

The Dream of the Rood and the Ruthwell monument: Fragility, brokenness and failure

In this fifth and final chapter, I want to pay attention to the other side of assemblage – that is, the way that things break up and break away. The poem (or poems) usually referred to as *The Dream of the Rood* is a fragile thing that has been, and in a sense asks to be, broken apart and pieced back together time and again. It is not a coherent whole, in any of its forms, but an elusive assortment – at once breakage and assemblage – that invites us to participate in its ongoing process of becoming.

I will start by closely analysing the poem as it exists in the Vercelli Book manuscript, carrying out a reading of the text in light of thing theory, looking at how the various things represented in the poem (tree, beam, beacon, gallows, rood, body) transform one another, but how they also shift and shape the human ‘dreamer’ as he speaks his vision. I will acknowledge the riddle-like nature of this poem yet contend that this is nevertheless a riddle without a solution. This point is crucial because it is their resistance to objectification that imbues these items with thing-power. They will not be resolved and therefore dissolved, but go on breaking, failing, merging, re-emerging and reanimating themselves. Although we are dealing with marred or disused materials here (an uprooted tree, a stained cross, a discarded gallows, a bloodied, buried body) these things are associated through their fragile but changeable nature; they gain an agency beyond their original ‘usefulness’ and form a vibrant, self-altering assemblage.

In discussing the ‘agency of assemblages’ Bennett has highlighted the fact that in any congregation or meshwork there is a ‘friction and violence between parts’ so that assemblages are ‘living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within’.¹ As such, when looking at how things are assembled in a poem like *The Dream*, we need to attend not only to the way in which the bits

and pieces come together but to how they suffer wounding, damage, breakage, but then seek new encounters to creatively compensate for these alterations. A fragile tree is torn from its roots, but instead of dying gains voice and agency as the killer of Christ; the body of Christ becomes lifeless but the blood of his death unites flesh and wood, human and rood, and gives both broken, disused things a new vibrancy. Human beings are entangled with this kind of thingness and so the dreamer is afflicted and altered by the things he sees, hears and speaks, and is ultimately rendered an inert but talking thing – spiritually and verbally active but physically passive and dependent. While the dreamer becomes a voice-bearer (OE *reordberend*), speech is not the means by which human subjects master objects in this poem. Rather, it is voice that links the human and nonhuman participants in this assembly together. Speech is like the connective tissue that binds one thing to another. Thus, the dreamer does not solve the riddle by speaking it but becomes part of it, does not name the ‘Cross’ with his voice but is united with the multivalent *treow-beam-gealga-rod* as part of an assemblage.

The second part of the chapter will explore the connections, and tensions, between a late tenth-century manuscript poem and a rune-inscribed stone sculpture from the eighth century: *The Dream of the Rood* and the Ruthwell monument. It has been difficult to keep these two things together in a sustained and meaningful way and yet it has been almost impossible to break them apart. As much as they have been drawn to each other across time and space, they have repeatedly asserted their own individual thingness. The fragility, brokenness and failure that runs through this meeting offers another, more thematic, way of understanding the relation between *The Dream of the Rood* and the runic poem on the Ruthwell monument. Acknowledging their resistance to straightforward unification gives us a way of speaking about the two together without forcing them to be the same – providing a means of talking about these things without eroding their autonomy. What kind of encounter does the Ruthwell monument offer us and how is this experience like or unlike that offered by *The Dream* in the Vercelli Book manuscript? Following the work of Fred Orton, I will argue that the Ruthwell monument is a thing of tension and paradox, at once beautiful and ugly, balanced and broken, fragile and enduring.² What I would add is the observation that sometimes this paradoxical quality results from the intentions of the monument’s makers, but sometimes it is accidental; and most of the time we are witnessing a collaboration, or maybe tussle, between human

and nonhuman forces. The agency of this monument comes from its resistance to human knowledge. It makes us think it is a certain kind of thing only to then break or fail to act as that thing. Part of this thing-power comes from the very *stoniness* of the monument: although stone may seem still, silent and solid to human observers, this material actually has a vibrancy of its own, a life story that has shaped and will shape our experience of that which we call the Ruthwell monument. As the stone moves and changes across the ages, will it one day cease to function as a monument, let alone a cross, altogether? And will it not break further and further away from the manuscript poem until no one can remember why these two things were put together in the first place?

The things in the Vercelli Book

It has long been acknowledged that *The Dream of the Rood* draws on the style and language of riddling found elsewhere in Old English literature. Michael Swanton, who produced an authoritative edition of the poem in 1970, was one of many critics to point out that a literary precedent for this mode ‘existed in the popular type of Anglo-Saxon riddle in which an enigmatic object is made to describe itself in oblique terms, sometimes telling its history’.³ More recently, Patrick Murphy notes how the language of riddling overlaps with the language of dreaming in the poem, pointing to the wonders of dreams, their shifting images and paradoxes, and their traditional need for riddle-like interpretation. Interestingly, Murphy argues that riddles, dreams and other literary forms closely associated with them in medieval manuscripts (like proverbs and fables) embody a ‘sense of failure’ insofar as their moral resolutions often fail to satisfy us. There is a friction between proposition and solution, and the unknown never completely fits into the known.⁴

Indeed, in [Chapter 2](#), I demonstrated the logic of *not* always answering or solving the identities of the speakers in Old English riddles. To name the thing is to objectify it and rob it of its enigmatic power. There is more to a riddle than its solution; a thing always exceeds the name we give it. The same contention applies to *The Dream of the Rood*. While the poem may invite us to find a theological truth among its visual and verbal layers, this is not the same as asking us to name and identify a single object. We need not even read the text against the grain here, for unlike some of the Exeter Book riddles, *The Dream* does not at any stage tell us to say what it is called. I especially want to avoid the notion

that the answer to this riddle is: the Cross. As I will show, there is no monolithic 'Cross' standing behind or beneath the alternating *treow-beam-gealga-rod*. Rather, we are at once dealing with one shapeshifting thing and with many different things criss-crossing into one another. What these things have in common is their fragility, their brokenness. And, as a result of this fragile brokenness, they hold a creative and transformative potential. The human body, and voice, is enmeshed in this process of breakage and alteration. Therefore, the things in *The Dream* have the power to shift and shape that which we call 'human'.

The poem is riddle-like from the outset, with the first twenty-seven lines depicting the dreamer's vision of some mysterious sight that is continuously altering its appearance. This passage does not lead us to any resolution but moves back and forth, back and forth, presenting us with a meshwork of things breaking open, spilling over and bleeding into other things. In the midst of this, the dreamer also receives glimpses of body parts, emphasising the fact that human beings are also caught up in this process. Drawing upon the third-person descriptive riddling mode, and the common riddle formula *ic seah*, the dreamer opens by exclaiming:

Puhte me þæt ic gesawe syllicre treow
on lyft lædan, leohte bewunden,
beama beorhtost.

[It seemed to me that I saw a wondrous tree, raised into the air,
wound round with light, the brightest of beams] (4–6a)⁵

What is more, 'Eall þæt beacen wæs / begoten mid golde' [that beacon was all drenched with gold] (6–7). *Begoten*, past participle of *begeotan* ('to pour over' or 'to sprinkle, anoint, drench, cover'), has the sense of water or even blood and evokes images of bodily fluids.⁶ To drench or cover with gold seems better suited to the adornment of a relic than a mere tree or beam. Yet this tree is also a *beacen*, a word which has retained in modern English its double sense of flaming brand and abstract sign, suggesting both materiality and immateriality. Along with the dreamer, we are gazing at a 'sigebeam' [victory-beam] (13) and are reminded 'ne wæs ðær huru fracodes gealga' [that was no felon's gallows] (10). Of course, the denial itself evokes images of human suffering and death – of a wooden beam on which bodies become corpses, where animate subject is transformed into inanimate object. In these lines, then, the sight seen by the dreamer is multivalent: a tree soaked with gold, a beam which is not a gallows, burning wood and shining symbol.

These things are also a human body. The dreamer says that ‘Gimmas stodon / fægere æt foldan sceatum, swylce þær fife wæron / uppe on þam eaxlegespanne’ [Gems stood beautifully at the corners of the earth, even as there were five upon the shoulder-span] (7–9). The symbolic, universal aspect of this ‘beam’ is once more depicted here, as it extends across the world and quarters the universe and is beheld by ‘halige gastas, / men ofer moldan, and eall þeos mære gesceaft’ [holy spirits, men over the earth, and all this fair creation] (11–12). This abstract quality is juxtaposed with a physical dimension. The word used for the crossbeam is *eaxlegespanne*, where *eaxle-* means ‘shoulder’, a word echoed later on with ‘bæron me þær beornas on eaxlum’ [the warriors bore me there upon their shoulders] (32). This line not only reveals that the *treow* is cross-shaped but that it has shoulders like the *beornas* that once carried it to the mound of Calvary, while the embodied Christ himself is later described as ‘se beorn’ (42). The five gems that adorn the crossbeam symbolise the five wounds of Christ and again connect wooden beam with fleshy body. The blood that flows from its right side (‘hit ærest ongan swætan on þa swiðran healfe’) (19–20) further identifies this thing as a body, while OE *swætan* could be translated as both ‘to bleed’ and ‘to sweat’ and has a dual quality as both blood and water, with simultaneous connotations of battle and baptism, death and life, whereby ‘the Church, symbolized by the water of baptism and the blood of the Eucharist, was born from the wound in Christ’s right side’.⁷

Visually, there are little clues in this opening passage that whatever the dreamer was gazing at had a cross-shape and cross-like qualities. Yet the image does not remain still long enough to be fixed in this way. To the contrary, what is most striking about this vision, and what gives the thing its ongoing transformative power, is its fragility, its woundedness and dyingness. The dreamer says ‘Hwæðre ic þurh þæt gold ongytan meahte / earmra ærgewin, þæt hit ærest ongan / swætan on þa swiðran healfe’ [Yet I could perceive through that gold the ancient strife of wretched ones, when it first began to bleed on the right side] (18–20). It is the gushing battle-sweat, that blend of blood and water, which hints at a long history and suggests that this thing has the ability to move and change through time. The word *ærgewin* (‘former struggle’ or ‘ancient strife’) conveys a sense of ancientness and yet the dreamer only sees and recognises this bygone event as the thing *ærest* began to bleed on the right side. Even as the tree or beam seems about to perish in the here and now, it paradoxically displays its ability to

span vast leaps of time and to carry the ancient strife of the past into the present. Rather than signalling its uselessness or obsolescence, the damage done to this thing endows it with the power to continuously alter itself into something new and beautiful: 'hwilum hit wæs mid wætan bestemed, / beswyled mid swates gange, hwilum mid since gegyrwed' [at times it was wet with moisture, soaked with flowing sweat, at times adorned with treasure] (22–3).

