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Author

Miller, Linda L.

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DRYTHELM'S JOURNEY TO THE OTHER WORLD: BEDE'S LITERARY USE OF TRADITION

In his service as Biblical commentator, hagiographer, and historian, the Venerable Bede worked willingly from established authorities. Using complex traditions, however, requires choices, and Bede controlled his diverse sources with a clarity of scholarship and charity of character that have always won admiration. Some of the most rigorous professional decisions he had to make in combining hagiography and historiography were in *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*.¹ Given the rich Irish and Roman heritage of the English church, the brief, effective miracle stories in *Historia Ecclesiastica* also presented Bede with many essentially literary choices. While Bede's literary skill is generally recognized, it has seldom been discussed in great detail; thoroughly examining a single story will, perhaps, illuminate his control of complex materials. Bede's spare account of Drythelm's journey to the other world (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, V, xii) is a particularly fitting example, both for its sources and its outstanding quality. Behind it lies one of the most elaborate and vital literary traditions of the medieval period. Most of the details of this miraculous story can be traced to widespread sources, and yet nothing else quite like it exists. "[T]o stir up living men from the death of the soul" (V, xii, p. 253), Bede has fashioned a consistently human and humane witness of the afterlife.

¹ Bede, *Opera Historica*, ed. by J. E. King. 2 vols. Loeb Classical Library (London, 1930). All English and Latin quotations are from this edition and are cited in the text.

Several critics have studied the problems affecting the miracle stories of the *Historia Ecclesiastica*. They have classified types, traced general influences, compared them to Bede's other works, and arrived at valuable general statements about his tradition. Bede's miracles incorporate the Biblical heritage of the Gospel accounts of Christ's ministry, the Apocalypse, and some apocryphal books,² with the hagiography of the early church and its elaboration in continental and Celtic saints' lore. Loomis argues that Bede, the ardent Benedictine, followed the continental authorities represented by St. Gregory in the *Dialogues*: "Celtic Christianity in Great Britain had its own miracle lore, but traditions from that source were ignored by Bede in his revelations of the operations of benevolent magic in English Christianity."³ St. Gregory the Great's miracle stories are undoubtedly Bede's principal authority and literary model, but the local sources for Drythelm's journey were likely Celtic since the otherworld visit is popular in Irish lore. Bede was exposed to many influences in his reading, writing, and in gathering information for his history. His responses were also complicated by the diverse demands of historiography, the "ethical truth" of the miraculous, and even by his theological attitude about miracles in a decaying world.⁴

General discussion of the vast and various tradition upon which Bede drew, except insofar as it underlies one's understanding, is really outside the scope of this paper. Emphasis on classes and types tends to prove only how Bede generally approached a body of material. My purpose is to discuss his use of tradition to create a particular brief work, the story of Drythelm. This paper will first examine elements in Drythelm's story in relation to the range of possible influences so as to define more precisely their commonality. Comparison with several of Bede's likely sources will bring out some differences of scope and pattern in his version.

² Bertram Colgrave, "Bede's Miracle Stories" in *Bede: His Life, Times, and Writings*, ed. by A. H. Thompson (Oxford, 1935), 201-229.

³ C. Grant Loomis, "The Miracle Traditions of the Venerable Bede," *Speculum*, 21 (1946), 404.

⁴ Charles W. Jones, "Bede as Early Medieval Historian," *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 4 (1946), 26-36, and Colgrave, 228.

Finally, analysis of the story's construction will show the effectiveness of its literary form.

