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MIRACLES AND THE MEDIEVAL MIND

THEORY, RECORD AND EVENT

1000-1215

BENEDICTA WARD



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TO SIR RICHARD AND LADY SOUTHERN
WITH AFFECTION AND GRATITUDE

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All biblical references are given according to common usage. The Latin text is the *Biblia Vulgata*, the English text the *Authorised Version*. Where no reference is given to a translation from Latin, the translation is my own.

*Convent of the Incarnation
Fairacres, Oxford
January 1982*

Benedicta Ward S.L.G.

Introduction

IT IS WELL KNOWN that miracles occupied a large place in medieval life. This situation was viewed with complacency by churchmen from Augustine to Newman, as presenting evidence of the continuing intervention of God in the world,¹ or with contempt by philosophers such as Hume:

When we peruse the first histories of all nations, we are apt to imagine ourselves transported into some new world, where the whole frame of nature is disjointed, and every element performs its operations in a different manner from what it does at present. . . .²

or with guarded interest by some, such as Bishop Stubbs, who, after a close acquaintance with such material in his editions of medieval texts, was moved to ask how far this belief 'in the constant infraction, by Divine authority, of the ordinary processes of the course of this world'³ diminished the credibility of writers. Whichever way miracles were regarded, it is certain that there are a great many accounts of them in the literature of the Middle Ages. They provide a major medieval source that only recently has begun to attract the attention it deserves.

The largest number of miracle stories are those connected with the shrines of the saints, and it is with these that I will chiefly be concerned. As a preliminary to this analysis, however, I have tried to discover what, in theory, men thought about miracles. This is not a straightforward task, since very little direct discussion of miracles took place from the time of Augustine to that of Thomas Aquinas. No treatise *De miraculis* survives in which the concept of the miraculous is discussed and related to other kinds of reality. Events called *miracula* permeated life at every level,⁴ but they were so closely woven into the

texture of Christian experience that there was no incentive to examine or explain the presuppositions that lay behind them. In the twelfth century, however, an interest in the relationship of miracle to doctrine arose, which was occasioned by changes in thought about the concept of *natura* to which *miracula* was increasingly opposed. Thought about miracles, however, remained fixed throughout the Middle Ages, following the lines laid down by Augustine in the fourth century, with some twelfth-century innovations. It was from this complex of ideas that Thomas Aquinas drew out his definitions that have formed later thought about the matter.⁵

Accounts of miracles were found not only at shrines; there are also miracles in the lives of the saints, and there are collections of miracles not associated with a place at all. The largest and most influential of these is the Miracles of the Virgin, which I have examined for the period immediately before they attained a predominant place in the literature of Europe. I have, finally, given some attention to the use made of miracle stories as propaganda, though this field is so wide that I have had to restrict myself to one or two types.

Throughout the Middle Ages miracles were unanimously seen as part of the City of God on earth, and whatever reflections men might have on their cause and their aim, they formed an integral part of ordinary life. The exploration of miracle stories leaves two principle impressions: the number and diversity of events regarded as in some way miraculous, not out of naivety but from a more complex and subtle view of reality than we possess; and the unity of opinion about miracles in both thought and record, a unity expressed by Augustine:

God himself has created all that is wonderful in this world, the great miracles as well as the minor marvels I have mentioned, and he has included them all in that unique wonder, that miracle of miracles, the world itself.⁶

I

The Theory of Miracles

THE PRESUPPOSITIONS behind any thinking about miracles in the Middle Ages are to be found mainly in four works by Augustine of Hippo: *De Genesi ad Litteram*, *De Trinitate*, *De Utilitate Credendi*, and *De Civitate Dei*. Augustine argues that there is only one miracle, that of creation, with its corollary of re-creation by the resurrection of Christ. God, he held, created the world out of nothing in six days, and within that initial creation he planned all the possibilities for the future. All creation was, therefore, both 'natural' and 'miraculous': 'all natural things are filled with the miraculous'.¹ 'The events of every day, the birth of men, the growth of plants, rainfall', are all 'daily miracles', signs of the mysterious creative power of God at work in the universe. But Augustine also held that men were so accustomed to these 'daily miracles' that they were no longer moved to awe by them and needed to be provoked to reverence by unusual manifestations of God's power. These, Augustine taught, were events also within the original creation; God had then created *seminum semina*,² *seminales rationes*³ hidden within the nature and appearance of things, which at times caused 'miracles' that seemed to be contrary to nature but were in fact inherent in it. The most usual channel for these 'hidden causes' to be made manifest was the prayers of the saints, and Augustine himself illustrated this in his account of the miracles connected with the relics of St Stephen in his diocese after 416.⁴

For Augustine, the mechanics of miracles were clear. They were wonderful acts of God shown as events in this world, not in opposition to nature but as a drawing out of the hidden workings of God within a nature that was all potentially miraculous.⁵ There were three levels of wonder: wonder provoked by the acts of God visible daily and dis-

cerned by wise men as signs of God's goodness; wonder provoked in the ignorant, who did not understand the workings of nature and therefore could be amazed by what to the wise man was not unusual; and wonder provoked by genuine miracles, unusual manifestations of the power of God, not *contra naturam* but *praeter* or *supra naturam*: 'I call that miraculous which appears wonderful because it is either hard or impossible, beyond hope or ability'.⁶ Events happened in nature or miraculously, but both were equally the work of God: 'Some things happen naturally, others miraculously; God works in whatever is natural and he is not apart from the wonders of nature'.⁷ The emphasis on the wonder caused in men, the psychological understanding of miracle, gave a wide scope for 'miracle', including *monstra* and *prodigia*⁸ in its definition, as well as *miracula* and *signa*; and the content of miracle collections, as will be seen, continued to illustrate this.

Throughout the period under discussion, people asked how miracles related man to God, not how they could be defined in their constituent parts. Yet a shift of emphasis can be seen even at the beginning of this period. Discussion about miracles usually arose in connection with either the creation or the incarnation, and it is in discussing the former that the earliest instance of this change of emphasis can be seen. Anselm of Canterbury's discussion *De Conceptu Virginali* is in many ways an unexpected source for this change, since his interests were not directed toward physics, and the main thrust of his thought was toward the Augustinian unities. However, Anselm in this treatise proposed a relationship between events that, while based on the three categories of Augustine, distinguished miracles from natural events and those events caused by the will of men:

So if we consider carefully everything that is done, we see that they happen either by the will of God alone, or by nature according to the power God has given it, or by the will of a creature. Now, those things which are done neither by created nature nor by the will of the creature but by God alone, are miracles (*semper miranda sint*): so it seems that there are three ways in which things happen, that is, the miraculous, the natural and the voluntary (*mirabilis, naturalis, voluntarius*).⁹

Events that happen by nature, or by the will of men, have here been distinguished from *mirabilia*, which are caused by the direct intervention of God in affairs, rather than being events that cause wonder in

man. Anselm gives as examples of miracles the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites, the turning of water into wine, and the interior miracles of conversion.¹⁰ As will be seen later, Anselm's interest in contemporary miracles was confined to precisely this kind of event, in which the action can be ascribed to God alone, especially in the salvation of souls. The ultimate cause of miracles has not changed in this concept, but the secondary causes have been differentiated. Miracles are seen as a particular kind of act by which God works directly in affairs. The actions of men and the workings of nature, though still ultimately actions of God by their mediation, are set free for examination in a new way. Their mode of action can be examined without impiety and *quomodo* can be applied to them more closely. Miracles are acts of God, not subject to the laws of nature or the usual way in which man acts within nature, while nature and mankind are themselves subject to the 'miraculous' power of God: 'The miraculous is not subject to the other two or to their laws, but freely rules them'.¹¹

Anselm's distinction between nature, will, and miracle in events was used later, and it was usually applied to the matter out of which it arose, the miracle of creation.¹² Peter Abelard, for instance, used this distinction in his commentary on the Creation narrative in Genesis, where he says the events he calls miracles are those 'against nature' or 'above nature' (*contra vel supra naturam*) in which God is acting directly, as he did in the first six days of Creation. Like Anselm, Abelard sees the creation of Adam from the earth and Eve from Adam as *praeter naturam*, and therefore miracles;¹³ the Virgin birth and the giving of sight to the blind he cites as other instances of genuine miracles.¹⁴ Like Anselm, Abelard was not here primarily concerned with the nature of things, but his reflections on nature and miracle tended, like those of Anselm, to set miracles in a specific category of events in which God acts directly in this world.

