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## Identity, authority, empowering: another approach to *The Dream of the Rood*

There is a basic question that no critic of the Old English poem, *The Dream of the Rood*<sup>1</sup> can avoid: what or who is the Rood? The history of criticism of the poem shows that this inquiry takes one very far, it helps to build a whole concept of interpretation of the poem. The variety of approaches are clear proofs that one is confronted with a real challenge. At the same time they can present a key to unlock several mysteries of this complex and skillfully structured work of art.

The doctrinal approach had found an advocate in, among others, Rosemary Woolf,<sup>2</sup> who presents a vast and thorough picture of the dogmatic background regarding the nature of Christ's person. Other scholars adopt the rhetorical point of view trying to discern whether the Rood is a figure or whether it functions as a symbol or an enigma/riddle as a special form of the prosopopeia.<sup>3</sup> The most recent studies tend to underline the importance of the functioning of the Rood as a sign, building up the adequate semiotic background to make clear the process of signification and of artistic expression. Judy N. Garde<sup>4</sup> and Martine Irvine<sup>5</sup> made an important contribution propagating the importance of a typological research in order to unfold the functioning of the character of the Cross as a sign, an agent of the Redeemer, and these attempts seem fruitful. However, the importance of a more complex analysis is claimed, and the limitation of the investigation to a mere typological approach is often criticized by the promoters of this method themselves (undoubtedly anxious to maintain its credibility).

The figure of the Rood in its various interpretations is considered as a multivalent sign, a speaking riddle, and also as a powerful relic. In my opinion,

<sup>1</sup> *The Dream of the Rood* is contained in the Vercelli Book, a 10th century manuscript. For the edition used, see: SWANTON 1987.

<sup>2</sup> WOOLF 1958, 137-153.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Orton develops an analysis based on the dual nature of the Cross. He sees it as a personified object endowed with the same capacities as the figures of the Anglo-Saxon riddles, keeping its nature of object remaining passive and thus presenting a clear distinction between the figure of Christ and itself. This view seems to correspond more appropriately with the nature of the poem, and it provides the best analysis of the functioning of the prosopopeia. ORTON 1980, 1-18.

<sup>4</sup> GARDE 1991, 1-112.

<sup>5</sup> IRVINE 1994.

the latter is attributable to the fact that it was considered being a sacramental sign, possessing real efficacy by contemporary readers. Martin Irvine had also discovered that besides taking up the rhetorical form of a sign, a symbol and of a speaking riddle, the Rood is also represented in a language descriptive of relics and sacraments. He continues: "The Cross is at once a tree or wood, a gallows, the instrument of salvation, the sign of victory over sin and death and a sacramental sign like the reliquary crosses decked with gold and jewels".<sup>6</sup> However, he did not carry out an analysis of it functioning as a sacrament, or, rather, a sacramental sign. The present essay attempts to adopt this approach. As a sacramental sign, the figure of the cross bears the poetical form of a typological allegorical figure, moreover, of a special form of allegory: a speaking riddle, complementing these with a special efficacy, thus the creation of a multiple-natured persona becomes possible. The consideration of the functioning of the Rood in these different rhetorical forms alone cannot explain important elements of the poem, although these determine the whole structural and semantic pattern, whereas the concept of the Rood as sacramental sign may provide answers. It also contributes to the unfolding of the extreme complexity of this figure, as its identification with the figure of Christ gains new perspectives. The analysis of the Rood as a sacramental sign may enrich our understanding of the poem from an approach taking into account the contemporary concepts about sacral figures.

This essay limits its objective only to the clarification of certain aspects of the functioning of the figure of the Rood as a sacramental sign. These are the identification of the Rood; the games of authority and power, that is the rules of transfer and consequences, effects of the authority on the characters; and the reciprocal influences among them. The analysis of the figure of the Rood being a sacramental sign will be carried out by application of these criteria to the investigation of the poem

### **Sacrament and Sphragis**

The importance of exegesis as a method of the re-interpretation of rhetorical tropes of antiquity is gaining attention in the literary criticism of medieval texts.<sup>7</sup> The analysis of the typological pattern of semiotic references of sacral figures appearing in literary texts sheds a new light on the functioning of literary tropes such as sign, symbol and allegory. Such a scrutiny also enables the discovery

<sup>6</sup> IRVINE, 1994, 447.

<sup>7</sup> See the seminal work of IRVINE

of correlational systems where sacramental signs fit well, having as common basis the typological structure. Consequently, the survey of the figure of the Rood can be taken on these grounds.

The patristic exegesis of a divinely inspired text describing divine realities made a new form of symbol appear: the sacrament, which is exceeding the trope of simple symbol as it has not only a semantic and artistic signification but it is endowed with a 'virtus', an inlaying power. The typological thinking enriched and re-defined considerably the way stylistic devices were regarded: Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*<sup>8</sup> and Bede's *De Schematibus et Tropis*<sup>9</sup> are an evidence of this. The typological method served as a device for the interpretation of the notion of sacrament, the discovery of its forerunners in the Judaic tradition and finally helped the understanding of the new typological interpretation Christ has given these by founding the sacraments on the basis of these pre-figures.

