

“Ah ain’t heard whut de tex’ wuz’”: The (Il)legitimate Textuality of Old English and Black English

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“Oral literature” is an uncomfortable pair of words; Walter Ong goes so far as to suggest that the phrase is “self-contradictory” (1982:13). Orality has gained legitimacy as an object of critical inquiry, but as long as critics are located in universities, they must, like archeologists, rely (however suspiciously) on transcriptions and try to piece out the gap between the fossil (the textual record) and the vanished life form (real oral performance) that it claims to record.

In this essay I examine two texts from radically different cultural situations: Anglo-Saxon monasteries and the rural Black South. Nevertheless, their respective provenance—in terms of speaker, reporter and legitimizing institution—bear intriguing similarities. Each text is concerned with the biography of the oral poet and issues of transcribing his orality. These parallels, put together, constitute a paradigm for the presentation of an oral poet in a literary frame.¹ The two framing, legitimating textual authors in question (as distinguished from the oral authors they present and circumscribe) are the Venerable Bede and Zora Neale Hurston. The embedded authors, Cædmon and John Pearson, are both Christian preachers who speak in a language still heavily structured by an oral, pagan culture. Because Bede and Hurston are both incorporating orality, they share similar

¹ There have been many attempts to draw parallels between Bede’s account of Cædmon and other accounts of poetic inspiration, both as potential sources for Bede’s narrative (if it is presumed to be fictional) and as subsequent analogues of that narrative (for critics who are interested in the inscription of oral inspiration in various cultures). Andy Orchard lists some of the copious research on analogues of Bede’s narrative (1996:417, n. 4); see also Lord 1993 for some comparisons with more recent narratives. My approach is unique only in that it compares two very similar conjunctions of literate narrative and divinely inspired Christian oral poetry, thus drawing attention to the two very different cultural environments and two very different agendas on the part of the literary transcribers who relate and preserve the embedded oral poems.

structures and even images, but because they have different cultural agendas, the politics of their presentation of orality differ. Bede and Hurston both construct a narrative to frame and explain a transcribed (and in a sense, translated) text by an oral author. In both cases, a literary narrative not only coexists with and circumscribes an oral poem, but that narrative also presents a “performance arena,” in J. M. Foley’s terms,² within which the oral poem is said to occur as a significant event. First, I will compare the two framing narratives of the creation, recognition, assimilation, and martyrdom of the oral poet; then I will address the performance arena and the problems of the transcription of the embedded text attributed to the oral poet.

The Venerable Bede (ca. 673-735), as he is now commonly known, was a highly learned and productive scholar, historian, and theologian who spent his entire life in service of the church at a time when England was only recently Christianized. His *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (*An Ecclesiastical History of the English People*) is a foundational text for the history of English Christianity.³ One episode from this history has attracted a great deal of attention: Bede gives us the life story of Cædmon, as well as Cædmon’s first divinely inspired poem (in Latin paraphrase). Cædmon grows up as a very ordinary cowherd, and until he is very mature has only one trait that distinguishes him from his fellow vernacular laborers—he cannot sing their beer-drinking songs. On one particular evening, he goes to tend cattle and, once asleep, receives the call to take up a new *theme* for singing, the praise of God. He does, and does so successfully that he is soon recognized and revered for this gift. For the remainder of his days he lives as a monk, inspiring others to piety and to a rejection of the world with his songs. Bede’s account of the vernacular devotion of Cædmon functions as didactic propaganda; it is important mediation between the church and the rough majority of English, who considered themselves Christian but were in much need of divine, or priestly, spiritual education. Cædmon is important to Bede because he begins in an unenlightened vernacular environment and

² See, for example, Foley 1995:81. He defines the “performance arena” as “the locus in which some specialized form of communication is uniquely licensed to take place” (8).

