

The “Battle with the Monster”: Transformation of a Traditional Pattern in “The Dream of the Rood”

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Background

In his preface to his edition of the Old English poem “The Dream of the Cross,” more often called “The Dream of the Rood,” Michael Swanton describes the poem as “immediately attractive,” stressing that “its poetic content is readily accessible to the modern reader” (1970:v). The question of accessibility is a good place to begin, but concern with the poem’s accessibility to the modern audience should not be the ultimate issue. Of far greater importance is how the poem was “accessible” to its contemporary readers. It seems that much of the criticism surrounding this poem has at its heart an intent to expound upon what Swanton calls the poet’s “literary sophistication” (v), which becomes more apparent, Swanton suggests, as we familiarize ourselves with the poem. To an Anglo-Saxon audience, however, “literary sophistication” was not necessarily a determinant of poetic merit. Even so, the status of “The Dream of the Rood” as having roots in oral tradition is not yet fully acknowledged.

Incorporation of oral-formulaic theory into an analysis of “The Dream of the Rood” may at first seem odd. It is safe to say that the term “oral literature” is far easier to associate with a poem like *Beowulf* than a poem that has been the crux of such thoroughly *literary* criticism. From Swanton’s perspective, as well as the perspective of many other critics of the poem, “literary sophistication” is one, if not *the* determinant of the poem’s poetic merit. Martin Irvine completely textualizes “The Dream of the Rood”; he suggests that as a text itself it drew its lifeblood only from other texts, and should be read “as exegetical extensions of, or supplements to, the gospel narratives, commentaries on the gospels, and saint’s lives—texts that formed one of the deepest layers of literary discourse”

(1986:175).¹ Whether one agrees with this statement or not, there is a vast array of criticism associating "The Dream of the Rood" with doctrinal and Latin influences.² Even Alain Renoir, in "Oral Theme and Written Text," suggests that "the detectable influence of Latin hymns suggests a literate composer for 'The Dream of the Rood'" (1976:339).

Yet Renoir also stresses the importance of what he calls "oral-formulaic theme survival," stating that "The Dream of the Rood" is among those "Anglo-Saxon poems presumably written but nonetheless composed in accordance with oral-formulaic practices" (345). Nor does he stand alone in his assessment of the poem as, if not orally composed, certainly rooted within oral-derived themes. Carol Jean Wolf (1970), for example, has illuminated the poem's "larger formulaic structures," such as the "approach to battle" type-scene.

Thus, although I would not suggest that "The Dream of the Rood" was composed orally in performance, it is, I would contend, oral-derived, and it is that presumption upon which this analysis is founded. The poem, in other words, straddles both worlds, having ties to both textuality and orality. The term "oral-derived" itself, as John Miles Foley points out, "disenfranchises neither oral tradition nor textuality, allowing us to take full account of the complexity of the work of art" (1992:81). This essay, then, is by no means designed to obviate the need for other readings, except perhaps those that view orality as a bacillus stamped out by intertextuality, as if the mere existence of literacy eviscerates all connection to the preliterate world. Rather it seeks to include rather than exclude, to suggest the kind of enriched reading made possible when we consider this poem as an inheritor of oral tradition instead of an exclusively textual creation.

In what follows I intend to show how the Rood poet drew upon the "Battle with the Monster" sequence as a strategy for the poem's composition. Albert Lord focused upon this narrative pattern within Indo-European epic, with particular emphasis on the theme of the "Death of the

¹ He textualizes the Anglo-Saxons themselves as well, stating (1986:175): "This was a culture based on texts. . . . Literate Anglo-Saxon culture in the monastic Christian environment was a composite of an earlier oral orientation towards tradition which was becoming largely superseded by the written traditions and textuality of Roman Christianity."

² See, e.g., Patch 1919, Woolf 1958, A. Lee 1975, and O'Carragáin 1982. For a discussion of the source and use of prosopopoeia, see Schlauch 1940.

Substitute.”³ More recently, in *Immanent Art*, Foley has expounded upon the sequence, defining the Battle with the Monster sequence as a combination of five specific concomitants: Arming, Boast, Monster’s Approach, Death of the Substitute, and Engagement (though these events may occur in differing order). It should be said at this point that even Foley asserts that within the corpus of Anglo-Saxon poetry the “Battle with the Monster” sequence is manifest in only one poem, *Beowulf* (1991:232). His analysis consists of a codification of this sequence in terms of the “succession of actions and motifs” (231) that comprise it as shown in that poem. Foley’s aim is a consideration of how the “Battle with the Monster” sequence as evident in *Beowulf* helps us in understanding that poem’s traditional structure, how “oral-formulaic structure stands as a viable hypothesis” for this patterning (232). But I would suggest that the pattern that emerges in Foley’s discussion of the sequence in *Beowulf* is one startlingly close to the pattern of conflict that emerges in “The Dream of the Rood.”

