5-1986

Beowulf for Modern Man: Orality and Literacy and the Anglo-Saxon Heroic Poem

Mark David Nevins
College of the Holy Cross, nevins_mark@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://crossworks.holycross.edu/fenwick_scholar

Part of the Literature in English, British Isles Commons

Recommended Citation

College of the Holy Cross

WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS 01610

The thesis of... Mark David Nevins ....

entitled. Beowulf for Modern Man: Orality and Literacy and ..

the Anglo-Saxon Heroic Poem ....

....

submitted to Department of. English ....

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of. Bachelor of Arts in English ....

at the College of the Holy Cross has been read and

approved by the following:

Pr. John Wilson

Pr. Deborah Boedeker
Pr. James Kee
Pr. John Mayer
Pr. Richard Rodino

....
-Adviser
Richard H. Rodino
....
1st reader

James M. Kee
....
2nd reader

....
Date   Director of Honors Program

BEOWULF FOR MODERN MAN:
ORALITY AND LITERACY AND
THE ANGLO-SAXON HEROIC POEM

Mark David Nevins
Fenwick Scholar, 1985-86

Modde word fraet.   Me þaet þuhte
wraetlicu wyrd,   þa ic þaet wundor gefraegn,
þaet se wyrm forswealg   wera gied sumes,
þeof in þystro   þrymfaestne cwide
ond þaes strangan stapol.   Staelgiest ne waes
wihte þy gleawra,   þe he þam wordum swealg.
                    —Anglo-Saxon Riddle
                    "The Bookworm"

A moth ate words. I myself thought that
a marvelous event, when I heard of that wonder,
that the worm swallowed up the speech of a certain man,
the thief in the darkness swallowed magnificent utterances
and the strong foundation. The stealing visitor was not
at all the wiser for swallowing those words.

Anglo-Saxon text of riddle on title page is from <u>Bright's</u>
<u>Anglo-Saxon</u> <u>Reader</u>, ed. James Hulbert (New York: Henry Holt
and Company, 1891); translation is my own.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

marshland of Yorkshire in search of the site of the Battle of Stanford Bridge. It goes without saying that I am most indebted to John for the ideas expressed in this thesis, for they are really his theories that I have adopted for my project. The strong points of this thesis are, of course, most a result of John's teaching, and the weak points are my fault alone.

James Kee kindly and warmly stepped in to become the closest thing to a "surrogate" advisor that I had this past year. Initially I expected from him only instruction in Old English to push me to the point where I could read Bewoulf. However, he went above and beyond the call of duty, and our time spent together produced discussions of the poem, many wonderful conversations and exploration into new critical areas. I am especially grateful to Jim for his extensive time devoted to wrapping the thesis up in the end of April and May. I am indebted to Richard Rodino not only for his input on this project, but for his tutelage since my first day of classes at Holy Cross. He has poured out ideas, urged me to do my best, vastly improved my writing style, fueled my summer reading lists, and always had time to just talk. Deborah Boedeker has enthusiastically helped me to focus my questions on the field of orality through her Greek Myths in Literature course, and her input as a classicist; I am extremely grateful for her help and encouragement especially in reading drafts of the thesis. John Mayer also contributed much time and energy to the reading

and revising of my manuscript, and I am especially thankful to him as he was the first to have enough confidence in me to urge me to apply for the Fenwick scholarship. Olga Davidson's course on Persian Mythology first exposed me to the theories of Parry and Lord, and I am grateful for her continued support and encouragement. I would also like to thank Ndingara Ngardingabe for cheerfully reading and commenting on various parts of this thesis. As always, I owe my parents everything, for, if not for their love and support, as the Public Television advertisement says, "none of this would have been possible." Finally, I would like to thank the Fenwick and Honors Programs at Holy Cross for allowing me to spend my senior year engrossed in this wonderful and educational project.

As I assemble this final version of my thesis I feel in a strange position. I can now see how much better this paper could be, yet the deadline has been reached and the thesis must be submitted. I think this thesis stands as an indication of a successful year as Fenwick Scholar, while at the same time my feelings about how it could be better are a further indication of how much I have learned. Finding out from each endeavor how to make the next even better is perhaps the most important part of the process of education, and I am extremely grateful that I was able to spend this year not only learning, but also learning how to learn.

M.D.N.
Holy Cross
April 1986

INTRODUCTION

My goal in this thesis is to show the difference of interpretation between a reading of the Old English poem Beowulf as the work of an oral performer and a reading of it a the work of a literate author. In doing so I will be drawing on more than fifty years' worth of study and scholarship in the field of oral formulaic theory, a field rich in the study of the manner in which peoples without writing compose and preserve stories and texts. My intention here is not to prove that Beowulf was composed in a traditional manner without writing, as opposed to being an authored, literate text as it has most often been read. I believe such a proof would be impossible. Rather, given the premises set down by a half-century of intensive study of oral composition of poetry, and given all the literate arguments for interpreting the poem, I would like to show that Beowulf can still be read as an oral poem, and that such a reading may result in an understanding of the poem that is at least as good, if not more satisfying than, readings of the poem assuming a thoroughly literate author. I hope to show that there is a real difference between reading this poem as a literary work, as most readers have done unquestioningly, and reading it as an oral work, as only a few

readers persist in doing recently.

Beowulf exists in only one manuscript, the Cotton
Vitellius A XV. The fact that the only record of it is a
written one, and the fact that there is only one written
record, has naturally led its readers to assume that the poem
was composed in the (for us) usual way: at some point in time
an author sat down and created the story of the hero Beowulf.
As I hope to explain, jumping to such a conclusion is what we
have been doing with Beowulf since we first unearthed the
manuscript, and certainly more so since J.R.R. Tolkien
recommended that we read the poem as a piece of great
literature. All we really know about Beowulf is that it is
anonymous, yet given our modern ideas of composition, most
readers have imagined some author for the poem and read it as
we would any authored work from any time. While Beowulf does
exist in a written form, we really have no more proof that it
is the product of literary authorship than we have proof that
it is not.

I would like to suggest that we take a fresh look at this
poem: that we shake ourselves free of those assumptions about
the poem that have been handed down to us as fact in criticism
of the poem since the first modern readings of the poem. Much
of what we think about Beowulf is assumption, based in our own
modern concepts of how composition works, that we have come to
accept as the truth about the poem. Putting aside the fact
that Beowulf exists as a written text, a fact that I will

atempt to show is not so indicative of literary authorship as it might appear, we can ultimately say with proof neither that the poem was composed by an author, nor that it was composed by a performer working from a tradition of storytelling. Each of these assumptions, however, can yield cohesive and reasonable interpretations of the poem. My hope is that we can take the less-traveled path, and offer a reading of Beowulf as the product of an oral culture, and that such a reading can take its place as an interpretation as valid as the countless literate readings that have preceded it. We can prove nothing about the composition of the poem, but if we can show the differences between reading Beowulf as a literary work and as an oral work then we may be able to prefer one interpretation over the other. Whether or not we prefer the oral interpretation over the literate, it may at least provide an alternative reading of the poem, cause us to look at Beowulf in a new light, and perhaps even tell us a bit about our own literacy and our relationship to texts

UNIT ONE

THE PREMISES OF ORALITY

In order to understand Beowulf as an oral poem, we must

first come to an understanding of orality, and the oral

composition of poetry, and how it differs from literacy and the

literate composition of poetry. The way an oral culture

understands and composes literature is radically different from

our own methods, so alien to our ways of thinking that, as

Albert Lord suggests, for a long time no one even guessed that

there might be a different way:

> It is a strange phenomenon in intellectual history as
> well as in scholarship that the great minds herein
> presented, minds which could formulate the most
> ingenious speculation, failed to realize that there
> might be some other way of composing a poem than that
> known to their own experience.[1]

Albert Lord is perhaps the single most important figure for

the foundation of orality theory. His work, coupled with that of

his mentor, Milman Parry, comes in the wake of the

nineteenth-century controversies in the search for the author of

the Homeric epics—the foundations of orality theory actually lie

---

[1] Albert B. Lord, The Singer of Tales,
(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 11.

[2] Those interested in the state of the study of traditional
literature before and after the work of Parry and Lord in greater

in the study of ancient Greek epic.[2]   Milman Parry

entered the field of Homeric studies in the midst of an argument

that pitted two literate interpretations of the poem against each

other.   One side, the "Analysts," wanted to try to find one

original text, which over the course of history was added to,

edited, and interpolated to the forms of the poem we have now.

The other side, the "Unitarians," argued for a single Homeric

author at a given point in time who took the vast folklore of the

ancient Greeks and combined it into the epics we read now.   Both

of these theories assume that the poems are literate productions:

the Analysts place a single author at the beginning of the

traditional process, the Unitarians place an author at the end,

as a kind of final shaper.   Parry offered a radically new

viewpoint: he suggested that the author is an unnecessary

hypothesis.   The heart of the Parry-Lord theory is that the poems

were produced by a <u>process</u> of oral composition, and that that

process proceeded for generations without the aid of an "author"

or the technology of writing--a tradition of <u>performance</u> produced

the Homeric epics.   Parry described the process that we now call

oral formulaic composition in an analogy to the Greek legends

themselves:

> Just as the story of the fall of Troy, the tale of
> the house of Labdakos, and the other Greek epic

---

detail may wish to consult the first Appendix of this thesis.
Appendix One is a short survey of the study of traditional
literature from its earliest roots, and the changes that came
about in scholarship after the publication of <u>The Singer of
Tales</u>, especially regarding the study of <u>Beowulf</u> and <u>Old English
Poetry</u>.

> legends that were not themselves the original
> fictions of certain authors, but creations of a whole
> people, passed through one generation to another and
> gladly given to anyone who wished to tell them, so
> the style in which they were to be told was not a
> matter of individual creation, but a popular
> tradition, evolved by centuries of poets and
> audiences....[3]

Parry argued that the poetry had been composed and preserved

orally, without writing, and so maintained for a long time

until it was eventually written down; the difference between

literacy and pre-literacy was one which earlier scholars had

not come to grips with, perhaps because they tended to place

less literary value and worth on a text which was propagated by

the apparently crude methods of folklore.[4] Parry's

breakthrough was understanding that the lack of writing (and

the lack even of the knowledge of writing) had evolved methods

of composition and preservation completely alien to our

literate mindframe. It is no wonder that we were so slow to

guess at the possibility of a theory such as the Parry-Lord--we

are very locked into our literate ways of conceiving things.

You will notice that my description above is stated in terms of

---

[3]Adam Parry (ed.), The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 421.

[4]Adam Parry, in his Introduction to The Making of Homeric Verse, has suggested that many of our literate assumptions about traditional literature are based in the belief that such works are "works of art too great, their dramatic structure is too perfect, to have been the more or less random conglomeration of a series of poets and editors" (xviii). The same bias applies to all would-be oral poetry, and it is an unwarranted value judgement that we must be careful not to make too hastily: "oral" does mean "illiterate" but it need not carry with it the connotations of "poor" or "unsophisticated."

a lack of literacy, as is much discussion of oral composition.
In fact, if the poetry in discussion is oral, then its
excellence suggests that its composers were not merely making
the best of the limitations of illiteracy, but were working
with an entirely different set of tools capable in their own
right of producing great poetry. While much of our discussion
of oral poetry is couched in terms like "pre-literate" and
"illiterate," we should be careful to avoid value judgments, or
to conceive of the poetry as an art doing the best it can while
waiting for the influx of literacy.

Perhaps the greatest problem facing the early classicists
was that they were dealing with a culture and a time far
distant from themselves: it is difficult for modern Western
scholars to make probing inquiry based on the few remnants
surviving from Homeric Greece. Parry and Lord faced this
problem, yet they did not base their theory only on
extrapolations from the extant Homeric epics. Parry and Lord
traveled to the untechnologized, rural areas of Yugoslavia and
the Baltic mountains, and to a people to whom writing was a
new, perhaps unrealized, phenomenon. These trips during the
1930's yielded impressive and original fieldwork in a culture
that still nourished an active oral storytelling tradition; in
this environment Parry and Lord were able to confirm some of
their speculations about the nature of oral composition, and to
refine their orality theory to the point where it was published
in Lord's doctoral dissertation, The Singer of Tales. Since

Parry and Lord could not travel to ancient Greece to observe

Homer's oral storytelling, they took what they learned from the

Yugoslavian tradition and set up a model for the art of oral

storytelling. Parry and Lord were lucky that the Yugoslavian

poetics are much like the Homeric in form, so their model could

easily be applied to Homeric studies. However, while the

Parry-Lord model cannot be so easily applied to all traditional

poetry, it nonetheless remains a valuable tool for

understanding the workings of oral composition, and a strong

foundation for later work that attempts to understand the

worldview or mindframe of an oral people. Lord recounts

Parry's feelings on the usefulness of the study in the

Introduction to The Singer of Tales, quoting from a few pages

of notes taken down by Parry before his death:

> The aim of the study was to fix with exactness the
> form of oral story poetry, to see wherein it differs
> from the form of written story poetry. Its method
> was to observe singers working in a thriving
> tradition of unlettered song and see how the form of
> their songs hangs upon having to learn and practice
> their art without reading and writing.[5]

The Parry-Lord theory paints the picture of an illiterate

poet singing the "Homeric" stories, folktales and legends

familiar to all his people, according to a set, formulaic

---

[5] Lord, The Singer of Tales, 3. It is interesting to note here how Parry's (and our) submergence in literacy colors his description: the use of "unlettered" and "without reading and writing" imply a view of orality natural to literates--that it is art proceding the best it can given its unfortunateness at a lack of the ability to write. We could easily say how unfortunate it is for us today that we are literate, and thus can no longer produce and perform the beautiful oral poetry of the days of old!

method of poetics. The special condition of the model is that

the stories were not memorized verbatim, but rather were

improvised and spontaneously re-created at each telling or

performance.[6] The core stories were always the same,

yet each poet might embellish them differently, depending on

his audience, the occasion, his mood, and his poetic

ability--so long as the story remained accurate to what he and

his audience knew was true, and the performance obeyed the

rules of the poetry. In this way, poems were not only created

and sung, but also preserved, as a new poet would learn the

craft from those who preceded him. Both the poet and the

audience are involved in a process of remembering the stories,

as both share in a common idea of what the poetry should

preserve. Since storytelling was his trade, and might very

---

[6]This model of storytelling is derived from the Serbo-Croatian studies of Parry and Lord, described later in this thesis, which they applied to Homeric verse. The generalization of improvisation cannot be readily applied to all oral literature; observation of oral tradition across many different cultures suggests that some poetry is improvisational, some is memorial, and some is a combination of the two. In a memorial tradition the story is told according to a much more fixed form than in an improvisational tradition; this is often because the poems are shorter than epic-length, and they may be carefully composed in private, and memorized, before being told. Much "praise poetry" seems to be memorial, such as the "head song" of chapters 59-60 of the Norse Egil's Saga, which was allegedly composed ovewrnight for performance the next morning. In contrast to the Serbo-Croatian poetry collected by Parry and Lord, much Oriental, Indian, and Norse poetry seems to be memorized. (cf. D.K. Fry, "Caedmon as a Formulaic Poet," in Oral Literature: Seven Essays, ed. J.J. Duggan. Also, John Miles Foley, "The Oral Theory in Context," Oral Traditional Literature: A Festschrift for Albert Bates Lord, ed. J.M. Foley (Columbus, Ohio: Slavica Publishers, 1980).)

well buy him his next meal, any given poet would place great

value on preserving his best stories; since the stories were

continually performed, the poet's audience would bring a set of

expectations to the performance, and the fulfillment of these

expectations would ensure that the poet was doing his job of

preserving well.

Anglo-Saxon poetry, the domain of Beowulf, provides an

excellent example of the limits of the Parry-Lord theory. The

most striking characteristic of oral poetry for Parry and Lord

was the formula—a constantly recurring group of words found in

Homeric and Yugoslavian verse. Parry reasoned that because the

poets had to compose poetry rapidly in front of an audience, a

system of language in which there is a set phrase for each

given idea had evolved to make the poet's job easier. Since

the poet's collection of formulas must be retained at the

forefront of his memory and on the tip of his tongue, Parry

posited a certain thrift: "Unless the language itself stands

in the way, the poet—or poets—of the Homeric poems has—or

have—a noun-epithet formula to meet every regularly recurring

need. And what is equally striking, there is usually only one

such formula."[7]   Francis P. Magoun, a friend of

Lord's, was quick to apply this concept to his own field of

Anglo-Saxon poetry, and Beowulf in particular.[8]

---

[7]Parry, The Making of Homeric Verse, 266.

[8]Francis P. Magoun, "The Oral Formulaic Character of
Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry," Speculum, 28(1953).

Parry and Lord had argued for the orality of Homeric verse based on its high formula content, a phenomenon they encountered in the Serbo-Croatian as well, and Magoun took it one step further and argued that Beowulf also exhibited a high density of formulas, and was thus also oral. Unfortunately, Magoun's application of the Parry-Lord theory to Old English was too quick, and was an application that seems more forced to support an a priori desire to prove Beowulf oral than to deduce orality from the facts: as Claes Schaar criticized Magoun, "the proposition 'all formulaic poetry is oral' does not follow, either logically or psychologically, from the proposition 'all oral poetry is formulaic.'"[9] Thus, a count of formulas in Beowulf is not an indication of its being orally composed or not. Since we are not out to prove anything about the mode of composition of Beowulf this does not matter greatly. While Magoun was instrumental in raising the possibility that Anglo-Saxon poetry might have been orally composed, a strict application of the Parry-Lord theory based on fixed-formula density is not wise for Beowulf because Anglo-Saxon poetics differ greatly from Homeric and Serbo-Croatian. Old English poetry is based on alliteration,

---

[9]Claes Schaar, "On A New Theory of Old English Poetic Diction," Neophilologus, 40(1956), 303. Schaar argues that not all formulaic poetry need necessarily be oral; since there must have been a transition between oral and literate composition, early literate poetry undoubedly mimiced the older oral style. Argumentation along these lines will occur later, as I try to show that the technology of writing need not rule out oral/performative composition of poetry.

not syllable count, and while the concept of fixed-formula may have been useful to Homeric poets, who were required to fill up certain patterns of syllables, in Old English there is a tendency against using the same words for description. Old English utilizes a system of variation based on alliterative demands, and a creative poet will usually find new ways to state a certain idea, through creative language. Beowulf, and all Anglo-Saxon poetry, does show certain examples of fixed formulas, and many examples of similarities of phrasings modelled on a given word, but fixed formulas in Beowulf were not as essential in rapid composition as for the Homeric poet or Yugoslavian guslar. To try to argue a position for Anglo-Saxon poetry based on the poetics of other languages is to force onto Old English an alien set of concerns that ultimately will not tell us anything true about the poem.

This is not to say that Anglo-Saxon poetry was not the product of oral-formulaic composition, but rather that we cannot directly apply the Parry-Lord model of fixed-formula density to Beowulf and its contemporary poems. There is a good chance that some principle of formula was utilized by the Anglo-Saxon scop. Considerable work has been done in Anglo-Saxon studies to adapt the definition of "formula" to Old

---

[10]See, for example, Robert P. Creed, "The Making of an Anglo-Saxon Poem," Essential Articles for the Study of Old English Poetry, ed. Jess B. Bessinger (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1968), 363-73; Robert D. Stevick, "The Oral Formulaic Analyses of Old English Verse," also in Essential Articles for the Study of Old English Poetry, 393-403; and, for

English.[10]   Given the poetic form of Old English,

formulas of a certain syllabic number are not crucial, but

there is still a sort of formulaic molding of the language.

Fixed formulas do appear (for example, "Beowulf mathelode,

bearn Ecgtheow"), but they are not as important as the formulas

that are composed of similar elements, adapted to the

alliterative demands of each line.   In the most recent article

on the subject, Anita Riedinger asserts that Old English poetry

is formulaic, and offers her own definition of the formula for

Old English as phrases that share the same general concept and

function:

> "Most would call x under (the heavens) a "system,"
> rather than a "formula," but when a given pattern
> such as this recurs over a hundred times in a body of
> verse and usually repeats the same function, it
> suggests to me that the poets regarded it as a
> formula--a given idea in a given metrical form that
> helped the poet make the poem (to paraphrase Parry).[11]

Given the art of poetry described by Parry and Lord, and trying

to adapt it to Old English, it seems natural that some sort of

formulaic language should have evolved to aid the poet in

composition.

While we may not be able to apply the Parry-Lord model to

Old English without some careful reworking to account for the

differences in poetics, the model itself serves as a

----

summaries of many other scholars' work in this area, John Miles
Foley's Introduction, "The Oral Theory in Context," in Oral
Traditional Literature.

[11]Anita Riedinger, "The Old English Formula in Context,"
Speculum, 60:2(April, 1985), 304.

wonderfully useful tool for understanding how Anglo-Saxon poetry may have been produced; it paints a wonderful picture of production of poetry in performance that we may use to envision the art of the Anglo-Saxon scop. Albert Lord in The Singer of Tales describes in detail the passing on of the Yugoslavian tradition of stories and story-telling: the education of the poet from a young boy when he first hears the songs, through his slow learning of the story themes and patterns and his absorption of the formulaic language, until he finally learns to take up the instrument on his own and sing a song in its entirety. Parry and Lord thus allow us to witness the actual oral composition of the poetry, as well as giving us a concrete model on which to base our thinking about the differences between the oral and written worldview, way of thinking, and methods for creating stories.

Like Parry and Lord, Eric Havelock's was also interested in the fact that the Homeric epics might have been composed orally. Havelock, however, was less interested in the poeticmeans by which the epics were produced, or the art of the poetry, but was concerned with the characteristics of a culture that would produce oral stories. In A Preface to Plato, published in 1963, only three years after Lord's revised doctoral dissertation The Singer of Tales, Havelock presents his revolutionary theory about oral poetry and illiterate cultures. Havelock arrived at his theory of oral poetry as a

way of explaining an interesting and at first confusing element in the philosophy of Plato: Plato saw poets as being unfit to be included in the perfect Republic. In the tenth book of The Republic, a treatise concerned with much more than just utopian theory, Plato "argues that the artist produces a version of experience which is twice removed from reality; his work is at best frivolous and at worst dangerous both to science and to morality."[12] The poets' way of apprehending and considering reality is diametrically opposed to the rational, scientific, and dialectical mode of thought that Plato was advocating in his teaching. Havelock bases his subsequent presentation of the mindframe of the oral culture on what he derives from Plato's objections. Those objections can be understood only if we posit a kind of poetry and an assumption about the nature of poetry that are very different from our modern experience of poetry and our modern understanding of its place in our culture.

Plato's problem with poetry goes deeper than merely the art. In the time of Plato, and the Homeric epics, poetry is a much more fundamental force than in our society. Havelock shows that Plato was apparently unable to distinguish between composition and performance, and possibly even learning: "The learning process...was not learning in our sense but a

---

[12]Eric A Havelock, A Preface to Plato, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 3-4.

[13]Havelock, A Preface to Plato, 157.

continual act of memorisation, repetition and recall."[13]
Plato is especially wary of the mimetic element of the
performance, the audience's tendency to deeply identify with
characters in the story, and the strange power of the poet to
mesmerize. In this process, he thought, there is a tendency to
identify with the poetry in such a way that the audience does
not question and analyze, but rather accepts uncritically. The
poet renders reality through meter and imagery; he does not
present it in the rational, scientific, and logical manner that
was the basis of Plato's discourse method. Plato is unable to
discuss poetry without also discussing the conditions under
which it is performed--context and performance cannot be
separated. Such was the state of poetry in ancient Greece, but
Plato's most basic objection was that, in his culture, a
culture still predominantly oral,[14] poetry, and the
uncritical, mimetic process of learning, was the foundation of
the educational system.

In a culture without writing, all that is to be remembered
must be preserved in the memory--there can be no recording of
important ideas in books to be stored on shelves. Havelock
argues that the narratives of ancient Greece, specifically
Homer, are not for entertainment alone, but also serve the
function of preserving the values of the community; the tale is

---

[14]Greece had had an alphabet for centuries before Plato
was born (427 B.C.), and Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides
were already dead before Plato began to write. However, the
culture, and especially the mode of education, was still
largely oral and Homeric.

actually made subservient to the task of accomodating the

weight of the educational materials within it. The story may

only contain a simplified encyclopedia of the culture's wisdom.

Most tales do not read like textbooks, but they still act as a

reminder to trigger the greater body of shared wisdom. The

specifics of wisdom may have been left to a more conventional

and practical process of example and imitation process in the

society. The poet is a member of the society who is gifted to

be able to tell the stories, and thereby pass on the knowledge,

but the tradition of values is shared by the whole culture.

The tradition is standardized in the group, and enforces the

habits and values of the community. That body of knowledge

concerning what is right and true and valuable that is shared

by the community may be called the common sense. Thus, while

the stories and values take oral form, that form resides

outside the daily whimsy of men--it will be passed on in a

collective social memory, and strengthened by repeated

tellings. And the telling of the story, the act of performance

shared among the poet and the audience, is the essential

element for preserving and passing on the wisdom:

> The poetic performance if it were to mobilise all
> these psychic resources of memorisation had itself to
> be a continual re-enactment of the tribal folkways,
> laws and procedures, and the listener had to become
> engaged in this re-enactment to the point of total
> emotional involvement. In short, the artist
> --identified with his story and the audience identified
> with the artist.[15]

---

[15]Havelock, A Preface to Plato, 159.

