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PATTERNING, TIME AND NIETZSCHE'S "SPIRIT OF REVENGE" IN *BEOWULF* AND *THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE*

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Old English poetry and the work of Thomas Hardy have been paired in the past, and by way of introduction to my own comparison, I refer to two critics who have pointed out similarities in the themes, preoccupations, and "mood" of both. In 1933 Catherine Wakefield wrote a prize-winning essay called "The Anglo-Saxon Philosophy in *Beowulf* and Thomas Hardy." She sees Hardy's view of God and Fate as essentially similar to that expressed in *Beowulf*, and extols the virtues and uplifting qualities shared by the Old English epic and the work of the novelist-poet. "Yet there is in *Beowulf* and Thomas Hardy," she writes, "a strength and grandeur of spirit that commands the admiration of the weakest among us. And we are grateful in an age of spiritual midgets that there remain among us still a few last Titans."¹

The comparison is voiced rather less rhetorically by a later critic, the Old English scholar Thomas Shippey. He takes a more analytical approach to this shared "spirit." In a discussion of the heroic dilemma in *Beowulf*, Shippey stresses that no decision is the right one, and that the Old English understanding of the problems of choice is particularly relevant, not only in modern literature "with its moral ambiguities and uncertainties,"² but especially in the work of Hardy:

Such situations are not meant to be resolvable; if they have any moral, it is Hardy's, that 'neither Chance nor Purpose governs the universe, but Necessity.'³

Certainly, a careful reader will sense some connections in mood or tone, if only to arrive at a fairly common conclusion: that Old English poetry and the work of Thomas Hardy are both somewhat gloomy. J. R. R. Tolkien has described the *Beowulf* poet's vision as "heathen, noble and hopeless;"⁴ Hardy has suffered much from being labelled a pessimist. They also share similarly tangled dichotomies: for example, the co-existence of Christian and pagan beliefs in *Beowulf*, and the juxtaposition of determinism and free will in Hardy.

My own initial justification, however, for bringing together the epic poem and Hardy's work, specifically his novel the *Mayor of*

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Casterbridge, is a fairly obvious surface similarity in the patterning—the interplay of repeated elements—in each work. This structural similarity paves the way for a discussion of more profound connections between the two works, making accessible their core of philosophical similarity. The novel and poem share patterns involving historical events, human actions and artifacts, and possibilities for human action. These patterns weave a similar fabric, or context for existence, for both the Germanic hero and nineteenth-century small town mayor. Highlighted against the interplay of recurrent textual patterns, the individual defines, detaches or entangles himself, and finally becomes engaged in a solitary contest with time itself. The outcome of the contest in each case may appear entirely dissimilar. Each man seems to respond differently to his pattern-evoked context, but their divergent responses introduce a new dimension to the comparison, and this, I would argue, is where a joint contemplation of these two texts is most interesting and valuable. Their divergent responses inevitably evoke their profound similarity in that each is bound by the same illusion: that time might be overcome. In Nietzsche's terms, each suffers in the extreme from the will's aversion to time: "that it cannot break time and time's desire—that is the will's most lonely affliction."⁵ The strength and implacable dignity inherent in each man's contest with time and his own will serves to illuminate only more powerfully for the reader the essentially destructive nature of their shared illusion. By using one man as a mirror for the other, we can better understand the terms, the extent, the nature, and the compelling power of this quality of destructiveness. I shall take a step-by-step approach to this joint survey, briefly identifying some of the major patterns in each text, tracing their interplay, and eventually establishing the Nietzschean common ground which is the basis for my comparison.

