

PERFORMING ANGLO-SAXON ELEGIES: A CONVERSATION*

MARK C. AMODIO and BENJAMIN BAGBY

Mark Amodio: Great to see you again, Ben. There's much to talk about, but the first thing I'd like to ask is what differences you perceive between performing some of the elegiac passages in *Beowulf* and some of the elegies and the other parts of *Beowulf* that you've performed?

Benjamin Bagby: I've always treated the elegies and also the laments within the story of *Beowulf* as pieces that have been inserted. They're pieces for me which have a beginning and an end, and the narrative just stops while we comment on something or we listen to someone else comment on it. So, for me, narrative time stops, just freezes during the elegiac passages, and then there's a moment of reflection, or some kind of emotion is expressed, and it requires a different sense of time musically. Also, since it has a beginning and an end, it's a different use of the instrument and a different musical structure. Generally for these laments, something gets going which remains fluid throughout the text so that the harp is not following the text, but is rather creating a texture or a repetitive figure or some kind of a carpet onto which the text can be laid quickly—or not quickly. It doesn't dictate a rhythm, but it provides a kind of, maybe I should call it a macro-rhythmic structure, something big that's moving very slowly, but allows the singer, within the context of that slow-moving rhythm, to shape the text as he wants, while still respecting the metrics.

MA: Is the music different for these passages? Do you see it as connected solely to these passages, or as situated within your more organic, totalizing performance of *Beowulf*?

BB: They are a bit isolated. For instance, in the Lone Survivor passage (2231b–2270a),¹ I made a conscious decision to have a beginning and an ending, and so it is a piece that exists along a continuum which has a repetitive figure which is always the same. It can be simple or decorated, but the structure is always the same. It's a series of three intervals; without getting too technical, it's three perfect fourths descending.

* The following is an edited and condensed version of conversations that took place in Poughkeepsie, New York, over the course of two consecutive evenings in November of 2016. The recordings made on those occasions and discussed in this conversation proved to be of insufficient quality and so Bagby, with the aid of a grant from the Vassar College Research Committee, subsequently re-recorded them in a professional studio in Cologne, Germany. These recordings are housed in The Frederick Ferris Thompson Memorial Library on the campus of Vassar College and are freely available in the folder Bagby at https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B_DdIKm_nVgTkpzZUVsbWV6a1U.

1 *Beowulf* is quoted and cited throughout from Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*. All translations are Amodio's unless otherwise noted.

This sets up for me a kind of space in which this lamentation can take place, or the story can be told, because it's not solely a lament, but is a lament within a story, a micro-story within another story. It's a monologue, basically, and I wanted to create a kind of space where that would be possible. There is something kind of ritualistic about it, because what the Lone Survivor is doing is quite ritualistic—a burial for his people—and I decided to give it a ritualistic accompaniment. Once that's going, once that's moving, my options are limited.

That's what's always so interesting about working with this instrument; it's an instrument that seems quite limited because it only has six strings. Any real harp player picking up that instrument would say, "you can't make music with this," there are not enough givens, so there are not enough strings, not enough notes. But I love the constraints, I love the limitations imposed by the instrument and its tuning, because it forces me into very, very tight corners, and in those tight corners, with the text, you can really create little miniature moments of, in this case, lamentation, and work in a very detailed way, and be forced to find creative ways to solve that problem.

It's never anything outrageous, it's always something within the context of the mode of the entire performance, because the entire performance of *Beowulf* must take place, and probably did take place, within a performance tradition; if an instrument was used, it was tuned in one musical mode all the time. When I say mode I mean here those six tones and their relation to one another, not in the sense of a scale or, like church music, but mode in the sense of, there are six tones and they're tuned in a certain way, so they gravitate towards a final note, which is the centre of the mode, and all of the melodic material that you're going to create is coming out of that tiny, tiny cell.

