Does It Really Mean That?
Interpreting the Literary Ambiguous

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Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

KATHLEEN DUBS

However disconnected the essays in this volume might appear to be at first glance, the unifying factor is the very notion of ambiguity, which is one of the essential features of the postmodern age: how it can be defined as opposed to what it means or is, where it can be found, and to what purposes it can be put, including questions of whether it is a positive or negative factor. But it is not a new phenomenon. Writers have always depended on equivocation, multiplicity of meaning, uncertainty of meaning - deliberate mystification one might say. Language itself is the basis of ambiguity not only in literature but in everyday public discourse. Therefore the papers in the volume should appeal to scholars not only working in the fields of modern or postmodern literature, but those who see the importance of ambiguity in the earlier texts, and perhaps their influences in later writing. Finally the essays included here not only provide specific analyses and proposed solutions for specific works or authors, they also open the reader to other possibilities for ambiguity, often not simply in literature or critical theory, but in the kinds of social issues the literary works deal with.

The ambiguity of the cross in the Old English "Dream of the Rood" looks not only at the physical transformations of the prosopopoeic rood, but at the ambiguities of the relationship between cross and dreamer, dreamer and reader, dreamer and Christ, and Christ and reader. And the uncertainty of whether, in Anglo-Saxon society, the cross was seen as a symbol of victory or defeat. The ambiguity of interpretation in late Medieval English devotional writing opens the question beyond some perhaps obscure old texts to the method of interpreting writing which is often deliberately ambiguous as a way of providing for literal as well as symbolic readings to some, but which remain for others absolutely "clear" and literal. It also reminds readers of the ambiguity of the meaning(s) of words to begin with, especially across time and place. Similarly whether Harry Bailly, the gregarious host of the Canterbury pilgrims, is a critic *for* Chaucer or *of* Chaucer is the question pursued in a consideration of the reception of *The Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer's own contemporary

audience. But it turns out that the ambiguous nature of the responses of Bailly and some of the other pilgrims, who are, we must remember, Chaucer's creations, might not be that helpful. So what lies behind this fellow and his critical comments after all?

To once again underline the fact that ambiguity is not a new phenomenon is a unique analysis of the ambiguity of the portrait of Dorian Gray. A similarly new approach is found in the entangled referential and metaphorical readings of Lewis Carroll, which looks at the work using insights derived from Barthes, Kristeva, and Lacan, but then turns the tables and examines the ambiguous critical approaches to Alice's character. The ambiguous presence of the empire and the nation in Virginia Woolf's late novels sees Woolf's turn toward the empire and the nation as coupled with a narrative technique pointing in the direction of a kind of novel that changes its relation to realism both textually and thematically. But it sees this turn as ambiguous, and even, perhaps, paradoxical.

The essay on the ambiguous in contemporary British prose uses two novels to explore some aspects of ambiguity itself, arguing that these various aspects support the current penchant for multiplicity and diversity as opposed to unity and oneness. The essay on Angela Carter explores ambiguity of body and identity, as well as ambiguity of genres, asserting that the transgression of gender boundaries corresponds with a disregard for genre boundaries as well, concluding that the resulting heterogeneity and multiplicity is analogous to the vanishing of boundaries of individual identity. A study of the female gothic elements in *The Grass is Singing* reveals how Lessing uses these elements to subvert more traditional fundamental notions, and mixes the various literary elements to create a deliberate ambiguity in character as well as narrative voice.

April de Angelis' 2002 play *A Laughing Matter* takes the reader back to the days of Shakespeare, Garrick's theater, and Johnson's *Dictionary* to peek inside the greenroom as playwrights, actors, and managers consider the ambiguity of the purpose of the stage, wondering what to produce next. Something of high seriousness – which is not likely to make a profit – or something low, which is sure to sell, and asks whether this is so far from the considerations of today's Hollywood.

The analysis of the situation of the mulatta in 19th century African-American writing forces the reader to consider how blackness is defined in America today, especially when one considers the place of those who are, as Richard Rodriguez would argue, brown. The concept of social attitudes in connections with controversial issues is also at the heart of the essay on ambiguity and the parody of incest in Melville and Nabokov. It looks at the ambiguities within two of their novels, as well as at the ambiguities of

their critical receptions, given contemporaneous attitudes towards incest. In doing so it concludes that the deeper ambiguities involve the relationships between art and science as well as between art and morality.

The paradoxical truth of literature and Gödel's formally undecidable propositions asks why literature, of all other possibilities of language use, of necessity, relies most directly on paradox, and how this reliance on paradox is connected to the problem of reference (the truth). While the questions whether the ambiguities of current critical approaches to literature will be the death-knell of literature as literature. The volume closes with an assessment of the place of rhetoric not only in literature, as exemplified not only in classical theories and a medieval text, but in President Barack Obama's speech on race, all the while highlighting the value of ambiguity in an unstable world.

In sum, then, the essays offer a rich selection in which our readers can find not only the specific fields they seek, but into which they might dip to discover new insights and ambiguities.

