

**THE DEATH OF ANGLO-SAXON SECULAR HEROES:  
A LINGUISTIC DISCUSSION ON *BEOWULF* AND  
*THE BATTLE OF MALDON***

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The need for new methods in the field of Anglo-Saxon studies has been apparent for some time<sup>1</sup>. One of the most effective and recent approaches to the different levels of the text —the Speech Act Theory— can provide the critic and the student of Anglo-Saxon literature with a different apparatus to focus on certain traditional cruxes from this literary period.

Using these theoretical principles as a starting point<sup>2</sup>, in the following pages, I would like to analyse two Anglo-Saxon passages, where the natural complexity of this poetry and the difficulties of interpretation require a different reading strategy. In this sense, the Speech Act Theory allows not only a pragmatic interpretation but also a reconstruction of the text in its synchronic dimension.

The chosen passages —*Beowulf* (2788-2816) and *The Battle of Maldon* (166-180)<sup>3</sup>— may be considered as examples of the same situation-type, that is, “the death of the hero”. The aim of this analysis is to show how certain aspects of discourse organization between the characters and the narrator depend on poetical criteria established by the author when developing the plot. This could favour a wide range of expressive devices at certain points in the narrative like, for instance, the reduction of the four strong stresses pattern of the long line to a simplified pattern of two in the short line.

Both sections develop the final discourse of the hero and include a narrative element which functions as a means of presenting the direct speech. In addition, these two moments may be considered as crucial for the story if we follow the criterion of immediate rhetorical effect<sup>4</sup>; they frame the personality and “Weltanschauung” of the character. If those lines in direct style help to create the effect of a voice different from that of the narrator, then the narrative presentation completes the

communicative frame. The literary purpose of these narrative presentations has been undervalued when considered “a unique semantic plan with different realisations”<sup>5</sup>. If instead of focusing on their lexical arrangement, we focus on their specific communicative purpose, that is, how they affect our acceptance of the discourse in direct style, we can see how the Anglo-Saxon author makes a functional use of a common set of expressions, giving us a clue about how the professional reciter should approach the performance of these sections.

Having said this, let us move directly to our main concern: the speech of *Thanksgiving*<sup>6</sup> addressed to the divinity within the situation-type aforementioned. Even though we accept the existence of situation-types, themes and even models of discourse in Anglo-Saxon poetry, this does not preclude a functional use of these conventional devices according to the different contexts. As Alter points out:

The process of literary creation (...) is an unceasing dialectic between the necessity to use established forms in order to break and the remake of those forms because they are arbitrary restrictions and because what is merely repeated automatically no longer conveys a message<sup>7</sup>.

The contextual use of a situation-type can be seen in these passages, allowing us to mark differences between two heroes apparently as close as Byrhtnoth and Beowulf.

Our analysis must begin with the identification of the communicative purpose of the direct speech sections. The presence of an *Expressive* illocutionary act permits to identify both as *Thanksgiving* discourses, normally associated in Anglo-Saxon narrative poetry with other speech acts such as *Praying* or *Begging*<sup>8</sup>. The reason for this has to be found in the narrow scope of Anglo-Saxon narrative situations. Henceforth, when a character has to face his death, the constraining Christian framework demands two basic speech performances: a) *Declaration*<sup>9</sup> of loyalty to God—normally expressed by the naming of his attributes—and, b) the expression of gratitude—made manifest by means of *Expressive* illocutionary acts. This gratitude is linked in the linear development of the plot with previous events which are seen as its main causes. Therefore, this situation-type helps us to elucidate the relationship that the speaker—the hero—establishes in his discourse between his life and the divinity. This relationship, of very little interest in the case of the religious hero—his/her life is such due to God’s design—, gains importance in the case of secular heroes as it reveals the complexity of the ideological framework for this type of characters in Anglo-Saxon poetry.

The situation-type is brought into the narrative of the two poems as a

direct consequence of a personal heroic decision of both characters: after the fight with the dragon —an enterprise which will prove disastrous for his own community— Beowulf lies injured. Then he asks Wiglaf to show him some pieces from the ancient treasure. On his return he utters the words we are considering.

