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LITURGY, PERFORMANCE,
AND POETRY OF THE PASSION:
DAVID JONES AND *THE DREAM OF THE ROOD*

Francesca Brooks

In a letter criticizing the vernacularization of the Latin liturgy, sent to the Catholic journal, *The Tablet*, in 1967, David Jones described the Roman liturgy as, “a visual and aural liaison with the formative things of this island and of the religion-culture of the entire West.”¹ Later in the letter, he elaborates:

That much was ratified and made explicit at the festal board in the Upper Room in the Roman procuratorship of Judaea by the young hero ‘that was God Ælmihtig’ when in ‘his habergeon: HVMANA NATVRA’ wove for Him by the pliant puella, the gladius-pierced Mother, he, by manual acts and spoken words made certain material things other.²

Jones quotes from *The Dream of the Rood*, along with the Middle English *Piers Plowman* and fragments of Latin, arguing that this Old English vision of the crucifixion is one of the formative things of British culture.³ Jones believed *The Dream of the Rood* “[far excelled] any subsequent English poem about the Passion,” with its genius deriving from its power to form, in the multimedia and multisensory mode of liturgical performance, a liaison between British and Christian traditions.⁴ The focus of this article is on Jones’s poetic engagement with *The Dream of the Rood* in the final passion sequence of *The Anathemata* (1952), “‘Sherthursdaye and Venus Day,” and on the relationship Jones proposes between this vernacular poem and the performance of the liturgy.⁵ Through painted inscription and verbal allusion, *The Dream of the Rood* is brought into contact with a whole nexus of passion materials from diverse cultural contexts—including Germanic poetry, Latin hymns, and the Norse Yggdrasil.⁶ Encoded with the possibility of both visual and aural performance, *The Anathemata* reads *The Dream of the Rood* as a paraliturgical artifact that meditates on the signification of, and is inspired by, the Anglo-Saxon performance of the liturgy.

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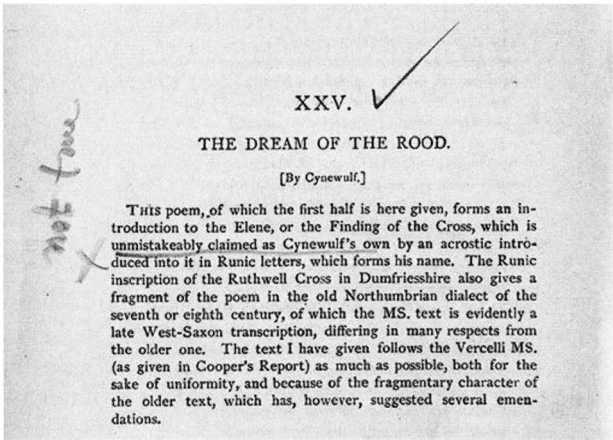


Fig. 1: Image showing Jones noting out-of-date scholarship in his copy of Henry Sweet’s *Anglo-Saxon Reader*. Reproduced with the permission of the David Jones Estate.

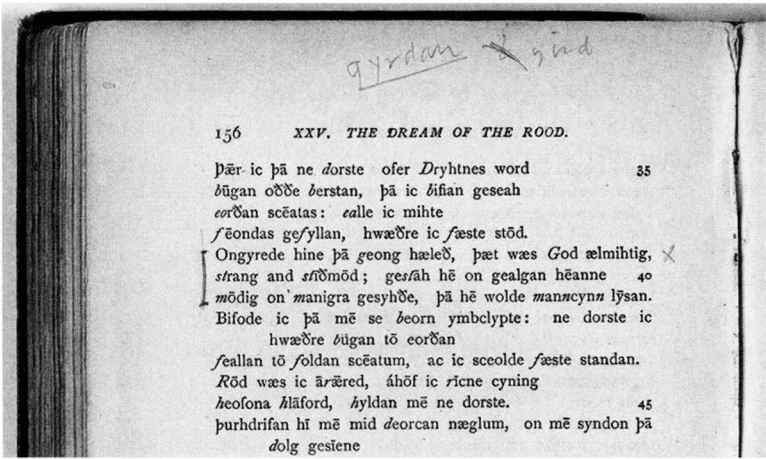


Fig. 2: Image showing Jones's gloss and mark-up of ‘The Dream of the Rood’ in his copy of Henry Sweet’s *Anglo-Saxon Reader*. Reproduced with the permission of the David Jones Estate.