³ For a recent perspective on the historical Bede and Cædmon, see Stanley 1995. Lees and Overing (1994) suggest that Bede’s historical record downplays and conceals the importance of Hilda, and that many modern critics have been complicit in this erasure; see also note 16.

crosses the border into the monastery; Bede presents him as an exemplar to the untutored multitude. For precisely this reason, one wonders if Bede's account of Cædmon's divine inspiration is actually true, or if it perhaps borrows some dynamics from the story of the annunciation.⁴

Bede's text was initially written entirely in Latin; although the "Hymn" was clearly spoken originally in Old English, it was first recorded in a Latin translation. Subsequently, an anonymous monk provided the Old English original as a marginal gloss to Bede's Latin paraphrase. Bede himself notes, in his entirely Latin text, that his Latin paraphrase of the "Hymn" cannot do justice to the Old English original.⁵ Clearly, someone felt it would be helpful to record the Old English version in the margin of Bede's manuscript page.⁶ That marginal gloss, a reversed translation, constitutes the first known text of English literature. Gradually, as the manuscript was reproduced, the vernacular came to be the only medium for writing the "Hymn" and even Bede's narrative frame itself was rendered in Old English (Kiernan 1990).⁷ The gradual translation of Bede's Latin, then, demonstrates the increasing legitimacy of the vernacular. Old English enters Bede's text just as Cædmon enters the monastery—as a marginal cowherd who is nevertheless educable. The story in the text and the story of the text draw attention to the paradoxes and cultural politics of oral literature.

⁴ In her subtle account of the mixed presence of literacy and orality in Old English poetry, O'Keefe notes that "while Cædmon's *Hymn* is our clearest record of a purely oral composition, the scholarly acceptance of its intrinsic orality is based less firmly on analysis of the nature or number of the formulae in the *Hymn* than on Bede's authoritative account of its author's illiteracy and of its miraculous occasion of composition" (1990:79).

⁵ Abrams 1986:21. Bede's comment is omitted by later scribes, since the Old English version was no longer absent from the page.

⁶ Kiernan (1990) has argued that the later scribe in fact performed a reverse-translation of the Latin, not supplying the original as a gloss but rather composing a new "original" based on the Latin. More recently, Isaac (1997) has supported this theory on philological grounds.

⁷ The peculiar status of Cædmon's "Hymn" is reflected in the fact that in modern research it is variously entitled *Cædmon's Hymn*, *Cædmon's Hymn*, and "Cædmon's Hymn," as well as the title that I use. One's choice depends partly upon whether one wishes to take Bede's word for the poem's origin, that is, whether one takes Cædmon to be a character or an author.

In her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Zora Neale Hurston traces the career of John Pearson, a half-black man of immense physical, charismatic, and creative power whom Hurston based on her own father. John is the illegitimate son of a white plantation owner. Because of this status, John is hated by his black stepfather and leaves to work for his (unacknowledged) real father. Thereupon, John falls in love with Lucy, gets in trouble with the law, and then finds his calling as a preacher *par excellence*. His excessive womanizing, however, threatens his career. The congregation knows perfectly well about his sinful ways, so he must maintain their faith in him by elevating the quality of his sermons. But John is a broken man; he attempts to find work as a laborer again, then finally repents. Just when he almost has a hold on virtue, he falls into sin again and dies in what appears to be an accident with a train. The outlines of the plot are taken from the life of Hurston's father, a womanizing preacher, but much of the verbal expression that the characters use derives from Hurston's field notes as an anthropologist; the book is filled with phrases from her notes, ranging from one-liners to an entire sermon. That sermon, the artistic climax of the novel, was transcribed by Hurston from the Reverend C. C. Lovelace at a real church service.

Before properly comparing the fictional narratives, a brief sketch of Zora Neale Hurston's relation to her text is necessary. Hurston was heir to both oral and written culture. She was born in the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, then educated at Howard University and Barnard College in cultural anthropology, a field that has long been structured by predominantly white academics who observe "primitive" culture. Like many other anthropologists, Hurston wished to record oral culture before assimilation threatened to erase it, but Hurston was recording, advancing, and engaging in her own culture, not studying it from an ivory tower. The ironies of Hurston's position are complex; she went back to Florida to gather oral sayings with the assistance of a wealthy liberal aristocrat who was enamored of the vogue of "primitivism" in the 1930s. Hurston went, in effect, as an employee; she signed a contract giving all ownership of the "data" she was to find to her patron (Hemenway 1977:110). But in order to be trusted she impersonated a local black woman, which, ironically, she happened to be. Everyone agreed that the folklore she gathered was valuable, but to whom did it belong? To the (mostly anonymous) oral tradition-bearers, to the white patroness, or to Hurston? To the discipline of anthropology or to the Harlem Renaissance? Hurston did publish some of her findings in academic journals, but she achieved her prominent place in African American letters by subverting the praxis of academic anthropology.

