

The Dream of the Rood and the Practice of Penitential Meditation

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The remains of poetry composed in Old English, that is, in the language of the Anglo-Saxons from the fifth through the eleventh centuries, are rather meager, amounting to less than two hundred poems of various genres, including some ninety-five metrical riddles. Most famous among them, of course, is *Beowulf*, a heroic poem of 3182 alliterative lines. Though there are other Old English heroic poems, such as *The Battle of Maldon* and *The Battle of Brunanburh*, most of the extant Old English poetry is of a religious or spiritual nature, including Scriptural poetry, saints' lives, liturgical prayers, homiletic, wisdom, elegiac and other lyric poetry. One of the more beautiful, moving, and distinctively Germanic of these religious poems is *The Dream of the Rood*, in which Christ in His passion and death is depicted as a heroic lord doing battle against the forces of evil, and His disciples like a comitatus who mourn the fall of their king. (1)

The Dream of the Rood is an Anglo-Saxon dream-vision (2) found on folios 104 *verso* through 106 *verso* of the Vercelli Book. The Vercelli Book is Codex CXVII of the cathedral library in Vercelli in northern Italy, on the ancient pilgrimage route from northwestern Europe to Rome. The codex may be described as an anthology of Old English verse and prose on religious and spiritual topics, with an emphasis on penitential and eschatological themes. Besides *The Dream of the Rood*, the Vercelli codex contains five other poems in Old English—*Andreas* and *Elene* (saints' lives), *Fates of the Apostles*, "Soul and Body I," and "Homiletic Fragment I"—along with twenty-three homilies and a prose *Life of St. Guthlac*, also in Old English. (3) The codex is dated to the last quarter of the tenth century and may have been left at Vercelli by an Anglo-Saxon pilgrim on his way to Rome, perhaps at the turn of the first millennium.

Most of the extant Old English poems are unique and are found in one of only five manuscript collections. (4) One exception is *The Dream of the Rood*, for it has the unique honor among Old English poems of having some dozen or so of its lines inscribed in runes on the early eighth-century Ruthwell Cross near Dumfries in Scotland. Though the exact relationship of the Ruthwell runic inscription to the Vercelli poem is disputed, it would indicate at least that a version of the poem existed some two centuries before it was written down in the Vercelli Book. (5)

One remarkable aspect of this dream-vision is that the cross or "rood" on which Our Savior died is given voice in what rhetoricians call *prosopopoeia*, an inanimate object speaking as if it were human. Just as a bejewelled cross of the Early Middle Ages (less commonly than as a crucifix) stood as an object of veneration and a vehicle for meditation on the passion and death of Christ, so the Rood of the poem both describes the Passion from a privileged perspective and, through verbal echoing, progressively identifies itself with the sufferings of Christ, leading the dreamer-visionary also to identify himself with both the Cross and, by contrast, with Christ. (6)

The speech of the Rood is framed by the narration of the dreamer, who, we should note, first looks upon the vision of the Cross appearing in the sky with fear and trepidation. The reason for that apprehensiveness is not far to seek. First of all, the appearance of "the sign of the Son of man in heaven" (Matt. 24:30)—understood as the Cross—was a harbinger of the Last Judgment, and, according to some patristic sources, would appear at midnight and catch sinners asleep and unprepared (cp. Matt. 24:42). (7) Secondly, as the Old English poem *Christ III* and Vercelli

Homily II asserted, on the Last Day the Cross would appear glorious to those who were to be saved, but would appear as the blood-soaked instrument of torture to those who were to be damned. In *The Dream of the Rood* the Cross appears first one way and then the other to the dreamer, placing him in fearful suspense.

In her analysis of the dream frame and verbal echoes in *The Dream of the Rood*, Constance B. Heatt notes that the Old English poem, unlike later medieval dream-visions, indeed, unlike the story of Cædmon recorded by Bede, seems to lack any indication of the circumstantial or psychological motivation for the vision: “In the *Dream of the Rood*, the poet gives no indication of who he was, what he was doing before he had the dream, why he in particular should have had the dream, or any information which might bear on the Dream’s cause—or if he did we have lost the clue.” (8)

Nevertheless, there indeed may be some clues left in the poem itself as well as in the historical and iconographic context of the Ruthwell Cross that point towards a possible origin of the visionary experience the poem describes. To investigate one possibility is the purpose of this paper.

It is widely agreed that the monument on which is found the runic inscription of lines from *The Dream of the Rood* dates from the age of Bede and is representative of the art of the Golden Age of Northumbria. Thus the Ruthwell Cross provides two basic facts about the poem: that at least a portion of the poem, recognizable as a version of the poem found in the tenth-century Vercelli Book, was already in existence in the first half of the eighth century, (9) and that the poem is associated with the Northumbrian monasticism of Lindisfarne, Melrose, Wearmouth and Jarrow, which developed a synthesis of Celtic and Roman traditions in the seventh and eighth centuries. (10)

The iconography of the Ruthwell Cross, Robert B. Burlin affirms, reflects the eremitic tradition of the Desert Fathers, an especially strong influence on Irish monasticism. Linking the iconographic evidence of the Ruthwell Cross with the Vercelli poem, Burlin considers *The Dream of the Rood* as “a literary expression of the contemplative experience,” (11) and argues for an interpretation of *The Dream of the Rood* as both an example and a celebration of the *vita contemplativa*, a circumstance that may aid in interpreting the poem. (12) Addressing himself to the milieu of *The Dream of the Rood* exclusive of the homilies and other poems in the Vercelli collection, John Fleming also gathers strong evidence corroborating the specifically monastic spirituality of the poem. The poem, Fleming maintains, is “about the monastic life, the Christian life par excellence, born of the deep spirituality of Anglo-Saxon Benedictinism.” (13)

With this spiritual and cultural context in mind, let us return to *The Dream of the Rood* itself.

The first-person narrator of the poem is generally referred to as “the Dreamer,” for by his own words (ll. 1–3) it seems that the vision was a dream he had while sleeping. Yet it is quite possible to take *swefn gemættan* in the sense of “to see a vision” and to understand *syðþan reordberend reste wunedon* (l. 3) in a contrastive sense: “While [other] men slept [I saw this!].” The ambiguity of whether the *swefen* is a dream experienced during natural sleep or as a vision experienced while waking is perhaps intentional. (14) Nora Chadwick, in her study of dreams in early European literature, notes that when “we look into early Celtic and Norse literature, and also into that of Greece and Rome, we are constantly in a state of uncertainty as to whether the supernatural experience is a dream, or a vision; whether the experience occurs, that is to say, to the subject subjectively, in his sleep, or as an objective reality.” (15)

An early testimony as to such uncertainty even in the beholder of a “dream-vision” may be found in a letter of Sulpicius Severus (A.D. 365–425), whose works were known in England from the eighth century at least, and possibly earlier through Irish sources. (16) The letter is worth quoting at length:

Sulpitius Severus to Aurelius the Deacon sendeth greeting. After you had departed from me in the morning, I was sitting alone in my cell; and there occurred to me, as often happens, that hope of the future which I do cherish, along with a weariness of the present world, a terror of judgment, a fear of punishment, and, as a consequence, indeed as the source from which the whole train of thought had flowed, a remembrance of my sins, which had rendered me worn and miserable. Then after I had placed on my couch my limbs fatigued with the anguish of my mind, sleep crept upon me, as frequently happens from melancholy; and such sleep, as it is always somewhat light and uncertain in morning hours, so it pervaded my members only in a hovering and doubtful manner. Thus it happens, what does not occur in a different kind of slumber, that one can feel he is dreaming while almost awake. (17)

Sulpicius follows with an account of the appearance of St. Martin of Tours to him while he was in this state of semi-wakefulness; the saint gives him his blessings and consolation before ascending into the clouds. Sulpicius subsequently hears that Martin had just died, the news of which casts him into deep sorrow and grief for the loss. But he comes to the conclusion in his letter that though he will be unable to reach the height of sanctity which Martin achieved, yet he has consolation in the hope that he may find pardon for his sins through the intercession of St. Martin on his behalf.

Important for our purpose are the following points: the meditational sequence consists of 1) a hope for the future life and 2) a weariness with this world, followed by 3) a disturbing remembrance of one’s sins, with 4) a consequent dread of the Judgment and 5) fear of punishment. This is followed by 6) a vision of a saint, who 7) provides hope for salvation through his intercession. *The Dream of the Rood* explicitly or implicitly exhibits these elements. The last two are essentially the matter of the poem, the difference between a human saint and the prosopopoeic Rood being inconsequential. However, the first five appear not as a prelude to the vision (for that prelude is not part of the poem) but as merely suggestive elements in the final third of the poem; yet they may be seen as clues to the preoccupations of the visionary prior to the onset of the vision proper.

