The Ruins of the Past: Beowulf and Bethlehem Steel

Mary Kate Hurley

Columbia University

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Abstract: Modern movies based on Beowulf elicit a variety of contradictory responses, from utter disdain to genuine enjoyment. This essay argues that the films in question form part of the ongoing legacy of the poem's performance, using a parallel drawn from the history of western New York and Bethlehem Steel.

§1. In the Old English elegy The Wanderer, ruins seem empty. They are the uninhabited remains of a time long past, although the speaker re-animates them in his mind and through his words. The past is present only in remembrance—the material objects that properly belong to it have "genap under nihthelm, swa heo ne wære" ("vanished, under night's helm, as if they never were," 95b–96). In the poem Beowulf, on the other hand, the remains of the past are not always so clearly abandoned, and their persistence in the present is fatal to the characters in the poem. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the sequence that leads from the Lay of the Last Survivor through the consequences of the cup stolen from the hoard (2221–23). A solitary man, described as a panchycgende ("thoughtful," 2235a), deposits the remaining treasures of his people in the ground, in a time long before Beowulf's present. After this man dies, a dragon takes up residence in the hoard, and guards the treasure peacefully for three hundred years, at which point a thief takes a single cup from its monstrous guardian. The dragon ravages the surrounding lands in anger—the lands of Beowulf and the Geats. In a sense, this piece of the past, through the anger it causes in the dragon, brings about the death of Beowulf, and ultimately the destruction of the Geats, if the prophecy of the Last Messenger holds true. The use of that cup, brought out of the hoard by a thief who may have wished to receive favor from Beowulf for procuring it, has disastrous consequences. One might be inclined to wish, in such a case, that this object had also "vanished under night's helm"—if only to allow Beowulf and his Geats to escape the destruction that its reappearance causes.

§2. Similarly, dismay follows in the wake of another ancient relic's reappearance, but this revival does not arrive in the form of the theft of a cup that moves a dragon to deadly wrath. Rather, this return of the past takes the shape of a text "rescued" from general apathy and wide-spread loathing by high school students. I refer to the various incarnations of Beowulf that have appeared in a variety of popular culture contexts over the past few years. Broadly speaking, there seem to be two scholarly reactions to contemporary Beowulf retellings, best represented by some of the responses to the 2007 Beowulf movie directed by Robert Zemeckis. The first: "for better or worse, it brings an ancient story to a new audience." The second, a less ambivalent exclamation: "the scandal!" Perhaps the most generous reaction has been to call it mostly harmless. The dominant sense of many academic reviews of the recent Zemeckis adaptation seems to suggest that the Poem, in the abstract sense, will finally rise above the modern drivel that masquerades under its name. John Fleming, in his review of the Zemeckis film, adds a melancholy note to this assertion, however: "for every person who will ever read Beowulf, a thousand will see this film. Any teacher must feel the sense of lost opportunity" (Fleming 2007). Though the sense of "lost opportunity" might seem to be the most benign of the intellectual reactions to the films and stage adaptations, the pain of asking that question is best articulated by Allen Frantzen (in his review of the Julie Taymor opera Grendel): "Why, as medievalists, do we often leave the theater, playhouse, or opera house disappointed in what writers, composers, and directors have done with the masterpieces of the Middle Ages?" (Frantzen 2006, 27).

§3. When faced with the utter insufficiency of modern re-interpretations of the poem for which so many Anglo-Saxonists spend part or all of their careers attempting to do poetic and historical justice, the temptation to frustration or even despair is strong. However, the adaptations of parts of the past—including its poetry—should not only occasion scholarly remorse; rather, as in the Wanderer, the past (including its ruins) might also move the human mind to acts of poetic creation. More importantly, the ruins of the past can also become the grounds for a better future. This possibility inheres not only in ancient textual ruins, but also in the ruins of a more modern past,
much poetry in the world like this,"  

what it lacks in coherent subject matter it makes up for with a

Information: "

of so many monuments in  

the way memory, though tied to objects, is not

makes its message

Sometimes the best way to destroy is to abandon

—Nicholas Howe, Across an Inland Sea: Writing in Place from Buffalo to Berlin

§4. Neatly documented in the Environmental Protection Agency's registry of Zone 2 superfund sites—the zone described as "Serving New Jersey, New York, Puerto Rico, US Virgin Islands and Seven Tribal Nations" (EPA 2010a)—the sole Superfund site in Lackawanna, New York is listed under the name "Tecumseh Redevelopment Incorporated." For those who know the history of Western New York State, the address on Route 5 (2600 Hamburg Turnpike) might seem familiar, but the former site names given after the address heighten the effect: this site was once Seneca Steel and Bethlehem Steel Corporation. Just south of the city of Buffalo, the rusting carcass of the former steel giant stands tribute to the decades of neglect and misuse that decimated the Rust Belt through the rise and fall of the steel industry in the United States, roughly spanning the years from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth.

