink explaining away recurring suggestions of Anglo-Saxon paganism. Every comprehensive edition of *Beowulf* and every book of length on the poem has had to address the poem's religious nature and deal with an enduring notion among new readers that the poem belongs to a pre-Christian,

Germanic polytheism, in the same manner that the *Iliad* belongs to the world ruled

by the pantheon on Olympus. When University of Iowa professor Jonathan Wilcox

read in a local college newspaper article that a potential student expressed

excitement about his upcoming *Beowulf* class, he immediately suspected that this

"young man, along with many students who take my classes, craves an unmediated

world of paganism, of pre-Christian gods and goddesses, and of heroic action not

circumscribed by Christian royal polity"("Teaching Anglo-Saxon Paganism" 96).

Wilcox quotes the newspaper article as follows: "'Oh! Oh! Oh! Cool! Cool! Cool!' said

an unshaven young man with the enthusiasm of a sweepstakes winner. The source

of his enthusiasm? A new course offered in the English department. 'Just imagine,'

he said, 'a whole semester on *Beowulf*?'" Doubtlessly informed by experience, it is

Wilcox, not the student, who introduces notions of paganism and presumes that it

lies behind this unqualified excitement about the poem. It is Wilcox who tacitly

admits that such Christian circumscription is antithetical to enthusiasm. "For the

earliest period of Germanic literature, sentiment makes the reader expect to find a

noble and ennobling Heroic Age, rude but grand" (Stanley 3), or so we're told by the

conventional wisdom of 20th century Anglo-Saxonists. At the very least, such a

student may become too preoccupied with the setting and story communicated by

the poem rather than with the wording of the poem itself, "the poem as poem," as

Tolkien calls us to focus our attention. It falls to the academy, therefore, to

circumscribe the poem with scholarly conventions and warnings against corrosive

alternatives.

In their 2007 edition of *Klaeber's Beowulf*, R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles assure us that "few specialists in *Beowulf* studies now dispute the essentially Christian character of either the poem or the milieu in which it arose" (lxvii). Larry Benson, in his essay "The Pagan Coloring of *Beowulf*," does the same: "The old theory that *Beowulf is* an essentially pagan work only slightly colored with the Christianity of a later scribe has now been dead for many years, and critics today generally agree that the poem is the unified work of a Christian author"(193). In her essay "Paganism in *Beowulf*: A Semantic Fairy-Tale," Christine Fell assures us, "Since the first edition of *Beowulf* reached the public, or at any rate the learned, scholars have repeatedly pointed out that the Christianity of the poem is not a matter of scribal imposition but integral" (Fell, 20). Although the arguments that follow these affirmations are less clear about what constitutes "Christianity" in a poem or how its "essence" is to be gauged, they agree that they agree that it is "Christianity" and it is "essential."

The poem contains many references to *metod*, "the Measurer," *wuldres wealdend*, "the Wielder of Glory," *halig dryhten*, "Holy Lord," *fæder alwalda*, "Father Almighty," all of which resemble references to the Christian God in ecclesiastical texts. We would not expect to find a specific name, such as Jehovah or Yahweh, though we may note the conspicuous lack of reference to Jesus in the poem. In the absence of a name, we may take all references to an especially powerful anthropomorphic agent to specify the same god who dined on curds and veal with Abraham underneath the terebinth trees at Mamre (Genesis 18), whose archangel, Satan, rebelled and began an eternal war for the souls of humanity, and whose son,

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Jesus, incarnated his "Logos" (John 1:1) and died to atone for humanity's inherited sin. Even today, in modern English, the job description "God," unless begun with a lower-case *g* or prefaced by an indefinite article, is taken to be as specific in its referent as the names Jehovah, Yahweh, or Elohim. This was enough for St. Paul, who tells the polytheistic Athenians, "as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: *to an unknown god*. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23; all Biblical quotations from NRSV). What is not otherwise specified is interpreted as reference to the familiar.

So too, in the absence of any specific identification, we must rely on the job description, "the Beowulf poet," to name our poem's intelligent designer. Beowulfians, as Kiernan says, have affirmed that it is a unified poem, and a unified poem must have a singular poet. A singular poet will have a singular religious affiliation which will of necessity define his poem. Such a reduction of the scholarly consensus does not bear the same power of persuasion as the reminder that it *is* scholarly consensus. Introductions to the poem's religion, such as those above, are quick to offer this fact of consensus, somewhat tautologically, as its primary evidence for the claims of that consensus. If such a consensus relies on what Moore called "small agreement indeed" in its claims, it can be defined more tangibly by what it is not. Whatever problems Kiernan's palimpsest theory poses to arguments about the poem's ultimate unity, he inscribes his argument within the circumscribed scholarly consensus by dissociating it from the arguments of their common opposition, "the dissectors"—liedertheorists, oral-formulaic theorists, structuralists,

and others who see the poem as the result of a process rather than a singular purpose.

Defining by Opposition

Jacob Grimm and subsequent German folklorists and literary scholars throughout the 19th century, perhaps motivated by nationalist desires for a classical literature of their own, perhaps influenced by the discoveries of the histories of redaction of the Bible and Homeric epics, collected oral and literate fragments of Northern European antiquity wherever available. They regarded Old English as linguistically close enough in its origin to German to potentially contain some vestigial references to pre-Christian (and therefore pre-Romanized) Teutonic culture discoverable by philological scrutiny. They observed that, because nearly all surviving Old English literature owed its preservation on parchment or vellum to the labor and resources of the church, the conditions of this material production necessitated a particular ideological constraint. They suggested that texts such as *Beowulf* could have had previous incarnations without the scattered references to Christian theology. They suggested that a pagan heroic poem could have received a supplemental and superfluous "Christian coloring" by redactors and scribes bound by such ideological constraints.

Authorial Intent

In "Paganism in Beowulf: A Semantic Fairy-Tale," Christine Fell argues that the occasional references to paganism in contemporary Anglo-Saxon scholarship are little more than echoes from Grimm's time. "[T]he nineteenth century laid the

foundations for much of what we think and the ways in which we today approach our material...much of their thinking is the foundation-stone of persistent mythologies in twentieth-century scholarship"(9).   According to Fell, references to Beowulf's pagan origins in the 20th century (specifically essays by her co-contributors in the *Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, John Niles and Fred Robinson) mimic the "ur-factor" of early philological scholarship: the preference for origins over intention as the goal of criticism. "We have been taught to look at family trees and relationships not only in philology but also in mythology and legend"(9-10). The alternative methodology she proposes would "shift the emphasis to use and meaning [requiring] words to be accepted as meaning what people use them to mean, rather than letting etymology or the meaning of an earlier century or decade be the arbiter"(9). Meaning, in this criticism, is determined by authorial intent. Philology is taken as reductive, and thus an insult to the author whose intent it ignores.

Consequently, most 20th century scholarship has characterized redaction theories as not merely reductive but pejorative. It is taken as a matter of course that redaction scholarship is anti-Christian. Fell assures us that, when it appears in philological scholarship, a phrase such as "'Christian scribes' is a pejorative phrase meaning nincompoops who did not grasp the significance and the quality of the works they were preserving" (13). The phrase "Christian coloring" according to Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, "previously had been used in a pejorative manner to refer to the poem's religious content" (lxxi).

Manufactured Opposition

Eric Stanley selected a large number of quotations he found to be offensive or pejorative in 19th and early 20th century scholarship, which he subsequently published as a series of articles (1964-5) and again in his book *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism*. This book has been taken as a thorough review of the discussion of religion in *Beowulf* and is frequently recommended in introductions to the subject. Stanley tells us that:

> The aim of these chapters is to point to the continuity of a critical attitude which exalts whatever in the Germanic literature of the Dark Ages is primitive (that is, pagan), and belittles or even fails to understand whatever in it is civilized, learned, and cosmopolitan (that is, inspired by Christianity). (*Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, 3, Stanley's parentheses)

This introduction immediately couches a discussion of one perceived value-judgment in terms of another and, in doing so, reveals the presumptions that led to the initial offense. According to Stanley's claim, if something in the poetry is attributed to anything other than Christianity, it cannot be civilized, learned or cosmopolitan. "Christianity," in that sense, simply means "good." Stanley is most distressed by the "refusal to read a profoundly Christian literature as the Christian writings of a Christian people"(79).

Edward B. Irving Jr., in his essay "Pagan and Christian Elements," tells us that Stanley's "quotes tell their own undeniable and embarrassing story" (183). Irving does not specify if it is the deceased authors of the passages that are to be embarrassed or if he personifies the quotations themselves, but the reference to

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such a normative emotion draws our attention to the social-identity investments already active in the polemic. Stanley, however, does not leave the quotes to tell their own story but circumscribes them with his own interpretations:

> As in Germany so in England the national poetic heritage was withered at the blighting touch of Christianity. That is how Jacob Grimm saw it: "After the introduction of Christianity the art of poetry took a religious turn, to which we owe many remarkable poems. But the freedom of the poetry and its roots in the people had perished." (10)

The translation of Grimm's words in quotation marks is Stanley's own, yet it does not match the interpretation that precedes it. Grimm's metaphor is one of restriction, invoking a schema akin to that chose by Wilcox when he says that the poem was "*circumscribed* ['written around' or 'surrounded by written limits'] by Christian polity." Stanley's preface, on the other hand, adds the disease metaphor of "blighting touch," *telling* us rather than *showing* us that this "is how Jacob Grimm saw it." Saying that Christianity prescribes limits on the content of poetry doesn't provoke quite the same sense of indignation produced by calling the religion as a whole a disease. Stanley primes his reader's emotional reaction before the actual quote, and it becomes easy to forget the distinction. In *Desire for Origins*, Allen J. Frantzen includes Stanley's interpolation as if it were a direct quote from Grimm: "According to Grimm, the history of native poetry, *Dichtkunst*, was drastically altered by 'the blighting touch of Christianity,' which caused 'the freedom of the poetry and its roots in the people' to perish"(Frantzen, 70). In Frantzen's text, Grimm's actual argument has been wholly replaced by a straw-man of Stanley's fabrication.

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Elsewhere, Stanley accuses M. Bentinck Smith of "out and out disparagement" (71) when she illustrates the dependence of the Old English *Andreas* on imagery more closely tied to Northern European than Biblical Mediterranean contexts. As Stanley quotes Bentinck Smith: "St Andrew, though professedly a Christian saint, is, in reality, a viking, though crusader in name he is more truly a seafarer on adventure bent. The Christ he serves is an *aetheling*, the apostles are *folctogan* captains of the people, and temporal victory, not merely spiritual triumph, is the goal." Stanley follows with his own interpretation: "In a context systematically disparaging Christianity the overtones of merely, in 'merely spiritual', must be taken to be the intended expression of a characteristic attitude to a saint's life, here desacralized as a romance of the sea" (71). He does not allow that "merely" could merely mean "only," as in "the goal is not only spiritual but also temporal victory." Even if Smith showed a preference for the temporal story from which the spiritual narrative takes its allegory, her imagined intentions rather than her argument preoccupy Stanley's analysis.

Throughout *The Search for Anglo Saxon Paganism*, Stanley's decontextualized quotes and subjective over-interpretation create a straw-man for theologically-minded scholars to castigate. The redactionists are simply "thesis-mongers trained in the German universities" (63) who "followed Grimm and Vilmar, often with dutiful simple-mindedness"(67). "Grimm and his followers were often led to pagan deities by fanciful etymologies"(70) resulting from "great gain in philological knowledge and great loss in literary good sense" (27) and motivated by "the wishful

thought that such Old English literature as is not obviously Christian in subject-matter is pre-Christian and therefore early"(40).

Though Stanley did little to prevent the *tu quoque* argument provided here, his own bias did not seem to complicate the authority he has been granted by later scholarship. Christine Fell assures us that "Eric Stanley did us a great service in his collected essays on *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism* in alerting us to the dedication and determination with which the nineteenth century pursued this demmed elusive Pimpernel. "(10-11). In *Desire for Origins*, itself a widely referenced history of Old English scholarship, Allen Frantzen says, "Eric Stanley's *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, a series of short notes published as a book in 1975, demonstrates the many ways in which scholarship prior to our own time was misguided and amateurish" (Frantzen, 8).

Tolkien: Critics as Monsters

Stanley's search for an offense to justify his predetermined outrage is not unprecedented in Old English scholarship. In arguably the most famous secondary text discussing *Beowulf*, J. R. R. Tolkien takes redaction criticism as a direct attack upon the value of the work itself and the author's unifying intent. "*Beowulf*: the Monsters and the Critics" (cited here, unless otherwise noted, from the earlier "A" text, edited by Michael Drout) is rightfully remembered as a decisive contradiction of the position articulated by W. P. Ker's statement that the poem's focus on monsters instead of semi-historical human characters displays a "radical defect, a disproportion that puts the irrelevances in the centre and the serious things on the

outer edges" (Tolkien, 52, from Ker's *Dark Ages*). However, Tolkien treats Ker

relatively gingerly, compared to earlier critics. These he rarely quotes directly, but

paraphrases their references to the poet and poem as "half-baked," "feeble,"

"incompetent," "aping," and "silly." Besides Ker's, the few quotations Tolkien

includes do not contain such derisive terms. In a note to the Gollancz Lecture

edition published in the *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Tolkien explains this

paraphrase by saying "I include nothing that has not somewhere been said by

someone, if not in my exact words; but I do not, of course, attempt to represent all

the dicta, wise or otherwise, that have been uttered"(289).

Taking aim at passages from Archibald Strong's 1921 *A Short History of

English Literature*, Tolkien quotes Strong, "The main story deals with the adventures

of Beowulf in his contest with ogres and dragons" and follows with his own surmise

that "there is bias in these plurals" (34). Without describing what the bias is or how

it may be interpreted through the surrounding text or contextual material, Tolkien

simply moves on as if the bias were self evident. The sentence by Strong which

seems to infuriate Tolkien the most, perhaps even provoking the essay itself, is the

following: "The *main interest* which the poem has for us is thus *not a purely literary

interest. Beowulf* is an important *historical document*, recreating for us a whole

society, telling us, in most authentic fashion, of life as it was lived in far-off heathen

days" (35, Tolkien's emphasis). Tolkien takes this statement to mean either that "it

is held that the literary merits of *Beowulf* are so small that its *historical* interest . . . is

the only one which can today attract a rational person of culture" or that Strong

insults the work by "confusing" the study of a work of art with the "quarrying" of

historical information. Strong, at least in the quotes cited, does not attack the

literary merits of the poem, as Tolkien suggests, nor does he define the "us" with

whom he identifies himself to be every "rational person of culture" as Tolkien

interpolates.   As with Stanley's interpretation of "merely spiritual" above, Strong's

phrase "not a purely literary interest" is perceived as an attack solely on the

grounds that it does not affirm "purely literary interest."

Tolkien takes further offense at assumed condescension in the statement that

Beowulf is "worth studying."

> The odd thing is that amidst all this Babel we catch one constant refrain: it is
> steadily said to be 'worth studying'. It is true that this is often qualified thus:
> 'it is the most worthy of study amongst Anglo-Saxon remains' (this being said
> in sometimes in tones that suggest that Andaman-islanders could be
> substituted for Anglo-Saxons). (33, Tolkien's parentheses)

The parenthetical phrase is difficult to decipher outside of a conceptual frame that

presumes scientific detachment is an attitude reserved for rock strata and less-than-

English cultures. This choice of peoples may have had less to do with the peoples

themselves than the intellectual context in which they appeared in contemporary

academic discourse. Alfred Radcliffe-Brown's 1922 *The Andaman Islanders*

introduced Emile Durkheim's functionalist approach to anthropology to the English-

speaking world. The functionalist approach, focusing on social structures rather

than individual self-explanation, may have resembled the detachment in Ker and

Strong which Tolkien took as insulting in its lack of deference to authorial intent.

If Strong's statement that Beowulf is "worth studying" and primarily of interest as a historical text were insulting, Tolkien's value judgments are even less conditional. He refers to scholars such as Strong as "fools who have trespassed in the confidence of their ignorance on paths too difficult for their dainty feet," (41) whose works "ought to be on an *index expurgatorius* or publicly burnt" (33, Tolkien's emphasis). Besides obviously escalating the polemic, this choice of language introduces metaphors of authority and insubordination. Redaction critics are *trespassers*, though the demarcation of the boundary they have crossed and upon whose authority that boundary was drawn remain unclear. The reference to an *index expurgatorius* invokes assumptions of a canon to which such material is opposed and an authoritative body to decide that it is so.

Tolkien, like Stanley, establishes the straw-man alternative which subsequent scholars may use to label all redaction scholarship, inverting a value-laden polemic he perceived but failed to illustrate. This alternative is relegated to the past, but remains present enough to serve as a label for similarly offensive scholarship as it occurs.

> But knowledge percolates slowly, and the dead dogmas of buried scientists often in mythopoeic perversion are the science of popular belief and the journalist today. So we can still hear of Grendel as symbolic of the sea, and Beowulf of the sun and of the redacting Christian monks in popular compendia still on the shelves of responsible book-shops. (Tolkien, 48)

With Tolkien's authoritative precedent, scholars who demand a Christian *Beowulf* can, as Stanley and Fell eagerly do, likewise label subsequent structural and

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anthropological study of the poem's mythic intertextuality as a "perversion" of the intended unity—a unity defined against a straw-man fabricated from decontextualized quotes and exaggerated interpretation (a phenomenon not so far removed from redaction). All criticism which does not honor the authority of the author or the unprecedented artistic originality of the written text shares in what Tolkien dismisses as "willful stupidity" (63). It is this characterization rather than the actual scholarly texts which survives in Kiernan's summary:

> The idea first surfaced as the so-called *Liedertheorie*, which held that the poem consists of many originally separate lays, loosely slapped together by carefree interpolators or enterprising scribes. Expressed in this way, the theory amounts to what most readers have rightly dismissed as an impotent assault on the artistic integrity of the poem. (248)

Whether it is an "assault" depends on the fact that it is "expressed in this way," with terms such as "carefree" and "loosely slapped together." This characterization, inherited from Tolkien, Stanley, and others, may depend less on what actual scholars were saying than on what they were perceived to be doing.

Threat of Disintegration

Stanley, like Tolkien, took historical or otherwise "scientific" approaches to the poem as an attack and an act of "disintegration." He titles a chapter: "Stock Views Disintegrating Old English Poems and Finding Germanic Antiquities in them." For Stanley, "The history of the disintegration of *Beowulf*" was a lamentable time of crisis in which "scholars were hacking the poem about"(42). This metaphor takes

for granted the initial unity of the poem and attributes evidence of redaction not to the actual process of redaction but to the "hacking" of that preexisting unity.

For Tolkien, "too much 'research' of the kind . . . is not so much criticism of the poem as mining in it"(32). Tolkien's oft-cited allegory of criticism compares the poem to a rock-garden constructed from the ruins of an ancient edifice.

> A man found a mass of old stone in a unused patch, and made of it a rock garden; but his friends coming perceived that the stones had once been part of a more ancient building, and they turned them upsidedown to look for hidden inscriptions; some suspected a deposit of coal under the soil and proceeded to dig for it. They all said "this garden is most interesting," but they said also "what a jumble and confusion it is in!" — and even the gardener's best friend, who might have been expected to understand what he had been about, was heard to say: "he's such a tiresome fellow — fancy using those beautiful stones just to set off commonplace flowers that are found in every garden: he has no sense of proportion, poor man."(Tolkien, 32)

Just in case this allegory failed to characterize the malicious destructiveness Tolkien felt in the criticism he targeted, his revision for the version presented in the Gollancz Lecture further polemicizes his argument:

> I would express the whole industry in yet another allegory. A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to discover whence the

man's distant forefathers had obtained their 'building material.' Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil, began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones. They all said: 'This tower is most interesting.' But they also said (after pushing it over): 'What a muddle it is in!' And even the man's own descendants, who might have been expected to consider what he had been about, were heard to murmur: 'He is such an odd fellow! Imagine his using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did not he restore the old house? He has no sense of proportion.' But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea. (248-9)

Tolkien goes on to explain the friends' insults in relation to scholars and quotations described above. The gardener or tower-builder, we may assume, is the author, the garden and tower the poem, and the stones the jumbled fragments of past lays and legends that appear in the poem either as references or formal precedents. The tenor behind both the flowers and the view of the sea is more ambiguous, but in either case, it is something that transcends the reductive scrutiny of the stone-picking friends.

This analogy is salient but somewhat misleading in its application. Neither structural nor philological analysis actually destroys anything. No preexisting whole has actually been reduced—a frequent confusion implicit in the use of the term "reductionist" in similar reactions. More importantly, this parable is less occupied with the accurate representation of either of the critical methodologies under review than it is with the excitation of social empathy and reaction in the audience. We sympathize with the gardener because his friends destroy his personal property and mock him behind his back. As with Stanley's rewording of Grimm, above, the audience has been emotionally primed by images of persecution.

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The critics have betrayed their friend, or even, in the final edition, their ancestor, the poet, by failing to subordinate their interpretations to his intent.

In this context, Strong's "worth studying" can be more easily interpreted as an offense, given that his interest is not with authorial intent but with the poem's pre-literate history. As such, it is a destructive interest that can only destroy the transcendental mystery of what it studies. "And behind this," Tolkien warns us, "lies the shadow of nineteenth-century 'research', modeled partly after, and directed according to the purposes of analytic science"(54). The invocation of the threat of scientific reductionism invites the commonplace analogy of "dissection" to which Kiernan referred. "The history of the disintegration of *Beowulf*" Eric Stanley tells us, "is well told by John Earle," who, in his 1892 book *The Deeds of Beowulf*, foreshadows Tolkien's and Stanley's fears of reductionism:

> The minute examination of the text has been stimulated by the passionate desire of demonstrating that the poem is not what it seems, a poetical unit, the work of an author, but that it is a cluster of older and later material fortuitously aggregated, in short, that it is not that highly organized thing which is called a Poem, the life of which is found in unity of purpose and harmony of parts, but that, on the contrary, it is a thing of low organism, which is nowise injured by being torn asunder, inasmuch as the life of it resides in the parts and not in the whole—a thing without a core or any organic centre. (John Earle, quoted approvingly by Stanley, 43)

Earle anthropomorphizes the text in order to characterize its critics as those who would tear a living thing to pieces, insulting it first as "a thing of low organism."

Tolkien, in the explanation of his tower analogy (in which the text is an intentional artifact) mixes in the metaphor of the anthropomorphic text:

> A story cannot be judged from its summarized plot, but only from the way this is told, and from the ideas and feelings which are stirred in the author — whether ever consciously formulated by him or not — in the telling, and which breathe a life and purpose into it. To judge of *Beowulf*, to try indeed to form any conception of it from stuff of this sort is to attempt an estimate of a great man from his skeleton. (Tolkien 34)

And later:

> One does not necessarily advance in acquaintance with a man, or understanding of his thought, either by studying his ancestors, or by dissecting his person. But dissection was for long the order of the day: dissection not only into heathen original and Christian interpolation, but into the component lays which had somehow — it never became clear quite how, fortuitously or arbitrarily — became conjoined into an "epic." (Tolkien, 45-6)

Tolkien inverts a time frame in the second quote. Redaction theory argues, in his terms, that component lays become conjoined into an epic. This is a movement from parts to whole (technically from wholes to macro-wholes). The dissection metaphor, to which Tolkien, Earle, and Stanley continually return, imagines a movement from whole into parts. As with the tower metaphor, the unity is presupposed to predate the parts. The parts are what is left over from the disintegration, dissection, or "pushing the tower over." Though chronologically inconsistent, the metaphor, as illustrated in Earle's quote, takes as its tenor the giving or taking of life. Without "ideas and feelings" which "breathe a life and purpose" into the work, we are left

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with the unimaginable alternative of "cluster of older and later material fortuitously aggregated" (Earle), "fortuitously or arbitrarily...conjoined" (Tolkien).

The terminology in the former Tolkien quote, where the author's ideas "breathe a life and a purpose" into the poem, are unmistakably derived from Biblical imagery of divine creation. "The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being"(Genesis 1:7). Their application to the act of authorship, and the implication that those who do not affirm the individual sovereignty of the author are attacking him and destroying his great work, call attention to a parallel that runs, more or less conspicuously, throughout the debate about the unity of *Beowulf* and sheds light on the preoccupation of this debate with the importance of Christian passages to that whole. The dichotomies of life-death, whole-parts, intention-origin, and poem-myth collapse into a single bifurcation of scholarship in which the first terms are united by a single authorial act of creation, and the second terms by hostility toward that creation.

Mere Stories vs. Great Man

What Tolkien opposes are the "beliefs about the accidental growth of epics" (46), not the fact of the epic's pre-Christian and pre-poem influences. He admits that the name Ingwine, used for the Danes (lines 1044 and 1319, meaning friends of the god Ing or Freyr) has a pagan reference, but calls it "a fossil which may indicate the character of the stones used in the building, but says nothing of the use to which

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the architect has put them" (39). It is not pagan because the author did not mean it

to be.   He further recognizes that:

> The old tale was not first told by our author. The sluggish bear's son with his
> hug who wakes up and becomes famous is a very old folk tale, the legendary
> association of the Danish and Heorot with a marauding monster, and of the
> arrival from abroad of a "champion" of the "bear-anger" was not invented by
> our poet. There are clear traces of it in Scandinavian tradition. The "plot" is not
> his, though he has poured feeling into it quite different from its *simple crude*
> *essentials*. And that plot is not perfect as the vehicle of the ideas aroused in the
> poet in making his poem. (77, my emphasis)

Just as Adam, before his author breathed life into him, existed as mere dust, so the

plot, the tradition, and the old folk tale are nothing but "simple crude essentials"

without a authoritative will to make them a vehicle for his own ideas. The value

judgment is Tolkien's own, which may explain why his ire is excited by scholarship

that values this material.   He frequently makes generalizations about a universal

Germanic brooding on doom, adding the conditional clause "though in what plane

such value was realized the Germanic North never found (and probably unaided

never would have found) a coherent or explicit theory" (67). The implication is that

without a coherent or explicit theory, we have nothing authentic to contrast or

compete with the author's presumed Christian allegory.

> Paganism is rarely a unified system, it is variable locally and in time; and its
> fragments in the North reach record in tattered form from times of confused
> or faulty memories, the periods of decay, or periods long after such things
> had become only conventional trappings of poetry and the amusements of
> antiquarians like Snorri — almost as far from *real paganism* as an 18th

century Jove or Mars. We glimpse there a heaven and a hell — the one rather the reward of courage the other the punishment of feebleness; but among much that is *crude or unshapen, or confused with other ideas ill assimilated* (possibly of extraneous, or Christian origin), the most dominant motive is that of courage, apprehended mystically as valuable in the war of Gods and men against their common enemy in Chaos and Darkness. (Tolkien, 67, my emphasis)

We can see operative in Tolkien's description of recorded Icelandic myth a whole series of expectations derived from familiarity with Christianity. Of the nine worlds in the cosmology described in the Eddas, he focuses only on the two he may translate into the Christian terms *heaven* and *hell*. He searches for a counterpart to the Christian doctrine of salvation and seems disappointed only to find vague notions of courage and weakness. Taking the "unified system" of Christian orthodoxy, recorded in text and preserved by a well-funded international institution, as the standard by which religion and religious narrative it to be gauged, Tolkien discredits any potential for influence that mythic traditions could have had on the shape of the text of *Beowulf*. Given his predilection for monolithic purpose, "confused or faulty memories," "decay," and "conventional trappings of poetry" could only be dead material awaiting the authorial breath of life.

In a somewhat tautological argument, he describes Snorri Sturlusson as an antiquarian rather than an author. Snorri did exactly what redaction criticism claims that the *Beowulf* poet(s) did—he compiled a unified work in a Christian age from disparate pre-existing myths of gods and heroes.   Though he was a Christian author writing in a Christian age, he was able to tell the stories of pre-Christian gods

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as stories within the frame of mild euhemerism in "The Deluding of Gylfi." However,

Tolkien has already delegitimated this activity as "dead" and "muddleheaded."

Therefore, for Tolkien, Snorri must be nothing more than an antiquarian. Whatever

Snorri's artistic contributions (and these are significant) the fact that we have

parallel texts with similar stories that did not originate with him undermines the

mystique of authorial authority within the work.

Christine Fell seizes upon the complicated nature of Icelandic Edda and saga

production to illustrate the problems of interpretation by authorial intent.

> It is true that it is easier in the world of late Middle English or of Icelandic
> saga, where there are multiple and widely different manuscripts of individual
> texts, to remember that we are in an age where the concept of authorial
> responsibility is different from our own. But even within the Anglo-Saxon
> world, where mostly we have only one manuscript of any extant poem and it
> is therefore particularly easy to slip into the *fallacy of author intent*, such
> matters of common knowledge as the variant texts, variant in period, in
> dialect, and in medium of preservation, of *The Dream of the Rood* ought to
> keep us on our guard. Even where a manuscript is from the Anglo-Saxon
> period there are few poems we can assign confidently to a named author. (17,
> my emphasis)

Fell's caution comes not in reference to *Beowulf* but as an attack aimed at John D.

Niles, whose essay "Pagan Survivals and Popular Belief" in the *Cambridge*

Companion to Old English Literature refers to the author of the Old English *Rune*

Poem "with as much confidence as if we knew of the existence of such a person"

(Fell 17). The passage in question comes as Niles attempts to describe the *Rune*

Poem as a more or less redacted work: "*The Rune Poem* may take its starting point

from ancient Germanic tradition, but as it stands, it shows how deftly the author

rehabilitated barbaric culture so as to render it innocent within the context of

Christian faith"(Niles, 135-6). Fell defends the position that the poem could have

been the result of "natural semantic development within a Christian environment"

(17). Their two positions are not as far apart as Fell's reaction would suggest. In

Niles' terms, the authorship involved in the *Rune Poem* was primarily an "act of

appropriation" (135, a process he describes more fully in his essay "Appropriations:

A Concept of Culture"), not quite the work of Tolkien's "great man."

Fell does not apply the same caution to discussions of the intent of the

Beowulf poet. She gives the presumed author total authority over subsequent

interpretations, even over the inclusion of names with documented pre-Christian

cognates.

> The list of folk-tale creatures, the *eotenas, ylfe* and *orcneas* are so clearly
> labelled progeny of Cain as Grendel is so clearly labelled 'heathen' that this
> shows, not lurking paganism, but an author determined to detach himself
> from any suspicions. The mentality is like that of King Alfred when he
> carefully explains that 'what we call Wyrd that is God's providence' or
> defends his description of the goldsmith Weland as 'wise' on the grounds that
> Weland was a skilled craftsman — just in case anyone foolishly thought he
> might be responding to supernatural implications of pre-Christian Germanic
> legend. (25)

In accordance with her preferred methodology of interpreting words strictly "as

meaning what people use them to mean" (9), Fell blocks the structural or

philological comparison of Alfred's reference to Weland (a semi-divine smith) and

Wyrd (Fate) to the Old Norse and Old High German texts which bear more elaborate

descriptions of each. The author has priority of interpretation—to "carefully

explain," "clearly label," and "detach himself" and his text as he determines. Critics

who employ any hermeneutics of suspicion do so "foolishly."

In Tolkien's terms, whatever the origins of the names and their stories, they

"are transmuted: they belong to a special time, with a special temper, and also to a

special man"(38). Hence they become disconnected from origin and context, a

singularity governed by modern laws of proprietorship. This underlying legality,

the barely-perceptible system of social mores which constrains not what can be

proven but what may be broached, allows Tolkien to say "We have no *right* to speak

in general either of confusion in one poet's mind or of a whole period's thought, or

of patch-work revision" (70, my emphasis). And again, "We have *no right* to assume

that he was ordinary and negligible or that his authorship was of no concern to him"

(38, my emphasis). In an argument approaching tautology, Tolkien grounds the

singular author's existence *as author* (as opposed to a simple "antiquarian" like

Snorri) on the suggestion that he would be concerned with his status as author, or at

least that we cannot assume "that his authorship was of no concern to him."

Authorial authority is thus validated by authorial authority. Whether or not there is

an author, there is a space of authority into which we may not "trespass" (Tolkien,

41). If we cannot trespass into such a space, and if we cannot ask such questions

and make such interpretations which the author *would* not approve, we may not,

then, ask if there ever existed such an author to grant such approval.

Two concentric boundaries have been written around the poet by the scholarship. The outer boundary separates the affirmative "consensus" from the "dissectors" and others who are "lost in speculation as to what is the nature and ultimate origin of that material in itself" (Tolkien, 45). This is the boundary which unites and defines what Kiernan called "Beowulfians as a group" from the "generally repudiated" theories of distributed origins. This is the consensus into which Wilcox must bring his naive student, who must trade for admission his excitement and "wishful thought that such Old English literature as is not obviously Christian in subject-matter is pre-Christian and therefore early"(40). Within this circle lies an inner circle wherein lies "*Beowulf* as it is, and was made . . . as a thing itself, as a poem, as a work of art, showing structure and motive" (Tolkien, 32). The consensus of scholarship has allocated itself to this middle band encircling the authorial center and protecting it from disintegration by circumscribing it—writing around it what is to be found within it and condemning to the periphery those who find anything else.

As Wilcox points out, the poem, in the text we have of it, is already "circumscribed by Christian royal polity"(96). Someone, poet or scribe, circumscribed "that man's [Beowulf's] courage/mind/heart" (*ðæs mannes mōd*) with didactic reminders that "The Measurer ruled all mankind then as he does now," (*Metod eallum wēold / gumena cynnes, swā hē nū ġīt dêð* 1057-8). The interpretation of the story begins in the text, itself. Whether or not this interpretation is integral or interpolated, whether it is part of the story or only part of the poem, and thus whether or not there could be a *Beowulf* unintended by the author of this interpretation, is another matter.

Klaeber's Foundation

As Arthur K. Moore noted above, the affirmation that few scholars disagree about the unity of the poem's religious worldview is not an argument in itself. Consensus is not evidence. In place of an argument for the poem's unified worldview, most scholars appeal to arguments of Frederick Klaeber as "the authoritative work governing Beowulfian scholarship" (Damico, forward to *Klaeber's Beowulf*). In his edition of the poem and in subsequent publications, collectively titled "Christian Elements in *Beowulf*," Klaeber argued at length that the poem as we have it is a theologically unified product of a Christian worldview. Stanley comments in the absolute terms characteristic of such references:

> 1911 saw the first three of F. Klaeber's four fundamental articles on the Christian elements in *Beowulf*. They contained the evidence in sufficient profusion for the correctness of the view that the poem as we have it is Christian in every part. . . . After Klaeber the essential unity of the poem could no longer be denied. (46-8)

In the fourth edition, retitled *Klaeber's Beowulf*, which currently serves as the academic standard, editors R. D. Fulk, Robert Bjork, and John Niles say of Klaeber's interpretive authority:

> Much of the subsequent scholarly commentary builds on the solid base of Klaeber's demonstration of the organic nature of the poem's Christian elements. Since the publication of persuasive studies by Tolkien, Hamilton, Whitelock, and Brodeur, building upon (or reinforced by) the work of other scholars whose views are of considerable weight . . . few specialists in *Beowulf* studies now dispute the essentially Christian character of either the poem or the milieu in which it arose. (lxvii)

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The key factors Fulk, Bjork, and Niles invoke are "persuasive studies," by scholars whose "views" rather than textual evidence are cited as "of considerable weight." The substance of these arguments or of what precisely constitutes an "essentially Christian character" receives little or no review. The conflict of metaphors in the first sentence illustrates an underlying conflict in the consensus argument. Klaeber is said to have demonstrated the "*organic nature* of the poem's Christian elements." This, along with similar metaphors of the text as fabric into which the poem's Christianity is interwoven (Battles, v), allow that the composition comes from various elements but that their integration followed a singular design. However, the reference to Klaeber as "the solid base" on which "subsequent scholarly commentary builds" precedes "organic nature" invoking the image of a stone foundation which covers over the fertile soil. Rather than creating a guide to the poem—a way in—Klaeber is described as limiting our approach to it.

In his survey, "Christian and Pagan Elements," in the 1997 *A Beowulf Handbook,* Edward B. Irving assures us that "Friedrich Klaeber demonstrates in detail that the Christian elements are integral to the poem and cannot be detached from it" (175). In anthropomorphic terms similar to those used by Tolkien and Stanley, Irving notes that Klaeber:

> . . . studied and documented the Christian elements in the poem responsibly and in great detail. He made the *indisputable* claim that the so-called Christian coloring was not laid late and lightly on the surface but was worked deeply into the very tissue of the poem at every point and could not be surgically removed without the *death of the patient*, and his majestic and

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universally admired edition of the poem stressed that same point. (Irving, 181, my emphasis)

Here again, rather than specify exactly what Klaeber wrote or what makes it "indisputable," Irving uses the rhetorical tactic of equating redaction criticism with murder. Further, Irving's three tenets, that 1) there is a single essential interpretation that is 2) indisputable and 3) evidenced by universal admiration, borrows a frequent rhetorical pattern employed by Bede and other medieval Christian apologists. For example, in his frequent derogation of the native British church's doctrinal autonomy, Bede cites "Catholic unity" ("unitate catholica," *Historia Ecclesiastica* 4.2) as the only necessary proof of his own correctness. He warns native churches "not to imagine that their little community, isolated at the uttermost ends of the earth, had a wisdom exceeding that of all churches ancient and modern throughout the world," (*ne paucitatem suam in extremis terrae finibus constitutam, sapientiorem antiquis siue modernis, quae per orbem erant, Christi ecclesiis aestimarent* 2.19). Bede never mentions how, for example, the British church calculated the calendric placement of Easter, nor does he bother to compare it to the Roman method of calculation. It is enough to mention that they deviate from "the custom of the universal church" (*morem uniuersalis ecclesiae*, 2.4).

As the solid foundation for the similarly catholic consensus of 20th century Beowulfian scholars, the specifics of Klaeber's argument deserve a critical reevaluation. Klaeber's essay, "Christian Elements in *Beowulf*" and his introduction to the poem both depend on an equation of correlation with causation. He documents an impressive number of words, phrases, and motifs that appear in

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Beowulf, and compares them to parallels in texts whose categorization as Christian

has rarely if ever been questioned.   While this aspect of his methodology is certainly

commendable, his use of these data depends on essentialist and value-laden

assumptions of Christianity and its alternatives.   Klaeber begins "The Christian

Coloring" section of his introduction with the frank admission that "We hear nothing

of angels, saints, relics, of Christ and the cross, of divine worship, church

observances, or any particular dogmatic points" (xlix). Undeterred, he continues,

"Still, the general impression we obtain from the reading of the poem is certainly the

opposite of pagan barbarism" (xlix). Proof by "general impression" is tenuous

enough, but the value judgment implicit in "pagan barbarism" underscores Klaeber's

bias.   In a response to John Niles' use of the term "barbaric" (of the *Rune Poem's*

"Christian mediation of barbaric lore" 135), Christine Fell argues:

> That disservice is done to our studies by the use of such fossilised terms as
> 'barbaric' and 'barbarian' ought to be obvious to one who professes to be a
> literary critic however much such terminology is still apparently acceptable
> to historians. The classical meaning of the term *barbarus* was of course
> 'foreigner' in the sense of non-Roman, as a Gentile was originally a non-Jew
> or a Welshman a non-Anglo-Saxon. But the merest glance at a Modern
> English dictionary, or newspaper editorial, shows this sense to have long
> been overtaken by the emotive overtones. What Niles intends us to
> understand by his term 'barbaric' is of course what he singles out as
> surviving pre-Christian (and so of course 'pagan') elements in the poem. (16-
> 17)

While Fell acknowledges that Niles is not intentionally adding a negative value

judgment to the word, she insists that "disservice is done to our studies" by its use.

She is not reacting to the use of *barbaric* to describe *paganism*, but to the association

of either of these terms with Anglo-Saxon poetry. This embarrassment at pre-

Christian vestiges is consistent with Stanley's bias against "whatever in the

Germanic literature of the Dark Ages is primitive (that is, pagan)," and preference

for "whatever in it is civilized, learned, and cosmopolitan (that is, inspired by

Christianity)" (3, Stanley's parentheses). Klaeber's argument lays the groundwork

for these by creating a value-laden dichotomy which depended on the association of

paganism with barbarism, with all of the contempt Fell points to in that term. "We

are no longer in a genuine pagan atmosphere. . . . The virtues of moderation,

unselfishness, consideration for others are practiced and appreciated . . . and the

poet's sympathy with weak and unfortunate beings . . . are typical of the new note"

(xlix-l). Privileging Christianity as the source of all morality, Klaeber necessarily

construes its absence to be characterized by amoral brutality. Finding little such

brutality, Klaeber presumes, vindicates the poem's Christianity. Again, in "Christian

Elements":

> On the whole, the poem's tone and values are predominantly Christian—in
> sharp contrast with, for example, the *Nibelungenlied*. The atmosphere is no
> longer pagan. The virtues of benevolence, moderation, self-control,
> consideration for others, and selflessness stand in sharp relief against the
> backdrop of the old Scandinavian setting. The main characters, Beowulf and
> Hrothgar, have undergone an astonishing spiritualization and moral
> refinement. (56-7)

To say that the characters have "undergone spiritualization and moral refinement"

assumes that they were unspiritual and amoral before this undergoing. Klaeber's

use of the *Nibelungenlied* , which dates to late 12th or early 13th century Austria, at least a century further into the Christian era than the *Beowulf* manuscript (Hatto 365), illustrates Klaeber's search for selective evidence. He seems not to grasp that non-Christians may also demonstrate self-control, moderation, unselfishness, or sympathy. Presuming that such elements originate in Christianity, he imagines they could only exist elsewhere only by transmission from a Christian source. Fulk, Bjork, and Niles perpetuate this assumption with only slight emendation which only begs the question:

> Predominantly religious in nature are the general tone of the poem and its ethical viewpoint. . . . The virtues of moderation, unselfishness, and consideration for others — virtues restricted to no particular religion, but associated with Christian precepts — are both practiced and appreciated. Particularly striking is the moral refinement of the two principal characters, Beowulf and Hroðgar. (lxxv)

The editors are less restrained in affirming the Christian God's monopoly on benevolence. Fulk, Bjork, & Niles point out with confidence, "Certainly, the poet portrays the main characters of the story, Beowulf and Hroðgar, as persons who are aware of the existence of a deity who is the creator, sustainer, and judge of human beings"(lxix). The abstract terms taken to describe God and the absence of uniquely Christian characters and concepts, most conspicuously Christ himself, leave only these three roles—creator, sustainer, and judge—to connect *Beowulf* to Christianity. This presumes that no other religious worldview could conceive of gods fulfilling these three roles.