MA: In the performances tonight, there really wasn't as much of a difference between the narratorial voice and the speaker's voice in the Lone Survivor passage. In other sections of the poem that you've performed, there's a sharper aural distinction between voices. In the Unferth passage, his voice is clearly distinguished—especially on those nights when he seems to be more rather than less drunk—but Beowulf's voice is always distinctly Beowulf's and Hrothgar's voice is always distinctly Hrothgar's. They have different musical signatures attached to them, but I didn't hear that much of a difference between the narrator's and the survivor's voices earlier this evening.

BB: That was a conscious decision, and I could do it differently. I could, for instance, as you say, begin the piece in the narrator's voice followed by the actual guy speaking, and then after he finishes his speech, have the narrator wrap up the story. Maybe in a few years I'll change that; these things, they're not written down anywhere, they're just performance traditions that are in my head.

MA: There's evidence of that in the Scyld passage (26–51).² When that passage is integrated into the larger context of your performance of *Beowulf*, it has a very different

² A recording of the version of this passage discussed here, one performed with a kind of ostinato harp pattern, is not the version that was recorded in Cologne at the same time the other pieces for

character than it did when you performed it this evening because when it's a part of your *Beowulf* performance, it doesn't stand out as a particularly elegiac moment, but seems more narrative.

BB: I think on the DVD³ the musical realization was more like the Lone Survivor, but I grew dissatisfied with that for the ship burial and I changed it in performance; now, I do it differently.

MA: Do you emphasize the passage's elegiac aspects more now?

BB: I use an accompaniment that allows me to go from speech to song and back to speech more easily. It's not anything with a fixed rhythm; it has a very loose rhythmic shape, it's very responsive to the text, whereas the other one is fixed.

MA: The sort of rhythmic drive that you were talking about, is that because you have to power the epic, the whole narrative, and yet still somehow have to focus in on the lamentations, or what are frequently called the elegiac passages in the poem? Does the rhythmic drive liberate you from that?

BB: It's liberating in that when I get to a passage that has a beginning and an end, I kind of leave the epic for a while and go into another space. So, that's liberating because I get a time out, basically, and then when it's over I go back into the epic, and there are lots of passages like that. The biggest one is probably *Beowulf's* swimming contest with Breca, which also has a rhythmically fixed accompaniment, which is extremely active, and very aggressive. It's about as strong as you can get on that instrument, and I purposefully made it as athletic as possible, so that he could be as big a show-off as he needed to be, and to turn that then into anger at Unferth, as a lead-in to mentioning all of the nasty stuff at the end.

MA: But that moment you're talking about, in the Unferth episode, *Beowulf* does begin in a very aggressive manner. What stands out in the DVD performance is not just the musical change signalling "*Beowulf* maþelode bearn Ecgþeowes" (1383) (*Beowulf* spoke, the son of Ecgþeow), but also the change in vocalization at that point.

BB: I do it on purpose. In my mind he's responding to Unferth from a position of incredible self-assurance, and then he says, "and Breca and I, we were kids, and you know how kids are, we decided to dare each other, and so on." But then he says, "ond þæt geæfndon swa" (538b) (and that we so performed). In my mind, he takes the harp from the scop—he says you know, "give me your harp," and he takes it, and says, "okay people, listen to this." He's said "hwæt" already, but it's basically his turn to sing a song within the epic.

this project were recorded. The version with the tuning discussed here can be found on the CD made for and included in Schulman and Szarmach, *Beowulf at Kalamazoo*. Because the version recorded in Cologne represents the way Bagby now performs that section, it is included in the url cited in the unnumbered footnote above, along with the other pieces recorded at that time as a useful comparand.

3 Bagby, *Beowulf*, DVD.

MA: Yes, it's what I call an embedded, embodied performance.⁴

BB: Yes, and then when he finishes the story, "Ða mec sæ oþbær, / [...] on Finna land" (578b-80) (then the sea bore me, [...] to Finland), I really play out the accompaniment, and then there's silence. And then he looks at Unferth and says, "I never heard of *you* doing anything like that." That always gets a huge laugh; it's the biggest laugh moment, aside from Unferth being drunk. But just as a line, it's an incredibly well-crafted turn; it's friendly, at first, and then it turns not so friendly very quickly. That's, for me, really a set piece, and from the moment he says "swa" to the moment he lands on "Finna land," it's one thing, all the time.

