



Desire, Christ and the Flesh: Reading *The Wife's Lament* and *The Dream of the Rood* and Julian's Revelations

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Abstract:

Extant scholarship on literary representations of the spiritual during the medieval era has mostly focused on Christocentric discourses via theological treatises and structuralist or semiotic methods. This essay undertakes a Lacanian study of three medieval texts—Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, "The Wife's Lament," and *The Dream of the Rood*—to demonstrate how Christ's identity is problematised: as the lover, the beloved, the Other, the lost object, and finally displaced entirely in the form of the Christian Cross, relegated to a realm of Derridean spectral non-presence. Through psychoanalytic and deconstructive frameworks, the essay traces the oscillation of Christ's ontological status across these texts, revealing how the feminine body and its inscriptions destabilise Christocentric subjectivity.

Keywords: Lacan, Derrida, medieval, Christ, jouissance, spectrality.

The medieval representations of the spiritual and the mystical in literary and devotional texts have largely been based on a Christocentric masculine discourse that holds the spirit, logos, and God as binary to the flesh, eros, and the Devil, following the argumentative style of Nietzsche in *On the Genealogy of Morality*. It is largely subsumed in the Flesh, the World, and the Devil triad.

There are only a handful of texts that counter such triadic momentum and deconstruct it, and one among such texts is Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, a book detailing Julian's reception of divine visions and her subsequent experiences as an anchoress.

Countering the patriarchal norm, Miller argues that Christ's image for Julian is maternal, predicated on Christ's corporeality and specifically the permeability of his body; Julian locates Christ's maternity in the anatomy and physiology of a body that bleeds, gestates, gives birth, and nourishes—functions that materialise the sacrificial and redemptive possibilities of pervious flesh (93–136). Though I agree with Miller insofar as the permeability of the body is concerned, and in part, I accept Christ's maternity as well, it is not all that Christ constitutes for Julian.

Therefore, beginning with a Lacanian reading of the female body in two texts, namely Julian's *Revelations* and the Old English poem "The Wife's Lament," I argue how both texts struggle with the normative feminine body, with the protagonist of the former text speaking through the body and the latter poem through language, yet how both of them roam on the fringes of experiencing the forbidden, namely the Other jouissance through a problematisation of the identity of Christ. The Other jouissance, for Lacan, is almost exclusively associated with the feminine structure, and he defines it as surplus enjoyment beyond the masculine phallic Order. Here, Christ, almost an androgynous figure incorporating the feminine and the masculine structure within his body, is depicted to be both the Other, the locale of the Symbolic Order, the domain of law, language and desire, as well as the *objet petit a*, the original Cause of desire that is lost and remains unattainable,

the vestigial remnants of a primordial pre-linguistic unity with the Other before one acquires language after birth, simultaneously.

The latter reaches its climax in my analysis of the Cross in *The Dream of the Rood*, where Christ and His Crucifix are merely reduced to a spectrality that hinges on a Derridean non-presence, and this initially arises from an oscillation between the poles of the lover and the beloved in Julian's text.

As already mentioned, I do not contend that maternal imagery is a limit to Christ's representativeness. Instead, the passions, sufferings, and wounds all constitute the image of a bodily ecstasy—ecstasy constituting a metaphor for a love that is simultaneously reciprocated and unrequited. Julian's body commences as a lover which constitutes a lack.

Contrary to the conventional metaphors, where the Church is the beloved and Christ is the lover, Julian is an embodiment of a lack of the Other's love, a Lacanian construct.

This lack, as Lacan would put it, occurs due to castration in the Symbolic. This holds true in part for her because it is indeed through her words that she experiences the most pain, and she yearns for a glimpse—that is, a visual rather than linguistic representation—of Christ.

However, his theory is not in complete synchronisation with Julian's experience because it is her body that is constitutive of the lack rather than the entire being entailing verbal language or *parole*.

It is Julian's body that is the site of a linguistic performance—it speaks—and thus, the text is inscribed on her body itself which expresses itself through varied perforations, wounds, and gestures towards the beloved. However, this problematises the originary narrative of her lack, and thus the conception of the lack transitions from an originary defining complex to that of a signifier whose signification is lost in the process of semiosis *ad infinitum*, as Peirce would have it (Peirce 239). In other words, the original meaning at the core of her bodily signs remains perpetually

deferred along an endless chain of approximate meanings. In Derridean terms, this originally intended meaning, the signified, is caught in the movement of *différance* leading up to the transcendental signified (Derrida, “Différance” 72). However, from a more Lacanian point of view, the unity of the Imaginary is only illusory, and the Symbolic is not limited to merely verbal language but encompasses the non-verbal linguistic norms as well, as exemplified by the laws, rules, and regulations imposed by society. Therefore, the non-verbal linguistic inscriptions and expressions of Julian’s body are constitutive of a homologous lack as entailed by a verbal-linguistic lack.