The fact that that common sense is passed on orally, through the emotional and uncritical vessel of poetry, is the basis for Plato's condemnation of poets—the philosopher feels that the tradition should not be accepted uncritically, and thus poetry is an improper receptacle for the values of the community.

Plato's criticism of the poetry is that it mesmerizes. Maintaining such a vast body of stories and truths in the human memory can be brought about only by a state of personal involvement and emotional identification with the poetry, which is what Plato means by *mimesis. Havelock argues that mimesis refers not so much to the poet's imitation of reality but to the poet's relation to the tradition and to the audience's relation to the poet's rendering of that tradition in his tale. There can be no distance from the tradition, no critique—or, as Havelock suggests, "such enormous powers of poetic memorization could be purchased only at the cost of total loss of objectivity."[16] If such is the case, the tradition will not tolerate originality and critical examination of itself; since the storehouse is limited by the finite bounds of memory, to venture original thought is to risk losing the precious truths being considered, and to place the tradition in jeopardy. Even if an especially skilled poet could incorporate original thought, it would probably not be tolerated by his audience, who would be bringing to the performance a set of expectations that they would demand be

---

[16]Havelock, A Preface to Plato, 45.

met. A lack of distance from the tradition is thus not a conscious choice of the culture, but rather a prerequisite for the retention of knowledge.

Havelock spends some time outlining how the tale teaches. The story is didactic; it recalls typical acts, attitudes, judgements, procedures and values. The poem does not take the form of active instruction, but rather, as Havelock suggests:

> There is no admonition: the tale remains dispassionate, but the paradigm of what is accepted practice or proper feeling is continually offered in contrast to what may be unusual or improper and excessive or rash.[17]

Value in oral societies is based in experience, not in abstract conceptions of virtue; the tale does not offer generalized ideas of goodness or badness, but rather concrete actions, based in shared experience or experiences of characters which have come to a state of common understanding and appraisal, which can be remembered and imitated by the tale's listeners.

The oral poet is not above the society, he is not a prophet--he is a recorder and a preserver, but he doesn't create the code. It is the tradition which creates the code, and the tradition does not take a static form. Thus, while the tradition will not tolerate originality, it is capable of slowly incorporating new values into the common sense. Change occurred in old oral cultures as it does today, but in oral cultures it is understood differently. In order to make new concepts understandable to the members of the community, the

---

[17]Havelock, A Preface to Plato, 87.

tradition frames them in old, shared terms--the new is always stated in terms of the old. This is the homeostatic tendency of oral poetry. Havelock suggests that

> The inhibition against new invention, to avoid placing any possible strain upon the memory, continually encouraged contemporary decisions to be framed as though they were also the acts and words of the ancestors."[18]

Conversely, the old is often reworked in the terms of the new; when a detail no longer has its old value or meaning, it is reworked according to the new picture; the tradition remodels and only reluctantly discards. Thus the tradition constantly contemporizes itself. Occasionally, a detail cannot be worked into the evolving tradition successfully, and it loses its meaning for the audience. Such a detail is rarely discarded, however, by a tradition that is so careful not to lose any of its stored values, but instead will remain a part of the common sense although it has lost its original meaning. This may cause problems for literate viewers of the tradition, as such details will appear as inconsistencies or flaws. Older, archaic details will go unnoticed or will not be problematic for oral listeners, because they will still be _felt_ as an important part of the tradition. Seeing such older remnants as inconsistencies requires a distance from the tradition not possible for an oral listener.

For Plato's Greeks, and for any members of an oral culture if we can generalize Havelock's theory, poetry is central to

---

[18]Havelock, _A Preface to Plato_, 121.

everyday life. Education means putting each member of the community into the state of mind of the common sense. The epic is a frame of reference for the whole community, recited by the poet who is gifted to recite the sense that is shared by all, and we could even say that the poem is inseparable from the common sense. That the wisdom of the community is secured and preserved in narrative is convenient: the dynamic story is a form which is more easily remembered, and that will assure that the wisdom is passed on. The personas of the narrative are heroes, because the narrative elements depend on doing, just as the audience requires a model of action and experience to imitate—a concrete not abstract model. That the form is poetry is also important, not only to aid in memory but also to lend the poet authority and persuasive power: metrical utterances are the voice of the Muse.

An understanding of the different way of preserving knowledge for oral cultures depends not only on their lack of writing, but also on their conception of the "self." The poet's job, again, is to retain and present a hoard of wisdom, not to form individual convictions; since there is little opportunity in an oral culture for forming personal opinions, and since remembering is so dependent on a lack of separation from the tradition, there is little expression of the self as an entity separate from the tradition.

> [The poets, who] have surrendered themselves to the
> spell of the tradition, cannot frame words to express
> the conviction that "I" am one thing and the
> tradition is another; that "I" can stand apart from

> the tradition and examine it; that "I" can and should
> break the spell of its hypnotic force; and that "I"
> should divert some at least of my mental powers away
> from memorisation and direct them instead into
> channels of critical inquiry and analysis.[19]

The concept of "personality" is a later, literate one. In an oral culture, character, or human identity, is not understood in terms of personality but in terms of reputation. A man's character is simply what his name means to those in his community who know him; his reputation is based on his acts, and his genealogy. What I am is what I have done, and what I have done determines how the others in my society judge me; if I am good, I have probably tried to imitate the model acts expressed by the tradition, and if I am bad there are undoubtably instances in the tradition that speak of correlative bad acts. As with all concepts for the oral mind, character or identity is completely bound up in the shared common sense. In later, non-oral cultures, and today, we conceive of ourselves as independent entities (with our own "personalities"); we have put a distance between ourselves and our texts through our literacy. We no longer need to re-enact the tradition, and we are able to conceive of an "I" that is able to speak, think and act in independence from what is remembered. Herein, I think, lies the essential difference between oral and literate cultures: the later concept of the self evolved hand-in-hand with the changing technology of communication. Writing, and storing our knowledge in written

---

[19] Havelock, A Preface to Plato, 199-200.

texts, allows us to dispense with memorization, and the emotional identification with the tradition required for memorization. We are able to conceptualize, as well as to image. Since our energies are freed from the burden of memorizing, and since we have our thoughts preserved in a fixed, written form that we can review, we can analyze what we have thought, and what has been told to us. We no longer have to _live_ what we know. From this literate relationship to texts comes a new concept of the self.

Hence, the state of literacy that follows orality makes possible the rationality that Plato was arguing for, though Plato was not arguing for literacy itself or the technical skills of reading and writing. With literacy comes a sense of "being"—no longer is all experience related to "doing"—and an ability to conceive of abstracts as well as concretes. Literates can envision what "goodness" is, without immediately conjuring up a story that exemplifies goodness. The way of knowing that Plato argued for has been shifted from emotional narrative to rational dialogue, or dialectic. In this spirit Plato sets up the philosopher as the ruler of his utopian Republic: philosophers think about things and reason. Poets do not reason, but merely accept and pass on. Plato believes that poets express mere opinion, or unexamined statements of the masses, and not knowledge: _doxa_ not _episteme_.

> There is a distinction drawn...between a concrete
> state of mind (which is confused) and one which is
> abstract and exact. The former is called "the
> opinion of the many" in Book Five [of _The Republic_],

and in Book Ten is identified once as "opinion" and
otherwise as the mental condition of the poet and of
his report on reality. In both cases, this concrete
state of mind reports a vision of reality which is
pluralised, visual and variant. The pluralisation in
both cases is then translated into terms of
contradiction.[20]

In poetry then, nothing "is"--nothing is permanent or
absolutely defined--because in poetry anything can change with
a given poet or poetic situation, or, on a greater level, with
a change in the common sense:

> In any account of experience which describes it in
> terms of events happening, these have to be different
> from each other in order to be separate events. They
> can only be different if the situations of
> "characters" in the story, or of phenomena, are
> allowed to alter, so that Agamemnon is noble at one
> point and base at another, or the Greeks at one point
> are twice as strong as the Trojans and at another
> point are half as strong. Hence the subjects of
> these predicates "are and are not." He does not mean
> that they cease to exist, but that in this kind of
> discourse it is impossible to make a statement which
> will connect a subject and a predicate in a
> relationship which just "is," and which is therefore
> permanent and unchanging.[21]

It is Plato's insistence, and the insistence of the literate
world, that we turn from the sensual and the experienced and
the shared to the analyzed and the abstracted, or, as Havelock
summarizes, "Platonism is at bottom an appeal to substitute a
conceptual discourse for an imagistic one."[22]

As suggested earlier, the movement from narrative-bound
thought to analytical thought was a strange one in the ancient

---

[20]Havelock, A Preface to Plato, 241.

[21]Havelock, A Preface to Plato, 247.

[22]Havelock, A Preface to Plato, 261.

Greek society, as the philosophers' argument for a change in the mode of thought began to arise well <u>before</u> the culture supported a high degree of literacy. In Greece, the new, analytic mode of thought was probably not well-received at first, as the very idea of "thinking" that Plato advocated violated some basic tenets of the common sense:

> the overall plan of the <u>Republic</u> calls for a progressive definition of a new education in Platonic science which, at every stage of its development through the secondary to the advanced levels, finds itself in collision with the general mind of Greece.[23]

The early philosophers themselves were in a state of tension, as they necessarily existed and thought in an oral framework, even though they were beginning to see its limitations of language and cognition. Narrative had always been the vehicle for values and customs, but now there was a call to analyze and rethink those customs and values, and that couldn't be done through narrative, or at least not through the commonly practiced type of narrative at the time. Writing is the key for the change in thought and world-view; although for the Greeks the possibility of a new way of apprehending was lurking about in an oral framework, such a change ultimately requires writing to come to fruition.

That the introduction of writing brings about momentous changes in the way we think and view our world is the central thesis of Walter J. Ong's <u>Orality</u> <u>and</u> <u>Literacy:</u> <u>The</u> <u>Technologizing</u> <u>of</u> <u>the</u> <u>Word</u>. However, Ong points out, momentous

---

[23]Havelock, <u>A</u> <u>Preface</u> <u>to</u> <u>Plato</u>, 245.

as the differences between oral and literate cultures may be,
modern literates have a difficult time seeing and appreciating
those differences.[24]   The technology of writing
allows and imposes very basic differences in our methods of
communicating, preserving thought, and thinking itself. Though
writing is not immediately natural to humans ("_Homo_ _Sapiens_ has
been in existence for between 30,000 and 50,000 years. The
earliest script dates from only 6000 years ago"),[25]
the fact that we write today colors our interpretative
abilities so that we have difficulty thinking in terms other
than literateness. In many ways, our ability to write makes it
impossible for us to understand what it would be like _not_ to be
able to write. The frame of reference for literates is the
written text, and the written text is such a powerful and
dominant concept for us "that oral creations have tended to be
regarded generally as variants of written productions or, if
not this, as beneath serious scholarly attention."[26]

---

[24]Recall the earlier quotation from Albert Lord
(note 1): even our most intelligent thinkers "failed to
realize" that we may not be able to make assumptions about
earlier cultures based on "our own experience."

[25]Walter J. Ong, _Orality_ _and_ _Literacy:_ _The_ _Technologizing_
_of_ _the_ _Word_ (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), 2.

[26]Ong, _Orality_ _and_ _Literacy_, 8. Again, this
observation echoes two earlier acknowledgements of literary
biases: Lord's that scholars "failed to realize that there
might be some other way of composing a poem than that known to
their own experience" (note 1 above), and Adam Parry's, that
traditional literature is often felt to be too good to have
been created by a "random conglomeration of a series of poets
and editors" (note 4 above).

Oral communication has its basis in sound, and by its very nature sound is transient and cannot be frozen; sound occurs in waves, which are active and temporally limited. Writing, on the other hand, allows an impression of permanence. Written text is visual, it is a concrete object, and it manifests itself spatially. When we can conceive of thought and communication as an object, our relationship to language changes, and that change also results in the possibility of a different way to perceive reality. Literates are changed by the ability to visualize communication and thought, and that visualization/objectification allows for a re-examination of communication and thought that is impossible in oral discourse. For example, since I have written the above paragraph, you as a literate reader may review what I have said as many times as you like; you may analyze what I have said, consider my arguments at your leisure, and ultimately accept or reject them. If I had spoken the above, however, you would have only one chance at apprehending it. While the circumstances of my speaking might have allowed a discussion of the material, they also might not have allowed a discussion, and if you did not follow my argument you would not have the chance to re-examine it. Neither of us, if it was spoken, would have the opportunity to examine my arguments at a later date, unless we remembered and repeated them. That is the temporal and unfixed nature of oral discourse. Further expounding on this example can, I think, suggest the nature of oral communication

suggested by Havelock, and objected to by Plato: if I had spoken the whole of my thesis thus far to you, and it was your intention to share it with someone else in as much of its entirety as you could manage, your best bet would be to accept and remember my arguments as wholly and uncritically as possible. If you tried to remember my arguments along with your own analyses of them, and then retold my thesis to an audience that was already familiar with and in agreement with my arguments, they would undoubtedly catch any of your own critical thought. Such, I think, is the relationship in an oral culture of the tradition, the poet, and the audience.

In the oral mind, all knowledge hinges on memory. As shown earlier, memory in an oral culture is preserved and passed on through repetition and performance; one possible hallmark of performance, Lord suggested, is the formula, which he sees primarily as an aid to composition, but which Havelock considers even more essentially to be necessary for the actual remembrance of values.[27] While formula may or may not be a useful concept for analyzing would-be oral narrative, Ong in Chapter 3 of Orality and Literacy serves up his own list of the characteristics of oral discourse; unlike Lord, Ong is not so concerned with a model of performance or an analysis of

---

[27]Havelock states on page 93 of A Preface to Plato that "in fact [the formula] came into existence as a device of memorisation and of record; the the element of improvisation is wholly secondary, just as the minstrel's personal invention is secondary to the culture and folkways which he reports and preserves."

texts in making these generalizations, but rather has taken the known characteristics of oral cultures and extrapolated from that knowledge a set of statements about orality that depend on the oral mindframe and worldview, and that can explain how and why oral discourse has and must have the form it does. At the risk of seeming list-like, I summarize from Ong in the following. Oral style is additive rather than subordinative; since it is performance-based, one element triggers off the next. This quality derives from the temporality of composition, and the fact that it is remembered through performance also accounts for the fact that it is aggregate rather than analytical. Such qualities make oral discourse seem boring at times to a literate listener or reader, but the fact that performance requires keeping a train of thought, and remembering is achieved by repetition, suggests that the style would not seem awkward to an oral mentality. As stated earlier, oral style is conservative or traditionalist; the truth must be remembered, and precious memory space cannot be wasted with original thought. This quality is related to the homeostatic quality: the narrative constantly contemporizes so that it is held as important by the common sense, and this contemporization is achieved by reshaping the old in terms of the new as the new is reformed in the image of the old. Oral narrative remains close to the human lifeworld, necessarily so because the oral mindframe is concerned with experience and imitatable action; for much the same reason the narrative and

characters are agonistically toned and dramatic—both to aid in
remembering as well as to offer powerful and clearcut models
and value-paradigms. Consequently, the narratives are what Ong
calls "situational" rather than abstract—they are closely
locked into experience, and are not non-concrete generalization
or conceptual.

The technology of writing then is not only the tool that
allows a shift from narrative/memorial modes of thought to
post-Platonic analytical cognition processes, but it is the
force that propels that shift along. The differences between
the oral and literate ways of thinking and worldview can
clearly be seen to depend on the influx of writing, if the
powerful implications of writing can be understood. The
ability to write interiorizes and visualizes thought; it allows
for reflection on discourse. With the technology to record
thought and communication, the mind is free of the storehouse
role, and can engage in analysis, free thinking, and original
thought without the fear of losing the truths and values that
are the cornerstones of society:

> By taking conservative functions on itself, the text
> frees the mind of conservative tasks, that is, of its
> memory work, and thus enables the mind to turn itself
> to new speculation.[28]

Most of all, writing makes us "self-conscious"—conscious of
our identity as individuals, and aware that we can take a
position independent of our tradition and common sense. With

---

[28]Ong, _Orality_ _and_ _Literacy_, 41.

writing comes a new sense of authorship, or ownership of words.
No longer is all discourse a part of the common tradition:
"The old communal oral world had split up into privately
claimed freeholdings."[29] With writing comes the
concept of individual thought, and the possibility of
plagiarism. Literacy not only allows a new and different
medium of communication, but more fundamentally it brings about
a powerful change in our mindframe.

Though Ong paints a picture of literacy as an invading
force that changes human thought irreversibly, he is hints at a
deeper orality even in literacy. This is a concept that needs
to be examined in much greater detail in further orality
studies, and Ong's reluctance to come to grips with the matter
is indicative of its difficulty. Though our literacy may give
us the impetus to think of ourselves as thoroughly literate
beings, such a thought is a bit of a delusion. Even in our
world of individuals, authored texts, and criticisms of our
traditions, there still remains a fundamental common sense, and
a basic reliance for much of our communication on purely oral
discourse. Ong says that

> in a deep sense language, articulated sound, is
> paramount. Not only communication, but thought
> itself relates in an altogether special way to sound.[30]

There are many shared values in our literacy, and the fact that
orality and literacy can co-exist in a culture, and do co-exist

---

[29]Ong, Orality and Literacy, 131.

[30]Ong, Orality and Literacy, 7.

in most cultures with writing, is a point well worth making if we are to understand both our literacy and the orality that we presume gives us such stories as the Iliad and Odyssey and Beowulf.

Understanding that orality and literacy are not mutually exclusive has been nearly as slow in coming about as the realization that oral poetry might be composed in a manner different from written poetry. While the great amount of work done in investigation of oral cultures and storytelling has been invaluable in aiding our reading of traditional narratives, there has nonetheless been a tendency to simplify the phenomena of oral and written composition, and to make each mode always and everywhere exclusive of the other. Albert Lord, among other scholars, argues that the first influx of literacy, which brings with it the concept of a single, fixed text, spells doom for the oral tradition:

> When [the singer] thinks of the written songs as fixed and tries to learn them word for word, the power of the fixed text and the technique of memorizing will stunt his ability to compose orally. . . . [This] is a transition from oral composition to simple performance of a fixed text, from composition to reproduction. This is one of the most common ways in which an oral tradition may die.[31]

The technology of writing may be especially threatening to Lord's concept of orality, since he perceives the Homeric stories, based on the model of the Yugoslav stories, to be so firmly based in a method of instantaneous spontaneous

---

[31]Lord, The Singer of Tales, 129.

improvisation.

Recent scholarship suggests that views such as Lord's may be too simplistic. There is a much more complex relationship between orality and literacy than we can see in Lord's picture, and I think that complexity is dependent on two things: first, literacy does not come into a culture instantaneously—there may arise in most oral cultures, especially before the invention of printing since books are so scarce, first a literacy of elite groups, while the bulk of the culture may go on living in an oral mindframe. As long as the emphasis is on hearing, a text read from a book will have the same effect on an illiterate listener as an orally composed text. Second, there is a good possibility that literacy can be perceived in its first stages as merely a means of symbolizing through signs the sounds of oral discourse. If such is the case, then there can exist a state of literacy that is unsophisticated—a state where the technology of writing exists but the cultural changes that Ong describes have not yet come about. In such a case, as in the first, writing exists but the dominant mode of thought is still oral.

In looking at the past it is human nature to over-simplify things. This tendency exists not only for orality theorists but for all historians. The fact is, events do not happen in as clear-cut a manner, or as wholly and completely, as our history would like to present them: the first primitive man who saw the possibility of utilizing metals for tools ushered

in the Bronze Age, but the changes in technology on a global level were anything but instantaneous. Eric Havelock says in his Foreword to A Preface to Plato that such was the case with literacy: "I concluded [that the conditions of literacy] would be slow of realisation, for they depended on the mastery not of the art of writing by a few, but of fluent reading by the many."[32] The co-existence of orality and literacy is the thesis for an impressive and needed work of scholarship by Brian Stock, The Implications of Literacy. Stock goes to great length to explain and document orality and literacy in medieval culture, and his work demonstrates that orality and literacy can co-exist quite comfortably, and that the transition from orality to literacy is a slow and gradual process. Stock sums up his concerns well in his Introduction:

> Before the year 1000--an admittedly arbitrary point in time--there existed both oral and written traditions in medieval culture. But throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries an important transformation began to take place. The written did not simply supercede the oral, although that happened in large measure: a new type of interdependence also arose between the two. In other words, oral discourse effectively began to function within a universe of communications governed by texts.[33]

For Stock, the mere presence of a written text does not make for a literate community; what is important is the community's relationship to the text. Whether the relationship

---

[32]Havelock, A Preface to Plato, ix.

[33]Brian Stock, The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 3.

is fully literate may depend, as suggested above, on how the text is apprehended (is it read or heard?). It depends even more on the audience's understanding of the nature of the text--is it perceived as fixed and single, or is it utilized merely as a pictorializing of oral discourse?. If we assume that there is no appreciable difference to a culture between a written and a spoken text, or that the essential understanding of the text rests not on its mode of preservation, then we must inquire "not only into the allegedly oral or written elements in the works themselves, but, more importantly, ... inquire into the audiences for which they were intended and the mentality in which they were received."[34] An oral community (and I use the term oral not so much to describe the community's state of written technology, but rather its relation to its tradition) defines itself on the basis of a shared interpretation of the story: the story is accepted uncritically and fulfills the function of preserving the community's values and wisdom. For an oral culture, the story is a manifestation of the common sense. A written, literate community, however, defines itself on the basis of an interpretation of texts as original productions, possessing the potential to reflect individual statements that may differ from the common sense. A literate narrative is most often perceived as a means of calling into question the greater common sense, and, of course, it is able to do so since narrative has been

---

[34]Stock, The Implications of Literacy, 7.

freed of its storehouse role in literacy.

Stock and Havelock both suggest that literacy can exist in an oral culture without causing a widespread change in mindframe, and, by further reasoning, it is possible that a single individual can possess the technology of writing while still thinking in a primarily oral manner.[35] Plato's predicament described by Havelock suggests that even though there was an alphabet and books, oral discourse dominated--literacy, unless widespread, does not affect a culture much. Havelock describes the phenomenon of "craft literacy"; although there may be a written record of a thing, a legal document for instance, the important constraint is still the verbal record or agreement in an oral culture. The influx of literacy was a slow and gradual process:

In short, in considering the growing use of letters

---

[35]Walter Ong does not take the same view. He presents the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, the 19th century linguist, who suggested that writing simply represents spoken language in visible form: "[de Saussure] thought of writing as a kind of complement to oral speech, not as a transformer of verbalization." (Ong, Orality and Literacy, 5.) Ong, as his work described earlier suggests, disagrees with de Saussure; Ong feels that the technology of writing, with its characteristic of visualization, immediately changes the processes of cognition. Ong offers the work of A.R. Luria as a counterpoint to de Saussure: Luria's studies on persons of varying degrees of literacy shows that the illiterate thought is bound up primarily in experience, while literacy and education allow for abstract thought. According to Luria, even the minimally literate persons will generally exhibit a higher degree of conceptual thought than the completely illiterate. Ong's presentation of literacy is offered in support of his arguments about oral and literate mindframes, and, while his presentation of the effects of orality and literacy are crucial and influential, his understanding of the relationship of orality and literacy may suffer from oversimplification.

in Athenian practice, we presuppose a stage,
characteristic of the first two-thirds of the fifth
century, which we may call semi-literacy, in which
writing skills were gradually but rather painfully
being spread through the population without any
corresponding increase in fluent reading. And if one
stops to think about the situation as it existed till
near the end of the Peloponnesian war, this was
inevitable, for where was the ready and copious
supply of books or journals which alone makes fluent
reading possible?[36]

Stock, too, offers persuasive evidence that writing was used

initially only for practical, most often commercial reasons

(i.e. for keeping accounts), rather than for normal

communication and certainly not for art. The manner of

introduction of literacy suggests that it <u>was</u> initially

perceived, as de Saussure suggested, as a pictorialization of

the spoken word, and its gradual inclusion into the culture

suggests that it was slow in altering the mode of thought of

the people in any radical manner. While many would learn to

sign their names, and to use writing for trade transactions and

legal agreements and inscriptions, the society would continue

to proceed as it had, on a foundation of oral discourse. The

basis of communication in the first stages of literacy still

tends to be oral (witness the late development of silent

reading), and it would not be wrong to assume that most poets,

even after they learned to write and began to compose in

writing, would still compose with the intent of performative

presentation: "As for the poet, he can write for his own

benefit and thereby can acquire increased compositional skill,

---

[36]Havelock, <u>A</u> <u>Preface</u> <u>to</u> <u>Plato</u>, 40.

but he composes for a public who he knows will not read what he is composing but will listen to it."[37]

The differences we have traced between an oral and a literate mindframe, and thus the consequent differences between a narrative produced by an oral poet-performer and a literate poet-author, can best be seen if we visualize a certain relationship of poet - tradition - text - audience - world for each mode of composition. In a literate framework the poet is an author. He is conscious of the fact that he is (or at least thinks he is) an independent entity: he is aware of a tradition of narrative and texts that have preceded him, and he may feel endebted to them, but in composing his piece the author writes as originally as he can. What makes the poet an author is that the story is his own. The author is trying to say something new to an audience that is made up of many other individuals, all with their own feelings of independence and their own unique views of the tradition. The author's audience will read his work at a later time, after it has been suitably revised, and each reader will most likely read it alone. The author's story will be something new to the reader, it will be a new and different way of looking at the world. Each member of the audience will perceive the story in a different and unique way, and the story will, more or less depending on the reader, become a part of the reader's understanding of the

---

[37]Havelock, A Preface to Plato, 39.

world.

