

PHASING *BEOWULF*:
AN ASPECT OF NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN FAIRYTALE AND EPIC

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It is by now a fairly reasonable proposition that the overall construction of *Beowulf* consists of a hero's three successive battles against three numinous adversaries, culminating in his death.¹ The threefold (or manifold) arrangement this entails, and which recurs in various places and at various levels throughout the poem, conforms to a pattern commonly found in fairytales: characteristically, several individuals in succession face a test, or a hero undergoes several consecutive tests, the last of these events (which are essentially one) having a decisive function. Propp's *Morphology*, Olrik's "Laws", or Bartlett's "Patterns" are inevitable referents here, but certain important aspects of this structure make it advisable to seek a more precise definition than these writers provide. The article introduces the concept of *phasing* to account for the multiple structure of both fairytale and epic, distinguishes it from the much-abused concept of repetition, defines some of its functions, traces it to a synecdochic conception of the world, and relates it to destinal notions in the poem.

¹ The *locus classicus* for this proposition, Tolkien (1936), placed the fights squarely "at the centre", though he attributed a bipartite structure to the poem. Klaeber (1950: lii) noted "a remarkable gradation in the three great crises of the poem." Rogers (1955) likewise stressed the progression of the three fights. Hume (1975) sought to reconcile bipartite and tripartite divisions in the poem. Robinson (1991: 153-154) writes of "patterns of climactic progression" and of the "firm design of ever-growing challenges to the hero." For a recent survey see Shippey (1997). See also note (23). Interlace or ring structures are not excluded by an adherence to the tripartite view; my analysis will, all the same, not rely on the merits of number three.

1. The structure of fairytales

According to the model proposed by Vladimir Propp (1928) for the analysis of the fairytale genre,² there are thirty-one “functions” or main actions which suffice to account for the composition of every wondertale. Functions always occur in a specific order, although there are codifiable exceptions, and of course not every function is made use of in each tale; further, tales are structured in “sequences”³ each consisting of a number of functions which may but need not appear again in another sequence of the same tale. Propp defined the sequence as a development proceeding from a Villainy or a Lack, through intermediary functions, to Marriage or some other closing function; this basic sequence may appear more than once in a given tale.⁴ A fruitful major premise of the book is that action is the main structural component of fairytales; and though the nature of epic tends to complicate the picture, action, too, seems essential to an account of the structure of *Beowulf*; this premise will prove of great importance to our study. Let us, first of all, illustrate the method with analysis of a text that will be of use to us later on, the tale *The Golden Bird* (Grimm 57, AT550; [Roman numerals and italics denote Propp’s function; these are followed by a summary of their application to our tale]):

The Golden Bird

First sequence

VIII. *The villain causes harm or injury to one member of a family*: the king’s golden apples are stolen night after night.

IX. *Misfortune or shortage is made known; the hero is either approached with a request and responds to it of his own accord, or is commanded or dispatched* (x3): one after the other, the king’s three sons must keep watch at night.

XI. *The hero leaves home* (x3): each goes to spend one night in the garden.

XII. *The hero is tested, interrogated, attacked etc. in preparation for receiving either a magical agent or a helper* (x3): their stay in the garden at night constitutes a test.

² Though Propp wrote of “folktales”, he actually had in mind the specific types of folktale known as “wondertales” or “fairytales”, i.e. those included between numbers 300 and 749 in Aarne-Thompson (henceforth AT) (1961).

³ Although I follow the English 1968 version, I find the term “move” too unsatisfactory for what it is meant to convey; the Russian term *xod* has been rendered into French as “sequence”, and in this one respect I shall follow Derrida’s (1970) French version which, for the rest, unlike the 1958 and 1968 English translations, is based on Propp’s second (1969), emended edition.

⁴ Morphology, p. 92. Functions are assigned a letter (A, B, C etc.), and each function is in turn to be realized by one of a number of possible “function forms” (A1, A2, A3, B1, B2, etc.) taken from open paradigms, but for our purposes it will not be necessary to use these symbols.

XIII. *The hero reacts to the actions of the future donor* (x3): the two eldest fall asleep, the third manages to stay awake and discovers that a golden bird eats the apples.

XIV. *The hero acquires the use of a magical agent*: he gets one of its golden feathers. This segment now begins anew: going to the garden was a reduced version of the coming adventure.

XI. *The hero leaves home* (x3): the three brothers set out one by one in search of the bird.

XII. *The hero is tested, interrogated, attacked etc. in preparation for receiving either a magical agent or a helper* (x3): a fox asks each in turn not to shoot him, offers advice in return.

XIII. *The hero reacts to the actions of the future donor* (x3): the first two try to kill the fox, the youngest spares him.

XIV. *The hero acquires the use of a magical agent* (x3): the fox advises each not to spend the night in a certain house; two disregard the advice, and as a result forget their mission; the youngest heeds it and obtains the fox’s further help.

XV. *The hero is transferred, reaches or is led to the whereabouts of an object of search* (x4): the fox takes him magically to the castle where the golden bird is kept, advising him not to replace the bird’s wooden cage with a golden one, but he thinks this ridiculous and changes them, whereupon the bird cries out and he is caught in the act; now he must redeem himself by obtaining a magic horse from a second castle, but again disobeys the fox’s instructions, and must go further yet in search of a princess; he fails once more, and must remove a mountain in eight days. The same function thus occurs four times.⁵

XIX. *The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated* (x3): with the fox’s help and suitable tricks, the hero fulfills all the conditions and manages to get away with princess, horse, and bird.

Second sequence

VIII. *The villain causes harm or injury*: the hero disobeys the fox’s parting warning, and his brothers steal his prizes and throw him into a well, then return claiming all the honour for themselves.

⁵ After *Transference/Guidance* (function XV), Propp offers functions XVI: *The hero and the villain join in direct combat*, and XVIII: *The villain is defeated*. No such figure or combat occur in our tale. It can be hazarded that the villain is internalized and the struggle is therefore an inner one, which our hero loses three consecutive times before overcoming his own rational inclinations and acting “unreasonably” as the fox (another projection of the hero’s mind) suggests. The model makes no provision for this reading, though, as the only thing that might suggest it is not an action but the triplication itself of failure. See below.

XIV. *A magical agent is placed at the disposal of the hero*: the fox comes again to his aid.

XX. *The hero returns*.

XXIII. *The hero, unrecognized, arrives home or in another country*: to escape his brothers' machinations, he arrives dressed as a beggar.

XXIV. *The hero is recognized*: horse, bird and princess recognize him.

XXVIII. *The false hero is exposed*: the princess reveals his brothers' treachery and deceit.

XXX. *The villain is punished*: the brothers are executed.

XXXI. *The hero is married and/or ascends the throne*: he marries the princess and is designated sole heir to the crown.⁶

These are not just a set of arbitrary or mechanical rules for the production of tales but have an organic coherence. Folklorist Alan Dundes noticed a parallelism between Propp's approach to the fairytale and that to ritual by Arnold Van Gennep, whose *Les rites de passage* codified the structure of an important set of rites.⁷ This anthropologist noted that rites of passage tend to fall into three categories: *preliminal* rites, or rites of separation, which help disengage initiands from their customary world; *liminal* rites, or rites of the margin, in the course of which they are subjected to various kinds of physical or symbolical tests; and *postliminal* rites, or rites of reincorporation, which return the individual to a new identity or status in the group. The resemblance observed was one of method: both the folklorist and the anthropologist had set aside issues of content to concentrate primarily on formal traits. There is also, however, a functional resemblance in that, like rites of passage, fairytales seem to delineate an initiation pattern – what Joseph Campbell (1949: 31) has called the "Universal Journey": "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man." See also Eliade (1963).

