

TEMPORAL CONFUSION: *CHRIST I* AS MEDIEVAL LYRIC

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Christ I is a poem which is often read reductively, only as it pertains to Christian symbolism, "in a way that suggests that it is a relatively diffuse and pallid attempt, a secondary one, to imitate the primary and powerful reasoning of the Fathers" (Irving 123). But this poem is much more than a secondary imitation of patristic thought. The poet is indeed heavily indebted to patristic philosophy and makes use of Augustinian imagery and allusions. For example, lines 2-14 of the poem mirror Augustine's image of the ruined house of his soul, found in the first book of his *Confessions*; and in the "speech of the faithful," lines 82-87 of the poem, we find Augustine's notion of sexuality and original sin, which is that "the essential importance of the Virgin Birth lies in the contrast between the miraculous conception of Christ and ordinary sexual conception by which Adam's guilt is perpetuated" (Hill, "Notes on the Imagery and Structure" 86). *Christ I* also mirrors the Augustinian definition of divine perception, expressed in Book XI of his *Confessions*: that God views all time at once, and that God exists within a single moment that encompasses the past, present, and future (Augustine 253-80). However, *Christ I* is more than a mere "pallid" imitation of patristic thought. By embracing Augustinian philosophy and then combining it with the conventions of lyric poetry, the poem brings its readers more fully into the moment of Christ's birth so that we can see, simultaneously, the past coexistence of Christ with the Father before the creation of the universe, the birth of Christ, through Mary, into the world of men, the Harrowing of Hell, and even the future Judgment.

Sharon Cameron argues that the lyric as a genre tends to rely less on telling a narrative sequence than on "prying apart the walls" of a single moment, a moment in which the past, present, and future come crashing together. She says:

If a poem denies the centrality of beginnings and ends, if it fails to concern itself with the accumulated sequence of a history, it must push its way into the dimensions of the moment, pry apart its walls and reveal the discovered space there to be as complex as the long corridors of historical time. For the moment is to the lyric what sequence is to the story. (204)

That is, one function of the lyric is to exchange the diachronic or chronological order of the world for a synchronic or simultaneous one. The poem works by becoming a momentary space—the lyric moment—in which all aspects of time—past, present, and future—come together as one. The lyric compresses together forms which would otherwise be completely opposite, in this case temporality and simultaneity, death and immortality. According to Cameron:

It is not surprising that the lyric, whose province is by nature the annihilation of a severative temporality, and which can compress space in its own restorative design, should seek to mediate the most profound space of all. . . . Religious lyrics are especially vulnerable to such a belief, predicated as they are on that violation of time/space which will bring their speakers into yearned-for relation with God. (248)

This "most profound space of all," especially in the context of Old English elegiac and lyric poetry such as *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and also *Christ I*, is the space between human beings and God.¹ By reading *Christ I* according to Cameron's viewpoint on lyric poetry, we can see that the poet has embraced Augustine's views on divine perception.

According to the Augustinian framework—most fully expressed in Book XI of the *Confessions*—human beings exist in the temporal world, bounded by the past, present, and future; God, however, exists outside of the constraints of time. Augustine differentiates between time, which is constantly passing, and eternity, which is constantly still. He does so in order to examine the difference between time, as it moves in the mortal world, and the divine perception of God, which in its stillness encompasses everything and stands outside of time. He

Felsen

laments our temporal state and wishes that, for at least a moment, mortals could experience perception the way that God perceives things: past, present, and future all at the same time. He says:

[People] do not yet understand how the things are made which come to be in you and through you. Try as they may to savour the taste of eternity, their thoughts still twist and turn upon the ebb and flow of things in past and future time. But if only their minds could be seized and held steady, they would be still for a while and, for that short moment, they would glimpse the splendour of eternity which is forever still. They would contrast it with time, which is never still, and see that it is not comparable. They would see that time derives its length only from a great number of movements constantly following one another into the past, because they cannot all continue at once. But in eternity nothing moves into the past: all is present. Time, on the other hand, is never all present at once. The past is always driven on by the future, the future always follows on the heels of the past, and both the past and the future have their beginning and their end in the eternal present. If only men's minds could be seized and held still! (261)

Augustine opposes the temporality of the mortal world to the eternal moment of God, who exists within that unreachable, present moment of time that does not pass. This conception of time encompasses knowledge, memory, and perception as well; we cannot know the present, because as it happens it passes, and we have only our memory of the event. Human perception thus becomes either memory of the past or the expectation of something yet to happen in the future, while divine perception can encompass all of time, and can see everything that has happened and will ever happen. Inside the world of *Christ I*, when the poet depicts Christ being born into the world of mankind, his readers are also aware of his past and future conditions; we know everything that Christ has done, and will do, from the creation of the universe to Judgment Day. And so, in a way, we momentarily can gain the same type of divine perception which—according to Augustine—is usually reserved for God alone, although it is only temporarily achieved while reading the poem.