The sacramental theory of the Church began to be formulated from the earliest times by a significant number of patristic authors.<sup>10</sup> As all sacraments have their source in Christ, He himself becomes the sacrament par excellence. As Augustine writes: "Omnia ergo futuri populi signa sunt et mysteria de Domino nostro Jesu Cristo [...]"<sup>11</sup> A sacrament consists of two basic elements: of an external sign and an internal efficacy. Augustine also discerns the 'virtus' and 'fructus sacramenti'. The 'fructus' means the fruits, the changes operated by the sacrament in the receiver's soul; 'virtus' means the 'device', the power lying behind the sacrament which brings forth these fruits: "Aliud est sacramentum, aliud virtus sacramenti,"<sup>12</sup> and "Gratia, quae virtus sacramentum est."<sup>13</sup> The term 'gratia' denotes the transcendental reality which guarantees that the consecration takes place, that is, the essential transformation of the substance of the sacrament into another substance; consequently, it denotes the working of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit, according to patristic theology, who guarantees that a sacrament or a sacramental sign transcends the effect of a simple

<sup>8</sup> Augustine. *De Doctrina Christiana*.

<sup>9</sup> Bedae Venerabilis. *De arte metrica, De schematibus et tropis, De orthographia*. 123 A.

<sup>10</sup> Theodor of Mopsuestia's Homilies are amongst the most important sources of the doctrine of sacraments of the early Church, followed by the Mystagogical Catechesis by Cyril of Jerusalem, the Liturgical Homilies of Gregory of Nazianze and Gregory of Nyssa, of *De Sacramentis* and *De Mysteriis* by Ambrose of Milan, the teacher of Augustine.

<sup>11</sup> Augustine. *De Civitate Dei* XV, 26.

<sup>12</sup> Augustine. In *Ioannis evangelium tractatus* 26:11.

<sup>13</sup> Augustine. In *Ioannis evangelium tractatus* 26:11.

sign. "Sed non quaerant spiritum sanctum nisi in Christi corpore, cuius habent foris sacramentum."<sup>14</sup>

The prerequisite of a sacrament is the existence of a sign, which has to be visible. This sign is the material of the sacrament, (water, bread, oil, etc.) that functions as a sign because it signifies something beyond itself, beyond its primary meaning and function. The sign has to be visible also to remind of its typology.

The Cross of Christ, as being the "sign of signs" is considered by Augustine as having sacramental value. The Cross is not only the strongest sign of salvation, it is also the greatest symbol of its strength and power, that is a sign with sacramental character. Robert Füglistner in his book "Das lebende Kreuz" tries to explain this sacramental nature of the Cross defining it as a "Realsymbol" and his explanation clarifies much of the concept of patristic thinking: "Ich versthee unter 'Realsymbol' ein Zeichen, das in gewisser Hinsicht selber der Bezeichnete ist."<sup>15</sup>

The Cross as object keeps its original nature, nevertheless, it is endowed with real sacramental power. Gregory of Nyssa<sup>16</sup> clearly discerns this phenomenon when he explains that the rod of Moses and the Cross are ordinary wood despite the miracles wrought through them, that the water of baptism remains water, nevertheless, it creates spiritual regeneration. The Cross has this power while, as Augustine states, it represents Christ in a unique way. In *Sermo CCCII*, 5,3 he writes to the newly baptized who received the sign of the cross: "Christianus es, in fronte portas crucem Christi. Character tuus docet quid profiteraris. Quando ille in cruce pendebat, quam crucem portas in fronte non signum ligni te delectat, sed signum pendentis."<sup>17</sup> This quotation is of importance for the understanding of Augustine's conception of the semiosis of sacred signs. The distinction is made clear: as it refers to Christ, the wood of the Cross has the capacity of rendering Christ himself referentially present.

The sign of the cross is present in all the sacramental rites. In the rite of baptism the new Christian is signed with the "signaculum redemptoris" (the sign of the Redeemer), that is, the sign of the cross. It is also called "sphragis", which means a seal or identifying sign on the heart effectuated by the power of

<sup>14</sup> Augustine. *Epistula*. 185. 44. 131. For a brief history of theology of the Holy Spirit, see François VANDENBROUCKE. *Esprit Saint. Dictionnaire de la Spiritualité Chrétienne*. Vol. 4. 1246-1318

<sup>15</sup> "By »real symbol« I mean a sign which is in a way the signified itself." (my translation). FÜGLISTER 1964, 54.

<sup>16</sup> Gregory of Nyssa. *Sermon in Diem Luminum*. 221-42, 226.

<sup>17</sup> Augustine. *Sermones*. *Sermo CCCII*, 5, 3.

the sacrament, which has everlasting effects on the whole being of its receiver, as it effectuates his/her indelible and unlosable assimilation to Christ.

### Defining the identity

The figure of the Rood undergoes a constant change as the poem progresses, it becomes more and more complex in its rhetorical form as well as in its content, that is, its identity. These consecutive identities appear at times to overlap and at others to be quite separate. At first, in the opening vision, it appears as a sign, then, in the second part of the poem, from the narration of the crucifixion, it gradually takes up other forms of rhetorical tropes. It becomes a symbol and an allegory, finally it appears in the complex form of *prosopopeia* and *enigma*. In this second part of the poem the reader is first of all faced with the challenge of the interpretation of the identity of the Rood and Christ and of the relationship between them. As the poetic structure here is very sophisticated, (perhaps the most sophisticated section of the whole poem), the interpretations vary greatly.

