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Recoding the Marvelous: The Medieval Vision Paradigm and Dante's *Commedia*

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Abstract

Most medieval visionary accounts share the characteristics of an empiric visionscape, an ordering of dispensation along the lines of Augustine's three-fold hierarchy for visions, a tendency toward the visionary's ultimate self-effacement in the presence of the divine, and an engagement in an passive/active dynamic (passive in receiving the vision, active in styling an authoritative account of the event). Dante's massive *Commedia* follows some of these characteristics (the first two) but pulls away into uncharted terrain concerning the last two characteristics. For as Dante moves away from the mundial and progressively enters the presence of the divine, he reveals an intensifying awareness of his psyche and its emotional / cognitive responses, and his scripting of these responses acts as a catalyst to engender similar responses in the reader. Also, he hesitates to interpret his allegorical account past the literal layer, forcing the readers to reveal their own hermeneutical dispositions as they follow his progress. In these ways his *Commedia* pre-figures the modus operandi of the later, Protestant-styled vision accounts（both literary and historical）.

Keywords: visions, paradigm, Augustine, visio corporalis, visio spiritualis, visio intellectualis, Dante, Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso, otherworldly journey, empiric, marvelous, signs, hermeneutic, medieval, Protestant

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摘　　要

多數中世紀靈視敘事具有經驗性靈視的特質，根據聖奧古斯丁有關靈視的三重結構所安排的配置，一種面對神聖，靈視者個人的自我抹除，以及進入一個兼主動/被動的動態過程（面對靈視時的被動，創作事件本身的權威性敘述時的主動）。但丁巨製《神曲》即是遵循上述（前兩個）特徵，但是一旦牽涉後兩個特徵時，就進入前人未至的領域。當但丁漸行離開世界而漸漸趨進神聖時，他展現對於其本身心靈與其情緒/認知反應，越發強烈的感受。而他對這些反應的書寫成為觸媒，在讀者身上，產生類似反應。他不願將其詮釋超出其寓言敘述的表面層次理解，強迫讀者，在他們跟隨著但丁的發展過程中，顯露其本身的詮釋傾向。藉由此法，但丁的《神曲》預示較晚，新教徒式靈視（文學與歷史）敘事的運作模式。

關鍵詞：靈視，典範，奧古斯丁，實體識（visio corporalis），想像識（visio spiritualis），智性識（visio intellectualis），但丁，地獄，煉獄，天堂，離世之旅，經驗的，神奇的，符號，詮釋學的，中世紀，新教的

Introduction

The thesis of this essay is that Dante's *Commedia* can be seen as illustrating the beginning of an early fourteenth-century shift in the medieval paradigm of vision experience,[1] a shift preparing both the audience and authors of vision accounts for a new way (i.e., a Protestant way) of reading and encoding the experience. This claim implies that a medieval paradigm of visionary experience was in place during Dante's lifetime and that a new Protestant paradigm was in the offing, and although it is not in the scope of this essay to provide the full Protestant paradigm, an outline of the medieval paradigm is very much in order.

To produce a representation that even approaches completeness of the tradition of the medieval Western vision experience is an overwhelming task. Much work delineating the tradition has already been done, and done well,[2]

[1] For this essay, I do not make any fundamental differences between visions thrust upon people unaware of the impending events and visions harvested by contemplative and mystical exercises. The first type emphasizes the passivity of the recipient and the vision's status as a gift of grace, and the second type emphasizes the works one can do in order to make himself or herself conducive to the receiving of such an experience. In general, the contents of the visions differ depending upon which of the two types they are (the 'surprise' visions usually detailing scenes from other worlds [Hell, Purgatory, Paradise, and Heaven] and the meditative visions aspects of Christ's passion and God's love). These differences are subsumed in the following observations that inform my construction of the medieval paradigm.

[2] See, for example, Eileen Gardiner's *Visions of Heaven & Hell before Dante*, and Carol Zaleski's *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times*. Bernard McGinn's has provided a thorough analysis of early medieval mysticism in his *The Growth of Mysticism*, and Jess Byron Hollenback, in her *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment*, starts her massive work with a list of distinctive features of vision experience. The first section of *Vox Mystica: Essays on Medieval Mysticism* (edited by Anne Clark Bartlett and others) provides a schema of visions based on methods of codification of the experiences. More recently, Barbara Newman has provided an overarching yet succinct taxonomy of visionary experience in her *Speculum* article "What Did It Mean to

and I surely will reap from such work in the development of my own argument's model, which I present here not so much for its originality as for its ability to extract from other models that which I feel most strongly pertains to the deepest patterns under-girding this particular mode of religious dispensation in general. I see four key characteristics to the medieval model: the empiric visionscape, a three-fold distinction in apprehending the vision, a high level of affection resulting in various degrees of self-erasure, and a passive/active paradox involving the visionary as first the audience and then the author of the visionary account. Although all four characteristics might not be present in every account of a medieval vision, usually a plurality of these characteristics is present in each account to the extent that building a paradigm with them is warranted.

It is important for me to stress at the outset that I will not be investigating the theories that attempt to explain the causes of these visions. It is of little importance to my argument whether these visions, in the end, came from a divine agency, a natural agency (psycho-somatic aberrations), or a social-cultural agency that pressured sensitive and anxious minds into hallucination. Neither of these options gains genuine precedence over another as a better explanation for the provenance of these experiences, for each is able in its own style and with its own terminology to provide a cogent account for visionary experience. Whether or not that account is held as the true account depends, of course, on the ontological and epistemological presuppositions already in place in the mind of the critic. Thus, one reaches a fundamental impasse when trying to advocate a theory of provenance over another; in the end the argument appeals only to those who were convinced already. Instead, my work focuses on the textual descriptions left by these visionaries, and on this level of the text I find certain commonalities of

Say 'I Saw'? The Clash between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture." I will make use of some of her distinctions below. (See works cited for full publishing information on these sources.)

description that point toward a set of shared tendencies of the visionaries to respond how they responded to, and to do what they did with, their visions. In this way my analysis is empiric leading to a cataloguing of shared apparent characteristics, not empiric leading to a theory of ultimate causes or origins.

And although there are differences in intention and affection between historic-literary accounts and aesthetic-literary accounts (one hardly thinks that Chaucer, in his *House of Fame*, was describing an actual experience—did he really experience the glass temple? did he really think he had flown with the eagle?) there are enough similarities in literary construction that any developed and sustained differentiation between the two types of accounts would, in the end, prove not all that fruitful to my argument. Almost exclusively I examine the mostly historical accounts because I have made the decision that such accounts may have a better warrant than the wholly aesthetic accounts for displaying patterns of presentation and apprehension engaged by the visions and visionaries and that such accounts probably served as models for the late-medieval accounts and for the later Protestant development of vision literature. (Of course, this claim has to be deeply tempered by the existence of early literary sources like St. John and Cicero.) In spite of my choice to focus primarily on the historic accounts, however, my main argument hinges on an aesthetic-literary account, Dante's *Commedia*. I trust that I will be able to show the close resemblance between this masterful poem and the hardly poetic, actual visionary accounts preceding it.

The Medieval Paradigm

The Empiric, Marvelous Visionscape

The first observation is that many mid- to late-medieval visions had a visionscape mediated by empiric means and constituted by noetic elements of the marvelous. By visionscape, I mean the temporal and spatial environment[3]

[3] Many times this environment formed a landscape recognizable as Hell, Purgatory, an Earthly Paradise, or Heaven. I wish to use the term visionscape rather than landscape, however,

into which the visionary was placed during the experience or the environment that came to the visionary and enclosed him or her; by empiric means I mean that the vision seemed to have been designed to be mediated by the five senses, or at least that phenomenological qualities were highly emphasized; and by noetic elements of the marvelous I mean things within the vision itself that, perhaps because of their ability to astound or amaze, brought the visionary into fairly immediate cognitive assent with the apparent intentions of the vision.

A few examples of such empirically mediated visionscapes are in order. Drythelm, a Northumbrian man who lived in England during the eighth century,[4] was taken to Hell, where he saw "dreadful flames," felt "violent hail and cold snow flying in all directions," heard afar off "the noise of a most hideous and wretched lamentation and smelled "an insufferable stench [that] spread with the vapors and filled all those dark places".[5] Another visionary, Tundale, who lived in Bavaria and whose vision was copied around 1150 and became immensely popular,[6] was led also into the nether regions where he saw "coals that burned with unusual brightness," smelled fumes that "exceeded all the tribulations […] suffered up to this point," and heard "the sound of sulphur flaming and of great howling in the depths of endurance."[7] And Edmund, a Benedictine monk from Eynsham[8] who lived during the late twelfth century and who traveled in a vision to Purgatory, saw, among other things,

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because although terrain that appears physical is common in these visions, it is by no means the only environment the visionaries may find themselves in.

