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CYNEWULF THE POET, ALFRED THE KING, AND THE NATURE OF ANGLO-SAXON DUTY

by Donna Schlosser

Whether he composed his verse in the eighth, ninth, or tenth century,¹ Cynewulf employed the codas of his four signed poems to deliver a consistent message to his audience about the nature of Anglo-Saxon duty: learn to repent, to recognize heaven as home, and to pray for yourself and your neighbor to reach that celestial destination. As Jackson Campbell has observed about the timeless nature of the coda in *Elene*: “He [Cynewulf] is here speaking to his audience directly as one man to another. This is a real experience. Even if the poem were being read aloud to a group a hundred years after his death, the same effect would be produced on the auditor.”² The power of a message to be understood by readers across the centuries can similarly be observed in King Alfred’s prefatory letter to the *Cura Pastoralis*, probably distributed to bishoprics throughout the kingdom in 894.³ read and learn the wisdom recorded in books by generations past, teach that wisdom to others, and through these acts of reading, learning and teaching, participate in building an earthly kingdom. As Allen Frantzen has observed about Alfred’s dual enterprise to advance both literacy and nationhood, “Perhaps the king’s description of the decline of learning is exaggerated. But we can understand his need to depict conditions in such a way that his efforts at renewal might seem more urgent and that others might be encouraged to join him.”⁴ Frantzen goes even further to suggest that Alfred and his group of writers “should be congratulated for understanding the power of literature not only to teach, but also to arouse political loyalty.”⁵

In this essay I wish to discuss Alfred’s letter to the bishops in com-

¹For debate on the dating of Cynewulf, see the essays by R. D. Fulk and Patrick W. Conner in *Cynewulf Basic Readings*, ed. Robert J. Bjork (New York 1996) 3–21, 23–53. See also Daniel G. Calder, *Cynewulf* (Boston 1981).

²Jackson Campbell, “Cynewulf’s Multiple Revelations” in *Cynewulf Basic Readings*, (n. 1 above) 247.

³This date is based on the judgments of F. G. Cassidy and Richard N. Ringler, *Bright’s Old English Grammar & Reader*, 3rd ed. 2nd corr. prnt. (New York 1971) 178.

⁴Allen Frantzen, *King Alfred* (Boston 1986) 6.

⁵*Ibid.* 3.

parison with Cynewulf's codas to *Fates of the Apostles*, *Juliana*, *Christ*, and *Elene*. My purpose is to examine how the messages of the religious poet and the secular king intersect with one another. Through this examination, I hope to cast further light on an early fusion during the reign of Alfred between the forces of Christianity and the forces of emerging nationhood, a fusion that instilled shared values and identities into the minds of those who were members of the church's congregation, as well as the nation's citizenry. More specifically, in light of Alfred's repeated deployment of the terms "*Angelcynn*," "English people" or "England," and "*Englisc*," "English language,"⁶ during the course of his letter, I wish to examine evidence that points perhaps to what might be considered some of the earliest signs of an English nation in the making. Throughout this essay, then, denotative terms such as "citizenry," "community," and "nation" are employed according to Benedict Anderson's definition of a nation as an "imagined political community," which comes into existence when individuals "imagine" a mental bond with one another that traverses distance and overcomes difference. Although the "members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them," as Anderson remarks, nevertheless, "in the minds of each lives the image of their communities."⁷

My study is in further dialogue with Anderson's notions on the emergence of nationhood from three additional perspectives. First, Anderson has proposed that we examine a nation not as the end-product of "political ideologies" (such as "fascism" or "liberalism"),⁸ but rather as the on-going production of interpersonal relationships characteristically generated by "large cultural systems"—specifically those "cultural systems" that he defines and investigates as "the *religious community* and the *dynastic realm*."⁹ Similarly, but by examining individual representatives of these two cultural systems, I trace the activities of a "religious" poet, Cynewulf, and a "dynastic" king, Alfred, who are engaged in promoting social values and identities for the members of their respective groups—an established congregate and an emerging nation.

⁶*A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 4th ed. (Toronto 1996) s.v. "Angelcynn" and s.v. "Englisc."

⁷Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London 1991) 6.

⁸*Ibid.* 5.

⁹*Ibid.* 12.

Second, Anderson examines the “nation” as a “community” whose outline appears during the Enlightenment period when it becomes impossible for the ties of religious affiliation to bond together the increasingly diverse peoples of the Old and the New World. Into the void created by weakened religious ties flows a new sense of communal identity, for people become joined through the shared act of reading about a new economics, a new science, and a myriad of new lifestyles described in widely-circulated newspapers and books written in the vernacular.¹⁰ I am proposing that several centuries prior to the Enlightenment period we begin to see the emergence of a “nation” as an incipient cultural system of community in Anglo-Saxon England. The traces become evident when Alfred employs the tools of a vernacular, a written text, and a preexisting religious bond that is still intact among his people to build a shared identity of nationhood—in effect, to create a citizenry that recognizes its members to be spread across an extended expanse of physical territory, but who are, nevertheless, joined in mind. This bond of a shared consciousness begins to take root, I propose, through the fledgling nation’s hearing and reading of English—its own vernacular—as the language is constituted in a series of texts that are translated from Latin upon Alfred’s bidding and example. Moreover, these texts constitute the raw materials of wisdom. It is to this trove of intellectual wealth, I suggest, that Alfred intends to establish a historical and contemporary claim of ownership for his people, joining them together as communal owners of what I denote as “intellectual property” and distinguish later in this essay from landed property.

Third, drawing upon the thought of Walter Benjamin, Anderson proposes that Christians measured time during the Middle Ages according to the prefiguring and fulfilling of events that were controlled by Divine Providence and experienced by human beings as a “simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present.” In other words, the concept of a period of time denoted by Anderson as “meanwhile” and marked by “temporal coincidence”¹¹ (by simultaneous events in which actors are aware of only the act in which they are engaged) does not arise in human consciousness until the appearance of “two forms of imagining which first flowered in Europe in the eighteenth century: the novel and the newspaper.”¹² I am proposing that several centuries prior

¹⁰Ibid. 35–36.

