

UNIT 5

The Dream of the Rood

The Dream of the Rood is one of the masterpieces of Anglo-Saxon literature. Its origins have puzzled scholars who have detected influences from the liturgy, hymns, sermon writing, rhetoric, theological controversy, the Anglo-Saxon riddles, and the tradition of heroic writing. The text is striking for the ways in which it conceives the story of the crucifixion of Christ in terms of an heroic ethos, while at the same time retaining the theme of suffering. The poet's brilliant strategy is to present the story of the crucifixion from three perspectives, that of the dreamer, the cross, and Christ. Further, within the account of the crucifixion, Christ is presented as a young warrior preparing for and then doing battle with the Devil, while the cross relates its own story of passive suffering. The cross is presented as a follower of Christ and as a member of his *comitatus*. His instinct is to defend his lord, but, paradoxically, he is obliged to suffer humiliation and not to seek vengeance against those attacking Christ. One of the intriguing aspects of *The Dream of the Rood* is how the text uses and at the same time redefines heroism, producing, it would seem, something that we might call 'Christian heroism'.

A sheet accompanying *The Dream of the Rood* headed 'Analogues' contains a translation of a Latin sermon which uses the rhetorical device of personification for the cross. It may be that this sermon, which was widely distributed in the Anglo-Saxon period, is in the background of the Old English poem. The sheet also contains some material from the liturgy for the 'Exaltation of the Holy Cross' which contains some of the themes and ideas found in *The Dream of the Rood* and may have influenced its composition.

In your reading of *The Dream of the Rood* consider how the conflict between heroic ideal and Christian obedience is developed. Both the dreamer and the cross are keen to relate their stories. What purposes can you suggest for the emphasis in the text on personal revelation? To what extent can *The Dream of the Rood* be described as a poem about transformation?

The Dream of the Rood

Hwæt, ic swefna cyst secgan wylle,
 hwæt me gemætte to midre nihte,
 syðþan reordberend reste wunedon.
 Puhte me þæt ic gesawe syllicre treow
 on lyft lædan leohite bewunden,
 beama beorhtost. Eall þæt beacen wæs
 begoten mid gólde; gimmas stodon
 fægere æt foldan sceatum, swylce þær fife wæron
 uppe on þam eaxlgespanne. Beheoldon þær engel Dryhtnes
 ealle
 10 fægere þurh forðgesceaft; ne wæs ðær huru fracodes gealga,
 ac hine þær beheoldan halige gastas,
 men ofer moldan and eall þeos mære gesceaft.
 Syllic wæs se sigebeam, and ic synnum fah,
 forwundod mid womnum. Geseah ic wuldres treow

The Dream of the Rood

Lo (*Hwæt*), I want to tell you about the best of dreams, what I
 dreamed at midnight when the speech-bearers [*reordberend*, people]
 occupied their beds. It seemed to me that I saw a wondrous tree
 rise up into the heavens, surrounded with light, the brightest of
 trees. That beacon was encrusted with gold; beautiful jewels shone
 out at the surface of the earth; also there were five up on the cross-
 beam. All those made fair (*fægere*) by eternal decree looked upon
 the angel of the lord [i.e., Christ]. That was not by any means the
 gallows of the wicked one, but holy spirits, men over the earth, and
 all that glorious creation looked upon him there. [1-12]

Wondrous was that cross of victory (*sigebeam*), and I was stained
 with sins, wounded with guilt. I saw that tree of glory

wædum geweorðod wynnum scinan,
 gegyred mid golde; gimmas hæfdon
 bewrigen weorðlice Wealdendes treow.
 Hwæðre ic purh þæt gold ongytan meahle
 earura ærgewin; þæt hit ærest ongan
 swætan on þa swiðran healf. Eall ic wæs mid sorgum gedrefed;
 forht ic wæs for þære fægran gesyhðe; geseah ic þæt fise
 beacen
 wendan wædum and bleom: hwilum hit wæs mid wætan bestemed,
 beswyld mid swates gange, hwilum mid since gegyrwed.