By weaving her material into powerful works of fiction, she learned to speak as well as record the voices she studied.⁸ This complex status as an author/anthropologist/scribe/spy seems at first glance to be convoluted, but it appears less so if one recalls the nature of an oral poet-author, who is always as much a collector and transmitter as she is a “creator.”⁹ Hurston re-enacts the structure of oral creativity and its goals of cultural retention, but she does so in a self-consciously theorized double-citizenship in both the oral and the written worlds.¹⁰

Hurston was keenly aware of the role Christianity played in subjugating American blacks; it helped to pacify resistance. This is a point that sharply distinguishes Hurston from the objects of her research. African traditions, including Hoodoo rituals, persist in the rural South alongside such Christian traditions as the Baptist Church. But they are both practiced “naïvely,” that is to say without a book-learned awareness of their role in colonialization. The fact that Hurston recorded *and* performed Hoodoo rituals (Hemenway 1977:118, 121-22) underlines her desire simultaneously to observe and to engage in the culture she revered. Although John, as a preacher, would appear to be the center of Christianity in his parish, it is in fact the pagan rhythms of African poetry in his sermons that enchant his congregation. Hurston writes of John in his later days that “he had still

⁸ She first published the sermon in question in Nancy Cunard’s ethnographic *Negro: An Anthology* (1934:50-54).

⁹ It must be granted that there is some awkwardness in the pastiche of material in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, Hurston’s first novel. Critics generally agree that Hurston’s art of preservation and creation is perfected in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. A contemporary reviewer writes that Hurston sets up her characters and situations “as mere pegs upon which to hang their dialect and their folkways” (Burris 1934:166). Sometimes Hurston fits the aphorisms so perfectly in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* that they retain all of their original edge, as when Lucy chides John for his womanizing, “Don’t git miss-put on yo’ road. God don’t eat okra” (1934:204), that is, “Don’t lose your path to salvation; God doesn’t accept into heaven slimy (sinful) people.” A comparison between my paraphrase and Hurston’s figurative dialect will reveal how much, as Bede says, is lost in translation.

¹⁰ A contemporary reviewer remarked that Hurston wrote “with double authority as a Negro and a student of folklore. An insider, she shares with her hero the touch of ‘pagan poesy’ that made him thrill his hearers when he preached. But she is an insider without the insider’s usual neuroses” (Gruening 1934). It is amusing that pure orality should be figured as neuroses. However backhanded the compliment, this is an enthusiastically positive review. Hurston’s dual citizenship in the oral and written worlds has come to appear less peculiar in the context of recent scholarship on orality. O’Keeffe, for example, points to scribes of Old English whose “participation in the texts made them literate analogues to oral performers. . .” (1990:192).

enough of the former John to be formidable as an animal and enough of his Pagan poesy to thrill” (1934:221, her capitalization). One of the key aspects of oral culture is a certain structure of naïveté, and John would certainly object to the accusation of being a pagan. John (and probably Lovelace) is necessarily unconscious, in an academic manner at least, of the subversiveness of his own oral modality. Nevertheless, as a colored or “yellow” black man, John experiences some of the same ambivalences as Hurston does as a black anthropologist. When his biological father Mister Pearson gives him a job, it is as a “house nigger,”¹¹ a privileged slave. Pearson tells John to watch the other workers and check on whether they are cleaning things properly: “Don’t say anything to ‘em, but when you find ‘em dirty you let me know” (43). John is asked to be an informant for white culture, much as Hurston was collecting folklore (officially, at least) for the benefit of her white patroness.

The Life Story of an Oral Poet

The careers of Hurston’s John and Bede’s Cædmon parallel each other. Alan Brown draws attention to the fact that the Florida in which Hurston grew up, studied, and set her novels was full of natural dangers, forcing its people to survive by becoming “animalistic.”¹² Both John and Cædmon are associated with beasts in their pre-enlightened state. John is beaten by his savagely violent stepfather until he grows big enough to overcome him. Later he has his first major legal scrape after savagely beating Bud. John is certainly not as much of an angry beast as his father, but in his lust he is just as bestial. In his youth he amazes everyone with his boundless physical strength, wherein his character may owe as much to Samson as to Hurston’s father (his Delilah comes later in *Nettie*). Like Samson, his lust is the undoing of his strength. When Alf Pearson first sees him, before finding out that John is his son, he says, “What a fine stud! Why boy, you would have brought five thousand dollars on the block in slavery time!” (37). That remark has many levels. Alf’s own lust produced this young man, but because of the darker half of his racial composition Alf

¹¹ Hurston initially titled the book *Big Nigger* (Hemenway 1977:194).

