

Time and Textuality in Visionary Writing: Narrating the Afterlife in Alber's *Tnugdalus*

Abstract

This essay explores the temporal complexity of medieval visionary narrative through the example of Alber's *Tnugdalus*, a twelfth-century German-language retelling of the *Visio Tnugdali*. It considers first eschatological time – that is, the temporal status of the afterlife depicted – , before turning to the narratological construction of time to show how pasts, presents and futures are collapsed in visionary narrative. Finally, it turns to the temporality of the text itself. The composition of the text is presented as part of a chain of telling and mediated retelling, and narrates a journey to the afterlife that transforms the life of the traveller (Tnugdalus) as well as the lives of those who hear it in the moment of retelling, a moment that is potentially infinitely repeatable.

Introduction

Medieval visions of the afterlife take a variety of forms, but tend to conform to the basic model of a temporary out-of-body experience undergone by a living human in which he or she visits the afterlife (which may or may not be clearly spatially located), often with a companion or guide, before returning to this-worldly existence.¹ As such, they are temporally complex: visions combine a moment of temporal suspension (the suspension of the worldly time of the protagonist) with a glimpse of eternity – or at least a state beyond worldly temporality. They are also often grounded in a specific moment of historical time that provides the vision with a stamp of authenticity and a sense of fixed, testable historicity.

The combination of temporal states and perspectives that make up such visions render them a rich and curiously untapped resource for an exploration of medieval conceptualizations of time and temporality. Visionary writing commonly employs a depiction of the af-

1. On the history and development of visionary literature see in particular the studies by Dinzelbacher, Morgan, Benz, and Pollard.

terlife that functions on both a literal and a symbolic level in order to reflect on the present time, typically to address the nullity of human existence and, correspondingly, the inadequacy or incompleteness of worldly temporality in the face of divine eternity. Bede makes this explicit in the introduction to his account of the vision of Drythelm when he describes the overarching purpose of what happens: “namque ad excitationem viventium de morte animae quidam aliquandiu mortuus ad vitam resurrexit corporis” (“[f]or to stir up living men from the death of the soul, a certain man, stark dead for a time, rose again to bodily life”, Bede V.12). Here, Drythelm’s death-like state during his vision of heaven and hell and his subsequent spiritual conversion become a metaphor for the spiritual ‘death’ of Bede’s audience, who should too be transformed ‘to life’ through the narrative. Others, such as the late ninth-century *Vision of Charles the Fat*, encourage reflection on the present time for a more specific, politically inflected purpose (Dutton 225–51). And visions also offer insight into the contemporary understanding of the afterlife and the extent to which it is conceived of in temporal terms. In the context of the twelfth century particular importance is conventionally placed on the discourse of the emergence of the doctrine of purgatory, which leads to the question of what we might like to term ‘eschatological time’ (Gragnotati 89–137): the extent, that is, to which the afterlife encountered is a time-bound, temporary experience through which souls might progress and be purged.

Visionary writing is not only temporally complex on the level of the subject matter, however, but also on the level of the narrative itself. The combination of the otherworldly experience with a this-worldly frame narrative (that establishes when, where and to whom the vision occurs) poses a particular narratological challenge that can result in embedded narratives, in non-chronological narration or in discrepancies between discourse time and story time, all of which have the potential to result in productive analysis. And, as Paul Ricoeur has shown, it is neither straightforward nor desirable to distinguish between this narratological level and the conceptual one set out above. In his *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur argues that narrativity and temporality exist in a mutually reinforcing ‘healthy’ circle: “time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative: narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal existence” (Ricoeur 3). Ricoeur is particularly useful for a discussion of visionary writing due to his reading of Augustine’s *Confessions*; here, he shows how eternity can

only be grasped through a comparison with (human) time (which it paradoxically resembles) made by the intelligence: time has a capacity to approximate eternity (Augustine, *Confessions* XI.vi:8). Attempts to approach eternity therefore result in some kind of narrativizing activity. In the case of the *Confessions*, Ricoeur argues, the soul's striving for eternity results in a kind of peregrination and narration discernible in the form of the text itself. The narration of the first nine books of the text consists in a movement in the direction of eternity, but even after this more obviously chronological, time-bound section comes to an end, the text remains grounded in time – and this characteristic of being time-bound both enables an approximation of eternity but also cannot help but highlight its own difference to it. Eternity is fundamentally timeless – as Augustine tells us (Augustine, *Confessions* XI, xii:16–xiv:17) – yet can only be grasped through time, and, by extension, narrative (Ricoeur 22–28).

