

## Chapter One:

### Seeing through Dreams: Image and Truth in early Dream Poetry

#### 1) Truth and Dreaming

One measure of the gulf between our own age and those that preceded it is the complete change in what we believe about dreams. The "cultural apartheid" outlined in the Introduction, assuming the only "objective" truths to be those to which strict science gives us access, has changed the way we think about dreams. Dreams, which so resist the weights and measures of modernism, are relegated to the realm of the merely subjective or else treated "scientifically" as phenomena, to be studied in "sleep laboratories", whose remembered symbols are to be examined only as yielding clues as to the pathology of the dreamer. Jung might be regarded as an honourable exception to this approach, but it can be shown that he drew most of the ideas that led him to the conclusion that dreams might refer to a more than personal or individual truth, from ancient, certainly from pre-enlightenment sources.

Now this narrow focus on the interpretation of dreams as a way of understanding only what is happening in an individual mind has been fruitful in the field of psycho-therapy, but it has also limited our expectation of what dreams might teach us.

If we are to enter fully into the early and mediaeval genre of *dream poetry*, then we need to recover the framework of ancient teaching about dreams. The most subtle and influential teaching about the nature of dreams and dreaming came down to mediaeval poets in the form of a (probably) pagan commentary on a (certainly) pagan text. Yet this work was understood for its wisdom by Christian monks, preserved, passed on and integrated into that harmonisation of Biblical and Classical texts which formed the intellectual basis of Christendom. The text, the *Somnium Scipionis*, is a fragment of Cicero's philosophical work *De Republica* and thus comes from the high classical period. The commentary is by Macrobius who lived at the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth century. He was a Neo-Platonist living at a time when Christian and Pagan could freely mingle and he became the source for much of the later thinking and understanding about dreams. The *Somnium* tells the story of how Scipio Africanus Minor has a dream in which he meets his Grandfather, Scipio Africanus Major, who takes him in a dream-journey to look down on Carthage "from an exalted place, bright and shining, filled with stars".(xi) Here Scipio is told by his Grandfather about his own future and given the moral encouragement and insight he needs to live well during the rest of his life.

#### 2) Five levels of the *Somnium*

Macrobius in his commentary takes occasion from this episode to make a careful distinction between the various types and levels of dreaming and the various kinds of truth or falsehood we might expect from them. He distinguishes five different levels of dreaming, from three of which we might learn or

have revealed to us real truth, from two of which, at more shallow levels we can expect "no divination" (*nihil divinationis*). he gives his five levels of dreaming as follows;

1) **Insomnium**: This is simply the replaying in our mind of things with which we have been pre-occupied, At first Scipio thought this was the kind of dream he was having because he had been talking about his grandfather that evening.

2) **Visum**: This occurs when we are not yet fully asleep but we think ourselves awake, we see shapes rushing towards us or flitting hither and thither, nightmares are included in this class.

then come the higher levels of dreaming from which we can expect a revelation of truth:

3) **Somnium**: This shows us truths carried through symbols or veiled under an allegorical form. Pharo's dreams in *Genesis* are of this sort. There is a whole genre of allegorical dream poetry all of which begin with descriptions of a feigned somnium. C.S. Lewis in his exposition of this text in *The Discarded Image*, from which this information is largely drawn, points out that "nearly all dreams are assumed to be somnia by modern psychologists."

4) **Visio**: This is a direct unveiled pre-vision of the future, and is quite rare in poetry except as a means of heightening the tension in dramatic narrative

5) **Oraculum**: This is when we encounter someone in a dream. a parent, or "some other grave and venerable person" who openly declares the future or gives us advice and guidance.

Most dreams of course and certainly most of the dreams we encounter in early poetry, combine elements of the various levels and move from one level to another. It is important to be aware of this background teaching about dreams both to show that they were regarded as at least potentially serious revelations of truth and because many of the poets who include dreams in their narrative are deliberately alluding to the *Somnium Scipionis* and giving clues as to what level of dream they intend to portray.

### 3) The Northern/Celtic dream-world

Lying behind this tidy classical categorisation of the dream world inherited from the Mediterranean culture which came with Latin, there were other layers of Celtic and Northern (that is to say Norse and Saxon) understanding about dreams and the dream-world equally available to native English poets. Alongside the *gravitas* of Scipio's dream, where the dreamer is addressed by a grave and venerable person and given a guided tour of the cosmos with moralising commentary, the English had access to another realm. This was the realm of the marvellous, the coloured lands, the islands of the blest, the realm where "stones have been known to move and trees to speak", a realm of shape-shifters and sudden transformation, of doors and windows opening into other worlds, a realm where the stories of a pagan past have been woven together with Bible stories, where beneath the shimmer of French or Latin courtliness we feel the strength and sinew of heroes from a much more ancient past. This is the world that stretches from the pagan hero Beowulf fighting the monster Grendel, to Arthur and the quest for the Grail. Part of the peculiar power and beauty of English poetry comes from the way it gathers together

and makes a new unity of its very diverse roots; the strong sharp rhythm of Saxon epic, the lapidary Latin of the Church, the beautiful gothic interlacings of Anglo-Norman story, and all these shot through with the memories, sometimes preserved only in place and personal names, of the old Celtic past.

#### 4) The range of early dream-poetry

Now the field of early and mediaeval dream-poetry is vast and one could explore the theme of transfigured vision very fully without straying from this period. One could look at the dream-poems in Chaucer, in *The House of Fame*, *The Book of the Duchesse*, *The Romance of the Rose*. We could of course examine the most extraordinary extended *Visio* of all, the great allegorical dream of Dante, which guides us from the classical *Oraculum* in which Virgil speaks to the poet and takes him through all the realms of Hell and Purgatory, into a new Christian *Oraculum* with the restoration of the dreamed and unforgotten Earthly Paradise where the pagan poet steps back and the dream-journey continues into the real heavens guided by a Christian girl until he comes at last to the ineffable sight of God. Staying with purely English poetry (though Dante's influence on all English poetry is huge) one could attend to Langland the most under-rated mediaeval poet, as in the alliterative verse of his *Piers Plowman*, as he recounts the marvellous dream that befell him as he slept, on a may morning in the Malvern hills. But perhaps the most telling of all, since we have not time to enter all these dreams, is to go back in time, back before Chaucer, before Langland, before Dante was born, before the battle of Hastings, when French with its soft syllables and rhymes began to insinuate into the clashing consonants of Anglo-Saxon, back to the beginning of known English poetry to a dream poem which is at once a crowning Christian achievement and the fulfilment of a still more ancient past.

