The discovery of the runic signature of an Old English poet at the conclusion of four poems in the early nineteenth century electrified Anglo-Saxon scholarship and initiated a rollercoaster of speculation about this mystery man and the extent of his writing which has been only recently subdued by the caution of modern criticism. The year 1840 saw Cynewulf translated from a jumble of indecipherable symbols confusingly placed in the text of these poems, to become the archetype of the vernacular poet working in the eighth and ninth centuries. The early critics of Old English, suddenly presented with a method to assimilate Anglo-Saxon poetry within the author-centred canon of English Literature, set about the task of explaining away virtually the entire corpus of Old English poetry as the work of Cynewulf until the responsibility for early poetry in the vernacular rested almost entirely on the name of one man.

The history of scholarly reaction to the Cynewulf question indicates the presuppositions which are involved in the critical treatment of an authored work and shows how these assumptions are affected by the historical and cultural background of the critic himself. The nineteenth-century response to the discovery of the signatures was an attempt to provide a factual background for the runic name, involving speculation about the date at which Cynewulf had lived and where he had worked. The ultimate aim of these early critics was to discover a real historical alias for the poet Cynewulf, enabling the immediate importation of core facts derived from documentary sources and by this superimposition proving incontrovertibly the method, date and occupation of the Old English poet.

Sievers based his theory for the date of the Cynewulf compositions on the spelling of the name itself and the weakening of i to e, Cyniwulf to Cynewulf, as observed in early manuscripts and charters. While the Ascension and the Fates of the Apostles have the spelling CYNWULF, Sievers concluded from the form CYNEWULF

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1 For a summary of the events surrounding the discovery of the runic signatures see D.G. Calder, Cynewulf (Boston: Twayne, 1981), 12-21.
in *Juliana* and *Elene* that the poems could not have been written before 750. Later commentators have refuted the evidence proposed by Sievers, emphasizing the highly partial nature of the manuscript witnesses on which he chose to base his hypothesis and the difficulty of establishing a dating system on a spelling change which may not have progressed simultaneously throughout the country. 

While more recent work on the dating of the Cynewulf poems proceeds with greater caution and with a more clear-sighted appraisal of the worth of the evidence provided by comparative manuscripts, the fact that it proceeds at all is indicative of the continuing critical obsession with the establishment of a body of fact to support the literary work. The runic signatures provide a tantalizing promise of somebody or something concrete and discoverable standing behind the poetry itself which has resulted in a tangible bias in the tone of Cynewulf criticism: 'It is not that an insufficient number of items appear under his name in the standard bibliographies, but that these represent essentially nonliterary work'. In this respect the figure of the author has become more important than the work for which he is responsible and, in order to divine the meaning of the literary text, the critic at first turns away from it in his attempts to reconstitute its creator. This involves the commentator in a process of identity-construction centred around the twin tenets of date and location. More fanciful critics read the literary works themselves as autobiographical remnants of their author, resulting in the persistent belief that Cynewulf was in fact a wandering minstrel as he represents himself at the conclusion of *Elene*.

However, the majority of scholars contented themselves with the supposition that Cynewulf was an ecclesiastic because of his preference for religious themes and his expansive knowledge of biblical and patristic writings, sermons and the liturgy.

While recent commentators recognize and shun the naive exuberance with which the early Anglo-Saxonists approached the question of Cynewulf's identity, they fail to realize the extent to which their own work reflects the continuing dominance of author-centred criticism. R.W.V. Elliott writing in 1991 confidently asserts of Cynewulf: 'While critical interest has shown no sign of abating, speculation on the poet's identity and fanciful biographical excursions have correspondingly declined', and then proceeds to declare that 'Care, learning, and imagination are certainly all present.

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in the four signed poems. So is Cynewulf’s profound spirituality, and so is the personal note which distinguishes not only the epilogues but can be heard elsewhere’. While Elliott is confident that he has escaped the fictionalizing impetus of the early twentieth-century Anglo-Saxonists, he is yet romantized by the notion of an individual psyche present in the poetry to be revealed by his own critical endeavours.

