

## CHAPTER SIX

# LANDSCAPES OF EVIL AND THE NARRATIVE PATTERN IN *BEOWULF*: THE ANGLO-SAXON HERO'S JOURNEY THROUGH THE LABYRINTH

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Literary thinking is  
akin to walking a  
labyrinth  
—Harold Bloom

In *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity Through the Middle Ages*, Penelope Reed Doob suggests that while “Interlace does very well as a model for the inner workings of a complex (medieval) poem, the labyrinth accounts for both the inner workings and the shape of the whole [...]. (The labyrinth) is the best model for one intriguing aspect of much medieval poetry: it incorporates both linearity and circularity”.<sup>1</sup>

Doob’s focus is on the medieval and the literary, with special attention paid to the significance of the labyrinth as a symbol. As complete and detailed as her study of the labyrinth as *topos* and *tropos* is, there is (surprisingly?) no mention of any Anglo-Saxon text, with the exception of the stylistic labyrinths of the works of Aldhelm and Alcuin. It is my aim in this chapter to show how a metaphorical and symbolic use of the idea of the labyrinth may provide a new insight into the structure, themes and narrative patterns of heroic poetry in Old English, especially *Beowulf*, including the confrontation with the agents of Evil. The maze, writes

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<sup>1</sup> Penelope Reed Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity Through the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 207-209.

Fisher “has proved a powerful prompt in sustaining an oral tradition on fundamental issues of life and love, security and prosperity, birth and death, earliest origins and life hereafter”.<sup>2</sup>

Harold Bloom has identified “labyrinth haunted geniuses” in classical, medieval, post-medieval and modern literature: Ovid, Virgil, Dante, Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, Blake, Yeats, Joyce, or Kafka, just to mention a few writers in whose work the idea of the labyrinth is prevalent.<sup>3</sup> Was the *Beowulf*-poet, then, also offering us a literary labyrinth? An answer to this question implies a certain degree of compromise between a contemporary analysis, which looks at the source text from a cultural and historical distance, and the underlying patterns of composition and storytelling that we might hold as true then and now.

Analysis of the language and the design of poetry in *Beowulf* lends support to the idea that the poem should be seen as “a web of words to be apprehended as an interlaced unity controlled by thematic design”.<sup>4</sup> Bernard Huppé described the rhetorical and thematic structure of Anglo-Saxon poetry as almost interchangeable, while stressing that “the development of the theme in the rhetorical structure of the poem tends to be serpentine, elusive, difficult, puzzling”.<sup>5</sup> All of these are terms clearly associated with visual and literary depictions of labyrinths. What is important here, I believe, is how the focus is put on what Huppé calls the “topography of the journey, and the delight of the maze”. The poem advances alongside the hero’s progress on a path full of distractions, which ultimately leads to an unavoidable end. I will return to this idea later.

Within a web of words, of alliterative patterns, of repetitions and variations of recurrent concepts and themes, we are presented with a language and a syntax of twists and turns, one which rises and falls, mirroring the heroic journey and the core idea behind the poem. Old English literature has often been compared to the art of the period, Anglo-Saxon seventh- and eighth-century art. The interlace, the curvilinear and rectilinear patterns of the *Lindisfarne Gospels* or the *Book of Kells* have

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<sup>2</sup> Adrian Fisher and Georg Gester, *The Art of the Maze* (London: Seven Dials, 1990), 142.

<sup>3</sup> Blake Hobby, ed. *The Labyrinth, Bloom’s Literary Themes*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, NY: Bloom’s Literary Criticism / Infobase Publishing, 2009), xv-xvi.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard F. Huppé, *The Hero in the Earthly City: A Reading of Beowulf*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 33 (Binghamton: Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, State University of New York, 1984), 22.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard F. Huppé, *The Web of Words; Structural Analyses of the Old English Poems: Vainglory, The Wonder of Creation, The Dream of the Rood, and Judith* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1970), xiv.

been described by art historians such as Carl Nordenfalk as of “labyrinthine quality, to the delight and despair of the spectator trying to disentangle them”.<sup>6</sup> Hiberno-Saxon ornament parallels the labyrinth, he adds, in “its conglomeration of undulating and swirling forms” unlike the much more immediately graspable designs of Classical decorative art.<sup>7</sup>

Labyrinths were certainly popular in Britain through the Middle Ages. P. R. Doob explains how the classical heritage of Virgil, Ovid and Pliny the Elder defined the idea of the labyrinth for early Christian and medieval writers, thereby creating a literary and visual background for the use and understanding of the literal and metaphorical mazes of the literature of the Middle Ages.<sup>8</sup> Labyrinths as carvings and constructions were also common in the British Isles. The Hollywood Stone (dated to around 550), found buried beside the pilgrim route of St Kevin’s Road towards Glendalough in Ireland, could well be symbolic of “the tortuous physical and spiritual journeys ahead” through a fourteen-mile pathway through the Wicklow Mountains.<sup>9</sup> The hard-to-date turf labyrinth in Alkborough in North Lincolnshire could relate either to an original festive and recreational celebration or, less likely, a religious one. Turf labyrinths might be dated as early as Norse and Danish settlement in the British Isles, if we follow the suggestion by John Aubrey in the late seventeenth-century that we received the Mazes from our Danish Ancestors. Fisher perceives a correlation between the areas invaded by Nordic settlers in England during the early medieval period and the sites of turf labyrinths. These labyrinths certainly show similarities in their layout to the crossable stone mazes in Scandinavia, which could have served as a protection and guide for sailors, as they are usually found near the coastline.<sup>10</sup> Labyrinths were used to contain the forces of nature, the monstrous storms that fishermen thought mazes could trap like a Minotaur, with power over sea life. In a labyrinth one could lose sight of evil spirits which were unable to turn corners (i.e. “the little people”), or use them as protection against wolves and evil gnomes.<sup>11</sup> In fact, as Fisher reminds us:

in Scandinavia there are over five hundred stone-lined path labyrinths, mostly along the shores of the Baltic sea [...]. There are over twenty

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<sup>6</sup> Carl Nordenfalk, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting* (London: Chatto and Windus Ltd., 1977), 7-26.

<sup>7</sup> Nordenfalk, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting*, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth*, I.

<sup>9</sup> Fisher and Gester, *The Art of the Maze*, 28.

<sup>10</sup> Fisher and Gester, *The Art of the Maze*, 30.

