Approaching the Vercelli Book: Travelogue, Ruminations and Ruminatio

Approaching the Vercelli Book: Travelogue, Ruminations and *Ruminatio*

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The Vercelli Book (Vercelli Biblioteca capitolare cxvii), one of the four celebrated Old English poetic codices, is reasoned to have been produced "in the middle of the second half of the tenth century."[1] Thereafter, it made its way to northern Italy by around the year 1100 and "was almost certainly in Vercelli, an important stopping place on the pilgrim route to Rome, throughout the later Middle Ages […]."[2] In September of 2024, I was able to make my own personal pilgrimage, as it were, when I was given the opportunity to travel to the Museo del Tesoro del Duomo e Archivio Capitolare, where this important cultural artifact is housed.[3] The purpose of this visit to Vercelli was to allow for in-person consultation of the manuscript, this being part of my larger treatment with the anthology's prose and poetic Old English texts and my ongoing study of the Vercelli Book as a linguistically performative object and cohesive textual entity. My harder findings and specific observations can be seen across my more orthodox medievalist research output and undoubtedly will continue to underwrite various aspects of my ongoing and future academic efforts. Nevertheless, in the weeks and months leading up to the actual journey I felt increasingly compelled also to try and set out

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[1] Donald Scragg, "Vercelli Book," in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, rev. ed., eds. Michael Lapidge, John Blair, Simon Keynes, and Donald Scragg (Chicester: Blackwell Publishing, 2014), 478–9 (p. 478).

[2] Ibid., 478–9.

[3] My visit and research would not have been possible without generous support from: the library itself and especially the manuscript curator Silvia Faccin; Kanazawa University; the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (KAKENHI Grant-in-Aid for Early-Career Scientists Grant number: 23K12119, Project: 'Language Ideologies and Spiritual Identity: Comparative Perspectives from the Vercelli Book'); as well as my loving family.

something of an alternative perspective, to put forward another approach to the Vercelli Book and its texts that, while perhaps still fairly modern academic in its diction, would be deliberately less so in terms of its overall trajectory.

To that end, in accompaniment with a straightforward report of my travel activities, in this bulletin editorial I would also like to present something of a critical exploration into faith-based interaction with the Vercelli Book. Drawing in personal reflections and ruminations alongside the central medieval literary notion of *ruminatio*, ultimately what I will advocate for is not the spiritual — and thus needless to say ineluctably subjective and abstract — merits of such an endeavor, but rather the more broadly generative and fruitful potentiality that is embedded in the process itself, as well as the conceptually stimulating viability of a 'non-academic' approach. As Mary Carruthers writes:

> a modern scholar is concerned primarily with getting the text objectively right, treating it as an ultimate and sole authority. We are taught to legitimate our reading (by which we mean our interpretation or understanding) solely by the text; we see ourselves as its servants, and *although both the possibility and the utility of such absolute objectivity have been called into question many times over the last century, this attitude remains a potent assumption in scholarly debate*, even for those most wedded to reader-response theories.[4]

Far from "absolute objectivity," my own view is that the prevailing status of the historian as an impartial observer is, in reality, itself a no less constraining form of ideological influence. Like any perspective, it comes bundled with it its own inherent biases, blind spots, and limitations.

As a critical starting point, it is helpful to bear in mind John D. Niles's word of

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[4] Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 205. Emphasis added.

caution to all modern readers of Old English poetry in his treatise on the Exeter Book, another of the major poetic codices; namely, that we need to be extremely cognizant of our status as "'outsiders' to the culture from which the book arose: it is impossible for anyone today to be an 'insider'."[5] Indeed, along with the potential for both misconception and anachronism — whether accidental or deliberate and creative — that is often encountered in various forms of reenactment, the dangers of harmful misappropriation loom especially large in connection to incendiary issues of ownership and heritage across both the academic discipline and popular imaginings of Early Medieval England. Still, there is something to be said for attempting to engage with the Vercelli Book in a self-reflective and meditative way, one that perhaps evokes usage patterns that are more akin to those of the manuscript's producers and early potential audiences. We cannot be afraid to get personal, given that the general scholarly consensus has settled around the idea that the manuscript represents an object for personal devotion, be it by a monastic, pilgrim canon, secular clergy, or possibly an abbot or bishop.[6]

Personally then, my Vercelli travel itinerary and main activities were as follows:

• Wednesday, 18 September: departure from residence in Japan

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[5] John Niles, *God's Exiles and English Verse: On the Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2019), 36.

