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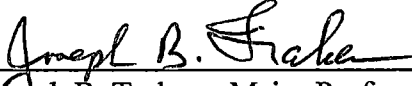
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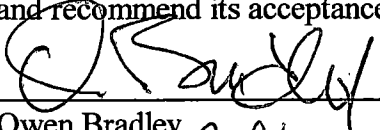
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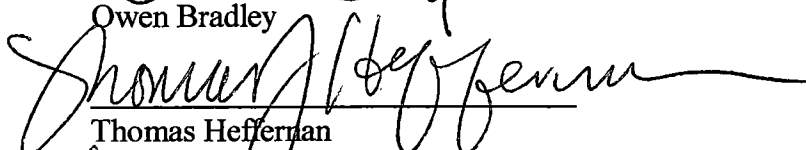


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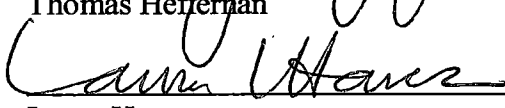
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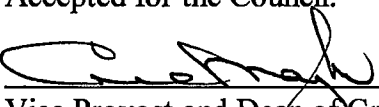


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Accepted for the Council:



Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

BEOWULF AND THE FLOATING WRECK OF HISTORY

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Eileen A. Joy
December 2001

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Abstract

In his Introduction to *A Beowulf Handbook*, John Niles writes that “future *Beowulf* studies are likely to reflect an increasing self-consciousness about both the historicity of Anglo-Saxon scholarship and the theoretical underpinnings of literary scholarship in general.”¹ There have been many scholars who have recently been attending to this task, especially in order to trace the connections between the historical and political issues of English linguistic imperialism and cultural colonization and the history of Old English studies, with the intention of raising what Allen Frantzen has termed a “critical self-consciousness” among Old English scholars, such that they might be willing to rethink their practices and subjects within the larger arena of “Cultural Studies,” while still continuing to emphasize the close study of language and history.² As a result, it is no longer “news” that Anglo-Saxon England and the Middle Ages are, to a certain extent, cultural constructs that have arisen out of the negotiations and interactions between scholars and their subjects, and therefore, efforts thus far to construct disciplinary genealogies often focus on persons, texts, and textual “events” that tend to underline the notions that “Anglo-Saxon England” is mainly a discursive formation and that scholarly disciplines are mainly ideological

¹John D. Niles, “Introduction,” in Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, eds., *A Beowulf Handbook* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 9.

²Allen J. Frantzen, *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 225-26.

enterprises and power discourses which, over the course of time, cover over their political origins through various acts of repression and “forgetting.”

While it seems apparent that disciplines maintain their institutional existence and authority—that they *endure*—through the discourses of one or more dominant ideologies, hidden or overt, and through historically codified systems of doctrine, it is the argument of this dissertation that the discipline of *Beowulf* studies emerges out of a series of historical accidents intersecting—sometimes randomly, sometimes more purposefully—with what Michel Foucault called “the more enduring structures of history,”³ in much the same way *Beowulf* exists for us today, not as the singular fruit of a long and purposeful enterprise of a unified nationalist bibliography, but rather, as one of the more beautiful scraps of the floating wreck of history. Furthermore, the scholars of our discipline cannot be construed as knowing subjects embodying *transcendental* notions of language and history; rather, caught in the pitch and tide of existential time, their lives and careers represent, not the fixity of any one idea, but the flux of ideas.

This study constructs a narrative of Anglo-Saxon scholarship from the seventeenth through twentieth centuries that will hopefully draw a picture of both the always historically contingent nature of the scholarly enterprise as well as the necessity of rethinking that enterprise in ways that could connect the study of an Anglo-Saxon text like *Beowulf* with one of the most pressing and urgent questions in the university community today: why are humanities studies necessary? Given the current state of the American

³Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language* (1972; reprint New York: Random House, 1982), 230.

university, which, as Bill Readings has shown so cogently in his book *The University in Ruins*, has become a kind of transnational techno-bureaucratic economically-driven corporation, the very question of the *value* of culture (detached from its role in building bureaucratic “excellence”) has reached a crisis point. Readings convincingly argues in his book that we need to find a way to both recognize the “historical anachronism” at the heart of the “space of the university” (it is no longer the perfect model of a rational community, nor the sole legitimator of what culture *means*), while also continuing to hold that space open as “one site among others where *the question of being-together is raised*,”⁴ which is another way of saying that the university is quite possibly the best site (if somewhat structurally and ideologically *past*) for holding open the temporality of questioning culture's relationship to history and vice versa, and this dissertation aims to demonstrate that the study of *Beowulf* can play an important role in this project.

⁴Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 18, 20.

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Chapter 1

Winged Creatures and Honey-Gatherers of the Spirit

I *Precepts are not given for the sake of being practiced, but practice is prescribed in order that precepts may be understood. They are scales. One does not play Bach without having done scales. But neither does one play a scale merely for the sake of a scale.*

—Simone Weil¹

In Borges's short story, "The Library of Babel," the universe is conceived of as a vast library of "enigmatical volumes," in which the distance between the divine and the human is measured by, in the narrator's words, a comparison of "these crude wavering symbols which my fallible hand scrawls on the cover of a book" and "the organic letters inside: punctual, delicate, perfectly black, inimitably symmetrical."² Furthermore, the narrator tells us that one chief librarian has deduced that the books in this universe, "which others call the Library," contain all possible permutations of the letters of the alphabet and the spaces between them, which is to say the books contain absolutely everything:

. . . the minutely detailed history of the future, the archangels' autobiographies, the faithful catalogue of the Library, thousands and thousands of false catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of those catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of the true catalogue, the Gnostic gospel of Basilides, the commentary on that gospel, the

¹Simone Weil, "Training," *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Arthur Wills (1959; reprint New York: Octagon Books, 1979), 177.

²Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel," *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1964), 52-3.

commentary on the commentary on that gospel, the true story of your death, the translation of every book in all languages, the interpolations of every book in all books.³

The initial reaction of the librarians and browsers to this discovery is "extravagant happiness," for if everything that has ever been or ever could be written can be found in the Library, there is suddenly hope that there is no problem which cannot be solved, and even the discovery of the origin of the Library and of time itself is possible. Happiness is soon followed by despair, however, when a paranoia settles in that somewhere in the stacks there will be valuable books that will be inaccessible, or corrupted texts that will be "false," and these beliefs lead to the perdition and destruction of "whole shelves" of texts. Some browsers go mad looking for specific volumes and even strangle each other over disputed texts. Others spend their whole lives seeking for a compendium of the totality of the volumes which does not, in all probability, exist. Many of the librarians commit suicide. The narrator, who himself has spent many years searching fruitlessly for the compendium, reaches the conclusion, finally, that "the certitude that everything has been written negates us or turns us into phantoms." Although he does not have much faith in the longevity of the human species, he believes the Library will endure: "illuminated, solitary, infinite, perfectly motionless, equipped with precious volumes, useless, incorruptible, secret."⁴

I relate this story, drawn from the labyrinths of Borges's luminous imagination, because I believe it beautifully illustrates the central paradox which has always faced and

³*Ibid.*, 54.

⁴*Ibid.*, 58.

continues to face the scholar of Anglo-Saxon literature—the impossibility of ever being able to fully reconcile the authorization and authentication of a specific text with the material conditions and textual aporia of the manuscript itself. There is always a point at which the scholar's attempts to fix provenance and significance (linguistically, historically, or otherwise) run aground on the jagged shoals of the manuscript itself, which may or may not be an original, may or may not be a second or third or fourth copy, may have been tampered with by countless bindings, re-bindings, and editorial emendations, may have been partially forged for polemical or other unknown reasons, and may have been damaged or partially destroyed by fire or worms or human neglect.⁵ And what is essentially opaque and corrupt is often held up, by necessity, as the very glass of history itself, or at least its cracked mirror. In addition, the rustling of the pages of the manuscripts which were remarked upon in the catalogues and papers of antiquaries but

⁵One need only recall that Matthew Parker, Cambridge scholar, manuscript collector, and first Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, would often direct his assistants to “complete” Anglo-Saxon manuscripts with the “wanted pages” by inserting text in a hand that imitated the original script. This altered text would then become the basis of a printed “edition” in Anglo-Saxon typeface, which could then be used, as was the case with Parker’s publication of Aelfric’s “Easter homily” (in *A Testimonie of Antiquitie*, 1566/1567), as a historical foundation upon which to build an argument against a Catholic doctrine’s validity—in this case, the doctrine of Transubstantiation, which Aelfric’s altered sermon seemed to deny, thereby aiding Parker in the royal project of liturgical reform. On this point, see May McKisack, *Medieval History in the Tudor Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 26-49 and Allen J. Frantzen, *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 43-47. For outright desecration of a manuscript, we might recall Sir Robert Cotton’s bookbinding practices. In 1612, or close to that date, he used a discarded mid-fourteenth-century illuminated psalter to provide flyleaves for the binding of a series of recent acquisitions to his library, including the *Beowulf* manuscript. Those leaves have since been removed from the nearly thirty “books” they helped to bind and have been reunited with other leaves in the British Museum Library volume, Royal MS 13 D.I*. On this point regarding Cotton’s bookbinding practices, see Colin G.C. Tite, *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton* (London: The British Library, 1993), 13-14.

which no longer exist in libraries continually threatens the serenity of the scholar's study.⁶ I venture also that the manuscripts which never found their way, after Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries in 1530s, into the great European libraries, have been as influential upon the shape and content of contemporary Anglo-Saxon studies as the manuscripts which did find their way, ultimately, into institutions such as the British Museum and the Bodleian Library at Oxford.⁷ The canon of Anglo-Saxon literature is therefore formed as much out of the void of lost manuscripts as it is out of the plenitude of existing ones. And what is "lost" is not always missing, per se; it is simply not read, translated, or edited. Or it is not named within the organizing systems of texts—it is not catalogued or indexed, perhaps because it does not suit a particular scholarly purpose or does not fit neatly within a generic distinction, or it is considered too "minor," or the bibliographer does not have the means to lay his hands upon it.⁸ Perhaps the manuscript

⁶Much of the scholar's inkwell, for instance, has been drained on behalf of Sir Robert Cotton's 5th-century Greek *Genesis*, Otho B.VI, one of the earliest illustrated Christian manuscripts in existence, which, since the fire in the Cotton Library at Ashburnham House in 1731, exists only in crumpled and burned fragments. See, for instance, K. Weitzmann and H.L. Kessler, *The Cotton Genesis* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), and Andrew Prescott, "The present miserable state of cremation": The Restoration of the Cotton Library" in C.J. Wright, ed., *Robert Cotton as Collector: Essays on an Early Stuart Courtier and His Legacy* (London: British Library, 1997). Likewise, there is much scholarly industry in speculation upon lost Cotton manuscripts which do not currently exist even as cinders, and even upon the physical schemata never rendered by Cotton himself, of Cotton's seventeenth-century London library. See, for instance, Colin G.C. Tite's "Lost or stolen or strayed": A Survey of Manuscripts Formerly in the Cotton Library" in *Sir Robert Cotton as Collector* and also *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton*, 79-102.

⁷Regarding this final point, see C.E. Wright, "The Dispersal of the Monastic Libraries and the Beginnings of Anglo-Saxon Studies," *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society*, 1 (1951): 208-37.

⁸One can overestimate the immense importance of the seventeenth and eighteenth-century paleographers and cataloguers to Anglo-Saxon scholarship and its emerging canon. In his

only finds its way secondhand into an edition at a late date, as was the case with the tenth-century homiletic poem *The Seasons for Fasting*. Laurence Nowell's sixteenth-century transcript of what may or may not have been the "original" poem was discovered in a British Museum manuscript (Additional MS. 43,703) shortly before the publication in 1942 of *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, edited by Elliott van Kirk Dobbie for Columbia University Press's Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records series, which aimed to be a "collective edition" including "all the surviving records of Anglo-Saxon poetry."⁹ Prior to the discovery of Nowell's transcript, the poem existed only as a fragment in the transcription of its opening lines in Humphrey Wanley's *Catalogus historico-criticus* of 1705, in which Wanley attempted to give a comprehensive account of the Saxon literature extant in English libraries at that time. Wanley (1672-1726) did not always have the means to travel and many of his requests to have manuscripts sent to him were not successful.¹⁰ His

study of English scholars from 1660 to 1730, David Douglas has written that the catalogues of medieval and Old English manuscripts compiled by the Oxford school of Saxonists at the turn of the eighteenth century "gave a great impetus to medieval, and in particular to Old English, studies. One of the chief difficulties of all previous investigators into the early medieval history of England had been that any proper comparative study of their chief sources was impossible for them owing to their ignorance of what MSS. existed, and where they were to be found" (David C. Douglas, *English Scholars 1660-1730*, 2nd. ed. [London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1951], 112). Humfrey Wanley's cataloguing of the Saxon manuscripts in the Cotton Library, undertaken as it was prior to the fire in 1731, was of great significance, and continues to retain its usefulness. On the debt of Anglo-Saxon scholarship to Wanley, see Neil Ker's tribute in N.R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), xiii-xiv.

⁹George Philip Krapp, Preface to *The Junius Manuscript*, ed. George Philip Krapp, The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), v.

¹⁰David Douglas has written that "it was Wanley's object to make his book as comprehensive as possible. But this, in an age when travel was neither easy nor inexpensive, entailed special difficulties, the more particularly for a student who at first was 'discouraged' from wandering by the Bodleian authorities who still employed him. It was usually impossible to get MSS. sent from Oxford, and though young Wanley did not lack audacity in his demands these

Catalogus therefore, although ambitious and extensive, was not exhaustive, yet its influence upon the shape of Anglo-Saxon studies remains palpable, which brings us to an instance of how the *mis*-naming of manuscripts can also impinge upon the formation of our canon. One need only recall that it was the somewhat misleading entry in Wanley's *Catalogus*, describing *Beowulf* as an Anglo-Saxon poem about a Danish hero, that caught the eye of the Danish scholar working in the British Museum Library in the 1780s, Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin (1752-1829). Out of his interest in recovering antiquities relative to the history of Denmark, Thorkelin gave us our *editio princeps*,¹¹ as well as two valuable transcripts that preserve over 1,900 letters of the poem since lost to the manuscript due to fire and other damage, thereby setting into motion the largest juggernaut in the history of Old English textual and literary studies.¹² If timing can be said to be as influential as accidental notation upon the shape of the Anglo-Saxon canon, we might also consider that Thorkelin's edition of *Beowulf* was produced at a time when the science of comparative philology, especially as theorized and practiced in Germany and Denmark by Grimm, Rask, Schlegel, and Bopp, was literally transforming and energizing literary studies on the

were seldom successful. When he asked leave to borrow from the Cotton Library that great portfolio of charters known to all students today as *Cotton MS. A.ii*, he was curtly informed that the librarian [Thomas Smith] was 'extremely amazed at the request', and advised that 'if the Mountaine cannot come to Mahomet, Mahomet must condescend to go to the Mountaine'" (Douglas, *English Scholars*, 114).

¹¹Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin, ed. *De Danorum rebus gestis seculi III & IV: Poëma Danicum dialecto Anglo-Saxonica* (Copenhagen: Thomas E. Rangel, 1815).

¹²For the fullest sense possible of the sheer volume of international *Beowulf* scholarship produced during the last two centuries, see Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, eds., *A Beowulf Handbook* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997). On Thorkelin's crucial role in bringing *Beowulf* into the scholarly spotlight, see Kevin S. Kiernan, *The Thorkelin Transcripts of Beowulf*, *Anglistica*, vol. 25 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1986).

Continent and in England. Moreover, according to Foucault, the science of comparative philology was constituting “historicity in the sphere of grammar,” in much the same way that Cuvier’s comparative anatomy was reconstituting the organizing principles and objects of the natural sciences.¹³ Whole new epistemologies of knowledge were rising out of the ashes of classical systems of thought, and Thorkelin’s edition of *Beowulf* (1815) could not have come at a time more conducive to the study of Old English texts; yet, if it had not been for the peculiarity of Wanley’s description of the poem in his *Catalogus*, *Beowulf* may have never arrived in quite the same way.

The ambition of the cataloguer or editor to render comprehensive and collective accounts of what has been written in a specific language or genre, regardless of the ultimate impossibility of the task, recalls the delusion of Borges’s browsers and librarians who search for the “perfect compendium” of all that has ever been written and go mad in the process. Contemporary manuscript scholarship, situated as it is within an academic climate of narrowly-defined specialization and the kind of theoretical caution that discourages grand statements, is perhaps less prone to making claims about comprehensiveness than earlier scholars. It is hard to imagine a John Leland among us now who, in 1546, set out for Henry VIII his plan for a history, *De Antiquitate Britannica*, “to be divided ‘yn so many bookes as there be shires yn England, and sheres and great dominions yn Wales’, fifty in all. A further six books would cover ‘the isles adjacent to your noble reaulme and under your subjection’. Finally, ‘as an ornament and

¹³Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 280.

right comely garlande to the enterprises afore saide', he had collected stuff to be distributed into three books, to be entitled 'De Nobilitate Brittanica'." Leland also had under his arm his *De Viris Illustribus* (published in 1709 by Antony Hall as *Commentarii de Scriptoribus Britannicis*), which purported to be a comprehensive anthology of English authors from the time of the Druids to the early sixteenth century. Although Leland began work on these projects, collecting source material and drawing up organizing schemata, he soon "lost his reason," and after being put in the custody of his brother, he died at the age of forty-nine in 1552.¹⁴ Rarely do contemporary scholars lose their minds under the pressure of projects too unwieldy to be accomplished; nevertheless, the textual editor of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts who seeks to construct his Ur-text or collective edition out of a series of variants takes upon himself a type of Sisyphean labor that will always reverberate, by virtue of what is missing, with the impossibility of completion. Matthew Battles, a librarian at Harvard College Library, has written of the pragmatism of the successors of Callimachus, the first bibliographer of the Ptolemaic libraries at Alexandria, who favored selective lists, called *canones*, of the works of "great" authors in the various genres, over the comprehensive indices Callimachus had favored. The number of papyrus scrolls, over

¹⁴McKisack, *Medieval History in the Tudor Age*, 6-7. It is worth noting here, as well, that it was Leland who claimed to have been directed by a royal commission in 1533 to "peruse and diligently to serche al the libraries of monasteries and collegies of this yowre noble reaulme, to the intente that the monumentes of auncient writers as welle of other nations, as of this yowr owne province mighte be broughte owte of deadely darkenes to lyvely lighte" (qtd. in McKisack, *Medieval History in the Tudor Age*, 3). As it turns out, Leland beseeched Cromwell to assist him to undertake this task before the actual Visitation Articles were issued in 1536 and 1538, but there is no evidence of a royal edict instructing him to collect books out of the monasteries. Perversely, or perhaps heroically, Leland *did* take it upon himself to visit the monastic houses after the Dissolution, and was responsible for a great many books and manuscripts finding their way into the Royal Library.

five hundred thousand at one time, simply overwhelmed those whose job it was to catalog the literary output of the Hellenic world. "We like to blame Caesar and Omar I for the loss of learning collected and cataloged at Alexandria," Battles has written. "The truth is both more troubling and more mundane: the greatest loss of books in Western history was caused not so much by burning as by bibliography."¹⁵ The same might also be said of the canon of Anglo-Saxon literature.

Similar to the browsers in Borges's Library who know that for every "true" text there are also countless "treacherous variations," the Anglo-Saxon scholar often works to either discover or reconstruct inductively the uncorrupt or most-nearly-perfect text. Often concomitant with this project is the desire on the part of the scholar to have an authoritative edition of a text from which he and others may begin extrapolating answers to the major questions of academic literary inquiry: who (or: what kind of person) wrote this text? From which village or monastery has it traveled to us? In which specific tongue does it speak to us? To which genre does this text belong, and to what purpose, personal, aesthetic or political, was it written? More important perhaps, are the questions that revolve around our desire to articulate an accurate account of cultural history. How, in other words, can our authoritative edition afford us a glimpse, if even a narrow one, of that ancient world which is forever lost to us except through the tabula of its remaining artifacts? How can we view in the language of the text the outward appearances of what we might call a distinctly Anglo-Saxon culture—its governments, economies,

¹⁵Michael Battles, "Lost in the Stacks: The decline and fall of the universal library," *Harper's*, January 2000: 36.

architectures, decorative and finer arts, social stratifications, religious beliefs and rituals—while also grasping the essence of what we might call the Anglo-Saxon unconscious?¹⁶ It is the rigor of science, the methodology of philology, that has often assisted and continues to assist the Anglo-Saxon scholar in the project of both perceiving and constructing a “best” text, through which an authentic cultural locus and psyche can be mapped and analyzed. Foucault has noted, as remarked above, that it was the rise of comparative philology at the beginning of the nineteenth century that bestowed upon language a “dense and consistent historical reality,” while also ushering in “a certain *modern* manner of knowing empiricities.”¹⁷ Foucault was skeptical of the science of the philologist, for whom

language forms the locus of tradition, of the unspoken habits of thought, of what lies hidden in people’s minds; it accumulates an ineluctable memory which does even know itself as memory. Expressing their thoughts in words of which they are not the masters, enclosing them in verbal forms whose historical dimensions they are unaware of, men believe that their speech is their servant and do not realize that they are submitting themselves to its demands. The grammatical arguments of a language are the *a priori* of what can be expressed in it. The truth of discourse is caught in the trap of philology. Hence the need to work one’s way back from opinions, philosophies, and perhaps even from sciences, to the words that made them possible, and, beyond that, to a thought whose essential life has

¹⁶We can see this critical desire in many of the adherents of our discipline, from the earliest to our most contemporary scholars. It was John Mitchell Kemble (1807-1857) who, perhaps, stated it most succinctly in his scheme for a series of lectures to be presented at Cambridge in 1834, “History of the English Language; First, or Anglo-Saxon Period,” where he wrote: “Our object is to prepare ourselves by study of some of the poems, the only real representation of the Saxon mind, to understand the nature and character of the people whose language we are to examine” (qtd. in Raymond A. Wiley, *Anglo-Saxon Kemble: The Life and Works of John Mitchell Kemble 1807-1857, Philologist, Historian, Archaeologist*, in Sonia Chadwick Hawkes et al., eds., *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, vol. 1, *British Archaeological Reports*, 72 [1979]: 196).

¹⁷Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 250.

not yet been caught in the network of any grammar.¹⁸

In a special volume of *Speculum* which was dedicated to a forum on "The New Philology," Stephen Nichols contrasted older forms of philology (the philology of Spitzer, Auerbach, and Curtius) which sought to limit the variations of manuscript texts by producing authoritative editions as "rational products" of a highly technological scholarship, and which then could serve as the transparencies through which medieval culture could be viewed and analyzed, with the newer philology which focuses on the original manuscript as the "matrix . . . of radical contingencies: of chronology, of anachronism, of conflicting subjects, of representation," in the gaps of which "the unconscious may be glimpsed."¹⁹ For new philologists, emendations and glosses do not stand in the way of understanding an "original" text—they are part and parcel of that text, and assist the scholar in mapping out the various discourses acting upon the manuscript, through which the manuscript can be historicized as a product of multiple and often competing social logics. There is no one authoritative text through which a distinct authorial or cultural meaning can be discerned; there is only a specific manuscript which bears the marks of "layers of discursive displacements and heterogenous meanings," as does history itself.²⁰ Whereas the more traditional philology, having flowered in an age of empiricist positivism in the second half of the nineteenth century, aims for a singular or

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 297-98.

¹⁹Stephen G. Nichols, "Introduction: Philology in a Manuscript Culture," *Speculum* 65 (1990): 1-10.

²⁰Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 65 (1990): 74.

even synoptic “best” text, the newer philology, having taken root in the age of postmodernity, aims to return the manuscript to its state of historical contingency and to then analyze that manuscript as the material product of multiple discourses. Despite the seeming difference in objective, I would argue that determining voice and intention in manuscripts is what is always ultimately at stake—who or what makes its gestures on the fragile vellum leaves, and to what purpose? This resonates with Foucault’s desire to gain access to a type of consciousness that exists prior to its expression in formalized systems of language. This is a desire, finally, that aims to grasp the essence of *lived* experience before language grabbed hold of it. Whether or not language can reveal anything other than its own operations is a question the interpreter of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts must continually put aside as a matter of necessity. Ultimately, as Frank Kermode has written,

World and book, it may be, are hopelessly plural, endlessly disappointing; we stand alone before them, aware of their arbitrariness and impenetrability, knowing that they may be narratives only because of our impudent intervention, and susceptible of interpretation only by our hermetic tricks. Hot for secrets, our only conversation may be with guardians who know less and see less than we can; and our sole hope and pleasure is in the perception of a momentary radiance, before the door of disappointment is finally shut on us.²¹

Even though the editing of Anglo-Saxon poetic manuscripts has been mainly untroubled by variant versions, mainly due to the fact that much of Anglo-Saxon poetry is contained in single versions in unique manuscripts, nevertheless, so-called “faithful” or “conservative” editions of these manuscripts often represent the results of a heavy cross-fertilization of transcribers and editors. Thus, while George Philip Krapp might have

²¹Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 145.

insisted, in his preface to his edition of *The Junius Manuscript*, that the series of volumes to be published as “The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records” will be “kept as free as possible of scholarly intrusions, paleographical, typographical, grammatical, or otherwise illustrative and editorial, and the necessary machinery of exposition and interpretation [will be] placed in the introduction and notes,”²² the headnote to *Beowulf* in Volume IV, *Beowulf and Judith*, tells us that the text of the poem is the result of a collation between the existing original manuscript (British Museum Library, Cotton Vitellius X.AV) and the transcriptions and collations by Thorkelin, Zupitza, Sedgefield, A.H. Smith, Wanley, and Conybeare, with some reliance upon Kemp Malone’s “readings” of Thorkelin’s original transcripts. Furthermore, some letters of the text, placed in brackets, are “conjectural”²³ (and these “conjectures,” we might note, are *also* the result of a cross-fertilization and *sifting through* of prior scholarly emendations). It goes without saying as well that the text itself is set in a typeface that is not peculiar to the original manuscript, but is immediately recognizable as a modern font style, utilized no doubt to ensure the normalization of the reading process by the scholars and their students who are not also paleographers, and thereby garner the widest critical audience possible for the poem. One understands immediately, from this headnote, the unwitting irony of Krapp’s claim that the series will be “as free as possible of scholarly intrusions.” There is, perhaps, no *Beowulf* edition which we can read which is free of scholarly intrusion, and therefore the term “record,” as

²²Krapp, *The Junius Manuscript*, v.

²³*Beowulf and Judith*, Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, vol. 4 (1953; reprint New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 2.

regards Anglo-Saxon poetry, is ultimately a misnomer. The very manuscript itself practically palpitates from the intrusions of many pens and the editor of a printed edition merely folds the already compromised text into his accordion of scholarly apparatus. Even Kevin Kiernan's work with ultraviolet and fiber-optic lighting and with spectral imaging to restore to the *Beowulf* text letters and parts of letters not previously visible to editors, and thereby reconstitute supposedly lost or altered text, finally gives us in his CD-ROM, *The Electronic Beowulf*, a mirror-holograph of an incomplete and deteriorated manuscript that bears the digital traces of its twenty-first century maker.²⁴ It would be difficult, I think, to hold up Dobbie's or Kiernan's *Beowulf* as more free of editorial intrusion than W.W. Skeat's editions of his three versions of *The Vision of Piers Plowman* for the Early English Text Society, which were extrapolated and cobbled together from over thirty manuscript sources.²⁵ Kiernan's electronic edition of *Beowulf*, comprising as it does digital facsimiles of the British Museum manuscript and Thorkelin's two transcriptions, as well as the text of Thorkelin's 1815 edition, Conybeare's and Madden's nineteenth-century collations between the manuscript and Thorkelin's edition, a new edition and transcript based upon rescued readings, glossarial index, links to related research sites (e.g., The British

²⁴For an account of new technologies being applied to manuscript scholarship, see Kevin S. Kiernan, "Old Manuscripts/New Technologies," in Mary P. Richards, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: Basic Readings* (New York: Garland, 1994), 37-54 and Andrew Prescott, "The Electronic Beowulf and Digital Restoration," *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, 12 (1997): 185-95. Visit, also, Kevin Kiernan's website "Guide to The Electronic Beowulf" at <<http://www.uky.edu/~kiernan/eBeowulf/guide.htm>>.

²⁵For an explanation of Skeat's initial methodology whereby he extracted three "versions" of the fourteenth-century dream-vision from a multitude of manuscripts, see his *Parallel Extracts from Twenty-Nine Manuscripts of Piers Plowman, with Comments, and a Proposal for the Society's Three-Text Edition of This Poem*, Early English Text Society, Original Series, vol. 17 (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1866).

Museum, *Old English Newsletter*, and Toronto's *Dictionary of Old English* Project), and search facilities that allow the scholar unprecedented access to comparative research tools, *does* represent a celebratory event in the history of Anglo-Saxon textual scholarship. But while Kiernan's project is to move what he views as an eleventh-century "archetypal" copy-revision of a unique "original" poem closer to the most conservative edition possible,²⁶ nevertheless, many hands and eyes will ultimately move over his electronic edition, which is a compendium, finally, of revisions of emended copies of a copy; it is an edition which has not been finally fixed in material time and space so much as it has been freed of those constraints and now has the possibility of existing everywhere at once. The scriptorium has become virtual, and the idea of a *Beowulf* manuscript which exists as a complex network of digital inscriptions and pixels, in *replicato*, as opposed to its current status as museum relic, gestures fittingly, I would argue, toward the manuscript culture in which it was first produced. But the textual scholar of *Beowulf* is finally less like the scribe whose conservative method of copying he emulates and more like the paleontologist who seeks to dream a dinosaur out of an antique piece of femur, or the anthropologist who seeks to resurrect, from footprints in the sand, the joys and sufferings of an entire tribe.²⁷

²⁶For the full scope and testament of Kiernan's work with the *Beowulf* manuscript, and his arguments as to the manuscript's provenance, construction, and date of composition, see Kevin S. Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996). For an overview of the debates surrounding Kiernan's arguments, see Robert E. Bjork and Anita Obermeier, "Date, Provenance, Author, Audiences," Bjork and Niles, *A Beowulf Handbook*, 13-34.

²⁷For an overview of current debates regarding editorial practices related to Old English manuscripts, see R.D. Fulk, "Textual Criticism," Bjork and Niles, *A Beowulf Handbook*, 35-54; Richards, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*; D.G. Scragg and Paul Szarmach, eds., *The Editing of Old English: Papers from the 1990 Manchester Conference* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994); Paul Szarmach, "The recovery of texts," in Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, ed., *Reading Old English Texts*

In Borges's Library, we would not worry, as we have, over the textual and contextual aporia of the Nowell codex containing *Beowulf*: we would not seek to reveal with fiber optic lighting the writing hidden under scribal "corrections" or Henry Gough's paper frames of 1845;²⁸ nor would we venture, by rigorous philological inquiry, to complete the half-lines burnt away at the edges of the ancient vellum. We would not search through history's thickets and fens for evidence of the poem's original bard and his since-vanquished tribe, or for the kings who might have provided patronage to the later poet, or for the English monks who might have reshaped, not only the old foreign song, but an original written poem as well. Having already accepted that our present copy of *Beowulf* is just that, a copy, flawed and imperfect, a variorum of endless varioria, we would spend all of our time browsing in Babel's stacks searching for the original, uncorrupted version, and for the chronicles which would reveal to us its makers, its subjects, and even ourselves. In the Library in which all possible texts and their variations exist, the original *Beowulf*, incorruptible and secret, as well as its most perfect translation, would await us, but how would we arrive at it? According to Borges's librarian-narrator, our method could only be regressive: "To locate book A, consult first a book B which indicates A's position; to locate book B, consult first a book C, and so on to infinity."²⁹ It

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 124-145.

²⁸Frederick Madden, appointed Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum Library in 1837, hired Henry Gough to assist him in the restoration and conservation of manuscripts damaged in the fire at the Cotton Library in 1731. For an account of Madden's and Gough's work on the Cotton manuscripts, see Andrew Prescott, "'Their present miserable state of cremation,'" Wright, *Sir Robert Cotton as Collector*, 408-22.

²⁹Borges, "The Library of Babel," *Labyrinths*, 56.

is the first premise of this dissertation that twentieth-century Anglo-Saxon scholarship, whether bending toward older or newer forms of philology, toward conservative or more radically theoretical readings of texts, has often been marked by this kind of regression, taking us further and further away from ourselves, which is not to say the cause is not noble, unselfish, or even, *a priori*, necessary as a precondition of a higher vocation. In the preface to his *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche addressed this point when he wrote,

We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge—and with good reason. We have never sought ourselves—how could it happen that we should ever *find* ourselves? It has rightly been said: ‘Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also’; *our* treasure is where the beehives of our knowledge are. We are constantly making for them, being by nature winged creatures and honey-gatherers of the spirit So we are necessarily strangers to ourselves, we do not comprehend ourselves, we *have* to misunderstand ourselves, for the law ‘Each is furthest from himself’ applies to all eternity—we are not ‘men of knowledge’ with respect to ourselves.³⁰

Just as Borges’s librarian-narrator despairs that the knowledge that all has been written will turn men into phantoms whose sole pursuit will be *looking* instead of *writing* (which is to say, *creating*), Nietzsche, reflecting upon the premium that was increasingly being placed upon “disinterested knowledge” in the late nineteenth century, wrote that the scholar solely devoted to objective science was a “mirror”:

. . . he is accustomed to submit before whatever he wants to be known, without any other pleasure than that found in knowing and ‘mirroring’; he waits until something comes, and then spreads himself out tenderly lest light footsteps and the quick passage of spiritlike beings should be lost on his plane and skin. . . . to such an extent has he become a passageway and

³⁰Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in Walter Kaufmann, trans. and ed., *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 451.

reflection of strange forms and events even to himself.³¹

It is the second premise of this dissertation that the history of Anglo-Saxon scholarship from the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries is marked by a diverse variety of the *interested* uses of manuscripts, and that the move of English studies into the academy proper (Oxford and Cambridge) at the turn of the nineteenth century brought about the end of Anglo-Saxon studies as an open and multivalent interest operating on the margins and within the intersections of private, public, and institutional spaces, and marked the beginning of Anglo-Saxon studies as a specialized profession. The death of Frederick Furnivall in 1910 and the subsequent handing over of the leadership of the Early English Text Society to Israel Gollancz, who had been established as the first lecturer in English at Cambridge in 1896, signaled, according to David Matthews, “the destiny of the discipline” as a going concern of the academy, where it had begun to secure a strong footing. This was mainly due to the role that comparative philology was playing in legitimizing English literary study by grounding that study in linguistic science.³² Philology would soon give way, after World War I, to belletristic criticism, moving the discipline closer to the analytical methodologies and aesthetic concerns of the fine arts, but Anglo-Saxon scholars continued to foreground close language study, rightly so, as the foundation on which to build any kind of interpretive work. But I would argue that the current

³¹Nietzsche, “We Scholars,” *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *Basic Writings*, 316-17.

³²David Matthews, *The Making of Middle English, 1765-1910*, *Medieval Cultures*, vol. 18 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 184-86, 190.

marginalization of Anglo-Saxon studies within English departments³³ is partially an outcome of the discipline having developed a high level of professional and technical expertise at the expense of popularizing its subject matter, both inside and outside the classroom. This is not to say that technical expertise and the *lingua franca* that expresses that expertise is not essential to the enterprise of manuscript and literary scholarship; if it were not for the higher forms of cognition and the symbols and language attendant upon communicating those forms, planes would not fly and Einstein would have been at a loss to give us his theory of relativity. Nevertheless, the fact of planes that *do*, indeed, fly and of charged subatomic particles that can be accelerated in order to produce energy, has profoundly changed the world in which we live, whereas academic literary studies has often turned away from this world under the banner of "art for art's sake," which could also be "history for history's sake," or "language for the sake of language." Lamenting the same state of affairs in the field of history, Simon Schama has recently written of the results of the eventual split between the narrative artistry of nineteenth-century historical scholarship, as practiced by Michelet, Carlyle, and Macauley, and the hard social science

³³For an overview of the recent discussions and debates over the marginalization of Anglo-Saxon and Medieval studies within English departments, see Allen J. Frantzen, "A Recent Survey of the Teaching of Old English and its Implications for Anglo-Saxon Studies," *Old English Newsletter* 26, no. 2 (1992): 34-45 and *Desire for Origins*, 1-26; John Hermann, "Afterword," *Allegories of War: Language and Violence in Old English Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 199-208; Peter Jackson, "The Future of Old English: A Personal Essay," *Old English Newsletter* 25, no. 3 (1992): 24-28; David Matthews, *The Making of Middle English*, 187-97; Gillian R. Overing, "Recent Writing on Old English: A Response," *AEstel* 1 (1993): 135-49; William D. Paden, "Scholars at a Perilous Ford," in William D. Paden, ed., *The Future of the Middle Ages: Medieval Literature in the 1990s* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 3-31; Lee Patterson, "On The Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies," *Speculum* 65 (1990): 87-108; T.A. Shippey, "Recent Writing on Old English," *AEstel* 1 (1993): 111-34.

of a twentieth-century technical scholarship that privileges the textual over the visual:

From this momentous reevaluation flowed several fateful consequences: the creation of the historical profession, crystallizing in academies and universities, acutely conscious of the dignity of its vocation and defined not by its connection to, but by its separation from, popular literature and vulgar entertainment; the creation of journals, which then encoded the language to be spoken and written by the new priesthood of Clio; a system of graduate instruction at the heart of which was the initiation of the young into that language, the examination of their accomplished imitation and mastery of it; the generation of 'debates,' which were really not much more than oedipal rites of passage by which the postdoctoral initiates established themselves as independent masters on the graves of their doctor-fathers' reputations.³⁴

While Schama's assessment of academic historical scholarship may be too harsh, it is certainly true that the technical expertise, disciplinarian codes of conduct, and academic context of the profession of Anglo-Saxon scholarship has driven it to its highest possible ground, from which vantage point it becomes harder and harder to connect our work to larger public concerns, or even to a public audience other than graduate students.

All knowledge practices are, I would argue, a negotiation between what can be known authoritatively and what can only be imagined, yet we often abject the imagination or creatively theoretical in favor of a cool and bloodless rationality, winnowing ourselves into the thin, reflecting glasses of the objective science Nietzsche was wary of, even as he held the chair of classical philology at the University of Basel. We often seek, in our editing and interpretation of Anglo-Saxon texts, to bring about a type of closure that, ironically, would be the end of us, and the end of art, if it ever happened. The canon, and even the corpus of Anglo-Saxon literature, is inherently incomplete and unstable, yet it is a

³⁴Simon Schama, "Visualizing History," *Culturefront* 7, no. 1 (2000), reprint *Harper's*, February 2000, 38.

dominant feature of much of Anglo-Saxon scholarship to contain and delimit the interpretation of its texts within a frame of reference that can only include other Anglo-Saxon texts, or texts in other languages which might have shared provenance or some kind of agreed-upon historical relationship with the text in question. So, a critic who wants to say something about the ambiguous quality of a line in *Beowulf* must first “prove” that Anglo-Saxon poets were capable of or even interested in ambiguity by referring to instances of ambiguity in other poetic texts of the same period.³⁵ The speculative is therefore always subjected to a series of ancillary objective proofs, which objective proofs operate in a supposedly closed system. But the system is not really closed and does not offer the perfect critical hermeneutics, because for every existing text there is a missing text, for every complete text there is an incomplete text, for every incomplete text there are numerous variant texts, for every read text there is an unread text, and finally, every missing page or corrupted line tears at the whole fabric of the critical enterprise while also pulling it toward the infinitude of possibility it does not want to acknowledge. This is not to say that scholars are not aware of the contingent nature of the scholarly textual enterprise. Paul E. Szarmach has written recently that current theoretical debates and disagreements among textual scholars who work to recover and edit Anglo-

³⁵This tendency is exemplified in an essay written by Fred Robinson in 1975, where he wanted to challenge the notion that Old English verse did *not* indulge in ambiguities, by suggesting that the “Book Moth” Riddle of the Exeter Book employed “verbal ambiguities to develop a specific poetic theme. Further, if this suggestion is correct, then not only will our understanding of a single minor poem have been increased, but we will also have a fuller awareness of the range of dictional subtlety which we may reasonably expect in other poems of the Anglo-Saxon period” (Fred C. Robinson, “Artful Ambiguities in the Old English ‘Book-Moth’ Riddle,” *The Tomb of Beowulf and Other Essays on Old English* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1993], 98).

Saxon texts, with some editors arguing for “the intellectual sovereignty of scribes” and some arguing for “the classical standard of conjectural emendation,” contributes to what he sees as the “decline and fall of the Absolute”: “Just as readers of Old English dictionaries no longer receive them like documents from Sinai, so too readers of texts must likewise accept editions as contingent documents. . . . Edited texts are unstable in the philosophical sense, and an acceptance of this state of affairs, informed by knowledge of the editor’s dilemma, can prevent error and acknowledge ambiguity or contingency in final interpretation.”³⁶ Katherine O’Brien O’Keefe, who advocates an “archaeological” method of editing, whereby an edition of a manuscript is presented within its historical context (bookmarked, for instance, by other manuscripts that may accompany it in an original codice), and the unique visual features of the manuscript are analytically “mapped” in modern print, has written that it is

precisely the material text which allows the poetic work to perform its criticism of the present through its insistent otherness. Decisions on editorial practice . . . are of the first importance, because the editing of a text determines the limits of the criticism that may be conducted on that text. In many ways, our discipline’s decisions on editing practice will determine the very viability of our subject. We may properly ask: ‘Does the text still live?’ The answer is yes, if we understand the text to exist in a dialogue with the present. In this way the text persists in affecting the world, since it comments on the world which receives it. Our editing should make possible such dialogical study, where the edited poetic work presses our reading community to reflect on itself in reflecting on the text.³⁷

O’Brien O’Keefe’s emphasis here upon the importance of the “reading community” which

³⁶Paul E. Szarmach, “The recovery of texts,” O’Keefe, *Reading Old English Texts*, 132-33.

³⁷Katherine O’Brien O’Keefe, “Editing and the Material Text,” Scragg and Szarmach, *The Editing of Old English*, 154.

exists in the present and upon the dialogical relationship between the contemporary reader and the most rigorously diplomatic edition possible of the original manuscript requires the editor of the Old English text to put his work into the service of something that lies outside of his usual desire to present the most readable text possible. And the editor must resist, as it were, the hermeneutic tendency to always stay “inside the box” of the text and its textual referents, thereby “freez[ing] the text in an arbitrary moment.”³⁸ Via an editorial approach that is both technically exacting and respectful of the text’s “otherness,” yet always aware of how the reader’s place in the present world impresses itself upon the text, O’Keefe admirably seeks to keep Old English texts alive by connecting what is always past (the manuscript) to what is always present (the reader). But once we see ourselves clearly in our reflections upon the text, how do we avoid falling into the deeper waters of solipsism? How do we tear ourselves away from ourselves? Once we recognize the impression of our reading selves in texts that are always inherently instable, we also recognize the instability of our place in the world and perhaps of the world itself—shall we faithfully record this moment in all its deconstructed particulars spreading out before us like pieces of shattered glass, or shall we insist on a more pointed coherence?

Nietzsche felt that the objective scientist was “one of the most precious instruments there are; but he belongs in the hand of one more powerful.”³⁹ Furthermore, he is “an artistic triumph that deserves care and honor; but he is no goal, no conclusion

³⁸*Ibid.*, 153.

³⁹Nietzsche, “We Scholars,” *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *Basic Writings*, 316.

and sunrise.”⁴⁰ Finally, it is the work of the objective scientist which the “more powerful” philosopher stands upon in order to take on the greater task of *creating value*. While the objective scientist’s job is to press everything into a formula and to “abbreviate everything long, even ‘time,’ and to *overcome* the entire past,” the genuine philosopher reaches for the future “with a creative hand.”⁴¹ It is not out of the realm of possibility to find these two forms merged into one scholar of Anglo-Saxon literature. Nevertheless, it is the third premise of this dissertation that contemporary Anglo-Saxon studies, and the larger field of English studies which Old and Middle English studies helped bring into being, currently display the effects of a cognitive split between objective form and valued substance, and that one of the results of this split has been the dehistoricizing of the humanities and the banishment from the discipline of the moral imagination and the aesthetics of style. The practices and discourses of literary studies have become so inaccessible to the general public, especially in their most highly technical and theoretical forms, that humanistic studies increasingly exist in an atemporal relationship to the broader popular culture in which most people are living their lives. Furthermore, the exercise of a humanistic scholarship at a level above the heads and far removed from the general educated citizenry effects a dangerous split in what might be termed the very foundation of humanistic studies: the mutually sustaining and dialectical relationship between intellectual theory and social practice. The fifteenth-century classical Renaissance ideal of teaching literary skills in order to empower the communal citizen with an eloquence connected to a substantive

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 318.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 326.

awareness of one's place in the stream of culture was grounded in the notion that philosophy counseled action. Putting aside for a moment the very complicated and often misunderstood relationship between the ideals of Renaissance humanism and the curriculum of the modern-day humanities, I would argue that literary studies, over time, have turned away from the question of the *usefulness* of their subject in the larger public domain, and have thereby sequestered their work outside the theater of history.⁴² Not wanting to assert the use-value of Anglo-Saxon texts by politicizing them through the lenses of gender, race, and class only (which ultimately constructs too narrow of an interpretive grid and panders to fashionable special interests), nor wanting to lean too heavily upon the illusion of the humanities producing good citizens via a steady diet of "high" literary texts (which texts may do nothing more than reinforce the values of a homogenous and oppressive social elite), I simply raise the issue here of what I see as the grievous loss to *public service* of the literary scholar. By the moral imagination and the aesthetics of style, I defer to James Anderson Winn, who has written that Cardinal Newman's idea, expressed in *The Idea of a University* (1854), that a liberal education helps to produce a "habit of mind" which is calm, free, and wise, has less currency in our uncertain and often bleak postmodern world, where highly educated persons have shown themselves capable of intellectual hypocrisy and brutal atrocities. Pol Pot, after all, was educated in Paris, and Hitler revered Wagner's operas. Nevertheless, if we cannot promise

⁴²On the subject of the complex relationship between "humanism" and the "humanities," see Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities: Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

moral improvement, we are at least obligated to teach as if we believe our fractured, discordant world *could* be rebuilt by exercising, with our students, our moral imagination, and we must put our whole selves “on the line, naked and frail,” in order to achieve this. Winn sees this project as intimately bound up with the artistic imagination, without which we would not have a subject to analyze or impart to others. Further, Winn writes that

. . . expressing our own moral responses to the material we teach requires the kind of self-exposure that performers risk each time they step onto a stage. A flat, neutral, cautious presentation of ourselves is a betrayal of the works and ideas we teach. . . . We need to encourage students at all levels to engage in performance, and we need to overcome our own unease about performance, making our writing less passive and inert, more personal and rhetorical, so that we may teach our students to appreciate and enact a wider range of styles. The teaching of style was once part of a system of class hierarchy we would now deplore, but in today’s world it actually holds out the hope of making our students less narrow, less insular, more curious about and sensitive to the lives of others.⁴³

Whereas earlier Anglo-Saxon scholarship of the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, often denigrated as amateurish or too compromised, as well-intentioned yet too flawed, or simply disremembered like a bad dream, was often practiced with great versatility and expertise by men and women whose lives were rich in varied experience and who often endeavored, passionately and without institutionalized forms of patronage, to connect their work to the service of what they perceived as a greater common good; conversely, contemporary Anglo-Saxon studies, mainly marked by its professionalized annexation within institutions of the highest learning, is practiced by men and women caught in a series of tautological discourses in which the discipline and the highly

⁴³James Anderson Winn, *The Pale of Words: Reflections on the Humanities and Performance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 125-28.

specialized and increasingly narrowly defined understanding of its texts becomes an end in itself, as well as a means to publication and tenure. Even those scholars who claim a social or political function for their work are making these claims in highly theoretical terms to academic audiences who then make counterclaims to which there are further counterclaims, and all the while the rest of world lives and dies, suffers and experiences joy, without so much as a shred of a notion of our existence or the possible significance of our work. It is hard to imagine a John Josias Conybeare (1779-1824) among us now, who halted work on his *Illustrations of Anglo-Saxon Poetry* in order to devote more attention to his clerical duties as vicar of a village church in Somerset and who, according to his brother William, only resumed work on the book, fitfully, when he deemed that the profits of publishing the *Illustrations* might be "subservient to a purpose of parochial usefulness," in this case, the building of a village school. Although John Conybeare held the Rawlinson Chair of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford (and this at a time when English was considered an "illiberal" and "vulgar" subject, and did not yet warrant a baccalaureate being dedicated to it), his clerical duties, his brother tells us, commanded the chiefest part of his attention.⁴⁴

Likewise, one is also struck by the story of the tubercular William Elstob (1673-1715)

⁴⁴William Daniel Conybeare, Preface to John Josias Conybeare, *Illustrations of Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, ed. William Daniel Conybeare (1826; reprint New York: Haskell House, 1964), iii-v. For John Conybeare's life and work as an Anglo-Saxon scholar, see also Hans Aarleff, *The Study of Language in England 1780-1860* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 175-76; W.F. Bolton, "The Conybeare Copy of Thorkelin," *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature* 55, 97-107; *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 4, 986; J.R. Hall, "The Conybeare 'Caedmon': A Turning Point in the History of Old English Scholarship," *Harvard Library Bulletin* 33 (1985): 378-403; Kemp Malone, "Conybeare and Thorkelin," *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature*, Anglo-American Supplement (1969): i-xi.

who, without patronage or backing, struggled most of his life to complete an edition of the Alfredian translation of Orosius. After long years of living on a clergyman's salary and attempting without success to solicit subscribers for the publication of his work and to secure preferments more conducive to his scholarship, William Elstob died without seeing any of his work in print, which also included an edition of Wulfstan and an ambitious compendium of Old English laws (a reediting and extension of William Lambarde's *Archaionomia*).⁴⁵ After his death, his sister, Elizabeth Elstob (1683-1756), labored for many years, unsuccessfully, to shepherd her brother's work into print, and also worked diligently on her own scholarship, which included a published edition of Aelfric's *An English-Saxon Homily on the birth-day of St. Gregory* (1709) and *Rudiments of Grammar for the English-Saxon Tongue* (1715), the first Old English-Modern English grammar produced in England; nevertheless, her work, given her status as a *female* scholar and the loss to death of her two greatest backers (her brother and George Hickes, the Oxford Saxonist), was not well-received and she was forced to flee London in or soon after 1718 due to unpaid debts.⁴⁶ Writing of herself in the third person in 1738, she said of

⁴⁵For accounts of William Elstob's career as an Anglo-Saxonist, see Eleanor N. Adams, *Old English Scholarship in England from 1566-1800*, Yale Studies in English, vol. 55 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1917), 93-104; Sarah H. Collins, "The Elstobs and the End of the Saxon Revival," in Carl T. Berkhout and Milton McC. Gatch, eds., *Anglo-Saxon Scholarship: the first three centuries* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), 107-118; John Petheram, *Historical Sketch of the Progress and Present State of Anglo-Saxon Literature in England* (London: Edward Lumley, 1840), 88-96. It should be noted here that some of William Elstob's work (his translation of a Saxon homily by Wulfstan) was included in George Hickes' massive compilation *Linguarum Septentrionalium Thesaurus*, a work in three volumes that first appeared in large folio volumes in 1703.

⁴⁶Despite the hostility of the initial reaction to Elizabeth Elstob's work, Sarah H. Collins has noted that the twentieth-century editor of Aelfric's work, Peter Clemoes, "has examined Elizabeth Elstob's manuscript edition of the homilies and has . . . found her text remarkably

her failed efforts to publish a comprehensive edition of Aelfric's homilies: "She had several other designs, but was unhappily hinder'd, by a necessity of getting her Bread, which with much difficulty, labour, and ill health, she has endeavour'd to do for many Years, with very indifferent success."⁴⁷ Finally, let us take note of the early English scholar who promoted Elizabeth Elstob's work, risked his life and career for his political and religious beliefs, and undertook scholarly research under various pseudonyms while "on the run." Such was the case with the Anglo-Saxonist George Hickes (1642-1715), chief editor of the *Linguarum Veterum Septentrionalium Thesaurus* (to which Wanley contributed his famous *Catalogus*) and William Elstob's professor at Oxford who, in 1690 after the Glorious Revolution, did not hesitate to refuse allegiance to the new king, William III, for which refusal he was immediately deposed as Dean of the Cathedral Church of Worcester. Despite the deposal, Hickes publicly insisted on the legitimacy of his deanship and consequently became a fugitive for nine years. His polemic pamphleteering was legendary, and even raised the ire of Jonathan Swift. Many scholars, including Humfrey Wanley and Edward Thwaites, risked their professional positions to collaborate with Hickes on his grammars and catalogues.⁴⁸

accurate and at least potentially helpful in determining some now difficult readings for any new editions of the *Catholic Homilies*" ("The Elstobs and the End of the Saxon Revival," Berkhout and Gatch, *Anglo-Saxon Scholarship*, 115).

⁴⁷Elizabeth Elstob, letter to George Ballard, 23 November 1738, qtd. in Kathryn Sutherland, "Editing for a New Century: Elizabeth Elstob's Anglo-Saxon Manifesto and Aelfric's St. Gregory Homily," Scragg and Szarmach, *The Editing of Old English*, 217.

⁴⁸For accounts of the career of George Hickes, see Adams, *Old English Scholarship*, 75-97; *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 9, 800-5; Douglas, *English Scholars*, 77-97; Richard L. Harris, "Introduction," Richard L. Harris, ed., *A Chorus of Grammars: The Correspondence of George Hickes and his Collaborators on the Thesaurus linguarum septentrionalium* (Toronto:

It is the fourth and final premise of this dissertation that, whereas earlier scholarship is characterized by a rich blending of intellectual interests, such that a Sir Robert Cotton (1571-1631) collected coins, stone inscriptions, and manuscripts, was interested in topography and mapmaking as well, and collaborated with his teacher William Camden (1551-1623) in excavating Hadrian's Wall in Scotland and in helping Camden write his English history, *Brittania* (1586), conversely, the objects of contemporary humanistic scholarship are mainly confined within narrow disciplinary contexts, such that the literary scholar and historian, or literary scholar and archaeologist, rarely meet in the hallway, much less in the "field" of research and teaching; therefore, contemporary Anglo-Saxon literary scholarship comes into being partially through a historical process of exclusion. We can see the early workings of this process in the dispersal of Cotton's various collections after his death. When Cotton's collection of manuscripts was bequeathed to the British nation in 1700, his collection of Roman stone inscriptions (altars, dedications, milestones, tombstones, etc.) remained in the summer-house at the family estate in Conington, which was in a neglected and fairly ruined condition. Eventually, the few stones that survived this neglect were donated to the Wren Library at Trinity College, Cambridge, where they were placed at the foot of the first-floor staircase, being too heavy to move anywhere else. At that time, the 1740s, it was thought fitting that Cotton's collection of stones should be housed in an institution that could offer

Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1992), 3-125; Shaun F.D. Hughes, "The Anglo-Saxon Grammars of George Hickes and Elizabeth Elstob," Berkhout and Gatch, *Anglo-Saxon Scholarship*, 119-47; D.J. Palmer, *The Rise of English Studies: An Account of the Study of English Language and Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 73-75; Petheram, *Historical Sketch*, 71-84.

literary contexts for the scholar interested in comparative studies of the Romano-British period; furthermore, Cotton himself had viewed his various collections as complementary to one another, and therefore, Cotton's "library" was never just a room full of books and manuscripts, such as we think of a library today, but rather comprised a unique array of textual and visual artifacts and fine art, all of which coexisted in a rich dialogic relationship. During the eighteenth century the Wren Library itself was more a museum of antiquities, including mineral and botanical specimens, than a storehouse of books, but the opening of the Fitzwilliam Museum in 1848 brought about the removal of many of the Wren Library's more eclectic non-book collections, and in 1969, in keeping with current notions of museology, Cotton's stones were moved to Cambridge University's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, where they are still housed today as part of a larger display of Roman Britain.⁴⁹ In the movements of Cotton's stones and other museum collections from the 1740s to the 1960s we can see how the academic desire for classification overtakes history itself, smoothing out its multiple valences into the unities requisite to the task of curating.

II *From what you would know and measure, you must take leave, at least for a time. Only after having left town, you see how high its towers rise above the houses.*

—Friedrich Nietzsche⁵⁰

Allen Frantzen, in the preface to the collection of essays *Speaking Two Languages*,

⁴⁹For a fuller account of Cotton's interest in excavations of Roman antiquities and his collection of stone inscriptions, see David McKitterick, "From Camden to Cambridge: Sir Robert Cotton's Roman Inscriptions, and their Subsequent Treatment," Wright, *Sir Robert Cotton as Collector*, 105-28.

⁵⁰Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Wanderer and the Shadow," in *Basic Writings*, 165.

has written that the founders of our contemporary humanistic disciplines were

motivated by fear of the institutional power of the natural sciences and took defensive measures to professionalize and organize their own disciplines accordingly. . . . Scientists exchanged views and examined research at annual meetings, thereby demonstrating progress in their work. Professionalism directed the attention of the disciplines away from the university (the meeting place of the disciplines) toward a national audience of scholars unique to each discipline. Annual meetings eventually became central to the professional activity of all the disciplines, but as marketplaces for jobseekers, not as markets for ideas. The demand for interdisciplinary studies that has characterized the last two decades testifies not only to the success with which the disciplines within the humanities has been narrowed as they have been professionalized, but to the sterility of the results.⁵¹

While I disagree with Frantzen that conferences are more about seeking jobs than exchanging ideas (mainly because I think both activities often conjoin each other and it would be difficult to quantify exactly where one activity ends and the other begins, or to say that one cancels or obviates the other), his larger point about the “sterility” of current interdisciplinary studies is an apt one. The idea, and even the limited practice of interdisciplinary studies has been given some lip service and even some space in the contemporary academy; nevertheless, while one can cross back and forth over the actual borders that demarcate the separate fields and classrooms, the disciplinary “home territories” are never reconstituted or refreshed in any substantial way, as that would

⁵¹Allen J. Frantzen, “Prologue: Documents and Monuments: Difference and Interdisciplinarity in the Study of Medieval Culture,” in Allen J. Frantzen, ed., *Speaking Two Languages: Traditional Disciplines and Contemporary Theory in Medieval Studies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 8. For an overview of recent work on the history of the emergence of English as a distinct discipline, see Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987); Jo McMurtry, *English Language, English Literature: The Creation of an Academic Discipline* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1985); David J. Palmer, *The Rise of English Studies: An Account of the Study of English Language and Literature from its Origins to the Making of the Oxford English School* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).

ultimately lead to disciplinary instability, and perhaps, therefore, to professional instability or erasure. In *The Discourse on Language*, Foucault has written that “[w]ithin its own limits, every discipline recognizes true and false propositions, but it repulses a whole teratology of learning.”⁵² A teratology is any discourse or narrative concerning monsters or prodigies; the success of a discipline, therefore, depends on the repulsing of those knowledges which do not fall within established disciplinary parameters, or those knowledges which would, by their very nature, reshape the entire scholarly enterprise already established and institutionalized. This is why, Foucault reminds us, Mendel’s studies of genetic traits were not readily accepted by his nineteenth-century peers, because Mendel “spoke of objects, employed methods and placed himself within a theoretical perspective totally alien to the biology of his time”; therefore, Mendel’s ideas, going against and beyond the established limits of his discipline, were considered monstrous.⁵³ True interdisciplinary studies are not really possible until the scholar is willing to break down everything he has in the way of a foundation or “home,” in order to begin again, untenured, in a new world. And the most valuable or “true” knowledges can only exist, perhaps, on the margins of any centrally-authorized discourse, where they can be perceived and articulated by those who look to the center first to see what is missing. This was precisely the case, I would argue, with many of our earliest scholars of Anglo-Saxon literature.

⁵²Michel Foucault, “The Discourse on Language,” *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (1972; reprint New York: Random House, 1982), 223.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 224.

In his Introduction to *A Beowulf Handbook*, John Niles writes that “future *Beowulf* studies are likely to reflect an increasing self-consciousness about both the historicity of Anglo-Saxon scholarship and the theoretical underpinnings of literary scholarship in general.”⁵⁴ There are several scholars who have been attending to this task, chief among them Allen Frantzen, who, in his book *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition*, a selective history of the discipline of Old English scholarship from the Renaissance through the nineteenth century, argues that “engagement with political controversy has always been a distinctive and indeed an essential motive for studying language origins and therefore for studying Anglo-Saxon.”⁵⁵ Frantzen believes that the attempts of modern Anglo-Saxon scholars to “disengage” their work from politics, and to justify that disengagement by relying upon what they see as the traditional argument of studying language and literature “for their own sake,” have forgotten that the discipline itself is relatively new and was founded upon “innovation.” It is Frantzen’s contention that Anglo-Saxon scholarship’s insistence on the separation of politics and linguistic studies, its veneration of methodology at the expense of a fuller understanding of the cultures under inspection, and its refusal to admit or confess the presence of scholarly subjectivity in its projects has brought about a state of affairs whereby “Anglo-Saxon subjects have failed to retain a place in the mainstream of modern intellectual and political

⁵⁴John D. Niles, “Introduction,” Bjork and Niles, *A Beowulf Handbook*, 9.

⁵⁵Allen J. Frantzen, “Preface,” *Desire for Origins*, xiii.

life.”⁵⁶ Additionally, Frantzen draws upon Edward Said’s *Orientalism*,⁵⁷ in order to demonstrate that the history of Anglo-Saxon studies is implicated in what Said saw as the ideological project of the European West, a project which drew upon a wide range of scholarly endeavors, legal, literary and otherwise, “to achieve academic mastery of the literary culture of Arabia and India, and thereby to assure the irrelevance, inferior status, and ultimately the powerlessness of Oriental texts.”⁵⁸ Anglo-Saxon studies, therefore, are implicated in projects of Western nationalism, of both the British and American variety. Not wanting to launch an overarching ideological critique of the discipline of Anglo-Saxon studies, an endeavor which he sees as “superfluous,” Frantzen instead attends instead to tracing the “intimate” connections between the historical and political issues of English “expansionism, linguistic imperialism, and cultural colonization” and the history of Anglo-Saxon studies, with the intention of raising a “critical self-consciousness” among Anglo-Saxon scholars, such that they might be willing to rethink their practices and subjects within the larger arena of “cultural studies,” while still continuing to emphasize the close study of language and history.⁵⁹ In this model, tradition and innovation are brought fruitfully together. In his preface to *Speaking Two Languages*, Frantzen expands upon his notion of the importance of embracing cultural studies by explaining that traditional literary scholarship “narrowed the scope of medieval studies by limiting its terrain to texts

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978).

⁵⁸Frantzen, *Desire for Origins*, 29.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 225-26.

and by conceiving of texts . . . as generic containers for language.”⁶⁰ Cultural studies, “rooted in ethnography, the study of diverse and remote cultures,”⁶¹ concentrate on the “political nature of the structural, structuring effects of the relationship between scholars and their subjects.”⁶² And this is why Frantzen is interested in analyzing, in *Desire for Origins*, Thomas Jefferson’s notions about American westward expansionism and manifest destiny alongside Jefferson’s introduction of the Anglo-Saxon language into the curriculum of the University of Virginia and his interpretation of an episode in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*, from which he was inspired to conceive plans for a Great Seal that would have incorporated the mythical Anglo-Saxon warriors, Hengest and Horsa, into its tableau as figures of bravery and democracy. Ultimately, Frantzen wants to trace connections between what Jefferson perceived as culturally relevant in Anglo-Saxon texts, the politics of American racialism, and the place of Old English in the history of American education.⁶³ Frantzen’s book and some of his subsequent writings related to his theses expressed therein have created controversy and sparked lively debate among contemporary Anglo-Saxon scholars, some of whom have faulted Frantzen for caricaturizing Anglo-Saxon scholars as too narrow in their interests, while others have bristled at the suggestion that a poststructural critique would be beneficial to their work

⁶⁰Frantzen, *Speaking Two Languages*, 24.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 25.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 22.

⁶³For a fuller understanding of Frantzen’s analysis of Jefferson’s Anglo-Saxonism and how that came to affect the structure of our modern-day university curriculum, see Frantzen, *Desire for Origins*, 15-22, 203-7.

on Anglo-Saxon culture.⁶⁴ It is not my intention to insert myself into this debate, so much as I wish to follow Frantzen's methodological lead in my own project of literary anthropology and to supplement the disciplinary history he has constructed in order to highlight certain aspects and motives of earlier scholarship that remain, even in Frantzen's work, *too narrowly imagined*.

It is no longer news that Anglo-Saxon England and the Middle Ages are, to a certain extent, cultural constructs that have arisen out of the negotiations and interactions between scholars and their subjects;⁶⁵ nevertheless, these historical periods once existed in vibrant materiality, and efforts thus far to construct disciplinary genealogies often focus on persons, texts, and textual "events" that tend to underline the notions that "Anglo-Saxon England" is mainly a discursive formation and that scholarly disciplines are mainly ideological enterprises and power discourses which, over the course of time, cover over their political origins through various acts of repression and "forgetting." John Niles best summed up this critical view in his recent essay "Appropriations: A Concept of Culture," when he wrote that

⁶⁴For an overview of the debate surrounding Frantzen's work, see Allen J. Frantzen, "Who Do These Anglo-Saxon(ists) Think they Are, Anyway?" *AEstel* 2 (1994): 1-43 and Joyce Hill, Review of Allen J. Frantzen, *Desire for Origins*, *Anglia* 3, no. 1/2 (1993): 161-64.