§5. More or less abandoned, these buildings were once the operating grounds of one of the most important industries in the United States: Big Steel. In contrast to the Lackawanna plant's former designation as "the fourth-largest plant of its kind in the world" (Peltier 2007), a search of the Buffalo News online site speaks to the history of decay and decline that dominate the industry's profile in the late twentieth century. One hundred and thirty five articles come up in a search for "Bethlehem Steel," and on each page of twenty results, there are at least one or two obituaries present for former steel plant workers, littered among articles from the last few years which chronicle the continuing decline of the steel industry in upstate New York. The most recent downward turn in the US steel industry is documented in articles leading up to the May 2009 closure of the ArcelorMittal company, which had been present on the former steel giant's property for several years. Bethlehem Steel closed in the 1980s, but its legacy is clear in the devastated economy of Lackawanna.

§6. However, things began to change as early as 2002, when the Environmental Protection Agency designated a $200,000 grant for the city of Lackawanna and Broome County, to be used to "identify and assess contaminated sites that it can clean up and develop" (EPA 2002). A prime candidate for development was the Lackawanna site, which included a 440-acre "Slag Fill Area, which was created by placing large volumes of iron-making and steel-making slag along what once was the bottom of Lake Erie" (EPA 2009b). The slag, along with heavy metals, acid mine drainage, and other post-industrial waste made the area unusable: in reshaping Lake Erie, the steel industry created uninhabitable land. By providing grant monies for brownfield rehabilitation, the EPA gave Lackawanna a chance to reassess, and ultimately to reshape the legacy of the steel industry on Lake Erie. The stated purpose of the brownfield grants is to provide "an opportunity to turn these properties into clean, job-creating, profit-producing assets once more. By reusing brownfields, communities help preserve their greenfields—open areas that have never been developed" (EPA 2002). In Lackawanna, however, the link to the future is made explicit by the elegant spires of white windmills.

§7. The wind turbines which rise above Bethlehem’s twisted remains are part of a project called Steel Winds. The Steel Winds effort aims to make the former steel site productive once more; however, in contrast to the environmental disaster of the carcass of the steel giant, this revitalization will create a greener future on the shores of Lake Erie. Steel Winds represents a kind of redemption for Lackawanna: the contaminated soil that for so long has lain fallow is now occupied by "windmill foundations, service roads and green space," and the mills produce "50 million kilowatt hours of electricity each year, enough electricity to power 9,000 homes." In a region that too often sees economic decline, Lackawanna appears to be leading the way as "one of the first urban windfarms in the country" (EPA 2010b). But more importantly, for the people of Lackawanna, it seems to be a source of hope. In the words of Donn Esmonde, a reporter for the Buffalo News: "Fate has not forsaken us. It gave us a stiff wind blowing off Lake Erie. It left us a vast lakeside stretch of befouled land unsuitable for human habitation—but perfect for the mammoth wind turbines that no one wants to live near" (Esmonde 2007). The wreckage of the past seems fertile ground for building a different future.

The dead are loved in a different way.

—Mikhail Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel"

§8. Roy Liuzza, in his essay "Beowulf: Monuments, Memory and History," argues that Beowulf stages a complex relationship between the oral and the written. Examining the interchange between physical objects and memory, Liuzza describes the treasures and swords of the poem as "powerfully charged conduits between past and present, reminders of past events and incitements to future action" (Liuzza 2005, 97–98). However, as he observes, "monuments fail," and the narrative power of Beowulf comes from its own awareness of the way memory, though tied to objects, is not made safe as a result of this association. Objects can be destroyed, and the destruction of so many monuments in Beowulf makes its message about the status of story even clearer: "poetic commemoration of a heroic life can be more reliable and stable than physical monuments" (Liuzza 2005, 99).