That she lacks is well demonstrated by her desire for the “revelation whereby I might have a clearer perception both of the bodily pains of our lord and savior, and of the compassion of our lady and of all those true lovers then and since who have believed in his pains; I wished I had been one of them, and had suffered with them” (Julian 26). Furthermore, she relates that “I conceived a mighty desire, praying to our lord God that he would grant me three wounds in my lifetime: the wound of contrition, the wound of compassion, and the wound of earnest longing for God” (Julian 27). The teratological metaphor is evident here in her employment of ruptured images of “wounds,” “bodily pains,” and “contrition”—all these consolidate her identification as a desiring subject, as the lover, an image that she herself attests to, in identifying her with “all those true lovers.” The teratological metaphor, furthermore, testifies that she is motivated by an image of rupture, a motif not merely in proximity with rape, but also with incompleteness and disruption of all Order. Order and law, being constructs of the Symbolic, are what she seeks the disruption of, and thus, her lack is a negation of Order with an impulse to return to the Imaginary illusion. However, as this is impossible, her lack becomes registered in the Real, dawning a terrible fear in her, exemplified in the text by her fear of “death”—a term that she perceived to be the end of this torturous experience

of bodily suffering. For her, then, death becomes a metaphor for the end of perfect communion with the Godhead, and this reminds the readers of how her wish for the “three” wounds might just be a metaphorical allusion to the Trinity, with which she desires an ultimate union.

Her lack and desire to be one in union with the Trinity is a remnant of the Neoplatonic tradition in late medieval literature, whereby the viewer and object of vision exist in pure, undisturbed harmony. However, such desire in the Symbolic can only be, by its very nature, momentary and fragmentary. Thus, ironically she provides what she does not have, for she provides this lack to the beloved in the form of desire. All desire is the perpetuation and displacement of the lack in the Symbolic (Fink, Lacan on Love), but in her case, there is no displacement of desire. Her desire for the Other is fixated on Christ, the beloved. The multiplication of her desire entails fixation on manifold parts of him that often seem to encompass a metaphoric rather than metonymic relation to her desire, namely the wound of contrition, compassion, and longing for God. These become sites of the condensation of her desire, and effectively, they, especially the final wound, threaten to pose as the potential surrogate of Christ. The surrogate takes various forms, but most apparently the form of a Cross, the Cross that the priest brings and its touch heals Julian. The Cross presents a slight possibility to be read as a surrogate victim of a sacrificial crisis, for the pains of Julian are all inscribed in the body, both the pain of her apparent deathbed and that of her suffering of the Lord’s passion.

Additionally, as both communicate through bodily parole, the slippage of similarity becomes too much in them, a twinship, which Girard terms the centre or repository of all differences, all monstrosities, from which evidently a new order will emerge (49). Therefore, the Cross acts as the surrogate sacrificial victim that both heals her wounds and aches her simultaneously.

However, it does so only by mimicking Christ as the ultimate sacrificial victim or the Lamb that was slain at the beginning of the world, and thus, the Cross functions through a mimetic desire.

However, desire is always of the Other, as Lacan's famous aphorism goes: "Man's desire is the Other's desire" (Lacan 690). Thus, while it is true that Julian's body, where the wounds are inscribed, becomes a desiring subject, a subject that is in excess of the structure of Other, its corollary is also true.

There is a transfiguration of desire to the Other, and thus the beloved, Christ, becomes the lover himself, reciprocating her love and desire. Indeed, explicating her famous nut metaphor, Julian asserts: "In truth, Christ is the maker, lover, and keeper" (30). Therefore, Julian now becomes the *objet petit a* of Christ, which He, the split subject, seeks. In keeping the nut, He becomes the substitute for Julian's incomplete desiring subjectivity, but the Lord, for Julian, cannot lack anything for it is "through the love of God does every created thing have its being" (Julian 30).

However, if God is Himself the desiring subject, and yet every created thing has its being in Him, then God, for Lacan, typically showcases the masculine structure, one that is fixated on partial objects and cannot reveal any lack (Fink, *Lacan on Love*).