In an oral situation, the relationship of the poet and audience to the tradition is drastically different. The poet is not an author, but a performer. When he presents a story, he presents it not to a group of isolated individual readers, but to a common audience at the very time the story is being composed or performed. Since the poet is a spokesman for the tradition, he does not shape it, but rather the tradition shapes the story and the poet's performance of the story. The tradition, and thus the story, is a thing commonly shared by both the poet and the audience, so there is nothing new or original being said, but rather a repetition and reaffirmation of the shared knowledge and values of the community. The story expresses the shared understanding of the world, and its performance depends on a very tangible interaction of the poet and audience. Unlike a literate author, an oral storyteller exists entirely within his tradition, and his story is shaped by the tradition; the tradition and the story are inseparable, and if the story ever changes, those changes reflect not the poet's originality but a greater change in the tradition and common sense of the culture. The oral mindframe conceives in terms of the cyclical: repetition in concept is as important as repetition of stories, and the cyclical nature of all experience is as real as the cyclical nature of the seasons. In an oral view, nothing is ever new, but to be understood must be seen in light of an earlier example of essentially the same

phenomenon. Linear conception, and the idea of the completely new, is a paradigm of literacy.

We must acknowledge that even in the most advanced literacy, such as that of the twentieth century, there exists a sort of underlying orality. One of the results of our literacy is that it allows us to feel that we are much more distinct and separate from our tradition than we may actually be. While we are independent thinkers and capable of thought and writing distinct from our tradition, our conception of our world and ourselves is still shaped by a shared tradition or common sense. This is a very difficult concept to comprehend and articulate. There is an essential difference between orality and literacy in terms of the relationship to the tradition, but that difference might be perceived as one of quantity more than one of quality. In some ways, members of an oral culture belong _more_ to their tradition than do the members of a literate community; members of an oral community are less critical of the tradition than are literates. Perhaps we can best describe this in terms of the subjective and the objective. In orality, there is no subject or object—there is no need to differentiate between the two because understanding hinges on shared beliefs and a lack of distance between the member of the community and the tradition. In literacy, as the realm of the shared diminishes, subjectivity and objectivity become comprehendable terms: "I" am a being separate from the community and the tradition. In this process there is a

reorientation of poet, audience, and tradition. Is the
difference between orality and literacy a difference of degree
or of kind? Perhaps this is what Havelock and Stock are trying
to show, that orality and literacy do not depend merely on the
technology of writing, and that orality forms a firm foundation
even in a literate culture. In the twentieth century, even
though our culture is for the most part literate, we depend on
a very oral--shared, common sensical--mode of communication
every day. Much of our media, telivision, radio, pop
literature, conversation, ritual, and even joke-telling is
really more oral than it is literate. However, often our
literacy causes us to underestimate how oral our culture is.

One of the first claims that Albert Lord makes in The
Singer of Tales is that "the singer of tales is at once the
tradition and an individual creator."[38] This
statement is a central one in Lord's early work, and it seems
rather confusing. Perhaps this issue stems from the old bias
that oral poetry cannot be excellent. The distinction that we
must make is that the excellence in oral poetry lies in its
artfulness, and that artfulness is not a result of originality.
Excellent oral poetry is poetry composed in the restrictions of
an inherited form. We must be careful not to give weight to
the poet as an original creator; rather, he is the member of
the society who sings the story best. If we set the poet up as
a creator, we risk a loss of the importance of the tradition of

---

[38]Lord, The Singer of Tales, 4.

the poetry, its inclusion of the old stories and the common sense of the people. Indeed, the more weight we give to the originality of the poet, the more he approaches a literate author, if not in his use of writing then surely in his consciousness of self apart from tradition. Again, we are here faced with the question of what exactly the difference between orality and literacy is, and whether or not it is simply a matter of degree. We might add, to make the difference clearer, that no matter how original a performer may be, it does not make him an author unless what he performs is recognized by his audience as a new story: oral poets are always performers. In modern culture, we have become accustomed to distinguishing between author and performer; in an oral mode we cannot distinguish between author and performer, because there is no conception of an author. The essential difference between orality and literacy is how the poet and the audience are related to the tradition, or, perhaps, how they perceive that relationship.

For Lord, the oral poet _feels_ his poetry; he sings by following a model he has learned by listening, but was never consciously taught. The poet does not conceive of a text, or a symbolic, visual representation of the story, but rather the natural constraints of performance. For the singer, and the oral mindframe, the truth is not measured by exactness of verbatim repetition, but rather loyalty to the tradition. When Lord asked Zogic, a skilled Yugoslavian singer, if he could

repeat exactly the story of another singer, Zogic replied with a sure "yes." Zogic also affirmed that a story of his own would be exactly the same in a telling twenty years later. Yet recordings of the original song and Zogic's retelling, and of two performances of the same Zogic song only days apart, show that

> Zogic did not learn it word for word and line for line, and yet the two songs are recognizable versions of the same story. They are not close enough, however, to be considered "exactly alike." Was Zogic lying to us? No, because singing the story as he conceived it to be "like" Makic's story, and to him "word for word and line for line" are simply an emphatic way of saying "like." . . . What is of importance here is not the fact of exactness or lack of exactness, but the constant emphasis by the singer on his role in the tradition.[39]

Remaining <u>true</u> for an oral poet is loyalty to the essence of what has said before.

The discussions in this unit, in the absence of one cohesive theory of orality, are the basic premises of orality that I would like to accept and assume in approaching <u>Beowulf</u>. It is just as reasonable that <u>Beowulf</u> be read as an oral product as it is to read it as a literary work; to understand the relationship of orality and literacy is to understand that the attribution of literacy to the <u>Beowulf</u> poet remains as unproven and as unprovable as the attribution of the purest orality. It is just our own literate bias that has naturally led us to assume literate conditions for the creation of

---

[39]Lord, <u>The Singer of Tales</u>, 28.

Beowulf. To read Beowulf as an oral work, we must envision it as a composition in performance, in a situation where the poet saw himself not as an original creator but as a spokesman for a tradition that he shared commonly with his audience. It is possible to read Beowulf according to the premises of orality, and such a reading is emphatically different from the more prevalent readings assuming literacy.

Adopting the premises of orality for the Beowulf poet means a radical change in the usual picture of him. Most Beowulf scholars, approaching the poem a a thoroughly literate work, imagine the poem to be the work of a very learned man, probably a cleric or monk. He could presumably read Latin as well as Old English, and he was well-versed in the important texts of his time: Augustine, Boethius, Bede, Virgil, and the important writers of English and Latin and possibly other cultures. He had an appreciation of his own Anglo-Germanic poetic form and corpus of legends, and at some point he created a poem in imitation of that secular, "pop" tradition. However, while he utilized Anglo-Saxon form and subject matter, he had the kind of relationship to the tradition that only literacy can produce. He viewed the tradition from a separate reference point--the Christian, scholarly tradition. While he admired the Anglo-Saxon tradition, he saw his job in creating Beowulf to be interpreting it according to the concerns of his very different culture, and that interpretation was possible because he stood apart from the tradition of Beowulf itself.

The oral model for Beowulf is much different. We see the Beowulf poet as an illiterate performer, who sings the story of the Geatish hero ashe heard it sung to him. He may or may not have composed it in writing--that does not make too much difference--but if he did create it in writing then he perceived writing as merely a tool for visualizing or recording oral composition. While our poet may have had "craft literacy," that literacy did not alter the way he stood in relation to his tradition. He was primarily a secular man; in spite of his conversion to Christianity, he was still very much attuned to his Germanic, pagan roots. His world-view, like the story of Beowulf, had been acquired through a tradition of oral discourse: the secular story-telling tradition, as well as Christian liturgy and sermons. While he may have been skilled in the telling of the story of Beowulf, he was not its author; neither he nor his audience would recognize in his performance anything that might be called original, or his. He may have been the most gifted in his community at singing the song, but he was not its creator--he was merely repeating what had been performed for him before, and what all singers of Beowulf would have done, better or worse. The story, its meaning, and the artform belong not to any one member of the community but to the tradition itself

Though much time has been spent in the past searching for origins of stories, and elaborately recreating contexts, origins and contexts are not my concerns. I am interested in

reading the one version of the poem that we possess, the unique Cotton Vitellius A XV manuscript, as an oral creation. While that manuscript is a written object, that does not make an oral reading unplausible, as expressed earlier. The model of orality set forth here assumes that cultural orality can continue long after the introduction of literacy. If the Beowulf poet could write, in our model he is still essentially oral in his method; this means that a combination of orality and literacy is possible, and that the ability to write can exist without radically changing the mindframe and concerns of the poet. If this is so, we can read Beowulf as "a performance in pen-and-ink."[40]

We know that not all oral poetry is improvised in performance, but I have chosen to make performance a part of my model because it seems a natural element of Beowulf. It accords with both the secular subject and the fluidity and style of the poem to suppose that it might have been created in performance. While I have utilized the theories of scholars who work with all types of oral poetry, across a range of cultures, I am not assuming that the model proposed here applies to all oral poetry, or even all Germanic oral poetry; it is a model that has been worked out for Beowulf, and I think that it is not an unreasonable hypothesis for Beowulf. Above

---

[40]This term is one I have borrowed from my thesis advisor, John Wilson, and, given our changing understanding of literacy, it may prove to be an invaluable means of understanding the preservation of oral poems as written texts.

all, I am not attempting to <u>prove</u> that <u>Beowulf</u> is an oral poem;
it is merely my hope that, given these premises of orality, a
reasonable and logical interpretation of the poem as an oral
performance may be offered. Reading <u>Beowulf</u> as an oral poem
offers new insights into the poem, allows for a better
understanding of many difficult characteristics and passages of
the poem, and, ultimately, stands as an alternative, pleasing
way of approaching the greatest work of art of the Anglo-Saxon
period.

UNIT TWO

READING BEOWULF AS AN ORAL POEM

To reiterate, I am not trying to say that Beowulf should
be read as an oral poem because it is one; that statement is
one we cannot prove or disprove. Rather, I think that Beowulf
can be read as an oral work, and reading it as an oral work
yields an understanding of the poem that is not apparent when
we approach the poem with literate preconceptions. In addition
to telling us something new about the poem itself, this "oral"
type of critical approach may also tell us something about our
own literacy and literate preconceptions.

In the previous unit I have constructed a "model" of
orality. Those "premises of orality" collectively define what
the word "orality" can mean when applied to Beowulf. In this
unit I will argue that the poem can be read according to those
premises: that there is nothing in the poem that cannot be
accounted for by the model of orality, and that an oral reading
yields interpretations of certain difficult elements of the
poem that are at least as cohesive and persuasive as the
literate interpretations. In this unit I will investigate what
I see as two different areas of cruces in Beowulf, which have
caused much critical ink to be spilled. The first area, which

comprises the first section of this unit, focuses on elements

of the poem that can be regarded as literary facts. In other

words, these areas do not rest on prior interpretations that

are not agreed on by most or all Beowulf scholars. Included in

this realm are the monsters and "marvelous" elements, the

"barbaric style," the flaws and inconsistencies, the gnomic

elements, and the treatment of the singer in the story. As I

shall show, these elements cause less of a problem for our oral

reading than for those readings which claim a literate mode of

composition for the poem, since literate interpretations must

resolve how and why these indisputably traditional, oral

elements still reside in an authored creation. I am extremely

grateful to John Niles' Beowulf: The Poem and Its Tradition, a

recent book which clearly sets forth and discusses those

elements that I have chosen to focus on in this first section.

Then there are larger differences of interpretation, those

which hinge on our understanding of the composition and purpose

of the poem as a whole. In the latter portion of this unit I

discuss the differences in interpretation between those, the

majority, who read the poem as literate—Christian and ironic,

expressive of a point of view peculiar to its author, and

critical of the heroic code—and the few who persist in reading

it as oral—pagan-heroic (though also Christian) and earnest,

expressive of a shared understanding which offers the heroic

code in a way which both Christianizes the hero and heroicizes

the tradition. Having made this distinction, we can decide if

the oral reading is cohesive, and if it is at least as good as, if not better than, the literate interpretations.

Reading the poem as an oral work makes us sensitive to the ways in which Beowulf resists approach by today's expectations--as Dorothy Whitelock has said,

> We are not entitled to assume without investigation that an audience of the poet's day would be moved by the same things we are, or, if by the same things, in the same way....[41]

That Beowulf often runs counter to modern conceptions and expectations is no new observation; for a long time the poem was not read at all as a piece of literature but rather only as a historical document. Scholars saw Beowulf as a valuable document for learning about Anglo-Saxon culture, since there are so few other sources from which to draw information about the Anglo-Saxons, but did not at all consider the poem as a piece of great and readable poetry. J.R.R. Tolkien was one of the first scholars to argue that Beowulf stands as a good piece of poetry:

> [To rate Beowulf] as mainly of historical interest should in a literary survey be equivalent to saying that it has no literary merits, and little more need in such a survey then be said about it. But such a judgement on Beowulf is false. So far from being a poem so poor that only its accidental historical interest can recommend it, Beowulf is in fact so interesting as poetry, in places poetry so powerful, that this quite overshadows the historical content, and is largely independent even of the most important facts (such as the date and identity of Hygelac) that

---

[41] Dorothy Whitelock, The Audience of Beowulf (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 2.

[42] J.R.R. Tolkien, "The Monsters and the Critics,"

research has discovered.[42]

The greatest problem for early readers of Beowulf, especially those of the 19th century, was the monsters and the other unrealistic elements of the poem. Such elements, scholars thought, should be relegated to the realm of fairy tale and folklore, and not admitted into "serious" literature. Tolkien, however, admitted the monsters and the marvelous as part of the poem's aesthetic and a legitimate subject for inquiry inquiry for Beowulf. Following in the wake of Tolkien, John Niles has stated that the marvelous elements in Beowulf are not something for us to be embarrassed about; that such embarrassment stems from our 20th century expectations of narrative. In Beowulf, the marvelous and the apparently historical blend together, and rest in the narrative quite comfortably together.

The poem was as not composed in the mode of realism. However, the mere fact that the poem conforms to a different literary convention, and that it contains "marvelous" elements, is not something we need an oral reading to resolve. There are many literate works that are far more fanciful than Beowulf, and most readers who claim literacy for the poet and the poem agree that many of the conventions and elements of the poem come from an earlier tradition of folklore and legends. What can an oral reading say about Beowulf regarding the "marvelous"

An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism ed. Lewis Nicholson (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), 54.

elements? Perhaps the reason many modern readers have been so troubled by the monsters in Beowulf is because of the relationship in the story of the marvelous elements to the apparently historical elements. Readers presuming literacy can accept a lack of realism in literature, but have reservations about mixing story and history in the way that the Beowulf poet does: the history of the Danish kingdom is presented in the same language and manner as the description of the Grendel monsters. An oral reading expects that lack of clear distinction between story and history: the poet is a performer, and he does not critically analyze the story, or change it from the way he heard it. In orality, truth is not so much correspondence with or fidelity to "reality" as it is being faithful to the old story itself. As such, the mixture of fantasy and history in Beowulf poses more of a problem for those who imagine a learned cleric making new use of old stories than it does for those who assume for the poem illiterate traditionalism and a poet who was not a creator but a performer.

An oral reading sees the marvelous not merely as a remnant of earlier folklore, but as a belief that is tightly interwoven into both the flow of the narrative, and also into the greater themes of the poem and what the poem is saying to its listeners about values and models of behavior. The monsters are not just fantastical elements, but are given a firm basis in reality by their status in Christian ideology and biblical history—they

are kin of Cain, survivors of the Flood, and their power is still strong and threatening for the audience of the poem. The newer Christian idealogy was assumed into the Anglo-Saxon culture in terms of the older pagan framework of understanding and world-view, and the Germanic traditional elements are still reserved a place in the Christian view of reality. Grendel, the older pagan monster who surely lived in folklore even before the Angles and Saxons migrated from the continent to England, was adopted by the Christian tradition by placing his origins in the Christian story of Cain and the Flood.

Theodore M. Andersson has made clear the problems of narrative consistency that Beowulf raises for modern readers:

> We all know that a good narrative poem should be well-made, that is, susceptible of a clear and logical dissection, or in simpler terms still, possessed of a transparent plot and easy to summarize. In this respect, Beowulf, an eminently good poem, disappoints us. It is strangely built. It is full of temporal dilations, but it has a gaping hiatus between Beowulf's return to Geatland and his final adventure.[43]

However, if we accept what Havelock has said about the function of traditional poetry, that the narrative is actually subservient to the task of carrying the load of the wisdom of the culture, then we may see that the different narrative form of Beowulf may be more deep-rooted than just the borrowing of style from the oral tradition. Often in the poem the logic of the narrative is upset so that the wisdom, which the story is

---

[43]Theodore M. Andersson, "Tradition and Design in Beowulf," Old English Literature in Context (ed. John Niles, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1980), 93.

obliged to preserve, can be made perfectly clear to the listeners of the story; the important concern is not the narrative so much as the truth. John Niles has called this the "barbaric style", borrowing the term from art criticism.[44] "Barbaric style" is a useful term for describing the very different narrative concerns and set of aesthetics of Anglo-Saxon poetry, and Beowulf in particular; much like the metalwork or manuscript illumination of the time, the poetry has a well-defined sense of aesthetic. The objection may be raised here that we do not need to posit an oral mode of composition on the poem to account for this "barbaric style"--it may be a literary convention that was borrowed from the older oral-tradition by a literate author. This borrowing argument works best, I think, with those characteristics of the poem that may be seen as dissectable elements, such as the incorporation of legendary heroes and stories. The style itself is so pervasive that it does not seem something easily borrowed, but rather a style still very much alive and natural

---

[44]John D. Niles, Beowulf: The Poem and Its Tradition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983): "Among art historians, the term barbaric (not "barbarous") has occasionally been used to denote the various types of abstract design that were cultivated, to some extent in common, by the Germanic and Celtic tribes who bordered on the Roman Empire. In contrast to Mediterranean naturalistic art, which came to provide a model for most Western European art from the Renaissance until the early twentieth century, the art of the Northern tribes shunned the realistic depiction of persons and things, knew nothing of three-dimensional perspective, and tended to break surfaces into intricate, swirling, zoomorphic designs rather than depict them in naturalistic "modeled" contours." (165-66).

to the poet. The style seems better explained as being governed by the poem's need to preserve wisdom and remain true to the poetic tradition, and thus the poem may not always be realistic or representational. Imagining an oral mode of composition, while not necessary to account for the "barbaric style" if we can imagine an author clever enough to thoroughly mimic the style, seems to account for the style in an easier and more natural way. If the poem was composed in performance, then the conventions of the poetry allow it to express what it considers most important, no matter what the consequences for the flow of the narrative might be.

Oftentimes in Beowulf, spatial[45] and temporal relations in the narrative are not as important as the theme, or as the stating of wisdom. For example, near the end of the poem, during Beowulf's fight with the dragon, we can see a very strange handling of time. In line 2538 and following, the poet presents Beowulf preparing for his battle, attacking the fire-drake single-handedly, and plunging into the midst of fiery battle. The poet heightens the tension to a climax as our hero's attack, for the first time in his life, fails:

---

[45]In manuscript illumination and illustration especially, the artists' lack of concern for spatial relationships is very evident. The purpose of such illustrations is to picture very clearly some event or relationship, and, as such, the concerns of "realistic" art are not held to be important. Often, to make a point clear, the artist will employ such devices as rendering figures the size of buildings, or of arranging his subjects in space in an entirely unrealistic manner. The foremost purpose of such illuminations is clear illustration, and as such that is given first priority, even over what our senses would tell us is proper or rational.

> thaer he thy fyrste   forman dogore
> wealdan moste,   swa him wyrd ne gescraf
> hreth aet hilde.[46]
>   (2573-75)

> there he the very first time
> might not have power, as fate did not decree for him
> glory at battle.

The poem presents Beowulf thus: his blade has failed him, he is fated for defeat, and he is in great pain, "fyre befongen" (2595, "enveloped in fire")--then, much to the dismay of the modern reader, the poem abruptly leaves Beowulf hanging and proceeds through a leisurely account of the thanes of Beowulf who, in the heat of the battle, have skulked off into the woods to hide. Granted, in doing so tension has been heightened for the reader or listener, but while Beowulf is presumably dying at the claws of the dragon, the poet rambles through the story of Wiglaf, a young retainer of Beowulf, and an intricate digression into the precious sword that he carries. After presenting Wiglaf, the poet has him launch into his famous speech, in which he sums up the heroic code and the duty of the thanes to their lord, and rebukes the retainers of Beowulf for failing to live up to that code. He concludes with the cry that he would rather die with his lord than fail in his role as retainer, and he then hurries off into the smoke to aid

---

[46]The text, here and in all passages quoted in this thesis, is that of Fr. Klaeber, Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg, 3rd edition (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1950). Unless otherwise stated, the translations are my own. In the Old English, spellings of some words have been altered to conform to modern English typeface (i.e. thorn and eth to "th", ash to "ae.")

Beowulf. When Wiglaf joins Beowulf 66 lines after we left the king, Beowulf seems in no worse shape. Surely this is odd, given the length of time that it must have taken Wiglaf to give his speech! This is a characteristic element of the "barbaric style": here the narrative has taken a backseat to the greater concerns of the poem, the preservation of knowledge and truth. Wiglaf's speech is one of the more important in the poem; it sums up the duty of the thanes to the lord, the bond of the Anglo-Saxon civilization. The poem has a duty to preserve and reinforce this value, and, regardless of the break in the narrative, this is the perfect time to do so. If we accept an oral reading of Beowulf, then the strange suspension of time for Wiglaf's speech seems less problematic; logical presentation of temporal relationships is not the foremost concern of the "barbaric style" at this point, and realism gives way for the preservation of wisdom.

John Niles characterizes much of Beowulf as "a diagram of an action rather than an imitation of action."[47] He shows how much of the action of the poem is defined by narrative conventions different from modern ones, and the resulting narrative is not always completely logical to modern readers since the poet's themes or concerns occasionally force him to convey his narrative in a rather un-narrative-like manner. Niles points out as example the scene where Beowulf and his men are waiting for Grendel in Heorot (688-709). For

[47]Niles, Beowulf, 168.

some strange reason, even though all are terrified that they

would not "eft eard-lufan aefre gesecean" (692, "ever again see

the dear homeland"), all the men except Beowulf are able to

fall into a deep sleep! Their sleep is, even more strangely,

not at all disturbed when Grendel arrives and bashes the door

in! It is only after Beowulf and the monster have begun their

violent battle that the men are roused from slumber. Niles

suggests here that the men of Beowulf are playing a role as

victim and audience, and that their weakness contrasts the

heroism of their leader. While a poet writing a

representational narrative might feel compelled to explain the

strange behavior of the men, the Beowulf poet and, presumably,

his audience accept the action because their expectations of

the narrative's function are different from ours:

> Their behavior is explicable on stylistic grounds,
> not mimetic ones. Rather than react as real persons
> would in the same situation, they are obedient
> participants in the conventions of an abstract type
> of narrative composition. According to these
> conventions, the hero is strong and his companions
> weak. . . . Apart from . . . ethical and
> dramatic functions, the men have no real interest.
> As the scene progresses, the poet forgets them except
> to call attention to their fear and
> ineffectiveness--qualities that again set them
> sharply apart from the hero.[48]

Here is the "barbaric style" at work again. An oral reading of

Beowulf asks us to cast off some of our modern expectations for

the narrative, preconceptions which are often very unconscious

and derive from our understanding of how narrative works in our

---

[48]Niles, Beowulf, 168.

own time. In this scene, the focus of the poem is on the hero and his bravery, our model for imitation; the supporting characters do not add appreciably to the scenario, so they are excluded. The poet devotes all his energy to focusing on Beowulf and the approaching Grendel; the tradition does not require him to invent elaborate solutions for the de-emphasizing of the retainers, so he solves his problem in the manner which requires the least expenditure of poetic energy—he has them fall asleep! Certainly, as good retainers, Beowulf's men must hold Heorot with him, but their roles in the battle are merely those of observers.

Niles has summed up the basis of the difference between our narrative concerns and the "barbaric style" of the Beowulf poet in his discussion of the "controlling theme" of the poem.[49] There has been much discussion of the theme in Beowulf,[50] but Niles says that in the final telling the poem is not about a hero, or heroism, but rather about community. The whole of the poem is embedded in a social/historical context, and the end of Beowulf's heroic actions is the good of the community. Digressions in particular have been pointed out by some readers, T.M. Andersson for example, as especially adding

[49]Niles, Beowulf, Chapter 13.

