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**The Riddle of the Runes:**  
the Runic Passage in Cynewulf's *Fates of the Apostles*

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In his article on Anglo-Saxon runes, John Kemble suggests that the word "rune" is related etymologically to the Old English word *rynan*, "to whisper" (328). This essay will examine the runic passage in Cynewulf's *Fates of the Apostles* and argue that the runic symbols of Cynewulf's signature do not serve merely to identify the poet and to provide words for the poem, but evoke within the context of the poem a tradition of Christian runic lore in order to "whisper" a moral allegory on the mysteries of salvation.

Editors have traditionally attributed three general functions to runic symbols in Anglo-Saxon poetry. First, they are used as letters to spell words. For example, Riddle 19 in the *Exeter Book* has four groups of runic symbols consisting of four to six runes each. The rune groups when read backwards spell simple words (Elliott 1953, 197).<sup>1</sup> Cynewulf also seems to use runes in this manner in the runic passage of *Juliana* in which two groups of runic symbols seem to spell the words *cyn*, "race, nation, people, tribe, generation," and the word *eowe*, a Northumbrian form meaning "sheep, ewe" (199-200).

The second commonly recognized application of runic symbols is to represent their own names which are read as words in the poetic text. Cynewulf uses runic symbols in this manner in the signature passages of *Juliana*, *Elene*, *Andreas*, and *Fates of the Apostles* (hereafter *Fates*). Finally, runic symbols seem to represent homophonically other words which become part of the poetic text. Examples of this are found in the *Husband's Message*, where the runes seem to be conveying instructions for a journey (1989, 90), and in *Solomon and Saturn*, where the runic symbols seem to represent the nineteen letters which are required for writing the *Pater Noster* in the Vulgate text of Matthew 6. 9-13 (Hacikton, 65).

Ralph Elliott proposes an additional methodology for interpreting runic symbols. In attempting to interpret the rune (U),<sup>2</sup> *ur*, in Cynewulf's *Fates*, Elliott argues that the rune may be read metaphorically based on the context of the *Rune Poem* (hereafter *RP*) (1953, 202). Elliott's methodology suggests an interesting hermeneutic for interpreting the runic characters. In effect, Elliott offers an allegorical reading of (U). He admits that the literal meaning of the runic symbol is "aurochs" but recognizes that this meaning makes no sense within the context of Cynewulf's poem. He then argues that the attributes of the aurochs, physical strength and fierceness, may be read into Cynewulf's poem in place of the literal meaning. Elliott's methodology, which is consistent with

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St. Augustine's direction for Scriptural exegesis, is not only valid for interpreting this runic symbol, but may be applied to other the runic symbols in Cynewulf's poem. In fact, although Elliott does not attempt it, a moral or tropological interpretation of the runic symbols is also possible.

In his use of *RP* to gloss (U), Elliott argues that this poem demonstrates that more than the purely graphic aspects of the runes had survived into the ninth century, and in fact represents the survival of runic lore and its assimilation to Christian doctrine (202). A few brief comments on the nature of the Anglo-Saxon *RP* may be helpful here before returning to Cynewulf's poem. *RP* is structured around the Germanic futhorc following its traditional order while adding three newly invented insular rune forms. In this, it is similar to the later Scandinavian rune poems whose purpose scholars speculate was to aid in learning the rune names and the order of the futhorc.

However, Marijane Osborn points out that the quality which distinguishes the Anglo-Saxon *RP* from its later Scandinavian counterparts is its moral tone. Many descriptions in the poem include explicit moral directives, and most of the others contain at least an ethical nuance. The *RP*, then, is an example of wisdom literature rather than simply a functional list. Furthermore, the purpose of *RP* seems in some sense moral; it offers a picture of secular life from a

point of view of Christian duty (168-9). In fact, as Margaret Clunies Ross argues, the the Anglo-Saxon *RP* and its Scandinavian counterparts participate in the Germanic gnomic and Latin encyclopedic traditions offering means of ordering important knowledge of the natural world and of human culture (26). The author of the *RP* recognized in the futhorc an opportunity to compose a poem about the temporal world and its relationship to the eternal world (Halsall 1981, 56-7).

