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The Dream of the Rood:
Apotheosis of Anglo-Saxon Paradox

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Although many critics of medieval literature insist that the Anglo-Saxons were great shambling oafs with no understanding of the Platonic world of the spirit, an examination of "The Dream of the Rood" indicates a double-sided *weltanschauung* worthy of the most subtle and sophisticated. The rood is both a physical entity and a spiritual symbol, but these are not separated in the poem. Despite the fact that later Christianity divided and dichotomized the from the spirit, "The Dream of the Rood" unites the physical and the spiritual (or meta-physical) in such a way that the uniting, the resolution of the paradox, is determined through deep religious faith. The paradox of physicality and spirituality in the poem can be explained and wholeness in Christian faith can emerge in the individual worshiper only after the miracle of God's grace is taken into account. Grace alone restores the totality, the wholeness, of life-death existence.

Anglo-Saxons, whose intellectual outlook included metaphysicality, were well prepared to accept Christian missionaries. "The Dream of the Cross" is therefore a powerful argument for the spiritual qualities of honor, truth, and courage which marked the Anglo-Saxon mind before Christianity and the spiritual qualities of mercy, justice, and love after Christianity had spread.

"The Dream of the Cross" has been called "one of the great religious poems of the English language,"¹ the finest dream-allegory in Anglo-Saxon as well as one of the earliest extant versions of the medieval dream-vision,² and hailed as a portrayal of Christ "as a truly heroic Germanic warrior with his

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disciples as his loyal comitatus."³ With the poem's Christian qualities thus celebrated, one can see that in the minds of many, the underlying Anglo-Saxon culture that produced it must be considered of secondary importance. Perhaps that is why the poem has been overlooked as an example of the subtlety and sophistication of intellectual thought in Anglo-Saxon culture. Perhaps too, that lacuna is due to the fact that many critics unconsciously approach Anglo-Saxon literature as exemplifying physicality, crudeness, and cruelty.

Far from being a compendium of pagan barbarism overlaid with sentimental Christian piety and superstition, "degradation and glorification,"⁴ "The Dream of the Cross" reveals an awareness of "ironic reversal" and "paradox,"⁵ a blend and balance of the physical and the spiritual, an "ecstatic vision into which pity and tears have been infused in rare degree."⁶ In its contrasting yet complementary qualities the poem shows a culture whose processes of thought rival the Platonic awareness of classical Greece.

Generally speaking, the literature of the Anglo-Saxons shows surprising sensitivity to the concerns of justice, morality, courage, honor, fidelity, and generosity. The *Beowulf* poet, for instance, whose "theme is the conflict of good and evil,"⁷ presents courts and halls which are dignified in dedication to personal responsibility, human understanding and *sophrosyne*, and the moral qualities such as duty, heroism, kingship, equity, loyalty, justice, and humility. How many White House parties in the twentieth century can boast a bard reciting American history or music above the artistic level of the Beach Boys?

The metaphysical pursuits of Anglo-Saxon culture sometimes exceed the spiritual qualities in works

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composed or copied by Christian scribes. Aside from the frequent commercials inserted by scribes, one can find evocations of the basic culture itself as an "organized and aristocratic civilization."⁸ Such a civilization show its awareness of deep meaning in surface objects, in its respect for the runes, and its praise of abstract qualities. Wisdom, according to Hrothgar, lies in preparation for the future, in knowing how to conduct oneself, how to regulate human activity, and how to keep from personal moral blindness. In what contemporary United States President could such a

metaphysical code be personified? Perhaps the view that Anglo-Saxons were simple is merely a reflection of our own simplistic thinking.