The first repeated pattern both texts hold in common is the systematic removal of suspense. The reader may predict the outcome of each story, either because it is referred to directly or indirectly before the fact, or because it is foreshadowed by cumulative allusions to other similar situations and references to Fate. Early in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* at the peak of Michael Henchard's prosperity, Nancy Mockridge, one of the "chorus" of town locals, foreshadows the Mayor's public disgrace when she comments with alarming accuracy that "There's a blue-beardy look about 'en; and twill out in time"⁶ (p. 65). Hardy may interject a direct warning that "gives the plot away." For example, when Henchard and Farfrae appear to be firm friends, Hardy observes: "And yet the seed that was to lift the foundation of

this friendship was at this moment taking root in a chink of its structure" (p. 74). Similarly, when Farfrae comes courting Henchard's daughter Elizabeth-Jane and finds Lucetta at home instead, the author tells us that "he hesitated, looked at the chair, thought there was no danger in it (though there was), and sat down" (p. 121). In *Beowulf* we learn almost immediately that the great hall Hrothgar has built as monument to his success, which Beowulf will risk his life twice to defend, will eventually be burned down anyway:

The hall towered
high, wide-gabled, awaited the hostile
surge of flame in battle, though the feud
of father- and son-in-law still lay
in distant time for dire hate to rouse⁷ (ll. 81-85)

We know before the battle that Grendel is fated to lose to Beowulf, "no more would he feed on human flesh beyond that night" (ll. 735-6). And again, before the dragon fight, we are told that both the dragon and the hero will die: "Yet the long-famed prince was destined to end his fleeting days of worldly life—and the worm with him" (ll. 2341-3).

One could also add to this list of ways in which suspense is removed that the mayor soon emerges as committed to self-destruction as Beowulf is to heroism, and the reader may begin to find a predictability in the actions of both. These few examples from each text would suggest that neither Hardy or the Old English poet is interested in focusing the reader's interest or energies on wondering what is going to happen next. Desire for gratification, or an emotional response, gives way to an intellectual, contemplative involvement with the text. What we are being asked to focus on, to contemplate, may be most strongly indicated by another level of patterning: the density of repetition in both texts and the cyclical sense of time and history that such repetition generates.

Beowulf begins and ends with a funeral. In fact, many of the poem's situations are remarkably similar. Beowulf finds himself in a situation identical to Hrothgar's: both are old men, have ruled well for fifty winters, and are faced with a monster that threatens to destroy everything they have achieved. The digressions in the poem, as well as Beowulf's own battles in the main narrative, repeatedly convey the same idea: the negative nature, not only of the vengeance feud in itself, but also of the attempts to stop the vengeance cycle by means of peace-weaving, or settling for peace-without-honor. Beowulf inhabits a world where the situations of men appear to be relentlessly similar.

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The characters in Hardy's novel also move, as it were, in the same circle. Robert C. Schweik has systematically discussed the repetition in the novel by dividing it into "structurally similar 'movements'" and demonstrating how "each provides a variation on a common pattern: an initial situation which seems to offer some hope for Henchard is followed by events which create doubt, fear, and anxious anticipation for an outcome that comes, finally, as a catastrophe."⁸ Henchard doggedly repeats himself. As he leaves Casterbridge an impoverished hay-trusser in search of employment, he forms "much the same picture as he had presented when entering Casterbridge for the first time nearly a quarter of a century before" (p. 239). He returns to Weydon Priors, the scene of his crime, and from thence his wandering becomes "part of a circle of which Casterbridge formed the centre" (p. 244). The elements of the conflict between Farfrae and Henchard have a repetitive quality that connotes, in the opinion of Dale Kramer, "the recurring nature of human action;" this in turn implies that the "seemingly unavoidable, inevitable enmity between Henchard and Farfrae has its antecedents, and will recur continually in later men of conflicting manners of life."⁹ The circle widens, reaches beyond the novel.

The repetition in both texts has several consequences. It shapes the reader's sense of time and demands a reassessment of the place of the individual and the meaning of present action within the narrative that is congruent with this time sense. The circular repetition in both texts implies a cyclical rather than a linear view of time, wherein human actions and experience exist in a continuum, and the past is always rising to meet the present and reaching into the future. The power and the presence of the past is everywhere apparent in Hardy's novel. Not only do the streets and buildings of Casterbridge evoke Old Rome, but "it was impossible to dig more than a foot or two deep about the town fields and gardens without coming upon some tall soldier or other of the Empire...an urn at his knees, a jar at his throat" (p. 54). The dead linger on, as do their deeds. Casterbridge lovers instinctively avoid meeting in the Ring, an amphitheatre permeated in the collective consciousness of the townspeople with the memory of ancient bloodshed and violence. The solid presence of the artifact is a reminder of the continuity and similarity of human actions. D. H. Fussell describes this connection well when he remarks that throughout the novel "past actions survive like buildings to form obstacles in the present which must be negotiated."¹⁰