<sup>11</sup> Fisher and Gester, *The Art of the Maze*, 144.

labyrinths which could be pre-medieval... and their sites are associated with ancient barrows, cairns and graves.<sup>12</sup>

He points out that, interestingly enough, there are nearly forty stone labyrinths on the island of Gotland.

Further speculation on the dating of other mazes around the British Isles, and the possible use of turf by Nordic settlers faced with the lack of stones, would go beyond the scope of this chapter. Their representations in manuscripts seems perhaps more reliable. For example, four out of the five manuscripts that survive from Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, which was certainly well-known and translated in Anglo-Saxon England, end with a graphic labyrinth. Boethius discusses the nature of Evil as *privatio boni* and the dialectical complexity of such an argument is, significantly, compared to the paths of a labyrinth:

“Nobody would care to doubt that God is all-powerful?”

“At any rate, no sane man would doubt it.”

“Being, then, all-powerful, nothing is beyond His power?”

“Nothing.”

“Can, then, God do evil?”

“No.”

“Then evil is nothing, since it is beyond His power, and nothing is beyond His power?”

“Are you playing with me,” I asked, “weaving arguments as a labyrinth out of which I shall find no way? You may enter a labyrinth by the way by which you may come forth: come now forth by the way you have gone in: or are you folding your reason in some wondrous circle of divine simplicity?”<sup>13</sup>

In the thirteenth-century we find a labyrinth illustrating the Island of Crete in the Hereford *mappa mundi*, evidence of familiarity with the Cretan myth. George Bain, back in 1951, noted the obvious connections between Mycenaean, Cretan and Maltese, and British and Irish Celtic art cultures. He wrote that “The labyrinth or maze and the meander symbols have both influenced the key patterns of the Pictish school of Celtic art”.<sup>14</sup> He identified the labyrinth in the *Book of Durrow*, the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, and four times in the single XHI-RHO page of the *Book of Kells* as well as

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<sup>12</sup> Fisher and Gester, *The Art of the Maze*, 28.

<sup>13</sup> *Boethius's The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. W. V. Cooper (The Ex-classics Project, 2009), 43. Accessed from <<http://www.exclassics.com>>, 07-08-2014.

<sup>14</sup> George Bain, *Celtic Art. The Methods of Construction* (London: Constable, 1977), 72.

in several ornamented stones. As in the most complex carpet pages of an illuminated manuscript, “where the eye first sees only a maze of serpentine lines until suddenly the initial stands out in sharp relief”<sup>15</sup>, Old English poetry, similarly, also requires an effort from the reader or listener.

The Anglo-Saxon poem, B. Huppé writes, “does not move in a straight line [...]. It demands of us a willingness to follow a subtle metaphoric thread in order to intensify the reader’s intellectual excitement in rediscovering the truth in words”.<sup>16</sup> The knot work in pre-Norman Northumbrian crosses, the limbed lacertines with their woven appearance in the artefacts found at Sutton Hoo and more recently in the Staffordshire Hoard, and multiple interlaced designs in metal work, ivory and stone, all give increased credibility to John Leyerle’s words:

Study of Anglo-Saxon art is most useful as an aid to the reassessment of early English literature because it is an important reminder that the society was capable of artistic achievements of a high order which can be looked for in poetry as well.<sup>17</sup>

Leyerle’s view of the interlace structure is supported by the use of phrases such as *wordcraeftum waef* by Cynewulf in *Elene* (l. 1237) or the *wordum wrixlam* of the scop in *Beowulf* (l. 874a). Words are varied or woven. The idea of weaving is certainly not foreign to the myth of the Labyrinth. The poet knows the complexity of his task, he proudly announces it, and like Ariadne he makes sure that we follow his thread of words to achieve the desired knowledge. Many throughout the history of humanity have found in the journey through the labyrinth the most adequate form to describe the path that leads mankind from ignorance to knowledge.

This is a route that must also be taken by those who venture to read in Old English the gnomic verses, *The Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, and – even more – the *Riddles* of the Exeter Book. It is the ambivalent condition of the maze as whimsical and mysterious, but also its connection with the process of learning that appears as analogous to these texts. In his analysis of Riddle literature Agop Hacikyan pointed out that “once man is aware of the presence of something disguised, he is by nature curious to discover what is concealed [...] a riddle therefore appeals to the basic

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<sup>15</sup> Bernard F. Huppé, *The Web of Words*, xvi.

<sup>16</sup> Bernard F. Huppé, *The Web of Words*, xvi-xvii.

<sup>17</sup> John Leyerle, “The Interlace Structure of *Beowulf*”, *University of Toronto Quarterly* 37 (1967): 3-4.

human urge to find and solve”.<sup>18</sup> Umberto Eco talks in similar terms of his fascination with labyrinths because they express one of the tendencies underlying all human curiosity, the desire to get out, to find an exit and at the same time the terror of being unable to achieve it, of being incapable - I add- to find a solution.<sup>19</sup>

In much the same way as the Sphinx tests Oedipus, and the Queen of Sheba undergoes a contest of wits with Solomon, the reader of an Anglo-Saxon riddle feels the need to solve an enigma. The riddler’s object, says Hacikyan, “is to confuse rather than to strike the reader’s apprehension”,<sup>20</sup> and Beeche notices how riddles “exploit the conventions of oral-formulaic tradition in order to throw the riddle-guesser off the track by leading him or her into wrong associative networks”.<sup>21</sup> Such confusion creates intellectual stimulation and a desire to reach the centre of the poet’s puns and double meanings. We need to remember that a labyrinth involves ideas of both hope and salvation; the idea of the centre is implicit in the idea of labyrinth. Unlike chaos, riddles and labyrinths are always built with a centre that can be found, whatever the distractions. They might have an order hard to apprehend, but comfort lies in its mere existence and the desire to turn chaos into knowledge.

If indeed the labyrinth was not at all unknown to Anglo-Saxon people, as I am suggesting, it could have influenced their literature as it did their art. In the case of heroic poetry and the ethos underlying its compositions, my aim is to show that the labyrinth as a concept, metaphor, and physical and mental representation might be a better and more comprehensive alternative to previous analogous models for the poem. These insightful approaches include ring composition, envelope pattern, spiral, circular, and interlace structures, among other suggestions to account for the formal and narrative patterns of *Beowulf*.

