1 / From *Logos* to Canon: The Making of a Saint's Life

Sacred Life in Sacred Word

One of the most imaginative and prolific writers of the Middle Ages also happened to be one of the most influential early medieval sacred biographers. Gregory of Tours was born in Arverni (the present Clermont-Ferrand) in 538–39 and died in Tours on November 17 in 593–94. Gregory, named Gregorius Florentius at birth, was descended from a distinguished Gallo-Roman family closely related to the most illustrious houses of Gaul. His education, he tells us, was in church schools and principally confined to a study of Scripture. Given such a clerical education in this region of Gaul in the late sixth century, it is fair to conclude that his knowledge of the classics was limited.[1] Although he frequently lamented his lack of training in rhetoric and secular literature, he appears to have read voraciously and was continually busy at his writing.[2] Gregory tells us: *Decem libros historiarum, septem miraculorum, unum de vita patrum scripsi; in psalteri tractatu librum unum commentatus sum; de cursibus etiam ecclesiasticis unum librum condidi.*[3] This list is not complete; there are works undoubtedly from his pen which are not contained in it, such as his *Passio Sanctorum Martyrum Septem Dormientium apud Ephesum.* Such industry may suggest that his self-deprecatory remarks are not to be taken entirely at face value.

Gregory's most important contribution to the corpus of sacred biography is his *Liber Vitae Patrum,* composed about 591.[4] This is a

1. Max Bonnet, *Le Latin de Grégoire de Tours* (Paris, 1890), pp. 48–76. Bonnet's comments on Gregory's education remain the standard; see also Raymond Van Dam, *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul* (Berkeley, 1985), pp. 202–9.

2. Edward James, *Gregory of Tours: Life of the Fathers* (Liverpool, 1985), pp. 10–11.

3. *Catholic Encyclopaedia,* Vol. VII, p. 20.

4. Gregorii Episcopi Turonensis Miracula et Minora Opera, "Liber Vitae Patrum,"

lively, albeit prolix, work of the lives of twenty Gallic saints, all but two of whom were connected to Gregory's family or with the two dioceses where he lived most of his life, Clermont and Tours. In the preface to this well-received work, he announced that his interest in writing it was

> to build up the church [*ecclesiam aedificare*] . . . [because] the life of the saints not only opens up their intentions but also excites the minds of listeners to emulate them [*verum etiam auditorum animos incitat ad profectum*].[5]

Gregory's intention is that his "Life of the Fathers" will prove exemplary. Such lives bestow benefit for both believer and unbeliever, and it is the latter who will contribute the most to the increase (*aedificare*) of the church in its missionary work. Gregory's point that readings from the lives of the saints can inspire individuals to take up the cross of salvation shares in the spirit of St. Augustine's reworking of the Pauline idea that the saints were the living *templum Dei*.[6] In his *De Mendacio,* Augustine, in an extension of Paul's remarks in 1 Corinthians 3:16–17, proposes that the saint's deed is a more useful depiction of Christian truth than the employment of complex language in Christian teaching.[7] Although Augustine may be making allowances for the illiterate, his argument also reflects his concern for the age-old dispute in rhetoric between *res* and *verba*. Gregory of Tours was unlikely to have known of this dispute in classical rhetoric, and yet his preface suggests that by the late sixth century the Augustinian position in the argument had become part of the common heritage of Christian thinking.

Scriptores rerum Merovingicarvm: MGH Vol. I, part II, ed. Br. Krusch (Hanover, 1885), p. 455.

5. Ibid., p. 622. Translations are mine unless indicated otherwise. For a valuable discussion of how Gregory's public received his teaching, see M. van Uytfanghe, "Hagiographie et son public à l'epoque Merovingienne," in *Studia Patristica* 16 (1985): 54–62.

6. *Biblia Sacra: Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem,* 2 vols., ed. R. Weber, (Stuttgart, 1983), Vol. II, p. 1772: "nescitis quia templum Dei estis et Spiritua Dei habitat in vobis." All quotations from the Latin Bible are from the Vulgate and will be from this edition.

7. St. Augustine, *De Mendacio, PL* 40, cols. 508, 513: "Ita pleraque in verbis intelligere non valentes, in factis sanctorum colligimus quemadmodum oporteat accipi, quod facile in aliam partem duceretur, nisi exemplo revocaretur."

For Gregory, and for the great majority of those who followed him in the composition of sacred biography, the truth or matter of a subject (*res*) was no longer to be exemplified primarily through ornamented language (*verba*) but through the depiction of specific action in the life of the saint. The change which upset the late-classical balance between matter and ornament was to favor matter over ornament in catechetical settings. The primary motive for this change was to make the learning of the classical handbooks (designed largely to teach eloquence) available to Christian teachers, to give them the rhetorical skills necessary to defend the truth of their Scriptures. In Jerome and Augustine, but also as late as Bede in *De Schematibus et Tropis Sacrae Scripturae Liber,* we see the Fathers adapting and rewriting texts of Cicero, Servius on Vergil, Donatus on Terence, the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium,* Horace's *Ars Poetica,* and other classical handbooks. Their intention was to take this classical tradition and turn it into a practical vehicle for their missionary program and for their scriptural exegesis. The very titles are indicative of this catechetical program, as in Fulgentius's allegorizing composition *The Exposition of the Content of Vergil according to Moral Philosophy* (ca. 550), perhaps the most influential commentary on Vergil for the Middle Ages.[8]

This legacy manifests itself most clearly in the propensity of medieval Christian sacred biography to emphasize dramatized action over complex argument. Gregory is one of the first sacred biographers in the Latin West to reflect this view unselfconsciously and hence stands at the beginning of the tradition.

There are two additional reasons for the primacy of the dramatic deed in medieval saints' lives: the paradigmatic actions of Christ in the New Testament and the illiteracy of the audiences for whom these texts were intended.

The lives of the saints were sacred stories designed to teach the faithful to imitate actions which the community had decided were paradigmatic. Christ's behavior in the Gospels was the single authenticating norm for all action. For actions (*res*) narrated in the lives of the saints to be binding for the community, they had to be an *imitatio Christi*. Thus, a particularly compelling instance of Christian charity in, the late-eleventh-century *Vita Aedwardi Regis* (composed 1068–75), which depicted Edward the Confessor healing the leprous woman, had authority for that community because it was a *speculum* in which they saw the curative hand of Christ. (The figure of Edward may have also

8. *Classical and Medieval Literary Criticism,* eds. A. Preminger, O. B. Hardison, Jr., and K. Kerrane (New York, 1974), pp. 284–85.

stood as a political allegory, with Christ reaching out in mercy to the beleaguered Saxon England after the recent debacle at Hastings.)[9]

Such actions, then, functioned as complex religious symbols and as such could synthesize a multilayered ethos with less ambiguity than argument (*verba*). The ability of such dramatic symbols to synthesize complex ideologies in narrative gave them a special place in a culture whose values were shaped by religious belief. In this narrative frame, action becomes ritual, and specific action becomes specific ritual. For sacred biographers, there existed a veritable thesaurus of established approved actions which they could employ in their texts. The repetition of actions taken from Scripture or from earlier saints' lives (often this practice extended to appropriating the exact language) ensured the authenticity of the subject's sanctity. Within this cultural setting, the saint's life, with its emphasis on right action, served as a catechetical tool much like the stained glass which surrounded and instructed the faithful in their participation at the liturgy. The sacred word no less than the sacred image, depicted vivid tableaux which communicated the Christian message unambiguously. Indeed, in the idiom of sacred biography, from Gregory to the *vitae* read in the second nocturns of the matins service, to learned Latin texts like the *Vita Aedwardi Regis* to the vernacular lives in the *South English Legendary,* to the lives written by John Capgrave at the close of the Middle Ages, paradigmatic action dominates the narrative structure. Thus, Gregory's central goal for his work is to present models of behavior so worthy of emulation that all will follow their example. Such a strongly mimetic orientation places the *Liber Vitae Patrum* firmly in a tradition of biographical writing as old as Isocrates' *Evagoras.*

Language and the Sacred

Gregory's next point in his preface is more difficult to construe. In a grammatical discussion of his preference for using the singular *vita* rather than the plural *vitae,* he concludes:

9. *The Life of King Edward the Confessor,* ed. F. Barlow (London, 1962), pp. 61–64: "A dish of water was brought; the King dipped in his hand; and with the tips of his fingers he anointed the face of the young woman and the places infected by the disease. He repeated this action several times, now and then making the sign of the cross. And believe in wonder one about to relate wonders. Those diseased parts that had been treated by the smearing softened and separated from the skin; . . . his healing hand had brought out all that noxious disease . . . when, all foulness washed away, the grace of God moulded her with beauty" (*cum dei gratia . . . eam uenusto decore informat*). (Barlow's translation.)

