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Cynewulf's Epilogue to *Elene* and the Tastes of the Vercelli Compiler: A Paradigm of Meditative Reading

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Abstract

In his epilogue to *Elene*, Cynewulf provides a paradigm of meditative reading. In it, (i) fear of the Lord leads to (ii) rumination on the texts available and (iii) digression into prayer. In his description of the Last Judgement, Cynewulf uses images of the four elements to move from the microcosm of his own experience to the macrocosm of universal Judgement. Rumination on the legend of the cross is an urgent preparation for the Last Day when, in turn, the mind of God will sift all human actions. In the Vercelli homilies, advice on meditative reading is consistent with Cynewulf's paradigm: the compiler presumably followed such a paradigm when reading his collection.

Cynewulf's *Elene* occurs within the Vercelli Book, the earliest anthology extant in which English devotional poetry is combined systematically with devotional prose.¹ In this paper I shall examine the epilogue to *Elene*, in order to see how its portrait of a monastic reader there corresponds to the ideas which the person who compiled the Vercelli Book had of devotional reading.² We know that Cynewulf wrote with literate, and probably monastic, readers in mind. The Vercelli Book contains two texts by him, each incorporating his

¹ On the ways in which the scribe of the Vercelli Book (possibly acting under the directions of a more learned patron) deliberately combined poetry and prose in his manuscript, see Ó Carragáin 1981. As in the present article I shall be quoting from Vercelli prose as well as Vercelli poetry, for consistency I shall reproduce the manuscript punctuation and capitalization, with references to folio and lines of the manuscript, together with a reference either to the line numbering in the edition by Gradon 1958, or (by page and line) to the edition of the Vercelli homilies by Scragg 1992.

² On the epilogue to *Elene*, I have found Elliott 1953 and 1991 and Warwick Frese 1975 most useful.

“signature” in an acrostic made up of runic letters. In each case, his purpose in composing the acrostic was to ask his reader for prayers for his soul. This motive, implicit in *Elene*, is explicit in *Fates*. There Cynewulf twice addresses the reader to ask for his prayers:

Sie þæs gemyndig mann se ðe lufige
þisses galdres begang þæt he geoce me
ond frofre fricle ic sceall feor heonan
an elles forð eardes neosan .

sið asettan . Nat ic sylfa hwær

of þisse worulde 54r8-12; *Fates* 107-12 (Krapp 1932: 54)

(May the man who delights in the course of this song remember this (Cynewulf's name, which has just been given), and seek for me help and protection. I must go away from here, set out alone upon a journey to a dwelling far from this world, I know not where.)

Two things are noteworthy about this request (and the analogous request in *Elene*). First, they are in the singular. They envisage a solitary reader, ‘who delights in the course of this song’ (*beorn se ðe lufige / þisses giddes begang*, 53v20-21; *Fates* 87-8). This is implied by the use of runes in the first place: the runic acrostics could not have been appreciated by a listening audience, only by a reader. Secondly, the requests envisage a reader who read as monastic authors advised men to read: taking their time to assimilate the meaning of the text, and ever ready to digress into prayer. If not necessarily himself a monk, the reader was expected to react as a monk was trained to react.

The epilogue to *Elene*, set out in the manuscript as a separate section and numbered “.XV.”, is unified by a single theme: that Cynewulf, as a monastic reader, has tried hard, with the help of divine grace, to penetrate to the spiritual meaning, or *sententia*, of those writings he has found on the Holy Cross (*Elene* 1251b-7a); and that this effort is urgent, because his life and the world itself is coming to an end, and the day is soon coming when the Lord Himself will give His definitive judgement, His divine *sententia*, on each person's activities:

Donne dryhten sylf . dom geseceð
engla weorode

133r14-5, *Elene* 1280-1

(when the Lord Himself will seek out judgement, with His retinue of angels)

Cynewulf's urgent efforts to sift out the meaning of the texts he is meditating (1238-9a) are a direct preparation for the Last Day when God will sift out and test all souls (1286b-1306a). The image here given of God's Judgement is

particularly relevant to the activity of reading. At the Judgement, the evil will be cast out of God's mind into hell:

gode no syððan
of ðam morðorhofe in gemynd cumað .
Wuldorcynige ac hie aworpene beoð
of ðam heaðuwylme in helle grund
torn geniðlan .