The thing or things seen by the dreamer cannot be objectified verbally, either. That the Cross is not the answer to what we are seeing and hearing, that the various fragile, breaking and changing things we encounter cannot be dissolved into this solitary object, is borne out by the fact that the poem does not, at any point, use the Latin term *crux*, or the Old English equivalent *cruc* (sign or shape of the cross). While *crux/cruc* is verbally absent from the text, we do have references to the *rod*. Given that *The Dream of the Rood* was the title bestowed on the poem in the nineteenth century, we may assume that the earliest scholars of this text privileged *rod* as the primary object with which this piece is concerned. But *rod* is not mentioned until line 44 of the Old English poem, after the thing has already been called a *treow*, *beam*, *sigebeam*, *gealga*, *beacen*; and it will go on to be called, and to call itself, these names again. The fact that the word *rod* is mentioned at all indicates that *rod* is not the sole solution to this riddle. Rather than comparing *The Dream* to those Exeter Book riddles that ask us to say what they are called, we might be better off comparing it to, say, Riddle 47, which announces itself as both a *moððe* and *wyrm* outright, not asking us to solve it but to reflect on its role and how we, as human readers, relate to it. Another apt parallel is Riddle 30a, which can be solved with a single word (OE *beam*) but whose spoken solution embraces everything from tree to log to ship to rood, underscoring the difficulty of trying to capture things within a verbal cage. Similar processes are at play in *The Dream*. We, like the dreamer, cannot satisfactorily name, know or control what we are seeing and hearing and speaking. What is our task, then?

In her work on the political ecology of things, Bennett asks a set of questions that are pertinent here: What method could possibly be appropriate for the task of speaking a word for vibrant matter? How to describe without thereby erasing the independence of things? How to acknowledge the obscure but ubiquitous intensity of impersonal affect? For Bennett, what is needed is a 'cultivated, patient, sensory attentiveness to nonhuman forces operating outside and inside the human body'. Indeed, without 'proficiency

in this countercultural kind of perceiving, the world appears as if it consists only of active human subjects who confront passive objects'. It is our task to defy this kind of action-oriented perception and allow ourselves to be caught up in things and their effects.⁸

Such an approach need not be 'applied' to *The Dream of the Rood*. It appears to be there already, embedded in the poem. The opening passage invites us to look and listen attentively to the transformations affected by fragile things and to reflect on our own, human, enmeshment with those transformations. The role we adopt as readers is one of patient, partially passive, perceptiveness, and the dreamer who mediates this poem for us sets an example. By the close of the initial passage, he is lying down and looking on as the *fuse beacen* (that is, 'eager' or 'lively' beacon) shimmers and shifts its shape: 'Hwæðre ic þær licgende lange hwile / beheold hreowcearig hælendes treow' [However, lying there a long while, I beheld, sorrowful in spirit, the saviour's tree] (24–5). While the thing dynamically affects change within itself, and within the human body, the dreamer simply watches and waits – a far cry from the human agent who actively organises and categorises objects. The dreamer says that he remained lying there for a long while 'oððæt ic gehyrde þæt hit hleoðrode' [until I heard that it spoke] (26). How to speak a word for things, to describe them without erasing their independence? In *The Dream*, this works the other way around. Things speak a word for us. We are not being asked to say what the thing is called at the close of this riddle-like section, but to lie back and hear it speak. Once more the dreamer shows the way, not so much speaking for things, but allowing the *wudu selesta* to possess his voice and speak through him. In the written, poetic form taken by *The Dream*, we do appear to receive the tree's words via the voice of the dreamer. Yet whereas modern editions have a habit of separating lines 28–121 out with quotation marks, the Vercelli Book manuscript does not follow this convention, furthering the sense that two voices (human and nonhuman) are merging into one here, making it difficult to frame or contain one within the other.

Now the poem shifts from the third-person descriptive mode of riddling ('ic seah', 'ic gefrægn') to the first-person mode ('ic eom', 'ic wæs'). When the *wudu selesta* does begin to talk, it moves into a more historical, narrative style than that of the opening shapeshifting vision. Nonetheless, the story told by the talking tree is similarly one in which a series of fragile things break, suffer, die, but then come together and reinvigorate one another – even if this

occurs in a more sequential and linear manner than in the previous passage. Accordingly, the first event that the tree relates is a violent cutting off of life:

Ʒæt wæs geara iu, (ic Ʒæt gyta geman)
 Ʒæt ic wæs aheawen holtes on ende,
 astyred of stefne minum. (28–30a)

[That was a long time ago (I remember it yet) when I was hewn
 down at the wood's edge, removed from my roots]

Here, the speaker is hacked down at the end of the wood and borne away from its forest home. The living tree is thereby turned into an inanimate beam of wood. Paradoxically, however, it is in this very moment that the tree is imbued with new life and the ability to become something else.

The tree claims that it was 'aheawen holtes on ende'. According to the TDOE entry for *aheawan*, the verb was used by Old English writers to describe the cutting down of trees, the cutting up of wood, but also the cutting or hacking off of body parts and the cutting down of entire nations. While these acts of 'cutting' imply pain or even death, a tree that is cut near the roots (i.e. coppiced) remains alive – in the same way that a person deprived of a limb can remain alive – and responds by growing new shoots. The memory of this experience seems not to belong to the living stump left behind, but to the timber that is carried away from the copse's edge and transformed into a gallows. In line 30, the speaker recalls how it was 'astyred of stefne minum'. This is usually translated into modern English as 'removed from my roots' or similar. Yet there is another way in which line 30 may be translated and interpreted, in keeping with my argument that the tree actually gains renewed life and vibrancy in its moment of suffering and death. OE *stefn* can be translated as 'root' or 'stem' but the same word also means 'voice' or 'sound uttered by the mouth'. We already know that the poet responsible for *The Dream* has a tendency to play with homophones: the word for tree (*treow*) in line 4, for example, may recall *treow*: 'truth', 'faith' or 'pledge'. There is good reason to think that another pun is at work in line 30. We read or speak *stefn* as 'roots' but might also hear 'voice' and reflect on the thing's ability to talk. After all, it is the tree itself speaking these lines. With this in mind, it does not necessarily work to translate the line as 'removed from' or 'deprived of my voice'. *Astyred* is the past participle of *astirian*, which may be translated as to 'remove' but, alternatively, as to

‘move’, ‘stir’, ‘rouse’ or ‘excite’. A different translation of lines 28–30 can be offered:

Ðæt wæs geara iu, (ic þæt gyta geman)
 þæt ic wæs aheawen holtes on ende,
 astyred of stefne minum. (28–30a)

[That was a long time ago (I remember it yet) when I was hewn
 down at the wood’s edge, stirred up in my speech]

And so, while these lines initially seem to be a simple description of the tree’s violent separation from its roots in the forest, the poem is evidently hinting at another consequence of this action, one perhaps unintended by the *feondas* who have carried out this attack: for even as the living tree is cut down, it suddenly finds its voice; its speech has been stirred or roused. Destruction, damage, even death, can make things talkative in this poem.

In becoming something else, the living-tree-turned-dead-beam does not only gain a voice but a renewed agency and even autonomy. At first, the speaker plays the role of inert object, remaining passive while its enemies seize it, carry it, set it down, fasten it in place and simply manhandle it:

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. (30b–33a)

[Strong enemies seized me there, made me into a spectacle, commanded me to raise up criminals. Men carried me there on their shoulders, until they set me down on a hill. The many fiends fastened me there.]

On a formal level, this section is quite different to the series of rapid, short half-line units of the opening vision, where different images were contrasted, progressing swiftly from paradox to paradox. Conversely, lines 30–3 are hypermetric, deploying extra syllables to widen the gaps between the alliterative *w*, *b* and *f* sounds and introduce a slower, broader, more reflective tone as the tree starts to speak, imbuing that nonhuman voice with the dignity and gravity of one who has witnessed something remarkable long ago.

However, as the tree watches the *frean mancynnes* hasten towards it, the verse quickens once more and the speaker suddenly takes on a form of thing-power, abruptly developing autonomy, the volition and determination to obey Christ, stand firm and not kill

the ‘fiends’ despite a full awareness that it could, if it wanted, do exactly that:

Pær ic þa ne dorste ofer dryhtnes word
 bugan oððe berstan, þa ic bifian geseah
 eorðan sceatas. Ealle ic mihte
 feondas gefyllan, hwæðre ic fæste stod. (35–8)

[There, I dared not, against the lord’s word, bow down or break,
 when I saw earth’s surfaces shake. I might have flattened the fiends
 entirely, yet I stood fast.]

Like many of the speaking objects found across Anglo-Saxon literature and material culture, the nonhuman voice creates a ‘passive yet powerful’ impression upon us, possessing a wondrous agency that is active and potent but also in keeping with its own properties as an artefact.⁹ It is as if the thing has had a moment of epiphany, realising that by no longer functioning as a growing tree it can now assume a new role and act as a deadly weapon – or choose not to. As well as triggering talkativeness, the brokenness of this thing has become the source of its new potency.

The gallows expresses its new found willpower and potential to cause harm, but alongside the young hero (*geong hæled*) who is hastening, stripping himself off, climbing or mounting, clasping and so on, the thing does come across as rather rigid. And yet what may begin as an ontological contrast soon turns into a union, a merging of human and nonhuman, active body and inactive artefact, as the two beings fuse together. This union is initiated by Christ, who embraces the speaking gallows, causing it to tremble: ‘Bifode ic þa me se beorn ymbclypte’ [I shook when the warrior embraced me] (42). The gallows relates how it dared not fall to the earth and this is followed by line 44a, in which the *gealga* is transformed, raised up as the *rod*. As mentioned, this is the first time that the word *rod* is used in the text. Nevertheless, this is clearly not the ultimate answer, or resolution, to the poem; the *rod* is simply another incarnation of the same speaker, who has shifted from *treow* to *gealga* to *rod*. By merging with the lively body of Christ, the speaker can re-emerge as yet another kind of thing. In this moment of togetherness, that active and animate body pours its life force into the rood, so that by line 44b there is a sudden change in roles. It is now the rood that is acting, the rood doing the moving, the rood that physically lifts or heaves up the body of a powerful, but now inert, king: ‘Rod wæs ic aræred. Ahof ic ricne

cýning, / heofona hlaforð' [I was raised as a rood. I lifted a mighty king, the lord of heaven] (44–5a).