⁶ There is a very brief third sequence (involving functions XI, XII, XIII and XIX) which concerns the fox but does not affect the present analysis. For the text I have relied on Rölleke's 1997 edition of the Grimms' seventh (1857) edition.

⁷ See Dundes (1963: 206-215), Van Gennep (1909), Dundes (1964: 96-7). As I shall have occasion to come back to the concept of ritual below, and in order to forestall misunderstandings, it is best to indicate here that a derivation of literary text from ritual is no part of my meaning.

2. The structure of *Beowulf*

Thirty years ago, Daniel Barnes (1970) argued that Propp's functional approach to the fairytale could be applied to *Beowulf* with surprising consistency (see also Shippey 1969). This did not prove the poem was in essence a fairytale, but it did show that the poem's structure corresponds to that of traditional folk narrative. Here follows an abbreviated version of Barnes' list of functions (for the text see Swanton 1975):

*Beowulf*⁸

First sequence

V. *The villain receives information about his victim*: Grendel hears the songs of the Danes in newly-built Heorot.

VII. *The victim submits to deception and thereby unwittingly helps his enemy*: the Danes sleep unaware of danger.

VIII. *The villain causes harm or injury to one member of the group*: in his first onslaught Grendel kills thirty men.

IX. *Misfortune or shortage is made known: the hero is either approached with a request and responds to it of his own accord, or is commanded or dispatched*: Beowulf hears of Hrothgar's plight.

X. *The hero agrees to or decides upon counteraction*.

(XI. *The hero leaves home*: Beowulf goes to Hrothgar's aid.)

XII. *The hero is tested, interrogated, attacked etc. in preparation for receiving either a magical agent or a helper*: Unferth taunts Beowulf.

XIII. *The hero reacts to the actions of the future donor*: Beowulf's reply to Unferth.

XVI. *Hero and villain join in direct combat*.⁹

XVIII. *The villain is defeated*.

XIX. *The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated*.

⁸ In the first sequence I have added one function which Barnes did not consider it necessary to include but which does seem to belong in the sequence; this is marked by brackets.

⁹ In fact, Grendel's approach to Heorot and subsequent conduct briefly recapitulate the series V-X: the villain hears the Danes' songs, the men sleep unaware of danger, the villain causes harm by slaying Hondscioh, Beowulf becomes aware of this, and he reacts appropriately. The retainer's death is then a reminder of Grendel's earlier depredations, and sets the scene for a contrast between the creature's former impunity and his present fateful encounter with Beowulf. On the narrative function of this death, see below.

XXI. *The hero is pursued*: Grendel's mother seeks Beowulf; this function introduces the Second sequence.

Second sequence

VIII. *The villain causes harm or injury to one member of a group*: Grendel's mother attacks and kills Aeschere.

IX. *Misfortune or shortage is made known*: Beowulf is informed.

XI. *The hero leaves home*: Beowulf sets out in pursuit.

XIV. *A magical agent is placed at the disposal of the hero*: Beowulf holds the sword Hrunting, Unferth's gift.

XV. *The hero ... reaches or is led to the whereabouts of an object of search*: Beowulf follows the monster's footprints.

XVI. *Hero and villain join in direct combat*.

XVIII. *The villain is defeated*.

XIX. *The initial misfortune is liquidated*.

XX. *The hero returns*: Beowulf returns to Heorot.

XXIII. *The hero ... arrives at home or in another country*: Beowulf returns to his people.

XXVII. *The hero is recognized. He is given a new appearance*: Beowulf is given treasure, land and status by Hygelac.

XXXI. *Hero marries and/or ascends the throne*: Beowulf eventually becomes king of the Geats.¹⁰

Third sequence

I. *One of the members of a family is absent from home*: the thrall, a stand-in for Beowulf, goes to the dragon's lair.

II. *An interdiction is addressed to the hero*: a curse exists on the hoard.

III. *The interdiction is violated*: the hoard is plundered.

¹⁰ Strictly speaking, the First sequence reaches function XIX, then is suspended. A new sequence begins (the mere episode) which does reach completion with function XX. Then the First sequence is resumed and finished: the hero returns to Sweden (XXIII), is recognized and praised (XXVII), ascends the throne (XXXI) (for this interrupted sequence, see Propp, p. 93). The structure (like that of *The Golden Bird*) is chiasmic: 1) he crosses the sea from Sweden, 2) fights Grendel, 3) goes into the mere, 4) fights Grendel's mother, 5) returns from the mere, 6) returns across the sea to Sweden.

V. *The villain receives information about his victim*: the dragon smells the thrall's traces.

VIII. *The villain causes harm or injury to one member of a group*: the dragon begins by attacking Beowulf's hall.

IX. *Misfortune or shortage is made known*: Beowulf learns of it.

X. *The hero agrees to or decides upon counteraction*.

XI. *The hero leaves home*.

XV. *The hero ... reaches, or is led to the whereabouts of an object of search*: Beowulf is led by the thrall to the dragon's lair.

XVI. *Hero and villain join in direct combat*.

XVII. *The hero is branded*: Beowulf is wounded.

XVIII. *The villain is defeated*: the dragon is killed by the combined efforts of Beowulf and Wiglaf.

XIX. *The hero returns*: Beowulf's body is taken to Hronesness for burial.

XXIX. *The hero is given a new appearance*: Wiglaf, another stand-in for the hero, becomes chief.¹¹

While one could disagree with Barnes over matters of detail, one cannot question the soundness of his use of Propp's scheme, nor the accuracy of his results. Not only can Propp's method be applied to our epic with supreme easiness, it can also help explain hitherto misunderstood aspects of the text (a case in point is Barnes' account of Unferth's role in the story). Whatever the consequences of

¹¹ The suitability of applying these last two functions to the ending of *Beowulf* is debatable. True, the hero "returns" so to speak, while the building of the funeral barrow equates the building of a marvellous palace to celebrate the hero's accomplishments – in a manner of speaking. These are ingenious readings, but hardly the same thing. As for the hero's *ascent to the throne* (function XXXI), Barnes (1970) concedes it is "not explicitly mentioned", but adds it can be surmised in the newly-exalted figure of Wiglaf. True; yet the point of Propp's scheme is that the hero himself survives, returns, marries, and rules; deputizing, while possible in other instances, cannot be accepted as fitting the final functions without a drastic reversal or manipulation of the scheme on the part of the poet. In other words: whereas the first two adventures do conform to the pattern, the third one deviates significantly from it: it contains the final departure without return, a "rite" of separation from the world and incorporation to human memory, as the final lines lovingly state: *cwædon þæt he wære wyruldcyninga manna mildust ond monðwærust, leodum liðost ond lofgeornost* 'They said that among the world's kings he was the gentlest of men and the most courteous, the most kindly to his people and the most eager for renown'. Nor, judging from the dire times in store for the Geats, is it at all clear that Wiglaf will have much of a future as king. These "deviations" from the fairytale model (a metaphorical expression not meant to prejudge the issue of origins) are, of course, not accidental but serve to shape the tragedy.