Bede begins by saying the tale is "not unlike the miracles of times past" and that he finds it good to touch on parts of it (*HE*, V, xii, p. 253). He introduces the background: Drythelm was a Northumbrian family man who died one evening of an illness but, to the consternation of his household, arose the following morning. As a result of the miracle vouchsafed him, he immediately divided his goods and retired into the monastery at Melrose, where he passed his life as a solitary constantly doing penance. When pressed by devout men, he would occasionally relate his experience. The story then continues with a first-person narrative. Drythelm finds himself following a shining guide, first through a region where souls are tortured alternatively in fire and ice, then to the stinking pit of Hell beside which Drythelm is left alone. He sees demons dragging souls into the pit and is himself attacked, but eventually the guide returns and leads him away. They approach a vast wall, but just as Drythelm wonders how they can pass through its blank face, he finds himself miraculously on top of it. Now he and his guide walk through shining flowery meadows filled with beautiful youths. To his unspoken thought the guide replies that this is not heaven. Drythelm is led toward a region which is so ineffably bright that it makes the flowery meadows seem mean, and he hears angelic music. The guide leads Drythelm back to the bright meadows and finally asks him if he understands what he has seen. The guide explains that the first dark region is for the souls of those who are not entirely evil but have died in sins. In the torture of ice and fire, they will do penance that will allow them to escape eternal Hell. Drythelm had seen those immediately damned at the pit and had been left there to see if he belonged to that number. The devils did not harm him; so the guide returned to show him the heavenly regions. The meadows are the abode of those who had died in good works but were not perfect enough to enter heaven before Judgment Day. The region of radiant light was heaven itself where those of great perfection immediately go upon death. The guide then suggests that Drythelm can aspire to that bliss if he lives purely thereafter, and Drythelm

wakes regretfully to earthly life again. Bede ends the account by describing Drythelm's life of penance as a monk.

Drythelm's story is associated with the monastery at Melrose where he ended his life. The events are specifically localized as happening at Incuneningham (Cuninghame) *circa* 698-705 A.D. The immediate authority Bede cites is the monk Hemgils who had his cell near Melrose. Bede also mentions that King Aldfrid of Northumbria often heard Drythelm tell his story when he visited Melrose. In the same paragraph he notes that Ethelwald was abbot at that time. Ethelwald and Melrose did give Bede much information for preparing his history.⁵ These authorities raise the possibility of Celtic influence. Although Melrose followed the Benedictine Rule in Bede's time, it was founded by Irish monks, and Celtic traditions were still treasured there. However, the only clearly Irish part of the story is the picture of Drythelm's penitential life after his vision: rigorous asceticism in general and the practice of immersing oneself in water for long periods in particular are Celtic monastic practices. To claim that even this feature is direct from local tradition is somewhat difficult since Bede knew from writing his life of St. Cuthbert the story of that famous saint's spending the night in the ocean and singing hymns. Interestingly, the authority for this passage in the *Vita* by an anonymous monk of Lindisfarne, which Bede followed, is a monk from Melrose, Plecgils, but in Bede's account an unnamed monk of Coldringham, near which the incident took place, is the witness.⁷ Drythelm's asceticism certainly forms an essential part of the story's frame: Drythelm acts so because of his experience, and Bede tells the story for the pious effect it may have on others. These elements suggest that the story's details are localized to some extent, but that it is not determined by native traditions.

⁵ D. A. Kirby, "Bede's Native Sources for the *Historia Ecclesiastica*," *Bull. of John Rylands Library*, 48 (1965-66), 347.

⁶ M. M. Pepperdene, "Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*: A New Perspective," *Celtica*, 4 (1958), 260 and 253-262 *passim*.

⁷ Bertram Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, (Cambridge, Eng., 1940). The passage in the anonymous life is found at II, iii, p. 79-81, and in Bede's account at X, p. 189.

Certainly the otherworld journey already possessed an oral tradition. "Much of this wealth of description was not confined to what was written . . . but was floating in the medieval air of faith and credulity and artistic interest, and was transmitted by the channels of folktale and even popular rumor based on avid memory and long, long thoughts. Thus oriental culture, the religious life of Greece and Rome, the Jewish tradition, the Celtic and the Norse, could furnish details of the Other World even for writers who could hardly recognize their own indebtedness."⁸ Such details as Drythelm's angelic guide with his "shining countenance and bright apparel," the valley leading to the foul-smelling pit of hell, belching flames, and the heavenly region with its bright flowery meadows thronged with rejoicing men in white and suffused with sweet odors and music, are all commonplaces from various accounts.