In effect, then the nut must be the partial essentially lacking object that God loves, ironically, due to his lack of that lack, and yet cannot admit it. For Lacan, then, this reciprocation of desire and love is how the cycle of love is brought to a fulfilment, though I would like to extend this fulfilment not to mere reciprocation but to a bodily partaking in each other's identity.

This is because Julian writes: "And until I am essentially united to him until I am so fastened to him that there is absolutely no created thing between my God and me I can never have love, peace, nor true bliss" (30). This testifies to the mystical Neoplatonic union that Julian seeks with God, though its sexual metaphors are too explicit to be overlooked. In asserting that the mediation of

“no created thing between God and me,” the sexual metaphor ironically negates what it painstakingly endeavours to consolidate, namely, the mediation of Christ, through the Holy Ghost, since Christ was both the Son of God—that is, his creation, something that Meister Eckhart calls the birth of God in the soul—and he is the Creator himself insofar as he is synonymous to the Trinity (Eckhart 14). Thus, Julian’s claim to the Trinity bypasses the mediation of Christ, which, in turn, is a negation of Christ the mediator himself, and this problematises her love for God, along with her desire for an unhindered union. Hence, the sexual metaphor, especially as expressed by the word “bliss,” the English translation of “*jouissance*,” raises the question of whether the *jouissance* she contemplates is a *Jouissance* of the Other.

Mysteriously enough, the wounds by sword prior to her death received by St. Cecilia range three in number (Jacobus de Voragine 689–91), a detail that Julian mentions (Julian 27), and this might be a metaphorical allusion to her desire for a sexual union, not with Christ Himself, but with the Trinity, with the three wounds being wounds of birth of Christ in the soul. Therefore, contrary to Miller’s argument (93–136), it is not the maternal nature of Christ from which Julian suckles, but it is the nature she proceeds to mimic. This is substantiated by her recollection of the story of Mary’s conception of Christ, immediately following the nut and bliss metaphors, with a reiteration of the latter in the word “Blissfully” (Julian 30).

Furthermore, her emphasis on the plainness of Mary and her perception of her in “bodily likeness” (Julian 30) attest to Julian’s allusions to her endeavours of mimicking her.

This is reinforced by “I saw that, for our benefit, he is all that is good and comforting and helpful to us. He is our clothing, who for love wraps and encloses us, embraces and encircles us, clings to us for tender love, that he may never leave us” (Julian 29). There is a surprising intermixing of metaphors in these lines, for these both reinforce the maternal as well as the sexual imageries, as

exemplified by the clause “embrace and encircle[ment],” and the word “cling” seems to escalate the problematisation, for clinging is an overtly sexual metaphor, but it can also mean a clinging to the Mother’s womb. Another instance of such problematised intermixing is her vision of the bleeding Christ. She writes:

Suddenly I saw the red blood trickle down from under the garland hot, fresh, plentiful, and lifelike just as I thought it would have done when the garland of thorns was thrust on his blessed head. So both God and man together suffered for me. I understood clearly and with certainty that it was he who showed it to me, without an intermediary; and I said, “Benedicite Dominus!” I spoke reverently, in a strong voice, and was astonished by the wonderful and marvellous fact of his being so friendly with a sinful creature living in this wretched flesh.
(Julian 29)

The teratological metaphors of rupture and disjunction make the sexual allusions quite evident, with the scream being an orgasmic overflowing rather than a holy utterance. However, the fact that she wondered how the Lord can be “so friendly” with a “sinful creature” is reminiscent of Mary’s astonishment at her conception of the Lord. She marvels at her timidity and the measure of God’s mercy in the same way Mary exclaimed to Gabriel, “Lo, here am I, God’s handmaiden” (Julian 30).

In either case, Julian’s desire for imitation is brought about by the principal clause “I understood truly” (Julian 29), as in the Neoplatonic philosophy, in the act of apprehension, the one whose intellect apprehends and the object of apprehension are united, and these need not necessarily be lover and beloved, and therefore, in this context, her phrase can be interpreted to indicate the Mother-son unity of St. Mary and Jesus, that Julian transposes to herself in employing the pronoun “I,” thus in a way, becoming the Lord’s Mother.

