

# Envisaging Heaven in the Middle Ages

Edited by Carolyn Muessig and Ad Putter  
With the assistance of Gareth Griffith  
and Judith Jefferson

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# Envisaging Heaven in the Middle Ages

*Envisaging Heaven in the Middle Ages* considers medieval notions of heaven in theological and mystical writings, in visions of the otherworld and in medieval arts such as drama, poetry, music and vernacular literature.

The volume considers the influence of images and visions of heaven on the secular literature by some of the greatest writers of the period, such as Chrétien de Troyes and Chaucer. The coherence and beauty of these notions make heaven one of the most impressive medieval cathedrals of the mind.

The book shows that the idea of heaven in the Middle Ages was as varied as those who wrote about it, and reveals the extent to which the Christian afterlife was (as it is today) a projection of human hopes and fears. Because 'the reality' of heaven was one based on speculation, as well as fancy, medieval heavens were products both of ingenious thought and of creative, wishful imagination.

With contributions from such experts as Peter Dronke, Beverly Mayne Kienzle, Robin Kirkpatrick, Bernard McGinn, Peter Meredith, Barbara Newman and A.C. Spearing, this collection will be essential reading for all those interested in medieval religion and culture.

**Carolyn Muessig** is Senior Lecturer in Medieval Theology at the University of Bristol. She is the author of *Sermon, Preacher and Audience in the Middle Ages*, *Medieval Monastic Education* and *The Faces of Women in the Sermons of Jacques de Vitry*: most recently, she co-edited *Hildegard of Bingen's 'Expositiones euangeliorum'*. **Ad Putter** is Reader in English Literature at the University of Bristol. He is the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and French Arthurian Romance* and *An Introduction to the Gawain-Poet*, and co-edited *The Spirit of Medieval Popular Romance*.

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# Contributors

**Elizabeth Archibald** is Reader in Medieval Studies at the University of Bristol. She has published studies of the Apollonius of Tyre romance and of the incest theme in medieval literature, and co-edited a collection of essays on Malory. She is currently working on medieval baths and bathing.

**Peter Dronke** is Emeritus Professor of Medieval Latin Literature at the University of Cambridge. He is a Fellow of the British Academy, and a Corresponding Fellow of the Real Academia de Buenas Letras, the Royal Dutch Academy and the Austrian Academy of Sciences. His books include *Medieval Latin and the Rise of the European Love-Lyric* (2nd edn 1968), *The Medieval Lyric* (3rd edn 1996), *Fabula* (1974), *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (1984), *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions* (1986) and editions of Bernardus Silvestris' *Cosmographia* (1978) and Hildegard of Bingen's *Liber diuinorum operum* (with Albert Derolez, 1996).

**Robert Easting**, MA, DPhil (Oxon), has taught medieval (and later) English Language and Literature at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, since 1973. His research has focused on medieval Latin and vernacular visions of the otherworld.

**Stephen D'Evelyn** is Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the Erasmus Institute, University of Notre Dame. He is presently finishing a commentary on Hildegard of Bingen's *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum* and writing a study of ancient and medieval poetry of gift-giving.

**Beverly Mayne Kienzle**, Professor at Harvard Divinity School, is completing a study of Hildegard of Bingen's *Expositiones euangeliorum*. Other publications include *The Sermon. Typologie des sources du moyen âge occidental*, fasc. 81–3 (2000) and *Cistercians, Heresy and Crusade (1145–1229): Preaching in the Lord's Vineyard* (2001).

**Robin Kirkpatrick** is Professor of Italian and English Literatures at University of Cambridge and Fellow of Robinson College. He has published widely on Dante and the relations between English and Italian literature and is currently finishing a verse translation of Dante's *Commedia* for Penguin Classics.

**Bernard McGinn** is the Naomi Shenstone Donnelley Professor Emeritus at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. His major interests are in the history of apocalypticism and in Christian mystical traditions.

**Peter Meredith** is Emeritus Professor of Medieval Drama at the University of Leeds. He was a founder editor with Meg Twycross of the journal *Medieval English Theatre* and one of the team which set up the Records of Early English Drama in Toronto. His major work has been in editing and the practical study of drama.

**Carolyn Muessig** is Senior Lecturer in Medieval Theology at the University of Bristol. Her interests include the sermons of Jacques de Vitry and female religious education. Most recently, she has co-edited (with Beverly Mayne Kienzle) Hildegard of Bingen's *Expositiones euangeliorum*.

**Barbara Newman** is Professor of English, Religion, and Classics at Northwestern University, where she holds the John Evans Chair in Latin. Her most recent book is *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (2003).

**Ad Putter** is Reader in English Literature at the University of Bristol. He is the author of two books on the *Gawain-Poet* and co-editor (with Jane Gilbert) of *The Spirit of Medieval Popular Romance* (2000). He is currently working on alliterative metre.

**Steven Rozenski** is an Assistant Language Teacher for the Tome-shi Board of Education in Miyagi Prefecture, Japan. He was a 2003–2004 Fulbright Scholar at the University of Cologne, Germany; his work focuses on the theological implications of the turn towards the vernacular in fourteenth-century German and English religious texts.

**Salvador Ryan** teaches Church History at St Patrick's College, Thurles, County Tipperary, Ireland. He has published widely in the area of late medieval popular piety and is currently preparing a monograph entitled *Popular Religion in Gaelic Ireland, c.1450–c.1650* for Four Courts Press.

**A.C. Spearing** is Kenan Professor of English at the University of Virginia and a Life Fellow of Queens' College, Cambridge. His work focuses on medieval to early modern poetry, late-medieval religious prose and the interactions of medieval literature with modern theory. His most recent book is *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics*.

**Mary Suydam** teaches religion, history and gender studies at Kenyon College. She is the author of numerous articles about Hadewijch of Antwerp. She is the co-editor (with Ellen Kittell) of *The Texture of Society: Medieval Women in the Southern Low Countries*, and the co-editor (with Joanna Ziegler) of *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*.

# Preface

In 2002–2004 the Centre for Medieval Studies of the University of Bristol organized a two-year research programme entitled *Envisaging Heaven in the Middle Ages*. Our aim was to explore heaven as it was envisaged by medieval people in art and literature, in popular and academic thought. An exploration of this kind seemed to us to call for expertise in a variety of fields, so we sought to bring together medievalists from a range of adjacent disciplines (theology, history, art history, literature and others). In the two project years, various medievalists from all relevant disciplines at the University of Bristol joined forces with leading scholars from around the world. We hosted four public lectures, by Peter Meredith, Tony Spearing, Peter Dronke and Robin Kirkpatrick. The series of invited lectures was followed on 16–19 July 2004 by an international and interdisciplinary conference, with keynote addresses by Bernard McGinn and Barbara Newman. This book contains all of the public lectures and keynote addresses and a selection of the conference papers, plus a chapter written by Carolyn Muessig to ensure coverage of an important source not studied in any of the other chapters: the medieval sermon.

# Acknowledgements

It is not usually the case that those charged with organizing a lecture series or a conference have nothing but happy memories of the events. The surprising fact is that we do, and we owe this rare pleasure not only to the quality and variety of all the lectures and conference papers, but also to the help and support of a number of individuals and institutions that participated in the lecture series and the international conference ‘*Envisaging Heaven in the Middle Ages*’, 16–18 July 2004. The project has been generously funded by the Read-Tuckwell Foundation of the University of Bristol. We thank Marcus Bull, Ian Wei and Beth Williamson, who first conceived of the idea and persuaded the Read-Tuckwell Foundation that it was worthy of their financial backing. Without that backing, the lecture series, the conference and this book would not have been. Paul Williams, then Academic Secretary of the Read-Tuckwell committee, has been helpful and encouraging throughout. The visits to Bristol by Peter Dronke, Tony Spearing and Beverly Kienzle were facilitated by Benjamin Meaker Visiting Professorships. We are grateful for these to the Institute for Advanced Studies, University of Bristol and its Provost Martin White.

For help in organizing the conference we thank our postgraduate students and the staff at Clifton Hill House, Liz Bird for opening the conference and Jon Cannon for organizing a splendid excursion around medieval Bristol.

Carolyn Muessig’s chapter was written especially for this book: we thank the Arts Faculty Research Fund of the University of Bristol for sponsoring the necessary research trips to the British Library.

For alleviating the task of editing the collection we are grateful not only to all the contributors, for their efficiency and cheerful cooperation, but also to Judith Jefferson and Gareth Griffith, for their excellent editorial assistance. The work of ensuring consistency of practice and compliance with the publisher’s house-style is the most labour-intensive part of the editorial process and we are grateful to Judith Jefferson and Gareth Griffith for shouldering most of this work. Such errors as remain are of course our responsibility.

An earlier version of the chapter by Barbara Newman appeared in *Religion and Literature*, 2005, vol. 37.1, (Spring): 1–24. Reprint permission has been kindly granted by the University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN.

Carolyn Muessig  
Ad Putter

# Abbreviations

- CCCM Corpus Christianorum. Continuatio Mediaevalis. Turnhout: Brepols, 1971–.
- EETS Early English Text Society. Published in various series: Early English Text Society, Extra Series (EETS, ES); Early English Text Society, Original Series (EETS, OS); Early English Text Society, Supplementary Series (EETS, SS). London/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1864–.
- MGH Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Published in various series. Berlin, 1877–1919; Stuttgart, 1938–; Hannover, 1826–1934.
- PG J.-P. Migne (ed.) Patrologiae cursus: Series Graeca, 161 volumes. Paris, 1857–1866.
- PL J.-P. Migne (ed.) Patrologia cursus completus: Series Latina, 221 volumes. Paris, 1844–1864.
- SC Sources chrétiennes. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1941–.



## **Part I**

# **Introduction**



# 1 Envisaging heaven

## An introduction

*Carolyn Muessig and Ad Putter*

The concept of heaven is broader than the theological tradition of heaven. The theological tradition is itself broader than abstract or academic theology, for it embraces not only formal theology but the life and thought of the entire community. Tradition is not repetition, but the transmission of a living reality, which must be renewed and rethought as the community develops.<sup>1</sup>

Jeffrey Burton Russell's words capture the expansive idea of heaven in the Middle Ages and its shifting shapes across different times and different cultures. Many religions have posited 'heavens' of some kind;<sup>2</sup> and even when we concentrate on a single religion, pre-reformation Christianity, and a single period, the Middle Ages, we discover that the idea of heaven in the Middle Ages was as varied as the people who wrote about it. There was no one heaven, but a polyphony of heavens. Furthermore, because 'the reality' of heaven was one based on speculation as well as fancy, medieval heavens were products both of ingenious thought and of creative wishful imagination.

The interest of the topic of heaven is duly reflected in the recent scholarship devoted to it. Because this scholarship forms the background of the new research collected in this volume, we begin with a brief survey of some important books that have appeared in the last two decades.

In *Heaven: A History*, Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang provided a groundbreaking study on the development of heaven from its semitic background to its decline in the modern era.<sup>3</sup> The subtitle of their book emphasizes the authors' central point: representations of heaven changed with the times. Perhaps the most important change to occur in the medieval period is the change from visions of heaven as garden (which is what the word 'paradise' originally meant) to visions of heaven as a walled city. Both ideas have precedents in the Bible – the garden in Genesis and the Song of Songs, the city in the Book of Revelation – but, as McDannell and Lang argue, the resurgence of cities in the twelfth century helped reinvigorate the conceit of heaven as a large city.

Jean Delumeau has taken a similar historicizing approach to the changing conceptions and meanings of paradise in his book *Une Histoire du Paradis*.<sup>4</sup> Delumeau's study traces paradise and its pre-Christian roots, the theological

developments made by the church fathers and medieval theologians regarding the differences between the earthly and celestial paradises and the 'loss' of paradise in the writings of Emmanuel Kant (1724–1804) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). Delumeau followed this study with *Mille ans de bonheur: Histoire du Paradis* which has the same broad sweep as the first volume, but focuses rather on apocalyptic thought. In the medieval period, the beliefs and teachings of such groups as Joachimites, Lollards and Hussites, receive particular attention.<sup>5</sup> Although McDannell and Lang's analysis and Delumeau's study present a general summary of the history of heaven and paradise, they are valuable in the understanding of the specific development of ideas about heaven in the Middle Ages.

Two recent studies of the development of heaven in Christian thought are Jeffrey Burton Russell's *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence* and Alister McGrath's *A Brief History of Heaven*. Russell's magisterial book presents many examples and concepts that were prevalent in the Middle Ages such as visions and their significance in revealing the mysteries of the afterlife, the use of poetry in expressing the inexpressible of the celestial abode and the experience of joy in the heavenly realm.<sup>6</sup> Whereas Delumeau's history often emphasizes the negative and apocalyptic aspects of the last things, Russell's work highlights the positive function of heaven as the individual's ultimate fulfilment. McGrath's book focuses on a broad range of literature dating from the gospels to the songs of John Lennon. Looking at various themes of heaven such as 'the city', 'the garden', 'atonement and paradise', 'signals of transcendence', 'the consolation of heaven' and 'heaven as the goal of the Christian life', McGrath demonstrates the effectiveness of literature in expressing (however approximately) experiences of paradise, for he argues that unlike theological treatises, which lacked a suppleness of language owing to their systematic approach, imaginative literature allowed for a greater flexibility of expression.<sup>7</sup>

The essay collections *The Iconography of Heaven*, edited by Clifford Davidson, and *Imagining Heaven in the Middle Ages*, edited by J.S. Emerson and Hugh Feiss, present detailed studies of heaven in the late Middle Ages that are more tightly focused than the books so far mentioned.<sup>8</sup> *The Iconography of Heaven* brings together seven essays which are mainly concerned with representations of heaven in the visual arts and the performing arts of drama and music.<sup>9</sup> The contributors discuss some of the stereotypical sights, sounds and smells associated with heaven (light, song, the fragrance of flowers and so on) and the ways in which these 'sensations' were artificially produced for earthly audiences. *Imagining Heaven in the Middle Ages* contains eleven essays dealing with the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The book is broken down into three sections: 'corporeality', which discusses the bodily enjoyment of heaven and issues concerning the corporeal versus the incorporeal reality of paradise; 'desire and fulfilment', which considers the monastic idea of completion in heaven and how exactly this was experienced; the final section, 'transcendence', is devoted to the ultimate heavenly attainment of union with God and the limits of human language in describing that union. At the heart of the collection is the influential

work of Caroline Walker Bynum's *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336*.<sup>10</sup> Here Bynum brilliantly traced the development of personhood and wholeness of self in the resurrected body making clear the centrality of corporeality in medieval heaven.

More recently Bynum with Paul Freedman has edited *Last Things: Death and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*.<sup>11</sup> The eschatological subject and chronology of this book of collected essays is broad, incorporating examples from the early church to the fifteenth century as well as discussion of not only heaven but also death and the apocalypse. In regard to heaven this study clarifies the immediacy of heaven in the medieval mentality. In particular, Harvey Stahl's article 'The Place of the Elect in an Illuminated Book of Hours', which examines numerous images of heaven in art, concludes that 'the afterworld [...] was not shown consistently but it did move closer to earth'.<sup>12</sup> As illuminators made heaven look familiar, the ineffable and unrepresentable somehow became accessible and tangible.

Such accessibility indicates a desire on the part of the artist of these books and their owners to have some kind of concrete understanding of heaven. Indeed, the theme of heaven when applied to medieval culture emerges in almost every context as it was the anticipated fulfilment and much hoped for completion of the Christian life. An ever-present anticipation of heaven made thoughts of the afterlife a vital part of one's daily existence. This explains the popularity of vision literature. Vision literature usually presented accounts of an individual's experience of the afterlife (heaven, purgatory and hell); often these visions happened as part of a near-death experience.<sup>13</sup> Scholarly interest in the genre is now such that we cannot attempt to survey the scholarship. Fortunately, however, Robert Easting's study *Visions of the Other World in Middle English* provides an excellent bibliographical guide to this growing subject. The title might suggest the bibliography is limited to Middle English scholarship, but general studies and criticism and editions of analogous visions in other vernaculars and Latin are also represented. The wide circulation of many of these visions, as documented by Easting, is testimony to the interest and entertainment they provided to medieval audiences.<sup>14</sup> Easting's study builds on and complements the classic treatment of medieval vision literature, Peter Dinzelbacher's *Vision und Visionliteratur im Mittelalter*.<sup>15</sup> One of the many significant points in Dinzelbacher's study is the change that occurred in vision literature in the early thirteenth century. In the twelfth century most visions were experienced by men and occurred once. In the thirteenth century, there was a shift with visions of the afterlife often being experienced by women and recurring on a regular basis.

The ideas raised in these studies on heaven are expanded and developed in the present collection. *Envisaging Heaven in the Middle Ages* deals with medieval notions of heaven in theological and mystical writings, in visions of the otherworld, in medieval drama, poetry and music, and in vernacular literature. In order to indicate the range of interests and approaches on offer, we have structured the book in four sections, each devoted to a different aspect of the theme of heaven. The first section addresses theological controversies as

well as established traditions concerning heaven. The chapters in the second part of the book deal with mystical and visionary traditions of heaven, and discuss the search for heaven in the writings of medieval mystics and in visions of the otherworld. The third section considers representations of heaven in medieval poetry and drama. Putting heaven into verse or onto stage posed obvious challenges; this section shows how poets and performers took on and overcame these obstacles. The fourth and final section examines vernacular appropriations of the idea of heaven in a range of languages and idioms (Irish bardic poetry, Chaucer's love poetry and medieval romance).

### The theology of heaven

The nature of the actual experience of heaven was the focus of intense speculation and debate in the Middle Ages. Some in the tradition of John Chrysostom (d. 407) argued that when the blessed entered heaven they would not achieve a complete understanding of the divine for such comprehension would be beyond the human reach.<sup>16</sup> Augustine viewed heaven as offering an unmediated intellectual understanding of God.<sup>17</sup> Gregory the Great argued that God would be seen immediately after death essentially and naturally.<sup>18</sup> These and other tensions and controversies prevailed in the West throughout the Middle Ages. At the centre of the debate was the question of how the individual interacted with the divine.

The relationship between God and the soul in heaven was a fraught topic in the later Middle Ages. Bernard McGinn's chapter '*Visio dei: seeing God in medieval theology and mysticism*' considers this relationship in heaven with an analysis of the differing concepts of the beatific vision. Pope John XXII (1316–1334) and Pope Benedict XII (1334–1342) each articulated concrete but opposite conclusions regarding the soul's ability to gaze upon God. McGinn shows clearly and precisely how this thread of argumentation developed from Pope Innocent III (1198–1216) to Meister Eckhart (d. 1327/1328).

The fulfilment of the desire to be united to God drove the argument and passion behind the debate of the beatific vision. Jean LeClercq's classic study of the monastic life, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, demonstrated how monks strove to achieve perfect understanding of self and God.<sup>19</sup> This sentiment was also entrenched in the writings of Hildegard of Bingen. Beverly Kienzle in her chapter 'Constructing heaven in Hildegard of Bingen's *Expositiones euangeliorum*', demonstrates that this desire for God is at the heart of Hildegard of Bingen's theology of heaven. In the *Expositiones*, the monastic yearning for union with God finds expression in engineering and architectural motifs. Metaphors of building indicate the path to heaven, but, as Kienzle suggests, they also reveal Hildegard's lived experience as she oversaw the building work at her own monastery Rupertsberg.

The monastic life, so Hildegard of Bingen or Bernard of Clairvaux would have argued, is the gateway to heaven. In this argument, heaven afforded privileged positions to those who had lived a life of monastic perfection. But there were conflicting views of who would gain access to heaven. Throughout the

history of Christianity, some theologians argued that after a period of purification all individuals could be restored to perfection, regardless of their way of life. Even the greatest sinners would one day return to God; this theological belief is known as apocatastasis among the Greek Fathers. In the West this belief was declared an anathema: only those who found redemption within the sacramental church could enter heaven. Yet, as Peter Dronke shows in his chapter 'The completeness of heaven', apocatastasis was an attractive belief that continued to find advocates, for it was based on the idea (at once logical and beautiful) that heaven could only be perfected when all created things returned to it. Looking at an impressive breadth of material, from the New Testament to Dostoyevsky, Dronke shows that even in the medieval West some theologians retained elements of apocatastasis in their theological view of redemption.

Carolyn Muessig's chapter 'Heaven, earth and the angels: preaching paradise in the sermons of Jacques de Vitry' uncovers a heaven that is militantly orthodox and designed to combat heretical views. Although heaven was the abode of God, the blessed and the angels, Jacques de Vitry reminds us that it was also the birthplace of discord and schism; in particular heaven was the region from which God had exiled the rebellious angels. His sermons demonstrate that heaven could be anything but peaceful; it could be viewed as a parallel universe which provided precedent for violent action against such groups as the Cathars.

### **Mystical and visionary traditions**

As indicated above, the bodily resurrection was an expectation in Christian theology.<sup>20</sup> Such an expectation points to the logical conclusion that heaven was not only a notional reality but a physical place where all the blessed would reside. Much time was spent in trying to figure out where this heaven was located and how it was arranged. Many theologians perceived it to be above the earthly and heavenly firmaments.<sup>21</sup> However, perceptions of heaven were often relayed not only through theological treatises but visionary literature. Such writings made heaven visible and tangible in the here and now, partly as an incentive to virtuous living on earth. As Robert Easting points out in *Visions of the Other World*: 'Medieval visionary experiences and everyday practicalities did not always inhabit divided and distinguished worlds. Moreover, both religious and the laity were encouraged to mediate and "see" the other worlds as part of a regular consideration of one's mortality.'<sup>22</sup>

This seeing accounts for perhaps the most dynamic and memorable accounts of heaven, the medieval legends of visits to the other world. As Robert Easting shows in his chapter on these legends, 'Access to heaven in medieval visions of the otherworld', the authors of vision literature were careful not to reveal too much about heaven, by imposing restrictions not only on what the visionary was allowed or able to report but also on what he was allowed to see. The visionary can see but only imperfectly, from afar. And it is not always clear what place he is describing: some visions make it clear that the visionary is not seeing the heavenly city itself but only its surroundings. The male visionary's reticence to

present all the details of his otherworldly encounter is a recurrent theme in the twelfth century.

The thirteenth-century beguines offer a very different visionary mode. Mary Suydam demonstrates how women could enter the spatial dimension of heaven and communicate with the divine. Her chapter 'Bringing heaven down to earth: beguine constructions of heaven' substantiates Dinzelbacher's observation concerning the rise of female visions in the thirteenth century. Suydam notes that such female visionary abilities challenged ecclesiastical restrictions of the official place of women in the church and allowed women a way to subvert hierarchical limitations. Furthermore, where male visionaries were sometimes reticent to speak, female visionaries spoke of their visions in graphic and highly personal detail, developing models of holiness that depended on the intimacy of their contacts with the divine rather than on institutional recognition.

This tension between verbal profusion and reticence in attempts to describe heaven is at the core of many visionary accounts. Steven Rozenski grapples with this seeming contradiction in his chapter '*Von Aller Bilden Bildlosekeit*: the trouble with images of heaven in the works of Henry Suso'. Rozenski discusses one of the few male visionaries from the fourteenth century, Henry Suso, whose use of both cataphatic and apophatic imaging of God embraces at once the concrete language of heaven as articulated by the beguines and the abstract intellectualization of Meister Eckhart under whom Suso studied.

The slippage between imagistic and imageless depictions of heaven in Suso illustrates the tensions inherent in the mystic's enterprise. A.C. Spearing's chapter 'Marguerite Porete: courtliness and transcendence in *The Mirror of Simple Souls*' provides an extreme case in point. In her controversial *Mirror of Simple Souls*, Marguerite Porete acts out the turbulent and paradoxical movements of transcendence. In the writings of studiously orthodox mystics, the union with God in this world is carefully distinguished from the union with God in the afterlife; in Porete's *Mirror* this difference is one of a number of logical distinctions to be suspended at delirious moments in the discourse. At such moments, the mystical union with God in the here and now seems to be not merely a foretaste of heaven but a complete achievement of it in the present life. The imaginative entertainment of such 'heretical' possibilities eventually caused Marguerite to be burned to death as a heretic.

## The art of heaven

Those who had allegedly experienced the visions of heaven and came back to speak of it often remarked upon its ineffableness. But this never stopped individuals from saying as much as possible about what was beyond description. This tension between apophatic and cataphatic sensibilities created some of the finest poetry of the period. Pushing language to its limits, heaven was sung about and lauded in poetry. Although poetry and visions in particular gave authors greater scope and licence to envisage heaven creatively and expansively, the task nevertheless challenged them to match the loftiness of their theme with

the beauty and sublimeness of their own language. And it also challenged the ingenuity of playwrights, directors and performers, who had to put heaven on stage and make actors ascend to and descend from it.

The chapters in this section discuss how heaven was represented in medieval poetry and drama. Medieval religious plays (which included accounts of the Creation and the Fall) had to wrestle with the problem of how heaven could be accommodated to the stage (or the wagon cart). Aesthetic ideas of paradise had to be translated into creative sets that could capture the dramatic biblical moments involving heaven. In his chapter ‘“Some high place”: actualizing heaven in the Middle Ages’, Peter Meredith illustrates the performance of heaven in late medieval mystery plays performed in Florence, Lucerne and York. The ingenious stage directions and special effects of these plays demonstrates that, even as the emotion and meaning of heaven loomed large in theological and visionary circles, it was also intensely realized for popular audiences.

The emotion of a dramatic event is sometimes most powerfully conveyed through music, which reaches emotions that word and images alone cannot touch. In his chapter ‘Heaven as performance and participation in the *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum* of Hildegard of Bingen’, Stephen D’Evelyn shows how ideas of mystery, beauty and community of heaven are evoked in the haunting liturgical songs of Hildegard of Bingen. As he argues, in these songs the words, the music and the setting of the performance are integrated to evoke, as it were, heaven on earth.

Of course, it is Dante’s *Divina Commedia* that proves beyond all doubt that theological thought and poetry can indeed enrich each other. Robin Kirkpatrick’s chapter ‘Afterlives now: a study of *Paradiso* canto 28’ is devoted to Dante, as theological thinker and poet, and presents a close reading of canto 28 of Dante’s *Paradiso*. This section of the *Paradiso* addresses the ordering of the angelic hierarchies. Kirkpatrick’s analysis presents a fresh interpretation of the canto, clarifying and bringing to the fore all the artistic and cultural components that have gone into the realization of these angelic lines which invite the reader to participate in Dante’s own vision of heaven.

Looking at Dante again in the context of two other vernacular poets, Barbara Newman demonstrates in her article ‘The artifice of eternity: speaking of heaven in three medieval poems’, how poets could elucidate the wonder of heaven with stunning effect. Newman analyses *Pearl* (anonymous, Middle English), *Paradiso* (Dante, Italian) and *Marienleich* (Heinrich von Meißen (Frauenlob), Middle High German), all of which have a heavenly Lady at their centre. Newman uncovers the ‘celestial poetics’ of these works, demonstrating that each author’s intimacy with the language allows for a myriad of mathematical, linguistic and poetic manoeuvres which all bring the reader to a heightened awareness of the excellence of heaven.

## Vernacular appropriations

The first three sections of this book are devoted to Latin and vernacular sources that are self-evidently crucial to our understanding of how medieval people envisaged, represented and used heaven: visions, mystical works and the writings of poets, preachers, theologians and academics. The chapters in the final section, ‘Vernacular appropriations’, focus on the distinctive forms in which heaven found its way into texts where one might not, at first sight, expect to find it: in the bardic poetry of later medieval and early Modern Ireland, in the poetry of Chaucer, and in the medieval romances of England and the continent.

Both in the scholarship and in the general consciousness, the bardic poets are much better known for their secular verse than for their religious poetry. Their dependence on the munificence of wealthy chieftains is reflected in the predominance of bardic poems in praise of the (potential) patron. Naturally, these panegyrics emphasize the warm welcome extended to guests at the door, the host’s generosity, the friendliness and beauty of his wife or daughter, the abundance of food and more especially drink. Yet alongside this secular poetry of praise, there survives a considerable corpus of popular religious poetry. As Salvador Ryan shows in his chapter ‘Exchanging blood for wine: envisaging heaven in Irish bardic poetry’, in this poetry heaven is represented and expressed in the unmistakable vernacular idiom of the secular bardic tradition. The poets like to imagine it as a lavish feast: God is the welcoming host (and there is no rude doorkeeper to keep the poet out); Mary is the obliging and accessible hostess; the wine flows liberally.

Bardic poetry thus reveals, perhaps in a way that vernacular poetry does most tellingly, that medieval (and modern) perceptions of heaven are always projections of earthly ideals. And it is precisely the fact that heaven, then and now, is shot through with earthly hopes and fears, that explains why heaven was so useful and meaningful to secular writers as a source for comparisons or hyperboles. In these figurative uses, heaven can be made to pay back some of the values and emotions that humans have invested in it from the beginning.

This figurative transference is explored in the two final chapters by Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter. In a comparison of Chaucer with his sources, Archibald in her chapter ‘Chaucer’s lovers in metaphorical heaven’ highlights Chaucer’s fondness for using heaven in the context of human love. Chaucer’s lovers are frequently transported to ‘heaven’, or (when things have gone wrong) to ‘hell’ or ‘purgatory’; gazing upon his blissful lovers is, as Chaucer frequently tells us, like envisaging heaven itself. As Archibald argues, such tropes are used in remarkably self-conscious ways in the *Merchant’s Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. In the former, ‘paradise’ is methodically invoked as the ultimate model of marital bliss, even as the sordid realities of the plot make it painfully clear that in this tale the ideal exists only in the deluded fantasies of old January. In the tragic story of love that is *Troilus and Criseyde* Chaucer many times speaks of ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’ where his source does not: are the similes and metaphors used in order to sacralize human love? Or, rather, to insist on the

incomparability of human and divine love? Or perhaps both? These are some of the questions that Archibald opens up in her chapter.

Ad Putter in 'The influence of visions of the otherworld on some medieval romances' detects the presence of heaven in a number of medieval English and continental romances. As he shows, castle descriptions in particular betray the influence of celestial visions: castles were often modelled on heaven, occasionally in graphic detail, as in the *Roman de Troie*, where Troy is imagined as being embellished with the same twelve precious stones that adorn the new city of Jerusalem in St John's Apocalypse. Putter's chapter culminates in a discussion of two of Chrétien de Troyes's romances, where Chrétien wittily and audaciously makes use of otherworldly motifs.

## Conclusion

Because the pains of hell and the fulfilment of heaven were expected to be experienced for eternity, the afterlife was central to the medieval imagination. As these chapters show, while many must have worried that theirs would be a hellish end, people never stopped hoping for heaven. The strength of human optimism is evident from the theological discussions regarding the beatific vision and apocatastasis. Such hopefulness combined with genuine curiosity about the nature of heaven. The pulleys and ropes of the medieval stage, the liturgical imitation of heavenly music in the monastery, and the verbal wizardry of medieval poets and mystics brought individuals to a closer realization of heaven, though the effort and artifice expended in the attempt also reminded them they were not in heaven yet.

The anticipation of heaven shaped the expectations of the medieval individuals, but their lived experiences also shaped the contours of heaven with equal effect. Hildegard of Bingen's choice of engineering images reflects her idea of the heavenly city of Jerusalem as well her involvement in the construction of her monastery. Jacques de Vitry promoted traditional views of heaven while introducing combative interpretations of paradise to justify persecution of the Cathars. In bardic poetry, too, heaven is in part the projection of earthly wishes: it is a banquet held by a generous chieftain and a charming hostess. The language of paradise in theological or secular writings, although rooted in biblical and patristic writings, mirrored the cultural milieux of its authors, and their historical situation transformed received ideas of heaven into a colourful mosaic of inherited and contemporary values and practices. Because paradise meant so much to medieval minds, poets of the period naturally used heaven figuratively to evoke emotions of ecstatic joy or utter despair (as when Chaucer's lovers are in heaven or hell) and drew on visions of heaven to give their settings a touch of the supernatural.

At the core of these varied notions and uses of heaven lies the desire to comprehend heaven and to know who would earn a privileged place there. Driven by intellectual curiosity and intense emotion, both hope and fear, anticipation and trepidation, this speculation generated a vivid array of heavens. The heavens that

have survived in art and writing remain one of the most impressive creations of the medieval heart and mind. As our observations will have suggested, we are as yet far from knowing all there is to know about the multiple representations of heaven in the Middle Ages. However, the richness of the findings presented in the following chapters shows the potential rewards for future study of the making of medieval heaven.

## Notes

- 1 J.B. Russell, *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, p.17.
- 2 For examples of 'heavens' in different religious faiths see C. and P. Zaleski (eds) *The Book of Heaven: An Anthology of Writings from Ancient to Modern Times*, New York: Oxford, 2000.
- 3 C. McDannell and B. Lang, *Heaven: A History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.
- 4 J. Delumeau, *Une Histoire du Paradis*, vol. 1, Paris: Fayard, 1992.
- 5 J. Delumeau, *Mille Ans de Bonheur: Histoire du Paradis*, vol. 2, Paris: Fayard, 1995.
- 6 Russell, *A History of Heaven*.
- 7 A.E. McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.
- 8 C. Davidson (ed.) *The Iconography of Heaven*, Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 1994. J.S. Emerson and H. Feiss (eds) *Imagining Heaven in the Middle Ages*, New York: Garland Publishing, 2000.
- 9 The essay on music is by Richard Rastall. Rastall's later monograph study on the music of the angels in the drama and liturgy of the period also deserves to be mentioned. See R. Rastall, *The Heaven Singing: Music in Early English Religious Drama*, Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1996.
- 10 C.W. Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.
- 11 C.W. Bynum and P. Freedman (eds) *Last Things: Death and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.
- 12 H. Stahl, 'Heaven in View: The Place of the Elect in an Illuminated Book of Hours', in Bynum and Freedman, *Last Things*, pp.205–32, at p.232.
- 13 C. Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts on Near-death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987; C. Zaleski, *Life of the World to Come: Near-death Experience and Christian Hope*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- 14 R. Easting, *Visions of the Other World in Middle English*, Annotated Bibliographies of Old and Middle English Literature, 3, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997.
- 15 P. Dinzelsbacher's *Vision und Visionlitteratur im Mittelalter*, Monographien zur Geschichte des Mittelalters, 23, Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1981.
- 16 Russell, *A History of Heaven*, p.84.
- 17 Russell, *A History of Heaven*, p.88.
- 18 Russell, *A History of Heaven*, p.96.
- 19 J. Leclercq, *The Love for Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, C. Misrahi (trans.), 3rd edn, New York: Fordham University Press, 1982.
- 20 Bynum, *The Resurrection of The Body*.
- 21 Basil of Caesarea, Bede and Thomas Aquinas are just a few of the theologians who speculated about the place and organization of heaven.
- 22 Easting, *Visions of the Other World in Middle English*, p.4.

## **Part II**

# **The theology of heaven**



## 2 *Visio dei*

### Seeing God in medieval theology and mysticism<sup>1</sup>

*Bernard McGinn*

In the summer of 1202, Pope Innocent III and his court abandoned the fetid and mosquito-laden city of Rome for the salubrious retreat of the Benedictine abbey at Subiaco. A curial official reports on the set of splendid tents the court set up and the papal officials who swam like fish in the adjacent lake. The pope himself we are told enjoyed gargling with the icy water: ‘The third Solomon loved to freely put his holy hands into it and take a frigid gargle so that it might provide medical aid for the twofold need of human life [i.e. the inner and outer] with its double power.’<sup>2</sup> During this retreat the pope took the opportunity to preach a sermon to the Subiaco community about *visio dei*, that is, how God can be seen both in this life and in the next, taking as his text the beatitude, ‘Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God’ (Matthew 5:8).<sup>3</sup>

Though Innocent III was not an original theologian, he had received an up-to-date education at Paris and had a gift for eloquence. Why he chose to speak about seeing God on this occasion may reflect the delights of his summer vacation, as well as his audience of monks devoted to the contemplative life. Innocent’s sermon begins with the classic distinction between two kinds of blessedness, that possible in this life (*in via*) and the perfect happiness of heaven (*in patria*). He also discusses the seeming contradiction between the Matthean promise that the pure of heart will see God and the biblical texts that deny that God can ever be seen. In good scholastic fashion, the pope solves the contradiction by distinguishing three kinds of vision: ‘Thus it is necessary to distinguish that one kind of vision is corporeal, another veiled, another comprehensive. The corporeal vision belongs to the senses; the veiled to images; the comprehensive to the understanding.’<sup>4</sup> The invisible God can never be seen by corporeal vision. ‘In the present life’, says the pope, ‘he can be seen by the effect of inspiration, contemplation, prayer, meditation, reading, and preaching, which lift the soul up to gazing on God’,<sup>5</sup> at least for those who have purified hearts. These veiled, or enigmatic, forms of vision, all dependent on faith, are far inferior, however, to the comprehensive vision to come in heaven on which Innocent waxes eloquent for most of the sermon.

Whatever kind of good you desire, if you see God you will have it in him. Since he is the highest Good, the fullness of all goods is in him. If you see

him, you will also comprehend him; if you comprehend him, you will also possess him.<sup>6</sup>

Innocent's threefold distinction of visions of God is straightforward, clear and traditional, being based primarily on St Augustine. One might think that the pope had settled the issue of what it means to see God for centuries to come. The story, however, turned out to be quite different. Perhaps no other period in the history of Christianity witnessed more debate over the issues involved in Christ's promise that the pure of heart shall see God. Many issues remained under discussion, such as: What kind of vision of God is promised in this beatitude? How can it be squared with divine invisibility and the numerous scriptural passages that affirm God cannot be seen? If there is some vision of God both here and in heaven, how are the two related? The thirteenth- and fourteenth-century controversies over seeing God are evident not only from thousands of pages of mystical and theological texts on these themes, but also from the fact that 134 years after the Subiaco sermon Innocent's successor, Pope Benedict XII, took the unusual step of condemning the view of his predecessor John XXII that the beatific vision was not to be enjoyed by the saved until after the Last Judgement. The problems about what it meant to see God were not as clear and simple as Innocent imagined.

We should not blame the vacationing pope too much, because *visio dei* had long been an issue in Christian thought. The problems began in scripture itself, as Innocent well knew. In Exodus 33:20 God tells Moses: 'You cannot see my face, for no one will see me and live.' But in Genesis 32:30 Jacob claims, 'I have seen God face-to-face and my soul has been saved.' After his vision of 'the Lord sitting on a high and lofty throne' in the Temple, Isaiah announces, 'with my own eyes I have seen the Lord of hosts' (Isaiah 6:5). Things do not get much clearer in the New Testament. The beatitude text cited by Innocent does not clarify whether the promised vision will be in the here or hereafter. A number of passages seem to deny any vision of the hidden Father, especially the text in the prologue of John's Gospel, 'No one has ever seen God; the Only Begotten God, who is in the Father's bosom, has revealed him' (John 1:18; see also John 6:46; 1 John 4:12; Matthew 11:27; 1 Timothy 6:16). But other texts both in the Pauline and Johannine letters promise a vision of God to come in heaven. For example, 1 Corinthians 13:12 contrasts vision here below and the coming vision: 'We see now mysteriously through a mirror, but then face-to-face; now I know in part; then I will know as I am known' (see also 2 Corinthians 3:18). The eschatological character of vision is also stressed in 1 John 3:2 adding an important reference to filiation in Christ: 'Beloved, we are God's children and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be; but we know that when he has appeared, we will be like him, because we will see him as he is.'

While there has been general agreement that the vision of God in heaven is the goal of the Christian life, the diversity of the scriptural witnesses has encouraged different views about how that vision is to be understood. Similarly, most Christians have believed that some kind of seeing, or contemplation, of God is possible in this life, but the nature of that vision and its relation to the *visio beat-*

*ifica* has been debated. Precisely why the early Christians placed such emphasis on seeing God may have much to do with their cultural milieu in which the visual was so strongly privileged. From the end of the second century, as is evident in Clement of Alexandria, the vision promised in the beatitudes was explained in terms of the Platonic philosophical ideal of contemplation of God (*thêoria theou*). Like Innocent, Clement held that the perfect vision to come was prepared for in this life by imperfect sight. A passage in book seven of his *Stromateis* says that gnostic souls

always keep moving to higher and higher regions, until they no longer greet the divine vision in or by mirrors, but with loving hearts feast forever on the uncloying, never-ending sight [. . .] This is the apprehending vision of the pure of heart.<sup>7</sup>

The kind of vision of God possible in this life, as well as the nature of the final vision in heaven, continued to be discussed throughout the patristic period. Despite the biblical prohibitions, some figures of the Old and New Testaments, notably Moses and Paul, were credited with higher and more direct contact with God than that open to most other humans. Were these face-to-face visions the same as the *visio beatifica*? Augustine of Hippo took up these questions in a number of places and set forth a theory of *visio dei* that was to have a powerful role in the Western Middle Ages.<sup>8</sup>

Augustine insisted that the only true satisfaction for all human longing was to be found in heaven in ‘the contemplation of the Good that is unchanging, eternal, always the same’.<sup>9</sup> At the end of the *City of God* he summarizes the coming reward: ‘There we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise; this is what shall be in the end without end.’<sup>10</sup> For Augustine, the reciprocity of love and vision was essential, not only in heaven but also on earth. As he put it in book eight of his treatise *The Trinity*, ‘The more ardently we love God, the more certainly and calmly do we see him, because we see in God the unchanging form of justice, according to which we judge one ought to live.’<sup>11</sup> When Augustine actually describes direct contact with God, however, metaphors of seeing often yield to language drawn from the other spiritual senses, especially touching and feeling, but also smelling and hearing.<sup>12</sup>

Augustine wrestled with the contrasting biblical texts about whether or not God could really be seen in this life. In his letter treatise *On Seeing God* from CE 413 he argued against any corporeal vision of God, either here or hereafter, but allowed that some vision of God as he ‘willed himself to be seen’ in imperfect fashion could be given to the saints in this life (chapter 20).<sup>13</sup> As he explained in a sermon on Psalm 41: ‘With the fine point of the mind we are able to gaze upon something unchangeable, although hastily and in part’ (*etsi perstrictim et raptim*).<sup>14</sup> The impossibility of seeing ‘God’s plenitude’ in this life supports scriptural claims that God cannot be seen, though Augustine allows for the possible miraculous exceptions of Moses and Paul whose perfection of life allowed them something close to a vision of God’s substance (*Epistula* 147, chapters 31–7).

In his famous discussion of the three modes of vision in book twelve of the *Literal Commentary on Genesis* Augustine summarized his views, distinguishing between corporeal, spiritual (i.e. imagistic) and purely intellectual seeing – the three categories we have seen in Pope Innocent’s sermon. In discussing God-given raptures during this life, ones in which ‘the soul’s intention is completely turned away or snatched away from the body’s senses’ (12.12.25), Augustine allowed for both imaginative visions sent by God, such as the images of heaven given to John in the Apocalypse, and also for the higher gift of intellectual visions. ‘There’, he says, ‘the brightness of the Lord is seen, not through a symbolic or corporeal vision [. . .] nor through a spiritual vision, but through a direct vision and not through a dark image, as far as the human mind elevated by the grace of God can receive it.’<sup>15</sup> Thus, Augustine went beyond Innocent in admitting some forms of miraculous direct vision of God in this life, though these always lack the perfection and stability of the beatific vision.

Despite the weight of Augustine’s influence, there was an alternate view, one that took the biblical prohibitions against seeing God more literally, denying that God’s essence could ever really be seen either in this life or in the one to come. This tradition is evident in such figures as Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius in the East, and John Scottus Eriugena in the West.<sup>16</sup> Commenting on Matthew 5:8, Gregory highlights the contradiction between the statements of Moses, John and Paul that God cannot be seen and the claim of the beatitude that only the vision of God gives final happiness.<sup>17</sup> Gregory solves the contradiction differently from Augustine by distinguishing between the divine essence that is always invisible and the divine energies; that is, the manifestations of God’s wisdom, goodness and other operations, that can be seen in the world. But Gregory also has a different reading of the beatitude. He fuses the two parts of the text, arguing that it is in our own inner purity that God becomes present and visible. ‘Hence’, he says, ‘if the person who is pure of heart sees himself, he sees in himself what he desires; and thus he becomes blessed, because when he looks at his own purity, he sees the Archetype in the image.’<sup>18</sup> Therefore, what the beatitude really promises is union with God through purity of life, not by means of ‘knowing the Nature that is above the universe’.<sup>19</sup>

Dionysius and Eriugena took this line of thought further. For Dionysius, *thèoria*, or seeing the manifestations of God in the hierarchies of created being, plays a vital role in our ascent to God, but his *Mystical Theology* also insists upon the absolute invisibility of God, claiming that Moses, the exemplary mystic, cannot contemplate the God who cannot be seen, but only the place where he dwells. According to Dionysius, Moses must break free of everything perceptible by the eyes of the body or of the mind, ‘away from what sees and is seen, and plunge into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing’ in order to be ‘supremely united to the Wholly Unknown by an inactivity of all knowing’.<sup>20</sup> Dionysius therefore separates mental activity and seeing from union with God. Removing all seeing and knowing, however, results in a higher, but paradoxical, vision that chapter two of the *Mystical Theology* describes as ‘unhiddenly knowing that unknowing which itself is hidden from all those possessed of

knowing amid all beings, so that we may see above being that darkness concealed from all the light among beings'.<sup>21</sup> This 'non-seeing' seeing is the highest attainment possible in this life and will continue in heaven, at least with regard to the divine essence. What is added to it in the life to come, as a discussion in chapter one of the treatise on the *Divine Names* shows, is the vision of the glorified body of Christ, 'just as the Apostles were illuminated at the time of his divine Transfiguration'.<sup>22</sup>

Eriugena was indebted to both Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius in his effort to work out a concordance between Greek patristic thought and Latin theology, predominantly Augustinian. Nevertheless, his teaching on *visio dei* is far more negative or apophatic than that of the bishop of Hippo.<sup>23</sup> In reality, if not in the same language, he accepted Gregory's distinction between God's hidden essence and his manifested energies, or theophanies, as the Irishman called them, following Dionysius. The entire universe for Eriugena was one vast harmony of theophanies, or illuminations, meant to lead us back to God – 'Omnia quae sunt lumina sunt' ('All things that exist are lights'), as he put it.<sup>24</sup> The Carolingian scholar admitted special forms of illuminative vision given to biblical heroes of the past and still available to the pure of heart. A passage from book five of his *Periphyseon* distinguishes three kinds of contemplation illustrated by the three protagonists of the Transfiguration account of Matthew 17.<sup>25</sup> Elijah is the type of those who contemplate God while still in the body; Moses prefigures those who see God when released from the body, while Christ himself represents those who will enjoy perfect contemplation after the resurrection of the body. Most contemplation in this life is of the first kind; but Eriugena, like Augustine, admitted that Moses, Paul and John the Evangelist all enjoyed experiences of deathlike rapture in which they beheld heavenly realities, even, in the case of John, of the *causa omnium*, the very Word of God.<sup>26</sup> What can never be seen, however, either in this life or even in the perfect state of the return at the end, is the essence of God. The divine essence is absolutely unknowable, even to God himself! (God cannot know *what* he is because God is not a *what*.) Although God's self can never be beheld, God is seen in his theophanies, the illuminations that objectively are nothing else than God showing himself, and subjectively are the deifying graces that transform humans. At the end of time the saved will gaze upon 'theophanies of theophanies' (*theophaniae theophaniarum*), things unimaginable to us in this lesser world of lights, but these are still theophanies.<sup>27</sup> As Eriugena puts it toward the end of the *Periphyseon*:

Since that which human nature seeks and towards which it tends [...] is infinite and not to be comprehended by any creature, it necessarily follows that its quest is unending [...] And yet although its search is unending, by some miraculous means it finds what it is seeking for; and again it does not find it, for it cannot be found. It finds it through theophanies, but through the contemplation of the divine nature itself it does not find it [...] What it is is not found, but only that it is, because the nature of God itself can neither be expressed or understood.<sup>28</sup>

The mystics and theologians of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries inherited this complex tradition regarding the vision of God in this life and in the next. Two factors gave their debates over what it means to see God particular force. The first was the visionary explosion in Western mysticism; the second was the debate over the nature of the *visio beatifica* impelled, at least in part, by the revival of Dionysianism and its conflict with the standard Augustinian view. Although these two factors arose independently, they intermingled in interesting ways.

The standard form of vision in the early Middle Ages emphasized a single extended vision (often a dream vision), ordinarily involving a tour of the other world. In the twelfth century a new wave of visions began that featured frequently repeated brief raptures to a supernatural realm and encounters with heavenly figures, often of a direct and transformative and therefore mystical character. Such showings were frequently designed to emphasize the sanctity of the seers and the importance of their message.<sup>29</sup> By the thirteenth century visionary collections, sometimes in the form of spiritual diaries, had become an important feature of female sanctity and a significant element in the mystical literature of the time, as shown by such authors as Beatrice of Nazareth, Hadewijch of Antwerp, Mechthild of Magdeburg, as well as a host of hagiographical texts about women. Many of these writings describe encounters with Jesus of a new type – more direct, more excessive, more somatic, and even sexual, in nature than had been customary in the monastic mysticism prior to 1200.<sup>30</sup> This explosion of visionary material, especially from women, fostered renewed interest in what it means to see God and in the criteria used to discern true visions from false. The need for ‘discernment of spirits’, stressed by both Paul and John (1 Corinthians 12:10; 1 John 4:1), had never been absent from Christian history; but it increased exponentially in the last centuries of the Middle Ages as learned clerics and the mystics themselves sought to make sense of the visionary explosion.<sup>31</sup>

The second factor in the thirteenth-century debates over *visio dei* was the new Dionysianism. Eriugena’s translation of the Dionysian corpus and his *Periphyseon* were by no means totally neglected from the tenth through to the twelfth centuries, but Dionysian theology experienced a remarkable renewal in the second quarter of the thirteenth century. The revival may have begun earlier under more dubious circumstances, since the heretic Amaury of Bène and his associates at the University of Paris in the first decade of the thirteenth century were accused of using the Irishman’s work as support for their pantheistic views, thus leading to the letter of Pope Honorius III in 1225 that ordered the destruction of manuscripts of the *Periphyseon* found in French monasteries.<sup>32</sup> The rising tide of Dionysianism became a flood between 1230 and 1250 as three major thinkers wrote commentaries on the entire Dionysian corpus (such extended commentaries were quite new) and the Parisian annotated *corpus dionysiicum* was prepared. The import of this Dionysian moment for the history of medieval thought has yet to be fully explored.

The new Dionysian wave assumed two forms. The first was created by a Victorine canon resident in northern Italy known as Thomas Gallus (i.e. the French-

man). Building on early Victorine interest in Dionysius, Thomas produced a series of commentaries on the whole corpus between c.1230 and 1246 in which he changed the course of the mystical use of Dionysius by reinterpreting negative theology in terms of the priority of supreme affectivity over all intellectual contact with God.<sup>33</sup> Adopted by Franciscans such as Bonaventure and the German mystical preacher Marquard of Lindau (d. 1392), and also by influential texts like the *Cloud of Unknowing*, this affective Dionysianism was a significant strand in late medieval mysticism. During the years 1240–1243, Thomas's friend, the one-time Paris master Robert Grosseteste, a Greek scholar in his own right, began a learned commentary on the corpus, which in some particulars shared Gallus's approach.<sup>34</sup>

In the 1240s a second option began to emerge. During this decade an unknown editor produced a glossed version of the *corpus dionysiacum* that became widely used in the University of Paris. This work included the translations of Eriugena and John Sarrazin, as well as the glosses of Gallus, along with the scholia ascribed to Maximus Confessor and large amounts of commentarial material drawn from Eriugena's *Periphyseon*.<sup>35</sup> Toward the middle of the same decade the learned Dominican master Albert the Great began to study the Dionysian writings. In 1248 he was called by his order to establish a new house of theological studies at Cologne. (He took along with him his prize student, a corpulent Italian friar today known as Thomas Aquinas.) In Cologne Albert completed the first of his commentaries, that on the *Celestial Hierarchy*. During the next four years he issued massive commentaries on the remainder of the corpus.<sup>36</sup> Albert's approach was quite different from that of Gallus, because of his insistence that Dionysius tells us 'how it is necessary to be united to God through intellect'.<sup>37</sup> This intellectual Dionysianism was to be of great significance for German Dominican theology and mysticism for the next century. The heritage of Albert's intellectual reading of the Dionysian corpus was realized in the writings of Meister Eckhart whose views on the vision of God challenged most of the traditional verities set forth by Pope Innocent a century before.