As we prepare to travel back to the beginnings of English verse its worth hearing a passage from *Bone Dreams* a dream poem of Seamus Heaney's in his collection *North* which is an exploration of the Saxon and Norse part of our inheritance. In these few lines Heaney takes us on a journey back through the different diction and styles that make up English, back to the kind of language the kind of poetry which stands at the threshold of our language:

I push back  
through dictions,  
Elizabethan canopies.  
Norman devices,  
the erotic mayflowers  
of Provence  
and the ivied latins  
of churchmen  
to the scop's  
twang, the iron  
flash of consonants

cleaving the line.

### 5) Introducing The Dream of the Rood

We are going to look now at a masterpiece of dream poetry which stands at the very beginning of English literature. Nobody knows how old it is, but it must have been composed by the end of the seventh century, or the very beginning of the eighth, for a key passage from it is engraved in the old runic writing on a stone cross in Ruthwell in Scotland, which has been dated to that period. Another small portion of it is engraved on a silver reliquary said to contain a fragment of the true cross in Brussels, but the full poem is found in its entirety only in one manuscript now in Vercelli in north Italy, once a halting place for English Pilgrims on their way to Rome. The poem may have found its way to an Italian Monastery, but the really significant thing about it is that it is not a *Latin* poem, a hymn of the church. It is aware of the Latin tradition and seems to draw in places on the great Latin hymns which celebrated the cross of Christ and explored the paradox of his victory on the tree of defeat. But the Language of this poem and with and through the language its rhythm, its echoes, and the world it draws with it, is *Old English*, the northern barbarian tongue, the language of the Saxon warriors who had at first come in their long dragon-ships setting flame to the monasteries, celebrating their own heroes in their terse and powerful alliterative verse. At the time the dream was composed the gospel was still comparatively new to these shores. Not all of the Saxons were converted and the poem arises from the first shining of the Light of Christ on the ancient pagan culture of the north.

To hear "the scop's twang, the iron flash of consonants cleaving the line" was to enter the world of those who sprang from *Ask* and *Embla*, ash and elm trees whom in the beginning the Gods made human, not from the Semitic world of Adam and Eve, who came to trees as outsiders only to pluck their fruit. The poet certainly knows about Eden and the tree of life that grew beside the fatal tree, he knows as Bede knew, the link embedded deep in the language of symbol, between Adam's Tree and Christ's Cross: "About the same hour in which the first man touched the tree of paradise, the second man ascended the tree of redemption" But, as we shall see, he also knows about *Yggdrasil*, the world-tree, and how Odin the all-father himself hung there.

Paul had said in the letter to the Romans that even in the pagan places God had not left himself without a witness, (Rom. 1:19-21) and in the Acts of the Apostles his famous speech to the pagan Athenians set out the basis on which a fruitful missionary encounter between Christ and pagan culture might take place. He sees the altar to the Unknown God and says *him whom you worship without knowing, him I preach*, (Acts 17:23) going on to develop the idea that even before the coming of the Gospel there are in pagan culture true elements real revelations from God about who he is, but these elements are mixed with falsehoods and delusions. The coming of the Gospel puts them into their true perspective fulfilling and completing what was hinted at or half-said in the old myths. Every nation and culture is called "to seek the lord, if haply they might feel after him and find him, though he is not far from every one of us" and Paul then goes on to quote a pagan poet in support of a truth from the Christian Gospel; "For in him we live and move and have our being, as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also His

offspring".(Acts 17:27-28)

What we witness in this poem is the wonderful transformation of a pagan inheritance through the power of the Christian story, but at the same time the Christian story is itself opened up to us in a new way by the emphasis and perspective that comes from the pagan past.

In the Vercelli manuscript this poem has no title and indeed it draws partly on the Saxon tradition of the enigma and the riddle. Although later scholars have always referred to it as *The Dream of the Rood*, we should not let that title influence us or jump to conclusions before the poet brings us to them. Part of the power of this poem comes from the fact that the mysterious tree the dreamer sees, and the young hero whom it bears are not named until well into the poem and at a fitting and climactic moment. The text that follows draws from the original Old English, the late professor Bennett's translation, which reflects the unrhymed powerful rhythmic alliteration of the original, and Helen Gardner's beautiful alliterative translation. Of course to understand this poem in its depth, and read it in some of the five ways we spoke about in the Introduction, we will have to lay the translation aside and savour the untranslatable sounds of the original, as the strong clean, compacted staves of Saxon poetry.

### **i) opening lines**

Let us begin by hearing in its original words the strong opening lines of this masterpiece:

Hwæt! Ic swefna cyst secgan wylle,  
hwæt me gemætte to midre nihte,  
syðþan reordberend reste wunedon!

Hearken, the rarest of dreams I purpose to tell  
Which I dreamed one midnight

When men with their voices were at rest (Lines 1-3 Bennett's translation)

*Hwæt*, the opening sound of this poem is untranslatable. modern versions give *Lo!* or *Hearken!* but *Hwæt* is the ritual opening made by the *scop*, the tribal poet, taking his harp in the hall to announce to the company that what follows is epic or high verse, a celebration of the great stories of the gods and ancestors, the stories that tell a people who they are. It is the word that begins the story of Beowulf's struggle with Grendel and with the dragon. Then the poet announces that he will tell the rarest of dreams which he dreamed one midnight "after the race of men had gone to their rest." the description of the dream as *rarest* and its placing at midnight give clear signals that what follows is not *Insomnium* or *Visio*, the shallower levels of dreaming through which the mind passes first in dreaming, but is rather a true *somnium*, and more for it is as we see an *Oraculum* the highest form of dream of all.