It is now established that the mystical desire bodily experienced by Julian oscillates between the seemingly irreconcilable poles of the lover and beloved, consequently problematising Christ's ontological status, embodying both the Other and the *objet petit a*. Hence, what remains to be examined is how the same parallel dynamic operates in a text in the order of reversal, with the feminine subject inhabiting language rather than the body as its principal medium of expressing desire. "The Wife's Lament" is an epitome of such a case, because it is a transposition of the Christological problematisation, uprooting it from the topography of bodily inscription to that of linguistic alienation. It thereby demonstrates that the oscillations inherently embedded in Christ's identity are hardly confined to the mystical register but are pervasive of the elegiac one as well. The figure of the Mother, the holy maiden, was conventionally held to be in contradistinction to the role of concubine, the social other.

However, as Alison Leytem argues, a common interpretation of the poem "The Wife's Lament," a poem detailing the sorrows of a wife abandoned in a lonely place by her husband, holds that the woman speaks of not one but two men, both a lover and her husband; her lamentation may be due to her sadness at one man's absence abroad and her inability to reach the other here at home. However, scholars have argued that the language in the poem suggests that the two men are actually one man, who may or may not be the speaker's husband. This brings forth the possibility that the woman may not be a wife at all, but a woman who has a close sexual relationship with her "hlaford," insinuating her role as a possible concubine in his household. Sexual desire could very much have been a reason for the speaker in "The Wife's Lament" to have such sorrow, especially if she turned out to be an exiled concubine (Leytem). The concubine has often been assumed to be more closely associated with the sexual relationship between men and women, to have been subtly

acknowledged but never socially accepted. Thus, the figure of the concubine upsets much of the generic expectations and conventions of the time.

Clare Lees notes that if one can read the elegies as one place in the poetry where the internal psychological state of the individual matters, then it follows that in Anglo-Saxon England that individual is male, even when, or perhaps especially when, that voice is universalised (146–69). For feminist scholars, active subjectivity in the poem derives principally from the use of language. Demonstrating the potential power of the female voice in “The Wife’s Lament,” Barrie Ruth Straus maintains that telling her story from her own point of view is a positive act for the speaker, the means by which she attempts to control the way the events of her life will be seen; the way the wife uses words reveals that she does not merely passively accept her fate but rather takes advantage of a form of action available to women of her time (335–56).

Though I agree with Lees and Straus in their perception of the poem as both an acquiescence and a recontextualisation of gender norms simultaneously, especially the voice of the feminine by the protagonist in society, I venture far from them in contending that the feminine indulged in secret forms of pleasure as well, demanding and engaging in behaviour that would have been labelled as socially inappropriate. An erotic trope similar to Julian is also found in “The Wife’s Lament” where Jesus assumes the role of a lover and the wife, the beloved, though the difference being that, unlike Julian, the wife experiences the *Jouissance* of the Other without verbal language.

The wife commences as only a barred subject in the *vel* of alienation—i.e., she is incarcerated in what is ironically a forced choice which enables her entry into the domain of language but only at the expense of the division of her subjectivity—and its alienation is verily evident in the poem that projects a certain dubiousness for temporality in the very beginning.

*Ic þis giedd wrece bi mē ful geōmorre,
 mīnre sylfre sīð. Ic þæt secgan mæg,
 hwæt ic yrmþa gebād, siþþan ic ūp wēox,
 nīwes oþþe ealdes, nō mā þonne nū.
 Ā ic wīte wonn mīnra wræcsīða.*

(“I sing this song, full of sadness,
 this song which is myself. I will tell, what I am able,
 about what hardships I have faced—since I grew up,
 recently or long ago, never more than now.
 Always I suffer my misery of exile.”) (Babyn)

The very phrase “*mīnre sylfre sīð*” which can also be translated as “(this song) which is myself,” as André Babyn does (Babyn), testifies to the inscription of the subject in the Other, which is because her song—a song of the Other—becomes herself almost in an ekphrastic fashion. Furthermore, the word “*wrece*,” a derivative of “*wrecan*,” is an ambiguous word, for in several instances, it is taken to mean “avenge” rather than “narrate,” and then, the initial line can be read as the subject desisting its subjugation in the realm of language to the Other. This in turn entails a grievance of the wife towards Christ, who does not resist yet detests her oppression.

This relates to the conventional gender norms of her time, but more than ever, it is probably an indication of sexual dissatisfaction, a satisfaction of which she has been deprived to date, as indicated by the third and fourth lines where the depiction of temporality is quite confusing. Additionally, the tense of the final line further problematises it, for the class five weak verb “wonn” is in preterite tense in grammatical disjunction to the adverb “Ā” [always], which is evermore

complicated by the preterite present verb in the second line “magan” that can be translated to “will,” “may,” or “can” variously.