[50]One of the most celebrated is R.E. Kaske's essay, "Sapientia et Fortitudo as the Controlling Theme of Beowulf," An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism, ed. Lewis Nicholson (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), 269-310. Kaske argues that offering the Latin concept of the heroic virtues of wisdom and strength united in the hero as a model of imitation is the function of the poem.

weakness to the narrative structure of the poem:

> The digressions are a problem in pertinence and it is
> hard to remember where they are inserted or in what
> order. The events of Swedish history in the second
> part are a tangle and even more difficult to retain.
> The anamolies of articulation are, we feel, at some
> level poetic deficiencies.[51]

As will be discussed in detail later, Andersson seeks to

resolve the problem of the digressions by proposing a structure

for the poem that the digressions fit neatly into. However, in

an oral reading, we do not find it necessary to fit the

digressions into a unified structural view of the poem.

Digressions in the poem serve as an elucidation of the social

order, and the poem's greatest values are those which cement

the bonds of the community--heroism it holds together and

protects the society. These digressions need not necessarily

give in to any narrative structure of the poem, since it is

their presence that forms the foundation for the telling of the

poem. The poem's inserted stories of different good and bad

kings and queens and heroes provide models for the listeners of

the poem, and, if the stories are paid heed, resultant

imitation will strengthen the community.

Nearly every concern of the poem relates to the ideal of

preserving the bonds of the community. The monsters that

Beowulf fights are presented as threats to the community, and

the only joys that man has on earth are those shared by all in

the mead-hall. The threat to Heorot is so dire because that

---

[51]Andersson, "Tradition and Design in Beowulf",
93.

hall is seen as the manifestation of the community and shared joy. Even the gold and treasure that the poet delights in describing are valued by the poem's characters not because of their monetary worth but because they are a symbol of the goodness of the people and of each owner's membership in the society.

The community-oriented "controlling theme" of the poem aligns itself well with Eric Havelock's theory on the wisdom-preservative role of poetry in an oral society. Havelock has shown that epic can be considered first and foremost a storehouse for societal values; since the greatest value for the Anglo-Saxons was community, it is natural that the community be the focus of the poem. Beowulf, in its digressions, statements of wisdom, and interest in history and genealogy is serving a role primarily of wisdom preservation. The Beowulf poet, in telling his story, is acting as a spokesman for the tradition and passing on the truth that he has heard told to him. In this way, Beowulf becomes for its listeners both an engrossing story and a repository of societal values; Beowulf himself is not only a great hero of folklore but also a powerful model of behavior for the society which places great value on the qualities that he embodies.

Our oral model presents Bewoulf as the shared product of a community, and it the community sharing that may have been responsible for producing the "barbaric style" in the first place. The poet who tells the story is the spokesman for a

tradition that is shared by the whole community; the audience, then, brings as much to the performance of the story as the poet does. There is a shared understanding in the community, not only of the details of the story, and the values and truths it preserves, but of the very way the story is told. Thus, the "barbaric style" was as natural to the audience as to the poet--the meaning and function of the story was perceived in the same way by the poet and the audience, and worked itself out most effectively in the "barbaric" narrative form of Beowulf and other potentially oral stories. Beowulf, we can be sure, exhibits this narrative style, and our model of orality for the poem explains the presence and function of that style in the simplest way.

While I do not intend to deal with the issue at great length, I would like to point out at this point in the argument that because of the relationship of the oral poet and audience to the tradition and story, our model of orality will not allow for allegorical intent in the story. As Havelock argues, oral stories are not a homiletic or didactic form of instruction; rather, they are instruction founded in community values shared by all through the tradition. Allegory comes into the picture only when some sort of a gap has come up between the poem and its audience, and the common sense of the audience is no longer the same as that of the story. Really, allegory can happen only in a tradition where the main mode of communication is written texts: in literacy a story is "frozen" and thus a

difference in the changing common sense of the reader can be reflected by the frozen text. If we are reading Beowulf as the product of a primarily oral mode of communication, there cannot be allegory since the tradition is not frozen in text and, by nature, constantly contemporizes itself. Since the meaning of the oral story is determined not by authorial intention but by the tradition, there is no chance for a gap springing up. In orality it is the tradition and the shared view of the community that provide meaning; oral stories would have little use for the indirect type of instruction of allegory, unlike sermons or other authored types of instruction which make use of much allegoresis.[52]

It is very natural that modern readers are drawn to allegorical readings of Beowulf, since the tradition of the story, frozen as it is in the unique manuscript, is so far removed from our own—a real gap has sprung up between us and the story. Allegorical readings presume the Beowulf poet was a a learned, literate author: Morton Bloomfield suggests that this is the case, as he says, "When allegory is used in Germanic poetry, it is a Christian element. In fact, it is a

---

[52]Brian Stock describes, for example, the formal conversion instruction of Paul, who "was given instruction, first by exempla, that is, by stories with morals, and then by similitudines, by abstract analogies with other moral principles. Among these Paul recounts the allegory of the transplanted tree." (Stock, The Implications of Literacy, 111). Few would argue that, whatever its mode of composition, the instruction offered by Beowulf was as formal as this.

[53]Morton Bloomfield, "Beowulf and Christian

sign of Christian influence."[53] There have been

several interpretations of Beowulf as allegory. Morton

Bloomfield has focused on one feature of the poem, the

relationship of Beowulf and Unferth, and concluded that "the

author of Beowulf consciously patterned the figure of Unferth

after the personified abstractions currently used in the Latin

poetry with which he was familiar";[54] the contention

is that Unferth was a representation of the Latin concept of

Discordia, which Beowulf, the rex justus or good king,

overcomes. M.B. McNamee offers a more complete overview of

the poem as a whole as an allegory: he argues that "[no one]

perfectly familiar with the details of the Christian story of

salvation can read Beowulf and not be struck by the remarkable

parallel that exists between the outline of the Beowulf story

and the Christian story of salvation."[55] McNamee,

like Bloomfield, asserts thoroughly literate, orthodox

Christian readers for the poem--"[Beowulf's audience] were much

more familiar with Scripture than are most modern readers"--[56]

in his conclusion that there exists a "close parallel between

---

Allegory: An Interpretation of Unferth," An Anthology of
Beowulf Criticism, ed. Lewis Nicholson (Notre Dame, Indiana:
University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), 161.

[54]Bloomfield, "Beowulf and Christian Allegory,"
160.

[55]M.B. McNamee, S.J., "Beowulf--An Allegory of
Salvation?", An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism, ed. Lewis
Nicholson, 335.

[56]McNamee, "An Allegory of Salvation," 339.

the situation of Beowulf and the Savior."[57]

While any audience of Beowulf will bring some natural, often symbolic, associations to the telling of the story, in an oral interpretation the poem cannot be allegorical. Allegorical meanings may not be so inherent in the story as they are the product of modern preconceptions, and the fact that the meaning of Beowulf may not be so apparent to us since we are so removed from the culture that produced the poem. While Grendel surely symbolizes evil and death and anti-societal tendencies, and while Beowulf certainly is the embodiment of the heroic code and a model for goodness, in an oral reading we may not suggest an intricately allegorical reading to the effect, for example, that Beowulf is Christ and Grendel is Satan. John Niles has said that "The Beowulf poet steadfastly resists this tempation [of allegory],"[58] but even this is a simplification: the resistance on the poet's part, if he is an oral poet, is not so much a conscious choice as the fact that, given his poetic concerns and relationship to the story, he could not possibly write/tell an allegory. If an allegorical reading were inescapable, we might be inclined to regard that as an argument for literacy; however, we may read the poem quite cohesively as an unallegorical affirmation of value and model of instruction for the Anglo-Saxon culture. Doing so demands that we take the

[57]McNamee, "An Allegory of Salvation," 347.

[58]Niles, Beowulf, 12.

poem at its face value, as the earnest story of a poet shaped
by the tradition; the details of such an interpretation will be
examined at length later.

While Beowulf does come to us as a written text, there is
some indication in the poem itself, and in literature of the
time, that the story might be read as the product of a poet in
performance.[59]   Phenomena such as Bede's description
of Caedmon provide accounts of oral composition in Anglo-Saxon
England. Bede's Ecclesiastical History, which survives in
numerous documents in both original Latin and Old English
tranlations, may be dated to 737 A.D.   The story of Caedmon
gives only a paraphrase of the famous hymn, so famous that many
transcribers of the Bede manuscript added the full text of the
hymn in the margin, but more importantly for our purposes, Bede
accounts for the process by which the hymn was produced.
Caedmon was an illiterate Englishman, yet, according to Bede's
description,

> exponebantque illi quendam sacrae historiae siue
> doctrinae sermonem, praecipientes eum, si posset,
> hunc in modulationem carminis transferre. At ille
> suscepto negotio abiit, et mane rediens optimo
> carmine quod iubebatur conpositum reddidit.

> Then they read to him a passage of sacred history or
> doctrine, bidding him make a song out of it, if he
> could, in metrical form. He undertook the task and
> went away; on returning next morning he repeated the
> passage he had been given, which he had put into

---

[59]As discussed in the last chapter, the fact that Beowulf
exists only as a written entity should not cause too many
problems for an attempted oral reading.

[60]The Latin text and English translation of the acount

excellent verse.[60]

There are several places in Beowulf where singing in a

community environment is described by the poet. This suggests

that the oral performance of songs was, at least, not uncommon

to the the audience of Beowulf, and gives further support to

the legitimacy for reading the poem as an oral composition

itself. In the very beginning of the poem, Grendel is enraged

by the men in the hall:

> thaet he dogora gehwam   dream gehyrde
> hludne in healle; thaer waes hearpan sweg,
> swutol sang scopes
>
> (88-90)
>
> for he each day heard joy
> loud in the hall; there was the sound of the harp,
> the clear song of the scop.

This passage describes the singing of songs, but at a later

point in the poem there appears an even more clear example of

the composition and singing of songs, new songs based on old

models, very similar to the composition described by Lord in

The Singer of Tales. After Beowulf has defeated Grendel, a

party of warriors rides out to the mere where the monster was

supposed to live, to revel in his defeat. All there praise

Beowulf, but one member of the party is especially skilled in

words of praise:

---

from Bede are from D.K. Fry, "Caedmon as a Formulaic Poet," in
Oral Literature: Seven Essays, ed. J.J. Duggan (London:
Scottish Academic Press, 1975). This is an excellent essay for
examining the miracle of Caedmon's composition, as well as
exploring the oral-formulaic composition of poetry in
Anglo-Saxon England, and how it might differ from the model
proposed by Francis P. Magoun.

                    Hwilum cyninges thegn,
   guma gilphlaeden,   gidda gemyndig,
   se the ealfela   ealdgesegena
   worn gemunde,   word other fand
   sothe gebunden;   secg eft ongan
   sith Beowulfes   snyttrum styrian,
   ond on sped wrecan   spel gerade
                      (867-873)

                    Sometimes a thane of the king,
   a proud man,   mindful of tales,
   he who indeed   of the old sagas
   many remembered,   other words found
   truthfully bound;   the man again undertook
   the feat of Beowulf   to stir up skillfully,
   and successfully to tell   an apt story

Here we see a poet creating a new story (he found "other words"

to tell it), that is nevertheless "truthfully bound." His

listeners apparently found it "apt" enough for their enjoyment.

In the lines immediately following this passage, the Beowulf

poet tells us that the scop also told tales of Sigemund and his

glory-deeds, how he slew a dragon. Obviously, the scop is

comparing Beowulf and the legendary hero Sigemund; the

listeners of the scop's song find the two heroes very similar.

Here we see the tendency of oral stories constantly to state

the new in terms of the old: Beowulf the new hero is much like

the Sigemund of the old tales. It is for this reason, the

basis in what is already a part of the tradition, that the scop

is able to tell the story, that the audience can identify with

the story, and that the story is considered by all to be

"truthfully bound."

John Niles draws the relationship between the scop in the

story of Beowulf and the Beowulf poet even more closely; he

believes that the existence of oral poets in the story is

strong evidence that the Beowulf poet himself was an oral poet:

> The ease with which the Beowulf poet slips into and
> out of the persona of an oral singer suggests that he
> saw little distinction between these singers and
> himself.[61]

Not merely the existence of singers in the song makes an oral

reading plausible, but rather the relationship between the scop

in the story and the poet raises the question of oral

composition. A literate author can write about oral poets

without being one himself, but in Beowulf we do not feel so

much that the poet is telling us about an alien art as we get

the idea that he is describing or enacting in the story the

very way that he himself is composing. In particular, it is

often difficult to mark the point at which the scop's song in

the poem begins and ends. For example, during a feast at

Heorot the scop tells the story of Finn, yet there is little

clean break between the story of Beowulf and the story of Finn

(line 1065ff). While it is not necessary to do an analysis of

the section here, this passage has caused much debate as to

where the actual story of Finn begins; Klaeber summarizes

several different interpretations in a lengthy note which

begins "scholars are not at all agreed on the punctuation and

construction of these lines."[62] It seems to me that

it is as if the Beowulf poet himself was used to telling the

story of Finn as well, and at this point in the story confused

---

[61]Niles, Beowulf, 38.

[62]Fr. Klaeber, Beowulf and the Fight at
Finnsburg, 170.

his relationship, and relationship of the Finn episode, to the larger story, and put himself in the place of the singer in the poem. The length of the Finn digression, the longest in the poem, and the existence of another manuscript, a fragment of The Fight at Finnsburg, confirm that the Finn digression in Beowulf was also a heroic story in its own right. Since the poet does not go to pains to set apart or describe the process of storytelling in Beowulf, this suggests that it was a practice familiar to both him and his audience.

A very bothersome element of Beowulf to modern scholars is the large number of apparent inconsistencies in the telling of the story of the Geatish hero. The resolving of these inconsistencies has been the labor of a great many critics; ever since Tolkien praised Beowulf as great poetry, Anglo-Saxonists have been loathe to admit that the inconsistencies in the poem are flaws, and spill much ink attempting to work out solutions to those inconsistencies. Some flaws can be ascribed to scribal error, given the fact that our Beowulf manuscript may be the last in a series of copyings. Some conflicting details, however, cannot be easily resolved by assuming scribal inaccuracy; such details defy explanation, they are real dissonances in the poem and seem to be the result of poor poetic craftsmanship, a solution not

---

[63]Arthur G. Brodeur has argued that "The greatest poet may suffer a lapse of memory; or, in seeking for specific effects at different times, he may fall into discrepancies which, even if discovered, might not have troubled him or his

acceptable to most medievalists.[63]

In a reading of Beowulf based in the premises of orality many of the supposed flaws in this poem are less problematic: they are inconsistencies which could hardly appear as flaws because they would go unnoticed in oral performance, or, if noticed, would go uncensured. If Beowulf is a traditional story, then the poet who told it was not creating a new story, but rather was retelling, as a performer only, a story that he had heard many times before. Regardless, then, of his own poetic creativity, his story was composed of traditional elements that he had to remain faithful to, even if their meaning or importance was no longer crystal-clear to him. His audience, since they shared in the tradition, would make sure that he remained faithful to the tradition, that he told only what he had heard ("mine gefraege").

The mistakes that cannot be discounted as scribal are so irksome to modern scholars precisely because we are modern readers; we consider Beowulf with our own preconceptions of

---

public. .. . . inconsistencies as striking as those in Beowulf may be found in the plays of Shakespeare." The Art of Beowulf (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959), 186. Though Brodeur assumes a thoroughly literate author, he never fully explains, at least to my satisfaction, just why the poem's inconsistencies would not have troubled the poet or the audience; his argument for the carefully constructed structure of the poem would, in fact, lead me to believe that the poet would be concerned that the poem be properly polished, even if it was produced in a "society which had not yet produced professional critics" (186). Brodeur gives no indication that the conflicting details may be seen as intentional, so we are finally left with the same problem: how or why do these details exist in an allegedly carefully authored work?

literacy, and by doing so impose on the poem a set of constraints and expectations that the poem may not have been composed under. Many of the apparent flaws in Beowulf are bothersome to a literate mind because they are the kinds of mistakes that a literate mind would easily see and correct in reviewing the poem. However, what if Beowulf is not the work of a literate author, but rather of a poet-performer, a spokesman for the tradition, composed in performance? If such were the case, then the story as told might be very different from a literate production because of the conditions of composition and the relationship of the poet to the poem. Several characteristics of such a composition can be elucidated.

If a story is an old one, told over a long period of time, then the common sense of the people may gradually change. While it is usually the case that, given the close relationship between the story and the common sense, the story will change to reflect the changing common sense (the homeostatic tendency), occasionally there will be details that will lose their original meaning. The oral poet will not, of course, simply discard these details, because even though they may not mean much to him, they are still felt to be an important part of the tradition that he has been entrusted to preserve. John Niles calls such details "truncated motifs."[64] These may be details that have little logical place in the narrative,

---

[64] Niles, Beowulf, 172.

but that the poet feels compelled to retain as they are a part
of the greater tradition that is producing his story. As
Dorothy Whitelock has suggested, "a poet who was free to invent
would presumably not have inserted puzzling features of this
kind."[65] If the poem was composed in an oral mode,
then the homeostatic tendency was at work--if our poet was not
literate, then he would not have gone through and "cleaned up"
the tale as a whole after he produced it. The poet is
obligated to include certain details that are part of the
tradition even if they don't flow right in.

A possible example of a "truncated motif" in Beowulf is
the curse on the dragon's treasure described in lines 3051-75.
In this section the poet qualifies the treasure that Beowulf
has fought the dragon to win:

```
thonne waes thaet yrfe    eacencraeftig,
iumonna gold    galdre bewunden,
thaet tham hringsele    hrinan ne moste
gumena aenig,    nefne God sylfa,
sigora Sothcyning    sealde tham the he wolde
--he is manna gehyld--    hord openian,
efne swa hwylcum manna,    swa him gemet thuhte.
                         (3051-57)
```

then was that powerful heritage,
gold of men of old wound by a spell,
that that ring-hall might not by touched
by any man, unless God himself,
True-king of victories granted him who He would
--He is man's protection--to open the hoard,
even such which man, as He thought proper.

John Niles argues[66] that it is perfectly natural in

---

[65]Whitelock, The Audience of Beowulf, 55.

[66]Niles, Beowulf, 174.

the realm of legend that a dragon's treasure have a curse on it. Niles explains the curse by means of "truncated motif" because the treasure's curse may be seen to be merely a detail mentioned off the cuff: the curse has no effect on the story at all, or at least the poet does not make any connection obvious. The curse is not given as a cause for Beowulf's death, nor for the impending doom for the Geatish people. The curse detail causes less difficulty for Niles, because it need not be viewed as a detail that flaws the story: it is merely a quality that both the poet and the audience associate with buried treasure, a stock detail of the tradition. If we are reading the poem as an oral performance, we do not need to account for a poet who would be concerned with smoothing out details to make the poem "read" more consistently. In an oral reading, then, even if the detail does not play an important role in the story, and even though it is a contradictory detail, the listeners of the story will not feel its inclusion is wrong. Dragon's treasures naturally have curses, so this one must too, even if that curse has no consequence for the story of Beowulf.

Howell Chickering has voiced strong disagreement with Niles' book in general, and with the matter of "truncated motifs and the dragon's curse in particular. He points out that one of the problems of such terms as "truncated motifs" is that they "force the resolution of long-standing interpretive problems, collapsing any doubleness of vision we might have

about the poem."[67]   In direct reference to the

dragon's curse, Chickering criticizes Niles for dismissing "as

inconsequential motifs . . . those very passages which

suggest the need for ironic or Christian readings of the poem's

ethos."[68]   I agree that the "barbaric style" and

"truncated motifs" should not be used as a catch-all for

resolving problems in the poem; we must not simply relegate

difficult elements of the poem to the idiosyncracies of an

archaic style.   I also agree whole-heartedly that "interpretive

problems," or tensions in the poem, add to the beauty of the

poem and should not be resolved by force--I hope to make this

clear later in my discussion of the pagan-Christian tension.

However, I will, for now at least, stick to the earlier claim

that our oral model does not allow for the kind of irony that

Chickering would find in the poem.[69]   The concept of

"truncated motif" when applied to the dragon's gold allows us

to explain the presence of the detail without being forced to

posit an author or an ironic intent.   Postulating a "barbaric

style" of the Beowulf poet should not be seen as an attempt to

---

[67]Howell Chickering, Untitled Review of John
Niles' Beowulf: The Poem and Its Tradition, Speculum 61(1986),
186.

[68]Chickering, Review of Niles in Speculum, 188.

[69]I am arguing here that I disagree with Chickering's
censuring of Niles' use of "truncated motifs." Chickering's
overall critique of Niles' book is something that will have to
be seriously considered; due to the fact that the article has
just appeared, and that I have drawn heavily Niles in this
thesis, however, the full consequences of that critique will
not be considered here.

mechanically wipe out dissonances in the poem, but rather to
show how the style of the poem itself accords well to our model
of orality.

Similar to the concept of "truncated motifs" and
traditional elements is the certainty that the Beowulf poet, if
he was an oral poet, doubtless had heard many different
tellings of the monster-killer legend. If such was the case,
then he undoubtedly had many different versions of the story,
all traditional, in his poetic memory. The possibility then
arises that contradictions in Beowulf may be owing to the
incorporation of details from different tellings of the story.
In the beginning of what has been called the second part of the
poem, the hero's return to Geatland, there is a long passage
where Beowulf relates to his king and court the adventures in
Denmark (1999-2151). Comparison of this passage with the
actual events earlier in the poem shows a certain number of
conflicting details: Beowulf speaks of Freawaru, the daughter
of King Hrothgar who passes the mead cup, he describes a pouch
of dragon skin that Grendel carries, and he names Hondscio, the
poor thane who was devoured by Grendel. However, during the
poem's account of the events in Denmark, in the first part,
Freawaru is never mentioned, there is no talk at all of
Grendel's marvelously crafted pouch, and Hondscio is never
called by name. Since the two "halves" of the poem might very
well stand alone, it could be postulated that they draw on
different sets of traditional details. Our poet may be

combining these two segments of Beowulf's life for the first time, or, in their telling, might be drawing on different versions of the story from the same tradition. Given the malleability of oral performance, this is not a major problem for an oral reading. However, for a literate reading of the poem, one which supposes a single author who is shaping an original story, such apparent contradictions cannot be easily reconciled except by very complicated explanation or concession of a sloppy storyteller.

In performance, the poet composes as he goes along, and the audience hears the poem only once, as it is being composed--thus the audience is not in a position to reread the poem many times. If such was the case for Beowulf, then neither the poet nor the audience would be able to take an "aeriel view" of the poem, or consider the story as a whole by critical reconsiderations; the performance is temporal, and thus has what Niles calls an "inorganic unity":

> As has often been noted, the performances of oral literature do not always achieve the same kind of unity that is characteristic of written texts. Works composed for the printed page tend to achieve an organic unity whereby each part relates to the others naturalistically. Each passage can be easily compared with the others, both in the process of composition and in the act of reading, so that internal discrepancies stand out as mistakes. Works composed for oral performance--in particular, works composed not only for but during oral performance, like the epic songs of the Balkans--achieve a unity that might be called inorganic, in that it is abstract and intellectual. It is based on consistencies of theme rather than of characterization or plot. To modern eyes it is therefore likely to appear as a lack of unity, but to phrase the matter thus is to put in negative terms

what might better be considered an expression of a
special kind of artistic impulse.[70]

Thus, in oral performance, the text cannot be apprehended as an
"object"--neither the listeners nor the poet can overlook the
tale as a whole and analyze it. Since performance is temporal,
the cohesiveness and effect of each individual scene will take
precedence over the cohesiveness and effect of the work as a
whole.

A fine example of scene-precedence is the two references
to the Geatish court's reaction to Beowulf's proposed
expedition into Denmark. Early in the poem, when Beowulf first
arrives at the court of Hrothgar, he explains to the Scylding
king his intent to fight Grendel; although he is still young,
Beowulf says, nevertheless his kinsmen are confident in his
ability and all stood behind his decision to undertake the
adventure:

> Tha me thaet gelaerdon   leode mine,
> tha selestan,   snotere ceorlas,
> theoden Hrothgar,   thaet ic the sohte,
> forthan hie maegenes-craeft   minne cuthon
> <div align="center">(415-18)</div>

> Then my people advised me,
> the best of wise earls,
> lord Hrothgar, that I seek you,
> because they know my strenght-craft

Yet, later in the poem when Beowulf returns home victorious,
his relieved king Hygelac professes that he and, presumably,
his court, were in no way in favor of the mission to Denmark:

> Ic thaes modceare

---

[70]Niles, Beowulf, 169.

```
        sorhwylmum seath,    sithe ne truwode
        leofes mannes;    ic the lange baed,
        thaet thu thone waelgaest    wihte ne grette,
        lete Suth-Dene    sylfe geweorthan
        guthe with Grendel.    Gode ic thanc secge,
        thaes the ic the gesundne    geseon moste.
                            (1992-98)
```

```
                  I of that with heart-care,
        with surging sorrows seethed, I did not trust in the journey
        of my beloved man; I asked you long
        that you the slaughter-monster not at all approach,
        that you let the South-Danes themselves settle
        the war with Grendel.  I say thanks to God
        that you I might see safe.
```

There is obviously a considerable difference here between the

presentations of the reaction to Beowulf's adventure, but

notice that the two descriptions occur nearly 1600 lines apart.

