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Hagiographical Imagery of Light and Ælfric's 'Passion of St Dionysius'

Hugh Magennis

In portraying the transcendence of the saint an important recurring image used in Old English saints' lives, as in hagiographical tradition generally, is that of light. Anglo-Saxon hagiographers inherited the idea of light as a central Christian symbol, a deeply traditional metaphor, expressing the divine nature and, in its dynamic aspect of illumination, the manifestation of that divine nature in the world. It was an image of glory, knowledge and transformation. Light was associated with creation, heaven and the divine; with Christ, redemption and Christianity; and with conversion and repentance. Reference to light and to the darkness it dispels is ubiquitous in the Bible, and the symbolism of light came to be thoughtfully developed and explored in patristic thought and in Christian liturgy, iconography and literature. Light had also featured significantly in the pre-Christian religions and philosophies of the Mediterranean, many of the former of which included sun-worship, and it has been shown that aspects of such traditions were incorporated into Christianity.¹ In the Christian view, however, light was seen as not being of this world – certainly not of this fallen world – which was a world of darkness, but rather from outside, its only source being divine.² Anglo-Saxon hagiographers were probably aware of different, world-affirming, traditions of the symbolism of light, but they are generally careful not to introduce such ideas into their writings. As I discuss elsewhere, however, such ideas do appear in Old English and related literature, forming an important contrast with what we find in the work of religious writers, including hagiographers.³

Light is associated with saints because of their special relationship to the glory of the divine, to the knowledge that came with Christ and redemption, and to the transformation of conversion and repentance; they experience light and they are figures of light. Vernacular hagiographers are usually closely following

Latin sources but also, particularly in the case of poetry, can develop the imagery in creative ways. In the present discussion there is room to concentrate only on Old English prose hagiography, but verse presents an obvious area for further study. Among prose hagiographers, Ælfric of Eynsham, the most prolific of them, provides a useful focus of attention. In many ways Ælfric's use of light imagery is representative of the wider hagiographical tradition, in which images of light are frequently drawn upon, but in one work, his 'Passion of St Dionysius and his Companions', in the collection *Lives of Saints*, it is evident that this imagery plays a particularly important role and, in my view, a very interesting one.⁴

In hagiography heavenly light is described as shining upon the saints, and when Christ's messengers appear to saints they are suffused with light or carrying light; similarly, in epiphanic scenes saints themselves are described as radiant and shining with light, in accordance with the words of Jesus in the gospel, 'I am the light of the world; anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark; he will have the light of life' (John 8. 12). Thus, to give examples of episodes from Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*, Christ himself appears to St Eugenia in her dark prison 'with a heavenly light' ('mid heofonlicum leohte', 'St Eugenia', l. 403), 'illuminating' (*on-lihte*, l. 405) the prison and bringing sustenance to her;⁵ the grey-haired physician who comes to heal St Agatha in her prison-cell, who announces himself to be the apostle of the Saviour, carries a *leohtfæt*, 'lantern', in his hands ('St Agatha', l. 133),⁶ and after her mutilated breast has been healed a great light shines in the prison (l. 147); similarly, a light shines in prison in the 'Passion of St Julian and Basilissa' (l. 213); in the 'Passion of St Sebastian' a light, accompanied by an angel, shines on the saint after his preaching to a group of afflicted Christians (ll. 87-88).⁷ In 'St Oswald' the sanctity of Oswald is demonstrated after his death when a heavenly light, 'swilce healic sunnbeam', 'like a lofty sunbeam' (l. 184), shines up to heaven from his remains;⁸ in an episode in 'St Martin' (omitted in Ælfric's earlier account of the same saint in the second series of *Catholic Homilies*)⁹ a wicked monk even manages by his 'devilish art' ('mid feond-licum cræfte', l. 823) to bring it about that his cell is filled with light and his own clothes are shining, but his sorcery is instantly found out by the holy Martin (ll. 809-29). The non-Ælfrician items included in the *Lives of Saints* manuscript also offer instances of similar images: in the 'Passion of St Eustace and his Companions', the likeness of the cross appears to Eustace between the horns of a stag, accompanied by the image of Christ, the cross being 'brighter than the sun's beam' (ll. 43-44);¹⁰ in the 'Legend of the Seven Sleepers' (also in the *Lives of Saints* manuscript) in their transfigured state the faces of the seven saints

shine like the radiantly bright sun: 'eall heora nebwilte ongann to scinenne swilce seo þurhbeorhte sunne' (ll. 753-54) (recalling the Transfiguration of Jesus, in which his face was 'shining like the sun', Matthew 17. 2).¹¹ The Old English 'Legend' announces itself as being about 'þæra eadigra seofon slæpera ðrowung, ðara haligra naman scinað on heofon, lihtað eac on eorðan beorhte mid Cristenum mannum' (ll. 1-3) [the passion of the seven blessed sleepers, whose holy names shine in heaven and brightly give light also on earth to Christian men].¹²

As well as shining with light, saints also spread the light, following Christ in bringing enlightenment to the world through their missionary and pastoral work and through the inspiration provided by their lives; in the words of Jesus to the apostles, they are 'the light of the world' (Matthew 5. 14). The teaching of Ælfric's St Sebastian drives away unbelief,

swa swa dægred to-dræfð þa dimlican þystra .

And manna eagan onlyht þe blinde wæron on niht .