In this essay I use Ricoeur's insistence on the interconnection of temporality and narrative as a starting point to think through the temporal complexity of medieval visionary writing. I focus on one of the most important medieval visionary narratives, that of *Tnugdalus* (or *Tundalus* or *Tundale*), which narrates the journey through the afterlife and subsequent conversion of its sinful protagonist and was retold in a range of languages throughout the Middle Ages. I concentrate specifically on Alber's *Tnugdalus*, a late twelfth-century German retelling of the Latin *Visio Tnugdali* of Marcus of Regensburg, a work that has gained relatively little scholarly attention yet resonates powerfully with increasing contemporary interest in secular time and eternity and has much to offer outside the field of German literary study. I explore the interlinked theological/conceptual and narratological aspects of temporality in this key medieval vision, but expand the focus on narrative to draw in a third dimension: the temporality of the text as itself, as object, experience or narrative phenomenon. In this respect I qualify Ricoeur by drawing on what Kiening and Stercken view as the mutually reciprocal relationship between temporality and mediality, where “the representation of time also means to form and cultivate the means of representation” (Kiening and Stercken 4). Textual media not only contain temporal structures, but are themselves temporally complex phenomena, and may reflect on their status as such. In fact, as I hope to show, the subject matter of visionary writing lends itself peculiarly well to this sort of reflection: the time of eschatology and the time of textuality are mutually illuminating.

In what follows, I first explore the temporal status of the afterlife

depicted in Alber's text and the question of eschatological time. I show how Alber, more so than his Latin source, seems deliberately to obscure the theological and ontological status of the afterlife and turns it instead into something much more experiential. In this way, as I explore in the second section, the journey to the afterlife becomes a moment of temporal suspension in Tnugdalus' life that enables critical reflection on human temporality and, in doing so, collapses the distinctions between past, present and future. Finally, I show how this is further complicated by narratorial reflection on the composition of the text itself, which is presented as part of a chain of telling and mediated retelling. The text stages itself as narration of past events that are nonetheless infinitely repeatable and 'present', and in so doing presents itself as a past act of textual, written composition that has the potential to be reactualized at any moment through performance. I suggest that this kind of textual self-awareness connects not only to the subject matter of afterlife vision (which it lends itself to peculiarly well), but also – more tentatively – to the emerging German-language literary culture of the period, a literary culture that is increasingly self-aware and reflects on its own textual and temporal status.

I. Eschatological time

Alber's *Tnugdalus* is one of the very earliest of many adaptations of Marcus of Regensburg's *Visio Tnugdali*. Marcus was an Irish monk, almost certainly a member of one of the two Irish religious houses in Regensburg, and it seems likely that he wrote his text – set in Ireland and full of Irish references – for the Irish community of the so-called Irish Benedictine 'Schottenklöster' (Boyle 120–22; Flache-necker 31–32) in 1149. It went on to become one of the most popular and successful medieval visionary narratives, widely transmitted and translated or adapted into a range of vernacular languages.² The *Visio Tnugdali* tells the story of Tnugdäl (or Tnugdälu), a worldly, sinful knight from Cashel in Ireland who collapses suddenly during a meal and is taken for dead. After three days he is to be buried, but wakes suddenly and retells what has happened to him: his soul left his body and, guided by an angel, went on a journey through the afterlife, observing and partly participating in the punishments of hell and the joys of heaven. The result of this journey is one of personal conversion, with Tnugdäl setting aside his previous worldly ways and leading a devout religious life.

2. An excellent and detailed overview of the tradition is given by Palmer.

3. For a detailed description of the manuscript and its contents see Fechter; Bauer 9, 249–60.

4. All translations from Alber's *Tnugdalus* are my own.

Alber's work, a German verse rendering of the Latin prose, was made in the second half of the twelfth century, perhaps only a couple of decades after the composition of the original text. It is today extant in only one manuscript (ÖNB, Cod. 2696), a multi-text manuscript of around 1300 containing primarily religious works of the twelfth century.³ Alber himself was almost certainly a canon at the Premonstratensian abbey of Windberg, some 50km east of Regensburg, which in the mid twelfth century was an intellectually ambitious house with an active scriptorium. Windberg manuscripts from this period are rich in glosses and interlinear writing, displaying a marked interest in the relationship between Latin and the vernacular, and the abbey has been identified as the home not only of *Tnugdalus* but also of a further German poem *daz himelrîche* (Pfeil 78–81; Müller 234–40). It can therefore be thought of as a significant node in the emergent and dynamic culture of German-language religious poetic writing in the mid twelfth century, which appears to have flourished primarily in and between religious houses in the south of the German lands (Bowden, "Vorauer Sammlung"). Alber claims to have written his specific text at the behest of three women, Ôtegebe, Heilke and Gisel (70), and a 'brother' Kuonrat (2151), all of whom have been plausibly identified in the Windberg necrologium: the three women were likely Windberg nuns (it was a double house) and Kuonrat perhaps Abbot Konrad I (Palmer 36–37). He states that he has made this German version of the narrative to make it accessible to a wider audience of "ungelêrten liute" ("uneducated/unliterate people", 64):⁴ perhaps local laity (Windberg maintained close links to its founders, the Counts of Bogen [Pfeil 81–86]) or indeed those without Latin in the community of Windberg itself.