The reference to the race of men sleeping prepares us subtly for the fact that it is not one of the race of men who speaks in the dream, but it also tells us something about the meaning of humanity for the poet. The Saxon word translated "race of men" or "humankind", or as Bennett does "men with their word" is *reordberend*. This means, literally, *speech-bearers*. To call human beings *speech-bearers* is to distinguish them from the animal kingdom not because they are unique but because they now bear

company with the angels who speak God's praises and with the Lord himself who gave men speech who is himself the Word and as the Word, was made flesh to redeem the word-bearers. The poetic device here is called a *kenning* and is frequent in Saxon and Norse poetry. The northern poets would never call a spade a spade if they could have the pleasure of calling it an earth-biter. A bear is called a bee-wolf (Beowulf) for its love of honey, the sea is the whale-road, a good lord is a ring-giver. Sometimes, especially in Nordic verse, there are kennings within kennings, as the poet's playful riddling helps you to see your world in a new way. So for example, an amber bracelet round a wrist becomes in a double-kenning *fire of the hawk's high cliff*. The kenning here, *speech-bearer* has the poetic effect of heightening the drama, for in the dream a speech-bearer is silent whilst a tree acquires powers of speech, powers that inevitably carry echoes of the pagan past in which men could learn wisdom from trees.

**ii) What kind of Tree is this?**

It seemed to me I saw the strangest of trees,  
lifted aloft in the air with light all around it  
of all beams the brightest. It stood as a beacon  
Drenched in gold; gleaming gems were set  
fair round its foot; five such flamed  
High upon its cross-branch. (Lines 4-9 Gardner's Translation)

It is important that we do not lose the sense of this *sylicre treow* (as it is called in Old English) is a *tree*. We must not immediately impose upon it our later sense of a precisely made cross. We must not either literally or symbolically cut it off from its roots, from the sense, to which we have already alluded, of its gathering into those roots the marvellous trees both of Scripture and of the Pagan North. It is first a tree. But this strange tree, lifted aloft and shining in the air, is also a *beacen*, a beacon, that is a sign which has been set up to convey a truth and to shine a light in dark places. I have stood before the Ruthwell cross in Dumfriesshire which bears a part of this poem written in the ancient runic lettering, itself a beacon set up to speak through its signs and symbols to the mixed Celts and Saxons who cast their eyes up to it. JAW Bennett describes it brilliantly in the opening of his wonderful last book *Poetry of the Passion*:

“The Passage cited thereon forms part of a complex programme of lettering and sculpture and was evidently chosen because of its peculiar fitness for a rood-like pillar, making it verily a speaking cross. A monument of such dramatic power, carved with such masterly assurance, set up on the very limits of north-west Europe some fifty years after the Synod of Whitby and probably before Charlemagne was born, must still astonish us. It is rightly called a *beacn*, a beacon, a sign. It casts a strong beam of light in what we are pleased to call the Dark Ages. It should be the first object of English pilgrimage”.

The tree lifted aloft the shining beacon wound round with light, becomes a great sign in the sky reaching from earth to heaven, binding together men and angels and indeed all creation in a sense of wonder:

... "Hosts of angels gazed upon it  
In world-without-end glory. This was no felon's gallows.  
Holy souls in heaven hailed it with wonder  
And mortal men on earth and all the maker wrought. (Lines 9-12 Gardner)

In these and the forgoing lines we are really being invited to see three things simultaneously, each as it were set through and beyond the other. There is first the beautiful jewelled cross, *begotten mid gold* gleaming with jewels, like Cuthbert's cross in Durham, like the reliquary on which some of these lines were engraved, but then through and behind the gold and jewels are light and the stars themselves, this is a great cross of light in the sky such as Constantine saw and was told *In hoc signo vinces* before his victory at Milvian Bridge (312). But if we listen to the Saxon words a third level becomes apparent the gems *faegere at foldan sceatum* are rendered in Bennett's more accurate translation not *fair round its foot* but *fair at earth's four corners*, the cross-beam is *thanne eaxlgespanne*, both phrases recalling the axle-tree one of the names of *Yggdrasil* the great ash tree of Norse mythology, whose top was in Asgard or heaven and whose roots were in Hell. This tree spanned and supported the nine worlds of Norse imagination. The name *Ygg Drasil* means literally the steed of *Ygg* or *Odin* for he climbed on it and rode it to the nine worlds. But it was on the tree that Odin underwent the most terrible rite of passage, for like the Christ, the coming one who was to show the true meaning of Odin's story and realise it in history, in the flesh, Odin was wounded to the death with a spear and hung nine days and nine nights upon the sacred tree. It was hanging on the tree that he was able to look down and see where the tree had cut markings into stone with its roots. Over those nine nights Odin deciphered the markings and found in them the secret of the magical alphabet known as runes. When in the refrain of some of the Scottish and border ballads there comes the repeated oath *by him that hung on tree*, scholars are divided as to whether it is a Christian reference, a pagan survival or something of both.

I think the poet here is perfectly clear. I think he is deliberately evoking and gathering the memory and the power of his pagan past, which is carried by the very meter and cadence of his verse, and allowing it find both its fulfilment and its judgement in the cross of Christ. For though Odin hung on *Yggdrasil*, though he visited the dead, though he gained the power of resurrection, he was no saviour. He could not meet or deal with our pain and alienation. Through his suffering he acquired personal power and magic knowledge, but he emerges in his resurrection as an incalculable one-eyed God exercising the power he learned from the runic alphabet entirely at and for his own behest, not as a self offering to take away the dreamer's sins and win him heaven. This is why the sculptor of the Ruthwell cross was making such a supremely powerful statement, lighting such a powerful beacon, when he chose the ancient runic alphabet to write the words we are about to read, when the tree itself speaks the real meaning and power of the life and death of Him Who hung upon it.

### iii) Transfiguration

Having given us this powerful and all-encompassing triple image of such cosmic proportions the poet with a master stroke produces a kind of reverse transfiguration which takes us to the heart of his vision. Whereas in the gospel transfiguration Christ labouring up mount Tabor with the disciples in all his obvious humanity, is at the summit transfigured before them so that they glimpse, shining through the weakness of the human body, the eternal glory. Here the poet invites us to look through the light and glory, through the outer decking of gold and jewels, to the pain and agony beneath. And he subtly prepares us for the meaning of the *staining* of the cross with sweat and blood which he is about to describe, of the *wounding* of its wood, by introducing first his own stain and woundedness, and ours:

Strange was that tree of triumph - and I a transgressor  
stained by my sins. I saw the tree of Glory. (lines 13-14)

is how Helen Gardner puts it which brings out the juxtaposition of triumph and transgression, glory and stain, though it does no justice to the original's strong "*forwunded mid womum*" which means deeply wounded by defilement.