('Passion of St Sebastian', ll. 108-09)

[just as the dawn drives away the dim dusk and enlightens
men's eyes that were blind in the night.]

In the same passion Polycarp asserts that Christ can enlighten ignorance through his mercy ('þurh his miltsunge onlihtan', l. 200), while Chrysanthus in the 'Passion of Saint Chrysanthus and his Wife Daria' speaks of the light of truth as revealed in the holy gospels and of not turning to darkness from the true light ('to þeostrum fram þam soðan leohte', l. 20). The enemies of saints, on the other hand, are spiritually blind, like the suitor of St Agnes, whom Ælfric describes as 'wið-innan ablend' (inwardly blinded), and the 'ablenda' emperor in 'St George' (l. 128).¹³ The miracle of healing the blind, which is granted to some saints, associates them with Christ, the spiritual significance of whose healing of the blind man in the gospels was carefully explained by exegetes in terms of spiritual enlightenment. Examples of the healing of blind people occur in Ælfric's *Lives of Saints* in the 'Passion of Saints Julian and Basilissa' (ll. 172-74), 'St Maur' (l. 97),¹⁴ 'Passion of St Dionysius and his Companions' (ll. 51-58) and 'St Martin' (ll. 585-91).

In line with the imperative of *imitatio Christi*, the use of light imagery in hagiography generally ties in with the idea of saints as perfected in themselves and transformative of others, providing the light that others need; saints participate in the light, and light is a sign of their sanctity. With a few exceptions, such as Cyriacus in the Old English poem *Elene* and Mary of Egypt, they are not

shown themselves as coming to see the light: the *leoht* that Cyriacus ignored before his baptism is mentioned in *Elene* (l. 1044), however;¹⁵ afterwards he himself can call forth a miracle of light, revealing the hiding place of the holy nails by means of a flame 'brighter than the sun' ('sunnan beorhtra', l. 1109). And Mary of Egypt in her time of temptation in the desert is comforted in her distress by the appearance of 'a light shining everywhere about me' ('leoht gehwanon me ymbutan scinende', Old English version, ll. 639-40); after her death her own body shines like the sun (ll. 883-84).¹⁶ Other saints are bringers rather than receivers of light.

Although Ælfric, like other writers, makes widespread use of light imagery in episodes throughout his saints' lives, there is, as mentioned above, one life by him in which light plays a particularly prominent role. This is his 'Passion of St Dionysius and his Companions' in *Lives of Saints*, a version that closely – though with considerable abbreviation – follows the highly influential *Passio Sanctissimi Dionysii* by the Frankish scholar and ecclesiastical leader Hilduin of Saint-Denis, *BHL* 2175 (*Incipit* 'Post beatam ac salutiferam').¹⁷ Hilduin's *passio* of Dionysius, the revered patron of his monastery, has been dated 835-40, and Ælfric would have read it in a version of the 'Cotton-Corpus legendary', the Latin hagiographical collection that was the main source for his writings about saints.¹⁸

Hilduin's *passio* is a hagiographical tour de force, in which Dionysius ('the Areopagite'), mentioned in passing in Acts 17. 34 as being among those converted by St Paul at Athens, and (Pseudo-)Dionysius, the anonymous, possibly sixth-century, author of a body of writings in Greek applying Christian concepts to a Neoplatonic system, are both amalgamated with a third figure, Dionysius the missionary of the Gauls, who is reported in an early *passio* and in Gregory of Tours's *History of the Franks* as having been martyred as bishop of Paris (according to Gregory, in the third century).¹⁹ The early *passio* is the *Passio Sanctorum Martyrum Dionysii, Rustici et Eleutherii*, *BHL* 2171 (*Incipit* 'Gloriosae martyrum passionēs'), formerly attributed to Venantius Fortunatus and dating, perhaps, from as early as the late fifth century.²⁰

Hilduin played an important role in introducing the Pseudo-Dionysian writings to the west and had already translated some of them into Latin by the time he composed the *passio*, which includes a detailed survey of the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus and extensive quotations from his own translations.²¹ He also wrote a metrical version of the life of Dionysius.²²

Hilduin was not the first to identify Dionysius of Paris with the other two figures. It is accepted that in his *passio* he drew extensively upon an existing

anonymous version of the life of Dionysius, *BHL* 2178 (*Incipit* 'Post beatam et gloriosam'), which mentions that Dionysius was converted by St Paul at Athens before beginning his missionary work,²³ and on other sources. Hilduin's contribution was to expand greatly on the existing picture of the composite St Dionysius, providing an elaborate narrative of the saint's Athenian phase and a wealth of detail about the writings attributed to him – none of which is in the anonymous *passio*, *BHL* 2178. It is notable that he includes in his *passio* reference to Dionysius's philosophical interest in the idea of light: the *passio* contains an account and inventory of Dionysius's works in which Hilduin writes that one of his epistles was to a certain Dorotheus, 'making known that the divine darkness [or mist] is an inaccessible light, in which God is said to dwell and in which is everyone who has been worthy in this body to know and see him' ('innotescens quod divina caligo sit lux inaccessibilis, in qua habitare Deus dicitur, et in qua sit omnis qui eum scire et videre dignus in hoc corpore fuerit', col. 32C). As pointed out below, the *passio* itself is unusual, even in the context of the widespread exploitation of the imagery of light in hagiography, in the extent of its preoccupation with this imagery, which was to be transmitted in turn in Ælfric's Old English version.

