



# ORAL TRADITION

## Festschrift for John Miles Foley

**This article belongs to a special issue of *Oral Tradition* published in honor of John Miles Foley's 65<sup>th</sup> birthday and 2011 retirement. The surprise Festschrift, guest-edited by Lori and Scott Garner entirely without his knowledge, celebrates John's tremendous impact on studies in oral tradition through a series of essays contributed by his students from the University of Missouri-Columbia (1979-present) and from NEH Summer Seminars that he has directed (1987-1996).**

**<http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/26ii>**

Volume 26, Number 2

October, 2011

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## Toward a Ritual Poetics: *Dream of the Rood* as a Case Study

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Oral-traditional and ritualistic practices rarely fall into mutually exclusive categories. Nevertheless, scholars tend to analyze oral-related Old English verse as if it were purely verbal, and tend not to seek out the potential connections between the once living tradition from which written texts stemmed and relevant ritual scenarios. But ritualization permeates multiple modes of expression. As Stanley Tambiah writes, “Although neither linguistically nor ostensibly can we demarcate a bounded domain of ritual (separated off from other domains) in any society, yet every society has named and marked out enactments, performances, and festivities which we can identify as typical or focal examples of ‘ritual’ events” (1981:116). Inattention to ritual on the part of most scholars interested in orality arises partly out of necessity: lacking ethnographic records for the performance of oral tradition in Anglo-Saxon England, we cannot speak with any confidence about the performance contexts or about the poets who composed the majority of the surviving poetic works.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, many scholars interested in “voices from the past” have been able to trace “the telltale compositional stamp” that oral-related poems bear (Foley 2002:47),<sup>2</sup> with that oral-traditional “stamp” legible in the specialized idioms—such as formulaic phraseology, themes, and type-scenes—that recur throughout the Old English corpus.<sup>3</sup> I want to suggest that it is also possible to trace ritualistic features, whether linguistic, imagistic, gestural, or acoustic, that enhance and inform the meaning of Old English poems such as *Dream of the Rood*.<sup>4</sup> Just as it is important to learn to hear the oral tradition that resounds in many textualized medieval works, so, I argue, it is important to recognize the ritual features that these poems

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<sup>1</sup> See Amodio 2004:chs. 1 and 2; Frank 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Foley defines “voices from the past” as a category that “offers a slot for those poetic oral traditions that time has eclipsed and which we can now consult only in textual form.” He continues, “Built into that capsule definition is a necessary flexibility. Any given poem’s original composition may have been oral or written” (2002:46).

<sup>3</sup> Old English verse employs idioms such as *hwæt* (a communal call to listen to narrative), numerous formulaic systems, themes, and type-scenes—all of which indicate a dedicated register of oral (or oral-related) poetry requiring different interpretive measures than literary ones. Since Francis Magoun’s seminal 1953 essay, scholars have traced the presence of oral-related idioms and clarified the tradition-specific features of Old English, distinct from those found in Ancient Greek and South Slavic verse. For overviews of scholarship on orality and Old English literature, see Olsen 1986 and 1988, and Amodio 2004. See also the searchable online bibliographies hosted by *Oral Tradition* at <http://journal.oraltradition.org/> and <http://www.oraltradition.org/bibliography/>.

<sup>4</sup> While my focus is on verse, the discussion does not intentionally exclude prose. For examples of Old English vernacular poetics operating within prose, see, for example, Zacher 2009 and Beechy 2010.

incorporate. My hypothesis is that ritual features, when integrated within oral-related poems, preserve their association with lived, emergent ritual processes. These features do not necessarily operate as purely allusive signs, but may behave metonymically, just as oral-traditional idioms do.

### Scholarship Bridging Old English Poetry and Ritual

What might happen if we allow for the possibility that Old English poems may enact a “ritual poetics” that rhetorically functions in a manner similar to oral poetics, metonymically invoking the whole by means of the part? The leap from oral tradition to ritual is not a huge one, since both rely upon performativity, that is, the process of bringing a poem or rite fully into being via performance, and both use stylized forms of communication in contrast to “everyday” speech and actions.<sup>5</sup> Roy Liuzza (2008) has also posited connections between poetry and ritual while questioning the categorical distinctions scholars often make between Anglo-Saxon prayers and charms, the first usually associated with sanctioned Christian practices (including rites) and the second with “Germanic” cultural relics. Using Lea Olsan’s definition of the charm,<sup>6</sup> he concludes (318-19):

Instead of a dichotomy, we might imagine a spectrum of practices, with an episcopal consecration (for example) at one end and a ceremony for the relief of elf-shot in horses at the other, and most forms of popular devotion somewhere in the middle. The defining criteria seem to have more to do with the specificity of the occasion and the extrinsic loci of authority than with the intrinsic nature of the performance. . . .

The metrical and prosimetrical charms, due to their quasi-magical character and their incorporation of utterances that conform to the expectations of Old English meter, have long been treated as literary oddities. Liuzza urges us to perceive prayers and charms on a continuum of performative utterances whose aim is to bring to bear in the world the efficacy of divine power.<sup>7</sup> Liuzza situates prayers and charms on a ritualistic continuum, from practices authorized by institutions such as the Church or the crown, to those that appear to belong to popular culture.