A weaker poet would have been content simply with this contrast between the glorious golden cross and the poor defiled sinner. But not this poet. He invites us instead to share an extraordinary *double-vision* which almost anticipates the effects achieved by some modern photographers and film makers, in which we see alternately and then as it were simultaneously, *both* the gold's glory *and* the sweat and blood upon the wounded wood. Here Helen Gardner's rendering is wonderful:

Yet beneath the gold I glimpsed the signs  
Of some ancient agony when again as of old  
Its right side sweated blood. Sorrow seized me;  
I was full of fear. I saw the beacon flicker,  
Now dazzling, now darkened; at times drenched and dripping,  
running red with blood, at times a royal treasure (lines 18-23)

Like the *souls blood* in Herbert's *Prayer* which is both the souls pain and its life, so the vision here does not ask us to choose between a harrowing empathy with Christ in his human weakness or a triumphal affirmation of his glory as God the Son, between a horrified understanding of the cross as a dreadful gibbet, and a devotion to it as a sign of salvation. Instead we are asked to affirm these twin sets of truths simultaneously and are offered a single image with which to embody them.

If the poem had ended here it would already have been an achievement but it is in the lines that follow that it realises its true dramatic power, for now we move, in the poets Latin world through *somnium* and *Visio* to *Oraculum*, and in his pagan world to the memory of the sentient, magical and speaking woods, for now the tree speaks, and here it is worth savouring the sounds of the original Anglo-Saxon:

#### iv) The Tree Speaks

"þæt wæs geara iu, (ic þæt gyta geman),  
þæt ic wæs aheawen holtes on ende,  
astyred of stefne minum. Genaman me ðær strange feondas,  
geworhton him þær to wæfersyne, heton me heora wergas hebban.

It was long since, yet I well remember

That I was hewn down at wood-edge

Struck off from my stem. Strong foes seized me,

Set me up for a spectacle, bade me raise their felons (Lines 27-31 Bennett's translation)

Bennett rightly points out here "the plain, staccato and intensely human language of the Saxon Rood" with its "rush of kinetic verbs that pile up as if expressing both the agitation of the speaker and the feverish activity of the men: **genamen...geworhton...heton...baeron...asetton...gefaestnodon...**This language at once establishes a humility of tone, consonant with the tree's obedience to its Lord."

The story the tree has to tell starts with disaster for itself,

struck off from my stem. Strong foes seized me

Set me up for a spectacle...

...foes aplenty fastened me...

So that when it says

....Far off then I saw

The King of all mankind coming in great haste,

With courage keen...(lines 33-4 Gardner's translation)

We have a momentary sense that this might be a rescue. In our woundedness, our rootlessness, the captivity and humiliation of our fallen nature, we identify with the tree. As with the tree we see man's lord approaching us *with courage keen*, we have kindled in us a hope that everything will be sorted out forthwith, the enemies simply overthrown, all our cares and suffering dealt with suddenly, dramatically taken away as it were in an instant by an intervening hand from on high. So often these are the prayers we make, that is the kind of God we would like. Not one who enters into and declares himself in the midst of our suffering and alienation, but one who will simply snap his fingers and take these things away. The poet refuses us this fantasy, but through the images and words of his dream takes us instead into the real depth of the Christian Gospel which is that our experience of alienation and suffering, our woundedness and coming death are too deep and too real to be magicked away. They must be redeemed, and to redeem them Christ must enter into them, take them into himself, bear them for us. "He is made to *be* sin who knew no sin"(2Cor.5:21), he is *made a curse* he is obedient even unto death. He cannot ultimately *take away* our sin unless he *takes it on*. He must *take it on* first in the sense of enduring it

himself before he can *take it on* in the second and glorious sense of doing battle against it and winning victory on our behalf. And this is the meaning of the next half-line and the extraordinary experience the rood goes on to describe. The young hero comes with courage to climb onto him, to embrace him, to identify absolutely with his condition.

#### v) Christ the hero

The King comes

With courage keen, eager to climb me

I did not dare against my Lord's dictate,

to bow down or break, though I beheld tremble

The earth's four corners.. I could easily

Have felled his foes; yet fixed and firm I stood.

Then the young Hero -it was God Almighty-

Strong and steadfast, stripped himself for battle;

He climbed up on the high gallows, constant in his purpose,

Mounted it in the sight of many, mankind to ransom. (Lines 34-42 Gardner's Translation)

This whole approach is so different from the purely historical one we might be used to. The poet does not use any of the gospel material about the events leading up to the crucifixion, indeed he has up to this point still not directly named Christ. Instead, building up towards his identity, in the Norse riddling tradition, by a series of titles, *frea manicures*, man's lord, *geeing health*, young hero or as Bennett gives it *young warrior*, though here, still without naming the name he draws aside the veil of the young warrior in order to get the full power of the paradox of incarnation between "young" and "God Almighty". So we have in one line. The young hero- it was God almighty.

Where he does reflect the Gospels in this poem, and indeed the rest of the NT is not at the level of historical narrative, the telling of the outer events, but at the level of exploring their inner meaning. Running throughout the New Testament is a double strand of understanding about the crucifixion. On the one hand, from a human perspective, we see it as a huge and horrific injustice in which an innocent man is falsely arrested stripped beaten and tortured to death, hung upon a felon's gallows. At this level we see Christ in his humanity entering into and enduring the suffering through coercion which sinful people inflict on one another. Nailed to the cross, unable to move, he is the picture of total human weakness and vulnerability in the face of evil and death. On the other level, from the perspective of Heaven, from the perspective of God's purpose in Christ from the beginning, Christ is not a passive victim, who is done unto, but is in charge of events, embodying the vigorous and active love of God which has come forth from heaven to take on and defeat all that would harm and destroy his beloved creature man. In this sense he really is a mighty warrior coming to our rescue.