While the discrepancy causes problems for a reading supposing a

controlling author, an oral reading allows for the integrity of

individual scenes to take priority over the narrative form as a

whole. Thus, in the first description, Beowulf is given extra

weight as a great hero because, regardless of the odds, his

kinsmen are confident in him. In a performance of Beowulf,

1577 lines later when Hygelac expresses deep relief at

Beowulf's return, the audience has forgotten the earlier detail

of full support, or at least is not in a position to critically

compare the two accounts. Thus, in the later description,

Beowulf's great feat of monster-killing is further amplified by

the worrying of his kinsmen for his safety in the face of such

great danger. The cohesiveness of the narrative is lessened

for literate readers by such an inconsistency, but in oral

performance the individual scenes are made more heroic and

gripping.

A type of inconsistency, or of storytelling unfamiliar to literates, is the <u>Beowulf</u> poet's handling of description. It seems odd to modern readers that the poem tells us little about the physical appearance of the characters; it has been argued that in the case of Grendel the lack of description serves to force the audience to bring to the story their own nightmarish vision, and that may be true, but why is there little description of characters like Beowulf and Hrothgar? If we recall the theories of Eric Havelock, we can account for the lack of description in <u>Beowulf</u> by the fact that the oral stories are based on the <u>traditional</u> and not the <u>empirical</u>. The poet doesn't describe details because he is repeating the story that was told to him, and the tradition, orally preserved, does not place a high value on remembering details. The oral poet bases his knowledge of things on what he has heard in stories; it is not a knowledge based on what "I observe" but on what "they say." Thus, Beowulf is not depicted in the poem so much as a warrior with certain characteristics, as he is a performer of heroic deeds. His reputation, or his "personality," is based in the deeds that the tradition preserves, or in those characteristics that characters in the poem experience: the coast guard notices that he stands head and shoulders above his men in stature and manner (247-51), he is widely known for having the strength of thirty men (379-80), and he gains reknown for his deeds of valor (418-424).

Finally, Beowulf is given an audience with Hrothgar not because of some personality trait, but rather because the retainer of Hrothgar finds him worthy by the stories he has heard of him (366-81). Nowhere are we told what color hair he has, if he is bearded or not, or his physical features, because these are not the details that the tradition would consider the most important to remember. Lineage is important in oral society, as traditional literature from the Bible to the Homeric epics can attest, so much is made of Beowulf's lineage (e.g. 251-4, 331-55).

Grendel is described in much the same terms as Beowulf: we are told almost nothing about his physical appearance, save that he is huge and monstrous. The one sparse description of Grendel and his mother is based on what people have heard about him:

```
Ic thaet londbuend,    leode mine,
seleraedende    secgan hyrde,
that hie gesawon    swylce twegen
micle mearcstapan    moras healdan,
ellorgastas.  Thaera other waes,
thaes the hie gewislicost    gewitan meahton,
idese onlicnes;    other earmsceapen
on weres waestmum    wraeclastas traed,
naefne he waes mara    thonne aenig man other
                        (1345-53)
```

```
I this land-men, my people,
hall-counselors have heard say,
that they saw two such
land-steppers holding the moors,
alien spirits.  One was,
of this that they most certainly might know,
the likeness of a woman.  the other wretched shape
in the form of a man tread the wretched path,
except he was greater than any other man.
```

Grendel's lineage is important, too, and derives back to Cain,

the first committer of fratricide; Grendel is named in such terms as "God's enemy," the "walker alone," and the "fierce spirit." He, of course, is characterized most by his terrible raids on Heorot, and the bloody ravages of the Danes: the deeds that have formed his reputation.

Not only characters, but the setting, too, is described mostly through heard or story-based details. The best example of this, and possibly the best example of description based in hearsay, is the passage on Grendel's mere. It is pictured as a desolate, frost-covered place, but only in sparse detail (1357-64). There has been said to be seen strange flames on the water at night (1365-6), and no one knows how deep the mere is (1366-7). The most enlightening detail about the mere, however, comes not through description, but rather through misty folk-lore:

> Theah the haethstapa   hundum geswenced,
> heorot hornum trum   holtwudu sece,
> feorran geflymed,   aer he feorh seleth,
> aldor on ofre,   aer he wille,
> hafelan beorgan;   nis thaet heoru stow!
>   (1368-72)

> Though the heath-stepper, harassed by hounds,
> hart with strong horns seeks the forest,
> fleeing far, rather will he offer life,
> life on the bank, before he will go in,
> to save his head; that is not a safe place!

There are a few passages in Beowulf of elaborate description, however, and these mostly concern precious treasure, armor and weapons. This may not seem to follow from the argument above, that the tradition does not preserve physical details well, unless we consider that the most

oral-based composition, but I think I have demonstrated the usefulness of an oral approach, if for nothing else than to give us some fresh insight into old problems. All great works of literature cause their readers to puzzle and question, and Beowulf is no exception, but if we are sensitive to the fact that Beowulf may have been composed with a different set of aesthetics and concerns than our own, then we may lessen the possibility that some of the difficulties in the poem are a result of our own asking of the wrong questions.

Unlike the inconsistencies in the poem, little critical attention has been paid to the gnomic elements of Beowulf. When cited, those elements have caused some problems for readers approaching the poem with literate assumptions: the inclusion of passages of wisdom not directly related to the narrative at hand seems clumsy, or, worse, straight proverbial wisdom conflicts with the ideal of originality. To account for the gnomes in Beowulf, critics positing a thoroughly literate author have offered explanations based on grounds that range from ironic intention to different types of rhetorical flair; Robert Burlin sums up the position of the gnomic elements for most Beowulf scholars:

> critics seem content to relegate these moments of
> aphoristic didacticism to the category of "Germanic
> Antiquities," formal, if not always conceptual,
> survivals of an older poetic mode, reformulated
> unimaginatively where congenial to a monkish
> Christianity. They may confirm the literary
> anthropologist's notion of a deep-rooted connection
> between story-telling and wise counsel, but they run
> counter to the modern critical preference for the
> inexplicit, for the discovery of "meaning" in the

> organic whole rather than the sententious assertions
> of the narrative voice.[71]

Burlin's essay presupposes a shaping, controlling author for
Beowulf; he speaks of "structural coherence" of the poem,[72]
and the poet's apparently self-imposed "consistency of
purpose,"[73] which suggests that he sees the gnomic
elements less as a natural, unconscious preservative function
of the poem, and more as the poet's manipulative handling of
old traditional elements.

   Though even the early literate writers included much
common wisdom in their work (the concept of plagiarism did not
come about simultaneously with the advent of writing), the
presence of so much common proverbial language is in conflict
with the concept of literacy as the mastery and questioning of
the commonplace. The gnomic element of Beowulf, finally, is
very difficult to reconcile in a reading of the poem as a
literate production, a reading assuming the poet himself was
imposing "'meaning' in the organic whole." However, proverbial
wisdom is what we should expect if Beowulf is the product of a
poet in performance: if oral, while the poem is a wonderful
and marvelous tale of a monster-killer, it is essentially about
values and shared wisdom. In our model of oral performance,

---

[71]Robert B. Burlin, "Gnomic Indirection in Beowulf,"
Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation, ed. Lewis
Nicholson (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame
Press, 1975), 41.

[72]Burlin, "Gnomic Indirection," 43.

[73]Burlin, "Gnomic Indirection," 47.

earlier, derived chiefly from Havelock, epic is given the task of preserving values; in fact, the preserving of values often takes precedence over the story itself. The wisdom that the poem espouses in an oral situation will be the common wisdom of the culture, of both the poet and the audience, since performance is shaped by the shared tradition.

There are in Beowulf many examples of gnomic or proverbial utterances, verses in the poem where the narrative is temporarily broken by words of wisdom that are applicable to the situation in the story, but which are often not directly related to the story. Burlin describes the process:

> Stepping momentarily out of his narrative, the poet takes the occasion to pronounce some accepted verity, usually concerning the forces which govern the great world—nature, wyrd, divine Providence—or the way man should respond to such forces——principally by respecting the values of the heroic society or by observing divine decree.[74]

Sometimes these utterances take the form of a character's speech, sometimes they are narrator's asides, but they always embody what are apparently the dominant values, models of behavior, and beliefs of the poet and audience; in other words, in an oral reading, these passages are sincere and valuable professions of the wisdom of the tradition. Quite often the gnomic utterance is spurred by the path of the narrative—as if the poet, in the telling of the story, was reminded of a proverb that fit the occasion and so included it in the story. When Beowulf has returned from his adventure in Denmark, he

---

[74]Burlin, "Gnomic Indirection," 42.

shows his love and allegiance for his king Hygelac by passing

on some of the treasure that he received from Hrothgar. After

describing the gifts--horses and treasure--the narrator

interjects a recommendation to the story's listeners that they

should learn from this example:

> Swa sceal maeg don,
> nealles inwitnet   othrum bregdon
> dyrnum craeft,   death renian
> hondgesteallan.
>
> (2166-69)

> So should kinsmen do,
> not at all knit malice-nets for each other
> by secret skill, prepare death
> for side-companions.

Here the poet takes care to draw the comparison between good

and bad retainer-behavior, since that relationship between the

lord and his thanes is the fundamental one for holding the

society together.

The poet may at times choose not to make the gnomic

statements himself in asides or elaborations on the narrative,

but instead put the words of wisdom in the mouths, and actions,

of his characters. Thus, near the end of the poem Wiglaf

explicitly expresses what has been the poem's thrust all along:

that Beowulf embodies and upholds the values of the society and

is an appropriate model for imitation:

> thone the aer geheold
> with hettendum · hord ond rice
> aefter haeletha hryre, hwate scildwigan
> folcred fremede, oththe furthur gen
> eorlscipe efnde.
>
> (3003-07)

> he who before held
> against the enemies the hoard and the kingdom

after the death of warriors, bold shield-warriors,
performed good for the people, or further yet
did earl-like things.

The Beowulf poet uses many of the digressions in the story to
serve as models of action, good or bad; one of the most famous
of these, Hrothgar's Heremod speech, is a fine example of the
poet using his characters to present gnomic wisdom. After
Beowulf has returned from the mere and the slaying of Grendel's
mother, Hrothgar takes time out from the celebration to offer
to Beowulf the example of a bad king, Heremod, whom Hrothgar
warns the Geat not to be like should the duty of kingship fall
to him. Hrothgar, in lines 1705-09, praises Beowulf for his
strength and his wisdom, and counsels him to be a comfort to
his people and a help to his warriors by a counter-example
which may be the poem's finest example of gnomic wisdom:

> Ne wearth Heremod swa
> eaforum Ecgwelan,   Ar-Scyldingum;
> ne geweox he him to willan,   ac to wealfealle
> ond to deathcwalum   Deniga leodum;
> breat bolgenmod   beodgeneatas,
> eaxlgesteallan,   oth thaet he ana hwearf,
> maere theoden   mondreamum from,
> theah the hine mightig God   maegenes wynnum,
> eafethum stepte,   ofer ealle men
> forth gefremede.   Hwaethere him on ferthe greowe
> breosthord blodreow;   nallas beagas geaf
> Denum aefter dome;   dreamleas gebad,
> thaet he thaes gewinnes   weorc throwade,
> leodbealo longsum.   Thu the laer be thon,
> gumcyste ongit!
>
> (1709-23)

> Nor was Heremod so
> to the sons of Ecgwela, the Glory-Scyldings;
> he did not grow for their joy, but for slaughter
> and for the destruction of the Danish people;
> with a swollen heart he killed his table-companions,
> shoulder-warriors, until he alone turned,
> mighty king from man's joy,

> although the mighty God him in joy of strength,
> raised in might, over all men
> advanced him forth. Yet for him in his heart grew
> in his breast blood-thirsty; not at all did he give rings
> to the Danes for glory; he waited joyless,
> that he that work of hardship suffered,
> long-lasting people-harm. Learn by him,
> understand munificence!

Hrothgar is especially attuned to this story, since it is the

story of a previous Danish King and one of his ancestors; the

listening audience may also have been familiar with the story

of Heremod from the tradition. In the story, all the rules for

good kingship are presented by showing what a bad king will do

and neglect to do. Heremod is not a good king because he

breaks the bonds of kinship and of the lord-thane relationship,

he does not place the security of his men and community first,

he is selfish, he scorns the God who has given him the might of

kingship, and he does not give rings, the visual symbol of the

integrity and closeness of the community. Heremod suffered

because of his selfishness and bloodthirstiness, and Hrothgar

warns Beowulf to learn from this example.

Much poetry of the Anglo-Saxon period is infused with

gnomic elements like those in Beowulf. While I do not want to

undertake a comparison of gnomic elements across the corpus of

Old English poetry here, as it would be far too lengthy and as

my lack of familiarity with the whole corpus prevents me from

doing so, I have noticed similarities in gnomic utterances in

even the few works I have studied closely. Death, an

all-too-familiar inevitability to Anglo-Saxons, is a common

subject of gnomic utterances (as the Beowulf poet suggests when

he says of death, after Grendel flees the hall in his
death-throes, "no thaet ythe byth to befleonne--fremme se the
wille" ("nor is that [death] easy to flee from--let him who
will try" (1002-03)). In lines 2590-91 of Beowulf, the poet
says "swa scael aeghwylc mon/alaetan laen-dagas" ("so must each
man/give up his lent-days"). In The Wanderer, a shorter
unauthored elegiac poem of roughly the same period as Beowulf,
the poet says "her bith maeg laene" (109, "here [on earth] the
kinsman is fleeting")[75] in Maxims II, a collection
of Anglo-Saxon proverbial sayings, it is said that "lif sceal
with deathe" (51, "life must contend with death"). The doom of
death is a Germanic belief that still remains strong in the
presence of Christianity.

Maxims is especially interesting because it clearly shows
the oneness of viewpoint of the tradition regarding its wisdom.
While Maxims is a collection of proverbs and wisdom, it is not
assembled or compiled in any real order. In many sections,
human laws are grouped quite comfortably with the laws of
nature; for example, in Maxims II, "Cyning sceal rice healdan"
(1, "The king must hold the kingdom") is immediately followed
by "wind byth on lyfte swiftust/thunar byth thragum hludast"
(3-4, "The wind in the sky is the swiftest, the thunder in time
is loudest"). Human wisdom is placed in the same realm as

---

[75]Texts of The Wanderer and of Maxims II are from Bright's
Old English Grammar and Reader, Third Edition, ed. Frederic
Cassidy and Richard Ringler (New York: Holt, Rinehart and
Winston, 1971.)

natural wisdom so that the human laws will be given more authority, and because the oral mindset considers both types of wisdom equally true and valid. The cyclicality of nature is a strong point of identification for Anglo-Saxon gnomes, and this is especially interesting since the oral mind has been characterized as perceiving reality in cycles—nothing is new, because new phenomena are apprehended in terms of past traditional experience. Thus, in Beowulf, "oththaet other com/gear in geardas, swa nu gyt deth" ("until came another/year onto the city, as it still does now" (1133-34)), and in The Wanderer:

        hu hi faerlice   flet ofgeafon,
        modge magathegnas,   swa thes middangeard
        ealra dogra gewham   dreoseth ond fealleth

        how they suddenly are gone from the hall,
        proud retainers, just as the middle-earth
        falls and vanishes each day.

The cycles of the year and the day lend comprehendability to an oral mindset's conception of the world, since elements repeating in a cyclical manner can easily be expressed in the same terms. If winter comes once a year, then each new winter can be understood in terms of previous experiences of winters.

Reading Beowulf as an oral composition makes the place of the gnomic utterances in the story more clear; recalling that the primary role of narrative in an oral culture is the retention of wisdom, the gnomic elements of the poem can be seen to play a crucial role in that retention. Many gnomic expressions seem themselves to be much like formulas—neatly

condensed proverbs are invaluable in preserving and rapidly calling to mind wisdom and values. The poet in an oral situation is a spokesman for all; he is telling a story that the audience is familiar with, both in terms of its content and style of presentation. In our oral model, the gnomic elements are the backbone of the tale, and the raison d'etre. As Niles has said, the poet uses the gnomic elements "to build up a grid of belief against which the action he recounts can be plotted."[76] The poem is thus a process whereby the society's beliefs and values are articulated in order to be remembered and appreciated by the audience.

Our model of orality posits the retention of traditional literature as part of the function of oral poetry. As I have shown above, there can be little debate that Beowulf preserves wisdom, and the presence of very similar gnomic elements across the corpus of Anglo-Saxon poetry is evidence that the gnomes are commonly shared values of the culture. Surely a literate author can make use of gnomes or proverbs, but if he does so it will be less as a statement of shared value and more for some personal, ironic, or self-conscious purpose. My oral interpretation of Beowulf depends on the fact that the proverbial wisdom in the poem is nothing but proverbial wisdom, that it is the poet's earnest affirmation of his tradition. In lieu of illustrating this here, I shall defer the argument to the latter part of this unit, as the status of the gnomes is

---

[76]Niles, Beowulf, 199.

integrally related to the larger question of the poet's
attitude toward the heroic code.

Unlike the easily cited gnomic elements of the poem, many
readings of Beowulf concern themselves with the more subtle
concept of irony. While our model of orality does not allow
for certain types of irony in a reading of Beowulf, as will be
discussed shortly, it would be naive to assert that there is no
irony at all in the poem. Beowulf, in fact, makes splendid use
of two types of irony in particular: verbal irony and what
might be called a type of dramatic irony. The Beowulf poet,
like all Old English poets, makes frequent use of litotes,
which is a type of ironic understatement. This type of irony
is perfectly coherent to the oral listener, since it does not
depend on a separation from the story, but, in fact, often
takes the form of aphoristic wisdom. The passage described
earlier, that "death is not easy to flee from," is an example
of litotes. Other examples can be found in many passages from
Beowulf: when Grendel has begun to attack Heorot, the poet
says "Tha waes eathfynde, the him elles hwaer/gerumlicor raest
sohte" (138-9, "Then was it easy to find, him who
elsewhere/sought a resting-place further away."); when Grendel
has been viciously wounded by Beowulf in the hall battle, the
poet calmly asserts "thaet waes geocor sith,/thaet se
hearm-scapa to Heorute ateah." (765-6, "that was a sad
journey,/that the enemy made to Heorot"). The latter example
also shows a sort of situational irony in the poem, at least

through the monster's eyes: suddenly he, instead of the hapless Danes, is the one who meets death at the hall.

Beowulf also exhibits dramatic irony, or the type of irony dependent on a difference in knowledge between the characters in the story and the listeners of the story. The part of the poem where the Danes and Geats are awaiting the outcome of Beowulf's battle with Grendel's mother, which shall be examined shortly in light of another type of irony, is an example of dramatic irony. When the mere begins to bubble and froth with blood, all those Geats and Danes watching sadly conclude that it must be a sign of the death of Beowulf. However, from the passage immediately preceding, the listening audience knows that the frothing of the water is actually a result of Beowulf's having killed Grendel's mother. The listening audience is well aware of Beowulf's victory, while the audience in the story as yet has no idea, or the wrong idea, of the battle's outcome. As T.M. Andersson suggests, tension in the poem is built up as the readers/listeners empathize with the audience in the poem:

> We are now given a view of Beowulf's companions on the shore despairing of the outcome and fully expecting that Beowulf has succumbed. Only when Beowulf breaks the surface is the illusion of bereavement dispelled and the meters peal joy once again.[77]

There are many instances in the poem where we as readers/listeners know more about what is going on than the

---

[77]Andersson, "Tradition and Design in Beowulf, 1

story's characters do: we are aware of the foreshadowed
destruction of Heorot in flames (82-3), we know what the
outcomes of the battles will be, and, at the poem's end, we are
told that Beowulf's soul is carried to the Father's embrace.
The phenomenon of dramatic irony is probably not due to the
narrator's taking a consciously "omniscient" point of view.
Nor does it seem to be due to a conscious rhetorical intent; if
anything, the abundant use of dramatic irony lessens the
tension for the listeners—we are not kept in suspense as the
characters in the story ar, and in fact we are often told what
the outcome of a situation will be well before that situation
has seen its fruition in the narrative itself. Instead, to
make up for the loss of tension in the narrative brought about
by dramatic irony, the poem depends on building suspense
through the audience's empathizing with the tension that the
poem's characters feel, which is probably quite natural (as,
much to his dismay, Plato would agree) when the audience is
participating as emotionally as oral audiences are supposed to.

A reading of Beowulf based in those premises of orality
discussed earlier, however, assumes that a certain type of
irony will not appear in the poem. Our model of orality posits
a lack of distance between the poet, the audience, and the
story; no new story is being created in a performance, but
rather the tradition, commonly shared by both the poet and his
listeners, is shaping the story through the mouth of the
storyteller, who is gifted in the art of narration. Remember,

for the story to continue to live on and be remembered in an oral culture, it had

> to be a continual re-enactment of the tribal folkways, laws and procedures, and the listener had to become engaged in this re-enactment to the point of total emotional involvement. In short, the artist identified with his story, and the audience identified with the artist.[78]

Thus, our oral model does not look for that type of irony which has been called the "wink of the author"—irony which depends on the poet establishing a distance between himself and his story so that he can critique or undercut his story. The poet's audience, to appreciate his irony, must also be aware of that distance between poet/listeners and story, but this cannot be so in a tradition where the poet "cannot frame words to express the conviction that 'I' am one thing and the tradition is another; that 'I' can stand apart from the tradition and examine it."[79] To speak in such ironic terms would be akin to criticism, or the adding of original thought, and that is something the oral tradition will not stand for.

This type of irony is a hallmark of literacy; it is in many ways much like the allegory described earlier. With literacy comes the gap between author and story and listeners. After the introduction of writing, storytellers begin to conceive of themselves as having control over their tradition, and of telling original stories. No longer is the story a

---

[78]Havelock, A Preface to Plato, 159.

[79]Havelock, A Preface to Plato, 199-200.

product of a shared tradition and common sense, but in
post-oral situations the story is considered an original work,
the viewpoint of a single individual. The fact that the
stories are no longer shared communally in performance, but
rather are read over in writing by individuals in private, adds
to this feeling of separation of author and story. The
storyteller in literacy is no longer a spokesman for the
tradition, but rather is a conscious shaper of the tradition
for a group of individual readers, each of whom has a viewpoint
that he or she considers original:[80]

> The interpretation of a poem usually presupposes a
> "poet" and a "reader." The poet is often known by
> name; the reader is usually a convenient fiction,
> whether the author's or the critic's. The reader is
> assumed to be a private audience. In addressing him
> or her, the poet is often able to adopt a personal
> voice that may be ironic or confessional in tone, for
> both irony and confession depend on a certain private
> bond being established between the speaker and the
> listener.[81]

In a literate work, the author creates a sort of "persona" to
tell his story, and that persona is usually original and
individualized, and capable of being confessional, critical,
original, or ironic.

No such persona exists in our model of orality for

---

[80] A treatment of the differences between the oral and the
literate ways of seeing the relationship of the storyteller to
the tradition appears in the second Appendix to this thesis.
There I have briefly sketched the differences between Beowulf
and John Gardner's modern novel Grendel; each is a telling of
the Beowulf story, but Gardner's work clearly shows the vastly
different ways that a literate storyteller can handle, rework,
and use for original and personal ends a traditional story.

[81] Niles, Beowulf, 197.

Beowulf--a poem as a dynamic oral event communally shared by a group of people. Through the artistry of the scop and the active participation of the audience the story was formed by the tradition, as were the poet and the listeners; thus, the story was the production of all, and embodies the common sense of both its performer and its audience. The poet "recalls the action, orchestrates it in its imposing detail, and mediates it by setting it within a value system that the listening audience would have recognized as its own."[82] Let us consider the passage in Beowulf at around line 1600, a passage John Niles has also cited as one illustrative of the problems of irony in an interpretation of this poem.[83] A group of warriors are gathered around the mere, waiting to see the outcome of Beowulf's battle with Grendel's mother:

> Sona thaet gesawon   snottre ceorlas,
> tha the mid Hrothgare   on holm wliton,
> thaet waes ythgeblond   eal gemenged,
> brim blode fah.   Blondenfeaxe,
> gomele ymb godne   ongeador spraecon,
> thaet hig thaes aethelingas   eft ne wendon,
> thaet he sigehrethig   secean come
> maerne theoden;   tha thaes monige gewearth,
> thaet hine seo brimwylf   abroten haefde.
> Tha com non daeges.   Naes ofgeafon
> hwate Scyldingas;   gewat him ham thonon
> goldwine gumena.   Gistas setan
> modes seoce   ond on mere staredon;
> wiston ond ne wendon,   thaet hie heora winedrihten
> selfne gesawon.
>   (1591-1605, italics mine)

Soon they saw that, wise earls,
they who with Hrothgar gazed on the sea,

---

[82] Niles, Beowulf, 198.

[83] Niles, Beowulf, 163ff.

> that was wave-blended all mixed,
> the water stained with blood. Grey-haired,
> aged, they spoke together concerning the good man,
> that they did not expect again of the noble one,
> that he, glory-exulting, might come to visit
> the famous king; then many agreed
> that the sea-wolf had destroyed him.
> Then came the noon of the day. They left the promontory,
> <u>valiant Scyldings</u>; they went then home,
> men of the gold-friend. The guests sat
> sick at heart and stared at the mere;
> they wished yet did not expect that they their dear lord
> himself would see.

