

ELISE LOUVIOT

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Direct Speech in  
*Beowulf*

and Other  
Old English  
Narrative Poems

Anglo-Saxon Studies 30

DIRECT SPEECH IN *BEOWULF*  
AND OTHER OLD ENGLISH NARRATIVE POEMS

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DIRECT SPEECH IN *BEOWULF*  
AND OTHER OLD ENGLISH NARRATIVE  
POEMS

Elise Louvriot

D. S. BREWER

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# Introduction

Wenn man sich das bild der erzählenden stabreimdichtung der Germanen vergegenwärtigt, so tritt sogleich die rede der handelnden und leidenden personen als hellbeleuchteter gegenstand hervor.<sup>1</sup>

Direct speech is one of the most striking features of Old English narrative poems. Quantitatively speaking, it is hard to miss as it often represents more than one-third of a complete poem and sometimes more than half.<sup>2</sup> Mostly, though, what strikes the modern reader is the imposing, even cumbersome, weight of speeches in Old English poetry. Several features obviously contribute to that impression: speeches can be very long and formal, they are systematically preceded by a conventional inquit usually taking up at least one whole line of poetry and they are often devoid of an answer, and sometimes even of an addressee.

Early twentieth-century critics, whose views of Direct Speech were informed by classical rhetoric and the modern novel, often found those characteristics puzzling, if not downright disappointing. They criticised Old English poetic speeches for being unable to serve characterisation and the progression of action. One would be hard-pressed to find similarly negative assessments of Old English poetics in contemporary scholarship. Nowadays, critics are much more sensitive to the specificities of early medieval compositions and no one would fault an Old English poem for not matching classical or modern aesthetic criteria – at least not consciously.

Surprisingly, though, that change of attitude has not led to a reassessment of Direct Speech in Old English poetry. To this day, the most complete treatments of the issue remain Heusler's 1902 paper and

<sup>1</sup> Heusler, 'Der Dialog in der altgermanischen erzählenden Dichtung', p. 189: 'If one considers the image of Germanic alliterative narrative poetry, then the speeches of the acting and suffering characters immediately appear as a well-lit object.' The lack of capitals on nouns is a feature of the initial publication. Unless stated otherwise, all translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> For the poems studied here, proportions are as follows: *Genesis A*, 30% (689 lines out of 2,319); *Guthlac A*, 38% (308 out of 818); *Beowulf*, 39% (1,231.5 out of 3,182); *Elene*, 41% (540.5 out of 1,321); *Christ and Satan*, 44% (317.5 out of 729); *Genesis B*, 50% (310 out of 617); *Andreas*, 53% (910.5 out of 1,722) and *Juliana*, 61% (448 out of 731). Some poems show lower proportions, however: *Exodus*, 13% (77 lines out of 590) and *Judith*, 13% (44.5 out of 349). As the term verse is often ambiguous, referring either to the half-line or to the entire line, I will avoid it as much as possible and use 'line' and 'half-line' instead, as appropriate.

## *Direct Speech in Beowulf*

Richman's 1977 dissertation.<sup>3</sup> Even more surprising, some of the old preconceptions regarding the nature and function of Direct Speech – namely that it is intrinsically connected to characterisation and the expression of individualised points of view – still seem to be lurking behind recent scholarship. In particular, the assumption that Direct Speech must serve characterisation through the representation of distinct voices remains intact.

What has changed is that nowadays, when scholars venture an opinion on the handling of Direct Speech – which only rarely occurs – they are more likely to praise the poets for achieving successful characterisation than to blame them for failing to do so. It seems as if, from recognising that Old English poetic speeches differed from our expectations and blaming them for it, we have turned to ignoring these differences so that we can better praise them.

Recent scholarship on Direct Speech has opened up another path, however. Seminal studies by the likes of Tannen and Rosier have shown that Direct Speech is not intrinsically connected to any particular way of representing speeches.<sup>4</sup> It is merely a form, which different cultures may exploit in very different ways – it may be used to represent distinct voices but it does not have to do so in order to be successful.

It is my contention that Direct Speech is not used to convey different voices and points of view in Old English poetry and that the sooner we recognise this the better able we will be to understand such crucial issues as characterisation, subjectivity and irony. Before we can move on to such important issues, however, it is important to re-examine traditional views on Direct Speech so that we can better deconstruct them and leave them behind.

### *Traditional Views on Direct Speech*

The traditional view on Direct Speech in Old English poetry was largely defined in the early twentieth century by scholars such as Hart, Klaeber and Bartlett, who all describe excessively formal and undramatic speeches:

<sup>3</sup> Heusler, 'Der Dialog in der altgermanischen erzählenden Dichtung' and Richman, 'The Stylistic Effect and Form of Direct Discourse in Old English Literature'. Heusler's is arguably the most complete as it encompasses the whole corpus of early Germanic poetry (and even some Sanskrit texts). It is characteristic of late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century nationalistic Indo-European scholarship in that it is sometimes keener on attempting to piece together what Germanic poetry must have been like before the advent of writing than on examining early Germanic poems as we have them, but it remains an important piece of scholarship. Richman examines the circumstances in which Direct Speech is preferred to other forms of Represented Speech (or conversely rejected in favour of them) and the form taken by the inquit in both Old English prose and poetry.

<sup>4</sup> See in particular Tannen, *Talking Voices*; Rosier, *Le discours rapporté*.

## Introduction

Not the passion for clever repartee, certainly, but surely that for eloquence, appears in the *Beowulf*. The long speeches are there for their own sake: they do not characterize, do not carry on the action. They are formal, dignified, ceremonial in character.<sup>5</sup>

The major part of these [speeches] contain digressions, episodes, descriptions, and reflections, and thus tend to delay the progress of the narrative. But even those which may be said to advance the action, are lacking in dramatic quality; they are characterized by eloquence and ceremonial dignity.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever the proportion of dialogue to non-dialogue, whatever the nature of the speech, the outstanding characteristic of dialogue in Anglo-Saxon poetry is a certain formality. Monologue and duologue, direct and indirect discourse, all are undramatic. The speech is a rhetorical device, beloved for itself quite as much as for any furthering of the action which it may contribute.<sup>7</sup>

It is worth noticing that the first two authors comment specifically on *Beowulf*, whereas Bartlett extends the validity of their judgement to Anglo-Saxon poetry as a whole.<sup>8</sup> This is representative of a wider trend: most of the research undertaken on Direct Speech in Old English poetry concerns *Beowulf* exclusively,<sup>9</sup> and those works necessarily constitute an important reference for the rest.<sup>10</sup> The statements quoted here also exemplify another important trend in the existing scholarship: the tendency to judge Old English speeches according to an implicit norm of what Direct Speech should be. It seems that, for Hart, Klaeber and Bartlett, Direct Speech probably should not be formal at all times and that it definitely should help to characterise and promote the action.

