Linking the Humanities Across Space and Time

By Chuck Guilford

Maybe--well, almost certainly--I've been spending too much time lately on the Web. I'm starting to see links everywhere. Just a click can take me from "Beowulf in Hypertext," a site at Canada's McMaster University that provides a resource on *Beowulf*, the Anglo Saxon epic, to beowulf.org, a project of Scyld Software, which seeks "to determine the applicability of massively parallel computers to the problems faced by the Earth and space sciences community." Because of the Web—even when I'm offline—my thinking my thinking has grown more associational, digressive, serendipitous, less linear. Like Kurt Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, I often feel I can leap from time to time and place to place, if not physically then certainly in my imagination, in my teaching and my writing.

I turn away from the computer monitor for a quick glance over my notes. It's 7:20 a.m., and I'm in my office sipping coffee before class, Survey of British Literature I, where in about twenty minutes, we'll be starting *Beowulf*, that ancient tale of heroic valor, of tribal vengeance, dragon slaying, clashings of good and evil, feasting hall and funeral pyre. Originally composed in an oral tradition and sung by a bard at ceremonial occasions, this tribal epic was transcribed in the eighth century and then passed down in print over a millennium, over an ocean, over a cultural chasm, to us upstairs in room 203, LA BLDG, to fill a few hours for students needing three core credits as part of the humanities requirement, on the way to a bachelor's degree, a ticket to success in the real world.

Beowulf comes early in the semester, after "Caedmon's Hymn" and "The Wanderer," two short and fairly accessible pieces that help us get a feel for Anglo Saxon

culture and poetry. *Beowulf* is longer, more complex and more demanding. Fortunately, we have a stunning new verse translation (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000) by Seamus Heaney, the Nobel-Prizewinning contemporary poet from Northern Ireland. Heaney brilliantly captures the alliterative, stress-based rhythms of the original poem in phrasing that is fresh and accessible to twenty-first century ears.

In the Introduction to his translation, Heaney notes that " . . . for reasons of historical suggestiveness, I have in several instances used the word "bawn" to refer to Hrothgar's hall. In Elizabethan English, bawn (from the Irish *bó-dhún*, a fort for cattle) referred specifically to the fortified dwellings which the English planters built in Ireland to keep the dispossessed natives at bay, so it seemed the proper term to apply to the embattled keep where Hrothgar waits and watches."

So after nightfall, Grendel set out
for the lofty house, to see how the Ring-Danes
were settling into it after their drink,
and there he came upon them, a company of the best
asleep from their feasting, insensible to pain
and human sorrow. Suddenly then
the god-cursed brute was creating havoc:
greedy and grim, he grabbed thirty men
from their resting places and rushed to his lair,
flushed up and inflamed from the raid,
blundering back with the butchered corpses."

Even so far from its original context in time, place, and language, the poem is a pleasure to read aloud, and students seem to enjoy hearing it, so I alternate the reading of selected passages with twenty-minute mini-lectures and class discussions. We consider the poem's language, its structure and design, its dominant themes and images, its historical context and possible contemporary analogues. As Heaney says, "Putting a Bawn into Beowulf seems one way for an Irish poet to come to terms with that complex history of conquest and colony, absorption and resistance, integrity and antagonism . . .." Seen from such a perspective, Heorot, the lofty house of the Ring Danes, comes to look more and more like a colonial fortress and Grendel and his mother like dispossessed natives. Taking our cue from Heaney, we might wonder whether this poem can help us understand the "troubles" of Northern Ireland, the conflicts between European settlers and Native Americans, or the attacks of 9/11 on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Beowulf, in Heaney's translation, almost teaches itself, even at 7:40 a.m. I'd like to stick with it, but this is a survey class. We've got a lot of literature to cover this term, far too much really, and after a week and a half it's time to move on to other works, like *The Book of Margery Kempe*, a lively and moving spiritual narrative by a fourteenth century mother of fourteen, an independent-minded woman who went into business and became one of the most successful brewers in Norfolk. Overcome by deep spiritual longings, however, she takes a vow of chastity and wins her husband's consent to embark on a religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Before departing, she seeks counsel from the anchoress, Dame Julian of Norwich, who tells her, "Set all your trust in God and fear not

the language of the world, for the more despite, shame, and reproof that ye have in the world, the more is your merit in the sight of God."

