Imagining the Medieval Afterlife:

Introduction

Richard Matthew Pollard

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.

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. Various versions of the famed and very ancient epic of Gilgamesh (Gilgames), for example, include journeys to the realm of the dead. China produced its own early stories of visits to an appropriately bureaucratic hereafter. 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 recountsings 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, French, Spanish, Italian, 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. To these translations, we might add likewise a series of useful bibliographies on the genre.

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. Watkins’ contribution in this volume (Chapter 9) 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. 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. 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 13, 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. This paradigm essentially asserts that reception is more important than original intention, in line with the ideas of Hans Robert Jauss. 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...
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(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. 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. 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

2 A good overview is Zaleski, Otherworld, 11–25. Cf. also Godelier (ed.), Mort.
3 EG, trans. George.
4 Bernstein and Katz, ‘Rise’.
7 A very select sampling: Dinzelbacher, Vision und Visionseratur; Dinzelbacher, ‘Way’; Dinzelbacher (ed. and trans.), Mittelalterliche Visionsliteratur; Dinzelbacher et al., ‘Visiones’; Dinzelbacher, Revelationes; Dinzelbacher, ‘Nova’; Dinzelbacher, Frauenmystik; Dinzelbacher, ‘Vision Literature’.
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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*.
12 Marchand (ed. and trans.), *L’autre*.
13 Díaz y Díaz (ed. and trans.), *Visiones*.
14 Ciccarese (ed. and trans.), *Visioni*: nineteen texts, up to the *Vision of Wetti*.
16 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 Esp, Wilson, ‘*Dissemination*’, e.g. 7–8. On the reception of visionary *theory*, see Keskiaho, *Dreams*.
19 Jauss, ‘*Literary*’.
20 And on the reception of the *Visio Wettini*, see Pollard, ‘*Charlemagne*’.
CHAPTER I

Just Deserts in the Ancient Pagan Afterlife

Susanna Braund and Emma Hilliard

Non FVI FVI NON SVM NON CVRO (‘I was not; I was; I am not; I don’t care’): the polemical quality of this Latin epitaph implies a certain scepticism about the existence of life after death. But its very fierceness testifies to Roman belief in the afterlife. As scholar of Roman religion John North points out: ‘No one would want an aggressive denial of the afterlife on his tomb unless belief in it was strongly felt by some of the living.’

Belief in an afterlife is amply attested in Greco-Roman antiquity. Types of evidence include the so-called mystery religions, ritual practices, epitaphs, and a range of literary texts. The first three of these may reflect beliefs that were widespread, whereas the literary texts, because of the limits of literacy in the ancient world, articulate ideas that we can only safely attribute to the elites. The oldest and most influential of the mystery religions was the cult of Demeter at Eleusis in Attica, known as the Eleusinian mysteries, which involved purification, initiation, and the promise of a blessed eternity in the Elysian Fields. Orphism likewise: instructions on gold leaves or plates buried with Orphic devotees directed the dead through the complexities of the Underworld to the Elysian Fields. The Pythagorean sect, named for the sixth-century BCE philosopher, which like Orphism had a strong presence in southern Italy (and thus exercised an important influence on Roman culture), maintained a doctrine of reincarnation called metempsychosis, according to which a soul would inhabit a series of bodies. Other mystery cults with strong manifestations during the classical period involved Cybele and Attis, Dionysus/Bacchus, and the Egyptian deities Isis and Osiris, to which we can add the Persian-inspired cult of Mithras and Christianity from Palestine.

Representations of the afterlife in Greco-Roman literature begin with the earliest extant Greek poems, with both Homer and Hesiod mentioning the house of Hades, lord of the dead and king of the Underworld, and continue through the classical period with increasingly elaborate and sometimes competing visualisations. The dominant feature of the
Greco-Roman afterlife was the idea that justice would be served after death. That idea of justice was conceived of in a range of forms, from the entirely positive vision of eternal existence in the Elysian Fields to the entirely negative images of criminals subject to tortures without end or relief. In both Greek and Roman thought, the afterlife was conceived as a kingdom complete with one or more judges (Minos, Rhadamanthus, and Aeacus) who would pass sentences on the newly arrived inhabitants of the Underworld. The elements of judgement, punishment, and reward are evident in the most salient texts, including, in Greek, Homer’s Odyssey Book 11 and the writings of the fourth-century BCE Greek philosopher Plato, who discusses the immortality of the psyche (soul) in several works, most importantly Phaedrus and Republic, which he ends with a detailed narrative of a vision of the afterlife, the so-called ‘Myth of Er’. Three Latin texts concerning the afterlife, written within a forty-year period during the first century BCE, stand as the most important surviving Roman texts: the finale to Book 3 of Lucretius’ epic poem expounding Epicureanism, De rerum natura (‘On the Nature of the Cosmos’); the concluding portion of the statesman and philosopher Cicero’s De re publica, known as the Somnium Scipionis (‘Dream of Scipio’); and Virgil’s narrative of Aeneas’ visit to the Underworld in Aeneid Book 6, when his father, Anchises, describes to him the highly moralised workings of the cosmos. Alongside these high-status and highly serious texts of epic and philosophy, the importance of judgement, punishment, and reward in the ancient conception of the afterlife is confirmed by satirical texts, for example, Seneca’s Apocolocyntosis (probably written in 54 CE), a Latin skit satirising the deification of the recently deceased emperor Claudius, which depicts Claudius’ post-mortem journey first to heaven and then to the Underworld and sees him sentenced to be a freedman’s slave, and in Greek, Lucian’s Dialogues of the Dead, dating from a century later, in which justice and equality after death are recurrent themes. These literary texts implicitly or explicitly frame a morality in which past behaviour affects the future and in which people meet their ‘just deserts’ in the afterlife. In this chapter, we will focus on the Latin representations of the afterlife, as they are more important than Greek authors for our understanding of the medieval period, discussing first the afterlife according to Lucretius, Cicero, and Virgil and then the articulations of hell offered in a sequence of influential Latin epics starting with the Aeneid.

