

## Oral Poetry and the World of *Beowulf*

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### I

Anyone who sets out to discuss *Beowulf* as an oral poem immediately places him- or herself on some rather shaky ground; for this is a hotly contested area where opinions are very definitely, even emotionally stated. I remember as a graduate student in the mid-1970s being told by a very distinguished scholar that *Beowulf* could not be an oral poem, since it was simply too *good*.<sup>1</sup> But since that time oral studies have burgeoned in all directions, and those of us who try to keep up with the field are gaining an increasing admiration for the sophistication and complexity achieved by poets working in preliterate cultures, or societies where the impact of literacy is marginal or restricted.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the appearance in recent years of two major books that give full weight to the oral affiliations of *Beowulf*, not to mention a host of lesser productions, signals the emergence of a new consensus in Old English studies.<sup>3</sup>

Since the pioneering work of Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord on Homer and Serbo-Croatian epic, the methodology employed has been a comparative one—contemporary oral traditions have been studied not only

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<sup>1</sup> On the well-entrenched view that oral composition (and formulaicity in particular) is incompatible with artistic excellence, see Bauman 1986:7, Olsen 1988:144-49, and Foley 1988:164 (Index, *s.v.* "Aesthetics"). For effective rebuttals of such objections, see Bauman 1986:8 and Finnegan 1988:71-72.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., the studies collected and cited in Foley 1985 and 1990 and the survey of the Parry-Lord tradition in Foley 1988.

<sup>3</sup> See Niles 1983: espec. pp. 31-65, 121-37, and Irving 1989. See also the survey articles in Foley 1981a:51-91 and Olsen 1986 and 1988. I have not seen the important study by Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe (1990).

for their own sake, but in order to illuminate the older literature of which *Beowulf* is an exemplar. Of course such an approach, spanning large tracts of time and very diverse cultures, is full of pitfalls and requires sensitive handling. But some of the results so far achieved have been very encouraging.<sup>4</sup> I hope in a small way to contribute to them in the course of this paper.

I should say at the outset that I do not consider *Beowulf* to be an oral poem *pur et simple*. The contention of some earlier scholars that formulaic = oral has been thoroughly exposed for the simplistic equation that it is.<sup>5</sup> The Old English poetic tradition was a very conservative one, and poets retained their traditional diction and prosody even when translating directly from Latin texts.

But conservatism, or conservation—the instinct to conserve what is good from the past—faces both ways and allows us to see more than it perhaps knowingly reveals. For embedded in a poem like *Beowulf* are elements, vestiges of thought and poetic expression, that go back a very long way indeed. My contention is that *Beowulf* emerges from a general background of oral poetry that puts the reader in touch with traditional modes of thinking and of perceiving the world.<sup>6</sup> I am aware that in making such a statement I am entering an arena of current scholarly controversy, and that some such term as “distinctive” may well be a more judicious choice of modifier than “traditional.” The social anthropologist Jack Goody—to cite one of the protagonists in the debate—accepts the fundamental distinction between “traditional” (what used to be called “primitive”) cultures and those of “advanced” western society and holds that the crucial factor that in every case distinguishes the two is the advent of literacy, the introduction of a writing culture that not only provides new instruments of technology, and a new way of conceptualizing language, but may even

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<sup>4</sup> For a survey of comparative studies, see Olsen 1988:157-63. The work of Jeff Opland is particularly significant; in a number of studies, culminating in his book *Anglo-Saxon Epic Poetry: A Study of the Traditions* (1980a), he has sought to illuminate Old English poetry by setting it against the living oral traditions of the Zulu- and Xhosa-speaking peoples of southern Africa. On the need to assess each tradition of oral poetry in terms of its own particular characteristics, see Foley 1981b and Niles 1983:41, n. 21.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the debate, see Olsen 1988:150-57 and also Finnegan 1988: 158 and the references cited there.

<sup>6</sup> On the persistence of oral habits of mind in Anglo-Saxon England and in other cultures to which literacy has been introduced (not always recently), see Parks 1987:49-51.

unlock new cognitive potential in the human brain.<sup>7</sup> The conclusions of Goody, Ong, and others are being challenged by a number of scholars who reject what they consider to be an unwarranted reification of the phenomenon of literacy and its determining role in social and intellectual change, and instead lay emphasis on the extent to which literacy is itself modified and assimilated to existing systems of belief and social organization in newly literate societies.<sup>8</sup> Ruth Finnegan—a strong proponent of this viewpoint—rejects any kind of technological determinism and all theories that propose a “technologically based great divide between the oral and the literate” (1988:14), and denies that there is any basic difference in modes of thought between oral and literate cultures (1988:59-85, 154-55). The ramifications of the question continue to be explored; in a recent volume of essays on literacy in the early Middle Ages, the editor notes that the various studies emphasize and seek to explore “the possibilities of a complex interrelationship between writing and other elements of social and cultural practice” (McKitterick 1990b:319).<sup>9</sup> Such an approach, rejecting deterministic explanations and fully alive to the complexities of a situation where “tradition” is never a fixed or static entity, but subject to constant change and innovation,<sup>10</sup> not least as a result of the interplay of oral and written modes, has much to commend it.

Some scholars have begun to venture into these deep waters in the field of Old English literature. In a fine series of recent articles Peter Clemons has examined the style of Old English poetry, and in particular the syntactic patterning of opposed half-lines within larger units of meaning (1979, 1981, and 1986). Although he does not relate his findings directly to the impact of literacy in Anglo-Saxon England, Clemons draws a firm distinction between the stylistic mode of earlier poetry (in which he includes *Beowulf*) that he sees as embodying traditional, even archaic modes of thought; and later poetry that manipulates the half-line in order to produce conspicuous rhetorical effects derived from Latin models and

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<sup>7</sup> Goody 1977; similar views are advanced in Ong 1982.

<sup>8</sup> See espec. Finnegan 1988 and Street 1984. For a discussion of the literature and a detailed case-study, see Kulick and Stroud 1990.

<sup>9</sup> For a balanced appraisal of the debate and Goody’s contribution to it, see McKitterick 1990a:4-5.

<sup>10</sup> See Finnegan 1988:57-58. But see Lord 1986:468, 494 for a reaffirmation of the place of “tradition” in “oral traditional literature.”

designed to appeal to the eye as well as to the ear. To give one of his examples, from *Christ III* (ll. 1495-96):

Ic wæs on worulde wædla þæt ðu wurde welig in heofonum,  
earn ic wæs on eðle þinum þæt þu wurde eadig on minum.

[I was poor in the world that you might become rich in heaven,  
I was wretched in your country that you might become fortunate in mine.]

What was once a vehicle for fundamental cultural data has here become “a framework for abstract thought” (1986:12). Clemoes’ analysis is very close to that expressed in 1969 by Northrop Frye in his essay “Mythos and Logos,” in which he opposes oral cultures, in which the central figure is the rhapsode (defined by *Chambers 20th Century Dictionary* as “a reciter of Homeric or other epics”) to “writing cultures,” dominated by the figure of the rhetor. In oral cultures the characteristic medium is poetry, and verbal expression is organized rhythmically. In writing cultures the emphasis shifts to prose and verbal expression is organized syntactically. Here poetry is seen as an adjunct to the “rational” disciplines (law, theology, ethics, and so on), giving imaginative force to ideas that are much better expressed in prose, with its superior capacity for “conceptual expression” and abstract language. (As Frye notes, many of these ideas are familiar from Sidney’s *Apology for Poetry*.)<sup>11</sup>

But let us return to the poem. To say that *Beowulf* has a background in oral verse, in a way that *Christ III* or the poems of Cynewulf (say) do not, is I believe an eminently defensible position. I do not intend to enter the debate about the dating of *Beowulf*—the poem has been dated to every century from the seventh to the eleventh—but it must be clear by now that I favor an early date, at least for the formation of the poem’s primary elements. (I hope to clarify what I mean by this in the course of the essay.) Our starting-point should be the recognition of the ultimate origin of the extant Old English poetry—a common Germanic tradition of oral verse-making brought over from the Continent by the early settlers in England.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> J. M. Foley (1988:95-96) draws attention to several papers by Eric Havelock in which he details a process by which the Presocratics transformed the *mythos*-centered world of Homeric thought into a world of analytic abstractions based on *logos*.