In order to recreate this divine perception, other Anglo-Saxon poets have often inverted and reordered the chronology of the events of Christ's existence. For example, in discussing the juxtaposition of the Harrowing of Hell and the Nativity in the Old English *Descensus ad Infernos*, Thomas Hill argues that

. . . the two episodes of Christ's life are structurally similar in that both Christ's birth and the Harrowing of Hell are "liminal" phases of His career. His birth and the Harrowing involve a transition from one mode of existence to another; both involve "birth" into a new life. And during both the Harrowing and Christ's birth He was in a sense between life and death and between two clearly defined and structured roles. . . . These events are, at least in terms of medieval Christian thought, essentially similar. ("Cosmic Stasis" 386-87)

The connection of these events in the *Descensus* is certainly not an arbitrary one, and Hill argues that the poem seems

. . . to be rather similar to *Christ I* in that both poems are about the process of Christian history. Both poems are fundamentally typological in structure, although the typology of the *Descent into Hell* is so straightforward that it hardly calls for comment. And both *Christ I* and the *Descent* are not so much concerned with historical . . . events in themselves as with ordering these events in a pattern which bears on the present moment.² ("Cosmic Stasis" 388)

In the *Descensus*, the pattern of these disparate events in the life of Christ is evident to the reader within the single moment of cosmic stasis at Christ's birth, when the temporality of the entire world stops, and we, as readers, are placed within the liminal moment which, for the Anglo-Saxon poet, God inhabits.³ Zbigniew Izydorczyk examines this same inversion and conflation of events, arguing that

[a]n account of the resurrection that precedes the descent points to the cause of the salvation about to be conferred on the congregation in hell, but it also prevents the descent from

Felsen

being reduced to a specific historical event, circumscribed by time and limited in its effects. The inversion charges the scene in hell with the potential for expanding in scope and relevance, the potential that eventually transforms it into its sacramental antitype—baptism. (445)

Both Hill and Izydorczyk describe how this inversion and conflation of the events of Christ's life prevents the reader from seeing them as historically separate. By doing so, both moments come crashing together and the poet has successfully achieved a conflation that is akin to the momentary glimpse into Augustine's vision of divine perception that can be found in *Christ I*.

The temporal inversion and conflation that these two scholars see in the *Descensus* is also evident in other Anglo-Saxon poems such as *The Dream of the Rood*. For example, Monica Brzezinski examines the juxtaposition of the Harrowing and the Judgment at the end of the poem and remarks that due to this conflation, the poem

. . . collapses in on itself; time, instead of expanding, becomes a vortex in which events separated by millennia seem to occur simultaneously. There is no longer any specific point in time to which we may refer, only a *mélange* of past, present, and future expectation. . . . We view time not as man sees it, linearly, horizontally, but perhaps as God sees it—all of earthly time is a mere eight lines within the limitlessness of eternity, an infinity which frames temporal existence. . . . (Brzezinski 264)

What Brzezinski—like Hill and Izydorczyk—is describing is the way that Anglo-Saxon poets make use of the lyric moment; these events, no longer circumscribed by linear time, escape from the barriers of mortal temporality; in doing so, they allow us, for a moment only, to glimpse the singularity of time within which, according to Augustine, only God exists.

By reading *Christ I* in this way—making use of Cameron's notions of lyric poetry in order to view the poem as an expression of Augustinian notions of time—the reader can experience Christ's existence throughout every part of the poem in the way that the poet

intended. In varying order we may see Christ's coexistence with God before the Creation, the moment of Christ's birth, and the Harrowing of Hell, respectively representing the past, present, and future. Yet although these three different aspects of Christ's life occur in separate places throughout the poem, in no particular order, there are two passages in which all three come together at one time. By placing all three of these events together in these passages, the poet utilizes the function of the lyric to break down the temporal barriers that separate us from divine perception. In Lyric V, this inversion and conflation of events serves to bring us closer to a singularity of temporal events:

Swa þu, god of gode gearo acenned,
sunu soþan fæder, swegles in wuldre
butan anginne æfre wære,
swa þec nu for þearfum þin agen geweorc
bideð þurh byldo, þæt þu þa beorhtan us
sunnan onsende, ond þe sylf cyme
þæt ðu inleohte þa þe longe ær,
þrosme beþeahte ond in þeostrum her,
sætton sinneahtes; synnum bifealdne
deorc deaþes sceadu dreogan sceoldan.
Nu we hyhtfulle hælo gelyfað
þurh þæt word godes weorodum brungen,
þe on frymðe wæs fæder ælmihtigum
efenece mid god, ond nu eft gewearð
flæsc firena leas, þæt seo fæmne gebær
geomrum to geoce.