In *Beowulf* the artifact provides a continual visual reminder of the past and a connection with the future. The ancient sword hilt that

Beowulf brings back from Grendel's mere is inscribed with runes depicting the "origin of ancient strife" (ll. 1688-9). As he gazes upon it Hrothgar is moved to begin his "sermon" to Beowulf, in which he warns the young hero to guard against and prepare for hardship which lurks unseen in the future, and exhorts him to understand the transience of his present victory. Swords are often reminders of past feuds and symbols of their future renewal. When Beowulf returns to Hygelac's court, he predicts the future failure of Hrothgar's attempt to "peace-weave," to marry his daughter to the prince of a tribe traditionally hostile to the Danes. "However right the bride," says Beowulf (l. 2031), an old man might casually notice a young warrior carrying his father's sword. In the old man's memory, the sword is a reminder of the youth's father's death at the hands of the Danes, and it thus will be an incitement to seek revenge. After a long winter in exile, unable to decide between action and acceptance of peace-without-honor, Hengest acknowledges his duty to take vengeance for his lord's death when a sword is laid in his lap.¹¹ The ancestral sword Wiglaf uses to aid Beowulf in a dragon fight is also a reminder of past and future enmity. The poet stops the action of the fight to tell us how Wiglaf's father took it from the dead body of the brother of the Swedish king, and it serves as a present reminder in the narrative of the Swedish feud which will destroy Beowulf's people after he is dead.

The reader becomes obliged to ask if the past in both texts is a insuperable obstacle, a circular trap wherein which these men are doomed to repeat themselves; and if this is so, what is the worth of or potential for the individual and his present action? If we see human artifacts, swords and buildings, as symbolic of cyclical repetition, must we also see the action and personality of the individual as such? I think the sense of the past, of recurrence and circularity, in both the poem and the novel, does reshape our response to the concept of individuality. The characters and actions of Michael Henchard and Beowulf take on an aura of impersonality, to the extent that each man achieves archetypal, if not mythic, stature.

The movement away from personality towards the impersonal, or archetypal, takes place in similar ways in each text. Hardy compares the mayor to Job, Faust, King Lear and Saul. J. Hillis Miller thinks that these references cumulatively suggest

that Henchard, without at first being aware of it, is in his life repeating certain archetypal patterns of tragic experience which have echoed through the centuries incarnating themselves now in this person, now in that.

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Henchard is not living his life freely, but is determined in his actions by the irresistible force of universal patterns of recurrence.¹²

As hero, dragon-slayer and powerful king, Beowulf also follows well-established patterns, models for which are found within the poem. Sigmund, Germanic hero and dragon-slaver, and Scyld Scefing, wise and powerful ruler, are but two examples of the legendary and historical antecedents for Beowulf's behavior. Moreover, as I suggested earlier, the mayor's actions repeatedly reveal his self-destructive nature in the same way that Beowulf's actions reveal his determinedly heroic nature. By sheer dint of repetition, we might begin to feel that the characters of these men are paradigms, archetypes of human behavior. It is also worth noting that the two men share another characteristic that contributes to their impersonality, to their eventual detachment from the flow of particular human experience. This is the failure of relationship, that is, the failure to connect with another human being.

Beowulf is dogmatically alone, insisting on the isolation of his heroic course. He always fights alone, does not develop another personal relationship after the death of his lord Hygelac, is absent from his hall, symbol of the *comitatus*' unity, when the news of the dragon is brought to him. Finally and most important although the hero characteristically insists on fighting the dragon alone (ll. 2532-3), only one man places human connection above this injunction, and he comes too late to save his lord's life. The mayor is motivated both by his loneliness and a desire for relationship, and by his guilt which causes a simultaneous denial and rejection of relationship. We see him at the end of the novel completely "unrelated," severed from his kin and from human society. At the end of the novel and the poem we see clearly how each man resides in his alienation, how he detaches himself from time, cyclical and linear, and how he forges his mythic identity.