<sup>12</sup> On the evidence for such a common Germanic tradition, see Niles 1983:45 and the references cited in Foley 1981a:61, n. 113. See also Lönnroth 1981 on the stable relation between a particular formula and a given theme in early Germanic verse as an

Recent investigations of the formulaic structure of Old English verse have shown that any given poetic formula is the product of a “formulaic system” involving the interaction of metrical, syntactic, and lexical elements; a vast interlocking set of such systems or matrices is available to the practiced poet, with the result that any given formula is a particular realization of a given matrix, an instantiation of the poet’s wordhord. A poet possessed of such flexible generative capacities must have offered considerable advantages to a poet who must compose and perform simultaneously (as in the case of oral epic delivery); for John D. Niles such a view of the formula and its underlying system accords with our knowledge of the poetic “language” or “grammar” acquired by specifically oral poets.<sup>13</sup> We cannot know the extent to which the *Beowulf*-poet was conscious of this technical heritage or exactly in what manner and with what degree of attentiveness to oral/aural concerns he manipulated his formulas. But his familiarity with extempore verse-making (as attested by tradition, if not practiced in fact in his day) is illustrated in the well-known passage where Hrothgar’s thane composes a song (on horseback) in celebration of Beowulf’s victory over Grendel: “word oþer fand / soðe gebunden. . . .” (“He found successive words correctly linked together. . .”).<sup>14</sup>

There are many potential areas where the oral inheritance of *Beowulf* might fruitfully be explored. We could look, for example, at the “I heard” (“ic gefrægn,” “ic gehyrde”) formula (or, uniquely in the opening lines of the poem, “we ... gefrunon,” “we have heard...”), where the poet acknowledges both his indebtedness to the past, the fact that his own telling is only the latest of many, and (in the poem’s opening lines) the link between poet and audience. In *Beowulf* the important question is: does this formula persist as a mere relic, as in such text-based poems as *Andreas* and

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indication of oral formulation.

<sup>13</sup> See Niles 1981:espec. 399-401. Niles’s article modifies and extends the analysis proposed in Fry 1967 and 1968, and also draws on Nagler 1967. For surveys of recent research on the Old English poetic formula, see Foley 1981a:60-79 and Olsen 1986:565-77 and 1988:167-68.

<sup>14</sup> On this passage (ll. 867b-97), see Irving 1989:84-86 and Niles 1983:37-39, and espec. the references cited on p. 37, n. 14. All quotations from *Beowulf* are from Klaeber 1950.

*Elene*, or does it still speak of a living oral community?<sup>15</sup>

Then there is a whole raft of elements in the poem that can be attributed to one salient feature of oral poetry: the tendency towards an immediate local effect, often at the expense (it seems to us) of narrative unity. Under this heading come the well known “digressions”; internal inconsistencies and contradictions (e.g., the conflicting statements about Beowulf’s childhood); and what Niles (1983:174) calls “truncated motifs,” such as the reference to the curse on the hoard, an intrusive element that seems entirely surplus to the requirements of the plot. Also in this category are the numerous expressions of gnomic wisdom and authorial commentary, what Stanley B. Greenfield (1976) has termed the poet’s “authenticating voice.”<sup>16</sup> The sententious expression of wisdom is a hallmark of oral cultures,<sup>17</sup> and for the most part such expressions in *Beowulf* are well integrated into their respective narrative contexts. The few cases in which the poet’s comments sit awkwardly in context show the importance he gives to such overt expressions of collective wisdom. Examples include the pair of homiletic gnomes on the theme of *sawle weard* at 183b-88 (“*Wa bið þæm ðe seal.... Wel bið þæm þe mot....*”) and what we may consider a merely opportunistic aside, divorced from the narrative context, at 2764b-66:

Sinc eaðe mæg,  
gold on grund(e) gumcynnes gehwone  
oferhigian, hyde se ðe wylle!

[Treasure, gold in the ground, can easily get the better of any person, hide it who will.]

Questions of narrative competence aside, such expressions are bound to seem intrusive to us to a greater or lesser degree because of our tendency to distinguish between narrative and sententious modes (prizing the former to the detriment of the latter) in a way that would have been entirely alien to

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<sup>15</sup> See now Parks 1987, which discusses this motif in the context of oral tradition.

<sup>16</sup> For a cogent discussion of “local effect,” see Cherniss 1970.

<sup>17</sup> See Frye 1969:7 and Bloomfield and Dunn 1989:106-49, espec. 135-37.

an early medieval audience.<sup>18</sup>

If we feel irritated by a lengthy digression on Swedish history, or baffled by a particularly inscrutable gnome, then this is not because the poet is a poor craftsman. The oral poet works in a temporal, not a spatial dimension; he is not able to conceive his work in one great sweeping overview, as a poet might who was working in a fully literate tradition. Such a conception of structure can accommodate any number of excrescences and divagations along the way; or rather the poet is restricted in the character, weighting, and distribution of his material only by the necessity to include those narrative elements essential to the story as he has received it (e.g., the tale of Beowulf must presumably not omit such key elements as the hero's journey to Denmark, the fight with Grendel, and so on). In approaching such a work, it is up to us to adjust our perspective.

## II

I shall touch again on some of these points, but I want now to consider the first of my major topics: the question of the poem's structure and what (if anything) it can tell us about the oral background of *Beowulf*. Everyone knows that the poem is organized around the three main fights Beowulf has with the monsters: first against Grendel; then Grendel's mother; and finally (many years later, in his old age) against a ravaging night-flying dragon. The marked hiatus between the Grendel-fights on the one hand, and the dragon-fight on the other, has long been remarked. The poem conspicuously lacks the smooth linear structure we might expect in, for example, a Victorian novel.

J. R. R. Tolkien, in his famous remarks on the poem as presenting "a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death" (1936:271), sought a literary rationale for the poem's structure, accommodating it to the categories of the literary criticism of his day (and his perceptions are still perfectly valid from one point of view). Other critics, beginning with Etmüller and Müllenhoff in the nineteenth century, took a less exalted view and posited composite authorship of various kinds. In 1905 L. L. Schücking published

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<sup>18</sup> For further examples of "opportunist" comments that seem imperfectly welded to their respective narrative contexts, see ll. 20-25; 1002b-8a; 1057b-62; and 2291-93a. There is a discussion of these passages in Sorrell 1979:175-76 and 195-200; Shippey 1977 is also useful.



his influential study in which the section of the poem recounting Beowulf's report to Hygelac (which he called "Beowulf's Homecoming") was given special significance—he saw it, in the words of Janet Bately, "as a piece specially composed by a poet-editor to join two originally separate poems, *Beowulf* as we have it being a work of composite authorship" (1985:409).

F. P. Magoun (1963) saw the poem as made up of three distinct folk-poems (with "Beowulf's Homecoming" as the second, lines 2009b-2176) brought together by an anthologizing scribe, "while Sisam described the poem as we have it as a serial in three installments which 'seems to have been built up to meet the demand for another story about the hero who destroyed Grendel,' with the 'Return' appearing to be 'an extension of the two older stories of Grendel and Grendel's Mother made by the poet who gave *Beowulf* substantially the form in which it has survived'" (Bately 1985:410).<sup>19</sup>

In what follows I hope to extend and modify these views by reference to my understanding of the processes of oral composition and performance. I should say at the outset that I do not see the need to retain any theory of composite authorship—such a view is foreign to oral poetry in any case. As Tolkien noted, the poem spans the whole career of the hero, "from first achievement to final death," albeit with some *lacunae* in the middle. This is an unusual pattern in a poem originating in a purely oral context. In his 1963 article (mentioned above) Magoun noted that oral songs are typically non-cyclic in character—in their original state they are told as discrete episodes, not as complete cycles to be performed in a single connected sequence; his examples include the Finnish epic, the *Kalevala*; and *Fáfnismál* and *Reginismál* in the Poetic *Edda* (1963:128-32). Magoun's findings are corroborated by the evidence of *Beowulf*, where references to narrative poems, scattered and allusive as they are, suggest verse that deals with restricted subject matter: in particular the songs (*gyddum*) that publicized Grendel's long-standing feud with Hrothgar (ll. 146b-54a); and the Finn episode (ll. 1063-1159a), a *leoð* that is sung through in a single

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<sup>19</sup> Bately's excellent summary of scholarly opinion on the authorship and structure of *Beowulf* should be supplemented by Haarder 1975:89-110 and Chase 1981:3-4. Chase notes in particular the postulation of B. A. K. ten Brink (1888) "of a final redactor in the course of the eighth century who did his best to reduce the loose collection of stories about Beowulf to a single epic" (Chase 1981:4).



sitting (see ll. 1159b-60a).<sup>20</sup> More problematic is the Sigemund material at ll. 867b ff.; we are told that Hrothgar's thane relates many events of Sigemund's career (ll. 874b-79a),<sup>21</sup> but the *Beowulf*-poet focuses in his summary on a single incident—the slaying of a dragon and the recovery of a treasure-hoard (ll. 884b-97). The Sigemund material is ostensibly an extension of a song about Beowulf himself; the singer is said to recite “sið Beowulfes” (“Beowulf's exploit”) in narrative form (ll. 871b-74a). Further short narratives may be implied in the song of the Creation reported at ll. 89b-98 (part of a Christian cycle?) and in the reference in Beowulf's report to Hygelac to the recitation of *gyd* (“elegy”?) and *spell* (“narrative”? “lay”?) at Hrothgar's court, in the context of a single day's feast (ll. 2105-16a).