PART I:

MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

THE ROOD AND CHRIST IN OLD ENGLISH POETRY

ÉVA ZSÁK

This paper takes a close look at the role and appearance of the Holy Cross in Old English poetry in order to see and understand how its significance is understood by and explained to its contemporary audience. One of the main focuses is, therefore, on how the Cross is described in the texts, what Old - and subsequently - Modern English expressions are used to represent it. Its role is then interpreted to see how it fits the redemption-history and what relationship it has with Christ. Another challenging concept is its parallel with the Virgin Mary, as well as the image of the Rood in literature; finally, the paper presents a short overview of the Christ-figure in relevant Old English poems.

The initial idea was to collect and analyse all the expressions referring to the Cross in the texts, in order to recognize how the Anglo-Saxon Christian tradition appreciated its role. Thus I collected the different literary phrases describing the Cross of Christ or referring to it. The Old English examples denoting the Rood in the Old English literary pieces, together with their Modern English equivalents, can be found in the Appendix. The Modern English translations are by S. A. J. Bradley, as found in his *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (S. A. J. Bradley ed., *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London: J. M. Dent, 1995).

As far as the Old English expressions are concerned, there are seven main different designations for the Holy Cross: *gealga*, *rode*, *treow*, *beam*, *beacen*, *wudu* and *wite*. Furthermore, since the two most numerous groups contain the words *treow* and *beam*, it is possible to create other subgroups under those headings, as well - *treow*, *wuldres treow*, and *lifes treow* for *treow* - whereas for *beam* the different expressions can be grouped around *beam*, *wuldres beam*, and *sigebeam*.

As for the first group, the word *gealga* (gallows) appears eight times in the analysed works and only once is it accompanied by an attributive adjective (o*n gealgan heanne*/the *despised* gallows [*The Dream of the Rood* l. 40]). In another compound, (*gealgtreowe/*the gallows-tree [*The Dream of the Rood* l. 146]), its material is denoted as well. In the other

examples it is simply referred to as ‘gallows’; there is no need to modify the meaning any further, the word itself may express its character. There is, however, one instance (l. 10) where its role and significance is articulated in the form of a negation: *Ne wæs (…) fracodes gealga*, ‘it was not the gallows of a criminal’, as if its importance could be emphasised even more by the negative statement. The Modern English translations almost everywhere correspond to the Old English expressions (except for the two examples found in *Elene*; l.169 and l. 480, where “Cross” is the translated equivalent) and the forms do not show great diversity, though the number of the examples is fairly small.

The second word appearing in the translations is *Rode* (Cross). In this case the number of examples is much larger: twenty instances in the poems. In eight instances it is used alone, without any attributives; three times it is referred to as *Cristes rod(e)* (the Cross of Christ) (*Andreas* l. 1337, *Elene* l. 103, *Elene* l. 972); twice it is mentioned as *halige rod* (the holy Cross) (*Elene* l. 720, *Elene* l. 1011); and once it appears as *Halig under hrusani/Hyded wære, æðelcyninges rod* (…the holy Cross of the noble king might be concealed under the earth) (*Elene* ll. 218-9). In the other compounds the rood is denoted as *Dryhtnes rod* (the Cross of the Lord) (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 136), *seo rod wuninge radorcyninges* (the Cross of the King) (*Elene* l.624), *æðelinges wæs rod aræred* (the Prince’s Cross was reared) (*Elene* l. 885), *Rod rodera cyninges* (the Cross of the King of heaven) (*Elene* l. 1074) and *uses dryhtnes rod* (the Cross of our Lord) (*Christ III* l. 1084). Once, however, a colour is added to the noun: *reade rod* (crimson cross) (*Christ III* l. 1101), referring to Christ’s blood, and its covering of the surface of the Cross, when the Holy Cross is seen shining over the created world on Judgement Day.

In the case of the expressions with the word *treow* (tree), three different subgroups can be created on the basis of the Old English forms. The first (and the largest, with fourteen examples) contains those expressions where the word *treow* is accompanied by different attributives; the second is where all the instances of *wuldres treo* (tree of glory) can be found (four, most of them in *Elene*); while the four examples of *lifes treow* (tree of life) are collected in the third subgroup.

A closer look at the first subgroup reveals fourteen terms containing the Old English expression *treow*. In six instances the phrase *halige treow* (holy tree) stands for the Cross of Christ, all of them in *Elene*. The compound *rode treo* (rood-tree) occurs three times, again, all in *Elene*. These expressions could also belong to the group where the phrases containing *rode* are listed; however, since, in the compounds *treo* is the second element, rendering *rode* an attributive, these noun-phrases fit rather

in this subgroup. On two occasions, both in *The Dream of the Rood* l. 17, and l. 25, the compounding element refers to Jesus Christ in connection with the *Wealdendes treow (*the Ruler's tree) and *Hælendes treow* (the Saviour's cross). As far as the attributives for *treow* are concerned, the adjectives refer to the high importance and significant role of the Cross. It is *syllicre treow* (wondrous tree) (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 4), *wlitige treo* (handsome tree) in *Elene* l. 165, and *mære treo* (glorious tree), also in *Elene* l. 214.

The second subgroup the compounds with *treow* contains the expressions *wuldres treow* (tree of glory). Four cases occur in *The Dream of the Rood* and *Elene.* Similarly to the third subgroup there are four examples of *lifes treo(w*) (tree of life), all of them from *Elene*. As they are from the same poem, there are no significant differences in the word forms either.