Byrhtnoth, having allowed the Vikings to cross over the sea-causeway —the “ofermode” scene— falls injured: after exhorting his men to go on fighting he thanks God for His help. A comparison between the two passages can be established on several points:

a) The heroes are explicitly identified as old men: *Har hilderinc (Mld. 169a)*; *gomel on gíohðe (Bwf 2793 a)*.

b) The narrators point out the imminence of their death: *Ne mihte þa on fotum leng fæste gestandan (Mld, 171)*; *ealdres æt ende (Bwf 2790a)*.

c) Before the final outcome takes place, both heroes give orders which, apart from their context-dependent contents, are addressed to those who have remained loyal to them. In *Beowulf*, they are included in the direct speech situation, while in *The Battle of Maldon* they are referred to in the narrative presentation. In both cases the nature of these orders can be explained according to the heroic ethos of the speakers: the construction of a funeral mound and the call to go on fighting.

d) In both narrative presentations, the verbs making the beginning of the direct speech are amplified and modified by a proposition dealing with the extreme difficulties of the characters to produce the speeches. So, the narrator points out how Beowulf’s young follower had to bring him back to life before he could speak:

(...)	he hine eft ongon
wæteres weorpan oðþæt	wordes ord
breosthord þurhbræc.	

(*Bwf 2790b-2792a*)

While Byrhtnoth, unable to hold his weapon or even stand before his men, becomes the image of the doomed warrior:

Feoll þa to foldan	fealohilte swurd;
ne mihte he gehealdan	heardne mece
wæpnes wealdan.	

(*Mld 166-168a*)

e) In both cases, before the direct speech opens, the narrator includes

a “background gesture”<sup>10</sup> in parallel to the verbal action: Beowulf supervises the treasure, *gold sceawode* (*Bwf* 2793b), Byrhtnoth looks up at heaven, *he to heofenum wlat* (*Mld* 172a); two very different actions preceding two very similar speeches. From a semantic point of view, these have no connection with the speech act verbs of the presentation. They can be considered as a closed set of actions working as an extra-linguistic support for certain discourse productions either emphasizing the sense or adding further details to the portrayal of the action.

f) Finally both paragraphs present editorial problems: *Beowulf* 2792 and *The Battle of Maldon* 172 have been considered as defective long lines. Though nothing in the manuscripts seem to require emendation, all editors accept this fact, differing only in the criteria to reconstruct the supposed missing half-line. This crux could be analysed under a different light with a pragmatic approach as we shall try to prove later on.

Going on with the direct speech sections, the *component illocutionary force* of both discourses is signalled by the *Expressive* act. This is introduced by explicit performative verbs: *Geþancie þe* (*Mdl* 173a); *ic (...)* þanc (...) wordum secge (*Bwf* 2793-2794), followed by a catalogue of the names of the divinity: *deoda waldend* (*Mld* 173b), *frea ealles* (*Bwf* 2794b), *wuldurcýning* (*Bwf* 2795a), *ecum dryhtne* (*Bwf* 2796a). Moreover the *Thanksgiving* acts are justified by the explicit mentioning of the gifts received from God. From this point onwards the similarity disappears and the discourses return to their respective narrative sequences. So Beowulf develops the theme of the treasure in several *Assertions*, explaining its meaning for the protagonist and his community. In the last *Assertion* of the sequence, the hero accepts death in the most detached way as if it were a natural end for his heroic career: *ne mæg ic her leng wesan* (*Bwf* 2801b). This attitude contrasts, for instance, with the dramatic treatment at Guthlac’s death in the religious poem of the same name. There personification is used in reference to death:

(...)	Swa waes Guðlace
enge anhoga	ættryhte þa
æfter nihtscuan	neah geþýded,
wiga waelgifre.	

(*Glc* 996b-999a)

The *asserting sequence* is followed by the instructions about the construction of the funeral barrow (*Bwf* 2801-2805). The narrator reappears for a few lines to describe Beowulf handing over the symbols of his authority: the golden necklace, the ring, the helmet and the coat of mail. Beowulf’s direct speech reappears to mention the death of all his



depends to a great extent upon the measure of aesthetic felicity with which the material is handled<sup>15</sup>.

In this sense, a tragic perception of Beowulf's death is the result of our own view of the death of a literary hero, rather than the attitude of the hero himself. Beowulf's detached acceptance of his fate and his preoccupation with the treasure and his people —both earthly concerns— seem to confirm this opinion.

