Adrian Papahagi, *Wyrd. Ideea destinului în literatura română veche*, Cluj-Napoca: Eikon, Colecția Universitas, 2014, 430 pp., ISBN 978-606-711-065-4 (paperback)

"Preserved like an insect within the amber of a poetic formula"- A Brilliant Display of Scholarly Endeavour

EUGENIA GAVRILIU
Retired Associate Professor,
egavriliu@yahoo.co.uk
"Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați

Reviewed here is a comprehensive piece of literary archaeology which deals with the foundation stones of Old English literature wherein the notion of **wyrd** lies embedded like a cultural relic.

Adrian Papahagi's is mainly a philological approach relying on textual evidence, with special focus on historical context, time posts (*ante quem/post quem*), lexical meaning and doctrinal connotations. He displays ingenious intelligence sustained by sound, erudite information in summoning up the whole gamut of Anglo-Saxon literature, with occasional opportune trespassing into the Old German, Saxon or Icelandic tradition.

A signifier of multiple meanings, **wyrd** appears subject to a process of semantic changes from the 'strong' denotation of **destiny**, through the 'weak' meaning of **human fate** to reach its most 'diluted' sense, that of **event** or **fact**.

Significantly enough, **wyrd** has survived in Modern English vocabulary only as the adjective "*weird*", immortalized in the Shakespearian "*Wierd Sisters*".

It is to be hoped that Adrian Papahagi's *Wyrd* will fill a blank in the Romanian cultural memory, hardly in the know, if at all, with the Anglo-Saxon literature as the most impressive achievement at the crossway between the late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

In the *Introduction* (pp. 13-33) the author embarks upon a necessary clarification of the scope and direction of his research and aims at highlighting his operational strategy.

Though intended as a close perusal into the whole literary corpus of Old English writings, the study does not purport to be a history of Anglo-Saxon

literature. Nor is it meant to be a survey of the history of religions and ideas, although its object of research is **wyrd**, a philosophical construct followed by a long array of religious and doctrinal notions such as astrological fatalism, divine will, free will, predestination, providence.

What the book actually stands for, maintains its author, is a philological survey which follows two concurrent directions according to the long-trusted German method of *Wörter und Sachen* (words and things). As a philologist, Adrian Papahagi [1] declares his allegiance to the study of words, hence his preference for a close reading text analysis with special concentration on the etymology, meaning, poetic and/or philosophical connotation while the rate of occurrence is scrupulously extended to the cases of *hapax legomena*, i.e. words or forms evidenced by a single appearance. As such an enterprise cannot be properly accomplished without a sound examination of the underlying ideas and beliefs, whenever necessary, the philological exploration has been sustained by rigorous philosophical awareness.

The author acknowledges his indebtedness to the *Dictionary of Old English Corpus* (DOEC) that afforded him direct access to the corpus of Anglo-Saxon writing, which renders his book the first exhaustible research into the primary lexical sources: glosses, glossaries, and vocabularies, all carriers of lexical and historical information.

The *Introduction* concludes with a splendid description of **wyrd** as a "*palimpsest*" in which the "*discarded image*" of a distant past emerges from beneath the superimposed successive layers to be revealed in all its compelling fascination of meaning (p. 33). The research proper starts with the chapter *Tradiția antică* (*Ancient Tradition*, pp. 36-51) where the problem of destiny is considered within the classical, Greek and Roman, tradition which associated the notion of an impersonal *Moira* with a fatalistic *Fatum* decreed by divine will. These stoic and neo-platonic concepts were disseminated into Old English culture through Boethius' *Consolatione Philosophiae* and, later, through the works of the great Latin Fathers of Early Medieval Christianity, Augustine and Gregory the Great.

In the next chapter, *Vocabularul destinului în Glosele anglo-saxone* (*The Vocabulary of Destiny in the Anglo-Saxon Glosses*, pp. 55-77) the author finds *Glosses* the earliest reliable sources to evince the use of the term **wyrd** bearing upon the idea of destiny in the Anglo-Saxon texts. The high rate of occurrence is an undeniable evidence that as early as the eighth century **wyrd** used to denote a fatal force with destructive effects. There is no theological rivalry to be proved between the power of God contained in such concurrent vocabulary as *casus*, *condicio*, *historia* or *Parcae* and the idea of indomitable **wyrd**. He considers **wyrd** a poetic topos, a prosodic fossil, marked by the formulaic characteristics of Old

English poetry while Christianity, with its denial of an intermediary between man and divinity, was definitely the religious creed of the Anglo-Saxons.

