

Didacticism in the Dream of the Rood

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DIDACTICISM IN THE *DREAM OF THE ROOD*

Cet article se propose d'envisager le *Dream of the Rood* sous l'angle généralement négligé des stratégies didactiques exploitées par le poète vieil-anglais pour transmettre son message religieux. Une analyse comparative du *Dream of the Rood* et du *Physiologus* anglo-saxon révèle ainsi que le discours du *Dream* reste fidèle aux conventions de l'écriture didactique religieuse anglo-saxonne, tant par sa symbolique et son imagerie que par son principe structurel, basé sur celui de l'homélie.

The link between the Old English *Dream of the Rood* and the homily has often been noted. The presence of extracts from the poem on a preaching cross, and its inclusion in a manuscript comprising mainly homiletic material, shows clearly that the *Dream of the Rood* was felt to provide religious instruction as well as aesthetic enjoyment. As pointed out by Alvin A. Lee, the *Dream* is "a religious poem composed to achieve specific spiritual results"¹. Accepting therefore that the ultimate aim of the *Dream of the Rood* is the edification of the reader or hearer, there remains that the means used by the poet to do so are less apparent than in other didactic works; and the present note proposes to investigate the workings of the didactic element in the *Dream of the Rood*, through comparison with another religious work, of avowed didactic intent: the Old English *Physiologus*.

The Old English *Physiologus* belongs to that hugely popular medieval genre, the Bestiary, where a number of animals are described, and from their appearance and habits are drawn spiritual lessons. The genre, which apparently originated in Egypt, was first written down in Greek, and translated into Latin during the first half of the fifth century A.D.². The standard form of the Bestiary has 49 chapters, corresponding to so many animals; but the number varies from one translation to another. Of these 49 chapters, the Old English *Physiologus* retains only three, descri-

bing and commenting on the Panther, the Whale and the Partridge. Of the "Partridge" passage, only fragments remain³. D.R. Letson, in his perceptive study of the Old English *Physiologus*, describes the technique of its author as "exegetic and homiletic"⁴. *Physiologus* uses three-fold exegesis as an organisational device: "Panther" is a typological passage, presenting Christ's sacrifice and the ensuing redemption of mankind; "Whale" is tropological, describing the wiles of the devil to lure men away from their duty; and "Partridge" brings an anagogical conclusion to the trilogy, with the Christian soul returning to God. Each individual chapter makes use of the pericope format, that is, has a bipartite structure, with first the "text" (in the case of the pericope proper, a reading from the Scriptures), then a "commentary". Finally, underlines Letson, within the text itself, we find a host of moral images which "would have been as meaningful to the preachers' congregation as to the poets' audience". Whereas the Latin bestiaries are more concerned with the interpretation to give the different creatures they describe, the English poet "is vitally concerned about careful description and the *inherent* significance of that description"⁵. An important part of the message of the Old English *Physiologus* is therefore conveyed by non-explicit means, through patterns of imagery to which Letson suggests that "Old English Christian audiences were thoroughly conditioned to respond intelligently"⁶.

That poetical considerations were not felt to be incompatible with didactic intent is apparent from the opening lines of "Whale":

Nu ic fitte gen ymb fisca cynn
wille wothcraefte wordum cythan
thurh modgemynd.

Now I will recount with poetic art, by
means of words and wit, a poem
about a kind of fish.⁷

Aesthetic appreciation is used as a means of instruction in its own right, and the effectiveness of the teaching is clearly linked to poetical skill. The *Dream of the Rood* has the same cultural background as the Old English *Physiologus*, and belongs to the same genre, that of religious poetry: it is therefore legitimate to seek similar conventions underlying the two poems, and comparable techniques in putting across the message they were designed to convey. As the *Dream of the Rood* does not consist of three complementary chapters, it would of course be futile to seek an identical overall plan to the work; but there remains the possible influence of the pericope format, and the importance of imagery and symbolism as meaningful elements of the poet's discourse.

