

The Dream of the Rood – A Blend of Christian and Pagan Values

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Abstract:

***The Dream of Love*, acknowledged as perhaps the greatest religious poem in English, has been recognized as an essentially Christian poem. It is my aim to analyse the capacity of the form of a dream vision to integrate also pre-Christian elements within the poem. The resulting text then creates the effect of continuity rather than of antagonism and lends itself to a multicultural interpretation, bringing the pagan oral tradition and mythology together with literacy through Christianity. The point to be made is therefore very rudimentary, it is to show spiritual continuity of the Germanic world through the archetypal image of the Tree in the Anglo-Saxon poem known as *The Dream of the Rood*.**

A generation after God had been declared dead by Friedrich Nietzsche, the American dramatist of early Modernism Eugene O'Neill employed in one of his less well received plays called *Days without End* the image of the Cross becoming a tree as the symbol of renewed faith of one of the protagonists. The man's faith, however, was redeemed with the sacrifice of the woman's forgiveness. The Anglo-Saxon poem known as *The Dream of the Rood* brings, more than a thousand years earlier, a reverse image - that of a tree becoming the Cross.

The Tree is perhaps the most widespread of religious symbols in the spiritual history of mankind. All the way from shamanism to the biblical tradition, there is hardly any mythology, culture, religion or system of thought that does not include in one way or another that particular symbol. The reason for that is doubtless its overwhelming semantic potential. It may be interpreted as the *axis mundi* or the Cosmic Tree, the Tree of Life, the Tree of Knowledge or wisdom and even as the Tree of Death as it is the case in the tradition of the Kabala where the Tree is blamed for providing the leaves to Adam to cover up his nudity. In the book of Zohar, the Tree is the source of esoteric knowledge as one of the consequences of the Fall. Such knowledge is linked with the physical existence of the body deprived of the "body of light." There again the Cross as instrument of torture and redemption brings together in one single image the two signified extremes of that major signifier of the Tree of Life. Through death the path leads to life, through the Cross, formerly a tree, to eternal light (Chevalier 1982:62-68).

As the first example of Anglo-Saxon religious poetry in the form of a dream vision the poem is not just a conventional rendering of Christian dogmas in verse. The enormous spiritual charge of that poem is the result of the alternating identification of the narrator with the cross-rod – a Christian symbol par excellence – versus the Tree of Life or the *axis mundi* of the Germano-Celtic mythologies, emphasized by the context of the dreaming poet. The fundamental existential message opening the way from pre-Christian values to Christian culture is then conveyed very powerfully. A possible interpretation of that message may be that human existence on the horizontal level is bound with its vertical dimension of eternal life through sacrifice: the self-sacrifice of the tree and of the warrior, inherent to paganism and that of Christ the Man and Christ the God. And sacrifice in its turn is then the condition for hope in this world as well as hope in the eschatological sense. In that context, I believe, it is the symbolism of the tree that is the crucial element binding the two worlds. The value of the ancient pagan forms of spirituality is upheld by the fact that the tree, as the essential link with the

divine, submits humbly, even if unwillingly, to its role of a torture instrument. The tree in so doing may thus be identified with Christ himself. After all, in the poem *The Dream of the Rood* it is the tree that is resurrected and becomes the symbol of Christianity when the human Jesus – just as the Germanic warrior – had fought out his battle and suffered death on the Cross. And last but not least it is precisely the form of a dream vision that allows for the prosopopoeia of a personified tree/cross to become the narrator within the dreamer's mind and the herald of the principal message of that extraordinary poem of the paradox of faith – of faith in hope through sacrifice which is a synonym for love.

In his analysis of transformations of myth through time Joseph Campbell points out that prior to the advent of Christianity four highly developed and mighty mythologies represented the religious life in Europe: classical Greek, classical Roman, Celtic and Germanic. Regardless of the fact that they shared a number of features with other mythologies of the ancient world, they had one thing in common that marks them significantly and is in contrast with the Near Eastern traditions. It is their respect for the individual and his own individual journey through life – the well known motif of the Quest. Those four mythological traditions, as Campbell claims, led to the heroic literary tradition. The military expansions of the 4th and 5th centuries brought along a new spirit from the Near East - the tradition of Christianity and the novel system of values based on life within a community and mutual interdependence of each individual member on the community based, among other things, on orthopraxis in the religious life of Judaism, Christianity and above all in Islam (Campbell 2000:163-164).