Karl Reichl offers another model for thinking about the relationship between verbal art and ritual. He draws attention to the problem of inking a dividing line between oral epic and ritual, since “in the performance of epic a number of ritual aspects can be discerned also in traditions where a framework of religious rite and ritual for the epic does not exist” (2003:253). Even though in some cultures the oral performance of epic may not be embedded within an

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<sup>5</sup> The recitation of formulas is commonly practiced in many ritualized events, such as legal cases, funerals, and liturgical ceremonies.

<sup>6</sup> “Oral performance to accomplish a purpose by means of performative speech in a ritual context” (Olsan 1999:403; quoted in Liuzza 2008:295).

<sup>7</sup> See Jolly 1996 for a book-length study that makes a strong case for treating the Old English charms as part of a continuum from folk to institutionalized Christian activity.

overtly religious rite, the performance settings for epics tend to be highly structured, in ways that reinforce social hierarchies and cultural values. According to Reichl, the relatively fixed performance settings and “act sequence” (the temporal unfolding of the performance according to a series of relatively invariant acts<sup>8</sup>) justify treating Turkic epic, at least, as a species of ritual. Both Liuzza and Reichl’s examples show how we could begin to rethink the relationship between oral tradition and ritual practices in Old English literature. Liuzza offers the figure of the spectrum as a model for imagining and interpreting a range of verbal sayings that were deemed to have practical (and spiritual) efficacy. Reichl’s work expands the figure of the spectrum, treating religious rites (even those without words) and the performance of oral epic as events lying along a ritual spectrum. Ritual theorists also recognize that ritualistic activities vary in their relationship to sacrality and in the degree to which every action and word must accord with a fixed pattern, and approach everything from liturgies to baseball games as ritualistic events. However, according to Catherine Bell (1997), rituals do share many characteristics in common, including formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism, and performance, which help to distinguish ritualistic from non-ritualistic practices.

Because they often unfold in relatively invariable performance settings according to specific sets of rules, the oral performances of living traditions are arguably ritualistic, if not full-blown rituals themselves. The use of tradition-specific (and often highly formalized) verse styles and a prescribed act sequence means that many oral-traditional performances cross the liminal threshold between ordinary and special, between unmarked actions and the ritualistic. For example, Zuni tales (*telapnaawe*) may only be recounted while the snakes hibernate and after sundown, since they make time elapse more quickly and can attract the “smile” of a snake (Tedlock 1999:xxvi-xxvii). Serbian epic has been typically performed in coffee houses during Ramadan for an audience of men (Foley 2002:209). When Turkic epic is performed in a yurt, the placement of the singer and those of greater prominence follows tacit rules: the singer sits “in the place of honor . . . opposite the entrance; the other participants are placed according to the sitting order of the yurt, the most distinguished members of the gathering sitting to the singer’s right and left” (Reichl 2003:257). In the field of medieval literature, Anglo-Saxonists have elucidated some of the potential performance settings or ritualistic conditions for the composition and/or performance of Old English verse and prose.<sup>9</sup> Pat Connor (2008) makes a case for reading Old English literature at guild feasts; Robert Luyster (1998) examines the possible role of the consecrated grove and Scandinavian fertility rites in the short elegiac poem, “The Wife’s Lament”; Lori Ann Garner (2004) has focused on the performance of Old English metrical charms, arguing that performance itself negates the seeming dichotomy between “living ritual” and “static text”; Peter Lucas (1992) posits the Paschal Vigil of Holy Saturday as a source for the metrical saint’s life, *Guthlac B*; Thomas D. Hill (2002) has investigated the relationship of Exeter Book Riddle 45 to a long-standing tradition involving the kneading of dough, sexually explicit

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<sup>8</sup> In the case of Turkic epic, the act sequence begins with a prelude or selection of short songs (*terma*) during which the singer warms up, followed by the composition in performance from sunrise to sunset of epic verse. At midnight there is a break, during which the singer leaves and payments from the guests are collected (Reichl 2003:258-60).

<sup>9</sup> This overview of scholarship on performance settings, while hardly comprehensive, may provide a sense of the wide variety of genres and contexts that have been explored.

gestures, and/or chanting; and John Niles (1999, 2007) has argued that the audiences of the heroic poems *Beowulf* and *Widsith* were Anglo-Saxon nobility.

Of these authors, Niles is the only one to theorize the role of ritual in relationship to Old English verse. In *Homo Narrans* he provides a useful introduction to ritual studies and its applicability to the study of oral-related texts. He first quotes Steven Lukes's definition of ritual: "ritual is 'rule-governed activity of a symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling which they hold to be of special significance.'" (1999:121). The focus of this definition accords with Niles's interest in the social reflexivity of early medieval texts such as *Beowulf*, which may at first glance seem timelessly mythic, but which in fact use heightened discourse to imaginatively think through contemporary issues such as lineage, kingship, and nation building. Niles's approach to the study of oral-related texts accords largely with a functionalist methodology developed in the early twentieth century that focuses on the social utility of oral traditions.<sup>10</sup> In this vein, he writes that an oral narrative such as *Beowulf* "can thus serve important functions of education and acculturation in the society in which it occurs. . . . For adults, it confirms the nexus of understandings that constitute their knowledge of the past and of the world around them, their social structure, and their moral action" (1999:129).<sup>11</sup> By calling attention to the power of ritualistic activities to educate and acculturate, Niles's approach to oral tradition *cum* ritual echoes Bronislaw Malinowski, who wrote that myth (which is often difficult to distinguish from oral tradition) carries "the normative power of fixing custom, of sanctioning modes of behavior, of giving dignity and importance to an institution" (quoted by Zumwalt 1998:81). For Niles, defining *Beowulf* as ritualistic allows him to interpret the poem as "a socially symbolic act" (142).