[6] See first: Mary Clayton, "Homiliaries and Preaching in Anglo-Saxon England," *Peritia* 4 (1985): 207–42; Francis Leneghan, "Teaching the Teachers: The Vercelli Book and the Mixed Life," *English Studies* 94.6 (2013): 627–58; Éamonn Ó Carragáin, "Rome, Ruthwell, Vercelli: *The Dream of the Rood* and the Italian Connection," in *Vercelli tra oriente e occidente tra tarda antichità e medioevo*, ed. Vittoria Dolcetti Corazza (Alessandria: Edizioni dell-orso, 1998), 59–105; Kenneth Sisam, *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 109–18; Elaine Treharne, "The Form and Function of the Vercelli Book," in *Text, Image, Interpretation: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature and its Insular Context in Honour of Éamonn Ó Carragáin*, eds. Alastair J. Minnis and Jane Roberts (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 245–62; Samantha Zacher, *Preaching the Converted: The Style and Rhetoric of the Vercelli Homilies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); Samantha Zacher, "Re-reading the Style and Rhetoric of the Vercelli Homilies," in *The Old English Homily: Precedence, Practice, and Appropriation*, ed. Aaron Kleist (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 173–207.

- Thursday, 19 September: arrival in Milan, visit to Duomi di Milano, travel to lodging in Vercelli
- Friday, 20 September: manuscript consultation at Archivio Capitolare, visit to Cattedrale di Sant'Eusebio
- Saturday, 21 September: manuscript consultation at Archivio Capitolare, visit to Museo del Tesoro del Duomo di Vercelli, visit to Basilica di Sant'Andrea, travel to lodging in Milan
- Sunday, 22 September: departure from Milan
- Monday, 23 September: arrival at residence in Japan

With me for this trip, I brought a rucksack containing my personal effects, having elected to carry only digital editions of the Vercelli texts to save on space. Initially, something about this choice struck me as cheating somehow, but eventually I accepted this reluctance as essentially unfounded.[7] At the end of the day, any modern edition represents an editorially mediated textual construct. My purposes would be served just as well on a screen as on a printed page, with both mass-produced contemporary options being at a far remove from the handwritten parchment of the manuscript as a uniquely produced object.

Outside of my primary research activity, my other aim during the mornings and evenings while away from my family and other work responsibilities on this trip was to spend as much of the time alone as possible in spiritually reflective meditation centered around texts of the Vercelli Book. By this I do not mean attempting to recreate perfectly an early medieval devotional process. What I had in mind was a rather more straightforward and undoubtedly modern personal exercise, one in the vein of theologian and anti-Nazi dissident Dietrich Bonhoeffer's conception of "personal meditation […]

[7] My thoughts were drawn to the peculiar "deep attachment" to the analogical and resistance that is frequently felt (e.g., vinyl compared to audio CDs), as highlighted by Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*, rev. ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), 184.

devoted to the Scriptures, private prayer, and intercession, and it has *no other purpose*."[8] Bonhoeffer continues to describe:

> In our meditation we ponder the chosen text on the strength of the promise that it has something utterly personal to say to us for this day and for our Christian life, that it is not only God's Word for the Church, but also God's Word for us individually. We expose ourselves to the specific word until it addresses us personally. And when we do this, we are doing no more than the simplest, untutored Christian does every day; we read God's Word as God's Word for us.
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> *We do not ask what this text has to say to other people*. For the preacher this means that he will not ask how he is going to preach or teach on this text, but what it is saying quite directly to him.[9]

For myself, marking my first full decade of Old English study and in the middle of a three-year research project focused specifically on the Vercelli Book, what I sought at this juncture was purposefully to give the Vercelli texts a bit of mental space to breathe new air. I wanted fresh rereadings and a refamiliarization that was from the beginning not already colored by or bound to the motive of producing academic results.

In addition, while what I was attempting was by no means a full-scale reenactment, I did feel it meaningful to take on board one specific element of broader medieval literary practice, the notion of *ruminatio*. Once again from Carruthers:

> the medieval scholar's relationship to his texts is quite different from modern objectivity. Reading is to be digested, to be ruminated, like a cow chewing her cud, or like a bee making honey from the nectar of flowers. Reading is memorized with the aid of *murmur*, mouthing the words subvocally as one turns the text

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[8] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* [*Gemeinsames Leben*, 1939], translated by John W. Doberstein (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 81–4 (p. 81). Emphasis added.

[9] Ibid., 82. Emphasis added.

> over in one's memory; both Quintilian and Martianus Capella stress how murmur accompanies meditation. It is this movement of the mouth that established rumination as a basic metaphor for memorial activities.[10]

Although I held back from vocalizing in Old English while reading on the plane to avoid startling the passengers seated next to me, I did make it a point actually to speak and mouth the words of the texts as part of my reflections at other times throughout the trip.

