# The Ethnography of Scribal Writing and Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Scribe as Performer

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What is the nature of writing and what is the role of the scribe in a culture in which speech has not lost its primacy?  If we think of Anglo-Saxon scribal writing in terms of "ethnopoetics," we can think of human responses to the voice, of a scribe obeying the somatic imperatives voice imposes, with text being as much act, event, gesture, as it is thing or product, with its origins not just in prior texts, but in memory and context.  John Miles Foley has shown how written documents can never be equivalent to spoken acts and yet he also stresses and demonstrates that we can and must derive performance traces from them (1992:290-91).  And Dell Hymes has often stressed the personal and particular as an essential category in the study of "ethnopoetics."  In his view, traditional texts are not just vessels of trans-individual "meaning" deriving from a tradition or of linguistic facts reducible to one structuralist patterning or another.  As he has demonstrated in "Language, Memory, and Selective Performance: Cultee's 'Salmon's Myth' as Twice Told to Boas," traditional texts must be put to the test of what he calls "practical structuralism" (1985:393):

> "Practical structuralism" . . . or "descriptive structuralism," has to do with the elementary task . . . called "gathering," as distinct from "collation." Linguistic controversy today usually presupposes the results of "gathering."  The argument is not about what exists (in one sense at least) as it is about how what exists is to be understood in terms of a model or general theory.  Of course a theory directs attention to some facts and away from others.

In ethnopoetics he sees the arguments circling around the issue of stylistic analysis, how to see some features as more significant than others (394-95):

> The choice will be the larger patterning that best accounts for all the data, that best fits the covariation of form and meaning in the text. In this respect

‘texts fight back’....  A pattern that is formally feasible may do violence to content, forcing reconsideration of what the possibilities of marking and patterning are.

Analysis of traditional texts can transcend the structuralist concerns favoring meaning over sound or vice-versa by considering a third plane: what Hymes calls "act and event."[1]

The hypothesis of this paper is that the Anglo-Saxon scribe copying vernacular texts, and particularly vernacular poetic texts, is in many cases a special kind of speaking performer and, as such, has a status analogous to that of traditional performers of oral verbal art, but who as part of his performance situation has the task of copying a designated register of utterance from one sheet of sheepskin to another.   In the course of doing this job,  moving back and forth between inner and outer speech and spoken and textualized utterances,   the scribe recreates the transmitted message

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[1] In a fundamental way my argument, while sharing some of Hymes' assumptions, will move in the opposite direction from his, as a result of the historical development of editing in the different fields of ethnopoetics and Anglo-Saxon.  While I want to stress the signs of the purely individual and transient in the manuscripts, Hymes is trying to find the fundamental structurating principals of Charles Cultee's two somewhat varying versions of the same story:   "A tape recording of Cultee's performance, if one existed, would add to our understanding, but it would not much affect the form/meaning relationships discoverable through the words themselves.  These relationships would still obtain, whatever the tone of voice, intonational contour, and distribution of pause.  Cultee's voice might be found to reinforce some relationships, clarify others, override and play off against still others.  Or his voice might demonstrate the pace at which Boas had instructed him to dictate.  In any case, the text still permits inference as to what he meant. . ." (1985:396-97).

But performance, as I understand it, consists precisely in those interpretive and exoteric gestures that are given it by the voice, that make it to rise out of the matrix of "the text," so that text and performance coexist in interpretive tension.  From an editorial standpoint, the same tensions exist between "the text" (an editorial ideal) and a (writing) author's own various extant material versions.  Peter L. Shillingsburg has made the important distinction between "work" and "version."  The work is "the product of [the author's] imagination.  It is shaped variously, grows, is revised, changes, develops in the author's mind.  The author's notes and drafts are aids to his memory and imagination.  As the work achieves completeness of form in the imagination . . . the written representation of it achieves not only a fullness but a stasis or rigidity" (1986:45).  The version "is one specific form of the the work—the one the author intended at some particular moment in time" (47).  The version is, in other words, an author's performance or idea of the work as he realizes it in a particular stint of writing.

through his own performance within the tradition.[2]  It is enlightening to an Anglo-Saxonist, constrained to work with mysterious texts copied in unknown circumstances 1000 years ago and more and attempting to discover some of the life that was once in them, to see Dell Hymes, an ethnographer working with much younger traditions, struggling with the same problematic, straining the elusive documentary traces of performance confected by Franz Boas a century ago from oral events he witnessed and recorded and trying to tease out of them, not text, but performance (1985).  It is also poignant to see Hymes, in another place (1981:341), evoking the experience of Anglo-Saxonists as if they were a model for ethnographers, as if Anglo-Saxonists had perfected the art of deriving living texts out of dead documents.