### Immanent Art and Ritual Studies

While focusing on the social symbolism of oral-related verse, its setting, or its place within a sequence of acts can contribute greatly to our understanding of Anglo-Saxon poetic forms, there remain other methods for exploring the relationship between ritual and oral-related poetry. An approach to studying ritualistic features within oral-related poems in traditional poetic terms could, for instance, examine the role of metonymic signifiers embedded in poems themselves.<sup>12</sup> This methodology, which I will elaborate upon in the following paragraphs, would thus take into account the modes of signification shared by both oral traditions and rituals. Unlike Reichl, who asserts that ritual features "will not be found in particular linguistic forms or

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<sup>10</sup> Like the anthropologist Ruth Benedict, and following Fredric Jameson, he also asserts that narratives serve as wish fulfillment for a society (1999:143).

<sup>11</sup> More specifically, he concludes that *Beowulf* "legitimized Anglo-Saxon institutions of kingship and thaneship, confirmed Christian ideals of sacrifice, and promoted a common culture among the English and the Danes" (1999:142).

<sup>12</sup> Niles equates the heightened rhetoric of epic verse with "ritualized discourse," a designation that he leaves unexplored. His chapter "*Beowulf* as Ritualized Discourse" (1999) constitutes an important step toward acknowledging the socially embedded character of early medieval verse, but it does not examine ritualized discourse *per se*.

poetic techniques” (2003:257), I suggest that the ritualistic may be located in the formal, as well as the functional, aspects of oral-traditional and oral-related poetry (*ibid.* 256). John Miles Foley’s approach to interpreting oral and oral-related works of verbal art, called “immanent art,” provides an important analytical tool for investigating ritual poetics in medieval verse.<sup>13</sup> The immanent art approach treats medieval oral-related texts as works that still resonate today through oral metonyms for those who learn to recognize them. I want to extend the application of immanent art to ritualized idioms, by treating ritual not as a concrete product, but as a practice that mobilizes bodies and artifacts to create events laden with meaning.

### *Performance and Tradition*

This description of ritual largely accords with the work of Bell, who writes that “ritualization” is a specialized type of practice (à la Bourdieu) “that is designated and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities” (1992:74). Richard Bauman makes a similar distinction between normative, less highly marked speech and verbal art by drawing attention to the manner in which performance itself is “constitutive of the domain of verbal art” (1977:11). Performance—whether of ritual or oral tradition—sets up interpretive frames (see Goffman 1974) that cause participants to adjust their expectations. Studies of ritualization and oral tradition share this central tenet of performance theory: that rituals and oral traditions live in their generation in real time by tradition bearers for communities. In Bell’s theorization of ritual, rather than existing *a priori* to a ritual event (which would amount to any performance being dead on arrival), meaning is created by ritualized bodies involved in the performance of a rite. Signification emerges or is generated by the interaction between ritual agents. For Bell, although meaning arises in the performance context, it can never be fully captured by discursive analysis: “strategies, signification, and the experience of meaningfulness are found in the endless circularity of the references mobilized, during the course of which some differentiations come to dominate others” (1992:116). These strategies and significations reference culturally- and generically-specific traditions, and for this reason no universal definition of ritual will suffice.

In the immanent art approach, the specialized idioms of an oral tradition resonate most fully only through the process of their enactment (in performance or a simulacrum of performance) in relationship to both a knowledgeable audience and to the tradition, which both the verbal “text” and the audience share. As Foley has described, such a traditional context differs in both degree and kind from the post-Gutenberg literary scenario so familiar to many readers, where an author’s individual idiolect is prized far above the use of a shared, communal poetic language. In fact, it may be difficult for readers of literature with no direct experience of oral traditions to understand how oral metonyms communicate because of strong aesthetic bias against “unoriginal” phraseology, unless such phraseology appears to be ironic or re-purposed in a clever and highly individualistic way. Such is seldom the case in oral traditions, since recurring phraseology serves as a highly efficient and powerful mode of communication.

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<sup>13</sup> Foley’s approach was originally developed for describing and interpreting oral-traditional verse rather than rituals.

The communicative strategies explored by immanent art apply, I would argue, to both oral and ritual traditions. Immanent art shows how the significance of an idiom depends upon its creation through performance and a shared tradition—that malleable, “dynamic, multivalent body of meaning that preserves much that a group has transmitted and invented” (Foley 1995:xii). Foley describes the interlinked phenomena of performance and tradition as “the enabling event” and “the enabling referent” (28). In other words, performance (or practice) is the primary medium for communication, but without the tradition a great deal of the communicative signal may be lost. Most works of non-oral-derived literature suffer no comparable degree of communication blackout when removed from their literary milieu. Their “enabling referents” inhere within the work itself, rather than depending primarily on tradition with its own specialized language for creating meaning. Foley summarizes the communicative mode of oral traditions in the following way: “empowerment of the communicative act results from the keying of performance—whether in the first instance by an actual experienced event or in the textual instance by its rhetorical vestige—and from the shared immersion in traditional context that is the performer’s and audience’s experiential heritage” (28).<sup>14</sup> Since written medieval texts may evidence “rhetorical vestiges,” we may discover oral—and, as I hope to show, ritualistic—idioms resonating for readers and auditors possessing the “experiential heritage.”