The majority of the critics try to define the figure and the role of the Rood in a close relationship with the two other characters of the poem: the Dreamer and Christ himself. Some interpretations even assume the presence of the common human being or of humanity as well, identifying it alternatively with the figure of the Dreamer or even with the Rood. Several efforts were made to prove that the Rood embodies the human, fragile and corruptive nature of Christ, some parallel this view with the Dreamer as the embodiment of mankind, being a kind of Everyman. This view seems to be over-simplifying, neglecting several characteristics of the poem which seems to ensure a more crucial position for the Rood. Other scholars regard the role of the Rood as secondary besides the main role Christ is supposed to play, and who assert that it serves only to underline or (more positively) to represent a special characteristic of Christ.<sup>18</sup>

Faith Patten states<sup>19</sup> that the Cross serves simply as a surrogate of Christ's human nature, in order to enable the presentation of Christ's figure only in his divinity. They refer to the names designating Christ only in his divinity, creating the image of a fearless and victorious hero who, although enduring all the outward process of the crucifixion, does not show any human reaction to these, and it is the Rood which assumes the latter role. This observation seems to be only partly true, while as regards Christ, it ignores the epithets added to His

<sup>18</sup> Daniel PIGG presents an extreme variant of this view: "The Cross is never more than a discourse attempting to rewrite the master discourse of Christ. The Cross has no particular associations apart from signifying Christ." PIGG 1992, 20.

<sup>19</sup> Faith Patten, PIGG 1992, 20.

figure after His death: e.g. "limwerige" (limb-weary) (line 63a). As for the Rood, although it is presented with the stylistic device of a well-developed prosopopeia, it seems that it is not presented completely as a human person sharing all the characteristics of humans.

Others, as J. A. Burrows<sup>20</sup> take a stand for a much more emphasized role the Rood is given in the poem. His view is that the Cross has a double persona, being a natural tree and a supernatural figure at the same time, sustaining this consequently throughout the whole poem. The Rood becomes the representative of humanity and it takes part as an active partner in Christ's suffering as well. Burrows considers the Rood not as a "simple dramatic figure", but as a double persona, belonging to two widely separated worlds, the natural and the supernatural (hence a double focus in the narrative as well, according to him.) The Rood is regarded as a surrogate both for the Dreamer and Christ, where the Dreamer is the representative of common humanity and Christ represents the divine sphere. The Rood, even incorporating this dichotomy, "cannot bridge the gap between natural and supernatural."<sup>21</sup> This assertion seems to be denied by the whole message of the poem, particularly in the last part, where the cross appears as a mediator between the Dreamer, and through him, all humans and Christ. In order to be able to carry out this mission, the Rood has to be endowed with a nature capable of uniting the two spheres. Certainly, this demands a special form of semiotic and also of rhetoric representation, and this is why the figure of the Rood is of a challenging complexity. The interpretations denying an individual identity of the Cross limit the richness of the figure, necessarily present to attain the poetic goal of the poem.

Peter Orton provides another interpretation of the figure of the Cross while studying it as a speaking riddle in relation to the Old English Riddles, considering the Cross as an independent dramatic figure.<sup>22</sup> In his exhaustive analysis he comes to the conclusion that the Rood has certain real human characteristics, but only some of these, and even the existing ones are limited. It has the power to speak, it can reason, has a certain volition and the capacity for action but as for the senses, it can see, hear but cannot feel the pain. He also stresses that although these capacities are present, their functioning is always dependent and enhanced by an exterior agent, happening, so the cross is not independent. Orton considers the formation of the figure of the Cross as being of great artistic value, as it proceeds, that the reader should be "forced by his art to accept a nature in it which, though far from its actual nature as an object, emerges easily

<sup>20</sup> BURROWS 1959, 126-27.

<sup>21</sup> BURROWS 1959, 125.

<sup>22</sup> ORTON 1980, 1-18.

from it with little sense of strain or falsification."<sup>23</sup> Consequently, the Rood is not a simple surrogate to represent the human Christ, because it is limited and it remains an object. It can rather be considered as a unique figure with a unique role also to interpret itself, and this is achieved by the presentation of the progressive understanding of its own significance.

Judy N. Garde creates a similar interpretation, she considers the Rood as perceiving itself as "a natural creature unnaturally implicated in the event of the crucifixion."<sup>24</sup> She also stresses the importance of the incapacity of the Rood to feel guilt. This is not only a consequence of its limited nature, but it also proves that it does not take part in the crucifixion as a human. Here lies a paradox which, in my view, is worth being examined and which suggests an even greater richness of the text as an interpretation of the Rood than an 'everyman' would allow. The presence of the feeling of guilt in the case of the Dreamer is doctrinally correct and coherent: even if he is not present at the moment of the crucifixion, he is indirectly the cause of it. ("He was pierced for our transgressions" [Isaiah 53, 5]). The Rood, on the contrary, was directly the agent of the crucifixion but has no ground to feel guilty about it; even it stresses its own obedience to Christ's will which hindered him from resisting their common enemies.

Another sub-class of the interpretations is provided by critics who emphasise the continuous change of the characters in the course of the narrative. The theory of the progressive identifications of Neil D. Isaacs<sup>25</sup> is one of the most pronounced ones. He claims that this constant change is a structural principle present in the whole poem and thus determines the functioning of the characters as well. This theory seems to be in congruence with the artistic formation of the poem, and also describes best the construction of the identification of the two characters: of the Rood and Christ.