Heusler and Richman have provided us with much more in-depth assessments of Old English Direct Speech, but they do not seem to disagree with such statements. Admittedly, Heusler is mostly concerned with technical matters, but he does express the view that Direct Speech occurs when more 'vivacity' (*Lebhaftigkeit*) is needed and that the best

<sup>5</sup> Hart, *Ballad and Epic*, p. 198.

<sup>6</sup> Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd edn, p. lv.

<sup>7</sup> Bartlett, *The Larger Rhetorical Patterns in Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, pp. 105–6.

<sup>8</sup> Bartlett refers to both Hart and Klaeber, but also in particular to Heusler, 'Der Dialog in der altgermanischen erzählenden Dichtung', pp. 235–6.

<sup>9</sup> No fewer than four Ph.D theses have been written on Direct Speech in *Beowulf* (Levine, 'Direct Discourse in *Beowulf*'; McNally, '*Beowulf* *mapelode*'; Perelman, 'The Conditions, Consequences, and Structure of Direct Discourse in *Beowulf*'; and Lee, 'Character from Archetype'), as well as many articles, including the following: Baker, 'Beowulf the Orator'; Harris, 'Beowulf's Last Words'; Shippey, 'Principles of Conversation in Beowulfian Speech'; Bjork, 'Speech as Gift in *Beowulf*'; Hill, 'Translating Social Speech and Gesture in *Beowulf*'; Kightley, 'Reinterpreting Threats to Face'. See also chapter 7 ('Words and Deeds') of Orchard's *A Critical Companion to Beowulf*, pp. 233–6.

<sup>10</sup> On the excessive influence of *Beowulf* on Old English scholarship, see especially Frantzen, 'The Diverse Nature of Old English Poetry'.

epic texts of the Proto-Germanic period must have used speeches to carry on the action.<sup>11</sup> As for Richman, he ends his illuminating accounts of the use of Direct Speech in Old English literature on a rather surprising admission of failure:

If Old English writers took this much advantage of direct discourse, why did they fail to create dialogue comparable to that written by Old Icelandic and later English writers? ... What is the underlying reason that Old English writers employ such an obtrusive inquit? ... oral presentation and the strict rules of alliterative metre do not explain why Old English poets failed to use an unobtrusive enclosed inquit. Unfortunately, I can offer no better explanation.<sup>12</sup>

Behind all those studies – explicitly in some cases but more often implicitly – lies the influence of Plato and classical rhetoric.<sup>13</sup> In the third book of his *Republic*, Plato opposes Direct Speech, which imitates the characters' voices (*mimesis*), with Indirect Speech, which is a form of narration (*diegesis*):

Isn't it narrative when he gives all the speeches and also what comes between the speeches? ... But, when he gives a speech as though he were someone else, won't we say that he then likens his own style as much as possible to that of the man he has announced as the speaker? ... Isn't likening himself to someone else, either in voice or in looks, the same as imitating the man he likens himself to? ... Then, in this case, it seems, he and the other poets use imitation in making their narrative ... If the poet nowhere hid himself, his poetic work and narrative as a whole would have taken place without imitation.<sup>14</sup>

That definition has dominated reflection on Represented Speech for centuries – even to the present day.<sup>15</sup> It is the basis of Plato's classification of literary genres and was systematically reproduced in later rhetorical treatises, including in Anglo-Saxon England under the pen of Bede (*De arte metrica*) and later Byrhtferth (*Byrhtferth's Manual*).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Heusler, 'Der Dialog in der altgermanischen erzählenden Dichtung', pp. 189 and 220.

<sup>12</sup> Richman, 'The Stylistic Effect and Form of Direct Discourse in Old English Literature', pp. 263–5.

<sup>13</sup> Richman is the only one who explicitly refers to Plato and who defines Direct Speech in accordance with Plato's writings: '(1) that direct discourse is imitative, immediate, vivid and objective, (2) that other modes of expression are reportorial, mediate, less vivid and subjective, and (3) that the best writers take advantage of the imitative possibilities of direct discourse' ('The Stylistic Effect and Form of Direct Discourse in Old English Literature', p. 7). Other writers do not cite Plato, but they often use the classical term *oratio recta* to designate Direct Speech, which is in itself a clue as to where their conceptions of Direct Speech come from.

<sup>14</sup> Book III, 393b–d. The translation is taken from Bloom's edition, pp. 71–2.

<sup>15</sup> See further below, 'Direct Speech Reinterpreted'.

<sup>16</sup> See Richman, 'The Stylistic Effect and Form of Direct Discourse in Old English Literature', pp. 3–4.

## Introduction

However, there is no evidence suggesting that Plato's theory ever had any impact on Old English poetic practice. Generally speaking, the impact of rhetorical treatises on Old English poetic practice has yet to be demonstrated.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Bede's and Byrhtferth's treatises only reproduce Plato's classification of genres, without putting it into a larger literary or theoretical context, so that it is largely emptied of its original meaning and, therefore, less likely to have influenced Anglo-Saxon poets. There is no reason either to suppose that Plato's theory necessarily applies to all literary traditions. It was devised for Greek poetry, with the canons of Greek poetry in mind, and while it may prove relevant to other traditions, there is no reason to suppose a priori that its value is universal.

### *The Persistence of Traditional Views*

It might seem surprising to think that traditional views of Direct Speech could continue to influence Old English scholarship today. In the past decades, considerable work has been undertaken to better understand the specificities of early medieval textuality in general, and Old English poetics in particular, so that it seems unlikely that anyone could still use classical rhetoric as a valid standard to evaluate Old English poetics. Indeed, the phrase *oratio recta* has been expelled from Old English scholarship and indictments of the failures of Old English poetic speeches have all but disappeared. And yet, the beast is not as dead as it seems. A comparison of Klaeber's third edition of *Beowulf* and its fourth edition recently undertaken by Fulk, Bjork and Niles is interesting in this respect. The new editors have slightly modernised the formulation of the passage quoted above (p. 4), but they have retained it in its entirety, which suggests they do not disagree too strongly. Even more interesting is their handling of Klaeber's later comments (the initial text is shown here first, with its modernised version below):

In spite of a certain sameness of treatment the poet *has managed to introduce a respectable degree* of variation in adapting the speeches to their particular occasions. *Great* indeed is the contrast between Bēowulf's straightforward, determined vow of bravery (632–638) and Hrōðgār's moralizing oration, *which would do credit to any preacher* (1700–1784). *Admirable* illustrations of various moods and kinds of utterance are

<sup>17</sup> According to Steen (*Verse and Virtuosity*, p. 139), 'There is insufficient evidence to show that the mastery of such [Latin] devices was acquired from rhetorical manuals or from schooling, so we cannot just take it for granted that Old English poets were using Latin devices consciously, or that they were familiar with their learned names and roles.' Like Campbell before her ('Adaptation of Classical Rhetoric in Old English Literature'), she concludes that Old English poets were more likely influenced by Christian (Anglo-)Latin poetry than by theoretical works.