(V, 109-24)

Thus you, God once begotten from God, Son of the true Father, were ever without beginning the glory of heaven; so now in its need your own handiwork begs with boldness that you might send us the bright sun, and that you yourself come, so that you may illuminate those who long before were wreathed in smoke, and here in the darkness sat in eternal night, shrouded in sin, had to endure death's dark shadow. Now hopeful, we believe in the salvation brought to the people through the word of God, which was in the beginning

Felsen

coeternal with God the Almighty Father, and is now become flesh devoid of sin, that the virgin bore as a help to the afflicted.⁴

Here we have all three aspects of Christ's life depicted one after the other: His existence without beginning with the Father (109-11 and 121-22), his coming into the world (112-14 and 123-24), and the Harrowing (115-118). This imagery of the Harrowing is particularly powerful within the poem; it consistently shows us the plight, not only of those who are still living, but also of those who are in Hell, in this passage and in others such as this passage from Lyric VI:

..... Nu hie softe þæs
bidon in bendum hwonne bearn godes
cwome to cearigum. Forþon cwædon swa,
suslum geslæhte: Nu þu sylfa cum,
heofones heahcýning. Bring us hælolif,
werigum witeþeowum, woþe forcymenum,
bitrum brynetearum. Is seo bot gelong
eal æt þe anum oferþearfum.
(VI, 146-53)

. . . Now they patiently abode in their bonds until the Son of God came to the sorrowful. Therefore spoke thus, those prostrate in torments: "Come now yourself, heaven's high King, bring salvation to us, weary slaves, overcome with weeping, with bitter burning tears. Relief for those in dire need rests alone in you.

Those poor souls waiting patiently in this passage are the same as those who wait in Lyric V, wreathed in smoke, enduring death's shadow, waiting for their release. In this way the Harrowing imagery, in itself and also as an oblique reference to the even more distant Judgment Day, becomes a future aspect of the single moment of the Advent that the poem opens up to the reader. This is a particularly powerful passage, in which we as readers move from the Creation, through the Advent, all the way to the Harrowing, and then back to Creation and

finally back again to the Advent, all in the space of fifteen lines. The reader is taken on a whirlwind tour of Christ's life in a breathless, headlong rush, and is left in a disoriented state, with the temporal, chronological chains of mortal life in ruins. This passage breaks down temporal barriers, rearranges the events of Christ's life, and places them together in the space of fifteen lines in order to "pry apart the walls" of the moment of Christ's birth and enable us to glimpse his entire life in a single moment.

In several passages of Lyric VIII we also see this conflation and rearranging of events taking place in order to recreate Augustine's notion of divine perception. First we see the image of Christ, before the Creation, as a child:

Eala þu soða ond þu sibsuma
ealra cyninga cyning, Crist ælmihtig,
hu þu ær wære eallum geworden
worulde þrymmum mid þinne wuldorfæder
cild acenned þurh his cræft ond meaht!
Nis ænig nu eorl under lyfte,
secg searþoncol, to þæs swiðe gleaw
þe þæt aseccan mæge sundbuendum,
areccan mid ryhte, hu þe rodera weard
æt frymðe genom him to freobearne.

(VIII, 214-23)

O thou true and peaceful King of all Kings, Christ Almighty,
how you were arisen, with your glorious Father, before all the
glories of the world, a child begotten by his craft and might!
There is not now any man under heaven, anyone clever and so
very wise who may explain to the sea-dwellers, expound
correctly, how the Warden of the skies took you in the
beginning as his noble child.