MA: But now in the passages that you are recording for this volume in memory of our mutual friend John Miles Foley, we don't have that sort of narrative drive. There was a plaintive, haunting quality to the beginning of the Lone Survivor's speech: is it the product of the emotional nature of those passages supplementing or taking the place of that narrative drive?

BB: These pieces are very powerful. They're unrelenting and very strong, and that provides a musician with a huge amount of musical energy. The elegies have this kind of psychological reality that's being explored from different sides and anyone listening can associate moments like that with their own life.

MA: That's one of the strengths and one of the beauties of the Anglo-Saxon elegies. We know so little about the details of the situation these speakers are in, but the emotional nature of their plights manages to resonate powerfully across all these centuries.

BB: The genesis of how I perform these passages goes back a number of years, when John told me he was going to write a book about the elegies and I offered to make some recordings to accompany the book. After looking at the elegies and elegiac passages, I began performing one of them, *The Lone Survivor*, in the context of the program of my ensemble, for a program called "Fragments for the End of Time," which is about the apocalypse, as viewed in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries.⁵ We recorded the program but I didn't record *The Lone Survivor*, because I still at the time was thinking, "I'm not going to record this, I'm going to record it for John."

MA: Which is what, in a way, you are doing now. Tomorrow we'll be recording *Deor* and *The Wanderer*, two non-Beowulfian pieces. The language is going to be different because it's not the *Beowulf*-poet's, and I'm very curious to hear how you're going to voice those pieces.

⁴ See Amodio, "Embodying the Oral Tradition," this volume.

⁵ Bagby, *Endzeitfragmente*.

BB: One thing that's really clear is that for *Beowulf* I have the harp tuned in a certain way, and it never changes. For other pieces I use other tunings. For the *Wanderer* I have a tuning which is basically the same, but one note is different. For *Deor* I have a tuning which is radically different. So the whole sound is quite, for me, radically different. I don't know, for a listener, though, if it will be.

MA: What determines the tuning? Does the text determine it, does the music speak to the text, or do they both somehow come together?

BB: It's a kind of synergy. I sit down with a text and begin just singing it in tuning "x." And then if I find something's not comfortable, or that something seems awkward, I'll try another tuning. There are seven or eight tunings I could use. There's a tuning in fourths, there's a tuning in fifths, there's what I call my "epic open tuning," there's what I call "epic-centred tuning," and there's a tuning which is found in a tenth-century treatise, an actual, historical medieval tuning.

MA: What treatise is that?

BB: It's from a treatise by a monk named Hucbald of St-Amand, who died in the early tenth century, but the manuscript is later, and the manuscript shows strings of a harp horizontally, six strings, with the pitches very clearly delineated, and he's using it like a primitive form of staff notation to notate Gregorian chant and is letting the image of the harp help his students visualize where notes are by writing the syllables of the chant on the harp strings. So you just sing the syllable on the string that you see. It looks like staff notation or tablature, but it's really a harp turned on its side, because there are no notes in the spaces. The notes are the lines; it's just the strings.

That's what I think of as the "monastic co-opting" of that instrument. We know for a fact from people like Otfrid von Weissenburg that Christian monks were having trouble with some of the brothers, perhaps ex-warriors who had entered monastic life, or the novices who had poor or non-existent Latin. But they had to learn the gospels, so this had to be in the Germanic language of their life, and Otfrid wrote this whole retelling of the gospels in German. Since it's in manuscripts from the eleventh century with musical notation, we know it was sung. And Otfrid in his preface says that while the young men, the novices, liked to listen to stories of heroes and deeds of valour and so on, they should be listening instead to the stories of Christ. The subtext of that is that he co-opted the epic poetry that they wanted to hear in German, and he just said, "Okay, I'll write these gospel stories in their language." And it's easy for me to imagine also that the instrument par excellence that one associates with epic, the harp, just moved over into the monastic world very easily.