The principle of the narrative, in both Latin and German, is one in which the soul is removed from worldly temporality and transposed to a state – or place (significantly, it is not entirely clear which) – that does not exist within this temporal framework. Yet whether what *Tnugdalus*' soul visits is *eternity* is a moot point. The soul visits a purgatorial afterlife, but referring to it as 'eternal' may be inaccurate. These afterlife spaces may seem eternal and to be without temporal structure, but they might better be conceived of as spaces of waiting: a kind of proto-hell and proto-heaven where souls exist before the Last Judgement. If this is the case, then they would correlate in some way with the passage of human time in the world.

It is impossible to consider exactly how to conceptualize this space, particularly in the context of the twelfth century, without

5. It was common scholastic practice to use nouns for abstract concepts, so the emergence of this noun may in itself not be particularly significant; see Morgan 149. For a thorough summary of critical responses to Le Goff, see Newman 109.

touching on arguments about the doctrine of purgatory. The classic argument espoused by Jacques le Goff in *The Birth of Purgatory* – that the twelfth century witnessed a gradual recognition of a separate space of purgation for those not entirely unblemished by sin – is now generally considered to be overstated; in particular, the emphasis Le Goff places on the emergence of the noun *purgatorium* in the late twelfth century as a moment of culmination is disputed.⁵ Although there was increased discussion of afterlife purgation in the twelfth century, the acknowledgement of the doctrine of purgatory by the papacy in 1254 and 1274 appears to be a result of centuries of general acceptance of the existence of afterlife suffering both punitive and purgative: a notion present in a “more or less rationalized” form since the time of Augustine (Newman 109). Indeed, as Peter Brown has argued, perhaps the clearest moment of change is in the seventh century, when an afterlife system that integrates penitential purgation begins to be evident, connected to the increasing wealth of the Christian church. Recent scholarship on visionary writing, as exemplified by the contributions by Helen Foxhall Forbes and Carl Watkins in the new *Imagining the Medieval Afterlife*, rightly stresses the importance of continuity from the earlier periods and downplays twelfth-century innovation. Although the number of visionary texts increases in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, developments do not typically concern the theology of the afterlife, but are concentrated on “subtle” contextual shifts (Watkins, “Otherworld” 112), and cannot be separated from literary trends and developments.

At first glance, though, the Latin *Visio Tnugdali* does seem to offer an unusually systematized depiction of the afterlife, and has been argued to mark something of a watershed in this respect (Düwel 532–33). Here, the loci of punishment or reward described can be grouped loosely into five zones: Upper Hell; Lower Hell; the rainy enclosure of the *mali non valde* (“the bad-but-not-very-bad”); the beautiful meadow of the *boni non valde* (“good-but-not-very-good”); and a series of glorious places for various categories of the blessed. Souls in Upper Hell undergo various punishments that correspond to specific sins committed, but still await final judgement – it is not always clear whether the punishments are purgative in an explicitly progressive, cleansing sense, or if they fulfil a kind of temporary, waiting-room function before judgement occurs. Lower Hell, however, is quite clearly a place of no return; souls here have already been through Upper Hell but are now punished for all eternity in a great pit of horror and torture.⁶ The condition of the bad-but-not-very-bad

6. “Paciuntur quidem ea primitus, que anti videbas, minora et tunc ducuntur ad ista, de quibus nullus, qui semel intraverit, amplius exire poterit” (Marcus 14.24). (“Indeed, they suffer first that lesser punishment that you saw before, and now they are led to this punishment from which no one who enters it once is able to exit again” Gardiner 179).

7. “Isti sunt mali, sed non valde, honeste quidem se observare studuerunt, sed bona temporalia pauperibus non sunt largiti, sicut debuerunt, et ideo per aliquod annos merentur pluviam et tunc ducuntur ad requiem bonam” (Marcus 15.9). (“These souls are evil, but not very evil. Indeed they tried to follow honestly, but in good times they were not generous to the poor, as they should have been, and therefore for many years they deserve to suffer this rain; then they will be led to a good place” Gardiner 181).

8. They are “de cruciatibus inferni erepti” (Marcus 16.7) (“freed from the sufferings of hell” Gardiner 182).

is temporary,⁷ and that of the good-but-not-very-good unclear, although it is suggested they have already gone through the punishments of Upper Hell.⁸ It is here that Tnugdalus meets King Cormac, his former lord, who has already suffered punishments and continues to be punished for three hours a day.