133r27-9; *Elene* 1302b-06a

(They will never subsequently come from that den of torment into the mind (or memory) of God, the King of Glory. Instead these bitter foes will be thrown from the fierce flame into the bottom of hell.)

On the other hand, the good will be able to see God (1307b-8a). For them the fire of Judgement will be a refining fire which will purge away all sin and leave them

asundrod fram synnum swa smæte gold
þæt in wylme bið womma gehwylces
þurh ofnes fyr eall geclænsod

133r31-2, *Elene* 1309-11

(separated from sins like refined gold which is in the flame, through the fire of the furnace, completely purged of every imperfection.)

Cynewulf's account of himself as a monastic reader is intimately related to the Judgement scene for which he prepares himself in his devotional reading. It is structurally significant that *Elene*, alone among the Vercelli texts, places even the elect in a refining fire.³ Cynewulf's urgent efforts to sift out what is valuable from his texts and to write what is true about the Cross (1251b-6a) are intended to prepare himself and his readers for the coming act of the divine intelligence which, in its Judgement, will tell every being the truth about their actions:

sceall æghwylc ðær
reordberendra riht gehyran
dæda gehwylcra þurh þæs deman muð
ond worda swa same wed gesyllan
eallra unsnyttro ær gesprocenra
þristra geþonca

133r15-8; *Elene* 1281b-6a

³ On the scriptural image of the refining fire, see Wisdom 3: 5-9; Daniel 7: 10; Matthew 3: 11; Luke 3: 16; the patristic interpretations of these scriptural texts are examined by Carl-Martin Edsman 1940.

(All men must then hear the truth about all their actions from the mouth of the Judge. Each man must take responsibility (literally, 'give a pledge') for every word he has previously spoken in foolishness, for all dark thoughts.)

The epilogue sees the Last Judgement as a divine meditation on human actions, for which the best preparation is repentance, aided by devotional reading which leads to prayer. The Vercelli scribe would have understood that this idea comes from a tradition which, as the scribe himself recorded, went back to Isidore of Seville. In Homily III, he provided a brief but connected programme of asceticism. In that homily, the discussion of reading follows a passage on fasting. The idea of fasting seems to have continued to preoccupy the mind of the scribe as he began to transcribe the new section of the homily, because he mistakenly wrote *fæstenu* (fol. 15v1; Scragg 81/126) when the context, and the other extant manuscripts of the homily, make it clear that *rædinga* was intended:

æfter þam fæstenne . Broðor mine synt þa fæstenu [*other manuscripts: gebedu ond rædinga haligra boca*] to beganne swa swa isidorius cwæð mid þam gebedum ge beoð geclēnsode ond mid þam rædingum ge bioð intimbrede Soðlice to witanne is þæt singallice gebed myclum fremap mid gode .

15r25-15v4; Scragg 81/126-9

(After fasting, brethren, fasting [*other manuscripts: prayers and reading of holy books*] are to be practised, as Isidore said: with prayers you are cleansed and with readings you are built up. It is to be known truly that perpetual prayer prevails much with God.⁴)

Elene exemplifies Isidore's teaching that 'it is better to pray than to read'. The final lines of the epilogue emphasise that it is those souls who avoided evil and devoted themselves to prayer who will experience God's mercy on the last day. Cynewulf's final concern is to encourage his reader to turn to God in prayer:

him bið engla weard
milde ond bliðe pæs ðe hie mana gehwylc
forsawon synna weorc ond to suna metudes
wordum cleopodon

133v3-5; *Elene* 1316b-9a

(The Guardian of the angels will be kind and gracious to them, because they despised every kind of evil, sinful deeds, and called aloud to the Son of God.)