With the next comprehensive section: *Destin și providență în proza engleză veche* (*Destiny and Providence in Old English Prose*, pp. 81-160) the study moves nearer to its core. A close examination of the translations of the Alfredian period (*The Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius, *The Universal History* by Orosius, the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great, the homiletic and hagiographic literature, the same as the occasional secular texts) leads the author to the conclusion that **wyrd** was used in its 'strong' meaning to translate **fatum** and **fortune**, while employed in its 'diluted' connotation it was a generic equivalent for **haphazard** or **event**.

The exploration reaches its densest in *Destinul în poezia engleză veche* (*Destiny in Old English Poetry*, pp.163-297) which surpasses by far all horizons of expectation in the reader. The material is organized in *Heroic and Pastoral Poetry* (*Beowulf, The Death of Edgar, The Battle of Maldon, Waldhere, Widsith,* with a welcome excursus into the Old German poem *The Song of Hildebrand* in search of a possible case of intertextuality), *Gnomic Poetry* (*Solomon and Saturn II, Maxims, The Fate of Men,* Anglo-Latin and Anglo-Saxon *Riddles*) and *Elegies* (*The Seafarer, The Rhyming Poem, Resignation, The Ruins*). Employing a one by one analysis strategy, Adrian Papahagi draws salient conclusions upon the occurrence of **wyrd**, followed by a large number of lexemes and phrases relevant for a possible fatalistic outlook. The gnomic poem *Solomon and Saturn II* arrests the attention due to the multitude of references to **wyrd** denounced as an omnipotently destructive agent epitomizing evil and death and defying God. Similarly, the *Maxims* tend to associate **wyrd** with unhappiness and unstableness to culminate in proclaiming its supremacy over the power of God epitomized in the well-known pronunciamento "*Great are the powers of God. Wyrd is the stronger*" (Maxim II 4b-5a).

The study continues with a subchapter on *Religious Poetry* which includes the "Caedmonian Poems" (*Genesis A, Exodus, Daniel*) and the "Cynewulfian poems" (*Helena, The Fates of the Apostles, Juliana*). The section is completed with *Other Hagiographic Poems* (*Andreas, Guthlac B, The Dream of the Rood*). Most suitably, the author draws a parallel between two poems of comparably equal length, *Beowulf* and *Genesis*, to conclude that **wyrd** appears to have suffered a process of dilution in the religious text while preserving its 'strong' meaning associated to misfortune and death in the heroic one.

The scope of the research is enlarged by a bird's eye survey of two other great literatures circumscribed to the Nordic tradition. In *Literatura biblică germanică* (*Germanic Biblical Literature*, pp. 355-365) **wurt** (in Old German) is found to occur exclusively in the traditional alliterative Germanic poetry, which sustains the poetic origins of the term.

In *Observații asupra poeziei islandeze vechi* (*Remarks on Old Icelandic Poetry*, pp. 369-379) the author emphasizes the notable differences between Scandinavian **urðr**, one of the three Scandinavian *Norns* (projections of the Greek *Moirai* and the Roman *Parcae*) and the Anglo-Saxon **wyrd**.

At the end of this laborious demonstration, a conclusive chapter *Concluzii*, (pp. 383-388) retraces the stages of the research and reiterates the results which could be summarized as follows:

- **Wyrd** is a Pan-Germanic, pre-Christian construct identified as **uurd** in Saxon, as **wurt** in Old German and **urðr** in Icelandic. It is only in Old English Literature that **wyrd** could be isolated as a poetic term of remarkable frequency of occurrence.

- **Wyrd** is found to carry three main categories of meaning, 'strong', 'weak' and 'diluted' that may appear concurrently in one and the same text. The 'strong' denotation that of *hostile destiny* tends to be prevalent in the original Anglo-Saxon poetry, independent of any Latin sources, while the 'weak' and 'diluted' meanings, with **wyrd** denoting a force subordinated to a divinity that governs human existence, mainly occur in translations from the late Antiquity and Patristic Theology.