In the case of other Anglo-Saxon heroic poems, there are certainly some labyrinthine connections to be made. Anglo-Saxons delighted in stories of the defence of a narrow place against great odds, as C .E. Wright

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<sup>18</sup> Agop Hacikyan, *A Linguistic and Literary Analysis of Old English Riddles* (Montreal: Casalini, 1996), 2-3.

<sup>19</sup> Umberto Eco, “Et in labyrintho ego”, in *Por Laberintos*, Catalogue of exhibition, edited by R. Espelt and O. Tusquets (Barcelona: RGM, 2010), 8-12.

<sup>20</sup> Agop Hacikyan, *A Linguistic and Literary Analysis*, 35.

<sup>21</sup> Tiffany Beeche, “Bind and Loose: Aesthetics and the Word in Old English Law, Charm, and Riddle”, in *On the Aesthetics of Beowulf and Other Old English Poems*, ed. John M. Hill (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2010), 57.

explained.<sup>22</sup> This kind of situation goes normally hand in hand with the hero's sense of isolation, such as that experienced by the consecutive victims at Finnsburgh or in Hildeburgh's wretchedness. She loses everyone, and finds herself lost in a world in which treachery and revenge prove their perpetual circularity. Germanic women in literature usually play the role of peace-weaver, although failure is common. The thread of Ariadne is constantly severed by an ethical code that - like the animals of the illuminated manuscripts - tends to bite its own body, destroying itself and causing the eventual fall of those who follow it blindly. The two manuscript leaves of *Waldere*, if we accept Hildegund as one of the speakers, give us a female character who finds relative success in encouraging the hero, who is apparently at bay with no way out. Both *The Finnsburgh episode* and *fragment*, and *Waldere*, then, explore episodes of conflicting loyalties, for which the model of the multicursal Labyrinth, in which one has to choose between two forking paths, is obvious. It is a choice between two evil courses leading to suffering. Nevertheless, as I will try to show shortly when dealing with *Beowulf*, the idea of voluntary choice in Anglo-Saxon heroic literature might be misleading.

Any other relevant parallel to be drawn from the overall structure of the legend and any conclusion to be taken from the Anglo-Saxon fragments of *Waldere* would be somewhat unclear without an exploration of the entire legend of Walter of Aquitaine, which I will not attempt here. However, the Old English text is long enough to attest to the popularity of the character of Weland, establishing an interesting link with the Cretan myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, since Weland has been referred to as the Northern Daedalus.<sup>23</sup> He represents the ideal of craftsmanship, and King Alfred even associates him with the sun when translating Boethius's *Consolatio Philosophiae*, an association directly linked to the very structure of the labyrinth and to the character of Daedalus in the classical myth. In his study of legendary metal smiths and early English literature James Bradley has written that 'The core of the Weland legend strongly suggests the influence of the Daedalus story'.<sup>24</sup> Without venturing into a

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<sup>22</sup> C. E. Wright, *The Cultivation of Saga in Anglo-Saxon England* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1939).

<sup>23</sup> Thompson's (2004, 132-170) analysis of "the gravestone, the grave and the wynn", discusses the context for the appearance of the winged Weland motif on stones, and notes that Weland is presented as an emblem of skill, wisdom and endurance in *Deor*, *Beowulf*, *Waldere* and Alfred's translation of Boethius' (p.165).

<sup>24</sup> James Lyons Bradley, "Legendary metal smiths and early English literature" (PhD diss., University of Leeds, 1987), 160.

deep comparative analysis of both stories, I would say that both figures represent “cunning workers” and the two legends imply “imprisonment in”, and “escape from”. “Although there is no labyrinth in the Weland legend”, says Bradley, “the similarity between the two stories has apparently given rise to the Icelandic word for labyrinth, which is *völundarhus*, literally, ‘Weland’s house’”.<sup>25</sup> As pointed out by Kerényi (2006), humanism, popular folklore and a strong biblical tradition have contributed to the naming of labyrinths in the northern European landscape that may take us away from their original meaning.<sup>26</sup> The terms, however, invite reflection: *Pietar-inleikki* (“Saint Peter’s Game”) but also *Jatulintarha* (“Forrest of Giants”) in Finland, *Wunderkreis* (“wonder circle”) in Northern Germany and *Jungfrudans* (“dance of the maidens”), used by Swedish peasants in Finland.

There are several other poems or episodes from the Old English heroic corpus which I will not deal with in depth here, but might benefit from an analysis that bears in mind the idea of the labyrinth as a mythological supportive structure for a heroic narrative.

One of them is the description of the English victory in *The Battle of Brunanburgh*, in terms that Greenfield and Calder rightly relate to the idea of “progression and circularity, kinesis and stasis, in historical events”.<sup>27</sup> The poet also makes use of the sense of mystery in journeys: the sun departing to return to its source, connecting the victory with the symbol that Pliny thought was at the very centre of the idea of the Labyrinth, and with the wonder of creation. On the other hand, in *The Battle of Maldon*, in which the loyalty of the retainers to the lord becomes the central theme, some of the fears that the treacher of mazes faces are clearly reproduced: the frequent testing, the loss of confidence, and the possibility of retracing one’s steps, here presented as shameful, compared to the bravery of those who advance encouraged by the words of the old retainer Byrhtwold (ll. 312-313): “Mind must be firmer, heart the keener, courage the greater, as our might falls”. One can hardly find better advice for those who wander through the maze of destiny; like Bloom, I wonder if there is any other image that so fuses high literature and life as does the labyrinth. The labyrinth, after all, as Michel Conan affirms “encourages self-reflection and a search for a personal code of conduct”.<sup>28</sup> Once such a

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<sup>25</sup> Bradley, ‘Legendary metal Smiths’, 160-161

<sup>26</sup> Karl Kerényi, *En el Laberinto*, ed. Corrado Bologna (Madrid: Siruela, 2006), 68.

<sup>27</sup> Stanley B. Greenfield and Daniel G. Calder, *A New Critical History of Old English Literature* (London, New York: New York University Press, 1996), 149.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Conan, ed., *Landscape Design and the Experience of Motion* (Harvard: Dumbarton Oaks, 2003), 295.



code is found and defended, the warriors in Maldon can die proud if not victorious.

The Labyrinth as a metaphor, and also as either a conscious idea or an unconscious impulse, was present in the *Beowulf*-poet's mind. The labyrinth functions as a central image in *Beowulf* as a whole, as it does in an even more recognizable way in the *Aeneid*, a text often compared to the Anglo-Saxon poem. *Beowulf*, a longer composition than the minor poems mentioned before, allows us to stress the importance of the overall design of the artist.