Byrhtnoth's *Plea* for the salvation of his soul, and the aforementioned reading on the Vikings demonstrate a clear change in the hero's perspective. In this case, Byrhtnoth's death is tragic, not only for the audience but also for the character himself. His inability to come to terms with his double role as an individual hero and as a national leader, seems to remain in the background during his *Plea*. In this sense, he is much closer than Beowulf to other figures of the Christian feudal epics, where the mistakes and great deeds of the heroes —the display of *ofermod*— are on a less important level than the everlasting salvation of their souls. Obviously, Beowulf's heroic individualism just takes for granted the poetic justice of his salvation (was there any other possibility for the positive hero of a Christian poem?) and so his only real concern tends towards his preoccupation with his continuing earthly fame.

The communicative analysis and the discussion on the pragmatic function of the two passages provide the basis for further considerations. This type of reading, as well as making clear the meaning of entire sections, can also be helpful when considering the interpretation of single lines, particularly, if the metrical criteria are not enough. The unanswered question of the "missing" half-lines in the narrative sections of the two passages can be a suitable example to test the approach.

The question of missing half-lines in Anglo-Saxon poetry has been considered from very different perspectives. Basically we can divide them into two basic views. On the one hand, there is that which considers the need to re-structure them as complete lines, according to the criterion established for normal lines and thus rewrite the so-called "missing" sections. On the other hand, we have those scholars who consider this phenomenon as a particular manifestation of the syllabic, alliterative and stress patterns of the Anglo-Saxon line. This question requires much more detailed discussion, not only because of the two aforementioned lines, but, in general for its possible implications when editing Anglo-Saxon poetic texts.

E.V.K. Dobbie, when editing volumes IV and VI of the *ASPR* adopts a position of no compromise as regards any possible emendation of the lines under discussion. In the case of *Beowulf* 2792, after noting that "nothing is lost from the MS. between *ƿurhbræc* and *gome!*"<sup>16</sup>, he adds that "it is

evident that a half-line has been omitted by the scribe". The list of the different emendations proposed by the editors of the poem are, all of them, a variation on the same structure: *Subject (proper or generic name) + Speech Act Verb*, so providing as the second half line a reasonably conventional introduction to direct speech, particularly since the "Beowulf + Speech Act Verb" pattern appears frequently in the poem as an off-line.

In the case of *The Battle of Maldon* the editorial attitude is quite similar; after pointing out that "the transcript does not indicate any loss in the MS"<sup>17</sup>, he continues by presenting the different emendations to the line, which basically conform to two patterns: either there is an alternative variation to the personal pronoun *he*: *heard heaðurinc / wigendra hleo*, or a conventional direct speech presentation: *hæleð gemælde / hleoðrode eorl*. All the possible emendations except the last one tend to take the half-line in the text as the second part of a hypothetical long line.

If we consider briefly the emendations to both lines, we immediately perceive an implicit double-criteria working in the minds of the editors:

a) all narrative presentations to a direct speech section are uniform so they must follow the pattern *Subject + Speech Act Verb*. This being settled, these elements are not particularly relevant in order to understand the overall sense of the passage and its literary implications.

b) the recorded omissions normally affect the most conventional elements of the presentation which suggests that the omission can only be due to scriptural mistake. Nevertheless, these assumptions can and must be revised. As A. Bliss says,

As a whole short lines are much more frequent than the editors have been accustomed to concede (...) editors of Old English poetical texts ought to give more weight than they have generally done to the possibility that short lines occurring in the manuscript may have been intended as such by the poet, particularly if a short line has either double or continued alliteration<sup>18</sup>.

The possibilities suggested by Bliss's paper are particularly relevant since they point out the use of a short line —rather than half-line— with a poetic intention. Similarly, but from a different perspective —the explanation of irregular rhythms in Anglo-Saxon poetry— P.F. Baum admits that

Wider and wider divergencies would give variety and also amuse the scop's artistic sense as the ear is leased by dissonances and music and then reassured by a return to the common harmonies<sup>19</sup>.

Baum's critical decision leads to the acceptance of rhythmical irregularities in Anglo-Saxon verse as a poetic technique to avoid monotony. This fact is particularly clear if we consider that any Anglo-Saxon poet or reciter would be very conscious of the importance of sound effects for the entertainment of his audience. To accept rhythmical irregularity allows us to accept the same kind of irregularity in the syllabic and alliterative arrangement of the line, as these three patterns continually interact. According to Jean-Marie Luecke,

The Old English unit (the verse, short line) is essentially a linguistic phrase —the pattern in it created by phrase stresses, its shape is determined by syntax and semantics; and the pattern of phrase stress will shift within the units according to the phrasal structure and meaning<sup>20</sup>.

If this is so and the short line can be considered as a syntactic and semantic unit there is no reason for not understanding it as a rhythmical unit too: the audience, simply, would not then perceive it as an incomplete line.