A similarly sizeable collection can be created with the compounds of the Old English word *beam,* with three subclasses. The first lists all the occurrences of *beam*, twelve altogether. There are five examples of the phrase without any attributives present in different literary pieces. The others show the word *beam* modified with adjectives; in *Elene* one can read about *blaca beam* (the shining tree) (l. 91), *on heanne beam* (on the high tree) (l. 424), *mærost beama* (the most celebrated of trees) (l. 1011), *Þone æðelan beam* (the noble tree) (l. 1073), and in *Christ III leohta beam* (that radiant tree) (l. 1089), *halgan beam* (on that holy tree) (l. 1093).

Furthermore, *Elene* contains a noun phrase, namely, *Rodor cyninges beam* (the tree of the heaven-King) (l. 885), which again refers to Christ and underlines the relationship between the Saviour and the Cross. Somewhat smaller is the following section of w*uldres beam* (tree of glory), including four elements. In one case, an attribute is also added: *wliti wuldres beam* (beautiful tree of glory) (*Elene* l. 89).

The third subgroup, with the attributive noun *sige-* (victory), sheds light on Christ's triumphant battle for the salvation of Mankind. In most cases (six examples out of eight, both in *Elene* and *The Dream of the Rood*) there is no further modifier to the noun; however, in the other two instances the attributes *syllic* (marvellous) (*The Dream of the Rood*, l. 13) and *selest* (the most excellent) (*Elene* l. 1026) are connected to it as well.

The following group contains eight expressions where the word *beacen* (sign/emblem) is used twice in *The Dream of the Rood,* and in *Elene* five times, whereas it also occurs once in *Christ III*. The attributes accompanying the noun may be of different categories; nevertheless, each of them emphasises the magnificent character of the Rood. It is *selest* (the most excellent), *soð* (true), *beorhtast* (the brightest), and *Godes* (God's). In

these poems the Cross is referred to as s*igebeacen* or *sigor beacen* (sign of victory) four times and also complemented with the superlative adjective s*elest*.

On one occasion (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 27) the phrase w*udu selesta* (the most noble tree) is used, revealing how the simple tree of the forest became the means of God's plan in the redemption. A closer look at the adjectives and modifiers used with the nouns referring to the Rood can demonstrate how important the Cross was considered, and what significant role it must have had in the salvation of Mankind, since almost all of the expressions indicate the glorious nature of the Cross, emphasising the role it undertook as a quasi Germanic warrior in service of its Lord.

The last group includes only one item as well. It indicates the original purpose of the Cross, that of torture (*wite*). Moreover, it is not even a simple one, since the poet of *The Dream of the Rood* mentions it as 'the cruellest of tortures' ('*wita heardost'*) (l. 87). Nevertheless, this is the only place where this feature is shown; everywhere else the glorious role it has played in salvation is in the foreground of the events.

Furthermore, it is not only the expressions applied to the Rood that can reveal its significance, but the poems themselves. In *The Dream of the Rood* it is the Cross itself who talks to the Dreamer about its origins; thus the reader can understand how a simple tree of the forest becomes a means of justice.

> þæt wæs geara iu, (ic þæt gyta geman),
> þæt ic wæs aheawen holtes on ende,
> astyred of stefne minum. Genaman me ðær strange feondas,
> geworhton him þær to wæfersyne, heton me heora wergas hebban.
> Bæron me ðær beornas on eaxlum, oððæt hie me on beorg asetton,
> gefæstnodon me þær feondas genoge. (ll. 28-33)

> [Years ago it was – I still recall it – that I was cut down at the forest edge, removed from my root. Strong enemies seized me there, fashioned me as a spectacle for themselves and required me to hoist up their felons. There men carried me upon their shoulders until they set me upon a hill. Abundant enemies secured me there. (Bradley 1995, 161.)]

Even though it had been selected from the trees of the wood, this fact itself would not be sufficient for it to become the Cross of Christ had not Christ Himself undertaken the mission to fulfil the deliverance of men from sin and eternal death.

> Geseah ic þa frean mancynnes
> efstan elne mycle þæt he me wolde on gestigan. (ll. 33-34)

[Then I saw the Lord of mankind hasten with much fortitude, for he meant to climb upon me. (Bradley 1995, 161.)]

Gestah he on gealgan heanne,
modig on manigra gesyhðe, þa he wolde mancyn lysan.
Bifode ic þa me se beorn ymbclypte. Ne dorste ic hwæðre bugan to eorðan,
feallan to foldan sceatum, ac ic sceolde fæste standan.
Rod wæs ic aræred. Ahof ic ricne cyning,
heofona hlaford, hyldan me ne dorste. (ll. 40-45)

[He climbed upon the despised gallows, courageous under the scrutiny of many, since he willed to redeem mankind. I quaked then, when the man embraced me, nonetheless I did not dare to collapse to the ground and fall to the surface of the earth, but I had to stand fast. I was reared as a cross; I raised up the powerful King, Lord of the heavens. (Bradley 1995, 161.)]

