

Repetition of the Same Phrases in *The Dream of the Rood* and What It Signifies*

Sung-Il Lee (Yonsei University)

There is no question about the Old English poem commonly referred to as *The Dream of the Rood* being one of the earliest manifestations of the literary device of resorting to the narrative frame in which the speaker tells what he has undergone in a dream. The poem may be considered the prototype of all the works, in English literature, utilizing this narrative frame, which was a literary convention uniquely medieval.

In reading a poem composed in the narrative frame of dream vision, however, we should remain alert not to take literally what is being uttered by the speaker in it. After all, that narrative frame is only a literary device—but not for truthful confession of what has actually happened in a dream. Then why

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does a poet resort to the narrative frame of dream vision? Any literary work creative in nature is the record of what its writer has seen and heard in his or her mind's eye and ear; in that respect, any work of imaginative literature can be considered the record of a 'dream vision,' in a broader sense of the phrase. But our present concern is to examine how the poet of the particular Old English poem, *The Dream of the Rood*, accomplishes what he wished to accomplish at the outset, by resorting to the narrative frame of dream vision.

The poem consists of three parts. The first twenty-seven lines are an introductory account of the appearance of a vision of the cross, and the voice is the poet's own. Then follows the main body, as well as the major bulk, of the poem (lines 28-121)—the personified cross's telling the dreamer what it underwent throughout the whole process of the Crucifixion. The voice in this central part of the poem is that of the Rood, an inanimate object, yet endowed with individuality and capacity for human ethos and pathos and expression of them through *prosopopoeia*, or personification. The lifeless wood becomes a *reorderend* ('speech-bearer'), so to speak, a kenning, by the way, used twice in the poem (lines 3 and 89) in referring to human beings. The remainder of the poem (lines 122-156) consists of two passages, of which the first (lines 122-148a) is a confession made by the dreamer regarding the spiritual elevation that the vision has inspired in him, while the second (lines 148b-156) is an allusion to the feelings of the spirits imprisoned at the Harrowing of Hell and to the joy of the angels upon Christ's triumphant return to the heavenly kingdom. As briefly reviewed, in terms of length in its tripartite division, the poem has a symmetrical structure: 27 lines for the introduction of the visionary cross, 94 lines for the visionary cross's narration addressed to the dreamer, and 35 lines for the conclusion.

My attention, however, is drawn, not to the artistic merits or demerits of the

poem, but to an aspect of the poem that a careful reader cannot overlook: repetition of certain phrases. One must not consider it simply as a manifestation of oral formulae, much discussed by those who pay attention to the oral nature of Old English poetry. True, a 'literary' or 'lettered' poet could also have utilized the verbal formulae established by their oral predecessors. But to regard repetition of certain phrases observable in an Old English poem simply as a manifestation of oral formulae is tantamount to looking at Old English poetry only as a mass of phrases formed in the oral tradition. When a certain phrase appears more than once in the same poem, a sensitive reader or listener must suspect that some authorial consciousness was at work in the evolution of the poetic lines, whether the poet intended to reveal it or not by so doing. My humble wish is to tell you how the recurrence of certain phrases in the poem has affected my reading of it. Whether the poet of *The Dream of the Rood* would approve of my reception of the work is beyond my concern, for I strongly believe in what we may call 'the reader's prerogatives.'

The point at issue is not to make a list of the phrases that appear more than once in the poem. Our attention is drawn rather to the workings of the authorial consciousness that may have impelled the poet to repeat certain phrases while composing the poem. Did it happen by sheer chance? Or, was there something working in the poet's sub-consciousness that made him do so, but he was not even aware of his so doing? Or, was the poet fully aware of what he was doing, and so he did with full artistic consciousness? Since none can claim that the very process of poetic composition is retraceable, any surmise has to be hypothetical. Nevertheless, I feel strongly inclined to believe that the poet was fully aware of what he was doing, and that he did so for a certain artistic effect he had in mind.