[4] See note 3 in Gardiner, *Visions*, 242-3 for other possible dates of this vision.

[5] Gardiner, *Visions*, 58-9.

[6] Gardiner, *Visions*, 252-3.

[7] Gardiner, *Visions*, 155-7.

[8] This Edmund of Eynsham is also known as simply the monk from Eynsham. Eynsham, as Robert Easting points out *The Revelation of the Monk of Eynsham*, is also commonly called "Evesham," perhaps because of a scribal error: "The English translator probably found the error in his Latin source; its stems originally from an easy misreading of the three minims of *in* as *ui*—*Euisham* instead of *Einsham*" (xxx).

> a high hill, up almost to the clouds […]. And there was under the farther side of this hill a full deep valley […]. And in the lower part of the side valley was a broad pond of horrible black water. And out of that same foul pond busily broke a mist of indescribable stench. Truly, the one side of that same high hill, which hanged toward the pond, cast out from it a horrible burning fire up to the heaven. And also on the other side […] was so great and inestimable cold, that is to say, of snow and hail, with many other cruel storms, that me thought and seemed [judged], that I saw nothing so painful and cruel as that cold was.[9]

Clearly there is in these visions a strong impression of an actual landed locale bounded in time and space into which the visionary is brought, a locale full of things that can be heard, smelled, seen, touched. Such a scene resembles a landscape very much, a macabre landscape to be sure, but a landscape nonetheless. Nevertheless, it is more conducive to analysis if the notion of a visionscape is retained over that of a landscape because sometimes the visionary is not brought to a material-laden locale. Instead, sometimes he or she is enveloped in a plenum of phenomenological data that construct their own liminal boundaries around the visionary. Yet even in this case the boundaries are still highly empiric. For example, Julian of Norwich relates in her *Revelations of Divine Love* that immediately before she received her revelations (ca. 1373), she lay languishing on her bed, thinking death was

[9] This is my modernization of the following account, found in Easting, *Revelation*, 49: "an hye hylle, vppe al-mooste to the clowdys […]. And there was vndyr the farthyr side of thys hylle a full depe valeye […]. And in the lower parte of the seyde valeye was a full brode ponde of horrabull blake watyr. And owte of that same fowle ponde bysyly brake a myste of an indycybylle stenche, Trewely, the toon side of that same hye hylle, whyche hangyd toward the ponde, caste oute fro hym an horrabulle brennyng fyre vppe on-to they heuyn. And also on tothyr side […] was so grete and inestimable cooled, that ys to seye, of snowe and hayle, with many other cruell stormys, that me thowghte and semyd, that Y sawe no-thyng so peynefull and cruel as [th]at colde was."

imminent. The parish priest having administered the last rites, he asked Julian to gaze upon a crucifix for comfort. As she did so, a strange phenomenon occurred: "[M]y sight began to fail, and the room became dark about me, as if it were night, except for the image of the cross which somehow was lighted up; but how was beyond my comprehension. Apart from the cross everything else seemed horrible as if it were occupied by fiends."[10] A short time later, still staring at the cross, she saw "the red blood trickling down from under the garland [of thorns], hot, fresh, and plentiful, just as it did at the time of his Passion when the crown of thorns was pressed on to the blessed head of God-and-Man."[11] Thus, Julian of Norwich did not go to a visionary locale like those described above in the visions of Drythelm, Tundale, and Edmund of Eynsham but was instead engulfed in an equally empiric, phenomenological construct of data.

Moreover, the visionscape is imbued with the marvelous. Something in the visionscape immediately causes in the visionary an involuntary response properly aligned with the overall purposes of the visions. This deep-seated response can be an emotional one or an intellectual one.[12] Teresa of Avila in her *Life* recounts that the first time she had a vision of Jesus, the vision "made so deep an impression upon me that, though it is more than twenty-six years ago, I seem to see Him present even now. I was greatly astonished and disturbed."[13] She was keeping disreputable company at the time, and the

[10] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 65.

[11] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 66.

[12] Jess Byron Hollenback puts it this way: "[T]he mystical experience is not mere 'perception' but rather something that compels a response to it with all of one's being" (40).

[13] Teresa of Avila, *The Life of St. Teresa*, 45-46. The issue here is the vision's basically inexplicable ability to arrest or convince; whether or not the vision was true (or from God instead of from any other source, be it natural or supernatural) is an ancillary issue. Teresa later admits that she doubted the veracity of this first vision of Christ (cf. Ch. 25, sec. 14 in her *Life*), but in no way did this later doubt impede the power of the vision to convince Teresa that something supernatural was standing before her during that first vision.

vision warned her of this; its purpose, then, was to dissuade Teresa from making spiritually lax friends. This being the case, the impression that was immediately created in Teresa did serve the purpose of the vision: Teresa "resolved not to see that person again."[14]

The creation, seemingly *ex nihilo*, within the visionary of an inward response in service to the overall function of the vision did not have to be only emotional. Hildegard of Bingen's visions produced in her a spontaneous well of knowledge useful to her future role as teacher/prioress:

> In the year 1141 of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, when I was forty-two years and seven months old, a burning light coming from heaven poured into my mind. Like a flame which does not burn but rather enkindles, it inflamed my heart and my breast, just as the sun warms something with its rays. And I was able to understand books suddenly, the psaltery clearly, the evangelists and the volumes of the Old and New Testament, but I did not have [before this] the interpretation of the words of their texts nor the division of their syllables nor the knowledge of their grammar.[15]

What is marvelous is the uniquely efficacious cause-and-effect dynamic within a particular vision, a dynamic that the visionary cannot control or repeated. During Julian of Norwich's first vision of the crucifix, she tells the reader that "[s]uddenly all my pain was taken away, and I was as fit and well as I had ever been; and this was especially true of the lower part of my body. I was amazed at this sudden change, for I thought it must have been a special miracle of God, and not something natural."[16] Julian had looked at crucifixes before. Yet one supposes that Julian had not had this sort of experience before, whenever she looked at the crucifix. There was something

[14] Teresa of Avila, *The Life of St. Teresa*, 46.

[15] Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, 2.

[16] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations* 65.

to this particular moment, to this specific experience laden with numinous qualities, that was persuasively potent and uniquely capable of creating this response of emotional or noetic conviction in the visionary.

The marvelous elements within the visionscape almost always created some sort of permanent change in the visionary.[17] Sometimes the change was purely physical. Drythelm came back from his other-worldly travels to the freezing side of Purgatory with the ability to be virtually immune to inclement weather: when he took up the custom of bathing in frigid streams during wintertime, his friends wondered at his body's ability to take the abuse. To this, Drythelm informed them, "I have seen colder."[18] Much more often, however, the transformation went beyond the merely physical. For example, after his experience Drythelm dedicated himself to a life of hermitage. The change could be more public than this, like the installation of the visionary as a public revealer and proclaimer of these holy truths: both Margery Kempe and Hildegard of Bingen understood themselves to be divinely commissioned to write about their visions in order to edify others in the faith.[19] Or the change could be the visionary's turning from the secular life to an officially sacred

[17] The locus classicus for this is Paul's vision on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-16; 26:9-19). Also, Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* is well stocked with such life-changing results from visions. However, because my area of focus concerning the actual constituents of the visionary experience begins with the mid- to late-medieval visions, I will not give any substantial textual space to these earlier accounts.

[18] Qtd. in Gardiner, *Visions*, 63.

[19] Margery Kempe, writing during the early fifteenth century, at first was "commanded in her soul that she should not write so soon" after receiving her visions, but afterward (some twenty years later!), "when it pleased our Lord, he commanded her and charged her that she should have written her feelings and revelations and the form of her living so that his goodness might be known to all the world" (*The Book of Margery Kempe*, 4). Hildegard tells us in her *Scivias* that she heard a "heavenly voice" saying to her "You therefore, O person, who receive these things not in the turmoil of deceit, but in the purity of simplicity, who receive these things straight from the manifestation of the things concealed, write what you see and hear" (3).

one. Teresa of Avila struggled for years to convince herself to become a nun. She finally did enter a nunnery in 1535, still only partly persuaded that this choice of life was for her. However, once she physically donned the habit, she underwent a sort of visionary experience that put her at ease:

> When I took the habit our Lord at once made me understand […]. At that moment, because I was entering on that state, I was filled with a joy so great that it has never failed me to this day; and God converted the aridity of my soul into the greatest tenderness. Everything in religion was a delight unto me; and it is true that now and then I used to sweep the house during those hours of the day which I had formerly spent on my amusements and my dress; and, and calling to mind that I was delivered from such follies, I was filled with a new joy that surprised me, nor could I understand whence it came.[20]

A Three-Fold Division

The second major observation is that many medieval visions can be taxonomized according to how their visionscapes used epistemological vehicles to mediate the experience. Otherworldly journeys like Drythelm's, Tundale's, and Edmund's led the visionary to believe that their bodies were actually traveling with them as they traversed the visionscape, which, to them, was a place fraught with material qualities (solidity, extension, and endurance in time). Consequently, in the written relation of these visions the primary mode for acquiring knowledge during the vision was that type of empiricism that leads one to assume a solid backdrop from which the sensory data can originate. This sort of vision is usually referred to the physical vision, also known as the corporeal vision or the visio corporalis.