As the climax to the first half of his Epicurean epic poem, Lucretius delivers a satirical debunking of the stories of the punishments of sinners in the afterlife by rationalising the stories. What is striking is his focus upon
the punishments meted out to the sinners rather than other elements of the infernal paraphernalia. His satire supports the larger project of Epicureanism: to remove fear of death so that people can achieve contentment in this life. It is self-evident that Lucretius would not give such a prominent position to debunking the myths unless such beliefs about potential punishments in the afterlife had a strong hold on his contemporaries. Before we turn to Lucretius’ satire, some background.

All we know of Lucretius is his poem, De rerum natura, a six-book epic written in the 50s BCE in which he expounds the materialist philosophy of Epicurus, who established a philosophical community just outside Athens in around 306 BCE. Epicureanism was an entirely empirical philosophy which held that there was no providential deity and that the universe was the result of accident. According to Epicurean physics, the cosmos consists only of atoms moving through a void. Everything that exists is the result of random collisions of atoms; differences in colour, texture, flavour, smell, are the result of different combinations of different types of atoms. Consequently, human beings consist of only atoms and void; death constitutes the dissolution of the component atoms of body and soul. According to Epicurean ethical theory, the goal of human life is ‘pleasure’, if pleasure is defined as ataraxia, which denotes ‘freedom from disturbance’. Epicurus advocated avoiding the kinds of pleasure that are neither natural nor necessary, such as the desires for sex, wealth, and high office, because they stir up extreme emotions such as pain, jealousy, and fear; instead, people should live simply by satisfying the natural and necessary desires for food and shelter.

In his poem, Lucretius articulates Epicurean philosophy with an explicit focus on the physical aspects of the world but an implicit moral message. Following Epicurus in regarding fear of death and fear of the gods as the principal obstacles to human happiness, he uses rationalistic arguments regarding the mortality of the soul and the workings of the natural world to assuage these anxieties. In Books 1 and 2 he describes how atoms and void behave by colliding (thanks to the random swerve) and disaggregating again; in Books 3 and 4 he deals with human biology, including the soul and the senses; and in Books 5 and 6 he accounts for the creation and nature of our world.

Lucretius’ vivid depiction of the afterlife comes in the finale to Book 3, which takes as its starting point the preceding argument that the soul is material and hence mortal, with death simply its annihilation. In the final 250 lines (830–1094), Lucretius shifts from expository scientific mode into a more emotional mode, appealing to the heart rather than to the
head. He first mocks people’s fears of what might happen to their bodies after death and the conventional laments of mourners, then has a personification of Nature haranguing someone who cannot bear the idea of dying. Then (3.978–9): ‘As for all those torments that are said to take place in the depths of hell, they are actually present here and now, in our own lives’. He cites four classic cases of the punishment of sinners, Tantalus, Tityos, Sisyphus, and the Danaïds, reworking material that dates back to the Odyssey, where Odysseus witnesses the punishments of Tityos, Tantalus, and Sisyphus (11.576–600). Ixion is the only classic case missing; Tantalus is usually represented differently, suffering from the torment of being unable to reach the food and water that surround him (hence the word ‘tantalise’) and the more familiar offence is killing and serving his son to the gods to eat. According to Lucretius, Tantalus, ‘transfixed with . . . terror at the huge boulder poised above him’ after he stole nectar and ambrosia from the gods, is really the person oppressed by superstitious fear. Tityos, ‘lying in hell forever probed by birds of prey’ who gnaw at his regenerating liver after his attempted rape of the goddess Leto, is really ‘that poor devil prostrated by love . . . devoured by gnawing jealousy’. Sisyphus, according to myth eternally doomed ‘to push a boulder laboriously up a steep hill only to see it . . . rolling and bounding down again to . . . the plain’, is really the politically ambitious man who never succeeds. The husband-murdering Danaïds, who are doomed to ‘pour water into a leaking vessel which can never by any sleight be filled’, really represent people who are never satisfied but always want something more. Lucretius wraps this section up by equating the terrors of hell – such as the dog Cerberus, the Furies, and darkness – with the pangs of conscience and fears of retribution for misdeeds that we experience in this life. Consequently, ‘the life of misguided mortals becomes a hell on earth’ (3.1023).

Lucretius’ handling of the traditional representations of exemplary punishments in the Underworld reveals elements of the belief system of his contemporaries even as he attempts to argue them out of their fears of the afterlife. The fact that his focus is precisely upon the punishments endured by these infamous sinners demonstrates the moral loading of depictions of the Underworld in Greco-Roman antiquity. Cicero’s depiction of the afterlife in his De re publica, written around the same time as Lucretius’ poem, is similarly moralised, even while being diametrically opposed to Epicurean doctrine: according to Cicero, the only true life is the life that follows death.

Cicero’s De re publica is his reworking of Plato’s Republic, complete with a vivid dream vision at the end, although Cicero’s dream is significantly