The Dream of the Rood survives in a manuscript known as the Vercelli Book, written in the second half of the tenth century. It is a dream-vision of a speaking cross that recounts the events of the passion from its own perspective.⁷ The Vercelli poem also shares language with two artifacts: the runic inscription on the early-eighth-century Northumbrian Ruthwell monument

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and the inscription on the early-eleventh-century Brussels Reliquary Cross.⁸ Although the meaning and resonance of this shared language is still contested, as Jones himself wrote, it “suggests a valid and wide appeal in this island.”⁹

In his essays, correspondence, and poetry, Jones frequently returned to the “Dreaming Tree” as he meditated upon the passion.¹⁰ Indeed, recent examinations of his extant library (at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth) reveal that Jones’s knowledge of, and engagement with, Old English language and literature, in particular *The Dream of the Rood*, was far greater than has previously been recognized.¹¹ In his copy of Henry Sweet’s popular Old English primer, the *Anglo-Saxon Reader*, Jones annotated the text, suggesting a close-reading of the original language.¹² Other volumes demonstrate that he continued to take an interest in how leading scholars of the twentieth century had translated the poem.¹³ The library reveals an extended engagement with *The Dream of the Rood* and its contexts, which is also reflected in its persistent presence as inspiration in his creative work.

As Jones wrote in his letter to *The Tablet*, the liturgy is a performance: a communal, public service in which a set of texts are voiced in combination with ritualized gestures and use of sacred objects. *The Anathemata* is described in the “Preface” as mind-wandering that occurs during the Mass (31), and the rituals of the liturgy also provide a structure for Jones’s exploration of history in the poem. Opening with the prayer of consecration from the Mass¹⁴ and closing with the rites of the service of the Eucharist,¹⁵ Jones draws on the rubric of the Mass to provide a model for the performance of *The Anathemata* through visual and aural media. *The Anathemata* is designed to be read aloud (it draws on a soundscape of music and multilingual voices), its ritualized gestures are scripted, and the printed object becomes a sacred artifact in the poem’s performance. Jones’s poem argues for a relationship between the liturgy and vernacular poetry, where the liturgy provides a model for the *anamnesis* that *The Anathemata* is designed to perform.¹⁶

As early as Howard R. Patch’s 1919 study, scholars understood *The Dream of the Rood* to be related to the liturgy as it was practiced in Anglo-Saxon England.¹⁷ While Julia Bolton Holloway emphasized the importance of performance-based liturgical traditions, Murray McGillivray has highlighted a connection between *The Dream of the Rood* and the Introit to the Christmas Day Mass; Elaine Treharne has suggested a link with baptismal rites; and Sarah Larratt Keefer has argued for *The Dream of the Rood*’s relationship to the Nones office and the Veneration of the Cross.¹⁸ Although an individual dream-vision, *The Dream of the Rood* reflects on the crucifixion in terms that recall the public, liturgical ritual that would have been familiar to Christian communities in Anglo-Saxon England. In the following lines, for example,

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our perspective shifts between the spiritual mystery of the crucifixion and the physical object of the crucifix, the historical event of the passion and the liturgical artifact that makes an *anamnesis* of this event:

wendan wædum ond bleom:	Geseah ic þæt fuse beacen
beswyled mid swates gange;	hwilum hit wæs mid wætan bestemed,
	hwilum mid since gegyrwed.

I saw that urgent beacon
change its covering and colours: sometimes it was soaked with wetness,
stained with the coursing of blood; sometimes adorned with treasure.
(21b-23b)

The adverb *hwilum*, meaning here “at some times / sometimes ... at other times,” suggests a non-linear sense of time and conveys an experience of the ritual in the process of performance.¹⁹ The liturgy is non-chronological, bringing past events into focus as though they are unfolding in the continuous present: as Jones once described it, the liturgy represents “the penetration of the timeless into time.”²⁰ The poem invokes a crucifix, perhaps a reliquary like the Brussels Cross, in the transubstantiative process of becoming the true cross during the Mass: the congregation sees a cross, but as a physical symbol it invites meditation on the spiritual sight of the body of Christ.

Jones recognises *The Dream of the Rood* as a reflection on the liturgies of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday when he writes:

	the hydromel
that moistens the mortised <i>arbor</i>	
	dry-striped, <i>infelix</i>
trophy-fronded	
	effluxed et <i>fulgida</i> ? (240)

This is a clear allusion to the cross “mid blode bestemed” (drenched with blood) (48b), but the blood is represented by the ritual liquid, the hydromel (“water-honey”) of the Mass. *The Dream of the Rood* and *The Anathemata* encourage us to read the events of the liturgies of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday on two perceptual levels at once: the congregation perceives the physical characteristics of the liquid, whilst spiritually perceiving the real presence of the blood of Christ. The word *fulgida* is an allusion to the Latin hymn, “Vexilla Regis”; however, in conveying a sense of luminosity it is also a response to the *beacen* (beacon, sign) of *The Dream of the Rood* which is “gegyred mid golde” (“covered with gold”) (16a), and “leohte bewunden” (“wound round with light”) (5b). The cross simultaneously shines with the light of spiritual revelation and with the gold that symbolizes this in the

ritual artifact. In his poetry, Jones reads *The Dream of the Rood* as a meditation on the liturgies of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and their modes of signification.

