the uses of uncertainty: on the dating of beowulf

AN AFTERWORD BY NICHOLAS HOWE

This trivial trope reveals a way of truth.
– Wallace Stevens, 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle,' 1918

Reading letters by nineteenth- and twentieth-century poets can be very disturbing to Anglo-Saxonists, for they are filled with exactly the information we long to know – and despair of ever discovering – about Old English poems: who wrote them, and when, and where, and even perhaps, why they did so. Take, for example, something as banal as the short letter and accompanying list sent by Wallace Stevens to his publisher Alfred A. Knopf on 16 October 1930 from Hartford, Connecticut. The letter reads in full: 'You wrote to me in the spring about re-printing Harmonium. I hand you such new material as I have, with a suggestion or two.'[1] In the attached list, Stevens names three poems to be dropped from the second edition of *Harmonium* and fourteen to be added in a precisely specified order. Stevens's letter and list can seem almost heartbreaking to the Anglo-Saxonist because, in their exquisite brevity, they provide more information about the dating and circulation of poems than do all the surviving records of pre-Conquest England.

The dating of *Beowulf*, the question of how to set a year and perhaps with it a local habitation for the longest, most widely read poem in the language, can be taken as an emblematic critical issue for Old English studies.[2] Worrying about when *Beowulf* was composed is, as a problem, closely akin to asking if Cynewulf is the only poet who can reasonably be described as the author of more than one Old English poem, or to wondering about the political allegiance and literary taste of the poet who composed *The Battle of Maldon*.[3] Anglo-Saxonists must accept a burden of ignorance about matters of authorship and chronology that would be, I think, intolerable to those who work in most other periods of literary history. Yet our predicament rests not simply on our ignorance about such matters. It is also that Anglo-Saxonists have been trained as literary and historical scholars to work in disciplines that treat such knowledge as basic to all serious study. Yet, by ironic contrast, even literary theorists who celebrate the death of the author, or historians who resist the temptations of vulgar biography, can still rely on knowing basic chronological facts about authors and texts. Whatever they might do with this knowledge, these readers can be certain that the poems in *Harmonium* come at the start of Stevens's career and those in *The Auroras of Autumn* come towards its end. About Old English poets, we will probably never know even these trivial facts.

1 *The Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York 1981), pp. 259-60.

2 This afterword does not survey the debate that has flourished since the publication of *The Dating of Beowulf*. It would be foolish to attempt such a survey after the searching essay by Roy Michael Liuzza, 'On the Dating of Beowulf,' in *Beowulf: Basic Readings*, ed. Peter S. Baker (New York 1995), 281-302. My debt to Liuzza's essay will be apparent to anyone who has read it. That arguments about dating *Beowulf* remain lively is abundantly clear from items summarized in the most recent issue (as I write) of *The Year's Work in Old English Studies*; see the *Old English Newsletter* 28 (1995), pp. 22-3; 42-4. I should also acknowledge my debt to John Dagenais, *The Ethics of Reading in Manuscript Culture: Glossing the Libro de buen amor* (Princeton: 1994). My thanks as well to Roberta Frank, first for inviting me to write this afterword, and then for engaging in a sustained conversation on what it means to do Old English studies today.

3 This point is nicely illustrated by the fact that a recent collection of essays on Cynewulf offers only two previously unpublished pieces, both of which centre on questions of dating. See Robert E. Bjork, ed., *Cynewulf: Basic Readings* (New York 1996), pp. 3-55, for pieces by R.D. Fulk and Patrick W. Conner. See, similarly, Jonathon Wilcox, '*The Battle of Maldon* and *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 979-1016: A Winning Combination,' *Proceedings of the Medieval Association of the Midwest* 3 (1995), pp. 31-50.