According to my interpretation, the Rood acts as an object, as a part of the inanimate creation. It recognizes its Creator together with the whole inanimate creation: "Weop æll gesceaft, / cwiðdon cyninges fyll. Crist wæs on rode" (lines 55b-56). "All creation wept, / weiled for the death of the King; Christ was on the cross."<sup>26</sup> As an agent of the act of redemption, while partaking in it in unity with Christ's will (although not suffering physical pain) it becomes a figure endowed with a complex identity, representing, in a similarly complex way, Christ himself and by transference owns capacities, powers and roles similar to Christ's.

<sup>23</sup> ORTON 1981, 2.

<sup>24</sup> GARDE, 1998, 98.

<sup>25</sup> ISAACS 1968, 3-18.

<sup>26</sup> Modern English translation by Kevin Crossley-Holland. *The Battle of Maldon and Other Old English Poems*. London: Macmillan, 1974.

The dichotomy of the human and divine aspects of Christ and of the Rood is in the center of the critical debates about the poem. The study of the figure of the Cross, first as a sign, then as a symbolic but independent figure seem convincing. Nevertheless, in my opinion, further light may be shed on the nature of dichotomy of the figure of the Rood (being an independent natural object and at the same time carrying transcendental characteristics) by considering it as being a sacramental sign. A sacramental reality necessarily bears in itself this dichotomy: it has to be fully an object, with all its natural characteristics and at the same time it has to transmit divine intervention. First, this presence necessitates a typological correspondence between the form of the natural object and the prefigures of the life of Christ, which enables it to function itself as a prefigure, as a sign on the first, cognitive level already. The Rood of the poem, through the typological references to the tree of life of Eden, through the allusions to the brass serpent elevated in the wilderness, even if distantly, but meets this requirement. Secondly, a sacramental sign has to be in a more direct correlation with Christ's life by being an independent object, having its well-definable role in creation. In the case of the Rood of the poem this requirement is also met as it is presented as a tree in a forest, and it keeps the essence of a tree. Thirdly, a sacramental reality is endowed with a part in the power of Christ through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Thus sacraments are bestowed with the power to give everlasting life, to heal, etc. The Rood will proudly display these powers gained from Christ as a result of its partaking in the act of redemption from the third section (from line 78 onwards), as it will be analysed in the next chapter. The identification of the figure of the Rood as bearer of sacramental nature is already detectable in the first two parts as well.

In the opening vision the dreamer sees the powerful sign of the cross as it changes its colour and hue, together with its identity: at times it is a glorious, adorned cross, at times it changes to a fear-inspiring tree, soaked with blood. The first verbatim identification takes place here, the overt denomination of the Cross: "hælendes treow" (line 25) "the Saviour's Cross", which identifies the Rood in close reference to Christ. The Old-English word designating 'Saviour' is, by its etymology, very expressive, deriving from the word 'hælan' meaning 'to heal' and 'to save' at the same time. This is also of doctrinal significance: Jesus' death on the Cross accomplished a total deliverance not only from sin, but from all sickness and disease, hence all healing power present in the Church, also in the sacraments. In a way, this is the first pillar of a kind of chiasmic structure built uniting this section with the third one, beginning with line 78, where the self-identification of the Rood follows with the assertion "and ic hælan mæg" (line 85b) "and I can heal", emphasizing its sacramental power.



Here this meaning is embedded in the ambiguity of the identifying term of the Cross (*hælendes treow*, the Saviour's tree).

At the introduction of the next section, the narrative of the Rood, the fragmentary nature of the structure is revealed. First, there is no mentioning why the Cross begins to speak, secondly, nor to whom it addresses this speech, and lastly, the narration begins with events very distant in time. This disjunction has its functional and stylistic role: it makes a clear cut to make readers realize the beginning of a new section, different on many levels from the previous one. According to Pasternack,<sup>27</sup> the changes of perspective are structural elements overall present in the poem and they serve the unfolding of the different aspects of the many-faceted, unsolvable mystery.

A shift is created from the prophetic level and time of the opening vision to the historical level; the narration functions strongly and primarily on the literary one. Very early in the narrative the use of the typological method appears, although discretely, mostly as an artistic device. The Rood foreshadows the events due to happen to Christ in the very near future, implicitly uniting these with the Old Testament through a hidden allusion to the prefigure of the brass serpent elevated in the desert to be looked upon: "geworhon him ðær to wæfersyne, heton me heora wergas hebban." (line 31) "bade me hold up their felons on high,/ made me a spectacle." Thus, by its artistic formation, the figure of the Rood meets the requirement of sacramental realities to be prefigures of the events of the life of Christ themselves.

Another parallel can be found also here in the fourth section. Now the Rood is passive, it endures the action of its enemies. There the Dreamer will be passive waiting on the Rood to act out actions of contrary value that is positive deeds, contrasting the negative value of the soldier's actions). The description of the whole scene is faithful to the narratives in the Gospels up to the details, not in a mechanic, servile way but succeeding in presenting a vivid narration from the point of view of a specific eyewitness. The perspective of an object, of the tree of the cross as witnessing the crucifixion is peculiar, and the invention of this stylistic solution brings an unparalleled quality to the poem.