The primary text in the twelfth century for discussing creation was the first chapters of Genesis, but the Platonists of the twelfth century who drew this kind of distinction among events were influenced also by the account of creation given in the *Timaeus* that they read with the commentary of Chalcidius.¹⁵ Thierry of Chartres wrote an account of the book of Genesis 'secundum physicam et ad litteram', the *littera* being the words of Scripture about creation, the *physica* being Chalcidius on Plato's *Timaeus*.¹⁶ The three-fold distinction of Augustine is

found also in Chalcidius: 'All things that exist are the works of God, or the work of nature, or the work of a human artisan imitating nature,'¹⁷ and was echoed in a Christian context by Thierry of Chartres, William of Conches, and, in a more formal and technical way, by Gilbert de la Porrée:

All things have been made by God as their author; but certain things are called God's works just as they are, namely those which he makes by himself and neither after some resemblance in nature nor through the intermediary service of someone else, as he makes heaven and earth . . . God therefore is the sole author of all things.¹⁸

In this view, some matters such as miracles belong to Divine omnipotence; other matters, which were created by God but follow their own laws, belong to the natural and created order. This shift from the sacramental view of the whole order of creation as miraculous, in which the power of God could be seen as a sign to men in all events, emphasized, from another point of view, the new freedom to examine the natural events; it also tended to limit the events that could properly be called miracles.

The interest of Platonists in the causes of things received a new impetus with the appearance of Aristotle's work on physics. Those who read Aristotle and his Arab commentators were diverted from the older concern with the unity and symbolism of events in God and began to concentrate on the mechanics of their secondary causes. This change affected the definition of miracle by limiting still further those events that could be called miraculous. This state of mind, which determined which texts would be used and translated, was already established, not an unexpected influence changing the direction of thought. Adelard of Bath's *Questiones Naturales* went far toward explaining away, as well as simply explaining, wonders. For instance, he was asked to account for thunder, a phenomenon almost universally seen hitherto as a sign from God, fraught with miraculous significance, and he makes his interlocutor phrase the request in tones of incredulity:

. . . One thing which clearly takes place in the air is an object of wonder to all nations: the death-dealing disturbance called thunder. By it not only are all nations terrified but fear weighs heavily also upon irrational creatures . . . is then your science bold enough to give the cause and origin of thunder, or is it unable to solve this most difficult problem, for in the face of thunder the philosophers are no braver than the rest.¹⁹

Adelard replied that the proper way to discover the 'cause and origin' of thunder was to examine its immediate causes in the currents of air. A storm had become merely a storm instead of a message from God. Adelard was convinced that recourse to miracle as an explanation was a last resort; only when all other causes had been tested and found wanting should the explanation of the direct intervention of God be propounded:

I will detract nothing from God; for whatever is, is from Him, and by Him; and yet not even this is to be said vaguely and without due care, for we must listen to the very limits of human knowledge; only where this utterly breaks down should we refer things to God.²⁰

This kind of reasoning when applied to the doctrine of creation brought criticism on William of Conches, in a letter from William of St Thierry to St Bernard of Clairvaux:

. . . describing the creation of the first man by philosophy or rather by physics, he says that his body was not at first made by God but by nature and a soul then given him by God, after the body had been made by spirits which he calls demons and by the stars. . . . As far as the creation of woman is concerned which is clear to all readers, with what stupidity and arrogance he holds the authority of sacred scripture in contempt. By interpreting that account according to physics, he arrogantly pretends the ideas he invents to the truth it contains and so makes light of a great mystery.²¹

Only 'the nature of things', it seems, should be learned from observation and philosophy; here also, the realm of the miraculous was being relegated to a department of the supernatural.

How far did the arguments of the masters of the schools affect their pupils? Gerald of Wales can be seen as typical of the clerk who absorbed a certain amount of new teaching, along with a basic rationalism.²² His works are filled with miracles and marvels, mostly of a ferocious nature, in the manner of Gregory of Tours.²³ In the *Topographia Hibernica* he comments on the relationship between miracle and 'nature'. He says he will speak in the second part of wonders that are not contrary to nature, but to the usual course of nature. Augustine also finds miracles and wonders inherent within nature as created by God; the strange and exotic are not *contra naturam*, they are *contra naturam curvam*, and are all works of God. This enabled Gerald to exercise his curiosity to the full in observing and recording the strange

flora and fauna in Ireland, an interest challenged by other churchmen as too secular and too trivial for serious record, but which Gerald defended as a survey of the wonderful works of God in nature.²⁴ In this, he is at one with the masters of the schools in their basic Augustinianism. He was, however, in practice also one with their more recent distinctions over miracles: the marvels of nature and of the works of man form two clear sections in the *Topographia Hibernica*, and the miracles of the saints, the true works of God, are grouped separately from both: 'Now let us pass on to miracles'.²⁵ The miracle by which St Kevin caused a willow tree to bear apples is distinguished as a miracle because it was caused by the prayers of St Kevin to God. But Gerald refuses to call the salmon-leap a miracle, since it is within the course of nature, however marvellous it may seem:

Salmon are moved by wonderful leaps which would be miraculous if this were not the nature of the fish. But this kind of fish makes such leaps because it is its nature to do so.

Thus, Gerald makes events that happen by the will of man the main part of his work, followed by a separate section about events that happen *naturaliter*, in the course of nature, whether marvellously or not, and a smaller section about events that are *miraculosa*, the result of the direct action of God in response to the prayers of the saints.

The distinction between the marvellous in nature and the miracles of the saints was not in this period very clearly expounded or applied. Nevertheless it is possible to see here a narrowing of their secondary causes. There was less and less chance of these being called miracles except by the ignorant. This narrowing was one further step in a pattern known to Augustine, who was himself interested in the causes of things and had explored natural marvels, with a *curiositas* as keen as that of Adelard of Bath,²⁶ to discover the 'natural properties' of things. But for Augustine this exploration expanded the realm of true miracle, where for the twelfth-century writers it restricted it. The 'how' of events was of interest to Augustine, as to any ancient philosopher, but he says that whereas for the pagans the marvels of nature are simply *miria*, for the Christians they are *signa* leading men to accept those wonders of faith that are beyond their comprehension. The Christians have, he says, a *ratio rerum* for the whole of creation, so that there is no need for them to supply a *ratio* for each of the *divina miracula*.²⁷ Mira-

cles and nature were thus for centuries put on an equal footing as signs from God to man. The twelfth century found a further distinction possible in the relationship between miracles and events of other kinds, and applied this distinction to their thinking here, as well as to practice in other spheres, though in a fragmentary fashion.