The debates over the nature of the *visio beatifica* initiated, at least in part, by the Dionysian revival, have been much studied.<sup>38</sup> In the year 1241 and again in 1244, William of Auvergne, bishop of Paris, along with the authorities of the university, condemned the view that even in heaven God will never be seen directly, but only through theophanies. As the first of ten rejected articles in the list of errors states:

The first [error is] that the divine essence in itself will be seen by neither man nor angel. We reject this error and we excommunicate its upholders and defenders by the authority of Bishop William. We firmly believe and assert that God will be seen in essence or substance by the angels and all the saints and he will be seen by the glorified souls.<sup>39</sup>

This denial of a direct vision of God in heaven, the expression of a form of Dionysianism influenced by Eriugena, seems to have been found mostly among

Dominicans.<sup>40</sup> The subsequent reaction against this view in the order of preachers – champions of orthodoxy as they were – is evident in Thomas Aquinas’s theology of the beatific vision, the classic expression of scholastic Augustinian theology of heaven.<sup>41</sup> But this was not the only option. While it was impossible to contradict a doctrinal decision of such weight, there was much room for manoeuvre in how it was to be interpreted.

Albert the Great worked out a solution to the nature of the beatific vision that both adhered to the Paris definition and also managed to save significant aspects of Dionysian apophaticism for the future of German theology and mysticism.<sup>42</sup> Like almost all theologians, Albert contrasted the modes of contemplative vision realized here below with the supreme enjoyment of heaven. In order to grasp the similarities and differences between these two forms of *visio dei*, it is useful to note some distinctions that Albert employed in his teaching: (1) the difference between vision and comprehension; (2) the distinction between knowledge of God *quid est* and knowledge *quia est*; (3) the meaning of the face-to-face vision of the Bible (Genesis 32:30, Exodus 33:11, 1 Corinthians 13:12); and (4) the role of intermediaries (*mediae/theopaniae*) in knowing God.

Central to Albert’s position is his claim that ‘It is one thing to be in contact [with something] through the intellect and to be poured out into the intelligible reality; and it is another thing to seize or to comprehend that intelligible thing.’<sup>43</sup> On this basis Albert argues, in accord with the 1241 decision, that the created intellect can directly attain the divine substance through what he calls ‘simple regard’ (*per simplicem intuitum*), but that it can never comprehend God. Thomas Aquinas also distinguished between the immediate vision of God in heaven and the impossibility of any created intellect attaining comprehension of the divine essence (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia. q.12, a.7). Therefore, both Dominicans would not have been happy with Pope Innocent’s characterization of the heavenly vision as *comprehensiva*. An important difference between Albert and Thomas emerges, however, with respect to the second issue, that is, knowledge *quid est* (what God is) and knowledge *quia est* (that God is).

Both Albert and Thomas do not allow for any *quid est* knowledge of God on earth or in heaven.<sup>44</sup> To attain such knowledge would be to know God as God knows himself – something impossible for finite created mind. But what about knowledge *quia est*, that is, knowing that God is? Here Albert differs from Thomas. For the Angelic Doctor, knowledge *quia est* is a straightforward term – the demonstration that a cause exists from knowledge of its effect, the kind of proof involved in Thomas’s five ways of demonstrating God’s existence set forth in *Summa theologiae* Ia.2.a.3. For Albert, however, knowledge *quia est* is realized in several analogous ways. In dependence on Aristotle, for whom knowledge *quia est* is a form of precise philosophical demonstration based on a remote cause or an effect that is ‘convertible with or proportionate to its cause’, in his *Commentary on the Mystical Theology* Albert denies that we can have natural *quia est* knowledge of God in this life, because there is nothing really proportionate to God.<sup>45</sup> In other places, however, the German Dominican seems to advance the possibility of some kind of *quia est* knowledge of God, even on

the basis of natural reason.<sup>46</sup> The clearest statement of this sliding scale of *quia est* knowledge is found in Albert's remarks on the fifth Dionysian letter where he says that although we do attain the vision of God in heaven, we never do so in a perfect way. Rather, 'the created intellect [...] is joined in a kind of confused way to the God who, as it were, goes beyond it'. Therefore, for Albert there is no knowledge *quid est* of God, because he has no defining feature; nor is there any knowledge *propter quid* because God has no cause. There is also no determined or perfect *quia est* knowledge of God because God has no remote cause or proportionate effect. Albert concludes, 'neither in this life, nor in heaven, do we see more of God than a confused *quia*, although God himself is seen more or less clearly according to the different ways of seeing and of those who see'.<sup>47</sup> Albert, like Eriugena, remains deeply negative even about the nature of the knowledge of God found in heaven.<sup>48</sup>

The Bible speaks of face-to-face vision, both in this life and the next. The seeming contradiction between such texts and those that deny any human can ever see God was also taken up by Albert. His fullest treatment is found in chapter four of the treatise on divine knowability in the first part of his *Summa theologiae* where he discusses not only the issue of face-to-face vision, but also whether such vision involves an intermediary.<sup>49</sup> Once again, Albert expresses agreement with the 1241 decision that the bare and pure intellect will see the essence of God in heaven. In order to understand this properly, however, he says that it is necessary to introduce some important distinctions about the different ways of understanding the terms 'face of God' (*facies dei*) and *medium*, or 'intermediary'. The face of God can be used in three ways, according to Albert. The common understanding signifies anything in which God appears and from which he can be known. Second, 'The face of God is used in the proper sense for his evident presence through an effect of grace aiding or protecting to some purpose [...] This mode differs from the first the way nature differs from grace.'<sup>50</sup> Finally, 'In the most proper sense the face of God is God's essential presence demonstrated and displayed without an intermediary in the way in which he shows himself to the blessed.'<sup>51</sup> These qualifications make it easy to see that the facial visions ascribed to Old Testament figures like Jacob and Moses were different from the face-to-face vision enjoyed by the saints in heaven, because they belong to the second not the third category.

To understand the difference between the graced visions of God given in this life and the beatific vision one must advert to the ways in which God uses intermediaries. Visions of God in this life always employ intermediaries, or theophanies, such as the supernatural habits and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.<sup>52</sup> In the case of the most proper form of facial vision in heaven, however, there is no medium or intermediary in the sense of an instrument God himself must employ to convey or reflect his essence. Nor is there an intentional medium, nor an 'aiding medium' (*medium coadiuvans*), that is, something the divine essence needs to make itself visible. God is pure light in himself. There is, Albert goes on to say, still need for a medium on the soul's side, that is, something to help the soul to see what is infinitely beyond it. 'If someone sees by the vision of glory', Albert avers,

he must be perfected by the habits of glory and beatitude. But these intermediaries do not mask or carry away or create distance between the one seeing and what is seen, but they strengthen the power of seeing and perfect it in the act of seeing. And to see through an intermediary in this way is not opposed to immediate vision, but agrees with it.<sup>53</sup>

Albert's doctrine of the light of glory (*lumen gloriae*) was a crucial aspect of his teaching on the immediate nature of the beatific vision, but his treatment of this theme highlights more differences between himself and Thomas Aquinas. The key difference is that Albert continued to use the Dionysian–Eriugenean language of theophany to describe both the light of glory itself and the different forms of divine illumination by which God strengthens souls in this life in order to lead them to eternal felicity.<sup>54</sup> In his discussion of theophany in chapter four of his *Commentary on the Celestial Hierarchy*, Albert identifies four forms of *lumen divinum*. The first two belong to this life: any seeing of creatures that leads to God and all divinely-sent special visions. The last two forms belong to heaven.

The third mode [. . .] is when in a divine light, which is not God, an object is seen that is truly God, not in the light as in a medium the way a thing is seen in its image, but along with a light strengthening the intellect [so that] God is seen immediately.<sup>55</sup>

The fourth and highest species of theophany is the direct *visio dei* of heaven. Albert describes this in the Eriugenean language of theophany:

Thus God himself is in each of the blessed as an illumination by whose participation he makes him a likeness to himself. In such a likeness the vision of God is called a theophany. In this way the same God will be illumination and object, but object as he is in himself, illumination insofar as he is participated in by the blessed.<sup>56</sup>

It is obvious, then, that although Albert defended the 1241 declaration on direct vision of God in heaven, his form of intellectual Dionysianism abandoned neither Eriugenean apophaticism nor the Irishman's language of theophany.

Albert's apophatic view of the vision of God, both in this life and the next, was radically heightened in the preaching and writing of his student Meister Eckhart. Eckhart took a dim view of the visionary claims of many contemporary mystics, poking fun at those who want to see God with the same eyes that they see a cow and who therefore loved God for his milk and his cheese!<sup>57</sup> Eckhart, of course, never denied the existence of heightened experiences of God, the raptures ascribed to biblical figures, like Paul.<sup>58</sup> He also uses terms like *gezücken-verzücken-entzücken* in his vernacular preaching to indicate being swept away from or above ordinary consciousness.<sup>59</sup> But the Dominican preacher did not see these special graces as integral or important to deification conceived of as the

birth of the Word in the soul. Indeed, they were more often dangerous, because people might think of them as ways to God, and Eckhart insisted that

Whoever is seeking God by ways is finding ways and losing God, who in ways is hidden. But whoever seeks for God without ways will find him as he is in himself, and that man will live with the Son, and he is life itself.<sup>60</sup>

Eckhart's thought, as Denys Turner expresses it, is an 'apophatic critique' of the desire for experiencing and seeing God.<sup>61</sup>

What did Eckhart mean by seeking God without ways in order to live in the Son? And how does that relate to traditional understandings of the *visio dei*? To be sure, Eckhart often discussed the scholastic debates over whether the essence of human beatitude here and hereafter rested more in the intellect or in the will, generally expressing the Dominican view of the priority of the intellect. But Eckhart's true notion of eternal felicity went beyond all loving and knowing, at least as we experience them in ordinary consciousness.<sup>62</sup> In German Sermon 7 he says that 'neither knowledge nor love unites', because even the intellect 'can never encompass God in the sea of his groundlessness'. Rather, true union, which Eckhart here describes as 'mercy' (*barmherzicheit*), is found in 'the completely mysterious something [in the soul] that is above the first outbreak where intellect and will break out'.<sup>63</sup>

The key to Eckhart's teaching on the vision of God is the priority he gives to fused identity, that is, the oneness of ground that can only be realized by seeking God without ways. The one ground of God and human lies deeper than the duality of seeing and being seen. Eckhart expressed this by the use of a metaphor of specular identity: 'The eye with which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me. My eye and God's eye is one eye and one seeing, one knowing, and one loving.'<sup>64</sup> Or, as another sermon says, 'You must know in reality that this is one and the same thing – to know God and to be known by God, to see God and to be seen by God.'<sup>65</sup> Eckhart went even further by advancing the claim that this specular identity is attainable in this life, not just in heaven.

To gain some insight into how Eckhart understood this form of beatifying vision we can investigate some texts both from his technical Latin works and his Middle High German sermons and treatises, especially some passages from his *Commentary on the Gospel of John* and a sermon where he discusses what it means to see God.

In his John commentary Eckhart took up the famous text of John 1:18, 'No one has ever seen God, but the Only Begotten God, who is in the Father's bosom, has revealed him.' Eckhart's exposition centres on how the Son reveals the Father, but he also explains how although God is invisible to all other things, 'what is not different from God' (*alienum a deo*) must be able to see God as God sees himself. This is true both of Begotten Justice (*iustitia genita*), that is the Son, and also of 'the just person insofar as he is just' (*iustus in quantum iustus*).<sup>66</sup> This message is underlined and expanded upon in the subsequent

discussions of seeing God found in the commentary. In exegeting the episode of the Samaritan woman in chapter four of the gospel, Eckhart contrasts the exterior knowledge gained through hearing and faith with the true interior knowledge that comes through possession of virtue, which he here equates with the face-to-face vision promised in scripture.<sup>67</sup> This tendency to make the eschatological vision of heaven immanent as a ‘knowing through identity’ (*cognitio per identitatem*) in the detached soul is heightened in other passages.<sup>68</sup> The most extended treatment of this form of vision comes in the treatment of Philip’s request in John 18:8, ‘Lord, show us the Father and it is enough for us.’ Eckhart provides sixteen understandings of this verse in the first part of his commentary and eighteen in the second. One of the latter puts his view in a nutshell. ‘The Father is shown to us’, the Dominican says,

when we are joint fathers of God, fathers of the One Image [i.e. the Word], as was said above about the knower and the thing known [. . .] What anyone meditates, thinks upon, and loves, becomes in him and from him (and from it and in it and out of it), a mental species, an image, a single offspring common to both.<sup>69</sup>

Thus, when we, like and with the Father, give birth to the Word in the soul, we enjoy face-to-face vision.

Eckhart preached this startling message to audiences of what Pope John XXII in his bull condemning Eckhart called ‘the uneducated crowd’. Among the sermons that are especially rich in this regard are two on John 16:16 (‘A little while and you will not see me and again a little while and you will see me’).<sup>70</sup> There is no space here to provide an analysis of these sermons in detail, but their teaching is also present in a homily that summarizes Eckhart’s message about the essentially apophatic nature of all *visio dei*.

German Sermon 71 deals with Paul’s conversion, specifically with the verse in Acts 9:8, ‘Paul rose from the ground and with open eyes saw nothing.’<sup>71</sup> In this sermon Eckhart first discusses the light from heaven that struck Paul down (Acts 9:3), insisting that such a light cannot be anything created, that is, any kind of medium – ‘If God is to be seen’, he says, ‘it has to happen in a light that is God himself.’<sup>72</sup> In the highest intellect, that is, in the intellect ‘that does not seek but rather remains in its pure simple being which is enveloped by this light’,<sup>73</sup> Paul was able to see all things as nothing, that is, to recognize the nothingness of creatures, and thus to begin to see God. If creatures are nothing by way of limitation and defect, however, God is also nothing, but by way of transcendence and excess.

The second half of the sermon explores four reasons for claiming that Paul saw God as literally ‘no-thing’.<sup>74</sup> First, ‘He saw the nothing which was God.’ In explaining this, Eckhart cites Dionysius’s teaching on God’s transcendence of being, light and life.<sup>75</sup> In order to see the true light that is God we must become blind and remove all ‘something’ from God. Here Eckhart has a passage that many interpreters have seen as a self-reference:

When the soul comes into the One and there enters into a pure rejection of itself, it finds God as in nothing. It seemed to a man as in a dream – it was a waking dream – that he became pregnant with nothing as a woman does with a child, and in this nothing God was born; he was the fruit of the nothing.<sup>76</sup>

(Note how this passage emphasizes the language of inner feeling rather than vision.)

Eckhart gives three further explanations for Paul's vision of nothingness. Knowledge of things depends upon external, that is, alien images; but when we know things in God, we know nothing but God and we see that all creatures are nothing in themselves. Hence, we know God and eternal life without a medium of any kind. 'The light that is God flows out and darkens all light', says Eckhart. Finally, 'The fourth reason why Paul saw nothing: The light that is God is not mixed with anything; no mixture enters in.' Hence, Eckhart concludes, 'In seeing nothing, [Paul] saw the divine nothing.' Eckhart's comment on what this means summarizes the fundamental message of the homily. If we think we can attain God by any mode or means, presumably even that of the light of glory in heaven, we are mistaken. 'One must receive God', Eckhart says, 'as he is a mode beyond measure, a being beyond being, for he has no limited mode.'<sup>77</sup> In other words, beatitude, both in this life and in the next, rests not in seeing or hoping to see something, but in recognizing that God is no-thing, a mystery beyond all perception and description.

Eckhart's teaching on seeing God, in harmony with the rest of his mysticism, is a dialectical coincidence of opposites. God can never be seen because insofar as he is transcendentally distinct from all things he is totally invisible to physical eye or mental vision. But when we recognize that God is literally *nihil*, or nothing, we begin to become aware that God is immanent, even more, that he is identical with the soul in the one ground – 'God's ground and the soul's ground is one ground'; or, in terms of vision, the ocular identity of the phrase – 'The eye with which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me.' From this perspective, the differences that exist between the vision of God here and in the hereafter, differences that Eckhart occasionally mentions,<sup>78</sup> tend to be relativized far more than in other thirteenth-century mystics and theologians.<sup>79</sup> Eckhart's fundamental message is that we should not so much long to see God in heaven as strive in the here and now to see all things, including God, with God's own eye. Pope Innocent would probably have been quite surprised at this form of *visio dei*.

## Notes

- 1 This chapter makes use of some materials expounded more fully in two other pieces: B. McGinn, 'Visions and Visualizations in the Here and Hereafter', *Harvard Theological Review*, 2005, vol. 98, 227–46; B. McGinn, 'Seeing and Not-Seeing: Nicholas of Cusa's *De visione Dei* in the History of Western Mysticism', in P. Casarella (ed.) *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance*, Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 2005, pp.26–53.

- 2 The account of Innocent's summer stay at Subiaco can be found in a letter from a curial official edited by K. Hampe, 'Eine Schilderung des Sommeraufenthaltes der römische Kurie unter Innocenz III in Subiaco 1202', *Historische Vierteljahrschrift*, 1905, vol. 8, 509–35. The text translated is found at p.530: 'Hec a tercio Salomone diligitur, cum in eadem manus sacras apponat libenter et de ipsa frigido gargarismo utatur, ut eadem duplici necessitati humane geminata virtute succurat.' For a summary and analysis of this incident and Innocent's sermon, see J.C. Moore, *Pope Innocent III (1160/61–1216). To Root Up and to Plant*, Leiden: Brill, 2003, pp.87–91.
- 3 Sermo XXXI can be found in PL 217, coll. 589–96. The Migne description of this text as being preached for the Feast of All Saints is not convincing.
- 4 Sermo XXXI (col. 592D): 'Sic est ergo potius distinguendum, quod visionum alia est corporea, alia aenigmatica, alia comprehensiva. Corporea consistit in sensu, aenigmatica in imagine, comprehensiva in intellectu.' The source for this triple distinction is Augustine's theory of vision, especially as laid out in *De genesi ad litteram* 12, but the terminology, especially the use of the word *comprehensiva*, is not from Augustine.
- 5 Sermo XXXI (col. 593B): 'Videtur tamen et in praesenti per inspirationis, contemplationis, orationis, meditationis, lectionis, praedicationis effectum, quibus ad intuendum Deum anima sublevatur.'
- 6 Sermo XXXI (col. 596AB): 'Quidquid boni desideras, si Deum vides, habes in eo. Qui cum sit summum bonum, in ipso est omnium plenitudine bonorum, quem si vides, et comprehendis; si comprehendis, et habes.'
- 7 Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 7.3.13. This reference to Matthew 5:8 is one of nineteen in Clement; he also uses 1 Corinthians 13:12 fourteen times.
- 8 Augustine's discussions of the vision of God, both here and hereafter, are found throughout his writings. There are explicit treatments of the beatific vision in *Epistula* 92 (written in 408); in three texts written in 413 (*Epistulae* 147 and 148, and Sermo 277), in *Epistula* 162 of 414, and in *De civitate dei* 22.29 from 426. In his *Retractiones* ii.41 Augustine says that this last treatment is his most adequate explanation of 'this truly most difficult question'.
- 9 Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 26.2.11 (PL, col. 36.203).
- 10 Augustine, *De civitate dei* 22.30 (PL 33, col. 804): 'Ibi vacabimus et videbimus; videbimus, et amabimus; amabimus, et laudabimus. Ecce quod erit in fine sine fine.' In his early treatments (e.g. *Epistula* 92.5–6 (PL 33, col. 320), Augustine denies any corporeal vision of God in heaven (though not, of course, of the Incarnate Word), but *De civitate dei* 22.29.3 (PL 41, col. 798–801) seems to hedge on this by holding out the possibility that the spiritualized eyes of the resurrected body will see God in all things. Eriugena later cited this text as support for his own view of seeing God in heaven through *theophaniae* (see *Periphyseon* 1 in PL 122, col. 447B).
- 11 Augustine, *De trinitate* 8.9.13 (PL 42, col. 960).
- 12 This is evident in the texts where Augustine discusses his own moments of heightened contact with God, such as the experiences at Milan and Ostia described in *Confessiones* 7.10.16, 7.17.23, 7.20.26 and 9.10.23–6, as well as places where he comments on scriptural passages concerning experiencing God in this life, such as *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 41.2–10, and 99.5–6; and *Tractatus in Iohannem* 20.11.
- 13 *Epistula* 147 (*De videndo deo*) can be found in PL 33, coll. 596–622. There is an English translation by M. Clark, *Augustine of Hippo. Selected Writings*, New York: Paulist Press, 1984, pp.365–402. For a discussion, see E. Naab, *Augustinus. Über Schau und Gegenwart des unsichtbaren Gottes. Texte mit Einführung und Übersetzung*, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1998.
- 14 *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 41.10 (PL 36, col. 471).
- 15 *De genesi ad litteram* 12.26.54 (PL 34, col. 476). See also the discussion of Moses in 12.27.55 and the text in 12.31.59. That Augustine did not restrict such direct visions to the saints of the Bible is evident from a passage in *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 134.6 (PL 37, col. 1742).

- 16 Most Eastern Fathers followed a more apophatic understanding of the *visio beatifica*; for example, John Chrysostom and John of Damascus. See V. Lossky, *The Vision of God*, London: The Faith Press, 1963, pp.77–9, 112–14.
- 17 Gregory of Nyssa, *De beatitudinibus*, Oratio VI, can be found in PG 44, coll. 1263–78.
- 18 Oratio VI (col. 1272B). For a translation, see Sermon 6 in *St. Gregory of Nyssa. The Lord's Prayer. The Beatitudes*, H. Graef (trans.), New York: Newman Press, 1954, p.149.
- 19 *Ibid.* p.151.
- 20 *De mystica theologia* I (PG 3, col. 1000D–1A). The ecstatic union of Dionysian mysticism therefore sublates all vision, or *thêoria*. As René Roques put it: '*Thêoria* achieves its completion in an ecstasy that surpasses but that does not annihilate it'; see 'Contemplation, extase et ténèbre mystique chez le Pseudo-Denys', *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, 16 vols, Paris: Beauchesne, 1932–95, vol. 2 (1953), col. 1886.
- 21 *De mystica theologia* II, PG 3, col. 1025B. For other texts in the Dionysian corpus on this non-seeing seeing (often citing 1 Timothy 6:16), consult *Epistula* 5 (col. 1073A), *De caelesti hierarchia* 4.3 (col. 180C), and *De divinis nominibus* 4.11 (col. 708D). It is interesting to note that the Dionysian writings do not cite Matthew 5:8.
- 22 See *De divinis nominibus* 1.4 (col. 592C) and the discussion in Lossky, *Vision*, pp.103–4.
- 23 For a summary of Eriugena's thought and mysticism, see B. McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, New York: Crossroad, 1994, chap. 3. Eriugena's view of the beatific vision was created in the context of the Carolingian debate over Augustine's position on *visio dei*, on which see M. Cappuyns, 'Note sur le problème de la vision béatifique au IXe siècle', *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale*, 1929, vol. 1, 98–107.
- 24 *In Ierarchiam Caelestem* 1.1, in J. Barbet (ed.) *Iohannis Scoti Eriugena. Expositiones in Ierarchiam Caelestem*, Turnhout: Brepols, 1975, p.3.
- 25 *Periphyseon* V (PL 122, coll. 998B–1000A), commenting on 1 Thessalonians 5:17. Though Eriugena's development is his own, he may be influenced by the discussion of the Transfiguration as revealing different modes of contemplation found in one of his favourite Eastern sources, Maximus Confessor (*Ambigua* 10). For a translation and commentary of this text, see A. Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, pp.94–154.
- 26 On John's direct vision of the Word, see Eriugena's *Homilia in Iohannem* IV in É. Jeaneau (ed.) *Jean Scot. Homélie sur le Prologue de Jean*, Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1969, pp.218–20. As this and other texts indicate, John used the three apostles Peter, Paul and John to signify three modes of seeing God – by faith, by rational or cataphatic theology, and by apophatic and mystical knowing. On the relation between Eriugena and Augustine on *visio dei*, see J. O'Meara, 'Eriugena's Use of Augustine in his Teaching on the Return of the Soul and the Vision of God', *Jean Scot Érigène et l'histoire de la philosophie*, Paris: CNRS, 1977, pp.191–200.
- 27 For some passages on the eternal need for theophanies, see *Periphyseon* I, col. 448C, II, col. 557BC, and especially V, coll. 905CD, 926CD, 945CD, 1000BD and 1010CD. John's longest discussion of the *visio beatifica* occurs in *Periphyseon* I, coll. 447B–451C. For some other discussions of the return to God and the *visio beatifica* in Eriugena's great work, see coll. 876A–82B, 977C–80C, 987A–94C. Some early writers credited Eriugena with a *De visione dei tractatus*, but no such work survives.
- 28 *Periphyseon* V, col. 919C; see also 1010CD. The final phrase in this passage ('et inenititur non quid est, sed quia solummodo est, quoniam ipsa dei natura nec dicitur nec intelligitur') may be the source of the distinction between *quid est* and *quia est* common among thirteenth-century scholastics in their treatments of the *visio beatifica*.
- 29 The standard work is P. Dinzelbacher, *Vision und Visionsliteratur im Mittelalter*, Monographien zur Geschichte des Mittelalters, 23, Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1981, especially chaps 12–16. See also McGinn, *Growth of Mysticism*, chap. 8.

- 30 For some general remarks on these aspects of the 'new mysticism', see B. McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism. Men and Women in the New Mysticism – 1200–1350*, New York: Crossroad, 1998, pp.25–30.
- 31 For further information and literature, see B. McGinn, 'Visions and Critiques of Visions in Thirteenth-Century Mysticism', in E.R. Wolfson (ed.) *Rending the Veil. Concealment and Secrecy in the History of Religions*, New York: Seven Bridges Press, 1999, pp.87–112; and McGinn, 'Visions and Visualizations in the Here and Hereafter'.
- 32 On the condemnation of Amaury and his possible connections with Eriugena (still disputed), see P. Lucentini, 'L'eresia di Amalrico', in W. Beierwaltes (ed.) *Eriugena Redivivus. Zur Wirkungsgeschichte seines Denkens im Mittelalter und im Übergang zur Neuzeit*, Heidelberg: Winter, 1987, pp.174–91. On Honorius's letter, M. Cappuyns, *Jean Scot Érigène. Sa vie, son oeuvre, sa pensée*, Brussels: Culture et civilisation, repr. 1969, pp.246–8.
- 33 Thomas Gallus composed no less than three paraphrases/commentaries on all four treatises and ten letters of the Dionysian corpus (one of which was inauthentic). The first comment was a series of glosses called the *Exposicio* finished by 1233. The second was the more extensive *Extractio* completed in 1238; the longest is the still mostly unedited *Explanacio* finished by 1243. For a recent review of these writings and an edition, translation and study of the *Exposicio* on the *De mystica theologia*, see J. McEvoy (ed., trans. and introduction) *Mystical Theology: The Glosses by Thomas Gallus and the Commentary of Robert Grosseteste on 'De Mystica Theologia'*, Paris, Leuven: Peeters, 2003. For more on the significance of Gallus, see McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, pp.78–87.
- 34 For a discussion, edition and translation of the comment on the *De mystica theologia* by Grosseteste, see McEvoy, *Mystical Theology*, pp.55–121.
- 35 The key study of this work is H.F. Dondaine, *Le Corpus Dionysien de l'Université de Paris au XIIIe siècle*, Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1953. We now possess an edition, translation and study of one part of this corpus, the section on the *De mystica theologia*, in L.M. Harrington, *A Thirteenth-Century Textbook on Mystical Theology at the University of Paris*, Paris, Leuven: Peeters, 2004.
- 36 Albert's commentaries have all now appeared in the new critical edition, *Alberti Magni Opera Omnia*, Münster: Aschendorff, 1951–. One of these texts is available in English translation, the *Commentary on Dionysius's Mystical Theology* found in S. Tugwell, *Albert and Thomas. Selected Spiritual Writings*, New York: Paulist Press, 1988, pp.131–98.
- 37 Albert, *Super Mysticam Theologiam* 2 (*Opera Omnia* 37.2, p.465, ll. 8–9): 'quomodo scilicet oportet per intellectum uniri deo'. Albert also speaks of an *unitio intellectiva* (p.460, l. 74). For other texts on the intellectual nature of union, see *Super Mysticam Theologiam* I, p.460, ll. 49–50 and p.462, ll. 22–5, as well as *Super Epistulam* V, p.493, ll. 64–8. L.M. Harrington (*Thirteenth-Century Textbook*, pp.15–22) argues that intellectual Dionysianism, in which Dionysius's tension between union and intellect is overcome by melding the two, goes back to the early Greek commentators, John of Scythopolis and Maximus Confessor. Harrington also believes that this approach is evident in Eriugena's translation, but not in the *Periphyseon*, which represents a more authentic reading of Dionysius.
- 38 The literature is large but well summarized in the massive book of C. Trottmann, *La vision béatifique. Des disputes scolastiques à sa définition par Benoît XII*, Rome: École Française de Rome, 1995. For a study of Bonaventure, Albert and Thomas, see W. Hoye, 'Gotteserkenntnis per essentiam im 13. Jahrhundert', in A. Zimmermann (ed.) *Die Auseinandersetzung an der Pariser Universität im XIII Jahrhundert*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1976, pp.269–84.
- 39 The text can be found in the H. Denifle (ed.) *Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis*, Paris: Delalain, 1889, I, number 128. The condemned article directly echoes Eri-

- gena's view as found in *Periphyseon* I, col. 447C: 'divinam essentiam nullo corporeo sensui, nulli rationi, nulli seu humano seu angelico intellectui per seipsam comprehensibilem esse'.
- 40 On the condemnation and its context, see Trottmann, *La vision*, chap. 2, 'Du *quid* au *quomodo* de la vision béatifique: Autour des condamnations de 1241-44', pp.115-208.
  - 41 Aquinas's view of the beatific vision is summarized in Trottmann, *La vision*, pp.302-20. For a more extended treatment, see W. Hoye, *Actualitas omnium actuum. Man's Beatific Vision of God as Apprehended by Thomas Aquinas*, Meisenheim am Glan: Anton Hain, 1975. Thomas discusses the beatific vision often; see especially, *Summa Theologiae* Ia.12; *Summa contra Gentiles* 3, chaps 51-5; *In Epistolam ad Hebraeos* cap. 1, lect. 6 (where he condemns Eriugena's view as heretical); *In Primam Epistolam ad Corinthios*, cap. 13, lect. 4; *In Evangelium Iohannis* cap. 1, lect. 11, 13; *Super de divinis nominibus*, cap. 1, lect. 1; *De veritate*, q. 8, aa. 1-2; *In Boethii De Trinitate* q. 1, a. 2; and also his commentary of Peter Lombard's *Libri Sententiarum* (In II Sent. d. 23, q. 2, a. 1; and In III Sent. d. 14, a. 1, sol. 3). For a treatment of the contrasts between Eriugena and Aquinas, see D. O'Meara, 'Eriugena and Aquinas on the Beatific Vision', *Eriugena Redivivus*, pp.224-36. As O'Meara shows, Thomas misunderstood Eriugena's view of theophany by treating it as a *similitudo* of God. There is still, however, an essential difference between Thomas for whom the divine essence is supremely knowable in itself (but not to us) and Eriugena's view of the unknowability of the essence.
  - 42 Trottmann, *La vision*, treats Albert's solution in chapter 4, 'La solution intellectualiste d'Albert le Grand and Thomas d'Aquin: le *lumen gloriae*', pp.282-302 on Albert. See also Hoye, 'Gotteserkenntnis per essentiam', pp.274-9.
  - 43 Albert, *Summa theologiae*, tractatus 3, quaes. 13, cap. 1 (*Opera Omnia* 34.1, p.40, ll. 39-41): 'Aliud est contingere per intellectum et diffudi in intelligibili, et alius est capere sive comprehendere intelligibile.' Question 13 is Albert's last and arguably fullest account of the beatific vision. Two other important treatments are found in *De resurrectione ex parte bonorum tantum*, q.1, a.9 (*Opera Omnia* 26, pp. 326-9); and the *Quaestio de visione dei in patria* (*Opera Omnia* 25.2, pp.96-101).
  - 44 See, for example, Albert, *De resurrectione* (*Opera Omnia* 26, p.329, ll. 22-5) and *Super de divinis nominibus* 1.21 (*Opera Omnia* 37.1, p.10, ll. 64-6). For a discussion, see Trottmann, *La vision*, p.193.
  - 45 *Super Mysticam Theologiam* 1 (*Opera Omnia* 37.2, pp.463-4, ll. 76-3), using Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 1.13 (78a22-38).
  - 46 On a possible natural *quia est* knowledge of God, see, for example, *Super de divinis nominibus* 7 (*Opera Omnia* 37.1, p.357, ll. 43-4), and *Summa theologiae*, tractatus 3, quaes. 14, cap. 1 (*Opera Omnia* 34.1, p.51, ll. 78-90). On the ambiguity of *quia est* knowledge in Albert, see W. Hoye, 'Mystische Theologie nach Albert dem Grossen', in W. Senner (ed.) *Albertus Magnus. Zum Gedenken nach 800 Jahren. Neue Zugänge, Aspekte und Perspektiven*, Berlin: Akademie, 2001, pp.598-9.
  - 47 *Super Epistolam* 5 (*Opera Omnia* 37.2, p.495, ll. 33-43). From these different treatments it may be surmised that Albert distinguished at least three forms of confused *quia est* knowledge of God (though he never says so explicitly): (1) a minimal one available to natural reason; (2) an advanced form given in faith and enhanced by mystical illumination; and (3) a strong form given in heaven by direct vision of God.
  - 48 The extent of Albert's apophaticism and his dependence on Eriugena has been recognized by a number of recent investigators; see S. Tugwell, 'Albert: Introduction', in S. Tugwell (ed., trans. and introduction) *Albert and Thomas Selected Writings*, New York: Paulist Press, 1988, pp.83-95; and É. Weber, 'Langage et méthode négatifs chez Albert le Grand', *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, 1981, vol. 65, 780-1 and 785-7.
  - 49 The importance of this text for understanding Albert's doctrine of mystical

- knowledge and the beatific vision was first noted by G. Meerseman, 'La contemplation mystique d'après le Bx. Albert est-elle-immédiate?', *Revue Thomist*, 1932, vol. 36, 408–21.
- 50 *Summa theologiae*, tractatus 3, quaes. 13, cap. 4 (*Opera Omnia* 34.1, p.46, ll. 26–38): 'Proprie dicitur facies dei praesentia evidens per effectum gratiae adiuvantis ad aliquid vel protegentis [. . .] Et ille modus differt a primo, sicut natura differt a gratia.'
- 51 *Ibid.* (p.46, ll. 46–8): 'Propriissime autem dicitur facies essentialis praesentia dei sine medio demonstrate et exhibita, hoc modo quo se exhibit beatis.'
- 52 *Ibid.* (p.47, ll. 19–21).
- 53 *Ibid.* (p.47, ll. 21–7): 'Si videt visione gloriae, oportet eum esse perfectum habitibus gloriae et beatitudinis. Haec tamen media non tegunt vel deferunt vel distare faciunt videntem et visibile, sed visivam potentiam confortant et perficiunt ad videndum. Et ideo sic per medium videre non opponitur ad immediate videre, sed stat cum ipso.'
- 54 See the discussion of the relation of the light of glory and theophany in Trottmann, *La vision*, pp.295–302. Albert speaks of the *lumen gloriae* as a theophany in *Super de divinis nominibus* 13 (*Opera Omnia* 37.1, p.448, ll. 31–49), and in the *Quaestio de visione dei in patria* (*Opera Omnia* 25.2, p.99, ll. 26–36).
- 55 *Super Caelestem Hierarchiam* (*Opera Omnia* 36.1, p.71, ll. 20–5): 'tertio modo, ut est in usu loquentium, quando in lumine divino, quod non est deus videtur objectum, quod vere est deus, non in lumine sicut in medio, sicut videtur res in sua imagine, sed sub lumine confortante intellectum videtur immediate deus.' Albert criticizes Hugh of St Victor for not recognizing the existence of this third type of theophany; nevertheless, it remains unclear exactly what Albert means by it. See the discussion in Trottmann, *La vision*, pp.299–302, who thinks that the third form of theophany may include the special illuminations given to mystics in this life.
- 56 *Ibid.* (p.71, ll. 24–31): 'sic deus ipse est in quolibet beato ut lumen quoddam, participatione sui faciens eum sui similitudinem, et in tali similitudine dei visio dicitur theophania; sic enim idem deus erit lumen et objectum, sed objectum prout in se, lumen vero, prout est participatus a beatis.'
- 57 See German Sermon (hereafter Pr.) 16b. Eckhart's writings will be cited according to the critical edition, *Meister Eckhart. Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, Stuttgart and Berlin: Kohlhammer, 1936–. The two parts of this edition will be cited as follows: *DW* = *Die deutschen Werke* with appropriate volume, page and line number; and *LW* = *Die lateinischen Werke* cited in the same way, but with the addition of the numbering system used in the edition. This passage is *DW* 1, p.274, ll. 1–4. For a comparable criticism, see Pr. 41 (*DW* 2, pp.291–2).
- 58 Generally following Thomas Aquinas, Eckhart discusses Paul's rapture in several places both in his Latin and German works. See the Sermon in die B. Augustini (*LW* 5, pp.594–5), and Sermon XXII (*LW* 4, pp.197–203). In the German works, Eckhart mentions Paul's rapture in Pr. 23, 61, 80, 86, 101, 102 and 104, as well as in *RdU* 10 (*DW* 5, pp.219–24). Eckhart even treats the post-biblical rapture of St Benedict in Pr. 73 (*DW* 3, p.259).
- 59 For a survey of these terms, see R. Forman, *Meister Eckhart as Mystical Theologian*, Rockport: Element Books, 1991, pp.95–125, though I believe that Forman overestimates the importance of ecstasy in Eckhart. For my own view, see McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart. The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing*, New York: Crossroad-Herder, 2001, pp.57–8, 150.
- 60 Pr. 5b (*DW* 1, p.91, ll. 7–10).
- 61 D. Turner, *The Darkness of God. Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, chap. 7, especially p.184.
- 62 I cannot enter into a full discussion of this here; see McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, pp.151–3.
- 63 Pr. 7 (*DW* 1, pp.122–3). For a translation of this sermon, see B. McGinn (ed.) *Meister Eckhart. Teacher and Preacher*, New York: Paulist Press, 1986, pp.252–5.

- 64 Pr. 12 (*DW* 1, p.201, ll. 5–8). See also Pr. 69 (*DW* 3, p.175, l. 5). This theme often appears in the Latin works in connection with Aristotelian teaching on the identity of knower and known in the act of knowing; see, for example, *Expositio in Iohannem* numbered sections 506–9 (*LW* 3, pp.437–41).
- 65 Pr. 76 (*DW* 3, p.310, ll. 3–4).
- 66 The comment on John 1:18 can be found in the *Expositio in Iohannem* numbered sections 184–98 (*LW* 3, pp.156–67). The key passage on vision as found in identity is numbered sections 195–6 (*LW* 3, pp.163–5). The theme of the ‘just person insofar as he is just’ (*iustus in quantum iustus*) runs all through Eckhart’s comment on the Prologue of John.
- 67 *Expositio in Iohannem* numbered sections 405–6 (*LW* 3, pp.343–5).
- 68 For example, *Expositio in Iohannem* numbered section 446 (*LW* 3, pp.381–2), and numbered sections 486–9 (*LW* 3, pp.417–22), dealing with auidial identity.
- 69 *Expositio in Iohannem*. Numbered section 573 (*LW* 3, p.500, ll. 8–12): ‘pater nobis ostenditur, quando dei compadres sumus, patres unius imaginis, sicut supra dictum est de cognoscente et cognito [. . .] [Q]uod enim quis meditatur, cogitat et amat, fit in ipso et ex se ipso et ex illo et in illo et ab illo species, imago, proles una communis utriusque.’ The whole comment on John 14:8 is found in numbered sections 546–76 (*LW* 3, pp.477–506); for a translation of this important text, see, McGinn, *Eckhart Teacher and Preacher*, pp.182–93.
- 70 On John 16:16, see Pr. 69 and 70 (*DW* 3, pp.159–98).
- 71 Pr. 71 (*DW* 3, pp.211–31). There is a translation in McGinn’s *Eckhart Teacher and Preacher*, pp.320–6. Eckhart begins the sermon by laying out four different meanings of Acts 9:8: (1) ‘When Paul got up from the ground, with his eyes open, he saw nothing, and the nothing was God’; (2) ‘When he got up, he saw nothing but God’; (3) ‘In all things he saw nothing but God’; and (4) ‘When he saw God, he viewed all things as nothing’ (p.211, l. 5 – p.212, l. 2). These four meanings interact throughout the sermon.
- 72 Pr. 71, p.214, ll. 6–7.
- 73 *Ibid.*, p.215, ll. 9–11.
- 74 The second part of Pr. 71 is found in *DW* 3, pp.222–31.
- 75 *De mystica theologia* V, p.3 col. 1048A.
- 76 Pr. 71, p.224; l. 4–p.225, l. 1.
- 77 *Ibid.*, p.231, ll. 1–2.
- 78 For example, Eckhart discusses some of the differences between enjoyment of God in the present life and after death in Pr. 102 (*DW* 4.1, pp.417–19, ll. 97–125, as well as p.421, ll. 139–42).
- 79 This is especially evident in Pr. 39 (*DW* 2, pp.265–6), where Eckhart insists that just as on earth we are always both *being born* and therefore different from God, and also *already born*, that is, identical with God, so too in heaven we will see God insofar as we are being born and not see him insofar as we are already born.

### 3 Constructing heaven in Hildegard of Bingen's *Expositiones euangeliorum*

*Beverly Mayne Kienzle*

Hildegard of Bingen's first homily on John 3:1–15, the story of Nicodemus, explains the role of heaven in neo-platonic terms as the human soul's place of origin and the site of its return. Hildegard explains the phrase 'filius hominis qui est in celo' to mean that humans receive souls from heaven and that souls return to heaven through the performance of good works, because they are members of the Son of God's body.<sup>1</sup> Within this theological framework of procession and return, Hildegard depicts the journey of return with architectural imagery: humans construct their repentance and restoration as they participate in building the heavenly city – an echo of Psalm 121(2):3, 'Hierusalem quae aedificaris ut civitas cuius participatio eius simul.'

The theme of salvation history provides the mortar for Hildegard of Bingen's thought in the fifty-eight *Expositiones euangeliorum*, commentaries on the Gospels in homiletic form. At once Creator and Redeemer, Christ grounds the course of salvation history, just as he constitutes the cornerstone of the edifice of salvation in *Sciuias*, Hildegard's first visionary treatise.<sup>2</sup> Christ's redemptive power and grace allow the human to work toward her own salvation, and the Holy Spirit inspires and guides this process of collective and individual construction. The Spirit sends the virtues to assist humans in the battle against sin and the striving to do good works, much as the virtues aid the soul's journey in Hildegard's morality play, the *Ordo virtutum*.

The exegetical drama of the *Expositiones* represents the *magistra's* preaching, teaching, and exegesis to her nuns at Rupertsberg, a unique testimony to a medieval woman instructing her community on the Scriptures for the liturgical year. Hildegard was supervising the construction of Rupertsberg around 1150; the church was consecrated in 1151.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, on her preaching tours, she witnessed the passion for building in the Rhineland.<sup>4</sup> The *magistra* describes her own exegetical endeavour with imagery of building. While she would have been familiar with patristic metaphors of exegesis and construction,<sup>5</sup> Hildegard's own experiences must have influenced her fondness for this imagery. In the autobiographical narrative from the *Vita Hildegardis*, she writes that she dug a moat and erected a wall around her sisters 'with the words of the Scriptures, regular discipline, and good habits', in order to fortify them against evil.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the *Expositiones*, *Sciuias*, and other works, Hildegard

depicts the human endeavour of working toward salvation with imagery of construction.

This chapter highlights the contours of heaven – literary, visual, and theological – as Hildegard expounds it: from paradise lost to the longed-for heavenly city – object of meditation and inspiration for building salvation, vision of the utmost peace, harmony, and praise in the celestial *symphonia*; the dwelling place of the angels, the virtues, and the blessed, who gleam with gem-like radiance; and the realm of hidden mysteries from which grace, inspiration, and revelation flow. The commentary here builds primarily on the *Expositiones euangeliorum*, but also incorporates the *magistra*'s other writings and illuminations to explore intertextuality and intervisuality in Hildegard's works.<sup>7</sup>

### Paradise lost

In *Sciuias*, Pars II, uisio I, Hildegard depicts Adam in the bright garden of paradise, from which he quickly falls into the darkness of sin. Innocent in his nakedness, he sniffs the flower of obedience but does not pick it.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, when commenting on Luke 2:1–14 and the infant Christ placed in the manger (verse 7), the *magistra* evokes the human first set in paradise under angelic protection and shining with divinely given rationality.<sup>9</sup> In a homily on the parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16:1–9), she interprets the steward as Adam, who stood first in righteous innocence but later transgressed the command of God.<sup>10</sup> In the same exposition, she identifies the 'heavenly and unfailing fatherland' which was lost through Adam; and in another homily, she refers to the lost innocence once possessed in heaven.<sup>11</sup> Consistently then, Hildegard evokes innocence, light, righteousness, and rationality for the state Adam first occupied in paradise. The blame for losing paradise falls squarely on the devil, as we see when the *magistra* writes to Arnold, Archbishop of Trier, and advises him to guard always against Satan, who removed the human from celestial harmony and the delights of paradise.<sup>12</sup>

Hildegard does not endeavour in the *Expositiones* to distinguish the garden of paradise from a larger heaven, although she does make references in the *Expositiones* to the heavens as the upper regions where sun, stars, and heavenly bodies are located.<sup>13</sup> However, when writing in another genre, the *Solutiones questionum XXXVIII*, she proves herself capable of engaging the thorny questions that Christians of her era posed about paradise, such as the materiality of the waters above the firmament, the whereabouts of the souls freed at Christ's descent into hell, or the waiting place of Enoch and Elijah. To such questions she replies primarily with a spiritual interpretation of the passages, in line with the traditional monastic exegesis that confronted the new scholasticism in the twelfth century.<sup>14</sup>

The loss of paradise results in humanity's desire to return there, a longing that Hildegard describes with vocabulary of sighing, moaning, and deep breathing: *suspirio*, *suspirium*; *gemitu*, *gemitus*; *anhelo*. As Hildegard explains succinctly in the letter cited above to Arnold of Trier: 'Therefore, God removed

individual will from the human, to the extent that he sighs for the heavenly homeland.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, she advises Eberhard, Archbishop of Salzburg, that he will attain his reward if he gasps for (*anhelas*) heavenly things with good intent.<sup>16</sup>

Turning desire for heaven into action requires spiritual labour involving contempt for earthly things and meditation on the heavenly, the extension of every effort of mind and body towards heavenly matters, and the aid of the virtues. In the *Ordo virtutum*, Heavenly Desire, one of the allegorical characters, describes herself as a golden door situated in heaven; one who passes through it will never again taste bitterness.<sup>17</sup> In the *Expositiones* the *magistra* describes the movement toward heaven as a stretching upward, using the verb *tendo*, to extend or reach.<sup>18</sup> Commenting on Jesus's journey across the Sea of Galilee, she interprets the passage as the human's leaving sin and beginning the good. Desire for heaven animates the human's choice to make the crossing and pursue the good. He sighs with love of heaven, toward which the virtues reach. Through the Holy Spirit, they assist the human in his renewal.<sup>19</sup>

In the same homily, Hildegard further explains the process of reaching for heaven: penance makes evident the sighing for God that comes from the hidden recesses of the heart; the moaning that begins in those secret places leads to contemplation of the invisible in heaven.<sup>20</sup> Reaching for heaven requires contemplation and action, the performance of good works. In an exposition on Luke 5:1–11, the story of the miraculous catch, the *magistra* explains the scriptural 'You will be fishers of men' as doing good works and thereby turning toward the understanding of the heavenly Jerusalem.<sup>21</sup>

The inspiration of the Spirit moves both the human and the assisting virtues in a heavenly direction. In a homily on Matthew 1:18–21, the espousal of Mary to Joseph, the *magistra* explains that the faithful soul, represented by Mary, espouses wisdom, designated by Joseph; having been taught by the Holy Spirit, the soul meditates on celestial matters.<sup>22</sup> Repeatedly in the *Expositiones*, Hildegard associates the virtues with heaven and celestial desire. Furthermore, she assigns the virtues active roles similar to those they play in the *Ordo virtutum*. As the *Ordo* represents the soul's struggle with the devil, her penitence and restoration with the aid of the rescuing virtues, so many of the *Expositiones* focus on the soul's journey and the virtues' assistance. All but two (*Verecundia* and *Pacientia*) of the seventeen virtues appearing in the *Ordo* figure in the *Expositiones*.<sup>23</sup>

A few examples will illustrate this rich intertextuality. The term *militia* describes the ensemble of the virtues in the *Ordo* and the *Expositiones*. In the exchanges between *Victoria* and the virtues in the *Ordo*, *Humilitas* calls *Victoria* to battle with her soldiers: 'Oh, Victory, who has overcome [Satan] in heaven, hasten here with your soldiers and bind, all of you, the Devil!' *Victoria* in turn calls the virtues *milites*: 'Oh, soldiers most strong and glorious, come and help me to vanquish this deceiver!' The virtues reply that they will do battle willingly: 'We are fighting most willingly with you against this deceiver.'<sup>24</sup> Comparable terminology appears in the *Expositiones*, when Hildegard explains the

significance of the heavenly host (Luke 2:1–14) and equates *multitudo militiae celestis* (verse 13) with *multitudo uirtutum*.<sup>25</sup> In the homily on Matthew 8:1–13, the healing of the leper and the centurion, Hildegard speaks of *tanta militia uirtutum*.<sup>26</sup> In her commentary on John 10:11–16, Jesus as the good shepherd, she glosses the one flock, *unum ouile*, which represents the virtues, as *una militia in Deo*.<sup>27</sup> When the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–24) hears the joyous noise emanating from his house, Hildegard allegorizes this as his approach to the mansion (*mansio*) of virtues, where he hears the joy of the heavenly vision.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, *Anima* in the *Ordo* invokes the virtues in their *mansio*: ‘Oh, you, royal virtues [...] how sweet is your dwelling place [*mansio*]!’<sup>29</sup>

Individual virtues assist the soul in the *Expositiones* as in the *Ordo*. A few examples will suffice to illustrate the helping role of the virtues. In Hildegard’s exegesis of John 10:11–16, Faith sends forth a call to the other virtues. Likewise, in the *Ordo uirtutum*, *Fides* summons the other virtues: ‘I am Faith, mirror of life: venerable daughters, come to me and I shall show you the flowing fountain.’<sup>30</sup> Faith even has a singing part in this *expositio* as the *magistra* describes the sounds of her summons to the other virtues and her proclamation of victory, both of which recall the *Ordo*.<sup>31</sup>

Another virtue, Fear of the Lord, takes part in the second homily for the Ascension (Mark 16:14–20). Jesus represents Fear of the Lord, who appears to the disciples, designating the lazy soul, and admonishes the soul because it has not shown faith. The virtue’s role recalls the *Ordo uirtutum*, where Fear of God introduces herself as the one who will equip others not to perish: ‘I, Fear of God, prepare you most fortunate daughters to look upon the living God and not perish’; and the virtues praise her saying: ‘You are very useful to us.’<sup>32</sup> In *Sciuias*, Hildegard envisions Fear of the Lord as a figure covered with eyes.<sup>33</sup> In this *expositio*, Fear of the Lord urges the soul to purify itself, promising that one who rejects evil and undertakes the good will be a friend of God. After Fear of the Lord achieves victory, good desires go up to heaven to prepare repose among the virtues for those who embody the virtue and fear the Lord.<sup>34</sup> They who had been lazy go out to proclaim the merit of virtue, aided by Fear of the Lord and by Christ’s sacrifice. Their proclamation recalls the moment in the *Ordo* when the chorus hails the restoration of *Anima*.<sup>35</sup>

Reaching for heaven therefore engages all of the human being’s effort and requires the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the aid of the virtues. Moreover, the *Expositiones* refer several times to the process of building one’s path to heaven. Hildegard employs the verb *edificare*, to construct or build, five times to refer to the building of good works. She describes Zacheus, repentant and restored to Christ, as *reedificatus*, rebuilt in uprightness.<sup>36</sup>

In a letter, Hildegard describes this motion upward to heaven as the construction of a tower. Addressing Bishop Gunther of Speyer, she urges: ‘Rise up quickly after the fall and build in the heavens.’<sup>37</sup> In another letter, she instructs Conrad, Bishop of Worms, that one who follows God’s commandments in doing good, builds the heavenly Jerusalem, whereas one who performs carnal deeds will fall

from the heavenly edifice. In the same letter, she teaches that one who renounces or cuts off self-will decorates the heavenly building with pearls, precious stones, and the finest gold, an allusion to Apocalypse 21:18.<sup>38</sup> She writes to an anonymous prior that repentant sinners decorate the heavenly Jerusalem with the precious stones of good works; and she exhorts Archbishop Hartwig of Bremen to stand with the utmost zeal to build the tower of the heavenly Jerusalem.<sup>39</sup> In another letter to Hartwig, she prays that windows be made in him through which the virtues shine from the beautiful buildings of the heavenly Jerusalem.<sup>40</sup>

In *Sciuias* III.3, Hildegard envisions the role of the virtues with the imagery of construction. In Vision III.3, the virtues are depicted in the tower of God's will, evidence of their solid strength. They admonish people coming in and out of the tower, reminding them of Christ's death, represented on the far right side of the scene.<sup>41</sup> The pillar of the Saviour's humanity, Vision VIII.3, represents the virtues ascending and descending a ladder, and the commentary states that they ascend laden with stones. The image recalls *The Shepherd of Hermas*, as several scholars have noted; manuscripts of *The Shepherd* circulated widely in medieval Europe.<sup>42</sup> The virtue of Hope gazes upon and stretches toward the crucifix on her left. The commentary explains seven of the virtues, corresponding to seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.<sup>43</sup> This ladder image from *Sciuias* illustrates the virtues modeling the sort of behaviour that Hildegard recommends to her sisters in the *Expositiones*. The virtues and the stones they carry represent the individual's role in building the heavenly city. The virtues and vices figure prominently in Hildegard's other two visionary treatises, the *Liber diuinorum operum*<sup>44</sup> and the *Liber uite meritorum*, in which each of the books opens with dialogues between virtues and vices.<sup>45</sup>

To this point we have seen that the first human fell from paradise by disobedience, that his desire to return is conceptualized by building the city with good works. How does Hildegard describe the city itself?

