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# Draumkvedet and the Medieval English Dream Vision: A Study of Genre

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*Draumkvedet* and the Medieval English Dream Vision: A Study of Genre

A Thesis

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by

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## Abstract

The Medieval English dream vision evidence influences from a variety of earlier vision literature, notably the apocalyptic vision and narrative dream. Philosophical visions by Plato, Cicero and Boethius, and Christian revelations of John and Paul contain traits that found their way into the dream poems by Langland, the *Pearl* poet and Chaucer. The Norwegian ballad *Draumkvedet* exhibits features that mirror these English visions. Notable characteristics pertaining to the character of the dreamer, the interplay between dreamer and dream, imagery of the vision, and structure, point to a common set of generic influences. Comparing *Draumkvedet* with its English counterparts demonstrates that they stem from the same tradition. *Draumkvedet* bares special resemblance to the *Dream of the Rood*, *Piers Plowman* and *Pearl* in its exploration of Christian doctrine and its appeal to the audience.

Key Words: *Draumkvedet*, *Piers Plowman*, *Pearl*, *Dream of the Rood*, dream vision, structure, dreamer, dream, abstraction, spiritual quest.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

In its home country, the vision of Olav Åsteson is considered a literary treasure, although nothing has been established for certain about its author or the historical context of its origination. Since it was first written down in the 1840s, scholars have attempted to identify *Draumkvedet*'s<sup>1</sup> age through analyses of the poem's language, imagery and theological content. The latter provides perhaps the most valuable clue; the Catholic authorities St. Michael and the Virgin Mary and the purgatorial scenes indicate not only a pre-Reformation origin but more specifically a time between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries when visions of the afterlife were widely popular.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the ballad's elements from Norse mythology, such as the "Gjallar Bridge" and the name of the devil, "Grutte Greybeard" suggest that Norse mythological concepts were still a significant cultural influence at the time of its origination. In the light of this, most modern scholars date *Draumkvedet* around A.D 1300.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that the poem was transmitted orally, presumably from the Middle Ages to the mid-19th century, means that several written versions exist today, all transcribed by different scholars who based their editions on various oral sources. Various individuals in the Telemark region in Norway knew parts or different versions of *Draumkvedet* as it had been transmitted to them by their ancestors. The transcriptions differ from each other in terms of vocabulary and length, but the more detailed versions all feature a similar epic structure; as Gudleiv Bø points out, the frame to Olav's vision and seminal episodes of the dream itself are so frequent in the

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<sup>1</sup> The poem's title literally means "dream song," but *kved* is also, as Michael Barnes points out, sometimes used for "ballad" or "poem" (85).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Kathryn Lynch, pp. 1-4.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Gudleiv Bø pp. 21-28, and Barnes pp. 85-105 for overviews of historical scholarship on *Draumkvedet*.

different versions that the characteristics can be considered integral to the archetypal<sup>4</sup> *Draumkvedet* (14). The characteristics of the dreamer and the seminal episodes of the vision constitute the skeleton of M. B. Landstad's, Olav Grasber's and Jørgen Moe's transcriptions from the 1840s. The version used for this study, a transcription by Moltke Moe from the 1890s, is also representative of the main versions in terms of the generic qualities that pertain to this discussion.<sup>5</sup>

Studies on *Draumkvedet*'s relation to the dream vision genre is scarce. Scholars have mainly looked for possible immediate sources in order to reach conclusions about the time and place of *Draumkvedet*'s origin. Moe proposed a connection to the Icelandic *Sólarljóð* in the *Older Edda* and the twelfth century Irish *Vision of Tundale*, and Sophus Bugge considered a second Irish vision, the *Vision of Thurkill*, as possible source for the Norwegian vision. However, the connection between *Draumkvedet* and the Icelandic and Irish visions is tenuous, and the studies by Moe and Bugge do not consider the poem as an example of dream vision with roots in the broad tradition. *Draumkvedet*'s place in the dream vision tradition is by no scholar taken further than Moe's recognition that the poem is of the type of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Considering *Draumkvedet* as an example of dream vision can reveal generic elements that have previously been overlooked. A genre based approach brings to light compositional and structural features otherwise missed, and thus makes a fuller, more comprehensive reading of Olav's dream possible.

*Draumkvedet*'s form and content allow for a comparison with broadly recognized examples of the medieval dream vision. The character of the dreamer, the occasion for the

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<sup>4</sup> Barnes considers the possibility that *Draumkvedet* could have been several related ballads, and that an urtext of the poem never existed. However, he also points out that all the major episodes reoccur in more than one variant (101).

<sup>5</sup> In his comparison of various versions of the poem, Knut Liestøl asserts that "Moe's text, in fact, contains everything that there is cogent reason to ascribe to *Draumkvedet*" (33).

dream, and the nature of the vision are similar from one vision to the next. The dreamer is characteristically in some state of sinfulness or melancholy; the dream is then a response to the visionary's reality; and the vision allows him to undergo an imaginational or spiritual development so that his perspective is changed after the dream experience. These characteristics, all discernible in the medieval English and Norwegian dream visions, have their precedents in a tradition that overreaches epochal and geographic boundaries.<sup>6</sup> Philosophical visions by Plato, Cicero and Boethius as well as theological visions such as the Revelation of John and *St. Paul's Apocalypse* contain individual features that reappear in subsequent visions. In *Draumkvedet* and its English contemporaries the influences from these precursors are important; the similarities that exist are thus manifestations of the strong link between individual visions and the greater dream vision tradition.

As a theological vision, *Draumkvedet* demonstrates particular similarities with the English Christian visions, in particular the *Dream of the Rood*, *Pearl*, and *Piers Plowman*. Their common eschatological content points to a close relationship based on specific common influences. While Olav's vision shares some characteristics of the apocalypse in the tradition of *Thurkill* and the *Tundale* its main emphasis is not on otherworldly punishment, but on the prospect of mercy. In this, the Norwegian poem resembles the subgenre of the "spiritual quest" presented in *Piers* and *Pearl*;<sup>7</sup> these poems offer a gradual ascent from the earthly to a spiritual perception which aims to lead the dreamer and the reader or listener towards a heightened sense

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<sup>6</sup> That *Draumkvedet* was influenced by other visionary poems is highly probable, considering both the popularity of the genre and the cultural exchange taking place between Norway, Britain and continental Europe in the Middle Ages. Henry G. Leach describes the diplomatic and literary interests of king Hákon Hákonarson's in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century and the resulting influx of literature, both ecclesiastic and worldly (18-20). The *Vision of Tundale* illustrates the popularity of the vision genre in medieval Europe. It was, as Eileen Gardiner points out, translated into at least twelve languages, and also found its way to the Scandinavian countries (14).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Barbara Nolan, pp. 148-149, and below, pp. 32-33, for a definition of the spiritual quest as a subgenre of the medieval dream vision.



of spirituality. These visions are thus occasions for perceptual development not only on the part of the dreamer, but also of his audience.

## Chapter 2

### Vision and Frame

#### The Frame of the Vision

Framing Olav's vision is both an introduction provided by a third person and a prologue narrated by the dreamer himself. In the introduction, the singer<sup>8</sup> invites the audience to listen to the experiences of Olav Åsteson and describes the setting in which Olav first told his dream. Stanzas 1-6 and 52 refer to Olav in third person, providing the listener with a framework which, by introducing the dreamer and the circumstances surrounding the vision, validates the authenticity of the enclosed narrative. The primary function of this frame, particularly the six opening stanzas, is twofold: it establishes the singer as a trustworthy mediator of Olav's dream, and it assures the listener of the event's authenticity regardless of the time or place of its reiteration. The introduction of *Draumkvedet* recounts the scene of the dream-event in such a way that the audience can visualize the circumstances and become new witnesses to the revelation of the dream. The reestablishment of the original scene of the dreamer in the church entrance thus provides a parallel to the singer-audience relationship. The congregation originally listening to Olav's account is now the audience hearing the singer's report, and the singer is a reincarnation of the visionary.

While the introduction adds to the listener's understanding of the narration to come, the last stanza of *Draumkvedet*, also from the perspective of the singer, recounts the description of stanza six, adding the indication that Olav Åsteson finished his account here. The frame and the embedded vision shift between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> person narrative, with the effect of the introducer adopting the voice, or perspective, of the dreamer. This shift of perspective from reporter to

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<sup>8</sup> Throughout the discussion of *Draumkvedet*, I will refer to the presenter as *singer* as the identity of the poet is unknown.

dreamer suggests that the ensuing account is truthful. The singer, by becoming Olav, purports to demonstrate his absolute loyalty to the original account.

The third person narration framing the vision is characteristic of early apocalyptical visions. The Revelation of John, *St. Paul's Apocalypse* and *St. Peter's Apocalypse* are introduced by mediators with no immediate connection to the dream or dreamer. Medieval English apocalypses, such as *Tundale* and *Thurkill*, are written in the third person entirely, and the mediators here do not present themselves as first hand witnesses of the events. J. Stephen Russell points out that the function of a framework by a third person is a convention of such ecstatic visions; the mediator appears as one who could "investigate and guarantee the validity of the vision," if questioned (44). The third person narrator of *Draumkvedet* establishes the dream as genuine primarily through the detailed outline of the events surrounding it.