¹² Brown comments that “John Pearson’s external struggle with the forces of nature mirrors his internal struggle with ‘De Beast’ that lives within him and ultimately destroys him” (1991:76).

sees him as a horse, an animal who can sire strong new animals. He means it as a compliment, of course, and John allows himself to be intoxicated by this perception of his “bestial” charisma, never perceiving the way in which Alf’s racist compliment points him toward an animalistic self-perception. Lust is his tragic flaw in a rather clear-cut way, but it is also symbolic of his energy.

Cædmon, like John, works with beasts, but he is more reserved, and he has none of John’s towering strength. The beasts with which Cædmon is associated are cattle (he goes to the *neata scipene*, “cattle barn” [25]),¹³ animals that are lowly but docile. Like John, Cædmon’s voice wins him the approval of the church hierarchy step by step, as the rough poetry shows such divine grace. John is viewed as a “house nigger” and Cædmon is a *clæne neat*, “clean cow”; they are stigmatized for their vulgar origins and their barbarous tongues, but they are paradoxically pure beasts, civilized farmhands, animals who speak. And in both cases, it is this paradoxically ugly-beautiful, rough-polished, vernacular-perfect *style* of poesy that wins them such acclaim.

Whereas John goes from being a lustful laborer to a lustful preacher, Cædmon forsakes *woruldhad*, “worldly (secular) life” (62), going from a docile cowherd to a docile monk. But even when Cædmon would seem to be entirely naturalized in the monastery, he is described as “swa swa clæne neten eodorcende in that sweteste leoð gehwerfde,” “just as a clean cow chewing the cud, so he turned [the Gospel] into sweetest poetry” (67-68). In other words, Cædmon learns divine truth in Latin from the monks, and reforms it into beautiful Old English verse. Bovine imagery follows him from his origins. This masticulation of Latin and rendering of English is an intriguing metaphor. Cædmon performs the transformation in his mouth, like a cow; Bede figures orality in physical terms. Hurston, on the other hand, is quite self-consciously subversive of the orality-literature borderline. She writes to her friend Langston Hughes in delight that she has read his poems out loud in Florida and that they have entered “back” into oral

¹³ For the sake of consistency, I quote Bede’s text (including Cædmon’s “Hymn”) in its Old English version, as found in the Bodleian Library manuscript Tanner 10, and edited by Mitchell and Robinson (1995:220-25). This stage in the evolution of Bede’s manuscript, in which the entire text is in Old English, is more comparable to Hurston’s text because Hurston’s framing narrative is in essentially the same dialect as her transcribed sermon-poem. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that whatever the original language of Cædmon’s text might have been, Bede’s narrative was originally in Latin.

circulation. She writes, “Boy! they *eat it up*... you are being quoted in Railroad camps, phosphate mines, turpentine stills, etc.” (Hemenway 1977:116; emphasis mine). In the chewing mouth of an oral poet, a text can be translated into orality. Hurston not only collected folklore but also created it, orally for Southern black laborers and in writing for the literati.

Both John and Cædmon have moments of silence before their divine gifts strike them. In the case of Cædmon, he is at a *gebeorscipe*, “beer-revel” (20) when he fails to sing the sort of festive poetry expected there, thus showing his piousness. A modern critic might infer that the real Cædmon probably sang often at such feasts, thus becoming a secular oral poet before his conversion, but it is Bede’s purpose to compose a myth of divine inspiration. So Bede goes out of his way to make Cædmon incompetent at pagan-like *gebeorscipe* poetry, so that he gets his gift of skill *ex nihilo*. Hurston, on the other hand, wishes to stress her culture’s collective contribution to John’s inspiration, and so religious inspiration is rarely mentioned in her account of the preacher. John is engaging in the thriving oral culture of the railroad camp when he attends the Sanford minister’s sermon, and performs it from memory to the camp again, making “the crowd [hang] half-way between laughter and awe” (173). Preaching is merely the most obvious way for a black oral poet to perform professionally.

The moment of John’s silence *is* significant, however—his inability to speak to Lucy when they first meet. He overcomes this initial silence, of course, but it underlines Lucy’s role in his life. Much later, when John is threatened by the congregation’s condemnation of his sinful ways, Lucy instructs him to admit his sins publicly; she is essential to his voice, operating as a kind of muse. Later, John shows bestial violence, striking Lucy on her deathbed, and it is the memory of this act that haunts him and causes him to forsake his voice, finally quitting his ministry after the climactic sermon. An oral poet must have skill and inspiration. Whereas Cædmon is portrayed as having no culturally derived skill but a mystical link with God, John is shown to be thoroughly continuous with a tradition of oral skill and inspired by a mystical link with Lucy.

