

## VII

### Religious Poetry: Cynewulf and His School

Nearly all Old English poetry is anonymous. One poet, however, had a habit of signing his verses, and from these signatures we know his name: Cynewulf.<sup>1</sup> His motive was not vainglory but (as he himself explains) hope that those who liked his poems would name him in their prayers. The signatures took the form of runes, woven in the verses towards the end but not at the very end of a given poem. From them we learn that the poet spelt his name indifferently *Cynewulf* and *Cynwulf*. Since he did not use the spelling *Cyniwulf* we infer that he lived after weak medial *i* had become *e*. The date of this sound-shift varies with the dialect. Other linguistic evidence, however, marks Cynewulf an Angle, and only the Northumbrian and Mercian dialects need be considered. Northumbrian weak *i* was kept until the middle of the ninth century, while Mercian variants with *e* appear early in that century, and this *e* may go back to the last years of the eighth. The earliest possible time for Cynewulf, then, is the last quarter of the eighth century, and the ninth makes a safer date. Of the man we know nothing except what we glean from his work. We have four poems of his: a list, a sermon, and two legends (i.e., saints' lives). We take them in the order given.

The Fates  
of the  
Apostles

*The Fates of the Apostles* is a poem of 122 lines, recorded in the Vercelli Book<sup>2</sup> (late tenth century). It falls into two parts: the list proper, in which are named the places or countries where the twelve apostles taught and died (1-87); and the poet's signature with accompanying verses (88-122). Unlike the *Menologium*, our poem does not include the feast-days of the twelve, but we need not infer with Krapp (p. xxxii) that "the motive which inspired its composition was, therefore, purely literary and devotional." A certain learned, antiquarian spirit also enters in, and such a list, though without dates, obviously had practical (didactic) worth besides. No single source answers precisely to lines 1-87, and such a source will hardly be found: Cynewulf starts by telling us he "gleaned far and wide" how the apostles "made their virtue known," and one naturally infers that the poet made a compilation drawn from various sources. Name-forms like *Petrus*

<sup>1</sup> See S. K. Das, *Cynewulf and the Cynewulf Canon* (Calcutta, 1942); K. Jansen, *Die Cynewulf-Forschung* (Bonn, 1908); K. Sisam, "Cynewulf and his Poetry," *Proc. Brit. Acad.*, xviii (1932), 303-331. The texts are edited by A. S. Cook, *The Christ of Cynewulf* (Boston, 1900), and *The OE Elene . . .* (New Haven, 1919); W. Strunk, *The Juliana of Cynewulf* (Boston, 1904); G. P. Krapp, *Andreas and the Fates of the Apostles* (Boston, 1906). On the so-called *Christ* see especially Brother Aug. Philip, *PMLA*, lv (1940), 903-909.

<sup>2</sup> Facsimile edition by Max Förster (Rome, 1913); printed verse texts in Krapp-Dobbie, II.

and *Paulus* point to Latin sources, and like lists in Latin have been pointed out by Krapp and by Sisam. The poem has a so-called epic opening consonant with the worth of the theme. The following passage is representative:

Certain ones in Rome,  
bold ones and brave, gave up their lives  
through Nero's cruel cunning,  
Peter and Paul; that apostleship  
is widely honored among the nations. (lines 11-15)

The personal part of the poem (88-122) makes more than a fourth of the whole. The disproportion springs from the author's eagerness to win the prayers of others, an eagerness which drives him to repeat, after the runic passage, the request for prayers which he had already made before that passage. Art here yields to soul's need! Otherwise the poem is marked by good craftsmanship. The riming half-line *nearwe searwe* (13b) is worthy of note.

*The Ascension* (otherwise known as *Christ B*) is a poem of 427 lines. Ascension recorded in the Exeter Book. The poem is divided into five fits. These we analyze as follows:

I. Exhortation to an "illustrious man" (the poet's patron?) to make every effort to understand why the angels at the nativity did not appear in white robes (1-10a); the contrast here between nativity and ascension (10b-19a); the throng [before the ascension] in Bethany (19b-34); Christ's farewell to his followers (35-51); the ascension and the song of the angels (52-66); the two angels appear to the disciples and explain the event (67-77).