As in the Revelation of John, the introduction in *Draumkvedet* establishes the notion that the vision is of consequence to the life of the listener. The prologue to the Revelation contains an appeal to "the man who reads" and to "those who listen." The listener who respects the revelation will be "happy," as the apocalypse is imminent (1:3). A similar message, voiced by the singer in stanza one and by the visionary in stanza six, announces Olav's vision. Here too, appeals to the listener emphasize the fundamental significance of the coming revelation. In both visions, the introductions are in the present tense and are thus directed to ever new audiences.

As in the Revelation, the frame to *Draumkvedet* thus places the vision in a timeless context, the invocation being directed towards ever new audiences to come.

The first six stanzas of *Draumkvedet*, apart from introducing the Dreamer and the establishing trust, present central images and ideas that anticipate Olav's dream. Olav's reaction after waking up from his ecstatic dream indicates its profound effect. There is, however, no

explicit information about the occasion for the vision. The information that he “lay down on Christmas Eve,/ And fell into deep sleep,” remains unelaborated and seemingly insignificant (2). Nevertheless, Olav’s actions after waking up are remarkable and important to our understanding of the dreamer and his account. Olav gains credibility because the singer portrays him as a man of integrity and courage. His courage is a particularly prominent characteristic which plays a central role in Olav’s vision. Stanzas 4 and 5, in which the singer tells about Olav hastening to church and interrupting the priest’s reading, are especially interesting. The protagonist’s unwavering, candid response to the dream indicates not only how taken Olav is by his experience, but also the significance he attaches to it. The confidence and intensity communicated in these stanzas ensure the listener’s initial interest in the dreamer and his tale.

The dreamer’s prologue confirms Olav’s personality as it was established in the introduction, and it indicates the troubling nature of the dreamer’s journey in the otherworld. The introduction has positioned Olav sitting in the doorway of the church, and the singer takes on the role of the dreamer in the listener’s imagination. Olav offers a prologue to his dream in stanzas 7-15, revealing in general terms where he has been and the physical and emotional effect the visionary experience has had on him. The outline he presents, “I have been up with the clouds/ And down at the sea of darkness,” indicates the route of his spiritual pilgrimage (8). Olav repeats this general description with varying terminology, adding that he has “seen the heat of hell,” that he has witnessed “much misery” and that he has come to “know death well” (10, 14, 15). What is more, Olav emphasizes how his experience has been both tedious and agitating; he feels “tired and weary,” but at the same time he seems “to burn” within (12). Combined, Olav’s description of the parts of his journey the disclosure of the state he is now in, prepare the listener for the progression of the vision and its arresting nature. Concluding this stanza group is a

statement by Olav about his talents and intellect. As if vindicating his own credibility, he claims to be “skilled,” and that this has earned him the status of a “wise” man (15). The prologue reiterates the dreamer’s soundness, and continues a sense of movement from the introduction which is continued in the vision.

A frame introducing dreamer and theme, as in *Draumkvedet*, is a common trait in vision literature. Barbara Nolan identifies this as a characteristic of medieval vision poetry, arguing that Guillaume de Lorris’s *Roman de la Rose* was the main influence. After the *Romane*, the typical prologue “introduced the pilgrim and established a setting and/ or theme predicting the narrative to come” (136). Prologues of earlier influential examples of the genre, however, present their subject and thematic scope similarly. The introduction to the Revelation announces the prophet’s vision with the statement that the “hour of fulfilment is near” and that the vision is about “what must shortly happen” (1:1). Furthermore, John carefully describes the emblematic seven golden lamps surrounding the angel and the seven stars in his right hand (1:12-16). We also learn that the prophet received the revelation while bearing “testimony to Jesus.” He thus received the prophecy while on a prophet’s mission (1:9). These details together with the initial declaration prepare the audience for major thematic concepts of the revelation.

The protagonist of the *Dream of Scipio* is already well known to the reader before the concluding book of the Cicero’s treatise. Cicero, in Book One, introduces Scipio as one of the “wisest and most distinguished of our countrymen” (8). The prologue to the vision mentions that Scipio’s grandfather, Africanus, whom the visionary meets in the vision, was the main topic of Masinissa’s and Scipio’s conversation preceding the dream. The King also invokes the “sovereign Sun, and all lesser lights of heaven,” which Scipio will later be confronted with (86). Thus, the introduction of *Scipio* not only introduces us to the narrator, but it also foreshadows

essential thematic aspects of the subsequent vision. Likewise Boethius introduces the state of the narrator and the major theme of fortune in the opening poem of *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Here, the visionary's plight – explicitly connected with “faithless Fortune” and her “worthless gifts” – lends Boethius's opening poem a prescient quality (3). Echoing the *Consolation*, Dante's *Divine Comedy* reaches, as Paul Piehler argues, a symbolic complexity in its prologue that surpasses its predecessors. Piehler maintains that, by analyzing the underlining symbols of the prologue analytically, the reader can foresee the stages towards redemption Dante encounters in the poem (112-113). Dante's prologue, in a more complex way than Revelation, *Scipio*, and the *Consolation*, captures the structural outline of the Comedy in its allegorical imagery. Like the *Roman*, the composition of the introduction and prologue in these earlier visions function as an index to their structure and content.

Together with *Draumkvedet*, medieval English dream visions widely share the foreshadowing characteristic in their prologues. Whereas the apocalypses of *St. Paul*, *Tundale* and *Thurkill* essentially aim to qualify their visions as a waking revelations rather than dreams, the prologues of *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman* establish the circumstances and setting of their succeeding visions. Similar to the prologues to Dante's and Olav's visions, the *Pearl* poet places indicative images in the five opening stanzas of *Pearl*. Images of the pearl, the herbs and the wheat of August are, as Nolan observes, suggestive of the vision to follow; she observes that the symbols in the first five stanzas are arranged like a “series of miniatures to adumbrate the form and direction of the subsequent composition” (163). The reader can follow these symbols as they reappear and gather thematic substance throughout the vision. The dreamer's self-centered sense of loss also forecasts the didactive lesson of the vision in the same way that Boethius's lament on the faithlessness of Fortune announces the theme in the *Consolation*. In a similar way, William

Langland initiates his dream vision with a noticeable set of details that signal the theme of the subsequent visions. The images of the sheep's shrouds, the hermit's habit and the description of Will's endeavor to hear the wonders of the world, signal the "necessary directions of the visionary poem" (Nolan 211).

The announcement of *direction* is similar in the prologues of *Draumkvedet* and the Middle English dream visions. *Draumkvedet* is different from the medieval English visions in that it mainly concentrates on the events after the vision, not its preconditions. Judging by the fullness of its description, Olav's appearance at the church is of central importance as a connection between singer, dreamer and dream. The question of the visionary's ethos plays a decisive role in lending credibility to his words. The controversial statement of the church-door scene, that Olav's vision is a more credible testimony of God's will than the priest's lectures, lends the dreamer – and consequently his vision – authority. As the dreamer gains the congregation's attention, he appears to discredit the priest's role as a mediator between God and man. Olav's account is thus a more consequential revelation of divinity than the words of the minister. Another factor in the episode's prominence is that it points to parallels within and without the poem. The scene not only echoes the singer-listener relationship constructed anew at every performance of the song, it also foreshadows the image of Michael and the souls in the key episode of the vision, the judgment scene. The singer's introductory account thus presents the listener with an image recognizable on several levels of the poem. The prelude to *Draumkvedet*, though turning our attention to the immediate consequences of the dream, prepares the listener for the dream in an essential way. It indicates, like the indicative images in *Piers* and *Pearl*, the dimensions of the vision to come.

## Outer and Inner Visions

In his dream, Olav visits different parts of the otherworld. For the most part the dreamer provides us with the designation of the places, such as the Gjallar Bridge, paradise, and brokksvalin; the scenes of punishment, however, which could take place in purgatory or hell, are left unspecified. While the introduction of the poem records Olav telling the men in church “many dreams,” the dream-stanzas, 16-51, do not mention separate dream experiences (5). During Olav’s extensive journey, however, distinct images seem to appear *ex nihilo*. The first such vision is God’s appearance in Olav’s mind (24). Then, on three separate occasions, he envisions the Virgin Mary, and the figures of the Devil, St. Michael and Jesus Christ are described as “appearing” in the north and south (30-33). Whereas the otherworldly places Olav passes are in an intelligible order and described in some detail, the three appearances of the Virgin come in three separate places: in the realm of the dead, in paradise, and in the halls of the sky (25, 28, 29). These appearances, like those of the other three biblical figures, are momentary and unannounced; the images appear and vanish.

Furthermore, the eight scenes of punishment Olav witnesses appear detached from the specific place where Olav encounters them (38-45). Although the audience can infer that Olav is in purgatory, the scenes of retribution are visions within his dream rather than stations on his journey. Unlike similar purgatorial scenes in the *Comedy*, *Thurkill* or *Tundale* the punishment scenes here seem to be nonspecific, emblematic images. They appear as ideas of retribution rather than place-specific events within an ordered sequence of the soul’s journey to heaven. Like the sudden appearances of the Virgin, St. Michael and Jesus Christ, the vision of the sinning souls is a vision within his dream. Thus, the “many dreams” of stanza 5 refer to the manifold revelatory images that have appeared to him during his otherworldly journey.