An example from Oceania sheds further light on Magoun's conclusions and—significantly for the thesis proposed here—provides an excellent illustration of the effect of an emergent writing culture on traditional narrative materials. In the context of a discussion of the use of writing and the influence of nineteenth-century European collectors in the recording of texts in the Pacific, Ruth Finnegan quotes Katherine Luomala on the literary characteristics of the version of the famous Maui story included by Sir George Grey in his *Polynesian Mythology* (1855):

“Its unity, coherence, and depth of feeling point to the work of a literary genius reinterpreting the mythology of his people. . . . Its author-raconteur saw the possibility of using an error in the father's rites over Maui as a point of departure in building up suspense to a climax. The narrator has integrated various stages of Maui's career from birth to death into a composition which resembles a novelette in its closely woven plot. The Arawa cycle is a masterpiece of primitive literature.”

Finnegan's comment that the version printed by Grey “is in the event just one among many possible ones, one composed by a particular individual (probably in writing), using his own insights and his own way of presenting the traditional episodes” (1988:116) seems entirely apposite.

Recent work on the African tradition has produced similar findings; here it is unusual to find an epic poem (or prose narrative) spanning the entire career of the hero—again the constituent episodes are told separately,

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<sup>20</sup> Alistair Campbell (1971:286-87) holds that at least two lays of Finn are incorporated in the poet's summary; but the subject is restricted to the fight at Finn's hall and its aftermath, as the poet indicates in his introductory comments at ll. 1063-70.

<sup>21</sup> Creed (1966) cites this passage as evidence against Magoun's theory of the composite structure of the poem.

on separate occasions, and there is no conception of a single connected work, complete in itself.<sup>22</sup> Finnegan gives the example of the Lianja “epic” from the Congo, which covers the birth and tribulations of the hero, his travels and leadership of his people, and finally his death. This runs to about 120 pages of text and translation in the printed version; “But how far was this conceived of and narrated as a unity prior to its recording (and perhaps elaboration) in written form? It is not at all certain that the traditional pattern was not in fact a very loosely related bundle of separate episodes, told on separate occasions and not necessarily thought of as one single work of art (though recent and sophisticated narrators say that ideally it should be told at one sitting)” (1970:109).

Often the separate episodes of such a cycle are brought together for the first time when dictated to a fieldworker such as an anthropologist or folklorist. The indigenous poets often remark with surprise on the novelty of the procedure—never before have they been called upon to relate the whole cycle in one continuous sitting or series of performances.<sup>23</sup> This, incidentally, illustrates one important way in which oral versions can be modified by being written down—when dictated to a fieldworker they are inevitably “decontextualized,” stripped of their original setting and audience. Their new setting is a thoroughly unnatural one for performance. (Of course, since the 1960s the use of battery-operated tape recorders has largely obviated this problem—the observer can be much less intrusive.<sup>24</sup> But the point is an interesting one in an Anglo-Saxon context; we think for example of Cædmon’s recitals to the learned monks of Whitby.)<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Finnegan 1970:108-10 (cited in Goody 1987:100-01). On the question of an African “epic,” see Foley 1988:89.

<sup>23</sup> See Opland 1980a:82-83, 1980b:43-43, and Finnegan 1988:170-71 on the Mwindo cycle recorded from a Banyanga singer from the Congo Republic.

<sup>24</sup> But see Tedlock 1982 on the role of the observer (with tape-recorder) in the production of oral narrative. Tedlock discusses three case-studies (drawn from his work with the Zuñi people of New Mexico and the Quiché Maya of Guatemala) where “the dialogical ground on which storytelling takes place opens wide enough to reveal the mythographer [i.e. observer]” (19; the case studies are discussed in chs. 13-16, pp. 285-338).

<sup>25</sup> In the Alfredian translation of Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*, IV.24, Cædmon’s oral poems (based on biblical material taught him orally) are said to have been written down and learned (or studied) by his teachers. The free interplay between oral and written at this

The work done by Goody, Finnegan, and others suggests that epic (in the sense of the welding of discrete episodes—what older scholars called “lays”—into connected cycles seen as complete poems in themselves) is not a characteristic poetic form of purely oral cultures; rather it arises in societies in the early stages of literacy, where there has already been some contact with a writing culture (e.g., Goody 1987:96-109). I believe that this has important implications for our understanding of *Beowulf*. I see the poem as lying at the interface between oral and written, a situation where poetry is moving from one medium to another, from “event” to “text.”<sup>26</sup> This is not the place in which to expatiate on the date and genesis of the poem; I will simply say that I am convinced by the argument, propounded by Patrick Wormald (1978) and others, that sees the aristocratic monastic society of the late seventh and eighth centuries as an ideal locus for the circulation of the poem.<sup>27</sup> And not the circulation alone, but also, I would argue, its literary preservation. For here we have a situation in which the writing culture of an elite minority is coming into contact with the oral storytelling traditions of the mass of the people: precisely the conditions in

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period is further suggested by Asser’s observation that Alfred as an illiterate boy learned to recite vernacular verse, but from a book that was read to him by his tutor (Asser, *Life of Alfred*, ch. 23). Asser also tells us that, as king, Alfred did not cease “to recite Saxon books, and especially to learn by heart Saxon poems, and command others to do so [et Saxonicos libros recitare, et maxime carmina Saxonica memoriter discere, aliis imperare]” (ch. 76; quoted in Opland 1980a:154). At an earlier period, Charlemagne’s biographer Einhard tells us that the emperor, in addition to transcribing traditional laws, “also had the old rude songs that celebrate the deeds and wars of the ancient kings written out for transmission to posterity” (*Vita Caroli*, ch. 29; quoted in Opland 1980a:155).

<sup>26</sup> The terms are those used by Clemons (1986:11).

<sup>27</sup> On the possible development of full-scale epic poetry from the short lay in Old English, see Campbell 1962. Campbell considers that the growth of Anglo-Saxon monasticism provided suitable conditions for the development of epic. Latin verse narrative provided a model, but “was not heavily drawn upon” (13). But for a rebuttal of Campbell’s views, see Niles 1983:55, n. 47. Opland (1980b:41-42), discussing Cædmon’s *oeuvre*, considers that biblical narrative poetry may have developed out of a native eulogistic tradition in an early monastic context.

which epic poetry can take shape.<sup>28</sup>

My view of the formation of *Beowulf* is briefly this: episodes from the *Beowulf*-cycle circulated orally from an early period; sometime in the late seventh or eighth century a monastic redactor (with aristocratic interests) shaped the poem into more or less its present form, recording the various episodes perhaps from a single singer (without benefit of tape recorder!) and doing a little editorial work to smooth over the cracks (perhaps most evident in the “Homecoming” section). From there an unbroken manuscript tradition carried the poem forward up to the unique surviving manuscript.<sup>29</sup>

Support for a reconstruction of this kind is provided by the sophisticated arguments of David Dumville in a paper that draws attention to the complex textual history of some Celtic texts that may well bear comparison with *Beowulf*. He cites, for example, a number of Irish analogues for what he calls “interpolations and omissions” and especially the bipartite structure of *Beowulf* (1981:145). Dumville studies the interaction of oral and written forms in two early Celtic texts, the Welsh heroic poem *Gododdin* and the Old Irish prose epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. The latter source exhibits a complex textual history; in particular, the heterogeneous linguistic forms of Recension I (eleventh century) are attributable in his view to the intervention of redactors and copyists: “There can be no doubt that here we see the hand of the redactor, whether adding new material, or supplying connecting passages, or offering in his

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<sup>28</sup> See Opland 1980b:43 and the suggestive remarks by Goody on the influence of Islamic literacy in West Africa (1987:125-38). For the evidence of land-charters as an indication of the monastic monopoly of literacy, and the corresponding low levels of lay literacy in the early Anglo-Saxon period (i.e., before the ninth century), see Kelly 1990: espec. 42-46. Wormald 1977 inclines to the “old view” of a clerical monopoly of literacy throughout the period, but for an alternative view of the situation in the later period, see Keynes 1990.

<sup>29</sup> At the time of writing this paper I had not seen E. B. Irving’s similar, if more general proposal (1989:7): “I boldly state here my own best guess, aware that the evidence for it is the merest gossamer. I think *Beowulf* is (or was originally) an eighth-century Mercian court poem, very close to oral tradition and carefully preserved thereafter, perhaps because of its excellence, by later transcribers.” It is possible that the “Scyld Scefing” prologue to *Beowulf* is an accretion of the Viking age, as K. Sisam argued (1953:339). Recently A. C. Murray (1981:101-11) has extended Sisam’s argument and argues for a late-ninth- or tenth-century date for the poem as a whole on the basis of the Danish genealogical material in the prologue; a similar argument is advanced by Audrey L. Meaney (1989:9-21 and 37-40).

own words what his sources may have given him in variant forms” (153-54). The linguistic variation and heterogeneity of *Beowulf* may well be an indication of such “an elaborate recensional history” (154), a history that may have included a period of oral transmission (151-52). Dumville concludes: “On a variety of theoretical grounds, supported by comparative evidence, *Beowulf* could be a work of very diverse origins and dates” (152).