II. The parting words of the angels to the disciples (78-87); Christ assumes his seat in heaven amid rejoicing on high (88-93); the disciples return to Jerusalem and await Pentecost as Christ had bidden before he ascended (94-107); white-robed angels (i.e. splendor) befit Christ's return to his throne above (108-118); song of angels, celebrating Christ's harrowing of hell and return to heaven with the redeemed souls (119-146); lyric passage (with rime) on the plan of salvation and man's need to choose between good and evil (147-160).

III. Man should thank God for his gifts, the greatest of which is the hope of salvation, held out at the ascension (161-187); Christ's earthly life, from nativity to ascension, made our salvation possible (188-193); of this Job sang, using the figure of a bird [Job 28:7], but the Jews could not understand (194-219); Christ divides gifts among men; no one gets all spiritual wisdom, for fear of pride harming him (220-246).

IV. God by gifts honors his creatures, whose worth reflects God himself, our sun (247-258); the Church is likened to the moon; after the ascension she shone forth over the earth (259-264a); through the gift of the Holy Ghost [at Pentecost] the Church was enabled to withstand the persecutions which began after the ascension (264b-272); the six leaps of Christ (conception, nativity, crucifixion, burial, descent into hell, ascent into heaven), referred to by Solomon [Song 2:8] (273-304); so ought we to leap from strength to strength until we reach heaven through holy works; to that end we must choose the good and reject the

evil; God will help us against devils; we must keep watch all our lives and pray to God, our benefactor, to whom be praise and glory for ever (305-339).

V. If God helps us, we need not fear devils (340-343a); Doomsday is near, when we shall be judged by our deeds (343b-346a); Christ's first coming was in humility [the angels did not appear in white robes]; his second coming will be in judicial sternness, and many will be punished (346b-357); runic passage (the poet's signature) on Doomsday (358-368a); the destruction of the world by fire (368b-375); be mindful of the soul's need now, before it is too late (376-384); the terrors of Doomsday (385-410); life is like a voyage, and heaven is like a port made ready for us by Christ when he ascended (411-427).

In this poem Cynewulf versified the conclusion of Gregory the Great's sermon on the ascension (the 29th of his gospel homilies).<sup>3</sup> Lines 220-246 owe much to another source, presumably an English poem not unlike the extant *Gifts of Men* (see below, p. 83). The Bible and other works seem to have been used more or less besides. The poet treated his matter with freedom and artistic skill, though of course his thought is derivative and traditional enough. This versified sermon must be reckoned successful. In structure it is governed by its chief source.

Juliana

*Juliana* is a poem of the Exeter Book. It comes to 731 lines as we have it, but through loss of MS leaves two passages are wanting: one before folio 70 (between lines 288 and 289), the other before folio 74 (between lines 558 and 559). The poem is made up of seven fits. These may be outlined as follows:

- I. Under the Roman emperor Maximian (A.D. 305-311), persecutor of the Christians, there lived in Nicomedia a pagan official named Heliseus [Eleusius], who fell in love with the young and beautiful Christian virgin Juliana; she wished to keep her virginity, but her pagan father Africanus betrothed her to Heliseus; she refused to marry him unless he turned Christian; he protested to her father, who expostulated with her (1-104).
- II. Juliana replied, holding her ground; Africanus argued further with her but could not move her; he turned her over to Heliseus for judgment; her betrothed, after pleading with her in vain, had her stripped and scourged; he then urged apostasy upon her with threats; she defied him and his false gods (105-224).
- III. Heliseus had Juliana hanged on a tree by the hair and beaten for six hours; he then threw her into prison; a devil visited her there in angel form, to persuade her to yield; at her prayer a voice from heaven revealed the tempter's identity and gave orders that she seize the fiend and not let him go until he had confessed all; she obeyed and thereby forced the wretch to reveal the secrets of devilry (225-344).
- IV. The fiend continues his confessions (345-453).
- V. He concludes; at his entreaty Juliana lets him go back to hell (454-558).
- VI. An angel saved Juliana from the fire into which her persecutor had thrown

<sup>3</sup> For the Latin text see Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, LXXVI. 1218.

her; she was then put into a vat of boiling lead but took no hurt; 75 pagans were killed by the lead as it splashed; the judge then ordered that her head be cut off (559-606).

VII. Juliana's martyrdom; her persecutor's death by drowning; Juliana's burial and the honors paid to her then and now; personal ending, with runic signature and plea for prayers in the poet's usual style (607-731).