## Direct Speech in Beowulf

Bēowulf's salutation to Hrōðgār (407–455) and *his brilliant reply to the envious trouble-maker Ūnferð* (530–606). [my italics]<sup>18</sup>

In spite of a certain sameness of treatment, the poet *introduces a degree of variation in adapting the speeches to their particular occasions*. There is a *notable contrast between Bēowulf's straightforward, determined vow of bravery* (632–8) and Hrōðgār's moralizing oration (1700–84), *as there is between the hero's mild and conciliatory reply to the shore watch* (260–85) and *his fiery retort to Ūnferð's provocation* (530–606). Illustrations of varying moods and kinds of utterances are Bēowulf's salutation to Hrōðgār (407–55), *the Last Survivor's speech* (2247–66), and *Wiglāf's scathing denunciation of the deserters* (2864–91). [my italics]<sup>19</sup>

The changes are slight, but, I believe, significant. All traces of explicit value judgements ('respectable degree', 'admirable illustrations') are gone, which reflects a general trend in literary scholarship towards greater neutrality. At the same time, slightly more psychologism is creeping in: Beowulf's speech is no longer merely 'brilliant' but 'fiery' and the added examples include a 'mild and conciliatory reply' as well as a 'scathing denunciation'. The original text suggested that the *Beowulf* poet had failed to produce fully 'respectable' speeches because they were not individualised enough to serve characterisation, but that there were a few creditable efforts worth noting nonetheless. The new version erases traces of the blame and reinforces the notion that there are many speeches expressing vivid individual emotions in the poem, transforming a grudging concession into actual praise.

I think that the praise is misplaced. Not that the speeches are not good, but their strength does not lie in their capacity to express individual emotions. Klaeber at least recognised that, even if he only saw it as a negative fact, and it seems that, on this point, instead of a step forward, the new edition takes a step back from confronting Old English aesthetics as they are.

The ways in which critics have tried to renew approaches to Direct Speech in the past decades are also telling. Since the 1980s, Old English studies have shown some (admittedly limited) interest in pragmatics. There have been a few academic papers on non-narrative texts,<sup>20</sup> but also, and sometimes more problematically, on Direct Speech.<sup>21</sup> It is important to note that the pragmatic concepts used in those studies

<sup>18</sup> Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd edn, p. lvi.

<sup>19</sup> Fulk, Bjork and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 4th edn, p. lxxxviii.

<sup>20</sup> See in particular Nelson, "'Wordsige and Worsige": Speech Acts in Three Old English Charms'; and Green, 'On Syntactic and Pragmatic Features of Speech Acts in Wulfstan's Homilies' and 'Speech Acts and the Question of Self in Alfred's *Soliloquies*'.

<sup>21</sup> Most notable are Perelman, 'The Conditions, Consequences, and Structure of Direct Discourse in *Beowulf*'; Shippey, 'Principles of Conversation in Beowulfian Speech'; and Kightley, 'Reinterpreting Threats to Face'. Perelman draws primarily on Searle's theory of Speech Acts (*Speech Acts* and *Expression and Meaning*), while Shippey and Kightley

have originally been devised to analyse actual conversations, not Represented Speech. This is not to say that pragmatics can have no relevance for the study of Direct Speech. On the contrary, it can be very useful in assessing precisely how (and to what extent) verbal interactions in Old English poetry differ from actual conversations.

Still, the choice to have recourse to a theoretical framework primarily concerned with actual conversation rather than to critical tools devised for Represented Speech is telling in itself.<sup>22</sup> It can partly be explained by the fact that pragmatics focuses on an issue particularly dear to the hearts of Old English writers – the connection between speech and action.<sup>23</sup> Another underlying reason, however, might be the fact that, in the theoretical framework inherited from Plato, Direct Speech is often misconstrued as a form of Represented Speech inherently closer (or even identical) to actual speeches. That misconception, however, has been proved wrong conclusively by specialists of Represented Speech.

### *Direct Speech Reinterpreted*

The confusion between real speeches and Represented Speech is connected to the larger issue of narrative illusion. It is often tempting to see art as a mere copy of reality, when in fact it can only be a transposition.<sup>24</sup> The temptation is even stronger in the case of Direct Speech, for at least two reasons. First, Direct Speech has often been used, in

focus more on Grice's principles of conversation ('Logic and Conversation') and Brown and Levinson's notion of face-threatening acts (*Politeness*).

<sup>22</sup> By contrast, French medieval literature has benefited from approaches taking into account modern research on Represented Speech. Two of the most remarkable works are Cerquiglini, *La parole médiévale*; Marnette, *Narrateur et points de vue dans la littérature française médiévale*.

<sup>23</sup> The importance of that connection for Anglo-Saxon culture is visible in the omnipresence of the formula *wordum and dædum* and its variants in poetry (*worda ond dæda* (Christ III, 1367, 1582), *wordum and dædum* (Genesis B, 440, Genesis A, 2352), *dædum and wordum* (Genesis A, 2251), *worda and / ond w(e)orca* (Phoenix, 659; Beowulf, 289, Psalm, 104 23:2), etc.) and elsewhere. Unless stated otherwise, all quotations from Old English poems are taken from the *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*. For an in-depth analysis of the formula and its uses in legal, poetic and magical contexts, see Clemoes, *Interactions of Thought and Language in Old English Poetry*, pp. 157–66. On the same theme, see also Clemoes, 'Action in Beowulf and Our Perception of It'; Shippey, *Old English Verse*, especially pp. 121–4; and Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf*, pp. 203–37. Among studies dealing more specifically with Direct Speech, see also Baker, 'Beowulf the Orator'; Bjork, *The Old English Verse Saints' Lives*, especially pp. 3–27; Greenfield, 'Of Words and Deeds'; Hill, 'Translating Social Speech and Gesture in Beowulf'; Jager, *The Tempter's Voice* and 'Invoking / Revoking God's Word'; Mintz, 'Words Devilish and Divine'; Nelson, 'The Battle of Maldon and Juliana'; and Olsen, *Speech, Song, and Poetic Craft*, especially pp. 3–5.

<sup>24</sup> This is a paraphrase of Gombrich's famous statement that a painting 'is a transposition, not a copy' in his explanation on why the colours on a painting cannot match the actual colours of the real-life object represented (*Art and Illusion*, p. 48).



particular in nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels, to promote the illusion of reality; and second, common preconceptions on Represented Speech, which are still taught in our schools, encourage the confusion between Direct Speech and actual speech.