Our uncertainty about the shape of an Old English literary career stands on a small scale for our uncertainties about the shape of Old English literary history. We have firm dates for some of the prose, many conjectures about the poetry, and an unspoken habit of pretending to more certainty about such matters than the evidence warrants. Or, perhaps more accurately, we have a tacit agreement not to worry in public about the chronological premises of our scholarly work. That is, the discipline argues freely and vociferously about when *Beowulf* might be dated, but it tends to evade the underlying questions about whether *Beowulf* can be dated within the state of our current knowledge. We evade these questions, naturally enough, because they threaten to induce a critical paralysis that is, if not unthinkable, then certainly unproductive. The dating of *Beowulf* is in this regard simply the most visible form of a larger disciplinary problem. To put it more historically, the controversies that have animated Old English studies over that last century or so have always swirled around *Beowulf*, and the question of dating is no exception. Indeed, arguments about how and when to date *Beowulf* are never merely about chronology but extend to the ways in which we read other Old English poems both in themselves and as forming a larger context for *Beowulf*.

Attempts to date *Beowulf* almost always carry with them some implicit, often unacknowledged, sense about the way the poem came into being. In the nineteenth century, to speak broadly, scholars emphasized the oral development and transmission of *Beowulf* from generation to generation so that they could establish a very early date for the original composition of the poem, as distinct from the date of its transcription in the manuscript. The poem was not the work of a single author, according to this argument, but the result of a long folk evolution by which anecdotes gradually cohered into episodes and then into an extended narrative as the matter of the poem was told and retold by anonymous bards. The slow growth of the poem through popular circulation was for such scholars essential to its greatness as folk-epic; it mattered as a cultural monument precisely because it was early and could not be assigned to a single author or precise moment of composition. That *Beowulf* had no set date proved that it had always been traditional, that is, it proved that the poem was not and had never been 'modern' within its own culture because it was not created through the new technology of literacy.[4] Indeed, much nineteenth-century writing on *Beowulf* is more comprehensible as the manifestation of nationalistic and ethnic desires than as literary scholarship. *Beowulf* mattered because it was epic, Germanic, originary, that is, because it was not at root Christian, Latin, derivative. If it seemed Christian, that was merely the thin glaze of piety left by monks who, through the very act of writing it down, consciously betrayed its authentic genius as a poem of the folk.

The obvious analogy for this vision of *Beowulf* would seem to be the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but it is partial at best – and then quite misleadingly so – because these two poems occupy a position of radical earliness in Greek literature. Classicists may disagree about their dates but none would argue, as do reputable Anglo-Saxonists for *Beowulf*, that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* close out the last moments of a poetic tradition. None would make their Homers into Alexandrians. Classicists have this great advantage over Anglo-Saxonists: they know that these two long poems, whatever their dates, appear early in Greek poetry and are originary for much that follows. The dating of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* depends at least partly on the references to and retellings of them that appear in later works. Indeed, if we lacked these poems we could reconstruct their narratives and much of their verbal texture from this commentary tradition. Above all, we could posit their existence and argue their cultural significance.

By contrast, if BL MS. Cotton Vitellius A.XV had been lost, as it might easily have been, no

4 For the oral formulaicists' resistance to literacy as a form of 'ethnographic pastoral,' see James L. Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Allegory' in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James L. Clifford and George Marcus (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1986), pp. 98-121.

trace of the poem we call *Beowulf* would remain and Anglo-Saxonists would have little if any reason to imagine its existence. For *Beowulf* is unusual not simply in being the longest poem in Old English. It is also in its historical, ethical, and political concerns quite different from Old English poems that run to longer than lyric length. The absence of references to *Beowulf* elsewhere in Old English or Anglo-Latin works means that there is no external cultural evidence to help us date the poem or at least set some plausible boundaries for it. If late in the eighth century Alcuin had alluded to *Beowulf* in one of his letters bemoaning the Viking ravages in northern England – 'Why aren't they like the peaceable Danes whom Beowulf befriended at Heorot?' – there would be much less need for this collection of essays, for we would be able to narrow the poem's date to the relatively acceptable term of a century. That there is no commentary tradition for *Beowulf* obviously frustrates attempts at dating the poem, but also should chasten those who argue that it thrived for a long time as an epic in Anglo-Saxon England.