It is a striking image of wounding and breakage that reinforces the fusion between wood and flesh: 'Purhðrifan hi me mid deorc-an næglum; on me syndon þa dolg gesiene, / opene inwidhlem-mas' [They drove dark nails through me; the scars can still be seen on me, gaping evil gashes] (46–7). The speaking rood itself recognises that this is the action, this driving through of dark nails, this opening up of holes or wounds, which actually has the adverse effect of connecting or assembling one thing with another; for here the rood shifts from the first-person singular ('ic' and 'me') to the dual pronoun ('unc'). Indeed, in line 48 the speaker is at pains to emphasise and intensify this moment of togetherness: 'Bysmeredon hie unc butu ætgædere' [They degraded us both together]. The body of Christ, which had been so animated moments before, is lifeless. Yet, as it departs, the wounded, battered, bloodied corpse leaves traces of its death behind on the rood. 'On me syndon þa dolg gesiene, opene inwidhlemmas' the talking thing says in line 46b, and then in 48: 'Eall ic wæs mid blode bestemed, / begoten of þæs guman sidan, siððan he hæfde his gast onsended' [I was entirely wet with blood, pouring out from the man's side, after he had sent forth his spirit]. Both statements serve to remind us of the lively, vibrant thing of the opening vision, showing that signs of fragility and death have become signs of renewed agency, of a thing that still shifts and shimmers and speaks in the here and now of the poem.

Where the first use of the OE word *rod* (44) in the poem signified the merging of gallows and body, wood and flesh, and thus the re-emergence of a new kind of thing, the second use of the word (line 56) underscores the inertia of the broken and defeated corpse:

Geseah ic weruda god
pearle þenian. Dystro hæfdon
bewrigen mid wolcnum wealdendes hræw,
scirne sciman, sceadu forð eode,
wann under wolcnum. Weop eal gesceaft,
cwiðdon cýninges fyll. Crist wæs on rode. (51b–56)

[I saw the god of hosts terribly tortured. Darkness had covered the king's corpse, clearly shining, with clouds. A shadow went forth, dim under the sky. All creation wept, cried for the king's fall. Christ was on the cross.]

The simple line ‘Crist wæs on rode’ testifies to the gallows’ successful slaying of its lord, but it also heralds the instant when the *geong hæleð* or *ricne cyning* is no longer a human body and has instead merged with and morphed into the *rod*. In the next lines, we are told how the lifeless *limwerigne* corpse is taken down from the gallows. All heat and energy and blood flow has fled from it: ‘Hræw colode, / fæger feorgbold’ [The corpse cooled, the fair life-house] (72–3). The speaking thing goes on to relate its burial and resurrection in a very succinct three lines: ‘Bedealf us man on deopan seape. Hwæðre me þær dryhtnes þegnas, / freondas gefrunon, / gyredon me golde ond seolfre’ [They buried us in a deep pit. But the lord’s friends and retainers found out where I was, adorned me with gold and silver] (75–7). Curiously, no mention is made here of Christ’s physical resurrection. His animate-body-turned-inanimate-corpse simply vanishes from the poem at this point and it is instead the rood that is dug up and decked out in gold and silver. And so, although the embodied Christ comes across as active – hyperactive, perhaps – when he first appears on the scene, the actions of that body are all crowded into a mere eleven lines (33–43) before it is abruptly deprived of its animacy. From lines 44 to 72, the corpse is predominantly described in passive terms, as it is raised, mocked, tortured, taken down, laid down, buried – and then it cools and vanishes from sight and sound. This has the effect of making embodied human life seem swift and short: we are excessively animate and active for a time; but only for a brief, transient time when compared to the enduring lifespan of other things in this poem.

Several breaks in time do occur throughout *The Dream*. It opens with what must have been a relatively recent event: the *swefna cyst* that came to the dreamer in the middle of the night. Although recounted in the past tense (‘Þuhte me þæt ic gesawe ...’) the dream is recent enough for the dreamer to be able to recall its visual and verbal content very clearly, so that it remains within the bounds of living human memory. Yet when the speaking tree takes over, it leaps back into the much more distant, historical past (‘Þæt wæs geara iu ...’). The series of events that the tree goes on to relate are again within the bounds of memory (‘ic þæt gyta geman ...’). This is no longer human memory, however, but nonhuman memory. Towards the end of its speech, the talking thing brings us further forward in time, to the day when *dryhtnes þegnas* uncovered it and adorned it with gold and silver (75–7). Another break in time occurs straight afterwards, when the rood addresses the dreamer in

the present tense: ‘Nu ðu miht gehyran, hæleð min se leofa’ [Now you might understand, my beloved hero] (78). Pasternack points out that all the sentences between 78 and 121 ‘make connections – either typological ones between historical events, analogical ones between historical event and Judgement Day or between contemporary man and Judgement Day, or tropological ones between historical event and contemporary man’.¹⁰ It is the nonhuman, speaking thing making these connections (line 121 is where its speech finishes). It is the nonhuman tree-gallows-rood whose life-span and perspective is stretchy and spacious enough to encompass the distant past, the present and the far future; the listening human is unable to make such vast temporal leaps without its help.

Human voices and bodies fade in and out of the poem’s fractured time frames. The dreamer speaks within the present of the poem, relating his vision in the opening and expressing hope for eternal life towards the end; but when the poem details distant historical events, it is the voice of the tree that does the remembering and narrating. Christ is embodied in human form in that historical past, but only makes an appearance in the present of the poem through the shapeshifting beam that has absorbed and now displays aspects of his human body within itself. On the other hand, the nonhuman speaking thing is capable of crossing temporal boundaries. In its endurance, it is both a variety of different things (breaking, dying, merging and re-emerging) and yet the same thing with the same voice, memory and sentience. This may lead us to recall Exeter Book Riddle 74, in which a single thing is mysteriously able to change from young girl to grey-haired woman to warrior but somehow remain itself *on ane tid*. As we have seen, the speaking thing in *The Dream* does not only alter itself in order to endure but embroils humans – who would otherwise fail to overcome their temporal rootedness – in this process. By verbally possessing the dreamer in order to speak about its history, the rood carries the human voice back into the past. By visually displaying the body parts of Christ in its own wounds and stains, the rood conveys the human body forward into the present and future.

Even as breakage in its form and functionality enables the thing to alter and revivify itself, these breaks in time allow it to defy a single state of being. This is why the dreamer cannot pin down, in words, exactly what it is he perceives. True, the poem contains allusions to cross shapes. These occur visually, in the opening section, and verbally, in the chiasmatic patterns which underlie the sequence of scenes narrated by the rood.¹¹ Yet

the thing seen and the thing that speaks eludes and exceeds its cross-like quality. It stretches across space and stretches across time to embrace its former and future existence as tree, gallows, beam, beacon, rood, body and more. Similarly, one effect of the hypermetric lines is to slow down and stretch out the verse within time.¹² This again creates an excess of meaning as well as expanding – one might say momentarily breaking – the carefully designed chiasmus, presenting us with something that goes beyond a cross shape.

As a result, the dreamer cannot really know, cannot really resolve, whatever he sees, hears and speaks – and he cannot and does not name it as a cross, or the Cross. The human dreamer does not, therefore, master the things around him through language but becomes enmeshed with them. Rather than reaching a resolution as the poem progresses, this human being is shifted and shaped by things, so that he himself is ultimately rendered an inanimate but talking thing – spiritually and verbally active but physically passive. He cannot hope to master things with a single word; talking things master him, bringing him into their riddle.

For a start, the poem suggests that the human body of the dreamer can criss-cross between discrete categories, highlighting not only the bodiliness of things but the thingness of the body. The lines ‘Syllic wæs se sigebæm ond ic synnum fah, / forwunden mid wommum’ [Splendid was the victory-beam and I stained by sins, wounded with stains] (13–14) may be read as the dreamer recognising a moral contrast between himself and this noblest of trees, where the latter is splendid (*syllic*) and he is hateful because of sin. Yet as a statement it has a visual or material dimension to it, as well as a moral one, and thus visually connects – as well as contrasts – the body of the dreamer with the sight of the rood. Even as the rood ‘wendan wædum and bleom’ [changed its colours and coverings] (22) and is at times ‘mid wætan bestemed’ [with wetness/blood bedewed], at times ‘mid since gegyrwed’ [bedecked with treasure] (22–3), so too the dreamer describes himself as at once wounded and brightly adorned, hateful but alluring to behold. *Wommum* is translated by Ó Carragáin as both (with) ‘sins’ and (with) ‘stains’.¹³ In Bosworth-Toller *wamm* is glossed as ‘a spot, mark, blot, stain’. Just as the sins of the past (*earmra ærgewin*) are displayed visually on the rood’s bloody, sweaty body, the sins of the present that afflict the dreamer are there to be seen as ‘stains’ or ‘marks’ on the skin.

The OE word *fah* is likewise key in seeing the body of the dreamer as thinglike. *Fah* can mean hostile or guilty but also

decorated, gleaming or brightly coloured. It is used elsewhere, in *Genesis B*, to describe the serpent that tempted Eve as ‘fah wyrn’ (899). Here, the snake is something shining and beautiful yet also deceitful and dangerous. In *The Wanderer* it describes a ‘weal wundrum heah wýrmlicum fah’ [wall wondrously high, adorned with serpentine patterns] (98) and in *Beowulf* the hall Heorot is ‘fættum fahne’ [gleaming with gold ornaments] (716). When applied to the dreamer, the word therefore makes him sinful and guilty but also adorned and shining like an engraved wall, gilded hall or jewelled cross or column. We are invited not only to hear of his sinful state but to see his wounds/adornments in the same way that we look at the Saviour’s tree. Like the rood, the dreamer is an object to be seen as much as a subject to be heard. In this poem, then, the shapeshifting thing impresses its own appearance, as well as voice, upon a human body. The dreamer responds to the vision of the *sigebeam* and only senses and expresses his own moral and physical condition in relation to it. That thing is wounded; I am wounded. It is adorned; I am adorned. It is a voice-bearer; I am a voice-bearer.

The dreamer is not simply shaped by the thing in terms of what he looks and feels like, either, but as the poem unfolds he is physically shifted by it too. The human dreamer is positively inert compared to the things he perceives and he comes to rely on the rood to fetch and carry him. The dreamer may be talkative and opens the poem by declaring his intention to speak, but then he swiftly fades out of focus and proceeds to relate the lively, shapeshifting actions of the tree as it towers, shimmers, changes its coverings, sweats, bleeds and so on. Towards the end of this opening passage, the dreamer reminds us that he is still here, but that he has been lying down and passively watching and listening to the thing’s performance (24–6). Starting with the moment when the tree starts to talk (‘Ongan þa word sprecan wudu selesta ...’) the poem breaks from the subject–verb syntactic pattern with which it opened to introduce a verb-initial pattern for the rood’s narrative.¹⁴ Such a word order emphasises action but places less emphasis on whom or what is acting. Sometimes things are done to the gallows (‘Genaman me ðær strange feondas’) while at other times things are done by the rood (‘Ahof ic ricne cyning’) and still other times things are deliberately not done by it (‘Hyldan me ne dorste’). Yet throughout this passage the thing remains involved and at the forefront of what is unfolding – unlike the sleeping dreamer who merely observes things happening from a spatial and temporal distance.