## Heavenly Jerusalem

The heavenly Jerusalem represents for Hildegard, as for other monastic writers, the object of contemplation and the destination of the afterlife, to be reached by living in accordance with the Rule of Benedict. The *Expositiones* reflect this current of monastic spirituality. Jerusalem represents the vision of peace and salvation, the final resting place for those who perform good works in this life.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Hildegard envisions the heavenly city as constructed of living stones, echoing the *lapidem vivum* of 1 Peter 2:4, to combine the human and the lapidary in her imagery. In the *Solutiones*, she prays for Guibert of Gembloux that the Holy Spirit enkindle him to persevere in service in order that he may deserve to become a living stone of the heavenly Jerusalem.<sup>47</sup> Writing to Bishop Gunther of Speyer, she explains that the foundation of the city consists of repentant sinners, explaining that it was laid first with those stones who were wounded and contaminated but who later pressed down their sins through penance. Those stones make a sort of gravel bed for the city walls.<sup>48</sup>

The gem image appears in various works to describe the radiantly shining saints who dwell in the heavenly city. 'O Jerusalem', a sequence for St Rupert probably written for the consecration for the church of St Rupert in 1151, praises the saint as a noble receptacle in which the Spirit sounds out a symphony. Rupert's radiance mirrors that of the heavenly city where he dwells.<sup>49</sup> Near the close of the *Ordo*, the chorus of virtues evokes the heavenly Jerusalem and those who 'gleam in heavenly goodness'.<sup>50</sup> Hildegard also uses the gem image in the *Expositiones* to describe Virginity and its place among the virtues.<sup>51</sup> As she avoided thorny questions about the earthly paradise and heaven in the *Expositiones*, so too Hildegard does not delve into the theological questions of her day about the resurrected body. However, in the *Solutiones*, she explains that humans receive spiritual bodies at the Resurrection, and that the spiritual body, united inseparably to the soul, will regard the face of God eternally.<sup>52</sup>

The imagery of construction that we have traced through Hildegard's works is accompanied by evocations of heaven as the place of musical harmony. In *Sciuias* Pars III, uisio XIII, choirs of angels sing in harmony.<sup>53</sup> Hildegard's well-known letter to the prelates of Mainz asserts that voices and instruments aid the restoration of the soul to its heavenly condition, and the ability to hear the celestial symphony becomes manifest when the community sings.<sup>54</sup> Some of the *Expositiones* include images of loud rejoicing and praises that accompany the return home of a repentant sinner.<sup>55</sup> Since the musical aspects of heaven will be discussed in Stephen D'Evelyn's chapter, we will move to considering Hildegard's vision of heaven as compared to that of some of her contemporaries.<sup>56</sup>

Hildegard retains the traditional exegesis of the heavenly Jerusalem as the vision of peace and salvation, glossing the word Jerusalem in that way in the *Expositiones*.<sup>57</sup> While she certainly envisions heaven as a city, she does not approximate Rupertsberg and its residents with dwellers in the heavenly Jerusalem in the same way that Bernard of Clairvaux does when he compares Clairvaux to Jerusalem.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, a strong visual correspondence links Rupertsberg and the heavenly Jerusalem in the illuminations of *Sciuias* and the *Liber diuinorum operum*. As Madeline Caviness observes, the architectural features that appear in those illuminations reflect the buildings at Rupertsberg.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps this makes a visual statement as strong as Bernard's words. In distinction from Bernard again, Hildegard does not present Jerusalem at war with Babylon, the city of heaven as antinomial to the city on earth.<sup>60</sup> Neither does she interiorize the city, as do Bernard and Aelred of Rievaulx when they invoke an inner spiritual house or castle.<sup>61</sup> Constructing heaven entails labour in the inner self, but the imagery is not directed inward; rather in *Sciuias*, it is envisioned as an outward process mirroring the virtues' transport of stones up the ladder.

Finally, heaven for Hildegard is the source of divine inspiration, the realm of hidden mysteries. In the *Expositiones*, the *magistra* refers to the edifice of revelation and to inspiration, secrets, and musical harmony emanating from heaven or dwelling there.<sup>62</sup> The *Expositiones* do not employ the visual imagery of fire and water that Hildegard uses elsewhere to describe inspiration. In *Sciuias*,

divine calefaction results in the *magistra*'s exegetical understanding.<sup>63</sup> In the *Vita*, sweet raindrops imbue her with an understanding of John's Gospel.<sup>64</sup> Prefaced by no claim of visionary experience, the *Expositiones* present the product of the seer's heavenly inspiration. They raise fortifications of Scripture to instruct an audience of sisters on how to climb the ladder to heaven, aided by virtues and laden with stones of good works, while they occupied the new monastery at Rupertsberg, their earthly site for heavenly contemplation and the performance of God's work.

## Notes

- 1 When no text is cited from the *Expositiones* (hereafter *Expo.*), pages refer to J.-B. Pitra (ed.) *Expositiones evangeliorum*, in *Analecta Sanctae Hildegardis*, Analecta Sacra, vol. VIII, Paris, 1882, pp.245–327. Texts are cited from the edition of the *Expositiones euangeliorum* by B.M. Kienzle and C.A. Muessig, CCCM, Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming. The Pitra homily numbers differ from those in the Kienzle–Muessig edition, and both are given. *Expo.* <34>: 'quia homines animas de celo accipiunt, quae ad celum per bona opera redeunt, cum etiam membra filii Dei sint', Pitra 16.1, p.289. On the theme of procession and return in the twelfth century, see J. Kim, 'Journey, Procession and Return in John the Scot, Eriugena', PhD Dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey, 2003, especially pp.247–54.
- 2 Hildegardis, *Sciuias*, A. Führkötter (ed.) CCCM 43, Turnhout, 1973, Pars III, uisio II, pp.349–50; C. Hart and J. Bishop (trans.) *Sciuias*, New York: Paulist Press, 1990, pp.325–6.
- 3 A. Silvas (trans. and annot.) *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999, p.239, n.3, gives 1 May 1151, as the latest possible date for the consecration. On Hildegard's supervision of the building and the images of *Sciuias*, see M. Caviness, 'Artist: to See, Hear, and Know All at Once', in B. Newman (ed.) *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1998, pp.120, 124.
- 4 R. Pernoud, 'The Preaching Peregrinations of a Twelfth-Century Nun, ca. 1158–70', in A. Ekdahl Davidson (ed.) *Wisdom Which Encircles Circles: Papers on Hildegard of Bingen*, Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996, p.16, points out that Hildegard participated in the passion for building that marked the intellectual activity and art and architecture along the Rhineland rivers, which the *magistra* travelled on three of her preaching tours.
- 5 On Gregory the Great's famous letter to Leander of Seville and other building images, see H. De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis I: The Four Senses of Scripture*, M. Sebanc (trans.) Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998, pp.132–4.
- 6 *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*, M. Klaes (ed.) CCCM 126, Turnhout: Brepols, 1993, p.37; Godefridus and Theodoric, *The Life of the Saintly Hildegard*, H. Feiss (trans.) Toronto, Ontario: Peregrina Publishing Company, 1996, p.60.
- 7 On intervisuality, I am indebted to M. Caviness, 'Artist', p.119.
- 8 *Sciuias*, Pars II, uisio I, pp.110–11; *Sciuias*, p.149.
- 9 *Expo.* <7>: 'homo creatus positus est in paradiso, cum angelo, uidelicet cum angelica custodia, multitudo militiae celestis, id est magnum miraculum in toto celesti exercitu, laudantium Deum, super hominem, quia diuina opera in ipso claruerunt, ita quod racionalitas in ipso operari debuit', Pitra 2.1, p.248.
- 10 *Expo.* <1>: 'prius in paradiso uillicus, in innocentia iusticiae fuit; cum autem preceptum Dei transgressus est, factus est uillicus peccati in iniquitate, quoniam preceptum Dei neglexit', Pitra 26.1, p.320.

- 11 *Expo.* <1>: ‘et uos recipiant in celestem et in indeficientem patriam, quam in Adam perdidistis’, Pitra 26.1, p.320. *Expo.* <27>: *quia hic filius meus*, scilicet homo, *mortuus erat*, scilicet innocentiam quam in celestibus habuit perdidit, *et reuixit*, in agnitione Dei; *perierat*, quia cibum uitae non habebat, *et inuentus est*, in gemitu penitentiae’, Pitra 12.2, p.281.
- 12 Hildegardis Bingensis, *Epistolarium*, Pars Prima I–XC, L. Van Acker (ed.) CCCM 91, Turnhout: Brepols, 1993, *Epist.* 23, p.64, ll. 121–5 (my translation). *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, J.L. Baird and R.K. Ehrman (trans.) New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, p.90.
- 13 Pitra 12.2, p.280; Pitra 16.1, p.288; Pitra 24.1, p.312.
- 14 *Solutiones questionum XXXVIII*, PL 197, coll. 1037–54, *Quaest.* II, PL 197, col. 1041A; XX, XXIX, PL 197, coll. 1046C/D, 1050B. On the *Solutiones*, see A.C. Bartlett, ‘Commentary, Polemic, and Prophecy in Hildegard of Bingen’s *Solutiones triginta octo quaestionum*’, *Viator*, 1992, vol. 23, 153–65.
- 15 *Epist.* 27R, l. 15, p.78; *Letters* I, p.91.
- 16 *Epist.* 25R, l. 15, p.71; *Letters* I, p.85.
- 17 *Ordo virtutum*, P. Dronke (ed.) *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages: New Departures in Poetry, 1000–1150*, 2nd edn London: Westfield College, University of London Committee for Medieval Studies, 1986, pp.180–92, at p.185, ll. 122–4: ‘Amor Celestis: Ego aurea porta in celo fixa sum: qui per me transit/numquam amaram petulantiam in mente sua gustabit.’
- 18 *Expo.* <4>: ‘uidelicet spiritalis desiderium, ubi homo terrena contempnit, et ad celestia toto annisu mentis et corporis tendit;’ Pitra 27.2, p.325.
- 19 *Expo.* <4>: ‘*Abiit*, in admonitione Spiritus Sancti, *Jesus*, saluator, *trans mare*, ultra putredinem uiciorum in mutatione eorum, *Galileae*, scilicet cum homo dimittit malum et incipit bonum, *quod est Tyberiadis*, uidelicet cum ad amorem celestium, quo omnes uirtutes tendunt, suspirat. *Subiit ergo*, consilians et adiuuans in admonitione Spiritus Sancti, *in montem*, scilicet in hanc celsitudinem, ut homo in uirtutibus renouetur, *Jesus et ibi sedebat*, in mansione requiei, *cum discipulis suis*, uidelicet uirtutibus’, Pitra 27.2, p.325.
- 20 *Expo.* <36>: ‘*Et nemo ascendit in celum*, ut celestia desideret, *nisi qui de celo descendit*, per suspiria cordis ascendens quod absconsum et occultum erat in corde suo, *filius hominis*, scilicet in hoc se hominem per penitentiam demonstrans, *qui est in celo*, quia gemitus primum in occulto cordis incipit, et tandem homines ad inuisibilem contemplationem, quae in celo est, perducit’, Pitra 16.3, p.292.
- 21 *Expo.* <43>: ‘*Ex hoc iam eris homines capiens*, ita ut propter bona opera quae facturus eris, in comprehensionem celestis Ierusalem uerteris’, Pitra 20.1, p.302.
- 22 *Expo.* <6>: ‘Nam fidelis anima per baptismum Ioseph, id est sapientiae quae et in terrenis et in celestibus, quaeque bona sapit, desponsatur. Et *antequam conuenirent*, in quibusdam secularibus inuenitur, in mente quaedam celestia meditari de inspiratione Spiritus Sancti edocta’, Pitra 1.2, p.246.
- 23 *Humilitas, Scientia Dei, Caritas, Timor Dei, Obedientia, Fides, Spes, Castitas, Innocentia, Contemptus Mundi, Amor Celestis*, an unidentified virtue whose name is illegible in the manuscript, *Verecundia, Misericordia, Victoria, Discretio, and Patientia*.
- 24 *Ordo*, p.190, ll. 215–19, 222–3: ‘O Victoria, que istum in celo superasti, curre cum militibus tuis et omnes ligate Diabolum hunc!’; ‘O fortissimi et gloriosissimi milites, venite et adiuuate me istum fallacem vincere!’; ‘nos libenter militamus tecum contra illusorem hunc’.
- 25 *Expo.* <8>; Pitra 2.2, p.249.
- 26 *Expo.* <19>; Pitra 8.2, p.265.
- 27 *Expo.* <31>; Pitra 14.2, p.285.
- 28 *Expo.* <26>: ‘*Et cum ueniret*, uias suas considerando, *et propinquaret*, per bonam coniunctionem, *domui*, id est mansioni uirtutum, *audiuit*, ad superna ascendendo,

- symphoniam, scilicet gaudium supernae uisionis, et chorum, uidelicet decorem et gloriam in quibus Deo seruitur*, Pitra 12.1, p.279.
- 29 *Ordo*, p.187, ll. 161–3: ‘O vos regales virtutes [. . .] et quam dulcis est vestra mansio.’
- 30 *Expo.* <31>; Pitra 14.2, p.285; *Ordo*, p.184, ll. 93–5.
- 31 *Ordo*, p.184, ll. 80–2: ‘Ego Fides, speculum vite: venerabiles filie, venite ad me et ostendo vobis fontem salientem.’ *Expo.* <31>: ‘*Sicut nouit me, in ostensione, pater, id est eternitas, et ego agnosco patrem, quia eternitatem ostendo, et animam meam, scilicet sonum, pono, in dulcedine, pro ouibus meis, quia occido inimicos qui illas destruere uolunt. Et alias oues, scilicet uirtutes, habeo, in obseruatione, quae non sunt ex hoc ouili, quia in his uirtutibus notae non sunt, et illas oportet me adducere, quando inimici eas destruere uolunt: illis clamabo, ut in magno auxilio et in nouis miraculis ueniant, et uocem meam, in admonitione per omnia, in multis signis, audient, percipiendo*’ Pitra 14.2, p.285.
- 32 *Ordo*, p.184, ll. 80–1, 82: ‘Ego, Timor Dei, vos felicissimas filias preparo ut inspicatis in deum uivum et non pereatis’ and the virtues praise her: ‘valde utilis es nobis’.
- 33 *Sciuias* Pars I, uisio I.2, p.9; *Sciuas*, p.68.
- 34 *Expo.* <33>: ‘*Et Dominus quidem Iesus, scilicet timor Domini, postquam locutus est eis, cum uictoriam perficeret, assumptus est in celum, ubi bona desideria ad Deum ascendunt, et sedet a dextris Dei, quia quietem in uirtutibus Deum timentibus parat*’, Pitra 15.2, p.287.
- 35 *Expo.* <33>; Pitra 15.2, p.287; *Ordo*, p.191, ll. 242/51. See also p.190, l. 228, and pp.191–2, ll. 252–69.
- 36 *Expo.* <57>: ‘*Zacheus, qui primum bonus in iusticia erat, sed iusticiam illam per zizania compressit, iterum per Christum in rectitudine reedificatus*’, Pitra 25.1, p.315. Other references to the edification of good works include: *Expo.* <15>, Pitra 6.2, p.260; *Expo.* <33>, Pitra 15.2, p.287; *Expo.* <45>, Pitra 20.3, p.304; *Expo.* <52>; Pitra 23.2, p.311.
- 37 *Epist.* 41R, p.107, ll. 15–16: ‘surge citius post ruinam et edifica in celestibus’, *Letters* I, p.113.
- 38 *Epist.* 45R, p.114, l. 15; *Letters* I, p.118–19.
- 39 *Epist.* 84R, p.201, ll. 386–7: ‘Et sic etiam in pleno desiderio cum pretiosis lapidibus bonorum operum celestem Ierusalem ornant.’ *Letters* I, p.190; *Epist.* 12, l. 5, p.27; *Letters* I, p.48.
- 40 *Epist.* 11, l. 12–13, p.26: ‘Faciatur etiam in te fenestras, que in celesti Ierusalem lucent, que sunt pulchra edificia in uirtutibus’, *Letters* I, p.47.
- 41 *Sciuias* Pars III, uisio III.3, pp.375–6; *Sciuas*, pp.343–54: Celestial Love, Discipline, Modesty, Mercy, and Victory. In *Sciuias* Pars III, uisio X.10–14, pp.558–61; *Sciuas*, pp.480–2, the Son of Humanity appears with five different virtues: Constancy, Celestial Desire, Compunction of Heart, Contempt of the World, Concord. Constancy holds a stag, which symbolizes transience; Contempt of the World has no body; Concord has wings and a very bright face.
- 42 *Similitudo* IX, *Le pasteur*, R. Joly (ed.), Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1997, SC 53bis, pp.289–365. On Hildegard and *The Shepherd of Hermas*, see C. Mews, ‘Hildegard of Bingen: The Virgin, the Apocalypse, and the Exegetical Tradition’, in E. Davidson, *Wisdom*, p.30, and other references cited there. *Sciuas*, Pars III, uisio VIII.3, pp.478–79.
- 43 *Sciuias*, Pars III, uisio VIII.14, pp.496–7; *Sciuas*, p.436.
- 44 Hildegardis Bingensis, *Liber diuinorum operum*, A. Derolez and P. Dronke (eds) CCCM 92, Turnhout: Brepols, 1996.
- 45 Hildegardis Bingensis, *Liber uite meritum*, A. Carlevaris (ed.) CCCM 90, Turnhout: Brepols, 1995.
- 46 *Expo.* <43>: ‘*Ex hoc iam eris homines capiens, ita ut propter bona opera quae facturus eris, in comprehensionem celestis Ierusalem uerteris*’, Pitra 20.1, p.302. See also

- Expo.* <14>, Pitra 6.1, p.258; *Expo.* <20>, Pitra 9.1, p.267; *Expo.* <21>, Pitra 9.2, p.268.
- 47 *Solutiones*, PL 197, col. 1040A.
- 48 *Epist.* 41R, p.107, l. 31; *Letters*, I, p.114.
- 49 Hildegard of Bingen, *Symphonia*, B. Newman (trans.) 2nd edn, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998, 49, pp.192–4.
- 50 *Ordo*, p.191, l. 246: ‘qui nunc lucent in superna bonitate!’
- 51 *Expo.* <21>: *quia uiderunt, agnoscendo oculi mei, id est scientia cordis mei, salutare tuum, in suauitate dulcedinis tuae, quod parasti, lucentem gemmam, ante faciem, id est desiderium, omnium populorum, quoniam uirginitas pre ceteris uirtutibus in castitate claret et lucent*’, Pitra 9.2, p.269.
- 52 *Solutiones*, PL 197, col. 1041BC.
- 53 *Sciuias*, Pars III, uisio XIII, p.615; *Sciuas*, p.525.
- 54 *Epist.* 23, pp.63–5; *Letters* I, pp.77–9.
- 55 Commentary on the parable of the prodigal son, *Expos.* <26–7>; Pitra 12.1–12.2, pp.277–82.
- 56 See Stephen D’Evelyn’s chapter in this volume.
- 57 See *Expo.* <14>, Pitra 6.1, p.258; *Expo.* <20>, Pitra 9.1, p.267; *Expo.* <21>, Pitra 9.2, p.268.
- 58 Bernard of Clairvaux, *Epistola 64, Sancti Bernardi Opera*, J. Leclercq and H. Rochais (eds) Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1974, VIII, p.158: ‘Et si vultis scire, Claravallis est. Ipsa est Ierusalem, ea quae in caelis est, tota mentis deuotione, et conversationis imitatione, et cognatione quadam spiritus sociata.’
- 59 Caviness, ‘Artist’, p.120, points out that the gems of Jerusalem’s windows in the sequence correspond to the colours of Ezekiel’s vision of the Temple and to those of twelfth-century stained glass. Moreover, a seventeenth-century drawing of Rupertsberg before its destruction shows architectural elements that are echoed in the illuminations of *Sciuias* and of the *Liber diuinorum operum*.
- 60 See M. Casey, *Athirst for God, Spiritual Desire in Bernard of Clairvaux’s Sermons on the Song of Songs*, Cistercian Studies Series, 77, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1988, p.220.
- 61 Bernard of Clairvaux, *In assumptione, Sermo 2, Sancti Bernardi Opera*, J. Leclercq and H. Rochais (eds) Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1977, V, p.232; *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, VI.2, *Sententiae*, Series 3, 12, p.71. Aelred of Rievaulx, *Sermo XIX, Opera omnia 2a, Sermones I–XLVI*, G. Raciti (ed.) Turnhout: Brepols, 1989, CCCM 2A, pp.147–54. See B. Kienzle, ‘The Twelfth-Century Monastic Sermon’, in B. Kienzle (ed.) *The Sermon. Typologie des sources du moyen âge occidental*, 81–3, Turnhout: Brepols, 2000, pp.282–3; B. Kienzle, ‘Exegesis on Luke 10:38 around 1100: Worcester MS F94, f. 1r–2r. A Tribute to James E. Cross’, *Medieval Sermon Studies*, 1997, vol. 40, 22–8.
- 62 *Expo.* <47>: ‘*Scriptum est, in spiritali transmutatione et interpretatione, quia domus mea, id est edificatio reuelationis, domus orationis est, scilicet ueritatis, quia nec celum, nec terra alium Deum preter me ostendunt, sed edificatio mea in qua me inuenietis, ostendit uobis ueritatem. [...] erat docens cottidie in templo; quia ipse filius Dei in ista apparitione nouae edificationis et interpretationis antiquae legis ad spiritalem intellectum procedit usque in finem in ecclesia.*’ Pitra 21.2, p.306. *Expo.* <48>: ‘Cum appropinquaret, inclinando se, Iesus, id est admonitio Spiritus Sancti, Ierusalem, scilicet ad hominem plenum uiciis et spurciciis, uidens ciuitatem, uidelicet edificationem saluationis’, Pitra 21.3, pp.306–7.
- 63 *Sciuias, Protestificatio*, p.4; *Sciuas*, p.59.
- 64 Klaes, *Vita*, p.43; Godefridus and Theodoric, *Life*, p.67.

## 4 The completeness of heaven

*Peter Dronke*

The idea that I should like to trace, and to illustrate with a few highlights from the beginnings of Christianity to the later Middle Ages, is the idea that heaven, in order to be heaven, must ultimately become complete. Even though there are divine punishments for the wicked in the afterlife, these cannot be everlasting. Everyone must in the end be received into the heaven that is unification with God. The goal of all existence is the final reintegration – what philosophers and theologians called the apocatastasis.<sup>1</sup> If it were otherwise – if, as the majority of Christians over the centuries have believed, there remained, at the last, a place of punishment for the wicked, a hell, which lay outside that reintegration – then the whole divine plan for humanity and for the universe would have failed.

The word ‘apocatastasis’ occurs only once in the New Testament,<sup>2</sup> as Peter addresses the populace outside the temple in Jerusalem (Acts 3:21): Christ will remain in heaven ‘until the time of the reintegration of all [ἀποκαταστάσεως πάντων, *restitutionis omnium*], which God has declared through the mouth of the saints since the age of his prophets’. Here the precise implications of that universal reintegration are not made clear. On the other hand, there are a number of passages in St Paul’s Epistles which indicate that Paul believed it implied the salvation of the whole of humanity, its complete reconciliation with and in God. To recall two of the most striking:

As all die in Adam, so all will live again in Christ [. . .] The last enemy to be destroyed is Death [. . .] When all things have been subjected to the Son of God, then the Son himself will subject himself to the One who has subjected all things to him, so that God may be all things in all [ἵνα ἡ ὁ θεὸς πάντα ἐν πάνσιν, *ut sit deus omnia in omnibus*].

(1 Corinthians 15:22–8)

For God wanted the whole fullness (πᾶν το πλήρωμα, *omnem plenitudinem*) to inhabit him, and through Christ to reconcile all things into him [ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν, *reconciliare omnia in ipsum*].

(Colossians 1:19–20)

‘The whole fullness’ would seem to mean the cosmos, seen as united to and sharing in the divine nature of Christ. So, too, at Ephesians 1:10: ‘God has

resolved [...] to reintegrate all things in Christ' (ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι πάντα ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ, *instaurare omnia in Christo*). And again, with absolutely specific reference to universal human salvation, there are two memorable moments in Romans (5:18 and 11:32): 'As one person's offence [that of Adam] brought condemnation upon all humanity, so one person's good act has brought the setting right of life to all humanity [...] God has enclosed all in their unbelief in order to show mercy to all' (ἵνα τοὺς πάντας ἐλεήσει, *ut omnium misereatur*).

Yet Paul also has moments (for instance 2 Thessalonians 1:8–9) where he speaks of Christ's revenge (ἐκδίκησιν, *vindictam*) upon unbelievers, promising them 'everlasting ruin' (ὄλεθρον αἰώνιον, *poenas in interitu aeternas*). And in the Gospel of Matthew we read of the wicked going 'into the everlasting fire' (εἰς τὸ πῦρ αἰώνιον, *in ignem aeternum*), or again, 'into everlasting punishment'.<sup>3</sup>

How did those who believed in the ultimate universal reintegration confront such passages? I shall discuss this question shortly, in connection with the fullest and most brilliant account of apocatastasis in Western thought, that of John Scottus Eriugena in the mid-ninth century.

The first major proponent of the apocatastasis was the Alexandrian church father Origen (c.185–254).<sup>4</sup> Among his prolific, multifarious discussions of the theme, I shall focus only on a passage in one of his chief works, *De principiis*, which survives far more fully in a fourth-century Latin translation than in the original Greek. Here we can see what is distinctive about his approach, and what contrasts it with the approaches of later Christian philosopher-theologians.

For Origen St Paul's key phrase, 'God will be all things in all', means that all things, animate and inanimate, will be perceived as divine by individual, rational human minds whose understanding has become fully purified.<sup>5</sup> This purification is something that will happen not suddenly but gradually, through immense ages – some reaching this goal swiftly, others following them, and still others far behind. Yet even these can eventually come from enmity towards God to reconciliation with him, till finally one reaches 'the last enemy, the devil, who is called Death',<sup>6</sup> who will be destroyed, not in his substance, which comes from God, but destroyed in such a way as to be enemy no more and Death no more.

According to Origen there *are* punishments for wicked souls, during many ages, yet this is a process of repairing through emendation, and of being restored, first through the teaching of angels, then through the powers of higher orders of angels, so that, step by step, advancing, the wicked too reach what is invisible and eternal.<sup>7</sup>

Origen's conception of ages owes something to Stoic cosmology. He does not accept the full Stoic account of apocatastasis, as it was taught for instance by Chrysippus, who envisages an indefinite number of world-cycles: 'the apocatastasis of the all will happen not once, but often' (γίνεσθαι δὲ τὴν ἀποκατάστασιν τοῦ παντὸς οὐχ ἀπαξ, ἀλλὰ πολλάκις).<sup>8</sup> Nor does Origen think it possible that the world-cycles will be identical with one another. Yet he does believe that there will be more than one world: 'But what their number may be, or of what kind, I confess I do not know. If anyone could show

this, I would gladly learn.<sup>9</sup> This openness, however, prevents Origen from affirming that the universal reintegration was made possible decisively, once and for all, by Christ's coming to earth. It is probably because of its less than fully Christian emphasis that Origen's teaching on the apocatastasis, tinged with Stoic speculation and the Platonic myth that souls pre-existed in a realm to which they will at last return, was condemned by a Synod at Constantinople in 543. On the other hand, the two greatest Byzantine Christian Neoplatonists, who likewise believed in and expounded the apocatastasis – Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor – were never condemned for this or any other aspect of their teaching. On the contrary, they were canonized as saints.

For the Christian Neoplatonic tradition, as for the pagan Plotinus, the universe, which proceeds from God (in what is termed *πρόοδος*, or *processio*), must ultimately return into God (a return that is called *ἄνοδος*, or *reditus*). But the Christian Neoplatonists also saw a special significance in Christ's incarnation and resurrection: this was the *peripety* in the cosmic drama – the turning point (*ἐπιστροφή*, or *conversio*) at which, the procession being complete, the universal return begins.

This is integral to the way that St Gregory of Nyssa understood and affirmed the final return to God. Yet his many affirmations of that return spring above all from his buoyant belief in the perfectibility of the whole human race. His treatise 'On the construction of the human being' (*De opificio hominis*), which Eriugena translated into Latin in the ninth century, giving it the title 'On the Image' (*De imagine*), is the first humanistic *Oratio de dignitate hominis*, to borrow the title of Pico della Mirandola's manifesto.<sup>10</sup> For Gregory, the reintegration is at the same time Plotinus' notion of the return and the Christian notion of redemption:

The grace of resurrection promised to us is nothing other than the apocatastasis of the fallen, back into their primordial condition. For the grace that we expect will be a kind of return [*ἐπ'ἀνοδος*] into the first life, by which the human being, cast out of paradise, will be led into it again [. . .] As darkness comes about when the earth's shadow occludes the sun's rays, and supposing someone could completely penetrate that shadow, he would arrive at total light, so should it be thought about us, that, having passed through the boundary of evil, and thus having reached the farthest darkness of sin, we shall again live in light, the nature of good things infinitely outstripping the measure of evil. This then is paradise again, again that tree which is also the tree of life, again the granting of the image, the dignity that there was in the beginning.<sup>11</sup>

What of punishments for the wicked? For Gregory these are clearly purgatorial, never infernal. As doctors have to cut away and cauterize painfully in order to heal, and will at last be thanked by those whom they have healed, so with divine punishments:

in the same way, when nature's evil is done away with, over long periods of time [...] then the apocatastasis, into the primordial condition, of those who now lie in evil will come about, and thanksgiving with one voice by the whole of creation, both by those who were punished in purgation and by those who did not even need purgation.<sup>12</sup>

In his treatise *The Life of Moses*, Gregory propounds a biblical prefiguration of the completeness of heaven. In Exodus 10:23, God plunged the Egyptians into a plague of total darkness, but spared the Israelites, who continued to have light. Gregory transforms this into a triumphant figura:

If, after the misery of three days in darkness, the Egyptians too shared in the light, perhaps one could infer from this the expected final reintegration [ἀποκατάστασις], into the kingdom of heaven, of those who had been condemned in Gehenna.

Many later Byzantine churchmen were shocked by this figura of Gregory's: some claimed it was an interpolation by another hand, others simply altered the passage. But as Gregory's illustrious editor, Jean Daniélou, insists, 'the authenticity of the text is certain'.<sup>13</sup>

In the seventh century another of the greatest doctors of the Byzantine Church, St Maximus the Confessor, expounds, and as it were sanctifies, Gregory's conception. He explains that it means both an outer and an inner process, macrocosmic and microcosmic:

For it is necessary that, just as the whole of nature, in the resurrection, will receive physical incorruptibility, at the hoped-for time, so too the seduced powers of the soul will, in the course of ages, cast off the memories of the evil ingrafted in them, and, when they have traversed all those ages, and have found no rest, they will come into God, who has no boundary. And thus through knowledge, not through participation in good things, they receive their powers, and are reintegrated [ἀποκαταστήναι] into their primordial condition, and are shown that the Creator is guiltless of sin.<sup>14</sup>

Before I turn to some less demanding and more popular reflections of the universal return, I must at least briefly retrace a few of the steps in the fullest and profoundest of all discussions of the completeness of heaven – that of Eriugena. He had translated some key writings of both Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus, from Greek into Latin, before his own depiction of the reintegration, which is adumbrated in the third and fourth, and central to the fifth, book of his masterpiece, the vast dialogue 'About Natures' – *Periphyseon* – of which the magnificent new edition by Édouard Jeuneau has just been completed.<sup>15</sup> There can be no question, in the present context, of an account that truly reflects the subtle complexities of Eriugena's argumentation.

Perhaps the most audacious and most unusual feature of Eriugena's notion of the return is that it includes the return of all living beings – not only human and angelic, but also those that, by the consensus of the learned world, were stigmatized as irrational animals. For Eriugena, this aspect of the return follows logically from an understanding of the Aristotelian categories, genus and species:

If there is one genus, called 'living being' [*animal*], of all the beings made up of body and soul [...] since human being and lion and ox and horse are united in and substantially one in it – how can all the species which belong to that genus perish, with only the species assigned to human beings surviving?<sup>16</sup>

Here Eriugena may well be influenced not by a learned source but by some of the biblical apocrypha, particularly cherished in his native Ireland, in which animals often appear as theophanies – as manifestations of the supernatural, the angelic and the divine. What of the inanimate world? In what sense can it be said finally to return into God? For Eriugena, all corporeal substances will ultimately be transformed back into their primordial causes, the creative principles from which they first proceeded, and in which they have their fullest reality. Eriugena evokes this process, in which transformation does not entail loss of identity, by way of a pair of images that recur in his writing almost like a musical motif:

For air does not lose its substance when it is turned into the sun's brightness, in such a way that nothing appears in it except light [...] Or again iron, or any metal, liquefied in fire, appears to be transformed into fire, so that it seems to be pure fire – except that the substance of the metal remains.<sup>17</sup>

But for Eriugena's vision of the rest of the process of unification, I must confine myself to the question of universal human salvation: how is heaven to be made complete, with all human beings and angels, evil as well as good, returning to God?

The debate between the Disciple and the Master, where who is speaking was often obscured in the earlier editions, emerges clearly in Jeuneau's new text of *Periphyseon* V. I had thought, says the Disciple, that the wicked would be tormented in eternal fire. If the whole of human nature will ascend into heaven, will that not mean there is no eternal death of misery? Yet if a part of humanity were to remain in suffering, would that not imply that God's Word – the Logos – had not embraced the whole of human nature, had not wished to save the whole human race – which is absurd?<sup>18</sup> If all humanity is gathered up in the Logos, and thus is to be saved (*salvandam*) in him, then what are we to make of Scripture's passages about everlasting torments?<sup>19</sup>

The Master argues that God does not punish any of his creatures in their substance, which he has made – only in the irrational motions of perverted will,

which he has not made.<sup>20</sup> Where is Judas tormented? Surely nowhere except in his polluted conscience. By what flame is Herod consumed, if not by his own fury? The eternal punishment of evil desires is their eternal destruction. What more grievous punishment can there be for the impious, than to want to act impiously and be unable to hurt anyone? This impotence is the chain with which Christ, in the harrowing of hell, bound Satan.<sup>21</sup>

Contemplating the wholeness of creation all at once is in effect the ascent into God. This wholeness is beyond space and time. Therefore hell can be in no place, such as under the earth: there is no place for an everlasting fire or an undying worm – all these are ‘set in holy Scripture figuratively’ (*figurate in sancta scriptura posita*).<sup>22</sup>

The reintegration of human nature in the divine has two modes: *restauratio* and *deificatio*. The first is the return to paradise, the second, eating of the tree of life. The whole of humanity will be restored to paradise – that is, into the pristine dignity of its condition – but the fruit will be only for those worthy of deification.<sup>23</sup>

Using the figura of Solomon’s Temple, the Master sees the *sanctum sanctorum* as dwelt in only by the high priest, who is Christ. Those who have lived least well will be at the Temple’s outermost porticoes, as it were offsetting those nearer to the centre. Judas and Peter both supped with Christ, but one was far from him, the other near.<sup>24</sup>

What of the fire of Judgement? Perhaps, says the Master, this final flame is the apparition of the Word of God in every creature, when only intelligible light will shine in all, both the good and the evil. For he – the Logos, the flame – will consume all things, when he will be all things in all, and will alone appear in all: *Consumet enim omnia quando omnia in omnibus erit et solus in omnibus apparebit*.<sup>25</sup>

Near the close of the dialogue the Master interprets the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in terms of the less and more perfect modes of return. The ten virgins signify the whole of humanity (*tota humanitas*).<sup>26</sup> Christ the bridegroom arrives with his bride, the heavenly Jerusalem. Yet the ten do not share his divine light equally: a part of humanity (the foolish virgins) will return to the natural human felicity of paradise before the Fall, another part (the wise virgins) will enter the supreme joy of theosis, *deificatio*, complete union with God.

The notion of the completeness of heaven is far from confined to speculative philosophers and theologians. It has numerous more popular reflections,<sup>27</sup> a few of which I should now like to recall. I leave aside here the many stories – from Prudentius in the fourth century to Dostoyevsky in the nineteenth – of sinners winning a temporary respite from hell’s pains. For Prudentius, the sufferings of tormented souls abate on the anniversary of Christ’s harrowing of hell: Christ’s descent, that is, had an enchanting effect like that of Orpheus, and this effect was so powerful that it still reverberates.<sup>28</sup> In Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan composes a poem (based in fact on a ninth-century Byzantine apocryphon)<sup>29</sup> about the weeping Virgin Mary begging for, and at last winning from God, a period free from torment for the sinners in hell, between Good Friday

and Pentecost each year.<sup>30</sup> The basic assumption underlying such stories, however, is always that, apart from the periods of respite, the pains are indeed everlasting.

The first two books of the *Sibylline Oracles* contain a highly-coloured account of the world's creation, history and end, pervaded by impassioned prophecies and warnings. These two books of the Oracles survive in a Christian redaction of a Hellenistic Jewish original; the latest scholarship sets the extant version before CE 150.<sup>31</sup> The passage, at the close of the second book, which prophesies the punishments of the wicked and the rewards of the just in the otherworld, has a surprising conclusion: the just can ask God to release the wicked from the never-ending fire, and he will grant this:

Gathering them up again, out of the undying flame,  
 God will set them in another place, for the sake of his people,  
 into another, everlasting life, among the immortals,  
 on the plain of Elysium, where the vast waves  
 of the deep lake of Acheron, ever-flowing, come near.<sup>32</sup>

Here the Judaeo-Christian Sibyl uses the imagery of the Homeric otherworld. She does not say outright that heaven will become complete, yet she evokes the deliverance of sinners, from the 'undying flame', into heavenly existence. She concludes her oracle dramatically, with a torrent of self-accusations, yet praying to the 'Saviour' (σωτήρ) to rescue her 'from my scourgers' (ἐμῶν ἀπὸ μαστικτήρων). However deep her sense of guilt, she too has the hope of salvation.

A striking anecdote conjuring up a completable heaven, which is unmistakably popular in tone, comes among the writings of the most cerebral of all the Christian Neoplatonists – the Syrian author who, around CE 500, wrote under the name of Dionysius, St Paul's convert in Athens. The whole *Corpus Dionysiaca* was translated into Latin several times, the most influential translation being that of Eriugena.

Dionysius's eighth Epistle<sup>33</sup> concludes with a story ('Don't laugh at it,' he says, 'for what I shall tell you is true'), about how he was welcomed in Crete by a holy man, Carpos – the name comes from Paul's second Epistle to Timothy. Carpos confesses to Dionysius that once upon a time he felt such rage and bitterness, when an unbeliever seduced one of his congregation into loss of faith, that he prayed to God to strike the two infidels with lightning. Instead, the lightning comes and splits his own house in two. Carpos sees heaven open, all ablaze, and Christ appearing amid angels. Then he sees the earth open, and the two infidels trembling on the brink of an abyss: at their feet serpents, as well as other humans, harass them and bite them. Carpos is delighted at this and encourages the serpents, sad that he himself cannot do more to help them in their violence.

Then Christ comes down from heaven and stretches out his hand to the infidels, saying to Carpos: 'You've raised your hand – now it's me you must strike. For here I am, ready to suffer again, for the renewed salvation of humankind.'

The profound, generous conviction, that no case against any human being is ever definitively closed, likewise underlies the earliest vernacular testimony I can adduce – the conclusion of King Alfred’s free prose adaptation of Boethius’s poem about Orpheus and Eurydice, in *The Consolation of Philosophy*.<sup>34</sup> Where Boethius writes:

Heu noctis prope terminos  
Orpheus Eurydicen suam  
vidit, perdidit, occidit.

Alas, near the boundaries of night  
Orpheus saw his Eurydice,  
lost her, and dies.<sup>35</sup>

Alfred renders the words *noctis [...] terminos* by *þæt gemære leohtes ond þiostro*, ‘the boundary of light and darkness’. At first it seems he wants to introduce a somewhat banal Christian moral allegory here: Orpheus becomes Everyman, ‘anyone who wants to flee from hell’s darkness and come to the true God’s light’. But what if such a person looks back to his old sins, committing them as fully as before? Alfred answers ‘For whoever with full will turns his mind back to the evils that he previously left [...] loses all his former good, unless he makes amends for this again’ (*buton he hit eft gebete*).

This last phrase is remarkable. Orpheus loses his good – his Eurydice – a second time, yet even this renewed loss is not conclusive. Orpheus can still win his Eurydice back, can ‘quite set free / His half regain’d Eurydice’ – for it always remains possible for a sinful Orpheus–Everyman to make amends.

It has not yet proved feasible, amid the maze of Carolingian glosses and commentaries on Boethius’s *Consolatio*, to determine precisely what interpretations of the Boethian text King Alfred might have known. And despite various scholars’ attempts to ascribe a Boethian commentary to Eriugena himself, no attribution has been convincing. Yet even if that little phrase, ‘unless he makes amends for this again’, does not carry a direct echo of Eriugena, it is unmistakably in Eriugena’s spirit.

Where Alfred gave a new meaning to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, as he found it in Boethius, four centuries later one of the southern French Cathar preachers, Pierre Authié, elaborated an otherworld myth which is quite unknown elsewhere. In the last chapter of my book *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, I cited this mythical narrative in some detail, as it was related by a woman, Sibylle Peire, to the Inquisitor Jacques Fournier, who later became Pope Benedict XII.<sup>36</sup>

During nine days and nights, she said, both angelic and human souls escaped from heaven to the world below. ‘They fell like the small rain. Then the heavenly Father, seeing himself almost deserted by spirits and souls, arose from his throne and put his foot over the hole through which they were falling.’ Yet he gave the deserters leave to return to heaven, ‘in such a way, however, that

bishops and great clerics – since their spirits were the counsellors and gave the advice to move out of heaven – will return there with great difficulty and belatedly'; but simple folk 'will return there swiftly and with ease'. Hell is nothing but the burning up of the earth at the end of time: 'But all human souls will then be in paradise [...] and all will be one, and the soul will love any soul whatever as much as the soul of its own father or mother or children.'

Here the conviction of the final reintegration of heaven is inseparable from an ironic picture of the religious establishment on earth – the bishops and prelates who, in the myth, are cast as the evil counsellors, and who, in the real world outside the myth, try to frighten simple folk with threats of hell. What I had not realized when I wrote about Pierre Authié's myth twenty years ago was how far his final vision – 'all human souls will then be in paradise' – diverges from any Cathar teaching of which we have record. There was indeed a Cathar belief that perhaps most souls may still be admitted later on from hell into heaven – that only Judas, and the Jews, and the wickedest of the wicked, will remain in hell for ever.<sup>37</sup> Yet I know of no Cathar source, other than Pierre Authié's myth, that denies the existence of a hell which is eternal.<sup>38</sup>

Often the greatest stumbling block for the idea of the completeness of heaven was Judas. We have seen how Eriugena coped with this problem; a more surprising attempt to cope was made around 1391 by the Dominican preacher St Vincent Ferrer, born of an English father in Valencia about 1350. We do not have the actual text of Vincent's sermon on Judas, only an account of it that was set down in Latin in 1398.<sup>39</sup> After betraying Christ,

Judas was moved by true, contrite and healing repentance. With all his strength he tried to reach Christ humbly, to ask forgiveness for his treacherous bargain. But because of the thronging crowds that followed and surrounded Christ, Judas was unable to get near him on Mount Calvary. So in his heart he spoke: 'Since I cannot reach Christ with my bodily feet, at least I shall run to meet him on Calvary with the footsteps of my mind, and humbly ask his forgiveness there.' This is what he did when he hanged himself with a rope: then his soul went to Christ on Calvary, asked for forgiveness there and obtained it without delay. Then he ascended into heaven with Christ, and so his soul is in bliss with the other saints.

This report of the sermon does not of itself imply that its preacher had come to doubt the very possibility of everlasting punishments. Yet Vincent must clearly have wanted to argue from a kind of 'limit-case': the sinner whom the Christian world believed to have most deserved damnation was not damned at all – he had ascended into heaven with Christ. Admittedly this was because of his repentance. Yet, given such an interpretation of Judas – even Judas! – the possibility of a heaven that could become complete was opened afresh.

Because of this sermon, the Inquisitor from Aragon initiated a heresy trial of Vincent in Avignon. But there Benedict XIII, who had Vincent as his confessor,

quashed the trial, burning the documents of accusation. And a generation later, in 1455, Vincent Ferrer was canonized in Rome.

Perhaps a decade before St Vincent Ferrer preached his Judas sermon, Chaucer composed his dream vision, *The Parliament of Fowls*.<sup>40</sup> Near the opening of the poem he recalls his reading of Cicero's *Dream of Scipio*, which, like most medieval readers, he read embedded in the commentary that Macrobius wrote about it around CE 400. Chaucer dwells on the Ciceronian and Macrobian images of the afterlife: in the Latin text, the elder Scipio reveals them to his grandson in a dream. Those who in life loved 'comun profit' will, after they die, 'unto a blisful place wende, / Ther as Ioye is that last withouten ende'. With a more Christian nuance Chaucer adds that the just 'shal go, after they dye, / To heven'; they 'comen swiftly to that place dere, / That ful of blisse is and of soules clere'. What of punishments for the wicked? Chaucer, or young Scipio's guide, says:

But brekers of the lawe, soth to seyne,  
And lecherous folk, after that they be dede,  
Shul alwey whirle aboute therthe in peyne,  
Til many a world be passed, out of drede,  
And than, for-yeven alle hir wicked dede,  
Than shul they come unto that blisful place,  
To which to comen god thee sende his grace!

Again Chaucer adds the Christian nuances, of forgiveness and of divine grace, to the pagan exposition that is his source. Yet it is clear that in his context, as in that of Cicero and Macrobius, *all* will eventually attain that blissful place. Scipio's last sentences in Cicero's *Republic*, as his grandson awakes and the work closes, are:

Indeed the spirits of those who have devoted themselves to sensual delights, and have as it were become their slaves, who have violated the laws of gods and men, impelled by sensual passions – when these spirits slip out of their bodies, they are whirled around the earth, and they do not return to this [blissful] place till they have been tossed about for many ages.<sup>41</sup>

Macrobius, commenting, adds explicitly that all must ultimately return:

For it is necessary that every soul [*omnem animam*] should revert to the place of its origin; but the souls who inhabit their body like pilgrims return there swiftly, after leaving the body, returning as it were to their homeland. Those, however, who cling to bodily allurements as their fixed abode, the more force it takes to detach them from these, the later do they return to the world above.<sup>42</sup>

In the end, however, it is necessary for every soul to return – whether we attribute this, like Cicero and Macrobius, to a cosmic law, or see it also as the

working of divine grace. The Christian Chaucer, passing on the thoughts of his pagan authors, allows us, for the space of his dream vision, still another glimpse of the completeness of heaven.