Let us keep in mind the tripartite division of the poem as the basis of our scrutiny on the subject. First, the poet provides the picture of himself having a vision of the Cross. And then, within this picture, which functions as the outermost frame, there is set an inner layer of drawing: the painful experience of being the means of the Crucifixion as recounted by the visionary cross. While reading what the tree tells the dreamer, we, the readers (or, more accurately, the eavesdroppers), partake in the dreamer's experience of listening to the cross's account *and* of re-living the agonizing moments the cross went through during the Crucifixion. When the visionary cross's narration is over, we then hear what effect it has had upon the dreamer, in the concluding passages uttered in the poet's voice again. In this tripartite construction of the poem, certain phrases are being repeated, thus making the listeners co-relate the contexts in which they appear.

To rush to my conclusion, the poem as a whole is a manifestation of the poet's attempt to incorporate in a piece of writing his thoughts on the interaction between story-telling and listening—by extension, between the process of poetic composition and the reader's reception of its outcome. To put it bluntly, what we have here in print is a manifesto of literary theory 'enacted'—the poet's thought on the function of imaginative literature being demonstrated within a literary text while its lines evolve. To make my points clear, I argue that *The Dream of the Rood* is a work which, partially at least, explores the issue: When a poet attempts poetic creation, what consequence can he expect as an outcome of his effort for artistic creation? Or, to simplify the matter, what is the relationship between writing (composing) and reading (listening)?

The most conspicuous instance of the poet's repeating an identical phrase is found in the verse, 'men ofer moldan, and eall þeos mære gesceaft' ('Men

over the earth, and all this glorious creation’):

Behēoldon þær eng[las] Dryhtnes ealle
fægere þurh forðgesceaft; ne wæs ðæ[t] hūrū frac[ō]des gealga,
ac hine þær behēoldon hālige gāstas,
*men ofer moldan, and eall þēos mære gesceaf.*¹⁾ (ll. 9b-12; italics mine)

[All the Lord’s angels, beautiful by creation,
Looked on there: that was indeed not a gallows for a felon,
For the holy spirits looked on it there, as
*Men over the earth, and all this glorious creation, did.*²⁾

Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson read ll. 9b-10a as follows:

Behēoldon þær *engel* Dryhtnes ealle
fægere þurh forðgesceaft;³⁾ (ll. 9b-10a; italics mine)

And their interpretation of the above is:

“All those fair by eternal decree gazed on the angel of the Lord (i.e. Christ or possibly the cross) there.” (Mitchell and Robinson, 258, note)

Mitchell and Robinson misread the lines. Although they correctly add that “‘those fair by eternal decree’ are the *hālige gāstas* of l. 11—the loyal angels who were predestined to remain in Heaven” (Mitchell and Robinson, 258, note),

1) All passages quoted from the poem are as they appear in *The Dream of the Rood*, edited by Albert S. Cook (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905).

2) This and all subsequent translations of the passages quoted from the poem are mine.

3) Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, *A Guide to Old English*, 6th edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 258.

they miss the point: the whole creation, including the blessed angels chosen to be the ‘hālige gāstas’ (line 11), was looking on the Cross. The emphasis here is that the bright Rood in the poet’s vision is magnetically drawing the attention of the whole creation, including the blessed angels; hence, ‘men over the earth, and all this glorious creation’ (line 12).

The second time when the phrase—‘men ofer moldan, and eall þēos mære gesceaft’—appears is on line 82:

‘Nū ðū miht gehyran, hæleð mīn se lēofa,
 þæt ic bealuwa weorc gebiden hæbbe,
 sārra sorga. Is nū sæl cumen,
 þæt mē weorðiað wīde and sīde
men ofer moldan, and eall þēos mære gesceaft,
 gebiddað him tō þyssum bēacne. (ll. 78-83a; italics mine)

[‘Now you can hear, my dear man,
 That I have endured what the evil-doers did,
 Work of painful sorrows. Now is the time come
 That they honor me far and wide—
Men over the earth, and all this glorious creation—
 Pray to this beacon.]