Though there has been a wealth of criticism identifying the epic heroic elements in “The Dream of the Rood,” there has yet been no attempt to situate that heroism within an identifiably orally connected design as complex as the “Battle with the Monster” sequence. The Rood poet’s utilization of this sequence shows that though he may have been literate, he possessed an intricate rather than a rudimentary understanding of the traditional poetic idiom. A key factor affecting the present analysis, and a reason why the poem’s conformation to the pattern has heretofore remained unrecognized, is the Rood poet’s radical but consistent transformation of the pattern to suit the specific subject matter. The sequence still exists and is still identifiable, but it is pressed into unique service. Though “The Dream of the Rood” can aptly be termed “heroic verse,” the merging of the genres of riddle, dream-vision, and Christian narrative complicates things significantly. It is the crucial fact that this is a Christian narrative, and especially that it is a narrative of the crucifixion, that is the most demanding. The Rood poet cannot utilize this theme in precisely the same way that the *Beowulf* poet did because of the variant subject matter of his poem. Though the Rood poet may describe it as a heroic struggle, in reality the struggle inherent in the crucifixion is in most respects quite atypical, differing markedly from the traditional physical “tests” that the Anglo-Saxon scop was accustomed to versifying.

³ Lord also explores the “mythic pattern” of the Death of the Substitute in *Singer of Tales* (1960:187, 195-97), with particular reference to the *Iliad*.

In “The Dream of the Rood” we have a poem about a battle that is not really a battle and about deaths that are not really deaths. In Jesus, we have a lord whose depiction as a hero is paradoxically reinforced by his *subversion* of the topoi usually associated with the heroic battle; he strips instead of arms, and his strength is manifested by his submission to and suffering in his own murder rather than by an outward display of courage in battle. In the Rood we have a thane who is atypical not only because he is not human, but also because his primary duty—protecting his lord—is actually forbidden by that lord himself. According to Foley (1991), in the Battle with the Monster sequence, “the recurrent structure meshes with and is modified by the demands of a particular situation” (236). “The Dream of the Rood” is certainly not standard heroic verse; thus it is only to be expected that the “Battle with the Monster” sequence will be transformed as well.

Let us examine, then, element by element, how the Rood poet utilizes this sequence to impart a traditional context for “The Dream of the Rood.” The monster’s Approach is perhaps the most difficult to discern. Foley stresses that the “monster’s Approach constitutes either the beginning or the third element in the sequence” (1991:234). This element occurs at the beginning of the sequence in “The Dream of the Rood.” But who approaches whom? The crucifiers are termed enemies by the narrating cross, but it is clear that neither Christ nor the Rood ever engages with them. Christ is not interested in doing so, and the Rood is forbidden such conduct. What approach or approaches are described, then?

Curiously enough, it is the approaches of Christ and the Rood that are illuminated here. The Rood’s description of his creation as a cross is essentially his depiction of his “approach” to Golgotha (32-33a):⁴

Bæron me ðær beornas on eaxlum, oððæt hie me on beorg asetton,
gefæstnodon me þær feondas genoge.

Men bore me on their shoulders, until they set me on a mound,
Enemies enough fastened me there.

Carried by the crucifiers, the Rood ascends the hill and is established there. It is then that Christ also approaches, towards the Rood, immediately hastening to him just as a hero might ascend to battle (33b-34):

Geseah ic þa frean mancynnes

⁴ All quotations are taken from Krapp 1932; all translations are mine.

efstan elne mycle þæt he me wolde on gestigan.

Then I saw the Lord of Mankind
hastening with great valor to ascend me.

What does it mean that the Approach in this variant of the “Battle with the Monster” sequence involves not paradigmatic enemies but essentially a lord and thane?