The visions within the dream are of most consequence in *Draumkvædet*. God appears to the dreamer and directs him away from the flaming glaciers and towards paradise (24). The vision of paradise marks, as Bø rightly observes, a new “dimension” in Olav’s journey (36). He moves from the harsh and cold nature of the underworld to an environment of warmth and friendliness. Here Mary’s familiar face meets him, and she speaks to Olav, directing him onwards to the judgment-scene (28). These inner visions are seminal, as they guide Olav from one stage of his spiritual pilgrimage to the next, always towards the vision’s central episode, the judgment scene. Olav’s visions conclude with a pronouncement of rewards for virtuous conduct on earth. The stanzas, 46-51, are “truths” derived from what the dreamer has witnessed and take the shape of a “verbal” vision as there is no source and no explanation for their appearance. He seems here to become one with the vision. His imagination adopts the lesson communicated by the images of his dream. These final truths are, as Bø comments, reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount, but Olav’s pronouncements are directly linked to central images of the poem (Bø 34). The inner visions Olav confronts in the progress of the dream produce the eschatological lesson of the poem. In the same way that the dream experience induces Olav to ride to church, these inner visions lead him towards the heart of the poem. These parallel movements both lead to a religious centrality.

This concept of visions within a dream can be traced back as far as the Western dream vision itself. In Plato’s *Dream of Er* the dreamer, similarly to Olav, witnesses separate episodes within his spiritual journey. Appearing on separate occasions are visions of the universe and the “samples of life,” and both apparitions reveal different conceptual truths of Plato’s *Republic* (258, 260). Here, as in *Draumkvædet*, the otherworld is a sphere in which ephemeral apparitions take place; and to Er, as to Olav, these inner visions are of greatest consequence. Drawing on

Plato's philosophical vision, Cicero presents his dreamer with seminal images appearing within Scipio's dream. The figure of Africanus, Scipio's father, and again a vision of the earth and the orbs, are visualizations within the dream, and they have a more forceful impact on the dreamer than the verbal representations. Like in *Draumkvedet*, the visions are short-lived and detached from any geographical environment. Like Olav's visions, Scipio's appear from and vanish into nothingness within the dream. Revelation too consists of multiple visions. From the vision of the seven seals to the sighting of the New Jerusalem, John's apocalypse can be separated into seven separate visions, forming a whole through their order and symbolism. Moreover, these visions have been, as Nolan points out, interpreted to represent, allegorically, the history of the Church (Nolan 11-12).

The eight visions of *Piers Plowman* are, unlike the Revelation, separated by the dreamer's awakening. Yet, his spiritual pilgrimage progresses naturally, and within his dreams he experiences yet profounder dreams. The third and the fifth visions of *Piers* contain inner dreams which are of particular consequence for the dreamer's intellectual progression; as James Simpson notes, both inner visions open the "way to resolution of the deepest question of the poem" (166). Will's confrontations with sinfulness of humanity within the third vision, and the tree of charity embedded in vision five, are "intensely personal" (166). In these inner visions he sees more deeply into the human condition and the interrelationship between justice and charity, which are main stages in his spiritual progression.

The 8<sup>th</sup> century vision *Dream of the Rood* features similar characteristics. Here, the rood's account of Christ's crucifixion and the vision of doomsday are situated within the outer dream. Bernard Huppé points out that the moment the dreamer perceives the beacon's voice represents a "transition from the dreamer's vision of the cross to his vision of the narrative of the cross" (83).

Contrasting the dreamer's description of the cross in its glorious but static appearance, the prosopopoeia of the cross marks a new imaginary dimension within the dream. The dream becomes a frame for the tale of the cross. As in *Piers*, the multiple dream-levels in the *Dream of the Rood* thus present content of more profound nature than the outer dreams.

Drawing on Revelation, *Pearl* culminates in a vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem. The dream also here becomes a frame for an inner vision which in its nature surpasses the foregoing. The protagonist may, as Nolan argues, initially observe the spectacle with "naïve indignation," but the sight of the pearl and the lamb within the pearly gates produces a reaction that demonstrates his elation (200). As he expresses, the "Delyt" of the vision drives his "mynde to madding" (1153-4). The impact of this sight is, like Will's inner visions in *Piers*, of particular consequence to the dreamer's ultimate understanding of what he has dreamt.

The tripartite vision structure in *Pearl* is explicit in a way that the dream-structure of the *Dream of the Rood* and *Draumkvedet* are not. Pearl's complex exterior and interior structure points to a poet who had clear intentions in terms of composition.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, *Draumkvedet*'s original structure cannot be analyzed since the poem does not exist in a recognizably original form. However, the features that recur in several versions, including the frame and the inner visions, betoken a structural concept which mirrors that of *Pearl*, *Piers*, and in turn their models. The main likeness consists in the presentation of a dream which leads the dreamer through a spiritual journey that involves multiple vision-levels. In the Norwegian and English dream visions above, the innermost visions significantly advance the understanding of the dreamer. The symbols, figures and scenes in these embedded visions transcend the outer dream and enable the dreamer to progress in his allegorical journey.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. J. J. Anderson, pp. 18-20, for a discussion of structure in *Pearl*.

## Chapter 3

### The Dreamer

#### Character of the Visionary

The introduction and prologue of *Draumkvedet* contain little information about Olav's character and state of mind. The singer's initial description is limited to his being "capable" and "young" (1). As the remainder of the introduction merely accounts for the dreamer's actions after the vision, the audience must assume that the initial comments were also true before the dream, and that Olav's emotional or spiritual state before the dream are irrelevant. The frame's focus on Olav's reaction after the vision implies that the visionary's personal state before the dream is insignificant. In the dreamer's prologue, Olav also emphasizes the effect of his otherworldly experience rather than any cause for it. His first half-dreaming comment about the dream suggests its strange and remarkable nature:

I am so tired and weary,  
And within I seem to burn;  
I hear water, but cannot see it,  
It seems to be flowing beneath the earth (12).

In these introspective comments Olav emphasizes the extraordinary nature of his experience. The apparent ambivalence of his physical and emotional state, at once exhausted and excited, suggests not only the complex nature of the dream but also the dreamer's absolute captivation. Repeated from stanza 11, the invisible flow of water recalls the enigmatic atmosphere of his vision and indicates that Olav is in-between the worlds of the vision and consciousness. However, he unequivocally warns that anyone who intends to "follow in his footsteps" will inevitably regret it (8, 9). These cautions by the announcement of the misery he has witnessed,

enforce the gravity of his experience. He has not only felt but also seen the pain of the otherworld, as he remarks in stanza 13. This synaesthetic rendering of his spiritual journey vivifies the otherworldly reality and points to the dreamer's sensitivity. Olav's close encounter with the misery of hell reflects positively on him. The prologue's focus on Olav's emotional and physical experience thus clearly appeals to the listener's empathy. The dreamer's agitation draws attention to his personal part in the vision. He does not, as the prophet John does, set aside his personal point of view. Thus, Olav's emotional account invites the audience's emotional participation.

It is hardly possible to determine who the person Olav Åsteson was;<sup>10</sup> but his portrayal suggest that he is an embodiment of youth, innocence and courage. Olav's actions after the dream, as described in the introduction, portray him as confident and utterly convinced of the significance of his vision; in fact, he is so enraptured by his experience that he disregards the churchly authority of the priest, and interrupts the service with his account (5). When Olav echoes the words of the singer, stating that he is "skilled" and therefore "considered wise," the listener assumes that this was also Olav's status before the dream; we are to trust that he is trustworthy and his account accurate. The combination of skill, social status and perseverance points to a figure of some standing, one who is generally respected, if not admired, but at the same time pragmatic. The few, but pointed, material clues about Olav augment this subtle image of a respectable, yet down-to-earth citizen. His quick horse (4), the dogs that follow him (13), and his scarlet cloak (16) lend him a noble quality, yet these attributes are, as the vision then reflects, inconsequential in the otherworld. It is the human fragility of Olav in relation to the indelible "misery" he faces in the world of the dead that constitutes his appeal (14). The notion

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<sup>10</sup> Gro Steinsland has found Olav to be a representative of the farming community and the Christian ideal (47). It has also been suggested that he is in fact St. Olav, the king who Christianized Norway in the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Liestøl, 24).

that this young figure faces an abyss of emptiness and death, an image Olav paints repeatedly in the prologue, affects the sympathies of the reader. Bø notes that Olav's "combined youthful innocence and noble nature" bring about the listeners favor (32); however, the listeners do side with the dreamer because he represents humankind in his expedition into afterlife.

The lack of an ante-vision portrait of the dreamer in *Draumkvedet* is uncommon in dream visions. The introduction to the Revelation, although it does not convey much about the prophet's character, nevertheless provides the context of his vision. He is, we are told, Jesus Christ's "servant" (1:2); the revelation came when he "preached God's words" (1:9); and it occurred on "the Lord's day" (1:10). All these factors explain to some extent how John received the vision. In contrast to the dreamer in *Draumkvedet*, John is explicitly chosen; the vision is clearly connected to the character of the visionary, and the initial portrayal of him leaves no doubt as to why he received the revelation. This explicit connection between dreamer and dream is characteristic of medieval visions. Whether the dreamer's spiritual or emotional state produces it, the dream is conventionally a "symptom" of the dreamer's situation (Russell 129).