Other parts of Drythelm's story are distinctive, but still partake of familiar oral and literary elements. The hellish regions are located in the northeast, paradise in the southeast. The Holy Land and the conventional site of Eden both lie southeast of Northumbria. Although north is associated with the infernal regions in Isaiah (xiv, 13) and in the OE *Genesis B*, written soon after Bede's period, northeast seems unusual. However, the directions are actually given in astronomical terms, "contra ortum solis solstitialem" (p. 254) and "contra ortum solis brumalem" (p. 260), and the slight change may have been for the sake of this parallel. If so, this detail indicates literary influence. The same may be said for the balance of two hellish and two heavenly regions. Of course, four parts parallel the commonplace division of the world. The number four also recurs frequently in Celtic other world descriptions⁹ and is generally a significant number for the medieval mind. However, numerical symbolism does not seem to be significantly emphasized in Drythelm's story.

Theology might dictate Bede's description, of course. One of the major critics of Bede's theology finds nothing exceptional in

⁸ Howard Rollins Patch, *The Other World According to Descriptions in Medieval Literature*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1950), 80-81.

⁹ Patch, 27ff.

the two hellish and two heavenly regions.¹⁰ St. Gregory provides authority in Book IV of the *Dialogues* where he writes, "[T]here are just souls who are delayed somewhere outside heaven. The delay imposed on them seems to indicate that they are still lacking in perfect justice. Yet, nothing is more certain than that the souls of those who have attained perfect justice are received into the kingdom of heaven as soon as they leave the body."¹¹ Drythelm's guide gives a similar explanation:

Yonder field indeed full of flowers, where thou seest this fair company of youth all joyful and bright, is the very same place where their souls are received, which depart out of the body in the doing of good works; yet are not of such perfection that they deserve to be brought straightways to the kingdom of heaven. . . . For all they which are perfect in all their words and works and thoughts come straight to the heavenly kingdom, as soon as they depart from the body. . . .

(V, xii, p. 263, 265)

Bede's other purgatory is unusual because of the alternating fire and ice. However, cold as a form of punishment within fiery hell is recorded in the apocalyptic vision of Paul,¹² and the infernal quality of ice and snow is common to Germanic peoples. In the same way, walls as boundaries to heaven abound, but they are usually walls of crystal or flame or mist with their gates and guardians and means of entry enumerated and described.¹³ I will return to the literary qualities suggested by the boundless, blank face of Drythelm's wall and other of his images, but to some extent all this imagery is traditional.

Bede's major literary source for miraculous otherworld visits is St. Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*, Book IV. The similar statements about the destination of souls quoted above and a specific

¹⁰ Sister M. T. A. Carroll, *Bede: His Spiritual Teachings*, The Catholic Univ. of America Stud. in Medieval History, N. S. IV (Washington, 1946), 178-180.

¹¹ Translated by Odo John Zimmerman, O.S.B. (New York, 1959), 215-216. Other quotations from this edition will be cited in the text.

¹² Montague James, trans., *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, 1924), 544, 547.

¹³ For instance, see James' translation of the *Visio* of St. Paul, cited above, and Celtic accounts summarized in Patch, *op. cit.*

reference to St. Gregory in the dying thane's story (*HE*, V, xiii, p. 275) show that this section of the *Historia* owes much to the *Dialogues*. The two closest parallels in Gregory deal with a Spanish hermit named Peter and a "soldier of Rome." Peter dies, but "[o]n being restored to life, he declared that he had seen hell with all its torments and countless pools of fire. He also mentioned seeing some of this world's outstanding men tossing in the flames. When his turn came to be cast into the fire, an angel in shining white robes suddenly appeared to prevent him from being buried in the mass. . . ." (IV, 37, p. 238). Peter's life thereafter was a model of penance. A short while later, Gregory relates the soldier's experience:

He saw a river whose dark waters were covered by a mist of vapors that gave off an unbearable stench. Over the river was a bridge. It led to pleasant meadows, covered by green grass and dotted with richly scented flowers. These meadows seemed to be gathering places for people dressed in white robes. The fragrant odors pervading the places were a delight for all who lived there. Everyone had his own dwelling, which gleamed with brilliant light. One house of magnificent proportions was still under construction and the bricks used were made of gold . . . There were houses also along the bank of the river, some of which were infected by the vapors and stench rising from the river. . . .