Bliss points out that in the Germanic languages, the short line can appear as a gnomic statement in certain stanzas. From this, he is able to prove how the great majority of Anglo-Saxon short lines answer either to a criterion of continued alliteration with the preceding line or they contain double alliteration. In both cases they conform to a perfectly coherent alliterative unit which is accompanied by an equally coherent rhythmical pattern<sup>21</sup>. Any apparent irregularities in the rhythm are compensated for what can be understood as "rhetorical silences". This concept derives from the distinction of line breaks between lines and short lines:

Line breaks take time and so are part of the material of rhythm. As such, they are part of the continuing movement and the timing of the language and not breaks in the measurement<sup>22</sup>.

All these critical considerations help us to conclude that the editorial attitude towards short lines must be seriously revised. For instance, *The Battle of Maldon* 172 fulfils all the syntactic, alliterative and semantic requirements to be considered a full line: the previous line concludes a syntactic and semantic unit: the short line, then picking up the "background gesture" which precedes the discourse, emphasizes the spiritual implications of Byrhtnoth's speech. Besides, its double alliteration establishes a closer relationship between subject and object and therefore stresses the basic meaning of the line: Byrhtnoth's



aspirations of spiritual reward. The rhythmical pattern, with its falling cadence, anticipates the rhetorical silence. The lack of an off-verse would thus indicate the lengthening of the same rhetorical silence.

In the case of *Beowulf*, the explanation for this phenomenon relies also on contextual reasons. As Jean-Marie Luecke suggests

(this line) may be a common ground between the case of two verses having the rhythmical feel of one and that of a single verse intervening between two full lines<sup>23</sup>.

This “intermediate” position, from the rhythmical point of view, is made more acceptable by a double alliteration which provides the necessary unity for the elements which carry the semantic weight of the line. The following line, which precedes the direct speech, may be read as a “stage direction” alien to the narrative presentation itself as it points out the preoccupation of the character prior to his death. The syntactic and semantic distance between the short line and this one justifies the existence of the rhetorical silence and so the rhythmical construction of the line is complete.

Up to this point in our analysis what we have tried to demonstrate is quite straightforward: if we accept the criterion of immediate rhetorical effect and the importance of each particular context in order to explain textual phenomena, the appearance of short lines, like the ones previously analyzed, can be justified by their pragmatic value in the production of the text. From this, we can conclude that irregularities in the stress, syllabic and alliterative patterns can be justified by our appreciation of the existence of the rhetorical silence, marked in the text by the omission of an off-verse. The rhetorical silence is a sound effect clearly appreciable by an audience and the lack of an off-verse, an indication to the reciter of the intended effect. The poetic function of these silences, which depend, obviously, on their immediate context, in the case of these two passages, is quite clear: to raise the dramatic tension in the audience prior to the hero's last words; words which are particularly relevant as they make the Christian ideology which frames both poems evident.