Would it were true!  But over the past century theories about the formula- and verse-structure of Anglo-Saxon poetic texts and the morphology, syntax, and phonetics of Old English language, as well as the assumption that the model of text-production that governs modern mentality and textuality also applies equally to Anglo-Saxon texts, have virtually swamped the documentary facts, the manuscripts, and if not making them exactly invisible, have imprisoned them within the vast armature of modern editorial and critical practices, rendering them almost irrelevant beside the edited products.  Yet these manuscripts are the handiwork and the performance traces of Anglo-Saxons themselves and may have much to tell us about the nature of the ethnopoetics of the Anglo-Saxons if they are

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[2] Basso, who used the term "ethnography of writing," outlines an important goal of research, which I hope impinges on this paper (1974:426):  "In contrast to earlier approaches, which have dealt almost exclusively with the internal structure of written codes, the one proposed here focuses upon writing as a form of communicative *activity* and takes as a major objective the analysis of the structure and function of this activity in a broad range of human societies.  Such a perspective does not obviate the need for adequate code descriptions . . . but it intentionally goes beyond them to place primary emphasis upon an understanding of the social and cultural factors that influence the ways written codes are actually used.  In this way, attention is directed to the construction of models of performance as well as models of competence, to the external variables that shape the activity of writing as well as to the conceptual grammars that make this activity possible."  Unfortunately, in his analysis of texts Basso chooses to look at the difference between informal and formal letters:  the distinctive factors he analyzes arise not from performative elements but from differences of genre and convention.  It would seem that to analyze performance effectively one would have to stay within the same set of genre expectations in the different data sets under analysis.

allowed to display themselves in the light of "practical structuralism."

When I speak of the scribe as performer I mean to apply the ethnographic sense of "performance" as expressed by Richard Bauman, that "performance . . . consists in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence" (1975:293). In literary studies this is a power reserved to writing authors. The elision conceals what for folklorists is the most important element of Bauman's definition, the one that makes the difference: performance is "a mode of spoken verbal communication." The notion that the present argument strives to emphasize and recuperate is that the scribe's performance is the product not only of the power of writing, but also of the power of speaking, and the scribe's performance is therefore considered not as faithful duplication, but as the exercise of his own "communicative competence" within the tradition that normally resides in speaking and traditional memory.

For exactly forty years, since Magoun's famous founding article on "the oral-formulaic character of Anglo-Saxon narrative poetry" appeared in 1953, it has been widely assumed that in its origins much Old English poetry was in some sense "oral." But, as Ward Parks has pointed out recently (1991), the net result of the oral-formulaic theory has been the radical textualization of orality even as it maintained an impermeable conceptual barrier between writing and orality. In French and German medieval studies since the 1970's, the dichotomy of orality and writing has been increasingly rejected as false and a long period of productive interaction and mutual influence has been recognized.[3] The interface of orality and writing has not been so generally acknowledged in Anglo-Saxon studies; in fact in the past decade there has been a wide backlash against orality as an important concept at all. Whatever the position of individual critics in the debate, the almost universal setting of the terms as "oral" vs. "lettered" has tended to divert Anglo-Saxonists' attention from the truly essential insight of oral traditional studies, that "oral texts," are, to use Bauman's terminology, "emergent," subject to ongoing reformulation

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[3] Michael Curschmann wrote in 1977, referring to early Middle High German: "We have forgotten . . . that in a culture which is still predominantly oral, in the general sense, there is no room for an absolute juxtaposition of oral and written, in a specific sense, and that when we use the term 'oral' in speaking about the Middle Ages we are of necessity speaking of a cultural phenomenon that is infinitely more varied and complex than that from which the Theory derives" (71).

throughout their traditional lives.[4]