A comparative analysis of certain elements of the story against the Cretan myth would present us with obvious parallels. Both Beowulf and Theseus are Indo-European "Sword Heroes", a category recently analysed in detail by C. Scott Littleton.<sup>29</sup> The Athenian and the Geat both come from afar to become monster slayers who fight man-eating enemies in underground realms. It is also relevant that, as Littleton points out, after returning to Athens Theseus has only two significant heroic adventures, the war against the Amazons and the killing of another animal-monster, the "ferocious Bull of Marathon". The similarities with the structure of the second part of *Beowulf* are interesting, to say the least. Littleton is confident enough to claim that although "the back stories are very different; the central elements of the two legends are so similar, however, that they almost certainly derived from a common Indo-European prototype".<sup>30</sup>

The structure of *Beowulf* presents us with a hero who goes into two mazes which I will call, for the sake of clarity, the Danish and the Geatish Labyrinths, the second being nothing but a mirror image of the first, maintaining the principle of symmetry at work in the poem. In the first half of the poem, Beowulf, a young hero eager for adventure, arrives at Heorot with the idea of killing Grendel and increasing his fame. The unexpected presence of Grendel's mother, the subverted image of "the maiden at the centre", is going to force the hero to take the decision to enter a maze which is both real and metaphorical. The struggle with a monster inside a labyrinth is often understood as a mythological representation of humanity's conscious and unconscious fears and demons. Here the female monster has no name and therefore is placed outside the familiar frame of language; the act of naming as disempowerment does not take place.

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<sup>29</sup> C. Scott Littleton, "Theseus as an Indo-European Sword Hero, with an Excursus on Some Parallels between the Athenian Monster-Slayer and Beowulf", *The Heroic Age* 11 (2008): 1-17.

<sup>30</sup> C. Scott Littleton, "Theseus as an Indo-European Sword Hero", 4.

The monsters' lair is a hellish space of the borderlands; however, as their own independent dwelling, it reassures them of their very own existence, in spite of belonging to the realm of the monstrous and Evil. This is "a landscape of desolation and despair".<sup>31</sup> Nature, understood as Creation, a concept semantically different from today's use of the term, is described in Beowulf's fight against Grendel's mother as chaotic and unlimited.

The landscape, seascape, and even the soundscape, which encircle her lair and hall, are vividly drawn. This landscape of the mind is a place of fear, a terrain riddled with the power of the poet's art. Nature and wildlife can be incredibly haunting and haunted. Against the anthropocentric order, the human-built limits of a hall which is finite, such as Heorot when is at peace; nature is chaotic, tumultuous, unlimited and infinite, terms one could apply to the ideas of "ugliness" and Evil. Not only does the nature around the mere mocks the vision of the perfect hall but also that of paradise.

Catherine Clarke, following Hugh Magennis, notes how this subversion forms part of the tradition of the inverted *locus amoenus*; "the home of Grendelkin parodies the stock image of the delightful place; the running water, trees and shade of the pastoral idyll are corrupted into a hideous and deadly landscape: a grotesque parodic power".<sup>32</sup> If this is a landscape of Evil it is because "it feeds off already created forms, mocking and travestying them".<sup>33</sup> "*Claene wæs þeos eorðe on hyre frumsceaft, ac we hi habbað syððan afylede swyðe ond mid urum synnum þearle besmitene*" writes Wulfstan: earth, like the human body which is made of it, is created good but has become corrupted and affected by mankind's sins.<sup>34</sup> Nature, as Jennifer Neville has noted, is precisely that for Anglo-Saxons: creation and the things created in this world (*scaeft, gescaeft*); a word for "nature", meaning the natural world that surrounds us, does not exist in Old English.<sup>35</sup>

Grendel's mother, as Shari Horner has rightly pointed out, is the less controlled feminine figure in the poem, although the language and theme of enclosure is used in her description - boundaries, movement,

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<sup>31</sup> Terry Eagleton, *On Evil* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2010), 78.

<sup>32</sup> Catherine A. M. Clarke, *Literary Landscapes and the Idea of England, 700-1400* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2006), 37.

<sup>33</sup> Eagleton, *On Evil*, 63.

<sup>34</sup> See CCC 421: *Secundum Lucam*.

<sup>35</sup> Jennifer Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 27 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

space.<sup>36</sup> The monster's relationship with these is in contrast to that of Wealhtheow, Hildeburh or Freawaru. If the remaining feminine figures in *Beowulf* are somehow culturally or physically enclosed and limited in their actions, Grendel's mother is characterised by freedom of movement, and an active process of revenge, which makes her even more monstrous.

Yet the monster's dwelling is nothing but an underground enclosure. McLennan, in an analysis of Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic texts in which the worlds of the supernatural and the mundane come into contact with each other, sees in the character of Hlégunnr in *Páttir Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, the breaking of society's conventions of gender which, I believe, could easily be applied to Grendel's mother: "an extreme example of the dangers of breaking out of gender roles to medieval Icelanders since she is turned into a monster as a direct consequence of her refusal to behave in a feminine manner".<sup>37</sup>

The space occupied by Grendel and his mother is certainly indescribable but seems to match the very nature of the creatures that inhabited it. Paul Oppenheimer points out that

The view of nature, or *Natura*, as itself a *daemon* capable of gargantuan malevolence is at least as old as the Stoics. In Stoic philosophy, the earth and all created beings are periodically consumed by an apocalyptic fire. *Natura* was a monster, though one with creative impulses, which human beings must teach themselves to accept.<sup>38</sup>

Nature's power to fascinate, to give life but also to destroy, is something which should not surprise the ancient or the modern reader. Grendel and his mother made their home in a ghostly landscape infested with wolves on the hills, with sea-monsters swimming upon the surface of a deep pool of water: *Nis þat heoru stow!* (l. 1372b); that is not indeed a pleasant place. The French historian Jules Michelet once claimed that:

The early Christians, as a whole and individually, in the past and in the future, hold Nature herself accursed. They condemn her as a whole and in

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<sup>36</sup> Shari Horner, *The Discourse of Enclosure Representing Women in Old English Literature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 81-83.