Niles has shown the problems in interpreting "hwate Scyldings"

("valiant Scyldings," 1601). In the passage above the

Scyldings (the Danes, Hrothgar's men) are called "hwate" at a

point where they are apparently displaying less than valiant,

or "keen-hearted" as Niles translates the term, behavior. In a

time of crisis and doubt, when the safety of Beowulf, who has

already rid them of one monster, is at stake, the Scyldings

give up their post at the mere's edge and retreat home. Why,

then, does the poet call them "hwate"? Niles suggests that

there are several ways of dealing with this. The first is to

try to reason logically why the poet would use the word in the

context of the scene; such an attempt, taking the term "hwate"

at its face value, can result in questionable resolutions.

Niles quotes R.M. Lumiansky, who has offered the explanation

that "'convinced Beowulf is dead,' the Danes "courteously

withdraw to allow the Geats to mourn their supposedly lost

---

[84]Niles, 164, quoting R.M. Lumiansky, "The
Dramatic Audience in <u>Beowulf</u>," <u>The Beowulf Poet: A Collection
of Critical Essays</u> ed. D.K. Fry (Englewood Cliffs, New
Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1968), 79-80.

leader in private.'"[84]

Another way of dealing with the "hwate Scyldingas" problem
is to resolve it by suggesting that the poet is using the term
in an ironic manner. In this situation, then, the poet
criticizes the Danes for their cowardly behavior by calling
them "valiant" when in fact they are exhibiting behavior that
is anything but valiant. If we are reading the poem as an oral
composition, we cannot accept this explanation, though it may
be a perfectly reasonable one for an interpretation presuming a
thoroughly literate author. If our poet is composing by oral
methods, he would not use irony in such a way, because doing so
would demand that he play with his audience's expectations of
the Scyldings. To an oral audience, the Scyldings would occupy
a place of honor and glory in their legends and common sense;
to call them dishonorable in such a playful, ironic way would
be unintelligible to the oral audience.

To confront this problem with our oral model we must again
keep in mind the nature of oral performance. In orality,
things do not change easily or whimsically--in terms of
quality, things are usually by nature good or bad, as Niles
suggests:

> In Beowulf, the essential qualities of persons and
> things do not change from moment to moment. Human
> beings may change, but if so, they change
> emphatically, once and for all, like Heremod or
> Offa's queen. People are either "good" or "bad,"
> "valiant" or "cowardly," and the poem's formulaic
> vocabulary reflects this point of view.[85]

---

[85]Niles, Beowulf, 164.

If the poet is composing in performance, he has a number of possible names for the Scyldings, any one of which he may use to fit into the alliterative demands of the line: he may call them "Hring-Dene," "Here-Scyldingas," "Gar-Dena," "East-Dene," or any one of a number of other descriptive names, all of which speak of the Danes in a praiseworthy manner. It so happens that in line 1601 the poet was talking about them returning home ("ham"), so he needed an epithet for the Danes that alliterated with the "h" in "ham"; he might very well have used "Here-Scyldings" ("Battle-Scyldings") instead. The important thing is that, for the poet, the Danes are strong and warlike and valiant by definition, so that he may choose any word from his "word-hord" that fits the alliterative and metrical demands—for the poet, the Danes are always valiant. Thus, in calling them the "hwate Scyldingas," the poet is simply filling in his line with a common name for the Danes; his audience would probably hardly have noticed which name the poet had chosen.

I do not mean to make the argument too simplistic here. Niles is right about the "hwate Scyldingas" phrase—the poet intends no irony. However, we very well might see irony of this type if the situation were otherwise. There is no irony here because the poem has already presented the Danes as valiant many times before, but if the poet and his audience did not feel so about the Danes, we might see him using this type of irony. If an oral poet was describing, for example, a tribe

his people hated, he might very well use this type of irony, and it might be apprehended by all as ironic usage; it could be ironic because it would not go against the expectations of his audience in such a way that it would be at their expense ("the wink of the author"). If a certain tribe is known to be be unethical in warfare, we might ironically call them "valiant." However, in the case of the "hwate Scyldingas" to call them valiant in one place and mean it, and to call them valiant in another place and mean the opposite, would be ironic usage that depends on a certain distance from the tradition, and that our model of orality does not account for.

The above discussion of the type of irony not acknowledged in an oral reading of Beowulf thrust us headlong into the larger differences of interpretation for the poem--those that hinge on whether or not the poem is a critique of the heroic code. The serious questions about the purpose of the poem depend on what is perhaps the most difficult thing about Beowulf: its intermingling of Christianity and paganism. What exactly is the status of Christianity in the poem? Many explanations have been offered, covering a range of possibilities from the argument that the poem was composed by a monk, so it has an inherent Christianity, to view that it is an old heathen tale "cleaned up" by a monk, with Christianity painted on so that it would be acceptable to a Christian audience. We can be sure of one thing at least: Christianity is a very real part of this poem. Derek Pearsall has shown

that the influence of Christianity is an undeniable element of

Beowulf and its contemporary works:

> For if by poetry we mean extant poetic literature,
> litterae, letters, and not un-recorded oral
> verse-making, then England has no poetry but that of
> the Christian tradition . . . and the Germanic
> heritage, when it emerges in Anglo-Saxon poetry,
> emerges re-shaped, absorbed, chastened, in a form
> quite distinct from survivals elsewhere of the pagan,
> heroic, Germanic past.[86]

An oral reading of Beowulf will not support a view of the poem

as being "colored" with Christianity. Such theories depend on

an author who is literate: he has a conscious control over the

story, and can use it in a new way, or change it fundamentally

to make it acceptable to a new audience. The proponents of

this theory, most notably F.A. Blackburn,[87] assume

a tradition of the poem in written form, so that at some stage

a monk, in writing, interpolates Christian elements into an old

heathen poem so that it will be able to survive in a Christian

environment that does not smile on pagan poetry.

The oral view, as I shall explain, takes a much more

---

[86]Derek Pearsall, Old English and Middle English Poetry (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 1.

[87]F.A. Blackburn, "The Christian Coloring in Beowulf," An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism (ed. Lewis Nicholson, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963). Blackburn neatly removes for examination all of the Christian elements in Bewoulf and concludes that "two are interpolated" and the rest (66 passages) are made Christian by "slight changes such as a copyist could easily make" (21). I will try to show later that this is, even if the technology of writing is discluded from the question, not possible for an oral view. In orality, we cannot imagine "that the Bewoulf once existed as a whole without the Christian allusions" (21), and that a later poet simply added the Christian elements as he saw fit.

subtle view of the evolution of Anglo-Saxon society. Many changes came about in England after the Angles and Saxons migrated from the continent and settled the island; the most profound of these was the influx of Christianity and Latin learning. While the learned minority possessed a sophisticated understanding of orthodox Christianity, the new ideas brought about changes in the common culture, that of the illiterate majority, only very slowly. The secular culture for the most part did not undergo a radical revolution of idealogy, but gradually incorporated the new concepts until the Norman invasion. Brian Stock shows that, although writing and books were a part of the Anglo-Saxon culture, they were mostly reserved for the clerics; in the common culture, writing was basically limited to legal and economic documents. Stock stresses that "the important point is not the degree to which writing penetrated oral culture: it was its irrevocability. Up until the eleventh century, western Europe could have returned to an essentially oral civilization. But by 1100 the die was cast."[88] Despite the best efforts of the monks, literacy and Christianity, though present in England from an early date, made their mark on popular culture very slowly, and were assumed always in terms of what the culture already understood. While Christianity and literacy existed in England in the monasteries, their effect on the society as a whole was very slow and limited. Simply the presence of a new

---

[88]Stock, The Implications of Literacy, 18.

religion and a technology of writing did not radically effect instantaneous change in the common culture--as discussed at length in the first Unit of this thesis, change in an oral culture comes about very slowly. The poet and audience of Beowulf, while they had assumed to some degree Christianity and literacy, were essentially pagan and secular; their Christianity was one that had accomodated itself to a pagan myth, and that Christianity was really inseparable from their paganism. Beowulf was produced by an Anglo-Saxon culture which was essentially in the process of absorbing the new concepts of the monks, but within the still-dominant framework of secular paganism. Beowulf, though it comes to us in written form, is not simply the product of a thoroughly monastic, learned culture; it is the result of a network of relationships in Anglo-Saxon culture, the complexity of which is evidenced by the tension in the poem between the pagan and Christian elements.

The first wave of Christianity in England would have been seen less as a change of values than as simply a change of mythology. The new Christian stories could have been incorporated into the pagan mythology, or "Germanized," and the old stories could have been reworked gradually by the storytellers to include the new Christian elements. Doubtless this phenomenon would have been understood and used by those doing the converting. As the common sense of the people and their understanding of their religion and God changed, that

change would be reflected in the stories that were told, since

the oral stories are shaped by the tradition and common sense.

As D.K. Fry shows, the "miracle" of Caedmon inventing Old

English verse to tell the Christian stories may not be such a

miracle at all:

> One might object . . . that formulaic diction
> develops very slowly, whereas Caedmon uses phrases
> fresh-coined, such as heofonrices weard and ece
> drihten. . . . Perhaps Bede thought of this new
> creation of formulaic diction as part of the miracle.
> Or perhaps Caedmon converted pre-Christian formulas
> for pagan deities into phrases praising his God:
> frea aelmightig could apply just as well to Odin as
> to Jehovah. Furthermore, life copies art: phrases
> from our literature pervade our daily thoughts. In a
> society devoted to oral poetry, Caedmon would carry
> thousands of epithets for heroes and gods in his
> head. I can easily imagine such a pious man mentally
> doodling with popular formulas, idly applying them to
> the God he worshipped.[89]

Perhaps for Caedmon, who sings his Christian hymn in the model

of the older Germanic creation hymns, and for the Beowulf poet,

the values and concepts have not changed radically, but the God

has. The new religious concepts are apprehended in terms of

the old, so, except for discarding some of the Germanic beliefs

that cannot at all be remolded in terms of Christianity, in

many cases merely the language has to be adapted.

Beowulf reflects the performer's essentially secular

knowledge of Christianity; he does not have a very orthodox

understanding of his religion. His understanding of

Christianity is the understanding he has gained from the common

---

[89]D.K. Fry, "Caedmon as a Formulaic Poet,"
47-8.

tradition, and that seems primarily steeped in a Germanic framework. The representation of Christianity in the poem supports this: its references to Scripture are few, basically just the creation song of the scop, the allusions to the flood (which he calls up to give the monsters a basis in Scripture), and several references to Cain. All of the tradition's knowledge about Christianity might conceivably have been learned from the Old Testament: that part of Scripture that would most easily have been adopted by a pagan, Germanic tradition, since the Old Testament projects a picture of a martial God who is much more like the Germanic legends than the loving Father of the New Testament. The poem seems much more familiar with pagan history and legend than with the stories of the Bible, as the digressions indicate, and this suggests that the tradition at the time still has a strong foundation in the Germanic common sense.

Niles has said that the "poet has transformed the bare bones of a folktale plot into a poem of greater significance by consistently developing its action in terms taken from the religious literature of the age."[90] I think we might further qualify this. For an oral reading of the poem, the transformation could hardly have been such a conscious one, but rather an integration of the new Christianity into the common sense. The poet-performer's understanding of Christianity seems more likely based in an oral mode of communication, such

---

[90] Niles, Beowulf, 89.

as homilies and teaching, rather than first-hand literate

contact with Scripture. Thus, when the Danish scop sings the

creation song (lines 90-98), the song echoes Genesis only in

the most basic ways—it is the story of a powerful god creating

the world. The song vaguely follows the story of Genesis in

terms of the objects God creates, and the order He creates

them, but it is hardly a literate retelling of Scripture.

Dorothy Whitelock shows that the terminology for God, "ece

Drihten" for example, need not necessarily be new Christian

inventions but older terms applied to any god.[91] By

the homeostatic tendency of oral poetry, old values were not

superceded by Christianity but rather were remolded, as,

simultaneously, the new concepts were incorporated in terms of

the old. Beowulf reflects this process: since the culture at

the time of the poem's composition was still in the process of

incorporating the new religion, the coexistence of paganism and

Christianity that causes modern readers such difficulty would

doubtless have been little problem for the poem's original

audience. It would be wrong to disregard the Christianity of

Beowulf, but we must keep in mind its decidedly pagan, Germanic

overtones. The common culture at the time of Beowulf's

composition were Christian in that they piously and fervently

hoped to be raised on the last day through the blood of the

Lamb; however, that hope existed comfortably with the beliefs

in the propriety of vengeance, the nobility of the old hero,

---

[91]Whitelock, The Audience of Beowulf, 10.

the value of honor and fame, and the inexorability of fate.

The point in Beowulf that has raised the most debate in

the pagan/Christian argument is the so-called "Christian

excursus," which comes at the time in the poem when the Danes

are faced with the destructive attacks of Grendel and do not

know what to do:

                    Monig oft gesaet
    rice to rune;   raed eahtedon,
    hwaet swithferhthum   selest waere
    with faergryrum   to gefremmanne.
    Hwilum hie geheton   aet haergtrafum
    wigweorthunga,   wordum baedon,
    thaet him gaestbona   geoce gefremede
    with theodthreaum.   Swylc waes theaw hyra,
    heathenra hyht;   helle gemundon
    in modsefan,   Metod hie ne cuthon,
    daeda Demend,   ne wiston hie Drihten God,
    ne hie huru heofena Helm   herian ne cuthon,
    wuldres Waldend.
                        (171-183)

                    Many often sat,
    powerful ones in council; they deliberated advice,
    what would be best for strong-minded men
    against the sudden attacks to perform.
    Sometimes they vowed at the heathen temple
    honor to idols, prayed with words
    that the heathen god might perform help for them
    against the distresses of the people. Such was their custom,
    the hope of heathens; of hell they thought
    in the heart; they did not know the Creator,
    the Judger of deeds, the Lord God they did not know,
    nor indeed did they know to praise the Lord of the heavens,
    the Ruler of the world.

In this passage the poet, who is a Christian, clearly shows

that the Danes in Beowulf, whom he presents as a tribe from the

"geardagas" ("old days"), were not Christians; in times of

trouble they could not turn to God because they did not know of

Him and His power. This is perfectly reasonable, yet the poet

apparently forgets this fact because throughout the rest of the

poem he shows the Danes acting and speaking as if they themselves are Christians. After the Scylding coast-guard has shown Beowulf and his men to the town, he says, "Faeder alwalda/mid ar-stafum eowic gehealde/sitha gesunde!" (316-18, "May the all-wielding Father/with grace hold you/safe in your journey!"). When Beowulf has destroyed Grendel, Hrothgar says, looking at the war-prize of Grendel's arm, "Thisse ansyne Alwealdan thanc/lungre gelimpe!" (928-9, "For this sight thanks to the Almighty/I bring about quickly!"), and again when Beowulf vows to destroy Grendel's mother, Hrothgar "ahleop tha se gomela, gode thancode,/mihtigan Drihtne" (1397, "lept up then, old man, thanked God,/the mighty Lord.").

To a reader presuming a literate milieu for Beowulf, the poet's confusion about the religion of the poem's characters causes considerable problems. Arthur G. Brodeur confesses the interpretive problem caused by the "Christian Excursus":

> If lines 175ff. are genuine, then it is necessary to reconcile the poet's direct statement that the Danes seek deliverance from Grendel by offering sacrifices to heathen gods with the Danish king's frequent expressions of thanks to God and acknowledgement of God's mercies--and particularly with the patently Christian sentiments of Hrothgar's long address to Beowulf after the overthrow of Grendel's dam. [92]

Is the fact that the poet apparently completely confuses the religious beliefs of the Danes at various passages an example of poor or sloppy craftsmanship? Brodeur admits that "The simplest way of resolving the inconsistency would be to throw

---

[92] Brodeur, The Art of Beowulf, 197.

out as interpolated all of the Christian excursus,"[93] but he does not give in to the temptation to do so. Rather, he offers a convincing explanantion for the state of Christianity in the poem: the poet acknowledges their goodness in Christian terms, even though he knows that they are pagans, because expressing goodness is something "a medieval Christian could hardly manage . . . without attributing Christian sentiments [to the characters], since such sentiments were part of his own thinking and feeling."[94]

Our oral reading deals with the "Christian excursus" in a manner that closely resembles that of Brodeur. We need not reject the "Christian Excursus" as a later interpolation, or give it special explanation. While the poet is presenting the Danes as pagans, he is also presenting them as good men (they are, after all, the "hwate Scyldingas"); for the poet, a Christian, good men necessarily worship, praise, and thank God, so to present the Danes as good men he has them do these things too, even though it violates the "logical" rules of narrative. The Danes are presented as good in terms that the audience can understand, for the traits of a good pagan alone might not seem good to the Christian listeners. The tradition in which the poet performs has, in a way, baptized the old pagans. It may simply have forgotten some of the pagan idioms, but more likely

---

[93] Brodeur, The Art of Beowulf, 197. This is the aim of F.A. Blackburn, among others, who was discussed earlier. (Blackburn, "The Christian Coloring in Beowulf.").

[94] Brodeur, The Art of Beowulf, 206.

it has adopted the use of Christian language in the mouths of pagans as one of the means by which it maintains respect for the pagan past. While there is a rather naive identification of goodness and Christianity being made here, when it comes right down to the ritual there is a clear distinction made between paganness and Christianity.

Dorothy Whitelock explains the Christian excursus by asserting that

> our poet would indeed be an unusual person if he were possessed of a sense of historical propriety, and tried to describe consistently what no longer existed, instead of [those things] with which he was familiar.[95]

Her presentation of the situation is correct: she is rephrasing what our oral model calls the "homeostatic tendency," or the poetry's constant contemporization of itself. Derek Pearsall has expressed much the same sentiment; he argues that

> [the poet] has to entrench a Christian or quasi-Christian frame of mind in those whom he admires, particularly Beowulf and Hrothgar, in order to make them admirable or even intelligible.[96]

It may appear, then, that Brodeur, Whitelock, and Pearsall are all saying essentially the same thing as the oral interpretation. A change has come about in the common culture that makes such language necessary because it is all the audience understands. If that is so, then it is the tradition

---

[95]Whitelock, The Audience of Beowulf, 95.

[96]Derek Pearsall, Old English and Middle English Poetry, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 10.

which forms the poem. However, the above scholars approach the poem with strictly literate assumptions about its mode of composition:[97] they make reference to a poet who could be characterized as a literate author. Perhaps, with the Christian excursus as an example, we are talking about a situation that is better understood in the terms of orality; if we can posit performance in pen-and-ink, then we can dispense with the fiction of an author, and deal more directly and easily with a tradition that forms the narrative. Both the literate and the oral views are explaining the phenomenon in the same manner, but the oral interpretation asks us to reorient our assumptions about the relationship of the poet and audience to the narrative. In the final telling, perhaps the oral view is better, or more convincing, because it presents a simpler and more natural explanation for the state of Christianity in the poem, and one that does not have to postulate the idiosyncracies of an author, but rather the mechanics of a tradition.

The presence of "wyrd" (the Germanic concept of fate) in Beowulf may at first seem strange, since the story affirms that God is the ruler of the universe and the final judge. Here again we are faced with coming to an understanding of the degree of amalgamation of paganness and Christianity in the

---

[97]On page 17 of Old English and Middle English Poetry, Pearsall completely rejects the possibility of Beowulf having been composed in performance, and in fact calls the application of oral-formulaic theory to Old English in general a "fantasy."

tradition. To be sure "wyrd" at its most fatalistic, the Germanic concept of the Norn sisters spinning out the fate-threads of each man and even of the gods, is a concept radically different from the more orthodox Christian concept of a fair God who has accorded us free will and guides the world with love and fairness. However, perhaps for the audience of Beowulf the concepts of "wyrd" and God's law were not so distinct; instead, their relationship may well be illustrative of the metamorphosing religious view of the period, the gradual intermingling of the pagan and Christian ideologies. Marie Padgett Hamilton has suggested that in Beowulf, "wyrd" has to some extent been Christianized; she notes that "God and Wyrd are brought into juxtaposition in such manner as to imply control of Fate by the superior power of Christian divinity."[98] To this I would add that the Anglo-Saxons' concept of Christianity was shaped by their own Germanic, pagan background, and the resulting conception of the divine in Beowulf is a strange intermingling of both pagan and Christian concepts. The concept of "wyrd" in Beowulf is very similar to divine Providence; the poet uses the term "wyrd" in a very Christianized way, so that it most often seems to represent the will of God. Thus, while the poem at many points uses pagan language, it uses that language to express an essentially

---

[98]Marie Padgett Hamilton, "The Religious Principle in Beowulf," An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism, ed. Lewis Nicholson (Notre Dame, Indiana: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), 127.

Christian idea. In Beowulf, the difference between "wyrd" and Providence may only be the difference between Fate as the inevitable law of the universe, and God decreeing His eternal will.

The presentation of what-must-be in Beowulf appears rather muddled to modern readers because it is based in a period of change from pagan to Christian in the middle of which the poem was composed. For the most part, the poet presents events as having an end predestined by God, but which man, by his actions, has some share in deciding. At times he presents fate as inexorable; in line 455 the poet has Beowulf say, "Gaeth a wyrd swa hio scel!" ("Fate goes always as it must!"). At times fate is portrayed much like a god who can choose the outcome of events based on man's actions or choice—a sort of "God helps those who help themselves" attitude: "Wyrd oft nereth/unfaegne eorl, thonne his ellen deah!" (572-3, "Fate often spares/ an undoomed warrior, when his courage avails!"). This sentiment is repeated later in a gnomic aside:

> Swa maeg unfaege   eathe gedigan
> wean ond wraecsith   se the Waldendes
> hyldo gehealdeth!
>   (2291-3)

> So may the unfated one easily endure
> sorrow and wretchedness, he who the Father's
> favor holds!

There are many examples of contradictions in the story in its presentation of fate. For example, the poet says of Grendel as he approaches Heorot and the waiting Beowulf, "Ne waes thaet wyrd tha gen,/thaet he ma moste manna cynnes/thicgean ofer tha

niht." (734-6, "Nor was that his fate then/that he more might on the kin of man/feast after that night."). However, later in the poem, Beowulf is portrayed as defeating the monster through his own might and the power of God--not at all simply because the monster was fated to die that night: "Nu scealc hafath/thurh Drihtnes miht daed gefremede,/the we ealle aer ne meahton/snyttrum besyrwan." (939-42, "Now a warrior has/through the might of the Lord performed a deed/that we all before could not/accomplish by wisdom.")

According to our model, we must expect different things from a literary poet, and from a poet who is an illiterate performer. Of a literate poet we should expect that the old image of wyrd was now thoroughly Christianized, so that it meant the will of God or Providence and no more. But what we find in Beowulf is not so simple; rather, it seems to be what we should expect of an illiterate performer who was being faithful to a tradition which contained both wyrd and the Christian Almighty. The presentation of fate in Beowulf is indicative of the fact that religious thought at the time of the composition of Beowulf has not reached a level of fully absorbed Christianity, at least for the poet and audience of the poem. Though the poet speaks of his period, the time of the telling of the tale, as being Christian, there is nonetheless much unconscious Germanic residue in his religious belief and conception of the universe. At some points in the poem the Germanic picture of fate is reconciled with

Christianity, but at many times it is not and is just casually
skimmed over. This is illustrative of the gradual assumption
of the new in terms of the old, and points out the homeostatic,
conservative nature of oral poetry.

If we insist on assuming a controlling author for Beowulf,
then the tension between pagan and Christian elements in the
poem results in interpretations of the poem that take a
diametrically opposed stance from that of orality. The most
important of such stances is the argument that Beowulf is a
critique of the heroic values, a popular view of the poem among
readers presuming literacy. Theodore M. Andersson has argued
that Beowulf is a Christian critique of the pagan heroic code;
the poem, he says, is basically the poet's warning that the old
heroic ways are futile, and that the audience should completely
adopt the new Christian way of life:

> The poet's mission may be viewed as an effort to
> extract meaning from the apparent meaninglessness of
> the heroic life. The emptiness of heroic posture is
> filled with the purposefulness of Christian
> aspiration. . . . The pessimism of the secular
> life is counterbalanced by the optimism of the
> spiritual life. . . . The Beowulf poet, located
> between the spiritual limitations of the heroic lay
> and the new doctrine of salvation, resolves the
> conflict by putting the heroic life in perspective
> against the promise of a future reward.[99]

The question this raises, then, is whether Beowulf is presented
as a genuine model for the audience, as we should expect if
this is an oral poem, or, as Andersson suggests, is he a

---

[99]Theodore M. Andersson, "Tradition and Design in
Beowulf, 95.

prideful over-doer who was exemplary of the older code but should not act as a paradigm of behavior for a Christian audience. An oral view of the poem does not allow for the latter view of the poem; if Beowulf is to be a critique, it cannot be an oral creation, for poems created in oral performance cannot adopt a critical role as subtly as Andersson would have. If Beowulf is oral, and the poet intended us not to imitate Beowulf, he would have made that point perfectly clear (as he does with the example of Heremod) not couched it in irony.