It is worthy of note that beheading (i.e., a normal form of execution) killed the saint, whereas the various (unhistorical) tortures left her unharmed. The poet had for source a Latin prose life of St. Juliana not substantially different from that printed in the Bollandist *Acta Sanctorum* under the martyr's feast-day, February 16. He followed his source in the main, but left out certain objectionable features of the lady's conduct, and used phraseology drawn from English heroic tradition. His departures from his source show a critical eye; his own verses, a practised hand. *Juliana* is not prentice work, as some scholars seem inclined to think. In particular, we do not blame the poet for keeping the miraculous instruction by which his heroine holds the devil fast in her clutches, grotesque though the scene to the modern reader. The poem's weakness lies elsewhere: it is hack work, verse done to order (or so we make bold to conjecture).

The author did better with the legend of St. Helen (mother of Constantine) and the true Cross. *Elene* is a poem of the Vercelli Book. It comes to 1321 lines. The MS text is marked for division into 15 fits. We summarize these as follows:

I-II. Constantine wins a battle by the sign of the cross, revealed to him in a dream, and becomes a Christian (1-193).

III. He learns Christian lore, especially the story of Calvary, and sends his mother Elene to seek the burial-place of the cross on which Christ died. Elene makes her way to Jerusalem by sea and land (194-275).

IV-VIII. Elene and the Jews; by keeping one of them, Judas, in a pit, without food, she finally makes him agree to help find the burial-place (276-708).

IX. Judas is led to Calvary but, not knowing just where the Cross is buried, prays to God for a sign (709-802).

X. God makes the sign; Judas digs in the spot indicated and finds three crosses 20 feet down; they are brought to Elene, and the true Cross is identified by another miracle: it brings a dead man back to life (803-894).

XI. War of words between Satan and Judas (895-967).

XII. Constantine rejoices when messengers from Elene bring the news; he orders a church built on the spot where the Cross was found; Elene sees to this; Judas is baptized (968-1043).

XIII. Judas is made bishop of Jerusalem; his name is changed to Cyriacus; Elene longs for the nails by which Christ was fastened to the Cross; Judas prays to God

for a sign, God answers the prayer, and the nails are found; the people rejoice and Elene thanks God (1044-1147).

XIV. Elene seeks advice about the nails; a wise man suggests that they be made into a bit for Constantine's horse. Elene gives treasure to Cyriacus before leaving for Rome; she urges regular observance of the day (May 3) when the Holy Rood was found; the poet calls down blessings upon those mindful of this festival (1148-1236).

XV. In a rimed passage the poet tells of his art; in a runic passage he signs his name; he ends with a passage on Doomsday (1237-1321).

This legend differs from the usual saint's life in that the interest attaches to a deed not linked with the saint's death. The Latin text which lay before Cynewulf as he wrote has not come down to us. If Carleton Brown is right,<sup>4</sup> it was of Irish origin; certainly it differed in some details from any extant version of the legend. The name-form *Cyriacus* (instead of *Quiriacus*) indicates that Cynewulf's immediate source stood close to the Greek original: no unexpected feature of an early Irish Latin text. In regular Old English fashion, Cynewulf took much from native heroic set pieces: e.g., the admirable but conventional descriptions of voyage and battle, heroic names and all.<sup>5</sup> His own contribution looms larger in the less poetical parts; he told his tale clearly and simply, as Old English poets go. Here he doubtless owed something to his Latin source (the suggestion is Sisam's), though he was far from modeling his style on that of Latin prose. The *inventio sanctae crucis* ends with line 1236, and the riming and runic passages of the last fit are commonly taken to be autobiographical, along with the runic signatures in the other poems. Sisam is probably right in taking 1259 f. to mean that the poet had a patron, and it seems plausible to infer from 1237 f. that Cynewulf was old when he composed *Elene*, though this age, coupled with divine inspiration (1251), reminds one of Cædmon and may have been put in by way of imitation of Bede's familiar story. Otherwise, we learn that the poet felt himself a sinner, in need of prayers, when his thoughts turned to doomsday: information accurate enough, no doubt, but too vague to help us much. The various runic passages make formidable problems which we cannot deal with here.<sup>6</sup>

The work of Cynewulf marks a new stage in the history of English religious poetry. This had begun with paraphrases of biblical story. It now went on to themes more pointedly didactic. Cynewulf himself versified exemplary deeds of saints and a sermon on the ascension. We do not know whether he took the lead in departing from Cædmon's themes, or whether he was following someone else.<sup>7</sup> In any case, the school which goes by his

<sup>4</sup> *ESr*, XL (1909), 1-29. See also F. Holthausen, *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, xxxvii (1905), 1-19, with the references there given.