<sup>37</sup> Alistair McLennan, "Monstrosity in Old English and Old Icelandic literature". (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2010), 7.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Oppenheimer, *Evil and the Demonic: A New Theory of Monstrous Behaviour* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 37.

every part, going so far as to see Evil incarnate, the Demon himself, in a flower.<sup>39</sup>

The physical portrayal of Grendel's mother's lair is certainly Labyrinthine: the underwater cave-like hostile hall which operates as a counterpoint to Heorot, into which the hero descends to fight a climactic battle as Theseus did, parallels the multiple depictions of underground labyrinths in literature. Examples would include subterranean Egyptian galleries, or the ones described as connected to the temple of Asclepius in Epidaurus. Asclepius is associated with moles and serpents, and consequently with the natural Labyrinths among which the monster's lair could belong. Kerényi explained how the fourth-century first witnesses of the Minotaur's cave were taken to an underground quarry near Gortina, shown to travellers as the famous Labyrinth.<sup>40</sup>

Even more important is the mental image created by the double depiction of the monster-mere, by Hrothgar and by the poet himself (ll. 1357-79, 1408-17). Beowulf and his companions, as translated by A. Orchard, "pass over steep, rocky, slopes, thin courses, narrow single tracks, unknown paths" in their way to the lake.<sup>41</sup> So labyrinth-like is the landscape that Heaney's translation describes it with the following words, "A few miles from here a frost-stiffened wood waits and keeps watch above mere; the overhanging bank is *a maze of tree-roots mirrored in its surface*" (emphasis mine).<sup>42</sup>

Orchard suggests "that several of the physical features of the home of Grendel and his mother should match those of the otherworld is scarcely surprising, given the poet's constant identification of Grendel with demonic foes".<sup>43</sup> This association brings back the idea of the labyrinth in early classical literature, since Plato described Hades as a Labyrinth with many forks and circuits.<sup>44</sup>

The landscape the reader or hearer pictures from the descriptions of the mere is "a landscape of the mind". Hildegard Tristram, in her discussion of stock descriptions of Hell in Old English prose and poetry, stated that the *Beowulf*-poet adapted a stock description from homiletic

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<sup>39</sup> Jules Michelet, *The Sorceress*, trans. A. R. Allinson, (Evinity Publishing Ink, [1939] 2009), Kindle edition, 4.

<sup>40</sup> Karl Kerényi, *En el Laberinto*, 77.

<sup>41</sup> Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-manuscript* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 38.

<sup>42</sup> *Beowulf*, trans. Seamus Heaney (New York and London: Norton, 2000), 95.

<sup>43</sup> Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, 39.

<sup>44</sup> See R. Espelt and O Tusquets, eds. *Por Laberintos* (Barcelona: RGM, 2010), 25.

writings: “not [only] the phraseology of the Blickling Homily XVI, and *Beowulf* passages is parallel, but their rhetorical properties of wolves, wind, forbidding mountains, dark colours, inaccessibility to living creatures etc.”.<sup>45</sup> On the ground of philological similarities, diction, phrasing and narrative details, Wright has convincingly argued that the *Beowulf*-poet was familiar with a version of the *Visio S. Pauli*, with the borrowed motifs naturalised into the setting of the poem:

his hell is still in the north, because that is where the Danes live, his frosty trees, bereft of the souls that once were suspended for the branches, are left to ‘hang’ over the water below; and his water monsters have been exorcised of their demons.<sup>46</sup>

Andy Orchard has observed further parallels that link the passages in both *Beowulf* and Blickling Homily XVI to sections of *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*.<sup>47</sup>

Anyone who reads the description of the mere for the first time is bound to be surprised by the conjunction of certain elements in the depiction of the landscape: fenland, headlands, a mountain, a narrow path, a course unknown, a joyless wood looming over water... Inland and by the sea at the same time, the scene appears difficult to interpret, labyrinthine in nature, a conglomeration of elements which do not seem to belong together. It may be an impossible setting in realistic terms – I find it hard to believe that this could be the description of a fjord or an arm of the sea – but it is a very effective landscape of the mind. Charlotte Ball prefers to speak of a “landscape of meaning”:

Grendel’s mere defies natural geography by incorporating standing water, the open sea, the bare rocks of the Danish headlands and overhanging trees in a configuration which is difficult to realize into one scene even within the mind.<sup>48</sup>

*Beowulf* is confronted, according to Knapp with a landscape that

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<sup>45</sup> Hildegard L. C. Tristram, “Stock Descriptions of Heaven and Hell in Old English Prose and Poetry”, *NM* 79 (1978): 111.

<sup>46</sup> Charles D. Wright, *The Irish Tradition in Old English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), 135.

<sup>47</sup> Andy Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2003), 158.

<sup>48</sup> Charlotte Ball, “Monstrous Landscapes: The Interdependence of Meaning Between Monster and Landscape in *Beowulf*”, *Hortulus: The Online Graduate Journal of Medieval Studies* 5 (2009): 1, accessed 20 November, 2014.

threatens horror and death in a very real world. Yet the heroic Geat's progress through this adventure figures Christ's point by point, and a focus that cannot settle a single concept – either Germanic heroism or likeness to Christ – establishes much of the aesthetic power of the episode.<sup>49</sup>

Roberta Frank suggested that the poet made use of both the prosaic (“pool, lake”) and poetic (“sea”) senses of the word *mere*.<sup>50</sup> The OE word is also used for “the lake of fire” (Revelation 21:8) into which sinners will be thrown come the time. In the poem, interestingly, the mere is already the dwelling of *felasinnigne secg* (l.1379). As K. Malone puts it, the poet's account is “a consistent and carefully-wrought picture of a hell on earth, an imaginative construction based on traditional Christian ideas about hell”.<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless, another possible parallel for the (un)natural world described around the monsters' dwelling in *Beowulf*, with clear labyrinthine echoes, has been suggested by Richard North. He argues that the passage in which the mere is depicted is indebted not only to St Paul's vision of hell, but also to Vergil's description of Avernus, the Roman underworld in the *Aeneid*.<sup>52</sup> In fact, the only cognate of the word landscape in Old English, *landscipe*, appears in *Genesis B* (ll. 375-376) where it is used as part of a description of hell: *ic a ne geseah laðran landscipe*.