(IV, 37, p. 239)

Bede was certainly drawing on these accounts because there is a verbal parallel between the description of Peter's penitential life and Drythelm's. The Latin shows this most clearly. Gregory writes: "Tantisque se postmodum jejuniis vigiliisque constrinxit, ut inferni eum videret et pertimuisse tormenta, etiamsi taceret lingua, conversatio loqueretur."¹⁴ Bede records: "et ibi usque ad diem mortis in tanta mentis et corporis contritione duravit, ut multa illum, quae alios laterent, vel horrenda vel desideranda vidisset, etiamsi lingua sileret, vita loqueretur" (p. 255).

Given the certainty of influence, the differences between Bede and St. Gregory are the more striking. Peter's rescue by the angel

¹⁴ J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, vol. 77, col. 382.

recalls the reappearance of Drythelm's guide just as the devils threaten him with fiery tongues. Gregory's freedom in assigning miracles to ordinary men is like Drythelm's simplicity. However, the hellish torments in flame, the evil stench, a fair flowery meadow, perfumed and brilliantly lighted, and the happy people in white were equally available to Bede from general tradition. And Gregory's central and ancient image of the dark river and the bridge, easily crossed only by the just, is absent from Bede. The river organizes the space of Gregory's other world, juxtaposing punishment and reward by placing the two regions within sight of one another. By contrast, Bede's description of the "vallem multae latitudinis ac profunditatis" (p. 254) and the later approach to a "murum permaximum, cuius neque longitudini hinc vel inde, neque altitudini ullus esse terminus videretur" (p. 260) gives a sense of vastness, a remoteness of one region from another. The inner spaces are also different because Gregory describes the physical setting — the houses, for instance — in earthly terms, while Bede's account has a vagueness which seems more otherworldly. Since space is the basic element in creating physical description, these differences indicate that in significant detail Bede's story actually owes little to Gregory, although the *Dialogues* are Bede's authority for this type of miracle story.

Other analogues have occasionally been suggested for Drythelm's journey, but the resemblances are superficial and scarcely important. A similarity in ordering events in Gregory of Tours' record of Abbot Salvius' first death and resurrection (*Historia Francorum*, Book VII, A.D. 584-585) recalls the opening of Drythelm's story, but the body of the two accounts is so dissimilar that the likeness is probably a standard pattern. Salvius, "exhausted by much fever," died during the day.

The monks and his own mother, blending their lamentations bore out his body, washed it, robed, and placed it on the bier; then, chanting psalms and shedding tears, they watched out the livelong night. But, at dawn, when all was made ready for the burying, the body stirred upon the bier. . . . While all stood amazed, asking what so great a miracle should mean, he answered them nothing, but rose up from the bier, feeling

no ill trace of the malady from which he had suffered, and remained three days without food or drink.¹⁵

Salvius eventually emerges and tells his story when urged, but beyond the standard images of sweetness, brightness, and happiness, his heaven little resembles Drythelm's, and his journey does not include the lower regions. Oddly, Salvius' revealing a mystery displeases God, and sores appear on the abbot's tongue. However, Drythelm follows a similar process of dying toward night after a wasting disease, sitting up at dawn (a natural image in any event), amazing the watchers, who include his wife (in Salvius' case it is his mother). He also withdraws for a period of prayer before emerging to settle his affairs. Some of these images come from narratives of Christ's resurrection.