- The fatalistic view in Anglo-Saxon poetry differs from the Graeco-Latin one in so much as it is strictly connected to a heroic stance that perceives cowardice as a human flow conducive to death. The triad destiny- fight-death (*wyrd- wig-dea*ð) is found to be underlying the notion of destiny inextricably linked to fighting and death. Hence the permanently negative connotation of **wyrd** as a destructive agent.

- There is neither a philosophical, nor a theological rivalry to be seriously considered between the power of God and the indomitable force of **wyrd**. As a literary-philosophical construct, **wyrd** was fashioned along the centuries at the intersection of more than one tradition when the Germanic pagan outlook of **destiny** was being attenuated by the notion of **providence** of Christian extraction.

The huge store of information that sustains this impressive cultural journey is displayed in the *Bibliography* (pp. 391-415) scrupulously subdivided into A. *Texte anglo-saxone și anglo-latine* (*Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Latin Texts*); B. *Texte antice* (*Ancient Texts*); C. *Texte medievale* (*Mediaeval Texts*); D. *Lucrări de referință* (*Reference Works*). Similarly, the section of *Indices* (pp. 416- 422): A. *Index nominum et operum*; B. *Index rerum*; C. *Index Codicae* turns out to be of most needed assistance in guiding the reader through this maze of philological erudition. The footnotes

prove equally helpful when they entice comparison to the scholarly opinions presented from a polemic stance, whenever the author appears to disagree with generally accepted opinions. Cross references, diagrams, tables, original quotations are frequently embedded and contribute to the exceptionally thorough argumentative force of this study.

Adrian Papahagi's *Wyrd* invites various types of readers, and it is to be expected that it might stir some degree of interest in Anglo-Saxon culture among the reading public at large. However, his is not a book addressing a casual readership that may find these erudite analyses a challenge hard to cope with.

As it documents one particular phase in the English literary history, *Wyrd* might be of interest for English tutors in those universities where Old English literature continues to be taught as part of English studies programmes. It is during such pedagogical practices that students might accept the invitation to cast a fresh look at the early stages of English literature.

But, above all, *Wyrd* addresses the restricted group of connoisseurs, the few, very few, "the happy few", indeed, in the academic media where this study of a commanding status is sure to inspire scholarly emulation along the paths opened by Adrian Papahagi's remarkable explorations. Feedback responses from the intellectual community have not been late to come, and Alexandru Baumgarten has recently commented on the philosophical implications of destiny as revealed in Adrian Papahagi's study [2]. So has Sever Voinescu, who praises the book for opening break-through vistas to any intellectual person in this country with an interest in the intricate ways thereby a philological study can reveal the age-long human concern with destiny. Voinescu only hopes that Adrian Papahagi's own academic destiny might not be hampered by his momentary political pursuits [3].

Exploring paths of research that have seldom attracted the scholars in this country, Adrian Papahagi's *Wyrd* will hopefully stand out as an impeccable case of learned information and intelligent, intellectual diligence.

Notes

[1] Adrian Papahagi is currently a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Letters of the "Babeş-Bolyai" University in Cluj, where he founded CODEX (The Centre for the History of Books and Texts) for the study of mediaeval manuscripts in 2007. He has a PhD in Medieval Studies from the University of Sorbonne (Paris IV) and previously taught at the Sorbonne and the Institute Catholique in Paris. His researches in Mediaeval literature have been published in *Scriptorium, Medium Aevum, Notes and Queries, Neuphilologische Mittelungen, Aevum, Comptes rendus de l' Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Léttres*. He also authored *Boethiana Mediaevalia* (Bucureşti: Zeta Books, 2010) and edited *Vocabularul cărţii manuscrise* (Bucureşti: Editura Academiei, 2012) in addition to the four volume proceedings of several conferences on Mediaeval Studies. The reviewer cannot but rejoice at Adrian Papahagi's

academic accomplishments, which could be predicted early in his career when, as an undergraduate at the "Babeș-Bolyai" University, he would contribute thought-provoking papers to the annual sessions of the Students' National Shakespeare Symposia hosted at "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați back in the late 90's.

[2] Baumgarten, Al. (2014) "Regele Alfred și destinul limbii engleze". *România literară*, XLVI (43), 6.

[3] Voinescu, S. (2015) 'Wyrd' in *Evenimentul zilei*, no. 7337/ 20.02, 13.