In medieval visions of afterlife, such as *Tundale*, *Thurkill* and Dante's *Comedy*, the prologues indicate the occasion for the dreamers' visionary experiences. The visionary in *Tundale*, as opposed to Revelation, embodies a corrupted soul. The prologue describes Tundale as prone to vanity and ignorant of the "eternal salvation of his soul" (150). Tundale, like Olav, is "skillful," even "friendly and joyful," but nevertheless sinful (150). In this sense Tundale is a precursor to Will and the jeweler; they represent humankind through their spiritual imperfection and the inevitably limited earthly perspective. Dante's *Comedy* delineates a protagonist whose inner conflict suggests his lost confidence in divine providence. Piehler understands the imagery in the prologue of the *Comedy* to be revealing of the protagonist's "psychological state" (112).

The man and beast, sun and mountain symbolically convey that the narrator is kept from salvation due to his sinful state of mind (116). Also here the dream becomes a reaction to the dreamer's circumstances, an immediate response to his inner turmoil.

In *Pearl*, the dream is also clearly a product of the protagonist's emotional state. The jeweler mourns the loss of his pearl, and his subsequent dream answers directly to his lament. The vision in *Pearl* is a consequence, or – as Anderson argues – an “externalisation” of the jeweler's uneasiness, but although his melancholy is profound, the nature of his loss is initially unclear (24). On the one hand he thus attracts sympathy, but there is something helpless and self-absorbed about his lamentation that evokes pity rather than admiration. In a similar way, the dreamer in *Piers* does not earn the reader's respect or admiration in the prologue. The shepherd's guise, the allusion to a hermit and the fact that he is searching for wonders imply that Will is, as Nolan remarks, a “spiritual drifter” (212). Lingering on the Malvern Hills, he communicates a sense of impassive aimlessness quite unlike Olav's excited determination, and the lack of an aim indicates that he has lost sight of his faith. In the *Dream of the Rood*, the visionary acknowledges that he is “stained with sins” and “wounded with wrongdoings” (19). The dreamer is in distress, but the reason is not explicit. The dreamer's spiritual state, of which he is conscious, resembles Will's in that both dreamers have, explicitly and implicitly, deviated from the line of faith.

Boethius's and Chaucer's philosophical visions feature a similar convention. The *Consolation* is, as Nolan argues, the model for the protagonists in the *Comedy*, *Piers* and *Pearl* (140). More explicitly than earlier vision authors, Boethius presents a troubled protagonist. In contrast to John, Boethius's visionary exemplifies the very personal nature of human disillusion. The individual's situation, not the common fate of mankind, is the initial precedent for the

revelation, although the dreamer's sorrows may be Everyman's. Chaucer's protagonists are, in line with the convention, also brought down by sorrow. The dreamer in the *Book of the Duchess* is in a state of melancholy that no "phisycien" may "heale" (39-40). His sleeplessness, announced in the opening lines of the prologue, suggests the craving for appeasement that he then receives in form of a dream. Here, in contrast to the *Consolation*, the specific reason for the dreamer's emotional state is unclear; he embodies, as George L. Kittredge observes, an "atmosphere," a mood of "love and sorrow and bereavement" (40). The visionary in the *Parliament of Fowls* experiences similar unspecified distress, revealing only that he is in search of a "certeyn thing" (20). Nevertheless, the immediate occasion for the vision here is also the state of the dreamer. Subsequent to the *Consolation*, dream visions the notion of the suffering dreamer. In contrast to *Draumkvedet*, the focus is not on the dreamer's integrity or trustworthiness; in fact, the dreamer's emotional imbalance is the link between the protagonist and his vision.

In contrast to Dante, Boethius and Chaucer, Olav's visionary experience is seemingly unrelated to his prior emotional or spiritual state. The occasion for the dream in *Draumkvedet* is not an existential plight; in fact, no detail in the poem suggests the dreamer's unhappy or sinful state of mind. Olav's situation resembles that of the protagonists in the visions of *Er* and *Scipio*. Both Plato and Cicero use distinguished characters as visionaries: Er, a former soldier, is characterized as a "brave man," and Scipio is a proven statesman (257). There is no particular emotional or spiritual cause for the vision, no religious or philosophical crisis that leads to the revelation. In fact, the dreams stress the honorableness of the protagonists, making the case that their worthiness deserves our trust. As Russell points out, the personality of Scipio "valorizes



[the] dream” (9); the dream becomes notable because of the dreamer’s status and credibility, not – as in the *Consolation* – because of his misfortune and unhappiness.

The same emphasis on worthiness is evident in the portrait of Olav in *Draumkvedet*. Although Olav is not renowned like Scipio, the introduction and prologue point to his status and credibility. There is no fault with Olav; his worthiness, like Er’s and Scipio’s, apparently occasions the dream event. A somewhat similar context leads to Cædmund’s vision in Bede’s account. To Bede, Cædmund’s revelation was a sign that “Heavenly grace had especially singled out a certain one” (17). The fact that Cædmund in a dream receives the gift to sing god’s praise is thus not coincidental; it is a confirmation of the dreamer’s qualification. Plato, Cicero and Bede thus use very similar characteristics to introduce their dreamers to the reader. The writers’ primary concern is justifying the supernatural revelations on the grounds of the visionaries’ believability and predestination. The situation in *Draumkvedet* suggests the same about Olav: he is chosen because of his ability to receive and share the revelation.

In an important way, the medieval dreamers, regardless of their personal state, share an important common quality. Kathryn Lynch observes that Scipio in his vision is made to perceive the “smallness and insignificance of his planet” (53). In every vision, the visionary is confronted with a reality beyond his grasp. There is a fundamental discrepancy between what the dreamer sees and what he understands. Thus Chaucer’s dreamer in the *Parliament*, brooding over Cicero’s vision, is filled with a “besy hevenesse” (89). Merely contemplating the disparity between the “lytel erthe” and “hevenes quantyte” troubles the protagonist because understanding it is beyond his scope (57-8). This “heaviness” is thus not primarily a reflection of that particular dreamer’s mentality, but rather a symptom of his humanity. The *Parliament* dreamer exemplifies the human inability to comprehend questions of profound metaphysical nature. The precursor of

this dreamer-type is Boethius's visionary in the *Consolation*. The narrator in his existential plight speaks not merely for himself but for humanity; the dreamer personifies a search for sense which is essentially human. Nolan remarks that the conventional visionary after Boethius is an "Everyman," because every being is in "need of consolation and spiritual guidance" (140). The dreamer, confronted with the insignificance of earthly life or the idea of divine providence, exhibits the limits of human awareness. Thus, the main quality of the dreamer, whether in theological or philosophical visions, is his typification of humankind.

*Draumkvedet*, *Pearl* and *Piers* share this focus on the discrepancy between divine and human comprehension. Moreover, the dreamers' personalities are, like Boethius's in the *Consolation*, universal; the jeweler's melancholy and Will's sense of indirection are common states of mind. The fact that the jeweler is distressed and therefore unable to understand the maiden's explanations accentuates his humanity. He conveys a sense that his earthly knowledge is not fitted to understand the eschatological concepts he confronts. Like Olav and Will, the *Pearl* dreamer demonstrates the essence of human perception through confusion and marvel. He describes the vision of the heavenly city as a "grete merwayle," something that "No fleshly hert ne might endure" (1081-2). Will, falling asleep for the third time, describes how the "merveillouseste metels" came to him (8. 68). The dreamer's metaplastic use of the word underscores the strangeness of the visions he receives. The jeweler and Will attempt to convey something that is in fact indescribable. Olav, in a very similar way, describes the otherworldly atmosphere with the statement that it "seemed like a marvel" to him (13). The extraordinary nature of the dream reflects the ordinary nature of the dreamer. The wonder of the jeweler, Will and Olav demonstrates, in a subtle way, how a vision of divinity is by nature unfathomable to the human understanding

## The Dreamer in the Dream

The vision in *Draumkvedet* conveys its theological message to the protagonist through sense impressions rather than verbal communication. Olav recalls not only what he has seen, but also what he has heard, tasted and touched. He “hears water” without seeing it (12), tastes the soil of the mire (22), and feels the physical strain of crossing the Gjallar Bridge (21). These references to multiple senses enhance the vividness of the spiritual pilgrimage and emphasize the dream’s reality. But we also get an impression of the dreamer’s sensitivity. He attempts to recreate the physical landscape, and initially, natural descriptions dominate his account. Olav’s meticulous descriptions are due in part to the fact that he travels alone. Unlike the dreamers in Chaucer’s or Langland’s dream visions, Olav is left to himself throughout the dream; interaction between him and divine representatives is limited to the Virgin’s command that he go to the site of the judgment scene. Traveling alone, Olav is forced to figure out the meaning of his vision for himself. After crossing into the realm of the dead, he crosses a wilderness of mires and thorns without guidance. His persistence in overcoming the natural obstacles suggests his hunger for understanding, for some meaning beyond the confusion in which he finds himself.

Interaction between the dreamer and a divine guide is standard in medieval dream visions, and the scarcity of such interaction in *Draumkvedet* is conspicuous. Neither *Tundale* nor *Thurkill*, visions that Moe, Bugge and Liestøl regard as immediate sources, feature a dreamer traveling alone. Among the earlier examples, only Revelation and *The Dream of Er* feature protagonists that do not communicate with an authority figure. The prophet John speaks once during his vision (7:13-14); generally, he observes and interprets. He witnesses the consequences of the “hour of fulfilment,” but they are not explained to him (1:3). Although John’s multiple visions communicate forceful images, the dreamer’s perspective remains, it seems, impersonal.

