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WHEN GOD BLEW SATAN OUT OF HEAVEN: THE MOTIF OF EXSUFFLATION IN VERCELLI HOMILY XIX AND LATER ENGLISH LITERATURE

By THOMAS D. HILL

Throughout his long and very productive scholarly career, J.E. Cross has been concerned with presenting new information for scholars interested in Old English language and literature; indeed, no living Anglo-Saxonist has accomplished more in this respect. The new edition of the Rogationtide Homilies, which he has just edited with Joyce Bazire, contains, as one might expect, much new and interesting lore. In offering tribute to Professor Cross's scholarly achievement I would like to discuss a curious motif from a homily included both in this collection and, in a slightly different version, in Paul Szarmach's recent edition of the unpublished prose of the Vercelli Book.

The homily opens with a brief definition of the Triune God and a summary of God's creation of the world; the homilist then turns to the fall of the rebellious angels and the creation of man. All of this material is relatively commonplace, but there is one motif which seems odd indeed, and hence merits discussion. The passage in question is as follows:

Erest on frymõe he geworhte heofonas and eorðan and sæ and ealle þa þing þe on him syndon and ealle þa englas þe on heofonum syndon; and ealle þa õe of englum to deoflum forsceapene wurdon, ealle he hi of him sylfum mid his oroðe utableow, and þone þe he foremærestne hæfde gesceapene ofer ealle þa oðre englas, þe Lucifer wæs haten, þæt is on ure geþeode 'Leohtberend' gereht. Ac he eft, þa he hine sylfne his Scippende gelicne don wolde and him þrymsetl on norðdæle heofona rices getimbrian wolde, he of þam ricene afeoll; and ealle þa ðe æt þam ræde mid him wæron and him æfter besawon, ealle hi wurdon of englum to deoflum forsceapene and on helle besceofene, þær hi on ecnysse witu þoliað forþam ðe hi forhogedon heora Scippend ælmihtigne God. 1

Most of the detail here seems conventional, but the beginning of the passage is quite startling. I would translate the first sentence tentatively as follows: "First in the beginning He [i.e. God] created the heavens and the earth and the sea and all of the things that are in them, and all the angels who are in the heavens; and all those who were transformed from angels to devils, all he blew away from Himself with His breath and that one whom He had

created foremost over all the other angels, who was called 'Lucifer' which is interpreted 'Lightbearer' in our language." This instance of the crucial verb utableow is not cited in the dictionaries as far as I can determine (a detail which strikingly illustrates the importance of putting these texts into print) but its meaning is quite clear. It must mean, at least literally, "blew away" or "blew out", and this raises the larger question of why the author of this homily might have supposed that God "blew" Satan and the fallen angels out of heaven. This apparently rather eccentric motif has, however, a long history, and it continued to recur - if somewhat sporadically - in later medieval and even Renaissance texts.

The crucial term here is the Christian Latin liturgical and para-liturgical practice of exsufflatio - of blowing as a sign of exorcism and cleansing. The ultimate sources of this liturgical custom are probably Biblical. In II Thess. ii 8, in which Paul describes the tribulations of the final times, he speaks of how Jesus will slay the Antichrist: "Et tunc revelabitur ille iniquus, quem Dominus Iesus interficiet spiritu oris sui, et destruet illustratione adventus sui eum . . . " This verse in turn echoes Isaiah xi 4: "Sed iudicabit in iustitia pauperes, et arguet in aequitate pro mansuetis terrae; et percutiet terram virga oris sui, et spiritu labiorum suorum interficiet impium." The meaning of these passages in their specific Biblical context is presumably that when God comes in judgment, He will execute His will simply by command; but even so, the fact that Paul speaks of Christ killing the Antichrist "with the breath of his mouth", and Isaias of God killing the wicked one "with the breath of his lips", provides a Biblical basis for the notion that the "breath of God" can in itself be the agent by which God punishes the wicked.