At the beginning of the epilogue, Cynewulf makes it clear that his efforts to assimilate his material about the Cross involved him in great anxiety. The epilogue as a whole, with its description of the Last Judgement, explains why. His is not the anxiety of a poet afraid that his poem might not come out right, but rather that of a monk aware that for himself and his readers death and judgement were swiftly approaching. He is anxious to achieve a proper understanding of the spiritual significance of his sources, so as to awaken in his readers that devotion which God would reward by the gift of His grace. Once he had, through meditation and prayer, properly assimilated the material on the Cross which he had found, composition of the poem seems to have been no further problem to him. Cynewulf refers to the activity of composing the poem as the natural and unselfconscious exercise of a traditional skill, needing no analysis. He only refers briefly to the act of composition, using two formulaic phrases. The first is *wordcræft wæf* (132v23, *Elene* 1237a). The word *wæf* comes from *wefan*, 'to weave'; the phrase might be literally translated as 'I wove word-skill', and is reminiscent of the formula *wordum wrixlan*, 'to vary words', found in *Beowulf*.⁵ The second formula used by Cynewulf is *leoducræft onleac* (132v31, *Elene* 1250a). The verb *onlucan* was traditionally used of poetic speech, in such formulae as *wordhord onleac*: Cynewulf's formula might be literally translated as 'unlocked the power of song'.⁶ These two references are brief and conventional. Cynewulf is not primarily interested in techniques of poetic composition. The epilogue is clearly intended to emphasize his efforts as a meditative reader, rather than his skill as a poet.

If his references to his authorship of *Elene* are casual, Cynewulf describes his efforts to read and assimilate the legend of the Cross not once but three times, in three successive periods (*Elene* 1236-42a; 1242b-51a; 1251b-7a). The third of these statements merges into Cynewulf's runic signature (1257b-76a), and this acrostic in turn forms the transition between Cynewulf's account of his own efforts and his account of the approaching Last Judgement. In the threefold repetition we can see something more than simply a reflection of how Cynewulf tried repeatedly to assimilate the *Acta Cyriaci*, his main source for *Elene*. Each of the three periods incorporates elements which Cynewulf apparently considered essential to the meditation of a text, and these elements correspond to the descriptions in monastic writers of what devotional reading should involve. The three statements in *Elene* are not merely descriptive. They are implicitly prescriptive, designed to drive home a paradigm or model of what devotional reading should involve. That is, they are designed to teach the sequence of spiritual dispositions which should be cultivated during meditative reading.

⁴ On the Latin homily which was the immediate source for the passage, see Scragg 1992: 81.

⁵ On *wefan*, see *TOE*, I, 479 (09.06), and II, 1495.

⁶ See *TOE*, I, 477 (09.05.05: to disclose, reveal), and II, 1236.

Each statement of the paradigm has a similar structure, and each contains three elements. In each statement there is a progression from (i) fear (caused by sin and intensified by an awareness of the approach of death and the Judgement) to (ii) an anxious meditation of the words of the text, until (iii) finally enlightenment is granted by God. Cynewulf seems to have considered the gift of composing poetry as simply a byproduct of this enlightenment (*Elene* 1250a, discussed above). We shall now examine in turn each of the three elements of the paradigm.

In each repetition of the paradigm, Cynewulf says that he began his meditation of the text with a sense of sorrow. He describes his state of mind in terms reminiscent of St Isidore's well-known definition of compunction of heart: 'humility of mind, praying in tears through remembrance of sin and fear of the Judgement' (*Compunctio cordis est humilitas mentis cum lacrimis exorients de recordatione peccati et timore iudicii*).⁷ Cynewulf avoids repetitiveness by giving a different motive for his sorrow in each statement of the paradigm. The three statements thus form a progressive series, in which the motives for compunction become increasingly urgent and universal.

In the first statement, Cynewulf associates his efforts to meditate with an awareness that his frail body is soon to fail him:

þVS ic frod ond fus þurh þæt fæcne hus
wordcræft wæf ond wundrum læs
þragum þreodode ond geþanc reodode
nihtes nearwe

132v23-4; *Elene* 1236-9a

(Thus I, aged and ready for death because of this treacherous house (my body), have woven word-skill and wonderfully gathered (material). At times I have meditated and sifted my thoughts carefully by night.)

Pamela Gradon pointed out that *fæcne hus*, 'the treacherous house' is a metaphor for the poet's own body.⁸ Cynewulf begins to meditate from an awareness that his body, already aged, cannot be relied upon much longer. Similarly, *fus* (1236a) in this context means 'restless and ready for death'.⁹ The association of the word *fus* with death is made clear by the context: the climax of the epilogue is to be a picture of the imminent end of the whole world. The Vercelli scribe would have fully understood the ascetic reasons why Cynewulf performed his study of the Cross legend *nihtes*, by night. As Homily III puts it,

⁷ Isidore of Seville, *Sententiarum Libri Tres*, II, xii: PL 83.613. On the theme of compunction in *Elene*, see Anderson 1983: 160-75.