## Notes

- 1 Cf. G. Müller, *Apocatastasis Panton: A Bibliography*, Basle: Missionsbuchhandlung, 1969; this also covers post-medieval writings.
- 2 For the passages from Acts and the Pauline Epistles alluded to in what follows, cf. especially the articles Chr. Lenz 'Apokatastasis' in T. Klauser *et al.* (eds) *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann 1950–, vol. 1, pp.510–16, and H. Rosenau 'Allversöhnung' in H.D. Betz *et al.* (eds) *Religion in Geschichte and Gegenwart*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1998–2006, vol. 1, p.322f.
- 3 Matthew 18:8; 25:41; 25:46.
- 4 From the vast secondary literature, I would signal particularly J. Daniélou, *Origène*, Paris: La Table Ronde, 1948, Ch. V 'Eschatologie'; A. Méhat, 'Apocatastase: Origène, Clément d'Alexandrie, Act. 3, 21', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 1956, vol. 10, 196–214; G. Müller, 'Origenes und die Apokatastasis', *Theologische Zeitschrift*, 1958, vol. 14, 174–90; W. Theiler, 'Ammonius der Lehrer des Origenes', in his *Forschungen zum Neuplatonismus*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1966, pp.1–45.
- 5 *De principiis* III 6, 2–6. I have used chiefly the edition of H. Görgemanns and H. Karpp: *Origenes vier Bücher von den Prinzipien*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976, but have also consulted that of H. Crouzel and M. Simonetti, *Origène, Traité des principes*, 5 vols, SC, Paris: Cerf, 1978–1984.
- 6 *Novissimus inimicus diabolus, qui mors appellatur*: this is the form in which Eriugena (*Periphyseon* V 930c) read and cites the Origen passage. In modern texts of Origen the editors have preferred the reading of the manuscripts which have simply *novissimus inimicus, qui mors appellatur*. Yet the reading that includes *diabolus* 'ne trahit pas la pensée d'Origène': cf. É. Jeuneau, *Études érigéniennes*, Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1987, p.388, n. 129.
- 7 *De principiis* I 6, 3.
- 8 R. Radice (ed.) *Stoici antichi: Tutti i Frammenti raccolti da Hans von Arnim*, 2nd edn, Milan: Bompiani, 1999, fragment 625.
- 9 *De principiis* II 3, 4; Radice, *Stoici antichi*, fragments 626, 628, 629.
- 10 *De opificio hominis*, PG 44, coll. 125–256; M. Cappuyns (ed.) 'Le *De imagine* de Grégoire de Nysse traduit par Jean Scot Erigène', *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale*, 1965, vol. 32, 205–62. Eriugena was not aware of the older translation, by Dionysius Exiguus (s. VI<sup>1</sup>), PL 67, coll. 345–408, of which three manuscripts survive: cf. A. Siegmund, *Die Überlieferung der griechischen christlichen Literatur in der lateinischen Kirche bis zum zwölften Jahrhundert*, Munich-Pasing: Filser, 1949, pp.85, 187f; on Dionysius's translation of Gregory, see also W. Berschin, *Griechisch-lateinisches Mittelalter*, Berne-Munich: Francke, 1980, p.103f.
- 11 *De opificio hominis*, PG 44, cap. 17, coll. 188C–89A (*De imagine*, 18, pp.236f); *De opificio hominis*, 21, 201d–4a (*De imagine*, 22, pp.243f).
- 12 E. Mühlberg (ed.) *Oratio catechetica*, Gregorii Nysseni Opera, III 4, Leiden: Brill, 1996, p.67.
- 13 J. Daniélou (ed.) *La vie de Moïse* II 82, SC, 3rd edn, Paris: Cerf, 1968, pp.154, 155, n. 1; see also J. Daniélou, 'L'Apocatastase chez Saint Grégoire de Nysse', *Recherches de science religieuse*, 1940, vol. 30, 328–47.
- 14 J.H. Declerck (ed.) *Maximi confessoris quaestiones et dubia*, Corpus Christianorum. Series Graeca, 10, Turnhout: Brepols, 1982, p.18.
- 15 É. Jeuneau (ed.) *Iohannis Scotti seu Eriugena Periphyseon*, 5 vols, CCCM 161–5, Turnhout: Brepols, 1996–2003 (hereafter *Periph.*). References are to column and part

- of column in the older edition (PL 122), which Jeuneau retains in his margins throughout.
- 16 *Periph.* III 737b–c. I have discussed this thesis of Eriugena’s in more detail in ‘La creazione degli animali’, in *Intellectuals and Poets in Medieval Europe*, Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1992, pp.193–217, esp. pp.199–202, with some further suggestions in *Imagination in the Late Pagan and Early Christian World*, Florence: Sismel, 2003, pp.182–4.
  - 17 *Periph.* V 879a–b. The images look back to Maximus’s *Ambigua ad Iohannem* (see Jeuneau’s note *ad loc.*, p.28), and forward to Bernard of Clairvaux’s *De diligendo Deo*: see É. Gilson, *La théologie mystique de Saint Bernard*, Paris: Vrin, 1947, p.40.
  - 18 *Periph.* V 921c–2a.
  - 19 *Ibid.* 923d–4a.
  - 20 *Ibid.* 927c.
  - 21 *Ibid.* 937a–b.
  - 22 *Ibid.* 970c–1a.
  - 23 *Ibid.* 978d–9b. Later, however (1015a–b), Eriugena, expressly correcting himself, modifies this conception: certainly all will receive some fruit – *naturalia bona* – from the tree of life, which is Christ, but the gifts of fruit will not be equal: only the elect will enjoy the fruit that surpasses nature.
  - 24 *Ibid.* 981a–3d.
  - 25 *Ibid.* 997d.
  - 26 *Ibid.* 1011c.
  - 27 On this see the illuminating monograph of L. Kretzenbacher, *Versöhnung im Jenseits: Zur Wiederspiegelung des Apokatastasis-Denkens in Glaube, Hochdichtung und Legende*, Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, Sitzungsberichte, Munich: Beck, 1971, Heft 7.
  - 28 Prudentius, *Cathemerinon* V 125–36.
  - 29 M.R. James (ed.) *Apocalypsis Mariae Virginis*, in *Apocrypha Anecdota*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893, pp.109–26; M. Erbetta (trans.) *Lettere e Apocalissi*, Turin: Marietti, 1981, pp.447–54. Both Erbetta and James censured the repetitious nature of the descriptions of hell’s torments in this text, Erbetta (p.447) calling it ‘monotono e di cattivo gusto’, James claiming (p.111) that it was ‘quite contemptible as literature, and even positively repulsive in some parts’. Yet this text had an immense diffusion, not only in Greek but in various vernacular adaptations. And while the detailing of infernal punishments is certainly wearying (compare e.g. the *Visio Pauli* or the *Liber Scalae*), there is at least one moment of moving grandeur: ‘And Mary said [to Michael]: I beg you, do me one favour: let me too be punished along with the Christians, for they are the children of my son. And the archangel said: You dwell in Paradise, holy queen, mother of God. And the all-holy one said: I beg you, move the fourteen foundations and the seven heavens, and we shall pray for the Christians so that the Lord God may hear us and have pity on them’ (section 25). Yet this is soon followed by a moment that would have been seen as repulsive, not only today but also by someone such as Eriugena, who was a contemporary of the author of the Greek text. Mary proclaims: ‘I’m not praying, Lord, for the perfidious Jews, but call upon your mercy for the Christians’ (section 26).
  - 30 On Dostoyevsky’s use of the apocryphon (*The Brothers Karamazov* V 5), see Kretzenbacher, *Versöhnung im Jenseits*, pp.72–8.
  - 31 J.H. Charlesworth (ed.) *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, I, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983, p.391f.
  - 32 A. Kurfess (ed. and trans.) *Orac.* II 334–8, *Sibyllinische Weissagungen*, Munich: Heimeran, 1951, p.66.

- 33 *Epistola* 8, 6, in G. Heil and A.M. Ritter (eds) *Corpus Dionysiaca* II, Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1991, pp.188–92.
- 34 W.J. Sedgefield (ed.) *King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius De Consolatione Philosophiae*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899, p.103.
- 35 *De Consolatione Philosophiae* III, m. 12, 49–51. Many translators and interpreters of this poem misconstrue verse 51, as if it said that, by looking back, Orpheus killed (*occidit*) Eurydice anew. But the poem's glyconic metre, a metre in which the penultimate syllable is always short, shows that we must read *Orpheus [. . .] occidit* ('Orpheus dies', or 'died'). Boethius, by setting Orpheus's death at the very moment when he saw Eurydice again, invented a conclusion to the myth which differed from all others that were known. And Alfred, seeing the implication of that death in Boethius's poem, as it were rejoins: 'No, however guilty Orpheus may have been, his guilt does *not* entail his death: he can always recover'. I have discussed the Boethian passage more fully in 'Imágenes mitológicas en la poesía de Boecio', in *Poesía latina medieval*, Siglos V–XV, M.C. Díaz y Díaz, J.M. Díaz de Bustamante (eds) Florence: Sismel, 2005, pp.33–45.
- 36 *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp.211, 317 (where I suggest some corrections, on the basis of the manuscript, Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica, Vat. lat. 4030, to the text as printed in J. Duvernoy, *Le registre de L'Inquisition de Jacques Fournier*, II, Toulouse: Privat, 1965, pp. 406, 411); cf. also *Women Writers* p.316 n. 5.
- 37 See A. Borst, *Die Katharer*, Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1953, p.173; cf. also E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou, village occitan de 1294 à 1324*, Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1975, pp.605–7.
- 38 There is a complete translation, *Écritures cathares*, by R. Nelli (Paris: Editions Le Rocher, 1959); there are also bilingual critical editions, by C. Thouzellier, of the *Livre des deux principes* (SC 1973) and the *Rituel cathare* (SC 1977); her adverse comments on Nelli's work, however, contain much exaggeration.
- 39 Text in H. Fages, *Notes et documents de l'histoire de Saint Vincent Ferrier*, Paris: A. Picard, 1905, p.95.
- 40 The citations below are from *The Parliament of Fowls*, verses 47–84, in *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, W.W. Skeat (ed.) I, 2nd edn, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899, p.337 – an edition that in almost every detail still surpasses the more recent ones. In the final verse cited (84) – 'To which to comen god thee sende his grace' – Scipio augurs for Chaucer, the narrator of the dream, what we might call a fast-track path 'unto that blisful place' (as against having to whirl about the earth in pain till many a world be passed). The verse is also Scipio's somewhat formulaic mode of taking leave of the narrator. In verse 81, 'out of drede' means 'without doubt'.
- 41 *De re publica* VI 29.
- 42 *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis* II 17, 14.

## 5 Heaven, earth and the angels

### Preaching paradise in the sermons of Jacques de Vitry

*Carolyn Muessig*

The Augustinian canon Jacques de Vitry (c.1160–1240) was a successful preacher and prolific sermon composer.<sup>1</sup> Among the exceptional men of his age, he received theological training at Paris before embarking on his peripatetic ecclesiastical career. After completing his studies, he travelled widely, sermonizing to a broad array of audiences. For example, he often preached in the diocese of Liège where the renowned holy woman Marie d'Oignies (d. 1213) attended his sermons;<sup>2</sup> he preached the crusade against the Albigensians in France, German Lotharingia and in the Midi.<sup>3</sup> He also preached the Fifth Crusade.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently he was elected bishop of Acre where one of his main duties was preaching. His final eleven years were spent as cardinal-bishop of Tusculum.<sup>5</sup>

The content of Jacques de Vitry's preaching is indicated in four extant homiletic collections containing over 400 of his sermons.<sup>6</sup> His fourth collection, the *Sermones feriales et communes* treats a topic which lends itself to a consideration of heaven as it has as its theme the first three books of Genesis. From the kaleidoscopic view of heaven presented in these twenty-five sermons, this analysis considers three facets: cosmology, lived experiences of heaven and angelology. Angelology is highlighted predominantly in Jacques de Vitry's sermons for the Archangel Michael and angels (29 September) from his *Sermones de sanctis* collection; therefore, these sermons will also be discussed. Sermons are a key source for understanding the way religious concepts were mediated between the clergy and the laity. Jacques de Vitry's sermons indicate what sorts of theological concepts of heaven preachers were expected to communicate to their audiences.

The *Sermones feriales et communes* are best known for their colourful *exempla* which are generally found at the end of each lengthy sermon.<sup>7</sup> However, the sermons themselves are equally fascinating accounts of thirteenth-century religious life.<sup>8</sup> In them, among other numerous theological and intellectual concerns, we grasp how Jacques de Vitry perceived cosmology. This discussion occurs mainly in the first and second sermons of the *feriales et communes* collection. These two sermons have as their themes respectively, Genesis 1:1–2: 'In the beginning God created heaven and earth' and Genesis 1:3–5: 'And God said: Be light made. And light was made'.<sup>9</sup> The sermons do not systematically present a cosmology, as this is not the primary aim of pastoral theology;

rather the topic is raised when our preacher wants to discuss the literal interpretation of creation. The sermons present an understanding of the physical heaven that is expressed within the broad outlines of ancient astronomy. Based on a simplistic understanding of the classical astronomer Ptolemy (c.85–160), Jacques de Vitry accepted that the world and the heavens were spherical.<sup>10</sup>

His random discussion of cosmology can be systematized as follows: there is the earthly region made up of earth, water, fire and air.<sup>11</sup> This corresponds to the *celum aerium*. Above the earthly region is the firmament consisting of the seven planets which are not fixed into spheres.<sup>12</sup> Counted among the planets are the sun and moon, plus Saturn, Jupiter, Mercury, Mars and Venus which were all located in the *celum ethereum*. Then there is the heaven of fixed stars, that is, the *celum sidereum*. There follows a fourth heaven which Jacques de Vitry defines as the empyrean.<sup>13</sup> Following the tradition set by Basil of Caesarea (d. 379), Bede (d. 735) and Peter the Lombard (d. c.1164), our preacher Christianizes the fiery Ptolemaic empyrean into the heavenly empyrean where the angels and saints reside.<sup>14</sup> The final frontier is the fifth heaven, the place where the divinity is located, or more precisely, the heaven of the holy Trinity, reserved only for God.<sup>15</sup> He explains that there are numerous ways of counting the heavens. Some philosophers distinguish seven heavens, while others count twelve.<sup>16</sup>

In discussing the physical heavens, Jacques de Vitry often uses the term *firmamentum*, but sometimes he uses the term *celum* as in *celum sidereum*. When discussing the place where the blessed and the divinity reside he either uses the term *celum* or *paradisus*.<sup>17</sup> Overall, in addition to the Ptolemaic references, Jacques de Vitry's numbering and terminology of the heavens are influenced by a number of authorities: Isidore of Seville (d. 636), Bede and the *Glossa ordinaria*. But perhaps the most influential source for Jacques de Vitry's literal interpretation of creation is the *Historia scholastica* of Peter Comestor (d. 1178). The *Historia scholastica*, completed around 1173, was intended by its author to be a thorough and literal interpretation of the Bible for clerics who were training in sacred scripture.<sup>18</sup> However, it became a 'bestseller' among the laity and clergy. Translated into several vernacular languages, it was one of the most widely distributed texts in the Middle Ages.<sup>19</sup> In regard to the physical heavens, Jacques de Vitry reproduces almost verbatim the *Historia*:

Firmamentum autem intelligimus quamdam exteriorem mundi huius uisibilem superficiem ex aquis congelatis, ut dicunt, ad instar cristalli solidatam et perlucidam, cetera sensibilia continentem ad similitudinem teste oui, in quo fixa sunt sidera.<sup>20</sup>

Peter Comestor's *Historia* renders the information as follows:

Id est quamdam exteriorem mundi superficiem ex aquis congelatis, ad instar cristalli consolidatam, et perlucidam, intra se caetera sensibilia continentem ad imaginem testae, quae *in ovo est*, et in eo fixa sunt sidera.<sup>21</sup>

Jacques de Vitry's reliance on the *Historia scholastica* in his *Sermones feriales et communes* represents one more way of how this popular work was disseminated. It also indicates his resistance to newer trends which were filtering into the Parisian schools. He was particularly recalcitrant to the new learning of philosophical thought in general, and to Aristotelianism in particular. For example, he argues that some doctors of natural philosophy (*doctores naturalium*) believe that in addition to the four elements of air, earth, fire and water there is a *quinta essentia*, an essence which is incorruptible and unchangeable and that it is above all the elements. Jacques de Vitry objects:

And to this opinion nearly all contemporary doctors of natural philosophy agree. But we, however, do not withdraw from the opinion of doctors of theology and of holy expositors, but we believe that waters are above the firmament, and that the firmament is made from water in the fashion of a solid crystal.<sup>22</sup>

The message was clear: only a basic scientific understanding of cosmology was needed in the field of sacred learning. Here Jacques de Vitry's heaven is an image processed and mediated through the literal eye of the *Historia scholastica*.

While Jacques de Vitry held that science had a limited scope to speculate about the physical heavens, religious practice could impart a palpable understanding of the heavenly empyrean. He turns to the senses within a religious context to establish this impression. For example, in order to show that paradise begins on earth but will be fulfilled in the future, he considers the method of singing an antiphon. First a choir sings a piece of an antiphon and then they sing a psalm; then when the psalm is completed and the whole antiphon is sung, the final note ends with a neuma. The first part of the singing gives a foretaste of eternal joy which one has in the present life; and the antiphon completed by a neuma designates the full joy of eternal happiness.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly the sense of hearing in the religious context of an enclosed garden offers another illustration of experiencing heaven on earth. This is seen in the *exemplum* of the abbot who enters his monastic garden in order to contemplate the joys of heaven. There the abbot is transfixed by a most beautiful bird frolicking with him. The bird sings an exquisite song and when it is over the abbot believes that the avian encounter has lasted for a few moments. However, when he returns to his monastery no one recognizes him and his claim to be their abbot falls on disbelieving ears. The perplexed monks refer to the monastery's catalogue of former leaders to find that he had been abbot 300 years earlier. Jacques de Vitry concludes the *exemplum* with this moral:

And so by this holy man, the Lord shows that one thousand years in eternal beatitude are without tedium, just *as yesterday* which has past by [Psalm 89:4]. How much greater will it [the beatitude] be to see *God face to face* [1 Corinthians 13:12] than to play with a little bird or to hear its song.<sup>24</sup>

The last point raises the issue of another sense needed in the enjoyment of heaven: sight. We find discussion of the beatific vision in the fifteenth and sixteenth sermons, which focus particularly on the earthly paradise having as their respective themes Genesis 2:8–10: ‘And the Lord God had planted a paradise of pleasure from the beginning’, and Genesis 2:15–17: ‘And the Lord God took man and put him into the paradise of pleasure to dress it, and to keep it.’ Jacques de Vitry believed that some sort of vision of heaven could be experienced on earth. Commenting on 2 Corinthians 12:10, where Paul is taken to the third heaven he says:

In this state one is not able to persist for long. For scarcely half an hour there may be silence of this sort in heaven [cf. Apocalypse 8:1], that is, in the soul contemplating celestial things. Just as *the spirit breathes where it wills* [John 3:8], so too it breathes when it wills. For the kingdom of God does not come by watching [and expecting], sometimes it comes and suddenly it withdraws, just as it is written: *I go away and I come back to you* [John 14:28].<sup>25</sup>

Indicating a monastic-type of spiritual progression that prepares the soul to see God, in ‘Sermo 16’, Jacques de Vitry states that because God is above the world no one can see him unless they first transcend to spiritual seeing. This is so because no one can glory in God unless they first completely spurn inconsequential glories.<sup>26</sup> With reference to Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153), Jacques de Vitry argues that the longing for this union is so great that one awaits death eagerly.<sup>27</sup> In an echo of Gregory the Great (d. 604), the soul which has some experience of heaven can withstand anguish in this world knowing that the joys of heaven await in the next.<sup>28</sup> Following the Augustinian tradition, in the heavenly paradise one sees God not with the physical eyes but with the eyes of the mind. The perfect vision of God is in the intellect.<sup>29</sup>

The joy of heaven may be sampled briefly in this life. The taste leaves the individual wanting more while knowing that the desire can only be fulfilled in heaven. During his days as a preacher in Liège Jacques de Vitry supported many devout women who claimed to see and speak to God, but there is no indication of heavenly encounters of this sort in his sermons.<sup>30</sup> Like his presentation of the physical heavens, Jacques de Vitry looks to tradition to explain the experiences of heaven on earth; in this instance he turned to the monastic lineage of thought found in Augustine, Gregory the Great and Bernard of Clairvaux.

By contrast with his fixed use of scholastic and monastic authorities to preach about cosmology and the beatific vision, one finds a more vital influence on Jacques de Vitry’s angelology. As with the study of cosmology, thirteenth-century innovation in angelology occurred partly as a result of the influx of Aristotelian thought which led to a systematization of the subject. Early scholasticism addressed such issues as where angels fit into the cosmology of creation; how one refutes the claim that Lucifer and other fallen angels could be saved; and why some angels chose proudly to rebel against God while

others confirmed their allegiance to him.<sup>31</sup> As we will see, Jacques de Vitry does show interest in these themes. Overall, however, he was not engrossed with the growing scholastic trend in considering angels in themselves. What concerned him more were angels' actions and their implications for human existence.<sup>32</sup>

His emphasis on the relationship between angels and humanity was no doubt shaped by pressing ecclesiastical concerns. In 1215 we know that Jacques de Vitry was in Rome to attend the Fourth Lateran Council as an assistant to the bishop of Liège, Hugh de Pierrepont.<sup>33</sup> One of the main functions of this council, convened by Pope Innocent III (1198–1216), was to address the crisis of Catharism in southern France and northern Italy. Indeed, the first three canons of the council present a revised *credo* and address the problem of heresy.<sup>34</sup> The emphasis of the new *credo* deals with creation, a major point of difference between the dualist Cathars and the monotheistic Catholics. The first canon affirmed: 'We firmly believe and simply confess that there is only one true God, eternal and immeasurable, almighty, unchangeable, incomprehensible and ineffable, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit three persons but one absolutely simple essence, substance or nature.'<sup>35</sup> But what is new in the revised *credo* compared with previous affirmations of orthodox faith is the discussion of angels. Here it is argued that God:

by his almighty power at the beginning of time created from nothing both spiritual and corporeal creatures, that is to say angelic and earthly, and then created human beings composed as it were of both spirit and body in common. The devil and other demons created by God were naturally good, but they became evil by their own doing. Humanity, however, sinned at the prompting (*suggestione*) of the devil.<sup>36</sup>

No council before Lateran IV had incorporated so decisively the theological role of angels and demons in the working of Christian history.<sup>37</sup> This was to some degree a direct response to the Cathars whose traditions and texts spoke of the power of angels, and in particular the struggle in heaven between God and the bad angels.<sup>38</sup> Jacques de Vitry, through his sermons, responded to Cathar angelology by insisting that angels were not equal to God and, just as Lateran IV specified, by showing that humanity fell by Satan's seduction. His angelology and demonology reflect more the practical concerns of a thirteenth-century anti-Cathar preacher rather than the academic pursuits of a systematizing, scholastic theologian. In fact, like many preachers who were products of academic Paris, Jacques de Vitry devoted much of his energy to recruiting both preachers and soldiers to the Albigensian crusade.<sup>39</sup> The tone of this recruitment policy was no doubt influenced by Lateran IV which called for an aggressive policy toward heretics and their supporters.<sup>40</sup>

Part of the process of recruitment was to denigrate Cathar beliefs. Hence it is not surprising that Jacques de Vitry turns his pastoral eye to explaining the fall of Lucifer:

After the angels had been created *there was silence in heaven as it were for half an hour* [Apocalypse 8:1], but Lucifer quickly broke the silence by intoning proudly and saying: I will put my throne in the north [cf. Isaiah 14:13]; *and I will be like the most High* [Isaiah 14:14]. And because of this pride, he who was formerly the Bearer of light, immediately upon crashing down became the Bearer of darkness, and from archangel was transformed into to archdevil, from day into night. Because of this John says in the gospel: *He was a murderer from the beginning, and he did not stand in the truth* [John 8:44]. ‘From the beginning’ means immediately after the beginning, for on the same day he was created he fell, that is on Sunday when *God divided the light from the shade* [Genesis 1:1], that is the good angels from the bad angels.<sup>41</sup>

The issue of when exactly Satan fell was important throughout the history of angelology as some early Christian traditions held that the angels were coeternal with the Father and were creators of the world.<sup>42</sup> Similarly in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Cathars who professed radical dualism claimed that there were two equally powerful, coeternal Gods: the good God creator of the spiritual world and the evil God creator of earth and all that is material.<sup>43</sup> By stating that Satan fell about half an hour after being created on Sunday, the first day of creation, Jacques de Vitry categorically puts the fallen angels into the scheme of Catholic cosmology, that is they were created beings not coeval with or equally powerful as God.

It was also germane to emphasize that God had control over heaven. Some Cathar teachings indicated that Satan ran riot in God’s abode taking a third of the angels and bringing them down to earth. The Cathar text *The Secret Supper* states that Satan ‘ascended even unto the fifth heaven, seducing the angels of the Father invisible’.<sup>44</sup> This notion that Satan could get back into heaven and then exert his influence is neutralized in the *Sermones*. In Satan’s aspiration to be equal to God, the good angels could not stand his stench and God could not bear his pride. Conjuring up the image from Isaiah 34:5 regarding the judgement of the wicked, Jacques de Vitry indicates that God exacted his vengeance by throwing Satan and his supporters out of the heavenly empyrean.<sup>45</sup> This is a key point in anti-Cathar preaching: angels were not equal to God and no angel, good or bad, could enter his heaven of heavens.

Jacques de Vitry’s understanding of angelic interaction with humanity is brought out in detail in two of his sermons on St Michael and the angels from his *Sermones de sanctis* collection. The first sermon has as its *thema* Matthew 18:6: ‘See that you despise not one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father who is heaven.’<sup>46</sup> Here is found an explanation of how angels acted as mediators between heaven and earth. Jacques de Vitry, going back to the tradition of the second-century *Shepherd of Hermas* and John Cassian (d. 435) and following Peter the Lombard, states that there is a good and bad angel given to each individual.<sup>47</sup> In a variety of manners good angels visit humanity. They can consult people sometimes

openly in human likeness; sometimes they may consult people privately or invisibly by speaking within the person just as in Zacharias 2:3: 'And behold the angel who spoke in me.' Jacques de Vitry assures his audience that the angels are near them just like a close friend. Through a kind of ineffable communication they make God's will comprehensible to humans.<sup>48</sup> He makes it clear, however, that while angels can somehow enter our bodies in order to communicate with us, they can never enter our souls for souls are the place of God not angels.<sup>49</sup>

He also discusses how bad angels bring evil thoughts to humanity. The first point is that, although demons can possess the human body as with the case of demoniacs, they, like their counterparts the good angels, are unable to possess the soul; they cannot enter the soul materially, only essentially. Demons operate by suggesting things to the soul but have no ownership or command over it.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless the power of suggestion could be effective enough: 'Evil angels with unjust suggestions inflame human hearts and incite them to evil.'<sup>51</sup>

The perception of how evil angels work in the world is developed in 'Sermo 25' from the *Sermones communes* collection. It is Jacques de Vitry's most explicitly anti-Cathar sermon as it ends with a remarkable 4000 word diatribe against them. Here, he employs an *exemplum* regarding the count of Toulouse's daughter whom Jacques de Vitry remembered from his preaching days in that region. He tells us that she was a Catholic surrounded by heretics who constantly hounded her to convert to Catharism. It happened that when her Cathar mother died, a demon, wanting to lure the good daughter toward Catharism, created an illusion of the dead mother adorned in beautiful clothes and a crown which appeared before the daughter and said: 'See, wretched one, you who never wanted to believe me, what great glory you have lost. And I accepting the good men of the Cathar faith [*bonis hominibus*] and their doctrine am crowned in heaven with glory and honour.'<sup>52</sup> The confused daughter sought the help of the orthodox churchmen [*uiris spiritualibus*] who prayed for the daughter and said mass for her. In turn, these liturgical acts forced the demon to bring the dead mother back to the daughter and say: 'O my daughter, beware, and do not be seduced by these evil men who deceived me, but just as you have begun remain in the Catholic faith!'<sup>53</sup> This unmasking of the devil is a crucial point for Jacques de Vitry. Cathars believed in a struggle between good and evil where evil was the more powerful force in the material world. However, Jacques de Vitry demonstrates that with the help of the church evil can be discerned. Hence, in accordance with Lateran IV, Jacques de Vitry aimed to show that the devil had influence in the world but did not rule it, his only power being suggestion.

At the heart of both Catholic and Cathar angelology was the struggle to develop an apposite theodicy. This is brought out in the second sermon dedicated to St Michael with the *thema* Apocalypse 12:7: 'And there was a great battle in heaven. Michael and his angels fought with the dragon and the dragon fought with the angels.'<sup>54</sup> As discussed above, the sin of pride made the fallen

angels insufferable to God and the good angels.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, Jacques de Vitry believed that Lucifer's presumption and obstinacy rendered his fall unpardonable. God could not forgive Lucifer because the proud angel was motivated by hatred; he had no excuse for sinning. Humanity's fall, however, is redeemable because, although weak, humans are inclined to acts of mercy.<sup>56</sup> This point is a variation of both Peter the Lombard's view, as well as that of Lateran IV, that the devil sinned without any temptation, while humanity sinned through another's initiative.<sup>57</sup> The reason Lucifer carries out this destructive plan is simply because he is a wicked character. In 'Sermo 2' of the *Sermones feriales et communes* Jacques de Vitry argues: Lucifer '*did not stand in truth from the beginning* [John 8:44], that is how humanity was ambushed; out of the motivation of ill-will Lucifer lead humanity to sin and deceitfully seduced the human race'.<sup>58</sup>

The heinous crime of pride in heaven is the first act of schism ever recorded in history. According to Jacques de Vitry, such a terrible crime was worthy of the most severe retribution. This is seen in the example of God's punishment of the schismatics Core, Dathan and Abiron who were swallowed up in an earthquake when they attempted a coup against Moses (Numbers 16:1–50).<sup>59</sup> Later in the sermon he argues again that it was crucial to expel Satan in order to maintain peace:

Therefore this schismatic and scoffer was thrown out of heaven just as Solomon said in Proverbs 22:10: 'Cast out the scoffer and contention shall go with him.' Bernard also says that it is better that one person be destroyed rather than unity.<sup>60</sup>

The justification of Satan's punishment in heaven comes into historical focus when one turns again to the 'Sermo 25'. Here Jacques de Vitry explicitly argues against the Cathars as agents of unrest and disruption. He likens them to schismatics in that that they cause dissonance in their exposition of scripture which they perversely expound not for edification but for attack against Christians.<sup>61</sup> Harkening back to 'Sermo 2' where he states that it was better for Satan to be banished from heaven rather than harmony be destroyed, he rehearses the same justification used for killing the Cathars during the Albigensian Crusade:

Therefore, if the secular power, which *does not bear the sword in vain* [Romans 13:4], had not applied the remedy already the Cathars would have occupied nearly the whole world. But just like one burning house when it is demolished lest others go up in flames, it is expedient to root out one heresiarch lest others are lead into error. Indeed a plant is removed from a garden because of unfruitfulness, a limb is amputated from a body because of infection.<sup>62</sup>

This rationale follows Augustine of Hippo's (d. 430) belief that war against

heretics and schismatics was a form of healing.<sup>63</sup> Augustine also argued that because schismatics and heretics chose separation from the church, violence against them was justified.<sup>64</sup> But the language for the justification of strategic action against heretics becomes more aggressive in the thirteenth-century. The violent idiom of extirpation that Jacques de Vitry employs is closer to Pope Innocent III's rhetoric of heretical eradication used to drum up support for the Albigensian Crusade than to Augustine's argumentation for a just war.<sup>65</sup> In such a context, the casting out of Lucifer from heaven becomes the primary example of a Catholic battleground against schism and heresy. God's punishment of the fallen angels becomes justification for war against schismatics on earth. Fittingly, the *thema* for 'Sermo 25' is Genesis 3:24: 'And he cast out Adam; and placed before the paradise of pleasure Cherubim, and a flaming sword, turning every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.' The killing of the Cathars to protect the Catholic world becomes analogous not only to the expulsion of fallen angels from the heavenly empyrean, but also to the casting out of Adam and Eve from the earthly paradise.<sup>66</sup>

The ideas of heaven as conveyed in the sermons of Jacques de Vitry find a strong resonance in many aspects of thirteenth-century Europe. Despite the influx of Aristotle into the scholastic world of learning, Jacques de Vitry chose to stick with Peter Comestor's biblical digest rather than to advance new and knotty theories of creation. His pastoral comments on cosmology helped perpetuate the *Historia scholastica* as one of the most popular books of the Middle Ages. Furthermore, his discussion of the sensory experience of God and heaven on earth and its ineffableness preserved the teachings of Augustine, Gregory the Great and Bernard of Clairvaux while avoiding explanation of the more controversial heavenly encounters of his contemporary female confesseees. Although keen to maintain traditional views of cosmogony and the beatific vision, he did not hesitate to press forward contemporary and problematic ideas of paradise as a battlefield where good triumphed over evil. Consequently, any blissful image of heaven that these sermons might evoke is obscured by Jacques de Vitry's interpretation of God's retribution of the fallen angels in paradise as a rationalization for brutality on earth.<sup>67</sup>

## Notes

- 1 The best studies on Jacques de Vitry's life include P. Funk, *Jakob von Vitry, Leben und Werke*, Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte des Mittelalters und der Renaissance, 3, Leipzig-Berlin: B.G. Teubner, 1909; reprint edn, Hildesheim: H.A. Gerstenberg, 1973, pp.8–10; J.F. Hinnebusch, *The Historia Occidentalis of Jacques de Vitry. A Critical Edition*, Spicilegium Friburgense, 17, Fribourg, Switzerland: The University Press, 1972.
- 2 See Jacques de Vitry, *Vita Mariae Oigniacensis*, D. Papebroeck (ed.), Acta Sanctorum, Iunii 4, Venice, 1743, Lib. II cap. 8, par. 79, p.657; see also cap. 7, par. 68, p.654.
- 3 Pierre des Vaux-de-Cernay, *Historia Albigensium*, PL 213, col. 626B/C. Guillaume de Puy-Laurens, *Historia Albigensium*, O. Holder-Egger (ed.) MGH, Scriptores, Hanover: Hahn, 1882, vol. 26, pp.596–602, at p.597, ll. 30/34.

- 4 J. Greven, 'Frankreich und der fünfte Kreuzzug', *Historisches Jahrbuch*, 1923, vol. 43:21 and n. 22; P. Alphanéry and A. Dupront, *La chrétienté et l'idée de croisade. Recommencements nécessaires, L'Évolution de l'humanité*, Synthèse collective; section 2, 38 bis, Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1959, vol. 2, pp.153–4.
- 5 See Funk, *Jakob von Vitry*, pp.60–1.
- 6 These collections are the *Sermones dominicales*, *Sermones de sanctis*, *Sermones ad status* and *Sermones feriales et communes*. For a list of the incipits and explicits of these sermons and the manuscripts in which they are contained see J.B. Schneyer, *Repertorium der lateinischen Sermones des Mittelalters für die Zeit von 1150–1350*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters, 43, 11 vols, Münster/Westphalia: Aschendorff, 1969–90, vol. 3 (1971), pp.179–218.
- 7 G. Frenken (ed.) *Die Exempla des Jakob von Vitry. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Erzählliteratur des Mittelalters*, Quellen und Untersuchungen zur lateinischen Philologie des Mittelalters, 5, Munich: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1914; J. Greven (ed.) *Die Exempla aus den Sermones feriales et communes des Jakob von Vitry*, Sammlung mittellateinischer Texte, 9, Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1914.
- 8 There is no complete edition of all twenty-five sermons. However, 'Sermones 1–14' have been edited. See C. Muessig, 'The *Sermones Ferialis* of Jacques de Vitry. A Critical Edition', 2 vols, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Université de Montréal, 1993. Any reference taken from these fourteen sermons will be based on this edition. These will be referred to as *sermones feriales*. References to 'Sermones 15–25' will come from the manuscript, Université de Liège, Centre d'Information et de Conservation des Bibliothèques, Liège 347. These will be referred to as *sermones communes*.
- 9 All biblical references are to the Douay version.
- 10 For a discussion of the reception of ancient cosmology in early scholasticism see C. McDannell and B. Lang, *Heaven: A History*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988, pp.80–2.
- 11 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones feriales*, 'Sermo 1', p.10, ll. 173–6: 'Duo scilicet superiora elementa, id est ignem et aerem, que nomine celi designantur, et duo inferiora, id est aquam et terram'.
- 12 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones feriales*, 'Sermo 4', p.70, ll. 340–4: 'Septem tamen planete qui non sunt fixi in firmamento sub ipso mouentur et contra ipsum, id est luna, sol, Saturnus, Iupiter, Mercurius, Mars et Venus, que mouentur in celo ethereo quod protenditur a regione lunari usque ad firmamentum, sub quo est celum aerium.' Jacques de Vitry does not explicitly state that the planets are not fixed *in spheris*. However, this is implied as the Ptolemaic tradition argued: 'secundum Ptolomæum, liminaria non sunt fixa in sphaeris, sed habent motum seorsum a motu sphaerum.' See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae, Cosmogony (1a.65–74)*, W.A. Wallace (ed.), London: Blackfriars, 1964–79, vol. 10 (1967), 1a, q. 70, a. 1, p.112.
- 13 This discussion is raised in the fourth sermon which has as its theme Genesis 1:7: 'And God made a firmament, and divided the waters, that were under the firmament, from those that were above the firmament.' Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones feriales*, 'Sermo 4', pp.70–1, ll. 347–50: 'Est insuper quartum celum quod est supra celum sidereum, id est celum empireum, in quo sunt angeli et anime sanctorum.'
- 14 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones feriales*, 'Sermo 4', p.70, ll. 347–9: 'Est insuper quartum celum quod est supra celum sidereum, id est celum empireum, in quo sunt angeli et anime sanctorum.' For references to Basil and Bede see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1a, q. 66, a. 3, vol. 10, pp.40–2. For reference to Peter the Lombard see *Sententiae in IV Libris Distinctae*, Liber 2, dist. 2, cap. 4, Grottaferrata: Collegii S. Bonaventurae ad Claras Aquas, 1971, p.340.

- 15 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones feriales*, 'Sermo 4', pp.70–1, ll. 349–52: 'Et est quintum celum quod dicitur celum sancte Trinitatis. De quo Lucifer ait: Ascendam in celum [cf. Isaiah 14:14]. Et de Cristo dicitur: *Qui ascendit super omnes celos* [Ephesians 4:10], uidelicet usque ad celum sancte Trinitatis.' Discussion of the fifth heaven, the heaven of the Trinity, or sometimes as it is called heaven of the heavens (*coeli coelorum*) is found in several medieval authors. See Isidore of Seville, *De natura rerum*, caput 12, 'De coelo', PL 83, col. 981: 'Nomina autem coelorum haec sunt: aer, aether, olympus, spatium igneum, firmamentum, coelum angelorum, coelum Trinitatis.' See also Bede, *In pentateuchum commentarii, Expositio in primum librum Mosis*, PL 91, col. 192B/C; *Glossa ordinaria super Genesis, Liber Genesis*, PL 113, cap. 1, col. 69B; Honorius Augustodunensis, *De imagine mundi*, PL 172, cap. 140, col. 146C.
- 16 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones feriales*, 'Sermo 4', p.71, ll. 353–68: 'Philosophi autem et qui de naturis rerum tractant, celum ethereum distinguunt in septem celos, id est in septem regiones totidem planetarum. Et uidetur aliquibus eorum quod celum sidereum, in quo fixe sunt stelle uel cuius partes sunt stelle, cum sit eiusdem nature cum stellis, non habet motum contrarium motui stellarum. Vnde supra illud dicunt esse aliud celum quod uocant firmamentum; et illud tanta celeritate et tanto impetu mouetur quod omnia que sub se sunt, id est stellas fixas et planetas, secum trahit ab oriente in occidentem, licet motum contrarium habeant ab occidente in orientem, quibus circulos suos diuersis temporibus perficiunt, sicut luna in mense, et sol in anno. Secundum hoc sunt celi duodecim, id est aerium, et septem celi totidem planetarum, celum sidereum, celum uolubile siue firmamentum, celum empyreum, et celum siue preminencia sancte Trinitatis.'
- 17 An example of the term *paradisus* used to describe the place where the angels reside is found in Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones feriales*, 'Sermo 2', p.28, ll. 195–7: 'Mane autem appellat modicam moram qua fuit in Paradiso, antequam contra Deum superbiret. Creatis enim angelis, *factum est silentium in celo quasi hora media* [Apocalypse 8:1].' This passage is in reference to the angel Lucifer in his prelapsarian state.
- 18 M.C. Sherwood-Smith, *Studies in the Reception of the Historia Scholastica of Peter Comestor: The Schwarzälder Predigten, the Weltchronik of Rudolf von Ems, The Scolastica of Jacob van Maerlant and the Historiebijbel van 1360*, Medium Ævum Monographs, 20, Oxford: The Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 2000, p.2.
- 19 J.H. Morey, 'Peter Comestor, Biblical Paraphrase, and The Medieval Popular Bible', *Speculum*, 1993, vol. 68, no. 1, 6–35.
- 20 The discussion of the firmament is taken from the third sermon which has as its theme Genesis 1:6: 'And God said: Let there be a firmament amidst the waters'. Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones feriales*, 'Sermo 3', p.44, ll. 42–51: 'We understand the firmament to be like an outer, visible, upper surface of this world made out of ice; as they say, similar to the firmness and transparency of a crystal, containing all perceptible things just as if in an eggshell, in which the stars are fixed.'
- 21 P. Comestor, *Historia scholastica*, PL 198, cap. IV, *De opere secundae diei*, col. 1058A.
- 22 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones feriales*, 'Sermo 3', pp.46–7, ll. 102–6: 'Et huic opinioni fere omnes naturalium doctores huius temporis assentiunt. Nos autem ab opinione doctorum theologorum et sanctorum expositorum non recedentes, et aqas supra firmamentum esse credimus, et firmamentum ex aquis in modum cristalli solidatum.' Elsewhere Jacques de Vitry wrote more vociferously of his distrust concerning the influx of Greek learning and natural philosophy into the study of scripture. See Jacques de Vitry, 'Sermo ad scholares' from his *Sermones ad status* collection in J.-B. Pitra (ed.) *Analecta novissima spicilegii Solesmensis altera continuatio*, vol. 2, Paris, 1888; reprint, Farnborough, England, 1967, pp.367–8.

- 23 This discussion occurs in the sixteenth sermon which has for its theme Genesis 2:15–17: ‘And Lord God took man, and put him into the paradise of pleasure, to dress it and keep it’. *Sermones communes*, ‘Sermo 16’, Liège 347, fol. 87va: ‘Hic igitur incipit paradus sanctorum, et in futuro consummabitur quod notatur in cantu psallentium qui prius quamdam particulam anthiphone inchoant, deinde psalmum cantant, postea tota antiphona canitur in cuius fine neuma subditur. Per primum prelibacio eterni gaudii quod habemus in presenti per hoc quod psalmus cantatur [...] Per integram antiphonam cum neumate designatur plenum gaudium iocunditatis eterne.’
- 24 ‘Et ita Dominus uiro sancto ostendit quod mille anni in eterna beatitudine, tamquam *dies hesternae* que preterit [Psalm 89:4], absque ullo tedio erunt. Plus est enim Deum *facie ad faciem* uidere [1 Corinthians 13:12], quam cum auicula ludere aut cantum auicule audire.’ This *exemplum* comes from the seventh sermon which has as its theme Genesis 1:14–15: ‘And God said: Let there be lights made in the firmament of heaven’, Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones feriales*, ‘Sermo 7’, p.124, ll. 420–38. See also Frenken, *Die Exempla*, no. 19, pp.108–9; Greven, *Die Exempla*, no. 19, pp.18–19. For a discussion of the implications of time and impressions of time in medieval culture see R.H. Cross, ‘“Time Past Well Remembered”: The Handling of Time in some Middle English and Old French Texts’, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Bristol, 2004.
- 25 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones communes*, ‘Sermo 15’, Liège 347, fol. 88rb–88va: ‘In hoc autem statu diu non potest persistere. Vix enim *media hora* huiusmodi *silencium* sit in celo [cf. Apocalypse 8:1], id est in anima contemplante celestia. Sicut enim *spiritus* [88va] *ubi wlt spirat* [John 3:8], ita quando wlt spirat. Regnum enim Dei non uenit cum obseruacione, aliquando uenit et subito recedit, sicut scriptum est: *Vado et uenio ad uos*’ [John 14:28].
- 26 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones communes*, ‘Sermo 16’, Liège 347, fol. 87vb: ‘Cum autem Deus supra mundum sit, nemo potest Deum uidere nisi mundum prius spirituali transcendat obtutu; nec potest pure in Deum gloriari nisi qui extrinsecas gloriolas perfecte respuerit.’ Compare Ambrose of Milan, *Expositio euangelii secundum Lucam*, Liber Sextus, PL 15, col. 1689B/C.
- 27 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones feriales*, ‘Sermo 16’, Liège 347, 87vb: ‘Bernardus: O uita secura ubi pura consciencia, ubi absque formidine mors expectatur, ymmo exoptatur cum dulcedine, et excipitur cum deuocione. Preterita sicut in hoc seculo inchoatur infernus malorum in perturbacione consciencie, ita paradus bonorum in contemplacionem, et gaudio consciencie.’ Bernard de Clairvaux’s quote comes from *De laude nouae militae ad milites templi*, cap. 1, PL 182, col. 922B/C.
- 28 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones communes*, ‘Sermo 16’, Liège 347, 88rb: ‘nec contristat eam quidquid ei accidit, omne quod affligit, requiem putat. Transire eciam per mortem appetit ut obtinere plenius uitam possit, funditus in infimis extingui desiderat quo uerius summa conscendat, et tanto magis finienda, quanto uerius infinita et eterna cognoscit.’ See Gregory the Great, *Moralium sive Expositio in librum B. Job*, Book 7, chap. 15, PL 75, col. 775D.
- 29 Here Jacques de Vitry follows closely Augustine’s *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim*, ed. A. Solignac, *Œuvres de Saint Augustin*, vol. 49, Paris: Brouwer, 1972, Book 12, paragraphs 25.52–31.59, pp.418–36. Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones communes*, ‘Sermo 16’, Liège 347, 87vb–88ra: ‘Ponit igitur Dominus hominem in paradiso spiritualis delectacionis, quando in illam regionem spiritualium, spiritus attollitur ubi sine ulla corporum similitudine perspicua ueritas cernitur, ibi uirtutes anime non sunt operose seu laboriose, ubi beata uita in suo fonte bibitur absque uisione corporali que fit per sensus et ymaginaria qua non corpora, sed corporum ymagines cernimus. In hac autem tercia intellectuali, claritas Dei non per enigmata sed per speciem uidetur; dum anima usque ad tercium celum rapitur ut ore ad os loquatur Deus illi quem dignum tali eloquio fecerit, non ore corporis sed mentis hanc uisionem Moyses desiderabat, qui iam per figuras et enigmata Deum uiderat, dicens:

- Si* [88ra] *inueni gratiam in conspectu tuo, ostende michi te ipsum* [Exodus 33:13]. Et Dominus in Numeri ad Aaron et Mariam: *Si fuerit propheta inter uos in uisione apparebo ei uel per supnium loquar ad illum. At non talis seruus meus Moyses, qui in omni domo mea fidelissimus est; ore enim ad os loquar ei, et palam non per enigmata et figuras Deum uidet* [Numbers 12:6–8]. Hec est locutio ineffabilis ubi nemo uiuens uidet Deum, uita scilicet ista qua mortaliter uiuitur in istis sensibus corporis. Nisi enim ab hac uita quasi moriatur homo alienatus a sensibus, ad hanc uisionem non poterit peruenire.<sup>7</sup>
- 30 See Mary Suydam's chapter for examples of this phenomenon. See also Bernard McGinn's chapter for discussion of the beatific vision.
  - 31 For a detailed discussion see M. Colish, 'Early Scholastic Angelology', *Recherches de Théologie ancienne et médiévale*, 1995, vol. 62, 80–109.
  - 32 Peter of Poitiers also exhibited this tendency. See Colish, 'Early Scholastic Angelology', p.93.
  - 33 É. De Moreau, *Histoire de L'église en Belgique: L'église féodale 1122–1378*, 3 vols, Brussels, L'Édition Universelle, 1945, vol. 3, p.137.
  - 34 N. Tanner, 'Introduction: Fourth Lateran Council – 1215', in N. Tanner (ed.) *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Nicaea I to Lateran V*, 2 vols, London: Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990, vol. 1, p.228.
  - 35 'Fourth Lateran Council – 1215', in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Council*, vol. 1, pp.230–71, at p.230. Edition contains the Latin original on the facing page.
  - 36 *Ibid.*
  - 37 Councils before Lateran IV had addressed some aspects of angelology. The synod of Constantinople (543) condemned Origen's (d. 232) theory of apocatastasis. (See Peter Dronke's chapter for further discussion of apocatastasis.) The council of Braga (561) condemned the Manichaean doctrine of dualism. See L.J. Elmer, 'Demon (Theology of)', in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 15 vols, 2nd edn, Washington, DC: Thomson, Gale, 2003, vol. 4, pp.646–50, at p.649. The Lateran Synod of 745 approved 29 September as the feast day of St Michael. See J. Michl, 'Angels (Theology)', in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, pp.418–23, at p.421. See also Paul M. Quay, 'Angels and Demons: The Teaching of IV Lateran', *Theological Studies*, 1981, vol. 42, 20–45.
  - 38 *The Vision of Isaiah* and the *Secret Supper* were well-circulated Cathar texts that discussed these matters. For the Latin version of *The Vision* see *The Vision of Isaiah*, in R.H. Charles (trans.), in *The Ascension of Isaiah, Translated from the Ethiopic Versions and the Latin Translation of the Slavonic, Is Here Published in Full*, London, 1900, pp.98–139. For the Latin version of the *Secret Supper* see R. Reitzenstein, *Die Vorgeschichte der christlichen Taufe*, Leipzig and Berlin: B.G. Teubner, 1929, pp.293–311. For accessible English translations see W.L. Wakefield and A.P. Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1969; *The Vision of Isaiah*, pp.447–58; *The Secret Supper*, pp.458–65. See M. Barber, *The Cathars: Dualist Heretics in Languedoc in the High Middle Ages*, Harlow: Longman, 2000, pp.83–4.
  - 39 See J. Bird, 'The Victorines, Peter the Chanter's Circle, and the Crusade: Two Unpublished Crusading Appeals in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS Latin 14470', *Medieval Sermon Studies*, 2004, vol. 48, 5–28.
  - 40 F.H. Russell, *The Just War in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, pp.196–7.
  - 41 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones feriales*, 'Sermo 2', p.28, ll. 196–206: 'Creatis enim angelis, factum est silencium in celo quasi hora media [Apocalypse 8:1], sed Lucifer cito silencium fregit dum superbe intonans ait: Ponam sedem meam ad aquilonem [cf. Isaiah 14:13], et ero similis Altissimo [Isaiah 14:14]. Et propter hanc elacionem, [8va] qui prius erat Lucifer, protinus corruens, factus est Vmbrifer, et de archangelo archidyabolus, de Lucifero Esperus. Propterea Iohannes in Ewangelio ait: Ille

- homicida erat ab initio, et in ueritate non stetit* [John 8:44], ab initio, id est statim post initium, eadem enim die qua creatus est cecidit, id est die dominica quando *Deus diuisit lucem a tenebris* [Genesis 1:1], id est bonos angelos a malis.’ The Light-bearer, which in Latin is translated as Lucifer, was an interchangeable name for Satan in the Christian tradition. See E. Pagels, *The Origin of Satan*, New York: Random House, 1995, p.48. Some Cathars believed that at his fall Lucifer’s name was changed to Satan; M. Lambert, *The Cathars*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, p.204.
- 42 D. Keck, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp.17–18.
- 43 Most scholars agree that in Languedoc before the Council of St-Félix-de-Caraman (c.1167/1174–1177) mitigated dualism was prevalent and that after the council radical dualism become the more dominant Cathar theology. See Barber, *The Cathars*, 7–9; and Lambert, *The Cathars*, p.162. Mitigated dualism is the belief in only one God and a lesser created being, often the fallen angel Lucifer, who challenged God’s power. With God’s help, Lucifer created the material world and was left to rule it. See Barber, *The Cathars*, p.8
- 44 *The Secret Supper*, in Wakefield and Evans, p.459.
- 45 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones feriales*, ‘Sermo 2’, p.29, l. 216–36: ‘Vnde se posse Deo equari putauit, et ideo celum pondus diaboli. Angeli fetorem eius, Deus elacionem ipsius portare non potuerunt. Vnde Dominus per Ysaïas: *Inebriatus est in celo gladius meus* [Isaiah 34:5], deiciendo scilicet malos angelos et non est inuentus amplius locus eorum in celo. Cum autem esset in celo empireo, et dixerit: Ascendam in celum [cf. Isaiah 14:14], manifestum est quod celum intelligitur Dei celsitudo, cui parificari uolebat.’
- 46 There is no critical edition of the *Sermones de sanctis*. This sermon is found in the thirteenth-century manuscript Douai, Bibliothèque municipale 503, ff. 119r–21v. See also Schneyer, *Repertorium*, vol. 3. p.200, no. 241 where the incipit and explicit are listed. This sermon will be referred to as ‘Sermo de sancto Michaelē I’. Saint Michael sermons in Schneyer’s *Repertorium* are identified by the siglum S70. The *sermones de sanctis* presents sermons to be preached for the feasts of saints throughout the liturgical year, general ideals of sanctity and various liturgical functions, e.g. dedication of altars. Schneyer, *Repertorium*, vol. 3, pp.195–212 lists 144 sermons as belonging to this collection. However, Jean Longère doubts that numbers 310–38 are authentic since they do not appear in the two best manuscripts (Douai, Bibliothèque municipale 503 and Liège, Université de Liège, Centre d’Information et de Conservation des Bibliothèques 345); he believes that only the first 115 sermons are by Jacques. See J. Longère, ‘Un sermon inédit de Jacques de Vitry: *Si annis multis vixerit homo*’, in J.L. Lemaître (ed.) *L’Église et la mémoire des morts dans la France médiévale. Communications présentées à la Table ronde du C.N.R.S. le 14 juin 1982*, Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1986, pp.31–51 (see pp.34–5 and p.38, n. 4).
- 47 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones de sanctis*, ‘Sermo de sancto Michaelē I’, Douai 503, f. 119v: ‘Vnde cuilibet homini datur unus angelus malus ad exercitium [. . .] et unus bonus ad custodiam.’ Regarding good and bad angels in the monastic tradition see A. and C. Guillaumont, ‘Démon (dans la littérature monastique)’, in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, 16 vols and tables, Paris: Beauchesne, 1932–95, vol. 3 (1957), coll. 189–212, at col. 210. See *Shepherd of Hermas*, mandate 6.2. John Cassian, *Collations*, 8, 17.
- 48 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones de sanctis*, ‘Sermo de sancto Michaelē I’, Douai 503, f. 120v: ‘Aliud autem angelorum bonorum ministerium est qui bona nobis consulunt aliquando aperte per subiectas creaturas, aliquando occulte et inuisibiliter suggerendo et in nobis loquendo. Vnde in Zacharias *et dixit ad me angelus qui loquabatur in me* [Zacharias 1:9]. Ipsi enim intra nos sunt ut familiarius quasi per ineffabilem communicationem suam aperiant uoluntatem.’ The term *subiecta creatura* is best understood

- 'in the likeness of humans' as Jacques de Vitry is echoing the tradition of angels appearing in human form to relay messages from God to humanity. See for example Peter Comestor, *Historia scholastica*, cap. 51, 'De tribus angelis susceptis Abraham', PL 198, col. 1098D. In regard to humanity's friendship with angels, Bernard of Clairvaux preaches similarly. See Bernard of Clairvaux, In Ps., *Qui habitat*, 'Serm. 12.10', PL 183, col. 235D.
- 49 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones de sanctis*, 'Sermo de sancto Michaelae I', Douai 503, f. 120v: 'Licet autem sint corporibus nostris tamen animas nostras que non nisi Deum capiunt introire non possunt, anima enim locus est Dei non angelorum.' This point is raised in John Cassian's *Collations* where he argued that it was impossible for anything other than God to penetrate the soul. See John Cassian, *Collations*, 7, 10–13. See also A. and C. Guillaumont, 'Démon', col. 208.
- 50 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones de sanctis*, 'Sermo de sancto Michaelae I', Douai 503, f. 120v: 'Vnde licet diabolus intret in corpora demoniacorum, in animas tamen earum non intrant [...] Demones non materialiter quod essentialiter intrent in animam scilicet per suggestionem non per dominium et potestatem quod extra sunt operantur.' (Note the use of *suggestionem*, the same word used in canon 1 of Lateran IV.) Jacques de Vitry struggles to clarify what he means by angels being essentially in the soul. He uses the analogy of casks of wine stating that good and bad angels are in humanity just as wine is said to be in a cask, for although the wine is surrounded by wood, nevertheless it does not seep into the substance of the wood. 'Dicitur igitur angelus bonus uel malus in homine esse sicut uinum dicitur esse in dolio, licet enim ligno circumdetur tamen infra ligni substanciam non ingreditur.' f. 120v.
- 51 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones de sanctis*, 'Sermo de sancto Michaelae I', Douai 503, f. 121r: 'Mali angeli iniquis suggestionibus hominum corda inflammant et ad malum incitant.'
- 52 'Vide, misera que nunquam michi credere voluisti, quantam gloriam amisti! Et ego bonis hominibus et eorum doctrine acquiescens gloria et honore coronata [Hebrews 2. 9] sum in celis.' Frenken, *Die Exempla*, no. 95, p.144; Greven, *Die Exempla*, no. 98, p.58.
- 53 'Filia mea, caue ne seducaris a pessimis qui deceperunt me, sed in fide catholica sicut cepisti permanere!' Frenken, *Die Exempla*, no. 95, p.144; Greven, *Die Exempla*, no. 98, p.58.
- 54 See Schneyer no. 242, p.200. This sermon will be referred to as Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones de sanctis*, 'Sermo de sancto Michaelae II'. There is another sermon in this collection not considered in the present study dedicated to St Michael and the angels, which has as its theme Daniel 7:10: 'Miliam milium ministrabant ei'. See Schneyer no. 265, p.203. The sermon focuses on the Pseudo-Dionysian divisions of angels into nine orders.
- 55 *Sermones de sanctis*, 'Sermo de sancto Michaelae II', Douai 503, f. 123r: 'Celum enim pondus eius; angeli fetorem ipsius et Deus eius elationem portare non potuerunt.' Similar wording is found in *Sermones feriales*, 'Sermo 2', see note 45 above.
- 56 *Sermones de sanctis*, 'Sermo de sancto Michaelae II', Douai 503, f. 123r: 'Teste autem Bernardo per presumptionem stare non potuit diabolus, per obstinationem non adiciet ut resurgat spiritus uadens et non rediens [cf. Psalm 77:39], uadens per presumptionem, non rediens per obstinationem. Mali autem angeli corrunt irremediabiliter, homo remediabiliter. Non redemit angelum Deus superbum quia inuenta est iniquitas eius ad odium [Psalm 35:3], nullam enim excusationem habuit peccatum, uero hominis fragilis inuentus est ad misericordiam [Proverbs 22:9].' This is similar to Peter of Blois, *Sermones*, 'De sancto Michaelae XXXIX', PL 207, col. 678B–C. The reference to Bernard of Clairvaux is, In Ps., *Qui habitat*, 'Serm. 11.', PL 183, col. 227A–B.