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The bulk of Klaeber's argument is constituted by a survey of phrases from the poem and their correlation to Christian texts, most requiring lengthy explanation despite the susceptibility to more general interpretation. For example, "The description of the sun as *candel* (1572 *rodores candel*, 1965 *woruldcandel*), which was perhaps inspired by a corresponding use of *lampas* or *lucema*, recalls the ceremonious use of candles during the service"(8). Klaeber overlooks the possibility that non-Christians might make a similar association between two sources of light and heat. He takes darkness to represent the Christian Devil and light to represent the Christian god (34).

> The peculiar phrase *deorc deaþscua* 160, which recurs as an epithet for Satan in *Christ I* 257 (ms. *deorc dredscua),* could perhaps denote "dark, murdering spirit," but also bears a striking resemblance to the biblical *umbra mortis:* Mt 4.16 (Is 9.2) *in tenebris ... in regione et umbra mortis,* Lc 1.79 *in tenebris et in umbra mortis,* Ier 13.16 *in umbram mortis et in caliginem,* Ps 22.4 *in medio umbrae mortis,* 43.20,87.7,106.10,14, Iob 3.5 (compare *Greg.Moralia* 4.4), and elsewhere, as for instance *Descensus Christi ad inferos 5.399.3. Vesp.Hymn* 9.12, *York.Miss* 1.71, *Lat.Hymn.MA* 101.34 *tenebra! et umbra! mortis patefactus inferus* (which at several points refersto the darkness of hell). If it is indeed a reference to the *umbra mortis,* the phrase would mean "darkness" and could therefore be read as a name for the devil as well. (22)

The implication is that without Christianity, people would not fear the dark. Likewise, he takes wolf imagery to represent the Devil.

> Sarrazin (1910: 21) argues that the description of Grendel's mother as *brimwylf* (1599, 1506, ms. brimwyl) derives from Scandinavian folklore, where the hero battles a man-eating she-wolf (see Bjarkarimur 4.58 ff. and

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compare Panzer 1910: 365, also 104). However, it is also quite possible that the common image of the devil as a wolf could have been of some influence. (20)

If the image of the devil as a wolf is common in Christian texts, the image of wolf as enemy of the gods is ubiquitous in Germanic myth (Pluskowski). Icelandic texts frequently use "the wolf" without further qualification to refer to Fenris, the lupine son of Loki prophesied to kill Odin in the Eddas (explicated in Snorri's *Hattatal*).

Likewise, Klaeber ignores Norse and other Germanic parallels to the poem's giants, finding them, rather, "derived from the Old Testament,"(xlix). Compared to nearly every other mythic system, the giants of the Hebrew Bible (such as the Nephilim of Genesis 6.4 or the Anakites of Numbers 13.28-33) are far less significant to that text compared to the giants who war with the Norse gods from the beginning of the world to its end in the Eddas. Klaeber (61), however, goes so far as to say that a draft of the poem originating before Christianity could not have included references to giants or their destruction in a great flood, despite the fact that Snorri (*Gylfaginning* 6) attributes just such a flood to Odin's slaying of Ymir. Upon observing the remaining hilt of the ruined giant sword with which Beowulf had slain Grendel's mother, Hrothgar refers to a flood that wiped out the race of giants (1687-93):

> Hrōðgār maðelode;   hylt scēawode
> ealde lāfe.   On ðæm wæs ōr written
> fyrnġewinnes;   syðþan flōd ofslōh

ġifen ġēotende ġíganta cyn,

frēcne ġefērdon; þæt wæs fremde þēod

ēcean dryhtne. Him þæs endelēan

þurh wæteres wylm waldend sealed. (1687-93)

Hrothgar spoke. He studied the hilt of the ancient treasure, on which was
written the description of that ancient battle, when the flood, the rushing
seas, wiped out the race of giants. They suffered severely. That was a tribe
foreign to the eternal lord; the ruler paid them a final reward with that tide.

This reference is obviously not incompatible with the Genesis story of the flood, but
neither is it incompatible with the story of Manu in the *Matsya Purana*, Utnapishtim
in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, or, most conspicuously, the slaying of Ymir in Snorri's
Gylfaginning. Snorri relates:

Synir Bors drápu Ymi jǫtun. En er hann fell, þá hljóp svá mikit blóð ór sárum
hans at með því drektu þeir allri ætt hrímþursa, nema einn komsk undan
með sínu hýski. (Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Faulkes)

Bor's sons [Odin and his brothers] killed the giant Ymir. And when he fell, so
much blood flowed from his wounds that with it they drowned all the race of
frost-giants, except that one escaped with his household. (Sturluson, *Edda*,
trans. Faulkes)

The kenning "Ymir's blood" for the sea occurs independently as early as the 10th
century skald Ormr Barreyjarskáld. Though de Vries suggests that Snorri's flood
story is derivative of the Genesis flood, Rudolf Simek contests this. *Vafþrúðnismál*
corroborates the polytheistic context of Snorri's version of this particular flood
story. The fact that Snorri's version differs slightly from *Vafþrúðnismál*, according to

Simek, indicates that *Vafþrúðnismál* was not Snorri's source, but that both accounts

drew from an even older tradition native to Norse polytheism rather than Biblical

flood stories (Simek 377).

Christine Fell cautions against "the artificiality of singling out bits and pieces

and using them to demonstrate 'paganism' "(33). The point of her argument,

ironically, serves as a caution against the same tactics used to argue for the poem's

Christianity.

> We are still unwary of the dangers and glamorised by the enchantment of
> pressing pictorial and literary scraps into identifiable 'legend-cycles'. It is
> naturally tempting to reduce our evidence to the controllable, similarly
> tempting to use any fragment of that evidence as a piece in a jigsaw, even if
> we have to manipulate or massage the piece to ensure a fit. If we have a
> mythology that includes a god Woden / Wotan / Oðinn it is more satisfying
> to establish links and patterns than reject the links and leave ourselves with
> unpatterned unrelated bric-a-brac. Some art-historians are happier with a
> picture of a man with a spear if it can be asserted that men with spears are
> depictions of an identifiable spear-God. (Fell 10)

The same argument could be made regarding Klaeber's association of monsters with

demons, wolves with Satan, and the sun with Christ. If Germanic legend provides a

tempting body of surviving literature to which we may connect odd fragments, how

many more connections could we make to the incomparably larger body of Christian

literature? With all of the literature generated in Christian contexts in the thousand

years before the creation of the *Beowulf* manuscript, we might continue finding

parallels for even the most banal elements of the poem. In Fell's statement, "We

need to be more aware of the dangers of argument by analogy, less delighted by the

riches of possible anthropological parallels" (24), we might replace "anthropological" with "theological." The similarities, however numerous, lead us ultimately to the irreconcilable differences.

Beowulf as Christ Figure

Klaeber finds it "odd" that the poem focuses on a hero's fight with monsters rather than historical battles.

> These difficulties are resolved, however, if we assume that the poet saw a profound significance in these fantastic, fairy-tale adventures, since they came to symbolize for him the greatest of all heroic struggles (Christ's fight against the devil), which fascinated Christians of Germanic descent. Or, to put it differently, the poet would never have chosen such a curious tale if it had not lent itself particularly well to Christianization. (69)

The argument that *Beowulf* is a Christian poem because Beowulf acts as a Christ figure has been echoed by several scholars (Cabaniss, McNamee, Donahue). However, in such a reading, Beowulf would replace Christ and shrug off the demands of Christian soteriology—he is the one who saves rather than the one who is saved. Beowulf never seeks God's aid in advance. God's agency is described as necessary in didactic asides, but it is portrayed in the narrative, if at all, as a minor act of assistance such as the light emanating from the giant's sword in the fight with Grendel's mother. Such an act might exemplify God's assistance, but it hardly proves the level of control assumed in Christian beliefs in Providence. These acts of subtle divine assistance have many more parallels in epic literature from polytheistic cultures, such as the invisible hand of Athena which guides Diomedes' spear in his

dual with Ares depicted in the *Iliad*. The appearances of Odin in Norse narratives

also parallels a subtler form of divine provocation and assistance to heroes. If this

sort of intervention is decisive, both Odin or Athena would be as worthy of the

designation "*sigora waldend*" ("wielder of victories," line 2875) or "*sige-hreþig*"

("victory-creative," 94) usually taken as a reference to the Christian God in *Beowulf*

(cf. *sigfoþr*, "father of victories" for Odin in *Voluspa* 55, *Grimnismal* 48, *Lokasenna* 58,

etc., catalogued in Whallon). This term, and nearly all others used for God in

Beowulf, has no shortage of polytheistic analogues (Whallon).

Even in the cases of divine intervention, it is the agency of the hero that

accomplishes the outcome. The power of the polytheistic gods in such cases is

neither providential nor omnipotent. In the *poly-agential* cosmology, they don't

need to be. However, in Christianity, especially Christianity of the Pauline and

Augustinian variety, human agency is entirely dependent upon God, and God's will is

entirely unconstrained by human agency. As I will argue in the following chapters,

in the *omni-agent schema* of orthodox Christianity, human agency is inversely

proportional to God's. To say that Beowulf is a Christ figure is to say that rather

than being saved through Christ, he, rather than Christ, does the saving. If this "lent

itself particularly well to Christianity," as Klaeber argues, it resembles a Pelagian

Christianity which assumes the power of the individual to save himself—a belief

condemned as heresy by Augustine. Orthodox soteriology demands the sort of

dependence on divine intervention exhibited in *Orms þáttr Stórólfsonnar*, cited in

Klaeber's introduction to the poem (xvi). In his subterranean battle with a

monstrous mother, Orm must call on God and St. Peter before he is able to overcome

his attacker and her murderous progeny. Beowulf calls on no one. When he gives

credit in his recounting the event, he has more diplomatic and secular motives for

doing so (discussed in Ch. 3, below).

Terms such as *dryhten* "lord" apply both to humans and to God, much as the

modern cognate *lord* could denote a member of the nobility or the substitute term

for Yahweh in the King James Bible. The use of one word to denote humans in one

context and God in another does not justify an equivocation of the two roles.

However, Klaeber goes so far as to indicate that the concept of human leadership is

built upon the Christian conception of God rather than the other way around.

> The phrasing of the passage in which Beowulf's men praise their lord
> suggests the praise of God: *eahtodan eorlscipe, ond his ellenweorc / duguðum
> demdon, -swa hit gede[fe] bið, þæt mon his winedryhten wordum herge, /
> ferhðum freoge* . . . 3173. This is an unmistakeable echo of the well-known
> liturgical Praefatio. See Gregory, Liber sacramentorum, Easter mass Praefatio,
> 91. (11)

The passage Klaeber cites translates as "they praised his nobility and his brave

action, spoke highly of his prowess, as it is fitting that one speak in high terms of his

friend-lord, love him in his heart." This description of praise may well resemble

those used in a particular Easter mass. One may praise God and one may praise man,

but the object of praise, here, is man, not God. Just six lines after these, the poem

ends with the description of Beowulf as *lofgeornost*, "eager for praise." Rather than

offering praise to God, Beowulf's men offer it to a human savior. They pay him the

only eternal reward guaranteed in the *Hávamál*, a collection of sayings attributed to

Odin: '*Deyr fé, deyja frændr, deyr sjalfr et sama, en orþstírr deyr aldrigi / hveims sér góþan getr*' "Cattle die, kinsmen die, / you yourself will eventually die, / but one thing I think will never die, / the good fame of one who earns it" (*Hávamál* 75, Bray, ed. and trans.).

In the summary of his argument, Klaeber admits that his conclusion depends on the quantity of references that could be attributable to a Christian worldview rather than on the quality of any individual reference.

> The overall character of the Christian elements is not particularly ecclesiastial or dogmatic. . . . They express the pronounced dualism in accordance with which all individuals should shape their lives. Allusions are usually brief, but quite numerous, and demonstrate by their very frequency the extent to which Christian ideas are considered to control life as a whole. Among these are a number of general expressions, whose equivalents in colorless, everyday language would be "thank God" (A III 1), "God knows" (2650), "God be with you" ("adieu, " 316 ff.). (51)

However, repetition is not weaving. Klaeber's stated goal, which later scholars proclaim him to have accomplished, was to disprove the redaction theorists such as Ettmüller, Müllenhoff, Möller, and ten Brink, specifically insofar as these had argued that the poem's Christianity came late in the redaction process. For this argument to be conclusive, the examples would need to be not only evident in Christian sources but absent from non-Christian ones. Very few of Klaeber's examples fit this qualification. These few specifically Christian passages are the very ones described as interpolations by Klaeber's rivals, as well as by a handful of 20th century philologists such as Francis Magoun, Charles Moorman, Michael Cherniss, and Karl

Schneider. For all of Klaeber's diligent collection and comparison of epithets and similes, he does little to show narrative parallels with Christian sources, Biblical or otherwise. If the assertions of God's Providence occur in the text only as assertions, they remain superficial addenda—*ad hoc* additions which circumscribe the action rather than create it. If Beowulf slays Grendel, he occupies the role assigned to God by these disputed passages. As such, God's pagan rival is not absent from the poem. It is Beowulf, himself.

Regardless of the presence or absence of other gods in the poem, the agency of the hero in effecting the salvation of his community, especially when compared to the limited agency reserved for God, bears at least as much in common with polytheistic myth as it does with Biblical monotheism. Klaeber is correct that the poem has many parallels in orthodox Christianity. However, these same elements also have parallels in polytheism. If we assess the poem's connection to either Christian or polytheistic tradition according to the number of extant parallels in the literature of those two traditions, we will of course find many more parallels in Christian texts. That is not because these elements are more characteristic of Christianity but because no literature remains of Germanic polytheism that was not selected and reinterpreted after conversion and under stringent theological constraints. Rather, we may compare what in the poem is irreconcilable with Christianity (and therefore likely to have originated from polytheistic tradition) against what in the poem is irreconcilable with polytheism (and therefore likely to have originated in Christian tradition). This approach has been avoided by previous scholars due to an assumed dependence on textual evidence. However, there are

ways of reconstructing a polytheistic world-view which are not entirely dependent

on surviving literature.

CHAPTER III

TWO MODELS OF GOD CONCEPTS

The approach to religious themes in *Beowulf*, particularly assumptions about human and divine agency, has been troubled by misleading definitions. Readers of the poem continually perceive some form of vestigial paganism, despite certain didactic passages in the poem which make explicit overtures to Christian beliefs in divine providence and creation. As Jonathan Wilcox indicated in his story of the eager undergraduate (above), the reader's expectations of a polytheistic epic are quite resilient, despite the didactic asides scattered throughout the poem which explicitly affirm Christian Providentialism. Explanations by scholars such as Wilcox, Fell, and Klaeber, that the poem is "circumscribed by Christian polity," and that explicit paganism is absent, does little to dissuade what Fell calls "persistent mythologies" because what they discount is not what readers pick up on in the text. The problem originates from the fact that expectations of what paganism *would have been* originate from Christian definitions of belief which are inadequate for isolating the source of the perceived discordance. This discordance, I argue, results from two modes of religious cognition. Christianity, in its core beliefs in divine providence and the need for divine salvation (soteriology), resembles the "attachment" behavior observed in the earliest stages of a child's social development. Propositional affirmations of creedal belief seize upon this predisposition and promote it by fostering belief in an omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient attachment figure that survives falsification long after children realize the human

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limitations of their original attachment figures (i.e. parents). This institutionally-

cultivated attachment disposition, the *omni-agent schema*, translates poorly into a

narrative structure of cause and effect. The alternative, the *poly-agent schema*,

resembles a more developed social psychology, corresponds strongly with the

anthropomorphized gods of polytheistic myth, and is crucial for understanding

narrative cause and effect as well as the drives and limitations of human agents.

Both schemas originate in evolved human cognition. Both are differently cultivated

by social context. *Beowulf* is dominated by the second form of religious cognition

but bears clear attempts by an author or redactor to assert a monotheistic belief in

God's agency where none is causally necessary, and limit the agency of the mythic

protagonist.

    Beowulf is the product of a society in the midst of a changing religious

worldview. The sole manuscript on which the poem is recorded originated in or

around the first decade of the eleventh century. Many scholars have argued that due

to this date, it is unlikely that vestiges of Anglo-Saxon paganism could survive in the

poem, much less govern its structure.   This argument depends on several tenuous

assumptions: 1) That conversion is an instantaneous event, 2) which is determined

by the conscious self-identification of the individual, with 3) a coherent and stable

set of beliefs, which 4) supplant beliefs from alternative systems similarly

structured. These assumed characteristics of religion, though widely taken for

granted today, originate in Judeo-Christian apologetics and function as poor criteria

for describing systems of myth and ritual in non-monotheistic societies.

The very nature of the "pagan question" seems to require essentialist notions of what it means for a text to be either Christian or pagan. The latter term, whether used by scholars seeking to prove its survival or those dismissing it, becomes immediately problematic due to its irrelevance to the people it is supposed to describe. Whereas the term *Christian* names its founder and, by extension, a body of qualifiers to apply to those falling under the name, the term *pagan* is a Christian coinage that does not describe what something *is,* but what it *is not* (namely Christian). Alternatively, the subjective categorization of one's self as a Christian is a social rather than analytical categorization. Studies in religious cognition have frequently demonstrated professed believers contradicting their own core beliefs when translating propositional beliefs into narrative representation. This unstable division is directly relevant to the study of *Beowulf,* not because the poem *is* either Christian or pagan, but because it *tries* to be both.

To be sure, it bears many deliberate marks of Christianity: monotheism, individual sin, divine providence, and approaching judgment. It also perpetuates beliefs that characterize most non-monotheistic religious views. These include anthropomorphic explanations of non-human phenomena, reciprocal relations with non-human agents, syncretism, and the assumption that one's actions are the results of one's own intent and effort. This is not to say that such characteristics never occur in works more widely regarded as Christian or that they would be recognized as non-Christian by the poem's earliest audience. Rather, we may observe that a definitive element of Christian narratives, namely the causal agency of an omnipotent god in the realm of human action, conflicts with a definitive

characteristic of myth, namely the distributed agency of many gods, mortals, and other sentient beings. Further, the narrative structure of *Beowulf* depends on a secular heroism that much more closely resembles the epics of polytheistic cultures than it does more theologically-consistent Christian saint's lives or stories of passive protagonists, such as Dante's *Comedia*. From this perspective, scholars who claim that *Beowulf* is not pagan but heroic or secular may not be justified in presuming a separation between the two.

Inherited Definitions

Philosopher Gianni Vattimo, a self-described "Catholic atheist", observes: "We cannot even speak but from a Christian point of view. That is because we are fundamentally incapable of formulating ourselves, fundamentally incapable of articulating a discourse, except by accepting certain culturally conditioned premises" (*After the Death of God*, 36). A fundamental tenet of the present argument is that the core of human thought emerges, not from local historical social norms, but intuitive assumptions originating in evolved cognitive predispositions. This perspective is compatible with Vattimo's observation. What Vattimo describes is not the formation but the formulation of ourselves—the reflective descriptions which must choose from a society-specific vocabulary to describe their objects. It is not thought, but the articulation of thought that is limited by available culturally conditioned premises. Among these culturally conditioned premises are the terms by which we categorize our culturally conditioned premises—at the present, terms like *culture*, *religion*, and *Christianity*. If we are limited in our ability to formulate

ourselves, we are still more limited in our abilities to categorize the unfamiliar.   In

his book, *Orientalism*, Edward Said observes:

> Something patently foreign and distant acquires, for one reason or another, a
> status more rather than less familiar. One tends to stop judging things either
> as completely novel or as completely well known; a new median category
> emerges, a category that allows one to see new things, things seen for the
> first time, as versions of a previously known thing. In essence such a
> category is not so much a way of receiving new information as it is a method
> of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things. If
> the mind must suddenly deal with what it takes to be a radically new form of
> life—as Islam appeared to Europe in the early Middle Ages—the response on
> the whole is conservative and defensive. Islam is judged to be a fraudulent
> new version of some previous experience, in this case Christianity. (58-9)

In particular, Christian definitions of religion tend to assume that all religions

consist of devotion to particular gods, are irreconcilable with other religions and

other gods (*ontologically exclusive*), serve as the basis of group cohesion (*imagined

community*), and are identifiable by the unchanging reflective beliefs of its members

(*creedal belief*). However, religious beliefs outside of the influence of Abrahamic

monotheism tend to be heterogeneous, contingent, and syncretistic. One of the few

attestations of pre-conversion belief among the Anglo-Saxons makes such religious

openness explicit. In the story of the conversion of King Edwin (c. 627 CE) the

Christian historian, Bede, hardly an unbiased source, relates the response of one of

the king's advisers to a Christian missionary:

> *Talis mihi videtur, rex, vita hominum praesens in terris, ad comparationem eius*
> *quod nobis incertum est temporis, quale cum te residente ad coenam cum*

dueibus ac ministris tuis tempore brumali, accenso quidem foco in medio et
calido effecto coenaculo, furentibus autem foris per omnia turbinibus
hiemalium pluviarum vel nivium, adveniensque unus passerum domum
citissime pervolaverit qui cum per unum ostium ingrediens, mox per aliud
exierit. Ipso quidem tempore quo intus est, hiemis tempestate non tangitur, sed
tamen parvissimo spatio serenitatis ad momentum excurso, mox de hieme in
hiemem regrediens, tuis oculis elabitur. Ita haec vita hominum ad modicum
apparet; quid autem sequatur, quidve praecesserit, prorsus ignoramus.

Such seemeth to me, my Lord, the present life of men here in earth (for the
comparison of our uncertain time to live), as if a sparrow should come to the
house and very swiftly flit through ; which entereth in at one window and
straightway passeth out through another, while you sit at dinner with your
captains and servants in winter-time; the parlour being then made warm
with the fire kindled in the midst thereof, but all places abroad being
troubled with raging tempests of winter rain and snow. Right for the time it
be within the house, it feeleth no smart of the winter storm, but after a very
short space of fair weather that lasteth but for a moment, it soon passeth
again from winter to winter and escapeth your sight. So the life of man here
appeareth for a little season, but what followeth or what hath gone before,
that surely know we not. (HE 2.13, King ed. & trans., pp. 282-5)

The tendency to see unfamiliar belief through the lens of the familiar is not limited
to Christianity. In his descriptions of the Gallic Wars (*de Bello Gallico*), Julius Caesar
projects his own Latin pantheon into the German religious practices he observes.

The god they reverence most is Mercury. They have very many images of
him, and regard him as the inventor of all arts, the god who directs men upon
their journeys, and the most powerful helper in trading and getting money.
Next to him they reverence Apollo, Mars, Jupiter, and Minerva, about whom

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they have much the same ideas as other nations. (ch. 6.17, Handford trans., p. 142)

The Roman historian Tacitus likewise records that the Germans elevate Mercury above the other gods, and after him Hercules and Mars (*Germania* ch. 9). It is highly unlikely that the Germans used Roman names for their gods. Neither author includes myths associated with these gods. Instead, the association of German with Roman gods is based on similarity of attribute. The Germans have a god of art, travel, and trade. The Romans have a god of art, travel, and trade. Therefore, in a process Georg Simek calls *interpretatio romana*, the German god is taken to be a version of the Roman god Mercury. It is likely that the German god which Caesar and Tacitus identify as Mercury is actually a variant of the proto-Germanic god Woðanaz, forerunner of the Norse god Odin, (Simek, North, Turville-Petre). Mercury and Odin are both revered as travelers, keepers of occult knowledge, and guarantors of honest trade. Both possess iconic staves (Odin's spear, Gungnir, and Mercury's caduceus) and winged helmets. Tacitus' addition of Hercules and Mars indicates a similar translation of Thor/Donar into Hercules (both known for their strength and represented wielding blunt weapons) and Tyr/Tiwaz into Mars (as gods of war). However, all of these parallels are static attributes. The myths of these three pairs of gods have no precise parallels.

Still, the *interpretatio romana* survived since, unlike the Germans, the Romans had the advantage of writing. A millennium after Caesar's contact with the Germans, English archbishop Wulfstan, in his sermon *De Falsis Diis* ("On the False

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Gods"), borrowing from a similar homily attributed to Aelfric, describes the current view of heathen gods:

> *Sum man eac wæs gehaten Mercurius on life, se wæs swyðe facenfull and ðeah full snotorwyrde, swicol on dædum and on leasbregdum; ðone macedon þa hæðenan be heora getæle eac heom to mæran gode and æt wega gelætum him lac offrodon oft and gelome þurh deofles lare and to heagum beorgum him brohton oft mistlice loflac. Ðes gedwolgod wæs arwurðe eac betwux eallum hæðenum on þam dagum, and he is Oðon gehaten oðrun naman on denisce wisan.* (Sedgefield, ed.)

> There was a man called Mercury in his lifetime who was very deceitful and, though quite clever, deceitful in his actions and schemes. The heathens also made him one of their most celebrated gods and often left gifts for him at crossroads, following the Devil's teaching, often bringing offerings to him on hilltops. This false god was worshiped by all pagans in those days; he was called Odin in the Danish tradition.

Wulfstan also perpetuates the association of Jupiter with Thor. However, he is aware of the incompatibility of the Germanic and Roman gods in their narrative contexts.

> *Nu secgað sume þa denisce men on heora gedwylde, þæt se Iouis wære, þe hy þor hatað, Mercuries sunu, þe hi Oðon namjað. Ac hi nabbað na riht, forðan þe we rædað on bocum, ge on hæþenum, ge on cristenum, þæt se hetula Iouis to soðan is Saturnes sunu.*

> Now some of those Danish men say in their heresy that this Jove, that they call Thor, was the son of Mercury, who they call Odin; but they do not have that right, for as we read in books, in the pagan as in the Christian, this wicked Jove is actually the son of Saturn.

Wulfstan, like Caesar and Tacitus, participates in a form of cosmological assimilation. Christian cosmology allows no sort of supernatural being other than God, angels, and demons. Wulfstan opts for euhemerism, the belief advanced by the Greek historian Euhemerus, that the gods were originally prominent mortals who came to be worshipped as they passed into legend. Wulfstan also, unsurprisingly, inserts the Christian devil into the religious mix.

However, Wulfstan goes a step further than the *interpretatio romana*. Neither Ceasar nor Tacitus explicitly derogates the Germanic beliefs. Even though the differences would have been obvious, they merely state the similarities as if to allow that the Germans might know something about these common gods that the Romans did not. This was in keeping with the syncretism that had merged many Roman gods with Greek cognates. Wulfstan's description is an appropriation of the beliefs of others into a worldview that is inflexible and closed to speculation. We would not expect a Christian bishop to do otherwise than condemn religious beliefs that conflict with Christian doctrine. But Christianity is not the only religion that Wulfstan assumes rests on a doctrinal foundation. His use of the word *gewylde* (heresy) refers not to the Danes' deviation from Christian orthodoxy but to their violation of a supposed pagan orthodoxy. He assumes not only that Odin was Mercury and Thor was Jupiter, and hence that Roman paganism was the same as Norse paganism, but also that the Danes committed a religious violation by believing anything other than what was recorded in the literature. While *gewylde* could merely mean "error," it occurs most often in Aelfric's writings (Wulfstan's predecessor and source) in descriptions of Christian heresies (Bosworth-Toller

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supplement, p. 316). This implies that Wulfstan is not merely assuming that

Mercury and Jupiter were historical people, but that one really was the father of the

other, and that the Danes were obligated by a supposed pagan orthodoxy to profess

belief in this tenet.

Wulfstan's characterization of paganism resembles what anthropologist

Pascal Boyer (*Naturalness of Religious Ideas*) calls "the trap of *theologism*."

> Theologism is the combination of two essential mistakes. One is to take the
> connections between religious assumptions for granted, as a self-evident or
> necessary aspect of religious representations. The other is to think that they
> can be best described by postulating some abstract intellectual entities
> ("symbol systems," "webs of meaning," "cultural theories," etc.) that
> supposedly underpin the connections. Theologism, in its various guises, begs
> the question of systematicity by positing that religious representations
> necessarily constitute shared, integrated, consistent sets of assumptions,
> often in the face of less-than-perfect empirical confirmation. Moreover, it
> leads to models with cognitive implications that are always difficult to
> estimate. The religious assumptions are treated as the realization or
> implementation of abstract objects, the precise properties of which are not
> clearly described. (229)

Boyer observes a connected misconception in which this categorization by

orthodoxy leads to the assumption that people with other beliefs fall into

homogenous units that can be treated as single entities.

> You represent the various groups as 'big agents.' For instance, you think what
> is happening in the political arena is that 'Labour is trying to do this . . .' or
> 'the Tory party is doing that . . .' although parties cannot literally be trying to
> do anything, as they are not persons . . . To think that a village, a company or

a committee is a big agent spares us the difficult work of describing the extraordinarily complicated interaction that occurs when you get more than two people together. (*Religion Explained*, 127, 251)

Wulfstan not only lumps all Danes into just such a big agent but insists that they alter their own belief to accord with the pagan writings on the subject, "bocum . . . on hæþenum," with which he is familiar as if these writings constituted a doctrine akin to the Christianity. The fact that the bishop regards the pagan literature as false does not seem to distract his insistence on a pan-ethnic pagan homogeneity.

Just as we lack of any sort of canon or regularized doctrine for pre-Christian European religious beliefs, so too we lack any native term cognate with the Christians term *pagan*. *Pagan*, like its English translation *heathen* (hæþen) originally referred to people who lived in rural areas (*pāgānus*, "of the country, rustic," *hæþen*, "of the heath, untilled land") at the time that Christianity come to dominate the urban areas of the Roman Empire. As such, it resembles the designation of *goyim* (Greek ἔθνη) in the Hebrew Bible, or *gentes* in the Vulgate (from which "Gentile"), both of which indicate "the nations," or every culture other than the Biblical authors' own. It is a negative definition, implying that all out-group members share some essential likeness. Judith Jesch observes, "While 'pagan' is derived from Latin, and 'heathen' from the vernacular, neither term is neutral, both implying Christian disdain. There is no non-judgmental equivalent, except for the strictly chronological (and therefore inaccurate) 'pre-Christian'"(55n).

Like Wulfstan, we have many Greek and Latin sources representing gods and goddesses, and we may be just as likely to assume these to be definitive, even

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dogmatic. But as Hilda Davidson points out in her 1988 *Myths and Symbols of Pagan Europe*,

> Gods and goddesses appear in popular mythologies in fossilized and static
> form. From the way in which they behave in various tales, often simplified in
> their turn, they are assumed to be deities of certain fixed types. . . However,
> we are dealing here with many different levels of belief, and also with
> confused traditions, which may have been worked on by earlier antiquarians
> long before modern scholars began their reconstructions (196-7).

Even in Greek and Roman myth, for which we have ample literature originating before conversion to Christianity, we cannot point to anything resembling fixed orthodoxy. If we view the works of Homer or Ovid from a post-Christian standpoint, we may assume that their works would have held a normative authority over their audiences and future poets who represented the same subject matter. If this had been the case, Book 2 of Herodotus' *Histories* would have been considered heresy for its claim that Helen had never been taken to Troy by Paris as in the *Iliad*, but held captive in Egypt while an apparition took her place in Troy. Not only was Herodotus not condemned for disputing the accepted convention and implying that the whole Trojan War had been fought unnecessarily, but his account became the basis for Euripides' popular play, *Helen*. The Greek audience's acceptance of such deliberate variation on traditional accounts resembles the relatively open-minded approach Tacitus and Caesar took to the Germanic "Mercury." Rather than saying, as does Wulfstan, that there is one true version which all must accept, the audience of *Helen* seems to have acknowledged that Homer says Helen was taken to Troy; Euripides says she wasn't. Tacitus seems

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content to relate that the Germans think Mercury is the highest god without the sort of correction Wulfstan inserts.

Reflective and Intuitive Beliefs

The assumptions of what would constitute "authentic paganism" (Fell, Irving) are often based on individual self-identification—i.e. Would the *Beowulf* poet and audience have identified themselves and the poem as Christian, or pagan? This is an improvement over the stance of Wulfstan, who defines a social group by his own assumptions about their religion and then blames the individuals rather than the category for inevitable deviations. But the notion that there is a kind of pagan belief that is more than an operational heuristic, contingent upon changing circumstances and new information, may be another cultural inheritance of the Judeo-Christian legacy. The question "What do you believe about (x)?" locates religious essence not in what a person believes about x but in what he *professes* to believe about x. Philosopher Daniel Dennett has dubbed this extra conceptual step, appropriately enough, *belief-in-belief*.

This is not to imply that a believer may be deliberately deceptive, but that profession of belief requires the believer to stop and think, and invariably invoke social convention. Cognitive psychologist Justin Barrett cautions, "Sometimes reports of one's own beliefs may be deceptive, but more frequently, people do not have a reflective belief until asked for one" (*Why Would*, 8). A Catholic reciting the Nicene Creed publicly and (we assume) privately affirms that Jesus was "begotten not made, consubstantial to the Father, by whom all things were made" without

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anything like a clear concept of the Athanasian reaction against Arius which led to the creed's instantiation. This creedal belief operates less as a means of understanding the real world than it does as a social identification. Indeed the word "creed" originates in the first word of the Nicene Creed—"Credo in unum Deum" (I/We believe in one God)—a verb rather than a noun. Translated into a noun, *creed* indicates the act of enunciating a belief, especially as a public act of affiliation, rather than the belief itself. This is fundamentally different than the contingent, operational beliefs which govern our actions in the world, such as the belief in gravity, the recurrence of the seasons, or our assumptions about the behavior patterns of our fellow humans.

Creedal beliefs constitute a form of what Barrett calls *reflective belief*. Reflective beliefs, such as those most easily identified as religious, require deliberate contemplation or explicit instruction. By contrast, *non-reflective* or *intuitive* beliefs, such as that animals are born from other animals or that solid objects can't pass through each other, mostly come hardwired in the human brain and are subtly molded through actual interaction with the environment. They rarely require verbalization and are more accurately observed through behavior than dialogue. Barrett interviewed people from Ithaca, New York (Barrett & Keil) to Delhi, India (Barrett, "Hindu Concepts") to test the compatibility of reflective beliefs, such as the omnipresence and omniscience of God, with nonreflective beliefs such as that a single agent, mortal or divine, can do and think only one thing at a time. Subjects were first given a questionnaire asking:

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Whether or not (a) God can read minds; (b) God knows everything; (c) God can do multiple mental activities simultaneously; (d) God needs to be near something to see, hear, smell, taste, or feel it; (e) God is spatial (in a particular place or places) or nonspatial (no where at all); and (f) God can occupy space with another object without in any way distorting it. (225)

Subjects were then asked to listen to a story about God's intervention in multiple scenarios and answer questions testing their recall of that story. The narrative scenarios allowed for God's agency to be either anthropomorphic or transcendent. In scenarios testing omnipresence, God was represented helping two people in different parts of the world without implying that he had to do them in sequence. In scenarios testing omniscience, God was represented assisting a praying supplicant; it was left to the subject to interpret him as either hearing the prayer and acting in response, thus learning what he did not already know, or acting on foreknowledge. Despite carefully removing any indication of anthropomorphic limitations, Barrett and Keil found that subjects consistently interjected human limitations even after they stated their own beliefs in God's transcendence.

In striking contrast to the results of the questionnaire, the results of the story recall items suggest an anthropomorphic everyday God concept. For the God items, subjects incorrectly reported that the information was included in the story 61.2% of the time on the average, for a mean accuracy of 38.8%. This compares to an average accuracy of 86.2% on the base items. . . Specifically, subjects seemed to characterize God as having to be near something to receive sensory information from it, not being able to attend differentially to competing sensory stimuli, performing tasks sequentially and not in parallel, having a single or limited focus of attention, moving from place to place, and

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sometimes standing or walking. God was not conceptualized as completely free of constraints. (228-30)

Barrett and Keil chose the indirect method of a recall test to avoid what Barrett calls *theological correction*. As Barrett explains, "People seem to have difficulty maintaining the integrity of their reflective theological concepts in rapid, real-time problem solving because of [cognitive] processing demands"(*Why Would*). As a result, the beliefs that make intuitive sense prevail over assertions of slower, culturally mandated, creedal beliefs. Variations of the test went so far as to remind subjects of their own reflective beliefs in God's transcendence and provide them the transcript of the story while they answered the recall questions. The results remained largely the same. Though people affirm beliefs in an unlimited God, they usually represent him with human limitations in space, time, and awareness.

Beowulf contains a vacillation between narrative and didactic asides remarkably similar to the intuitive anthropomorphism and reflective theological correction offered by Barrett's test subjects. The propositional interjections—the "monkish interpolations" as Müllenhoff and 19th century scholars called them—are the exceptions, the *theological corrections*. They occasionally profess creedal references to God's agency, but this agency is not depicted in the action of the poem. To recall Wilcox's term, they *circumscribe* the story—write around it—but they do not constitute or structure it.

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Allzumenschliches

Descriptions of religion, whether one's own or that of another, tend to take the form of propositional statements, hence *reflective* beliefs. As Barrett's studies demonstrate, these reflective beliefs are not necessarily translated into operational beliefs—the sort necessary to easily conceive and remember a narrative. Specifically, reflective beliefs that do not conform to anthropomorphic conceptual predispositions are quickly forgotten in the reconstruction of a story. Barrett's studies indicate the prevalence of anthropomorphism as the default, occurring even when it conflicts with reflective tenets.

These findings accord with the anthropomorphism hypothesis of religion collected and explicated by Stuart Guthrie (*Faces*; "Why Gods"). The basic idea is familiar enough. Xenophanes observed in the 5th century BCE that "If oxen (horses) and lions . . . could draw with hands and create works of art like those made by men, horses would draw pictures of gods like horses, and oxen of gods like oxen" (Guthrie, *Faces*, 178).

The degree of anthropomorphism exhibited by the god of Abrahamic religions is as difficult to isolate in historical representation as it is in the responses of Barrett's test subjects. Clearly the amorphous *omni-god* (omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent god) of monotheism has an embarrassingly anthropomorphic past. Harold Bloom opens his reading of the Yahwist (J) source of Genesis, *The Book of J*, by noting the disparity between theological assumption and narrative embodiment.

Yahweh, in transmorgrified forms, remains the God of the Children of Abraham, of believing Jews, Christians, and Muslims. But Yahweh, in the Book of J, is a literary character, just as Hamlet is . . . Why does Yahweh attempt to murder Moses? How can God sit under the terebinth trees at Mamre and devour roast calf and curds? What can we do with a Supreme Being who goes nearly berserk at Sinai and warns us he may break forth against the crowds, who clearly fill him with great distaste? (2)

The point at which Yahweh graduates from merely superhuman to Supreme Being is not only historically ambiguous, it seems to happen in the midst of the story. In his discussion of the same dinner at Mamre mentioned by Bloom, James Kugel observes the vagaries of Yahweh's narrative representation:

While the 'angel' is unrecognized at first—mistaken for an ordinary human being—after the recognition takes place, something equally striking occurs: usually, it is no longer an 'angel' at all that is speaking, but God Himself. Thus, in the passage above about Abraham and the three men, these three effortlessly slide into being God at some point. (Kugel, 115)

This ambiguous shift from man to god resembles the vacillations between intuitive and reflective belief in theological correction on a historical scale. Even the oldest books of the Bible are the result of centuries of redaction and interpretation, resulting in an evolving god that, unlike Bloom's *Hamlet* analogue, cannot be exclusively attributed to any particular person, culture, doctrine, or precedent. There are, however, a handful of characteristics which God has maintained in monotheistic religions despite their incoherence with intuitive beliefs and the vestigial remains of an all-too-human Yahweh still evident in scripture.

The oddity of this anthropomorphism highlights the fact that Yahweh in the *J* source is not just another name for the capital-G God. It is a fundamentally different god concept. As Biblical scholar Yehezkel Kaufmann illustrates in his comprehensive 1960 work, *The Religion of Israel*, Judeo-Christian monotheism, at least as it is conceived by the time of the Second Temple, shows fundamental differences in the way its adherents conceive of the nature of the god Yahweh and the way pagans (his term) conceive of the gods, the world, and human agency. "It is not the plurality of gods per se, then, that expresses the essence of polytheism, but rather the notion of many independent power-entities, all on a par with one another, and all rooted in the primordial realm" (23). In paganism, Kaufmann argues, the gods have origins and limitations by which they have more in common with mortals than with a universal god. There is no correlate in paganism to the monotheistic idea of a god beyond limitation or necessity who precedes and rules over all of creation.

The "primordial realm" or "metadivine [ʿal ʾelōhī] realm," Kaufmann argues, is the physical substance out of which the gods were born, as well as the rules of fate or necessity to which they are bound. "Although the will of the gods plays a significant part in the cosmogonies, there is something that transcends it: the power of matter, the innate nature of the primordial order. The gods are conceived in the world-stuff, emerge out of it, and are subject to its nature"(31). This primordial order consists not only of matter but also of rules of causation and necessity exemplified by the Hindu *rita* (world order) and Greek *moira* (fate)—forces to

which the gods are bound and over which they have no ultimate control.   Likewise, morality was not the creation of the gods but something external to them.