However, instead of having a visionary come into its visionscape, a vision might appear to come to the visionary and to surround him or her in a web of signs. This type of vision can seem to be just as empiric as the first

[20] Teresa of Avila, *The Life of St. Teresa*, 17.

type, the corporeal vision, except that there is no solid, material-like backdrop in the visionscape against which the one experiencing it can stabilize the phenomena. Again, Julian of Norwich's opening vision in her *Revelation* is a good example of this. A small crucifix was set before her. Soon it shone so brightly it was all Julian could see, and shortly after this, Christ's figure on the crucifix appeared to bleed. Julian was caused to worship God ("'*Benedicite Domine!'* I said, and I meant it in all reverence even though I said it at the top of my voice. I was overwhelmed with wonder"), and then immediately after this she writes, "In my spirit I saw her [the Virgin Mary] as though she were physically present, a simple humble girl, still in her youth, and little more than a child."[21] Unlike the men who saw Purgatory, Hell, or Paradise, Julian was fully conscious of the fact that she went nowhere physically. Yet she saw things come to her, visionary elements that she knew to be non-physical. They appeared to betoken physical presence ("I saw her as though she were physically present"), but Julian knew that they were not physical, as her qualifying *as though* testifies. This vision took on the feel of a show: Julian looked at signs and saw in them a deeper spiritual truth. Thus, as she gazed at the crucifix, "[a]t the same moment," she says, "the Trinity filled me full of heartfelt joy, and I knew that all eternity was like this for those who attain heaven. For the Trinity is God, and God the Trinity."[22] Somehow the crucifix led her into this knowledge as a signifier leads the recipient of the sign into knowledge of the signified.

This type of vision utilizing this sort of sign-laden visionscape can be described as an imaginative vision, also known as the spiritual vision or the visio spiritualis.[23] The visionary sees things, hears things, smells things, just as

[21] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 65-67.

[22] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 66.

[23] Imaginative by virtue of the agency of the classical locus of the imaginative force of the brain (not in any way to be construed as connoting a made-up, 'imagined' trance) and spiritual by the same virtue, the mind taken to be influenced by the spirit of the body (not to be construed

one would do in the corporeal vision, but apparently the visionary is conscious that these experiences are transpiring mentally, as being crafted and constituted by images that either pre-existed in the mind's store of visual remembrances or placed into the mind by a supernatural source. What is astounding here is the ability of these phenomenological signs to impress upon the one experiencing them an overwhelming sense of numinous presence. Margery Kempe, early in her dubious career as a holy soothsayer in mid-15th century England, while kneeling in prayer saw the following vision:

> And then anon she saw Sainte Anne great with child, and then she prayed Saint Anne if she could be her maiden and her servant. And anon our lady was born, and then she busied herself to take the child to herself and keep it until it was twelve years of age with good food and drink, with fair white clothes and white kerchiefs. And then she said to the blessed child, "Lady, you shall be the mother of God.' The blessed child answered and said, 'I would I were worthy to be the handmaiden of her who shall conceive the son of God." The creature [Margery] said, "I pray you, Lady, if that grace fall on you, forsake not my service."
>
> The blissful child passed away for a certain time, the creature being still in contemplation, and later came again and said, "Daughter, now am I become the mother of God."[24]

Margery witnesses the birth of baby Mary, talks with the child Mary, and then hears from the Mary who is now a mother, and all this while in the

as pointing to a particular sacred of holy content, although much of the content was indeed sacred).

[24] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 15.

same session of contemplation.[25] Margery sees this in her spirit, or with spiritual vision, for she knows she is still in contemplation. Yet the presence mediated by the marvelous elements of this visionscape induces Margery to converse with the personages in the vision, to take the infant, the youth, and the adult Mary to represent the actual Mary in each case.

Likewise, Francis of Assisi, when he received the stigmata while worshipping at the top of Mt. La Verna (ca. 1224), received in a vision a sign which he construed as a figure of Christ. Rapt in contemplation, he saw

> a seraph with six resplendent and flaming wings come down from heaven; which seraph, with swift flight, drew nigh to St. Francis so that he could discern him, and he knew clearly that he had the form of a man crucified; and thus were his wings disposed: two wings were extended over his head; two were spread out in flight; and the other two covered the whole of his body. St. Francis, beholding this, was sore afeard, and yet was he filled with sweetness and sorrow mingled with wonder. Joy had he, exceeding great, at the gracious aspect of Christ that appeared to him thus familiarly and looked on him so graciously; but, on the other hand, seeing him nailed upon the cross, he suffered unspeakable grief […].[26]

The text is clear that the seraph appeared, yet it is equally as clear that Francis saw Christ through the seraph. The seraph, then, was a sign, and Francis knew it was a sign. To have had such a Christo-centric, emotional response to a seraph that was actually a seraph and not Christ figured as a seraph would have been idolatry. This knowledge in Francis of Assisi that the sign was properly signifying Christ, coupled with the fact that the visionscape

[25] The rest of the vision consists of Margery's traveling with the Holy Family to visit Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, for twelve weeks, to help in the nativity of Christ, to entertain the Magi, and to aid Mary in her own journey into Egypt.

[26] *"The Little Flowers of St. Francis,"* 114.

came to Francis and surrounded him (he did not have to travel into it) indicates that this is a spiritual vision, a visio spiritualis.

Different from the corporeal vision and the spiritual vision, the intellectual vision, or visio intellectualis, used minimal empiric means, if any at all. Its main epistemological avenue for transferring information and conviction was a direct, intuitive revelation of the truth into the visionary's mind. Augustine of Hippo, in my opinion, provided the clearest explanation of what exactly an intellectual vision is. Incidentally, he is the source for the three-fold division of visionary experience, and in the following excerpt that provides the definition for an intellectual vision, the other two types of visions are described. I leave the descriptions in so that Augustine's lucid account can supplement what I have already said above. The subsequent account is from Augustine's *De Genesi ad Litteram*, or *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (ca. 410-15). It is short enough to quote almost in its entirety, and paraphrase can hardly improve Augustine's characteristic eminent intelligibility, which remains even in translation.

> There are various ways of seeing, and with God's help I shall try to explain them and show how they differ. When we read this one commandment, *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*, we experience three kinds of vision: one through the eyes, by which we see the letters; a second through the spirit, by which we think of our neighbor even when he is absent; and a third through an intuition of the mind, by which we see and understand love itself. Of these three kinds of vision the first is clear to everyone: through it we see heaven and earth and in them everything that meets the eye. The second, by which we think of corporeal things that are absent, is not difficult to explain; for we think of heaven and earth and the visible things in them even when we are in the dark. In this case we see nothing with the eyes of the body but in the soul behold corporeal images: whether true images, representing the bodies that we have seen and still hold in

> memory, or fictitious images, fashioned by the power of thought. […] The third kind of vision, by which we see and understand love, embraces those objects which have no images resembling them which are not identical with them. A man, a tree, the sun, or any other bodies in heaven or on earth are seen in their own proper form when present, and are thought of, when absent, in images impressed upon the soul. There are two ways of seeing them: one through the bodily senses, the other through the spirit, in which images are contained. But in the case of love, is it seen in one manner when present, in the form in which it exists, and in another manner when absent, in an image resembling it? Certainly not. But in proportion to the clarity of our intellectual vision, love itself is seen by one more clearly, by another less so. If, however, we think of some corporeal image, it is not love that we behold.[27]

The intellectual vision does not involve images at all; thus, if images are involved, then although that vision can be corporeal or spiritual depending on the kind of image in question, the vision cannot be intellectual. Consequently, when Julian of Norwich says that God revealed to her in a moment the Trinity, she describes this simply as her "mental vision of the Godhead."[28] She does not mention seeing any images or figures directly related to this specific part of the first revelation. In the same manner, Hildegard of Bingen, in 1141, tells us that "the heavens were opened and a blinding light of exceptional brilliance flowed through my entire brain. And so it kindled my whole heart and breast like a flame, not burning but warming. […] And suddenly I understood the meaning of the expositions of the books, that is to say of the Psalter, the evangelists and other catholic books of the Old and New Testaments."[29] Again, no visual images mediated this revelation, and it is called a vision by virtue of the conventions for conversing about

[27] Augustine, *The Literal Meaning*, 185-86.