Hwæðre ic þær licgende lange hwile
 beheold hrowcearig Hælendes treow,
 oð ðæt ic gehyrde þæt hit hleoðrode;
 ongan þa word sprecan wudu selesta:
 "þæt wæs geara iu - ic þæt gyt geman -
 þæt ic wæs aheawen holtes on ende,
 astyred of stefne minum. Genaman me ðær strange feondas,
 geworhton him þær to wæfersyne, heton me heora wergas
 hebban;
 bæron me þær beornas on eaxlum, oð ðæt hie me on beorg
 asetton;

gefæstmodon me þær feondas genoge. Geseah ic þa Frean
 mancynnes

efstan elne micle, þæt he me wolde on gestigan.

þær ic þa ne dorste ofer Dryhtnes word
 bugan oððe berstan, þa ic bifian geseah
 eorðan sceatas. Ealle ic mihte
 feondas gefyllan, hwæðre ic fæste stod.

adorned with garments shining beautifully, adorned with gold. Gens had covered honourably the tree of the Ruler. However, I through that gold was able to see the ancient hostility of the wretched ones in that it first began to bleed on the right side. I was utterly afflicted with sorrows; I was frightened because of that beautiful vision. I saw that lively beacon changing in its coverings and colours: sometimes it was drenched with blood, soaked with the flowing of blood; sometimes it was adorned with treasure. [13-23]

Nevertheless, lying there for a long time, I gazed upon the sorrowful tree of the Saviour, until I heard that it spoke; the best of trees then began to utter words: 'That was a long time ago - I still remember it - that I was cut down at the edge of the forest, removed from my root. There strong enemies made me into a spectacle for themselves; they commanded me to raise up their criminals. Warriors bore me on their shoulders until they set me on a hill; many enemies fixed me there. I then saw the Lord of mankind hasten with great zeal when he wanted to climb upon me. [24-34]

There, against the word of the Lord, I did not dare to bend or break when I saw the surface of the earth tremble. I might have destroyed all the enemies; however, I stood firm.

40 Ongyrede hine þa geong hæleð — þæt wæs God ælmihtig! —
 strang and stiðmod; gēstah he on gealgan heanne,
 modig on manigra gesyhðe, þa he wolde mancyn lysan.
 Bifode ic þa me se beorn ymbclypte; ne dorste ic hwæðre

45 bugan to eorðan,
 feallan to foldan sceatum, ac ic sceolde fæste standan.
 Rod wæs ic aræred; ahof ic ricne Cynig,
 heofona Hlaford; hlyðan me ne dorste.
 Purhðrifan hi me mid deorcan næglum; on me sundon þa dolg
 gesiene,

opene inwidhlemmas; ne dorste ic hira ænigum sceððan.
 Bysmeredon hie unc butu ætgædere; eall ic wæs mid blode
 bestemed,
 begoten of þæs guman sidan siððan he hæfde his gast
 onsended.

50 "Feala ic on þam beorge gebiden hæbbe
 wræðra wyrda: geseah ic weruda God
 bearle þenian. Fystro hæfdon
 bewrigen mid wolcnum Wealdendes hræw,

55 scime sciman; sceadu forð eode,
 wann under wolcnum. Weop eal gesceaft,
 cwīðdon Cyninges fyll: Crist wæs on rode.
 Hwæðere þær fuse feorran cwoman
 to þam Æðelinge; ic þæt eall beheold.

Sare ic wæs mid sorgum gedrefed, hnag ic hwæðre þam secgum
 to handa

60 eaðmod, elne mycle. Genamon hie þær ælmihtigne God,
 ahofon hine of ðam heftan wite; forleton me þa hilderincas
 standan steame bedrifenne; eall ic wæs mid strælum
 forwundod.