As an object, the Cross instantly recognises Christ as the "frea mancynnes", that is the "Lord of Mankind", as the first term used by him testifies to it. Moreover, the Rood imitates Christ. The line "Ealle ic mihte feondas gefyllan" (37b-38) "I could have felled /all my foes" suggests that although it had the capacity to deliver himself and Christ, it followed Him in accepting the crucifixion willingly himself, too. Line 39 is worth the attention. Here appears for the first

<sup>27</sup> PASTERNAK 1984 173-75.

time the phrase "god ælmihtig", "Almighty God", which will be the most frequent designation of Christ in the poem. Here it has the role of strengthening the power of "geong hæleð", "young warrior" who is described as "strang ond stiðmod" "firm and unflinching", marking who will be utterly victorious, and in a single phrase it identifies Christ as God. The assertion of the authority of Christ seems very accentuated in the whole passage, and this is achieved by the designations by which the Rood identifies and describes Christ. It is striking that thus, in the course of the narration of the crucifixion, a contrast is built between the Rood and Christ. In the discourse of the Rood the latter appears exclusively as a royal, mighty figure designated with such terms as "frea mancynnes", "geong haeleð", "god ælmihtig", "rice cyning", "heofona hlaford", and as "beorn"; whereas the Rood remains a natural object. Nevertheless, correspondences are built between them: they are bound together in the act of crucifixion.

A similar counterpoint is created in line 44b-45: "Ahof ic ricne cyning, heofona hlaford, hyldan me ne dorste" "I bore aloft the mighty King,/ the Lord of Heaven. I dared not stoop." The contrast is only indirect, the line is confined to express also the real glory of the cross. On the first, expressive level the spiritual reality is presented, Christ's glory as a king and hero, although in the historical account of the Gospels this is not so: there the immediate, the actual defeat and fall, the scandal is presented as a simple narration. The overt and primary presentation of the otherwise concealed spiritual reality, that is of the glory laying behind the visible fall, is an artistic method of high value. A great stylistic and semantic condensation is thus achieved in the duality of the visible scandal /visible glory of Christ's state. The tension and the point of interest is also shared with another, more intricately present duality: the simultaneous scandal and glory of the state of the Cross. As being primarily visible, the glory of the King is shining as an undeniable reality. With a rare artistic device, the scandalous deeds of the soldiers are described as directed rather against the Rood, more indirectly and only alternately do they appear as harming Christ. Thus the tension of the absurdity of the happenings is created in a unique way. The narrative emphasises the unity of the two characters in lines 48-49b: „Bysmeredon hic unc butu ætgædere. Eall ic wæs mid blode bestemed,/begoten of ðæs guman sidan" "They insulted us both together; I was drenched in the blood/ that streamed from the Man's side." The line recalls the first description of the Rood in the opening vision, "hit wæs mid wætan bestēmed/ beswyled mid swātes gange" (lines 22b-23a) "at times dewy with moisture/ stained by flowing blood". The allusion in both cases is sacramental, as associations with the Blood of Christ

of the Eucharist are evoked. Although it may be obscure in the case of the first vision, this allusion could be easily recognized by a public accustomed to feasts or processions linked to the celebration of the Eucharist. The introduction of sacramental Blood adds to the deliberately created mysterious character of the whole scene of the opening vision, strengthening its artistic value. In the scene of the crucifixion, it manifests in one extraordinary image the sacramental unity of the Rood and Christ. The same intricate artistic method is applied here as in the whole scene: the flowing of the Blood of Christ is not described directly as pouring out from Christ's body as it appears in the Gospel narrations, but as drenching the Rood, thus uniting the two characters as well as investing the Rood with a undeniable sacramental character (the Blood poured out during the Crucifixion is the foundation of the sacrament of the Eucharist).

The scandal of the Cross is described also through a game of the power-relations, the Rood has "mihte", yet it "ic fæste stood", and the "rice cynig", the "heofona hlaford" is on the gallows-tree, condensed into a very strong paradoxal image: "Geseah ic weruda god/ ðearle ðenian" (51b-52a) "I saw the God of Hosts stretched/ on the rack." The parallel structure of the two short sentences, reduced to the essential and therefore of a strong stylistic effect form the climax of this part. Both are in fact a condensed, full identification, of credal nature, the first of the Rood, the second, of the moment of redemption, Christ, and the Rood in one phrase. The first is: "Rod wæs ic aræred" (line 44a) "A rood was I raised up", and then: "Crist wæs on rode" (56b) "Christ was on the Cross." In the first case the Cross realizes for the first time its new identity gained, and it proclaims it also to the Dreamer. Thus these lines can be considered as marking the first moment of proclamation of its real significance. The second line cited above presents an even fuller distancing of itself, the change from first person singular to third also testifies to it, stressing the objectivity of the proclamation. At the same time, an even fuller self-interpretation can take place as it happens in reference to Christ. This line is the climax also stylistically. The similarity of the laconic, credal character of the two identifying sentences strengthens even further the intimate connection between the two characters: Christ and the Rood. Thus the figure of the Rood is lifted into heights which enable it to serve as a mediator between the divine and the natural realm, that is, which enables it to bear a sacramental character.