Yet although Marcus’ text undoubtedly has a sense of eschatological temporality, the spaces described certainly do not amount to a total or coherent otherworld. Importantly, despite the fact that it is unusually distinctly systematized, the shape of the afterlife depicted is not a twelfth-century invention but rather draws (as do other details of the text) on the older Irish tradition of visionary writing (Boyle 123–29; Watkins, “Doctrine” 227–32). And indeed the overall effect is not to present the audience with a clearly-defined system of the afterlife but instead to focus on the spiritually transformative experience undertaken by Tnugdalus’ soul: in fact Marcus’ *Visio* is perhaps most novel in its depiction of the soul of the visionary participating in the punishments of the afterlife rather than simply observing them (Düwel 532–33). It is for this reason that Julia Weitbrecht, in her discussion of both Marcus and Alber, prefers to refer to the purgative zones simply as “Reinigungsorte” (“places of purification”) (Weitbrecht 151–52).

This aspect is even more prominent in Alber’s reworking. Much of Marcus’ systematization, however imprecise, is dissolved and the relationship between different loci and zones is more fluid. Specific terminology for places visited is avoided; there are occasional references to *helle*, but this term is used to describe individual sites of punishment rather than an overarching location, and refers primarily to a condition of unpleasantness rather than a physical place. The guiding descriptors of what Tnugdalus’ soul witnesses or experiences are based on sensation, such as pain, torment, punishment or joy and the overall effect is an experiential one. Take, for example, the passage in which souls who have committed the sin of greed are punished inside the belly of a great beast. In the Latin text, where this episode is clearly marked out with the title *De avaris et pena eorum* (“On the Greedy and their punishment”), the beast has a name, Acheron, a mouth that seems wide enough to contain nine thousand armed men and is divided into three sections by two column-like parasites, one with his head facing upwards, the other down, who are later identified as the Irish giants Fergus and Conallus (Marcus 7.6–9). When Tnugdalus is dragged by devils into the belly of the beast, he experiences a clearly defined list of horrors, including bears, lions, fire, cold, sulphur and so on (Marcus 7.32). In the German work, the beast – now nameless – is described in less

specific detail, and the experience of the soul is narrated primarily in terms of extreme emotion so terrible as to be inexpressible:

dâ wart ir aller êrste kunt
 waz nôt und angest wære.
 die manicvalten swære,
 die sî dâ muose liden,
 sî möhte niemen vol schriben.
 dâ was michel unlust
 und maneger slahte âkust,
 manic unkunder;
 wunder unde wunder,
 des was dâ vil unde vil. (712–21)

(Then the soul knew for the first time what pain and fear were. The manifold torments, which it had to suffer there, could never be described in writing fully by anyone. There was great unhappiness and many forms of suffering, and many monsters; wonder upon wonder, of this there was very much indeed.)

As Christina Lechtermann has shown, such statements of inexpressibility, both in terms of what is witnessed and the sensations provoked, are a particular characteristic of Alber's writing. She argues that they offer a powerful means of communication in a text that – more so than its Latin source – is particularly concerned with direct address to the audience. In the passage described above, the horrifying sensations experienced by *Tnugdalus*' soul culminate in such an address, which encourages a heightened imaginative response centred around fear: the audience should strive ("dar nâch ringen" 726) to avoid entering the belly of the beast like *Tnugdalus*' soul. Here, as elsewhere, the focal point of the journey is the experience of *Tnugdalus*' soul and the effect of this on the audience rather than the facts of what the soul sees and participates in. As a result, the theological specifics of eschatological time are almost entirely unimportant; the experience of afterlife instead throws focus onto worldly temporality, and how behaviour in the world might be changed in such a way as to alter the afterlife experience that awaits you.

Tnugdalus' journey through the afterlife is temporally vague and might best be thought of as taking place in a state of suspended time. We are told how long the journey takes in terms of worldly time – *Tnugdalus*' body is as if dead from Wednesday to Saturday (272) –

but this time period is not mapped onto the experiences of his soul. Any temporal details in the afterlife instead fit in with the overall experiential focus: it is mentioned more than once that the punishments the soul endures seem to last a 'long time' (e.g. "diu wîle dûhte dâ vil lanc" [557]), when the soul is in a valley of fire. The time spent in the belly of the beast described above seems to the soul to last a thousand years (735–36). Yet this is time described in terms of sensation: time is used here in order to make the punishments more scarily effective. The result is the creation of a kind of experiential temporality that directs itself at emotional response from audience, rather than any attempt at rationality or explanation. Time in the afterlife is not clearly plotted – there is an explicit sense of temporal dislocation between this world and next – but the afterlife experience is nonetheless made manifest and effective through reference to worldly temporality.