At any event, the association of blowing and exorcism is firmly established in patristic Christian literature. Tertullian speaks reprovingly of a Christian frankincense seller passing by a heathen temple and remarks: "Quo ore Christianus turarius, si per templa transibit, quo ore fumantes aras despuet et exsufflabit, quibus ipse prospexit? Qua constantia exorcizabit alumnos suos, quibus domum suam cellarium praestat?" In this passage the verbs despuet and exsufflabit are glossed in the next sentence by exorcizabit; the Christian's gesture is not simply an act expressing his repugnance, but is specifically an act of religious cleansing. Again in discussing the situation of a Christian woman married to a pagan husband, Tertullian speaks of how the unbelieving husband might not understand the true meaning of such Christian acts as making the sign of the cross or exsufflation: "Latebisne tu, cum lectulum, cum corpusculum tuum signas, cum aliquid immundum flatu explodis, cum etiam per noctem exurgis oratum? Et non magiae aliquid uideberis operari [italics mine]?"5

Again in Augustine's writing the verb exsufflare is associated with exorcism, both the formal exorcism of Christian ritual and as an informal gesture of repudiation. A passage from the Contra Julianum, opus imperfectum illustrates this usage. The point Augustine is making is that the liturgical gesture of exsufflation

implies that the infant who is to be baptised must be exorcised and is therefore to be seen as affected by original sin.

Tu autem, qui eam [i.e. an infant] negas a diabolo possideri, procul dubio negas a potestate erui tenebrarum, cum in Christi regnum regeneratione transfertur, et accusas universam catholicam ecclesiam magno crimine maiestatis. Non enim legibus huius mundi alio crimine tenetur reus, quisquis imaginem, quamvis non vivam, tamen imperatoris exsufflat. Exsufflantur autem parvuli in exorcismo, priusquam baptizentur; exsufflantur igitur vivae imagines, non regis cuiuscumque, sed dei; immo vero exsufflatur, sed diabolus, qui contagione peccati tenet parvulum reum, ut illo foras misso parvulus transferatur ad Christum. Exsuffletur itaque Iuliani amentia, ne maiestatis rea in parvulorum mundatione et exsufflatione dicatur ecclesia [italics mine].6 (You, however, who deny [that an unbaptized infant] is possessed by the devil, without doubt you deny [him] to be seized from the power of darkness, when he is born into the kingdom of Christ by rebirth, and you accuse the universal Catholic church with the great crime of offence against majesty. For is he not held guilty of some crime by the laws of this world who blows upon the image, which although not alive, is yet that of the emperor? Yet little ones are blown upon in exorcism before they may be baptized; those live images are blown upon, [images] not of some king, but of God. But by no means is He blown upon, rather the devil [is], who holds the little one condemned by the contagion of sin, so that one [the devil] being cast out, the little one may be brought to Christ. Let the madness of Julian be blown upon, lest the Church be called guilty of an offence against majesty in cleansing and blowing upon little ones.)

This motif was also current in hagiographical texts. Sulpicius Severus tells a story of how Martin confronted a local warlord with exsufflation.

Sed ut ad Auitianum recurram - qui cum in omnibus locus cunctisque in urbibus ederet crudelitatis suae infanda monumenta, Turonis tantum innocens erat: et illa bestia, quae humano sanguine et infelicium mortibus alebatur, mitem se adque tranquillum beato uiro praesente praestabat-: memini quodam die ad eum uenisse Martinum: qui ubi secretarium eius ingressus est, uidit post tergum ipsius daemonem mirae magnitudinis adsidentem. quem eminus, ut uerbo, quia ita necesse est, parum Latino loquamur, exsufflans, Auitianus se exsufflari existimans, quid me, inquit, sancte, sic accipis? tum Martinus, non te, inquit, sed eum, qui ceruici tuae taeter incumbit. cessit diabolus et reliquit familiare subsellium: satisque constat post illum diem Auitianum mitiorem fuisse, seu quod intellexerit egisse se semper adsidentis sibi diaboli uoluntatem, seu quod inmundus spiritus ab illius consessu per Martinum fugatus priuatus est potestate grassandi, cum erubesceret minister auctore nec ministrum auctor urgueret. 7

(But to get back to Avitianus - in every district and every city he stayed in, he left unspeakable evidence of his cruelty; but at Tours, and Tours alone, he was harmless. Brute beast that he was, who battened on human blood and the deaths of his unhappy victims, he showed himself mild and peaceable where the man of blessings was present.