 This insight, which seems to me to have so much explanatory power in individual cases of early medieval poetic practice and manuscript manifestations, continued in specific instances to yield to the brute power of the closed written texts that confronted medievalists in their manuscripts and editions. Even the most ardent oralists seemed paralyzed in the face of these fixed texts. An "oral text" got written down once and for all and thereafter was closed, finished—to be succeeded only by written operations. It became a collection of formal properties (such as formulism, parallelism, stock scenes, and so forth) that might be evidence of pretextual oralism, but the textualization or objectification of what were in reality events or actions was not contested. The traditional text, once written, lost its warrant of traditionality and had to be regarded in the same way as any written text, subject to the same operations. As for editors, if they considered orality at all, it was only to recover the "original" first written form (usually in a past far removed from the date of the manuscript) closest to some mythical defining oral moment. This first writer and any successors, far from being regarded as possibly sympathetic and knowledgeable participants in the traditional cultural exchange, were assumed to be outside the oral loop, mere recorders whose duty was to subsume the traditional material entirely into the realm of written culture. The "impermeable barrier" contributed to a reified notion of the scribe as a non-traditional writer who could receive and transmit language without participating in its emergence.

 Let us turn to the other side of the gap: the "written residue" of the tradition, the manuscripts themselves. The most striking fact, even allowing for the passage of a thousand years and more, is the suspiciously

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 [4] The recent groundbreaking work of Mary Carruthers (1990) on the primary role throughout the Middle Ages of memory and voice in the composition of learned Latin writing, her understanding that "works" exist ideally in the memories of the educated and that "texts" have the status of cues or prompts for memory, doubtless has much to contribute eventually to our understanding of the development and preservation of traditional oralistic vernacular texts during the same period. Nevertheless, there is an important difference between Carruthers' idea of *memoria*, an elaborately learned behavior reserved to a cultural elite (and from which scribes are, almost by definition, excluded), and "traditional memory" as used here, a competence for elaborated utterance in the vernacular widely diffused as part of the ordinary language apparatus available to all normal speakers. Bede's story of Cædmon is, after all, not the miracle of how the angel taught one man to sing where nobody could before, but how the angel overcame one man's inability to sing in a cultural situation where even all the farmhands practiced the oral-formulaic technique.

low survival rate of manuscript evidence for Anglo-Saxon poetry. Of upwards of 1000 manuscripts that have come down to us from Anglo-Saxon England (as listed by Gneuss 1981), a mere *five* contain vernacular poetic texts as a significant part of their contents. A few dozen others hold various short poetic texts and fragments, but these are often preserved as marginalia, additions, or metrical liturgical texts. The facts of preservation suggest that Old English poetic texts never did exist in any great numbers, and for good reason—their natural mode of existence was in orality, with the result that they only got written down in rare and unusual (if now mostly irrecoverable) circumstances.

Nevertheless a few poetic texts, amounting to several thousand lines, are preserved in two copies; not much perhaps, but enough to make clear another striking fact: never are these two-copy texts written in such a way that they could be said to be identical—even discounting the inevitable sprinkling of scribal errors. Yet when they are compared in their two versions line by line, they are clearly the "same" texts, not different recensions. And the variations are not of the nature of random error; they are for the most part "indifferent" variations—that is, they could not be detected as erroneous or ungrammatical if there were only one uncontested copy (as is the case with the vast majority of poetry): all but a handful of the variants make sense—there is usually nothing to choose between them in this regard, though sometimes one variant breaks the rules of alliteration. Variation is the norm, it would seem, not the exception in the copying of poetic texts.

Moreover, the textuality of the manuscripts shows, beyond verbal variation, various irregular features that seem to be the product of gestural imitation of speech—marks in the writing that are analogous to the concomitants of speaking beyond the phonemic string—variable spacing, free morphemic word division, and diacritics, which tend to make sense as marking, albeit in an unsystematic manner. These seem to stand for the very features of phonic speech that modern textuality does not formally mark, such as rhetorical pauses, rhetorical word-stress, and variations of pitch and loudness. This textuality is always unstable within and between texts in matters of layout, beginnings and endings of texts, capitalization, punctuation, spacing, and diacritics—in fact it is as "emergent" in its way as the texts that it conveys. I will call this a speaker-based, writer-based textuality that differs radically in its features from the textuality of Latin texts in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts copied from the eighth century on, which

were developing a much more reader-based and regularized textuality, a textuality that seems rather familiar to a modern reader (Parkes 1987).