> *Unde manifestum est, melius dici vitam patrum quam vitas, quia, cum sit diversitas meritorum virtumque, una tamen omnes vita corporis alit in mundo.*
>
> Whence it is clear that it is preferable to speak of the life of the fathers than lives, because, although there is a diversity of merit and virtue, in the world one life nourishes all bodies.[10]

Gregory's conclusion is most important as it reveals his understanding of the relationship between theological truth and language. Notice that his argument moves beyond purely grammatical concerns into the realm of theology. The precedents of Gellius, Pliny, and the grammarians notwithstanding, the essential reason for his choice of the singular when composing a book of more than one life is based on the developing Christian idea that the saints share collectively in the luminous life of the incarnate Christ. In sum, sanctity is derived from the sacred, which is radically singular.[11]

Like much of his thinking, Gregory's understanding of this interdependence of saint and savior is derivative. Indeed, it is this very lack of originality in his remarks which makes him an ideal figure for our discussion: Gregory's real importance is his ability to represent the *Weltanschauung* of the age. In the present instance, although his remarks are not directly derived from Augustine, they owe much to Augustine's Neoplatonist teaching that human life was like a penumbra reflecting the central brilliance of the divine. In Question 46 of his *De Diversis Quaestionibus Octoginta Tribus,* Augustine stated:

10. Krusch, pp. 662–63: "Et quaeritur a quibusdam, utram vita sanctorum an vitas dicere debeamus. A. Gellius quoque et conplures philosophorum vitas dicere voluerunt. Nam Plinius auctor in tertio artis grammaticae libro ait: 'Vitas antiqui cuiuscumque nostrum dixerunt; sed grammatici pluralem numerum non putaverunt habere vitam.' Unde manifestum est, *melius dici vitam patrum quam vitas,* quia, cum sit diversitas meritorum virtutumque, una tamen omnes vita corporis alit in mundo. Et scripsi, fateor, in inferiore confessorum libro aliqua de quorundam vitam quae in corpore operati sunt breviora, idcirco quia, cum de Dei virtute ingentia censeantur, parva tamen redduntur in scriptis; prolixiora quoque in hoc, quod vita sanctorum vocitare voluimus, libro imperiti idiotaeque praesumimus propalare, orantes Dominum, ut dignetur dare verbum in ore nostro, qui ora mutorum ad usus praestinos saepius reseravit, et quod in sanctis praecipit scribi, reputet ea suis in laudibus declamari."

11. See Ephesians 5:8–14 and Romans 12:3–10.

Sed anima rationalis inter eas res, quae sunt a Deo conditae, omnia superat; . . . in tantum ab eo lumine illo intellegibili perfusa quodammodo et inlustrata cernit. . . .

Now among the things which have been created by God, the rational soul is the most excellent of all. . . . [It is] imbued in some way and illumined by him with light, intelligible light.[12]

Gregory subordinates grammaticality, and with it language's ability to represent reality, to the exigencies of religious truth. Language, it appears, can be employed in discourse to depict contexts which violate both the normative view of things (e.g., Gregory's use of the singular rather than the plural) and its own syntactic structures so that it may be a handmaiden to theology. Once again, the most influential teacher for the Middle Ages on this subject is Augustine, who in Book IV of *De Doctrina Christiana,* argues for the Ciceronian ideal that wisdom and eloquence (*sapientia et eloquentia*) must be intimately yoked.[13]

For Augustine however, (and, it would appear, for Gregory), the highest duty of the Christian writer was the clear expression of the truth; the basis of Christian rhetoric under Augustine's guidance was strongly antisophist. Indeed, the great feat that Augustine accomplished in *De Doctrina Christiana* was to reestablish the Ciceronian ideal of *sapientia et eloquentia* against his sophist opponents. Truth without the ornament necessary to persuasion cannot teach; persuasion without truth is empty. Augustine, paraphrasing Cicero in *De Oratore,* says:

sapientiam sine eloquentia parum prodesse ciuitatibus, eloquentiam uero sine sapientia nimium obesse plerumque, prodesse numquam.

wisdom without eloquence is of small avail to a country, but that eloquence without wisdom is generally a great hindrance, and never a help.[14]

12. Augustine, *De Diversis Quaestionibus Octoginta Tribus,* ed. Al. Mutzenbecher, *CCSL* (Turnhout, 1975), p. 73; and D. L. Mosher, trans. and ed., *Saint Augustine: Eighty-Three Different Questions* (Washington, 1982), p. 81. In his *De Doctrina Christiana,* ed. J. Martin, *CCSL,* Vol. 32 Pt. 4, I (Turnhout, 1962), Augustine, in an oblique reworking of a remark in the Epistle to James, refers to God as the "Father of lights" (". . . *supernam quae 'a Patre luminum' descendit . . .*"). See Bk. IV, V, VII.

13. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana,* Bk. IV, V, VII. See also the informative discussion of this ideal by Peter Dronke in "Medieval Rhetoric," *The Medieval Poet and His World* (Rome, 1984), pp. 7–38.

14. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana,* Bk. IV, V, VII.

Augustine's great work of biblical hermeneutics and exposition of Christian rhetoric had, as Baldwin pointed out more than half a century ago, a "significance . . . out of all proportion to its size."[15] Cassiodorus refers to the authority of *De Doctrina Christiana* in his work on the Psalms; Rabanus Maurus drew heavily on Book III in his *De Institutione Clericorum;* and in the thirteenth century, St. Bonaventure began his *Ars Concionandi* with a reference to Augustine's distinction between *inventio* and *elocutio*. Such an influential treatise must have affected the intellectual climate even of remote late-sixth-century Tours. Stancliffe has recently demonstrated that as early as Sulpicius Severus's completion of the *Vita Sancti Martini* (ca. 396) there was a considerable amount and variety of Christian writing in Gaul.[16] Thus, Gregory of Tours specific argument that language must be made to serve truth, even if such service required a suspension of the rules governing language, is part of a larger Augustinian tradition which by the late sixth century was already becoming normative in sacred biography.

The correlation between Gregory's subordination of grammaticality to religious truth and Augustine's arguments concerning the function of language in a catechetical situation has not been noted before, but it can readily be documented. In *De Doctrina Christiana,* Augustine considered the matter of the responsibility of the Christian teacher and his use of language, arguing that it was appropriate for the teacher to use less correct words (*utetur etiam uerbis minus integris*) if that was all there was available to him, provided that the content was taught and learned correctly.[17] Implicit in these remarks of Augustine and those of Gregory is the belief that language is capable of reflecting accurately not only the apparently random events of daily life but also the most abstract and metaphysical religious truths, even if language has to be bent (*ex novo*) into new significances. This argument belongs to a strongly antisophist tradition traceable to Aristotle's insistence that the *res* or the dialectic of an argument was more critical than *eloquentia*.[18] What is of fundamental importance for this view of narrative in sacred biography is the idea that language is syncretistic: it cannot only harmonize different ontological planes, heaven and earth, but, if

15. Quoted in T. Sullivan, *De Doctrina Christiana, Patristic Studies* XXIII (1930): 5, 41.

16. C. Stancliffe, *St. Martin and His Hagiographer* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 55–70.

17. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana,* Bk. IV, X, XXIV.

18. Sullivan, p. 57. See also R. Pfeiffer, *The Classical World* (Oxford, 1968), passim.

necessary, it can also contradict its own required structures to do so.[19]

More than a thousand years after Gregory's observation concerning the relationship between language and religious truth, Osbern Bokenham wrote in the preface to his *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* that all composition must contain four causes, and although Bokenham does not state this as unequivocally as does Gregory, the two are essentially in agreement about the primacy of meaning in the Christian rhetoric of saints' lives. Meaning for Bokenham is related to the clarity of exposition, which he considers a work's formal cause: "and the more clere/ That it may be, the formal cause/ Settyth in dew ordre clause be clause."[20] The Augustinian ideal that the work be a synthesis of wisdom and eloquence which should provoke emulation is also endorsed by Bokenham in the prefatory remarks to his translation of the *Vita S. Margaretae:* ". . . to excyte/ Mennys affeccyoun to haue delyte/ Thys blyssyd virgyne to loue & serue. . . ."[21]

The Two Worlds of Sanctity and Narrative

Gregory does not dismiss the ontology of events in an individual's life in his argument for the primacy of the collective life, but his language does suggest that his thinking on this matter was dualist. Gregory believed that the saint, unlike the rest of humankind, lived simultaneously in two worlds, the heavenly and the earthly. Although these two worlds intersect, they are fundamentally different. The heavenly has primacy and serves to guide the earthly. This belief was widespread and early on received the imprimatur of the papacy. In his "Moralia [In] Job," Gregory the Great also takes up this problem of how the saints participate in both the heavenly and earthly spheres:

> [The saints] innately possess within themselves a proper changeableness; yet while they always zealously desire to cling to the unchanging truth, by clinging to it they cause it to happen that they become unchanging. Whenever they hold to this with complete affection, they find that being led above themselves they overcome this, that changeable things were produced in themselves. Indeed for what else is change save only a certain type of death?[22]

19. Although it is not an issue for this stage of the discussion, for the view that ontology is not a property of language—whose primary exponents are Wittgenstein, Austin, and Waismann—see J. Kaminsky, *Language and Ontology* (Carbondale, 1969), pp. 91–105.

