CHAPTER FOUR

EPIC AND EVANGEL

Sedulius has been described with some accuracy as a "poet between two worlds."1 His biblical epic not only harks back to the literary heritage of classical antiquity but also anticipates developments in European literature which come to full fruition in the Middle Ages and thereafter. Educated as they were in the schools of the grammatici and rhetores, it was difficult for Sedulius and most other Christian poets of Late Antiquity to think of using anything but traditional verse forms. At the same time, they were devoted to the truth of the Scriptures and felt ambivalent about or even hostile to pagan literature, especially its mythological content.2 The result was that Christian poets of Late Antiquity followed a pattern, as Curtius puts it, "of keeping to the antique genres and filling them with Christian matter."3 This is, in fact, pretty much the way in which Christian authors of Late Antiquity (e.g., Augustine and Jerome) justified their usurpation of the best of the classical cultural tradition.4 The new Christian contents and contexts were supposed to "baptize" the pagan forms. For Christian authors the practice of borrowing from pagan authors like Virgil seemed as justifiable as the Israelites' spoiling of the Egyptians—an action performed at God's command—before they left for the promised land.

While there is much to be said for this analysis of the Christian poetry of Late Antiquity in general, Curtius' suggestion that Sedulius and other biblical poets merely filled the form of the pagan epic with Christian matter (as though the new content of the Christian epic did not affect its form in any way) is misleading. Sedulius' poem was intended to be an epic,

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4 See Augustine, De doctrina christiana 2. 42 (CC 32, 76-7) and Jerome, Ep. 70. 2 (CSEL 54, 700 ff.). On Jerome's attitude towards pagan literature, see A.S. Pease's observations in TAPA 50 (1919), 150-67.
as we shall see, but it is also profoundly biblical and emphatically different from its pagan epic models not only in terms of content but in formal respects as well. The *Paschale carmen* is best understood as an early representative of a new literary form which is both biblical and epic, whose formal and material elements cannot be so glibly separated as Curtius' formula implies.

i. The Gospel as Epic

If Sedulius' first readers had been asked to identify the literary form of the *Paschale carmen* they would doubtless have declared it an epic. For one thing, Sedulius' poem was written in hexameters. In ancient literary theory specific meters were often associated with specific kinds of poetry. In *Inst.* 10. 1. 46-57, for instance, we find Quintilian lumping together under the category of epic a number of widely divergent authors who all happened to write in hexameters. The first-century rhetorician mentions Homer and Theocritus, two poets who differ in some very important respects, in the same breath. Quintilian evidently considers them both epic poets simply because they used hexameters. The connection between hexameters and the epic, which traditionally dealt with heroic subjects, was so well established that the hexameter was often simply described as "the heroic meter." Many of the earliest descriptions of the meter of Sedulius' poem (e.g., the "Gelasian Decree" and Isidore, *De viris illustribus* 20) term it "heroic," and the subscription in *Cod. Vind.* 85 describes Sedulius himself as having taught "the heroic meter" (meaning, no doubt, the *Aeneid*).

Of even more importance than Quintilian's statements on the epic, at least for our purposes, are the poetic theories of Diomedes, a grammarians more nearly contemporary with Sedulius, whose division of poetic genres in the fourth century was "of particular importance" for the Middle Ages. According to Diomedes, there are three major kinds of poetry: *genus activum vel imitativum*, *genus enarrativum*, and *genus commune*. The genres are classified according to the person speaking. In the first the poet does not intrude at all; only the dramatic characters speak. Tragedy and comedy belong to this genre. In the second genre, only the poet speaks. To this category belong poems such as Lucretius' *De rerum natura* and Virgil's *Georgics* (with the exception of the Aristaenus episode in 4. 315-558). In the third genre both author and characters speak.

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