Letson identifies the basic descriptive patterns of *Physiologus* as those “involving light and darkness, beauty and ugliness, and pleasant and foul odours”; to these, he adds the notion of *colour*, with Joseph’s coat: “certainly the Joseph-Christ allegory was a near automatic association”⁸. All these descriptive elements, notes Letson, were shared by both the poetic and homiletic traditions. It is therefore hardly astonishing that the *Dream of the Rood* should present a number of parallels with “Panther”, the first part of the Old English *Physiologus*. Both poems deal with Christ’s death, his Resurrection, and the Redemption thus obtained for humanity, making use of similar descriptive elements.

We first have, in both cases, the image of changing colours, symbolizing the presence of Christ:

Thæt is wrætlic deor, wundrum scyne
 hiwa gehwylces; swa hæleth secgath
 gæsthalge guman, thætte Iosephes
 tunece wære telga gehwylces
 bleom bregdende, thara beorhtra gehwylc
 æghwæs ænlicra othrum lixte
 dryhta bearnum, swa thæs deores hiw,
 blæc brigda gehwæs, beorhtra ond scynra
 wundrum lixeth, thætte wrætlicra
 æghwylc othrum, ænlicra gien
 ond fægerra frætwum bliceth,
 symle sellicra.

He is an exquisite animal, wondrously beautiful in every hue. Just as people, pious men, say that Joseph’s coat was ashimmer with colours of every tint, each one of which shone more bright and altogether more incomparable than the other upon the children of men, so this animal’s hue, a gleam in its every variegation, brighter and more beautiful, shines wondrously so that each one ornately gleams more exquisitely than the other, yet more incomparable and more handsome, ever more exotic.

Syllic wæs se sigebēam, ond ic synnum fāh,
 forwundred mid wommum. Geseah ic wuldres
 trēow,
 wæðdum geweorthode, wynnum scīnan,
 gegyred mid golde; gimmas hæfdon
 bewrigene weorthlice wealdes trēow.

Magnificent was the cross of victory, and I was stained with sins, wounded by evil deeds. I observed that the tree of glory, enriched by its coverings, decked with gold, shone delightfully. Gems had becomingly covered the Ruler’s tree (. . .). I was fearful in the presence of that beautiful sight. I observed the urgent portent shift its coverings and its hues; at times it was soaked with wetness, drenched by the coursing of blood, at times adorned with treasure.⁹

Eall ic wæs mid
 s[orgum] gedrēfed.
 Forht ic wæs for thære fæggran gesyhthe.
 Geseah ic thæt fūse bēacen
 wendan wæðdum ond blēom; hwīlum hit wæs
 mid wætan bestēmed,
 beswyled mid swātes gange, Hwīlum mid since
 gegyrwed.

Not only do these two passages produce a similar visual effect for the reader, but we also find a number of verbal echoes which clearly show that we are dealing with imagery conventional to the theme. The Panther is “wundrum scyne” (1.19): the dreamer sees the Cross “wynnum scinan”; the Panther’s coat, like Joseph’s, is “gehwylces bleom bregdende” (11.22-3): the dreamer sees the

Rood “wendan wædum and bleom” (1.22a); both Panther and Rood are qualified as “sellic”¹⁰; and “sothfæste men” flock to the sweet perfume of Redemption, “geond ealne ymbhwyrft eor-than sceat(a)”¹¹, while “men ofer moldan” gaze upon the glorious Rood, covered in gems “æt foldan sceatum”¹². Both poems further agree in their depiction of Christ’s death and descent into Hell, stressing the valour of the hero Christ, and his weariness which culminates in darkness: a deep pit for the Rood, a rock tomb for Christ, and general darkness for the whole of the universe, in the *Dream of the Rood*, a hidden retreat in the mountain caves for the Panther¹³.