> The ethical moment was equally incapable of giving the gods ultimate sovereignty. For morality is viewed by the pagan not as an expression of the sovereign will of the gods, but as part of the supernal order that governs the gods themselves. Morality, too, is, so to speak, part of nature, and its laws "laws of nature" (38).

In Kaufmann's view, a Judeo-Christian monotheist should not be as perplexed as Euthyphro by Socrates' question, "Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?" (Euthyphro, 10a). To a monotheist, God determines holiness.

In polytheism, as in monotheism, a god's worshippers may supplicate him in order to influence the physical or social world. But in polytheism, a magician may act directly with the matter (*mana*, Kaufmann 31ff) through which the gods initially obtained their power, effectively bypassing the gods in asserting his own autonomous agency. Likewise, if fate or *dharma* function according to their own rules, human diviners might forecast their destinies without the intercession of a god. The reason that magic and divination are condemned in the Bible is that they constitute a means of human agency independent of Yahweh. In polytheism, however, these constitute options not only for humans, but for the gods themselves.

> The distinctive mark of all pagan rituals is that they are not directed toward the will of the gods alone. They call upon self-operating forces that are independent of the gods, and that the gods themselves need and utilize for their own benefit. The ultimate symbol of divine

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subjection to transcendent powers is the god as magician or as diviner. (40-1)

The gods act not only through immanent power but through interaction with other autonomous forces beyond them. Likewise, divination is, for them, not merely the discovery of divine will but the discovery of their own fates.

> The basic idea appears to be that the system of signs and portents functions autonomously, as a part of nature through which one learns about both the will of gods and the cosmic order which transcends them. Because the system is self-operating, the gods also divine and prophesy to gain knowledge of the unknown. Divination can, therefore, not have been originated by the gods for the purpose of disclosing their will; it is prior to them; it is science of cosmic secrets by which even the gods can serve themselves. (43)

The fact that the gods must act to empower, protect, and enrich themselves, that they must acquire magical tools and weapons, fight and slay each other, and often resort to ignoble methods to deceive each other and humanity, fundamentally separates them from the Biblical God. These facts are also the substance of all mythology. Myths, narratives about the gods, function only with gods of limited scope and influence.

> In myth, the gods appear not only as actors, but as acted upon. At the heart of myth is the tension between the gods and other forces that shape their destinies. Myth describes the unfolding destiny of the gods, giving expression to the idea that besides the will of the gods there are other, independent forces that wholly or in part determine their destinies. (22)

Kaufmann gives copious, if brief, examples primarily from Greek and Near

Eastern myths to demonstrate the physical and mental limitations of pagan gods

illustrated in, if not wholly constituting, their signature stories. Pagan gods, in short,

are distinctly human. The Bible retains scattered vestiges of Israel's monolatrous

past—Yaweh's surprise at Adam's transgression, his battle with Leviathan, and his

near loss in a wrestling match with Jacob, among others—but these have been

heavily subsumed under centuries of motivated interpretation (theological

correction) to protect the conception of Yaweh's pre-existence, omniscience, and

omnipotence.

The prominent Germanic god Wotan/Odin, as recorded in Scandinavian

sources (the *fornaldursögur, Poetic Edda, Prose Edda, Heimskringla*), not only

demonstrates human limitations but is obsessed with them. Nearly all of his

appearances involve his quests for knowledge, prophecy, skill, and material

possessions. Though he is frequently characterized as a god of war and monarchy,

he may just as accurately be described in modern parlance as a god of self-

improvement. He hangs himself from the holy tree Yggdrasil to learn the art of runic

inscription. He sacrifices his eye to the giant Mimir in order to drink from his well of

knowledge. Continuing the theme of imbibing mental skill, he uses shape-shifting

and deception to steal the mead of poetry from the giant Suttung. He uses

necromancy to resurrect a prophetess in the quest to learn the fate of his son

Balder—a fate which he cannot alter. He depends on his ravens, Hugin ("Thought")

and Munin ("Memory"), and his high seat, Hlidskjalf, to give him insight into the

world beyond his limited sensory perception.

Portrayals of Odin's intercession into the affairs of mortals largely resemble the interloping of gods of culturally distant pantheons in epic literature. The *Vǫlsunga saga* introduces him simultaneously as the father of the Volsung line of kings and as an immortal worker of magic. He sires Sigi, who is in turn the father of Rerir. When Rerir and his wife prove unable to conceive children, they pray to the gods, and Odin intercedes in the manner of a magician. Odin does not hear their prayers directly, but is informed by his wife, Frigg. Unlike Yahweh in his response to Abraham and Sarah, Odin does not seem to have the option of enabling his supplicants' fertility by divine will or command alone; but the god is, according to the saga, "not without resources" (*eigi aurþrifrada*). He sends a magic apple in the care of a shape-shifting *wish maiden* (*oskmey*; *óskmær* according to Byock). The maiden, Hljod, the daughter of the giant Hrimnir, takes the form of a raven and drops the apple in Rerir's lap while he is seated on a mound. Rerir suspects the purpose of the auspicious event and eats the apple, after which his wife becomes pregnant with Volsung. Soon afterwards, Rerir becomes fatally sick, and, according to the saga, he "intended to go to Odin; in those days that seemed desirable to many" (*ǫtlaði at sekia heim oðinn ok þotti þat moigum fysilikt i þann timæ*).

Rerir's interaction with Odin seems virtually indistinguishable from that of a monotheistic supplicant. He prays to his god for the alleviation of a state of affairs beyond normal human control, and he looks forward to an afterlife in that god's presence. It is in Odin's actions which are unobservable to Rerir that he differs significantly from later monotheistic portrayals of divine agency. He cannot hear Rerir's prayers directly; he must exploit substances possessing power beyond his

own (the apple and possibly the mound) and the agency of supernatural envoys (Frigg and Hljod). But we only know this because the narrative incorporates him as a character who requires a means for his agency. Conversely, according to Kaufmann, Biblical monotheism conceives Yahweh as:

> [A] supernal God, above every cosmic law, fate, and compulsion; unborn, unbegetting, knowing no desire, independent of matter and its forces; a God who does not fight other divinities or powers of impurity; who does not sacrifice, divine, prophesy, or practice sorcery; who does not sin and needs no expiation; a God who does not celebrate festivals of his life. An unfettered divine will transcending all being. (*Religion of Israel*, 121)

In the Biblical account of the birth of Abraham's son Isaac, a story of divine intervention in human fertility which parallels that of Odin and Sigi, Yahweh's actual means of enabling Sarah's post-menopausal fertility is affirmed but never portrayed. How he enables Sarah to become pregnant seems immaterial to the author(s) of the text. Yahweh is uncharacteristically anthropomorphized in these passages in Genesis, appearing as one of three men who visit Abraham at Mamre (Genesis 18). Yaweh not only assumes human form, but he eats calf and curds prepared for him by Abraham (Kugel, 113-5; Bloom, 12). Standing before Abraham, he admits his own lack of omniscience when he says, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know" (18:20-21). The story clearly carries vestiges of proto-Biblical monolatry, if not full-blown polytheism, which was monotheism's historical, if not philosophical, forebear. Yet, even at his most anthropomorphic, Yahweh's means of enabling Sarah's

pregnancy remain without description. After Abimelech attempts to take Sarah as his own wife, Genesis 20:17-18 says, "Then Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. For the LORD had closed fast all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife." Genesis 21 does little to elaborate: "The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him" (21:1-2).

The surviving anthropomorphism of these episodes indicates their antiquity and somewhat troubles the distinction Kaufmann assumes between paganism and monotheism (assuming this account was originally monotheistic rather than monolatrous). However, the fact that Yahweh's agency is not accompanied by explanation, even when his physical form and limited knowledge are explicit, confirms a fundamental difference between the two modes of theology. As in the creation narrative of Genesis 1 (if not Genesis 2), Yahweh speaks, and what he describes comes to pass.

The act of explaining Yahweh's agency is implicitly condemned in the story of Abraham and Sarah. When Sarah, while eavesdropping, overhears Yahweh say that she will become pregnant, she laughs, and Yahweh reacts defensively. "The LORD said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" (18:13-14). Sarah denies her laughter for fear of retribution and is confronted directly by Yahweh. This

interaction may simply exemplify a perceived taunt of a superior by an inferior. However, in Kaufmann's dichotomy, it may also indicate the greatest challenge to monotheism: the assertion of autonomous reason over the assumption of unfettered teleological agency.

> The basic idea of Israelite religion is that God is supreme over all. There is no realm above or beside him to limit his absolute sovereignty. He is utterly distinct from, and other than, the world; he is subject to no laws, no compulsions, or powers that transcend him. He is, in short, *non-mythological* (*Religion of Israel*, 60, emphasis added).

For Yahweh to have his own mythology, that a story of his action against an oppositional agent or nature might require a means external to himself for its completion, undermines the "supernal God" concept of later Judaism and its offshoots. A story requires conflict. Conflict requires a division of agency (e.g. a *poly-agent schema*). If conflict is impossible for Yahweh, he cannot have his own story.

> Along with the theogonic idea, the Bible rejected the thought that YHWH draws upon any external source of power. . . . The Bible has no concept of overriding fate and unalterable destiny. Its God is not subject to sexual needs, cycles of growth, life and death, or any cosmic order. The Bible knows only one supreme law: the will of God. Destiny is determined only by God; from him emanate the decrees that bind all. God alone has fixed the laws of heaven and earth, the world and all that is therein (Jer. 31:35; Ps. 148:6; Job 38:33, and elsewhere). Typical is the notion that the order of the cosmos is a covenant which God has imposed upon it (Jer. 33:20, 25). The blessings of fertility, the regularity of nature, the order of the times and seasons have all been ordained by God. He is first and last (Isa. 41:4; 44:6; 48:12); before him

there was no god nor will there be after him (43:10). No decree or fate binds

him. . . .The biblical God . . . is outside of the flux of becoming and change; he

controls times and sets seasons (72-3)

In the parallel stories of Abraham and Sigi, the actions of the human supplicants are

remarkably similar. The roles of the two gods parallel each other but for the fact

that Yahweh's means are not described. To reveal means would trap the concept of

Yahweh inside "the flux of becoming and change."

Monotheism and Early Agent Concepts

Kaufmann's illustration of Yahweh as capital "G" God is familiar enough. This

is the notion of God inherited by Christianity and Islam, and seems to have been a

defining characteristic of Judaism at least since the reign of Josiah and the

consolidation of Yahwist cults at Jerusalem (Wright 2009, Kugel 2007). However, as

illustrated in the above examples of Yahweh's all-too-human embodiment in Genesis,

this abstract God has not always stood apart from pagan god concepts. Something

elevated Yahweh from *a god* into *God*, and did so in spite of the fact that 1) his own

sacred scriptures evidence his anthropomorphic limitations, 2) none of the

neighboring cultures maintained lasting monotheistic cults, and 3) political and

economic forces discouraged this development (Babylonian captivity, Roman

occupation, etc.) for intervals often extending over several generations. Cultural

context alone is insufficient to explain the shift.

Justin Barrett argues that:

a superknowing, superperceiving, superpowerful, immortal, and (perhaps)
supergood god possesses a strong selective advantages, such that once it is

introduced, belief in such a god should spread quite well. This *supergod* concept matches well (but not perfectly) with the God of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, and other religious traditions as well. (*Why Would*, 89, my italics, Barrett's parentheticals)

Jean Piaget (*Child's Conception of the World*; *Physical Causality*) observed a tendency in children to attribute purposeful design to objects and characteristics of objects whether they were natural or the products of human design.   Piaget termed this tendency *childhood artificialism*. Mountains, his child subjects told him, were made for climbing. Wind was made by someone, a god or human, blowing air from his mouth or nostrils. Rocks were pointed to keep people from sitting on them. Everything, in the children's minds, was created by a human-like will for a human-like purpose, very often, not by gods but by humans. Piaget hypothesized that artificialism begins when children observe human creation of artifacts and apply this generalized knowledge to all objects. Research by developmental psychologist Deborah Kelemen confirms this bias, which she terms *promiscuous teleology*.

But teleology does not necessarily imply full-blown anthropomorphism. Research has found that infants' expectations of intentional agency are not bound to phenotypically human images. Infants can follow goal-oriented behavior in images of faceless blobs (Johnson, Booth, & O'Hearn) and computer dots (Csibra & Gergely) devoid of any anthropomorphic characteristics beyond that of apparent self-propulsion. Kelemen observes that "rather than being anthropomorphic, children's earliest concept of agency is abstract and is invoked by a range of nonhuman entities from the time when overt signs of children's sensitivity to mental states are

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becoming increasingly robust" ("Intuitive Theists"). This would indicate that childhood artificialism is not the product of observation, much less of cultural learning, but an evolved psychological mechanism only later refined through observation (Biro & Leslie, 2007). Kelemen's studies have found that children from different religious and cultural backgrounds consistently prefer a form of creationism even when told that their parents prefer a scientific view with no creator ("Children's Preferences"). It is only around the age of ten that children from non-religious households begin to adopt scientific explanations for the origin of the natural world (Evans). For this reason, Kelemen suggests that children are born "intuitive theists," only coming to non-creationist beliefs through education if at all.

Besides being born creationists, we are also born predisposed to belief in omniscience. Developmental psychologists Simon Baron-Cohen, Alan Leslie, and Uta Frith developed a false belief task to test children's understanding of what other people know and what they do not. Children were told a story with accompanying illustrations describing two girls, Sally and Ann, in a room with a with a basket and a box. In the story, Sally puts a marble in the basket and leaves the room. Ann then moves the marble from the basket to the box, shortly after which Sally returns. The children are asked which container, the basket or the box, Sally will look inside for her marble. Most children over the age of four (excepting those with autism) realize that Sally is unaware that in her absence the marble has been moved. Younger children, on the other hand, say that Sally will look in the box despite the fact that she was absent when Ann put it there. Through interaction with others, children eventually learn the limits of human knowledge; only God's knowledge escapes

falsification. As Barrett interprets these findings, children "begin with a default assumption that beliefs are infallible and must then learn that beliefs can be wrong. . . . Through development, they had to mature to the point of answering correctly for a person but needed only to maintain their naïve default assumption to answer correctly for God" (79). Thus, individual humans and possibly the anthropomorphic schema fails a key test of godhood, "For one who is not prescient of all future things is not God" (Augustine, *City of God*, 5.9, p. 194). Whereas in early development, children believe that all humans are omniscient and omnipotent, after learning of human limitations, the only agent unrestricted in power and knowledge is God.

In those same earliest days of life when young children intuitively accept disembodied agents with power and knowledge unlimited by physics, they exhibit another likewise unlearned set of social behavior patterns. The discovery of *attachment* behavior by Harry Harlow and theorized by John Bowlby confronted the contemporary behaviorist paradigm with its first disconfirming evidence. The conventional psychological wisdom of the time dictated that infants learned behavior through operant conditioning, coming to love their mothers only as a means of nutrition. Harlow (in Haidt) discovered that the young rhesus macaques in his laboratory derived comfort from stimuli to which they had never been conditioned. Testing a hunch, Harlow created two artificial mothers: one made of wire which held a bottle of milk, and another made of foam covered with cloth with no milk dispenser. Contrary to the Freudian and behaviorist assumption that the monkeys would be conditioned to find comfort where they found nourishment,

none of the babies clung to the wire mother any longer than they had to for feeding. Once satiated, they exhibited an unambiguous and unconditioned preference for the soft, cloth mother. The discovery of these unconditioned behaviors or *fixed action patterns* laid the groundwork for evolutionary psychology.

John Bowlby explored the implications of Harlow's findings for human development. The resulting theory of attachment explained the behavior of children in relation to their care-givers (*attachment figures*) as sources of emotional security and models for learned behavior.   The child's mental attachment system monitors his/her relative proximity to the attachment figure, creates a sense of distress when the attachment figure is out of sight for too long, and creates a sense of comfort and security when proximity is reestablished. The care-giver functions as a mobile *secure base* from which the child may explore, checking back at regular intervals for comfort and information (*social referencing*, Campos and Stenberg). This pattern of exploration, anxiety, return, and reference was reliably demonstrated by Mary Ainsworth and colleagues in a test they dubbed the *strange situation* (in Kirkpatrick).

Lee Kirkpatrick has argued that attachment behaviors in children have precise parallels in religious behaviors of people throughout life:

> It seems clear that beliefs about a personal God who watches over one
> functions psychologically as a secure base, just as do human attachments. It is
> easy to see why: An attachment figure who is simultaneously omnipresent,
> omniscient, and omnipotent would provide the most secure of secure bases. . .
> In monotheistic religions in particular, there is the potential for God (by

whatever name he or she is identified) to serve as an attachment figure. (87, 92)

Kirkpatrick's book, *Attachment, Evolution, and the Psychology of Religion*, draws evidence from religious literature as well as modern studies of religious believers (mostly American Christian) that monotheistic religious adherence exhibits all of the primary elements of attachment psychology.

<u>Faith</u>

The Hebrew Bible is replete with descriptions of Yahweh as an attachment figure and his followers as wholly dependent children at the mercy of his protection and provision (Genesis 15:1: "the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield [protection]; your reward [provision] shall be very great"). In addition, metaphors originating in the pastoral economy of the early Levant merge with attachment psychology. Psalm 23 ("The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me by the still waters,") fails to continue the believer-as-sheep metaphor to the extent of depicting Yahweh sheering and eating his followers. It only borrows those elements of the pastoral schema that parallel the child-parent schema.

This is not to say that, as an attachment figure, God can never fail to provide sustenance and protection. Kirkpatrick notes:

> Perceptions of God as a nurturant caregiver and as a punitive, frightening being are not necessarily opposites, nor mutually exclusive. In some cases, the latter may actually serve to reinforce the former. Bowlby noted that lambs and puppies develop and maintain attachments despite receipt of

unpredictable punishments from their caregivers and, moreover, that
attachment behaviors actually increase as a result of such treatment.
Similarly, human infants are attached to parents who mistreat them (Egeland
& Sroufe, 1981). The basis for this seemingly paradoxical behavior is that the
punishments, like other sources of fear and distress, activate the attachment
system and hence the seeking of proximity to the primary attachment figure.
The same individual is, in a sense, both the source of the problem and the
solution. (83)

This is precisely the sort of reasoning that came to define Judaism in exile. In the
period before the Babylonian conquest, Yahweh was a henotheistic patron god
rather than a monotheistic universal God (Mark S. Smith, p. 165). However, it was in
the time of Israel's greatest national crisis, a collective "strange situation" in
attachment terms, that Yahweh received an ironic promotion to omnipotence. Mark
S. Smith observes:

> First in the face of the great empires and then in exile, Israel stands at the
> bottom of its political power, and it exalts its deity inversely as ruler of the
> whole universe, with little regard for the status of the older deities known
> from the preexilic literary record. . . The events leading to the Judean exile of
> 587 extended Israel's understanding of its deity's mastery of the world even
> as the nation was being reduced. (165)

The loss of national sovereignty threatened more than the lives and livelihoods of
Israel's people. It also threw Yahweh's potency, if not existence, into doubt. Robert
Wright observes:

> The momentousness of Israel's geopolitical defeat, and the depth of the
> psychological trauma, left two basic theological options on the table and
> rendered one of them unpalatable. First, the Israelites could just conclude

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that their god had lost a battle; Yahweh had done his best, only to lose to the mighty Marduk, imperial god of the Babylonians. But the thought of your national god losing has never been appealing (to Israelites, to Moabites, to people in general), and in this case it was just about unbearable. For if Yahweh had lost this battle, he had lost in an utterly humiliating way. His temple—his home—had been destroyed, and his people had been stolen…. That left option two: concluding that the outcome had been Yahweh's will. But if the outcome was Yahweh's will, then he was even stronger than had been previously evident. (170-1)

Seeing the attachment figure as cruel seems to be psychologically less unnerving than seeing him as wholly absent or impotent in the face of a threat (Kirkpatrick, 83). This may be due to the fact that a child already realizes his/her own impotence and thus loses nothing by being reminded of it. Realizing the absence or impotence of the attachment figure leaves the child with no resources other than his/her own at the very moment he/she is confronted with the futility of those resources. In an actual childhood threat situation, the child is far more likely to survive by continuing to seek out and seek to appease an attachment figure than going it alone. As a result, the intuitive plan of action is to supplicate, regardless of how inconsistent or vindictive the attachment figure has proven to be.

The fact that the attachment system is a fixed action pattern, that it functions (although in different forms) whether or not the child has reason to trust the attachment figure to handle a given situation, connects it to the Biblical concept of faith (Hebrew 'ēmûn, Greek pistis, πίστις) more reliably than with the conditional beliefs of polytheism. It correlates especially well with the Pauline idea of faith. Paul emphasizes faith as a relationship with God rather than a conditional belief:

"Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many

nations, just as it had been said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'" (Romans 4:18).

The Pauline school that came to dominate Christian orthodoxy focused specifically

on faith over the law, ritual, or understanding. "Now faith is being sure of what we

hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1). The term became

definitive of early Christians to the point that it sufficed as a social marker

separating Christian from Jew and polytheist long before the term "Christian"

emerged: "All the *believers* were together and had everything in common" (Acts

2:44).

<u>Theory-of-Mind and Limited Gods</u>

Evidence of the infant's predisposition to goal-directed action, unlimited by

perceptual and physical constraints or phenotypically human embodiment, has led

Barrett and Richert to dispute Guthrie's *anthropomorphism hypothesis* of religion

(described above). Holding anthropomorphism as the root of religious beliefs

implies that the individual's beliefs are based on observation of humans and

subsequently applied to God or gods. They should therefore be altered as the child's

concept of specifically human agency changes. Barrett and Richert suggest that the

disembodied and unconstrained agent concepts that precede more limited

anthropomorphic schemas are evidence that the god concept familiar in Abrahamic

monotheism precedes the more limited gods of polytheistic mythology. In this

model, which the authors dub the *preparedness hypothesis*, ontogeny completely

inverts phylogeny. The familiar historical chronology, popularized by Herbert

Spencer and other 19th century forerunners of anthropology, assumes that religion

evolves along a continuum beginning in animism, proceeding to anthropomorphism, and culminating in monotheism as a result of progressive civilization. In disputing this progressivist model, Barrett and Richert's preparedness hypothesis agrees with Kaufmann's observation that monotheism grew *in spite of* anthropomorphic polytheism rather than out of it. While I dispute their characterization of Guthrie's hypothesis (which uses the term *anthropomorphic* more broadly to include disembodied intentional agency), I agree that the transcendent God of monotheism is grounded in a very different cognitive system than that which gives rise to anthropomorphic polytheism. The preparedness hypothesis' theoretical base in evolutionary psychology explains how the two models of gods could coexist throughout history despite their mutual exclusivity. I doubt that the developmental priority of transcendent agency concepts would suffice to bolster this mode of thought through the disconfirmation of social experience. Barrett's experiments with anthropomorphic intrusion errors into transcendent god concepts pose an explanatory challenge. However, the addition of Kirkpatrick's link between attachment psychology and monotheistic faith suggests a grounding of transcendent agency in a separate cognitive network than that which processes fully anthropomorphic schemas.

I suggest that the anthropomorphism hypothesis, in opposition to which Barrett and Richert define their preparedness hypothesis, not be defined by Guthrie's anthropomorphism, due to the fact that Guthrie's hypothesis incorporates early abstract agency concepts as well as embodied ones. Instead, I suggest the *anthropomorphic god concept* be defined by the sort of full-blown

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anthropomorphism which emerges subsequently as children refine their social schemas in order to comprehend the increasing complexity of their extended social world. It is this development which marks the emergeance of metarepresentation and the transition of the individual from the *omni-agent schema* of attachment to the *poly-agent schema* necessary to expand one's social relations and refine one's comprehension of the thoughts of others.

In the false belief task (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith) above, we noted that around the age of four children begin to realize that other people's knowledge is limited by things like sense perception and access to information. While this is familiar enough to escape notice, it is connected to a uniquely human evolutionary development in cognition dubbed *theory-of-mind* (ToM) by primatologists Premack & Woodruff. Awareness of the presence of an intentional agent accomplishes little on its own. To successfully integrate into a social milieu, protect ourselves against cheaters, convince others to share their resources, discourage violence, etc. we must be able to see things from the point of view of others. Developmental psychologist Alan Leslie terms this sort of perspective-taking *metarepresentation* (Leslie, "Pretense and Representation"; "Selective Attention"). An individual needs to be able not only to represent a given situation as it is, but to represent the representation as another person would, who had different access to information, different preconceptions, and different goals.

Between the ages of eight and fourteen, the child's number of attachment figures grows to include peers and relatives (Haidt 119). At the same time, children

learn to integrate a new awareness of the limitations of others. While their new attachment figures can provide emotional support, they do not necessarily offer the same level of perceived security that was attributed to the attachment figure at an earlier stage of development. As attachment security decreases, the need for coalition-building increases. Creating support networks, alliances, exchange relationships, etc. requires progressively advanced levels of metarepresentation which, in turn, requires progressively subtler understandings of the conceptual and perceptual limitations of individual others.

Polytheistic gods rarely exhibit omniscience. The *Nasadiya* (Creation Hymn) of the *Rig Veda* gives the gods room for wonder:

> Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced?
> Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of this
> universe. Who then knows whence it has arisen? Whence this creation has
> arisen—perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not—the one who looks
> down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows—or perhaps he does not
> know. (10.129.6-7, Doniger trans. 25-6)

Of course, the Christian spirit world is also populated by less-than-omnipotent supernatural agents. The difference lies in the subordination of these weaker spirits. In Christianity, angels with autonomy are demons. The word "angel" means messenger. They do not initiate action of their own will. They merely act as vessels of God's will. As such, they do not compare with the pagan gods. Pagan gods, as Christian apologists since Justin Martyr have been happy to point out, have more in common with demons of the Christian cosmology. However, even demons are

subordinate agents, at least since Origin's assertion that they carry out God's will unwittingly (*felix culpa*), creating opportunities for God to show his mercy. As such, even their comparative autonomy falls short of that possessed by pagan gods. Though the agency of pagan gods is limited by the means available, their wills are not the effect of prior causal agency any more than are those of humans in normal social cognition. In other words, a god may be manipulated to react in anger, lust, ignorance, etc., but this is a feat possessed by mere mortals by virtue of metarepresentation. Through normal theory-of-mind, we may trace causal agency back to an initial causal agent, whose motives are just as open to us as those of any other human or god. In Christianity, however, metarepresenting God's thought process is forbidden, for "no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God" (1 Corinthians, 2:11).

The anthropomorphism that characterizes pagan gods lends them to inclusion in social cognition. The transcendent god as attachment figure, on the other hand, does not require a well-developed ToM. Attachment behavior does not require the child to read the attachment figure's mind. A child responds with fixed action patterns such as crying even when a parent explicitly discourages crying. This is not to say that people do not attempt to read an attachment figure's mind; only that the mindreading originates separately from the attachment seeking, connected by subsequent reflective effort.

Kirkpatrick admits that attachment theory is less informative in the study of polytheism than more anthropomorphic cognition in which gods are regarded much the same as human exchange partners:

> In polytheistic belief systems . . . I suspect people's perceived relationships with deities are not attachment relationships. For example, one such mechanism to which I have alluded already is that of perceived relationships with gods predicated on principles of social exchange rather than attachment. The typical pattern in polytheistic systems is for gods to be specialized, in the sense that different gods are seen to be responsible for different kinds of effects in the world: the weather, the bounty of the harvest, success or luck in the hunt or on the battlefield; disease and good health; and so forth. To the extent that these effects are important to the human condition, people enter into implicit or explicit social contracts with these deities to influence their behavior, with different gods presumed to expect or demand different kinds of sacrifices or investments. In most cases, then, supernatural beings are seen to offer a particular provision or set of provisions in exchange for a particular obligation—the sine qua non of social exchange. (92)

The most identifiably religious aspect of most non-monotheistic cultures, the ritual of sacrifice, rarely takes the form of a show of submission or the rendering of a thing owed. Rather, it takes the form of a contractual exchange between two equally responsible parties (Wade 41-2). The Latin prayer "*do ut des*," (I give so that you will give) finds its cognate in the Vedic "*Dãdãmi se, dehi me*" (Mauss 17).

This is the orientation of one pagan priest described by Bede in his *Historia Ecclesia*. When the missionary Paulinus preaches to the English King Edwin (c. 627), Edwin's chief priest, Coifi, seems eager to convert, but not for virtues inherent in Christianity. The priest advises the king:

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*Tu vide, rex, quale sit hoc quod nobis modo praedieatur: ego autem tibi
verissime quod certum didici, profiteor, quia nihil omnino virtutis habet, nihil
utilitatis religio ilia quam hucusque tenuimus nullus enim tuorum studiosius
quam ego culturae deorum nostrorum se subdidit ; et nihilominus multi sunt
qui ampliora a te beneficia quam ego, et maiores accipiunt dignitates,
magisque prosperantur in omnibus quae agenda vel adquirenda disponunt. Si
autem dii aliquid valerent, me potius iuvare vellent, qui illis impensius servire
curavi. Unde restat, si ut ea quae nunc nobis nova praedicantur, meliora esse et
fortiora, habita examinatione perspexeris, absque ullo cunctamine suscipere
ilia festinemus.*

May it like your highness to prove what manner of doctrine this is which is
now preached unto us; but thus much I surely avouch unto you, which I have
certainly learned, that the religion which unto this day we have observed
hath no virtue nor advantage in it at all: for none of your subjects hath set
himself more earnestly to the worship of our gods than I; and yet,
notwithstanding, there are many of them which receive from you more
ample benefits than I, and higher dignities than I, and better prosper in all
they take in hand to do or seek to get than I. If now the gods could aught
have done, they would rather have helped me, who have been careful to
serve them more zealously. Wherefore it remaineth that, if you shall find
after good examination that these things which be now newly preached to us
be better and of more power, then without longer delay we hasten to receive
them. (HE 2.13, King ed. & trans. pp. 282-3)

In other words, Coifi's allegiance to the gods is conditional, based on expectation of
reward from them, particularly in the form of recognition from the king.

Caesar's description of Celtic druids describes an office entrusted with
officiating ritual and settling cosmological debate, but just as heavily occupied with
judicial and educational duties. Likewise, the *goði* (usually translated "priests") of

Icelandic sagas function more as landholders, war chiefs, and Mafioso-style dons who have the added responsibility of maintaining ritual and courting the patronage of particular gods. These examples suggest that the division between the social and supernatural worlds was not fixed. The gods in these societies were the objects of the same sorts of metarepresentation required to manage relationships with fellow humans. This may include devotion, but it would just as likely include conditional alliance, reprimand, grudges, unrequited love, imitation, and even strategic human opposition to the gods through magic or alliance with competing gods.

Human and Divine Agency in Narrative Representation

The polytheistic supplicant, like Coifi and Sigi, seeks aid, reward, and protection from the gods the way he would seek them from other mortals. This interaction may be metarepresented in narrative on both sides—we see the desires, powers, suspicions, limitations, etc. of both the human supplicant and the god whom he supplicates. Such is not the case with the abstracted omni-potentate. As Kaufmann notes, a god with a story is a god with needs, limits, competitors, and the potential for failure. Pagan gods fit easily into narratives, differing from human protagonists only in the magnitude of their actions and, usually, their challenges. Theologically correct monotheistic narratives, as in most Biblical examples, can only have protagonists who are psychologically human—who have desires, limitations, emotions, etc. Neither the Gospels nor Milton's *Paradise Lost* manages to escape this limitation. The synoptic Gospels maintain Jesus' human limitations and separation from the Father, which they maintain he accepted as necessary to the incarnation.

Both Johns (Milton and the gospel author) vacillate between anthropomorphic characterizations and theologically correct didacticism.

The only sort of narrative which is logically permitted by monotheism is one which is also compatible with the attachment schema. In order to attribute all agency to an omnipotent and omniscient God, the story must limit the agency of the protagonist to the decision of obeying and acting as conduit of God's agency or disobeying and awaiting inevitable judgment. This is precisely the template of the hagiography genre. In the prose *Life of Saint Cuthbert*, which Bede expanded from an earlier anonymous source, the eponymous hero acts as a vessel of God's will rather than through his own ability or from his own agenda. In introducing his subject, Bede himself defers credit for the work's authorship to *Domino juvante* (with the Lord's help).

The feats which Cuthbert performs through God's power might not impress the modern reader as the sort of thing requiring divine intervention. Two events Bede describes as miracles (*miraculis*, ch. 19 & 20) requires Cuthbert to do nothing more than scare away birds with raised hands and shouts. In both cases, the birds are treated as interlocutors rather than animals. A group of ravens who had been pulling thatch out of a roof at the monastery were reproved by Cuthbert and flew away "ashamed" (*Uix uerba compleuerat, et confestim tristes abiere* 224). When a flock of birds is eating grain from the monks' harvest, Cuthbert chastises them, asking "Why are you eating crops you yourselves did not grow?" ('*Quid tangitis,*'

inquit, 'sata, quæ non seruistis? 222). However, when Cuthbert takes an eagle's meal,

he attributes the act as the acceptance of divine providence.

> *Cui uir Domini, Disce inquit filiole fidem semper et spem habere in Domino,*
> *quia nunquam fame perit, qui Deo fideliter seruit. Et sursum aspectans*
> *uidensque aquilam in alto uolantem, Cernis inquit aquilam illam porro*
> *uolantem? Etiam per huius ministerium possibile est Domino nos hodie reficere.*
> *Talia confabulantes, agebant iter iuxta fluuium quendam, et ecce subito uident*
> *aquilam in ripa residentem, dixitque uir Dei, Uides ubi nostra quam praedixi*
> *ministra residet? Curre rogo, et quid nobis epularum Domino mittente attulerit*
> *inspice, et citius affer. Qui accurrens attulit piscem non modicum, quem ilia*
> *nuper de fluuio prendiderat.*

 'Learn to have constant faith and hope in the Lord,' said Cuthbert. 'He who

serves God shall never die of hunger.' He looked up and saw an eagle flying

high overhead. 'Do you see that eagle up there? *God is quite capable* of

sending us food *by it*.' They were making their way along a river, talking

much about such things, when they suddenly saw the eagle settling down on

the bank. 'There,' said the saint, 'is the *servant* I was telling you about. Run

and see what *God has sent* and bring it back quickly.' The boy brought back a

big fish which the bird had just caught. (Ch. 12, 196-7, my emphasis)

Cuthbert's reliance on external agency blurs the boundary between providence and

theft when he stops at an empty shepherd's hut while traveling. After feeding his

horse straw from the roof (the very thing he chastises the ravens for in Ch. 19),

Cuthbert begins his evening prayers. As he does so, his horse, now chewing directly

on the roof, dislodges a cloth-wrapped bundle containing bread and meat. Cuthbert,

as well as Bede, disregards the human agency and intent behind both the hut and

the food stash.

*Laudemque decantans benefidis coelestibus, Deo inquit gratias qui et mihi pro
eius amore ieiunanti et meo comiti coenam prouidere dignatus est. Diuisit ergo
fragmen panis quod inuenit, partemque eius dimidiam equo dedit, reliquum suo
esui reseruauit, atque ex illo iam die promptior factus est ad ieiunandum, quia
nimirum intellexit eius dono sibi refectionem procuratam in solitudine, qui
quondam Heliam solitarium, quia nullus hominum aderat qui ministraret,
eiusdem modi cibo per uolucres | non pauco tempore pauit. Cuius oculi super
timentes eum, sperantes autem in misericordia eius, ut eripiat a morte animas
eorum, et alat eos in fame.*

'O God,' he said. 'I was fasting for the love of Thee and in return thou hast
fed both me and my animal, blessed be Thy Name.' He broke the bread and
gave half to the horse. From that day on he was much more ready to fast, now
that he knew he had been fed in his solitude by Him who, when there was no
one else to provide, had sent the very birds, day after day, with food for Elijah
in the wilderness. His eyes are ever on them that fear Him and hope in His
mercy, so that He may, in the words of the Psalmist, 'snatch their souls from
death and feed them in time of famine.' (Ch. 5, pp. 170-1)

The attribution of divine agency by both the protagonist and the author clearly
enough bypass mundane causal explanations (i.e. shouting and hand waving scare
birds away; eagles fish, must land to eat, and tend to fly away leaving their catch
when approached by large mammals). But a second significant omission is required
for the last story. Bede tells us that Cuthbert was traveling in an area far from any
human habitation. The fact that he discovers a shepherd's hut with a food stash
should not be surprising if we, unlike the author or protagonist, extend our theory-
of-mind to the shepherd. A shepherd who traveled with his flock to a remote area
would need food and shelter just as much as Cuthbert, hence the construction of the
hut and the placement of the bundle of food. That same shepherd is likely to return

and, as anyone who can pass the false belief task above will know, is likely to expect

his roof to be intact and his food to be waiting.

This lack of any significant metarepresentation is not limited to these

incidents, nor to Bede's *Life of Cuthbert*. Throughout the hagiography, Cuthbert is

the conduit for miraculous healing (though frequently accompanied by material

remedies). However, these are always described as means to the end of promoting

conversion to Christianity and enabling the work of the church.

When the Abbess Aelfflaed is afflicted with pain in her legs, Cuthbert sends,

in his absence, a cincture to her. Wrapping the cincture around her legs relieves the

pain in her legs. Afterwards, a nun under the abbess' care is afflicted with

headaches which are also cured by being wrapped in the cincture. The nun then

closed the cincture in her locker, but when asked for its return by the abbess, the

nun could not find it. Bede interprets the event as follows:

> *Quod diuina dispensatione factum intelligitur, uidelicet ut et per duo sanitatis*
> *miracula Deo dilecti patris sanctitas appareret credentibus, et deinceps*
> *dubitandi de sanctitate illius occasio tolleretur incredulis. Si enim eadem zona*
> *semper adesset, semper ad hanc concurrere uoluissent egrot, et dum forte*
> *aliquis ex his non mereretur a sua infirmitate curari, derogaret impotentiae*
> *non saluantis, cum ipse potius esset salutis indignus. Unde prouida ut dictum*
> *est dispensatione supernae pietatis, postquam fides credentium confirmata est,*
> *mox inuidie perfidorum materia detrahendi est prorsus ablata.*

> It is clear that this was done by divine dispensation, so that the holiness of
> the father beloved of God might be made apparent to believers through these
> two miracles of healing, and that henceforth all occasion for doubting his

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sanctity might be removed from the incredulous. For if that girdle had always been there, sick people would always have wished to flock to it; and when perhaps one of them did not deserve to be healed of his infirmity, he would disparage its power, because it did not heal him, when really he was not worthy of being healed. Hence as has been said, by the providential dispensation of heavenly grace, after the faith of believers had been strengthened, forthwith the opportunity for the envious and unbelievers to disparage was entirely taken away. (Ch. 23, 232-5)

"The sick" in question do not seem to have mattered quite so much as the recognition that Cuthbert was the chosen instrument of God. Similarly, when a boy thought to be a demoniac is brought to the monastery for divine healing, Bede tells us that "the martyrs refused to grant the cure in order to show just how high a place Cuthbert held amongst them" (*sed noluere sancti Dei martyres ei petitam reddere sanitatem, ut quam celsum inter se locum Cuthbertus haberet, ostenderent*). Though Cuthbert had already died, a monk gathered earth from the spot where water used to wash Cuthbert's corpse had been dumped. The refusal of the martyrs to cure the boy before Cuthbert could be associated with the miracle echoes the lack of importance of the boy in question. This focus on Cuthbert's holiness, however, is not an estimation of him as an individual. The use of relics, both the cincture and the earth touched by the water which had cleansed the saint's corpse, attest to the fact that Cuthbert's relevance had nothing to do with his own existence as a person or causal agent. He needed to be neither present nor alive for the divine residue to do its—or rather God's—work.

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Beowulf in the Strange Situation

As a warrior with the strength of thirty men and several victories against

superhuman monsters already under his belt, Beowulf obviously approaches the

*strange situat*ion of Grendel's incursion into Heorot without the need for reference

to an *attachment figure*. Instead he displays a refined understanding of the social

milieu he enters before he seeks it out. He knows of Grendel's abilities compared to

the ability of Hrothgar and the Danes to oppose him. Despite the fact that Grendel

has killed scores of warriors, Beowulf insists on meeting him unarmed as a matter of

honor.

> *Hæbbe iċ ēac geāhsod   þæt se ǣġlæċa*
> *for his wonhȳdum   wǣpna ne reċċeð;*
> *iċ þæt þonne forhicge   swā mē Hiġelāc sīe,*
> *mīn mondrihten,   mōdes blīðe,*
> *þæt iċ sweord bere   oþðe sīdne scyld,*
> *ġeolorand tō gūþe,   ac iċ mid grāpe sceal*
> *fōn wið fēonde   ond ymb feorh sacan,*
> *lað wið lāþum.*
> I have also heard that this rogue, in his savagery, does not use weapons, so I
> will also go unarmed so that Hygelac, my kinsman-lord, will be of good mood
> for me to bear a sword or a broad shield, a yellow battle-board, but I will
> wrestle that fiend with my strength in the fight for life, one man to another.
> (433-40)

Beowulf's decision to deliberately handicap himself may seem as reckless (wonhýd)

as he claims Grendel to be. However, his thought process incorporates two

metarepresentations. He is mindful of Grendel's thought process for strategic

purposes, and he recognizes that this indicates a courage on Grendel's part that he

would fail to match even if he defeated the unarmed monster while armed. He

further recognizes that meeting Grendel on equal terms will result in his own fame,

particularly in the eyes of his uncle and king, Hygelac. "I will also go unarmed so

that Hygelac, my kinsman-lord, will be of good mood" (435-7b).