The notion of the artist as a unique individual responsible for his own work, which grows as it were organically from his thoughts and feelings, emerged in the late eighteenth century and flowered with that group of poets now labelled Romantic. Earlier literary movements had perceived poetry as a rhetorical practice: the poet engineered a masterful blending of already-existing works invested with the authority of age to produce a creation tailored to the expectations of a particular audience. For the Romantics poetry was instead ‘the result of a process in which emotion is re-created imaginatively, reflected upon and qualified by the constraints and pleasures of poetic form’, a process peculiar to each individual and qualified in its variety to represent the multiplicity of urges and responses which constitute the human condition.

This conviction that literature springs a child from the mind of its creator, reproducing the lineaments of his intellectual and cultural profile, is responsible for the inspired response of the early twentieth-century critics of Old English, who contracted a persistent case of the muse themselves: as Frederick Tupper Jun. waxed lyrical on Cynewulf in 1911: ‘Romance seldom stalks frank and undisguised... The Old English poet, Cynewulf, is but a “nominis umbra,” a featureless phantom, a “ghost that streams like a cloud, man-shaped”’. Tupper was enlightened in his early realization of the pointlessness of speculation about Cynewulf’s identity, although in advocating a different approach to this question, he anticipated only the increasing reliance on the material of the poetry itself to provide an index to the character of the poet: ‘The chief and pervasive addition which the poet makes to the material of his originals is the intimate reflection of his own sensitive and lovable personality... throughout his verse one feels a realistic intensity which grows from the play of his imagination upon the text before him’.

This model for the reading of literary texts was identified in 1953 by M. H. Abrams who differentiated three methods of authorial criticism: examining the life of the author for an explanation of his work; reading the author out of his work, which exists for the critic...
'merely as a convenient record from which to infer something about his life and character'; reading the work in order to find the author in it, involving a vision of 'aesthetic qualities as a projection of personal qualities ... the poem as a transparency opening directly into the soul of its author'.

The first Anglo-Saxonists, in the impossibility of employing the former method, came to rely increasingly on the other two, unaware that the critical practice in which they were engaged resulted in the production of works more fictional than those which they were studying.

The history of scholarly reaction to lines 678b–679a of Cynewulf's Ascension poem indicates that much literary criticism undertakes to de-emphasize ambiguity and misunderstanding with the purpose of uncovering an absolute meaning for the text. The difficulty in ascertaining an exact interpretation for these lines worried early critics of the poem. The lines are situated within a passage based on the 'gifts of men' trope, and the popular belief was that they represented tree-climbing as a God-given attribute of man alongside skill in music, warcraft and seafaring. The critical uneasiness with the lines was provoked largely by a sense of umbrage at their possible violation of the innate nobility of the Anglo-Saxons, and the prolonged academic debate over the lines represented an emotional interchange of opinion about the ancestry of the critics themselves. The early academic reaction to the tree-climbing lines holds a mirror to historical assumptions about the nature of our forebears, in which each critic felt his own inherited nature to be on trial: 'The study of Anglo-Saxon texts and history was always undertaken by those who were engaged in pursuit of self-definition'.

These preconceptions about the Anglo-Saxon character are derived from established scholarly ideas of the aristocratic dominance of the Middle Ages; the vision of an Anglo-Saxon world populated by high-principled warriors, loyal queens and thanes, and warbling bards, all surrounded by sumptuous wealth and generosity: 'The typology of Anglo-Saxon culture most familiar to us, since it was preferred by many of the culture's early historians and archaeologists, is the world of the epic, of aristocracy, of Germanic antiquity folded into monastic learning, of pagan and Christian combined'.