Within the Gospels these strands are differently emphasised by different Gospel writers. Mark emphasises the *passio* in passion, after the arrest of Jesus nearly all the verbs about him are passive, he is *done unto*. John, on the other hand, from the moment of his arrest emphasises the sense in which Christ, not Pilate is really in control. John uses the title King for Christ over a dozen times. In John, Christ says at the beginning "the son of man must be lifted up" (Jn 3:14) and shows the cross as an *exaltation* and a moment of victory, and again has Christ saying "no-one takes my life from me it is mine to lay down and mine to take up again" (Jn 10:18).

The great task for any poet dealing with this matter is to do justice to both sides of this mystery in the *combined* action and passion of Christ. For at the heart of it is the deeper mystery of what the theologians have called the dual nature of Christ, that he is *both* fully human *and* fully divine at one and the same time, the two natures subsisting in one single person. Reason alone, certainly post-enlightenment reason alone, simply cannot deal with this. It demands a more subtle and complex response. In fact only the arts, certainly poetry, but also painting and music, have come anywhere close to embracing simultaneously both parts of the paradox and expressing the mystery adequately. The way the poet does it here is so to identify the *cross itself*, whom the nails also pierce, with the *passion* of Christ that the cross is able to express and symbolise that *passion* whilst at the same time witnessing and celebrating the *action* of Christ the saving hero. We can see in more detail at how this happens in the lines we have just examined, and those that follow, hearing them this time in the power of the original language:

Ongyrede hine þa geong hæleð, (þæt wæs god ælmihtig,

*Ongyred* is an astonishing word. Hammer's translation, otherwise good in places has *got ready* which is inadequate. In other contexts *Ongyred* carries that sense of preparing, especially preparing for a contest or a battle, but it actually means to *strip* or *divest* oneself. Bennet gives *stripped himself*, Helen Gardner is even better with *Stripped himself for battle*, but it takes four words strung-out in modern English to convey what is in one pithy word of Anglo-Saxon. But what is the thought? What are the allusions lying behind this picture of the young hero stripping himself for battle before he climbs the cross?

At one level there is the image of an athlete stripping himself ready for the race, an image which had already been applied to Christ through the allegorical way the Church read the Bible and through its Latin hymns. The beautiful picture of the sun rising in the O.T. poem Psalm 19:verse five:

He is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race had been applied by the Church to that other sun the Son of God, who came from the chamber of the virgin's womb and , as Ambrose's Latin hymn on the verse puts it, eagerly runs his course.

*Ongyrede* here though conveys more than just the preparation of the warrior-athlete, if we take it in its deeper sense of *stripped*. Firstly it alludes to, but at the same time reverses the emphasis of the gospel

account of the forcible stripping of Christ before the crucifixion. For in a paradox the poet is saying that although, to the outward eye others were stripping Christ for humiliation, in truth, to the inward eye that sees reality, Christ was stripping himself for action. And almost certainly the poet, in choosing this word, has in mind the great passage where Paul speaks of the *kenosis* of God, his self-emptying, his stripping away from himself of the glories of Heaven in order to enter the travail of earth for us, Christ:

"...though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -even death on a cross."(Phil 2:6-8)

So stripped and ready, strong and steadfast, the young hero climbed the high gallows. Again it is an active choosing to climb the tree. Behind it probably lies the passage from Bede we alluded to earlier "About the time the first man touched the tree of paradise, the second man ascended the tree of redemption." This is an image which George Herbert was also later to use in his poem *The Sacrifice*: "*Man stole the fruit, but I must climb the tree*".

This climbing of the tree is witnessed by many because it is done for many :  
modig on manigra gesyhðe, þa he wolde mancyn lysan . (line 41)

*Modig* means both bravely and proudly and is a kind of showing of inner glory in the midst of what is meant to be outward humiliation. And then in the second half of the line the poet reveals what this crucifixion is all for, and returns us as it were to that hope of rescue kindled in the first sight of the young hero:

þa he wolde mancyn lysan,

Gardner has "*mankind to ransom*, Hamer "*to redeem mankind*" but both these are too sophisticated, too much after-the event, using theological jargon, something the poet for all his depth and theological subtlety never does. The poet's word *lysan*, gives us modern English *loosen, loose untie, set free*, which Bennett expands into: "*Resolved to loose man's bonds*". With an eye, as always, to the paradox of his mystery, the poet has offered the word for *loosen* just as Christ is to be *fastened*, through-driven with dark nails, as he puts it a few lines later. His *fastening* is our *freedom*. *Mancyn* harks back to the title he gives Him earlier *freaþ mancynnes*. *Freaþ* is the Norse for God or Lord but also puns with *freog* meaning free. He is *Freaþ mancynnes*, Mankind's Lord because he will *loosen* Mankind, set Mankind free. Here, as we have noted, the contrast is implicit with the other *Freaþ*, the god Odin, who hung on the tree not openly in the sight of many to set mankind free, but secretly in the occult passage-making of the shaman and in order to acquire the hidden knowledge whereby he would have power, certainly to loose, but also to bind others.

#### vi) The poem's polarities

The entire energy of this poem is generated by its skilfully holding in tension the two sets of polarities

from which its power to move us flows: the polarity between Christian and Pagan Faith, and within the Christian gospel, the Polarity between the passion of Christ's human suffering and action of His divine battling against, and victory over evil and death. Having evoked the latter with these images of the young warrior the poet now returns us to the former in the next few lines with his close identification of the tree's experience with that of the suffering Christ:

Horror seized me when the hero clasped me  
But I dared not bow or bend to the earth  
Nor falter nor fall; firm I needs must stand...  
They drove dark nails through me, the dire wounds still show,  
Cruel gaping gashes, yet I dared not give as good.  
They taunted the two of us; I was wet with teeming blood,  
Streaming from the warriors side when he sent forth his spirit  
High upon that hill helpless I suffered  
Long hours of torment;...(lines 42-50 Gardner's translation)