The mission of the Rood was to help, to assist Christ in His redemptive act, to be there to carry it out. From its account of the Crucifixion it is understood that the Cross was aware of the significance of the event (Ó Carragian 1982, 494), recognized that its task was to obey God's plan, to be an agent between God and man (Pasternak 1992, 169). One of the significant features of the Cross lies in these elements: that it was chosen to be part of the deliverance and, at least as the text reveals it, the Rood considers itself the chosen agent of God (Garde 1991, 93) and fulfils its duty. It brings salvation to mankind and holds its Creator despite its instincts (Garde 1991, 98). Its perception of the Crucifixion is the view of a participant who endures the whole event because it was commanded to; thus it dares not interfere (Dockray-Miller 1997, 5). In addition to the personal report of the Cross in *The Dream of the Rood*, the inscription on the Ruthwell Cross carries the same subjective narration of the experience.

... [Ahof] ic ricnæ Kyningc,
heafunæs Hlafard, hælda ic ni dorstæ.
Bismærædu ungket men ba ærgad[re]; ic [wæs] miþ blodæ [b]istemi[d],
bi[goten of .....]
Krist wæs on rodi.
[….]. Ic þæt al bih[eald]
Sar[æ] ic wæs mi[þ] sorgum gidroe[fi]d, h[n]ag[ic ....]

[I raised up the powerful King, the Lord of heaven. I did not dare to topple. They humiliated us both together. I was soaked with blood, poured forth… Christ was on the cross. […] All this I witnessed. I was sorely oppressed by anxieties, nonetheless I bowed… (Bradley 1995, 5.)]

Through this the Rood has become an integral part of the redemptive act. Furthermore, from an ordinary tree of the forest, felled for purpose, it becomes the tree of life. In this it also mirrors the stages in the Passion: Christ is "felled" and then rises again to life. One intermediary step in the process is fairly paradoxical, namely that, first it must become the tree of death, the instrument of Christ's death, so that it could grow to be the tree of life and victory (Cherniss 1992, 252). It is not a simple passive eyewitness of the process, though first it is afraid. Nonetheless, later it can actively participate, culminating with its bowing down to give up Christ's body (Ó Carragian 1982, 500). A parallel can be drawn between the tree whose fruit was the cause of man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden and the rood-tree through which man is reconciled to God (Raw 1992, 167). As a result of this, it has become the glorious emblem of victory, enabled with healing powers for all those who honour it.

A further feature of the significance of the Cross is its heroic nature. It stands behind its Lord as an Anglo- Saxon retainer stood behind and served his secular lord, ready to defend its lord unless ordered to do otherwise. Their relationship is similar to that of the Germanic warlord and his vassal (Cherniss 1992, 241-242). For the services accomplished both receive the treasure: the received the ornaments and jewels which decorate it. On the other hand, the Cross can also be considered as Christ's weapon. The decoration on the surface of the Rood is similar to those on swords in Germanic literature. Moreover, the personalisation of the weapon is a traditional feature in heroic poetry, and, as can be seen, something very similar happens in *The Dream of the Rood* as well, even though its human as well as supernatural qualities can never be forgotten (Cherniss 1992, 242).

The relationship between Jesus Christ and the Rood-tree is visibly very close and strong. Several elements refer to the special bond between them. In the course of the narration of the Cross, the reader must face the blurring of boundaries and the shift between Christ and the Cross suffering the same Crucifixion as its Lord. Like Christ, the Cross itself is both human and supernatural.

> Bismærædu ungket men ba ærgad[re]; ic [wæs] miþ blodæ [b]istemi[d],
> bi[goten of .....
> *(The Ruthwell Cross Transcription)*
>
> [They humiliated us together. I was soaked with blood, poured forth…
> (Bradley 1995, 5.)]

Hwæðre ic þurh þæt gold ongytan meahte
earmra ærgewin, þæt hit ærest ongan
swætan on þa swiðran healfe. (ll. 18- 20a)

[However, through the gold I could discern the earlier aggression of wretched men, in that it had once bled on the right side. (Bradley 1995, 160.)]

þurhdrifan hi me mid deorcan næglum. On me syndon þa dolg gesiene,
opene inwidhlemmas. Ne dorste ic hira nænigum sceððan.
Bysmeredon hie unc butu ætgædere. Eall ic wæs mid blode bestemed,
begoten of þæs guman sidan, siððan he hæfde his gast onsended.
(ll. 46- 49)

[They pierced me with dark nails: the wounds are visible upon me, gaping malicious gashes. I did not dare to harm any of them. They humiliated us together. I was all soaked with blood issuing from the man's side after he had sent forth his spirit. (Bradley 1995, 161.)]

Sare ic wæs mid sorgum gedrefed, hnag ic hwæðre þam secgum to handa,
eaðmod elne mycle. Genamon hie þær ælmihtigne god,
ahofon hine of ðam hefian wite. Forleton me þa hilderincas
standan steame bedrifenne; eall ic wæs mid strælum forwundod.
(ll. 59-62)

[I was sorely oppressed with anxieties, nonetheless I bowed to the hands of those men, obedient with much fortitude. There they took hold of almighty God and lifted him out of that grievous torment. Me those valiant men left to stand covered with blood; I was thoroughly wounded by sharp points. (Bradley 1995, 161.)]