Martin Irvine, writing about the Cross as a sign in *Elene* attending the uncovering, that is an interpretation, draws a parallel between this poem and *The Dream of the Rood* as both being based on the game of concealment-uncovering. In his opinion, the essence of our poem is that of the full exegetical

uncovering of the identity of the Rood as Cross.<sup>28</sup> Peter Orton observes the same phenomenon as a characteristic of the functioning of the figure of the Rood in the poem in contrast with the other examples of prosopoeic representation, that is the riddles. He states that whereas the riddles were meant to hide the identity of the object through the personification, in the Dream not so much the identity, but the significance of this identity is hidden, and the game of uncovering of this aspect bears the major stylistic burden.<sup>29</sup> The Rood seems to yield to this interpretation as the structure of the poem itself is built on the same principle; where the degree of the hiddenness of the identity of the Rood varies, together with the degree and way of its revelation. In the game of covering-uncovering the identity of the Rood and Christ a gradual process of uncovering is unfolding. This decoding is more and more successful as the Rood becomes more and more united with Christ, and the Rood finally achieves a successful self-interpretation. The sacramental character of the Rood functions also on this level, as its identification with Christ, and thus its partaking in Christ's divine presence, which is the source of its sacramental nature, follows and keeps the duality of hiddenness-visibility, in the same way as sacraments are visible as signs, while their real significance is veiled, and is manifested when their identification with Christ takes place.

The figure of the Rood will stay a distinct figure even when it will represent Christ. Its identification originates from its unity with Christ and its partaking in the act of redemption. Nevertheless, its identity reaches its full state when the Rood, through the transfer of Christ's authority, will be able not only to represent, to symbolize Christ but also to portray him as if really present, by carrying out the same essential actions unique to Christ, as to send on mission, to heal, to give eternal life, and to judge, thus fulfilling its nature being a sacramental sign.

### **Games of power and transfer of roles: Christ's authority**

The sacramental character of the figure of the Rood expressed in the form of a speaking riddle will be manifested also through a transfer of empowerment. The figure of the Cross proclaiming its extraordinary capacities is a unique artistic form used to express its partial identification with Christ. The transfer of the different types of authority from Christ to the Cross and then, by the mediation of the Rood, affecting the Dreamer also testifies to the sacramental nature of the Cross.

<sup>28</sup> IRVINE 1986, 157-81.

<sup>29</sup> ORTON, 1981, 2.

Judy N. Garde's essay took the analysis of the notion of authority in the poem as a starting point. This emphasizes the display of Christ's "victory-tree". She writes: "... it seems clear that the poet is interpreting the victory of the Cross in the light of its known redemptive consequences."<sup>30</sup> The present study will attempt to develop this aspect, focusing on the role of the cross, as N. Garde states: "The visionary Rood is vigorously asserting specific roles as Christ's crucifixion-tree, the symbol of its triumph, and the sign of its return... Like in Exodus, it proclaims the ineffable power underlying its power."<sup>31</sup>

The thorough presentation of this divine authority of Christ is of utmost importance. First, it helps to preserve the doctrinal faithfulness to the Gospels, asserting that He was given authority above all, "on heaven earth and under the earth" (Eph.1,20), secondly, because Christ is the source of the authority and all the attributes bestowed on the Rood.

Christ's authority originates from His essence as being God. Through the presence of the Germanic "Comitatus" idea in the narration His earthly power is stressed as well. This authority is even more emphasised in the last part, in the exhortation of the Rood and after, in the discourse of the Dreamer.

Christ has the power first of all to give life, as salvation means ensuring eternal life; secondly, He is the Healer; and thirdly, the Judge. All these capacities are presented in an accentuated way after the narration of the crucifixion. The number of words suggesting Christ's authority is really striking, naming His unquestionable might, which is exercised on the powers of hell, on earth on humans, and also in his heavenly kingdom. His first characteristic attribute, that is life-giving, is retold concisely and almost with a credal form by the Dreamer himself: "He us onlȳsde ond us lif forgeaf, / heofonlicne ham." (lines 147-148a) "He has redeemed us; He has given life to us, / A home in heaven."

After the victory on the Cross, which consists in willingly and freely assuming the cruel death to carry out the mission, the second scene and moment of Christ's victory is in Hell. The line "hweðere eft dryhten aras / mid his miclan mihte" (lines 101b-102a) "Yet the Lord rose / with his great strength" shows his authority over Satan as well as the later description of the Harrowing: "Se sunu wæs sigorfæst on ðam siðfate, mihtig and spedig," (lines 150-151a) "On that journey the Son was victorious, / strong and successful", and then again "anwealda ælmihtig" (line 153a) "almighty Ruler" appears as a version of the overall present "ælmihtig god". No Harrowing passage is contained in the narrative of the crucifixion. It is missing as it is not a direct experience of the Rood itself, only the burial of the crosses is alludes to the Harrowing in the words "deep

<sup>30</sup> GARDE, 1991, 96.

<sup>31</sup> GARDE, 1991, 96.

pit”, thus creating the chiasmic structure at this level as well. The power of Christ as Victor of the universe is emphasized even more by the fact that this passage is found at the end of the poem.

Christ as the Healer appears only indirectly, when the healing capacity of the Rood is mentioned, which clearly originates with him. This origin would not be questioned by a reader familiar with the Gospels presenting the narration of Christ's healings. He is presented as a healer of souls; the line about the renewed hope stands for it: "Hiht wæs geniwad" (line 148b) "Hope was renewed".