### III

All this is of course highly speculative and full of imponderables. So I want to move rapidly on to my second major emphasis: the treatment of *time* in *Beowulf*, and particularly the way in which the poet moves freely from the presentation of events in the “present” time of his narrative to other events—narrative, legendary, historical—located in different time-frames, in the “past” and “future” of the poem, as it were.<sup>30</sup> And just as in the first part of this paper I moved outside the traditional boundaries of literary studies to incorporate the insights of contemporary anthropologists, here I wish to draw on the work on Maori oral poetry of a distinguished classical scholar and Professor Emeritus of Otago University, Professor Agathe Thornton.

In her book *Maori Oral Literature as Seen by a Classicist* she discusses at some length the three accounts of Maori cosmogony and history written down by the Arawa chief Te Rangikaheke in 1849 (A. Thornton 1987:43-86, espec. 43-75). (It is important to note that Te Rangikaheke became literate only in the 1840s and that this material had never before been reduced to writing.) The three accounts fall into two groups. The first (MS. 81) was written for Governor Grey, with whom Te Rangikaheke collaborated extensively in recording Maori traditions. This is known as “the Grey Book.” The second and third versions (MS. 43 and MS. 44) were written for the people of Hawaiki (the original Polynesian homeland)—they were Te Rangikaheke’s kinsfolk and would be expert judges of the material. These two accounts are known as “the Hawaii Book” (“Hawaii 1” and “Hawaii 2”).

Thornton draws attention to the marked stylistic differences between the two books, differences reflecting an oral versus a written mode of presentation. Thus in “Hawaii 1” there is much direct speech and dialogue,

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<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of the various time-frames operating in the poem, see Niles 1983:179-96.

and extensive use of verbal repetition and parallelism to build insistent speech rhythms—features Thornton sees as characteristic of oral art. In the Grey Book, on the other hand, most of these features are dropped or diluted, so that a “smoother” narrative style is adopted.

From the point of view of the treatment of *time*, the differences between the two versions are even more marked. Te Rangikaheke tells the story of how Tamatekapua, the Arawa chief, decided to emigrate from Hawaiki to Aotearoa (New Zealand). In the Hawaii Book, events are related not in chronological order, but in an order dictated by relationships of significance between events—for example, the linking of an event in the present (or near-present) with some mythological event that gives it special meaning. This creates a characteristic “zigzag” pattern, as Thornton’s diagrams clearly show.<sup>31</sup> Such a narrative method reflects the Maori orientation to the *past* as the source of meaning for the present. In contrast, the Grey Book presents the narrative material much more briefly and in chronological order. Te Rangikaheke was clearly very astute in judging the kind of narrative presentation that would suit literate *pakeha* (European) tastes. In broader perspective, the production of alternative versions for two kinds of audience points to one area in which we can legitimately isolate important differences between oral and written narrative modes.<sup>32</sup>

The “zigzag” pattern of the oral method creates what Thornton calls “appositional expansions,”<sup>33</sup> an incremental style that is very close to the opportunistic local effects that motivate the so-called “digressions” in *Beowulf*. Like Te Rangikaheke in telling his stories to an Hawaiian audience, the *Beowulf*-poet often sets aside strict chronology. He is not interested in presenting a smoothly flowing linear narrative, but rather in evoking his thematic concerns in the most effective way.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See the charts in A. Thornton 1987:97-100, espec. chart 3, “Odyssey 21” (99).

<sup>32</sup> Dennis Tedlock cites a 1904 study of the Zuñi Indians of New Mexico in which the author, Matilda Coxe Stevenson, reorders her collected materials in a chronological sequence “which reflects her own Western preoccupation with history more than actual Zuñi practice” (1983:36). See further Bauman 1986:8 on the “manipulation of narrative time.”

<sup>33</sup> A. Thornton 1987:67; the concept was developed in Thornton and Thornton 1962 and further discussed in A. Thornton 1984:104-10.

<sup>34</sup> For an explanation of the chronological discontinuities in *Beowulf* as a literary device, see Leyerle 1967. From an examination of Alcuin’s twin lives of St. Willibrord, Leyerle concludes that “natural” (that is, chronological) order was used in narratives

A good example of these techniques is seen in the poet's narrative of the celebrations in Heorot that follow Beowulf's defeat of Grendel. After the poet's narration of the lay of Finn and Hnæf, and Queen Wealhtheow's anxious speech to Hrothgar, the victorious Beowulf is presented with golden treasures:

Him wæs ful boren, ond freondlāpu wordum bewægned, ond wunden gold estum geeawed, earm[h]reade twa,	
hrægl ond hringas, healsbeaga mæst	1195
þara þe ic on foldan gefrægen hæbbe. Nænigne ic under swegle selran hyrde hordmaðum hæleþa, syððan Hama ætwæg to þære byrhtan byrig Brosinga mene, sigle ond sincfæt,— searoniðas fleah	1200
Eormenrices, geceas ecne ræd.— þone hring hæfde Higelac Geata, nefa Swertingas nyhstan siðe, siððan he under segne sinc ealgode, wælreaf werede; hyne wyrd fornam,	1205
syððan he for wlenco wean ahsode, fæhðe to Frysum. He þa frætwe wæg, eorclanstanas ofer yða ful, rice þeoden; he under rande gecranc. Gehwearf þa in Francna fæþm feorh cyninges,	1210
breostgewædu, ond se beah somod; wyrsan wigfrecan wæl reafedon æfter guðsceare, Geata leode hreawic heoldon.— Heal swege onfeng. Wealhðeo maþelode, ..... (ll. 1192-1215a)	1215

[The cup was borne to him and welcome offered in friendly words to him, and twisted gold courteously bestowed on him, two arm-ornaments, a mail-shirt and rings, the largest of necklaces of those that I have heard spoken of on earth. I have heard of no better hoard-treasure under the heavens since Hama carried away to his bright city the necklace of the Brosings, chain and rich setting: he fled the treacherous hatred of Eormenric, got eternal favor. This ring Hygelac of the Geats, grandson of Swerting, had on his last venture, when beneath his battle-banner he defended his treasure, protected the spoils of war: fate took him when for pride he sought trouble, feud with the Frisians. Over the cup of the waves the mighty prince wore that treasure, precious stone. He fell beneath his shield; the body of the king came into the grasp of the Franks, his breast-armor and the neck-ring together. Lesser warriors plundered the fallen after the war-harvest: people

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intended for public reading, and that since *Beowulf* demonstrates “complex artificial [that is, non-chronological] order” (7), it was intended for the study [and was presumably a product of it]. But this analysis sits uncomfortably with his conclusion that stylistic interlace in narrative is to be linked to the principle of association, the atemporal manner in which the mind characteristically orders experience (14). For an alternative (and, to me, more satisfactory) explanation of the “interlace” phenomenon, see Cherniss 1970.



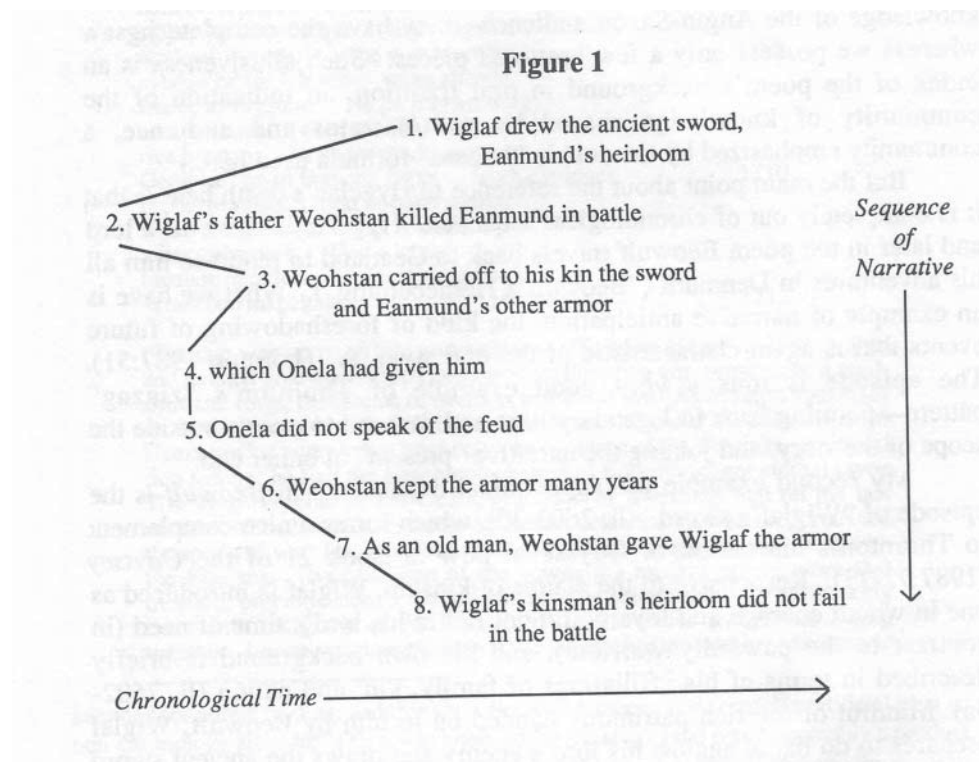
of the Geats held the place of corpses. The hall was filled with noise.  
Wealthew spoke....] (Donaldson 1986:49)