[28] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 66-7.

[29] Qtd. in Flanagan, "Hildegard von Bingen," 60.

immediate and vivid revelation, not by virtue of any literal connection of seeing things. This condition of the visio intellectualis is emphasized by Teresa of Avila: She speaks here of her intellectual vision of Christ, whom she claims stood by her:

> For if I say that I see Him neither with the eyes of the body, nor with those of the soul,—because it is not an imaginary vision [visio spiritualis],—how is it that I can understand and maintain that He stands beside me, and be more certain of it than if I saw Him? If it be supposed that it is as if a person were blind, or in the dark, and therefore unable to see another who is close to him, the comparison is not exact. There is a certain likelihood about it, however, but not much, because the other senses tell him who is blind of that presence: he hears the other speak or move, or he touches him; but in these visions there is nothing like this. The darkness is not felt; only He renders Himself present to the soul by a certain knowledge of Himself which is more clear than the sun. I do not mean that we [in this vision] now see either a sun or any brightness, only that there is a light not seen, which illumines the understanding so that the soul may have the fruition of so great a good.[30]

Traditionally, it has been these categories of visio corporalis, visio spiritualis, and visio intellectualis that have been used in analyses and explications of visions. Some late medieval theologians and contemplatives slightly rearranged the taxonomy or complicated the schema,[31] but the basic

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[30] Teresa of Avila, *The Life of St. Teresa*, 234-35.

[31] For example, Bonaventure, in his *Intinerarium Mentis in Deum*, states that "the human mind has three fundamental attitudes or outlooks. The first is toward corporeal things without, and in this respect it is designated as animal or simply sensual; the next is where it enters in within itself to contemplate itself, and here it ranks as spirit; the third is where its upward glance is beyond itself, and then it is designated '*mens*' or mind" (qtd. in Ray C. Petry, *Late Medieval Mysticism*, 133). This is fairly straightforward Augustinian doctrine. However,

foundation is still Augustine's axioms. And he did more than simply make these distinctions: he introduced a hierarchy among the individual types of visions. He suggested that each "must be considered separately, so that reason may ascend from the lower to the higher."[32] Augustine arranged a hierarchy of these three categories, ordering them in importance and credibility[33] according to the decreased role empiricism plays in apprehension of elements or images of the vision itself (sensory data, being mediated, is always open to error) and the increased role that reason or intuition (more specifically, immediately revealed knowledge) plays in receiving and discerning the vision. Furthermore, the facts that the visionscape of the visio corporalis resembles more the landscape of the earth; that the visionscape of the visio spiritualis resembles that of celestial, angelic realms; and that the visionscape of the visio intellectualis, if it can be said to have a visionscape at all, resembles that of the beatific, ineffable realm of the immediate presence of God all lend credence to the idea that the vision categories should be arranged somehow in order of importance, and that the visio intellectualis should always be of the highest order. This is borne out in the answers given to Teresa of Avila when she asked about the nature of one of her experiences:

Bonaventure adds that each of these three categories can be seen in two ways, just as God is seen "as Alpha and as Omega" and thus thought of as being doubled, appearing "in each as in and through a mirror," just so "it is necessary that these three primary grades should be [doubled and] raised to the number six": consequently, man is "led in the most orderly way, by six successive grades of illumination, to the quiet of contemplation" (134). This is to say that (according to Bonaventure, at least) because man is both body and mind, the three types of visions outlined by Augustine can be applied to the dichotomy, resulting in six possible venues for visionary knowledge: "sense, imagination, reason, intellect, intelligence, and the fine point or apex of the soul" (134).

[32] Augustine, *The Literal Meaning*, 191.

[33] Augustine privileges the visio intellectualis because of its lack of need for mediatory signs, symbols, and sensory data: the immediacy of the visio intellectualis ensures its truth (see pp. 191-98 in *Literal Meaning*).

> I went at once to my confessor, in great distress, to tell him of it. He asked in what form I saw our Lord. I told him I saw no form. He then said: "How did you know that it was Christ?" I replied, that I did not know how I knew it; but I could not help knowing that He was close beside me,—that I saw Him distinctly, and felt His presence,—that the recollectedness of my soul was very deep, as in the prayer of quiet, and more continuous,—that the effects thereof were very different from what I had hitherto experienced,—and that it was most certain. I could only make comparisons in order to explain myself; and certainly there are no comparisons, in my opinion, by which visions of this kind can be described. Afterwards I learnt from Friar Peter of Alcantara, a holy man of great spirituality, […] and from others of great learning, that this vision was of the highest order, and one with which Satan can least interfere; and therefore there are no words whereby to explain […].[34]

A Lover's Union

The third general observation is that in most medieval visions, the amount of love or devotion generated to the holy objects in the vision was extremely high. As I mentioned above, I believe this has something to do with the marvelous qualities of the visions in general, for the overwhelming, powerful affect that is created by these visions is not the type which can be reasoned into existence. The emotion could be fear, dread, sorrow, sympathy, or love, and certainly this small list is not exhaustive. The most common emotion, however, was a profound experience of love. Sometimes the love brought about by a vision or a series of visions would be directed to humanity in general. In one of her many communications with the divine, Margery Kempe was commanded by Christ, "Daughter, ask what you will, and you shall have it." Margery responded: "I would I had a well of tears to constrain you with so that you should not take utter vengeance on man's soul in order to

[34] Teresa of Avila, *The Life of St. Teresa*, 234.

part him from you without end, for it is a hard thing to think that any earthly man should ever do any sin wherethrough [sic] he should be parted from your glorious face without end."[35]

More often, however, the love was directed to Christ. Gertrude the Great (1241-1298) saw Christ for the first time when she was 26 years old: "I beheld Thee, my most loving Love, and my Redeemer, surpassing in beauty the children of men, under the form of a youth of sixteen years, beautiful and amiable, and attracting my heart and my eyes by the infinite light of Thy glory, which Thou had the goodness to proportion to the weakness of my nature." After he speaks to her, she says, "When Thou hadst said these words, my soul melted within me."[36] This was in Germany. In Italy, Friar John of La Verna, a contemporary with Francis of Assisi, experienced "such exceeding great love and fervour for the charity of Christ whereby He had abased Himself to take our humanity upon Him, that it verily seemed to him as were his soul ravished from his body, and that it burned like a furnace."[37] This love was especially strong when engendered by visions of Christ's Passion. The eighth revelation of Julian of Norwich is an extremely detailed vision of Christ's passing: his body literally wastes away before Julian's sight. Julian concludes the episode by asserting, "Here it was that I truly felt that I loved Christ so much more than myself, and that there could be no pain comparable to the sorrow caused by seeing him in pain."[38]

But the greatest experience a visionary could have of love was the ineffable experience of being mingled with the very essence of God, who is Love. This is sometimes described as the Visio Dei, the direct Vision of God, and it is almost always a version of the visio intellectualis. Only the most determined and most blessed mystics, contemplatives, and visionaries

[35] Kempe, The Book of Margery Kempe, 104.

[36] Petroff, *Medieval Women's*, 222.

[37] "Little Flowers", 95.

[38] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 90.

achieved it. Teresa of Avila warns of its inexpressible joy: "Consider, that what I am saying is not even an iota of what may be said; […] for that cannot be told which it [the soul] feels when our Lord admits it to the understanding of His secrets and of His mighty works. The joy of this is so far above all conceivable joys that it may well make us loathe all the joys of earth."[39] Stressing the condition that the self must lose itself in this vision, Jan Van Ruysbroeck (1293-1381) in his treatise *The Sparkling Stone*, advises those who would see God that the soul "who has forsaken self and all things, and does not feel himself drawn away because he no longer possesses anything as his own" can expect, in "the inmost part of his spirit," to receive a vision of the love of God:

> There he finds revealed an eternal Light, and in this light, he feels the eternal demand of the divine Unity; and he feels himself to be an eternal fire of love, which craves above all else to be one with God. The more he yields to this indrawing or demand, the more he feels it, And the more he feels it, the more he craves to be one with God. […] For, in the transformation within the Unity, all spirits fail in their own activity, and feel nothing else but a burning up of themselves in the simple unity of God.[40]

This privileging of love was based on biblical texts, two of the more prominent being the eighth and the twelfth chapters of 1 Corinthians. The opening verses of 1 Cor. 8 say, "Now as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth. And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know. But if any man love God, the same is known of him"[41]; clearly, then, men *ought to know* something. In this subordinate way, knowledge was retained as an orthodox pursuit for the Christian, as long as it

[39] Teresa of Avila, *The Life of St. Teresa*, 239-40.