The afterlife is also given a sense of temporality through narrative. The afterlife experience may not specifically be 'eternity', as we have seen, but it is nonetheless temporally dislocated and so needs, just as Ricoeur shows us for eternity, an injection of human time in order to be experienced: it needs to be narrated. The paucity of reference in Alber's work to any kind of purgative work or progress, as well as the lack of specificity of the status of other souls, means that the afterlife *seems* eternal, or at least to exist in a state of static permanence. This state is interrupted and given temporality through the narrative of Tnugdalus' soul as it moves progressively through the series of punishments and joys. Each one of these spaces is described only in terms his encountering it; it is implied that the punishments exist in a cycle of constant repetition, but this is never made explicit. The fact that the fate of other souls being punished is largely irrelevant – they are simply a background decoration to the primary emphasis on Tnugdalus' soul – means that individual punishments come across as existing in a static state of temporal suspension, and are given a sense of temporality only through the movement of Tnugdalus' soul. The fate of other souls does come more into focus in the paradisaical spaces, but even then these souls function primarily as exemplary figures, with emphasis deflected onto ways of behaving that Tnugdalus (and by implication the audience) should engage in the future. The warring kings Conkober and Danâtus, for instance, now existing peaceably side by side, are framed as an example of the importance of penitence (1570–96).

The process that Tnugdalus' soul undergoes – the narrative of the afterlife – is importantly one of purification itself, a progression from

punishment to reward. And although it is a process that is described through Tnugdalus' journey through the afterlife, it is really about ways of behaving in this world: the experience of the afterlife throws focus onto this-worldly pasts, presents and futures, and how these might be changed and complicated in such a way as to alter the afterlife experience that awaits you. I am not the first to note this specifically didactic aspect of Alber's work; in fact, it is a mainstay of the (relatively small) body of scholarship on his text. Alber's shaping of the journey through the otherworld in order to draw attention specifically to behaviour in this world – his interest in *Diesseits* rather than *Jenseits* – is stressed by Brigitte Pfeil and, more recently, Maximilian Benz and Julia Weitbrecht. Equally, there is no reason to doubt that such a didactic dimension is connected to the specific needs of a non-Latinate audience (Palmer 35–41). Yet (as I hope to have shown already) didactic vernacularity does not mean a lack of complexity. As I go on to explore in the next section, the construction of this-worldly time in *Tnugdalus* is interestingly unstraightforward for both the audience of the text and Tnugdalus himself. The narrative of Tnugdalus' life resists a simple chronology; past, present and future overlap and displace one another in a complex and inconclusive manner both conceptually and narratologically.

II. Salvation and repetition

In their recent volume on medieval temporalities, Almut Suerbaum and Annie Sutherland suggest that although medieval texts tend to subscribe to a kind of Boethian 'eternalism', where "the past and future exist and are just as real as the present", they nonetheless engage with a kind of 'presentism' (according to which the present alone exists). This leads, they argue, to a particularly productive aspect of medieval writing: an interest in challenging states other than the present, in "play[ing] with our temporal certainties, problematising any notion of past, present and future as fixed and immutable categories" (Suerbaum and Sutherland 7). Their argument resonates with the situation in *Tnugdalus*. Here, Tnugdalus' journey to the otherworld involves an enforced reflection on his own past, as he is driven to consider the sins he has committed and the ways he has behaved; it also forces explicit consideration of the future, both in terms of what will happen after death (and the prospect of death itself) and how his this-worldly future might be shaped through different forms of be-

haviour. Yet the journey disrupts the separation of the three temporal states of past, present and future, and any clear notion of beginnings and ends or pasts and futures is disturbed.

The journey taken by Tnugdalus' soul is first of all an actualization of his future: in the series of punishments that make up the first part of the journey he both sees and – importantly – participates in the future which awaits him. Unlike many other literary visionaries, Tnugdalus is not simply a bystander but undergoes various punishments for sins he has committed; punishments, that is, that he would have undergone had he genuinely died at that moment. In this sense, he experiences his future, but a future transposed prematurely into the present moment. Participation in punishment also involves recalling acts of the past. A striking example of this is found in the punishment accorded to thieves (737–846), where souls must cross a bridge covered with iron spikes over a burning lake with dragons, carrying with them what they stole. Falling off the bridge – which is narrow, with souls coming from both directions – is inevitable. Tnugdalus' soul is instructed to cross while carrying a cow, which represents (or is?) the one that he stole from his godfather:

Dô sprach der engel sân
 'dû muost âne mich dar über gân.
 dû muost ouch dar zuo
 mit dir trîben eine kuo,
 die stæle dû dîme gevateren.' (787–91)

(Then the angel said, 'you must go over it [the bridge] without me. You must also carry a cow with you, which you stole from your godfather.')

This symbolic memorialization of a past deed brings past and future together into Tnugdalus' present: what he experiences in this moment is a both a remembrance of the past (stealing the cow) and a premonition of the future (the afterlife punishment he will suffer for stealing this cow). Past and future are collapsed into a moment of 'now' that looks in both directions. Yet by bringing his future into the present moment – by experiencing it 'early' through his journey – Tnugdalus has the opportunity to change this future. A different hypothetical future is presented to Tnugdalus' soul when he visits the various states of glory and learns of the importance of changing the way he lives and repenting of sins committed. The result of this experience is that his previous 'future' – various fiery punishments – is

displaced and is transposed into a past. This original future, seen and partly participated in, becomes a past experience: a memory that transforms both his present and his new future.

