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Fighting Words

Joseph Falaky Nagy

In reference to the body language that both launches the oral performance and sets the stage for the spoken or sung word to work its effect upon the audience, Paul Zumthor said: “In its primary function, before the influences of writing, voice does not describe, it acts. It leaves to gestures the responsibility of designating the circumstances” (1990:40). A similar function, of contextualizing oral performance, can often be attributed to gesture that is depicted *within* the performance, specifically in the story told or the situation described. Richard P. Martin (1989), Dwight F. Reynolds (1995), and John H. McDowell (2000), among others, have taught us much about the identification of the performer striving to be the best at what he does with the protagonist determined to live up to a heroic code, and about the extent to which real performers and fabulous warriors in diverse traditions speak with a common voice, expressive of a shared ethos that highlights the delicate balance between preserving heroic dignity and upholding collective interests. The heroicization of the performer and the poeticization of the hero on the level of *language*, whether these are conscious or unconscious processes, surely extend to the level of *depicted* gesture as well. When a traditional singer or storyteller describes what a hero *does*, even if it is non-verbal action, might it not correspond to the “heroic” act of singing the song, or telling the story? And are not valuable clues as to the traditional understanding of the nature of oral composition and performance to be gleaned from descriptions of the hero’s gestures, specifically of his often distinctive way of coping with seemingly overwhelming forces poised against him, and shaping them into a vehicle for the perpetuation of his fame? In my own field, the study of Celtic storytelling traditions as reflected in the medieval literatures of Ireland and Wales, the examination of heroic duels as performances, and of the metaphorical implications of *striking*, *throwing*, *leaping*, and other heroic gestures—strategies not only for overcoming an opponent but also for responding to the threat of ignominy or obscurity that would follow in the wake of defeat—reveals a “heroics” of storytelling and of representing

tradition, whether in oral or written form. The pen, or the mouth, may or may not be mightier than the sword, but these instruments of authority are subtly connected indeed.¹ And our understanding of oral tradition will be well served by further study of these connections, both within and beyond the Celtic realms.

University of California, Los Angeles

References

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¹ The poet-hero link is explored in many of the contributions to a Festschrift for Patrick K. Ford (Jones and Nagy forthcoming), who in his work has contributed mightily to our understanding of “heroic poets/poetic heroes” such as the Welsh legendary figure of Taliesin.