Barnes' argument as to the question of *Beowulf's* origins, it is clear there are strong structural resemblances between the epic poem and the oral tale, one such being that action is fundamental in an account of the epic's narrative structure.

3. Recurrences

A Proppian presentation of *Beowulf* facilitates analysis of a different kind of structural ground which poem and tale have in common. In the first sequence of *The Golden Bird* each of the following events occurs several times:

1. *One after the other, the king's three sons are told to keep watch at night* (IX).
2. *All three go to spend a night in the garden* (XI), *and are tested there* (XII).
3. *The two elder brothers fall asleep while keeping watch on two consecutive nights; the youngest succeeds in staying awake* (XIII).
4. *The two eldest obtain nothing, the third gets one golden feather* (XIV).
5. *The three leave home in succession* (XI).
6. *The three face the fox's request* (XII); *two ignore it, the youngest heeds it* (XIII).
7. *The three receive the fox's advice as to where to spend the night; two disregard it, the youngest follows it* (XIV).
8. *The hero fails to observe the fox's injunctions three times, is helped out of an impasse on the fourth* (XV).
9. *In chiasmic progression, he obtains princess, horse, and bird* (XIX).

In other words, almost everything in the First sequence must take place three or more times; put differently, step 1 is lengthened into three, and so for the others, each of which concerns in essence one single event, fragmented, or expanded, into various episodes: three nights, three departures, three conversations with the fox, three pieces of the same advice, four difficult tasks and four failures, followed by four successes. The resulting structure conditions the narrative in several ways. Firstly, it gives the tale duration: one single encounter between the youngest, or only, character and the fox would force us to reach the end of the tale much sooner.¹² Secondly, the tale acquires rhythm, and hence solemnity, from the recurrence of events. Thirdly, a modicum of tension is introduced: by

¹² "Hero sets out, overcomes obstacle, and marries girl" will not do as a tale; we demand a minimum of personality in the hero, perhaps a name, a physical trait, a background; we need a minimum environment (village, forest, river); we require the danger to be known of beforehand or at least intimated; above all, we require time, for without it there is no story. One might then be tempted to conclude that length is a fundamental requisite of tales, and go on to ask how long a tale must be, or whether its length can be objectively measured; there are probably limits beyond which a tale is unmanageable, below which it is a mere anecdote, or a blueprint for a tale. Statistical analyses might, however, prove little in this regard if, as I suspect, duration has to do not with objective length but with the need for creating the illusion of process, for process must be sustained, and to this end structure, not length alone, is required. Hence the discussion below.

the time the second and third brothers act, we know the outcome that awaits them should they fail to live up to the situation, which increases our expectations and enhances the value of their actions. In the fourth place, and as a result of this, by the time the youngest comes to face his task a climactic point has been reached (a climax which is lengthened by repeated failures on his part). Lastly, his success is enhanced by the earlier failures of his two brothers and himself, and brings the search to a satisfactory resolution.

If we look at *Beowulf* as consisting primarily of action and view its macrostructure as similarly shaped by three sequences corresponding to the hero's three fights, we can likewise detect a number of traits this arrangement gives the poem. To begin with, the story gains in duration: the simplicity and unity we tend to associate with fairytale plots are avoided and, potentially at least (and subject to other constraints), an "epic breadth" is achieved: not just an adventure but a life, not a *comitatus* but a world are delineated by this succession of episodes. In the second place, a rhythm is established: hardly has Beowulf slain the first monster when a second one appears, intimating that the quelling of monsters is going to provide the basic design for the hero's existence; instead of a simple adventure, an adventure *pattern* is created. Furthermore, tension begins to develop as soon as it transpires that this second fight is going to be no mere repetition of the first but will require a much harder exertion: the danger looming before the hero proves the greater thereby (even as his heroic stature is enhanced by it); this is because a paratactic arrangement does not simply accumulate: we tend to look for a sequential, temporal or causal cohesion, and so for order, among the elements juxtaposed. Beowulf's three fights are stacked along a gradient (of increasing difficulty), much as *veni, vidi, vici* grades action in a progression rather than just piling it up. In the fourth place, and in consequence of this, by the time Beowulf comes to face the dragon a climax is reached – a climax which is lengthened by his several initial failures to wound his foe. Finally, his victory and death after all this build-up bring the poem to a properly cathartic conclusion, one commensurate with the epic scale of such a life.

If the structure of *Beowulf* can be comfortably viewed as consisting in three sequences corresponding to his confrontations with Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon, it is also clear that each sequence repeats the same fundamental functions:

VIII. *The villain causes harm or injury to one member of a group.*

IX. *Misfortune or shortage is made known.*

X. *The hero agrees to or decides upon counteraction.*

XI. *The hero leaves home.*

XVI. *Hero and villain join in direct combat.*

XVIII. *The villain is defeated.*

XIX. *The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated.*

XX. *The hero returns.*

From a structural point of view, then, essentially one single event is being told three times: the entire poem is about one journey and struggle which are drawn out into three journeys and three fights; there is hence one single enemy which, at this general level of analysis, is not to be identified with any of his physical adversaries. As to just who or what this foe may be of which the three monsters are embodiments, a hypothesis will be offered below on the basis of further structural analysis.

4. Triplication, repetition, increment

Although Propp states that triplication may modulate specific details, functions or groups of functions, and even sequences, he does not go into the significance of the phenomenon and dismisses it as not functional (Propp 1928: 74-75). Structurally this is correct, as triplication does not add functions and does not affect the overall design of the tale. However, a look at Sequence I, and especially at function XV, reveals that the essence and climax of *The Golden Bird* lies precisely in the repeated failures on the brothers', then on the hero's part: we understand that there is an obstacle (a thing Propp's scheme fails to predict here, although, as we shall see, his entire model actually builds on the notion of difficulties to be overcome), and that this obstacle lies within the hero himself, in his refusal to heed advice contrary to convention or commonsense. The triplication (actually, quadruplication) of function XV is the key to the entire sequence, but a Proppian analysis cannot reflect this.

A partial account of triplication can be found in Axel Olrik's "Laws" (Olrik (1909); see also Olrik (1922, chapter 3). According to the "Law of Repetition", all folktales endlessly repeat; one specific form of this is the "Law of Three", by which events in tales are repeated thrice; while according to the "Law of the Weight of the Stern", the third occurrence is the decisive one (whereas in other genres the "Law of the Weight of the Bow" may assign the principal role to the first one). Granted that such "laws" do correspond to realities in the tale, it remains to be asked, why should they apply in the first place? Lüthi holds that since Indo-Germanic (read Indo-European) languages distinguished between dual and plural, three constituted the first case of real plurality (Lüthi 1975: 45). If so, we can surmise it would be the smallest number with a claim to universality. This tallies with Sears' (1986: 93) observation that, traditionally, the number three signified a totality. By the same logic, when applied to a process rather

than to entities the number three would suggest completion or fulfilment. Furthermore, while two is the smallest number required to establish a pattern, three is the smallest number needed to set up a pattern then break it; by the same token, three is the smallest number needed to set up a pattern then clinch it; the third instance is (in our Western culture) the one that crowns the progression.