In the closing sections of *The Dream* (122–end) the dreamer becomes verbally active once again, expressing his reaction to the words of the speaking thing. Uplifted by the story of the rood, he is also spiritually active by this point. That is, he describes himself as praying before the beam ('Gebæd ic me þa to þan beame') and uses a variety of phrases to explain how his mind, heart and spirit are yearning for heavenly things: 'Wæs modsefa / afysed on forðwege' [My mind was urged on the way forth] (124–5) and 'Is me nu lifes hyht / þæt ic þone sigebeam secan mote' [It is now my life's hope that I might seek the victory-beam] (126–7). And yet, while the dreamer may yearn and seek with his spirit, he remains as physically immobile as he was in the opening – and, more than this, he expresses a physical dependence on the rood to one day raise him into heaven:

ond ic wene me
daga gehwylce hwænne me dryhtnes rod,
þe ic her on eorðan ær sceawode,
on þysson lænan life gefetige
ond me þonne gebringe þær is blis mycel,
dream on heofonum, þær is dryhtnes folc
geseted to symle, þær is singal blis,
ond me þonne asette þær ic syþþan mot
wunian on wuldre, well mid þam halgum
dreames brucan. (135b–144a)

[and each day I hope for the moment when the lord's rood, which I saw before here on earth, may fetch me from this fleeting life and bring me to where there is great bliss, joy in heaven, where the lord's people are placed at the feast, where there is ongoing delight, and set me down there, where I might afterwards dwell in glory and justly enjoy bliss with the holy ones.]

In this passage, a series of verbs grant agency to the thing rather than to the human being: *dryhtnes rod* will 'fetch' (*gefetige*) and 'bring' (*gebringe*) and 'set down' (*asette*) the dreamer where there is bliss among the holy ones.

The dreamer is hardly a masterful human subject at the outset, but, as the poem progresses, he loses still more of his subjectivity and becomes increasingly like an object. The talking thing commands him, and all humankind, to become treasure-bearing objects when it states that, 'Ne þearf ðær þonne ænig anforht wesan / þe him ær in breostum bereð beacna selest' [There need be none who are fearful among those who bear the best of beacons in

their breasts beforehand] (117–18). This image has both an outer dimension (recalling a pectoral cross worn on the breast, perhaps) and an inner one (some precious treasure mysteriously concealed within a chest), and makes me think not of human subjectivity but of other objects that survive from Anglo-Saxon culture, such as the pectoral cross of St Cuthbert or the Franks Casket. Even more forcefully, the rood commands humans to become voice-bearing objects: ‘Nu ic þe hate, hæleð min se leofa, / þæt ðu þas gesyhðe secge mannum, / onwreoh wordum þæt hit is wuldres beam ...’ [Now I command, my beloved hero, that you speak this vision to mankind, and reveal with words that it is the tree of glory ...] (95–7). Again, I am reminded of extant Anglo-Saxon artefacts, of the numerous inscribed objects (helmets, jewels, brooches, crosses) which sometimes speak of their makers, owners or masters but whose voices also granted them life and a ‘vestige of subjectivity’.¹⁵

In *The Dream*, voice is an attribute that flows freely across the subject and object binary and enmeshes human with nonhuman, body with object, things with other things. Even as the tree had to be stirred up in its voice by being removed from its roots, the talkative potential of humans also needs to be roused. Voice is connected to sight, and through seeing, speaking and hearing the dreamer moves from sleep to wakefulness, from death to life. It is sight that initially distinguishes the dreamer from the rest of humankind, for while they lay at rest in the middle of the night, he envisions the best of dreams. Yet this is a vision not only to be seen but spoken and heard. ‘Hwæt’ as a conventional exclamation commands the attention, both aural and visual, of the audience. The rest of humankind against whom the dreamer is contrasted are said to be ‘reordberend’ [voice-bearers] (3). What is implied is that we, as audience and as humans, may ‘bear’ voices within our bodies but that the transformative potential of these voices remains unused while we lie asleep. The dreamer, on the contrary, has his eyes wide open and the wakefulness of his dream vision is contrasted with the sleep of the inanimate, insensible voice-bearers around him, whose eyes, ears and mouths remain closed to the spiritual truth. Ó Carragáin informs us that ‘the liturgy made it clear that, even during sleep, divine grace could bring the heart to deeper wakefulness, so that sleep could be a true vigil, a time of spiritual growth’.¹⁶ While his eyes are open, the dreamer at first looks on in silent awe – but paradoxically speaks his silent awe, for the poem itself is the fulfilment of his potential as a voice-bearer. The dreamer is challenged to imitate and become a thing that talks,

and the voice in which he fulfils this challenge ultimately merges with that of the talking tree as the latter narrates the story of the crucifixion for a significant portion of the poem. What is more, although the poem ostensibly shifts back into the 'human' voice of the dreamer from line 122 onwards, traces of his verbal individuality actually fade away as the poem comes to a close. Around line 147, the dreamer suddenly substitutes the personal *ic* with an *us*. The *us* functions as (indirect) object rather than subject and introduces an impersonal, repetitive tone to the final lines of the poem. The individual persona of the dreamer finally breaks away, but the entirety of humankind is now brought into the poem, each of us included as a voice-bearer (*reordberend*) who may spread the word about the wonders we have seen and heard.

Poetry, textuality, materiality

Until now, I have been reading a 156-line Old English poem known as *The Dream of the Rood*. This version of the text is found in the Vercelli Book manuscript, across folios 104–6, and has been dated to the second half of the tenth century, probably copied down c.970 by one scribe, possibly at St Augustine's, Canterbury. The book gets its name because it has survived, not in Canterbury, but in the cathedral library at Vercelli, Italy. A piece of northern Italian chant, scribbled onto a page of the manuscript, shows that the book was already at Vercelli by around 1000–1100 AD and, since Vercelli was on one of the pilgrim routes on the way to Rome, the Anglo-Saxon manuscript may have been brought along by a group of English pilgrims, perhaps given as a gift to the church.¹⁷

The Dream of the Rood is a curious title invented by scholars who first studied and published the poem in the early nineteenth century. The text could as easily have been called *A Vision of the Cross* or *The Riddle of the Tree*. There is no title in the Vercelli Book itself. The poem opens abruptly near the top of folio 104v. and starts with a plain H to introduce the opening word, *Hwæt*. The folio is damaged by a water stain in the outer margin and by reagent at the bottom of the page. Like all Old English poetry, *The Dream* is laid out in long continuous lines.

Pasternack has pointed to the differences between discrete Old English poems such as *The Dream of the Rood* as they are presented to us in modern editions – with titles, in units marked and defined by rhythm and alliteration, with current conventions of punctuation – and what she calls the 'verse sequences' found in

Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, which are not constructed of fixed dimensions or content but which ‘act’ as poems when certain conditions suggest their coherence. Pasternack contends that this verse ‘operates without the author function’ and so ‘opens itself to another poet, a reader, a scribe or manuscript compiler remaking it’. These verse sequences are ‘constructions that another can reconstruct, much as the Anglo-Saxons used Old Roman stones to construct new churches’.¹⁸

As one of the four main codices in which the bulk of surviving Old English poetry is found, the Vercelli Book asks us to assemble a poem in what is an open process and in which the ‘poem’ is never quite completed. Indeed, the Vercelli Book may even contain fragments of poems embedded within its highly poetic prose homilies, visually undifferentiated by the Anglo-Saxon custom of writing both poetry and prose in long lines across the page and yet audibly there for the making – before failing to act as poetry and breaking off into prose again.¹⁹ We can say, therefore, that this process of poem-making and poem-breaking is partly accidental, whereby the reader can easily skip or miss parts, spill over from poetry into prose, prose into poetry, or from one poem into another, linking and breaking sections depending on what he or she finds on the manuscript page and how he or she responds to it.

That the Vercelli Book engenders acts of finding, making, breaking and remaking is embodied by the Cynewulfian runes that are integrated into some of its texts. On folio 54r. of the Vercelli Book a request for prayers incorporates the name CYNEWULF in runes. Immediately prior to this, the reader is told: ‘Her mæg findan foreþances gleaw, se ðe hine lysteð leoðgiddunga, hwa þas fitte fegde’ [Here the wise fore-thinker, he who delights in the singing of lays, may find who fixed together this song] (*Fates of the Apostles*, 96–8). Thus, we as readers are invited to solve this riddle by ‘finding’ the one who found and ‘fixed together’ this song. The straightforward solution is: Cynewulf. But the OE word *fegan* is defined as to join, unite, bind, fit or fix.²⁰ The ‘I’ who is revealed to be Cynewulf found and bound or fixed together this visible song. This same ‘I’ invites us to find him and fix together his name from the scattered runes. That is to say, Cynewulf asks us as readers to recognise ourselves in him. Like Cynewulf, we as readers are finders and fixers. The wise, fore-thinking person will surely discover that the one who found and fixed together ‘this song’ is not only Cynewulf but also herself or himself. The song is not something original in us, but we can remake its meaning in a collaborative act.

The invitation to recreate Cynewulf by finding him, working out the meaning of each rune and uniting them or fixing them together is analogous to our active involvement in the making and breaking and remaking of poems in the Vercelli Book, whereby we link together verse sequences and work out their connections.

This collaborative act involves both human and nonhuman participants. The physical condition of the Vercelli Book manuscript, and the processes by which it came to that condition, similarly shape the reader's response to its texts. The manuscript consists of 135 parchment leaves, with the sheets normally arranged so that the hair side is outside. Hair and flesh sides are not always easy to distinguish. The parchment itself is 'yellowish, smooth, and somewhat transparent' but holes and faults in the parchment affect the written space on various folios.²¹ These elements of fragility, damage and defect are especially interesting. Sarah Kay has linked the violent processes (flaying, scraping, stretching, drying, stitching, folding) inflicted on the dead animal during the making of parchment manuscripts to the forms of torture endured by the protagonists of many of the texts written on them, contending that the skin of the medieval manuscript could sometimes double as the reader's own skin, having an uncanny effect on her or him, and undermining the categorical demarcation between human beings and other animals.²² Folio 98r. of the Vercelli Book shows stitching where a gash or cut made in the flaying may have opened up and been mended, and folios 64r. and 56r. show unstitched worm holes, while 63r. shows treelike veins which were the result of blood in the skin when the animal died. These are but a few examples of the many marks on the manuscript. When readers of the Vercelli Book encountered such blemishes would they have thought of the bruised and battered body of Christ or the bloody and sweat-drenched rood? If so, they may well have felt a more tangible and immediate connection with these thinglike bodies, these bodylike things, linking them to the stained, veined, torn and stitched skin before them: skin which served as a voice-bearer for the word.