We note firstly how this episode is sandwiched within the “main” narrative, to which the poet directly returns: “The hall was filled with noise. Wealthew spoke....” Mention of the great necklace (*healsbeaga mæst*, 1195b) leads first to a highly allusive reference to another great necklace, the legendary *Brosinga mene*. (This is exactly what Thornton means by “appositional expansion.”) Then in a short narrative digression, the poet returns to Beowulf’s necklace and tells how Hygelac was wearing it on his fatal expedition against the Franks and Frisians. (This episode is also highly allusive and for some raises the question of *consistency* in the narrative; Beowulf is later said to have presented the necklace to Hygd, Hygelac’s queen [ll. 2172-76]. The solution, of course, as with the reference to Hama and the *Brosinga mene*, lies in the more comprehensive knowledge of the Anglo-Saxon audience—they have the complete jigsaw whereas we possess only a few scattered pieces. Such allusiveness is an index of the poem’s background in oral tradition, an indication of the community of knowledge shared by poet/narrator and audience, a community emphasized by the double “I heard” formula used here.)

But the main point about the reference to Hygelac’s death here is that it is completely out of chronological sequence. Hygelac is Beowulf’s lord and later in the poem Beowulf travels back to Geatland to report to him all his adventures in Denmark (“Beowulf’s Homecoming”). What we have is an example of narrative anticipation, the kind of foreshadowing of future events that is again characteristic of the oral style (A. Thornton 1987:51). The episode is thus a very good example of Thornton’s “zigzag” pattern—pointing back to legendary time and forward to events outside the scope of the story, and joining the narrative “present” at either end.

My second example of “appositional expansion” in *Beowulf* is the episode of “Wiglaf’s sword” (ll. 2602-30), which forms a nice complement to Thornton’s discussion of Odysseus’ bow in Book 21 of the *Odyssey* (1987:72-73). Responsive to the claims of kinship, Wiglaf is introduced as one in whom courage and loyalty did not fail in his lord’s time of need (in contrast to the cowardly warriors), and his own background is briefly described in terms of his affiliations of family, kin, and nation (ll. 2602-4a). Mindful of the rich patrimony handed on to him by Beowulf, Wiglaf prepares to do battle against his lord’s enemy and draws the ancient sword that had once belonged to the Swede Eanmund, the ill-fated son of Ohthere who had sought refuge from his uncle Onela at the court of the Geatish king Heardred. We are told that Wiglaf’s father Weohstan killed Eanmund and

carried off his armor (including the *ealdsweord etonisc*, l. 2616, “gigantic [or “giant-made”?] old sword”), which the victorious Onela later presented to him as the spoils of war. The poet tells us that the question of a blood-feud did not arise, “although he [Weohstan] had killed his [Onela’s] brother’s son” (ll. 2618b-19). Weohstan retained the armor of Eanmund for many years until, nearing the end of his life, he handed it over to his son. We reenter the narrative “present” at l. 2625b, where we are told that “this was the first time that the young warrior should engage in the onset of battle alongside his dear lord. His heart did not melt within him, nor did his kinsman’s heirloom fail in battle” (ll. 2625b-29a). The structure of “appositional expansion” is evident here, and Figure 1 below represents the relationship between chronological time and narrative movement discernible in this passage.<sup>35</sup>



<sup>35</sup> The diagram is based on Thornton’s representation of the episode of Odysseus’ bow in the *Odyssey* 21 (A. Thornton 1987:99).

Although the term “apposition” is more familiar to students of Old English poetry as a stylistic or syntactic concept, it seems appropriate, as Thornton does, to extend it by analogy to larger narrative units.<sup>36</sup> Of course the features that I have isolated in these passages have been noted before; but possibly not in the same context.<sup>37</sup> My main point is that the technique of “appositional expansion” is simply part of the poet’s inherited oral style—a way of making poetry that he found lying ready to hand. Under the circumstances, it would indeed be remarkable if he did *not* compose in this way.

#### IV

I want now finally to examine some of the ways in which this distinctive way of organizing the narrative reflects the vital concerns of a traditional culture whose thought-world is everywhere discernible in the poem. And here I want to invoke the close affiliation described by Goody between traditional modes of thought and oral modes of expression. I also want to draw on the insights of contemporary narrative theory, especially the work of performance-oriented scholars who seek a unified understanding of narrative based on a consideration of storytelling in its fullest possible context. Thus Richard Bauman proposes a triple focus on the narrative text; the events recounted in the narrative (narrated events); and the real-life situations in which the narratives are told (narrative events). Bauman draws here on the work of Roman Jakobson, Walter Benjamin, and especially Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of “the work in the totality of all its events” (1986:112). Popular narratives are thus seen as vitally connected to their social and cultural contexts, and the relationship of literary “form” to social “function” becomes a crucial issue, now open to systematic investigation by careful fieldwork and analysis (*ibid.*:2 and 8).

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. the analysis adopted by Fred C. Robinson (1985), where the poem is conceived as built up of sets of apposed units at every level from the compound word to the major structural divisions of the narrative. Indeed, the *Beowulf*-poet’s treatment of chronology should be seen in the context of his wider use of an “appositive” or “paratactic” style; see further Irving 1989:16-17, 22-23, 27 *et passim*, and Gillian R. Overing’s “metonymic” reading of the poem (1990:espec. 1-32).

<sup>37</sup> Leyerle discusses the four scattered references to Hygelac’s raid as an example of structural interlace (1967:7-8). On Wiglaf’s sword, see the semiotic analysis in Overing 1990:52, 54.

This emphasis on the narrative work as a cultural totality seems to me potentially immensely fruitful, yet difficult to apply to a poem such as *Beowulf*, which is almost totally bereft of the kind of context that a folklorist or ethnologist would find useful. Yet by careful examination of the poet's recurrent thematic concerns and his stated attitudes and responses to the events, phenomena, and entities (animate and inanimate) that constitute the poem, we may form some impression of a distinctive outlook and mind-set, a view of "the world represented in the text," to use Bakhtin's phrase.<sup>38</sup>

The subject matter of the two narrative episodes from *Beowulf* treated above is by no means arbitrary; both deal with notable treasures—a legendary neck-ring and a famous weapon. One important symbolic meaning of such treasure has been widely noted: artifacts in general and weapons in particular are very much seen as a measure of the status and prestige of their owners, and often receive extended treatment as a consequence.<sup>39</sup> The further significance of such crafted objects is treated by Fred C. Robinson in his recent book *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*; Robinson draws attention to the way in which in the poem the natural world is seen as implacably hostile; a hostility that is confronted by human beings not only by means of their cultural institutions and social organization but also—perhaps preeminently—by the creation and use of human artifacts (1985:70-75).

If the monsters are the symbols of a hostile Nature, then artifacts, things created by human skill, are potent symbols of the human world. Emphasis is given to their character as hand-made objects: the mailshirt Beowulf wears for his descent into the mere is *hondum gebroden* (l. 1443; cf. ll. 321b-22a), and his helmet is richly ornamented, "as the weapon-smith had made it in far-off days" (ll. 1451b-52a; cf. ll. 405b-6, 453-55a and 1681a). The incandescent golden banner that lights Wiglaf's way into the hoard is characterized as "hondwundra mæst, / gelocen leoðocræftum" (ll. 2767-71a, "the greatest of hand-wonders, woven by the skill of limbs"). Further reference to the process of manufacture of metal artifacts (here iron swords) is conveyed in phrases such as *fela laf* (l. 1032), *hamere gebruen* (l.

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<sup>38</sup> Bakhtin 1981:255, quoted in Bauman 1986:112.

<sup>39</sup> On treasure (and weapons in particular) as a symbol of human worth, see Niles 1983:213-23, espec. the references cited at 213, n. 2.