Although Foley describes oral-traditional performances (in real time and on the page), his immanent art approach could also apply to many ritual contexts in which actions and words are endowed with significance. Jonathan Z. Smith comments on the communicative richness that arises when one inhabits a ritual space: “When one enters a temple, one enters a marked-off space in which, at least in principle, nothing is accidental; everything, at least potentially, is of significance. The temple serves as a *focusing lens*, marking and revealing significance” (1982:54).<sup>15</sup> In ritual, both demarcated space and the tradition-specific features of performance help to cue ritual practice and “reveal” significance. Roy Rappaport in his chapter entitled “Enactments of Meaning” emphasizes the importance of performance (where Bell would use the term “practice”<sup>16</sup>) to ritual communication: “Performance is not merely one way to present or express liturgical orders but is itself a crucial aspect or component of the messages those orders carry” (1999:118).<sup>17</sup> According to Rappaport, sanctioned behavior informs the performance of rituals (whether new or ancient). Thus, we may observe that in both oral-traditional performance

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<sup>14</sup> See also Foley 1991.

<sup>15</sup> We could draw a broad comparison between the “marked-off space” of the temple “which serves as a focusing lens” and the idiomatic language of an oral tradition, which may be “marked-off” by such features as meter, prosody, special speech styles, and formulaic opening and closing phrases.

<sup>16</sup> In her textbook on ritual, Bell surveys studies that have emphasized ritual’s performative dimension. She describes how this approach values the efficacy of performance, demonstrating “that ritual does what it does by virtue of its dynamic, diachronic, and physical characteristics” (1997:75). In *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Bell critiques implementations of performance theory for naturalizing a subject-object dichotomy created in the first place by the theorist, for essentializing the performance model of ritual, for insisting upon a feature of ritual that in itself is too broad a descriptor, and for treating rituals primarily as texts in need of interpretation by the theorist or scholar (1992:42-45).

<sup>17</sup> Rappaport’s *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999) provides one of the most comprehensive studies of ritual since Emile Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912/2001).

and ritualization, acts of communication arise due to the “enabling event” of performance within a marked off space and are endowed with highly resonant significance due to the “enabling referent” of tradition. Immanent art also privileges the memetic richness of a shared tradition. The collective memories from which tradition is constructed, together with performance (or its “rhetorical vestiges”), create a crucible for the “richly contexted array of meanings” that emerge in oral traditions (Foley 1995:28)—and also in ritualizations.

### *A Metonymic Register*

According to Foley, tradition and performance set up the conditions for a highly resonant and efficient mode of communication. The poetic register of a particular tradition or genre within a tradition usually does not have the broad functionality of everyday language. The trade-off is a specialized way of speaking with a “density of associative, metonymic meaning accruing to and implied by linguistic integers” (1995:16). Building on the work of Lord and Parry, Foley describes how the basic linguistic units of many oral-traditional poetic languages exceed the print-bound notion of what constitutes a “word.” In the South Slavic tradition, for instance, a “word” may be a formulaic unit, a line or pair of lines, a type-scene, and even an entire story pattern. In Old English verse, scholars have identified formulaic systems, themes, type-scenes, and conventions—all of which could be termed oral-related idioms. Such poetic words constitute (along with music and paralinguistic features) the specialized register of an oral tradition. Foley explains why oral idioms may be called metonyms: “Because registers are more highly coded than everyday language, because their ‘words’ resonate with traditional implications beyond the scope of multipurpose street language, they convey enormously more than grammars and dictionaries (based as they are on everyday language) can record” (2002:116). For this reason, registers also self-referentially point to the tradition from which they emerge, allowing them to “persist beyond live performance and into texts” (116). Furthermore, for traditional participants, every instantiation of an oral idiom recalls past experiences of similar performances.

Ritualized actions and words, like their oral-traditional kin, bear especially weighty connotations due to the narrow focus of the canon (or, in oral-traditional terms, the register). Signs are invested with greater significance. Rappaport explains: “It follows that the acceptance of an order, because it is in its nature highly restrictive, is therefore more socially consequential and significant than the affirmation of a more or less unrestrictive code” (1999:127).<sup>18</sup> Accepting a ritual order means accepting the traditional ramifications that have accrued to that order. For instance, following the order to kneel when praying can indicate the dedication of the body and mind, in a position of servitude, humility, or vulnerability, to the object of prayer; kneeling also indicates dedication to the encompassing ritual tradition. According to Bell, the ritual process itself accords symbols with their sacrality, and allows them to index a system or experience “of a greater, higher, or more universalized reality—the group, the nation, humankind, the power of God, or the balance of the cosmos” (1997:159). Like Rappaport, she argues that the resonance of ritual symbols depends upon ritual practice itself: “in actuality, ritual-like action effectively

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<sup>18</sup> In Rappaport’s terminology, “acceptance” does not denote faith or belief; it means participation—ranging from passive attendance to the playing of a supportive role in a liturgy.