These parallels are not made to suggest that one poet was influenced by the other, but they point towards the fact that both were drawing from a common fund of imagery, following what may be considered a convention of Old English religious poetics. The symbolic imagery that links the three parts of *Physiologus* is of the same nature as that of the *Dream of the Rood*; and while “Partridge” is too fragmentary to provide much information on these matters, we may notice that “Panther” and “Whale” share a similar stress on their “hiw” (“Panther” 1.20, “Whale” 1.8), their appearance and colouring, both opposed and put in parallel by the use of the same word; the same device reappears in the poet’s insistence on the sweet odour of the breath of the Whale and the Panther, which, while apparently putting the two animals on a same level, in fact underlines the essential difference of their natures. And last, in all three parts of *Physiologus*, darkness is explicitly the mark of hell and the devil. As noted above, Christ’s death is typologized by the Panther’s retreat to the gloom of the mountain caves; similarly, the Whale is said to trap men in its “heolothelme” (1.45), its “helm of darkness”, and carry them down to Hell, “grundleasne wylm / under mistglome” (46b-47a), the bottomless abyss plunged in misty darkness.

The technique used by the *Physiologus*-poet — an interweaving of symbolic imagery which provides unity to his composition, and gives depth to his discourse through juxtaposition and opposition, with a minimum of formal complication — is not without recalling the use by the Rood-poet of what is generally termed “echoic repetition”. Echoic repetition is defined by Eugene R. Kintgen as

The reuse of a potentially free element or the use of an element etymologically related and phonetically similar to the original one.¹⁴

The study of the frequency of such echoes in a number of Old English poems leads Kintgen to the conclusion that Old English poetry is “characterized by the frequent repetition of such important words as substantives and verbs”, and that within his sample, the *Dream of the Rood* is especially dense in echoes, with no less than 130 such repetitions within its 156 lines¹⁵. As in the *Physiologus*, these repetitions or echoes may be considered an important unifying element in the poem, though the Dream-poet’s use of the device is more sophisticated than that of the Physiologus-poet. Constance Heatt thus suggests that

it is not the emotional sequence in itself which gives the poem unity as a whole, but, rather, the various dreamlike transferences and parallels, both in sense and wording, which create that meaningful sequence.¹⁶

Closely linked to the poet’s echoic technique is his conscious exploitation of ambiguity; as pointed out by Michael J. Swanton, there is in the *Dream of the Rood* a “close interplay of physical and abstract”. Thus, “fah”, which first appears at line 14 of the poem, could variously mean “stained”, “hostile”, or “guilty”; whilst “heanne”, referring to the Cross (1.40), may be understood as either “high” (héah) or “low” (héan), thereby underlining the paradox inherent in the Crucifixion. These different levels of meaning anticipate the eschatological message further developed by the poet; ambiguity is structural to the poet’s conception, stresses Swanton:

The symbol is defined first in that interlocking of physical and abstract aspects that illustrates its tropological role, and to this is added a third, chronological dimension referring either backwards or forwards in the length of the poem. (...) The technique erects a series of postulates in the mind of the reader which the body of the poem must, and does satisfy. The total effect, therefore, is not confusion but tighter concision.¹⁷

The overall framework of the *Dream of the Rood* is likewise based on repetition, contends E. R. Kintgen, who sees the poem as bipartite: the Cross tells of its experience, and how that experience affected its life; and then, the dreamer does likewise. This division of the dual discourse into two parts recalls Letson’s note that each individual part of the *Physiologus* is also bipartite, with first a description, then an interpretation. The overall plan both of the *Dream of the Rood* and *Physiologus* chapters, however, seem to me to be tripartite: for neither Kintgen nor Letson take

into account the closing lines of the poems, the nature of which is somewhat different to that of the body of the works. For while parts one and two are indeed concerned with description, then explanation, the third, concluding part widens the scope, effecting a shift towards the reader, who thus finds himself integrated within the poem. This process, in the *Dream of the Rood*, is prepared and reinforced by the echoic technique; as noted by Hieatt,

the cross is made to parallel the thoughts and situation of Christ and the dreamer, and both Christ and the cross become, in a sense, extension of the consciousness of the dreamer.¹⁸

In “Whale” and “Partridge” of the Old English *Physiologus*, this third part takes the form of an open address to the audience, with the exhortative “Uton”, in conjunction with the appearance of the first person plural:

Forthon is eallinga [...] dryhtna dryhtne, ond a deoflum withsace wordum ond weorcum, thæt we wuldorcyning geseon moton. Uton a sibbe to him on thas hwilnan tid hælu secan, thæt we mid swa leofne in lofe motan to widan feore wuldres neotan.

