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Narrating Time in the Twelfth Century



Robert Hardy, *Engel*, 2023, oil on canvas, 20 x 20 cm – <https://roberthardyartist.com>



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Time in the Twelfth Century

Do we exist in time, or does time exist in us?

Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time 2*

Quid est ergo tempus? Si nemo ex me quaerat, scio; si quaerenti explicare uelim, nescio.

(So what is time? If no one is asking me a question about it, I know what it is; but if I want to explain it to the questioner, I do not know how to.)

Augustine, *Confessions* 11.14.17

1. Several of the essays in the collection have developed from a workshop held at the Humboldt-Universität Berlin in December 2018, organised by Sarah Bowden and Lea Braun and supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. Plans for a second workshop were derailed by the Covid-19 pandemic and the authors instead met several times online to discuss draft essays. These online meetings were an intellectual and personal delight during a difficult period, and the editors would like to thank all participants for their willingness to engage in intensive, productive and enjoyable discussions.

The essays that make up this special issue of *Interfaces* share a common interest in the narration and representation of time in twelfth-century texts.¹ The volume focuses primarily on works that we would now regard as ‘literary’: writing that prompts an affective response in its audience through the tactical use of rhetoric and form. Our special issue is primarily concerned with writers operating in England, France and Germany, a cultural zone bound together in the central Middle Ages by the relatively fluid circulation of people, books and ideas across territorial boundaries. While our focus is on the literatures and languages of these regions (vernacular and Latin), the contributors have worked up their essays with an awareness that this is an editorial choice with respect to scope and scale, a choice that brings certain patterns into view at the expense of others. England, France and Germany are conceived of here as a cultural zone nested within a series of larger spaces, with graduations including, but not limited to, western Christendom (overlying the world of Roman antiquity), eastern Christendom (overlying the ancient Greek world), and a larger Afro-Eurasian frame. A different set of essays might just as well have chosen a different scale and thereby brought a different set of patterns into view.

The decision to focus on the twelfth century is equally a determination of scope and scale. The periodization itself is not novel. Famously, or perhaps infamously, the twelfth century has been branded by scholars as a moment of ‘renaissance,’ ‘reform’ or ‘renewal,’ epithets that emphasise a break from the immediate past and a return to an earlier golden age (Ladner). In differing ways, these qualifiers

all seek to capture the remarkable foment of the twelfth century, “a period of intense, rapid, and to a high degree self-conscious change in almost all aspects of human thought and activity” (Constable 4). It is not our aim here to dispute the claim that certain phenomena in this remarkable century lend themselves to these more disjunctive, as opposed to accretive, models of change. Nor do we disagree with the ultimate target that advocates of the ‘twelfth century renaissance’ have in their sights: the pejorative scholarly portrayal of the ‘middle ages’ as something merely medial, and the glorification of the ‘Renaissance’ (in its more usual early-modern sense) as a unique moment of rupture and reengagement with classical learning. Nonetheless, the view of the ‘twelfth century’ that emerges from this special issue of *Interfaces* is at once more continuous than the term ‘renaissance’ implies, more complex in its relationship to the past than ‘reform’ suggests, and more excitingly experimental than any kind of ‘renewal’.

The twelfth century also emerges as an unusually rich period for thinking about the conceptualization and representation of time in texts. Primarily, we suggest, this is due to the wealth and diversity of textual material available to us from the period, often in emergent or developing forms (such as vernacular romance and historiography, or works of scholastic theology and dialectic). These innovations may often be radical in their presentation, but are always grounded (frequently self-consciously) in other traditions, resulting in texts that, in different ways, are aware of their own pasts and, in some cases, their potential futures. In this sense, the time of texts becomes at times just as important as the representation and understanding of time within texts. In the broadest terms, though, what brings these essays together is a common interest in the representation of time and temporal structures in twelfth-century narrative. All concern the way in which different kinds of texts, written in different languages yet in the same period, organize and structure their content so as to depict temporal process, order or change. Across these essays, the authors explore how twelfth-century writers employed literary techniques (be they rhetorical, allegorical or narratological) with the aim of organizing time or engaging creatively and intellectually with theories of time and eternity.