Fisher's discussion of water mazes emphasizes how “a large water surface is visually fascinating, constantly changing as the breeze plays upon it, as well as reflecting the images of reeds, vertical elements and people beyond”.<sup>53</sup> Although the monsters' mere in *Beowulf* could well prove fascinating for the reader, it is also terrifying, as no twigs or leaves float on the surface but monsters and blood. Della Hooke explains that Lucan described, in *Pharsalia*, how Caesar felled a sacred Celtic Grove near Marseilles in the first century BC; and certain similarities with the landscape around the monsters' dwelling in *Beowulf* are striking:

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<sup>49</sup> Peggy A. Knapp, “Beowulf and the strange necessity of beauty”, in *On the Aesthetics of Beowulf and Other Old English Poems*, ed. John M. Hill (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2010), 96.

<sup>50</sup> Roberta Frank, “The *Beowulf* poet's sense of history”, in *The Wisdom Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, 53-65 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, Western Michigan University, 1982).

<sup>51</sup> K. Malone, “Grendel and his abode”, in *Studia Philologica et Literaria in Honorem L. Spitzer* (Bern: A. G. Hatcher, 1958), 306.

<sup>52</sup> Richard North, *The Origins of 'Beowulf': From Vergil to Wiglaf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 8-10.

<sup>53</sup> Fisher and Gester, *The Art of the Maze*, 130.

The axe-men came on an ancient and sacred grove. Its **interlacing branches** enclosed a cool central space into which the sun never shone, but where an **abundance of water sprouted from dark springs** [...] the barbaric gods worshiped here had their altars heaped with hideous offerings, and every tree was **sprinkled with human blood**[...]. **Nobody dared enter this grove** except the priest; and even he kept out at midday, and between dawn and dusk – for fear that the gods might be abroad at such hours (emphasis mine).<sup>54</sup>

In the case of the Danish Labyrinth, Beowulf is able to return from the mere, not an easy task because in Labyrinths, wrote Isidore of Seville, it “seems impossible to emerge from the darkness and return to light”.<sup>55</sup> The hero’s victory, from the point of view of a Christian poet, could operate neatly to equate the Beowulf-Theseus type solver of the Labyrinth with Christ as harrower of Hell. The killing of the monster leads to the purification of the landscape. It is also relevant that the description of watery bodies in *Beowulf* is ambiguous and conveys multiple senses. The energy of moving water pushes the plot forward. The sea brings Scyld Scefing and Beowulf to the people who need them at the right time, but also takes back the lifeless bodies of the heroes; it is a medium for travel with but it is packed with dangerous monsters. Beowulf’s descent into the mere brings him into a fluid and liminal space where he is completely isolated from his social group, an isolation which might remind us of other exiles on the sea in Old English lyrical poetry, likewise battling with the forces of nature. Oppenheimer’s description of the aesthetics of nightmares comes close to the feeling we experience as readers at this point in the story, when we visit an “alien landscape”. “The dreadful acts occur in a timeless, intricate cabinet, on a wicked stage of calculation and falsity, in a smothered semi-dark in which all rules or laws become the accomplices of destruction”.<sup>56</sup>

Regions where water met land, or rather were intertwined, as boundaries are blurred in the landscape of the moors and fens, were surely not unusual in north-western Europe during the migration period, when the

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<sup>54</sup> See Della Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England. Literature, Lore and Landscape*, Anglo-Saxon Studies 13 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2010), 12.

<sup>55</sup> *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, edited by W. J. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach and Oliver Berghof (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 307.

<sup>56</sup> Oppenheimer, *Evil and the Demonic*, 112.

area was subject to rising sea levels.<sup>57</sup> Siewers adds that “To the evolving Anglo-Saxon sense of identity, the sea was both an ethnic historical border and an allegory for the Christian sense of the fleeting nature of mortality”.<sup>58</sup> The descent (into hell or underground) also places the Anglo-Saxon hero within a very long tradition of epic figures who take such a journey into the unknown, which goes from Gilgamesh, Aeneas or Amaterasu, and many others, to Christ. If we think of the Old English poem as of what it is, the work of a Christian poet, and we take into account the ancestors of the Grendel-kin, then Beowulf’s fight against the monsters in the underwater labyrinthine cave, and the way he purges a wasteland of Evil, has to be reminiscent of Christ’s Harrowing of Hell as found in the Gospel of Nicodemus, and therefore of apocryphal visions of Hades.

The fight with Grendel’s mother takes place in an anti-hall, where treasure is accumulated and solitude, chaos and danger occupy the space reserved for community, order and safety in a human dwelling. Beowulf is more threatened during this fight than he was against Grendel, and uses armour and a sword to defeat his adversary. Ultimately, his victory depends on God’s help. The uselessness of the sword Beowulf gets from Unferth is, I believe, symptomatic of the limits of human power; as Hrunting fails, the absent *comitatus* fails with it. The hero himself is shown as vulnerable for the first time in the poem, as only fate in the form of a miracle saves him from being dispatched by the *ides* monster.

In the first maze Beowulf makes the landscape safe for human use by defeating two monsters that share with the Minotaur their humanoid condition. If they stand for the Evil that must be fought and defeated, their place at the centre of the Labyrinth “*in malo*” (as with Ovid’s prison for the Minotaur) is rather ambiguous. In both heroic traditions they are monstrous as a consequence of their ancestors’ offences to God, which caused Yahvé’s punishment of Cain’s kin and Poseidon’s curse on Minos, respectively.

It is worth noting that the labyrinth of classical literature was built to hide royal shame, the very existence of that which is at the same time intimate and “other”: the Minotaur. Nature’s maze in *Beowulf* is the landscape occupied by the monsters, dwellers at the edges of space and time, the time of creation and destruction, protagonists of the Genesis and

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<sup>57</sup> Kelly M. Wickham-Crowley, “Living on the ecg: the Mutable Boundaries of Land and Water in Anglo-Saxon Context”, in *A Place to Believe In*, eds. Lees and Overing (place: publisher, 2006), 85-110.