[40] Jan Van Ruysbroeck, "The Sparkling Stone," in Petry, *Late Medieval*, 293.

[41] Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the bible are from the King James Version.

is sought in order that one might use it to attain to genuine love of God. This subordination is re-emphasized in 1 Cor. 13: 8-13:

> [8] Charity never faileth: but whether *there be* prophecies, they shall fail; whether *there be* tongues, they shall cease; whether *there be* knowledge, it shall vanish away. [9] For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. [10] But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. [11] When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. [12] For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. [13] And now abideth faith, hope, and charity, these three; but the greatest of these *is* charity.

This passage is focusing on the nature of *agape* love, the absolute highest form of love, a love that finds its sole origin in the nature of God. Because of this emphasis, the ethical status of other good things (in this case, knowledge) is necessarily lower. Nevertheless, these verses point out that even when love is made perfect (the *then* part of the *now . . . then* construction), Paul stresses that one will also have perfect knowledge: "then shall I *know* even as I am known" (italics mine).

Yet if heavenly knowledge is always to yield to love, how much more so earthly knowledge, which, according to the medieval theologians, is inherently flawed in the first place. Surely, this regulating of knowledge to a place below the acquisition of divine love served as the impetus to works like Bernard of Clairvaux's *De Diligendo Deo*, which, in keeping with the Pauline implications, still accorded to knowledge a certain kind of respect but pre-eminently elevated love, and like the English anchorite's *Cloud of Unknowing*, which at times harshly intimates that knowledge is practically useless when it comes to loving God: "For of all other creatures and their works—yea, and of the works of God himself—may a man through grace have fullness of

knowing, and well can he think of them; but of God himself can no man think. And therefore I would leave all that thing that I can think, and choose to my love that thing that I cannot think. For why, he may well be loved, but not thought."[42]

The Passive/Active Paradox

My fourth and final observation concerning the medieval paradigm of visionary experience is that in many cases the medieval vision was a combination of activity and non-activity on the part of the visionary. The occurrence of the actual vision was always out of the control of the visionary. Sometimes this was very obvious: in many of the other-worldly, corporeal visions, the visionaries rarely anticipated the experience; indeed, some, once they understood what was happening, tried to resist the experience but instead were "carried along screaming and kicking." [43] Other accounts portray visionaries as not resistant but passive. Hildegard begins her *Scivias* with the proclamation that on a certain day, "a burning light coming from heaven poured into my mind."[44] She mentions nothing about desiring or striving to attain this light before it actually came to her.[45] When Teresa of Avila first saw Christ, she was in the middle of what she later realized was a sin of vanity; she had no prior thought whatsoever of a forthcoming vision, and she carefully points out in her *Life* that the vision originated from the intentions of God—she saw it "when our Lord was pleased to show me."[46]

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[42] *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 15.

[43] Gardiner, *Visions*, xxiii.

[44] Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, 2.

[45] It is well know that during her childhood and youth she had received visions, but the nature of these visions and whether or not she actively sought them then is unclear.

[46] Teresa of Avila, *The Life of St. Teresa*, 45.

The vision accounts coming from the sacred orders, however, reveal an active/passive stance taken by the visionary.[47] Many prayed for visions and received them shortly after. Angela of Foligno claims that when she asked God "what I could do to please him more, in his pity he appeared to me many times, both while I was sleeping and keeping vigil, crucified on the cross, and he told me I might look on his wounds."[48] Francis of Assisi prayed on Mt. La Verna, "O my Lord Jesus Christ, two graces do I pray Thee to grant unto me ere I die: the first, that while I live I may feel in my body and in my soul, so far as is possible, that sorrow […] that Thou didst suffer in the hour of Thy bitterest Passion; the second is, that I may feel in my heart […] that exceeding love wherewith […] Thou wast enkindled to endure willingly for us sinners agony so great."[49] In that same day, his vision of the crucified seraph was granted. Likewise, Friar John of La Verna, "as he devoutly elevated the body of Christ in that mass and offered it up to God the Father," asked God "to deliver from the pains of purgatory the souls of the dead." Immediately after this, he "beheld a multitude of souls, well-nigh infinite, come forth from

[47] This is not to say that visionaries like Margery Kempe, who never committed themselves to a career in the Church, continued in a passive mode concerning their visions. Kempe, for one, embraced a very active role when she became more accustomed to receiving visions, daring even to ask for special favors and revelations from both Christ and Mary. Her embracing of agency is also indicted by the authorial choices she made toward the end of her life in choosing both her amanuenses and her accounts to retell.

[48] Angela of Foligno, *The Book of the Experience of the Truly Faithful*, in Petry, *Late Medieval*, 254. Sometimes the requested visions would come years after, but nevertheless they came. This was the case with Julian of Norwich; Years before her visions she asked from God the experiential knowledge of his Passion (*Revelations*, 63). The vision was so long in coming that she completely forgot about the request (64). Although I am using this as an instance of an active attitude on the part of the visionary, because of the lapse of years and the visionary's forgetting of the request, one can as easily see this as an example of the passivity of the visionary.

[49] *"Little Flowers of St. Francis,"* 113-14.

purgatory, after the manner of countless sparks issuing from a fiery furnace; and he beheld them ascend to heaven through the merits of Christ's Passion."[50]

As these last examples illustrate, the monasteries and contemplative communities were a seedbed for visions, "the fruits," as one recent critic put it, "of a complex spiritual discipline."[51] This certainly is in line with the teachings of such medieval figures as Ignatius Loyola, Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure, Ramon Lull, Meister Eckhart, and Catherine of Siena. All these writers stressed the great possibility of attaining visions for those willing to exercise self-denial and to develop strong habits of continual spiritual meditation. None, however, guaranteed the experience. As Teresa of Avila put it, concerning the possibility of seeing a vision of Christ or God,[52]

> Certainly, the imagination may be able to picture it,—the form and the brightness of it,—and gradually make it more perfect, and so lay up that image in his memory. Who can hinder this, seeing that it could be fashioned by the understanding? But as to the vision of which I am speaking, there are no means of bringing it about; only we must behold it when our Lord is pleased to present it before us, as He wills and what He wills; and there is no possibility of taking anything away from it, or of adding anything to it; nor is there a way of effecting it, whatever we may do, or of seeing it when we like, nor of abstaining from seeing.[53]

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[50] *"Little Flowers of St. Francis,"* 92.

[51] Newman, "What Did," 3.

[52] Teresa of Avila restricts her comments to the visio Christi, in itself a special genre of vision experience. I extend her general comments here to all visions involving the mechanism of immediate dispensation unto to mind of the visionary of either phenomenological or intuitive data. This dispensation is the underlying sufficient and necessary element for my working definition of vision.

[53] Teresa of Avila, *The Life of St. Teresa*, 258.

There is, moreover, another way the visionaries of the Middle Ages were tightly stretched between the poles of the active and passive. The visionaries were hardly in control of what they saw. However, because the act of having a vision often meant that the visionaries were responsible for remembering it and for telling others about it, they were more or less in control of the eventual oral or written codification of the ordeal. As a result, they had to take on the potentially opposing roles of amanuenses and authors. They were amanuenses to the extent that they were specifically commanded to report what they had seen and experienced, and they were authors to the extent that they had to consciously craft literal and figurative word structures in the language of their culture. They themselves had to decide how formal or dynamic their 'translation' of their subjective experience would be (subjective in the sense that they were subjects of things epistemologically revealed). Granted, there is no doubt that in many cases the visionary, in order to overcome literacy deficiencies, had to utilize a scribe who wrote down the experience as the visionary dictated it. This is true for Julian of Norwich, for Francis of Assisi, for Margery Kempe, for Drythelm, Tundale, and Edmund, the monk of Eynsham. Others, like Teresa of Avila and Hildegard of Bingen, wrote their own texts. But regardless of whether these visionaries dictated the vision or wrote the account themselves, all were involved with authorial choices, choices comprising decisions of descriptive phraseology, structural arrangement, omissions of seemingly inconsequential detail, and positioning of emphases. Thus, although one supposes Julian of Norwich, for example, had no choice as to whether or not she wanted to depict Christ's face as "brown as it dried up in death" or the wind that struck it as "strong, dry, and piercingly cold" (after all, these are the givens of the vision), one does assume she had a choice concerning the wording of her final appraisal of the scene: "And it seemed to me, that with all this drawn-out pain [of the Passion], he had been a week in dying."[54] Surely this is Julian's psychological, emotional

[54] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 88.

response to what she saw and the statement would take away little if anything from the text were it omitted from the account. However, Julian must think that the omission would matter to the integrity of her recollective, authorial act of producing (in this case, via dictation) a text that properly couches the vision with sufficient emphasis. For after she makes her statement, she takes pains to qualify her wording: "When I say 'it seemed to me that he had been a week in dying' I am only meaning that his dear body was so discoloured and dry, so shriveled, deathly, and pitiful, that he might well have been seven nights in dying."[55] Yet Julian's concern for textually structuring the vision is far from extreme when compared to someone like Brigitta of Sweden (ca. mid-fourteenth century), who definitely engaged in holy co-authoring. Brigitta went so far as to develop a fairly dependable pattern for this activity:

> she would read from her book of hours, then sit down at her writing desk next to a window overlooking the adjacent church, where she could see the body of Christ on the high altar. Having prepared her pen and writing tablets beforehand, "she waited for the angel of the Lord," who faithfully arrived before long to dictate a portion of the lectionary,"[56]

and often after this she herself would revise the resultant text.