§9. Liuzza’s understanding of the importance of the poetic past as it is told in Beowulf shares good company with J.R.R. Tolkien’s 1936 essay "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," where Tolkien argues against the use of the poem as "merely" a source of historical information: “Beowulf has long been used as a quarry of fact and fancy far more assiduously than it has been studied as a work of art” (Tolkien 1958, 3–4). Tolkien argues, in part, that the text has not been studied as a unified work of art, but rather as a poorly executed source of supposedly historical information about the distant past, and he introduces a new possibility for the poem as art, arguing that what it lacks in coherent subject matter it makes up for with a coherent theme. The rise of the young man Beowulf and the fall of the old king, he suggests, make the poem cohere around a single theme: that of mourning a lost past. Tolkien argues further that "there is not much poetry in the world like this," because
§16. In an interview for the
release of the Zemeckis film, Neil Gaiman, who wrote the film script, explained
this memory, this echo of an echo, plays repeatedly in classrooms across the world, where Beowulf stands at the "origin of English literature" despite the fact that, in Liuzza's words, it "seems more like a poem about endings than beginnings," its protagonists are not English, and it depicts a story less of originary battles than "a series of solitary adventures" set in a world that is equal parts folk tale, fantasy, and lament for human failings (Liuzza 2005, 92).

§10. As Anglo-Saxonists do not need to be reminded, the text is actually far more complicated than a simple tale of rise and fall, a song of mourning that stands at the dawn of English literature. Rather, as Liuzza argues persuasively, the very recording of an oral poem in a written text changes the message it sends its audience: "songs transmitted by memory keep the past firmly in service to the present, always ancient but always new; texts create a fixed record, separable from both its author and its audience" (Liuzza 2005, 104). Songs, or the oral tradition broadly speaking, situate the past as irrevocably past; books, on the other hand, "their texts stubbornly unchanging, simply grow old, ageing into an incoherence which requires translation or commentary, stored in the scriptorium or shredded into scraps for more immediate use" (Liuzza 2005, 104–5). The Beowulf handed down to the present creates a very different effect, however. For Liuzza, Beowulf is "not only about a particular history of certain Danes and Geats, but about History itself: the meaning of the past, the means by which it is recorded, and its remaining value to the present" (Liuzza 2005, 105). Oral culture, in the form of the scops, songs and digressions of the Beowulf poem, remains within the textual as a vivid reminder that the past can cause the fissure and dissolution of the present, and that memory is not an unambiguous player in narratives of cultural identity.

§11. Liuzza's analysis—as does Tolkien's before it—stands in stark contrast to the evaluation of the epic genre proffered by Mikhail Bakhtin in his essay "Epic and Novel."10 Bakhtin, in his explanation of the difference between the form of the (proto-)novel and the form of the epic which preceded it, argues that the novel stands as qualitatively different from the epic genre because of its complexity, and always holds within itself the possibility of alternative worlds: "reality as we have it in the novel is only one of many possible realities" (Bakhtin 1982, 37).11 Epic, on the other hand, creates a static past, in which "[t]here is as yet no consciousness of the possible relativity of any past," no possibility of a world different from the one it articulates (Bakhtin 1982, 15). Bakhtin goes on to argue that because the past, in the epic, is "sacred," the temporalities implied by the genre are qualitatively different. In contrast to the malleable uses that Liuzza suggests are present in the oral tradition, Bakhtin argues that the epic genre does not look to the future per se; rather, it looks to guard "the future memory of the past" (Bakhtin 1982, 19). The Past, in Bakhtin's formulation, is static, undeniable, and unchangeable—the past Liuzza suggests is that of the book, rather than the oral tradition.

§12. As an Anglo-Saxonist and a medievalist, when I face the Bakhtinian idea of the genre of epic, I find myself arguing that Beowulf cannot possibly be so dead: how could a poem so aware of its own transitory, ambivalent nature ever be "walled off absolutely from all subsequent times, and above all from those times in which the singer and his listeners are located" (Bakhtin 1982, 15)?12 Within the poem, the permeability of the present to influence from the past is undeniable, and a deep-seated ambivalence towards modern retellings of the poem suggests, to me at least, that we are not cut off from the time of Beowulf and his adventures. Rather, the multiple retellings of the poem—from The 13th Warrior to Beowulf and Grendel to Zemeckis' Beowulf—and the lively debate that occurs around them, suggest an alternative to this static view of the epic and to the fundamental loss of the past.