But other numbers besides three are employed by (Western) fairytale and myth, if, admittedly, not quite as often, to convey totality or completion. Four is the number of the Gospels, as of the cardinal points; seven is the number of the Days of Creation in *Genesis*; seventeen is recurrent in Irish myth (Rees and Rees 1961: 197-201). Doubling plays a fundamental role in the fairytale-type (*Kind and unkind* AT480); *Little Red Cap* (AT333) contains four exclamations of the type "Oh Granny, what big ears you have" in the Grimms' version, five in Perrault's (Perrault 1987: 113-115). Dundes (1964b) has ably discussed the dominance of number three in American (read Western) culture; but the use itself of multiplication, whether into two, three or more, in fairytale, epic, myth and culture is a more basic fact which requires its own explanation.

One practical concept to approach the phenomenon is *increment*, first proposed by Gummere (1907: 42, 86, 90-1) in his study of ballad technique; "incremental repetition" would account for multiplication with Weighted Stern, essentially, a build-up to a climax, in ballad and fairytale; while according to Bartlett (1935), the application of the same concept casts light on certain structural properties of Anglo-Saxon poetic rhetoric:

Incremental is the name here applied to a comparatively infrequent but poetically interesting type of verse groups. In this type the narrative proceeds by a series of more or less parallel steps which have a cumulative force. At the end of any one group a definite point has been reached by the method of the house that Jack built...While each of the three, four, or five members is a step marking progress in the whole, each succeeding step also repeats, with variation and amplification, the first one (Bartlett 1935: 49).

One advantage of this notion of "increment" is that it does not favour triplication over other numbers, it merely acknowledges three is a minimum; another, that it recognizes a partial similarity or parallelism among the various "steps" – a paratactic principle which, as suggested earlier, combines accumulation and progress. Bartlett's first example, which is also her clearest for our purposes, is *Beowulf* 702b-736a, which describes Grendel's nocturnal advance towards Heorot, and which she breaks down into four sections linked cumulatively by the use of *com* 'came' at crucial half-lines, as well as by subsidiary instances of parallelism (emphasis in the original):

Com on wanre niht
 scriðan sceadugenga

Ða com of more under misthleopum
 Grendel gongan,

Com þa to recede rinc siðian

Geseah he in recede rinca manige,

Bartlett rightly points at the cumulative repetition of *com* (though she omits to mention that the same idea is expressed by a different verb, *wod*, at 714); furthermore, “*manscaða* 712 echoes *scynscaða* 707; *Rinca* 728 echoes *rinc* 720 *Winreced* 714 anticipates *recede* ... 720 and 728” (Bartlett 1935: 50). Such echoes and anticipations do contribute to eliciting a definite sense of progression (even sound repetition, alliteration, helps to establish an advancing rhythm). And although she does not dwell at any length on the incremental value of the description, her text clearly relies on the readers’ familiarity with earlier critical discussions of this passage which would make explicitation unnecessary.

That the pattern has an incremental quality seems indisputable. Several objections may, however, be levelled at this approach. Bartlett (like Gummere before her and mostly everyone else after her) employs the term “incremental” to designate a linguistic usage.¹³ She calls its effects “verbal echoes” (Bartlett 1935: 49); she identifies the incremental pattern as “probably only a specialized extension of the Parallel pattern” (Bartlett 1935: 49), while the latter is defined as built on linguistic doubling: “words in pairs, phrases in pairs, sentences in pairs”, especially when doubling “is extended to fully elaborated sentences and

¹³ The technique is invariably said to affect “a line or stanza” (Abrams (1999:18), Preminger and Brogan (eds. [1995: 581]); *signes, lettres, et sons* ‘signs, letters, sounds’ (*Dictionnaire des genres et notions littéraires* 1997: 599); “lines or stanzas” (Baldick 1992:109); “lines or phrases” (Murfin and Ray 1997: 172). Cuddon (1992: 787) expands the possibilities under “Repetition” to include “sounds, particular syllables and words, phrases, stanzas, metrical patterns, ideas, allusions and shapes” (I do not know what he means by the last two, and his examples are unenlightening; of “Incremental Repetition” he only says it is “a rhetorical device”). Lanham (1991: 189-191) considers no less than three types of repetition: a) of sounds (alliteration, rhyme, etc.), b) of words (anaphora, polysyndeton, etc.), c) of clauses, phrases, and ideas; of the fourteen terms included under (c), most touch upon linguistic items only, a few are predicated of ideas (*commoratio, exergasia, tautologia*), and all pertain to language. There is, in all these, no mention whatsoever of action as a possible object of incremental repetition. Nor have I been able to find in the *Beowulf*-literature statements concerning other than either language or “ideas”, “concepts”, “thoughts”. Nowhere in O’Keeffe’s (1997) enlightening survey is it suggested that scholarship has been concerned with the structuring of action in the poem.

to sentence groups” (Bartlett 1935: 30). But if *Beowulf* 702b-736a can be said to offer an Incremental pattern at all, surely the increment is one of action, action which advances in part (but only in part) thanks to repeated uses of *com* and other “verbal echoes”. We shall be looking at this passage in more detail below, but it is not amiss to point out here that, whereas incremental language probably always accompanies or suggests “incremental action”, the converse need not be the case: we can have progress in the action with no significant iteration on either the lexical or the syntactic levels, as, for example, where action develops in a clearly advancing manner, unaided by linguistic increment, over large stretches of poetic narrative: thus, the very structuring of *Beowulf* into three progressively harder fights has, as observed earlier, a decidedly incremental quality providing rhythm, tension, and climax, but no special linguistic markers to indicate this. Obviously, it seems desirable to identify the technique of “incremental” development of action or events, whether or not reinforced by incremental language. Furthermore, since essentially the same technique employed in *Beowulf* 702b-736a is, as we have seen, at work in the tale of *The Golden Bird*, Bartlett’s definition of the Incremental pattern as involving “verse groups” precludes a generalizing insight as to the fundamental similarity between these texts. It seems safer to argue that Bartlett’s “patterns” constitute special versions of more basic techniques of composition, and it will therefore be needful to take the inquiry directly to the roots of the technique.

5. Phasing

A more precise conceptualization seems to be required. If “triplication” is too specific a category for this, “repetition” is too broad, as it covers rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, parallelism, refrain, anaphora, and many other techniques; a term so all-encompassing is fairly useless for identification purposes.¹⁴ Nor is it even clear that “repetition” is a satisfying label for at least certain aspects of the phenomenon Bartlett’s “rhetorical patterns” try to cover. As I see it, *Beowulf* 702b-736a does not “repeat” (with or without increment, variation, or amplification) in the second step material from the first, rather all four steps constitute so many variations on one single occurrence – Grendel’s march on Heorot. We should not view these as distinct yet partly “repetitive” actions so much as consider them one extended event broken up or segmented into four significant moments in the time-continuum of the monster’s advance. Now in the foregoing pages I have borrowed or supplied terms such as “recurrence”, “multiplication”, “dividing”,

¹⁴ It is not useless at all, of course, for the purpose of analysis. An initial recognition of repeated elements in a text, at whatever level, will clarify issues of structure, and so of meaning. It is when the function of each instance of “repetition” is focused upon that differentiation becomes essential. All the same, see below for a remark on the conceptual problem posed by repetition.

