

# A Little Circle of Light

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Death takes everything. It is left us to win and maintain an enclave against a chaos that presses in. That theme pervades *Beowulf*, as Tolkien<sup>1</sup> shows in his excellent essay, “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics.” Hrothgar, king of the Danes, constructs the fantastic mead-hall Heorot, a besieged “circle of light.” There a bard or *scop* sings of Creation, “how the Almighty had made the earth / a gleaming plain girdled with waters.” Our whole world is no more than an island in a sea of darkness, and this song of created order triggers Grendel’s rampage.

*Beowulf* starts off the semester of The Great Conversation devoted to the Middle Ages. Our guiding question is always, “How should we live?” For this poem, that could be specified as another question, “How should we face the monsters who threaten order?”

These monsters are within and without. The international system is currently at mortal risk with Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. European peace is a rare thing. Any extended peace is a little circle of light indeed against the sweep of history. Precarious, and not without serious exceptions (such as the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s), a European equilibrium has obtained the last seventy years. But now chaos makes its push.

It is the disorder of one soul, that of Putin, that has thus disturbed the world. But we all must grapple with internal monsters: insouciant voracity, ogres of fear, vampiric narcissism, gigantic pride, and resentment.

These monsters are hard to see, inhabiting as they do unilluminated psychic corners and the blindspots of history. Even this wonderful poet, who sees so much, starts *Beowulf* by celebrating Scyld Scefing, Hrothgar’s great-grandfather. This isn’t an obvious place to start, as the hero of the tale, Beowulf, is a Geat from southern Sweden, who crosses the Sound to Zealand (the largest island of modern-day Denmark, and site of Copenhagen) to help Hrothgar. Though the poem ends with the death of the king of the Geats, Beowulf, it starts with Scyld: “that was a good king,” the poet states emphatically. Scyld makes his people, the Danes, secure, by lording it over their neighbors: he was “scourge of many tribes / a wrecker of mead-benches, / rampaging among foes.” That is, many mead-halls burned so that Heorot could rise.

The old heroic code is celebrated throughout *Beowulf*, and that system of open-handed gift-giving of a warlord to his retainers itself requires destroying the little circles of light of one’s neighbors: a gratuity fed by plunder. The monstrosity of grace dependent on cruelty, of a heaven built upon hell, seems to lie somewhat beyond the poet’s ken. But otherwise, this poet shows himself profound in plumbing the precarity of existence.

Tolkien points out that the structure of the poem is one of balance: “a contrasted description of two moments in a great life [that of Beowulf], rising and setting, ... first achievement and final death.” The poem’s ending has the Geats in a most perilous position. Their bulwark Beowulf has died; he has no heir. The Swedes press in. The Geat circle of light will be extinguished.

In Beowulf’s prime, he kills Grendel and Grendel’s mother, preserving the Danish nobility’s circle of light. The king he has helped, Hrothgar, counsels the young man, for whom he sees kingship coming in turn: “So learn from this / and understand true values. I who tell you / have wintered into wisdom.” This is Heaney’s translation—and that last phrase is particularly magnificent. What is Hrothgar’s wisdom? Do not let power corrupt your soul; it breeds the delusion that one is invincible, uncapturable by the waves of relentless change. Do not become prideful, as Hrothgar admits he had become: “I came to believe / my enemies had faded from the face of the earth.” But then Grendel came, and he was humbled.



Simone Weil notes in her brilliant “The *Iliad*, or The Poem of Force” that exercising force against others dehumanizes the one intoxicated by such power. Hrothgar has seen this:

“Sometimes [God] allows the mind of a man/of distinguished birth to follow its bent, / grants him fulfillment and felicity on earth / and ferts to command in his own country. / He permits him to lord it in many lands / until the man in his unthink- ingness / forgets that it will ever end for him. ... The whole world / conforms to his will, he is kept from the worst / until an element of overweening / enters him and takes hold / while the soul’s guard, its sentry, drowns, / grown too distracted.”

This is an internal Grendel: “The devious promptings of the demon start. / His old possessions seem paltry to him now. / He covets and resents; dishonors custom / and bestows no gold; and because of good things / the Heavenly Powers gave him in the past / he ignores the shape of things to come.”

The *Beowulf* bard finds wisdom in the ancient, pre-Christian ways and stories, showing us that the mythical age of heroes, like mythology in general, is not something dead and gone, something to be dismissed. This Christian *scop* does not act in the censorious and supercilious manner of many other medieval Christians confronting the pagan past. Mythology hovers over the abyss, most pointedly in the Norse tales. And there is light and wisdom in that hovering. (One might compare what the *Beowulf* poet has done to the stupendous achievement of C.S. Lewis in *Till We Have Faces*, which likewise treats paganism as iconic of reality’s depths.) If even Saint Augustine could only see in the ancient mythological religions the operations of demons, so much the worse for Christian civilization. If God is God, that is, identical with reality in its depths, He could not have suddenly appeared having never appeared before.

This is one of the keynotes of the political philosopher Eric Voegelin. Democratizing his insights somewhat, one might ask: is not God always there, in each significant happening in our lives? Indeed, does His presence not constitute significance as such? This constitution of meaning and order out of the divine presence could not have bypassed tens of thousands of years and billions of human lives. If we find across the New Testament reference to the Lamb slain from, or before, the foundation of the world, one thing being claimed is that history, personal and universal, is constituted by God’s, very often obscure, communication with us.

And so, though all things in time are doomed, though tragedy is the truth of time, could there not be a remedy *within* the tragedy? “The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5). If agonized humanity has never ceased to be devoured by its own beasts in a cosmic colosseum, we might remember that love embraces ordeal and night. And perhaps our small and always perishing lights belong to a constellation that is rising.

## Note

1. Portrait of J.R.R. Tolkien on pp. 28 and 41.