While miracles were an accepted way in which Christians were in touch with the supernatural, other modes of supernatural contact to some extent were distinguished from miracles. At first sight, the most obvious and final distinction made was that between miracle and magic. The 'arts of magic' had been consistently forbidden in the Christian church and the 'miracles of the saints' proposed as their antithesis. Edicts of church councils and disciplinary directions in penitentials alike had forbidden magical practices to Christians, and this prohibition continued throughout the Middle Ages. The reaching of the church did not change, nor did the disregard for it at a popular level decrease. In fact, in the twelfth century the revival of learning and the interest in science led to an increase in the amount of magic practised and discussed. It was necessary to make further definitions of what was licit and what was forbidden.

Discussion about magic was older than Christianity. The power of God exercised through Moses was contrasted in the Old Testament with the impotent magic of Pharaoh's magicians (Exodus 7:12ff.).²⁸ Saul conjured the spirit of Samuel through the witch of Endor (1 Samuel 28:7-20).²⁹ The ancient classical world argued endlessly about the powers of demons and the wonders of great men.³⁰ The debate was summarized and fixed for Christians up to the twelfth century and beyond by Augustine. Magic, for him, was *thurgy* and concerned wonders wrought by demons; it was wholly reprehensible because of the contact with demonic forces. The miracles of both Old and New Testaments, he says, were quite different from pagan magic:

Those miracles and many others of the same kind . . . were intended to support the worship of the one true God . . . they were achieved by simple faith and devout confidences, not by spells and charms composed according to the rules of criminal superstition, the craft which is called magic, a name of detestation, or by the more honourable title of 'thurgy'.³¹

The powers of the demons, he says, were essentially cheats, deceptions, and lies, in no way powers equal to that of God, as their practitioners,

supposed: 'The whole thing is in fact an imposture of malignant spirits . . . it is from the devil that these phantoms come'.³² The only way for demons to exercise power over people after the devil's defeat by the resurrection of Christ was by deception; the gods of the ancient world found no place as a separate source of power in the new theology.³³

The practice of magic, however, was not as dead, either in debate or in popular practice, as the injunctions of Augustine might have led one to suppose. Penitentials continued to prescribe penances for the use of magical arts well into the twelfth century and beyond. Two things were especially condemned: the invocation of demons and the continued observance of pagan festivals, such as the New Year. The idea of a witches' sabbath was held to be a delusion, but it suggested enough of Satan worship and the old cult of Diana to merit penances lasting two years.³⁴ Actions connected with medicine, such as collecting herbs, were thought to be more efficacious if incantations were used, but the words had to be those of the Creed and the Our Father to avoid blame: 'If you have done otherwise, the penance is ten days on bread and water'.³⁵ 'Egyptian days' had survived in church calendars, and their overtones of 'luck' were easily confused in the popular mind with 'providence'.³⁶ Both St Martin and St Benedict were said to have overthrown demons inhabiting pagan sanctuaries.³⁷

The use of magic for contact with the supernatural was as usual in the northern pagan lands as in the Mediterranean world. Missionaries in both areas tended to stress similarities between magic and miracle rather than their differences. The Christian saint was frequently presented to the unconverted as having greater powers through his miracles than the demons offered by magical deceits; the effectiveness of the demons' powers was challenged, not their possibility. In the *Life of St Cuthbert*, it was said that Cuthbert went through the pagan villages of Northumbria preaching and demonstrating the benefits of the miracles of the saints in opposition to popular magic.³⁸ When the country people were in distress, the same *Life* shows them resorting at once to familiar amulets and charms, and accusing St Cuthbert of taking away their best defence.³⁹ In the conversion of pagans in Europe, magic remained one of the options for supernatural help long after baptism had in theory replaced it with the assurance of the prayers of the saints. Often, the invocation of Christian saints was merely added to older incantations and their relics to amulets.⁴⁰ Though the church stressed a difference, asserting that prayers to the saints were intercessory requests

for their prayers to God, the peasant using them had firmer expectations and a more resolute attitude, based on his experience of the manipulations of magic.⁴¹ The methods of magic and miracle could appear identical; and they could not always be distinguished by their results. The vengeance of the saints could fall as heavily on men as the results of maleficent magic.⁴²

In theory, magic that involved the invocation of demons was condemned by the church and miracles were recommended as the proper method for a Christian to obtain supernatural aid. An intermediate area of practices, however, which later ages would certainly call magic and some would call miracle, in this period was simply an application of current ideas about causation. The theory of Augustine that there were 'hidden virtues' in all parts of creation came very close to the popular idea of 'occult virtues' hidden in all objects, which could be invoked and used.⁴³ These were used especially in 'natural medicine'.⁴⁴ Gems, in particular, were said to have hidden powers that could be exploited for healing and for protection in all kinds of dangers.⁴⁵ Such dealings with nature were not forbidden; while the *praetigia inferna* were condemned and the *superna miracula* praised, natural charms and incantations were allowed and were distinguished from both magic and miracle. The power of healing the sick obtained by mixing earth from a holy place or using water connected with a saint was close to the ancient use of the four elements for obtaining power. Hildegard of Bingen illustrates the close connection between miracle and magic in her book of remedies, in which rites and incantations for the use of occult virtues in natural objects are mingled with prayers and the sign of the cross.⁴⁶ The wide area of the use of 'natural' properties was in fact neither magic nor miracle, though in retrospect it was to be confused with both.

John of Salisbury's approach to magic, miracle, and 'natural' powers is typical of twelfth-century scholars. He accepted and repeated the list of forbidden magical arts that had been drawn up by Isidore of Seville.⁴⁷ He was sceptical about magic that claimed to use demonic powers and cited his own experience as a sorcerer's apprentice when he was a boy:

I was judged useless for such purposes and as though I impeded the sacrilegious practices, I was condemned to have nothing to do with such things and as often as they practised their art I was banished as if an obstacle to the whole procedure.⁴⁸

The deceipts of the demons, he implied, rested on the mistaken credibility of the practitioners of magic. *Physica*, that which is non-material, was manifested through normal processes of causation: 'in fact, there is no act or object whose origin is not due to some specific cause or purpose'. But beyond that, 'only those things should be accepted which are the product of faith and are attributed to the glory of an omnipotent God'.⁴⁹ Thus, he can cite Julius Caesar and his wife as being the recipients of omens conveyed through nature, which were in fact true and from God, and he goes even further with Vespasian and attributes true cures at his hands to the power of God. Nevertheless, he asserts that what should be most closely considered by Christians are the miracles of the saints. Of the examples he gives of miracles, some are miracles of the saints—Stephen,⁵⁰ Benedict,⁵¹ and Cuthbert⁵²—but the others belong to the intermediate world of natural medicine. A demoniac was cured by carrying a paper on which the Lord's prayer was written; herbs gathered by moonlight while the gatherer recited the Lord's prayer effected cures; parts of the New Testament written out and carried on the body provided protection.⁵³ He also held that while most ways of foretelling the future were both erroneous and forbidden, certain means of prophecy were allowed:

Yet it is permissible that one should be consulted about the future on condition that he possesses the spirit of prophecy or that as a result of his knowledge of medicine he recognizes what is taking place from natural signs in the bodies of living creatures.⁵⁴

Certain dreams could also be prophetic.⁵⁵ Thus, while in theory the distinction between miracle and magic was clear, the intermediate field of natural causes could confuse the issue if later categories were placed upon this very different area.