It is bleeding on the right side just as Christ is experiencing the wounding of His own body, the same nails go through it; Christ's physical suffering is transmitted to the Rood (Garde 1991, 96). It is humiliated together with its Lord, and buried just as He is (Samuels 1988, 316). It becomes courageous, as Christ's courage is transmitted to it, heroic and victorious because these are characteristics of Christ, as well (Hinton 1996, 78). Its power and glory derive from Christ's power and glory (Raw 1992, 167). Consequently, it is venerated and praised, for it is the victorious sign of the Redeemer, the way through which the sins of mankind have been forgiven (Raw 1992, 167).

The parallel can be approached from a different point of view, as well. It is not only the Cross that can take over qualities from Christ, but some aspects of the Rood have been applied to Jesus, too, most likely because of the liturgical practice of the Invention of the Cross. [The Invention (or

discovery) of the True Cross in 326, according to the legend of Elene (Bradley 1995, 164.).] Ælfric associates the tree of life image with Christ just as much as with the Cross. The explanation of this can be found in the Book of Revelation, where the fruit of the tree of life will be the reward for all those who win through (Book of Revelations II. 7). According to Ambrose, this fruit is the gift of eternal life and the text refers to Christ in His church (Raw 1992, 178).

Another correspondence is also worth considering: that of the Rood and the Virgin Mary. In *The Dream of the Rood* the Rood tells the Dreamer how it is honoured by God, as was His mother.

> Hwæt, me þa geweorðode wuldres ealdor
> ofer holmwudu, heofonrices weard!
> Swylce swa he his modor eac, Marian sylfe,
> ælmihtig god for ealle menn
> geweorðode ofer eall wifa cynn. (ll. 90-94)
>
> [You see! The Lord of glory, Guardian of heaven-kingdom, then honoured me above the trees of the forest, just as he, the almighty God, in the sight of all men, also honoured his mother, Mary herself, above all womankind. (Bradley 1995, 162.)]

The parallel between Mary and the Cross results from their situations during the redemption history. Mary is linked to the Cross since she not only was chosen (a seemingly insignificant girl—as the tree was insignificant as well) but also because she, too, also agreed to fulfil her role in the redemptive act (Raw 1992, 103). Moreover, they receive the same kind of admiration for their roles. Furthermore, their behaviours in accepting the divine command show similar features, as well. They are both obedient to it, which may seem, at first, against their natures. Nonetheless, they do not dare to refuse. Mary is disturbed when she hears the message from the archangel, just as the Cross trembles when Christ embraces it (l. 42). As Mary's part was to bear Christ into human life, the Rood must bear Him to His death (Ó Carragain 1982, 497). Moreover, they both receive similar contempt from the people around them: Mary from Joseph (Matthew 1: 18-19), since he was about to divorce her, and the Cross, humiliated and mocked together with the crucified Christ (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 48a). Both of them are witnesses of His death, just as both of them become part of His glory.

In addition, *The Dream of the Rood* presents two different portrayals of the Crucifix. When the Dreamer observes it for the first time it is the victorious tree of glory, shining and adorned with jewels and gold (ll. 4-17). Subsequently, the bleeding wound on its right side appears through

the beautiful covering and the Cross then changes colour from the glorious to the blood-stained (ll. 18-23) (Smith 1992, 20). The two forms co-exist and complete each other, and are fundamental to the relationship between Christ and the Cross, showing the two extremes of the redemptive act (Smith 1992, 24).

The Cross which appears to Constantine in *Elene* is a shining tree of glory, covered with gold and jewels (l. 89) The invention of Christ's Cross shows the three crosses found together in the soil (l. 833) and then how it alone was decorated with jewels and gold, and placed in a silver chest (ll. 1020-26). Cynewulf's poem is the first where the discovery of the Cross is attributed to Elene.

Christ's Cross in *Christ III* appears as the sign of Judgement Day, bright and radiating. However, this time it is not because of the gems and precious stones adorning it; but because the surface of the Rood is covered with the blood that He shed for the sins of men, and which shines over the entire created world (ll. 1081-1089). Its colour and brightness will not only out-blaze even the sun; in fact the Cross will be shining instead of the sun.

The picture becomes more detailed when we examine the figure of Christ. A valiant, heroic figure emerges from *The Dream of the Rood*, stripping himself, approaching and mounting the Cross, fearless; he needs neither help nor incitement from anyone (Ó Carragain 1982, 500).

> Geseah ic þa frean mancynnes
> efstan elne mycle þæt he me wolde on gestigan. (ll. 33b- 34)
>
> [Then I saw the Lord of mankind hasten with much fortitude, for he meant to climb upon me. (Bradley 1995, 161.)]

The description shows Christ before and during the event of the Crucifixion; not much is said about the later occurrences. The viewpoint here changes, and from then on the Cross becomes more active in the Passion. The passage cited above also corresponds to the description found in *The Ruthwell Cross Inscription*, which underlines Christ's action as an example of free will; he willingly, even eagerly, assumes the sacrifice, as well (Ó Carragain 1982, 500). This aspect is also highlighted in the poetic version of *The Creed*. [Bodleian MS Junius 121. fol. 43a-47a, ll. 26-31. (Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, 536.)] This Christ is the Anglo-Saxon warrior, the Lord who can face and accomplish the task assigned to Him, whose activity and heroic behaviour are transferred to the Cross so that it too can carry out its mission.