Obviously, Jesus and the Rood are not opponents of the Beowulf and Grendel ilk, but then this is not a poem like *Beowulf*. The author of “The Dream of the Rood” drew on a traditional pattern to highlight the struggle of the Rood and Christ, to emphasize that both the dramatic tension and the poignancy inherent in the poem spring from the fact that their true battles are not against the Romans, but against each other. Jesus must endure his suffering upon the Cross, and the Cross must correspondingly suffer his complicity in that death, forbidden by his lord to offer aid. Jesus dies on the Rood, and the Rood must eternally suffer his status as *bana*, “slayer,” because his lord forbade him to help. The Rood calls the crucifiers “enemies,” but in terms of narrative progression the fighting is waged not between the Romans and the Rood, or the Romans and Jesus, but between the Rood and Jesus.

When we factor the traditional pattern into this variant of the Approach, the conflict resonates with a poignancy that is otherwise impossible to perceive. This lord and thane, who share a bond of duty and sacrifice, are forced to confront one another as adversaries, to become each others’ “monsters,” and are cast into that role not only by the crucifiers and the decree of Jesus but by the oral traditional pattern itself. In the New Testament (John 19) it should be noted, Jesus is described as carrying the cross himself to the place of his crucifixion. Without changing the essence of the story, the Rood poet subtly but deliberately transforms the event as depicted in the Gospel to make the poem resonate and harmonize with the traditional multiform, even as he transforms the traditional multiform to suit the specialized situation.

Perhaps this evidence for the Rood poet’s utilization of the “Battle with the Monster” sequence would seem either circumstantial or thin were not the other elements of the sequence in place. Yet before Jesus actually ascends the Rood, we find variations of both the Boast and Arming topoi. Just before Jesus commits his heroic act, the Rood claims that “Ealle ic mihte/feondas gefyllan, hwæðre ic fæste stod” (“I was able to fell all enemies, but I stood fast,” 37b-38). There is no other way to describe this than to say that the Rood is uttering a conventional Germanic *beot*. This

passage fulfills all the concomitants of the traditional Anglo-Saxon boast, conveying the Rood's personal statement of will, ability, and individual intent, directed outward; the same can be said of Beowulf's boast before he fights Grendel. Yet the Rood's assertion that "I was able to fell all the enemies" is followed by a qualifier: "but I stood fast." How can this be a boast if its intent is thwarted by the Rood's refusal to enact it?

The answer lies in the particular religious and aesthetic problem under scrutiny in this poem. The inversion of the traditional paradigm that highlights his achievement emphasizes the fact that the Rood's true challenge is found not in his ability to overcome the crucifiers, a feat that he could accomplish with ease, but in his willingness to obey the word of his lord by refusing to submit to that desire. As with Jesus, "standing fast" is the battle.⁵

Like the Rood's "anti-boast," Jesus' stripping for battle (rather than arming) presents another reversal of the traditional paradigm. The Rood describes his actions: "Ongyrede hine þa geong hæleð, (þæt wæs god ælmihtig)/strang and stiðmod" ("The young hero who was Almighty God unclothed himself, strong and firm of mind," 39-40a). As in the case of Beowulf's fight with Grendel, this disarming is not a sign of weakness, but a declaration of strength, a further assertion of the hero's status as "strang and stiðmod." The fact that the Rood poet chooses precisely this moment to term Jesus a *hæleð* ("hero") emphasizes this traditional projection as well.

The Rood poet's inversion of the Arming and Boasting elements is obvious, but it is that obvious transformation that should sensitize us to a search for inversional changes in the more elusive components of the "Battle with the Monster" sequence, such as the Approach, the Engagement, and ultimately the Death of the Substitute. The Approach has already been discussed, and within "The Dream of the Rood" the crucifixion itself is the Engagement, since the true battle is between Jesus and the Rood. This opposition is reinforced not only in the Approach, but throughout the poem. Although the crucifiers drive the dark nails, it is the Rood who becomes soaked in Jesus' blood, the Rood who is described as "ðam hefian wite" ("that oppressive torment," 61). Throughout, the Rood depicts *himself* as the source of Jesus' struggle, identifying himself at one point as Jesus' *bana*, or slayer (66). In turn, the Rood describes the presence of Jesus as the source of his own woes (42-45):

⁵ Burrow (1959) points out the Cross' ability to strike down the evil-doers, yet believes that this must be tied to Christ and his freedom not to take up the cross, to refuse to submit, because the Cross/Christ are indissolubly linked.

Bifode ic þa me se beorn ymbclypte. Ne dorste ic hwæðre bugan to eorðan,
 feallan to foldan sceatum, ac ic sceolde fæste standan.
 Rod wæs ic aræred. Ahof ic ricne cyning,
 heofona hlaford, hyldan me ne dorste.