1285) and *homera lafe* (l. 2829).<sup>40</sup> Robinson's emphasis on the value of artifacts as a means of asserting human dominance over the menacing forms and forces of wild nature is particularly apposite in the case of metal weapons, for they are the means *par excellence* of extending control over a hostile environment. Their value in this process is both symbolic and real. Weapons—and swords in particular—are continually invoked in the poem as efficacious instruments; for example, Beowulf's "boasts" before his descent into the mere (ll. 1490b-91), and his attack on the dragon: "Nu sceall billes ecg, / hond ond heard sweord ymb hord wigan" (ll. 2508b-9, "Now shall the blade's edge, hand and hard sword fight for the hoard"; cf. ll. 2562b-64a, 2498b-2502 and 2659b-60). The poem is full of references to swords and to the performance of their function as offensive weapons, "when the bound blade, forged with the hammer, a sword shining with blood, powerful in its edges, shears through the opposing boar-crests above the helmets" (ll. 1285-87). We think of the hero's own achievements with the sword, of his dispatching of a group of sea-monsters during his swimming-contest with Breca (ll. 548b-75a), or indeed of his killing of Grendel's mother; or of the crippling sword-blow delivered to Wulf son of Wonred by the aged Swedish king Ongentheow, a blow repaid with deadly force by Wulf's brother Eofor (ll. 2961-81). But the poet is keenly aware of the destructive effects of swordplay on the fragile fabric of his society: Unferth "was not honorable to his kinsmen at the swordplay" (ll. 1167b-68a); and the tragic events at Finnsburh culminate in the slaying of Finn who is "in his turn" a victim of "sweordbealo sliðen æt his selves ham" (l. 1147, "cruel sword-evil in his own home"). The sword thus becomes both the means and symbol of such devastating internecine strife, a warfare that originates from the primal fratricide, when Cain became "to ecgbanan angan breþer" (l. 1262, "the sword-slayer of his own brother").

This inchoate consciousness of the sword as an ambiguous instrument is reinforced by deeper uncertainties regarding the efficacy of weapons. As an extension of the warrior's own powers, weapons are a crucial aid; Hrunting, for example, is described as "not the least of aids to strength" ("Næs þæt þonne mæstost mægenfultuma," l. 1455) that Unferth lent to Beowulf for his adventure beneath the mere, and the weapon is later

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<sup>40</sup> These phrases are discussed in Brady 1979:108-10. Brady's discussion of swords in *Beowulf* (90-110) illustrates the poet's very detailed knowledge of swords and sword-lore. For further discussion of this subject, see Hatto 1957 and Davidson 1962.

characterized as a *guðwine* (“warfriend,” l. 1810).<sup>41</sup> The hero’s parting resolution sets out the stark alternatives as he perceives them: “I will get glory for myself with Hrunting, or death will take me” (ll. 1490b-91). Either the technology of iron will prevail, or the hero will face annihilation. Success—indeed survival—in this environment is balanced on the edge of a sword. There is a sense that against such opponents as the Grendels and the dragon the technology of weaponry is being pushed to its limits. Beowulf brings to Heorot his full complement of armor and weapons, including his “hyrsted sword, / irena cyst” (ll. 672b-73a, “ornamented sword, best of irons”), but vows not to use it against Grendel, who is ignorant of such *goda* (“good instruments”?, l. 681), “although I certainly could” (l. 680b). But it later becomes clear that the monster is immune to weapons; the warriors who come to Beowulf’s aid during Grendel’s night attack are unaware that “not any of the choicest of irons on earth, no war-sword, would touch the evil ravager: for with a spell he had made victory-weapons [*sigewæpnum*] useless, every sword-edge” (ll. 801b-5a). And those who marvel at Grendel’s hand and arm displayed on the gables of Heorot after the battle “said that no hard thing would reach him, no iron good from old times [*iren ærgod*] would harm the bloody battle-hand of the fearsome one” (ll. 987b-90). Such an observation emphasizes the limited efficacy of even the most valued and proven artifacts. Likewise the sword Nægling fails the hero in his struggle with the dragon, and the poet comments that “it was not ordained for him that iron edges might help him in the combat” (ll. 2682b-84a; cf. 2904b-6a). An explanation follows: “The hand was too strong, so I heard, that overstrained with its stroke every sword, when he bore to battle a wound-hardened weapon; he was in no way the better for it” (ll. 2684b-87). If Grendel, by his monstrous nature, is impervious to iron weapons, then, by one of the strange parallels linking monster and hero, Beowulf himself becomes the cause of the failure of weapons. The instruments of warfare are rendered useless in his hands when confronted with an enemy of superlative strength, for the paradoxical reason that his own physical might simply overtaxes them. There could be no clearer illustration of the limits of these “good instruments” in which so much trust is placed. It is even possible to find in the poem two formulaic systems that link swords to the concept of failure: cf. l. 2577b (“þæt sio ecg gewac”), l. 2584b (“guðbill geswac”), l. 1524b (“ac seo ecg geswac”; cf. also l. 1460b); and cf. l. 2681a

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<sup>41</sup> For a discussion of these terms as applied to Hrunting, see Brady 1979:103-5. The intimate bond between a hero and his weapons and the personification of a weapon (especially a sword) as a warrior’s retainer in the heroic literary tradition is discussed in Cherniss 1973.



(“*geswac æt sæcce*”) and l. 2629a (“*gewac æt wige*”; cf. *The Battle of Maldon* 10a, “*wacian æt þam wige*”).

But the situation is more complex than this discussion might suggest, and the poet does not fail to reflect the positive evaluation of weapons and other artifacts sanctioned by his culture and embedded in the traditional vocabulary of heroic verse—as in the designations *sigewæpnum* and *iren ærgod* cited above. Thus the value of weapons is reaffirmed even in the moments of their most signal failure. Nægling’s failure to perform the function for which it was created is rendered especially poignant by its characterization as *iren ærgod*, the same epithet used with reference to Grendel’s immunity to weapons at 989a:

guðbill geswac  
nacod æt niðe, swa hyt no sceolde,  
iren ærgod. (ll. 2584b-86a)

[The war-sword failed, naked in battle, as it ought not to have, iron good from old times.]

The element of personification is strongly felt here—Nægling is seen as in a sense a traitor or deserter (perhaps on a par with Beowulf’s cowardly warriors), terms which, with an animate referent, would be included in the meaning of the verb *geswican*. The poet’s ambivalent attitude to the sword is perhaps best shown in his complex and nuanced treatment of Hrunting, the ancient and battle-tested weapon lent to Beowulf by Unferth for the hero’s second great fight (see ll. 1455-64). Hrunting’s failure to harm Grendel’s mother is underscored by its proven efficacy in conventional combat: “it had endured many hand-battles, had often sheared through the helmet, a doomed man’s battle-dress; this was the first time for the precious treasure that its glory had failed” (ll. 1525b-28). Even in the act of being discarded, the sword retains its character as an elaborately crafted artifact—an artifact that is explicitly set in opposition to the hero’s unaided physical strength (ll. 1531-34a):

wearp ða wundenmæl wrættum gebunden  
yrre oretta, þæt hit on eorðan læg,  
stið ond stylecg; strenge getruwode,  
mundgripe mægenes.

[Then, angry warrior, he threw down the [sword with] twisted pattern, bound with ornaments, so that it lay on the ground, hard and steel-edged; he trusted in his strength, a hand-grip of might.]

Beowulf’s verdict on Hrunting is similarly even-handed:



Ne meahte ic æt hilde mid Hruntinge  
 wiht gewyrcean, þeah þæt wæpen duge. (ll. 1659-60)

[I could not achieve anything with Hrunting in the battle, although the  
 weapon is an effective one.]

And on having the sword returned to Unferth, he did not disparage the weapon in any way, but “said that he considered the war-friend to be good, strong in battle [*wigcræftigne*]” (ll. 1810-11a). Hrunting is still here designated as *leoflic iren* (“precious iron,” l. 1809).

Two further examples of the use of iron as a defense against elemental powers provide telling illustrations of the limits of this early technology. Eschewing military assistance in his attack on the dragon, Beowulf nevertheless orders the construction of “a wonderful war-shield all of iron” (“eallirenne. . . wigbord wrætlic,” ll. 2338-39a). The poet’s explanation reveals the astute technical assessment behind this decision: “he knew clearly that wood from the forest would not help him, linden against flame” (ll. 2339b-41a). Beowulf’s action is a calculated and pragmatic one—such a device will give only a slender and temporary advantage over his powerful fiery opponent; and so it proves: “the shield gave good protection to the life and body of the famous prince for a shorter while than his purpose required” (ll. 2570b-72); and the poet goes on to say (in a passage whose meaning and syntax are far from clear<sup>42</sup>), that Beowulf had to suffer defeat in battle for the first time in his life (ll. 2573-75a). Caroline Brady’s discussion of the noun *searo*, and the relation between its meanings as “arms/weapons” or “something crafted by skill” is relevant here (1979:118-21). Her characterization of Beowulf facing the dragon brings out well the relation between these two senses (119): “in 2568b Beowulf *on searwum* (his defensive arms of *hiorosyrce*, *heregrima* and the iron shield and his offensive weapons of *Nægling* and *wællseax*) awaited the dragon’s attack. . . .” Human strength and courage are to be supplemented by the most advanced technology of the day—but with results that are far from decisive. For all his war-gear Beowulf remains a small vulnerable figure in face of the dragon’s onslaught, and the outcome of the hero’s final combat is scarcely a triumphant victory for humankind.