The Rood depicts the Last Coming of Christ as the coming of the Judge. The line "se ah domes gewæld" (line 107b) "clearly mentions this power of judgement. Primarily being a legal phrase, it also implies the concept of right and of authority. In an indirect way, this power will be partly bestowed on the Rood itself.

### The authority of the Rood

No description of the Resurrection closes the narrative of the crucifixion either, but directly the image of the elevated, exalted cross marks the beginning of the new section, the third one. This method of using stylistic disjunctions also serves as an artistic device which augments the power of the Sign.

The Cross itself is presented here in a completely changed status, from 'gealga treow' it is transformed into victory-emblem, from the historical tree into eternal sign. In the second part of its discourse, after the narration, he proclaims his own power uncovering its new identity: "Forðan ic prymfæst nu/ hlifige under heofenum" (84b-85a) "wherefore I now stand in high, / glorious under heaven". The fact of elevation, and consequently, its visibility alludes to the origins of this new state, the crucifixion, stressing the new identification with Christ. This identification is even more accentuated by a scriptural allusion to Isaiah describing the suffering servant, that is the Messiah in the line "Iu ic wæs geworden wita heardost,/ leodum laðost, (87-88a) "Long ago I became the worst of tortures, / hated by men", now this description denotes the Rood. The same is also underlined through the allusion to the completion of the typological sign of the elevated brass serpent: it could heal just as the elevated cross now can heal: "ond ic hælæn mæg/æghwylcne anra, ðara ðe him bið egesa to me." (lines 85b-86) "And I can heal/all those who stand in awe of me." Here as well, the prefigure of Christ, that is, the image of the serpent fuses with that of the Rood, suggesting that the figure of the elevated Christ and the Rood are in a way inexchangeable. The semiotic richness of the allusions and the multiple typological transfers add an artistic dynamism of high quality, which could be perceived as such by the

contemporary reader/listener, most presumably familiar with the typological correspondences. The reference to physical healings unquestionably testifies to the presence of the sacramental character as a result of an inner identification with Christ and of the transfer of his healing powers. What is more, the Rood even shares Christ's capacity to give life as a result of its partaking in the suffering: "ær ðan ic him lifes weg/ rihtne gerymde" (lines 88b-89a) "until I opened / to them the true way of life."

The people bow, pray to the Rood as a mark of general acknowledgement of its authority. Later he commands, which is a sign of authority: "Nu ic ðe hate, ðæt ðu ðas gesyhðe secge mannum" (line 95a-96), "Now I command you, my loved man,/ to describe your vision to all men" and entrusts with a mission, similarly to Christ, who gave the universal call to His followers to proclaim the Gospel. ("These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them" (Matthew 10, 5) and "As the Father sent me, so I am sending you" (John 20, 21).

The right of the Rood to judge is indirect and is expressed by the overt and verbatim mentioning of the saving power of the sacramental sphragis, the character on the heart, received in the sacrament of baptism: "ðe him aer in breostum bereð beacna selest" (line 118) "who has carried the best of all signs in his breast." The following parallel with Mary is justified by the fact that both Mary and the Cross have contributory roles as mediators due to their partaking in the redemption.

### The effects of the sign of the Rood on the Dreamer

The last part, beginning with line 122 with the discourse of the Dreamer presents the impact the Rood had on the Dreamer as a sacramental sign. Almost all the characteristics of such a process are detectable. An important inner change occurred in the Dreamer since the first section. Even formal devices underline this: the shift of time from a narrative past tense used in the first section to the present in the last part. The long narrative and exhortation of the Rood renders it presumable that the cognitive recognition of the significance of the crucifixion and of redemption had a major role in this case. The understanding of the message of the Rood about the possibility of salvation through the sign of the cross, as it claims proudly for itself, explains the joy of the Dreamer to a great extent but not exhaustively. The epithets characterizing his feelings are in a sharp contrast with those in the opening vision: "ic synnum fah" (line 13b) "I was / stained by sin" "forht ic wæs" (line 21a) "I was frightened", 'hreowcearig' (line 25a) 'sad', etc. Now the Dreamer's state is changed into "bliðe mode,/elne mycle"(122b-123a) "eager/ and light-hearted", in spite of the loneliness, caused

by a positive, constant desire for the presence of the cross.