⁶⁵For an overview of the most important work in this vein thus far, consult Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century* (New York: William Morrow, 1991); Frantzen, *Desire for Origins*; Allen J. Frantzen and John D. Niles, eds., *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997); Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Matthews, *The Making of Middle English*; Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987); E.G. Stanley, *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1975).

culture is chiefly produced through a complex series of purposeful appropriations either of the past or someone's present property (whether material, linguistic, or intellectual in nature). Whether these appropriations are the work of individuals acting in relative isolation or of groups acting in consort, the results of this activity tend to be expressive of an underlying ideology that is characteristic of a time and place as well as of specific class interests, ethnic allegiances, and so on.⁶⁶

Further, Niles points out that some scholars might think of Anglo-Saxon culture as a palpable "something to which their life or scholarly work is connected by almost tangible lines," but in their efforts to bolster this claim they appeal to "genealogies, genetics, archaeology, the statements of reliable authorities, and any other evidence that comes to hand, unaware that the effect of all such efforts is only to tighten the web of mental inferences in which they and their personal orientations are suspended."⁶⁷ The truth of history is never possible in this schemata, only particular, invested versions of *ideas* of history. While I am more than willing to accept the wisdom and even the *sanity* of this Derridean insight, it must only serve as a caution, for the past continually begs our attention—in the name of justice, it even insists on it. Therefore, while we may admit the contingent and subjective nature of the scholarly enterprise, we must still lean into history, with all of our weight, in order to take stock of its multiple and often conflicting impressions, and we must even ask ourselves, as Foucault insisted: how might a particular culture have experienced itself prior to having been caught in the web of written language in these, our beloved recovered texts? To this issue of the impenetrability of the past

⁶⁶John D. Niles, "Appropriations: A Concept of Culture," Frantzen and Niles, *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity*, 205.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 209.

joined with the need to articulate history (to speak for the dead, as it were), Simone Weil wrote in her notebook:

The past: something real, but absolutely beyond our reach, toward which we cannot take one step, toward which we can but turn ourselves so that an emanation from it may come to us. . . . Whence will renewal come to us—to us who have defiled and emptied the whole earthly globe? From the past alone, if we love it.⁶⁸

It is my belief that our discipline was structured as much out of the efforts of those scholars who were, in essence, working either outside of or against dominant ideologies, and who were often politically or institutionally disenfranchised, as it was structured by scholars supposedly working under the spell of royalist, polemicist, nationalist, racist, colonialist, or other elitist master narratives. Furthermore, many of our earliest scholars, prior to the recent tidings of contemporary Anglo-Saxon scholars regarding the compromised and contingent nature of our discipline, were unabashedly invested in the idea that the present *should* be implicated in the past, and vice-versa, and they eagerly sought a dialogical relationship with history and its texts, not to tie them, under the false guise of objectivity, to ideological interests, but to rescue and restore what they viewed as a native culture in danger of being disregarded, and therefore erased. This is not to say that self-interest or various blindly patriotic interests did not play a part in the earliest formations of our discipline, only that disciplinary histories often concentrate on the emerging ideological forces at work in the history of Anglo-Saxon studies at the expense of those elements, including historical chance, which seem discontinuous in relation to these forces. And therefore, it is fruitful to speak, as Frantzen does, of John Mitchell

⁶⁸Simone Weil, "Social Harmony," *Gravity and Grace*, 229.

Kemble's editing of *Beowulf* in the 1830s within the context of Kemble's devotion to Jakob Grimm's philological science and Kemble's desire to commemorate the lineage of English history in the poem, and therefore posit Kemble's scholarship as intimately connected to a particularly specious type of romantic nationalism.⁶⁹ But what of Fanny Kemble's worried characterization of her brother in 1828 as "neither Tory nor Whig, but a radical, a utilitarian, an adorer of Bentham, a worshipper of Mill, an advocate for vote by ballot, an opponent of hereditary aristocracy, the church establishment, the army and navy"?⁷⁰ Or Kemble's youthful expedition to Spain in July of 1830 to help General José Maria Torrijos and his Constitutionalists launch their ultimately doomed overthrow of the absolute government of Ferdinand VII? As Kemble matured, some of his views changed (he became more conservative), and he even wrote an article in 1838 against the Custody of Infants Bill which would have extended and protected the rights of mothers in custody cases.⁷¹ It is not Frantzen's intention or obligation to give a full account of Kemble's biography except as it relates, perhaps, to his Anglo-Saxon scholarship, and therefore he mainly comments on Kemble's *commentary* on Anglo-Saxon literature. My point here is that Kemble's character, his beliefs and opinions, even the *development* of his beliefs and opinions, as well as his motivations as a scholar of Anglo-Saxon literature, are too fluid and complex, ultimately, to be accounted for under the rubric of *Anglican nationalism* or

⁶⁹Frantzen, *Desire for Origins*, 34-35, 56-59, 195-97.

⁷⁰Qtd. in Bruce Dickins, *J.M. Kemble and Old English Scholarship*, Proceedings of the British Academy, vol. 25 (London: Humphrey Milford, 1938), 5.

⁷¹Wiley, *Anglo-Saxon Kemble*, 214.

British imperialism. Yet this is where he is compartmentalized in Frantzen's brief account of his career as an Anglo-Saxon scholar, which career is then slotted within the larger framework of Frantzen's account of the history of Anglo-Saxon studies as essentially political (and in some cases, *racialist*). But what we must consider, I would argue, is the extent to which Kemble's scholarly writing was essentially performative, revealing to us, therefore, not readily identifiable ideological values that Kemble transferred to Anglo-Saxon culture (and therefore to the scholarship of Anglo-Saxon culture), but rather the warping and woofing of those values as they come into contact with a negotiation between a text and an individual consciousness which is always keenly aware of its audience and its place in history (and which consciousness is even capable of forgetting itself).

While it seems apparent that disciplines maintain their institutional existence and authority—that they *endure*—through the discourses of one or more dominant ideologies, hidden or overt, and through historically codified systems of doctrine, I am not convinced that one can really say with absolute authority that the formation of our discipline has been mainly ideological. Rather, I see our discipline as emerging out of a series of historical accidents intersecting—sometimes randomly, sometimes more purposefully—with what Foucault called “the more enduring structures of history,”⁷² in much the same way *Beowulf* exists for us today, not as the singular fruit of a long and purposeful enterprise of unified nationalist bibliography, but rather, as one of the more beautiful scraps of the floating wreck of history. Furthermore, the scholars of our discipline cannot be construed

⁷²Foucault, “The Discourse on Language,” *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 230.

as knowing subjects embodying *transcendental* notions of language and history; rather, caught in the pitch and tide of existential time, their lives and careers represent, not the fixity of any one idea, but the flux of ideas. The discourse of history may ultimately be caught in the snare of ideology, but there must also be an account of history which is not held in the teeth of that trap, and which still lives somehow in our reckoning of it, however imperfect. Furthermore, our task as literary scholars is not so much to aim for the absolute truth of a text, or of a particular culture, as it is to *animate* and *supplement*, with every methodological and theoretical tool at our disposal, the always incomplete compendium of texts and of lived experience, thereby creating a historical constellation in which the past lives and moves with us through our present moments, and through which we can begin to investigate what our ethical obligations might be to those who have become lost in the ebb and flow of history's currents. In this essentially collaborative project of restoration, we do not seek to overturn or disprove each other's findings; rather, we endeavor to fill in the gaps of each other's accounts and to speak that which has not yet been spoken. This type of scholarship is both curatorial and analytical, and not only aims to preserve and analyze what has been written, rubbing the materiality of *what is* against the grain of *what if?*, but also considers the narratives for which there is no visible account. What is ultimately required, therefore, is technical and intellectual rigor, playful creativity, and ethics. To undertake this labor we have to first heed Simone Weil's advice to herself when she was contemplating the proper method whereby she should direct her attention toward the truth of this world: ". . . as in the case of an excessive devotion, we become dependent on the object of our efforts. . . . [We must] draw back before the object we are pursuing. Only an

indirect method is effective. We do nothing if we have not first drawn back. By pulling at the bunch, we make all the grapes fall to the ground."⁷³

The field of Anglo-Saxon studies is immeasurably enlightened and enriched by the insights of Frantzen's work regarding the ideological forces at work in the shape of our canon and methodologies. It is not my purpose in this study to quibble with what I view as an important seminal text, or even to offer an *alternative* disciplinary history; rather, I propose to build upon and *supplement* that work by constructing a narrative of Anglo-Saxon scholarship from the seventeenth through twentieth centuries that will hopefully draw a picture of both the always historically contingent nature of our enterprise as well as the necessity of rethinking that enterprise in ways that could connect the study of an Anglo-Saxon text like *Beowulf* with one of the most pressing and urgent questions in the university community today: why are humanities studies necessary? Given the current state of the American university, which, as Bill Readings has shown so cogently in his book *The University in Ruins*, has become a kind of transnational techno-bureaucratic economically-driven corporation, as opposed to a purely state-supported nonprofit institution devoted to the inculcation of a national culture, the very question of the *value* of culture (detached from its role in building bureaucratic "excellence") has reached a crisis point. Specifically, in his book, Readings has written that

the link between the University and the nation-state no longer holds in an era of globalization. The University thus shifts from being an ideological apparatus of the nation-state to being a relatively independent bureaucratic system. The economics of globalization mean that the University is no longer called upon to train citizen subjects, while the politics of the end of

⁷³Simone Weil, "Attention and Will," *Gravity and Grace*, 171.

the Cold War mean that the University is no longer called upon to uphold national prestige by producing and legitimating national culture. The University is thus analogous to a number of other institutions—such as national airline carriers—that face massive reductions in foreseeable funding from increasingly weakened states, which are no longer the privileged sites of investment of popular will.⁷⁴

While Readings would not want to return to the model of the university as a site that produces and legitimates a “national culture,” he does argue in his book that we need to find a way to both recognize the “historical anachronism” at the heart of the “space of the university” (it is no longer the perfect model of a rational community, nor the sole legitimator of what culture *means*) while also continuing to hold that space open as “one site among others where *the question of being-together is raised*,”⁷⁵ which is another way of saying that the university is quite possibly the best site (if somewhat structurally and ideologically *past*) for holding open the temporality of questioning culture’s relationship to history and vice versa, and it is my belief that the study of *Beowulf* can play an important role in this project. Furthermore, I hope this study demonstrates that *Beowulf* has much to tell us, in both its material history *as a manuscript* and as a work of art, about the historical contingencies of our present lives and work.

Frantzen rightfully urges us to recognize our always compromised, always politicized selves in our past and thereby expand our horizons, embracing “new methodologies and technologies” (i.e., poststructuralist theory), so that we can shed our

⁷⁴Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 14.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 18, 20.

current isolation and integrate our work into “emerging institutional constructs”⁷⁶ (i.e., cultural studies).⁷⁷ This study aims for an understanding of the past that will enable us to also rethink our profession as something extending beyond and even overcoming the boundaries of the institution. Although our discipline might certainly be thought to be most properly sustained within the college or university setting, this dissertation considers the idea that whereas once Anglo-Saxon studies included a broad and fluid range of applications, both intellectual and social, it has now become too contained within the parameters of an increasingly esoteric set of narrowly-defined academic functions. The future of Anglo-Saxon studies will have less to do with the survival of the fittest within the academy, and more to do with what will be perceived by the larger public as its broader cultural significance. It is important to note here, following Nicholas Howe’s caution that a disciplinary history “threatens to become a kind of meta-commentary which finally does not engage the original object of study (the Anglo-Saxons and their culture),”⁷⁸ that this study focuses upon the manuscript of *Beowulf* as a material object that ties together various episodes in the history of our scholarship, but also locates within the text of the poem itself events that seem to resonate with that history, as well as our own. Through an analysis of our history rubbed against the grain of the history of the *Beowulf* manuscript

⁷⁶Frantzen, “Who Do These Anglo-Saxon(ist)s Think they Are, Anyway?": 2.

⁷⁷It is worth noting here that Bill Readings questions the value of the argument that “Cultural Studies” will somehow “save the University by giving it back its lost truth,” for “the radical claims of Cultural Studies display rather more continuity than might be expected with the redemptive claim that underpinned the literary model of culture, however much they oppose its institutional forms,” and therefore, Cultural Studies “arrives on the scene with a certain amount of cultural exhaustion” (Readings, *The University in Ruins*, 18, 16-17).

⁷⁸Nicholas Howe, “Historicist Approaches,” in O’Keefe, *Reading Old English Texts*, 82.

and of the poem itself I wish to construct a constellation of shared cultural experience between the subjects and the scholars of the poem, whereby we can recover and remember both the past and ourselves.

This study follows Frantzen's method of historiography, which is neither wholly chronological nor comprehensive, selective rather than encyclopedic, and which is indebted to the notion that history is marked by change and rupture more than it is by progress and stability, revealing itself "not as a continuous unfolding fabric but as a web, with interconnected, interdependent strands and, depending on where one stands, several centers."⁷⁹ Moreover, this study recognizes its debt to Frantzen for bringing Hans Robert Jauss's reception theory to bear upon the analysis of Anglo-Saxon texts, and therefore asserting "the importance of patterns of understanding that emerge only as a text is read and reread and rewritten over time—not [just] within one age (e.g., the Anglo-Saxon), no matter how diverse its linguistic data may be."⁸⁰ Events narrated within the text of *Beowulf*, therefore, are seen in this study as containing within them cultural conflicts that form a "horizon" (Jauss's term) that expands as it comes into contact with successive generations of readers. The text, therefore, is an "answer" to a question which continually reformulates itself over time in accordance with the cultural concerns of the textual community within which it is being read (and this includes the original audience of the

⁷⁹Frantzen, *Desire for Origins*, 106-7.

⁸⁰Frantzen, "Who Do These Anglo-Saxon(ist)s Think they Are, Anyway?": 8.

poem as well as those of us reading and studying the poem today).⁸¹ This study expands Jauss's definition of the textual community to include those persons who owned the poem but left no record of having read or analyzed it (i.e., Sir Robert Cotton), or who left only brief accounts of their encounters with the poem (i.e., Humfrey Wanley), as well as those scholars who were more actively engaged in the reading and editing of the text. The textual community of *Beowulf*, from the seventeenth through twentieth centuries, is therefore comprised of acquirer-owners, librarian-bibliographers, curator-preservationists, philologist-editors, as well as persons who blur even these lines, and the manuscript itself is seen as moving through an historical process of centering and decentering, discovery and loss, that bears the marks of a continual series of scholarly labors to assert the cultural relevance of Anglo-Saxon literature in a world that has been marked more by transitory structures than enduring ones, by violent convulsions more so than peaceful stability.

In the poem itself, questions related to history's essential processes of centering and decentering, discovery and loss, are poignantly posed. Wiglaf's herald, after Beowulf's death, warns that the men and women of Beowulf's tribe, bereft of their treasures, will one day tread strange countries as exiles:

nalles eorl wegan
maððum to gemyndum, ne mægð scyne
habban on healse hringweorðunge,
ac sceal geomormod, golde bereafod
oft nalles æne elland tredan,
nu se herewisa hleahtor alegde,

⁸¹For a fuller understanding of Jauss's theories, especially as related to medieval literature, consult Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982). For a more general overview of reception theory criticism, see Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London, 1984).

gamen ond gleodream.
(3015-3021)⁸²

no warriors shall wear
treasures as memorials, nor shall any maiden have shining
ring-ornaments on her neck,
but desolate and bereft of their gold,
again and again, they shall tread a strange land,
now that their hero has put aside his laughter,
his joy and dreams of happiness.

While the prognostications of Wiglaf's herald concerning the destruction the Swedes (and also the Franks and the Frisians) will surely bring to the Geats, now that their leader is dead and their wealth unprotected, can be construed as a warning about the consequences of cowardice, or of holding fast to the values of feud and vengeance, there is a hint of inevitably as well—all tribes, and therefore all cultures and their treasures, and the histories and memories inscribed therein, are eventually absorbed and reabsorbed, written and rewritten, in the yaw and pitch of historical time. Beowulf's request to have a memorial barrow built for him high on a hill where it will be seen by travelers passing by on their ships, which ships can only come to Beowulf's grave from the future that is now forever out of his grasp,⁸³ can be seen as a desire to be kept alive as the marker of a

⁸²All citations of the poem are taken from Frederick Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg*, 3d ed. (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1950). All translations are mine.

⁸³Hatað heaðomære hlæw gewyrcean,
beorhtne æfter bæle æt brimes nosan;
se sceal to gemyndum minum leodum
heah hlifan on Hronesnæsse,
þæt hit sæliðend syððan hatan
Biowulfes biorh, ða ðe brentingas
ofer floda genipu feorran drifað.
(2802-2808)

Command the battle-warriors to build a bright mound

cultural memory—the manuscript itself serves as Beowulf’s textual barrow and its scholars could very well be those voyagers who are always passing just under the cliffs of his memorial. The poem, which speaks continually of what is *in gemyndum*, both *remembers* and *memorializes* Beowulf’s experiences and also *reminds* Beowulf’s original tribe and every successive audience to hold the lessons of Beowulf’s life *in mind*. Beowulf himself, in his last request, embodies the desire for remembrance, and as his retainers cover his mound with turf, reciting his praises with dirges, the poet covers him over with heroic epithets. With every reading of the poem, Beowulf is awakened, then put back to a rest which is never a rest. One of his last statements to Wiglaf—*ne mæg ic her leng wesan* (“I can be here no longer”; l. 2801)—becomes a pregnant irony, one we would do well to heed, for when Beowulf asks to be remembered by those traveling from far away “ofer floda,” he is addressing the future, and that future, miraculously, has come to pass in our attention the poem. In our excavations of the manuscript, which is also a tomb, we might ask how can our editions of the poem, our carefully arranged piles of remnant words and the spaces between them (the grave-goods of the manuscript, as it were), can most properly signify into *our* future what Beowulf’s memorial stones were meant to signify—our presence in this transitory world. In this universe, *which some men call the Library*, how are we to conduct ourselves, such that the history of Anglo-Saxon cultures

after the fire at the edge of the sea’s tides,
so that it shall be a reminder to my tribe;
have it rise high on the whale-cliffs,
so that sailors will afterwards call it
Beowulf’s barrow, when they drive their ships
from far over the dark waves of the sea.

and even ourselves can be best accounted for? It is the final aim of this study to pose these and other provocative questions raised by the poem in relation to our work as scholars of Anglo-Saxon texts and cultural historians, and to contemplate how we and our work can be *more in the world*, a state of being, I would argue, that Beowulf's life and career in the poem exemplifies.

Chapter 2

Beowulf in the Palm at the End of the Mind¹

We know that the world is not algorithmically compressible. There exist particular chaotic processes that are not algorithmically compressible, just as there exist mathematical operations that are non-computable. And it is this glimpse of randomness that gives us some inkling of what a totally incompressible world would look like. Its scientists would be librarians rather than mathematicians, cataloguing fact after unrelated fact.

—John Barrow²

We think things persist in time because structures persist, and we mistake the structure for substance. But looking for enduring substance is like looking for time. It slips through your fingers. One cannot step into the same river twice.

—Julian Barbour³

¹The title of this chapter is taken from Wallace Stevens' poem "Of Mere Being," which begins, "The palm at the end of the mind,/Beyond the last thought, rises/In the bronze decor,/A gold-feathered bird/Sings in the palm, without human meaning,/Without human feeling, a foreign song" (Wallace Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play*, ed. Holly Stevens [New York: Vintage Books, 1972], 398). The title is a kind of nod toward *Beowulf*'s status in the twenty-first century as, finally, an electronic manuscript that is now capable of not only travelling into the farthest reaches of cyberspace, but also of becoming part of the new electronic universal library, and therefore it exists in a "platform" that gives to human cognition its greatest means of archival comprehension, and yet, the manuscript is still, by virtue of its language and history, utterly foreign and strange. The title is also meant to form the beginning of a response to the following passage written by the South African poet Breyten Breytenbach while he was visiting the replica of Goethe's *Gartenhaus* in Weimar, as well as nearby Buchenwald: "The past is the ink with which we write the present—and in the process and the flow of writing the words, the concepts and ideas, the images, the flights become . . . just *ink*. Whereas what we'd probably like to write would be an open hand wherein time, which is the future of the present moment, could find its fit and fist" (Breyten Breytenbach, "The Faces of Ants," *Harper's Magazine*, March 2000: 21).

²John D. Barrow, *Theories of Everything: The Quest for Ultimate Explanation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 200.

³Julian Barbour, *The End of Time: The Next Revolution in Physics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 49.

I **The Catalog**

One of the honorable traits of men is their will to leave their reports as witnesses.

—Czeslaw Milosz⁴

In his seventh novel, *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino illustrates the “desperate moment” that always comes at the evening hour to the emperor of the Tartars, Kublai Khan, when he realizes that his empire, which had seemed to him “the sum of all wonders,” is, in fact, “an endless formless ruin.” In this landscape, his “triumph over enemy sovereigns” makes him only the heir “of their long undoing.”⁵ Likewise, his pride at “the boundless extension” of the territories he has conquered, is immediately followed by the melancholy of knowing that it is not possible to know and understand all of those territories, and therefore, he can never truly possess them. The only delight the Kublai Khan experiences is when he listens to the tales of the traveler of his realms, Marco Polo, who describes to him, in the language of fabulism, the various cities of his kingdom.

Calvino’s book, which is really more of a series of poetic meditations than a novel, is structured as a dialogue between the Khan and Marco Polo, in which they sit together in the Khan’s hanging garden at dusk while Marco Polo describes, one by one, each city he has visited and surveyed. Fifty-five cities are surveyed in all, and the book reads much like a catalogue or annotated atlas, with Calvino arranging the chapters under descriptive

⁴Czeslaw Milosz, “A Historian’s Worries,” *Road-Side Dog*, trans. Robert Haas (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998), 152.

⁵Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 5.

categories, such as “Thin cities” and “Trading cities,” that repeat themselves throughout the book. Images of the surreal predominate throughout, with Marco Polo describing remote outposts such as Fedora, “that gray stone metropolis,” in the center of which there “stands a metal building with a crystal globe in every room.” This metal building is a kind of museum of all the possible futures once imagined for Fedora, and in each globe a visitor can see “a blue city, the model of a different Fedora,” which represents “the forms the city could have taken if, for one reason or another, it had not become what we see today.”⁶

And then there is Armilla, which has “nothing that makes it seem a city, except the water pipes that rise vertically where the houses should be and spread out horizontally where the floors should be: a forest of pipes that end in taps, showers, spouts, overflows.” Against the sky, various pieces of porcelain stand out, “like late fruit hanging from the boughs.”⁷

Because the narrative has no distinct or recognizable chronology, and represents a conversation that supposedly takes place over the course of only one evening, the reader can thumb through Calvino’s book not only sequentially, from the first to last page, but also according to category, or place, and never feel that the narrative thread has been lost, for each chapter is like an entry in an encyclopedia that stands on its own and is only related to the other chapters by virtue of belonging to the same category, or to the rubric of “city” or “Khan’s empire.” Our experience of reading the book, as well as Kublai Khan’s dominion, is contained within those rubrics, and in Marco Polo’s descriptive monologues, the categories determine the character of the places to such an extent that,

⁶*Ibid.*, 32.

⁷*Ibid.*, 49.

although the structures, inhabitants, and customs of each city are colorfully unique, nevertheless, as the Kahn notices, “Marco Polo’s cities resembled one another, as if the passage from one to another involved not a journey but a change of elements.”⁸ Therefore, in the cities of Zaira and Maurilia, both listed under the category of “Cities and Memory,” Marco Polo’s descriptions mainly center on the issue of how, exactly, each city’s present is perceived by its inhabitants through their memory of its past, such that Zaira consists of the “relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past: the height of a lamppost and the distance from the ground of a hanged usurper’s swaying feet,”⁹ and the city of Maurilia can only be appreciated nostalgically by comparing what it has become with postcard images of what it once was.¹⁰

Although visited daily by tax collectors, ambassadors, and various envoys from his far flung provinces who share with him the hard facts of his realm—“the first and last names of officials dismissed and decapitated, the dimensions of the canals that the narrow rivers fed in time of drought”¹¹—the Khan only really begins to understand his empire through Marco Polo’s fabulist dream-like recollections. Although these recollections are orderly in their appearance within the book, in the same way a cartographer’s map provides the picture of an empire according to the logic of latitude and longitude, depth and elevation, scale and compression, both book and map can only *approximate* the places

⁸*Ibid.*, 43.

⁹*Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 30.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 21.

that are ultimately as elusive as the shifting sands of the great Ottoman deserts, and which tend toward a future that can only be guessed at.¹² Whether these cities will flourish, fall into decadence of their own accord, or ultimately be destroyed, cannot be “read” in the text of their descriptions, and in any case, as Marco Polo points out, “It is not the voice that commands the story; it is the ear.”¹³ Both Marco Polo and the Kahn intuit and even lament the great divide between language and knowledge, between the description of a place and the place itself, between the past and the past recounted *in the present moment*. And this is why Marco Polo tells the Khan that there are some cities that know only departures and not returns, and the Kahn tells Marco Polo that, “At times I feel your voice is reaching me from far away, and I am prisoner of a gaudy and unlivable present.”¹⁴

The tension, and even anxiety, of the exchange between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, in which the desire to catalog, and therefore to *know* the world through a descriptive and orderly inventory of its cities runs up against the impossibility of ever accomplishing such a task (with *fiction* emerging, finally, as the most elegant and compact descriptive tool), recalls the anxiety attendant upon the encyclopedic projects of the early

¹²The English literature scholar and historian of bibliography D.F. McKenzie has written that maps are actually texts whose “relation to reality is like that of words to the world—almost entirely arbitrary, not mimetic. Just as we see a landscape because we have already named its parts and look for what we know—for ‘valley, rock, and hill’—so maps take on meaning by virtue of the conventional understanding given to signs and their structure in a particular text. The most primitive expression of spatial relationships in a map is more symbolic than representational, since it must involve scale and the omission of detail. Celestial maps are testimony to the phenomenal powers of compression” (D.F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the sociology of texts* [London: The British Library, 1986], 35).

¹³Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 135.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 135.

modern cataloguers Roger Chartier writes about so elegantly in his monograph, *The Order of Books*. Understanding that “[b]ringing together the entire written patrimony of humanity in one place [was] . . . an impossible task,”¹⁵ these bibliographers sought to compile comprehensive catalogues of books collected in various libraries (usually restricted to the provenance of one nation, such as Italy or France), which could then be provided to anyone wishing to design “an open and universal library,” and in the process they redefined the term *library* itself:

The sum of their titles defined an ideal library freed from the constraints imposed by any one actual collection and overflowing the limits inherent in anthologies and compilations by the immaterial construction of a sort of library of all libraries in which nothing (or almost nothing) was lacking.¹⁶

According to Chartier, the idea of a “universal library” that would bring together all books ever written, and therefore would constitute the ideal repository of all knowledge (seen, mistakenly perhaps, as an entity whose borders could be demarcated, literally, from one end of a text to another), is a persistent dream that can be found throughout Western civilization. Furthermore, it is a dream that “underlay the constitution of great princely, ecclesiastical, and private ‘libraries’; it justified a tenacious search for rare books, lost editions, and texts that had disappeared; it commanded architectural projects to construct edifices capable of welcoming the world’s memory.”¹⁷ In relation to the present study, we

¹⁵Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 63.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 62. By way of example from the period under discussion in his book, Chartier describes the proposal made in 1785 by Etienne-Louis Boullée for the reconstruction of the Bibliothèque du Roi, in which Boullée put forth a design for what would have been the largest

might recall that Sir Robert Cotton (1572-1631) was eager to combine his collection of books and manuscripts with the collections of other antiquaries in order to form a “national library,” and even went so far as to petition Elizabeth I during the last years of her reign for the foundation of an academy of antiquities which would incorporate such an institution. Elizabeth was not receptive to such a proposal, but in 1622 Cotton moved his collections to a new home in Westminster, adjacent to the Houses of Parliament, and made it clear that, after his death, he intended to settle his library upon the nation as a public repository.¹⁸

Due to the rapid and voluminous production of titles and editions afforded by the medium of print, it was readily accepted in the early modern period that collecting in one

reading room in Europe—a one-hundred by thirty meters barrel vault that would cover the interior court between the existing buildings. According to Chartier, Boullée’s reading room was to be an immense basilica “containing the memory of the world,” and the acknowledged model was Raphael’s *School of Athens*, with two crucial differences:

In the fresco in the Stanza della Segnatura there are few books, and the few shown are in the hands of the person who composed or copied them; in Boullée’s drawing the thousands of books of the Bibliothèque du Roi constitute a universal body of knowledge that has been conserved and reduced to a thesaurus. Similarly, in Boullée’s version, the perspective is no longer structured to present an open porch, a human presence, and the power of creative discourse (that of Plato and Aristotle surrounded by their disciples); rather it converges towards a door that marks the threshold between the profane world of the ignorant and the world of learning’s elect and towards an allegorical statue in the classical mode, a symbol of the heritage that must be brought together and mastered before new thoughts are conceivable. (63)

The idea that a library “recuperates a sacred character that ecclesiastical buildings had lost” (Chartier, *The Order of Books*, 63) is echoed by Thomas Smith in his preface to his 1696 catalogue of the Cotton collection, where he describes the library with whose charge he had been entrusted by Sir John Cotton (grandson to Robert Cotton) as “that shrine of sacred antiquity” (Thomas Smith, “To the reader,” *Catalogus librorum manuscriptorum bibliothecae Cottonianae*, ed. Colin G.C. Tite [Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1984], 23).

¹⁸On this point, see Kevin Sharpe, *Sir Robert Cotton, 1586-1631: History and Politics in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 50-51, 80. See also Tite, “Introduction,” Smith, *Catalogus*, 8.

place all the texts ever written, or even all the texts ever written in just one language, was an impossible task, and therefore selection became an absolute necessity, ultimately leading, as Chartier points out, to the various meanings of the term *bibliothèque* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁹ In addition to being a building full of books, it could also be “a Compilation of several works of the same nature or of Authors who have compiled all that can be [compiled] on the same subject.”²⁰ These “libraries,” or anthologies, could be quite hefty and were usually published in multiple volumes, such as “the sixteen-volume *Histoire générale des voyages* of Abbé Prévost covering the years from 1746 to 1761, published first in quarto format, and later, between 1746 and 1789, in

¹⁹One could argue that the desire to collect in one place all the texts ever written and to have a listing of those texts that would assist in the ordering of that collection, provide a safeguard against losses, and offer a means, via selection, of proper navigation *into* and *through* the voluminous titles almost always coincide historically, going as far back as the ancient and “vanished” Library of Alexandria. In other words, it was not just the advent of a print culture that necessitated the need for what might be called *selective* bibliography. Luciano Canfora has written that the Ptolemies and their librarians set out to not only amass everything ever written, but also to translate everything into Greek, and Ptolemy I (4th to 3rd-century B.C. ruler of Egypt) even went so far as to issue orders “that any books on board ships calling at Alexandria were to be copied: the originals were to be kept, and the copies given to their owners” (*The Vanished Library*, trans. Martin Ryle [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989], 20). Projects of compendia and compilation were simultaneous with projects of translation, and by the time of Callimachus, chief librarian at Alexandria from c. 260 to c. 240 B.C., the need for a catalogue of some sort must have been evident, but with scrolls numbering in the hundreds of thousands, a comprehensive descriptive bibliography would have been nearly impossible. Callimachus, often referred to as the father of bibliography, settled upon a selection of “eminent” authors in various genres of literature, such as epics, comedies, tragedies, works of history, law, and the like, and our notion of a literary canon most probably derives from Callimachus’s selective classifications. Because Callimachus not only listed works, but also provided summaries of content, author biographies, and critical commentary, his catalogue took up some 120 scrolls, but it was mainly only useful to those already familiar with the layout of the library. The idea of a catalogue as a navigational tool for arranging and locating particular texts within a library did not bear fruit until the librarianship of Didymus during the Augustan period.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 65. Chartier draws his definitions from Furtière’s 1690 *Dictionnaire*.

eighty duodecimo volumes.”²¹ Another example with encyclopedic aspirations was the *Bibliothèque universelle des dames* (Paris, 1785-97, 156 octodecimo-sized volumes), which contained “travel narratives, novels, and works of history, morality, mathematics and astronomy, physics and natural history, and all the liberal arts.”²² An eighteenth-century counterpart to these exhaustive and somewhat unwieldy libraries were the smaller, portable anthologies, titled *extraits*, *esprits*, *abrégés*, and *analyses*, that “aimed at eliminating, selecting, and reducing rather than accumulating a multitude of separate and dispersed works in one collection.”²³ According to Chartier, this ultimately created a tension “between comprehensiveness and essence [which] thus ordered the complex and contradictory relations between the library in its usual spatial and architectural sense and

²¹*Ibid.*, 66. We might recall here John Leland (1503-1552), the sixteenth-century English antiquarian, who traveled extensively throughout England before and after the Dissolution in order to inspect as many libraries as he could for the purpose of compiling various anthologies, including a Dictionary of British writers, his *Commentarii de Scriptoribus Britannicus*, a compendium of 593 authors (both actual and suppositious) from the Druids to the early sixteenth century, chronologically arranged with brief notes, which was eventually published by Antony Hall, a Fellow of Queen’s College, in 1709 (Bodleian MS. Top. Gen. C.4). Leland did not see any of his works in final print form, as he “lost his reason” in his forties, perhaps from overexerting himself in his compiling activities, which also included plans for a “Description of Britain,” a survey of Henry VIII’s “ample reaulme” with particular attention paid to place-names, as well as a *Civilis Historia*, which was to be divided into books representing each shire. We might also recall Leland’s contemporary, John Bale (1495-1563), who was interested in compiling the names and works of monastic authors before the Dissolution overwhelmed and divested the monastic libraries of their treasures. He produced several multivolume anthologies, including the *Illustrium Maioris Britanniae Scriptorum Summarium* (1548) and the *Catalogus Maioris Britanniae Scriptorum Summarium* (1557), both divided into books according to centuries with one hundred authors per century. It is generally understood that Bale’s work was much indebted to Leland’s, to whom Bale often paid tribute. On these and other points related to Leland and Bale’s antiquarian compiling *bibliothèques*, see May McKisack, *Medieval History in the Tudor Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 1-25.

²²Chartier, *The Order of Books*, 67.

²³*Ibid.*, 68.

print genres—relationships that assigned to the ‘library’ as a book, be it one volume or one of a series, the functions of accumulations or of selection attributed to place.”²⁴

Encyclopedic compendiums and catalogs, the smaller anthologies, and dictionaries made up a large portion of the output of eighteenth-century publishers, according to Chartier, but there was still a need for yet another form of *bibliothèque*, or *library*, that of “the books that contain the Catalogues of the books in the Bibliothèques.”²⁵ The circulation of these catalogues meant that “the closed world of individual libraries could be transformed into an infinite universe of books noted, reviewed, visited, consulted and, eventually, borrowed.”²⁶ Gabriel Naudé, in his *Advis pour dresser une Bibliothèque* (written in 1627 and addressed to Henri de Mesmes, *président* at the Parlement de Paris and an avid book collector), insisted that, in addition to aiming for comprehensiveness and quantity in furnishing an actual library, the book collector must also consider it obligatory to accumulate and copy catalogues of libraries:

One must not omit nor neglect to have transcribed all the Catalogues, not only of the great and renowned Libraries, ancient or modern, public or private, in the possession of our compatriots or of foreigners, but also the Studies and Cabinets that for not being known or frequented remain buried in perpetual silence.²⁷

What we have here is the idea of the catalogue as a kind of key which opens up previously disclosed or inaccessible storehouses of knowledge, or that provides a navigable path

²⁴*Ibid.*, 69.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 69.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 70.

²⁷Qtd. in Chartier, *The Order of Books*, 70.

through libraries that, although “open” in the sense that one could visit them and gain permission to view particular texts, did not readily advertise to the broader public their complete holdings and therefore those holdings were somewhat hidden, and even apocryphal. We can recall again the library of Sir Robert Cotton, the presses of which held the unique composite manuscript, Vitellius A.xv, containing *Beowulf*.²⁸ Although it is well documented that Sir Robert’s library was always known in his lifetime as an open and generous lending repository of antique books and manuscripts, so much so that the many books and manuscripts he loaned out did not return to his library,²⁹ by the time of the

²⁸Cotton shelved the volumes of his manuscript collection in presses designated by the names of Roman emperors whose busts were placed on top of the presses. In designations that still exist today, the presses were named after the twelve emperors from Julius Caesar to Domitian and two royal women, Cleopatra and Faustina. According to Colin Tite, these names would have been “well known to Cotton and his contemporaries, steeped as they were in the history and literature of the classical world, and these twelve were those whose lives had been written by the Roman historian, Suetonius.” Furthermore, “Cotton would probably also have been aware of the practice, both in the Roman period and later, of arranging private libraries in presses ornamented with portrait-busts, mottoes or medallions.” It is Tite’s conjecture that Cotton’s choice of busts may have been influenced by “Charles I’s purchase of portraits of the same twelve Caesars, eleven of them by Titian, at the Duke of Mantua’s sale in 1628” (Colin G.C. Tite, *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton* [London: The British Library, 1994], 86).

²⁹Tite has written that, “as the working collection of a generous owner the [Cotton] library was always vulnerable: at a minimum, a tenth of its stock was lost by one means or another during the seventeenth century” (*The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton*, 25). For a detailed survey of eighty manuscripts that strayed from the Cotton library in the century and a half before it entered the British Museum in the 1750s, see Tite, “‘Lost or stolen or strayed’: A Survey of Manuscripts Formerly in the Cotton Library,” in C.J. Wright, ed., *Sir Robert Cotton as Collector: Essays on an Early Stuart Courtier and His Legacy* (London: British Library, 1997), 107-147. Furthermore, as regards the perceived importance of Cotton’s library during the seventeenth century and its generous lending policies, Tite has written that “[t]he list of loans, which cover the years 1604 to 1667, contain well over 200 names, ranging from high officials of church and state at one end of the scale of status to a country parson at the other.” The library was so active, in fact, that it was occasionally viewed by the Crown as a source of threat. Tite writes: “Already, in 1621, Francis Bacon has been forbidden access to it after his fall for fear of what he might find there; in 1626 threats of closure were made by Buckingham against the library; and in 1629 the discovery amongst the manuscripts of a tract which the king and his advisors chose to regard as seditious led to the arrest of Cotton, his librarian and other associates” (Tite, “Introduction,”

keepership of his son, Sir Thomas Cotton (owner of the library from 1631 to 1662), lending practices became stricter and more regulated, and by the time of Sir John Cotton's ownership (1662 to 1702), the practice of taking out bonds against loans became a standard procedure, and scholars were further encouraged to view and work with articles within the confines of the library itself rather than taking them out.³⁰ Because there was no formally published catalogue until the Reverend Thomas Smith's in 1696, word of mouth, access to informal catalogues compiled by library visitors, the right connections, and a certain amount of obsequious supplication are what gave a scholar access to the Cotton Library's treasures during the times of his son's and grandson's keeperships. It was well known in Cotton's lifetime and afterward that his library possessed valuable Saxon manuscripts, such as two of the four surviving letters patent of King John recording *Magna Charta* and a fifth-century Greek *Genesis* (now BL Cotton Otho B.vi), but actually getting one's hands on them required knowing the right people and handling those persons with a certain amount of tact and toadying. When Humfrey Wanley (1672-1726), a noted paleographer and Anglo-Saxonist and ultimately the library keeper for Robert Harley, was interested in 1697 to view the contents of Cotton's library as part of his project to copy the hands of all the antique manuscripts extant in English libraries at that

Smith, *Catalogus*, 6). Additionally, Sharpe has written that Cotton's library, although not the largest of the private libraries of the period (Selden's was larger, with over 6,000 volumes), it did possess "a monopoly of the most important material for early English history," and its signed loan receipts and loan lists show that the borrowers ranged from Jacobean antiquaries and historians such as Edmund Bolton, William Camden, Simonds D'Ewes, and John Speed, to ecclesiastical scholars and divines such as the Archbishop of Canterbury, to literary figures such as Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones, and to important Jacobean government figures such as the king and queen, Francis Bacon, and Fulke Greville (Sharpe, *Sir Robert Cotton*, 75-78).

³⁰On this point, see Tite, *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton*, 25-29.

time,³¹ he was cautioned by both George Hickes and Arthur Charlett to approach the library keeper, Thomas Smith, with great deference and diplomacy. In a letter dated May 26, 1697, Hickes wrote to Wanley that, when asking for the Saxon Charters (now BL Cotton Augustus A.ii), he should write to Thomas Smith “with great earnestnesse, and sense of your obligations, and thankfulness to him, and promises to use the MS., as he shall prescribe, and that you shall let the world know by whome you received so great a benefit, and that you shall be obliged to do him any service at home, and abroad, if you ever travell to visit foreign libraries.”³² Smith actually rebuffed, on more than one occasion, Wanley’s request for the “Charters of the Saxon Kings” to be sent to him where he worked at the Bodleian Library, perhaps because he himself was interested in publishing some of them.³³ Even after Wanley explained to Smith that he would gladly

³¹Wanley had actually paid a visit to the Cotton library once before, in April of 1695, by way of a recommendation to Sir John Cotton from Samuel Pepys, but Smith had limited his visit to one-and-a-half hours. Nevertheless, Wanley did manage to view quite a few manuscripts, including, we know, Cotton Vitellius A.xv, because he copied out “almost a leaf and half of the fragment of Judith.” On this point, see Wanley’s two letters to Thomas Tanner dated April 16 and April 19, 1695 in P.L. Heyworth, *Letters of Humfrey Wanley: Paleographer, Anglo-Saxonist, Librarian, 1672-1726* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 12-16.

³² Qtd. in Richard L. Harris, ed., *A Chorus of Grammars: The Correspondence of George Hickes and his Collaborators on the Thesaurus linguarum septentrionalium* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1992), 186.

³³Wanley and Smith were to have, over the entire course of their acquaintance, an extremely antagonistic relationship, most probably due to Wanley’s energetic and somewhat brash personality, and also because, as the younger of the two (he was twenty-three when he first approached Smith), he posed somewhat of a threat to the older Smith’s own paleographic and bibliographic work. According to Tite, there was more to Smith’s initial refusal to allow Wanley to view the Saxon charters “than simply his perception that Wanley was too readily assuming he would be lent a collection denied to [other] scholars Smith planned to publish some of these charters himself: Wanley seemed about to tread on his toes” (Tite, *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton*, 73). In a letter Smith wrote to Wanley dated June 8, 1697, in which Smith let Wanley know in no uncertain terms that he would not let the charters leave the library, writing, “if the mountaine cannot come to Mahomet, Mahomet must condescend and be content to go to the

wait until he could travel to London, and that his main intent in viewing the charters was “more relating to the nature of Letters, than to the Diplomata or Charters themself[es],”³⁴ Smith continued to try to dissuade Wanley by telling him in a letter dated July 3, 1697 that, “as to the characters used by our Saxon ancestors, I meane the most antient, the Cottonian Library will afford you but little help. For tho’ there is there, as everybody knowes, an excellent collection of Saxon monuments, yet farr antienter are to be met with elsewhere, particularly at Cambridge . . . and in the muniment house belonging to the Cathedral Church of Canterbury.”³⁵ In the same letter, in even stronger terms, Smith wrote, “you are to expect no great matter, as to this designe, as you now explain it, from this library: but you are to seeke elsewhere.”³⁶ Smith did finally relent to allow Wanley to inspect the holdings when he was in London in 1698. This was achieved, according to Wanley in a letter he wrote to Charlett dated April 30, 1698, by “summoning up all the powers of my Rhetorick” and writing Smith a letter in which he “call’d the Library a

mountaine,” Smith also indicated that he did indeed plan on publishing some of the charters himself, and had, in fact, been intent upon this for some time: “you could not possibly forget, when you wrote your letter [requesting the charters], by referring to my [catalogue] preface . . . that tho’ I did not make an absolute promise of publishing those Charters, and the formes of the old letters found in them, and in other antient books; yet as I had at that time, so now at the present I have the same designe and resolution to publish them with several other pieces of antiquity, when a fit opportunity shall present itself” (qtd. in Adams, *Old English Scholarship*, 120-21). Furthermore, in the same letter, Smith let Wanley know that “if by the misfortune of the times I be driven out of London, or be hindered by the infirmities of my age, and the other circumstances of my life, from performing these serious intentions, I shall then readily and willingly devolve that work upon you” (*ibid.*, 121).

³⁴Qtd. in Heyworth, *Letters of Humfrey Wanley*, 62.

³⁵Qtd. in Adams, *Old English Scholarship*, 123-24.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 124.

Venerable place; the Books, sacred reliquies of Antiquity, &c. with half a dozen Tautologies.”³⁷ When Wanley, after dining with Smith, finally gained admittance to the library, he noted in another letter to Charlett (dated May 30, 1698) that “[t]he books lie in unexpressible disorder and confusion, and have done so, as I have been told, ever since K. Charles his time.”³⁸

As regards the apocryphal nature of a library’s holdings due to the lack of a catalogue, or because a catalogue did not provide a library visitor with a “key” to the exact location of a manuscript within a library, Wanley was once accused by John Hudson, Bodley’s Head Librarian, of being responsible for the loss of the “Royal Societies MS. Copie of Plinies Epistles” (probably BL Arundel MS 154), which had passed from the private library of Edward Bernard (Professor of Astronomy at Oxford, 1763-91) to the Bodleian after Bernard’s death in 1697. Hudson, in fact, could not initially locate any of the books purchased from Bernard’s estate that Wanley, as an Assistant Librarian, had been responsible for cataloguing in 1697, and he therefore assumed they had gone missing somehow, and that Wanley was the culprit, an implication that left Wanley angry and fairly certain that “the Doctor” (Hudson) simply had not inspected the Bodleian’s holdings thoroughly enough, and he even wrote Hudson a letter detailing exactly where he had placed the books and manuscripts, with shelf and cupboard locations.³⁹ Manuscripts could also gain apocryphal status by disappearing and reappearing in more material fashion. In

³⁷Qtd. in Heyworth, *Letters of Humfrey Wanley*, 91.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 95.

³⁹On this point, see Heyworth, *Letters of Humfrey Wanley*, 73-75, 185-86.

the preface to his catalogue of the Cotton collection, *Catalogus librorum manuscriptorum bibliothecæ Cottonianæ* (Oxford, 1696), Thomas Smith wrote of how Sir John Cotton purchased for “30 golden guineas from the widow of a certain nobleman of high degree” the fifth-century Greek *Genesis* that Sir Robert Cotton had loaned to Thomas Howard, earl of Arundel, a half-century earlier. Not long after it was restored to the library, it was damaged in the fire at Ashburnham House in 1731, and exists now only as a collection of charred fragments. Further, Smith wrote that he remembered “seeing and handling a charter of King John confirming the rights and liberties of England, with the seals appended of the barons present at the time, which was presented in the year 1630 by Edward Dering, knight, of Kent, in token of the love and respect which he bore to the first of the Cottons, but by some foul play it has disappeared.”⁴⁰ Mysteriously, or perhaps not so mysteriously, one letter for *Magna Charta* with the Great Seal of King John attached, as well as King Edward the Fifth’s “Confirmation of *Magna Charta*,” were present when the contents of the Cotton Library were inspected after the 1731 fire, albeit in a somewhat damaged state. According to the 1732 report from the parliamentary committee charged with viewing and reporting upon the contents of the library after the fire, King John’s *Magna Charta* was “scorched and shrivelled up” and the “impression of the Seal . . . melted away.”⁴¹ What is left of Dering’s gift to the library is now housed in the British Library as Cotton Charter XIII.31a, and is not even readable with ultraviolet light, most probably because of faulty restoration work undertaken upon it in the 1830s by Josiah

⁴⁰Smith, “To the reader,” *Catalogus*, 24-25.

⁴¹This report is reproduced in facsimile in Tite’s edition of Smith’s *Catalogus*.

Forshall, Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum from 1827 to 1837.⁴² There was, in fact, even *another* copy of King John's *Magna Charta* (without the Great Seal attached) given to Sir Robert Cotton on January 1, 1629 by the barrister Humphrey Wyems, and this copy, in fairly good and very readable shape, is now housed in the British Library as Cotton Augustus II.106. Is it possible that in his haste to catalogue the Cotton collection, and feeling the pressure of the threat of other scholars making forays into the library, that Smith simply overlooked the presence of the charter he claimed had disappeared? We might recall here Wanley's statement above as to the disorderly state of the library when he visited it in 1698. In his preface to his *Catalogus*, Smith declaimed responsibility for listing the *entire* contents of the library, especially as regarded the charters and other legal documents:

But you must not expect a detailed account of all the charters, diplomas, letters and other documents contained in monastic records and other collections, of which so vast a supply exists dealing with affairs both domestic and foreign that a thick volume would be needed to enumerate their bare titles. No man could accomplish such a task single-handed unless he devoted many years to it. . . . But as for the papers and other materials hitherto unexamined and inaccessible which are kept in boxes and date from the distant past, together with various diagrams of ancient design, seals, coins, images and antiquarian stores, I must put off their

⁴²On this point, see Andrew Prescott, "'Their present miserable state of cremation': The Restoration of the Cotton Library," Wright, *Sir Robert Cotton as Collector*, 405-407. It is important to note here that in Prescott's accounting of the various successive efforts from the eighteenth through nineteenth centuries toward the restoration of the Cotton materials after the 1731 fire at Ashburnham House, it is clear that the parliamentary report of 1732 regarding the post-fire state of the collection may have overestimated the damages. Specifically, Prescott calls the number of manuscripts labeled as "lost, burnt or intirely spoiled" (114, to be exact) in the 1732 report "misleading." Furthermore, he writes that many of the manuscripts reported as lost "were in fact preserved as fragments or 'burnt lumps' which were beyond the reach of eighteenth-century conservation technology but were successfully restored during the nineteenth century. Consequently, the majority of manuscripts reported as lost in 1732 are available for consultation today" (*ibid.*, 392).

consideration until I am able to publish some volumes of analects.⁴³

We do not know if the King John charters were, in fact, missing at the time Smith produced his catalogue, but in the 1703 report by the commissioners appointed by the Trustees of the Cotton Library after Sir John Cotton's death to inspect the holdings (which commissioners included Humfrey Wanley), it is noted that "there are many hundreds of Originall Charters laid up in Drawers which are not described in Dr. Smith's Catalogue."⁴⁴ Additionally, conjuring up a delightful image of Dr. Smith hastening off to his rooms with leaves of parchment stuffed under his coat, the commissioners also noted that Smith "w[as] pleas'd to own, that has carried off to his own Lodgings those [charters] which he found to be of the greatest value, for their Security & better Preservation, where he now keeps them safely by him."⁴⁵

Although his library was renowned in early Stuart England as a formidable and important collection of antique manuscripts, books, state papers, coins, and stone inscriptions, his collection did not really become publicly notated, in the fullest sense of the word *publicly*, until it was described, as mentioned previously, in the first printed catalogue written and published in 1696 by Smith, library keeper for Sir John Cotton, Robert Cotton's eldest grandson.⁴⁶ Even then, Smith's *Catalogus* had enough flaws and

⁴³Smith, "To the reader," *Catalogus*, 24.

⁴⁴This letter and report, written and compiled by Matthew Hutton, John Anstis, and Humfrey Wanley, and presented to the Trustees on June 22, 1703, is reproduced in facsimile (without page numbers) in Tite's edition of Smith's *Catologus*.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶Smith's catalogue was not the first written account of the contents of Cotton's Library, but it was the first *published* account. Sir Robert himself often compiled book lists, as did his first

omissions to render it somewhat incomplete and therefore to render certain texts, by virtue of their omission or mis-description, somewhat inaccessible. Moreover, Sir John Cotton initially had his misgivings about the worth and even the political appropriateness of the catalogue.⁴⁷ Smith himself admits as much in his prefatory address, where he writes that, for some time, Sir John Cotton outright forbade the project, "partly from fear of unseemly ostentation in showing off his literary wealth, partly for other reasons; first, that no such idea had come into the mind of his grandfather or father; secondly, that no catalogues had yet been printed of the manuscripts collected by the munificence of princes and magnates from every quarter of their dominions and stored in the most famous libraries of England and the rest of the world."⁴⁸ Even William Sancroft, the late Archbishop of Canterbury, warned Smith that "the state of the times" were not provident toward the venture, as noble as it was to "revise or rather reconstruct the old catalogues which were mutilated

library keeper from 1625 to 1638, Richard James, and his close friend, the lawyer, orientalist, and book collector John Selden (1584-1654), as well as the Archbishop of Armagh James Ussher (1581-1656) and the historian William Dugdale (1605-1686), all of whom were regular visitors to the Library. In the 1670s it would appear that a new handwritten catalogue was compiled, the purpose of which may have been to advertise the contents of the library to a broader public. Samuel Pepys had a copy of this catalogue, which is now housed in the Pepys library at Cambridge. On this point, see Smith, "To the reader," *Catalogus*, 24, and Tite, "Introduction," Smith, *Catalogus*, 2-3, 7 and *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton*, 57-70.

⁴⁷In a letter dated June 30, 1687, Sir John Cotton wrote to Smith concerning his proposal to publish a catalogue: "Truly, Sir, we are fallen into so dangerous times, that it may be more for my private concerns, and the public, too, that the library should not be too much known. There are many things in it, which are very cross to the Romish interest, and you know what kind of persons the Jesuits are" (qtd. in Eleanor N. Adams, *Old English Scholarship in England from 1566-1800* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1917], 118-19).

⁴⁸Smith, "To the reader," *Catalogus*, 23.

and imperfect and teeming . . . with a thousand errors.”⁴⁹ Smith viewed the production of his catalogue as a public service, to both his “native land and to literary culture,” and furthermore, he saw his labors in compiling it as “some token of respect, obedience and affection with which I am drawn as bounden debtor to the Cotton family and at the same time to kindle a torch to light the way for others interested in eliciting and revealing the antiquities and history of our native land.”⁵⁰ Of course, the real impetus for Smith’s project, which Sir John Cotton finally relented upon, was most probably a more pragmatic one: to not lag behind or be embarrassed by the efforts of other compilers, led by Edward Bernard at Oxford, to publish a catalogue of all the antique manuscripts extant in English libraries at that time.⁵¹ Smith admits as much in his prefatory remarks, and even refers to

⁴⁹*Ibid.* The “state of the times” that Smith remarks upon in his prefatory remarks to his catalogue refers to the reign of William and Mary, monarchs who came to the throne in 1689, and whose government did not readily bestow favors upon vehement anti-papists and non-jurists such as Thomas Smith, who had lost his fellowship at Magdalen College, Oxford during James II’s reign, and, as a conservative episcopal reverend, would not swear an oath of allegiance to the new monarchs (see Tite, *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton*, 71). According to Harris, “The episcopal foundations of the Church of England placed particular emphasis, in its conservative wing, on the apostolic succession and on the conception of a priest forever retaining his sacerdotal powers. . . . They felt the established Church of England had been diverted from the true path by switching allegiance to rulers [William and Mary] without *de jure* status” (Harris, “Introduction,” *A Chorus of Grammars*, 37).

⁵⁰Smith, “To the reader,” *Catalogus*, 23.

⁵¹What is referred to as *Bernard’s Catalogue* (or, Edward Bernard, *Catalogi librorum manuscriptorum Angliae et Hiberniae in unum collecti*) was published at Oxford in 1697, and actually involved the labors of a wide array of scholars, including Humfrey Wanley and George Hickes, working under Bernard’s supervision. One can imagine that it must have served as a prototype for Wanley’s 1705 *Catalogus historico-criticus*. Bernard had been Savilian Professor of Astronomy at Oxford for eighteen years, and his catalogue, which came to include surveys of manuscripts extant in libraries throughout England, began as a comprehensive survey of manuscripts in the Bodleian in 1692, and grew in scope after that. According to David Douglas, “*Bernard’s Catalogue* . . . was one of the major achievements of the Oxford school of Saxonists, and it gave great impetus to medieval, and in particular to Old English studies. One of the chief difficulties of all previous investigators into the early medieval history of England had been that

Bernard's project with high admiration. Nevertheless, in an effort to perhaps set himself apart and also to protect the Cotton Library from too much outside intrusion, Smith writes that the final prod for his project was the fear, on the part of Sir John, that "some unscrupulous bookseller with more regard for profit than equity should take advantage of the impunity on which such dishonesty usually can count to thrust on the literary world even in his lifetime an unauthorised edition incomplete in many places and crammed with the foulest errors." Furthermore, Smith indicated that it was Sir John himself who insisted that Smith's catalogue "should be published separately, unconnected with any other, and should not be added as an appendix to another's work."⁵² In this way, Smith coyly paid deference to the work of other cataloguers while also insisting upon his stature as the most fit cataloguer of the Cotton collection, and upon the stature of the library as a unique entity unto itself. Clearly, the territory of literary history was something worth guarding and staking a claim upon, even while, at the same time, the chief cataloguer could insist on the necessity of his task as simply the logical extension of a library that already belonged "not to a single family but to the whole nation."⁵³

Although Smith's catalogue was not without its errors and omissions, as stated

any proper comparative study of their chief sources was impossible for them owing to their ignorance of what MSS. existed, and where they were to be found. . . . it was thus that *Bernard's Catalogue* introduced a new period in the comparative study of Anglo-Saxon texts" (David C. Douglas, *English Scholars: 1660-1730* [1939; reprint London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1951], 112).

⁵²Smith, "To the reader," *Catalogus*, 23-24. One has to wonder, given Smith's occasional penchant for somewhat hysterical proprietary feelings in relation to the Cotton collections, if Sir John Cotton really insisted that the Cotton library had to have a catalogue "unconnected with any other," or if Smith merely invented this statement as a preemptive defense of his own objectives.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 23.

above, it was the first attempt at a full accounting to appear in print prior to the fire at Ashburnham House in 1731, and therefore provided an invaluable record of volumes subsequently damaged or destroyed. Furthermore, it provided an indispensable starting point for future cataloguers, such as Humfrey Wanley and Joseph Planta,⁵⁴ who would be instrumental in correcting some of Smith's oversights and thereby opening up the collection even further. Wanley, always a prodigious and ambitious schemer of grand projects, spent a good portion of his early career compiling a catalogue of all Anglo-Saxon manuscripts extant in English libraries, which led to more forays into the Cotton as well as other libraries in the late 1690s and early 1700s, and this ultimately resulted in his *Librorum Veterum Septentrionalium, qui in Angliae Bibliothecis extant . . . Catalogus Historico-Criticus*, published in 1705 as Volume Two of the Oxford Saxonist George Hickes' *Linguarum Veterum Septentrionalium Thesaurus* (published in three volumes from 1703 to 1705).⁵⁵ In a letter written to Arthur Charlett (Master at University College,

⁵⁴Joseph Planta, Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum from 1776 to 1799, began a catalogue of the Cotton manuscripts in 1793, which was finally published in 1802. According to Tite, Planta's catalogue "is still, for want of a successor, the standard guide available to the modern scholar" (Tite, "Introduction," Smith, *Catalogus*, 9). According to Andrew Prescott, however, Planta's catalogue, as well as Smith's, "had both, within fifty years of their publication, ceased to be accurate guides to the collection they describe. The 1731 fire reduced Smith's catalogue overnight to the status of a historical document: an indispensable guide to the contents of the collection before the fire but no longer an up-to-date working catalogue. . . . Planta's inadequate treatment of burnt and missing manuscripts was a glaring deficiency in his catalogue. An even more serious fault, however, was his failure to distinguish between manuscripts lost in the fire and those already noted as wanting [by Wanley] in Smith's 1696 catalogue. Some of these were lost to the Library as a result of loans and exist elsewhere. Others may simply have been phantoms which never existed" (Andrew Prescott, "'Their present miserable state of cremation,'" Wright, *Sir Robert Cotton as Collector*, 432).

⁵⁵Wanley's aspirations as a paleographer and scholar were many—he contemplated, at various times, producing an edition of the Anglo-Saxon Bible, translating Old English scriptures, compiling all the different alphabets of the world, writing a history of printing, and even writing the

Oxford and alternately Wanley's patron and taskmaster) on October 19, 1699, Wanley laid out his original plan for his *Catalogus Historico-Criticus*:

In one word, if Dr Hicks will accept from me a Catalogue of all the Saxon MSS that I know of in England, I will do my endeavor to restore many (hitherto) Anonymous Tracts to their proper Authors; will specify particularly, whatever has been printed & what not; with a multitude of Remarks & Observations that I have not met with in the former Edition of his book. With this Catalogue, I shall annex the Specimens of the Characters of the most Considerable MSS. of the languages of the Northern Nations, as the Gothic, Francic, Langobardic, & Islandic, besides the Saxon, with Specimens of MSS. in Welsh, Cornish, Scotch & Irish.⁵⁶

It was Wanley who first noted that Smith had omitted mention of *Beowulf* in his description of the Vitellius A.xv manuscript,⁵⁷ and it was Wanley's somewhat misleading,

life of Cardinal Wolsey (see Douglas, *English Scholars*, 108, and Harris, *A Chorus of Grammars*, 66-67)—but perhaps his most ambitious, never fully realized plan was to write a *Res Diplomatica* for England. In a letter written to Thomas Smith dated June 20, 1697, Wanley explained why he had initially been so assiduous in requesting permission to view the Saxon charters in the Cotton Library: "... my intent is, to trace the Greek and Latine letters from the oldest Monuments of antiquity now extant, as the Marbles and Medals to the MSS. and so down to the present age. . . . I am not in hast with my design, which I know will co[st] many years time, and the trouble of a personal view of every bo[ok] in Capital letters in Europe, &c. yet after all, if nobody shal in that time have prevented me, I may have a second vol. de re Anglorum diplomatica [Wanley is referring here to Mabillon's *De re diplomatica*]" (qtd. in Heyworth, *Letters of Humfrey Wanley*, 62). Although Wanley often professed the desire to travel throughout Europe, he never left the confines of England. His *Catalogus historico-criticus*, undertaken at Hickes' behest, of course, was his greatest achievement.

⁵⁶Qtd. in Heyworth, *Letters of Humfrey Wanley*, 140.

⁵⁷This was an omission that may have been unavoidable, given Smith's reliance, to a certain extent, upon catalogues written by previous library keepers, such as Richard James, who had appended to the Vitellius A.vx manuscript a table of contents, "Elenchus contentorum," that omitted direct mention of *Beowulf*, but which left a gap between "6. Defloratio siue translatio Ep[isto]larum Alexandri ad Ar[istote]lem cum picturis prodigiosorum" and "8. Fragmentum Saxon: de Iuditha et Holoferne." Kevin Kiernan has written that the gap indicates that James "had failed to describe a text that appeared at this point" and that "[e]ither James had no idea how to describe *Beowulf* or the poem was temporarily out of the codex" (Kevin S. Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, rev. ed. [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996], 73-74). In either case, his omission of the poem was probably influential upon Smith's oversight, for, as Tite has written, Smith's catalogue "relied, to some degree, on the previous handwritten catalogues as

yet descriptive entry for *Beowulf* as an Anglo-Saxon poem about Danish and Swedish wars in his *Catalogus historico-criticus*,⁵⁸ that ultimately brought the poem to the attention of the Danish antiquary and archivist Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin, who was responsible for two transcripts of the poem being made in the late 1700s, which record over 1,900 letters since lost to the original due to the crumbling edges of the manuscript.⁵⁹ In a letter he wrote to the Swedish scholar and theologian Erik Benzelius (1675-1743) dated August 28, 1704, Wanley mentioned that “some years ago I found a Tract in the Cottonian Library (omitted in Dr Smiths Catalogue) written in Dano-Saxon Poetry, and describing some Wars between Beowulf and a King of the Danes of the Family of

well as on the contents tables which some of the manuscript volumes carry” (Tite, “Introduction,” Smith, *Catalogus*, 6).

⁵⁸Specifically, Wanley wrote, “In hoc libro, qui Poeseos Anglo-Saxonicae egregium est exemplum, descripta videntur bella quae Beowulfus, quidam Danus, ex Regio Scyldingorum stirpe Ortus, gessit contra Sueciae Regulos.” Wanley’s 1705 *Catalogus* has been reproduced in facsimile as volume number 28 in the series *English Linguistics: 1500-1800* (Menston, 1970). Kiernan has made the provocative argument that Wanley’s description would seem to imply “that *Beowulf* originally existed as a separate codex,” and may have been occasionally removed by readers from the composite codex, Vitellius A.xv. On this point, as well as on the paleographic and codicological evidence Kiernan provides to support this assumption, see Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, 133-50. I will return to the issue of the manuscript’s codicology later in the chapter.

⁵⁹When Thorkelin first traveled to England in the late 1700s, he was Regius Professor of Antiquity at the University of Copenhagen and Keeper of His Majesty King Christian VII’s Privy Archives. Christian VII (1766-1808) had granted Thorkelin a stipend in 1785 so that he could “travel through Great Britain, Ireland, and the Isles, for two years in order to collect and record all the extant Danish and Norwegian Monuments, Deeds, and Documents . . . on his promise to deliver on his homecomings to Our National Archive and the great Library all the Collections he in such manner may procure” (qtd. in Kevin S. Kiernan, *The Thorkelin Transcripts of Beowulf* [Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1986], 2). Although Thorkelin was granted leave to travel for two years from 1786 to 1788, he actually stayed abroad until 1791, and it was during this time that he would have worked with the *Beowulf* manuscript (*ibid.*, 4).