It is well known that echoes and traces of *The Dream of the Rood* (or some song or story resembling it) can be found elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon material culture, beyond the manuscript page. The Brussels Cross is often studied alongside *The Dream of Rood* because its verse inscription includes lines matching some of those found in the poem. Badly damaged and with its once jewelled front missing, it takes the form of a large piece of cross-shaped wood covered with a silver plate. Across the arms, a craftsman has

inscribed his name in large Latin letters: 'Drahmal me worhte' [Drahmal made me]. An inscription around the edges reads: 'Rod is min nama; geo ic ricne cyning bær byfigynde, blod bestemed' [Rood is my name. Trembling once, I bore a powerful king, made wet with blood]. These lines roughly correspond to lines 44 and 48 in *The Dream of the Rood*, stripping the riddling vision and historical narrative of that poem down to its bare essentials and omitting any reference to a dreamer figure. This is followed by a common form of dedication: 'þas rod het Æþmær wyrican and Aðelwold hys beropþo[r] Criste to lofe for Ælfrices saule hyra beropþor' [Æthlmær and Athelwold, his brother, ordered this rood to be made so as to praise Christ for the soul of Ælfric, their brother]. The cross speaks in both the first person and the third, meaning that the epigraphic voice emerges from the material form of the cross yet also seems able to stand apart from its own speech, memory and identity.

In early medieval England, then, a 'poem' can manifest itself in different material forms with different functions. This raises important questions. When and how does a poem become a poem in this period? How do different material things invite different kinds of interaction and interpretation? *The Dream of the Rood*, in its multiple forms, presents us with a speaking 'I' which implicitly refers to itself as a tree, or as a gallows, or as a rood, or as a body. But who or what does this 'I' actually belong to? How is the perceived identity of the speaker altered by media, materials, substance, shape and size? It is one thing to imaginatively engage with a literary dream vision, in which a tree speaks from the pages of a manuscript; it is another thing to hold or kiss a silver and bejewelled cross that claims it once carried the king of heaven; it is another thing again to be confronted with a huge stone monument, speaking as if it were living wood, or a wounded body ...

The thing in Ruthwell

The complicated relationship between *The Dream of the Rood* and the runic poem on the Ruthwell monument is a riddle that has intrigued Anglo-Saxonists for a long time. What to make of the connection between a late tenth-century manuscript poem and a rune-inscribed stone sculpture from the eighth century? It has been difficult to keep these two things together in a sustained and meaningful way. It has been almost impossible to break them apart. As much as they have been drawn to each other across time and space, they have repeatedly asserted their own individual thingness.

Their assembly or meeting has been characterised by friction as well as agreement. It is tricky, therefore, to account for the connection between these two different things. The best explanation may be that 'each makes use of a conventional, probably primarily spoken topos that was widely available as a resource in Anglo-Saxon culture for some considerable time'.²³ Here again, voice acts as a connective glue linking two things that should not function together and yet somehow, sometimes, do. A disjointed poem in a manuscript that is out of place; a demolished, reassembled, mismatched monument; fragmented words that sound similar but do not look alike: it might be that the fragility, brokenness and failure that runs through this meeting offers another, more thematic, way of understanding the relation between the dream vision in the Vercelli Book and the Ruthwell monument. Acknowledging their resistance to straightforward unification (their thing-power) gives us a way of speaking about the two together without forcing them to be the same – providing a means of talking about these things without eroding their autonomy.

The 'spoken topos' which provides the only perceptible link between the Vercelli Book poem and the Ruthwell runes does not amount to much: when the runic inscriptions on the monument are transliterated, transcribed and thus transformed into something resembling a poem, they correspond to less than eighteen lines of the 156-line *Dream of the Rood*.²⁴ More importantly, and more obviously, these runes are but a part of a three-dimensional stone monument and they partake in its other features, such as inhabited vine scroll, biblical scenes, Latin inscriptions and so on. Unlike the poem in the Vercelli Book, our experience of the Ruthwell monument is only partially 'poetic'. This point has been made recently by Orton, Wood and Lees, who remind us that while *The Dream* signals its genre, beginning and ending according to conventional expectations of Old English poetry, utilising figuration, dream vision, frame narratives, the '*sententiae* inscribed on the Ruthwell monument, by contrast, do not announce that they are structured in the form of a poem or as parts of a poem' and 'might be best understood as a hybrid genre'.²⁵ Even if our experience of the Ruthwell runes is a poetic one, it is poetry that breaks off as we start to move our bodies around the four-sided column. Usually, Anglo-Saxon poetry is located on the manuscript page, in a two-dimensional not a three-dimensional space, and 'we can be invited to walk around a poem only in a metaphorical sense'.²⁶

What sort of encounter does the Ruthwell monument offer us, then? How is this experience like or unlike that offered by *The Dream* in the Vercelli Book? Above all, I understand the Ruthwell monument as a thing of tension and paradox. This view has been borne out by my own personal experience of it but also by an examination of its documented history, the written record of which started with a note made in 1599 when Reginald Bainbrigge visited the church of Ruthwell and saw *something* there.²⁷ For me and for many of those who have engaged with and talked about the monument across time, the thing is at once beautiful *and* ugly, balanced *and* broken, fragile *and* enduring. Sometimes this paradoxical quality results from the intentions of the monument's makers (it is multilingual and multi-scripted, it is stone that speaks as if it were living wood); sometimes it is accidental and thingly (the mismatched colour of the stones, the fading runes, the possible shedding of its paint); but most of the time we are witnessing a collaboration, or maybe tussle, between human and nonhuman forces. The agency of this monument comes from its resistance to human knowledge. It makes us think it is a certain kind of thing (tree? beam? rood? wood? flesh? stone? column? cross?) only to then break or fail to act as that thing. This tension, this contradictory character, will inform the way I write about the Ruthwell monument in the pages to follow.

We should start with movement since this is one of the key ways in which one engages with the monument, distinguishing it from the manuscript page. This three-dimensional, four-sided work of stone sculpture has the power to keep human bodies on the move. As part of this kinetic process, it also keeps us guessing. Acts of seeing and then not seeing, speaking and then not speaking, touching and not touching, knowing and not knowing are bound up with this riddle-like game. Voices and images manifest themselves before our senses only to break off again as we turn a corner, asking us to piece disparate parts of the monument together as we move around it. This object has the ability to humble human subjects. It plays on our uncertainty and forces us to confront the fragility of human memory, the smallness and vulnerability of our bodies, the limits and failures of knowledge gained through the senses. We may think back to the dreamer's inability to really know what it is he is envisioning in *The Dream*; but whereas he was lying down while the thing moved and changed and remembered and talked, the reverse is true in the case of the Ruthwell monument, which asks its human viewers to move while it stands still.

The first sort of motion that the monument expects from us is *movement around*. What is it that we perceive as we do so? One of the primary functions of the monument was to ‘invoke a metonymic vision of the Crucifixion arrived at through an understanding of its texts and its images of figures and animals who touch, hold or consume the body of Christ in its multiple forms’.²⁸ There is no opening ‘Hwæt’ here to tell us where to begin our walk around the monument, but wherever we come from, wherever we go, we meet versions of Christ. On the original north side we see vine scroll (see [Figures 5 and 6](#)). This could be the first thing to catch our eye as it fills the centre of this narrow side. The vine scroll is inhabited by birds and beasts who are feeding on bunches of grapes, thus invoking the ancient Middle Eastern concept of the Tree of Life and calling forth eucharistic associations whereby all creation feeds on the true vine and is incorporated into the body of Christ and the universal Christian Church. Surrounding this vine scroll are a series of runic inscriptions, which appear to be describing an almighty god (*god almeittig*) and powerful king (*riicnæ kyninc*) in the third person. Yet we are also presented with a first-person speaker (*ic*) here, who is raising that king but daring not to bow or tilt before being drenched with blood poured from the man’s side. The speaking voice seems to belong to the masculine gallows and yet this gallows is paradoxically referring to itself in the third person (*þa he walde on galgu gistiga*).

The original east side, one of two broad sides, depicts a faded Crucifixion scene on the base. Above this, we see a depiction of the Annunciation, featuring the Archangel Gabriel greeting the Virgin Mary; above, we find Christ healing a blind man; above again, Mary Magdalene is washing Christ’s feet with her tears and drying them with the hair of her head; at the top, Elizabeth is embracing the pregnant Mary. Latin inscriptions, in the Roman alphabet, identify each of these scenes – as they do on the opposite west face. The body of Christ is present (but not necessarily visible) all the way from top to bottom of this side. This is a very different version of that body, however, from the one that we encountered on the narrow side.

Moving around to the original south side, we are once more faced with vine scroll surrounded by runes. This time, the voice unlocked by penetrating the mystery of the runes announces that ‘krist wæs on rodi’. As before, even though it refers to itself in the third person, this voice may belong – or at least partially belong – to



5 The Ruthwell monument, north (now east) side, upper and lower stones: vine scroll and runic inscription (© Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture, photographer T. Middlemass).

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the feminine *rod*, who claims to have been an eyewitness to the events it recounts (*ic þæt al biheald*).

Finally, if we choose to finish here, one comes to the original west face of the column. The base is too worn to identify accurately, but may have been a Nativity scene. Above, we can see a somewhat faint image of Mary, seated on an ass, holding the Christ child in the flight into or out of Egypt; above that two male figures, Paul and Anthony, break a loaf of bread in the desert, evoking the edible body of Christ; then there is the adult Christ being recognised by two beasts, crossing their paws; and at the top, John the Baptist holds or points to the body of the Agnus Dei.

Thus, as we move around the monument we soon become aware that we are moving around a body, amongst other things. That body is both physical and symbolic, present and absent, literal and



6 The Ruthwell monument, north (now east) side, lower stone: vine scroll and runic inscription (© Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture, photographer T. Middlemass).

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mysterious; we can see it, here and there, but must also read it and speak it. The body is broken into bits. On one side, its blood pours forth or drenches us; elsewhere, it is being eaten as fruit or as bread; it is adult in one space but a child in another; unborn within the womb, but then on the verge of death. It is our role, as we move around, to piece these broken bits together. In doing so, we may reach a *deeper* understanding of what the body of Christ means and yet the *surface* of the column prevents us from forming a complete picture – something is always breaking away, something always eludes us. Movement around a four-sided column entails forgetfulness as much as remembrance; and not seeing or not touching or not speaking is a continuous part of this experience. Stand before the east face of the column. Can you remember what is on the west face? It will depend on how much you have committed to memory.

