

## Gerd Wolfgang Weber (1942–1998)

Professor Gerd Wolfgang Weber, Frankfurt, died of cancer at the age of fifty-six on May 24, 1998. His premature death is a major loss for Old Norse philological and literary studies, which he rejuvenated with his ideas, his wit, and his unusual command of modern literary theory.

To see Gerd Weber at an international conference was an amazing and heartwarming experience. The small, neatly dressed man with the round, jolly face seemed to be everywhere at once, incessantly talking, joking, pulling strings, preparing new projects in several different languages. He moved with apparent ease in all scholarly camps and expressed himself with fluency and elegance not only in German but also in English, French, and several Scandinavian languages.



Scholars who converse with such graceful facility are often suspected of superficiality, at least in countries influenced by Lutheranism such as Germany and Sweden, but Gerd Weber was by no means superficial. He was, on the contrary, almost too cautious and meticulous in his scholarly work, and it usually took him a long time to produce even a very short review. Each written sentence was formed with great care, each statement scrutinized and double-checked for possible error. There was thus a discrepancy between his oral and his written performance. While the former was normally light and chatty, the latter was concise but somewhat labored in its syntax and often fraught with theoretical implications.

While still a young student at the University of Frankfurt, Gerd Weber spent a year in Spain (Salamanca) and then another in Britain (Oxford). At Oxford he studied together with John McKinnell, Michael Chesnutt, and Margaret Clunies Ross under the guidance of the eminent Old Norse scholar Gabriel Turville-Petre. Much of Weber's theoretical inspiration came from that year at Oxford and from his later contacts with American universities.

His doctoral dissertation, *Wyrð: Studien zum Schicksalsbegriff der altenglischen und altnordischen Literatur* (Bad Homburg 1969), supervised by Klaus von See, also reveals to some extent the influence of Turville-Petre, but it is at the same time an independent, learned, and far-reaching study in Germanic philology, dealing with the idea of fate in early West Germanic and Old Norse texts. Weber demonstrates that the concept of *wyrð* is not genuinely or exclusively Germanic, but rather is influenced by classical Roman and Christian thinking, transmitted to Anglo-Saxon writers through Latin texts such as *De consolatione philosophiae* by Boethius. The dissertation shows that Weber, even at the earliest stage of his career, was able to deal with a variety of Germanic and Latin sources and draw critical conclusions from many kinds of philological and literary evidence.

After completing his doctorate, Gerd Weber spent three years as German lecturer at the University of Uppsala before returning to Frankfurt in 1972 to assume a newly created position as professor. In addition to his duties in Frankfurt, he also taught at the University of Marburg in the winter terms from 1985 to 1995.

With the exception of a survey of Old English literature ("Altenglische Literatur: Volkssprachliche Renaissance einer frühmittelalterlichen christlichen Latinität," in Klaus von See et al., *Europäisches Frühmittelalter*, vol. 6 of *Neues Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft* [Wiesbaden 1985], 277–316), Weber's later publications on medieval literature were more specifically concerned with Old Norse texts. Some of the earliest deal with skaldic poetry, for example "Die Lausavísa des Þórvaldr inn veili," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* 97 (1968): 158–60, and "Die Christus-Strophe des Eilífr Goðrúnarson," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Alter-*

tum 99 (1970): 87–90, or with early Scandinavian mythology, for example “Das Odinsbild des Altuna-Steins,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 94 (1972): 323–34, and “Odins Wagen: Reflexe altnordischen Totenglaubens in literarischen und bildlichen Zeugnissen der Wikingerzeit,” *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 7 (1973): 88–99. Later works include historical surveys such as “Die Literatur des Nordens,” in Willi Erzgräber et al., *Europäisches Spätmittelalter*, vol. 8 of *Neues Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft* (Wiesbaden 1978), 487–518, and various encyclopedia articles written for *Kindlers Literatur Lexikon* (25 articles in vols. 2–6 [München 1966–71], also included in *Kindlers Neues Literatur Lexikon* [München 1988–92]), and for *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, 2d ed. (“Edda, Jüngere” in 6:394–412 [Berlin 1986] and “Euhemerismus” in 8:1–16 [Berlin 1994]).

His most important works on Old Norse literature, however, deal with the historiographical conception and narrative poetics of the sagas. Pioneering in their reinterpretation of the sagas, which he reads in the light of Christian medieval literature, are “Irreligiosität und Heldenzeitalter: Zum Mythencharacter der altisländischen Literatur,” in *Speculum Norroenum: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. Ursula Dronke et al. (Odense 1981), 474–505; “*Siðaskipti*: Das Religionsgeschichtliche Modell Snorri Sturlusons in *Edda* und *Heimskringla*,” in *Sagnaskemmtun: Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson, on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday, 26th May 1986*, ed. Rudolf Simek, Jónas Kristjánsson, and Hans Bekker-Nielsen (Wien 1986), 309–29; “The Decadence of Feudal Myth — towards a Theory of *riddara-saga* and Romance,” in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*, ed. John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth, and Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Odense 1986), 415–54; “Intellegere historiam: Typological Perspectives of Nordic Prehistory (in Snorri, Saxo, Widukind, and Others),” in *Tradition og historieskrivning*, ed. Kirsten Hastrup and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (Århus 1987), 95–141; and “Snorri Sturlusons Verhältnis zu seinen Quellen und sein Mythos-Begriff,” in *Snorri Sturluson: Kolloquium anlässlich der 750. Wiederkehr seines Todestages*, ed. Alois Wolf (Tübingen 1993), 193–244. These articles lay the foundation for a new understanding of Norse historiography, and although some critics have found them too speculative and “theoretical” in their approach, I have no doubt that they will continue to inspire many scholars in the field. Many of his contributions to the study of modern Scandinavian literature deal with national romanticism in nineteenth-century Denmark and Sweden, an area where he was able to use his eminent knowledge of Old Norse literature to shed new light on the texts.

Weber proved to be an innovator and proponent of new ideas also in his capacity as (co-)editor of three series, The Viking Collection (Odense 1983–), *Studia Borealia* (Odense 1993–), and *Hesperides* (Trieste 1995–), and of the volumes *Speculum Norroenum* (Odense 1981), *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature* (Odense 1986), and *Idee · Gestalt · Geschichte: Festschrift Klaus von See* (Odense 1988). Like many other Old Norse scholars, I had the pleasure of collaborating with him in some of these enterprises and was always impressed by his professionalism, generosity, and exceptional ability to absorb and utilize new theoretical concepts in an independent way. Towards the end of his life, Weber announced the publication in the *Hesperides* series of a book of his entitled *Mythos und Geschichte: Sechs Essays zur Geschichtsmythologie Skandinaviens in Mittelalter und Neuzeit*. It is to be hoped that the volume will soon appear, since it contains some of his best work on Old Norse as well as modern Scandinavian literature, including one previously unpublished study.

Gerd Weber was often invited to foreign universities as visiting professor or guest lecturer and was well liked by students and colleagues in many different countries and cultures. He will be fondly remembered, and his works will be read with profit and admiration.

Lars Lönnroth