The two traditions blend in the very early medieval literature. Rather than the victory of “light,” i.e., Christianity over “darkness,” i.e., paganism, the poetry of the Dark Ages, I believe, should be interpreted as the culmination of *mythos* in the Gospel. Whereas in the environment of the classical Greek and Roman cultures *mythos* had its opponent in the *logos* of philosophers and was interpreted as “pagan,” the authentic Germano-Celtic substratum seems to have absorbed and assimilated the new tradition, with that important reservation however, that both Celtic and Germanic forms of Christianity acquired in the early centuries of its existence some quite specific features and a rather pronounced pagan or heretic flavour. Symbols and myths may be understood simply as signs and images that refer beyond themselves to the implications of ontological experience but only so that the meanings in question are accessible through those very symbols and mythologies themselves. Indeed, it has been remarked often enough that myths express ontological experience more fully than rational constructions. In other words, no logical interpretation can grasp the essence of symbols and myths (Neubauer 1998:44). One of the essential points of encounter in the Germanic context was precisely that of the Tree and of the Cross. The Tree/Cross, itself being a symbol par excellence, represents openness, revelation, and refers to polarities and the utmost limits of existence. The horizontal and vertical dimensions, transcendence and immanence, finity with infinity meet there. The symbol itself then bridges the abysmal distance between heaven and earth (Neubauer 1998:16-17).

The association of the Tree of Life with manifestations of the divine is firmly embedded in the Christian tradition. The Cross erected on top of the hill of Golgotha at the world's very centre leads back to the ancient image of the Cosmic tree. Christian iconography features numerous examples of the Cross in foliage. In its utmost interpretation it is Christ himself who became metonymically the Cosmic Tree, the *axis mundi* as it is explicitly expressed by Origen.

All sacred objects and places mediate the energy of the numinous through the symbolic and metaphorical discourse of respective mythologies and provide the language through which a human being may transcend the individual and participate in the universal. The archetypal understanding of the Tree as the world center, the *axis mundi* or even the whole cosmos is common to many cultures

reaching as they do at the same time both into the inaccessible heavens and into the unknowable underworld. Trees are mortal and may be felled, but they also may survive for time out of mind and are often venerated for their great age and near immortal status (Fee 2001:111-112).

In the ancient world trees marked sacred places and each tree was believed to have its lord (*baal*), ruling spirit or soul. Significant events in the Old Testament take place in the vicinity of holy trees. Among numerous other examples there is the instance of Abram building the first altar to his Lord

God on the Palestinian territory in the plain More by the prophetic More oak-tree and it was there that God gave him the promise of land in heritage. Later, trees are replaced by the so called asheras or wooden poles to indicate a place of worship. Respect to trees is obvious also in the biblical instructions about pruning and grafting. It should not take place before the end of the third year of a tree's life, then the first crop of fruit belongs to the Lord God and only the crop of the fifth year may be collected by men. During a siege of enemy territory trees must not be damaged or felled. In the biblical tradition, there are of course the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge, symbols that are reflected and transmuted in the form of the Cross of Christ. In Oz 14, 8 the Lord God compares himself to a fir showing green as opposed to spiritless idols. In the New Testament the word 'tree' in the sense of 'wood' is metonymically and etymologically used in the sense of the Cross (Ga 3, 13; Dt 21, 33; 1Pt 2, 24). In Luke 23, 31 the opposition of a green and dry tree occurs to represent Jesus versus Judaism or Judaism earlier and later (Novotný 1992:1000-1001).