For example, the poem *Soul and Body* has an overlapping section of 120-odd lines preserved in two late tenth-century manuscripts, the Exeter Book and the Vercelli Book.  Here are parallel extracts from those two texts[5] transcribed from the manuscripts and arranged comparatively to show how they differ in many details even as the gist remains substantially the same in both versions (orthographic/phonetic variants are ignored).   (The first version of each line is from the Vercelli text; the second version is from the Exeter; verbal variation is in bold; grammatical variations are underlined; present lineation follows the Vercelli manuscript; the lineation of the Exeter manuscript is indicated by slashes.)

V:  Hwæt druhðu  dreorega   tohwan drehtest ðu me  eorðan
E:  hwæt druguðu  dreorga  tohwon dreahtest / þu me  eorþan
*What have you done, bloody one?  Why afflict you me, earth's*



V:  fulnes ealfor **wisnad** lames ge licnes  lyt ðu ge **mundest**
E:  fylnes    eal for  **weor nast**    lames gelicnes / lyt þuge þohtes
*foulness? You decay (are dried up) completely, figure of clay.  Little
        thought you*


V:  tohwan þinre sawle **þing** siðþan wurde syððan oflic
E:  towon þinre sawle **sið**  siþþan  wurde / siþþan heo  of lic
*what your soul's fate afterwards would be after it from the body-*


V:  homan læded wære : hwæt wite ðuðu me  **weriga** hwæt
E:  homan  læded wære ·  hwæt wite þume /  **werga**  hwæt .
*case would be led.  What?  do you blame me, weary (damned) one?  Lo,*


V:  ðu huru wyrma gyfl lyt ge þohtest **þa ðu lust gryrum**
E:  þu huru wyrma  gifl · lytge þohtes
*you worms' food,  little you thought [, when you pleasure (leading to)
        terrors*

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V:  **eallū ful geodest  hu ðu on eorðan scealt wyrmum to**
   *all fulfilled, how you upon earth must (be) for worms*


V:  **wiste . hwæt ðu onworulde ær lyt ge þohtest** hu þis is
E:                                          hu þis / is
   *(some) food.  Lo, you in the world had little thought] how this is*

V:  þus  lang hider <u>hwæt þe la engel</u> ufan of roderum sawle
E:  long hider  <u>7þeþurh engel</u>  ufan  ofroderum  sawle
   *(thus) long here <to abide>  (V): .Lo you indeed an angel down from*
                                              *heaven a soul*
                         *(E): and to you by means of an angel down*
                                        *from heaven a soul*


V:  onsende þurh his sylfes hand meotod ælmihtig of
E:  on/sende  þurh his sylfes hond  meotud  ælmihtig  of
   *sent through his own hand, lord almighty, from*


V:  his.mægen þymme . 7þege bohte blode þy halgan .7
E:  his / mægen þrymme   7þe þa  ge bohte  blode þyhalgan 7
   *his power-strength and you (he) redeemed by means of holy blood and*


V:  þu me <u>mid</u> þy heardan  hungre  gebunde  7ge hæft nedest
E:  þume / þy heardan   hungre gebunde   7ge hæft na dest
   *and you with hard hunger bound and imprisoned me*


V:  helle witum . **eardode** icþe on innan  nemeahte icðe
E:  helle / witū  <u>ic þe</u> In in nan  noicþe of meahte   flæsce bifongen
   *with hell-torments. . . .*


They further differ in the strategies of spacing.  Vercelli is in general spaced according to lexical categories—almost every word is separated by a minimum space, as in modern textuality, and thus a minimum of rhetorical meaning can be attributed to the spacing.  Exeter, in contrast, is spaced according to phrase groups, so that there is a directed rhetorical effect that breaks the text into a series of imprecations by the indignant soul against the guilty body.  On the face of it, the Exeter presentation encourages a rhetorical, "histrionic" oralization, which seems natural for a text occurring in an anthology of poetry, that is, rhetorically heightened pieces.  Equally naturally in a text  found in a book of homiletic and doctrinal material (mixed prose and verse), the Vercelli presentation is relatively flat and

"prosy" in its presentation and is perhaps meant for private reading and meditative, private oralization (see C. Sisam 1976:44).    As written performances, apart from the textual variations, these are completely different texts, implying different genres and expectations for reception.  A "performance edition" of each manuscript would want to emphasize these differences, not mask them by the conventions of modern print textuality.[6] As presented below, the Exeter version should be read as a series of dramatic, personal accusations, while the Vercelli version should be read in a calm, steady voice that emphasizes the expository value of the statements about the relation of soul to body.  (The relative size of spacing indicates relative length of pause.  The signal "-" indicates a measured beat, roughly equivalent to an eighth rest.)