Both John/Lovelace and Cædmon are prolific and seemingly effortless creators, surrounded by awe-struck admirers. We are told that they each made many unrecorded poems of divine grace, but we are only given a selection of that oral plenitude in a textual sample. An important feature of the archetype of the prophet/divine oral poet is his inadequate competitors. Many tried to imitate Cædmon, but “*nænig hwaðre him þæt gelice don meahte*,” “none, however, could perform like him” (11-12). In this respect,

Hurston is clearly crafting her story to fit an archetype rather than the sociological truth. In a letter to James Weldon Johnson, she wrote: “[Y]ou and I . . . know that there are hundreds of preachers who are equalling [Lovelace’s] sermon weekly” (Hemenway 1977:193-94). But in the novel John towers over all his competitors, and this is the only reason his congregation tolerates his embarrassing womanizing for as long as they do. The only potential replacement is Cozy, who incompetently tries to fill John’s shoes, straining to produce a pale imitation:

“Y’all say ‘Amen’. Don’t let uh man preach hisself tuh death and y’ll set dere lak uh bump on uh log and won’t he’p ‘im out. Say ‘Amen’!! .. Say ‘Amen’! Say it lak you mean it, and if yuh do mean it, tell me so! Don’t set dere and say nothin’!” (249).

After the sermon, Harris seeks Sister Boger’s opinion of his performance, and she makes an “indecent sound with her lips,” then comments: “dat wan’t no sermon. Dat wuz uh lecture” (250). Whether intentionally or not, Boger is using an untranscribable sound to put down a *lecture*—not only a professor’s instruction but also, as Hurston would know, a *reading*. It is still, of course, an orally improvised sermon, but it is figuratively mere reading because Cozy has no understanding of the rhythms of the call-and-response system; he should never need to beg for an “amen.”

Ironically, it is John’s sermons that are more closely tied to the biblical text; during Cozy’s sermon Sister Boger whispers “‘Ah ain’t heard whut de tex’ wuz’,” and the other lady replies “‘Me neither’” (248). Cozy is simultaneously slighted for being too literary and not literary enough. Cædmon’s “Hymn” is not generated in the oral sphere either; it is a paraphrase (however liberal) of Genesis.¹⁴ Behind each text is a “real” performance, behind that performance (as Sister Boger reminds us) is a text, and behind the biblical text (a Christian believes) is the pure, spoken word of God. Orality and literacy are never easy to divide; even in the oral church environment, the audience is listening for a textual referent. The difference between Cozy and John is not knowledge of the text (though Cozy shows little) but rather knowledge of the systems of orality that are so crucial to the black church. One rule is that the preacher must frame his orality as an explication of a particular scriptural quote, which Cozy forgets to do. Cozy’s sermon thus lacks what J. M. Foley calls word-power; as Foley

¹⁴ Orchard (1996) has recently contributed a detailed explication of the presence of subtle allusions to native, classical, and (especially) biblical sources in both Bede’s narrative and Cædmon’s “Hymn.”

suggests, “word-power derives from the enabling event of performance and the enabling referent of tradition” (1995:208). Cædmon’s fellows do not have *Godes gife*, the “gift of God” (14), which modern readers might interpret as oral composition skills, but Hurston is perfectly aware that it is orality (and hence African-ness), not divinity, that makes John’s sermons so transcendent. Finally, both figures meet appropriate ends: Cædmon predicts his death and, true to his gentle nature, asks the good will of his comrades, while John, on the other hand, dies both sinful and repentant. In his great sermon, he conceives of Jesus as laying himself in front of the Damnation Train, a graphic modern image of dying for our sins. John then enacts his own image, driving from his last infidelity in such a guilty stupor that he does not seem to see the train that kills him.

Transcription or Translation?