Nora Chadwick, again, has shown that it is characteristic of Norse and Celtic dreams found in early literature that they are of a functional nature, serving as prophecies or revelations or as inspiration, and that they are further characterized by having been “deliberately cultivated or induced by an acquired technique.” Further, she suggests that the origin of this kind of dream and dream literature may be found in eastern Mediterranean mysticism, transmitted to the West through the monastic spirituality of St. Martin of Tours. (18)

If we see *The Dream of the Rood* as the record of a vision induced by an “acquired technique” of penitential meditation—meditation dwelling on the frequently conjoined motifs of the Last Judgment, the necessity of penance in this life, and the impossibility of amendment either after death or at the imminent Day of Judgment—then we may gain insight into the “psychological motivation connecting the dreamer’s waking life with the dream itself.” (19)

We find possible evidence for such a technique of penitential meditation in the Irish practice of cross-vigil (on which, see below) and in the Benedictine practice of frequent meditation on the Four Last Things, as enjoined by the *Regula Sancti Benedicti*:

Diem iudicii timere, gehennam expavescere, vitam aeternam omni concupiscentia spiritali desiderare, mortem cotidie ante oculos suspectam habere. Actus vitae suae omni hora custodire, in omni loco Deum se respicere pro certe scire.

[Live in fear of judgment day and have a great horror of hell. Yearn for everlasting life with holy desire. Day by day remind yourself that you are going to die. Hour by hour keep careful watch over all you do, aware that God's gaze is upon you, wherever you may be.] (20)

A combination of these two practices of cross-vigil and penitential meditation may be reflected in the penitential prayers recited before a cross, such as those found in British Museum MS Arundel 155, where the Cross of Christ is petitioned for salvation from sin and protection from devils, and where the crucified Christ is importuned for the grace of true repentance, forgiveness of sins, and the final grace of eternal life and the Beatific Vision.

The prayers from MS Arundel 155 offer a number of examples of a type of penitential prayer that is both meditative and petitionary in nature. (21) Perhaps the most striking of these meditative prayers are those addressing the subject of the Redemption and the mystery of the Cross. A series of six short prayers consider the steps of the Passion, Resurrection and Second Coming, each followed by an appropriate petition of a particularly penitential nature. (22) Each prayer begins, "*Domine Jesu Christe, adoro te (Eala Drihten Hælend Crist, ic geeadmede þe),*" followed by one of the following steps: in ascending the cross, wounded on the cross, placed in the sepulcher, descending into hell to release the captives, rising from the dead and ascending into heaven, and coming again in judgment. The petitions include 1) that the Cross release the penitent from the destroying angel (*fram engle sleandum*), 2) that the wounds of Christ be healing for his soul, 3) that Christ's death be his eternal life, 4) that Christ forbid that he should enter hell, 5) that Christ release him from his sins and bring him to heaven, and 6) that in His second advent Christ not enter into judgment of him as a sinner, but that before death He grant him forgiveness of all his sins.

Following this series of short prayers there is a further series of six longer prayers focusing exclusively on the Passion and the Cross. (23) Two of these prayers have titles, *Ante Crucem Domini: Oratio Sancta*, and *Oratio ad Crucem cum septem Petitionibus*, which indicate that they were to be prayed in the presence of a cross, perhaps that on or over an altar. Each of these prayers is penitential and perhaps reflects an Anglo-Saxon version of the Irish practice of cross-vigil, a form of penance which required one to stand, kneel, or lie prostrate with arms extended in the form of a cross, sometimes for hours, while reciting a number of prayers, usually the 150 Psalms. One (untitled) prayer from the Arundel MS asks:

Exaudi me, domine, prostratum coram adoranda cruce tua et tribue mihi gratiam tuam, ut merear tibi mundus assistere et placere conspectui tuo.

Gehyr me, [Drihten,] astrehtne beforan geeadmedendre rode þinre and syle me gyfe þine þæt ic geearnige þe clæne wið-standan and gelican gesihðe þinre.

[Hear me, Lord, prostrate before thy adoring cross, and grant me thy grace, that I might merit to assist Thee purely and to please thy countenance.] (24)

The stretched-out (*astrehtne*) attitude of the suppliant may indicate that the prayer was for use in cross-vigil, and its penitential aspect is clear from the immediately preceding lines:

Respice et miserer mihi misero obsessum facimorum pondere multarumque nequitiarum labe polluto. Non me derelinquere digneris, piissime pater, sed indulge, quod impie gessi.

Beseoh and gemiltsa me earmum of-settum mana mid hefe and mid magegra scylda womme besmitenum, na þu me forlætan gemedema, arfæstusta Fæder, ac forgif þæt ic arleaslice dyde.

[Behold and have mercy on me, a miserable one, beset with sins and polluted with many heavy iniquities; do not deem me worthy to be forsaken, merciful Father, but forgive that which I impiously committed.]

The role of the Cross in the Anglo-Celtic system of penance seems to be one of mediator and intercessor. The Cross is both the symbol and the instrument of salvation by which the Redemption was achieved. As the instrument of salvation, the Cross is seen as the mediator through which Christ offers salvation; as the symbol of the Redemption itself, it is seen as an intercessor for the penitent.

The eleventh Arundel prayer is a meditation on Christ stretched out on the cross (*in cruce extendisti / on rode aġenudest*) and a petition for the grace of *veram poenitentiam / soðe dædbote* and of final perseverance. (25) Another prayer, in which the Cross is seen as mediator of salvation, asks for forgiveness of all sins and protection henceforth *per vexillum sancte crucis / þurh sigebeacn haligre rode* from all the wiles of the devil, and to be led into eternal life. (26) Still others pray for salvation, liberation from sin and from the power of the devil, and eternal life *per gloriam et virtutem sancte crucis*, as well as for various other petitions for the sake of the holy, blessed, glorious, venerable, praise-worthy, and magnificent Cross of Christ. (27)

In many of these prayers the Cross is regarded almost as a person, as the greatest of the saints, through whom the salvation of Christ is vouchsafed to mankind. In view of these Anglo-Saxon prayers to the Holy Cross, whose origins may date back further than the date of their manuscript, the prosopopeia of *The Dream of the Rood* may seem less surprising.

Though cross-vigil was one of the many penances imposed by the Irish *libri poenitentiales* for specific sins, it apparently also was undertaken voluntarily by the pious, especially during Lent. (28) It involved “watching” or vigil during the night in accordance with Christ’s admonition, “Vigilate ergo (nescitis enim quando dominus domus veniat: sero, an media nocte, an galli cantu, an mane), ne, cum venerit repente, inueniat vos dormientes. Quod autem vobis dico, omnibus dico: Vigilate” (Mark 13:35-37), advice which is strongly iterated, for example, in Vercelli Homily III. (29)

Though there is no direct indication in the poem that the visionary was engaged in cross-vigil, both the vision of the Cross itself and the repetitive associations and progressive identification of the Cross with the man and both with Christ suggest the appropriateness of the

proposition. That our visionary was in cross-vigil is not an essential conclusion, but if he is seen as in a position of cruciform prostration when the vision appears, that could explain the fact that he beheld the Cross while *licgende* ‘lying’ (l. 24a). (30)

Whether we envision the Dreamer of the poem as having been in cross-vigil or not, from the prayers referred to above, and from Old English homilies and books of devotion, we may infer or surmise the matter of a penitential meditation in which he might have been engaged. Kathleen Hughes has shown some prominent examples of Irish influence on early English private prayer as found in the early ninth-century *Book of Cerne* and the late eighth-century MS BM Royal 2 A.xx, both works of private devotion. (31) Two types of prayer found in these works which derive from the Irish are the *lorica* and the confession of sin. The former is a prayer for protection and usually involves a detailed list of the parts of the body to be guarded by divine aid. In each of the manuscripts cited appear *loricae* involving the Holy Cross. A prayer found in the *Book of Cerne* is also found in the tenth-century *Regularis Concordia* as the first collect following the Penitential Psalms during the Good Friday office of the *Adoratio Crucis*. (32) As John Fleming has noted, the Old English glosses to this devotion show some semblance to *The Dream of the Rood*, (33) but that is because the prayer enumerates the steps of the act of divine redemption from Christ’s ascent onto the cross through His descent into hell, to His resurrection and second coming on the Day of Judgment. It is tempting to think that a similar devotional prayer might have formed the basis for a meditation which precipitated a mystical experience as recounted in *The Dream of the Rood*. Be that as it may, the *Cerne lorica* to the Holy Cross as well as other *loricae* and confessional prayers discussed by Hughes show strong influence from the penitentials (34) coupled with a dread of judgment, a combination which we also find in many of the Old English homilies.