In this respect criticism often reveals more about the nature of the critic than the text; it is 'a closed circuit within which the interpreter can only find out what he has fed into it beforehand'. The relationship between this method of critical interpretation and the perception of the individual author is one of appropriation: the critic is able to work in the name of the author, secure in the knowledge that a coherent meaning resides in the text to be uncovered by his/her own critical endeavours. This process presents itself as transparent, as though the critic merely unearths from the text a meaning placed there by the author clear to see. The extent to which the work of criticism represents a re-writing of the meaning of the text becomes visible when it concentrates around those parts of the original which are most ambiguous to the modern commentator and which gather confused and conflicting readings. These sites of blatant misinterpretation and misunderstanding, where the critics clash together most noisily, provide the focus for the anxious struggle to recover meaning by highlighting how easily it slips into incomprehension.

The history of the contention surrounding lines 554b-557 of Cynewulf's *Ascension* indicates how swiftly the critic can convert to author and himself supply the original intention of the artist. Sievers objected to the lines

gesêgon wilcuman
heofones Wâldend,
folca Feorhgiefan,
frætwum ealles wâldend
ond mægengrymmes

arguing that they failed to fulfil the requirements of Old English metre and pointing to the unartful repetition of 'wâldend'. Successive commentators and editors of the text proceeded to suggest emendations by which the line could be improved and restored to the elegance which Cynewulf would surely have intended. Trautmann's suggestion in 1907 that a leaf was probably missing at this section in the manuscript went largely ignored for many years, despite the fact that these lines do occur at the conclusion of folio 15v and a lacuna is therefore entirely probable. The adoption of Trautmann's theory by Karl Jost in 1946 and later by John C. Pope has encouraged its general acceptance and active speculation about the content of the missing lines. Jost reconstructed the lines

14 lines 554b-557. All quotations in Old English from the *Ascension* are taken from A.S. Cook's edition of *The Christ of Cynewulf* (Boston: Ginn, 1900).
following the course of the hymn *On the Lord's Ascension* generally ascribed to Bede. This hymn, which has been cited as the probable source for this section, explains Cynewulf's exploitation of the contrast between the Ascension and the descent into Hell which does not appear in Gregory's 29th Homily, believed to be the main source for the poem, or in the biblical narration. The missing sixty-five or seventy lines of the Old English poem are therefore conveniently available and the chronological displacement of lines 527-535, which describe Jesus sitting at the right hand of God before he has actually arrived in Heaven in the course of the poetic narrative, is also explained away as 'a brief glimpse of the sequel ... a foretaste of the dramatic presentation to come'.

Cynewulf is demonstrated to have been following a narrative technique acceptable to modern literary standards of chronological and consistent development of theme and narrative, and is therefore reconfirmed once more as a skilful poet.

In this respect criticism clearly reveals its preconceptions of the features which should be demonstrated by the authored work and, where they are found to be lacking, its predilection for correction and replacement in order to raise the work to a preconceived standard. The author is therefore not an unchanging individual confirmed in the psyche of the reader by his actual existence, his real life in history. He is instead constructed by the reading subject, conjured out of the text only if the text can be seen to conform to a predecided level of narrative and character consistency: 'Attributing discourse to an individual is not a spontaneous recognition of a given fact of invention, but an elaborate ritual which constructs the author'.

The subject positions of author and reader are intimately related by a process of mutual constitution: 'As institution, the author is dead, his civil status, his biographical person have disappeared ... but in the text, in a way, I desire the author: I need his figure (which is neither his representation or his projection), as he needs mine'.

The veneration of the figure of the author in modern society which has resulted from the cultural acceptance of the Romantic viewpoint has produced this need in the reader for the ideal of the individual creator. The image of the single authoring subject represents a guarantee of a unified, meaningful text, and creates the illusion of progressive communication in the reading process: the identified author speaks to the individual reader through the medium of the text. This image for the method of reading has become a cultural norm matched in the perception of the process of composition: as the reader creates the author from the text, the author must first imagine his ideal reader while he is writing. A disturbance of the accepted role of author or reader destroys the equilibrium which is required for the

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16 Pope, 'The Lacuna', 216.
reading process to signify. The destruction of the literary machinery which maintains the idea of unity and progression in the act of writing and reading, makes the reading subject uncertain of the correct interpretative response. It allows the possibility of non-communication, the threat of a linguistic void unshaped by an individual mind.