### Exeter

hwæt druguþu - dreorga?
tohwon dreahtest þu me? - - eorðan fylnes - eal for  weor nast -
lames gelicnes - - - lyt þuge þohtes  towon  þinre sawle sið siþþan  wurde -
- siþþan heo of lic homan  læded wære

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[6] Contrast the "normal" edition of Moffat, designed to facilitate silent, private study and recuperation by the eye.  It conflates the two texts into a third "performance," one resembling a modern text in punctuation and verse-division, while calling attention to all the changes to the originals (text from Moffat 1990:50):

Hwæt drug<e> þu, dreorga?  Tohwon dreahtest þu me,
eorþan fylnes?  Eal forweornast
lames gelicnes.  Lyt þu geþohtes
to<h>won þinre sawle sið  siþþan wurde
siþþan heo of lichoman  læded wære.
Hwæt, wite þu me, werga?  Hwæt, þu huru wyrma gifl,
lyt geþohtes,  <þa þu lust gryrum
eallum fuleodest,  hu þu in eorðan scealt
wyrmum to wiste.  Hwæt, þu in worulde ær
lyt geþohtes> hu þis is long hider.
Ond þe þurh engel  ufan of roderum
sawle onsende  þurh his sylfes hond
meotud ælmihtig  of his mægenþrymme
ond þe þa gebohte  blode þy halgan
ond þu me þy heardan  hungre gebunde
and gehæftnadest  hellewitu(m).

hwæt - - wite þume werga?

hwæt - - þu huru wyrma - gifl - - - lyt ge þohtes hu þis is long hider
- -7þeþurh engel - - ufan  ofroderum  sawle onsende þurh his sylfes hond -
- meotud ælmihtig - - ofhis mægen þrymme  - - - 7þe þa ge bohte -  blode
þyhalgan - - 7þume þy heardan - hungre gebunde  -  7ge hæft nadest -
helle witum

**Vercelli**

Hwæt druhðu dreorega?  tohwan   drehtest ðu me eorðan fulnes
ealfor wirnad lames gelicnes?  lyt ðu ge mundest tohwan þinre sawle þing
siðþan wurde syððan oflichoman læded wære :

Hwæt - - wite ðu* me  weriga?  hwæt - - ðu huru wyrma gyfl lyt
ge þohtest þa ðu lust gryrum eallum ful geodest  hu ðu on eorðan scealt
wyrmum to wiste .

hwæt ðu onworulde ær lyt ge þohtest hu þis is þus lang hider

hwæt þe la engel ufan of roderum sawle onsende þurh his sylfes
hand  meotod ælmihtig of his mægen þymme . 7þege bohte blode þy
halgan . 7þu me mid þy heardan hungre  gebunde  7ge hæft nedest helle
witum.

* MS: ðuðu

Now, the merely verbal variation between these versions has long
been noted and has been explained in two ways.  The older tradition, still
quite lively among editors, chalks up variation to the deficiencies of scribes
and treats points of variation in multiple-copy texts as "hot spots" requiring
emendation (Dagenais 1991:254).  Kenneth Sisam went further and thought
that the fact of variation, which he no doubt rightly assumed was just as
operative in the rest of the corpus  existing in unique copies (though we
can't see it for lack of comparative material), impugned the general
"authority" of poetical manuscripts and warranted the introduction of
editorial emendations on grammatical, aesthetic, or other grounds whenever
the text didn't satisfy.[7]  The other response, more in vogue at the moment

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[7] Sisam follows, with less rhetorical aggressiveness, in the tradition of  A. E.
Housman, according to which scribes can do very little right and editors are derelict in their
duties who take scribal doings seriously.  Invoking Sisam's argument to authorize
emendations is practically a convention in Old English editorial practice.  The tendency to
denigrate the authority of manuscripts because of the indubitable fact of scribal intervention
has recently been carried to almost solipsistic lengths by Hoyt Duggan, who argues that we

(Orton 1979, Moffat 1987), is to see variants as evidence of scribal "revision," and to regard variant copies as deliberate rewritings that must be judged as versions, usually with one version being judged superior and hence "more original" than the other (it is never supposed that a reviser might actually improve a text, though that is the ostensible purpose of revision; maybe sometimes the "better" text is less original). Of course, both models in their different ways are textualist and working from origins to closure.