Aledon hie ðær limwerigne; gestodon him æt his lices heafdum;
 beheoldon his ðær heofenes Dryhten, and he hine ðær hwile
 reste,

65 meðe æfter ðam miclan gewinne. Ongunnon him þa moldern
 wyrcan

beornas on banan gesyhðe, curfon hie ðæt of beorhtan stane;

The young warrior (*geong hæleð*), strong and resolute, stripped (*ongyrede*) himself — that was God Almighty. He mounted onto the high gallows, proud in the sight of many, when he would redeem humanity (*mancyn*). I trembled when the warrior embraced me; however, I did not dare to bow to the earth, to fall to the surface of the earth, but I had to stand firm. I was raised up a cross (*rod*); I raised up the powerful King, the Lord of Heaven. I did not dare to bend. [35–45]

They drove me through with dark nails; on me the wounds (*dolg*) are clear to see, open malicious wounds. I did not dare to harm any of them. They mocked us both together. I was thoroughly drenched (*bestemed*), covered (*begoten*) with the blood from the side of the man after he had sent forth his spirit. [46–49]

I experienced on that hill many of the cruel effects of fate (*feala ... wræðra wyrda*): I saw the God of hosts violently stretched out. Darkness had surrounded with clouds the Ruler's corpse, the shining light. A shadow went forth, dark under the sky. All creation wept, lamented the fall of the King. Christ was on the cross. However, there came from afar certain ones, hastening to the Prince; I beheld all that. I was greatly troubled with sorrow; however, I, in my humility, bent down, with great zeal, to those men close beside me. There they took Almighty God, raised him from that oppressive torment. The warriors left me to stand there covered over with sweat. I was thoroughly wounded with arrows. They laid him down there exhausted (*limwerigne*); they stood at the head of his body. They beheld the Lord of Heaven, and he rested there for a time, exhausted after the great struggle. [50–65a]

'Then the warriors began to construct a tomb within sight of the slayer; they carved it out of bright stone.

gesetton hie ðæron sigora Wealdend. Ongunnon him þa
sorthleoð galan

earme on þa æfentide, þa hie woldon eft siðian,
meðe fram þam mæran þeodne; reste he ðær mæte weorode.

70

Hwæðere we ðær grotende gode hwile
stodon on staðole; stefn up gewat

hilderinca; hræw colode,

fæger feorgbold. þa us man fyllan ongan

ealle to eorðan; þæt was egeslic wyrd!

75

Bedealf us man on deopan seape; hwæðre me þær Dryhtnes
þegnas,

freondas gefrunon,

gyredon me golde and seolfre.

"Nu ðu milt gehyran, hæleð min se leofa,

þæt ic bealuwara weorc gebiden hæbbe,

sarra sorga. Is nu sæl cumen

80

þæt me weorðiað wide and side

menn ofer moldan and eall þeos mære gesceaft,

gebiddaþ him to þyssum beacne. On me Bearn Godes

þrowode hwile; for þan ic þrymfæst nu

hlifige under heofenum, and ic hælæn mæg

æghwylcne anra þara þe him bið egesa to me.

Iu ic wæs geworden wita heardost,

leodum laðost, ær þan ic him lifes weg

rihtne gerymde, reordberendum.

Hwæt, me þa geweorþode wuldres Ealdor

ofer holtwudu, heofonrices Weard,

swylce swa he his modor eac, Marian sylfe,

ælmihhtig God for ealle menn

geweorðode ofer eall wifa cynn.

"Nu ic þe hate, hæleð min se leofa,

þæt ðu þas gesyhðe secege mannun;

onwreoh wordum þæt hit is wuldres beam,

se ðe ælmihhtig God on þrowode

95

They set therein the Lord of Victories. They then began to sing a song of sorrow, wretched in the evening time. Then they wanted to travel back again, exhausted, from that famous prince. He rested there alone. [65b-69]

'However, we, weeping there a good while, stood on the place; the voices of the warriors rose up; the corpse cooled, the fair dwelling of the soul. Then they began to cut us down completely to the earth; that was a terrible fate! They buried us in a deep pit; however, the thanes of the Lord, his friends, heard about me, and they clothed me with gold and silver. [70-77]

'Now you are able to hear, my beloved man, that I have endured the work of evil-doers, the effects of painful sorrows. Now the time has come that far and wide men over the earth honour me and all this great creation; they pray to this symbol. On me the Son of God suffered for a time; therefore, glorious, I now rise up under the heavens, and I am able to heal each one of those who is in awe of me. At one time I had become the most severe of tortures, the most hateful to the people, before I opened the right way of life to the speech-bearers [i.e., the people]. Indeed, the Lord of Glory, the Guardian of the kingdom of Heaven, honoured me above the trees of the forest in the same way that he, God Almighty, honoured also his mother over all women, Mary herself, before all human kind. [78-94]