Thus the tree both exists in this world and seems to transcend it, and therefore may be seen to symbolize the oppositions of life and death and of eternity and transience. Trees are most often associated with life-giving energy, and due to their longevity are quite often thought to be repositories of wisdom: the Egyptian Osiris and the Greek Adonis, as resurrection gods, both are associated with trees, and the Buddha was born again in the wisdom he found under the Bodhi Tree. Sometimes both in the Indic and Norse traditions, a tree is thought to represent life and death on a cosmic scale, symbolizing the full manifestation of the universe. (Fee 2001:112).

The Norse World Tree, the mighty ash tree Yggdrasill connects all three planes of the cosmos and the nine worlds of the Norse universe. All life springs from its source, and it sustains its own life, as well (Fee 2001:111-112). It is upon Yggdrasill that Odin as the archetypal dying god hangs himself to gain the knowledge of the very secrets of life and death. In the biblical tradition the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge are symbols reflected and transmuted in the form of the Cross of Christ (Fee 2001:86-87, 112).

The poet who wrote *The Dream of the Rood* emphasized the cross's identity as a tree and also as a battle standard: he even called it "the Victory Tree." Indeed, the most idiosyncratic Anglo-Saxon outgrowth of the Cult of the Cross was the widespread popularity of large, standing stone crosses, which became objects and locations of worship. It is certain that the Rood of Christ was often likened to a tree. The Ruthwell Cross being the most striking example of a combination of Celtic artistic tradition known as interlace interwoven with human and animal figures, biblical scenes and Germanic runes and warrior conception of Christ later developed into the poem of *The Dream of the Rood*, all bound together in an overtly Christian symbol. The Cross as the symbol of Christianity was embraced as late as in the fourth century and when its popularity reached Britain in the seventh century it took on a peculiarly Germano-Celtic pagan flavor - as a battle standard and as the transmutation of the cosmic tree (Fee 2001:113-114). John Blair in his most recent study *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* remarks: "A cross must have been the normal outward and visible sign of a site's Christian status, whether free-standing [...] or - as it may often have been - carved or painted on an older holy stone or tree." Blair also points out that:

The fact that the old English words for 'cross' are *rōd*, *treōw* and *bēam*, rather than some loan-word from *crux*, may suggest that the first crosses were perceived as of like kind to the sacred landmarks which they replaced. At Rudstone (*rōd-stān*, 'cross-stone') in east Yorkshire, a great prehistoric menhir still stands beside the church. [...] It is especially interesting that two early texts associate crosses with aristocratic houses. [...] These (presumably timber) crosses sound very much like the 'guardian trees' of farms and houses in Scandinavian folk tradition, and it is tempting to think that they were direct successors of cultic trees planted outside houses in the pagan period. (Blair 2005:226-7).

Blair also brings evidence of early local churches and burial places situated in near vicinity of large trees that may have been sacred and already burial grounds in the pagan times, Christianized by

the building of a chapel. Elsewhere he testifies to the strong attachment and respect for holy trees as late as in the late 1070s in connection with an episode from the life of St. Wulfstan:

[...] the thegn Aelfsige built his church [...] beside a huge nut-tree where he liked to sit dicing and feasting in the summer. When St. Wulfstan objected to the overshadowing branches, Aelfsige retorted angrily that he would rather leave the church unconsecrated than cut the tree down; [...] Richard Morris points out that nut-trees, especially hazels, have often been considered sacred and their nuts and twigs are found in ritual deposits of widely different dates. (John Blair 2005:382).

The evidence provided by John Blair about the complexities of the process of Christianization of England may result in a controversy as to whether the power resides in the saint to make a place holy or is the place holy and allows for manifestations of the numinous through the saint? The ash-tree as the archetypal sacred tree of northern paganism appears frequently in hagiographies and that recurrent choice of it