20. Osbern Bokenham, *Legendys of Hooly Wummen,* ed. M. S. Sergeantson, *EETS* O. S. 206 (Oxford, 1938), p. 1.

21. Ibid., p. 3. See also Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana,* Bk. IV, XII, XXVII.

Gregory views the saints as active agents in securing their sanctity; it is their desire to cling to the sacred which inheres in them and transforms their earthly lives.

If language and its story-making agent, narrative, are to represent the actual life of the saint as a historic event, they must be able to reflect the nature of the interaction and the meaning which erupts when these two ontological planes collide. Language will often have to depict contexts which defy all our understanding of probability and the natural world; as Augustine sanctioned and Gregory of Tours practiced, language will have to bend to the will of this more primary reality. Narrative in this genre is primarily a medium for symbolic representation, since the essential thing (*res*) being signified (the presence of the divine in the saint) exists outside a system where sign and signified can be empirically validated. It follows that our reading and interpretation of such narrative should take seriously its symbolizing structures.

Gregory of Tours presented his explanation of his choice of title with little rhetorical embellishment, and we can infer that he believed the meaning of his remarks to be obvious. Of course, it is anything but obvious to a modern reader. Such an understanding of the dimensions of the self (what Gregory would have expressed with the reflexive pronoun *seipsum*) and language's capacity to reflect such concerns is alien. Gregory's point here is of seminal importance in the genre of medieval saints' lives. It reflects an understanding of sanctity, and of language's responsibility in representing the essence of the holy, that is crucial to sacred biography and the mentality of these writers. In Gregory's view narrative can reflect both actual circumstances and metaphysical truth.

Although the problem of universals is not the subject of widespread debate until the eleventh century, the vocabulary of that debate does shed some light by way of analogy on what Gregory intended centuries earlier. From this theological perspective, the substance of the holy is contained fully in Christ; the saints partake wholly of this substance but contain this substance only as accident. Yet, because they all share

22. Gregory the Great, *Libri Moralium sive Expositio in Librum Job,* in *PL,* 75, col. 1004; for a discussion of Gregory's meaning in an Old English context, see R. E. Bjork, *The Old English Verse Saints' Lives* (Toronto, 1985), p. 20.

the same substance, they are fundamentally alike, despite their accidental differences.

Questions Posed by the Tradition

Gregory of Tours and Osbern Bokenham write as cultic biographers; yet, separated from them by so many centuries as we are, it is difficult to see how their remarks have anything to do with the genre of biography. Biography is, after all, a sister discipline to history, and it is historical narrative which claims to represent "reality." How is it possible to compose a biography which conflates the subject's life with the lives of others and still expect it to be a record of that subject's life? Whose life is recorded when such a work is finished? How can this marriage of disparate parts be construed as history? Did Gregory have a historiography fundamentally different from our own? What sort of reality are Gregory and Bokenham intent on illustrating?

Aside from questions about the historiography implicit in the text, there are questions which need to be asked concerning audience response. Is the biographer not bound to relate to his audience the facts of his subject's life as accurately as possible? And what might we infer concerning the literary expectations of such an audience? Would the audience be expected to know that the life they heard or read was a literary mosaic? If they did understand this method, what might their response have been? What is the relationship of the biographer to his subject and to his audience? Were there certain verbal cues in the work that signaled to the audience a conflated incident? If so, how exactly did these narrative signs work? Were such borrowings considered fiction?

Another important arena for inquiry concerns the question of authority and the tradition of the genre. For example, who decided what other lives to integrate into the subject's life and what aspects of these lives to use? Do only certain aspects of the life, such as the birth narrative, allow for such a method? Could the biographer licitly borrow bits and pieces from ages past and other cultures? Was it not only possible but even quite probable that something Gregory borrowed from, say, the *Vitae Patrum* for use in his life of the prominent Auvergne martyr St. Julian (*De Passione et Virtutibus Sancti Juliani Martyris*) might itself have been borrowed? What are the implications of such a method if practiced widely over a period of fifteen hundred years? Might such conflation of different lives require certain patterns of substitution? Was such a biography designed with a specific purpose in mind, besides that of a documentary record of a cult, such as for a liturgical ceremony? What aesthetic criteria guide us in our reading?[23]

A Rich Harvest

Although there was a dearth of autobiography in the Middle Ages, there was a considerable amount of biography.[24] Biographies of kings, courtiers, bishops, abbots, monks, nuns, hermits, and holy men and women from varied socioeconomic backgrounds abound.[25] Those which treat the lives of the saints seem to have been the most beloved. The *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina* alone lists more than eight thousand saints' lives, and in English there are hundreds of examples extant in verse and prose. These sacred tales survive in greater volume and variety than any other writing. If we consider that only a fraction of the lives that were written managed to survive the iconoclastic ravages of the reformers, we can get some idea of the extraordinary currency of the genre in its own time. Bale writes:

> They who got the religious houses at the dissolution of them took the libraries as part of the bargain and booty, reserving of those library books, some to scour their candlesticks, and some to rub their boots. Some they sold to the grocers and soapsellers, and some they sent over the seas to the bookbinders, not in small numbers, but in times whole shipfuls, to the wondering of foreign nations.[26]

23. Edgar de Bruyne's, *Études d'esthétique médiévale* (Brugge, 1946), is still the standard work.

24. On this question of autobiography, see G. Misch, *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, trans. E. W. Dickes, 2 vols. (London, 1950); B. Smalley, *Historians in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1974), pp. 67–78; W. C. Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven, 1980); C. Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050–1200* (London, 1972); P. Dronke, *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1970) and *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1984).

25. For a handy reference guide to this vast corpus in England, see A. Grandsen, *Historical Writing in England c. 550 to c. 1307* and *Historical Writing in England II c. 1307 to the Early Sixteenth Century* (Ithaca, 1974–82).

26. *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina Antiqua et Mediae Aetatis*, 2 vols. (Brussells, 1898–1901; 2nd ed., 1949) The 8,989 texts listed include variants of the same life. See also the *AS*, 2nd ed., ed. J. Carnandet, 69 vols. (Paris, 1863). Perhaps the most comprehensive single-volume bibliography to appear recently on the vast literature concerning Christian sanctity is S. Wilson, ed., *Saints and Their Cults: Studies*

Given such quantity of material, it is fair to assume that virtually everyone in the Middle Ages was exposed to the lives of the saints in one form or another.

Such variety makes categorizing these biographies quite difficult. Sanctity was the prerogative of men, women, and children (such as Chaucer's "litel clergeon") from all walks of life. There are saints who were kings, bishops, members of the aristocracy, of the peasantry, and of the bourgeoisie. As Weinstein and Bell have recently shown, there was a radical democracy concerning the divine call to sanctity.[27] Although these lives were written under different circumstances at different times about individuals from vastly different social backgrounds, the conservative ethos of the genre (inherent in its rhetoric and theology) tends to play down differences while extolling socially accepted paradigms of sanctity. Such rhetorical and theological hegemony was more easily maintained when the texts were exclusively in Latin. As we might expect, the rhetorical traditions governing genre loosen somewhat (from the thirteenth century) when the vernacular begins to assume an increasing role in sacred biography. The majority of those lives rendered in English in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are rhetorically unpretentious, their *dispositio* substantiating Dante's complaint in the opening lines of *De Vulgari Eloquentia*: ". . . no one before me has discussed the teaching of vernacular stylistic art in any way."[28]

Complementing the variety of their subject matter were the idiosyncrasies of the sacred biographers themselves. While we can say that most were drawn from the ranks of the clergy, it is devilishly difficult to characterize the particular training or preparation they received. Some were learned, and some were dunces; some were ironists, while some were pious; some were among the greatest figures in the Middle Ages, and some were obscure individuals whom history has swallowed; some were scrupulous in their research, while others did no

in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 309–417. For a discussion of the massive amount of destruction of this corpus during the sixteenth century, see Thomas J. Heffernan, "The Rediscovery of the Bute Manuscript of the *Northern Homily Cycle*," *Scriptorium: revue internationale des études relatives aux manuscripts* 36 (1982): 118–29. See also May McKisack, "Leland and Bale," in *Medieval History in the Tudor Age* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 1–25.