The exploration of natural causes in 'science' often brought condemnation on itself as trafficking with demons: Gerard, archbishop of York, was condemned as a dealer in magic when a copy of Julius Firmicus was found under his pillow at his death,⁵⁶ St Dunstan's reputation for learning and inventiveness caused him to be called a sorcerer,⁵⁷ William of Malmsbury gave Gerbert a lasting reputation as a magician.⁵⁸ 'Magic' was also the accusation passed on miracles not acceptable to another party. The miracles of heretics were condemned as magic,⁵⁹ the miracles of Becker were called magic by his opponents:

'They spread it around everywhere that the monks of Canterbury did these things by magical incantations and by such devilish arts that they seemed rather than were miracles'.⁶⁰ 'Magic' for the period in question meant supernatural dealing with demons. It was condemned and set against miracles. It is an anachronism to call the intermediate sphere of natural causes 'white magic' or to extend this description on the miracles of the saints.⁶¹ Miracles and magic were two extremes, at least in theory, of dealing with the supernatural; the intermediate sphere was a commerce with natural elements, however mistakenly described.

The process of distinction among events called *miria* in this period is seen particularly clearly in relation to the supernatural events called sacraments. In one sense the sacraments always had been 'miracles' *par excellence*, insofar as they were the supreme instances of the regular but mysterious intervention of God in the created order: *quotidiana miracula*. In this period the sacrament of the eucharist in particular began to be regarded as a miracle in a different sense. The other sacraments at times did have miracle stories attached to them, and popular belief made them a means of protection and assistance in temporal needs,⁶² but such instances were few, partly because these sacraments were administered only once in a lifetime. Also, extreme unction provided little material for miracles since it involved no outward or psychological change in the people concerned, but effected a change in their status. In certain monastic circles the sacrament of penance, which was increasingly used in personal confession in this period,⁶³ was concerned more closely with the psychological state of the penitent than with his restoration to his place in the church.⁶⁴ Particularly among the monks, miracle stories began to appear concerning the miraculous effects of the sacrament of penance either in its application or its omission. The real emphasis on a sacrament as miraculous, however, was to be found in connection with the eucharist. Unlike the other sacraments, the eucharist involved the use of bread and wine, natural objects that could be observed and discussed in terms other than those of psychology.

Three kinds of miracles were connected with the eucharist: what was later called 'the miracle of the mass' itself (the discussion of the content of the sacrament in theological terms); visions and miracles that illustrated this; and, as there were to a much lesser degree for other sacraments, miracles tangential to the sacrament that demonstrated its

power in practical situations. Though the first of these, the change in substance effected by the mass, was invisible and therefore beyond analysis, the nature of the change was discussed. The discussion shows a change from the traditional perception of the eucharist as marvellous to a particular understanding of it as miraculous. There is no complete change from one view to the other in this period, and, as with other aspects of the miraculous already discussed, both the traditional view and the changes were present at once.

The traditional understanding of the eucharist as 'the mystery [not the miracle] of the body of Christ which is the church' (Col. 1:4) was a central theme of patristic teaching.⁶⁵ It had been vividly presented by Augustine⁶⁶ and was incorporated in the words of the canon of the mass.⁶⁷ In this period Anselm of Canterbury had continued this tradition in a personal prayer *Before Receiving the Body and Blood of Christ*:

Make me, O Lord, so to perceive with lips and heart and know by faith and by love, that by virtue of this sacrament I may deserve to be planted in the likeness of your death and resurrection by mortifying the old man and renewal of the life of righteousness. May I be worthy to be incorporated into your body 'which is the church'.⁶⁸

This understanding of the *quoniam* of the eucharist as symbol and mystery received still greater emphasis in the next century, partly as a reaction to a different kind of inquiry. Thus Hugh of St Victor asserted the traditional approach, but in reaction to the recent application of dialectic to the mass:

Here is marvel indeed. The flesh that is eaten below remains whole in the heavens. Why do you start up with your logic, dialectician? What do you think of this, sophist? Why are you seeking arguments? That would be to sprinkle dust on the stars. Your logic does not reach so high.⁶⁹

The understanding of the sacrament in personal and spiritual terms as *mirra* and mystery continued and was in fact made more personal in this period; but at the same time Hugh of St Victor's *dialecticus* and *sophista* examined how the bread and wine became the body and blood of Christ in a desire to show that the change was 'real'. Interest in the manner of this change was not unknown in the early church,⁷⁰ but the focus of the questions now asked was very different. The discussion that

revolved around Paschasius Radbertus and Ratramnus in the ninth century had effectively concentrated attention not on the results of the sacrament for the believer but on the method of the change of substance in the elements themselves. Paschasius had held that the bread and wine of the eucharist changed at the words of consecration into the same body that Christ received from the Virgin at Bethlehem;⁷¹ it was a view taken up in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and illustrated, as will be seen, by miracle stories, several of which were included in Paschasius's work.⁷² The host was seen as Christ the Child in visions. The protests of some theologians that the sacramental change was effected spiritually, not visibly, came to a head with the teaching of Berengar of Tours. Eventually he agreed to resign his views in favour of a statement that carried to its extreme the theory that the flesh of Christ was received in a more than spiritual manner:

The bread and wine which are placed on the altar are after consecration not only a sacrament but also the real body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . with the senses not only as a sacrament but in reality these are taken and broken by the hands of the priest and are crushed by the teeth of the faithful.⁷³

The carnal, naturalistic approach apparent here, in which the changed bread and wine is the body of Christ that can be held, broken, and chewed, presents a new focus on the sacrament. It is not so much the 'body of Christ which is the church' as 'the body of Christ which is the host', and the host itself had been changed by a miracle. Hugh of St Victor called the sacrament *miraculum*, Stephen of Autun said the change was *miraculosa* and Simon of Tournai compared it with the miracle of the raising of Lazarus. Both miracles were done 'not naturally . . . but against the course and order of nature'.⁷⁴

The idea that transubstantiation was a miracle *contra naturam*, a marvel, coupled with the over-vivid images of the reality it produced, is connected with a flood of miracle stories that illustrated the 'reality' of the change. Such stories could even be called 'counter-miracles', since they break through the miraculous surface of illusion to a representation of the substance that lies behind the unchanged appearance. These are a second type of eucharistic miracle. The host was seen to change into the Christ child, either as a beautiful boy, or as a child pierced and wounded. Or, in the place of bread and wine, there appeared flesh and

blood. Sometimes the figure of Christ crucified appeared at the consecration, with blood flowing from his wounds into the chalice. At other times, the Virgin Mary was seen offering the child to the communicants. The most common miracles were the replacing of bread and wine at the consecration by a child or by flesh and blood. One instance of each stands for many:

One day when . . . Adolph was celebrating mass and before the 'O Lamb of God', he lifted up the host to break it, and saw the Virgin in the host itself sitting upon a throne and holding the infant to her breast . . . he saw also a lamb in the host . . . and when he looked again, Christ on the cross with bent head.⁷⁵ Less than two years ago a priest who was in doubt about the sacrament of the body of Christ celebrated mass . . . and the Lord showed him raw flesh in the host.⁷⁶

In the second instance, a bystander, a nobleman called Wridekin, claimed to have seen the raw flesh also, which is asserted to show that this was not the imagination of an individual but a reality that could be seen by others. The appearance of these 'realities' in place of the host are said to be either for the conviction of unbelievers or for the reward of special devotion. In either case, miracles of this kind are an inversion of the central miracle of transubstantiation, though they claimed to affirm it.