It will depend on the extent to which your memory fails you. Yet, even if you have an eidetic memory, remembering an image is not the same as seeing or touching it in the here and now – eyes detecting shape and colour, flesh feeling stone. When you are looking at eucharistic scenes, you are simultaneously not looking at baptismal ones; when viewing vine scroll, you are not seeing a human body; when reading and speaking the voice of masculine gallows, you are not reading or speaking as the feminine rood. Even as the Ruthwell monument presents the body of Christ to us, it conceals aspects of that body; it is able to keep body parts out of reach, out of memory. We may, in theory, take as much time as we want with this monument, but space is limited.

The other sort of motion that the monument expects from us is *movement up and down*. This is, of course, interconnected with movement around – we are free to pause in our walk from one side of the column to another in order to tilt our heads back or kneel down or simply move our eyes from top to bottom. This type of movement is particularly relevant to our reading of the runes on the narrow sides. On the original north side, for instance, as you read the runes down the right-hand border, you are moving your eyes down the shaft of the column but you are also performing a bowing movement with your body. What is more, the lowermost runes that you read on this right border are *ur* and *gar* or *u* and *g*. This has been reconstructed as the word *buga* in the sentence ‘*buga ic ni dorstæ*’. Hence, as we make a bowing movement with our bodies we read the word ‘bow’ (*buga*). Something similar occurs on the narrow south side, where the final two runes down the right hand border are *hægl* and *ac* or *h* and *a*. This is thought to be a fragment of the word *hnag* in the sentence ‘*hnag ic þam secgum til handa*’. Again, the word we read as we bow down to read it is ‘bow’ or ‘bend’ (*hnag*). The Ruthwell monument is thus an object that not only has the authority to move the human subjects that stand before it, but to humble them.

Even as it humbles us, bringing us low, the monument can raise us high. On the north narrow side, we move our gaze from the runes on the lower right border to those on the upper left border; and there we see the phrase: ‘[ahof] ic riicnæ kyninc’. As we read how a gallows raised a powerful king – or perhaps speak and adopt the ‘I’ ourselves – we move our body from a bent or bowed position to tilt our heads back and strain our necks. As we perform these up and down movements, it is hard not to become aware of our own bodies within space. Whereas our walk around the monument

made us aware that we were moving around a body, this bowing and stretching, crouching, kneeling, lifting, straining, forces us to confront the fragility of our own human bodies. Our movements around the column concealed space from us, emphasising the limits of human knowledge, while our movements up and down emphasise the physical limitations of the human body.

Finally, the monument wants us to *move across* it. For example, if we wish to read the runes on either of the two narrow sides in full, we must move our eyes across the top border, then down the right border, back up to the top of the left border and down. That is to say, we must make cross shapes with our eyes. As we make this movement, we are at the same time reading or speaking about a gallows, or a rood, while also taking in the inhabited vine scroll imagery that flows up, down, across and in loops and knots, partly distracting us from the runes, partly enhancing their meaning. As such, we may glimpse cross shapes but these half-crosses are always merging with other kinds of things.

There is, of course, another cross shape on the Ruthwell monument as it stands today. Whether you are tracing the upward flow of the vine scroll on the narrow sides, or viewing the series of figural images on the broad sides upwards from the base of the shaft, your eyes will eventually alight on the crosshead. Yet can we really perceive this cross? Within the parish church in Ruthwell, the monument stands at about six metres high. If you stand back from it, you can view the crosshead from a distance. But how is one meant to see and read its images, let alone its fragmentary inscriptions? If you stand close to the monument, the central column seems to rise into the air like a ‘syllicre treow on lyft lædan’ but then you must strain your eyes, neck and back even more to try and view the crosshead above you. How can we hope to touch it? Either way, this cross shape is only partially glimpsed. It remains impenetrable, out of reach, always slightly beyond human senses and our means of knowing it. Nor should we forget that this crosshead is a nineteenth-century addition to the monument, designed by Henry Duncan in 1823 to replace a ‘lost’ cross. It is, furthermore, mistakenly reversed. It is a cross that does not quite fit; a cross out of place. This monument allows us to move across it and to half glimpse cross shapes and yet it ultimately fails to be a cross – eluding any attempts to identify and categorise it in this way.

All in all, the Ruthwell monument moves the viewer while continuously hiding something from us. The different kinds of

movements it asks for (around, up and down, across) hint at but evade different ways of identifying this thing. The monument continuously makes those who engage with it aware that it might be one thing (tree? food? body?) but is also always some other thing slightly out of our grasp (rood? cross?). Although the monument invites human bodies to interact with it, it forces us to confront the fragilities of our bodies as we try but repeatedly fail to see, speak, touch and know.

This public sculpture was almost certainly made for a monastic community who, perhaps individually but more probably collectively, may have interacted with the monument in the close-up, multisensory, multilingual and mobile manner I have explored above. Yet this imposing work of stone sculpture can be experienced from a distance too – a significant attribute, given that it was originally erected outdoors.²⁹ For whom would the monumental aspect of this work have been the most important part of it? Alongside the religious, monastic audience of the Ruthwell monument, we must take into account its other audience: the British who were still living in the Solway region in the early Middle Ages. The kingdom of Rheged was an important component part of early Northumbria, though there are difficulties in pinpointing exactly when and where this kingdom existed: Rheged is mentioned in a number of British sources, yet, perhaps unsurprisingly, the name does not appear in Bede or the early ninth-century *Historia Brittonum*. The location of the kingdom and its importance is open to debate, depending on how much credence is given to the evidence of early Welsh poetry. Nevertheless, the place names of present-day Dumfriesshire point to a significant population that continued to distinguish itself from the incoming Anglians, and so the pre-Anglian history of the Solway region should be taken into account when discussing the Ruthwell monument.³⁰ Orton, Wood and Lees highlight that fact that even a British person literate in the Latin alphabet and language is unlikely to have been able to read the Old English runes on the narrow sides of the monument.³¹ Karkov has similarly picked up on the inability of the British population to decipher all the inscriptions on the monument, and the alternative meanings that this could have created for that group.³² In both of these studies, the authors come to the logical conclusion that, to the British, the Ruthwell monument might have functioned as a symbol of aggression, an intimidating and imposing thing assembled and forcibly inserted into the land, its display of distinctly Anglian runes an affront to the British.

Even though the British of the Solway region had been dominated by the incoming Anglo-Saxons, does this mean that this group was excluded from engaging with the Ruthwell monument? We have seen how even an intimate interaction with this monument entailed elements of obscurity, concealment and unknowing. Can runes still speak without being read and unlocked? What do they speak of? They might suggest violence, given that runes were designed to be cut, carved or scratched into the bodies of things dead and not dead.³³ They could also speak of permanence, the irremovable. What does the stubborn muteness of this monument signify? What about the bluntness of its sheer size and stability? Power? Control? Arrogance? While the British may have been kept away from the monument – whether because of physical distance or lack of literary and interpretative power – there is more than one way to ‘read’ this thing. While it goes against scholarly tendencies, we need not privilege the detail or intricacy of this monument at all. What if the highly visible nature of this beacon was its primary function? This column, probably painted in technicolour, perhaps decorated to resemble precious metalwork, must have had the power to dazzle and intimidate onlookers from far away. For the British, this immovable pillar may well have evoked the brightly and boldly adorned bodies of those Anglo-Saxon warriors who had seized control of their region. A striking and colourful, but aggressive and alien, thing inserted into the land can communicate loud and clear even before one scrutinises its iconography. And the British would have seen something very different to what we see today – not an old, broken, obscure, fading thing but maybe a metallic and painted, shining and glittering shaft, shockingly new, unambiguous in its message and confident of its own durability, as capable of keeping human viewers away as it was of drawing them towards it.³⁴ This is another of the Ruthwell monument’s paradoxical qualities, then. Stillness, solidity and stability could be as crucial as movement to the way it was experienced.

Indeed, the monument plays on the tensions and contrasts created by its own materiality. It simultaneously presents itself to us as unyielding *and* emotional, fragile *and* enduring. As noted, the north side of the column is inscribed with the voice of a masculine *galgu* which describes a scene of wounding and death as it is ‘miþ blodi bist[e]mi[d]’ [drenched with blood] begotten from Christ’s right side. If we move around to the original south side, however, a transformation occurs and the inscribed voice now belongs to a feminine *rod*. As well as shifting gender, the wood has undergone

a change from death-bearing gallows to life-bearing rood. This change is catalysed by the body of Christ, now hanging from the gallows, now rising on the rood. It is a change that stirs both the voice of the wood and its emotional life as it relates how ‘saræ ic wæs miþ sorgum gidræfid’ [I was sorely afflicted with sorrows]. This emotional response, expressed in a feminine voice, links the wood with another human body, that of the sorrowing Mary.³⁵ In one dynamic movement from north to south, we have speech, transformation and emotion. But who or what is doing the talking here? The possibilities are somewhat confusing and contradictory. For a start, some lines are in the third person (e.g. ‘geredæ hinæ god almeittig þa hewalde on galgu gistiga’ and ‘krist wæs on rodi’) while others are in the first person (e.g. ‘hælda ic ni dorstæ’ and ‘saræ ic wæs ...’). An effect of the third-person voice is to distance the human who reads it. So should we speak it? Neither is it clear who owns the first-person voice and who should speak it. Am I the ‘I’ or is it the ‘I’? Can the human who performs and speaks the ‘I’ for a moment and then moves on claim ownership of it? This could be interpreted as an imposition. Can a man speak the rood? Can a woman speak the gallows? Does the voice really belong to the absent wood of the historical cross? Alternatively, it might belong to the solidly present stone that bears the voice and will still bear it long after talkative men and women have fallen silent. This is one way of comprehending it, to be sure. The stone is performing as some other thing: a lifeless yet enduring material paradoxically speaking as if it were fragile yet lively; a hard, blunt substance recalling its emotional suffering.