Immediately following the above pledge, Beowulf adds: "Let him put his faith

in the Lord's judgment, whom death takes! ("ðǣr ġelȳfan sceal/ dryhtnes dōme sē þe

hine dēað nimeð" 440b-441). This is clearly the sort of thing one would expect in

Christian providentialism. It is also a reflective profession of a belief mandated by

the social context of the poem's transcription. The terms dryhtnes dome (lord's

judgment) refer unambiguously to God. However, this is immediately followed by

the ascription of agency to death (déað). The Lord judges, but Death takes.

Fourteen lines later, a third non-anthropomorphic agent is introduced: "Wyrd goes

as she will" (Gāð ā wyrd swā hīo scel 455). The Lord, Death, and Fate (wyrd) all

compete with the protagonist as potential causal agents of the outcome of the

impending contest. But rather than originating in the sort of attachment language

found in Cuthbert's story, these other agents are limitations of Beowulf's agency that

are motivated by the social norms ("The Lord" in Christian parlance; Death and

Wyrd in the cosmology of pre-Christian Germanic belief). Wyrd, like Kaufmann's

example of Fate in classical paganism, co-exists with anthropomorphic gods and

gives evidence to their anthropomorphism by remaining beyond their control. As

socially mandated reflective qualifiers, the insertion of these three agents resembles

Beowulf's insertion of Hrothgar's authority in the lines that precede them. The

hero's diplomatic deference to Hrothgar, which serves to lessen the status threat

Beowulf poses, matches his deference to the Lord, Death, and Fate. Moreover, we should not overlook the suggestive repetition of the word for Lord, first as *mondrihten* referencing Hrothgar, then as *dryhtnes* referencing God.

The question of Beowulf's religious orientation turns on the source of his sense of confidence. Is he venturing out from a secure base (God as attachment figure), or is he placing his trust in his own understanding of the dangerous social milieu before him and his estimation of his own abilities relative to his human (and humanoid) challengers? Many reflective assertions assert the agency of non-anthropomorphic agents. Others, equally reflective, affirm the intuitive causal agency of the hero alone: "He trusted his strength, the power in his grip, as a man should do if he intends to win long-lasting praise through battle: he cares nothing for his life" (*strenġe ġetruwode,/ mundgripe mæġenes. Swā sceal man dôn,/ þonnē he æt gūðe ġegān þenċeð/ longsumne lof, nā ymb his līf cearað* 1533b-6).

While the two competing agency concepts occur in such didactic asides, the intuitive story, the sequence of cause and effect, prefers the anthropomorphic agency. In the fight with Grendel's monstrous mother, after throwing his opponent to the ground, Beowulf loses the upper hand and nearly suffers a fatal blow.

> *Hēo him eft hraþe   andlēan forġeald*
> *grimman grāpum   ond him tōġēanes fēng;*
> *oferwearp þā weriġmod   wigena strenġest,*
> *fēþecempa,   þæt hē on fylle wearð.*
> *Ofsæt þā þone seleġyst   ond hyre seax ġetēah,*
> *brād [ond] brūnecg;   wolde hire bearn wrecan,*
> *āngan eaferan.   Him on eaxle læġ*
> *brēostnet brōden;   þæt ġebearh fēore,*

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wið ord ond wið ecge   ingang forstōd.

Hæfde ðā forsīðod   sunu Ecgþeowes

under ġynne grund,   Ġeata cempa,

nemne him heaðobyrne   helpe ġefremede,

herenet hearde,   ond hāliġ God.

Geweold wiġsigor   wītiġ drihten,

rodera rǣdend,   hit on ryht ġescēd

ȳðelīċe,   syþðan hē eft āstōd.

She quickly paid him back with a powerful strike and seized him again tightly
with an aweful crush. That strongest of soldiers stumbled and fell. She sat
atop her hall-guest and drew her broad, bright-edged dagger. She meant to
avenge her son, her only family. Across his shoulders lay a mail hauberk; it
protected his life, withstood a pierce from the blade point. There the son of
Ecgtheow, the Geat's champion, would have finished his life under the broad
surface of the earth, if his armor had not saved him, the hard battle-net, and
also holy God. The wise lord, ruler of heaven, brought about war-victory,
easily decided it right, once he stood up again. (1541-55)

The poem gives two distinct causes for the failure of the ogress' stab—Beowulf's

mail armor and God's ambiguous agency (*geweold*)—and two distinct causes for the

battle's outcome—Beowulf's rise to his feet and God's right decision. God's decision

is *easy* (*ȳðelīċe*) as well as *right* (*ryht*), but only *after* (*syþðan*) Beowulf stands up (*hē*

eft āstōd).   Was God waiting for Beowulf to stand up before deciding rightly? If so,

what was the efficacy of such a decision? The stab at Beowulf's chest was deflected

by his mail. The mail's efficacy is small wonder given that, in line 455, we learn that

it was made by Weland, a legendary smith of semi-divine character occurring

elsewhere in Germanic myth as a maker of magical weapons.

A poem about a man with the strength of thirty men, who has a history of slaying monsters, and whose life is saved by exquisite armor, and who slays three monsters, hardly constitutes a David-and-Goliath story. It differs in its assignment of causal initiative. The hero is too strong and the role of God too supplemental for the sort of strong belief in Providence that characterized the omni-agent schema of medieval Christianity. The text juxtaposes actions and reactions that are intuitively complete, but adds to these an abstract profession of faith—a theological correction—that can only be didactic in purpose. This interjection of culturally-mandated, reflective beliefs into an intuitive narrative structure resembles the anthropomorphic intrusion errors observed in Barrett's cross-cultural studies of god concepts. This interjection of reflective belief, however inconsistent or unnecessary to the event structure, occurs in both Bede's *Life of Cuthbert* and *Beowulf*. Though unnecessary in the *Life of Cuthbert*, these theological corrections do not conflict with the portrayal of Cuthbert's agency. Cuthbert's pattern of action extends no further than that of a child acting upon fixed action attachment patterns. He explores the world with the certainty that he can rely on the intervention of an omnipotent attachment figure. He does not effect change in the world himself. Beowulf, on the other hand, occasionally professes an attachment relationship, but his ability to affect change in the world originates in his superhuman strength, quasi-magical accoutrements, and nuanced abilities of metarepresentation. The assertions of attachment-style religious belief seem to satisfy creedal requirements both in the social milieu within the poem and the religious context of the manuscript's creation. It seems clear that Bede was searching for stories of

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auspicious events in Cuthbert's story which could be interpreted as proof of divine

agency. He was motivated by the desire to promote Cuthbert's spiritual legacy. In

doing so, he selected stories which would not be noteworth but for the possibility of

demonstrating Providence. In *Beowulf*, a Christian audience is confronted with a

story which triggers the audience's fancy by its own characters and actions. Its

protagonist, unlike Cuthbert, is proactive. In Bede, Cuthbert waits upon the Lord,

goes where he is led, and passively observes the operation of the divine. In *Beowulf*,

the hero goes where he will and does what only he can do. God's role in *Beowulf* is,

at most, to award a rubber stamp after the feat has been accomplished. Given the

strict theological mandates of the society in which the poem was committed to

parchment, that rubber stamp may have saved the story that doesn't otherwise

require it.

CHAPTER IV

TWO MODELS OF THE SOCIAL SELF

Emerging Hierarchy and the Limits of Social Cognition

To say that god concepts originate in evolved cognitive predispositions is not to say that the historical and cultural location of their manifestation is unimportant. If, as I argue in the previous chapter, monotheism is rooted in a stage of cognitive development that loses its dominance in early childhood, it is a testament the power of culture that this mode of cognition is maintained throughout life in spite of the emergence of critical theory-of-mind. In this usage, it helps to recall the origin of the word *culture* as the process of cultivation as opposed to fabrication. A given social context may trigger predispositions such as the attachment system which would otherwise dissipate through disuse.

This would explain the correlation of the adoption of monotheism and the centralization of previously small-scale societies. The translation of Yahweh from anthropomorphic to transcendent god was not the only such occurrence. Fourteenth century BCE Egypt had seen the rise to omnipotence of the god Amun coincide with the spread of its empire. Robert Wright observes:

> The theology had one hallmark of an emerging monotheism: the dominance of the divine firmament by a single god, Amun. Amun had grown in power after championing a series of Egyptian military campaigns and getting credit for the ensuing victories. Vast wealth and landholdings had flowed into Amun's temples—which meant, in practical terms, that the priests of Amun, who

presumably had themselves favored these wars, were now powerful, overseeing a commercial empire involving mining, manufacturing, and trade.

To check the power of these priests, pharaoh Amenhotep IV (later Akhenaten) outlawed the worship of Amun, declared that Aten (formerly the sun disk symbol of Re) was the only god, and declared himself Aten's sole representative on Earth. Akhenaten's motivation was demonstrably political. As the perception of Amun's power rose, the power of his priests rose to the point that they became a threat to the pharaoh. In order to maintain his political power, the pharaoh had to manufacture a monotheism of his own. While such a process need not involve the conscious action of those in power, the effect is the same. The consolidation of religious authority effects the consolidation of political authority.

Similarly, the elevation of Yahweh was preceded by the elevation of rivals from the emerging empires of Babylon and Assyria. Mark S. Smith points out:

> The rise of supranational empires suggested the model of the super-national
> god. As a result, the figures of Assur and Marduk assumed such proportions,
> the super-gods whose patronage of empires matches their manifestation as
> the sum-total of all the other deities. . . Mesopotamian authors are exploring
> the nature of all divinity in relation to a single major god (165).

The emergence of super-national political allegiance requires more than the addition of a supranational authority. It requires the weakening of local and familial social bonds. As Smith notes, the paring of social ties coincides with the paring of theological pluralism:

By the seventh century the lineage system of the family had perhaps eroded, thanks to a variety of factors, including the deleterious effects of royal power on traditional patriarchal authority. . . A culture with a diminished lineage system, one less embedded in traditional family patrimonies due to societal changes in the eighth through sixth centuries, might be more predisposed both to hold to individual human accountability for behavior and to see an individual deity accountable for the cosmos. (I view this individual accountability at the human and divine levels as concomitant developments.) Accordingly, later Israelite monotheism was denuded of the divine family, perhaps reflecting Israel's weakening family lineages and patrimonies (164).

This is the same social phenomenon Craig Davis has argued lies at the core of *Beowulf*, especially the "institutional resonance of the monster-fights in *Beowulf*, the 'political' or 'ideological work' the poem is attempting to perform" (x). Davis argues:

Grendel and his mother are primarily political monsters and the meaning of their destruction by the hero is peculiar to the poem's political context, an institutional nexus which I take to be a troubled and transitional one between tribal forms of social organization and those of an incipient national kingship. The monsters are manipulated by the poet to isolate and demonize an aspect of the venerable Germanic social value of kindred solidarity (cf. Berger and Leicester, "Social Structure as Doom: The Limits of Heroism in Beowulf 54). They are used to dramatize the resistance of entrenched kindred chauvinism—of regressive tribal institutions like the blood-feud—to late pagan and early Christian attempts at intertribal monarchy.

While I do not share Davis' belief that the tribal social structure is unique to the monsters or that it is a necessarily deliberate addition of the author, the poem and its story certainly originate from a time when small-society modes of interaction were becoming replaced by hierarchical authoritarianism.

The deliberate promotion of the intertribal system by the author is not a necessary tenet for the present argument. What is more important is the paradigm shift in implicit concepts of social relations this movement entails. In the sort of small-scale societies in which the social cognition of modern humans evolved, it was possible for individuals to know the vast majority of the people with whom they interacted throughout their lives. If they did not know every person in their extended social world directly, they could at least recognize another individual by reputation or social relation (that individual's father, mother, grandparent). In the more populous and cosmopolitan social world of intertribal kingdoms, individuals would have to constantly deal with people whom they could recognize neither by reputation nor by affiliation with other individuals. Moreover, they would be required to consider anonymous strangers as part of their in-group, depend on them for fair trade, trust them as comrades on the battlefield, etc. These intertribal kingdoms became nations in Benedict Anderson's definition of that term as "an imagined political community." Though Anderson's book, *Imagined Communities*, seeks to describe the modern democratic nation state, his definition of nation fits Roman, Carolingian, and Anglo-Saxon political units equally well in this respect.

> It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. . . In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined (6).

To the human brain, which evolved to maintain relationships with approximately 150 individuals (Dunbar), the anonymity afforded to individuals in large in-group populations poses a challenge to the individual trying not to be cheated by her fellow group member.

In his 1962 *Primitive Social Organization: An Evolutionary Perspective*, anthropologist Elman Service distinguished four types of social organization which occur cross-culturally in correspondence with population size: bands, tribes, chiefdoms, and states. For the majority of *homo sapiens*' evolutionary history, we have primarily been organized in hunter-gatherer bands of between 20 and 60 individuals typically genetically related but with the capacity for fission and recombination. Leadership of such bands is nearly always situational—a particularly good hunter might lead a hunting foray but exercise no authority in other social activities and maintain his status as a hunt leader only so long as he is able to maintain success. These bands may occasionally combine with geographically and genetically adjacent bands for temporary social and economic exchange or to form strategic alliances against more distant bands. As these alliances became permanent, the bands merged into tribes. "Head men" (often having endogenous terms that translate as "Big Man") emerge at the tribal level and achieve higher status, though this status must be constantly proven. Though a head man may serve to resolve disputes and serve as the tribe's central voice, he rarely enjoys unconditional authority and retains what he has only so long as it remains beneficial to all (Boehm). As tribes merge into chiefdoms, usually accompanied by the development of a settled agricultural or pastoral economy, the emergent chiefs

grow to enjoy permanent status and hereditary succession. The authority of the chief is exhibited (and dependent on) redistribution of wealth. He receives tribute from the people of his chiefdom, but he is expected to redistribute that wealth generously to those in need and as a reward for pro-social action.

Though we may note a correspondence between the progression of group size and social order with the progression of history (particularly European history), we should not assume, despite Service's choice of title, that bands, tribes, or chiefdoms are primitive in the sense of being inferior to modern nation states, democratic or otherwise. Because the cognitive mechanisms that underlie these various organizations are the product of human and pre-human evolution, we find evidence of all of these stages in every place and time, including within post-industrial Western democracies. The progressions that concern the present argument are primarily the increase of group size and the centralization of coercive authority.

The Dunbar Number

The benefits of increasing group size are not hard to imagine. Larger communities have a larger labor force, more fighting men able to defend community resources and seize those of other groups, and a larger knowledge and technology base. However, the increase in group size awakens a very old problem that has been extremely influential in the evolution of human intelligence. All social animals must deal with the problem of individual cheaters—those who benefit from the labor or sacrifice of others but give nothing in return. Friedrich Nietzsche, in 1873,

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speculated that the intelligence that defines homo sapiens lay not in the advantage

of discerning truth from falsehood, but from the ability to deceive our rivals:

> As a means for the preserving of the individual, the intellect unfolds its
> principle powers in dissimulation, which is the means by which weaker, less
> robust individuals preserve themselves—since they have been denied the
> chance to wage the battle for existence with horns or with the sharp teeth of
> beasts of prey. This art of dissimulation reaches its peak in man. Deception,
> flattering, lying, deluding, talking behind the back, putting up a false front,
> living in borrowed splendor, wearing a mask, hiding behind convention,
> playing a role for others and for oneself. . . . Insofar as the individual wants to
> maintain himself against other individuals, he will under natural
> circumstances employ the intellect mainly for dissimulation. But at the same
> time, from boredom and necessity, man wishes to exist socially and with the
> herd; therefore, he needs to make peace and strives accordingly to banish
> from his world at least the most flagrant *bellum omni contra omnes* (*Truth
> and Lies*, 452)

Nietzsche's suspicions have been to a large extent confirmed by the last three

decades of evolutionary psychology, to the extent that the mechanisms underlying

human social cognition have occasionally been dubbed Machiavellian intelligence

(Byrne & Whiten). Byrne and Whiten's *Machiavellian Intelligence Hypothesis* along

with Robin Dunbar's *Social Brain hypothesis* assert human intelligence evolved less

as a means of understanding the world as it is than as a means to understand our

fellow humans and navigate the social world on which the individual's survival and

reproduction depended. Noting a correlation of brain size and social structure in

non-human primates, both hypotheses agree:

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Primate intelligence evolved primarily to deal with complex social problems, rather than nonsocial ecological or technological problems such as locating food, extractive foraging or using tools. Support for the hypothesis comes from correlational analyses of a number of primate species showing a link between a proxy of intelligence, the ratio of neocortex to the rest of the brain and various measures of social complexity, such as group size (Barton & Dunbar, 1997), frequency of tactical deception (Byrne & Corp, 2004) and frequency of social play (Lewis, 2001). Measures of non-social complexity, such as range size or foraging style, show no such correlation with neocortex ratio. (Mesoudi, Whiten, & Dunbar, 2006)

In particular, the threat of becoming the sucker of such dissemblers has led to the refinement of cognitive mechanisms of cheater detection which precede individual experience in actual interpersonal interaction.

Two pioneers of the field of evolutionary psychology, John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, have, over the last three decades, simultaneously illustrated the role of the problem of cheater-detection in social cognition and the priority of evolved cognition to experiential learning. In their most famous example, the Wason Selection Task, Cosmides ("Social Exchange") illustrates the human ability to solve a problem dealing with rule violation far quicker than a problem exhibiting the same logical equation which had no such social relevance. Test subjects are presented with two problems taking the form of an "If P then Q." In one scenario, test subjects were given the following problem:

Part of your new job for the City of Cambridge is to study the demographics of transportation. You read a previously done report on the habits of Cambridge residents that says: "If a person goes into Boston, then that

person takes the subway." The cards below have information about four Cambridge residents. Each card represents one person. One side of a card tells where a person went, and the other side of the card tells how that person got there. Indicate only those card(s) you definitely need to turn over to see if any of these people violate this rule. (96)

Each card showed one of the following: Boston, Arlington, subway, cab. Logically, only the cards reading Boston and cab need to be checked.   However, less that 25% of the subjects answered correctly, including subjects with formal training in logic. By contrast, between 65 and 80% of subjects answer correctly when the question involves contractual obligation, such as "If you are to eat those cookies, then you must first make your bed" or "If a man eats cassava root, then he must have a tattoo on his chest." This maintains the "If P, then Q form," but adds the social contract element: "If you take benefit B, then you must satisfy requirement R." Tooby and Cosmides explain:

> People who ordinarily cannot detect violations of if-then rules can do so easily and accurately when that violation represents cheating in a situation of social exchange. . . . When asked to look for violations of social contracts of this kind, the adaptively correct answer is immediately obvious to almost all subjects, who commonly experience a "pop out" effect. No formal training is needed . . . even when the situation described is culturally unfamiliar and even bizarre—subjects experience the problem as simple to solve, and their performance jumps dramatically. (Cosmides and Tooby 96)

Tests like these confirm an evolved domain specificity in human cognition. While individual experience and cultural interaction contribute to an individual's ability to interact in a social environment, some problems are easier to solve than others

because the brain comes equipped with more resources devoted to problems that fostered survival and reproduction in our ancestors.

> The human mind must include inferential procedures that make one very good at detecting cheating on social contracts. The game-theoretic complexities governing conditions of reciprocation in social exchange indicate that the capacity to engage in social exchange cannot evolve in a species unless one is able to detect individuals who cheat (fail to reciprocate) on social contracts (Axelrod, 1984; Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981; Trivers, 1971). An individual who engaged in exchange, but who lacked the ability to detect cheaters, would experience fitness costs with no compensating benefits, and would be selected out. (Cosmides 196)

While the cognitive resources devoted to social interaction are comparatively vast, they are not limitless. Anthropologist Robin Dunbar has observed a limit to the number of social connections individuals are able to maintain.

> The problem of maintaining group coherence and stability through time obviously increases (probably exponentially) with group size. The more individuals there are, each trying to maximize his or her genetic interests, the less likely it is that common purpose will prevail. Divergent interests will become harder to reconcile and the risks of exploitation by those willing to cheat on the implicit contracts that underpin sociality rise dramatically. Evidence from the fossil record and modern primates suggests that average group sizes rose progressively through time from around 60-80 (values not untypical of living chimpanzees) to around 150 in modern humans. (Dunbar, "Culture" 194)

Beginning in 1993 (Aiello & Dunbar), anthropologist Robin Dunbar has illustrated the spontaneous and cross-cultural tendency for communities to limit the number of

regularly interacting individuals to approximately 150 persons. Neolithic villages, modern hunter-gatherer communities, 18th century English villages, Doomsday Book villages, business units (such as Gore-Tex, which limits its branches to 150 employees), and a host of other social units repeatedly attest that the optimum number of associates in an individual's social network remains very close to 150. Beyond 150, it becomes difficult for a single individual to keep track of enough personal information, either learned directly or second-hand, to safely interact with other potential dissemblers. Groups exceeding the 150 limit move toward Anderson's imagined communities and toward types of centralized social order that can deal decisively with the anonymity that results.

Cheaters, Bullies, and Rulers

It is not hard to see the need fulfilled in increasingly anonymous populations by the rise of central authorities. A strong chief would have the power to punish cheaters, enforce the pooling of resources (taxes) and participation in social ventures (military and labor service), and serve as decisive voice among squabbling subgroups. The book of *1 Samuel* records the shift from incipient chiefdom to strong chiefdom when Samuel reluctantly anoints Saul king of Israel. The immediate rationale is voiced by the people: "we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles" (8:20). However, Samuel voices a perennial concern in such a shift:

> These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your
> sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run

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before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves (1 Samuel 8:10-18).

While a central authority may embolden the social group as a whole, he (and it is nearly always a he) poses a significant threat to the individual's status, resources, and reproductive fitness. The evolutionary dilemma is not significantly different in humans than in other social animals. A submissive male who allows an alpha male to dominate all of the fertile females is extremely unlikely to pass his genetic inheritance forward. Males who work to subvert or directly oppose such dominance, either through multi-male coalitions or through conspiracy with females, are far more likely to have offspring.

In fact, anthropologist Christopher Boehm points out that authoritarian hierarchies have more in common with our fellow apes than they do with the small-scale societies of early humans. Boehm has documented the cross-cultural occurrence of a particular ambivalence toward prominent individuals, especially when they become coercive and threaten to subjugate their peers. Overbearing individuals are regularly checked by social leveling mechanisms that serve to create

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what Boehm designates a *reverse dominance hierarchy*. Whereas great apes and monarchic states are ruled by dominant individuals, individuals in the sort of small-scale bands in which our species evolved vigorously protect their autonomy through collective censure of individuals who threaten it.

> Individual dislike of being dominated, reflected in the ethos and reinforced by it, is transformed by small communities into what amounts to social policy. I think it is accurate to call the result a "reverse dominance hierarchy" (Boehm I984, I99I) because, rather than being dominated, the rank and file itself manages to dominate. So-called acephalous societies and even incipient chiefdoms have reverse dominance hierarchies. By contrast, authoritative chiefdoms, kingdoms, and primitive states are not committed to such egalitarian ideals (even though they recognize and deal with power abuse), and therefore they have dominance hierarchies that are "orthodox" in that they follow a pattern shared with our closest phylogenetic "cousins," the African great apes. Compared with both African great apes and other humans at the strong-chiefdom level or higher, human groups committed to egalitarian behavior have gone in an opposite direction. They have done so because followers discovered that by forming a single political coalition they could decisively control the domination proclivities of highly assertive individuals, even their chosen leaders. This political direction was somehow reversed after the invention of agriculture, and an "orthodox" version of social dominance hierarchy reappeared. ("Egalitarian" 236)

This is not to say that egalitarianism evolved for its own sake. Rather, shared ambivalence toward domination by another outweighed the inclination toward dominance by any individual in the band-level societies in which humans lived for the majority of our species' evolution.

Boehm notes that a group's egalitarianism is inversely proportional to its size.

> A "material" factor that seems to correlate universally with absence of such
> leadership is smallness of social scale. . . . Locally autonomous groups in
> which authoritative leadership is suppressed are well known to subdivide at
> a certain basic size, often just a few hundred persons. This takes place not
> just where resources are sparse but even where they are relatively abundant
> and where sedentary life gives everyone a local subsistence investment.
> ("Egalitarian" 236)

Though Boehm implies that it is egalitarianism that causes the group size to remain

small, the Dunbar number may provide an underlying explanation. In a society that

is small enough for every individual to know every other (or at least every other he

or she would need to depend on), coercive authority is unnecessary, and those who

grasp at it are more cheaters than leaders. However, as the population rises above

the number individuals can know by experience or reputation, cheaters might take

advantage of anonymity unless a strong leader enforces pro-social behavior.

Whether egalitarianism causes small group size or vice versa, it is significant that

the two function well together in ways that egalitarianism and large populations do

not, nor do authoritarianism and small groups. This may be due to the fact that the

more intimately a cheater or leader is known, the less power he has to elevate

himself at the expense of others.

The display of above average size, strength, or ability, which implies an

individual's greater importance to the group in defense or acquisition of resources,

naturally empowers that individual disproportionately to his peers. Thus it

behooves the uniquely endowed individual to make his importance known to the

rest. However, we are wary of braggarts who may undervalue the importance of

their fellows and subsequently undervalue their autonomy. With this in mind,

Boehm suggests:

> [O]f equal interest are others with exceptional physical or supernatural
> strength, special abilities in gaining subsistence, or an unusual propensity to
> compete assertively or take other people's lives. This is a study of behaviors
> that control any main political actor whose assertiveness would otherwise
> result in an unusual degree of control over others. ("Egalitarian" 229).

Boehm describes the methods of the Dobe Ju/'hoansi (also known as !Kung) hunters

of the Kalahari for keeping even the most able hunters from using their abilities for

social status. !Kung custom gives credit for a kill to the owner of the arrow used in

felling the animal rather than to the one who shot the arrow or tracked the animal.

Many hunters will return from solo expeditions and describe the prey they provide

to the community as if they found it lying on the ground (Boehm, *Hierarchy in the

Forest*). In the case of the !Kung, it is not an act of piety (no one actually believes

that the animal was simply found by the hunter) but an act of modesty. When

modesty is absent, the reverse dominance hierarchy brings forth its leveling

mechanisms:

> There is great variability among men as to who is responsible for the kills.
> They use two principal mechanisms to keep the best hunters from
> dominating the politics of the camp and monopolizing the women. We have
> seen that they preemptively cut down those who might become arrogantly
> boastful. They also share all large-game meat, helping those who are
> incapacitated or down on their luck, and these customs are enhanced by
> some very practical cultural rules. . . . The fact that the best hunters speak so

modestly, and frequently swap arrows to avoid envy, is a monument to the efficacy of ridicule as an instrument of social control. . . . If they are faced with serious upstartism people like the !Kung will go far beyond ridicule. (*Hierarchy*, 48)

Richard Lee, cited as a source by Boehm, encountered the !Kung reverse dominance hierarchy first-hand (183-188). During his fieldwork, Lee had earned a reputation as a miser for not sharing the provisions he brought with him. At Christmas, he hoped to improve his reputation by purchasing the healthiest ox he could find to slaughter for a Christmas feast. Finding an ox which he calculated would provide four pounds of meat for every member of the local !Kung social network (which Lee estimated at 150, publishing before Dunbar's initial studies), Lee reserved the massive animal for the feast. When the !Kung learned of his plans, they referred to the animal as "a bag of bones" though it was larger than any livestock Lee had seen in his time with the !Kung. Others commented that "it was going to be a grim Christmas because there won't be enough meat to go around," and told Lee that he "has lived here for three years and still hasn't learned anything about cattle;" "You'll have to kill it and serve it, I suppose, but don't expect much of a dance to follow"(184). When the custom is finally revealed to Lee, one of the !Kung tells him:

> It is our way. . . . Say there is a Ju/'hoan who has been hunting. He must not come home and announce like a braggart, 'I have killed a big one in the bush!' He must first sit down in silence until I or someone else comes up to his fire and asks, "What did you see today?" He replies quietly, "Ah, I'm no good for hunting. I saw nothing at all, just a little tiny one." Then I smile to myself because I know he has killed something big (187).

When a party of !Kung men follow the successful hunter to the site of the kill to carve it up, they complain that they have wasted their day coming to such a scrawny kill. The hunter is expected to agree with such derision.

The art for understatement has clear parallels in Germanic literature with likely roots preceding the rise of strong chiefdoms or monarchial states. In *Grettis saga*, a much-cited Icelandic analogue of *Beowulf*, Grettir enters a grave mound and fights for his life against an undead *draugr* which has been terrorizing area farms. After defeating his opponent, Grettir staggers back to the farmhouse where he is a guest, carrying with him the treasure that the draugr had been guarding. As he lays the treasure out on his host's table, his host asks him why he can't keep the same hours as everyone else. Grettir replies only, "Many little things happen at night." The only part of the treasure Grettir seems to want for himself is a short sword. His host agrees to give it to him on the condition that "you must prove your prowess before I give you the sword," as if the victory against the *draugr* and the claiming of the sword were not quite enough (*Saga of Grettir the Strong* 40-1).

When Lee asked his !Kung hosts why it was a custom to insult someone who had provided such a vital resource to the community, his interlocutor replied, "Arrogance."

> When a young man kills much meat he comes to think of himself as a chief or a big man, and he thinks of the rest of us as his servants or inferiors. We can't accept this. We refuse one who boasts, for someday his pride will make him kill somebody. So we always speak of his meat as worthless. This way we cool his heart and make him gentle (188).

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These sorts of leveling mechanisms do not seem to be limited to small bands or absolutely egalitarian societies. Even in incipient chiefdoms, if not beyond, the dominant authority figure must demonstrate personal humility as well as competence relevant to his position. In the Icelandic saga of Hrolf Kraki (*Hrólfs saga kraka*), one of the *fornaldarsögur* or "sagas of ancient times," as well as an analogue of *Beowulf* which shares many of its characters, the eponymous king comes much closer to the incipient chieftain than a strong chieftain or feudal king. Though a hereditary king, Hrolf clearly depends on his retinue of champions in order to maintain his rank and kingdom. Early in his reign, Hrolf depends on a band of twelve berserks, warriors characterized by their ferocity and unpredictability. The alliance between Hrolf and the berserks does not resemble the ritual shows of fealty that might be expected in a Carolingian court. Rather, after spending the raiding season pursuing their own designs, the berserks return to Hrolf at midwinter with a display that is less than submissive.

> Upon returning to the king's guard, it was their custom to challenge each and every man. They begin with the king, asking him if he considers himself their equal. The king answers, "That is difficult to say with men who are as valiant as you are. You have distinguished yourselves in battles and bloodlettings with many peoples in the southern regions of the world as well as here in the North." The king answers in this way, more from courage than from fear, because he knows their minds, and they have won great victories for him. (*Saga of Hrolf Kraki*, ch. 24, p. 53)

The autonomy of the berserks is guaranteed as much by their coalition as by their strength. As Boehm observed, anti-authoritarian tendencies are only relevant if

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they are shared and acted upon. The berserks' custom bears all the marks of a ritual

of status demarcation in an egalitarian society. The king demonstrates modesty and

foresight, and the berserks display the collective militant strength on which their

social status depends as well as the autonomy that strength ensures.

Parallel rituals are common in anthropological literature. In 1968,

anthropologist Napoleon Chagnan documented a ritual feast by which two warring

bands of Yanomamo, natives of southern Venezuela and northern Brazil, came

together to resolve hostilities and unite against common enemies. The visiting band

is welcomed into the camp of their erstwhile enemies who perform a war dance

simulating actual attack. "The visitors remain motionless in the hammocks while

Krihisiwa's dancers try to intimidate them. Everyone knows that this is the point

when treacherous hosts could murder their guests. But the guests must not show

any emotion or fear for true men, Yanomamo, are fierce" (Chagnon & Asch). Though

acted between rival bands, the ceremonial show of force has the same message as

the berserks show before Hrolf: "We could kill you, but we won't."   This is the exact

opposite of the displays expected by an authoritarian monarch: bowing the head

and thus bearing the neck as if to say "You could kill me, but please don't."

Hrolf's court is far from egalitarian. The king's retinue jockey for seats

nearest to the king to indicate their elevated status in comparison with those who

must sit further away. However, submission to the king cannot be taken for granted.

Rather, the whole court acts as a coalition which is able to advance the interests of

each of its members. Like the "head man" of a tribe in Service's scheme, Hrolf's

status is dependent on his own demonstration of ability, and the power of his

command is relative. When the king learns that the berserks continue in their

practice of throwing leftover bones at a scrawny farm boy named Hott, he reminds

them, "It is a bad habit that you have adopted, throwing bones at innocent men. It

brings dishonor to me and shame to you. I have repeatedly spoken to you about this

matter, but you have paid no attention" (*Hrolf*, ch. 23, p. 49). Though the king's

honor is tarnished by the act, he seems to have no power to stop the matter and is

limited to reasoning with his subjects. The king is only able to maintain his position

through his application of theory-of-mind. He knows that he needs the berserks to

protect him and advance his own influence over others, but he knows that he cannot

be seen to esteem himself over them. In this, we see the early stages of more

centralized authority, but we see it confronted by reverse dominance. The berserks,

as with any king's retinue, serve as the barrier between the ascendant authority and

the leveling mechanisms which always threaten to reemerge.

Deferred Authoritarianism: the Unapproachable Superior

If the majority of individuals in a society possess an ambivalence toward the

emergeance of centralized leadership, the optimum model would be a society with a

genuinely benevolent chief. In reality, unfortunately, as Winston Churchill famously

noted, power corrupts. However, the establishment of an authority beyond

reproach—literally too distant for his faults to be observed or for his subordinates

to censure him—would serve as the next best thing to the untenable model of a

benevolent dictatorship.

It is worth emphasizing that people who exhibit egalitarian behavior are not opposed to leadership per se; indeed, they value it so long as the benefits outweigh the penalties. In discussing the Baruya's execution of a man whose high status went to his head, Godelier (1986:109-10) says that "differences between individuals are only permitted . . . insofar as they work for the common good." This statement may well provide the key to how egalitarian political behavior can coexist with a big-man type of society, since with respect to rivalry between groups a big man's prestige rubs off on those associated with him. Such coexistence, also identifiable in incipient chiefdoms, provides a likely basis for conflict, but it also contains the seeds of a nonegalitarian political arrangement, one in which the benefits of further domination may seem worthwhile to the main political actors (Boehm, "Egalitarian," 237).

Both Caesar and Tacitus record a similar egalitarianism in their Germanic contemporaries—an egalitarianism which the Romans sought to undermine as a means of cultural assimilation.

The Romans themselves encouraged kingship. They supported whatever nascent royal authority they found among their barbarian allies, perhaps sometimes even creating kingship where it did not exist before. . . The Romans wanted a reliable and efficient system for managing the independent, loosely organized tribes. They thus supplied the wealth and weapons which made possible not only the control of one allied tribe over its neighbors but also, as important, the firm rule of a friendly chief over the clans of his fellow-tribesmen (Davis 19).

Caesar relates several stories in which Romans were invited to conquest by status-seeking locals who hoped to become their colonial legates. He says of the Gallic Treveri, "Two rivals were struggling there for supremacy – Indutiomarus and

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Cingetorix. As soon as news came of Caesar's approach with the legions, Cingetorix

presented himself, assured Caesar that he and all his followers would remain loyal

to the Roman alliance"(5.3, p. 106). After Caesar accepted the offer, other Treveri,

which Caesar refers to as "other leaders of the tribe," and eventually Indutiomarus,

himself, sought a similar alliance. The presence of "other leaders," indicates that,

though Indutiomarus and Cingetorix were two powerful leaders of the Treveri with

undeniable personal ambition, they did not occupy anything like a kingship.

Cingetorix was willing to submit to a foreign hierarchy in order to secure a position

for himself in his own community which would have been untenable without Roman

military alliance. Similarly, Dumnorix, a leader of the Aedui and voluntary ally of the

Romans, "had said in the Aeduan council that Caesar had offered to make him king

of the tribe—a statement that was much resented by the Aedui, although they dared

not protest to Caesar" (5.6, p. 107). Ironically, when this same Dumnorix defied

Caesar's orders and fled, he defied the cavalry detachment sent to capture him by

"shouting over and over again that he was a free man and a citizen of a free state"

(5.7, p. 108). It seems that Dumnorix, though quite aware of how he could use the

foreign alliance to secure his own power over his council-governed society, did not

yet grasp the fact that he, himself, was expected to submit without question.

Early medieval Germanic courts, like that of Hrolf, increasingly took the form

of a strong chiefdom. Craig Davis, drawing from work by Wallace-Hadrill,

documents the emergence of small, chief-dominated war bands under Roman

colonial organization:

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Within these new confederations developed a special military clique or *comitatus*, a band of professional warriors personally attached to the emergent war-chief and directly dependent upon his bounty for their livelihood. The *comitatus* replaced the old hastily assembled and readily dispersed war-party of earlier times. In effect, it functioned as a standing strike force ideally capable, as the *Beowulf*-poet would later emphasize, of deployment against external enemies on an instant's notice (lines 1246-50). Internally, the *comitatus* was a "cross-cutting institution" (Miller, *Kings and Kinsmen* 266—67) and worked against kinship structures in several ways. The old assemblies of tribal elders had enjoyed no executive power. Their judgments on clan-feuds and other intratribal matters had the same force as decisions by the International Court at the Hague: compliance was voluntary, enforcement the responsibility of the plaintiff and his kinsmen (cf. Lewis, *Social Anthropology* 343—44). A successful war-chief, however, in the company of his armed retinue, could impose his will on an assembly whether he had obtained general consensus or not; and he could enforce or ignore any judgment he wished (19-20).

The kinship structures Davis describes resemble the incipient chiefdoms described by Boehm, characterized by inherited status but limited in their influence over the constituent clans. The emergence of a singular head of the *comitatus* matches the strong chieftainship described by Boehm, in that it was "based upon war-service and the accumulation of moveable wealth—treasure, cattle, slaves. It was democratically open to parvenus, soldiers of fortune who fought simply for gain, at the same time that it rendered the society as a whole more hierarchical by separating full-time warriors from ordinary tribesmen"(20). However, in its mobility, openness to outsiders, and small size, the comitatus resembled the band level of social organization described by Service except that, rather than hunting and

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gathering, it was primarily occupied with militarism. This is significant because the egalitarianism of the band depended on the fact that every member was largely self-reliant—he could hunt on his own, gather food, thatch arrows, craft baskets and clothes, etc. Without the ability to provide for themselves, individual members of the comitatus depended on their leader to secure resources, either through political alliance or strategic raiding. This does not mean that they would simply submit to whoever offered to step into this role, as it is likely any one of them could fancy himself equally capable of it. In a small group, each is likely to know the weaknesses of his leader and use that knowledge as a check on status, as do Hrolf's berserks.

As Dumnorix recognized, an individual could exploit his alliance with a higher and more remote authority, such as Julius Caesar, to counteract his local society's leveling mechanisms. The thing hunter-gatherer bands use to keep bullies in check—insult, awareness of their own limitations, and, ultimately, group retaliation—is removed as populations grow and caste barriers are erected. The more removed the king, the more removed from criticism. If his personal weakness is hidden from his subjects, his vulnerability to the antiauthoritarian sentiment is reduced. Hence, the local authoritarian ruler is protected by the unfalsified power of a deferred authority who may retaliate if his legate is not obeyed. This appeal to a higher power functions clearly enough in the borderlands of an empire such as the Roman or Carolingian.

When a group is removed from the threat of imperial enforcement of hierarchy, it is likely to "devolve" into a more egalitarian collection of cognitively

manageable social networks. Such was the case when Iceland was settled by those who opposed Harald Fairhair's subjugation of Norway. Harald's rise to intertribal rule was an innovation in Scandinavia, and it provoked Boehm's *reverse dominance hierarchy* into action. However, Harald was able to maintain enough self-seeking retainers to defeat this opposition by force, at which point the incipient chiefs resorted to fission by fleeing to Iceland, the British isles, and elsewhere. Realizing that this, too, threatened his rule, Harald sought to prevent this fission by subjugating or killing these men abroad (Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* 82-3).

Jesse Byock argues that during Iceland's first century, "the evolutionary machinery was in many ways running in reverse."

> Icelandic institutions eliminated a significant number of the roles played by elites and overlords. By avoiding the formation of self-perpetuating executive structures, the farmers collectively retained control over coercive power. In doing so they denied would-be elites the crucial state function of monopolizing force. Leadership was limited to local chieftains who often operated like 'big men,' individuals whose authority often was temporary (*Iceland*, 65).

As with the reaction against Harald, fission of retainers rather than exile of upstart despots became the primary leveling mechanism.

> The legal *goði-thingman* bond was created by a voluntary public contract which did not depend upon a geographical base. . . . This relationship provided little sense of either permanency or protection to either leader or follower . . . The *goði* was answerable only to minimal guidelines set by law and to the pressure of public opinion. Possession of all or part of a *goðorð* (the political office of chieftaincy) granted a leader little formal authority

over his followers . . . It appears that a chieftain, in accordance with the *Grágás*, had little power to command a thingman to act against his will. Instead, a chieftain's power rested, to a large degree, on the consent of his followers (*Iceland* 119-20).

Tenth century Iceland was not 11th century England or 6th century Denmark. However, the consistent competition between individual quests for power and reverse dominance hierarchies in Northern Europe attested from Caesar's conquest of Gaul to the settlement of Iceland confirms the cognitive predisposition theorized by Boehm. The only strategy an authoritarian can depend on for long-term guarantee of individual status remains the appeal to a higher authority removed from social leveling mechanisms and capable of violent retaliation against those who show insubordination. In addition to deferring the origin of individual commands beyond the usual modes of censure, this deference to a higher power would likely avoid the signs of self-aggrandizement and the leveling mechanisms that they would trigger by forcing the leader to show modesty—a strategy which would have extended Dumnorix's career had he been willing to submit to Caesar's command. *Beowulf* depicts a time of transition from diffuse to more centralized authority, and it seems to have been composed during a similar transition (Davis).