On one hand, therefore, we can see that in the relationship between the Cross and Christ the glorious, victorious characteristics of the Cross are

emphasised. The Rood-tree had an important part in the crucifixion and in the accomplishment of the Redemption, as He was the loyal servant in service of his Anglo-Saxon lord. Christ, on the other hand, is his Lord, a valiant Germanic hero who climbs the Cross and faces death.

There is a certain assimilation in their relationship, as we can see in lines 33b-77 of *The Dream of the Rood:* the paradox of being both together and alone in their mission. The Rood's story began when it was cut down by the enemy (*strange feondas*, l. 30) to be the gallows for their criminals. The moment when Christ ascends the gallows (l. 40), however, the rood is transformed; it becomes the Cross, the means of Salvation. They bear the punishment and the abomination of the 'mocking people' (l. 48) together: the Cross, suffering from the same wounds as Christ, becomes drenched, and perhaps even cleansed, with the blood of the Saviour. Nonetheless, with the death of Christ, the Rood remains alone, it witnesses the darkest hours of Christian history. Its words reveal not only the pain of someone who knows his task must be fulfilled and cannot resist his fate and, but those of a Germanic warrior who lost his lord, as well (ll. 48-56).

With Christ dead, the Rood must be active, it must hand over the body of Christ; and it suffers from the terrible loss (ll. 59-60). Having completed its awful charge, still bearing the wounds and blood it is now neglected by men. It can observe how Christ is laid down, the tomb carved for Him, laid in it, and left alone (ll. 65-69). Something similar happens to the Cross. They once again they share togetherness, even though separated in place and time. In the company of the other two gallows, set up next to the Cross of Christ (this is the only time in the poem when the two other crosses are mentioned; the Rood talks about itself and the other two crosses in plural ll. 70-75), with contempt or fear men take the Rood out of the ground, drop it into a pit, and bury it there. Unlike Jesus Christ's return, this means of Redemption must remain hidden under the soil until Elene finds it with divine help in the 4th century. It is only then that it can receive the gratification and adoration it deserves.

Thus the ambiguity of the transference of roles and the crossing of boundaries is one means of presenting the Passion of Christ. In equating the Cross and the Virgin of Mary with Christ, the poets show how the Providence of God take any person or object and fashion it to His will. In these cases, as well, the identification with Christ in His suffering, humiliation, acceptance, and resolve are also rewarded with glorification. Ultimately the reader is also invited to cross over into this scheme, to participate in this process - like the Dreamer in *The Dream of the Rood*. In that way the transference of the suffering and glory are shared: the

togetherness and the aloneness of the Anglo-Saxon retainer witnessing the death of his Lord and the Christian follower witness to the death of His Lord. This remarkable concept, as emphasized in these poems, especially *The Dream of the Rood*, achieved through the use of very few words or phrases, but powerful enough to use the ambiguous to present a clear picture of the significance of the Cross in the redemptive act of Jesus Christ.

Appendix

***Gealga (gallows)*:**

On galgu	the gallows (*Ruthwell Cross*) (Labyrinth Library 2007)
Ne wæs ðær huru fracodes gealga,	Certainly it was not the gallows of a criminal there (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 10) (Labyrinth Library 2007)
On gealgan heanne	the despised gallows (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 40) (Labyrinth Library 2007)
Gealgtreowe	the gallows-tree (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 146)
On galgum	on the gallows (*Christ and Satan* l. 508) (Labyrinth Library 2007)
On galgan	on the gallows (*Christ and Satan* l. 548)
On galgan	upon the Cross (*Elene* l. 169) (Labyrinth Library 2007)
On galgan	upon the Cross (*Elene* l. 480)

Rode (Cross):

Cristes rode	Cross of Christ (*Andreas* l. 1337)
Rod wæs ic aræred	I was reared up as a cross (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 44)
Crist wæs on rode.	Christ was on the Cross. (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 56)
Rode	that Cross (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 119)
Rode	the Cross (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 131)
Dryhtnes rod	the Cross of the Lord (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 136)
Cristes rode	Christ's Cross (*Elene* l. 103)

Halig under hrusani,	
Hyded wære, æðelcyninges rod	the holy Cross of the noble king might be concealed under the earth (Elene *ll. 218-9)*
Of rode	from the Cross (*Elene* l. 482)
Seo rod wuninge radorcyninges	the Cross of the King (*Elene* l.624)
Halige rod	the holy Cross (*Elene* l. 720)
Roda	Crosses (*Elene* l. 833)
Æðelinges wæs rod aræred	the Prince's Cross was reared (*Elene* l. 885)
Cristes rod	the Cross of Christ (*Elene* l. 972)
Halige rod	the holy Cross (*Elene* l. 1011)
Rod rodera cyninges	the Cross of the King of heaven (*Elene* l. 1074)
On rode	upon the Cross (*Christ II* l. 727) (Labyrinth Library 2007)
Uses dryhtnes rod	the Cross of our Lord (*Christ III* l. 1084) (Labyrinth Library 2007)
Reade rod	crimson cross (*Christ III* l. 1101)
Þa he on rode wæs	on the Cross (*Christ III* l. 1114)

Treow (tree):