§13. In a New York Times article on modern Beowulf retellings, Charles McGrath argues that new versions of the poem Beowulf, on screen, stage or even in print, miss "an ancient delight: terror" (McGrath 2006). Far more interesting to McGrath than the modern inflections on the poem's medieval story is the fear that the medieval hearers of Beowulf would have felt:

They listened to the poem in circumstances much like the ones it describes, huddled together around a fire and fretting about what lurked outside in the darkness, and they knew something that some of the modern adapters may have lost sight of: that in the right circumstances it's extremely pleasant to be scared out of your wits (McGrath 2006).

Pleasant, perhaps, but I am struck by the possibility that the creation of multiple Beowulf reincarnations might also usefully serve a different purpose. Even the "brooding, existential" character of Beowulf and Grendel is not without its message: that the past is rarely a straightforward narrative.13

§14. The brooding tone of the movie is largely provided by Gerard Butler's portrayal of the eponymous hero, Beowulf. But the moment which epitomizes the foreign nature of the past and the narratives which it creates comes from a character added to the story for the movie (Selma, a witch played by Canadian actress Sarah Polley). Speaking to Beowulf of the dead Handscio, she explains the grief he feels for his dead retainer: "Handscio's life had worth to you since you knew him. Others know others." In a single line, Gunnarson's Beowulf and Grendel posits an entire counter-narrative to the poem's world, an untold story in which the Others of the poem (Grendel, his mother, Selma) have their own narratives, lives, and even loves. Gunnarson's film brings out the possibility—implicit in the poem's narrative but made explicit in the film—of a continuity beyond human communities in the film, one for the very Others such narratives exclude.

§15. If there is any terror in the poem, it is not merely the chills offered by its famous monsters. The poem offers a view of the past that makes memories of that past the catalyst for destruction not only in the future, but of any possible futures. It is the memory of past enmity, for example, which destroys Hildeburh's peace making marriage and precipitates violence after the long winter at Finn's court, as part of the Finnborg episode (1063–1159). In the messenger's speech (see footnote three) it is simply the knowledge of Beowulf's death which will bring retribution from the Swedes. The future for Beowulf's people is short, violent, and characterized most clearly by its enslavement to the violence that in the past began feuds, and in their present, continues them.14

§16. In an interview for the Edmonton Journal, after the release of the Zemeckis film, Neil Gaiman, who wrote the film script, explained
his first reaction to the story when he read it as a young person: "I thought, this is a great story. It's got serious monsters in it and dragon fighting at the end. That's when I fell in love with it" (Helm 2007). Further, he avers that his role in helping create the movie was one worthy of the poem's legacy, and moreover, of his own moment of falling in love with the poem: "I love the idea that people will go and see our Beowulf and at least know, my God, there's a cracking story there. . . . Even if some of those kids are compelled to pick up the original and understand what's going on, I think we'll have done our job" (Helm 2007). Gaiman's use of mythological materials in his work is self-evident to his fans, but his work with Beowulf suggests a more complex understanding of the relationship between old stories and the modern world. By re-telling Beowulf, Gaiman bequeaths the Old English poem to a modern world in which its prominence as a "classic" or "foundation" is in dire peril—one need look no further than the recent decision to terminate the distinguished chair of palaeography at King's College London to know that the tools necessary to understand the medieval past are far from safe.

What I suggest is that, as the Steel Winds turbines in Lackawanna, the story can we see the possibilities the Anglo-Saxon poem could not that he did die long before his dragon encounter, Beowulf and Grendel texts alone cannot explore. Film-makers present conditions that scholars and enthusiasts alike assure it will never be reduced to complete unlivable land. And though they are, on the surface, utterly different, Bagby, in which his portrayal of Unferth varies from merely belligerent to drunk: the difference is based, one assumes, either on Bagby's audience or his historical context, mythological allusions, and cultural purpose. But there is also the aspect of the poem that Liuzza emphasizes in his reading—the poem as a living text and as performance. I am reminded of the recitations of Benjamin Bagby, in which his portrayal of Unferth varies from merely belligerent to belligerently drunk: the difference is based, one assumes, either on Bagby's audience or his mood. But what this change emphasizes is the role of Bagby as a performer: he re-creates the poem each time he recites it. Beowulf, in the minds of both Anglo-Saxonists and contemporary audiences, is far from the static epic for which Bakhtin argues; and yet, the understanding of the poem as part of the living genre of performance seems at odds with some of the reactions to the Zemeckis film.