Ælfric is not very interested in Dionysius as a writer of philosophy but he is extremely interested in him as a convert and converter and as a bishop and martyr. The account he inherits from Hilduin is quadripartite in structure; the four parts dealing, respectively, with the conversion of Dionysius at Athens through the ministry of St Paul, Dionysius having been a devotee of the pagan gods (Hilduin, chs. 1-8); the writings of Dionysius, presenting an itemized list of these and an extended summary of their contents, including excerpts from Hilduin's own translation of them (Hilduin, chs. 9-16); the travels of Dionysius, first to Rome and then, at the direction of Pope Clement, as a missionary in the region of Paris, where, as Hilduin puts it, 'Gallic pride and Germanic obstinacy rather eagerly submitted to him' ('subdebat se illi potius certatim Gallicanicus cothernus atque Germanica cervicositas', ch. 22, col. 41C) (Hilduin, chs. 17-22); and his persecution and martyrdom, along with those of his companions Rusticus and Eleutherius, and events after his death (Hilduin, chs. 23-36).

Ælfric reduces the structural divisions from four to three, summarizing the account of Dionysius's writings in a couple of sentences. He mentions the names of some of those for whom the books were written (ll. 91-96) but makes no attempt to follow Hilduin in exploring the nature of Dionysius's thought in these books, noting only that he wrote 'many books concerning the true faith and

concerning the orders of angels, with wondrous reasoning' ('mid wundorlicre smeagunge') (ll. 87-88; trans. by Skeat, II, 175). Ælfric's version overall is brief indeed compared to the Latin, to the extent that it has been seen as 'more an epitome than a close rendering'.²⁴ While it is more than an epitome, the 'Passion of St Dionysius' is certainly an example of Ælfric at his most concise, with little other than the odd emotive epithet (a familiar element of his style) in the way of addition to the bare story. Ælfric's severe pruning of his source results in a much sharper narrative than is found in Hilduin's expansive and highly-wrought Latin version, the Old English version highlighting clearly in its three movements the themes of the saint's conversion (ll. 1-80), missionary work (ll. 81-187) and martyrdom (ll. 188-340).

Ælfric ignores most of Hilduin's rhetorical flourishes and tropes,²⁵ but significantly he adopts his most insistent image, that of light. Hilduin was aware of the philosophical importance of light in the writings of Dionysius, in which inaccessible light is an image of God's unknowableness, and it is my suggestion that, influenced by his reading of Dionysius, he self-consciously elaborated the imagery of light as a major motif in the *passio*, thereby also providing a key means of expressing the important theme of conversion in Dionysius's story. In elaborating the imagery of light, Hilduin was exploiting what had become a commonplace in hagiography generally, but usually in saints' lives light is employed as a 'local' theme, specific to particular episodes. In Hilduin's *passio*, however, and in Ælfric's Old English adaptation of it, the idea of light becomes a recurrent feature in the story of the saint, integral in a way that I have not found elsewhere in hagiography despite the widespread use of images of light in this kind of writing.

It has recently been suggested that another feature of the 'Hilduinian' legend of St Dionysius, the saint's carrying of his cut-off head to his place of burial while the head praises the Lord, functions as a symbolic expression of the philosophy of Pseudo-Dionysius. In his book *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature*, David Williams writes, 'The ultimate demonstration of the paradoxical relation between the *via positiva* and the *via negativa* that [St Dionysius] was thought to have expounded is now "shown" through the monstrous representation of a speaking head that communicates nothing'.²⁶ Williams sees Pseudo-Dionysius and his Western translator and interpreter John Scotus Eriugena (c. 810 – c. 877) as playing a key role in the development of a medieval theory of monstrosity, according to which the monstrous serves to demonstrate the inadequacy of human cognition in

containing the limitlessness of the real and thereby shows that God transcends human knowledge utterly. Williams focuses on 'the Areopagite's insistence on the superiority of the deformed image over the natural' as part of his teaching concerning the *via negativa* that leads towards God.²⁷

Williams makes a persuasive case in general terms but it should be pointed out that, according to the accepted view, the head-carrying episode has been inherited by Hilduin from *BHL* 2178, 'Post beatam et gloriosam', and is independent therefore of the interest in Pseudo-Dionysius's thought engendered by Hilduin and his younger contemporary Eriugena. As the – earlier – *BHL* 2178 account has it,

beatissimi se Dionysii et pontificis venerandi sanctum
exanime cadaver erexit beataque manu caput a corpore
abscisum, lictoris ense truncatum *pendulis* coepit brachiis
vectitare atque ab illo montis cacumine duobus fere milibus
firmis gressibus apportavit novo et prius inaudito miraculo,
exanime corpus viventis currere more et homo jam mortuus
firmis incedere plantis.

(ch. 13; p. 794B)

[The lifeless corpse of the most blessed and venerable
bishop Dionysius raised itself up and with its blessed hand
began to carry in its hanging [reading *pendulis*] arms the
head which had been cut off from the body and beheaded by
the attendant's sword, and from that mountain summit it
carried it for almost two miles with steady steps in a new
and previously unheard of miracle, a lifeless corpse and a
man already dead hastening in the manner of a living person
and advancing with firm feet.]

Hilduin follows this closely, even using many of the same words and phrases, but he introduces an angelic troop which accompanies the miraculous walk and adds a reference to sweet-sounding hymns in praise of God ('hymnis dulcisonis Deum laudans', col. 47B); and he draws upon the imagery of light.