shows beyond reasonable doubt that these associations were a veneer on a pre-Christian substratum. Special trees could be assimilated to Christian culture through the hagiographical device of saints planting them: thus staffs driven into the ground by Aldhelm, Cynehelm and Eadwold sprouted miraculously into huge ash-trees. Disaster awaited anyone who felled the ashes in St. Nectan's grove at Hartland (Devon). As late as the 1680s a naturalist saw St. Bertram's (Beorhthelm's) ash-tree 'that growes over a spring which bears the name of the same Saint,' [...], and found that the common people superstitiously believe, that 'tis very dangerous to break a bough from it; so great a care has St Bertram of his Ash to this very day.' In twelfth-century legend the site of King Oswald's martyrdom at Oswerstry was marked by a spring and a health-giving sacred ash-tree. 'Holy trees' in place names were not necessarily holy in the Christian sense [...]. The simple and obvious way to re-incorporate a sacred tree, stone, or other feature was to mark it with a cross [...]. A ritual landscape sown thickly with unacceptable sites of magical power could not be obliterated, but the sites could be made acceptable (Blair 2005:476-482).

The form of literature known as dream vision is commonly connected with the literary conventions of the Middle Ages, mainly of the 13th and 14th centuries. It is held to be a convention that enables allegorical expression and allows the protagonists to transcend the boundaries of life and death; heaven and hell. The form of the dream vision is, however, also in close connection with the rise and gradual development of the idea of purgatory or the "third place" between heaven and hell several centuries earlier. We are dealing therefore in the case of the poem *The Dream of the Rood* with two different artifacts. One is the powerful direct narrative of the tree/rood known from the inscription on Ruthwell Cross from the 7th century when the embrace of paganism and Christianity was still quite tight. The other is the text of the dream vision setting of the full-length poem from the 10th century.

The primitive man believed that in dreams the transcendental world is encountered. He considered the persons appearing in dreams as real; he could meet with the dead and also with gods. He believed that in dreams the soul is separated temporarily from the body. Those who had powerful dreams were considered as elect. Dreams were interpreted as an instruction of gods to some act, as omen or prophecy. There were specialists in the interpretation of dreams in ancient Egypt, Babylonia, Greece or in the changing cultures of Asia Minor. Some believed dreams to be the work of demons, others as the consequence of physical processes in the human body. Cicero in *De divinatione* for example warns against false and deceptive dreams. In the Old Testament God uses dreams as his instrument of communication with humans. The Bible, however, also mentions false dreams but never considers them as the manifestations of the otherworld. The number of dreams in the Old Testament is a few more than thirty, in the New Testament there are only nine and always as a direct form of instruction from God to a human.

The most complex analysis of dreams is the *Commentarius in Somnium Scipionis* by Macrobius from the late fourth century A. D. His text, together with *Policraticus* by John of Salisbury

and *De spiritu et anima* by Pseudo-Augustine, was the key source for the renaissance of dream visions in the 12th century and it brings the typical medieval typology of dreams and categories of dreamers. A dream or a vision as a means of direct communication with God was primarily made legitimate through the legendary prophetic dreams of the two emperors Constantine (312 A.D.) and Theodosius the Great (394 A.D.) when a prophetic dream about a conditioned victory in impending battle was the immediate cause of conversion. The first truly Christian author to bring extensive analysis concerning dreams was Tertullian in his treaty *De anima*. Yet early Christianity and the Church Fathers were exceedingly suspicious of dreams, mainly in connection with their specialised interpreters. The ecclesiastical restrictions, though, did not apply to dreams that initiated conversions to Christian faith, as it was the case for example in the life of St. Augustine. Augustine's attitude to dreams was, however, also ambiguous since he was aware of the connection between dreams and possible heresy. The treaty *De spiritu et anima* attributed to him became the cornerstone of the new oneirology in the Middle Ages. The other source of literary dream visions were the visions of the "third place" or purgatory, as the place between heaven and hell started to be called in the 12th century. Their tradition is connected with the monastic environment of the British Isles of the 7th and 8th centuries and with the person of the Venerable Bede. There again, as in the case of the symbolism of the tree, a continuity of spiritual tradition may be observed going back to times immemorial of ancient oriental cultures, Germano-Celtic paganism and the eschatological apocalyptic visions of early Christianity of the first four centuries (Le Goff 1998:240-278).

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