The impetus to date *Beowulf* early had its origin at least in part in the position of Homer's works early in the Greek tradition. If *Beowulf* were to be the epic of Anglo-Saxon England, and achieve literary parity with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, it required a comparably early date. If it did achieve such parity, then Germanic philology could enjoy a status comparable to that of classical philology.[5] Call it Homer-envy, or, the beginnings of English studies as a discipline. When Anglo-Saxonists became less willing, in the wake of J.R.R. Tolkien's '*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics,' to identify the poem as an epic, some of the impetus for an early date was lost.[6]

Yet one feature of oral composition did survive this critical shift away from reading *Beowulf* as an epic. Scholars who wished to maintain an early date for *Beowulf* found it useful to assume a long interval of circulation for the poem between the time it was composed and the time it was written down in manuscript. Like the people they study, Anglo-Saxonists have tended to relate the value of a text to its antiquity: wisdom comes with age, as the meanings of the Old English word *frod* instruct us. No one surveying this debate should discount what Roberta Frank identifies as the 'emotional commitment' of past scholars to an early date.[7] More recently, especially through the work of Kevin S. Kiernan, the orthodoxy of an early date for the poem has been challenged much as was the orthodoxy of its oral-formulaic origin.[8] In ways that would have been unimaginable as recently as the 1970s, none of the contributors to this volume explores the dating of *Beowulf* through the machinery of oral-formulaic theory. On the contrary, the undercurrent in these essays is that *Beowulf* as we know it is a written text with, quite probably, an identifiable moment of composition.

Arguing the written status of *Beowulf* is not, however, at all the same as demonstrating that it had a set meaning throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. Textuality does not fix meaning in an overdetermined or deadening manner, despite what some idealizers of oral composition would have us believe. Instead we must recognize that any inscription of *Beowulf* in a manuscript creates a new context for the poem and thus shifts the grounds for its interpretation. As a result, the poem's status in a manuscript as textuality rather than orality must be recognized as decisive by the interpreter. This new position in Old English studies is well articulated by Carol Braun Pasternack, who closes her *The Textuality of Old English Poetry* by arguing that the manuscript version of a

5 Colin Chase addresses this matter in his 'Opinions on the Date of *Beowulf*, 1815-1980' pp. 3-4 of this volume.

6 J.R.R. Tolkien, '*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics,' *PBA* 22 (1936), pp. 245-95.

7 Roberta Frank, 'Skaldic Verse and the Date of *Beowulf*,' p. 123 of this volume.

8 Kevin S. Kiernan, 'The Eleventh-Century Origin of *Beowulf* and the *Beowulf* Manuscript,' pp. 9-21 of this volume; see also his *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* (New Brunswick, N.J. 1981; rprt. with Foreword by Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, Ann Arbor 1996); and 'The Legacy of Wiglaf: Saving a Wounded *Beowulf*,' in *Beowulf: Basic Readings*, ed. Baker, pp. 195-218.

poem is not merely a mechanical transcription of a previously composed work: 'we should consider the extant texts of Old English poetry as treating issues of concern contemporary to the era of their manuscript production.'[9]

It may well be a healthy corrective to the excesses of oral-formulaic theory that none of the contributors in *The Dating of Beowulf* articulates a gradualist creation for the poem: that is, none suggests that its text grew through a slow process of accretion as it passed orally from one generation to the next until it achieved a form something like that recorded in Cotton Vitellius A.XV. In 'The Eleventh-Century Origin of *Beowulf* and the *Beowulf* Manuscript,' Kiernan argues for the joining of two distinct poems about a figure known as Beowulf sometime after c. 1016, but he does so without recourse to oral-formulaic theory: 'Palaeography and codicology, in any case, do not support the theory that the *Beowulf* manuscript is a late copy of an early poem. On the contrary, they support the view that *Beowulf* is an eleventh-century composite poem, and that the *Beowulf* manuscript is a draft, the archetype of the epic as we now have it.'[10] His claim that *Beowulf* was written at or very close to the time when it was written down in the manuscript, in the years after Knut came to the English throne in 1016, brings us much closer to our own literary climate in which poets like Stevens publish their poems shortly after writing them. It would thus follow in Kiernan's argument that *Beowulf*, with its evocation of a Danish past, had a precise political and poetic function to play in a Danish-ruled England that it would not have had in an earlier period when lines of political and cultural allegiance were drawn less starkly or at least with less insistent reference to the overseas connection.