The first part of Hilduin's account, beginning with a reference to the light that shines upon Dionysius and his two companions at their death, is as follows:

ac lux ineffabilis cunctis resplenduit; et beatissimi Dionysii se cadaver erexit, sanctaque manu caput a corpore dolabra lictoris truncatum, angelico ductu gressum regente, et luce coelesti circumfulgente, pendulis coepit brachiis vectitare. Et facta est omnes multitudo coelestis exercitus exanime ejus corpori caput proprium, ab ipso monte ubi fuerat decollatus, per duo fere millia deportanti usque ad locum, in quo nunc Dei dispositione et sua electione requiescit humatum, sine cessatione hymnis dulcisonis Deum laudans. (ch. 32; col. 47A-B)

[but an indescribable light shone forth on them all; and the body of the most blessed Dionysius raised itself up and, with an angelic escort guiding his path and a heavenly light shining around him, with his holy hand he began to carry in his hanging arms the head which had been cut off with the attendant's axe. And there was a great host of a heavenly army, accompanying him as with his lifeless body he carried his own head, from that mountain where he had been beheaded, for almost two miles to the place in which it is now rests in burial, according to God's providence and his own choice, praising God without ceasing with sweet-sounding hymns.]

From Hilduin's account it appears that it is the angelic host that does the praising – an appropriate activity for them – as the participle *laudans* seems to agree grammatically with *omnes multitudo* (with *omnes* for *omnis*). The syntax is potentially confusing, however (the participle being far removed from its noun), and the passage could be read as meaning that the saint's head was singing. Later adaptors of Hilduin, including Ælfric (l. 296), interpret it in this way, producing an even stranger miracle than the 'straightforward' head-carrying, as found in Hilduin and his source; a miracle eagerly seized on by Williams.²⁸

Hilduin's presentation of the episode stresses that it is according to divine dispensation and with heavenly approval that the saint makes his miraculous walk to his final resting place, the miracle serving therefore to authenticate dramatically the link between the monastery of Saint-Denis and a great saint. Far from labouring the point about the grotesqueness of the miracle, especially if it is the angels and not the severed head which are praising God, Hilduin insists that

such a miracle is not difficult for God. (ch. 33; col. 47C-D). He considers the miracle from the perspective of the greater miracle of God breathing life into dust and that of the bodily resurrection. As well as adding the angelic host and the song of praise to the inherited account of this miracle, Hilduin introduces the imagery of light – 'lux ineffabilis cunctis resplenduit' [an indescribable light shone forth on them all], 'luce coelesti circumfulgente' [with heavenly light shining around] – thereby taking up an idea that has figured throughout his narrative but which had not been significant in *BHL* 2178.²⁹ In my view, it is in his emphasis on light rather than his cultivation of the monstrous that Hilduin reflects the thought of his subject in the *passio*, an emphasis that is also transmitted in Ælfric's version of the legend.

As I have suggested, Ælfric was not interested in Dionysius's philosophy, but he could see how suitable the imagery of light was in the story of Dionysius, the story of a convert who becomes a converter and undergoes a glorious martyrdom. Ælfric knows light as an effective symbol in hagiography and is happy to follow Hilduin in his imaginative elaboration of it in the life of Dionysius, even including a highly 'Dionysian' image of darkness as a betokening of light near the beginning of the narrative. Rather than reducing the concentration on light in line with his instinct for abbreviation, Ælfric chooses to draw upon the imagery extensively in his version, so extensively indeed that, just as in Hilduin, light becomes the most prominent image in his text – which is not the case elsewhere in his saints' lives.

The image of darkness betokening light, mentioned just above, is the first instance of imagery of light in Ælfric's 'Passion'. Ælfric relates that Dionysius had seen the sun darken at the time of Christ's Passion and that Dionysius had interpreted this darkness as a sign of light to come. Living at the time in Egypt, Dionysius, along with some other philosophers, saw

hu seo sunne aþystrode to sweartre nihte
fram mid-dæge oð non þa ða ure drihten þrowode
for mancynnes alysednyse . and hi micclum þæs wundrodon .
þa cwæð Dyonisius . þeos deorce niht getacenaþ
micel leoht towerd eallum middan-earde
þæt god sylf geswutelað soðlice mann-cynne.
(ll. 11-16)

[how the sun grew dim unto swart night from midday to nones when our Lord was suffering for mankind's redemption, and they greatly wondered thereat. Then said Dionysius, 'This dark night betokeneth a great light to come upon all the earth, which God Himself will verily manifest to mankind'. (Skeat, p. 171)]

Here Ælfric faithfully transmits the essential meaning of a much more elaborate passage in the Latin:

Ubi simul cum eo degens, quando Deus homo, Dominus noster Jesus Christus pro mundi salute invidia Judæorum cruci pendit afflixus, et sol sui Domini mortem pavescens, lucis suæ radios in tetræ mutavit noctis horrorem, atque orbis climata tenebrarum obtexit caligine, earumdem tenebrarum signo antea invisio et inaudito attonitus, ut omnium litterarum disciplinis edoctus, dixit: hæc nox, quam nostris oculis novam descendisse miramur, totius mundi veram lucem adventuram signavit, atque Deum humano generi effulsurum, serena dignatione dictavit.