This passage with the cow and the bridge clarifies peculiarly well the temporal complexity of salvation in medieval Christianity. As Benjamin Thompson has shown, salvation can be understood as a kind of “static present-centredness”, a “unity of having-been, being and expectation” in which, at all (present) moments, future salvation depends on past acts (Thompson 53). Such past acts, good or bad, determine one’s afterlife future, but this future can in turn be transformed through confession and penance, for example, or (increasingly in the later Middle Ages) acts of suffrage. Thompson relates this temporal situation to the threefold present developed by Augustine in his *Confessions* – itself the basis for the ‘presentism’ that Suerbaum and Sutherland contrast with Boethian ‘eternalism’. Here is not the place to go into detail about Augustine on time (and not least because I agree with Ricoeur [6] that there is no pure, coherent Augustinian phenomenology of time, but rather a questioning system that necessarily remains full of aporias). But at the heart of his thinking on time in the *Confessions* is the notion of the ‘distension’ of the soul (*distentio animi*) through which past and future can be grasped. Neither past nor future have being, but can be perceived through the distension of the mind (or soul) through memory and expectation.

The kind of ‘presentism’ we find in *Tnugdalus* is not a theorized one by any means (there is none of Augustine’s theological complexity). It is also not that there is no sense of past and future; *Tnugdalus*’ journey itself is clearly framed as a past act that occurred in 1149 (29–33), as I discuss in more detail below. Rather, their certainties can be problematized and recast through the way in which they can be collapsed into the present moment. Past and future are also continuously brought back into the present through repetition: a repetition that reactualizes *Tnugdalus*’ experience and keeps it in the present as well as grounding it in the past. One good example of this can be found if we return to the cow. The punishment of carrying the cow over the bridge suggests a striking materiality of sin, with *Tnugdalus*’ soul literally struggling under the physical burden of his wrongdoing (the cow). But this burden pushes at the boundaries of symbolism; it is not just a weighty object, but actually a cow that – much as one would expect – does not want to cross the spiky bridge (816). The punishment is not just a memorialization of the sin committed but also a kind of repetition, a moment of cow wrangling that revisits the

original theft and reenacts it, this time recast as an act of punishment.

Such a principle of repetition extends more broadly, and goes beyond the purgative repetition of past sins or the implied constant circular repetition of other punishments encountered (as I discussed above). Perhaps most significantly, repetition is the guiding principle of the journey as an act of narration: a journey that is constantly to be told and retold. When Tnugdalus' soul is separated from his body at the start of his journey he is told explicitly that transforming the lives of others through narrating his own experience is one of the main purposes of what is happening to him. The angel who guides him says that when the journey is over:

niht dû belibe,
 dûne sagest besunder
 diu manicvalten wunder
 sol *künden* dîn zungen
 der werlt ze bezzerunge (506–10)

(you must not pause without having spoken to everyone
 about the manifold wonders; your tongue should reveal
 these things for the improvement of the world)

Tnugdalus must narrate the memory of what he has experienced (which is now in the past) to an audience, an act of narration that has the explicit function of changing (ideally) the present existence and future of his listeners.

This act of narration is explicitly retold in Alber's text, in which Tnugdalus' experience is narrated strictly chronologically from a this-worldly perspective. We are told how Tnugdalus collapses suddenly and appears to be dead, but then after three days suddenly revives. He takes the eucharist, changes his lifestyle and then tells his story: "dô tete sâ sîn munt / den liuten über al kunt, / wie im wære geschehen / und allez daz er hete gesehen" (339–42) ("then with his mouth he told all the people what had happened to him and everything that he had seen"). It is only at this point that the focus shifts to the otherworldly experience. What this means is that we, the audience, do not follow the chronology of Tnugdalus' experience but rather that of his own immediate audience, sharing in their eyewitness experience and only finding out what 'happened' to him when he returns to his body and revives. As a result, what we are told is cast as Tnugdalus' own narration of events. Such an eyewitness perspective is vital for ensuring the authenticity and validity of the experi-

ence, an issue that is clearly at stake for writers of visions, and we see here the kind of techniques used in medieval history-writing to stress the 'truth' of events. Yet the journey of Tnugdalus' soul is not told in the first-person as if it were in Tnugdalus' voice, but rather in the third-person by a detached narrator who nonetheless comments on what occurs and addresses his audience directly, in the manner of an omniscient narrator. The narration of the journey ends with Tnugdalus' soul returning to his body and beginning his narration again. This is, of course, a narration that we are explicitly told we have already heard, and which is introduced in language that echoes the original instructions given to Tnugdalus' soul by the angel:

si begunde ir swigen brechen
 und den liuten zuo sprechen,
 und künden besunder
 diu manivalten wunder
 diu ir hie vor habt vernomen (2125–29)

(the soul began to break its silence and speak to the people, and to reveal to everyone the manifold wonders, which you have already heard about).