Direct Speech is commonly described as the (written) reproduction of an initial (oral) speech, ideally achieved with all the precision and accuracy that a high-quality audio recording would allow. In other words, Direct Speech is presented as a sort of mechanical, automatic transcription. In textbooks, the impression is often reinforced by exercises inviting students to transform Direct Speech into Indirect Speech, as if the former was the raw material and the latter the processed product. A good example of that attitude is provided by Leech and Short's influential handbook:

The essential semantic difference between direct and indirect speech is that when one uses direct speech to report what someone has said one quotes the words used verbatim, whereas in indirect report one expresses what was said in one's own words. The formal relationships between these modes of report are most easily shown by seeing how it is possible to convert one into the other.<sup>25</sup>

The two authors then proceed to explain the conversion from Direct into Indirect Speech as a series of morphosyntactic transformations. As shown by Combettes,<sup>26</sup> that belief in the intrinsic fidelity of Direct Speech is strongly connected to the confusion between actual speech and Direct Speech: if Direct Speech is taken to be the mere transposition (without processing) of an initial speech, then it seems logical that the final object should be identical to the initial one. According to that logic, the initial speech is displaced, but it is still essentially the same. This, of course, is a terrible misunderstanding; as Sternberg puts it:

In no form of quotation, therefore, not even in the direct style, may we identify the representation of the original act of speech or thought with that act itself; to do so would be comparable to equating Balzac's rendering of the Vauquer pension with the pension itself.<sup>27</sup>

And yet, traces of such a way of thinking may be found in literary criticism, where Direct Speech is often associated not only with fidelity, but also with simplicity and lack of elaboration. Direct Speech appears as an object somewhat alien to the written world, and thus, for some, to the literary world. Blanchot's take on dialogue is particularly emblematic:

<sup>25</sup> Leech and Short, *Style in Fiction*, p. 318.

<sup>26</sup> Combettes, 'Énoncé, énonciation et discours rapporté', pp. 97–8.

<sup>27</sup> Sternberg, 'Proteus in Quotation-Land', p. 108.

## Introduction

Dans les romans, la part dite dialoguée est l'expression de la paresse et de la routine : les personnages parlent pour mettre des blancs dans la page, et par imitation de la vie où il n'y a pas de récit, mais des conversations ; il faut donc de temps en temps dans les livres donner la parole aux gens ; le contact direct est une économie et un repos (pour l'auteur plus encore que le lecteur).<sup>28</sup>

The words used by Blanchot are remarkable in that they establish a radical difference between dialogue – seen as a sort of imitation of real-life conversations and thus, implicitly, as unliterary – and narrative, which is not thought of as an imitation of real-life actions, but as a completely different process: creative rather than imitative.

Since the 1980s, that kind of conception of Direct Speech has been much criticised by linguists. The notion of fidelity has been rejected especially strongly, and with good reason. It has always been obvious that in the case of fiction the idea of fidelity made little sense, at least not literally. For too long, though, the use of Direct Speech in fiction was seen as a separate case or a sort of exception.<sup>29</sup> In fact, studies have shown that fiction is not the exception but the norm. Thus, Tannen writes:

The term 'reported speech' is a misnomer. Examination of the lines of dialogue represented in storytelling or conversation, and consideration of the powers of human memory, indicate that most of those lines were probably not actually spoken. What is commonly referred to as reported speech or direct quotation in conversation is constructed dialogue, just as surely as is the dialogue created by fiction writers and playwrights.<sup>30</sup>

The reason why speakers 'construct' dialogue instead of reporting it is twofold. First, it is impossible to report something accurately under normal circumstances, so that some reconstruction is unavoidable:

It cannot be the case that dialogue presented in oral storytelling is being reported exactly as it was spoken, unless the report is based on the deliberate memorization of a transcript which was based on a tape-recording of the talk. Experiments have proven what is intuitively obvious – that

<sup>28</sup> Blanchot, 'La douleur du dialogue', pp. 208–9. 'In novels, the sections written in dialogue are the manifestation of laziness and habit: characters speak to insert blanks on the page, and to imitate life in which there are no narratives but conversations. So, from time to time, it is necessary to let people speak; the direct contact is both time-saving and restful (for the author even more than for the reader).'

<sup>29</sup> Occasionally, it is even completely ignored, as in Tuomarla, *La citation mode d'emploi*.

<sup>30</sup> Tannen, 'Introducing Constructed Dialogue in Greek and American Conversational and Literary Narrative', p. 311. See also, by the same author, *Talking Voices*, especially pp. 17–19 and 102–32, as well as Ducrot, *Le dire et le dit*, pp. 198–9, and Calaresu, *Testuali parole*, pp. 49–52.

humans cannot keep in their minds the precise words they have heard, even for a moment. They listen for the meaning and, when called upon to remember what was said, may reconstruct it into words<sup>31</sup>

Second, and most importantly, accurate report is usually not the objective pursued. In fact, in many instances, it is clear for everyone involved in the conversation that the speech represented never took place. Speakers regularly use Direct Speech to represent 'impossible speeches': hypothetical speeches, choral speeches, speeches too long or too detailed to be remembered or speeches translated from a foreign language, to name but a few of the most common cases. Usually, speakers do not use Direct Speech to provide information on an initial speech to an interested third party, but rather to give more weight to an argument or to dramatise the climax of a story.<sup>32</sup> Even when an initial speech does exist, speakers (re)construct it to achieve maximum impact, not accuracy. For all these reasons, it is preferable to use the term 'Represented Speech' rather than the misleading 'Reported Speech'.

The variety and the creativity of the uses of Represented Speech in ordinary conversation, and more particularly of Direct Speech, suggest that the true exceptions are not fictional speeches but textual quotations, which, outside scholarly texts, are actually quite rare. A broader cultural perspective confirms the view that quotation and Direct Speech need not be equated. Rosier shows that in classical rhetoric *oratio recta* (Direct Speech) and *sententia* (quotation) were two very distinct tropes: *oratio recta* was used in narratives to 'imitate' (*mimesis* / *imitatio*) the characters' speeches whereas *sententia* was used as an argument from authority in legal contexts.<sup>33</sup> According to Rosier, the conflation of the two concepts dates back (in France at least) to the seventeenth century, when the issue of Represented Speech was more and more analysed as a grammatical device rather than as a trope. During the same period, the formal similarity between the two devices was reinforced by the progressively systematic use of quotation marks in both cases, so much so that they became identical in the eyes of the theorists, and the characteristics of the quotation came to be associated with the concept of Direct Speech as a whole.

That evolution is also undoubtedly connected with the growth of literacy in Western culture. In oral narratives, of course, there is no punctuation and thus no quotation marks. More fundamentally, the notion of exact textual reproduction does not make sense in oral cul-

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313.

<sup>32</sup> For more details on the various possible functions of Direct Speech, see Calaresu, *Testuali parole*, pp. 55–8 and Holt, 'Reported Speech'.

<sup>33</sup> Rosier, *Le discours rapporté*, pp. 11–25.

tures.<sup>34</sup> As shown by Lord, what oral poets consider faithful and accurate is anything but a verbatim reproduction:

We must remember that the oral poet has no idea of a fixed model text to serve as his guide. He has models enough, but they are not fixed and he has no idea of memorizing them in a fixed form. Every time he hears a song sung, it is different ... We are more aware of change than the singer is, because we have a concept of the fixity of a performance or of its recording on wire or tape or plastic or in writing. We think of change in content and in wording; for, to us, at some moment both wording and content have been established. To the singer the song, which cannot be changed ... is the essence of the story itself. His idea of stability, to which he is deeply devoted, does not include the wording, which to him has never been fixed, nor the unessential parts of the story.<sup>35</sup>

The conception of Direct Speech as a quotation and thus as a textual reproduction is, then, clearly a culturally circumscribed phenomenon and not a universal, obvious fact, especially not when it comes to still largely oral cultures.