These difficulties are the transposition of the structural alienation of the wife, the subject, in the domain of language to the thematic loneliness of the wife without her beloved in a hostile landscape. Her loneliness and longing then refer to a sexual fulfilment insofar as these entail the word “*wræcsīða*” indicating “journeys of exile,” a journey of moving away from the phallus or its Order of law, that is, her deprivation of phallic jouissance, which stands in contrast to the Other jouissance, being an exclusive enjoyment only available to the masculine structure as it is sanctioned by the Symbolic Order and its domineering limits. She effectively terms it as “*wīte*” [misery]. Regardless of how hard she attempts, it is through language that she must be expressive of her desires.

Thus, the poem demonstrates the divisiveness of the wife’s alienation and its inexpressibility without the language of the Other, which in this case is the Christian vocabulary.

Despite their erotic connotations, the vocabulary decidedly remains a Christianised one and one whose Other is the omnipotent (m)Other of all desires in separation. The words “*hlaford*,” “*freond*,” “*wine*,” etc., have been employed elsewhere in a distinctly Christian context. For instance, the words “*hlaford*” and “*freond*” are employed in the poem *The Dream of the Rood* as epithets of Christ: “*Āhōf ic rīcne Cyning, / heofona Hlāford*” (“...I lifted a mighty King, / Lord of the heavens,...”) (Glenn); “*Sī mē Dryhten frēond, / se ðe hēr on eorðan*” (“...May he be friend to me / who here on earth earlier died...”) (Glenn). Similarly, in *The Wanderer*, the word “*goldwine*” or “*gold-friend/generous friend*” is employed to indicate Christ in the line “*goldwine mīnne / hrūsan heolstre biwrah*” (“I hid my gold-giving friend / in the darkness of earth...”) (Liuzza).

Thus, with a Christianised vocabulary in language, it is evident that the subject or the wife in the poem exists because of the Other's desire, or the Husband in the poem. However, this binary of the existence of the wife as a complement to the Husband is ruptured by the problematising ontological status of the Husband, namely, whether he is the Other or the object of desire.

He is both the Cause of her desire as well as its object. He is the Cause of her desire insofar as she remains the Other in her veil of alienation (Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*), as already mentioned, and he is the *objet petit a* of hers insofar as all of her references to their loving memories in the poem emerge from almost an immemorial past, the events that are not likely to take place in the future, and thus, this metaphorically represents her relations with Christ on the Imaginary level with her self-image of completeness and perfection, in full communion with Him. However, the Imaginary level is only illusory and ruptured by her entry to the linguistic or the Symbolic Order, and what remains of that memory of a libido-cathected gestalt is only the longing for the Other, hence, reducing the Other to the mere residue of the memory, the vestigial remnants of a unity that remains unsymbolisable, thus effectively an entity in the register of the Real. Hence, the identity of Christ oscillates between that of the Other and of the object. In Derridean terms, He is neither the Other nor the Lacanian *objet petit a*, but merely a spectrality that dwindles between presence and absence.

This has been variously evidenced throughout the poem, and is most apparent in its linguistic and structural disjunctions. In the line “Ærest mīn hlāford ġewāt heonan of lēodum” (“First my lord departed from my people, / over waves rolling...”) (Babyn), it is questionable whose “leodum” or people he leaves. It is possible that *leodum* as a noun may be modified by the same epithet “*min*” that does “*hlaford*.” However, His abandonment of her people then objectifies Christ because it is a metaphorical reflection of the now unattainable unity of the Imaginary Order and, who at present

remains unsymbolisable, crystallised in the *objet petit a*. However, the phrase “*mīnre lēodfruma*” again escalates the *leodfruma* to the omnipotent position of the Other who left at will.

The most interesting phrase, though, is “*mīnre wēaþearfe*” (“my grievous need”), for it captures the ambiguity of Christ’s ontological crisis. The need of the split subject in alienation and separation is that of the Other’s desire, a juxtaposition of the subject’s lack of being with the lack of the Other, and thus, Jesus is the Other as long as he fulfils her need of a corresponding lack, that is, so long as he is a desiring Other. However, the narrative seems to recount a lack of love and desire on the part of the Lord towards his bride, and if the Husband does not fulfil the function of the desiring Other, then it must be her “woeful need” of a *jouissance* that he has to fulfil, in which case he certainly is relegated to the position of the object of desire. It is possibly the need for phallic *jouissance* that she is after because her lack is expressed through language, much like Julian expresses the same lack through her bodily gestures, and all speech, as Lacan says, is the demand for love (Fink, *Lacan on Love*); the Husband is certainly the object that the subject loves, demanding reciprocation.