“threefold”, “fragmenting”, “increment”, “drawing out”; these are all approximations to a strategy which, as far as I know, still awaits a name. The characteristic feature of the technique is the way it breaks up action, motion or development into a (variable) number of steps or phases, so that one task becomes three tasks, one error becomes four consecutive errors, one advance is turned into a number of key moments. I will call the technique *phasing*, and write of certain events or actions as “phased” into three or more episodes. I take the notion from anthropologist David Parkin’s (1992: 12) claim “that all rituals are in some way rites of passage: in other words, that they presuppose phasal movement, directionality, and positioning.” When writing of “phases”, he has in mind the three standard stages of rites of passage as defined by Van Gennep: separation, margin, and reincorporation; all rituals “involve a liminal phase, a betwixt-and-between element, and so presuppose an initial phase of separation and one of reaggregation.”¹⁵ While this specific pattern, itself “phasal”, can indeed be applied to *Beowulf* (see below), my use of the term “phasal” will designate the fact itself of a structuring of events into three or more sequenced episodes. I shall use the verb “to phase” as meaning ‘to organize or carry out gradually in planned stages or instalments’ (*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1982 Supplement); the relevant verbal use would correspond to the sense of the participial form found in “a phased withdrawal” or “a phased implementation”. The hero’s progress in *The Golden Bird* can be said to be phased into various stages, and each stage into various sets of actions carried out by his surrogates and/or himself. Beowulf’s struggle can likewise be said to have been phased into three crucial fights; and the last of the three, carrying the “Weight of the Stern” indeed, epitomizes the ultimate result of such a struggle: though on two occasions the hero is able to stave off danger, he will eventually fall.

Much as film consists essentially of motion segmented into significant frames, phasing disaggregates the flow of action or occurrences (essentially, then, of time) into a set of significant steps. For a definition of the technique, I propose the following: phasing is an expansion or segmentation of an event into a number of sequenced moments or episodes for the purposes of giving narrative duration, rhythm, tension, climax, and a satisfactory resolution;¹⁶ further, phasing may be reinforced by a variety of linguistic strategies which include repetition. Though the terms “repetition” and, in particular, “incremental repetition”

¹⁵ Parkin (1992: 16) here basically follows Victor Turner, whose development of Van Gennep’s work on rites of passage has made “liminality” a classic concept in anthropology. See Turner (1969), especially chapter 3.

¹⁶ Some of these items are vague enough, and (like the concept of length: see note 12) will require further study (what, for instance, constitutes a satisfactory resolution?), but they seem intuitively acceptable and, for the purposes of the present article, I shall make do with them.

would easily convey part of this meaning, they have important conceptual resonances not to be found in “phasing”. Not only is literary repetition an operation on language, while phasing touches the presentation of events (assuredly one can speak of events repeated, but, as pointed out above, that is not generally what is meant when “(incremental) repetition” is appealed to, rather this term conjures up a recurrence of words, sentences, lines, and so on); but, while repetition takes one item and reproduces it, phasing unfolds it into several episodes. None of Beowulf’s fights is “the basic one”, all three correspond to one event; thus the second fight does not simply repeat the first but gives yet another form to the event itself; in Lord’s (1960) terminology, they are “multiforms of the same theme”.¹⁷ The conceptual difference is important: phasing corresponds to a synecdochic understanding of the cosmos in which everything is part of a whole and nothing exists in isolation, so that each event is seen as a fraction of a larger design, from which alone it derives its proper significance; repetition, by contrast, assumes the existence of an “original” and of “copies” which reproduce the model more or less faithfully. The model becomes the principal item, so that to speak of repetition is to speak of the “Weight of the Bow”; phasing, on the contrary, adheres to the “Law of the Weight of the Stern”.

Genesis phases Yahveh’s Creation into six different acts, thereby emphasizing order and periodization, with the most important day, the day of rest, placed at the end (the “Weight of the Stern”), making up a seven-series. The Babylonian Epic of Creation (*Enuma Elish*) similarly phases the creation of the ordered cosmos into a series of dismemberments of Tiamat’s body by Marduk, the resulting fragments being turned one by one into various parts of the universe – a literal expression of the synecdochic vision according to which everything in the cosmos is part of a whole.¹⁸ In both texts phasing solemnizes action, giving it

¹⁷ Lord (1960: 199). See also Blomfield (1938: 399), where she seems to come close to this idea when she writes of “the unfolding of an event into its separate aspects”.

¹⁸ First the sky (constellations, sun and moon) is made, then the earth (clouds, rivers, mountains), this work being culminated by the slaying of Qingu, Tiamat’s lover and battle-leader, from whose blood humankind is created. For the text, see Dalley (1991). The logic of myth often makes the dismemberment of a gigantic or cosmic being necessary for the shaping, reshaping, or restoration of the world. This is literally the case with the giant Ymir in Snorri’s *Edda*, of whose body the world was made (see Faulkes 1988: 11); a more figurative version of this is found in the *Rig Veda* (5.85.1) which presents the creation in terms of a sacrificial simile when it tells of how, in order to separate earth from sky, Varuna “struck apart the earth and spread it beneath the sun as the priest who performs the slaughter spreads out the victim’s skin” (O’Flaherty 1981: 211). It is more schematically true of Christ, whose five wounds (limbs and torso) and crown of thorns (head) brand the parts of his body, which in Christian imagery is a microcosmic symbol of the universe, so that the crucifixion is indeed the sacrifice that renews the world (the same principle is yet more symbolically represented by the priest’s breaking the sacred wafer into three pieces in the Mass). In another sense, sacrifice (often in the form of rending, tearing, quartering and so on of the scapegoat) is the “price” the community pays for recovering its wholeness, purity, or peace. In the *Chanson de Roland* both versions of sacrifice

the qualities of the ordered, of the appointed, of the sacred. On the other hand, the phasing of Beowulf's struggle into three increasingly difficult tasks signals the hero's inexorable advance towards his appointed end.¹⁹ Phasing enhances process and assigns rhythm to time; it may be used to convey notions of order, ceremony, harmony, or beauty; by the same token, it may suggest finality or inevitability. In all cases, its central function is a "ritualizing" one. By *ritualization* I understand the transformation of an ongoing practice into a significant, self-reflexive activity; all literary language, including both oral and written, both poetry and non-poetry, is ritualized in this sense to some degree, through highlighting its own formal aspects over and above its communicative value; so with the strongly patterned language of fairytale and epic. The use of phasing simply amounts to a codification of narrative practice itself.