Therefore it is altogether (sense incomplete) the Lord of lords and always strive with words and with deeds against the devils so that we may see the King of glory. Let us ever look to him for love and for salvation in this transitory time, so that in glory with the One so cherished we may to existence infinite enjoy heaven.¹⁹

“Partridge” is in too fragmentary a state for one to be certain that the “we” of the last few lines did not appear in the body of the poem, but its ending follows the same model as “Whale”: an exhortative “uton”, extending the focus to the audience, which is thus included in the final note of hope and salvation:

Uton we thy geornor gode oliccan, firene feogan, frithes earnian, duguþe to dryhtne, thenden us dæg scine, thæt swa æthelne eardwica cyst in wuldres wlite wunian motan.

Let us therefore the more earnestly propitiate God, reject sin, gain peace, salvation from the Lord, while for us the day shines, so that we may dwell in the splendour of glory in the choicest of noble dwellings.²⁰

In relation to the *Dream of the Rood*, however, “Panther” is of more interest. On the one hand, the reader is implicitly present at the beginning of the poem already: “*We* bi sumum hyrdon ...”, “*We* have heard tell ...”²¹ as he is also at the beginning of the *Dream of the Rood*, with the opening “Hwæt”. And as in the *Dream*, the concluding message of hope and salvation is not expressed in openly hortative terms, but merged as it were in the

“explanation” part. The reason for this is readily perceptible; the “explaining” of the Redemption of mankind by Christ must of necessity englobe the reader, who also partakes of the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice. Though the openly homiletic “uton” is not to be found in the concluding lines of the *Dream* or “Panther”, their didactic nature remains obvious. “Panther” thus ends on a quotation of St Paul:

Swa se snottra gecwæth sanctus Paulus:
 “Monigfealde sind geond middangeard
 god ungnýthe the us to gíefe dæleth
 ond to feorhnere fæder ælmihtig,
 ond se anga hyht ealra gesceafta,
 uppe ge nithre.” Thæt is æthele stenc.

Thus spoke Paul, the wise saint:
 “Manifold are the unsparing benefits
 throughout the world which the
 almighty Father and the Hope of all
 creatures above and below appor-
 tions us as a gift and for the preserva-
 tion of life”. That is a noble fra-
 grance.²²

This use of an authority can leave no doubt as to the intent of the lines. In the *Dream*, no special authority is invoked, but the authority is the vision itself, the words of the Rood within the vision, and ultimately, the poet to whom God granted the “revelation” of the “sermon” of the Cross. For the *Dream* does indeed have a binary structure, inasmuch as it is constituted by a duplicated sermon. The first sermon is that of the dreamer, who, being the “preacher” to the readers or listeners, provides the framework of the poem; the second, central sermon is that of the Cross, whose reported discourse provides the substance and authority of the work.

The parallels between the dreamer and the Rood as teachers are worth noting. Both derive their “knowledge” from personal experience, with a stress on the exclusive nature of this experience, expressed by a recurrent “I”, which introduces both speeches:

Ic swefna cyst secgan wylle
 h[w]æt mē gemætte
 Thūhte mē thæt ic gesāwe...

I want to recount the choicest of
 dreams, that *I* dreamed ... it seemed
 to *me* that I saw...

Thæt wæs geāra iū, (ic thæt gýta geman),
 thæt ic wæs āhēawen
 Geseah ic
 thā Frēan mancynnes
 Thær ic thā ne dorste ofer Dryhtnes word
 būgan oththe berstan.

Years ago it was — *I* still recall it —
 that *I* was cut down ... *I* saw the
 Lord of mankind; *I* did not dare
 bend or break against the word of the
 Lord.²³

Only after Christ’s death does the Rood’s narrative shift from “I” to “We”, referring to the other crosses, but symbolic of the

Rood's partaking in the wholesale desolation of Creation. After this point, the "I-speech" of the Rood recurs, but explicitly as the voice of the instructor, rather than the witness. This change is accompanied by a disappearance of hypermetric lines; it is the beginning of a sermon, addressed to a specific, if reduced, audience. The dreamer's presence, which was only self-proclaimed at the beginning of the poem, is now acknowledged by the Rood, thereby giving the poet authority in the eyes of *his* audience:

Nū thū miht gehȳran, hǣleth mīn se lēofa, thæt ic bealu-wara weorc gebiden hǣbbe	Now, my beloved man, you can hear that I have experienced the pain caused by men of evil...
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Nū ic thē hāte, hǣleth mīn se lēofa, thæt thū thās gesyhthe secge mannum.	Now, my beloved man, I enjoin you to declare this vision to people. ²⁴
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The Rood's enjoinder that the dreamer "declare this vision to the people" gives the poem the status of a divinely revealed text, akin in nature — though not in authority or sanctity — to the biblical reading of the pericope. With the Rood's order to the poet to recount his vision, and the explicit message to be transmitted, we have the third part detected above in the *Physiologus*: the focus is widened to mankind, and contains not only information, but specific instruction:

Ac thurh thā rōde sceal rīce gesēcan of eorhwege æghwylc sǣwl, sēo the mid Wealdende wunian thenceth.	Through the Cross every soul which purposes to dwell with the Ruler shall find its way from the earthly path into the kingdom. ²⁵
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The Rood having finished its preaching, the dreamer is now provided with the "reading" which supports his homily: he therefore goes on to explain his experience. This part, which is predominantly "I-centred", is once again a sermon; the dreamer is implicitly putting himself forward as a model to the reader, and though the hortative element is not explicit in the last part, the intrusion of "us" instead of "me" in the concluding lines

Hē ūs onlȳsde ond ūs lif forgeaf	He redeemed <i>us</i> and gave <i>us</i> life
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is a clear invitation for the audience to share in the dreamer's experience, so that from being "alone with little company" (11.123-4) in his worshipping of the Cross, he become one of a multitude.

The different parts of the “homilies” within the *Dream of the Rood* are further marked by shifts in tense, and metrical changes. The “authority” on which the preaching is based is characterized by the past tense, and by the presence of hypermetric lines. Thus, as soon as we enter the description of the poet’s vision, we shift from the present tense “Hwæt! I want to recount...” to the preterite “it seemed to me”; and thus it remains until the vision is ended (1.126a). The narrator then states his resolution in the present tense (to 1. 144). The final lines conclude once again in the past tense, that of authority. The tenses within the Rood’s discourse follow a similar pattern. A short introduction in the present tense (“I still recall it”) gives way to the preterite for the testimony which forms the basis for the “homily”; metrically, this part — the most authoritative part of an authoritative vision — is characterized by its high density of hypermetric lines. The teaching/preaching of the Cross is then reported (in direct speech) in the present tense, while the final instructions to the dreamer present an interesting blend of past and future reference: the past events of Christ’s death, Resurrection and Ascension determine what is to come on the day of Judgement. It may readily be seen that present-tense passages in the *Dream of the Rood* correspond to the didactic element of the poem, explaining and elaborating on the past tense descriptive “testimony”. As such, they may be said to be secondary to the past tense passages; their less exalted nature is further indicated by the fact that they are metrically regular. They are not designed to impress the imagination or catch the ear, but to provide easily assimilated instruction.

The didactic intent in the *Dream of the Rood* may therefore be said to be present at all levels of the poem. Its very imagery belongs to the poetic conventions of the Old English homilists and lesser religious poets. Its overall structure is ultimately derived from the homily, while its complex internal structure is due to a duplication of the pericope format, the Rood’s homily being part of that of the dreamer/poet. This structural peculiarity allows the poet to make full use of ambiguity and anticipation to make his message more effective. He thus repeats the same thing twice, but on a different level; not by juxtaposition, as in *Physiologus*, but by enveloping one within the other. The lofty message of the Rood, assimilated within the discourse of a fellow-sinner, is made more accessible to the audience: the invitation to strive for the heavenly home through contemplation of the Cross becomes all the more effective in the mouth of the “unworthy” poet.

The presence of the *Dream of the Rood* among the homiletic material of the Vercelli Book is therefore particularly relevant, and the poem itself is the masterpiece of a society for which, to quote Letson, there was a “functional identity” between homilist and poet.