- 57 Petrus Lombardus, *Sententiae in IV Libris Distincte*, Tome 1, Lib. II, dist. 21, cap. 7, p.437.
- 58 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones feriales*, ‘Sermo 2’, p.28, ll. 211–14: ‘*ab inicio in ueritate non stetit* [John 8:44], id est ex quo homo conditus fuit, quem per inuidiam ad peccandum induxit, et fallaciter seduxit’. See also Innocent III, *De contemptu mundi*, ‘De superbia et casu Lucifer’, PL 217, cap. XXXI, col. 729A–D.
- 59 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones feriales*, ‘Sermo 2’, p.29, ll. 216–36: ‘Primum igitur scisma factum est in celo, quod Deus dure uindicauit in angelos corruentes. Postmodum in Chore et Datham et Abyron dure et cum rigore iusticie puniuit. Ex quo patet quam abhominabile sit peccatum scismatis in conspectu summi Dei. Similiter peccatum superbie et elacionis, id est affectus, ille quo angelus primus propriam excellenciam immoderate appetiit. Voluit enim similis esse Altissimo, non per gratiam et per imitationem, sed per potencie equalitatem. Licet aliquibus uideatur quod cum optima naturalia haberet, non creditit simpliciter se posse equari Deo, sed in hoc equiparari uoluit ut nulli subiectus esset, et alii subiecti essent sibi! Sancti tamen expositores senciuunt quod malicia et presumptione excecatus non contulit, nec deliberauit creaturam non posse equari Creatori.’
- 60 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones feriales*, ‘Sermo 2’, p.29–30, ll. 238–65. ‘Eiectus est igitur de celo ille scismaticus et illusor, iuxta illud Salomonis in Parabolis: *Eice derisorem, et exhibit cum eo iurgium*. Teste utique Bernardo: Melius est quod pereat unus quam unitas.’ The quote from Bernard comes from Bernardus, *Epistolae*, 102, 2, in *S. Bernardi Opera*, J. Leclercq and H.M. Rochais (eds), 8 vols, 1957–77, Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, vol. 7 (1974), p.258, ll. 18–19.
- 61 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones communes*, ‘Sermo 25’, Liège 347, f. 146va–vb: ‘Sicut autem dissonancia in affectu et uni[146vb]tate facit scismaticum, ita dissonancia in intellectu facit hereticum, dum Sacras Scripturas peruerse exponunt quas audiunt et legunt non ad edificacionem sed ad Cristianorum inpu gnationem.’
- 62 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones communes*, ‘Sermo 25’, Liège 347, f. 148va–vb: ‘Vnde nisi secularis potestas, que *non sine causa gladium portat* [Romans 13:4], apposuisset remedium, iam fere occupassent totum mundum. Sed sicut una domus succensa quandoque diruitur ne alie succendantur, ita expedit extirpare unum heresiarcham ne alii pertrahantur in errorem. Planta quidem [148vb] amouetur ab orto propter sterilitatem, membrum a corpore propter contagionem.’ I would like to thank Gareth Griffith for alerting me to the fact that *non sine causa gladium portat* is from Romans 13:4.
- 63 For discussion see Russell, *The Just War in the Middle Ages*, p.24.
- 64 See for example Augustine, *Contra litteras Petiliani donatistae libri tres*, lib. 2, cap. 19, par. 43. See also Russell, *The Just War in the Middle Ages*, p. 24.
- 65 See for example Innocent III’s letter to several bishops encouraging them to support a crusade against the Albigensians. Innocent III, ‘Epistola XXVI: Narbonensi, Arelatensi, Ebredunensi, Aquensi, Arelatensi, Ebredunensi, Aquensi, et Viennensi Archiepiscopis eorumque Suffraganeis. De caede Petri de Castronovo. (Laterani)’, PL 215, coll. 1354A–1358A.
- 66 One wonders if the artist who painted the miniature of the ‘Expulsion of the Albigensians from Carcassone in 1209’ in *Grandes Chroniques de France* had a similar idea in mind. Here men and women with eyes downcast, virtually naked are driven out by soldiers from the city gates of Carcassone. The miniature is found in Cotton Nero E. II pt. 2, f. 20v, c.1415. I am grateful to the electronic list medieval-religion, especially John Shinnors and Katherine French, for bringing this image to my attention. The miniature can be viewed from the British Library website Images Online: <http://www.imagesonline.bl.uk/britishlibrary/>.
- 67 I am grateful to George Ferzoco and Ad Putter for reading and commenting on an earlier version of this chapter.

## **Part III**

# **Mystical and visionary traditions**



## 6 Access to heaven in medieval visions of the otherworld

*Robert Easting*

*sufficiat tibi hac vice, permissa vidisse*

[let it suffice you for this time to have seen what you have been allowed to see]

(Vision of Ulrich von Völkermarkt, 1240)<sup>1</sup>

William of Malmesbury tells how St Dunstan, during a meal at Bath, was ‘carried to heaven in his mind [‘*animo caelum transuectus*’], and saw the soul of a certain pupil from Glastonbury being borne into the sacred places of heaven amid loud applause from the angels’ (ii.16.1), and how on another occasion, during sleep, Dunstan ‘escaped in mind to heaven’ (‘*mente in caelum euasit*’), and saw his mother seated on a high throne in heaven during a crowded festival, ready to marry a high king; Dunstan, captivated by the harmonies of ineffable sweetness, is taught a song of praise, which he subsequently teaches to the monks and clerks at Canterbury (ii.27). It was a sign of Dunstan’s asceticism and compunction that ‘his bodily and spiritual sight was cleansed, and he could see with the eyes of both kinds the secrets of heaven [‘*diuina misteria*’] even while he was still burdened with the weight of earth’ (ii.26.5). ‘[H]e saw with his eyes and heard with his ears what other holy men can only long with a great and long-lasting desire should be conceded them in a future life’ (ii.28.3).<sup>2</sup>

Such brief celestial encounters are widely reported in hagiographical writing, for, along with other miracles, they are almost a necessary part of the authenticating experiences of saints’ lives. From the twelfth century on, affective glimpses of heaven are also recurrent, for instance, in eucharistic visions, as when the monk of Savigny (before 1153) takes the bread, looks up and sees the heavens open and Jesus standing there, filling the visionary’s inmost parts (‘*uiscera*’) with unspeakable exultation and inestimable sweetness.<sup>3</sup>

But alongside such frequently recorded fleeting epiphanies of heaven there survives a substantial body of more extensive visionary accounts of the otherworld, variously describing soul-journeys to one or more of the realms of the afterlife, hell, purgatory, the earthly paradise, and the celestial paradise or heaven.<sup>4</sup> This chapter surveys some of them and considers not only something of the variety of what *is* ‘seen’ of, or in, heaven in such visions, but also looks at their careful insistence about what is *not* seen or what *cannot* be recounted,

either because the visionary is not permitted to see heaven proper, or because there is a strict obligation placed on visionaries not to speak of such divine mysteries as they *are* allowed to witness, or because heaven is, strictly speaking, beyond imagination and verbalization. In this literature, the omnipresent so-called 'inexpressibility topos' covers a range of reasons for what is not said or unsayable. It should be noted, however, that in literary or rhetorical terms, unlike Dante most of these texts do not earn the right to say 'I cannot say' by the brilliance of what they *do* say, for, as the *Gawain* poet might put it, Dante is a poetic pearl compared to these (mainly) prose white peas.<sup>5</sup> We find in them none of Dante's verbal dexterity in pursuit of the ineffable, none of the 'conceptual and lexical torsion'<sup>6</sup> of his paradisaical neologisms.

It is a truism of secondary discussions of the medieval afterlife that hell gets described more than heaven. In visionary soul-journey literature of the non-charismatic kind, studied by Carozzi,<sup>7</sup> compared with similar modern near-death experiences by Zaleski,<sup>8</sup> Dinzelbacher,<sup>9</sup> and Van Uytvanghe,<sup>10</sup> and distinguished by Dinzelbacher<sup>11</sup> from the multiple ecstasies experienced usually by women visionaries from the twelfth century on, purgatory gets described more than both hell and the earthly paradise, and the earthly paradise or some other place of joy and rest, some *Vorhimmel*, is described more frequently and fully than heaven.

Just as a saint might be expected to have a vision of heaven (as with Dunstan), so visions of saints in heaven might be part of the miracles authenticating sainthood. Thus, for example, the newly 'martyred' boy saint William of Norwich is seen in heaven sitting on a golden footstool ('scabello residentem aureo') at the feet of Christ enthroned, during a near-death vision of the otherworld experienced by one Lewin of Welney near Ely (1144), and he is also seen dressed in a garment 'in hue and jewels and gold' like that of Christ in majesty above the heavens in another (dream-) vision of the otherworld experienced by a little girl ('uirguncula') from Mulbarton.<sup>12</sup>

Like these, many visions of the otherworld are quite brief, and do not report a lot of detail. Symeon of Durham, for example, recounts the vision seen by Eadwulf (1080), who 'dies' one Sabbath nightfall but revives before sunrise. He is told 'many things concerning the blessedness of the just and the punishments of the damned which he had seen when he had been separated from his body. Further, he said that some whom he had previously known he had recognized amongst the blessed rejoicing in the flowery places; while to certain others who were still alive he foretold that the eternal tortures and torments were prepared for them in hell.'<sup>13</sup> Whether the flowery places are heaven or not is unclear. Similarly, in the vision of the Icelandic woman Rannveig (1198), we are given just a brief description of the place where she sees, or rather can scarcely look upon, the Virgin, within a light as bright as the sun:

Before them there were delightful, smooth meadows, made beautiful with all kinds of flowers and perfumes. There she saw many beautiful mansions and many houses, high and gorgeous so that she thought she would never be able to comprehend their splendour, but they were not all equally splendid.<sup>14</sup>

These varied mansions, prompted by John 14:2, are assigned to various Icelandic bishops. The smooth meadows and perfumes are, of course, fully conventional, and therefore intended to be deemed the more authentic. There are certainly idiosyncratic descriptions in these visions. However, the redactors of the visions, if not also the visionaries themselves, clearly felt the need for their accounts to conform more or less to accepted images of heaven, often biblical. Visionary descriptions then tend to confirm (and are given authority by their likeness to) earlier accounts.

But, of course, this does not mean that heaven is not more fully envisaged in these visions at all. We find in them elaborate reworkings of traditional images of heaven as garden and city, deriving from Genesis and Revelation. The tenth-century Irish Vision of Adamnán gives an extensive description of a multiform heaven, the land of saints, the hierarchies of the heavenly host about the Lord's throne in the court of heaven, the music, the colours of the seven crystal walls of the surrounding city, the sustaining savour of the candles, the door wardens of the seven heavens, and the punishments and rewards for the guilty and the righteous as they pass through, for this text preserves something of the early apocalyptic notion of the punishments which take place in multiple heavens.<sup>15</sup> The text veers between the reticence of inexpressibility and extravagant detail: 'a little out of much is that which we have told',<sup>16</sup> a version of the topos *pauca e multis*.<sup>17</sup>

The Holstein peasant Gottschalk (1189) sees heaven as an enormous city, with houses with transparent walls and benches seating 1000 each.<sup>18</sup> The priest Ulrich von Völkermarkt (1240) sees heaven as a house like a middle-sized city, with high crystal and gold walls, and a tower 200 cubits (or approximately 100 metres) high, with at the top four windows, wherein Cherubim blow on horns of emerald; in the tower dwells the highest wisdom ('summa [...] sapiencia').<sup>19</sup> Ulrich is allowed to look through a window in the wall of this house-as-city heaven and sees the Virgin Mary and saints dancing, wearing fragrant clothing bedecked with gold and precious stones, and bearing palm leaves.

In the late seventh-century Valerius of Bierzo's account of the vision of Maximus, who, like most of these visionaries, appeared to have died and then came back to life, the visionary is welcomed by an angel of light 'in amenissimum locum'. But, as in a number of these visions, it is left unclear exactly where the visionary is. This superlatively beautiful paradise, with its glowing red roses, its glittering white lilies, radiant with purple and saffron brilliance – is this heaven or not? Perhaps it is, for he is told by his angel guide, that if he lives well and is penitent he will return to this place of beauty and remain with the angel for eternity ('si bene egeris, beneque penitueris, mox iterum reversus fueris, in isto amenitatis loco te suscipiam, et tecum permanebis in aeternum').<sup>20</sup> There is no hint in the vision of there being any other place of bliss for eternity. In Valerius's account of the vision of Bonellus, Bonellus, rapt in ecstasy, is promised a return to a spectacular, architecturally sophisticated 'cellula' found 'in amenissimum iucunditatis locum [in the most beautiful place of joy]',<sup>21</sup> a structure that Ciccarese (p.299) has called a baroque *palazzo*. Again,

the visionary is urged to persevere to the end, when he will be taken up into this habitation, which again looks as if it must be heaven, though is not so called.

So, we must not expect heaven, however architecturally or horticulturally elaborate, always to be revealed by name. Texts vary in their usage, not only of such terms as *amenissimum locum*, *paradisum*, *paradisum celestis*, *Syon*, *Ierusalem celestis*, *sanctorum requies*, or simply *celum*, but also in their concern, or lack of it, to distinguish one kind of paradise from another.<sup>22</sup> In the *Visio Tnugdali* (written 1149), one of the longest and most complex of all medieval visions of the otherworld, Yolande de Pontfarcy has distinguished three divisions of paradise (never named as such), separated by three walls, of silver, gold, and precious stones, recalling perhaps the three heavens of St Paul. Though not so called, the last enclosure might well be termed heaven, for here dwell virgins, the nine orders of angels, and saints, and from this height Tnugdál contemplates the glory of everyone below, the punishments endured by the sinners, and the orb of the earth seen as if under a single ray of the sun ('quasi sub uno solis radio');<sup>23</sup> this echoes Gregory the Great's account of Benedict's vision of the world ('uelut sub uno solis radio').<sup>24</sup> If this high place is not heaven, the comprehensive understanding Tnugdál is granted is certainly heavenly:

Non solum autem visus, verum etiam scientia dabatur ei insolita, ita ut non sibi esset opus interrogare amplius aliqua, set omnia sciebat aperte et integre, quecunque volebat.<sup>25</sup>

[He was also given not only vision but extraordinary knowledge, so that he had no more need to inquire about anything but knew clearly and fully everything he wanted.]<sup>26</sup>

But this is a claim for totality of insight that visions of this kind rarely venture. Far more common is the cautious refusal to claim access to such heavenly knowledge. St Paul, quoting Isaiah, had, of course, expressed the essential inconceivability of heaven: 'But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him' (1 Corinthians 2:9 after Isaiah 64:4). And he had also provided the biblical archetype of the brief unspoken vision or audition, his third-person statement of being rapt into paradise, the third heaven, and hearing 'secret words, which it is not lawful for man to utter' (2 Corinthians 12:2-4). Paul's reticence prompted the apocryphal *Apocalypse of Paul*<sup>27</sup> (late fourth century)<sup>28</sup> and its manifold descendants, and with it the whole genre of medieval otherworld visions which came to fill the information gap. But Paul's reticence also prompted the prohibitions that vision texts imposed upon themselves when it came to envisaging heaven; perhaps some visionaries, or the redactors of their visions, were conscious of Augustine's dismissive reference to the *Apocalypse of Paul*'s impudent undertaking to tell precisely what Paul said could not be told.<sup>29</sup> Although many otherworld visions *are* happy to give descriptions of heaven, *more*, I suspect, are not. Many visions of the otherworld skip heaven or

regions of the blessed altogether – they concentrate on the realms of punishment, infernal or purgatorial, as with some later redactions of the *Visio Sancti Pauli*.<sup>30</sup> But the most common form is that indebted to Bede's account of the Vision of Drythelm, which established a shape for the otherworld journey that was almost as influential as the *Apocalypse of Paul* itself.

During his temporary death, Drythelm (c.696) is guided through a fourfold otherworld, but he passes through only the middle two realms and is permitted only glimpses of the extremities: he traverses a purgatorial region that he wrongly thinks is hell, of which he sees only the entrance to the pit, and he enters a paradisaal region that he wrongly thinks is heaven, of which he sees only the outer edge. Of the glorious fragrant field filled with light, the guide tells him, 'non hoc est regnum caelorum quod autumas [this is not the kingdom of heaven as you imagine]'.<sup>31</sup> But they proceed to a much more gracious light with sweetest sound of people singing, and a yet more wonderful fragrance; but disappointment follows:

In cuius amoenitatem loci cum nos intraturos sperarem, repente doctor substitit; nec mora, gressum retorquens ipsa me, qua uenimus, uia reduxit. [When I began to hope that we should enter this delightful place, my guide suddenly stood still; and turning round immediately, he led me back by the way we had come.]<sup>32</sup>

His guide explains that the kingdom of heaven is *near* the place that they *nearly* entered: 'quicumque in omni uerbo et opere et cogitatione perfecti sunt, mox de corpore egressi ad regnum caeleste perueniunt [any who are perfect in every word and deed and thought, as soon as they leave the body, come to the kingdom of heaven]'; those in the paradisaal field departed the body practising good works, 'non tamen sunt tantae perfectionis, ut in regnum caelorum statim mereantur introduci [but they are not in such a state of perfection that they deserve to be received immediately into the kingdom of heaven]',<sup>33</sup> which remains unseen by Drythelm.

For many visionary soul-journeys following in what Zaleski calls the Drythelm 'line', heaven itself is not accessible either because they are not really dead, though they appear to be; or they 'really' are dead, but are not yet sufficiently pure to encounter heaven and are therefore sent back to amend their lives, and to warn others to do likewise.

In other words, in visions of the otherworld, where we might expect to find heaven envisaged, we often find that it is at best glimpsed from afar, and often not even approached.

Thus, in his otherworld vision, Ailsa (early twelfth century, recorded 1200) enters the *Paradysus Dei* but not heaven, for heaven is the final stage not yet accessible to the soul of the visionary during its temporary absence from the body, nor yet accessible to those in paradise. Peter of Cornwall, the visionary's grandson, maintains a clear distinction between these two, similar to Bede's Drythelm: paradise is

campum infinite magnitudinis [. . .] in quo requiescunt anime sanctorum in summa quiete et leticia, donec eis aperiatur ianua celestis curie in qua angeli sunt cum Deo, et multe etiam anime sanctorum que iam a predicto campo illuc transierunt, uel etiam perfectorum anime que statim egressae sunt a corporibus suis celum intrauerunt, et sicut angeli ipsi Deum uident facie ad faciem.

[a field of infinite size [. . .] in which rest the souls of the blessed in utmost quiet and joy, until the gate of the celestial court is opened to them in which the angels are with God, and also the many souls of the blessed who have already passed thither from the foresaid field [of paradise], and also the souls of the perfect who entered heaven as soon as they departed from their bodies, and who, like the angels, behold God face to face.]

The spirit of Ailsi's dead son Pagan, who acts as his guide, himself waits patiently in paradise until he is worthy 'introduci in celum, ubi uident angeli et perfectorum anime Deum deorum in Syon [to be introduced into heaven, where the angels and souls of the perfect see the God of gods in Syon]'.<sup>34</sup> As here, what reported visions of the otherworld reveal of heaven is often what the visionary is told by an otherworld guide rather than what they claim to have seen themselves, and in this instance even the guide is only going by hearsay.

Sometimes heaven is seen or heard only at a distance. An acephalous and anonymous letter among those addressed to Lull reports the vision of a monk<sup>35</sup> (after 757) who sees first an earthly paradise of the living and joyful, full of flowers, and a path leading thence like a rainbow to the first heaven, and others to the second and third heavens, each higher heaven more beautiful than the one beneath, but no further details of these heavens are reported by the author of the letter who cannot recall all the visionary told him – a secondary level of inexpressibility.

On the summit of a mountain in the earthly paradise, accessed via St Patrick's Purgatory in Ireland, Owein (c.1147, text c.1181–1184) looks up and sees the gate of the celestial paradise as a heaven of gold, and he is blessed with the quasi-pentecostal fiery food which descends daily from heaven like rays upon each of the inhabitants of the earthly paradise as they await their entry, a longer or shorter period according to their merits. Owein, alive in the otherworld, is suffused within with such sweetness that he does not know whether he is alive or dead.<sup>36</sup>

The Essex peasant Thurkill (1206) discovers similarly that those in the temple on Mt Joy each day hear the songs from heaven, as if all kinds of musical instruments sounded in concord, and which refresh each hearer with interior sweetness.<sup>37</sup> Along with light, music is, of course, one of the principal manifestations of heaven, supported by the whole structure of the Pythagorean/Platonic/Boethian concept of *musica mundana*, and from c.1330 of the *musica caelestis* of Jacobus Leodiensis.<sup>38</sup> Unlike some visionaries who, as mentioned below, are prohibited from recounting what they have seen, Thurkill is force-

fully reminded of his duty to make known his vision, for he was *eductus*, rapt, led forth, in order that he should make public what he had seen,<sup>39</sup> and when he does speak it is with unwonted facility.

Some visionaries are allowed a little farther: as far, but only as far, as the gate of heaven. The monk Barontus (678/679) passes three gates of paradise but is not permitted to enter the fourth and last; he sees the wonderful splendour and clarity everywhere, but can scarcely look at it for a moment as his eyes are beaten back ('reverberatis oculis').<sup>40</sup> Similarly, according to Boniface, the anonymous Monk of Wenlock (c.717), who has been shown what angels tell him is the 'famous paradise of God', sees across a purgatorial river the immense shining walls of the celestial Jerusalem, but cannot look upon them or upon the souls hastening towards them after their final passage through the river, on account of their brilliance and splendour, which defeat his sight ('reverberatis oculorum pupillis').<sup>41</sup>

Some are allowed to peer inside heaven, like Ulrich who saw the Virgin dancing, but we are not told what they saw beyond the merest commonplaces. Boso of Durham (1095) follows a company of monks towards a wall of immense height in which there seemed to be neither door nor window. *They* pass through, but Boso remains outside, though,

inuenta fenestrella, contemplatus sum per illam campum latissimum et uer-  
nantium flosculorum mira uarietate pulcherrimum, ex quibus admirandi  
suauitas odoris emanabat.

[I found a small window through which I saw a wide plain beautiful with  
the blooming of a marvellous variety of flowers, which gave off a scent of  
wonderful sweetness.]<sup>42</sup>

Boso is ordered to make known what he had seen to the prior of his local monastery.

Some visionaries *are* allowed to see heaven, but it is inexpressible and/or they are not permitted to report what they see or hear, like St Paul ('non licet homini loqui', 2 Corinthians 12:4). Salvius (574) was raised up by two angels and carried to the highest pinnacle of heaven,

ita ut non solum hunc squalidum saeculum, verum etiam solem ac lunam,  
nubes et sidera sub pedibus habere potarem. Deinde per portam luce ista  
clariorem introductus sum in illud habitaculum, in quo omne pavementum  
erat quasi aurum argentumque renitens, lux ineffabilis, amplitudo inenarra-  
bilis.<sup>43</sup>

[until I seemed to have beneath my feet not only this squalid earth of ours,  
but the sun and the moon, the clouds and the stars. Then I was led through a  
gate which shone more brightly than our sunshine and so entered a building  
where all the floor gleamed with gold and silver. The light was such as I  
cannot describe to you, and the sense of space was quite beyond our  
experience.]<sup>44</sup>

A voice as of many waters (Apocalypse 14:2) speaks from within a luminous cloud. Salvius does not report what the voice said.

Stans igitur in loco quo iussus sum, operuit me odor nimiae suavitatis, ita ut, ab hac suavitate reffectus, nullum adhuc cybum potumque desiderarem.

[As I stood in the spot where I was ordered to stand there was wafted over me a perfume of such sweetness that, nourished by its delectable essence, I have felt the need of no food or drink until this very moment.]

The voice requires Salvius to return to the world, where he suffers a tongue swollen and covered with sores: 'Vae mihi, quia talem misterium ausus sum revelare! [Woe is me that I have dared to reveal such a mystery!]', he exclaims, and he prays for forgiveness: 'in simplicitate cordis haec feci (Genesis 20:5), non in iactantia mentis [I did that which I did in the simplicity of my heart, and in no spirit of vainglory]'.

The young Italian boy Alberic (c.1115) is carried upward by a dove and, led by St Peter, he traverses the seven heavens, of the air, Mars, Mercury, the sun, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn, and then, on the apostle's order, is carried

ad locum quendam muris altissimis circumdatum. Et cum super ipsos muros me statuisset, aspexi, que intus erant; iussum tamen michi est, ut nulli hominum ea panderem.

[to a certain place surrounded by very high walls. And when he had placed me upon those walls, I looked, and saw those things which were within; however, it was commanded me that I not reveal them to any man.]<sup>45</sup>

Unlike Salvius, Alberic sensibly does not reveal anything of the celestial city, and says little of any of these heavens, save that the sixth contains the various orders of the saints, angels, and apostles, etc., and the seventh contains the throne of God and the singing Cherubim. Instead, he lists the fifty-one provinces, from India to Samaria, which he flies over on his return journey.

The Yorkshire boy Orm (1125), like Salvius, is led aloft by the archangel Michael, and sees the sun, moon, and stars below him, but much larger than they appear to us. He sees the gates of heaven, but just how delightful they are cannot be told. When led through these gates Orm sees Christ on a most splendid cross, his wounds bleeding (though Orm does not see the wound in his side), and Mary and the apostles all holding golden crosses. After visiting paradise, those outside it, and hell, Orm is reintroduced to heaven, where he now sees the Lord seated on a throne surrounded by angels, and Mary seated at God's right hand, and the apostles on thrones. They are talking together but Orm is not able to understand what they are saying. He sees the Lord hold a sword two-thirds extracted from its sheath, the apostles also holding swords, and Mary praying for all people. 'Hec et alia multa vidi, que nulli hominum mihi revelare licet [I saw these and many other things, which it is not lawful for me to reveal to any man].'<sup>46</sup> He is instructed, however, by his guide to tell the priest Sigar of Newbold what he has

seen, but when Sigar asks him if he saw monks or secular priests in heaven or hell, Orm says, 'Prohibitum est . . . mihi, ne de hoc aliquid tibi dicam [It is prohibited for me to tell you anything about this].'<sup>47</sup> Whether Orm himself was not willing to be drawn on such a question or whether Sigar has invented both the enquiry and the response, we cannot know.

The Cistercian novice Gunthelm<sup>48</sup> (c. 1161) ascends via narrow and steep stairs (106) to the most serene region of pure ether (107), to a small chapel hanging in the air, which is far larger within than without, in which the Virgin sits dressed in gold, and then he passes further through places of sweet-smelling flowers, and is introduced by Raphael into paradise, i.e. heaven (108), a gold-walled city, modelled, as all such cityscapes are, on the Celestial Jerusalem of Revelation,<sup>49</sup> including the fount of living waters. Unlike Thurkill, Gunthelm is prohibited from telling any but his abbot in confession what he has seen (112); when he does start to tell others he is castigated by St Benedict, who deprives him of speech for nine days, though his abbot subsequently makes known the vision for the benefit of pious minds, as he at least was not under orders to keep silent.

A more complex account is given in Adam of Eynsham's report of his brother Edmund's vision in 1196. After thirty-four chapters devoted to purgatory, the text describes the Benedictine novice Edmund's encounters in paradise, but this is not heaven or the celestial paradise but the earthly paradise, as in the Vision of Dryhthelm, a place of sojourn en route from purgatory to heaven. In Chapter 51 Edmund meets in the earthly paradise a certain prior (probably Bartholomew of Eynsham):

Trewly, Y saw hym ful blessydly amonge þe holy spiritys and blessyd  
seyntys yn a ioyful reste, exempte and delyueryd frome al peynys, gladsum  
and mery of þat place þat he was yn, but mekyl more gladder and that  
yncomparable for the certen bydyng that he boode, to haue the sight of God  
(2622–6)

for 'al that were ther yn that place were ordende to be the cytsonnys [citizens] of  
the hye and euerlastyng Ierusalem' (2733–4).

In Chapter 54 Edmund witnesses how Christ crucified appears in a vision to those in the earthly paradise, a vision within a vision, reminiscent of Orm's sight of Christ crucified in heaven. In Chapter 55 Edmund approaches a crystal wall of immense height and length, with a gate wherein a cross rises and falls to admit or keep out members of the throngs flocking towards it. This is the gate of paradise, by which we are to understand the celestial paradise. Edmund, holding the hand of his guide, St Nicholas, is about to enter, when the cross descends and cuts him off from the saint. His guide turns to encourage his faith and Edmund enters as the cross is raised. Stairs rise inside the wall; souls ascend to where Christ is enthroned. But 'Trewly', says Edmund,

Y knew for certen that thys place, were Y saw oure Lorde syttyng yn a  
trone, was not the hye heuyn of heuyns, where the blessid spiritis of angels

and the holy sowlys of ryghtwys men ioyin yn the seyghte of God, seyng Hym yn Hys mageste as He ys, where also innumerable thowsondis of holy spiritys and angels serue Hym and assiste Hym.

(2856–61)

The high heaven of heavens is not seen by the visionary, ‘for no man may cumme to hyt, the whyche no mortalle man seithe, nethyr may see’ (2867–8). Edmund is allowed to witness briefly only ‘the courte of heuyn; and also the ioy of Crystis reynynge’ (2884–5).<sup>50</sup>

The *Visiones Georgii* in St Patrick’s Purgatory present perhaps the most elaborate account of the restrictions on what a visionary might and might not see of the otherworld. Many of the visions of the otherworld discussed so far are experienced during a state of assumed death or in a cataleptic trance. As a pilgrim to the Lough Derg cave in 1353, George Crissaphan, like Owein, is alive, though George’s otherworldly experiences are reported as visionary. The author of the visionary text expends some energy on trying to establish the manner in which George sees features of the otherworld. The fact that George is not dead prevents his proper entry into heaven, as his guide, the archangel Michael (who led Orm), tells him: ‘obstante mortalitate tua in celum non potes ascendere nec dei gloriam sanctorumque eius intueri [on account of your mortality you may not ascend into heaven nor see the glory of God nor of His saints]’.<sup>51</sup> The paradise that he and his guide enter in Visio 21 is, we learn, an image of the celestial paradise, allowing George to see celestial things in so far as they can be seen in corporeal things or corporeal figures (214/3–6). The text strains repeatedly to express the supernal wonder of the place – everything is ‘supra modum’ or ‘plus quam narrari potest [more than can be told]’ (218/5). The orders of souls in the procession he witnesses shine forty-nine times brighter than the sun, in specified colours. But what George sees is not the spiritual world proper but a simulacrum ‘in effigie corporali’ (230/5, 13); the incorporeal is invisible because indivisible and does not make and cannot make a bodily angle (‘indiuisibile autem non facit nec facere potest angulum corporealem’).

Igitur spirituale sensibiliter in sua propria natura videri non potest, quia omne, quod sensibiliter videtur, videtur sub angelo, sicut veritas docet sciencie perspectiue.

(230/7–11 [cf. 248/10–16])

[Therefore that which is spiritual cannot be seen by the senses in its proper nature, because everything which is seen by the senses is seen from an angle, as the truth of the science of perspective teaches.]

In Visio 26 George looks up and sees heaven open, and an infinite light, brighter than if innumerable worlds were turned to burning chaff (243/2–7). In an enormous palace he sees two thrones, Jesus as king on the higher, and the

Virgin as queen on the one slightly lower, ‘cuius regine pulchritudo et dulcedo vultus nec depingi nec enarrari, sed nec sufficienter excogitari posset [the beauty of the queen and the sweetness of her countenance cannot be painted nor told nor adequately imagined]’ (244/8–9). George is permitted to see this sight by Christ’s ‘singularissima gracia [most special grace]’ (247/18). But what he sees is not ‘Christi deitatem nec Christi animam nec Christi anime spirituales gloriam [Christ’s deity, nor Christ’s soul, nor the spiritual glory of Christ’s soul]’ (248/16–18). Michael reminds George that he is not dead, and quotes Exodus 33:20, ‘Non videbit me homo et vivit [Man shall not see me and live]’ (at 213/15 and 249/1–2). He is allowed only to see Christ’s glory ‘quantum pro nunc est tibi possibile videre oculo corporali [in so far as it is possible now for you to see with a corporeal eye]’ (249/12–13). George sees those in paradise in ‘subtilissime ymagines corporum [the most subtle images of bodies]’ (250/15–16); indeed the paradise he sees ‘nouiter a deo formatus est et creatus, vt in ipso, sicut in figura et ymagine celi empyrei [has been newly formed and created by God, as in itself, so in a figure and image of the empyrean heaven]’ (251/11–13), just so that George can see the blessed who are really in the presence of God. When George has gone, it will all vanish totally, and the spirits will return to heaven (252/2–4, 257/17–258/6); this insubstantial pageant faded will leave not a rack behind.

This consciousness of the problem of the living eye perceiving the otherworld of the spirit pervades virtually the entire tradition of visionary literature, and Augustine had, of course, proposed a hierarchy from *visio corporalis* to *visio spiritualis* to *visio intellectualis* in his account of the *raptus Pauli* (2 Corinthians 12:2–4),<sup>52</sup> but, however unsatisfactory we find the account in *Visiones Georgii*, nowhere within the body of otherworld visionary writing is so concerted an effort made as here to give a scientific rationale for what cannot be seen, and to give an explanation for *how* what is seen *is* seen.

Maybe these recurrent restrictions over a millennium on what almost exclusively male otherworld visionaries could see or report of heaven in their one-off visions contributed by contrast to the outpouring of multiple ecstatic heavenly visions, encounters, and auditions with Christ, Mary, and the Deity, of the kind more frequently experienced by women from the twelfth century on. Hildegard of Bingen in 1141 already voices a confidence about her access to heaven which is quite alien to the self-denying ordinances and otherworldly prohibitions of the mainly non-mystical soul journeys. ‘I have said and written these things’, Hildegard proclaims in her *Protestificatio* to *Scivias*, ‘not according to the invention of my mind or that of any man, but as I saw, heard, and perceived them in the heavens through the secret mysteries of God’ (‘Et dixi et scripsi haec non secundum adinventionem cordis mei aut ullius hominis, sed ut ea in caelestibus uidi, audiui et percepi per secreta mysteria Dei’).<sup>53</sup> Whereas God’s heavenly mysteries were largely concealed from the perceptions of earlier otherworld visionaries, for Hildegard and her successors it was God’s mysteries themselves which revealed heaven to a newer mode of mystical or ecstatic contemplation. Hade-wijch of Brabant, in her thirteenth vision, was to claim, for instance, that she

saw the highest heaven, revealed previously to no one.<sup>54</sup> Frequently, of course, mystical texts evince less interest in heaven as a place or space than in the experience of the presence of God, Christ, Mary, angels, and saints, and the visionaries' conversations with them.

Even for Dante power failed high phantasy at the excess of the supreme vision ('A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa'),<sup>55</sup> one might say, especially for Dante, because he understood so clearly the limitations of imagination and metaphor, however extended. Undisturbed by the poetic insights of the *Divina Commedia*, the older and poetically lesser kind of otherworld visionary accounts carried on, with variations as ever. In these visions the beatific union with God is not the end in sight, as it is in contemplative writings.<sup>56</sup> For instance, in *The Revelation of Purgatory* (1422), the spirit of the nun Margaret is seen, having passed through purgatory, being weighed, defended by Mary, and led across a bridge to a white chapel, given a sceptre, and taken in procession to a golden gate, and told, 'Doghtyr, go in at þis ȝate and receyue þe blisse of paradise and of heuyn, þe which þat is þy kynde heritage and þat Adam was in.'<sup>57</sup> This contradictory statement – for she is here entering heaven, having already passed through the earthly paradise – bespeaks a continuing confusion of paradise and heaven, and, like so many soul journeys before it, this fifteenth-century text denies the reader any account of heaven proper. The narrative stops at the gate; the *divina mysteria* remain unrevealed.

This brief survey of many centuries of Christian otherworld visions, of one-off soul-journeys experienced usually by men in a state of near-death physical collapse due to illness, suggests that although some of them do claim an insight into the confines of heaven, or multiple heavens, as in the Vision of Adamnán, the majority do not. Some such texts are brief and give little description of the supposed regions of the afterlife; some are more extensive and concentrate more on the places of punishment and purgation – no real difficulties with providing great detail there; some offer counterbalancing descriptions of the bliss of the saved in the earthly paradise, or some other indeterminate place of rest between purgatory and heaven, in terms familiar from the rhetoric of the *locus amoenus*.<sup>58</sup> But for the most part, unlike some of the intimate mystical encounters of many women contemplatives from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries in particular, the vision texts considered here do not allow themselves to describe heaven at length. The visionaries, and the redactors of their accounts, are conscious of the restrictions placed upon their access to heaven: though seemingly dead at the time of the vision, the visionaries were actually alive, and by that fact alone were debarred from full entry to heaven; or they were 'dead' but were sent back because they were not yet ready for heaven; or, though permitted a glimpse of heaven, they were told not to reveal what they had seen or heard, following the Pauline model; or what they experienced was simply ineffable; or what they were allowed to see and report was only a simulacrum of heaven adjusted to their powers of apprehension, and not heaven proper. Richard of St Victor wrote that descriptions of the afterlife were to be taken in a mystical sense,<sup>59</sup> and some redactors of visions would have agreed with H. of Sawtry,

who, following Hugh of St Victor who follows Gregory the Great and Augustine, points out that spiritual things are said to be seen under the aspect and form of material things ('spiritalia dicuntur uideri quasi in specie et forma corporali').<sup>60</sup> But for the most part the accounts we have been considering are not too concerned about the conundrums of whether or not what is 'seen' in vision is but a seeming physical sign of an unseeable spiritual reality. Although we might expect to find extensive revelations of what medieval people thought of heaven in such texts, it is striking how reticent these are. Even in many other-world visions heaven is hard to envisage in the Middle Ages.

## Notes

- 1 J. Grabmeyer, 'Visio quam Ulricus sacerdos vidit. Die Vision des Papstes Ulrich von Völkmarkt im Jahre 1240', *Mediaevistik*, 1996, vol. 9, 189–227, text pp.210–15 (p.213).
- 2 See *Vita Dunstani*, in William of Malmesbury, *Saints' Lives*, M. Winterbottom and R.M. Thomson (eds and trans.), Oxford Medieval Texts, Oxford: Clarendon, 2002, pp.266–7, 284–7.
- 3 See G. Constable, 'The Vision of Gunthelm and Other Visiones attributed to Peter the Venerable', *Revue Bénédictine*, 1956, vol. 66, 92–114, text pp.113–14.
- 4 For a recent bibliography, see R. Easting, *Visions of the Other World in Middle English*, Annotated Bibliographies of Old and Middle English Literature, 3, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997.
- 5 For a survey of the representation of paradise in the *Divina Commedia* and the popular visions, see A. Morgan, *Dante and the Medieval Otherworld*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 8, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp.166–95.
- 6 The phrase is from F.R. Psaki, 'The Sexual Body in Dante's Celestial Paradise', in J.S. Emerson and H. Feiss (eds) *Imagining Heaven in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, New York and London: Garland, 2000, pp.47–61 (p.50). See also the chapters by Kirkpatrick and Newman in this volume.
- 7 C. Carozzi, *Le voyage de l'âme dans l'au-delà d'après la littérature latine (Ve – XIIIe siècle)*, Collection de l'École française de Rome 189, Rome: École française de Rome, 1994.
- 8 C. Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- 9 P. Dinzelsbacher, *An der Schwelle zum Jenseits: Sterbevisionen im interkulturellen Vergleich*, Freiburg: Herder, 1989.
- 10 M. Van Uytvanghe, 'Les Visiones du très haut Moyen Âge et les récentes "expériences de mort temporaire". Sens ou non-sens d'une comparaison. Première partie', *Instrumenta Patristica*, 1991, vol. 23, 447–81, and 'Les Visiones du très haut Moyen Âge et les récentes "expériences de mort temporaire". Sens ou non-sens d'une comparaison. Seconde partie', *Sacris Erudiri*, 1992–1993, vol. 33, 135–82.
- 11 P. Dinzelsbacher, *Vision und Visionsliteratur im Mittelalter*, Monographien zur Geschichte des Mittelalters 23, Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1981.
- 12 *The Life and Miracles of St William of Norwich*, II.iv, II.v, A. Jessopp and M.R. James (eds), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896, pp.67–77.
- 13 Symeon of Durham, *Libellus de Exordio atque Procurso istius, hoc est Dunhelmensis, Ecclesie: Tract on the Origins and Progress of this the Church of Durham*, D. Rollason (ed. and trans.), Oxford Medieval Texts, Oxford: Clarendon, 2000, p.215.

- 14 C. Larrington (trans.) *Women and Writing in Medieval Europe*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, pp.138–41 (pp.140–1), and see the discussion in C. Larrington, ‘Leizla Rannveigar: Gender and Politics in the Otherworld Vision’, *Medium Ævum*, 1995, vol. 64, 232–49.
- 15 See Dinzelbacher, *Vision und Visionsliteratur*, p.113; J. Stevenson, ‘Ascent through the Heavens, from Egypt to Ireland: Gnostic or Coptic apocryphal antecedents, with particular reference to *Fis Adamnán*’, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 1983, vol. 5, 21–35; and more recently on multiple heavens in early apocalyptic writings, M. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993; A.Y. Collins, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism*, Leiden: Brill, 1996, pp.21–54; and J.E. Wright, *The Early History of Heaven*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- 16 C.S. Boswell, *An Irish Precursor of Dante: A Study on the Vision of Heaven and Hell ascribed to the Eighth-century Irish Saint Adamnán, with Translation of the Irish Text*, Grimm Library, 18, London: Nutt, 1908, p.35.
- 17 See E.R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, W.R. Trask (trans.), London: Routledge, 1979, p.160.
- 18 E. Assmann (ed.) *Godeschalculus und Visio Godeschalci*, Neumünster: Wachholtz, 1979; *Godeschalculus* 50, pp.134–6, *Visio Godeschalci* 22, p.190.
- 19 Grabmeyer, ‘Visio quam Ulricus sacerdos vidit’, p.212.
- 20 Valerius of Bierzo, *Dicta beati Valeri ad beatum Donadeum scripta*, R.F. Poussa (ed.), Madrid, 1942, pp.110–21, repr. with commentary in M.P. Ciccarese, *Visioni dell’aldilà in occidente: Fonti modelli testi*, Florence: Nardini, 1987, p.282.
- 21 Ciccarese, *Visioni dell’aldilà*, pp.286–8.
- 22 See R.R. Grimm, *Paradisus Coelestis Paradisus Terrestris: Zur Auslegungsgeschichte des Paradieses in Abendland bis um 1200*, Munich: Fink, 1977.
- 23 *Visio Tnugdali lateinisch und altheitsch*, A. Wagner (ed.), Erlangen: Deichert, 1882, p.52, ll. 24–5.
- 24 Grégoire Le Grand, *Dialogues*, 2.35.3, SC 260, Paris: du Cerf, 1979, p.238, and see P. Courcelle, ‘La vision cosmique de saint Benoît’, *Revue des Études Augustiniennes*, 1967, vol. 13, 97–117, and P. Dinzelbacher, ‘Ekstatischer Flug und visionäre Weltanschauung im Mittelalter’, in D.R. Bauer and W. Behringer (eds) *Fliegen und Schweben: Annäherung an eine menschliche Sensation*, Munich: Dt. Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1997, pp.111–45, esp. pp.123–5.
- 25 Wagner (ed.) *Visio Tnugdali*, p.53, ll. 5–8.
- 26 *The Vision of Tnugdali*, J.-M. Picard (trans.), with an introduction by Yolande de Pontfarcy, Dublin: Four Courts, 1989, p.153.
- 27 On differing opinions concerning the identification of paradise with the third heaven in the *Apocalypse of Paul*, see A. Hilhorst, ‘A Visit to Paradise: *Apocalypse of Paul* 45 and its Background’, in G.P. Luttikhuisen (ed.) *Paradise Interpreted: Reflections of Biblical Paradise in Judaism and Christianity*, Leiden: Brill, 1999, pp.128–39, esp. pp.138–9.
- 28 This dating has most recently been preferred, against suggested earlier possibilities, by K.B. Copeland, ‘The Earthly Monastery and the Transformation of the Heavenly City in Late Antique Egypt’, in R.S. Boustani and A.Y. Reed (eds) *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp.142–58.
- 29 Augustine, *In Iohannem Tractatus* 98.8, PL 35, 1885.
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- 31 *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, vol. 12, B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (eds and trans.), Oxford Medieval Texts, Oxford: Clarendon, 1969, repr. 1992, pp.492–3.
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- 34 R. Easting and R. Sharpe, 'Peter of Cornwall: The Visions of Ailsa and his sons', *Mediaevistik: Internationale Zeitschrift für interdisziplinäre Mittelalterforschung*, 1988, vol. 1, 207–62 (p.233), extracts from ll. 401–10, 428–9, and see discussion, p.219.
- 35 *Epistola* 115, E. Dümmler (ed.) MGH, *Epistolae III Merovingici et Karolini aevi*, I, Berlin: Weidmann, 1892, pp.403–5, repr. Ciccarese, *Visioni dell'aldilà*, pp.366–8; see also *Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus*, M. Tangl (ed.) MGH, *Epistolae Selectae*, I, Berlin: Weidmann, 1955, pp.247–50; for details see Carozzi, *Le voyage de l'âme*, pp.258–65.
- 36 *St Patrick's Purgatory: Two Versions of Owayne Miles and The Vision of William of Stranton, together with the long text of the Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*, R. Easting (ed.) EETS OS 298, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, pp.144–5, see ll. 885ff.
- 37 *Visio Thurkilli. Relatore ut videtur Radulpho de Coggeshall*, P.G. Schmidt (ed.), Leipzig: Teubner, 1978, p.33, ll. 1–4.
- 38 See R. Rastall, *The Heaven Singing: Music in Early English Religious Drama: I*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996, pp.175–93.
- 39 Schmidt (ed.) *Visio Thurkilli*, p.9, ll. 2–3.
- 40 See Ciccarese, *Visioni dell'aldilà*, p.252.
- 41 See Ciccarese, *Visioni dell'aldilà*, pp.350, 352.
- 42 Symeon of Durham, *Libellus de Exordio*, pp.248–9.
- 43 *Gregorii episcopi Turonensis Historiarum Libri Decem*, VII.1, B. Krusch and Wilhelm Levison (eds) MGH, *Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum*, I.1, Hanover: Hahn, 1951, pp.324–6, repr. in Ciccarese, *Visioni dell'aldilà*, pp.156–60.
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- 47 Farmer, 'The Vision of Orm', p.82.
- 48 Constable, 'The Vision of Gunthelm', text pp.105–13 (I have included page numbers in parentheses). The article was reprinted in G. Constable, *Cluniac Studies*, London: Variorum Reprints, 1980, with Addenda, see pp.3–4.
- 49 For the rich iconography of this version of heaven see, *La Gerusalemme celeste*, Catalogo della mostra, Milano, Università Cattolica del S. Cuore 20 maggio-5 giugno 1983, M.L. Gatti Perer (ed.), Milan: Università Cattolica, 1983.
- 50 Cited with line numbers from the late Middle English translation of the Latin, from the parallel text edition in *The Revelation of the Monk of Eynsham*, R. Easting (ed.) EETS OS 318, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- 51 *Visiones Georgii: Visiones quas in Purgatorio Sancti Patricii vidit Georgius miles de Ungaria A. D. MCCCLIII*, L.L. Hammerich (ed.) Det. Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskab. historisk-filologiske Meddelelser, 18.2, Copenhagen, 1930, p.213, ll. 3–4.
- 52 Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* 12.
- 53 *Hildegardis Sciuas*, A. Führkötter (ed.) CCCM 43, Turnhout: Brepols, 1978, p.6.
- 54 See M. Suydam, 'Hadewijch of Antwerp's Dark Visions of Heaven', in Emerson and Feiss, *Imagining Heaven in the Middle Ages*, pp.119–41.
- 55 *Paradiso* 33.142. According to Charles S. Singleton, *fantasia* is here 'an image-receiving faculty, not image-making', *Commentary to The Divine Comedy*, Bollingen Series LXXX, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975; paperback edition 1991, iii, part 2, p.586.