As an audience of listeners or readers we have followed the linear chronology of Tnugdalus' original eyewitness audience, with the linear chronology of Tnugdalus' experience embedded within this, but the displacement of the embedded narrative from Tnugdalus' voice to that of a narrator introduces a sense of circularity. Vitally, this is a story that always ends with its protagonist returning to his body and starting the story again.

A focus on temporality uncovers a connection between the narrative of Tnugdalus' journey and the conceptualization of the after-life space through which he makes this journey, as described in section one. Much like the spaces of the afterlife, the narration of Tnugdalus' experience has a straightforward chronological linearity, which renders it comprehensible. But such linearity is confused both by the collapsing and transformation of pasts and futures as well as by the introduction of a principle of circular repeatability. Repetition is, as the example of the cow has shown, a way of understanding the possibility of reactualizing the past in order to change the future. It is also, however, a principle of narration, rendering the story of what happens to Tnugdalus an infinitely repeatable experience without beginning or end. This structure of repetition stresses the didactic

impact of the story and the possibility of constant retelling in order to enable yet more audiences to ‘witness’ what happened and engage in their own kinds of salvific transformation.

III. The perpetual ‘now’

We have seen how the narrative of Tnugdalus’ journey is constructed in order to explain and teach the afterlife and process of salvation as effectively as possible and, as a result, to encourage a transformative response on the part of its audience. Much as Ricoeur shows in the case of Augustine’s exploration of eternity, which can only be grasped through narrative, here the way in which Tnugdalus’ experience is narrated leads to a clear and more effective approximation of the afterlife. Yet the way in which this is done places a particular emphasis on textuality. For this text is not just about the journey of Tnugdalus, but is also about the power of retelling what happens; it is a text that is as much about narrating the afterlife as it is about the afterlife. The narration of the otherworldly experience may have originated in the mouth of Tnugdalus, but it is presented explicitly as a mediated narrative in the mouth of Alber – and this adds a further layer of temporal complication. Tnugdalus has narrated what happened to him to a contemporary audience in order to transform their lives, and this act of narration is then retold by others (including Alber) in order to continue the effect. The result of this chain of telling and mediated retelling is that all these acts of narration are explicitly situated in the past yet have the potential to be retold (and reactualized) constantly; they thus exist both in the past moment and in a state of what we might think of as a perpetual ‘now’. I would like to clarify this observation further by turning to the prologue and epilogue, both of which are unique to Alber and do not appear in Marcus’ Latin work.

In the prologue, the journey of Tnugdalus’ soul and the personal transformation this results in are presented explicitly as events of the historical past. At the start of the text the audience is informed, in the past tense, that the vision narrated was had by an Irish knight (22) and that the events reported are exactly as he saw them: “daz tuon wir iu kunt als er sîn jach” (28) (“we tell it to you as he saw it”). They are, moreover, precisely dateable to the year 1149:

dô der wâren tûsent jâr
ergangen unde zehenzic

und eines min dan fümfczic
von diu daz Krist geborn wart (30–33)

(when one thousand years had past – and one hundred and
one less than fifty – from the time Christ was born)

Further contextualisation is offered by the fact that the events happened after the crusade of Emperor Conrad III (1146–47) during the time of pope Eugenius II (34–43). The narrative was then brought to Regensburg by a “ein münich guot” (“a good monk”, 44), who took it to the convent of St Paul and wrote it down as he had heard it (“als erz vernam von enes munde”, 52); this we can assume is Marcus, although he is not named explicitly. Now the current narrator is writing the text again for uneducated or unlatinate people (“die ungelêrten liute”, 63), in the hope that all sinners may be forgiven their sins. Following this, after a short excursus about St Patrick ridding Ireland of dragons, the main narrative begins with the introduction of its protagonist, “Tnugdalus” (183), a noble knight from Cashel.

The prologue establishes and situates temporally two interlocking layers: on the one hand Tnugdalus’ own otherworldly journey, which happened in 1149 and which includes his own oral report of his experience; and on the other, the history of the narrativization of this journey, from Tnugdalus’ oral report to the Latin transcription to the present German text. Both of these layers are grounded in specific historical moments and introduced through multiple strategies of authentication (dates, places, contextual information, patronage, and even a reference to Gregory the Great and the importance of eyewitness corroboration [56–62]). Yet the prologue also introduces a third layer: that of the immediate reception of the text, a moment timeless in its immediacy. The text opens in the present tense with a statement that draws attention to its immediacy:

Die vernemen wellen
wunder diu wir zellen,
die tuon uns ein stille. (1–3)

(Those who want to hear the wonders we tell, make a moment of silence for us)

The text – its reception, its performance, its reading – exists in this noun of silence, “ein stille”, which is not bound to a specific moment in time or to a specific duration, but is rather a repeatable, personalized present-tense *now* of active textual reception.