Hardy implies in several scenes of the novel that "Henchard was constructed upon too large a scale" (p. 139) to be aware of emotional nuance, or the subtleties and pettiness of human intercourse. His is always the bull-in-the-china-shop approach, which assumes greater stature and dignity as his fortunes decline, and his alienation increases. The large-scale construction of Henchard's nature is completed in his final detachment; he is initially an outcast from society and then detached from life itself. In a remarkably powerful scene, Hardy foreshadows both kinds of detachment in one image. Henchard, contemplating drowning himself, sees his effigy—a remnant of the

Skimmity-Ride held by the townspeople to disgrace Lucetta—float past him:

In the circular current imparted by the central flow the form was brought forward, till it passed under his eyes; and then he perceived with a sense of horror that it was *himself*. Not a man somewhat resembling him, but one in all respects his counterpart, his actual double, was floating as if dead in Ten Hatches Hole. (p. 227)

Henchard sees himself as Other, and in death. The figure is caught in the "circular current," or cyclical time, but is also born along by the "central flow," or linear time, offering an image of simultaneous relation to time. The Mayor, however, is *watching* this, is "outside" time. His actual death and the terms of his will signify a desired, decisive and total erasure from the slate of human time and memory, and we are not merely horrified or saddened, but transfixed by the simplicity and grandeur, the essential nature of this gesture as a statement of being, a negative definition of the Self, an attempt to relinquish will.

And here, of course, is the point of greatest difference between the Germanic hero and the mayor of Casterbridge. The diminishment of possibility leads Henchard through resignation to a retreat into non-being, and decisive negation. Beowulf responds to his fate with decisive affirmation. Whereas Henchard "had no wish to make an arena a second time of a world that had become a mere painted scene to him" (p. 244), Beowulf re-enters this arena of action and engagement with the world that Henchard shuns. But Beowulf's engagement parallels the mayor's withdrawal in that both gestures apparently "transcend" time, break free from the circular current and the central flow. The dragon fight is an initially complex and clouded issue. The hero is uneasy, not clear in his mind, unsure of himself:

fierce grief
and anguish of mind racked the good man:
the wise king thought he's greatly angered
God, the Eternal Lord, by breaking
natural law; dark thoughts gnawed at his breast,
which was not customary with him. (ll. 2327-2332)

He breaks out of this circle of recrimination and moral uncertainty through the decision to act. It is the death of the hero that clarifies the meaning of his final gesture. In apparent direct contrast to the mayor,

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Beowulf makes an assertion of will. His death makes a claim on human memory, a mark upon time. As a bid for immortality, for *lóf*, Beowulf's death embraces time, but like the mayor's death, it also attempts to transcend time.

In the Old English epic poem and Hardy's novel the two men are caught in a continuum of time which is created, defined, by the density of repeated patterns of human experience and of possibilities for human action. The pervasive insistence of this patterned contextual backdrop enables us to see the characters spotlighted in relief. We wait for them to perform. Miller points out that the strength of the "irresistible force of universal patterns of recurrence" in the life of the mayor "lies partly in the fact that until the end of his life he is ignorant of them."¹³ He explains how this has changed by the end of the novel;

When the characters are freed of their illusions and can see present, past and future clearly, each recognizes the inevitability of his fate and even its impersonality.¹⁴

The mayor's final understanding brings detachment and apparent freedom from the constraints of time, as does Beowulf's final gesture in fighting the dragon. The men, of course, are mortal, but their attempts at resolution of the temporal dilemma give them a grand, larger-than-life, if not mythic quality in the eyes of the reader. Catherine Wakefield is, in fact, quite accurate when she speaks of "grandeur of spirit." But the source of this grandeur is not the resolution, it is simply the attempt at resolution.