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NOTES

¹ Alvin A. Lee, “Toward a Critique of *The Dream of the Rood*”, in Lewis E. Nicholson and Dolores W. Frese eds., *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation. For John C. McGalliard*, Notre Dame/London, Univ. Notre Dame Press, 1975, pp. 163-191.

This may seem like stating the obvious, but it needs to be said, as the anti-Christian outlook of the beginning of the century, which implicitly postulated an inherent incompatibility between literary quality and religious thought, has left some lingering prejudices. See E. G. Stanley, *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, Cambridge, Brewer, 1975 (Reprint of articles in *Notes and Queries*, ccix-cxx: 1964-5).

² Cf. Albert S. Cook, pp. lvii-lxxxix of the introduction to his edition of *The Old English Elene, Phoenix and Physiologus*, New Haven, Yale U.P. / London, Oxford, Oxford U.P., 1919.

³ There have been heated debates as to whether the Old English *Physiologus* is complete in its present form, or once comprised a greater number of chapters. Modern criticism tends towards the former view: the gap in the Exeter Book (where *Physiologus* is to be found) is not such as to warrant the theory of a larger poetical cycle (cf. Cook, *op. cit.*, pp. lxxx-ix). Moreover, the sequence chosen by the Old English poet — a trilogy of land/water/air, or redemption/temptation/final redemption — is both pleasing and effective enough without the adjunction of further chapters.

⁴ D.R. Letson, “The Old English *Physiologus* and the Homiletic Tradition”, *Florilegium*, 1 (1979): pp. 15-41.

⁵ D.R. Letson, “The Old English *Physiologus...*”, p. 20. My italics.

⁶ D.R. Letson, “The Old English *Physiologus...*”, p. 18.

⁷ *Physiologus* is quoted from *The Exeter Book*, George Philip Krapp & Elliott VanKirk Dobbie eds., New York/London, Columbia U.P./Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1936 (pp. 169-174). All thorns and eths have been transcribed as th.

⁸ D.R. Letson, “The Old English *Physiologus...*”, p. 33.

⁹ "Panther", 11.19-30. *The Dream of the Rood* is quoted from *The Dream of the Rood*, Michael Swanton ed., Manchester/ New York, Manchester U.P./ Barnes and Noble, 1970. Translation by S.A.J. Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, London, Melbourne and Toronto, Dent (Everyman), 1982; pp. 353-4 for "Panther", p. 160 for the *Dream*.

¹⁰ "Panther", 1.30: "symle sellicra"; *Dream* 1.13: "sylic wæs se sigebeam".

¹¹ "Panther" 11.66 and 68.

¹² *Dream*, 11.8 and 12.

¹³ "Panther" 1. 36, and *Dream* 64b-55a both refer to death in terms of rest, motivated by weariness ("Panther" 11.38-9, *Dream* 1.63).

¹⁴ Eugene R. Kintgen, "Echoic Repetition in Old English Poetry, Especially the *Dream of the Rood*", *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 75 (1974): pp. 202-223.

¹⁵ Kintgen, pp. 208 and 210. The poems examined by Kintgen comprise extracts from *Genesis A*, *Juliana*, *Fates of the Apostles*, *Exodus*, *Judith*, *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *The Dream of the Rood*, *Phoenix* and the *Battle of Maldon*.

¹⁶ Constance Hieatt, "Dream Frame and Verbal Echo in the *Dream of the Rood*", *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 72 (1971): pp. 251-263. Quotation from p. 254.

¹⁷ Michael J. Swanton, "Ambiguity and Anticipation in *The Dream of the Rood*", *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 70 (1969): pp. 407-425. Quotation from pp. 421 and 425.

¹⁸ Hieatt, "Dream Frame...", p. 254.

¹⁹ "Whale", 11.82-end; Bradley p. 357.

²⁰ "Partridge" 11.12-17.

²¹ "Panther", 1.8.

²² "Panther", 11.70-74; Bradley p. 355.

²³ *Dream*, 11.1, 2, 4, 28-9, 33, 35; my italics.

²⁴ *Dream*, 11.78 and 95; Bradley p. 162.

²⁵ *Dream*, 11.119-120; Bradley p. 163.