A line-by-line search for contrast, antithesis, and paradox in "The Dream of the Cross" reveals an almost line-by-line proof that such contrariety exists. The title itself suggests a linguistic ambiguity that announces intellectual awareness among the people whose culture prepared them for looking at life in more than one way. The word "dream" in the title is translated "joy" or "mirth" or even "harmony." "Rood" is to be distinguished from "cross" because the word "rood" refers to a ceremonial symbol of the crucifixion rather than the actual pieces of wood which served as an engine of execution. Thus the title could well be "The Harmony of the Hopeful Hanging" or "The Mirth of the Miraculous Mangling." Humor (or attempts at it) aside, readers can judge for themselves that the title exhibits linguistic paradox in which the cross is both a physical entity and a spiritual symbol.

In the first line of the poem the speaker reveals an attention to the difference between dream and reality, between the dream itself and the report of the dream that he is about to make. Essentially, readers have two contrasting yet complementary experiences to keep in mind the dream and the

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account of the dream: "I will *tell* the dearest of *dreams*." The difference between the telling and the dreaming is as essential in its quiet way as Wordsworth's emotions recollected in tranquility. The dichotomy between the event and the memory of it is healed by a new experience the meaning that unites event and recollection in a Hegelian conflation of thesis and antithesis into synthesis, a meaning much like the trinitarian Godhead of the Hindus, in which Brahma, the creator (Spring, or the growing season) merges with Siva, the destroyer (Autumn or the harvest season) under the uniting and fulfilling spirit of Vishnu the preserver (which might be called a recognizing of the fact that both biological and spiritual life are preserved through flux).

The fact that (in the second line) the dreamer dreams at midnight is significant, according to Alvin Lee, since it shows the contrast of midnight, the "canonical hour of nocturns when, according to spiritual discipline, the *wacigende* [waking, alert] man is to be vigilant while the *sleac* [slothful, lax] one sleeps." Also,

It is at night that supernatural forces or dream figures (a radiant cross, angels, demons, and trolls) appear to human beings, seeming to suggest at a large number of crucial points in Old English poetry that ordinary waking experience is imagined to be less real and meaningful than what is revealed in dreams, visions, and nighttime adventures.⁹

A brief allusion to Northrop Frye supports Lee's view: The difference between day and night, between the public person and the private person, between company and isolation, between light and dark, between professional and personal, between busyness and repose, etc., ad infinitum, indicates, if nothing

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else, just difference striking contrast. What is more paradoxical than the alternation of daylight and darkness and the antipathetic experiences corresponding to each?

Readers note that the dream or spiritual vision occurs when mortal men are wont to rest. That emphatic split between spiritual vision and mortal snoring, between divine and animal existence, presents not only the contrast between one kind of man and another, but also prepares the reader to accept the dreamer as more authoritative than a mortal man because the dreamer has had a spiritual experience. He knows. The lesser mortals around him have only snorted and burbled while they were, according to Charles W. Kennedy's translation of the poem, "sunk" in slumber. I might add that translating "reste wunedon" as "sunk in slumber" rather than the usual "wont to rest" adds a delightfully onomatopoeic quality of "unk" sound to the poem. Consider "ker-plunk," "drunk," "hunk," as in crouch or squat (cf. "hunker"), "clunk," "dunk," "gunk," "bunk," "lunk," as in "lunker," a heavy fish, "funk," and "punk." All indicate a downward direction, a falling. To a medievalist, gesture is important. Likewise, direction (downward, such as this, or upward, as the cross soon will be ("on lyft laedan"), is of primary importance.

The sense of direction is all the more important in the next line when the poet reiterates a customary Anglo-Saxon

syntactical unit in "hwaet me gemaette," often translated "what I dreamed," but better preserved in the syntactical direction (or word order) as "what dreamed me." He also uses "þuhte me," which should be considered "it thought me" rather than "I thought," to bring out the underlying concept that to one in this stage of Anglo-Saxon culture, objects often call their attention to the mind of an observer rather than an observer objectively calling them to mind. It is as if outside influences

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force the mind to react to them, as if the mind is swept in the direction of the flow of visually perceived objects. In other words, outside forces *wyrd*, destiny or fate as well as temporal events and situations penetrate the mind and cause it to acknowledge something it has not previously perceived. In a sense, this is hallucination rather than thought. But it is not to be disparaged. After all, such a philosophic stance as this is the basis for the revealed religion of Christianity. [10](#)