This image calls to mind the image of Christ as a baby in the manger at the moment of his birth into the mortal world. In seeing the image of Christ as a child at the Creation, these two birth moments converge; the poet has fused the Creation and the Advent into the single image of the Christ-child. By doing so, he allows the reader to see events

Felsen

nonlinearly. In the same way, Augustine says about God's divine perception that "[y]our today does not give place to any tomorrow nor does it take the place of any yesterday. Your today is eternity. And this is how the Son, to whom you said *I have begotten you this day*, was begotten co-eternal with yourself" (263). For Augustine, the moment that the Father begat the Son is a moment that is eternally happening, not one which happened at a specific point in the past. The poet has recreated this divine perception within the poem by fusing the Creation and the Advent into a single moment, utilizing the conventions of lyric poetry to pry apart the walls of temporality.

In addition to the moment of Christ's birth, the poet also plays with temporality in his examination of Christ's paternity and maternity. Here the poet has chosen to conflate the two sides of Christ's genealogy, again thematically linking Christ before the Creation to his birth:

Sylfa sette þæt þu sunu wære
efeneardigende mid þinne engan frean
ærþon oht þisses æfre gewurde.
þu eart seo snyttro þe þas sidan gesceaft
mid þi waldende worhtes ealle.
Forþon nis ænig þæs horsc, ne þæs hygecræftig,
þe þin fromcyn mæge fira bearnum
sweotule geseþan. Cum, nu, sigores weard,
meotod moncynnes, ond þine miltse her
arfæst ywe! Us is eallum neod
þæt we þin medrencynn motan cunnan,
ryhtgeryno, nu we areccan ne mægon
þæt fædrencynn fier owihte.

(VIII, 236-48)

He Himself established that you were the son, co-dwelling with your only Lord, before any of this had ever come to pass. You are the Wisdom, who with the Ruler wrought this entire creation. Therefore there is not anyone so wise nor so crafty, who might plainly show your origin to the children of men. Come now, Guardian of Victory, Measurer of Mankind, and show your mercy here! We all desire that we may know your

mother-kin, that mystery; we cannot explain any further at all the father-kin.

At the same time that the poet is relating the details of Christ's Father, he also discusses his mother, who is part of the Advent, an event which, at the time of Creation, is still far in the future. This now brings the Creation and Advent closer together. And these two events are linked to an event that is even farther in the future, the Harrowing of Hell:

Us is þinra arna þearf!
Hafað se awyrgda wulf tostenced,
deor dædscua, dryhten, þin eowde,
wide towrecene. þæt ðu, waldend, ær
blode gebohtes, þæt se bealofulla
hyned heardlice, ond him on hæft nimeð
ofer usse nioda lust. Forþon we, nergend, þe
biddað geornlice breostgehygdum
þæt þu hrædlice helpe gefremme
wergum wreccan, þæt se wites bona
in helle grund hean gedreose,
ond þin hondgeweorc, hæleþa scyppend,
mote arisan ond on ryht cuman
to þam upcundan æpelan rice. . . .

(VIII, 255-68)

. . . We have need of your grace! The accursed wolf, beast of shadow, has widely scattered your flock, O Lord. What you, Lord, bought before with your blood, this the baleful one cruelly oppresses, and takes into his bondage against our anxious desire. Therefore, Savior, we eagerly beseech you with the thoughts of our hearts, that you quickly give help to the weary wretches, so that the destroyer of wisdom may fall low into the abyss of Hell, and thy handiwork, Creator of men, may arise and justly come to the noble heavenly kingdom. . . .

In this single lyric the poet has now linked heaven/earth/hell, past/present/future, and Creation/Advent/Harrowing, and has collapsed the temporal narrative of Christ's existence into a single moment. They

Felsen

are no longer events which have happened in the past, or are going to perhaps happen at some unspecified time in the future. For Augustine, past and future events simply do not exist in any kind of eternal way, “[f]or if, wherever they are, they are future, they do not yet exist; if past, they no longer exist. So wherever they are and whatever they are, it is only by being present that they *are*” (267).

Within *Christ I*, the poet utilizes the single metaphor of the Golden Gates in order to bring the past and future together with the present, so as to conflate everything into a single moment which approximates Augustine’s notion of the divine, eternal present:

þu þisne middangeard milde geblissa
þurh ðinne hercyme, hælende Crist,
ond þa gyldnan geatu, þe in geardagum
ful longe ær bilocen stodan,
heofona heahfrea, hat ontynan. . . .

(VIII, 249-53)

Bless you mildly this middle-earth through thy advent, Savior Christ! And the golden gates, which in days of old stood long before fully locked, High Lord of heaven, bid them open!