6. Phasal structures

Not only the macrostructure of *Beowulf* is to be understood in phasal terms; the poem time and again resorts to this technique in the detail of specific events, and we can include as instances of phasing the following:

- a) Malone has shown that the poem is concerned with three stages in Beowulf's life: his youth and old age are represented respectively by his twofold struggle with the ogres and his fight with the dragon; but worked into his dispute with Unferth (499-606) is a lengthy account of the hero's adolescent exploits, which include the slaying of many a sea-monster, displaying the rash impetuosity which formerly characterized him.²⁰ Thus

obtain; not only is evil king Marsil maimed in an episode structurally identical to that of Grendel's defeat, but Roland himself will die as the price to be paid for the Franks' conquest of Saragossa. On the similarity between Grendel's and Marsil's ends, see Lord (1960: 206-207). On the universal, hence exemplary and sacrificial nature of Roland's death, see Aguirre (1993: 196). In light of these considerations, there is significance in the way Beowulf defeats Grendel by tearing off his arm, then in his beheading Grendel's mother and the ogre's body, for these acts suggest a reduced version of that cosmic dismemberment, especially as they signal the restoration of Hrothgar's world. Significantly, no such dismemberment is carried out on the body of Beowulf's third enemy, and this "breach" of narrative ritual (like the puzzling devolution of the hoard to the earth after Beowulf had died to liberate it, like the various "deviations" from the fairytale pattern – see note 11) is concomitant with the foretold collapse of the Geatish nation so that, far from leading to restoration, the hero's sacrifice will herald the end of his people. On sacrifice, the *locus classicus* is Hubert and Mauss (1898); see also, with reservations, Girard (1972).

¹⁹ Roland's great battle is likewise phased into three major encounters, punctuated by the three oliphant-episodes. The hero's death itself has a phasal quality as it is protracted (with the help of incremental language) over no less than nine *laissez* (168-176).

²⁰ Malone (1948: 144-6). Strictly speaking, then, we have three ages but four instances of monster-quelling, the fourth one, which is chronologically the first, being tucked, like a subordinate clause, into the flying scene. One further piece of data to make us suspect the unique status of triplication.

- the hero's life history is phased into three ages which punctuate his advance towards death.
- b) Beowulf's entrance in and incorporation to the realm of the Danes is phased into three successive challenges. When he lands on Danish shores, the watchman demands that he disclose himself and his errand (229-300); on reaching Heorot, Wulfgar challenges him once more before communicating his arrival to the king (331-98); hardly has he settled in the hall when Unferth taunts Beowulf with a distorted account of his youthful prowess, whereby the hero feels obliged to reply in kind (499-606); having gotten the upper hand in what is basically a flying contest, he is finally acknowledged as a proper member of the company. Only then does queen Wealhtheow offer the mead-cup, after presenting it to Hrothgar and a number of Danes, to Beowulf, thereby signalling the Danes' acceptance of the newcomer as honorary member of their *comitatus*.²¹ The hero's approach to and acceptance by the Danes could be dealt with in a couple of lines; but the poet knows this occasion calls for solemnity, and duration. He could introduce a variety of digressive incidents, or perhaps engage in some reflections on the momentous arrival of heroes. He opts for a well-proven traditional strategy, offering several different, and graded, instances of the basic event, each containing its own challenge, dialogue, and welcome.
- c) The impressive quality of Grendel's approach to Heorot owes much to a phasing of the creature's advance into four significant moments, reinforced by incremental language. (1) *Com on wanre niht scriðan sceadugenga* (702-3) 'The creature that prowls in shadows came stalking through the black night'; first he is pictured cautiously moving through darkness, then he moves away from the swamp and towards the hills: (2) *Da com of more under misthleopum Grendel gongan* (710-1) 'Then out of the wasteland came Grendel, advancing beneath the misty slopes'. Next (Bartlett did not consider this step) he emerges from the mist and beholds Heorot: (3) *wod under wolcnum to þæs þe he winreced ... gearwost wisse* (714-5) 'He strode beneath the clouds until he could most clearly make out the wine-hall...'. Finally he reaches the building: (4) *Com þa to recede rinc siðian dreamum bedæled* (720-21) 'The creature, bereft of joys, came on making his way to the hall'.²² The poet employs incremental

²¹ On the Sovereignty-symbolism of the cup, see Aguirre (1998b).

²² "Each successive statement of Grendel's oncoming represents an advance in time, in forward movement, in emotional force", writes Brodeur (1959: 91). Needless to say, an advance in space is also conveyed by the phasing of Grendel's approach, as well as a notion of gradual ascent (see below).

repetition to reinforce the phasing of the action, *com* governing an infinitive of advance in three cases (and once, *wod*, which yields the same effect without repetition), plus prepositional expressions which indicate point of departure (2: *of more*) and of destination (4: *to recede*), plus adverbials suggesting motion from darkness (1: *on wanre niht*) through mist (2: under *misthleopum*) to clear sight (3: *gearwost*), the phased motion bringing him closer and closer to the hero.

Furthermore, it would appear that Heorot is built on an eminence. Leaving aside the assumption that an easily defensible place would be naturally selected for this stronghold, and the traditional symbolism which calls for a significant fortress to be situated on a hill or mountain-top as an axial place linking earth and heaven, the fact is Grendel seems to be ascending.²³ First he comes out of the swamp, then he is found advancing beneath mist-covered slopes, then he appears striding “beneath the clouds” until he can see the hall: only after having risen above the mist would he be expected to see the building “most clearly”.²⁴ For the rest, part of the Christian symbolism attached to Grendel presents him as a creature of hell, his place being naturally “below”; hence that reference to his inability, and so, his desire, to drag the warriors ‘away beneath the shadows’ (*under sceadu bregdan*, 707); this I take to be a reference both to the domain of death and, more literally, to the low swamp from which he has emerged, and to his watery dwelling. The phasing of his advance is then all the more significant as it marks an arrogant ascent that precludes, and magnifies, his inglorious fall.

- d) The dragon’s onslaught yields a similar pattern. *Gewat ða byrnende gebogen scriðan* (2569) ‘Then burning, coiled, it went gliding out’. The hero’s sword fails to do more than bite into the flesh of the creature, which, enraged, strikes a second time: *wyrme yrre cwom, atol inwitgæst, oðre siðe, fyrwylmum fah* (2669-71) ‘The serpent, angry, a dreadful malicious spirit, came on a second time, glowing with surges of fire’, whereupon Beowulf strikes its head so hard that his sword breaks. Now the dragon charges again: *Ða wæs þeodsceaða þriddan siðe, frecne fyrdraca fæhða gemyndig, ræsde on ðone rofan* (2688-90) ‘Then a third time the

²³ Does *on heahstede* (285) ‘in a lofty position’, mean an eminence of terrain? On the axial symbolism of the mountain, see Eliade (1947); for an application of the concept to the *Chanson de Roland* see Aguirre (1993: 196).