The Social Function of the Self

If the human brain has evolved to specialize in tracking social relationships, it should not be surprising that it has also evolved to appease the predispositions of those on whom we depend for sustenance, alliance, and procreation. If we can use theory-of-mind to figure out what other people want in an ally or sexual partner, we

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can manifest just such an appealing individual in ourselves. Neuroscientist Antonio

Damasio divides the conscious self into two parts. The first, the *core self* operates on

instinct and learned behavior as opposed to reflective thought (Damasio 131-67).

We are conscious of what the core self is doing while it is doing it, but we may not

know why. The *whys* of our actions are represented in what Damasio calls the

autobiographical self, the story by which we represent ourselves to ourselves and to

others (195-233). It is not, however, all that you are. It is only the story. We do not

recall everything that happens to us, much less everything that happens around us.

Instead, we selectively cull information from our experiences that conforms to our

preconceived notions of ourselves and our relations to our particular social

environments.

In his book, *The Feeling of What Happens* (43-7, 113-21), Damasio tells the

story of a patient named David who suffered from severe amnesia caused by

widespread neurological damage from a case of encephalitis. David is unable to

learn or recall specific names or facts for more than two minutes. When asked for

specific information, such as a name or a date, David manufactures an answer

through a process known as *confabulation*—a sort of lie that the conscious mind

believes. When asked to name the month, he would reply confidently that it was

February or March, and that it had been quite cold. After walking to the window

and opening the curtains to feel the heat from the bright sunlight, he would

immediately change his story, accurately estimating that it was June. Similarly,

when Damasio entered the room, the two would greet each other warmly and begin

a happily non-specific conversation. When Damasio asked David to identify him,

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David would reply only "you're my friend." When pressed for a name, he would elaborate, "George; you're my cousin, George McKenzie." Damasio had worked with David for nearly twenty years, and the two had developed considerable rapport, though the rapport was not based on conscious recall, much less coded social relations. David interpreted the rapport as a family relation—that they were cousins. Due to his loss of long-term memory, David had also lost the ability to maintain his *autobiographical self* in a fashion we could call accurate. He is relying on an intuitive inference, a belief that is felt, but not explained. In order to provide reflective explanation for the intuited situation, David fabricates (confabulates) a narrative, though he does not recognize that he is doing so. He is not lying. The explanations, "You're my friend—You're my cousin, George McKenzie," are ad hoc confabulations which David believes because they are both familiar types that are compatible with his intuitive inference. Significantly, he only resorts to the confabulation when pressed by Damasio for an explanation. That is to say that his confabulation has a social function which would not be served by admitting "I don't know."

David is not alone in his tendency to confabulate. Neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga has documented numerous cases of patients who, due to a surgical procedure dividing left and right hemispheres of the brain, were unable to use the brain mechanisms dedicated to verbal communication (located in the left hemisphere) to explain information presented only to the right hemisphere. When asked to explain with the left hemisphere visual information that the left hemisphere had not processed, patients either stated that they did not see anything,

or they confabulated situations that made sense but were inaccurate. "When the command 'walk' was flashed to the right hemisphere, the patient stood up from his chair and began to leave the testing van. When asked where he was going, his left brain said, 'I'm going into the house to get a Coke'" (Gazzaniga 13).

The phenomenon of confabulation is not limited to patients with brain lesions, though these allow a more precise study of it. Because Gazzaniga's patients and David had different sorts of brain lesions, they did not know why they behaved the way they did. But these lesions do not explain the confabulation they exhibited. Confabulation does not seem to be the product of brain damage, but a consistent feature of human consciousness designed to create a narrative identity that explains the individual's action in terms acceptable to the immediate social milieu (Hirstein, 2005; Fotopoulou, et al, 2008). That is to say that narrative identity—how we came to be who we are, and what we will become—serves a primarily social function. The function of autobiographical memory is not "Know thyself," but "explain thyself."

Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber have presented a strong case that uniquely human capacity to reason evolved, not as a means of discerning the truth about the world (animals seem to get by decently enough without it), but as a means of convincing our fellow humans to act a certain way relative to ourselves or our strategic aims. "Our hypothesis is that the function of reasoning is argumentative. It is to devise and evaluate arguments intended to persuade. Reasoning so conceived is adaptive given human exceptional dependence on communication and vulnerability to misinformation" (Mercier & Sperber, 2010). Our brains have

evolved to instantly process signs of intelligent life, group affiliation, reciprocity

tallies, vendettas, and the like, milliseconds before the language centers of the brain

begin the search for the appropriate socially-constructed signifiers and justifications.

Language is a function of second-order consciousness, *reflective* consciousness,

consciousness of consciousness, our own and that of others. It adopts, refines, and

applies social conventions after the fact. As David's case illustrates, our reflective

consciousness interprets; it does not control. In other words, the way we think is

not culturally constructed, but the way we tell ourselves we think is. The self is a

narrative—ad hoc, redacted, and subject to multiple authors.

Social Intelligence in Heorot

In a small-scale society, a hunter can be totally modest yet still be highly

regarded as a worthy member of his community, as indicated by Lee's account of

the !Kung custom of belittling one's own contribution. However, as the size of the

social network expands beyond the Dunbar number and anonymity increasingly

blurs the line between fellow and foreigner, one cannot take for granted that his

efforts have been recognized or reciprocated. In this event, a certain amount of self-

promotion may become necessary to avoid unrequited altruism. Earning a

reputation is earning access to alliance and sustenance, not to mention (as *Beowulf*

rarely does) mating opportunities. Though it may have become increasingly

necessary in the evolutionarily novel situation of large-scale societies, bragging

would nevertheless trigger the evolved predisposition that maintained the

egalitarianism of small scale societies for most of our evolutionary history. As a

result, individuals in an incipient chiefdom would have had to walk a fine line between self-promotion and bragging.

The *Hávamál*, the Old Norse collection of proverbs attributed to Odin, provides the medieval Norseman a wealth of advice on how to walk that line. In it, fame is more prized than wealth, family, or life itself. "Cattle die and kinsmen die, thyself too soon must die, but one thing never, I ween will die, — fair fame of one who has earned" (*Deyr fé, deyja frændr,/ deyr sjalfr it sama,/ ek veit einn, at aldrei deyr:/ dómr um dauðan hvern*, *Hávamál* 75, Bray ed. and trans.). However, many of the poem's proverbs emphasize the importance of modesty and silence, reminding the cautious to "say what is needed or be silent" (*mæli þarft eða þegi, Hávamál* 19).

The import of such sayings resembles the leveling mechanisms of small-scale societies, though a new dimension of censure emerges in increasingly anonymous social milieus. In small-scale societies like the !Kung, group members know the upstart's individual faults and can therefore remind him of them. In an unfamiliar group, the normative potential of ridicule is replaced by that of the potential perils posed by unknown interlocutors. "A wise counseled man will be mild in bearing and use his might in measure, lest when he come his fierce foes among he find others fiercer than he" (Ríki sitt skyli ráðsnotra hverr/ í hófi hafa;/ þá hann þat fiþr, es með frœknum kömr,/ at engi's einna hvatastr" *Hávamál* 64). This advice is paralleled in the *Völsung Saga*. After the shape-shifting dragon, Fafnir, has been mortally wounded by Sigurd, he recounts to the hero the strategy which he had employed effectively until that day:

Ek bar egiſſhialm yfir ollvm folke siþan ek la a arfe minnſ broðurſ ok sva fnyſta ek eitri alla vegha fra mer ibrott at einghe þoðe at koma I nad mer ok einghe vopn hreddvmzt ek ok alldri fann ek sva margann mann fyrir mer at ek þettumzt eigi miklv ſterkare enn allir voru hreððir vid mik.

Ever since I began guarding my brother's inheritance, I have been a terror to all men. I snorted venom in every direction so no one dared come near me. I feared no weapon, and, even though I have faced many men, I have never doubted that I was far stronger than all of them together. They were all terrified of me.

   (*Vǫlsung saga*, Grimstad ed. and trans., 140-1).

Sigurd replies, "The terror that you described makes few victorious . . . for anyone who encounters many is bound to find out, sooner or later, that no one is invincible" (*sa ęgiſſ hialmr er þu ſagðir fra gefr fám sigr þviat hverr ſa er med mavrgum kemr ma þat finna eitthvert ſinn at einge er einna hvataztr*; 140-1). In the mythic case of Fafnir, it might have been a generally safe bet that taking the form of a dragon could enable the hoarding of wealth despite most attempts at coalitional reprisal. Though Sigurd dealt the dragon his death blow, he was put to the task by Regin, Fafnir's own brother, and strategically counseled by Odin; thus we may refer to the act as a coalitional effort. The role of Odin, who appears to Sigurd in disguise at times when the young hero must make strategic dicisions (e.g. choosing his horse, digging the pit from which to attack Fafnir, etc.), as adviser both to Sigurd within the narrative of the *Völsung Saga* and to the Northern world more generally as indicated in the *Hávamál*, places the god's agency heavily within the realm of strategic social navigation.

The *Hávamál* acknowledges the potential of ridicule to serve as a means of social leveling. However, it must remain a coalitional practice, since mocking may be employed by the upstart strategically against those he sees as rivals of his own influence. Thus, "An unintelligent man, and ill-natured, jeers at everything. This he does not know—what he needed to know—that he's not deficient in faults." (*Hávamál* 22, "[*Ósniallr*] *maðr/ ok illa skapi/ hlær at hvívetna,/ hitki hann veit/ —er hann vita þyrpti—/ at hann er[a] vamma vanr*," Dronke ed. and trans., p. 7; Bray uses *Vesall* for *Ósniallr*). The caution is not against jeering, but jeering at everything.

As tribes merge, whether they take the form of chiefdoms or incipient democracies such as that of 10th century Iceland, the means of social leveling necessarily change form. Tact is required for those who would chastise another as well as those who might otherwise appear too arrogant. The full extent of any particular coalition is not always evident. Acting in accord with the instincts that functioned well in small-scale societies could set off a perpetual cycle of vengeance between competing tribes in an inter-tribal confederation.

Beowulf, *Lofgeornost*

Beowulf's social world is characterized by a similarly fine line between encouragement to fame and censure of bragging. The last word of the poem describes the eponymous hero as *lofgeornost*, "the most eager for fame." Some scholars have called this a condemnation by the poet of Beowulf's hubris (Fjardo-Acosta). The last line follows shortly after Beowulf's death, the result of a battle with a dragon that might have been more practically accomplished by a larger force

of men-at-arms. In his long speech foreshadowing the fall of the Geats, Wiglaf, the only thane to aid his aged king in the battle, laments that Beowulf's eagerness to fight the dragon and his resulting death will bring more harm than good to the Geats once hostile nations hear that they are leaderless (3074-84). However, he also acknowledges that it is Beowulf's reputation as a warrior that has kept these potential invaders at bay.

The context of *lofgeornost* in the last line not only describes Beowulf as eager for fame, but as one who was known as being eager for fame—that is, his eagerness was part of his fame. "They said that, out of all the kings in the world, he was the mildest and most gentle of men, the kindest to his people, and the most eager for fame" (*cwǣdon þæt hē wǣre wyruldcyning[a]/ manna mildust ond mon(ðw)ǣrust,/ lēodum līðost ond lofġeornost*; 3180-2). It is unlikely that such terms as "mildest of men," "most gentle," or "kindest" would preface an accusation of hubris. If Beowulf's desire for fame led to his downfall, it also served as one of the traits which made him as a character and, therefore, enabled the action of the poem.

We may take a cue from the coast warden who confronts Beowulf upon his arrival to the Danish coast. "A sharp shield-warrior must discern between two things—words and deeds—if he thinks well" ("*'Ǣġhwæþres sceal/ scearp scyldwiga ġescad witan,/ worda ond worca, se þe wel þenċeð*," 287-9). The eagerness for fame which characterizes Beowulf is one that is based on his deeds and others' words. As a motivating factor, the desire for fame is mostly commended throughout the poem.

The caution against bragging differs in that it is a caution against praising oneself, especially where the deed does not warrant the description.

The desire for fame is encouraged more often than not throughout the poem. Before turning the hall over to Beowulf for the night, Hrothgar reminds him to "Think of glory and show mighty courage," ("*ġemyne mǣrþo, mæġenellen cyð* 659). After his success, Hrothgar commends him by saying, "Now you, yourself, have done such deeds that your fame will endure always and forever" ("*Þū þē self hafast/ dǣdum ġefremed þæt þīn [dōm] lyfað/ āwa tō alder*" 953b-55a). Likewise, as Wiglaf comes to Beowulf's aid against the dragon, he encourages his king: "Dear Beowulf, do what in your youth you said you would, never let your fame diminish as long as you live" ("*Lēofa Bīowulf, lǣst eall tela,/ swā ðu on ġeoguðfēore ġeāra ġecwǣde/ þæt ðū ne ālǣte be ðē lifiġendum/ dōm gedrēosan*" 2663-66b). Desire for fame is not the only motivation for action, but it is acknowledged as a motivation superior to need. Before he know's Beowulf's identity, Wulfgar, Hrothgar's herald, comments, "I think it for pride and hardiness, and not due to exile, that you have sought Hrothgar"("*Wēn' iċ þæt ġē for wlenċo, nalles for wrǣcsīðum,/ ac for hiġeþrymmum Hrōðgār sōhton*" 338-9). After Grendel's mother kills Æschere, Beowulf, himself, consoles Hrothgar in terms very close to *Hávamál* 75: "Each of us will continue to wait for the end of life in this world. Let him who can strive for glory before death. That is the best afterward for those bereft of life"("*Ūre ǣġhwylċ sceal ende ġebīdan/ worolde līfes; wyrċe sē þe mōte/ dōmes ǣr dēaþe; þæt bið drihtguman/ unlifġendum æfter sēlest*" 1384-9).

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Whereas the familiarity of individuals in small-scale soceieties ensured that, at least in large part, an individual's accomplishments would be known by most of those with whom that individual interacted and upon whom he depended, the increasing anonymity of individuals in a chiefdom may have jeopardized the accomplished individual's opportunities for reciprocity. Even in an incipient chiefdom, the resources controlled by the chief were circulated primarily among his *comitatus*—his military buffer against a reverse dominance hieararchy. This would make membership in the comitatus, or even the chance to serve a chieftain, advantageous to any who could provide service. Since many would, consequently, seek to enter the emerging military aristocracy, and since the chieftain would be expected to reward all who served him, he would need to show discernment in those whom he allowed to serve him.

When Beowulf comes to Heorot, he must make himself known by his lineage, home, and, not least, his accomplishments, as he is allowed to pass deeper into the concentric circles of social intimacy with the Danes. First, the coast guard demands: "Now I must know your lineage before you go beyond here, unless as false spies you go further into Danish lands"("*Nū iċ ēower sceal/ frumcyn witan, ær ġē fyr heonan,/ lēasscēaweras, on land Dena/ furþur fēran*" 251b-54a). Because he recognizes the fact that they are a foreign comitatus in military array, the warden must quickly categorize them by group-alliance. From there, they pass on to Heorot, where their kinship is questioned by Wulfgar, Hrothgar's herald. At this point, still unidentified beyond their affiliation with Hygelac, they must depend on Wulfgar as an intermediary rather than speaking to Hrothgar directly. Only when Hrothgar

reveals his familiarity with Beowulf, both that he knew him as a boy and that he knows of his accomplishments since, are the Geats allowed to approach and speak to Hrothgar directly.

Though Hrothgar knew Beowulf as a child, we are told that early in his life, the hero had been a bit of a slacker (2183b-88a). It is due to the fame earned later that Beowulf is welcomed in Heorot.

> *Ðonne sæġdon þæt   sǣlīþende,*
> *þā ðe ġifsceattas   Ġeata fyredon*
> *þyder tō þance,   þæt hē þritiġes*
> *manna mæġencræft   on his mundgripe*
> *heaþorōf hæbbe. . . .*
> 　　　　　　　　*. . . Iċ þǣm gōdan sceal*
> *for his mōdþræce   madmas bēodan.*
> Reliable seafarers, those who brought the Geats money and goods in thanks, have told me that he has the strength of thirty men, strong in battle, in his strength of hand. . . . To this good man I shall offer treasures for his true courage. (377-81a, 384b-85)

It is no coincidence that Hrothgar mentions gift-exchange immediately after acknowledging Beowulf's reputation. In permitting Beowulf to enter the hall and act on his behalf, Hrothgar is accepting him into an exchange community.

The impact of an individual's social identity in creating access to exchange relationships, as discussed above, makes the cultivation of the autobiographical self a selection advantage. As the complexity of the social world increases, the individual must craft his or her own autobiographical self to accord with the social

exchange communities he or she interacts with. Beowulf enters with the advantage

that his reputation precedes him, but he must carefully manage his persona to both

prove his worth as a thane (and recipient of resources) and avoid appearing as a

threat to the social equilibrium of Heorot. In his first dialogue with Hrothgar,

Beowulf describes his past battles with giants and nicors as prologue to his intended

combat with Grendel. By declaring his intention, he creates an ad hoc identity for

himself as the match to the scourge of Heorot. He specifies those elements of his

past that are directly relevant to the unaccomplished event. He establishes himself

as the *type* of person who would defeat Grendel before he becomes *the* person who

does defeat Grendel. If he maintains the narrative he has begun in his introduction,

he does it as a performance of the script he, himself, has drafted. This is not to say

that he takes victory as the foregone conclusion. He acknowledges the potential for

a grisly defeat which both demonstrates his grasp of the gravity of the situation and

allows him to maintain control of how his story is told even if he cannot accomplish

the action he proposes. He assures Hrothgar that he will not have to see to his

burial come victory or defeat, for if he loses, his body will be torn to pieces and

devoured by Grendel. Even in this outcome, Beowulf suffers no public shame, and in

the recitation of this outcome, he exhibits his acceptance of a fate that would evoke

self-preservation in others.

While Beowulf's physical size and past accomplishments enable his access to

the social world of Heorot, he also poses a potential threat to that social order.

Hrothgar and his thanes have been overpowered in the one place where they should

be the most secure. By declaring his intention to kill Grendel, he is implicitly

declaring his martial superiority to the Danes collectively and Hrothgar in particular. Unferth, in particular, feels his own social dislocation at Beowulf's arrival, and responds by attacking the story upon which Beowulf's social status and potential action depend. His challenge comes not in reference to the impending trial, but in reference to Beowulf's identity narrative. He asks,

> *Eart þū se Bēowulf,   se þe wið Brecan wunne*
> *on sīdne sǣ   ymb sund flite,*
> *ðǣr ġit for wlenċe   wada cunnedon*
> *ond for dolġilpe   on dēop wæter*
> *aldrum nēþdon?*
> Are you the Beowulf who strove with Breca on the open sea in a swimming race? There for pride you tested the waters and for brash boasts you risked your life in the deep water. (504-510a)

Though *lofgeornost* may carry positive connotations, Unferth chooses terms "for wlenċe…ond for dolġilpe" (508-9) which frame the story in terms of the sort of arrogance which is both counter-productive and indicative of an individual who would place his own dominance above the good of his group.

The narration of the poem is unambiguous in asserting that Unferth's motivation is, itself, overweening pride.

> *Wæs him Bēowulfes sīð,*
> *mōdġes merefaran,   miċel æfþunca,*
> *forþon þe hē ne ūþe   þæt ǣniġ ōðer man*
> *ǣfre mǣrða þon mā   middanġeardes*

ġehēdde under heofenum   þonne hē sylfa.

This quest of Beowulf's, the brave sea-farer, was a great annoyance

to Unferth, since he did not think that any other man on earth, under the

heavens, could achieve more fame than he, himself. (501b-505)

In these terms, it is not only the deeds which are the object of Unferth's jealousy, but

the desire for glory as a virtue in itself—a virtue publicly exhibited by actions rather

than by declaration.

Recalling the coast guard's differentiation between words and deeds,

Beowulf replies by bringing Unferth's identity narrative into play:

Nō iċ wiht fram þē
swylcra searonīða   secgan hȳrde,
billa brōgan.   Breca nǣfre ġīt
æt heaðolāce,   nē ġehwæþer inċer,
swā dēorliċe   dǣd gefremede
fāgum sweordum.

I have never heard anything about you in such deadly straights, sword rages.

In the play of battle neither you nor Breca, with a fine sword, has done a deed

as bold or daring. (581b-6a)

Beowulf goes on to connect coming events to individual backstory:

Secge iċ þē tō sōðe,   sunu Ecglāfes,
þæt nǣfre Gre[n]del swā fela   gryra ġefremede,
atol ǣġlǣċa,   ealdre þīnum,
hȳnðo on Heorote,   ġif þīn hiġe wǣre,
sefa swā searogrim,   swā þū self talast.

I say in truth, son of Ecglaf, Grendel, that awesome terror, never would have

caused such havoc or humiliation in Heorot against your lord, if your courage

and spirit were as fierce as you yourself say they are. (590-4)

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Further, Beowulf reminds Unferth, publicly, of his own past act of fratricide—an act that not only violates reflective historical norms but exploits the evolved predisposition to familial cohesion.   As many scholars, including Tolkien and Klaeber, have noted, it is the act of fratricide which defines Cain and, vicariously, Grendel and his mother as Cain's descendants. What has received less attention is that fratricide is the one particular act that God is said to judge. Beowulf tells Unferth, "you became your brothers' murderer, your next of kin. For that you will suffer punishment in hell, no matter how sharp your wits" (*ðū þīnum brōðrum tō banan wurde,/ hēafodmǣgum; þæs þū in helle scealt/ werhðo drēogan, þēah þīn wit duge*; 587-9). At the end of his life, as Beowulf lies mortally wounded and reflects on his life, he only mentions one crime that could condemn him: "For all that I may have some joy, though sick with life's wounds, because the ruler of men will not charge me with the murder of my own kinsmen, when my life goes out from my body"("*Iċ ðæs ealles mæġ/ feorhbennum sēoc ġefēan habban;/ forðām mē wītan ne ðearf waldend fīra/ morðorbealo māga, þonne mīn sceaceð/ līf of līce*" 2739b-43a). In limiting God's judicial relevance to the judgment of kin-slaying, the poem differs significantly from other Old English works such as the *Christ* poem or the two *Soul and Body* poems.

In the verbal sparring between Beowulf and Unferth, past is more than prologue. It is identity. An individual's past actions are indicative of future actions, and, as we saw with Hrothgar's promise to share treasure with Beowulf upon recounting his fame, future actions merit a share in resources and an elevation in status. To control an individual's social power, one challenges not only his potential

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for accomplishments yet to be done, but the story by which he his known. Each aspersion Unferth makes is more than an *ad hominem* attack. It is an attempt at social leveling aimed at rival who is perceived as a threat despite—or precisely because of—the shared goal of Grendel's defeat.

Hrothgar, too, stands to lose a great deal of status upon Beowulf's success. Hrothgar's epithet, "*helm Scyldinga*," "helmet (or protector) of Scydings" (371, 456, 1321), has become unsustainable after Grendel's unchecked rampage.   If Hrothgar wishes to use Beowulf's desire for glory as a means to motivate him to achieve the mutually beneficial deed, he would not want to resort to the sort of immediate social leveling through ridicule that Unferth employs. The old king needs Beowulf to be confident to the point of heedlessness, but his need is a potential weakness. As with any relationship between chieftain and thane, Hrothgar will be expected to pay Beowulf in treasure for his deeds, but terms have not been set. With such a grave threat he will be faced with finding an equally great means of leveling the exchange.

It is possibly for this reason that Hrothgar also takes an interest in Beowulf's autobiographical self. He adds to Beowulf's backstory a motive which Beowulf, himself, did not mention—and one which significantly elevates Hrothgar's status in the tallies of social reciprocity.   Immediately after Beowulf initially declares his intention to fight Grendel and publicly acknowledges that he might be torn to pieces as a result, Hrothgar responds, "For past protection, my friend Beowulf, and for old favors, you have sought us out" ("*For ƕfyhtum þū, wine mīn Bēowulf,/ ond for ārstafum ūsiċ sōhtest*" 456-72). He goes on to describe a past event in which Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow, killed a man, resulting in his exile and the possibility of

war between the Geats and Wylfings. Hrothgar settled the conflict by sending a boatload of treasure to the Wylfings, thus allowing Ecgtheow to return to Geatland, where he married the king's daughter thereby bringing Beowulf into the world. If not for Hrothgar's generosity, Beowulf would not exist. This information alters Beowulf's narrative identity by changing his motivation from one of self-initiated heroism to that of the repayment of a family debt. Rather than an act of selfless heroism, we now see an unreciprocated act of kindness initiated by Hrothgar. According to the revised identity narrative, Hrothgar will not be as significantly in Beowulf's debt after the defeat of Grendel. Rather he will occupy the role of a generous benefactor who has finally received reciprocity. The story of the debt of Ecgtheow has been stated publicly by a figure of high social status, and it is not an insult like Unferth's, which one would intuitively seek to dispute in order to save face.

Hrothgar's motivation in reinterpreting Beowulf's backstory sheds light on the motivations of the author of the poem's Christian coloring. To find a role for God in the poem, a reason to give God credit for what is clearly Beowulf's accomplishment, several lines in the poem reify Beowulf's strength as a gift of God. Like Hrothgar's insertion of his own generosity into Beowulf's past as a causal factor in his present task, the theological correction of the otherwise mythic story must remove Beowulf's autonomy and make the hero, on whom the poem depends, himself dependent. I will return to this undermining of the hero's autonomy outside the narrative in the following chapter. Within the narrative, the king's insertion of

Beowulf's debt acts a means of social leveling which protects Hrothgar's status as "protector of Scyldings."

Beowulf's responds to the tension his presence has created within the social world of Heorot by restraining the boasts he has just made in response to Unferth. As Boehm's theory predicts, any self-promotion is likely to elicit hostility from other group members. If a minimum of self-promotion is necessary against the anonymity of populous chiefdoms, it must be mixed with a minimum of modesty—modesty which must be displayed to appease those who might feel threatened. Beowulf, even as he meets Unferth's derision with boasting, follows with a renunciation of boasting: "In the play of battle neither you nor Breca, with a fine sword, has done a deed as bold or daring. I do not boast of it!"(*nō iċ þæs [fela] ġylpe*; 586b). *Gylpe*, the boasting Beowulf claims he does not employ, is the same negative characterization of boasting by which Unferth had criticized Beowulf in 509a (*dol-gilpe*). Of the motivation for his swimming match with Breca, he admits, "We were just boys when we agreed in our boasts," but tacitly apologizes when he repeats, "we were both still in our youth" ("*Wit þæt ġecwǣdon cnihtwesende/ ond ġebēotedon – wǣron begen þa git/ on geogoðfeore*" 535-7b).

Though his accomplishments are frequently attributed to his own motivation for glory, in this moment Beowulf explains his mission as the result of a group decision based on his own attributes as these were described by others, rather than his own boast:

Þā mē þæt ġelǣrdon   lēode mine

þā sēlestan,   snotere ċeorlas,

þēoden Hrōðgār,   þæt iċ þē sōhte,

forþan hīe mæġenes cræft   mīn[n]e cūþon,

selfe ofersāwon,   ðā iċ of searwum cwōm,

fāh from fēondum,   þǣr iċ fīfe ġeband,

ȳðde eotena cyn,   ond on ȳðum slog

niceras nihtes,   nearoþearfe drēah,

wræc Wedera nīð   —wean ahsodon—,

forgrand gramum.

Then the best warriors and the wisest men of my own people advised me
that I should seek you out, Lord Hrothgar, because they knew the extent of
my strength; they had seen me, themselves, coming from the fight, stained
with my enemies' blood after I subdued five, slew a tribe of giants, and fought
sea-monsters amidst the waves in the night. I survived that gauntlet,
avenged the Weders' persecution as they asked of me, beset by enemies.
(415-24a).

In these lines, Beowulf walks the narrow space between self-disclosure and

bragging. He cannot assume that Hrothgar and the Danes know about his previous

fights with giants, though such information is quite relevant to the current situation.

However, he has already been provoked into doing quite a bit of boasting. By

describing himself from another's point of view, he demonstrates an admirable level

of social intelligence. Elsewhere, Wiglaf, the only other character in the poem who

describes, in his own words, an action previously described by the narrator, exhibits

ambivalence toward his own boast. Having just scolded the Geats for not showing

the same courage that he himself showed in assisting Beowulf against the dragon, he

follows his account of his own valor by dimishing it.

Iċ him līfwraðe   lȳtle meahte

> *ætġifan æt gūðe,   ond ongan swā þēah*
> *ofer mīn ġemet   mǣ ġes helpan;*
> *symle wæs þȳ sǣmra,   þonne iċ sweorde drep*
> *ferhð ġenīðlan,   fȳr unswīðor*
> *weoll of ġewitte.*

I could only offer him a little life-protection in battle, but nonetheless I offered help to my kinsman beyond my own means; with every strike of my sword our mortal enemy grew weaker, the fire from his mouth less severe. (2877-82a)

The ambivalence toward boasting results in the employment of other hedges, as well. It is in similar descriptions of his own exploits that Beowulf includes references to God, *Wyrd* (fate), and other place-holders for his own agency. In describing, before Hrothgar and Unferth, his sea race with Breca, he comments: "The hostile, scathing fiend drug me down to the ocean floor, held me in his constricting grasp. Yet it was given to me to stab that monster with the point of my sword,"("*Me to grunde teahfah/ feondscaða, fæste hæfde/ grim on grape; hwæþre me gyfeþe wearð/ þæt ic aglæcan orde geræhte,/ hildebille*;" 553b-7a). What or who "gave" him the ability to stab the creature and how an action might be reified and exchanged is unclear, though it allows him to show some humility before his new peers by which he might temper his own autobiographical diplay. Subsequently, he adds: "Wyrd often spares an undoomed man while his courage endures!"("*Wyrd oft nereð/ unfægne eorl, þonne his ellen deah*" 572b-3).

It is conspicuous that Beowulf only refers to God in providential terms when speaking to Hrothgar. Elsewhere in the poem, God is either synonymous with fate or takes the role of an unseen agent akin to Odin in the *Völsung saga*. It might

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require too much speculation to argue that this was the deliberate choice of an author or a feature which took precedence from the actual interactions of non-Christians with Christian kings. Both are possible. Regardless, Beowulf mentions God's assistance when speaking to Hrothgar, but not when recounting his fights to Hygelac. In describing his battles in Grendel's mere to Hrothgar, Beowulf says:

> *Iċ þæt unsōfte   ealdre ġedīġde*
>
> *wiġġe under wætere,   weorc ġenēþde*
>
> *earfoðlīċe;   ætrihte wæs*
>
> *gūð ġetwǽfed,   nymðe meċ god scylde.*
>
> *Ne meahte iċ æt hilde   mid Hruntinge*
>
> *wiht ġewyrċan,   þēah þæt wǽpen duge;*
>
> *ac mē ġeūðe   ylda waldend*
>
> *þæt iċ on wāge ġeseah   wlitiġ hangian*
>
> *eald sweord eacen,   ofost wīsode*
>
> *winiġea lēasum,   þæt iċ ðȳ wǽpne ġebrǽd.*
>
> I did not gently escape that undersea battle with my life. I performed my deed with difficulty. The fight was decided against me at first, but God protected me. I could not use Hrunting for that fight, though that weapon is good; but the ruler of men granted to me that I might see on the wall an old, gigantic sword, shining as it hung. He has often guided the friendless one. So I took that weapon. (1655-64)

Upon his return to Geatland, Beowulf leaves the attribution of divine agency out of his story. He tells his uncle that, though Grendel meant to kill him, "it would not be so once I stood up in anger"("*hyt ne mihte swā,/syððan iċ on yrre uppriht āstōd*" 2091b-92). It should be noted that the point at which the hero stands up is also the turning point in the fight with Grendel's mother, though the narration attributes agency to both God and Beowulf (1554-5, discussed above). This is not to say that

Beowulf shows no modesty before the Geats. In his speech to Hygelac, Beowulf

skips the details of his own actions and focuses on the fact that his fame will be

shared by the Geats as a group: "It is too long to tell how I there repaid the people's

enemy for all his crimes, my prince. I did honor to your people with my actions" ("*Tō*

lang ys tō reċċenne hū i(ċ ð)ām lēodsceaðan/ yfla ġehwylċes ondlēan forġeald;/ þǣr iċ,

þēoden mīn, þīne lēode/ weorðode weorcum" 2093-6a). In both scenarios, Beowulf

tells his own story (displays his autobiographical self) in terms favored by the

particular king. In doing so, he would need to metarepresent the Danes to

understand how they perceived him and what they desired from him in order to

present himself accordingly.

Besides the ambivalence toward bragging, the social customs exhibited in

Beowulf further illustrate Boehm's characterization of the incipient chiefdom in the

comparative egalitarianism within the court. Though the social order is not

dissimilar to the king-and-courtier arrangement of late medieval monarchies, there

are few demonstrations of subordination, and these are as easily interpretable as

acknowledgements of the host-guest relationship or the tempering of perceived

boasting discussed above. The terms used for kings (*cyning, hlaford, dryhten*) are

never used in contexts that imply unrestrained dominance, or the king's freedom

from compensating thanes for their service in objective standards of requital. These

terms of rank are also interspersed with terms describing familial relations or

responsibilities of the king. Both Hrothgar and Beowulf are described as "*wine-*

dryhten" ("friend-lord," Hrothgar: 360, 862, 1183, 1604; Beowulf: 2722, 3175).

Hrothgar is frequently described as "*wine Scyldinga*" ("friend of the

Scyldings/Danes," 30, 148, 170, 350). Their thanes are described as "*winemágas*" ("friend-men," 65). The customs of the court exhibit no prostration or shows of subordination. Though Beowulf must, upon first arrival, speak to Hrothgar via Wulfgar as the king's herald, this may be due to the fact that Beowulf is still unfamiliar to the group. The poem specifies that Wulfgar, himself, speaks to the king eye-to-eye and on equal terms. "He hastily returned to where Hrothgar, old and gray-haired, sat with his band of earls; he boldly went and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the Danish king. He knew the proper custom. Wulfgar spoke to his friend and lord" ("*Hwearf þā hrædlīċe þǣr Hrōðgār sæt/ eald ond anhār mid his eorla ġedriht;/ ēode ellenrōf, þæt hē for eaxlum ġestōd/ Deniġa frean; cūþe hē duguðe þēaw./ Wulfgār maðelode tō his winedrihtne*" 356-60).

Beowulf's relationships to Hrothgar and Hygelac, as well as Wiglaf's relationship to Beowulf, are described in particularly egalitarian terms. In metarepresenting Beowulf's motives, Hrothgar describes himself in saying that, by coming to Heorot, Beowulf sought not a lord (e.g. *hlaford* or *dryhten*), but "a loyal friend" (*holdne wine*, 376b). Beowulf says of his relation to Hygelac, "We are Hygelac's board-companions" ("*We synt Hiġelāces bēodġenēatas*," 342b-3a). When Wiglaf comes to Beowulf's aid, the bond between kinsmen is not differentiated from the bond between king and thane. "They felled the fiend. Their courage took its life and they destroyed it together, the two nobles; So should a man be a thane in need!" (*Fēond ġefyldan ferh ellen wræc,/ ond hī hyne þā bēġen ābroten hæfdon,/ sibæðelingas. Swylċ sceolde secg wesan,/ þeġn æt ðearfe*! 2706-09a).

The relationship between king and thane is of the reciprocal, *do ut des* variety. As is characteristic of the chiefdom, the chief distributes common resources which he thanes both share in and help secure from foreign groups (and, often, the labor class which is no longer able to exert a reverse dominance hierarchy).   The background narrative of Scyld Scefing's son enunciates the expectations of a chief:

> *Bēow wæs brēme   –blǣd wīde sprang—*
> *Scyldes eafera   Scedelandum in.*
> *Swā sceal ġe(ong) guma   gōde ġewyrċean,*
> *fromum feohġiftum   on fæder (bea)rme,*
> *þæt hine on ylde   eft ġewuniġen*
> *wilġesīþas,   þonne wīġ cume,*
> *lēode ġelǣsten;   lofdǣdum sceal*
> *in mǣġþa ġehwǣre   man ġeþeon.*
> Beowulf, son of Scyld, was renowned, his glory spread wide in Scandinavian
> lands. So should a young man bring about good in his father's domain
> through the splendid bestowal of wealth, so that thereafter loyal comrades
> will stand beside him when war comes, the people will support him. By such
> noble deeds a man will prosper in any nation. (22-25)

The king-thane relationship is not based strictly on economic exchange but an exchange community which involved intimate social ties beyond any formal division of labor. The thanes were not easily replaceable the way a modern factory owner might replace one worker with another. In attempting to rally the Geats to support Beowulf against the dragon, Wiglaf evokes the past comraderie of the beer-hall as well as the sharing of treasure:

> *Iċ ðæt mǣl geman,   þǣr wē medu þēgun,*

þonne wē ġehēton   ūssum hlāforde

in bīorsele,   ðē ūs ðās bēagas ġeaf,

þæt wē him ðā gūðġetawa   ġyldan woldon

ġif him þyslicu   þearf ġelumpe,

helmas ond heard sweord.   Ðē hē ūsiċ on herġe ġeċēas

tō ðyssum sīðfate   sylfes willum,

onmunde ūsiċ mǣrða,   ond mē þās māðmas ġeaf,

þē hē ūsiċ gārwīġend   gōde tealde,

hwate helmberend,   þēah ðe hlāford ūs

þis ellenweorc āna āðōhte

tō ġefremmanne,   folces hyrde,

forðām hē manna mǣst   mǣrða ġefremede,

dǣda dollicra.   Nu is se dæġ cumen

þæt ūre mandryhten   mæġenes behōfað,

gōdra gūðrinca;   wutun gongan tō,

helpan hildfruman,   þenden hyt sŷ,

glēdeġesa grim.

I remember the time when we drank mead, when in the beer-hall we made promised our lord, who had given us these rings knowing that we would pay him back for such accoutrements, these helmets and hard swords, if such a need arose. When he chose us for his band for this foray, by his own will, he reminded us of glories and gave me presents because he thought we were good warriors, bold helm bearers, although our lord, as defender of the people, intended to perform this brave deed alone, because he, of all men, had achieved the most glory through dangerous deeds. The day has now come that our kin-lord needs the strength of good warriors. Let us go help the war-chief, though the terrible fire is hot. (2633-50b).

While such gifts bind the thane to king, the thane's service equally binds the king to showing material favor. Beowulf commends Hrothgar's fulfillment of this obligation when speaking to Hygelac:

> Swā se ðēodkyning   þēawum lyfde.
> Nealles iċ ðām lēanum   forloren hæfde,
> mæġnes mēde,   ac hē mē (māðma)s ġeaf,
> sunu Healfdenes,   on (mīn)ne sylfes dōm;
> ðā iċ ðē, beorncyning,   bringan wylle,
> ēstum ġeȳwan.   Ġēn is eall æt ðē
> lissa ġelong;   iċ lȳt hafo,
> hēafodmāga   nefne, Hyġelāc, ðeċ.
> So the people's king lived by good custom. By no means did I lack for rewards to match my might. He paid me, the son of Halfdan, according to my own strength, which I now give to you, war-king, gladly make available. I still depend on your good will. I have few close kinsmen, Hygelac, besides you. (2144-51a)

The treasures given to Beowulf by Hrothgar signify an exchange between two equally magnanimous parties. Hrothgar follows the custom of a good king in rewarding a warrior who has fought a battle for him. Beowulf has earned the reward, and adds to Hrothgar's renown by describing the gifts he distributed to a foreign court. The fact that Beowulf then gives the reward of his own work to his king might seem to indicate that, as Hygelac's subordinate, he was required to show some sort of homage to his superior. However, Beowulf specifies that he bestows Hrothgar's treasure on Hygelac not because it is Hygelac's due, but because "I have few close kinsmen, Hygelac, except for you" ("*iċ lȳt hafo,/ hēafodmāga nefne, Hyġelāc, ðeċ*"; 2150b-51). It is not that a subordinate owes his possessions to his superior,

but that an individual is expected to share with his close kin (heafod-maga)—an ethic of close-knit, egalitarian, band-level societies. The narration makes a *swa sceal* teaching moment of the scene, repeating the designation of "kinsman" ("*mæg*"): "so should a kinsman do, never weaving a net of malice for another with secret plots, devising death for close comrades" ("*Swā sceal mǣġ dôn,/nealles inwitnet ōðrum breġdon/ dyrnum cræfte, dēað rēn(ian)/ hondġesteallan*," 2166b-69a).

Hrothgar's Sermon I: Heremod

Hrothgar is affirmed in the narration and by Beowulf to embody the ideal chief. His past victories brought him wealth and renown which he shared with his retainers by building Heorot. "Then military success was given to Hrothgar, glory in battle, so that his friend-kin eagerly obeyed him, until the young band grew into a mighty war company," ("*Þā wæs Hrōðgāre herespēd ġyfen,/ wiġes weorðmynd, þæt him his winemāgas ġeorne hȳrdon, oðð þæt sēo ġeogoð ġewēox magodriht miċel*" 65-66). Hrothgar never neglects to redistribute wealth. "He did not forget his promise; he gave out rings, treasure at the feast" ("*Hē bēot ne ālēh: bēagas dǣlde, sinċ æt symle. Sele hlīfade hēah ond hornġēap*," 80-1). However, it is Beowulf, rather than Hrothgar, who has become the "protector of Scyldings" (*helm Scyldinga*) after the defeat of both Grendel and his mother. Presenting the head of Grendel to Hrothgar, Beowulf no longer needs to boast. Everyone in the court is as aware of Beowulf's accomplishment as the fact that Hrothgar and all of the Danes failed in that same task.