Sulpicius Severus' *Vita S. Martini*, vii, has been connected to Drythelm,¹⁶ perhaps because the *Life* was well known in Britain,¹⁷ but the story of the unbaptized catechumen who is recalled from death by Martin's prayer just as he is being consigned to the pit is only a similar type, not a similar narrative. As the foregoing discussion of literary sources tries to illustrate, Bede had types for every part and every image of Drythelm's story. He has chosen and expressed them, however, in a wholly original way.

The extent of this imaginative reworking can be judged by another of Bede's production, the apocalyptic vision of St. Fursa (*HE*, III, xix). St. Fursa is an Irish saint, and if Bede's reference to a little book on his life is accurate, Fursa's tale probably derives from Celtic sources. Nevertheless, this story is, like Drythelm's, remarkably spare by contrast with the involved symbolism and allegory of St. John, the apocryphal apocalypses, or most Irish underworld lore. Since Drythelm's story has been linked to apocalyptic literature,¹⁸ I will stress the difference between Bede's

¹⁵ *The History of the Franks*, trans. by O. M. Dalton. 2 vols. (Oxford, 1927), ii, 286.

¹⁶ Colgrave, "Bede's Miracle Stories," 215.

¹⁷ J. D. A. Ogilvy, *Books Known to Anglo-Saxon Writers from Aldhelm to Alcuin (670-804)*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), 81. This has been a general source in checking Bede's knowledge of particular works.

¹⁸ Colgrave, "Bede's Miracle Stories," 215.

two stories, although there are some similarities. No doubt some of Bede's imagery derives from apocalyptic literature; after all, he wrote a commentary on the canonical Apocalypse. In contrast to the episodic quality of St. Gregory's or Bede's other miracles in *Historia Ecclesiastica*, these apocalyptic sources resemble Drythelm's account in being fully worked out and forcefully didactic narratives. However, the perspectives of apocalypics, even in St. Fursa's little tale, are notably distinct from Drythelm's finite perceptions.

To begin with, an apocalyptic vision involves the final judgment of the world as a whole; a general view is built into it. Apocalyptic visionaries always have the cosmos before or beneath them. St. Fursa is "carried away heavenward" and told to "look back upon the world" to see it surrounded by the four fires that will eventually engulf it. Furthermore, the significance of each thing that St. Fursa sees is explained to him as he experiences it. The effect produced by this latter method of narration is clearer in the *Apocalypse of Paul*. Paul's visits to the places of torment and righteousness follow a pattern of observation, question, answer; his experiences are organized by the recurring "And I asked the angel . . ." ¹⁹ This technique gives the narrator control over what is happening to him, which means effective control of the other world itself. Paul's freedom to choose what he will see is a sure sign of his privileged character. St. Fursa's consoling and omnipresent guides are far more modest, but they are still assurances of safety. Although he shows his kinship to Drythelm by being personally frightened by events, in contrast to the apocalyptic Paul, Fursa's guides immediately dispel fears with comforting explanations of all that occurs.

The details of punishment and the ability of apocalyptic narrators to recognize particular sinners and their judgments tend to set them apart morally. Recognizing people one knew on earth is no doubt intended to stress the closeness of damnation to every life, but the narrators' detailed view of the horrific torments of others and their own immunity from the agonies of their fellows

¹⁹ For example, James, 542ff.

are actually isolating. However, the remoteness of the narrator is significantly modified in St. Fursa's account. In returning to earth, the saint recognizes one of the tormented and, despite his guides' protection, he is struck by the burning soul and bears the marks to his grave. As it is later explained to him, he received the blow because he had once taken a gift from the evil man. The tone of apocalypses is intentionally terrifying, and their images are violent. These aspects are visible in Bede's account of St. Fursa, but the arrangement of events — Bede tells his readers that he is choosing only a few incidents from the written *Life* — stresses Fursa's own fear and his personal involvement with the damned. The scale of this vision is small and human.