²⁴ We may even sense a contrast between *under misthleopum* and *under wolcnum*, reinforced by the earlier *under sceadu*, the shadowy underworld to which Grendel belongs; as he advances he moves upwards and reaches more open space until he stands ‘under the clouds’; his subsequent sundering of the hall-doors is of course the climax to this unstoppable forward-and-upward motion.

scourge of the nation, the dangerous fire-dragon, was mindful of feuds, rushed upon the brave man’, this time clenching the hero’s neck between its fangs.²⁵ At this point, Wiglaf’s sword does what Beowulf’s could not do, sinks into the dragon’s underside, while dying Beowulf provides the coup de grace with his knife. The result of phasing the battle into three charges to which there correspond three sword-strokes (and a final stab, making a fourfold series) is a lengthening of the scene, an increase in tension, a glorious climax, and a pyrrhic victory.

- e) Another instance of phasing, again building up towards tragedy, results from the impossibility of slaying any of the monsters with human weapons. A confident Beowulf does not even try to fight with Grendel (although he does not know the ogre is invulnerable to swords); he tries and fails with Grendel’s mother, and is saved in the nick of time by his discovery of a giant-made sword (*[ealdsweord eotenisc]* 1558) which does its job; he again tries and fails against the dragon, and Wiglaf’s timely arrival with another *eotenisc* sword (2616) helps defeat the creature but cannot prevent Beowulf’s death. The hero never seems to know that conventional swords are useless, but readers and listeners, coached in folklore, see a pattern of increasing helplessness building up.²⁶
- f) In the Irish epic tale *The voyage of Mael Duin* the hero is advised to take only seventeen fellows on his boat, but his three fosterbrothers insist on coming on board; in the course of his voyage he will lose the three one by one (while retaining the seventeen); phasing is involved in the gradual loss of these unworthy companions whose presence disrupts the company’s wholeness.²⁷ In turn, Beowulf takes fourteen companions to sail with him to Denmark (207), the same number (minus one) on his mere expedition, and twelve (plus the nameless thrall) to accompany him to the dragon’s lair (2401, 2406).²⁸ Whether or not there is a remnant of number-symbolism here, this monolithic group seems to function as a conventional marker of totality (see above, section 4): they stand for the *comitatus*, ‘the community’. Now, one warrior (Hondscioh) is lost to Grendel before the hero can stop the creature, and another (Aeschere, one of Hrothgar’s men) to Grendel’s mother before she can be slain. One way

²⁵ Notice the absence of significant lexical or syntactic repetition; *oðre siðe* and *þriddan siðe* do not, of course, constitute linguistic repetitions so much as indications of “repeated” action.

²⁶ On the symbolism of these swords in connection with issues of fate and the human will, see Aguirre (1998a).

²⁷ For the text and translation see Stokes (1888, 1889); for analysis see Aguirre (1990).

²⁸ Like Mael Duin’s seventeen, these have no special separate function to play in the story: they all move together as one man.

of accounting for their narrative function is to say that Beowulf's end is phased into three deaths and, therefore, through the anticipatory logic of phasing, his death is heralded by theirs. On the one hand, the loss of his fellows is the price or precondition for a successful passage; the hero must cleanse himself, or else he must sacrifice certain superfluous aspects of himself or of his community embodied in his, often nameless, companions; this principle (which underscores the logic of Aeneas', Odysseus', the Ancient Mariner's, Mael Duin's, Hamlet's, Everyman's journeys)²⁹ is manifested obliquely in the deaths of Hondscioh and Aeschere. On the other hand, these two are, as Lord (1960) points out, Beowulf's surrogates;³⁰ hence we can say that the hero's advance towards inevitable death is staved off, but also precluded, by the loss of these two warriors. Wiglaf would have been an obvious third stand-in; but the poet has constructed his text towards a tragic denouement. The survival of this surrogate in place of the hero, far from being a mere variation on Propp's functions XIX (*The hero returns*), XXIX (*The hero is given a new appearance*), and, as Barnes thought, XXXI (*The hero ascends to the throne*), signals a telling "departure" from the Proppian scheme and, hence, from the happy ending of tales.

- g) Even in matters not directly concerned with the "main" story phasing may be resorted to. The presentation of Hrothgar in line 64 is preceded by brief accounts of his ancestors: Scyld Scefing, Beowulf Scylding, Healfdene, suggesting that an individual belongs in a line and must not be introduced abruptly. The same logic accounts, in a non-phasal but equally synecdochic mode, for the introduction of Grendel at 104-114, and again at 1258-1267, as one of the race of Cain.

7. Thresholds and rites of passage

Phasing "freezes" motion into one significant episode, starts it again, arrests it once more; each time motion is stopped, a threshold is, implicitly or explicitly, suggested which the hero will have to confront. Basically, then, phasing is a threshold-creating operation. On the structural level this corresponds to the frequent use of thresholds in *Beowulf* at plot level. The hero crosses the sea (after the appropriate rite of consulting omens and choosing companions) to fight Grendel, then returns to his homeland by sea. He faces three challenges (by the

²⁹ They must relinquish, respectively, Palinurus the helmsman; Odysseus' and the Mariner's entire crews; the three unwanted companions; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; Fellowship, Kindred, Goods etc. See Aguirre (1990).

³⁰ Lord (1960: 201) compares Aeschere's death to those of Achilles' Patroclus and Gilgamesh's Enkidu; he does not actually mention Hondscioh as another surrogate of Beowulf.

coast-guard, by Wulfgar, by Unferth), amounting to three symbolic thresholds he must negotiate, his entrance into Danish society being thus marked by a phased rite of incorporation. Significantly, Grendel is presented twice (103, 1348) as a *mearcstapa* 'a prowler of the borderlands': he inhabits the cursed threshold between the human and the numinous worlds, and will violate the implicit boundary which separates his territory from human space. In pursuit of Grendel's mother, the hero will in turn cross that same threshold, forest, wasteland, crags, and take *stige nearwe, enge anpaðas, uncuð gelad* (1409-1410) 'a narrow path', 'a constricted route', 'an unfamiliar way' before he can reach the mere: a standard progression through various difficult or perilous threshold-points to the centre of evil. Much later he will decide to fight the dragon *æt wealle* (2526), by the wall itself which separates its lair from the human domain, and again we are told of the liminal nature of the place where the battle is to be fought: *Geseah ða be wealle ... stondan stanbogan, stream ut þonan breacan of beorge* (2542-6) 'Then he ... saw arches of rock standing in the rampart through which a stream gushed out of the barrow': wall and arch divide the worlds, a stream links them, and battle is joined on the threshold itself.

Propp's model strongly suggests that the hero's adventure takes him across a number of threshold points or moments. To name some of the more obvious ones: an Interdiction (III) which the hero (or someone whose actions are to affect him) will violate; a Departure (XI); a challenge as he encounters the Donor (XII); a further advance which often takes him into the Villain's dwelling (XV); Struggle with the Villain (XVI); Return (XX); Pursuit (XXI); Difficult Task (XXV). Further, although this model does not acknowledge trebling to be functional, we have seen that this technique too contributes to the phasal structure of the action, and in this sense provides additional narrative *limina*. In a way, the hero's entire career can be seen as a succession of threshold-crossings, some of a spatial, some of a figurative nature.