¹¹Ibid. 24.

¹²Ibid. 26.

to the eighteenth, the concept of “meanwhile” is understood and employed by Alfred as he strives to join his people together as members of a nation. For Alfred, the passage of time on earth is measured by more than a prefiguring or fulfilling of sacred, Christian moments. In fact, earthly time can also be filled with the activities of learning, which permit individuals to acquire a shared knowledge that not only bonds them together but also enables them to become participants in the process of nation-building. I suggest, therefore, that Alfred’s imagining of an extended educational community, as described in his letter to the bishops, represents an incipient nation-making project that occurs in the “meanwhile” on earth—to coin Anderson’s term. For it is in the “meanwhile,” before they might gain admittance to heaven, that Anglo-Saxon men and women can hear or read the words that Alfred deems important for them to know and thus become members of an imagined community of mind wherein they begin “to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways.”¹³

The ensuing discussion of the earliest signs of an emerging English nation is tripartite. First, I consider the “message” of the poet and of the king with respect to the creation of a self-portrait, an audience portrait, and a communally shared picture of the world. Second, I consider the poet and the king as each adopts the persona of a teacher who employs distinctive teaching strategies to instill ideas into the minds of the members of his audience. Third, I consider the roles that oral and written words play in the education projects of poet and king alike.

THE MESSAGE

Through an initial examination of Cynewulf’s coda in *Fates of the Apostles*, we begin to discern the outlines of the poet’s self-portrait during a moment of pragmatic self-appraisal. Bidding those in the audience who are pleased with his poem to pray for his “*geomrum me*,” “sad self” (89b), Cynewulf justifies his request for prayers with an explanation of his personal circumstances: “*Hu, ic freonda beþearf / liðra on lade, þonne ic sceal langne ham, / eardwic uncuð, ana gesecan*” (91b–93).¹⁴ (How I need friends, merciful ones, on a journey, when I am obligated to seek alone the lasting home, the unknown dwelling.)

¹³Ibid. 36.

¹⁴All quotations are from Cynewulf, “Fates of the Apostles” in *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, ed. George Philip Krapp, vol. 2 (New York 1932) 51–54. All translations are my own.

The lonely, apprehensive voice of the exile is evident in these few words of verse, and as Peter Clemoes has remarked, “Cynewulf’s poems in their several ways all stemmed from the exemplary insecurity he felt as he journeyed through this dangerous world between Christ’s two comings.”¹⁵ I wish to point out, however, that apprehensiveness does not lead to paralysis; rather, the poet adopts a proactive, pragmatic approach to insure the accomplishment of his spiritual task. Indeed, he organizes a prayer group of friends to petition on his behalf the mercy of the Creator. Such efficacious behavior implies, then, that while each soul must find its own way to heaven, the journey is also a shared experience, for petitions by others increase the likelihood of the soul’s arrival and admittance at heaven’s gate.

Thus far, the poetic message in the coda contains two portraits: the penitent and the petitioners. The third element of the message, the picture of the world wherein poet and audience abide, develops through Cynewulf’s meditation on the incontrovertible evidence that all people and things on earth are bound to perish: “*Ne moton hie awa ætsomne, / woruldwunigende; (W) sceal gedreosan, / (U) on eðle, æfter tohreosan / læne lices frætewa, efne swa (L) toglideð*” (99b–102). (Men are not permitted to be together forever, inhabiting the world; pleasure shall perish, the bison¹⁶ on the native land shall decay thereafter, and the body’s perishable treasures, even as the sea vanishes.) In truth, both the poet and his audience have but one matter of exigency in a world that is destined for destruction—to help each other prepare to meet the maker of all life. Underscoring this ineluctable aspect of Anglo-Saxon spiritual duty, Ralph Elliott has remarked that Cynewulf envisions Judgment Day as a “contract between man’s earlier state and the elemental upheaval of doomsday itself.”¹⁷

I suggest that King Alfred, too, recognizes the world’s inevitable demise; however, in his message to the bishops he constructs a self-portrait, a portrait of his citizenry, and a picture of the world which shift pragmatic urgency *from* the spiritual preparation of one’s soul *to* the earthly construction of one’s community. Alfred’s prefatory letter to the English translation of Pope Gregory’s *Cura Pastoralis* clearly

¹⁵Peter Clemoes, *Interactions of Thought and Language in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge 1995) 274.

¹⁶My translation of the “U” rune is based on the judgment of Ralph W. Elliott, “Cynewulf’s Runes in Christ II and Elene” in *Cynewulf Basic Readings* (n. 1 above) 282.

¹⁷*Ibid.* 289.

articulates the ties which join the king to his people and establishes a foundation for the growth of their community on earth. Alfred's concerns for the kingdom's preservation can be understood in terms of his self-portrait as a translator. He has assumed the duty of translation as a first line of defense against the decay that has been eroding the reputation of Anglo-Saxon scholarship since before his accession to the throne. In fact, he believes that he is witnessing a situation in which his scholar-priests are no longer able to read and write Latin.¹⁸

In comparison to Cynewulf, however, Alfred does not assume that since all things in life are transitory, then the soul's preparation for the spiritual hereafter precedes, or perhaps even excludes, attention to the exigencies of earthly life. Indeed, the king neither accepts nor sanctions the reality that he perceives: that since many of his scholar-priests can no longer decipher the meaning of the Latin word, the wisdom recorded in the books of the kingdom's libraries has, in effect, passed away. It is to reestablish the cultural value of wisdom in the minds of teachers, those scholar-priests responsible for the education of others, then, that the king applies himself to the task of recovering knowledge by undertaking the task of translation: "*Da ongan ic, ongemang oðrum mislicum ond manigfealdum bisgum ðisses kynerices, ða boc wendan on Englisc ðe is genemned on Læden 'Pastoralis' ond on Englisc 'Hierdeboc'*" (183).¹⁹ (Then I began, among the other mixed and manifold activities of the kingdom, to translate the book into English which is called in Latin "Pastoralis" and in English "Shepherd's Book.") Alfred Smyth has identified the "*witan*" as the crucial target for the king's reeducation program, since members of this group represent "men upon whom the king hoped to rely for loyalty and for crucial administrative know-how in the supervision of the courts, the drafting of legal contracts, and the education of youth."²⁰ I suggest, however, that the inception of the king's translation project represents more than a recovery of pragmatic knowledge for the edification of his *witan*.