Drythelm's account keeps this human quality foremost. In contrast to apocalyptic visions, even St. Fursa's, Drythelm enters the other world as a soul gone to judgment after death. He experiences his miracle with the perspective and understanding of a finite being until the graceful explanation of his angelic guide completes "a miracle worthy of remembrance and not unlike the miracles of times past" (V, xii, p. 253). Within Bede's framing comments in the chapter, Drythelm tells his story himself. The first-person point-of-view is a literary technique which gives the story an awe-inspiring dimension appropriate to the unknown; yet, because Drythelm relates his own experience, the tone remains gentle, simple, and personal.

Drythelm leaves the world behind completely; he dies, and his going out and coming in are never further explained. He responds humanly to what he sees and is capable of noting directions and making descriptions. But he cannot see into the pit to map its features; he cannot find a break in the wall before heaven nor detect the method by which it was surmounted. The limitations of his perspective magnify the mystery of the unknown. In the same way the generalized images of broad valley and boundless wall, the abstract nouns used to indicate the dark *loca* of hell, and the bright *mansiones* of paradise emphasize Drythelm's human proportions.

Despite his guide, he encounters his experiences first with only his finite understanding. His natural speculations about the broad valley and fair meadow are denied without comforting comment:

I began to think that this [valley of ice and fire] peradventure might be hell, of whose intolerable torments I have heard men oftentimes tell. The guide who was in front made answer to this thought of mine: 'No, think not so! for this is not hell as thou dost suppose.' (p. 257)

And as he led me through the midst of the companies of the blessed inhabitants, I began to think with myself that perchance this was the kingdom of heaven of the which I have heard men oftentimes preach. To this my thought he answered, saying: 'Nay, this is not the kingdom of heaven as thou dost imagine.' (p. 261)

Nor is Drythelm isolated from the fear of torment. His guide abandons him before the roaring pit of hell; as he stands there, "not knowing what I should do, nor whither I should turn my steps, nor what end awaited me" (p. 257, 259), he sees other souls conducted there. Although he is able to tell what they are superficially — a shorn clerk, a layman, a woman, he has no privileged knowledge of their sins or their punishments. As they sink into the pit, he is as ignorant of their fates as of his own. Drythelm's finitude is summed up when the angel finally asks if he understands what he has seen: "Respondi ego, 'Non'" (p. 262).

Drythelm is a simple man, in need of his guide's explanation. After his vision other people are able to "suck increase of godliness out of his words," but Drythelm remains a simple transmitter of grace. The full impact of the experience is kept distinct from the pious explanation by Drythelm's relating his story in character. The angel's explanation at the end is literal. Bede the historian then points out the overriding meaning of the story by localizing it as a historical event and completing the story of Drythelm's life to show the vision's effect.

The air of simplicity does not contradict the high degree of literary craft the story reveals. Most notable are the parallel passages quoted at the top of this page, and the syntax of the sentence quoted which expresses Drythelm's fear at being abandoned at hell's edge. Furthermore, the images are emotionally powerful. Surrounded by demons and darkness, Drythelm looks about for help and sees "the glimpsing of a star shining in the midst of darkness" (V, xii, p. 258), which grows nearer and brighter until the evil

is dispersed. Then Drythelm rather prosaically identifies the light as his former guide. After waiting at the pit for a time:

[Drythelm] was aware of a crowd of evil sprites which did hale five human souls lamenting and wailing into the midst of that darkness, the evil sprites meantimes laughing and triumphing And the evil sprites hailing them went down into the midst of that burning pit; and it came to pass that as they sank farther I could not make distinction between the crying of the men and the laughing of the devils, yet for all that had still a confused noise in my ears.

(p. 259)

This is a straightforward physical description, expressed plainly; yet it epitomizes the Christian belief that in the descent into sin the human becomes indistinguishable from the demonic.

Bede inherited a tradition of the miraculous which was necessarily shaped by his own attitudes and abilities. He was little interested in originality as the modern mind defines it, but he was capable of using tradition to achieve a particular effect. Through Drythelm's story he has expressed man's attempt to comprehend the final unknown — the journey of his soul into judgment.

Linda L. Miller

University of California, Los Angeles