The demand for reciprocation conceals the phallic signifier through which *jouissance* is administered both to the feminine and masculine. It is possibly for the lack of this *jouissance* that the curse is laid upon the Husband at the end, for he has no way to experience the *jouissance* without the apparent illusion of the woman, though the true *jouissance* is only delivered by the organ unless the Husband is a Lacanian hysteric, in which case he would have been able to partake in the *Jouissance* of the Other—a surplus *jouissance* that she inevitably partakes in. This partaking of hers is expressed in the gaps of language in the poem, variously punctuated by occasional words such as “*mōcēcare*” [sorrow at dawn], “*wræcsīða*” [journey of exile], “*hygegeōmorne*” [sad in mind], and “*brēostceare*” [cares or sorrows in breast]. All of these compound words testify to the

body as the site of countless psycho-sensual emotions that function without the aid of language. These testify to a non-verbal experience, as a residue of the Imaginary, which ironically constitutes the endless jouissance of (m)Other, the unsymbolised in the Real, and therefore even her surplus jouissance is derived from her Husband's Imaginary body which treats him both as the Other of the language and desire, and as the lost object. Then, it is through her longing as a non-verbal act inscribed in her body and the Imaginary body of the "hlaford" that she enjoys the feminine Jouissance of the Other as a residue of the Jouissance of the Imaginary, and it is through these mechanisms that the identity of the Husband is problematised.

If Christ's oscillation, in Julian's *Revelations*, is between the binaries of the Other and the lost object of desire, and if the Husband's ontological status faces, in "The Wife's Lament," a similar dislocation, assuming a form of spectral indeterminacy between presence and absence, then *The Dream of the Rood* is a textual embodiment of the culmination of this trajectory of ambiguity. It is the poem that corrodes this zone of ambiguity into an all-engulfing dissolution of Christ's subjectivity, entailing consequently a Derridean non-presence, an act verily mediated through the Cross's enigmatic persona. The oscillation in the first two texts takes the shape of complete unambiguous dislocation here, grammatical, temporal, and historical, so much so that ascribing a fixed categorical position to either Christ or the Cross becomes almost impossible.

The ontological status of the Lord, the Husband, is then dislocated, and I term it in a Derridean fashion as a spectral non-presence. This spectral non-presence, I argue, is manifested as sheer disjunctions, if not the total nonexistence, of grammar, structure, and language in the poem *The Dream of the Rood*, a poem where the crucifix retells the story of Christ's sacrifice and heavily laments the Lord.

One of its most evident instances, which significantly contribute to the demonstration of the Cross's a-historicity, or its non-place in history, is the grammatical distortions. Though most critics would argue that the poem's structure is flawlessly coherent except for a few instances of syntactic and linguistic variations, a handful of critics argue about the disjunctions in the poem. One such critic is Pasternack, who painstakingly demonstrates the architectonic unity of the poem but only to delineate its disjunctions so that the latter is perceived as a sort of "bas-relief," to employ his term, disrupting the monotony of the former (167–86).

However, even in his enlightening essay, these disjunctions are shown to be only occasional and teleological. These are described with emphasis, which helps in bringing the readers' attention to certain places in the poem, and in providing an auditory relief to the audience.

However, this teleological argument hardly sees through the stringent poetic structure, which it still heavily draws upon, a structure that I will now evince to be virtually nonexistent.

Dividing the poem into several sections, Pasternack argues that the first section, consisting of the vision (lines 1–26), is dependent on the subject-initial word order, whereas the second, the narrative of the Cross (lines 27–77), relies on verb-initial order, installing in place V–S sentence patterns (Pasternack 167, 172). Yet in both of these cases, the projected dominant patterns are evidence that they are more of an aberration than a rule.

For instance, in the opening lines, the reflexive pronoun "mē" (line 2) serves as an object, and not a subject; subsequent lines alternate between subject-initial, verb-initial, and adverb-initial constructions with no regularity and predictability. Similarly, in the second section with the proposed verb-initial structure, multiple lines—including 28, 29, 32b, 34b, 35, 36b, 37, and many others do not at all commence with a verb, and the so-called V–S pattern is further ruptured by the subject being displaced in lines where it is neither following the verb nor preceding it in any

consistent fashion.³ Taken together, these inconsistencies serve to demonstrate the complete absence of structure in the poem, and what remains is actually the presence of an illusion of coherence and structure binding it. This creates an inexplicable emptiness for the Cross, that oscillates between life and death, presence and absence.