Arguments about the date of *Beowulf* are thus also arguments about the circulation the poem may have enjoyed in Anglo-Saxon England. The closer a date to Cotton Vitellius A.XV that one offers for the composition of the poem, the less time it would have had to circulate, and thus, arguably, the less cultural work it could have accomplished in the interval. Conversely, the more compelling a case one wishes to argue for the poem's epic centrality, the earlier a date one would presumably be likely to offer. Remembering these competing visions for the function of poetry in Anglo-Saxon England, one can understand why reputable scholars have dated *Beowulf* anywhere from (roughly) 675 to 1025, a span of some 350 years. The embarrassment, even the scandal of Old English scholarship is not merely that we have no accepted date for *Beowulf* but that we cannot even agree on a century. Roy Michael Liuzza offers a disturbing comparison for our critical uncertainty:

> Without a doubt, the date of *Beowulf* matters; imagine the confusion that would result if some critics placed *Paradise Lost* in the late seventeenth century, others in the early sixteenth, still others in the middle of the nineteenth, and viewed Milton variously as a contemporary of Wyatt, Pope, or Tennyson.[11]

Perhaps all that saves us from the interpretive anarchy envisioned by Liuzza is that Anglo-Saxonists have not only no date for our *Paradise Lost* (*Beowulf*) but also no dates for, as it were, our Wyatts, Popes, or Tennysons (e.g., the poets of *Deor, The Seafarer,* or *Exodus*). In this larger context, the problem of unknown dates becomes less of a source of confusion than in Liuzza's scenario about a *Paradise Lost* stranded undatably within the ineluctable chronological march of English poetry.

Liuzza's telling observation also prompts one to speculate that our desire to date *Beowulf* pre-

9 Carol Braun Pasternack, *The Textuality of Old English Poetry* (Cambridge 1995), p. 200.
10 Kiernan, 'The Eleventh-Century Origin,' p. 20 of this volume.
11 Liuzza, 'On the Dating of *Beowulf*,' p. 283.

cisely has been shaped, as well as preserved, by our practice of reading it within the otherwise chronologically secure tradition of English literature. We may argue about which of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* were written in the late 1380s or the early 1390s, or about which of Shakespeare's plays were written early rather than late in the 1590s, but these are uncertainties of a relatively few years and do not seem as disconcerting as the uncertainty of centuries we face with *Beowulf*. Indeed, the problem of its date might seem less troublesome to us as readers if we were to remove *Beowulf* from the chronological frame of this tradition, especially as it has been maintained by undergraduate anthologies.

A reader, especially one who learned to love *Beowulf* after reading it in a standard survey course, might well ask if there is any reason for scholars to date *Beowulf* so variously. Is the nature of the evidence so malleable that it can yield such widely divergent results? For not only is the period from 675 to 1025 a very long stretch of time, it also constitutes about three-quarters of the period traditionally labelled Anglo-Saxon (600-1100). One might answer this question by quoting Emerson's aphorism: 'If I know your sect I anticipate your argument.' That is, from the type of evidence offered, one can predict a scholar's dating of *Beowulf*. In general terms, the more closely one works with the language and metre, the more likely one is to date the poem early. Conversely, the more closely one works with the manuscript, the more likely one is to date the poem late.[12]

Perhaps the only generalization about the dating of *Beowulf* I would hazard is that the evidence one chooses will shape, even predetermine, one's findings. The situation of those who argue from historical evidence may seem rather different because they have offered a very wide range of dates for the poem. Yet one can still observe that the type of historical evidence adduced will usually determine the date offered for the poem. If one reads the poem through other depictions of Germanic tribes before the conversion to Christianity, one will probably date it early. If one reads it as a treatise on rulership, one will probably relate it to some exemplary Anglo-Saxon king, such as Offa or Alfred the Great.[13] If one seizes on the poem's flattering (or at least not overtly hostile) depiction of the Danes, then one might well argue it was written very late in the period.

