Imagining the Medieval Afterlife: Introduction

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> So as to deprive evil men of a pretext to make excuses in their sins, and to render these same men completely inexcusable in their faithlessness, almighty God has through the ages endowed almost every generation with witnesses . . . through whom he has deigned to reveal plainly some uncertain and hidden facets of his wisdom. This he did so that they might learn openly and clearly, not just by word but also by sight, about the torments of the wicked, and the shining dwellings of the just, and the state of souls after they leave the body, and what places of punishment or what kinds of torments await each sin, and finally by what suffrages these sins can be expiated after death.[1]

So wrote the English monastic chronicler Ralph of Coggeshall (d. 1218). These words prefaced his retelling of the experience of one of these 'witnesses', namely a peasant named Thurkill. On the evening of 28 October 1206, this humble man was visited by St Julian, who took his soul on a journey through the afterlife. During this vision Thurkill sees souls being judged and the torments of hell and purgatory, and learns, in the case of the last, how the intercession of the living can help the dead to join the blessed souls residing in paradise. In the passage quoted, Ralph reminds readers that Thurkill's experience was one in a long line, while also warning his audience that these texts are to be respected and heeded: they are, after all, new revelations from God.

Even with this, Ralph could not have known just how important this tradition was: across cultures and across the centuries, humans have been telling stories of those who breached the barrier between the living and the dead, and reported back on the latter.[2] Various versions of the famed and very ancient epic of Gilgamesh (Bilgames), for example, include journeys to the realm of the dead.[3] China produced its own early stories of visits to an appropriately bureaucratic hereafter.[4] In the western tradition, Book 11 of Homer's *Odyssey* relates how Ulysses encounters the departed, while Book 6 of Virgil's *Aeneid* is entirely devoted to the protagonist's visit to the

Underworld (this ancient background is covered by Braund and Hilliard, Chapter 1, this volume). Early Christianity had offered its own take on the tradition, whether the protagonist's hopeful view of heaven in the *Passion of Perpetua*, or in the Bible itself, where we find the famous story of Lazarus and the rich man in the afterlife: one rewarded, one punished (Luke 16.19–31). The Bible furthermore offered all sorts of other details about the fate of the dead, such as the idea of intercession for them (2 Macc. 12.43–6), a Last Judgement (Matt. 25.31–46; cf. Matt. 13.36–43, 24.27–35), and even Christ's Harrowing of Hell (1 Peter 3.19). Building on these pre- and early Christian traditions and texts, the European Middle Ages developed its own, important corpus of afterlife voyages (now more anxious in tone), like the abovementioned *Vision of Thurkill*, but the most famous is of course the *Divine Comedy* of Dante. These recountings of the afterlife circulated widely, were disseminated to diverse audiences, and shaped how people behaved in this life and conceived of the next. Indeed, these accounts offer a great richness for historians and literary scholars of today: as the historian Jacques Le Goff pointed out, 'ideas about the other world are among the more prominent features of any religion or society'; others suggest these texts reveal 'l'intimité d'une société passée', and the 'hopes and fears, toils and pleasures, of the Middle Ages'.[5] Taken diachronically, the changes in the medieval hereafter mirrored changes of living society, helping to elucidate developments in popular culture, religious beliefs, mental and social structures, even gender roles and individualism. This is not to forget that works like the *Vision of Thurkill* are wonderful, moving examples in the history of European literature.

Modern scholars have explored this afterlife vision or voyage genre for a long time, but the topic is so important that one recent handbook lamented that it 'still is not sufficiently' examined, and that even now few 'accept these texts as valuable enough to be considered in historical studies'.[6] The author of this complaint, Peter Dinzelbacher, has himself helped to correct this imbalance: he produced not only the now-standard book on medieval visionary literature (a great part of which concerns the otherworld), but also numerous follow-on publications, mostly in German.[7] Alongside these, we have now that of Claude Carozzi, whose massive 1994 tome covered the medieval Latin tradition of 'voyages dans l'au-delà' from its beginnings to the thirteenth century, though this work was still incomplete and imperfect.[8] In English, the best comprehensive treatments are rather more limited, but we might highlight here Dods, Zaleski, Morgan, Easting, and Gurevich.[9] Besides these studies, there have appeared numerous volumes of translations of these vision texts, suggesting

that they are a topic of great ongoing interest with scholars and students alike. Collections of (afterlife) visions have appeared in German,[10] French,[11] Spanish,[12] Italian,[13] and English translation. In the case of the last, Eileen Gardiner's volume of translations has been in print continuously since 1989 and has sold well over ten thousand copies.[14] To these translations, we might add likewise a series of useful bibliographies on the genre.[15]