Syllicre treow	wondrous tree (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 4)
Wealdendes treow	the Ruler's tree (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 17)
Hælendes treow	the Saviour's Cross (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 25)
Halige treo	that holy tree (*Elene* l. 107)
Halige treo	the holy tree (*Elene* l. 129)
His rode treo	his rood-tree (*Elene* l. 147)
Wlitige treo	that handsome tree (*Elene* l. 165)
On rode treo	on the rood-tree (*Elene* l. 206)
Þæt mære treo	glorious tree (*Elene* l. 214)
Halige treo	that holy tree (*Elene* l. 429)
Halige treo	that holy tree (*Elene* l. 443)
Þæt halige treo	the holy tree (*Elene* l. 701)
Halige treo	holy tree (*Elene* l. 840)
On rode treo	on the rood-tree (*Elene* l. 855)

Wuldres treo (tree of glory):

Wuldres treo	the tree of glory (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 14)
Wuldres treo	the tree of glory (*Elene* l. 827)
Wuldres treo	the tree of glory (*Elene* l. 866)
Wuldres treowes	the tree of glory (*Elene* l. 1251)

Lifes treow (tree of life):

Þæt lifes treow	the tree of life (*Elene* l. 664)
Đam lifes treo	the tree of life (*Elene* l. 706)
Lifes treo	the tree of life (*Elene* l. 756)
Lifes treo	the tree of life (*Elene* l. 1026)

Beam (tree/ cross):

Đam beame	the tree (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 114)
Beame	the tree (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 122)
Blaca beam	the shining tree (*Elene* l. 91)
On heanne beam	on the high tree (*Elene* l. 424)
Rodor cyninges beam	the tree of the heaven-King *(*Elene *l. 885)*
Mærost beama	the most celebrated of trees (*Elene* l. 1011)
Þone æðelan beam	the noble tree (*Elene* l. 1073)
Þone beam	the tree (*Christ II* l. 729)
Leohta beam	that radiant tree (*Christ III* l. 1089)
Halgan beam	on that holy tree (*Christ III* l. 1093)
On beame	on the tree (*Christ and Satan* l. 508)
On beame	on the Cross (*Christ and Satan* l. 567)

Wuldres beam (tree of glory):

Wuldres beam	the tree of glory (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 97)
Wliti wuldres beam	beautiful tree of glory (*Elene* l. 89)
Wuldres beam	tree of glory (*Elene* l. 218)
Wuldres wynbeam	the joyous tree of glory (Elene l. 843)

Sigebeam (tree of victory):

Syllic wæs se sigebeam	the magnificent cross of victory *(The Dream of the Rood* l. 13*)*
Sigebeam	the tree of victory (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 127)
Đam sigebeame	that tree of victory (*Elene* l. 420)
Đam sigebeame	that tree of victory (*Elene* l. 444)
Þam sigebeame	the tree of victory (*Elene* l. 665)
Sigebeame	the tree of victory (*Elene* l. 860)
Þæs sigebeames	the tree of victory (*Elene* l. 964)
Selest sigebeama	the most excellent tree of victory (*Elene* l. 1026)

***Beacen (sign/ emblem)*:**

Þyssum beacne	this sign (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 83)
Beacna selest	the noblest of signs (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 114)
Beacen godes	the emblem of God (*Elene* l. 109)
Sigebeacen soð	the true emblem of victory (*Elene* l. 886)
Selest sigebeacna	the noblest of those emblems of victory (*Elene* l. 974)
Sigor beacen	the victory emblem (*Elene* l. 984)
Sigebeacne	the symbol of victory (*Elene* l. 1256)
Beacna beorhtast	the brightest of portents (*Christ III* l. 1085)

Wudu (wood):

Wudu selesta	the most noble tree (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 27)

Wite (torture):

Wita heardost	the cruellest of tortures (*The Dream of the Rood* l. 87)

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GOOD OR EVIL: THE AMBIGUITY OF INTERPRETATION IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLISH DEVOTIONAL WRITING

TAMÁS KARÁTH

When Diomede in Book V of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* recognizes that the military efforts of the Greeks as well as his own ambitions to conquer Criseyde are meaningful only if one credits Calkas' vision of the future fall and destruction of Troy, he makes two important contributions to the medieval history of ambiguity:

> And but yf Calkas lede us with *ambages* –
> That is to seyn, with *double wordes sleye*,
> Swich as men clepe *a word with two visages* –
> Ye shul wel knowen that I nought ne lye...
> (Chaucer 2000, ll. 897-900, emphasis mine)

The prototypical Greek hero, also a prototypical rhetorician, does not only poetically embellish Isidore of Seville's authoritative and almost minimalist definition of ambiguity,[1] but acknowledges that his own sincerity, i.e. his rational explanation of the world around him, is preconditioned by the arbitrariness of crediting or discrediting Calkas' reading of signs. Ambiguity steps out from the role that scholarly definitions assigned to it in the field of rhetoric and becomes a preliminary act of interpretation. In the shade of Troilus' highly elaborate monologues on man's defenselessness in the face of exterior (or superior) powers, Diomede's recognition provides a shocking alternative: our truths, beliefs and explanations are constructed on conscious axiomatic decisions. The consequences of such an assumption point beyond Chaucer's often rehearsed lesson, according to which dreams (and signs) can be interpreted

[1] "Ambiguitas est, cum id, quod scriptum est, duas aut plures res significare videtur." (Etymologiae II, 5, 10 in Lindsay 1966)

in several ways, and seem to bind even faith to a preliminary rational consent.