There is one more aspect of passivity that is important to mention. The vast majority of the accounts of medieval visions required the reader to be passive concerning the interpretation of the vision. Hildegard's *Scivias* is one of the best examples of this, as it is replete with visionary description followed by authorial interpretation. Hildegard writes of seeing a white cloud breathing "into a clear region [another] white cloud which contained a large number of stars in itself and which had sent forth down through itself the fair form of a man." What does this mean? "[T]his signifies that in this garden of

[55] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 88.

[56] Newman, "What Did," 38-39.

pleasantness, the devil—through the seduction of the serpent—approached Eve in order to get her cast out from the garden."[57] The white stars are apparently the human race. In another section, her vision is of an army of angels. These angels "had wings on their shoulders, and they too had faces that were like the faces of people. The looks on their faces appeared as if they were the image of the Word of God shining in a mirror." The interpretation is, "These signify the archangels who also pay attention to the will of God in the desires of their own intellects."[58]

Julian of Norwich structures her text in the same way, rendering her readers almost completely passive as far as interpretative activity goes. For example, she says, "I was let in imagination down on to the sea-bed, and there I saw green hills and valleys looking as though they were moss-covered, with seaweed and sand."[59] The very next sentence explains to the reader, "This I understood to mean that if a man or woman were under-sea and saw God ever present with him (as indeed God is) he would be safe in body and soul, and take no hurt." By no means are all of her explications this short. In one section of her *Revelations* (Chap. 51), she spends almost twenty paragraphs interpreting for the reader her vision of a lord and a servant, sitting and standing respectively. The lord sits on the earth—this means that God, whom the lord-figure signifies, "made man's soul to be his own city and his home."[60] The servant is standing near the lord, on his left. What does this signify? Julian says,

> In the *servant* is represented the second Person of the Trinity; and in the *servant* again Adam, or in other words, Everyman. When I speak of the *Son* I am thinking of the Godhead which is equal to the Father's, and when I say the *servant* I have Christ's human nature in mind. He

[57] Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, 18.

[58] Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, 69.

[59] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 77.

[60] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 145.

> is the true Adam. The *nearness* of the servant has to do with the Son, and the *standing on the left side* refers to Adam.[61]

So the book goes. (Indeed, at times the author seems so eager for the reader to receive the interpretation the vision gets short-shrift: Julian's forty-first chapter starts off, "After this our Lord showed me about prayer. The result of this revelation is that I now see that there are two conditions about prayer. One concerns its rightness, the other our sure trust."[62] In the seven remaining paragraphs of the chapter, not one description of the actual vision is given.)

But if the visionary often plays an active role in interpreting the account for the reader, he or she more often plays a passive role in receiving the interpretation of the vision from an the vision itself. Most ostensible is this in the other-worldly journeys, where the visionary is almost always accompanied by a guide of some saintly or celestial order who protects, reproofs, and (mostly) instructs the visionary. In later visions, especially in the visio-spiritualis mode, the guide takes on the form of a voice. This brief account from Hadewijch of Brabant's writing (ca. first half of thirteenth century) illustrates this, giving the general flavor of this element in her work:

> Then I saw coming as it were a bird, namely the one called phoenix. It devoured a grey eagle that was young, and a yellow eagle with new feathers that was old. These eagles kept flying about incessantly in the deep abyss. Then I heard a voice like thunder […] that said: 'Do you know who these different-colored eagles are?' And I answered: 'I should like to know this better.' […] And indeed the truth was told me concerning all this […]. One of the eagles who were swallowed was Saint Augustine, and the other myself […]."[63]

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[61] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 147.

[62] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 123.

[63] Hadewijch of Brabant, *Visions*, in Petroff, *Medieval Women's*, 197-198.

And Julian of Norwich herself was not beyond the need for an interpreter, as evidenced in a rather famous passage in which the interpretation came, too, in the form of a voice:

> And he [God] showed me more, a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, on the palm of my hand, round like a ball. I looked at it thoughtfully and wondered, "What is this?" And the answer came, "It is all that is made." I marveled that it continued to exist and did not suddenly disintegrate; it was so small. And again my mind supplied the answer, "It exists, both now and for ever, because God loves it."[64]

Finally, Hildegard herself often heard a voice instructing her as to what her visions meant. The voice, in providing these interpretations, was ensuring Hildegard's compliance with its own instructions, for Hildegard opens *Scivias* with the following account:

> Behold, in the forty-third year of my passing journey, when I clung to a heavenly vision with fear and trembling, I saw a very great light from which a heavenly voice spoke and said to me: O weak person, both ashes of ashes, and decaying of the decaying, speak and write what you see and hear. Because you are timid about speaking and simple about explaining and unskilled about writing those things, speak and write those things not according to the mouth of a person nor according to the perception of human inventiveness nor according to the wishes of human arrangement. But according to the extent that you see and hear those things in the heavens above in the marvelousness of God, bring to light those things by way of explanation, just as even a listener, understanding the words of a

[64] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 68. Although Julian here writes "my mind supplied the answer," I take her meaning to be that Julian heard the answer from God instantly in her mind.

> teacher, explains those things according to the course of the teacher's speech—willingly, plainly, instructively.[65]

Dante's Commedia and the Paradigm

Keeping the Course

Dante stays well within the medieval paradigm concerning my first two observations of both the marvelous, empiric mediators build into the visionscape and also the three-fold ordering of vision as set in place by Augustine. Because Augustine arranged his ordering of the three modes according to the epistemological devices utilized by the dispensation (empiric devices leading to the symbolic, and the symbolic leading to the intuitive), we can look at Dante's visionscape in light of the hierarchy. Dante begins his great vision writing fully within the register of physical attributes. In Canto 3, as he crosses hell's gates, Dante tells us "sighs and cries and wails coiled and recoiled / On the starless air, spilling my soul to tears" (3.22-23).[66] In Canto 4, the ledge of Limbo, Dante hears "sounds of sighing […] from every side / sending a tremor through the timeless air" (4.26-27). In the same canto, Dante passes over a brook "as if it were firm ground" (4.108). The materiality of the account intensifies as the narrative continues, taking upon itself the pure physicality of the human body, alive and dead. In Canto 5, as Dante moves down to the next level, "the choir of anguish, like a wound, / strikes through the tortured air" (5.25-26). Soon he feels the buffeting wind afflicting the lustful lovers. On hearing about Paolo and Francesca, Dante "felt my senses reel / and faint away with anguish. I was swept / by such a swoon as death is, and I fell, / as a corpse might fall, to the dead floor of Hell" (5.137-40).

All this is in keeping with the characteristics of Augustine's visio corporalis, designated to its proper place at the beginning of a soul's education of divine things via data entering the mind through the body's sensory organs.

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[65] Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, 1.

[66] All quotations from the *Commedia* are taken from John Ciardi's translations.

Besides this, the poem's connections to the early-medieval accounts of physical other-worldly travels are obvious: Dante has his visionary guide, Virgil, and the locale of the Dantean purgatory is between Dante's hell and heaven—marginalized just as the purgatories of these earlier accounts are wedged between hell proper and the gates of heaven.

Yet as the reader moved from Dante's *Inferno* into his *Purgatorio*, the epistemological mediators shift from the strictly empiric to the highly symbolic. By this I mean that Dante in this second part of his journey learns to look at things more strictly as signs than as physical entities in their own right. This is especially so concerning the whips and reins. The whips and reins are panels built into the ledges of the purgatorial mountain. They detail biblical or classical scenes and are designed to rebuke or shame the penitents who see them by displaying for them overt pictures of people who faithfully withstood temptations.

In a strong way, the whips and reigns are still empiric. In Canto 10, Dante describes one of the etchings: "The Angel who came down from God to man / with the decree of peace the centuries wept for, / which opened Heaven, ending the long ban, / stood carved before us with such force and love, / with such a living grace in his whole pose, / the image seemed about to speak and move" (10.31-36). He turns to see a carving of a choir; "Emerging from the marble were portrayed / the cart, the oxen, and the Ark from which / the sacrilegious learned to be afraid. / Seven choirs moved there before it, bringing / confusion to my senses; with my hearing / I thought 'No,' with my sight, 'Yes, they are singing'" (10.52-57).