A number of homilies urge meditation upon Christ’s suffering on the cross as a penitential exercise. For example, at the close of his homily *In caput ieiunii*, Ælfric urges his audience to confess their sins, amend their lives, and “*to smeagenne hu se ælmihtiga Crist his eadmodnysse cydde þaða he to cwale sealde hine sylfne for us and swa ure synna ætbræd*. (It is for us to meditate how the Almighty Christ showed forth His humility, when He gave Himself to death for us, and so took away our sins.)” (35) From this we may surmise that meditation on the Passion was a not unusual lenten penitential practice. Yet as a more proximate source for earlier Anglo-Saxon meditations, the Blickling and Vercelli homilies may be more revealing than those of Ælfric, for they represent, like the *Book of Cerne*, the kind of devotional literature which had been collected before the monastic reforms of the tenth century. (36)

Blickling Homily III (*Dominica Prima in Quadragesima*) shows that there apparently was a popular belief, possibly of Irish origin, that the Second Coming would occur at the end of Lent, when all would have had their chance to do penance:

Þa gesetton halige fæderas & godes folces lareowas þa tid þæs fæstenes foran to Cristes þrowunga, & hie sweotolice cyþdon þæt se egeslica domes dæg cymeþ on þa tid þe Godes sunu on rode galgan þrowode.

(The holy fathers and teachers of God’s people have instituted the time of this fast [i.e., Lent] before the passion of Christ [i.e., Holy Week], and they have plainly shown that the awful Doomsday shall come about the time that the Son of God suffered upon the rood-gallows.) (37)

We can well imagine that such an expectation of the Judgment may have stirred the penitential efforts of the faithful during Lent, and it might also have provided a special stimulus to the contemplative imagination in meditating on the cross, such as is enjoined by Blickling Homily VIII (*Sawle þearfe* ‘Soul’s Need’):

Us is eac mycel nedþearf þæt we geþencean hu Drihten us mid his þrowunga alesde from deofles onwalde, þa he on rode galgan stag, & his þæt deorwyrðe blod for ure hælo ageat. Forþon we sceolan weorðian þæt halige sigetacen Cristes rode & æfter fylgeon & biddon ure synna forgifnessa ealle æt somne. . . . Forðon we sceolan mid ealle mod & mægene to Gode gecyrran & don soðe bote ure yfeldæde, þonne forgifeþe us Drihten ure synna forgifnessa & ece lif æfter to þisse worolde.

(There is much need for us to bear in mind how the Lord delivered us by His passion, from the devil’s power, when he ascended the rood-tree and shed his precious blood for our salvation. Wherefore we ought to honour the holy victory-sign of Christ’s cross and follow after it and pray for forgiveness of our sins, all together. . . . Wherefore we must with all mind and might turn to God and truly repent of our evil deeds, then will the Lord give us forgiveness of our sins and eternal life after this world.) (38)

The homilist’s urging to bear in mind how Christ delivered mankind from the power of the devil through His passion, and to honor the *halige sigetacen Cristes rode*, to follow after it, and to pray for the forgiveness of our sins bears some resemblance to the Rood’s own admonition to the Dreamer of the poem, but we shall find ever closer homiletic correspondences to *The Dream of the Rood* in Vercelli Homily II on the Judgment Day.

The appearance of the Holy Rood in the first twenty-three lines of the poem has unmistakable eschatological elements associated with chapters 24 and 25 of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, as well as with the Apocalypse of St. John. The visionary’s initial description of the Rood as the *sylicre treow / on lyft læden* ‘a most wondrous tree / born aloft in the air’ (4b–5a), seems to correspond to Matt. 24:30, “And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven,” which would precede the second coming of Christ. The Rood is a *beacen* ‘sign,’ the harbinger of the Son of man; it is the *beama beorhtost* ‘brightest of beams’ beheld by all creation: “For as lightning cometh out of the east, and appeareth even into the west: so shall also the coming of the Son of man be” (Matt. 24:27).

The Rood is accompanied in the vision by troops of angels and is beheld by the saints, *haligre gastas / men ofer molden*, which is reminiscent of Matt. 24:31: “And he shall send his angels with a trumpet, and a great voice: and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from the farthest parts of the heavens to the utmost bounds of them.” The fact that the vision comes *to midre nihte / syðþan reordberend reste wunedon*, ‘in the middle of the night / while speech-bearers dwelt at rest’ (2a–3), is further suggestive of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Matt. 25:1–13) who represent mankind awaiting the return of Christ, the Bridegroom. Waiting for the bridegroom, they fell asleep but were awakened *at midnight* by a cry announcing, “Behold the bridegroom cometh, go ye forth to meet him.” The point of the parable is that not all will be prepared for the second advent of Christ, and when He comes, it will be too late to prepare oneself. For those who are not prepared, for those still in their sins, as

the homilies are anxious to remind us, it will be too late for amendment. (39) And the first reference the visionary makes to himself after he begins the description of the vision is to his sinful condition: “*ic synnum fah, / forwunded mid wommum*” (13b–14a).

When the visionary sees the gem-covered and gold-bedecked Rood begin to bleed on its right side, he is driven through with sorrow and fear:

*Eall ic wæs mid sorgum gedrefed.
Forht ic wæs for þære fægran gesyhðe. Geseah ic þæt fuse beacen
wenden wædum ond bleom; hwilum hit wæs mid wætan bestemed,
beswyled mid swates gange, Hwilum mid since gegyrwed. (20b–23)*

(I was struck completely through with sorrows.
Fearful I was before that fair vision. I saw that bright beacon
change clothing and colors. Awhile it was with wetness drenched,
soaked with the flow of blood, awhile with treasure bedecked.)

These particulars, except for the fear and sorrow of men on the Last Day—“and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn” (Matt. 24:30; cf. Apoc. 1:7)—are not found in the Gospel prophecy, though Vercelli Homily II provides an analogue and an explanation of the significance of the bleeding Rood. There the Vercelli homilist says that “*on þæm dæge bið Dryhtnes rod blode flowende betweox wolcnum,*” followed by the appearance of Christ: “*Þonne bið seo wund gesewen þam firenfullum, ond þam soð-fæstan he bið hal gesewen.*” (“On that day the Lord’s rood will flow with blood between the clouds. . . . Then the wounded [Christ] will be seen by the wicked, and to the righteous He will appear whole.”) (40) In the homily it is Christ who appears whole to the righteous while appearing wounded with the marks of crucifixion to the sinful, but with the identifications of Christ and the Cross in *The Dream of the Rood*, the significance of the varied appearance in each is the same. Furthermore, the reaction of the sinful on the last day will be similar to the visionary’s initial reaction to the bleeding Rood: “*In þam dæge þa sinfullan heofiaþ ond wepaþ, forþan hie ær noldon hira synna betan, ac hie sarige aswæmaþ ond in susle afeallað.*” (“On that day the sinful will lament and weep, because they earlier did not wish to atone for their sins, but they sorrowfully shall grieve and rot in torment.”) (41)

Many of these same particulars appear in *Christ III* in the Exeter Book: it is at midnight, when careless men are *slæpe gebundne* ‘bound in sleep,’ that the Great Day arrives and men are drenched in remorse for their sins, when it is too late for penance. Lines 1061–1114 of *Christ III* describe the appearance of the Holy Rood at Doomsday. It will appear in the heavens, and to the consternation of sinful men it will drip with blood, yet shine like the sun. The description closely parallels that of the *Dream* at certain points, and I believe the penitential doctrine implicit in *The Dream of the Rood* becomes clear when we compare it with the explicit moralizing in *Christ III*:

*Þær him sylfe geseoð sorga mæste,
synfa men, sarigferðe.
Ne bið him to are þæt þær fore ellþeodum
usses dryhtnes rod onweard stondeð,
beacna beorhtast, blode bisteded,
heofoncyniges hlutran dreore,
biseon mid swate þæt ofer side gesceaft*

*scire scineð. Sceadu beoð bidyrned
 þær se leohta beam leodum byrhteð.
 Þæt þeah to teonum geteod weorþeð,
 þeodum to þrea, þam þe þonc gode
 womwyrcente wita ne cuþun
 þæs he on þone halgan beam ahongen wæs
 fore mancynnes manforwyhrtu,
 þær he leoflice lifes ceapode,
 þeoden mancynne, on þam dæge
 mid þy weorðe, þe no wom dyde
 his lichoma leahtra firena,
 mid þy usic alysde. Þæs he eftlean wile
 þurh eorneste ealles gemonian,
 ðonne sio reade rod ofer ealle
 swegle scineð on þære sunnan gylde. (42)*

(There men stained with sin, sad at heart, shall see for themselves the greatest of sorrows. It will not be as a grace to them that there Our Lord's Rood, the brightest of beacons, will stand in the presence of all nations, bedewed with blood, the bright gore of the King of Heaven, drenched with blood that shines brightly over the wide creation. Shadows will be hidden where the resplendent tree shall illuminate the peoples. Yet that shall be decreed as afflictions, as punishments to peoples, to workers of evil who did not give thanks to God for [His] sufferings, because He was hanged on that holy beam for the sins of mankind, where He, the Lord of mankind, dearly bought [our] life on that day by the ransom of His body—which did no evil or transgression of sins—whereby He redeemed us. For that He will exact compensation with severity when the red Rood shall brilliantly shine over all in place of the sun.)