27. D. Weinstein and R. M. Bell discuss the breadth of this vocation to sanctity in Part 1 of *Saints and Society* (Chicago, 1982), especially "The Call to Holiness."

28. See Dronke, *Poetic Individuality*, p. 33.

research at all; some were contemporaries of their subjects, while others were separated from them by centuries; some worked from documentary evidence, and others, perhaps most of them, worked with oral legend (some of these biographers even constructed their narratives from wall paintings and from epigraphic materials); some were able to work in rich *scriptoria*, while some barely had the parchment to complete their task; some were duty bound by commands from superiors to write their lives, while others were moved by genuine zeal; some wrote lives which are deliberately polemic, while others tried to depict the actuality of the life as they received it.[29]

Given the diversity of their backgrounds and interests, what can we infer about these biographers and their subjects? I shall argue that we can establish the tradition which brings this diversity together. Indeed, one of the paradoxes of the genre is that out of such diversity the tradition has wrought what for some is such a stifling sameness. Although author and community may have differed on the interpretation of events, the biographies that emerged from this complex interaction followed well-established narrative models. These models were derived from Greco-Roman biography on the one hand and Hellenized-Jewish character sketches on the other. These two traditions present quite differing approaches to biography. They are harmonized, however, by the Christian biographer, most notably by the biographers of the saints; they typify, perhaps more than any other medieval genre, Augustine's penetrating remark concerning the difference between the Christian and the non-Christian orator and his use of rhetoric: "So that he may give forth that which he drinks in [divine inspiration], and pour out what he will be filled with (*ut ructet quod biberet, uel quod impleverit, fundat*)."[30] For Augustine, the Christian linguistic movement is circular; it begins and ends in God.

Why "Sacred Biography"?

I have chosen to call this volume *Sacred Biography* because this title communicates the matter of my subject more comprehensively than the term *hagiography*, whose traditional critical associations seem now largely outdated. To paraphrase Lucien Febvre, categories and their

29. For this variety of disposition, see the accounts of sacred biographers in Grandsen, *Historical Writing in England*, Vol. I, chaps. 4, 5, 7, 14, 16.

30. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Bk. IV, XV, XXXII.

labels can become fossilized and falsify the psychological realities of a period.[31] This is true in the present instance where the perfectly suitable term *hagiography* is now virtually impossible to read except as an epithet signifying a pious fiction or an exercise in panegyric. To be sure, these are characteristics of hagiography, but they are not its exclusive concerns. In fact, labels, while pretending to describe a particular reality, can foster misreadings of these texts and obscure their originality.

Sacred biography, as understood here, refers to a narrative text of the *vita* of the saint written by a member of a community of belief. The text provides a documentary witness to the process of sanctification for the community and in so doing becomes itself a part of the sacred tradition it serves to document.[32] The appropriation of many of these texts into the liturgical celebration of the medieval church attests to the fact that many in the church believed the texts to be inherently sacred. Paulinus of Perigueux reports in a poem entitled "On the Sickness of His Grandson" (*De Uisitatione Nepotuli Sui*) (ca. 461?) that his grandson was healed by having a text containing the miracles of St. Martin placed on his body.[33]

This definition of sacred biography implies an interpretive circularity in the composition and reception of these texts. First, the text *extends* the idea that its subject is holy and worthy of veneration by the faithful, and, second, the text as the documentary source of the saint's life *receives* approbation from the community as a source of great wisdom. In its participation in the tradition, the text is canonized by the tradition and thereafter itself becomes part of the appropriating force of the tradition.

The three areas of my principal concern here will be the tradition of the medieval saint's life as biography, the conventions used in the development of the genre, and the characterization of the female saint as heroic victim. Of all the genres that survive from the Middle Ages, only the lives of the saints, arguably the richest in terms of extant records, are still treated by literary historians as documents for source studies (*Quellenkritik*) and little else. The genre has until recently fallen through the net of scholarly research, avoided by the historians because it lacks "documentary" evidential status and by the literary historians because saints' lives are rarely works of art. We live, moreover, in a pluralist age ruled by a post-Marxian secular materialism, in an age when fear of the avenging angel of the Lord has been replaced by fear of microorganisms. We have replaced the awe-full reverence for the Almighty with a minute examination of the specific. Microbes have replaced devils. Our literary language has followed this transference of belief. The leading theorists of the last twenty years, in both literary criticism and historiography, share two important methodological premises inherited from the logical-positivists: a skepticism of metaphysical inquiry and a disbelief in the ontological status of language. From this methodological vantage point, they argue that narrative is unable to reflect any reality other than its own. Their major premise which decisively veers from the mainstream of Western philosophical argument is that language—which they define as a rule-based system of mutually intelligible signs—cannot represent reality, for reality is itself a random series of unrelated discontinuities (i.e., is not rule-based). Language is a closed encoding system, and if it reveals anything about a "reality" outside itself, that "reality" is a fictive one. It is some considerable distance from this position to that wherein language is a vehicle for representing not only the "things" of the material world but also the numinous presence (e.g., the scriptural λόγος). Augustine, Gregory, Bokenham or—even the proverbial medieval man on the street—all would affirm the ability of language and narrative to represent not only this world but the divine as well.[34]

If we are interested in learning about the mentality of the Middle Ages, we can study no better text than the saint's life, for it quintessentially illustrates what Braudel has termed the *longue durée*.[35] Of any

31. Roger Chartier, "Intellectual History or Sociocultural History? The French Trajectories," in *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca, 1982), p. 16. Chartier's essay, which cites Febvre, is a sober analysis of the problems in modern French historiography, particularly as practiced by the followers of Foucault and other postmoderns.

32. F. E. Reynolds and D. Capps, *The Biographical Process: Studies in the History and Psychology of Religion* (The Hague, 1976), pp. 2–30.

33. Michael Petschenig, ed., "Paulinus of Périgueux," *CSEL* 16.1 (Vienna, 1888), pp. 1–190, especially pp. 160–64, "Carmina Minora." Gregory of Tours noted with approval this miraculous cure. The date of Paulinus's composition is vexed. The date of 461 was given to me in private communication by R. van Dam, who is currently working on this material.

34. J. Kaminsky, *Language and Ontology*, pp. 91–105. See also B. Herrnstein-Smith, *On the Margins of Discourse: The Relation of Literature to Language* (Chicago, 1978), pp. 19, 41–50, 154.

35. See also J. Le Goff, *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages* (Chicago, 1980) and *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1984), pp. 3–4; Jean-Claude Schmitt, "Religion populaire et culture folklorique," in *Annales Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* (1976): 941–53; the study by E. Delaruelle, *La piété*

medieval genres it has the longest continuous history, beginning with St. Luke's rendering of St. Stephen's martyrdom in Acts and having no *de facto* end; ironically, the reformers wrote saints' lives using models from their papist predecessors, and lives continue to be written and retold today.[36]

The Relationship Between Author and Audience

Texts have their beginnings not in the act of composition but in a complex series of anticipations. The primary anticipation in the composition of sacred biography is that which contains the interaction between the author and his audience. The reasons for this complex intersubjectivity will become clear, I hope, but for the moment let us say simply that "texts" written in and for a cultic function iterate a system of values with wide community acceptance. Such narratives are designed to promote social cohesion. If the normative values are not present or challenged by such a text, it is unlikely that the text will receive community approbation. Let us begin our analysis at the earliest stage in the composition of a saint's life, prior to the writing of the text, with the relationship of the sacred biographer to his audience.

populaire au moyen âge (Turin, 1975), and the important but comparatively unknown work of A. Ja. Gurevich, *Contadini e santi,* trans. from the Russian by L. Montagnani (Turin, 1986). Paul Zumthor comes quite close to a concise expression of the *longue durée* as this term applies to the Middle Ages: ". . . this essential fact remains: here is a period not impossible to delimit within the continuum of human time, using more or less constant criteria; it is a period long enough to exist in our laboratories on a more than microscopic scale, yet limited enough that its traits can be ascribed to more than mere probability," in *Speaking of the Middle Ages,* trans. Sarah White (Lincoln, 1986), p. 9.