The interesting question here is how this undeniably deep and basic change occurred, from an overwhelming sense of sinfulness to a "light-hearted" state, from passivity to an intense desire for action, even if it means also the "passive" action of contemplation. The activity of a sacramental agent, provoking essential changes in one's being, would provide an explanation in this case as well. The presence of the "beacna selest" on the heart, that is of the sacramental sign of the cross, has the influence on its bearer giving a desire for celestial things. In the poem the longings for the presence of the Cross is also a classic symptom proving the work of the Holy Spirit, which is specially bound to the sacraments, where the taste of the divine presence generates a more intense desire for a closer communion with God. The desire to be alone, in contemplation of the Cross is emphasized. The line "Me is willa to đam /mycel on mode" (129b-130a) "these longings master/ my heart and mind" reinforces this exercise of the power of the Rood over the Dreamer. The term 'mycel' hints to its strength, and in the idea a certain possession, belonging is also suggested. The notion of a new belonging is the second effect of the presence of the 'sphragis', which is the sign of possession of the master.<sup>32</sup> This aspect is repeated in the following line, and the term used is very expressive. "Mundbyrd" means protection, allegiance and was used as a legal term denoting the protection granted by a superior in return for a service. The term also implies the meaning of belonging, supposing a treaty ensuring the right for protection, and besides the associations to the feudal system, the concept of "sphragis" provides a more exhaustive understanding of the significance of the term here. The aspect of protection included in the notion of the sacramental sphragis means, firstly, defence from evil; secondly, from the viles of earthly life; thirdly, of eternal damnation. A duality of meaning is detectable in the word "mundbyrd" also according to Swanton:<sup>33</sup> it can mean both protection and hope, suggesting an allusion to the Last Judgement as an occasion of the exercise of the protection of the Rood. This aspect will appear later in a more expressed way. The heavenly protection is put in contrast with the earthly

<sup>32</sup> The signaculum, or sphragis also represents the belonging to Christ, the King. Augustine uses the term "character" meaning a sign marking a possession, but at the same time a belonging as well, where the allusions to the contemporary military custom are easily detectable. The most frequent use of the term appear in the context of "sign of the King", "character of the King" or "the character of the Emperor". These naturally refer to the kingship of Christ, and the Christians as being enrolled in his army, sharing his victory as well, and the image of the Christ-Victor is a preferred image for centuries in the early Christian literature. The belonging to Christ is strongly implied.

<sup>33</sup> SWANTON 1987, 147.



one expected from influential friends. The expression "ricra feala /freonda" (131b-132a) "many friends/ of influence" fits well into the context of this whole part built upon the display of power-relations, authority and rights of possession.

The Dreamer expects to be finally seized by the Rood and lifted up to Heaven on the Day of Judgement, trusting in its power to do so. The aspect of belonging is at work again: the Rood will come to take those who are His. Artistically this line is interesting, it is a disjunction from the common doctrinal image of Christ coming for his people. This replacement creates again an emphasised identification between the figure of the Cross and that of Christ, and is explainable and justifiable by the attribution of sacramental power to the Cross. Thus, like Christ, the Rood has the right and authority to take the believer honouring it into eternal life. Moreover, the presence of the sacramental sphragis enables the recognition of the believer as a member of the saved. The presence of the sacramental sign of the Cross is the representative of Christ, and the sudden shift in the following lines from the mentioning of the Rood to the reference to Christ "Si me dryhten freond" (line 144b) "may the Lord be a friend to me" accentuates this. Interestingly, in this phrase the cross is presented again in its status as a simple gallows: "gealgtreowe" (line 146a), which, through its stressedly negative meaning refocuses the attention back on the supremacy of Christ.

The Dreamer receives his mission from the Rood, and this is a special mission, which implies an intentional choice of person. The consecration, the aspect of setting apart implied in the concept of sacramental "sphragis" is detectable here.<sup>34</sup> Through his mission the Dreamer becomes fully a member of the community of those to whom he is sent.

The reception of a calling creates a typological similarity between the Dreamer and the prophets of the Old Testament. The same process of empowering through divine intervention is present in both cases, in the case of the prophets through the direct action of the Spirit of God, in the Dreamer's case through the effects of the sacramental sign of the Cross. The Dreamer is capable of retelling the lesson received from the Cross: he gives proof that he understood it correctly. Moreover, the lofty tone shows that it is not only knowledge that he gained but a deep conviction, which will result in being in community with the Rood first, and second, in recognising his task to tell its story to "secge mannum" (line 96b). His credal exposition of the essence of the message is of a rare conciseness

<sup>34</sup> The aspect of setting apart is an important element of the sphragis. It meant not only a mark of belonging but it also had a far deeper significance: that of the consecration, which implies an essential inner change of character as well, as a consecration of the person to Christ.

and so of an undeniable artistic value in lines 145-149. This capacity of understanding also refers to a sacramental phenomenon, namely to the sudden capability of a correct and wholly incorporated exegesis, which is possible through a divine intervention of the Spirit of Truth, as N. A Lee interprets St. Leo the Great's eighth homily on the Passion: "how gazing upon Christ lifted up on the Cross we are to see more than the physical appearance; enlightened by the Spirit of Truth we are to detect the refulgent glory of the cross."<sup>35</sup> Thus the self-interpretation of the Rood is taken over by the Dreamer himself, accomplishing his mission of proclamation of the glory of the Rood, the "living sign" of Christ.

### Conclusions

The analysis of this text was limited to the survey of only some criteria as being devices of an investigation of the functioning of the Rood as a sacramental sign. Neither does this paper claim a full discovery of the significance of the figure. The poetic presentation of the Rood follows the processes of unfolding of its complex identity. However, it seems that a deeper understanding of the nature of identifications between the Rood and Christ is possible through the attribution of these also to the presence of the sacramental nature of the Rood. The analysis of the transfer of essence and attributes in sacramental realities provides us important clues for detecting the different roles the Rood plays in the different parts of the poem, and also how its changing status influences the development of the Dreamer's character as well. The closer view gained in the course of the investigations of the complex figure of the Rood results in a greater admiration of the high level of artistic representation of this uniquely beautiful poem.

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<sup>35</sup> LEE 1972, 477.

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