Scyldingi, and some of your Suedish Princes.”⁶⁰ Kevin Kiernan has pointed out that there was another Danish antiquary who had taken note of *Beowulf* before Thorkelin, the eighteenth-century National Archivist Jakob Langebek (1710-1775), whose *Scriptores Rerum Danicarum Medii Ævi* entailed extensive research trips to Sweden, Finland and Russia, as well as England. According to Kiernan, “Langebek twice cites Wanley’s catalogue description of *Beowulf* in Volume I of *Scriptores Rerum Danicarum*, the second time marvelling that no Englishman has yet produced an edition.” Although Thorkelin saw his own antiquarian researches as an extension of Langebek’s work, Kiernan has asserted that “there is decisive evidence that Thorkelin first learned about the poem the same way Langebek did, by reading Wanley’s catalogue.”⁶¹ Thorkelin was also responsible for the *editio princeps* of the poem, published in 1815 as *De Danorum Rebus Gestis . . . Poëma Danicum Dialecto Anglosaxonica*, an edition which can be said, in some respects, to have

⁶⁰Qtd. in Heyworth, *Letters of Humfrey Wanley*, 239. It has been noted by other scholars as well that *Beowulf* was not the only text omitted by Smith in his description of the Vitellius A.xv manuscript. Kevin Kiernan has noted that “The Nowell Codex, the part of Cotton Vitellius A.xv containing *Beowulf* . . . consists of five items: a *St. Christopher* fragment, *The Wonders of the East*, *Alexander’s Letter to Aristotle*, *Beowulf*, and the *Judith* fragment. Yet Smith’s catalogue records only two items: *Translatio epistolarum Alexandri ad Aristotelem, cum picturis de montrosis animalibus Indiæ* and *Fragmentum de Juditha & Holopherne*.” Further, Kiernan writes that it is “not surprising then that Thorkelin failed to include Cotton Vitellius A.xv when he first prepared the list of manuscripts he wanted to study at the British Museum. Fortunately, he later supplemented his list by reference to more reliable sources than Smith” (Kiernan, *The Thorkelin Transcripts of Beowulf*, 5-6). Those “more reliable sources” were Wanley’s *Catalogue* (1705) and David Casley’s *A Catalogue of the Manuscripts of the King’s Library: An Appendix to the Catalogue of the Cottonian Library* (1734). David Casley was the deputy librarian of both the Royal and Cotton libraries at the time of the fire at Ashburnham House, and he was charged immediately after the fire with helping to assess the damage to the Cotton collections, and also to help restore some of the damaged manuscripts. On Casley’s efforts with the post-fire assessment and restoration of the Cotton library, see Prescott, “‘Their present miserable state of cremation’,” Wright, *Sir Robert Cotton as Collector*, 391-95.

⁶¹Kiernan, *The Thorkelin Transcripts*, 2-3.

launched the international juggernaut known as academic *Beowulf* criticism.⁶²

Wanley had already visited the Cotton Library several times prior to its closing upon Sir John Cotton's death in 1702, as I have indicated earlier, and he had taken note of the Anglo-Saxon manuscripts he viewed while there, as well as copying out portions of them—initially out of a general antiquarian curiosity to view the collections, then as part of his interest in the paleography of Anglo-Saxon MSS., and later as part of his efforts to compile his *Catalogus historico-criticus*—but it was after Sir John's death that he was appointed, in 1703, along with Matthew Hutton and John Anstis, by the Parliamentary-appointed Trustees of the Cotton Library (one of whom was Robert Harley) to inspect and report on the library's holdings, and their subsequent report, completed on June 22nd of the same year, essentially amounted to an emendation and slight enlargement of Smith's 1696 *Catalogus*.⁶³ Smith himself, having always refused, as a nonjuror, to take oaths of

⁶²The importance of *Beowulf* studies within English literary circles, both amateur and professional, is most certainly a belated affair (and, in some ways, is contemporaneous with the rise of academic English studies itself, also a belated discipline, which does not really come into full being until the late nineteenth century). In his Introduction to *A Beowulf Handbook*, John Niles has written that, although the manuscript containing *Beowulf* must certainly have existed for a long time, nevertheless, "No one seems to have read it—or if anyone did, then no one left a record of any mental glosses on it—during a period of time extending from the twelfth century, or thereabouts, until the late eighteenth century. If the poem was read before that great hiatus, its reception then remains a mystery to us today." Further Niles writes that "[f]rom Thorkelin's time until now . . . *Beowulf* has become the hub of a critical discourse that extends around the world, now facilitated by electronic communications systems as well as by the media of print" (John D. Niles, "Introduction," Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, eds., *A Beowulf Handbook* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997], 1-2).

⁶³On this and other details of Wanley's entire career as a paleographer, bibliographer, and library keeper, see C.E. Wright, "Humfrey Wanley: Saxonist and Library Keeper," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 46 (1960): 99-129. Smith's *Catalogus*, as well as the parliamentary committee's report, and Wanley's annotations to Smith's publication, are reproduced in Colin Tite's edition of Smith's catalogue, previously cited.

allegiance, and having lost his patron, was essentially alienated from the Trustees, and shortly after helping to bury Sir John at the family seat in Conington in Huntingdonshire, a warrant was served upon him by two of the Trustees to give up his keys to the Library.⁶⁴ According to Tite, the commissioners essentially supplemented Smith's catalogue in three distinctive ways: they "included a brief list of manuscripts added to, recovered by and missing from the library since the publication of Smith's catalogue. Secondly, they counted the number of folios in all the manuscript volumes, correcting the numbers given in the volumes themselves; and thirdly, they drew up a handwritten list of charters and coins as, in effect, an appendix to Smith's catalogue."⁶⁵ It is important to keep in mind here that when we refer to Wanley's catalogue of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts that was published as Volume Two of Hickes' *Thesaurus* in 1705, that his annotations of Smith's catalogue in 1703 amounted to a revised catalogue of the Cotton collection, while also constituting an important component, as regarded Cottonian Anglo-Saxon materials, of his 1705 *Catalogus historico-criticus*.⁶⁶ It is interesting to note here as well that, as with all of his

⁶⁴Smith did not initially give up the keys, and for a time, he assisted in the Commissioners' inventory, all the while lobbying the Trustees to consider retaining him as keeper. Eventually, he was locked out. Regarding the matter of the keepership of the Cotton library after Sir John's death (a position Wanley was also interested in), and the machinations surrounding the ultimate decision to award it to William Hanbury, husband of Sir John's granddaughter and one of the Trustees, see P.L. Heyworth, "Thomas Smith, Humfrey Wanley and the Cottonian Library," *Times Literary Supplement*, 31 August 1962: 660.

⁶⁵Tite, "Introduction," Smith, *Catalogus*, 10-11.

⁶⁶An original copy of Smith's *Catalogus* that belonged to Robert Harley can be found in the Bodleian (MS. Add. D. 82; S.C. 30308), and this is the copy upon which Wanley and his two associates based their work. Wanley's own copy of Smith's *Catalogus*, dated April 17, 1698 (Oxford) can also be found at the Bodleian (Gough London 54; S.C. 18041), as well as Smith's own working copy with corrections in his hand (MS. Smith 140; S.C. 15738). I am indebted to Tite's edition of Smith's *Catalogus* for these details.

projects, Wanley envisioned a much more comprehensive accounting of the contents of Cotton's Library than he was able, or even allowed, to undertake at the time. According to P.L. Heyworth, "Wanley concerned himself deeply with this inspection, and differed from his colleagues, and especially Smith, over the question of how detailed it should be. Wanley was in favour of an inspection so minute that it would have amounted, in fact, to a recataloguing."⁶⁷ In a letter he wrote to Robert Harley dated May 19, 1703, Wanley expressed his anxieties over producing a less than full survey of Cotton's manuscripts, and also laid out his own plan for how he felt the survey should best be handled, to include a fuller accounting of the loose charters and coins, and to essentially include anything and everything Smith had omitted—what would have amounted to an immense undertaking, especially given the less than organized state of the library under Smith's keepership. Regarding his anxieties and concerns, he wrote,

If the Books in the Library were only to have their Leaves Number'd and to be Compar'd with Dr Smith's Catalogue (as some of the Inspectors do Apprehend) the work will be at an end, as soon as they can find all things in their Places, which the Doctor [Smith] ha's specified. But I understand your Honors Commands otherwise: it seem'd to me, as if your Honors could do nothing till you knew justly the Number & Quality of all that is Vested in You by the Act of Parliament; and this cann[ot] be known but by correcting the Errors in the Doctors Catalogue (if any such be found) and by supplying all that is *wanting* therein.

Sir, I am fearful that there may arise some difference in Opinion among the Inspectors, as to what is *Wanting* in Dr Smith's Catalogue and I shall reckon (till I see Your Honors judge otherwise) the passing over of the Particular Charters in the Chartularies, and the particular Letters, Records, &c. in very many other Volumes, to be another great Omission, in that elaborate Work.⁶⁸

⁶⁷Heyworth, "Thomas Smith, Humfrey Wanley and the Cottonian Library": 660.

⁶⁸Qtd. in Heyworth, *The Letters of Humfrey Wanley*, 213-14.

The Trustees, in point of fact, as well as Wanley's associate commissioners, *did* see and feel otherwise, and Wanley had to satisfy himself with the Commissioners making brief mention in their very short report of items wanting or missing in Smith's catalogue, as well as making handwritten annotations in the margins of Harley's copy of Smith's *Catalogus* in order to indicate the number of folios in each manuscript volume (these annotations are in Wanley's hand). It would appear that Smith was also an impediment to Wanley's desire for a full accounting, for in a note dated May 31, 1703, Wanley wrote that Smith "would Agree that we should Inspect the Books: that is, compare the Numbers inscribed in them, with his Printed Catalogue; but would not then permit us to Examine the Books, as to the Tracts they comprehend, or allow any access to the Charters at all, saying that the former would take up more time than his hea[l]th would permit, & that the Latter ought not to be done 'till a Library-keeper be appointed."⁶⁹ Wanley *did* manage to add an appendix to their report that included a listing of loose charters and coins—this listing, however, cannot be viewed as even close to comprehensive, a fact due, we can be fairly certain, to time constraints placed upon the commissioners by the Trustees, and by Parliament. In fact, Kiernan has written that "both Wanley and Smith had to bend a little," for the books, charters, coins, and other antiquities "were all duly inspected, despite Smith, but the other inspectors managed to rein Wanley's more elaborate plans for perfecting Smith's catalogue."⁷⁰ Wanley's appeal to Harley's sense of obligation (obligation to Parliament, and one could imagine, *to England*) to supply "all that is wanting" in the survey of the

⁶⁹Qtd. in Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, 92.

⁷⁰Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, 93.

Cotton Library was probably not as noble a plea as it appears above, and the ulterior motive was most likely Wanley's desire to gain a leisurely entrée into parts of the collection that he probably believed the prickly Smith had withheld, and was continuing to withhold, from him.

What is of primary interest here, in relation to Chartier's history of early modern bibliography, is the productive convergence of the efforts of two bibliographers, both aiming for comprehensiveness within the framework of a specific place and genre—in Smith's case, the antique manuscripts contained in Cotton's library, and in Wanley's case, the antique manuscripts contained in all of England, as in *the libraries of England*—but also both limited by the very human impossibility of achieving total control and mastery over the archive of manuscripts in question; nevertheless, when taken together as a collation, the contents of Cotton's collection are more fully realized, and are therefore more fully *known*. Likewise, the convergence of projects of *compendia*—specifically, Langebek's *Scriptores Rerum Danicarum*, Thorkelin's journeys to Europe as National Archivist of Denmark to collect “Danish and Norwegian Monuments, Deeds, and Documents” (inspired and compelled by Langebek's example), and Wanley's *Catalogus* (with Smith's *Catalogus* as prototype for the Cotton collection)—“produces” the first printed edition of *Beowulf*, without which modern *Beowulf* scholarship would be a very different animal indeed. The way in which the collation of two catalogues can be productive of new insights into the contents of a library at the moment the later bibliographer, librarian, or scholar notes the places where the two catalogues do not agree or fully match up, or even when Wanley noted the places where the collection itself and

Smith's catalogue did not match up when he inspected the Library in 1703, is reminiscent of the way in which Edmond Dantès determines the method for breaking out of the Château d'If, where he has been imprisoned, in Italo Calvino's fable, "The Count of Monte Cristo" (based on the novel of the same name by Alexandre Dumas). The narrator of the story, Dantès, sits in his prison cell each day contemplating the possibility of an escape, while listening to another prisoner, Abbé Faria, who daily scrapes away at the walls and floors in a futile attempt to tunnel his way out. Of his various attempts, Dantès muses, "The walls and the vaults have been pierced in every direction by the Abbé's pick, but his itineraries continue to wind around themselves like a ball of yarn."⁷¹ Nevertheless, while Dantès is not interested in imitating the hapless Faria, he is very much interested in tracking, by the sounds Faria makes, Faria's path, for, as Dantès himself puts it, "the very knowledge that someone is seeking an avenue of escape is enough to convince me that such an avenue exists or, at least, that one can set himself the problem of seeking it. . . . I feel that Faria is a man attempting his own escape but also that he is a part of my plan; and not because I am hoping for an avenue to safety opened by him—he has been wrong so many times by now I have lost all faith in his intuition—but because the only information I have concerning this place where I am has come to me from the series of his mistakes."⁷² Dantès finally realizes that the only way out, for either of them, will come when he is able to conceive of the perfect prison from which no man could possibly escape, and places this

⁷¹Italo Calvino, "The Count of Monte Cristo," *I zero*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), 141.

⁷²*Ibid.*

conceptualization alongside what he and Faria already know about the prison they are actually in, thanks to Faria's explorations:

If I succeed in mentally constructing a fortress from which it is impossible to escape, this conceived fortress either will be the same as the real one . . . or it will be a fortress from which escape is even more impossible than from here—and this, then, is a sign that here an opportunity of escape exists: we have only to identify the point where the imagined fortress does not coincide with the real one and then find it.⁷³

Even though Smith's accounting of the manuscripts in Cotton House at Westminster clearly did not meet Wanley's standards, it was the path laid out by the series of Smith's mistakes that Wanley would have needed to follow to execute the plan he presented to Harley, for if the books in the library were *only* to be compared with Smith's catalogue, in order to see that the manuscripts Smith had identified were indeed "in their Places," then, as Wanley indicated to Harley, *the work will be at an end*. The "perfect" catalogue, therefore, could only be realized in the identification of the places where Smith's catalogue and the library's holdings did *not* agree, which meant the best possible catalogue was ultimately achieved in the borderland between the supposedly "full" library and the "wanting" catalogue.

In both Smith's and Wanley's case, the complete catalog was always a conceptualization of perfection that lay just out of reach. For Smith, and by his own admission, the contents of even just one library were overwhelming enough in number to render a truly complete catalogue beyond the individual compiler's grasp. This was partly because the Cotton library was always, more or less, a lending library, and was also

⁷³*Ibid.*, 151-52.

continually being augmented by gifts and donations,⁷⁴ and also because there were so many loose, single documents (such as charters and various state papers) that had never been adequately stored, much less itemized in an orderly fashion. Cotton House itself was in a greatly run-down condition, and when Wanley inspected the library in 1703 he had reported that the books, manuscripts, and charters had “already suffered great hurt, & will be utterly spoiled if care be not taken of them.”⁷⁵ Additionally, the numbers of full manuscripts and fragments of manuscripts that had been bound together was such that it was probably quite difficult for one person to thoroughly survey their full contents and to

⁷⁴Tite has written that, after Sir Robert Cotton’s death, there were many accessions to the library: “Two monastic cartularies, of Lenton and Walsingham, and the cartulary of the Woodford family were given by the antiquary, Samuel Roper, in 1670 or thereabouts; Sir Edward Walker, Garter, gave a manuscript of Mandeville’s *Travels* and another of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History* at much the same time, and Anchitel Grey gave a cartulary of Dale Abbey. In 1697 the diarist, John Evelyn, said that Sir John Cotton was still adding to his ‘Treasure of *Medals* and *Manuscripts*’ and in the same year Humfrey Wanley gave a fifteenth-century manual of devotion” (Tite, *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton*, 32-33).

⁷⁵Bodleian MS. Add. D. 82, fol. iii. Qtd. in Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, 67. As regards the condition of Cotton House when Smith was library keeper, the House of Lords commissioned Sir Christopher Wren in 1705 to survey the house and grounds regarding their suitability as an acquisition by the Commonwealth, and he was of the opinion that they were definitely *not* suitable as regarded housing a library, and that the Cotton collections should be removed to another location. In a report of the House of Lords to the Queen in March of 1705, the Lords wrote that “[t]he place wherein the Library is contained, is a narrow little Room, Damp and Improper for preserving the Books, and papers. There is only one Window at each end, and the Arch over one of them in a Ruinous Condition, and ready to fall, as is also the Arch upon which the Room is built” (qtd. in A.T. Bolton, “The House, library and garden of Sir John Cotton,” *Wren Society* 11 [1934]: 54). Nevertheless, the Lords were eager to convert Cotton House into a national repository of sorts, and they wanted to move books and other antiquities there from the Queen’s Library at St. James and from Gresham College. Wren was dubious of the enterprise, and in a report to the Lords dated December 15, 1706, he conceded that, while “the Queene’s bookes may conveniently be contained in the bigger roomes,” nevertheless, “the Books & Rarities & Instruments of Gresham College can hardly be brought hither also” (qtd. in Bolton, “The House, library and garden of Sir John Cotton”: 58). Additionally, Wren did not feel Cotton House could even receive the Queen’s books until the house was “first new ripped and the lower roomes (which are rotten & paved new boarded)” (*ibid.*).

list all of them without omissions or making mistakes in the description of a codex, especially without anyone helping to double-check or proof the work. Smith never pretended, as noted earlier, to be offering in his *Catalogus* a complete listing of the entire contents of Cotton's collections, which, in any case, could not be achieved due to his "poor health and increasing age, not to mention other afflictions,"⁷⁶ instead, he let his readers know that, "For the present you can only point a finger at the spring from which to quench your thirst."⁷⁷ Nevertheless, Smith *did* intend to eventually compile an inventory of the loose charters and formerly unexamined papers, and he was keenly aware of the possible threat of other cataloguers beating him to those papers. He said as much in a letter to George Hickes, dated April 24, 1702, written after Hickes had asked Smith several times if Wanley could be allowed into the Cotton Library (yet again) to inspect the Saxon charters as part of his work on his catalogue for Hickes' *Thesaurus*. In this letter, Smith rebuked Hickes for assuming that he had already promised to let Wanley look over

⁷⁶Smith, "To the reader," *Catalogus*, 24.

⁷⁷*Ibid.* While foregrounding his own humility and shortcomings as a cataloguer in his prefatory remarks to his readers, Smith also played down Sir Robert Cotton's voracious collecting activities by writing that "Cotton did not intend to found a universal library: his chief, if not his sole, interest was to obtain books and documents tending in any way to clarify native antiquities, but if by happy chance anything of great value and extreme antiquity, although of different relevance, came his way he did not scorn it" (Smith, "A history and synopsis of the Cotton library," *Catalogus*, 46). As regards the antiquities of England, however, Cotton was certainly aiming for comprehensiveness, just as Smith was certainly aiming to write, on the heels of other, more informal handwritten accounts, the "true" Cottonian catalogue. Edmund Bolton once wrote that Cotton's library made Paulus Jovius's library look like a charnel house (Kevin Sharpe, "Introduction: Rewriting Sir Robert Cotton," Wright, *Sir Robert Cotton as Collector*, 38, n. 245). Moreover, Colin Tite has written of Cotton's extensive book collecting activities, which ran not only to acquiring manuscripts that related to English antiquity (out of a general antiquarian interest), but also to vast amounts of state papers and documents, and even to continental and oriental manuscripts, which suggests, in Tite's mind, that Cotton felt the need "to supply the absence of a national library" (Tite, *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton*, 101).

“the Saxon, and Latin-Saxon charters in the drawers to Henry II time.”⁷⁸ With a certain amount of pique, Smith replied: “How ready I have been to assist you in your present studyes and designe, as to what concerns the Library so farr as I could, or ought, without prejudicing myself, and letting your Clerk or Amanuensis [uncomplimentary reference to Wanley] runne away with that credit, more or less, which is onely and wholly due to my discovery, I leave you seriously and conscientiously to reflect upon.”⁷⁹ In the same letter, Smith indicated that he had already given himself the “great trouble of looking over the old parchments and papers and digesting them into a Catalogue, in order to print it with other things, as a Supplement to a more full and correct edition of my printed Catalogue of the MSS. books.”⁸⁰ Smith considered it “an unreasonable demand to let Wanley ransack in the boxes by himselfe at pleasure, and take a list of every thing there, which was valuable in order to print it in your booke.”⁸¹ Smith did relent to let Wanley view the Saxon charters, but he did not think it prudent to let him view the Latin charters, as he considered those to be outside Wanley’s proper purview and belonging more rightly to his own survey, which he indicated he would have done long before “but for sad discouragements and hinderances, arising from the wickedness of the times.”⁸² We can only imagine the bitterness and rancor with which Smith must have viewed Wanley’s re-

⁷⁸Hickes to Smith, 22 April 1702 (qtd. in Harris, *A Chorus of Grammars*, 365).

⁷⁹Qtd. in Harris, *A Chorus of Grammars*, 364-65.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 365.

⁸¹*Ibid.*

⁸²*Ibid.*, 366.

entry into the library in 1703 as an inspector.

In Wanley's case, his desire to survey all of the Anglo-Saxon manuscripts extant in English libraries at one time was handicapped by his occupational duties as Assistant at the Bodleian library, and later as Assistant to the Secretary of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, and by the shortfalls in his income, such that he did not possess the leisure nor the capital required for such a venture.⁸³ In a letter sent to Arthur Charlett on October 19, 1699 when he was working in the Cambridge libraries, Wanley wrote: "Tis 7 weeks since I came hither, and I never wrought harder in my life for 7 weeks together, than I have now done: And yet I have not finished, nor shall I be able to finish this Journey: for Sir Thomas Bodley's Bell begin's to sound so loudly in my Ears, that I shall not be quiet, till I'm actually in his Library."⁸⁴ Wanley often struggled in vain to acquire posts that would have been more conducive to his paleographic and bibliographic ventures. Venting his frustration in late 1698 to Hickes concerning his hard work on *Bernard's Catalogue* and the short leash with which he felt the Bodleian kept him, he wrote, "I have taken pains enough about Dr Bernards Catalogue; but there's no talk about my going to London, nor do I believe I shall be permitted to set foot therein, in some

⁸³At one point, Wanley's plans for comprehensiveness in his catalogue were even more ambitious, and in the summer of 1700 he proposed a scheme for visiting the libraries of France, Germany, and Italy in order to "examine their manuscripts, collate important texts, take specimens of handwriting, and search for works—particularly cartularies and other monastic records—bearing on English history; he solicited and got the approval of nearly a dozen influential people, including the Vice-Chancellor of the University [Oxford], Bodley's Librarian, four Heads of Houses, Samuel Pepys, and Hans Sloane" (Heyworth, "Introduction," *Letters of Humfrey Wanley*, xvi). Wanley's plans were not realized, and the sting of his obligations was always upon him.

⁸⁴Qtd. in Heyworth, *Letters of Humfrey Wanley*, 139-40.

years'.⁸⁵ At various times in the late 1600's and early 1700's, he sought posts of importance in the Tower Records, the Bodleian, Worcester College, and even in the Cotton Library itself after Sir John's death, none of which he obtained.⁸⁶ Wanley *did* visit many libraries—from 1699 to 1702, for the purpose of compiling his *Catalogus historico-criticus*, he worked in three college libraries at Cambridge, in the Royal and Cotton libraries in London, in the Royal Society Library at Gresham College, and in the Dean's library at Canterbury—and many manuscripts were loaned to Hickes for Wanley's use, and therefore, his *Catalogus historico-criticus* was the most comprehensive yet assembled, and to this day is still useful to the scholar of Anglo-Saxon literature.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, Wanley had some frustration as to what he perceived as the catalogue's shortcomings due to the various occupational hindrances he endured while compiling it. In his letter to Erik Benzelius, dated August 28, 1704, Wanley wrote of his completed

⁸⁵Qtd. in Harris, *A Chorus of Grammars*, 87.

⁸⁶Wanley did eventually take on the keepership of Sir Robert Harley's library in 1704, and stayed with the Harley family until his death in 1726, and this was the post in which he would ultimately flourish as both a collector and curator, as well as a bibliographer. On this point, see Wright, "Humfrey Wanley: Saxonist and Library-Keeper," 109-29. Regarding some of Wanley's professional disappointments, see Douglas, *English Scholars*, 99-103, Harris, "Introduction," *A Chorus of Grammars*, 85-96, and Kenneth Sisam, "Humfrey Wanley," *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (1953; reprint Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 259-77.

⁸⁷In the Introduction to his *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon*, N.R. Ker wrote that Wanley's catalogue "is a book which scholars will continue to use, or neglect at their peril. His opinion on any given matter will always be worth knowing." Further, Ker wrote that "Less than a dozen manuscripts containing a considerable amount of OE [Old English] have been found in English libraries since Wanley wrote" (N.R. Ker, "Introduction," *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957], xiii). Ker mentions that, in addition to the libraries Wanley visited, he also obviously had access to manuscripts from the cathedral libraries of Durham, Exeter, Lichfield, and Rochester, and from the private libraries of Sir Simonds D'Ewes, Thomas Cartwright, Robert Burscough, and John Moore.

catalogue that "Some learned men here are pleas'd to like it as it is; but I assure you, Dear Sir, I could have made it much better, if I had had my Time to my self."⁸⁸ It is possible as well that Wanley's ambition to visit libraries in Europe in order to enhance his catalogue's comprehensiveness was thwarted by Hickes who, although initially impressed by Wanley's travel prospectus, ultimately opposed it. According to Kenneth Sisam, Hickes later said that "he was afraid England would lose a genius to France."⁸⁹ Although neither Smith's nor Wanley's catalogues were wholly comprehensive, nor altogether perfectly accurate in their descriptions of individual texts and manuscripts, when collated together (and when collated with later catalogues), as they were by later bibliographers and librarians, such as David Casley, Samuel Hooper, Joseph Planta, Josiah Forshall, and Frederic Madden,⁹⁰

⁸⁸Qtd. in *Letters of Humfrey Wanley*, 236.

⁸⁹Sisam, *Studies in Old English Literature*, 265.

⁹⁰Samuel Hooper produced *A Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Cottonian Library* in 1777, which included the corrections made to Casley's catalogue in the 1756 report submitted to the Museum by two museum officers, Matthew Maty (first Keeper of Printed Books and eventually Principal Librarian) and Henry Rimius. According to Prescott, Hooper's catalogue was deemed "of limited assistance to readers grappling with Smith and Casley," and that is why the Trustees asked Planta to investigate the matter, which led to the production of his new catalogue in 1802 (Prescott, "'Their present miserable state of cremation'," Wright, *Sir Robert Cotton as Collector*, 400). Forshall, while Assistant Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum Library in 1826, was eager to try and restore the "mere lumps of wax and cinder" that Planta had locked away with the Harley charters in a garret room close by his study, having deemed the damaged manuscripts either "deest" or "desideratur" in his 1802 catalogue. According to Prescott, "Forshall's work led to the recovery of a number of important Anglo-Saxon manuscripts which were described by Planta as either lost or unusable" (*ibid.*, 405). Among Forshall's "discoveries" were the unique manuscript of Alfred's prosimetrical translation of Boethius (Otho A.vi), 131 leaves from the Old English translation of the Pastoral Care (Tiberius B.xi), and two eleventh-century manuscripts of Ælfric's Homilies (Vitellius C.v and D.xvii). Frederic Madden, Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum Library from 1837 to 1866, was responsible in 1837 for making a list of all the Cotton manuscripts damaged in the fire of 1731, with special attention being paid to the "fragments" remaining in "the old Charter Room" that had basically been neglected by previous Keepers, even Forshall. According to Prescott, Madden's inventory was "masterly" and "more comprehensive than any previous survey of the manuscripts, since he described all the volumes damaged in the

they had the effect of revealing the identity of texts, such as King John's *Magna Charta* and *Beowulf*, that had earlier been somewhat "hidden" by virtue of the absence of a public notation of their existence, and therefore, particular texts came to the attention of antiquaries and historians, such as Langebek and Thorkelin (and later, John Mitchell Kemble, who produced the first English edition of *Beowulf* in 1833), who were interested in producing scholarly editions of antique literatures, which editions had the effect of preserving manuscripts that, due to inadequate storage and handling, and even neglect, were in a continual state of decay and always under the threat of erasure.⁹¹ Still, one cannot overlook the anxiety that attended both Smith's and Wanley's bibliographic projects as they strove for the effect of total inventory of a specific order of knowledge—Smith, because his ill health, "the times," and other bibliographers, such as Bernard and Wanley, upset the serenity of his beloved library, which beloved library he was even eventually locked out of, and Wanley, because he always felt keenly the press of his other obligations, his patrons and employers often stood in the way of his ambitions,

fire, not just the worst affected" (*ibid.*, 410-11). Furthermore, according to Prescott, Madden's "classification and listing of the different types of damaged manuscripts provided the basis on which the [restoration] work was organized over the next forty years. His analysis of the treatment required was acute and needed little modification as the work proceeded" (*ibid.*, 412). Kevin Kiernan has noted that Madden "kept a meticulous record of the Cotton collection in a slender (13 X 4 cm.) ledger book titled *Cottonian MSS., Repairing and Binding Account*" (Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, 69, n. 7).

⁹¹In fact, the Vitellius manuscript containing *Beowulf*, which was badly burned along its outer edges in the Ashburnham House fire, remained in its damaged binding until the middle of the nineteenth century, when Frederic Madden, Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum Library, and his assistant Henry Gough gave it a new binding and framing. According to Kiernan, "the charred and brittle outer edges of Cotton Vitellius A. xv. were left unprotected for over a century, and many letters and words continued to crumble off from the time of the first transcripts in the late 18th century until the 19th-century binding prevented all further losses" (Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, 68).

and because his reach often exceeded his individual grasp.

According to Chartier, the different meanings given to the term library, or bibliothèque, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries “clearly show one of the major tensions that inhabited the literate of the early modern age and caused them anxiety. A universal library (or at least universal in one order of knowledge) could not be other than fictive, reduced to the dimensions of a catalogue, a nomenclature, or a survey.”⁹² And even “the dimensions of a catalogue,” as we have seen, were also partly fictive and ultimately not adequate as schemes for representing “the whole collection,” although it may be that, in the collations of their inadequacies, they led to the recuperation of items that, once found and restored to their proper places, brought the *bibliothèque* closer to “full.” The anxiety attendant upon encyclopedic projects was a natural projection, or extension, of the anxiety attendant upon those wishing to install a comprehensive library in a specific place, such as Boullée’s Bibliothèque du Roi (see footnote 15), but that, as Chartier writes, “no matter how rich it might be, only gives a truncated image of all accumulable knowledge.”⁹³ There is always a gap, of course, between a supposedly exhaustive inventory, such as Wanley’s *Catalogus historico-criticus*, and the library collections themselves, which, through a variety of historical vicissitudes, are always incomplete, haunted by the absence of texts once found, then gone missing, or destroyed by the royal censors, the religiously fanatic, the poorly educated and misinformed, and the caprice of Nature. There is also the way in which an inventory of a collection of texts,

⁹²Chartier, *The Order of Books*, 88.

⁹³*Ibid.*

whether keyed to a single collection, such as Cotton's library, or to a provenance, such as *Anglo-Saxon*, or *monastic*, can never quite keep pace with the ways in which those texts are bound and re-bound, dismembered and recompiled, and thereby multiply, spill over, and exceed whatever physical or categorical boundaries are constructed to keep them contained and preserved, and therefore most comprehensive projects of bibliography attempt to contain that which is always simultaneously decaying and disappearing, while also piling up beyond its grasp. The failings of the bibliographer to contain a specific branch of knowledge, or a specific collection of texts, within the neat border and legible lines of his catalog, are grounded, to a certain extent, in the perpetual failure of the library to properly preserve and contain its manuscripts and books. In both cases, desire exceeds ability, and the bibliographer who works digressively in order to reconstruct the "true" catalogue of any library, or *bibliothèque*, situated in history can only know departures, and never returns.⁹⁴

⁹⁴Colin Tite has worked assiduously to reconstruct a picture of the manuscript holdings of Sir Robert Cotton's library while he was alive, before he began making donations to other libraries, such as the Bodleian at Oxford. His methodology is, of necessity, digressive. For example, Tite begins one strand of his exploratory research with the knowledge that Sir Thomas Bodley solicited contributions from Cotton for his re-creation of the public library at Oxford, and he looks in the Library's Register of Benefactors at the Bodleian under the year 1603, in order to trace gifts Cotton made out of his Library then, while also checking the actual manuscripts to look for pressmarks and inscriptions unique to Cotton's library and hand, in order to deduce manuscripts that "strayed" from the original collection. Likewise, Tite utilizes loans memoranda from Cotton's library, Cotton's own handwritten, yet incomplete 1621 catalogue, informal catalogues made by visitors to his library, such as James Ussher, John Selden, and William Dugdale, the catalogue compiled by Cotton's first librarian, Richard James, catalogues compiled by unknown scribes employed by Cotton, knowledge of Cotton's binding practices, letters to the Cotton family, tributes and acknowledgments to the library and its owners in work published in the seventeenth century, as well as other bibliographic and codicological clues in order to deduce some kind of idea of Cotton's original collection, but also to show the various ways in which that collection was never "inviolable," how it was always a "working collection," and to say of Cotton himself, "Eager harvester he may have been, miser he was not." Of course, what Tite ultimately does is to trace

II The Library

In my early youth I got somewhere a conviction that "alexandrianism" meant a weakening of creative impulse and a proliferation of commentaries on great works of the past. Today I do not know whether this is true, yet I have lived to the epoch when a word does not refer to a thing, for instance a tree, but to a text on a tree, which text was begotten by a text on a tree, and so on. 'Alexandrianism' meant 'decadence.' Then for a long time concerns about this game were abandoned, but what about an epoch that is unable to forget anything?

Museums, libraries, photographs, reproductions, film archives. And amid the abundance individuals who do not realize that around them an omnipresent memory hovers and besieges, attacks their tiny consciousness.

—Czesław Miłosz⁹⁵

The elucidation of the meaning of the sentence 'everything flows' is one of metaphysics' main tasks.

—Alfred North Whitehead⁹⁶

In contemporary Alexandria, Egypt, a somewhat rundown and decaying city once revered as the world's most glorious (and perhaps, first) metropolitan center for learning and culture, a postmodern edifice of granite, steel, aluminum, and glass is rising beside the Mediterranean Sea. Designed by the Norwegian firm Snøhetta Architects to have over 69,000 squared meters of floor space, and to eventually house 4 to 8 million volumes of books, 50,000 maps, 100,000 manuscripts, and 250,000 disks and audio and video tapes, this rising structure is the new Bibliotheca Alexandrina, inaugurated by the 1990 Aswan Declaration, and envisioned as a rebuilding of the ancient Library of Alexandria. On

"departures" from Cotton's collection in order to effect the "return" of those departed manuscripts, even if only as an idea. See Tite, "'Lost or Stolen or Strayed'," Wright, *Sir Robert Cotton as Collector*, 107-47.

⁹⁵Miłosz, "Alexandria," *Road-Side Dog*, 30.

⁹⁶Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: The Free Press, 1969); qtd. in Ilya Prigione and Isabelle Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature* [Boulder, CO: New Science Library, 1984], 303).

February 12, 1990, members of the International Honorary Commission, including various heads of state and world dignitaries, met in Aswan, Egypt and signed a "Declaration for the Revival of the Ancient Library of Alexandria." In that Declaration, the signatories, which included the American historian and former Librarian of Congress, Daniel Boorstin, as well as various representatives from Arab and European countries, stated that

On the eve of the third millennium and under the patronage of President Mohamed Hosni Murabak, the Government of the Arab Republic of Egypt is seeking . . . to revive the Ancient Library of Alexandria by restating its universal legacy in modern terms. The Bibliotheca Alexandrina will stand as a testimony to a decisive moment in the history of human thought—the attempt to constitute a *summum* of knowledge, to assemble the writings of all the peoples. It will bear witness to an original undertaking that, in embracing the totality and diversity of human experience, became the matrix for a new spirit of critical inquiry, for a heightened perception of knowledge as a collaborative process.⁹⁷

Furthermore, it was stated that the new Alexandrian library would be "a link with the past and an opening onto the future," and that it would be "unique in being the first library on such a scale to be designed and constructed with the assistance of the international community acting through the United Nations system."⁹⁸ The writer and journalist Alexander Stille recently visited the construction site and has written that

The new library's architecture is in keeping with its ambitions. A glass-and-aluminum disk-shaped roof almost twice the length of a football field tilts up at an angle, rising from below the ground to about a hundred feet in the

⁹⁷Susanne Agnelli et al., "The Aswan Declaration," *Bibliotheca Alexandrina* (1999)—[cited 23 March 2001]. Available from www.unesco.org/webworld/alexandria_news/aswan.html. In addition to various leaders and representatives of Arab countries, the other signatories included the late President of France, François Mitterand, Queen Sofia of Spain, the Provost of Worcester College, Oxford, Lord Briggs, and Princess Caroline of Monaco. There were also representatives from Brazil, Germany, Greece, Italy, Norway, and Russia.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*

air. It is meant to look like the sun emerging from the sea at dawn. The surface of the roof includes hundreds of different-colored panes, and resembles a huge computer circuit chip. On the back of the building, the workers are finishing up an enormous curved wall encased in granite, on which characters from almost all the world's known scripts and alphabets are inscribed, symbolizing the universalist aims of the new project.⁹⁹

According to the architects' design prospectus, the concept of "a simple circle inclined towards the sea, partly submerged in water," is meant to represent "the image of the Egyptian sun, that in contemporary terms will illuminate the world and human civilization." In even more hyperbolic terms, the overall conceptualization, according to the designers, is meant to symbolize "a unique form *cum* fiction which combines the heritage of the region with the intended revival of cultural radiance to reach the corners of the universe."¹⁰⁰ As regards the structure currently being erected, Stille describes Snøhetta's design concept as "a kind of amphitheater facing the sea" with "seven terraced floors, each narrower than the one beneath it, which rise in one enormous open space under the tilting glass roof. The lowest floor, beneath sea level, will house ancient manuscripts, and each successive floor is supposed to advance metaphorically to the present."¹⁰¹ In descriptions of both the conception and execution, the modern Bibliotheca Alexandrina takes upon itself a powerful symbolic function, as well as a massive responsibility to incorporate all of world culture.

⁹⁹Alexander Stille, "Resurrecting Alexandria," *The New Yorker*, 8 May 2000: 92.

¹⁰⁰"Design of the new building," *Bibliotheca Alexandrina* (1999)— [cited 23 March 2001]. Available from www.unesco.org/webworld/alexandria_new/design.html. Construction photographs as well as more details regarding the design concept for the new library can also be accessed at the design firm's website: www.snoarc.no/site.html.

¹⁰¹Stille, "Resurrecting Alexandria": 95.

Stille suspects that Egypt's motives in reviving the ancient library are not altogether as noble as they appear in the Declaration, arising mainly, perhaps, from Murabak's desire to open up Egypt's stale economy to foreign investments. Egypt's government also has a long history of censoring its own citizens and cultural institutions, and of supporting very concerted efforts to erase portions of its own history, especially the Greek and Roman periods, and therefore, its interest in reviving the ancient library in order to "embrace the totality and diversity of human experience" is somewhat suspect.¹⁰²

Indeed, the new Bibliotheca Alexandrina is being built upon what may very well be an important archaeological site as regards Egypt's past—specifically, what is believed to be the site of ancient royal palace of the Ptolemies—and there has been some concern as to what, exactly, is being bulldozed over, sometimes in the middle of the night, in order to erect the new structure. Several Greco-Roman remains—notably two second-century Greek mosaic floors—were discovered near the construction site, and even though the Egyptian government, embarrassed by foreign press coverage of the midnight bulldozing, allotted some funds for their excavation, as Stille writes, "the funds . . . soon ran out, and now, ironically, the new library may be burying the ancient library once and for all."¹⁰³

Regardless of Egypt's, or even UNESCO's motives, in building the new library, its stated

¹⁰²In 1999, according to Stille, "the Egyptian government has earned a spot on the Committee to Protect Journalists' list of the ten worst enemies of freedom of the press," and he quotes an Egyptian journalist, Hisham Kassem, as saying, "It's a bit of a paradox that the government is building a library while it is banning books" (Stille, "Resurrecting Alexandria": 92).

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, 99. As regards Egypt's conflicting motives in building the new library, and its record of censorship—including censorship of its own historical past—see Stille, "Resurrecting Alexandria": 92-94 and 97-99.

objectives for comprehensiveness and inclusivity—to hold the world’s memory, as it were, in a structure of granite and glass—is probably more folly than achievable reality.

Moreover, situated as it is on the lip of the twenty-first century, the project raises a lot of problematic questions. As Stille himself asks,

What does it mean to ‘revive’ an ancient library whose exact location and contents are unknown? Can a library that will start with about two hundred and fifty thousand books—far fewer than the number in the library of a small four-year college in the United States—hope to live up to its grand claims? Does it make sense to build a library designed to hold eight million books at a moment when so much information is moving from printed to digital form? In the age of the Internet, does it even make sense to conceive of a universal library in terms of glass, aluminum, and concrete?¹⁰⁴

Quantity and comprehensiveness, of course, were qualities that the ancient Ptolemies themselves prized over all else when making acquisitions for their library, going so far as to steal scrolls from ships calling at Alexandrian ports and to not return manuscripts loaned to them from other libraries, and hoping to amass some five hundred thousand scrolls before they were finished with their collecting activities, a number they came very close to reaching.¹⁰⁵ Stille points out that even the Library of Congress, with a hundred and nineteen million items in its collection, “is selective in its acquisitions, and the cost of

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁰⁵On this point, see Canfora, “The Universal Library,” *The Vanished Library*, 23-35. As regards the overall collecting activities of the Ptolemies, see also Edward Alexander Parsons, *The Alexandrian Library, Glory of the Hellenic World: Its Rise, Antiquities, and Destructions* (Amsterdam: The Elsevier Press, 1952), 163-203. In relation to the unscrupulous methods the Ptolemies sometimes employed in order to acquire manuscripts, Parsons shares the famous story told by Galen of how, under Ptolemy III (Eurgetes), “the original autograph or authentic manuscripts of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were obtained from Athens and . . . the Ptolemies, realistic book-hunters that they were, kept the priceless muniments of the Attic drama and willingly forfeited the sum of fifteen talents which had been deposited for their safe return” (Parsons, *The Alexandrian Library*, 164).

even being quasi-universal comes to some three hundred and eighty-six million dollars a year.”¹⁰⁶ Regardless of Stille’s reminder of the pragmatic limitations upon, as Chartier puts it, “the dream of a universal library,” the idea of an archive that will contain and provide access to the entire memory of civilization has a long tradition behind it, and is clearly still with us today.

According to the Italian scholar Luciano Canfora, the scholar-librarians appointed by the Ptolemaic rulers “were privileged to imagine that they might actually gather together every book in the world—a glittering mirage, which cast its spell on the library for a while before becoming the stuff of literary fantasy. This desire for completeness, this will to power, are akin to what drove Alexander, as a rhetorician of antiquity put it, ‘to overstep the limits of the world’.”¹⁰⁷ This mirage of totality has wrapped within it another illusion, of course—the idea that there exists out there in the world a complete corpus of texts that need only be gathered and catalogued, ordered and shelved, edited and translated, in order to make the universal library complete, but the world, as the library, exists in such a state of flux and transition as to always leave this corpus subject to untraceable dispersals and destructions—to a series of historical accidents, such as fire and flood, and even to erasures by more purposeful means, such as military invasion or the scholarly emendation of “profane” or “difficult” texts—and therefore the limitations of place upon any one text at any one given time, makes the dream of the universal library infinitely susceptible to a wide variety of contingencies that *precede* any attempts by the

¹⁰⁶Stille, “Resurrecting Alexandria”: 98.

¹⁰⁷Canfora, *The Vanished Library*, 24.

librarians to gather in and shore up the world's memory. Nevertheless, the ancient Ptolemies' desire to house in their library "all the books of the world" is mirrored exactly in the Aswan Declaration's proclamation to "attempt to constitute," with the new Bibliotheca Alexandrina, "a *summum* of knowledge," a proclamation that assumes that such a *summum* could even be retrieved, much less amassed in one place. The new Bibliotheca Alexandrina also represents, on another level, the desire to revive, and therefore reconstitute a past, original institution that is believed to have been somehow intact before its collections were threatened and ultimately destroyed, either by rampaging Christians, Julius Caesar, or the first Caliph of Egypt, or because papyrus rolls, in the final analysis, were simply just too perishable. Obviously, no one believes that the actual, *original* library can ever in any way be systematically recuperated, scroll by scroll, for not only are the original texts now gone, but also gone missing are the catalogues of the collections, such as Callimachus's *Pinakes*.¹⁰⁸ But the term *revival* implies the bringing back to life what once existed in more vibrant and vital fullness. The notion that a library could have once been "full" prior to its eventual dispersal or wholesale destruction, and that its curators mainly worked to collect, organize, and stand guard over its collections,

¹⁰⁸Callimachus of Cyrene was *auclis regius bibliothecaris* at the Alexandrian Library in the mid-third century B.C. (or so it is conjectured by some classical scholars, for the records of librarianship are indeterminate and often date after-the-fact). Callimachus is often referred to as the father of bibliography, because of his *Pinakes*, or *Tables of all those who were eminent in any kind of literature and of their writings* (numbering 120 scrolls), which were bio-bibliographical tables of the corpus of Hellenic poetry and prose that was contained within the Library during his tenure. Callimachus's original catalogue is lost to us today, but has been somewhat reconstructed by references to it in the writings of other authors (both contemporary with and post-Callimachus), and by book lists compiled by scholars such as Quintilian and Aristophanes of Byzantium, that most likely utilized his *Pinakes* as a prototype. On the subject of Callimachus's librarianship and his catalogue, and on the difficulties inherent in reconstructing the early history of the ancient Library, see Parsons, *The Alexandrian Library*, 141-45, 204-18.

belies the fact that, even in the most ancient of traditions, the material apparatus and content of manuscripts and books often underwent profound changes as a result of the various processes of their curatorship—processes that involved the creation of preservation and scholarly support materials, such as bindings and flyleaves and copies, descriptive tables of contents and catalogues and indexes, and projects of literary abridgement and compendia—and therefore, as the library has always been subject to the vicissitudes of history, so have the books in the library always existed in a state, not of preserved stasis, but of perpetual translation. Canfora has written that the Ptolemies and their librarians “set out not only to collect every book in the world, but to translate them all into Greek. Naturally, Greek compendia and compilations were also prepared, one example being the *Egyptian History* of Manetho.”¹⁰⁹ Likewise, there was much “willful meddling,” as Canfora puts it, in transcriptions and translations of texts such as Homer’s *Iliad*, and this was meddling moreover, that probably exists in some form in the oldest extant copy of Homer’s work that we have today, whereas the original Homeric verses do not exist in written form at all.¹¹⁰ In addition, forgers would appear “in throngs, offering

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, 37-38. The first printed edition of Homer was issued in Florence in 1488, and was most likely based upon Greek manuscripts coming into Italy out of Byzantium during the one hundred years or so before its fall to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. The classical scholar Bernard Knox has written that “The immediate predecessors of the printed edition of Florence were bound manuscript books written on vellum or on paper in a cursive minuscule script complete with accents and breathings. These books were the final phase of the process of copying by hand that went all the way back to the ancient world” (Bernard Knox, “Introduction,” in Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles [New York: Viking, 1990], 6). So, modern editions of Homer are based upon several palimpsest texts of third century B.C. through fourteenth-century copies (with variations) of copies (with variations) of the supposed eighth-century B.C. original papyrus scrolls. What we have of Homer today, therefore, is more an artifact of the Middle Ages than the ancient world in which he supposedly lived (although, of course, the language of those scrolls is archaic Greek).

counterfeit antique scrolls which they had patched up from oddments or simply produced from scratch,” and “unless they were obvious fakes, the librarians hesitated to refuse them for fear they might be snapped up by their rivals.”¹¹¹ Sometimes even the librarians themselves would “fabricate forgeries by way of amusement A certain Cratippus composed a learned historical work in which he passed himself off as an Athenian, a contemporary and intimate of Thucydides. The title of this strange work, *Everything Thucydides Left Unsaid*, hinted at its character: it was full of wisdom after the event.” According to Canfora, even though a librarian at Alexandria undertook this forgery as an amusement, and did not hide this fact from his fellow librarians, Plutarch later “made use of Cratippus’s work as if the author had really been what he pretended to be.”¹¹²

Ultimately, the library at Alexandria was not what we would conceive of today as the large research library: that place where the student and scholar go to drink from the well of knowledge before returning to their studies to think and write—the library, in other words, as an institution which supports the work of the university. Instead, the library *was* the university. It was the *museum*, the *lyceum*, and the *scriptorium* rolled up

And then there is the supposition, put forth in a pamphlet defending Jewish history, by the first-century A.D. historian Joseph ben Matthias, that the Greeks “did not learn to write until very late in their history. . . . and even Homer ‘did not leave his poems in writing’; his separate songs were ‘transmitted by memory’ and ‘not united until much later’” (Knox, “Introduction,” *The Iliad*, 8).

¹¹¹*Ibid.*, 45. It is interesting to note here that the presence of forgeries was a problem in the Cotton Library as well, and in the “Report by the Commissioners to the Trustees” in 1703, Wanley, Hutton, and Anstis wrote that, of the “Charters made in the time of t[he] Saxon Kings . . . we know some to be counterfeit, & do suspect others; but not judging that our business was to Criticise, we have put them down, as others, to those Persons whose Names they bear” (Wanley et al., “Report by the Commissioners,” in Smith, *Catalogus*).

¹¹²*Ibid.*, 47.

together, and its librarians were artists and scholars who lived as scribblers in the cage of the Muses.¹¹³ Canfora points out that the library, as well as the librarians, were actually the Ptolemy's property and "one of the instruments of his power," and although they enjoyed a materially secure and comfortable way of life, they were not allowed to leave the palace grounds.¹¹⁴ The ancient library at Alexandria represented the Ptolemies' attempt not only to gather in the world's memory, but also to be masters over the minds of their subjects, yet this supposed mastery was still dependent upon the librarians themselves, and their labors—sometimes bumptious, sometimes more brilliant—continually shaped and reshaped the world's texts, and ultimately, the reception of the "world memory" contained therein, both in their time and in our own, and therefore, any attempt to understand the literature or philosophy of "an age" must take as a first invariant premise the fact of the library's material impressions of its functions in what remains of any period's expressive documents. The flow of events within any library—of the lives of its curators, as well as of its daily operations and the scholarly activities taking place there among and *upon* the books—impress themselves upon the collections in such a manner as to make any attempt to understand those collections as static and solitary entities impossible. When the contemporary scholar works his way backward in order to piece together the textual elements that constituted the past library, whether it is the ancient Library at Alexandria or

¹¹³An ancient poet contemporary with the Library, Timon of Phlius, referred to the Alexandrian librarians as "bookish scribblers who spend their whole lives pecking away in the cage of the Muses" (qtd. in Canfora, *The Vanished Library*, 37). Canfora points out that Timon's description of the librarians, *charakitai*, or "scribblers," involved a play on words, "for *charax* is 'an enclosure'—the pen within which these fancy birds live their mysterious lives" (*ibid.*).

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, 41-42.

Cotton's library in Westminster, he will reach, finally, not the "original" library itself, but rather the material traces of a partial series of crossings and re-crossings, comings and goings, of texts in and out of an architectural space called the library, which, although it might appear to be a quiet, orderly, well-regulated, and "closed" system, is really in a perpetual state of "open" entropy. Furthermore, any unique text we are fortunate to have recovered from the past, such as *Beowulf*, must be viewed, not as a text purely unique to the supposed time of its original composition, or "copying"—in this case, the Anglo-Saxon period—but as a palimpsest of the *scholia* of the *lyceum* known as the library, not only the monastic library in which it may have first been written or transcribed or translated, but also Cotton's, and perhaps, Nowell's library, the British Museum Library, and most recently, the new British Library at St. Pancras.¹¹⁵ It may be that the textual artifact can never be anything more than the product of the time in which it is being described and interpreted, which is not to say there is no set of *real* previous incarnations or even originary historical status for a text like *Beowulf*, only that the artifact often bears the marks, both ideological and physical, of its handling and interpretation over time, and

¹¹⁵The signature, "Laurence Nouell a.1563," is entered at the head of the first folio of the manuscript codex containing *Beowulf*, thereby giving us the mark of the first known owner of the manuscript, out of whose library we assume Cotton acquired the manuscript. Nowell's actual identity is somewhat shrouded in mystery, as is the means whereby Cotton may have acquired the manuscript from him, but it is clear, from most accounts, that he was, like Cotton, an avid collector of books, antiquary, and library keeper. On this and other issues related to Nowell's identity, career, and scholarly interests, see Carl T. Berkhout, "The Pedigree of Laurence Nowell the Antiquary," *English Language Notes* 23 (1985): 15-26; Robin Flower, "Laurence Nowell and the Discovery of England in Tudor Times," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 21 (1936): 47-73; Raymond J.S. Grant, *Laurence Nowell, William Lambarde, and the Laws of the Anglo-Saxons* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 1996), 9-17; Thomas Hahn, "The Identity of the Antiquary Laurence Nowell," *English Language Notes* 20 (1983): 10-18; Retha M. Warnicke, "Note on a Courts Request Case of 1571," *English Language Notes* 11 (1974): 250-56.

cannot be understood apart from the structures and apparatus (museums, libraries, scholarly prefaces, glossarial indexes, etc.) designed for its presentation.¹¹⁶

It has been argued by Stephen Nichols that the interest of a manuscript lies not so much in the supposedly recoverable "original" text, as it does in the social history of writing and reading that can be "read" in the various ways a manuscript has been materially altered and "glossed" over time. Nichols has pointed out that the idea of an "original" or "*Urtext*" that supposedly represents the closest possible version of an author's "original work," an idea whose roots may be traced back to the "scientific medievalism" of the latter nineteenth century, "belies a print-culture bias."¹¹⁷ The danger in

¹¹⁶Exploring the various manifestations of the heroic memory of the ancient Gauls in French history, Krzysztof Pomian has written of how the French perception of its Gallic past is affected by the different ways in which the archaeological artifacts of that past are arranged, displayed and interpreted by archaeological museums, museums which, since the nineteenth century, have "undergone changes and reorganizations that have ultimately affected the ways in which visitors perceive the exhibits and therefore the image of the past they take away with them. . . . New interpretations determine the arrangement of artifacts as well as the accompanying commentary and thus the significance attached to each object." Furthermore, Pomian writes that "the oldest representations of the Gauls, in the form of surviving artifacts once treated as worthless junk, embody all later representations, in that their significance and in some cases even their physical appearance bear the earmarks of countless discoveries, techniques, and theories from the time of Montfaucon and Caylus to the archaeologists of today" (Krzysztof Pomian, "Franks and Gauls," in Pierre Nora, ed., *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, vol. 1, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer [New York: Columbia University Press, 1996], 44-45).

¹¹⁷Stephen G. Nichols, "Commentary and/as Image," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 91, no. 4 (Fall 1992): 966-67. It is important to note here that, in another essay, Nichols makes it clear that he does not want to give the impression that he believes all contemporary text editing of medieval works "seeks to construct a single authorial text," and that he is aware that "a variety of other editing approaches exist. . . . such as the synoptic edition illustrated by the *Nouveau recueil complet des fabliaux* directed by William Nooem and the late Nico van den Boogaard, that attempt to mediate between manuscript versions and an authorial text" (Stephen G. Nichols, "Philology and Its Discontents," in William D. Paden, ed., *The Future of the Middle Ages: Medieval Literature in the 1990s* [Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994], 117). But he also contextualizes that comment by stating that "truly synoptic editions or other attempts to represent different manuscript versions of a work or works in a single edition have often been hampered by the cost of producing printed editions of this sort and the difficulty of using them"

this approach, Nichols argues, in which variation between differing manuscript versions of the same text are resolved into an agreed-upon “*Ur*-reading,” which leads to a “conventional” edition, is that, “[b]y reducing a potentially large number of versions to one edition, or several editions, printing enhances the appearance of universal and transhistorical qualities of the edited works.”¹¹⁸ Nichols believes that the “principal vehicle of access” to the medieval mind is in the original manuscripts themselves, in all their variety and disagreement—in what he calls the “manuscript matrix,” which comprises not only the primary poetic or narrative text itself, but also “the highly individual and distinctive scribal hand(s) that inscribe the text, illuminated images, colored rubrications, and . . . glosses or commentaries in the margins or interpolated in the text.”¹¹⁹ Nichols recognizes that in the process of transcription, which is “not free from mimetic intervention,” a scribe may alter the original writer’s meaning. One has to recognize therefore that almost all medieval manuscripts “postdate the life of the author by decades or even centuries,” and therefore the manuscript is a “matrix,” or “place,” of “radical contingencies: of chronology, of anachronism, of conflicting subjects, of representation.”¹²⁰ Ultimately, for Nichols, the manuscript represents not a text, but a “medieval event,” and an understanding of the manuscript as a “multi-voiced and temporally open-ended matrix” allows modern editors to not only focus on locating a text

(*ibid.*).

¹¹⁸Nichols, “Commentary and/as Image”: 968.

¹¹⁹Stephen G. Nichols, “Introduction: Philology in a Manuscript Culture,” *Speculum* 65, no. 1 (January 1990): 7.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*: 8.

in the midst of flux, but to “focus on the agents of flux as also productive of meaning.”¹²¹

Just as Nichols has argued for an understanding of the medieval manuscript as a “unique witness to its historical context” (meaning the historical context of its production, and reproduction, in the medieval scriptorium *as a manuscript*),¹²² so has D.F. McKenzie argued for a history of the printed book that would attend to the material forms of its publication and transmission in order to assess the impact of those forms upon a literary text’s reception at any given time. More specifically, McKenzie believes that the discipline of bibliography should attend to “the sociology of texts,” and should explore, as McKenzie himself has done in his work with English Renaissance literature (specifically, with printed editions of the plays of William Congreve), “whether or not the material forms of books, the non-verbal elements of the typographic notations within them, the very disposition of space itself, have an expressive function in conveying meanings.”¹²³ Roger Chartier has written of McKenzie’s approach that “both the imposition and the appropriation of meaning of a text depend on material forms whose modalities and treatment, long held to be without significance, delimit the intended or possible ways to comprehend the text.”¹²⁴ In Chartier’s opinion, McKenzie’s reconfiguration of bibliography’s role is both “formidable” and “superb,” because, “[w]ith daring and

¹²¹Nichols, “Philology and Its Discontents,” Paden, *The Future of the Middle Ages*, 119-121.

¹²²*Ibid.*, 119.

¹²³McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*, 8.

¹²⁴Roger Chartier, “Texts, Forms, and Interpretations,” *On the Edge of the Cliff: History, Language, and Practices*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 82.

originality, McKenzie formulates the central question in both textual criticism and the social sciences today—the question of the production of meaning as it is constructed in the intertwined relations among forms and interpretations.”¹²⁵ And I would argue, conjoining the unique aspects of both Nichols’ and McKenzie’s viewpoints regarding the importance of a text’s material form in revealing its various social meanings, that the folios containing *Beowulf* represent a “manuscript matrix” in which one can begin to read not only the medieval history (and perhaps, the social logic) of its production *as a literary text* (either as a circa 1000 AD holograph-original or as a copy of an earlier work) but also the early modern and modern history of its preservation and presentation *as a library codex* (as a *book*, as it were), a history, moreover, that has brought about material changes, not only in the text itself, but in the *disposition* of the text, that ultimately delimit (and even occasionally *extend*) all the possible ways the poem itself can be received and understood.¹²⁶

The activities (and even, occasionally, the *lack* of activity) of the curators of the

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, 89.

¹²⁶One can see an attention to material forms and the disposition of the text in the *Beowulf* manuscript most thoroughly explored, perhaps, in the work of Kevin Kiernan, whose landmark work in 1981, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* (*op. cit.*), represented the most extensive codicological and paleographic analysis ever assembled on the Cotton Vitellius A.xv manuscript, and which can be seen as laying the groundwork for Kiernan’s later work with the manuscript, culminating in the Electronic *Beowulf* Project with the British Library. Kiernan’s ultimate aim, however, at least in his 1981 and later studies of the *Beowulf* manuscript, is not so much the reconstruction or *writing* of the social history revealed in the newly recognized “manuscript matrix,” as it is an attempt to use the most finely-tuned and technologically advanced methods for analyzing the manuscript’s material features in order to produce compelling evidence for the assertions that, 1) the manuscript dates to the early 11th century, 2) that the *Beowulf* poem itself may have at one time been a separate codex, and 3) that the manuscript may have been contemporary with the writing of the poem itself (see Kiernan, “Introduction,” *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, 3-12, for a fuller exemplification of his provocative thesis).

unique manuscript containing *Beowulf* within the library have, historically, shaped and reshaped the codex to such an extent that the supposedly “original” song or poem can only be accessed, or *known*, through a negotiation between the manuscript text itself and all of the biblio-methodologies whereby that text has been made accessible and legible, and parts of it even covered over, destroyed, and thrust into apocryphal obscurity. And the “manuscript text itself,” it is important to remember, is an entity whose shape—both its material shape as a codex or book and the shape of its poetic lines of language—has changed over time due to its handling by its curators, whose methods for storing, porting, describing, and making accessible the text have affected what might be called the architecture of the text, which, in turn, affects how that text will be read, especially when we insist on there being such a thing as *the historical manuscript text*—an entity we often read inductively by comparing the present damaged manuscript with earlier transcripts that reveal a more original, fuller version, and therefore, “the original text” is partly what we have at the British Library in front of us (if we are willing to go there and view it firsthand), and partly a scholarly construct. And the curators’ methods, furthermore, have been constituted in negotiations and struggles between the different librarians’ opposing philosophies for, and approaches to, describing, handling, and preserving the manuscript, as well as materially affected by various political and even personal contingencies, such as Charles I’s jailers who closed and locked Cotton’s library in 1629 or Thomas Smith’s physical ailments and professional paranoia. Our understanding of *Beowulf* today, therefore, is somewhat bound within the confines of a long historical process of librarianship that includes Robert Cotton’s binding practices, Richard James’ omission of

the poem in his handwritten list of the contents of the Vitellius A.xv manuscript (undertaken some time in the 1620s), Thomas Smith's omission of the poem in his catalogue (perhaps following James' lead), as well as Wanley's 1705 *Catalogus* misdescription, the shocking neglect of Cotton's collection after Sir John's death in 1702 until, and even after, the establishment of the British Museum in 1753, the manuscript's belated preservation by Frederic Madden and Henry Gough in 1845, Kevin Kiernan's 2000 electronic edition, and everything in between. Practices of librarianship as seemingly benign as binding, compilation, and copying can have profound effects on the course of literary scholarship, and therefore upon the understanding of a work of literature—effects, moreover, that keep our understanding of any literary text contained, not only within the apparatus constructed for its presentation, but also within our sense of how we believe the composite manuscript was constructed, and when and where it was supposedly compiled, and even dismembered and reassembled. Furthermore, while our understanding of the poem can be delimited by the forms of its material presentation, it can also be deepened and extended by the reinvention of those forms, with the acknowledgment that different curatorial practices, having imprinted themselves upon the manuscript itself, can never be exclusive of, nor released from each other (nor entirely superseded).

In the early 1950s, Kenneth Sisam wrote an important and influential essay in the history of Anglo-Saxon studies, "The Compilation of the Beowulf Manuscript," that could be said to have provided the sound basis for any interpretive writing attuned to the idea that the Nowell codex represented a "collection" unique to its assumed time of copying

and compilation—as Sisam himself put it, “round about the year 1000.”¹²⁷ Sisam had actually made the comment in a 1934 review of a facsimile edition of *The Exeter Book* that “the Beowulf codex, even allowing for *Judith*, is a collection in verse and prose of marvellous stories, with a strong secular bent.”¹²⁸ And this remark had its genesis in an even earlier essay published in 1916, “The Beowulf Manuscript,” in which Sisam asserted that the Vitellius A.xv manuscript “consists of two separate codices, fortuitously brought together by the binder in the sixteenth or seventeenth century.”¹²⁹ It was in the 1916 essay, in fact, that Sisam cautioned against “the dangers that beset a historical study in which insufficient attention is paid to manuscript indications, often the clearest indications of time and place,”¹³⁰ yet it must be noted that, for Sisam, an attention to “manuscript indications” stopped at the above observation regarding the fact that the Vitellius A.xv manuscript was composed of two separate codices bound together in the early modern period, and his work in ascertaining a common provenance for the five texts in the Nowell

¹²⁷Kenneth Sisam, “The Compilation of the Beowulf Manuscript,” *Studies in the History of Old English Literature*, 65.

¹²⁸Kenneth Sisam, review of *The Exeter Book of Old English Poetry*, *The Review of English Studies* 10 (1934): 342.

¹²⁹Kenneth Sisam, “The Beowulf Manuscript,” *Studies in the History of Old English Literature*, 61. Cotton Vitellius A.xv contains two distinct codices, which most scholars agree were bound together when they were in Sir Robert Cotton’s possession. According to Kevin Kiernan, “The first 90 folios are in a twelfth-century handwriting, and we call this part of Cotton’s book the Southwick Codex, based on the notice of ownership . . . on the second folio. The last 116 folios are copied by two early eleventh-century scribes, and we call this part of Cotton’s book the Nowell codex, because a previous owner, Laurence Nowell, left his name in it in 1563” (Kevin S. Kiernan, “The Legacy of Wiglaf: Saving a Wounded *Beowulf*,” in Peter S. Baker, ed., *Beowulf: Basic Readings* [New York: Garland Publishing, 1995], 195).