The strange, inconvenient, and often puzzling textuality of manuscripts is for the most part totally disregarded in critical discussions and reformatted out of existence in modern editions, textual variants being eliminated by emendation or compromise between preserved versions, while spacing, pointing, and so on are reduced to the conventions familiar in modern texts. Recently Anglo-Saxon textuality and literacy have been foregrounded and the discussion greatly advanced by Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, who has introduced the concept of "developing literacy" among scribes, showing that in all likelihood vernacular literacy was quite different from our own, because its reading worked by a process of anticipation and guessing that depended as much on memory and knowledge of traditional expression as it did on accurate scanning of texts. She has also suggested some ways of taking account of the textuality of manuscripts.[8]

If we move from the manuscript facts to the concept of scribe as performer we can attribute to the scribe a dynamic and determinative role that he is normally denied; just as the storyteller of folklore was once seen as a "passive and anonymous mouthpiece or conduit," so is the scribe of vernacular texts—while his glaring marks of innovation and individuality are seen as irrelevant or deplorable. Bauman, who privileges the performer further than perhaps anyone else, sees "narrated events" as being evoked by verbal means in a narrative text that emerges only in performance. If we can put the scribe in the place of the storyteller, we might say that he takes

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have no basis for establishing Old English meter because we can never be certain of a given spot whether we have an authorial reading or a scribal "corruption" (1988: espec. 160-63).

[8] On the question of the authenticity of scribal versions, I want to separate myself somewhat from the position of O'Keeffe in *Visible Song* (1990), who, if I understand her aright, sees the competencies of the native speaker as essentially interfering with the transmission of the message, as being a source of error, however rich and interesting these phenomena might be in their own right. For her there is still a privileged original message with which scribes interfere without authorization.

not a "narrated event"—something held in the memory before performance—but an "event of narration," a preexistent text, and restructures it in the memory in the moment between reading and copying (cf. Bauman 1986:6).

The concept of the scribe as performer seems to me to deal more successfully with both the realities of the material texts as we have them in manuscripts and the requirements of the "emergent text" that is at the heart of the oral theory. The idea runs something like this. In Christian Anglo-Saxon England of all periods most scribes would be members of monastic houses. Several essential conditions are thus entailed: as patrons of these houses and suppliers of high-placed recruits to them, the secular nobility would maintain practical and cultural connections with monastic readers and writers that would encourage the continuing practice of "traditional poetics"[9]; a practical dependence on texts and writing would be normal and universal in the monastic environment, whatever the personal literacy of individuals; the practice of oralizing utterance through the liturgy and monastic *lectio* (see Leclerq 1977:18-22) would be the norm of textual reception and reproduction. But an Anglo-Saxon scribe, when writing his or her mother tongue rather than Latin, though having in most cases been trained to the technical skills of writing as a scribe of Latin, would, in the writing of the vernacular, hear as well as see what was being written; scribes would receive it from within the social penumbra of speaking in general and their competencies as speakers of the language in particular. Knowledge of the traditional discourse and native-speaker competencies would impinge on the writing to a much greater degree than would the less internalized cultural and linguistic competences imposed by written Latin. While doubtless scribes copying Latin tended to pronounce it

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[9] As we know must be the case from the large number of biblical and liturgical/monastic poetic texts preserved in the format of traditional Anglo-Saxon poetry. Wilhelm Busse argues that in the later tenth century the claim of ecclesiastical reformers that written texts had greater authority than oral traditions was being vigorously opposed by aristocratic forces (both secular and ecclesiastical), and that this gave rise to a plethora of texts asserting the superiority of writing; specifically, "the danger to this claim to authority of the books seems to originate from the resistance of laymen. In their world, this claim encounters norms of behavior which have been established by historical experience, which were then transmitted orally; on their part, these norms were at least partially threatened by the monks' claim to the superiority of the written tradition, when they intended to transform these behavioral patterns, to adapt them to the teaching of the books"(1988:33).

aloud as they wrote (and in fact we tend to forget that most of the Latin writing copied by Anglo-Saxons was also destined for the voice, since it largely consisted of prayers, litanies, liturgy, hymns, sermons, saints' lives, and so forth), they had to follow the script more rigorously in what they pronounced when writing Latin, for they would *see* a language that was not their native tongue and they would *hear* forms of words fixed in their ears by liturgical practice, which was always aural.  Both eye and ear would reinforce the fixity of the text: the very speaking aloud would act as a check on the relation to the script, for when an average scribe became disconnected from the script he or she would no longer be able to speak or copy at all.[10] The formulaic rigor of this discourse would enforce a pretty clear line between the text and "error."  This is apart from any questions of the greater prestige and authority of Latin texts.