In the building of a future from the remains of a past, Beowulf and Bethlehem Steel become two sides of a shared story. There's a grace in the slender turbines that rise above the industrial waste of the past. On the shores of Lake Erie, Steel Winds suggests the possibility of a future that is more than the past it is built on, and perhaps even a future that has learned from the history written in the unlivable land. And though they are, on the surface, utterly different—Beowulf is a poem, not an environmental project, and the work of scholars and enthusiasts alike assure it will never be reduced to complete disuse like the slag-filled remains of the steel plant—Beowulf shares critical territory with Bethlehem Steel. The influence and interpretation of present performances can be instructive not only as to the present conditions of the poem's interpretation, but also to as-yet untapped possibilities within the poem, possibilities that scholarly texts alone cannot explore. Film-makers have the freedom to embellish on the text, and in so doing, they bring to life what is plausibly accurate about the poem, rather than only what is present, explicitly or implicitly. In the assertion that "others know others," Gunnarson's Beowulf and Grendel offers a window to a world of outcasts, a view from the recent decision to terminate the distinguished chair of palaeography at King's College London to know that the tools necessary to understand the medieval past are far from safe.

What is the story told by the Zemeckis Beowulf? For all its insistence on the idea of "the sins of the father" being the vehicle of destruction, and its indulgence in showing the gold-clad figure of Angelina Jolie (as Grendel's Mother) at every opportunity, the film does illuminate parts of the story of Beowulf that might otherwise be overlooked. One such example is the sheer distance between Heorot and Grendel's lair, and the depiction of Grendel's distress at Heorot's noise. The Zemeckis film emphasizes the pain that human "seledream" ("hall-joy") causes the monster it excludes, a reminder that the scop's song of Creation is the noise that brings Grendel to his attack. Wiglaf's loyalty to Beowulf is poignantly emphasized: before the final fight with the dragon, in his old age, Beowulf asks him, "are you with me?" Wiglaf's response: "To the end." The scene echoes what we know of the poem's ending, and Wiglaf's fidelity to his lord in Beowulf's last battle.

That is to say, there is a great emphasis, within the university, on fidelity to the letter of Beowulf, proven by the generations of scholars who have spent their lives trying to make sense of its meter, its language, its history written in the unlivable land. And though they are, on the surface, utterly different—Beowulf is a poem, not an environmental project, and the work of scholars and enthusiasts alike assure it will never be reduced to complete disuse like the slag-filled remains of the steel plant—Beowulf shares critical territory with Bethlehem Steel. The influence and interpretation of present performances can be instructive not only as to the present conditions of the poem's interpretation, but also to as-yet untapped possibilities within the poem, possibilities that scholarly texts alone cannot explore. Film-makers have the freedom to embellish on the text, and in so doing, they bring to life what is plausibly accurate about the poem, rather than only what is present, explicitly or implicitly. In the assertion that "others know others," Gunnarson's Beowulf and Grendel offers a window to a world of outcasts, a view from the point outside Hroðgar's court that is only alluded to in Beowulf. Zemeckis, on the other hand, emphasizes the utter solitude of Beowulf, the isolation of the hero and the overwhelming sense that he did die long before his dragon encounter, perhaps even at the moment he was made a "hero" in the first place. Only by retelling the story can we see the possibilities the Anglo-Saxon poem could not have imagined for itself.
In Western New York, the plethora of movies, operas and theatrical productions of *Beowulf* participate in the ongoing life of the poem. More important to remember, these re-interpretrations participate in the *Beowulf* tradition in ways that are neither wholly positive nor wholly negative. The films might well be thought of as part of the performance history of *Beowulf*. Even the critical work done on the text lives well beyond the lifetime of any one Anglo-Saxonist, and there is still the opportunity to tap into the lesson we can learn from the *Beowulf* poem's modern lives. This lesson is that *Beowulf*, in essence, is still a living poem, in the way all stories still live if they are still told. The poem lives simultaneously in our scholarship and in the imagination. Each successive incarnation of the text is another performance in the life of the poem, and its ending has not been written yet.