¹⁸For debates on Alfred's perception of the state of learning in his kingdom, see the discussions by Susan Kelly, "Anglo-Saxon Lay Society and the Written Word" in *The Uses of Literacy in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge 1990) 32–62; Seth Lerer, *Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Lincoln 1991); Alfred P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford 1995).

¹⁹All quotations are from Alfred, letter to the Old English *Cura Pastoralis* in *Bright's Old English Grammar & Reader*, eds. F. G. Cassidy and Richard N. Ringler, 3rd ed. 2nd corr. print. (New York 1971) 180–183. All translations are my own.

²⁰Smyth (n. 18 above) 533.

The translation project, as well as Alfred's courteous but firm bidding to his bishops, implies, I think, that the king specifically perceives his scholar-priests to be in need of practical lessons, since they have evidently lost the linguistic skills necessary for imparting the kingdom's trove of wisdom to others. Thus, cognizant that books remain unread by those most qualified to absorb and redistribute this collection of inherited wisdom, Alfred urges: "*Ond for ðon ic ðe bebiode ðæt ðu do swæ ic geliefe ðæt ðu wille, ðæt ðu ðe ðissa worulddinga to ðæm geæmetige swæ ðu oftost mæge, þæt ðu ðone wisdom ðe ðe God sealde ðær ðær ðu hiene befæstan mæge, befæste*" (180–181). (And therefore I bid you that you do, as I believe that you wish: that you empty yourself of worldly things as most often you are able so that you can establish the wisdom which God has given you wherever you can establish it.) Clearly, the duty of Alfred's audience differs from the duty of Cynewulf's. For while both writers urge their audiences to shun "worldly things," the king, nevertheless, selectively chooses to preserve a special class of "worldly things"—a collection of recorded wisdom that can be passed from one generation to the next. Hence, he directs his bishops through a polite command, but a royal imperative nonetheless, to attend to the duty of "establishing" their wisdom in the world, as he knows they "wish" to do. Rhetorically, he avoids employing the language of direct chastisement, which might foment dissension and cause further non-productivity, as he grants the bishops the courtesy of considering their desire to teach as being heartfelt but temporarily distracted by "worldly things" other than the books of wisdom.

Alfred, therefore, does not permit the transitory nature of life on earth to interfere with the establishment and development of earthly communities—communities which he intends to cultivate with the support of a collective fund of recorded wisdom that will be passed from teacher to student. Moreover, we might further question the inherent degree of responsibility assigned by Alfred to the bishops for the decayed state of Anglo-Saxon learning. Regarding this question, P. R. Orton has suggested that Alfred possibly views the bishops as those scholar-priests who in their younger days at the cathedral school had been "unwilling to incline to the spoor,"²¹ or in other words, had been "unwilling" to apply themselves to the rigors of learning—the toil that represents a hunt for the signs, or "spoor," of wisdom as it is passed

²¹P. R. Orton, "King Alfred's Prose *Preface* to the Old English *Pastoral Care*, lines

from one person to another. If Orton is correct, then Alfred's carefully crafted, rhetorical bidding to his bishops, I think, carries a serious, underlying charge, historical in nature, against the educators for entertaining a long-time propensity toward a life of pleasure, which brings with it a concomitant distaste for the toil of learning. In short, had they learned their lessons well as students, perhaps they would have not forgotten their Latin so quickly, and hence would be presently fulfilling their duties as teachers. An additional observation by Orton lends further credence to the notion that Alfred perceives the present decay of learning as a situation that comes with its own history. Alfred's strategic deployment of the preterit tense as a structural device in certain passages of the letter, Orton speculates, might indicate both the king's adoption of a "much longer historical perspective" toward the decline of education as well as his perception that the problem is "quite deeply rooted in the English church."²²

Alfred's message thus far in his letter, then, contains both the self-portrait of a translator, who foresees the crucial role that recorded wisdom will play in guaranteeing his kingdom's survival over time, as well as the portrait of an audience, who learns that its duty is to aid the translator in his project. The third element of the message, the picture of the world wherein translator, audience, and community abide, develops through Alfred's depiction of times past, present, and future. In light of Orton's attention to Alfred's deployment of the preterit tense, I wish to look more closely at the king's management of time and event as structural devices which not only order his letter, but also reorder the world of the letter's recipients, who come to apprehend a new educational role for themselves as well as a new educational goal for their students. Briefly stated, I suggest that Alfred's reordering of the present world through the inauguration of a new educational enterprise, as well as his bid to guarantee a future world of literacy in the kingdom by placing a vernacular copy of the *Cura Pastoralis* in every bishopric, indicates that the king deems the secular forces of an emerging nation to be responsible for the education of its citizens. No longer shall the education of future civic leaders be left to the sole discretion of the Church fathers.

In other words, although Alfred might consider the bishops to be a

30–41," *Peritia* 2 (1993) 143.