The cross of the vision, which is lifted high or "towers" in air, presents a double vision to the dreamer. It is "leohte bewundon," twined around with brightness as the arm of a braceleted Viking wench might be with golden jewelry, or "compassed" with shining gold. Here the light imagery crescendos for six lines to create a visual climax of stunning spiritual brightness. Then comes the antithesis. The light of God and the dirt of man are contrasted. The dreamer sees himself as dim and soiled with flesh, dark and loathsome as any coalpit stone, yet paradoxically and miraculously a recipient of God's light, a beholder of wondrous whiteness. The contrast leads him to observe that the cross itself has not always been a lucent spiritual symbol, but was once, like him, soiled with its material nature, an object of callow physicality, a crude structure, ignominiously created for torture and shameful execution of criminals. Then, for the dreamer, the two realities fluctuate and twine like the spiral of ribonucleic acid and the opposing spiral of deoxyribonucleic acid, the sources of biological existence that are shot through with creative purpose just as the fluctuations of appearance and purpose make the cross waver in his eyes. The cross varies its

vesture and hue,

Now wet and stained with the Blood outwelling,

Now fairly jewelled with gold and gems. [11](#)

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In this climactic vision the cross is two antipathetic objects at once, yet both are one.

The contrast and sameness of golden cross and fleshly man continue as the rood reveals its origin and the past is shown as antithetic to the present:

through the gold-work outgleamed a token

Of the ancient evil of sinful men

Where the rood on its right side once sweat blood.

(lines 18-20, Kennedy)

What once was the cross of shame is now no more. The cross has become redeemed not only by paradox in form execution engine redeeming symbol of spirituality but also by paradox in time past/present.

When the cross speaks, it shows its own history as analogue to the account of Christ's crucifixion. Again, the contrast between shame and glory, past and present, disgrace and triumph, then and now makes the poem thematically vibrate with tension as it rivets the attention of the reader with its death/life paradox. As Alvin Lee points out,

the poem is deeply involved in the paradox of victory through apparent defeat. However powerful becomes the poem's imaginative focus on events surrounding the death of Christ, and on the part played in them by the tree who tells the

story, there is always another perspective at work whereby the tragedy is seen as an episode in a larger pattern of meaning symbolized by resurrection and redemption. From one perspective the dreamer-poet sees a bleeding tree or body but from another he sees a gold-covered, jeweled *sige-beam* [victory beam]. The first of these points to the dominance of sin and death *her on eorþan* [here on earth], the second to the tree as a

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beacen [beacon] leading his soul away from the world into a kingdom of joyful banqueting.[12](#)

Since the first thirty or so lines of this poem so aptly prove its use of paradox, antithesis and contrast, it would be exhausting and repetitive to continue a line-by-line examination of the remaining 125 lines. It would be profitable, however, to turn to an examination of paradox, since that is a mystery that distinguishes simplistic thinking from wisdom in any culture.

Paradox cannot be explained as long as a thinker remains within the system that produces paradox. To resolve the antithesis he must venture outside the system to see that while each side refutes the other, the contrariety joins to form a total greater than the sum of its parts. So with paradox in "The Dream of the Cross." How a cross (or rood) can be both shameful and exalted, physical and spiritual at the same time is a contradistinction that is resolved only by reference to Christian miracle. The tension of two opposites is eased into a total wholeness, fused into oneness by the unity of the trinitarian godhead. Thus the dreamer's propagandistic purpose is reinforced and proved by his poetic technique, a triumph of intellect indicative of the sophistication of Anglo-Saxon culture.