However, Jones is also interested in what the enactment of the liturgy might teach the poet about the power of words and multisensory media to make this material thing other. In “Sherthursdaye,” *The Dream of the Rood* is used as a paraliturgical artifact: Jones’s passion sequence can be performed both visually and aurally, and this multisensory innovation is made possible through his engagement with the Old English poem. On one level we can see the poetry as presenting us with the aural artifact of *The Dream of the Rood* through allusion to the Old English text, and the inscription as presenting us with the visual artifact of the manuscript page, inscribed stone, or metal. However, we can also see the auality and visuality of *The Dream of the Rood* interacting differently in these facing pages: while the poetry presents us with a vision in which the “dreaming arbor” is pecked at in a moment of arresting visuality, the painted inscription can be read as the voice of the cross cutting through this vision.

Jones’s earliest recorded encounter with the Old English poem was an aural one, and he was particularly affected by the sound of the language. In a letter to Colin Wilcockson, Jones described hearing the poem read by his cousin in the 1930s: reflecting on “how marvelous it sounds,” he suggested that “the strength of the sound” was impossible to achieve in translation.²¹ His interest in poetry-as-sound is part of the project of *The Anathemata*, where numerous footnotes and accent marks are intended to shape the reader’s voice.²² However, in the Latinate English of the poetry, Jones does not preserve any of the original sound of the Old English. This sonic dimension is implied in the Old English lines Jones chose for “Ongyrede” inscription, which represent the voice of the cross in the Vercelli poem and (in similar language) on the runic inscription at Ruthwell:²³

Ongyrede hine þa geong hæleð— þæt wæs God ælmihtig—
strang ond stiðmod; gestah he on gealgan heanne,
modig on manigra gesyhðe, þa he wolde mancyn lysan.

He stripped himself then, young hero—that was God almighty—
strong and resolute; he ascended on the high gallows,
brave in the sight of many, when he wanted to ransom mankind.
(39-41)

Catherine Karkov suggests that for those who erected the Ruthwell monument, “the poem was also an oral performance spoken in the voice of the cross. The monument thus has a voice, an interior from which it speaks its history.”²⁴ In reusing these lines Jones also produces an artifact that claims

a voice of its own: the inscription appeals to the auditory as well as the visual imagination.

The “Ongyrede” inscription is one of only two included in the final section of *The Anathemata*, the other being “Postea Sciens Jesus” (1951).²⁵ This inscription is unique in Jones’s entire corpus, because it includes musical notation. As with “Ongyrede” and its relationship to the poetry it faces, “Postea” was intended to face page 237 where “his desiderate cry: / SITIO” rings out in an echo of the painted words. The music of “Postea” was sung at the climax of the Good Friday Liturgy. Jones’s detailed note for this “desiderate cry” suggests a desire to see the soundscape of the liturgical service recreated in the performance of his poem: “Three pitches are used by three separate cantors....*Sitio* is sung to six notes, G G A G F F. See illustration facing p.235.”²⁶ The inscription is designed as a script for the voice, and, given Jones’s interest in the sound of Old English, something similar may be intended for “Ongyrede”: the voice of the cross cuts through the liturgical soundscape of “Sherthursdaye.”

Moreover, “Ongyrede” presents the reader with a complex visual play with the multimedia contexts of *The Dream of the Rood*. Jones’s painted inscriptions reference medieval manuscripts through their color palette and through their style and script. First introduced to medieval manuscripts at Camberwell College of Art, Jones continued to be fascinated by manuscripts throughout his life: there are, for example, several instances of Jones practicing letter-forms and transliterating from reproductions of Old English manuscripts in his extant library.²⁷ In “Ongyrede” Jones uses the Old English letter-forms *eth* (ð) and *thorn* (þ), while the capitals suggest an early insular script such as that used in a gospel book like *The Lindisfarne Gospels*. This is not an accidental resemblance. Indeed, in a letter to Hague, Jones expressed his admiration for insular script, describing how Alcuin, under Charlemagne, “created the [...] model script.”²⁸ Jones draws our attention to the way that gospel books are also visible signs with a performative significance in liturgical ritual, and he offers the reader the same multisensory possibilities for his own book. As Anna Johnson writes, “Ongyrede” becomes a “*sigbeacn*” (victory-beacon) for the poem: a paraliturgical artifact that forms a multisensory liaison between national and religious culture through poetic performance.²⁹ *The Dream of the Rood* makes possible this innovative relationship between liturgy and poetry of the passion.