¹³⁰*Ibid.*

codex mainly rested upon a critical examination of their paleographic, linguistic, historic, and literary historic indications in order to argue that, although each text must have had a manuscript history prior to its collection with other texts into one codex, one could say something somewhat definitive about why and when they would have ultimately been assembled together, "round about the year 1000." In the 1916 essay, Sisam acknowledged a wide discrepancy in the dating of the various pieces of the Nowell codex, as regards their original *écriture*, since the hand of the three prose pieces preceding *Beowulf* (*Judith* comes after) had been referred by various scholars to different dates in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.¹³¹ "We thus have," Sisam wrote, "on the one side complete agreement that the date of the hand in *Beowulf* is 'circa 1000', or 'late-tenth-century', and on the other the widest discrepancy in the dating of the identical script when it appears in the prose tracts—a phenomenon, to say the least, disquieting."¹³² Sisam was disquieted by some discrepancies on the literary historical level as well, for two of the prose tracts (*Wonders of the East* and *Letter of Alexander*) contain Eastern themes, and this was troubling to Sisam because "[t]he appearance of Oriental themes in English literature has been placed at the end of the Old English period."¹³³ Nevertheless, Sisam decided that the presence of these motifs in a "circa 1000" manuscript meant that "the introduction of these Oriental themes belongs to the great period of Continental influence which began with the

¹³¹One of these scholars was Max Förster who, in 1919, published the first full description of the Vitellius A.xv codex, titled *Die Beowulf-Handschrift*. His work was not to be updated until Kevin Kiernan's *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* in 1981.

¹³²*Ibid.*, 63.

¹³³*Ibid.*

tenth century,”¹³⁴ and he asserted that since all pieces in the codex belong to two hands—the same two hands identified in the poem of *Beowulf* itself—there was a sound basis for the idea that, regardless of each text possessing its own unique transmission history, the contents of the codex share a provenance and date as regards their duplication and compilation. In the later paper, “The Compilation of the Beowulf Manuscript,” Sisam offered compelling paleographic, orthographic, linguistic, and historical evidence for his earlier supposition, and further clarified how it was that five such disparate pieces—*The Passion of St. Christopher*, *The Wonders of the East* (with illuminations), *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, *Beowulf*, and *Judith*—would have been brought together in one codex, and he decided that the impetus was a thematic one. More specifically, Sisam felt that the separate texts, with the possible exception of *Judith*, which he felt might be a late accretion,¹³⁵ were connected by virtue of the presence of “monsters” in each piece.

Christopher, according to Sisam, was a giant, “twelve fathoms high,” as well as “one of the race of dog-headed cannibals,” and the *Cynocephali*, along with various monsters of

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Sisam did not want to make the case that *Judith* fit the overall thematic design, and he did not think it was necessary to do so as “[s]omebody decided that it should be joined to the collection, whether because there was no more convenient place for it, or because Judith was felt to be, like Beowulf, a saviour of her country, at a time when England needed such inspiration in the struggle with the Danish invaders” (Sisam, “The Compilation of the Beowulf Manuscript,” *Studies in the History of Old English Literature*, 67). Sisam believed, due to historic, linguistic, and orthographical features in the text, that the Christopher *fragment* may have been a late accretion as well, and the fact that *Christopher* and *Judith* were placed, respectively, at the front and back of the codex, lent plausibility to his theory. Even so, no matter when and where each piece either first helped to form, or was joined, to an older collection, Sisam was very much intrigued with the idea of the codex as a “book” of the early medieval period grouped around a theme.

the East are also referred to in *Wonders of the East* and *Alexander's Letter*.¹³⁶ *Beowulf*, of course, has the "marvellous" creatures Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the fire-breathing dragon (and, it could be argued, even Beowulf himself). Ultimately, even though Sisam believed that the codex containing *Beowulf* represented a historically and linguistically diverse group of texts, he nevertheless was convinced that they were incorporated, at a certain point in time (circa 1000), into a bound collection of "marvellous stories." He also asserted that it was important to "distinguish MS. Vitellius A xv from the collection it preserves: the manuscript may be a copy of an earlier one containing all or some of the pieces."¹³⁷ Further, he wrote that "the state of the texts shows that none of them was composed for that codex. They are all copies and have a previous manuscript history."¹³⁸ Sisam did not believe, mainly due to the "childish draughtsmanship of the illustrations to *Wonders*," that the manuscript could belong to the "golden age of English book-production" of the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, but more likely was the "plain everyday work of a good period, well suited for reading in a monastic library or cloister."¹³⁹ Imagining what the title of the codex might have been, if it *had* been titled by "a catalogue of those days," Sisam proffered, in what soon came to be an oft-repeated

¹³⁶*Ibid.*, 65-66.

¹³⁷*Ibid.*, 68.

¹³⁸*Ibid.*

¹³⁹Sisam, "The Compilation of the Beowulf Manuscript," *Studies in the History of Old English Literature*, 96.

description of the codex, *Liber de diversis monstribus, anglice*.¹⁴⁰

One cannot underestimate the scholarly capital gained by following Sisam's influential lead in considering the Nowell codex as a thematically-structured anthology, from which premise many scholars have fished for the echoes of language and meaning they have deduced in *Beowulf* in the texts that accompany it (and vice versa), thereby claiming access to the tracks of the very pathways of the Anglo-Saxon mind writ across not just one text, but several. One could also say that the perpetually open question of how the Anglo-Saxons themselves might have regarded the poem, or of how the poem was intended to be received by any one of a number of possible audiences, has often been thought to be inextricably bound up with the open question of the intentionality behind the compilation of the codex. Almost twenty years after Sisam first made his suggestion concerning the manuscript's "theme," Edward Irving conjectured in his *Introduction to Beowulf*, "It may be that a little information as to how the poem was regarded [by the Anglo-Saxons] can be drawn from the manuscript in which it appears. . . . Is it possible that whoever put the manuscript collection together about the year 1000 included *Beowulf* because it contained interesting descriptions of monsters and dragons? We can only add this to our long list of open questions."¹⁴¹ That such an open question has remained

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.* This was partly a pun, on Sisam's part, on the anonymous eighth-century (?) Anglo-Latin manuscript, *On Monsters and Strange Beasts* (or *Liber Monstrorum*), which survives in five ninth- and tenth-century manuscripts. This manuscript has historically been significant in *Beowulf* studies for its mention of a *rex Huiglaucus qui imperavit Getis et a Francis occisus est*, which would seem to lend some credence to the idea that there once existed in historical reality, as there is in the poem, a Hygleac who was king of the Geats.

¹⁴¹Edward B. Irving, Jr., *Introduction to Beowulf* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 17.

compelling for Anglo-Saxon scholars is evident in Andy Orchard's book *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the "Beowulf"-Manuscript*, published in 1995, which takes Sisam's famous characterization of the manuscript as an English *Liber Monstrorum* as its impetus for thematizing the codex as a collection of narratives about "prodigies" and "prideful monsters," Beowulf and Alexander chief among them, who are deserving of their ultimate damnation.¹⁴² In a less than enthusiastic review of Orchard's book, Kevin Kiernan has pointed out that Orchard's thesis depends more on references to Latin and vernacular analogues, some "dubious and distracting," than it does upon the actual Nowell codex texts themselves.¹⁴³ Nevertheless, Orchard's study exemplifies the critical tendency to regard the Nowell codex as a distinctly Anglo-Saxon *anthology*, the intratextual study of which can yield some insights into the construction of meaning in Anglo-Saxon culture. This assumption, ~~ala~~^{fr} Sisam, has also retained its critical force in the most contemporary methodological stances, as evidenced in an essay that Nicholas Howe contributed to *Reading Old English Texts*, an anthology edited by Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe and published in 1997, which provides an overview of "new critical methods" for analyzing writings in Old English. In his essay, Howe recalls Sisam's title for the manuscript in order to ironize it¹⁴⁴ as well as reemphasize the usefulness of interrogating

¹⁴² Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the "Beowulf"-Manuscript* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 1995).

¹⁴³ Kevin S. Kiernan, "Review of *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the "Beowulf"-Manuscript*, by Andy Orchard, *Speculum* 73 (July 1998): 882-84.

¹⁴⁴ Specifically, Howe writes, "But if we go back to Sisam's mock-rubric for the manuscript, we can take the *anglice* which modifies *liber* as an ironic and salutary reminder that not one of its texts is set in England" (Nicholas Howe, "Historicist Approaches," in Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, ed., *Reading Old English Texts* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

the meaning of an individual text via its relationship to other texts in a compilation, and in a slightly new twist, reversing the traditional notion of text and context as regards the Nowell codex, he asks his readers to consider treating the prose texts *Wonders of the East* and *Letter of Alexander* “not as codicological glosses for *Beowulf* but instead as valuable ethnographic representations” in order to “reconsider some of our assumptions about Old English canonicity.”¹⁴⁵ Ultimately, Howe, like Sisam and other influential critics before him, perceives the critical value in relating texts to their manuscript context, especially with an understanding of that manuscript as a *compilatio*, defined by Martin Irvine as “the selection of materials from the cultural library so that the resulting collection forms an *interpretive* arrangement of texts and discourse.”¹⁴⁶ The compelling possibility that the *compilatio* in question—the Nowell codex—may represent the tail end of a long process of the binding, dismemberment, and rebinding of numerous texts (some of which may have since vanished completely) in different locations over a period extending from the tenth through the early seventeenth century is not usually a consideration for the scholar making comparative forays into the codex, although it does call into question, at the very least, the

1997], 93-94). Ultimately, Howe wants to highlight this irony in order to call attention to the ways in which the prose texts accompanying *Beowulf* in the Nowell codex provide “tantalizing evidence for the cultural work the Anglo-Saxons did to locate themselves within Christian geography” and therefore they provide the modern critic with a means for reading “the ethnography of cultural and geographical belief in Anglo-Saxon England” (*ibid.*, 94).

¹⁴⁵Nicholas Howe, “Historicist Approaches,” O’Keefe, *Reading Old English Texts*, 94-95.

¹⁴⁶Martin Irvine, “Medieval Textuality and the Archaeology of Textual Culture,” in Allen J. Frantzen, ed., *Speaking Two Languages: Traditional Disciplines and Contemporary Theory in Medieval Studies* (1991); qtd. in Howe, “Historicist Approaches,” O’Keefe, *Reading Old English Texts*, 95.

precision with which one can discuss the motives of a compiler-librarian (as opposed to, say, the motives of one or two "author"-copyists). It is well documented that Sir Robert Cotton was extremely prodigious at dismembering and rebinding manuscripts in order to create "new" volumes, as well as using leaves torn from discarded manuscripts for the flyleaves, pastedowns, and spine strips of newly bound material. N.R. Ker has written that "Cotton was a chief offender in this kind of activity. Leaves of manuscripts which did not belong to him found their way, licitly perhaps, but in at least one instance illicitly, into his collection . . . and leaves of manuscripts which he owned were taken out of the volumes to which they properly belonged and were bound up elsewhere."¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, Colin Tite has written that Cotton "discarded medieval bindings, divided up volumes, and redistributed the component and sometimes rudely severed parts. These (in the hands of a latter-day Procrustes) might then find their page margins cut down or virtually eliminated in order to reconcile their size with that of their new companions, companions which might well be unrelated to the new arrivals by either subject matter or authorship."¹⁴⁸ And whatever Cotton may or may not have done with specific texts in his library, including those now bound together with *Beowulf*, those activities would have occurred near the terminus of a long medieval and early modern manuscript history which might have seen the Nowell codex texts in a variety of other arrangements, and the fragmentary nature of

¹⁴⁷Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon*, lxii.

¹⁴⁸Tite, *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton*, 104.

Judith and *The Passion of St. Christopher*, especially, attest to such a history.¹⁴⁹

According to Kevin Kiernan, there has been an historically significant lack of close attention to the physical features of the Nowell codex, which, in his opinion, bears the clear marks of the aftermath of the meddling of a variety of possible post-Dissolution bibliophiles (including Cotton), and, although Kiernan sees all five Nowell texts as having derived from the same scriptorium, he argues that *Beowulf* may have been, in the Old English period, a separable codex later joined to the prose texts in the early modern period, with *Judith* possibly having been joined even later “some time between 1537 and 1563.”¹⁵⁰ In his description of the Nowell Codex in his landmark 1981 study, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, Kiernan asserts that, although the codex had been “extensively described” by Sisam, as well as by Max Förster, Kemp Malone, and Tim Westphalen, these descriptions have “overlooked, underestimated, or misrepresented important features of the codex that have crucial bearing on the original, as opposed to the recent, construction of the codex.”¹⁵¹ Furthermore, he claims that it “cannot be denied that Cotton Vitellius A. xv., as a composite codex, has been virtually ignored,” and that “the only full

¹⁴⁹The extensive meddling with and damage to medieval manuscripts following Henry VIII's Dissolution of the monasteries, either through emendation, dismemberment, or outright destruction has been well documented. See, especially, C.E. Wright, “The Dispersal of the Monastic Libraries and the Beginnings of Anglo-Saxon Studies,” *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society* 1 (1951): 208-37 and “The Dispersal of the Libraries in the Sixteenth Century,” in Francis Wormald and C.E. Wright, eds., *The English Library before 1700* (London: Athlone Press, 1958), 148-75. The deliberate mutilation of early manuscripts by post-Dissolution collectors is also well documented in Ker's *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (*op. cit.*).

¹⁵⁰Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, 159.

¹⁵¹*Ibid.*, 120.

description if it, in German, is riddled with errors and contradictions, and yet by necessity is still regarded as definitive.”¹⁵² For Kiernan, rectifying the oversights and blunders of previous codicological studies is imperative, for “the results intimately involve one’s understanding of the *Beowulf* MS, and ultimately, of *Beowulf* itself”¹⁵³ (and here, he is echoing Sisam’s caution in his 1916 essay, to beware “the dangers that beset a historical study in which insufficient attention is paid to manuscript indications”). As regards an understanding of *Beowulf* as a poem, and even, as a testament to the historical times in which it was produced, Kiernan ultimately wants to demonstrate, through a close and thorough codicological as well as paleographic inspection, that *Beowulf* was “still undergoing revision in the 11th century, and consequently the manuscript, or at any rate part of it, may represent something very close to an autograph.”¹⁵⁴ Kiernan’s theses here is partly inspired by his belief that Sisam’s characterization of the codex as an English *Liber Monstrorum* is thoroughly misguided as regards *Beowulf*, a poem he sees as having “nothing in common with the prose texts that now precede it.”¹⁵⁵ Kiernan sees *Beowulf* as far removed in style, subject matter, originality, and aesthetic distinction from the prose texts that precede it, and as having more in common with the *Judith* fragment, “which formerly was undoubtedly part of another codex” and “was almost certainly added to the

¹⁵²*Ibid.*, 168. The German study Kiernan refers to is Max Förster, *Die Beowulf-Handschrift. Berichte über die Verhandlungen der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, Philologisch-historische Klasse*, 71 (1919).

¹⁵³Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, 120.

¹⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 139.

codex in early modern times.”¹⁵⁶ Kiernan’s suppositions about the construction of the codex, backed up by extensive and thorough linguistic and historical research, as well as a rigorous attention to often-overlooked aspects of the material manuscript—page gatherings, arrangement of the vellum pages’ hair and wool sides, scribal prickings and rulings—have been somewhat contentious within scholarly circles; nevertheless, they unsettle long-held assumptions about the Nowell codex as a *compilatio* as well as reopen the question of the ways in which the separate texts within the codex relate to each other, or of how they should be associated. One could say that, since Kiernan’s 1981 study, there has been a renewal of interest in codicological studies (partially in response to new technologies for analyzing old manuscripts), especially as they bear upon questions regarding the relationships (literary, historical, cultural, and otherwise) between texts that have been bound together. This is especially evident in the 1994 volume of essays Mary Richards edited for the Basic Readings in Anglo-Saxon England Series, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: Basic Readings*, in which volume six of the fifteen essays focus on new insights into the construction and compilation of specific codices—insights, moreover, that call into question long-held assumptions about the sources, places of origins, and histories of the manuscripts (which ultimately has implications for the interpretation of “meaning” in individual texts as well). To cite just one example, Patrick Conner’s contribution to the volume, “The Structure of the Exeter Book Codex,” is the result of his close study of the material apparatus and paleography of that manuscript, from which study he makes the provocative argument that the Exeter Book is not, as has been conventionally assumed,

¹⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 140.

“an extensive but organized collection of miscellaneous verse forms from the Anglo-Saxon period,” but “a compilation of three manuscript booklets.”¹⁵⁷ Conner’s study breaks apart the conventional understanding of the Exeter Book as a large *compilatio*, and in doing so changes the possible parameters for inquiry into the meanings of the separate texts. As Conner himself puts it, the critical value of “recognizing the three-booklet structure of the Exeter Book is that it allows students of Old English poetry to examine and exploit the juxtapositions of poems within each booklet without having to account for the relationship of apparently disparate texts in different booklets.”¹⁵⁸ Ultimately, as regards Kiernan’s work with the Nowell codex, one is struck by the insight that the manuscript containing *Beowulf* is as much an early modern production as it is a medieval one, and that the codex could perhaps tell us something, not only about Anglo-Saxon culture, but also about the ways in which an Anglo-Saxon culture was “constructed” in the early modern period.

Kiernan believes that “the curious neglect of the *Beowulf* MS is directly attributable to the ancient prejudice of Old English scholars that *Beowulf* was originally composed in the 7th or 8th century. In this way, the value of the early 11th-century MS of *Beowulf* was vitiated before it was even studied.”¹⁵⁹ Kiernan is very much aware that he is swimming against a very strong tide of established scholarship that has indeed, for the most part, viewed the extant *Beowulf* manuscript as having probably first been written in

¹⁵⁷Patrick W. Conner, “The Structure of the Exeter Book Codex (Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS. 3501),” in Mary P. Richards, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: Basic Readings* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), 301-02.

¹⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 315.

¹⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 168.

the 7th or 8th century, from which point it most likely had several transmissions through several different regions in England (accounting for differences in the dialect forms used in the poem), until it came to be copied in the version we now have, somewhere between the years 975 and 1025.¹⁶⁰ And this assumption, of course, has historically led to reams of interpretive scholarship aimed at discerning *Beowulf*'s meaning(s) by filtering the poetic text through the historical lenses that most appropriately meet the assumptive time contexts. Of course, scholars have argued contentiously over the supposed "original" period of composition, and since 1815, when Thorkelin claimed that the poet must have been an eyewitness to *Beowulf*'s actual deeds, they have suggested dates ranging from 340 to 1025, with circa 515-530 and 1000 being generally accepted as the extreme limits.¹⁶¹ I will cite just a few noteworthy examples of interpretive studies that assume a period of transmission (longer and shorter), and which take historicist approaches grounded in that assumption—historicist approaches, moreover, that view the supposed "original" period of *écriture* as primary in interpreting the poem's signifying gestures¹⁶²—and all of which, although often subject to revision and refutation, have

¹⁶⁰According to Kiernan, "these are loose [dating] limits, based on Neil R. Ker's dating of the script as 's. x/xi' in his *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon*, pp. vxii and 281" (Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, 13, n. 2).

¹⁶¹For this brief overview of what have historically been viewed as possible composition dates for *Beowulf*, I am indebted to Robert E. Bjork and Anita Obermeier, "Date, Provenance, Author, Audiences," Bjork and Niles, *The Beowulf Handbook*, 13.

¹⁶²So crucial has the dating of the manuscript been to studies of the poem, that in an essay on that very subject, Roy Liuzza has written that "dating the poem forces us to make explicit our understanding of its form and content. The question of dating *Beowulf* foregrounds the most important questions of Old English poetry—creation and tradition, transmission and reception, context and the limits of interpretation" (Roy Michael Liuzza, "On the Dating of *Beowulf*," Baker, *Beowulf: Basic Readings*, 284). For other overviews of the debate over the dating, see also Bjork

played important roles, at one time or another, in influencing (and even structuring) other studies of the poem's possible meanings. Ritchie Girvan, in his 1935 monograph *Beowulf and the Seventh Century*, assigned a date to the "original" composition (mainly based on linguistic, historic, and cultural evidence) of 680-700, in Northumbria, with the main historical elements of the poem perhaps originally belonging to the early sixth century.¹⁶³ Nevertheless, Girvan saw his main task, as he himself stated, "to trace whether, and if so how far, our knowledge of the conditions in the later seventh century is reflected in the poem,"¹⁶⁴ and he proceeded to try to show "a close correspondence between seventh-century conditions in Northumbria and the poem both in the material and intellectual side."¹⁶⁵ The poem's meaning, therefore, for Girvan, rested upon an understanding of a seventh-century understanding of religion, myth, folklore, allegory, epic, and history. Roy Liuzza has written that the "stumbling block" in Girvan's approach was "the assumption that Beowulf is an ordinary representative of an ordinary Englishman's attitude at a given moment in history."¹⁶⁶ Likewise, Nicholas Howe has written that Girvan's study can appear "disarmingly naive to later readers," and is mainly valuable today as an object lesson "about the great temptation facing those who practice any variety of historicism:

and Obermeier, "Date, Provenance, Author, Audiences," Bjork and Niles, *A Beowulf Handbook*, 13-28 and Colin Chase, ed., *The Dating of Beowulf* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981).

¹⁶³Ritchie Girvan, *Beowulf and the Seventh Century* (1935; reprint London: Methuen & Co., 1971), 25-26.

¹⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁶⁶Liuzza, "On the Dating of *Beowulf*," Baker, *Beowulf: Basic Readings*, 284.

the slippery, if convenient, elision of texts and contexts to confirm an argument."¹⁶⁷

Nevertheless, Girvan's "vision of that era" also rested, to a certain extent, upon the foundation of his belief that the extant manuscript was a later "copy" of an earlier poem, and that it bore all the linguistic marks of multiple transmissions. In 1951, following the general idea that the poem originated in a period much earlier than the date of the manuscript, Dorothy Whitelock, in her highly influential monograph *The Audience of Beowulf*, argued that the poem may have originally been composed in the years between 775 and 800, possibly in the court of Offa of Mercia. This assumption allowed her to posit a poet "composing for Christians, whose conversion was neither partial nor superficial," through which assumption, and drawing upon homiletic, patristic, and even Latin sources, as well as upon linguistic and historic evidence, she could exemplify the assertion that "the Christian element [in the poem] is not merely superimposed; it permeates the poem."¹⁶⁸ Whitelock did allow that the poem was not "immune from modification during the period that separates this Christian author from the date of the extant manuscript," yet she also

¹⁶⁷Howe, "Historicist Approaches," O'Keefe, *Reading Old English Texts*, 83-84. More specifically, Howe writes that "a contemporary historicist critic would argue that Girvan offers little independent or non-literary evidence for his reconstruction of seventh-century Anglo-Saxon England, and in fact creates his vision of that era largely from *Beowulf*. In this circular exercise, Girvan draws from *Beowulf* to create a seventh-century context that he will then use to date the text" (*ibid.*, 84). Liuzza has pointed out that the circularity of historical arguments related to literary subjects is often inevitable: "Texts and the cultures in which they are created exist in a dialectical relation of mutual interpretability; rarely is there an uninterpreted given, a fixed standpoint, a context which is not also a text in need of decipherment, or a material object which is not also the bearer of an immaterial meaning whose precise tenor can only be approximated by the modern critic, and then often by reference to literary works" (Liuzza, "On the Dating of *Beowulf*," Baker, *Beowulf: Basic Readings*, 285-86).

¹⁶⁸Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* (1951; reprint Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 4-5.

stated that “the work makes on me, as it has on others, so strong an impression of homogeneity that I believe later alterations have not materially changed the general conception and purpose of the man whom I call ‘the *Beowulf* poet’.”¹⁶⁹ For Whitelock then, understanding this poet’s intentions had a lot to do with understanding his eighth-century court and broader social milieu, the oral and other cultural traditions upon which an eighth-century poet might have drawn, as well as his and his audience’s eighth-century sense of Christian doctrines and teaching and art, and this is why, for Whitelock, the poem, written by “a subtle and sophisticated poet” for “an alert and intelligent audience,”¹⁷⁰ was ultimately about religious (and even, socio-cultural) edification. Even more importantly, as regards the assumed “gap” between *Beowulf*’s supposed original ecriture and its surviving “copy,” Whitelock did not believe that a poem^m which praised the Danes could have been written during or after the Viking raids.¹⁷¹ In 1983, in *Beowulf: The Poem and Its Tradition*,¹⁷² John D. Niles argued that the poet’s ambiguous depiction of the Danes meant that the poem’s composition could very well have been in the tenth

¹⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁷¹Liuzza has written of Whitelock’s thesis that “Assumptions about the nature of the poet and his audience—like all assumptions about human cultural history—rely as much on prejudice and desire as on research; Whitelock spoke, perhaps, from experience of the English attitude toward German culture in the second World War . . . and could not imagine a Viking-Age collaborationist composing *Beowulf*” (Liuzza, “On the Dating of *Beowulf*,” Baker, *Beowulf: Basic Readings*, 285).

¹⁷²John D. Niles, *Beowulf: The Poem and Its Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

century, an argument first made by Levin Schücking in 1917.¹⁷³ This supposition has provided the foundation for much of Niles' interpretive work with the poem, the most important, perhaps, being his 1993 article, "Locating *Beowulf* in Literary History," in which he refined his ideas concerning *Beowulf*'s possible composition date to "not earlier than the reign of Alfred and probably during the reign of one of his immediate successors, possibly Aethelstan, who was chosen king by both Mercians and West Saxons in 924."¹⁷⁴ Niles was mainly concerned, on an interpretive level, with showing the kind of "ideological work" he believed the poem "did" within its time of composition, and the tenth century, a transitional period of major cross-cultural crisis and change in England,¹⁷⁵ provides Niles with the perfect setting within which to explore a perspective that involved, as he wrote, "looking upon Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry as a discourse, in Foucault's sense of a corporate means for dealing with a subject and authorizing views of it."¹⁷⁶ Indeed, as Liuzza has written, "a late *Beowulf* is a text in some ways more interesting to the contemporary reader than a pre-Viking Age poem, because it is more involved in irony,

¹⁷³See Levin Schücking, "Wann entstand der *Beowulf*? Glossen, Zweifel und Fragen," *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 42 (1917): 347-410.

¹⁷⁴John D. Niles, "Locating *Beowulf* in Literary History," *Exemplaria* 5, no. 1 (March 1993): 101.

¹⁷⁵More specifically, Niles wrote that "by the time this poem was put down in writing, the English-speaking peoples of Britain had . . . weathered the storms of Viking invasions and had established control of a somewhat turbulent Anglo-Scandinavian society. They . . . had developed a single kingdom, built largely on the Carolingian model and administered through coinage, written documents, and a state bureaucracy. The changes that affected the society to which *Beowulf* pertains were momentous, and by their workings the nation that we call England came into being" (Niles, "Locating *Beowulf* in Literary History": 81).

¹⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 79.

politics, and the self-conscious ambiguities of literary perspective.”¹⁷⁷ Following this perspective, Niles saw *Beowulf* as a product of a society that used writing “to express an ideology capable of persuading people to be governed and rulers to govern well.”¹⁷⁸ Ultimately, Niles saw *Beowulf* as “a vehicle for political work” which was ideological on an ethnic as well as an ethical level, and he challenged other scholars to “define more exactly the nature of the syncretistic system of thought that underlies this narrative and lends it ethical and spiritual significance.”¹⁷⁹

Just as Girvan’s and Whitelock’s perspectives were rooted, to a certain extent, in the critical traditions of their times, so is Niles’s perspective obviously sensitive to contemporary ways of looking at history and texts, in which ideology and its relationship to culture, more so than “the artist’s intention” or “theme” (historic or aesthetic), is paramount to understanding the multiple textures of a work of art. In Girvan’s work with the poem, “the age” (an entity thought at that time to be coherent and unified in terms of its features—social, cultural, and otherwise) is emphasized, in Whitelock’s work it is “the poet and his audience” (entities, again, thought to be coherent and somewhat unified, especially during the heyday of New Criticism when Whitelock’s book was written), and in Niles’s work it is the ways in which “the age,” “the poet,” and “the audience” are constructed and constrained by the conflicting ideologies that “speak” them, and in turn, “speak” the poem itself. In Girvan’s and Whitelock’s work with the poem, text and

¹⁷⁷Liuzza, “On the Dating of *Beowulf*,” Baker, *Beowulf: Basic Readings*, 285.

¹⁷⁸Niles, “Locating *Beowulf* in Literary History”: 81.

¹⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 108.

context, as well as the aesthetic of the poet and the historical time in which he wrote, once pinpointed and elucidated carefully, are fairly stable entities capable of withstanding repeated critical assays; in Niles' work with the poem, text and the most probable socio-historical contexts represent a complex of conflicting tensions and politics that are productive of multiple meanings, or *cultures*. In all cases, as well as in the many studies that were and continue to be influenced by such critical ways of thinking about the poem's meaning and historical significance, the underlying assumption is that *Beowulf*, as a poem, belongs to an age earlier than its compilation with other manuscripts in a decidedly medieval codex.

For Kiernan, there is no long and complicated (or even shorter) history of transmission, and he compiles a mass of paleographic, codicological, linguistic, and historic evidence to make the case that, although the *Beowulf* manuscript may not be "original," in the sense that it is the first written rendering of the poem (a claim no one could substantiate with any amount of existing evidence, unless we were to some day find a note in the rubble of an ancient monastery claiming, "I, Brother Humbert, wrote *Beowulf* in 1026"), for, as Kiernan writes, the manuscript "is certainly a copy, for the scribal errors are, for the most part, copying errors: but the transmission of *Beowulf* may have only been from the poet's wax tablets to the extant MS."¹⁸⁰ More specifically, Kiernan believes that "[e]vidence from the gatherings, and the corroborative evidence from the fitt numbers, indicate the poem was revised in the course of being copied."¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, 171.

¹⁸¹*Ibid.*

Further, in what is the more contentious of Kiernan's discoveries, "[t]he indications are that two distinct poems were combined for the first time in our extant MS, and that many years after the MS was copied, the second scribe was still working with it."¹⁸² For Kiernan, the value of accepting his "incredible" thesis that the *Beowulf* manuscript is only one or two steps removed from its archetype is that it fully justifies new investigations into the extant manuscript, and therefore renews and replenishes the study of the poem's possible meanings—cultural, historical, and otherwise. At the very same time, however, that Kiernan's 1981 study attempts to resuscitate and restore the "authority" of the *Beowulf* manuscript—long held to be, along with most other Old English manuscripts, full of scribal corruption and inaccuracies¹⁸³—he simultaneously unsettles the authority of the codex as an Anglo-Saxon *compilatio*, for, as he himself writes, "[i]t is important to know about the construction of composite codices, which were assembled by enthusiastic antiquarians, like Nowell and Cotton, often enough after the original codices had been disassembled and otherwise transmogrified."¹⁸⁴ And even for a scholar like Kiernan, who practices his manuscript scholarship with a high level of meticulousness and precision, and with state-of-the-art technologies, the question of the Nowell codex's texts possible prior transmogrifications is a perpetually open one, and therefore, the question of "meaning," as

¹⁸²*Ibid.*

¹⁸³For the seminal work on the topic of authority in Old English verse manuscripts (which work Kiernan is directly confronting in his 1981 study), see Kenneth Sisam, "Notes on Old English Poetry: The Authority of Old English Poetical Manuscripts," *Studies in the History of Old English Literature*, 29-44. This essay, originally published in 1946, was widely influential, especially in its support of the necessity for conjectural readings when editing Old English verse.

¹⁸⁴Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, 168.

regards all the possible relationships between those texts, must begin its essays with the understanding that the manuscript is a kind of Chinese puzzle box, in which the Anglo-Saxon artifact lies “bound” within a series of late medieval and early modern enclosures, which enclosures themselves are currently bound, and even “boxed up,” as it were, within Victorian, modern and postmodern containers.¹⁸⁵

There is another matter that complicates our understanding of the “original” binding (or bindings) of the texts within the Nowell codex, and that is Madden’s and Gough’s framing of the manuscript folios in the mid-nineteenth century. Andrew Prescott has written that, in 1837, when Frederic Madden became Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum, he was “prompted by the discovery of a great mass of unrestored fragments of Cotton manuscripts lying forgotten in a garret room . . . to have all the manuscripts fully restored. He used a binder named Henry Gough to inlay each leaf of the damaged vellum manuscripts.”¹⁸⁶ On August 7, 1845, Madden wrote in his diary that “Gough is getting on nicely with the restoration of the injured vellum manuscripts and brought me up today the Bede of the 8th century, Tib. A. XIV, and the Beowulf and other Saxon treatises, Vitell. A. XV, both inlaid and perfectly repaired and restored.”¹⁸⁷ Kiernan has written that the new binding was “a remarkable piece of craftsmanship, as well as of

¹⁸⁵These modern and postmodern “containers,” in my mind, include everything from its old display case in its former location in the British Museum, Madden’s and Gough’s 1845 paper frames, the glass box within which the manuscript is now housed for public display, Kiernan’s CD-ROM version, and even the new British Library itself.

¹⁸⁶Andrew Prescott, “The Electronic Beowulf and Digital Restoration,” *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 12 (1997): 185-95— [cited 1 April 2001]. Available from www.uky.edu/%7EKiernan/eBeowulf/ajp-llc.htm.

¹⁸⁷Qtd. in Prescott, “The Electronic Beowulf.”

preservation, even though the threads and folds of the original gatherings had to be sacrificed—if indeed they had not already been destroyed by the fire.”¹⁸⁸ Although Madden’s and Gough’s preservation work was technically expert for its time, and did serve the purpose of protecting the manuscript from further textual loss, as Prescott has written, the manuscript’s preservation “came at a price. In order to have a retaining edge for the paper frame, Gough had to conceal letters around the edge of the verso of each leaf. Julius Zupitza (editor of the Early English Text Society’s 1882 edition) lamented the loss of these letters, and attempted to make them out by holding them up to the light.”¹⁸⁹ Zupitza made it clear in the preface to his edition that he “grudged no pains in trying to decipher as much of what is covered is possible,”¹⁹⁰ and his edition was authoritative for many generations of scholars who assumed his readings of covered text were accurate, especially since he referred troublesome areas to the authority of Thorkelin’s transcripts, the originals of which he had in his possession while working with the manuscript at the British Museum. One has to consider, however, how the verification of Zupitza’s readings of covered text might have altered all the scholarly editions and critical writing upon the text that followed it. Kevin Kiernan has pointed out that Kemp Malone, “who could have used modern artificial lighting to verify them [the covered readings] for his facsimile

¹⁸⁸Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, 68. The loss of threads and folds is significant, for, according to Kiernan, “it greatly complicates the normally simple process of collation” (*ibid.*, 70), and therefore, Kiernan’s own theses regarding the compilation of the Nowell codex rests upon what he himself terms incomplete grounds.

¹⁸⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰Julius Zupitza, “Preliminary Notice,” *Beowulf: Autotypes of the Unique Cotton MS. Vitellius A xv in the British Museum, with a Transliteration and Notes*, ed. Julius Zupitza, Early English Text Society, Original Series, vol. 77 (London: N. Trübner & Co, 1882), vi.

edition of the Nowell codex, made no special effort to read beneath the frames,” and Malone’s “cautious, yet fundamental reliance on Zupitza for covered readings repeatedly appears in phrases like ‘gone or covered’ and ‘may or may not be whole’, corresponding to analogous statements in Zupitza’s notes.”¹⁹¹ Working with the aid of fibre-optic light in the summers of 1982 and 1983, Kiernan was able to reveal that although Zupitza’s notes were “extremely accurate as far as they go,” nevertheless, they “do not record hundreds of letters and parts of letters that still survive in the manuscript, recto and verso.”¹⁹² More specifically, Kiernan discovered “forty-nine whole letters and ten virtually whole letters where Zupitza saw nothing, 118 whole letters where he saw only a part of a letter, and 171 parts of letters where he saw either nothing at all or considerably less than what actually remains in the manuscript.”¹⁹³ Kiernan’s discovery, as well as his collation of Zupitza’s and Malone’s notes with his own readings, demonstrated many places where both Zupitza’s and Malone’s text readings and notes were deficient, and we would do well to consider how many critical interpretations of the text’s meaning have rested upon a recourse to only one or both of these facsimile editions, both of which are *copies* of a text whose *disposition* had been materially altered by Madden’s and Gough’s paper frames. And the act of copying the text itself, by means (in both cases) of a photographic medium, had to have carried with it a certain degradation of “readability” of the original.

¹⁹¹Kevin S. Kiernan, “The state of the *Beowulf* manuscript 1882-1983,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 13 (1984): 24, n. 8. Malone’s edition that Kiernan refers to is *The Nowell Codex (British Museum Cotton Vitellius A. XV, Second MS)*, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile, vol. 12 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde & Bagger, 1963).

¹⁹²*Ibid.*

¹⁹³*Ibid.*, 25.

It has been conventionally assumed that from the time of its removal to the British Museum in 1757 until Madden's and Gough's framing and rebinding of the manuscript that *Beowulf* suffered textual loss (in the neighborhood of 1,900 letters) due to the handling of the manuscript in the Museum library, where it was made freely available to readers in the late 1700s. Furthermore, according to Prescott, the textual loss may have been made worse "by a misguided attempt to bind up the manuscript undertaken by the Museum binder Elliott under the direction of Joseph Planta at the time he was preparing his catalogue of the Cotton collection between 1793 and 1796. Since Elliott's binding apparently did not protect the fragile edges of the manuscript, it did little to stop the gradual crumbling away of the manuscript."¹⁹⁴ One could say that the ultimate value of Madden's and Gough's binding in 1845 was in keeping the already damaged edges of the manuscript pages secure until the proper technologies could emerge for capturing and preserving the fragile text. Kevin Kiernan has maintained that, regardless of textual loss due to handling by readers, "[f]or the most part the *Beowulf* manuscript is surprisingly well preserved and easy to read. Even the 2,000 or so letters that eventually crumbled from the edges of the Cottonian Library fire in 1731 are usually saved or restored in one way or another by the later eighteenth-century Thorkelin transcripts."¹⁹⁵ Nevertheless,

¹⁹⁴*Ibid.* Prescott further mentions that there are records of the manuscript being used by Sharon Turner sometime before 1805, by Conybeare in 1817, by Frederic Madden in 1824, by Grundtvig in 1829, by Benjamin Thorpe in 1830, and by Kemble sometime before 1833, and that "[e]very time one of these readers used the manuscript, more pieces of text fell off the edges and ended their life on the floor of the British Museum" (*ibid.*).

¹⁹⁵Kevin S. Kiernan, "Digital Image Processing and the *Beowulf* Manuscript," *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 6 (1991): 20-27— [cited 1 April 2001]. Available from www.uky.edu/~%7Kiernan/eBeowulf/ksk-llc/htm.

Kiernan has also asserted that “it must be admitted that the current binding is not a safe or useful way to preserve a treasure of the stature of *Beowulf*.”¹⁹⁶ Specifically, Kiernan argued in 1984 that since “the vellum leaves are cockled and perhaps somewhat thicker than their paper frames, the binding is actually much smaller than the codex is meant to bind. Thus the covers give little protection, since the book is always ajar.”¹⁹⁷ While Kiernan originally would have liked to have seen the manuscript leaves removed from the paper frames, and the vellum resuscitated by chemical means, he ultimately concluded that the paper frames, since “some chips of vellum are now held in place by tape alone,” should not be removed,¹⁹⁸ and he turned his attention to the various ways new photographic and digital technologies could enhance a facsimile edition of the manuscript, and which would also assist him in providing more primary evidence for the provocative assertions he had made in his 1981 study of the manuscript. According to Kiernan, the use of digital image processing to produce an electronic facsimile of the manuscript, “while providing no miraculous new sightings, does help us to see some things we have and have not been looking for.”¹⁹⁹ Specifically, as stated above, Kiernan has been interested in rescuing the text hidden beneath Madden’s and Gough’s frames, as well as layers of scribal correction and rewriting that could provide compelling clues to the dating of the poem’s *écriture*—an *écriture*, moreover, as previously indicated, he feels may be contemporaneous with the

¹⁹⁶Kiernan, “The state of the *Beowulf* manuscript”: 40.

¹⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 40-41.

¹⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁹⁹*Ibid.*

manuscript's original production. Kiernan has used powerful medical imaging technology for *The Electronic Beowulf*, a CD-ROM edition of the poem (release date: 2000) that he produced in conjunction with Paul Szarmach (Director of the Medieval Institute at Western Michigan University), the British Library Digital and Network Services Steering Committee, and staff members at the British Library, including Andrew Prescott, Curator of Manuscripts.²⁰⁰ Therefore, although Kiernan's electronic edition, just like many scholarly print editions, has a publisher (University of Michigan Press) and an editor who is a textual scholar (Kiernan, an English professor at the University of Kentucky), as well as a cost for the general "reader" (currently, \$150), because the project was initially instigated by The British Library in 1993 as part of its strategic objectives for the year 2000 to "increase access to its collections by use of imaging and network technology,"²⁰¹ I consider *The Electronic Beowulf* to be as much a product of library curatorship as of literary scholarship, representing as it does a remarkable achievement, not only of textual editing, but also of preservation, and even, *restoration*. Prescott has written that "although

²⁰⁰According to Prescott, hundreds of concealed letters were shot using fibre-optic light in conjunction with a German-made medical scanning camera, the ProgRes 3012, "covering not only the *Beowulf* poem but also the whole of the Nowell codex. Already, images of fibre-optic letters have been used by Professor Kiernan to help correct entries for the Dictionary of Old English. . . . In this way, the process of creating the digital facsimile becomes an extension of the process begun by Gough of conserving and restoring the fire-damaged manuscript, but one performed without direct intervention on the manuscript itself" (Prescott, "The Electronic Beowulf and Digital Restoration"). Of course, even Prescott himself admits that exposing the manuscript to certain types of light, even fibre-optic light, and to the higher temperatures the process of shooting the manuscript sometimes engenders, does raise concerns about wear and tear on the manuscript as it is being handled during the digital imaging process.

²⁰¹Kevin S. Kiernan, "Old Manuscripts/New Technologies," Richards, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, 54. On the genesis of the project, see also Prescott, "The Electronic Beowulf and Digital Restoration."

the final result reflects one man's vision of the manuscript, the creation of it has required a new type of collaboration between scholar, curator, conservator, photographer and technical expert."²⁰² *The Electronic Beowulf* is a stunning package that includes "a comprehensive collection of the images of the entire composite codex," as well as linked images of readings hidden by paper frames and scribal corrections, digital facsimiles of the complete Thorkelin transcripts and of Conybeare's and Madden's nineteenth-century collations between Thorkelin's edition and the original manuscript, an edition of Kiernan's 1981 landmark study, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, a glossarial index (with links to the University of Toronto's *Dictionary of Old English Project*), and search facilities that will give the Anglo-Saxon scholar (and student) unprecedented access to new comparative research tools.²⁰³ Prior to, but very close to the time of its release date, Prescott wrote that *The Electronic Beowulf* could "perhaps be described as a diplomatic

²⁰² Prescott, "The Electronic Beowulf and Digital Restoration." And I would argue, additionally, that this "new type of collaboration" marks a return to an older tradition (that predates more modern notions of disciplinarity), in which the distinctions between "author" and "librarian" and "scholar" were harder to draw. Callimachus, third-century resident of the Museum of Alexandria, was not only a librarian who curated and *copied* scrolls, but also a poet (hence, his initial presence in the Museum), a reader, and by virtue of his *Pinakes*, a bibliographer and literary historian as well. And I would argue as well that Sir Robert Cotton conjoined in his library the occupations of antiquarian collector, curator, librarian, bibliographer, and scholar. Colin Tite has recently shown that Cotton was not just a collector with a staff of librarians, but a librarian himself (see Tite, *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton*, 43-57). Likewise, Kevin Sharpe has argued that, whereas the collaboration in antiquarian studies between Cotton and the historian William Camden is well known, as is the fact that Cotton's library must have provided much of the raw material for Camden's history studies, such as *Remaines Concerning Britain* (1586), perhaps Cotton did more than just contribute primary research material to his teacher and friend. Specifically, Sharpe has suggested that "Cotton rather than Camden wrote the history of Mary of Scots' reign which was forwarded to De Thou for incorporation in his *Historia Sui Temporis*" (Sharpe, "Introduction," Wright, *Sir Robert as Collector*, 12).

²⁰³ An overview, with samples, of all the components and features of the 2000 release of *The Electronic Beowulf*, is available at The British Library's website, under "Digital Collections."

edition done with pictures rather than words, but even that does not convey the radical nature of the edition” because, for the first time, we will have “an image edition which draws together and juxtaposes all the primary evidence for the transmission of *Beowulf*, and exposes the different layers of evidence on which the received text depends.”²⁰⁴

One of the most interesting editorial features of *The Electronic Beowulf* are “image maps,” which offer the user-reader the capability to zoom in on particular areas long regarded as “cruces” of the manuscript (areas involving scribal errors or corrections, or covered readings) that have been enhanced by fibre-optic backlighting or ultraviolet photography and are accompanied by annotated explanatory notes. These legibly enhanced and annotated textual enlargements can be viewed alongside the unique folio, verso or recto, from which they have been culled, as well as alongside the relevant selections of the Thorkelin transcripts or the Conybeare and Madden collations.²⁰⁵ Obviously, these image maps, as well as the links to the manuscript itself, and to its eighteenth-century transcriptions and nineteenth-century collations, allow the *Beowulf* scholar an extraordinary means for reintegrating the *membra disiecta* of the manuscript and, as Prescott has written, “A user will not only have at his fingertips all the key evidence for the history of this text but will also be able to juxtapose them in ways which would be

²⁰⁴Prescott, “The Electronic Beowulf and Digital Restoration.”

²⁰⁵John Josias Conybeare made a collation of the manuscript with Thorkelin’s 1805 edition in 1817, and this collation, according to Prescott, is “an important witness to the deterioration of the manuscript at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries” (Prescott, “The Electronic Beowulf and Digital Restoration”). Madden made a more accurate collation with Thorkelin’s printed edition in 1824, which was prefaced by “an eerily realistic drawing of the first page of the poem, the only extant representation of the manuscript before its restoration in 1845” (*ibid.*).

impossible even if all the volumes were assembled in one room.”²⁰⁶ One could argue that *The Electronic Beowulf*, by virtue of collecting together the primary text with its primary transcriptions and collations in the format of a digital facsimile, constitutes a new “binding” of the manuscript, and by virtue of its image maps and search facilities, provides a seemingly endless series of combinations of new text “readings,” and therefore the conventional arrangement of the elements of the codex, as well as the conventional *disposition* of the text of *Beowulf* is altered to such a great extent that one can only begin to imagine the profound changes in the ways in which the poem will be received and understood by readers in the future. Instead of sitting in the hush of the British Library Manuscripts Reading Room, slowly (and perhaps, reverentially) turning the pages of the original codex, feeling the vellum under one’s fingers and the memory of an Anglo-Saxon culture emanating from the ink in the folios and the world’s memory from the millions of volumes of manuscripts and books all around, the future reader-user, sitting alone in his study (or perhaps in a cyber café) in front of his quietly pulsing laptop screen, will “click” from verso to recto, illumine a “covered reading,” “zoom in” on specific letters, and be able to jump from folio 130 to folio 172, or from line readings in the manuscript to line readings in the transcripts, without having to navigate the material interference of flyleaves, pages, and all the traditional apparatus of books (and all this while the scholar’s body itself barely moves a muscle). With broadband Internet access technology, he will be able to do this while also simultaneously ordering books on *Beowulf* scholarship from Amazon.com, e-mailing Kevin Kiernan to query him about an image map annotation, and

²⁰⁶Prescott, “The Electronic Beowulf and Digital Restoration.”

searching for concordances of portions of *Beowulf*'s text in Toronto's web-based electronic *Corpus of Old English Texts*. And with the advent of new types of wireless technology and computer miniaturization, one can easily imagine the *Beowulf* scholar of the future walking through the streets of a crowded city and wearing PC-powered eyeglasses and a jacket in which transmitters, chips, databases, speakers, and microphones have been woven into the fabric. To each passerby, the scholar is just a man walking down the street, when in fact he is downloading, viewing, and annotating folios of the *Beowulf* manuscript with voice-activated software and "wearable" hardware. In the technologically sleek and supple electronic study *cum* library *cum* marketplace of the future, where it will be increasingly difficult to draw the line between the "inside" and the "outside" of the university or library—between *the world of the book* and *the world*—the *Beowulf* scholar may find himself perched on a tenuous membrane separating the past from the present, where at any moment he may experience the vertigo of being wrenched out of historical time altogether.

Kenneth Sisam believed that the Nowell codex was, for the most part, a collection of texts intentionally compiled and bound together in the medieval period, "round about the year 1000," and that the separate pieces, ultimately disparate texts due to differing historical provenances and routes of transmission, had to ultimately be connected, on a significant literary historical level, by virtue of a shared pair of "hands" and binding, and this belief still holds water today, albeit with some modification as regards which pieces were bound together at which times, and this observation of Sisam's, much respected by his colleagues, most likely provided the impetus for much scholarship aimed at uncovering

the intentionality behind such a compilation (behind which, there is always the faint, beckoning image of the monastery or cloister whose library shelves supposedly held the original codex, and whose librarians may have copied and compiled its contents from disparate pieces rescued from the mists of an even fainter past, in which there may have been another library filled with scribblers, copiers and binders who had shored together the remnant memories of an even *more* distant past, and so on and so forth). This belief has been grounded, to a certain extent, in both a recognition, as well as mis-recognition of an obvious state of affairs, for while the codex containing *Beowulf* is obviously a deliberate binding together of different texts, the exact nature of when, where, and how each piece was initially bound—perhaps as solitary pieces, perhaps with other, since lost texts—and then came to be joined together in one volume called, finally, the “Nowell codex,” is obviously a complicated issue. Nevertheless, in both past and present time, the placement of *Beowulf* as the fourth item in the Nowell codex means that *Beowulf* is always read—when it is read with a sensitivity to its disposition within a specific manuscript context—within the “frames” (linguistic, aesthetic, historical, thematic, etc.) of the texts that surround it. And this is partially why Kiernan’s electronic edition of the poem promises to represent such a striking and radical departure in what might be called the conventional codicological understanding of the poem, because the supposedly “original” manuscript text is lifted from the Nowell codex and “rebound,” as it were, with other texts that, although long separated in historical time from *Beowulf*’s *écriture*, speak directly to the issue of the “original” poem, both recovering and supplementing its gestures simultaneously (and at a mighty speed not currently comprehensible to the person who

reads the poem as he turns its pages; one by one, whether in the original manuscript itself or in a scholarly edition). We might pause to consider, therefore, the implications of new technologies that simultaneously preserve and restore an ancient manuscript, such as *Beowulf*, with a keen and rigorous attention to getting every last textual detail of the folios as visibly present, clear, and accurate as possible (thereby throwing the text back into the past, as it were, if even just one hundred years or so), while also presenting that “original” manuscript in a package so dramatically modern and supple in its features, that the user-reader is able to position, frame, flip, and toggle the text in any sequence the software allows. *Beowulf* is no longer, in its electronic form, a codex, or even a book, but something else entirely, and we might ask ourselves if the distinction matters in our understanding of the poem. In their preface to *A History of Reading in the West*, Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier write that the electronic representation of a text brings about profound changes in reading habits:

First, it alters our notion of context by replacing the physical contiguity among the texts present in one object (a book, a journal, a newspaper) with their position and their distribution in the logical architectures that govern data bases, electronic files and the retrieval systems and key words that make it possible to access information. It also redefines the ‘material’ nature of works by shattering the physical connection that used to exist between the print (or manuscript) object and the text or texts it bore and by giving readers (rather than the author or publisher) control over the organization and the appearance of the text that they bring up on the screen. Thus the entire system for identifying and handling texts has been radically refashioned.²⁰⁷

Because *The Electronic Beowulf* allows the reader to “scroll” vertically through portions

²⁰⁷Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, eds., *A History of Reading in the West*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 26-27.

of the text, while simultaneously offering retrieval devices related to folio and line numbers, as well as indexical and glossarial elements, it brings together, to a certain extent, the ancient practice of reading the *volumen*, or roll, with the more modern practice of reading the codex, or book, but it does so in a way that implies a totally new relationship to the poem.

Although Kiernan could maintain in 1984 that, because of digital imaging technology, “the manuscript is in far better condition today than it was 101 years ago,”²⁰⁸ implying that modern techniques for manuscript restoration don’t just *preserve* the poem, but actually *recover* it (if even partially), nevertheless, he has also admitted more recently that digital technology has its limits, too—it cannot, for instance, “subtract the top text of a palimpsest and enhance the bottom text”—and that rather than “settling the text . . . digital image processing may ultimately oblige us to admit that we do not and probably cannot have an established text of *Beowulf*.”²⁰⁹ And I would argue that *The Electronic Beowulf* is itself a type of palimpsest that is most useful to the scholar who sees it, ultimately, not as the “most close to pristine” edition of the codex, but as yet another mediation between different transcriptions, collations, and readings of the poem, all wrapped, for the first time, within a package that allows the scholar to view documents alongside each other that, historically, have not been available for such a side-by-side

²⁰⁸Kiernan, “The state of the *Beowulf* manuscript”: 42.

²⁰⁹Kiernan, “Digital Image Processing and the *Beowulf* Manuscript.” As regards Kiernan’s work with digital imaging technology and Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, see also Kevin S. Kiernan, “Old Manuscripts/New Technologies,” Richards, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, 37-54, and his 1993 “Prospectus” for the *Electronic Beowulf* project, which is available at the British Library’s website, under “Digital Collections.”

placement, because, quite obviously, those documents are unique and fragile artifacts that cannot often be allowed to move or travel beyond the protected confines of the institutions which house them—in the case of the Thorkelin transcripts, the Royal Library in Copenhagen, and in the case of *Beowulf*, the British Library in London.²¹⁰ And, as Prescott has indicated, even if you could have all of these documents in one room together, you could not integrate them in the manifold and technologically muscular ways the electronic edition allows you to. And when one pauses to consider the plethora of modern *Beowulf* scholarship that has been generated on the basis, not of readings of the original manuscript and first transcripts, but upon the facsimiles, collations, and scholarly editions of those primary artifacts, and that modern scholarly editions themselves are

²¹⁰Interestingly enough, and in a bold move that had not been attempted by previous editors of the poem, Frederick Furnivall, Director of the Early English Text Society, requested that the Thorkelin transcripts be sent from the Royal Library, Copenhagen to the British Museum, so that Julius Zupitza might consult them while preparing his 1882 edition of the poem for the Society. In a letter dated August 14, 1880 sent to Christian Bruun, librarian of the Kongelige Bibliothek, Furnivall wrote, "I ask of you the favour, that you will send, as soon as you conveniently can, to the Keeper of the MSS in the British Museum . . . these copies of *Beowulf* by Thorkelin & Grundtvig, & let them remain there till the middle of September, so that Prof. Zupitza may use these copies, under the Museum rules" (qtd. in J.R. Hall, "F.R. Furnivall's Letter to the Royal Library, Copenhagen," *Notes and Queries*, New Series 45, no. 3 [1998]: 268). According to J.R. Hall, Grundtvig never made a copy of the original manuscript, although he did make a collation in 1829 between a handwritten version of his own, based on Thorkelin's transcripts and printed edition and Conybeare's collation, and the original manuscript, but this was a collation that would have been among Grundtvig's papers that were donated to the Royal Library after his death in 1872, and most likely, in 1880, had not yet been catalogued (*ibid.*, 268-69). In any case, Bruun wrote to the Ministry for Church and Education for permission to release the Thorkelin materials to the British Museum, and that permission was speedily granted in the same month that Furnivall wrote his letter (*ibid.*, 268). Most important, as regards our attention to the ways in which editions of the poem have historically been compromised by editors' inability to place the original Thorkelin transcripts alongside the original manuscript, J.R. Hall suggests that Zupitza may have only consulted the Thorkelin material over a two week period, and therefore, "Although Zupitza used them with general intelligence, the time he had them available proved to be too little for him to use them with particular precision" (*ibid.*, 270).

products of mediations between manuscript readings and all serious editions previously published, Kiernan's electronic edition of the poem promises to bring about a major corrective to previous readings, not only of the poem's text, but of its meaning as well. Birte Kelley has shown, through statistical analysis, that "well over half of all . . . [conjectural] readings adopted by editors from 1950 onwards had been proposed by 1857," and that "it is generally recognized that present-day apprehension of the text of *Beowulf* owes a great deal to scholars of the first half of the nineteenth century, for most editions carry numerous textual notes attributing readings to authorities such as Grundtvig, Kemble, Thorpe, and Grein."²¹¹ When one considers that Kemble's edition of the poem relied upon a manuscript reading that occurred at the tail end of almost eighty years of textual loss due to handling, *without* recourse to Thorkelin's original transcripts (Kemble *did* possess, of course, a copy of Thorkelin's 1815 edition of the poem, but most scholars agree that this edition is seriously flawed),²¹² one can only begin to imagine the sheer plethora of all the modern literary interpretations of the meaning of *Beowulf*—historical, aesthetic, or otherwise—that are grounded, to a certain extent, in his edition. Kiernan himself has famously argued that "since the inauguration of *Beowulf* studies in the early nineteenth century, scholars have shown surprisingly little interest in

²¹¹Birte Kelly, "The formative stages of *Beowulf* textual scholarship," *Anglo-Saxon England* 11 (1983): 247.

²¹²J.R. Hall has pointed out that, "[f]or 175 years, Thorkelin's edition has been ridiculed—with, admittedly, good reason" (J.R. Hall, "The First Two Editions of *Beowulf*: Thorkelin's (1815) and Kemble's (1833)," in D.G. Scragg and Paul E. Szarmach, eds., *The Editing of Old English: Papers from the 1990 Manchester Conference* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994), 243). In his essay, however, Hall also points out certain instances in the history of Thorkelin's handling of the *Beowulf* manuscript that "stress the intelligence with which Thorkelin conceived of his task" (*ibid.*).

the unique *Beowulf* manuscript.”²¹³ Furthermore, he has written:

Indeed, though most editors have of course consulted the MS for specific readings, I know of no modern ed. founded on the MS itself. The facsimile [Zupitza’s 1882 autotype facsimile] achieved its special status not because scholars had been convinced that it was a uniformly reliable reproduction of the MS (it is not), but because Zupitza’s ‘transliteration’ is actually a convenient restoration, incorporating Thorkelin’s readings wherever the MS was defective. . . . Thus by 1882, Zupitza had seemingly preempted the need to study the MS at first hand. Editors have neglected the Thorkelin transcripts for the same reasons.²¹⁴

Since 1922, probably the most often-utilized edition of *Beowulf* in the American and British graduate classroom (wherein *Beowulf* scholars are trained) has been Frederick Klaeber’s *Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg*, in which Klaeber admits his debt to Zupitza’s notes, as well as to Kemble’s reading of the manuscript,²¹⁵ and one has to consider the very serious implications that this has brought to the work of interpreting the poem’s possible meanings. For example, as stated before, there has always been much controversy over the dating of the *Beowulf* manuscript—the settlement of which would provide, at the very least, a more clear picture of the poem’s intended audience, which, in turn, provides a key to the poem’s “message”—and much of the fodder for this debate comes from the linguistic and historic evidence presented in the poem itself. But what if the scholar collects his evidence from a facsimile version, and not from the manuscript itself? Kiernan provides two examples of just such an implication:

²¹³Kevin S. Kiernan, “The Eleventh-Century Origin of *Beowulf* and the *Beowulf* Manuscript,” Richards, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts*, 277.

²¹⁴*Ibid.*, 278, n. 2.

²¹⁵Frederick Klaeber, “The Text,” in *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. Frederick Klaeber, 3rd ed. (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1950), facing 1.

Kemp Malone, who of course extensively studied the manuscript in preparing his facsimile of the Nowell Codex, nonetheless relied on a facsimile alone for the reading 'faer (?)', supposedly written 'in a much later hand' above line 2 of folio 179v; in the manuscript this 'reading' is nothing more than a smudge of dirt on the vellum. And C.L. Wrenn, who established **wun[d]ini* as a proof of the early date of *Beowulf*, unfortunately based his reading on a facsimile, too, for the *d* he believed to be lost was in fact merely covered by the paper mounting, and the *-ini* is clearly *-mi* in the manuscript.²¹⁶

Nevertheless, even with Kiernan's and The British Library's digital "restoration" of the manuscript, the "original artifact" is never recoverable (a palpable fact that Kiernan himself, as noted above, readily admits), and the manuscript (both Cotton Vitellius A.xv as well as *The Electronic Beowulf*, and every facsimile version in between) is indelibly imprinted and forever changed, as regards all of its possible uses and receptions, by the marks of its curatorship—a curatorship, moreover, that represents a historical process, not of institutional stability over time, but of vicissitude and change, albeit with some progress as regards methods of analytic bibliography and manuscript preservation. Therefore, when we wish to write a disciplinary history of Anglo-Studies, we would do well to pay attention, not only to the ideological uses of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts by editors, scholars, and educational institutions—a task Allen Frantzen attends to in *Desire for Origins* (1990)—but also to the ways in which those manuscripts were managed prior to being transmitted from the librarian-bibliographer to the scholar-in-the-reading-room to the reader-at-large. Ultimately, ideology is opportunistic upon what remains, and what remains in the unique manuscript containing *Beowulf* is an artifact, not of the Anglo-Saxon age, but of the early modern and modern library.

²¹⁶*Ibid.*, 281.

III Beowulf in the Palm of Your Hand

Daily occurrences lean every day into history. Both a human being and a thing turn one side to what is now, while with the other they look toward us or our successors out of the depths of past time.

Scraps of paper, telephones, meetings—i.e., daily routines—quickly become merely ridiculous, but later on grow to a monumental size, as they are parts of a totality carved out of the whole of experience in which many details irrevocably perish.

—Czeslaw Milosz²¹⁷

In Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, one of the cities described (or perhaps, imagined) by Marco Polo is Tamara, in which the streets are "thick with signboards jutting from the walls" and "[t]he eye does not see things but images of things that mean other things: pincers point out the tooth-drawer's house; a tankard; the tavern; halberds, the barracks; scales, the grocer's."²¹⁸ Furthermore, "[i]f a building has no signboard or figure, its very form and the position it occupies in the city's order suffice to indicate its function: the palace, the prison, the mint, the Pythagorean school, the brothel."²¹⁹ Ultimately, the visitor to Tamara has to scan the city as if it were comprised of written pages, and, as Marco Polo points out to the Great Khan, "the city says everything you must think, makes you repeat her discourse, and while you believe you are visiting Tamara you are only recording the names with which she defines herself and all her parts." Therefore, one can never really discover Tamara, but the effect of having been there, immersed in its signs and "text," is that when you find yourself in the empty landscape that stretches beyond the

²¹⁷Milosz, "Leaning Into," *Road-Side Dog*, 46.

²¹⁸Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 13.

²¹⁹*Ibid.*, 13-14.

city, "[i]n the shape that chance and wind give the clouds, you are already intent on recognizing figures: a sailing ship, a hand, an elephant. . . ."²²⁰ Such is the experience of the visitor to the British Library today who, believing he has glimpsed the world of the Anglo-Saxons in the unique manuscript containing *Beowulf*, has only glimpsed the words with which that world named itself and its parts, words which most likely came about through an artistic process of ventriloquism, and which have been tampered with in the various historical and cultural processes by which that manuscript was first produced, transmitted, and received.²²¹ And then there is the fact, even after we take into account all the possible ways in which the manuscript may have been shaped and reshaped prior to its acquisition by Sir Robert Cotton, that the codex had to be bound and ordered, lost and found, neglected and then belatedly restored within the collections through which it was ultimately accessed and read, and it also had to be notated—miniaturized and categorized, as it were—by the bibliographers, before it could be located and unfolded in the present moments of those editors, scholars, and translators wishing to understand the poem, and then represent it to a larger audience. The librarians and bibliographers, by their actions—some bumbling and ignorant, others more pointed and intelligent—and by the decisions they made concerning the best way to list and describe, bind and frame the

²²⁰*Ibid.*, 14.

²²¹We might also recall here John Niles' comments in his essay, "Appropriations: A Concept of Culture," that "Anglo-Saxon England is not out there but rather *in here*, as a feature of consciousness," and that it is also "*nothing other than what it has been perceived to be* by historically grounded human beings, from the time of the Anglo-Saxons to the present moment" (John D. Niles, "Appropriations: A Concept of Culture," in *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity*, eds. Allen J. Frantzen and John D. Niles [Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997], 209).

codex, set the initial starting conditions for how that codex would be received, how it would be tampered with or left alone, preserved or destroyed, read or ignored. The practices of librarianship, therefore, have had a profound effect upon the historical dimensions of literary scholarship and determine, in advance, all the possible receptions and uses, editions and reproductions of a literary text. While it may be true that a later bibliographer or textual scholar will improve upon his predecessor's description of a codex, just as Humfrey Wanley corrected Thomas Smith's mistakes, and later Joseph Planta corrected Wanley, and Colin G.C. Tite and Andrew Prescott continue even today to try to determine the "true" contents of the original Cotton collection by working digressively to locate and take note of all the manuscripts and books that might have originally resided with Sir Robert Cotton before they were dispersed or damaged or thoroughly *deest*, nevertheless, the first bibliographer of a collection—and in the case of the Cotton Library, as Tite has argued, that would be Sir Robert Cotton himself²²²—determines, by virtue of the categories under which he will order the contents of a collection, the interpretive frames through which that collection will initially be analyzed and understood, until the categories are changed and broadened by the next bibliographer, or scholar, and so on and so forth. The cognitive processes involved with literary scholarship, I would argue, are somewhat structured according to theoretical guidelines dictated by these historically-situated generic categories, such as "Vitae Sanctorum" and "Fragmentum Saxonicum" (categories in Smith's 1696 *Catalogus*) or "alliterative verse" and "charms" (categories in N.R. Ker's 1957 *Catalogue of*

²²²See Tite, *The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton*, 43-57.

Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon), and therefore literary scholarship, if not entirely bound by the catalog, at least initially proceeds by the path the catalog has marked out in advance. Conversely, bibliography has its limits, for if, at some point in the future, we are able to hold in our pockets the sum of all existing manuscripts and books on a silicon chip the size of a dime²²³—to be able to hold, in the palm of our hand, as it were, the universal

²²³On December 29, 1959, the Nobel-prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman gave a talk at the annual meeting of the American Physical Society at the California Institute of Technology, entitled “There’s Plenty of Room at the Bottom.” In what is now considered to have been a classic address, one that gave an important impetus to the field of computer and mechanical miniaturization (and hence to computer chip technology) and to nanotechnology (the science, not yet fully realized, of creating “nano-machines” able to manipulate matter atom-by-atom), Feynman asked his audience to imagine a time when the entire twenty-four volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* could be written on the head of a pin. Feynman imagined that, although something like this had not yet been attempted, nor could his audience readily conceive the means of doing it, since physicists had been so adept at developing technologies for magnification, such as the electron microscope, then they could just as easily reverse the process somehow with the aim of miniaturization. Feynman asked his audience to consider that if the entire contents of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* could fit on the head of a pin, then what about all the books in the entire world? According to Feynman’s survey of the holdings of the Library of Congress, the British Museum Library, and the National Library of France, there were perhaps twenty-four million volumes of interest which, when miniaturized according to his example of the encyclopedias, would take up about a million pinheads, which could “be put in a square of a thousand pins on a side, or an area of about 3 square yards” (Richard P. Feynman, “There’s Plenty of Room at the Bottom,” *Engineering and Science* [February 1960]—[cited 11 February 2001]. Available from www.zyvex.com/nanotech/feynman.html). Furthermore, Feynman predicted that “All of the information which all of mankind has ever recorded in books can be carried around in a pamphlet in your hand—and not written in code, but a simple reproduction of the original pictures, engravings, and everything else on a small scale without loss of resolution” (*ibid.*). As an example of the beneficial use of such a technology, Feynman proffered the following example: “When the University of Brazil . . . finds that their library is burned, we can send them a copy of every book in our library simply by striking off a copy from the master plate in a few hours and mailing it in an envelope no bigger or heavier than any other ordinary air mail letter” (*ibid.*). Feynman took his idea step further, even, by proposing that “instead of trying to reproduce the pictures and all the information directly in its present form, we write only the information content in a code of dots and dashes . . . to represent the various letters,” and he saw that, with this method that “all of the information that man has carefully accumulated in all the books in the world can be written in the form of a cube of material two-hundredth of an inch wide—which is the barest piece of dust that can be made out by the human eye” (*ibid.*). In addition to the kind of microchip technology developed by companies such as Intel Corporation, scientists have made great strides in miniaturization since Feynman’s talk, especially at UCLA where the chemist James Heath, along

library and all its copies—and if we had the capability to navigate and view this library with an electronic device the size of a palm pilot, we will have succeeded in tapping into the ultimate catalogue of written texts, one which makes possible bibliographers of all who possess it, but it will be increasingly difficult to know where to draw the line between what we might call the marketplace of texts and their public repository, between the production and preservation of books, between writing and rewriting. Kevin Kiernan's electronic "image-based" 2000 edition of *Beowulf*, sold as two CD-ROMs costing \$150.00, represents a collaborative effort between a scholar and his assistants at the University of Kentucky (Kiernan *et al.*), the University of Michigan Press, and the British Library that ultimately blurs, and even conflates, the line between the marketplace of *Beowulf* editions and the institutions responsible for preserving and making accessible to the public (in however limited a fashion) the manuscript itself. If the "national library" of the future is to be an electronic, universally-accessible public archive of texts—verbal, visual, and otherwise—which, increasingly, it is looking like it *will* be, then Kiernan's edition both preserves and makes accessible the unique manuscript itself (traditionally, the Library's function) as well as makes that unique manuscript navigable and "legible" within its proper textual and literary historical contexts (typically, the English scholar's function), and it

with R. Stanley Williams and Philip Kuekes of HP Labs, recently succeeded in building a molecular switch (see www.foresight.org/FI/2000Fenymen.html #2000Winners). In addition, President Clinton inaugurated in his fiscal year 2001 budget a National Nanotechnology Research Initiative (see www.nano.gov), universities, such as the University of Washington, have founded nanotechnology research centers (see www.nano.washington.edu), and private companies, such as Zyvex Corporation in Palo Alto, California, have already sprung up to develop the technology to make miniaturized machines capable of manipulating matter at the molecular level. It seems probable to imagine that Fenymen's vision of the future will come to pass, and that it will have profound implications for the conception and the execution of a "universal library."

does so in a context that weds the cultural artifact in its public educational domain to the commercial *agora*.²²⁴

Ultimately, the library, as the world, can never be fully contained, and therefore it always exceeds any structural boundaries we may erect and place upon it—architectural, bibliographic, and theoretical; nevertheless, the very powerful and human desire *to contain*, and therefore, *to know*, the world in all of its parts and particulars, creates an industry that leaves in its wakes institutions such as the national library (i.e., the British Library or the Library of Congress), the world catalog (such as OCLC's *WorldCat* or *Gabriel*),²²⁵ and finally, the cross-disciplinary scholarship of texts. And these institutions,

²²⁴It should be noted here that while new technologies are providing greater access to a wide variety of texts, and even to unique artifacts, such as *Beowulf*, that these technologies are not cheap, and increasingly, libraries will struggle for ways to pay for the new information technologies the public is already demanding, and it may soon be reasonable to ask the greater public, and even the scholar, to share in those costs. Andrew Prescott has written, in reference to Kiernan's electronic edition of *Beowulf* (an edition on which Prescott has been an important collaborator) that most of the arguments "in favour of the digitization of manuscript materials have been framed in terms of increasing access. . . . The premise has, of course, always been that digital images will be free or at least very cheap. This is a false impression created by the fact that governments and other bodies are at present willing to fund digital projects to keep their researchers in the technical vanguard. As programmes for digitization start to have to recover their costs, the free ride will come to an end, and it is by no means clear at present that libraries will be able to provide digital images as cheaply as microfilm or indeed photography. . . . At the moment, the costs of network access are borne by academic institutions, but this may not continue to be the case in the future" (Prescott, "The Electronic *Beowulf* and Digital Restoration").

²²⁵"OCLC" is the acronym for Online Computer Library Center, a for-profit corporation based in the United States (Ohio), which was originally founded in 1967 by a consortium of university presidents to "share library resources and reduce costs." In 1971, they introduced an online shared cataloguing system, *WorldCat*, which now serves 38,736 libraries in 76 countries and territories. In addition, they offer technical assistance to both private and public institutions wishing to build electronic libraries, and they also provide archival and preservation services, including educational workshops, pre-film preparation, microfilming and duplicating, scanning preservation microfilm, and bibliographic control and storage. More information about OCLC can be accessed at their website, www.oclc.org. *Gabriel* is the world wide web server for the Conference of European National Libraries (CENL), and is a project in which the British Library has taken a leading role. As their website indicates, "For those who enjoy acronyms, *Gabriel* might

of course, leave in their wake systems of methodology and disciplinarity and codification that not only organize and order and make accessible the "world" of texts, but perhaps also place restrictions upon what can be known and expressed at any given moment within the boundaries of those institutions.²²⁶ At the same time, the future would seem to herald the mixing and melding, and perhaps even the complete annihilation, of the boundaries within which institutions often define themselves and their functions. In 1995, at a meeting of the European Commission in Brussels, several pilot projects for a "world-wide

be said to stand for GAteway and BRidge to Europe's national Libraries," but "Gabriel also recalls Gabriel Naudé, whose *Advis pour dresser une bibliothèque* (Paris, 1627) is one of the earliest theoretical works about libraries in any European language and provides a blueprint for the great modern research library" ("General Information about *Gabriel*"— [cited 24 March 2001]. Available from www.bl.uk/gabriel/en/about-gabriel.html). The impetus for the project was an awareness among members of CENL that national libraries across Europe were developing unique online systems in order to broadcast information about their respective collections, but that there was "no uniformity in the way users can get information about or access to these [information] services," and therefore, "only a pan-European systematic guide can guarantee that all available services can be found and accessed adequately" ("*Gabriel* Mission Statement"— [cited 24 March 2001]. Available from www.bl.uk/gabriel/mission/mission-en.html). Gabriel therefore functions as a guide to the disparate collections and their information services by "providing a single entry point to the libraries . . . and by disseminating information about the National Libraries in a uniform way" (*ibid.*).

²²⁶Foucault has famously written of the ways in which disciplines (i.e., specific orders of knowledge in their institutional contexts) not only found intellectual discovery and discourse, but also constrain and set limits on that discovery and discourse, and therefore upon *what can be known* in that discipline at any given moment. In his now classic lecture delivered at the Collège de France in 1970, "The Discourse on Language," he asserted that disciplines are defined by "groups of objects, methods, their corpus of propositions considered to be true, the interplay of rules and definitions, of techniques and tools: all these constitute a sort of anonymous system, freely available to whoever wishes, or whoever is able to make use of them, without there being any question of their meaning or their validity being derived from whoever happened to invent them" (Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith [New York: Pantheon Books, 1972], 222). For a discipline to survive, it is in constant need of "fresh propositions," but those propositions "must refer to a specific range of objects" or are at least "obliged to utilize conceptual instruments and techniques of a well-defined type," and they "must fit into a certain type of theoretical field" (*ibid.*, 223). Ultimately, "Disciplines constitute a system of control in the production of discourse, fixing its limits through the action of an identity taking the form of a permanent activation of the rules" (*ibid.*, 224).

Information Society" were inaugurated, including *Bibliotheca Universalis*, whose seven founding members included the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Library of Congress, Die Deutsche Bibliothek, and the British Library. Their main objective is to "make the major works of the world's scientific and cultural heritage accessible to a vast public via multimedia technologies . . . [and to] exploit existing digitization programmes in order to build up a large distributed virtual collection of knowledge and make it available via the global communication networks," with the ultimate aim of establishing a "global electronic library system." Furthermore, "All documents would belong to the public domain."²²⁷ In 1997, the partners of *Bibliotheca universalis* compiled a list of projected programs for the creation of universal digital collections that would adhere to "encyclopedic, thematic or historic principles," which included "American Memory" for the Library of Congress, "Memoria Hispanica" for the National Library of Spain, and "Memory of the World" for the National Library of the Czech Republic.²²⁸ So at the close of the twentieth century, the

²²⁷"Bibliotheca universalis project: partners, objectives and achievements 1996-1998"—[cited 24 March 2001]. Available from www.bl.uk/gabriel/bibliotheca-universalis/bibuniv.htm.

²²⁸The American Memory Historical Collections for the National Digital Library is actually up and running, and can be accessed at the Library of Congress's website at <http://memory.loc.gov>. The American Memory project comprises over five million digitized items from over ninety historical collections, and provides access to traditional printed materials, such as books and manuscripts, as well as maps, films, sound recordings, sheet music, prints, and photographs. Nicholas Baker's recent book, however, *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* (New York: Random House, 2001), ought to give us reasons to pause when considering what our national and large research libraries have been discarding over the years (in favor of microfilm and other electronic media which may or may not faithfully or even clearly record all of the "material" aspects of original books and newspapers, and therefore, much material history is lost), which means that the "American Memory," whatever that ultimately means, can never be even close to complete, or rather, represents a version in which the texts of that memory have been abstracted from the cultural matrix of all of the messy complexities of the original history of their production, transmission, and reception.

ancient and persistent dream of constructing libraries “capable of welcoming the world’s memory” (Chartier’s phrase) receives a new definition, a definition, moreover, that assumes that the limitations of “place” that have always been inherent in such projects can now be overcome. In the *Bibliotheca universalis*, the prospectus of the universal library is rewritten for the digital age, and we might well ask how the bibliographer and librarian will define their functions in this new world.

D.F. McKenzie, in his 1986 book *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*, calls for an extension of the parameters of both the library’s and the bibliographer’s functions and then fuses them with an editorial and scholarly function such that bibliography would be not only responsible for what has traditionally been considered its proper function—the preservation, classification, and curatorship of books, along with the analysis of the material properties of texts—but also for the scholarly study of the production, transmission, and reception of texts in their proper social contexts, thereby creating a new bibliographic field, “the sociology of texts.” This is, I would argue, a richly conceived set of functions that could serve to reinvigorate librarianship, analytic bibliography, and textual scholarship all at the same time, while also making the postmodern literary critic-cum-cultural historian who regards textual scholarship as too narrow and overly positivist (and even boring) look weak-kneed in comparison. McKenzie himself argues strenuously that bibliography is best suited to take on the task of writing the cultural history of writing, publishing, and reading practices, and even goes so far as to say, “the text as a recorded form is, pre-eminently, a bibliographic fact. . . . No other discipline—and certainly neither history nor criticism—commands the range of textual phenomena, or the technical

scholarship, to deal fully with . . . [the text's] production, distribution and consumption."²²⁹

Taking his scheme a step further, McKenzie also argues for a new definition of "text," to include verbal, visual, oral, and numeric data, a definition that would put under the charge of "national libraries" and the discipline of bibliography non-book "texts," such as maps, sound recordings, films and videocassettes, television programs, computerized information, and so on. In McKenzie's view, the library in the Western tradition has historically been "too absorbed by books,"²³⁰ and needs to revise its purview to accommodate a wider array of mediums of communication, or *culture*. This is a striking departure, which McKenzie himself acknowledges at the outset of his book, from the classic statement of Sir Walter Greg that "what the bibliographer is concerned with is pieces of paper or parchment covered with certain written or printed signs. With these signs he is concerned merely as arbitrary marks; their meaning is no business of his."²³¹ Ultimately, McKenzie finds this and other traditional definitions of bibliography inadequate:

As long as we continue to think of it [bibliography] as confined to the study of the non-symbolic function of signs, the risk it runs is relegation. Rare book rooms will simply become rarer. The politics of survival, if nothing else, require a more comprehensive justification of the discipline's function in promoting new knowledge.²³²

²²⁹McKenzie, *Bibliography and the sociology of texts*, 45.

²³⁰*Ibid.*, 64.

²³¹Qtd. in McKenzie, *Bibliography and the sociology of texts*, 1.

²³²*Ibid.*, 4. It has to be noted here, as well, however, that McKenzie still sees the book as holding a prominent place in the library of the future, and he does not share the pessimism of those

In McKenzie's sociology of texts, bibliographers

should be concerned to show that forms effect meaning. Beyond that, it [the new bibliography] allows us to describe not only the technical but the social processes of their transmission. In those quite specific ways, it accounts for non-book texts, their physical forms, textual versions, technical transmission, institutional control, their perceived meanings, and social effects. It accounts for a history of the book and, indeed, of all printed forms including all textual ephemera as a record of cultural change, whether in mass civilization or minority culture.²³³

In McKenzie's mind, if bibliography does not extend its boundaries and concerns in precisely the way he describes, and if bibliography excludes considerations of "the social, economic and political motivations of publishing," it will "degenerate into a feebly

who predict the imminent "end of the book." In fact, McKenzie himself, as a scholar, is *most* interested in the history of books. He writes, "The book as we know it will, of course, remain an important form of text—for many purposes, the most important. I want nothing to do with the fashionable claims that—as Tom Stoppard might have put it—the pages of the book are numbered" (*ibid.*, 63).

²³³*Ibid.*, 4-5. McKenzie has demonstrated the practice of this "new" bibliography in his own study of the treaty of Waitangi, signed in February of 1840, by which forty-six Maori chiefs gave the queen of England sovereignty over their territories in New Zealand, *Oral Culture: Literacy and Print in Early New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1985). In this study, McKenzie analyzed the various intersections of a literate culture with a non- or pre-literate culture, in order to map out the "indeterminate relation between indexical sign and symbolic meaning" (McKenzie, *The sociology of texts*, 34), and to demonstrate what happens when Western customs of writing, literacy, and printing are imposed upon an essentially oral culture. Additionally, McKenzie wrote a study, "Typography and Meaning: The Case of William Congreve" (in *The Book and the Book Trade in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Giles Barber and Bernhard Fabian [Hamburg: Ernst Hauswedell, 1981]), analyzing the alterations made by Congreve and his publisher, Jacob Tonson, in the 1710 edition of Congreve's plays, which shows, according to Chartier, "how the status of a work was altered significantly by formal changes with no apparent discursive significance (a shift from a quarto to an octavo volume, the numbering of scenes, a note at the beginning of each scene recalling which characters are onstage, marginal indications of who is speaking, mention of entrances and exits)." Furthermore, according to Chartier, McKenzie's analysis shows "that the status and interpretation of a work depend on material considerations; against the 'death of the author,' it stresses the author's role, at the side of the bookseller-printer, in defining the form given to the work; against the absence of a reader, it recalls that the meaning of a text is always produced in a historical setting and depends on the differing and plural readings that assign meaning to it" (Chartier, *On the Edge of a Cliff*, 85).

digressive book list and never rise to a readable history.”²³⁴ McKenzie’s hope is that a sociology of texts will have “an unrivalled power to resurrect authors in their own time, and their readers at any time” and “to enable what Michel Foucault called ‘an insurrection of subjugated knowledges’.”²³⁵ The new bibliography will accomplish this, in McKenzie’s view, because

by dealing with the facts of transmission and the material evidence of reception, it can make discoveries as distinct from inventing meanings. In focussing on the primary object, the texts as a recorded form, it defines our common point of departure for any historical or critical enterprise. By abandoning the notion of digressive bibliography and recording *all* subsequent versions, bibliography, simply by its own comprehensive logic, its indiscriminate inclusiveness, testifies to the fact that new readers of course make new texts, and that their new meanings are a function of their new forms. The claim then is no longer for their truth as one might seek to define that by an authorial intention, but for their testimony, as defined by their historical use.²³⁶

It is important to note here as well that McKenzie feels strongly that the dominant anti-humanist strain in contemporary literary criticism needs to be corrected, and that “Bibliography has a massive authority with which to correct that tendency. It can, in short, show the human presence in any recorded text.”²³⁷ In addition, “bibliography can be an

²³⁴ McKenzie, *Bibliography and the sociology of texts*, 5.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 20. This desire to recuperate humanism, albeit with an appreciation of the insights of deconstruction and poststructural theory regarding the limitations of human agency, self-representation, and the understanding of history, is prominently evident in medieval studies in the work of Lee Patterson, who has written that we need a criticism that “insists not only upon the dialectical nature of its relation to its own time but upon the negativity of that dialectic, upon adopting an antagonist stance to the depersonalized, depoliticized, and tranquilized homogenization accomplished by modern American culture” (Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* [Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987], 72).

essential means whereby we recover the past,"²³⁸ an idea that jibes with the humanist notion that by understanding history properly, we make ourselves virtuous (or at least, we make our studies virtuous). McKenzie's scheme ultimately calls for an enlargement and expansion of how a library should be constituted and constructed, and of what the bibliographer's role should be in relation to that new model, and throughout his book the terms *comprehensive* and *inclusive* are invoked, thereby reinscribing, with a new and ambitiously postmodern configuration, the dream of a "universal library" that, according to Roger Chartier, himself a historian of the book, has been so pervasive throughout Western civilization.²³⁹ Indeed, of McKenzie's prospectus for a new kind of bibliography, Chartier writes that "The library latent in McKenzie's pages is . . . a library not restricted

Furthermore, he writes that "To grant the social totality unfettered sway over the individual, who is then reduced to a helpless mediation of historical forces that can be fully understood only by the modern historian, is to invoke an 'absolute historicism,' in Gramsci's phrase, that entraps us all" (*ibid.*, 74). One sees this line of thinking echoed in the work of Chartier, who has written, in regards to his own discipline, history, that, although history must reject the idea of stable, universal, fixed meaning, and also take into account the "tension between the inventive capacities of individuals or communities and the constraints, norms, and conventions that limit . . . what is possible for them to think, say, and do," nevertheless, the practitioners of historical scholarship must also take as their "special task . . . an appropriate account of the 'population of the dead' (de Certeau's words) . . . that are its object. If we give up striving for truth, an ambition that may be out of all measure but that is surely fundamental, we leave the field open to all manner of falsification and to all the forgers who betray knowledge and therefore hurt memory" (Chartier, "History Between Narrative and Knowledge," *On the Edge of the Cliff*, 20, 27).

²³⁸McKenzie, *Bibliography and the sociology of texts*, 45.

²³⁹It is important to note here that McKenzie does not foresee a national library in which all texts, verbal or otherwise, could possibly be assembled—in one place, as it were—but he does envision a comprehensive archive through the collaboration of several institutions. He writes, "it is not a question of creating a monolithic institution with the curatorial role of preserving all forms of text (the National Sound Archive is part of the British Library; the British Film Archive is not). What is important is the promotion of inter-institutional collaboration in the pursuit of a common aim, and the proper provision at last for the archiving and accessing, the bibliographic control, of the new kinds of text" (McKenzie, *Bibliography and the sociology of texts*, 61). Note McKenzie's use of the word *control* here, another indication of bibliography's desire to contain.

to books—far from it—but one in which all the texts offered by modern technology have a prominent place. Yet it is also a library in which every text must be available for consultation without the distortion ineluctably brought on by a change in its material support.”²⁴⁰

Ultimately, even though “place,” as a structural boundary upon the universal library, has been somewhat overcome in McKenzie’s vision, by virtue of a collaboration between various archives and repositories of texts, nevertheless, McKenzie’s future library, no matter how comprehensive, will exist in a technologically-advanced world in which the production and transformation of knowledge in an almost continual, ever-flowing state of transmission and reception will always be one step ahead of any system of organization that would seek to contain and control textual information. And I would argue, against McKenzie’s notion that the book, as a unique form of textual transmission, will still occupy an important and critical position in the future library, that with the increasing capabilities of computers to render and transmit texts *in their original forms*, the notion of “place,” in its strictest architectural sense, may be completely *undone*. In the future, “books” and “manuscripts” will constitute the *museum within the library*, and their digitized textual counterparts will literally circle the globe in pixellated fiber optic waves and bounce from satellite to satellite—Grendel will come stalking, not only through moor and fen, but also through time and cold space—and these texts will be far more open and susceptible to being *written upon* and tampered with than the original MS. copy of *Beowulf* somewhat protected in its glass case at the British Library. As Cavallo and

²⁴⁰Chartier, *On the Edge of the Cliff*, 84.

Chartier write in their preface to *A History of Reading in the West*, the world of electronic texts removes a constraint that has always been, historically, unavoidable: "a strict limitation on the reader's inability to intervene in the book."²⁴¹ Although, since the time of the printed book, the reader could make his presence known by inscribing that presence in the spaces not occupied by type (for example, comments written in the margins), he could not actually interfere with the text itself in such a way that the text was materially changed, but that changes, according to Cavallo and Chartier, with the electronic text:

Not only can readers subject texts to a number of operations (they can be indexed, annotated, copied, shifted from one place to another, recomposed); they can become co-authors. The distinction between writing and reading and between the author of a text and the reader of the book, which had been immediately discernible in the printed book, now gives way to a new reality: the reader seated before a monitor screen becomes one of the authors of a multi-author text; at the very least, he or she can 'cut and paste' to make up a new text on the basis of fragments freely extracted from elsewhere. Like the owner of many manuscripts who could assemble works of a very different nature into one collective work—one *libro-zibaldone*—readers of the electronic age can construct original texts at will whose existence, organization, and appearance depend only on themselves. Moreover, they have the power to intervene at any moment to modify a text, rewrite it, or appropriate it.²⁴²

One can only begin to imagine the sheer volume of texts possible within such a scenario, which, along with printed texts, may well bring to pass the "gaudy and unlivable present" that traps the Great Khan in Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, and it will be increasingly difficult to write the narrative of our intellectual history in the forest of so much data.²⁴³ And there

²⁴¹Cavallo and Chartier, "Introduction," *A History of Reading in the West*, 27.

²⁴²*Ibid.*, 27-28.

²⁴³There are some reasons, I believe, for the *Beowulf* scholar to celebrate the advent of new technologies, which may very well provide new means whereby *Beowulf* might be both better

will always be the question of what I would call "the texts that got away," such as the papyrus rolls burned at Alexandria, Cotton's fifth-century *Genesis*, and even the lost films reels of Orson Welles' *Othello*, not to mention all the e-mail messages written, read, and deleted in the span of only one minute. Although, as Chartier has written, "In the universe of remote communications made possible by computerized texts and electronic diffusion, texts are no longer prisoner of their original physical, material existence,"²⁴⁴ texts *are* subject to new forms, as well as conventional forms, of disappearance and erasure. To fire and water, we can add the "delete" key, the damaged disk sector, and the power surge. There is an ephemeral quality to electronic writing that makes it especially subject to leaving no traces behind it after it disappears.²⁴⁵ The *Beowulf* manuscript, having somehow survived Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries, as well as Sir Robert Cotton's generous, often unchecked lending practices, the fire at Ashburnham House in 1731, and

preserved as a unique historical artifact, as well as be "opened up" to be written upon again and again, thereby generating new "versions" that circulate to wider audiences in a wider variety of ways. I will address this subject in the concluding chapter.

²⁴⁴Chartier, *The Order of Books*, 89.

²⁴⁵This state of affairs poses critical problems to the historian dependent upon the preservation of archived materials. Regarding the difficulties that will be inherent in the future for the diplomatic historian, Michael Moss has written that "most narrative documents throughout the world are being produced on computers, and software, and that mark-up protocols are being developed to allow vast bulks of text to be searched very rapidly to locate references to specific information. This would suggest that the physical file of records as we know it may disappear. . . . marked-up documents will be held in texts bases that can be searched freely and easily transported to other platforms. The danger for the archivist and historian in this new world is that a great deal will be lost unless adequate management controls are imposed. Crucially, what may be missing from the documents themselves are the drafts and redrafts, which clog paper files but show clearly how a policy or decisions evolved and who was responsible" (Michael Moss, "Archives, the Historian and the Future," in Michael Bentley, ed., *Companion to Historiography* [London: Routledge, 1997], 966).

even the mishandling and outright neglect with which it was treated for many years afterward, still remains with us today, albeit in a somewhat damaged state. And it is precisely because of all the visible damages to and interventions upon the original, preserved manuscript that we can begin to reconstruct a history of the social uses of that manuscript.²⁴⁶ If forms do, indeed, effect meaning, as McKenzie argues, we might ponder how our understanding of knowledge will change after the disappearance of the book, for, as Chartier has written,

In the form that it has acquired in Western Europe since the beginning of the Christian era, the book has been one of the most powerful metaphors used for conceiving of the cosmos, nature, history, and the human body. If the object that has furnished the matrix of this repertory of images (poetic, philosophical, scientific) should disappear, the references and the procedures that organize the 'readability' of the physical world, equated with the book in *codex* form, would be profoundly upset as well.²⁴⁷

Likewise, our understanding of *Beowulf* is shaped by the form in which we receive it as readers, whether it be in the form of the manuscript itself, one of its many printed facsimile or transliteration editions, or a digital reproduction, and we should pay more rigorous attention to the ways in which the multiple forms of the text, historically situated, organize

²⁴⁶*Beowulf*, in its manuscript form, of course, has been so worked over by textual scholars, as regards supposed original authorial intentions and later material interventions upon the manuscript, that one could venture to say we are approaching the law of diminishing returns in this area. Nevertheless, a sociology of the various editions and translations of the poem that would explore the various ways in which social, economic, and political forces have impinged upon the production, transmission, and reception of various print and non-print versions of the poem in public, private, and institutional contexts, has not yet been fully taken up, and represents an area of research and analysis ripe for excavation. An example of one recent foray into the "sociology" of the text of *Beowulf* would be Allen Frantzen's chapter, "Writing the Unreadable *Beowulf*," in his monograph *Desire for Origins* (*op. cit.*).

²⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 90-91. We might contemplate as well the ways in which Kiernan's electronic *Beowulf* both conflates and collapses the manuscript codex and "book" in one fell swoop, thereby altering forever the possible forms of the poem's social reception.

our reading of it. As Cavallo and Chartier reemphasize, “we need to hold that forms produce meanings, and that a text is invested with a new meaning and a different status with every change in support that makes it available to reading.”²⁴⁸ Furthermore, the world of a text is “a world of objects, forms and rituals whose conventions and devices bear meaning but also constrain its construction.”²⁴⁹ Given the very fragile state of *Beowulf* in its manuscript form, and its susceptibility to the physics of decay, not to mention any number of historical disasters that could befall it—from fire and flood to the explosive devices of terrorists—the future scholar of Anglo-Saxon literature may very well be dependent upon its electronic facsimile, the form of which will both extend the understanding of a manuscript text to which only a very few scholars have historically had access, as well as constrain that understanding within the two-dimensional parameters of its digital analogue form. But, of course, the manuscript itself is most likely an analogue as well, albeit packaged in a more physically tactile form than its digital counterpart, for while a present scholar, such as Kevin Kiernan, may, with the aid of technology, “pierce” and “see through” the manuscript in order to peel away its various palpably physical and textual layers, in order to view the history of its making, both as a book and as a piece of literature, the electronic *Beowulf* is essentially a light show of digital ciphers and pixels which is highly dependent upon the silicon and circuitry of the hardware required to “run” it as a program. In the future, without the proper hardware, the CD-ROM disks may very well be viewed as the shiny baubles of a vanished tribe, and therefore, as just another piece

²⁴⁸Cavallo and Chartier, “Introduction,” *A History of Reading in the West*, 2.

²⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 3.

of the detritus of the past. Such a scenario is not entirely inconceivable.

In the much same way as the book has functioned as an enduring metaphor for the *summum* of knowledge, the library has historically functioned as a powerful metaphor for the repository of that universal knowledge, a universal knowledge moreover whose content can be contained and managed and made accessible, ideally, within the descriptive demarcations of the cartography of the catalog, and in the future, within the database of all the possible links between all of the existing catalogs, thereby giving rise to the electronic “world catalog.” McKenzie has given us a picture of the librarian as curator, bibliographer, and cultural historian, overseeing a vast repository of textual knowledges, with a keen understanding of his role as a public servant whose main job is to both preserve all the unique historical forms of textual knowledge²⁵⁰ as well as write a history of its cultural production and uses, and in doing so, he has demanded more of the library, in terms of its comprehensiveness, than has perhaps been envisioned before, and he demands it in an age when the very notion of borders and boundaries, clear lines of demarcations and their margins, will very likely be undone by the advent of technologies that will allow both unprecedented access to texts, as well as the interpenetration of all information all at once with instantaneous changes wrought at the same moment, changes, moreover, that may not leave visible traces. And therefore, “the dream of Renaissance

²⁵⁰It is McKenzie’s very strong view that the preservation and custodianship of texts, in book form and otherwise, is very much a public duty “because commercial considerations rarely bear upon the past with much responsibility to historic depth” (McKenzie, *Bibliography and the sociology of texts*, 62). Furthermore, “A principle of economy in the service of private interest renders all records vulnerable,” and only a “bibliographically informed concept of library service, dedicated to the public interest as a matter of principle and not of profit, will effect the preservation of such texts, guarantee their authenticity, and ensure access to them” (*ibid.*, 63).

bibliographers of making the particular place in which the reader finds himself or herself coincide perfectly with universal knowledge, thus putting that knowledge within grasp,”²⁵¹ is both perfectly realized and blown apart all at once. Nevertheless, I can imagine the job of future literary scholars, cultural historians, and bibliographer-sociologists (as McKenzie would have it) being extremely similar to the task faced by Anglo-Saxon scholars and historians today, and even by the paleographers, cataloguers, and librarians of the past—that of sifting through the pieces and remnants of the artifacts that have somehow endured the maelstrom of progress and time, and trying to preserve them while also dreaming them into wholeness. And I would argue that folded deep within the labors of this task are both the desire and the dilemma of Walter Benjamin’s “angel of history,” whose face is always inexorably turned toward the ruins of an irrecoverable past:

Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him piles skyward. This storm is what we call Progress.²⁵²

So both the textual scholar as well as the cultural historian, and even the literary critic of *Beowulf*, wish to “make whole what has been smashed,” but to what end, and for what ultimate purpose? For even the scholar who admits the limitations inherent in such a task nevertheless wishes to render the most accurate accounting of history possible. This

²⁵¹Chartier, *The Order of Books*, 91.

²⁵²Walter Benjamin, “Theses for a Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 257-58.

question demands a consideration of ethics as regards our proper relation to the past, a subject I will return to in the concluding chapter.

Chapter Three

Beowulf and Kemble in the Temple

One cannot cut out from the continuity of space and time an event as if it were like an atom; but the inadequacy of human language obliges one to talk as though one could.

—Simone Weil¹

Little animals from cartoons, talking rabbits, doggies, squirrels, as well as ladybugs, bees, grasshoppers. They have as much in common with real animals as our notions of the world have with the real world. Think of this, and tremble.

—Czeslaw Milosz²

Consider Franz Kafka's very short parable, "Leopards in the Temple":

Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers; this is repeated over and over again; finally it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes part of the ceremony.³

We can see in this parable the process of reading, and even writing, history in reverse.

What begins as a random, even violent phenomenon, becomes part of the sacred and, we can imagine, antique ritual—belonging to a time before leopards. What cannot be kept out of the temple, however, nor seen as naturally belonging there, is absorbed into the

¹Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Toward Mankind*, trans. Arthur Wills (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1952), 129.

²Czeslaw Milosz, "The Warning," *Road-Side Dog*, trans. Robert Haas (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 47.

³Franz Kafka, "Leopards in the Temple," *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories and Parables*, ed. Nahum n. Glatzer (1935; reprint New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1983), 472.

narrative frame where it will eventually accrete historical, and ultimately, symbolic value. The literal and material leopards, therefore, who, from the impulse of thirst alone, drink the sacrificial pitchers to the dregs *in historical time*, will undergo a transformation and enter into the realm of the *figurative*, wherein their physiognomy will be reduced to its aesthetic particulars, represented in our own time, perhaps, as images of leopards painted onto the pitchers themselves, within which blood has become wine. This type of transformation can be seen as a process of textualization, in which animate matter (both physical and psychic) becomes legible only at the moment it enters into the topology and lexicon of a generic script. This is also history as a dark comedy, in which the forces of rupture and change are naturalized in the theater of historical narrative, and thereby lose their significance as anomaly. The leopards get to keep, but also lose their teeth, as it were. Their stealth and menace, which most properly belong in the forest outside the temple, are made part of the tableau of the spectacle of culture, and it is precisely this spectacle that commands the attention of the historian who, by the very nature of his gaze, will often disremember the leopards *as leopards*, and will assign to them the function of *ideology in motion*. The historian is not altogether incorrect; he has merely disremembered what might be called *leopard history*, in favor of *cultural history*.

As regards the disciplinary history of Anglo-Saxon scholarship in England in the early to mid-nineteenth century, this chapter considers the extent to which the first English editor of *Beowulf*, John Mitchell Kemble (1807-57), has been disremembered in order to assign to him the function of ideologue and to cast him as a player upon the stage of cultural imperialism. In order to demonstrate how his two editions of *Beowulf* (1833 &

1837), as well as his historical work in *The Saxons in England* (1849), participated in the ideological movements and productions of his time, such as German Romanticism, British nationalism, and Western ethnocentrism, and therefore contributed to what might be viewed as the romanticized logocentrism of the contemporary discipline of Old English studies (and more specifically, of the study of the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* within that discipline), Kemble has often been *read backwards* into the tableaux of cultural spectacles in which he mattered much less and performed a more critical and iconoclastic function, I would argue, than is commonly assumed. In the process of portraying Kemble as an important and pivotal player in the discursive (and sometimes ceremonial) rituals of European romanticism, British nationalism, and modern textual scholarship, the rich complexity, variation, and mixed motives of his work are often elided in favor of fitting him squarely into the fixed topology of various ideologies. Therefore, he is the passionate devotee and acolyte of Jakob Grimm's "new" philological science who brings Grimm's methods from Germany into England where he applies them to early English manuscripts such as *Beowulf*, thereby revolutionizing Anglo-Saxon scholarship and putting it on the path of positivistic linguistic studies; or, he is the dilettante Germanophile and British nationalist who brings to his study of early literary and historical documents a desire to memorialize and commemorate the Germanic roots of England's past, thereby helping to found the discipline of Anglo-Saxon studies (and *Beowulf* studies in particular) upon a dangerous, romantic, and ultimately false ethnocentrism (which ethnocentrism then becomes part of the collective unconscious of modern Anglo-Saxon scholarship). For each instance in which Kemble is "remembered" as such, it can be shown that he was just as

readily forgotten, not only by his contemporaries, but also by those Old English scholars who followed closely after him, and even by ourselves. Furthermore, it can be shown that the ideological motives often assigned to his work, such as "nationalism," were of a different character and contained different connotations during Kemble's lifetime than is allowed or admitted in contemporary analyses of his work, primarily because those motives are viewed (often unconsciously) through the lenses of twentieth-century historical contexts.

As the scholar always leaves himself behind in the form of his published *textual remainders*, these remainders often serve as the *body* or *corpus* to which we direct our critical forensics, but unlike the physical corpse which lies *in toto*, sans consciousness, on the pathologist's metal table, the books, articles, letters, notes, and other written materials belonging to the scholar, all of which, even when placed alongside each other, are more like scattered and scattering pieces of relic consciousness than full body, are rarely to be found in one place.⁴ Just as some portions of Kemble's corpus of work have disappeared

⁴And this raises the question, of course, which will become more explicit as the chapter develops further, of how the disciplinary historian could ever render a complete (or total) account of a scholar's work or the most balanced account of how that work may have affected and been affected by the various discourses of social, political, and institutional milieus into which it may have entered, for the historian must apply his imagination to the record at hand, which record (the scholar's writings) is itself a product of the working of an imagination upon other records, which themselves are products of imagination, and so on *ad absurdum*. Jacques Barzun, in his essay "The Formative Effect of History," sums up this problem thus:

There is no point in writing history if one is always striving to overcome its principal effect. That effect . . . is to show the contents and character of the past, its vagarious, "unstructured" disorder, due to the energetic desires of men and movements struggling for expression and full sway. Hence the futility of trying to make history say something positive in answer to system and method. Histories are imperfect mosaics, unofficial reports, held together by a 'logic of events' which is clear to writer and reader because of their own animal faith in motive and reason. . . But, in the end, multiplicity defeats regularity and no one can turn from the

into the rarely visited nooks and crannies of various libraries, so have portions of the visible marks of his cognitive processes and scholarly rhetoric disappeared. Let us begin then, with a paper chase.

In July 1900 it would appear that some papers belonging to Kemble, including notes on *Beowulf* from 1834, Kemble's collations of the *Beowulf* manuscript, transcriptions of notes and collations from Rasmus Rask's copy of the Danish scholar Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin's edition of *Beowulf* (1815), materials for an Anglo-Saxon glossary, and notebooks on British antiquities, were sold by family members, but an exact inventory of these papers, as well as details regarding where and to whom they were sold, is not known, although some of these papers now reside at the British Museum Library as well as the library at Goucher College in Maryland.⁵ In 1934, two substantial sets of Kemble's papers were sold by family members. The first of these, being part of a larger collection of papers belonging to the family of Rev. C.E. Donne (who married Kemble's

record or the history feeling that "now he knows." (Jacques Barzun, *Clio and the Doctors: Psycho-History, Quanto-History, and History* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974], 123)

One possible solution, of course, is to strive for as many different histories as possible, all of which will involve the interplay of the critical imagination and the always incomplete record, and to seek in the reading of these various texts, as Barzun would argue, not "instruction," but "cultivation."

⁵Details regarding the dispersal and whereabouts of Kemble's private papers are culled from Simon D. Keynes's working notes titled "The Papers and Correspondence of John Mitchell Kemble (1807-57)." These can be found online via the webpage for the Royal Historical Society of the British Academy's "Gallery of Antiquaries," which can be accessed through the website for Trinity College, Cambridge at <<http://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/users/sdk13/chartwww/KemblePapers.html>>. Keynes has put these working notes together as part of a larger project of his that he has been working on since the early 1980's, entitled "Anglo-Saxon History: A Select Bibliography," which, in its third revised edition, was published in the *Old English Newsletter*, Subsidia Series, 13 (1998). Keynes's "Anglo-Saxon History" is also accessible via the website for the Richard Rawlinson Center for Anglo-Saxon Studies and Manuscript Research, Western Michigan University at <www.wmich.edu/medieval/rawl/keynes1/index.html>.

daughter Mildred), landed at Sotheby's where, obviously having profits foremost in mind more so than the desire to keep all of Kemble's papers assembled together, they divided the Donne family's papers into six lots that were marked and numbered accordingly, "536 BROWNING," "546 GRIMM," "547 KEMBLE," "549 & 550 LITERARY," and "559 W.M. THACKERAY." While there was a little bit of "Kemble" in each lot, mainly in the form of correspondence with well-known literary authors and scholars, the parcel designated "547 KEMBLE" was the largest, comprising thousands of pages of working papers, including holograph and autograph-manuscripts as well as transcripts, notebooks, drawings, and proof sheets. Perhaps most significant in this parcel were eighteen manuscript notebooks for Kemble's history *The Saxons in England* (originally published in two volumes in 1849), and the original holograph manuscript for his edited collection of Anglo-Saxon charters, *Codex Diplomaticus Aevi Saxonici* (originally published in six volumes from 1839-48). Although lot 547 was the bulkiest, it was not, according to the final sales prices, the most valued of the parcels. In fact, "559 W.M. THACKERAY," which comprised one album of about ninety drawings by Thackeray and two autograph letters (one from Thackeray to Kemble, and one from Kemble to another party in which he *discusses* Thackeray) that had been originally assembled by Kemble, an intimate friend of Thackeray's when they were students together at Cambridge, sold for £740, whereas "547 KEMBLE" sold for £5.10 to G. Michelmores, a bookseller in London (5 Royal Opera Arcade). Michelmores swooped into Hodgson's as well and picked up the Kemble papers that Mary Barham Johnson (Kemble's great granddaughter) was selling there for £2.15, mainly notable for having included material that Kemble had gathered for a seventh

unpublished volume of the *Codex Diplomaticus*. It is worth mentioning here that Sotheby's described Kemble in its sale catalogue as the "elder son of Charles Kemble,⁶ philologist and historian," and not as the first English editor of *Beowulf*.

What, we might ask ourselves, was this corpus of Kemble's working papers worth in 1934, not to mention how valuable we might perceive it to be today in relation to our own understanding of the history of Anglo-Saxon scholarship? Michelmores, with just the Sotheby's lot in hand, slapped on a price tag of £105 and promptly offered it to the library at Kemble's alma mater, Trinity College, Cambridge, where, most likely, they felt sure of making a sale. Their proposal, however, was turned down on the advice of a certain G. Lapsley who, although professing himself "inexpert in Anglo-Saxon matters," gave his opinion of the value of the papers "from the point of view of scholarship (history and philology)." He indicated in a letter to the Secretary of Council at Cambridge (T.C. Nicholas) that "the Toller-Bosworth Dictionary and Liebermann's classical edition of the Anglo-Saxon laws will have made Kemble's collections worthless except for the history of scholarship." Further, he wrote that since the materials (the antique manuscripts and books) Kemble used for his six volumes of Anglo-Saxon charters had not "since disappeared," his notes and transcripts were likewise worthless.⁷ Lapsley concluded his

⁶John Mitchell Kemble was a member of the famous English acting family, which included John Philip Kemble (his uncle), Sarah Siddons (his aunt), and his sister Frances (or "Fanny") Kemble, who was also an indefatigable chronicler of her own life and her family's exploits, penning more than ten volumes altogether, the most pertinent to piecing together a biography of John Mitchell Kemble being, *Record of a Girlhood* (1878; 3 volumes), *Records of Later Life* (1882; 2 volumes), and *Further Records: 1848-1883* (1890; 2 volumes).

⁷The *Beowulf* scholar will have to chuckle, or perhaps be amazed here, at the notion that a transcript of an old manuscript is worthless when the original manuscript has not "disappeared." If not for the two Thorkelin transcripts of the *Beowulf* manuscript, which manuscript sits housed

opinion by writing that

The whole collection would of course have much interest for the College, for Kemble was a great scholar and if much of his work is now obsolete he none the less made available a great deal of the material with which later scholars have worked. For these reasons I am of the opinion that if this collection were offered to us we should accept it gladly, but that we are not justified in spending £105 for it.

The Council Secretary let it be known in turn that they would be happy to have the Kemble papers as a gift from the bookseller to the College, but could "not see their way to buy them." Michelmore booksellers, perhaps not ones to be discouraged, conjoined the papers purchased from Sotheby's and Hodgson's into one group and listed that group in their 1934 (?) catalogue for £200. But still, no buyer. Over the years, Michelmore broke up the collection into smaller lots and slowly but surely sold off these bits and pieces of Kembleania until they closed down in 1955, at which point what was left, four separate lots priced at £118.25 total, went to Sotheby's to be auctioned off, where they were

today behind bulletproof glass at the British Library in its new location in St. Pancras, whole portions of the poem would now be lost to us (due to the neglect, mishandling, and deterioration of the Vitellius A.xv codex), and some words and letters would have also been lost to Kemble as he was editing and transcribing the poem in the 1830s. It is the opinion of J.R. Hall that, even though Kemble did not attribute any of his restorations of the original text to Thorkelin nor even acknowledge Thorkelin's edition, there are too many places where Thorkelin's and Kemble's editions agree to assume otherwise ("The First Two Editions of *Beowulf*: Thorkelin's (1815) and Kemble's (1833)," D.J. Scragg and Paul E. Szarmach, eds., *The Editing of Old English: Papers from the 1990 Manchester Conference* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994], 249). In any case, Lapsley's dim view of the worth of Kemble's transcripts indicates either a stunning lack of historical discernment or simply a solid belief in the safety and inviolability of the old charters. Interestingly enough, the Society of Antiquaries in London, although purchasing in 1942 Kemble's original manuscript for his treatise on German sepulchral antiquities, *Horae Ferales*, they declined in 1947 to purchase the papers relating to his collection of Anglo-Saxon charters, saying they were "not worth buying." These eventually found their way to Beinecke Library at Yale University. *Horae Ferales* was published posthumously in 1863 by R.G. Latham and A.W. Franks *without* the benefit of Kemble's original manuscript, which was missing at the time; the resulting volume is a somewhat bizarre compendium, therefore, of a few of Kemble's drawings and public addresses from the time of his northern excavations, 1849-1855.

picked up by George Harding's Bookshop (London), and then traveled to Perkins Library at Duke University, where they are still housed today.⁸ As the years passed from 1934 to 1955, Kemble was described in Michelmores catalogues variously as "Historian, Author of *The Saxons in England*," "Anglo-Saxon Scholar," and "Historian and Philologist," but never as the first English editor of *Beowulf*.

Although there are runs of Michelmores catalogues housed in the British Museum and Bodleian Libraries, there is absolutely no trace of a Michelmores register that might have indicated to whom and when the separate parcels of Kemble's papers were sold. Thanks to Simon Keynes at Trinity College, Cambridge, who has traced (and who continues to trace) the dispersal and present location of Kemble's papers, we have some accounting of where these papers ended up, and it is telling as to the interests of the acquirers, who, in many cases, would seem to have purchased materials that correlated to their broader collecting interests. Therefore, the Folger Library has materials related to Kemble's tenure as Examiner of Plays in London, the Library of Congress's law library has materials from Kemble's student days relating to "Collections for the Early Law of England," and the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin has a collection of letters from Kemble to Jakob Grimm. Ironically, even though Trinity College, Cambridge was Kemble's alma mater, the library there possesses very little in the way of Kemble's working papers, and

⁸The Kemble papers housed at Duke are a motley lot, comprising transcriptions made by an assistant on "Regulations touching money, coins, weights, measures, the assise of bread, etc.," correspondence dated from 1660-1716 from the House of Brunswick-Lüneburg transcribed by Kemble for his *State Papers and Correspondence illustrative of the social and political state of Europe, from the Revolution to the Accession of the House of Hanover* (1857), as well as chapter drafts for parts of *The Saxons in England*, notebooks, correspondence, poetry and satirical works, and assorted other random writings, including word lists, partial transcriptions, and even doodles.

the majority of what they do have (offprints of published papers and “scattered philological notes on a range of subjects, for example the *Eddas*, a mistranslation of *Beowulf* by Thorkelin,” etc.) only came to them in 1999 through the estate of Prof. Christine E. Fell, formerly of the University of Nottingham.⁹ In the form of his textual remainders, Kemble has traveled far beyond the confines of England and eminent British libraries to places as far flung as California, Texas, Kansas, Maryland, Connecticut, New York, Germany, and New Zealand.

Why relate these details at all, which, on the surface, would seem to interest only the most fevered of bibliophiles? Perhaps to provide a metaphor *in material form*, for just as Kemble’s papers and manuscripts were dispersed within his family and then to various auctioneers and booksellers, refused by his alma mater, gathered together and then subdivided in order to be dispersed again, with some parcels landing right back where they started (Sotheby’s), and with all of this movement of *pieces* now being traced by a contemporary scholar at Trinity College who wishes to present some kind of *whole* picture

⁹It should be noted here that the library at Trinity College does possess a first-edition copy of Kemble’s *Beowulf*, inscribed by him to the College. The fact that they do not possess other first-edition copies of Kemble’s publications may say something about Kemble’s attitude toward Cambridge after being turned down for two positions there he lobbied for vigorously: Protobibliothecarius in 1845 and Regius Professor of Modern History in 1849. We would also note here that the date (1999) of the purchase by Trinity College of just a few fragmentary materials once belonging to Kemble from the estate of Prof. Fell, juxtaposed with G. Lapsley’s rejection of over 4,000 pages of Kemble’s working papers and correspondence in 1934, is extremely telling as to the perceived worth, over time, of Kemble’s work as an Anglo-Saxon scholar. Even today, Prof. Simon Keynes’s, and therefore Trinity College’s, interest in *putting Kemble back together*, as it were, in the tracing of the dispersal of his papers, may have more to do with an estimate of the worth of the *provincial*, as opposed to a belated acknowledgment of Kemble’s stature as an important figure in the history of Anglo-Saxon scholarship. Simon Keynes, of course, does have a primary interest in the history and historiography of the Anglo-Saxon period, and Kemble’s status as both a Trinity man as well as a scholar interested in Anglo-Saxon history makes him a rightly compelling subject for Keynes.

of what Kemble left behind, but can only represent it as an ordered series of locations of dispersed *fragments*, our accounts of Kemble and his work as an Anglo-Saxon scholar often represent a reconstitution of a supposed whole out of the fragmentary lines of *portions* of his life and work. And this supposed “whole” is often divorced from what I would term the *stemmata* of his larger corpus, and also from the fullest possible representation of the historical constellation of the larger disciplinary, social, and cultural movements of which he was briefly a part, and which also, on occasion, ignored and even exceeded him. It is important to note here that this reconstitution of a whole may not always be the avowed critical purpose; rather, it is often the byproduct of different scholars with differing scholarly purposes always approaching the assessment of Kemble’s work from the exact same (and timeworn) biographical angle. For example, a scholar may wish to only say something about Kemble’s work as a transcriber and editor of the *Beowulf* manuscript, and therefore simply shed some light on the history of editorial methodology within the discipline of Anglo-Saxon scholarship (J.R. Hall’s and Michael Lapidge’s commentary on Kemble comes to mind here).¹⁰ Or, the scholarly aim may be to properly locate and describe Kemble’s work as a philologist as it pertains to the history of language studies in England within a particular time period, as in the case of Hans Aarsleff’s commentary.¹¹ Or, the scholar may be interested in seeing how Kemble’s work

¹⁰See Hall’s and Lapidge’s essays, “The First Two Editions of *Beowulf*” and “On the Emendation of Old English Texts,” respectively, in Scragg and Szarmach, *The Editing of Old English*, 239-50, 53-67.

¹¹See Hans Aarsleff’s *The Study of Language in England, 1780-1860* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 161-210.

as an Anglo-Saxon scholar contributed to the philosophical underpinnings of the modern academic discipline of Anglo-Saxon studies, which underpinnings are seen as tainted by “Germanism” or “romantic medievalism.”¹² Tapping another vein, and following in the critical wake of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), the scholar may wish to describe how Kemble’s work as a comparative philologist, historian, and Anglo-Saxon scholar, primarily in his editions of *Beowulf* and *The Saxons in England*, may have contributed to what might be loosely termed the imperialist, racializing, and nationalist impulse in English culture.¹³ However, in the process of always identifying Kemble primarily as a philological “pioneer” who “revolutionizes” English language studies, and by always linking him to Jakob Grimm and Göttingen in that respect (and there is hardly any assessment of Kemble’s life or career that does *not* do this, and perhaps it is somewhat unavoidable, given Kemble’s very real devotion to Grimm and everything Göttingen represented at the turn of the nineteenth century), Kemble’s work is inscribed over and over again as a kind of recomposition of the imprint of Grimm’s (and German Romanticism’s) long shadow. Moreover, this imprint is seen as thereby constituting the whole cloth of Kemble’s scholarly consciousness, which consciousness *spills over* in very material ways into the

¹²For two prominent examples of this type of approach to Kemble’s work, see E.G. Stanley, *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1975), 16, 28-32, 72-74, 88, 105, and Richard C. Payne, “The Rediscovery of Old English Poetry in the English Literary Tradition,” Carl Berkhout and Milton McC. Gatch, eds., *Anglo-Saxon Scholarship: The First Three Centuries* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), 149-66.

¹³For two examples of the critical work in this vein that include Kemble in their purview, see Allen Frantzen, *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 34-35, 56-59, 63, 71, 170, 195-97, and Clare A. Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest: History and Myth in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 49, 52, 66-70, 176-77, 180, 182, 201.

larger stream of English culture, and even affects its course. Kemble's work, in other words, whether as the textual editor of *Beowulf* or historian, is seen as having palpable effects upon not only the methods and practices of all *Beowulf* scholars after 1833, but also upon the very imagination of English citizens regarding what it means to be "English."

Kemble's work, I would argue, was generated within a richly diverse set of cognitive, academic, social, cultural, and political matrices in which different subjects, disciplinary knowledges, and events were always being "thought" alongside each other, the result of which was a wide variety of private writings and publications and even *actions* in which we can see the imprint of an ideology (and individual consciousness) always in flux, always in a process of negotiation with different cultural forms and contexts. And yet, the "first English editor of *Beowulf*" and "disciple of Jakob Grimm," as well as the historian and archivist, and the assessment of his work as such, is often separated from the young Cambridge student who went secretly to Spain at the age of twenty-three in 1830 to aid the exiled constitutionalist General José María Torrijos in his attempt (which ultimately failed) to overthrow the existing Spanish government of King Ferdinand VII,¹⁴ from the editor of *The British and Foreign Review* who argued in 1837 for encouraging free trade because it was the "general interest" that united one nation to another, "not community of religion, nor similarity of speech," and in 1839 argued for an extension of the electoral franchise that went much further than the Great Reform Act

¹⁴Raymond A. Wiley, "Anglo-Saxon Kemble: The Life and Works of John Mitchell Kemble 1807-1857, Philologist, Historian, Archaeologist," in Sonja Hawkes et al., eds., *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, vol. 1, *British Archaeological Reports*: 182-85.

passed by the British parliament in 1832,¹⁵ or from the archaeologist who, in the last year of his life, while addressing the Royal Irish Academy, cautioned his audience against pursuing a field of inquiry which was so “narrow” it would exclude “the claims of others,” and urged them to consider their studies of their antiquities “only as links in one great chain, which embraces many nations, and many periods of human culture.”¹⁶ And how might a sense of the flux of Kemble’s thinking be applied to an assessment of his work, such that we could take into account the fact that the young Cambridge student who worshiped the ideas of Bentham and Mill, and would even stop to bow in front of their houses, later turned against them, or that the young liberal Whig who wrote a passionate petition in 1826 to Parliament in favor of Catholic Emancipation, in middle age polemicized against Romish influences in the Anglican church, saw the “squabbles of Whigs and Tories for power and place” as a “joke,” and also argued in 1840 for liberal cooperation with the conservative, reforming government of Robert Peel?¹⁷

In his book *Society and Cultural Forms in Nineteenth Century England*, the British historian Simon Dentith, drawing upon the work of Raymond Williams and Mikhail Bakhtin, argues that cultural forms structure a textual culture that exists as “a realised signifying system,” but, “the people who inhabit and use that system do so in an active

¹⁵John Mitchell Kemble and David Urquhart, “Nécessité d’une Alliance entre la France et la Russie,” *British and Foreign Review* 5 (1837): 296-319, and John Mitchell Kemble, “The State of the Nation,” *British and Foreign Review* 9 (1839): 273-319, respectively.

¹⁶John Mitchell Kemble, *The Utility of Antiquarian Collections, as throwing Light on the Pre-historic Annals of the European Nations* (Dublin: Hodges, Smith, & Company, 1857), 30-31.

¹⁷Wiley, “Anglo-Saxon Kemble,” 178, 221-22, and Raymond A. Wiley, ed., *John Mitchell Kemble and Jakob Grimm: A Correspondence 1832-1852* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971), 141.

way, constantly renegotiating and reinflecting the forms and conventions of that system to their own ends." Furthermore, "[T]he arena for that activity is the society they inhabit; it is only in the context of a particular set of social forces ('hegemony'), and against the background of other meanings which circulate within a particular social order, that cultural meanings take on their force and specificity—that they can 'mean' anything at all."¹⁸ Kemble's work with the *Beowulf* manuscript, therefore, is more than just the sum of what he learned when he sojourned as a student in Göttingen, and even more than the sum of what he either accepted or rejected from the texts of other scholars working with early manuscripts. Moreover, his relationship with Grimm, on both a personal and professional level, as well as his intellectual explorations into Germanic culture, are far more complex than we are usually willing to allow (or, perhaps, to perceive).¹⁹ Additionally, we often neglect to assess, in specific analytical terms, how Kemble's work might have penetrated

¹⁸Simon Dentith, *Society and Cultural Forms in Nineteenth Century England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 13.

¹⁹While it is true that Kemble initiated and pursued an acquaintance with Grimm out of a very real devotion to Grimm's work, especially in his *Deutsche Grammatik* (published in three volumes between 1822 and 1831), even described himself in a letter to Grimm as one of the "few [in England] who know how to honor and love in the highest degree the first of the contemporary philologists" (qtd. in Wiley, *John Mitchell Kemble and Jakob Grimm: A Correspondence*, 19), and dedicated his first edition of *Beowulf* to the German scholar, their relationship, although primarily one of mutual respect, had its disagreements and difficulties. A close perusal of their correspondence reveals many instances when they disagreed over matters of philology, philosophy, scholarly propriety, and even politics. As one example of this, Grimm once requested that Kemble review the English translation of Bettina von Arnim's *Goethes Briefwechsel mit einem Kinde*, which Grimm admired very much, but in a letter dated 24 May 1839, Kemble, in what was for him at that time a typical male haughtiness, wrote, "I hate to see woman out of her place in the great scheme which society has developed and God himself sanctioned. English women would not comprehend her journal, any more than they comprehended her letters—and God forbid they should!" (qtd. in Wiley, *John Mitchell Kemble and Jakob Grimm: A Correspondence 1832-1852*, 173). Grimm, more of a feminist than Kemble, was disappointed.

into the textual work of his contemporaries. Nevertheless, we are often content to let the tail wag the dog.

On the basis of readings of prefaces to Kemble's two editions of *Beowulf* (1833 and 1837), his letter to M. Francisque Michel that was published as the preface to Michel's *Bibliothèque anglo-saxonne* (1837), his historical commentary in *The Saxons in England* (1849), and his review of volumes three and four of Maucavey's *History of England* (which appeared in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1856), Allen Frantzen concludes in *Desire for Origins* that Kemble "accepted as the historian's chief duty the commemoration of the nation's greatness."²⁰ Furthermore, even though Frantzen treats Kemble only briefly in his "selective" history of Anglo-Saxon studies, it is fruitful within the context of his larger project for him to posit Kemble's editing of *Beowulf* in the 1830s within the context of Kemble's devotion to Jakob Grimm's philological science and Kemble's supposed desire to memorialize a distinctly Germanic or Teutonic lineage of English history in the poem. In Kemble's view, according to Frantzen, history, or the proper study of the past, serves the edifice of the modern empire, and therefore Kemble's Anglo-Saxon scholarship is intimately connected to a particularly specious type of German Romanticism which can only inevitably contribute to cultural and social currents of nationalism, imperialism, ethnocentrism, and ultimately racialism.²¹ While it may certainly be true that Kemble's work as an Anglo-Saxon scholar both participated in and contributed to these currents (which currents, furthermore, Frantzen sees embedded in the objects and methodologies of

²⁰Frantzen, *Desire for Origins*, 56.

²¹*Ibid.*, 35, 63.

our contemporary discipline)—he was, to a certain extent, a Germanophile as well as an English patriot, and it would be absurd to set about denying this aspect of his personality—nevertheless, Frantzen's analysis reads Kemble's ideology *backwards* through the historical lens of the twentieth century, and neglects aspects of Kemble's other writings (his political essays addressed to "The Present Government of Russia," "The State of the Nation," or "Alliance of France and Russia," for example, written while he was editor of *The British and Foreign Review* from 1837 to 1844) that would point to a more complex view of what Kemble saw as the uses of history, and to a political sensibility that cannot easily be boxed into "Whig," "liberal," "polemic," "traditionalist," "partisan," or "nationalist," all of which are applied to Kemble in Frantzen's book. Moreover, although applied liberally by Frantzen to the historical work of Sharon Turner, Kemble, and Macauley, three historians who form a representative troika in Frantzen's critique,²² the label "nationalist" is left completely unexamined as an historical or culturally specific term. In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson has written that "nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind. To understand them properly we need to understand

²²In the section of his book titled "Orientalism and Anglo-Saxonism," Frantzen briefly analyzes the work of Thomas Babington Macauley (author of the five-volume *History of England*, published in 1848), Sharon Turner (author of the three-volume *History of the Anglo-Saxons*, published from 1799-1805), and Kemble in order to provide a characterization of nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxon scholarship as "nationalist" in its outlook (Frantzen, *Desire for Origins*, 27-25). Of Kemble specifically, Frantzen writes, "... for all his superiority in scholarly discipline to Macauley or Turner, Kemble shared their general idea of the service scholarship owed to nationalism" (*ibid.*, 35). Furthermore, Frantzen writes that it was "but a short step backward from the attitudes of these influential scholars, writing at the height of British colonialism, to those of the clergymen of the English Reformation, whose work with the Anglo-Saxon language and manuscripts supplied foundations on which the edifice of empire would rest" (*ibid.*).

how they have come into historical being . . . the creation of these artefacts toward the end of the eighteenth century was the spontaneous distillation of a complex 'crossing' of discrete historical forces; . . . once created, they became 'modular,' capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations."²³ The aspects of "nationalism," or even "imperialism," as cultural artefacts *of a particular kind*, are not explored adequately in Frantzen's book; the terms, therefore, take on a monolithic significance that implies a unity of meanings across cultural and chronological lines (he transports them, for instance, straight from the period of the English Reformation to Victorian England) and forecloses the possibility of understanding a scholar's practices as connected to a complex set of social identifications, some of which may even be in conflict with each other. It must be noted here that one of the most important historians of "nation-ness," Eric Hobsbawm, has noted that the development of nationalism in England has not been studied intensively enough. Still, it is important to take the following statements of his into account when considering the ways in which earlier English scholarship might have been "nationalist" or "imperialist":

First, official ideologies of states and movements are not guides to what is in the minds of even the most loyal citizens or supporters. Second, and more specifically, we cannot assume that for most people national identification—when it exists—excludes or is always or ever superior to, the remainder of the set of identifications which constitute the social being. . . . Thirdly, national identification and what it is believed to imply, can change and shift in time,

²³Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 4.

even in the course of quite short periods.²⁴

Clare Simmons gives Frantzen's line of reasoning an even sharper point in her book *Reversing the Conquest*, where she sees the assumptions about England's Germanic lineage in Kemble's *The Saxons in England* finding their affirmation in the German scholar F. Max Müller's lectures to the Royal Institution in 1861 where he conjoined comparative philology, evolutionary biology, and geology in order to posit Anglo-Saxon as part of a Teutonic sub-group of an Aryan race. Müller's lectures then set the stage (perhaps unwittingly, on Müller's part) for Edward Augustus Freeman's lectures to the Royal Institution in 1873 on comparative politics wherein he founds a distinctly racist political theory, which lends significant support to a reading of history already prevalent in Victorian culture whereby the truest English lineage can be traced straight through from Alfred to Victoria (with the Norman Conquest representing an aberrant period of alien tyranny—a rupture in the progress of the true heritage of England, as it were), which, in turn, gives the stamp of authority by virtue of longevity and purity to the concept and material effects of “empire,” which, finally, in Simmons' view, prepares the way for “the racist excesses” of the twentieth century, which excesses culminate in Hitler.²⁵ The foregoing attempts to trace the unbroken *sententia* of Simmons' thesis in her monograph, just as Simmons attempts to draw an unbroken line of racialized nationalism in English historiography from the Reformation to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* to fascist

²⁴E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 10.