## Notes

1. See on this matter N.F. Blake, "The Dating of Old English Poetry" in Brian S. Lee ed. *An English Miscellany Presented to W.S. Mackie*. Cape Town: O.U.P., 1977, pp. 14-27.
2. Manuel José Gómez Lara, "El discurso del héroe anglosajón en Literatura Inglesa". Unpublished Dissertation. Univ. of Seville, 1985.
3. See appendix.
4. According to Michael Cherniss, "(...) any element in the poem should be explicable by reference to its immediate context. The poet says whatever he says in order to gain a specific rhetorical (or dramatic) effect at that specific moment in the course of his narrative when he chooses to say it". "*Beowulf*: Oral Presentation and the Criterion of Immediate Rhetorical Effect", *Genre* 3 (1970), pp. 214-228, p. 216.
5. See Charles Edward McNally, "Beowulf Mafelode: Text Linguistics and Speech Act in *Beowulf*", p. 203. See *DAI* 36 (1975), 1476A.
6. I define this group of speech acts as having an *Expressive illocutionary point* with the speaker adopting a psychological attitude of moral duty towards the hearer. The basic terminology used for the description of the different types of speech acts follows John Searle's categories in "A Classification of Illocutionary Acts", *Language in Society* 5 (1976), pp. 1-23.
7. Robert Alter, "Biblical Type-Scenes and the Uses of Convention", *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978), pp. 355-368.
8. Both of them present a *Directive* illocutionary point, varying the degree of the attempt by the speaker to get the hearer to do something. They show clearly the relationship of authority established between the participants of the speech situation.
9. John Searle, p. 13.
10. Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis*. New York: Anchor Books, 1946, p. 101. For an analysis of the concept in *The Battle of Maldon* see Edward B. Irving, or., "The Heroic Style in *The Battle of Maldon*", *Studies in Philology* 58 (1961), pp. 457-467.
11. Both, *Assertions* and *Statements*, belong to the group of *Representative* speech acts in Searle's taxonomy. The difference between them is a matter of illocutionary force being the *Assertion* closer to the group of verdictives and the *Statement* to that of the expositives (Austin's taxonomy).
12. Another type of *Directive* speech act. The speaker adopts a psychological position of extreme humility.
13. See N.F. Blake, "The Battle of Maldon", *Neophilologus* 49 (1965), pp. 332-345, and, by the same author, "The Genesis of *The Battle of Maldon*", *Anglo-Saxon England* 7 (1978), pp. 119-129.
14. See the reference in Wulfstan's *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* and the entries for the year 1004 and 1010 in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.
15. Alan Renoir, "The Heroic Oath in *Beowulf*, the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Nibelungelied*", in *Studies in Old English Literature in Honour of A. Brodeur*, S.B. Greenfield ed. Oregon: Oregon University Press, 1963, pp. 230-266, p. 242.
16. *ASPR*, vol. 4, p. 259.
17. *ASPR*, vol. 6, p. 144.
18. Alan Bliss, "Single Half-Lines in Old English Poetry", *Notes and Queries* 216 (1971), pp. 442-448, p. 448.
19. P.F. Baum, "The Meter of *Beowulf*", *Modern Philology* (1948-49), pp. 73-91, p. 74.
20. Jane-Marie Luecke O.S.B., *Measuring Old English Rhythm. Literary Monographs* 9. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978, p. 50.

21. Alan Bliss, pp. 447-448.  
 22. Jane-Marie Luecke, p. 58.  
 23. Jane-Marie Luecke, p. 98.

## APPENDIX

The passages commented in this paper according to the edition of the *ASPR*.

### BEOWULF (2788-2816)

- He ða mid þam maðmum maerne þïoden,  
 dryhten sinne, drïorigne fand  
 2790 ealdres æt ende; he hine eft ongon  
 wæteres weorpan, oðþæt wordes ord  
 breosthord þurhbræc, \* \* \*  
 gomel on gïohðe (gold sceawode):  
 “Ic ðara frætwa frean ealles ðanc,  
 2795 wuldurcyninge, wordum secge,  
 ecum dryhtne, þe ic her on starie,  
 þæs ðe ic moste minum leodum  
 ær swyltdæge swylc gestrynan.  
 Nu ic on maðma hord mine bebohte  
 2800 frode feorhlege, fremmað gena  
 leoda þearfe; ne mæg ic her leng wesan.  
 Hatað heaðomære hlæw gewyrcean  
 beorhtne æfter bæle æt brimes nosan;  
 se scel to gemyndum mimum leodum  
 2805 heah hlifian on Hronesnæsse,  
 þæt hit sæliðend syððan hatan  
 Biowulfes biorh, ða ðe brentingas  
 ofer floda genipu feorran drifað”.  
 Dyde him of healse hring gyldenne.  
 2810 þïoden þristhydig, þegne gesealde,  
 geongum garwigan; goldfahne helm,  
 beah ond byrnan, het hyne brucan well:  
 “þu eart endelaf usses cynnes,  
 Waegmundinga. Ealle wyrd forsweop  
 2815 mine magas to methodscafte,  
 eorlas on elne; ic him æfter sceal”.

**THE BATTLE OF MALDON (166-180)**

Feoll þa to foldan fealohilte swurd;  
 ne mihte he gehealdan heardne mece,  
 wæpnes wealdan. þa gyt þæt word gecwæð  
 har hilderinc, hyssas bylde,  
 170 bæd gangan forð gode geferan;  
 ne mihte þa on fotum leng fæste gestandan.  
 He to heofenum wlat:  
 “Geþ ancie þe, ðeoda waldend,  
 eaera þaera wynna þe ic on worulde gebad.  
 175 Nu ic ah, milde metod, mæste þearfe  
 þæt þu minum gaste godes geunne,  
 þæt min sawul to ðe siðian mote  
 on þin geweald, þeoden engla,  
 mid friþe ferian. Ic eom frymði to þe.  
 180 þæt hi helsceaðan hynan ne moton”.