36. H. J. Cadbury, *The Making of Luke-Acts* (London, 1961), p. 135; R. M. Grant, "Greek Literary and Historical Criticism," in *The Earliest Lives of Jesus* (London, 1961), pp. 38–49. For a recent and most complete bibliography on the *vitae* of Jesus, see W. S. Kissinger, *The Lives of Jesus* (New York, 1985); Baudouin de Gaiffier, "Hagiographie et historiographie," in *Recueil d'hagiographie* (Brussells, 1977), pp. 139–66. See also H. White, *Tudor Books of Saints and Martyrs* (Madison, 1963); *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe,* 8 vols., ed. S. R. Cattley (Fulham, 1836); A. Monteverdi, "I testi della leggenda de. S. Eustachio," *Studi Medievali* 3 (1908–11): 489–98; Weinstein and Bell, *Saints and Society,* p. 26. There is some pronounced similarity with Islamic sacred texts; see Marshall G. S. Hogdson, *The Venture of Islam,* 2 vols. (Chicago, 1974), Vol. I, Book 2, Chap. IV, also pp. 254, 326–27.

The primary social function of sacred biography, understood in the broadest of terms, is to teach (*docere*) the truth of the faith through the principle of individual example. The catechetical imperative is the most fundamental of the shared anticipations between author and audience. Brown, Weinstein and Bell, and others have shown how the saint and the saint's life could be used to support a wide spectrum of social needs. Although none of the sacred biographers discussed here would deny the value of the Augustinian precept of *ut doceat, ut delectet, ut flectat,* the primary emphasis throughout the Middle Ages was *ut doceat.* The effect of this emphasis was to diminish the importance of the aesthetic dimensions of the text. Such diminished importance is crucial, for it underlies a central thesis of sacred biography: the art of the text is designedly not a reflection of individual ability, of virtuoso excellence but is part of a tradition and posits a different orientation between author, text, and audience from that which would exist if aesthetics were a chief concern. As a result of this secondary interest in a text's art, the major anticipation which unites author and audience is how the text reflects the received tradition, a tradition whose locus is in the community. Such tradition is neither monolithic nor frozen but changes as the community selects and reinterprets anew from within itself.[37]

The nature of this complex relationship between author and audience can reveal much about the final narrative. *Audience* refers to the community of belief, whether that community is many, a congregation, or one, such as a bishop who assigns the composition of the biography to one of his court. Although the term *author* has a certain usefulness about it, it is also somewhat misleading. *Author* as used here can range in meaning from someone who has little interpretive interaction with the text to someone who exercises considerable influence over the text. Authorship, however, is never identified as an act of virtuosic composition, an ideal which usually stands apart from the community and its traditions. The author as literary artist writes for the *cognoscenti,* for a limited number of individuals with some training and understanding of the tradition and how it can be challenged. Such an idea of authorship, however, is hostile to the necessary function of cultic biography. The author for sacred biography is the community, and consequently the experience presented by the narrative voice is collective. The principal reason for this is the dominant role given to the text's didactic

37. Ernst Kris, *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* (New York, 1964), pp. 64–84.

element. The author is not the expert; rather, the community is a collection of experts, and the narrative reflects this state of collective authority.[38]

The author must also construe a life which will illustrate the exemplary behavior of the subject—what we should call the ethical dimension—to a community which has definite expectations concerning the outcome of this biographical record. A most interesting aspect of this presentation of what the community has acknowledged as normative behavior is the transformation the text undergoes as a result of its acceptance. This ethical imperative illustrated for prescribing behavior by the deeds narrated in the life of a saint can itself become constitutive. Hence the dramatic moments, no matter how individual and heroic they might appear, are conventionalized and thus exist as paradigms for the community. For example, in Walter Daniel's *Vita Sancti Aelredi,* discussed in Chapter 3, the individual ascetic practices which Aelred learned and imitated from the lives of earlier saints became in his personal appropriation of them normative for the community of monks at Rievaulx. His behavior, once lauded as heroic and distinctively individual, was viewed after his canonization, as having become part of the tradition and as a model for public *imitatio.* Thus, the new sacred model reclaims past models and in turn is authenticated by them as these past lives are reintroduced in the present. By virtue of this constitutive or ethical imperative, the individual sacred biography continually renews for the faithful a tradition of great antiquity. As we shall see, Walter Daniel, Eddius Stephanus, and Reginald of Canterbury use these earlier texts to reclaim the past and in so doing validate the present. In this pattern of figural repetitions the singular character of sacred biography—what makes it different from, say, the way Dante uses Vergil—lies in the medieval understanding that the saint's life is the perfect *imitatio Christi.* Hence these repetitive mimetic patterns have as one of their primary objects the reconstitution of the divine in new historical dress.

The life of the text is bounded from its inception by a complex web of significances which in turn foster an intersubjectivity between author and audience. In this model, the audience for biography serves more deliberately as resource, censor, critic, and arbiter than we have come to expect since the eighteenth century. Such a complex interdependency makes it difficult to construe these texts as simply the artifacts of the dialogue between a high and a low culture. Indeed, such a characterization obscures the real conceptual intimacy which author and audience appear to have shared. Given this model of intimate reciprocity, the claim for two distinctive cultures—a dominant clerical elite on the one hand and a subordinate illiterate peasantry on the other—most recently and persuasively argued by LeGoff and Schmitt, seems wide of the mark. Murray has written convincingly about the degree to which the Dominican Thomas of Cantimpre's (ca. 1201–70/80) *Bonum Universale de Apibus,* a rather typical collection of *exempla* used in preaching, incorporated comparatively recent anecdotes, the bulk of which were drawn from his own interaction with the laity. The very existence of Cantimpre's work (one might add to it the *exempla* collections of Etienne de Bourbon, Jacques de Vitry, Odo of Cheriton, etc.) plus the fierce rivalries for preferment which existed among the major mendicant orders, among the mendicants and the monks, between different groups of regulars, and between the regulars and the seculars, should make one chary about a monolithic view of "the clerical elite." Le Bras' view of the medieval clergy as a congeries of mutually competing interests is nearer the mark. Moreover, as Robertson has shown for fourteenth-century England, it is equally naive to view the peasantry as some homogeneous "mass" bound by similar economic, agrarian, religious, and cultural patterns occurring with cookie-cutter reproducibility throughout the land.

Let us now return to the nature of the relationship between the sacred biographer and his audience. One must resist the impulse to conclude that because of such intimacy between author and audience that the sacred biographer was a cipher simply reflecting the received opinion and that such compositions were mere cultural montages. The function of the text was not only to document the wondrous appearance of the divine in a man or woman but also to interpret for the community what was only partially understood, mysteriously hidden in the well-known public record, buried in the very ideal of sanctity itself. Such complex narrative structures possess what Clifford Geertz, borrowing a phrase from Gilbert Ryle, has called "thick description."

If, on the other hand, we inquire into the function of biographies since Boswell's *Life of Johnson,* we find that they present themselves rhetorically as the authoritative word on their subject's life. They exist not to confirm what the community may already understand but rather

38. J. Ferster, *Chaucer on Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 46.

to increase that understanding, to bring a new, complete, and carefully documented understanding of the subject to the community.[39]

Types of Testimony: The Oral Tradition

Conversely, the raw materials for the saint's life were often stories which originated with the audience; stories which, although dependent on oral testimony, were considered admissible evidence. It is clear that before the late-eleventh-century consolidation of canonization by the Vatican (especially under the jurisdiction of Alexander III, 1159–81), virtually all the worship of saints began as local cults. Their legends, as we would expect, sprang from these local traditions. With some exceptions, after the machinery of canonization was in place, most stories, anecdotes, and legends which comprised the basic data of the sacred biographer were selected, adapted, and retold so as to conform to the dictates of the Vatican's administrative policy concerning canonization and to promote the cultus of the saint beyond its original locale. And yet, even in this climate of control, this new "authoritative" text could not conflict too greatly with the original community's stories lest it risk alienating itself from its cultic center.[40]

Such an interdependence does not allow for an easy distinction between author and audience, for these are terms which reflect modern notions of literary interaction. The medieval audience's primary role, as indicated above, is as resource and juror. Considerable skill was required to promote within a community a text that possessed what one might call a protective understanding of the subject of the biography. To complicate matters even further, the audience's understanding might at times be incompatible with the written text, since their understanding may have been dependent on the flexibility of a collective oral tradition. Moreover, different respondents, as we know from the work of the students of oral literature, although able to tell the same story, invariably would introduce differences, however subtle, in their retelling. Texts may fossilize such a fluid interpretive scheme.[41]

39. C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), pp. 3–30.

40. W. Baldwin, *Alexander III and the Twelfth Century* (Westminster, Md., 1966). Alexander's pontificacy was from September 7, 1159, to August 30, 1181. See also André Vauchez, *La sainteté en occident aux derniers siècles du moyen âge: d'après les procès de canonisation et les documents hagiographiques, Bibliothèque des Ecole Françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, Pt. 241 (Rome, 1981).*

41. A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (London, 1960); see also J. M. Foley, *Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography* (New York, 1985). See Zumthor, *Speaking of the Middle Ages,* passim; M. Foucault, "The Being of Language," in *The Order of Things* (New York, 1970), pp. 42–44.