After examining the tokens of Beowulf's victory, especially the engraved

sword hilt, Hrothgar acknowledges the level social ground he shares with Beowulf

by calling the hero "my friend," ("*wine mín Béowulf*" 1704), just as he did after

Beowulf's initial declaration of intent to fight Grendel (456). He assures Beowulf

that he has won the glory which motivated his feat, and simultaneously affirms that,

despite his unequaled abilities, he is not a threat to his weaker peers:

> *Blǣd is ārǣred*
> *ġeond wīdwegas,   wine mīn Bēowulf,*
> *ðīn ofer þēoda ġehwylċe.   Eal þū hit ġeþyldum healdest,*
> *mæġen mid mōdes snyttrum.   Iċ þē sceal mīne ġelǣstan*
> *frēode, swā wit furðum sprǣcon.   Ðū scealt tō frōfre weorþan*
> *eal langtwīdiġ   lēodum þīnum,*
> *hæleðum tō helpe.*
> Your glory has spread throughout the world, my friend Beowulf, over every
> people; you take it all in stride and balance power with wisdom. I will
> perform an act of friendship for you, as we agreed before. You will be a
> comfort forever for your own people, help of heroes. (1705-9a)

By this account, Beowulf would make an ideal member of any small-scale society,

from egalitarian band to incipient chiefdom. It is at this point that Hrothgar tells the

story of Heremod, an arrogant and greedy king who killed his own thanes. As

Heremod grew (geweox) in personal power, he turned against his own men:

> *Ne ġeweox hē him tō willan,   ac tō wælfealle*
> *ond tō dēaðcwalum   Deniġa lēodum;*
> *brēat bolgenmōd   bēodġenēatas,*
> *eaxlġesteallan,   oþ þæt hē āna hwearf,*

mǣre þēoden,   mondrēamum from.

He grew not for their benefit, but for their destruction and the annihilation of the Danish people. Enraged, he cut down his table-companions, shoulder-companions, until he turned away alone from the joys of men, that famous prince. (1711-15)

The point of comparison is not between Beowulf as king and Heremod as king, since Beowulf is not a king at this point, nor is his inheritance of Hygelac's throne assumed. The comparison is between Heremod and Beowulf as individuals who have the unchecked power to do violence to their companions. The slaying of one's own in-group is not a crime which needs to be explained in order to be condemned. Heremod violated the expectation established for a king's treatment of his thanes as well as for any individual's treatment of his in-group companions. The inclusion of this comparison is hardly necessary if Hrothgar's intent is to commend Beowulf. Comparing the hero to what would seem to be a worst case scenario is hardly a compliment. However, in what follows, we see a shift in conceptions of personal accomplishment and standards of modesty that will mark both the shift from incipient chiefdom to rigid hierarchy as well as the shift from polytheism to monotheism. Hrothgar's story of Heremod contains the basic moral premise expressed in the *Hávamál* and *Volsung saga*—a moral premise rooted in a cognitive predisposition and exhibited globally by small scale societies as documented by Boehm. However, Hrothgar's reasoning for this moral does not invoke the dangers of provoking a stronger foe or the universal feelings that inspire anti-authoritarian coalitions. Instead, he invokes a non-egalitarian exchange relationship in which the individual—every individual—is born into debt.

Ðēah þe hine mihtiġ god   mæġenes wynnum,

eafeþum stēpte,   ofer ealle men

forð ġefremede,   hwæþere him on ferhþe grēow

brēosthord blōdrēow,   nallas bēagas ġeaf

Denum æfter dōme;   drēamlēas ġebād

þæt hē þæs ġewinnes   weorc þrōwade,

lēodbealo longsum.   Ðū þē lǣr be þon,

gumcyste onġit.

Though mighty god had exalted [Heremod] in the bliss of vigor, raised him above other men, yet in his heart grew a blood-ravenous breast-hoard. He gave no rings to the Danes to match their honor; he abided joyless, suffered the misery of war, a protracted affliction to his people. Learn from him; understand virtue! (1716-23a; Fulk, Bjork, & Niles adopt Klaeber's capitalization of God, though the manuscript uses the lower case g).

Hrothgar reifies Heremod's strength and skill at violence as objects which are distributed by a central authority, God, in the same way a chief distributes actual objects of wealth. This means that the treasure won by Heremod was actually won by his application of treasure given by a second-tier chief. Heremod then fails as a middle-level chief by not being as generous with his thanes as his divine lord was with him. Unlike the incipient chiefdom in which chiefs depend on their thanes, and the status of the thane is protected by his ability to serve the chief in feats the chief could not perform alone, the vertical relationship Hrothgar describes resembles the three-level hierarchy of the Roman Empire in which Cingetorix or Dumnorix were able to raise themselves above their peers by becoming the link to the higher authority and source of wealth presented by Julius Caesar.

The narration has already presented this idea of God as prime-giver from which kings receive the wealth they bestow upon their people. Describing Hrothgar's virtues as a king, the narrator states that: "all he distributed to young and old" (71b-72, "*eall ġedǣlan, ġeongum ond ealdum swylċ*"). Rhetorically, this obfuscates the fact that the thanes who receive treasure from the king actually enabled the acquisition of that treasure. With their contributions ignored, the relatively horizontal exchange community becomes a vertical, tiered hierarchy. All distributed wealth comes from above, via the king, and all that the subordinates can do is to pass on that generosity to those in their power. Though they may serve their king and God, the king no longer looks to his thanes as providers. Moreover, there is less potential for censuring the king, and none at all for censuring God. This model of centralized authority fits the model of the feudal king, placing God at the top of the hierarchy as the ultimate emperor who creates and justifies the social stratigraphy beneath him. Such a vertical social order may well have been as familiar to the author and audience at the time of the manuscript's production as it is today. When we translate "*dryhten*" as "king" rather than "chief," we may too easily associate Hrothgar with a later model of feudal king. The prevailing social order depicted in the poem, however, appears much more horizontal, though it exhibits the rhetorical first step toward a feudal hierarchy.

Besides actual material goods, the defining characterists of each individual, and thus that individual's autobiographical self model, are susceptible to being reified and reinterpreted as gifts given by God. Hrothgar continues in his story of Heremod:

> *Iċ þis ġid be þē*
>
> *āwræc wintrum frōd.   Wundor is tō secganṇe*
>
> *hū mihtiġ   god manna cynne*
>
> *þurh sīdne sefan   snyttru bryttað,*
>
> *eard ond eorlscipe;   hē āh ealra ġeweald.*
>
> *Hwīlum hē on lufan   lǣteð hworfan*
>
> *monnes mōdġeþonc   mǣran cynnes,*
>
> *seleð him on ēþle   eorþan wynne*
>
> *tō healdanne,   hlēoburh wera,*
>
> *ġedēð him swā ġewealdeṇe   worolde dǣlas,*
>
> *sīde rīċe,   þæt hē his selfa ne mæġ*
>
> *for his unsnyttrum   ende ġeþenċean.*

I tell this story for you, the wisdom of many winters. It is a wonder to say how mighty god to the race of man through ample spirit deals out wisdom, land and title; he holds all power. Sometimes he permits the mind's thought of a man of great family to wander, gives him joys to hold in his homeland, a stronghold of men, makes broad regions of the earth subject to him, a great kingdom, that he himself cannot see an end to it, in his foolishness. (1723b-34)

Wisdom (*snyttru*), like strength, is no longer a trait but a gift. This conceptual shift fundamentally changes the autobiographical self model possible in one who adopts it. This deference of credit and agency resembles the previous one in which Hrothgar reframed Beowulf's story by adding the story of his gift to Ecgtheow, making Beowulf the debtor rather than the benefactor. Just as, after Hrothgar's story of Ecgtheow, Beowulf looked less like a self-motivated hero and more like a son paying the debts of a father, so too, as the recipient of God's gift of strength,

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Beowulf is merely passing on the agency of another when he risks his life against Grendel.

As with his invocation of Ecgtheow's debt, Hrothgar demonstrates quite a bit of skill at stripping Beowulf of his characteristic virtues even as he praises them. In his parting speech to Hrothgar, Beowulf declares that he will come to Hrothgar if another time of need besets Heorot. Hrothgar responds, "The wise Lord has sent those words into your heart; I have never heard a smarter speech from such a young man. You are strong in might, mature in mind, and wise in words!" (*Þē þā wordcwydas wiġtiġ drihten/ on sefan sende; ne hȳrde iċ snotorlicor/ on swā ġeongum feore guman þingian./ Þū eart mæġenes strang ond on mōde frōd,/ wīs wordcwida*" 1841-45a). Hrothgar praises the words, but only after stating that they did not originate in Beowulf himself. Similarly, the narration reifies Beowulf's characteristic attributes, especially strength, as objects given out by God. "he held battle-ready the generous gift God had given him, the greatest strength of all mankind," ("*hē mancynnes mǣste cræfte/ ġinfæstan ġife, þe him god sealde,/ hēold hildedēor*"; 2181-83a). After Beowulf's defeat before the dragon, the narration surmises: "he was forced, against his will, to find a place of rest elsewhere just as every one of us must give up these loaned days" (*sceolde [ofer] willan wīċ eardian/ elles hwerġen, swā sceal ǣġhwylċ mon/ ālǣtan lǣndagas*; 2589-91a). Not only strength and wisdom, but time is an object to be given.

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Crediting Providence as Pro-Social Signal

Though Hrothgar and the narrator maintain a social model of divine feudalism in which all things originate and flow from God, Beowulf's references to God, as discussed above, occur only in his speeches before Hrothgar and only at times when his words might be interpreted as bragging. The social function of these deferences to God's participation, as well as similar references to Fate, Death, and other abstract agents, are more akin to the !Kung's "finding" a carcass on the hunting ground. Rather than requiring any specifically Christian understanding of a monotheistic cosmos, they meet a cross-cultural cognitive predisposition to avoid the appearance of bragging which might precipitate coalitional censure. To some extent, many invocations of God by Hrothgar and the narrator are limited to discouraging bragging in ways that resemble social leveling mechanisms described by Boehm. They fall far short of the omnipresent god concepts in Christian narratives like Bede's *Life of Cuthbert*. The theological corrections in Bede follow the mundane as well as the miraculous and are identifiable not by the difficulty of their accomplishment but by their utility in forwarding the ministry. In *Beowulf*, God is only cited after-the-fact; never as a motivation for action or a judge of actions (beyond that of fratricide). Characters are not motivated to seek God's will. No one cites God's will as something to which their own agendas should aim. No one looks forward to divine intervention. They are motivated by the quest for personal glory and the glorification of their kin groups, and this motivation is, itself, regarded as a virtue. This would mean that the custom exhibited by Beowulf would differ in purpose than the custom exhibited by Hrothgar and the lines of narration which

insert theologically correct abstractions about God's providence. It is likely that the poem contains vestiges of oral tradition originating in incipient chiefdoms, given the amount of egalitarian social intelligence exhibited in the conversations taking place within Heorot. If certain passages assume a more vertical hierarchy, characteristic of feudalism and Christian occasionalism, this would indicate that these passages originated at a later date.

Regardless of the history of the poem's composition, two distinct social purposes may be served by references to God's agency. On the one hand, attributing Beowulf's actions to God's agency serves the theological tenets of Christian dispensationalism, the belief that God, rather than any other human or supernatural agent, orders the universe. On the other, it serves as a strategy of revealing one's own abilities and accomplishments in a largely anonymous social milieu without triggering evolved predispositions to censure potential upstarts. Reading the poem as a representation of social intelligence at work, we need not give so much weight to the truth value of individual claims by characters or narration. Telling something other than the facts can serve a social purpose and constitute a causal action within a narrative. When Beowulf tells Hrothgar that God decided the outcome of his fight with the Grendel-kin, he represents himself according to the way he perceives Hrothgar to prefer.

CHAPTER V

INGELD, CHRIST, AND BEOWULF

Hierarchy

The shift from lateral community to vertical hierarchy requires a parallel shift in social cognition from metarepresentation to attachment schema. The likely reason for this correlation is the fact that once the population with which one must interact exceeds the Dunbar number, the individual's cognitive resources dedicated to tracking social interactions are overwhelmed and new strategies must be invoked to ensure pro-social behavior from others and signal one's own pro-social behavior to others. This is not to say that the author of *Beowulf*, much less the character of Hrothgar, would need to be aware of this shift. It would likely characterize social interactions, particularly those of the aristocracy, and be so familiar as to be adopted into narrative without special consideration. The fact that social schemas originating both before and after this shift are juxtaposed somewhat incongruously may argue that elements of the poem were composed both before and after such a shift.

In the mythic (as opposed to the monotheistic) conception of the world, gods and humans, ghosts and monsters, although they may differ in attributes, do not differ in the fact that they are the objects of metarepresentation, or, as Byrne and Whiten phrase it, of Machiavellian intelligence. Anthropologists such as Robin Dunbar prefer the designation "social brain hypothesis" due to the negative connotations "Machiavellian" evokes—itself an unfortunate association derived

from a limited and too literal reading of Machiavelli. However, the connotations of self-serving social intelligence were inevitably a factor in the evolution of human intelligence. Those who could fool their fellows into sharing resources while they, themselves, gave little or nothing in return, would stand to have more genetic offspring. In order to maintain mutually beneficial relationships and to not jeopardize one's own genetic fitness by expending resources on self-serving cheaters, humanity's ancestors had to be able to differentiate beneficial from detrimental alliances. As the brain developed new innovations in cheater-detection, it also developed new innovations to deceive the capacity to bypass such skepticism in others. While our social intelligence evolved to successfully maintain pro-social alliances in small-scale societies, it did not evolve to the extent that it could reliably ascertain the intentions and trustworthiness of the thousands of people that would depend on each other in chiefdoms and states. Whereas, as Boehm notes, many societies dealt with this problem by dividing into manageably small communities, these communities would remain vulnerable to any society that somehow managed to ensure individual cooperation by thousands of mostly anonymous in-group members. As discussed in the previous chapter, monotheism occasionally emerged independent from but parallel with centralized states. These monotheisms differed not only in the reduction in number of gods but, as Kaufmann argues, in the fundamental nature of the one god that remained. So too, the way in which the individual was expected to interact with this omni-god fundamentally changed. The *omni-god* was not to be addressed in the *do ut des* fashion by which humans had previously allied with pagan gods (not to mention powerful humans). He was not

subject to metarepresentation by humans the way other gods had been, and, therefore, could not be deceived. One might seek His Will, but not as a means of seeking ultimate ends, limitations, or motivations. The only part of God's mind a monotheist was permitted to wonder about was His will for that individual. It was not in the power of the individual to reveal or conceal anything from God, nor to enable or hinder God's design. The only thing the individual could do was to obey or disobey, and the effect of that choice would affect none but the individual himself. The effects of obedience or disobedience would be reward or punishment from God, who is characterized by the omnipotence to reward and punish, the omniscience to know who had been naughty or nice, and the omnipresence to be the hidden cause behind any fortune or misfortune that the believer encountered. In short, when the population outgrew the limits of mature social cognition, the dominant religio-social model of the cosmos regressed to the attachment schema which precedes metarepresentation in individual development.

The monotheist assumes that God knows everything about him, even his thoughts, while he can know nothing about God. This effectively disables the inclusion of God in metarepresentation. Once believed, this conception ensures the cooperation of even the most successful cheater—at least his cooperation with the will of God. As we shall see, this does not make the monotheist any more altruistic. In fact, it functions in exactly the opposite direction, requiring the individual to devalue other individuals and even his own autonomy. It is this sort of derogation of the individual that we see in Hrothgar's dialogue and in the Christian didactic asides in *Beowulf*. This single virtue of subordination to divine will is exactly the

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opposite of the social intelligence demonstrated by Beowulf's dialogue and the episodic digressions that constitute the vast majority of the poem. The Christian coloring of the poem attributes human action to either divine gifts or unholy sin and affiliation with Satan. The pagan-heroic coloring of the poem, by contrast, demonstrates a level of social intelligence far more complex than anything permitted in orthodoxy Christianity. The shift to metarepresentation to attachment also results in the division of the world into just two groups: the faithful and the infidels. With this reduction of complexity, an individual no longer needs to differentiate between Wylfing, Scylding, Brising, Bronding, Weder, and Frisian, much less recall their past interactions or track their motivations for future action.

If humans are naturally inclined to reject upstarts, braggarts, and chiefs, to the point that they are willing to forgo the advantages a centralized hierarchy can provide (increased population, military, resources, division of labor, etc.), it would seem that the only thing necessary to enable the development of hierarchies is a means of diffusing such anti-authoritarianism. The reverse dominance hierarchy, as Boehm has described it, functions through techniques aimed at the rising authority (ridicule, sanctioning, exile, assassination) and techniques which bypass that authority (fission, stealth). Julius Caesar acted as a deferred authority in cases such as that of Dumnorix and Cingetorix where he possessed the capability of military enforcement but remained aloof from the population he controlled, operating through subordinates. In such a case, the subordinate qua subordinate could feign modesty through his deference to a higher authority and still centralize political power. However, as Caesar himself learned from Brutus and Cassius, a human

authority cannot remain out of range of all potential censure. The function of the

higher power may explain the successful confluence of centralized political power

and monotheism, but it is only higher when it remains beyond reproach.

Nevertheless, is perceived as near enough to punish cheating or defection.

Panoptic Monotheism

In their essay, "Birth of the High Gods," evolutionary psychologists Azim

Shariff, Ara Norenzayan, & Joseph Henrich argue that the monotheistic conception of

God functions to "outsource" (124) the job of cheater-detection in societies that

have outgrown the ability of human social intelligence to do the job.

> Moralizing high gods gradually moved to the forefront of religious systems as
> cultural evolution—driven by processes favoring larger, more cooperative,
> more harmonious groups—favored rituals and practices that instill greater
> degrees of committed belief in people about gods who (a) cared about
> cooperative and harmony-enhancing behavior (the group's moral norms),
> (b) could and would reward and punish appropriately, and (c) had the power
> to monitor all behavior all the time. These religious beliefs helped expand the
> sphere of human cooperation. In particular, we suggest that the fear of
> imagined supernatural policing agents helped overcome the constraints
> imposed on the scale of human social interaction and cooperation by our kin
> and reciprocity-based psychologies. (124)

Unlike human social intelligence, with its limit of around 150 familiars, "there are no

restrictions on how many transgressions these supernatural agents can keep track

of. The consequence is that 'hidden defection,' which was still a viable individual

strategy in groups with indirect reciprocity, is markedly reduced" (124).

In the scenario we propose, cultural group selection favored those culturally transmitted social norms that best promoted cooperation within the group and success in competition with other groups. The evolution of such norms, which has been extensively modeled, can stabilize costly behaviors through the effects of reputation on the withdrawal of help and through direct costly punishment (as well as some other mechanisms). Cultural group selection merely favors the combinations of particular norms that are most beneficial to the group. As this process continues, however, it favors larger and larger cooperative groups (Roes & Raymond, 2003). As group size increases, it begins to stress the limits of reputational information and diffuse punishment's capacity for stabilizing cooperation and maintaining within-group harmony. We argue that widespread beliefs in certain kinds of supernatural agents can help extend the potency of social norms by covering the expanding opportunities for cheating and free riding that emerge as the group expands and coverage of reputational information begin to crack. Eventually, these groups, with widespread commitment to powerful, omniscient moralizing gods, would become larger and generally more competitive than groups whose belief structures did not increase cooperation. (131)

Whether or not an individual planned to cheat his social group, he would need exhibit his own commitment to that group in order to convince his fellows that he was worthy of shared resources (costly-signaling). The social brain hypothesis holds that we are predisposed to not only show the general attributes of sociality but to adapt our outward persona to fit the specific preferences of the particular society. This is likely the original function of metarepresentation (Mesoudi, Whiten, & Dunbar; Dunbar "Social Brain Hypothesis"; Malle). This phenomenon of cultivating one's social identity, including observable behaviors and even

internalized self-description, corroborates many aspects of the cultivation of the individual subject proposed by Michel Foucault. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault uses Jeremy Bentham's design for a prison, the Panopticon, as an example of the exercise of power through visibility. In a prison designed to make every inmate observable from a central tower, the potential for catching and punishing deviant behavior is obvious. Foucault notes that the normative power of the Panopticon does not depend on actual observation and punishment but on the inmate's awareness that he is being watched by those with the potential to punish.

> Bentham laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so. . . . Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that . . . should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary. (Foucault 201)

As long as the inmate believes he is being observed, actual observation becomes unnecessary.

> He who has been subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. By this very fact, the external power may throw off its physical weight; it tends to the non-corporeal; and, the more it approaches this limit, the more constant, profound and permanent are its effects. (202-3)

As Shariff, Norenzayan, and Henrich suggest of an omniscient God, so too in the Foucauldian exercise of power, "A real subjugation is born mechanically from a fictitious relation" (202). The level of fictitiousness in the relation of the monotheistic believer to his God would seem to exceed that of the prisoner to the prison administrator. Surrounded by walls and seeing the central tower, the inmate would seem bound to a physical and social reality. It is the administrator himself, rather than the system that surrounds and depends on him, Foucault argues, that is the fiction. While the ability of the administrator of the Panopticon to punish insubordination may be directly observed (e.g. physical abuse by jailers, reduction of rations, etc.), the actual enforcement is unlikely to be observed in the action of the administrator himself. Prison guards, taking their orders from the central administrator, intermediates, or pre-established codes of conduct, provide the only enforcement visible to the inmates. It is necessary that these enforcers believe that they act according to the administrator's will. In other words, it is necessary that they believe in the administrator, not that the administrator actually exist or act as the source of the actions justified by invoking him.

As such, the jailers in the Panopticon have their analogues in the worldly enforcement of the fictitious relation of God to man. A popular rhetorical model for monotheistic apologists involves finding or creating some event which can be interpreted as the work of God and leaping to the conclusion that this singular event proves everything in their theological doctrine. This is the model laid out in 1 Kings 18:20-40 in which Elijah challenges the priest of Baal to a lightening dual with

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Yahweh. Though the story focuses on the fact that Baal did not send lightening and Yahweh did, we see Elijah seize the opportunity to do more than prove his point:

> When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, 'The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God.' Elijah said to them, 'Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape.' Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there. (1 Kings 18:40)

The turning points of Europe's conversion to Christianity were consistently accompanied by the appearance of divine intervention in the form of martial victory and the suppression, often bloody, of any native religious sovereignty. Constantine's victory at the Milvian bridge set a precedent for equating submission to God with divinely ordained elevation above one's peers on a centralized hiearchy. Just as Bede's *Life of Cuthbert* interpreted even the most mundane events as the expression of divine Providence, so many hagiographies, as well as the tactics of conversion employed by the saints they described, carried a clear message to potential converts: God is watching you, and he will reward or punish you accordingly. Armed with the actual power of centralized imperial military might, zealous Christians targeted the most conspicuous icons of non-Christian religious and philosophical sovereignty for destruction, which they then interpreted as evidence of Providence.   Germanic polytheists frequently venerated especially large and ancient trees as cites of worship. As a result, these trees made especially easy targets for Christian missionaries to demonstrate the power of God to punish or reward, with Roman or Caroligian troops along for good measure. Willibald relates of the mission of Boniface in Germany:

Now at that time many of the Hessians, brought under the Catholic faith and confirmed by the grace of the sevenfold spirit, received the laying on of hands; others indeed, not yet strengthened in soul, refused to accept in their entirety the lessons of the inviolate faith. Moreover some were wont secretly, some openly to sacrifice to trees and springs; some in secret, others openly practised inspections of victims and divinations, legerdemain and incantations; some turned their attention to auguries and auspices and various sacrificial rites; while others, with sounder minds, abandoned all the profanations of heathenism, and committed none of these things. With the advice and counsel of these last, the saint attempted, in the place called Gaesmere, while the servants of God stood by his side, to fell a certain oak of extraordinary size, which is called, by an old name of the pagans, the Oak of Jupiter. And when in the strength of his steadfast heart he had cut the lower notch, there was present a great multitude of pagans, who in their souls were most earnestly cursing the enemy of their gods. But when the fore side of the tree was notched only a little, suddenly the oak s vast bulk, driven by a divine blast from above, crashed to the ground, shivering its crown of branches as it fell; and, as if by the gracious dispensation of the Most High, it was also burst into four parts, and four trunks of huge size, equal in length, were seen, unwrought by the brethren who stood by. At this sight the pagans who before had cursed now, on the contrary, believed, and blessed the Lord, and put away their former reviling. (Willibald, *Life of St. Boniface*, Robinson trans., 62-4)

The tree, more likely consecrated to Donar/Thor and translated in the *interpretatio Romana* as that of Jupiter, was reasoned to be sacred and therefore the most likely place for the god to demonstrate his agency in the world. Destroying the site, even though the work of human agency, played upon expectations that such agency would be prevented by the god if it were in his power. It was a case of monotheists

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using metarepresentation, but doing so poorly. Willibald relates that people

practiced divination, but Boniface is not concerned with proving the Christian God

was a superior source of divine knowledge. Bede's *History* and *Life of Cuthbert*

contain several stories about pagans being converted after Christian missionaries

foretell significant events which then come to pass. However appropriate that

might be when preaching to those who sought foreknowledge through divination,

Willibald has no such story. Boniface does not try to beat the pagans at their own

game. He simply destroys whatever he takes to serve as a link between a people

and their non-Christian beliefs. The fact that the tree fell more easily than expected

emboldened the interpolation of Providence, never mind that extremely old and

thick oaks are prone to collapse under their own weight. Willibald emphasizes that

the act was, therefore, "unwrought by the brethren who stood by." It was therefore

evidence that a jealous God was actively involved in the affairs of the world. In the

Panoptic model of religious affiliation, it validated one ficticious relation by curbing

another.

Syncretism and Conversion

Significantly, one of the reasons that Willibald gives for Boniface's

destruction of the sacred Hessian oak is that many of the Hessians, "refused to

accept *in their entirety* the lessons of the inviolate faith" (my emphasis). This is not

to say that Boniface was refused out of hand. Another missionary in pagan Northern

Europe and a contemporary of Boniface, Wulfram of Sens, tried to convert Radbod,

king of the Frisians. In an oft-cited anecdote of conversion, Radbod is initially open

to accepting the new belief and the new God, but recoils at the last second, once

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Wulfram establishes that choosing Christianity entails rejecting his native beliefs and his own kin.

> *Praefatus autem princeps Rathbodus, cum ad percipiendum baptisma inbueretur, percunctabatur a sancto episcopo Vulframno, iuramentis eum per nomen Domini astringens, ubi maior esset numerus regum et principum seu nobilium gentis Fresionum, in illa videlicet caelesti regione, quam, sit crederet et baptizaretur, percepturum sit promittebat, an in ea, quam dicebat tartaream dampnationem. Tunc beatus Vulframnus: 'Noli errare, inclite princeps, apud Deum certus est suorum numerus electorum. Nam praedecessores tui principes gentis Fresionum, qui sine baptismi sacramento recesserunt, certum est dampnationis suscepisse sententiam; qui vero abhinc crediderit et baptizatus fuerit, cum Christo gaudebit in aeternum.' Haec audiens dux incredulus – nam ad fontem processerat, – et, ut fertur, pedem a fonte retraxit, dicens, non se carere posse consortio praedecessorum suorum principum Fresionum et cum parvo pauperum numero residere in illo caelesti regno; qui potius non facile posse novis dictis adsensum praebere, sed potius permansurum se in his, quae multo tempore cum omni Fresionum gente servaverat.*

First prince Radbod, when he was wettened with an eye toward true understanding through baptism, binding the oath in the name of God, earnestly questioned the holy apostle Wulfram where the greater number of kings, princes, and nobles of the Frisian people would be if he believed and was baptized and sent himself forth into true understanding—namely, whether they be in that heavenly region or in that one which is called hellish damnation. The blessed Wulfram replied, "Do not err, illustrious prince, the number of those chosen people among God is certain. For those preceding princes of the Frisian people who died without the sacrament of baptism, it is certain, underwent the judgment of damnation; but truly those who hence believe and are baptized, will rejoice with Christ in eternity." Hearing these

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things the incredulous chief—having proceeded to the baptismal font—as he was borne, drew back his foot from the font, saying that he was not able to neglect the fellowship of those earlier Frisian people to reside in the heavenly realm with a small number of poor people; that it was not so easy to affirm these new doctrines, but he would rather endure with those which had served all the Frisian people for so long a time. (from Krusch and Levinson, eds., *Vita Vulframni*, 668, found in Drout, 219. Independent translation by Britta Spann)

It is not just the water in the baptismal font but the "new words" (novis dictis) from which Radbod recoiled once it became clear that this meant the public abandonment of his ancestors. This act, familiar in Christianity as a public profession of faith, may be taken as a change of belief but it is primarily a public act. In particular, it is a public act of social affiliation. Actual belief, the way one assumes the world, seen or unseen, to actually exist, remains unobservable. Whether or not Radbod actually believed Wulfram's assertion that he was choosing between heaven and hell is unknowable. Perhaps, in his own mind, he was actually willing to burn in Hell in order to be with his ancestors, though this is not necessarily the case. What is clear is that his decision was based on social ties with an imagined community. Though gods differ from ghosts, at least in the Christian cosmology, Radbod is choosing between two social affiliations. He may either maintain his affiliation with the spirits of his ancestors or forsake this to affiliate with a few modest Christians and their God. For Radbod, the new doctrine (*novis dictis* or *percepturum*) was not something distinct from social affiliation but part of an existence in social reality. His initial openness and subsequent rejection of Christianity is less surprising if we allow that gods, like living kin and ghosts of ancestors, are part of an imagined

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community. For Radbod, welcoming Jesus into his pantheon would be no different than welcoming Wulfram into his own home. Welcoming Wulfram did not require him to eject all of his other acquaintances from his home and from his company.

Radbod's initial predisposition to religious syncretism seems to have been the norm rather than the exception in new converts. Augustine of Hippo, in his *Explaining the Psalms*, was required to refute members of his flock who were of the opinion, "Just because I frequent idols and get advice from visionaries and fortune tellers, that does not mean I have left the church—I am a Catholic!" (*Explaining the Psalms* 88.2.14, in Gary Wills' *Saint Augustine*, 6-7). Pluralism, though abhorrent to Augustine, was quite the norm for paganism. Historian Charles Freeman observes:

> One finds pagans actually treating Christian shrines as another manifestation of the divine, not necessarily of greater or less significance than any other spiritual site. There is a story of a pagan lady from Seleucia who broke her leg and travelled first to Jewish magical healers, then to the supposed tomb of Sarpedon, a mythical hero from the Trojan war, and then to the shrine of the Christian saint Thecla in search of a cure. Bowersock shows how pagan cults, far from being curtailed or overwhelmed by Christianity, even adopted Christian images. (Freeman, 265)

The lady from Seleucia demonstrates a contigent belief rather than devotion. It is almost empirical in testing the powers.

Bede, like Augustine, shows little regard for religious pluralism in his accounts of the conversion of England.

> *Reduald iamdudum in Cantia sacramentis Christianae fidei imbutus est, sed frustra: nam rediens domum, ab uxore sua et quibusdam perversis doctoribus*

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seductus est, atque a sinceritate fidei depravatus habuit posteriora peiora prioribus; ita ut in morem antiquorum Samaritanorum et Christo servire videretur, et diis quibus antea serviebat. Atque in eodem fano et altare haberet ad sacrificium Christi, et arulam ad victimas daemoniorum.

King Redwald had long since been instructed in Kent in the mysteries of the Christian faith, but in vain: for returning home again he was led away *by his wife* and certain false teachers, and being in such wise corrupted from the *simplicity of the faith*, his end was worse than his beginning; so much so that he seemed after the manner of the old Samaritans to serve both Christ and the gods he served before. And so in one temple he had both an altar for the sacrifice of Christ and another little altar for offerings made to devils. (*Historia Ecclesiastica* 2.15, pp. 292-3, my emphasis)

Bede doesn't seem to consider whether Redwald ever realized that by accepting Christianity he was expected to reject all else. Though Bede says little of what particular role Redwald's wife played in his tie to other gods, the story resembles that of Radbod in that the king's familial and spiritual commitments are thoroughly enmeshed. Rather than appreciating Redwald's inclusion of Christ in his temple, Bede echoes Elijah's reaction to syncretism: "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). Elijah offers two options: follow either Yahweh or Baal. Maintaining a relationship with both seems to be even less valid, in the prophet's eyes, than complete rejection of Yahweh. So too, Bede says of Redwald that "his end [religious pluralism] was worse than his beginning [complete ignorance of Christianity]."

Constantine, though singularly responsible for the merger of monotheism and empire, may not have been entirely clear about monotheistic exclusionism. The

arch constructed to commemorate his victory at the Milvian Bridge contains

representations of Mars, Jupiter, Heracles, Victory (as a goddess), and the sun, Sol

Invictus, which Constantine frequently took as a patron. Charles Freeman argues:

> For committed Christians, the idea that their support might have been sought
> for purely political reasons would have been abhorrent. In so far as theirs
> was a religion requiring absolute dedication and the rejection of all other
> cults, conversion meant a complete change of lifestyle and the rejection of the
> conventional values and beliefs of Greco-Roman society. Constantine may not
> have been aware of this. As a traditional Roman, he had been brought up in a
> society where allegiance to several cults could be held simultaneously, as his
> own patronage of Hercules, Apollo and Sol Invictus shows. He seems to have
> assumed that Christianity would be the same and that any involvement he
> might have in Christian rituals would not be at the expense of earlier
> allegiances. This would explain why he continued to use the traditional
> imagery of the sun to support his authority. Constantine was still issuing
> coins bearing images of Sol Invictus as late as 320, and in the great bronze
> statue he later erected to himself in the Forum in Constantinople he was
> portrayed with the attributes of a sun-god, with rays emanating from his
> head. (160)

In the Arch of Constantine, we have an unlikely parallel with *Beowulf* in one regard:

though both originate in what we now take to be a Christian context, neither one

uses names or concepts unique to Christianity. Neither uses the names Christ or

Jesus. The arch is dedicated "To the Divinity," which, as Freeman points out, was a

term already widely used before the arrival of Christianity. Similarly, nearly all

terms for God in *Beowulf* are vague enough to be equally applicable to non-Christian

gods or earthly princes.   William Whallon, in examination of terms for God in *Beowulf*, argues:

> As *god* is common in *Beowulf*, *goð* is common in the *Edda*. The Cleasby-Vigfusson dictionary remarks that the ON word is often used without the definite article and seems, like the Hebrew *Elohim*, to be singular in meaning though plural in form. The phrase *halig god* of *Beowulf* 381 and 1553 answers to the *ginnheilog goð* of *Voluspa* 6, 9, 23, 25, and Ls. 11.4. The words *metod* and *wyrd* stand in apposition in Beow. 2526-27. . . For the words *fæder, alwalda*, and *metod* are as biblical as *pater, omnipotens*, and *fatum* are in the Aeneid, and *Beowulf* is to this extent neither Christian nor unchristian but pre-Christian. (Whallon, 19-20)

Constantine's arch contains images which are easily recognized as specific pagan gods, but these are not specifically named in the inscription, except for Victory, which might be equivocal, taken as event rather than goddess. Similarly, *Beowulf* contains at least vestigial imagery with parallels in what little survives of Germanic myth (Stitt, Glosecki, North, Davis). The reason that the figures of Mars, Jupiter, and Heracles are recognizable *as* Mars, Jupiter, and Heracles is that we have a wealth of literature and art produced before conversion on material more durable than that available in polytheistic Northern Europe. Given that comparatively little physical art or writing existed representing non-classical polytheism, it is not hard to see why so little remains of the material which might help to identify the vestiges in *Beowulf*.

Whatever pluralism Constantine may have held for himself, Christianity seems perfectly designed to turn toleration of itself into elimination of alterity in a

very short time—quickly enough for people like Bede and Elijah to forget that they ever depended on the very pluralism they abhor. In 381, within three generations of the Edict of Toleration, emperor Theodosius banned all things pagan in the empire and its environs. This suppression included the destruction of the Serapeum library at Alexandria and the banning of the 1200 year old Olympic Games (Freeman 224-5).   In 382, Bishop Ambrose prevailed upon the emperor Gratian to remove the Alter of Victory from the Roman Senate. Pagan senators sent a delegation to Gratian at Milan to discuss the matter, but, on Ambrose's insistence, the senators were denied an audience. Following Gratian's death, the pagan orator and prefect of Rome, Quintus Aurelius Symmachus wrote an appeal to Valentinian II on the same matter. Freeman observes:

> It was not just the removal of the altar that he deplored but the denigration of all that it symbolized, the diverse spiritual world of paganism and the freedom of thought it allowed. "What does it matter," he wrote, "by which wisdom each of us arrives at the truth? It is not possible that only one road leads to so sublime a mystery." Ambrose saw the letter and replied, "What you are ignorant of, we know from the word of God. And what you try to infer, we have established as truth from the very wisdom of God." Again, Ambrose prevailed and Valentinian refused Symmachus' request. (230)

These two patterns of reasoning evoke the maxim that philosophy consists of a set of questions that can never be answered, whereas religion consists of a set of answers that can never be questioned. Ambrose's ontological certainty derives from his complete blindness to questions of epistemology. He can declare that he knows the truth without any compulsion to explain how he knows it is the truth, and he

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may do so because he has the ear of the emperor. If Ambrose had the ear of the emperor in 382, he would have the emperor's subordination within a decade. In 390, emperor Theodosius ordered the suppression of riots in Thessolonika which resulted in the death of thousands. His resulting unpopularity became an immediate political vulnerability, and was seized upon as such by Bishop Ambrose, who denied Theodosius communion due to his sinful act. As a result, Theodosius came to Ambrose's basilica in Milan to prostrate himself before the bishop and ask God's forgiveness, which would of course be granted vicariously through Ambrose (Freeman 324-5). From this point on, both political and religious authority were dependent upon a ficticious relation with a deferred agent of reward and punishment. Truth, as indicated in Ambrose's dismissal of Symmachus, was no longer conceived as something to be sought or found but something to be given— and given only by that deferred central agent.

Ambrose's abstenance from the difficulties of epistemology was not unique. In Acts 17, Paul comes to Athens and is distressed to see idols in the city. When he begins to preach in the marketplace, he attracts the attention of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. "So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means'" (19-20). The attitude of the Greeks toward Paul's different point of view was not only one of toleration but genuine excitement. The Areopagus had been the site of Athenian debate, political and philosophical, since pre-classical times. It had been the seat of the Athenian council and the site of the trial of Orestes in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*. The author of

Acts, however, fails to appreciate the context, commenting: "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new"(21). The Athenians were, in effect, treating Paul like a Greek philosopher in inviting him to debate them at the Areopagus. Paul seizes upon the Greek's receptiveness but refuses to even pretend to reciprocate, turning the inclusiveness he exploits into the exclusion of any view other than his own.

> Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him--though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.' Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." (Acts 17:22-31)

Ironically, the thing Paul seizes upon as evidence of his own truth is an icon of the Socratic wisdom he lacks. In raising a marker to an unknown god, the Greeks acknowledged the limits of their own knowledge. Paul, however, remains blissfully unaware of his own ignorance. Rather than concerning himself with explaining how he knows that he is right and they are all wrong, much less offering evidence, Paul enforces his claims with the threat of divine judgment.

Like Ambrose, Wulfram, Bede, and Boniface after him, Paul does not care to know what his interlocutors know, much less to hear how they arrived at their conclusions. In other words, he has no appreciation for metarepresentation beyond categorizing his interlocutors as either *Christian* or *other*, *one of us* or *one of them*. His arguments are less arguments than imperatives. They are based not on comparing methods of knowledge but on submission to the only authority he acknowledges. As such it abdicates social intelligence for attachment.

Augustine

The Christian concept of *conversion* depends on an absence of the sort of contingency and openness characteristic of polytheism. Originating in the Latin *verto*, to turn, it excludes metaphorical schema which might allow openness or inclusion. If we characterize belief as, for example, a container, we could easily conceive of many objects included together within it. However *verto* implies a schema of bodily reorientation. One can only face one direction at a time. To turn from one object to another makes the connection of the individual to the object zero-sum. It requires a choice—the acceptance of one thing and the rejection of all

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others. This schema fits quite well with the attachment model of interaction with the world. While the child explores the world, he is turned away from his mother. When too much time passes or a strange situation ensues, he turns away from whatever worldly object has previously caught his attention and turns toward his attachment figure to reestablish contact and a sense of security.

Perhaps no monotheistic apologist has done more to promote the word and its underlying schema than Augustine of Hippo. In a fashion analogous to Paul and Ambrose, Augustine describes religious understanding in terms which evoke a child's turning alternately toward an attachment figure or toward the world. He characterizes his philosophically-minded contemporaries as "inquieti iniqui," which Watts and Rouse translate as "unquiet naughty people" (209). "Iniqui" carries connotations of imperfection, impurity, and lacking appropriate measure, and may not have necessarily carried the same connotations that Watts and Rouse's choice of "naughty." However, Augustine's imagery frames human reason and self-reliance in the schema of a child wandering away from a parent in the typical exploratory phase of attachment behavior.

> Let them be turned back; and behold, thou art there in their heart, in the heart of those that confess thee, and that cast themselves upon thee, and that pour forth their tears in thy bosom, after all their tedious wanderings. Then shalt thou most gently wipe away their tears, and they do weep the more, yea, and delight in their weeping; even for that thou, O Lord, and not any man of flesh and blood, but thou Lord who madest them, canst refresh and comfort them.

Ipsi convertantur, et ecce ibi es in corde eorum, in corde confitentium tibi, et proicicntium se in te, et plorantium in sinu tuo post vias suas difficiles: et tu facilis tergens lacrimas eorum, et magis plorant et gaudent in fletibus, quoniam tu, domine, non aliquis homo, caro et sanguis, sed tu, domine, qui fecisti, reficis et consolaris eos. (*Confessions* 5.2, pp. 208-211. All English and Latin excerpts of *Confessions*, unless otherwise noted, are Page & Rouse eds. & trans.).