⁸ Gradon 1958: 71. See also *hus* in *TOE*, I, 689 (16.02.05.02 A holy place or sanctuary).

⁹ See the range of meanings associated with this word in *TOE*, II, 995.

þæt nis idellic ær to arisenne . ond ær leohte to wacienne forþam
dryhten gehet þone heofonlice beah þam waciendan .

14v5-7, Scragg 78/86-8

(It is not useless to get up early and to be awake before dawn, because the Lord promised the heavenly treasure to the wakeful.)

The second statement of the paradigm explains Cynewulf's anxiety by linking such physical factors to moral ones. It is his sinful acts which oppress him, and there is perhaps a hint that this guilt has added to his physical illness:

ic wæs weorcum fah
synnum asæled sorgum gewæled
bitrum gebunden biesgum beþrunge
132v26-8; *Elene* 1242b-4

(I was made guilty by my actions, bound in my sins, afflicted by sorrows, bitterly bound and oppressed by afflictions.)

These two expressions of Cynewulf's sorrow come respectively at the beginning of the first and second statements of the paradigm. In the third statement, the description of Cynewulf's sorrow is kept until the end, so that it can merge into the runic passage. This passage widens the issues of the poem from Cynewulf's anxieties about himself to the imminent end of all creation. We move from the microcosm of Cynewulf's body and its sins to the macrocosm of the world, seen in the perspective of its approaching end (Cross 1962). Thus a passage which might have been merely a riddle is made to transform and universalize the concerns of the poem:¹⁰

a wæs sæcc oððæt
[C] cnyssed cearwelmm . *Cen* . drusende
þeah he in medohealle maðmas þege
[Y] æplede gold . *Yrming* . gnornode
[N] . *Nied* . gefera nearusorge dreah
[E] enge rune þær him . *Eoh* . fore
milpaðas mæt modig þrægde
[W] wirum gewlenced . *Wynn* . is geswiðrad
gomen æfter gearum geoguð is gecyrrad
[U] ald onmedla . *Ur* . wæs geara
geoguðhades glæm nu synt geardagas
æfter fyrstmearce forðgewitene
[L] lifwynne geliden swa . *Lagu* . toglideð

¹⁰ To enable the reader to appreciate the role of the runic acrostic in developing the themes of the poem I give the names of the runes in italics in the text, and again at the appropriate points of the translation; and their phonetic values in square brackets to the left of the text.

[F] flodas gefysde . *Feoh* . æghwam bið
 læne under lyfte landes frætwe
 gewitaþ under wolcnum winde gelicost
 133r2-10; *Elene* 1256b-71

(There was always conflict¹¹ until that (i.e., until I had been given enlightenment about the Cross). I was tossed in waves of worry, a guttering torch [*Cen*]. Although he partook of treasures and curved gold in the meadhall, the wretch [*Yrming*] lamented. His necessary companion [*Nied-gefera*; i.e., his body]¹² endured crushing suffering, an oppressive secret. Meanwhile before his eyes the steed [*Eoh*] measured out the milestones, galloped full of spirit and proud in its ornament. Joy [*Wynn*] and pleasure is lessened with the years' passing. Youth has sped away from us and the glory of old. Once there was wealth (or strength) [*Ur*] and the radiance of being young. Now the days gone by have escaped from us in the course of time. The joy of life has departed, just as the sea [*Lagu*] ebbs and the waters (are) driven onwards. Riches [*Feoh*] are transitory for everyone under the skies, the beauties which adorn the land depart under the clouds like the wind ...)