²²*Ibid.* 148.

factor in the demise of Anglo-Saxon learning, both present and past, he prefers not to chastise them directly nor charge them with crafting a solution. Rather, he assumes full and personal responsibility for advising this elite group of intellectuals as to how the kingdom's educational system must not only be renewed, but also be preserved for future generations. Thus, the king's vision of an earlier golden period in English history when "*man utanbordes wisdom ond lare hieder on lond sohte*," "men from abroad sought hither on land wisdom and learning," is only momentarily sullied when he acknowledges the current practice of importing teachers by candidly noting that "*we hie nu sceoldon ute begietan, gif we hie habban sceoldon*," "we are obligated now to get them abroad, if we must need have them" (180). For Alfred's thoughts quickly turn away from this bleak landscape and begin to forge ties with the wise men of earlier ages—Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans—who, like himself, initiated translation projects to assure the continuity of wisdom and thereby the continuity of community. And upon this association, he builds a new vision of the present. It is a vision that holds hope for an educated citizenry in the future because the king has seized the moment to inaugurate a secular education project in the present by effectively employing the intellectuals of the church, while concurrently soliciting their counsel, to undertake the translation of those books of wisdom "which all men need to know." Alfred articulates his vision in crafted language that allies him with his bishops in a joint participatory effort and that seeks to persuade them with words of negotiation and reason: "*For ðy me ðyncð betre, gif iow swæ ðyncð, ðæt we eac suma bec, ða ðe niedbeðearfosta sien eallum monnum to wiotonne, ðæt we ða on ðæt geðiode wenden ðe we ealle gecnawan mægen . . .*" (182). (Therefore it seems better to me, if it seems so to you, that we also should translate certain books, those that are most necessary for all men to know, into that language that we all are able to understand. . . .)

To recap before moving to the next stage of discussion, I have suggested that the messages of Cynewulf and Alfred offer two perspectives on Anglo-Saxon duty. While the former directs his audience to concentrate effort in life on the project of reaching a heavenly home, the latter directs his audience to participate in the project of building a home on earth by performing the duties of scholarship and teaching. In both cases, however, each man is a pragmatic practitioner of persuasion, and therefore, I wish to turn now to the strategies employed by the

poet and the king for the purpose of instilling their ideas into the minds of others. To facilitate comparison between the two wordsmiths, I shall approach each as the teacher he becomes as he strives to communicate with his audience by sharing autobiographical experience, employing the exemplum form of narrative, disclosing the nature of meditation, and crafting imagery to increase the impact of his message.

THE TEACHER

Turning first to the poet, we find that autobiographical experience in Cynewulf's codas reveals the poet-teacher to be, in fact, a lonely penitent who has waited too long before trying to find his way home to heaven. He is concerned that each member of his audience is in danger of making the same mistake. Thus, his autobiographical tale also serves as an exemplum; it is a cautionary tale to encourage others to begin the process of seeking redemption while there is still time before the non-negotiable moments of death and judgment arrive. This fusion of autobiography and exemplum is particularly evident in the coda to *Juliana*. Initially, the poet recalls his sinful behavior in life: "*Sar eal gemon, / synna wunde, þe ic siþ opþe ær / geworhte in worulde*" (709b–711a).²³ (I remember every sorrow, the wounds of sins, which I late or early wrought in the world.) Subsequently, he admits his tardiness in attending to his spiritual duty: "*Wæs an tid to læt / þæt ic yfeldæda ær gescomede, / þenden gæst ond lic geador siþedan / onsund on earde*" (712b–715a). (It was too late before I became ashamed of my evil deeds, while the ghost and the body traveled together in health on earth.)

In the coda to *Elene*, we catch clear sight of the poet-teacher explaining to his audience how the act of meditation had triggered an awareness for him about his spiritual-secular purpose on earth. The scene begins with Cynewulf's meditative reflection that his life has been devoted to the writing of poetry: "*Wordcræftum wæf ond wundrum læs, / þragum þreodude ond gepanc reodode / nihtes nearwe*" (1237–1239a).²⁴ (I have woven the words of poetic art and collected miracles, meditated on times and sifted thought, anxiously in the night.)

²³All quotations are from Cynewulf, "Juliana" in *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, eds. George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, vol. 3 (New York 1936) 113–133. All translations are my own.

²⁴All quotations are from Cynewulf, "Elene" in *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, ed. George Philip Krapp, vol. 2 (New York 1932) 66–102. All translations are my own.

Subsequent to the receptive mood that meditation has invoked, divine revelation ensues, as Cynewulf discloses: “*Nysse ic gearwe / be ðære rode riht ær me rumran geþeaht / þurh ða mæran miht on modes þeaht wisdom onwreah*” (1239b–1242a). (I did not entirely know about the truth of the cross before wisdom, through the glorifying power, displayed to me still further thought during the counsel of my mind.) Finally, divine revelation ushers in Cynewulf’s realization that God has given him the skill and the wisdom to craft poetry as he had never crafted it before: “*Mægencyning amæt ond on gemynd begeat, / torht ontynde, tidum gerymde, / bancofan onband, breostlocan onwand, / leoðucræft onleac*” (1247–1250a). (The mighty King bestowed and poured into my mind [a wisdom], opened a clearness, widened it at times, unbound my body, untwisted my mind, and unlocked the poetic art.)

Of crucial importance in this carefully sequenced scenario (meditation, revelation, realization) is the implication that human insight into the purpose of life on earth transpires during the daily act of labor: it is during the toil of “*wordcræftum*” when Cynewulf realizes he is doing precisely as God wishes. To Daniel Calder’s observation, then, that the value of this scene rests in its depiction of Cynewulf’s conversion as he crafts the story of Constantine’s conversion,²⁵ I wish to add that of equal importance is the depiction of divine revelation as an integral element in Anglo-Saxon quotidian existence. From this perspective, the poet encourages the audience to recognize that divine revelation can likewise enter their lives at any moment during the daily rhythms of labor. However, the labor must be performed with mindful attention, for it is this heightened state of meditative absorption that makes one receptive to divine insight. With reference to this particular point—that meditation serves as the catalyst for divine revelation—my analysis differs from that of Antonina Harbus, who proposes that the memory of a textual representation of the cross triggers the poet’s revelation, and thus, revelation is “an act of remembrance.”²⁶ Rather, I am proposing that revelation is represented as a direct pouring of divine wisdom into the poet’s mind prior to the act of reading. My analysis also differs from that of Ursula Schaefer, who theorizes that Cynewulf “has found

²⁵Calder (n. 1 above) 135.

