POETRY AS RUMINATION: THE MODEL FOR BEDE’S CAEDMON

J. M. PIZARRO

Department of English, State University of New York at Stony Brook,
Stony Brook, NY 11794-5350, USA

Abstract

Bede’s comparison of the first English poet as he versifies scripture to a ritually clean animal chewing the cud (History of the English Church IV, 24), as well as his remark that by this act Caedmon turned his instructors into auditors, are derived from Rufinus of Aquileia’s description of the blind Alexandrian scholar Didymus at work internalizing texts that were read to him (Historia Ecclesiastica XI, 7).

About the famous simile by which Bede compares Caedmon in the process of poetic composition to a clean beast chewing the cud, Charles Plummer tells us that it is a favorite figure of Bede’s, who uses it elsewhere in his work, and that it echoes in part the descriptions of ritually clean ruminants in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.1 Scripture, however, never uses these dietary specifications figuratively, and always presents them in conjunction with additional requirements (the split hoof, for example) that would have been irrelevant to Bede’s purpose.2 In this instance it is unlikely to have been the direct source or inspiration of the historian of the English church.

The passage in Bede occurs after Caedmon’s acquisition of the gift of poetry and describes how this simple man, having joined the monastic community on the strength of his miraculous ability, dedicated himself to the production of poetry: he would listen to the narrative of sacred history relayed to him by literate monks and, having transformed it into English verse, give it back to them in this new form, thus turning his former teachers into an audience.

And he, recollecting within himself whatever he had been able to learn from listening, like a clean animal chewing the cud (quasi mundum animal ruminando), converted it into the most harmonious song and reciting it melodiously transformed his instructors into auditors.3
The source of the figure, and of Bede’s specific application of it to Caedmon, is to be found in the second of the two books that Rufinus of Aquileia added to his Latin translation of Eusebius’s history of the church. These books, Historia Ecclesiastica X and XI, cover events between 324 and 395, and were intended to bring Eusebius’s account up to date. In Book XI, 7 Rufinus, who has been narrating in some detail the Arian persecution of Catholics in Alexandria under the heretical bishop Lucius, stops to portray Didymus the Blind, the celebrated teacher and scholar of that city, whose student he had been between 371 and 373, while traveling in the Near East in the company of Melania the Elder.

He, having lost his sight at an early age, when he was still ignorant of the first rudiments of letters, was fired by a greater desire for the knowledge of the true light and did not allow despair to affect his wishes, having heard that it is written in the gospel that what is impossible among men is possible with God. Trusting in this divine promise, he ceaselessly implored the Lord that he might receive not the sight of the fleshly eyes but the illumination of the heart. For he combined both study and labor with prayers, and applied his constant, uninterrupted vigils not to reading but to listening, so that what vision gave to others might be granted to him by hearing. But when, after laboring by lamplight, sleep, as it usually does, would come upon the readers, Didymus, believing that that stillness had not been intended for slumber or relaxation, like a clean animal chewing the cud, would bring back all the nourishment he had received (tamquam mundum animal ruminans cibum quem ceperat ex integro revocabat) and reorganize in his mind and his memory those things he had learned earlier as others read them from books, so that it would seem not as if he had heard what was read, but as if he had copied it on the pages of his mind.

Other church historians, such as Jerome and Palladius, had studied with Didymus at this time and have left brief characterizations of their teacher. But they do not include this description of the method used by Didymus to internalize what was read to him. Like Bede, Rufinus uses the image of rumination figuratively (tamquam), to represent an activity of the mind; he makes no reference to split hooves or other such ritual specifications; he emphasizes that this process changes the status of the protagonist who, initially a mere auditor, goes on to become a writer and copyist in the metaphorical book of his mind and thus to produce in a new form the oral text he had ingested. Characteristically, Bede takes his model not from poetic composition but from scholarship, an activity more familiar to him than the creation of vernacular poetry.

There is much in the story of Caedmon that cannot be explained from Rufinus’s account of Didymus, which has nothing to say about the miraculous acquisition of an intellectual gift. The mental discipline