A third class of miracles is connected with the eucharist, and in these the consecrated elements themselves were regarded as a permanent focus of power, just as a relic was held to be. In stories of punishments that befell those who celebrated mass unworthily, the host turned black or vanished from the hands of the priest.⁷⁷ In some stories animals or insects venerated the host or protected it.⁷⁸ In other tales communion afforded special protection, as, for instance, in the story of a knight who conquered in an ordeal by battle by receiving communion first.⁷⁹ The host was placed along with the relics of saints in altars at their consecration.⁸⁰ The pious had a strong inclination to treat the consecrated bread and wine, if they had been subject to a vision of their 'real' nature, as relics to be preserved and venerated.

An instance of the veneration of such consecrated elements was known to Lanfranc of Bec; a century later, a similar instance was known to Hugh of Lincoln. The contrast between the two stories expresses the contrast between the two approaches to the eucharist as *tygnum* and as

mirum in this period. In the first instance, Guirmund, bishop of Avranches, says Lanfranc, *magister meus* told him that when he was a boy in Italy he heard of a priest who found the elements turned to flesh and blood at the mass. The priest asked the bishop's advice; the bishop summoned a council and ordered the elements to be enclosed in the centre of the altar 'so that all that remained might be perpetually preserved'.⁸¹

When Hugh of Lincoln visited Normandy, however, and was invited to venerate a similar shrine, he refused to do so, saying that the true miracle was the host daily consecrated and received:

Why should we gape at a sensory image of this divine gift when every day we behold by faith this heavenly sacrifice whole and entire? Let that man look with his bodily eyes on the minute fragment who cannot by faith internally behold the whole.⁸²

This episode showed no lack of appreciation of the eucharist as a miracle in Hugh; his biographer related that he often saw a beautiful child between his hands when he said mass and was moved to tears at the sight.⁸³ It shows rather the concern of the monk, significantly a Carthusian, a member of a new order, for what is personal and spiritual in the *miraculum* of the sacrament, while the factual record by Lanfranc shows a situation in a parish setting, where the host that the parish priest had seen turn into real flesh at the consecration was treated as a relic for external veneration. The approach of Hugh is traditional, but with a more personal and emotional aspect; the approach reflected in the story told by Lanfranc indicates the other view, in which the host was a relic among relics, dignified only because it was the relic of Christ.

The great increase within this period in devotion to the eucharist led official theology to the position taken by Hugh of Lincoln, but the other kind of veneration of the host did not disappear in popular devotion. In fact, eucharistic hosts more frequently were held to work miracles once attributed to the saints; the *quomodo* questions of the natural scientists reinforced this belief. They focussed attention on the nature of the elements, and therefore on what was visible and immediate. This attention gave a miraculous aspect to the host and caused it to be regarded as a relic. It therefore could be misused for magical purposes, and miracle stories relate this.⁸⁴ The Fourth Lateran Council forbade

the reception of the host in such a way that it could be carried out of the church—an indication of the extent to which the host was regarded as an object of power to be covered and used.⁸⁵

It is in this third category of miracles connected with the host that the eucharist is most clearly linked with the miraculous. The first category of the theological content of transubstantiation made the mass a miracle *spiritualiter*, and the second category was meant to demonstrate this; the third can only be called miraculous *corporaliter* in that the host was separated from its context to become a focus of power like the relic of a saint.

Thus the sacrament of the eucharist was seen to be in some sense a miracle. However, it differed from other miraculous events in that it was predictable. It was a regular and covenanted act of God through a prescribed ritual that precipitated the intervention of the divine in an expected way. The mass was, in itself, a predictable act of God '*supra naturam*' and additional miracles illustrated this. It is possible to see another ceremony, that of the ordeal, in the same category, as in some sense a miracle in itself, with other miracles to illustrate it. During this period, however, the ordeal ceased, at least in theory, to be used in judicial inquiry, and one can see here a further limitation on the supernatural in affairs similar to those already discussed.

The ordeal was an appeal to the judgement of God; it took place either by hot iron, water, or a duel; it could also use the host. The elements to be used were blessed by a priest, the participants solemnly set apart from society, and the affair conducted as a ritual, with prescribed prayers and actions.⁸⁶ If a man were innocent, his burns would show signs of healing within three days; if he had been tried by water, he would float if guilty, since the natural element of water would reject him; the winner in an ordeal by battle was assumed to have won by the power of God 'who judges justly'. It was a clear, public, and final demonstration of the decision of God in legal matters. It was believed to be unprejudiced by men and in correspondence with the facts. The elements of water and fire were created by God and specially open to his direct influence after the blessing given them; they would then reveal the guilt or innocence of a man, who was also created by God. It was a miracle in the sense of *signum*, and, since water and fire did not normally behave in this way, it was also *mirum*.

The ordeal as ritualized miracle was accepted by its critics in the twelfth century; it was simply held to be out of place. The arguments presented by Peter the Chanter were perhaps decisive in this matter and can be cited as typical of the new approach.⁸⁷ In his view the ordeal was a miracle, but it was demanded, and to do this was to tempt God⁸⁸ by assuming that he will intervene in the work of the law. Miracles, according to Peter the Chanter, were unusual and uncovenanted events, coming straight from the act of God, usually in connection with sanctity. In the division of events into those caused by God through the will of men, the course of nature, or directly, Peter transferred the ordeal from the last to the first. Ordeals, moreover, seemed to him to be contrary to the authority of the scriptures. He also showed them to be frequently wrong in their results in practical situations.

This practical discussion of whether ordeals were correct in their results cut at the heart of the appeal *ad iudicium Dei*. Miracle stories had not always shown previously that their results were correct; there are earlier instances of ordeals whose results were wrong; but Peter the Chanter compiled a list of instances in which their results were shown always to be wrong. He told anecdotes of failures and of false judgments. He also demonstrated that the ordeal in fact favoured certain participants.⁸⁹ It was a practical discussion of the mechanics of the 'miracle' and a reassessment of its results that destroyed both its hold on theory and its reliability in practice. A decree of the Fourth Lateran Council⁹⁰ forbade clergy to be involved in ordeals, and the essential connection by which the process claimed to be supernatural was broken. A miracle was no longer a central procedure in law-courts; miracles were relegated to a more theological atmosphere.

Among the other scriptures which the Pentateuch of law contains, the book of Exodus is pre-eminent in merit, in which nearly all the sacraments by which the present church is constituted, nourished and ordered, are presented figuratively.²

He goes on to consider the crossing of the Red Sea exclusively in terms of salvation and symbol: 'There through the crossing of the Red Sea, and Pharaoh and the drowning of the Egyptians, are prefigured the mystery of baptism and the death of spiritual enemies'. This was precisely the kind of comment that appeared in the *Gloss* whenever the text demanded comment on miracles. Anselm of Laon's gloss on St John,³ which became a standard gloss on the Scriptures, proceeds in this way. The miracle of the raising of Lazarus, for instance, includes texts from Augustine and Jerome in which typology predominates. In the first, Lazarus is the sinful soul loosed from sin:

When the sinner is condemned he lies in the tomb, when he repents he rises, when he confesses he comes forth, as if made manifest from the darkness but still bound, and the ministers say, 'loose him and let him go'.