According to Maureen Halsall, the hermeneutics of *RP* imitate what St. Augustine identified as the method for reading scripture. By requiring considerable intellectual effort on the part of the reader, first in the discovery of the concealed rune name ascribed by each rune and then by perceiving how the illumination of that rune name has been incorporated with the Christian vision *RP* becomes a meditation on how the signs of physical creation point back to their ultimate source and meaning, God (61-2). Using *RP* as a gloss, we might use a four-level hermeneutic for the reading of the runic symbols in the signature passage of *Fates*. First, the runic symbols represent letters which form an acrostic for Cynewulf's name. Based on a reading of the runic passage in *Juliana*, Cynewulf's purpose for doing this in *Fates* and his other signed poems is clear; he wished the reader to pray for the well-being of his soul on Judgment Day (Halsall 1988, 483).

*Bidde ic monna gehwone  
gumena cynnes, þe þis gied wæce  
þæt he mec neodful bi noman minum  
gemyne modig, ond meotud bidde  
þæt me heofona helm helpe gefremme  
(Juliana, 718-23)*

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(I pray to every man, to all of mankind, who reads this poem, that he, zealous and mindful, remember my name, and bid the Measurer grant me the help of heaven's protection)

Since Cynewulf is requesting suffrages of his readers, he seems to emulate the pre-Christian practice of inscribing the name of the dead on stones in runic symbols. It is interesting to note further that this application of the runic symbols indicates that the poet is quite aware of the written nature of the text since the runic symbols must be seen and re-arranged, not merely heard, to function as letters spelling his name.

On the next level of reading, the names of the runic symbols represent words which are read within the context of the signature passage. The logographic nature of the runic symbols has been long recognized by readers of the poem. Elliott argues that runic name/words of Cynewulf's signature in *Fates* are: (C) *cen*, "torch"; (Y) *yr*, "yew bow"; (N) *nyd*, "need"; (W) *wyn*, "joy"; (U) *ur*, "aurochs"; (L) *lagu*, "water"; and (F) *feoh*, "wealth." Of these, the readings of (N), (W), (L), and (F) are accepted by most editors. However, the Anglo-Saxon runic symbols (C), (Y) and (U) have been the subject of considerable editorial controversy.<sup>3</sup>

Allowing Elliott's interpretation of the runic symbols, the signature passage of *Fates* reads:

*Her mæg findan foreþances gleaw,  
se ðe hine lysteð leod giddunga,  
hwa þas fitte fegde. (F) þær on ende standeþ,  
eorlas þæs on eorðan brucap; ne moton hie awa ætsomne  
woruldwunigende. (W) sceal gedreosan;  
(U) on eðle after tohreoan;  
læne lices frætewa, efne swa (L) toglideð.  
þonne (C) ond (Y) cræftes neosað  
nihtes nearowe, on him (N) ligeð,  
cyniges þeodom. Nu ðu cunnon miht  
hwa on þam wordum wæs werum oncyðig. (vv 96-106)*

(Here the thoughtful man who takes pleasure in verse, can discover who composed this poem. (F) Wealth stands last; men enjoy it on earth. The earth-dwellers cannot always be together. (W) Joy must perish after (U) strength on earth; the perishable adornment of the body decays just as (L) water glides away. Then the (C) torch and (Y)

bow on whom (N) constraint, the King's servitude, lies, seek adequacy in the confines of the night. Now you can discover who has been revealed to men by these words.)<sup>4</sup>

In Cynewulf's poem, however, the runic symbols represent a sign system more complex than is revealed by merely marking the correspondence between

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the runic symbols, letters and words. In fact, the space between the runic signifiers and what they signify spans at least two additional levels of interpretation. First, the runic word/symbols may be interpreted within the context of the poem. The images evoked by the runic symbols amplify and resonate with the symbolic structure established in the catalog passage of the poem. For example, (C), *cen*, "torch," with its image of the torch in the signature passage extends and resonates with the system of light images in the catalog section of the poem. Secondly, the runic symbols are empowered by the Christian runic tradition represented RP. In this sense, the gnomic statements of RP create a moral allegory within the context of Cynewulf's poem.