From this and from the parallel description of Judgment Day in the Vercelli homily we see that the vision of the Rood is definitely eschatological and apocalyptic. The fear which he feels is due to his consciousness of his sinful condition and his awareness that the appearance of the Holy Rood in the sky may signal the Day of Judgment, for which he does not feel prepared. Therefore, prostrate he beholds the vision *hreowcearig* (25a), which may be interpreted as “sorrowful, with a disposition towards penance,” as I have argued elsewhere. (43)

What we have seen so far is that the opening of *The Dream of the Rood* presents us with an imagined situation which contains in a dream-like form the major elements of a penitential meditation on *domes dæge*, such as might have been derived from Scripture, from liturgical and devotional prayers, and from homilies. The appearance of the Cross at midnight seems to herald the Second Coming, and the visionary experiences the collective vision of mankind on the Last Day; with the sinful he sees the Rood drenched with blood, and with the righteous he sees the glorified symbol of the redemption. He is struck with fear and contrition, but had the Second Coming actually transpired his contrition would not have availed. But the vision is not the Second Coming; it is a prophecy and a forewarning. In lines 9b–12 the scene seems to become frozen, iconographical; the appearance of the Holy Rood and the heavenly hosts, which the living would only expect to see as harbingers of the Last Judgment, becomes static. The angels

are not blowing their trumpets; the elect are not being gathered from the four corners of the earth; they merely behold and contemplate the *signum* of salvation.

The visionary Dreamer, charged with a sense of his own sinfulness and of imminent judgment, finds, as it were, a stay of execution and the grace of mystical disclosure of the meaning of the Cross revealed by supernatural speech. Thus, in a state of contrition, the foundation of true penance, the Dreamer hears the story of the Cross.

Through the device of verbal echo, the poem identifies the Cross with the Dreamer and both connects and contrasts each with Christ. (44) The Cross is the point of meeting between the God-man and suffering, sinful humanity. The Cross becomes symbolic both of the human condition and its promise of future glory. At another and most important level, the Cross is the symbolic key to man's salvation both through the historical crucifixion of Christ and the crucifixion of the old man (cf. Romans 6:6 and Matt. 10:38–39) in the penitential preparation for the life of the world to come.

In relating its former history of having been hewn down in the forest by *strange feondas* and converted into an instrument of death, the Rood reflects the patristic commonplace of the fall of man through a tree. The prosopopoeic Rood invites us to see it as representing human nature, made an instrument of death through the machinations of fiends and the original sin in the forest of Eden. But the Lord of mankind, desiring to free men from death, ascended the rood-tree—assumed human nature—and *ongyrede hine*, stripped Himself of heavenly glory, that He might adorn human nature with greater glory than it had yet known: *gegyred mid golde* and *mid since gegyrwed* (16a, 23b).

In that cosmic act of salvation, mankind as a whole had yet to look on painfully while all creation wept the death of the King. The Rood, like the visionary, *wæs mid sorgum gedrefed* (59a, 20b), driven through with the sorrows of our sinful nature. The Rood declared, “*Eall ic wæs mid strælum forwundod*” (62b), just as the visionary was *forwunded mid wommum* (14a). The arrows with which the Cross and man are wounded are those which Vercelli Homily IV tells us are the sins of men: “*Ponne hæfð þæt diofol geworht bogan ond stræla. Se boga bið geworht of ofer-mettum; ond þa stræla bið swa manigra cynna, swaswa mannes synna bið.*” (“Then has the devil made bows and arrows. The bow is made of pride; and the arrows are of as many kinds as the sins of men are.”) (45) And Christ, the Ruler of victories, was placed in the tomb *mæte weorode* (69b), just as each man must face ultimate responsibility for his life alone at death and judgment. The Rood too was buried until *dryhtnes þegnas* took it and adorned it with gold and silver, thus symbolizing the death that all men must suffer and the resurrection unto glory which the Lord's faithful are to expect.

In its peroration, the Rood relates that while it was once a sign of torture and most loathsome to people, now it is the glorious sign of the true way of healing for men:

Is nu sæl cumen
þæt me weorðiað wide on side
menn ofer moldan ond eall þeos mære gesceaft,
gebiddaþ him to þyssum beacne. On me Bearn Godes
þrowode hwile. Forþan ic þrymfæst nu
hlifige under heofenum, ond ic hælan mæg
æghwylcne anra þara þe him bið egesa to me. (80b–86)

(But now the time is come
that I am honored far and wide
by men over the earth and all this glorious creation;
they reverence this sign. On me the Son of God
suffered awhile. Therefore I, now glorious,
tower under the heavens, and I am able to heal
everyone of those who are in awe of me.)

The healing which the Rood offers is, of course, the healing of the wounds of sin. Thus the Cross becomes a symbol of the penitential life—the way of renunciation and mortification by which the wounds of the soul are healed and the spirit is prepared for eternal glory, as the Cross was raised from gallows to the sign of glory and as the Virgin was elevated from lowly station to that of Queen of Heaven (cf. 87–94).

Thus the vision of the Cross teaches the Dreamer that though the way of the cross entails that radical submission of self to present suffering—as the Rood had submitted to the will of the Lord though it involved accepting His suffering as its own—it offers hope of the greatest of glories. It teaches, in sum, what the penitential homilies on the Last Judgment teach, what the devotional prayers to the Cross implore, and what Anglo-Celtic monks and hermits practiced.

To return to the questions of who the Dreamer was, what he was doing before he had the vision, and why he in particular should have had the vision, we may now attempt a partial answer. The spirituality of the poem is so thoroughly monastic that we must assume the persona of the Dreamer to be a monk. This assumption would also help provide an answer to the question of what he was doing before he saw the vision. The Anglo-Celtic monastic practice of penitential vigil in prayer and meditation on the Four Last Things would be sufficient to explain the matter of the vision, especially if the meditational vigil were performed in the presence of a physical cross, such as a jeweled altar cross of the Carolingian period or a high cross like that of Ruthwell. An acquired technique for inducing a dream-vision after the manner of Sulpicius Severus's seven stages would be consonant with such meditation, and whether we regard the *Dream* as portraying a true mystical experience “recollected in tranquillity,” or as a purely literary product of the mystical imagination, the results of the two could be indistinguishable.

Though we can never know precisely why this man and not another had the grace of an apocalyptic vision (they come to sinners as well as to saints), the practice of penitential vigil and meditation as affording an opportunity for seeing things hidden to men “bound by sleep” is perhaps as close as we can come to answering the question of “why?” But see below.

On this basis we can imagine the “Dreamer” perhaps nearly in a trance meditating on the cross and on his own sins, for which he does tearful penance so that he will not be found in mortal sin at the Last Judgment. Suddenly, in the middle of the night while he alone continues his vigil, it seems that the Rood appears to him like “the sign of the Son of man in heaven.” The Rood is glorious, but the Dreamer is unprepared to receive it and to stand free from sin before the King of Glory, whose harbinger the Rood is. He realizes himself still to be “*synnum fah / forwundon mid wommum*” (13b–14a), and therefore he is driven through with sorrow and fearful before the fair sight. He then sees the Rood transformed before his eyes into the bloody instrument of crucifixion, and than again changing in appearance to the jeweled Cross of triumph. He is perhaps aware that the one would appear to the sinners at the Judgment, while the other would appear to the righteous; seeing both aspects he lies contemplating the mystery in a state of sorrowful contrition until at length the Rood speaks.

The message of the Rood is one of painful submission and of glorious exaltation. Through verbal echoes and images of wounding and sorrow and helplessness, the poet conveys the message of the necessity for men to join in the Rood's identification with the suffering Christ in order to find healing and salvation. The Rood teaches that Christ's suffering was in order to redeem mankind, to "loose" him from his sins (41b, 99–100), and that now healing is available through His holy Rood (85b ff.). The Cross comes to the Dreamer to reinforce the doctrine of judgment according to one's works in this life (103b–109), but especially to provide hope for the attainment of glory through penance. The Rood relates that Christ will ask men which of them would suffer death for His Name's sake, though at that final hour few will know what to reply, and they shall be greatly afraid (110–116). However, the Rood offers hope to the Dreamer:

*Ne þearf ðær þonne ænig anforht wesan
 þe him ær in breostum bereð beacna selest
 ac ðurh ða rode sceal rice gesecan
 of eorðwege æghwylc sawl,
 seo þe mid wealdende wunian þenceþ. (117–121)*

(There then none need be very afraid
 who bears in his breast the best of signs.
 But through the Rood must the kingdom seek
 away from the earth each soul,
 who with the Ruler expects to dwell.)