The anonymity of Old English poetry does not allow it to conform to modern reading processes, which are made to function by the dual figures of author and reader. However, because these figures are essentially ideal constructs, they can be manufactured within the text. The Cynewulf poetry demonstrates this procedure of author-creation more dramatically than post-Renaissance literature where the attribution to an author has become an expected part of the publication process and the historical facts of an author's life are often easier to recover. Cynewulf is an example of an authorial presence which has been entirely constructed by the critical industry from a name alone, proving that 'the author-function can operate effectively whether or not it refers accurately to an historical individual who writes the text; as for instance when authorial readings are performed on a text which carries a pseudonym or the name of someone who never existed'. There is no proof that Cynewulf actually wrote the poetry which bears his name, there is no record of his existence outside the literary works; the entire phenomenon of Cynewulf as a named Old English poet is based on an assumption that this is the true explanation for the runes.

The term 'author-function' was first used by Michel Foucault to indicate that the concept of the author was equivalent to the narrative and stylistic devices employed in any text: the addition of an author's name to a work encourages a particular response in the reader according to established social and cultural expectations, in the same way that, for instance, the use of suspense will produce a specific reaction. Foucault asks the questions, 'What is the name of an author? How does it function?', recognizing that in essence it is only another group of words, another piece of discourse, but that in its social dimension it serves to differentiate a specific group of texts and indicate their shared structural and linguistic patterning. The author's name demarcates literature from Literature for the modern reader, announcing itself as, 'Discourse that ... is not to be immediately consumed and forgotten'. The concentration of interest in the works of Cynewulf while other Old English poems pass largely unregarded — poems which some would judge more worthy

21 Ibid., 121.
22 Ibid., 123.
of attention on the grounds of thematic or stylistic interest — is therefore explained: the tacit assumption of modern criticism is that an authored work is somehow more deserving of study than an unsigned text. Michel Foucault comments that, since the seventeenth century, literary anonymity has become interesting only as a mystery which can be solved to reveal the inevitable presence of the single author-figure.\(^{23}\) The discovery of the author's name also enables the critic to close down certain avenues of response, to group together texts and examine them as a unified corpus, thereby approaching more nearly the ultimate encoded meaning of the work: ‘To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author ... when the Author has been found, the text is ‘explained’ — victory to the critic’.\(^{24}\)

This bias towards the authored text is clearly demonstrated in the treatment of Cynewulf's *Fates of the Apostles* which was discovered to be a signed work in 1888, and hence later, than *Ascension*, *Juliana* and *Elene*. The attitude to this poem, a catalogue of the deaths of the Apostles, was immediately fixed by its relation to the other three signed poems, in comparison with which its stylistic poverty is emphasized. The presence of Cynewulf's signature in *Fates of the Apostles* is the cause of much critical discomfort because it does not demonstrate the narrative and thematic craftsmanship of *Juliana*, *Elene* and *Ascension*. Its inclusion within the Cynewulf canon has the advantage of preserving within the critical arena what would probably otherwise be regarded as a fairly uninteresting example of Old English catalogue poetry, and the disadvantage of ensuring that the criticism which it receives is always coloured by the preference for its three counterparts: ‘This change of status happens because the text is subjected to a new set of operations (new comparisons, interpretations and valorisations) when its composer is constructed as an author. The text is re-made or re-written in terms of the authorial model and the particular type of cultural dissemination which this model supports’.\(^{25}\) The transformation of *Fates of the Apostles* from anonymous to authored work illustrates the fluidity of the author-function. Moreover, while the critical response to *Fates* was changed by its inclusion within the canon, the prevailing opinion of the other three Cynewulfian poems and of Cynewulf's merit as a poet was also adjusted.

The construction of the authorial canon is an important aspect of the author-function and serves to perpetuate critical notions about the ultimate unity and homogeneity of a group of texts. The Cynewulf canon has fluctuated enormously throughout the history

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\(^{23}\) Ibid., 126.