- 56 See further, Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, pp.88–93.
- 57 M.P. Harley, *A Revelation of Purgatory by an Unknown, Fifteenth-Century Woman Visionary: Introduction, Critical Text, and Translation*, Studies in Women and Religion, 18, Lewiston, New York: Mellen, 1985, p.86.
- 58 See Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, pp.195–200.
- 59 *Benjamin Minor* 18, PL 196, col. 13.
- 60 *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*, ed. Easting, *St Patrick's Purgatory*, p.123, ll. 72–3.

## 7 Bringing heaven down to earth

### Beguine constructions of heaven

*Mary Suydam*

Sacred spaces in Europe during the Middle Ages were sharply divided along two similar but not identical axes: clerical/secular and male/female. In churches, for example, the altar and areas around it were specifically reserved for the priest (clerical and male) to the point of enclosure behind specially constructed screens. In nunneries, the sacristy, the place where sacred vessels were stored, was a masculine preserve in an otherwise feminine space, the convent. And, as Roberta Gilchrist has commented, 'It would seem that the space of any medieval church, parochial or monastic, consisted of an intricate map of gendered spaces.'<sup>1</sup> In addition to the male/clerical altar space, religious women were often segregated from men in choirs or at the north ends of churches. This map of gendered sacred spaces would seem to indicate that clerical men had firm control over access to the sacred within medieval Europe.

Yet in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries a small group of women called beguines, themselves neither monastic nor secular, managed to construct a different kind of sacred space – heaven – one to which they had particular ease of access. Through the mechanism of ecstatic visions, 'holy women' (*mulieres sanctae*) such as Lutgard of Aywières (d. c.1246), Ida of Nivelles (d. c.1232), Hadewijch of Antwerp (fl. 1230s–1240s) and Agnes Blannbekin (d. 1315) brought heaven down to earth so that others could benefit from their unique knowledge. Some of them were so successful at this endeavour that men and women, laity and clerics, accepted and appealed to their abilities in this 'alternate' sacred realm. This chapter examines the functions of their heavenly visions in sanctioning and constructing 'heaven on earth' as well as a particular, localized model of holiness.<sup>2</sup> In addition to this present-oriented model of holiness, a very few beguines were able to serve as interpreters of God's word and to provide ongoing vehicles for transformation through the medium of the written text.

First a word of explanation about the actual spaces inhabited by beguines. Beguines flourished in northern Europe, particularly in the Low Countries, from the thirteenth century through the end of the Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup> They were not nuns, that is, they did not take permanent vows. Yet they were not quite lay people either. Unlike monks and nuns, they did not marry (although some of them had been married, and they were free to leave at any time) and they tended to live in

communal spaces, either by renting houses in urban spaces or by constructing formal beguinages in city centres.

Beguines represented all social classes in Europe. Some were quite wealthy and used rental income to support other, poorer beguines, who may have joined the movement out of economic necessity as much as out of a religious calling. Beguines lived in urban areas and were never isolated in rural convents as were nuns. They worked like other townspeople, generally in some aspect of the cloth trade, and attended local parish churches. As far as we know, these parish churches did not tend to have choir screens. The churches were quite small and would have been, by necessity, less segregated along male–female lines, although the clerical/secular axis remained in place with priestly domination of the altar space.

Beguines were most prominent in the area now known as the southern Low Countries, a very heterogeneous cultural landscape in which distinctions between male and female, religious and lay did not so much define as describe. Many scholars have commented that regional norms were such that neither gender nor religious affiliation strictly limited anyone to a particular sphere of action.<sup>4</sup> It has been argued that during the central Middle Ages polarized notions of gender associated with learned professions, such as that of lawyer and theologian, became generalized to the population at large.<sup>5</sup> This does not appear to have been the case in the southern Low Countries, for the active commercial life in this region encouraged a high degree of literacy across gender and class lines. Both rich and poor, girls and boys, received basic education that included reading and writing. Indeed, it was common for the city to provide free education to those parents or guardians who were otherwise unable to afford it.<sup>6</sup> As Ellen Kittell and others have documented, a high rate of literacy, heritability of both sons and daughters, and the preference for public, oral testimony (in which women participated) contributed to the integration of women at almost all levels of the region's society. Women ruled Flanders as countesses for most of the thirteenth century and as duchesses of Brabant in the fourteenth. They were regents for the Hapsburgs in the sixteenth. They could be found in county administration,<sup>7</sup> bargaining in the markets of the major towns,<sup>8</sup> baking bread, tanning, retailing, growing wheat, butchering meat, selling cloth, and warping loom threads.<sup>9</sup>

Because beguine devotional life also took place in urban and communal settings, beguines were much more visible in public than nuns living in monasteries far from town centres. The beguinages of most Flemish cities such as Lier, Gent, Mechelen, Dendermonde, and Antwerp were located in the centres of these towns. Beguines ran schools and infirmaries, conducted their own trade, and attended parish churches.<sup>10</sup>

The beguine movement was both religious and economic in nature. Some beguines acquired reputations in their communities for 'holiness', primarily through their spectacular visionary experiences. Significantly, these visions are often reported as having taken place, not in the quiet solitude of a monastic cell, but in the choir or at the altar rail of a public parish church. For example, the

visions of Hadewijch of Antwerp, a thirteenth-century beguine, usually begin by describing the festival day and place: 'I sat one day in May, ready to hear the Mass of St. James'; 'On a certain Pentecost Sunday [. . .] Matins were being sung in church and I was there.'<sup>11</sup> Beguine *vitae* report that most of these women had visionary experiences during Mass, while receiving communion, and while singing in the choir. That is, these visions were not private raptures, but were apparent to all. The *vita* of Lutgard of Aywières, for example, details visions during her reception of the Eucharist: '[A priest] saw her face and hands [. . .] soaked and shining as with a recent flow of blood [. . .] So he secretly took a pair of scissors and cut a snippet of her hair.'<sup>12</sup> And on another occasion:

Every Friday in the monastery of St. Catherine, there were the First Vespers [. . .] Now Lutgard was accustomed to sing solo [. . .] It seemed to her that Christ came along under the appearance of a lamb and [. . .] put his mouth to her mouth and thus sucked from her lungs and drew out a melody which was wonderously [*sic*] suave [. . .] The hearers perceived her voice as being more infinitely pleasing than usual, and their hearts were moved to a wondrous devotion.<sup>13</sup>

Similar incidents of Christ's special favour are reported from the *vita* of the beguine Ida of Nivelles. In these examples, audiences (including, significantly, a priest) witness these experiences and are moved by them. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, audience witness and participation was required for validation of claims of holiness.<sup>14</sup>

This phenomenon of public visions enabled beguine holy women to construct an alternate sacred space, one in which Christ vacated his usual space, that of the altar, and came to them. For example, again from the *Visions* of Hadewijch of Antwerp: 'Then Christ came from the altar, showing himself as a child [. . .] and he turned to me and with his right hand took from the ciborium his body, and in his left hand he took a chalice.'<sup>15</sup> This motif also occurs in the *vitae* of other beguines, notably Lutgard of Aywières, Ida of Nivelles, and Agnes Blannbekin.<sup>16</sup> Why would Christ leave the altar and visit these women? According to most of them, these appearances coincided with their visions of heaven. An example from 'Vision 4' of Hadewijch of Antwerp:

At the seventh clap all the heavens of each kingdom of heaven opened in eternal glory. The angel declared: 'All of you [denizens of each heaven] [. . .] be herewith witnesses to me of that which I show to this one in wonder and fear' [. . .] At the same instant I was enclosed in his wings and was in the middle of the kingdom that was himself.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, Christ has now vacated his usual masculine space, that of the altar, and enclosed these women in a new kind of sacred space – heaven. Thus, in their traditional female space they became conduits of heaven. Wherever they were – church nave, choir, at the altar rail – in their visionary moments, heaven

surrounded them. The power of these experiences is demonstrated through supporters' convictions that other people could be drawn into heavenly space just by knowing or being near them. The *vita* of Ida of Nivelles records the story of a priest who, while celebrating Mass, saw a vision of Ida, 'glorified in soul and in body [...] he too was raptured aloft to heaven'.<sup>18</sup> It is quite striking that this phenomenon of witnessed heavenly visions is very rare in stories about medieval male visionaries, who had more access to sacred earthly space than did women.<sup>19</sup>

Another example, from the record of Agnes of Blannbekin, explains the utility of such visions for other people. Her *vita* claims that

Since the hand of God came upon [this] holy person after Mass in church [...] experiencing raptures and enfolded in unspeakable light, she saw a man [...] and in that man she saw that light [...] and in the man and the divine light she saw the elements, and creatures and the things made thereof [...] and she also saw all the human beings who still live on earth.<sup>20</sup>

By gaining access to heavenly space these holy women now possessed knowledge of the inhabitants of the heavenly realms. In fact, many accounts of these women emphasize that they saw the human inhabitants of various heavens, and in many instances, those of purgatory and even hell. For example, Hadewijch's 'Vision 13' states: 'I know the number of these persons [occupants of the highest heaven], which is very small, and I know all those who belong to it, the ones in heaven and the ones on earth.'<sup>21</sup>

Such knowledge had two specific uses. First, for those who accepted their claims, these women were privileged with knowledge not available to anyone else, even priests. It is significant that priests and confessors were often great admirers of such women. For example, Thomas de Cantimpré, a Dominican friar, wrote admiring *vitae* of several beguines, among them Marie d'Oignies and Lutgard of Aywières. Thomas wrote of Lutgard that she was graced with the gift of prophecy: 'I have, over these sixteen years, experienced Blessed Lutgard's prophecy in my regard to have been absolutely true.'<sup>22</sup>

Second, such privilege meant that these holy women, with their unique access to the heavenly realms, could help other people find out what had happened to their loved ones. Ida of Nivelles' *vita* declares flatly:

[The Book of Life] was revealed to her and when she began to read it, she found the names of many persons written, who had already passed away, or else were still surviving in the world. The divine consolation of this sweet vision rejoiced her soul, because she received from it reliable indications about the salvation of a number of persons who were in a perilous position [...] of whom she had doubted whether or not they would be saved.<sup>23</sup>

Ida could also tell people their status in life and often warned them of impending doom: 'Thus it was that she was granted the divine gift for recogniz-

ing the standing of certain persons, both good and evil.<sup>24</sup> Miri Rubin has argued persuasively that clerics recorded stories of these visions, many of which occurred during reception of the Eucharist, as part of a programme to teach Eucharistic theology to the laity.<sup>25</sup> Yet, as the above example demonstrates, the acclaim for beguine holy women's visions was also due to their perceived unique knowledge of heaven.<sup>26</sup>

These two intertwined functions of beguine holy women's heavenly visions – enhanced individual status and societal benefit – shed light on their roles as what Barbara Newman has termed 'apostles to the dead'. Beguine *vitae* are replete with instances in which relatives appealed to holy women in order to find out the status of deceased loved ones. Moreover, beguines often claimed exact knowledge of what was required to free suffering souls from purgatory. Ida of Nivelles, for example, was regularly sought out for such knowledge and advice. Newman argues convincingly that such an 'apostolate' entailed exchanging one type of suffering for another. That is, the living beguine could exchange her suffering, in the form of fasting, flagellation, copious weeping, or illness, for that of the suffering soul in purgatory. In this manner, beguine devotion to, and suffering on behalf of, Christ's broken body (both figuratively and eucharistically), 'could furnish means for the redemptive transfer of pain from one suffering member to another'.<sup>27</sup> Thus, for Newman, although the suffering exchange enabled women to become like Christ, this purgatorial 'apostolate' of suffering generally kept women firmly in their place as passive victims (as she puts it 'a victim united to the supreme Victim').<sup>28</sup>

Newman makes an important point. I believe, however, that redemptive suffering is only part of the story. In order to participate at all in the exchange of suffering, beguine holy women had to be perceived as knowing something that others did not – and the medium for such knowledge was envisioning heaven. Their suffering was but one part of their perceived dedication to the divine. For example, Thomas de Cantimpré wrote of Lutgard that God eventually advised her that she had suffered enough:

God appeared to her while she was wailing with tears and congratulated her on how faithfully she had carried on her bargaining on [others'] behalf [. . .] In place of these lamentings for my sinners, my will is that you be consoled [. . .] Rather would I have you carry on your prayers with a fervour altogether placid in your heart. Let it be through this that you fittingly ward off the Father's wrath, just as you used to do through your tears. This state, thus attained, abode changeless in her up to the very date of her death.<sup>29</sup>

Apparitions of Lutgard after her death claimed that she transferred many souls with her to paradise, demonstrating that the end of Lutgard's suffering did not cause others to regard her as 'less holy'.<sup>30</sup> I argue that it was her access to heaven, not her suffering, that gave Lutgard specialized knowledge and allowed her to act on behalf of others. That is, suffering itself may have been a mechanism for attaining a trance-like state – a technique and not only asceticism,

passive visitation, or a simple exchange. Religious specialists in other traditions regularly practice trance-inducing techniques such as sleep and food deprivation, copious weeping, and flagellation.<sup>31</sup> Understanding beguine suffering as a technique, as well as an exchange, explains why Lutgard and other holy women, after a time, no longer needed to practice such techniques, in the same way that adepts in hypnosis are able to enter trances quickly.

Beguine roles as 'apostles to the dead' may also explain why these holy women's bodies appear to have been accorded a different kind of sanctity than were those of saints. Several *vitae* note that, just as with saints, beguine women's clothing and body parts were regarded as helpful relics. According to Thomas de Cantimpré, villagers believed that Marie d'Oignies's clothing was especially beneficial for women having difficult childbirths, and he personally asked nuns at Lutgard's convent to save her right hand for him as a relic.<sup>32</sup> Generally speaking, however, cults of these holy women's relics did not 'take', that is, they did not continue to be observed for long after their death. One reason for this may be the informal nature of beguine institutional life. Walter Simons has noted that, unlike nuns, beguines never developed an 'institutional memory' of founders and ancestors.<sup>33</sup> Another reason may lie in the present-oriented and personal nature of beguine holiness itself. That is, beguine women's bodies were holy because through them they brought heaven 'down to earth'. Although these visions share some well-known iconographic commonalities such as the appearance of the Eagle of John, they were known for highly individualized depictions of heavenly realms and references to particular people – after all, holy women claimed to see something granted to no one else. After death, this connection between heaven and earth through the medium of the living beguine no longer existed.

A.T. Thayer has noted that late medieval sermons often mention the intercessory role of saints, and adds as an aside that 'saints may also serve as intercessors for those in purgatory, although it is more common for preachers to urge the living to pray for the dead'.<sup>34</sup> It is significant that the dead require living, rather than other dead, intercessors. Perhaps, in order to be 'apostles to the dead' beguines needed to be living beings. The particular ideal of the saint as an exemplary person who has been graced by God with extraordinary virtues and abilities, and who serves as a model of goodness for the ages, was increasingly promulgated from the twelfth century on.<sup>35</sup> But, as many scholars have noted, this ideal was only one part of early concepts about sanctity and slowly took shape through many centuries. It is clear that there were many, often specifically localized, models of holiness in medieval society. In the southern Low Countries, it appears that beguine holy women constructed or responded to a particular model of holiness that regarded living women as holy because of their unique access to and knowledge of heavenly realms and their concomitant unique ability as *living* holy women to pray for the dead souls they encountered there, and to warn living human beings of their probable fates.<sup>36</sup>

Although the beguine as 'living saint' took her holiness and heavenly visions with her to the grave, there was one way in which a few beguines created a

permanent connection between heaven and earth: the literary record. As illustrated above, some clerics were so impressed by performances of beguine holiness that they wrote biographies in which they provided graphic details of the heavenly encounters they so admired. And a handful of beguines wrote their own accounts. These documents raise some intriguing questions. If performances involving woman and audience were so important to a present-oriented piety, why write the visions down? In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, what changed when one moved from oral performance to written text? I believe that one function of these visionary written texts was to provide 'scripts for performance' for future audiences. Additionally, heavenly visions also functioned to provide 'citational authority' generally denied to women in that era. Elsewhere I have detailed my arguments about visionary texts as scripts for performance: now I would like to focus upon the issue of citational authority.<sup>37</sup>

Claire Waters argues persuasively that all medieval biblical interpretations, whether written expositions or oral sermons, needed what she calls 'citational authority', that is, the authority to both cite and be cited.<sup>38</sup> Medieval sermons were in that sense 'explicit performances' – direct interpretation of Scriptures by authorized males to an audience of listeners. But the precedent for medieval preaching was biblical prophetic or charismatic speech, which was theoretically available to inspired laity as well as clerics. Waters theorizes that medieval male preachers thus laboured to limit prophetic performances, and hence the charismatic authority of non-institutional speakers, to the realm of prediction rather than exposition. This goal was largely achieved by the end of the Middle Ages.

Unlike the oral, interpretive, and explicit performance of a sermon, women's visions were 'implicit performances' in the sense that the meaning of their visions was not made explicit to a direct audience at the time of the vision. The performative aspects of visions primarily involved their effects upon others. In the example given earlier, a priest's transformation was effected by witnessing the sight of a holy woman's hair dripping with blood, but he did not 'see' her vision.

I argue that the shift from visionary performance to written visions was the way in which female holy women could offer an interpretive framework, with its citational authority, for their visions. Writers like Hadewijch could cite Scripture, interpret for others the knowledge they had acquired, and depict their own 'vision' of the Christian life in much the same fashion that preachers used their masculine spaces to communicate and interpret the word of God to audiences of both listeners and readers. But to do so successfully the female bodies of beguine holy women needed to be displaced and replaced by a (disembodied) text that provided the masculine citational lineage of Christ or other divine beings who gave them knowledge and authorized their words.

The visions of the thirteenth-century Flemish beguine Hadewijch of Antwerp are a good example of the ways in which beguine holy women's constructions of heavenly space allowed them to overcome the obstacles to women's authoritative preaching. I will examine 'Vision 4' in some detail to demonstrate how heavenly space empowered Hadewijch to construct new interpretations of both heavenly and earthly realms through personal designation as God's messenger.

According to Hadewijch, her visions took place in churches during liturgical services. That is, most of her visions occurred in earthly sacred spaces. As in the *vitae* of beguines examined earlier in this chapter, there was a public dimension to Hadewijch's visionary experience, an architecture within which was constructed a second, heavenly, architecture. Both spaces are now enclosed within the textual architecture. 'Vision 4' begins:

I sat one day in May, ready to hear the Mass of Saint James [...] for it was his feast day. During the Epistle my senses were drawn inwards [...] by a great violent force of a terrible spirit that from within drew me within myself.<sup>39</sup>

Hadewijch's recitation of the exact date and liturgical time carefully connects the personal, the earthly, and the heavenly spaces. The epistle for the festival of St James was Wisdom 5:1–5 (my italics):

Then shall the just stand with great constancy against *those that have afflicted them*, and *found their labours worthless*. These seeing it, shall be troubled with terrible fear, and shall be amazed at the suddenness of their unexpected salvation. Saying within themselves [...] We fools esteemed their life madness, and their end without honour. Behold how they are numbered among the children of God, and *their lot is among the saints*.

The structure of Hadewijch's 'Vision 4' closely follows this text, beginning with the terrible fear and anguish that drew her 'within herself'. Hadewijch then begins to construct the visionary space:

Then was shown to me a rare and unusual image: two kingdoms that seemed of noble richness and noble birth and of the same lineage and power in the whole world. And then came a burning Angel completely ablaze with flaming fire.<sup>40</sup>

At first these kingdoms are described in terms of noble lineage and power, as one would depict earthly secular kingdoms in the Middle Ages. However, the arrival of the fiery angel signifies a different kind of kingdom: the heavenly realm. The burning angel, drawn from imagery associated with seraphim, the angels closest to God, causes all motion within the earthly and heavenly realms to cease:<sup>41</sup>

And he opened his wings wide and struck seven mighty claps, like a *herald* who wishes to *silence everything for his voice*, so that one may hear his message. At the first clap, the moon stood still in her rotation for this silence, which was commanded there. At the second clap, the sun stood still in its rotation. At the third clap, all the stars stood still. At the fourth clap, those who dwell in paradise were awakened from their repose to wonder at

this new happening. At the fifth clap, the heavenly throne stood still. At the sixth clap appeared all the saints, all holy people, living and dead, all who are in heaven, in purgatory, and on earth [. . .] At the seventh clap all the heavens of each kingdom of heaven opened in eternal glory.<sup>42</sup>

Paradoxically eternal 'time' is momentarily disrupted. 'All holy people' – living and dead – witness Hadewijch's vision. Moreover, the vision violently separates sacred time from sacred space, thereby creating a new form of sacred time in which inhabitants of all sacred spaces are public witnesses to her epiphany. For the angel declares: 'All you stopped through this service, and all you revealed through the service of those who serve, be herewith witnesses to me of that which I show to this one in wonder and fear of you [MS. C 'of me'] who stand here.'<sup>43</sup>

The angel also specifically identifies Hadewijch with the righteous of the epistle reading: 'You, *unknown to all your friends and to all your enemies!*'<sup>44</sup> Hadewijch is the focus, or perhaps, the enactment, of the epistle reading, and through that enactment she becomes a vehicle for its interpretation. As a result, Hadewijch is publicly acclaimed in both earthly and sacred realms. Although she is silent as to the identities of those occupying the earthly sacred architecture with her, the witnesses to this revelation presumably are those with aspirations to be holy people. In fact, all possible holy audiences are witness-participants, encompassing the immediate audience in the church as well as future listening audiences. Thus Hadewijch appropriates both the heavenly and the earthly sacred spaces, past and future, for her personal vindication (also experienced by the righteous of the epistle reading).

Opened through the agency of her vision, the two heavens, or kingdoms, are instantly accessible to Hadewijch: 'At the same instant I was enclosed in his wings and was in the midst of his kingdom that was he himself.'<sup>45</sup> The angel then invites Hadewijch to choose one of the heavens in order to enter. This invitation effects an ecstatic experience: 'Then I fell into him as surrounded by sweeter newer faith and that was full of knowledge with the taste of true love.'<sup>46</sup>

The angel twice commands Hadewijch to choose the more powerful of the two heavens. As Hadewijch remains within the ecstatic experience in 'the penetrating taste of sweet love', the angel informs Hadewijch that she has been 'touched by complete faith, which eternally shall make all things new. "Taste and understand the differences between these two kingdoms."<sup>47</sup> Notice Hadewijch's use of sensory images: 'touched by love', 'taste and know'. Hadewijch does not simply gaze passively at the revelation; she interacts with it on multiple sensory levels, and thus truly constructs and inhabits a sacred three-dimensional *space*.<sup>48</sup> She is at various points absorbed in mystical rapture, addressed by, and in turn speaking to, the angel, and acclaimed by the heavenly hosts. The vision also spans the past, present, and future, even as it stops time.

Hadewijch continues: 'And then I saw her whose was one heaven, and my Beloved, each in his own heaven, and each of them equally powerful, in the same service, the same glory, the same all-powerfulness.'<sup>49</sup> Who is 'her' to

whom one heaven belonged? Hadewijch never answers this question directly. However, since the entire revelation vindicates her before the saints, there is no doubt that the 'her' refers to Hadewijch herself.<sup>50</sup> Not only is she 'numbered among the saints', but Hadewijch envisions and enters a heaven which *belongs* to her.

Together the heavens and the saints have attested to Hadewijch's glory, but the revelation does not end with their acclamation. In fact, Hadewijch now constructs an even more complicated visionary sacred space:

Then the Angel spoke to me again: 'Now see me united in unity with your Beloved, and you are my loved one, loved with me. These entire heavens which you see are hers and mine; and these you saw as two kingdoms that were destroyed were our two humanities before they became full grown.'<sup>51</sup>

In this speech Hadewijch and the angel are revealed to be occupants of two types of heavenly spaces. One space is envisioned as two separate kingdoms, each belonging to the Angel and to Hadewijch. In the same space re-envisioned, the separate kingdoms become one, the angel is revealed as Hadewijch's Beloved (Christ), who is united with Hadewijch. Hadewijch also continues to occupy the earthly space of the sanctuary, as does the Angel-Christ who is witnessed by the saints in both heaven and earth. Christ 'belongs' on earth as a man, as does Hadewijch as a human being. But each also 'belongs' in heaven as spiritual beings. Although Christ's simultaneous placement may seem theologically appropriate, Hadewijch's status is less clear. How can she occupy both earthly and heavenly sacred spaces in view of a theology which allows for human perfection only after death? The answer given by many Hadewijch scholars is that the heavenly Hadewijch revealed as united with Christ represents the 'ideal' Hadewijch to whom she aspires.<sup>52</sup> According to this perspective, the earthly Hadewijch is granted a vision of her future heavenly beatification. However, the angel's next words challenge this interpretation:

I was full-grown before and nevertheless we remained equal. And I came into my kingdom yesterday, and you became full-grown afterwards, and nevertheless we remained equal. And *she shall become full grown today* and come tomorrow *with you* into her kingdom, and nevertheless shall remain equal with me.<sup>53</sup>

Hadewijch uses the term 'full-grown' (*volwassen*) to indicate a state of spiritual perfection. Here Hadewijch is both 'you', the human receiver of the vision who is directly addressed by the Angel-Christ, and 'she', witnessed in the vision. But 'you' (the earthly Hadewijch) *became* full grown, while 'she' (the heavenly Hadewijch in the vision) *shall become full grown today*. The roles of the occupants of the earthly and heavenly spaces appear to have been deliberately reversed, or at least confused. And the Angel-Christ declares that in all three states of being, Hadewijch is equal to him.

The revelation of these united heavens, and Hadewijch's ascension in both, serves as a moral exemplar and inspiration for the occupants of both earthly and heavenly sacred spaces. The angel *assumes* the possibility of human perfection. This smooth elision of a difficult theological problem allows Hadewijch to claim the right to state her belief that, through the unceasing pursuit of love, perfection and complete union with God are attainable in this life. Thus Hadewijch's audiences are drawn into her 'vision' of what the goals of humans should be. The angel announces that it is *his* function to explain and Hadewijch's to reveal the steps to such perfection:

You, beloved strong and great lady, have wished, with your doubts, to know from me whereby that might be, and through what works, that she should become full grown like me, so that I should be like her and you should be like me. Let this be in me, and let it be announced to you by my mouth.<sup>54</sup>

Notice that it is Hadewijch's status in *both* sacred places – heaven and earth – that guarantees an audience for her written exposition. Without her access to heavenly revelation, 'announced to you by my mouth', no one would have been interested in preserving her interpretative writings for future audiences. And this revelation's occurrence within the earthly sacred sanctuary is itself one guarantee of the revelation's authenticity.

'Vision 4' ends by commissioning and sanctioning the work of both the heavenly and the earthly Hadewijchs: '*This shall be her work*, with which tomorrow she shall present herself for the satisfaction of us both.'<sup>55</sup> Only two of Hadewijch's visions – 'Vision 1' and 'Vision 4' – conclude with instructions that Hadewijch must follow, rather than with a sentence separating the revelation from its reporting, such as 'I came back to myself' or 'I came out of the spirit'. In this case, sacred timelessness and earthly time intersect. Hadewijch must present herself 'tomorrow' but she also occupies an eternal, timeless space: that of the disembodied literary text.

What can we learn about the beguine construction of heavenly space from this remarkable literary vision? First, Hadewijch clearly situates herself in both earthly and heavenly sacred spaces. She refers to a specific date and liturgical place so that her audience can know the exact type of earthly space which she occupied at the time of the revelation. The vision, which proclaims Hadewijch's salvation, even though she has been despised by all persons, closely follows the text for the very service in which Hadewijch takes part. Her vision and the written text also appropriate well-understood attributes of sacred heavenly spaces and places herself within them.

Second, by clearly defining and establishing herself within pivotal sacred spaces in both heaven and earth, Hadewijch becomes the mouthpiece through which this revelation flows. Elizabeth Petroff has written about the 'authenticating voice' used by ecstatic women to gain a hearing for views which would otherwise have been ignored, because women, especially lay women, lacked

interpretative authority. For example, Catherine of Siena's *Dialogues* and Gertrude of Helfta's *Herald of Divine Love* are written in a divine voice. In Hadewijch's case the authenticating voice (in this case, the Angel-Christ) proclaims her as messenger and spouse so that she can speak in her own voice, which is identified as equal to the voice of God. She has achieved the citational authority generally available only to men. Thus, it is clear that Hadewijch is not shy about proclaiming her own status within both spaces. She is called 'the most perfect person who lived on earth' in the highest heaven. Hadewijch's declaration that all holy people, living and dead, witness her vindication demands that holy people of any era must encounter themselves within the living performance of her textual vision. In that way Hadewijch's textual revelation of salvation, like her vision, has no end.

It is the close connection between the earthly sacred liturgy and the heavenly revelation that serves to authenticate the latter. Furthermore, Hadewijch's status in the intersection of heaven and earth constructs a three-dimensional architecture that enables the incorporation of multiple audiences: the immediate audience present in the church as well as the hearing audiences of the future receiving the text. Hadewijch has indeed brought heaven down to earth. But her success in doing so was dependent upon others' beliefs in this possibility. Like Lutgard, Ida, and Agnes, her holiness was located in her person and was acknowledged by others. Like them, the regional mechanism that gave her this status was the ongoing individual and group construction of heavenly space.

The third-century jurist Ulpianus wrote: 'Strictly speaking, we call holy [*sanctus*] things that are neither sacred [*sacer*] nor profane but are confirmed by a sanction [. . .] What is subject to a certain sanction is holy, even if it is not consecrated by God.'<sup>56</sup> In other words, the 'sacred' and the 'holy' are not identical. As Jacqueline Hamesse notes, '*sacer* refers to a state of being, *sanctus* to the result of an action' generally achieved through a religious rite.

It appears that in the medieval southern Low Countries beguine women became holy, not through clerical rites, but through the accord of others. Unlike the gendered earthly sacred space in which women had no privilege, heavenly space gave beguine holy women with extraordinary abilities a sacred 'room of their own'. Inquisition records of a later time detail the tragic fates of those who were unable to persuade others that their abilities were divine and not demonic. The beguine construction of heavenly space was both an individual and a societal effort.

## Notes

- 1 R. Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: the Archaeology of Religious Women*, London: Routledge, 1994, p.134.
- 2 This model was different from the model being proclaimed by the church of the saint as an eternal intercessor. My research for this chapter is based upon the *vitae* of Ida of Nivelles, Lutgard of Aywières, Ida of Leuven, Agnes Blannbekin, and the self-recorded visions of Hadewijch of Antwerp. It is important to note that, although all of

- these women are regarded as part of the beguine movement, all but Hadewijch and Agnes eventually became nuns. This was a common thread in the lives of those beguines who became prominent for their holiness. The *vita* of Ida of Nivelles was possibly written by the Cistercian Goswin of Bossut, that of Lutgard by the Dominican Thomas de Cantimpré, and the *vita* of Ida of Leuven was anonymously compiled. All three *vitae* exist in very different and interpolated manuscripts. Editions of texts and explanations of the authors and redactions are found in M. Cawley (trans.) *Lives of Ida of Nivelles, Lutgard, and Alice the Leper*, Lafayette: Guadalupe Translations, 1987; and *Ida of Louvain*, Lafayette: Guadalupe Translations, 1990. The revelations of Agnes Blannbekin have been edited in a critical edition; see P. Dinzlbacher and R. Vogeler (eds) *Leben und Offenbarungen der Wiener Begine Agnes Blannbekin (d. 1315)*, Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1994. An English translation based on this critical edition is U. Wiethaus, *Agnes Blannbekin, Viennese Beguine: Life and Revelations*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002. Hadewijch's visions exist in five different medieval manuscripts. A very good modern Dutch edition based on MS. A with facing medieval Flemish is I. Dros (trans.) *Hadewijch: Visioenen*, Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Prometheus/Bert Bakker, 1996. A medieval Dutch edition based on MS. C was published by J. Van Mierlo, *Hadewijch: Visioenen*, Leuven: De Vlaamsche Boekenhalle, 1924–1925.
- 3 Beguines first appeared in the late twelfth century and by 1216 had obtained papal approval for their way of life. Until their condemnation in 1310 they were a widespread religious movement in the Low Countries and Central Europe (beguines in the southern Low Countries continued to flourish long after 1310). The standard work in English on beguines has long been E. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture: With Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene*, New Brunswick: Octagon Books, 1954. More recently, W. Simons's *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200–1565*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001 provides an updated overview of this movement. See also Simons's 'The Beguine Movement in the Southern Low Countries: A Reassessment', *Bulletin de l'institut historique belge de Rome* 1989, vol. 59, 63–105. The origins of the beguine movement continue to be debated. See C. Neel, 'The Origins of the Beguines', in J. Bennett *et al.* (eds) *Sisters and Workers in the Middle Ages*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp.240–60. But see also J. Ziegler, 'Secular Canonesses as Antecedent of the Beguines in the southern Low Countries: An Introduction to Some Older Views', *Studies in Medieval And Renaissance History*, 1991, vol. 13, 114–35; 'Women of the Middle Ages: Some Questions Regarding the Beguines and Devotional Art', *Vox Benedictina*, vol. 3, no. 4, 338–57; and *Sculpture of Compassion: The Pietà and the Beguines in the Southern Low Countries, c.1300–1600*, Brussels: Institut historique belge de Rome, 1992.
  - 4 See E. Kittell and M. Suydam (eds) *The Texture of Society: Medieval Women in the Southern Low Countries*, New York: Palgrave Press, 2004.
  - 5 S. Stuard, 'The Dominion of Gender: Women's Fortunes in the High Middle Ages', in R. Bridenthal, C. Koonz, and S. Stuard (eds) *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, 2nd edn, Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1998, p.130.
  - 6 H. De Ridder-Symoens, 'Stad en kennis' in M. Carlier, A. Greve, W. Prevenier, P. Stabel (eds) *Hart en marge in de laat-middeleeuwse stedelijke maatschappij/Core and periphery in late medieval urban society*, Leuven: Garant, 1996, p.133.
  - 7 E.E. Kittell, 'Women in the Administration of the Count of Flanders' in *Frau und spätmittelalterlicher Alltag*, Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1986, pp.487–508.
  - 8 P. Stabel, 'Women at the Market: Gender and Retail in the Towns of Late Medieval

- Flanders' in W. Blockmans, M. Boone, T. de Hemptinne (eds) *Secretum Scriptorum: Liber alumnorum Walter Prevenier*, Leuven: Garant, 1999, pp.259–76.
- 9 E.E. Kittell and K. Queller, "'Whether man or woman': Gender inclusivity in the town ordinances of medieval Douai", *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 2000, vol. 30, no. 1 (Winter), 98–9.
  - 10 Early Rules for beguinages assume that women will leave the *hof* but regulate the circumstances under which they may do so. For example, the 1246 Rule for beguines in the diocese of Liège lists 'going out without permission' (allene wt te gane plach sonder orloff) as a serious error (reproduced in L.J.M. Philippen, *De Begijnhoven: Oorsprong, Geschiedenis, Inrichting*, Antwerp: Ch. and H. Courtin, 1918, p.307). The 1286 Rule of Mechelen states: 'This is the desire of the house, that one will [live] communally; that no young or full-grown woman who dwells in the house will go outside the house' ('dit sijn de pointe die thoef beghert, dat men houde ghemeinlike: dat ghene joffrouwe or vrouwe, die woent inden hof, ga buten den hove'). The same Rule also states that 'no beguine will go into town without the approval of her housemistress, nor without a companion' ('Negene beghine en sal gaen inde stat orlof hare huus meestersen, noch sonder gesellinne buten der groter poerten vanden hove'). F. de Ridder, 'De Oudste Statuten van het Begijnhof van Mechelen', *Handelingen van de Mechelse kring voor Oudheidkunde*, 1939, vol. 39, 18–29, see pp.24, 28. Both Rules assume that women will leave the *hof* but regulate the circumstances.
  - 11 Quoted in Columba Hart (trans.) *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, New York: Paulist Press, 1980, 'Vision 4', p.273, 'Vision 7', p.280.
  - 12 'Et ecce, vidit faciem ejus et manus, quae tantum nudae patebant, quasi recenti perfusas sanguine relucere; cincinnos vero ejus quasi noctium infusos sanguine. Quod videns, clam forcipe partem illorum in partem tulit, et ad lucem eos in manu ferens.' Lutgard, Book II.23 (Cawley, *Lives*, p.46).
  - 13 'In monasterio S. Catharinae, omni feria sexta, in vespere Sabbathi subsequentis [...] cum versus super responsorium cantabatur (cujus utique versum ob gratiam devotionis Lutgardis sola cantare solebat) videbatur ei interim dum cantaret, quod Christus in specie agni super pectus suum se tali modo locare [...] et os suum ori illius poneret et sic sugendo de pectore illius mirabilis melodiae suavitatem extraheret. Nec dubitare quisdam poterat in hoc cantu divinum adesse miraculum, cum in solo verso illo vox in infinitum solito gratior audiretur. Unde et corda audientium ad devotionem interim mirabiliter movebantur.' Lutgard, Book I.19 (Cawley, *Lives*, p.19)
  - 14 M. Suydam, 'Beguine Textuality: Sacred Performances', in M. Suydam and J. Ziegler, (eds) *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*, New York: St Martins Press, 1999.
  - 15 'Doe quam hi vanden outare hem seluen toenende also een kint, ende dat kint was wan dier seluer ghedane dat hi was in sinen yersten drien jaren; ende hi keerde hem te mi waert ende nam vter ciborien sinen lichame in sine rechte hant ende in sine slinke hant nam hi, enen kelc die sceen vanden outare comende, maer ic en weet wanen hi quam. Daer mede quam hi in die ghedane des cleeds ende des mans dat hi was.' J. Van Mierlo (ed.) *Hadewijch: Visioenen*, vol. I, pp.77–8, ll. 57–74. Unless otherwise noted, all English translations of Hadewijch's writings are my own.
  - 16 For Lutgard, see end note 13 above. Ida of Nivelles: 'Thus when the priest [...] was elevating the Host, Ida saw in the priest's hand the newborn, child, handsome beyond any manner of beauty [...] She stayed in the same spot until High Mass. Just as she had in the previous Masses, so now she saw the Child, but slightly bigger in stature, coming down from the altar towards her. He gave her his embrace and kiss. Cumque sacerdos [...] hostiam elevaret vidit illa in minibus ejusdem sacerdotis puerulum tamquam recenter natum speciosum vere super omnimodum pulchritudinem

omnium parvulorum [...] Permansit autem usque ad Missam majorem in eodem loco et, ut in praecedentium Missarum celebratione viderat, vidit modicum grandiusculae staturae puerulum de altari venientem ad se, qui ei amplexum et osculum praebens.' Ida of Nivelles, Chap. 23 (Cawley, *Lives*, pp.60–1).

Agnes Blannbekin: 'When she went to church on Saturday [...] she saw a lamb white as snow [...] It walked around all the altars where Masses were read, and kissed with its mouth the chasubles of the priests [...] And suddenly she found the lamb standing next to her, kissing her cheeks.' U. Wiethaus (trans.) *Agnes Blannbekin, Viennese Beguine: Life and Revelation*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002, p.105.

17 'Metten seude slaghe worden ontploken alle hemele van elcs hemels rike in eeweliker glorien [...] Doe was ic binnen die uren omvaen in sinen vloghelen ende in die middelt sijns riken, dat hi selve was.' J. Van Mierlo, *Hadewijch: Visoenen*, pp.48–9, ll. 14–32. See also Dros, *Hadewijch: Visoenen*, pp.60–2.

18 'Cumque oculos defixisset in eam, visum est ei videre ipsam in anima et corpore glorificatam. Statimque solo procumbens, viribus corporis destitutus et in excessu mentis factus, in caelum raptus est.' Ida, Chap. 26 (Cawley, *Lives*, p.76).

19 An exception would be possibly St Francis. But see, for example, from a later time, the writings of Richard Rolle. See also the chapter about Henry Suso in this volume.

20 Wiethaus, *Agnes of Blannbekin*, pp.17–18. Lutgard also claimed to know heavenly secrets: 'The Eagle appeared to her in the spirit [...] And [...] she saw that the Eagle was in the act of inserting its beak into her own mouth [...] with the result that [...] no secrets of Divinity any longer escaped her.

Visionis ergo modum moderatius contemplate, vidit quod Aquila ori suo rostrum imponeret [...] ut secundum id quod viventibus possibile est, nulla eam divinitatis secreta laterent.' Lutgard, Book I:15 (Cawley, *Lives*, pp.15–16).

21 'Dat ghetal van desen kinic ende dat es herde cleine ende alle kinicse dijt sijn in hemel ende in erde.' Dros, *Hadewijch: Visoenen*, p.134, ll. 196–8.

22 'Quo sedecim anni fluxerunt medii, prophetiam piae Lutgardis in me veracissimam sum expertus.' Lutgard, Book II:38 (Cawley, *Lives*, p.55).

23 'Quod liber quem videbat erat Liber Vitae. Et cum coepisset in eo legere, invinit multarum nomina personarum scripta, quae vel jam obierunt vel adhuc in hoc mundo superstites errant. Hac dulci visione consolationa divina laetificavit animam suam, quoniam per eam certum accepit indicium de salute plurimorum qui statu periculoso positi [...] de quibus antea dubitaverat utrum salvarentur vel non.' Ida, Chap. 18 (Cawley, *Lives*, p.49).

24 'Ita ut statum quorundam tam de bonis quam de malis, ei daretur divinitus cognoscere.' Ida, Chap. 28 (Cawley, *Lives*, p.81).

25 M. Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp.108–16. Because of her emphasis on visions as a teaching tool, Rubin downplays clerical intellectual belief in visions. She specifically includes the *vitae* produced by Thomas de Cantimpré, Jacques de Vitry, and Caesarius of Heisterbach, noting that 'much of this production took place in the Low Countries and northern France' (p.112).

26 As Mulder-Bakker notes: 'Where we have learned to construct a deep divide between visionary women and learned men, people of the Middle Ages were much more inclined to see them as kindred spirits.' See A. Mulder-Bakker (ed.) *Seeing and Knowing: Women and Learning in Medieval Europe, 1200–1550*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2004, p.8.

27 B. Newman, *From Virile Woman to Womanchrist*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995, p.120.

28 Newman, *From Virile Woman*, p.122. Newman excepts those singular women such as Hadewijch who creatively challenged the paradoxical theological system that promised mercy but threatened punishment.

- 29 'Apparuit ei in fletibus rugienti, et congratulans ei quod miserorum negotium diu fideliter egisset [. . .] Consolatam te esse in his lamentis pro meis peccatoribus volo, nec sustinebo te in fletibus ulterius fatigari; sed placido cordis fervore in oratione persistes, et per hoc, sicut quondam per lacrymas, iram patris dignanter averies. Hic status in ea usque in diem mortis immobilis remansit.' Lutgard, Book II.41 (Cawley, *Lives*, p.58).
- 30 Lutgard, Book III.21 (Cawley, *Lives*, p.85).
- 31 Joanna Ziegler has argued that the beguine Elisabeth of Spalbeek carefully practised such techniques in order to regularly perform Christ's Passion each Friday, and suggests that other beguines may have done likewise: J. Ziegler, 'Elizabeth of Spalbeek's Trance Dance of Faith' in Suydam and Ziegler, *Performance and Transformation*, pp.299–355.
- 32 Lutgard disapproved of this request, by the way, and only granted him use of her little finger. Lutgard, Book III.18 (Cawley, *Lives*, pp.81–2).
- 33 Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, p.143.
- 34 A.T. Thayer, 'Roles of Saints in the Penitential Themes', in B. Kienzle (ed.) *Models of Holiness in Medieval Sermons*, Louvain-la-Neuve: Fédération internationale des instituts d'études médiévales, 1996, p.341 n. 15.
- 35 J. Hamesse, 'The Image of Sanctity in Medieval Preaching as a Means of Sanctification', in Kienzle, *Models of Holiness*, pp.127–39.
- 36 Other scholars have reached the same conclusions about Low Countries models of sanctity. See especially U. Wiethaus, 'The Death Song of Marie d'Oignies: Mystical Sound and Hagiographical Politics in Medieval Lorraine', in Kittell and Suydam, *The Texture of Society*, pp.153–79, Kienzle, *Models of Holiness*, and, most recently, A. Mulder-Bakker, *Lives of the Anchoresses: the Rise of the Urban Recluse in Medieval Europe*, M.H. Scholz (trans.), Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.
- 37 Mary Suydam, 'Beguine Textuality: Sacred Performances', in Suydam and Ziegler, *Performance and Transformation*, pp.169–210.
- 38 C. Waters, *Angels and Earthly Creatures: Preaching, Performance, Gender in the Later Middle Ages*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. Waters is using the term 'citational authority' in the ways in which it has been conceptualized in the works of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, although she does not cite them.
- 39 'Ic sat op enen meidach ende soude messe horen van Sente Jacoppe alst recht was, want het doe sijn dach was. Doe worden mi binnen der epistolen mine sinne binnen ghetroct met enen groten verstormden ghelate van enen gruweleken geeste di mi van binnen trac inbinnen mi.' Dros, *Hadewijch: Visioenen*, p.60, ll. 1–7.
- 40 'Doen wert mi vertoent ene selsenne ghelike: twee conincriens als van ere rijcheit, ende van ere gheborten ende van enen gheslechte ende van gheliker const in alre ghewelt. Ende doen quam een Inghel bernende al vol onsteken van inviereghen viere.' Van Mierlo, *Hadewijch: Visioenen*, ll. 9–14. See also Dros, *Hadewijch: Visioenen*, p.60.
- 41 M. Suydam, 'Hadewijch of Antwerp's Dark Visions of Heaven', in J.S. Emerson and H. Feiss (eds) *Imagining Heaven in the Middle Ages*, New York: Garland Press, 2000.
- 42 'Ende hi ondede sine vloghele wide ende hi sloech dar mede grote slaghe seune alsoe een roupre die al verstillen wilde te siere stemmen om te ghehome sinen wille. Metten yersten slaghe hilt die mane stille van haren lope te diere stillen die daer gheboden was. Te dien andren slaghe liet die sonne haren loep te diere stillen. Metten derden slaghe hilden alle die sterren van haren lope. Metten vierden slaghe worden die vanden paradyse van haerre rasten versweect dies te bewonderne met nuwer redenen. Metten viften slaghe hilt die troen stille van sinen lope. Metten zesten slaghe openbaerden alle die heyleghen van heyleghen menschen leuende ende dode alle die

- sijn inden hemel ende in purgatorien ende in erdrike elc na dat hi wesen sal gheheelc in allen. Metten seuende slaghe worden ontploken alle hemele van elcs hemels rike in eeweliker glorien.’ Van Mierlo, *Hadewijch: Visioenen*, pp.48–9, ll. 14–32.
- 43 ‘Alle ghi ghestilde die dient ende alle ghi gheopenbaerde diemen daer mede dient sijt mi hier mede orconde van dat ic toene derre wonderendere ende derre gruwelendere van uv die hier steet.’ Van Mierlo, *Hadewijch: Visioenen*, p.50, ll. 38–42 (MS. C has *van mi*).
- 44 ‘Du onbekinde alle dinen houden ende alle dinen weder saken, gheminde ye alsic selue.’ Van Mierlo, *Hadewijch: Visioenen*, p.50, ll. 44–7.
- 45 ‘Doen was ic binnen diere vren omvaen in sine vloghelen ende in die middelt sijns riken dat hi selue was.’ Van Mierlo, *Hadewijch: Visioenen*, p.50, ll. 42–4.
- 46 ‘Ende doen vielic in heme alse omuaen met ere sueter nuwer trouwen ende die was vol van bekinessen met smake van gherechter minnen.’ Van Mierlo, *Hadewijch: Visioenen*, p.50, ll. 47–50.
- 47 ‘Gereenne metter gheheelder trouwen die eweleke alle dinc nuwe sal maken, ghesmake ende kinne selue wat dese hemele hebben onghelics, ende kies den rijcsten ende den moghensten.’ Van Mierlo, *Hadewijch: Visioenen*, p.51, ll. 52–5.
- 48 Of course, Hadewijch could well be invoking the concept of spiritual senses. But even this idea to me posits a more three-dimensional heavenly and ecstatic realm than does the idea that one only gazes at the heavenly revelation. Hadewijch’s interaction with her vision is noteworthy throughout.
- 49 ‘Ende doen saghic enen dies die ene hemel was ende mijn lief, elken in sine hemel, euen gheweldech ende in gheliken dienste ende in alre ghelikere glorien ende in ere werdegheer gheweldecheit ende in enen verdraghelikere ghenadecheit jn allen eeuweleken wesene.’ Van Mierlo, *Hadewijch: Visioenen*, p.51, ll. 59–64.
- 50 This is the standard interpretation of this vision. See for example, Van Mierlo, *Hadewijch: Visioenen*, p.50; Hart, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, p.380 n. 49; Dros, *Hadewijch, Visioenen*, p.176.
- 51 ‘Doen seide die Jngel noch te mi: Nu sich mi eneghe gheenecht dinen gheminden ende mine gheminde side ghemint met mi. Dese geheele hemele die du sies die hare sijn ende mijn ende die du saghes alsoe twee coninciken die verwoest waren dat was onser tussen menscheit eer si vol wies.’ Van Mierlo, *Hadewijch: Visioenen*, p.52, ll. 72–8.
- 52 For example, Hart’s notes to ‘Vision 4’ explain: ‘From this point onward, “you” means the ideal Hadewijch and “she”, “her”, the real Hadewijch’, Hart, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, p.380, n. 51.
- 53 ‘Jc wies vore ende nochtan bleuen wi effene. Ende ic quam in mijn rike ghisteren ende ghi wiest na nochtan bleuen wi effenne. Ende si sal volwassen heden ende met di comen marghen in hare rike ende nochtan bliuen effene me mi.’ Van Mierlo, *Hadewijch: Visioenen*, p.52, ll. 78–83.
- 54 ‘Du heuves, lieue starke grote ende vrouwe willen weten met dinen twifele te mi waer bi dat wesen soude ende met wat werke dat si mi ghelijc volwassen soude dat ic hare ghelijc wesen soude ende di ghelijc mi seluen; dat si in mi ende dat si di cont van minen monde dat es mine verstenisse miere riker naturen.’ Van Mierlo, *Hadewijch: Visioenen*, pp.52–3, ll. 83–9.
- 55 ‘Dat sal hare werc sijn daer si ons mede ghenoech maerghen hare seluen volbringhen sal.’ Van Mierlo, *Hadewijch: Visioenen*, pp.54–5, ll. 107–29.
- 56 Quoted in J. Hamesse, ‘The Image of Sanctity in Medieval Preaching’ in Kienzle, *Models of Holiness*, p.130. Ulpianus was referring to *buildings*, to places that had been dedicated by special rites.