The *beacna selest* 'best of signs or emblems' possibly represents the chrism of baptism, through which one is cleansed of original and all actual sins. In order to maintain the pristine purity of baptism, however, one must daily take up the cross of penance (the Irish "blue martyrdom" (46)), as Christ seems to intimate in Luke 9:23, "And he said to all: If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me." This is the penitential asceticism of the Desert Fathers and of Celtic and Northumbrian monasticism. Seeking the Kingdom of *eorðwege* 'away from the earth' implies in this tradition turning from worldly ways, rejecting the way of the world. The Rood confirms this way of penitential renunciation as the way of salvation, and the Dreamer's sorrow is turned into joy as he returns with greater zeal to the course in which he had already embarked. This seems evident from his words:

*Gebæd ic me þa to þan beame bliðe mode,
 elne mycle, þær ic ana wæs
 mæte werede. Wæs modsefa
 afysed on forðwege; feala ealra gebad
 langung-hwila. Ic me nu lifes hyht
 þæt ic þone sigebeam secan mote
 ana oftor þonne ealle men,
 well weorpian. (122–129a)*

(Then I prayed to that Cross with glad heart
 and great zeal, there where I was alone

with little company. My spirit was
 urged forth; I experienced many
 periods of longing. Now is the hope of my life
 that I that victory-beam might seek
 alone more often than all other men,
 to revere it well.)

Lines 124b–126a present some difficulty of interpretation, which my translation does little to resolve. If we translate with C.W. Kennedy, “My soul was fain of death. I had endured / Many an hour of longing,” (47) the Dreamer is seen as contrasting his previous state of *accidia* (48) and near despair with his new zeal and hope which the vision of the Rood has given him. If, however, we see those lines as part of a parallel series of simple preterites beginning in line 122: *gebæd ic; ic ana wæs; Wæs modsefa; gebad*—then they should be interpreted as part of a description of his present condition, and may be freely translated, “My spirit was made eager for the course and often experienced periods of yearning [i.e., spiritual *Sehnsucht*].” I prefer the former, contrastive, interpretation, however, for it accords well with the common experience of contemplatives: “spiritual dryness” or “the dark night of the soul,” a temptation to despair which is only overcome by faithful endurance and submission until relieved by a renewed experience of grace.

The vision of the Rood, then, has given the Dreamer hope of salvation through acts of penitential asceticism in union with the sufferings of Christ. Through the intermediary of the Cross, the sign of suffering and atonement, the penitent gains an identification with the Savior and partakes in His salvific merits. The penitent has been taught by the Rood that by bearing in his breast the spirit of penance he shall be safe on that Day of Judgment and shall be brought by the Holy Cross, which he viewed here on earth, to the glory of the heavenly *patria* where there is eternal beatitude with Christ and His saints (135b–144a). Meanwhile, with greater eagerness and zeal he will continue to “seek the cross” in penitential devotion alone in seclusion from men. This declared desire to seek the cross in solitude—like Christ in the hour of His death, *ana . . . mæte werede*—is in keeping with the tradition of spiritual advancement from the life of the *coenobium* to the life of a solitary hermit or anchorite, to become a *monachus* in the strict original sense.

We see, then, that *The Dream of the Rood* is a reflection of the spiritual and penitential values of Anglo-Celtic monasticism, and that it represents both a special experience and the traditional message of penitential meditation: to honor the cross of Christ with fruits worthy of penance is to gain healing for the wounds of sin, protection from the severity of Christ’s judgment, and the reward of eternal salvation. Throughout the poem we find the images of sorrow, wounds, infirmity, and bondage, and the eschatological orientation which is characteristic of the Old English penitential motif. At the close the Dreamer contrasts the glories and bliss of heaven with this *lænan life* ‘fleeting, transitory life,’ and makes the plea of the penitent and the proclamation of the redeemed in the person of the mystic:

*Si me Dryhten freond,
 se ðe her on eorþan ær þrowode
 on þam gealgtreowe for guman synnum.
 He us onlysde ond us lif forgeaf,*

*heofonlicne ham. Hiht wæs geniwad
mid bledum on mid blisse þam þe þær bryne þolodan. (144b–149)*

(May the Lord be a friend to me,
He who here on earth formerly suffered
on that gallows-tree for the sins of men.
He released us and granted us life,
a heavenly home. Hope was renewed
with blessedness and bliss for those who there endured the burning.)

That hope of salvation through the grace of Christ was at once the rationale for undertaking the penitential discipline and the result of its healing medicine—the soul’s need. Though the Irish and Anglo-Saxon modes of penance often seem barbarous to moderns, it is difficult to gainsay the laconic logic of a Drythelm—“I have seen greater austerity” (49)—or the sublime vision of the Dreamer. For the Anglo-Saxon monk the burden of the cross—the life of penitential reparation—meant a glorious victory over sin and death with Christ and eternal bliss with the angels and saints in the presence of Almighty God, *þær his eðel wæs*. With such a faith and such a hope, who would not attend to his soul’s need, the while he may and can?

Gesihð Rodes (50)

Hwæt! Ic swefna cyst secgan wylle
hwæt me gemætte to midre nihte,
syþþan reordberend reste wunedon. (51)

þuhte me þæt ic gesawe syllicre treow
on lyft lædan, leohte bewunden, 5
beame beorhtost. Eall þæt beacen wæs
begoten mid golde; gimmas stodon
fægere æt foldan sceatum; swylce þær fife wæron
uppe on þam eaxlgespanne. Beheoldon þær engel Dryhtnes ealle,
fægere þurh forðgesceaft. Ne wæs ðær huru fracodes gealga. 10

Ac hine þær beheolden halige gastas
men ofer moldan ond eall þeos mære gesceaft.
Syllic wæs se sigebeam, ond ic synnum fah,
forwunded mid wommum. Geseah ic wuldres treow,
wædum geweorðode, wynnum scinan, 15
gegyred mid golde; gimmas hæfdon
bewrigene weorðlice wealdes treow. (52)

Hwæðre ic þurh þæt gold ongytan meahte
earmra ærgewin, þæt hit ærest ongan 20
swætan on þa swiðran healfe. Eall ic wæs mid sorgum gedrefed.
Forht ic wæs for þære fæggran gesyhðe. Geseah ic þæt fuse beacen
wenden wædum ond bleom; hwilum hit wæs mid wætan bestemed,
beswyled mid swates gange, hwilum mid since gegyrwed.
Hwæðre ic þær licgende lange hwile

beheold hreowcearig Hælendes treow, 25
oððæt ic gehyrde þæt hit hleoðrode.
Ongan þa word sprecan wudu selesta:

“Þæt wæs geare iu, (ic þæt gyta geman),
þæt ic wæs aheawen holtas on ende,
astyred of stefne minum. Genamen me ðær strange feondas, 30
geworhton him þær to wæfersyne, heton me heora wergas hebban.
Bæron me ðær beornas on eaxlum, oððæt hie me on beorg asetton,
gefæstnodon me þær feondas genoge. Geseah ic þa Frean mancynnes
efstan elne mycle þæt he me wolde on gestigan.
Þær ic þa ne dorste ofer Dryhtnes word 35
bugan oððe berstan, þa ic bifian geseah
eorðan sceatas. Ealle ic mihte
feondas gefyllan, hwæðre ic fæste stod.
Ongyrede hime þa geong hæleð, (þæt wæs God ælmihtig,)
strang ond stiðmod; gestah he on gealgan heanne, 40
modig on manigra gesyhðe, þa he wolde mancyn lisan.
Bifode ic þa me se beorn ymbclypte; ne dorste ic hwæðre bugan to eorðan,
feallen to foldan sceatum. Ac ic sceolde fæste standan.
Rod wæs ic aræred. Ahof ic ricne Cyning,
heofona Hlaford; hyldan me ne dorste. 45
Þurhdrifan hi me mid deorcan næglum; on me syndon þa dolg gesiene,
opene inwid-hlemmas. Ne dorste ic hira nænigum sceððan.
Bysmeredon hie unc butu ætgædere. Eall ic wæs mid blode bestemed,
begoten of þæs guman sidan, siððan he hæfde his gast onsended.

“Feala ic on þam beorge gebiden hæbbe 50
wraðra wyrda. Geseah ic weruda God
þearle þenian. Þystro hæfdon
bewrigen mid wolcnum Wealdendes hræw,
wann under wolcnum. Weop eal gesceaft, 55
cwiðdon 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,
eadmod elne mycle. Genamon hie þær ælmihtigne God, 60
ahofon hine of ðam hefian 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 hie ðær heofenes Dryhten, ond he hine ðær hwile reste,
meðe æfter ðam miclan gewinne. Ongunnon him þa moldærn wyrcan 65
beornas on banan gesyhðe; curfon hie ðæt of beorhtan stane,
gesetton hie ðæron sigora Wealdend. Ongunnon him þa sorhleod galan,

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

“Hwæðere we ðær hreotende gode hwile 70
stodon on staðole, syððan stefn up gewat
hilderinca; hræw colode,
fæger feorgbold. Þa us man fyllan ongan
ealle to eorðan; ðæt wæs egeslic wyrd!
Bedealf us man on deoþan seape. Hwæðre me þær Dryhtnes þegnas 75
freondas gefrunon, (54)
gyredon me golde ond seolfre.