²⁵Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest*, 180-83, 202.

tendencies in contemporary British culture. Again, as with Frantzen's account of nationalist, even racializing, tendencies in the history of Anglo-Saxon scholarship, the term "nationalism," in its historical and culturally specific sense, goes largely unexamined. This is not to say that Frantzen and Simmons do not address the historical and social conditions of particular forms of territorial expansion and nationalist ideology of the time periods within their respective purviews (for, of course, they do), only that their use of the term "nationalism" is thoroughly contemporary (post-Holocaust) and does not seem to have benefitted from an attention to recent theoretical discussions among historians regarding the historical origins and philosophical underpinnings in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries of modern versions of nationalist thought and praxis.²⁶ It is worth noting here that Frantzen's and Simmons' views are somewhat supported by the views of the historian Simon Dentith, who writes in his monograph *Society and Cultural Forms in Nineteenth Century England* that "the genuine scholarly achievements of philology lent authority to a racialised view of human, and particularly European, history. More particularly in an English context, the unequivocal establishment of the Germanic roots of the English language supported a Germanicising strain in English culture." Further, he

²⁶Given the historical focus in Frantzen's and Simmons' monographs upon the relationship between language and literary studies and the contexts of British imperialism and Western ethnocentrism from the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, the following texts would add further historical dimensionality to the reading of their texts: Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1991), P. Chatterjee's *Nationalist Thought and the Colonialist World* (1986), Linda Colley, "Whose Nation? Class and national consciousness in Britain 1750-1830" (*Past & Present*, 113, 1986), Ernest Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), Eric Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (1990), Eric Hobsbawm's and Terence Ranger's edited collection of essays *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), and Samuel Raphael, ed., *Patriotism. The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity* (3 vols., London, 1989).

writes that "the context for all these [Victorian] ideas about ethnicity and race was of course the constant presence and expansion of the British Empire."²⁷ But it is also important to note Dentith's caution (which also serves as his criticism of Said's monograph, *Culture and Imperialism*) that the "danger of arguments which insist on the pervasiveness of Imperialism as an ideology, however, is that they can suggest too readily that culture, and even specific cultural forms, were the instigating causes of imperialism as a practice."²⁸ It is also worth noting here that Dentith sees a shift in late Victorian/Edwardian culture away from a belief in free trade and liberal reformism and toward more atavistic and regressive notions of militant imperialism,²⁹ and while it cannot be denied that Kemble's bent of mind was often atavistic, his political ideology as espoused in his articles in *The British and Foreign Review* from 1835 to 1844, and even his thinking on the importance of international cooperation in archaeological investigations as expressed in the writings from the latter years of his life, would place him in opposition to the type of fundamentally protectionist thinking prevalent in a late nineteenth-century "imperialist" or "nationalist" culture, which type of thinking most historians would agree contributed to the racist and sectarian violence of the twentieth century.³⁰

²⁷Dentith, *Society and Cultural Forms*, 168.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 177.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 171-72.

³⁰There are many difficulties attendant upon the disciplinary historian who wishes to assign "nationalism" as the principal guiding force in the comparative philology being practiced in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as exemplified in Kemble's work, not the least of which *ought to be* the chore of determining what *species* of "nationalism" we are talking about. This is not easy to do. As Hobsbawm has written, in nineteenth-century liberal discourses there is "a surprising degree of intellectual vagueness" regarding "the nation." Therefore, Hobsbawm

Frantzen's and Simmons' accounts of Kemble's scholarship are very much informed by contemporary forms of critical theory and historiography, especially, I would argue by works of post-colonialist critique, such as Edward Said's *Orientalism*, in which Western culture is seen as a set of discursive formations partly predicated upon an imperializing and colonizing (and ultimately, an elision) of Eastern culture.³¹ But their

himself attempts to reconstruct "a coherent liberal bourgeois theory of the 'nation' . . . in the manner in which archaeologists reconstruct trade routes from the deposits of coins" (Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, 24). What he finally concludes is that "[t]he 'principle of nationality' which diplomats debated and which changed the map of Europe in the period from 1830 to 1878 was . . . different from the political phenomenon of nationalism which became increasingly central in the era of European democratization and mass politics" (*ibid.*, 44). Both Frantzen's and Simmons' accounts of Kemble's work would seem to assign to his editing and historical practices a political ideology that does not really begin to emerge until well after his death, which is not to say Kemble could not have helped to preconceive and even lay its racist foundations, only that the historical conditions necessary for what Frantzen and Simmons call "nationalism"—a political nation-state ideology founded upon racialized views of history and destiny—had not yet come into full material being. More important, however, Frantzen and Simmons do not explore the tensions and dissensions inherent in the liberal discourses regarding "the nation" of Kemble's time, nor do they seek to delineate what might have been Kemble's unique contributions to those discourses—what might have set him apart, in other words, from his contemporaries. Ultimately, however, it is not the analysis of ideological flux that they pursue; rather, the delineation of the sameness of intellectual thought and practice is their quarry.

³¹Said further developed his argument in his later work, *Culture and Imperialism*, published the same year as Frantzen's and Simmons' monographs, where, as Simon Dentith has written, "the ordinary processes of culture, especially visible in the novel, contributed to a particular imaginative mapping of the world in which Britain naturally assumed primacy, and by which the practices of imperialism came to be taken for granted" (Dentith, *Society and Cultural Forms*, 170). This connection between Said's work and the work of Frantzen and Simmons is an important one, and represents a line of scholarly thought that must be taken into serious account, especially when we consider (as so few Anglo-Saxon scholars looking at Kemble's work do *not* consider) that it was not Kemble who singlehandedly carried comparative philology straight from Germany into England, as it was the English orientalist and lawyer William Jones (1746-1794) whose *Grammar of the Persian Tongue* (1771) saw nine London editions plus a French translation in 1772, and whose tenure in India from 1783 to 1794 as a judge of the supreme court of judicature at Fort William in Calcutta brought him to the study of Sanskrit and to the founding of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, to which he delivered a series of anniversary discourses (eleven in all), in which he laid the groundwork for the ethnological analysis of etymology and grammatical structure that became the "science" of comparative philology. Jones's lectures, and his Asiatic Society, were not initially well received in England, but they had a profound effect upon Friedrich

emphasis upon delineating, critiquing, and assuming the worst material effects of the strains of "Romantic" and "Germanic" ideology operating upon and through Kemble's publications has a long tradition behind it, beginning with Kemble's contemporaries, such as "T.W.," who complained in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1834 that Kemble had turned Anglo-Saxon into German-Saxon,³² and Frederic Madden who summed up Kemble in his diary in 1839 as possessing "some talent but with conceit and too much Germanism."³³ In the preface to his 1885 edition of *The Oldest English Texts* for the Early English Text Society, Henry Sweet railed against the "Germanizing" of philology that had led English scholars to lose their nationality,³⁴ and in his collection of articles published from 1964-65 in *Notes & Queries* (published in monograph form in 1975 as *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism*) E.G. Stanley connects Kemble's scholarship to the German historiography and

Schlegel, who borrowed heavily from Jones's thinking in his *Ueber die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* (1808; a work also heavily influenced by J.G. Herder's 1771 essay *Ueber den Ursprung der Sprache*), which we know had a profound impact upon language studies in Germany, which then came to England for the second time, not only through Kemble by way of Grimm's *Deutsche Grammatik* (1819), but also through Benjamin Thorpe by way of the Danish scholar Rasmus Kristian Rask's *Undersøgelse om det gamle Nordiske eller Islandske Sprogs Oprindelse* (1818), and by Friedrich August Rosen of University College, London by way of Franz Bopp, with whom Rosen studied in Berlin in 1824 (Aarsleff, *The Study of Language in England*, 115-61). This brief sketch is provided to demonstrate that there were multiple points of entry by which comparative philology came into English intellectual milieus, as well as multiple sites of interest for applying its insights, and even differences of opinion as to what it could reveal about the history of language, as well as what should be its most proper applications and ends. Aarsleff's book is especially instructive on this point.

³²Qtd. in Arthur G. Kennedy, "Odium Philologicum, or, a Century of Progress in English Philology," in Hardin Craig, ed., *Stanford Studies in Language and Literature* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1941), 15.

³³Qtd. in Gretchen P. Ackerman, "J.M. Kemble and Sir Frederic Madden: 'Conceit and Too Much Germanism'?", Berkhout and Gatch, *Anglo-Saxon Scholarship*, 176.

³⁴Henry Sweet, "Preface," *The Oldest English Texts*, ed. Henry Sweet, Early English Text Society, Original Series, 83 (1885; reprint Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), v.

literary criticism of the first half of the nineteenth century that "had gone as far towards extreme German nationalism as, in the field of Anglo-Saxon scholarship, it was ever to go."³⁵ Not only is it somewhat breathtaking to see such an unbroken historical line of what I would term "anti-Germanism" in the critical assessment of Kemble's work,³⁶ but what these accounts often overlook, I would argue, are the writings of Kemble that would provide contraindications to the conventional assessments of his ideology. What we get instead are the same worn-out saws culled from the same sources again and again, primarily the prefaces and postscripts to his editions of *Beowulf* and *The Saxons in England*, his letters to *The Gentleman's Magazine* during the "philological controversy" of 1834,³⁷ Fanny Kemble's autobiographical writings, Bruce Dickins' 1938 lecture to the

³⁵Stanley, *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, 4.

³⁶It is worth noting here that an interesting tic of this critical bent is the conflation of Kemble's choice of wife with his supposedly German-bent ideology. Therefore, Stanley writes that Kemble acquired in Germany "a sound knowledge of philology, his political views, his literary views, and his wife, of which acquisitions all but the first were unfortunate in some respects" (Stanley, *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, 28), and Simmons writes that Kemble, "taking the Germanic ideal even into his private life . . . married the daughter of a German professor; in a further irony, the marriage proved a failure" (Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest*, 68). Taking this critical slant one step further, Simmons proposes in a later essay that "the unfortunate outcome of Kemble's marriage to the daughter of a German scholar suggests a desire to be united with the idea of Germany, rather than a union based on personal compatibility" (Clare A. Simmons, "'Ironworded Proof': Victorian Identity and the Old English Language," *Studies in Medievalism* 4 [1992]: 206).

³⁷Kemble is perhaps most famous (or infamous) for his part in the so-called "philological controversy" waged in the pages of *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1834 between the "old Saxonists [who] were antiquaries in the English tradition rather than philologists and [who] were heavily represented in the publishing societies, especially in the Society of Antiquaries," and the "new Saxonists [who] stood for the Continental philology of Rask and Grimm." Kemble began the controversy when he reviewed Benjamin Thorpe's *Analecta Anglo-Saxonica* in the *Magazine* in April, and used the occasion to promote Thorpe's philological competence and to characterize books printed by the Society of Antiquaries as "bibliomaniacal foppery" and the practice of language study in England in general prior to Thorpe's translation of Rask's *Grammar* as incompetent and ignorant. Defensive letters from eminent scholars of early English literature, such

British Academy on Kemble's life and career,³⁸ Raymond Wiley's 1979 biography, and Kemble's published correspondence with Grimm edited by Wiley. The effect of this, even in more conservative accounts that mainly focus on Kemble's skills as an editor, is what I would call the monolithic Kemble. This effect, we must remind ourselves, is a thoroughly *contemporary* one.

After surveying critical accounts of Kemble's scholarship from the 1830's through the 1990's, two narrative structures emerge which almost all but a few accounts participate in. Briefly, I have categorized these as: 1) the story of Kemble the "pioneer" who brings comparative philology from Germany to England *by way of Grimm*, thereby revolutionizing Anglo-Saxon manuscript studies in the process, and serving as the turning point upon which amateur antiquarianism evolves into professional textual scholarship, and 2) the story of "too German Kemble" who ushers in a long era of Anglo-Saxon scholarship tainted by the tenets of German Romanticism *by way of Grimm*, which serves to found and even authenticate the romantic medievalism of the later nineteenth century, with a subset of the second narrative tendency being that the romantic medievalism of the nineteenth century is a major tributary of the larger and pernicious cultural stream of nationalism and ethnocentrism. Just as Sotheby's parceled out Kemble's effects into the

as Thomas Wright, Joseph Bosworth, and Frederic Madden, soon flowed in, calling Kemble a "tyro," and denigrating his scholarship as "misled by the German school," but also, in some cases, taking Kemble's criticism as something worth considering and adjudicating, and thus paving the way for a serious and historically important dialogue on language study (Aarsleff, *The Study of Language in England*, 195-204).

³⁸Bruce Dickins, *J.M. Kemble and Old English Scholarship*, The Proceedings of the British Academy, vol. 25 (London: Humphrey Milford, 1938).

categories that would best ensure a probable sale, Kemble's intellectual labors have been sectioned off from each other in order to serve the very limiting and limited patterns we have so far constructed for the sake of assessing his contributions to our field, and especially to the study of *Beowulf*. I would add here, also, that we have not spent enough time considering the ways in which Kemble's scholarly writing was performative, revealing to us, not readily identifiable ideological or professional values (either culturally latent or dominant) that Kemble transferred to Anglo-Saxon culture (and therefore to the practices and objects of our scholarship), but rather the warping and woofing of socially and culturally-constructed values as they come into contact with a negotiation between a text and an individual consciousness, which consciousness is often keenly aware of its audience and its place in history (and is even capable of forgetting itself). Nor have we spent enough time considering, in terms of the forms of reception that we could measure, the different ways in which his work didn't matter at all except in hindsight—the ways in which, for example, philology developed by setting him aside or disremembering him or by simply rupturing in differing contexts that did not include Kemble as a member, either alive or dead,³⁹ or how editions of *Beowulf* from C.W.M. Grein's 1857 edition forward

³⁹An instructive case in point here might be the informal circle of student and professor philologists at University College, London in the 1820's and 1830's, led by Friedrich August Rosen and including Thomas Key, George Long, and Henry Malden, which eventually, under the influence of Robert Gordon Latham (Rosen's successor), became the Philological Society of London in 1842, and was in turn energized, we might say, by Frederick Furnivall's taking on of the secretaryship at the age of twenty-eight in 1853, and who was then personally instrumental in inaugurating and expediting the *New English Dictionary* Project and also the *Early English Text Society*, which society was responsible for Julius Zupitza's transliteration and autotype edition of *Beowulf* in 1882. How did this Society, which included Kemble in its original council, extend Kemble's work with comparative philology into the future of English language studies in general and Anglo-Saxon studies in particular? I will let Aarsleff answer the question:

The Philological Society did not create a forum for the new philology in England.

moved his contribution to the outermost margin of the their texts, and, in some cases, barely mention his contribution at all.⁴⁰ The amount of time his papers spent languishing at G. Michelmore booksellers at 5 Royal Opera Arcade in London ought to give us reason to pause as well.

The historian Dominick LaCapra, in his essay "Rhetoric and History," offers the suggestion that "all forms of historiography might benefit from modes of critical reading premised on the conviction that documents are texts that supplement or rework 'reality' and not mere sources that divulge facts about 'reality'."⁴¹ Furthermore, he cautions that

On the contrary, its reports on contemporary Continental scholarship being many fewer than has been anticipated in the original announcement in the *Athenaeum*, the most striking fact about the society's work during the first twenty years is the virtual absence of non-English, Germanic philology. The Society was based on a native tradition which emphasized three kinds of work: classical philology; the investigation of the forms, dialects, and etymologies of English; and the ethnologically oriented philology that turned to distant non-Indo-European languages. (Aarsleff, *The Study of Language in England*, 221-22)

⁴⁰Birte Kelly, in a statistical analysis that demonstrates that "well over half of all . . . [conjectural] readings adopted by editors from 1950 onwards had been proposed by 1857," has written that while "it is generally recognized that present-day apprehension of the text of *Beowulf* owes a great deal to scholars of the first half of the nineteenth century, for most editions carry numerous textual notes attributing readings to authorities such as Grundtvig, Kemble, Thorpe, and Grein. . . . often realization of the debt remains only vague" (Birte Kelly, "The formative stages of *Beowulf* textual scholarship," *Anglo-Saxon England* 11 [1983]: 247).

⁴¹Dominick LaCapra, *History and Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 11. This insight follows somewhat from the work of Foucault who, in his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*, writes that the modern discipline of history has taken as its primary task, not the interpretation of the document, nor the attempt to decide whether it is telling the truth or what is its expressive value, but to work on it from within and to develop it: history now organizes the document, divides it up, distributes it, orders it, arranges it in levels, establishes series, distinguishes between what is relevant and what is not, discovers elements, defines unities, describes relations. The document, then, is no longer for history an inert material through which it tries to reconstitute what men have done or said, the events of which only the trace remains; history is now trying to define within the documentary material itself unities, totalities, series, relations. . . . The document

"all history . . . must more or less blindly encounter the problem of a transferential relation to the past whereby the processes at work in the object of study acquire their displaced analogues in the historian's account."⁴² When writing this, LaCapra desired to point out some of the insights of Continental philosophy and post-Saussurean linguistic theory to his fellow historians, so that their work might benefit from a more theoretical understanding of *rhetoric*, both the rhetoric of historical documents as well as the rhetoric of their own discourse, and the often compromised nature of the relationship between the two. While some historians, such as LaCapra, have been leaning into other disciplines, so have English scholars been leaning, becoming in the process, not just literary critics, but *cultural* critics, and even cultural *historians*, transformations earned partly by a spiriting away of the objects of the history department, with not enough attention always being paid, I would argue, to the methodological debates being waged there among Clio's doctors. And while the Old English scholar has always been adept at cross-dressing within the disciplines, performing history and anthropology as well as philology and literary criticism, by virtue of the difficulties attendant upon reading the texts and the very deep mysteries attached to

is not the fortunate tool of a history that is primarily and fundamentally *memory*; history is one way in which society recognizes and develops a mass of documentation with which it is inextricably linked. (Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith [1972; reprint New York: Random House, 1982], 6-7)

⁴²LaCapra, *History and Criticism*, 11. LaCapra uses the term *transference* "in the modified psychoanalytic sense of a repetition-displacement of the past into the present as it necessarily bears on the future. 'Transference' is bound up with a notion of time not as simple continuity or discontinuity but as repetition with variation or change—at times traumatically disruptive change. Transference causes fear of possession by the past and loss of control over both it and oneself. It simultaneously brings the temptation to assert full control over the 'object' of study through ideologically suspect procedures that may be related to the phenomenon Freud discusses as 'narcissism'" (*History & Criticism*, 72).

the production of specific manuscripts, one should nevertheless be careful of wearing the mantle of historian too lightly, for the problem of a "transferential relation to the past" that often keeps the enlightened historiographer awake at night does not seem to trouble our sleep *enough*, even when we profess a certain theoretical sophistication.⁴³ For while we may be credited with helping to broadcast the important news of the instability of language and therefore of texts, as well as the gaps that often exist between experience and the language used to describe experience,⁴⁴ still, thanks to our recent and coincident devotion to theories of social constructivism, where, as Nancy Partner has written, "social teleology crushes out human ontology,"⁴⁵ much of our contemporary criticism is also concerned

⁴³In his monograph *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), LaCapra has written that while history is a field that is particularly resistant to the type of critical theory that would call attention to the subject-position of the scholar, "literary criticism at times has been given to theorizing as a self-propelled, unqualifiedly performative movement of thought that lacks specificity and generates its own internal aporias and resistances" (LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz*, 207).

⁴⁴For important work regarding the insights of contemporary language theory as it has been applied to manuscript studies in both Old and Middle English studies, see Stephen G. Nichols, ed., "The New Philology," *Speculum* 65 (1990), Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, *Visible Song: Traditional Literacy in Old English Verse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), William D. Paden, ed., *The Future of the Middle Ages: Medieval Literature in the 1990s* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1994), and Carol Braun Pasternack, "Post-structuralist theories: the subject and the text," in Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, ed., *Reading Old English Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁴⁵While there are many theories of social constructivism (or constructionism), most following mainly on the heels of Foucault's writings (especially *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, and *History of Sexuality*), I follow Nancy Partner's definition in her essay "No Sex, No Gender," where she writes that

this view denies any innate endowment of mind universal to human beings, ignores or denies the psychosexual dynamics which culminate in individual character, and concedes only some minimal biologic substratum as shared among all of our species over time. Psychoanalysis assumes that manifest patterns of behavior, speech, and conscious desire all variously reflect the organization of an individual mind . . . which must continually adjust its wishes to the demands of a real

with arguing the presence of the voracious maw of ideology in past works of literature and literary scholarship, in which case we take texts to be very stable entities indeed.

Everything in this scenario is, to a certain extent, caught in the teeth of the powerful trap of ideology, and everything in the text (and in the textual apparatus) that is not discerned to swim with the tide of a prevailing cultural narrative is discerned as swimming rather hopelessly against it. The adherents of the new philosophy whereby the idea of transcendental truth and a total progressive history are rejected, are themselves the authors of a new kind of totalizing history in which the meaning of any given moment is always provisional to the powers that allow it and *speak* through it. And this is why history can be read backwards so effectively, even when the scholar rejects the notion of progress, for power exists as a series of repetitions of the same, and therefore endures always and in all places.

We can refer one last time to Allen Frantzen's study of the historical beginnings of the discipline of Anglo-Saxon studies, *Desire for Origins*, for a demonstration of this type of critical reduction, albeit unabashedly invested in its own political agenda. For while Frantzen insists that his method of historiography is indebted to the notion that history is

exterior world. In the constructivist vision, 'mind,' in this sense, disappears, and the body and its behaviors are a metaphor map shaped solely by the unavoidable and ubiquitous pressures of social processes determined by power relations: social teleology crushes out human ontology. (Nancy F. Partner, "No Sex, No Gender," in Nancy F. Partner, ed., *Studying Medieval Women* [Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy, 1993], 122)

See the recent collection of essays edited by Allen J. Frantzen and John D. Niles, *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1997), for a prominent example of social constructivist theory as it is applied to Anglo-Saxon texts and "textual events."

marked by change and rupture more than it is by progress and stability, revealing itself “not as a continuous unfolding fabric but as a web, with interconnected, interdependent strands and, depending on where one stands, several centers,”⁴⁶ nevertheless all of the “strands” Frantzen traces belong to the same ideological web of Western Orientalism, English and American ethnocentrism, and more generally, “expansionism, linguistic imperialism, and cultural colonization.”⁴⁷ Frantzen’s “discontinuist” model of history works very hard to fit textual “events,”⁴⁸ such as Kemble’s editing of *Beowulf*, into an ideological scheme that arches over and contains the disconnected events framed within it.⁴⁹ He may admit a model of history that proceeds mainly by rupturing, or that exists as “a population of dispersed events,”⁵⁰ but he is very busy connecting the dots of a cultural

⁴⁶Frantzen, *Desire for Origins*, 106-7.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁸Frantzen borrows the idea of a text’s “eventfulness” partly from Hans Robert Jauss’s *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, in which texts are seen as “always in transition between writer and reader, and between one reader and the next” (*Desire for Origins*, 123), and partly from Edward Said, who has written that “texts are worldly” and that “to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted” (qtd. in Frantzen, *Desire for Origins*, 126-7). Criticism that is “concerned with both the history of the text and with its linguistic dimension” is criticism that is attuned to a text’s “eventfulness” (*ibid.*, 126). Frantzen also mentions his indebtedness to LaCapra, J.G.A. Pocock, and Jerome McGann regarding the “eventfulness” of texts.

⁴⁹John D. Niles echoes this historical judgement when he writes that “culture is chiefly produced through a complex series of purposeful appropriations either of the past or someone’s present property (whether material, linguistic, or intellectual in nature). Whether these appropriations are the work of individuals acting in relative isolation or of groups acting in consort, the results of this activity tend to be expressive of an underlying ideology that is characteristic of a time and place as well as of specific class interests, ethnic allegiances, and so on” (John D. Niles, “Appropriations: A Concept of Culture,” Frantzen and Niles, *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity*, 205).

⁵⁰Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 22.

history in which everything is enmeshed within the regressively "political,"⁵¹ and modern Anglo-Saxonists who see their work as having arisen out of historically progressive matrices of disinterested techniques of scholarship, are either denying the obvious or committing professional suicide.⁵² Of course, Frantzen would be the first to admit the impossibility of constructing a history, disciplinary or otherwise, that did not have its own ideological, political, or self-serving purposes. He is, in fact, very concerned that we "break the taboo of so-called disinterestedness in scholarship and consider the political place of our work."⁵³ At the same time, however, he claims an apolitical stance for his work when he writes that his choice of particular theoretical strategies (i.e., deconstruction, Foucault's archaeological analysis, and textual eventfulness) "have been chosen because they are neither explicitly political or programmatic. Revisionist criticism should . . . not substitute one kind of politically oriented and theoretically programmatic and exclusive set of scholarly procedures . . . with another."⁵⁴

⁵¹Frantzen has written that "engagement with political controversy has always been a distinctive and indeed essential motive for studying language origins and therefore for studying Anglo-Saxon" (Frantzen, "Preface," *Desire for Origins*, xiii).

⁵²For recent writing and debate related to the idea that a revitalization of Old and Middle English studies must be connected to the emerging field of "cultural studies" and to theoretically-enlightened forms of interdisciplinarity, see, in addition to Frantzen's *Desire for Origins*, Allen J. Frantzen, ed. *Speaking Two Languages: Traditional Disciplines and Contemporary Theory in Medieval Studies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); Stephen G. Nichols, "Philology in a Manuscript Culture," *Speculum* 65 (1990): 1-10; Gillian R. Overing, "Recent Writing on Old English: A Response," *AEstel* 1 (1993): 135-49; William D. Paden, "Scholars at a Perilous Ford," in William D. Paden, ed., *The Future of the Middle Ages in the 1990s*, 3-31; Lee Patterson, "On The Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies," *Speculum* 65 (1990): 87-108; and T.A. Shippey, "Recent Writing on Old English," *AEstel* 1 (1993): 111-34.

⁵³Frantzen, *Desire for Origins*, 225.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 114.

Frantzen's point that scholarship is rarely disinterested, even when it is claiming to be "scientific" (the claim of philology and often of manuscript and source studies), is an essential one for understanding the "tradition" from which our work supposedly descends, but I want to make the argument here that his treatment of Kemble's work as an Anglo-Saxon scholar is symptomatic of a larger trend at work in recent accounts of our *disciplinary history*, whereby important ethical questions raised by historiographers regarding our proper relationship to the past are dutifully pointed to and then glossed over in favor of a restrictive and selective historical method that reduces scholars' texts "in homogeneous fashion to mere symptoms of some encompassing phenomenon or process."⁵⁵ In this scenario, the glove always fits, and we are asked to accept as inescapable what Foucault wanted us to believe: "power and knowledge directly imply one another"⁵⁶ and we are part of the discursive network that produces and is produced by both. Our work is both set free by the "poststructural recognition of the enigmatic contingency of the text,"⁵⁷ but also relentlessly and narrowly focused on the power that we

⁵⁵LaCapra, *History and Criticism*, 38.

⁵⁶Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1975; reprint New York: Random House, 1979), 27.

⁵⁷Roy A. Liuzza, "The Return of the Repressed: New and Old Theories in Old English Literary Criticism," in Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, ed., *Old English Shorter Poems: Basic Readings* (New York: Garland, 1994), 129. This is the same freedom Hayden White points to in the field of history when he writes that the "very undecidability of the question of where the text ends and the context begins and the nature of their relationship appears to be a cause of celebration, to provide a vista onto a new and more fruitful activity for the intellectual historian, to authorize a posture before the archive of history more dialogistic than analytic, more conversational than assertive and judgmental" (Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987], 186). Ultimately, in this scenario, as White also writes, there is the danger that "all texts are regarded as being equally shot through with ideological elements or, what amounts to the same

perceive to be speaking through that language and foreclosing its possibilities.⁵⁸ And this is why Foucault was able to make what I consider to be his most arresting and bleakly nihilistic statement, "the soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy."⁵⁹

thing, as being equally transparent, reliable, or evidential in what they can tell us about the 'mental climate' . . . in which they arose" (*ibid.*, 187).

⁵⁸This is the same criticism that LaCapra levels against "contemporary sociocultural history," which he sees as being "in part motivated by a justifiable revolt against an abstracted history of ideas. But it has often tended simply to reverse the latter's assumptions (through reductionism) and to replicate its documentary treatment of artifacts (as symptoms of society or economy rather than mind)" (LaCapra, *History and Criticism*, 80).

⁵⁹Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 30. In his disciplinary history of Middle English studies *Negotiating the Past*, Lee Patterson has written that Foucault's philosophy provides the ultimate fulfillment of a nightmare vision of a world so perfectly administered . . . so thoroughly bureaucratized . . . that reality itself is constituted through the insidious, invisible workings of power. . . . The very entrance upon a field of action implicates the agent in a web of power relations that predertermines the scope and direction of his action. Power may presuppose freedom, but it remains itself the primary term: freedom is simply that which power requires for its actions, and is thus brought into being in order to provide the necessary conditions for power's enactment. (Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987], 65)

Foucault has been criticized for having been too aloof from political questions in his treatment of the discursive operations of power, mainly because he refused to posit central sites from which power originally emanated, preferring instead to concentrate on its operations and *effects* in various knowledge discourses, such as the social sciences. Most famously, Frank Lentricchia, in his 1982 essay, "Reading Foucault (Punishment, Labor, Resistance): Part Two," criticized Foucault's theorizing of power thus: "Like the God of theism, it is ubiquitous; unlike God it has no intention" (qtd. In Patterson, *Negotiating the Past*, 65). Likewise, Hayden White wrote in his essay on the stylistics on Foucault's discourse, "His philosophical position is close to the nihilism of Nietzsche" (White, *The Content of the Form*, 105). One could argue, however, that throughout Foucault's work there is a strong political sensibility, albeit a very dark and Kafkaesque one, seeking to expose the lies and "accidents" underlying conventional formulations of the "individual" and of his proper relation to the larger *polis* and the various "state" powers and institutions that conceive, construct, enact, and administer that *polis* (and ultimately form and limit the individual, society, and "culture" in the process). One could say that without being overtly political, Foucault laid the important groundwork for an anti-authoritarian philosophy that is readily seized upon by critics interested in political analysis. The enormously widespread use of Foucault's work in relation to ideology critique in literary studies, where very specific sorts of power are uncovered and critiqued (i.e., Louis Montrose's analysis of Elizabethan court politics in relation to Spenser's poetry), would seem to bear this out. It is precisely because of the inherent political, if Nietzschean nature of his thinking, I would argue, that the application of Foucault's social philosophy to questions

Therefore, the most astute insights regarding the contextual and rhetorical aspects of language, speaking, and writing have led to the narrativizing of new cultural histories, both literary and otherwise, in which the historical subject, known mainly through his “textual remainders,” is revealed as a tissue of gaps, absences, deferments, limits, and contradictions, unmasking finally, just as Toto pulled back the curtain to unmask the wizard of Oz, the discursive powers that “speak” him. This is history as a puppet theater in which the cultural historian makes visible the strings of the marionette, without admitting the existence of the master who pulls them. This is the kind of historiography that Roger Chartier has described as always affirming “the primacy of the political, understood as the most all-embracing and most revelatory level of any society.”⁶⁰ The irony here, I would argue, is that among those historians or literary critics cum cultural historians who would pride themselves on their rejection of the idea that there could be such a thing as a transcendental historical meaning exterior to the orders of discourse, a recomposition of a total and totalizing history is brought about.

What seems necessary as a corrective here is an attention, when we are historicizing ourselves, to what LaCapra has termed the “exceptional” or “liminal”—those moments when figures in our disciplinary history can be seen as essentially exterior and even resistant to the narrative models we have so far constructed for them, mainly because

concerning culture can become extremely reductive. This is more the fault of the literary critic, who often works reductively, than it is the fault of Foucault, who would wince, I think, at much of what we have done with his philosophy.

⁶⁰Roger Chartier, *On the Edge of the Cliff: History, Language, and Practices*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 19.

they inhabit and even travel between different and differing cultural modalities and mentalités (or “turns of mind”). In Kemble’s case, this would require reading his various texts *against* each other in order to highlight moments of ideological friction and flux, and even to pinpoint moments when certain philosophical underpinnings usually associated with his work, such as German Romanticism (à la Herder and Grimm), begin to break apart from the pressure of Kemble testing them against more than one frame of cultural or social reference. This would also require finding ways to problematize the conventional notions of the material effects of his intellectual labors, by placing assessments of his supposed role as “pioneer” or “innovator” or the most important “link between Germany and England” in Anglo-Saxon studies⁶¹ alongside existing historical accounts of the nineteenth-century movements of comparative philology and English Romanticism in disciplinary contexts where Kemble is diminished or completely absent or only one of many key players who inhabit different social spheres and time periods.

In order to do full justice to the complexity of Kemble’s thinking as he was editing and translating *Beowulf* in the 1830s, we would first need a discussion of the political climate in England at the time of Kemble’s first 1833 edition (a climate never described in any depth in any assessment of Kemble’s work), and how his preface to that edition, which Frantzen has relied upon so heavily in his critique of Kemble as an “imperialist,” must be read within the context of the political upheavals of that time (Catholic Emancipation, Great Reform Act, battles between Whigs and Tories in parliament, uprisings and aggression in other parts of Europe), as well as within the context of

⁶¹Stanley, *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, 28.

Kemble's somewhat iconoclastic political views toward these affairs—Frantzen terms Kemble a "partisan" and a "polemic," but he decidedly was *not* a Whig nor a strictly liberal or even Anglican partisan, and his editorship of and writing of articles for *The British and Foreign Review* from the late 1830s through the early 1840s as well as his occasional pamphleteering makes that abundantly clear. Finally, it seems that the time is ripe to discuss the possible value of a scholarship like Kemble's that sought to connect the artifacts and writings of the past (i.e., *Beowulf*) to the present, and to pose and perhaps answer the question: if we are going to accuse Kemble of constructing a blindly patriotic cultural history by reading Victorian British culture *backwards* through its romanticized origins in the Germanic past, how would we critique our own work, which often scandalously neglects the present?

Whether we have written accounts that highlight the positivist and progressive aspects of our discipline, in which the supposedly quaint and misguided antiquarian philosophies of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries metamorphose into the hard linguistic science of nineteenth-century philology,⁶² or that reveal the ways in which our

⁶²This is a common characterization of the progress of Anglo-Saxon studies in many accounts of the history of those studies. See, for example, Eleanor N. Adams, *Old English Scholarship in England from 1566-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1917); J.R. Hall, "The Conybeare 'Caedmon': A Turning Point in the History of Old English Scholarship," *Harvard Library Bulletin* 33 (1985): 378-403 and "The First Two Editions of *Beowulf*: Thorkelin's (1815) and Kemble's (1833)," Scragg and Szarmach, *The Editing of Old English*, 239-50; Michael Murphy, "Antiquary to Academic: The Progress of Anglo-Saxon Scholarship," Berkhout and Gatch, *Anglo-Saxon Scholarship: the first three centuries*, 1-17. Hans Aarsleff questions the idea that more "scientific" ideas regarding language study represent progress in the field when he wrote that "all earlier study of language is seen as a rather malicious conspiracy against the future and present enlightenment, and history gains attention only as a sort of inverted self-flattery. It has become fashionable to pick forerunners, though it is rarely clear whether the runners were engaged in the same race or even that they were running toward the same goal" (Aarsleff, *The Study of Language in England*, 9).

scholarship has always been overly-determined by dominant social and political forces (thereby revealing the lie of progress), we seek ways to construct a past in which we can glimpse our own reflection (and even, our validation). But the truth of any of these narratives, if we insist that truth matters, and I think it does, may lie chiefly in placing what is overlooked or omitted alongside what is always and already told in order to create a vibration between the two, and even in admitting that our discipline emerges as much through accident and chance and random acts of individual intention as it does through more codified systems of discourse and doctrine.⁶³ Further, we must admit the rhetorical aspects of the texts we read and analyze—that when we read the work of earlier scholars we witness *performances* in which the cognitive processes operating upon and through language are merely reflected and not *revealed* in that language, which is more a collection of shadows than the actual figures throwing those shadows.⁶⁴ But, having admitted this, we should not be too smug in our newfound linguistic philosophies and strategies of

⁶³Lee Patterson has written that the idea of “intention” in contemporary criticism as an interpretive category has been “largely written off as a vestige of positivism” (Patterson, *Negotiating the Past*, 73). Nevertheless, he argues that, even when we admit the social constraints upon writing and reading that are always and everywhere present, “a text is also a function of specific human intentions, in the sense both of self-consciously maintained purposes and of impulses that may be incapable of articulation but nonetheless issue from a historical intentionality, and it is a large part of our task to how these intentions went into its making. . . . To grant the social totality unfettered sway over the individual, who is then reduced to a helpless mediation of historical forces that can only be fully understood by the modern historian, is to invoke an ‘absolute historicism’ . . . that entraps us all” (*ibid.*, 73-74).

⁶⁴In his essay “The Context of the Text,” Hayden White writes that “[t]he historically real, the past real, is that to which I can be referred only by way of an artifact that is textual in nature. The indexical, iconic, and symbolic notions of language, and therefore of texts, obscure the nature of this indirect referentiality and hold out the possibility of (feign) direct referentiality, creating the illusion that there is a past out there that is directly reflected in the texts. But even if we grant this, what we see is the reflection, not the thing reflected (White, *The Content of the Form*, 209).

textual deconstruction, as if our quarry could always be caught and revealed as a creature of his own sign system (it may be we reveal the style of our scholar or of his time and nothing else).⁶⁵ If he is capable of carefully fashioning an image of himself as a particular kind of scholar, he is also capable of overturning that image, disremembering it, and even slipping away from it unnoticed. Further, we might agree that a proper account of our history is best located on the plane of unresolvable tension between the fact of that history as irredeemably random, and even *lost*, and our desire, because we *need* something from

⁶⁵White would perhaps counter by saying that a semiological analysis of a text "shift[s] hermeneutic interest from the content of the texts being investigated to their formal properties, considered *not in terms of the relatively vacuous notion of style* but rather as a dynamic process of overt and covert code shifting by which a specific subjectivity is called up and established in the reader" (White, *The Content of the Form*, 193, italics added). Further, White explains that this type of analysis "would begin with a rhetorical characterization of the text's elements . . . by which to identify the nature of the authority claimed by the text as a perspective on the reality it purports to represent, and would proceed to the disclosure of the modality of code shifting by which a specific mental set is specified as necessary to the proper reception of the text by an ideal reader, and thence to a detailed analysis of the metalinguistic elements of specific passages where a particular kind of social code is invoked as a standard for assessing the validity of all social codes in the reader's purview" (*ibid.*, 196-97). The ultimate quarry, I would argue, is ideology itself as it impresses itself upon the formal aspects of the text, thus shaping the content as well as its reception, and foreclosing the possibilities of our modes of interpretation. Again, White might counter by saying it is not an all-encompassing ideology he is seeking to pinpoint in his analysis so much as he wishes to locate a given historical text "within a certain domain of the culture of the time of its production" (*ibid.*, 208). As intellectual history attends to the *mentalités* (processes of meaning production) whereby historical texts are brought into being, a semiological approach that attends to the formal properties of those texts as *reflective* of particular historically-situated cognitive processes seems an insightful and beneficial approach, although I would argue that the analysis is still somewhat limited by viewing those particular cognitive processes reflected in the formal properties of the text as always and forever contained and caught within socially-determined systems of signs, codes, and meanings (what is possible is *what is possible only at a given moment*). Ultimately, White is attending to "the deep structure of the historical imagination" (White, *Metahistory*, ix), which structures would appear to be, through his analysis, always ideologically-determined. If the truth of any given historical moment is the quarry, that truth must be seen as always relative to the discourse that chases after it. For specific illustrations of the ways in which White applies semiological analysis to historical narratives, see the essays contained in *The Content of the Form*. His essay on Foucault, "Foucault's Discourse: The Historiography of Anti-Humanism," is especially compelling.

it, to make it cohere as a narrative. Finally, all of these considerations must be navigated within the larger frame of the fragmentary and dispersed nature of our archive, which is more of a scrap pile gathered from the floating wreck of history than a well-organized library of elegantly arranged codices. For indeed, Kemble has been dispersed through his textual remainders, and we mainly clutch at only a few of the excised pieces of the written cloth he labored so assiduously to cover himself with. But without our own labors, there could be no history at all. In the vein of that paradox, there is much work to be done.

Chapter Four

The Time of *Beowulf* Is Infinite in Every Direction¹

*Sorrow rises and falls, comes near with its deep spoons,
and no one can live without this endless motion;
without it there would be no birth, no roof, no fence.
It happens: we have to account for it.*

*Eyes squeezed shut in love don't help,
nor soft beds far from the pestilent sick,
from the conqueror who advances, pace by pace, with his flag.*
—Pablo Neruda²

*You can hold back from the suffering of the world, you have free permission
to do so and it is in accordance with your nature, but perhaps this very holding
back is the one suffering that you could have avoided.*
—Franz Kafka³

I *It is necessary not to be "myself," still less to be "ourselves." The city gives
one the feeling of being at home. We must take the feeling of being at home
into exile. We must be rooted in the absence of place.*
—Simone Weil⁴

¹The title is taken from Walter Benjamin's statement, in his early essay on the *Trauerspiel* and tragedy, that "the time of history is infinite in every direction and unfulfilled in every instant. This means that no empirical event is conceivable that would have a necessary connection to the temporal situation in which it occurs" (qtd. in Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997], 64).

²Pablo Neruda, "Sonnet LV," *100 Love Sonnets*, trans. Stephen Tapscott (1959; reprint Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 119.

³Franz Kafka, "Reflections of Sin, Pain, Hope and the True Way," *The Great Wall of China: Stories and Reflections*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (1936; reprint New York: Schocken Books, 1960), 305.

⁴Simone Weil, "Decreation," *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Arthur Wills (1959; reprint New York: Octagon Books, 1979), 86.

Consider the well-known photograph taken of Holland House in London of September 1940 (*fig. 1*), the morning after a German air raid had devastated the house, but had somehow left the library walls, with their shelves of neatly arranged books, mostly intact. This was the period of the Blitz, when the German Luftwaffe bombed London and other English cities continually for months, hoping to make Britain vulnerable to a land invasion. Holland House, the remnants of which now form part of an open-air theater, was built in 1605 for Sir Walter Cope. It was one of the first “great houses” of Kensington, and during England’s Civil War, it was occupied by Cromwell’s army. The photograph shows three men who appear quite comfortable, even calm, as they browse and select books from the tidy stacks, while all around them lie the bombed-out ruins of the library, its roof smashed to pieces, its charred beams exposed, ladders and chairs and other assorted pieces of furniture crushed under the rubble. But the browsers appear oblivious to the terrors of the night before and the chaos surrounding them on all sides. They are the very image of scholarly repose, of quiet study and reflective contemplation, and the symmetry of the books and the shelves are the very picture of order in the midst of disorder. Outside, but also inside, lies a world on the brink of apocalypse, what Churchill called “the abyss of a new dark age.”⁵ The photograph provides an image of the fetishization of the text, or *document*, of the ways in which history attaches itself, not to the disturbances and crises surrounding it on all sides, but to the ruins of the past, and

⁵Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War: Their Finest Hour* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), 2: 225-26.



Fig. 1. Holland House in London after Luftwaffe bombing, September 1940 (RCHME Crown Copyright).

even more so, to the orderly archive of the narratives of those ruins.⁶ In that austere repository of the bound volumes of *fabula* and *historia*—the library—the scholar seeks the world of lived human experience, but encounters instead one of its chief symptoms—writing.

It is not news to call attention to the *Beowulf* manuscript as a historical ruin, or even as an artifact of the ruins of history. Somehow, by a series of accidents (or was it by various small acts of willed custodianship?), it survived the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII in the 1530s and the wholesale dispersal and destruction of books and manuscripts attendant upon that dissolution,⁷ the closing and confiscation of the Cotton

⁶Dominick LaCapra has written that the “archive as fetish is a literal substitute for the ‘reality’ of the past which is ‘always already’ lost for the historian. When it is fetishized, the archive is more than the repository of the traces of the past which may be used in its inferential reconstruction. It is a stand-in for the past that brings the mystified experience of the thing itself—an experience that is always open to question when one deals with writing or other inscriptions” (Dominick LaCapra, *History and Criticism* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985], 92, n. 17). I would add here that the real, actual men in the Holland House photograph, who are perusing the books of the ruined library, might represent, not just scholarly repose and the fetishization of the archive, but also the very admirable trait of “carrying on” in the midst of a national tragedy.

⁷C.E. Wright has outlined the destruction to and losses of monastic manuscripts during the reigns of Henry VIII and his successor Edward VI, and has written that Henry VIII’s dissolution of the monasteries, beginning in 1535, and Edward VI’s Act of Uniformity in 1549 and his Act against Superstitious Books in 1550 led to a wholesale scattering and destruction of antique books and manuscripts. According to Wright, it was unfortunate “for the history of our early vernacular literature [that] Anglo-Saxon manuscripts suffered very heavily; the important heroic poem of *Waldere*, for example, is preserved for us today in only a fragmentary state in a few leaves that were in all probability (though not certainly) used in a binding and are now in the Royal Library at Copenhagen” (C.E. Wright, “The Dispersal of the Libraries in the Sixteenth Century,” in Francis Wormald and C.E. Wright, eds., *The English Library Before 1700* [London: The Athlone Press, 1958], 156). Of course, the concealing and smuggling abroad of manuscripts against the reformers’ wishes by those devoted either to the old faith or to bibliophilia, ensured the survival of manuscripts such as the codex containing *Beowulf*, as well as the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Luttrell Psalter, just to name a few of the saved riches (Wright, “The Dispersal of the Libraries,” Wormald and Wright, *The English Library*, 166-67).

Library by Charles I in 1629,⁸ the removal of the library to the Bedfordshire home of Thomas Cotton's daughter-in-law in 1650 and its return to London in 1692,⁹ the omission of the poem in Thomas Smith's catalogue of 1696,¹⁰ the neglect and multiple moves of the library by the state in the years following its bequest to England in 1700 by Sir John Cotton,¹¹ the fire in Ashburnham House in 1731, the undue haste and carelessness with which unskilled workers labored to restore burned manuscript leaves directly after the fire, and the subsequent languishing of the manuscripts in temporary accommodations in the Old Dormitory of Westminster School until the establishment of the British Museum in 1753. And even from the time of the establishment of the Museum until the Keeperships of Henry Ellis in 1812, Josiah Forshall in 1827, and Frederic Madden in 1837, the task of curating and restoring Cotton manuscripts remained, for the most part, either in suspension or under the charge of those not adequate to the task.¹² That the manuscript itself is an archaeological remain, miraculously recuperated, is self-evident, but I would like to also suggest that the quiet and calm of the well-regulated and orderly Manuscripts

⁸Kevin Sharpe, *Sir Robert Cotton, 1586-1631: History and Politics in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 80-81.

⁹*Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁰This omission is indicated in a letter from Humfrey Wanley to Erik Benzelius, dated 28 August 1704 (P.L. Heyworth, ed., *Letters of Humfrey Wanley: Paleographer, Anglo-Saxonist, Librarian, 1672-1726* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989], 239).

¹¹Sharpe, *Sir Robert Cotton*, 83.

¹²For the most meticulous and detailed recounting of the movements of and various attempts to both catalogue and restore the Cotton Manuscripts after the fire in Ashburnham House in 1731, see Andrew Prescott, "'Their Present Miserable State of Cremation': The Restoration of the Cotton Library," in C.J. Wright, ed., *Sir Robert Cotton as Collector: Essays on an Early Stuart Courtier and His Legacy* (London: British Library, 1997), 391-454.

Reading Room of the modern British Library—an atmosphere which lends itself to the idea of the material text as something finally preserved, stable and fixed, its rhetorical gestures recoverable, and of our world as something safe and permanent—is an illusion of order perched upon the ever-trembling lip of human conflagration and apocalypse that the poem itself invokes. This is not to say that our world is currently on the brink of annihilation, only that each day, somewhere, there is a social community under threat of censure, violence, displacement, and erasure, and the archive represents, not history coming into being and intelligibility in books, but the shoring up of language against the continual undertow of history's undoing of consciousness. Immersing ourselves in the passages of the poem that record the wars, migrations, and exiled communities of the past, we do not usually recognize the haunted shapes of our own history, nor do we often grasp, as Walter Benjamin has written, “the constellation which . . . [our] own era has formed with a definite earlier one.”¹³ One would have to read *Beowulf* in the rubble of Grozny (the Chechen city that is no longer, recognizably, a city; *figs. 2 & 3*), and even then, as the Holland House photograph attests, we might slip into a reverie of forgetting where we are, so strong is the attraction of the codex as a map and picture of the world finally brought to order.

There are moments in the archive, if one is receptive to them, when, as Benjamin has written, history becomes “the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous,

¹³Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 263.



Fig. 2. Grozny after a period of heavy fighting, March 1995 (Copyright 1996, Eddy van Wessel).



Fig. 3. City center in Grozny, March 1995 (Copyright 1996, Eddy van Wessel).

empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now,"¹⁴ at which point it is possible to experience the shock of time standing still—"a cessation of happening."¹⁵ Every present moment carries within it the abridgement of the entire past of human history, not only as a complex of causes and effects, but also as a gestalt, and historical understanding constitutes "an afterlife of what is understood, whose pulses can still be felt in the present."¹⁶ Thus, for a Roman soldier well versed in his own military history, the sight and sounds of the Huns on their horses galloping into Adrianople in 378 A.D. might have suddenly evoked an image culled from the cultural memory of Roman galleys bearing down upon the shores of Carthage five centuries earlier. Such an insight would have been devastating, yet illuminating. At such a moment, the clocks are shattered, and the conformism that has dictated the soldier's life falls away to reveal—too late—the repressed image of his own (and the Carthaginians') impending destruction. Yet this image is fleeting—a sudden flash of memory, as Benjamin put it, that "flits by" and can only be seized upon by someone prepared to recognize it at a moment of danger. Benjamin's

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 261.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 263.

¹⁶Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street, and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: New Left Books, 1979), 352. According to Cadava, Benjamin's notion of the "shock" inherent in the recognition of these pulses of the past returning (while simultaneously passing away) in the present was connected to Freud's discussions of the latency of experience, in which he hypothesized that, "when we are confronted by an event that paralyzes us by the magnitude of its demand, an event that we recognize as a danger, we fend off the danger through the process of repression: the danger is in some way inhibited, and its precipitating cause—the event, with its attendant perceptions and ideas—is forgotten. Not entirely effaced, however, the danger of the event renews its demand and opens another path for itself, emerging, symptomatically, as an image of what has happened—as a return of what was to have departed—without our acquiescence or understanding." Therefore, for Benjamin, as for Freud, "consciousness emerges as memory begins to withdraw" (Cadava, *Words of Light*, 103).

concept of history, as is well known, is *messianic*, and he believed that the past “carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption”; furthermore, “[t]here is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one.”¹⁷ There is always a risk, therefore, in leaving the past too much in the past, in understanding the past only for its own sake, or in believing the past merely *culminates* in us, since its claim is always upon the present, and represents, finally, when it appears to us, not the return of what is similar, but what is wholly different and *Other*. But how do we recognize this claim, which is both urgent and often unfulfilled? Consider the photographs from the recent war in Sierra Leone recently smuggled to the press, which include an image of dogs tearing the flesh from the corpse of a woman gang-raped and then murdered by R.U.F. rebels (*fig. 4*) as well as another image of rebels holding up the severed head of one of their “enemies” (*fig. 5*), and place these pictures alongside the prognostication of Wiglaf’s herald, after Beowulf’s death, of the perpetual and savage enmity among men which will ultimately lead to a landscape where “the black raven, hungry for carrion and hastening over the doomed, shall tell many tales, shall say to the eagle how he succeeded at the feast, when with the wolf he plundered the slain” (“ac se wonna hrefn fus ofer fægum fela reordian,

¹⁷Benjamin, “Theses on a Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, 254. Furthermore, Benjamin wrote: “The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And the enemy has not ceased to be victorious” (*ibid.*, 255). Cadava writes that the messianic element in Benjamin’s writings on history was very much connected with the Judaic conception of messianism as, in the words of Gershom Scholem, “a theory of catastrophe.” Further, Cadava writes that, for Benjamin, this messianism is “neither outside time nor in the future, but rather what is given in time,” and this is why the task of the historical materialist, as Benjamin saw it, was “to establish ‘a conception of the present as the *Jetztzeit* [“now-time”] which is shot through with chips of messianic time” (Cadava, *Words of Light*, 144, n. 53).



Fig. 4. The decomposing body of a woman who was gang-raped and murdered, being devoured by dogs, Sierra Leone (Copyright Vanity Fair, October 2000).

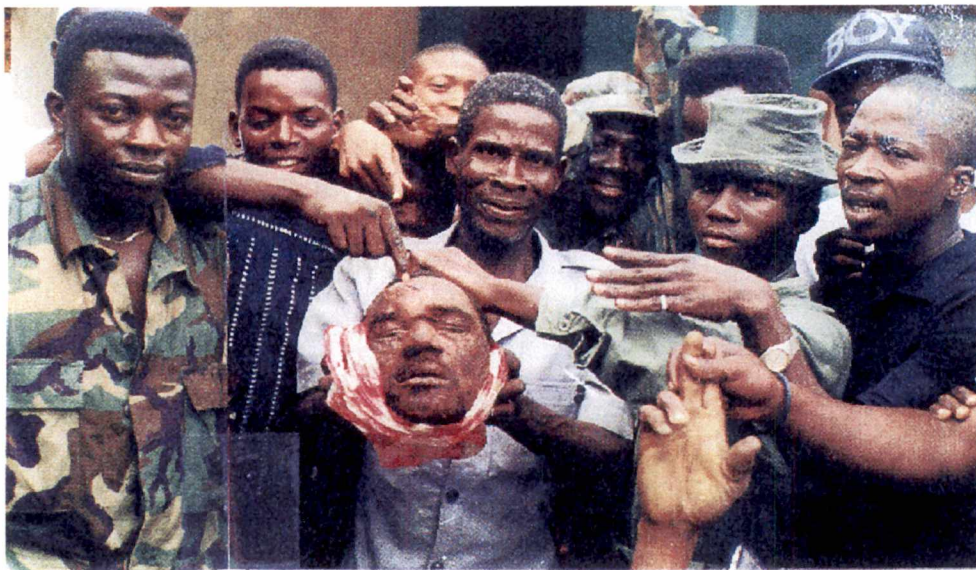


Fig. 5. R.U.F. rebels proudly display the severed head of Alhajie Nabieu, a wealthy man who was killed at Bunumbu Teachers' Training College, Sierra Leone (Copyright Vanity Fair, October 2000).

earne secgan, hu him æt æte speow, þenden he wið wulf wæl reafode"; ll. 3024-3027).¹⁸

Consider also the many photographic images of the flight of refugees and exiles of the wars of the past century—from the Armenians forcibly deported and massacred by the Ottoman government in 1915 to the Iraqi Kurds forced into Turkey at the end of the Gulf War to the half-million "internally displaced persons" living in camps in Rwanda in 1994 after the Tutsi genocide to the ethnic Albanians fleeing Kosovo in 1999 (*fig. 6*), to name only a very few—alongside the picture provided, again, by Wiglaf's herald of a future in which the women of Beowulf's tribe, stripped of their possessions and under the heel of the Swedes' fury, will "tread a foreign land, not once but often" ("oft nalles æne elland tredan"; l. 3019). One can imagine a line of sight between the Kosovar woman who is looking at the photographer's lens through the barbed wire of the Kukes I refugee camp in northern Albania in 1999 (*fig. 7*) and the gaze of the women of Beowulf's tribe who,

¹⁸R.U.F. stands for the Revolutionary United Front, a rebel army founded by Foday Sankoh in 1991 (and financed and trained by Muammar Qadhafi) to take over the diamond mines in Sierra Leone and lead an uprising against the government, and which, until it initially agreed to lay down its arms in July of 1999, was responsible for an unmitigated reign of terror and some of the worst human rights abuses on record. One of their most infamous moments came in 1996 when, during the first free elections in Sierra Leone's history, the R.U.F. soldiers "went on a rampage, chopping off people's hands as a warning not to vote" (James Traub, "The Worst Place on Earth," *The New York Review of Books*, 29 June 2000: 62), but even worse was the event remembered simply as "January 6" when, in 1999, the rebels moved into Sierra Leone's capital city to implement "Operation No Living Thing," wherein they "killed an estimated six thousand civilians, raped thousands of women, and chopped off the hands of thousands more, and destroyed most of east Freetown" (*ibid.*). Since the Lome peace accords in July of 1999, in which the R.U.F. agreed to turn in their arms as long as they were made part of a coalition government, and the U.N. was invited in to monitor the transition, peacekeeping efforts in the region have been, for the most part (and as of the writing of this chapter) unsuccessful, and even though Sankoh was eventually taken into custody for not complying with U.N. directives, the rebels continue to roam the countryside and villages, fomenting war, while the United Nations busies itself with organizing war crimes tribunals in Freetown.

All citations of the poem are taken from Frederick Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3d. ed. (Lexington: D.C. Heath & Company, 1950). All translations are mine.



Fig. 6. A Kosovar Albanian family on the road from the Morina border crossing to Kukes, April 1999 (Copyright Human Rights Watch, 1999).



Fig. 7. A Kosovar Albanian woman looks out through the fence of the Kukes 1 refugee camp in northern Albania, April 1999 (Copyright Human Rights Watch, 1999).

upon hearing of Beowulf's death, might have paused to look over the horizon of what was familiar to them toward their uncertain future—a future that, as we know, has never had an end of violence or exile. The gaze of the Albanian woman who has been displaced from her home to live in a “no man's village” of tents and barbed wire pierces the veils of history, not only to look upon and demand regard from the future that will, increasingly, have a difficult time remembering her and her displacement, such that she could be properly grieved for, but also to look backwards across the horizon of a past that is filled to the breaking point with mirror images of her disenfranchisement. Her particular place in history is both a culmination and also a *looking forward*. Likewise, the photograph of the two women and one child walking through what is left of the streets of Grozny after it was bombed by the Russians in 1995 (*fig. 2*) both haunts the future—contained in the picture of every glittering modern city is this negative image of its possible destruction—and also recalls the past, even the past of the Geats as recalled by the *Beowulf* poet, who himself was looking backwards, and perhaps even demanding of his audience that they consider their future in relation to that past. Although the photographer in Grozny chose to center his subjects within the frame of his lens, which is also the frame of the present moment in which the photographer and his subjects came together in an instant of time, we cannot help but notice that they are moving from one end of the street, or picture, to the other, and therefore, they are always arriving from the past, and also, always disappearing into the future. The photographer, like the poet, may wish to wrest his figures from the flow of time, but they are always returning to it, and there is only ever a brief moment, when

attempting to arrest these figures, to understand what is always pregnant there.¹⁹ And what is pregnant there is what Benjamin would have called the coming together of the Then and Now in a constellation of images (see footnote 30), which represents, finally, not an arrangement of clear “lines of sight” (and therefore, similarities), as romantically imagined above, between the past and the present, but rather, the refraction of the past’s difference (or “otherness”) through the recognition of its continual irruption in the present, and the photograph itself, finally, is “an image of petrified unrest”²⁰ that gathers within itself all the demands of what has been forgotten in history, and what is still being

¹⁹It may be that art, whether visual or textual, is always structured by the principle of arrest, of taking objects, persons, and events out of the current of time in order to penetrate—via the mediums of language, *mise en scene*, canvas and paint, etc.—what is perceived (by the artist) to be either transcendent *in time*, or “against the grain” *of time*. I would argue that the figure of Beowulf himself personifies this arrest in both ways, for he is both the most mythical human character in the poem (he has been imagined before by other cultures and he will be imagined again in other guises; therefore, he transcends the particular time and place to which the *Beowulf* poet consigns him, while also obeying the strictures of the conventional archetype), and he also behaves in a way that is often inconsistent with the predominant warrior ethos established both in the poem and even in historical and anthropological analogue, and therefore, his actions create an interruption, or stopping point, in the historical narrative that the original audience(s) of the poem, we can imagine, would have been very familiar with, and in contemplating Beowulf’s actions, they would have been contemplating, not the valorous image of “the heroic past,” but the arrest of that past in a figure who is trying, often in vain, to work against the grain of what would seem to be its predominant values: feud and vengeance. Although Beowulf may be the least historical figure in the poem, his very iconoclasm reveals the fissures in the supposedly “heroic” era he inhabits: all is not well, and *Beowulf* is hurrying to mend the broken fences of a culture enmeshed in continual internecine strife and war. I will elaborate on this point in Section II.

²⁰Benjamin originally used this phrase to describe allegory in his essay “Central Park,” where he wrote, “Whatever is struck by the allegorical intention is severed from the contexts of life: it is at once destroyed and conserved. Allegory holds fast to ruins. It offers the image of petrified unrest” (qtd. in Cadava, *Words of Light*, 23). I am indebted to Eduardo Cadava here, who suggests in his book on Benjamin and the photography of history that “[t]hese ruins name the shifting site of photography’s truth” (*ibid.*).

forgotten there.²¹

Thinking of the ways in which the modern photographs of war and the poetic text of *Beowulf* “speak” to one another, we have to also consider their underlying structural differences. On the one hand we have images that constitute a photographic documentary record; on the other we have portions of an Anglo-Saxon poetic text which, although largely fictional, refers itself more than once to the historical record, and therefore, lays a nonfictional claim upon that record, while also blurring the generic lines between *historia* and *fabula*.²² The poem is ultimately a work of art structured primarily by the archetypal story of the hero, but in almost every instance, Beowulf’s actions are framed—on both the front and back ends—by the “historical record” of the world of the poem, some of which can be authenticated with recourse to actual Scandinavian history, and even, to its

²¹And what is being forgotten there, finally, is the insistent demand of history’s Others for what the moral philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas called “le face-à-face sans intermédiaire” (Emmanuel Lévinas, *Le temps et l’autre*; qtd. in Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1993], 53). The only way to consider our ethical obligation to the figures of the past is to first recognize our utter ontological separateness from those figures, and then to set aside “identity” or “self-sameness” as the category whereby we recognize what the Other is demanding of us and how we are obliged to answer that demand. I would argue that in the poem *Beowulf* itself Grendel can be seen as operating as a kind of forgotten “Other” (literally, in the poem, *aglæcean*, or *terror*) whose demands are not recognized, and therefore, he is perceived to be an alien enemy who must be destroyed, although, by virtue of his association with Cain, he shares a genealogy with the human characters in the poem. I will return to this point in Section II.

²²Roy Liuzza has written that *Beowulf* “is frustratingly ambivalent—it is not quite mythical enough to be read apart from the history it purports to contain, nor historical enough to furnish clear evidence for the past it poetically recreates” (R.M. Liuzza, “Introduction,” *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* [Ontario: Broadview Press, 2000], 16). Moreover, he writes that “the poem itself is a monumental exercise of the historical imagination, poetically re-creating a past which is itself multilayered and temporally complex” (*ibid.*).

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landscape, while other parts more properly belong to the catalogues of legendary history.²³

In either case, the poem continually historicizes its own narrative and, by virtue of the allusive nature of many of the historical asides, asks its audience, as well, to refer the fragmentary history of the narrative to the more complete “record” they may be familiar with (and even, for the original audiences, to what is *remembered* more fully). This produces a doubling effect, in which both the characters of the poem as well as its audience are simultaneously reminded to “remember” the ways in which history has already laid the tracks for the main actions of the story, and taken them up again as well, and therefore the poem is thoroughly historical (and even, apocalyptic). Regardless of

²³John Niles has written that “*Beowulf* begins with a genealogical prologue that sets the main action of the poem against the background of the Danish dynastic history from the time of Scyld Scefing, the eponymous ancestor of the Scyldings, to that of Hrothgar, his great-grandson. Since Scyld is generally taken to be a mythical king while Hrothgar is thought to be historical, readers must soon confront a question posed by Claude Lévi-Strauss in the context of North American Tsimshian myths: ‘The problem is: where does mythology end and where does history start?’ The reader’s desire to distinguish between two different modes of past time, the fabulous and the factual, runs headlong into the obstacle of the storyteller’s blank refusal to admit such distinctions. Such an impasse naturally spurs reflection as to how adequate the reader’s categories are” (John D. Niles, “Myth and History,” in Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, eds., *A Beowulf Handbook* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997], 216-17). Ultimately, for the purposes of my reading of the poem (elaborated upon in Section II of this chapter), the poem is, as Benjamin might have said, thoroughly *shot through* with *chips* of historic time; whether or not specific figures in the poem, such as Hygelac and Hrothgar, or particular events, such as Hrothulf’s treachery against Heorot, can be located in historical analogue, is not as important as recognizing how the figures in the poem, as well as the poet himself, gesture digressively toward “history,” and therefore continually insist that attention be paid to *what has happened* and *what will happen*, and finally, it is probably not too outlandish to suggest that the original audience(s) of the poem would have viewed the events of the poem as both fabulous *and* historically possible. Some of the personages of the poem may have actually been part of the living historical memory of its audiences (the fourth-century king of the continental Angles Offa I, for example, mentioned in lines 1,944-62 of the poem), and where they were not, they were at least historically *plausible*—much of the “history” recounted in the poem, in other words, whether or not it happened *exactly* the way the *Beowulf*-poet says it happened, is at least consistent with what we know of tribal society in Europe during the period of the Migrations. I will return to this point in more detail later in this section of the chapter.

whether or not the history invoked by the poem can be verified with absolute precision in sources outside of the poem (and for the most part, it cannot be) is ultimately not relevant here. After all, as Roberta Frank has pointed out, "[t]he poet's reconstruction for his protagonist of a northern heroic age presents such an internally consistent picture of Scandinavian society around AD 500 that his imitation of historical truth has been taken for the reality. Indeed, the one event in *Beowulf* recorded by the literate world—Hygelac's raid on the Merovingian kingdom—is referred to no less than four times (1202-14, 2354-66, 2501-8 and 2911-21), almost as a touchstone of authenticity," yet ultimately, "the Beowulf-poet imparts to things a unity they do not possess."²⁴ What *is* important and relevant here, as Nicholas Howe has pointed out, is that we set aside our desire for a precise correspondence between Anglo-Saxon ancestral history and the history recounted in the poem, and recognize that "[t]he relation between ancestral and poetic geography is adequate to carry the poem's historical burden. The Danes and Geats were sufficiently akin in culture and location [to the Anglo-Saxons] to serve in an OE poem that re-created the region left behind in fact but not in memory."²⁵ The "history" of the world of the poem, therefore, although only remotely and partially "factual," while also being allusive and legendary and even highly symbolical, forms part of the inherited cultural memory of the poet and his original audience and therefore the poem itself is a kind of inquiry into the

²⁴Roberta Frank, "Germanic legend in Old English literature," in Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 100-01.

²⁵Nicholas Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 146.

collective unconscious of early English (and early Germanic) culture, whereby the cultural tensions and anxieties raised when history and memory intersect and even overcome each other can be investigated, and perhaps, even ameliorated.