To effect the transition from his own personal situation to that of the whole world, Cynewulf first refers to himself in the third person (*beah he in medohealle maðmas þege*, 1358) so that the reader (while working out the acrostic embodying Cynewulf's own name) is also beginning to contemplate a generalized image of the transient human condition. A central part of this image is the racing horse (the E-rune, 1261b, stands for the word *Eoh*, 'a steed'). This steed is clearly intended to evoke the aristocratic life.¹³ Thus the epithets associated with the steed are chosen so as to recall, not so much the steed itself, but rather the qualities which a young aristocratic rider would embody and enjoy: *wynn* (1263b, a rune-name, 'joy'); *gomen* (1264a, 'pleasure'); *geoguð* (1264b, 'youth'), *geoguðhades glæm* (1266a, 'the radiance of being young'); and *lifwynne* (1268a, 'the joy of life'). In the steed, Cynewulf provides his reader with a compelling image of the joy of life, swift and quick to pass. Cynewulf allows his images for time's passing to develop naturally from the image of the racing steed: thus youth is said to be *gecyrred* (1264a: literally, 'to have run off'), and the joy of life is said to be *geliden* (1268a: literally, 'departed on a journey'). The days gone by are *æfter fyrstmearce forðgewitene* (1267): *fyrstmearc*, which contains the metaphor of a marker or point (*mearc*) denoting the end of an allotted span

¹¹ For a defence of the manuscript reading, see Hennessy Olsen 1985: 85. Although the manuscript reading is likely to be an error for *secg*, 'man', Olsen does show that the Vercelli compiler could have made sense of it.

¹² Cf. the theme of "this treacherous house", line 1236b, discussed above.

¹³ See *Beowulf* Section XIII, lines 837-924; *The Battle of Maldon*, 1-5, etc.

(*fyrst*) of time, looks back to the earlier word *milpaðas* (1262a: literally 'mile-tracks'). The racing steed galloped over tracks on which the miles were marked out by milestones. Line 1267 could be paraphrased by saying that the days gone by 'have departed after time's winning-post has been reached'. Concepts such as "youth" and "joy of life" have scriptural associations, and also recall the larger theme of the Ages of Man (examined by Burrow 1986). By the end of the acrostic the reader has moved from meditating on Cynewulf's particular situation, to meditating on the life of man and the way of the world. Cynewulf next applies the idea of speed and transience to the untrammelled elements: the tides and waters (1268-9a) and the wind (1270-6a). Images of the sky, wind and air predominate in this final stage of the transition from the microcosm of his own body to the macrocosm of the universe. Thus, Cynewulf evokes the four elements, earth (of which the human body itself was made), water, air and (what will consume them all) fire. If the earth and its adornments (*landes frætwe*, 1270b) are as shifting and transitory as water and air, this is because it, like all created things on earth, awaits to be consumed by the fire of Judgement:

swa þeos world eall gewiteð
 ond eac swa some þe hire on wurdon
 atydrede teonleg nimeð .
 Ðonne dryhten sylf dom geseceð
 133r13-5; *Elene* 1276b-80

(So all of this world will vanish; likewise the destroying flame will take away everything which was begotten in it, when the Lord Himself seeks out Judgement.)

By means of his runic signature Cynewulf links his own sense of bodily and moral insecurity to the fate of every man and of all the world. The necessity for proper meditation of devotional texts becomes more and more urgent as we advance into the last days, and approach the day of God's judgement on our world and its actions.

The second element of the paradigm is the act of meditating a text. This activity is described in the first and third statements of the paradigm; in the second statement it is to be inferred (see line 1244) but it is there subsumed under Cynewulf's account of his anxiety. In the first statement of the paradigm, Cynewulf uses three phrases to describe his assimilation of the text (the passage has already been quoted and translated above):

wundrum læs
 pragum þreodode ond gepanc reodode
 132v24; *Elene* 1237b-8

Lesan was used to gloss two Latin words: *legere* 'to read' and *colligere* 'to collect' (Bosworth-Toller 1898: 635; Bosworth-Toller 1924: 614, under *lesan*).