We tend to metaphorize time as space; childhood and youth and age are often presented as places to be gone through, and life as a road to be travelled. Abstract notions of space and action, in turn, are often rendered concrete by a sequence of places joined and separated by thresholds; phasing is thus perhaps the simplest and most effective way of conveying the notion of advance. The presence of such significant divides helps us to understand Beowulf's tale as a journey of initiation consisting essentially in a metaphorical *rite de passage*: twice does the hero abandon a comfortable environment to fight an enemy, twice does he defeat it, twice does he return. The stages of the rite of passage, separation from the familiar world, a test undergone in or across the liminal area between the worlds, and reaggregation to the human world, are twice faithfully deployed in *Beowulf*. A third time he sets out – now to fight a more terrible enemy, one which has furthermore challenged his own home and kingdom; a third time he

emerges victorious, but this time he is not destined to come back: his final passage accomplished, he passes from the world of man. All in all, the hero's life itself is defined as a transit phased into three occurrences, the three fights, each in turn phased into three stages, separation, testing, reaggregation, which serve to "mark time" and enhance the impression of process.³¹ To the five functions given above for phasing we may add that it effectively creates the illusion of movement and advance. Such a gradating of advance was, according to Van Genep, the essence of rites of passage: *Il me semble que tous les rites de départ en voyage, en expédition, etc., ont pour but de faire que la scission ne soit pas brusque, mais progressive, de même que l'agrégation ne se fait en général que par étapes* 'It seems to me that all rites of departure on a journey, expedition, etc. have as their goal to ensure that the separation will not be sudden but gradual, just as, on the whole, reaggregation is only accomplished in stages' (Van Genep 1909: 51).

And from this statement, another function of phasing can be inferred: phasing allows for a character's gradual transition into a realm where a sudden entrance might prove excessive, too brusque, or downright disastrous; the Numinous must not be ventured into in a haphazard manner, and the phasing of the hero's advance towards it suggests a heightened degree of respect for its dangers. Phasing is thus the perfect technique for presenting the approach to the Other, transforming a common action into a numinous one, marking the stages of ritual, and endowing an event with the awesome solemnity of the appointed.

8. Conclusion

Who or what, then, is Beowulf's adversary? Let me rephrase the question: to what extent is the hero free to act when his every move is inscribed within a rigid, ritualized narrative pattern; when, furthermore, phasing and the sacrificial quality of his surrogates' death, which is to say, structure and action and symbol, work towards one same end, namely, affirming the primacy of the whole over its parts? The point has bearing on the issue of whether destinal forces play a significant role in the poem. From the analysis above, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the real enemy which the hero faces, and of which the three monsters are embodiments, is Fate. Much has been written against the notion of Fate in *Beowulf* and, generally, in medieval Germanic literature ever since the excesses

³¹ I have little doubt that that favourite Anglo-Saxon device, the paratactic method (including the "appositive style": see Robinson [1985]), though a different technique, is ultimately to be related to phasing: in both cases the poet feels almost constrained to unfold his topic into several items so as to enclose discreteness within continuity; both phasing and parataxis are synecdochical in this sense.

of its nineteenth-century proponents led it to discredit,³² but the issue is far from decided, and the sober perception of the poem's phasal construction does provide a strong argument for reading some manner of destinal power into it. I would hold that the text narrates the hero's doomed struggle against such a power by dividing his progress into several, graded episodes of monster-quelling; in the first (if one ignores that reckless massacre of sea-creatures by a boy-hero), a boastful youth easily trounces the ogre bare-handed; in the last, a cautious warrior in the extremity of age laboriously overcomes a dragon, thanks only to outside help, and only to die soon after. Put differently, the tale of Beowulf has the structure of an initiation journey, the journey of life at the end of which death awaits. Twice he returns, leaving a surrogate, Hondscioh, Aescere, behind, the third time he succumbs to his fate (leaving behind a worthy surrogate who, it is nevertheless intimated, will not be able to protect his people). By Fate we are not to understand only death but the inevitable flow of events, time itself; nor do we have to conceive of it as a goddess – as a personification of destinal forces, but as an abstract, yet very real, power: by Fate read structure – the structure of the universe, the structure of the narrative.³³

When O'Keeffe (1996: 100) reminds us that "[v]ariation is not simply the juxtaposing of appositives to slow down a narrative advance; variation is intrinsic to the poet's ability to meet the demands of alliteration", one can only agree with the basic notion and, simultaneously, question the key concept: for what is meant by "narrative advance"? If it is the development of narration (concerning certain events), fine and good. But the ambiguity of the concept should be plain: a narrative is also a sequence of events (as narrated) (the same ambiguity crops up in French *récit*; see Genette 1983: 25-32). Do these terms designate the telling of the facts (or perhaps the sequence of statements which present the facts, the "text" rather than the "act" of telling them), or the "facts" which are being told of? The conclusions reached in this article depend on assuming that in *Beowulf* it makes sense to speak of narrative as the sequence of events told of, and thus, on assigning to action a crucial role in the poem, beyond the un-

³² For arguments against this concept, see Phillpotts (1928), Timmer (1940), Stanley (1964, especially chapter 11); more recently, Trahern (1991). On the other hand, a notion of fate in the poem is accepted by Bonjour (1950: 33-34, 44-46, 69); and see especially Brodeur (1959). For detailed arguments defending in linguistic as well as mythological terms the presence in the poem of a destinal force see Aguirre (1995a), (1995b), and (1998c); I argue in this last that a collocational analysis of *wyrd* forces us to the conclusion that the word inescapably means "fate". To forestall at least one objection: that fate is the enemy does not mean Grendel is (no more than) an allegory, anymore than the *femmes fatales* of James M. Cain's novels are allegorical, though the fact they embody important destinal features does magnify the disquieting impression they, like Grendel, produce on us.

³³ For a more detailed analysis of how phasal structures contribute to the creation of a sense of Fate, see my "Narrative composition in the *Saga of the Volsungs*" (forthcoming).

doubted value of diction, formulaic constructions, repetition and other linguistic strategies. On this premise, I have proposed the need for a term such as “phasing” to designate a narrative strategy which presents action and events not singly but as parts or episodes of a larger whole, often with the help of linguistic repetition. This is a synecdochical strategy which affirms the whole over its parts and is thereby a suitable instrument for suggesting the permanent, the harmonious, the appointed; hence the ordered, but also the *déjà vu*; therefore the unchangeable, and consequently the inevitable – in the end, phasing may serve to emphasize the inevitability of change, time, Fate itself. This, I would claim, is one of its basic functions in *Beowulf*. Phasing seems to be a compositional strategy in fairytales, shaping them as ritualized narrative practice. Insofar as *Beowulf* adheres to this strategy at various levels, this poem, too, may be said to constitute ritualized narrative, and one further argument is to be added to those which support for this epic, if not an outright folk origin, at least a significant link to folklore.³⁴

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³⁴ An early version of this article was read as a short paper at the 9th International SELIM Conference held at the University of Vitoria, Spain, in September 1996. I am grateful to Jim Lawley for his insightful suggestions on my use of the term “phasing” and on the significance of the number three; and to Ana Moral and Encarni López for their perceptive comments on *Beowulf* 702-21. This article is part of a wider research project (code-numbered PB93-0242), made possible by funding from the Dirección General de Investigación Científica y Técnica (DGICYT) under the auspices of the Spanish Ministry of Education.

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