²⁶Antonina Harbus, “Text as Revelation: Constantine’s Dream in *Elene*,” *Neophilologus* 78 (1994) 650.

something *in books*, and that is what he is passing on here.”²⁷ Rather, I hypothesize that the poet is crafting his *own* wisdom, acquired through meditation and revelation, into a poem which he hopes will inspire the members of his audience to begin their own spiritual quests.

Hence, the audience learns from the poet-teacher that the most basic activities in life can serve as catalysts for divine revelation. For Cynewulf as a poet, as a teacher, and as a human being, there is no separation between earthly and secular activity. To live is to be always mindful of the return journey to heaven that must be undertaken. And if the heavenward path beckoning before one’s eyes is not enough to spur one in the proper direction, Cynewulf employs poetic imagery to teach the devastating alternative. In the coda to *Christ*, the horror of Judgment Day unfolds. The poet’s warning precedes the vision, as an anxious teacher alerts his students: “*Forþon ic leofra gehwone læran wille / . . . Is us þearf micel / þæt we gæstes wlite ær þam gryrebrogan / on þas gæsnan tid georne biþencen*” (815, 847b–849).²⁸ (Therefore I desire to teach each of my loved ones . . . it is greatly necessary for us that we earnestly reflect upon the appearance of the soul during this barren time before that horror.) But should the audience still find commitment to spiritual duty burdensome, the poet depicts the vision of “*þam gryrebrogan*,” “that horror,” in vivid and concrete detail: “*Rodor bið onhrered, / ond þas miclan gemetu middangeardes / beofiað þonne. Beorht cyning leanað / þæs þe hy on eorþan eargum dædum / lifdon leahtum fā*” (825b–829a). (The sky will be moved and the great spaces of the earth will tremble then. The bright king will repay those who lived on earth in slothful deeds, guilty in vices.)

The lesson of the poet-teacher could not be more clear or more non-negotiable. Cynewulf teaches his flock that to live is to prepare the soul for its return journey to heaven, for life on earth is never anything but a transitory moment. The lesson of the teacher-king, however, is in many ways more complex and arduous, for Alfred’s vision of earthly life is more than an encounter with transience. Thus, the king teaches the bishops that to live is to learn about life on earth, impart this knowledge to others, and in so doing, develop an educated citizenry who is capable

²⁷Ursula Schaefer, “Hearing from Books: The Rise of Fictionality in Old English Poetry” in *Vox Texta: Orality and Textuality in the Middle Ages*, eds. A. N. Doane and Carol Braun Pasternack (Madison 1991) 129.

²⁸All quotations are from Cynewulf, “Christ” in *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, eds. George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, vol. 3 (New York 1936) 3–49. All translations are my own.

of renewing England's stature in the present and guaranteeing its eminence in the future.

The strategies of autobiography and exemplum, of course, feature prominently in Alfred's letter; like the poet, the king fashions a bond between himself and the members of his audience by participating in the same activities which he is asking them to perform. Therefore, Alfred inaugurates a renewal of both the art of scholarship as well as the art of teaching by demonstrating, through his own example, the scholarly act of translation that produces a book of knowledge for the purpose of education: he translates the wisdom of Pope Gregory's book, *Cura Pastoralis*, from Latin into English. Patrick Geary's remarks concerning the mode of experiential learning so characteristic of medieval times is instructive for our understanding of Alfred's actions as an effective teacher: "The primary 'how to' books of the Middle Ages were people, and much that was at the very core of cultural reproduction was probably never vocalized or textualized. Verbalization was necessary only for specific kinds of knowledge and under certain specific circumstances" (173).²⁹ I suggest that Alfred represents an early figure in a debate that would long continue to occupy thinkers of the Middle Ages concerning the merits of an education that is acquired by the student through the reading of books, providing theoretical knowledge, or through the observation and subsequent performance of action, providing hands-on experience.³⁰ It appears, I think, that Alfred recognizes the value of both modes of learning by depicting himself in his letter not only as an example to be observed and subsequently imitated, but also as the creator of a book deemed worthy of reading and the writer of thoughts deemed worthy of preserving long after their "vocalization" would have faded in the ear and mind of the audience.

Even more intriguing to note is that while the *Cura Pastoralis* contains a prescription for religious duty, Alfred has "translated" the book into a symbol which marks the inception of a secular literacy program aimed at producing the next generation of an educated citizenry. Henceforth, Pope Gregory's work visibly signifies Alfred's determination to make the wisdom of the elders, a wisdom not focused solely

²⁹Patrick J. Geary, "Land, Language and Memory in Europe," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 9 (1999) 173.

³⁰Chaucer often takes up this question; it is considered, for example, by the dreamer in the prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* and appears in the eagle's explanation for the dreamer's flight in *The House of Fame*.

upon religious duty, available in a contemporary age deemed by him to be a period of cultural renewal. We can view Anglo-Saxon spiritual duty, therefore, as in the process of being “translated” into an earthly context. For although Alfred has chosen to give the bishops a spiritual *vade mecum*, he has also chosen to issue a number of earthly challenges to them: to become a new breed of scholar-teachers, to renew the Anglo-Saxon reputation for learning, to make the wisdom of the minds of other cultures accessible in the vernacular, and to produce a new generation of educated citizens who will fill the places of the *witan* elders when their earthly time has elapsed.