I found one major effect of this style of reading to be that I was genuinely made to feel the reading process. The act of lengthy readings lingered afterwards as a physical sensation in my jaw. While it should also perhaps have been obvious, I was struck at first by the genuine novelty of realizing how long it really takes to traverse *Andreas* and *Elene* non-silently from beginning to end in their entirety. Equally though, it occurred to me that narrative sequence and quote-unquote 'completion' of the texts might be missing the point entirely. As Daniel Calder outlines with respect to another of the hagiographical Cynewulf texts, *Juliana*: "the narrative pattern […] is ritualistic, not merely sequential or synoptic"; characters (and I might add the narrative events themselves) "perform roles that require only the ritual fulfillment of a known teleology […]."[11] Not only are the texts *from* a set worldview, they actively anticipate and presume unwavering dedication *to* said worldview. Naturally, this notion of the implied audience applies to any number of sacred texts and religious writings, which "take for a granted a reader for whom interpretation and participation are inseparable parts of the same process […] even the most apologetic of texts never really accommodate an objectivist epistemology […]."[12]

Playing directly into this facet of active involvement, I was compelled to notice how the personal deixis of the Vercelli texts give rise in turn to feelings of both

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[10] Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 205.

[11] Daniel Calder, "The Art of Cynewulf's *Juliana*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 34 (1973): 355–71 (p. 357).

[12] Markus Bockmuehl, "'To Be or Not To Be': The Possible Futures of New Testament Scholarship," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51.3 (1998): 271–306 (p. 300). Bockmuehl is specifically considering the implied reader of the New Testament, but his sentiment is without a doubt applicable more broadly.

engagement and displacement, especially when read in various sequences and reflected on separately, together, and in a more holistic manner. Returning to the texts time and again, it is easy for the reader to *be spoken to* by the direct addresses to an external audience that arise not only in the didactic homiletic prose, but also in the verse.[13] I no less readily found myself feeling personally involved in various capacities amidst the shifting between first-, second-, and third-person discourse, and all the more so while speaking the words of the texts aloud and hearing them in solitude. More and more, what I came to perceive was that the texts effectively seek to draw in the devotional reader across time and space, framing the believer-participant not as an observer entity that is merely party to and separate from the narratives told, but rather as an individual actant who is presented as continuous with and living out their underlying metanarrative.[14] All in all, my largest takeaway was that the framework of devotion must at least be kept in mind — if not, indeed, kept at the very forefront — for approaching and interpreting the Vercelli texts, be it as a collection or in isolation. The texts are to be ruminatively *chewed* as much as literarily, linguistically, or historically *swallowed*.

For fear of saying too much that stinks outright,[15] I will close out these reflections on personal engagement with the religious writings of the Vercelli Book in a simpler way, borrowing a metaphor from Markus Bockmuehl. I would suggest that the door between philological study of Old English and experiential spiritual practice should at least be left open, because for many — including the original text producers and users — "there are limits to how much you can usefully say about

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[13] N.B. This feature is not one that is common in Old English narrative verse. Elise Louviot. *Direct Speech in Beowulf and Other Old English Narrative Poems* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2016), 87.

[14] I would in this perception acknowledge no small degree of influence from the rhetoric about "[l]iving in the fifth act" put forward in N. T. Wright, "N. T. Wright on Scripture and the Authority of God," *BioLogos*, October 3, 2018, https://biologos.org/articles/n-t-wright-on-scripture-and-the-authority-of-god.

[15] Cf. Jason N. Blum, "Chapter 5: Hui-neng and the Stink of Zen," in *Zen and the Unspeakable God: Comparative Interpretations of Mystical Experience* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2015), 120–53.

the stained glass windows of King's College Chapel without going inside."[16]

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[16] Bockmuehl, "'To Be or Not To Be,'" 302.

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Vercelli Book へのアプローチ：旅行記・反芻と *Ruminatio*

ジェイコブ・ウェイン・ラナー

要旨

『ヴェルチェッリ写本』(the Vercelli Book, Vercelli Biblioteca capitolare cxvii) は古英語詩を収録する 4 大写本の一つである。宗教的詩のほか，説教や宗教的散文も含まれており，一般的に写本自体が個人の信仰的ディヴォーション (英：devotion, 静思の時) のためのものだと考えられる。本稿には以下が含まれる：

1) Museo del Tesoro del Duomo e Archivio Capitolare への出張報告；
2) 中世の基本的な文学概念 (*ruminatio*) から派生される精神的かつ主観的考察。

最終的には，ヴェルチェッリ集に対するいわゆる「非アカデミック」な思考アプローチの刺激的可能性を提唱する。