These generalizations can, of course, be complicated or refuted by other examples. What seems less open to contradiction is the further claim that almost every scholar who has pursued the date of *Beowulf* has chosen to do so largely from a single perspective: that of language, or social institutions, or manuscript (to cite only the three most common). While *Beowulf* scholars are usually scrupulous about admitting counter-examples from within their own type of evidence, they have been less willing to consider opposing or complicating factors from other types of evidence. Those who pursue the linguistic approach rarely engage with those who pursue the manuscript approach, and vice-versa. And those who pursue the historical approach, broadly defined, are usually reluctant to engage the technical aspects of language and manuscript study. If there is to be a persuasive case for the poem's date, it will of necessity draw from and synthesize these various kinds of evidence. As the current debate demonstrates to anyone who can maintain even a minimal distance, any monocausal argument for the date of *Beowulf* is inevitably weakened because it does not refute or otherwise accommodate arguments based on different but equally legitimate types of evidence. Only if we believe a priori that one category of evidence is more compelling than all

12 For a recent study that works with language and metre to argue an early date for *Beowulf*, see R.D. Fulk, *A History of Old English Meter* (Philadelphia 1992), especially pp. 348-92. For the relation between manuscript study and a late date for *Beowulf*, see the studies cited in n. 8 above. See also Angus Cameron et al., 'A Reconsideration of the Language of *Beowulf*,' pp. 33-75 of this volume; and Thomas Cable, 'Metrical Style as Evidence for the Date of *Beowulf*,' pp. 77-82 of this volume.

13 On these issues, see further Alexander Callander Murray, '*Beowulf*, the Danish Invasions, and Royal Genealogy,' pp. 101-11 of this volume.

others can we accept a monocausal argument. If that turns out to be the case, then there is further evidence for my claim that most debates about *Beowulf* are arguments in shadow about how we are to do Old English studies.

Rereading the essays brought together in *The Dating of Beowulf* some fifteen years after their original publication has the great value of reminding us that the central monument of this poetic corpus – on which rests most critical claims for the value of the language and its poetry and thus for the place of the discipline within the scholarly and academic world – has no fixed basis in time or place. The most immediate contribution that *The Dating of Beowulf* made to Old English studies was to destroy the illusion that there was substantial evidence for the then-current consensus about the poem's date. That this collection has effected a deep change in our way of thinking as a discipline is vividly signalled by the differences between the first and second editions of the standard history of Old English literature. Writing in 1965, Stanley B. Greenfield rehearsed the critical consensus of the time: 'Whether the *Beowulf* as we have it was orally composed or not – and I incline to the latter view – a written text in the Anglian or Mercian dialect probably existed by the middle of the eighth century.' Some twenty-one years later, and after the influence of the Chase collection had been registered, Greenfield and his co-author, Daniel G. Calder, could only make this observation: 'The early consensus on dating, that *Beowulf*, a poem of Mercian or Northumbrian origin, was fixed in its present form by the eighth century and then transmitted through one or more scribal copies to its present manuscript, has crumbled. Various linguistic, historical and esthetic arguments suggest dates of composition from the late eighth through the early eleventh century.'[14]

Ten years after Greenfield and Calder spoke with a hint of despair about a consensus that had crumbled, we can speak more persuasively about the uses of uncertainty. The most profound contribution made by *The Dating of Beowulf* to Old English studies in general has been to introduce a vital and stringent uncertainty into a discipline that for too long proceeded comfortably in the belief that certainty was itself a marker of critical value. Yet with this sense of uncertainty comes as well the recognition that it makes for a difficult and potentially self-contradictory critical practice. If, as I argue elsewhere, the dominant and persistent critical method in Old English studies has been historicist in one variety or another, how then can one work on a poetry that has no accepted chronology or even sequence?[15] To put it bluntly, how can one be a historicist if one cannot conclusively date *Beowulf* within the span of three centuries?