Why does the phrase, which, by the way, constitutes an entire line, have to appear twice in the same poem? Should we regard it merely as a coincidence, or as another instance of the manifestation of oral formulae, or as something intentionally done by the poet? The fact that the rather long phrase made up of eight words (‘men ofer moldan, and eall þeos mære gesceaft’) appears in two different stages of poetic development—once in the introductory part of the poem, in which the first-person narrator on the outermost layer, the poet, tells

us how he encountered a vision, and again within the utterance of the personified cross in the poet's vision—makes us scrutinize on a possible link between the outer layer of the poem and the core of the work, the narration of the cross.

The juxtaposition of two identical lines appearing in two different stages of poetic development—first, in the introductory part depicting the epiphany of the Cross, and then in the visionary cross's message to the dreamer—suggests interaction between the poetic situations set up in the two parts. Whether the poet intended it or not, doubtless there is not only verbal resonance but a stream of consciousness running through the two phases of poesy-making. In the dreamer's vision, 'Men over the earth, and all this glorious creation' (line 12) looked on the Rood; now the visionary cross, in its address to the dreamer, demands that 'Men over the earth, and all this glorious creation' (line 82) pray to the beacon.

Another attention-calling instance is found in the recurrence of the phrase, 'elne mycle' ('with great zeal'). This phrase appears three times in the poem: lines 34, 60, and 123. The first time it appears is when the visionary cross tells the dreamer how eager Christ was to mount on the rood:

'Geseah ic þā Frēan mancynnes
 efstan *elne mycle* þæt hē mē wolde on gestīgan. (ll. 33b-34; italics mine)

[‘Then I saw the Lord of mankind
 Hasten *with great zeal*, for He wished to mount on me.]

The second time the phrase appears is when the cross tells the dreamer how

much it felt inclined to cooperate with those who had come from afar to take care of Christ's body after the Crucifixion:

‘Hwæðere þær fūse feorran cwōman
 tō þām Æðelinge; ic þæt eall behēold.
 Sāre ic wæs mid [sorgum] gedrēfed, hnāg ic hwæðre þām secgum tō handa
 ēaðmōd *elne mycle*. (ll. 57-60a; italics mine)

[‘Nonetheless came there the eager ones from afar
 To the Prince; I beheld that all.
 I was in pain, afflicted with sorrows; yet I stooped to the hands of the men,
 Humble, *with great zeal*.]

The third and the last time the phrase appears is when, after the visionary cross's recount is over, the dreamer tells us how much he has been reformed by the vision and is now prepared to worship the Cross without any shade of doubt or skepticism:

Gebæd ic mē þā tō þām beame bliðe mōde
elne mycle, þær ic āna wæs
 mæte werede; wæs mōdsefa
 āfysed on forðwege; feala ealra gebād
 langunghwīla. (ll. 122-126a; italics mine)

[Then I prayed to the cross in glad cheer,
With great zeal, where I was alone,
 With no company. My soul was
 Urged on forth away; I endured many bouts
 Of longing.]

I don't think the reiteration of the phrase 'elne mycle' in the above three passages is haphazard. There is a kind of chain reaction felt passage after passage. In its address to the dreamer, the cross says that Christ mounted on the gallows 'with great zeal' for the redemption of mankind (ll. 33b-34); then, when those who had come from afar to take care of the body of Christ were trying to lower it from the gallows, the cross says, it 'stooped to [their] hands . . . , humble, *with great zeal*' (ll. 59b-60a). Telling the dreamer how it felt when the Crucifixion was going on, the cross has said: 'I did not dare then, against the Lord's word, bend or burst, when I saw the surface of the earth tremble. I could have crushed all my enemies; nevertheless I stood fast' (ll. 35-38); 'I trembled when the Man embraced me; yet I did not dare to bend to earth, fall to the surface of the earth, but I had to stand fast' (ll. 42-43); 'I was raised to be the Rood; I heaved the powerful King, Lord of the heavens. I did not dare to bow down' (ll. 44-45). Then, why suddenly the picture of the cross stooping to cooperate with those who were trying to lower Christ's body?