Constance Hieatt identifies three complexes of images in Cynewulf's poem: treasure and reward; light and blindness; and the journey. Hieatt as well as number of other readers of the poem have also recognized that a number of the items in the catalogue of the apostles embody a paradox. Words referring to treasure and reward occur frequently in *Fates* and are divided into contrasting eternal and transitory varieties. For example, the apostle Bartholomew chooses *the wuldres dreamas*, "joys of heaven" (48b) rather *þonne þas leasan godu*, "than those lesser goods" (49b). James chooses *ece lif*, "eternal life" (73b) as the *wig to leane*, "reward of struggle" (74b). Simon and Thaddeus seek *sigelean*, "reward of victory" (81a); the joy of the afterlife makes *þas lænan gestreon*, "these fleeting treasures" (83b) and *idle æhtwelan*, "vain riches," (84a) contemptible (118).

The first runic symbol of Cynewulf's signature, (F)*feoh*, "wealth," extends the treasure motif. In every instance where the Old English runic symbol (F) has a clear meaning, the approximate translation seems to be "wealth" with the additional connotation of transitory and illusory comfort summed up in the term "worldly goods" (Halsall 1981, 97). In the context of Cynewulf's signature passage, (F), read as wealth, seems to be consistent with this sense of "worldly goods" when the text says that *"eorlas þtes on eorðan brucaþ"* (men enjoy it on earth) (99a). The earlier statement that *"(F) þær on ende standeþ"* (Wealth stands last) (98b), however, seems to contradict the Christian concept that worldly goods are an impediment to salvation. RP makes a similar distinction between worldly goods and the treasure of salvation.

(F) *Feoh byþ frofur fira gehwylcum;  
sceal ðeah manna gehwylc miclum hyt dælan  
gif he wile for dryhtne domes hleotan* (1-3).

(Wealth is a consolation to every man; although every man must distribute it liberally, if he wishes to receive the Lord's judgment.)<sup>5</sup>

The description of this runic symbol turns on a paradox indicated by the word *ðeah*, "although." The poem describes *feoh* as *frofur*, "consolation," and in a secular sense the comfort provided by worldly goods is obvious. Wealth, according to conventional Christian belief, however, is a hindrance to salvation;

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it is the "eye of the needle" through which few can pass. But, another type of consolation is being suggested by RP. The poem states that by distributing wealth man can achieve the Lord's judgment, salvation. The meaning of *feoh*, then, moves from an expression of worldly goods to one of alms giving, altruistic and bountiful charity which wins the praise, *dom*, of the eternal lord.

This moral sense of *feoh* may be read into Cynewulf's signature passage. What a thoughtful reader (*forþances gleaw*) may now understand from the statement *"(F) þær on ende standeþ, / eorlas þæs on eorðan brucaþ"* (98b-99a) is not merely the literal reading, "Wealth stands last / men enjoy it on earth," but also that the giving of alms is one of the cardinal Christian virtues and a means of gaining salvation; temporal wealth is a means of gaining an eternal reward if it is dealt with properly. The reader may also be reminded while reading a poem which concerns itself with judgment and the problems of gaining salvation, that the giving of alms was recognized as. one of the authorized suffrages to

win respite for those suffering in purgatory-the place where the "not too good and not too bad" were purged of all traces of sin before entering into their eternal reward.