I remember one day Martin going to visit him; and, when he had entered his private office, he saw sitting behind his back a demon of astonishing size. From where he was (I am forced to use a phrase that is hardly Latin) Martin blew at it. Avitianus thought that it was he who was being blown at.

"Why, holy man, do you behave to me like this?" he asked.
"It is not at you", said Martin, "but at him, that loathsome creature mounted on your shoulders."

The devil capitulated and abandoned his familiar perch; and it is certainly the case that from that day onwards Avitianus was more gentle, either because he now realized that he had always been the tool of the devil that was riding him, or because the evil spirit, once driven from its seat on him by Martin, was deprived of its power for mischief. For the servant was now ashamed of his master and the master was not goading on its servant.)

This episode is translated by Elfric in the "Vita Sancti Martini Episcopi" in his $Lives\ of\ Saints$:

His wæl-hreownysse he cydde on gehwilcum burgum. and symble he blissode on unge-sæligra manna slæge. ac æt-foran martine he wæs milde ge-puht. and ne dorste on turonia don nane wælhreownysse. Se halga martinus com to him hwilon. and þa þa he eode into his spræc-huse. þa geseah he sittan ænne sweartne deofol ormætne on his hrycge. and he him on ableow. Þa wende auitianus þæt he him on ableowe. and cwæð to þam halgan were. hwi behylst þu me swa halga. Se bisceop him andwyrde. Ne behealde ic na þe. ac þone sweartan deofol þe sit on þinum hneccan ic þe of ableow. and se deofol swa aweg gewat. and his hiwcuðe setl sona ða forlet. Auitianus soðlice siðþan wæs mild-heortra . . . 8

The Old English follows the Latin quite closely with the exception that Ælfric seems to render the Latin phrase "quid me . . . , sancte, sic accipis?" ("why, holy man, do you treat me this way?") as "hwi behylst bu me swa halga" ("why do you look at me so, oh holy one?"). One might initially assume that Ælfric did not quite understand this scene; but Halm, the editor of the CSEL text of the dialogues, lists adspices as a variant reading for accipis, and it seems likely that Ælfric was following the reading of the manuscript he had before him even if the sense of this exchange was not immediately

apparent.9

The liturgical history of exsufflation is complicated; as the text I have quoted from Augustine's Contra Julianum indicates, exsufflation was part of the liturgy of infant baptism in Augustine's experience, but this usage is apparently not found in the earliest Roman liturgical texts. It was however attested in Gallican liturgical texts, is mentioned by Alcuin, and has become part of the modern Roman Ordo Baptismi parvulorum. I cite an "Ambrosian" ritual Ad cathecumenum faciendum as an example of exsufflation as a gesture against the power of diabolic forces:

In primis interroga eum, et dic:

Quis illu(a)m offert? Responsio. Ego (Nos).

Interrogatio. Quid vult fieri? Responsio. Christianus.

Interrogatio. Meretur a parentibus suis? Responsio. Meretur

Interrogatio. Abrenuntiat diabolo et operibus eius.

Responsio. Abrenuntiat.

Interrogatio. Saeculo et pompis eius. Responsio. Abrenuntiat. Hic contesta eum, et dic: Memor esto sermonum tuorum, ut a te nunquam abscedant. Responsio. Memor ero. Deinde tange aures et nares eius de sputo, et dic: Epheta,

quod est, adaperire in odorem suavitatis.

Exsuffla a pede ad caput, ad deridendum diabolum:

Exsufflo te, immundissime spiritus, in nomine Domini nostri

Ihesu Christi. Tu autem effugare, diabole: appropinquavit enim iudicium Dei.

Hic accipe oleum benedictum, . . .

Who offers him [her]?

R. I do [we do].

Q. What does he wish to become?

R. A Christian.

Q. Are his parents worthy?

R. They are worthy.

Q. Does he renounce the devil

R. He renounces.

and his works?
Q. His world and his pomps?

R. He renounces.

Iful of thy words, that they

Now call upon him and say: Be mindful of thy words, that they never depart from thee.