<sup>5</sup> The poet's Franca, Hugas, Hreðgotan, and Hunas did not actually fight in the ranks of Maxentius at the Milvian bridge, where Constantine by tradition had his vision of the cross.

<sup>6</sup> See Sisam's discussion and R. W. V. Elliott, *English Studies*, xxxiv (1953), 49-57.

<sup>7</sup> The author of *The Dream of the Rood* probably lived before Cynewulf, but this poem is a thing apart.

name greatly widened the scope of vernacular verse. We have looked at Cynewulf's own poems. We now take up the poems of others on kindred themes.

The English hermit St. Guthlac early became the subject of a Latin life by Felix, a monk of Croyland.<sup>8</sup> This life served as source for an English prose life of the saint. Two English verse lives have likewise come down to us; they are known as *Guthlac A* and *B*,<sup>9</sup> and are recorded together in the Exeter Book. One passage in *A* (between lines 368 and 369) and the last few lines of *B* have been lost by mutilation of the MS. *A* comes to 818 lines, divided into eight fits; *B*, to 561 lines, divided into seven fits. In each poem the first fit makes a kind of prologue. In *B* this prologue is devoted to the story of Adam and Eve; Guthlac is introduced toward the end of the fit. In *A* the prologue begins with the bliss of heaven, and goes on to the problem of how to attain this bliss: some of the ways of leading one's life on earth are considered, and finally the poem comes to the hermit's way. Guthlac is not introduced until the second fit. In both poems Guthlac is plagued by devils, but is sustained by forces of good and dies in the odor of sanctity. Grein wrongly attached the first 29 lines of *A* to the preceding poem about doomsday, which ends with a passage on the life eternal. *B* seems to be based chiefly on the Latin life. It has been attributed to Cynewulf on stylistic grounds, but since his signature is wanting we find it safer to attribute the poem to some Anglian who belonged to the same school. *A* is commonly reckoned earlier; its author owed little if anything to Felix, but relied on oral tradition, though making use of literary sources in giving literary form to this tradition.

Guthlac

Yet another legend, known to scholars as *Andreas*, has come down to us in the Vercelli Book.<sup>10</sup> Its 1722 lines of verse are divided into 15 fits. The poem tells how St. Andrew at God's bidding rescued St. Matthew from the cannibal Mermedonians, and, after suffering much at their hands through the machinations of Satan, called forth upon them a miraculous flood which made them see the error of their ways. When they had taken for theirs the true faith, Andrew left them, but God bade him turn back and stay with the converts a week longer. He then went away for good, to their great grief. The poem ends with a choral song in praise of God, put in the mouths of the erstwhile cannibals. The poet had for source a Latin version (of which two fragments survive) of the Greek apocryphal *Acts of Andrew and Matthew*. He treats his source with a freedom for which he apologizes in a well-known passage (1478-1489a): his paraphrase is selective rather than inclusive. The verses make lively reading. They may lack polish, but they have vigor to spare. Like most Old English religious poets, the author leans

Andreas

<sup>8</sup> Text printed by P. Gosser, *Anglistische Forschungen*, xxvii (1909).

<sup>9</sup> Good texts will be found in editions of the Exeter Book. For a discussion, see G. H. Gerould, *MLN*, xxxii (1917), 77-89.

<sup>10</sup> Ed. G. P. Krapp, *Andreas and the Fates of the Apostles* (Boston, 1906). A prose life of St. Andrew also existed, ed. J. W. Bright, in his *Anglo-Saxon Reader* (4ed., 1917), pp. 113-128. For the Latin source-material, see F. Blatt, *Die lateinischen Bearbeitungen der Acta Andreae et Mathiae* (Giessen, 1930).

hard on heroic tradition for the phraseology of poetic elaboration, and for purple passages in general. The epic opening,

What! we have learned of the twelve under the stars  
in days of yore, heroes rich in glory,  
thanes of the Lord. Their might did not fail  
in warfaring, when banners clashed,  
after they scattered as the Lord himself,  
high king of the heavens, had set their portion.  
Those were famous men the earth over,  
brave folk-leaders and bold in fight,  
doughty warriors, when shield and hand  
on the field of battle defended helmet, . . .

is not unlike that of *Beowulf*, though it would be wrong to presume borrowing: both poets drew from a common stock of heroic formulas. The military metaphor need not disturb us more here than in "Onward Christian Soldiers," or Eph. 6:10-17.