Hieatt argues that a noticeable complex of images in the catalogue passage of *Fates* is linked to light, brightness, revelation and blindness. Light is associated with the apostles themselves, their mission of salvation and their heavenly reward. For example, the apostle Andrew chose *leoht unhwilen*, "eternal light" (20b), and John sought the *beorhtne boldwelan*, "bright dwelling" (33a). The apostle Thomas *onlihted*, "enlightened" (52b), the minds of his hearers before he sought the *wuldres leoht*, "light of glory" (61b). Matthew brought *leohtes geleafan*, "faith of light" (66a), *mid Sigelwarum*, "to the Sun-Dwellers" (64a), the Ethiopians. The final prayer of the poem, furthermore, has as its object the achievement of heaven which is the *þa breohtan gesceaft*, "the bright creation" (116b) (Hieatt, 117). The light imagery of the runic symbol (C) *cen*, "torch," in the signature passage complements the light and darkness motif in the catalogue of the apostles. In the signature passage, moreover, the image of the torch is juxtaposed with the image of the dark constraints of the night (103a). *RP* conveys a comforting description of (C), "torch."

(C) *Cen byþ cwicera gehwan,      cuþ on fyre  
blac ond beorhtlic      byrneþ oftust  
ðær hi æðelingas      inne restap.* (16-8)

(The torch is known to every living man for its flame, glittering and bright; it burns most often where princes rest within.)

This passage portrays an image of brightness and repose. Karl Schneider interprets *þær hi æðelingas inne restap* as a reference to death and the fire of the torch as that which lights the funeral pyre (Halsall 1981, 114). If Schneider's interpretation is allowed, the runic symbol seems to be linked to a place of repose after death—a guest-hall of paradise—an *imaoc* not far different from that

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represented by the *refrigerium* which in the Christian eschatological thought of the time awaits the souls of the blessed before they enter heaven at the Last Judgment.<sup>6</sup> When this image is contextualized in the signature passage of Cynewulf's poem, the promise of refreshment seeks to relieve the constraints of darkness and, as we will see presently, the anxiety caused by the perilous journey of life.

In *Fates*, the motif of the journey, which is indicated by the word *sið*, represents the apostles' literal movement during their mission and their final journey to salvation through martyrdom (Hieatt, 118). Thus the apostles Simon and Thaddeus are described as *siðfreme*, "journey-ready" (77a). John *siðe gesohte*, "sought the journey" (32a), and his brother James was not *siðes sæne*, "slack of the journey" (34a). In the opening *Fates*, furthermore, Cynewulf describes himself as *siðgeonwr*, "journey-weary" (1b), and later, as he contemplates his future, he readies himself *sið asettan*, "to set out on a journey" (111a). The journey motif, then, is a unifying element in the poem; it describes the mission of the apostles and poet's own struggle to overcome the trials of his earthly existence and to gain salvation. Only by examining the journeys of the *siðfreme* apostles can the poet contemplate his own journey without feeling *siðgeomor*, and finally advise the readers to direct their individual journeys toward heaven (Hieatt, 118).

The importance of the signature passage is signaled by its being framed with prayers which reiterate the theme of the journey to an unknown land. First,

*huru ic freonda beþearf  
liðra on laðe,      þonne ic sceal lange ham,  
eardwic uncuð,      ana gesecean,  
lætan me on laste      lic earðan dæl,  
wælreaf, wunigean      weormum to hroðre* (91b-95b).

(Truly, I need friends on the wretched journey when I must seek alone the eternal home, the unknown dwelling; the body, the earthen part, the corpse-spoil, leaves me behind to dwell as the joy of worms).

And later,

*Ic sceal feor heonan*

*an elles forþ eardes neosan,  
sið asettan, nat ic sylfa hwær,  
of þisses worulde; wic sindon uncuð,  
eard ond eðel (109b-113a).*

(Far from here, far from this world, I must go forth alone, set out on a journey I know not where, to seek a dwelling place; the dwelling places, home and hearth, are unknown).