A helpful vocabulary to describe this kind of specifically textual temporality is provided by Jonathan Culler in his *Theory of the Lyric*. In his influential attempt to theorize lyric across time, Culler identifies what he terms the 'lyric present', a present now-ness at the heart of much lyric. The lyric present is not simply the use of the present tense, and nor does it strive for a kind of timelessness, but is rather characterized by iterability. The lyric present is therefore perhaps best understood as the "iterable now of lyric enunciation" (Culler 289); it is "accomplished in the act of utterance" (Culler 290), an iterable moment of enunciation that belongs to the poet, the lyric voice and the reader. Culler's iterable lyric now, constantly reactualized in the moment of enunciation (whether audible or not), is precisely what we see in Alber's poem. Here, the staging of the text as a repeatable now that I have described above of course resonates with conditions of reception – the text recited orally to an audience –, an element of performativity that Culler identifies as a characteristic of the lyric now. But what is particularly interesting in Alber's work is the fact that the status of the text as an iterable moment of enunciation is staged so explicitly.

In the epilogue, attention is drawn to the act of composition by describing it as something that occurred in the past (2163) and through a change from a first-person to third-person narrative voice to discuss the efforts of the author, named as Alber ("er ist geheizen Alber", 2185). There is then a request that those affected by the text or pleased by it should pray for the soul of its author, "der aller schuldigste man / der briesters namen ie gewan" (2183–84) ("the most sinful man who ever held the name of priest"):

Der dise rede hât getihtet
 und ze rîmen gerihtet,
 der gert an iu allen,
 ob ez iu wol gevalle,
 daz sîn ze guote werde gedâht
 und von iuwer bete brâht
 ze gotes hulden werde
 [...]
 ir solt im wûnschen alle
 daz sîner sünden galle
 hie alsô zebreeste
 daz etelîche reste
 sîn sêle dort gewinne. (2163–69; 2177–81)

(He who composed this text and put it into verse asks of you all – if you liked it – that he may be thought of well by you and that he may be brought through your prayers to God's love [...] You should all wish that the bitterness of his sins be broken down to such an extent here in this world that his soul obtains eternal rest in the other world.)

The change to a third-person voice for this sort of prayer is not unusual for German-language poetic works of this period and is conventionally understood to draw a distinction between the narrator (or reciter) and the author, reflecting conditions of reception through oral recital (Hellgardt 71–72). But it also reflects the temporal tension I am trying to describe. On the one hand, there is a tension between the historically grounded single event of *Tnugdalus'* journey and its mediation and remediation in various forms and languages by different authors. Yet this tension is further complicated by the fact that individual authoritative accounts are themselves also grounded in specific points in time. *Tnugdalus* is a written object by one specific named author (Alber), and is further temporally grounded by the naming of the three nuns and the brother Kuonrat who encouraged its production (a fact that also, implicitly, ties it to the specific space of Windberg). So the temporal point of *Tnugdalus'* journey is repeated and reactualized through further defined points and objects with their own authorship and authority.

On the other hand, there is also a tension between the written object – the text Alber wrote in Windberg – and what we can assume to be the primarily oral-performative nature of its reception. Attention is drawn not only to Alber's authorship but also to his salvation, which extends beyond the moment in time when he wrote the text. We return here to the temporal complexity of salvation, which I explored above: Alber may have written the text in a specific time and place, but its ongoing influence on his salvation shows how he continues to be 'present' and how his future has the constant potential to be changed and affected by his work, which is attached to him but transcends him. He may be the author, but Alber is also part of the community of those who are transformed by the text – in his case not through listening to it (or even experiencing it in the case of *Tnugdalus* himself) but by retelling it. As such, we return again to the circularity and repeatability of the text. Alber's poem is a work that was composed at a specific time, but that transcends this time; much like the structure of *Tnugdalus'* own narrative, which begins

and ends with him telling it in a kind of endless circularity and is retold by other witnesses, this text is potentially infinitely repeatable.

IV. Conclusion

Alber's *Tnugdalus* can certainly be viewed in the context of an increasingly self-conscious German-language literary culture. As I have explored elsewhere, twelfth-century German religious texts have a tendency to address and thematize their own performativity (Bowden, "Performing Didacticism"). Yet here this feature is made peculiarly apparent by the subject matter. The performative repeatability of the text has a particular affinity with the material narrated: a journey to the afterlife that transforms the life of the traveller and also the lives of those who hear it in the moment of its retelling. This is an afterlife experience that is strongly grounded in this-worldly notions of past, present and future. Different pasts, presents and futures are, however, presented simultaneously, in overlapping layers, and are directed towards (and perceived through) the now of the recipients. Temporal differentiation is transposed into an active present through the self-presentation of the text as an object composed at a specific moment but not bound to that moment, which can be received repeatedly and which makes demands of its recipients (whoever they may be at any specific time). As a result, both this-worldly and other-worldly temporality are subordinate to a kind of perpetual, repeatable now of active textual reception and personal transformation.

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