On her pilgrimage she develops a deep sense of compassion for the sufferings not just of humans but of animals: "And ... if she saw a man had a wound or a beast, ... or if a man beat a child before her or smote a horse or another beast with a whip, ... her thought she saw our Lord be beaten or wounded ...." Upon returning home, she begins preaching her unorthodox faith and is eventually called to account before the powerful Archbishop of York, who calls her a Lollard and a heretic; but in the end her persistence and sincerity win his blessing. Margery Kempe wasn't an author we studied when I was a student, but I'm grateful for the research of Sanford B. Meech and Hope Emily Allen, who discovered and edited the tale of this most extraordinary woman. Although different from *Beowulf* in many ways, Kempe's story also derives from an oral tradition and was told to a scribe who was able to capture on paper much of the spontaneity and idiomatic freshness of her everyday speech.

Before coming to Boise State University in 1981, I taught as an adjunct instructor at Kansas State University. Adjuncts are by definition "non essential," a fact of which they are regularly reminded by their pay, their job security, and their general working conditions. Much of my teaching during those years was done in night classes at Fort Riley, home of the 1st Infantry, the Big Red One. Because hardly anyone else, including most of the adjuncts, wanted to go there, I was given all sorts of courses that I would never have had a shot at on campus--Humanities: Classical; Humanities: Baroque & Enlightenment; and Humanities: Modern.

We studied the love poems of Sappho, the epics of Homer. Read *Agamemnon* and *Oedipus Rex*. Learned about "entablature" and "frieze." "Ionic." "Corinthian." "Doric." Typically, the humanities class would be taught back to back with another class in two-hour sessions that met twice a week, say Monday and Wednesday from 6:00 to 8:00 and from 8:00 to 10:00. On Tuesday and Thursday this pattern was repeated.

My second preparation was English Composition, an area I had never formally studied. Like most instructors I pieced these composition courses together from the English Department's teaching guide, occasional staff meetings, and memories of my own freshman comp experience. I recall a colleague suggesting that I think for a while about the truly outstanding teachers I'd had—the ways they'd inspired, challenged, and supported me. That was good advice. As my mind replayed favorite classes I'd taken—German, with Herr Rothfuss; Advanced Writing, with Ken Macrorie; Chaucer, with James Sledd—I recalled diverse techniques and teaching styles, and the one common thread that ran through them all: the teachers' deep love for their subjects and their eagerness to inspire that love in their students.

My Fort Riley students were always able to bring me back from such lofty soaring. For the most part, they were enlisted personnel and dependants, sometimes retired military. By day they trained or worked, often in clerical or equipment maintenance positions, and by class time they were tired but ready for a change. Students from a 6 p.m. humanities class would often reappear in an 8 p.m. composition class, so I could blur the borders a bit and link some of the content. For instance, if we'd been discussing Plato and Aristotle in humanities and studying argument in composition, I could bring some classical rhetoric into the writing class. Once while leading into a unit

on argument, I was trying to explain the meaning of the word "rhetoric" and somehow came up with the hypothetical example of two people arguing over possession of a cow in a time before courts or lawyers. This led to a discussion that went, as best I can reconstruct it, as follows:

"You know," said Maynard, "what you just said about those cows makes me think of France back in World War II when I was there and they did it there. If you were in a jeep, say, and you hit a chicken, I mean run over it, and they all came out of their houses and take you to court, you have to pay not just for the chicken, but they figure way back to how old he is and how many years he's got left and how many eggs he might lay and then they give you the bill. Why that one damn chicken could cost you a whole month's pay."

"Yep that's how it is," Maria agreed. "Even in Hungary we have it the same and in Germany, too."

"When I was in Germany," Danny put in, "I saw this guy drive a half-track out in a field and rip it all up and they charged him a thousand dollars, and hell, the farmer was right over there plowin' it up anyhow, and they charged him a thousand dollars. Course it did get pretty bad sometimes. I mean I remember they had these big white posts alongside the road, and we'd just drive along and mow 'em down for the hell of it."

"Good times," I said, trying to shake the class loose from the spell that had fallen over us all. "Well," I continued, searching for a link back to something I might have said about a cow, "That's what those Sophists were like, or so Socrates says. They didn't care about what was right or wrong or true or false, just as long as they got what they wanted. They didn't care about the truth, just about winning the case."