R. I will be mindful.

Then touch his ears and nostrils with spittle and say:
Epheta, that is, Be opened, unto the odour of sweetness.
Blow upon him, from head to foot, to mock the devil:
I blow upon thee, most unclean spirit, in the Name of our Lord
Jesus Christ. Thou, however, O devil, take flight: for the
judgement of God has drawn near.

Then take the sanctified oil . . .

Then you breathe into his face in the likeness of a cross: I exorcize thee, most unclean spirit, in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ: O every assault, all wrath, every phantom, be ye rooted out and put to flight from this creature of God . . .)

This text is chronologically appropriate as an analogue to *Vercelli Homily XIX*, since it occurs in a tenth-century liturgical manuscript, but it is geographically quite remote. North Italian liturgical usage is unlikely to have been known to the Vercelli homilist — who is so known as the result of one of the more spectacular vagaries of manuscript preservation rather than because of any apparent tradition of close cultural exchange between Anglo-Saxon England and northern Italy. But if this is a remote analogue, it nonetheless strikingly illustrates the significance of exsufflation in the liturgy as a gesture specifically directed against the devil and his powers, and the less dramatic usage, which the Vercelli homilist is more likely to have known, bore the same essential significance.

To return to Vercelli Homily XIX, I would argue that the motif with which I am concerned is best understood as an extension of the concept of exsufflatio to the plane of myth. The originator of this motif (possibly the Vercelli homilist himself, but more probably some precursor) knew about exsufflation as a liturgical gesture and about the currency of this motif in hagiography and elsewhere. He also knew that God had expelled Satan and the fallen angels from heaven at an early point in the prehistory of the cosmos. In searching for a way of expressing how God expelled Satan and his followers from heaven, the homilist chose to express this spiritual event in terms of the liturgical action of exsufflatio and thus coined the striking sentence I have quoted.

In concluding this paper I would like to cite a few more examples of this theme from later medieval English and renaissance poetry both to illustrate the currency of the motif and to elucidate some texts which have either been misunderstood or ignored by the commentators. The first passage occurs in *Piers Plowman B XVIII*, in the dramatic encounter between Christ and Lucifer at the harrowing of Hell:

Eft be light bad vnlouke and Lucifer answerde

Quis est iste? What Lord artow? quod Lucifer; be

lighte soone seide 'Rex glorie,

The Lord of myght and of mayn and alle manere vertues

The Lord of myght and of mayn and alle manere vertues, Dominus virtutum.

Dukes of bis dymme place, anoon vndo bise yates
That crist may come In, be kynges sone of heuene!'
And wib bat breeb helle brak with Belialles barres . . . 12

I have discussed this passage before, 13 and in returning to it would like to suggest that this striking image of Christ's "breath" breaking the gates of hell owes something to the tradition of exsufflatio as a liturgical gesture implying exorcism along with the verbal play on breath and the Latin term spiritus which I suggested earlier.

My next text is again from *Piers Plowman*, though this passage is less clearly dependent on the tradition of *exsufflatio*. At the end of the confession of the seven Deadly Sins, the figure Repentance prays for sinful mankind, and part of his prayer briefly summarizes Christ's death on the Cross, the descent into Hell, and Christ's

freeing of the lost souls who died before the passion.

And sibbe wib bi selue sone in oure sute deidest
On good fryday for mannes sake at ful tyme of be daye;
Ther biself ne bi sone no sorwe in deeb feledest,
But in our secte was be sorwe and bi sone it ladde:
Captiuam duxit captiuitatem.
The sonne for sorwe berof lees si3t for a tyme.
Aboute mydday, whan moost li3t is and meel tyme of Seintes,
Feddest wib bi fresshe blood our forefadres in derknesse:
Populus qui ambulabat in tenebris vidit lucem magnam.
The li3t bat lepe out of bee, Lucifer it blente
And blewe all bi blessed into be blisse of Paradys. 14

I have already discussed the dense and sometimes rather cryptic imagery of this passage at some length, and I do not wish to repeat myself here. But in this description of how the light (i.e. God the Son) "blows" the blessed to paradise, we have the mirror image of the text in *Vercelli Homily XIX*. In the latter God blew the evil angels out of heaven; here God the Son blows the blessed to the joy of heaven, and although I still would argue that this passage in *Piers Plowman* is Trinitarian in that the action of the "Sanctus *Spiritus*" is suggested by the verb "blow", this passage also presumably reflects the liturgical action of exsufflation.