Earlier in its recounting of the Crucifixion, the Rood tells the dreamer at one point:

‘Ðurhdriƿan hī mē mid deorcan næglum; on mē syndon þā dolg gesīene,
 opene inwidhlemmas; ne dorste ic hira ænigum sceððan.
 Bysmeredon hīe *unc bŭtŭ atgædere*; (ll. 46-48a; italics mine)

[‘They pierced me with dark nails; on me are the wounds seen,
 Open, malicious wounds; nor did I dare to injure any of them.
 They mocked *us both together*.]

‘Us both together’—when the cross says so, the implication is that union, or fusion, of the two—the cross and Christ—was complete at the moment of

nail-hammering. Insomuch as the cross's self-identification with Christ had been attained, it had to feel and act exactly as Christ did. Hence the cross's being willing to '[stoop] to the hands of the men, humble, *with great zeal.*'"

I will cite one more case of an identical phrase appearing more than once. One might argue that the phrase in question is simply an instance of understatement: 'mæte weorode' (literally, 'with little company,' meaning 'alone'). The phrase first appears in the passage where the visionary cross tells the dreamer how 'the eager ones' (implied by the word 'fūse' on line 57), who had come from afar to claim the body of Christ, built a tomb and, after placing Corpus Christi therein, took their journey back, leaving Him behind alone:

Ongunnon him þā sorhlēoð galan
 earme on þā æfentīde, þā hīe woldon eft sīðian
 mēðe fram þām mæran þēodne; reste hē ðær *mæte weorode*. (ll. 67b-69;
 italics mine)

[Then they began to sing Him a dirge,
 The miserable ones did, in the eventide, when they would travel back,
 Weary, from the glorious Prince. He rested there *with no company.*]

The phrase 'mæte weorode' reappears later in the poem, with a slightly different spelling ('mæte werede'), when the poet tells us how, after listening to what the visionary cross has said to him, he finds himself reformed and ready to commit himself to worship of the Rood:

Gebæd ic mē þā tō þām bēme blīðe mōde
 elne mycle, þær ic āna wæs

mæte werede; wæs mōdsefa
āfysed on forðwege; feala ealra gebād
langunghwīla. (ll. 122-126a; italics mine)

[Then I prayed to the cross in glad cheer,
With great zeal, where I was alone,
With no company. My soul was
Urged on forth away; I endured many bouts
Of longing.]

This passage has already been quoted earlier, as an illustration of repeating the phrase ‘elne mycle.’ I quote the passage again for the purpose of pointing out that the reappearance of the phrase ‘mæte weorode’ (line 69), with a slightly different spelling, ‘mæte werede’ (line 124), which smacks of rather common Germanic understatement, somehow suggests a possible link between its first appearance in the passage depicting Christ being left alone in his tomb, and its reappearance in the passage depicting the poet being left alone only with the lingering image of the Rood after the vision.

Just as the cross went through the process of undergoing change, not merely physical but spiritual, as indicated in its recount of the whole sequence of the events involving the Crucifixion—being chopped off in a wood, being carried to Golgotha to stand as a gallows, bearing Corpus Christi, having been pierced by the same nails as driven through Christ’s body, witnessing the lowering of Corpus Christi that was to be entombed, being left deserted on Golgotha in the dark, being buried in a deep pit (‘Bedealf ūs man on dēopan sēaþe’) (ll. 75), and finally being excavated by Christ’s disciples to be extolled as the emblem of Christ’s glory—so did the dreamer undergo spiritual regeneration. The body of Christ had to be left alone in His tomb newly delved: ‘reste hē ðær *mæte*

weorode’ (‘he rested there *with no company*’) (l. 69). Now that the dreamer had heard all the recount of the cross, he could somehow get closer to understanding the loneliness Christ must have felt while going through the Passion. For that reason, the dreamer could ‘[pray] to the cross in glad cheer, *with great zeal*, where [he] was alone, *with no company*’ (ll. 122-124a).