“Nu ðu miht gehyran, hæleð min se leofa,
þæt ic bealu-wara weorc gebiden hæbbe,
sarra sorga. Is nu sæl cumen 80
þæt me weorðiað wide on side
menn ofer moldan ond eall þeos mære gesceaft,
gebiddaþ him to þyssum beacne. On me Bearn Godes
þrowode hwile. Forþan ic þrymfæst nu
hlifige under heofenum, ond ic hælan mæg 85
æghwylcne anra þara þe him bið egesa to me.
Iu ic wæs geworden wita heardost,
leodum laðost, ærþan ic him lifes weg
rihtne gerymde, reordberendum.

Hwæt, me þa geweorðode wuldres Ealdor 90
ofer holmwudu, heofonrices Weard,
swylce swa he his modor eac, Marian sylfe,
æلميhtig God, for ealle menn
geweorðode ofer eall wifa cynn.

“Nu ic þe hate, hæleð min se leofa, 95
þæt ðu þas gesyhðe secge mannum,
onwreoh wordum þæt hit is wuldres beam,
se ðe æلميhtig God on þrowode
for mancynnes manegum synnum
and Adomes ealdgewyrhtum. 100

Deað he þær byrigde; hwæðere eft Dryhten aras
mid his miclan mihte mannum to helpe.
He ða on heofenas astag. Hider eft fundað
on þysne middangeard mancynn secan
on domdæge Dryhten sylfa, 105
æلميhtig God, ond his englas mid,
þæt he þonne wile deman, se ah domes geweald,
anra gehwylcum swa he him ærur her
on þyssum lænum life geearnaþ.

Ne mæg þær ænig unforht wesan 110
for þam worde þe se Wealdend cwyð.
Frined he for þære mænige hwær se man sie,
se ðe for Dryhtnes naman deaðes wolde

biteres onbyrgan, swa he ær on ðam beame dyde.
 Ac hie þonne forhtiað, ond fea þencap 115
 hwæt hie to Criste cweðan onginnen.
 Ne þearf ðær þonne ænig unforht wesan
 þe him ær in breostum bereð beacne selest.
 Ac ðurh ða rode sceal rice gesecan
 of eorðwege æghwylc sawl, 120
 seo þe mid Wealdende wunian þenceð.”

Gebæd ic me þa to þan beame bliðe mode,
 elne mycle, þær ic ana wæs
 mæte werede. Wæs modsefa
 afysed on forðwege; feala ealra gebad 125
 langung-hwila. Ic me nu lifes hyht
 þæt ic þone sigebeam secan mote
 ana oftor þonne ealle men,
 well weorþian. Me is willa to ðam
 mycel on mode, ond min myndbyrd is 130
 geriht to þære rode. Nah ic ricra feala
 freonda on foldan. Ac hie forð heonan
 gewiton of worulde dreamum, sohton him wuldres Cyning;
 lifiaþ nu on wuldre. Ond ic wene me 135
 daga gehwylce hwænne me Dryhtnes rod,
 þe ic her on eorðan ær sceawode,
 on þysson lænan life gefetige
 ond me þonne gebringe þær is blis mycel,
 dream on heofonum, þær is Dryhtnes folc 140
 geseted to symle, þær is singal blis;
 ond he þonne asette þær ic syþþan mot
 wunian on wuldre, well mid þam halgum
 dreames brucan. Si me Dryhten freond,
 se ðe her on eorþan ær þrowode 145
 on þam gealgtreowe for guman synnum.
 He us onlyside ond us lif forgeaf,
 heofonlicne ham. Hiht wæs geniwad
 mid bledum on mid blisse þam þe þær bryne þolodan.
 Se Sunu wæs sigorfæst on þam siðfate, 150
 mihtig ond spedig, þa he mid manigeo com,
 gasta weorode, on Godes rice,
 Anwealda ælmihtig, englum to blisse
 ond eallum ðam halgum þam þe on heofonum ær
 wunedon on wuldre, þa heora Wealdend cwom, 155
 ælmihtig God, þær his eðel wæs.

The Dream of the Rood

Listen! I intend to tell the choicest of dreams
which I dreamt in the middle of the night
while speech-bearers (53) dwelt at rest.

It seemed to me that I saw a most wondrous tree
borne aloft in the air, enveloped with light,
the brightest of beams. That beacon was completely 5
stippled with gold; gems stood
fair at the corners of the earth, five of which there were
up on the crossbeam. Beheld it there all the angels of the Lord,
fair from their creation. Nor indeed was that a criminal's gallows. 10
But there beheld it holy spirits,
men over the earth, and all this glorious creation.
Wondrous was that victory-beam, and I was stained with sins,
deeply wounded with wrongdoings. I saw the Tree of Glory,
worthily adorned, beautifully shining, 15
garnished with gold; jewels had
covered worthily the tree of the forest.
Nevertheless, through that gold I was able to perceive
the ancient strife of wretches, when it first began
to bleed on the right side. I was struck completely through with sorrows. 20
Fearful I was before that fair vision. I saw that bright beacon
change clothing and colors. Awhile it was with wetness drenched,
soaked with the flow of blood, awhile with treasure bedecked.
Yet I lying there a long while
beheld in penitent sorrow the Savior's tree, 25
until I heard that it uttered speech.
Began then to speak words the most blest of woods.

"It was years ago (I remember it yet),
that I was hewn down at the forest's edge,
removed from my trunk. There mighty enemies seized me, 30
made me there into a spectacle, ordered me to bear their criminals.
Men bore me then on their shoulders, until they set me on a hill;
fastened me there enemies enow. Then I saw the Lord of mankind
hasten with great zeal when that He would ascend me.
There I dared not then against the Lord's word 35
bow or break, when I saw trembling
the surface of the earth. I might all
the foes have felled, nevertheless I stood fast.

The young warrior stripped Himself, He who was God almighty,
strong and resolute; He ascended the high gallows, 40
bold in the sight of many, since mankind He would redeem.
I trembled when the warrior embraced me; nonetheless I dared not bow to the ground,
fall to the earth's surface, but I had to stand fast.

A cross was I raised; I lifted up the mighty King,
Lord of the heavens, to bow down I dared not. 45
They drove me through with dark nails, on me are the scars yet to be seen,
open wounds of malice. I dared not harm any of them.
They mocked us both together. I was all drenched with blood,
which gushed from the man's side after He had sent forth His spirit.

“Many on that hill have I endured 50
of cruel fates. I saw the God of hosts
violently outstretched; darkness had
covered with clouds the Ruler's corpse,
His bright radiance; shadows went forth,
wan under the welkin. Wept all creation, 55
bewailed the fall of the King. Christ was on the cross.

“Yet there eagerly from afar came men
to that Prince; I that all beheld.
Sorely was I with sorrows distressed, yet I bent to those men's hands,
humbly with great zeal. They took up there almighty God, 60
lifted Him from that heavy torment; the battle-warriors left me then
standing drenched with blood; I was all pierced through with darts.
There they laid down the limb-weary One, stood at the head of His body,
beheld there the Lord of heaven, and He rested there awhile,
tired after that great battle. They began to make a sepulcher, 65
warriors in sight of the slayer; they carved it out of bright stone;
they set therein the Lord of victories. They began to chant a dirge,
wretched in the eventide. Then they again wished to depart,
weary from that glorious Lord. He rested there with small company. (55) 70

“Nevertheless there we (56) weeping a good while 70
stood in place, after the lament rose up
of the warriors; the corpse cooled,
the fair life-seat. Then one began to fell us
all to the earth; that was a fearful fate!
We were buried in a deep pit; nevertheless the Lord's thanes found me there, 75
friends heard of me, adorned me with gold and silver.

“Now you might hear, my dear man,
that I the work of evil men have endured,
sore sorrows. But now the time is come 80
that I am honored far and wide
by men over the earth and all this glorious creation;
they reverence this sign. On me the Son of God
suffered awhile. Therefore I, now glorious,
tower under the heavens, and I am able to heal 85
everyone of those who are in awe of me.
Once I was made the most terrible of torments,
most hateful to men, before I for them the way of life

properly prepared, those bearers of speech.
 Lo, then honored me the Lord of Glory 90
 over all forest trees, the Guardian of the heavenly kingdom,
 just as He His Mother also, Mary herself,
 almighty God, for all men
 honored over all the race of women.
 “Now I command you, my dear man, 95
 that you this vision reveal to men,
 disclose with discourse that it is the Glory Tree,
 on which suffered almighty God
 for mankind’s manifold sins
 and Adam’s ancient offense. 100
 Death He there endured; nevertheless the Lord arose again
 with His great might to help mankind.
 He then ascended into heaven. Hither again He will come
 to this middle-earth to seek mankind
 on the day of judgment, the Lord himself, 105
 almighty God, with His angels,
 that He then will judge, He who possesses the power of judgment,
 each of everyone as he here earned for himself
 before in this transitory life.
 Nor may there any be unafraid 110
 of that word which the Ruler utters.
 Let him ask of the multitude where might the man be,
 who for the name of the Lord would taste
 bitter death, as He before on that beam did.
 But they they will be afraid, and few will think 115
 what they to Christ might begin to say.
 There then none need be very afraid
 who bears in his breast the best of signs.
 But through the Rood must the kingdom seek
 away from the earth each soul, 120
 who with the Ruler expects to dwell.”