The oral tradition is important in a study of medieval sacred biography even if many of the texts appear primarily to be the products of the learned. For example, although Walter Daniel's knowledge of Aelred was based on a long-standing intimacy of many years, the traditions and historiography that informed the genre demand that he consider the oral record. In prefaces to works as distant as Pontius's *Life of St. Cyprian* (ca. 259) and the unquestioned place of oral supplement in the English *vitae* contained in the *South English Legendary* (ca. 1300), we see this emphasis on the importance of the *viva voce*. Walter Daniel was informed by this oral culture, and it is a culture that has a view of the past different from one built on an archival historicism. Its critical method did not depend so exclusively on an evidentiary system.

The governing cultural stories within an oral society were reinterpreted in light of present experience. This manner of interpreting the past, which we may call reflexive, ensures that the past is never completely divorced from the present, never becomes a foreign artifact, but is always within the realm of the familiar. Indeed, since the past resides within the memory, the society is never alienated from its past. Critical access to and empathetic understanding of the past is not a problem. In the *Phaedrus,* Socrates tells of the rebuke given to the god Theuth, the inventor of writing, by Thamus, the king of Egypt:

> O most ingenious Theuth, the parent or inventor of an art is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them. And in this instance, you who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing.[42]

Socrates's anecdote underscores the idea that oral understanding is not one which considers the past a distant artifact with a fixed dimension in time. Rather, within the oral consciousness, an understanding of the

42. Quotation from Plato in M. T. Clanchy, "Trusting Writing," in *From Memory to Written Record* (London, 1979), pp. 231, 233–257.

past is contingent upon present circumstance wherein the past is continually reconstructed by the present. The past and the present are in a dialogue within the individual consciousness. Such fluid accessibility between past and present is clearly part of the object of sacred biography; a major premise of that tradition is to document the continuing presence of past constitutive patterns of behavior as models for the present.

As indicated above, documentary evidence of the past produces an entirely different historicism from that of a system which makes use of oral evidence. Fifteen hundred years after Plato penned the *Phaedrus,* in the medieval England of the late thirteenth century, these two modes of recall and their respective evidentiary values entered their final struggle. The issue concerns a debate between Edward I and John, Earl de Warenne, concerning the legitimacy of de Warenne's ownership of his land. The king insisted that private rights had to be legally warranted; the crown by this time appears to have accepted the authenticity of charters and other documentary forms of testimony. De Warenne responds to this inquiry into the legitimacy of his ownership with an appeal to the nonliterate traditions of oral memory:

> The king disturbed some of the great men of the land through his judges wanting to know by what warrant [*quo warranto*] they held their lands, and if they did not have a good warrant, he immediately seized their lands. Among the rest, the Earl Warenne was called before the king's judges. Asked by what warrant he held, he produced in their midst an ancient and rusty sword and said: "Look at this my lords, this is my warrant! For my ancestors came with William the Bastard and conquered their lands with the sword, and by the sword I will defend them from anyone intending to seize them. The king did not conquer and subject the land by himself, but our forebears were sharers and partners with him."[43]

The rusty sword brought to England during the Norman invasion as evidence for ownership against the royal lawyers' demands for charters is a beleaguered attempt at maintaining the legitimacy of the nonliterate oral tradition.

The increasing complexity of institutions from the late twelfth century clearly elevated the importance of the documentary mode of re-

43. Ibid., pp. 20–21: "By then [the reign of Edward I] the province of myth and hearsay was the only appropriate place for a story which claimed priority for memory over written record in the king's court." See also M. Powicke, *The Thirteenth Century* (Oxford, 1970), p. 521.

cording traditions. As texts gradually replaced the oral stories, the oral stories in turn came to be viewed with increasing skepticism and as less than faithful repositories of the truth. As written narratives became a part of the Vatican's apparatus of canonization, they assumed an official status which the oral report never possessed. The oral witness became the product of the provincial, the rustic, and, as such, from the twelfth century lost its former importance within the tradition of the sacred tale.

Meaning in Rhetoric

How does the sacred biographer reconcile the tensions in the complex web which ties author, subject, and audience together to produce a text in a situation that was often overflowing with conflicting and fragmentary sources? Just as we saw Gregory of Tours subvert the grammaticality of language to contain his meaning, so too is language the consolidating, symbol-making force uniting these polarities.[44] The basic answer of how this task of consolidation is accomplished is to be found in the creative potential of the rhetorical structures sanctioned by the genre. The Augustinian ideal of the role of rhetoric acting to synthesize *sapientia et eloquentia,* although still the general goal, was to be modified in practice. Because of its role as the cultic history of Christian heroism and as the potential source for liturgical texts, sacred biography stresses the element of *sapientia* over that of *eloquentia.* Although meaning is designed to upset the delicate balance between these two elements, it is nonetheless still true that meaning must be served by language that is not consciously self-referential, not consciously seeking after artistic eloquence. To begin with, the sacred biographer must draw contradictions into the controlling rhetoric of his telling through the employ of particular linguistic devices, specifically through the use of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony, in the selection of *topoi* and sources, and in variation of tone and point of view.[45] The display of such rhetorical language offers to the auditor or the reader a situation in which his comprehension of the text depends not

44. K. Burke, "Four Master Tropes," In *A Grammar of Motives* (New York, 1945), pp. 503–17.

45. H. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973), pp. ix–42, and "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978).

only on the "documentary" nature of the text, the testamentary evidence presented as corroboration of the divine favor in the individual's life, but on the individual's ability to comprehend the linguistic formulae established in the text and sanctioned by the genre.

In sum, these rhetorical tropes are not mere linguistic adumbrations superimposed on the life of this or that saintly man or woman; rather they create the type of life being narrated, since our comprehension of the life comes exclusively through the filter of language.[46] Geoffrey of Vinsauf in the *Poetria nova* discusses the function of such rhetorical figures as metonymy, synecdoche, hyperbole, and catachresis and makes this very point that such figures exist to serve meaning:

> *Quae clausum reserent animum sunt verba reperta,/ Ut quaedam claves animi.*
>
> The expressions are found in order to unlock the sealed spirit: they are, as it were, the keys of the spirit.[47]

Let me offer an example of how a trope such as synecdoche is used by a medieval author and how that use, unless it is understood by the modern reader, can lead to a misinterpretation of the text.[48] The tradition of dividing history into six separate ages, begun by Augustine, was to remain the dominant view of Christian historiography for most of the Middle Ages. The hexameral literature which survives is copious.[49] For example, in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People,* the Venerable Bede, following Augustine, proposed that history was divided into this hexameral scheme and that his own work was a record of the sixth age of mankind. Moreover, this sixth age was an age of

46. C. Taylor, "Interpretation and the Social Sciences of Man," in *Interpretative Social Science: A Reader* (Berkeley, 1979), p. 45: "The language is constitutive of the reality, is essential to its being the kind of reality it is."

47. Dronke, "*Medieval Rhetoric,*" p. 30. See also the editions and bibliography by J. J. Murphy: *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley, 1981); *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts,* (Berkeley, 1971); *Medieval Eloquence: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Medieval Rhetoric* (Berkeley, 1978); and *Medieval Rhetoric: A Select Bibliography* (Toronto, 1971).

48. I could use one of the other figures, but Bede's use of synecdoche nicely illustrates his method and my point.

49. A. J. Burrow, "Time," in *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 55–94; see also A. Ja. Gurevich, "Ideas of Space and Time in the Middle Ages," in *Categories of Medieval Culture* (London, 1985), pp. 26–39.

grace since it was ushered in by the redemptive glory of the Incarnation and would end in the consummation of the Last Judgment. The record of that age (viz. its history) was cotemporal with the age of the church, since the church was founded by Christ. Further, both that age and the church have as their mission the fulfillment of the Pauline ideal of bringing salvation to the entire world. Bede's Northumbrian church is part of a larger English church which is in turn part of the universal Roman church. It is through the use of synecdoche that Bede's Northumbrian or English church stands for the universal church. Thus, in writing about the English church, Bede is also writing about the soteriological mission of the entire church.[50]

It appears that Bede understood the political beginnings of Britain to be acts of Providence, that the arrival of the Romans, coterminous with the sixth age, and the growth of the English polity were caused by Divine Providence. For Bede, political and ecclesiastical history are inseparable. Thus, we can say that Bede's history of the church in England was also a history of the country of England, a history of the larger Roman church, and a history of the progress of the Pauline mission of the conversion of the world. Synecdoche allows Bede to compress all of human history into this grand design without diminishing the accuracy of his record of the English church.