The tuning, for instance, that Hucbald gives, that's the tuning that is related more to the world of monastic chant, singing chant. It's a tuning we call diatonic, which means it's like a scale of notes, six notes in a row. The other tunings I use have gaps, they're maybe, like a gapped octave, without getting too musically specific. That's what gives it that pentatonic sound. So I use the Hucbald tuning, or at least have been, so far, for *Deor*. Now don't ask me why, it just worked out that way. Maybe it's because *Deor* has a refrain.

MA: Yes, it's one of the only Old English poems to have anything like a refrain.

BB: And *the Wanderer* is yet another tuning. It's close to the *Beowulf* tuning but not exactly the same. It's not what I would call an open tuning. In other words, you have to think about the notes you're playing. In the open tuning every note is correct, all the time. And this tuning, there are traps you can fall into, so you're having to strategize while you play. But it's a very strong, modal tuning; it has a very strong orientation to two different poles, one note, and a different note, and moving back and forth between them all the time.

MA: So here we are again, Ben, after a second night recording on the Vassar campus. I want to start this evening by picking up a thread from last night's discussion and asking if, when you step outside of the borders of *Beowulf*, you think about your performance differently, and do the texts present themselves to you differently? Is there some sort of performative baseline for your performances of Old English texts, perhaps because of their consistent metrics, or do the non-*Beowulfian* pieces somehow seem like parts of a wholly different performance tradition?

BB: Metrically not; that's still the same for me. But when I'm dealing with a poem which has a beginning and an end and it's not an epic, and it's not telling a story necessarily, I do have a different approach generally, in that I try to find one musical idea which will encompass the whole structure of the poem, the whole thing I want to say. Within an epic, the main task is to encompass the variety and still keep the thing coherent.

MA: So for a piece like *Deor*, which is fairly short—you were able to run through it in single takes earlier tonight—there seemed to be a consistency to the music, to that presentation. But your performance of the *Wanderer*, as I told you after your first run through earlier this evening, was not at all what I expected. I was surprised by the dynamic range that you gave it; at times it's very plaintive, and then all of a sudden it becomes more explosive.

BB: When I see an expression like “eala” (alas), I take it seriously. When the speaker three times uses an expletive like that, it's like *heu* in Latin, or *ah*, or any time you hear *ach* in German, it's one of those words that signifies its user's terrible distress. That it comes three times is for me a clue that this is not a laid back, philosophical reflection but, rather, that it's a sign of emotional turmoil, of extreme unhappiness, and of being cut off from his people—there are all of these images of the wall and the snow and hail, and there's all this imagery of desolation, physical desolation, cold.

MA: And that sense of the cold and the desolation gets picked up in his physical isolation, since we discover at the end of the poem that he's off by himself, and is not even within the small community mentioned in the poem.

BB: He's muttering by himself in the corner.

MA: Yes, but muttering loudly, and muttering with real emotion, something you foregrounded in your interpretation this evening of the *ubi sunt* passage (92ff.) as well, by stretching out that “hwær” (where).⁶ Was your approach shaped somewhat by the genre into which these poems have been placed, especially in terms of the beautifully plaintive music you created?

BB: Yes probably. I’m going to have to work on a song that’s happy once, you know, just to see what it’s like.

MA: What would that be in Old English poetry?

BB: The swimming contest with Breca is kind of a happy thing. It’s just a pure physical action, and, “aren’t I great?” In the way I perform it, as I mentioned last night, it has a steady musical thing that’s going on, and it’s rhythmic. And I layer the metrics onto that rhythm that’s created by the instrument. In *Deor*, I’m using a really simple musical device, which is moving from one tonal centre to another one. Back and forth, it has a kind of inevitable feeling, that’s always going from the one to the other, and then there’s that refrain, which breaks it a little bit. So the accompaniment provides this extremely calm structure, and I can kind of put the text in there as I would like. And I bend it and I stretch it, a little bit, depending, but it’s not the kind of rhythmic thing like you have with the Breca episode in *Beowulf*. The *Wanderer*, as you noticed, starts and stops a lot, because that’s the way he’s thinking. It starts with a very long meditation, which kind of is like whenever anybody is obsessing about something; it’s going around and around in the head, more and more and more, and then he’s imagining this scene with the lord greeting him, kissing him, and holding him, and then, “bang!” He wakes up out of this reverie and he’s on what is probably a boat, and like the speaker of the *Seafarer*, he’s facing horrible seagulls and bad weather, and then he’s kind of in a delirium. That segues into a completely different section, which is this kind of typical thing you’d find in the *Edda*, or the Old English wisdom poems, “a wise man must do this,” “wise men should know that,” and so all of a sudden he’s preaching to us.

