

“Ah ain’t heard whut de tex’ wuz”: The (Il)legitimate Textuality of Old English and Black English

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“Oral literature” is an uncomfortable pair of words; Walter Ong goes so far as to suggest that the phrase is “self-contradictory” (1982:13). Orality has gained legitimacy as an object of critical inquiry, but as long as critics are located in universities, they must, like archeologists, rely (however suspiciously) on transcriptions and try to piece out the gap between the fossil (the textual record) and the vanished life form (real oral performance) that it claims to record.

In this essay I examine two texts from radically different cultural situations: Anglo-Saxon monasteries and the rural Black South. Nevertheless, their respective provenance—in terms of speaker, reporter and legitimizing institution—bear intriguing similarities. Each text is concerned with the biography of the oral poet and issues of transcribing his orality. These parallels, put together, constitute a paradigm for the presentation of an oral poet in a literary frame.¹ The two framing, legitimating textual authors in question (as distinguished from the oral authors they present and circumscribe) are the Venerable Bede and Zora Neale Hurston. The embedded authors, Cædmon and John Pearson, are both Christian preachers who speak in a language still heavily structured by an oral, pagan culture. Because Bede and Hurston are both incorporating orality, they share similar

¹ There have been many attempts to draw parallels between Bede’s account of Cædmon and other accounts of poetic inspiration, both as potential sources for Bede’s narrative (if it is presumed to be fictional) and as subsequent analogues of that narrative (for critics who are interested in the inscription of oral inspiration in various cultures). Andy Orchard lists some of the copious research on analogues of Bede’s narrative (1996:417, n. 4); see also Lord 1993 for some comparisons with more recent narratives. My approach is unique only in that it compares two very similar conjunctions of literate narrative and divinely inspired Christian oral poetry, thus drawing attention to the two very different cultural environments and two very different agendas on the part of the literary transcribers who relate and preserve the embedded oral poems.