Augustine clearly maintains an attachment model for adult life. Those who explore the world through human reason are noisy and disobedient children. They are assumed to need to return, crying and anxious, to God the way a child who has reached his attachment anxiety threshold feels the need to reestablish contact with the parental attachment figure. As Lee Kirkpatrick describes it, the attachment system exhibits a parallel sequence of *turnings*:

> Attachment and exploration are linked in a kind of "dynamic equilibrium" (Cassidy, 1999): The exploration system is activated under normal, familiar circumstances, with the child metaphorically or literally keeping one eye on the mother's whereabouts while at play. (Actually, the child is likely to periodically move back closer to the attachment figure at regular intervals to check in and make sure he or she is still attentive and available, a phenomenon labeled *social referencing* by Campos and Stenberg, 1981.) If the attachment figure moves away, or if the child becomes frightened or injured, the attachment system is activated and attachment behaviors appear; the exploration system is simultaneously deactivated. Assuming that attachment behaviors are successful in restoring adequate proximity, the attachment system is then deactivated and exploration can begin anew. It is in this sense that attachment figures offer two relational provisions: a *haven of safety* to which to turn in times of distress or danger, and a *secure base* for exploration at other times. Confidence in the accessibility and reliability of

the attachment figure enhances the ability to explore and to do so with confidence. (30)

The thing from which one turns doesn't matter. In Augustine's thought, as in the child's attachment schema, there are only two classes of objects: the attachment figure and everything else. The *everything else* could consist of people, objects, or simply distance between parent and child. The conversion in his *ipsi convertantur* creates a duality between God and everything else. When an individual turns, he faces away from one thing and toward another. Once engaged, anything which causes the faithful to turn their faces away from God becomes antithetical to an attachment relationship with God. As Robert J. O'Connell observes, Augustine's orientation schema is not limited to use of the word *conversio*.

> How he revels in ringing the changes on that word *vertere*! "Because we turned away from [You] [*aversi sumus*], we have become perverted [*perversi sumus*]. Let us turn back now, Lord [*revertamur*], lest we be overturned [*ut non evertamur*] . . ." (*Conf* 4.31) is one of the best examples; only his unquestionable favorite, *convertere*, is absent. But it gives a fairly accurate idea of how Augustine intends the term *pervertere*: he thinks of it as an act of "turning in the wrong direction," in a direction in which one *ought not* turn. . . . Things are all upside down (*eversi sumus*). So, Augustine thinks, there is a natural and inexorable connection whereby "turning away" from God ("aversion") leads to "perversion," which leads to "subversion" (or "eversion"); and the only cure for this monstrous situation is that we "convert" and "revert," turn around and return to our original contemplative submission to God. So, too, there is a similar natural and inexorable connection between the soul's proud desire for independence of the One and its "vain" itch to exult in its power to act upon and dominate the many. (179-80)

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Augustine's *Confessions* is celebrated for its originality as the first autobiography in Western literature. Phillip Cary describes the form of the autobiography within the Augustinian *conversio* schema as an inward turn. In creating his autobiography, Augustine turns away from the material and social world and toward the world of Platonic ideals and contemplation of God. This is largely consistent with the way Augustine describes himself—at least the self which narrates, though not the self of his errant youth. However, we may see Augustine's autobiography as a written form of the *autobiographical self* as described by Damasio and other cognitive psychologists (above, Ch. 3): as a narrative of the self, a confabulation, designed primarily for presentation to one's community. A confabulation is not necessarily false, but, as illustrated in the case of Damasio's amnesiac patient, David, it involves the creation of a narrative which begins with a present situation and works backwards, generating a story which will explain the present to an interlocutor in terms which facilitate the individual's social acceptance. Augustine's anecdotes from his youth are selected and interpreted only insofar as they promote his theological point of view as a Christian apologist. If he had been asked why he had stolen pears from a neighbor's orchard at the time of the event, it is unlikely he would have responded "I did not care to enjoy the thing which I had stolen, but I joyed in the theft and sin itself" ("*nec ea re volebam frui, quam furto appetebam, sed ipso furto et peccato*"; 2.4, pp. 76-9, my translation, after Page & Rouse). However, this reframing of young Augustine's action in old Augustine's religious commitments is meant to serve the elder narrator rather than the younger character. In its use, the *Confessions* are a story about an inward turn, but one

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fabulated for an outwardly directed sermon. Insofar as he writes for a human

readership, he is constructing an autobiography for public display and a foundation

for self-representation. However, it is not himself he wants his reader to come to

know. This is why he does not seem concerned with how he, himself, is perceived,

either as the subject of the work or its author.

> *Quid ad me, si quis non intellegat? gaudeat et ipse dicens: quid est hoc? gaudeat*
> *etiam sic, et amet non inveniendo invenire, potius quam inveniendo non*
> *invenire te.*
>
> What concerns it me, if any understand not this. Let him rejoice
> notwithstanding and say: 'What is this?' Let him so also rejoice, and rather
> love to find in not finding it out, than by finding it, not to find thee with it.
> (*Confessions* 1.6, 18-19)

His purpose is not to lead the reader to an understanding of God but to an

attachment to God.

Of course, it is God to whom Augustine directs his confession. Confession,

however, is not communication. He does not reveal anything to God that God did

not already know. "And from thee, O Lord, unto whose eyes the bottom of man's

conscience is laid bare, what could be hidden in me though I would not confess it"

("*Et tibi quidem, domine, cuius oculis nuda estabyssus humanae conscientiae, quid*

occultum esset in me, etiamsi nollem confiteri tibi"; 10.2, vol. II, pp. 74-75). Neither

does he learn anything from a reply. Rather, the confession acts as a profession of

faith—a public act which signals to others that Augustine is devoted to God.

Cary observes that, as conversion, the inward turn is incomplete because, for Augustine, even the inward self is a created thing. Only the Creator himself serves as that to which one should ultimately turn (63-6). It is God rather than Augustine's self which serves as the fixed point by which all other objects, including Augustine's *autobiographical self*, are to be oriented. Insofar as the *autobiographical self* is constructed as an act of social communication, it demonstrates a level of metarepresentation more advanced and autonomous than the social referencing characteristic of attachment behavior. Though Augustine clearly describes his own relationship with God as a model for other Christians, this seems to be the extent of his metarepresentation. The overarching social schema which guides the characterizations of characters in the narrative is that of attachment behavior. Ironically, Augustine's metarepresentation goes only as far as it must to communicate to the reader that metarepresentation is a frivolous distraction from attachment to God. As such, Augustine is not terribly concerned to explore how others think. He is, rather, motivated to describe their thinking in his own terms— namely those of *sin*, *conversion*, and *grace.*

Augustine initiates his autobiography, appropriately enough, in his infancy— the years in which attachment styles are the only form of social interaction. However, he strips his actual attachment figures of their natural roles. Having chosen God as his lifelong attachment figure, he recasts his parents and nurses as peripheral stand-ins for a deferred attachment figure. Their social roles are vicarious. Even their own bodies are reduced to mere vessels through which God acts.

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Quid enim est quod volo dicere, domine, nisi quia nescio, unde venerim huc, in

istam, dico vitam mortalem, an mortem vitalem nescio. et susceperunt me

consolationes miserationum tuarum, sicut audivi a parentibus carnis meae, ex

quo et in qua me formasti in tempore; non enim ego memini. exceperunt ergo

me consolationes lactis humani, nec mater mea vel nutrices meae sibi ubera

implebant, sed tu mihi per eas dabas alimentum infantiae, secundum

institutionem tuam, et divitias usque ad fundum rerum dispositas. tu etiam

mihi dabas nolle amplius, quam dabas, et nutrientibus me dare mihi velle quod

eis dabas : dare enim mihi per ordinatum affectum volebant quo abundabant

ex te. nam bonum erat cis bonum meum ex eis, quod ex eis non, sed per eas erat.

What is it that I would say, Lord my God, but even this: that I know not

whence I came hither; into this, a dying life (shall I call it) or a living death

rather? I know not. And the comforts of thy mercies did take me up, as I

have heard it of the parents of my flesh, out of whom, and in whom thou

sometimes did form me, for I myself cannot remember it. The comfort

therefore of a woman's milk did then entertain me: yet did neither my

mother nor nurses fill their own breasts; but thou, O Lord, didst by them

afford a nourishment fit for my infancy, even according to thine own

institution, and those riches of thine, reaching to the root of all things. Thou

also ingraftedst in me a desire to suck no more than thou suppliedst them

withal; and in my nurses to afford me what thou gavest them: for they were

willing to dispense unto me with proportion, what thou suppliedst them with

in abundance. For it was a blessing to them, that I received this blessing from

them: which yet was rather by them, than from them. (*Confessions* 1.6, pp.

12-15)

Consequently, the importance of Augustine's mother and wet nurses to Augustine

lies, not in themselves as sovereign individuals, nor even in their contribution to his

sustenance, but only in their function as conduits of God's agency. The modern

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reader will recognize a rejection of the Kantian regard for human autonomy. For Augustine, people are not valuable in and of themselves.

> For we are commanded to love one another: but it is a question whether man is to be loved by man for his own sake, or for the sake of something else. If it is for his own sake, we enjoy him; if it is for the sake of something else, we use him. It seems to me, then, that he is to be loved for the sake of something else. For if a thing is to be loved for its own sake, then in the enjoyment of it consists a happy life, the hope of which at least, if not yet the reality, is our comfort in the present time. But a curse is pronounced on him who places his hope in man . . . For if we find our happiness complete in one another, we stop short upon the road, and place our hope of happiness in man or angel. Now the proud man and the proud angel arrogate this to themselves, and are glad to have the hope of others fixed upon them (*On Christian Doctrine*, pp. 836 & 843)

The world was not waiting for Kant to formulate his categorical imperative in order to appreciate people as ends in themselves. In Book 2, Augustine dwells on the period of sorrow which followed the death of a close friend in early adulthood. "*Wretched I was; and wretched is every soul that is bound fast in the friendship of mortal things*" ("miser eram, et miser est omnis animus vinctus amicitia rerum mortalium" *Confessions* 4.6, pp. 164-5). But Augustine the apologist corrects Augustine the mourner by redirecting his attention toward the only friend who cannot die:

> *Beatus qui amat te, et amicum in te, et inimicum propter te. solus enim nullum carum amittit, cui omnes in illo cari, qui non amittitur. et quis est iste nisi deus noster, deus, qui fecit caelum et terram et inplet ea, quia inplendo ea fecit ea? te*

nemo amittit, nisi qui dimittit, et quia dimittit, quo it aut quo fugit nisi a te

placido ad te iratum?

But blessed is the man that loves Thee, and his friend in Thee, and his enemy

for Thee. For he alone loses none that is dear unto him, to whom all are dear,

in him that can never be lost. And who is this but our God, the God that made

heaven and earth, and who filleth them, because in filling them he created

them? Thee, no man loses, but he that lets Thee go. And he that lets Thee go,

whither goes he, or whither runs he, but from Thee well pleased, back to

Thee offended? (*Confessions* 4.9, pp. 172-3)

Augustine's reduction of his social world, in these lines, to the singular attachment

to God again evokes the image of a child running to and from the secure base of the

parent. Augustine, like a child who stops to reestablish contact with a parent,

focuses not on the plight or thought of the human but on whether God is pleased or

displeased.

As mentioned above, confessions to God are not communication if God

already knows their content and the confessor does not communicate for the

purpose of learning from or changing mind of his interlocutor. As such, there is no

role for metarepresentation in a relationship with God. Like the parent-child

relationship, the believer is concerned with social referencing—maintaining visual

contact with the attachment figure and looking for signs of approval or disapproval.

In addition to this, Augustine's denial of sovereignty to other human beings, even his

mother and best friend, makes the activity of metarepresenting the thinking process

of any other mind nearly pointless.

Quid mihi ergo est cum hominibus, ut audiant confessions meas, quasi ipsi sanaturi sint omnes languores meos? curiosum genus ad cognoscendam vitam alienam, desidiosum ad corrigendam suam. quid a me quaerunt audire qui sim, qui nolunt a te audire qui sint.

What therefore have I to do with men, that they should hear my confessions, as if they would cure all my infirmities? A curious people to pry into another man's life, but slothful enough to amend their own. Why do they desire to hear from me what I am, who will not hear from thee what themselves are? (*Confessions* 10.3, II 76-77)

Augustine seems to have trouble understanding the point of communication. He assumes that, when one individual inquires into the life of another, it must be for the purpose of judging or correcting him. Therefore he responds by claiming that it is they, not he, who need correction (corrigendam). Augustine's social intelligence is aware of the importance of cheater detection, as well as the social imperative that one not be identified as a cheater. But catching and correcting cheaters is hardly the only aim of social curiosity. People often take interest in others as ends in themselves, models for behavior, and potential rivals, allies, mates, or kin in need. Because social intelligence is an evolved trait, we do not need to know why we take such a strong interest in other people's business. It is as likely to feel to the nosey gossiper like an impulse to knowledge for its own sake.

Knowledge for its own sake, for Augustine, is no better than the overvaluation of social ties. In the implicit attachment metaphors above, Augustine always priviledges the child who turns toward the parent (God) over the one who explores, or turns toward the world. Just as Paul and Ambrose dismissed the Greeks'

and Romans' appreciation for the unknown, Augustine, too, rejects what he calls *morbus cupiditatis*, the "disease of curiosity."

> *Ex hoc morbo cupiditatis in spectaculis exhibentur quaeque miracula. hinc ad perscrutanda naturae, quae praeter nos non est, operata proceditur, quae scire nihil prodest et nihil aliud quam scire homines cupiunt. hinc etiam, si quid eodem perversae scientiae fine per artes magicas quaeritur. (10.35, Confessions II, 176-7)*

> And out of this disease of curiosity are all those strange sights presented unto us in the theatre. Hence also men proceed to investigate some concealed powers of that nature which is not beyond our ken, which it does them no good to know, and yet men desire to know for the sake of knowing. Hence proceeds it also, if with that same end of perverted learning, the magical arts be made use of to enquire by.

As one who prefers the *safe haven* of attachment to God, Augustine does not appreciate the impetus to exploration—the impulse to know for the sake of knowing. As Kirkpatrick notes, the attachment system overrides the exploratory impulse when a strange situation occurs or prolonged separation causes the child anxiety. Though Augustine rarely admits having felt any such separation anxiety in his prodigal past, he often claims that he should have felt some similar anxiety. He also asserts that his science-minded contemporaries ought to feel it.

> *Per impiam superbiam recedentes, et deficientes a lumine tuo, tanto ante solis defectum futurum praevident, et in praesentia suum non vident—non enim religiose quaerunt, unde habeant ingenium, quo ista quaerunt—et invenientes, quia tu fecisti eos, non ipsi se dant tibi, se, ut serves quod fecisti, et quales se ipsi fecerant occidunt se tibi, et trucidant exaltationes suas sicut volatilia, et curiositates suas sicut pisces maris, quibus perambulant secretas semitas abyssi.*

Out of a wicked pride turning back from thee, failing thereby of thy light, they foresee an eclipse of the sun so long beforehand, but perceive not their own which they suffer in the present. For they enquire not religiously enough from whence they are enabled with the wit to seek all this withal: and finding that 'tis thou that made them, they resign not themselves up unto thee, that thou mayest preserve what thou hast made, nor do they kill in sacrifice unto thee, what they have made themselves to be; nor slay their own exalted imaginations, like as the fowls of the air; and their own curiosities, like as the fishes of the sea, in which they wander over the unknown paths of the bottomless pit. (*Confessions* 5.3, pp. 212-13)

The folly Augustine perceives is the failure of anxiety and the perpetuation of self-reliance. Turning one's attention toward oneself or to other people or other elements of creation on the impulse of one's curiosity or imagination, in Augustine's view, only distracts the errant individual from the anxiety he aught to feel.

One of the adolescent transgressions over which Augustine expresses regret is his love of epic literature—particularly Virgil's *Aeneid*. Becoming emersed in the story of Aeneas and Dido, he recounts that he wept in sympathy with Dido upon her separation from Aeneas and subsequent suicide.

Quid enim miserius misero non miserante se ipsum et flente Didonis mortem, quae fiebat amando Aenean, non flente autem mortem suam, quae fiebat non amando te, deus.
For what can be more miserable than a wretch that pities not himself; one bemoaning Dido's death, caused by loving of Æneas, and yet not lamenting his own death, caused by not loving of thee, O God. (Confessions 1.13, pp. 38-9)

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In order to appreciate Dido's emotion, he had to engage in a level of

metarepresentation which he does not achieve as an author. The fact that he is

ashamed of his ability to do this illustrates the antagonism between his own social

orientation and the complexities of third and fourth-order intentionality. He is

clearly capable of thinking about people thinking about other people, but he seeks to

discredit the skill altogether.

> *Sine me, deus meus, dicere aliquid de ingenio meo, munere tuo, in quibus a me*
>
> *deliramentis atterebatur. proponebatur enim mihi negotium animae meae*
>
> *satis inquietum, praemio laudis et dedecoris vel plagarum metu, ut dicerem*
>
> *verba Iunonis irascentis et dolentis, quod non possit Italia Teucrorum avertere*
>
> *regem: quae numquam Iunonem dixisse audieram, sed figmentorum*
>
> *poeticorum vestigia errantes sequi cogebamur, et tale aliquid dicere solutis*
>
> *verbis, quale poeta dixisset versibus: et ille dicebat laudabilius, in quo pro*
>
> *dignitate adumbratae personae irae ac doloris similior affectus eminebat*
>
> *verbis sententias congruenter vestientibus. Ut quid mihi illud, o vera vita, deus*
>
> *meus? Quid mihi recitanti adclamabatur prae multis coaetaneis et*
>
> *conlectoribus meis? nonne ecce ilia omnia fumus et ventus? itane aliud non*
>
> *erat, ubi exerceretur ingenium et lingua mea? laudes tuae, domine, laudes tuae*
>
> *per scripturas tuas suspenderent palmitem cordis mei, et non raperetur per*
>
> *inania nugarum turpis praeda volatilibus. non enim uno modo sacrificatur*
>
> *transgressoribus angelis. Quid autem mirum, quod in vanitates ita ferebar, et a*
>
> *te, deus meus, ibam foras, quando mihi imitandi proponebantur homines, qui*
>
> *aliqua facta sua non mala si cum barbarismo aut soloecismo enuntiarent,*
>
> *reprehensi confundebantur; si autem libidines suas integris et rite*
>
> *consequentibus verbis copiose ordinateque narrarent, laudati gloriabantur?*

Give me leave, O my God, to tell thee something of mine own wit, which was

thy gift, and what dotages I spent it upon. My master put a task upon me,

troublesome enough to my soul, and that upon terms of reward of

commendations, or fear of shame and whipping: namely, that I should declaim upon those words of Juno, expressing both her anger and sorrow, that she could not keep off the Trojan King from going into Italy: which words I had heard that Juno never uttered; yet were we enforced to imitate the passages of these poetical fictions; and to vary that into prose which the poet had expressed in verse. And he declaimed with more applause, in whose action, according to the dignity of the person represented, there appeared an affection nearer to anger or grief, set out with words agreeable to the matter. But to what end was this, O my true Life, my God? Why was my declamation more applauded than so many others of mine own age and form? Was not all this mere smoke and wind. And could no other subject be found to exercise my wit and tongue in? Thy praises, O Lord, thy praises, might have stayed the tender sprig of my heart upon the prop of thy Scriptures, that it might not have been cropped off by these empty vanities, to be caught up as a prey by those flying spirits. For by more ways than one is there sacrifice offered to the collapsed angels. But what wonder was it, if I were thus carried towards vanity, and estranged from thee, O my God; whenas such men were propounded to me to imitate, who should they deliver any of their own acts, though not evil, with any barbarism or solecism, they were utterly dashed out of countenance: but should they make a copious and neat oration of their own lusts, in a round and well followed style, would take a pride to be applauded for it. (*Confessions* 1.17-18 I 50-53)

Augustine metarepresents Juno, a pagan goddess, in a way that he does not permit himself to metarepresent God. While he regularly describes God as loving, patient, etc., he cannot actually recreate God's thinking process the way he can with Juno. Juno is frustrated. Being omnipotent, God cannot be frustrated. He can be perpetually loving, understanding, merciful, or any other positive trait because his omnipotence removes him from the world of change, conflict, strategy,

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reconsideration, and desire. Augustine may attach adjectives to God's thinking process, but this is not representation. He can seek to know God's will for himself. He can wonder, "What does God want me to (want/think/say/know)?" But his mindreading cannot extend to "What does God think I think?" much less, "How do I get God to think that I think (x)?" As such, it is limited to seeking and maintaining attachment, exhibiting no more metarepresentation than a child uses to maintain attachment with a parent. If he had access to God's mind the way he has to Juno's, he would simultaneously elevate his own social status relative to God and bring God into a world of social peers rather than a world of creatures. But the danger in acting the role of Juno is not only that he might want to, next, metarepresent God and hence lose some of his fear and reverence. An equal danger lies in the fact that weeping for Dido or voicing Juno's anger creates an emotional bond between Augustine and another self. Though Dido or Juno might be fictional, their stories provide enough detail for Augustine to fill in the rest and create a bond which is no less real for being imaginary.

Dunbar's social brain hypothesis has illustrated that our social intelligence works just as well in representing the minds of fictional characters as it does of real people who are at some remove. Fiction and myth emerge from the same cognitive systems which collect, synthesize, and spread gossip. Fiction and myth, like gossip, are more interesting when they evoke more emotions. Stories of conflict are intuitively more compelling than stories in which nothing is risked or won. For this reason, the threat Juno poses to the Christian god emerges from the very fact that

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she is not omnipotent. She is more like Augustine and, therefore, easier to sympathize with.

Ingeld and Christ

Like Augustine, Alcuin, Charlemagne's most esteemed resident scholar, saw a dichotomy between interest in secular narrative and devotion to God. In a letter dating from 797 addressed to Speratus (likely Unuuona, Bishop of Leicester according to Bullough, 1993), Alcuin reacts to the thought that tales of the legendary king Ingeld were being told within ecclesiastical circles.

> *Verba Dei legantur in sacerdotali convivio; ibi decet lectorem audiri, non citharistam, sermones patrum, non carmina gentilium. Quid Hinieldus cum Christo? Angusta est domus; utrosque tenere non poterit. Non vult rex celestic cum paganis et perditis nominetenus regibus communionem habere; quia rex ille aeternus regnat in caelis, ille paganus perditus plangit in inferno. Voces legentium au dire in domibus tuis, non ridentium turbam in plateis.*

> Let the words of God be read at the refectory of the priests; there let the lector be heard, and not the lyre-player, the sermons of the fathers, not the songs of the heathens. What has Ingeld to do with Christ? Narrow is the house; it cannot hold both of them. The Heavenly King does not desire to have communion with pagan and forgotten kings listed by name; the Eternal King reigns in heaven, while the forgotten king laments in hell. The voices of readers should be heard in your houses, not the laughing rabble in the courtyards. (Drout 221)

Though who precisely was telling or hearing stories of Ingeld is in doubt, Alcuin draws his distinction in clearly social terms. There is only one king, "*rex celestic*," worthy of attention. All others are "lost" ("*perditus*," which Drout translates as

"forgotten"). The implication is that if Christians associate with Ingeld and with God, then God is forced to associate with Ingeld. But since Ingeld did not himself submit to God, then he is to be lost or forgotten by Christians. After dividing the eternal king from all others, Alcuin goes on to make a value-laden distinction between the voice of a reader and the laughing or babbling of the crowd ("*ridentium turbam*"). Recall that Wulfstan imposed a particular understanding of what pagans aught to believe based on the fact that certain books recorded that Mercury was the son of Jupiter, "for we have read in books" ("*forðan þe we rædað on bocum*"). Like Wulfstan, Alcuin privileges the solitary voice of a singular authority who speaks through literature rather than the back-and-forth of communication. In literature, as with God, no response is possible. The book fixes knowledge and the reader must conform. The antithesis of this, the courtyard, like the Areopagus, is an exchange of ideas. One need not believe what he hears, but he may nonetheless entertain interest, as the Athenians did with Paul. Alcuin, like Paul, associates contingent belief with ignorance.

The fact that Ingeld is a threat indicates that stories connect the listeners to the social milieu of the story. If, as Dunbar has suggested, fiction excites the brain systems that evolved for monitoring our actual social network, we may understand why Alcuin found Ingeld to be such a threat. The Christians Alcuin scolds, while showing no actual disrespect to God or their church superiors, were maintaining a type of fictive kinship with out-group (non-Christian) individuals. By entertaining the stories of non-Christians, the individual fleshes out a fuller picture of another human being. The imagined other need not have the same desires as the individual

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who metarepresents those desires in order to evoke empathy. This is the phenomenon Augustine identified when he commented that actors, even when they express sinful desires of their characters, are applauded for the power of their empathy. Ingeld and Juno, like Radbod's ancestors and Augstine's family and friends, threaten to disrupt the monotheist's devotion to God because they engage the social intelligence—the cognitive mechanisms which attempt to read the minds of our peers through metarepresentation. This social intelligence does not require conscious focus. When it is engaged, it dampens the attachment schema.

Reduction of Social Relations

If, as I argue, monotheism depends for its salience on the attachment system, and if the engagement of social intelligence disengages and redirects the individual's focus from dependence to comprehension and self-reliance, we might expect to see monotheistic literature attempting to sever social ties—converting or turning the individual away from multiple social bonds and toward the solitary bond to God. While Judeo-Christian literature is full of references to God as a father and fellow Christians as brothers and sisters, it frequently advocates the reduction of interpersonal bonds even within the family. Jesus says in *Matthew* 10:37 "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." In an analogous passage, *Luke* 14:26, he says, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple." The correspondence between these two passages locates it with the range of the Q text, a likely source for both *Luke* and *Matthew* consisting of sayings

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of Jesus, which was subsequently lost. This at least argues that the passage emerged quite early in the Christian movement.

While this division of familial relations might seem harsh, it is a key reason that monotheism works to ensure cooperation among non-genetic kin. We do not need religion to empathize and share resources with our biological kin or with community members who reciprocate our altruism. However, where people do not personally know the majority of their fellow group members, they will be unlikely to cooperate with those they do not know, especially in zero-sum interactions where they must choose between benefitting themselves and their kin or benefitting strangers. Cognitive psychologists Scott Atran and Ara Norenzayan explain: "One evolutionary problem with religion is explaining how and why biologically unrelated individuals come to sacrifice their own immediate material interests to form genetically incoherent relationships under an imagined permanent and immaterial authority" (716). For a social organization to function as well as a small band comprised mostly of genetic kin, it has to remove the genetic kin and reallocate the individual's loyalties. "These culturally contrived cell loyalties mimic and (at least temporarily) override genetically based fidelities to family kin while securing belief in sacrifice to a larger group cause" (Atran & Norenzayan, 716). This functions to replace actual kin with what Rudolf Nesse has dubbed *fictive kin.*

For religion to work at a level of population too large for the monitoring (via metarepresentation) of every individual with whom one must cooperate, every individual must demonstrate a level of commitment to the group. In the case of

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monotheism, commitment to the group does not have to be understood as a commitment to the group. As noted above, Augustine asserts that Christians are to love each other, not for each other's sake, but for God's sake. This is a commitment to the group, even if it's not understood that way by the individual. God acts as a stand-in for the group. If one Christian sees another Christian expressing absolute submission to God's will, she can more easily trust him than she could another individual who is obviously engaged in social (e.g. Machiavellian) intelligence. Nesse explains:

> It is difficult to create committed relationships, one by one. You never know if the other person will live up to the commitment. But if you are a member of a group, and if everyone in the group makes sacred vows to follow certain rules, especially rules to help each other when there is no hope of reward, and if they monitor each other to be sure that all are following the rules, this can create a community of believers. This may explain why it is so important that belief be based, as Kierkegaard emphasized, on faith itself, and not on reasons. Communities of believers are networks of fictive kin that can provide huge benefits for their members. (3)

Reasoning, like social intelligence, evolved for the promotion of self and kin (Mercier & Sperber). Consequently, it does not inspire trust. Likewise, a promise of commitment cannot be taken by itself. Not only might someone deliberately lie, but, as illustrated in cases of confabulation, we are not always aware that we are formulating our thoughts and identities for social approval rather than for the communication of truth. We might be genuine in promising commitment but be unable to foresee a conflicting commitment interfering with the reciprocation of another's aid. Nesse explains:

There are inherent problems and paradoxes in commitment strategies. First, it is always tempting to promise more than can be delivered. Some excess solidifies the commitment, but more arouses skepticism and testing. Second, so many benefits come from having committed friends, that people are eager to create such relationships. Soon, there are too many to make good on each commitment, or one finds oneself in a triangle, committed to helping two people who are fighting. Some commitments, especially marriage and political alliances, are defined, in part, by prohibition of other commitments. (4)

Prohibiting other commitments from the outset serves as the surest method of ensuring an individual's commitment, even if the other commitments would not actually cause conflict. Monotheism, qua monotheism, excels other forms of religion in its rigid limiting of individual commitments to real and imagined kin. The fact that such limits apply not only to other gods but to other individuals, real and imagined, is evidenced by the decision of Radbod, and Augustine's rejection of Dido as well as Juno. Nesse comments on the reorientation of familial attachment in religion:

This may explain why religious fervor is responsible for so much good in the world. Paradoxically, this same capacity for subjective commitment may explain why religions have also been responsible for so much evil, whether in the form of crusades against out-group members, or drastic enforcement of conformity within the ranks. (4)

By converting the ties that bind an individual to kin and community, religious orthodoxy also exploits the tendency to be hostile to outsiders. Normally, the division between insider and outsider remains contigent upon appraisal of

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individual outsiders who could potentially become allies, trading partners, or mates. However, if the only permissible relationship is with God, and all others are either brothers through Christ or damned heathens, there is no reason even to appraise those outside of the centralized group. Without this check, the predisposition to the two evils Nesse mentions, crusades and drastic conformity, become a dominant characteristic.

Herem

The Hebrew bible sets an unequivocal precedent for the expansion of the faith and the elimination of potential human or divine ties. Yahweh instructs the Hebrews on the proper way to invade and subjugate a country:

> Take care not to make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you are going, or it will become a snare among you. You shall tear down their altars, break their pillars, and cut down their sacred poles (for you shall worship no other god, because the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God). You shall not make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, for when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to their gods, someone among them will invite you, and you will eat of the sacrifice. And you will take wives from among their daughters for your sons, and their daughters who prostitute themselves to their gods will make your sons also prostitute themselves to their gods. (Exodus 34:12-16)

The prohibition against a covenant with the land's native inhabitants is based on the fact that they could act as intermediaries between their own gods and the Hebrews. The use of imagery from sexual unions ("jealous God," "they prostitute themselves to their gods") confirms Nesse's comparison to marriage and political alliances which prohibit other commitments. That is to say that these commitments are zero-

sum. In this schema, an individual is like a consumable good. Only one god can possess the individual. The fact that this schema is not shared by polytheistic societies is viewed as prostitution by the biblical author. Deutoronomy mirrors the passage from Exodus and incorporates the turning metaphor that will later be adopted by Augustine.

> When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you--the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you--and when the LORD your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for that would *turn away your children from following me*, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. But this is how you must deal with them: break down their altars, smash their pillars, hew down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire. (Deuteronomy 7:1-5, my emphasis)

As in the case of Boniface's destruction of the Jupiter's Oak and Ambrose's removal of the Altar of Victory from the Curia, the strategy in Exodus and Deuteronomy focuses on the destruction of sites sacred to other gods.

> But as for the towns of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them--the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites--just as the LORD your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 20:10-20)

The author does not mention what, exactly, is abhorrent about things these people do for their gods. The only reason he gives for the prohibition is that it would constitute a sin against God. We may invert Socrates' question to Euthyphro to ask whether a thing is sinful in itself or if it is the arbitrary judgment of God that makes it sinful. To call God's will arbitrary might seem unusual in a monotheistic context. It makes explicit the anthropomorphism of Yahweh, which Kaufmann argues is antithetical to his nature. However, these verses establishe the doctrine of *herem*, the belief that a commitment to Yahweh is threatened by any other commitment to the extent that non-Yahwehists must be annihilated before they are allowed to communicate. It is important to note that the action called for is not merely abstinence from these polytheistic practices. It commands the annihilation of the entire people based on the possibility that (1) they might teach the Hebrews their own practices and (2) that the Hebrews would actually do it. Even learning of such practices is enough to warrant genocide, as if Hebrews could not abstain from practicing what they learned in the event they communicated with the Hittites or other foreigners. This logic employs a contagion metaphor. The Hebrews are in danger of being infected by the beliefs of foreigners. It is as if, once infected, they would not have the ability to withdraw from idol worship. We should not overlook the openness and potential syncretism that is revealed by this prohibition. The prohibition would be unnecessary if there were not a persistent curiosity on the part of the people as to the beliefs of others—at least it would not need to be repeated so frequently. However, syncretism is the target of this censure. The

people, edifices, and practices that must be destroyed are targeted because they are so promising to the open social intelligence.

Charlemagne and the Saxons

Though remote in place and time, the fusion of political and religious group identification functioned similarly through the imperial and missionary expansionism of Christian Roman (Freeman, 2005, 2010) and Carolingian emperors. Though celebrated as a civilizing influence on medieval Northern Europe, Charlemagne, the patron of Boniface and Alcuin, practiced the same policy of genocide called for in Exodus and Deuteronomy. His war against the Saxons of the 770s-80s, while clearly a war of political conquest, was consistently bolstered in its relentlessness and severity by the drive to convert polytheists to Christianity, leading eventually to the 782 Massacre of Verden in which he ordered the execution of 4,500 Saxon captives who would not convert to Christianity. Richard Fletcher comments, "As wars of Christians against barbarians who were also pagans, they had from the outset a religious tinge. It was, after all, on his very first Saxon campaign in 772 that Charlemagne destroyed the heathen sanctuary of the *Irminsul* or 'World Tree'"(213). The *Irminsul* was either a pillar or a tree that seems to have been connected to a pole cults that appeared in Europe in the late Bronze Age (Simek, 176).

After subduing Saxons by force, Charlemagne's army would oversee their forced baptism en masse. The Saxon Capitulary (or Capitulary of Paderborn) records the laws imposed to enforce commitment. Refusal of baptism became a

capital offence, along with eating meat during Lent, cremating the dead, or participating in rituals deemed to be pagan. Other laws enforced tithes, infant baptism, churchyard burial, cessation of business on Sundays and feast days, and the provision of churches with local land and slaves. Richard Fletcher observes:

> It was not simply that the sanctions were of an extreme harshness. It was also that the measures to be adopted in Christianization would destablilize and dislocate the social texture of Saxon life at the most intimate levels of family existence, touching birth, marriage and death. . . . It seems reasonable to infer that this tearing apart of Saxon society was deliberately intended, and that the measures were framed by persons who knew how to inflict the maximum damage (216).

The conversion forced upon the Saxons was the same that had been proffered to Radbod a generation earlier. The presence of God was being inserted into a close-knit social network, and the Saxons were expected to connect to each other not as autonomous individuals, but through God (i.e. through the church and imperial authorities).

Fletcher notes, "It is fairly clear that Charles and his advisers misjudged the Saxon potential for resistance both to the Franks and to Christianity"(214). Like Radbod, the Saxon's refusal of Christianity rested not on a commitment to one or several gods, but on a model of contingent social interaction with political as well as supernatural powers. Robert Bartlett notes:

> There are numerous cases where conversion and the imposition of a newly powerful monarchy are associated and, conversely, instances where paganism and decentralized rule seem to belong together, one of the most

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celebrated being that of the pagan Saxons, who had no kings and decided matters in local assemblies in the period before Frankish conquest brought them monarchy, a comital system and Christianity. The Saxon rising of 841–2 pitted the Saxon freemen and freedmen against the new class of lords, and one of their aims was to re-establish 'the law that they had had in the time when they were worshippers of idols'; they wished to expel the lords and 'each man to live by the law he wished, in the old style'. Paganism and a popular constitution are here explicitly connected. (66)

The Saxon's local assembly and the egalitarianism it expresses seems to have posed as great a challenge to imperial subjugation as any specifically religious commitments. This makes sense if we see Charlemagne's centralized imperial hierarchy as originating from the same cognitive model as the centralized cosmology as Christianity. The Saxons weren't rejecting God any more than they might reject the advice of member of the local assembly. They were exerting a reverse dominance hierarchy against a god and a Frank who both sought to elevate themselves at the expense of all others.

Conversely, incipient chiefdoms seem to have been easier prey for assimilation, as they already had a chief who at least maintained control of resources and the alliance of the warrior caste. Bede transcribes a letter from Pope Gregory to the recently converted King Ethelbert:

> *Et ideo, gloriose fili, eam quam accepisti divinitus gratiam, solicita mente custodi, Christianam fidem in populis tibi subditis extendere festina, zelum rectitudinis tuae in eorum conversione multiplica, idolorum cultus insequere, fanorum aedificia everte.*

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Therefore, my illustrious son, zealously foster the grace that God has given you, and press on with the task of extending the Christian Faith among the people committed to your charge. Make their conversion your first concern; suppress the worship of idols, and destroy their shrines. (HE 1.32, pp. 168-71)

In these passages, Gregory reveals the engine of conversion: incorporate the chief into the religio-political hierarchy and then use his political and military status to destroy all alternatives. In doing so, he reveals his own view of the king as his subordinate, "*gloriose fili*," "my glorious son." The pope goes on to ensure the king's subordination to Augustine of Canterbury.

Reverentissimus frater noster Augustinus episcopus, in monasterii regula edoctus, sacrae Scripturae scientia repletus, bonis auctore Deo operibus praeditus, quaeque vos ammonet, audita, devote peragite, studiose in memoria reservate : quia si vos eum in eo quod pro omnipotente Domino loquitur, auditis, isdem omnipotens Deus hunc pro vobis exorantem celerius exaudit. Si enim, quod absit, verba eius postponitis, quando eum omnipotens Deus poterit audire pro vobis, quem vos negligitis audire pro Deo?

Our most reverend brother Bishop Augustine has been trained under monastic Rule, has a complete knowledge of holy scripture, and, by the grace of God, is a man of holy life. Therefore I beg you to listen to his advice ungrudgingly, follow it exactly and store it carefully in your memory; for if you listen to him when he speaks in God's name, God himself will listen more readily to the prayers he utters on your behalf. But if you ignore his advice, God forbid, and disregard him when he speaks for God, how should God pay attention when he speaks for you? (HE 1.32, pp. 170-3)

Gregory is explicit that Ethelbert's submission to God requires his submission to both Augustine and Gregory himself.

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Assuming a similar subordination of king to church, Bede tells the story of

the Christian King Oswy, who, according to Bede, was an innocent man slain through

treachery. Despite this, Bede asserts that his death was deserved because he did not

follow the command of a bishop in one particular matter.

Contigit ipsum regem instigante omnium bonorum inimico, propinquorum

suorum manu interfici. Erant autem duo germani fratres qui hoc facinus

patrarunt qui cum interrogarentur quare hoc facerent, nil aliud respondere

potuerunt, nisi ob hoc se iratos fuisse et inimicos regi, quod ille nimium suis

parcere soleret inimicis, et factas ab eis iniurias mox obsecrantibus placida

mente dimitteret. Talis erat culpa regis pro qua occideretur, quod evangelica

praecepta devoto corde servaret: in qua tamen eius morte innoxia, iuxta

praedictum viri Dei, vera est eius culpapunita. Habuerat enim unus ex his, qui

eum occi-derunt comitibus, inlicitum coniiigium, quod cum episcopus prohibere

et corrigere non posset, excommunicavit eum, atque omnibus qui se audire

vellent praecepit ne domum eius intraret neque de cibis illius acciperent.

Contempsit autem rex praeceptum, et rogatus a comite, Intravit epulaturus

domum eius: qui cum abiisset, obviavit ei antistes. At rex intuens eum, raox

tremefactus desiluit equo, ceciditque ante pedes eius, veniam reatus postulans.

Nam et episcopus pariter desiluit: sederat enim et ipse in equo. Iratus autem

tetigit regem iacentem virga quam tenebat manu, et pontifical! auctoritate

protestatus: "Dico tibi," inquit," quia noluisti te continere a domo perditi et

damnati illius, tu in ipsa domo mori habes."

It fell out that, by the instinct of the enemy of all good, the king was himself

murdered by the hands of his own alliance. Now the executors of this heinous

act were two brothers german; who, being examined upon what motion they

committed this act, were able to answer nothing else save that they were

angered with the king and made his enemies for this cause, that he was wont

to shew overmuch clemency to his enemies and meekly to let be offences

done by them, when presently they entreated him. Such was the fault of the king, for which he was murdered, because with a devout heart he observed the commandments of the Gospel: his guiltless death nevertheless, a true fault of his was punished, according as the man of God had foretold him. For one of these retainers who murdered him had lived in unlawful wedlock, and when the bishop was not able to let or amend it, he excommunicated him and commanded all that should be ready to hear him, not to enter that offender's house or partake of his meat. But the king set at nought the sentence of the bishop, and when invited by the retainer, entered his house to feast there: and after departing therefrom he met with the bishop. Thereon the king looking upon him, by and by being much afeared, lighted off from his horse and fell down before the bishop's feet, asking pardon for his offence. For the bishop too lighted off his horse at the same time as the king for he was himself too on horseback. But in anger he touched the king, as he lay on the ground, with the rod he held in his hand and protested unto him with bishoply authority, saying: "I tell thee, because thou wouldest not refrain from the house of that wicked and damnable person, thou hast to die in that very house. (HE 322; pp. 438-41).