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The verbal echoes between these passages, which frame the runic signature, are remarkable as the motif of the unknown journey resonates with the *sið* motif in the catalog section of the poem. The reader should expect the poet's Questioning of his life's journey to be answered within the framed signature passage.

The signature passage is also framed by exhortations to, "the man who appreciates this song"; first, "*beorn se ðe lufige / þisses giddes begang*" (88b89a), and later, "*mann se ðe lufige / þisses galdres begang*" (107b-108a). The address to the reader--the man who loves how this song goes--not only points directly to the address with which the signature passage opens, but also indicates that the mysteries of the signature passage are not superficial and will not be unlocked without contemplation.

*Her mæg findan foreþances gleaw,  
se ðe hine lysteð leod giddunga,  
hwa þas fitte fegde (96-98a).*

(Here the thoughtful man who takes pleasure in verse, can discover who composed this poem.)

Cynewulf, then, describes his movement toward salvation as a risky and unknown journey, and the apostles embody most appropriately the assurance that the risky voyage can be overcome (Calder, 222-3). In *RP*, the description of the rune symbol (L) *lagu*, "water," which appears in Cynewulf's signature, resonates with the motif of the risky journey toward an unknown and unsure goal.

*(L) Lagu byþ leodum langsum gepuht,  
gif he sculun neþan on nacan tealtum  
and hi sæyþa swyþe bregap  
and se brimhengest bridles ne gymed (63-6).*

(The sea is a lingering thought for men if they must venture in an unstable boat and are greatly terrified by the sea waves; and the brim-horse yields not to its bridle.)

*RP* portrays a darker and more sinister image than either the context of Cynewulf's signature passage or the rune name suggests a vivid image of the terror for an unknown journey. It suggests further that the boat in which the journey is undertaken is unstable and difficult to control--an image which seems analogous to the uneasy relationship between soul and body found in the Anglo-Saxon homilies and poems in which the body merits damnation by refusing to heed spiritual promptings of the soul and by giving into its own sidful desires. A careful reader may object to extending the allegoric potential of the *RP* this far, but the sense of terror caused by a perilous journey is apparent in the description of the rune, and this motif is consistent with Cynewulf's journey

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motif in *Fates*. In the context of the runic signature, however, the poet states that the terror of the erilous journey represented by (L) *toglideð*, "glides away." Just as the apostles were forced to face a perilous journey, their spiritual heroism enabled them to pass through it and find eternal salvation. Poet and reader also face a perilous journey through life to judgment, but the example of the apostles indicates that with the proper attitude toward life, the dangers of the journey can be overcome and "*efne swa (L) toglideð*" (*Fates*, 102b)--just as the terror of the unknown journey glides away.

Interestingly, the description of the problematic runic symbol (Y) in *RP* seems to reinforce this idea of overcoming the perilous journey. Here the description of (Y) is one of joy and honor.

*(Y) Yr byþ æþelinga and eorla gehwæs*

*wyn and wyrþmynd, byþ on wicge fæger,  
fæstlic on færeldre fyrdgeatewa sum (84-6).*

(The yew-bow is for every noble and warrior a joy and an honor; it is on horseback, steadfast on the journey, and reliable war gear.)

The key image here is that the bow is reliable and steadfast protection on a journey. (Y) is, in the context of Cynewulf's signature passage, useful and a strength, "*crtvftes neosað*" (*Fates*, 103b), to those who are oppressed by the darkness of their doubts. As such, this sense of (Y) seems to answer some of the concerns that Cynewulf expressed about the unknown journey and those inherent to the reading of (L).