Until this point I have discussed the given narrative story that frames the embedded text. Now I would like to turn to the oral texts themselves, Cædmon’s “Hymn” and John’s last sermon for Zion Hope Church. In each case, the fact that we call it a “text” is a key part of its history; in order to become a text it has undergone what Foley calls an “intersemiotic translation” (1995:94) from an oral to a written medium. These examples will provide suggestive insights into the liminality, or rather hybridity, of oral literature because each text contains distinct traces of a double origin. Cædmon’s song is translated into Latin, then Old English writing, whereas Hurston transcribes the Reverend C. C. Lovelace’s sermon and then transports it into a literate novel. Both Cædmon’s and Lovelace’s devotional song-poems are embedded in a legitimizing narrative written by a cultural ambassador. Both sermon-poems give us a narrative of God’s creation of the world. The notable difference is that Bede is reinforcing the dominant culture by acculturating its primitive fringe, whereas Hurston is reinforcing a subversive Harlem Renaissance by asserting the value of the Southern oral origin that the Harlem literati (as Hurston termed them, the “Niggerati”¹⁵) are in danger of forgetting.

¹⁵ Hemenway 1977:43. Hurston included herself in this group. She is not simply being sardonic. “Nigger” is, of course, an abusive term when used by a white speaker. But it is also a term of familiar address *between* black people, with no derogative connotation. But not all black people—because of its derogatory quality in a white mouth, it was considered declass  by precisely the Niggerati to whom she refers. So her term is meant to ridicule the pretentious whitewashing of black culture implicit in the

Indeed the framing narratives have an important link with the embedded text; origins are at stake. John's origin is illegitimate, whereas that of Cædmon is non-legitimate. Thus Cædmon rises in social and divine terms without any fundamental discontinuity, whereas John must reject the "legitimate" white future offered him by his biological father in favor of the "illegitimate" black future of oratory. Both of their sermon-poems are centered on creation. In retrospect, this is certainly appropriate, since one represents what would be the beginning of English literature and the other represents a key moment in the Harlem Renaissance's quest for cultural origins. Black English and Old English, John and Cædmon all lack legitimacy, and so origins are a suggestive topic.

But here again, politics is present in Hurston and absent in Bede.¹⁶ Cædmon's poem, like John/Lovelace's sermon, tells the story of God's creation of the world. But Cædmon gives an utterly nonpolitical creation of the world in his 9-line "Hymn"; *firum*, "people" (44a) are an afterthought. In contrast, Lovelace/John puts great emphasis on the creation of man, implying that God the father is black. The incompetent Cozy had made an awkward sermon claiming that Jesus was black because of the fact that it is so hot in Israel. Lovelace, on the other hand, uses the oral situation of delivery to make the point much more effectively. Speaking in a room where presumably everyone is black (including Hurston), Lovelace narrates a thrilling drama of the creation of man. Each element of the universe asks for the new man to be made in his image. Lovelace looks around at a room of people who have been told that to be black is to be bestial, and intones "'God said, 'NO'! / I'll make man in my own image, ha!'" (273).

Hurston wants to communicate not only the meaning but also the effect of a dynamic, collaborative, and improvisational oral event. As one critic writes, "those elements of early modern black arts that derived from folk culture owe a great deal to an expressive form, both in songs and folktales, that in some respects is antithetical to the notion of a fixed,

concept of an imitated "literati," but it is also a pointed reminder; if a black writer allows "nigger" to be stricken from her vocabulary, she loses a huge section of her oral heritage along with it.

¹⁶ Of course, the apparent absence of political alignment in Bede in fact conceals definite political goals. In an incisive recent critique of Bede, Lees and Overing (1994) observe how Bede not only appropriates and positions Cædmon for the sake of his history, but also how Bede similarly positions Hilda, who is the unnamed Abbess in Bede's account of Cædmon. Bede's simultaneous inscription and subordination of Cædmon's orality parallels his inscription and subordination of the life of Hilda.

regulated text” (Sundquist 1993:39). In the analogy I am drawing, medieval Latin is to Old English as academic “white” English is to the Black English vernacular (a situation that Hurston herself did much to undo). In both cases, the “lower” tongue is barely admissible, if at all, in a written text. Bede is like Hurston in that his overall narrative is in the literate tongue. But Bede is still closer to the white writers preceding (and following) Hurston who “translated” black idiom into an outsider’s idea of what it should sound like. In her faithful transcription of Black English, Hurston is assiduously conscious of the grammatical rules of orality, just like the anonymous scribe who wrote out the Old English version of Cædmon’s “Hymn.” For example, Hurston notes that “You as subject gets full value but is shortened to yuh as an object. Him in certain positions and ‘im in others depending on consonant preceding” (Hemenway 1977:115).