In the second, Lazarus is a type for the Jews: 'Lazarus dead is a symbol of the Jews who do not believe in Christ'.⁴ The programme of Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* was still in force: 'We must meditate on what we read until an interpretation be found that tends to establish the reign of charity'.⁵

The 'spiritual' meaning of the text predominates in the instances just quoted. The question of *how* Lazarus was raised was already settled by the assumption that God does what he chooses; the questions that remained were, when was he acting miraculously? and to what purpose for men were his actions? The miracle of the changing of water into wine at Cana provided a fruitful source for reflection on the miraculous acts of God, and writers connected this miracle with the eucharist. Within this period, however, a more typical approach is that of Rupert of Deutz in his commentary on St John. He assumes, with Augustine, that the process by which water is made into wine by nature and the actions of men was simply speeded up without intermediaries in the case of the water changed at Cana; it is the purpose, not the process, of the miracle that excites his interest:

2

The Discussion of Miracles in Practical Contexts

THE SPARSE INFORMATION to be gained from direct discussion of miracles can be supplemented by an examination of how miracles were considered indirectly by those recounting them or using the accounts of others. One example of this indirect discussion of miracles is found in the works of commentators on the Scriptures. The vocabulary of miracle was a complex matter, but certain episodes in the Scriptures commonly were called miracles or signs, whatever word was used for them in the Vulgate. One of these was the creation of the world and the creation of Adam in particular; another was the Virgin Birth; a third was the resurrection. Besides these, certain actions of Christ as well as certain events in Exodus in connection with Moses, Elijah, and Elisha were called miracles. These included the feeding of the five thousand, the turning of water into wine, the raising of Lazarus, the healing of the sick. Comments made about the miracle of creation have already provided some insight into the concept of miracle in this period; comments on other miracles fill out this picture.

Writers on biblical miracles predominantly followed part of the patristic tradition of exegesis. This tradition saw events in the Bible as moments illustrating the relationship between God and man, to be explored for their significance for contemporary readers.¹ Miracles were no exception to this. The intense interest felt in this type of consideration was expressed earlier, in a way that continued to be recognized throughout this period, by Rabanus Maurus. In his commentary on the most miracle-filled book of the Old Testament, the book of Exodus, the abbot of Fulda exclaimed:

For it is not to be wondered at that God could make wine out of water . . . how greatly we rejoice that he who alone could do this was made man, walked among men for thirty years, entering into the prison of the flesh. So this new miracle proves that which only the faithful believe, that omnipotent God was made man.⁶

This was the kind of comment most frequently made on biblical miracles, as it was the kind of comment most often used about contemporary miracles. When defending the more unlikely of the miracles attributed to St Faith, for instance, Bernard of Angers set out to show that these stories were edifying for the faithful and in accord with the Word of God. But other questions were being raised about biblical miracles in this period, and these questions were not unlike those raised by the 'natural scientists' about contemporary miracles. The question of *how* an event called a miracle took place, an examination of its mechanics rather than its effects, emerges in the *quaestio* and the *sententia*, in which contemporary opinion predominated over the quotations given from the Fathers on a text.⁷ In discussing the text of Romans 5:12, Anselm of Laon had recognized the creation of all men from Adam as a miracle, in which the 'hidden causes' were contained in one man and conveyed to all men.⁸ Peter Lombard, however, carried his questions a step further. He asked *how* this was so and illustrated the process by referring to another miracle, the feeding of the five thousand. He gives as an explanation for both miracles the 'hidden causes' of Augustine:

The course of all creatures has natural laws; over this natural course the Creator himself has made them able to do otherwise than that which is natural to them.⁹

As instances of this process he cites the flowering of Aaron's rod, the childbearing of Sarah, the ass of Balaam that spoke, and he quotes Augustine on Genesis as his authority. The difference he introduces, however, into the consideration of the miracles is the shift of emphasis from an exclusive concern with the lessons to be drawn from an event, to the question of the event's mechanics: not 'why is that said?' but 'how can that have happened?'

This questioning of miracles in the sixteenth century and under other pressures led to discarding the concept of the miraculous in cer-

tain 'scientific' circles; there is no question of that here. But Peter Lombard's interest in secondary causes found echoes even in a critic such as Robert of Melun, who repeats the comments of Lombard in his own commentary on the same text from Romans.¹⁰ Later still, Simon of Tournai asked similar questions about the feeding of the five thousand and the raising of Lazarus. He asks what kind of event it was: 'whether his raising was a natural or a miraculous event',¹¹ and he concludes that it was both: 'it was accomplished miraculously but once done it was natural'. The restoration of a dead person to life he regarded as a direct intervention of God and therefore a miracle *contra naturam*. But when he considered how Lazarus behaved afterwards, he had to say he lived 'naturally' rather than 'miraculously': he could eat, sleep, marry, behave as any man would. His discussion is still far from attacking the miracle as such, but again it changes the emphasis from seeing an event as *signum*, as a message from God to the hearer, to considering how it came about in itself.

This was not, in fact, an entirely new approach to the miracles of Scripture. It was known to the early church and was revived by Isidore of Seville and by the Irish schools of the seventh century. In particular, one treatise that had the authority of Augustine until the thirteenth century was produced in Ireland and known in this period: the *De Mirabilibus Sacrae Scripturae*. Here the miracles of the Old and New Testaments were discussed, within the Augustinian framework of 'hidden reasons' but with the *quomodo* questions of a Simon of Tournai. How, the writer asked, did Christ and St Peter walk on the water?

But it is possible to ask whether the bodies of the Lord and St Peter grew lighter in their nature so that the water held them up, or if the water solidified so that it could support human bodies.¹²

This *quomodo* questioning was to attain popularity in the thirteenth century, and it is significant that most of the surviving manuscripts of this work were copied and glossed in that period. The Irish work had the authority of Augustine in the twelfth century and may have been known and appreciated then. It is cited here not for its possible influence, but as a parallel for the kind of interest being shown in biblical miracles in this period. This interest had its counterpart in the explorations of William of Conches and Adalard of Bath, and in their

determination not to resort to 'miracle' as an explanation until other causes had been examined for contemporary events. It is one more instance of the narrowing in certain circles of the concept of miracle from that which by its unusual nature instructs the soul, to a special category of acts of God, outside nature's normal course.

In addition to the biblical commentators, preachers often discussed miracles in their sermons. In the sermon, a didactic exercise, many kinds of illustrations were used to drive home a lesson, among them stories of miraculous happenings. *Exempla* were drawn from nature, classical literature, contemporary events, and from biblical texts, in a tradition of preaching that can be traced back to the Gospels.¹³ It was a method of preaching strongly recommended by Gregory the Great: more are usually pierced by examples than by words of reason. . . . The hearts of the hearers are generally stirred to the love of God and neighbour by examples rather than by words.¹⁴ Augustine of Hippo used the occasion of a miracle as an illustration to a sermon, when he spoke about the powers of the saints on Easter morning in the church in Hippo and directed the attention of his audience to the cure of a young man and his sister, Paulus and Palladia. He made the man stand before the congregation as one just then cured by the relics of St. Stephen, and beside him he put his sister who was still suffering from the same kind of illness.¹⁵ This example was for the edification of the hearers, a sign of the power of the saints, and not a wonder, of interest for its marvelous qualities. The process of the cure was of no interest for him or for his congregation, except for its strength as a witness to the powers of heaven:

What do these miracles attest but the faith which proclaims that Christ rose in the flesh and ascended into heaven with the flesh?¹⁶

This was the recognized approach of the preacher to miracles. They were pre-eminently treated as signs. This was also the pattern for the twelfth-century preachers and in particular the monastic preachers, who continued to present miracles as *signa*, *subservient* to their end—to implant or strengthen faith. The Cistercians, for example, used as their theme the miracle of the Incarnation rather than the theme most popular with the commentators, the Creation. The Cistercian most renowned as a preacher in his day, Bernard of Clairvaux,

rarely referred in his sermons to miraculous events, but he insisted on the 'great wonders', the miracles of the Incarnation and the salvation of men:

When the Almighty in his majesty took upon him our flesh he did three works, made three conjunctions, which were so wonderfully singular and singularly wonderful that nothing had been or could be seen to be greater upon earth. He joined together God and man, mother and virgin, faith and the human heart.¹⁷

In his sermon on St. Martin he says that he values the miracles of Martin, but considers the faith of Martin of greater importance for his hearers: 'Rich is this Martin, rich in merits, rich in miracles, rich in virtues, rich in signs'.¹⁸ And he urges his hearers to distinguish between *miracula* and *signa* on the one hand and *merita* and *virtutes* on the other: 'Consider diligently therefore what is appropriate to your condition, that is, which is to be admired and which is to be imitated'.¹⁹ In a sermon on St. Victor, he emphasizes the same idea about the miracles of St. Victor:

These and other similar deeds of the holy man we should venerate but not emulate; it is safe to emulate that which is more solid rather than that which is more sublime, that which is filled with virtue, even though it is less in glory.²⁰

This is not to say that Bernard underrated miracles. On the contrary, he used them frequently to support his own preaching and to illustrate the power of faith, especially when preaching the Crusade. The point he made about miracles on all occasions was, however, that they were a means to bring men to God and of comparatively little interest in themselves.