The vision focuses entirely on the content of the revelation; hence, at the end of Revelation, the reader does not have a developed sense of John's character, and there is no indication as to how the prophet has himself been affected by the vision of the apocalypse. The philosophical vision of *Er* presents a similar type of dreamer. Plato's visionary is also passive in the sense that the vision dominates, whereas the effect on the dreamer remains unexplored. Er reports that he heard words delivered by an "interpreter" (260). But, as in Revelation, these words express dicta, and the dreamer is never in a position to comment or to ask questions. He too is merely an observer. In both of these early visions, the dreamers' function is to bear witness and to pass on a message; their personalities remain seemingly unaffected.

Unlike the Revelation, *Draumkvedet* emphasizes the visionary as much as the vision. Here the dreamer is clearly affected by his experience and his mode of perception changes as he advances through the vision. Olav's understanding develops as a function of the development of the dream. There is a marked contrast between the focus on his bodily pain and endurance in the initial dream stanzas and the theological pronouncements of the peroration. He arrives at these pronouncements through his observations only, not through the teachings of a divine authority. And, in contrast to Er or John, Olav's interpretations evidence a process from seeing to understanding. He thus refers back to the confusion of the wilderness in stanza 46, with the proclamation,

He is blessed in our world

Who gives his shoes to the poor:

He will not have to walk bare footed

On the bed of thorns.

Olav's narration has developed from the mere description of his visionary experience and its immediate physical effects to a reflection on his part upon their spiritual significance. He thus undergoes a didactic process evocative of the platonic stages of perception, with Olav's mind evolving from the physical level of pain and suffering to recognition of the overriding theological ideas. The chaos that initially surrounds the dreamer, similar to the initial wilderness Dante and Will find themselves in, suggests a mental state of confusion. He wanders uncertainly ever further, arriving at the periphery of hell apparently bewildered as to where to turn. Twice Olav receives directions from sudden visions of God and Mary. Through such sporadic guidance he overcomes his initial befuddlement and proceeds to increasingly enlightening visionary experiences. This process from chaos to more ordered and enlightening descriptions seems to reflect Olav's increasing ability to comprehend what he sees.

Lynch suggests that the "increasing complexity of images" in such visions as the *Consolation* and *Comedy* is a "sign of the narrator's progress" (72). A similar reflection is evident in *Draumkvedet*. Accordingly, the central episode, St. Martin's judgment of the souls, not only presents the theological heart of the poem, it also occasions a shift in the sophistication of Olav's narrative. Initially a wandering reporter, Olav now halts and turns his attention to the movement around him. Embodying a center in the otherworldly sphere, Olav turns first to the north, then to the south. Seeing the archangel with his train, he implicitly "knows" it to be "good" (32). Though he merely made observations in the early stages of his dream, he now interprets and recognizes the relevance of what he sees; and though the beginning of his journey was dominated by wilderness, the sight of St. Michael, Jesus Christ and the judgment reflects a permanent sense of order.

The development Olav undergoes is characteristic of dreamers in medieval dream visions; among the precursors, the dreamer in the *Consolation* clearly demonstrates this ascent of the mind. In Boethius's discussion with Philosophy, the visionary is initially preoccupied with the worldly manifestations of fortune, and he complains of the misery they have brought on him. The first poem's delineation of his situation in the prison cell and the turn of events leading to it convey a narrow understanding of the nature of fortune (10-11). Like the *Draumkvedet* dreamer, Boethius has to adjust his perspective before he can understand the philosophical truths governing the order of nature. Thus Philosophy announces to the dreamer that in order to advance his understanding she will "wipe the dark clouds of mortal things from [his] eyes" (6). In the progression of Boethius's vision the reader can trace the dreamer's "spiritual progress" through his "capacity to absorb increasingly complex doctrine" (Lynch 61). In book five the dreamer engages in a profound discussion with Philosophy about human choice in a providential universe, and the contrast between this final metaphysical discussion and the initial self-centered complaint is a marked demonstration of the dreamer's intellectual development.

Middle English visions appear to adopt this feature from Boethius's precedent, and the *Pearl* dreamer may serve as an illustration. The contrast between the jeweler's grievances in the prologue and his acknowledgment of God's omniscience suggests a shift of perspective or "movement of the soul," as Russell terms it (161). More explicitly than Olav in *Draumkvedet*, the jeweler is slow to understand and progresses haltingly from the personal and worldly level to the metaphysical. Russell sees in this progression a movement from "personal" to the "universal" (161). Despite the *Pearl* maiden's manifold attempts to explain the heavenly concept of justice, the dreamer's reactions time and again point to his relative short-sightedness. Still, the dreamer matures as a result of the dialogues with the maiden. If he does not gain a complete

understanding of the concepts explained to him, he nevertheless develops, as Davenport points out, a sense of “awe and reverence”: and this internal progress makes him “worthy” enough in the maiden’s eyes to receive the final revelation (18). The jeweler’s final words of devotion, especially the pronouncement that he has “founden hym, bothe day and naghte, / A God, a Lorde, a frende ful fyn,” presents his acceptance of God’s benevolence (1203-4); although the pearl’s lectures have not satisfied his intellect, the vision has calmed his emotions. In the epilogue, as Anderson also notices, he understands the folly of his attempt to enter the heavenly city, and the fact that he passes “judgment on himself” suggests his developed maturity (72).

Though the dreamers in medieval dream visions are as multi faceted as the genre itself, the emphasis on ordinariness is an important common denominator. In both the Norwegian and English visions of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the personality of the dreamer embodies a naiveté which accentuates the disparity between human and divine knowledge. The Everyman quality is particularly clear in the dreamers’ response to their supernatural experience. Will, the *Pearl* dreamer, and Olav convey how the divine atmosphere elicits a sense of magic that is beyond the denotation of words. Kittredge sees in the protagonist of the *Dutchess* a “childlike wonder” which is thus characteristic of medieval dreamers (49). Whether the visionaries make the journey alone, with a guide, or, like Will, with ever new interlocutors, the visions occasion an inner development that moves from the physical to the spiritual and the personal to the universal.

The medieval dream vision thus characteristically broadens the dreamer’s perspective. As opposed to the early apocalyptic visions, the dreamer is not merely a mediator of a doctrine, but an explorer of its implications. The dreamers are Everymen because they, like every human being, need an initiation by divinity to grasp concepts that transcend the narrowness of earthly

experience. Whereas Revelation does not contain clues as to the prophet's reactions to his vision – he rather becomes one with it – the *Consolation* and the subsequent English dream visions clearly emphasize not only the vision as such, but also the dreamer's part in it. Thus, the evolution of dream and dreamer is, as in *Draumkvedet*, closely related, the one simultaneously reflecting the progression of the other.



## Chapter 4

### Imagery and Imagination

#### Levels of Abstraction

Macrobius's *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* defines Cicero's vision as an "enigmatic dream" or Latin "somniaum." The somniaum, according to Macrobius, "conceals with strange shapes and veils with ambiguity the true meaning of the information being offered."<sup>11</sup> The proper interpretation of the dream can thus lead to recognition of the enigmas' concealed truths. The imagination receives, in the platonic sense, impressions which mirror truths in the absolute sense. Because the vision directs itself to the world of ideas, the dreamers in such visions are, as Lynch sees it, representative of human reason (68). Macrobius held that dreams could transmit divine truths and that, consequently, human imagination constitutes a bridge between earthly and divine nature. Scipio comprehends the ideas communicated to him only if he abandons his preconception; and his visionary experience is at once a journey inside his mind and beyond it. Scipio's understanding of his vision evolves from the narrow to the transcendent.

In Boethius, the dreamer's struggle to detect in his experience a "mirror of God's plan" is an echo of Macrobius's theory of visionary enigmas. Medieval dream commentators were influenced by this approach to dream interpretation (Lynch 61). The notion that divine order can be found in mundane objects, indeed in all nature, is a synthesis of Christian and platonic philosophy.<sup>12</sup> And, as a reflection of spiritual truths, dreams are especially significant. Thus dream visions in the Middle Ages characteristically trace images on different levels of abstraction to pursue their spiritual essence. *Pearl*, *Piers* and *Draumkvedet* exhibit a Macrobian influence in their development of imagery from a worldly to a redefined spiritual perspective.

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Russell, pp. 62-3.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Lynch, pp. 52-62, and Russell, pp. 51-78.

In this sense, a dream experience like Olav's is a gradual transition from familiar concepts to abstract ideas, from the concrete to the metaphysical. The images that dominate the descriptions in the early stages of his journey are worldly. The "deep valleys," the vast fields of "thorns" and "mires" reflect the nature of Olav's living surroundings (11, 16, 22). As he crosses the Gjallar Bridge his descriptions become increasingly unnatural. As Peter Dinzelbacher observes, rivers and bridges commonly signify a "border between two eschatological areas" (114). In a sense, the connection between the two otherworldly environments is also a symbolic connection between different levels of the protagonist's imagination. Thus, whereas Olav's first transcendence coincides with his falling asleep, this second boundary – embedded in the vision – marks the transition from familiar landscapes to predominantly enigmatic scenery. Not only does he see the divine figures of the Virgin Mary, St. Michael, Christ and the devil, the landscape here consists of "waters / Where blue flames cover the ice," and a "glowing" paradise (24, 27). These images evoke a sphere which is conceptually removed from the real world of the dreamer; Olav's descriptions present earthly nature removed to its otherworldly manifestation.