In other words, Alfred teaches about the transitoriness of human existence on earth. Yet, unlike Cynewulf, whose response to transience is to direct himself and others to look heavenward, Alfred directs his audience to tend to the preservation and development of an earthly community while they are members of it. The differing perceptions of the horizon that distinguish the secular king from the religious poet also effect a distinction in the role that meditation plays in the life of each. As we have seen, Cynewulf perceives the act of meditation as preparation for the mind to receive divine revelation. In Alfred’s letter to the bishops, however, the king demonstrates meditation to be a stream of reflection as he reveals himself moving smoothly among visions of the past, the present, and the future. Moreover, the audience witnesses meditation to be a mental process in which human beings deploy their imagination to shape memories, refashion reality, and create a picture of the future. Meditation, then, as Alfred teaches about it, is a catalyst for earthly action.

The act of meditation as the process of consciously shaping, or organizing, the raw data of past events into a memory that is iconic in its embodiment and mirroring of ideas important to the mind and heart of the meditator appears early, just after Alfred “sends greetings” to the named recipient of his letter, Bishop Wæferth: “*Me com swiðe oft on gemynd hwelce wiotan iu wæron giond Angelcynn, ægðer ge godcundra hada ge woruldcundra; ond hu gesæliglica tida ða wæron giond Angelcynn*” (180). (It has very often come to me in my mind what wise men there were formerly throughout England, both of religious and of worldly orders; and how there were happy times then throughout England.) The conscious crafting of the past by Alfred into an iconic memory of England as a landscape populated by “wise ones”—an artfully fashioned memory in which an extended description

of England's former cultural preeminence develops—abruptly concludes when Alfred's mind's eye returns to the scene of the present. It is at this point when the act of meditation and the project of refashioning reality occur. The king's voice suddenly issues forth with the urgent, but carefully phrased command, which we have examined earlier—the polite, but nonetheless demanding, royal imperative that the bishops renew their participation in scholarship and teaching.

Yet as quickly as Alfred moves into this meditation upon the present, he leaves it behind and resumes his meditation upon the past. In so doing, he effectively frames his imperative to the bishops with the authority of historical evidence that attests to the vulnerability of the written word: “*Ða ic ða ðis eall gemunde, ða gemunde ic eac hu ic geseah—ær ðæm ðe hit eall forhergod wære ond forbærned—hu ða ciricean giond eall Angelcynn stodon maðma ond boca gefylða*” (181). (When I remembered all this, then I remembered also how I saw—before it was all plundered and burned—how the churches throughout all England stood filled of treasures and books.) Through this memory, the king invokes the glory of the past as justification for a renewal of scholarship in the present. Significantly, he does not explain the destruction of the churches' treasures and books as the product, nor the proof, of earthly transience. Transience, therefore, is not depicted as justification for viewing the purpose of life on earth strictly in terms of preparation for a journey heavenward. Rather, the vulnerable materiality of the written word is depicted as justification for a renewed earthly effort to preserve and disseminate the collective wisdom which prudent individuals over time had deemed appropriate for recording.

The act of meditation as a creator of the future emerges when Alfred envisions a new generation of young scholars who have mastered English and have begun to master Latin. Nevertheless, a sense of urgency to bring about this renewed state of learning pervades the closing lines of the king's letter when Alfred insists that the *Cura Pastoralis* occupy a prominent and visible place in the ministry. The implication is that the king cannot depend upon the longevity of the current cadre of bishop-teachers—perhaps because he doubts that they have the stamina, after their laxity in scholarship, to remain committed to the hard work that lies ahead. Implied also is his recognition that the bishops are, indeed, only temporary participants in the earthly community. And should these wise elders depart before the renewal of learning has been accomplished, the physical presence of the *Cura Pastoralis* will serve as

a symbol to remind the neophyte scholar-teachers that the king himself has shaped their destiny. As Alfred remarks: “*Ond ic bebiode on Godes naman ðæt nan mon ðone æstel from ðære bec ne do, ne ða boc from ðæm mynstre: uncuð hu longe ðær swæ gelærede biscepas sien swæ swæ nu, Gode ðonc, welhwær siendon*” (183). (And in the name of God, I command that no one take the book-marker from the book, nor the book from the minster; it is uncertain how long there may be such learned bishops, as now, thanks be to God, there are almost everywhere.)

Thus far, we have considered the king’s techniques of autobiography, exemplum, and meditation. To conclude our look at his teaching strategies, I wish to consider Alfred’s use of imagery to instill in the minds of his readers the path of glory, destruction, and resurrection that Anglo-Saxon learning has followed. As we know, Alfred begins his letter by carefully building, image by image, an extended picture of England during a glorious moment of its past. Whether we equate this picture of glory with the days when Northumbria was the home of Bede, Alcuin, and other illustrious scholar-teachers, or whether we consider the image to be solely a product of Alfred’s imagination, one significant point does not change: that is, the king has chosen to depict to his readers an English heritage worth recovering. As Paul Szarmach reminds us about the personal nature of the king’s vision: “Whatever the relation of the *Preface* to *realia*, it is clear that Alfred is giving expression to the concerns of his own mind and conscience. The *Preface* is primarily a record of Alfred’s perceptions of his milieu; its meaning is tonal or attitudinal, not factual.”³¹ Subsequent, then, to painting this first picture of glory, Alfred paints a second in somber shades that communicates his anxious concern about those scholar-teachers who are unable to read their books of wisdom. Yet while the king recognizes that the inevitable forces of time and transience have robbed these intellectuals of their linguistic facility, he nevertheless instructs that their duty is to select, preserve, and promote the wisdom of the wise minds that have preceded them. Therefore, while decay is a constant threat to the written word, it is just as surely an abiding challenge to be taken up by the king and his freshly motivated intelligentsia. Indeed, as Susan Kelly has remarked, Alfred’s “insistence that his officials set themselves to studying on pain of losing their position may have provided a

³¹Paul E. Szarmach, “The Meaning of Alfred’s Preface to the Pastoral Care,” *Mediae-*

foundation for the expansion in the tenth century of the range of administrative documentation in the vernacular.”³²

Hence, Alfred concludes his imagistic triptych of glory and decay with a portrait of renewal: “*Eall sio gioguð ðe nu is on Angelcynne friora monna*” (All the youth of free men who are now among the English people) will be taught to read and write English, and those who are willing and able will begin to study the Latin words of wisdom (182). This image of the future rests securely, of course, upon the example of the king himself: he has learned the Latin tongue from a group of scholar-priests and is now engaged in translating the Latin word into English for the benefit of his bishops, who in turn, will do the same for their students. The imagery of one individual learning and then teaching another, and so forging an infinite chain of literacy, is a powerfully instructive one, for it clearly depicts how human beings, as individuals, can effect the transfer of inter-generational wisdom.