It was through such rhetorical structures as these that the sacred biographer built his text and signaled to his audience the complex antique traditions to which the text was indebted.

Another approach (one which we will look at in more detail in Chapter 3) to this synthesizing of apparently disparate documentary testimonies involves an appeal to the presence of the omnipotence of God in the life of the saint. The saint is depicted as someone in whom the natural laws of causality are suspended because of divine favor.[51] Such an approach does not give the biographer excess license, nor is it an argument for the unbridled use of miracle stories. Rather, it simply acknowledges as a matter of theological principle—a theological principle that no one in the Middle Ages would have taken issue with—

50. C. Kendal, "Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica,*" in Murphy, *Medieval Eloquence,* pp. 145–46.

51. See John Capgrave's remarks in his prologue to *The Life of St. Katharine,* ed. C. Horstmann, EETS O.S. 100 (London, 1983), p. 3: ". . . next that lady a-bove [Virgin Mary] alle other in blys/ffolweth this mayde whiche we clepe kataryne./ Thus wene we, lord, becavse that thov and thyne/ have ȝove to hir *grace* so greet plente,/ That alle thy pryuileges whiche been in other fovnde/ Arn sette in hir as in souereyn of heygh de-gree/ffor in alle these rychely dooth she abounde."

wanting to disparage the concern of the medieval historian or biographer for the reporting of actual events, it is important to point out that both history and biography were understood to be narrative genres—designed, as Bede tells us, *ad imitandum bonum*. That is, these narrative records were designed to inform and provoke approved behavior from their audiences by means of rhetorically sophisticated and avowedly mimetic reminiscences of the life of Christ. The effectiveness of the historical or biographical record depended heavily on the writer's persuasive skills, on what the medieval rhetorician would call the writer's *elocutio*.[59]

At the same time that the sacred biographer's narrative depicts the exemplary, those wise and judicious actions praised by all humanity, his biography must also strive to isolate the divine mystery present in the person. The subject must be made to appear fully human while that which is being written must confirm and celebrate his or her "otherness." Such a situation involved some degree of paradox, since it was a constant of medieval Christian apologetics that perfection in this life was impossible. Hence a narrative portrayal of the joining of the human and divine—the presence of God palpable in his creation but illustrated in language which did not explicitly claim for itself divine inspiration—was dangerously close to an acknowledgment that the mystery of the Incarnation had taken place more than once in a particular man or woman. The Incarnation was that most mysterious union of disparates to which most medieval thinkers believed perfection alone pertained. From the beginning of orthodox Christian apologetic writing, this idea of singular perfection is a constant. Clement of Alexandria, in his *Miscellanies,* stated the idea succinctly: "But I know of no one man perfect in all things at once while still human, though according to the mere letter of the law, except Him alone who for us clothed Himself with humanity."[60]

The sacred biographer sought to maintain a difficult balance between the narrative depiction of a not quite demigod (if the expression be permitted) and a moral everyman. If this characterization—a characterization which perforce finds its most complex expression in what we might call a biographical dualism—is weighted too far toward the supernatural, we lose the man, while if the exemplary is underemphasized, we end up without our saint.

59. On *elocutio*, see Kendal, "Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*," pp. 148–52.

60. A. Freemantle, ed., *A Treasury of Early Christianity* (New York, 1953), p. 58.

Biographical Dualism

The division of the life of the saint into an ethical dimension on the one hand and an encomiastic celebration of the saint's intimacy with God on the other has a great antiquity. We find such biographical dualism in its infancy in the Athenian orator Isocrates' panegyric *Evagoras*—a text he claimed on somewhat dubious grounds to be the first encomium of a living person. His contemporary Xenophon borrowed from the *Evagoras* in his own panegyrical life of the Spartan king Agesilaus where, as Leo was the first to point out, the biography is divided for the first time into two distinctive sections: *praxeis,* in which the life is summed up in a chronological manner, and then *ethos,* which is a somewhat rigorous and interpretive discussion of character.[61]

This interplay of *praxeis* and *ethos* became the dominant mode in Greek biographical writing. It was used extensively by Plutarch and was adopted in the Latin tradition to some extent by Suetonius, who in turn bequeathed it to medieval biographers such as Einhardt and Asser.[62] Contemporary with Suetonius were the Gospel writers, who, as Grant, Hengel, and Cox have argued, emphasized a particular aspect of hellenized Semitic biography: the miraculous. This narrative of miraculous anecdote, indicative of character, appears to have been in existence for some time prior to the formation of the Gospels and is known to have been widely used in the hellenized Semitic communities of ancient Palestine. Scholars have labeled this genre *aretalogy* since it is believed that it arose from the practice of reciting the wondrous deeds and miraculous acts (*aretai*) of the divinity. Indeed, in late-Hellenistic Greek, the word ἀρεταί is often used in contexts where its meaning is best construed as "miracle."[63] Hence, centuries before Gregory of Tours argued for the importance of presenting the deeds of

61. F. Leo, *Die Griechisch-Römische Biographie nach ihrer Litterarischen Form* (Leipzig, 1901), pp. 91–92: "Die Erfindung und Begründung dieses εἶδος gehort dem Isokrates. Der Euagoras (73 τὸν ἔπαινον τοῦτον) hat eine richtige Vorrede an Nikokles und eine zweite ans Publikum über die neue Gattung, die Isokrates mit dieser Schrift in die Litteratur einführt." See also P. Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1983), pp. 12–13.

62. Cox, *Biography,* p. 13; see also C. G. Gianakaris, *Plutarch* (New York, 1979), pp. 39–40. For a somewhat different point of view from that of Leo, see A. Wardman, *Plutarch's Lives* (Berkeley, 1974), p. 2 and passim.

63. M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period,* 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1974), Vol. I, pp. 58–61.

the saints, we see the biographical tradition already fixing on this idea of the primacy of act (*res*) over argument (*verba*).

New Testament scholars, such as Hengel, have recently shown that the Gospels fit this classification, since they are the canonical transcriptions of no-longer-extant oral texts that depicted in an anecdotal narrative the wondrous deeds and sayings of Christ. It is this narrative aretalogy of the Gospels and models of Greco-Roman encomium and panegyric, such as Plutarch's *Life of Alexander,* Iamblichus's *Life of Pythagoras,* Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus,* or Suetonius's *Augustus,* which influenced the author of *Acts of the Apostles* and other early Christian writers. The classical and the early-Christian biographical traditions show the effect of a consolidating force by the time we reach such distinctive texts as the anonymous *Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas* (ca. 203), Eusebius's life of Origen in the *Ecclesiastical History,* (ca. 330), Athanasius's *Life of St. Anthony* (ca. 357), and Sulpicius Severus's *Life of St. Martin* (ca. 397), to name some of the more important early sacred biographies.

Fixing the Text in the Canon

Now let us consider the manner in which some of these early sacred biographies might have been composed. Let us assume that a hypothetical *vita* represents an early stage in the written transmission of the cultus. It is reasonable to assume that our hypothetical biographer has an understanding of the community's expectation concerning the figure whose life he is about to compose. Indeed, it appears often to have been the case that the audience's knowledge of the subject was as great as the biographer's own. Furthermore, there were usually entrenched legends, often contradictory, of the saint in the community. Of course, such a situation is a commonplace of this sort of composition, and contradictory elements can be found in the ultimate paradigm for all sacred biography, the Gospels. The persistence of textual contradictions suggests the lack of a dominant consolidating tradition. Nonetheless, the presence of contradictory motifs in the legend is especially difficult for the early biographers, since, if the biographical subject has recently died, the cult still exists in the memory primarily as oral record. At this early juncture the record acknowledging the sanctity of the subject depends chiefly on stories associated with the living man in different contexts. It does not yet depend on the claims of the miracles after the saint's death originating from the locus of the cult, the burial place.