I trembled when the man grasped me round. Yet I did not dare to bow to earth,
 to fall to the earth's surfaces, but I had to stand fast.
 I was raised up a cross. I lifted up the powerful Ruler,
 the Lord of the Heavens, I did not dare to bend.

As Jesus' torment resides in enduring the Rood, so the Rood's torment resides in enduring both Jesus and Jesus' command that the Rood forgo action against the crucifiers.

But though each element in the "Battle with the Monster" sequence is in evidence here, it is the Death of the Substitute that reverberates most profoundly, not only for the most immediate conflict involving the Rood and Jesus, but also for the dreamer and the Christian audience. As Lord puts it, this pattern entails "the death of one of the hero's companions, a death that is caused by the actions of the hero" (1980:140). This death usually precedes the main character's battle, and often serves as a galvanizing event in the development of that hero. In *Beowulf*, Hondscio and Æschere are substitutes, and they perish before that hero's battles with the monstrous Grendel and his dam, respectively. In the *Iliad*, to take another example, Patroklos serves as the substitute, dying instead of Achilles at the hands of Hektor; Achilles later avenges his companion's death. It is as if the demise of the hero's companion acts as a catalyst for the evolution of the hero himself: Achilles achieves glory during his subsequent vengeance-driven *aristeia*, and Beowulf, after witnessing the killing of Hondscio, attains his first great victory. Both Beowulf and Achilles can be seen as blameworthy in the deaths of their friends—as Achilles lends Patroklos his armor and Beowulf makes no move to protect his kinsman—and both are spurred by their losses to deeds that come to define them.

Who serves as the "substitute" in "The Dream of the Rood?" The main criteria of the pattern are threefold: his death is caused by the actions of the hero, customarily precedes the main character's battle, and is often a galvanizing event in the development of that hero.

The primary hero in the poem is usually assumed to be Jesus, who in action and description has been aligned by many with the prototypical Anglo-Saxon hero. With the creation of Jesus as a hero-lord, the Anglo-Saxon poet attempts to assimilate the crucifixion into the matrix of the warrior band, in an effort to make the poem's conflict relevant to its

audience. Wolf argues that the crucifixion is a "heroic conflict" in which "the Redeemer exhibits the heroic attitudes of resolution and boldness" (1970:204, 206). In addition, Macrae-Gibson (1969) and Dubs (1975) discuss Jesus himself as a warrior approaching battle. Diamond (1958) thoroughly catalogues the heroic phrases used in "The Dream of the Rood", and A. Lee characterizes Jesus as "the figure of the heroic Dryhten par excellence, strong, resolute, and eager for battle" (1975:178). Even Diamond's assertion that the heroic diction is somewhat inappropriate (considering the situation) amounts to evidence, in a backhanded way,⁶ of the poet's intent to create his poem in accordance with the mindset of his audience. It is not difficult to establish Jesus as heroic. But how does the Rood serve as Jesus' substitute?

Certainly the Rood's "death" is brought about by Jesus. The Rood's boast indicates that if he had been allowed he could have saved his lord, and saved himself in the process. But that course of action was forbidden (35-39):

þær ic þa ne dorste ofer dryhtnes word
 bugan oððe berstan, þa ic bifian geseah
 eorðan sceatas. Ealle ic mihte
 feondas gefyllan, hwæðre ic fæste stod.

I did not dare to bend or burst
 over the commandment of the Lord, when I saw the surfaces
 of the earth trembling. I was able to kill
 all the foes, but I stood fast.

It is Jesus' edict that prevents the Rood's action, Jesus' edict that causes not only his own death but that of the rood, a death underscored by the Rood's burial in a deep pit after the crucifixion.

As a rule, the Death of the Substitute precedes the hero's battle, but in this specialized case, the substitute *is* the hero's battle, and so the typical progression cannot stand. It is the substitute's death as a galvanizing force in the development of the hero that is of greater interest. In the context of the poem, Jesus' suffering and death are impossible without the suffering and death of the Rood. And without both events taking place, Jesus cannot become the *heofonrices weard* ("guardian of the heavenly kingdom," 91), and ascend in ultimate triumph. Without the death of the Rood, Jesus' own victory becomes inconceivable.

⁶ Diamond attempts to explain away the disjunction by suggesting that the Rood poet was "caught in a net of tradition," and "unable to compose any other way" (1958:5).