*creates* the sacred by explicitly differentiating such a realm from a profane one” (157), but Rappaport’s explanation of ritual significance more closely dovetails with immanent art because he explains that such symbols, in a circular manner, draw their potency from the same sacred or extra-mundane tradition that they performatively create.

### Case Study: *Dream of the Rood*

When studying an early medieval poem, we may listen for the “vestige” of a ritualized word or symbol that invests the poem with a significance that both narrowly refers metonymically to its own embeddedness with a specific ritual and also escapes the attempt to nail down its “ritual meaning.” I will argue that ritual metonyms invest *Dream of the Rood* (Vercelli Codex CXVII) with the extra-textual associations of the specific liturgical situations to which these signs refer. *Dream of the Rood*, the well-known tenth-century dream vision of the Holy Cross narrating its experience of Christ’s crucifixion to a Dreamer, has long attracted scholarship attesting to its ties with ritualized and devotional scenarios. In 1919 Howard Patch suggested that the author of the poem “could hardly rid his mind of all the echoes of the hymns and responsive utterances and the liturgical offices which he was accustomed to hear at various times during the church year” (233). Subsequent scholarship on ritual and *Dream of the Rood* has generally assumed that in one way or another Christian liturgical and devotional practices inform its lines, and the majority of scholars who have written about ritual in this poem have focused their attention on the relationship between the poem and the *Adoratio crucis* or Veneration of the Cross.<sup>19</sup> In particular, Éamonn Ó Carragáin and Sarah Larratt Keefer have demonstrated in great detail the various relationships between *Dream of the Rood*, the Ruthwell Cross, and the ceremonies of Holy Week, especially the *Adoratio crucis* on Holy Friday before Easter. Their findings, in addition to those of Patch and Peggy Samuels, serve as the basis for this essay’s exploration of ritual metonym in *Dream of the Rood*; however, in the work of these scholars the references in *Dream of the Rood* to Holy Week are treated as allusions rather than metonyms.<sup>20</sup> M. Bradford Bedingfield’s summary of scholarship on the relationship between liturgy and *Dream of the Rood* epitomizes this typical literary approach toward the study of medieval verse, and toward liturgical features in *Dream of the Rood* more particularly (2002:137):

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Patch 1919; Ó Carragáin 1982, 1983, 2005, 2010; Samuels 1988; Hill 1993; Bedingfield 2002; and Keefer 2005, 2008. For other liturgical and ritualistic sources: Patch explores verbal and imagistic associations with a wide array of hymns; Julia Bolton Holloway (1984) has argued that pilgrimage to Jerusalem served as the creative and spiritual model for *Dream of the Rood* (and the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Crosses, and the *Adoratio crucis*); Earl R. Anderson (1989) has also described the poem’s association with the symbolism of the canonical hours; and Murray McGillivray (2005) has shown that the introit and gradual of the Christmas Day Mass may explain the use of the phrase “engel dryhtnes” (“angel of the Lord”) as an epithet for Christ.

<sup>20</sup> Ó Carragáin (2010) also suggests that Holy Week rituals were influenced by a poetic tradition in which crosses were dramatized, a tradition from which *Dream of the Rood* eventually emerged.

The general consensus of those looking to place *The Dream of the Rood* in some sort of liturgical context is that, due to the individual genius of the poet of the Vercelli version (and due to the fact that we know little about the liturgical forms at the stages of the poem's development), we can find only echoes of the liturgy, not direct borrowings, and that we must therefore discuss the poem and the liturgy in terms of analogues, not sources.

By using the immanent art approach, another path opens up before us, one that does not require that we analyze "echoes of the liturgy" as either analogues or direct quotations of specific sources. Instead, clear references to ritualization may operate as idioms with metonymic force.

### Dream of the Rood and Liturgical Metonyms

Specific verses in *Dream of the Rood* echo the ceremonies of Holy Week, in particular the *Adoratio crucis* or Veneration of the Cross at the Nones Office on Good Friday. Ó Carragáin traces the similarities between Christ and rood in the Gospel of the Mass (Luke 22:1-23) on the Wednesday of Holy Week in which Christ is implicitly compared to the green wood (*viridi ligno*) of the forest: "this identification was probably inspired by early Christian liturgy and iconography, which regularly presented the glorified cross as a symbol of Christ" (2010:149-51; see also Ó Carragáin 2005:311-16). Keefer remarks that lines 55b-56a of *Dream of the Rood*, "Weop eal gesceaft, / cwiðdon Cyninges fyll" ("All creation wept, mourned the fall of the king"),<sup>21</sup> contain an "eerie echo" of the *Dum fabricator mundi* antiphon that "recounts the moment of Christ's death on the cross when creation cried out in anguish" (2008:240) through the phrase "terre motus enim factus fuerit magnus quia mortem filii dei clamabat mundus se sustinere non posse" ("all the great earth was shaken because the world cried out at the death of the Son of God which it could not bear") (Keefer 2008:212, n. 17).<sup>22</sup> This antiphon is sung as part of the adoration of the unveiled cross during the Veneration of the Cross ritual (*ibid.*:212).