Recent scholarship, which has offered a new understanding of Anglo-Saxon England as “a period of national liturgical experiment and innovation,” helps us to refine our perception of the relationship between *The Dream of the Rood* and the liturgy.³⁰ Indeed, it also makes evident the extent to which Jones’s poetic reading of *The Dream of the Rood* has anticipated some of the

developments in Anglo-Saxon scholarship. Despite limited extant Anglo-Saxon liturgical manuscripts, liturgical rites and offices inherited from the continent were frequently adapted to suit the local needs of communities of worshippers.³¹ Although *The Dream of the Rood* is not a liturgical poem, it certainly reflects the creative energy that the sensory experience of the Christian liturgy could inspire. It exudes awe and wonder at liturgical traditions, in combination with an attempt to assimilate these practices into a vernacular shape.³² In an article for the *Dublin Review*, Jones discussed “the particular shape” of *The Dream of the Rood*, arguing that “no Mediterranean man could have told the dream that the rood dreamed.”³³ Jones’s argument that *The Dream of the Rood* is a Christian poem with a distinctly vernacular shape is expressed in the vision of the passion on page 240 of *The Anathemata*. Here, allusions to *The Dream of the Rood* are expressed in a Latinate English that recalls the language of liturgical texts:

On rune-height by the garbaged rill
 the scree-falls answers the cawed madrigals
 and there are great birds flying about.
 And (to sustain his kind)
 the mated corbie
 with his neb
 forcipate, incarnadined—
 prods at the dreaming *arbor*
 ornated *regis purpura*
 as his kind, should.

Old English tropes are intimately bound up with the Latin of the liturgy to express Jones’s belief that *The Dream of the Rood* is a literary response to Anglo-Saxon liturgical rites. Jones draws on two important tropes of Old English poetry: invoking the beasts of battle, familiar from poems including “The Battle of Brunanburh,” he creates a more intensely visceral vision of the passion.³⁴ Furthermore, by intensifying the sense of the cross’s agency and viewing the wood of the cross as one with Christ’s flesh, he plays with a uniquely Anglo-Saxon prosopopoeia.³⁵ The “dreaming *arbor*” references the editorial title of the Old English poem but uses a Latin word for “tree,” which offers a further allusion to the “Vexilla Regis”—a sixth-century hymn which until the late 1950s was sung during the Good Friday Liturgy.³⁶ Jones believed that the “Vexilla Regis,” like *The Dream of the Rood*, was one of the “works...that can be made only in a given cultural phase [that retained] a unique validity for...subsequent phases of that culture.”³⁷ Jones does not argue that *The Dream of the Rood* should be understood as a liturgical hymn; rather, he suggests that, like the “Vexilla Regis,” this Old English poem

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draws on the creative energy of the liturgy to communicate what the rite means to its current, local participants.

Jones's engagement with *The Dream of the Rood* in his passion sequence can be seen to have anticipated the emerging scholarly understanding of how Anglo-Saxon liturgical innovations might have inspired Old English literature more broadly. In recent work, Christopher Jones argues that liturgical forms should be seen "as fundamentally relevant to the study of Anglo-Saxon poetics," and in an analysis of "Caedmon's Hymn," Bruce Holsinger suggests that this poem "draws on *liturgical* form to help determine the present and future shape of *literary* form."³⁸ Rereading *The Dream of the Rood* and its enmeshment with the developing liturgical culture of Anglo-Saxon England through Jones's late-modernist poem, we can argue that—like *The Anathemata*—*The Dream of the Rood* is best understood as a vernacular, poetic response to liturgical culture that creatively draws on the multisensory media with which the performance of the liturgy also makes "this thing other."³⁹

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NOTES

1. Jones, "The Latin Mass," 25. One of the key changes of The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (1962-1965) was permission to celebrate most of the Mass in vernacular languages. Jones was deeply opposed to the changes: he wrote several letters to *The Tablet* and discussed them, at times obsessively and at length, in correspondence to friends.

2. Ibid., 25.

3. Line 39 of *The Dream of the Rood*. Translation from Treharne, *Old and Middle English: An Anthology*, 108–15. Both text and translation are hereafter cited parenthetically.