Alfred’s triptych of glory, destruction, and renewal also teaches about the hardy nature of an English literary landscape which survives time’s ceaseless process of decay through its own persistent acts of renewal. The king’s aim to preserve and distribute his culture’s wisdom is evident in his closing directions as to how the *Cura Pastoralis* is to be treated and valued by its recipients. While I have pointed out that the book functions as a symbolic marker for the king’s education program, I suggest now that the king anticipates, indeed desires, this symbol to be replicated and circulated. For he has made clear provision that if the book is not in its designated place in the minstry, nor under the bishop’s study, then it is to be either on loan to another for study, or reproduced. One more reproduction of the book, of course, means that one more symbol of the kingdom’s literacy movement will take up residence in a visible place of prominence. Seth Lerer has also recognized the nature of Alfred’s vision, which depicts education as an active endeavor shared by the many, when he observes that “dialogue and discussion are, for the king, public ventures for instruction,”³³ and emphasizes that for Alfred “literacy grows out of a social interchange.”³⁴

valia 6 (1980) 59.

³²Kelly (n. 18 above) 54.

³³Lerer (n. 18 above) 83.

³⁴Lerer (n. 18 above) 84.

THE WORD

The foregoing analysis of the position that the book occupies in Alfred's dual enterprise of literacy and nation-making brings us to the third and final stage of our discussion—to a consideration of the role that oral and written words play in the “message” and the “teaching strategies” of both poet and king. I wish to turn first to Cynewulf's codas and examine the oral word as a catalyst which can spur audience members to begin preparing for their journey heavenward by triggering their active participation in the poet's own spiritual quest. We catch sight of this catalytic process within the concluding lines of the codas to *Fates of the Apostles* and *Juliana* when Cynewulf's verse assumes the form of public prayer.

When the audience accedes to the poet's request for prayers in *Fates of the Apostles*, the members are not only praying for the poet, but also for themselves. For he has employed the inclusive first-person plural pronoun at this point in the verse to bind himself and his petitioners together as a single voice in the act of uttering a mutual desire: “*Ah utu we þe geornor to gode cleopigan / sendan usse bene on þa beorhtan gesceaft, / þæt we þæs botles brucan motan, / hames in hehðo*” (115–118a). (But come we the more eagerly to cry out to God and send our prayers onto that bright creation so that we, the unpardonable, may be permitted to enjoy a home in heaven.) The prayer concludes with words of praise for the Lord artfully framed within the rhythms of alliteration and oral-formulaic phraseology that would conceivably spur the audience to utter the words of praise in unison with the poet: “*Nu a his lof standeð, / mycel ond mære, ond his miht seomaþ, / ece ond edgiong, ofer ealle gesceaft. Finit*” (120–122). (Now and forever his praise endures, great and famous, and his might continues, eternal and forever becoming young again, over all creation. Amen.)

The concluding prayer in *Juliana* praises the Lord in a more expansive manner, employing a chain of appositives to describe the multiple aspects of God's power. The language that joins poet and audience together in the act of praising God first emerges when the poet folds the identity of his listeners into an identity larger than that of the “audience” they comprise: he addresses them as members “*gumena cynnes*,” “of the family of mankind” (719a). Next, he requests that when the newly constituted family recites “*þe þis gied wræc*,” “this poem he made,” (719b), that it be spoken as a petition for God's help on his behalf, for the man who is striving to prepare his soul for the journey

home. Finally, he concludes his poem-prayer with a series of familiar images of God. The chain of rhythmic, appositional phrases, akin to those we have examined in *Fates of the Apostles*, readily permits the audience to join the poet in praying aloud and, at least during these moments of public utterance, their minds, like his, are focused on the Maker whom each petitioner must eventually meet.

In contrast to these depictions of the power of the oral word to trigger preparation for a return journey to the heavenly home, Cynewulf shows in the coda to *Elene* that private reading of the written word fails to elicit a similar assumption of spiritual duty. In fact, the poet reveals that only after he has experienced divine revelation and has meditated upon God's message is he prepared to disclose the story of his miraculous experience to others, as well as to discover (and implicitly, understand) textual references to the cross as a symbol of victory: "*Ic þæs wuldres treowes / oft, nales æne, hæfde ingemynd / ær ic þæt wundor onwriġen hæfde / ymb þone beorhtan beam, swa ic on bocum fand, / wyrda gangum, on gewritum cyðan / be ðam sigebeacne*" (1251b–156a). (I had a recollection not once but often of the glorious tree before I had revealed the miracle about the bright tree, as I found in books, during the course of events, in writings telling about that emblem of victory.) Thus, while Cynewulf recognizes the book as a repository of spiritual wisdom, his autobiographical exemplum teaches that this written form of wisdom cannot be tapped unless the reader, like himself, has meditated, experienced divine revelation, and then meditated further upon what had been revealed. The limitation of the book as a catalyst for spiritual enlightenment also appears in the coda to *Christ*. Cynewulf acknowledges that "*us secgað bec / hu æt ærestan eadmod astag in middangeard*" (books tell us how at first the gentle one descended upon earth) but also confesses that "*ic ne heold teala þæt me hælend min / on bocum bibeað*" (I did not properly defend what my savior commanded me in the books (785b–787a, 792–793a).