My second example of the use of ironworking technology in the poem is the threefold reference to the double iron bracing that reinforces the wooden structure of Hrothgar’s hall. Narrating the events of the great fight in Heorot, the poet expresses wonder that the hall survived the

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<sup>42</sup> See the discussion in Wrenn 1973:191.

encounter of the two formidable antagonists (ll. 771-73a); “but it was so firmly made fast with iron bands inside and out, forged with ingenious skill” (ll. 773b-75a). The poet adds that the Scylding *witan* had considered the building indestructible, “unless fire’s embrace should swallow it in flame” (ll. 778-82a). In the poet’s reference to the “*irenendum / searþoncum besmīþod*” (ll. 774b-75a), one might be forgiven for detecting a hint of pride in a substantial technical achievement, an architectural refinement of note.<sup>43</sup> But in a later passage, reporting on the restoration of Heorot after the battle, the poet emphasizes the damage sustained by the building, an emphasis that suggests—the syntax is uncertain—some doubt as to the efficacy of the iron bracing (ll. 997-1000a):

Wæs þæt beorhte bold tobrocen swiðe  
 eal inneward irenendum fæst,  
 heorras tohlidene; hrof ana genæs  
 ealles ansund. . . .

[The bright building was greatly shattered, the whole interior firm with iron bands, the hinges sprung apart; the roof alone survived wholly undamaged. . . .]

The third reference to the ironwork, at ll. 721b-24a, similarly hints at the limitations of the technology: the hall-door, although *fyrbendum fæst*, yields “immediately” to Grendel’s touch. Like the iron shield, the iron bracing on the hall is a real though tenuous technological achievement, giving some limited security in normal circumstances, against human enemies, but offering only marginal protection against powerful external forces that place the hard-won achievements of human civilization under constant threat.

We are all familiar with the critical analysis of *Beowulf* that opposes the world of the hall, a precarious oasis of light, warmth, and human community, against the dark, savage, and (above all) solitary world of the monsters, who threaten to destroy the fragile works of humankind at any

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Cramp 1957:72-73. On the rarity, value, and uses of iron in the early Middle Ages, see Le Goff 1988:205-7; the use of iron to brace wooden buildings is one of his examples (207). See also the glossary to Klaeber’s edition, *s.v. iren* (as noun and adjective) and the compounds in which *iren* is the first or second element (cf. *isern-*). It is significant that swords are often designated metonymically as “irons” (e.g. ll. 802, 1809, 1697, 2050, and 2778).

moment.<sup>44</sup> If not actively inimical to people, natural phenomena are only barely under control. The fire that consumes Hnæf's funeral pyre is characterized as "gæsta gifrost" ("greediest of spirits," l. 1123a), and will rise in its full destructive potential in the burning of Heorot. Beowulf's own pyre is described in language that borders on the anthropomorphic, emphasizing the fire's inexorable destructive power: this element will devour (*fretan*) the warriors' chief (ll. 3114b-15) and concludes its work by breaking open the prince's *banhus* (ll. 3143-48a). In the final section of *Beowulf*, the poet gives great emphasis to the dragon's destructive fire in its feud against mankind: "bryneleoma stod / eldum on andan" (ll. 2313b-14a; "blaze of fire rose, to the horror of men"); and "fyres feng" is listed as one of the means of death in a rhetorical catalogue that forms part of Hroþgar's "sermon" (ll. 1762b-68). Fire must have been greatly feared—and respected—in Anglo-Saxon England.<sup>45</sup> An anxious sense of balance is preserved in Exeter Riddle 50 ("fire"), where the subject described is simultaneously inimical to humans and benevolent; this is the paradox on which the riddle turns.<sup>46</sup>

In summary, the technological skills possessed by the early Anglo-Saxons must have been barely adequate to the task of controlling—or even modifying—a perennially hostile environment.<sup>47</sup> The fragility of human tenure on the world is acknowledged repeatedly within the poem: joy is

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<sup>44</sup> See espec. Haarder 1975:205-42 and Halverson 1969. See also Hume 1974 and 1975, where the poem's controlling theme is characterized as "threats to social order," specifically "troublemaking, revenge, and war."

<sup>45</sup> See the extracts collected in Blair 1976:199-200.

<sup>46</sup> Aldhelm's riddle XCII ("Scintilla") emphasizes the immense destructive power of something (fire) that begins as a tiny spark:

Nam saltus nemorum densos pariterque fructecta  
 Piniferosque simul montes cum molibus altos  
 Truxque rapaxque capaxque feroxque sub aethere spargo. (ll. 6-8; Pitman 1925:54-56)

<sup>47</sup> On the rudimentary character of medieval technology, see Le Goff 1988:195-221. For a recent assessment of early Anglo-Saxon technology (and its social and political implications) from an archaeological perspective, see Arnold 1988. Rosenthal (1979) claims that a marked improvement occurred in material culture and communications toward the end of the seventh century. The introduction of mortar to enable permanent building in stone from the 670s was restricted to church building and would not have affected the mass of the population (on the early stone churches see Blair 1976:122-26 and Cramp 1976).

inevitably succeeded by sorrow and *edwenden* (“sudden change,” “reversal of fortune”) is a constant theme. Here I believe we gain a powerful insight into the traditional mentality, the thought-world of an oral culture, as the poem reflects it. In the heroic world there seems no such thing as an unmixed blessing; in Book 24 of the *Iliad* two urns are said to stand on the door-sill of Zeus, one full of evils, another of blessings: the urn of sorrows is dispensed to some undilute, but those more fortunate receive a mingled brew, when “Zeus who delights in thunder. . . shifts, and moves now in evil, again in good fortune” (ll. 527-33; cf. *Beowulf* 1057b-62).

Further implications flow on from this. In cultures that are incapable of producing permanent monuments (e.g., stone buildings), the kind of “portable property” we have discussed achieves great significance. Great artistic skill is expended in creating and embellishing these objects and they are transmitted from one generation to the next as priceless heirlooms. They reflect the status, the *mana* of their owners. Thus by a kind of heroic metonymy a warrior’s prowess and prestige are conveyed directly in terms of his weapons (see, e.g., ll. 330b-31a, 368-69a and 1900-03a); the man is made “worthy” by possessing worthy things. This attitude to material possessions is found everywhere in the poem. The emphasis on the dragon’s hoard, for example, goes deeper than merely a Christian scepticism about the value of hoarded wealth. The poet’s emphasis is on the failure of the treasure—a collection of artifacts—to fulfill the purpose for which it was created, and not merely in a functional sense; for in its inability to circulate and form the material of mutual exchange and gift-giving it denies the ethic of reciprocity on which Anglo-Saxon social relations were based.<sup>48</sup> The treasure in the hoard falls into a state of desuetude, its rusting cups and mail-shirts lamented eloquently by the “last survivor” who commends it to the earth from which it was first obtained (the decaying state of the hoard is noted again at ll. 2756-64a and 3047-50). The hoard passes into the control of hostile Nature (symbolized by the dragon), is liberated by Beowulf (through his proxy Wiglaf), and is finally buried, as grave-goods to accompany Beowulf, “where now it still remains, as useless to men as it was before” (ll. 3167b-68).<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> See Niles 1983:213-23.

<sup>49</sup> Precious armaments are also loaded onto the funeral pyres of Hnæf (ll. 1107-13) and Beowulf (ll. 3137-40). Niles (1983:216, 222) points out that grave-goods buried with nobles—a sign of the deceased’s prestige—were irrecoverable. And Arnold notes that early Anglo-Saxon society “was prepared to consign large quantities of precious metal to

This concern with the social and symbolic meaning of artifacts is then intensely revealing of “the world represented in the text”; in particular, the poem’s emphasis on weapons, power, status, and control is vital to our understanding of *Beowulf* as an expression of a traditional culture and its anxieties. The French cultural historian Jacques Le Goff (1988:244) considers that the material insecurity of the Middle Ages goes a long way toward explaining the intellectual insecurity of the age. He adds that, “according to the Church, there was only one remedy. . . to rely on the solidarity of the group, of the communities of which one formed a part, and to avoid breaching this solidarity by ambition or derogation. It was a fundamental insecurity which boiled down to a fear of the life to come” (325). We might add that in the heroic world of *Beowulf*, the need for social cohesion is determined not so much by the fear of hell (although the Grendels’ associations with the underworld are not irrelevant to the terror they inspire) as by the sheer exigencies of survival in an unremittingly hostile environment. Grendel is most fearful and threatening, not so much in his strength or malice, but by virtue of the fact that he is (as we have seen) impervious to weapons—and thus, in terms of our analysis, beyond normal human means of control. But Beowulf is no ordinary man; he scorns to use weapons against Grendel and, in a magnificent display of arm-wrestling, succeeds in defeating his monstrous opponent by wrenching his arm off at the shoulder. He defeats Grendel’s mother in a parallel virtuoso performance; although unscathed by Hrunting (ll. 1522b-28), she is finally felled by the *giganta geweorc*, a great sword made by the giants (the Grendels’ collateral ancestors) stored in her lair. Although this is not a human artifact and “was larger than any other man might bear to battle-play,” the hero is able to wield it successfully against his formidable antagonist.