However, despite such oscillations, the Cross's spectrality cannot yet fully be asserted unless it is historically dislocated as well; otherwise, such oscillations might be erroneously interpreted to mean the Cross's magnification as the Absolutist hyper-essential excess, beyond these phenomenological and ontological boundaries. Thus, in an attempt to investigate the Cross's historicity, I would begin by eliciting the temporal disjunctions abounding the poem.

In the initial-most line of the poem, the present indefinite tense of the infinitive "*secgan*" is immediately contested in that very line with the future tense of its succeeding verb "*wylle*," both of which are problematised by the preterite indefinite verb "*gemætte*"; and the temporal unity of the entire sentence, however wavering, is completely disrupted by the act of transforming the sentence in a pluperfect sense with the decisive employment of the adverb "*Syðþan*," which, additionally, acts almost as a lexical caesura separating the subordinate adverbial clause "*syððan reordberend reste wunedon*" from its preceding lines, "*Hwæt, ic swefna cyst secgan wylle, / hwæt mē gemætte tō midre nihte.*"

This process of subsuming all the variegated tenses in the sentence into a pluperfect one, or the pluperfect-isation, is continued by the clause "*þæt ic gesāwe*" dominated by the pluperfect verb "*gesāwe*," ignoring the preterite tenses of its preceding clause "*Pūhte mē*" and succeeding clause "*on lyft lādan.*" Whatever sense of uniformity, irrespective of its negligibility, produced by such a process is disrupted by the absence of any pluperfect tense in the following lines, which are vested by a series of simple preterite verbs "*wæs*," "*stōdon*," "*wæron*," "*Behēoldon*," "*wæs*," and

“*Geseah*,” but these preterite verbs are again interrupted by pluperfect verbs “*geweorðode*,” “*scīnan*,” “*gēgyred*,” and “*hæfdon Bewrigene*.” Thus, the disruptive mechanism continues.

Therefore, these instances which profusely abound in the poem, though among which I have demonstrated only a few for analysis, clearly depict that the poem, including the Cross’s narrative as well as the poet’s vision, is quite temporally disjunct, functioning on entirely different spatiotemporal planes, oscillating between the past and the present, life and death, presence and absence. Hence, although such analysis affirms—or disaffirms—the Cross’s ontological status as neither presence nor absence but a non-presence, the question of its temporal status still lingers.

However, what is precisely conveyed by the polarised terms “the past” and “the present” with respect to the Cross is contentious, and whether it is at all correct, both in terms of grammar and meaning, to employ the definite article prior to it is again a dilemma. It is because these terms do not indicate a historical precedence or succession, and any attempt to locate these in history is doomed to failure, as verily instantiated by the poem’s commencement in a moment of pastness grammatically expressed as the poet’s desire to narrate a “dream,” a memory.

However, this precise “moment of pastness” is quite indeterminate, for this poem must now only be the recollection of a memory, and thus, in effect, its translation, a retelling of the pastness—a pastness that is, however, already past both in the mental desire to narrate (“*secgan wylle*”) as well as in the physical act of translating the poem from an oral tradition, albeit this does not mean that spoken narration precedes the written one, as the oral tradition is itself a translation of the inscriptions on the Ruthwell Cross, which, in turn, has been a translation from the Celtic futhorc runes, that were only symbolic and the symbols intercultural.

Therefore, as the poem and, in effect, the temporal situation of the Cross get caught up in these webs of infinitely multiple mutual discourses, its Christocentric meaning is questioned, because

the Cross is now placed in an intercultural, interreligious, and intertextual discourse that both precedes and succeeds the historical Christocentrism. Therefore, any quest for a historical locus of the Cross is bound to be a failure, because historically, it precedes Christocentrism insofar as its glorification, torture, and subsequent death precede the torture, death, ascension, and glorification of Christ in quite an anachronistic fashion, and it succeeds Christocentrism insofar as it heralds the redemptive message, torchbearing the path to salvation, and proclaims the Second Coming of the Messiah—an unknown Saviour who is neither the same as the Sacrificial Lamb of God nor the Trinitarian Godhead.