Furthermore, like the marvelous elements in medieval visions, these representations have the power to automatically convince. They can move the mind from one set of beliefs to another almost instantly, creating within the visionary an alignment with the overall purposes of the dispensation. The change is evident in the psychological or somatic responses of the perceiver.

Thus, in Canto 12, when Dante sees thirteen scenes portraying the follies and punishments of people famous for their pride with such vividness that "[t]he dead seemed dead, the living alive. A witness / to the event itself saw it no better / than I did, looking down there at its likeness" (12.67-69), he is moved to exclaim in the next stanza the following imprecation: "Now swell with pride and cut your reckless swath / with head held high, you son of Eve, and never / bow down to see the evil in your path!" (12.70-72). Dante has quickly acquiesced to a certain set of beliefs about the proud, beliefs that will serve to reprove Dante himself concerning his pride.

Nevertheless, the whips and reins are meant to be taken as visual semantic signs. They may be initially mediated via the senses, but their meaning becomes apparent only when the displaced surface-of-events they offer to the viewer become linked to the historical context the viewer is supposed to provide (one assumes that Dante assumed his characters on the mountain would know the context of the etchings). They are meant to be interpreted as pointing away from themselves and to some other, accepted truth, itself based upon a history that stands outside the current events of the purgatory. Thus, the basic ontological structure of the whips and reins speaks to their function as signs moving toward a textuality and away from a purely physical materiality. For the most part, these devices are two-dimensional, flattened representations fashioned as a sort of text to be read during certain intervals in the penitents' punishment. For these reasons I look at these entities as being much closer to the floating, fluctuation images and symbols presented to the receiver of a visio spiritualis than as the pseudo-physical backdrops present in the visio corporalis.

Other episodes in the *Purgatorio* illustrate this same basic movement away from a sign couched in the physicality of the setting (say, the intense visceral dynamic of the retributive punishment upon the damned in hell designed to remind them of the nature of their past sins, or the inability of the penitents in purgatory to move forward without the aid of the sun's light, a

limiting condition that continually reminds them that even now their purgings take place only through a divine power accorded to them by the grace of God) to a sign couched in a quasi-textual fabric that exists to present an Other (the signified of the signifier / signified duality) before its viewers / interpreters via semantic displacement. One such scene in Canto 8 depicts a green serpent approaching the flowering valley in which the neglectful rulers of the second ledge rest. Two green angels guard this valley by night, they sense the serpent's approach, and they swoop down to turn it away. Although the text does not explicitly mention this, it is implied that this is a nightly occurrence. Why does this masque-like series of events exist? To continually remind those reposing in the valley of their divine protection from the devil, the lord of the earthly realm in which they (the rulers) were forced to retard their spiritual development in order to follow their divine responsibility to give themselves unto worldly management. Regardless of its purpose, however, its mode of operation is clear. It envelops its audience with a visual panorama that exists to be seen as a sign. In this way it comes to its audience, it presents them with material whose raison d'etre is to be interpreted, and then removes itself from the center of emphasis once the interpretation has been made (that is, it embraces its apparently subordinate stance as a sign to its object). Thus, when Dante the author approaches this part of his text, he has Sordello clutch Virgil's arm, point to the apparition, and cry out, "Our Adversary! There he is!" (8.96). Once the serpent is seen and understood to stand for the devil, its purpose is over; Dante drops the scene's description abruptly and moves on to other matters.

This sort of staging of signs that come upon and envelop a passive audience is highlighted by the dreams that Dante has during his stay on the purgatorial mount. These dreams have him meeting divine personages who encourage him on his present travels or illuminate him concerning his travels to come. A description of one dream is enough to show this pattern. In Canto 9, directly after the above scene and still on the second ledge with the neglectful rulers and directly before the gates of purgatory proper, Dante

sleeps and dreams of an eagle with wings of gold that swoops down and snatches him up into the sphere of fire. He awakes, and Virgil, who is sitting next to him, explains to Dante that a heavenly personage, Lucia, approached while Dante was sleeping and took him up into the next level of Purgatory, passing the gates of fire. In Dante's dream, this lady was figured as the eagle and the passage through the fiery gates as a passage through the sphere of fire (see 9.13-63). In his dream, then, Dante received an account of an event coded symbolically in a manner fundamentally different from the coding (if indeed there is coding) of the events in the *Inferno*.

In the last cantos of the *Purgatorio*, the ultimate pageantry of ostentatious symbolism occurs at the very peak of the mountain. The earthly garden of paradise, it seems, is simply the poet's stage to showcase the history of the Church Militant in terms of figures, tropes, and signs. The interpretative feats of gymnastics both Dante the pilgrim and the readers of this account have to undertake in order to make sense of the scenes make it easy to realize that the stance the reader (or, in Dante the pilgrim's case, the viewer) has to take in order to properly engage the vision is, again, radically different from that which had to be utilized in order to make sense of the *Inferno*. That was visio corporalis, and this is visio spiritualis. And although the pageant is no dream, the material bodies of the marching saints, the dancing virtues, the strutting animals may as well be aerial, seeing that there is not intercorporeal action between the duo of poets and the members of the sacred masque that parades in front of Dante and Virgil (compare this to the many times Dante touches, kicks, or literally stumbles upon the damned in the *Inferno*). Furthermore, it is here that Dante gets his first glimpse of a Beatific Vision: he sees the dual nature of Christ mediated through an alternating image[67] that is reflected the eyes of Beatrice (Canto 31.112-126). Although it is through a

[67] A constantly altering—flickering—image is what Dante seems to describe: "Judge, reader, if I found it passing strange / to see the thing unaltered in itself / yet in its image working change on change" (31.124-126).

sign of a sign, this is a bona fide vision of Christ, of the divine. There are some records of visions of Christ or of God in the corporeal, other-worldly visions, but they are few indeed; predominantly visions of Christ occur in the visio-spiritualis mode.

In Dante's *Paradiso*, the modality of the vision moves even further away from the materially laden.[68] Here Dante runs across entities that are supposedly in two places at once. For example, in the sphere of the moon (Canto 3), Dante meets Piccarda, who appears to him in a ghostly body fashioned like "a footnote of our lineaments" reflected in a "clear glass when it is polished bright, / or in a still and limpid pool," yet Beatrice insists that Piccarda and the other souls that Dante sees with here are indeed "true substances" (3.13, 10-11, 29). Later on, however, when Dante wonders how Piccarda can be satisfied with being in the lowest heavenly sphere, Beatrice explains that Piccarda and, by extension, all the souls in the heavenly spheres, are really in the Celestial Rose that revolves around God, and therefore they are in another realm transcendent to the heavenly spheres themselves. Beatrice explains to Dante that the souls "showed themselves here not because this post / has been assigned them, but to symbolize / that they stand lowest in the Heavenly host" (4.37-39). Why? Because, as Beatrice explains, by means of

[68] I do not want to suggest that Dante moves through the Augustinian hierarchy as cleanly and discretely as *Inferno*: visio corporalis, *Purgatorio*: visio spiritualis, *Paradiso*: visio intellectualis. Instead, I see a spectrum spreading throughout the three books. The beginning of the *Inferno* definitely is fashioned as visio corporalis, and the end of the *Paradiso* is definitely visio intellectualis, although the attempt Dante makes of describing it necessarily involves words and analogous images (this is Dante the author trying to do what every true visionary hesitated to do—describe the mystical union with imagery). What lies between these poles is a collection of gradations moving away from one pole and advancing toward another. I agree in general with the analyses of Francis X. Newman ("St. Augustine's Three Visions and the Structure of the 'Commedia') and with Marguerite Mills Chiarenza ("The Imageless Vision and Dante's 'Paradiso'"), but more so with Chiarenza, who hints toward the presence of this spectrum in Dante's poem.

this symbolic manner "one [must] speak to mortal imperfection / which only from the *sensible* apprehends [emphasis Ciardi's] / whatever it then makes fit for intellection" (4.40-42).

When Dante gets closer to the zenith of his vision experience, the mode of revelation moves more and more into the intuitive, into the visio intellectualis. It climaxes with a directly implanted revelation of God's nature. Aided and encouraged by the prayers of St. Bernard and of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Dante dares to wish for the vision of God, and "as I wished," he says, "the truth I wished for came / cleaving my mind in a great flash of light" (33.140-41). Augustine made clear that this highest vision is such that there are no corresponding images that one can use to describe it. Dante observes this limitation. His very next line tells us, "Here my powers rest from their high fantasy" (12.142). Four lines later, the great *Commedia* is over.