Andersson's argument rests firmly on the assumption that the Beowulf poet was utilizing older pagan stories for his own end, to make his own point. This does not necessarily mean that the story itself is new: with a great knowledge of Germanic heroic stories, Andersson systematically points out that nearly every element of Beowulf can be found in heroic lays. However, for Andersson, "The more immediate question . . . bears on the poet's organization of the scenes he inherited. How did he form his narrative and what is the broader purpose subtending the form he chose?"[100] Andersson proposes a formal wave-like rise-and-fall pattern for Beowulf, which the main narrative events as well as the digressions fit neatly into. The application of such a pattern

---

[100]Andersson, "Tradition and Design," 93.

[101]Herbert G. Wright, for one, has set up a similar fluctuating pattern in Beowulf: he shows that "closely related

is not new to <u>Beowulf</u>,[101] but Andersson insists that this pattern was consciously cultivated by the poet to point out that victory through the heroic code is only temporary, and is always counteracted by defeat. He offers the construction of Heorot, the arrival of Beowulf, the victory over Grendel, and the victory over Grendel's mother, as the major high points of the poem, each of which is followed by a crushing low point: Grendel's ravages, Grendel's renewed attack, the attack of Grendel's mother, and the dragon's raids, respectively.[102]

For Andersson, this rise-and-fall pattern ends on a fall: in the end, Beowulf is killed and his people are plunged into turmoil. It is the end of the poem that is the focus for much of the argument of whether or not <u>Beowulf</u> is a criticism of the heroic code. The question we must ask is "What is our opinion of Beowulf at the conclusion of the poem?" We are to conclude, according to Andersson, that the fall of the hero is indicative of some flaw in the heroic code itself:

> <u>Beowulf</u> is a kind of <u>momento mori</u> dwelling insistently on the transientness of earthly things.
> . . . The only refuge in this secular wasteland is the hope of heaven.[103]

---

to the coming and going of light and darkness are the fluctuations of joy and sorrow in <u>Beowulf</u>." Herbert G. Wright, "Good and Evil; Light and Darkness; Joy and Sorrow in <u>Beowulf</u>," <u>An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism</u> ed. Lewis Nicholson (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), 261.

[102]On page 97 of <u>Old English Literature in Context</u>, Andersson presents a diagram for the pattern of the poem; I have summarized this diagram.

[103]Andersson, "Tradition and Design," 104.

For Andersson, then, there is a final irony in the poem, which is supposed to express the poet's belief that the orthodox Christian life is the only one worth living. The poet's withholding of approval, finally, of the hero he seems to praise, is the indirect suggestion that there is something better. As discussed earlier, this is a very literate type of irony--it depends on the poet's independence from his tradition, and the audience's independence from the tradition as well if they are to understand the poet's intent.

Can we understand the poem as one in which Beowulf in the end stands as a worthy model of goodness for the audience to imitate, or must we accept that, as illustrated by the tragic end of the poem, the heroic way of life is not recommended by the poet? An oral reading asserts that we can read the poem as an earnest affirmation of the heroic code. To offer an oral reading, however, we must keep straight in our minds the Christianity of the poem, since our opinion of the hero at the end of Beowulf is inextricably wound up in our understanding of the poem's Christianity. As discussed earlier, we can characterize the Christianity of Beowulf as still deeply affected by the Germanic values: boasting, acts of war (if justified), and the exacting of vengeance are not judged by the poet to be un-Christian deeds. In fact, while the worldview of the poem is an amalgamation of both pagan and Christian values, the pagan elements may actually be the stronger of the two. This is a poem composed after the influx of Christianity, but

it is a story told for the benefit of the common man, for whom
the older Germanic values may be more practical than the newer
Christian ones. For some readers, the weight of mortality at
the end of the poem has caused great problems; at the poem's
conclusion we are left with the feeling that, while Beowulf has
triumphed over the dragon, his death is the preface to a long
period of despair for his people the Geats. This is the
Germanic notion of fate taking over; in spite of Beowulf's
great accomplishments, he is only human and so he must die.
Herbert Wright has noted that the Germanic concept of doom is a
powerful one in Beowulf: "as the poem advances, with the
deepening of the elegiac strain sorrow gets the upper hand, and
all else is subordinate."[104] There is a sort of
irony here, the "cosmic irony" of Germanic fate, but that irony
is a firm part of the Germanic common sense: death is an
inevitable part of life, and to live most is to face death as
the hero does.

Beowulf is granted glory on earth, and a marvelous funeral
barrow, as a reward, but little is made of a Christian reward
in afterlife, save the one line "him of hraethre gewat/sawol
secean sothfaestra dom." (2819-20, "from his breast went/the
soul to seek the reward of those fast in truth."). Little is
made of his Christian reward, but much is made of the finery of
his barrow and of the fact that men will speak of him in

---

[104]Wright, "Good and Evil, Light and Darkness,
Joy and Sorrow in Beowulf," 257.

stories from that point on. The Germanic concept of reward has taken precedence here--the tangible forms of reward are more closely clung to than the faith-bound promises of Christianity. The ending of the poem is bleak because, on earth, all good things must come to an end; in the words of the Wanderer poet, "Hu seo thrag gewat,/genap under nihthelm, swa heo no waere." (95-6, "How the time goes,/grows dark under the helm of night as if it never was."). The inevitable Germanic doom casts a shadow over the end of the poem in the realization by the Geats that their society is on the verge of tumbling. Beowulf attacked the dragon not out of pride, and not out of greed for the gold in the barrow, but because the wyrm posed a threat to the community he was obliged to protect. He died protecting that community, but his death was all the more tragic because he died alone save for Wiglaf. While Beowulf was dying fighting the dragon, his men were skulking in the woods for fear, letting down their side of the bond of kinship and loyalty to the lord. The Geats are well aware of their failure, and do not need the litotic reprimand and prophecy of misery that Wiglaf gives them:

> Wergendra to lyt
> throng ymbe theoden,   tha hine sio thrag becwom.
> Nu sceal sincthego   ond swyrdgifu,
> eall ethelwyn   eowrum cynne,
> lufan alicgan;   londrihtes mot
> thaere maegburge   monna aeghwylc
> idel hweorfan,   syththan aethelingas
> feorran gefricgan   fleam eowerne,
> domleasan daed.
>
> (2882-2890)

Too few defenders

> gathered around the lord, when the hard time came to him.
> Now you must treasure-receiving and sword-giving,
> all home-joy of your people,
> and comfort lay aside; of land-right must
> those kinsmen of each man
> turn idle, when princes
> from afar learn of your flight,
> your unworthy deed.

The bad times ahead for the Geats are a result not of failure on Beowulf's part, or because of any fault in the code, but rather are due to their own cowardice and lack of fulfilling their duty. It is for this reason that the dragon's gold is buried with Beowulf; not only to reward him, but also to remind the Geats that since they did not live up to their promises they shall not share in the gold that is a symbol of the goodness of the warriors and the strength of the people. The end of the poem is primarily pagan; while it gives some nod to the newer Christian values, it places most of its emphasis on the inevitability of fate, our doomed existence as mortals, and on the values of the community. In the final gnomic statement of the poem, the poet, through bad example as with the Heremod story, shows how society will crumble if its people do not act well and bravely to support and defend those values that hold the people together. The poem is about the most important values for the community, and how failure to preserve those values will only hasten the disaster that awaits us all.

Thus, at the end of the poem, Wiglaf, who is the spokesman of the people and the common sense, pronounces that Beowulf's actions are exemplary: "swa he manna waes/wigend weorth-fullost wide geond eorthan" (3098-99, "so he was of

men/the worthiest throughout the wide earth"); we are meant by
the poet to take this at its face value. Beowulf has ruled his
tribe for fifty years, without bloodshed, because he has been
an example for their behavior; he has shown them how their
fulfillment of duty and loyalty can cement together the whole
community--how they can seek glory by performing deeds that
will strengthen the society. Beowulf has indeed learned well
from the bad example of Heremod, and it is with total sincerity
that at the very end of the poem his hearth-companions together

      cwaedon thaet he waere   wyruld-cyninga
      mannum mildust   ond monthwaerust,
      leodum lithost   ond lofgeornost.
                (3180-82)

      said that he was of world-kings
      the mildest of men and the gentlest,
      kindest to his people and most eager for praise.

Beowulf, the poem and the hero, supports this reading well.
Every element of the poem can be demonstrated to point back to
the values of the Anglo-Saxon culture, the most important of
which is the integrity of the feudal community. Beowulf, as he
is presented by the narrative, lives his life to protect the
community which he is endebted to protect; the main events of
the story, in which the hero fights the monsters that threaten
society, are presented within a running traditional commentary
of digressions that add further insight into what a hero should
and should not be. In its simplest terms, Beowulf is the story
of a great man who, as a loyal young retainer, and as a devoted
old king, exemplifies right down to the last action of his life
exactly what we, the listeners, should strive to be.

In an oral reading, Beowulf is finally not a critique, but an earnest embodiment of the heroic ideal for an audience whose culture embraces without discomfort elements of paganness and Christianity, at a time when the differences between the two were not as great as they might seem to be. The hero lies dead at the end of the poem, but his death is not tragic because death is understood by the poem's audience to be the inevitable end of life. If the listeners of the story believe that Beowulf went to the "Father's embrace," then it was because he was true to the old code of their pagan fathers, while at the same time behaving as a good Christian warrior and king should behave. There is much tension in the poem between its pagan and Christian elements for us as 20th century readers, but that tension may very well not have existed for the poem's original audience, and the tension certainly does not argue for the command of a literate, Christian poet. In the final telling, Beowulf is really the new being stated in the terms of the old, the new Christianity being assimilated into the older pagan framework. The poet is neither a pagan nor a thorough Christian; the two are at one in him and in his tradition, and he is doing the best he can through the story of a legendary hero to preserve and express those invaluable ideals to an audience who still holds them to be paramount, necessary, and true.

EPILOGUE

BEOWULF FOR MODERN MAN

In his afterword to Beowulf: The Poem and Its Tradition,
John Niles discusses the excellence of the poem. Whatever the
mode of composition, the story of the Geatish hero is a moving
one, and the fact that we read the poem with passion 1000 years
after it was written down is evidence enough for the excellence
of Beowulf. Niles notes that the excellence of the poem has
also been used as an argument for composition by a learned
author; as discussed earlier, there has been a strong tendency
among scholars to assume that a poem as good as Beowulf could
not possibly have been composed by the "crude" methods of
tradition and folklore. Why, Niles asks, could the excellence
of the poem not argue as well for an oral composition? The
poem shows no demonstrable evidence of Latin influence, and in
fact seems to speak more strongly to the secular man than to
the learned cleric. If we read the poem as an oral
composition, and thus as an earnest, uncritical affirmation of
the value of the heroic code, then it is surely directed at the
pious, but very secular, layman. Beowulf is about a
pre-Christian hero, who also happens to lead a life that
recognizes some Christian values (though often a very different

Christianity from that of the twentieth century). A _Beowulf_
poet who was composing the poem in performance was interested
in sincerely and honestly presenting the values of his
community, which at the time of the poem's composition were a
strange hybrid of pagan and Christian elements. While there
were certainly scops who did not bring meadhalls to their feet
in applause (though such poets probably did not practice their
craft long), certainly there were other scops who were gifted
poets, producing wonderful poems no less great because they
were not written down. To read _Beowulf_ as an oral poem, we
must accept that a poet can be artful without being original,
that an excellent poem can be the product of a poet who is not
creating but transmitting, and that excellence is possible even
in a form dictated by an inherited tradition.

It is not easy to read _Beowulf_ as an oral poem, because
orality is such an alien thing to us 20th century literates.
We are a society obsessed with reviewable texts and with the
printed word. Even when we communicate orally, our literacy
comes into play; we depend on instruments such as tape
recorders in our zeal to capture details _word for word_. Albert
Lord's Yugoslavian singers would have a difficult time in
modern Western society, as our emphasis has swung from sharing
communal thought in oral discourse to individually interpreting
original thoughts exactly recorded in texts. When we first
began to study traditional literature, our literacy made it
difficult to imagine that there might be a way of communicating

different from the literate way. Today, even after we have
come to understand that many cultures have and continue to
communicate and exist in a primarily oral mode, our literacy
makes it difficult for us to truly understand and empathize
with orality. Though I tried in this thesis to present a
reading of Beowulf as an oral poem, I found myself constantly
slipping into literate terms, asking literate questions, and,
in spite of my best intentions, often reading the poem in as
much a literate manner as those readers whose interpretations I
hoped to differ from. While our literacy, thankfully, allows
us to analyze Beowulf, it also prevents us from ever truly
understanding the orality we might posit on the poem.

In reading Beowulf as an oral poem, we must be sensitive
to the context of the poem, to what John Niles calls its
tradition, and what Dorothy Whitelock argues are the concerns
of the poem's original audience, which may be very different
from our concerns today. However, this is not to say that we
must argue for a complete discarding of our own
twentieth-century views, concerns, presuppositions, and
"baggage." Not only is doing so impossible, but trying to do so
suggests that our only interest in the poem is some sort of
curiosity about the archaic. We must bring some of ourselves
to the reading of the poem, and engage in a dialogue with it;
that we still read the poem today suggests that it still speaks
to us. While we may not model our lives after the heroic code,
worry about the stability of tribal kingdoms, and understand

all the digressions into legend, Beowulf is in the long run not primarily about those Anglo-Saxon values; it is about the value of the community, and about "call[ing] up one's own dragonlike strength to confront and kill whatever in nature or society or in ourselves threatens to put an end to human joys and replace them with darkness, isolation, and gloom."[105] And that is surely something to fight for today.

We should investigate the context of the poem to understand details of the poem that are tied into the poem's culture and traditional foundation, but we should also be sensitive to our natural reactions to the poem. By listening to the chords the poem strikes in us today, we can best participate in a relationship with the poem that might be called "oral." As much as our literacy might lead us to think otherwise, our culture today still has a strong underlying orality. We have stories, just as the Anglo-Saxons did. We may place our faith and value in the stories of Christianity, or of Darwin, but those stories are no more "real" than the stories of fate and heroic models were to the original listeners of Beowulf. Just as the pagan and Christian elements of Beowulf seem contradictory to us, so might the co-existence in our society of, for example, Christian and athiest beliefs seem contradictory to a viewer from another time and another culture. Yet we live our lives each day by and with our stories, for the most part oblivious to the tensions in our

---

[105]Niles, Beowulf, 29.

common sense. Though our literacy leads us to think that we can analyze and control our shared common sense, perhaps our tradition has hold of us more than we have hold of it.

By studying orality, I have tried in this thesis to present a cohesive interpretation of Beowulf as the product of an oral poet in performance; I believe that reading the poem in this way is new, cohesive, and satisfying. However, putting the discipline of literary criticism aside, we continue to read Beowulf because it still speaks to us today, centuries after its composition—that is the nature of great literature. We read it because it tells us, though perhaps not through the same proverbs that were so important to its original listeners, something about being human. Though we read the poem as literates, if it truly speaks to us then we are engaging it on terms that are more oral than literate, and the Geatish hero who was "of world-kings/the mildest of men and the gentlest,/kindest to his people and most eager for praise" (3180-82) still instructs us on how to stand strong against modern Grendels and dragons.

APPENDIX ONE

THE LEGACY OF LORD:

A SHORT OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY OF TRADITIONAL LITERATURE

BEFORE AND AFTER THE SINGER OF TALES

Primarily, we must be grateful to Albert Lord for taking

the Homeric Question and broadening it to the Oral Formulaic

Question. Lord has given us the tools: the Balkan studies

have great value for us because they allow us to see oral

traditional composition in action in the environment of a

traditional oral culture. This is what we lack for the Homeric

poems and Beowulf: a living, studiable context for the poetry.

Granted, we may never study the Yugoslav stories as great

literature, as we consider the Iliad and Odyssey and Beowulf,

but the Balkan tradition has given us a model with which we can

re-examine those stories that have for so long been isolated

from a living tradition. Lord himself states the work of the

future:

> Surely one of the vital questions...is how to
> understand oral poetics, how to read oral traditional
> poetry. Its poetics is different from that of
> written literature because its technique of
> composition is different. It cannot be treated as a
> flat surface. All the elements in traditional poetry
> have depth, and our task is to plumb their sometimes
> hidden recesses; for there will meaning be found. We
> must be willing to use the new tools for
> investigations of themes and patterns, and we must be

willing to learn from the experience of other oral
traditional poetries. Otherwise "oral" is only an
empty label and "traditional" is devoid of meaning.
Together they form merely a facade behind which
scholarship can continue to apply the poetics of
written literature.[106]

Not only Homeric, but all traditional literatures can now be

re-evaluated in new light, and "better understood and

appreciated because [Albert Lord] encouraged us to ask the Oral

Traditional Question."[107]

Early studies of traditional literature did not account at

all for implications of orality; the possibility of unliterate

composition of serious literature was entirely alien to the

first scholars of older stories. Our first critics, especially

those Homerists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

in Europe, were most interested in finding authors and

reconstructing original texts. As Foley makes clear, "these

early studies make very little or nothing of the possible

orality of the poems they examine, occasionally suggesting sung

or recited performance but always assuming a prior written

---

[106]Albert Bates Lord, "Homer as Oral Poet," Harvard
Studies in Classical Philology. 72(1967), 46.

[107]John Miles Foley (ed.), Oral Traditional Literature: A
Festschrift for Albert B. Lord, ,51. For much of the content
of this appendix I am heavily endebted to John Miles Foley's
lengthy introduction in Oral Traditional Literature. Foley's
introduction was invaluable for providing me with a complete
overview of the evolution of The Oral Traditional Question, as
well as the work of many scholars which, due to their being
published very long ago or in languages other than English,
would have been very difficult for me to access otherwise.

record which serves as the basis for the performance."[108]
The recurrence of certain groups of words was noted, but
nothing was made of it, save use for trying to discover
authorship or to find similarities between poems. Rather than
being an indicator of the tradition, or some greater force
uniting a common poetry, I think the recurrence of formulas was
instead seen as the originality or poetic style of a single
poet--the poet artfully invented a particular phrase, which he
liked and so used elsewhere.

By the late 1870's a few German scholars were paying
closer attention to recurring elements in traditional poetry.
Eduard Sievers, best known for his work with the metrics of
Anglo-Saxon poetry, noticed the recurrence of certain words or
synonyms to express a given idea or narrative instance.[109]
F. Charitius took the concept a step further, and insisted on
the need to look more closely at recurring phrases, rather than
just words, which fit into given metrical units.[110]
Both Sievers and Charitius were beginning to realize that the
recurrence of such words and word-groups might be a clue that
there was something about traditional poetry different from
more modern writing.

The great majority of understanding of formulaic language,

---

[108]Foley, Oral Traditional Literature, p.52.

[109]Eduard Sievers (ed.), Heliand, 391-496.

[110]F. Charitius, "Uber die angelsachsischen Gedichte vom
hl. Guthlac," Anglia, 2(1879), 265-308.

however, was much more firmly nestled in the critical methods
and concerns of the time. A critical debate which arose in the
1870's between Gregor Sarrazin and Johannes Kail shows that an
understanding of the importance of those recurring phrases was
beginning to arise, but an understanding of the nature of
formulas was still locked in very literate critical concerns.
In a paper of 1886 Sarrazin showed similarities of language
(repeated formulas) between Beowulf and the four poems we
attribute to a poet we call "Cynewulf."[111] No doubt
Sarrazin's interest in these arose from his investigations into
authorship or relationship of the poems, yet he opens the door
for a new understanding of repeated phrases. Sarrazin attests
that in the Parallelstellen (his term for verbal
correspondences) "like thoughts are expressed alike"
(translated form the German by John Miles Foley).[112]
Kail responded to Sarrazin with the suggestion that the
Parallelstellen were characteristic of his own greater concept
of an "epic style."[113] Apparently, Kail saw in all
traditional epics a similarity of style, decorum, and theme,
and the Parallelstellen was simply one more factor arguing that
a poet composing an epic was bound to follow a certain
traditional style. In an 1892 response to Kail, Sarrazin falls

---

[111]Gregor Sarrazin, "Beowulf und Kynewulf," Anglia,
9(1886), 515-50

[112]Foley, Oral Traditional Literature, 548.

[113]Johannes Kail, "Uber die Parallelstellen in der
angelsachsischen Poesie," Anglia, 12(1889), 21-46

back into the standard mode of critical thought of the day.[114]
Unable to see a deeper, more traditional force at work in the
poet, Sarrazin simply concludes that the explanation of
stylistic/formulaic similarities across certain poems pointed
to composition by a single author.

Such an assumption of authorship proceeded well into the
twentieth century. Scholar J.S.P. Tatlock, working with the
Middle English poet Layamon's Brut, urges an understanding of
the formula as "magnifying and imposing, no mere convenience
but often a means of embellishment."[115] He compares
formulas to recurring motifs in a musical score, as the process
of formulaic composition will later be compared to
improvisation by jazz musicians. Tatlock, however, gives no
credit to a larger tradition or shared sense of poetic style in
the use of formulas. In a statement which seems to contradict
the undeniable frequent recurrence of formulas in traditional
poetry, Tatlock says:

> On the whole the earlier poet cultivated variety and
> ingenuity of phrasing. He was more inclined to
> present the same situation over again in different
> words, than a different situation in the same
> words.*** Anglo-Saxon poetry in general is
> sophisticated and not popular, produced in large part
> by professionals and scholars, and the complexity of
> the verse...and its uniformity through several
> centuries, and other uniformities of style, point to

---

[114]Gregor Sarrazin, "Parallelstellen in altenglischer
Dichtung," Anglia 14(1892), 186-92

[115]J.S.P. Tatlock, "Epic Formulas, Especially in
Layamon," PMLA, 38(1923), 494-529.

[116]Tatlock, "Epic Formulas, Especially in Layamon,"

a conscious _ars poetica_.[116]

Tatlock is arguing for an isolation of the poetry from a tradition, and from a common sense of the people. He says that the _Brut_ is more formulaic than Old English poetry because there are more verbatim repetitions; in Old English Tatlock sees a system of variation which he identifies as a literary technique.[117] The work of Tatlock opposes the possibility of seeing Anglo-Saxon verse as the product of a _traditional_, and certainly more _oral_ composition. Tatlock offers the Anglo-Saxon poet as a "professional and scholar," and thus as a very self-conscious author of an original text. By taking the poet out of the context of an oral culture and a shared, more _unconscious arts poetica_, Tatlock diminishes or negates the possibility of the story deriving implicitly from the shared common sense and tradition of the poet's culture.

In the final count, however, Tatlock does offer a less "literate" analysis of Old English poetry than his contemporaries were wont to show. Generalizing on the use of formulas, Tatlock says, "the usage...appears in the beginnings of a literature,...near the head of the written documents of the peoples involved. The usage bears the marks of oral delivery, and assisted it. It goes with singing more than

---

515-16.

[117]The question that might be raised here in pursuing an oral view is "what if this system of variation _is_ the oral technique of the Old English poet? Old English poetry can easily be seen as an essentially formulaic system adapted to the poetic rules of alliteration.

reciting, and with that more than reading."[118]
Though still tied to a conception of the poetry as written
literature, or fixed-text-oriented, Tatlock nonetheless borders
on the breakthrough understandings of the nature of composition
without writing that will later be advanced by Parry and Lord.

Francis P. Magoun's 1953 article "The Oral Formulaic
Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry" overturned the whole
field of the study of Old English poetry. Seven years before
the publication of The Singer of Tales, Magoun presented the
theories of his Harvard colleagues Parry and Lord in terms of
Old English verse. At a stage even earlier than this 1953
article, Magoun had suggested that a study of Old English
poetry for repeated elements "might ultimately lead to an
understanding of the actual technique of composition."[119]
In this earlier article, and later in more depth in the 1953
article, Magoun is aware that a process, a shared tradition not
only of storyforms but of the art of composition as well, is
the shaping force behind our traditional poetry, and is thus
responsible for the similarities in that poetry. In discussing
the art of oral poetry, Magoun boldly asserts:

> The recurrence in a poem of an appreciable number of
> formulas or formulaic phrases brands the latter as
> oral, just as the lack of such repetitions marks the
> poem as composed in a lettered tradition. Oral

[118]Tatlock, "Epic Formulas, Especially in Layamo

[119]Francis P. Magoun, "Recurring First elements in
Different Nominal Compounds in Beowulf and in the Elder Edda,"
Studies in English Philology: A Miscellany in Honor of
Frederick Klaeber, (ed. Kemp Malone and Martin Ruud.), 77.

poetry, it may safely be said, is composed entirely of formulas, large and small, while lettered poetry is never formulaic.[120]

After a formulaic analysis of the first 25 lines of Beowulf, Magoun claimed that more than 70% of the language occurs in some other place in Anglo-Saxon poetry. He also claims that since the surviving of corpus of Old English poetry is presumably merely a small sample of the tradition, the claim of 70% may even be a conservative one, and in actuality "there might well be almost nothing in the language here used that could not be demonstrated as traditional."[121]

We have seen earlier that the theory of Magoun may be too complete an application of the Parry-Lord theory; the Parry-Lord theory is best not applied indiscriminantly to traditions other than the Homeric or Serbo-Croatian. Also, the theory seen in this light might seem a rather simplistic and derrogatory notion: that oral poetry is merely a stringing together of formulas. The best oral traditional poetry may be a necklace strung of formula beads, but it is also a beautiful piece of jewelry that in its final appraisal is worth so much more than the sum of its constituents. Not only the language, but the narrative and story patterns as well are traditional. Formulaic language, whether of the "fixed formula" type or not, must have arisen to aid the poet in his singing, not to trap

[120]Francis P. Magoun, "The Oral Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry," Speculum, 28(1953), 447.