If Cynewulf can be said to privilege the spoken word as his principal means for raising the spiritual consciousness of his audience, Alfred can be said to employ the written word as his principal building block for constructing the communal identity of a youthful nation. As we have seen, the king carries in his mind the treasured memory of a time when the reputation of Anglo-Saxon learning drew students from abroad in search of wisdom. I suggest that this vision of an eclectic gathering of scholars from diverse locales on earth marks the site in

Alfred's mind where his program for literacy merges with his program for nation-making. For Alfred, the existence of the word as a written text not only has the power to draw minds together for study, but also has the tangibility to serve as a visible sign that marks the physical site where knowledge is preserved as well as grown. I suggest further that within the shelter of this imagined environment so conducive toward scholarship and civility, Alfred glimpses the creation of alliances among human beings that traverse the divisions of landed property, be they the boundary lines of a family estate or the territorial borders of a kingdom. Thus, while Geary justly points to the use of English in Anglo-Saxon documents whose "primary concern about land and its history" mirrors a public desire that the particulars of property ownership be recorded in a language understood by the many,³⁵ I suggest that Alfred's vision of a renewed learning center reveals a second, although nascent, conception of property ownership. As a king who knows by personal experience the toll of war that arises through border disputes, Alfred appears to glimpse the possibility of social alliances that traverse the contested lines of both estates and territories. He foresees, I think, how social alliances of mind that spring from the sharing of wisdom recorded in books—from the sharing of intellectual property—might fortify and expand the social framework of a nation in which members claim a common ownership of ideas and are thus joined by a bond of knowledge that can bridge distances and differences.

Additionally, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that when the king educates his citizenry for the purpose of building an extended community of social relationships on earth, he is, as well, endeavoring to educate them for participation in the world-at-large—preparing them to become world citizens. In fact, Alfred's recognition of the knowledge to be gained by understanding the languages of others is evident when he speculates as to why so many books of wisdom have not been translated into English: "*For ðære wilnunga hie hit forleton, ond wol-don ðæt her ðy mara wisdom on londe wære ðy we ma geðeoda cuðon*" (182). (By intention, they [translators] abandoned it [the project of translation], and desired that here in this land there would be more wisdom because we would know more languages.) The magnetic power of written words to attract one mind to another, one person to another, and indeed, one nation to another, as I have been discussing, has also been

³⁵Geary (n. 29 above)175.

observed by Lerer, who comments with regard to Alfred's education and translation projects: "We may thus conclude that texts provide a new place for people to unite. Books bring together different writers into florilegia; they bring together different readers into scholarly communities; and they bring together rulers and their subjects, parents and their children, in a literate apprehension of the world."³⁶

Yet, as much as Alfred believes in the power of the written word to attract a collection of bright minds about itself, he also perceives a link between the word and the individual: that is, he perceives that the private act of reading is an effective means of education. In other words, to read is to learn without a need for intervention in the form of meditation or revelation; therefore, education stands as an enterprise over which human beings exert complete control and for which they are totally responsible. Just as individuals possess the ability to learn through their own initiative, so do they also possess the freedom to apply that learning as they see fit—to help build the earthly community which their king envisions, a kingdom which presents itself to the world as a site of cultural preservation and development. In his study of Anglo-Saxon monastic communities and their sponsorship by Alfred, Lerer has considered the function that human intention serves in linking together the promotion of education, the construction of monasteries, and the production of books: "Central to this figuration is the place of artifice in civilized life. . . . Human workmanship provides a way of organizing nature or experience into an assuring whole. It erects the structures that may stand against malevolent forces outside the purview of the city or the hall."³⁷

In light of our examination throughout this study of Anglo-Saxon duty as a guiding principle in the consciousness of both the individual and the community, and in response to Lerer's representation of "human workmanship" as "artifice" which has the power to defend the cultural integrity of "the city or the hall," I wish to conclude with an extended comparison of the nature of Anglo-Saxon duty as it is deliberately fashioned by poet and king to serve as the framework, the irreplaceable pillars of support, of Anglo-Saxon daily life. From the religious poet's perspective, "human workmanship" would be, in essence,

³⁶Lerer (n. 18 above) 95–96.

³⁷Lerer (n. 18 above) 92–93.

the active spiritual tending of the soul that makes the soul deemed worthy for entrance into the heavenly home. Communal life on earth, therefore, is organized around a shared image of the life hereafter, and furthermore, transience is a welcome certainty, for the individual is ever eager to return to the true home in heaven. From the secular king's perspective, however, "human workmanship" would be marked by individuals who join together for the purpose of actively working to transform the raw materials of their earthly existence into a culture that overcomes the ravages of transience. When Alfred yokes together education, the monastery, and the book, therefore, I propose that he builds the infrastructure by which an ever-growing mass of wisdom can be organized and preserved for consultation, be instilled in the minds of future civic leaders, and be employed efficaciously in the project of preparing the ground for a newly-formed nation in the world-at-large.

Additionally, I suggest that the triadic union of education-monastery-book might also be viewed as the union of Nation-Church-Word. And it is through this second triadic lens that we catch sight of the Alfredian genius which skillfully fuses the kingdom's religious and secular needs by joining the oral with the written word and subsequently putting both forms of linguistic expression to work. For rather than supplant the speech of Cynewulf and other religious voices like his, which serves to stimulate spiritual commitment, Alfred expands the scope of Anglo-Saxon spiritual commitment to include the concept of civic duty, particularly, the duty to learn the written wisdom that the elders have recorded over time. Hence, both the oral and the written word are harnessed to the best interests of the community's material and spiritual requirements. To the familiar religious principle which teaches that to live an ethical life is to secure a place in heaven, Alfred links a new secular principle: to live an ethical life is also the means by which to attain a respectable position in one's community on earth. Earthly life, therefore, becomes more than a deathwatch, more than a passing of time until the force of transience has dispatched the soul on its way to heaven or hell. Rather, earthly life becomes the arena for translating Christian principles into a secular, quotidian existence which champions the building of a community and the linking of one

community to another to form a communal nation, a nation that might be worthy of receiving God's mercy on Judgment Day.

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