To understand how Direct Speech is used in a given narrative tradition, it is important not to impose an a priori conception derived from our own cultural background, but to stick to the facts. Direct Speech is a form of Represented Speech characterised by the fact that the enunciation markers,<sup>36</sup> and especially the deictic markers ('I', 'you', 'here', 'now', 'this', 'that', etc.), within the speech are appropriate to the situation of utterance of the speech itself, and not to the situation in which the speech is represented. In other words, the terms 'I', 'here' and 'now' refer to the represented speaker (the character) in the situation where and when they are supposed to have spoken. It differs from Indirect Speech, in which 'I' normally refers to the representer (the narrator), while the represented speaking character is referred to as a 'he' or 'she' set in the past and in the distance.<sup>37</sup> Direct Speech is also characterised by the fact it is explicitly identified as Represented Speech by a reporting clause or inquit (for example, 'he said'), and

<sup>34</sup> It is interesting to note that in the article quoted above, Tannen sees writing ('a transcript') as the only possible way someone might remember something verbatim. Even tape-recording is not considered enough to assist accurate memorisation.

<sup>35</sup> Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, pp. 22 and 99. Concerning the issue of the influence of the development of literacy on attitudes towards discourse and memory, see also Ong, *Interfaces of the Word*, and especially *Orality and Literacy*. See also Tannen, *Spoken and Written Language* and, concerning Direct Speech more specifically, Coulmas, 'Reported Speech: Some General Issues'.

<sup>36</sup> 'Enunciation markers' is a generic term to designate all the traces of the situation of utterance in the utterance itself, i.e. all the traces of subjectivity (in a linguistic sense). The category includes deictic markers, evaluative vocabulary, aspect, modality and pragmatic markers. On linguistic subjectivity, see further below, beginning of Chapter 3.

<sup>37</sup> Except for first-person narratives, of course, in which there are two 'I's: one set in the narrated past and the other in the present of utterance.

sometimes also by specific punctuation (usually a comma followed by a quotation mark in Present-Day English). In that, it differs from Free Direct Speech, which lacks the *inquit*.

So, is the form of Direct Speech, such as it has been described, necessarily imitative, as Plato suggested? Traces of the Platonic opposition between *mimesis* and *diegesis* can still be found in many accounts of Represented Speech, although the vocabulary used nowadays is usually slightly different. Most often, following Clark and Gerrig,<sup>38</sup> *telling* is opposed to *showing* rather than to imitating, but the idea still lingers that Direct Speech and Indirect Speech correspond to two very different activities.

It is perhaps regrettable that Plato, and not Aristotle, had such lasting influence on this particular issue. The great popularity of Plato's theory should not lead us to forget the philosopher's relative lack of interest in, and even distrust of, poetry.<sup>39</sup> In many ways, the interpretation offered by Aristotle in his *Poetics* is much more sensitive to the nature of poetry. For Aristotle, all poetry, and all art generally speaking, is imitation, however it is done,<sup>40</sup> so, for him, both Direct and Indirect Speech are imitative. To sum up very briefly the attitudes of the two Greek philosophers, Plato sees two essentially distinct activities, imitating and telling, where Aristotle sees only one activity, imitating (i.e. representing), and many ways to achieve it.

Aristotle's perspective reflects the reality of discursive practice much better than Plato's. In fact, there are not just two forms of Represented Speech but multiple forms, which may differ from each other more or less sharply.<sup>41</sup> If it is easy to see how many different forms could correspond to many different tools used by the poet, it is much harder to imagine how all those forms could correspond to distinct activities

<sup>38</sup> Clark and Gerrig, 'Quotations as Demonstrations'.

<sup>39</sup> Plato saw poetry as an educational tool at best and as a distraction at worst: 'we ourselves would use a more austere and less pleasing poet and teller of tales for the sake of benefit, one who would imitate the style of the decent man and would say what he says in those models that we set down as laws at the beginning, when we undertook to educate the soldiers' (Bloom, trans., *The Republic of Plato*, 398b).

<sup>40</sup> 'Now epic-making and the making of tragedy, and comedy too, and the art of making dithyrambs, and most of the art of composing to the flute and lyre – all these happen to be, by and large, *mimeseis*. But these arts differ from one another in three respects: for they do their *mimesis* (a) in different matter (in-what), (b) on different subjects (of-what), and (c) by different methods (how).' 1, 1447a. The translation is taken from Whalley's edition, pp. 45–7.

<sup>41</sup> Rosier, *Le discours rapporté*, pp. 125–60. See also Combettes, 'Énoncé, énonciation et discours rapporté'. The best-known forms are Free Direct Speech, Direct Speech, Free Indirect Speech, Indirect Speech and Narrated Speech, but each category may encompass several variants. This is especially true for Free Indirect Speech, which is characterised by a mix of enunciation markers appropriate to the character and to the narrator: the form is always mixed, but the same category of markers may be appropriate to the character in one case and to the narrator in another.

and, if so, what activities exactly. According to Rosier,<sup>42</sup> the forms of Represented Speech should not be seen as radically distinct devices, but as a continuum from Narrated Speech to Direct Speech, i.e. from less to more actualised forms.

That notion of actualisation is very important. It may refer to several phenomena. All definitions, whether from the field of linguistics or philosophy, concur on the fact that it corresponds to a change from potentiality to actuality. It may designate, for instance, the way in which elements of the language (understood as an abstract system) may be used in a given context. It may also refer to the capacity of some linguistic markers to attribute existence to an object.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, events belonging to a time and place distinct from the situation of utterance (e.g. past or hypothetical events) are, from the reference point of that situation, lacking in actuality. Therefore, actualisation may also designate all the markers that attribute existence to an object in the situation of utterance, that is, typically, proximal deictic markers such as 'here', 'now', 'you', 'I' and 'this'. Direct Speech is rich in such markers, which enables it to give more 'existence' to the represented speech. It goes without saying that this has nothing to do with actual existence in real life: the 'existence' or 'actuality' referred to here is only discursive.

The actualising properties of Direct Speech are the reasons why it is often described as particularly vivid, or life-like. The linguistic phenomenon of actualisation is not unlike the literary phenomenon of the reality effect,<sup>44</sup> which is also a device designed not to attest to a reality, but to produce the impression of reality. The two merely differ in that the former relies on linguistic properties whereas the latter also relies on narrative and cultural conventions in order to be effective.

Such phenomena are closely connected to the notion of imitation, but a good understanding of how they work should make it clear that imitation cannot be interpreted in the Platonic sense. For Plato, imitation is essentially the copy of an existing object, which is itself only the copy of an abstract form (or idea, *eidos*). Such a conception is incompatible with the notion of actualisation: to actualise something is to give it reality or, rather, to give it a reality effect. It is a creative process, not a derivative one. If one understands imitation as Aristotle does, as a true representation and not as a mere copy, then it is fully compatible with the notion of actualisation.