Overstepping the Bounds

But if Dante is faithful to the medieval paradigm as far as the empiric visionscape and the Augustinian ordering goes, he oversteps the boundaries established in the last two general characteristics. Dante's near-unions with the divine in the figure of Christ are hardly genuinely self-effacing for Dante, and neither is much of the approach to his union with God. Furthermore, Dante's coding of his vision is more of an aesthetic exercise designed to levy upon the reader an interpretive responsibility that will reveal the reader's own orientations to truths/histories lying outside the account than merely a recollection of a supposedly historic (albeit subjective) event during which the celestial and the mundane marvelously intersected.

In Dante's numerous near-unions with the divine, whether they came through the mediation of Beatrice's smile or eyes or the increasingly vivid symbols of the ethereal rose, he never ceases to describe his psychological responses to the events. This is to say, Dante never loses sight of his own self as did most of the visionaries who claimed to have been raptured into the

divine essence. Instead, Dante's desire not only to know himself but also to know what is *going on inside* himself is clear enough in the *Inferno*. One becomes accustomed to Dante's early remarks about feeling pity and is slightly surprised when his pity turns to hate toward the end of the nether-landish journey (cf. Dante's tearing of Bocca's hair in Canto 32.103-05). I say 'slightly surprised' because it is evident throughout the journey that Dante is there to become educated about sin and to become hardened to it. The journey, in essence, is for the sake of increasing Dante's knowledge about, and personal abhorrence of, sin. The journey here is about Dante, not the damned souls.

The journey in the *Purgatorio* account takes this knowledge and converts it to self-knowledge: Dante learns of his own general sins, figured by the seven *P*s emblazoned on his head, and of his particular sin (pride). He learns how he can expect himself to respond to the punishments of this sin. His fear is allayed only through the admonitions of both Virgil and the Angel who strikes the signs of sin off his forehead. And the account is still replete with references to Dante's psychological responses to the events encountered. Still, one almost expects this, since this part of the vision focus on a purging of sin.

What is genuinely surprising is that Dante's references to the self do not let up in the third part of the vision, the travel into the celestial spheres. It still seems to be about Dante, about his questions, his thoughts, his intentions, his desires, his introspections. Early in this final stage Dante wishes to ask Beatrice about the origin of souls and their actions. He fears his own thoughts may lead him into heresy, so he hesitates to ask. However, he makes sure to tell us, "If I stood mute, then, tugged to either side, / I neither blame myself, nor take my doubt— / it being necessary—as cause for pride" (4.7-9). He is aware of this feeling of pride and knows how to explain it away. When he meets blessed personages to whom he is attracted, it is not enough for him to let us know that this affinity existed; he provides us with a textual analog of

how the experience felt to his own self. When he hears Bonaventure speak from within the solar garland of Canto12, Dante tells us, "and as the North Star draws a needle's point, / so was my soul drawn to that glorious flame" (12.29-30). This, then, was the tug he felt, something closer to a mechanical, instinctual attraction than a developed one. Later, when Dante addresses his ancestor Cacciaguida, who was made a knight while on earth, Dante rebukes himself for feeling pride in the meeting: "O trivial pride of ours in noble blood! / that in possessing you men are possessed, / down here, where souls grow sick and lose their good, / will never again amaze me, for there, too, / where appetite is never drawn to evil— / in Heaven, I say—my own soul gloried in you" (16.1-6). By this we see that once again Dante, while supposedly face to face with heavenly souls, is looking inward to see what is going on in his own psyche. In Canto 23, Dante is almost overcome by a vision of the Church Triumphant. He relates the event as such: "As one whose senses have been stricken blind / by a forgotten vision comes to himself / and racks his wits to call it back to mind— / such was I" (49-52). He knows exactly how the experience felt and can still recall it in verse to his audience. And when Dante sees Mary's visage, he tells us that "through all else on the long road I trod / nothing had held my soul so fixed in awe" (32.91-92). His self-knowledge of these inner responses allows him to make this judgment.

It might be argued that these descriptions of the interior Dante are merely poetic devices utilized by Dante to form his poem. This could be, and I am not suggesting that Dante actually experienced this vision as an historical event. On the same grounds, however, one could point out that by such means Dante is creating an imaginary envelope within which his readers can vicariously psychologically experience what the pilgrim Dante allegedly experienced. In this way he would be breaking away from the fourth characteristic of the medieval paradigm: instead of receiving the visionscape passively and then actively engaging his authorial powers to script a semi-historical account of the occurrence, which is what the majority of medieval visionary working within the tradition did, Dante constructs both the

(supposed) visionscape experience and the (supposed) historical rendering. This would be a genuine restructuring or recoding of the genre of vision recollection because whereas the medieval paradigm (as well as the later development within the paradigm of the scripted vision) did engage an element of aesthetic construction, the resulting textual accounts were never taken to be environments within which the reader could receive his or her dispensation of divine things. A person may have read or listened to the medieval accounts, I suppose, to validate the assumption that it was possible for anyone to have a vision and to find out what things might help effect just such an experience. But one did not read in order to have the experience right then and there, in and from the text. Yet Dante allows for almost no space between his text and the attentive reader; the psychological markers facilitate the reader's empathetic acquisition of the event. In structuring the *Commedia* this way, although Dante the pilgrim appears to be predominately passive throughout the account, Dante the author is completely and aggressively active in constructing a textual visionscape with its own types of pathetic and noetic dispensers of vision.

Dante rejects the passive/active paradox in another way. He provides a visionary account that requires the reader to engage in personal interpretive activity. No doubt, Dante does provide passages of interpretation in the *Commedia* via Virgil, Beatrice, Bernard, or himself, but these instances of interpretation stay on a certain superficial level of textual activity, supplementing only the literal layer of the poem. According to the well known letter Dante wrote to Can Grande della Scala affirming the warrant to apply a four-fold method of interpretation along the lines of the medieval quadriga, the poem can be taken to mean other things beyond this literal level, and just what these other things are on the political, moral, and eschatological level are left for the reader's discernment. In this way the onus of interpretation is levied upon the outside observer—on us, the readers—and the stance taken to draw for the meaning will indicate the pre-existent orientation of the audience. The task of reading Dante is a revelatory one: it reveals dispositions, be they

religious or political. In turn, this act of revelation informs the reader of his or her own allegiance to a set of values and beliefs already set in place before the reading of the poem took place. If taken seriously, by readers close to the cultural field within which Dante himself lived and worked, the poem forces sides (again, be they religious or political) to be drawn. This is exactly what the serious, aesthetically devised vision accounts of later years forced upon their readers, accounts like the late-Medieval *Pearl* or *Piers Plowman* (both ca. 1400), and even the early-modern *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). The main purpose of these later accounts, it seems, was to emphasize a self-orienting hermeneutical action taken up by the serious reader. That so many were moved to passionately embrace the 'messages' of these poems (or to vilify the authors and reject any critical stances taken by them) indicates that the texts did just that. These later accounts, being past Dante's time considerably, betoken the full flowering of this move into using hermeneutics as an identifying marker for a readership. Dante's poem precedes them all and starts the grounding of this shift toward forcing the audience into a self-defining involvement.

These two qualities of the *Commedia*, its focus on the self and its actively aesthetic construction of the experience, prefigure the later Protestant stance toward the immediate revelation of the marvelous that is the sine qua non of the vision experience. For the Reformers, knowledge of the self, especially knowledge of the sinfulness of the self coupled with its emotional responses to that sinfulness, was a necessary element to any efficacious vision of Christ or of God. Indeed, such high revelations were completed only with this sort of self-knowledge, since Christ was to be known and valued to the Reformer for redemptive qualities, and God for qualities of mercy. The redemption and the ground of mercy which was its origin make no sense without a concomitant understanding and acceptance of a fundamentally sinful self. This entails a deep, honest well of self-knowledge. Furthermore, the coding of the Protestant experience of salvation (in the form of diaries, spiritual autobiographies, sermons, or works like *Pilgrim's Progress*) was

intended to provide for the reader a textual terrain within which one's own vision of conversion could be brought to life. Consequently, for the Protestant the text itself was a biblically sanctioned medium of efficacious grace, and as such it was never to be considered as merely a pointer to past events. To view the text this way would be to strip it of its own marvelous quality to engender vision. However, it is not within the range of this essay's topic to outline such a Protestant revision of the medieval paradigm of visions. Such an outline is forthcoming in my work. It is enough here to point out that Dante did something with the last two characteristics of the medieval paradigm that moved his *Commedia* beyond the strict pale of what a medieval vision, along with the text that made the vision accessible to the public, looked like. Since the next great evolution of theological assumptions was the Reformation, it makes sense to consider Dante's work as a possible pointer to some of those new doctrines.

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