(ch. 5; col. 27A-B)

[While he was dwelling with him [*sc.* the philosopher Apollophanus], at the time when God as man, our Lord Jesus Christ, for the salvation of the world hung tortured on the cross through the ill-will of the Jews, and when the sun, becoming afraid at the death of its Lord, changed the rays of its light to the dread of hideous night and covered the skies of the world with the mist of darkness, he was astounded by the sign of this same darkness, a sign previously not seen or heard of, well-versed though he was in the study of all that had been written, and he said, 'This night, which, new to our eyes, we see with wonder to have descended, has given a sign of the true light which will come to the whole world, and it has told us in its bright graciousness that God will shine upon the human race.']

Ælfric simplifies and clarifies Hilduin's imagery, omitting, for example, the paradox of dark night as having bright graciousness (*serena dignatione*) and supplying the detail that the darkness lasted from midday until the ninth hour (cf. Matthew 27. 45). The central idea comes through, however, and indeed Ælfric in an addition to his source points out that the light which Dionysius predicted did come to him later with the preaching of Paul at Athens, which led to his conversion:

and him com þæt leoht to . þurh paules lare syððan
swa swa we her secgað on þisre soðan rædincge.
(ll. 18-19)

[and that light came to him through Paul's lore afterward,
even as we shall here say in this true reading. (Skeat, p. 171)]

Ælfric also follows the Latin in including the account of Paul healing a man blind from birth the day after his encounter with Dionysius. There is no sign of this episode in Acts 17 or in *BHL* 2178. Hilduin has invented it with the evident intention of developing the theme of enlightenment, in particular the enlightenment of Dionysius, to whom the Apostle sends the man as a sign. Ælfric's version of the episode picks up on the symbolism of enlightenment in the speech the healed man makes to Dionysius, referring back to the earlier mention of the darkened sun:

Ic eom se ylca þe þu embe sprycst .
þe blind wæs geboren . and seo beorhte sunne
minum eagum ne scean . oþ þisne andwyrðan dæg .
ac se eadiga paulus mine eagan onlihte
þurh his drihtnes mihte . þe he mannum embe bodað.
(ll. 67-71)

[I am the same man of whom thou speakest, who was born blind, and the bright sun never shone on my eyes until this present day; but the blessed Paul enlightened mine eyes through his Lord's might, concerning whom he preacheth to men. (Skeat, p. 173)]

Hilduin's original reads,

Ego nempe sum, cui cæco nato hactenus sol non luxit; sed ipse Paulus, cujus tibi defero mandata salubria, Jesu Christi magistri sui invocata virtute, sanitatis mihi lumen indulsit.

(ch. 8; col. 28D)

[I am indeed he upon whom, blind from birth, the sun has not shone up until now; but Paul himself, whose health-bringing commands I report to you, has granted me the light of healing, calling upon the power of his master Jesus Christ.]

Interestingly, the episode of the healing of the blind man is the only specifically described piece of wonder-working by a saint in Hilduin's entire text, with the exception of the bizarre post-mortem episode of Dionysius carrying his cut-off head. Hilduin, followed by Ælfric, mentions that Dionysius performed miracles but does not say what they were. As mentioned above, the episode of the healing of the blind man has been invented by Hilduin, as has the earlier episode of Dionysius seeing the sun darken at the time of Christ's death and interpreting it as a sign of light to come. *BHL* 2178 provides no information about Dionysius before his conversion and covers the conversion in a single sentence, before immediately whisking the saint off to Rome to begin his own missionary work (ch. 3; 792E).

Later in the 'Passion' Ælfric transmits an image of light from Hilduin in his account of the preaching of Dionysius among the Franks. As he fearlessly carried out his missionary work at Paris, says Ælfric, idolators opposed the saint, but when they saw his face shining with heavenly light they submitted to him, or fled – 'swa hraðe swa hi ge-sawon his scinendan neb-wlite / mid þam heofonlican leohte' (ll. 169-70) [as soon as they saw his shining countenance with its heavenly light (Skeat, pp. 179-81)]. This follows Hilduin's account:

tanta et ita ineffabiliter in eo lux cælestis gratiæ radiabat, ut aut omni ferocitate una cum armis deposita se illi prosternerent: aut qui compuncti Spiritus sancti dono ad credendum non erant, pavore nimio solverentur, et territi a præsentia ejus aufugerent.

(ch. 22; col. 41B)

[so great a light of heavenly grace shone in him, and in such an unutterable way, that they either prostrated themselves before him, laying down their fierceness along with their weapons, or those who were not motivated to believe by the gift of the Holy Spirit were overcome with great fear and fled terrified from his presence.]

To move on finally to the martyrdom of Dionysius and his companions Rusticus and Eleutherius, it is notable that in both Ælfric and Hilduin the account of this is generally highly conventional, but again the insistence on the imagery of light is striking. Ælfric relates that in his lightless dungeon (l. 257) Dionysius celebrated mass before his death, and as he divided the sacred host,

þa com þær heofonlic leoht .
ofer ealle þa meniu . swilc swa hi ær ne gesawon .
þær com eac se hælend mid þam heofonlican leohte .
and fela engla mid him . þær menn onlocodon.
(ll. 262-65)

[there came a heavenly light over all the multitude, such as they had never before seen. There came likewise the Saviour with the heavenly light, and many angels with Him, where they were looking on. (Skeat, pp. 185-87)]

This corresponds to Hilduin's

resplenduit hujus modi lux de cælo super eum et omnes qui ibi aderant, qualem nemo eorum antea viderat; in qua veniens apparuit ei Dominus Jesus Christus, etiam cunctis videntibus, quibus est datum videre, cum multitudine angelorum.