What is so moving here is the sense of having to restrain all the desire, to hurt back, the impulse to vengeance, which was part of the pagan ethic. This desire to give as good as we get is subsumed instead into something, also deep in the pagan ethic, which at last finds its truest expression in this poem, that is the courage of endurance, to be *strang and stidmod*, this is the virtue celebrated so brilliantly in the great last stand against the Vikings in the Battle of Maldon, courage which is called upon and inspired just at the point when the beloved leader has died:

Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,  
mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað.  
Her lið ure ealdor eall forheawen,  
god on greote. A mæg gnornian  
se ðe nu fram þis wigplegan wendan þenceð.  
Ic eom frod feores; fram ic ne wille,  
ac ic me be healfe minum hlaforde,  
be swa leofan men, licgan þence." (linea 312-319)

Mind must be harder spirit must be bolder  
And heart the greater as our might frows less  
Here lies our leader in the dust....  
...hence I will not  
but I intend to die beside my lord

give up my life beside so dear a chief

The impulse to endure all things with the chieftain and die beside him in battle is transformed in the *Dream* into this intense identification with the agony of Christ, this refusal to bend or bow as the dreadful deeds are done simultaneously to Christ and the cross. The poem then goes on to blend in a brilliant fusion, the two pagan forms. On the one hand elegy for the fallen hero, and on the other battle song of his triumph, since uniquely the crucifixion is an instance simultaneously of death and of triumphant victory.

### vii) The climax

Now the poem moves towards its climax when the rood, the mysterious tree, at last fully and formally names the one who hangs upon it, building towards the naming of that name in perhaps the most concentrated and dramatically placed half-line in all of English verse:

...I saw the Lord of Hosts

Outstretched in agony; all embracing darkness  
covered with thick clouds the corpse of the world's ruler

The bright day was darkened by a deep shadow  
all its colours clouded; the whole creation wept

Keened for its King's fall; Christ was on the rood. (lines 51-56 Gardner's Translation)

Though not even Helen Gardner's brilliant translation can do justice to the terse power of the original text in those last two lines:

wann under wolcnum. Weop eal gesceaft,  
cwiðdon cyninges fyll. Crist wæs on rode.

From out of the darkness of *wann under wolcnum* comes the powerful half-line *weop ealgesceaft -all creation wept*. The power these words exercise in gathering in all that has gone before exemplify not only this poet's skill, but also the essence of poetry itself. Firstly *weop eal gesceaft*, picks up and gathers in the earlier phrase *eall peos maera gesceaft -all this wondrous creation*, which he had used in lines 11-12, before the rood began to speak, to show that it was indeed the world-tree that all the levels of being, holy souls, men on the earth and all this wondrous creation, beheld. And now at the moment of Christ's death *eall gesceaft* is weeping.. The poets repeated phrase secondly gathers in and echoes a weeping or groaning of all creation which he finds in the New Testament :

For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth together in pain until now. (Romans 8:22)  
But as we have seen, the poetic medium and language in which he has chosen to work is full of echoes from the Norse stories which the poet is also re-calling and redeeming. Here *weop eall gesceaft* recalls the story of Balder the beautiful, the shining god of light who was killed by his own blind brother

through the machinations of Loki and who would be restored to life only if *eall gesceaft* the whole creation wept for him. The story of Balder's death is perhaps the most moving in the whole Norse cycle, and it more than foreshadows or reflects the story of Christ, it actually communicates it to some people, to some imaginations, to some northern souls, in a way that the stories of Latin and Semitic culture simply cannot approach, as we shall see at the end of this chapter when we consider how the issues of this poem resolved themselves in the life of a man of our own century.

*Crist was on rode* is really the climax and the point of the whole poem. The rood's narrative thereafter with its gentle and moving account of the deposition is as much a part of the necessary setting of that line as were all the lines which preceded it.

### **viii) The Tree Now**

In the ensuing lines the cross continues its extraordinary double role as both the witness of the saviours sufferings and as one who is absolutely identified with the same sufferings, to the extent that the cross, like the saviour, has its own deposition and burial. But the cross continues also as a witness, and by its apparition in the dream, also enters in its own way into a resurrection. The tree has become, through the poem, so completely identified with the Christ who suffered upon it that it is able, as a symbol, to carry to the dreamer all that Christ is:

Now you have heard beloved hero

How I endured the evil men did to me,

Suffered great sorrow. Now the season is come

When all things honour me, here and everywhere,

mortal men on earth and all the maker wrought (lines 78-82 Gardner's translation)

In the fiction of the poem these words are uttered to the dreamer by the cross about itself, in fact they are the words of the risen Christ about Himself. But the tree that bore him speaks with the honour of Christ and invites the dreamer to pray to or rather through him in order himself to participate in Christ's glory as Christ has participated in his suffering. And so there is a resolution of all things when, after the tree has finished speaking, we return to the voice of the narrator whose ancestors would once certainly have prayed to a tree and thought of it as one on which Odin had fared forth to other worlds, now also prays to a tree, but how transformed a tree, and how transformed his and our vision of the world when he says:

Then I prayed to that blessed beam, blithe in spirit,

With courage keen; no comrade was by me,

I lay there alone. There was longing in my heart,

I was fain to fare forth... (lines 122-125 Gardner's translation)

### **6) The poem in our own age.**

Though this poem might be seen as the most remote from us in time, culture, and language of all the poems we shall study, I do not think it is remote at all. It was written in an age of transition, of tension

between the old and the new, and we live in just such an age again. Moreover the mythical northern world of its ancestry was not only not dead then, it is not dead now. It still haunts our memories and kindles our imaginations in a way in which even the most ornate Classical myths can never do. I thought it would be interesting to look at the influence the world of this poem and the issues it raises exercised on the formation of the mind and faith of someone of our own time. The story of the conversion of C.S. Lewis provides a very interesting side-light here on what myth, especially great myth of this kind is, and why Orthodox Christianity need not be afraid of it. Lewis, an Ulsterman, fell fully in love with the North, the whole cycle of story and legend which it embodies, as a child. It touched his soul and imagination in ways that Christianity, which he associated with "ugly, architecture, ugly music and bad poetry" had thus far failed to do. This was because the Norse stories addressed themselves directly to his imagination and he did not learn until much later in life that he might encounter the Gospel as much with his imagination rather as with his post-enlightenment reason or his sense of duty. He had joy of these great stories, but the cultural apartheid of his day prevented him from feeling he might have truth from them as well, until a great thinker, Owen Barfield, himself drawing on Coleridge, and a great poet, JRR Tolkien, both Lewis' personal friends, helped him to break down the barriers and rediscover the unified and transfiguring way of seeing which is really the subject of this book. Here is how it happened. In *Surprised by Joy* Lewis gives an account of three moments of transfiguration, moments of sudden Joy, experienced in early childhood, which came much later to be part of a thread of experiences that led him to Christ. It is the third "glimpse" as he calls it, which arose from reading poetry that concerns us here.