Using the past to think in the present

From one perspective, the writers studied here can be straightforwardly regarded as participants in a cultural continuum; their sour-

es (philosophical, theological, scientific) are largely those of their ancestors (Greek, Roman, patristic, Carolingian and insular), and the concepts of time that they invoke are primarily inherited. The earliest stratum of these sources is very old indeed. The Book of Genesis, dating back to the sixth century BCE, provides the starting point for a number of twelfth-century reflections on temporality, ranging from Honorius Augustodunensis' musings on the instantaneous creation of the universe in the *Imago Mundi* to Hugh of St Victor's development of the story of Noah building the ark in his elaborate *pictura* (texts discussed here by Younge and Burgon respectively). The earliest influences from the Greek world, albeit distantly felt, extend back to the pre-Socratics. In his analysis of an ekphrasis from *Le Roman de Thèbes*, Morton, for instance, detects traces of Pythagorean thought in references to the harmony of the spheres. Plato himself, and specifically his reflections on time and the cosmos in the *Timaeus*, passed down to medieval writers via Calcidius' commentary and translation, looms large in several essays of the volume. In addition to working directly with the *Timaeus*, twelfth-century writers also absorbed Platonic ideas from Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. Through the guiding figure of Lady Philosophy, Boethius teases out the contrast between human time, governed by capricious fate, and eternal time, ordered by providence.

Beyond this lies the contribution of late antique authorities, not least Saint Augustine, whose anguished reflection on time in Book 11 of the *Confessions* attracted considerable attention in the twelfth century. For Augustine, only the present can truly be said to exist; the past having gone and the future being yet to arrive. When we talk about past and future, Augustine states, what we really describe is a process of recollection (*distentio*), which is necessarily achieved through narration:

Quod autem nunc liquet et claret, nec futura sunt nec praeterita, nec proprie dicitur, "tempora sunt tria, praeteritum, praesens, et futurum," sed fortasse proprie diceretur, "tempora sunt tria, praesens de praeteritis, praesens de praesentibus, praesens de futuris." Sunt enim haec in anima tria quaedam et alibi ea non video, praesens de praeteritis memoria, praesens de praesentibus contuitus, praesens de futuris expectatio.

(What is now patently clear is that neither future nor past events exist, and it is incorrect to say, "there are three times, past present and future." Perhaps it would be appropriate to

say, “There are three times: the present respecting things past, the present respecting things present, and the present respecting things future.” These three things do somehow exist in the soul, and I do not perceive them anywhere else: for the present of things past is memory; the present of things present is paying attention; and the present of things future is expectation.) (11.20).

The impact of Augustine’s statements about time in Book 11, and the crucial connection he makes between time and narrative, can be perceived throughout the essays in this volume, whether explicitly or implicitly. In addition to exerting a direct influence on the twelfth century, the *Confessions* continues to be an important source for modern literary theorists, as Bowden points out in her discussion of Paul Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative*. Taking Ricoeur as her starting point, Bowden loops the modern back to the medieval, showing how visionary narrative exemplifies Ricoeur’s deeply Augustinian notion that “time becomes human to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative.”

The reliance of these twelfth-century writers on a shared pool of sources marks them out as participants in a common cultural arena, namely Western as opposed to Eastern Christendom. Augustine’s *Confessions*, with its highly personalized definition of time, for example, had a negligible impact in the Byzantine world, while Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* was not translated into Greek until Maximus Planudes took up the task around 1300. Within the Christian West, the essays in this volume show, nodal centres, such as the rich monastic landscape of the southern German lands, the cathedral school at Chartres and the Abbey of Saint Victor, mattered more than political territories when it came to the dissemination of ideas. Taking a step back, the authors considered in this collection are also defined by their shared ignorance of conceptions of time that were familiar to scholars elsewhere in the Arabic and Greek-speaking worlds, the most striking example being Book IV of Aristotle’s *Physics*, with its famous definition of time as “the calculable measure of dimension of motion with respect to before-and-afterness” (*Physics* 219b, 1–2). The influence of Aristotle’s definition of time as motion on western intellectuals, felt first in the late twelfth century but gaining traction in the thirteenth, including in the work of Thomas Aquinas, marks the commencement of a phase of learning that lies beyond the scope of this collection.

Narrating time

In their reliance on earlier authorities for theoretical ideas about time, the writers considered in this volume show the side of the twelfth century that emphasised cultural continuity. Where we have identified ‘innovation’ in this collection, this lies primarily in the realm of formal and literary experimentation, with earlier notions of time being reformulated for new audiences and new ends. As the quotation above from the *Confessions* implies, a key role in how time is perceived and understood falls to narration. Narratives – be they historical, religious or literary in a narrower sense of the word – take place within time while also employing complex strategies to order, and organize, and depict time (Lessing; Ricoeur). Narratologists have developed various sets of terminologies for talking about this distinction; Genette, for instance employs a threefold distinction between ‘story time,’ ‘discourse time’ and ‘narrating time.’ While events are narrated within their temporal structure, narrative time may expand, contract, pause or collapse, shaping a unique experience of time while drawing attention to this very act of temporal composition by showcasing different temporal conceptualizations. Every text thus creates its own time as an integral part of its composition but may also resonate with other modes of perceiving and conceptualizing temporality.