Here Hurston consciously departs from the theory of her fellow contemporary folklorist, James Weldon Johnson, who “regularized” black dialect in order to avoid the mockery of minstrel-stereotypes, thereby losing all the original poetry and translating a sermon into quasi-white verse: “Oh, I tremble, yes, I tremble, / It causes me to tremble, tremble, / When I think how Jesus died.”¹⁷ Johnson, like Bede, wishes to translate the “substance” and wipe off the tarnish of the vulgar tongue. We see a similar disparity in knowledge of, or attention to the rules that govern, the vernacular between the early and the late transcribers of Cædmon’s “Hymn,” as O’Keeffe (1987) demonstrates.

Of course, the late Old English transcribers made errors because they were removed by time from the rules dictated by a living language, whereas the authors against whom Hurston was reacting (both black and white) were removed *culturally*, but no less far removed, from the living language of the black South. Inevitably, however, Hurston imposes literary regularity on her text. Committing voice to print, even if that print is phonetically adapted to a dialect, is a translation. Further, the reader is required to imagine, to recreate, the polyphonic interaction between the preacher and the congregation; after the sermon, Hurston writes, “there had been a mighty response to the sermon all thru its length” (281). Music was an essential element of a sermon (Sundquist 1993:39). The preacher certainly half-sang many sections, for example “I can hear ‘em ring under His footsteps / Sol me-e-e, Sol do / Sol me-e-e, Sol do.” One can see in Hurston’s punctuation

¹⁷ “The Crucifixion” (Sundquist 1993:48).

and capitalization of all four “Sols” an attempt to demand music in the reader’s mind.¹⁸ The reader must remember any black preacher (for example, Martin Luther King, Jr. in his “I Have a Dream” speech), and generate a sound picture by combining that memory with the provided text. Indeed, Hurston’s reminder of the “mighty response” that she has not transcribed is reminiscent of Bede’s comment in the Latin text that translation is never adequate. These are gestures toward a true oral event that the text inadequately records. A contemporary book reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement*, assuming that the entire book is Hurston’s fiction, criticizes the climactic sermon that Hurston makes John speak, arguing no reasonable reader would believe that such a sermon was really delivered. The reviewer writes that the sermon “is too good, too brilliantly splashed with poetic imagery to be the product of any one Negro preacher” (Hemenway 1977:194). In fact, of course, it was precisely that.

Hurston’s format is worth comparing to the layout of Cædmon’s “Hymn.” John’s sermon is aligned to the left margin like poetry, and many lines have no punctuation. As O’Keeffe points out (1987), the Old English version of Cædmon’s “Hymn” was originally written with no line breaks because they were not necessary to a native speaker familiar with the rhythms of the language. By refusing to punctuate Lovelace’s sermon “correctly” Hurston strengthens the aural effect of the words, since punctuation causes a modern reader to concentrate on the meaning of the words as sentences, whereas a lack of punctuation makes the reader search for voice and phrasing as in modern poetry. Thus Hurston is demanding the same experience that the original Old English scribes assumed was the only option—an orally competent reader.

Transcription is inevitably political. Bede would like to erase all pagan elements from Cædmon’s text. He does so partly by rendering it in Latin (the language of the Church), but he also alters Cædmon’s text in translating it. It has been argued that the Old English hymn uses formulae that conjure the hero worship of Germanic culture, not Christianity. Bede’s Latin paraphrase, whether intentionally or no, erases many of these oral, pagan, and Germanic elements. As Kiernan points out, when Bede originally translated Cædmon’s “Hymn” into Latin, he did not use alliteration and elided the redundant addresses to God (*ece Drihten, Frea, halig Scyppend*; “eternal lord,” “master,” “holy maker”). Alliteration and

¹⁸ Foley has recently applied the reception theory of Wolfgang Iser to help explain how “oral-derived” texts can demand an active reader who helps to fill the gaps on the page by reconstructing an oral event in her own imagination (Foley 1991b and 1995).

redundancy are chief characteristics of Old English oral poetry, precisely the sort of thing Bede would erase along with the vernacular.