From an anthropocentric perspective, the nature of stone seems to be at odds with this vibrant moment of transformation and emotion. Why would stone speak as if it were a rood or a body? Would not the wood of a tree that once grew greenly in the forest, or the bone of a once sentient and lively animal, have worked better? I would suggest that we should, in fact, reflect on the tension created here and the effects of that tension. Just as we encounter the body of Christ as we walk around the monument, the voices that speak from the two narrow sides evoke the transformative power of the Saviour and His crucifixion. The apparent inanimacy and immutability of the stone emphasises this power, this miraculous ability to turn death into life. Stone is the limit case here. Stone stretches that transformative power to the point of failure. It works because it almost does not work. How can stone, of all things, talk and change and feel? This point

is accentuated when one thinks about those missing medieval elements of the modern monument – colourful paint and metallic effects, possibly, but maybe also a relic of the True Cross contained within the hole at the centre of the Annunciation panel.³⁶ If so, this dead stone would have borne the body, as well as the voice, of living wood; and in turn that living wood would have vitalised the stone. Such additions, when set against inert stone, would have intensified the contrast between fragility and endurance, sentience and insentience, life and death, facilitating the imaginative change undergone by those who interacted with the Ruthwell monument, deepening their understanding of what Christ's sacrifice truly meant.

The runes, too, play a part in this process. Those on the narrow sides of the monument are difficult to read, in more ways than one. They stand in contrast to the Latin inscriptions on the broad sides, which are written in an impersonal voice in the third person and set out in a straightforward manner so that 'any literate religious man or woman would have had little trouble either reading them or understanding their meaning'.³⁷ The runes are a different matter, trickier and more complex. On a monument that also displays Roman and Greek alphabets, this runic lettering seems to draw attention to itself as a different sort of script, one that carried arcane and archaic associations even for the Anglo-Saxons who cut and carved it. The rune masters who engraved these symbols into wood or bone or stone were elevated and celebrated for their singular skilfulness, their talent carrying connotations of literacy, mastery and maybe even magic.³⁸ Interpreting runes was no easy feat, either. Even if you had committed their shapes and names and sounds to memory, the runic characters on the Ruthwell monument are generally smaller and less distinct than those of the Roman alphabet on the broad sides. What is more, while the language of the runes is vernacular Old English, it is a poetic kind of language and this 'poem' is broken up by the corners of the column. The British would have been unable to decode these runes, but many members of an Anglo-Saxon audience would have likewise found their interpretive skills tested by them.

The various difficulties of the runes force us to stop, hesitate, look, speak, perhaps stutter, misread, mispronounce, try once more, fail, try another time, pause, wait, look closer, deeper, reach out ... Whatever we do, it is hard to simply pass the runes by. They create a break in our movements around or across or up and down and slow down time while we attempt to perceive them. All the

while, we are gazing on stone, maybe touching it, and recognising its thingness, even as we are slowly reading or hearing or speaking the voice of a living tree-gallows-rood. Again, a contrast is brought forth. There is, on the one hand, a 'poetic coherence' to the runic inscriptions, and this 'patterning of language, which is not obvious unless the runes are read aloud (and thus formalised), seems to have some relation of association with the structure of the inhabited plant-scroll, its rhythm, the way it moves to the left and the right, and marks those moves with different forms of flora and fauna'.³⁹ But this is only the case when the runes are read aloud without difficulty or failure. On the other hand, we have a hesitancy which is linked to the problematic visual appearance of the runes. This does not flow upwards and downwards, side to side, with the flora and fauna of the vine scroll, but instead dwells on the slowness, stubbornness and depth of stone. As is well known, the OE word *run* connoted more than runic characters or inscriptions; it could also mean mystery, secret or whispered counsel.⁴⁰ Both medieval and modern audiences sense that the runes are mysteries to be penetrated, that the runic characters are hiding something within or beneath themselves; and in order to access this *something* we do not flow with vine scroll but delve deeper into the stone. Whereas (most of) the runes on the Franks Casket were carved in relief, and thus emerged from the darkness of the bone box, the runes on the Ruthwell monument are incised, retreating into the material from which the column has been constructed.

We may experience an imaginative change as we take on, and maybe hear others take on, the voices inscribed on the Ruthwell monument. Yet at the same time that we try to penetrate the runic mysteries, we are confronted by inexorable stone. This further confounds human attempts to identify this monument as one thing or another, slowing down time and forcing us to instead ruminate on the tension between fragility and endurance, with the nonhuman actors in this collaborative performance shaping our conception of what it means to transform and be transformed.

The potency of this effect has changed across the ages as the Ruthwell monument has shifted from painted pillar to dull, faded column. We do not really know what the monument looked like in the early Middle Ages but we can be sure that it looked different to the way it looks now. As Jane Hawkes points out, even the application of paint could highlight details and make them easier to decipher and yet in that act 'definition is imposed and defined; by applying colour, decisions concerning the meaning

and the presentation of that meaning, are implemented'.⁴¹ For an early medieval viewer, the Ruthwell runes may have been sharper, clearer and simpler to see and to read. Today, however, those runes are fragmented, worn away, lost. In the eighth century, the stoniness of the column could have been overlooked more easily; today, we cannot fail to recognise and acknowledge it. Painted texts and images have returned to stone carvings. Gradually, as time goes by, the stone is reasserting its thingness ...

And so, when writing about the Ruthwell monument in our time, one has a duty to talk with and about the lithic. As shown in [Chapter 2](#), stone may not be as solid, as stark, as still, as enduring as humans tend to assume. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has recently challenged some of these cultural truths by exploring the life of stone and following its matter energy. Cohen recognises that 'Durability is the reason we short-lived humans construct walls, pyramids and memorials by use of quarries. Stone seems an uncomplicated material, instantly and bluntly knowable.' There is something very real about the 'comforting solidity' of stone and this 'reality' is not infinitely pliable, so that we cannot, for instance, 'squeeze water from a rock because we "socially construct" the lithic as aqueous'. However, the permanence of stone is also a quality that humans desire from it, representing some ability or power we wish for ourselves. This does not, however, 'mean that stones are so immobile that they will not reveal their fluid tendencies when viewed in a nonhuman historical frame'. Cohen is attempting to be both scientific ('from a deep history perspective all stone moves and changes') and attentive to the insights of medieval writers, for whom inanimate stones were rather alien.⁴² He refers to high medieval lapidaries, such as that of Marbode of Rennes, to make this point; but there is also evidence within Old English texts for the animacy and agency of stone.

Andreas (another Vercelli Book poem) has St Andrew encounter a stone column: 'He be wealle geseah wundrum fæste / under sælwage sweras unlytle, / stapulas standan storme bedrifene, / eald enta geweorc' [He saw by a wall, firmly fixed, standing under the side of the building, some great columns, storm-beaten pillars, the old work of giants] (1492–5). Whereas in line 87 of *The Wanderer* the old work of giants is said to stand idle ('eald enta geweorc idlu stodon'), St Andrew speaks to the stone and expects it to respond. The saint 'wið anne þæra, / mihtig ond modrof, mædel gehede, / wis, wundrum gleaw, word stunde ahof' [mighty and bold-minded, held a meeting with one there, wise and clear-sighted, at once raised a word] (1495–7). He addresses the stone in the second person and

commands it to listen to the counsel of God: ‘Geher ðu, marmanstan, meotudes rædum’ [You, marble stone, hear the measurer’s counsel!] (1498). Once the *marmanstan* has heard what Andrew has to say it does indeed react. And so this ancient work, this dead thing of bygone days, springs into life: ‘Næs þa wordlatu wihte þon mare, / þæt se stan togan. Stream ut aweoll, / fleow ofer foldan; famige walcan / mid ærdæge eorðan þehton, / myclade mereflod’ [There was not then a whit more time wasted on words before the stone split open. A stream welled out and flowed over the fields. Foamy billows drenched the earth by dawn, and the torrent grew greater] (1522–6). This passage suggests that Anglo-Saxon writers grasped something about stone – its potential for both permanence and action, endurance and liveliness – that new materialists and ecotheorists are now exploring afresh.

When we learn how to recognise it, then, the life story of stone (its deep history, how humans found, formed, sculpted, inscribed it, how we broke it, intentionally or accidentally, how it broke itself, how it endured for spaces of time yet refused to stay the same, transformed itself, returned to its former self) has, does and will shape our experience of the Ruthwell monument. Yes, the stoniness of this column has allowed it to endure across the ages while other, timber monuments have long since rotted away. But that does not mean that this work of stone has stayed the same across time. That thing in the church at Ruthwell is habitually referred to as a cross, whether a ‘high cross’ or ‘preaching cross’. In one sense, the monument is indeed a cross; but within its stony being it also contains that latency and excess that is characteristic of all things. This thing is both more and less than a cross; it remembers its deep past and anticipates its distant future. Although the Ruthwell monument was never a ‘living’ creature like the whale of the Franks Casket, it does carry traces of a vibrant former life that had nothing to do with Christian crosses. This former life carries us outside of religious categories such as Christian and pagan, or minute historical divisions between, say, the medieval and modern, and into the realm of vast geological time frames, all the way back to the Carboniferous age. The pale pinkish-grey lower stone of the monument is a quartz-rich, medium-grained, mica-free, not obviously lamented sandstone; the pale red upper stone is also a quartz-rich, medium-grained sandstone, but is less well sorted compared to the lower stone and its reddened hue is due to the introduction of iron oxide that coated the grains at the moment when they were cemented and compacted together. Both stones

are likely to be Carboniferous sandstone of the Northumberland–Solway Basin.⁴³ As well as demonstrating that the stone monument in Ruthwell had an autonomous life outside of the historical narratives in which we try to embed it, elements of its deeper past also affect the way that we respond to this thing as a work of art. For instance, the uniformity of grain sizes of the lower stone identify it as a ‘prime piece of building stone’ and an ‘excellent stone for sculpture’.⁴⁴ Just as the whale and its bone shaped the look and feel of the Franks Casket, the kind of stone that offered itself to Anglo-Saxon builders, sculptors and carvers in the Solway region at once restricted and enabled the art they could produce.

Some of us, sometimes, will experience the Ruthwell monument as a fine, visually and verbally pleasing artefact, a well-designed and well-executed work of art, which has retained its ability to move us. But it is now thought likely that the monument had more than one moment of production. It first took its monumental – as opposed to rocky, amorphous – shape in the eighth century, but was possibly augmented in the ninth century or later. Material and pictorial inconsistencies between the upper and lower stones, as well as deviations between the inscriptions, may be taken for evidence of at least two historically and culturally different communities and moments of production.⁴⁵ As such, the Ruthwell monument ‘was always and remains today a monument in process’.⁴⁶ The processes endured and provoked by the Ruthwell monument complicate its artistic appeal, however. We must concede that the monument we see today is surely less balanced and symmetrical than it once was, after Scottish Reformers toppled it and smashed it up in 1642 following the issuing of the *Act anent Idolatrous Monuments in Ruthwell*. In truth, the terms ‘toppling’ and ‘smashing’ may sound overly dramatic in comparison to what really went on, for it seems that Gavin Young (minister at Ruthwell from 1617 to 1671) ‘demolished’ the monument with ‘no more and no less damage than he could get away with’. In any case, this act did alter the Ruthwell monument irreversibly, did break it, unbalance it, spoil its symmetry. Although the ‘toppling’ of the monument might not have been as violent and vehement an act as is casually assumed, it was, nonetheless, an act of iconoclasm that changed the column from one thing to another. The term ‘iconoclasm’ cannot account for everything that went on in and around 1642, but its connotations of breaking or destroying images are pertinent here – for this was one of the steps that helped transform the pillar from a series of (perhaps painted and coloured) texts and images to blocks of

bare stone. In defacing its 'idolatrous' images, Young also brought out its latent stoniness.