This volume was envisaged, first of all, to consolidate and digest (in English) all the variegated contributions that have taken place in the field since the studies of Dinzelbacher and Carozzi, including on the late Middle Ages, ignored by the latter. In Part I, the reader will find a series of chapters that treat the subject in chronological (and regional) slices, from a Roman prelude through to the late Middle Ages. Some particularly important figures or texts in the afterlife vision tradition are treated separately, like Gregory the Great, the *Vision of Tnugdal*, or Dante, in Part IV. Finally, while these voyages, visits, apparitions, or visions that reveal the beyond and/or its inhabitants are a key aspect of how medieval Europeans imagined the afterlife, they are not the whole story. Both artistic and theological perspectives need to be taken into account. As such, the chapters in Parts II and III help to provide a wider context for these afterlife narratives by addressing theological or artistic sources. As a whole, therefore, the Anglophone reader will find for the first time a more-or-less complete overview of what medieval Europeans thought awaited them after death.

Besides consolidation, however, this book allows some of the leading scholars in this field – mainly historians, but also literary scholars – to advance new arguments in their respective areas, changing how we think about the history of the afterlife and the visions that describe it. For example, previous scholarship has emphasised the supposed inventive exceptionality of the central Middle Ages, which produced many new visions and, according to Le Goff's celebrated *The Birth of Purgatory*, a third otherworldly realm.[16] Watkins' contribution in this volume (Chapter 6) reveals instead that this period was characterised more by continuity than by rupture, with an afterlife that retained many older features, including a lack of tidy tripartition (likewise noted by Gardiner in Chapter 13). Furthermore, the chapters in Parts II and III help us to move beyond Le Goff's well-known arguments, notably his dismissal of the early Middle Ages as theologically stagnant with regard to the afterlife. Stead (Chapter 11) shows for instance that where Le Goff saw purgatory's 'triumph', the idea had in fact almost no impact on visual depictions of the afterlife from the twelfth to the fourteenth century. In addition, as

Moreira here demonstrates (in Chapter 8), purgatory was an idea that had developed long before, in connexion with the rise in anxious, hopeful intercessions for the dead during the very early Middle Ages. Indeed, as Foxhall Forbes proves (in Chapter 9), most of the important theological developments linked to the afterlife came out of the supposedly 'stagnant' early Middle Ages, where new ideas were sometimes advanced by vision texts themselves. Other chapters reveal how further stereotypes about the early medieval afterlife need to be nuanced: for example, in my own chapter (Chapter 3), I show how previous emphasis on the political purposes of Carolingian visions has obscured the important (and hitherto ignored) role women play in these texts.

This volume takes the focus off the central Middle Ages not just by highlighting overlooked complexities in the early medieval period, but likewise by offering new perspectives on (often overlooked) later medieval (*c.* 1200–1500) developments. In the past, many have suggested that the older afterlife vision genre, typified by that of Thurkill (*c.* 1206) described above, either declined or even died out with that very same text, to be replaced by the rosier afterlife visions of the female mystics.[17] Stoudt, however, in Chapter 14 explores the otherworld journeys of the female mystics themselves, and suggests that these were often not so rosy as we have been led to believe. Furthermore, in Chapter 7, Adams, building on previous arguments by Easting, emphasises instead that people continued to record more traditional visions of the afterlife in this period.[18] But her chapter also demonstrates that the genre became even more complex and interesting over these centuries, encompassing visions *of*, and apparitions *from*, heaven, hell, and purgatory, and buttressing Church teachings on everything from the cult of saints to the sacrament of penance. Kelly, in Chapter 10, likewise explores this same complex situation, showing how these apparitions received the imprimatur of theologians.

This volume also puts increased weight on the reception and impact of these sources, in line with a recent historiographical trend that argues that we should heed the multifarious ways these texts were subsequently received, reused, and recirculated, rather than fixate on their putative, 'original' meaning.[19] This paradigm essentially asserts that reception is more important than original intention, in line with the ideas of Hans Robert Jauss.[20] In his chapter about Gregory the Great (Chapter 12), for example, Keskiaho shows how the afterlife episodes presented in the *Dialogues* had an important effect on the succeeding tradition, such that ecstatic (as opposed to dream) visions of a tangible afterlife subsequently became the norm. As Gardiner explores toward the end of her chapter