Beowulf is successful because he is able to meet the monsters on their own terms. It has often been noted that Beowulf himself has more than a little of the monstrous about him. Both he and the monsters are characterized as *aglæca* (“awesome one,” “formidable one”), and the poet shows no reluctance in relating his many superhuman feats—e.g.,

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the ground” in this way (1988:xiv). Such serious depletion of resources often led to warfare.

swimming back from a battle with thirty mail-coats slung over one arm.<sup>50</sup> Locked in fierce combat, Beowulf and the dragon are characterized as *ða aglæcean* (l. 2592), a use of the expression that gives weight to Peter Clemoes's observation that "a poem such as *Beowulf* deals with mighty beings in collaboration or conflict" (1986:10). Here the figure of Beowulf is seen to be crucial, speaking directly to the anxieties and insecurities of early Anglo-Saxon civilization. In face of the monsters' incursions, mere human leaders can offer only limited protection. Although in his role as protector of his people Hrothgar is termed *eodor Scyldinga* (literally "fence of the Scyldings," ll. 428 and 663; cf. l. 1044), he is not equal to his opponent Grendel, who in his fearsome depredations is described by the aged Danish king as *ingenga min* ("my invader," l. 1776). The twelve-year reign of terror to which Grendel subjects Hrothgar and his people—the king despairs of ever seeing an end to it—is a powerful expression of the fear of untamed natural forces experienced by many small tribal societies. Grizzly Woman, the sinister and powerful ogress who figures in tales of the Clackamas Chinook indians of the Pacific Northwest coast of North America, is likewise a pitiless and insatiable destroyer of humankind. Of her role in the story of "Gitskux and his Older Brother" Dell Hymes comments (1981:379-80): "The plot is extended. . . by the repeated return of the Ogress thought safely dead. The drama, perhaps nightmare, of the monstrous figure who comes uninvited, kills the proper wife and dons her skin, comes back and comes back." Yet even the most formidable enemies of the human race have weaknesses that can be exploited by human courage and resourcefulness, and in this tale Grizzly Woman is first checked as a result of her own error and is finally caught offguard and killed for good (347-53). And in the powerful story entitled "Grizzly Woman Began to Kill People," the "forgetting" by the ogress of some crucial details leads to her downfall at the hands of the young girl Water Bug (373-74). In desperate settings such as these, reassurance is offered by the figure of the "hero"—in the case of Water Bug, an exemplar of the native tradition of "youngest smartest," and in the Old English poem one who by his superhuman strength and prowess will stave off the forces of primal nature and tip the balance decisively in favor of the precarious human community, or at least hold out the possibility of a more equal contest. At the risk of sounding portentous, I see Beowulf as a savior or wish-fulfillment figure,

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<sup>50</sup> On the marvelous in *Beowulf*, see Niles 1983:3-30. For the suggestion that Beowulf's retreat from Frisia was undertaken in a rowboat, see Niles 1983:5, n. 3 and Robinson 1974:124-26. Robinson's skepticism has been convincingly challenged by Greenfield (1982).

the embodiment of the power and control over wild nature that the early Anglo-Saxon community was unable to achieve in and of itself.

The insights of structuralist anthropology seem to me to offer us a useful model here; for Beowulf can be seen as an instantiation of Claude Lévi-Strauss's characterization of the hero (or god, or folktale protagonist) as the mediator between the worlds of nature and culture.<sup>51</sup> (One crucial aspect of the hero's potency that we have identified in the present discussion could be expressed, in the terms of a Lévi-Straussian structural homology, as weapons : (human) enemies :: Beowulf : monsters, thus establishing, by a process of analogy, the hero himself as a special kind of weapon.<sup>52</sup>) The Cambridge anthropologist Edmund Leach applies the structuralist theory of liminality to the area of religious belief, seeing the binary opposition between this world and the "other world" as mediated by a zone of overlap redolent with "tabooed ambiguity." He observes (1964:39): "The gap is bridged by supernatural beings of a highly ambiguous kind—incarnate deities, virgin mothers, supernatural monsters which are half man / half beast. The marginal, ambiguous creatures are specifically credited with the power of mediating between gods and men."<sup>53</sup> One sees how readily such a theory could be applied to *Beowulf*, where, as we have seen, the term *aglæca* is applied equally to the hero and to the monsters. The Grendels are manlike beasts who may be said to form a link between the natural world and the "underworld" of demonic beings (the unknown realm of *helrunan*, "those skilled in the mysteries of hell," ll. 162b-63).<sup>54</sup> Beowulf the hero, in some senses a "beastlike man," mediates between the hostile world of nature (symbolized by the monsters) and the world of men who struggle

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<sup>51</sup> See, e.g., Lévi-Strauss 1987:espec. 75-85 and 202-3; more generally, the four volumes of his *Mythologiques* (1964-72).

<sup>52</sup> Robinson (1985:73) draws attention to the poetic device of referring to a king by such metaphoric terms as *eodor*, *helm*, and *hleo*; cf. Irving 1989:141. Another such analogy is suggested by the inscription on the hilt of the "giant-wrought" sword, describing God's destruction of the race of giants in the Deluge; as Michael Nagler puts it (1980:146; cf. 148): "The runic inscription on the hilt is no mere decoration. It tells us iconographically just what this weapon is: God's instrument for quelling the forces of disorder."

<sup>53</sup> See also Leach 1976:71-72.

<sup>54</sup> On Grendel's affinities with hell and the demonic, see Chadwick 1959:173-75 and Niles 1983:11-12.



continually to wrest from nature a small outpost of civilization and security (symbolized by the hall).<sup>55</sup>

In many ways of course, the hero's death marks the definitive limit of his success; yet Beowulf's approach to the dragon does not differ in essence from his stance against the Grendels. In his valedictory *beotwordum* he says that he would gladly have laid aside his sword against the dragon, had it been possible, "as I did long ago against Grendel" (ll. 2518b-21), and dismisses his *comitatus* in order to meet his opponent alone. Yet although the dragon is killed, Beowulf dies as well and his people are left exposed to their traditional enemies—hardly the actions of a national savior, as Wiglaf's muted criticism implies at ll. 3077-78.<sup>56</sup> But Beowulf is driven by forces too powerful to be outweighed by considerations of social prudence (ll. 3085b-86) and holds to the *heahgesceap* ("high destiny") of the traditional hero; as many commentators have noted, two conflicting thematic impulses are at work here, and they are not neatly resolved. One of these asserts Beowulf's unequivocal heroism, presenting the dragon-fight as his "siðas[t] sigehwile sylfes dædum" (l. 2710, "last achievement of victory through his own actions") and demonstrating that the traditional statement of martial intent ("death or glory") need not be a choice of exclusive alternatives but is capable of being fulfilled *in toto* (ll. 2535b-37); his winning of the gold for his people (in exchange for his life) is seen as the crowning achievement of his career. This final part of the poem is consciously shaped as an "exit-piece"; Beowulf's death is far from sudden or unexpected and is several times anticipated by the narrator in language that reflects the hero's own dark musings.<sup>57</sup> In a poem that presents the hero's achievements in the context of a full biographical cycle (like the Lianja "epic") an account of his death is inevitable, and may well stem from a narrative tradition that diverges thematically—and psychologically—from other episodes in the cycle.

In a wider perspective, Beowulf's death can be seen as a temporary (if significant) reversal in the eternal struggle of the emergent human

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<sup>55</sup> On the symbolic value of the hall in Old English poetry, see Hume 1974 and Irving 1989:133-67, espec. 142.

<sup>56</sup> Irving considers Wiglaf's criticism here to be a "nonce-effect." In these lines "it is enough for the words to fit a local emotional context. They need not fit into some larger context that demands a consistent viewpoint, whether of approval or disapproval or . . . some neat balance of attitudes" (1989:161-62).

<sup>57</sup> See ll. 2309b-11; 2341b-44; 2419b-24; 2573-75a; 2586b-91a, and 2725b-28.

community against its elemental adversaries; one hero falls, but others will surely come.<sup>58</sup> Here one may ponder the significance of Sigemund; established early in the poem as an exemplary parallel to Beowulf, he yet differs from him in one important respect, for Sigemund's solitary expedition against a hoard-guarding dragon is eminently successful and brings him wide and lasting fame (ll. 884b-97); significantly, he too is characterised as an *aglæca* (l. 893). Heroes may rise and fall; they are manifestly different from ordinary folk, yet on their actions hang the fates of whole communities. They, like Beowulf, are ever desired, ever mourned.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. Nagler 1980:147, n. 7, 156.

<sup>59</sup> An early form of this paper was given at the fifteenth conference of the Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Renaissance Studies held at the University of Otago, Dunedin, NZ from 29 January-2 February 1990. I am very grateful to Dr. Patrick Wormald, Dr. Greg Waite, and John Caygill for reading the paper at a later stage and for their many helpful comments.

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