What is most fascinating, however, is how the oral traditional pattern of the Rood as Jesus' surrogate meshes with what has previously been considered purely a doctrinal influence. Rosemary Woolf (1958) asserts that the poem represents an Anglo-Saxon attempt at coming to grips with a medieval area of dispute: the dualistic nature of Christ, which we may see as mirrored in the Rood's assumption of Jesus' suffering, his "substitution" for him. We see the Rood, not Jesus, driven through with dark nails, and we see the Rood, not Jesus, soaked in blood, because the poet wished to show us Jesus as victor and sufferer, represented respectively by the young hero who forcefully and willingly ascends the Rood and by the Rood itself.⁷ A pertinent and arresting assertion to be sure, but perhaps not the whole story. We also see the Rood suffering instead of Jesus because in keeping with the oral traditional multiform, the Rood serves as Jesus' substitute, suffering and dying like Patroklos and Hondscio so that the hero can ultimately conquer.

With the discussion of Rood as substitute, one might think that the topic is closed. But the *geong haeled* ascending the cross is not the only hero in "The Dream of the Rood" worth considering, and the Rood is not the only substitute. We saw in the elements of Approach and Engagement that in keeping with the traditional pattern, each character served as the other's antagonist. Now each character serves as the other's substitute as well. With some particularization due to the unusual nature of the situation, the three criteria for the Substitute are met not only by the Rood but by Jesus as well.

In the past, critics have focused almost exclusively on the figure of Jesus, whom the Rood poet transforms into a warrior lord dying for his *comitatus*. Yet if it is true that the story of the crucifixion is the centerpiece of the poem and its central conflict, we have to note that at the most basic level this crucifixion story is not is not mainly the story of Jesus at all, but rather of the Cross. The perspective is first-person; the point of view is entirely the Rood's as he tells of *his* origination. His story relates how he became a cross, hewn down from the edge of the wood, and is not concerned with the story of the nativity. It is the actions and reactions of the Rood that constitute the bulk of the narrative.

In addition, the crucifixion itself is described through the Rood's eyes; we see his own first impressions of Jesus hastening towards him, his own wishes to defend his lord, and his own torment at not daring to do so. The central heroic conflict is clearly the Rood's. Though it is Jesus who dies "þa he wolde mancyn lysan" ("when he wished to free mankind," 41),

⁷ On the Cross serving as a surrogate for Christ, see also Patten 1968.

it is the Rood who sees, who is able to fell the crucifiers, who stands fast, who trembles, who holds up the high king, who is covered in his blood. During some fifteen lines that describe the crucifixion scene, the first person singular pronoun is used no fewer than twelve times. Certainly Jesus is depicted as a warrior, but in terms of the narrative the Rood is portrayed no less heroically. The Rood may define himself as his lord's slayer, but he is also the means by which Jesus conquers, and the Rood's status as a hero is reflected in his gold and silver ornamentation (77), his ability to heal anyone in awe of him (85-86), and his function of bringing mortals into heaven (135-40).

So the Rood is a hero as well. Then how does Jesus fit as his substitute? First, it is evident that Jesus' death is caused by the actions of the Rood, whose complicity in the death of his lord is beyond question. The Rood calls himself a *bana* ("murderer"), and he cannot escape the literal and figurative "stain" of that killing. Jesus' death is also most certainly a galvanizing force in the Rood's development. In terms of the dramatic action of the poem, Jesus' death transforms the cross from mere wood to *wuldres treo* (14), a "tree of glory" covered in gold and gems. The Rood itself speaks of its change in status (80b-83a):

	Is nu sæl cumen
þæt me weorðiaþ	wide and side
men ofer moldan	and eall þeos mæran gesceaft,
gebiddaþ him to þissum beacne.	

Now the time is come that men honor me far and wide
over the earth, and all this great creation, that they
worship this sign.

The Rood also states that *because* god suffered upon him, he now rises up glorious under the heavens. Without Jesus' death, the Death of the Substitute, the hero cannot attain glory. We could assert much the same concerning the substitute deaths of Hondscio and Patroklos.