The word may here refer primarily to the activity of reading, but it could also refer to the process of associating disparate texts by verbal reminiscence which is central to monastic meditation (Leclercq 1961: 57-152). *Preodian*, 'to deliberate, take thought', is used together with the word *smeagan* in an eleventh-century homily which tells how Joachim 'pondered and meditated in his heart what he should do in this matter' (*He ða Joach preodode ond smeade on his mode hwæt he embe þæt dyde*).¹⁴ *Smeagan* usually glosses the Latin verb *meditari*, and *preodian* seems likewise to refer to the process of meditation. Gradon takes the verb *reodode* as deriving from *hriðrian*, 'to sift' (Gradon 1958: 71, note to line 1238). *Gepanc reodode* would therefore mean 'I sifted my thought'; the process of meditation involved sifting out those elements of the text which were most suitable for prayer. The refining fires of the epilogue bring us back once more to the idea of "sifting": meditation of a text is for Cynewulf preparation for the day when all men will be

ascyred and asceaden scylða gehwylcre
deopra firena þurh þæs domes fyr .
133v1-2; *Elene* 1313-4

(purged and cleansed from every kind of guilt, from deep sins,
through the fire of judgement.)

In the third statement of the paradigm, Cynewulf emphasises the role of memory in meditation:

ic þæs wuldres treowes
oft nales æne hæfde ingemynd
ær ic þæt wundor onwrigen hæfde
ymb þone beorhtan beam swa ic on bocum fand
wyrða gangum on gewritum cyðan
be ðam sigebeacne
132v31-133r2; *Elene* 1250b-6a

(I meditated on that tree of glory not once but often, before I
discovered the miraculous truth about the tree – according to what
I found set out about the victorious symbol in the books which
chanced my way.)

Like the Vercelli scribe himself, Cynewulf was dependent on chance (*wyrða gangum* could be translated as 'the course of chance events') to bring him useful material on the Cross. His efforts to meditate on the Cross were therefore unavoidably long-drawn-out and interrupted. He tells us that he had to return to the subject 'often, not just once' (*oft nales æne*, 1252a). His assimilation of his sources is seen, as in Isidore and other monastic writers, as an exercise of memory (*ingemynd*, 1252b) (Leclercq 1961; Carruthers 1990:

¹⁴ Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 121, fol. 125r (Assmann 1964: 124, lines 241-4).

156-88). Only by such an effort could his mind become imbued by the texts and insights which he happened to find.

The third element in his paradigm was for Cynewulf the most important: without it the other two were useless. Cynewulf makes it clear that his enlightenment about the Cross did not come from his own intelligence or from the efforts which he had made, but was granted by divine grace. In this, Cynewulf was at one with the monastic tradition:

nysse ic gearwe
be þære [rode] riht ær me rumran geþeapt
þurh ða mæran miht on modes þeapt
wisdom onwreah
132v25-6; *Elene* 1239b-42a

I did not clearly or rightly understand about the (Cross)¹⁵ until
Wisdom, in her glorious power, gave deeper insight (*rumran
geþeapt*, literally 'wider thought') to the thought of my mind.

In this first statement of the paradigm, enlightenment is attributed to 'wisdom'. Within a monastic tradition, wisdom has specific meanings, which we will examine in a moment. In the second statement of the paradigm, enlightenment is attributed explicitly to the action of divine grace. This divine gift heals the moral and bodily ills which had afflicted Cynewulf; his power to compose the present poem was part of this divine gift:

ær me lare onlag þurh leohtne had
gamelum to geoce gife unscynde
mægencyning amæt ond on gemynd beþeat
torht ontynde tidum gerymde
bancofan onband breostlocan onwand
leoðucræft onleac þæs ic lustum breac
willum on worlde

132v28-31, *Elene* 1245-51a

(before the mighty King, to comfort an old man, gave me
instruction in a glorious way: bestowed on me a noble gift and
poured it into my mind, at times revealed it in its brightness and
extended it. He unbound my body and opened my spirit, unlocked
the craft of poetry which I have enjoyed eagerly and in happiness.)

In the third statement of the paradigm the supernatural enlightenment granted to Cynewulf is referred to briefly and implicitly, in his account of how he 'uncovered all the miracle of that glorious tree' (*ic þæt wundor onwrigen*

¹⁵ Editors supply *rod*, 'cross', because without it the line would lack alliteration. Without the word, the imperfect line would still make sense, albeit vague and grammatically as well as metrically suspect: 'about that [matter]'.

hæfde / ymb þone beorhtan beam, *Elene* 1253-4a). But Cynewulf's main concern in this third statement is to link the account of his efforts to meditate with that of the approaching Judgement. Here, the paradigm is completed by the Last Judgement scene itself. It is on the Last Day, Cynewulf emphasizes, that men will be finally enlightened as to 'the truth about all their actions', and will give a true account of all their thoughts on this life (see lines 1281b-6a, quoted and discussed above).