Thus, in *Draumkvedet*, specific images and constellations recur on different levels of abstraction. As Olav's account develops, new images echo earlier scenes. Michael in the judgment scene echoes Olav in the church, the tremulous souls paralleling the church's congregation. The constellation of the dreamer and the congregation again parallels that of the singer and his or her audience. On three different levels, this central interrelationship appears, every time one stage further removed from the real situation. The singer reshapes the context of his own situation in his introduction; the first person narrator does the same in his dream. When this situation appears for the third time in the judgment scene, the vision is at its nucleus. A similar pattern of abstractions is evident in the reappearance of animal imagery. The "swift

horse” of the introduction has its counterpart in the dreamer’s prologue and in the vision. In the prologue Olav notes that his “horse did not neigh” in the otherworld, and preceding the judgment scene he emphasizes the black and white horses of the devil and St. Michael. The three separate instances are increasingly removed from the reality of the listener; so too are their significance in the poem. From being a mere means of transportation in the introduction, the horse in the prologue becomes a means for the listener’s interpretation of the otherworldly atmosphere. Lastly, the horses of the devil and the archangel enforce the schism between the forces of good and evil. In the same way as the authority-audience construction, the reappearing image of the horse gains symbolic value as the poem’s levels are further distanced from the physical reality. In the Macrobian sense these images, as they reappear in different shapes and contexts, represent enigmas that conceal, and on contemplation reveal, their governing spiritual idea.

Following a similar concept of increasing abstraction, the *Pearl* poet uses a pattern of images to indicate the various dream-levels. The central recurring symbol is the pearl itself, whose connotations expand as the dreamer progresses in his vision. Initially, nothing suggests a broader sense of the jewel than that of a material pearl literally lost in the garden, but its allegorical value increases in line with the dreamer’s vision. The special emphasis on the pearl in the prologue conveys, like the singer-audience constellation in *Draumkvedet*, a sense of the poem’s structure and central idea. The pearl evokes the circular shape of the poem as a whole; and, as Nolan observes, it conveys an “abstract image of unity and perfection” which foreshadows the jeweler’s final trust in God’s benevolence (Nolan 175). This abstraction evolves and gains profundity as the dreamer and reader progress through the vision. Through this pearl, the jeweler moves beyond his initial grief and presents an altered view point in the stanzas of the epilogue.

The change from the worldly to the otherworldly setting in *Pearl* marks, as in *Draumkvedet*, an abstraction of imagery and analogy. In the new setting, the light, the scents and garden echo the waking setting, but the nature of the earthy dream-garden is transformed, like in *Draumkvedet*, to combine the worldly with the strange. The garden setting consists of images that reflect the real world, but in an advanced stage of beauty which suggests their divine origins. Whereas the dreamer could not appreciate the incarnation of God in the environment of his “erbere,” he marvels at the garden in the dream, demonstrating at least a sense of his advanced proximity to the source of creation. Here, the dreamer finds “all the features of the *erber grene* raised to a state of visionary transformation” (Piehler 146-147). Echoing Macrobius’s theory of the *somnium*, matter contains its spirit. The perceptibility of the image’s spiritual essence depends on its proximity to the original source. Thus the translucent pearls on the ground, the freshness of the flowers and the sweet song of the birds in the heavenly garden at once refer back to – and transform – the earthly setting. As in *Draumkvedet*, the half earthly, half divine natural images mark a border between two heavenly realms.

The otherworld of the dream setting in *Pearl* consists, as in the Norwegian poem, of multiple areas, all signifying a space which is relative to the real world. There is a clear distinction between the maiden’s geographical position and that of the dreamer, just as the river in *Draumkvedet* indicates a boundary between a transitional sphere and the realm of the dead; the stream is in both cases a border, a barrier “between time and eternity” (Piehler 148). Across this barrier, in the vision of the heavenly city, the central images of the first two settings, the pearl, music, and light reappear, completing the “pattern” of evolving images in the immediate presence of Jesus Christ (153). Thus three distinct levels of imagery are discernible, the symbols gaining significance and perfection in accord with the proximity to the vision’s nucleus. At the

same time, the order of imagery reflects the dreamer's widening perspective: "The fictional 'places,'" Nolan observes, "serve as metaphors for the mental states of the spiritual pilgrim" (146). As in *Draumkvedet*, the increasing abstractions direct the protagonist and the audience from a limited worldly understanding to a widened cosmic perspective.

Langland's dream vision can be seen to represent a similar movement from earthly to heavenly ideas. *Piers Plowman* also communicates a dual progression: the development of the dreamer's imagination and the increasing profundity of the visions he experiences. Will certainly undergoes a more didactic learning process than Olav, but they both come to understand the theological significance of the episodes to which they are subjected. In *Piers* these dream episodes range from the field of folk in the first Passus to the Antichrist and future apocalyptic conflict in the last. For Will to arrive at the final perception of Truth, the visions must afford a gradual ascent from the level of worldly reality to spiritual truth. Lawrence Clopper notes that this ascent is traceable through the sequence of visions from the *Visio* to the *Dobest*, the first three presenting a "line of knowing from the world through the mind into the soul" (7). While the world Will sees is initially confusing and its people debased, the ensuing pilgrimage redefines his perspective through glimpses into the cosmic perspective and the evolution of the church. When Will – in *Dobest* – again returns to the initial realm he imagines it as "a world of essences in which substance rather than accident is manifested" (7). Will's movement from material to substance parallels Olav's because in both poems there is a transformation of meaning from the limited to the metaphysical. In *Draumkvedet* the final doctrines reflect the theological significance of the "misery" Olav has encountered (14); in *Piers* the last vision echoes of the initial depiction of society in a "fuller, more formally complete way" (Nolan 256). Will's and Olav's developing understanding is simultaneously the reader's. He or she partakes in a journey

which aims, as Steven F. Kruger argues, “not only inward, but also outward and upward, toward the external and transcendent” (74). *Piers*, *Pearl* and *Draumkvedet* are thus visionary pilgrimages that lead, through a series of notional levels, to the central concept of the poems; the outer stages in all three visions serve to prepare the visionary and the audience for the increasing imaginational challenge of the next stage.

Parallels among these medieval visions, in terms of their abstractions of images, evidence a common desire among the poems to find in nature evidence of the supernatural. The poems offer, like the *Comedy*, an “*itinerarium mentis ad Deum*” based on the interpretation of natural images and earthly experience (Lynch 147). Macrobius’s theory on Cicero’s dream contains the central idea of dreams as enigmatic revelations which, if interpreted, can disclose sacred truths. *Draumkvedet* and the English dream visions follow this line of thought in that they actively engage in a contemplation of earthly images and their reflection of divinity.

### **The Vision as Spiritual Quest**

Theological visions form a subgenre of dream vision poetry; although they share characteristics of the philosophical visions, their eschatological content and purpose set them apart. The emphasis in medieval theological visions varies, but two major categories are discernible. In one, scenes of punishment dominate the content and they form the center of the visionary experience; in the other, the vision presents a search for divine truth, thus mediating an occasion for spiritual meditation. The first visions, referred to by Nolan as “monastic,” focus on terrors of hell (126). Characteristically, they present hyperbolic imagery of horror to convey a plain moral message (126). The central attention given to purgatorial scenes in visions such as *Tundale*, *Thurkill*, and *St. Patrick’s Purgatory* place them in the monastic category. This

tradition, heavily influenced by *St. Paul's Apocalypse*,<sup>13</sup> thus shares a distinct didactic purpose; the limited moral lessons suit their use as exempla in sermons and penitential appeals. They are a part of the extensive medieval sermon literature that concentrates on the punishments of sins.<sup>14</sup> The underlying purpose of this literature is, as Rosemary Woolf observes, to strengthen faith through “servile fear” rather than “love of God” (295-6). Intimidation, not consolation shapes the content of these visions.

By contrast, the spiritual quest of the later Middle Ages goes beyond the communication of otherworldly punishment and offers instead a search for “salvation” (Nolan 6). These visions are ultimately echoes of the Revelation in their progression towards a sight of the heavenly city. The visionary represents a pilgrim’s development towards a higher sense of knowledge which the audience can follow. In this dual process, the spiritual quest conveys a “liminal” experience (Lynch 49). Through the experience of the protagonists, audiences are initiated into divine concepts that ordinarily lie beyond human grasp. What sets the quest apart from the monastic poem, then, is its gradual progression from the earthly to a divine perspective on justice, life, and love. This quest is at once the narrator’s the dreamer’s and, importantly, the listener’s. The major medieval dream poems Nolan identifies as characteristic of the spiritual quest are, next to the *Comedy*, *Piers* and *Pearl*. These, she maintains, are composed so as to lead the reader through “a systematically ordered series of discoveries” towards a “visionary perception of the world” (155). *Piers* and *Pearl*, as opposed to *Tundale* and *Thurkill*, share the quality of being explorations of religious concepts; the protagonists search for and experience a gradual disclosure of the poem’s fundamental expression. *Piers* thus depicts Will’s (and Everyman’s) slow recognition of the “way to repentance and spiritual perfection” (Nolan 209). Similarly,

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<sup>13</sup> For the influence of *Paul* on apocryphal visions, see Russell, pp. 39-49.