When we consider Jesus as substitute, however, "The Dream of the Rood" truly begins to resound. This is a deeply Christian poem, and it is important that we not underestimate the nature of its connection with the oral traditional context. The traditional pattern found in oral and oral-derived pre-Christian Indo-European epic, the Death of the Substitute, blends with the "referent" of the "substitution" of Jesus in Christian terms. As Jesus tastes bitter death on the Rood, he not only substitutes for the Rood, he "substitutes" for all mankind, making salvation possible. And this is the same Jesus whose death, in terms of the oral traditional paradigm,

fortifies and glorifies the Rood. As Grasso argues in “Theology and Structure in ‘The Dream of the Rood’,” “the poem presupposes belief in the tenets of faith, Christ’s salvific death and resurrection” (1991:23).⁸ No one would contest this opinion. But to assert that doctrine is the only influence on the poem robs it of a vital nuance of meaning. As the death of Patroklos transformed Achilles, Jesus’ death is the event through which the Rood itself is imbued with purpose.

And here we see how the Christian and oral traditional referents merge. Jesus serves as the substitute not only for the Rood but for all mankind; thus his death, in Christian terms, is the event that imbues with purpose not only the Rood but all mankind as well, a truth reflected in the emotions of the dreamer (145b-48a):

	Si me dryhten freond,
se ðe her on eorþan	ær þrowode,
on þam gealgtreowe	for guman synnum.
He us onlȳsde	on us lif forgeaf,
heofonlice ham.	

Let the lord be my friend,
 he who before suffered here on earth
 for the sins of men upon that gallows-tree.
 He redeemed us and gave us life,
 heavenly home.

As the Rood attains glory because of the death of his substitute, so the dreamer attains eternal life and a heavenly home.

The significant scriptural influence upon which the poet draws plays a crucial part in transforming the traditional pattern itself, and imbuing it with new meaning. For instance, Albert Lord suggests that the Death of the Substitute is “followed by a journey during which the hero’s ultimate destiny, death, is discovered” (1980:140). This is indeed the destiny of both the Rood and Jesus, but the ultimate result of their deaths, and those of all the characters in the poem, is eternal life. The “deaths” of the substitutes are not really deaths at all.

Aligning “The Dream of the Rood” with the Battle with the Monster sequence indeed offers us rich insights into how traditional structures are transformed. Nowhere can this be more clearly demonstrated than in a final

⁸ Grasso further asserts that both the theology and structure of the poem have their source in the Nicene Creed, and speculates that “‘The Dream of the Rood’ may well have been composed as a personal meditation on the creed by a monastic author” (1991:25).

analysis of Lord's general comment on the mythic pattern of the Death of the Substitute within the Germanic tradition. Lord asserts that an essential element is missing, an essential element that an examination of "The Dream of the Rood" proves wasn't really missing at all: "the sense of guilt in breaking taboos and insulting the gods" (141). In the case of *Beowulf*, Lord explains, "the hero not only does not incur any guilt in the Germanic reinterpretation of the pattern, but, quite the opposite, he gains great glory" (141). Certainly this does seem to be the case in *Beowulf*, but to extend that assumption to the rest of Germanic tradition may amount to oversimplifying the situation, especially when we consider the case of Jesus and the Rood.

One of the Rood's identifying features is that he suffers exquisite guilt over his role in the death of Christ, the death of his substitute, much as Achilles suffered guilt over the death of Patroklos. The Rood's guilt is made manifest in the poem's central metaphor, that of the Cross as one moment adorned with gold and the next moment sweaty with blood. The Rood has broken the ultimate taboo; he has become the instrument of his lord's death. In *Beowulf*, Lord states, "guilt has become a virtue and the pattern is broken" (141); I would suggest that "The Dream of the Rood" proves that the pattern is not broken, but almost magically recast. Within the metaphor of a cross that is represented as covered with blood that both stains and adorns, we see the perfect union of guilt and virtue—not the evolution of culpability into merit but their paradoxical coexistence. Guilt has not *become* a virtue, guilt *is* the virtue.

"The Dream of the Rood" is a poem whose richness resides in its ability to be everything at once, and not only in terms of genre. We have the paradoxical status of the Rood, who is both Jesus' slayer and the instrument through which he transmits eternal life, both the betrayer of his lord and the fulfiller of his lord's desire. He is hero, monster, and substitute all at once. We have the paradoxical status of Jesus, whose heroism is inherent in his refusal to fight for his life and whose life is inherent in his death. All of these contradictions are caught, to borrow Diamond's words, in a "net of tradition" (1958:5), but not in a pejorative sense. The Rood poet offers us a web that interweaves patterns found in oral-formulaic narrative with the story of the crucifixion. The central Christian symbol is accorded its meaning through the lens of the traditional paradigm. From the audience's perspective, it is reverence rooted in traditional referentiality.

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