<sup>42</sup> Rosier, *Le discours rapporté*, pp. 133–60.

<sup>43</sup> A good example of the latter phenomenon is the determiner 'some' in Present-Day English, which, unlike 'any', presupposes the existence (or at least the possible existence) of the designated object.

<sup>44</sup> The reality effect is a concept invented by Barthes in 'L'effet de réel'. Barthes is particularly interested in the superfluous details that, in realistic descriptions, take the represented world closer to the actual world, but the concept may be extended to any device serving the same function.

One of the strengths of Aristotle's analysis is its fine delineation of the complex relations between poetry and truth or reality, through the concept of verisimilitude. He argues that the poet must not relate what actually happened but what could happen, and that it is better to represent something impossible but convincing rather than to represent something possible but unconvincing (*Poetics*, 9, 1451a). In other words, what matters is not the reproduction of what already exists but the production of a representation believable by the audience.

According to Mercier, such belief is based on four types of conventions shared by the author and the audience: generic, empirical, pragmatic and diegetic conventions.<sup>45</sup> To sum up, generic verisimilitude has to do with the horizon of expectations set up by the genre,<sup>46</sup> empirical verisimilitude with common experience; pragmatic verisimilitude with the credibility of the narrator and the narrating situation; and diegetic verisimilitude with the inner logic of the plot. Verisimilitude relies thus on two types of knowledge: what the audience knows (or believe they know) about the world, but also, and very importantly, what they know about literature. Each genre prescribes not only the type of events that can legitimately happen, but also the devices that may be used to represent them convincingly. A good example is the case of the omniscient narrator, which is highly unlikely empirically, but has become a staple device of the realistic novel and is now fully accepted by the audience.<sup>47</sup>

As a conclusion, Direct Speech may be redefined thus: it is not the transposition or the copy of a pre-existing speech, but the actualised representation of a speech within another discourse (for example a narrative), achieved through the use of certain enunciation markers (first- and second-person pronouns, present tense, 'here' and 'now', etc.), which promote the illusion that the situations of utterance of the represented speech and the representing discourse coincide, i.e. promoting the illusion that a character exists and speaks in the same time and place as where the story is told.

The linguistic characteristics of Direct Speech thus predispose it to create an illusion of reality, but the exact form taken by that illusion is likely to vary a great deal according to the type of discourse considered. Direct Speech may very well contribute to verisimilitude but there is no reason why that verisimilitude should be strictly empirical or conform to the conventions set by other genres. On the contrary, it may be based on generic, pragmatic and diegetic conventions that

<sup>45</sup> Mercier, 'La vraisemblance' (§ 14 of 15).

<sup>46</sup> The notion of horizon of expectations ('Erwartungshorizont') is due to Jauss, in *Literaturgeschichte als provokation*, pp. 144–208. The book was translated into English by Bahti as *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*.

<sup>47</sup> Cavillac, 'Vraisemblance pragmatique et autorité fictionnelle'.

go against common experience and the expectations of present-day readers.

For the apparent strangeness of Direct Speech in Old English poetry to make sense, it is necessary to examine the phenomenon in the context of a specific poetic tradition and its own conventions. The most striking characteristics of Direct Speech seem to be shared by all Old English narrative poems, which suggests that the extant corpus is relatively homogeneous. However, there might be more subtle differences between certain groups of poems, which is why it is important to consider a relatively large and rich corpus.

### *Corpus and Methodology*

Selecting a corpus likely to be genuinely representative of the Old English poetic tradition as a whole is a task fraught with much difficulty. Not only are we necessarily deprived of all the poetry that may have been composed orally and never preserved on parchment, but only a fraction of the manuscript production of the period survives to our time. Most of the extant poetry is preserved in four manuscripts, which owe their preservation to reasons largely unrelated to their literary merits.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, it is almost impossible to determine where and when any individual poem was composed. All we know for sure is that the poems were first committed to writing somewhere in Anglo-Saxon England between the beginning of Christianisation (and thus literacy) in the seventh century and the copying of the manuscripts at the turn of the eleventh. Whether the mix of dialects exhibited by most poems reflects the history of their transmission or the existence of a poetic dialect mixing several influences remains hotly debated,<sup>49</sup> though not as hotly, perhaps, as the question of the poems' dates of composition. Among the various criteria used for dating, linguistic ones are the least subjective and therefore the most reliable, but they are not entirely satisfactory. First of all, they only allow relative and not absolute dating. Second, the validity of some linguistic criteria has been called into question, most famously by Amos.<sup>50</sup> Fulk's *History of Old English Meter*

<sup>48</sup> The Exeter Book was likely preserved because it was useful as a cutting board and to store gold leaf, whereas the continued interest in Junius after the eleventh century is probably due to its illustrations. See Muir, *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, vol. 1, pp. 1–2 and *Ms. Junius 11*, especially the first section of the introduction, 'The Work, its Date, Provenance and Subsequent History'.

<sup>49</sup> The theory of a common dialect was put forward by Sisam, *Studies in the History of Old English Literature*, pp. 119–39. It is accepted by many, but not by all, see Gneuss, *Language and History in Early England*, p. 91.

<sup>50</sup> Amos, *Linguistic Means of Determining the Dates of Old English Literary Texts*.



takes Amos's arguments into account and presents strong evidence, but it too has been criticised for its insufficient consideration of metrical issues and of recent research on phonology,<sup>51</sup> so the debate is still very much open. However, Fulk's study is comprehensive enough to constitute a useful point of reference, and his conclusions will occasionally be referred to in this book.

Very little is known, then, of the context(s) in which the different extant poems were composed and received. The research undertaken for more than a century can compensate for that decontextualisation to some extent, but it can also introduce anachronisms and thus alter our perception of the texts. Feminist writers have shown, for example, how prejudices of the turn of the twentieth century still colour our perception of female characters in Old English poems.<sup>52</sup> One may legitimately wonder whether the relatively few texts preserved have enough in common to allow for meaningful comparisons and whether what little we know about them is enough to draw conclusions on the conventions of the Old English poetic tradition as a whole.

To answer those questions, it is necessary to recontextualise the poems as much as possible. To that end, three main avenues may be explored. One may choose to focus not on the context of production of the poems, which is largely beyond our reach, but on the only known context of their reception – the manuscript. The cultural and political context at the time of the copy is of limited use for a study focused on a linguistic device, but several characteristics of the manuscript itself – the order in which the texts are presented, their layout, punctuation and, in some cases, their illustrations – may provide useful clues on how the poems were read.

It is also possible to compare the poems with their Latin sources, when such a source exists.<sup>53</sup> It inevitably restricts the field of investigation to the texts most likely to be heavily influenced by a foreign tradition, but it can also shed light on the method of composition. Most importantly, it may reveal what forms are considered acceptable or not by the poet: a systematic tendency to avoid a particular device, if it is found in several distinct texts, is strongly indicative of an existing norm.