It would be quite different for a scribe writing the vernacular: the scribe could speak and write from words heard in both the outer and inner voices, regardless of what the script "said."  Texts would exist in a shifting zone of "gists," and would not be made familiar by daily, seasonal, or annual repetition, as liturgical texts were.  What would be "heard," "spoken," and thus written would be partly determined by an untraditional medium, the preexisting script—even though its words might be entirely traditional—and partly by the tradition which the scribe possessed as a native speaker and knew to be appropriate to the genre of the script being copied.  The script would be a kind of prompt or cue in two registers—presenting fixed words in one register that would suggest and promote words in another.  The performing scribe thus produces a palimpsestic text in which the old text largely predetermines the new but is authoritatively overridden by the words of the new oral/written text.  It is important to remember that even the worst botch of copying, by any theory, still conveys accurately the overwhelming majority of the forms of the text being copied.  In the standard editorial view the "correct" forms belong to the pre-existing text (and insofar as they have persisted correctly through the tradition, to the author), while all the "incorrect" or "deviant" forms belong solely to the scribe.

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[10] There has been a tendency to overestimate the Latin accomplishments of English monks, doubtless as a reaction to the general marginalization of Anglo-Latin literature in mid-century Anglo-Saxon studies.  See the corrective remarks of Hohler (1975:71-72) on the poor level of Latin literacy of English clerics and the poor execution of Latin documents in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

If we look at the text for what it was as far as its producer was concerned, a synchronic structure, the pre-text functions as a kind of external memory to the scribe, who produces the new text by a combination of this synchronic "memory" or set of cues *plus* an active, diachronically acquired competence of linguistic and discourse skills that have long since been internalized, including traditional oral memory.[11]  Thus *all* the forms belong to the scribe, or rather to the present "event" of writing, even though they have a variety of sources.  The fact that the texts so transmitted/performed consisted largely of formulaic presentations of well-known stories, ethical aphorisms, and ecclesiological truisms made it all the easier for "anybody" (that is, the scribe) to textually perform with some authority.  Granted that some "writing events"/performances are richer than others and that doubtless there would be conflict and static between the underwritten and the overriding texts, nevertheless as part of the performance of a normal language event, a performing scribe would resolve these in a writing that made sense in terms of the living tradition of vernacular discourse as he or she possessed them at the time of writing and in ways that made harmonic sense with the understanding of the text by its writer and contemporary users (vernacular texts were not copied to preserve them for posterity but to make them available for present uses).[12]

In the transmission of traditional vernacular verbal art, whether in a purely oral medium or in the mixed vocal/writing medium of manuscripts, there is no single authorizing voice; rather, in the preservation and passing along of traditional genres and messages, even in writing, a particular message continues to be authorized by its status as a performance.  The concept of error (except for mechanical writing faults) is irrelevant, if by error we mean a failure to reproduce exactly what the exemplar contained.

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[11] See Parks 1987 (espec. 512) on diachrony and synchrony in the transmission of traditional narrative.

[12] Cf. Benjamin 1968:86: "All this points to the nature of every real story.  It contains, openly or covertly, something useful.  The usefulness may, in one case, consist in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim.  In every case the story teller is a man who has counsel for his readers.  But if today 'having counsel' is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, this is because the communicability of experience is decreasing.  In consequence we have no counsel either for ourselves or for others.  After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding."

Perhaps it might have been theoretically possible for a scribe to have copied verbatim the text of an "oral traditional" message from a pre-existing script. But it seems in practice that scribes did not do that. From what we can tell, they always varied the text, as if the mere copying of a text was bad form, or empty form. The authenticity of the message was in its voice, and the voice, in the absence of any other agent, had to be the scribe her- or himself.