This approach was used by other Cistercian preachers. Aelfred of Rievaulx, himself known for miracles, preached on the book of Isaiah and noted that miracles could be experienced by unbelievers as well as the faithful and were, therefore, no sure guide to virtue. Is it not better, he concludes, to seek the gifts of humility, patience, and charity? Where these are present, he adds, they will be confirmed by miracles: 'What is taught is confirmed by miracles'.²¹ In the next generation another Cistercian, Baldwin, abbot of Ford, continued the same theme:

'All miracles are either through faith or because of faith . . . what God requires is faith, not the power to do miracles'.²² Adam of Perseigne wrote in the same vein, indeed echoing the words as well as the sentiments of Bernard:

Among the wonders that the Creator in his wisdom has done, three are singularly wonderful and wonderfully singular . . . that is, mother and virgin, the Word made flesh, God and man. These are new things, unheard of and wonderful, which exceed nature.²³

The Cistercians had no monopoly on using miracles in preaching. Peter Damian stressed the inner meaning of every text or example he used, from miracles to the details of his bestiary:

We say nothing to provoke astonishment, but those who look at things from a higher point of view will find here a sacrament of the greatest significance for their lives.²⁴

He used miracle stories in his sermons briefly and to illustrate a moral or spiritual message; his use of a miracle of St Benedict is typical. A story was told at Monte Cassino of the deliverance of the monastery from fire when, at the prayers of the monks to St Benedict, rain fell and extinguished the flames.²⁵ In Desiderius's account in the *Miracles of St Benedict*, several details are mentioned that Peter Damian omits or changes in his sermon on St Benedict. Desiderius emphasizes the power of St Benedict in that particular place and concludes that men should pray to St Benedict and visit his grave, since he cares for his own. For Peter Damian, the fire at the monastery is a symbol of sin, the cloud a symbol of grace, and the message is the need for repentance and prayer to God.

Miracle stories in sermons confirmed the message of the preacher. When collected for preachers, they often lost their individuality. This process can be seen in a large collection of Cistercian miracles made at the end of the twelfth century, possibly by the abbot of Eberbach, Conrad. This miracle book, the *Exordium Magnum Cisterciense*, falls into two parts. Five books contain miracles ascribed to various people, most of them Cistercians, who are named; these stories claim to be about events and to be connected with individuals. The sections in the last two books, however, are thematic, and miracles are added as illustra-

tions. For instance, in the first books, the compiler writes about 'The Lord Pons, Fifth Abbot of Clairvaux', 'A senior monk to whom the Lord Jesus appeared on the Vigil of Easter', 'a Brother in whose hand crumbs of bread were turned into most precious pearls', while in the last books he gives long exhortations 'About the dangers of disobedience', 'In praise of patience', etc. These exhortations are in fact sermons, and he uses miracles to illustrate themes. When he describes the dangers of reciting the psalter carelessly, for example, he uses a story from the *Life of St Anno* as illustration and he refers briefly to a Mary miracle. In each case the details are subservient to the preacher's needs, names are replaced by 'certain nun', 'a certain clerk', and no precise location or time is given.

Such stories were, at the end of the twelfth century, collected into manuals for preachers and separated from the older kind of miracle collection. One such work was the *Dialogus Miraculorum* of Caesarius of Heisterbach, in which wonder stories were grouped under twelve subject headings:

While others are breaking whole leaves to the people, that is, are expounding hard problems of Scripture or writing down the more important occurrences of modern times, I have collected the crumbs that fell and have filled twelve baskets with them for those who are poor not in grace but in learning.

Popular stories were then grouped under headings for sermons of 'contrition', 'contrition', 'confession', and so forth. The stories could be extracted and used according to theme.

By the beginning of the thirteenth century, handbooks for preachers were more common, particularly among the friars who were undertaking popular preaching and needed sources upon which to draw. *Exempla* thought suitable for a preacher's use were fairly clearly defined. Lessons might be drawn from stories told by ancient writers, from natural history, and from the miracles of the saints. Guibert of Nogent, in discussing how a sermon should be put together, insists on the spiritual preparation of the preacher, who is breaking the bread of God in the words he utters for the good of souls:

Prayer precedes preaching, so that the soul, on fire and burning with divine love, speaks of what he has experienced of God, and just as far as he is on fire within, will he inflame the hearts of his hearers.²⁶

Miracles might be used for illustration, but secular examples were frowned upon, at least for monks. Caesarius of Heisterbach says that in his own monastery, Abbot Gerard once saw that several of the brothers had fallen asleep during his sermon in the chapter house; he at once said, "There was once a king who was called Arthur . . ." ²⁷ and then rebuked the monks for waking up at the mention of that name.

The sermons of the period fall into two categories: sermons and didactic literature (such as the treatises of Peter Damian, the miracles of the Cistercians, and the writings of Peter the Venerable) for the monastic orders who were expected to show interest in the matter of the sermon, with a few edifying miracles by way of illustration; and sermons for the *illiterati*, those less concerned with theology, whose interest had to be kept by *exempla* to a greater extent. Guibert of Nogent tells preachers to distinguish between the unlettered and the lettered, who would need less in the way of illustration. The *rustici* and *simpliciter*, he says, need *exempla* of an edifying and arresting kind:

Let us endeavour moreover to please the simple folk by including in our sermons stories and deeds of former times and let us present these as part of a many-hued picture. ²⁸

James of Vitry illustrated his *Sermones Vulgares* liberally with *exempla*, many of them miracle stories, which were later collected into books of *exempla* for other preachers to draw upon.

The aim in sermons, whether for *rustici* or *monachi*, was to encourage men in the way of salvation. Sometimes this could best be done by stories: "Many will be stirred by examples who will not be moved by precepts." ²⁹ Certain stories were particularly favoured by preachers. They used the miracles of the saints in sermons for their festivals and drew upon the miracles of the Virgin to provide interest in sermons for her feasts. They inserted miracles into sermons on the Eucharist. And above all they enlivened sermons with accounts of miraculous visions of heaven and hell. Monastic devotion fed upon stories of the fate of their members in the next world. Popular preaching also introduced the prospect of heaven and hell, described in detail in miraculous visions and set out for the warning and encouragement of the hearers. The close link between the liturgy and the sermon before the coming of the

friars gave a certain limitation to the content of sermons, and it is not usual to find miracles used as illustrations at any length. Monastic discourses included stories of miraculous visions of the dead and their discourses on heaven and hell, but the wealth of detail was curtailed by time, even when the sermons were delivered in the chapter house rather than the chapel. An instance of the contrast between how miracles were set out in miracle collections and how they were used in spoken sermons is provided by the story of Theophilus, one of the most famous of the Mary miracles. In collections of Mary miracles, it is set out in great detail, often including imaginary conversations between the protagonists. ³⁰ In a sermon by Fulbert of Chartres, ³¹ this story is used as the second of two illustrations. The first is a story of the death of Julian the Apostate, ³² also found in Marian collections, and is mentioned to show how Mary hears the prayers of the righteous. The second story, that of Theophilus, ³³ is called *rusticina*, but is described at no greater length than the first, as an illustration of how Mary helps even the unrighteous:

Even you, O former sinner Theophilus, she snatched by her power from the very jaws of the devil, when you invoked her with repentance. ³⁴

Neither story is recounted in full, but enough is taken from them to illustrate the point made by the preacher. In this case he presumes that both stories will be known to his hearers and that the mention of them will help his argument.