A second important point that Diomede's remark adds to an overall assessment of ambiguity in the Middle Ages is its visual richness: ambiguity, as revealed by Diomede, pertains to words that take on shapes, i.e. two faces, and are inherently associated with "sleye" and "double" things. These Middle English adjectives often emerge in the context of falseness, tricks and false cunning – in short, misleading ambiguity.[2] The *prefigure* (prototype) of this visual concept of ambiguity can be traced back to high and late medieval representations of the Temptation, where all visual elements of Diomede's definition – the misleading spell with two faces – crystallize in a brilliant iconographic constellation: from the 12th century on, representations of this biblical scene emphasize the way in which the tempter's words take shape (i.e. a face, very exceptionally even two faces, one turning to Eve, the other towards Adam). The half-human serpent sometimes provides a mirror to Eve, or even more often, is itself (herself?) the mirror to Eve. The juxtaposition of two identical heads – those of the female serpent and Eve – creates the confusion of outward temptation and the inward inclination to this temptation (Réau 1956, 84; Schade 1990, 54-62) The palpable deceit in ambiguity has one root (one tree), in which good and bad are originally inseparable for the innocent soul before the Fall. Ambiguity, however, implies the disambiguation of evil and bad, which has ever been the concern of post-lapsarian humanity. This is also the concern of my paper.

The previous brief reflection overarching the distance between an early and a late medieval definition of ambiguity may imply that ambiguity became equal with evil deception. Indeed, it embraced so many suspicious notions that the most desirable thing was to get rid of it. This endeavor underlies all suspicions targeted at visions where the probability of divine

[2] For the various connotations of "double," cf. point 6 of the respective entry in the *Middle English Dictionary*: "(a) Of persons, etc.: false; deceitful, treacherous, unfaithful, unreliable [...]; (b) of actions, words, meanings: intentionally ambiguous, deceitful, deceptive." (Kurath et al. 1961, 1247) For "sleye," cf. especially points 3 and 4 to the entry "sly" in *The Oxford English Dictionary*: "(3) Of persons: Adept or skilful in artifice or craft; using cunning or insidious means or methods; deceitful, guileful, wily, underhand [...] (4a) Of actions, things, etc.: Marked or characterized by, displaying or indicating, artifice, craft or cunning; of an insidious or wily nature. (b) Of words, etc.: Full of duplicity or wile; subtle; disingenuous." (Simpson and Weiner 1989, 763) Both dictionaries agree on a visible semantic shift of both adjectives at the end of the 14th century: the extension of duplicity to words and utterances appears at that time.

inspiration was as strong as that of devilish deceptions. As Kathryn Kerby-Fulton writes:

> [w]hat all modern scholars agree on is that the ambiguity in visionary literary genres is deliberate. Ambiguity, meanwhile, was the last thing the medieval church wanted when confronted with claims to visionary experience. (Kerby-Fulton 2006, 23)

As the fear of evil suggestions and the desire to recognize divinely inspired visions led to the birth of a new genre of visionary instructional literature (the *discretio spirituum*, i.e. the discernment of spirits*)*, visionary and devotional texts showed a high level of sensitivity to the structure and contents of these texts. Nevertheless, the very attitudes to ambiguity remained ambiguous. In what follows I will focus on the contradictory strategies of the use of ambiguity in the 15th-century *Book of Margery Kempe*, the first acknowledged autobiography in English literature. In an attempt to prove the divine source of her visions, Margery (and the co-authors of her book) seek to invest the woman with the authority which has a counter-claim to traditional authorities. Strategies of eliminating and embracing ambiguity at the same time in this *Book* will be placed in the larger context of late medieval East Anglian spirituality by evoking the *Book of Showings (or Divine Revelations)* by Julian of Norwich as well as East Anglian dramatic texts (either intended to be performed or to be read as private devotional material) that elaborated on the complexities of the ambiguity of visions, more broadly on the ambiguity of images as such, in a visual and theatrical context.

In a quest for confirming authorities in Chapter 18 of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the visionary woman is ultimately commanded by God to visit, in addition to other local clergymen, Dame Julian of Norwich:

> And than sche was body [bidden] by owyr Lord for to gon to an ankres in the same cyte, whych hyte Dame Jelyan. And so sche dede, and schewyd hir the grace that God put in hir sowle of compunccyon, contricyon, swetnesse and devocyon, compassyon wyth holy meditacyon and hy contemplacyon, and ful many holy spechys and dalyawns that owyr Lord spak to hir sowle, and many wondirful revelacyons whech sche schewyd to the ankres to wetyn yf ther wer any deceyte in hem, for the ankres was expert in swech thyngys and good cownsel cowd yevyn. (Windeatt 2000, ll. 1335-43)

In spite of the lack of Margery's reference to Julian's *Showings (Divine Revelations)*, it cannot be doubted that by the time of their encounter in 1413 – or 1415, as suggested by Sanford B. Meech and Hope Emily Allen in the