As, in the poem, the Cross as the historical symbol of the Christian faith is dislocated and accorded only a non-place in history (the state of the spectres), the quest for the origin and meaning of the poem, if it at all can be termed “a poem” (for it is now only pieces of disjointed and fragmented narratives), is invalidated as well because the meaning of the poem, being interwoven in such endless discourses, is perpetually differed and deferred in the play of *différance* (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 65). Such is so not only because it is a mosaic of other texts, as Barthes argues (53)—but also because both the poem and the Cross now become atemporal,¹ since the poem is still engaged in the process of both constructing and deconstructing its meanings even now, for it is only an automaton in *différance*, leaving traces of meanings a-temporally.²

Conclusion

This essay has, thus, traced the sequential destabilisation of Christ’s identity across three medieval texts, with each stage representing a distinct modality characteristic of the same fundamental problematisation. In Julian of Norwich’s *Revelations*, the identity of Christ incessantly oscillates between that of the lover and the beloved, i.e., the Other and the *objet petit a*, with the feminine

body serving as a site of inscriptive desire both sustaining and undermining the Christocentric framework.

The teratological metaphors related to rupture and the intermingling of maternal and erotic imagery evince a subjectivity that does not with mere passivity receive divine communion, but plays an active role in problematising the mediatory role of Christ, ironically enough, by seeking an unmediated union with the Holy Trinity. In “The Wife’s Lament,” a transposition of this problematisation takes place: from the bodily register to that of the linguistic. On the contrary, the wife expressing herself through the Christianised vocabulary of the Other, yet betraying the grammatical and temporal disjunctions of the poem, actively reduces the authoritative figure of the *hlaforð* to a mere spectral figure in a perpetual state of oscillation between the position of the Other—the reason of her desire—and the *objet petit a*—the residue of an irreparable unity of the Imaginary Order, the pre-linguistic Order. The surplus jouissance partaken by the wife through the non-verbal inscriptions of her body reinforces the instability of Christ’s identity, as something simultaneously grounded in the linguistic Order and the lost object haunting its periphery. The trajectory is brought to its end by *The Dream of the Rood*, where Christ’s ontological and temporal identities are entirely dissolved. The poem’s structural, grammatical, and temporal disjunctions expose the narrative of the Cross as the site harbouring radical indeterminacy, which is neither present nor absent, but inhabits a Derridean non-presence preceding and exceeding the historical methodological Christocentrism it purports to represent. The poem’s intercultural and intertextual genealogy—from futhorc runes through oral tradition to written text—enmeshes the Cross in a play of *différance* that keeps on perpetually deferring its signification, rendering any quest for an originary Christocentric meaning unattainable. Taken together, these readings capture the

medieval literary and devotional tradition as texts deconstructing themselves on their own, contrary to a narrative of undisturbed Christocentric subjectivity.

Whether expressed through Julian's bodily wounds, the unnamed wife's linguistically demarcated sorrows, or the Cross's own lacerated materiality, the feminine body and its inscriptions always function as the appropriate sites where this deconstruction becomes legible, exposing the central signifier of Western literature, Christ and his identity as an irreducibly unstable construct, suspended between presence and absence, subject and object, origin and trace. Its implications are far-reaching: if Christ's identity is so much constitutively unstable within the very tradition that always attempts at its consolidation, then the Christocentric discourse of medieval devotional and elegiac literature may be understood not as a monolithic edifice, but as a perpetually self-revising, self-shifting structure, one whose meanings are always already subject to the *différance* it can never contain.

Notes:

1 I do not use the word "atemporal" in the sense used by Patten, who substitutes it for what I would consider a more appropriate word, "timeless," as his concept of atemporality remains deeply rooted in history and universality, unlike my usage here, which simply means a non-relation to time.

2 I define "Trace" as the marks of an originary absence exposed in the form of bipolarities, disjunctions, etc., underlying the Transcendental Signified.

3 To sustain this claim, a fuller enumeration of the syntactic irregularities is required. In Pasternack's "first section," the succeeding line "*hwæt mē ġemætte tō midre nihte*" is evidence of

a more passive construction where “*mē*” appears rather as an object than as a subject; the following lines alternate between subject-initial order (“*reorberend*”) and verb-initial order (“*Pūhte*,” “*lādan*”). In the “second section,” lines 28, 29, 32b, 34b, 35, 36b, 37, 38, 39b, 40a, 41, 43b, 44a, 45a, 46b, and many more do not start with a verb; the V–S pattern is further ruptured by the displacement of the subject in lines 27, 28, 34, 35, 36b, 37b, 38b, 44a, etc. In some lines the subjects are succeeded by verbs (34b, 35, 36b, 50, 55), in others adverbs take precedence (57, 59a, 62b, 69b, 70a), and in yet others further syntactic variations exist.

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