Commentaries and sermons are not primary sources for miracle stories. A third kind of writing is more closely related to the primary records of miracles and occasionally discusses theory. The men who put together miracle collections had a purpose in doing so, and the prefaces of their collections, though formal and stylized and repeating the same themes, at least show what the miracle collectors supposed their work to be; and at times variations in the prefaces or narrative add to this information.

Augustine of Hippo, in his account of the miracles of St Stephen, sets out the main reasons for presenting posthumous miracles. His account of contemporary miracles at the tombs of saints is in the last book of the *City of God*, which is an account of the *aeterna beatitudo* of the City

of God. God works wonders through prayers offered through his saints in connection with their relics. Augustine says that such wonders should be recorded and publicized to convert unbelievers and strengthen the faith of the Christians:

I have been concerned that such accounts should be published because I saw that signs of divine power like those of older times were now often occurring and I felt that they should not pass into oblivion, unnoticed by the people in general.³⁵

He himself caused careful records of local miracles to be kept and publicized, though he adds that these are only a small proportion of the miracles that happened.

These themes occur in later collections. It is usually said that records should be kept for the glory of God:

The goodness and wisdom of our Lord and Saviour is exalted by the prayers of many, and so much more wonderful does he appear when he works wonders through his saints after their death.³⁶

They were to be written down and read aloud for conversion and for the increase of faith: 'Unbelievers are excited to believe by miracles, and they also confirm faith, so that wonders animate the faithful and confound unbelievers'. The accounts claimed to be only a fraction of the miracles done by the saints: 'For a new narrator always takes over from the previous one, since there are always new miracles to wonder at'.³⁷

Writers often deplore their inability to do justice to such a great theme; and it is usual to say that some great man has commissioned the work, or that it has been undertaken at the prompting, sometimes on the orders of, the writer's community. Reginald of Durham, for instance, wrote at the suggestion of Aelfred of Rievaulx; Thomas of Monmouth claimed that Bishop William Turbe and the monks of Norwich, as well as a vision of the founder of the house, Bishop Herbert, urged him to write; Thomas Becket himself appeared to both Benedict and William at Canterbury to reinforce their commission by the monks.

It is clear from these prefaces that the writers were not much concerned with the theory of miracles. The 'how' question was already answered for them. The miracles of a particular saint and a particular

shrine existed, and the writers used everything that could be gathered under such a title. The miracles were primarily advertisements for the shrine or the saint, and even the dedications to great men were simply a way of ensuring interest and patronage. The ability of the saint to work miracles was, for a number of reasons, proclaimed by the miracle collection; it would be vain to look there for an interest in the events in relation to probability or doctrine.

There are, however, a few exceptions to this approach. Where there was criticism, writers defended miracles, and sometimes a collector was moved to reflect about a miracle. One particularly striking instance of this is in the account given by William of Canterbury of a knight who lost his horse in the forest of Ponthieu and attributed its recovery to the prayers of St Thomas:

Some would say that the finding of the horse was due to chance and that it had no cause at all. Others would agree that if it had a cause then that cause was directed towards some other end and the recovery of the horse was merely an incidental consequence. There are others who would hold that it was a combination of causes . . . but the truth is that not a leaf falls from a branch without cause, for to admit the power of chance in the physical world is to detract from the power of the Creator. The Creator has so ordered the laws of matter that nothing can happen in his creation except in accordance with his just ordinance, whether good or bad. If we are to seek the cause of things, we must look for the original cause, which is not itself caused by something else. And the original cause, that is, God, is the true cause of the miracle I have just described.³⁸

This passage conveys the average expectation about miracles for the period, and it is significant that it comes from the largest collection of miracles, those of St Thomas of Canterbury. In contrast to the new writers who wanted to reserve the explanation of events as miracles until all other causes had been examined, the mainstream of apprehension of events that is found particularly at the great shrines was to see miracle as a normal explanation, and the one to be preferred. Augustine had taught a belief in God under whose hand all nature is potentially miraculous:

How can an event be contrary to nature when it happens by the will of God, since the will of the great Creator assuredly is the nature of every created being?³⁹

This was the basis of the miracle collections of the period. Miraculous explanations of events were preferred to natural ones; God who created and controlled all things was seen as constantly intervening in inexplicable ways, and most obviously in connection with the power of his saints at the places where their relics lay. Abbot Samson expressed the same opinion of causation as William of Canterbury when he described the miracles of St Edmund. After an account of the immediate cure of William Fitzsketil from fever at the shrine, he added that some might think such a cure unnatural from its suddenness:

Someone may marvel at this; but only to those who consider the ordinary laws of matter instead of the nature of the Creator. For if he created the laws of matter in accordance with his will, why should he not alter them whenever he chooses to do so?⁴⁰

This Augustinian approach to miracles expressed in these two shrine collections underlies the accounts of miracles next to be considered. The reflections on miracles and nature that have been observed in the theory of miracles in the period lay mostly outside the actual daily events at shrines where the most unlikely tales were supported with the simple assertion that 'God is glorious in his saints'; the greater the miracle, the more power it demonstrated at that place.⁴¹ Popular expectations of the miraculous in every kind of situation could be focused on shrines and their saints; they presented a formidable force in evidence of the theory that produced them, and, in a later age, provided material for those with other theories of events and reality to criticize.

3

Miracles at Traditional Shrines: St Faith, St Benedict and St Cuthbert

THE DISCUSSION OF MIRACLES during the Middle Ages shows above everything else the acceptance of the miraculous as a basic dimension of life. The bounds of reality included the unseen in a way alien to modern thought. Miracles were the rule rather than the exception, and the concept of the hand of God at work in the whole of life coloured the perception of miracles and their records. Given this preoccupation with miracles, it is to be expected that there would be many records of contemporary miracles. These records provide the main body of material for studying miracles. The largest number of these miracles were recorded at the shrines of the saints, since virtually every town had its shrine and frequently someone able to record the miracles.

This large amount of material about miracles reflects the urgent needs of the living and their trust in the powers of the dead. Needs of every kind were focussed upon the bones of the saints in their shrines, the special places on earth where men could be in touch with the saints, who enjoy the full vision of God and who could therefore be expected to offer potent and efficacious prayer for those who asked for their intercession. From the evidence produced by the shrines of Europe, I will present a general outline of this process, before proceeding to a more detailed examination of certain major shrines where the collections are both extensive and illuminating.

The relics venerated in the West in this period can be placed in three groups. First, there were the relics of saints connected with the Bible and the early church: relics of the true cross, bones of the apostles, relics of the early Christian martyrs. The hand of St James at Reading was the chief relic of Reading Abbey in the twelfth century; the tomb