[121]Magoun, "Oral Formulaic Character," 451.

him in a stifling medium.

The publications of Lord and Magoun made the oral-formulaic theory, if not immediately widely accepted, nonetheless a possibility that had to be reckoned with. However, several important Old English scholars would have no part of the Parry-Lord theory. Claes Schaar did not agree with Magoun's formulaic analysis of Beowulf, and argued that "the proposition 'all formulaic poetry is oral' does not follow, either logically or psychologically, from the proposition 'all oral poetry is formulaic'."[122] He countered Magoun's theory with the assertion that similarities (formulaic repetitions) were the result of literary borrowing, pointing to the Cynewulf poems for evidence. Hence, Schaar argued against oral composition of Old English poetry, advocating instead production by an author who borrowed from other literate poets or, possibly, from a shared poetic language. This seems a reasonable reaction to Magoun's over-application of Lord to Old English, at least in terms of Cynewulf who runically signs his poems, giving us the clue that he meant them to be read. It is only natural that an Anglo-Saxon poet would make good use of the rich tradition at hand. However, we should not rule out the possibility that the recurring characteristics of Old English poetry might also be based in a common oral tradition; again, from our vantage point, we can prove nothing about the

---

[122]Claes Schaar, "On a New Theory of Old English Poetic Diction," Neophilologus, 40(1956), p. 303.

works in question. Schaar's objections seem less encompassing

if we disregard the concept of fixed-formularity for Old

English, and instead concentrate of the relationship of the

poet to the text and the tradition.

Kemp Malone, a top scholar in Old English and especially

Beowulf studies, joined Schaar in opposing the oral formulaic

theory. In an untitled review of Godfrid Storms' Compounded

Names of People in Beowulf, Malone takes a violently opposing

viewpoint:

> The Beowulf poet was no minstrel, strumming a harp
> and composing verse as he strummed. He was a
> sophisticated literary artist, who gave careful
> thought to what he was doing and did not rest content
> until he found the right words for what he had in
> mind. The use of traditional diction is one thing;
> improvisation is something else again. The two need
> not go together and in Beowulf they emphatically do
> not.[123]

This argument, again, is based on the presumption that an

illiterate poet could not create such important and beautiful

poetry, and is a value judgement we must be careful not to

make. In a later article, Malone suggests that Magoun is wrong

in theorizing that formulas are traditional tools that evolve

slowly through the art of many, not one, composers. The idea

of a gradual evolution of formulaic language, Malone says,

> works well enough when applied to a singer who keeps
> to the traditional themes but it does not work at all
> when applied to a singer who breaks with tradition by
> choosing Christian themes. Whoever composed the
> first Christian song in English had to make up his

---

[123]Kemp Malone, English Studies, 41(1960), 200-2

[124]Kemp Malone, "Caedmon and English Poetry," Modern

formulas as he went along.[124]

Malone's argument about language here does not seem so
necessary to me. Caedmon, the first English poet we know of
who sings a Christian song, praises the Christian God, but
names Him with the older, pagan-derived names and kenning
epithets. While Christian poets may have found that some of
the old deity language was not appropriate for the Christian
God, they also found that some of it was, and comfortably used
it. If the old poets had to make up new names, they
undoubtably did so in the older, traditional ways and forms.
In the oral tradition, the new must always be presented in
terms of the old, or it will not be understood and accepted by
the common sense. Kemp Malone refuses to accept an oral basis
for Old English poetry, and in doing so seems to fall into the
trap of trying to look back and neatly package history into
separate, distinct categories; in the case of the
pagan/Christian issue, he seems to assume that the conversion
to Christianity occured overnight. Such major historical
changes happen very, very slowly even today, how much more so
in Medieval England which had no mass communication. Malone is
not sensitive to the slow, gradual intermingling of cultures
which must have occured in the change from pagan to Christian,
and which would have been reflected in the slowly changing
language.

The reverberations in classical studies caused 25 years

Language Notes 76(1961), 195.

ago by The Singer of Tales have still not ceased, and the waters have been constantly churned by younger scholars responding, favorably and unfavorably, to the Parry-Lord theory. Only recently has the theory begun to be applied to traditions beyond the Yugoslav, Homeric and Anglo-Saxon, as much of the ink spilled before recently has been in arguing about the validity of the oral-formulaic theory. Robert Creed, for example, accepted the theory but adapted it for his own uses. He placed special emphasis on the quality of the formula not so much as just a memorable sound, but as "a significant segment of [the singer's] rhythm. To be useful to the singer every phrase or word which is metrically significant should also be a syntactic unit...a phrasal group or clause."[125] This differs from Lord's definition in its emphasis on the greater poetic structure and concerns, not just small word groups.

As John Miles Foley has noted, Robert Stevick "applauds the enthusiasm but censures the lack of rigor which he feels is evident in the studies of the singer theorists."[126] It was Stevick who first offered the analogy of Jazz improvisation, and he criticizes Creed for his emphasis on structured, verbatim retelling in performance (a theory which, incidentally, contradicts the findings of Parry and Lord that

---

[125] Robert Creed, "The Making of an Anglo-Saxon Poem," The Beowulf Poet, ed. D.K. Fry. 142.

[126] Foley, Oral Traditional Literature, 63.

erformances, at least for Yugoslavs, are never verbatim): "In
a traditional oral (or musical) art form--as opposed to a
tradition perpetuated in writing or notation--memory of past
performances will have a very large effect on any further
performance . . . In fact, Creed's reconstruction equally
suits the proceedings of a lettered poet composing pen-in-hand
in a formulaic manner."[127] Stevick has placed
greater emphasis on the role of the tradition in shaping the
story than on the role of the poet shaping the story. The poet
sings the tradition, he preserves and transmits it, but he
seldom consciously shapes it. While he "improvises" with his
formulas, he does not alter the truth of the essential story.

Larry Benson has raised serious questions about the
composition of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Citing literary creations
which utilize formulaic structure, such as Alfred's Pastoral
Care, and The Meters of Boethius, Benson suggests that the
older poems, those with no known authors, may also be formulaic
and literary. Benson states that "not only can literate poets
write formulaic verse, they can write it pen in hand in the
same way any writer observes a literary tradition."[128]
Robert Diamond earlier foreshadows Benson's questions, in a
manner that comes to a more ambigous conclusion:

---

[127]Robert D. Stevick. "The Oral Formulaic Analyses of
Old English Poetry." in Essential Articles for the Study of Old
English Poetry.. (ed. Bessinger and Kahrl). p. 398.

[128]Larry D. Benson, "The Literary Character of
Anglo-Saxon Formulaic Poetry," PMLA, 81(1966), 337.

> On the basis of internal evidence alone (there is no external evidence), it is impossible to determine whether the Cynewulf poems [and, thus, all of the anonymous tradition of Old English poetry] were composed orally and written down by a scribe, were composed with pen in hand in the ordinary modern way, or were composed by a learned poet who was making use of the traditional poetic formulas handed down to him from an age when poems were oral.[129]

Perhaps here is a good place to end this overview: we really cannot say whether Beowulf is or is not either an oral or a literate work. From this appendix it can be seen that both views have had an impact on the study of Old English poetry, and, ultimately, both views have yielded reasonable, albeit very different, readings of the poem. Critical struggles such as this oral/literary controversy are extremely useful for the discipline of criticism, so long as, ultimately, they do not preoccupy our thought to the extreme that we neglect the wonderful works of poetry that gave rise to the theories in the first place.

---

[129] Robert Diamond, "The Diction of the Signed Poems of Cynewulf," Philological Quarterly 38(1959), 229.

APPENDIX TWO

BEOWULF AND GARDNER'S GRENDEL:

ORALITY AND THE CRITICAL MONSTERS

Twentieth-century man is a literate being, and literacy pervades all he thinks, feels, experiences--indeed, all that he is. Problems arise when twentieth-century man tries to read a work such as Beowulf from his own perspective, one so profoundly shaped by his literate tradition, and gives no allowance for the fact that perhaps the people from whom he receives that work might have had a different perspective. The fact is, the creators of Beowulf were from a very different tradition, and had a very different perspective and world view; it is very possible that what they thought, felt, experienced, and all that they were, was shaped by an oral, not at all literate, culture and tradition. When reading Beowulf, medieval literature, or, for that matter, any literature removed from our own, it is crucial to keep in mind the perspective of the creators of that other work, and perhaps even to rethink our own perspective in terms of theirs. To neglect to do this is to risk getting little, or nothing, or incorrect things from the work being read--in effect, to turn a window for viewing another culture into a rather useless mirror

for viewing our own culture.[130] Beowulf may be read in light of its possible composition in oral performance, and doing so will allow a satisfying and cohesive interpretation of the poem that differs greatly from an interpretation assuming a thoroughly literate poet; John Gardner's Grendel offers a means of illustrating and understanding just how different the literate tradition that produced Grendel is from an oral culture, and how a true understanding of our own literacy can aid us in understanding the oral situation that may have produced Beowulf.

In order to understand the differences between a written and an oral work, and why it is so difficult for a literate person to read oral literature the way it should be read (or, perhaps more correctly, the way it should be heard.), we must first arrive at an understanding of what orality and literacy are. This is itself is no easy task. The fact that Beowulf comes from a culture that could write things down does not in itself make the work or the culture literate. Strictly speaking, an oral culture is one without writing; however, it is not the lack of writing itself but rather those characteristics of the culture that a lack of writing creates which define the orality of a culture, and those characteristics may continue long after writing becomes available. For a culture that cannot write things down, the

_____

[130] For the window/mirror metaphor, I am thankful to John Wilson and his lectures on medieval literature.

only way important ideas can be guaranteed permanence is through the memory and voices of the people of the culture. The storyteller is such an important figure for the oral culture because he represents and embodies the common memory of the culture. The storyteller cannot divorce himself from his tradition. This means that all things that are to be remembered will take one pform: the form of the collective memory of that culture. In such a collective memory, there is only room for one viewpoint, for one way of seeing and understanding and remembering the reality that surrounds the culture. With the advent of writing comes a change in the way a culture remembers things. Now that thoughts and events can be written down and saved and consulted at any time by all members of the community, there is no longer the need for the collective memory of the people to carry the burden of serving as the memorail storehouse. Since the collective consciousness of the community need no longer be contained in the minds of its few storytellers, but instead is restricted only by how much room there is for books, every member of the culture can now be his own storyteller. There can be many different ideas, many different ways of viewing the one reality--the culture has shifted from a dependence on its one collective consciousness (that of the whole society) to an emphasis on the consciousness of each individual of that society. This difference of emphasis, I think, illustrates the essential difference between oral and written or literate cultures, and the implications of

this difference may never be fully understood.

Certainly, orality and literacy are very difficult things
to describe, and I think they are better understood by an
examination and comparison of works from each of the cultures
than by an attempt to define them, such as the one that
precedes. Conveniently, in Beowulf and John Gardner's Grendel
we have what amounts to a telling of a story from both an oral
and a literate viewpoint. In reading each of these in light of
the other, the first thing that strikes me is the difference in
the way that each story is told. For an Anglo-Saxon listener,
there was only one way to tell the story of Beowulf—indeed, as
Milman Parry and Alfred Lord would attest, the scop singing the
tale of Beowulf would emphatically argue that he was telling
the one and only story of Beowulf.[131] This is the
crux of orality—the existence of only one view of reality, the
view held by the whole culture, which is passed down from

---

[131] See Alfred Lord's The Singer of Tales
(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960) for more on the
phenonenon of the storyteller. A slight digression, but one
that is relevant, is the fact that in an oral culture all
storytellers telling a tale would argue that they were all
telling the exact same tale, and in the exact same way,
regardless of the fact that each's presentation of the tale
might be very different in its narrative sequence, its details,
or in countless other ways. Even the same storyteller telling
the same story on different occasions would claim that each
telling was exactly the same, even though usually they were
not, as Parry and Lord have shown in their work with Balkan
storytellers. It seems to me that the importance of the story
for the storyteller is in the truth about reality that the
story tells, and that the truth does not change in any telling
of the story. A preoccupation with the changing details of the
story is a literate preoccupation, and would not matter, much
less be comprehended, by an oral storyteller.

generation to generation. Thus, Beowulf is told by what we would call a third person omniscient narrator--he is a narrator who is telling the story the way it is, and the only way it can be. Grendel stands in stark contrast to this. The story is told in the first person; it is told through the eyes of the book's main character, Grendel the monster. Now we can begin to see how Grendel could only be the product of a literate culture. In writing Grendel, Gardner has taken the original story of Beowulf and turned it around, something the original Beowulf poet could not have conceived of doing. Immediately, it is obvious that the story is no longer the one truth about the reality of the society, but instead it is Gardner's own interpretation of reality. More than this, Gardner is not simply presenting a view of reality, but is using the story to comment on that reality; the author of the literate work is asking questions about the reality that surrounds him, whereas the scop could never question the nature of his reality but could only present "the way things are." The author can ask questions about the reality he lives in only because he is a part of a literate tradition, and he has come to realize that his consciousness is separate from the consciousness of his culture. For the author, there is one reality, but many individual interpretations of that reality.

The most immediately apparent way that Beowulf differs from Grendel is in terms of its plot. In Grendel, as is the case in most modern literature, it is the characters that

determine the plot. The whole action of Grendel depends on

what Grendel and his supporting characters (most notably the

dragon) think and do; the sense of the plot's dependence on its

characters is only heightened by the fact that the story is

told in the first person. The concept of characters

determining plot may not be so easy to see, perhaps because it

is such an ingrained part of our modern common sense, but I

think it becomes much more apparent when we compare Grendel

with Beowulf. Beowulf, like most oral literature, consists of

a plot which exists outside of its characters. Indeed, a work

of oral literature could almost be seen as a plot in search of

characters. The story of Beowulf is not dependent on the

character of Beowulf, and in some ways the characters of

Beowulf can even be seen as an aspect of the plot; really, any

good archetypal hero could have been the protagonist of

Beowulf, as any good archetypal hero would have reacted in the

same way as Beowulf when confronted with Grendel, Grendel's

mother, and the dragon. In the story of Beowulf, as in Greek

tragic theater, for example, which is also an artform heavily

dependent on an oral tradition, there is really no question as

---

¹³²I use the Greek tragic theater as an example here, in
spite of the fact that nearly all of our extant Greek tragedies
can be safely credited to an author. Authored though they may
be, I do not think that they could have been created by
playwrights who were not as in touch with their tradition as
the fifth-century B.C. Greeks must have been. The tragedies
depend on older myths for story material, and the tragedians
depend on their audience's familiarity with these stories.
There is rarely any surprise as to how the stories proceed or
end for the Greek audience; however, there was a difference in

to what will happen in the story.[132]   When presented
with _Beowulf_, or any other myth, we have a _feeling_ for what
will happen--we know Beowulf will defeat Grendel, for
example--maybe because we have heard the story sung before, or
maybe because of our Jungian collective unconscious, or maybe
moreso because we can feel for the truth that the oral culture
would understand: that this is what _must_ happen. In _Grendel_,
having read _Beowulf_ we know what must happen generally if
Gardner is not to contradict the story he is working with, but
we really have no idea why or how the plot will unfold. There
is no second-guessing the literate, existential Grendel.

   The difference in the concept of the self for our culture
and for the Anglo-Saxons is important for an understanding of
the difference in plot. The Anglo-Saxons had no concept of the
personality as we know it today. As was the case for all
aspects of their culture, your identity was based on what the
society as a whole knew about you: your reputation. The
Anglo-Saxon Beowulf, who is the ideal hero in every sense of
the word for the story's listeners, can only react in one way
to the situations he encounters. However, the Grendel in
Gardner's story, an embodiment of the modern psychological

---

the use each tragedian made of the story for what he wanted to
say in his play. These seem to be the trappings of a literate
culture, using the older story to make a comment on the present
times, just as Gardner uses Grendel. This apparent
contradiction should cause us to raise questions about our own
culture as well: how oral is our culture, in spite of its
apparent literacy? can a modern author really step outside his
own tradition (as much as we assume he can) in order to comment
on it?

being, with his own individual personality, can act in any
number of ways given a certain situation; it is Grendel's
choice of a specific path in a specific situation that
determines the plot of the story. We could probably even go so
far as to say that because Beowulf has no capacity for acting
in a number of different ways in a certain situation that there
is actually no plot in Beowulf. Isn't Beowulf only a series of
formulas and patterns strung together by a scop, based on a
shared tradition, independent of its characters? If this is
so, then Beowulf probably doesn't have a plot in our sense of
the word, but that is hardly to say that it is shallow or
random or purposeless--its purpose for its society is not to
comment, as Grendel does, but, as always, to tell the truth
about reality. Beowulf is told in the context of the whole
shared consciousness and shared story collection of the people.[133]
Its allusions and digressions, boring as they might seem to a
modern reader, are of critical importance for listeners in an
oral culture: they derive from and embody that powerful oral
common sense, and restate for the society the
non-individualistic, non-opinioned values of the society.

---

[133]The beginning of the poem, the allusion to Scyld
Sceafing, which assumes a knowledge of at least part of the
Anglo-Saxon story collection, attests to this fact. Again,
much like the Greek tragedians, the storyteller assumes a
knowledge of the tradition. However, the purpose of the story
differs from that of the tragedies. Beowulf is not used to
comment on or question society in the way that Aeschylus, for
example, uses The Oresteia to question justice and comment on
his society; instead, Beowulf presents the truth the culture
will understand: how to give meaning to an otherwise bleak
life through heroism.

Upon a close examination of <u>Beowulf</u> and <u>Grendel</u>, I feel
that <u>Grendel</u>'s essential literacy comes from the fact that it
can, and in fact its main purpose is to, criticize reality. It
can be argued that <u>Beowulf</u> is a Christian adaption of a pagan
story, and that thus it offers a criticism of that paganness,
but I don't think that this is so. The oral poet singing
<u>Beowulf</u> is, in true oral style, telling a new story
(Christianity) in terms of an old story;[134] he does
this so that the new story can become a part of the culture's
shared consciousness in a way that can be understood and
remembered by all. Thus, it is not a criticism at all, but
rather a means of protecting the common sense. The new
experience of Christianity is absorbed into the old story of
"the way things are," and the story is told again with no loss
of the central truth; in effect, the meaning of the story has
not changed, nor, for the scop, has the way in which the story
is told. <u>Grendel</u>, however, is a consummate criticism of
reality (at least in its methods); Gardner takes the story of
Beowulf and changes it not only in point of view but in
purpose, to comment on both the values that the original story
espouses--and--the world-that surrounds the author. In <u>Grendel</u>,

---

[134]Much the same as Caedmon, who sings the story of the
new Christian God in terms of the old pagan gods. This is the
homeostatic tendency of orality, that for a new concept to be
understood, remembered, or even listened to at all by the
people, it must be presented in a familiar framework: the
framework of the shared consciousness of the society. And,
conversely, for the old to be remembered, understood, and
valued it must be adapted to the new--the oral story constantly
contemporizes itself.

the wise but absurd dragon tells Grendel that life has no
meaning but the meaning we impose on it--thus, the thing to do
is to go find some gold (not the dragon's gold!) and sit on it,
thereby giving meaning to life. Grendel sees the truth in
this, but still wants desperately to believe the sweet song of
the Shaper. When all his attempts to integrate himself into
the Shaper's society are crushed by the incompassionate members
of that society, Grendel takes the advice the dragon hinted at
and decides that the meaing he will impose on his life is that
of the ruiner of men. By setting up his novel in this way,
Gardner is able to make his audience think about the questions
raised about the meaning of life, as well as to criticize the
Anglo-Saxon culture and its beliefs about the meaning of life.
While the Anglo-Saxons might agree that in the end life is
hopeless (note the elegiac tone to almost all their poetry),
there would be no doubt for them that some meaning for life cam
be discovered in reality, and shared through poetry. For the
audience of Beowulf there is only one way to find meaning in
life, and that is by embracing the heroic code. This is the
sweet song of the Shaper. Again, there is only one world view
here, and the audience of Beowulf would not understand the
irony in Grendel when Grendel's downfall at Beowulf's hands
occurs because Beowulf is also following the dragon's
advice--only Beowulf imposes meaning on his life not by sitting
on gold or plaguing men, but by killing monsters.

There remain in Grendel many ingredients which show an

essential literacy in comparison with the strong feeling of orality in Beowulf. Grendel (like the characters in the authores, literate romances that follow the older heroic tales in English literature) undergoes a change in his view, a move from innocence to existential cynical experience. Such a change could not be seen in Beowulf, for it goes against the monistic common sense of the story's listeners--again, change contradicts the one reality of things. Gardner uses Grendel to comment not only on the meaning of life, but religion, government, sexuality, human (and monster) nature, and nearly every other aspect of his surrounding reality; Beowulf of course, can never question or comment, but only tell the one truth.

When attempting to understand such complex issues as orality and literacy, one tends to simplify in order to make the issues clearer. I hope I have not oversimplified the questions at hand in order to try to answer them, and, more importantly, I hope I have not oversimplified the works Beowulf and Grendel--for surely the beauty and importance of both these works far overshadows any analysis I might make of orality and literacy. The works themselves are what are most important, but I think much can be gained by an understanding of the traditions that shaped the creation of each of these stories; to say that they are different does not imply that one is more valuable or more correct. Beowulf lives and dies as the hero embodying the heroic code and goodness of his race; he gives us

a reason for living, a way of living, and a clear view of the
nature of human reality. Grendel, cynical and critical monster
that he is, gives us a very different view of reality, and down
even to his last words in the book ("and so may you all," which
is an ironic bad-wish ending when compared to the many similar
good-wish endings of medieval romances), comments on the
tradition that spawned him.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Beowulf Autotypes

Bessinger, Jess (ed.). Essential Articles for the Study of Old
    English Poetry. Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1968.

Bradley, S.A.J. (trans. and ed.). Anglo-Saxon Poetry. London:
    J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd, 1982.

Brodeur, Arthur G. The Art of Beowulf. Berkeley and Los
    Angeles: The University of California Press, 1959.

Burlin, Robert B. and Edward B. Irving (ed.). Old English
    Studies in Honour of John C. Pope. Toronto: University of
    Toronto Press, 1974.

Cassidy, Frederic and Richard Ringler. Bright's Old English
    Grammar and Reader, Third Edition. New York: Holt,
    Rinehart and Winston, 1971.

Chickering, Howell. Untitled Review of John Niles' Beowulf: The
    Poem and Its Tradition. Speculum, 61(1986), 186-89.

Creed, Robert P. (ed.). Old English Poetry: Fifteen Essays.
    Providence, Rhode Island: Brown University Press, 1967.

Donaldson, E. Talbot. Beowulf. New York: W.W. Norton, 1966.

Duggan, J.J. (ed.). Oral Literature: Seven Essays. London:
    Scottish Academic Press, 1975.

Foley, John Miles (ed.). Oral Traditional Literature: A
    Festschrift for Albert Bates Lord. Columbus, Ohio:
    Slavica, 1981.

Greenfield, Stanley (ed.). Studies in Old English Literature
    Literature in Honor of Arthur G. Brodeur. Oregon:
    University of Oregon Press, 1963.

Havelock, Eric A. A Preface to Plato. Cambridge: Harvard
    University Press, 1949.

Huppe, Bernard F. The Hero in the Earthly City. Binghamton, New
    York: State University of New York at Binghamton, 1984.

Klaeber, Frederick (ed.). Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg.
    Boston: D.C. Heath, 1950.

Lord, Albert B. The Singer of Tales. Cambridge: Harvard
    University Press, 1960.

Mitchell, Bruce and Fred C. Robinson. A Guide to Old English.
    Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964.

Magoun, Francis P. "The Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon
    Narrative Poetry." Speculum, 28(1953), pp. 446-467.

Nicholson, Lewis (ed.). Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in
    Appreciation. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre
    Dame Press, 1975.

Nicholson, Lewis (ed.). An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism.
    Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963.

Niles, John D. Beowulf: The Poem and Its Tradition. Cambridge:
    Harvard University Press, 1983.

Niles, John D. (ed.). Old English Literature in Context: Ten

Essays. D.S. Brewer, Rowman and Littlefield, 1980.

Ong, Walter J. _Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word_. London: Methuen, 1982.

Opland, Jeff. _Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetry_. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1980.

Parry, Adam (ed.). _The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry_. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971.

Pearsall, Derek. _Old English and Middle English Poetry_. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977.

Pope, John Collins. _The Rhythm of Beowulf_. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966.

Reidinger, Anita. "The Old English Formula in Context." _Speculum_, 60:2, 1985.

Schaar, Claes. "On a New Theory of Old English Poetic Diction." _Neophilologius_, 40(1956).

Stock, Brian. _The Implications of Literacy_. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983.

Stolz, Benjamin A. and Richard S. Shannon (ed.). _Oral Literature and the Formula_. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1976.

Tolkien, J.R.R. "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." _Proceedings of the British Academy_ 22(1936), pp. 245-295.

Whitelock, Dorothy. _The Audience of Beowulf_. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951.