Then I prayed to that Cross with glad heart
 and great zeal, there where I was alone
 with little company. My spirit was
 urged forth; I experienced many 125
 periods of longing. Now is the hope of my life
 that I that victory-beam might seek
 alone more often than all other men,
 to revere it well. My desire thereto is
 strong in spirit, and my hope of succor is 130
 directed to the Rood. I haven’t many mighty
 friends on earth. But they have gone hence,
 departed from worldly joys, sought for themselves the King of glory;

they live now in heaven with the High Father,
 dwell in glory. And I look forward 135
 each day when the Lord's Rood,
 which I here on earth formerly beheld,
 from this transitory life will deliver me
 and bring me then to where there is great bliss,
 joys in heaven, where there is the Lord's people 140
 set at the banquet, where there is unending beatitude;
 and He then will set me where afterwards I may
 dwell in glory, fully with the saints
 possess joys. May the Lord be a friend to me,
 He who here on earth formerly suffered 145
 on that gallows-tree for the sins of men.
 He released us and granted us life,
 a heavenly home. Hope was renewed
 with blessedness and bliss for those who there endured the burning. (57)
 The Son was victorious on that journey, 150
 mighty and successful, when He came with a multitude,
 troops of souls, into the Kingdom of God,
 the Ruler almighty, to the joy of angels
 and all the holy ones who in heaven before
 dwelt in glory, when their Ruler came, 155
 almighty God, where His homeland was.

NOTES:

1. The only other Germanic poem treating Christ and His disciples as if they lived within the Germanic warrior ethos is the ninth-century Old Saxon *Héliand*. See *The Heliand: The Saxon Gospel*, translated by G. Ronald Murphy, S.J. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
2. The dream-vision genre in Western literature began with Cicero's "Dream of Scipio" in Book VI of his *De republica*. The genre became widely popular in the Middle Ages, beginning with *The Dream of the Rood*. Other medieval dream-visions include the *Roman de la Rose*, Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* and *Hous of Fame*, William Langland's *Vision of Piers the Plowman*, and *Pearl* by the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, etc.
3. George Philip Krapp, introduction to *The Vercelli Book*, ed. George Philip Krapp, *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), xi–xx.
4. The five manuscripts are the Exeter Book, the Vercelli Book, the Junius Manuscript, the Paris Psalter, and the *Beowulf* manuscript. Virtually all extant Old English poetry has been published by Columbia University Press in six volumes of *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* (1931–1953).
5. The editions of *The Dream of the Rood* by Michael Swanton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970; revised ed., Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996), and the earlier but still useful one by Bruce Dickins and Alan S.C. Ross (Methuen, 1934; reprint with additions, New York: Appleton, 1966) both contain the Ruthwell runic text as well as introductory and bibliographic material on the Ruthwell Cross and related monuments.

- To my knowledge, the best treatments of the Ruthwell Cross are Vol. 5 of *The Arts in Early England*, by G. Baldwin Brown (London: Murray, 1921), and *The Ruthwell Cross: Papers from the Colloquium sponsored by the Index of Christian Art, Princeton University, 8 December 1989*, Index of Christian Art Occasional Papers I, ed. Brendan Cassidy (Princeton University Press, 1992).
6. Margaret Schlauch, "The *Dream of the Rood* as Prosopopoeia," *Essays and Studies in Honor of Carleton Brown* (Albany: New York University Press, 1940), 23–34, and Constance Hieatt, "Dream Frame and Verbal Echo in the 'Dream of the Rood,'" *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 72 (1971), 251–263.
 7. For example, St. Jerome, in his *Commentary on Matthew*, iv, 25, writes: "The tradition of the Jews is that Christ will come at midnight as at the time of the going forth from Egypt, when the Passover was celebrated, and the destroying angels came; when the Lord passed over our dwellings, and our doorposts were hallowed by the blood of the lamb. Whence also I think that the Apostolic tradition has survived, of not allowing the people to be dismissed before midnight on the vigil of Easter, in expectation of the coming of Christ. But after the hour has passed, all, with confidence of safety, celebrate the festival. Whence the psalmist also said: At midnight I will rise to give thanks to Thee, because of Thy righteous judgments [Ps. cxviii, 19]." Quoted in Pierre Batiffol, *History of the Roman Breviary*, 2, note 1. Cf. also Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, vii. 19, and St. Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, vi. 17.
 8. Constance Hieatt, "Dream Frame and Verbal Echo in the 'Dream of the Rood,'" 253.
 9. Douglas Mac Lean, "The Date of the Ruthwell Cross," in *The Ruthwell Cross: Papers from the Colloquium sponsored by the Index of Christian Art, Princeton University, 8 December 1989*, 49–70, argues for a date between 731 and 750.
 10. Peter Hunter Blair, *Northumbria in the Days of Bede* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 111–114, et passim; and P.H. Blair, *The World of Bede* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970), 100–113, 139–193.
 11. Robert B. Burlin, "The Ruthwell Cross, *The Dream of the Rood*, and the Vita Contemplativa," *Studies in Philology* 65 (1968), 33.
 12. See also Paul Meyvaert, "A New Perspective on the Ruthwell Cross: Ecclesia and Vita Monastica," in *The Ruthwell Cross: Papers from the Colloquium sponsored by the Index of Christian Art, Princeton University, 8 December 1989*, 125–129.
 13. J.V. Fleming, "*The Dream of the Rood* and Anglo-Saxon Monasticism," *Traditio* xxii (1966), 60.
 14. Macrobius, in the third chapter of his *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* (c. 400 A.D.), classifies dreams under five main types: the enigmatic dream or *somnium*, the prophetic dream or *visio*, the oracular dream or *oraculum*, the nightmare or *insomnium*, and the apparition or *visum*. Macrobius considers only the first three types as vehicles for foretelling the future. Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, translated by William Harris Stahl, *Records of Civilization, Sources and Studies*, No. XLVIII (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 87–92. Old English dream vocabulary did not admit of these fine distinctions.
 15. Nora K. Chadwick, "Dreams in Early European Literature," in *Celtic Studies*, ed. James Carney and David Greenes (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968), 33.
 16. See J.D.A. Ogilvy, *Books Known to the English, 597–1066*, Mediaeval Academy of America Publication No. 76 (Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1967),

- 242–3. Aldhelm (c. 639–709) may have been familiar with the *Epistles* of Sulpicius Severus, and perhaps his *Life of St. Martin* and *Dialogues* as well, through the Irish connections maintained at Malmesbury.
17. Epistle to the Deacon Aurelius, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. H. Wace and P. Schaff, Vol. XI (Oxford and New York: 1894; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1951), 19.
 18. Chadwick, 45–47.
 19. Hieatt, 253.
 20. *The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. Timothy Fry, O.S.B. (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1981), 4.44–49, 182, 184. An Old English version of the *Regula*, produced during the Benedictine reform of St. Dunstan and St. Æthelwold shortly before the compilation of the Vercelli Codex, reads: “*Domesdæg he [the monk] sceal simle gepæncean, and hellewitu he him sceal a ondrædan, and þæs ecean lifes he sceal mid ealre geornfulnessse girnan, and ælce dæge he him sceal deaðes wenan. His weorca he sceal giman on ælce tide, þæt þa gode sien, and he sceal gepencan, þæt he nahwer Gode dygle ne bið, ac he hine æghwær gesihþ.*” (“He [the monk] must always be mindful of the Day of Judgment, and he must always be in fear of the pains of Hell, and he must desire eternal life with all zealousness, and each day he must be in expectation of death. Of his works he must ensure that at all times they be good, and he must be mindful that he is nowhere hidden from God, but that He sees him everywhere.”) *Die Angelsächsische Prosabearbeitungen der Benediktinerregel*, ed. Arnold Schröer, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964), 17–18. The translation is my own.
 21. The prayers from BM MS Arundel 155 are in Latin with Old English interlinear glosses and were published by Holthausen, Campbell, and Logeman: Ferdinand Holthausen, “Altenglische Interlinearversionem Lateinischer Gebete und Beichten,” *Anglia*, 65 (1941), 230–254; Jackson J. Campbell, “Prayers from MS. Arundel 155,” *Anglia*, 81 (1963), 82–117; and Henri Logeman, “Anglo-Saxonica Minora, (Pt. 1),” *Anglia*, 11 (1889), 97–120, and “Anglo-Saxonica Minora, (Pt. 2),” *Anglia*, 12 (1889), 497–518.
 22. Holthausen, “Gebete und Beichten,” 232–233, prayers 4 through 9.
 23. Holthausen, “Gebete und Beichten,” 233–237, prayers 10 through 15.
 24. Holthausen, “Gebete und Beichten,” 234. The translation is my own.
 25. *Ibid.*
 26. Holthausen, “Gebete und Beichten,” 234–235.
 27. Holthausen, “Gebete und Beichten,” 235–237, prayers 13 through 15.
 28. Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), 182.
 29. *Die Vercelli-Homilien: I.–VIII. Homilie*, ed. Max Förster, Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Prosa, XII. Band (Hamburg, 1932; reprint, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964), 60–62. A modern translation of Vercelli Homily III by James Schonewiese may be found in *The Vercelli Book Homilies: Translations from the Anglo-Saxon*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991), 31–35.
 30. Cf. the glossed Latin prayer in MS Arundel 155 cited above.
 31. Kathleen Hughes, “Some Aspects of Irish Influence on Early English Private Prayer,” *Studia Celtica*, 5 (1970), 48–61.