(ch. 29; col. 45C)

[in this way a light from heaven shone forth over him and all who were present there, such as none of them had seen before; and in it the Lord Jesus Christ came and appeared to him, with a host of angels, even before the sight of all, to whom it was granted to see.]

And just after the beheading of Dionysius and his companions, a great light shines upon their bodies and a heavenly light accompanies Dionysius's carrying of his head. I have already quoted Hilduin's elaborate description of this event above. Ælfric transmits it (more briefly) as follows:

Þær com þa micel leoht to þære martyra lice .
and þæs bisceopes lic mid þam leohte aras .
and nam his agen heafod þe of-aheawen wæs
uppan ðære dune . and eode him forð þanon
ofer twa mila þam mannum onlocigendum
his drihten herigende . mid halgum lof-sangum .
and engla werod eac þær wynsumlice sungon .
oð þæt þæt lic becom þær ðær he licgan wolde .
mid heafde mid ealle . and þa halgan englas
singallice sungon . swa swa us secgað bec .³⁰
(ll. 291-300)

[For there came a great light to the martyrs' bodies, and the bishop's holy body arose with that light, and took his own head, which was hewn off upon the hill, and went him forth thence over two miles, while the men were looking on, praising his Lord with holy hymns; and a company of angels also there winsomely sung until the body came where it desired to lie with the head and all, and the holy angels continually sung, as books tell us. (Skeat, pp. 187-89)]

Here in what Ælfric describes as a 'strange wonder' ('syllic wundor', l. 306) and a 'strange sign' ('syllice tacn', l. 309), Dionysius rises up 'with the light' ('mid þam leohte', l. 292) and carries his head to his desired resting-place. Ælfric inserts his own interpretation of the sign, saying that it showed that Dionysius's soul lived on and how great had been his faith while he was alive (ll. 309-12). Afterwards, when Dionysius's remains have been translated to a famous monastery (Saint-Denis), Ælfric follows Hilduin in relating that unnumbered miracles take place there, the first mentioned of which is the healing of the blind (l. 336).³¹

In his account of St Dionysius Ælfric, following Hilduin, includes motifs referring to light that are familiar enough in hagiography. They are more frequent and insistent here than elsewhere in Ælfric's saints' lives, however. They occur at each stage of the saint's story and, as such, they perform more of a structural

function than in other Ælfrician lives. In particular, they serve to emphasize the theme of conversion, a theme that runs through the whole narrative. Ælfric is not interested in reflecting the 'Dionysian' metaphor of the light of divine unknowableness, but he is interested in the theme of conversion, which appears in the 'Passion of St Dionysius' in its most developed form in his hagiographical writings.

The saint as convert is not a theme that Ælfric explores widely in his work, nor is it one to which his highly stylized approach to hagiography is suited. Elsewhere, he discusses the failings and imperfections of saints as great as Peter and Paul, but he is careful to reserve such concerns for his homiletic rather than hagiographical writings. According to the early medieval hagiographical model of sanctity which is evident at its most refined and consistent in Ælfric's lives, saints are typically presented as superhuman and unchanging 'iconic' figures,³² who convert others but are themselves in a state of achieved sanctity, elevated above human fallibility. They are presented in oppositional terms, reflecting heavenly perfection, not earthly weakness.³³ Saints who are known to have converted are accommodated to this pattern, either by the hagiographer drawing a veil over their pre-conversion activities, or by having them convert at a very young age, or by the suggestion that they were already searching virtuously for truth before they received the Christian message. In Ælfric, even saints whose progress was known to be more 'gradational',³⁴ like Cuthbert, are reconceived in terms of the image of the saint as constant in perfection.

The 'Passion of St Dionysius' is an Ælfrician saint's life in which conversion is inherited as a central preoccupation, applying to the saint himself and to his work among hostile tribes. Conversion had been a distinguishing feature of Hilduin's story. In its expression in Hilduin there is already accommodation of the saint to the model of constant virtue: Dionysius had been a seeker after truth in his former life, not at all like the ignorant and savage Gauls/Franks, the 'Other' that he converts later. Before his conversion he had honoured the 'unknown God' (cf. Acts 27. 23) and he was receptive to the divine portent of the darkening sun. Ælfric maintains the preoccupation with the theme of conversion in his version, adopting, and if anything extending, Hilduin's imagery of light as the key means of symbolizing the theme, an imagery that, as I have proposed, Hilduin was particularly prompted to elaborate from his reading of the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius himself. Conversion is effected in the legend of St Dionysius by preaching, and also by means of – mostly unspecified – signs and wonders, described as unprecedented. The ones that are specified are associated with light, and light is itself the manifestation of the special

relationship of the saint to God. I would suggest that it is in Hilduin's *Passio Sanctissimi Dionysii* and in Ælfric's vernacular adaptation of it that the potential of the traditional image of light expressing sanctity and conversion is most purposefully fulfilled among early medieval hagiographical writings.

NOTES

¹ See Hans Conzelmann, 'φῶς', in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), ix, 310-58 (pp. 313-18); Hugo Rahner, *Greek Myths and Christian Mysteries*, trans. by Brian Battershaw (London: Burns and Oates, 1963), esp. pp. 89-178.