4. Jones, "The Fatigue" in *The Sleeping Lord*, 32, n.1. In this paper I will be thinking about the event of the liturgy as a performance that is multisensory, i.e., it engages the visual, auditory and (to some extent) olfactory senses, and multimedia, in the sense that it makes use of a diverse range of media including ritual objects, gestures, and the human voice.

5. Jones, *The Anathemata*, 223–43. Hereafter cited by page number.

6. Jones refers to these paintings as "inscriptions" in *The Anathemata*. Gray popularized the term "painted inscriptions" with her 1981 book *The Painted Inscriptions of David Jones*.

7. Swanton, "The Dream of the Rood," 1.

8. Orton, Wood, and Lees, *Fragments of History*, 157.

9. Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 269. See also Orton, Wood, and Lees, on the critical history and the risks of reading these artifacts together, *Fragments of History*, 151–56.

10. Jones, "The Fatigue," 32. An illustrative example is found in letters to Hague between January 1 1973 and October 14 1974, where the poem is discussed six times: Thomas Fisher

Rare Book Library, David Jones Papers, Box 1.

11. Both Alexander and Johnson emphasize the limits of Jones's knowledge of Old English. (Alexander, *Man and Artist* 67; Johnson, "Wounded men," 94). "Wounded men and wounded trees," 94.

12. NLW 670, David Jones Papers, National Library of Wales.

13. NLW 418, 509 and 452 (1+2), David Jones Papers, National Library of Wales.

14. Jones, *The Anathemata*, 49, n.1.

15. Jones, *The Anathemata*, 242.

16. Jones informs us that *anamnesis* "is a key word in our deposits," and quotes from Gregory Dix by way of a definition: "in the scriptures [...] *anamnesis* and the cognate verb have a sense of 'recalling' or 'representing' before God an event in the past so that it becomes here and now operative by its effects." N.1, 205.

17. Patch, "Liturgical Influence in *The Dream of the Rood*," 233-257. See also Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and Rood*.

18. McGillivray, "Dream of the Rood 9-12 and the Christmas Liturgy"; Treharne, "Hiht wæs geniwad"; Keefer, Performance of the Cross; and Keefer, Nones on Good Friday."

19. *Dictionary of Old English*, "hwilum," www.doe.utoronto.ca <http://0-tapor.library.utoronto.ca.catalogue.libraries.london.ac.uk/doe/>.

20. Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, David Jones Papers, Box 1, letter to René Hague dated June 8, 1966.

21. Jones to Wilcockson, 23rd September, 1963, published in Wilcockson, "Notes on Some Letters of David Jones," in *Agenda*, 78-79.

22. Jones, *The Anathemata*, 43.

23. Swanton, *The Dream of the Rood*, 90.

24. Karkov, *Art of Anglo-Saxon England*, 45. See also, Orton, Wood and Lees, *Fragments of History*, 149-151, on the voice at Ruthwell.

25. Jones, *The Anathemata*, 235.

26. *Ibid.*, 237, n.3.

27. NLW 1621, 874, and 824.

28. Jones, Letter to René Hague, June 14, 1970.

29. Johnson, "Wounded men and wounded trees," 108.

30. Bedingfield, *Dramatic Liturgy*, 1. See also Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and Rood*, on the Vercelli and Ruthwell poem as responses to the liturgy, both in terms of inherited tradition and locally adapted rite.

31. See, for example, Bedingfield and Gittos, *Liturgy of the Late Anglo-Saxon Church*.

32. See, for example, Keefer, "Nones on Good Friday," 41-42, on the addition of the *Deposito Crucis* to the English Regularis Concordia tradition and her analysis of its influence on *The Dream of the Rood*, Nones on Good Friday," 41-42.

33. Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 269-70.

34. 'Neb' is an allusion to "The Battle of Brunanburh," lines 60-62. See Johnson, "Wounded men and wounded trees," 89-110, on Jones's engagement with the beasts of battle in *In Parenthesis*, "Wounded men and wounded trees," 89-110.

35. See Schlauch, "'Dream of the Rood' as Prosopopoeia."

36. Walsh and Husch, *One Hundred Latin Hymns*, 100-3. See also Robichaud, *Making the Past Present*, 123-30, on Jones's interest in the hymn.

37. Jones, "The Eclipse of a Hymn," in *Epoch and Artist*, 260.

38. Jones, C., "Performing Christianity," 448; Holsinger, "Caedmon's Hymn," 175.

39. Jones, *The Anathemata*, 46.

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