Phoenix

From legend we go to fable. Mediterranean (originally Eastern) lore about beasts and birds early made its way to England, where the poets, like their sources, put it to allegorical and didactic use. *Phoenix* is the most notable composition of this kind in Old English. The poem is recorded in the Exeter Book. It has 677 lines, divided into eight fits.<sup>11</sup>

The first fit pictures an earthly paradise in the east. The second describes the life of a fabulous bird, the phoenix, in this paradise, and tells of its flight to Syria, every 1000 years, to renew its youth. The process of renewal (by fire) is explained in the third fit. In the fourth we get a description of the new bird, risen from the old bird's ashes; then comes an account of the departure of the phoenix for its old home. With the fifth fit the bird returns to its paradise, and the author begins (381) an allegorical treatment of the fable: the phoenix is likened (1) to the elect of Adam's seed, and (2) to Christ. This comparison, together with pertinent digressions (such as the story of Adam and Eve), takes up the rest of the poem to lines 661b-666, which make a conventional ending in praise of God (compare *Andreas* 1718-1722) but are followed by a second ending, in macaronic verse, on the rewards of the good in the life to come.

Lines 1-380 are based on the *De Ave Phoenixe* of Lactantius (*fl. c.* 300).<sup>12</sup> The allegorical comparisons, etc., were drawn from various learned sources; in part, from the author's fancy. The verse, though rising to no heights, is competently done and makes pleasant reading. The poet was evidently a clerk and presumably an Angle; he lived in Cynewulf's day or thereabouts. Earlier scholars had more precise views, but the old datings go beyond our scanty evidence. As Sisam remarks in another connection,<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Ed. A. S. Cook, *Elene, Phoenix and Physiologus* (New Haven, 1919). For the eleventh-century *Phoenix*, see F. Kluge, *ES*, VIII (1885), 474-479, and Cook, *ed. cit.*, pp. 128-131.

<sup>12</sup> O. F. Emerson compares the Latin and English poems in *RES*, II (1926), 18-31.

<sup>13</sup> *Proc. Brit. Acad.*, XVIII (1932), 307. See also R. Imelmann, *Forschungen zur ae. Poesie* (1920), p. 239.

Elaborate linguistic and metrical tests have been applied to establish the chronological order of Old English poems. Because these tests leave out of account differences of authorship, of locality, of subject, and of textual tradition, the detailed results, whether of relative order or of absolute date, are little better than guess-work hampered by statistics.

Unnatural natural history is further represented by a poem called *Bestiary* or *Physiologus*,<sup>14</sup> recorded in the Exeter Book. The name, which does not appear in the MS, is that of the poet's source. The poem, 179 lines long, falls into three fits, but most of the third fit is wanting, through loss of a MS leaf at some stage in the transmission of the text. The three fits are devoted respectively to panther, whale, and partridge; these have been thought to stand for the creatures of land, sea, and air. In the first fit (1-74), after an introductory passage on the lower animals in general, the panther's looks and ways are described and given allegorical interpretation: the beast itself is likened to Christ; its foe the dragon, to Satan. The whale (75-163) does not get so good a character; it is credited with passing for an island to entice unwary sailors, who "land" only to drown when the creature dives. Another trick of the whale's when hungry is to send forth a sweet scent from its open mouth, thereby luring its prey into its very jaws, which it then shuts upon them. In the allegory the whale stands for the devil and his crew of tempters; the whale's mouth for hell. The poet's treatment of the partridge (164-179) cannot be made out from the text as it stands, because of the loss of so many lines. The verses end with a passage (175-179) which seems to be of general application, like the introductory passage (1-8a) already mentioned. We thus have reason to think the poem complete, except for the lacuna in the third fit. The author presumably did not try to paraphrase the whole of his source, but restricted himself to three of the creatures considered in the pseudo-scientific book from which he drew. His poem might well have been written by the author of *Phoenix*. Whether it was or not, it belongs to the same period and reflects a like taste. In later times we find fuller and more elaborate treatment of unnatural natural history; see below, p. 161.

The  
Bestiary

<sup>14</sup> Ed. A. S. Cook, *ed. cit.*