Hieatt argues further that many of the items in the catalogue of the apostle embody an obvious paradox. She attributes this pattern of paradox on two patterns from I Corinthians 15:54: "he that loses his life for my sake shall find it," and "Death is swallowed up in victory" (123-24). Robert Rice also detects this underlying paradox upon which he builds his reading of the poem as a penitential meditation. To Rice, the poem demonstrates the darkness of the poet's, and by extension, the readers', spiritual condition and uncertain fate (106-7). One aspect of the paradox of the catalogue passage is the reversal of the "heroic convention." The apostles are "warriors" who win victory through the courage of their convictions and by facing their "enemies" bravely. However, they are "victorious" by submitting to martyrdom-victory is gained through death. As Elliott argues, the courage and strength expected of the secular warrior represented by the runic symbol (U), and the RP portrays the aurochs as a brave and strong fighter.

*(U) Ur byþ anmod ond oferhyrned,  
felafrecne deor, feohteþ mid hornum  
mære morstapa; þæt is modig wuht. (4-6)*

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(The aurochs is proud and over-horned, a very fierce beast, the mighty moor-stepper fights with horns; that is a proud creature.)

The runic symbol (U), then, represents a sense of strength and accomplishment, and certainly the description of the aurochs, *feohteþ mid hornum / mære morstapa*, is in "heroic" terms. However, the aurochs is described as a "*felafrecne deor*"; this passage conveys a sense of physical strength and courage through threateningly aggressive and violent action which is not consistent with the Christian prescription of "turning the other cheek" demonstrated in Cynewulf's representation of the apostles. Finally, consciousness of these accomplishments results in pride, "*modig wuht*," the seminal sin of western Christianity.

Courage, as portrayed by the runic symbol (U), contrasts sharply with the paradoxical courage demonstrated by the apostles; the one representing the ethos of the worldly warrior, the other the warrior of God. In the signature passage, the pride and aggressiveness of the worldly warrior is ephemeral. "*(W) sceal gedreosan; / (U) on eðle æfter tohreosan; / læne licesfræteawa, efne swa (L) toglideð*" ((W) Joy must perish after (U) strength, the perishable adornment of the body, must decay in the native land just as (L) water glides away) (*Fates*, 100b-3b). The signature passage, then, not only literally represents the inevitable loss of physical strength through age and disease, but also points allegorically to the necessity of stripping away the affectations of earthly accomplishment and pride in order to merit eternal reward. Christian courage is that demonstrated by the example of the apostles, not that represented by the runic symbol (U).

Furthermore, in the context of these lines is the runic symbol (W), "joy." Literally, the passage says that the joy of human life will fade after physical strength succumbs to the infirmities of human existence. RP defines (W), *wyn*, as the lack of want and sorrow.

*(W) Wenne bruceþ, ðe can weana lyt  
sares and sorge and him sylfa hælp  
bæed and blysse and eac byrga geniht (22-4).*

(He experiences joy who knows little of want, soreness, and sorrow and for himself has success and bliss and abundant security.)

Certainly, this sense of security, "*byrga geniht*," is something that seems absent from Cynewulf's sense of his life's

journey. However, a joy based in worldly security and a life without trial is not necessarily helpful in gaining salvation. To the early Christian mind, the primary purpose of earthly life was preparation for the true and eternal life which awaits the faithful in heaven. In order to live a life of Christian perfection, a believer was expected to practice a living "martyrdom" through the mortification of the flesh and the elevation of the spirit. Soreness and sorrow, "*sares and sorge*," were paradoxically helpful in achieving the true joys of salvation. Furthermore, trust should not be placed in

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the security of the earthly community; life on earth could prove more a danger to salvation than a help. The Christian must turn away from the "*byrga*" of the secular community and seek the security of the heavenly "*byrga*," the communion of the saints. When Cynewulf states, "*(W) sceal gedreosan*" ((W) Joy must decay), then, he is presenting another Christian paradox; the false joys of earth must be overcome in order to achieve the true joys of heaven.