(Chapter 13), one such vision, namely that of Tnugdal, became so successful in the later Middle Ages that it deserves its own special treatment. My chapter (Chapter 3), furthermore, considers how focusing on the 'original' *Apocalypse of Paul* obscures a notable revision by Carolingian women, one imbued with feminist resistance to patriarchal impositions.[21] Finally, Wieland, in Chapter 5, offers a compelling analysis of Bede's sly adaptation of the *Vision of Fursey*, showing how it was born out of strong feelings of national pride. Other chapters discuss how the content of these afterlife voyage texts was mobilised to a larger public through sermons: Watkins (Chapter 6) and Adams (Chapter 7) for the central and later Middle Ages respectively, while Hen (Chapter 2) and Boyle (Chapter 4) make clear that already in the seventh century afterlife visions were being packaged into sermons, contrary to Dinzelbacher's claim.[22] The afterlife vision genre thus suffused European culture. Indeed, far from being divorced from this tradition as has been claimed, Dante's *Divine Comedy* has a political purpose (to tout the Holy Roman Empire) that cannot be fully appreciated without noting the manifest, and probably deliberate, contrasts between his afterlife and that of his visionary predecessors, as Corbett shows (Chapter 15).

This volume does many things, therefore: as a rare English-language overview, it re-emphasises the significance and complexity of the early and later Middle Ages with regard to the afterlife, and encourages us to look more seriously at the subsequent fate of these texts. We can only hope that the 'afterlife' of our volume will be to spur yet more discussion and debate about this fascinating subject.

Notes

1 My translation of Ralph of Coggeshall, *VT*, ed. Schmidt, 2; Ward (ed.), 'VT', 411. Cf. the French translation by Cédric Lotz.
2 A good overview is Zaleski, *Otherworld*, 11–25. Cf. also Godelier (ed.), *Mort*.
3 *EG*, trans. George.
4 Bernstein and Katz, 'Rise'.
5 Le Goff, *Birth*, 1; Aubrun, 'Caractères', 109; Holdsworth, 'Visions', 153.
6 Dinzelbacher, 'Eschatology', 512.
7 A very select sampling: Dinzelbacher, *Vision und Visionsiteratur*; Dinzelbacher, 'Way'; Dinzelbacher (ed. and trans.), *Mittelalterliche Visionsliteratur*; Dinzelbacher et al., *'Visiones'*; Dinzelbacher, *Revelationes*; Dinzelbacher, 'Nova'; Dinzelbacher, *Frauenmystik*; Dinzelbacher, 'Vision Literature'.
8 Carozzi, *Voyage*, ignoring the mystics and often unfocused; cf. Flint's review in *JEH* 48. Cf. also Carozzi, 'Géographie'; Carozzi, 'Carolingiens'; Carozzi, *Eschatologie*.

9 Dods, *Forerunners*; Zaleski, *Otherworld*; Morgan, *Dante*; Easting, *Visions*; Gurevich, '*Divine*'.
10 Dinzelbacher (ed. and trans.), *Mittelalterliche Visionsliteratur*: thirty-one authors or texts, sixth to fifteenth century.
11 Micha (ed. and trans.), *Voyages*: seventeen texts, up to the *Vision of Thurkill*; Marchand (ed. and trans.), *L'autre*.
12 Díaz y Díaz (ed. and trans.), *Visiones*.
13 Ciccarese (ed. and trans.), *Visioni*: nineteen texts, up to the *Vision of Wetti*.
14 Gardiner (ed. and trans.), *Visions*: twelve texts, up to the *Vision of Thurkill*. For some (overly severe) critiques, see Lafferty in *JML* 2 and Botterill in *Speculum* 65. The sales figures were kindly estimated by Gardiner.
15 Fros, 'Visionum'; Gardiner, *Visions*; Easting, *Visions*; Dinzelbacher, 'Nova'; cf. Dinzelbacher, 'Eschatology'.
16 Dinzelbacher, *Revelationes*, 30–3; cf. Dinzelbacher, 'Littérature', 295; Dinzelbacher, *Mittelalterliche Visionsliteratur*, 21, 25; Dinzelbacher, *Vision und Visionsliteratur*, 238–58; Lotz, 'Visions', 47; Le Goff, *Naissance*, trans. Goldhammer, *Birth*.
17 Dinzelbacher, *Mittelalterliche Visionsliteratur*, 21; Dinzelbacher, *Revelationes*, 31; Lotz, 'Visions', 48; Aubrun, 'Caractères', 129–30; Carozzi, *Voyage*, 635–49; Morgan, *Dante*, 3, 7, 112: 'After 1206 and the *Vision of Thurkill*, no new visions of the other world were recorded' (7).
18 Easting, 'Send'; Easting, *Visions*, 10.
19 Esp. Wilson, 'Dissemination', e.g. 7–8. On the reception of visionary *theory*, see Keskiaho, *Dreams*.
20 Jauss, 'Literary'.
21 And on the reception of the *Visio Wettini*, see Pollard, 'Charlemagne'.
22 Dinzelbacher, *Vision und Visionsliteratur*, 238.