<sup>58</sup> Alfred K. Siewers, “Landscapes of Conversion: Guthlac’s Mound and Grendel’s Mere as Expressions of Anglo-Saxon Nation-Building”, *Viator* 34 (2003): 28.



the apocalyptic narratives of Christian and Germanic myth. Hrothgar's royal power represents what Ewa Kuryluk has defined as the world of the established, to which "an anti-world of the hidden, forbidden, apocryphal and heretical" is opposed.<sup>59</sup> In Anglo-Saxon England, as J. J. Cohen has pointed out, "the hybrid body of the monster became a communal form for expressing anxieties about the limits and fragility of identity".<sup>60</sup> The monsters are presented as descendants of Cain and therefore placed in a biblical context that makes them "quasi-human beings with ancient pedigree in the land".<sup>61</sup> The semantic complexity of the figure of the giant is well observed by Cohen when he states that "fear and envy, attraction and repulsion, prohibition and liberation, 'other' and 'us'", are contradictions characteristic of the reception of this type of monster.<sup>62</sup> It is precisely because of this that generally the most fascinating monster "is often that which confuses nature's categories by mixing up body parts or crossing human with animal features"<sup>63</sup>; that is certainly the case of both Grendel's kin and the Minotaur.

Kerényi has explained how the Minotaur "in the middle" is transformed by Christianity into a devil,<sup>64</sup> the road that leads to the creature is that to perdition, the invitation to enter clear, the way back, obscure and impossible unless is taken by the saviour-figure: Theseus, Beowulf, Christ. A new Christian meaning is given to an old symbol of both the road to the underworld of the dead and yet of (restoration of) life too. If the hero moves within a labyrinth in search of a centre, this contains both the problem and the answer, and yet once solved, the hero needs to

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<sup>59</sup> Ewa Kuryluk, *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex: The Grotesque: Origins, Iconography, Techniques* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1987), 3.

<sup>60</sup> J. J. Cohen, *Of Giants, Sex, Monsters, and The Middle Ages, Medieval Cultures* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xvii-4.

<sup>61</sup> Alfred K. Siewers, "Landscapes of Conversion", 234.

<sup>62</sup> J. J. Cohen, "The Use of Monsters and the Middle Ages", *SELIM: Revista de la Sociedad Española de Lengua y Literatura Inglesa Medieval / Journal of Old and Middle English Studies of Spain* 2 (1992): 47-69.

<sup>63</sup> Richard Kerney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters. Interpreting Otherness* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), 115.

<sup>64</sup> *Beowulf's* monsters live in an untamed nature, which cannot be trusted, but perhaps can be tamed. This hellish landscape is experienced by Christians in a way that invites confrontation. Neville (1999: 43) expresses this idea brilliantly: through the depiction of the natural world, the state of the human race on earth reveals itself to be a state of perpetual siege. Passive endurance against the natural world is thus transformed into, and interpreted as, active performance of heroism against the devil.

leave the space and the logic followed to return to the life outside, now affected by the journey inside the maze.

Fifty years after the fight with Grendel's mother, and now King of his people, the Geats (another parallel with the post-Labyrinth role of Theseus), Beowulf is bound to "enter" a second labyrinth in the fight with the dragon. If labyrinths celebrate vital energy, youthful playfulness, a perfect place for children to run, fearless and frenetically through their paths, it should not come as a surprise that the old hero would find this journey tiring. Like mirrors in the cinematic labyrinths of Orson Welles, characters and episodes in the poem tend to be reflected and make complete sense when compared to the "others" surrounding them. We only need to think of the heroic triad formed by Hrothgar, Beowulf and Wiglaf. The Geatish Labyrinth is not an exception, but adds meaning to the Danish, and provides us with a coherent explanation of the ethos of the entire poem.

Ramón Espelt notes that Penelope R. Doob has shown us **how**

The notable discrepancy between the idea of the labyrinth suggested by literature and the depiction of the labyrinth until the 15th c., is a fascinating subject [...]. The nub of the paradox lies in the fact that, while the texts that describe the labyrinth encourage us to imagine it as multicursal, the visual representation of the labyrinth is invariably unicursal.<sup>65</sup>

Such a paradox might help me prove the poet's use, likely unconscious, of both, the idea of the labyrinth as path and pattern. The digressions in *Beowulf* move as if in a multicursal network, interlaced with one another, they are not arranged chronologically. The poet can consequently come back to a previous path already explored to describe a certain character, as he does with Hygelac. I entirely agree with Knapp when she writes that "the background tales in *Beowulf* are puzzling, sinister and densely crowded with striving. The episodes of Beowulf's career, though, are enacted in linear narrative time".<sup>66</sup> This double concept of time, which might be explained by its cyclic nature in the Classical world and linear in Christianity, takes us back to the duality of the Labyrinth as model. Beowulf as the hero of the poem walks in a unicursal labyrinth which takes him from A to B, emphasizing humankind's mortality and the transience of life on earth inherent to the Anglo-Saxon mind. When his retainers flee into the forest they seem to have a choice, but on the contrary, Beowulf has not. The wanderer of a unicursal maze needs to

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<sup>65</sup> Espelt and Tusquets, eds., *Por Laberintos*, 152.

<sup>66</sup> Peggy A. Knapp, "Beowulf and the strange necessity of beauty", 86.

make only one decision, either to enter the Labyrinth or to stay away from it. Beowulf had already taken that decision when he decided to travel to Denmark in order to kill Grendel. Now at home the process is re-enacted. Unlike B. Phillpotts, who claims that “fame in northern poetry is for the man who has the courage to choose”,<sup>67</sup> I believe that Beowulf is totally aware of the fact that *Gæð a wyrd swa hio scel* (“fate will always go as it must”), (l. 455). The idea of free choice turns into an illusion. *Wyrd* as fate or providence or rather both, gives the Christian poet the opportunity to build the hero’s journey as unicursal. It was not by chance that in the Renaissance the multicursal maze became the figurative expression of a profane world governed by human decisions.<sup>68</sup>

The maze in the land of the Geats is structured around a monster and a treasure. P. R. Doob suggests two possibilities for the Labyrinth as protection – either it is keeping a treasure safe, or it protects the relics of a tomb.<sup>69</sup> In the case of the dragon’s barrow, both are true. The treasure itself shares a basic feature with the labyrinth, movement. That is the essence of the two and therefore it needs to be watched, otherwise they become dangerous. Gold has no negative connotations in the Germanic or the Christian tradition, so long as it circulates and keeps the social order. It is only those who hoard it who show its potential negativity and futility. To be and to move in the labyrinth is for the hero himself a manifestation of his own existence and of the desire to survive.

The old hero, like the maze-walker, goes where the road leads, following the only course that can be taken. The labyrinth here does not appear impenetrable for the hero, as he is able to find the centre where the monster waits. However, he is unable to reach the exit, so that the labyrinth has become inextricable. His admiration of the treasure that he acquired for his people, before his death, and the instructions for his barrow to be built respond to the core idea behind the success of those who explore the labyrinth. This is the concept that explains the paradox of the meaning of Ariadne’s thread in a unicursal structure where one cannot stray from the route towards the centre and back to the start - the dual concept of oblivion-memory.