I have repeatedly used the qualifier "apparent" because the notion of the possibility of resolution is the source of the illusion that dominates both men. The belief in the possibility of resolution is itself an embodiment of Nietzsche's "spirit of Revenge," the destructive force of which is clearly implied by Zarathustra's plea that man be delivered from it: "For *that man be freed from the bonds of revenge*: that is the bridge to my highest hope, and a rainbow after protracted storms."¹⁵ In his essay "The Question of value in Nietzsche and Heidegger" James S. Hans makes the nature and effects of such revenge clearer.¹⁶ He cites the section "On Deliverance" from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* where Zarathustra says: "This, yet this alone, is revenge itself: the will's aversion to time and its 'It was.'" This concept of revenge, in its broadest metaphysical sense, is not only a particular form of persecution, but is a manifestation of the individual's revulsion against the passage of time, which "includes not only the 'it was' but, just as

essentially, the 'it will be' and the 'it is not.'"¹⁷ Revenge governs the actions of both the hero and the mayor, in that each attempts, whether through relinquishment or assertion of the will, to deny the presence of the 'It was,' to dissociate himself from time, and so to dissolve the bonds of revenge. But each man's form of resistance only defines his stance as victim; it embodies the all-embracing grasp of the spirit of revenge, each man's powerlessness within its grasp, and the self-defeating irony of his subjection to it.

The more one tries to defeat and control time, by whatever approach, the more one is defeated and controlled by it, in the form of revenge. The qualities of illusion, frustration and self-destruction that attend the attempt are well described by Hans:

The problem with our commitment to revenge, in both individual and cultural terms, is that it leads us to think that we can overcome and negate the past through an act of revenge, when in fact we only end up perpetuating the 'It was' that so revolts us, leading in turn to the desire for further revenge. In this way the acts of the will are always driven by the 'It was' and reinforce the continuity of it that the act of revenge is supposed to break. Not only is the will opposing something against which it is always bound to lose; not only is the will in turn always directing its present actions in terms of a past that it wants—but will never be able—to overcome through revenge; but also each act of the will that arises out of the revulsion against the 'It was' increases the revulsion and extends the power of the 'It was' over the will. Every attempt to negate time is bound to fail...¹⁸

The grand attempts of both hero and mayor to resolve the temporal dilemma serve to exemplify the impossibility of resolution. My point is that the attempt itself nonetheless illuminates the cycle, the 'It was' that each man pits himself against so grimly, so heroically, so doggedly (to borrow one of Hardy's favorite adjectives for the mayor, and to conflate the sense of many an epithet for Beowulf). Michael Henchard's and Beowulf's opposition to the cyclical 'It was' of their patterned contexts of existence are separately awe-inspiring; each man possesses his own grandeur and dignity. But when we use the hero as a mirror for the mayor we also glimpse the power of the "It was" with terrible and awe-inspiring clarity.

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NOTES

¹*The Colby Mercury*, 4 (1933), 41.

²T. A. Shippey, *Old English Verse* (London, 1972), p. 26.

³*Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴"The Monsters and the Critics," reprinted in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame, 1971), p. 71.

⁵F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Middlesex, 1961), p. 161.

⁶All references to this novel are from Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (New York, 1977).

⁷All references to *Beowulf* are from *A Readable Beowulf*, trans. Stanley B. Greenfield (Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1982).

⁸"Character and Fate in Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*," *NCF*, 21 (1966), 250.

⁹"Character and the Cycle of Change in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*," *TSL* 16 (1971), 111-112.

¹⁰"The Maladroit Delay: The Changing Times in Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*," *CritQ* 21 (1979), p. 25.

¹¹This part of the Finnsburh episode is problematic and open to several interpretations. See Klaeber, pp. 175-176, for a discussion of this passage.

¹²*Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 100.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 217.

¹⁵Nietzsche, p. 123.

¹⁶*Philosophy Today* 28 (1984), 283-299.

¹⁷In *The New Nietzsche*, ed. David B. Allison (New York, 1979), p. 72.

¹⁸Hans, p. 292.