Plus, there’s a storyteller who’s commenting, so it’s all going in and out of focus. In a not-so-logical way, I see it as very cinematographic; you’re getting shots of things that are segueing, or cutting to other scenes, and it’s not necessarily chronological, and it’s not necessarily logical. And then near the end we get the lamenting part, the *ubi sunt* passage, and the “eala” (95) (alas). So I view it as a kind of psychological portrait of loneliness and disconnectedness. As a long-time expatriate, I can identify with that, because I’ve had moments like that myself. Not quite so drastic, but anyone who’s lived away from home knows that any kind of dislocation can give you the feeling that nothing makes sense anymore.

MA: We get very much that same feeling running through *Deor*, but in a very different context. *Deor* has never seemed particularly elegiac to me, especially when placed

⁶ All citations to the *Wanderer* and *Deor* are from Krapp and Dobbie, *ASPR* 3.

alongside the other Old English elegies. There's the so-called refrain, the lovely "þaes ofereode, þisses swa maeg" (7) (that passed over, so may this) but it just doesn't seem to have the same sort of emotional charge that the other Old English elegies do.

BB: No.

MA: *Deor* is a professional performer, and he's lamenting the loss of professional opportunities, and it's unfortunate for him, certainly, that he's been displaced by Heorrenda, but it doesn't seem to be a situation equivalent to what we encounter in all the other elegies. I didn't hear in your performance of *Deor* the emotional range that is central to your *Wanderer*, which, again, took me very much by surprise. Let's talk further about the music for *Deor*. As you mentioned earlier, you had to do a special tuning for it, which is something of a departure from what you've done with the other Old English texts that you've put to music.

BB: It's part of an ongoing project of mine, which is to discover what the tunings of this instrument may have been. I do not believe there was one tuning, but rather that there were many, many tunings in different cultures that used such an instrument. I also want to discover if they all had certain things in common, such as certain kinds of relationships between strings, certain musical intervals, which would have to be there, either the octave or the perfect fifth or the perfect fourth, and everything after those intervals is conjecture.

For *Deor*, I'm using a tuning—we talked about it a bit yesterday—found in a treatise from a monastic context, and it's just a series of six tones in a scale. So on the piano, it's not those notes, but on the piano you would just play C, D, E, F, G, A. Those six tones provide you with some interesting intervals if you're a harpist and you like to play two strings at once, so it provides me with a series of three perfect fourths, or two perfect fifths. There's nothing fancy, nothing composed, nothing polyphonic; it's all really basic stuff that I'm playing. I think when you're trying to tell a story or sing, and you're using such an instrument, the last thing anybody wants to hear is something complicated, because what can you play on six strings that's so complicated? You can play patterns, and stuff like that, which I do. So, the musical realization of *Deor* is really fairly straightforward, but it's static, and it's very unlike *Beowulf*, or the *Wanderer*, in that it's a static moving between two tonal centres. Everything else gets put on top of that.

MA: Do you see the music for *Deor* being extended elsewhere in the Old English corpus? Or, I guess I should ask you a different question, do you see yourself extending elsewhere into the Old English poetic corpus?

BB: Yes, I do. I'd like to move on to *Widsith* and the *Seafarer*. That's already a huge amount of material. I'd like to do *the Husband's Message*, *the Wife's Lament*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*.

MA: To date, the poems that you've worked on are all within the secular Germanic tradition. They're all ones that don't have Christian sources.