Though rooted in certain traditions of narration, many of the texts considered in this special issue show an awareness of other structures and forms of writing that can be employed to reflect on and complicate the experience of time, as a result connecting discourses and genres and creating new types of textualizing temporality. Reeve, for instance, shows how twelfth-century romance draws on historiographical writing and its order of historicity to produce an ordered, synchronous time. To conceptualize the flow of time, narratives employ metaphors of folding or unrolling time to reflect the succession of events as well as the progression of the reader through the text (Younge). Time is depicted as motion in a certain direction, as movement suspended and continued, ascending or descending, and this spatial positioning can be employed to approximate different perspectives and levels of access on time – from the linear progression of humanity through history to the ultimate simultaneity of the divine.

When employing spatial elements and motions to express temporal experience, some narratives employ physical objects that func-

tion as markers of specific moments in time and connect these to the present of the audience. Narrative descriptions of physical objects may also serve as an occasion to pause or divert the flow of reported time and cause reflection on the experience of narrative time, as is the case with ekphrastic descriptions of imagined objects (see the contributions by Morton and Burgon). Pretzer discusses the depiction and function of built structures – Roman columns, both real and imagined – in the Middle High German chronicle *Kaiserchronik*; these columns, he shows, function as chronotopes, a form of textual ‘spoliation’ analogous to the medieval practice of incorporating reclaimed architectural components into newly constructed buildings.

Narrated time and the time of the narrative can be ordered according to different temporal models that may interact or compete within a text. Reeve demonstrates, for instance, how the circularity of ‘everyday life’ and the linear progression of (salvific) history can enrich or contrast each other. Equally, as Bowden shows, narratives can add yet another layer to their complex temporality by thematizing their own mediality and the process of their retelling and textualization. Narration also plays with the relationship between different temporal levels – past, present and future – and the way in which they divide and order time. The twelfth-century author was able to avail themselves of diverse narrative tools that serve to connect and distinguish the temporal layering of past, present and future in a text: prolepses and analepses, stories within stories or extradiegetical commentary complicate the *ordo narrandi* and serve to draw attention to the way time is both an integral part of narrative composition and a way to disrupt the flow of narration. Time can be stretched or condensed; moments of non- or a-synchronicity may harmonise or collapse temporal layers. This is exemplified by Braun in her essay on the Middle High German *König Rother*, in which she explores the ways this text connects and stabilizes past and present by means of a genealogical *longue durée* on the one hand, and complex models and anticipations of future events on the other.

The essays in this volume are less concerned with genre- or discourse-specific models of temporality. Rather, the texts discussed draw on a multitude of literary tropes and motifs to give aesthetic and narrative form to what might otherwise be quite abstract notions of time. These include the use of the *katascopos* or ‘view from above,’ the dream vision, *ekphrasis*, and ‘simultaneous’ styles of history writing, as well as allegory and prophecy. These devices all offer the twelfth-century author an opportunity to position their readers at

some form of remove from ordinary human time—above, outside, or askance. They also underline how twelfth-century writing demonstrates a critical awareness of these traditions, as well as the experimental efforts to connect, contrast or amalgamate narrative strategies and techniques from different sources. While many of these techniques have long traditions and are far from unique to the twelfth century's discourse on time, the diverse examples of narrating time that are collected in this volume showcase an enhanced interest in the reflection of time not only discursively, but through narrative strategies, structuring and forming it at the same time as producing new understandings of temporality and its relevance for the *conditio humana*. As many of the essays show, textual form and conceptual content mirror one another to create a highly effective (and affective) experience.