## 8 *Von Aller Bilden Bildlosekeit*

### The trouble with images of heaven in the works of Henry Suso<sup>1</sup>

*Steven Rozenski, Jr*

In irem ersten anevang wurden ir ingetragen von neiswem hohe und vernünftig sinne, die vil überswenk waren: von der blossen gotheit, von aller dingen nihtkeit, von sin selbs in daz niht gelassenheit, von aller bilden bildlosekeit und von derley sinnen, die mit schoenen worten bedacht waren und dem menschen lust in trügen.

At the beginning of her religious life lofty intellectual matters were imparted to her by someone, things that were very high-flown: the naked Godhead, the nothingness of all things, losing oneself in the nothingness (of God), the inadequacy of all images, and other similar teachings that were well-expressed and that one finds very pleasing.<sup>2</sup>

Thus begins the account of the spiritual formation of Elsbeth Stigel (c.1300–c.1360), a nun in the Dominican convent of Töss (part of the present-day Swiss canton of Zürich), bound closely through correspondence and confession to the Dominican friar Henry Suso (1300–1366). Suso attributes to Stigel the transcription of his auto-hagiography, the *Vita* or *Life of the Servant*, explaining that she furtively recorded the contents of their conversations over a long period. When he discovers this, he demands out of humility that the papers be destroyed. A sudden divine command, however, prevents him from burning the entire *Vita*, thus providing us with this account of his spiritual development in the fourteenth-century Rhineland.

Stigel learns from the unnamed teacher of the epigraph about ‘aller bilden bildlosekeit’ – a phrase Tobin quite adequately translates as ‘the inadequacy of all images’. Pressing further into the phrase’s significance, however, one finds that the Middle High German *bilde* ‘shape’ or ‘image’ – stems not only from the Old High German *bilidi* (‘reproduction’ – originally even ‘sign of wonder’, ‘miracle’) but from the allied verb *biliden* (‘to copy a shape’ or ‘to give shape to a thing’) which, by Suso’s time, conveyed both the specific sense of spiritual *formatio* and that of education or personal formation more generally.<sup>3</sup> In this context, ‘aller bilden bildlosekeit’ encompasses not only the inadequacy of images, but also imparts a sense of the aporetic at the heart of the mystical teachings Stigel was exposed to: grasping the face of God in imageless images and formless forms, losing the shape of one’s own selfhood in the nothingness

of the Godhead. At the same time, however, Suso's texts are remarkable in the vividness of their imagery – Jeffrey Hamburger remarks that 'Suso uses images as signposts for all travelers on the mystical way, no matter how far they have advanced toward spiritual perfection'.<sup>4</sup> They are at the marrow of Suso's pedagogical programme; yet the gap between cataphatic practice and apophatic theory is wide indeed. Indeed, Suso writes that 'still, so that one may drive out one image with another [*doch, daz man bild mit bilden us tribe*], I shall now explain it to you through images and by making comparisons, as far as this is possible';<sup>5</sup> Hamburger remarks that "to drive out images with images," to suggest the imageless by means of images, such is Suso's method. Images are to be dispensed with, yet they remain indispensable; they are evoked, even as they are expunged.<sup>6</sup> Images are both necessary and burdensome; they appeal to Suso's instincts in the exercise of the *cura monialium* even as they clash with his ideals of an imageless apprehension of the divine. This conflict of the proper role of images and visions in pastoral care and mystical contemplation is especially evident in Suso's descriptions of heaven.

Among the male mystics of the later Middle Ages, Henry Suso occupies a unique position. Early on, he studied at the feet of Meister Eckhart at the Dominican *studium generale* in Cologne; Eckhart's apophatic mysticism certainly made a deep and long-lasting impression on the young Swabian. Despite this formative education, however – and although attempts to portray the divinity itself are fairly rare – his works are filled with apparitions from and visions of the afterlife; they focus primarily on the righting in heaven of wrongs done here on earth. I examine the role that these visions play in his system of thought, concentrating especially on the textual tension between the apophatic and the cataphatic, between God's hidden and unknowable aspects and those revealed in dreams and visions. Do these heavenly images conflict with – or even violate – his repeated emphasis on apophaticism? Suso's writings are infused with both heavenly apparitions and descriptions of the afterlife on the one hand and Eckhartian apophaticism and denigration of the need for images of God on the other; Hamburger writes cogently that Suso's attitude towards images is 'at times contradictory, even deliberately paradoxical'.<sup>7</sup> The tension between these conceptual poles provides a significant perspective on the Swabian Dominican's important position in shaping lay piety in the late Middle Ages and his contribution to Meister Eckhart's legacy in the fourteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

Richard Kieckhefer's seminal work on sainthood in the fourteenth century points out that raptures and visions 'generally were more important to the female than to the male saints, with few exceptions: when men did have visions, they were seldom integral to their lives as for the women. (The one most important exception is Henry Suso)'.<sup>9</sup> Visions or heavenly apparitions were often used as a justification for texts that might prove controversial to ecclesiastical authorities; women in particular, often deprived of conventional access to paths of authority and education, appealed directly to the authority of visions and revelations to bolster the validity of their mystical and visionary writings.<sup>10</sup> Richard King writes cogently that 'the abstract and complex metaphysics of apophatic or

negative theology deriving from Pseudo-Dionysius was overwhelmingly the domain of male intellectuals within the Church.<sup>11</sup> Despite the massive importance of Dionysian negative theology to the development of Latin mysticism, it remained relatively underrepresented in vernacular, and especially female-authored, mystical texts. We might reasonably expect Henry Suso – with his secure theological formation and Latin learning – to follow this framework; as Kieckhefer notes, however, Suso’s texts overwhelmingly depend on visions and image-laden narratives. His visions are widespread and wide-ranging; certainly the most memorable scenes of the *Vita* – the encounter with a murderous brigand on the banks of the Rhine, the dog shredding a doormat outside Suso’s cell – depend on a highly visual narrative followed by an allegorical interpretation often provided by God.<sup>12</sup> Less visionary events are still remarkably rooted in the flesh – as, for instance, when Suso takes his stylus and bloodily carves *IHS* above his heart, leaving wide scars to serve as a life-long reminder of his devotion. Despite all this cataphatic thought, however, Suso develops a remarkably forceful system of apophatic mysticism; this is especially prominent in the speculative sections of his *Little Book of Truth*.

In the third volume of *The Presence of God*, Bernard McGinn details an important shift in the use of visions in the mystical texts of the early twelfth century. Whereas previously the visionary narratives employed in mystical texts tended to involve a lengthy journey through heaven and hell, in the twelfth century – and growing in popularity and importance in later centuries – visions began to describe ‘ecstatic transport to the supernatural realm, where a revelation in pictorial form was given to the seer, most often by a heavenly being. These experiences tended to be repeatable apparitions consciously prepared for and expected’.<sup>13</sup> Visionary experiences became both a more momentary and a more specific device. Rather than general information about the afterlife and the soul’s possible punishment or reward, mystics began to report visions that gave often very specific prophetic information relevant to individuals, communities, and the church as a whole. Suso’s visions bear most of these traits, although they tend to take place more firmly in this world – whether while celebrating mass in the monastery chapel, praying in his cell, or journeying in the Rhineland. Most notable are the glimpses of heaven he is given, both in an extended dialogue with God in the form of Eternal Wisdom, and in periodic visits of dead friends and teachers.

Suso asks God in the *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*: ‘Lord, why should this physical seeing be important to me? [. . .] Lord, it is a thousand times more beneficial for me not to be able to see you.’<sup>14</sup> Suso critiques physical visions of God, insisting instead that to focus on spiritual visions with spiritual eyes is crucial to the proper appreciation of the Godhead: ‘what the eyes of the spirit see is more real and more true’, he claims.<sup>15</sup> Faith in God’s presence in the Eucharist, for example, is indirectly referred to as a spiritual sight, the importance of which surpasses all physical visions. In the *Vita* Suso formulates his opposition to images more explicitly: ‘A person should live free of images and possessiveness. This results in the most joy.’<sup>16</sup> Detachment from the world and detachment

from images and forms go hand in hand. The free and imageless life that Suso proposes certainly coincides well with the teaching of many apophatic mystics of the time – in particular his teacher Meister Eckhart’s repeated emphasis on detachment and living *sunder warumbe* (without a why). Suso advocates an imageless, detached relationship to the world and to an unseen God; he emphasizes the importance of spiritual, disembodied visions of a hidden Godhead.

But Suso does not always follow the advice he himself gives. In the *Vita*, for instance, Suso describes his visions of the afterlife:

During this time he had very many visions of future and hidden things, and God gave him somehow a sense, to the extent that this is possible, of what heaven, hell, and purgatory are like. It was quite usual that souls would appear to him when they had departed this world, telling him how things had gone for them, how they had earned their punishment, and how one might help them, or what their reward from God was like.<sup>17</sup>

Suso is quick to note that the knowledge God gives him is ‘als verr es denn moht sin’ – as far as it might be, as far as it can be known – but nevertheless his visions of departed souls become a common occurrence and he learns a great deal from them about their various standing in the afterlife.

Immediately after this passage comes a description of the most touching – yet certainly also the most puzzling – of Suso’s visitors. Meister Eckhart had died in 1328 while awaiting a verdict from his heresy trial in Avignon; a year later Pope John XXII promulgated the bull *In agro dominico* condemning some propositions taken from Eckhart’s writing as heretical. Suso understandably leapt to the defence of his master’s thought in the *Little Book of Truth*; here in the *Vita* he describes an encouraging posthumous visit from a Dominican named Eckhart.<sup>18</sup> Along with a Straßburg Blackfriar, Eckhart visits Suso and assures him ‘that he [Eckhart] lived in overflowing glory in which his soul had been made utterly godlike [*blos ver-goetet waz*] in God’.<sup>19</sup> The term *vergoetet* – quite rare in Middle High German – deserves further attention: it carries the sense of beatification and being made godlike, but literally bears the sense of being ‘godded’ – an absolute merger with God – and that his works were thus met with ultimate approval in heaven, if not in Avignon – would certainly be a great relief to Suso and his fellow Dominicans. The first thing Suso wants to learn from Eckhart is the reward given to those who sought eternal truth in true detachment; ‘He was shown that it could not be captured in words how these people were taken within the limitless abyss.’<sup>20</sup> Here, the apparition of Eckhart affirms the ultimate indescribability of union with God; the experience itself escapes the capability of language, although that the experience took place can be permissibly and adequately expressed.

Finally, Suso asks his old teacher how someone can achieve this prized point of *ingenomenheit*. Eckhart’s response is the only instance of direct speech in Suso’s report of the vision: ‘He [Eckhart] answered, “Such a person should, with respect to his ‘selfhood,’ withdraw from himself in deep detachment and should

receive all things from God and not from creatures, and should adopt an attitude of calm patience toward all wolfish men.”<sup>21</sup>

Here, Eckhart reiterates their shared belief in the importance of detachment and the abandonment of self; he also adds a new emphasis on patience against persecutors, likely a poignant reference to the church officials that pursued the heresy case against him.

Nevertheless, this passage seems also to provide substantial contradictions: if one truly ought to withdraw from selfhood and achieve pure detachment, why is Eckhart appearing to Suso in a vision, as an individual self, and trying to assuage his (Suso’s) anxiety about Eckhart’s posthumous whereabouts and well-being? It is unclear whether Eckhart’s heavenly apparition, made godlike in God after death, falls into the category of God or creature – it is best, perhaps, to see him in this role as a mediator between God and mankind, of a kin with angels. At any rate, the apparition’s soul has been made godlike in God, and is thus qualified to lead Suso away from creaturely things. If we are to consider Suso’s *Vita* as a work of auto-hagiography, this vision corresponds with Richard Kieckhefer’s concise assessment that: ‘In the context of hagiography, supernatural revelations usually came in the form of visions. Often, these were quite simple: Christ, a saint, an angel, or an unsainted deceased person would come to the living saint to impart information or instruction.’<sup>22</sup> In this context, the deceased Eckhart – not sainted, yet godlike in God – is able to transmit consolation and spiritual advice to the Swabian Dominican.

Later on in the *Vita*, however, Suso is privy to information, albeit circumlocutory, about his own future after death. In the midst of a period of great suffering, a dead canon appears to Suso ‘in a vision wearing a beautiful garment, green and full of red roses all over’.<sup>23</sup> Suso receives assurance that his patience in the face of injustice will be recognized by God; the spirit concludes by telling Suso the meaning of his garments. ‘[T]he red roses on a green field – that is your patient suffering. You have clothed me with it and because of this God wants to clothe you eternally with himself.’<sup>24</sup> This illuminating revelation from the departed canon assures Suso that his continuous patience on earth will be rewarded by being clothed eternally by God. This surprising detail is not without its patristic context: St Augustine cites in the *Confessions* the passage from Romans that caused his conversion; in it Paul exhorts his readers to ‘clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ’ (Romans 13:14). In the passage from the *Vita*, however, the intentionality behind the clothing process is reversed: rather than Paul’s exhorting the Romans to turn away from the lusts of the flesh by clothing themselves in Christ through baptism (thus aiding themselves in the development of their moral life), here Suso learns that *God* wants to serve eternally as *Suso*’s celestial clothing as a heavenly reward for the level of patient suffering already achieved – a remarkable reinterpretation of beatific unification and a consolation for the beleaguered Blackfriar, indeed.

In the final chapter, after a powerful recapitulation of the principles of Pseudo-Dionysian apophaticism, Suso teaches his spiritual daughter Elsbeth Stagel a technique of visionary ascent by which one is meant ultimately to

transcend visions and achieve an inexpressible experience of the divine presence. He prefaces this instruction by questioning its validity: ‘how can one form [imageless images: *bildlos gebilden*] or state the manner of something that has no manner [of being], that is beyond all thinking and the human intellect?’<sup>25</sup> Once again, the spectre of imageless images (as in the epigraph’s catalogue of apophatic keywords that Elsbeth Stigel learned before coming under Suso’s care) raises its head. How can one write about the inexpressibility of God? The needs of pastoral care and Suso’s own troubled life seem to call for positive representation of God in the incarnate Christ and for visions of heavenly reward; the apophatic mysticism that Suso so clearly admires and emulates attempts to emphasize the unknowable, imageless facets of God’s existence.

In this passage there follows a series of fairly traditional allegories for the Trinity and the imitation of Christ, leading to the advocacy of a breakthrough to a level of perception beyond senses and selfhood. This ultimately leads to a rapture: ‘This rapture [*inschlag*] takes from him images, forms, and [all] multiplicity; he loses awareness of himself and all things.’<sup>26</sup> The use of images is denigrated once again in favour of a pure and imageless conception both of God and of the faithful. That is, not only does God transcend existence and images, but the believer also should lose both a sense of discrete selfhood and the perception of images as he approaches the One.

Immediately after this passage, the text reports the death of Suso’s beloved student Elsbeth Stigel. After her death comes her posthumous visitation in a ‘spiritual vision’, the description of which ends the *Vita*. Her garments are brilliantly white and her mien joyful and radiant. ‘She approached him and showed him how nobly she had entered into the naked Godhead.’<sup>27</sup> One might not expect, after Suso’s extended encouragement of a *bildlos* – imageless and formless – understanding of the zenith of religious life, that the *Vita* would end on such a resoundingly imagistic and visionary description of heavenly reward, albeit one typical of hagiography. Nevertheless, it reinforces a theme found throughout the text: although Suso seems a vigorous opponent of images and visions on a theoretical level, in practice during the hardships of the world – in particular after the deaths of those close to him and during the periods of torment and distrust he finds in both the secular and religious milieu – he draws upon his extensive visions of heaven and apparitions of the dead, resplendent in their heavenly reward, in order to be reassured of his own rectitude.

Suso goes to great lengths in the *Vita*, however, to assure readers of the validity of his visionary experiences by offering an analysis of visions and their sources; the primary criterion established for determining the validity of visions is their adherence to an intellectual apprehension of the naked Godhead.

I shall also tell you how to distinguish between pure truth and dubious visions originating in sense knowledge. Direct sight of the naked Godhead: this is pure genuine truth without any doubts. And every vision, the more intellectual and free of images [*bildloser*] it is and the more like this same pure seeing, the nobler it is.<sup>28</sup>

So comparison with the unmediated experience of the simple or naked Godhead – however that may be defined – becomes the chief criterion by which visions are to be judged; visions that are free of images are considered closer to this pure and unmediated sight of the Godhead.

He continues by describing the various visions of Old Testament figures, relating that some were more vividly image-filled than others and that some prophets received their visions most effectively while asleep. He too values sleeping visions because the external senses are less active during sleep, allowing for less distraction from the external world. He acknowledges that the messages found in dreams can be deceptive, but recounts that St Augustine's mother was able to distinguish between mere dreams and important revelations received while asleep. Suso considers the power to discern between the two an ineffable gift from God; 'And the person to whom God has given this same gift can better find his own way in this matter. No one can explain this to another just with words. One knows it by experiencing it.'<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, this experience-based incommunicability at the core of his theory of discernment seems to pose a significant challenge to the external verifiability of visions. Rather than sticking to his earlier, more rigorous formal framework by which visions can be evaluated and judged – and their contents communicated to others – based on their degree of correspondence to 'direct sight of the naked Godhead', Suso here claims that the ability to determine the viability of a dream-vision is an entirely experiential and incommunicable matter, thus injecting a troublesome level of subjectivity. He relies on Old Testament examples of proper dream interpretation without offering advice or guidelines regarding contemporary discernment.

In the *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom* we find Suso receiving a detailed vision of heaven and hell from his interlocutor, eternal Wisdom. The visions of hell describe, as might be expected, the excruciating torment of damned sinners in a late-medieval context. Suso understandably asks how he might best avoid this eternal fate, and eternal Wisdom grants him a vision of the joys which might await him in heaven. Eternal wisdom likens Suso to a pilgrim in search of his homeland, assuring him 'you belong in the fatherland of eternal paradise'.<sup>30</sup> The memories of trials and torments experienced on earth will be overwhelmed by the warm welcome of his kinsmen, Suso is told, and 'the more bitterly you have suffered, the more worthily you will be received'<sup>31</sup> – certainly a magnificently reassuring thing for the ever-suffering Swabian to hear, and germane to the late-medieval predilection for identification with the physical suffering of Christ.

Suso is given richly descriptive assurance that he will come to enjoy heavenly reward:

how the wounds will flame bright that you received here for love of me. In the fatherland you are among such intimate friends that the one in this countless number who knows you the least loves you more dearly [*minnet dich minneklicher und getriwlicher*] than any father or mother ever loved an only dear child on earth.<sup>32</sup>

Despite this rich promise of the love, appreciation, and recognition Suso will enjoy in reward for his devoted service to God – and in response to his plea for a still more detailed description of what awaits him – eternal Wisdom is quick to tell Suso that he can only see it from afar: ‘I shall take you there in contemplation and shall let you look at it from a distance by means of a rough comparison.’<sup>33</sup> Even the tour that he has received thus far has only been a rough preview of the actuality of heavenly reward. By asserting that Suso’s text can only approximate the glories of heaven, eternal Wisdom both downplays any claim to representing the unknowable expanses of heaven fully or accurately and provokes the sense that, however glorious the heavenly kingdom that Suso describes, heaven itself is certain to be still more magnificent.

One particularly noteworthy aspect of the description of heaven that follows is its reliance on imagery from courtly poetry – a theme echoed elsewhere in Suso’s works: ‘look how this wonderful place glitters with hammered gold, how it glows with precious pearls, adorned with jewels and translucent as crystal, alive with the sparkle of red roses, white lilies and all kinds of fresh flowers.’<sup>34</sup> Despite the distant view Suso is supposed to be getting, the detail in this passage is remarkable – a catalogue of precious objects pleasing to the eye. Eternal Wisdom then details the heavenly landscape and its denizens:

Here are the complete joys of summer. Here are the meadows of sunny May. Here is the valley of true joy. Here one sees lovers’ glances dart joyfully back and forth. Here are the strains of harps, the tones of violins, singing, dancing of all kinds and the constant enjoyment of perfect joy.<sup>35</sup>

The perfect joy of Suso’s vision of heaven conjures up images of an idyllic scene from courtly poetry or romance; the combination of a lush summery valley with musical imagery and more vague promises of joyfulness is an appropriate complement to the jewelled palace described above (although one wonders if it is merely monkish modesty that has him simply describing the flirtatious glances of lovers rather than taking part in them). From this passage Suso moves on to write a paragraph of Marian imagery centring on her beauty and mercy, tapping into the vast popularity of Marian intercession in the late Middle Ages. Eternal Wisdom describes Mary wreathed in flowers, mounted above the rest of the heavenly host, looking mercifully upon humanity. After this there is a fairly standard description of the wonders of the nine-fold hierarchy of angels, followed by a blissful catalogue of the apostles, martyrs, confessors, and virgins that populate heaven.

There follows a long allegory comparing the resurrection of the body to a bridal gift, which is concluded with a description of the crown and golden wreath which will complete the resurrected body in heaven. The crown, eternal Wisdom explains, is the essential reward; the wreath is the accidental reward. Whereas accidental reward simply recognizes quotidian acts of Christian charity, essential reward

consists in the contemplative union of the soul with the naked Godhead, because it never rests until it is led beyond all its powers and the capacities and is directed into the natural substance of the Persons and into the simple nakedness of Being.<sup>36</sup>

Essential heavenly reward is here figured as a unification with God and an abandonment of the self into the abyss of Being. Suso's description of a contemplative aspect to heaven pushes his framework of heavenly reward beyond the previous paradisiacal vision into something much closer to the contemplative ideal of beatific vision of and union with God. Here, of course, the influence of Eckhartian apophaticism is especially pronounced, and the importance of the previously mentioned vision of Eckhart's visit and description of *his* heavenly union with God in the *Vita* is evident. Eternal Wisdom goes on to assure Suso that the rewards of the heavenly fatherland will outweigh all the sorrows and adversities of the world; the torment Suso had to face on earth will be forgotten completely through the joys of heaven. Eternal Wisdom ends the dialogue with the Blackfriar by easing him back to earth, explaining that to him that his time to dwell in heaven has not yet arrived, and that these images served only to reassure him in the midst of future earthly sufferings.

Henry Suso's texts demonstrate a fundamental ambiguity towards heavenly visions. Although the Dominican's writing is laden with apophatic thought and the denigration of the role of images in religious belief, he is nevertheless under constant reassurance from various heavenly apparitions and through descriptions of heavenly reward. At times he points towards a systematization that would discern the veracity of visions – for instance, in the *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, his divine interlocutor instructs him 'Keep yourself free of all images coming from outside'<sup>37</sup> – and the aforementioned attempt to classify visions according to their imagelessness and closeness to sight of the naked Godhead. Suso attempts to provide a clear-cut division between images validly stemming from the Godhead and misleading, external, non-transcendental, physical visions. In textual and pastoral practice, however, the framework employed is far more ambiguous. Taken at the root, Suso's constant reliance on imagery and visions undermines the thrust of his apophaticism; his richly visual texts provide instead an appealing – albeit unabashedly cataphatic – insight into fourteenth-century depictions of heaven.

## Notes

- 1 Much gratitude is due both to the German–American Fulbright Commission, for supporting my research with a fellowship during the academic year 2003–2004, and to the University of Cologne's Institute for German Language and Literature, which hosted me as a visiting Fulbright Scholar. My mentors there, Ursula Peters and Hans-Joachim Ziegeler, proved immensely helpful and supportive during my time in the shadow of the great *Dom*. I dedicate this chapter to the memory of my loving grandmother, Carol Kirschner Marciniak (1926–2004), born on the banks of the Rhine a short way upstream from Cologne.

- 2 Middle High German citations are from K. Bihlmeyer, *Heinrich Seuse. Deutsche Schriften*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1907. Page numbers will be prefixed by 'B'. English translation is taken from F. Tobin's translation in *Henry Suso: the Exemplar, with Two German Sermons*, Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1989. Page numbers will be prefixed by 'T'. Departures from Tobin's translation will be indicated by square brackets. This quote is found in B p.97; T pp.132–3.
- 3 By the eighteenth-century this term would expand further to form the etymological basis for the genre of *Bildungsroman*.
- 4 J. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany*, New York: Zone Books, 1998, p.232.
- 5 T p.191, cf. B p.201: 'doch, daz man bild mit bilden us tribe, so wil ich dir hie biltlich zoegen mit glichnusgebender rede, als verr es denn muglich ist.'
- 6 Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary*, p.204.
- 7 Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary*, p.202.
- 8 It is also worth noting in this regard Suso's great influence on succeeding generations of readers: there are more extant manuscripts of the Latin version of his *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, the *Horologium Sapientiae*, than any other late medieval text, with the exception of the *Imitatio Christi* of Thomas à Kempis.
- 9 R. Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, p.172.
- 10 Rosalynn Voaden points out that apophatic theology – works that assume that negation is the surest way to arrive at knowledge of God – was a more secure and authoritative domain: less scrutiny was paid to practitioners of the *via negativa*. She explains the predominant attitude towards visions, writing that 'spiritual visions were an inferior form of transcendental experience: they could be manipulated, misconstrued, misunderstood; there was a constant danger of deviating from accepted doctrine and incurring charges of heresy': *God's Words, Women's Voices*, Rochester, York Medieval Press, 1999, p.71. Although Eckhart's radical apophaticism certainly did little to stem accusations of heresy against propositions in his works, this bias against visions has a sound patristic foundation, stemming from Augustine's tripartite hierarchy of vision in *De Genesi ad Litteram*. He ranked, in ascending order of authority and trustworthiness, corporeal vision, imaginative vision, and intellectual vision. Augustine elucidates his formulation by departing from Genesis, writing, [w]hen 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. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, J.H. Taylor, S.J. (trans.), Ancient Christian Writers, vols 41–2, New York: Paulist Press, 1982, p.185.
- 11 R. King, *Orientalism and Religion*, New York: Routledge, 1999, p.19.
- 12 Frank Tobin (*Henry Suso*, p.48) neatly summarizes the difficulty in the introduction to his translation of Suso's German works: 'in his discussion of visions, he assigns value to them according to how intellectual and free of images they are [...] Their value also seems to be determined by how detached they are from the normal activity of the senses and how separated the visionary is from external activity. Although most of the visions described in the *Life* can be viewed as occurring apart from normal use of the senses and external activity, few appear to achieve the intellectuality of that pure seeing that Suso valued most.'
- 13 B. McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism – 1200–1350*, New York: Crossroad, 1998, p.27.
- 14 T p.280, cf. B pp.295–6: 'Herre, waz lit mir kraft an diser liplichen gesiht? [...] Herr, mir ist tusent stunt nûzzer, daz ich dich nit gesehen mag.'
- 15 T p.280, cf. B p.295: 'wan dú ogen des geistes gesehent eigenlicher und warlicher'.
- 16 T p.181, cf. B p.164: 'Ein mensch sol in siner unbiltlichkeit und in siner

- unenthaltlichkeit stan, dar inne lit der maist lust.’ Note also that the original has the ideal person remaining in ‘unbiltlichkeit’ – a term conveying a sense of unformedness or imagelessness, perhaps even uneducatedness.
- 17 T pp.74–5, cf. B p.22: ‘Do in den selben ziten hat er gar vil vision künftiger und verborgener dingen und gab im got neiswi ein enpfintlich kuntsami, als verr es denn moht sin, wie es in himelrich und in helle und in vegfür stünde. Ez waz im gewonlich, daz vil selen im vor erschinen, so sú von dieser welt geschieden, und im kund taten, wie es in ergangen weri, wa mit sú ir bússe hetin verschuldet und wa mit man in gehelfen moehte, oder wie ir lon vor got weri.’
  - 18 Although opinion remains divided on the identity of this Eckhart, I follow Frank Tobin’s level and convincing assessment in his introduction to the Paulist Press edition of the *Exemplar* that it is indeed the great Dominican mystic and theologian who appears to Suso.
  - 19 T p.75, cf. B p.23: ‘daz er waz in überswenker guenlich, in die sin sele blos vergoetet waz in gote’.
  - 20 T p.75, cf. B p.23: ‘Dez wart ime erzoetet, daz dero menschen ingenomenheit in die wiselosen abgründkeit nieman moehti gewoerten.’
  - 21 T p.75, cf. B p.23: ‘Do sprach er: “er sol im selb nah sin selbsheit mit tiefer gelassenheit entsinken, und ellú ding von got nüt von der creatur nemen, und sich in ein stille gedultkeit sezzen gen allen wúlfinen menschen.”’
  - 22 R. Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls*, p.155.
  - 23 T p.171, cf. B p.148: ‘in einer gesiht und hate ein schoen gewand an, daz waz gruen und waz umb und umb vol roter rosen’.
  - 24 T p.171, cf. B p.148: ‘Die roten rosen in dem gruenen velde, daz ist úwer gedultiges liden, mit dem hend ir mich gekleidet, und got will úch hier umb mit im selben eweklich kleiden.’
  - 25 T p.201, cf. B p.191: ‘wie kan man bildlos gebilden unde wiselos bewisen, daz über alle sinne und über menschlich vernunft ist?’
  - 26 T p.203, cf. B p.193: ‘Der inschlag entschleht im bild und form und alle menigvaltekeit, und kunt in sin selbs und aller dingen warnemenden unwússentheit.’
  - 27 T p.204, cf. B p.194: ‘Si trat hin zú ime und zogte ime, wie adellich si in die blossen gotheit vergangen were.’
  - 28 T p.195, cf. B p.183: ‘Den underscheid enzwúschen luter warheit und zwifellichen visionen in bekennder materie will ich dir och sagen. Ein mittelloses schowen der blossen gotheit, daz ist rehtú lutrú warheit ane allen zwivel; und ein ieklichú vision, so si ie vernúftiger und bildloser ist und der selben blosser schowung ie gleicher ist, so si ie edler ist.’
  - 29 T p.196, cf. B p.183: ‘Und welem menschen got die selben gabe git, der kan sich dest bas hier inne berihten. Es kann nieman dem andern wol mit worten geben, denn der merkt es, der es enpfunden hat.’
  - 30 T p.240, cf. B p.240: ‘du hoerest in daz vaterlant dez himelschen paradyses’.
  - 31 T p.241, cf. B p.241: ‘wan so du ie bitterlicher gelitten hast, so du ie wirdeklicher enphangen wirst’.
  - 32 T p.241, cf. B p.241: ‘wie werdent die wunden und dú zeichen so inbrunstlich glenzende, dú hic von miner minne enphangen sint! Sich, du bist da in dem vatterlande als wol gefrúnt, daz der vroemdest der unmezigen zal minnet dich minneklicher und getrúwlicher, denne kein vater oder kein múter ir einiges herzklichs kint ie gemint in dieser zit.’
  - 33 T p.241, cf. B p.241: ‘ich wil dich da hin vueren in betrachtunge, und wil dich einen verren anblick lazen tûn nach einer groben glichnússe’.
  - 34 T p.241, cf. B p.241: ‘Sihe, dú wúnklich stat glenzet hin von durschlagem golde, si lúhtet hin von edlen margariten, durleit mit edlem gesteine, durkleret als ein kristalle, widerschinent von róten rósen, wissen lylien und allerley lebenden blúmen.’
  - 35 T pp.241–2, cf. B p.242: ‘hey, hie ganzú sumerwunne, hie des liechten meien ówe,

hie der rechten vroeden tal! Hie sihet man vroelich ögenblicke von lieb ze liebe gan; hie harphen, gigen, hie singen, springen, tanzen, reien und ganzer vroede iemer phlegen.'

36 T p.243, cf. B p.245: 'lit an schoewlicher vereinunge der sele mit der blosen gotheit, wan e gerüwet si niemer, e si gefueret wirt über alle ir krefte und mugenheit, und gewiset wirt in der personen naturlich wesentheit und in des wesens einvaltigen blozheit'.

37 T p.275, cf. B p.288: 'halte dich luterlich von allen ingezognen bilden'.

## 9 Marguerite Porete

### Courtliness and transcendence in *The Mirror of Simple Souls*

A.C. Spearing

I first read *The Mirror of Simple Souls* as a Cambridge graduate student, in the only printed form then available, a modernization by Clare Kirchberger of the version in Middle English.<sup>1</sup> The English writer, identified only as ‘M.N.’, states in his first sentence that he translated it from French with some trepidation, because it was full of elevated theological matters and spiritual experiences and was very obscurely expressed – so much so that, his first attempt having led to misunderstandings, he reworked it, adding glosses of his own. M.N. shows no sign of knowing who was responsible for his fascinating and yet dangerously difficult source, not even whether it was by a man or a woman; nor did Kirchberger know. I read it because I was working on a dissertation on *Piers Plowman*, and was studying prose devotional writings to see if they provided any analogies for the distinctive structure and method of proceeding of Langland’s poem. I was indeed struck by a certain similarity between these two very different allegorical fictions: both seemed to move forward not directly and systematically but in a loose spiralling motion, repeatedly returning to glimpse the same themes from different angles. An unexpected insight – but I saw no way of using it, and in the end I let it slip. I was unaware that in 1946 the French text had been identified<sup>2</sup> as a book by Marguerite Porete which had been condemned as heretical and had led to her being burned at the stake in 1310 – ‘the first documented case of an execution for mystical heresy in Western Christianity’.<sup>3</sup> Porete’s book was also supposed to be burned, but copies survived, and, though only one French manuscript is now available, dating from nearly two centuries after the original, the *Mirror* was translated into Latin and Italian as well as Middle English, and survives in all those languages. Since Guarneri announced her discovery in, of all places, the official Vatican newspaper, I and my Cambridge teachers could perhaps be excused for not knowing about it. Subsequently she published the French text,<sup>4</sup> and Marilyn Doiron published the Middle English *Mirror of Simple Souls*.<sup>5</sup> That I should have known about, even though the place of publication was this time the *Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Pietà*, an unexpected home for a Middle English text. But by then I had abandoned the dissertation, and it was only recently that I came back to the *Mirror* by way of studies of Julian of Norwich and *The Cloud of Unknowing* for translations that my wife and I were commissioned to make for Penguin

Classics.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently my wife contracted to produce another Penguin Classic called *Medieval Writings on Female Spirituality*,<sup>7</sup> intended, as far as possible, to represent those writings as they were available in medieval England. For this, at her request, I translated selections from the Middle English *Mirror of Simple Souls* into modern English. In doing so I found myself newly fascinated by the *Mirror*. Whether or not it was rightly condemned as heretical, it is certainly a work of extremely advanced mysticism. One index of this is something that makes its status in the present volume seem precarious: it scarcely distinguishes between heaven as a state of being after death and the 'land of freedom' (p.154) achievable in this life by total submission of the will to God. Yet the *Mirror* was read in both English and Latin in England, where the religious climate was supposedly so conservative. One of the three manuscripts (all of Carthusian provenance) containing the English *Mirror* also includes the only surviving copy of the Short Text of Julian of Norwich; and a Latin version of the *Mirror* by the Carthusian Richard Methley exists alongside his Latin translation of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The latter juxtaposition is of special interest, bringing together two works of Christian mysticism in which the incarnation plays a startlingly small part, one (the *Cloud*) concerned with the language and logic of the *via negativa* and the other (the *Mirror*) with its phenomenology. The manuscript situation suggests an unexpectedly keen English interest in the more adventurous forms of spirituality, and at the same time a continuity between those and more mainstream mystical writings. It may also suggest that we should not be too ready to interpret Julian and the *Cloud* author entirely in terms of cautious orthodoxy.

I have begun autobiographically so as to emphasize that I do not present myself as a lifelong expert on Marguerite Porete; but amateur status may have some advantages in approaching a text which the author introduces by stating that it will never be properly understood by scholars and theologians. I shall discuss the French version, relying heavily, though not always verbatim, on the most recent translation by Colledge, Marler and Grant.<sup>8</sup> Porete is no longer, as Peter Dronke could write only twenty years ago, 'the most neglected of the great writers of the thirteenth century',<sup>9</sup> and some readers may know her book much better than I do. Some, however, may not know it at all, and so I provide some basic information about it and her.

We know nothing of Marguerite Porete's early life, except that she probably came from Hainaut (perhaps Valenciennes), in northern France. In adult life she may have been a beguine, belonging, that is, to one of the unenclosed sisterhoods that originated in the Low Countries in the early thirteenth century and then spread rapidly through France and Germany. The beguines were laywomen living a communal version of what they regarded as the apostolic life. They lived in chastity and supported themselves by manual work, but they could hold private property and could leave to get married. They aided the sick and poor, but also practised contemplation, often of a visionary and ecstatic kind. 'For them the imitation of Christ was not just a means for becoming *like* Christ, but more a means of becoming *one with* Christ or having immediate knowledge of

him.’<sup>10</sup> At least three beguines are famous as vernacular mystical writers: Mechthild of Magdeburg in German, Hadewijch of Brabant in Dutch, and Marguerite Porete in French. Because the beguines were women speaking and writing about religious matters without being under strict ecclesiastical control, their growing numbers aroused increasing suspicion from the Church, and their way of life was condemned by the Council of Vienne in 1311–1312. The sisterhoods did not disappear immediately, but by the mid-fourteenth century the movement was in decline. If Porete had once been a beguine, she later rejected even that relatively informal discipline, and at the end of the original version of the *Mirror* she classes beguines with other religious and clerics as being unable to understand her writings (p.152).

Porete probably wrote that original version in the 1290s. In or before 1306 the bishop of Cambrai ordered it to be burned as heretical, warning that if she continued to circulate it she would be regarded as a relapsed heretic, and thus be liable to execution. She did continue – indeed she sent it to three theologians to invite them to confirm its orthodoxy, adding for their benefit a further section (chapters 123–39) supposedly intended to help them understand it. She describes this supplement as containing ‘certain considerations for the forlorn [*marriz*] who ask the way to the land of freedom, which consideration did me much good when I was one of the forlorn’ (p.154). She regarded the ‘forlorn’ theologians as her spiritual inferiors, guided not by divine love but by reason: the tenor of her writing is esoteric and elitist, with spiritual superiority translated into courtly terms, so that she sees herself as belonging to a spiritual aristocracy with God as its head – a topic to which I shall return. The three theologians approved what they saw, though one said it was so ‘exalted’ that he did not really understand it,<sup>11</sup> and two warned that it was unsuitable for most readers. Porete then submitted it to another prelate, the bishop of Châlons, presumably hoping that he would set the earlier condemnation aside, but instead, in 1308, she was arrested by the Dominican Inquisitor, William of Paris, confessor to the king of France, Philip the Fair. The expectation was that persons accused of heresy would defend their views, and might possibly succeed in convincing the authorities that they were harmless, or alternatively would retract them. Porete refused to do either: she simply would not reply to her interrogators. She was kept in prison, and in 1310 a larger committee of theologians was asked to judge fifteen propositions drawn from her book. They did not see the book as a whole, and the propositions would have been translated into Latin, so they were not reading the *Mirror* as the French poem in prose and verse, the ‘work of theological fiction’,<sup>12</sup> that it is. This is important. The *Mirror* is not simply *about* transcendence: it enacts in words the vertiginous movement towards becoming one with God. The skills needed to respond to that enactment differ from those taught by scholasticism. (For that reason, I shall not try to place the *Mirror* theologically in relation to the Dionysian tradition of the *via negativa*, or to the so-called ‘Heresy of the Free Spirit’, or to its possible influence on Eckhart.) Only three of the propositions extracted from the *Mirror* have survived. One, recorded in the chronicle of William of Nangis, is ‘That the soul annihilated in the love of

the Creator may and should grant nature whatever it wishes or desires, without blame or remorse of conscience'. The other two, preserved in the record of the theological examination, are 'That the annihilated soul takes leave of the virtues, and is no longer in their service, for she has no further use of them; but the virtues obey at need' and 'That such a soul does not care about the gifts or consolations of God, nor ought to, nor can, for it is totally intent upon God, and its intention would thus be impeded.'<sup>13</sup>

These ideas do appear in the *Mirror* but they exist in it not as propositions forming a logical structure, but as dynamic elements in a dialogic text, in which opposing views are put forward, often propelled by intense emotions; and there is a fundamental slipperiness or jerkiness about it that denies the possibility of the clear-cut identities and distinctions on which scholasticism relies. Rather than offering a sustained logical argument, the *Mirror* proceeds in a series of fluctuations, sometimes steady and sometimes violent, each correcting the last, as if it were a boat tacking across the sea in high winds. In this way, though largely in prose, it resembles a greatly expanded troubadour lyric, seeming to express the movements of a fluid and self-conscious consciousness. The scholastic methodology of Porete's accusers, which led them to treat propositions extracted from the text as if they could be judged independently of the meaning and emotional expressiveness of the whole, was bound to misrepresent her intentions. Similarly, at the level of the sentence, though the terminology and syntax may sometimes suggest a vernacular scholasticism, words are often not being used to clarify thought and to define and distinguish meanings, so as to make them accessible to the rational mind, but performatively,<sup>14</sup> to produce contradictions that will defeat rational understanding and point towards a field of meaning that lies beyond its reach.<sup>15</sup> Opposites, such as everything and nothing, are identified, and nouns such as Love hover indeterminately between abstraction and personification. The result can be called nonsense, or heresy, or poetry.

Porete understands perfectly well how to conduct a logical argument, but when she does so it tends to be in forms verging on parody. To take one example, in chapter 43 the Holy Spirit astonishingly asserts that 'this Soul' – the individual soul out of whose experience the book is made – 'has given us everything which she possesses. And whatever we have, she herself has given us, in a manner of speaking' – the *manière de parler* being that, if the Soul had what God has, she would wish to give it to God, and 'good intention is counted as the deed' (p.63). This is a typical manoeuvre on Porete's part, using logic in the manner of metaphysical poetry, to subvert orthodoxy. The logical outcome of intentionalism becomes what is apparently a reversal of the accepted relations between God and the soul, so that the soul gives God all that God has; thus the soul is equal, or perhaps even superior, to God. Another example occurs in chapter 117, where the Soul argues that, because she is 'the sum of all evils' while God is 'the sum of all good', and 'one must give alms to the very poorest, or else one deprives him of what is rightfully his', God's goodness is rightfully hers – all his goodness, because nothing less than that can 'fill up the abyss of

the depth of [her] own evil'. Thus, she concludes, 'Just as Christ by his death is the redemption of his people and the praise of God the Father, so I, because of my [wickedness], am the salvation of the human race and the glory of God the Father' (pp.138–9). That is a deeply shocking claim; and Porete clearly enjoys standing at the perilous edge of cliffs of this kind, looking down into the terrifying abysses of heresy. In due course, the *frisson* or *ecstasis* of intellectual terror would become the horror of the material fire.

There are points, certainly, at which analytic clarity seems to be within reach. The most striking instance is in chapter 118, where the Soul expounds seven states of being, first mentioned in the prologue and reintroduced in chapters 58 and 91, 'by which one climbs from the valley to the summit of the mountain, which is so isolated that one sees nothing there but God' (p.141). I pause over this, because it is a most important crystallization of Porete's spiritual experience into discursive thought – a numbered sequence of steps, of the kind often found in mystical theology, leading from earth to heaven. It comes near the end of what was probably the first form of the *Mirror*. Chapter 122, a series of lyrical poems celebrating the Soul's union with Love, concludes with an *Explicit*, and the remaining seventeen chapters are those added later for the benefit of the forlorn and unwise. By chapter 118 we are surely longing for some such clarification to emerge from the preceding labyrinth. The first state consists of obedience to the commandments, with no sense that any better life is attainable, and the last is treated very briefly, because nothing can be said about it on earth: 'the seventh state Love keeps within itself, to give to us in everlasting glory, of which we shall have no knowledge until our souls shall have left our bodies' (p.146). This is what heaven usually means, yet in chapter 80 Porete has written something disturbingly similar about a state of mystical ecstasy that can be experienced on earth. The Soul refers to 'The rapturous exaltation which overwhelms me and joins me to the heart's heart of Divine Love, into which I am melted' (p.104), but adds, 'One must [. . .] be silent about this state of being, for of it one can say nothing' (p.105) – a remark reminiscent of the famous concluding proposition of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, that 'what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence',<sup>16</sup> or perhaps of Augustine's statement that if the ineffable can be called ineffable it is not ineffable, a contradiction 'to be passed over in silence rather than resolved verbally'.<sup>17</sup> In chapter 118 she does say something about the other earthly states of being. In the second, the Soul goes beyond the commandments to follow the counsels of perfection. In the third, she longs to 'give the loved one that which the lover [herself] most loves', and that means 'to abstain from the work which she loves [. . .] and the life of the will which takes nourishment from this'. So the Soul must give up good works, because they are what she most loves (as perhaps Porete herself gave up the good works required of beguines), and the Soul must renounce her own will. 'So one must crush oneself', Porete terrifyingly puts it, 'hacking and hewing at oneself to widen the place in which Love will want to be' (p.142). In the fourth state, the soul is 'overwhelmed' and 'wholly drunken' with love, and once more believes that she has reached the highest possible mode of being

(p.143). But in the fifth she is disillusioned, seeing that God is everything and she is nothing, and that she must not will even God's will:

Now this Soul has fallen from love into nothingness, [...] And this fall has been so low [...] that the Soul is unable to raise herself up again from such an abyss; nor must she do this, but rather remain where she is. And there the Soul loses her pride and her girlishness, for her spirit has grown old, and no longer lets her be lighthearted and glad, because her will has left her, which often, when she felt the stirrings of love, made her proud and overweening and [haughty], when she was exalted in contemplation in the fourth state. But the fifth state has subdued her in showing to the Soul her own self.

Finally, in the sixth and last earthly state, 'the Soul does not see herself at all, [...] nor does she see God [...] But God of his divine majesty sees himself in her' (p.145). The mind is defeated, reason is defeated, by these assertions; and my point here is that they exceed the sevenfold division into which they are forced. This is not, as we might expect and hope, a conceptual framework for the whole text, but just one crystallization of a range of spiritual experience that defies definitive categorization.

The *Mirror* is largely a dialogue, and the chief speakers are the Soul and Love; but many others appear as needed, one merges into another, and there are some sections not attributed to any speaker at all. The text frequently seems to contradict itself, not just discursively, but also dramatically: a notorious instance concerns Reason, a frequent interlocutor in the earlier chapters. Reason, we have been informed, 'understands only the obvious, and fails to grasp what is subtle' (p.18), and Love has told her, 'Ah, Reason, [...] you will always see with one eye only, you and all those who are nurtured by your doctrine' (p.62). Those who are nurtured by Reason's doctrine are, in a word, the Church – the Church as an earthly institution, described by Porete as 'Holy Church the Less' by contrast with 'Holy Church the Great', which consists of the few elite souls like herself who are moving towards union with God (p.38, etc.). In chapter 87 the Soul sensationally asserts, 'I am and I shall be always without fail, for Love has no beginning or end or bounds, and I am nothing but Love', and this statement so appals Reason that she dies on the spot, with the Soul callously commenting, 'Alas! why did she not die long ago?' (p.112). (If the Soul's reason were to die, then she would be unable to see any reason why her reason had ever existed.) Yet in chapter 98 Reason reappears, alive and well, without a word of explanation, to incite Love to clarify the purpose of the book in which they are all characters. It is surprising how many commentators on the *Mirror* emphasize Reason's death but fail to mention her resurrection. (Sells states that 'The central event of the drama is the death of Reason', who 'finally dies' in chapter 87; Lichtman that 'Reason must eventually expire and does so quite dramatically before Love can have Her way with the Soul'; Robinson that Reason is 'dismissed in the midst of the drama'.)<sup>18</sup> Reason, though incessantly despised

and ridiculed, is a necessary part of the *Mirror*; if she did not keep on asking for clarification on behalf (as she says) of 'ordinary people' (p.29), the book could hardly exist. In chapter 53 the Soul complains that Reason's questions 'have shamed and spoiled this book', making it too long, 'for the sake of you and those whom you have nourished, who go at a snail's pace' (p.73), yet without those questions the book would be even more impossibly difficult than it is.

In some sense the Soul is Marguerite Porete herself, somewhat as in *Piers Plowman* Wille is both the human will and in some sense Will Langland, its supposed author. In chapter 52 the Soul is referred to as 'this precious pearl' [*ceste precieuse marguerite*], probably alluding to the author's Christian name. And in some sense many of the personified speakers are aspects of the Soul, so that Reason is Porete's reason; others, such as Holy Church and the Virtues, cannot be so interpreted, but they too come and go as the flow of thought and feeling requires. Love, the most important speaker, is in one sense an abstraction, including the Soul's love for God, but in another sense Love is God himself, and, as the Soul claims in chapter 87 and elsewhere, she too *is* God. Identity is fluid, and so is gender: Love is both she and he. A scholastic analysis seems scarcely possible.

This also applies to Porete's treatment of heaven. In chapter 118, as we have seen, an attempt is made to distinguish the mystical perfection achievable on earth (the sixth state) from that of 'everlasting glory' (the seventh): 'And so this soul in the sixth state is made free of all things and pure and illumined, yet not glorified, for glorification is of the seventh state, and that we shall have in glory, of which no-one is able to speak' (p.145). Yet in chapter 52 this orthodox distinction has been blurred by Love her/himself:

For, says Love, just as the iron is clothed in the fire, and has lost its own appearance, because the fire, which has changed it into itself, is stronger, so this Soul is clothed in this more, is fed and is changed into this more, because of its love of this more, without paying heed to the less, but dwells and is changed into this more of a peace that is ultimate and everlasting [*ce plus de oultre parmanable paix*], where no-one can find her. This Soul loves in the sweet land of complete peace.

(pp.71–2)

Is this *doulce contree de oultre paix* heaven or the privileged place of those made free on earth? The same fluidity is apparent in chapter 81, where the Soul is described as 'imprisoned and held in the land of complete peace, for she is at all times in complete satisfaction where she swims and eddies and floats and ebbs in divine peace' (p.105). The words are once more those of Love, and they once more leave us uncertain whether Love is referring to earth or to heaven. Adjectives such as *oultre* and *parmanable* are used with an enthusiasm and abandon that contrasts markedly with the guardedness of other mystics such as Hilton, who is always careful to distinguish the partial mystical transformation

possible in this life from the complete perfection that awaits the saved in the life to come.<sup>19</sup>

The death and reappearance of Reason is, I think, an illustration of a general truth about the *Mirror*: what seem when they occur to be decisive crises and turning points in the text are not necessarily so in retrospect. Reason dies, and yet Reason is not really dead. The dramatic structure of the Soul's experience could be seen and defined as such, as a drama in seven acts with a beginning, middle, and end, only from outside that experience; and that is where Porete can never remain, because it is *her* experience. Or, as Hollywood more moderately puts it, 'the Soul is not only an interlocutor in the dialogue, but also the arena within which the drama takes place'.<sup>20</sup> Again a parallel with *Piers Plowman* seems apt, though Langland operates on a less exalted spiritual level than Porete. Wille's story can never be a well-formed narrative, even after three or more attempts by the poet to turn it into one, because the writer of the poem *is* Wille: he is inside it, living it, not just outside it, shaping it.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in reading the *Mirror* we are aware of ups and downs, and of what seem to be crucial changes of direction, but an overall shape never becomes clear, and the *Explicit* is followed by a supplement. But this is not something we can accept with complacency; we go on to *wanting* it to become clear, and, after moments of illumination and despair, heights and abysses, we go on feeling bewildered and frustrated. And I think we need to see that experience of ours as readers in the context of Porete's experience. The ideal outcome of the mystical process as she represents it is the total annihilation the individual will. Her belief, touched on at several points, is that in granting free will to the soul God loses the perfect freedom of his own will. He is not free to take back what he freely gave. But the perfected Soul, Love explains earlier, is dissolved into God, and, as a result,

he in his divine goodness sees himself all alone. In that goodness it will be with him just as it was when he knew himself all alone, before she ever was, when he gave her his goodness of which he made her the mistress. That was Free Will, which he cannot have back from her unless the Soul pleases. Now he has it, with no demur, just as he had it before she was its mistress. No-one but he is like this; no-one loved except him, for there is no-one except him, and so he loves all alone, and sees himself all alone, and praises himself all alone out of his own being.