The tomb, whether located in a church or a churchyard, was monitored by the clergy and hence gave to the clergy a legitimizing authority with respect to the variety and number of miraculous stories surrounding the relic.[64]

The movement from oral story to written text was a momentous step. It represented a broadening of the cult and as a consequence diminished the importance of the oral tales and the role of those who cherished such tales. It is difficult to underestimate the importance of the *viva voce* as a source for both the early biographer and the early historian. Indeed, the testimony of the living witness was of greater value, it would seem, than the documentary evidence. Eusebius mentions the interesting anecdote of St. John's putative disciple Papias, who sought the testimony of the apostles as it was remembered by those who had actually heard it. Papias shows deeper reverence for this oral record than for any written text as he says, "For I did not imagine that things out of books would help me as much as the utterances of a living and abiding voice."[65] Today, however, we are accustomed to an opposite point of view: it is to the bookish narrative that we surrender *a priori* our skepticism. But despite this preference for the eyewitness, the task of discerning the authentic witness, the true voice of tradition, was not easy. The sheer number of stories growing up around local cults could be enormous. And these numerous testimonies concerning the sanctity of living saints were, in turn, more difficult than written texts for the clerical hierarchy and the biographers to coalesce into a desired scheme.

Medieval sacred biographies are replete with the biographers' testimony to the variety of stories which surrounded their subjects during life. Sulpicius Severus wrote of St. Martin of Tours that in his life "he was already regarded by everyone as a saint." Walter Daniel tells us that even as a young abbot Aelred's "fame runs through the whole countryside. Bishops, earls, barons venerate the man and the place itself." St. Cuthbert's sanctity was so widespread that he was summoned from the solitude of the recluse's life on Inner Farne around 685 by King Egfrith and Archbishop Theodore to accept the bishopric of Hexham, a position he traded for that of Lindisfarne. Thomas of Celano says that after the miracle of the swallows St. Francis's popularity was so widespread that people from all over would come "to kiss the

64. S. Wilson, *Saints and Their Cults;* see the introduction and passim.

65. Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine,* trans. and ed. G. A. Williamson (New York, 1966), p. 150; and R. Grant, *Eusebius as Church Historian* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 61–63.

hem of the saint's garment . . . [and indeed some became so frenzied by Francis's nearness that] they laid hands on him, pulled his habit and even cut pieces from it so as to keep them as relics."[66]

Indeed, these local traditions were vital and were not simply the products of the lay side of the community. For example, long after the process of canonization was under the control of the Vatican, we have instances in which both lay and cleric came together to proclaim one of their own as a saint. In the first *lectio* of the *Officium* for Richard Rolle of Hampole, written probably in the 1360s, we learn that Richard has been proclaimed a saint: *Sanctus dei heremita Ricardus in villa de Thornton iuxta Pickering Eboracensis diocesis accepit sue propagacionis originem.* Unfortunately for the good people and clergy of Yorkshire, the Vatican never canonized their man.[67]

The Text as Relic

Presented with a variety of such vital oral traditions, the early biographer must have found many of the events surrounding the saint's life to be fluid, different in different locales, and (as suggested above) at times contradictory. However, in spite of these contradictions, such legends, even those clearly apocryphal, were readily incorporated into the growing cultus and became articles of faith. At this early stage in the growth of the cult, criticism, disagreement, and differing points of emphasis are endemic; they are all undergoing continual interpretation; this is a hermeneutic process which is facilitated by the lack of an established written text. If there are *vitae* beginning to emerge at this early stage, then the presence of continued interpretation indicates that none has, as yet, achieved a position of sufficient dominance to limit the growth of new stories about the saint.

The "authorized" biography, to borrow a not completely appropriate

66. Stancliffe, *St. Martin;* Sulpicie Severe, "Vie de Saint Martin," ed. J. Fontaine, in *Sources chrétiennes,* 3 vols. (Paris, 1967), Vol. I, p. 250. For Aelred, see M. Powicke, *The Life of Aelred of Rievaulx* (Oxford, 1950), p. 28. For Cuthbert, see B. Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert.* For Francis, see Otto Karrer, ed., *St. Francis of Assisi: The Legends and the Lauds* (London, 1947), pp. 41, 49.

67. R. W. Woley, ed., *The Officium and Miracula of Richard Rolle of Hampole* (London, 1919), p. 23. Woley's edition is superior, being more complete than that contained in G. G. Perry, *English Prose Treatises of Richard Rolle de Hampole,* EETS O. S. 20 (London, 1886), pp. xv–xxxiii. Virtually all the historical background we have on Rolle (d. 1349) is found in the nine *lectiones* for matins printed by Woley.

expression from modern parlance, besides its obvious interest in being viewed as the text of record, serves less well known but equally important ends: it acts to terminate unsanctioned oral tradition and coalesces the myth-making powers of the community around its paradigms. Within this varied biographical mélange, however, the sacred biographer's *primary* mission in writing the life is not to render a chronological record of the subject's life, Xenophon's *praxeis,* but rather to facilitate the growth of the cult.

For the Christian sacred biographer, this mission means stressing the encomiastic aspects, the *ethos,* of the subject's life. Such a task involves a considerable degree of interpretation, and it is an interpretive process which—if the life is to gain adherents for the cultic figure—must accomplish two vital objectives: it must complement and satisfy the specific community's traditional understanding of this holy person, and it must establish the text itself as a document worthy of reverence, as a relic. There is evidence for this belief throughout the tradition in both Latin and vernacular *vitae.* Gregory of Tours, in his life of Nicetius, Bishop of Lyons, reports how a deacon of Autun, suffering from blindness, placed a book containing accounts of the miracles of St. Nicetius over his eyes and was cured at once: "Immediately the pain and the shadows dissipated, and by the power [*ab virtute*] of this volume he recovered his sight." It was only after he was cured of his blindness that the deacon read the accounts of the miracles presented in the book. In the late-thirteenth-century account of the *Vita Sancti Kenelmi Regis* in the *South English Legendary,* we have a most explicit instance of a sacred narrative as cultic relic:

> That writ was puyr on Englisch i-write: ase men it radden there;/And for-to tellen withoute ryme: theose wordes it were:/ "In klent covbache kenelm, kyngues sone, lijth onder ane thorne, is/ heued him bi-reued."/ this writ was wel nobleliche: i-wust and up i-do,/ And i-holde for gret relike: and ȝeot it is al-so;/The nobleste relike it is on thar-of: that is in the churche of rome.[68]

The potential cultic status of these texts marks, I believe, a major difference between Christian sacred biography, its Greco-Roman-Semitic ancestors, and the Renaissance biography which followed it. The text of the Christian saint's life is meant to serve two audiences, not only the present, temporal one but the divine as well, for the lives of the saints are meant to reflect honor and glory to God. The medieval sacred

68. James, *Gregory of Tours,* p. 77; C. Horstmann, *The Early South-English Legendary or Lives of the Saints,* EETS O. S. 87 (London, 1887), pp. 352–53.

biographer and the community interact and the fruit of this labor establishes what I call the text's iconicity.

The text should so appropriate the vitality and truth that tradition has bestowed on the *viva voce* that the populace will slowly begin to transfer their cherished beliefs from the oral renderings to the written composition. Such a process, however, can take considerable time. The text, as it slowly achieves recognition from an ever-widening circle of the pious, can be said to become increasingly "legitimized." This process is syncretistic as the text gradually incorporates and consolidates various traditions. At this stage in the emergence of a written text as the official text of choice—in order to ensure the text's continued dominance—the authority on which the text is based must be spiritualized. A concomitant of the process of legitimation, this spiritualizing of the text takes one of two methods.[69] First, we may find a steady disassociation of the text from the unique historical author. Such a process shrouds the document's origins in mystery and gives to the document an ahistorical, quasi-transcendental character; further, this process helps, paradoxically, to augment the document's status as an inspired text. Sacred biography is not sacred scripture, and no one in the Middle Ages would have equated the two. However, if they both partake of inspiration, then we ought to consider that Augustine's remarks that "these words were not written by human industry, but were poured forth by divine intelligence" were undoubtedly believed to apply to these texts as well as to Scripture.[70] The second method is simply to declare from the outset that the document is the product of a divinely inspired minister of God.

As our hypothetical saint's life moves from oral through multiple written versions, it moves toward being accepted as canonical undergoing the while a subtle but sure transformation from witness to tale, to text, to history, and finally to sacred history. The final version, if accepted by the community of believers, holds all these interpretive moments within itself. This complex process of transformation—from oral sayings through multiple written records, toward a recognition of either a single text or the broad outlines confirmed by a single tradition —is syncretistic. It is through this continual process of adding and excising that the text achieves iconicity, since the text has now not merely

69. R. E. Brown, "Hermeneutics," in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary,* eds. R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer and R. E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, 1968), pp. 605–23.

70. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana,* Bk. IV, VII, XXI.

joined a normative (viz. canon) list of documents but has at this stage become a document to be revered as a symbol (viz. icon) of the deity. The iconicity of the document is firmly established when the biographical record has become part of the community's worship and the text itself is revered as an essential part of the liturgy to accompany the worship of both saint and God.[71]

71. J. C. Turro and R. E. Brown, "Canonicity," in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary,* pp. 515–34.

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