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<sup>67</sup> Bertha S. Phillpotts, “Wyrd and Providence in Anglo-Saxon Thought”, in *Interpretations of Beowulf: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Robert D. Fulf (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, [1928] 1991), 6.

<sup>68</sup> *Por Laberintos*, ed. Espelt and Tusquets, 152.

<sup>69</sup> P. R. Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth*.

Bertrand Gervais explains how the labyrinth of myth constitutes “a theatre of oblivion”.<sup>70</sup> Once the centre is reached and the monster killed, the journey is not complete until the hero returns home, tells his story, and shares his booty. Suddenly one discovers the use of Ariadne’s thread: it reminds the hero that he needs to leave the Labyrinth because there is someone waiting outside, someone who expects him to fulfil his duty towards his people. Beowulf solved the Danish Labyrinth, achieved fame in Hrothgar’s realm, and was able to get back home and tell his tale at the court of Hygelac, making sure that his deeds were made known and celebrated accordingly. However, at home the hero discovers the tragic side of labyrinths. He needs people, his *self*-group, to remember him because this time he will not be able to achieve a physical return. He hopes gold and monuments will keep his memory alive, that they will, metaphorically speaking, make him complete the hero’s journey.

The poet himself contributes to this final goal by the very fact of writing down the poem. Emulating Daedalus, or the Christian God as the creator of the cosmic labyrinth of the universe, he builds a story that in the words of R. M. Liuzza “coils around on itself like a serpent, the reader being lost in the narrative maze of a history that finally seems to consume the Geats themselves”.<sup>71</sup> Having advanced through the poem as maze-treaders, with our vision fragmented and “severely constricted”, we reach the end of the poem and become maze-viewers. We take the wings of Weland and look at the labyrinth from above, discovering the whole pattern, amazed by the complex artistry of the overall design.

The tension between linearity and circularity, between the unicursal and multicursal patterns, I argue, should not be underplayed. Putting the blame on Beowulf for his final decision to fight the dragon alone or for his supposed excess of pride or greed is simply pointless if we believe that we have found a solution to the big riddle that this poem is. In keeping this tension alive, and with every new interpretation, we acknowledge the greatness of this literary masterwork. The poet insists once and again on the limits of human knowledge, *Men ne cunnon, secgan to soðe* (ll. 50-51). The funeral of Beowulf parallels that of Scyld Scefing, so that the story goes back to the start. We feel like Socrates when he confesses his admiration and frustration towards the maze: “we got into the labyrinth and when we thought we were at the end, came out again at the beginning,

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<sup>70</sup> Bertrand Gervais, “The Broken Line: Hypertexts as Labyrinths”, in *Revue d’études anglophones* (Orleans: Paradigm, 1998), 26-36.

<sup>71</sup> *Beowulf*, ed. R. M. Liuzza, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Toronto: Broadview, 2013), 32.

having to seek as much as ever”.<sup>72</sup> The brave in battle ride around the mound, providing a sense of continuity around death and the infinite, as their Greek counterparts did in Anchises’ funeral games in the *Aeneid*, in a complicated interweaving pattern, which made Virgil think of the pathways of the Cretan labyrinth.

I am with Peggy A. Knapp when she acknowledges that “part of *Beowulf*’s power to haunt is that it eludes conceptual fixities, continually slipping away from conclusions that at first blush seemed obvious”.<sup>73</sup> *Beowulf* is labyrinthine in its complexity, “the process by which the essentials of structure are perceived in Old English poetry”, Huppé reminds us, “is more like finding the way in a maze than it is like solving an equation”.<sup>74</sup>

The tension between coexisting patterns in the poem might help us answer the question of how to judge morally someone who is more than a man and yet no more than a man. I have acknowledged elsewhere<sup>75</sup> the inscrutability at the core of this question that addresses the judgement of a hero who is also a king, a folktale archetype, a Germanic Super-man, and God’s agent, and yet just a mortal heathen human being. Much literature has been produced, much ink has been spilled over the moral judgement of the old *Beowulf*. Many have tried to offer straightforward explanations to a question that resists a simple answer. If one adopts a perspective from “within the labyrinth”, as Doob brilliantly explains when analysing the *Aeneid*, the reader might find in the poem “a profound sense of human waste and failure”.<sup>76</sup> However, if we embrace a more detached overview, we may see the triumph of virtue and appreciate the struggle of those who accept the inevitability of loss, the transient fame of the hero, and the limitations of human nature. Labyrinths and life, writes Doob, “involve chaos and order, destiny and free choice, terror and triumph – all held in balance, all perspective-dependent”.

There can be no one better than J. L. Borges, who had a soft spot for both Labyrinths and Anglo-Saxon poetry to corroborate this impression. “Maybe the purpose of the labyrinth – if the labyrinth does

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<sup>72</sup> See Plato, *Euthydemus, Dialogues*, cited in *Por Laberintos*, ed. by Espelt and Tusquets.

<sup>73</sup> Peggy A. Knapp, ‘Beowulf and the Strange Necessity of Beauty’, p. 82.

<sup>74</sup> Bernard F. Huppé, *The Web of Words*, p. xiv

<sup>75</sup> Miguel A. Gomes, ‘Confronting Evil and the Monstrous *Other* in *Beowulf* and its Filmic Adaptations: Understanding Heroic Action and the Limits of Knowledge’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Vigo, 2015).

<sup>76</sup> Penelope Reed Doob, ‘Virgil’s *Aeneid*’ in *The Labyrinth*, ed. by Harold Bloom, 1-14 (p. 7)

have a purpose”, writes Borges, “is to stimulate our intelligence, to make us think about the mystery and not the solution. Seldom do we understand the solution; we are human beings, nothing else. But, of course, there is something beautiful about looking for the solution and knowing that we cannot find it. Maybe enigmas are more important than solutions”.<sup>77</sup> Maybe our projections on the poem make us go left or right as readers and literary critics without realising that every path takes us back to the beginning.

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<sup>77</sup> Interview in Marguerite Yourcenar, “Borges o el vidente”, in *Peregrina y extranjera*, as cited in *Por laberintos*, edited by Espelt and Tusquets (Barcelona: RGM, 2010), 167.

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