The oral-formulaic tradition may also constitute a valid textual context.<sup>54</sup> The same themes and formulas appear in numerous texts, varying slightly from one instance to another. Comparing several such instances may allow the critic to identify an invariant at the core of the formula, and thus the norm against which each instance should be measured.

<sup>51</sup> Blake, 'A History of Old English Meter. R. D. Fulk'.

<sup>52</sup> See in particular Renoir, 'Eve's I.Q. Rating' and Bloomfield, 'Diminished by Kindness'.

<sup>53</sup> This method is strongly advocated by Hill in 'Literary History and Old English Poetry'.

<sup>54</sup> This view is defended in particular by Renoir in *A Key to Old Poems*.

The three methods are not mutually exclusive and all of them are used in this volume. Knowing the manuscript context is useful in all cases, of course. Furthermore, there is no reason to draw a strict opposition between texts with and without a Latin source. Texts without a known Latin source may constitute a useful reference point to evaluate the translations and to see if the changes introduced by the poets are coherent with the conventions observed in the 'original' corpus. As for oral-formulaic features, they are present in the entire corpus, even in the most literate and Latinate texts.

Oral-formulaic theory has attracted a fair amount of controversy, so I will clarify how it is understood here. The first proponents of that theory argued that the stylistic characteristics of oral compositions differed radically from those of their written counterparts and that such poems could be transmitted virtually unchanged for generations.<sup>55</sup> That conception revived the search for a mythical Germanic past,<sup>56</sup> as critics were encouraged to test existing poems in order to determine which ones were genuinely oral – i.e. which ones potentially dated back to the dawn of Anglo-Saxon culture – and to discard the rest as less authentic.

That approach was rightly criticised on methodological grounds: as early as 1956, Schaar noted that 'the proposition "all formulaic poetry is oral" does not follow, either logically or psychologically, from the proposition "all oral poetry is formulaic"'.<sup>57</sup> Following Ong's work on orality and literacy,<sup>58</sup> a new conception of oral-formulaic poetry arose, taking into account the possibility of a 'transitional' culture: no longer completely oral, but not yet as fully literate as our own, in which illiteracy has become synonymous with social exclusion. One interesting conclusion of that approach is that even the most literate Anglo-Latin texts did not presuppose an attitude to writing identical to our own.

The shift towards a 'transitional' view of Anglo-Saxon culture took the focus away from the mostly unknown oral Germanic past and onto the period in which the extant Old English poems were preserved on parchment. For O'Brien O'Keeffe, the way that Old English poems are copied – in continuous lines, with very little punctuation, variable spelling and irregular word division – shows that they required a mode of reception close to that of oral poetry:

<sup>55</sup> The founding studies are: Parry, 'Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making I' and Lord, *The Singer of Tales*. For Old English poetry more specifically, see also Magoun, 'The Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry'; Creed, 'The Making of an Anglo-Saxon Poem'.

<sup>56</sup> On that trend in Anglo-Saxon studies, and especially on the figure of the oral poet in that myth, see Stanley, *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism*; Frank, 'The Search for the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet'; and Niles, 'The Myth of the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet'.

<sup>57</sup> Schaar, 'On a New Theory of Old English Poetic Diction', p. 303. See also Benson, 'The Literary Character of Anglo-Saxon Formulaic Poetry'.

<sup>58</sup> Ong, *Interfaces of the Word*, and especially *Orality and Literacy*.

A reader of Old English necessarily brought a great deal of predictive knowledge to the text to be read, precisely because the manuscripts are low both in orthographic redundancy and in graphic cues. This knowledge came from a deep understanding of the conventions of Old English verse, marked as it is by formula, generic composition and repetition, in short, by those features generally considered necessary for the successful transmission of oral-poetry in non-literate cultures ... the nature of the Old English poetic works transmitted, the character of their manuscripts, and the record of their variance (in multiply-attested works) indicate that early readers of Old English verse read by applying oral techniques for the reception of a message to the decoding of a written text.<sup>59</sup>

In the wake of studies such as *The Invention of Tradition*,<sup>60</sup> our understanding of oral tradition has also evolved. It is no longer seen as a treasure handed down from generation to generation but as a mode of expression and an identity marker: a way for a community to construct its identity through perceived continuity with a more or less distant and mythical past. It has also been pointed out that a tradition is not monolithic, but particulate: it is a complex, organised body of forms, ideas, patterns and practices in use within a certain community.<sup>61</sup> A given instance of traditional behaviour (be it a poetic performance or something else) only ever uses parts of the traditional material available and, as a consequence, tradition can never be handed down whole: each new performance of traditional behaviour is a reworking of parts of the existing tradition.

Foley and others have noted that poetic diction works like a special language, meaning both that it achieves more than ordinary language, but that it shares many of the essential properties of ordinary language (particularly regarding how it is acquired and how it conveys meaning).<sup>62</sup> In fact, the comparison with ordinary language is

<sup>59</sup> O'Brien O'Keefe, *Visible Song*, p. 21. In that book, she examines several texts that are preserved in multiple manuscripts (Caedmon's *Hymn*, but also *Solomon and Saturn* and the poems of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*) and shows that the variants are typical of oral-formulaic transmission, in that they respect the constraints of the context and the diction. Scribes apparently paid special attention to the formulas' main keywords and completed them according to their own knowledge, without necessarily striving for verbatim reproduction (see pp. 39–46).

<sup>60</sup> Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*.

<sup>61</sup> On tradition as particulate, see in particular Drouot (*How Tradition Works*; and *Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Saxon Literature*), who borrows from Dawkins the concept of 'meme' to describe a 'small unit of culture that reproduces in minds' in direct reference to genes, understood as small units of biological information that reproduce in cells. Regarding traditional poetry, formulas, type-scenes and themes were long recognised as the basic units, but Foley has shown that there is a whole spectrum of traditional phraseology, which cannot be reduced to three types of units (*Immanent Art*, p. 16).

<sup>62</sup> For traditional poetic diction as a special 'register' and a special language, see in particular Foley, *The Singer of Tales in Performance*, pp. 82–92 and *How to Read an Oral Poem*, p. 127 ('Oral Poetry Works Like Language, Only More So'). Mize also makes the interesting

valid not just for discursive traditions, but for all forms of traditional behaviours.