² On light in early Christian tradition, see Pierre-Thomas Camelot, 'Lumière', in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, ed. by M. Viller and others, 17 vols (Paris: Beauchesne, 1976), ix, 1149-58, at col. 1149 and 1151-55; also Conzelmann, 'φῶς', in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, IX, 356-57; Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, 2nd edn (London: Dacre Press, 1945), pp. 416-25; Jean Danielou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), pp. 298-301. On the importance of light in the writings of the most influential western father, Augustine, see Eoin Cassidy, 'Per Christum Hominem ad Christum Deum: Augustine's Homilies on John's Gospel', in *Studies in Patristic Christology*, ed. by Thomas Finan and Vincent Twomey (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), pp. 122-43 (p. 129).

³ See my article, 'Imagery of Light in Old English Poetry: Traditions and Appropriations', forthcoming in *Anglia*.

⁴ Walter W. Skeat, ed. and trans., *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, EETS, o.s. 76, 82, 94 and 114 (London: Oxford University Press, 1881-1900; repr. as two vols, 1966), 'Passio Sancti Dionysii et Sociorum Eius', II, 168-91.

⁵ 'Natale Sancte Eugenie Uirginis', in *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, I, 24-51.

⁶ 'Natale Sancta Agathe Uirginis', in *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, I, 194-209.

⁷ 'Passio Sancti Iuliani et Sponse Eius Basilisse', in *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, I, 90-115; 'Passio Sancti Sebastiani Martyris', in *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, I, 116-47.

⁸ 'Natale Sancti Oswaldi Regis et Martyris', in *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, II, 124-43 (cf. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, III, 11: *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. by Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 246-47); Felix of Crowland in his *Life of St Guthlac* reports a similar miracle after the death of Guthlac: see ch. 50: *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac*, ed. and trans. by Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), pp. 158-59.

⁹ 'Vita Sancti Martini Episcopi et Confessoris', in *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, II, 218-313; for the *Catholic Homilies* version, see 'Depositio Sancti Martini Episcopi', in *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The Second Series: Text*, ed. by Malcolm Godden, EETS, s.s. 5 (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 288-97; for translation, see *The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church: The First Part, Containing the Sermones Catholici, Or Homilies of Ælfric*, ed. and trans. by Benjamin Thorpe, 2 vols (London: Ælfric Society, 1844 and 1846), II, 499-519.

- ¹⁰ 'Passio Sancti Eustachii Martyris Sociorumque Eius', in *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, II, 190-219.
- ¹¹ Hugh Magennis, ed., *The Anonymous Old English Legend of the Seven Sleepers*, Durham Medieval Texts, 7 (Durham: Durham Medieval Texts, 1996); for translation, see *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, I, 489-54.
- ¹² See Magennis, *The Anonymous Old English Legend*, p. 62, note to ll. 2-3.
- ¹³ 'Passio Chrisanti et Dariæ Sponse Euis', in *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, II, 378-99; 'Natale Sancte Agnetis Uirginis', in *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, I, 170-95; 'Natale Sancti Georgii Martyris', in *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, I, 306-19.
- ¹⁴ 'Natale Sancti Mauri Abbatis', in *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, I, 148-69.
- ¹⁵ P. O. E. Gradon, ed., *Cynewulf's Elene*, rev. edn (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996); for translation, see S. A. J. Bradley, ed. and trans., *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London, Melbourne and Toronto: Dent, 1982), pp. 164-97.
- ¹⁶ Hugh Magennis, ed. and trans., *The Old English Life of St Mary of Egypt* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002); cf. the St Oswald reference at n. 7, above.
- ¹⁷ Hilduin, *Passio Sanctissimi Dionysii*, edited in *PL*, 106, 23-50; translations from this and from *BHL* 2178, mentioned below, are my own. Ælfric had also inserted a short passage on St Dionysius in the item 'Natale Sancti Clementis Martiris' in the first series of *Catholic Homilies* (*Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series: Text*, ed. by Peter Clemoes, EETS, s.s. 17 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 497-506, ll. 39-50), where it is stated that Clement, whom Peter 'chose for pope of the Roman people after his day, and before his passion ordained him pope' (trans. by Thorpe, I, 559), sent Dionysius, with his companions, to preach Christianity among the fierce heathens of the 'francena rice' (l. 41) [kingdom of the Franks]; through his preaching and miracles, says Ælfric, the whole people inclined to the faith. On this life, and Dionysius's place in it, see Joyce Hill, 'Ælfric's Homily for the Feast of St Clement', in *Ælfric's Lives of Canonised Popes*, ed. by Donald Scragg, Old English Newsletter, subsidia 30 (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, Western Michigan University, 2001), pp. 99-110 (see esp. pp. 105-07).
- ¹⁸ On the Cotton-Corpus Legendary, see Patrick H. Zettel, 'Ælfric's Hagiographic Sources and the Legendary Preserved in B.L. MS Cotton Nero E. i + CCC MS 9 and Other Manuscripts' (unpublished D.Phil thesis, Oxford University, 1979); see also Zettel's article, 'Saints' Lives in Old English: Latin Manuscripts and Vernacular Accounts: Ælfric', *Peritia*, 1 (1982), 17-37; and Peter Jackson and Michael Lapidge, 'The Contents of the Cotton-Corpus Legendary', in *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints' Lives and Their Contexts*, ed. by Paul E. Szarmach (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 131-46.
- ¹⁹ Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum*, I, 30: *Gregorii Turonis Opera*, ed. by Wilhelmus Arndt, MGH, *Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum*, 1, (Hannover: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1885), pp. 1-450 (p. 48); translated by Lewis Thorpe, in *Gregory of*

Tours: The History of the Franks (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 87. Gregory reports that Dionysius was one of seven men who were consecrated bishops at the time of Decius (emperor 249-51) and sent to preach among the Gauls. Concerning Dionysius, Gregory states only that he was sent to *Parisi* and that he 'suffered repeated torture in Christ's name and then ended his earthly existence by the sword' (trans. by Lewis, p. 87) ('diversis pro Christi nomine adfectus poenis, praesentem vitam gladio imminente finivit', ed. by Arndt, p. 48).