"The third glimpse came through poetry. I had become fond of Longfellow's Saga of King Olaf: fond of it in a casual shallow way for its story and its vigorous rhythms. But then, and quite different from such pleasures, and like a voice from far more distant regions, there came a moment when I idly turned the pages of the book and found the unrhymed translation of Tegner's Drapa and read

*I heard a voice that cried  
Balder the beautiful  
Is dead, is dead*

I knew nothing about Balder; but instantly I was uplifted into huge regions of northern sky, I desired with almost sickening intensity something never to be described (except that it is cold, spacious, severe, pale and remote and then, as in the other examples, found myself at the very same moment already falling out of that desire and wishing I were back in it."

He goes on to describe how this first encounter with Balder developed into a deep engagement with the whole world he inhabited, including of course the stories of Odin and the world-tree which we have looked at. So that when he published his first book, *Dymer*, a long poetry cycle, he prefaced it with this line from the Norse Havamal:

*Nine nights I hung upon the tree, wounded with the spear as an offering to Odin, myself sacrificed to myself.*

Unfortunately Lewis was fully in the grip of the post-enlightenment apartheid of which we spoke in the

last lecture, in which imagination could have nothing to do with the insights of reason, which was itself thereby weakened and dwindled into mere rationalism. As Lewis himself starkly put it:

Such then was the state of my imaginative life; over against it stood the life of my intellect. The two hemispheres of my mind were in the sharpest contrast. On the one side a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other a glib and shallow "rationalism". Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless."

The first bridge to be thrown across this great divide was made for Lewis by the thinking and scholarship of his friend Owen Barfield. Barfield was a great student of Coleridge, not only as a poet but as a philosopher and he was able over the course of many years friendship and argument to persuade Lewis of the truth which Coleridge, reacting against enlightenment at its height had hammered out, that Imagination and aesthetic experience have as much right to be considered windows onto real truth as does purely rational argument. Having shown Lewis that he must take his imagination at least as seriously as he took his capacity for reason, Barfield went on to demonstrate, in a great and much under-valued book *Poetic Diction*, (a book he dedicated to Lewis) that Myth, far from being something peripheral or infantile to be left behind as man grows and develops, has in fact a central place in the whole development and meaning of the structures of language and thought by which we know ourselves. Lewis then met and became close friends with Tolkien, a man who deeply shared Lewis' love of all things Northern. Tolkien was as a professor of Old English, thoroughly versed in all the Norse and Anglo-Saxon poetry, but he was also an instructed Catholic Christian, whose Faith gave him the basis for a coherent critique of modernism. Tolkien had already achieved the integration of faith, imagination and reason towards which he was now to enable Lewis to struggle. A significant part of that integration especially in the context of this poem and of the conversation which brought insight to Lewis was that Tolkien loved and understood trees, not simply as part of the subject matter of botany but as they actually are, which includes a great deal more than their botany. We take up the account of the impact of Tolkien's ideas as it is told by Humphrey Carpenter in the *Inklings* drawing largely on the words of Lewis and Tolkien themselves in subsequent letters, for this was a momentous conversation and both of them reflected a great deal on it afterwards. I quote it at length because it revisits almost all the themes we have encountered so far in the consideration of the *Dream* and will continue to explore throughout this book.. Indeed the great passage in which Tolkien considers what a tree really is, relates not only to how we are to read *The Dream of the Rood* but also to the very issue raised by Heaney in *Rainstick*: the full reality is always more than *the fall of grit and dry seeds*. This is Carpenter's account of the conversation that took place almost exactly 66 years ago as Lewis, Tolkien, and Hugo Dyson strolled through Magdalen grounds late on a Saturday in Sept. 1931, discussing metaphor and myth:

Lewis had never underestimated the power of myth. Far from it, for one of his earliest loves had been the Norse Myth of the dying god Balder. Now, Barfield had shown him the crucial role that mythology had played in the history of language and literature. But he still did not *believe* in the myths that delighted him. Beautiful and moving though such stories might be, they were (he said) ultimately untrue. As he expressed it to Tolkien, myths are "lies and therefore worthless, even though breathed through silver."

No, said Tolkien. *They are not lies.*

Just then (Lewis afterwards recalled) there was "a rush of wind which came so suddenly on the still, warm evening and sent so many leaves pattering down that we thought it was raining. We held our breath."

When Tolkien resumed, he took his argument from the very thing that they were watching.

You look at trees, he said, and call them "trees", and probably you do not think twice about the word. You call a star a "star", and think nothing more of it. But you must remember that these words "tree", "star", were in their original forms names given to these objects by people with very different views from yours. To you, a tree is simply a vegetable organism, and a star simply a ball of inanimate matter moving along a mathematical course. But the first men to talk of "trees" and "stars" saw things very differently. To them the world was alive with mythological beings. They saw the stars as living silver, bursting into flame in answer to the eternal music. They saw the sky as a jewelled tent, and the earth as the womb whence all living things have come. To them the whole of creation was "myth-woven and elf-patterned".

This was not a new notion to Lewis, for Tolkien was, in his own manner, expressing what Barfield had said in *Poetic Diction*. Nor, said Lewis did it effectively answer his point that myths are lies.

But, replied Tolkien, man is not ultimately a liar. He may pervert his thoughts to lies, but he comes from God, and it is from God that he draws his ultimate ideals... Therefore, Tolkien continued, not merely the abstract thoughts of man *but also his imaginative inventions* must originate with God, and must in consequence reflect something of eternal truth. In making a myth...a person is actually fulfilling God's purpose, and reflecting a splintered fragment of the true light. Pagan myths are therefore never just "lies": there is always something of the truth in them.