32. *Regularis Concordia Anglica Nationis*, ed. Dom Thomas Symons (London: Nelson, 1953), 43.
33. J.V. Fleming, “*The Dream of the Rood* and Anglo-Saxon Monasticism,” *Traditio* xxii (1966), 68.
34. The Irish penitential canons were drawn up from an early period and codified in *libri poenitentiales* or penitential books for the guidance of priests in assigning appropriate penances for the salutary medicine of souls. The Anglo-Saxon Church adopted the use of *libri poenitentiales* as early as the seventh century, and Irish and Anglo-Saxon missionaries to the Continent spread their use in ensuing centuries. See *The Irish Penitentals*, ed. Ludwig Bieler and D.A. Binchy (Dublin: Institute for Advance Studies, 1963), and *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, ed. John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer (1938; reprint, New York: Octagon, 1965).
35. Ælfric, “In Caput Ieiunii (Ash-Wednesday),” *Ælfric’s Lives of the Saints*, ed. W.W. Skeat, EETS O.S. 76 and 82 (1885; reprint as one vol., London: Oxford University Press, 1966), I, 282–283.
36. See Joan Turville-Petre, “Translations of a Lost Penitential Homily,” *Traditio*, 19 (1963), 51.
37. *The Blickling Homilies*, ed. and trans. R. Morris, EETS O.S. 58, 63, 73 (1874–1880; reprint as one vol., London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 26–27.
38. *The Blickling Homilies*, ed. and trans. R. Morris, 96–99.
39. Eight out of the eighteen Blickling Homilies deal in whole or in part with the theme of penance, and, characteristically, six of these eight conjoin the theme of penance with that of Judgment Day. The Vercelli Homilies exhibit a similar emphasis on penance in preparation for the Day of Judgment.
40. *Die Vercelli-Homilien*, 44–45. The translation is my own. The five gems seen on the Rood in the *Dream* (7b–9a), probably symbolizing the five wounds of Christ, find an echo in Blickling Homily I (*Annunciatio S. Mariae*), where we are told that when Christ came “*to þæm heahsetle þære rode on þæm upstige eall ure life he getremede. He sealde his þone readen gim, þæt wæs his þæt halige blode, mid þon he us gedyde dæl-nimende þæs heofonlican rices; ond þæt geweorþeþ on domes dæge þæt he cymeþ to demenne cwicum & deadum. Þonne forhtiaþ ealle gesceafta, ge heofonware ge eorþware.*” (“He came to the throne of the rood, in the ascent of which all our lives he supported; and he gave his red gem, which was his holy blood, and thereby made us participators of the heavenly kingdom; and it shall come to pass on Doomsday that he will come to judge the quick and the dead. Then shall all creatures, both the hosts of heaven and of earth, be afraid.”) Morris, *The Blickling Homilies*, 8–11. The royal-heroic imagery of Christ’s ascent onto the rood is similar to the *Dream*’s, as well as is the mention of the gem. The associated eschatological elements are likewise similar to those in the *Dream*. The homilist’s adding that the hosts of *heaven* as well as the creatures of earth will be afraid on the last day is a rarity.
41. *Die Vercelli-Homilien*, 45. The translation is my own.
42. *Christ*, 1081–1102, in *The Exeter Book*, ed. George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records III* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 33. The prose translation is mine.
43. Robert C. Rice, “*Hreowcearig* ‘Penitent, Contrite,’” *English Language Notes*, XII, No. 4 (June 1975), 243–250.

44. Constance Hieatt, “Dream Frame and Verbal Echo in the ‘Dream of the Rood,’” 251–263.
45. *Die Vercelli-Homilien*, 103. The translation is my own.
46. Charles Plummer, in his introduction to *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, Tomus Primus (1910; reprint, Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1968), cxix, note 7, notes, “An ancient Irish homily distinguishes three kinds of martyrdom, white or bloodless, which consists in abnegation, fasting, and labour; blue martyrdom, which consists in mortification of the will, penitence, and amendment; and red, or literal martyrdom.”
47. Charles W. Kennedy, *Early English Christian Poetry* (1952; reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 96.
48. See the Additional Note to line 126 in Dickins and Ross, eds., *The Dream of the Rood*, 35. B.F. Huppé, *The Web of Words* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1970), 109, renders *langunghwila* as “times of languishing” or *taedium vitae*. For a study of the meaning of *accidia* or *acedia* during the early medieval period, see Siegfried Wenzel, “Acedia 700–1200,” *Traditio*, 22 (1966), 73–102.
49. See Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, V.12.
50. The title, *Gesihð Rodes*, is an Old English rendering of “Dream (or Vision) of the Rood” by Bernard F. Huppé in *The Web of Words* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1970), 64. All titles of Old English poems are by modern editors; the manuscripts do not give titles to poems.
51. A characteristic of Germanic languages is that the stress falls on the initial syllable of a word (excepting prefixes), which facilitates alliterative versification. The Old English alliterative line of poetry contains two half-lines, each with two main stresses, separated by a caesura or pause. The alliteration is determined by the first stressed syllable in the second half-line: at least one stressed syllable of the first half-line must alliterate with it, and neither stressed syllable of the first half-line may alliterate with the second stressed syllable of the second half-line. The Old English verse half-line is the building block of which the poetry is constructed.
- Like other poetry stemming originally from oral composition, Old English verse is heavily formulaic. As Greenfield and Calder explain, “Anglo-Saxon poetry was fashioned from a stock of verse or verse-pair formulaic systems; that is, from stylized syntactically related collocations of words in regular rhythmic patterns” which could be varied “for contextual or alliterative purposes” (*A New Critical History of Old English Literature*, 125).
- Old English poetic diction employed a vocabulary enriched by inherited terms not used in prose, including numerous synonyms for such important (heroic age) concepts as “man, warrior” (*beorn*, *cempa*, *guma*, *randwiga*, *rinc*, *scealc*, *secg*, *wrecca*, *ylde*), “king, prince or nobleman” (*cyning*, *drihten*, *frea*, *wealdend*, *ealdor*, *brego*, *fengal*, *bealdor*, etc.), “battle” (*gefeoh*, *hild*, *orett*, *here*, *gewinn*, *getoht*, *tohte*, *beadu*, *beadulac*, *ecgplega*, *wigplega*), and so forth. Common also to Old English verse is the use of *kennings*, a kind of metaphor composed of two elements, such as *reordberend* ‘speech-bearers’ (= human beings), or *hronrade* ‘whale’s road’ (= sea); and of *litotes*, a form of understatement, such as *mæte weorode* ‘with little company’ (= alone).
- My principle of translation is somewhat like that of Ælfred the Great, *hwilum word be worde hwilum andgit of andgiete*, sometimes word for word, sometimes sense for sense. Occasionally I could reproduce the alliteration, though by no means is my translation an attempt to recreate the Old English alliterative line. As far as I could, without overly

straining (nor being slavishly constrained by) modern English syntax and idiom, I tried to render the meaning line for line. Whether I succeeded, it is for the reader to say.

52. Some scholars suggest emending MS *wealdes* 'of the forest' to *wealdendes* 'of the Lord.' See my translation, line 17, which renders the manuscript reading.
53. A kenning for "men, human beings."
54. A metrically defective line.
55. *mæte weorode*, an instance of OE litotes or understatement; i.e., He was alone.
56. I.e., the three crosses on Calvary.
57. Possibly a reference to purgatorial fire, which the souls of the just were believed to endure before Christ's "harrowing of Hell," alluded to in lines 147–151a.