The work of time

This affective work of twelfth-century texts about time – the way, that is, that they encourage a particular emotional or intellectual response in their readers or listeners – forms another thread that runs through many of the contributions. Of equal importance is the way in which their form contributes to, and shapes, this response, by which we mean either the peculiarities and affordances of a particular genre or text-type (and how this form is shaped to encourage certain responses), or the affordances of the written text in general. The marked increase in the production of written texts in twelfth-century Europe, both in Latin and the vernaculars, accompanied by considerable diversification of the types of texts being written down, was unsurprisingly accompanied by a concurrent interest in conceptualizing textuality and thinking about the peculiar communicative power of textual objects, often resulting in explicit moments of self-reflection within individual works. Such moments of self-reflexivity are discussed in the twelfth-century context most commonly with regard to emergent genres of (fictional) romance (on which see Reeve), but, as essays in this volume show, they extend to other forms as well, both narrative and discursive. The essays here draw attention to how the texts they discuss demonstrate a self-awareness of their status as written or created artefact, and how this self-awareness can lead to explicit consideration of the effect the text should have on its recipients. The result is an intersection between thinking about time and

thinking about the work of the text (be it intellectual, didactic, meditative or otherwise).

Sometimes the work of the text is to encourage or enable thinking through conceptual problems about time. Different forms perform this work in different ways, as is shown by Pretzer in the case of historiography, or Morton, Braun and Reeve in the case of romance. The aesthetic experience of narrative literature functions as a mode of thought different to philosophical or theological discourse, and its descriptive possibilities can force audiences to take themselves out of linear temporalities and contemplate other ways of structuring and conceptualizing time.

The thinking work of the textual form also plays a central role in more discursive writing. Particularly (although not exclusively) in monastic and scholastic contexts, texts were designed to be read and contemplated as part of a structured and carefully-taught meditative practice. Mary Carruthers uses the rhetorical term *ductus* to describe the way in which such texts offer their users a path to follow that guides their experience; it “is the way by which a work leads someone through itself: that quality in a work’s formal patterns which engages an audience and then sets a viewer or auditor or performer in motion within its structures, an experience more like travelling through stages along a route than like perceiving a whole object” (Carruthers 190).

Ductus helps us understand the way in which the medieval text functions as process rather than static object, reminding us that textual reception is always a temporal experience. Yet the meditative process the text encourages also offers a way of thinking conceptually about time. Both Burgon and Younge pay particular attention to the motion of the reader through the text as a spiritual exercise, and how this exercise is constructed to help them engage with difficult temporal concepts, while depending on its (imaginative) interaction with other forms, here visual art. Narrative itself can also serve as a training tool for what Pierre Hadot has called ‘spiritual exercises:’ spatio-temporal drills that help the reader to discover eternity within the limits of time, or provide the basis for temporal performativity in ritual and religious contexts. Morton and Pretzer show how authors embed *ekphrasis* and the description of architectural features in order to compel their readers to think differently about time. That time itself – more specifically models of the future – can serve as a space of reflection and counterinsurance – is demonstrated by Braun’s analysis of the temporal layers and their interconnectedness in *König Rother*. Textual practices are only one component of the

techniques described by Sonntag that were used by monks to achieve a state of detemporalization. The organisation and iterability of the monastic day enabled monks both to perceive time and step outside time in an attempt to effect a simulation of eternity or an escape from time. Sonntag demonstrates perhaps most explicitly a factor that recurs in many essays, namely the way in which texts, other media and practices can be ordered not only to think about time but also to force an affective response – to feel time.

An affective response should ultimately be a transformative one. Meditative practices transform through increased understanding, even if the object (time/eternity) cannot ever be grasped entirely; their practised repetition is also fundamental to their success. Bowden traces a straightforward and explicit process of affective transformation through the example of visionary narrative, which guides the reader or listener through conflating pasts, presents and futures and encourages spiritual transformation in the model of the exemplary protagonist. To a greater or lesser extent, however, all the essays demonstrate how medieval texts perform and stage active work. The twelfth century emerges as a period concerned with what textuality – and different textual forms – can do. This may not in itself be anything radically new (meditative reading practices were common in monastic contexts in earlier centuries) but is given new prominence through the increased diversity and quantity of texts being written down. These texts may concern the subject of time, but they also obtain a time of their own: the time of the (potentially infinitely repeatable) experience of reception, which sets in train a process of personal change.

*

This collection is not designed to be in any way comprehensive, or constitutive of a coherent stance either about the medieval experience of time or its representation in twelfth-century writing. As Gillian Adler and Paul Strohm have recently argued, medieval people were astonishingly flexible and creative in their approach to time and temporality. It has been our intention to open up lines of dialogue and to think in broad terms about the ways in which time is productive of different kinds of meaning: both philosophical or theological concepts of time itself, as well as forms of meaning produced by particular ways of organising and structuring time in texts. We also hope our work will encourage new ways of thinking about the time of the twelfth century and throw new light on the way in which this period is shaped by both change and continuity.

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