\(^{25}\) Williamson, *Authorship*, 44.
of Anglo-Saxon scholarship, growing to include virtually everything written in the Old English poetic genre and then shrinking to include only the signed works following Sisam's suggestion in 1933. The most influential studies of the canon were those undertaken by S.K. Das in 1942, who completed a hugely complicated metrical analysis of both the signed poems and the works of the so-called Cynewulf school, and C. Schaar in 1949, who examined the poems primarily for their stylistic coherence. Both studies agreed that only the signed poems can definitely be attributed to Cynewulf and these findings were universally accepted by the academic community, despite the fact that the complexity of the results, especially in Das's analysis, actually precludes a close examination of his conclusion.

The question of the extent of the canon has been re-examined more recently by J. Duthie Collins, working on the assumption of linguistic individuality and that, since 'one of the important cultural norms occurring throughout the entire Old English period was that deviation from established custom was to be avoided in all aspects of life, a poet would not indulge in innovative linguistic practice for the sake of variety as is expected and rewarded today'. This form of analysis is the opposite of the approach of the critic who proceeds to judge an Old English poem according to modern standards of realism and consistency, but it is still employed to discover authorial groupings and a homogenous inter-textual structure which fulfil the author-centred thrust of modern criticism. While therefore attempting to approach Old English poetry on its own terms and with a pseudo-scientific yardstick, the concern with the establishment of the Cynewulf canon has not deviated from the time of the earliest critics and its purpose is still the setting up of boundaries within which meaning can be collected.

The initial inclusion within the canon of non-signature poems which seemed to exhibit similar stylistic characteristics to the four Cynewulfian works, produced the notion of a 'Cynewulf school' as a sub-genre of Old English poetry. Alexandra Olsen, writing in 1984, bases her analysis on this early canon grouping, extending her investigation to include *The Dream of the Rood*, *Christ III* and *Andreas*. She justifies her choice of these poems: 'Whether the

28 'For nearly forty years, scholars have relied on S.K. Das's *Cynewulf and the Cynewulf Canon* as having provided clear, objective evidence that Cynewulf composed only the four "signed" poems. Unfortunately none of Das's evidence is reliable', S.E. Butler, 'The Cynewulf question revived', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, lxxxiii (1982), 15-23, at 15.
signed poems and the poems of the Cynewulf Canon are by a single author or whether they are simply works that derive from a common formulaic tradition, one interested in literary artistry should examine the poems of the canon because their use of the mixed tradition of Old English poetry illuminates the use thereof by Cynewulf. However, her decision to discuss these poems in particular indicates the endurance of old ideas about the validity of the canon-based study and the ascendancy of the individual author over the anonymous majority of Old English poetry.

The hypothetical reconstruction of a medieval author's canon and chronology by the application of linguistic or stylistic 'tests' is a subjective process coloured by modern ideas of how the medieval mind operated. The creation of a set of normative values, whether they be stylistic, metrical or thematic, is performed by the critic before he approaches the text itself and they therefore pre-exist the actual analysis which he undertakes. Schaar himself realized the fallacy of this approach: 'the countless alterations made, not least by Sievers, so as to render the lines pretty and flawless illustrations of metrical theories are needless and have nothing to do with sound criticism. The Anglo-Saxon poets were no metrical fanatics ...' However, he did not perceive that he was himself working to a similar set of preconditions. The set of criteria which are chosen as the control for such literary experiments therefore indicate more about the individual critic and which facets of medieval literature he most values, than they contribute to our knowledge of the text: "it is impossible to examine an event from a position that is not an interpretation of the event".