§24. The poem *Beowulf* begins and ends with a scene of story telling. The first line of the poem calls us as readers into the scene where such narratives are told: "Hwaet we Gardena in geardagum, / þeodcyninga þrym gefrunon" ("Hwaet! We have heard of the glories of the Spear-Danes in days of yore, the kings of the people"). This assumption, that "we have heard" these stories before, is part of the allure of *Beowulf*. The poem tells us that stories matter, and it does so through its use of story-telling as a narrative device, whether it is the story of creation sung by a scop that lures an angry Grendel to attack, or the Lay of the Last Survivor's meditation on the fleeting nature of human life shortly before a dragon ends *Beowulf*'s life. In the final lines of the poem, the Geats "begnornodon" ("mourn," 3178) their fallen hero. But more than simply grief, these retainers "woldon [care] cwidan, [ond] kyning mænan, / wordgd wrecan ond ymb wer sprecan" ("wished to speak their cares, and mourn their king, weave word-songs and speak about the man," 3171–72). In the midst of the wreckage of their past and present, perhaps it is not too fanciful to think that these retainers were already beginning to build the future of their fallen king. That future resides most clearly in the stories which attest to his deeds. *Beowulf*—in a poem, a play, an opera or a movie—continues to live only so long as the tales goes on, enlarging the "we" who have heard.

Notes

1. All citations of *The Wanderer* are from the Krapp and Dobbie (1936) edition. All translations are my own. [Back]
2. All citations of *Beowulf* are from the Klaeber (1936) edition. [Back]
3. The Last Messenger's speech (390-3027) offers a prophecy of events which will befall the Geats after Beowulf's death, noting that "Nu is leodum wen / orleg-hwile, syððan underne / Froncum ond Frysum fyll cyninges / wide weorcdeð" ("Now it is the people might expect a time of war, since the news of the fall of the king travels far, to the Franks and the Frisians"; 2910–13). [Back]
4. Popular versions of the text which have appeared in recent years include: the 2006 Julie Taymor and Eliot Goldenthal opera production of *Grendel*, John Gardner's classic 1971 novel, which retells *Beowulf* from Grendel's point of view; the loosely adapted Antonio Banderas film *The Thirteenth Warrior* in 1999; Sturla Gunnarson's 2005 *Beowulf and Grendel*, starring Gerard Butler; the 2007 *Beowulf Prince of the Geats* and the Robert Zemeckis *Beowulf* (2007), co-written by Neil Gaiman and Roger Avary. This past fall in New York City, the theatre company Banana Bag and Bodice presented *Beowulf: A Thousand Years of Baggage* which was named one of the best off-Broadway plays of 2009 in *The New Yorker*. [Back]
5. The impressive range of responses to the Zemeckis movie is nearly impossible to catalogue in full, but can be well represented by the following responses to the film by scholars: Andy Orchard and Neil Gaiman both comment on their attitude towards the film in "Critics May Carp, but Writer Happy to Spread Ancient Story." Orchard is described "as a lifelong enthusiast of an ancient masterpiece that still represents a form of scholastic torture to many students . . . [who] is happy to welcome any adaptation to the canon," and Gaiman suggests that the importance of his writing on the film is to make people realize that the dense and difficult poem is actually a "cracking good story." Sophie Gee, writing in *The New York Times*, suggests that reinterpretations such as the Zemeckis film (and the Pullman trilogy *His Dark Materials*, which is based loosely on *Paradise Lost*) can give the "kiss of life" to rarely-read classics (Gee 2006). Richard Scott Noakes, in his "*Beowulf* Movie Review" (2007) asserts that "All *Beowulf* films can be divided into two categories: the bad, and the mediocre. We still await the version that breaks beyond the mediocre. Once the breathless hype is over, this film will be remembered as one of the mediocre group." Finally, John Fleming, in his article "Good Grief, Grendel!" (2007), is one of the harshest critics of the movie, noting that "[t]o solicit from a medievalist a review of Robert Zemeckis's *Beowulf* is to pick a quarrel unlikely to be evaded." [Back]
6. Compare with, for example, Fleming (2007), who states that, "If one sets out to compete with genius, one must be either be armed with genius oneself, or win absorption through a redeeming humility." [Back]
7. The work of Nicholas Howe is particularly instructive in terms of methodology for addressing questions of place—both ancient and modern. In *Across An Inland Sea: Writing in Place from Buffalo to Berlin* Howe writes eloquently of both the power of place in the life of a writer and the particular power of place which haunts the medievalist (or any scholar of the distant past). He writes of the Ring of Brodgar in the Orkney Islands, responding to another writer's reaction to the stones: "Even if the stones are ghosts, Hiestand seems to say, they have their stories and may tell us to if we see how they have metamorphosed over time. Her desire to read these stones is infinitely moving. But these stories cannot become attendant spirits of place, austerely minimalist figures on the verge of speech. For it is not these stories which trouble me, but rather those that were being told as the stone were raised by people we know little about. The stories told as the site was being made are lost" (Howe 2003, 138). [Back]
8. The definition of a brownfield site, as outlined at the Environmental Protection Agency's website, is: "With certain legal exclusions and additions, the term 'brownfield site' means real property, the expansion, redevelopment, or re-use of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant" (EPA 2009a). The former Bethlehem Steel site was classified as a brownfield because of the acid mine drainage and heavy metal contaminants already mentioned. [Back]
9. Examples given in Liuza range from the construction of Heorot, in which the destruction of the hall is mentioned in the same lines
as its building, to the necklace given to Beowulf at the court of Hroðgar, at which point it is linked to the death of Hygelac later, because he will be wearing the necklace when he dies in battle (Liuzza 2005). [Back]