One answer to this question, though not a very happy one, is to follow those general handbooks on the subject that imply Anglo-Saxon England enjoyed a degree of cultural consistency during these centuries sufficient to allow one to date the poem at any moment within that duration.[16] A stasis of 300 years is, however, a very long claim to make, even if one believes Anglo-Saxon England to have been a dark age. Another answer, more complicated and perhaps more satisfying, is to suggest there is a historicism that can accommodate this problem because it is not completely invested in locating and dating a work, but instead defines its critical method by articulating the relation between its object of study and its own moment. In other words, one might envision a historicism that takes as its central issue this matter of historical understanding. Liuzza has noted that

14 Stanley B. Greenfield, *A Critical History of Old English Literature* (New York 1965), p. 82; Stanley B. Greenfield and Daniel G. Calder, *A New Critical History of Old English Literature* (New York 1986), p. 136. At the conclusion of this quotation, Greenfield and Calder add a note citing *The Dating of Beowulf*. I follow Liuzza in making this comparison.

15 Nicholas Howe, 'Historicist Approaches' in *Reading Old English Texts*, ed. Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe (Cambridge 1997), pp. 79-100.

16 For a valuable counter-argument to this assumption, see Colin Chase, 'Saints' Lives, Royal Lives, and the Date of *Beowulf*,' pp. 161-71 of this volume, especially p. 168.

this situation makes our critical practice formalist despite our historicist allegiances; as he puts it with epigrammatic force: 'any approach to *Beowulf* is of necessity not documentary but monumental.'[17]

This claim that we search for meaning in forms of expression, in the text itself, because we remain in such uncertainty about the context of the work is compelling, and damaging to a strict historicist position. Yet there can be in the techniques of formalism, in its struggle with language and figuration, ways to apprehend a text's cultural and historical position. Formalism can become something more than a description of the text as verbal artefact; it can also be an interpretive method to engage historical questions. The insight offered by the art historian Michael Baxandall that 'the *style* of pictures is a proper material of social history'[18] can be translated to a poetic canon, especially one that has certain set forms of metrical, verbal, and figural expression. The traditional moves of formalist practice can, when revived by a theoretically informed historicism, yield evidence about the thematics and thus the historical situation of Old English poems. The danger, of course, is that the critic will employ style as others employ historical context: not as the material of history but as the key that alone will unlock the chronology of all Old English poetry.[19]

There is perhaps only one critical assumption shared by all parties to this debate about dating, though it remains largely implicit: that once we fix the date of *Beowulf* with reasonable exactness, our interpretive difficulties will resolve themselves. This claim seems most immediately evident of the late-daters: if the poem's composition in its current form should be dated after 1016 then its function as pro-Danish propaganda seems to impose a self-evident reading on the poem. Yet one must resist the assumption that a firm date for *Beowulf* will settle any or all of our interpretive difficulties. To belabour the obvious, there are many texts in English about which critics disagree in every particular – except their dates of publication. *Moll Flanders* (1722), *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), *Heart of Darkness* (1902), and *Ulysses* (1922) are just a few works of known date that have yielded radically divergent interpretations. To have the date of *Beowulf* would be useful in itself and also as a corrective to its misuse as historical evidence; but in the absence of such knowledge we must not overestimate its value. Having the date of *Beowulf* would not in itself resolve any of our interpretive problems because they must be traced as much to our own cultural moment as to the historical milieu of the poem. In fact, this quest for the date of *Beowulf* shows at times a touch of the interpretive error that has flawed much historicist criticism of Old English poetry: namely, the belief that we know enough about Anglo-Saxon England to know how our interpretation of the poem would be affected by the fact that it was datable to 725 or 895 or 1025. And, to press this claim harder, we must resist attributing to Anglo-Saxon England at any given date – 725 or 895 or 1025 – a cultural homogeneity that would make our work easier but which is otherwise unwarranted. To know the date of a poem is not the same as to know the contexts that date might provide.