<sup>14</sup> See Rosemary Woolf, pp. 293-298, for characteristics of sermon literature.

*Pearl* – though the protagonist may not understand as much as the reader – allows for a “spiritual ‘seeing’” of the poem’s central point, the heavenly city (157). *Draumkvedet*, though shorter and structurally less complex, shares with these visions a movement towards the seeing of divine truth. Olav’s vision is an inquiry into the nature of heavenly justice.

On the one hand, *Draumkvedet*’s depiction of infernal punishment somewhat resembles those in the monastic visions. These purgatorial scenes include the punishments of sins such as greed, cursing, witchcraft, corrupt priests, and marriage between cousins. The monastic visions contain punishment scenes which mirror the medieval Christian perception of earthly conduct and its harsh consequences in the afterlife. But the emphasis of Olav’s vision is clearly on forgiveness and the promotion of good deeds. The poem, though illustrating the punishment of sins, stresses the sinners’ eventual absolution at the hands of St. Michael. Whereas *Tundale* and *Thurkill* stress the horrors of hell, the Norwegian poem gives much attention to the forgiving nature of heavenly justice. Thurkill and Tundale are punished for their respective sins in their visions and the descriptions of these procedures clearly serve to frighten readers. In *Draumkvedet*, as in the *Comedy*, *Pearl*, and *Piers*, the dreamer experiences visions that go beyond common the superstitions found in *Tundale* and *Thurkill*. These dream visions are not merely didactic; their protagonists are led to an insight into eschatological truths. So what Olav and Will are confronted with is not a catalogue of religious doctrines, but an exploration of their essence. This is what Clopper – referring to *Piers* – terms “tracing... the *imago dei*” through its manifestation in the world and the mind to the soul (6). Whereas the medieval apocalyptic visions in the tradition of *Paul* and *Tundale* center on scenes of pain and punishment, the spiritual quests aim to reveal a divine perspective.



*Draumkvedet* and its English counterparts thus exhibit a very similar notion of the vision as progression towards a theological truth. Apart from the English quests, the *Comedy*, and *Draumkvedet*, the *Dream of the Rood* also exemplifies this spiritual development. The dreamer gains a sense of divine nature, a “fullness of bliss,” which he was far removed from before the vision (139). The cross is here the sign through which the dreamer, and by extension the listener, arrives at a new perspective. These spiritual pilgrimages, paralleling an earthly pilgrimage, present the dreamers’ progression towards a spiritual epiphany. Movement and direction – significant notions in *Draumkvedet* – imply both physical and spiritual progression on earth and in the dream of the otherworld. In the same way the visions project a landscape half-earthly, half-supernatural, the progress of the vision presents a gradual seeing of the otherworld with suggests its imitation on earth. “All parts of the poem,” as Nolan argues, “should lead the reader or listener toward his own spiritual edification and purification through his participation, interpretation and understanding of the narrative” (135). In the contemplative mode of its description, the development of the dreamer, and – most importantly – the social contexts of its performance, *Draumkvedet* is a dual quest, involving both the visionary and his audience.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

Russell, in defining the dream vision genre, points to two subgenres which influenced the medieval dream vision. One, the dream-as-narrative-event, is typically a part of a larger scheme, as in God's message to Joseph in Matthew 2:13 or Aeneas's waking vision before leaving Carthage (23-39). The other, the apocalypse, is dominated by a vision which leaves its circumstances and dreamer's part in it insignificant, as in Revelation, *Paul*, and visions of the philosophical tradition such as *Er* and *Scipio* (39-49). Through the conflation of these influences medieval dream visions feature, as I have attempted to show, a similar set of characteristics which tailor the vision to the dreamer's personality. Thus, *Draumkvedet* and the medieval dream visions in general evidence influence from the narrative dream and apocalypse. The medieval dream visions by Langland, the *Pearl* poet and Chaucer exhibit similar characteristics traceable to visions by Cicero and Boethius on the one hand, and John and Dante on the other.

Olav's vision, like the Middle English examples of the genre, contains elements from philosophical and theological visions. The relationship between dream and divine order, whether platonic or Christian, seems to be as central to the interpretation of *Draumkvedet* and *Pearl* as it is for the reading of the philosophical visions by Cicero and Boethius. What determines the close relationship between the English and Norwegian visions, then, is their common heritage. The fact that influences from the apocalyptic dream and the dream as narrative event are evident in these visions suggests that they are born out of a common tradition; consequently, these medieval dream visions, including *Draumkvedet*, are best understood in light of not only individual characteristics but the sources of their origin. Viewing *Draumkvedet* through a genre-historic lens reveals the significance of otherwise-overlooked elements.

Draumkvedet's most striking features become apparent if one considers the poem as an offspring of the dream vision tradition. The character of Olav, the parallels of the scene in the church, the dreamer's outline of his journey in the prologue to the vision, the multiple stages of the dream, and the progress of the dreamer are all features that echo influential earlier visions and that characterize Middle English dream visions. Underlying these features is the interplay between vision and visionary, central not only in *Draumkvedet* but generally in dream visions after Boethius. The dream visions by Langland, the *Pearl* poet and Chaucer also present this interplay, essentially combining the distinctive features of the apocalypse and the narrative dream. This common denominator, as it were, suggests that the authors behind these visions, whether Norwegian or English, were influenced by similar conventions.

Of the variety of medieval dream visions, *Draumkvedet* is especially comparable to the English visions of theological content. The dreamer, appearing as a *worldling*, one who illustrates the disparity between human and divine intelligence, is a consistent feature in both philosophical and theological dream visions. Yet in the theological vision the everyman quality is of particular significance. In *Pearl* and *Piers* it allows for the complex relationship between dreamer and audience that Nolan points to with regard to the subgenre of the spiritual quest. The philosophical visions by Boethius and Chaucer also accentuate the dichotomy between earthly knowledge and the perception of transcendental truths. In the monastic visions *Tundale* and *Thurkill* the narrators are witnesses and exemplifications of the sinner's experience in the otherworld. Compared to the spiritual quests, then, the audience's role in the philosophical and monastic visions is different. The theological visions aim to engage the audience. *Draumkvedet*, like the *Comedy* and the English spiritual visions attempt to explain central doctrines of the Christian belief. They are "meditations[s]" on afterlife and the nature of God (Nolan 151). Like

the English dream visions, *Draumkvedet* is not merely a didactic statement of doctrine, but a personal exploration of the underlying questions of faith.

*Draumkvedet* should thus be considered as a product of a tradition which is highly self-conscious. Even without references specific direct sources, the Norwegian poem, in a very similar way to the Middle English visions, embodies a range of influences from not only narrative and apocalyptic but also philosophical and Christian dream visions. The fact that similar characteristics reappear in the English and Norwegian poems suggests a connection based on their common debt to the dream vision tradition. Because it allows for a fuller and more comprehensive interpretation, a consideration of the tradition should therefore be the starting point for any reading of Olav's vision.

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## Appendix

### **Draumkvedet** (The Dream Song)<sup>15</sup>

#### THE FRAME OF THE VISION

1. Will you listen, I can sing  
Of a good young man,  
About Olav Åsteson,  
Who was asleep for so long.

2. He lay down on Christmas Eve,  
And fell into deep sleep,  
He did not awake before Epiphany  
When people were going to church.  
    And that was Olav Åsteson,  
    Who was asleep for so long.

3. He lay down on Christmas Eve,  
And he slept for so long,  
He did not awake before Epiphany,  
When the birds were fluffing their wings.  
    And that was Olav Åsteson,  
    Who was asleep for so long.

4. He did not awake before Epiphany,  
When the sun dawned over the heath,  
Then he saddled his quick horse,  
Intending to ride to church.  
    And that was Olav Åsteson,  
    Who was asleep for so long.

5. The priest stands at the altar,  
Reading out long glosses,  
Olav seats himself in the church door,  
And tells about his many dreams.  
    And that was Olav Åsteson,  
    Who was asleep for so long.

---

<sup>15</sup> The translation of the poem and explanatory notes is based on Moe's version in Steinsland.



6. Men, old and young,  
Gave their attention,  
While Olav Åsteson  
Related his dreams.  
    And that was Olav Åsteson,  
    Who was asleep for so long.

#### PROLOGUE TO THE VISION

7. I lay down on Christmas Eve,  
And fell into deep sleep,  
Did not awake before Epiphany,  
When people were going to church.  
    For the moon gleams,  
    And the paths disperse so far.

8. I have been up with the clouds  
and down at the sea of darkness;  
He who wishes to follow my footsteps,  
Will not laugh lightheartedly.  
    For the moon gleams,  
    And the roads disperse so far.

9. I have been up with the clouds  
And down at the bottom of the sea;  
He who wishes to follow my footsteps,  
Will not laugh from happy lips.  
    For the moon gleams,  
    And the roads disperse so far.

10. I have been up with the clouds  
And down on the black moors;  
I have seen the heat of hell,  
And a part of the heavenly kingdom.  
    For the moon gleams,  
    And the roads disperse so far.

11. I have traveled over the hallowed water,  
And over deep valleys;  
I hear water, but cannot see it,  
It seems to be flowing beneath the earth.  
    For the moon gleams,  
    And the roads disperse so far.