This form of criticism is perhaps most influential because it takes on the vocabulary and style of a scientific presentation with hypothesis, statistics and conclusion working in linear progression. In this respect it tacitly claims immunity from the bias of historical and cultural specificity, adopting a format which is perceived to deal in universal truths. Pseudo-scientific literary critics like Das, Schaar and Diamond, who examine the Cynewulf canon for its formulaic continuity, seem to place themselves in some privileged critical space earlier than that occupied by the interpretationists. In establishing textual groupings according to linguistic or metrical standards these critics make the rules for the academic establishment to follow and, in determining whether a text is 'by Cynewulf', 'Cynewulfian' or 'not by Cynewulf' they package and label the literary goods for the next category of critics to unwrap and decipher, thus displaying 'the

31 Olsen, Speech, 113.
32 Schaar, Studies, 48.
33 Frantzen, Speaking, 5, citing Pearsall.
dismaying and even self-congratulatory sureness with which some scholars seek to establish the "linguistic facts about poetic style" upon which mere critics may be permitted to construct interpretations. The role of these critics is vital in the operation of the author-function because they suggest that a certain group of works shares a linguistic and metrical fingerprint as tangible as the author's signature.

The attraction of the figure of Cynewulf to the Anglo-Saxon critic and historian is further enhanced by the shadowy figure of Cædmon, the divinely inspired poet whose story is told by Bede in his *Ecclesiastical history*. As Calder demonstrates, Cædmon and Cynewulf can be used to demarcate a bipartite history of Old English literature as it passed from pagan to Christian influence, from orality to literacy, from spontaneous creation to conscious literary artifice. After Cædmon has wrested vernacular poetry from its germanic, heathen roots into a new arena of divine worship, Cynewulf leads "the second revolution in the history of this otherwise unchanging verse" pioneering the use of secondary religious texts and evolving a more meditative style in contrast to the eulogising and exclamatory tone of Cædmon. In this respect the chronology of Old English poetry can be seen as satisfyingly progressive and critics are able to observe an early preference for those concepts which are still most highly valued in the modern world: 'The most important of those assumptions is that Anglo-Saxon England was a culture on its way to becoming our culture. That is why it made progress from pagan to Christian, from oral to lettered, from illiterate to literate, from chaos to order'.

The convenient, and indeed alliterative, pairing of Cædmon and Cynewulf as the prime movers in the development of a literary form which was otherwise static, belies the critical obsession with the individual as an agent of historical change. These two figures, simply because they are the only known and recorded Old English poets, have been allowed to assume an archetypal significance as structural pawns in a vision of Anglo-Saxon history which is critically created. The phenomenon of Old English literature as it exists without any documented author figures is resilient to critical endeavours to provide a chronology of its creation, which could then be used to deduce valuable information about the development of cultural ideas and allow literature and history to work in tandem to produce the complete paradigm of Anglo-Saxon life. The artificial prominence of Cynewulf and Cædmon, then, is employed to contain the un-authored mass of remaining poetry as pre-Christian, oral-Christian or literate-Christian, thus encouraging a certain critical reaction according to generic conventions. In this way the influence of the

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36 Calder, *Cynewulf*, 12.
37 Ibid.
author-function extends not only to the author’s specific named works, but to the entire corpus which can be assimilated in relation to the known individual. The possibilities of meaning are then further enclosed and certain textual combinations prohibited thereby furthering the critical illusion of the approach towards some ultimately attainable truth.

Gerald Bruns identifies the dichotomy between ‘the closed text of a print culture and the open text of a manuscript culture’ which disrupts the modern perception of creativity as an individual and unique act. The intervention of the scribal hand renders each copy of a medieval text in some way singular and prevents the absolute reproduction of the text as it was first composed by the author. The multiplicity of copies in fact deconstructs the author-function as it exists for the modern reader because the text is not viewed as the sacrosanct property of its creator but as open to later additions and improvement: ‘The medieval scribe had a certain responsibility to the text to copy neither sloppily ... nor slavishly leaving unchanged matters which, for one reason or another, the scribe felt could be rectified’. The Middle Ages therefore made its utmost obligation to the text rather than its author, and its aim the creation of an ideal work rather than the accurate record of an individual contribution: ‘in a manuscript culture to translate means also the turning of a prior text into something more completely itself, or something more than what it literally is’. The modern profusion of critical writing on Old English poetry can be seen as the natural continuance of this medieval belief in the unfinished text: the author’s use of already existing literature as source material, the scribal corrections and the critical interpretations, all attempt to approach more closely some perfect meaning which inheres in the text before it has even been written. The ultimate purpose in composition is therefore not that of the author, for he merely refines the words of previous authors who themselves relied on their predecessors for inspiration. The purpose of the work exists in some space previous to its creation, a space which the cycle of authorial, scribal and critical activity constantly strives to reattain by repeatedly reexpressing the ‘meaning’ of the text in a new linguistic format. The innovation in modern criticism of Old English literature is its removal of the discussion from the folios of the manuscript itself and onto the printed page, allowing a greater proliferation of interpretative response than could ever be allowed by the space available between the real lines of the text. In this chain of