Like language, tradition does not exist as such. It can only be reconstructed and studied through observable performances, just as language can only be reconstructed and studied through observable texts and speeches. Like language, tradition is a complex system, constantly under (internal and external) pressure to evolve in new directions, while maintaining a strong-enough continuity that day-to-day practitioners may have no idea that the system is evolving (though they are apt to think that younger practitioners are less competent than their elders, partly because the system used by younger practitioners may already be different in some ways). Again, like language, tradition conveys meaning through the use of fixed forms that are conventionally (and thus to some extent arbitrarily) connected to certain meanings.<sup>63</sup> And finally, like language, tradition plays a major role in signalling and constructing a communal identity.<sup>64</sup>

Once tradition is seen in that light, it becomes obvious that innovations cannot be seen as the destruction or even the disruption of an ancient heritage. They are an integral part of the traditional process. What is interesting is that tradition typically advertises itself as permanent and unchanging (see for example, what Drout calls the 'Universal Tradition Meme': 'because we have always done so'),<sup>65</sup> even though we know it is everything but. As a consequence, tradition always

point that 'formulaic sequences are processed cognitively as wordlike entities', which implies that 'they have the same capacity for nuanced and creative deployments as do lexemes themselves' (*Traditional Subjectivities*, p. 108).

<sup>63</sup> The fact that the connection between form and meaning is largely arbitrary in languages as we know them (with a few exceptions, as in the case of onomatopoeia) is one of the basic tenets of modern linguistics, as outlined by Saussure (see his *Cours de linguistique générale*). However, some aspects of communication (particularly non-verbal elements) may retain an iconic or indexical connection to the meaning they express, even though that meaning is at least partly conventionalised. It is likely that the same goes for traditional practices – i.e. just because they carry a conventional meaning does not necessarily mean that the connection between form and meaning has become completely arbitrary.

<sup>64</sup> In his works on tradition, Drout prefers to use a biological model to explain how tradition works. However, such a model is problematic in that it seems to suggest a linear filiation. A good example of that problem is offered by Drout's treatment of the 'Happy Birthday' meme: according to him, 'We can trace a single "Happy Birthday" meme spreading by being copied when a person who has never heard it before is exposed to the meme. After that copying event there is one copy of "Happy Birthday to You" in the first individual's mind and another in the second.' (*Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, p. 16). In fact, common experience suggests that this is not how such a meme spreads. At home and at birthday parties elsewhere, children are repeatedly exposed to the song (often long before they can understand its words) until they know it by heart and can sing it on their own without help. It is extremely rare for someone to learn that meme from just one model. Similarly, it seems likely that most traditional items spread through repeated exposure from various sources rather than from the replication of a single model (such replication would actually be more characteristic of modern intertextuality).

<sup>65</sup> Drout, *Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, p. 3.

contains an element of fiction. As Pasternack puts it, 'Tradition relies on memory and on new statements sounding *as if* they have always been a part of the community's memory' (my emphasis).<sup>66</sup> It seems as if the point of tradition is to provide stability and legitimacy by integrating new elements into an existing system and promoting the illusion that they have always been part of the system, thereby negating the threat inherent to anything new or unknown.

As a consequence, the fact that an element is recognised as 'traditional' does nothing to prove its antiquity. On the other hand, when a body of texts use the same 'traditional' features,<sup>67</sup> they claim allegiance to a shared textual community through that shared reference and thus demand that we examine them within the context of that community. While there are legitimate doubts regarding whether all the extant Old English poems originate from the same social sphere, geographical area and time frame (and in some cases there is even a certainty that they do not), most scholars will agree that they do share such a common reference and this, in turn, legitimates the decision to examine them as a whole, even if that whole is by no means homogeneous.

The exact position of tradition in relation to the text is a complex issue, which probably still needs to be refined in future years. Pasternack offers the stimulating view that 'the "implied tradition" functions as does the "implied author" in other texts except that the entity invoked is not a particular subjectivity but a mode of thought understood to be long-accepted by the community'.<sup>68</sup> The comparison to the function of the author is particularly apt, especially if 'author' is understood in its strongest sense, as the authority behind the text (*auctor*). It also works well to account for the apparent lack of an individual voice behind most Old English poems.

At the same time, Pasternack's view is slightly problematic in that it seems to deny agency to the poet. By contrast, Foley prefers to think of tradition as an 'enabling referent' that is summoned by the performer rather than as an authoring entity.<sup>69</sup> We can compare it to Proust's famous 'madeleine' calling to mind all the memories attached to Combray and its surroundings:<sup>70</sup> in the same way, the traditional motif evokes all the contexts in which it has been met before, so that its expressive power far exceeds its literal meaning.<sup>71</sup> Much like Foley,

<sup>66</sup> Pasternack, *The Textuality of Old English Poetry*, p. 74.

<sup>67</sup> Or even explicitly claim a connection to the same form of traditional poetry, as when Old English poems choose to represent the figure of a traditional *scop*, as in *Beowulf*, *Deor* and *Widsith*. On that topic, see Niles 'The Myth of the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet'.

<sup>68</sup> Pasternack, *The Textuality of Old English Poetry*, p. 62.

<sup>69</sup> See in particular Foley, *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (the phrase 'enabling referent' is used in the preface, p. 14, and in the introduction, p. 1, but the idea is developed throughout the book).

<sup>70</sup> Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann*, in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, pp. 44–7.

<sup>71</sup> See for instance Foley, 'Texts That Speak to Readers Who Hear'.

Drout is wary of seeing tradition as an actor (a 'nebulous force' as he puts it) in the creative process.<sup>72</sup>

There might be some desirable middle ground between regarding tradition as a driving force or as a passive tool. The Bakhtinian notion of polyphony, as developed by the likes of Anscombe and Ducrot, may provide a useful model, even if it was not originally designed to address the issue of traditional discourse. Broadly speaking, linguists use the notion of polyphony to describe the fact that a given discourse is not a closed, self-sufficient entity, but that it typically reflects and engages with other discourses, i.e. with a plurality of voices and points of view. This is particularly obvious in the use of proverbs, represented speech, quotations or ironic statements, but all discourses are polyphonic to some extent. Polyphony does not deny agency to the speaker, but it recognises the fact that a speaker is typically engaged in an interaction rather than a mere action, which, in turn, supposes that they are not the sole bearer of agency.

I believe a similar view might be fruitfully applied to traditional texts, even if it is understood that traditional polyphony has its own specificities. The poet has agency, but, by using traditional diction, they choose to engage and interact with other members of the community. Tradition, of course, is not an actual force endowed with intent. It is an abstraction, a name we give to the numerous discourses that contribute to the elaboration of a common special language (a common 'register' in Foley's terminology). Not only were those discourses produced by people who had their own agency, but the discourses themselves have agency in that they may influence others in ways that were not predicted by their authors.

As a consequence, Old English poems may be seen as a group of discourses that, through their choice to use the same traditional language, signal their willing participation to an ongoing conversation. As such, not only is it legitimate to consider that extant Old English poems are united by more than just chance, but it is crucial to read individual texts against a larger intertextual background.

While modern intertextuality often requires the reader to recognise a specific text, traditional intertextuality is more diffuse, as explained by Renoir and Pasternack:

With written rhetoric, the statement calls to mind a specific work or group of works whose conscious evocation informs our interpretation of the immediate context ... With oral-formulaic rhetoric, on the contrary, the statement calls to mind a paradigmatic situation whose conscious

<sup>72</sup> Drout, *Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, p. 2. See also Mize (*Traditional Subjectivities*, p. 108), who insists on the 'active personal agency' of the individual poet.