The poem shows not merely a magical hocus-pocus Mediterranean religiosity in its mysterious appeal, but also reveals a northern culture so adept at thought, so imbued with concepts of material and spiritual wholeness, that it was ready for a religion that more fully expressed its view of human existence as paradoxical. Not for nothing did Anglo-Saxons live by the metaphysical concepts of honor, truth, loyalty, fidelity, courage, and such abstract qualities of the comitatus. Many of them were raised in an intellectual sphere far above the idea that

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some moderns have of the dark ages being filled with dimwits whose highest accomplishment is an animal desire for joints of meat, procreation, and mead. A culture that could dedicate its greatest heroes to a life filled with such concepts which denigrated temporal materialism was well on its way to expressing an imaginative, cultured, learned and wise civilization. Likewise, if a yearning for the unattainable is an acknowledgement that something exists that one cannot clutch or even touch in this present life (and many Anglo-Saxon poetic forms, among them lament and *planctus*, the *ubi sunt* nostalgia for an old lost time as "Widsith," "Deor," "The Wanderer," "The Seafarer," and "The Ruin" repeat the motif), then it takes only a higher vision to resolve the paradox and bring that theme to its fullest cultural expression. What religion is not an attempt to grasp the unattainable?

Although "The Dream of the Rood" is a fusion of Anglo-Saxon and Christian culture its importance is ubiquitous and timeless.

The narrative of the poem is deeply involved in the central quest-theme of biblical mythology, the human desire for a return to that dream [joy] with God which was forfeited by the disloyalty of the thane Adam when long ago he tasted the forbidden fruit in the guest-hall of Eden.[13](#)

"The Dream of the Rood" speaks for its time and for all time, for the Christian religion and for all religions, for its culture, which acknowledges the complementary paradox of opposites, and for all cultures that do so. From the horizontality of handle and verticality of blade making up opposing yet fulfilling axes to archaic Greeks, to the paisley black and white yin-yang of ancient Orientals, to the RNA and DNA as well as plus and minus, on and off, of

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the binary system that makes modern computers work, the principle extends into all that humans know. Thus the poem stands as a supreme example of the subtlety and sophistication of Anglo-Saxon or even modern thought. From its finite base of simple time and space it reaches forth to grasp the infinite.

Notes

1. C. L. Wrenn, *A Study of Old English Literature* (New York: Norton and Company, Incorporated, 1967), p. 34.
2. M. W. Grose and D. McKenna, *Old English Literature* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973), p. 90.
3. Wrenn, p. 103.
4. J. B. Trapp, *Medieval English Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 114.
5. Stanley B. Greenfield, *A Critical History of Old English Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1965), pp. 138-139.
6. George K. Anderson, *Old and Middle English Literature* (New York: Collier Books, 1965), p. 35.
7. David Wright, tr., *Beowulf* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1957), p. 9.
8. Wright, p. 9.
9. Alvin A. Lee, "Toward a Critique of *The Dream of the Rood*," in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson and Dolores Warwick Frese (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), pp. 167-168.

10. Although Julian Jaynes does not use Anglo-Saxon mentality as an example, the thought processes of this heroic age echo his idea (expressed in *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bi-Cameral Mind*) that the left and right cerebral hemispheres were only feebly connected by a not-fully-

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developed corpus callosum at this primitive time in human history. Hence, the left brain often did not know what the right brain was doing, and vice versa, allowing for such mind-bending experiences as hallucinations and visionary revelations from an imagined outside-the-body force, such as a dead ancestor, a spirit, a demon, or a god. We have just seen that Anglo-Saxon syntax in such uses as "it thought me," or "what dreamed me" is a candid admission of object-dominated thought.

When the alternating right-brain/left-brain impulses meld into a total experience something new emerges consciousness. That is true also in the emotion of the dream (right brain) and the later telling and objectifying of it (left brain) in "The Dream of the Cross." Here the impulses become a new resolution that rests on both bases realization of spiritual duty.

11. Lines 23-25 of "A Dream of the Cross," translated by Charles W. Kennedy, reprinted from *Early English Christian Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963) for *The Literature of Medieval England*, ed. by D.W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1970).

12. Lee, p. 164.

13. Lee, p. 163.