The life of this stone thing did not end here, though. As with the things in *The Dream of the Rood*, this 'death' eventually reinvigorated and reinvented it. It lay broken in two, suddenly fragile and a far cry from the imposing pillar that had spoken of Anglian dominance and British subjugation, in Murray's Quire, before the massive lower stone was brought out of the quire in the eighteenth century and left lying in the garden of the manse near the church. It was in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that the Reverend Henry Duncan reassembled the monument in the form we see it today. In 1802 he brought the lower stone and surviving fragments of the upper stone together and erected them in the garden of the manse. In 1823, unable to find the 'missing' transom, Duncan commissioned a local mason to make a replacement. In this reconstruction, Duncan mistakenly placed the fragment above the transom, the apex of the cross, the wrong way round. Did this turn the Ruthwell monument into an artistic failure? For Ó Carragáin, 'apart from this small error, Duncan convincingly reconstructed the cross: a remarkable achievement' for which he 'deserves the gratitude of every student of the Ruthwell Cross'.⁴⁷ For Orton, Wood and Lees, the 'Ruthwell Cross' as we see it is 'an inelegant thing' and what passes as reconstruction 'is actually an awkward mixture of five carved and inscribed Anglo-Saxon stones and six vulgar blocks of convenience from the nineteenth century (one of which is no more than a wedge) cemented together with crude pointing that here and there serves as modelling'.⁴⁸ Ó Carragáin focuses on the meticulousness of the nineteenth-century transom designed and commissioned by Duncan, praising it as a fine work of art in itself, whereas Orton, Wood and Lees are keen to draw our attention to the vulgar blocks and mere wedges of the reconstruction, half suggesting that such mundane, unadorned materials do not belong in an artwork.

Thus, the post-medieval life of the stone monument altered what modern scholars can think and say about the quality of its production, too. What use is it, then? What is the Ruthwell monument for and what does it do? For Tilghman:

If we are to fold the logic of the riddles into our thinking, the Ruthwell Cross speaks *either* of its virtual existence as the Cross *and* of the sand, the rock, the chisels, the paint, the rituals, the destruction, the excavation, the renovation, and, yes, the scholarly fetishization that make up its being.⁴⁹

The existing monument does tell us a good deal about early medieval Northumbria. Some of the messages it delivers from that place of the past are no doubt what its makers intended (the mystery of the body of Christ, the narrative of the Crucifixion) and so we can say that they chose the right material, in stone, to convey those ideas to a distant future. Some of what the monument says about the Solway region in the early Middle Ages may not be exactly what those makers intended but is what modern historians want to know (regarding relations between Anglo-Saxons and British, for instance). The monument also carries stories from beyond its initial moments of production (stories about the Scottish Reformation or about nineteenth-century antiquarianism).

Yet something else is going on, as well; some thingly, stony story that we struggle to grasp and cannot control has been slowly emerging over time. Any original gesso and colourful paint that might have covered the monument has now flaked away, revealing the mismatched hues of the lower and upper stone, discarding human attempts to obscure the former life of this thing and instead displaying another sort of narrative, about the process of its making: the quarrying and building and sculpting that went on before it could be called 'finished'. The runes are fading or lost altogether, making it ever more difficult to connect the Ruthwell verses to the *Dream of the Rood* and yet forcing us to become more reliant on the later poem if we wish to read the monument. Across the centuries, decoration has fallen from the stone while inscribed words have retreated into it. It is as if this thing of stone is at once discarding and absorbing the human messages that have clung onto it. It is enduring but progressively failing to convey meaning as human beings intended.⁵⁰ This is partly the fault of humans (the conditions we kept the monument in, our alternating acts of destruction and preservation) and partly nonhuman defiance (stone will only put up with so much before it sheds its adornments, before it fades and crumbles when exposed to weather and contact and time). We may wish to make the most of this fragility, brokenness and failure, for the 'bare stone seen by the modern viewer is, in effect, a text that allows for ambiguity that can be exploited by the modern iconographer' and when 'reading such stone it is possible to read all the details, and to read them as having potentially equal significance' so that all readings are simultaneously possible.⁵¹ But for how long will this attractive ambiguity last? For how much longer will humans be able to exploit it? When will the damaged stone retreat into utter nonsense? The stone is withdrawing from us all the time.

It seems to want to return to that rocky amorphousness that has more to say about prehistory than history, about a prehuman past prior to columns and crosses. Will the stone cease to function as a monument altogether? And will it not break further and further away from the manuscript poem until no one can remember why these two things were put together in the first place?

Notes

- 1 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, pp. 23–4.
- 2 See Fred Orton, 'Rethinking the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Monuments: Some Strictures on Similarity; Some Questions of History', in Catherine E. Karkov and Fred Orton (eds), *Theorizing Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2003), pp. 65–92, at 87.
- 3 Swanton, *English Poetry before Chaucer*, p. 105. A more extensive discussion can be found in Peter Orton, 'The Technique of Object-Personification in *The Dream of the Rood* and a Comparison with the Old English Riddles', *Leeds Studies in English*, 11 (1980), 1–15.
- 4 Murphy, *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles*, pp. 36–7.
- 5 References to the text are taken from George P. Krapp (ed.), *The Vercelli Book*, ASPR 2 (London: Routledge, 1932). Translations are mine.
- 6 TDOE.
- 7 Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 326–7.
- 8 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, pp. xiii–xv.
- 9 Ramey, 'Writing Speaks', p. 348.
- 10 Carol Braun Pasternack, 'Stylistic Disjunctions in *The Dream of the Rood*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 13 (1984), 167–86, at 179.
- 11 See Pasternack, 'Stylistic Disjunctions', p. 177.
- 12 Lines 8–10; 20–3; 30–4; 39; 40b–43; 46–9; 59–70 of *The Dream* are all hypermetric.
- 13 Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, p. 328.
- 14 Pasternack, 'Stylistic Disjunctions', p. 172.
- 15 See Karkov, *Art of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 153–65.
- 16 Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, p. 328.
- 17 Details and references to the Vercelli Book are taken from the following facsimile: Celia Sisam (ed.), *The Vercelli Book: A Late Tenth-Century Manuscript Containing Prose and Verse*, *Vercelli Biblioteca capitulare CXVII* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1976). A concise overview is also provided by Elaine Treharne, 'Manuscript Sources of Old English Poetry', in Gale Owen-Crocker (ed.), *Working with Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2009), pp. 89–111.
- 18 Pasternack, *Textuality of Old English Poetry*, pp. 1–8, 148.

- 19 See Charles D. Wright, 'More Old English Poetry in Vercelli Homily XXI', in Elaine M. Treharne, Susan Rosser and D. G. Scragg (eds), *Early Medieval Texts and Interpretations: Studies Presented to Donald G. Scragg* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2002), pp. 245–62.
- 20 TDOE.
- 21 See the physical description in Sisam, *The Vercelli Book*, pp. 17–18.
- 22 Sarah Kay, 'Original Skin: Flaying, Reading, and Thinking in the Legend of Saint Bartholomew and Other Works', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 36:1 (2006), 35–74; and Sarah Kay, 'Legible Skins: Animals and the Ethic of Medieval Reading', *Postmedieval*, 2:1 (2011), 13–32.
- 23 Orton and Wood with Lees, *Fragments of History*, p. 167.
- 24 This is not exactly a 'word-for-word' correspondence; but the Ruthwell runes do sound similar to lines 39–49 and 56–64 of *The Dream of the Rood*.
- 25 Orton and Wood with Lees, *Fragments of History*, p. 166.
- 26 Ibid., p. 146.
- 27 See Bainbrigg's note, British Library MS Cotton Julius VI, folio 352, first published by R. I. Page, 'An Early Drawing of the Ruthwell Cross', *Medieval Archaeology*, 3 (1959), 285–8.
- 28 Karkov, *Art of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 138.
- 29 Orton and Wood with Lees, *Fragments of History*, p. 55.
- 30 Ibid., pp. 121–4.
- 31 Ibid., p. 124.
- 32 Karkov, *Art of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 145.
- 33 For the various ways of cutting runes, see Page, *Introduction to English Runes*, pp. 40–1; for the association between cutting, writing and violence, see Frantzen, 'Writing the Unreadable *Beowulf*'.
- 34 This reading of the monument is informed by some of Jane Hawkes's observations in 'Reading Stone', in Karkov and Orton (eds), *Theorizing Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*, pp. 5–30.
- 35 Karkov, 'Naming and Renaming', in Karkov and Orton (eds), *Theorizing Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*, p. 46.
- 36 See Karkov, *Art of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 145.
- 37 Ibid., p. 144.
- 38 Page, *Introduction to English Runes*, pp. 115–16.
- 39 Orton and Wood with Lees, *Fragments of History*, p. 147.
- 40 The etymology of the word 'rune' in Old English, Old Norse and related Germanic languages is discussed by Martin Findell, *Runes* (London: British Museum Press, 2014), pp. 8–9.
- 41 Hawkes, 'Reading Stone', p. 28. In 1999–2000 the Manchester Museum, University of Manchester, recoloured a cast of the Ruthwell monument drawing on evidence surviving from other sculptures, manuscript illuminations and metalwork. Images of this coloured cast

can be viewed online at <http://poppy.nsms.ox.ac.uk/woruldhord/contributions/369>.

42 Cohen, 'Stories of Stone', 56–63. Cohen revisits these arguments in his book *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*.

43 See Orton and Wood with Lees, *Fragments of History*, pp. 40–1.

44 Ibid.

45 See Orton, 'Rethinking the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Monuments', in Karkov and Orton (eds), *Theorizing Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*, pp. 65–92. See also Orton and Wood with Lees, *Fragments of History*, pp. 40–7.

46 Karkov, 'Naming and Renaming', p. 35.

47 Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 17, 19.

48 Orton and Wood with Lees, *Fragments of History*, p. 39.

49 Tilghman, 'On the Enigmatic Nature of Things', p. 34.

50 Cf. Ingold, *Being Alive*, pp. 26–7.

51 Hawkes, 'Reading Stone', pp. 27–8.