While I have cited a wide variety of texts which are analogues to the text from *Vercelli Homily XIX*, I have not cited any exact parallels. Indeed, I know only one text in which the striking image of God blowing Satan and his followers out of heaven is exactly replicated - and in this instance it is virtually certain that the image was coined quite independently. Spenser, in "An Hymn of Heavenly Love", summarizes the narrative of the fall of the angels, and having defined the sin of the angels as pride, succinctly defines God's response:

Th' Almighty seeing their so bold assay, Kindled the flame of his consuming yre, And with his onely breath them blewe away From heavens hight, to which they did aspyre, To deepest hell, and lake of damned fyre; Where they in darknesse and dread horror dwell, Hating the happie light from which they fell. 15

Vercelli Homily XIX is an obscure text which has only very recently become accessible to modern Anglo-Saxonists. It is virtually impossible that Spenser could have seen it. (The Vercelli manuscript itself was not discovered by Anglo-Saxonists until the 19th century; the first clear reference to it at all is in 1748.) And yet both Spenser and the Vercelli homilist hit upon the same rather odd image to describe how Satan and the fallen angels were driven out of heaven. It is of course possible that both Spenser and the Vercelli homilist derive this figure from a common source - for example a homily or a hymn which I have missed. But it is also possible that they coined the image independently. For a variety of reasons which

it would take too long to articulate in this context, I suspect that the Spenserian figure derives from the images of breathing and blowing in *Piers Plowman*; and if this is true, it is a further reason for thinking that the similarity between Spenser's poems and the Old English homily is happenstance.

No one has ever suggested - nor is anyone likely to suggest - that the author of *Vercelli Homily XIX* was a great Christian literary artist. But he shared with those great Christian poets Langland and Spenser a heritage of imagery and an awareness that truths concerning the spiritual history of the world can best be expressed by analogy. And so when he had to discuss that hidden and deeply mysterious moment of Christian history in which Satan fell, he hit on a very expressive image to define the manner in which God used His power. This image did not apparently become widely current; but the fact that it was an apt one was proved - if proof were necessary - by the fact that it was rediscovered by Spenser.

Eleven Old English Rogationtide Homilies, ed. Joyce Bazire and J.E. Cross, Toronto Old English Series, 7 (University of Toronto Press, 1982) p.16; Vercelli Homilies IX-XIIII, ed. Paul E. Szarmach, Toronto Old English Series, 5 (University of Toronto Press, 1982) p.79. Another edition of this homily is that of A.M. Luiselli Fadda in Nuove Omelie Anglosassoni della Rinascencenza Benedettina, Filologia germanica, Testi et Studi, 1 (Florence, 1977) pp.71-99. Bazire and Cross acknowledge that the punctuation of the opening lines of this passage is problematical (p.23). I follow the suggested punctuation of Fadda at this point, and Szarmach's interpretation of the word utableow as a compound.

For an account of the "inspiration" of the angels see Hildegard L.C. Tristram, Vier altenglische Predigten aus der heterodoxen Tradition . . ., Inaugural - Dissertation zur Erlangung der Doctorwürde der Philosophischen Fakultät der Albert - Ludwigs - Universität (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1970) p.428 (N.R. Ker Cat. 38, art. 55, p. 56).