41 Bruns, ‘The originality of texts’, 125.
re-statement and re-definition of meaning, the status of the individual author is displaced in preference of the *ur*-text, the elusive, original and absolute statement of truth around which all this writing is centred.

The rhetoricians of the Middle Ages were intensely aware of their own position within this chain of interpretation, and harnessed the intertextuality of language later described by the post-structuralists to provide the basis for their literary endeavour. Cynewulf’s use of source material or Alfred’s preference for an imitative Latin style are conscious techniques employed to invest the text with another form of authority than that derived from the addition of an author’s name. The reliance on tradition, on tested and respectable literary forms, was intended to endow each new text with an instant stamp of importance, and signal that the work was composed according to certain orthodox doctrinal tenets. This acknowledgement of the inherently derivative nature of language provides medieval literature with a unique power, proceeding in harmony with the flow of linguistic possibility without the burdensome modern desire for literary originality.

The contrast between this vision of medieval literature as a chain of interpretation and the academic impetus to isolate the works of Cynewulf in an authorial paradigm which has its roots in eighteenth-century England, should compel every commentator on the poems to interrogate his/her critical procedures. In the Cynewulf phenomenon nothing can be taken for granted. Even the runic signatures which attach the name of Cynewulf to the four Old English poems exist on a symbolic level only: they transmit no real information about the poet or his method of composition. They do not have a proprietorial significance because there is no record of an historical figure with which the poems can be definitely associated. There has been lengthy critical speculation concerning Cynewulf’s reasons for adding his signature to these four poems. Ursula Schaefer asserts that Cynewulf intended to establish a boundary for their future interpretation: he intended to establish ownership of his work in the same way that Ælfric declared his authorship in his prefaces. She believes that Cynewulf, realizing the hazards of entrusting his literary productions to the criticism of future generations, was anxious to preserve the religious integrity of his words and that his signature therefore indicates an ‘awareness that, once written, poetry gets out of its author’s hands and its future life is therefore uncontrollable ... this could have been his ultimate reason for tying his poetry forever to the name of the author: to keep it from lapsing forever into the never-land of fictitious discourse’. Dolores Frese agrees with Schaefer’s assessment, declaring that Cynewulf ‘was striving for more than

nominal immortality' by adding the signature to his work.\textsuperscript{43} She claims that Cynewulf was able to use the runic puzzles 'as a means of mastery and power over the matter of the poem' and that he aimed to perpetuate his name.\textsuperscript{44}

The overt function of the runic signatures as requests for prayer has never represented an entirely convincing reason for their inclusion within the poems. The difficulty of interpreting the runes, which would be exacerbated if the poems were read aloud and not studied on the manuscript page, seems unusual if they are intended seriously to petition the reader.\textsuperscript{45} While Elliott asserts 'he clearly wanted his name to be deciphered, to be remembered in prayer and intercession, and to achieve this he had to make the runic passage intelligible, the runes themselves unequivocal', the multiplicity of critical interpretations which exist for the runic passages would seem to indicate that Cynewulf, intentionally or otherwise, did not achieve the clarity which Elliott believes necessary. Frederick Tupper's association with the Anglo-Saxon reader of Cynewulf's poetry — 'The man of the eighth and ninth centuries found sun-clear the symbols that have often beriddled the man of the nineteenth and twentieth... no Old English poet would ever have dreamed of putting even in a riddle such a strain upon the powers of his readers'\textsuperscript{46} — at best represents an excuse for the modern incomprehension of the runic passages and does not advance an understanding of the epilogues.