At the risk of seeming merely paradoxical, one can suggest that our interpretive work with

17 Liuzza, 'On the Dating of *Beowulf*,' p. 295. For fundamental discussions on the relations between formalism and historicism, see Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore 1978), especially chapter 4; and Dominick LaCapra, *Soundings in Critical Theory* (Ithaca 1989).

18 Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford and New York 1988), p. v.

19 In this regard, it is salutary to reread Ashley Crandall Amos, *Linguistic Means of Determining the Dates of Old English Literary Texts* (Cambridge, Mass. 1980) for its cautionary tales about scholars who claimed to have found the key to dating Old English poetic texts. For a recent news report on such a scholar, see John Dugdale, 'Who's Afraid of Beowulf?' *The New Yorker*, 23 & 30 December 1996, pp. 50-2. This account of David Howlett's dating of *Beowulf* in the Alfredian period appears in a special issue of *The New Yorker* devoted to fiction.

Beowulf would become more difficult the more exactly we could date it. Thus, for example, if it is late and written in an England under Danish occupation, is it an encomium of the continental Danes and thus flattery of their descendants, the occupiers of the island? Or, more problematically, is it meant to chasten the occupying Danes into some recognition of their shared ancestry and thus commonality with the Anglo-Saxon English they have conquered and oppressed? Or, if the poem was written as a primer for princes in Alfredian England, what was its lesson? That a young Anglo-Saxon prince should follow Hrothgar's injunctions to the young Beowulf? Or that the young Christian prince should understand that Beowulf's pagan virtues as manifested by the crisis at Hrothgar's court are admirable but fatally limited? Chronology, no matter how precisely measured, never yields only a single context.

All this said, where do we stand today in 1997 with the dating of *Beowulf*? The reader can choose a date for the poem from among the possibilities argued in these essays as well as in other sources. To decide on a date for *Beowulf* is certainly possible, especially as it allows one to recognize that any date is also implicitly a theory about the poem's composition, circulation, and meaning. Alternatively, one might decide that all one can do is adopt, as I once did, the engaging (though somewhat obscurantist) scepticism of Alain Renoir: 'I readily confess that I should be at a loss to tell when, where, by whom, and under what circumstances, this greatest of all early-Germanic epics was composed.'[20] Or one might end by suggesting that while we may never know the date of *Beowulf* we should keep asking the question because it has been for generations, and seems likely to remain so, a powerful means for thinking about the poem. If we hold to this position, then it follows we should also entertain the possibility that there was never a single, commonly accepted reading in Anglo-Saxon England of this poem we call *Beowulf*. Instead, as is typical of complex texts, we should accept the likelihood that for as long as people knew the poem in Old English there may have been different, possibly contradictory readings of the poem – even among those who lived at the same time and in the same place. Our anxiety as scholars who work in a time of interpretive multiplicity should not lead us to imagine nostalgically that Anglo-Saxon England was a haven of certainty for readers. To quote Stevens one last time, from 'The Poems of our Climate' (1938), his meditation on the 'flawed words and stubborn sounds' of poetry: 'the imperfect is our paradise.' Our sense of the past and its poetry should honour the same possibilities for subtlety, contingency, and contradiction we admit in our time.

To have a date for *Beowulf* would simply allow us to begin in another way our work of interpretation.

20 Alain Renoir, 'Old English Formulas and Themes as Tools for Contextual Interpretation,' in Phyllis Rugg Brown, et al., ed., *Modes of Interpretation in Old English Literature: Essays in Honour of Stanley B. Greenfield* (Toronto 1986), 65-79, at p. 68. One might note, somewhat sceptically, that Renoir's critical approach in this essay certainly sits better with an early than a late date for *Beowulf*. In that sense, his claim to not know the date of the poem should not be taken as meaning that he had no opinion (implicit, in this case, I would suggest) about the matter. For my use of Renoir as a defensive manoeuver, see *Migration and Myth-making in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Haven 1989), p. 177, n. 38. If I were writing that note today, I would be more hesitant to quote Renoir though I would still refrain from offering a date for *Beowulf*.

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