10. “Epic and Novel” is part of a larger collection of work called *The Dialogic Imagination*, and takes as its subject the differences between the two forms. [Back]

11. My understanding of "alternative worlds" as an important part of the literary endeavor is due in no small part to the work of George Steiner in his book *After Babel* (1998), an analysis of translation in which he argues that translation itself stages a constant creation of alternative worlds through its work to link past with textual present, and its rewriting of texts to fit a different context than their source. [Back]

12. In the Gunnarson Beowulf and Grendel, the emphasis is on the more existential aspects of the "hero's quest," emphasizing the idea that there are two sides to the story of Grendel. McGrath describes the movie: "At first Grendel is a blond little moppet, a sort of miniature Bigfoot, who would be perfectly presentable if someone would just shave his beard and wax his excessively hairy legs. Nor is there any hint of an unhealthy relationship with Mom. The great trauma of Grendel's life is the ethnic-cleansing murder of his father by Hrothgar, and it is simply misplaced revenge or the lack of a good therapist—and not all-purpose malevolence—that prompts the grown-up monster's raids on the mead hall. He has no beef at all with Beowulf and his Geats. Beowulf, for his part, begins to have doubts about why he is in a foreign country, doing another king's dirty work, in the first place. This, Mr. Gunnarsson, a native of Iceland, has said is because he intended the movie partly as a veiled commentary on American involvement in Iraq. In other words, the movie is, of all things, a politically correct 'Beowulf,' though it has some spectacular scenery and is historically accurate in at least one respect, reminding us that not the least of the hardships suffered by those early Norse warriors was the lack of shampoo" (McGrath 2006).

McGrath's flip dismissal of the idea of a "politically correct Beowulf" is one of the core problems with his analysis: he forgets that the story was at first passed down orally, and might have reflected all manner of inflections from both its author and its audience. [Back]

13. Compare with the Last Messenger, again, as well as with the feud between the Frisians and the Danes in the Finnsburh Episode, in which the enmity between Frisian and Healf-Dene, meant to be assuaged by peace-weaving marriage of Hildeburh with Finn, erupts into the present with deadly force. [Back]

14. Compare with, for example, the novel *American Gods*, in which figures from Norse, Egyptian, Anasazi and other mythologies are still present and active in modernity, albeit in a slightly less imposing stature (Anubis and Thoth, for example, Egyptian deities associated with the judgment of the dead, are undertakers named Mr. Jacquel and Mr. Ibis, respectively). [Back]


16. The essay by Allen Frantzen (2006) on the Taymor Grendel opera is a brilliant example of this, and combines Frantzen's expertise as an Anglo-Saxonist with the keen eye of the opera critic. [Back]

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The old Bethlehem steel factories live on the outskirts of Buffalo in a town called Lackawanna. Parts are owned by a foreign company – Mittal. Those parts are kept up, have been rebuilt even in the five years I've been coming back to Buffalo. And it teaches you to value those intact ruins which were once someone else's city of the future (38). Yet rising above these ruins now are the turbines that form part of what is called Steel Winds – an effort (I hope not final) to make the area which has for so long been home to the carcass of a giant productive once more. From an article in the Buffalo News, this line particularly struck me – Put together from pieces of a fragmented past, "Beowulf" is a poem we know, perhaps, only by its reputation -- we know it by what we've been left.