'Now I command you, my beloved man, that you relate this vision to human kind; reveal in words that it is a cross of glory on which the Almighty God suffered

- 100 for mancynnes manegum synnum
and Adomes ealdgewyrthum.
Deað he þær byrigde; hwæðere eft Dryhten aras
mid his miclan milhte mannum to helpe.
He ða on heofenas astag. Hider eft fundað
on þysne middangeard mancynn secan
105 on domdæge Dryhten sylfa,
ælmihtig God and his englas mid,
þæt he þonne wile deman, se ah domes gewæald,
anra gehwylcum, swa he him ærur her
on þyssum lēan life geearnað.
110 Ne mæg þær ænig unforht wesan
for þam worde þe se Wealdend cwyð:
frineð he for þære mænige hwær se man sið,
se ðe for Dryhtnes naman deaðes wolde
biteres onbyrgan, swa he ær on ðam beame dyde.
115 Ac hie þonne forhtiað, and fea þencap
hwæt hie to Criste cweðan onginnen.
Ne þearf ðær þonne ænig anforht wesan
þe him ær in broostum bereð beacna selest;
120 ac ðurh ða rode sceal rice gesecan
of eorðwege æghwylc sawl,
seo þe mid Wealdende wunian þenceð."
Gebæd ic me þa to þam beame bliðe mode,
elne mycle, þær ic ana wæs
125 mæte werede. Wæs modsefa
afýsed on forðwege, feala ealra gebad
langunghwila. Is me nu lifes hyht
þæt ic þone sigebeam secan mote
ana ofor þonne eall men,
130 well weorþian. Me is willa to ðam
mycel on mode, and min mundbyrd is
geriht to þære rode. Nah ic ricra feala
freonda on foldan, ac hie forð heonan
gewiton of worulde dreamum, sohton him wuldres Cýning;

for the many sins of humankind and Adam's original sin. He tasted death there; however, he arose again through his great power to help human kind. He then rose up into the heavens. From there he will hasten back into the earth to seek out the human race on the day of judgement, the Lord himself, the Almighty God, and his angels with him, when he who has the power of judgement wants to judge each and everyone according as he has deserved in this transitory life. Nor may any one be unafraid before the word that the Ruler speaks. He will ask before the many, "Where is the man who, for the name of the Lord, would be willing to taste death as he did before on the cross?" But they will be afraid, and few will think what they may begin to say to Christ. None need be terrified who bears in his heart the best of symbols. But through the cross each soul must seek out the kingdom from the earthly way, those who intend to dwell with the Ruler.' [95-121]

I prayed then to the cross with a glad heart, with great zeal, when I was alone. My spirit was inspired to set out on the way forth; I have endured in all many times of longing. It is now the hope of my life that I may seek out the cross of victory alone more often than all men, to honour it well. The desire for that is great in my heart, and my hope for protection is directed to the cross. I have few powerful friends in the world, but they have departed from here, from worldly joys; they have sought the King of Glory. [122-133]

135 lifiap nu on heofenum mid Heahfædere,
 wuniap on wuldre; and ic wene me
 daga gehwylce hwæne me Dryhtnes rod,
 þe ic her on eorðan ær sceawode,
 on pysson lænan life gefetige,
 140 and me þonne gebringe þær is blis mycel,
 dream on heofonum, þær is Dryhtnes folc
 geseted to symle, þær is singal blis;
 and me þonne asette þær ic syþþan mot
 wunian on wuldre, well mid þam halgum
 dreames brucan. Si me Dryhten freond,
 145 se ðe her on eorðan ær browode
 on þam gealgtreowe for guman synnum;
 he us onlȳsde, and us lif forgeaf,
 heofonlicne ham. Hilt was geniwad
 mid bledum and mid blisse, þam þe þær bryne þolodan.
 150 Se Sunu wæs sigorfæst on þam siðfate,
 mihtig and spedig, þa he mid manigeo com,
 gasta weorode, on Godes rice,
 Anwealda ælmihtig, englum to blisse
 and eallum ðam halgum þam þe in heofonum ær
 155 wunodon on wuldre, þa heora Wealdend cwom,
 ælmihtig God, þær his eðel wæs.