The verbal echoes traceable here and there in the poem, as examined above, signify a certain continuity of the flow of consciousness. The tripartite division of the poem notwithstanding, each segment is linked to the others, not only structurally but in terms of the stream of consciousness. And that flow is implied by reiteration of the same words and phrases. The first-person narrator in the outermost layer, while telling us about his having had a vision of the Cross, says:

hwæðre ic þurh þæt gold ongytan meahte
 earmra ærgewin, þæt hit ærest ongan
 swætan on þā swiðran healfe. Eall ic wæs *mid s[o]rgum gedrefed*; (ll. 18-20;
 italics mine)

[Nevertheless I could perceive through that gold
 The bygone strife of the miserable, see that it first began to
 Bleed on the right side. I was entirely *afflicted with sorrows*;]

The dreamer, while watching the bleeding wounds on the right side of the cross —by extension, on the right side of Christ’s body—was ‘entirely *afflicted with sorrows*.’ And, the cross tells the dreamer in its recount that, when ‘the eager ones’ came to retrieve Corpus Christi, it ‘was in pain, *afflicted with sorrows*’:

‘Hwæðere þær fūse feorran cwōman

tō þām Æðelinge; ic þæt eall behēold.

Sāre ic wæs *mid* [*sorgum*] *gedrēfed*, hnāg ic hwæðre þām secgum tō handa
ēaðmōd elne mycle. (ll. 57-60a; italics mine)

[‘However, there came the eager ones in haste from afar
To the Prince; I beheld that all. I was in pain,
Afflicted with sorrows; I stooped, however, to the hands of the men,
Humble, with great zeal.]

As much as the wounds received by Christ are felt poignantly by the wooden cross, so the dreamer, who has heard the recount made by the cross, can relive the moments of the painful suffering both of Christ and the Cross. This is what the poem is all about—the power of telling a story, or of making a confession. In a distinct way, *The Dream of the Rood* is a manifestation of what the modern literary theorists have termed ‘meta-poetry.’ It is a poem not only about the sublime moment of epiphany of the divine glory, but also about how a chain reaction is bound to occur when the process of telling a story and listening to it goes on—which is what literature is all about. How the dreamer, the listener of the visionary cross’s narration, has been transformed is being shown toward the end of *The Dream of the Rood*. The real essence of the artistry of the poem, after all, does not lie in what we read line after line, but in the overall picture of a man being transformed—being assimilated with the story-teller—as the poem progresses, while a gradual buildup of sentiments in the readers consciousness coincides with what develops in the poet’s own as he writes on.

주제어: 꿈속 환영(幻影), 구전 상투 시구(口傳 常套 詩句), 의식(意識)의 흐름,
문학관(文學觀)의 투영 (投影), 반복의 우연성과 의도성

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Abstract

Sung-Il Lee

The Dream of the Rood is taken as the earliest manifestation of the literary device commonly referred to as 'dream vision.' Although this view is embraced by most students of Old English literature, in-depth reading of the poem enables us to consider the poem also as a manifesto of literary theory 'enacted'—a work that embodies the critical thought that its author harbored.

The presence of some phrases that repeatedly appear in the poem can be seen as proof of the poet's utilizing oral formulae. But the very fact that the poet employed the same phrases in three distinct stages of the poetic development of the work implies that there was a certain critical consciousness at work while he was composing it. In this essay, I have tried to trace how the poet's critical consciousness may have affected his composition of the poem, even if we grant that many scholars argue for Anglo-Saxon poets' conforming to oral formulae.

The recurrence of the same phrases in different stages of the development of the poem evidences the presence of a stream of consciousness. Although there are two voices in the poem—the dreamer's (or the poet's) and that of the rood personified in his vision—there is unbreakable linkage in its tripartite division. The poem, as a whole, is a marvelous specimen of meta-poetry in the sense that its writer, either consciously or unwittingly, incorporated in his work his critical thought on the inter-relationship between story-telling and listening, ultimately between poetic composition and reading.

Key Words

dream vision, oral formulae, stream of consciousness, theory enacted
(meta-poetry), repetition haphazard vs. intentional