Meanwhile, in the act of writing, the somatic event of speaking or "mouthing" the received words transferred itself at least partly and unconsciously to the motions of writing, contributing to the wavering and unsystematic signals that we can see as part of the as yet unfixed textuality of the vernacular. In fact, if the expectation for scribes was "performance," then variability would have been seen as a positive value, as a kind of authorizing afflatus in itself. From this point of view, the scribe-as-performer would see the rewriting as enhancing the traditional text by giving it life in the present, by making it "more real." Various somatic gestures, such as exaggerated spacing, unexpected accent-marks to enhance rhetorical meaning by indicating pitch, signs of hesitation, changes of letter size, might have reinforced meanings more real to the scribe when heard than when seen. The particular "gestures" traced in the manuscripts may have been learned from the habits of writing "oralistic" Latin texts, specifically neumed liturgical texts, which show analogous spacings and markings (though much more emphatically and systematically marked).[13] We see one such scribe ('Scribe A') in Corpus Christi College Cambridge, MS 201, writing out on paginated folios 1-7 parts of the *Regularis Concordia* in an Old English version *along with* neumed Latin responses (that is, Latin texts marked for oral performance); in another place the scribe writes out as well an Old English verse version of Bede's poem *De die iudicii* (*On Judgment Day*); the totality of this scribe's performance suggests fluency in and familiarity with both traditions of writing.[14]

It is hard to keep in mind, yet it is crucial to remember that the moment of performance is probably the only moment these texts ever knew:

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[13] See Berry 1988 for a brief and clear discussion of liturgical singing practices in late Anglo-Saxon England, along with good plates of two Anglo-Saxon musical manuscripts (Oxford Bodley 775 and Corpus Christi College Cambridge 473).

[14] 'Scribe B' of CCCC 201 shows similar abilities, writing out extensive passages of Old English prose and verse and Latin prose, side by side.

how can we trace back to the original *Beowulf* as if there had ever been a single originary moment producing a text precisely reflecting what the "author" consciously intended as the perfect form to be preserved exactly as produced.  It is unlikely there was a concept of stable preservation, of stable textual markers (such as marked verses in modern editions), or of closure. The "text" existed in memory and performance.   If we could trace *Beowulf* back to some impossible original performance, we would find along the route a jumble of genetically linked variations, some longer, some shorter, some better, some worse, but with a tendency towards simplification the further back we went, as if we were dismantling an artichoke.  We might get to the heart, but it would be a fuzzy and simple, if essential, kernel.  It is more likely that the text became *more* complex and articulated over the course of transmission within a living tradition rather than "trivialized" by scribal changes.   The text of *Beowulf* we possess in British Library manuscript Cotton Vitellius A. xv of the late tenth century is the sum total of all the writings that ever took place, including the final (that is, scribal) one within its line of memorial/written transmission.[15]

To sum up:  performance as  I have been defining it is to be understood as centering on the scribe as transmitter of traditional vernacular messages.  Such a scribe differs in his behavior from a scribe preserving authoritative messages in Latin; the performing scribe transmits a traditional gist to an audience for present use, not for future generations.  As such, the scribe is part of an emergent tradition,  and he is  responsible to that tradition, not to an unknown "author" or to a dead piece of sheepskin, as he exercises his memory and competence to produce the tradition for a particular audience on a particular occasion.  The tradition itself is the

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[15] The attitude must have gradually changed, though the practical reality did not. For example, as a reality, scribes of the fifteenth (!) century copy Middle English alliterative poems with considerable variability, so that, for example, the four manuscripts of *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathylyne*, while not intelligible as the product of deliberate revision, are completely at variance with one another in hundreds of spots, in completely random and indifferent ways that suggest scribes are free to vary the details so long as the message and verse forms remain more or less intact (Gates 1969 presents all the variants of the four versions).  One of these fifteenth-century scribes, Robert Thornton, of whose practices we know a considerable amount, transmitted many of the Middle English alliterative poems that have come down to us; he had a tendency to freely rewrite the ends of lines, but at the same time he had internalized a new ideal of textuality, so that he tended to go back to his exemplar and cancel his free variations and rewrite according to the exemplar (see Triggs 1990:143; also Duggan 1988:150-51).

dynamic but unrealized amalgam of lore and story frameworks, of linguistic and cultural competencies that were stored in the heads of people linked within that tradition.  The performing scribe produced the text in an act of writing that evoked the tradition by a combination of eye and ear, script and memory.[16]

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[16] This paper is slightly modified from one delivered at the Seventh International Interdisciplinary Conference of the Society for Textual Scholarship, New York, April 15, 1993.  I thank John Miles Foley, who invited me to be on his panel, and Dell Hymes, whose work stimulated this paper in the first place; the generous advice and encouragement of both during the conference discussions have been most helpful to me as I revised this piece.

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