²⁰ *Passio Sanctorum Martyrum Dionysii, Rustici et Eleutherii*, in *Venanti Honori Clementiani Fortunati Presbyteri Italici Opera Pedestria*, ed. by Bruno Krusch, MGH, Auctores Antiquissimi, 4, Pars Posterior (Berlin: Weidmann, 1885), pp. 101-05. For a succinct account of this *passio* and the other major Latin Dionysius texts, see E. Gordon Whatley, 'Acta Sanctorum', in *Sources of Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture: Vol. I: Abbo of Fleury, Abbo of Saint-Germain-des-Près and Sancta Sanctorum*, ed. by Frederick M. Biggs and others (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2001), pp. 22-486 (pp. 171-74).

²¹ On the writings of Dionysius, with quotations from them, see Hilduin, *Passio*, cols. 29-37. Hilduin's own translation of Pseudo-Dionysius, which 'has been judged to be almost unintelligible and was rarely copied' (David Luscombe, 'The Reception of the Writings of Denis the Pseudo-Areopagite into England', in *Tradition and Change: Essays in Honour of Marjorie Chibnall Presented by her Friends on the Occasion of her Seventieth Birthday*, ed. by Diana Greenway, Christopher Holdsworth and Jane Sayers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 115-43 (p. 119)), was soon superseded by the more fluent version of John Scotus Eriugena, which 'was to become the standard Latin edition of Denis's writings' (Luscombe, 'The Reception', p. 120).

²² See Michael Lapidge, 'The Lost *Passio Metrica S. Dionysii* by Hilduin of Saint-Denis', *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch*, 2 (1987), 56-79.

²³ *Acta Fabulosa S. Dionysii Areopagite Afflicta, Auctore Anonymo*, ed. by Constantinus Suyskeno and others, in *Acta Sanctorum, Octobris Tomus Quartus*, ed. by Joanne Carnandet, 2nd edn (Paris and Rome: Victor Palmé, 1866), pp. 792-97; on Hilduin's use of this work, see Raymond J. Loenertz, 'La légende Parisienne de S. Denys l'Aréopagite: Sa genèse et son premier témoin', *Analecta Bollandiana*, 68 (1951), 217-37. There is no mention of writings by Dionysius in this anonymous *passio*, but the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus was known in northern Europe by the early ninth century and was already associated with Dionysius of Athens, the authority of whose attributed writings had been particularly invoked in support of images in the iconoclasm controversy: see Henri Moretus Plantin, 'Les Passions de Saint Denys', in *Mélanges offerts au R. P. Ferdinand Cavallera: Doyen de la Faculté de Théologie de Toulouse, à l'occasion de la quarantième année de son professorat à l'Institut Catholique* (Toulouse: Bibliothèque de l'Institut Catholique, 1948), pp. 215-30 (p. 229); Luscombe, 'The Reception', pp. 116-18.

²⁴ Zettel, 'Ælfric's Hagiographic Sources', p. 236.

²⁵ Such as that of *senex-novus* (see esp. ch. 26; col. 43B-C) and *miles Christi* (e.g., ch. 19; col. 39B).

²⁶ David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996), p. 308.

²⁷ Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, p. 6.

²⁸ In his discussion of the theme of the *lingua palpans* (*Deformed Discourse*, pp. 298-303), Williams attributes the idea of the talking head (as found in later versions) to Hilduin, but without examining the grammar of the relevant passage.

²⁹ *BHL* 2178 has only one image of light, referring to Dionysius providing light among the pagans at Paris: 'ut posita super candelabrum lucerna incredulis mentibus lucis suæ radios ministraret' (ch. 7; 793C) [so that as a lantern placed on its stand he supplied the rays of his light to unbelieving minds]. This particular image is not taken up in Hilduin (but cf. his ch. 22, col. 41C, discussed below).

³⁰ Ælfric's participle *herigende* (l. 296) and the accompanying singular pronoun *his* make it clear that the head is singing, this phrase being grammatically separated from *engla werod* in the following line; Ælfric has the angelic host singing as well, however.

³¹ Cf. Hilduin, ch. 36; col. 50A.

³² See Scott DeGregorio, 'Ælfric, *Gedwyld*, and Vernacular Hagiography: Sanctity and Spirituality in the Old English Lives of SS Peter and Paul', in *Ælfric's Lives of Canonised Popes*, pp. 75-98.

³³ See Charles F. Altman, 'Two Types of Opposition and the Structure of Latin Saints' Lives', *Medievalia et Humanistica*, n.s. 6 (1975), 1-11.

³⁴ On the 'gradational' approach in hagiography, see Altman, 'Two Types of Opposition', esp. pp. 3-5.