According to Cynewulf, (N) *nyd*, "constraint," is the "King's servitude," *on him (N) ligeð, / cyninges þeodorn*" (*Fates*, 104b-5a). The passage of *RP* describing (N) also constitutes a paradox.

*(N) Nyð byþ nearu on breostan; weorþ eþ hi þeah oft niþa bearnum  
to helpe and to hæle gehwæþyre, gif hi his hlystaþ æror. (vv27-8)*

(Need is constricting in the heart for the children of men; however becomes a help and healing for anyone if they attend it early.)

Although (N) causes suffering, it serves as a help and healing for the sufferer. This emphasis placed on *nyd* not only as something that must be endured, but also as a moral test or trial that can turn out well given the right attitude by the sufferer suggests a number of Christian moral concepts. One, certainly, is the need to mortify the flesh, the monastic martyrdom that merits salvation. Another possible reading is that (N) represents the suffering of penance which wins salvation. Thus, a potentially threatening rune is put to a didactic Christian purpose.

Based on this discussion, we might attempt a tropological reading of the runic passage of *Fates*, replacing the rune names with moral significance suggested by *RP*.

Here the thoughtful man who takes pleasure in verse, can discover who composed this poem. (F) The reward of charity stands foremost; noble men enjoy it on earth. The earth-dwellers cannot always be together. Just as the absence of distress must perish and (U) the empty pride of earthly accomplishments, the perishable adornment of the body, decays in the homeland so (L) the terror of the unknown voyage glides away. Then the (C) eternal light of consolation and (Y) steadfast protection on the journey on which (N) the curing constraint, the King's servitude, lies, seek adequacy in the confines of the night. Now you can discover what has been revealed to men by these words. (vv 96-106)

The runic symbols, then, serve as an object of religious meditation for the reader as the interaction of the poetic context and the runic traditions creates a rich and varied spectrum of meaning for the meditative reader. As the word suggests, the runic symbols "whisper" a message of salvation.

## Notes

1. The four groups of runic symbols are:

|                    |        |              |         |
|--------------------|--------|--------------|---------|
| (S)(R)(0)(H)       | SROH   | <i>HORS</i>  | Horse   |
| (N)(0)(M)          | NOM    | <i>MON</i>   | Man     |
| (A)(G)(E)(W)       | AGEW   | <i>WEGA</i>  | Warrior |
| (C)(0)(F)(0)(A)(H) | COFOAH | <i>HAOFO</i> | Hawk    |

2. The following notation will be used to designate runes:

| Rune | Notation | Name        | Meaning   |
|------|----------|-------------|-----------|
|      | ( C )    | <i>cen</i>  | "torch"   |
|      | (Y)      | <i>yr</i>   | "bow"     |
|      | (N)      | <i>nyd</i>  | "need"    |
|      | (W)      | <i>wyn</i>  | "joy"     |
|      | (U)      | <i>ur</i>   | "aurochs" |
|      | (L)      | <i>lagu</i> | "water"   |
|      | (F)      | <i>feoh</i> | "wealth"  |
|      | (EO)     | <i>eoh</i>  | "yew"     |

3. The uncontested runes are common to most Germanic futharks.

(*F*) *feoh*, "cattle, wealth" is read as a cognate of the Germanic word *\*fehu*, "cattle," which represents a vital aspect of any agricultural community.

(*W*) *wyn*, "joy," is related to the Germanic word *\*wunjo* meaning the absence of *nyd*.

(*N*) *nyd*, "need" is from the Germanic word *\*naupiz*, "need, necessity, constraint," and stands in opposition to *wyn*.

Finally, (*L*) *lagu*, "water," is a cognate of the Germanic word *\*laguz*, "water." Interestingly, Elliott suggests that *lagu* represents water as a source of fertility, and may have been associated with the nether water realms, an'abode of demons and monsters, of early German cosmology (Elliott 1989, 71-4).