BB: But I have several Christian ones, too, that I want to do, including *Judith*, and I have done some of the Old English *Boethius*.

MA: You have?

BB: Yes, in fact I was almost going to do it here, the first metrum, but there just wasn't time and I didn't have it prepared enough to record. It's the introduction to it, and then the actual lament of Boethius at the beginning of the *Consolation*. I'm very interested in the metra of the *Consolation*, and I'm actually working with Sam Barrett, a musicologist at Cambridge University who's looked at all of the manuscripts between the ninth and the eleventh centuries that contain any Boethian metra with any hint of a musical notation. He's working on a book about the metra, and I'm hoping to do a concert program in the future about Boethius.⁷

MA: I hope you do get to explore some of the Christian texts because it would be interesting to hear if you discover that a different sort of performance tradition informs them. Since you first started working on *Beowulf* a number of years back, you've always been a remarkably responsible interpreter of these old texts, which John Foley called "voices from the past."⁸ While you wisely steer clear of trying to recreate what might have been, you still breathe life into these poems in a way that John greatly admired, as do I and so many others.

BB: I never try to recreate how something sounded in place X. It could very well have sounded like that in place X, but that's not my first and foremost priority. I also don't do anything, however, where I would say, "well, I *know* that it didn't sound like this, but I like that anyway, so that's what I'm going to do," because that's opening a door to another room, and then you might as well have other instruments. Why limit yourself to the tuning of six strings, why, dadada? You can get a keyboard, and then you're into, really, a composition *based* on an ancient text and not a performance of that text.

But I'm trying to scrape away all that stuff and to really go back to basics as much as I can and try to see what were the musical elements that really would have been known at the time of that text. So, in other words, there's a little bit of musicology involved, in knowing about what music was like then, whether Christian or not. We know very little about any of it, but most of what we know is Christian, so that there's some kind of integrity between the music and the text, and it's not one musical language with another text language, but they're in the same world. I would never say that this is an authentic whatever.

⁷ See Bagby, *Boethius: Songs of Consolation*.

⁸ Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem*, 39.

MA: The much-to-be-avoided “a-word.”

BB: “The a-word,” yes; if somebody thinks, “oh, this takes me back to the good old days,” I mean, how do they know that? That’s the comment you get sometimes, “Oh, I could see them, I can imagine,” and I say, “Well that is all taking place in your head; I can’t create that for you.” I’m trying really to keep the musical language as close to the textual language as I can, so that they really can live together in harmony, and that allows me then to introduce the aspect of feeling. I find these poems are full of deep feelings. Another kind of inheritance from the nineteenth century that we have is that medieval music is very distanced, it’s very noble, it doesn’t in any way show emotion, or that it’s all happening on the level of number. There is even a school of musicology which says that medieval music is an oral manifestation of the medieval idea of number, and nothing more. And so when we then try to make it mean something emotional, we’re doing it a disservice by making it modern.

MA: I first saw you perform *Beowulf* in the mid-90s and I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve seen you perform it since, but from the first what struck me is that your sense of the affective dynamics central to all of these works is finely honed, and as Alain Renoir stressed in his *Key to Old Poems*, the affective dynamics of earlier literature should not be overlooked, because that’s what makes it come alive, and it’s what allows these texts to still speak to us. When you add the music to it, the affective dynamics become an even more powerful element in the reception of these texts. Despite the enormous gulf that separates Anglo-Saxon England from the contemporary world, Old English poetry still manages to touch us, especially those haunting voices we find in the elegies. Even on the page, those voices have the power to reach out and stir us, and when you perform those voices, you really bring them to life in a way that engages your audience and remains faithful to the poem because you’re such a responsible interpreter.

BB: I try to be. The other part, the emotional part, I can’t help it; that’s the way it is. If somebody were to hand me a text, and say, “here’s a room full of people, and this text is from their culture, and it relates to their lives, can you read it to them?” I’m not going to read it like the phonebook, and I’m not going to read it like a scientific paper or just recite it. I’m going to enter into the voice of whoever wrote it.