Throughout the epilogue to *Elene*, it is in ascetic terms that Cynewulf sees his efforts to assimilate the material on the Cross that came his way. In the Vercelli homilies, as in other early medieval accounts, meditation is similarly seen as an exercise of asceticism. Cynewulf mentions at the beginning of the epilogue that he studied his material by night (*nihtes*, *Elene* 1239a). This detail has an ascetic significance. St Benedict prescribed the period before dawn, between matins and lauds, for meditation (in this context, learning by heart) of the psalms and liturgical lessons by those who had not yet perfectly learned them.¹⁶ In his commentary on the Rule, Smaragdus develops this prescription into a picture of compunction which is reminiscent of Cynewulf's account of the attitudes with which he began his meditation:

Non enim in lectulo carnalium voluptatum dilectus Christus invenitur, sed in laboribus sanctis, excubiis sacris, et orationibus invenitur crebris, non in somni torpore, sed in vigiliarum oratione et orationis invenitur compunctione.¹⁷

(Christ the beloved is not found in a bed of carnal delights, but in holy works, sacred night-watches, and in frequent prayers; not in the torpor of sleep, but in the prayer of vigils and in the compunction of prayer.)

The Vercelli scribe was familiar with such sentiments. Vigils are among the ascetic exercises recommended in Vercelli Homily III:

þæt nis idellic ær to arisenne . ond ær leohte to wacienne forþam dryhten gehet þone heofonlice beah þam waciendan
14v5-7; Scragg 78/86-8

(It is not without use to rise early and to be awake before dawn, because the Lord promised the heavenly reward to those who watch.)

The epilogue is a description of, and an exhortation to, watchfulness. It exemplifies the scriptural truth that 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' (Psalm 110/111: 10; Ecclesiasticus 1: 16, and parallels). In seeing

¹⁶ "Quod vero restat post Vigiliis a fratribus qui psalterii vel lectionum aliquid indigent meditationi inserviat": *The Rule of St. Benedict*, Ch. VIII (Fry 1981: 202-3).

¹⁷ Smaragdus. *Commentarium in Regulam Sancti Benedicti*, PL 102: 830.

ascetic vigils and meditation as a preparation for a wisdom conceived as divine enlightenment, Cynewulf is typically monastic, and at one with the sentiments of other texts (such as Homilies III and XXI) in the Vercelli collection. A parallel to the successive stages of Cynewulf's paradigm is provided by Vercelli Homily XII. This rogation homily, directly concerned with the ascetic life, describes how divine wisdom operates in the soul:

be ðam dryhtnes egesan hit is ðus cweden . initium sapientie timor domini . Snyttro fruma is dryhtnes egesa of ðam dryhtnes egesan us wiorðað acenned hiortan onbyrdnes of ðære onbyrðnesse eaðmodnes bið acenned of ðære eaðmodnesse licumlice lustas ond ealle uncysta wiorð ut awyrtrumade ond ealle gastlice mægenu sciolon forð weaxan of dryhtnes egesan

74v24-75r6: Scragg 229/53-8

(Of the fear of the Lord it is said that 'initium sapientiae timor domini': the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord. From the fear of the Lord, compunction of heart is born in us, and from compunction humility is born. By humility bodily lusts and all vices are gradually rooted out, and spiritual virtues must spring up through fear of the Lord.)

The sequence of spiritual states in this passage, as well as the analogous sequences in the beginning of the epilogue to *Elene*, suggest the dispositions with which the Vercelli scribe may have felt he should approach the act of reading *Elene* in particular, and the verse and prose of his collection in general.

Cynewulf's justification for ending his poem with the Last Judgement scene in *Elene*, as in his other signed poems, was a devotional one: the Judgement provided the strongest motivation for the sort of prayerful reading he describes at the beginning of the epilogue. The primary function of Cynewulf's study of material on the Cross was to make his mind receptive to a higher activity, the activity of prayer. He wrote his poem to encourage his readers to open their hearts in turn to the promptings of the same Spirit, and, thus inspired, to pray for his soul.

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