I would also call attention to other parts of the synaxis that have vernacular echoes in the poem, since the verbal, rhetorical, and imagistic parallels function cumulatively as metonyms for the ritual event of the *Adoratio*. For instance, the hymn *Pange lingua gloriosi* of Venantius Fortunatus was sung with the stanza *Crux fidelis* ("O faithful cross") serving as a refrain (Keefer 2008:212-14). The first line of this stanza may be found in the vernacular poetic idiom of *Dream of the Rood* (ll. 90-91):<sup>23</sup>

Hymn:	Crux fidelis inter omnes arbor una nobilis "O faithful cross, among all others a singular tree"
Poem:	Hwæt, me þa geweorðode wuldres Ealdor ofer holmwudu, heofonrices Weard.

<sup>21</sup> The Old English text is from Swanton 1996. All Old English translations are my own.

<sup>22</sup> Translation from the Latin is by Keefer.

<sup>23</sup> Patch (1919:252) links different verses from the *Pange lingua* to *Dream of the Rood*.

“Listen, the Lord of glory then honored me over sea-wood, the  
Guardian of heaven.”

Like the *Advent Lyrics (Christ I)*, *Dream of the Rood* appears to invest its verse with vernacular translations of liturgical antiphons and hymns. Scholars have sometimes described these liturgical references as occasions for meditation. But these references also participate in a communication strategy typical to oral-related verse: metonymic referentiality. As metonyms for Latin verses and their liturgical contexts, these translations invoke generally the Latin liturgy and specifically the moments in which their referents arise. Such lines in *Dream of the Rood* as “weop eal gesceaft” (l. 155b) and “Hwæt, me þa geweorðode wuldres Ealdor . . .” (l. 90) function as ritual metonyms that link the vernacular poem to sacred liturgy, bringing to bear the promise of redemption associated with participation in the liturgy.

Furthermore, the poem invokes the entire sequence of the *Adoratio* by following the steps in which the ritual unfolds. Keefer describes the sequence of the ritual, based on composite sources, as follows:<sup>24</sup> “(1) a procession and responsory that brings forward the shrouded cross as emblem of Christ crucified and then unveils it; (2) the adoration proper, with individual prayers, sung psalms, and antiphons; (3) the singing of the *Pange lingua* (and the unique *Depositio crucis*) to complete the Veneration ritual proper” (2008:208).<sup>25</sup> She writes that the rood’s first appearance to the Dreamer resembles the revelation of the cross in the Veneration ritual: “Just as the *crux gemmata* is unveiled through vision to reveal the True Cross for the Visionary in *The Dream of the Rood*, so the processional cross or jeweled cross reliquary of Good Friday is unveiled to become, for its viewers, the Rood on which Christ died: *Ecce lignum crucis*” (240). The dream vision genre itself helps to frame the extraordinary context in which the Holy Cross could be unveiled to the minds of both the Dreamer and the poem’s audience. Descriptively, the poem enacts a process of unveiling by first presenting a “syllicre treow” (“uncanny tree”), then revealing that the tree was in fact the “beama beorhtost” (“brightest of trees”) covered in gold and adorned with five jewels, upon which all creation gazes. The mysteriousness of the “tree” is then emphasized again in such lines as “syllic wæs se sigebeam” (“uncanny was the victory-tree,” 13a) and the manner in which it shifts between bloody and bejeweled states. Such a transition, Patch has noted (1919:249-51), could signify the shift in ritual usage from a Lenten to Easter cross. Not least, the poem’s deployment of the riddle genre, when the Cross recounts its origins, further emphasizes the mental path from mystery and confusion to revelation. For an audience familiar with the Veneration ritual, the connection between the mysterious slow-reveal of the “syllicre treow” and the unveiling would, however, probably not be clear until the poem metonymically signals the subsequent parts of the Veneration sequence.

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<sup>24</sup> Her sources are “Roman *ordines*, continental service books, and customaries,” as well as the *Regularis Concordia* and two recently discovered eleventh-century manuscripts: Oxford, Bodl. Lib., Bodley 120, and CCCC 422, which she describes as “the only witnesses for an Anglo-Saxon Veneration of the Cross service which demonstrate actual practice of the Good Friday service, a practice that confirms the better-known prescription of church ritual as it was laid out in the tenth century” (2008:206).

<sup>25</sup> As a consequence of these ritualized representations of the events of the crucifixion, “the congregation is actively drawn into a dramatic recreation of the past within the present” (Keefer 2008:210).

By invoking the second and third steps in the *Adoratio crucis* sequence, *Dream of the Rood* calls forth sense memories of bodily participation in ritual. In the second part, the members of the clergy and the congregation approach “the unveiled cross and pray at its foot” (Keefer 2008:210), a process that is echoed in the representation of the Dreamer prostrate at the foot of the cross (ll. 24-25): “Hwæðre ic þær licgende lange hwile / beheold hreowcearig Hælendes treow” (“Yet lying there for a long while I, troubled with sorrow, beheld the tree of the Healer”). Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, Catherine Bell writes that one of the outcomes of ritualization is the creation of “ritualized bodies,” or “a body invested with a ‘sense’ of ritual” (1992:98). In the Veneration ritual the placement of the cross above the body creates the perception of a naturalized hierarchy, with the human body in the lowest position, the cross above, and beyond the God of heaven.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the ritualized body engenders the felt perception of the cross as mediator between humanity and Christ. In the third part of the sequence, the *Pange lingua* is sung, and, as we have seen, *Dream of the Rood* translates the most prominent line of the recurring refrain from this hymn. In terms of ritual poetics, then, the poem invokes the ritualized body at the Veneration of the Cross. The lines that recall the *Dum fabricator mundi* antiphon and the *Pange lingua gloriosi* metonymically call forth the lived experience of intoning or listening to them. Above all, the mirrored sequence of steps in the Veneration ritual and the multi-layered invocation of both the ritualized body and its acoustic environment all contribute to invoking an experience of the Veneration of the Cross, while locating this experience in the personal, first-person narrative of the Dreamer.<sup>27</sup>