“Sounds like my husband,” Maria said, “All he does is argue. At home. At a meeting. At work.”

“A born rhetorician,” I put in.

“That’s for sure. He really is. He comes home and walks in from work and says, ‘Hey, what’s with all the rhetoric around here?’”

“Okay then, let’s look at Martin Luther King’s rhetoric in ‘Letter From Birmingham Jail,’ page 628.”

“Who says a person can’t be a radical and still be patriotic?” Danny interjected suddenly. “What about Socrates? What about King?”

“Was King a radical? Was Socrates? Were they patriotic? Let’s consider this. Let’s look at King’s letter.”

But that discussion happened a long time ago, in another state. For the past twenty three years, I’ve lived and taught in Idaho, and for the past five years, I’ve served on the IHC’s Board of Directors, an honor and responsibility that has also been a lot of fun. IHC’s stated mission of “connecting people with ideas,” involves a variety of efforts to carry humanistic learning beyond the classroom. Besides sponsoring an annual Distinguished Humanities Lecture and Dinner that brings internationally known speakers to Idaho, we have our own IHC Speakers Bureau, which sends Idaho humanities scholars to lecture throughout the state; and we offer grants to public school teachers, to museums and libraries, and to other individuals and institutions with ideas for innovative public programming in the humanities.

On February 22, 2003, the IHC held a ceremony to honor Horace Axtell, a Nez Perce elder, for Outstanding Achievement in the Humanities. His extended family was

there—wife, children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews—along with many others who have been influenced by his efforts to preserve his tribe's language and culture and build bridges of understanding to the dominant culture.

Axtell's book, *A Little Bit of Wisdom*(Confluence Press, 1997), is part memoir, part tribal history, and part spiritual reflection. Like *Beowulf* and *The Book of Margery Kempe*, it comes out of an oral tradition. Axtell was assisted by Lewiston writer, Margo Aragon, who taped and transcribed his reminiscences and observations then shaped them into a book, while maintaining his distinctive voice and style. As he tells stories of his Christian upbringing, his military service during WWII, his brief time in prison afterward, and his battles with alcohol, one dilemma he constantly faced was his struggle to live simultaneously in two different cultures, while not feeling truly a part of either. All of this, and especially his time in the service, leads him to consider how the word "united" might apply to his people: "I don't think it means that we should forget our own ways or our own language. We're of a different race, a different color, a different breed, and we can't ever get away from that." Finally, he comes to accept and embrace his cultural heritage, including the Seven Drum Religion, or *walahsat*, which, as a younger man, he had been taught to reject as heathen. As he puts it, "The life we have is the life we want to hold on to—our Indian ways. These ways were left here from our old people. Our ancestors done it that way, one heart to the other. It's still here. You can trace it back."

At the award ceremony in Lewiston there was drumming and chanting. Many people stood and spoke about Horace Axtell, telling stories, offering anecdotes and memories. For some speakers, this was clearly very difficult because of a certain shyness

or reticence. A few made their way to the microphone in wheelchairs. One with a walker joked that her Indian name means “Traveling Woman.” Tears were held in check as long as possible, then released and transformed into laughter. Hugs were exchanged. The Nez Perce and English languages commingled and harmonized.

Then, as the tributes ended and the drumming began again, an honor guard of Nez Perce military veterans took up the colors and marched slowly and solemnly, Indian style, almost a shuffle really, from the front of the room to stand by the drumming circle, at least three, maybe four generations standing there, until with a solid thump at the end of the rising, winding voices, the ceremony ended.

Margo Aragon summed up my feeling at that moment pretty well when she wrote, “To be around Horace is to step into a place where time and space are meaningless words. The past becomes the present and the future unrolls before your eyes.”

It’s a feeling I get a lot these days, an intriguing riddle that’s hard to put into words. T. S. Eliot comes close to articulating the sensation at the start of his poem “Burnt Norton” when he writes,

> Time present and time past
> are both perhaps contained in time future,
> and time future contained in time past.

So at least I’m not alone in this nonlinear, associational sense of time. Events, words, and images from the present are woven with visions of the past and the future into a single fabric. And apparently the Internet isn’t entirely to blame. It could be due partly to the humanities.