The immediate reference for the golden gates is, of course, the Virgin Mary, through whom Christ passed into the world. But this poem does not allow us to see any particular image separated from its other possible referents; we must see the other possibilities for the golden gates. In addition to Mary, the golden gates may also represent the gates of Eden, through which, since the Fall, none may pass:

Wlat þa swa wisfæst witga geond þeodland
oppæt he gestarode þær gestapelad wæs
æþelic ingong. Eal wæs gebunden
deoran since duru ormæte,
wundurclommum bewriþen. Wende swiðe
þæt ænig eida æfre ne meahste
swa fæstlice forescyttelsas
on ecnesse o inhebban,
oppæ ðæs ceasterhlides clustor onlucan,

Felsen

ær him godes engel þurh glædne geþonc
þa wisan onwrah ond þæt word acwæð:
"Ic þe mæg secgan þæt soð gewearð
þæt ðas gyldnan gatu giet sume siþe
god sylf wile gæstes mægne
gefælsian, fæder ælmihtig,
ond þurh þa fæstan locu foldan neosan,
ond hio þonne æfter him ece stondað
simle singales swa beclused
þæt nænig oþer, nymðe nergend god,
hy æfre ma eft onluceð."

(IX, 306-25)

. . . Then the wise prophet looked throughout the land until he stared at where a noble entrance was established. A colossal gate was bound all about with precious metal, encompassed with wondrous bands. He thought deeply how any of mankind might ever, unto eternity, undo those firmly fixed bolts, or unlock the lock of the city-gate, until an angel of God with joyous thought revealed a hint, and spoke these words: "I may say to you what truly came to pass, that at a certain period, God himself, the Almighty Father, will purify the golden gates by the strength of his spirit, and will visit earth through the firm gates, and that then after Him they will remain forever, eternally, so firmly closed that none other save the Savior God will ever after unlock them again."

The golden gates may also represent the gates of Hell, which according to the Gospel of Nicodemus, Christ ripped down during the Harrowing. And the golden gates may also represent the gates of heaven, through which Christ led his people after the Harrowing, and again at Judgment Day. The single image of the golden gates allows the reader to glimpse, at the same instant, the Fall, the Advent, the Harrowing, and the Judgment Day. The reader is challenged to see the events of Christ's life, not purely chronologically, but rather typologically, in more of a synchronic paradigm than in a diachronic, temporal pattern. Instead of these events occurring at separate times of Christ's life, they instead become, in essence, three different aspects of Christ's existence. In this

way the poem surpasses our human limitations of measurement, going from a limited perception of time passing into something more. Augustine says that measuring the length of a poem by the number of its lines is “not an accurate means of measuring time, because it can happen that a short line spoken slowly may take longer to recite than a long one spoken hurriedly. The same applies to a whole poem, a foot, or even a single syllable” (274). Instead of this limited perception, Augustine suggests that perception should be “an extension of the mind itself” (274) through which we cease measuring and simply attempt to see things as God would, in a more holistic viewpoint that transcends temporality.

Reading *Christ I* through the lens of lyric poetry and Augustinian perception, it becomes impossible for us to see any event of Christ’s life without also thinking of the others, and we must therefore begin to read the poem typologically rather than chronologically. Augustine explains that when he sits down to read a psalm, his attention encompasses the whole; yet when he begins to read, it becomes nothing more than future expectation passing into memory. He reads and reads, until the expectation is shortened and the memory increases, until there is no more expectation and only memory (278). But in *Christ I*, all time exists at once, and for a moment we can experience the poem with divine perception. Utilizing the conventions of lyric poetry as Cameron describes, *Christ I* succeeds in doing what the lyric is supposed to do: break down the temporal walls that normally exist in the mortal world, and pry apart the single moment of Christ’s Advent, allowing the reader to perceive and experience the whole of Christ’s existence at once. For a short time only, the poem gives its reader the yearned-for moment of union with God, who exists in that Augustinian singularity of time, able to see all things at once.

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Notes

¹ Compare, for example, the way that memory, in *The Wanderer*, constantly shifts between past, present and future; these constant shifts break down the temporal barriers of the poem, creating a lyric moment surrounding the moment of exile in which the Wanderer, as well as the poem's audience, can (for a moment only) put aside the cares of this world and approach God.

² For a more thorough and general discussion of typology in relation to the events of Christ's life, see Burlin, *The Old English Advent*.

³ For more about this liminal moment of "cosmic stasis" at Christ's birth in the *Descent*, see Heatt 431-32; Conner 187.

⁴ All references to *Christ I* are taken from Gollancz's edition of *The Exeter Book*. The translations are my own.

Felsen

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