- The word occurs once in Elfric's Hexameron, where it is registered in Clark-Hall and Merritt and in Bosworth-Toller under the form "ut ablawan". It is, however, listed (correctly I believe) as a compound in Richard L. Venezky and Antonette diPaolo Healey, A Microfiche Concordance to Old English Poetry (Newark, Delaware, and Toronto, Ontario, 1980) together with this example from the Vercelli Homilies. The possibility that this passage might somehow imply an un-Biblical "insufflation" of all the created angels comparable to the insufflation of Adam in Genesis 2:7 is precluded both by context and the preposition ut. Cf. Fadda's translation: "Anzitutto, in principio egli creò i cieli e la terra e l'acqua, e tutte le cose che sono in essa, e tutti gli angeli che sono nei cieli; e tutti quelli che da angeli furono trasformati in diavoli, tutti costoro col suo fiato soffiò lontano da sé, anche quello che egli aveva creato il più illustre fra tutti gli altri angeli e che si chiamava Lucifero, cioè, nella nostra lingua, portatore di luce" (p.72).
- See Franz J. Dolger, Der Exorzismus im altchristlichen Taufrituel, Studium zur Geschichte und Kultur des Altertums 3 (Paderborn, 1909) pp.118-30.
- De Idololatria, XI, 7: CCSL 2, 1111.

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- Ad Vxorem II, v, 2: CCSL 1, 389. This text has been cited as a very early instance of the custom of making the sign of the Cross; while this seems plausible, it is necessary to observe that Tertullian does not specify what this sanctifying gesture actually is.
- Contra Julianum (Opus Imperfectum) III, 199: CSEL 85, 498.
- Dialogi II (III), 8: CSEL 1, 205-6. The translation is quoted from The Western Fathers, trans. and ed. F.R. Hoare (London, 1954: repr. New York, 1965) pp.130-1.
- "Vita Sancti Martini", cap. 42 in Elfric's Lives of Saints, ed. W.W. Skeat, EETS 76, 82, 94, 114 (London, 1881-1900: repr. Oxford, 1966) II, p.292.
- 9 CSEL 1, 20.
- For a good article on the topic see the *Enciclopedia cattolica*, ed. P. Pashini et al. (Florence 1949-54), under the headword *insufflazione*. See also Alcuin, *Epistola 134*, MGH *Epp*. IV, 202, *Epistola 137*, *ibid*., 207, and his *De ritibus baptismi*, PL 98.938B. Wulfstan mentions the rite; in the

ritual he knew the ritual of exsufflation and the ritual of marking the candidate's forehead with the sphragis, the sign of the Cross, were apparently conflated: "In cuius quoque facie a sacerdote per exsufflationem signum crucis sit, ut effugato diabolo Cristo, Domino nostro, preparetur introitus" Sermo VIIIa, ed. Dorothy Bethurum in The Homilies of Wulfstan (Oxford, 1957) p.169. Cf. also ibid., p.170 for another reference to this rite. For an extended series of references to this topic, see Rudolf Sunstrup, Die Bedeutung der Liturgischen Gebärden und Bewegungen in Lateinischen und Deutschen Auslegungen des 9. bis 13. Jahrhunderts (München, 1978) pp.308-9.

- Manuale Ambrosianum ed. Marcus Magistretti, Monumenta Veteris Liturgiae Ambrosianae (Milan, 1897-1905) II, 466-7. The translation is quoted from E.C. Whitaker, Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy, 2nd ed. (London, 1970) p.143. The Latin text is conveniently reprinted in the Enchiridion Euchologicum Fontium Liturgicorum ed. Enzo Lodi, Bibliotheca "Ephemerides Liturgicae", Subsidia 15 (Roma, 1979) 976-7.
- Piers Plowman: The B Version, . . . ed. George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson (London, 1975) pp.624-5 (Passus XVIII, 316-21). I have not reproduced the brackets and the italics of this text.
- "The Light that Blew the Saints to Heaven: Piers Plowman B, V. 495-503", RES 24 (1973) pp.444-9.
- Kane and Donaldson, p.337 (Passus V, 486-95).
- The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition, ed. Charles G. Osgood and Henry G. Lotspeich (Baltimore, 1932-57) VII p.215 (lines 85-91). My colleague Carol V. Kaske is preparing a brief paper on this image in its specifically Spenserian context. Cf. also a problematic image which occurs in Donne's sonnet "Temple" in the sequence "La Corona" in which he speaks of Jesus "Blowing, yea blowing out those sparks of wit", among the doctors in the Temple, The Divine Poems of John Donne, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford, 1952) p.3. Among my friends at Cornell and elsewhere who helped me with this paper I would particularly like to thank Mr Charles D. Wright and Paul E. Szarmach.