They live now in Heaven with God the Father (*Heahfædere*) and dwell in glory. And for myself, I look forward each day to the time when the cross of the Lord which I saw here on earth before will fetch me in this transitory life, and will bring me to where there is great bliss, joy in the heavens, where the people of the Lord are set at a feast, where there is everlasting bliss. May he then set me where I may afterwards dwell in glory and experience joy with the saints. May the Lord be a friend to me, he who before suffered here on the earth on the gallows-tree for the sins of man. He redeemed us and gave us life and a heavenly home. Hope was renewed with joy and bliss for those who endured the fire of Hell. The Son was victorious on that expedition, mighty and successful, when he came with the multitude, the company of spirits, into the kingdom of God, the almighty Ruler, to the angels in bliss and to all the saints who dwelled before in glory, when their Ruler came, Almighty God, to where his homeland (*eðel*) was. [134-56]

THE DREAM OF THE ROOD

Editions

- Michael Swanton, ed., *The Dream of the Rood* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970; rpt. 1978, and frequently reprinted).
[This edition contains useful introductory material and summaries of scholarship on the text. The textual notes are also helpful.]

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THE DREAM OF THE ROOD: ANALOGUES

1. Pseudo-Augustine, *Sermon IV*

Then Jesus came to the tree from which death's laws had sprung. When He ascended this citadel of sin, He brought down the keystone of the enemy's power. The tree, which had formerly been the mother and source of torments, unknowingly received the Just Man. It pierces and afflicts Him. He is not guilty and yet His punishment is savage. O (Satan), cruelest of murderers, you have lost the props of your cause. The Cross itself cries out against you; the very instrument of death and pain rejects you. 'I do not recognize that the man I punish is a criminal', the Cross says. 'These apples are not of my seed; this man is not mine. You are deceived, for you graft alien fruit onto me. He derives nothing from me. Why does He hang upon me? I see only the image of my apples' shape, for I do not recognize my native poison in Him.' Then the Man -- strong in battle, righteous on the gibbet and innocent in the hostile torment -- crushed the horns of sin with His spotless hands. When He fastens Himself completely to the wood, He blunts death's sting and kills the sin which a tree created. Then the blood, pouring from His side, washed away whatever sin had earlier stained; shining from its sullied mesh of branches, the Cross beamed forth radiantly. The innocent blood ran through the wood's fibres, once the instrument of punishment and suffering. With this medicinal blood the fibres in turn prepare the sacraments of salvation, where previously they had provided death's food for those about to live.

2. from the liturgy for the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

V. The sign of the Cross shall be in the heavens. R. When the Lord shall come to judge.

Ant. O Cross more splendid than all the stars, honoured throughout the world, deeply loved by men, holiest of all things: you alone were worthy to bear the price of the world's ransom. O sweet wood, O sweet nails, that held so sweet a burden: save this flock gathered today to sing your praises.

Hymn Tell, my tongue, of the victory gained in glorious conflict, and sing a triumphal song about the trophy of the Cross, telling how man's Redeemer offered His life and thus won the day. The Creator in grief at the harm done to the first man when, by eating of the fatal apple, he fell headlong to death, Himself at that moment marked a tree to undo the harm done by a tree.

Hymn Faithful Cross, tree that is alone in its glory among all other trees; no forest ever yielded its equal in leaf, flower and fruit. Loving nails and loving wood bear a loving burden.

Hymn The standards of the King appear, the mystery of the Cross shines out in glory, the Cross on which Life suffered death and by that death gave back life to us. Tree of dazzling beauty, adorned with the purple of the King's blood, and chosen from a stock worthy to bear limbs so sacred. How favoured the tree on whose branches hung the ransom for the world....