MA: Even when they exist only on the mute surface of the manuscript page, or on the equally mute surface of the book’s pages, texts are full of voices. They’re always speaking to us, and you’re giving voice to them in an effective way. One of the intriguing aspects of hearing you working through some of the pieces we recorded today was hearing all the changes you made in different takes.

BB: Especially the *Wanderer*, and *Deor* also, like the *Deor* refrain; that’s a fixed thing, but for the verses, I had a plan that some of them were in a lower register, and some of them were in a higher register. And that’s one of the only choices I have.

MA: As we talked about briefly tonight during the recording sessions, your performances are not set, but are always different. Because you don't work from a set score, and you don't work from a set plan in your mind that you're going to inflect this line this way, it all just sort of happens in performance, and you know yourself when you're on a roll, or when you're not on a roll or when you get sort of lost for a minute.

BB: Yes, you can lose concentration.

MA: But one thing that doesn't vary is the text, which is always fixed for us, because it has to be fixed. But imagine how much more flexibility the whole performative moment, what Foley has called the "performance arena,"⁹ had in a culture where the poet had no fixed text, no fixed score, no fixed performance, and perhaps no fixed performance style either.

BB: He would have had the performance style he inherited from his teachers, and if he grew up in an oral tradition, he would have probably been rather conservative, and he would have said, you know "this is the way it has to be." When asked "why," he'd say, "well, that's because it's always been that way."

MA: I see your point, but I'm not so sure that they thought in the terms you suggest. For the oral poet, it's always the present moment that is most important. For example, *Beowulf* is widely considered to be a very traditional text, and it certainly is, in all sorts of ways, yet all you have to do is poke at it, in any number of places, and you'll discover that the poet is doing something that no other Anglo-Saxon poet has done, so in addition to being perhaps the most traditional Old English poem, it is arguably—and paradoxically—perhaps the most non-traditional. But, to return to your point about "that's the way it has to be," that's the way that we would say it now, but I'm not sure that they would articulate it in similar terms.

BB: I'm talking here about music. The scop maybe didn't have a performative style, if he was trained to perform these things with his voice, and if he used the harp, then he had some training, he had something that made him different from everybody else. Generally, in traditional music societies, performers are very conservative. They maybe introduce a few new things along the way, but they're very much adhering to what they learned.

MA: But do they adhere to that because they fear breaking out of it? Or do they adhere to it because that's what they know, and what their audience expects?

BB: Yes, that's what they know; I don't think they realize that they're even in a tradition.

⁹ Foley, *Singer of Tales in Performance*, 8; emphasis deleted.

MA: Because the moment you're conscious of being in a tradition, you're no longer in that tradition, you've stepped outside of it, and you're now [...]

BB: Observing yourself.

MA: You're now engaging in what Brian Stock calls "traditionalistic action."¹⁰ Traditions just *are*: they live, they breathe, they're not self-reflective, they're not worried about self-preservation; they're just doing what they do because that is what is done.

BB: I agree. My only thought is about the music. I know when I'm thinking about how, if you have an instrument with six strings, once you have decided on a tuning for those six strings, even before you've played one note, a huge amount of performance material has been decided. And then it's just a question of filling in the blanks, actually, but it's mostly going to be questions of rhythm, and pattern, and density, speed, and the favouring of certain strings that go with other strings. When I say intervals, that's what I mean; I don't say chords because we don't have chords in that time. I think that whatever a young man or boy learned from an uncle or a father or brother, or whomever, about that instrument, if he had that function in society, to tell these stories, to play this instrument, I think that he probably learned the musical thing by rote from an older, more experienced player, and just was required to master any number of ways of playing—maybe also different ways of tuning—and he didn't think of it as something he was creating: it's just, that's what we play. Which is what you were saying. But I'm really only competent to speak about the music.

MA: And I'm really only competent to talk about the text, so we make a good pair. Well, Ben, I think we'll close on that note and go raise a glass to John's memory.

¹⁰ Stock, *Listening for the Text*, 164.