12. I am so tired and weary,

And inside me I seem to burn;  
I hear water, but cannot see it,  
It seems to be flowing beneath the earth.

For the moon gleams,  
And the roads disperse so far.

13. My horse did not neigh,  
My dogs did not bark,  
The morning birds did not sing;  
It seemed like a marvel to me.

For the moon gleams,  
And the roads disperse so far.

14. I was in the otherworld,  
For many tedious nights;  
God in heaven knows  
How much misery I saw.

For the moon gleams,  
And the roads disperse so far.

15. I am a skilled man,  
Therefore I am considered wise,  
A long time I was in hell,  
And I have come to know death well.

For the moon gleams,  
And the roads disperse so far.

#### THE JOURNEY TO THE WORLD OF THE DEAD

16. The first time I went hence<sup>16</sup>  
I traveled over a bed of thorns,  
My scarlet cloak was torn,  
And I lost the nails on my feet.

For the moon gleams,  
And the roads disperse so far.

17. The second time I went hence  
I traveled through a circle of thorns;  
My scarlet cloak was torn,  
And I lost the nails on my fingers.

For the moon gleams,  
And the roads disperse so far.

---

<sup>16</sup> *went hence*. Original term: *uteksti*; from *extasis* and *exitus*: the soul's journey outside of the body.

18. I came to the Gjallar Bridge,<sup>17</sup>  
Which hangs so high in the air,  
The whole bridge is gold-plated  
And there are spikes in both ends.  
    For the moon gleams,  
    And the roads disperse so far.

19. The serpent stings and the hound bites,  
And the ox stands in the middle:  
Three are the creatures on the Gjallar Bridge,  
And all are grim and angry.  
    For the moon gleams,  
    And the roads disperse so far.

20. The hound bites, the serpent stings,  
And the ox stands goading,  
They let none over the Gjallar bridge,  
Who has judged wrongly.  
    For the moon gleams,  
    And the roads disperse so far.

21. I have crossed the Gjallar bridge,  
It is both steep and cumbersome;  
I have also waded through the Väs moors<sup>18</sup>,  
But I overcame them.  
    For the moon gleams,  
    And the roads disperse so far.

22. I have waded through the mires,  
They seemed bottomless to me;  
Now I have walked the Gjallar bridge,  
With mire soil in my mouth.  
    For the moon gleams,  
    And the roads disperse so far.

23. I have crossed the Gjallar bridge,  
Fastened with hooks;  
But the moors were more tiresome,  
God's bless those who must go there.  
    For the moon gleams,  
    And the roads disperse so far.

---

<sup>17</sup> *Gjallar bridge*. Original term: *Gjallarbrui*; from Norse mythology where a bridge crossed the river Gjöll, separating the living from the realm of the dead.

<sup>18</sup> *Väs moors*. Original term: *Våsemyrane*; impenetrable moor landscape in the world of the dead.

## JOURNEY TO THE WORLD OF THE DEAD I

24. Then I came to those waters  
Where blue flames cover the ice;  
God appeared in my mind,  
And directed me away from there.  
    For the moon gleams,  
    And the roads disperse so far.

25. I was in the otherworld,  
I knew no one there,  
Only the blessed mother of God  
Who had red gold on her hands.  
    For the moon gleams,  
    And the roads disperse so far.

26. Some traveled over the Grimar mound<sup>19</sup>  
And others over the Skåle sands<sup>20</sup>,  
But those who crossed the Gjallar stream  
Came out wet on the other shore.  
    For the moon gleams,  
    And the roads disperse so far.

27. Then I turned into the winter path<sup>21</sup>  
On my right hand side;  
There I saw paradise  
Glowing over the wide world.  
    For the moon gleams,  
    And the roads disperse so far.

28. There I could again see the mother of God;  
I did not know where to go:  
“Go to brokksvalin<sup>22</sup>,  
Where judgment will be pronounced.”  
    For the moon gleams,  
    And the roads disperse so far.

## PRELIMINARY JUDGMENT

29. When I came to the pilgrims' church<sup>23</sup>,  
I knew no man there,

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<sup>19</sup> *Grimar mound*. Orig. term: *Grimaråsen*; a high mound in the otherworld.

<sup>20</sup> *Skåle sands*. Orig. term: *Skålestrond*; the house beach.

<sup>21</sup> *winter path*. Orig. term: *vetterstig*; a path which leads the souls to the world of the dead.

<sup>22</sup> *brokksvaline*: halls of the clouds, a place close to paradise.

<sup>23</sup> *pilgrim's church*. Orig. term: *pilegrimskyrkja*; the same as brokksvaline.

Only my good godmother  
With red gold on her hands.  
    In brokksvalin,  
    Where judgment would be pronounced.

30. From the north they came,  
Riding thunderously;  
In the front rode Grutte Greybeard<sup>24</sup>,  
Behind him his large swarm.  
    In brokksvalin,  
    Where judgment would be pronounced.

31. From the north they came,  
I knew it well,  
In the front rode Grutte greybeard,  
The horse he rode was black.  
    In brokksvalin,  
    Where judgment would be pronounced.

32. From the south they came,  
I knew it was good;  
In the front rode St. Michael,  
The horse he rode was white.  
    In brokksvalin,  
    Where judgment would be pronounced.

33. From the south they came,  
Riding so quietly,  
In the front rode St. Michael,  
After him, Jesus Christ.  
    In brokksvalin,  
    Where judgment would be pronounced.

34. From the south they came,  
Appearing slow and calm;  
In the front rode St. Michael,  
Under his arm lay his horn.  
    In brokksvalin,  
    Where judgment would be pronounced.

35. St. Michael it was,  
He sounded the long horn:

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<sup>24</sup>Grutte Greybeard. Orig. term: Grutte gråskjegget; the devil.

“And now all souls  
Will commence for judgment.”  
    In brokksvalin,  
    Where judgment would be pronounced.

36. The souls then began to tremble,  
Like aspen leaves in the wind;  
And each and every soul there  
Wept over its own sins.  
    In brokksvalin,  
    Where judgment would be pronounced.

37. St. Michael of the souls  
Applied his scales,  
Then he weighed all sinning souls,  
Towards Jesus Christ.  
    In brokksvalin,  
    Where judgment would be pronounced.

## JOURNEY TO THE WORLD OF THE DEAD II

38. I saw a man,  
The first I met,  
A little boy he bore in his arms;  
He was in the earth to his knees.  
    In brokksvalin,  
    Where judgment would be pronounced.

39. I came to a man,  
His cloak was leaden:  
This poor soul in our world  
Was greedy in hard times.  
    In brokksvalin,  
    Where judgment would be pronounced.

40. I came to several men,  
They carried glowing soil:  
God have mercy on the poor souls  
Who moved border-stones in the woods.  
    In brokksvalin,  
    Where judgment would be pronounced.

41. I came to several children,  
They stood still on blaze:  
God’s mercy to the sinning souls,

Who cursed their father and mother.  
In brokksvalin,  
Where judgment would be pronounced.

42. I came to the toad and the serpent,  
They pecked each other with their teeth:  
They were sinning siblings,  
Who had cursed each other.  
In brokksvalin,  
Where judgment would be pronounced.

43. There I met two serpents,  
They bit each other in the tails:  
They were sinful cousins,  
Who married each other on earth.  
In brokksvalin,  
Where judgment would be pronounced.

44. I came to the Sysle house<sup>25</sup>,  
There were the witches inside:  
They stood in a pool of blood,  
So hard was their work.  
In brokksvalin,  
Where judgment would be pronounced.

45. It is hot in hell,  
Hotter than anyone can imagine;  
There they hang over a cauldron with tar,  
And chopped a priest's back down.  
In brokksvalin,  
Where judgment would be pronounced.

#### REWARD FOR GOOD DEEDS

46. He is blessed in our world  
Who gives his shoes to the poor:  
He will not have to walk bare footed  
On the bed of thorns.  
The tongue speaks,  
But the truth is told on judgment day.

47. He is blessed on earth  
Who gives his cow to the poor:  
He will not have to walk dizzily

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<sup>25</sup> *Sysle house*. Orig.: *Syslehuset*; place for punishment of witchcraft

On the high Gjallar Bridge.  
The tongue speaks,  
But the truth is told on judgment day.

48. He is blessed on earth  
Who gives bread to the poor:  
He need not fear in the otherworld  
The harsh baying of hounds.  
The tongue speaks,  
But the truth is told on judgment day.

49. He is blessed on earth  
Who gives corn to the poor:  
He need not fear in the otherworld  
The sharp horns of the oxen.  
The tongue speaks,  
But the truth is told on judgment day.

50. He is blessed on earth  
Who gives food to the poor:  
He need not fear in the otherworld  
Neither mockery nor hatred.  
The tongue speaks,  
But the truth is told on judgment day.

51. He is blessed on earth  
Who gives clothes to the poor:  
He need not fear in the otherworld  
Vast mountains of ice.  
The tongue speaks,  
But the truth is told on judgment day.

52. Men, old and young  
Gave him their attention;  
That was Olav Åsteson,  
Now he has told his dreams.



## **Vita**

Christian Carlsen was born in Siegburg, Germany, grew up in Norway and received his Diploma of Education in English and Music (Dpl. Päd.) from the Pädagogische Akademie in Salzburg, Austria.