Whatever Bede would have us believe, Cædmon does not create by miracle alone; he is informed by church doctrine as well as oral style (although it is possible that Bede is preserving only what is most consonant with doctrine in the sample text). Likewise, C. C. Lovelace is not illiterate. In his sermon he introduces his topic, then begins with a reading from the Bible. Using his dialect he frames the quotes, which he reads in white English: “‘When the father shall ast, “What are these wounds in thine hand?” . . . Zach. 13:6’.”¹⁹ In so doing, he transfers the language of the King James Bible (Sundquist 1993:49) into black sermon-song just as Cædmon improvises Old English on a Vulgate ur-text as it is read to him. John and Cædmon work *from* the Bible; they are partly oral creators but also partly, in Erik Pihel’s terms, “post-literate” (1996:249).²⁰

John thus begins with the text, but quickly launches into improvisational poetry (271-72):

God my master, ha!
 Father!! Ha-aa!
 I am the teeth of time
 That comprehended de dust of de earth
 And weighed de hills in scales
 That painted de rainbow dat marks de end of de parting storm
 Measured de seas in de holler of my hand
 That held de elements in a unbroken chain of controllment.
 Make man, ha!

The message may be Christian, but like Cædmon’s “Hymn” the medium is not. As Hurston writes (145-46), “John never made a balk at a prayer. Some new figure, some new praise-giving name for God, every time he knelt in church. He rolled his African drum up to the Altar, and called his Congo Gods by Christian names.” Hurston is engaging in her culture as she records it, bending her narrative voice to John’s rhythms. She herself uses an oral-style epithet (“praise-giving name”) to describe John’s coinage of oral-style epithets. Orality has pagan connotations; John’s voice is figured

¹⁹ In the book’s fiction, at least, John learns basic literacy to impress Lucy.

²⁰ As O’Keeffe suggests (1990:13), “the conditions ‘orality’ and ‘literacy’” are not separate states but rather “the end points on a continuum through which the technology of writing affects and modifies human perception.”

as a pagan African drum, regardless of his Christian intentions. It has often been said that Cædmon calls his Christian God by Germanic names,²¹ and Hurston has John doing the reverse. Wearing the hat of the anthropologist, Hurston observes that “the Negro has not been christianized as extensively as is generally believed. . . .” As evidence of this, note the drum-like rhythm of all Negro spirituals.”²²

Both Cædmon’s and John’s poems share characteristics of oral verse. John uses the rhetorical trope of *energia* as well as anaphora to give a stirring visual effect to his description of Jesus (275):

I see Him grab de throttle
Of de well ordered train of mercy
I see kingdoms crush and crumble
Whilst de archangels held de winds in de corner chambers
I see Him arrive on dis earth

In using the train image, John is embellishing the Bible with an object from the modern world; but this creative license, and for that matter anachronisms as well, are features of oral poetry. Like Cædmon, John puts oral epithets before God. Compare John’s “Oh Jesus, Oh-wonder-workin’ God” (285) with Cædmon’s *weorc Wuldorfæder*, “work of the glory-father” (38a).²³

Transcription inevitably entails translation, and translations are always political. Neither Cædmon nor Lovelace/John is an oral poet in the sense that Homer was, but both employ oral poetics, even while both are informed by and preserved by written texts. The Old English version of the “Hymn” was once considered too illegitimate to be written down. Now, it stands at the beginning of the *Norton Anthology of Literature* (Abrams 1986:21),

²¹ See, for example, Mitchell and Robinson 1995:220-21, as well as Stanley 1995:144.

²² “The Sanctified Church” (Sundquist 1993:53).

²³ John’s repeated “I see” reminds us of the *Rood* poet’s repeated *Geseah ic*, “I saw” in the first part of the poem (ll. 4, 14, 21, 33, 36, Mitchell and Robinson 1995:258-59). Indeed, although Caedmon’s poem presents an excellent textual analogue for John’s sermon, the sermon is in itself much closer to *The Dream of the Rood* in that both are semi-delirious visions, taking free license to reimagine the biblical text, skipping through biblical time with evangelical zeal. Just as the *Rood* poet uses prosopopoeia to energize the passion of Christ, so John makes the sun, moon, and stars speak.

providing an anchoring origin for a new idea of what literature means.²⁴ Hurston's experimental oral literacy has likewise gradually acquired canonicity as the century progressed. Like the anonymous scribe who provided the Old English "Hymn," Hurston was able to change the idea of legitimacy in literature.²⁵

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²⁴ For a much-needed feminist evaluation of this canonical positioning, see Lees and Overing 1994:38-43.

²⁵ I am in debt to John Miles Foley and an anonymous reader for *Oral Tradition* for suggestions that greatly improved this essay.

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