Similar to *Beowulf*'s blurring of genres, the documentary photographs bear a visual testimony to war and aestheticize it at the same time, and the photographer's sense of tableau (always present, even in moments of great danger) guides the movement and operation of his camera, such that the resulting photographs simultaneously *record* and *shape* history according to a singular angle of vision. And this is an angle of vision, moreover, that arises, not from a vacuum, but from a rich cultural tradition of photographic techniques and aesthetics—even the photographs of war, therefore, like the poem, draw upon the iconic gestures and framing devices of what might be called the image bank of a collective culture. And we might even say, following Eduardo Cadava in his recent writings on Benjamin's concept of history and the photography of history, that both the poem and the photographs are "modes of bereavement" that "speak to us of mortification," and further, that "this bereavement acknowledges . . . the return of the departed."²⁶ Both the poem and the photographs lay bodies to rest, while also resurrecting them, if even briefly, and both are quietly insistent that a certain regard, or attention, be paid. Cadava writes that "[a]lthough what the photograph photographs is no longer present or living, its having-been-there now forms part of the referential structure of our relationship to the photograph."²⁷ Likewise, the modern *Beowulf* scholar might recognize

²⁶Cadava, *Words of Light*, 11.

²⁷*Ibid.*

the similar spatial configuration that structures his relationship with the Old English text, and also see, to paraphrase Siegfried Kracauer, that it is not the Geats and Danes who appear in the poem, but the sum of what is to be deducted from them.²⁸ Both *Beowulf* and the photographs referenced above testify to the senseless horrors and displacement of war, and, if read properly, both penetrate and inhabit each other, creating in the reader the “shock” of the posthumous arising in the present—with respect to *Beowulf*, the photographs are, as Benjamin might have said, “dialectics at a standstill,”²⁹ and history “comes into legibility” in the *Jetztzeit* (“now-time”) of our recognition of the past and present coming together.³⁰ But this intersection of image and poem under the gaze of the scholar is many steps removed from the primary experience of seizing upon an image of the past as it suddenly appears at “a moment of danger” when this experience even happens at all to the primary witness of history—the R.U.F. rape and murder victim, for

²⁸The actual quote is, “it is not the person who appears in his photograph, but the sum of what is to be deducted from him”; see Siegfried Kracauer, “Photography,” in Thomas Y. Levin, ed. and trans., *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 56.

²⁹Walter Benjamin, “N[Theoretics of Knowledge; Theory and Progress],” in Gary Smith, ed., *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, trans. Leigh Hafrey and Richard Seiburth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 51. Benjamin wrote that the camera gave to the historical moment it “snapped” a “posthumous shock, as it were” (Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” *Illuminations*, 174-75).

³⁰Cadava has written that, for Benjamin, *Jetztzeit* or *now-time* (also defined as the mystical *nunc stans* by Hannah Arendt) “is to be understood according to the structure of photographic temporality, which conceives of the relationship between a past and a present as dialectical—that is, as imagistic” (Cadava, *Words of Light*, 64). More specifically, Benjamin himself wrote: “Every present is determined by those images that are synchronic with it; every now is the now of a specific recognizability. In it, truth is loaded to the bursting point with time . . . It isn’t that the past casts its light on the present or that what is present casts its light on what is past; rather, an image is that in which the Then and Now come together, in a flash of lightning, into a constellation” (qtd. in Cadava, *Words of Light*, 64).

example (*fig. 4*), may not have seen anything as she was being thrown to the ground except the ground itself. And both the photographic images and the text are works of representation with respect to something that is not representable, and that is history itself, and history is *not* representable, as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, “not in the sense that it would be some presence hidden behind the representations, but because it is the *coming* into presence, as event.”³¹

Nevertheless, in the field of *Beowulf* studies, one might say that the representation, and even the *pinning down*, of history has been a primary concern, and much criticism has been devoted to assigning the poem to its proper historical time, in order to better understand the Anglo-Saxon culture (and even more so, cultures) out of which it might have arisen (more than once)—as myth, history, and artistic performance combined. Although there is much critical uncertainty and contention regarding how to date *Beowulf*’s “original” composition (as opposed to its manuscript “copy” date, reasonably agreed upon to be somewhere in the neighborhood of 1000 C.E., with most studies aiming to place its *écriture* somewhere between the eighth and early eleventh centuries), and even though many critics have agreed that it is ultimately a mainly unresolvable question, as Liuzza has pointed out, “[w]ithout a doubt, the date of *Beowulf* matters.”³² Commenting further on how important debates over the dating of the poem have been and will continue to be important for *Beowulf* studies, Liuzza has written that

³¹Jean-Luc Nancy, “Finite History,” in David Carroll, ed., *The States of Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 166.

³²Roy Michael Liuzza, “On the Dating of *Beowulf*,” in Peter Baker, ed., *Beowulf: Basic Readings* (New York: Garland, 1995), 283.

[t]o fix the moment of origin is to have some conception of the nature of the thing brought into being: is it the text contained in MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv? some earlier archetype of this manuscript, free from errors but without substantive variation from the surviving text? or some previously existing tale, or collection of tales, transmitted orally and finally written down some centuries after its original composition? Each of these alternative definitions has important consequences not only for how we date *Beowulf* but for how we read it; dating the poem forces us to make explicit our understanding of its form and content. The question of dating *Beowulf* foregrounds the most important questions of Old English poetry—creation and tradition, transmission and reception, context and the limits of interpretation.³³

Yet one might also add that the often central importance of “the question of dating” in *Beowulf* studies often forecloses the possibility of investigating how and to what extent the poem gestures to its most belated and future audiences, who arrive with every new reading of the poem in the present and add to the poem’s multiple historical contexts, and therefore, to the possible meanings to be derived from those contexts.³⁴ The investigation of this possibility would seem pressing at a time when English studies are giving way to “Cultural Studies,” which themselves are losing their center of gravity due to the decline of the nation-state (and “national culture”) as the guiding force behind the humanities (and even, the university) curriculum, and all of this pushes the already marginalized *Beowulf*

³³*Ibid.*, 283-84.

³⁴Nicholas Howe has written that, at the close of the twentieth century, scholars of Anglo-Saxon literature and history inhabit a position of “haunting anxiety that the past, even if it can be reimagined or recovered, will be mute when we press it to speak to our moment.” Nevertheless, Howe believes that “the consequence of not making that connection is great,” and if we “fail to make pre-Conquest England a subject of interest, even in a quietly modest way, we risk trivializing ourselves as antiquarians who collect lore about the past as magpies collect bright, shiny objects” (Nicholas Howe, “Historicist Approaches,” in Katherine O’Brien O’Keefe, ed., *Reading Old English Texts* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997], 82.

even further into the margins.³⁵ But who, in the contemporary Western culture in which *Beowulf* possesses a prominent place (although it is often left unread by most people, even in the departments of English where it is enshrined as a point of origin for English literary history), will even place these images and *Beowulf* alongside each other with the desire of experiencing the shock of recognition that shatters the continuum of time (and separation of place) between the lost tribe of the Geats, the displaced persons of the last century, the ruined (absent) city of Dresden or Grozny, and the mutilated and killed Africans in Sierra

³⁵There is a real threat to the future of literary studies (and humanities studies more generally), in fact, in where much of "Cultural Studies" is heading, as Bill Readings outlines so cogently in his book *The University in Ruins*: "... 'culture' no longer has a specific content. Everything, given a chance, can be or become culture. Cultural Studies thus arrives on the scene along with a certain exhaustion. The very fecundity and multiplicity of work in Cultural Studies is enabled by the fact that culture no longer exists as a specific referent to any one thing or set of things [i.e., literary texts]—which is why Cultural Studies can be so popular while refusing general theoretical definition. Cultural Studies . . . proceeds from a certain sense that no more *knowledge* can be produced, since there is nothing to be said about culture that is not itself cultural, and vice versa. Everything is culturally determined, as it were, and culture ceases to mean anything *as such*" (Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996], 17). There is no doubt, in my mind, that *Beowulf* already suffers in this scenario, although the text remains firmly entrenched for many, both within and without the university setting, at least on a culturally symbolic level, as the "point of origin" for English literary culture, and even the popularity of Seamus Heaney's translation and the exuberance of its reception among popular culture critics and the general reading public would seem to underline how important *Beowulf* still is in the social imagination as a cultural marker or icon. And yet, all of this is happening at a time when the "social value" of "epic" literary texts is continually being called into question within academic circles. The British literary theorist Terry Eagleton, for example, questions the inclusion of *Beowulf* within contemporary programs of English studies because "we no longer believe in heroism, or that the world itself is story-shaped, and we ask of literature a phenomenological inwardness which is of fairly recent historical vintage" (Terry Eagleton, "Hasped and hooped and hirpling," review of *Beowulf*, trans. by Seamus Heaney, *London Review of Books*, 3 November 1999). Eagleton is likely also very wary of a text that is a chief signifier for a cultural corpus, "English literature," that, in Eagleton's view, "was the product of a Victorian imperial middle class, anxious to crystallize its spiritual identity in a material corpus of writing" (Terry Eagleton, "The end of English," *Textual Practice* 1 [1987]: 2).

Leone? Who has been training his attention, or his regard, for such an encounter?³⁶

Consider, also, two brief episodes in the material histories of the *Beowulf* manuscript and the photographs smuggled out of Sierra Leone that, when placed alongside each other, provide a glimpse, not only of history “coming into presence, as event,” but also of the way in which we only ever arrive at an understanding of history through the belated recovery of *things*, or *objects*, that have accidentally fallen out of its chaos. It is a well-worn tale that the *Beowulf* manuscript’s presence among us is a kind of miracle of almost fatal catastrophes, recovery, and recuperation. Although there is no existing written record (that we are aware of) of anyone having seen or read the poem before Humfrey Wanley’s notation of it in his 1705 *Catalogus*,³⁷ codicological and

³⁶While working as a grape harvester in the south of France in 1941, Simone Weil spent a good deal of time considering the ways in which a certain kind of attention, or regard, was necessary in the process of learning the truth about the world, and she saw this attention as something that filled the subject so completely there would be nothing left of the “I,” and therefore, nothing of the will. Attention, therefore, would be an “exercise of the intelligence, which consists of looking.” Further, she wrote: “In the inner life, time takes the place of space. With time we are altered and if, as we change, we keep our gaze directed toward the same thing, in the end illusions are scattered and the real becomes visible. This is on the condition that the attention should be a looking and not an attachment” (Simone Weil, “Attention and Will,” *Gravity and Grace*, 174).

³⁷*Antiquae Literature Septentrionalis Liber Alter . . . qui in Angliae Bibliothecis extant, nec non multorum Vett. Codd. Septentrionalium alibi extantium Catalogus Historico-Criticus* (1705). *Beowulf*’s entry in Wanley’s catalogue would have represented the first *public* notation of the manuscript, but we can find a slightly earlier mention, in a letter that one of Wanley’s patrons, George Hickes, sent to Wanley on August 20 (?), 1700, where Hickes wrote, “I can find nothing yet of Beowulph,” indicating that Wanley had inquired that Hickes look into the possible history of the poem or of Beowulf himself as a literary/historical figure (qtd. in Richard L. Harris, ed., *A Chorus of Grammars: The Correspondence of George Hickes and his Collaborators on the Thesaurus linguarum septentrionalium* [Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1992], 337). And we know, from an even earlier letter Wanley wrote to Thomas Tanner dated April 19, 1695, that Wanley “copied almost a leaf & a half of the fragment of Judith,” which tells us that Wanley had the Nowell codex in hand at that early date, although whether or not he took note of *Beowulf* at that time is not known (qtd. in Heyworth, *Letters of Humfrey Wanley*, 15). We can also deduce, of course, from bibliographic evidence that two early modern figures, Laurence Nowell and Sir Robert Cotton, had the poem in their possession, and must have at least looked at the

paleographic evidence tells us that the manuscript goes back at least as far as the tenth century, and that means that it survived the political upheavals and transitions of the tenth through fifteenth centuries, most likely in the shelter of a monastic library,³⁸ and then also had to survive Henry VIII's and Edward VI's orders for dissolving the monasteries and chantries, and for banning "superstitious books," from the 1530s through the 1550s, during which time many valuable manuscripts either perished completely or were destructively dismembered and dispersed, in various forms and pieces, into the four winds of the European continent.³⁹ But I would like to focus on one event in particular—the

poem, if they did not also try to read and understand it.

³⁸Although it has been said that, after the Danish wars of the ninth and tenth centuries and then the Norman Conquest, England was relatively stable and free from internal political trouble until the Reformation, there *were* many incidents that proved threatening to manuscript collections. As C.E. Wright has written, the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 "was destructive of manuscript material—records were burnt on Market Hill in Cambridge and of the colleges there only Corpus Christi appears to have escaped damage" and "earlier in the same century, in 1327, there was the famous attack on the monastery of Bury St Edmunds, when the townspeople forced their way into the abbey and are reputed to have carried off, among other things, all the writings they could lay their hands on" (Wright, "The Dispersal of the Libraries," Wormald and Wright, *The English Library Before 1700*, 148). It is my particular prejudice that history is almost never "stable," and that the term itself is highly relative, often eliding the many hidden fault lines of a culture through which many conflicts and tensions between different social groups run and along which many tremors are felt, only some of which may lead to an outright catastrophe. One must keep in mind, I think, the continual conflicts during the Middle Ages between the English and the French (most notably between 1152 and 1259 and the Hundred Years War of 1337 to 1453), various baronial wars (for example, Simon de Montfort's rebellion against Henry III in 1258), the Black Death of 1347 to 1350, and even the fratricidal Wars of the Roses in the late fifteenth century, all of which contributed to a period in English history that, I would argue, was more convulsive than it was stable.

³⁹C.E. Wright believes we should take with a grain of salt the story related by the seventeenth-century antiquarian John Aubrey (by way of his grandfather, Isaac Lyte) that there was a day in the sixteenth century when "the leaves of illuminated manuscripts from the despoiled abbey of Malmesbury fluttered like butterflies through the streets of the town" (Wright, "The Dispersal of the Libraries in the Sixteenth Century," Wormald and Wright, *The English Library Before 1700*, 151); nevertheless, Wright has pointed out that more reliable contemporaries to the occasions, such as the antiquaries John Bale and John Leland, *do* paint a similar picture of

1731 fire at Ashburnham House in Little Dean's Yard, Westminster, where the *Beowulf* manuscript was being housed temporarily⁴⁰—in order to pull from that event the image of the manuscript *in flight*, quite literally, *from* history, without which escape it could not also bear witness to the past (not only the past of its material history *as a manuscript*, but also the Anglo-Saxon history enclosed within the poem and the medieval history we believe to be enfolded within its *écriture*). A contemporary narrative account of “the Fire which happened at Ashburnham-House, Oct. 23, 1731,” provides much colorful detail regarding how the fire occurred (“It began from a wooden Mantle-Tree’s taking Fire, which lay across a Stove-Chimney”), as well as the mayhem that ensued with trying to put out the fire and rescue the books. In particular, it describes how many of the books were removed from the house when it became clear that the fire could not be easily subdued:

But the Fire prevailing, notwithstanding the Means used to extinguish it, Mr. Casley the Deputy-Librarian took Care in the first Place to remove the famous Alexandrian MS. and the Books under the Head of *Augustus* in the *Cottonian* Library, as being esteemed the most valuable amongst the Collection. Several entire Presses with the Books in them were also

destruction and loss. Writing in 1549 about what he saw as the horrible abuse of learning in England due to the dispersal of the libraries, John Bale described what he had seen happen to the books and manuscripts afterwards: “A great nombre of them whych purchased those superstycyous manysons, reserued of those lybrarye bokes, some to serue theyr iakes, some to scoure theyr candelstyckes, and some to rubbe their bootes. Some they solde to the grossers and sopesellers, and some they sent ouersee to the bokebynders, not in small nombre, but at tymes whole shyppes full, to the wonderynge of the foren nacyons” (*ibid.*, 153).

⁴⁰According to Kevin Kiernan, a new building to house the Cotton collection “was planned and endorsed by an Act of Parliament in 1706 (6 Anne, c. 30), yet nothing was done. By 1722, Cotton House was in such bad shape that the collection had to be removed to Essex House, Strand, where it remained for the duration of a seven-year lease, which was not renewed because Essex House was considered a firetrap. So Cotton’s library was moved to another interim house, and another firetrap, ominously named Ashburnham House” (Kevin S. Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* [1981; reprint Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996], 67). The contents of the Royal library were housed at Ashburnham as well.

removed; but the Fire increasing still, and the Engines sent for not coming so soon as could be wished, and several of the Backs of the Presses being already on Fire, they were obliged to be broke open, and the Books, as many as could be, were thrown out of the Windows.⁴¹

According to Kevin Kiernan, "The *Beowulf* MS was presumably saved for us by being thrown from the window, for the present condition of Cotton Vitellius A. xv shows that the Vitellius press was one of those that caught fire from the back."⁴² So the *Beowulf* manuscript flew, quite literally (we can imagine), out of Ashburnham-House and into the surrounding yard where, the next morning, Westminster School boys picked through the fragments of burnt manuscripts, and even kept some as souvenirs.⁴³ I would like to suggest that the image, and even the arc, of *Beowulf*'s flight through the window that evening in October of 1731 remains permanently embedded within the fact of the manuscript's existence, and also, that at every moment of present time, *Beowulf* is still caught in that arc, is still held within its flight *away* from specific historical situations (or contexts) that might otherwise subsume and erase it, while, at the same time, with each new restoration and reading of the poem, *Beowulf* is thrown out of one mansion of thought only to be carted off to another (just as the manuscript itself was picked up in Little Dean's Yard and carried into the dormitory of Westminster School), and in the process, *comes into presence* again and again, as both a historical document *and* a literary

⁴¹"A NARRATIVE of the Fire which happened at *Ashburnham-House*, Oct. 23, 1731. and of the Methods used for preserving and recovering the Manuscripts of the Royal and Cottonian Libraries" (BL MS 24,932, p. 11); qtd. in Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, 68.

⁴²Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, 68.

⁴³See Andrew Prescott, "'Their present miserable state of cremation'," in Wright, *Sir Robert Cotton as Collector*, 393.

text, and simultaneously, the figures of the poem itself—part legendary, part historical—return, again and again, robed in their alterity and speaking in foreign tongues.

Beowulf's existence among us is due, in part, to the same welter of complex causes and circumstances—cognitive *and* visceral, pointed *and* random, stable *and* traumatic—that brought the photographs cited above out of Sierra Leone. Sebastian Junger, an independent journalist and writer who has spent much time traveling through world “hot spots,” such as Bosnia, Sierra Leone, the Congo, and Macedonia, was the first person to stumble upon the photographs, which had originally been in the possession of R.U.F. rebels who were, apparently, fond of recording their own atrocities.⁴⁴ The photographs now reside with Washington’s State Department and will be instrumental (one hopes) in prosecuting war crimes committed in Sierra Leone during the 1990’s. The key image in this story, as it relates to the picture of *Beowulf's* arc through the window at Ashburnham House in 1731, is the singular moment at which the photographs—at a point of complete chaos and confusion—were wrested away from the photographer. In the summer of 2000, Junger was in the town of Bo in central Sierra Leone where he was introduced to a man, a village Elder, who had been captured, along with his family, in October of 1992 by a contingent of rebels mixed in with soldiers from the Sierra Leone Army (who, we might remember, are supposed to be on opposite sides, but such is the mayhem and absurdity of a civil war). For a year, he was forced to work as a laborer on coffee and cacao farms, and every day he kept notes on what the rebels were doing by

⁴⁴See Sebastian Junger, “Terror Recorded,” *Vanity Fair*, October 2000: 367-69, 398-400. All details regarding the rescue of the R.U.F.’s self-documentary photographs are culled from Junger’s article.

writing "on white paper with a matchstick dipped in lime juice."⁴⁵ Executions were a regular occurrence: "people were shot or had their throats cut, sometimes after a mock trial, sometimes on a whim."⁴⁶ The Elder told Junger that there was one rebel in particular, a Mr. Saliah, who was responsible for documenting each killing, and he would keep all the photographs in a satchel slung over his shoulder. One day, after living in captivity for about one year, the Elder was accused of knowing about an escape attempt and he was lined up with other prisoners who were going to be tortured and then killed by having their throats cut, one by one. The Elder watched as the rebels went from prisoner to prisoner, slashing the cords of each man's life, and all the while Saliah was taking pictures. "I could feel nothing of myself," he recalled, "because I was a dead man. I knew my time was finished on earth."⁴⁷ Providence came in the form of an Alpha jet, part of the Nigerian-led forces battling the rebels, which flew in low over the encampment and started dropping bombs. Everyone scattered and began running into the jungle, and amazingly, Saliah was standing his ground and taking pictures of the plane when he was killed by an explosion. Even though the Elder had bombs raining down all around him, and even though he knew the surviving rebels would come looking for him later, he grabbed the photographer's satchel, hid behind a cottonwood tree, and then ran off into the bush.

There is more to the story of how the photographs escaped,⁴⁸ just as there is more

⁴⁵Junger, "Terror Recorded": 398.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*: 399.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

⁴⁸The Elder, for instance, spent three weeks starving in the jungle before reaching the Moa River in Guinea with hundreds of other refugees, only to be driven back into Sierra Leone by the

to the story of how *Beowulf* manages to emerge in the twenty-first century somewhat intact, but the image to focus upon here is that of the Elder *in flight* with the photographs in hand—photographs, moreover, that will always be imprinted with the forward-moving energy of that flight, but which will primarily perform the function, *always in a different place*, of bearing witness to the violence done to and by the Elder's community, and perhaps, even open up a space within which those who have been tortured and murdered, as well as the passing of their way of life, can be mourned, just as the poem bears witness to, and even invites, the mourning of the violent death of its hero and his culture's way of life. The artifact, whether visual or textual, must be plucked from the flow of history in order to be returned to it, and the arc of *Beowulf's* flight through the window could be seen as occurring, again and again, at the exact same moment of the Elder's flight. The two could even be seen as *passing through* each other in a way that allows us to see, not only the past in the present and the present in the past, but also the way in which the present always hastens to gather up and carry off the traces of the past, while also leaving that past, in all its vibrant materiality, far behind. In this way, history keeps its distance, while also investing everything in the present with its aura (and one might also say, its demands).⁴⁹

bullets of Guinean soldiers, at which point he was picked up and imprisoned (once again), this time by Sierra Leone government soldiers who suspected him of siding with the rebels and thereupon tortured and interrogated him for months. During this time, his wife managed to keep the the photographs hidden. See Junger, "Terror Recorded": 399.

⁴⁹And one could perhaps also argue that the cultural historian, or the literary critic interested in the historical context of acts of writing, often busies himself with trying to pry open these auratic objects, or artifacts—the photographs, the poem—in order to break through to their points of origin, only to realize, that the artifact of history is not a path to that history, but rather the break, or *caesura*, that separates it from the present.

But one cannot assume that the uncanny interpenetration of past and present leading to a recognition of the past's claims upon the present proffered in the above examples is readily available to us (except through prearranged, even staged, modes of artifice), and moreover, the parallel readings and conjoined images I have sketched above may stem from too romantic a view of history (too much of a mystified abridgement), connected as it is to the belief, espoused by the historian Patrick Hutton in his book *History as an Art of Memory*, that a certain kind of historicism can bring about an imaginative reliving of the past, and furthermore, that living memory bears past lived experiences into the present where they can be accessed in an almost visceral (and even, spiritual) manner.⁵⁰ For the historian Dominick LaCapra, who has written more than one book on the critical problems inherent in the attempt to properly remember, represent, and "work through" the Holocaust,⁵¹ the danger inherent in an approach that views the past as a "pure, positive presence" is that the past is always "beset with its own disruptions, lacunae, conflicts, irreparable losses, belated recognitions, and challenges to identity," and certain modern constructions of past memory can run the risk of becoming "mystified."⁵² For LaCapra, "memory is both more or less than history, and vice-versa," and furthermore, history may not be capable of grasping "certain elements of memory: the feel

⁵⁰Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1993), 72.

⁵¹Specifically, LaCapra has written *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) and *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

⁵²Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, 24-25.

of an experience, the intensity of joy or suffering, the quality of an occurrence."⁵³

Ultimately, history and memory must exist in a supplementary relationship "that is a basis for a mutually questioning interaction or open dialectical exchange that never attains totalization or full closure."⁵⁴ For LaCapra, sorting out the various relationships between memory and history, especially with regard to a "limit-experience" such as the Holocaust,⁵⁵ is an extremely important affair for the historian who wishes to both honor the testimony of the primary witnesses and participants while also critiquing that testimony when it lapses into nostalgia, fiction and "junk-Proustian" sentimentality. And this is a task fraught with possible dangers, for the historian is also a witness (albeit a secondary one) and has to beware of succumbing to a positive transferential relationship with his subject, whereby testimony and history become conflated. Once a mutually critical accommodation has been worked out between memory and history, LaCapra wants to make sure that the past is properly "worked through," on a psychological level,⁵⁶ so that both the subjects

⁵³*Ibid.*, 20.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

⁵⁵By "limit-experience," LaCapra means to indicate that the Holocaust was unique "in a specific, nonnumerical, and noninvidious sense. In it an extreme threshold or outer limit of transgression was crossed, and whenever that threshold or limit is crossed, something 'unique' happens *and* the standard opposition between uniqueness and comparability is unsettled, thereby depriving comparatives (especially in terms of magnitude) of a common measure or foundation" (LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, 7).

⁵⁶For LaCapra, certain psychoanalytic concepts, when put into a mutually critical dialectic, offer an important means for relating history to memory after limit-events; specifically, he points to melancholia and mourning (as Freud defined them in his essay, "Mourning and Melancholia") as necessary stages in coming to grips with an event such as the Holocaust, for both the victims and perpetrators, as well as those in the present, including the historian, wishing to adequately "remember" and come to grips with such an event and with those who were "lost" in it: "Melancholia may be necessary to register loss, including its lasting wounds . . . [and] mourning .

(and readers) of his history and the historian himself can both know the past *and* free themselves from a possibly obsessional fixation upon memory and its sites in order to be active social and political agents in the present.⁵⁷ Ultimately, in LaCapra's work, memory is asked to strip itself of its auras and to serve traumatic history, not as its haunting presence or essence (as Benjamin might have had it), but as the site through which its own phantasmic gestures can be critically deconstructed and actual bodies (perpetrators, victims, and bystanders) can be laid to rest. It is not preferable, in this schema, to have an undifferentiated, immediate encounter with the past, through the remnant topography, artifacts, witnesses, or documents of that past, that does not include a critical function. Of course, LaCapra is focusing his critical articulations regarding the proper relationship between memory and history upon one of the most traumatic events of our most recent past, the Shoah, which brought "the image of Western civilization . . . as the bastion of elevated values if not the high point in the evolution of humanity" to the absolute

. . . may counteract the melancholic-manic cycle . . . and enable a dissolution or at least loosening of the narcissistic identification that is prominent in melancholy" (LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, 183-84). LaCapra opposes Freud's "acting out," in which the subject is caught in the grip of the mechanisms of a continual repetition of the past, to "working through," in which the repetition is modified to offer "a measure of critical purchase . . . that would permit desirable change" (*ibid.*, 186).

⁵⁷It is important to note here that LaCapra does not believe that the past can be so completely "worked through" that it completely loses its grip upon the present, because this would imply a kind of eventual obliviousness to the past that could in itself be detrimental. Rather, it is important to engage in a kind of "memory-work" (à la Freud) in which "memory exists not only in the past but in the present and future tenses. It relates acknowledgment and immanent critique to situational transcendence of the past that is not total but is nonetheless essential for opening up more desirable possibilities in the future" (LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, 16). Furthermore, working through the past is "a process (not an accomplished state) and involve[s] not definitive closure or full self-possession but a recurrent yet variable attempt to relate accurate, critical memory-work to the requirements of desirable action in the present" (*ibid.*, 42).

shattering point,⁵⁸ and therefore exists for many in contemporary culture as the historical trauma most immediately insistent upon our ethical attention, and upon our obligation to properly mourn (hence, properly *remember*) the past. And *Beowulf* is an Old English poem that, although it articulates the very real trauma of the extinction of a distinct culture (the Geats, or Gautar—who could also stand in for *any* distinct culture threatened and even subsumed by war),⁵⁹ while also continually pointing to the violent upheavals, terrors, and restless wanderings of a particular era, its historical subject matter is culled from a period so far removed in time from the present (the period of the Migrations, approximately fourth to sixth century, C.E.),⁶⁰ we feel utterly cut off from it, except by the

⁵⁸LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz*, 9.

⁵⁹It has to be pointed out here that I am well aware of the common historical fallacy whereby the annihilation of the Geats predicted in the poem is assumed to be a historical fact that refers, according to some scholars, to the ancient Gautar of southern Sweden, an assumption that has led, as John Niles has pointed out, to historical “guesswork run riot.” Further, Niles has remarked that many theories regarding what might have happened to the “actual” Geats, and how that might tell us something about the poet’s intentions, have been formulated “in the absence of historical evidence either that the Gautar disappeared at any time during the first millenium or that their eventual absorption into ‘greater Sweden’ was the result of wars of conquest. The modern equation of the Geatas with the Gautar rests almost exclusively on the phonological correspondence of these names, together with some *Götterdämmerung*-style thinking” (John D. Niles, “Myth and History,” Bjork and Niles, *A Beowulf Handbook*, 227). For the purposes of my discussion thus far, it is not ultimately important whether or not there is a sound set of historical references for the collapse of Geatish society and its absorption into another tribe, or nation, as predicted by Wiglaf’s herald within the poem. More important is the fact that, not only in the period of the Migrations, but also in the later Middle Ages through to our own time, distinct social groups have always been subject to casualty, erasure, and displacement through war, often at the hands of those for whom the annihilation of a distinct group of people is the chief aim of waging a war, and the poem itself gestures toward and mourns, in advance, this kind of annihilation (which is also an absorption of one tribe into another).

⁶⁰According to Norman Davies, “[i]n the early centuries of the first millennium, few parts of the [European] Peninsula were inhabited by the peoples who would later settle there permanently in well-defined national ‘homelands’. . . . Tribes and federations of tribes, large and small, conducted an unending search for better land. . . . The irregular rhythms of migration depended on a complex equation involving climatic changes, food supply, demographic growth, local rivalries,

vanishing avenue of myth. Some will even argue that the very alterity (or, "otherness") of the historical period of the German Invasions and Migrations, combined with the very paucity of information we possess regarding that era, should stop or at least caution us from trying to draw parallel lines of identification in any way with that past, or from trying to build from that past's artifacts (i.e., *Beowulf*) an auratic space within which we could feel the pulses of an earlier era moving through our own.

Patrick Wormald gives the conventional view of what can be known about Anglo-Saxon culture in his essay "Anglo-Saxon society and its literature," where he writes that

[l]ittle can be known of the period between 407 and 597, when most of what had been Roman 'Britannia' was settled by Germanic-speakers whom it is convenient to call Anglo-Saxons—though the Angles and Saxons, from the neck of the Jutland peninsula in Denmark and the north German coast . . . were certainly accompanied by others from the Low Countries and perhaps Scandinavia. Most of the sources that purport to tell this story were assembled at a much later date from suitably adjusted oral tradition, myth and imaginative fiction. . . . Archaeology gives some support to the impression of colonization from [across the North Sea] It also testifies to a sharp economic decline in the quality of life once sustained by the Roman province; and, by the sixth century, to the emergence of a warrior culture, whose men were buried with weapons of war, and women with

distant crises" (Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996], 215). More specifically, in relation to the peoples who make up the ancestry of the characters in *Beowulf*, there was, as part of the period of the Migrations, what Davies has termed "the massive historical process which . . . has been called 'the Barbarian Invasions' and . . . has often been reduced to 'the Germanic Invasions'". To the Germans it is known as the *Völkerwanderung*, the 'Wandering Peoples'—an apt term which could well be applied to its Germanic and non-Germanic participants alike. . . . Anthropological analysis suggests that three main types of population were involved: the settled inhabitants of the Empire, living in cities or on rural estates; the barbarian tribes, living from primitive arable or pastoral farming; and the true nomads. One must also add the sea raiders, who, like the nomads, lived largely from plunder, and who operated over huge distances in the northern sea" (*ibid.*, 217-19). It is important to note here as well Davies' caution that the "fluidity of migrant tribal groupings, and the chaotic nature of their movements, did not suit the purposes of those who tried to make sense of the migrations in later times. Chroniclers and historians were tempted to write in terms of discrete, permanent, and self-conscious tribes where no such entities had necessarily existed" (*ibid.*, 217).

rich jewellery that illustrated its profits.⁶¹

Additionally, James Earl has written that "records of the settlement period . . . are nearly nonexistent. There is Gildas's lamentation from the British camp; there are a few evanescent settlement villages, all made of wood, like West Stow . . . there are cemeteries, brooches, some pottery . . . and other grave goods; and until quite recently there has been general agreement among historians that without more evidence than this, what we cannot speak of we must pass over in silence."⁶² According to Earl, most literary scholars "remain content to begin Anglo-Saxon history with the conversion rather than the settlement . . . and to deduce earlier 'pagan' ideas and institutions from their more or less incongruous blending with later Christian evidence," but Earl himself is not content to pass over the period's possible social configurations in silence, and he believes sharper distinctions *can* be drawn "between the tribes before they came to Britain and the kingdoms the missionaries found when they arrived there," mainly by drawing on conventional sources such as chronicle, archaeology, and classic studies of Germanic institutions (i.e., George Dumézil on cult and class structure); nevertheless, as Earl himself states, "[t]here is enough conflicting evidence to suggest that no general model of the settlement is possible, but different areas underwent distinctive transformations from Roman to British to Anglo-Saxon rule. Martin Carver compares the situation to that of colonial Africa, where power

⁶¹Patrick Wormald, "Anglo-Saxon society and its literature," Godden and Lapidge, *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, 2.

⁶²James W. Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 32.

took so many different forms.”⁶³ Ultimately, Earl’s response to this dilemma in his work with *Beowulf* is to adopt a psychoanalytic anthropological method that will allow him to chart an ethnography, not of the “historical reality the poem supposedly represents,” but instead, of *the world of the poem*, and this is a world that Earl sees as being mainly characterized by loose confederations of warring tribal nations within which there were social organizations that were structured primarily either by kinship or lordship ties (or a combination of the two), and because most men belonged to both kinship and lordship systems the two corresponding cultures of warfare and agriculture would have flourished complementarily while also often being in open conflict with each other.⁶⁴

John Hill, in his recent work with *Beowulf*, also acknowledges the difficulty of sketching a clear picture of Anglo-Saxon culture, given the scarcity of surviving historical evidence, and he relies upon “an analogically flexible ethnology” that draws upon what we know of similar cultures (both past and present) in northern Europe and France, the Pacific rim, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere. More so than Earl, Hill is very much concerned, not so much with grasping the meanings of “the world of the poem” (which would shelve an anthropological understanding of the poem in favor of an understanding of the poem’s literary symbolism), but with grasping the very real social world upon which the culture depicted in the poem may have been patterned, and he looks for “non-centralized, small group societies as sources of insight where kinship structures are largely bilateral; where there is customary settlement of grievances through revenge and feud;

⁶³*Ibid.*, 33, 36-37.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 100, 109-10.

where gift giving matters; where myths and legends are ancestral and incorporating; where the sense of time is genealogical and not deeply historical, mechanistic, and alienating; where there is hierarchy between chiefs and warriors and where there is a tendency toward monarchy.”⁶⁵ Hill sees “the approximate historical period” for the main action of the poem as “the late fifth and early sixth centuries, in areas of southern Sweden and northern Denmark (the isle of Zealand), whereas the poem probably comes down to us in an eleventh-century manuscript, from an Anglo-Saxon culture not much earlier than the ninth century and perhaps a century later;”⁶⁶ nevertheless, Hill believes that, setting aside the “poet’s occasional sense of [moral and spiritual] difference,” the social groups in the poem “upon whom the *Beowulf* poet founded his heroic world, and the Anglo-Saxon people to whom, in his own (unknown) time and place, he addressed his poem,” shared social values (related to kinship and lordship ties, law codes, warrior ethics, etc.) that point to a continuity between the two cultures, and “comparative ethnology is the most promising way of bringing out of obscurity the shared organization of those groups.”⁶⁷ Ultimately, Hill sees *Beowulf*’s world, and therefore, also, the Scandinavian world of the period of the Migrations, as well as, to a certain extent, the Anglo-Saxon world of the poet’s audience, as

a face-to-face one [where] . . . morality is probably tied first to familial, then to lord-retainer, and then to group relations. In this world violent

⁶⁵John M. Hill, “Introduction,” *The Cultural World in Beowulf* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 5.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 8.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 17-18.

settlement is part of the institution of the feud (which in turn has a customary, juridical heart); grand gift giving has complex social dimensions; time is a matter of cycle and kin-line (or patriline), not clock time or historical measurement; and God is both in heaven and in the life and death events of this world, effectually underwriting the customary values of revenge as settlement, of amity between kinsmen, and of loyalty between lord and retainer.⁶⁸

Unlike Earl, who sees the poem, ultimately, as “an act of cultural mourning,” in which “[t]he destruction of the heroic world at the end of the poem represents a renunciation,”⁶⁹ Hill does not see a huge gap between the world of the poem and the world of the poet, for he sees the poet, not engaging in a “Christian distancing” from his material, so much as he “everywhere underwrites the essential values of that world, which he owns as well, and which he sanctions by every means available to him,” and therefore, “the world goes on in its changeable and violent ways: there is no clear view in the poem that times have got better since those days.”⁷⁰

It could be said that Earl’s and Hill’s work is somewhat of an exception in contemporary *Beowulf* studies in its focus upon the fifth to sixth-century culture of the subjects of the poem, for much historically-oriented scholarship (especially in the period between Dorothy Whitelock’s 1951 study *The Audience of Beowulf* and Fred Robinson’s 1985 study *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*) would seem to be more inclined toward

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 19.

⁶⁹Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, 47-48. It has to be pointed out here that Earl sees the poem as being deeply ambivalent about what should constitute one culture’s appropriate attitude toward the past; nevertheless, he does typify the poem as an essentially epic “heroic narrative,” through which the later Anglo-Saxon audience could come to grips with the end of a culture that is irretrievably *past*, and even, lost.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 145.

discerning and analyzing the culture of the supposed eighth, ninth, or tenth-century readers of the poem, wherein the more fashionable questions relating to, as John Niles has put it, "What are the cultural questions to which *Beowulf* is an answer?" can be interrogated.⁷¹ And one could say that the most recent scholarship, under the influence of poststructuralist forms of thought, is mainly interested in the poem as a literary performance in which the polyphonic discursive networks of complex literate cultures (with the emphasis on the *plural* in cultures) can be investigated. John Niles has, I think, best summed up this approach, as well as its value, in a 1993 essay where he wrote that

we need to reconstruct an Anglo-Saxon context within which the poem and the fact of its textual existence make sense. I am not speaking of a 'background' in the repudiated sense, but rather of an historical matrix in which the discourse of heroic poetry took place—whether in oral or manuscript form—and which this discourse had some power to shape, as well. . . . we can proceed with indifference to earlier conceptions to the effect that *Beowulf* reflects the mentality of one specific group of people located in one time or place, or provides a clear window on early Germanic social institutions, or stands as an unambiguous statement of 'heroic values,' 'Christian allegory,' or any other monolithic abstraction. Instead, we can begin to read the poem as a site of ideological conflict, a complex work of art that responded to lively tensions, agreements, and disagreements in the society from which it came.⁷²

More recently, in an essay written for *A Beowulf Handbook*, published in 1997, Niles indicated that the traditional biases of positivist historicism and literary aestheticism are giving way, finally, to "a fresh critical approach" that "focusses less on issues of historicity or literary value per se than on questions of how a given text serves as an agent of social ideology, a means of collective self-fashioning, and a participant in a period-specific

⁷¹John D. Niles, "Locating *Beowulf* in Literary History," *Exemplaria* 5 (March 1993): 79.

⁷²*Ibid.*: 80.

tensions and tropes.”⁷³ For myself, I do not think it is possible to dispense with the notion that the poem reflects (or at least attempts to represent) some kind of fifth or sixth-century historical reality, which we would do well to spend some time investigating, no matter how “dark,” or hidden, to our view, for the later complex societies in which the poem may have been written and read (and that includes *our* society) are themselves asked by the poem (rather insistently, in my view) to consider that history and its social structures quite seriously in relation to their present moment, and while the poem may reflect a dense web of competing ideologies prevalent in the time period of its *écriture* and reception (and I think it does), it does so in relation to an earlier historical period which is also fraught with its own ideological conflicts and crises, and it is in the tensions and anxieties raised between the later culture’s memory and representation of its supposed prehistory and the ways in which the subjects of that prehistory make their own gestures against the grain of the cultural topologies predominant in that memory both within and without the poem, where the real interest of the poem, and even its urgency, may lie.⁷⁴ And I would also

⁷³Niles, “Myth and History,” Bjork and Niles, *A Beowulf Handbook*, 217.

⁷⁴Niles himself would partly understand this as being where the real interest in studies of the poem lie, I think, for in his essay, “Appropriations: A Concept of Culture,” he writes that, “despite all one’s passion for accuracy in sifting through the annals of the past, it no longer matters what ‘really happened’ in history. What’s done is done. The victors of former struggles are now wrapped by the same earth that covers their victims. What does matter greatly is *what people believe* happened in history, *what they say* happened, for such beliefs and claims can have a passionate relation to rivalries of which the outcome is still in doubt” (John D. Niles, “Appropriations: A Concept of Culture,” in Allen J. Frantzen and John D. Niles, eds., *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity* [Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1997], 220). Where I would quibble with Niles is over the idea that “it no longer matters what ‘really happened’ in history.” I think it matters a great deal, especially to the historian, and also to the person who believes, along with Benjamin, that “[t]here is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a

argue, following Hill, that the world *continues* to go on “in its violent and changeable ways,” and therefore, there is a continuity between the world of the poem and our own world that we would be remiss to overlook, or to dismiss as too *other*, for it is precisely the return of the cultural Other, wrapped within the Anglo-Saxon language of the poem itself and carried forward in time by the historical fact of all of the poem’s *present* moments of material existence that we are even able to consider the claims upon our attention of the *unfamiliar* Anglo-Saxon (and even, Scandinavian) past.

If one wants to understand the past *as it was* (to give the dead their due remembrance, as it were, and to properly recognize their claims upon the present) as well as overcome that past (overcome one’s fixation on what may be a culturally overdetermined “version” of that past) in order to free oneself from it in a way that leads to a more active ethical life for the scholar, both an empathetic ability to empty oneself out and become “open” to Benjamin’s cessations of happening (admittedly, a somewhat mystical experience) as well as critical judgement and distancing are required, and it may be that art (specifically, art that takes history as its point of departure, or even, arrival—and this would include *Beowulf* as well as the documentary photograph) provides

claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply” (Benjamin, “Theses on a Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, 254). Furthermore, Niles’s statement is a relatively safe one to make when discussing a past for which no forms of “living memory” or living witnesses exist, whereas if one were to apply Niles’s comment, “What’s done is done,” to something like the Holocaust, or even World War I, we would rightly be appalled at its insensitivity, and even, its lack of historical understanding. But obviously, the depth of our sensitivity and historical understanding lies in proportion to the proximity to us *in time* of traumatic events, and this may be, in my view, a real ethical problem. And this is why, when Alan Alda’s character says in Woody Allen’s film *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, “tragedy plus time equals comedy,” Allen meant for us to take this statement as evidence of Alda’s character’s complete moral banality.

an ideal stage upon which to construct such an experience, both in its more immediate and also in its more critical aspects. LaCapra himself devotes three out of six chapters in *History and Memory after Auschwitz* to an exploration of art's function in relation to history and memory: "Rereading Camus's *The Fall* after Auschwitz and with Algeria," "Lanzmann's *Shoah*: 'Here There is No Why'," and "'Twas the Night Before Christmas: Art Spiegelman's *Maus*." Specifically, LaCapra is concerned to sort out whether or not art has "a special responsibility with respect to traumatic events that remain invested with value and emotion,"⁷⁵ and he takes the French filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, especially, to task for claiming that his monumental nine-and-one-half-hour oral history of the Holocaust, *Shoah*, is "not a documentary" or even "representational," but is instead "a fiction of the real."⁷⁶ According to LaCapra, Lanzmann, as a filmmaker (and, also, as a secondary witness), indulges too often in a positive transferential identification with his subjects that privileges reliving the past over a critical working through of that past, and *Shoah* is therefore "best viewed as neither representational nor autonomous art but as a disturbingly mixed generic performance that traces and tracks the traumatic effects of limit-experiences, particularly in the lives (or afterlives) of victims. It is a film of endless lamentation or grieving that is tensely suspended between acting out a traumatic past and attempting to work through it."⁷⁷ Lanzmann eschewed archival footage when making his film and chose to concentrate instead on conversations with eyewitnesses

⁷⁵LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, 1.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 96.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 98.

(victims—especially those prisoners who worked in the *Sonderkommando*—and perpetrators) wherein they recount their experiences in the death camps in Poland and in the Warsaw ghetto, and on a seemingly endless series of silent panning and tracking shots of the pastoral landscapes of former camp sites and mass graves, as well as the train tracks, roads, and grassy pathways leading into them in order to record the disappearance, and even the *le néant* of the traces of the Holocaust.⁷⁸ The film rejects a traditional chronological or historiographical approach, and instead relies, in its structure, on a circular and almost compulsive repetition of testimony and images. Lanzmann rejected the question, “why did this happen?” as an academic obscenity, and set about, in the making of his film, to produce, in his words, an “originary event” in which he, as a participant, could undergo a certain kind of suffering, “permitting perhaps, the spectator as well to pass through a sort of suffering.”⁷⁹ In order to create this “originary event,” Lanzmann

⁷⁸While Lanzmann himself was aiming for an atmosphere of “hallucinatory intemporality” in his concentration upon what he refers to as the blank “non-lieux de mémoire” of the Shoah in present-day Poland, mainly because he believes that “[t]he worst crime, simultaneously moral and artistic, that can be committed when it is a question of realizing a work dedicated to the Holocaust is to consider the latter as *passé*” (qtd. in LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, 105), LaCapra would seem to be somewhat distressed at Lanzmann’s focus upon this “hallucinatory intemporality” and upon the beautifully “blank” spaces of former camp sites, and he wonders “what will happen for viewers from a later generation, who may not be familiar with the [archival] images Lanzmann intentionally excludes. Will they take his beautiful pastoral landscapes at face value or simply as nostalgic, often chiaroscuro aestheticizations of ruins from a forgotten past rather than as a bitterly ironic commentary on the past these sites conceal . . . ? Moreover, is it possible that archival documents, images, and footage would not have a merely banalizing effect but might serve to provide reality tests for an imagination that can otherwise run rampant to the point of obsession and hallucination? Indeed, might they even increase the challenge confronted by the artistic imagination in rendering the impossible?” (LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, 108-09).

⁷⁹Claude Lanzmann, “Les Non-lieux de la mémoire,” in Michel Deguy, ed., *Au sujet de Shoah: le Film de Claude Lanzmann* (Paris: Belin, 1990), 282; qtd. in LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, 122-23.

was interested that his interviewees not just “remember” what happened, but actually “relive it” in the telling, so that their trauma could be recorded in its most immediate aspects, and that is why, for Lanzmann, the film is not about memory, per se (which is always a corruption of history), but about the *incarnation* of the past in the present, and as he himself stated in an interview, “Memory is weak. The film is the abolition of all distance between the past and the present.”⁸⁰ The ultimate task of the film’s viewers then, as Shoshana Felman put it, is “not the finite task of making sense out of the Holocaust, but the infinite task of encountering *Shoah*,”⁸¹ or we might say, the infinite task of encountering history itself. LaCapra is wary of Lanzmann’s approach, especially because the film would seem to “resist closure and attest[s] to a past that will not and should not pass away, a past that must remain an open wound in the present,” and it does so “with a dominant tonality of unrelieved melancholy and desperation.”⁸² For LaCapra, the excesses of Lanzmann’s film are in keeping with a certain tendency that has “a long tradition in French thought that emphasizes tragic, self-renderingly ecstatic experience,” and he wonders if Lanzmann’s desire to identify with the victims may not be “a displaced religious longing that is encrypted in his vision of art, a longing for which the term masochism may be too

⁸⁰Claude Lanzmann, “Le Lieu et la parole,” in Deguy, *Au sujet de Shoah*, 301; qtd. in LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, 129.

⁸¹Shoshana Felman, “The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*,” in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, M.D., *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 268; qtd. in LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, 113.

⁸²LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, 117.

facile a designation.”⁸³ Ultimately, LaCapra questions the film’s overtly liturgical function, which, when placed alongside Lanzmann’s claims for the primacy of the aesthetic and the film’s obviously deeply traumatic historic subject matter, pull the film in several different, not altogether compatible directions.⁸⁴ I have explicated LaCapra’s discussion of Lanzmann’s film at some length here because, having viewed and been tremendously moved by the film as well as impressed by its artistry (by how the film made visible in its pastoral landscapes the very real way in which time and modes of forgetting cover over the traces of the past, but also how language alone—the voices of the witnesses, without benefit of archival footage—filled in the stark emptiness of those landscapes), and thinking also about the ways in which *Beowulf* both aestheticizes history while also ritually memorializing and mourning it, I think we have to give art some room to conflate and even confuse these functions of the aesthetic and historic. One of art’s primary functions may very well be to hold open a social space within which the very anxiety produced by the tension between history’s and memory’s points of incommensurability (and between modes of remembering and forgetting) can be performed and played out, and perhaps, even alleviated.

A literary text such as *Beowulf* that speaks of and gestures toward a traumatic cultural history—part real, part wholly unreal—so far removed from us in time and place

⁸³*Ibid.*, 98, 134.

⁸⁴As an example of the ways in which Lanzmann’s film was often received by critics as if it possessed a liturgical function, LaCapra cites Elisabeth Huppert’s contribution to *Au sujet de Shoah* (*op. cit.*), “Voir (*Shoah*),” in which she wrote that “the emptiness that we carry in ourselves is perhaps that through which we participate in the divine principle. In *Shoah* it is on the exterior of the film, but it exists” (qtd. in LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, 121 n. 23).

that we feel emotionally disconnected from it and for which there are no recognizable memory sites (other than the literary text itself),⁸⁵ and whose composition history is fraught with so many unresolvable aporia (thereby continually unsettling our ability to situate it historically with any kind of precision, with respect to the English culture in which it was composed and read), would seem to provide an ideal site through which to interrogate the always fluctuating relationships between memory, history, and art, to investigate just how far and to what extent the dead have a claim upon the memory of contemporary culture, whether or not we, in the present, have an obligation to “work through” claims of past suffering, displacement, and erasure, whether or not there are

⁸⁵“Memory site” here is a term borrowed from the historian Pierre Nora who has designated as *lieux de memoire* material and symbolic elements of French history and national identity—artistic objects, monuments and buildings, places, holidays and commemorative objects, historical events, figures, and periods—that have become invested by the cultural imagination with symbolic auras that are essentially opposed to their actual (if even recoverable) history, and the historian’s task, in an era where the “historicized memory” has overtaken history, and where “the past is a world from which we are fundamentally cut off,” is to interrogate the ways in which memory sites accrue and accrete symbolic value in order to peel away the layers of a culture’s forgetfulness about its own past (Pierre Nora, “Introduction,” *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, vol. 1, ed. Lawrence Kritzman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer [New York: Columbia University Press, 1996], 12). Examples of *lieux de memoire* from French culture would be the prehistoric caves of Lascaux, Joan of Arc, Versailles, Bastille Day, Marcel Proust, May 1968, the Eiffel Tower, etc. Of course, the *Beowulf* manuscript displayed under glass at the British Library in London is a *lieu de memoire* in English cultural history that, even for those who have never read it, calls up, by its very name, the collective unconscious of English culture (albeit, this is a largely false consciousness, the very hallmark of a *lieu de memoire*, because in the final analysis, a culture’s “reality” is more symbolic than demographic). I would point out here as well that, while there are no museum exhibits or geographical or topographical sites related to the specific history referred to in *Beowulf* that one could visit and where the past of the poem could be invoked (or experienced) symbolically—one cannot visit, for instance, Beowulf’s “monument” on a promontory cape in Sweden—yet, there *are* actual sites that are ancillary to the “history” of the poem where such an invocation, on the part of various spectators, has most likely occurred over and over again, such as the excavated boat burial remains from Uppland and Sweden preserved in Stockholm’s national museum, the excavation of Sutton Hoo in Suffolk, and the excavated village of Thorsberg in Southern Denmark, just to name a few.

limits to what history can expect of memory and vice-versa, and to explore the tensions and anxiety inherent in those moments when history and memory break off from each other and are incapable of filling in the other's silences. These questions would seem pertinent and even urgent, not only for the historian who is wrestling with what Michel de Certeau termed the proper accounting of "the population of the dead," but also for the literary scholar who is searching for a way to bring *Beowulf* from the margin to the center of cultural studies discourse.⁸⁶ And given the fact that, since its first English edition in 1833,⁸⁷ *Beowulf* has operated in English and American culture less as a purely "literary text" (to which we have mainly gone to discover something about art and "making" in Anglo-Saxon culture) and more as a historical *lieu de memoire* that both conjures up and has often aided in the construction of a largely *imagined* collective and commemorative English (or Germanic) past, the poem, as well as the history of the critical study of the poem, is already encrusted with layer after layer of symbolic auras that call the very mutually overdetermined relationship between cultural memory, history, and art

⁸⁶I would argue as well that the very alterity or "otherness" of the Anglo-Saxon culture depicted in *Beowulf* provides, in many ways, an interesting context within which to investigate the limits of one's ethical attention, especially if one is invested (as I must confess, *I* am invested) in the idea that, first, the cultivation of a certain kind of moral attention, or *regard*, must be a part of what cultural workers and university teachers do, and second, that this attention finds its most proper objects and tests, not in what is most proximate and familiar, but in what is most "other," unfamiliar, and strange. This is precisely the kind of test faced by the human characters in the poem, I think, in their confrontations with what they perceive to be "Other"—the *aglæcean*, or monsters—who must always be met, finally, in their own "outland" territory, which is always situated along the very edge of the human villages and courts, but which is also seen by those who venture there (to mere or cave bottom) as the very outermost limit, or threshold, of that human world, which might also be seen as the ground of the breaking point of identity in the poem (specifically, the "warrior" identity).

⁸⁷John Mitchell Kemble, ed. *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf, the Traveller's Song, and The Fight at Finnesburh* (London: William Pickering, 1833).

into question.

According to Lawrence Kritzman, the historian Pierre Nora coined the term *lieu de memoire* in order to denote the “‘memory places’ of French national identity as they have been constructed since the middle ages,” and memory must be here understood, not in its literal sense, but in its “‘sacred context’ as the variety of forms through which cultural communities imagine themselves in diverse representational modes,” with *realms of memory* functioning as “an inventory of *loci memoriae*.”⁸⁸ More specifically, Nora has written that the “*lieu* is a *templum*; something singled out within the continuum of the profane (whether in time, space, or both), a circle within which everything counts, everything is symbolic, everything is significant. In this sense, the *lieu de memoire* has a dual nature: it is a hermetic excrescence upon the world, defined by its identity and summed up by its name, but at the same time open to an infinite variety of possible other meanings.”⁸⁹ And certainly, in our culture, *Beowulf* is a poem that almost no one has read and yet, which everyone has heard of, with its very name conjuring up, not only the mythical and shadowy figure of its hero, but also his, and ours, supposedly “heroic” or “Germanic” past; moreover, this past can be recapitulated and redrawn over and over again by each new generation of *Beowulf* scholars who work to both further clarify and deepen (and even, radically alter) our understanding of the cultural milieus upon which the poem’s subject matter may have been based and in which the poem may have been produced and transmitted, while also reinscribing the poem as something that *must matter*,

⁸⁸Lawrence D. Kritzman, “Foreword,” Nora, *Realms of Memory*, 1: ix.

⁸⁹Nora, “Introduction,” *Realms of Memory*, 1: 19-20.

whose symbolic possibilities are inexhaustible.⁹⁰ And we might say that the *Beowulf* manuscript matters so much to those of us who study it—on an unconscious level, perhaps—because it holds within its vellum leaves the material vestiges and traces of a commemorative consciousness that has miraculously managed to survive in a society that has grown disenchanted with remembering, and for which, other than the Church, there are no places within which the ritual of remembering can be performed and even, made sacred. Nora has written that our fascination with memory sites, such as *Beowulf*, may stem from the fact that *lieux de memoire* often constitute “rituals in a ritual-less society; fleeting incursions of the sacred into a disenchanted world; vestiges of parochial loyalties in a society that is busily effacing all parochialisms; de facto differentiations in a society that levels on principle; signs of recognition and group affiliation in a society that tends to recognize only individuals, assumed to be equal if not identical.”⁹¹ Furthermore, *lieux de memoire* arise out of the idea that there is no longer any such thing as living memory, and therefore what remains of memory must be marked, archived, organized, and authenticated because “without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them

⁹⁰The inexhaustible versatility of symbolic forms of a *lieu de memoire* also extends to the popular culture sphere, of course, and in relation to *Beowulf*, we have seen many examples of its flexibility in contemporary culture, ranging from John Gardner’s novel *Grendel* (1971), in which Grendel actually becomes a sympathetic character, to the 1970s D.C. Comics comic book series, *Beowulf*, to Michael Crichton’s novel *Eaters of the Dead* (1976), in which the story of Beowulf in “Daneland” is combined with the Arab Ibn Fadlan’s account of his historical mission from Bagdad to the king of the Bulgars, to the 1999 film *The 13th Warrior* (based on Crichton’s novel), to the science fiction film *Beowulf* in which the actor Christopher Lambert as the eponymous hero fights monsters in the sleekly techno-futuristic forty-first century, and even to Seamus Heaney’s Whitbread Award-winning translation of the poem published in 2000.

⁹¹Nora, “Introduction,” *Realms of Memory*, 1: 7.

away.”⁹² Ultimately, Nora wants a critique of *lieux de memoire* that will show, through a peeling away of their historically constructed symbolic layers, their infinitely regressing self-representational nature, which demonstrates at the same time the infinite regress of the historical memory, or of a culture’s memory about itself, and therefore, that which has vanished, completely, is still vanishing. It may be that when we consider the image of the women of Beowulf’s tribe, bereft of their possessions, walking “a foreign path, not once but often,” or of the Kosovar family traveling into exile with only the barest of their possessions (*fig. 6*), we are actually seeing the truth of our own cultural condition vis-à-vis our history: we ourselves are bereft, as Nora would put it, of “the kind of inviolate social memory that primitive and archaic societies embodied, and whose secret died with them,” and simultaneously bound to “a memory without a past that eternally recycles a heritage, relegating ancestral yesterdays to the undifferentiated time of heroes, inceptions, and myth.”⁹³ But if our symbolic capital (our cultural possessions, which include the *Beowulf* manuscript) were to be stripped away from us, as Nora’s form of historical critique would have it, we would undergo a strenuous process of *deracinement* that would reveal to us what has always been the instantiating and enduring condition of human culture: our utter rootlessness. And we would have a difficult time embracing this rootlessness, although, if we *could* embrace it, we might experience a kind of liberatory release from the teeth of the trap of a cultural history which has been for us, finally, a kind of agreed-upon blindness.

⁹²*Ibid.*

⁹³*Ibid.*, 1:2.

II *The fault of Beowulf is that there is nothing much in the story.*
 —W.P. Ker⁹⁴

According to James Earl, "*Beowulf* explores the Heroic Age out of which history is born and the apocalyptic end toward which history inevitably moves. The death of the Heroic Age at the end of the poem, then, is a past destruction symbolizing a future one; but the end of the Heroic Age is also the beginning of our own."⁹⁵ It is generally agreed upon, as I have commented above, that the so-called "Heroic Age" of the poem is a mainly mythologized era, an "artificial idealization," according to Earl, that represents "a slippery form of history, ever advancing to absorb all but the most recent past."⁹⁶ Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe has written that the "ethos of heroic life pervades Old English literature," including *Beowulf*—an ethos, moreover, whose "touchstone . . . is the vital relationship between retainer and lord, whose binding virtue is loyalty," but which can also

⁹⁴W.P. Ker, *The Dark Ages* (1904; reprint London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1955), 252.

⁹⁵Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, 29.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 34. To provide one exception to this view, Fred C. Robinson has written that, since most of the human characters of the poem can be located in Latin, Old Icelandic, Scandinavian, and Anglo-Saxon sources outside of the poem, the subject matter of *Beowulf* suggests a poet “who has a fairly firm command of the history of Germania in the fifth and sixth centuries,” with which history Robinson feels the audience of the poem would have been familiar (Fred C. Robinson, “*Beowulf*,” in Godden and Lapidge, *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, 148-49). In line with Earl’s thinking about the poem being mainly preoccupied with the mourning of the end of an idealized past, however, Robinson has also written of the ways in which the poem, although filled with Christian regret for the human characters caught in a “hopeless heathen world,” also celebrates their “ancestral valor” and “heroic virtue,” and therefore, also mourns that lost culture. For Robinson’s work with *Beowulf* in this vein, see Fred C. Robinson, *Beowulf and the Appositive Style* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985).

devolve into the individual desire for “valour and reputation whatever the cost”⁹⁷—but the real, actual heroic world in which this ethos was supposedly originally founded is extremely difficult to call forth. Even the term, “Heroic Age,” O’Keefe points out, which was coined by H.M. Chadwick in 1912 in order to denote a particular stage in Western culture, was partly postulated “to establish authority for ‘historical’ information possibly contained in national epics and lays written long after that ‘heroic’ stage.”⁹⁸ Furthermore, O’Keefe writes that “Chadwick’s hypothesis is, in fact, open to grave doubt and cannot be extended to recover a historical reality for the social customs of the migration.”⁹⁹ For O’Keefe, the differences between “the literary representations of warrior life and the social realities of both [Anglo-Saxon] kingship and military life” can be awfully difficult to pinpoint and “the features of early kingship in Anglo-Saxon England are insufficiently documented to allow a specific portrait of the relationship between lord and retainer and the conduct expected of each.”¹⁰⁰ Offering some possible avenues through which to work through these differences, O’Keefe looks to the career and work of Alfred the Great (871-99), who “left behind both a military and an intellectual legacy” that O’Keefe believes

⁹⁷Katherine O’Brien O’Keefe, “Heroic values and Christian ethics,” Godden and Lapidge, *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, 107, 122.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 113.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.* It should be noted here that my discussion in Section I of this chapter on James Earl’s and John Hill’s work with the cultural world represented in *Beowulf* demonstrates, I think, that the historical reality of Migration Era-society, and therefore of the relationships between tribal leaders and their retainers, is not as insufficiently drawn for us, perhaps, as O’Keefe believes it is, although her point that historical documents contemporaneous with that time *are* insufficient is well taken.

demonstrates how very different (and more ideologically nuanced) ninth-century social realities were from the social reality of "the Germanic war band" of heroic literature,¹⁰¹ and she also looks to the poem *The Battle of Maldon* as a unique instance of "both a polished work of literature and a memorial of an historical event," in which one can note aspects of a warrior ethos that is "schematically opposed" to "the values of the literary heroic code."¹⁰² Ultimately, for O'Keefe, the heroic idiom displayed in *Beowulf*, whereby "the ultimate heroic reputation may be gained by risking death in a glorious combat,"¹⁰³ is not always completely adequate when pressed to the complex realities of later Anglo-Saxon warfare, such as the actual battle at Maldon (recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as having taken place in August of 991 C.E.) where Byrhtnoth, the leader of the English forces against the Viking invasion, dies in the middle of the fighting, part of his army deserts the field, and the English ultimately lose. O'Keefe's cautions against conflating the *literary* Anglo-Saxon warrior ethos with the realities of early Anglo-Saxon society are important to heed; nevertheless, as Earl has written, it may be the function of heroic literature, such as *Beowulf*, to always reveal "the fallen nature of the present age by contrast [with the Heroic Age]." Further, he writes that a culture "projects into its Heroic Age its own ideal forms, against which it can measure itself, and the hero is an ideal type against whom men can measure their behavior—although by this measure cultures and

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 113-15.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 117-21.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, 109.

men will always be found deficient."¹⁰⁴

There is always a gap, then, between the supposed Migration-era "Heroic Age" of a poem like *Beowulf* and the cultural realities faced every day by those living in Anglo-Saxon England, and this raises the question yet again, posed by Niles (cited above), as to what kind of "cultural work" *Beowulf* did in the society in which it may have first been composed and read, and this is a question which much current work with the poem would seem to be mainly preoccupied. For Niles, this means dispensing with the conception that *Beowulf* might be able to tell us something about the supposedly static historical reality of fourth to sixth-century "heroic values," and concentrating instead on the ways in which the poem represents "a broad collective response to changes that affected a complex society during a period of major crisis and transformation."¹⁰⁵ Ultimately, Niles sees the poem as a kind of political site through which the poet attempts to legitimate English nation-building ambitions "in mythic terms through invocation of a common, pseudo-Christian, Anglo-Danish past," and although the poem is set in fifth- and sixth-century Scandinavia, it "articulates a response to the two great sources of tension in English culture during the late sixth through early tenth centuries: the integration of Germanic culture and Christian

¹⁰⁴Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, 45.