The runes can now only be interpreted as they exist for the modern-day commentator: it is impossible to recover a sense of their initial significance for the Anglo-Saxon audience. The runic signatures are important to modern scholarship primarily because they provide a method by which to link the four poems. They are made to symbolize continuity of authorial personality as it exists within the texts themselves: 'To trace Cynewulf's esthetic progress from apprentice (\textit{Fates}) to journeyman (\textit{Juliana}) to bard (\textit{Christ}) to

\textsuperscript{43} D.W. Frese, 'The art of Cynewulf's runic signatures', in Nicholson and Frese, \textit{Anglo-Saxon poetry}, 312-34, at 313.

\textsuperscript{44} Frese, 'Cynewulf's runic signatures', 314.

\textsuperscript{45} Sisam, \textit{History}, 18ff., claimed that the inclusion of cen, yr and ur, which survive only as rune names, would signal the use of other less obvious runes when the text was read aloud; Schaefer, 'Hearing', 127-34, also asserts that the runes were aimed at a listening audience because the majority of Anglo-Saxons would have been illiterate; T.A. Shippey, \textit{Old English verse} (London: Hutchinson, 1972), 157, does not believe that comprehension of the runic acrostic is dependent on their visual aspect. I am not convinced by any of these arguments which seem to be based on the assumption that the poems would be read aloud and that the runes must therefore be made to signify in this way. While the Anglo-Saxons were no doubt finely attuned to the aural reception of literature, the identification and decipherment of rune names which are embedded within an Old English text seems improbable, especially when the majority of the runes signify as perfectly acceptable Old English words and are therefore indistinguishable from their context when read aloud.

\textsuperscript{46} F. Tupper Jun., 'The Cynewulfian runes of the religious poems', \textit{MLN.}, xxvii (1912), 131-7, at 132.
seer (*Elene*) is illuminating and rewarding.47 The poems in reality are as anonymous as the rest of Old English poetry. The signature is convenient as a label on which criticism can pin its speculation about the artist: it functions in the same way as the titles which are invented for the creators of the anonymous poems, the *Beowulf*-poet, the *Judith*-poet, but it achieves greater conviction because it at least exists in the manuscript original.

The development in scholarly treatment of Cynewulf as author indicates how much critical methods have changed and provides an index to the underlying endurance of traditional modes of thinking about Old English poetry. The early Anglo-Saxonists conspicuously read the author out of his work, as part of their overall preference for the surface 'realist' meaning of literature. They perceived the author as a real person and it was therefore natural for them to write about his personality and attempt to discover an historical record of his existence. The modern commentator is engaged in a process of uncovering a hidden meaning in the text, a procedure based upon the assumption that things are not what they seem but represent more than is apparent. In the same way the recent scholar approaches the existence of the author with greater caution, perceiving the creator-figure as a factor which must also be disclosed from the recesses of the text.

The tendency now is to view the biographical writings of earlier scholarship as facile and misguided. However, the influence of the Romantic theory of composition on modern reading procedure is not always easily discerned because it resides on the structural level: in the way, for example, that we group together the four Cynewulf texts and subject them to analysis as though they are the unified record of an authorial consciousness. The myth of the single author is encoded within the edifice of the literary canon, it shapes our perception of good and bad literature, it restricts even the words which can be chosen in an analysis of a literary work. However, its application in the criticism of Old English literature is an anachronism: if the analytical methods which were to be used to interpret Old English poetry had been allowed to develop in a vacuum, it is highly unlikely that the authorial model would feature at all. The elevation of Cynewulf, and Caedmon, to unnatural prominence in the study of Old English literature is a symptom of the critical desire to conform to already established methods developed to analyse more mainstream literary periods. The importance of the scribe and the compiler, combined with the manuscript method of production and dissemination in Anglo-Saxon England, must be combined with the notion of the author to produce an analytical method more suited to the material under study. After Barthes's proclamation of the death of the author, the Anglo-Saxon poet should be allowed to rest in peace.