Though we may note that Bede does not expect Oswy to show the same sort of intimate connection to God expressed by Augustine, he resembles Augustine in his disregard for the actual social interactions in the matter. He praises Oswy for the forgiveness which his murderer cites as a reason for the murder. Bede says that when Oswy showed clemency to his enemies, it was "with a devout heart he observed the commandments of the Gospel." However, when he forgives the man whom the bishop commands him to exile, Bede takes this for a crime which warranted his death. This last offense differed only in the fact that he disobeyed the bishop and, presumably, disobeyed God.

Olaf Tryggvason

If Christianity reserves the pinnacle of its social hierarchy for God alone, it creates many subordinate offices which are nonetheless superior to the majority of the population. By converting Ethelbert, Augustine of Canterbury placed the king below himself in the chain of command—as Ambrose did to Theodosius, and Oswy's bishop expected to do. As a social strategy, this is the same ploy Dumnorix used to exalt himself over his egalitarian council when he allied himself with Julius Caesar. By demonstrating commitment to God, the only commitment validated in the centralized social order of a monotheistic society, a king could become rather ruthless with those to whom he was not bound in Christ.

In his *Heimskringla*, Snorri Sturlusson describes King Olaf Trygvason's mission to convert Scandinavia to Christianity by a strategy that the author of Exodus would approve. Olaf, having a long career as a Viking before his conversion to Christianity, was not only not pacified by conversion, but, through it, progressed from pillage to conquest and religious genocide. He made his first convert, Jarl Sigurd Lodverson of Orkney by the ultimatum of conversion or death. "They had not talked long before the king said that the jarl and all his folk should become Christian, otherwise he should die forthwith; the king said he would go with fire and sword over the isles and waste the land if the folk would not take up Christianity" (Ch. 47, p. 153; similarly reported in *Orkneyinga saga*, ch. 12, p. 37). To ensure conversion, Olaf took Sigurd's son as a hostage. After having Haakon Sigurdsson, king of Norway, murdered, Olaf took the throne and began a campaign of religious conquest. His typical strategy consisted of calling a *thing* (diplomatic convocation of earls),

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arriving with an army, and threatening to kill any who did not convert. Snorri tells

us that Olaf "bade all men take up Christianity, and those who spoke against it he

dealt with hard; some he slew, some he maimed and some he drove away from the

land" (Ch. 53, p. 159, following the same strategy in chapters 54, 55, 59, 62, 65). The

local chiefs, who by custom came to the *thing* unarmed, were left with no alternative.

Olaf would then destroy pagan temples such as that at Lade, taking all of its treasure

for himself. When word of these tactics spread, subsequent locals formed coalitions

and arrived at Olaf's *thing* armed, which "turned this bidding to the thing into an

arrow of war meeting . . . and when the king came to the thing, the body of bonders

were come there fully weaponed." Unable to enforce Christianization through

intimidation, Olaf resorted to treachery, saying:

> "I wish that we shall be friends again, as we have formerly agreed between
> ourselves. I will go there where ye have your greatest offering and see your
> worship. Then shall we all take counsel about what worship we shall have
> and we shall all be as one about it." And when the king spoke mildly to the
> bonders, they were softened in their minds and all their talk was reasonable
> and peaceful. (ch 65, p. 168)

Meeting with the chiefs at the observance of summer solstice, Olaf arrives with an

army of thirty ships. Addressing the pagans he was unable to convert when their

army outnumbered his own, he now changed the story to say:

> We held a thing in Frosta and I bade the bonders let themselves be baptized;
> but they bade me turn myself to sacrificing with them, just as King Hacon the
> foster-son of Athelstan had done. Then we came to an agreement between
> ourselves to meet at Mæren and there make a great offering. But if I turn to

the offering with you, then I will have you make the greatest sacrifice that can ever be made, and sacrifice men. (Ch. 67, p. 169)

The men he proposes to sacrifice are the unconverted chieftains themselves. Outnumbered, the chiefs capitulate. One of them, named Iron-Skeggi, attempts to reason with Olaf to take a syncretistic approach. Olaf feigns diplomacy and accompanies the chiefs to the pagan temple.

> King Olav now went into the temple with a few of his men and a few of the bonders, and when he came thither where the gods were, he saw Thor sitting there, the most honoured of all the gods and adorned with gold and silver. King Olav then heaved up a gold-chased spike-axe that he had in his hand and struck Thor so that he fell from his place. The king's men leaped up and thrust down all the gods from their places; and whilst the king was in the temple Iron-Skeggi was slain outside the temple door. The king's men did it. When the king came out to his men, he bade the bonders choose between two things: one was that they should all take up Christianity, and the other was that they should hold battle with him. . . . King Olav had all the folk who were there baptized, and took hostages of the bonders that they should hold to Christianity. After that, King Olav let his men go round all the folk districts in Trondheim; no man spoke against Christianity and all the folk in Trondlaw were baptized. (Ch. 69, p. 170)

To add insult to injury, Olaf took Iron-Skeggi's daughter and forced her to wed him.

In Tunsberg, Olaf arranged for a feast to host pagan priests, including Eyvind Kelda, the grandson of King Harald Fairhair. "King Olav had all these men gathered in a room and had it all well laid out; he made a great feast for them and gave them strong drink; and when they were drunk Olav had the place set on fire and burned it and all of the folk who where therein," (Ch. 62, p. 165-6). His tactics for coercive

Christianization were carried to Iceland when he sent the Saxon priest Tangbrand to convert the Icelanders. In his two-year mission, Tangbrand murdered three men who insulted him, (171). *Njal's saga* records that Tangbrand and Olaf laid the groundwork for a violent clash between Christians and pagans at the Icelandic *thing*, which was only averted when the Lawspeaker, Thorgeir Tjorvisson, was bribed into making Christianity the law. "The heathens thought they had been grossly defrauded. Nevertheless, the new faith became law, and all people in the land became Christians" (*Njal's saga*, ch. 105, p. 212).

Olaf's contempt for non-Christians extended to his personal life, as well. He pursued Queen Sigrid "Strong-mind" of Sweden by sending her what he alleged to be a ring seized from the razed pagan temple at Lade. However, the ring proved to be a forgery. Though Sigrid agreed to discuss Olav's proposal, she would not convert to Christianity. "Then King Olav said that Sigrid should be baptized and take the true faith. She answered, 'I will not go from the faith I have had before, and my kinsmen before me. I will not say anything against thee if thou believe in the god that pleases thee.'" (*Heimskringla* 163-5). Olaf and Sigrid both exhibit the degree of openness of their respective religions. Though Sigrid is open to marriage to a believer of another god, she regards her own religious identity as an affiliation with her ancestors. Olaf, however, is indignant. "King Olav was very wroth and answered hastily, 'Why should I wed thee, thou heathen bitch?' and he struck her in the face with the glove that he was holding in his hand." In Olaf's social schema, marriage would not be enough to tie him to Sigrid. As with Augustine's dictum, Olaf

can only relate to another through God. If Sigrid has no connection to God, Olaf
cannot connect to her directly.

Olaf's career ended with his death in 1000, within a decade of the production
of the *Beowulf* manuscript. In his zeal to force converts to Christianity at spear point,
Olaf rivaled Charlemagne. In his quest to destroy non-Christian holy sites, he
exceeded Boniface. In his rejection of social ties to "heathens," he followed the
model of Augustine. Ironically, Olaf was despised by Anglo-Saxons as a Danish
heathen. Since the mid 800s, Danish and Norwegian Vikings (generally referred to
by the Anglo-Saxons simply as Danes) had raided coastal villages and monasteries of
England. In 991, King Æthelred's ealdorman, Byrhtnoth, was defeated by a band of
Vikings at Moldon, and soon afterwards became a folk hero embodying English
resistance to the "Danes" (Wilcox, 81). After this defeat, Æthelred attempted to pay
for a cessation of raiding with tributes that the English referred to as *danegeld*.

St. Brice's Day

Eventually, in 1002, reacting to an alleged plot against him, Æthelred ordered
the massacre of all Danes within his realm. The Anglo-Saxon chronicle describes the
event:

> *7 on ðam geare se cyng het ofslean ealle ða Deniscan men þe on Angelcynne*
> *wæron on Bricius messedæg. forþon þam cynge wæs gecydd þæt hi woldon hine*
> *besyrewian æt his life. 7 syððan ealle his witan. 7 habban syþðan his rice.*

> And in that year the king commanded that all the Danish men among the
> English race be slain on Brice's mass day because the king had been alerted

that they plotted against his life and all his councillors, and would seize his kingdom afterwards. (Wilcox, 79)

In 1004, Æthelred issued a charter for the reconstruction of a church at the monastery of St. Frideswide in Oxford. The charter describes the events which, two years prior, following Æthelred's order for the extermination of the Danes, involved a group of Danish residents of Oxford fleeing from militant townspeople and into a church. As Wilcox notes, lawcodes dating from before Æthelred had guaranteed sanctuary within churches. However, as the charter notes, the English burned their own church in order to kill the Danes inside.

> *Omnibus enim in hac patria degentibus satis constat fore notissimum quoniam dum a me decretum cum consilio optimatum satrapumque meorum exiuit vt cuncti Dani, qui in hac insula velut lollium inter triticum pululando emerserant, iustissima exinanitione necarentur, hocque decretum morte tenus ad effectum perduceretur, ipsi qui in prefata vrbe morabantur Dani, mortem euadere nitentes, hoc Xpi sacrarium, fractis per vim valuis ac pessulis, intrantes asilum sibi repugnaculumque contra vrbanos suburbanosque inibi fieri decreuerunt, set cum populus omnis insequens, necessitate compulsus, eos eiicere niteretur nec valeret, igne tabulis iniecto, hanc Ecclesiam, vt liquet, cum ornamentis ac libris combusserunt.*

For it is fully agreed that to all dwelling in this country it will be well known that, since a decree was sent out by me with the counsel of my leading men and magnates, to the effect that all the Danes who had sprung up in this island, like cockle amongst the wheat, were to be destroyed by a most just extermination, and this decree was to be put into effect even as far as death, those Danes who dwelt in the afore-mentioned town [Oxford], striving to escape death, entered this sanctuary of Christ, having broken by force the doors and bolts, and resolved to make a refuge and defence for themselves

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therein against the people of the town and suburbs; but when all the people in pursuit strove, forced by necessity, to drive them out, and could not, they set fire to the planks and burnt, as it seems, this church with its ornaments and its books. (trans. Wilcox 80)

Æthelred compares the Danes to "cockle amongst wheat," an allusion to the Parable of the Tares in Matthew 13: 24-30.

> The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. The owner's servants came to him and said, "Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?" "An enemy did this,' he replied. The servants asked him, "Do you want us to go and pull them up?" "No," he answered, "because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn."

When pressed for an explanation of the parable, Jesus responds:

> The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

In the parable as well as in Æthelred's application of it, both the wheat and the

cockles represent people. The metaphor removes human agency as a factor in the

selection of the saved and the damned. They are judged by their origin. In the

metaphor, there is nothing either wheat or cockles can do to effect their

categorization. Æthelred does not seem concerned that the Danes who died at

Oxford were not Viking raiders. They share a common origin. Their association

with the cockles in the parable also implies that they were pagan, as least as far as

the English were concerned. They were not put in place by God (or perhaps

Æthelred saw himself in the place of the sower of wheat), so, therefore, they must

have been planted by the devil.

Cockles are genetically kin to domesticated wheat, so they naturally spread

anywhere wheat grows. However, the parable inserts a more sinister agent behind

the spread of the cockles. While it is causally unnecessary, the insertion of an enemy

agent functions turns a natural phenomenon into a perceived attack. The only

actual difference between the cockles and the wheat is the desirability of each to the

owner of the field. The wheat grows at his will and for his use. The incursion of a

malicious agent evokes a host of cognitive predispositions which incline people

toward group-based prejudice and obedience to authoritarianism to an extent they

would otherwise resist. In their survey of studies in psychological authoritarianism

and cultural conservatism, John T. Jost, Jack Glaser, Arie Kruglanski, and Frank

Sulloway (2003) found a wealth of evidence that individuals who were confronted

with imagery of personal loss and death were significantly more likely feel

suspicious of non-group members, people who they perceived as different, and group members who sympathized with non-group members.

> Mortality salience leads people to defend culturally valued norms and practices to a stronger degree and to distance themselves from, and even to derogate, out-group members to a greater extent. In addition, the fear of death has been linked to system-justifying forms of stereotyping. . . . Mortality salience has also been shown to evoke greater punitiveness, and even aggression, toward those who violate cultural values (Jost et al, 2003, 364).

Whether the Danes in Oxford actually posed a threat or not matters less once they have been associated with the devil and with a plot to murder the king. Moreover, Jost *et al* observe, "There is by now substantial archival research suggesting that during times of societal crisis, people are more likely to turn to authoritarian leaders and institutions for security, stability, and structure" (365). Not only does Æthelred's evocation of the devil and plotting Danes make his English subjects more hostile to out-group members, it also makes them look to him for security.

The effect of fear on group identity and submission to authority resembles, and likely originates in the brain's attachment system. Recall that one of the ways Mary Ainsworth created the *strange situation* which sent a child crying for his mother was merely by approaching the child herself, when he was separated from his attachment figure. The introduction of an unknown person, especially one larger than the child, creates separation anxiety. Recall also that Augustine criticized contemporary scientists for the fact that they focused on learning about and navigating the world on their own understanding and agency rather than feeling the

anxiety of immanent damnation. The introduction of fear bolsters both religious

and group commitment. As discussed above, monotheism helps to disengage

antiauthoritarianism by allowing the actual authorities to show subordination and

defer the origins of their actions to God. The inclusion of a threat in an otherwise

ambiguous event would then help to cement that authority structure and individual

group commitment.

Hrothgar's Sermon II: Mind as Fiefdom, Self as Vassal

With the Parable of the Tares in mind, we may return to the second half of

Hrothgar's "sermon," which began with a warning to Beowulf not to become like

Heremod. Hrothgar explains:

> *Iċ þis ġid be þē*
> *āwræc wintrum frōd.   Wundor is tō secganne̩*
> *hū mihtiġ god   manna cynne*
> *þurh sīdne sefan   snyttru bryttað,*
> *eard ond eorlscipe;   hē āh ealra ġeweald.*
> *Hwīlum hē on lufan   lăteð hworfan*
> *monnes mōdġeþonc   mæran cynnes,*
> *seleð him on ēþle   eorþan wynne*
> *tō healdanne,   hlēoburh wera,*
> *ġedēð him swā ġewealdene̩   worolde dælas,*
> *sīde rīċe,   þæt hē his selfa ne mæġ*
> *for his unsnyttrum   ende ġeþenċean.*
> *Wuna(ð) hē on wiste;   nō hine wiht dweleð*
> *ādl nē yldo,   nē him inwitsorh*
> *on sefa(n) sweorceð,   nē ġesacu ōhwær*
> *ecghete eoweð,   ac him eal worold*

wendeð on willan   hē þæt wyrse ne con.

It is a wonder to say how mighty god to the race of man through ample spirit
deals out wisdom, land and title; he holds all power. Sometimes he permits
the mind's thought of a man of great family to wander, gives him joys to hold
in his homeland, a stronghold of men, makes broad regions of the earth
subject to him, a great kingdom, that he himself cannot see an end to it, in his
foolishness. He dwells in opulence, not the least hindered by illness or old
age or sorrows, in darkened awareness, nor anywhere does enmity bring the
raging sword, but the whole world goes as he wishes. He knows no worse.
(1724b-1739)

Hrothgar invokes the model of God as feudal lord who owns and distributes as

possessions even the abstract characteristics which constitute an individual. His

description of the man who cannot imagine an end to his comfortable life "to his

folly" resembles Augustine's assertion that people are deluded into comfort when

they should be terrified for the state of their souls. Hrothgar goes on to include a

lurking evil, like the devil sewing cockles in the Parable of the Tares.

> *Oð þæt him on innan   oferhyġda dǣl*
> *weaxe(ð) ond wrīdað.   Þonne se weard swefeð,*
> *sāwele hyrde;   bið se slǣp tō fæst,*
> *bisgum ġebunden,   bona swīðe nēah,*
> *sē þe of flānbogan   fyrenum scēoteð.*
> *Þonne bið on hreþre   under helm drepen*
> *biteran strǣle   him bebeorgan ne con,*
> *wom wundọrbebodum   werġan gāstes;*
> *þinċeð him tō lȳtel   þæt hē lange hēold,*
> *ġȳtsað gromhȳdiġ,   nallas on ġylp seleð*
> *fǣtte bēagas,   ond hē þa forðġesceaft*
> *forġyteð ond forġȳmeð,   þæs þe him ǣr god sealde,*

wuldres waldend,   weorðmynda dǽl.

Until within him the amount of arrogance waxes and spreads, when the
guard, the soul's keeper, sleeps. The sleep is too sound, weighed by troubles.
The killer, close by, hatefully shoots from his bow. Then he the bitter arrow
strikes beneath the helm and in the heart. He cannot protect himself from
the evil wonderful compulsion of the evil spirit. It seems too little to him
which he had held for so long. Grim-minded, he wants more. In his pride he
gives no rich rings, and he forgets and neglects the impending work, because
God, ruler of glory, has given him his share of worth. (1740-52)

The thing which one should be afraid of in Hrothgar's speech differs from its

counterpart in Augustine in that it becomes more specific. Augustine advises that an

individual should be afraid of the state of his soul and impending judgment of God.

Hrothgar seems less concerned with damnation than with the encroachment of an

enemy within the mind. It is unclear who or what is the guardian ("*weard*") or the

soul's shepherd ("*sawele hyrde*"). The evil spirit wielding a bow has an analogue in

Ephesians 6:16. "In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you

can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one." The confrontation between the

soul's guardian and the evil archer is taken as the cause of the man's emerging anger

and greed. Again the individual is somewhat divested of autonomy. It is no longer

the man who is the origin of his own greed. His change of state is now the result of

an attack by an evil spirit. The self has become a place rather than an intentional

agent.

> *Hit on endestæf   eft ġelimpeð*
> *þæt se līċhoma   lǽne ġedrēoseð,*
> *fǽġe ġefealleð;   fēhð ōþer tō,*

sē þe unmurnlīċe mādmas dǣleþ,

eorles ǣrġestrēon, eġesan ne ġȳmeð.

Bebeorh þē ðone bealonīð, Beowulf lēofa,

secg bet[e]sta, ond þē þæt sēlre ġeċēos,

ēċe rǣdas; oferhȳda ne ġȳm,

mǣre cempa. Nū is þīnes mæġnes blǣd

āne hwīle; eft sōna bið

þæt þeċ ādl oððe ecg eafoþes ġetwǣfeð,

oððe fȳres fenġ, oððe flōdes wylm,

oððe gripe mēċes, oððe gares fliht,

oððe atol yldo; oððe ēagena bearhtm

forsiteð ond forsworceð; semninga bið

þæt ðeċ, dryhtguma, dēað oferswȳðeð.

In the end it happens afterward that his body lies miserable, falls to fate; another arises who deals out treasure without mourning it, the earl's previous conquest, and is not dissuaded by terror. Beware of that evil, my dear Beowulf, best warrior, and choose for yourself the higher, the eternal wisdom. Do not think arrogantly, mighty soldier. Now is the peak of your might, but only a while. Soon enough disease or sword-edge will separate you from your power, or the fire's grip, or flood's whelm, or sword's bite, or spear's flight, or terrible old age, or eye's brightness fails, soon dimmed. Suddenly it happens, warrior-lord, that death overtakes you. (1753-68)

In this light, it seems that Hrothgar is speaking from a point on the theological spectrum between metarepresentation and Augustinian faith. He reduces the agency of the individual by anthropomorphizing characteristics such as greed and pride. However, he does not depend on God as the reference point for prescribing behavior. The behaviors he advises against are the same as those which provoke censure in small-scale societies.

Beowulf and Ingeld

In contrast to Hrothgar, and in contrast to the majority of the monotheistic tradition described so far, Beowulf engages in a complex metarepresentation which alots each individual sovereign causal agency over his or her thoughts and actions. After his return to Geatland, Beowulf tells Hygelac of his adventures as well as the state of the Danish court. One matter he touches on is the intended marriage of Hrothgar's daughter to Ingeld the Heathobard. The Heathobards and Danes had until recently been at war, and Hrothgar hopes that a marriage will cement a truce between the two nations.

> *Sīo ġehāten (is),*
> *ġeong, goldhroden,   gladum suna Frōdan;*
> *(h)afað þæs ġeworden   wine Scyldinga,*
> *rīċes hyrde,   ond þæt rǣd talað,*
> *þæt hē mid ðȳ wīfe   wælfǣhða dǣl,*
> *sæċċa ġesette.*
> [Freawaru, Hrothgar's daughter] young and dressed in gold, is betrothed to the gracious son of Froda; the friend of the Scyldings has arranged this, the kingdom's shepherd, and reckons it a good plan that with a wife he should settle his share of the feud and slaughter.

> (2024-29a)

In order to tell the story, Beowulf engages in third-order intentionality. He describes an intentional action which has taken place (level 1). Intentional actions differ from events insofar as they are caused by an intentional agent (person, animal, spirit, etc.). This is only first-order intentionality because one need not understand why a person initiates an action in order to realize that a person, rather than

random chance, has caused the action. Beowulf moves into second-order

intentionality when he metarepresents Hrothgar's reason for arranging the

marriage, namely that forming a union between the two warring factions will create

a new sense of comraderie. In order to understand Hrothgar's reasoning (i.e. why

Hrothgar thinks a marriage will result in peace), Beowulf must then represent

Hrothgar's metarepresentation of Ingeld (level 3). Though diplomatic marriage was

common, Hrothgar would have to know Ingeld well enough to know that he would

allow such a marriage and would see it as sufficient to deter further conflict. It is in

this third tier that Beowulf understands Hrothgar's thinking about Ingeld's thinking,

but simultaneously compares it to his own metarepresentation of players in coming

events:

> *Oft seldan hwǣr*
> *æfter lēodhryre   lȳtle hwīle*
> *bongār būgeð,   þēah sēo brȳd duge*
> *Mæġ þæs þonne ofþynċan   ðēodęn Heaðobeardna*
> *ond þeġna ġehwām   þāra lēoda,*
> *þonne hē mid fǣmnan   on flett gæð,*
> *dryhtbearn Dena,   duguða biwenede;*
> *on him gladiað   gomelra lāfe,*
> *heard ond hrinġmǣl   Heaða-Bear[d]na ġestrēon*
> *þenden hīe ðām wǣpnum   wealdan mōston,*
> *oð ðæt hīe forlǣddan   tō ðām lindplegan*
> *swǣse ġesīðas   ond hyra sylfra feorh.*

Too seldom, anywhere, in the the time immediately following the fall of a lord,
does the spear rest, even though the bride is worthy. This may, then, agitate
the Heathobard prince and every thane of that people, when a noble son of

the Danes attends the lady in their hall and is splendidly received. On his

person hangs a shining, ancient heirloom, hard-forged and pattern-welded,

the inheritance of a Heathobard as long as they were able to maintain their

weapons, until they were led to disaster in that shield-play, their dear

companions and their own lives. (2029b-2040)

At this point, Beowulf is imagining the same basic scenario which Hrothgar must be

imagining—the peaceful union of Dane and Heathobard—but he also

metarepresents the thinking of people whom Hrothgar (as Beowulf metarepresents

him) does not consider. We may say that Beowulf is comparing one third-tier

representation with another. In other words, Beowulf could be comparing his idea

of Ingeld's thinking (level 2) to his idea of Hrothgar's idea of Ingeld's thinking (level

3). This lateralizes the vertical tier schema, but does not simplify it or reduce the

number of minds Beowulf has to track in order to maintain his imagined scenario

(not to mention that he is communicating this to another mind: Hygelac's). In fact,

Beowulf moves beyond Ingeld in his metarepresentations.

> *Þonne cwið æt bēore   sē ðe bēah ġesyhð,*
> *eald æscwiga,   sē ðe eall ġe(man),*
> *gārcwealm gumena   him bið grim (se)fa,*
> *onġinneð ġeōmormōd   geong(um) cempan*
> *þurh hreðra ġehyġd   hiġes cunnian,*
> *wīġbealu weċċean,   ond þæt word ācwyð:*
> *"Meaht ðū, mīn wine,   mēċe ġecnāwan*
> *þone þīn fæder   tō ġefeohte bær*
> *under heregrīman   hindeman sīðe,*
> *dȳre īren,   þ̌ær hyne Dene slōgon,*
> *wēoldon wælstōwe,   syððan Wiðerġyld læġ,*

æfter hæleþa hryre,   hwate Scyldungas?

Nū hēr þāra banana   byre nāthwylċes

frætwum hrēmiġ   on flet gæð,

morðres ġylpe(ð),   ond þone māðþum byreð,

þone þe ðū mid rihte   rǣdan sceoldest.'

Manað swā ond myndgað   mǣla ġehwylċe

sārum wordum,   oð ðæt sǣl cymeð

þæt se fǣmnan þeġn   fore fæder dǣdum

æfter billes bite   blōdfāg swefeð,

ealdres scyldiġ;   him se ōðer þonan

losað (li)figende,   con him land ġeare.

Þonne bīoð (āb)rocene   on bā healfe

āðsweord eorla;   (syð)ðan Inġelde

weallað wælnīðas,   ond him wīflufan

æfter ċearwælmum   cōlran weorðað.

Þȳ iċ Heaðo-Bear[d]na   hyldo ne telġe,

dryhtsibbe dǣl   Denum unfǣcne,

frēondscipe fæstne.

Then, over beer, an old spear-warrior will speak. He will see the ring, remember all of those men impaled on spears, his spirit will be grim. Sad in mind, he will begin to search the thoughts in the heart of a young warrior, to test his spirit, to awaken foul war, and speak these words: "Can you, my friend, recognize that sword, that precious iron, which your father carried into battle under his battle mask on that last expedition where the Danes slew him, created that killing field when Withergyld lay dead after the fall of heroes by sharp Scyldings? Now, here some son of those slayers goes across the floor exulting in that armament, boasting of that murder and bearing that treasure which you, by rights, should possess!" He admonishes and reminds him all the time with bitter words, until the opportunity comes, and Freawaru's thane sleeps bloodied from the bite of a sword, forfeiting his life for his father's deeds. The other one escapes from there alive, for he knows

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the land well. Then oaths sworn by earls on both sides will be broken.

Afterwards deadly hatred wells up in Ingeld, and his love for his wife cools

after the whelm of grief. Thus I account the Heathobard's loyalty in this

noble alliance not without human weakness, nor their friendship solid.

(2041-69)

With the incorporation of the Heathobard provacateur's tale, the number of

metarepresentations multiplies exponentially. The provocateur must understand

what will move the thane of Ingeld to break the peace cemented by the marriage of

Freawaru and Ingeld. This means that Beowulf metarepresents the provocateur

metarepresenting the Heathobard thane. But the provocateur doesn't stop there.

He not only awakens the thane's sorrow by reminding him that his father was slain,

he urges the son to represent how the son of his father's slayer's son thinks. He

represents this Dane, who has inherited the Heathobard's father's sword from his

own father, as bragging of the murder. As discussed at length in Chapter 3, bragging

about anything at all identifies an individual as a threat to the group. Bragging

about the murder of the thane's father, a boast made visual by the Dane's possession

of the sword of the Heathobard's slain father, targets three expected emotional

responses: motivation to censure braggarts, indignation at the theft of one's

property, and vengeful outrage at murdered kin.

This last motivation, the desire for vengeance, has deep roots in evolved

cognition. It would seem to be a useful emotion in small-scale societies when one's

community members were likely to be genetic kin. As a social strategy, it is not

always rational in the immediate case, but as a deterrent, a commitment to revenge

can deter cheaters. Nesse notes:

A commitment to spiteful retaliation can be equally useful. . . . A person

whose briefcase was stolen might spend extra expensive days in a distant

city just to testify against the thief. Such spite is, from a rational point of view,

senseless. Until, that is, you consider reputation. If a potential thief knows a

particular person is committed to spiteful retaliation, he won't touch that

person's briefcase. (2)

This assumes that the potential offender knows who he is dealing with.

Consequently, revenge becomes less advantageous in the long or short term as

societies become larger and more anonymous. Perhaps it is not coincidence that the

incipient chiefdoms of early medieval Europe, particularly those preserved in

Iceland, contain an overwhelming preoccupation with vendetta cycles. The same

population levels which rely on social intelligence rather than attachment in their

religious beliefs also show a propensity for narratives of murder and revenge,

frequently featuring kin to avenge slain kin.

The accounts of vengeance feuds in Icelandic sagas became the subject of two

studies of the effect of biological kinship on coalitional alliance. Steve B. Johnson

and Ronald C. Johnson (1991) compiled a list of murders from several sagas

(*Orkneyinga, Njal's, Egil's, Grettir's, Laxdaela, Sworn Brothers, Jomsvikings*) and

compared the kin relationship of those involved as a test of Daly and Wilson's

(1988) hypothesis that the degree of social relation is factored into decisions to kill

for selfish motives or to risk one's life to defend another. Johnson and Johnson

demonstrated that, in the Icelandic sagas, brothers were less likely to murder each

other for personal gain or in retaliation for personal slights. They were also more

likely to avenge a brother's murder than were those of more distant biological

relatedness (cousins, uncles, nephews) and non-biological foster brothers. Even in cases where brothers competed for status or resources (especially in matters of inheritance which direcly pit brother against brother), they were less likely to kill each other than parallel competitions with non-kin or more distant kin. Dunbar, Clark, and Hurst (1995) followed the previous study with an examination of the *Orkneyinga saga* and *Njal's Saga*, observing that individuals were only likely to engage in the enforcement of justice if the wounded party was a close family member or if there was a common interest with non-kin.

In Germanic hero narratives, the natural drive to avenge one's slain kin was a culturally reinforced imperative. As predicted in the above studies, the demand for avenging of murdered kin was only rivaled by the prohibition against killing one's own kin. In another demonstration of his talent for metarepresentation, Beowulf tells a story in which these two desires clash. Hæþcyn, father of Hygelac, lost one of his sons at the hands of another.

> *Wæs þām yldestan   unġedēfeḷiċe*
> *mǣġes dǣdum   morþorbed strêd,*
> *syððan hyne Hæðcyn   of hornbogan,*
> *his frēawine,   flāne ġeswencte,*
> *miste merċelses   ond his mǣġ ofscēt,*
> *brōðor ōðerne   blōdigan gāre.*
> *Þæt wæs feohlēas ġefeoht,   fyrenum ġesyngad,*
> *hreðre hyġemēðe;   sceolde hwæðre swā þēah*
> *æðeling unwrecen   ealdres linnan*
> A bed of slaughter was made for the eldest son by the action of a kinsman
> after Haethcyn struck down his own friend-lord with an arrow from his horn-

bow. He missed his target and hit his kinsman, one brother to the other with

a bloody shaft. That was an unredeemable strike, wickedly sinful, spirit-

crushing; yet, nevertheless, a nobleman who lost his life remains unavenged.

(2435-43)

Beowulf goes on to imagine the plight of a father who, having lost one son, must

contemplate losing another. The dilemma might seem strange to modern society

since the state takes responsibility for prosecuting crime out of the hands of the

victim.

Dilemmas such as that of Hæþcyn illustrate the limitations of the strategy of

vengeance. Other, likely, more common shortcomings of vengeance feuds include

the vulnerability of those without strong kin groups able to avenge them and the

fact that such feuds can go on for generations. In the latter case, the deterent

function of vengeance is overwhelmed by the instinctual drive to avenge. A society

which could maintain the threat of vengeance as a deterrent but, simultaneously,

inhibit the execution of the vendetta would be far more conducive to integrating

factions which would otherwise stay at each other's throats. In Shariff, Norenzayan,

and Henrich's description of the function of an omnipotent and omniscient God, the

agent of retaliation is conceived to be fully capable of punishment and therefore

constitutes a deterrent from anti-social behavior. If God is imagined to observe and,

eventually, punish murder and other wrongs, it relaxes the necessity of clan

vengeance. This would indicate that, due to its destructiveness and difficulty to

maintain, the vengeance impulse, though it would remain a biological predisposition,

would be selected out of cultural narrative. The prohibition against revenge, at least

within the in-group, is an integral characteristic of Judeo-Christian faith. "Do not

say, 'I'll pay you back for this wrong!' Wait for the LORD, and he will deliver you"

(*Proverbs* 20:22; cf. *Leviticus* 19:18, *Deuteronomy* 32:35, 1 *Samuel* 26:10-11, *Psalm*

94:1, *Proverbs* 24:29, *Jeremiah* 51:36, *Romans* 12:17, *Thessalonians* 4:6, *Hebrews*

10:30). By deferring the role of avenger to God, monotheism requires a regression

of the individual's autobiographical self conception from self-reliant warrior to child

of a powerful father. This greatly reduces the necessity for Machiavellian social

intelligence. If all of those one interacts with are afraid of divine punishment, the

individual does not need to portray himself as committed to avenging wrongs done

against him. It is no longer as necessary to metarepresent the mind of a potential

cheater to wonder what he's hiding, what his motives are, or his strengths and

weaknesses. As populations increase, it becomes less likely that an individual's

commitment to revenge will be known by the potential cheater. In this scenario,

beyond the Dunbar number, the ability to remember who is who and metarepresent

accordingly becomes nearly impossible, and thus less effective a strategy for

ensuring altruism. For this reason, the ontogenetically primitive social strategy of

attachment behavior actually facilitates the development of the society as a whole.

Looking back at the vendetta cycles produced in small-scale societies in

which the revenge motive might have been more functional than it is today, it is easy

regard these narratives as more primitive. We may agree that they are at least less

civilized insofar as this term is divested of its value judgment and linked solely to

the *civitas*. However, more civilized narratives are not less complex. In their

requirements of social cognition, they are very often much more so.

We might argue that Beowulf's tale of Hæþcyn points to the futility of revenge, but appears that the impossibility of revenge is part of what makes the story lamentable. This accords with his response to Hrothgar, "Do not grieve, wise man. It is better for every man that he avenge his friend rather than mourn too much" ("Ne sorga, snotor guma. Sēlre bið ǣġhwǣm þæt hē his frēond wrece, þonne hē fela murne" 1384-5).   Even Klaeber cites this passage as a point of departure from the poem's supposed Christianity and connection to "the Germanic code of blood vengeance—quite incompatible with the ethos of the New Testament"(55).

Beowulf's meditation upon Hæþcyn's situation, like his insight into the future conflict between Heathobards and Danes, demonstrates a level of metarepresentation that does not figure into Christian representations of thought. He does not attribute human actions or mental states to sin as Hrothgar and Augustine do. He sees people reacting to specific social interactions, and he does so with admirable sympathy for all individuals involved. He does not define Grendel by his descent from Cain or his association with sin. He extends his thoughts into Grendel's mind to recognize that Grendel fights unarmed and unarmored as a deliberate means of demonstrating his superiority in combat. In response to this, Beowulf determines to fight Grendel on equal terms. This decision has a demonstrable causal role—intuitive rather than reflective—in Beowulf's victory. The poem reveals that Grendel is protected from human weapons by spells, unbeknownst to the Danes. By relying on weapons, the Danes are actually handicapping themselves. By attempting to understand Grendel, and by meeting

him on his own terms, Beowulf becomes Grendel's counterpart—a fellow *aglæca* and as much a creature of myth as the monsters of the poem.

To the extent he attributes agency to God, it is the sort of agency demonstrated by mythic gods. If God revealed to him the giant sword in Grendel's lair, this level of divine agency pales in comparison to that demonstrated when Odin appeared in the court of Volsung to deliver the sword that will be claimed by Sigmund. It is the agency of an unseen agent, not the sort of omnipotence described by Kaufmann and exhibited in the *Life of St. Cuthbert*. Beowulf does not seek God's will or expect reward or punishment. The closest he comes to acknowledging something like Providence, it is in dialogue with Hrothgar. The context of these references parallels of that of a prominent hunter or warrior in small band society. Discounting his own agency serves a specific social purpose in the company of warriors suspicious of an overconfident outsider. When he learns that the dragon has awakened to wreak havoc on his kingdom, Beowulf wonders if he has offended God and if the event is divine punishment. This is a metarepresentation of God's mind that could be compatible with the social referencing of attachment behavior. However, it is equally compatible with metarepresentation in actual human interaction. Neither gods nor humans need to be omnipotent to retaliate for real or perceived insult.

How to Read the Poem: Is Syncretism Disintegration?

The question is whether or not these elements are vital to the poem— whether, as some scholars have claimd, *Beowulf* without the Christian elements

would be a different poem. If we remove all elements of the poem that have

parallels in Christianity, then this would be an accurate assertion. However, this

assumes that anything found in orthodox Christian texts must have originated in

Christianity. It is not the commonality with Christianity that is decisive, but the

incompatibility with polytheism. If even many of the references to God have

cognates in polytheism, there would seem to be little in the poem that is

incompatible. The governing structure, insofar as it employs a poly-agent schema,

resists only the omni-agent schema. This latter is postulated in various parts of the

poem. However, it is not conclusively demonstrated in the poem's action. It does

not dominate the poem to the extent it does The *Life of St. Cuthbert* or Augustine's

autobiographical *Confessions*. The deference shown to God in *Beowulf* is not

deference to a higher power in a centralized hierarchy. There is no evidence of

conversion, but rather inclusion. The poem, besides the interpolations in the

narration, exhibits the same sort of syncretism as that shown by kings which Bede

calls apostates. Whether the Christian coloring was deeply believed by the redactor

that added it or was only added by political necessity (to justify the use of church

parchment and man-hours against any overzealous Alcuins or Olafs), it functions

like the post hoc theological correction exhibited by Justin Barrett's test subjects.

These described an anthropomorphic god in narrative but added abstract

propositions asserting God's omniscience and omnipotence to accord with locally-

mandated orthodoxy. So too, *Beowulf* describes the miraculous accomplishments of

an anthropomorphic god peppered with theologically correct but narratively

incongruous assertions of divine providence. In the case of *Beowulf*, however, the

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anthropomorphic god and the omnipotent god are two different gods. The threat he poses to the hierarchical social order demanded by Christianity is affirmed by Augustine's and Alcuin's demonization of Dido and Ingeld. Neither Dido nor Ingeld were gods in the sense that they had cults or received sacrifices, but as mythic figures they clearly dissipated the centralized hierarchy of Christianity and the central role of God as the source of all agency.

Reading the poem without Christian monotheism is not so invasive a procedure as to result in "the death of the patient" as Irving argues. It is quite superficial and easy to see around. However, this does not mean that it has no function. Beowulf shows diplomatic tact before Hrothgar when he defers credit for his own action to the God Hrothgar repeatedly refers too. In doing so, he soothes the shame of an old king who is unable to defend his own hall and depends on a young warrior of another tribe. He invokes God as a means to avoid bragging in a manner found in small-scale societies across the world. In deferring credit to God, he made himself less of a social threat to the society he addressed. Likewise, the poem's occasional affirmations of the omni-God reduced the perceived social threat the poem itself posed to the focused sociality of Christianity. Without these lines affirming theologically correct abstractions, however unnecessary to the narrative, Beowulf would have been regarded as another of the damned kings wailing in Hell alongside Ingeld. His story could not otherwised have bypassed the Alcuins of the 11th century to find transcription onto vellum—likely church property inked by man-hours otherwise dedicated to exclusive service to Christ. The degree to which one or several poets or redactors believed in the necessity of God's inclusion in the

poem is less relevant to a reading of the poem than the function these isolated and

abstract theological corrections serve in the social world of the manuscript's

production—and only in that social world. A multiplicity of authors poses a threat

to those who uphold an omni-agent preference. Perhaps this explains Stanley's fear

that the poem will "disintegrate" if readings of the poem do not keep a close orbit

around centralized authority of a single author.   Tolkien's comparison of such

criticism to the destruction of the labor of one by the curiosity of many resembles

Stanley's insistence on unified authorship, not only in its rejection of heterogeneity

in the poem, but in its privileging of an omni schema in literary criticism. As a

critical approach, the omni schema looks to an ultimate authority in the author.

Critics are constrained to a search for the author's will in the way that Augustine

sought only the will of God. The critic metarepresents the omni-author only to the

extent that he searches for that author's intent. Such criticism refrains from looking

into the author's limitations. It ignores the possibility that a work could be more

fruitful than even the author realized. For an approach to the poem, poly schema

critics may take Beowulf as a model of metarepresentation. He knows Unferth's

story about him is a story with a purpose. However, he recovers the telling of that

story and recaptures control of his own autobiographical self. In a world in which

the only reliable afterlife is, as the Havamal says, "fame for one who wins it," the

continuity of that fame depends on the retelling of the autobiographical self after

"the death of the patient." Fame, in other words, requires metarepresentation. If

each metarepresentation were constrained by the validation of every individual at

every intentional level between the character and the reader, we would have little attention left to fleshing out that character.

Nor does looking past the author's reflective interpolations necessarily imply disrespect. Richard Lee's !Kung informant shows no disrespect to his fellow hunter when he looks beyond the obligatory refrain, "Ah, I'm no good for hunting. I saw nothing at all, just a little tiny one." He metarepresents his kinsman's mind and guesses at what cannot be said. "Then I smile to myself because I know he has killed something big" (187). If we look past the socially-mandated deference of agency to God—if we recognize it *as affirmation* rather than explanation, the way the !Kung recognize the hunter's disavowal of achievement. Just as the !Kung smiles when he recognizes the incongruity between public profession and actual deed, the Beowulfian may smile in recognizing both hero and poet employing such necessities. Theological correction is required precisely because the action is such an achievement. Because he has succeeded where others have failed, Beowulf shows respect by divesting himself of agency and inserting God's aid in his autobiographical representation. At a time when the English demonstrated their willingness to burn the last remnants of heathenism, including the heathens themselves, the preservation of a poem with mythic sympathies requires similar insertions of obligatory humility.

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