### *Crosses that Speak*

Another important metonym operates in *Dream of the Rood* to link the narrative of the talking Holy Cross with direct experiences of ritualized crosses of stone and wood that “speak.” Two artifacts suggestively point toward the possibility that, in the Anglo-Saxon Christian tradition, material crosses could be invested with first-person identities and represented as speakers. Both the Brussels Cross (early 11<sup>th</sup> century) and the Ruthwell Cross (late 7<sup>th</sup>-early 8<sup>th</sup> century) have inscriptions that represent them speaking directly to the reader or auditor. The Brussels Cross states, “Rod is min nama; geo ic ricne cyning bær byfigynde, blod bestemed” (“Rood is my name; I once bore the powerful king, trembling, soaked with blood”), recalling some of the sentiments and lexical choices in lines 36b (“bifian”), 42a (“bifode”), 44 (“Rod wæs ic aræred. Ahof ic ricne Cyning”), and 48b (“eall ic wæs mid blode bestemed”) of *Dream of the Rood*. Even more intriguingly, the Ruthwell Cross carries a runic inscription whose lines directly overlap with a handful of those in *Dream of the Rood* (ll. 39, 40b-41a, 42b, 44b-45, 48-49a, 56b-59, 62b-64a). Verses from the Ruthwell Cross appear in italics interlineally

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. ll. 155b-56 of *Dream of the Rood* describing Christ’s ascension to heaven: “þa heora Wealdend cwom, / ælmihtig God, þær his eðel wæs” (“then their Ruler came, almighty God, where his homeland was”).

<sup>27</sup> From the perspective of ritual studies, these lines would invoke, for Christians, the obligation “to act in conformity to form” (Rappaport 1999:136), that is, to approach the cross with reverence.

(Swanton 1996:94-97):<sup>28</sup>

Ongyrede hine þa geong hæleð, (þæt wæs God ælmihtig),  
*[+ Ond]geredæ hinæ God almehttig*

. . . gestah he on gealgan heanne,  
*þa he walde on galgu gistiga*

modig on manigra gesyhðe . . .  
*[m]odig f[ore allæ] men.*

. . . ne dorste ic hwæðre bugan to eorðan,  
*[B]ug[a ic ni dorstæ .....]*

. . . Ahof ic ricne Cyning,  
*[Ahof] ic riicnæ Kyniŋc,*

heofona Hlaford; hyldan me ne dorste.  
*heafunæs Hlafard, hælda ic ni dorstæ.*

. . .

Bysmeredon hie unc butu ætgædere. Eall ic wæs mid blode bestemed,  
*Bismærædu unŋket men ba ætgad[re]; ic [wæs] miþ blodæ [b]istemi[d],*

begoten of þæs guman sidan. . . .  
*bi[goten of .....]*

. . . Crist wæs on rode.  
*+ Krist wæs on rodi.*

Hwæðere þær fuse feorran cwoman  
*Hweþræ þer fusæ fearran kwomu*

to þam æðelinge. Ic þæt eall beheold.  
*æþpilæ til anum. Ic þæt al bih[eald]*

Sare ic wæs mid [sorgum] gedrefed, hnag ic. . . .  
*Sar[æ] ic wæs mi[þ] sorgum gidræ[fi]d, h[n]ag [ic .....]*

. . .

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<sup>28</sup> Ó Carragáin (2010:138-42) contrasts the Ruthwell and *Dream of the Rood* verses.

. . . mid strælum forwundod.  
*mip strelum giwundad.*

Aledon hie ðær limwerigne, gestodon him æt his lices heafðum;  
*Alegdun hie hinæ limwærignæ, gistoddum him [. . .] licæs [hea]ff[du]m;*

beheoldon hie ðær. . . .  
 [bi]hea[l]du[n] hi[æ] be[r] .....

In the following translation, words that appear only in *Dream of the Rood* are in bold; those that occur only on the Ruthwell Cross are in italics and, when necessary, in parentheses. When the translations overlap directly, no italicization or bolding is used.

The **young hero** unclothed himself then: **that was** God almighty . . . . *When he leaped* (*wished to leap*) onto the high gallows, mighty **in the sight of many** (*before all men*). . . . *Yet* I did not dare to bow down **to the earth**. . . . I lifted the powerful king, the lord of heavens, nor did I dare to bend. . . . They mocked us both together. I was **all** drenched with blood, poured forth **from the man's side**. . . . Christ was on the rood. Yet they swiftly came from afar **to the lord** (*nobles [came] to the one*).<sup>29</sup> I beheld all that. In pain, I was distressed with sorrow, I bent . . . deeply wounded with arrows. There they laid down the limb-weary one, stood at his head, they beheld there. . . .