The controversial readings of the remaining runes are due in part to their being a relatively late extension of the runic futhork. Elliott states, however, that their literal and figurative meanings were sufficiently well known to be applied correctly in the *Rune Poem* (1953, 194). (U) *ur*, "aurochs," is a cognate of the Germanic \**uruz*, "aurochs," a species of wild ox once found in northern Europe. Elliott suggests that the aurochs was a sacred animal for early Germans and that hunting the ox may have provided young men with a test of their strength (1989, 65-7). Furthermore, (U) appears to still have possessed in the ninth century its earlier association with manly strength (1953, 194). Kenneth Brooks, however, dismisses the literal meaning of the rune "ox" as well as Elliott's interpretation as "manly strength," calling it "far-fetched." Brooks prefers to interpret the rune homophonically as "ours," based on the context of the poem (Brooks, 124). The *Rune Poem*, however, supports Elliott's position and shows that the older meaning, manly strength and violent achievement, was preserved at least into Cynewulf's century (Elliott 1953, 52). Reading (U) as "ox," however, has little relevance to a modern reader. This rune, then, demands a metaphoric reading of "strength" which foreshadows the method of rune interpretation addressed in this essay.

(C) *cen*, "pine, torch," is a cognate of the Germanic \**kenaz*, "torch." Elliott surmises that it could be a symbol of fire and that it could symbolize comfort and security (1989, 74). Brooks admits "torch" as a possible meaning for the rune, but does not commit himself to this interpretation (Brooks, 126). Krapp favors a homophonic interpretation of this rune along with (Y) reading them as *cene and yfel*, "the resolute and the wretched" (Krapp, 125). This argument, however, seems based more on the interpretive context of Cynewulf's poem than on linguistic and intercontextual evidence. Again, the linguistic evidence and the *Rune Poem* favors Elliott's reading of (C) as "torch."

(Y), *yr*, is the most problematic of the three controversial runes. Elliott suggests that it means "yew bow," and that it is etymologically the same as the Germanic \**eihwaz* "yew." This word, however, is already represented in the Germanic futhorks by the rune (EO), *eah* (1989, 75-6). Although the *Rune Poem* does not specifically identify (Y) as a bow, it does suggest that it is a piece of war equipment. The poem also suggests that the rune represents the active pursuits of a warrior (1953, 196). Elliott's argument has not received general acceptance by the editors of Cynewulf's poem. Although familiar with its treatment in the *Rune Poem* and its etymological relationship to the Icelandic rune for "bow," Brooks is unable either to accept this interpretation or to develop a reasonable alternative. Brooks suggests that (Y) may represent a late mutation of the "u" sound and combination of "the U-rune with a subscript I-rune joined to it" (126-7). Unfortunately, Brooks does not share the evidence upon which this observation is based. Krapp, on the other hand, voids the issue of the rune name entirely favoring the homophonic

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interpretation mentioned earlier (125). Maureen Halsall speculates that (Y) means "bow," but mentions other possible interpretations including "saddle," "horn," "adornment," "female aurochs," "iron ax," and "gold buckle" (1981, 156). Although the *Rune Poem* does not empower any of the suggested interpretations of this runic symbol, it does associate (Y) with the active life of the noble warrior and with war equipment. Based on this and on the context of the other Germanic futhorks, accepting Elliott's interpretation of the rune as "bow" is reasonable.

4. Citations from *Fates of the Apostles* are from Volume 2 of the *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* edited by George Phillip Krapp, pages 51-4. The translations into Modern English are my own.

5. Citations from the *Rune Poem* are from *The Rune Poem*, ed. by Maureen Halsall (Toronto, 1981). The translations into Modern English are my own.

6. *Refrigerium* denotes a quasi-paradisaical state of happiness. Originally not a place, Tertullian imagined a special kind of *refrigerium*, the *refrigerium interim* reserved for certain of the dead, singled out by God as worthy of special treatment during the period between their death and the time of final judgment (Le Goff, 46-7).

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