¹⁰⁵Niles, "Locating *Beowulf* in Literary History": 81. Specifically, Niles sees this period, by the time of the poem's *écriture* (circa 1000 AD), as a time when "the English-speaking peoples of Britain had turned away from their pagan beliefs and had embraced the teachings of Christianity. They had weathered the storm of Viking invasions and had established control of a mixed and somewhat turbulent Anglo-Scandinavian society. They were no longer competing against one another as separate tribes ruled by warlords but had developed a single kingdom, built largely on the Carolingian model and administered through coinage, written documents, and a state bureaucracy. The changes that affected the society to which *Beowulf* pertains were momentous, and by their workings the nation that we call England came into being" (*ibid.*).

faith into a single system of thought and ethics, and the integration of all the peoples living south of Hadrian's Wall and east of Offa's Dyke into one English nation ruled by the West Saxon royal line."¹⁰⁶ Following somewhat the same line of critical thinking in his work with the migration myth in Anglo-Saxon England, Nicholas Howe has written that, "[d]espite frequent political rivalries, religious disputes, and some degree of dialect variation, [the Anglo-Saxons] could gather a sense of unity from their continental origins as these were memorialized in the central works of the culture," and these works, moreover (which include *Beowulf*), reflect Anglo-Saxon cultural ideals that "blur the distinctions between spiritual belief and historical fact."¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, Howe writes that while Old English poets, including the *Beowulf*-poet, "name places and give some sense of relative location, they think of Germania less as a region to be mapped than as one to be evoked."¹⁰⁸ Fred Robinson, who, perhaps, attributes more historical reality to the poet's subject matter than other critics (or, at least, contends more forcefully that the poet's audience would have been familiar with the "history" invoked in the poem, both of the legendary and more mundane ancestral nature), nevertheless would also agree that the poem ultimately represents a "middle ground" between whatever the fifth- to sixth-century C.E. historical record might have actually been and one culture's *memory* of that record, and this is a memory, moreover, that seeks to close the gap somehow between what is perceived to be both vitally ancestral and lost, yet also "Other" (i.e., pagan and tribal

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*: 106.

¹⁰⁷Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England*, 6.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, 143.

Scandinavia), and what is vibrantly present and familiar (the Christian society of post-conversion “England”). Specifically, Robinson writes that “the poet of *Beowulf* attempts to build a place in his people’s collective memory for their lost ancestors,” and he does so by using an appositive style that allows him to “exercise in his listeners’ minds the powers of inference and the ability to entertain two simultaneous points of view that are necessary for the resolution of poignant cultural tensions.”¹⁰⁹ Following Robinson’s lead in closely analyzing the syntactical structures of the poem’s language, in which words such as *metod* can name either a pagan or Christian deity, Howe writes that “the frequency of apposition [in the poem] means that one cannot discard older, pagan meanings in favor of newer, more comfortable meanings unique to Christianity. At a lexical level, apposition forces listeners to hold two meanings at the same movement; at an interpretive level, it forces listeners to accept ambiguity and understand that history cannot be reduced to a single dimension.”¹¹⁰ One can see, even in the very early scholarship of W.P. Ker, who didn’t think much of *Beowulf* overall (and whose scholarship, which now often seems “quaint,” and even, hidebound, was not attuned to all of the possible sites of ideological frictions in Anglo-Saxon culture), the insight that the “history” contained in early epic poetry is always already transformed by a sensibility (what Ker called the epic, or heroic imagination) which, having admitted that the actual history of war and warriors in the Dark Ages is itself too politically complex for poetry, “turns by preference to adventures where the hero is isolated or left with a small company, where he is surprised and assailed

¹⁰⁹Robinson, *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*, 13-14.

¹¹⁰Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England*, 175.

in a house by night, as at Finnesburh, or where he meets his enemies in a journey and has to put his back to a rock” and ultimately, the poet’s “subject matter is not purely material; it has been idealised more or less before he takes it in hand.”¹¹¹ But that the subject matter was rooted in *some* kind of historical reality, Ker *did* believe, and furthermore, “the actual world, so infinitely more complex than the world of heroic poetry, was nevertheless occupied in the Dark Ages with the heroic ideal.”¹¹² The poem, therefore, as Ker recognized and I would ask we recognize again, no matter how *shaped*, always arises, first, out of history.

Regardless of the consensus of critical opinion that *Beowulf* takes place somewhere between myth and history, and that the cultural memory of the poet’s present cannot help but shape whatever true historical material is at hand (the present always consecrating the past, as it were by giving to it its status of *inevitability*—things could not have happened any other way), the heroic past of the poem would have had, for its author and audience, according to Earl, “a dynamic structure, a thematic history: times were better, and then got worse. Simply put, the idealized past implies a fall into the present.”¹¹³ Furthermore, Earl writes that the poem

accounts for the fact that the heroic world, historical as it is, is definitely past. *Beowulf* focuses on the collapse of the heroic world, a collapse that results in the world of history as we know it and at the same time displays

¹¹¹Ker, *The Dark Ages*, 85, 84.

¹¹²*Ibid.*, 85.

¹¹³Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, 34.

the essential nature of history as collapsing, falling, eschatological.¹¹⁴

What I want to focus on here is the image Earl evokes of the past falling into the present, and of history as being in a perpetual state of collapse, which is also a state of perpetual translation of the past into the present and the present into the past, such that it is often difficult to maintain clear lines of distinction between past, present, and future, origins and ends. We have a wealth of scholarship that has more than amply demonstrated, I think, the ways in which the poem mediates the claims of two distinctly different cultures (the Migration Era continental world of the poem and the later Anglo-Saxon culture of the poet), as well as the ways in which the later Anglo-Saxon culture *appropriates* the historical and mythological milieu of the earlier Scandinavian culture in order to propagandize particular Anglo-Saxon values and cultural aims while also honoring what is perceived to be a vital and important ancestral heritage, and therefore this scholarship has also given us a vibrant picture of the ways in which the poem *performs* ideological tensions and anxieties between the differing cultures while also acting as a site through which the multilayered (and often conflicting) relationship between memory and history

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, 46. It has to be noted here that Earl believes the poem is actually a kind of hybrid genre that combines a very dark, northern eschatological mythology with a Judeo-Christian apocalypticism that sees "the transcendent world [as being] revealed in history itself" (*ibid.*, 43). *Beowulf's* essentially fifth- to sixth-century Scandinavian world-view, then, is Christianized, according to Earl, in two important ways: first, "*Beowulf* takes the myth of the eschaton from native belief and historicizes it the way Christianity does, by removing it from a world of mythical symbols like Ragnarök and setting it into the historical world as a statement about human history," and second, "[t]he world destroyed at the end of the poem is the heroic world, that pre-Christian world which in many respects had to be renounced by the Anglo-Saxons with the coming of Christianity" (*ibid.*, 46-47). Where I would quibble with Earl is over the notion that the poem is a form of renunciation for a world that is utterly lost, and therefore, *past*. It is my belief, following Hill as well as Robinson, that the poem is more ambiguous in its attitude toward the past's values than the term *renunciation* would allow. Additionally, there is more historical continuity between the world of the poem and the world of the poet than Earl allows, I think.

can be played out and interrogated, and even, subsumed into the cultural act of *writing*, which is not just the operation by which the poem comes into being, but also the set of literate acts whereby a culture writes *itself* into unified being.¹¹⁵ While these readings of the poem have greatly enriched our understanding of the construction of meaning in Anglo-Saxon culture, they have also abjected the concerns of modern history to a position somewhere outside the traditional hermeneutic circle of interpretation. What is needed

¹¹⁵The kind of scholarship I am thinking of here really begins in earnest, I think, with Dorothy Whitelock's *The Audience of Beowulf* (1951) and runs through to the present day, with the most notable examples being, to my view, the following texts: David N. Dumville, "Beowulf and the Celtic World: The Uses of Evidence," *Traditio* 37 (1981): 109-60; Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf* (1994); Robert T. Farrell, "Beowulf and the Northern Heroic Age," in Robert T. Farrell, ed., *The Vikings* (London: Phillimore, 1982), 180-216; Roberta Frank, "The Beowulf Poet's Sense of History," in Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel, eds., *The Wisdom of Poetry* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1982); Allen J. Frantzen, "Writing the Unreadable Beowulf: 'Writan' and 'Forwritan,' the Pen and the Sword," *Exemplaria* 3 (1991): 327-57; Hill, *The Cultural World in Beowulf* (1995); Howe, *Migrations and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England* (1989); Michael Lapidge, "Beowulf, Adhelm, the *Liber Monstrorum* and Wessex," *Studi Medievali* 23 (1982): 151-92; Niles, *Beowulf: The Poem and Its Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983) and "Locating Beowulf in Literary History" (1993); Fred Robinson, *Beowulf and the Appositive Style* (1985); Gillian R. Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990); Michael J. Swanton, *Crisis and Development in Germanic Society, 700-800: Beowulf and the Burden of Kingship* (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1982); Patrick Wormald, "Bede, Beowulf and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy," in Robert T. Farrell, ed., *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1978), 32-95. This brief bibliography is not meant to be exhaustive, but does cover, I think, the most important inquiries since Whitelock's study into the question of how the poem reflects the later Anglo-Saxon culture's appropriation of earlier historical and mythological materials in its various projects of what Niles would call cultural self-fashioning.

Regarding the importance of *writing* in cultural self-fashioning, Niles has written, following Seth Lerer's arguments in *Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), that "writing was a linking device that promoted complex cultural connections, as when Bede incorporated written documents such as papal letters into his *History* or when various Anglo-Saxon authors wrote glosses on Scriptural texts, glosses that in turn sometimes inspired later commentary. By permitting knowledge to be accumulated in stable form in books and monastic libraries, the technology of writing fostered the growth of science, in partial displacement of magic. By calibrating time in the form of annals, writing made possible history in something like the modern sense, as opposed to legend or myth" (Niles, "Locating Beowulf in Literary History": 89).

now, I would argue, is a reading of the poem that would focus upon the cultural tensions and anxieties produced when different modes of “remembering” meet each other on the stage of the history of what Earl has called “the world of the poem,” which world, as both Earl’s and Hill’s work has demonstrated, has its roots in an anthropological reality that can be located in many different times and places in human history, and therefore, possesses somewhat of a transcendent historical value. It is a world, I would argue, that, in its emphasis on the unavoidable cycle of violence and historical collapse that dictates human lives, is both *early* and *late*—*early*, in the sense that the poem represents an earlier (and even *primitive*) social chaos that we believe has been brought to order through the natural advances of “civilization,” and yet, at the same time, *late*, in the sense that the poem reveals the dark coils and fissures of aggression and ethnocentric hatred that still run through the passageways of contemporary human psychology and therefore, are still erupting in the present and bringing things—persons, tribes, races, villages, cities, and even nations—often decisively, to an end, and therefore, the world of the poem is also not entirely *past*. But this is not to say the poem’s vision is unrelentingly dark, or thoroughly eschatological (as Earl would have it), for in the figure of Beowulf himself, I think we have a cultural hero who, although definitely “a man of his time,” also often swims against the tide of the social chaos of his age and therefore represents the principle of cultural renewal and evolution. Ultimately, I think we need to view *Beowulf* as a poem in which it is possible to glimpse the posthumous “Other” arising in the present—not only in the present of the Anglo-Saxon age in which the poem may have first been composed as a literate text, but also in each successive age in which the poem may have been read and is

still being read. The poem itself is a kind of refraction of constellated images of acts of remembering and forgetting that underline the always tenuous relationship between history and memory, as well as the perils of glossing over the signifying gestures of those figures, historical or legendary, who, by virtue of being “snapped” by the photographer or “written” by the poet, are always departing into the past while simultaneously returning to the present with their throbbing messages. Ultimately, the poem is, as Claude Lanzmann said of his film *Shoah*, a “fiction of the real,” and there must be a way, somehow, to make of the poem an “originary event,” whereby we can seize upon what Benjamin called “the true picture of the past” as it flits by, while also understanding the “secret heliotropism” by which “the past strives to turn toward the sun which is rising in the sky of history.”¹¹⁶

Beowulf himself turns toward the sun rising in the sky of history, and calls attention to the relationship between memory and the “marking” (writing) of history, and to the sacred claim that the past lays upon the present, when he conveys to Wiglaf, just before dying, his request (or even, hope) that “the battle-warriors will command that a bright mound be built . . . high on the whale-cliffs” (“Hatað heaðomære hlæw gewyrcean beorhtne . . . heah hlifan on Hronesnæsse”; ll. 2802-05) as a “gemyndum” to his people (as a memorial which keeps Beowulf *in mind*), and as a marker to future seafarers “when their ships drive from afar over the darkness of the flood” (“ða ðe brentingas ofer floda genipu feorran drifað”; ll. 2807-08). Beowulf’s desire to be “noted” with a memorial barrow built high on a hill where it will be seen by travelers passing by on their ships, which ships can only come to Beowulf’s grave from the future that is now forever out of his grasp, can be

¹¹⁶Benjamin, “Theses for a Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, 255.

seen as a desire to be kept alive as the marker of a cultural memory. The poem, which speaks continually of what is *in gemyndum*, both *remembers* and *memorializes* Beowulf's experiences and also *reminds* Beowulf's original tribe and every successive audience to hold the lessons of Beowulf's life *in mind*. Moreover, Beowulf himself, as well as the audiences both within and without the poem, are continually reminded of the ways in which historical memory and ritualized modes of remembrance mediate the present and make claims upon the future,¹¹⁷ and one could even say that the poem also generates—both for its characters as well as its readers—the very real anxieties produced by such mediations and claims. And these are mediations and claims, moreover, which can work forward as well as backward in time. Therefore, when we are first introduced to Hrothgar and his “great mead-house” (“medoærn micel”; l. 67)—well in advance of

¹¹⁷By “ritualized modes of remembrance,” I mean to indicate those moments in the poem when either Hrothgar's *scops* (the poet-bards of his court), individual characters in the poem (i.e., Beowulf, Wealhthow, Hrothgar, Wiglaf's herald, etc.), or the poet himself interrupt the narrative of the main action of the poem in order to recount a historical episode that is somehow instructive for the present moments of the poem. These episodes have traditionally been referred to as the “digressions” of the poem, although it is generally agreed upon by contemporary scholars that they are essential elements of the overall structure of the poem, which follows naturally from the assessment of Adrien Bonjour, as early as 1950, that “each digression brings its distinct contribution to the organic structure and the artistic value of the poem” (Adrien Bonjour, *The Digressions in Beowulf* [1950; reprint Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970], 75). By “ritualized,” I am referring specifically to the idea that *Beowulf* most likely originated in oral performance, and therefore, much of what is written into the literate text carries with it the structures of oral-formulaic discourse, which give to the historical digressions, especially, the aura of the spoken ritual of living memory, in which a culture never forgets its past because it is continually remembering it *out loud*, according to a script that has been passed from one generation to another. My thinking here follows from John Niles's work with the poem and with modern folklore, and from his statement that “we do not have to read *Beowulf* as a literate island in a sea of much inferior oral poetry, as some scholars do, nor as the unmediated gift of an oral poet's inspiration, as some Romantically inclined scholars have done in the past. Rather, it is a *tertium quid*: a unique kind of hybrid creation that came into being at the interface of two cultures, the oral and the bookish, through some literate person's prompting” (Niles, “Locating *Beowulf* in Literary History”: 105).

Beowulf's actual entry into Heorot as its protector and cleanser-redeemer—we are told not only that Heorot is the “the greatest of hall-buildings” (“healærna mæst”; l. 78) towering over the landscape, but also that it will not be long (“ne wæs hit lenge þa gen”; l. 83) before that hall is consumed by hostile fires due to the ruthless violence and “sword-hate” of “sworn in-laws” (“se ecghete apumsweoran”; l. 84).¹¹⁸ The hall is already destroyed, then, before Beowulf even enters its horn-gabled doors in order to secure it against Grendel's attacks. Before he arrives, *he has already arrived*, and before he undoes Grendel and his kin, Beowulf's warrior work has already been undone—Beowulf's work, in fact, begins to unravel, not at the moment of his departure from the country of the South-Danes (when Grendel and his mother have been suitably chopped up), but rather, *before* he even conceives of crossing the sea from his homeland to go there. Beowulf's powerfully brutal assaults upon Grendel and Grendel's dam are freighted, at every point, with that unraveling, which gives us a picture of human history, not as a progressive series of causes and effects, but as the open, heterogeneous *theatrum* of the eternal return, and what returns, over and over again, is the maw of our often violent nature and the taking up of swords. More pointedly, with respect to *Beowulf*, and even to contemporary world culture, what returns, over and over again, is war, as well as the cultural monstrosities it

¹¹⁸The manuscript actually reads “apum swerian” here (line 84B), and Klaeber amended it to read, “apumsweoran,” so that what was perhaps, originally, “oaths sworn” becomes “sworn in-laws.” Klaeber's emendation has been contentious, and I am following Roy Liuzza's recent translation in my reading, mainly because it is consistent with the theme of fratricidal violence that runs throughout the poem and, by virtue of Ingeld's later treachery against his father-in-law, Hrothgar, which leads to Heorot's downfall, is also in keeping with this early foreshadowing of that event by the poet. One could argue that the original manuscript reading could be kept, and that would not take away one whit from the fact that Heorot and Hrothgar's kingdom are ultimately doomed because of internecine feuding.

engenders.

It is possible to glimpse, I think, in Grendel's perpetual night-stalking of moor and fen, not only a God-cursed monster intent, from envy alone, on murdering good men, as the poem encourages us, at times, to believe, but also the very picture of the monsters the men have spawned within themselves in their eagerness for wealth, power, and fame, and which are coming home to claim their rights of ownership.¹¹⁹ Likewise, one can see Grendel as the figure, *writ large*, of the repressed memory of all the men and women slaughtered in order to build Heorot into what it was before Beowulf arrives there—Heorot, therefore, supposedly “the best of all halls,” is continually haunted by what its inhabitants may have been busily trying to forget with all their drinking and celebrating: their *giftstol* was built, not with wood, but with bodies, many of the gifts of gold doled out to the king's loyal band of thanes had first to be wrenched from the corpses of the battlefield, and, to paraphrase Thoreau, Hrothgar does not sit upon his chieftan's chair; it sits upon him, and quite heavily, we can imagine, for Hrothgar continually *broods*, and when he is not waxing melancholically upon man's dark fate, he is hastening off to bed.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe has written that “[t]he Grendel kin are descendants of the fratricide, Cain, whose killing of Abel God himself avenged But the monstrous progeny of Cain merely mirror behaviour in the civilized human world. Heorot is built only to await the destructive flames from the rekindled Heathobard feud (82-5). Finn and Hengest endure through the Frisian winter a fragile, unwilling peace until vengeance shatters their agreement (1127-53). The Franks and the Swedes nurse their enmity toward the Geats, and the sombre promise of their vengeance lends further poignancy to Beowulf's death (2910-27)” (O'Keefe, “Heroic values and Christian ethics,” Godden and Lapidge, *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, 112).

¹²⁰In *Walden*, Thoreau wrote, “We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irish-man, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them” (Henry David Thoreau, “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” *Walden; or, Life in*

Of all the characters in the poem, it may be that the dark world the poem invokes, especially by way of Grendel and his ravaging kin, weighs most heavily on Hrothgar's shoulders, who, after the murder by Grendel's *dam* of his beloved counsellor Æschere, tells Beowulf, in a somewhat hysterical tone, that the landscape "held" by Grendel and his race of "foreign ghosts" ("ellorgæstas"; l. 1349) is "wolf-haunted," "windy," and "terrible" ("wulfhleopu," "windige," and "frecne"; ll. 1358-59), and that the mere in which Grendel dwells with his "mother" is an "abyss" that no one can fathom ("No þæs frod leofað gumena bearna, þæt þone grund wite"; ll. 1366-67). But Hrothgar is not just an effeminate worrier; he is, in fact, a king and former warrior who may have good reason to dwell so constantly, as he does throughout the poem, on his fears of inescapable fate and death, for, as Earl has written, "The great celebrations of . . . [Beowulf's] success are riddled with reminders that the king is old, his succession uncertain; his sons are too young, and his wife campaigns against his plan to adopt Beowulf; his nephew is perhaps plotting, his adviser Unferth is vaguely criminal, and the betrothal of his daughter is the first step

the Woods [1854; reprint New York: Dover, 1994], 60). In one of our first introductions to Hrothgar in the poem, when the poet is detailing the "perpetual quarrel" ("singale sæce"; l. 154) Grendel bears against the South-Danes, we are told that, due to the troubles of his time, Hrothgar "seethed continually; nor could the wise warrior turn away from his misery" ("Swa ða mælceare maga Healfdanes singala seað; ne mihte snotor hæleð wean onwendan"; ll. 189-91). This initial impression of Hrothgar as a melancholic holds throughout the poem, although I think it is interesting to point out here that Edward Irving once described Hrothgar as "manic depressive," and although he readily admitted that we "ordinarily see Hrothgar in passive, if not indeed in feeble, attitudes and poses," nevertheless Irving also thought it was important that readers of the poem recognize that Hrothgar "has one moment of genuine action in the poem" in which he "leaps to his feet and moves with speed and energy," and that is immediately after his beloved friend Æschere is murdered by Grendel's mother, when Hrothgar "leaves the hall, mounts his horse, and leads both Danes and Geats through the terrifying landscape . . . to the shore of the evil mere" (Edward B. Irving, Jr., *Rereading Beowulf* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989], 52-53).

toward the inevitable war in which the hall will be burned. Shadows are everywhere.

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark, and Grendel is its symbolic embodiment.”¹²¹

It may be that Grendel’s bloody incursions into Heorot, which incursions Hrothgar seems powerless to stop (although it is never mentioned that he himself has tried to do actual battle with Grendel), have called to the mind of the king a memory of past strifes on the battlefield when, as a young man, he thought he had subdued his enemies with the strength of his sword, or later, as a ruling chieftain, with the purse of his *wergild*.

Grendel’s violent assaults against Heorot and its inhabitants, prior to Beowulf’s arrival, are described by the poet as a kind of “warfare,” or “battle-craft” (“*guðcræft*”; l. 127), that lasts for “twelve winters’ time” (“*twelf wintra tid*”; l. 147), during which time Grendel would seem to be lashing out against his exile from the company of men and their bright halls (an exile first dictated by God to Cain after Cain’s murder of Abel, and imposed upon Grendel due to his status as a descendant of Cain’s; ll. 102-14). Perhaps most striking in this conflict is Hrothgar’s seeming inertia in the face of such a feud (a

¹²¹Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, 75. Beowulf himself would seem to be aware that something is wrong in Hrothgar’s court, not only because he predicts to Hygelac how Ingeld’s (Hrothgar’s future son-in-law) treachery will bring Hrothgar’s reign to a bitter end (ll. 2022-69), but also because he tells Unferth, toward the close of their boasting match, that Grendel “has found that he need fear no feud, no terrible sword-storm from your people, nor should he very much dread the Victory-Scyldings” (“*he hafað onfunden, þæt he þa fæhðe ne þearf, atole ecgpræce eower leode swiðe onsittan, Sige-Scyldinga*”; ll. 595-97). This statement of Beowulf’s would seem to include Hrothgar in its condemnation, and it has to be noted that what appears to be a severe insult on the part of Beowulf here is out of joint with everything else Beowulf has to say about Hrothgar throughout the poem, and he may have been simply carried away by the heat of his exchange with Unferth when uttering these lines. Nevertheless, they are telling as regards Hrothgar’s ambiguous nature throughout the poem: is he a good king, or an ineffectual leader? a brave battle warrior, or a decrepit old man who seems to have misplaced his courage somewhere? a wise and hardy chieftain, or an emasculated fool? The poem would seem to shower him with positive epithets while also showing, via the depictions of Hrothgar’s actions or lack thereof, the possible lie of those praises.

feud, moreover, that threatens the very fabric of the social world he has built up and “held” for half a century), as well as the cowardice of the men who seek a bed elsewhere than in the great hall when it is feared or “betokened” (“gebeacnod”) that Grendel will be nearby (ll. 138-143), and one explanation for this may be that Grendel is so demon-like (“ellengæst,” or “powerful ghost” and “ellorgæst,” or “elsewhere ghost”; hence, alien, terribly strange, and not human) that Hrothgar and his men are incapable of knowing how to fight him—Grendel, as well as his muscular (yet also mysterious) hatred, therefore, exceed the boundaries of what is “knowable” in this culture, and thus there is no logical means of fighting him that can be readily seized upon by Hrothgar and his men, and Grendel would appear to be immune to their swords. In fact, when Beowulf chops off Grendel’s head in his underground mere, but only *after* Grendel has dragged himself there to die after Beowulf has dealt him his mortal wound in their earlier hand-to-hand combat in Heorot, Beowulf’s sword blade literally melts (ll. 1588-1611), indicating that, even in death, Grendel’s body is not easily penetrable by conventional (and one could even say, in the world of the poem, *modern*) weapons of war.¹²² But Grendel’s “feud,” which is essentially fratricidal, *is* knowable in the South-Danes’ culture, and one could even say that Heorot is both built up and torn down simultaneously within the crucible of that

¹²²It has to be noted here that the sword which Unferth originally presents to Beowulf, Hrunting, with which to do battle against the Grendelkin, is *not* effective in Beowulf’s fight with Grendel’s *dam* in the mere—it will not “bite” her or wound her at all (ll. 1518-28), and Beowulf has to discard it and resort, one again, to hand-to-hand combat. But in the midst of that combat, in which, at one point, Beowulf appears to be on the losing end (ll. 1541-49), he sights an ancient battle sword, “the work of giants” (l. 1562) hanging on the wall of the underground cave, and he is able to use *this* sword to slice Grendel’s *dam* through the neck (ll. 1563-69). Nevertheless, it is this sword blade that also melts after being used to chop off Grendel’s head.

culture's internecine feud and vengeance, of which Grendel is simply a cultural marker, if not the very manifestation of its collective Unconscious, and this may be why, at one point, Grendel is referred to as a "hateful hall-thane" ("healðegnes hete"; l. 142), and Hrothgar even refers to him once as "my invader" ("ingenga min"; l. 1776).

It may be that the multiplicity of descriptions of Grendel within the poem, from *ellengæst* ("powerful spirit"; l. 86) to *healðegnes hete* ("hateful hall-thane"; l. 142) to *æglæca* ("terror"; l. 159)¹²³ to *deogol dædhata* ("secret hatemonger"; l. 275) to *on weres wæstmum* ("man-shaped"; l. 1352)—just to name a few—points to Grendel's inherently ambiguous nature within the South-Dane, and more broadly, the poem's heroic culture that is desperately trying to come to grips with his presence, at once strange and terrifying, but also familiar, which suggests Grendel might be a kind of embodiment of the principle of the Uncanny, or *unheimlich*—a sublimely terrifying figure signifying both "home" and "not home" simultaneously.¹²⁴ It is worth noting here as well that when Beowulf is battling

¹²³The meaning of the word *aglæca* has stirred much controversy among Old English scholars, although most translations, following Klaeber, have used "monster" or "demon." Liuzza, in his recent verse translation, has used, alternately "ravager," "evil beast," "loathsome creature," "monster," "horrible creature," "awful warrior," etc., but he also points out that the OE *aglæca* literally means "awesome one" or "terror," and that its translation in his edition is "admittedly tendentious" (Liuzza, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, 75 n. 1). Following the literal meaning as well as Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, who suggests that an *aglæca* is one who violates a natural or a moral law (Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, "The Aglæca and the Law," *American Notes and Queries* 20 [1982]: 67), and wanting to have a translation that fits with what I believe is Grendel's signification as a kind of haunted figure of the collective unconscious, I have chosen "terror."

¹²⁴In his 1906 essay on the principle of the uncanny, Freud wanted to argue against the German psychologist Ernst Jentsch's idea that uncanny feelings are the result of doubts and confusion that arise when we come across something completely unfamiliar in an alien environment, and he wrote that "the uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Penguin Freud Library*, vol. 14, ed. and trans. James Strachey [London: Penguin, 1990], 363).

the dragon, both he *and* the *draca* are referred to as *aglæcan* together (l. 2593), indicating, once again (perhaps), the difficulty of drawing the line between the categories of *monstrous* and *human* in the poem. John Hill has pointed out that the monstrous and the human are, indeed, not so clearly demarcated from each other in the poem, and that

the connection of the Grendel family with Cain is not merely accidental or associative. In *Maxims* (ll. 192-8) Cain's fratricide is given as the origin of strife and the beginning of the need for battle-readiness. In *Beowulf* the link is largely topographical rather than lineal . . . Grendel lives in a border place that once was home for monsters and giants long since condemned as Cain's kindred. His association with Cain comes mainly through the catalogue of misbegotten creatures that descended from Cain, whose fratricidal spirit lives on in all acts of dark violence, not just Grendel's. Grendel's wasteland is of the world; so is his violence.¹²⁵

I would argue that the link between Grendel and Hrothgar's culture, on a historical level, *is* lineal, but that in order to show how close by violence always is to this culture—both the violence of the past, as well as the present forms of feud and vengeance to which that past leads—Grendel's stomping grounds have to exist, topographically, on the edge of the South-Dane's village, and Grendel himself and his "kin" have to be able to cross back and forth between the two worlds in order to show the motion of the repressed figures of history between the conscious and subconscious realms of the South-Danes' (and even, the Anglo-Saxon's) cultural memory.

In the struggles between Grendel and Heorot we can see the tension that inheres when different modes of "remembering" meet each other on the plain of history: the South-Danes do not recognize themselves in the outcast Grendel, who has come from the "no man's" borderland of their prehistory and therefore represents what is supposedly

¹²⁵Hill, *The Cultural World of Beowulf*, 120.

lawless and inhuman (read: uncivilized) there, yet Grendel rages against the edict that he can have no place with the men in Heorot where, we can assume, he feels he belongs, *as kin*, otherwise he would not suffer so much when hearing the “joyful” celebrations from inside the hall (ll. 86-90).¹²⁶ Grendel’s encounters with the South-Danes then, both prior to and after Beowulf’s arrival in Heorot, represents a rupturing of a particular historical continuum—the uncivilized (hence, to the South-Danes, the anthropologically primitive) Grendel blasts a hole in sixth-century South-Dane time and literally *tears* his way, cannibalistically, through Hrothgar’s troop of soldiers, who are therefore consumed by the literal mouth of their own forgotten (or repressed) history.¹²⁷ And this may be the same mouth that ultimately takes Beowulf in its jaws, for when it is clear in his battle with the dragon (undertaken in the twilight of his reign over the Geats) that his defenses are weakened, the dragon “seizes him by the neck in his bitter jaws” (“heals ealne ymbefeng

¹²⁶It is worth noting here that while, for Grendel’s mother, the fiery mere would seem to be home, for Grendel, as Hill has pointed out, that mere is “his grievance” (Hill, *The Cultural World in Beowulf*, 120). While the poem provides much evidence of how Grendel’s sense of outrage at being “not welcome” in Heorot, where it would seem he often longs to be, leads to his rampaging incursions there, Grendel’s mother’s attack would seem to be due to a more concrete, and even, within the culture of the poem, a legally-justified motivation: vengeance for Grendel’s murder by Beowulf. But James Earl has pointed out that a legal system that allows a chain reaction whereby Beowulf avenges the deaths of Hrothgar’s thanes by killing Grendel, and Grendel’s mother avenges her son’s death by killing Æschere, whose death is then avenged by Beowulf, and so on and so forth, “contains a terrible contradiction: though vengeance is intended to inhibit violence, once it breaks out it is almost impossible to contain until it has run its awful course” (Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, 75)

¹²⁷That Grendel actually *eats* the thanes he kills is clearly shown during his assault on Heorot when Beowulf is waiting for him; before Beowulf, pretending to be asleep, arises to engage Grendel in hand-to-hand combat, Grendel seizes a sleeping thane and, after slitting him open, “drank the blood from his veins, swallowed him in chunks, and soon had devoured all of that lifeless man, feet and hands” (“blod edrum dranc, synsnædum swealh; sona hæfde unlyfigendes eal gefeormod, fet ond folma”; ll. 742-45).

biteran banum"; ll. 2691-92), and although Beowulf continues to flail away at the dragon with his sword and even succeeds, with Wiglaf's help, in killing the creature (ll. 2702-11), the dragon's bite constitutes his mortal wound. In one respect, the dragon may be a *only* dragon pulled straight out of pure mythology—a "wurm" or "draca" who hoards treasure and who has been placed in the narrative as a purely fabulous element, because *fabulous men must fight fabulous monsters* (Beowulf, being the most suprahuman figure in the poem and even the son, not only of Ecgtheow, but also of *mythos*, must have larger-than-life monsters with which to do battle). And the dragon certainly does not come carting the complex genealogy to which Grendel is fettered and bound, whereby he could be seen as possessing an ancestral link with the human characters in the poem, but we *could* see the dragon as a symbolic marker for the kind of greed and rapacious covetousness that mis-shapes men into Grendel-like monsters who are eventually eaten up by that which, by its very nature, is never full. At one point in the narrative, Hrothgar refers to Grendel as "misshapen" ("earmsceapan"; l. 1351), and as once having been glimpsed walking about in "the form of a man" ("weres wæstmum"; l. 1352). The dragon, by contrast, is pure horror—a "terrible stranger" ("gryregieste"; l. 2560). According to Hill, the dragon takes us "deeper than we were with Grendel creatures, deeper than fratricidal rivalry or inchoate revenge" into a kind of "primal rage" which Beowulf is ultimately not able to overcome because, in Hill's view, "the poet seems to recognize that super-ego mastery, which would prevent grudge feuds or lawless grievances, is not general in the world. . . . Eventually its exemplars die and where war has not been transmuted into dependency and exchange we can expect the encouragement of feuds and the outbreak of dark

impulses.”¹²⁸ One could also argue that Beowulf’s partial consumption by the dragon and his eventual death, after having been so successful in killing Grendel and his mother, indicates that one can kill bad persons who have twisted themselves, through hatred, into “demons,” but not the dark psychology that inspires them, and this is precisely where a kind of cultural anxiety might begin to develop, both for the members of Beowulf’s tribe, who are finally leaderless, as well as, we can imagine, for the audience(s) of the poem (including us), because the barbarity of what is *perceived* to be the primitive outland past, supposedly entombed in history, keeps returning to wreak havoc.

Beowulf’s defeat of Grendel in a kind of naked hand-to-hand combat, where Beowulf literally rips Grendel’s arm out of his socket and Grendel hurries back to the wilderness of the fens to die (ll. 815-23),¹²⁹ would seem, at first, to return Heorot to its former security, and the initial reaction is to celebrate by refurbishing the hall and holding a banquet (ll. 991-1019). But during this banquet we have Hrothgar’s scop’s recounting of the story of the feud and slaughter between Finn and Hengest—a feud between in-laws without an apparent end of vengeance and reprisals, and therefore, although it lies in the past, it gestures toward the future, and even calls Beowulf’s triumph over Grendel into question. The chief emblem of the Finn episode (ll. 1068-1158), as it is often referred to, would seem to be that of the exiled Dane warrior Hengest brooding through the “slaughter-stained winter” (“wælfagne winter”; l. 1128) in Frisia after he has seen his lord

¹²⁸Hill, *The Cultural World of Beowulf*, 137, 139.

¹²⁹According to Hill, Grendel is “a fratricidal ghoul” and “a virulence against which armed strength is useless” (Hill, *The Cultural World in Beowulf*, 123).

Hnæf murdered by Hnæf's brother-in-law, the Frisian Finn, in a senseless battle that seems to have no specific legitimate cause and which ends in an uneasy truce. The picture of Hengest nursing his feelings of desolation and also his desire of vengeance through the many months of winter, when the sea is "locked in icy bonds" ("ȝpe beleac isgebinde"; l. 1132), permeates the episode with its images of hoar and frost and a psychology that roils like the storms the scop tells us are raging over the dark ocean (l. 1132), and casts a deathly pall both forward and backward in time—no matter how much of a deep freeze you place the "restless heart" ("wæfre mod"; l. 1150) of murder into, it still burns. Hengest, along with a small band of followers, *does* finally avenge Hnæf's death by slaying Finn, along with many of Finn's retainers (with whom he had supposedly made peace), and he hurries back to Daneland with the dead king's wife (Hnæf's sister, Hildeburh), paving the way, one can be sure, for more killing reprisals. The scop's story of the feud between Hengest and Finn represents, finally, a cultural memory that *mediates* the more immediate memory of Beowulf's defeat of Grendel, and creates a tension between the historical reality, illustrated in the Finn episode, that men's desire for vengeance has no end, and the cultural belief (or is it a wish?), illustrated in Beowulf's encounter with Grendel, that monstrous enemies can be permanently driven back into the wilderness from which they originally emerged, and this is a tension, moreover, that is simply unresolvable in the world of the poem, and even, I would argue, in our own time.

The poet further complicates this tension when he follows the scop's recitation of the Hengest and Finn story with an encounter during the banquet between Beowulf and Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's queen, who bestows upon Beowulf what is, according to the

poet, “the greatest neck-collar ever heard of anywhere in the land” (“healsbeaga mæst para þe ic on foldan gefrægen hæbbe”; ll. 1195-96). More important than the necklace’s beauty and worth, perhaps, is the advice that comes with it from Wealhtheow, who wishes for Beowulf to be “kind in deeds” (“dædum gedefe”; l. 1227) to her sons and to remember that, in Heorot, “each earl is true to the other” and “mild in his heart” (“æghwylc eorl oþrum getrywe” and “modes milde”; ll. 1228-29), and this is advice that may spring from an anxiety, on Wealhtheow’s part, that Hrothgar will make Beowulf his son, therefore displacing her two sons from their rightful place in the hall. Ultimately, her statement that the earls of Heorot are “true” to one another is undercut by the “history” already pointed to by the poet (ll. 80-85) and predicted later by Beowulf (ll. 2032-69), and which casts a pall over each and every signifying “culture-building” gesture made within Heorot’s bright walls, whether by Beowulf, Hrothgar, or Wealhtheow—Heorot will be done in by internecine treachery and feuding, and is therefore already burning when Wealhtheow moves through the hall, bearing her gift (and anxiety) to Beowulf. And that Beowulf’s own court back home in Geatland is not exempt from the same kind of social disorder that threatens Heorot is made evident in the “historical” story the poet relates about the gift itself, in which we are told that Hygelac will be wearing that necklace when, out of pride, he travels over the sea to Frisia looking for a feud with the Franks, and ends up dead, under his shield, on a foreign field (ll. 1202-14). Once again, before Beowulf can accept Wealhtheow’s gift, or even finish his work in Heorot, which would seem to be the work of a forward-looking diplomat intent on forging alliances in a culture torn apart by ceaseless cycles of aggression and war, while also attempting to hold a certain kind of pathology

(embodied in Grendel and his kin) at bay, somebody has already hastened to undo that work, and that somebody—in this instance, Hygelac (and all those who share in his shortsighted mindset and temper)—is coming to get Beowulf and his Geats, not from the past, but from the future.

One could say that there is a never a heroic action that Beowulf can take in the poetic narrative that is not immediately mediated by an instance of either past or future “history” in which men act badly, and therefore, the fabric of whatever cultural “good” Beowulf works in the world of the poem (which is also the “good” Beowulf works as a positive figure of cultural memory in the time of the poem’s reception as a literate culture-building performance) is always being pulled apart, seam by seam. And this is a history which everyone in the poem is “singing,” not only the poet and Hrothgar’s bards. After Beowulf’s defeat of Grendel’s dam, when Beowulf returns to Heorot and presents Grendel’s head, as well as the “gigantic” decorated and jewelled ancient sword hilt found in the mere, to Hrothgar, Beowulf’s triumph is set into relief against the story, related by Hrothgar, of Heremod’s violence and love of destruction (ll. 1709-22). As Adrien Bonjour once pointed out, this second Heremod digression¹³⁰ “serves as a kind of exordium to Hrothgar’s great ‘twenty parson power’ speech,”¹³¹ and may have been intended, in the

¹³⁰The first Heremod digression occurs when one of Hrothgar’s scopas, after it is clear that Grendel has been mortally wounded and has dragged himself back to the mere to die, devises a song about Heremod and Sigemund (ll. 871-915), in which, as Liuzza has pointed out, “Beowulf is praised indirectly by being compared first to Sigemund, another famous monster-slayer . . . and then contrasted to Heremod, an earlier king of the Danes who descended into tyranny” (Liuzza, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, 80, n. 1).

¹³¹Bonjour, *The Digressions in Beowulf*, 48.

world of the poem, to simply warn Beowulf against the dangers of arrogance, and may also serve, along with Hrothgar's "sermon" (ll. 1724-84), as, again, suggested by Bonjour, "a kind of preparation and prologue to Beowulf's future career as a king,"¹³² which he will embark upon when he returns to Geatland. But the reader of the poem cannot help but be struck by the fact that Hrothgar's description of Heremod as a man who lived, not for the lives of his Danish men, but for their "destruction and murder" ("wælfelle ond . . . deaðcwalum"; ll. 1711-12) is echoed by Beowulf himself when he later relates to Hygelac, upon returning home, his prediction of Ingeld's treachery against Hrothgar, a treachery that is not so much inspired by a legitimate cause (the feud between the Danes and Heathobards having been "settled" by Ingeld's marriage to Hrothgar's daughter, Freawaru, but by a "bitter violent hate" that "wells up" in Ingeld ("Ingelde weallað wæniðas"; ll. 2064-65). And this violent hate, whose cause would seem to be rooted more in a malevolent psychology that cannot let go of old wounds than in a specific incident of *pax*-breaking (for Hrothgar's enmity with the Heathobards has a jurally-authorized *end* via the marriage pact), is perfectly matched in Hrothgar's description of Heremod as someone who nursed in his heart "a blood-ravenous breast-hoard" ("breosthord blodreow"; l. 1719). Therefore, Hrothgar may want Beowulf to look to past history to edify himself concerning the perils of a certain kind of sociopathology (which Hrothgar may naively believe, perhaps, *he* has kept at bay in his kingdom), but Beowulf has also glimpsed that very same past returning in the future, and this would have to have created a certain kind of cultural anxiety, not only for Beowulf, but also for the Anglo-Saxon audience of the

¹³²*Ibid.*, 50.

poem (if even on an unconscious level), due to the insight that peace, when effected, is always short, whereas the long view of history is caught in the perpetual cycle of war.

Earl has pointed out that the Finn episode (ll. 1066-1159), along with the Heathobard digressions (when Beowulf relates to Hygelac Ingeld's treachery against Hrothgar; ll. 2024-69), which are also about "kin-feuds no truce can settle," actually "frame" Grendel's mother's vengeful attack on Heorot and Beowulf's murderous reprisal for such, and therefore, "[w]hatever else Grendel's mother represents, she represents the violence Anglo-Saxon kingship was most at pains to control, and which Anglo-Saxon law struggled for centuries to limit, modify, and eliminate."¹³³ And I would argue that these historical asides in the poem also call into question Beowulf's defeat of Grendel's mother, for while the monster may lie dead, her children are ceaselessly at play on the killing fields of history. According to Earl, "eliminating revenge is perhaps the first task of civilization,"¹³⁴ and the underlying assumption here is that, whereas the Anglo-Saxon culture of the poem is mainly structured by a kind of "tribal feud" mindset, *our* culture (and even the culture of the poet), by contrast, has supposedly evolved along social lines that have left the tribe behind in favor of "the state," a cultural entity, as Earl describes it, "organized by centralized authority and sworn oaths among men, and governed by law."¹³⁵ But one has to only look to Sierra Leone, or to Israel and Palestine, or to the Balkans, or even to the inner cities of America, to see that our world culture is still subject to the

¹³³Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, 75.

¹³⁴*Ibid.*

¹³⁵*Ibid.*, 33.

violence, and even war, engendered by a certain kind of limiting and isolationist social “group think” (inspired and often exacerbated by ethnic, racial, religious, economic, political, and class factionalisms) that sets itself in direct opposition to “state law,” and even, through terrorism, thrives on its lawlessness. Additionally, in popular culture, the recent film *Fight Club*, based on the novel of the same name by Chuck Palahniuk, dramatizes the desire on the part of young, angry, and socially disenfranchised white men who feel they have become “the crap and slaves of history” to form a martial face-to-face tribal culture whose sole price of admission is the willingness, on the part of its members, to endure a seemingly endless series of brutal fistfights, the primary aim of which is to see how much physical punishment the members of “the club” can both dole out and withstand, and to participate in terrorist acts against institutions of consumerism and capital, such as banks. The film offers a stark and quasi-apocalyptic vision of society’s discontent, and its popularity, especially among young American men, tells us something about the dark psychological currents that are always running just beneath the surface of any civilized society, and which cannot be simply relegated to some earlier, “primitive” age.

Perhaps the most grim instance in the poem of both past and future history always coming in and sweeping away, with the violence of war, the cultural work of the present occurs when Beowulf is gearing up to fight the dragon and he decides to tell his retainers, in what is often typified as his “farewell address,” the story of Hrethel, Hæthcyn, and Hygelac, which helps to illustrate the long enmity that has always existed between the Geats and the Swedes (ll. 2426-2509), and which we know from Wiglaf’s herald’s speech

(ll. 2910-3027) will eventually be the undoing of the Geats. What is especially telling in the messenger's speech, is that it both looks over the horizon of the future to provide a terrifying glimpse of the Swedes' (and also the Franks' and the Frisians') inevitable murderous incursions into Geatland, now that the Geats are without a leader, while also filling in the story of the *origin* of the feud between the Geats and Swedes—the memory of Ravenswood—a memory which Beowulf himself does not relate to his retainers earlier in the poem, perhaps signifying his role as a true *man in the middle of history*, who can neither return to the very beginning to undo the violence of the past, nor project himself into the future to hold back the unfolding of the seemingly inevitable legacy of that past. It is fitting somehow, in a poem that seems preoccupied with the points of seamlessness between past, present, and future that the poet decided to weave together the different elements of the historically *long* feud between the Swedes and the Geats, through his own historical asides, as well as through the voices of Beowulf and Wiglaf's herald, in a manner that is not at all chronologically consistent, and the fact that he placed alongside each other in the narrative the recounting of the deadly *originary* events at Ravenswood with the prediction of the Swede's final (almost genocidal) retaliation, would seem to indicate that the patterns of the past find their perfect realization on the *present* horizon of the future, and in the future itself, which is always caught in the grip of an almost primeval rage. Beowulf's peaceful rule for fifty years as the Geats' king has only been, in Earl's words, "a holding action against . . . chaos."¹³⁶ Although everything in the poem, in its multiple moments of *écriture* and reception, is utterly *past*, within the poem itself,

¹³⁶Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, 77.

different modes of recollection (on the part of the poet, as well as the human characters) weave past, present, and future together in a way that arrests chronological time and replaces it with the gestalt of apocalyptic time. And here, by *apocalyptic*, I mean to imply time that is *revelatory*, that reveals the hidden future in the past and the hidden past in the future. As a result, almost *everyone* in the poem is a bard of history, from the author/narrator to Beowulf himself to Hrothgar and his scop to Wiglaf's herald, and finally, even, to the nameless Geatish woman who sings sorrowfully over Beowulf's funeral pyre about the "harm and captivity" of "the hard days ahead" (ll. 3150-55), and this is a history, moreover, that turns on a wheel of continual aggression and violence between men from which there is seemingly no escape, either by recognizing its roots in the past or discerning its shapes on the horizons of the future. And by inference, all of human history, it would seem, is locked within a terrifying and dangerous *present* during which everything is remembered and "seen" (i.e., predicted), yet nothing is properly *recognized*.

Beowulf himself is the only warrior figure in the poem who would seem to be trying to stand for something other than personal greed, isolationist tribal politics, and the amassing of power through rapaciousness¹³⁷—who would seem, therefore, to be trying to

¹³⁷Even Hrothgar, we have to remember, often referred to both within and without the poem as the good and wise warrior-king ("æpeling ærgod" and "snotor hæleþ"; ll. 130 & 190, to cite just two out of many positive epithets), has sitting at his feet in his court (a position of honor, we can infer) Unferth, murderer of his own brother and a boastful liar (and also, ultimately, a coward), which would seem to indicate that, in order to hold the kingdom of the South-Danes "safe from war" from other tribes for "one-hundred half-years," as Hrothgar tells Beowulf at one point ("ic Hring-Dena hund missera weold under wolcnum ond hig wigge beleac manigum mægpa"; ll. 1769-1771), a king must surround himself with thugs.

stand outside of historical time—and this may be why, of all the figures in the poem, he is the hardest to locate in historical analogues, because he is the legendary *novus homo*, as Roberta Frank once put it,¹³⁸ who may have originated, long before the poet conscripted him, as a tribal dream of salvation in politically troubled times, or, in the poet's own time, as the wish fulfillment of a Christian society who, looking backwards into what they may have believed was their mainly savage heathen past, are hoping for at least one human figure of sanity and decency in their prehistorical genealogy.¹³⁹ Although Beowulf's obvious love of a good fight and his boasting in Hrothgar's court as to how he will handle and defeat Grendel (ll. 424-55, 601-06 & 632-38) are clearly consistent with the sixth-century warrior stereotype, Beowulf's relationship with both Hygelac and Hrothgar offers a model for tracing some of the ways in which Beowulf resists full conscription as a "man of his time." As Beowulf is fatherless, the Geatish and Danish courts each offer their favorite soldier both *folcrist* and fatherly advice, but neither camp can firmly hold Beowulf in a position of undivided, static loyalty. Neither Hygelac nor Hrothgar is able to fully impel Beowulf to do exactly as he wishes whenever he wishes it. Beowulf *does* satisfy Hrothgar's need to rid Heorot of Grendel and Grendel's *dam*, but we should remember that Beowulf travels to the land of the South-Danes on his own initiative (ll. 194-201), in

¹³⁸Frank, "Germanic legend in Old English Literature," Godden and Lapidge, *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, 98.

¹³⁹Earl sees the poem as a depiction of "a struggle to impose order on real social chaos," and Beowulf himself "is a typical hero of civilization" who, like Hector and Aeneas before him, "rises above the claims of kindred and sexuality to embrace the more abstract claims of civilization. He is the man without a kindred, or whose kindred is as big as all Scandinavia." Therefore, the poem fits within the epic mode in its combination of "present, past, and imagined elements" and serves as "a response to the social and cultural transformations of the Dark Age, a new civilization's analysis of its own origins" (Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, 38).

defiance of Hygelac's wishes (ll. 1992-97). And while Hrothgar, after Beowulf has "purged" his *gold-sele* of Grendel, would have Beowulf stay on in Heorot as a son (ll. 1175-76), Beowulf accepts Hrothgar's gifts only as tribute to Hygelac (ll. 2155-57), and turns Hrothgar's offer of kinship into a politically astute diplomatic agreement: Beowulf will always come to the aid of the Danes, if needed, and Hrethric (Hrothgar's oldest son) will always be welcome in the court of the Geats (ll. 1826-39). Beowulf then returns to Hygelac's court where he will eventually become the Geats' *cyning*, but he initially resists Hygd's offer of the kingship upon Hygelac's death, and Hygelac might have been surprised at Beowulf's deference to his son, Heardred, since his earlier bestowal upon Beowulf of "seven thousand acres, a hall and a throne" ("seofan þusendo, bold ond bregostol"; ll. 2195-96) would seem to have conferred upon Beowulf the status of second-in-command. In addition, the poet makes it clear that Hygd, after Hygelac's death "did not trust that her son knew how to hold the ancestral thrones against foreign peoples" ("bearne ne truwoðe, þæt he wið ælfylcum eþelstolas healdan cuðe"; ll. 2370-72). But Beowulf, for motives not entirely clear, prefers to take on the role of counselor to Heardred instead (ll. 2373-79), and when he finally takes on the kingship, after Heardred has been killed in a skirmish with the Swedes, his fight with the dragon, after fifty years of supposedly peaceful rule, marks his departure, yet again, from a cultural standard—that of the *frōd*, *gamol*, and *hār* king. Beowulf's decision to take on the dragon by himself, when he is in the twilight of his reign, is a direct contradiction of Hrothgar's earlier prophecy: "In the end it happens that the loaned body weakens, and falls doomed" ("Hit on endestæf eft gelimpeð, þæt se lichoma læne gedreoseð, fæge gefealleð"; ll. 1753-55). Though the

main thrust of Hrothgar's speech here, which caps his famous "sermon," is that Beowulf, like all men, will eventually be overtaken by death (and he is, as we know, eventually done in by the *fyres feng*), Beowulf's vigorous *action*, as an "ancient" man, in confronting the dragon is in stark contrast to Hrothgar's earlier state of inertia while Heorot is being ravaged by Grendel: "the best house stood idle" ("idel stod husa selest"; ll. 145-46).

Beowulf's resistance to full conscription by either Hrothgar's or Hygelac's court marks a resistance to particular social values associated with the "Heroic Age." By disobeying Hygelac with the mission he undertakes to aid the South-Danes, Beowulf violates one of the most important tenets of the *comitatus*: stick close to your own kin. According to Hygelac, Beowulf should have "let the South-Danes themselves make battle with Grendel" ("lete Suð-Dene sylfe geweorðan guðe wið Grendel"; ll. 1996-97). If we take Beowulf's final speech to Hrothgar as a fitting coda to his venture, however, it is possible to view Beowulf's journey as an intelligent and prescient move towards tribal alliance (read: tribal stability) that could only strengthen the Geats' position against the Swedes (not counting Ingeld's later treachery, of course, which Beowulf himself predicts: ll. 2029-31). The journey of Beowulf into "Daneland," while possibly endangering the safety of the Geats, who are temporarily without their strongest and most beloved warrior, ultimately contributes, at least in intent, to the Geats' welfare, and is in stark contrast to Hygelac's later raid upon the Franks—a political blunder of immense proportions. The original audience(s) of the poem could not have helped but notice the ways in which Beowulf, for all of his testosterone-ridden bellowing, was a man ahead of his time. He was even, I would argue, at a time when most men boarded their ships only for journeys of

raiding, a man who embraced a certain kind of *rootlessness* that allowed him to see that his country, was not just Geatland or Daneland, but the entire world. In this respect, the figure of Beowulf inhabits the pre-, or even, post-*ontological* position that is necessary, I would argue, for right ethical action in a world in sore need of such labors. Precisely because he does not allow himself to belong to just one country, he embodies the essential trait necessary for what Lévinas called the *defining* moral stance—a type of attitude that affirms, “in the beginning, it does not matter who the Other is in relation to me—that is his business.”¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, Beowulf embodied what is perhaps the most extreme, and even most saintly principle that a moral person can act upon, “I am ready to die for the Other.”

Ultimately, of course, time does take Beowulf, and it does so violently, but not without Beowulf’s awareness of, and even *anxiety* for, what is inevitably coming. And we know that Beowulf does not go into the dragon’s cave full of overweening pride or a boasting confidence in his own strength (states of mind he *does* articulate fifty years earlier, however, when he fights monsters on behalf of the Danish court), and, in fact, when he first hears that the dragon has razed the gift-hall of the Geats, “his heart swelled with brooding thoughts, and that was not his usual way” (“breost innan weoll þeostrum geþoncum, swa him geþywe ne wæs”; ll. 2331-32). Although he reminds his retainers, before going to meet the dragon, that his credo has always been to wage war as long as he has a sword with which to fight (l. 2499), this statement’s seeming bravado is undercut by what the poet tells us about Beowulf’s state of mind prior to making this statement: “His

¹⁴⁰Emmanuel Lévinas, “Philosophie, Justice et Amour,” *Entre Nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l’autre* (Paris: Grasset, 1991), 123.

heart was full of mourning, restless and ready for death" ("Him wæs geomor sefa, wæfre ond wæalfus"; ll. 2419-20). Finally, Beowulf tells his retainers, "I would not bear my sword or weapon against this worm, if I knew how else I might boast to grapple against that monster" ("Nolde ic sweord beran, wæpen to wyrme, gif ic wiste hu wið ðam aglæcean elles meahte gylpe wiðgripan"; ll. 2518-21). Textual evidence would seem to indicate that Beowulf goes into the dragon's lair knowing full well that he will not be coming back out, and therefore, he knowingly and willingly sacrifices himself, albeit not without trepidation, both for himself and the tribe who depend on him, but he goes, finally, perhaps because there is no other way that the fabulous realm from which he has been culled will allow for him to depart, for, as Joseph Campbell has written, "[t]he hero of yesterday becomes the tyrant of tomorrow, unless he crucifies *himself* today."¹⁴¹ If Beowulf were more of a historical figure, in other words (such as an Offa or a Hygelac), and not the mythically suprahuman "Redeemer" of his tribe, or the wish-fulfillment of a poet seeking to join his ancestral "heathen" past to his Christian present, he would have to be consigned to the chronicle of existential time, and his death would have to have come the way it does to the other warriors in the poem—through the hatred and treachery of his own kin, by the sword of the wandering, rampaging enemy eager for treasure and new settlements, or because, in a fit of pride (what Hrothgar terms "oferhygd"; ll. 1740 & 1760), he falls on his own weapon (much like Hygelac, whose ill-advised piratical raid against the Franks brings about his untimely death). In other words, if we are talking about

¹⁴¹Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949; reprint Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 353.

history, as opposed to the fabulous, there is no other way for a warrior to die in the world of the poem, and we might realize that, for all of the textual space he occupies, Beowulf is not as much the central character of the world of the poem, as he is the interloper at the margin of a story that is less about a redeemer-hero questing for fame and more about the chaos and convulsions of Germanic tribal society—the prehistory, as it were, of the nation-states of post-conversion England, that was mainly characterized, as James Earl has described England during the period of conquest and settlement, by “military organization, war with the native inhabitants, large land claims, power struggles, masculine violence, exploitation and lawlessness.”¹⁴² For Beowulf is ultimately mortal, as his death in the dragon’s cave makes clear, and it may be, as Nicholas Howe has written (in a passage that is worth quoting at length), that

[i]f Beowulf attempts the impossible, it is not in fighting the dragon by himself but rather in holding to some vision of peace across the north. For there is neither the force of national identity nor the authority of religious belief to maintain peace after his death. In this pagan world, violence exists unrestrained by any sense of ethical or political good. Only the hero can hold feuds in abeyance, and he is constrained by his own mortality. Whether Beowulf dies beside the dragon or gently in his sleep, the world will collapse around his people because the past cannot be erased. . . . Although he exerts his authority to keep the peace, Beowulf cannot reshape his world of fragmented tribes and kingdoms; he is not a sixth-century Bismarck or even a Charlemagne. Rather, Beowulf holds out some brief hope that the geography of the north need not be demarcated by feuding parties but by beneficent voyagers such as he was as a youth.¹⁴³

We might also consider the ways, however, in which the later nation-states of a Bismarck or a Charlemagne themselves eventually convulse and collapse over and over

¹⁴²Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, 37-38.

¹⁴³Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England*, 172-73.

again, giving rise, in the time of the poem's *écriture*, and even in our own time, once again, to factionalism, ethnic hatreds, terrorism, and war. It has become a commonplace of much writing on the current state of world affairs to invoke what is often called the crisis of the nation-state, an entity that the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has typified as "that wondrous contraption which for the last few centuries has managed to tie together and 'homogenize' the processes of cognitive, aesthetic and moral spacing, and make their results secure within the realm of its triune—political, economic and military—sovereignty."¹⁴⁴ More specifically, Bauman writes that the "foundering of the *Pax Sovietica*, of the *Pax Titoica*, of the Berlin Wall, and the repacing frenzy that followed, are but the most recent cases of a phenomenon whose most vivid and best remembered pattern had been set by the Dark Ages in the wake of the collapse of the *Pax Romana*."¹⁴⁵ Adding to the great instability caused by these momentous political changes (which only represent the tip of the iceberg of the power vacuums that have recently opened up throughout the world and into which many separatist and murderous ideologues are only too happy to run—think Sudan, Congo, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, etc.), we have also seen recently the emergence of a true world economy run by what Bauman has typified as "extraterritorial economic elites who . . . favour state organisms that cannot effectively impose conditions under which the economy is run, let alone impose restraints on the way in which those who run the economy would like it to

¹⁴⁴Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 230.

¹⁴⁵*Ibid.*

be run; the economy is effectively transnational,"¹⁴⁶ and all of this leads to a situation where, as Eric Hobsbawm has written, "'ethnic' identities which had no political or even existential significance . . . can acquire a genuine hold as badges of group identity overnight."¹⁴⁷ Hobsbawm has pointed out as well that the new transnational economy (represented by such entities as the European Economic Community and the International Monetary Fund) has

been made possible both by technological revolutions in transport and communication, and by the lengthy period of free movements of the factors of production over a vast area of the globe which has developed since World War II. This has also led to the massive wave of international and intercontinental migration, the largest since the decades before 1914, which has . . . both aggravated inter-communal frictions, notably in the form of racism, and made a world of national territories 'belonging' exclusively to the natives who keep strangers in their place, even less of a realistic option for the twenty-first century than it was for the twentieth.¹⁴⁸

All of this, in Bauman's view (a view I concur with), has led to "a postmodern world of contingency and nomadism" where "the focus of, simultaneously, contentious social spacing and identity-building is now the contrived, made-up community masquerading as a Tönnies-style inherited *Gemeinschaft* . . . brought into being and kept in existence mostly, perhaps solely, by the intensity of their members' dedication."¹⁴⁹ This is a community that "lives under the condition of constant anxiety and thus shows a sinister and but thinly

¹⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 231.

¹⁴⁷Eric Hobsbawm, "Whose Fault-line is it Anyway?", *New Statesman and Society*, 24 April 1992: 24-5.

¹⁴⁸E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and nationalism since 1780: Programme, myth, reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 174.

¹⁴⁹Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 234.

masked tendency to aggression and intolerance.”¹⁵⁰ We must finally be wary, I think, of the idea which seems to have infused so much of the scholarly writing on *Beowulf*—that history has somehow brought human beings out of the darkness of the social chaos represented in the poem and into the light of the kind of “civilization” that has its roots in places such as the early Anglo-Saxon courts and monasteries wherein the poem may have first been set down into writing, where authority is more centralized and social barbarity, in all its multivalent forms, has been made, quite literally, unethical and *illegal*. As Bauman has also written,

[t]he modern era has been founded on genocide, and has proceeded through more genocide. Somehow, the shame of yesterday’s massacres proved a poor safeguard against the slaughters of today, and the wondrous sense-making facilities of progressive reason helped to keep it weak. . . . If there is malaise, as after the ignominious intervention in Vietnam, the lesson absorbed and memorized by the defeated is the need for more force and more effective force, not more ethical conscience. In America the shame of Vietnam boosted high-tech warfare much more than it did moral self-scrutiny. With electronic surveillance and smart missiles, people can now be killed before they have a chance to respond; killed at a distance at which the killer does not see the victims and no more has to (or, indeed, can) count the bodies.¹⁵¹

Further, Bauman writes that “[e]ver anew, with each shift in the balance of power, the spectre of inhumanity returns from its exile,”¹⁵² and this calls to mind all the various ways in which the spectres of inhumanity *return* in *Beowulf*, and in many different guises—as misshapen, malformed men and anthropomorphized monsters (Grendel and his mother)

¹⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 234-35.

¹⁵¹*Ibid.*, 227.

¹⁵²*Ibid.*, 228-29.

who kill and devour, as beasts of prey (the dragon) whose very breath is a destruction, and also as the kings and their followers (Hygelac, Finn, Hengest, Heremod, Hæthcyn, etc.) who live for feud, and therefore make a kind of continual love to death. The poem may be less about Beowulf, or a veneration and mourning of the “lost” cultural hero of evolution, and more about the men who break oaths and steal for pride, kill their own brothers, and taunt each other to murder, for these are the figures who both precede Beowulf’s entry into the story and follow on his heels after he leaves, and we might ask ourselves how far removed in misty time these men ultimately are from the masked and grim Russian soldiers returning from battle in Chechnya in 1999 (*fig. 8*), or from the young rebel soldier in Sierra Leone who has proudly written on the butt of his rifle with red lipstick, “war is my food” (*fig. 9*).



Fig. 8. Masked Russian soldiers returning from battle in Chechnya and arriving at the Kavkaz border crossing on December 13, 1999 (Copyright Human Rights Watch, 2000).



Fig. 9. 25-year-old Kamajor fighter holding his gun, which reads, "War is My Food," which he painted on with red nail polish (Copyright Molly Bingham for Human Rights Watch).

III *Men esteem truth remote, in all the outskirts of the system, beyond the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us.*

—Henry David Thoreau¹⁵³

Coda

Typically, *Beowulf* scholarship has been characterized by the implicit understanding that when we talk about the poem, we are talking about an artifact of the past that speaks to an even earlier past, and therefore, study of the poem is best directed toward understanding the specific historical cultures out of which the “story” may have first arisen, and into which it may have been imported and appropriated “as a poetic text” for various artistic and ideological ends; furthermore, it seems generally agreed upon that the poem represents one culture’s mourning (and also, possibly, their renunciation) of an earlier, ancestral society. Nevertheless, the history enclosed within the poem (following the argument of Earl, cited above) is awfully “slippery” and elucidates, therefore, what happens to “history” when “cultural memory” gets hold of it, and the poem would seem to insist, as I hope I have demonstrated, that we spend some time ruminating over the very complicated relationships between history, culture, memory, and art. It seems awfully important at this juncture in time, I think, to try and understand where we, in the present, stand in relation to what is always a “slippery history,” and whether or not, in our possession of the poem as a cultural artifact, we now inhabit the role of “the designated

¹⁵³Thoreau, “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, 63.

mourner,” and if so, what are our obligations to the cultural memories, both early and late, enclosed within the poem?

Scholarship that won't allow *Beowulf* to speak to the present is, to me, a kind of lamentable “holding back” from that present and its history, and it may be that we need to break the taboo that *Beowulf* cannot tell us anything about our present world, whether because it is too past, too Other, or too culturally “different,” because we need to make this poem speak to our present moments if we wish to keep it alive (which is another way of saying, if we wish to keep art alive as an important site for “performing” and investigating questions of culture and history). Finally, we should consider what it will mean to teach *Beowulf* in the new transnational global bureaucratic corporation of higher education that the University has become, as Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins* has demonstrated so cogently, at a time when, especially in America, the discourse of “culture” is giving way to the discourse of “consumerism,” meaning we will have to work ever more hard to devise a richly diverse space (discipline-wise) in the University within which we can keep “culture and history” *open* as an critical question, to which I believe *Beowulf* is one of many important answers.

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