For audiences with the “experiential heritage” linking poem and standing cross, the lexical echoes in *Dream of the Rood* could have served as a ritualistic metonym for being in the presence of the Ruthwell Cross or others like it. The cross’s presence would have been associated with specific ritualizations (the Mass, Lauds, Vespers, the ceremonies of Holy Week, and so on). Although the lines on the Ruthwell Cross and in the Vercelli Codex were inscribed during different centuries, using different dialects and different alphabets, their lexical similarities suggest a shared tradition.<sup>30</sup> Two possibilities present themselves: first, that the “ekphrastic” verses on the Ruthwell Cross directly inspired *Dream of the Rood*; second, that lost oral, written, or etched versions of these texts could connect them across centuries and dialects. Either possibility creates the conditions for a relationship between the longer poem, in manuscript form (the book itself being an object highly invested with ritualistic potential), and a cross (or crosses and reliquaries containing crosses) employed in ritualized situations.

<sup>29</sup> On the translation of this line of the Ruthwell inscription, see Bammesberger 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Ó Carragáin treats *Dream of the Rood* as part of a larger tradition, including the verses on the Ruthwell Cross and the distich on the Brussels Cross. He suggests, in addition, that “some versions of the dream-vision frame of the Vercelli poem existed as early as the end of the seventh century (perhaps a generation before the Ruthwell Cross) in sung, oral forms” from which the Ruthwell tituli were excerpted (2010:141). Although no surviving testaments to these oral songs and their content exist, it is evident from the similarities between *Dream of the Rood* and the Ruthwell Cross verses that these poems were more than religious lyric (in a narrow sense); they engage the reader or auditor in the spectrum of ritualistic functions that feature the cross, ranging from the Exaltation of the Cross on Good Friday during Holy Week to personal devotion.

To generate a sense of what the metonymic invocation of the Ruthwell Cross (or others like it) may, at least in part, denote, we need to consider how the Ruthwell Cross could have been used and perceived by Anglo-Saxons. Etched vine scrolls emphasize that the Ruthwell Cross is “fundamentally a tree: an image, central to pre-Christian Germanic religion, which in Christian culture became the *arbor vitae*, an image of the *mysterium fidei*” (Ó Carragáin 2005:286). Like Christ, the figure of the Ruthwell Cross unifies seemingly opposite states: it is inert stone, but also living wood (*arbor vitae*); a bringer of death and a token of eternal life; a massive figure of stony silence and a speaking object.<sup>31</sup> The four sides of the cross announce to the ear and eye its vital role in Christ’s sacred history. As an emblem of doubleness and a synthesis of contradictions, it easily fulfills the role of Christ’s simulacrum. From the perspective of ritual poetics, the metonymic invocation of the inscriptions on the Ruthwell Cross calls into the acoustic and imaginative experience of *Dream of the Rood* the experiential knowledge of a silent-speaking cross. In both sets of verses, those on the cross and those in the Vercelli manuscript, the rood is identified as Christ’s companion when he conquered death. In a parallel move, the metonymic reference in *Dream of the Rood* to the inscribed stone cross (that speaks using first-person narration) re-creates the cross-as-companion association in the mind of the audience. They, like the Dreamer, may “in breostum bereð beacna selest” (“in the breast carry the best of signs,” 118), since by hearing or reading about the speaking Cross, the lived experience of being in the presence of ritual crosses is called to mind—the mind in Anglo-Saxon verse and prose being synonymous with the heart.<sup>32</sup>

By exploring the possibilities of a ritual poetics in medieval verse, we may glimpse how poems that already use the traditional referentiality of an oral poetics may likewise engage a ritual referentiality in order to evoke experiences of specific ritualized objects and ceremonies. By wedding the findings of immanent art to ritual theories of signification, in what I am calling “ritual poetics,” we may discover that lines of verse carry a metonymic force linking the spoken or oral-related written word to the vivid, multilayered experience of ritualized situations. I have sought to demonstrate that *Dream of the Rood* not only alludes to liturgical sources and the runic inscription on the Ruthwell Cross; it may also invoke for its audience the lived sensory experience of ritual, for both aesthetic and religious effect. By metonymically summoning the *Adoratio crucis* ritual, the poem evokes the ritualized bodies of participants, the sensory memory of obedience and humility before the cross, and experiences of revelation and adoration.

In the third phase of the *Adoratio*, the cross undergoes a ritual burial or *Depositio crucis*, an act that viscerally yokes the cross to Christ’s personal narrative. There are strong theological parallels between the *Depositio crucis* ritual and *Dream of the Rood* since both treat the Cross as a representation of “the physical body and by implication the human nature of Christ” (Hill 1993:299). In addition to expressing theological congruence with this ritual, the poem also metonymically invokes the *Depositio crucis* in the verses: “Ða us man fyllan ongan / ealle to

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<sup>31</sup> As Keefer notes, “the cross, as understood within the Christian aesthetic, becomes the paradox of simplicity in design, enclosing within its own semantics a great complexity of truths” (2008:204).

<sup>32</sup> See Lockett 2011, as well as Mize 2010:137-51, who writes that the phrase *in breostum* is one of “numerous examples” through which “*The Dream of the Rood* represents the dreamer’s understanding of and devotion to the True Cross, gained through his *visio crucis*, as a mental object contained within the enclosure of his heart” (150).



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