They talked on, until Lewis was convinced by the force of Tolkien's argument. But he had another question to put to his friends, and they decided to go indoors...There, he recorded, "we continued on Christianity".

Lewis had a particular reason for holding back from Christianity. He did not think it was necessarily untrue: indeed he had examined the historicity of the gospels, and had come to the conclusion that he was "nearly certain that it really happened". What was still preventing him from becoming a Christian was the fact that he found it irrelevant.

As he himself put it, he could not see "how the life and death of Someone Else (whoever he was) two thousand years ago could help us here and now -except in so far as his example could help us." And he knew that Christ's example as a man and a teacher was not the centre of the Christian story. "Right in the centre", he said, "in the Gospels and in St. Paul, you keep on getting something quite different and very mysterious, expressed in those phrases I have so often ridiculed -"propitiation" - "sacrifice" - "the blood of the Lamb"." He had ridiculed them because they seemed not only silly and shocking but meaningless. What is the point of it all? How could the death and resurrection of Christ have "saved the world"?

Tolkien answered him immediately. Indeed, he said, the solution was actually a development of what he

had been saying earlier. Had he not shown how pagan myths were in fact God expressing himself through the minds of poets, and using their images to express fragments of His eternal truth? Well then, Christianity (he said) is exactly the same thing -with the enormous difference that the poet who invented it was God Himself, and the images He used were real men and actual history.

Do you mean, asked Lewis, that the death and Resurrection of Christ is the old "dying god" story all over again?

Yes, Tolkien answered, except that here is a *real* Dying God, with a precise location in history and definite historical consequences. The old myth has become a fact. But it still retains the character of a myth. So that in asking what it "meant", Lewis was really being rather absurd. Did he ask what the story of Balder, or Adonis, or any of the other dying gods in pagan myth "meant"? No, of course not. He enjoyed these stories, "tasted" them, and got something out of them that he could not get from abstract argument. Could he not transfer that attitude, that appreciation of *story*, to the life and death of Christ? Could he not treat it *as* a story, be fully aware that he could draw nourishment from it which he could never find in a list of abstract truths? Could he not realise that it *is* a myth, and make himself receptive to it?...Twelve days later Lewis wrote to Arthur Greeves: "I have just passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ -in Christianity. I will try to explain this another time. My long night talk with Dyson and Tolkien had a good deal to do with it."

Given the way all the great themes of this poem were so deeply woven with a life-changing experience for Lewis it is not surprising that he records in *Surprised by Joy* "I was deeply moved by *The Dream of the Rood*."

And so, painfully and by great exercise of learning and imagination, Lewis, in the Twentieth century, attained to that re-integrated vision, that transfiguration of experience, which was the very atmosphere this anonymous 8th Century poet breathed, and which is instinct in every line he wrote.

I have no doubt that this poem which was with us before the present millennium began will continue to call us to a transfigured vision well into the next millennium.

Cicero *De Republica, De Legibus* text and trans. By CW Keyes Loeb Library 1928

*Macrobius on the Dream of Scipio* Trans. WH Stahl Columbia 1952

For a summary of Scipio's dream and Macrobius' commentary see CS Lewis *The Discarded Image* CUP 1964 pp 23-28, and 60-69

ibid pp.63-64

ibid p.64

Macbeth Act III:scene 4. Line 123

For a recent account of this complex multi-layering of old elements in the English sensibility see Peter Ackroyd's *Albion; The Origins of the English Imagination, Chatto and Windus, 2002*

In *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* edited by FN Robinson *OUP* 1974

A good parallel text, if one wants to have a go at the Italian, is the 3 Volume Dante; The Divine Comedy with translation and comment by John D. Sinclair, *Bodley Head*, 1961

The Vision of Piers Plowman; a critical edition of the B-Text by A.V.C. Schmidt Everyman 1978  
Seamus Heaney North *Faber* 1975

ibid p.20

For a full discussion of the history and significance of these different textual sources see Michael Swanton The Dream of the Rood, *Manchester* 1970, and *A Vision of a Rood*, the opening chapter of J.A.W. Bennett's Poetry of the Passion; studies in twelve centuries of English verse, *Oxford* 1982., which also contains a parallel text giving Bennett's own translation of the first 86 lines. A complete Old English text with parallel verse translation is to be found in Richard Hamer's A choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse selected with an introduction and parallel verse translation, *Faber*, 1970 pp.159-171. There is also a fine translation by Helen Gardner in The Faber Book of Religious Verse edited by Helen Gardner pp.25-29

Bede *De Genesis in litteram* iii.18 quoted in Bennett p.15

See Bennet p.1ff

ibid p.1

For a summary of the relevant aspects of Norse Mythology see The Myths of the Norsemen by Roger Lancelyn Green Penguin 1960. Green was a friend and Biographer of C.S.Lewis and although his book is aimed at Children it gives one of the best summaries and coherent re-tellings of this diverse material, preserving something of the atmosphere and emphasis on elements in the material which especially moved Lewis and the other Inklings. (see below, at the conclusion of this chapter for the influence of this material on Lewis's imagination)

Bennett p.5

Hamer p.163

Quoted in Bennett pp 18-19

See above note xiv

Complete Works of George Herbert p??

text and translation Hamer pp.68-69

In Surprised by Joy, Bles 1955 fount edition 1987 p 139.

Ibid pp.19-20

Dymer, J.M.Dent, 1926 (under the pseudonym Clive Hamilton)

Surprised by Joy p.138

His book What Coleridge Thought, remains a lucid guide to Coleridge's philosophy and theology of imagination

Owen Barfield Poetic Diction *Faber and Gwyer* 1928

Humphrey Carpenter *The Inklings; C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and their friends*, George Allen and Unwin, 1978

ibid pp.42-45 Carpenter writes “the account of the conversation between Lewis, Tolkien and Dyson is based on Lewis’ letter to Greeves of 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1931 and on Tolkien’s poem “Mythopoeia”

Surprised by Joy p.171