(p.116)

That restoration of God to his lonely self-sufficient perfection can come about only if the Soul relinquishes her will. But in order to write the book, Porete had to retain her will, and we also have to retain wills of our own, and to live in it as frustrated and even resisting readers. If we were able to achieve the quietism it recommends, that would make reading itself impossible. A striking observation that bears on this occurs in chapter 110. The previous chapter has stated that a creature lacks the art to know what God has; so what art does a creature possess? Love answers:

It is a subtle instrument of which perception is born, which gives knowledge in the Soul, to understand more perfectly what is said than even he who says it, however much the speaker may understand what he says; because the listener rests, and the speaker labors, and knowledge cannot endure labor without becoming less noble.

(p.133)

Porete as speaker or writer of the *Mirror* does indeed labour, constantly twisting language to make it point towards an elusive meaning. The labour of composing the *Mirror* must have been entirely different from the annihilation of the will into peace which is its central theme. But listeners or readers too have to labour to understand, at least (I speak for myself) if they have not already achieved the annihilation of the will towards which it urges them.

This may help to explain contradictions that run through the *Mirror* as to its authorship and intended audience. The *Mirror* refers far more often to its existence as a book than, for example, *Piers Plowman* does: it is a profoundly self-reflexive text, a mirror that keeps on reflecting itself. To give some examples, in chapter 2 Love says, ‘Children of Holy Church, [. . .] it is for you that I have made this book’ (p.12), and in chapter 13 she gives the book its title (p.29). In chapter 20 Reason questions what ‘This book says’ (p.40), and in chapter 54 she asks the Soul ‘how many kinds of death you had to die before you came to understand this book perfectly’ (p.73). They are both characters *in* the book, yet they must struggle to understand it. In chapter 66 Love explains to Reason that the Soul has advanced so far that ‘she starts her reading where you leave off’; the lesson is written by the Holy Spirit on ‘costly parchment’ which is the Soul herself, ‘and there [. . .] is conducted that divine teaching which human wit cannot put into words’ (p.87). Is this the same book as that in which they are characters? Chapter 96 includes a narrative about the writing of a book, which becomes the book we are reading:

Once there was a poor suppliant creature who for long sought God in his creatures, to see whether she would find him as she would have him be, and as he himself would be if the creature let him work his divine works in her without hindrance from her; and nothing did she find, but remained as she was, hungering for that which she sought. And when she saw that she found nothing, she [thought to] herself; and her [thought] told her that she should go to seek him, as she would have him be, in the very depths of the core of the understanding of the purity of her exalted [thought]; and this poor suppliant creature went to seek him there, and she [thought to herself] that she would write of God in the manner in which she wished to find him in his creatures. And so this poor suppliant creature wrote what you hear.

(p.120)

We can only suppose that the poor suppliant creature is Porete herself. In chapter 101, the Soul explains to Reason that she has finished with ‘doing’, ever

since 'Love opened his book for me. For this book is so written that, the moment when Love opens it, the Soul knows everything, and every work of perfection is accomplished in her by the opening of this book' (p.125). Is that also the book we are reading? And in any case, who is the book's author, the Soul or Love? On occasion, Porete implies collaboration: in chapter 97 'the Soul who wrote this book' refers to 'the time when I made it, or rather when Love made it for me and at my request' (p.121), and in chapter 119 she states that the book is one 'that Love has caused [. . .] to be written by human knowledge', but that it is 'base and very little, however great it seemed to me when I began' (p.147). So the book, taking its own writing as one of its themes, contains a running commentary on itself, and one that does not express a fixed point of view but is always shifting as the text unfolds. It is tempting to suppose that we could master this situation by drawing a distinction between Porete as the *sujet de l'énonciation* and the Soul as the *sujet de l'énoncé*, somewhat along the lines of the opposition commonly found in Dante criticism between poet and pilgrim in the *Commedia*; but in practice I do not find that any such distinction works. It does not work very well with Dante,<sup>22</sup> but at least in the *Commedia* there is a systemic difference in time between the journey through the other world and the writing of the poem that recounts that journey, whereas in the *Mirror* that is not so. There the journey and the writing are the same: the book both has been written and is in process of being written as we read it.<sup>23</sup>

The position the *Mirror* proposes for its 'you' is no more fixed than that of its 'I'. The prologue has Love addressing 'both actives and contemplatives' (p.10), and, as we have seen, Reason goes further and regards her questions as serving 'ordinary people' (p.29). Later the Soul apologizes to readers who have grasped 'exalted matter' from the book for now descending to 'little things' for the sake of those capable of no more (p.80), and later still she fears lest Reason's followers, unable to understand her language, 'should receive death in that state of being in which I am at peace' (p.89). As the book develops, Porete increasingly suggests that it will be of value only to those who already know from experience what it has to teach. In the chapter in which Reason returns, Love addresses a more exclusive audience:

You, ladies, to whom God has given this life abundantly out of his divine goodness, asking for no return, and not only this life of which we speak but also with it that other state of being of which no man ever spoke, you will recognize your customs in this book.

– but others will not (p.122). After a statement of the need for the soul to return its will to God comes another address to the audience, dividing it sharply between insiders and outsiders:

Interpret this if you wish, provided that you can; if you cannot, you are not such as this; if you were such as this, it would be clear to you. If you had

the ears with which to hear it, you would not be brought to such utter nothingness, and I cannot express it otherwise. If his goodness has deprived you of your hearing, I cannot reawaken it.

(p.135)

This makes it hard to see that the *Mirror* has any external purpose at all. It cannot give hearing to those who lack it, but if it were really only for those who can fully understand it, they would not need it, because they would already be 'such as this', having already undergone the spiritual ascent towards which it points. The book as a work to be read can only be for those who cannot understand it, and not understanding it is indeed the way we experience it. The will to understand is a crucial part of our reading experience, and yet abandonment of the will is just what the *Mirror* repeatedly praises and urges.

My title refers to 'courtliness and transcendence'. I have said something about transcendence, though the most important thing to say is that nothing can be said about it. Now I turn to courtliness, which I can treat more briefly because it has been so penetratingly discussed by Barbara Newman.<sup>24</sup> In the prologue, Love urges us, 'Now listen humbly to a brief story of worldly love, and understand that it applies also to divine love' (p.10). The story is that of a princess who falls in love at a distance with King Alexander simply from what she has heard of his *courtoisie* and *noblece*. Within her he is near, but outwardly he is far, so she has a portrait painted as she imagines him. The Soul, 'who had this book made', says that she has undergone a similar experience, and that her king gave her 'this book' – the *Mirror*.

But even though I have his picture, still I am in a distant land, and far from the palace where the most noble loved ones of this lord dwell, they who are all pure and made perfect and free by the gifts of this king with whom they dwell.

(p.11)

Analogies between 'worldly love' and 'divine love' are of course familiar in medieval literature, nourished by commentary on scriptural sources such as the Song of Songs; and we find traces of that tradition throughout the *Mirror*, in statements such as 'This Soul [. . .] has languished for Love for many a day' (p.64). But Porete also sees a more specific analogy between the love of God and the refined love of medieval courtly poetry (*Fine Amour* is a term used in the French text), a love possible only to those who are noble, those of the royal court. That becomes explicit from chapter 30, where the Soul laments that God 'has taken whatever I possessed, and he has given me nothing, he has kept it all', and asks, 'Ah, Love, for the love of God, is this how a lover shares?' (p.49). The idea of God as the lover and beloved of the soul is central to what follows, and the *Mirror* presents spiritual love as having much in common with the *Fine Amour* of courtly literature. It is an exclusive love, both personally exclusive – God is always 'my beloved', never 'our Father' – and, no less important,

exclusive in terms of rank. In the medieval poem that was most influential in disseminating a courtly conception of love, *The Romance of the Rose*, the first task of the youth who desires to be fashioned as a lover is to gain entrance to the exclusive space of the garden where Love himself holds court. Similarly, in chapter 52 of the *Mirror*, 'O most highly born', Love tells the Soul, 'you have indeed entered into that one free dwelling place where no-one enters if he is not of your [lineage, without illegitimacy]' (p.71). To enter this select company is to be 'free' (*franc*), a term used repeatedly: spiritual *franchise*, no longer bound by obsession with the requirements of the Virtues, is understood in terms of freedom as opposed to serfdom or indeed any kind of work for a living – the freedom of an ideal aristocracy that no longer has to struggle to hold the superior place that belongs to it by right. This elevated spiritual status is a matter of high birth: not that Porete literally believed spiritual capacity to be transmitted by lineage, but that high birth provides an analogy to a superiority granted by God, not achieved by personal struggle.

The Soul insists on this exclusivism of rank. Those who merely keep the commandments, she states in chapter 63, are comparable to 'tradesmen, who are called base in the world, because base they are, for well-born men are incapable of involvement in matters of trade or of living solely in their own interests'. But she can tolerate such people, she tells God, because 'they are expelled from the court of your secret friends, just as [a *vilain*] would be expelled from the court of a noble [. . .], where no man can be if he is not of [*lignage*]' (pp.84–5). In chapter 82, Love asserts that the Soul 'is [*franche*] in all four quarters. For there must be four quarterings for any noble man, before he can be called of gentle birth, and this is also true in the spiritual sense' (p.106). And in chapter 85 Love adds that the Soul is '*franche, mais plus franche, mais tres franche, mais surmontamment franche*', and 'replies to no-one, if she does not wish, if he is not of her [*lignage*], for a man of noble birth would not deign to reply to a [*vilain*] if he challenged him' (p.109). There are many other such passages; in chapter 121 the Soul acknowledges that her judgement of spiritual tradesmen is harsher than God's, promising the Trinity, 'I will be silent, since that is your wish' (p.149). But we need to grasp that, though the attitude conveyed by Porete, with her small regard for bishops and theologians, is often the proud contempt of a *gentil-homme* for *vilains*, she remains aware of the difference between social and spiritual rank. One place where this is made clear is a beautiful passage in chapter 82, which describes how the annihilated soul, 'loses her name in him by whom and into whom she is melted and dissolved', just as rivers lose their names when they flow back into the sea from which they came (p.107). 'Name', *nom*, in the double sense of family name and reputation, often upheld by violence, is an obsession of the medieval aristocracy; but the goal of the spiritual nobility is to lose their name, to melt back into God.

One parallel, then, between mystical love and the love of courtly poetry lies in the language of social superiority and exclusion; another lies in the conception of love as a harsh discipline, a form of suffering voluntarily undertaken with no guarantee of reward. To return to *The Romance of the Rose*, Love there, in

the Middle English version, warns the would-be lover that ‘peyne and gret adversité/ He mot endure, and eke travaile,/ That shal me serve’ (*Romaunt* ll. 2010–12),<sup>25</sup> and the lover later marvels

How ony man may lyve or laste  
 In such peyne and such brennyng,  
 In sorwe and thought and such sighing,  
 Ay unrelesed woo to make.

(ll. 2726–9)

The demands made on the Soul in the *Mirror* are harsher still, and her submission is more readily diagnosed in psychopathological terms. To illustrate this, I want to turn to the supplementary chapters added after 1306. These begin in an impersonally didactic way, taking up various questions related to mysticism raised by the New Testament and by theology. In effect, Porete is defending the orthodoxy of her mysticism along lines that would have been familiar and acceptable to theologians, and I suspect that she originally intended to go no further. By chapter 130, though, the pressure of personal experience begins to crack the frame of orthodoxy. There she writes, ‘Now I shall tell you what I used to consider when I lived the life I have described, which was a life forlorn, in the days when I did not know how to endure or to comport myself’ (p.163), and she lists four absolute oppositions between God and herself. In the following chapter, she writes,

So afterwards I considered, in the midst of my wickedness and of his goodness, what thing I could do to make my peace with him, and I set myself to meditating through comprehending this comparison, yielding him my will unreservedly, and I said that if I had never been, then by the same token I should never have sinned against his will; and if that were pleasing to him, that would be my pleasure.

This introduces a series of further hypotheses. She would be willing to ‘return to nothing’, if that were God’s pleasure (p.165). She would be willing to suffer all torments coming from God rather than have ‘everlasting glory by [her] own powers’. She would rather that Christ should resuffer all his torments than that she should displease God. She would rather that the whole of creation should be annihilated than that she should ‘sin or wish to sin’. She would rather suffer eternal torment than do anything displeasing to God (p.166). And so on, in a series of ever more extravagant suppositions about what she would do in order to conform to God’s pleasure. Again, she would not be willing to be redeemed from everlasting torment even at the request of ‘the sweet humanity of Jesus Christ, and the Virgin Mary, and all the court of Heaven’ if it were not God’s will, ‘for I could not endure it, if I did not have it of the pure love which he has for me of himself, of his pure goodness, and of his will alone, as a lover has toward his beloved’ (pp.166–7).

And then she imagines three questions that God puts to her: how would she react if he wished her to love another more than him, or if he loved another more than her, or if he wished another to love her more than he did? At each question, she writes, 'my wits failed', yet God presses her for an answer (p.167). She goes on:

And now I shall tell you how I answered. I told him that what he was doing was wishing to try me in every respect. Alas, what am I saying? Truly, I never uttered a single word to him. My heart all alone took up this battle with him, which answered in deathly anguish and said that now he wanted to part from his beloved, with whom he had lived, and who believed that he was to live yet longer with her; but since it was the case that on his side he could will this so, and since one must will everything that he wills, I answered to him and said[. . .]

(p.168)

Everything here is narrated in the past tense, but what shatters the illusion of pastness, the illusion that Porete herself must surely have wished to accept, of experience digested and complete as a stage on the road to the present, is the 'Alas, what am I saying?' (*Helaz, que dis je?*). That indicates a change of perspective in the course of the narration itself: the past once more becomes present, now with the recognition that this dialogue took place not in external reality but in the heart – a reminder perhaps that in the prologue the princess's portrait of Alexander could only be based on 'the appearance under which she loved him' (p.11), not on the reality, which was forever inaccessible except by entering the black hole of annihilation. Porete's answer to God is that if he really demanded these things of her,

I would wish it, and not ever wish anything again. And so, Lord, my will comes to its end in saying this; and so my will is martyred and my love is martyred; it is you who have led them to martyrdom, when they supposed that it had all come to nothing. Once my heart thought that it could always live in love through the longing of a good will. But now these two matters have been brought to their end in me, and they have brought me out of the days of my childhood.

(p.168)

These horrifying thought experiments are extreme developments of the parodies of theological argument in which Porete had earlier taken a dangerous pleasure, but now they crush the self in earnest. They are expressions of masochistic devotion, a love so total in its submission to the will of the beloved that its end has to be self-annihilation. This is what abandonment of the will means, not as an idea but in reality. This is the outcome of the courtly conception of love-service as a form of suffering – and especially perhaps when Love's servant is a woman.

I have no wish to argue for ‘a specifically feminine form of spirituality’,<sup>26</sup> but the closest fictional parallels to this self-annihilation that occur to me do involve female characters. One (also suggested by Watson)<sup>27</sup> is Grisilde in Chaucer’s ‘Clerk’s Tale’. She sinks her will totally into that of her husband, telling him,

Ther may no thyng, God so my soule save,  
 Liken to yow that may displese me;  
 Ne I desire no thyng for to have,  
 Ne drede for to lese, save oonly yee.

(ll. 505–8)

She fears to lose nothing but Walter himself; but then he announces that she *is* to lose him (she is to be expelled from his palace and his presence in favour of a supposed second wife), and her response is still a passionate merging of her will into his even to the point of death:

And certes, if I hadde prescience  
 Youre wyl to knowe, er ye youre lust me tolde,  
 I wolde it doon withouten necligence;  
 But now I woot youre lust, and what ye wolde,  
 Al youre plesance ferme and stable I holde;  
 For wiste I that my deeth wolde do yow ese,  
 Right gladly wolde I dyen, yow to plese.

(ll. 659–65)

The other parallel (one mentioned in passing by Sargent)<sup>28</sup> is that twentieth-century classic of masochistic pornography, the *Histoire d’O* of ‘Pauline Réage’ (Dominique Aury), in which the heroine known only as ‘O’ – the perfect symbol of a soul brought to nothing – submits to the most horrifying torments to please her beloved, which include his giving her to others. One possible ending, described by Réage as suppressed, is that ‘O’ begs, and is granted, her lover’s permission to commit suicide – annihilation of the will indeed. Of course in these cases the beloved is not God, but, as Barbara Newman has recently written, ‘divine and carnal love, though opposed in morality, are exactly the same in psychology’.<sup>29</sup> Again, Porete’s work omits the voluntary bodily sufferings described both in the *Histoire d’O* and in the *vitae* of many medieval holy women from Marie d’Oignies to Catherine of Siena.<sup>30</sup> Ontological masochism, however, may be more dangerous than physical masochism, and was certainly regarded as such by the medieval Church. For me the point of these parallels is to bring home that there must have been a psychology underlying the theology of Marguerite Porete. Her extreme self-abjection, though ontological, remains a version of what we now call masochism. This masochism is what Porete takes as the ground of her mystical writing; and, it would appear, she eventually put it into practice in her life, allowing the martyrdom of her will to be completed by the martyrdom of her body: ‘such peyne and such brennyng’.

## Notes

- 1 C. Kirchner (ed.) *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, London: Burns, Oates, 1927.
- 2 R. Guarnieri, 'Lo Specchio delle anime semplici e Margherite Porette', *L'Osservatore Romano*, 16 June 1946, p.3.
- 3 B. McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism – 1200–1350*, New York: Crossroad, 1998, p.244.
- 4 R. Guarnieri (ed.) 'Il Miroir des simples âmes di Margherita Porete', *Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Pietà*, 1968, vol. 4, 501–708.
- 5 M. Doiron (ed.) 'The Mirror of Simple Souls: A Middle English Translation', *Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Pietà*, 1968, vol. 5, 243–355.
- 6 E. Spearing (trans.) *Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love (Short Text and Long Text)*, London: Penguin, 1998; A.C. Spearing (trans.) *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works*, London: Penguin, 2001.
- 7 E. Spearing (ed.) *Medieval Writings on Female Spirituality*, New York: Penguin, 2002.
- 8 E. Colledge, J.C. Marler, and J. Grant (trans.) *Margaret Porete: The Mirror of Simple Souls*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999. I cite this translation by page numbers, indicating changes by square brackets. Babinsky's version is less accurate; one particularly unfortunate error is her rendering of the French prologue's 'Mais non obstant que j'aye son ymage, n'est il pas que je ne soie en estrange país [But notwithstanding that I have his image, I am none the less in a strange land]' as 'But it is no hindrance that I have His image, for it is not true that I am in a strange land' (E.L. Babinsky (trans.) *Marguerite Porete: The Mirror of Simple Souls*, New York: Paulist Press, 1993, p.80). Robinson's reliance on this leads her into what seems a fundamental misunderstanding: that the prologue offers two 'distinctly different' 'fables of love', the divergences between which 'are keys to Porete's message' (J.M. Robinson, *Nobility and Annihilation in Marguerite Porete's Mirror of Simple Souls*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001, pp.49–50; see also p.98). I quote the French text, as edited by Guarnieri, from P. Verdeyen (ed.) *Margaret Porete Speculum Simplicium Animarum*, Turnhout: Brepols, 1986.
- 9 P. Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (†203) to Marguerite Porete (†1310)*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- 10 R. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972, p.62.
- 11 E. Colledge, 'Introductory Interpretative Essay' to Colledge, Marler, and Grant, *Margaret Porete*, p.xl.
- 12 N. Watson, 'Misrepresenting the Untranslatable: Marguerite Porete and the *Mirouer des simples âmes*', *New Comparison*, 1991, vol. 12, 124–37.
- 13 P. Verdeyen, 'Le procès d'inquisition contre Marguerite Porete et Guiard de Cressonessart (1309–1310)', *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique*, 1986, vol. 81, 47–94 (pp.88, 51); M. Sargent, 'Le *Mirouer des simples âmes* and the English Mystical Tradition', in K. Ruh (ed.) *Abendländische Mystik im Mittelalter: Symposion Kloster Engelberg 1984*, Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1986, pp.443–65 (p.443).
- 14 Cf. N. Watson, 'Melting into God the English Way: Deification in the Middle English version of Marguerite Porete's *Mirouer des simples âmes anienties*', in R. Voaden (ed.) *Prophets Abroad: The Reception of Continental Holy Women in Late-Medieval England*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996, pp.19–49 (p.30).
- 15 Robinson (*Nobility and Annihilation*, p.34) conveniently sets out her claim that 'Porete had a clear [theological] agenda throughout her text, although the thread of her thought might prove difficult to follow at times' in opposition to the conception, most sharply stated by Watson ('Misrepresenting' and 'Melting') of the *Mirror* as a

- performative text. I have learned much from Robinson but share Watson's understanding of the fundamental nature of the *Mirror*.
- 16 L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (trans.), revised edn, London: Routledge, 2001, p.89.
  - 17 Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, D.W. Robertson (trans.) Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958, p.11.
  - 18 M. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p.119; M. Lichtman, 'Negative Theology in Marguerite Porete and Jacques Derrida', *Christianity and Literature*, 1998, vol. 47, 213–27 (p.215); Robinson, *Nobility and Annihilation*, p.36.
  - 19 I am greatly indebted to Ad Putter for suggesting the argument and much of the wording of this paragraph.
  - 20 A. Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995, p.95.
  - 21 This sentence was written before I had read David Benson's excellent book, *Public Piers Plowman* (C.D. Benson, *Public Piers Plowman: Modern Scholarship and Late Medieval English Culture*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), which argues so cogently against 'the myth of the poet'; but I hope my formulation is distinguishable from a claim that the 'I' of the poem represents 'a single authorial voice' (Benson, p.101).
  - 22 T. Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
  - 23 Cf. C. Bothe, 'Writing as Mirror in the Work of Marguerite Porete', *Mystics Quarterly*, 1994, vol. 20, 105–12 (p.105).
  - 24 B. Newman, 'La mystique courtoise: Thirteenth-Century Beguines and the Art of Love', in her *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995, pp.137–81 and B. Newman, 'The Mirror and the Rose: Marguerite Porete's Encounter with the *Dieu d'Amours*', in R. Blumenfeld-Kosinski, D. Robertson and N.B. Warren (eds) *The Vernacular Spirit: Essays on Medieval Religious Literature*, New York: Palgrave, 2002, pp.105–23.
  - 25 The *Romaunt of the Rose* and the 'Clerk's Tale' are cited by line-number from L.D. Benson (ed.) *The Riverside Chaucer*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.
  - 26 M. Sargent, 'Le Mirouer des simples âmes and the English Mystical Tradition'.
  - 27 N. Watson, "'Yf wommen be double naturelly": Remaking "Woman" in Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*', *Exemplaria*, 1996, vol. 8, 1–34 (pp.2–3).
  - 28 M. Sargent, 'Le Mirouer'.
  - 29 Newman, 'The Mirror and the Rose', p.106.
  - 30 For comparison of Catherine with 'O', see S. Beemer, 'Asceticism, Masochism, and Female Autonomy: Catherine of Siena and *The Story of O*', *Studies in Medievalism*, 1996, vol. 8, 195–209.

## **Part IV**

# **The art of heaven**



## 10 ‘Some high place’

### Actualizing heaven in the Middle Ages

*Peter Meredith*

There were medieval ‘plays’ in the churches of Europe from at least the ninth century and there were ‘medieval’ plays in places like Lucerne and York in the late sixteenth century. The most fruitful and varied period is the later one, from the fourteenth century to the sixteenth. York and Florence, which have impressive civic drama from this later period, are good starting points for a discussion of the medieval dramatic heaven. From the hazy beginnings of the Corpus Christi play at York in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century to its well-documented forced demise in 1569, the Mercers’ Company, one of the richest guilds in the City, provided the culminating moments of the performance of the play in the streets of York with its pageant of Doomsday. The pageant opens in heaven, before moving to earth for the Judgement itself, to hell for the final destination of the damned, and thence back to heaven. The text of the pageant provides no description of the settings but the archives of the Company contain extensive accounts referring to the refurbishing of the pageant wagon, and, most importantly, an indenture (1433), including an inventory, for the handing-over of the possessions of the Company at the change of pageant masters.<sup>1</sup> The inventory provides the most detailed information about a pageant wagon that exists for English medieval drama and much of it is concerned with heaven. These are the relevant details in their order of appearance in the inventory:

ij paire aungell wynges, with *iren in the endes*; ij trumpes of *white plate* and ij *redes*; [. . .] a cloud and ij peces of rainbow of *tymber*; array for god (that is to say a sirke wounded, a diademe with a veserne gilted); [. . .] iiij *irens to bere uppe heven*; iiij *smale coterelles* and a *iren pynne*; a *brandreth of iren* that God sall sitte upon when he sall sty uppe to heven, with iiij *rapes* at iiij corners; a heven of iren, with a *naffe of tre*; ij peces of rede cloudes and sternes of gold, langing to heven; ij peces of blu cloudes *payntid on bothe sydes*; iiij peces of rede cloudes with sunne-bemes of golde and sternes, for the hiest of heven, with a *lang small border of the same wurke*; vij grete aungels, halding the passion of god (ane of thame has a fane of laton and a crose of iren in his hede, giltid); iiij smaller aungels, giltid, holding the passion; ix smaler aungels *payntid rede*, to renne aboute in the heven; a lang small *corde*, to gerre the aungels renne aboute;<sup>2</sup>

I have underlined the visual aspects of heaven in the foregoing inventory and italicized the technical elements. Visually, heaven is dominated on the one hand by clouds, stars and sunbursts and on the other by angels. Only one action is referred to, God's return to heaven (*sty uppe* or 'ascend'), and the mechanisms of the wagon are dominated by this – the iron heaven, the windlass (*a naffe of tre*) and the raising device of ropes and iron seat (*brandreth of iren* or 'iron grate or grid'). The inventory seems to have been used right through the fifteenth century (certainly there is no further copy of it or a replacement) and the nearest there is to a later one is a receipt given by the pageant masters for 1526 noting present and missing items. The 'yren sett with iiij rappes' and a 'wendes with j repe' are still there (if the 'wendes' is to be equated with the earlier 'naffe'), and there is mention of 'the clowd' and 'ij grett Angells' and 'iiij lyttell angelles', but the great host of heaven amidst a mass of brilliantly colourful clouds seems to have gone.

Six years after the York inventory was written, an Orthodox cleric, Bishop Abraham from Suzdal, twenty miles north-east of Moscow, was in Florence attending the later stages of the Council of the Eastern and Western Churches which was attempting to reconcile the differences between the two. While there he saw two plays, one of the Annunciation, the other of the Ascension, performed in two of the churches of Florence. In both, heaven played a major visual part. Bishop Abraham describes the action of both plays in some detail, but also, perhaps more surprisingly, he describes the mechanics of the action.<sup>3</sup> He must either have talked to those involved in the production or been taken on a tour of the sets before or after the performance. In the first play, the Annunciation, heaven was placed above the main doorway into the church, about twenty-one feet from the ground; in the second, the Ascension, it was 'high above' the stone screen, itself twelve feet high, which ran across the centre of the church. There is also a further heaven above the altar at the far end of the church.

The following details can be extracted from his descriptions. In the heaven of the Annunciation was a throne on which God the Father, 'a man of majestic appearance [. . .] in magnificent robes and with a crown on his head', sat surrounded by 'a multitude of little boys [. . .] representing heavenly virtues' and by 'five hundred little oil lamps',<sup>4</sup> all at first concealed behind curtains. Another version of Abraham's account reads:

Around the throne [. . .] there are seven spheres, the smallest of which measures two ells in diameter. and around it another, two hand-spans larger, and so on, and on them burn a thousand [. . .] oil lamps. On the largest circle, between the lights, there sit facing each other four small children, dressed as angels and with angels' crowns, one holding a tambourine, the others a zither or a hand-drum. All this represents an imitation of the seven spheres of heaven, of the planets, of heavenly might and inextinguishable angelic light.<sup>5</sup>

Across the centre of the church, on top of the stone screen, is the other part of the 'set' – Mary's chair and bed. The two parts of the performance space are

linked by ropes. At the moment of the Annunciation itself, the curtains around heaven were drawn back with the sound of gunfire representing thunder, 'the lights moved endlessly to and fro weaving in and out very fast, some going up and others going down',<sup>6</sup> and Gabriel suspended from the ropes crosses from heaven to the top of the screen, above the heads of the audience.

His descent is accomplished in the following manner. He has on his back two small pulleys, invisible from below on account of the great distance. These pulleys are supported by two ropes. Meanwhile the third and finest rope is pulled by people who are up high and out of sight to lower the angel and pull him back again. The appearance of the machinery is amazingly wonderful, even to grown men. And everything is decorated in gold.<sup>7</sup>

As a climax to the play, when Gabriel returns to heaven there is 'a loud and continuous thunder-flash'; 'Flames came down from the upper platform and exploded all over the church with terrifying thunder, and lights all over the church which had been extinguished were lit by the flash.'<sup>8</sup>

In the Ascension play at the church of Santa Maria del Carmine, heaven is again an elaborate construction. It is best thought of as a cube, twelve feet square, suspended from the roof beams of the church at about twenty-four feet above the right-hand end of the screen. It is 'beautifully painted underneath and on the sides' and has an opening (presumably in the side facing the audience) six feet in diameter. This is draped with a blue curtain painted with the sun, moon and stars 'a representation of the first celestial sphere'. Beneath heaven, on the screen, is the Mount of Olives from which Christ is to ascend, four and a half feet in height and with two steps leading up to it. Bishop Abraham's description of the event follows:

After these [words to the disciples] and other words, a peal of thunder is heard, Christ appears on the Mount, and all turn their eyes upwards to see heaven open and God the Father floating above, suspended in the air in wondrous fashion, in a great light, which comes from innumerable lamps; the little boys, who represent the heavenly Powers, move around him to the sounds of deafening music and sweet singing; the big painted angels on the discs move in the shape of a circle so that they seem to be alive. From heaven where God the Father is there descends on the seven ropes an exceedingly beautiful and cleverly constructed *nuvola* [cloud machine]: it is round and surrounded by swiftly turning discs. To the right and to the left are two children dressed as angels, with golden wings. When the *nuvola* is half-way down, Jesus takes two great golden keys and says to Peter: You are Peter and on this rock I shall build my church [. . .] And when he has blessed him and handed him the keys, he goes up with the help of the seven ropes in the direction of the *nuvola*, blessing Mary and the Apostles with his hand. It is a marvellous sight and without equal: the ropes are set in motion by means of a very clever pulley-system, so that the person who represents

Jesus seems really to go up by himself, and he reaches a great height without wobbling. The pulley-system is invisible [. . .] When he approaches the *nuvola*, this envelops him from head to foot, the two angels bow before him on the left and the right, and in the same instant the *nuvola* is lit up by a multitude of lights which shed their splendour everywhere. But Jesus goes higher and higher, accompanied by the two Angels, and soon he steps out next to God the Father, the music ceases and it grows dark. Then the Virgin and the Apostles look up to the chamber above the altar: the curtain is drawn back from the place which represents upper heaven, and there is light again.<sup>9</sup>

I have quoted from these examples, almost from opposite ends of Europe, at length because they demonstrate the ‘actualizing’ which separates the dramatic heaven from that of the other art forms. There are inevitably two sides to presenting heaven on the stage, or as a stage, appearance and reality. The appearance is that it must look like what is expected of heaven – or surprise by something unexpected but acceptable (and since no one positively knew what heaven looked like there was considerable scope for surprise); the reality is the mechanical means by which such an appearance is created. The heaven of the painters and sculptors contributed to the one but it is modified by the necessities of the other. The constraints, and the potential, of structures made of wood or iron, of ropes, pulleys, pins and windlasses, carrying the weight and mass of human bodies are an essential part of the dramatic heaven – and the constraints were not unknown. Medieval workmen were familiar, for example, with the dangers of raising heavy weights, but they had no need to conceal the means by which they were raised. To what extent did workmen when they became stage practitioners feel the need to conceal?

It is clear that Bishop Abraham is aware of the ropes and pulleys that allow Gabriel to ‘fly’ across the space between doorway and screen, and he is impressed by the mechanical skill. But he also draws attention to the concealment of the mechanism. Is this something which would have worried a medieval audience – being able to see the mechanisms at work? Or is an appreciation of the wonders of the machinery part of an appreciation of the wonder of heaven itself? Or does it simply create another kind of wonder? A man wearing a mask and elaborate robes is the dramatist’s God. The mask is a theatrical device that does not deceive anyone into thinking that the actor is God, but it does distance the one from the other and create an effect of other-worldliness specific to the mask. Can sets and mechanisms do the same? It is impossible to be sure and it is also impossible to know whether what is true of one part of Europe is true of another, but it is worth noting Bishop Abraham’s obvious delight in the mechanical side of the plays. From the point of view of concealment, it is also worth bearing in mind that at York the whole wagon and its performers, heavenly, earthly and hellish, had to move amongst the people in the streets from one ‘station’ to the next, almost certainly involving them leaving the wagon and reassembling in their appropriate positions for the

beginning of the next performance in full view of the audience. Is this also, walking side-by-side with an angel or even God, for example, simply more of the mechanics of the performance, or to some extent part of the wonder of heaven?<sup>10</sup>

The problem for those putting on a play is more limited than for a writer. It is not how to represent the unrepresentable but how to activate convincingly what has been portrayed over and over again by artists and sculptors, and occasionally how to surprise by unexpected mechanical or scenic ingenuity. The activation is important. This is not a static scene but one in which divine figures have to move in a way that convinces and impresses an audience. Bishop Abraham puts his finger on that when he comments that Christ rose up to heaven on his lift 'without wobbling'. Nothing destroys the wonder more than the mechanical jerk of a raising mechanism or the shake of a lift. But what of the often-presented scenery of heaven? It is also worth noting that though the York Mercers are dealing with a heaven on a moveable wagon in the streets of York and the Florentine companies are dealing with a fixed stage in a church, both are attempting to provide similar effects. For both, height is important: both use raising mechanisms, though of necessity that in York is far less complicated than that in the Florentine churches. Light, which is a major element in Florence, is less obviously important at York, but it needs to be borne in mind that the performance of the Doomsday pageant almost certainly took place largely after dark and therefore must have been lit by torches, and that God, at least, had a reflective golden mask.

Music clearly played a large part in the Florentine plays; in the York Doomsday there is on the one hand the threatening 'trumpets' of the angels – the scene is the Last Judgement – and on the other, as a stage direction makes clear, the more welcoming *melodia angelorum* towards the end of the pageant. Two further elements make up the normal scenario: angels and clouds. At York, apart from the two trumpeting ones, the angels are all carved. As befits the Judgement, they carry or support the instruments of the Passion. In Florence almost all the angels move, some to emphasize the turning spheres of the heavens. Both use clouds. At York the colour and decorative properties are emphasized – red and blue, sunbursts and stars – but clouds also mark the division between heaven and earth and apparently between heaven and the 'hiest of heven'. In Florence, the *nuvola* emphasizes Christ's passing from earth to heaven, the cloud providing both movement and temporary concealment.

But knowing that such elements are common is not enough, we also need to know what they might look like or how they were contrived. For this we are largely dependent on descriptions, of which there are few, company records, informative on the practical level but not always on the visual, and, an essential but in many ways a last resort, comparison with how heaven and its inhabitants are shown in the visual arts. A carefully thought-through reconstruction of the Mercers' pageant by Meg Twycross for a performance at the original sites in York in 1988 raises many of the issues and offers some possible solutions. To take the angels first. Apart from their wings, there is no indication in the York

records as to how the angels in the Domsday pageant were costumed, so there is a free choice between the usual representations: the ecclesiastical vestments and the feathered suits. Twycross in fact used both; the feathered suit for the trumpeting angels and the vestments for the decorative angels holding the Passion symbols and for an additional angel with a sword to divide saved from damned (see Plate 10.1). For the clouds, Twycross made use of the typical lichen-like forms but shaped them into two hollow circles (white on blue) to allow for a revolving centrepiece (a sunburst, in front of a moving circle with angels and stars, itself in front of another sunburst, all gold on red backgrounds). God's footstool is also fronted with cloud. Height is provided by the top of the pageant wagon, the raising mechanism is concealed on the back of the wagon (a windlass on the floor) and only the ropes are visible. Light was a problem for Twycross's reconstruction, and health and safety concerns meant that electric spots had to be used to illuminate the scene on the floor of the wagon. But it demonstrated that light was a practical theatrical necessity and not just an essential aspect of heaven.<sup>11</sup>

That there is a full description of the Florentine plays means that there is not the same need to look at modern production, and I want now to broaden the scope of the investigation into the appearance of angels, clouds, light, music and height beyond York and Florence, but not excluding the records of the Sant' Agnese Company at Santa Maria del Carmine which are of interest in filling out Bishop Abraham's account. To turn first to angels. Though there are no records contemporary with Bishop Abraham's visit, later lists from the Company inventories have:

Four albs for the Angels of the *Nugola*, in cotton twill, new and ornate  
Four pairs of wings for the said Angels decorated with tinsel

Two used albs embroidered in red and decorated with tinsel to be worn by  
the Angels

Two wigs for the Angels, white

Two pairs of large wings to be worn by the Angels.<sup>12</sup>

There are also eight angels of *cuir bouilli*, painted red, which are attached to the Ascension *nuvola* in S. Maria del Carmine; compare the nine red York angels which 'renne about in heven' and which Twycross places around the edge of the occasionally-moving, circular disc behind God (Plate 10.1). Angels with red-painted faces appear at Mons, 1501, (Raphael), and in the fifteenth-century Paris Resurrection, where Gabriel appears 'dressed in white with a crimson face'. The red-painted faces are more likely to be for their startling effect than specifically to demonstrate the burning love of the angels for God.<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere, angels become themselves special effects of heaven, like the angel of the Resurrection in Palma who is placed high in the gallery. 'When the time for him to sing comes, he is to have his wings full of lighted candles. And when he comes out, there will be an explosion [*una bombarde*], or some such noise, to signal his



*Plate 10.1* Meg Twycross's reconstruction of the York Mercers' pageant wagon, Petergate, York, 1988. God has descended half-way to earth; a sunburst and the circular clouds of heaven are behind his head, another cloud is at his feet. The trumpeting angels stand at the four corners of the roof, some of the decorative angels between them on the frame of the wagon (photo: David Mills).

appearance.<sup>14</sup> Angels are frequently connected with light, are, indeed, light, as Augustine says:

Wherefore if the angels belong unto God's six days' work, they are that light called day; [...] For when God said: 'Let there be light, and there was light'; if we understand the angels' creation aright herein, they are made partakers of that eternal Light, [...] the only begotten Son of God, with whose light they in their creation were illuminate, and made light.<sup>15</sup>

They are also inevitably connected with that other element of heaven, music, both vocal and instrumental. Early in the York Creation pageant, after God has created 'a blys' around himself, he fills it with angels who fulfil their function, that of praising God, with a *Te Deum*. At the entry of Charles I into Barcelona in 1519 an elaborate heaven was created on the gate of St Anthony with God the Father at the centre surrounded by 'six angels playing stringed instruments [*instrumens de corda*], three dressed in white albs, three with albs and red dalmatics [...] and all wearing angels' masks [*cares*] and wings'.<sup>16</sup>

If the basic appearance of the angels is 'albed' or 'feathered', that of the clouds is rather more difficult to pin down. Most cloud effects in English art, carved or painted, are shown as undulating lines with a lichen-like appearance. In early Renaissance Italian art, though often layered, they are given a less diagrammatically stylized form.<sup>17</sup> In the late Lucerne play, a cloud is produced, when God gives Moses the Ten Commandments, by the use of a smoke machine.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately Bishop Abraham does not specify the appearance of the clouds in the Florentine plays. A stage direction in the Paris Resurrection, however, provides some idea of the effect of the use of cloud machines. After the Harrowing of Hell, the machine on which Christ stands,

should be pulled gradually, and his legs should show below the machine [*l'engin*], and, above, his head and joined hands, [...] and the cords pulling the device [*instrument*] on which Jesus is, should be hidden by cloth looking like a cloud [*en maniere de nue*]. And from the place where Jesus is, there should come forth above and below white and yellow manna [*manne*] like large gold and silver coins [*blans en forme d'or et d'argent*].<sup>19</sup>

It is tempting to suggest that the 'manna' is to distract from what to a modern audience might seem a comic effect. But celebrating an ascension with foil or imitation coins or flowers is a dramatic commonplace, and this and similar moments commonly appear in pictorial art as feet disappearing into a cloud with no obvious sense of comedy. The Chester Ascension seems to call for an effect similar to the French one.<sup>20</sup>

Light is frequently called for in heaven, in stage directions and text. Brilliance is a characteristic not just of angels but of heaven itself. The most elaborate light effects to be described are the Italian ones. Vasari, describing the mechanisms which Brunelleschi used at S. Felice in Florence, talks of a heaven with

an infinite number of lights flashing like lightning [...] Inside it [the moveable dome], above the heads of the angels [with golden wings and hair], there were three circles or garlands of lamps, fitted with certain little lights that could not spill, which from the ground appeared to be stars, while the planks, covered with cloth, resembled clouds.

Later he describes a hollow copper *mandorla* [an almond-shaped frame], in which were placed some small lamps in such a way that 'when a spring was held down they were all concealed within the copper *mandorla* and when the spring was not depressed the light from all the lamps could be seen shining through the openings'.<sup>21</sup> Even these pale into insignificance when set against the flashing fires that Bishop Abraham reported (see above), and lightning is, perhaps surprisingly, a not infrequent element of heavenly light. At Bourges, angels hurl fire 'in the form of lightning [*fouldre*]' at the Jews who try and disrupt the Virgin Mary's funeral procession,<sup>22</sup> and 'a clowd from heven' sets the heathen temple 'on afyer' in the English *Mary Magdalen*.<sup>23</sup> Golden masks, wings and hair, and metallic surfaces like tinsel, are frequently used to enhance the effects of light in heaven. The gold and silver 'coins' showered down from heaven in the Paris Resurrection are a not uncommon way of scattering light.

The music is, like light, an inevitable accompaniment of heaven. The English N.town stage direction emphasizes this when, rather than mention the choir, it simply says, 'Here þe aungel bryngeth manna in a cowpe of gold, lyke to confectionys: þe hefne syngynge.'<sup>24</sup> Everywhere angels sing, play and dance, the forms and harmonies reflecting the concord of heaven. Occasionally a play will more subtly use the intellectual idea of harmony. The well-known second pageant of the Shepherds in the English Towneley Cycle, both refers to the notion of the perfection of heavenly time in music, the time of the angel's *Gloria* is referred to as 'Thre brefes to a long' (l. 948) with its obvious Trinitarian reference, and also demonstrates the perfection of heavenly harmony by implying it in the singing of a single angel, thereby contrasting with the explicit and recognizable earthly harmony of the 'tenory', 'tryble' and 'meyne' (low, high and middle voices) of the shepherds' own song.<sup>25</sup>

Music is, of course, not the only sound in heaven. The thunder of the opening doors of heaven has already been mentioned, and also the *bombarde* which accompanied the angel's appearance in Palma. The sixteenth-century Lucerne play has stage staff called 'thunderers' who provide an appropriate accompaniment to God's giving of the Ten Commandments, to Christ's death on the cross and to Pentecost. There are also *Schützen* ('musketeers', 'riflemen') to fill out the thunderers' effects.<sup>26</sup> A 'peal of thunder' accompanies the opening of heaven in the Florence Ascension play and gunfire 'in imitation of heavenly thunder' in the Annunciation.<sup>27</sup> One of the impressive effects of the present-day Elche play is the thunderous noise which accompanies the appearance of the spherical *nuvol* (cloud) or *mangrana/granada* (pomegranate) high above in the dome of the church. As well as giving an appropriately solemn aural context for the descent of this huge glittering ball, which opens to reveal a distant angel singing,

it also serves the practical purpose of drawing the audience's attention up into the dome.

The most is made of height where it is already available, such as a church, but where there is no ready-made height, it is created. The 'hiest of heven' at York was clearly on the top of the pageant wagon; on one of the Corpus Christi floats in Barcelona, four pillars supported a 'heaven of clouds [*un cel de nuvols*]',<sup>28</sup> in Lucerne, heaven was 'high up, at the top of the square [*the Weinmarkt*], raised between the two oriels of the *Haus zur Sonne*'. This Lucerne heaven was built out seven and a half feet from the front of the house, enclosed with curtains, and reached by a ladder slanting across the house. Just below heaven was the choir (see Plate 10.2).<sup>29</sup> For the Chester *Noyes Fludde*, 'some high place' is required for God: 'And firste in some high place – or in the clowdes if it may bee – God speaketh unto Noe standing without the arke with all his family.'<sup>30</sup> Given the unusual raised walkways of Chester, the Rows, it seems likely that they provided the necessary height.

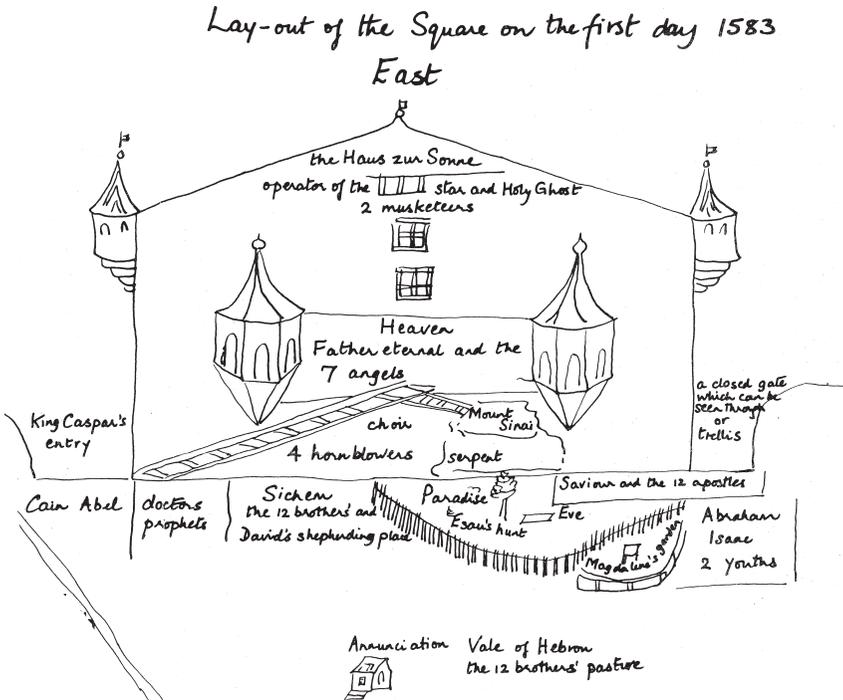


Plate 10.2 The top of the *Weinmarkt* in Lucerne showing the position of heaven on the *Haus zur Sonne*. The choir and the hornblowers, who assist with the thunder effects, are below heaven. Above heaven is the window from which the mechanical dove, representing the Holy Spirit, is sent out along a line which stretches across the whole square. (Part of the lay-out for the play in 1583, redrawn from the original sketch-plan in the Zentralbibliothek, Luzern.)

The examples of the staging of heaven that I have dealt with up to now mostly reflect secular usage in a number of different contexts. The York play as a whole was controlled by the city and the pageants mainly by the individual craft guilds, and it was performed in the streets on wagons. The Florentine plays were organized by lay members of religious guilds dedicated to the honour and worship of Christ, the Virgin Mary and other saints, and performed in the churches. The Lucerne play was run by the city of Lucerne, performed by a wide variety of people in one of the main public squares of the city, the *Weinmarkt*, and directed for much of its sixteenth-century life by the town clerk, Renward Cysat. I have, however, also touched on performances under other auspices, and it is to those that I now want to turn. Is there any difference in the staging of heaven between plays under secular control and those under the control of the church?

As with the two Florentine plays, and with Elche, performance in church allows for the use of a purpose-built height, and the plays associated more or less closely with the liturgy made use of that when staging heaven. Moosburg, twenty or so miles north-east of Munich, staged a celebration of the Ascension in the fourteenth century. A structure representing Mount Sinai is placed immediately below the opening in the roof. Inside is placed an image of Christ dressed in liturgical vestments, and, at the time of the performance, there is also a singer (referred to as *Salvator*) to sing Christ's words. A cord is let down through the opening and attached to the head of the image. Two circlets decorated with flowers, one surrounding a dove and the other an angel, hang below the opening (suspended vertically?), and a third, hung with silk cloths, hangs just below the opening (horizontally), framing it. At the appropriate time, after nones on Ascension day, members of the song-school representing the twelve apostles and the Virgin Mary process to the 'Mount' where two winged angels stand 'in a raised place' near the 'Mount'. The action, interspersed with singing, then follows. The image of Christ is raised from the 'Mount' and the dove in its circlet descends onto the head of the image. The assembled apostles sing, and then the angel descends. The image of Christ is drawn up higher, and the *Salvator* sings from inside the 'Mount'. The image of Christ is finally drawn up through the opening.

Such a barebones description hardly does justice to the imposingly simple action, but equally there is no great suggestion in the rubrics that the 'performance' should be theatrically effective. There is great stress on props and costume – the apostles wear haloes with their names on them and some at least carry their symbols – and on the order of the procession, but height alone with a minimum of decoration is left to suggest heaven. There is, however, some indication afterwards of the potential dangers of such a celebration, and they affect heaven:

after the image of the Saviour has entered the roof, then large wafers [. . .] are sent down from above with roses, lilies and flowers of various kinds. And small children [. . .] collect the wafers and the flowers in their hands, praising the heavens and singing 'Holy, holy, holy' or 'Come, Holy [Spirit]'.

This is the proper celebration. The alternative is implied in: ‘Be warned lest the noise and unsightliness of the image of the devil, with abominations of fire, of sulphur and pitch, or mixed coloured waters and other irreverences and dialogues of whatsoever kind [...] become mingled with this devotion.’<sup>31</sup> This danger is made explicit in the caustic comments of one sixteenth-century reformer:

Then out of hande the dreadfull shape of Sathan downe they throw,  
Oft times with fire burning bright, and dasht a sunder tho.  
The boyes with greedie eyes do watch, and on him straight they fall,  
And beate him sore with rods, and breake him into peeces small.  
This done, they wafers downe doe cast, and singing Cakes the while,  
With Papers rounde amongst them put, the children to beguile.  
With laughter great are all things done: and from the beames they let  
Great streames of water downe to fall, on whom they meane to wet.<sup>32</sup>

Clearly heaven, even in church can be a source of profanation – or innocent fun.

Two final examples bring heaven to earth. Perhaps the fullest description of angelic costume comes from Philippe de Mezières’s service for the Presentation of the Virgin (1372). It is an earth-bound celebration, but heaven nevertheless predominates: ‘Gabriel and Raphael are to be dressed in girded albs with amices, with stoles around their necks and crossing over their breasts.’ On their heads they wear elaborate hats made of white sendal or silk or paper or parchment, triangular or rectangular, with lappets as on a mitre and a border, and painted on top with flowers. They have wings and carry red rods in their hands. The other angels are dressed similarly but the orders are distinguished by the colour of their hats and their lilies: red hats for the first three with a gilded lily, blue for the second three with a blue lily, and white for the third three with a silver lily. The archangel Michael was to be dressed in full armour, with a gilded crown on his helmet. The two musicians are also dressed as angels but without wings.<sup>33</sup> The angels represent heaven on earth surrounding the Virgin Mary, but the only action in which they are involved, apart from a procession, is the taming of Lucifer by Michael.<sup>34</sup>

A service called the *Aurea Missa*, celebrating the Annunciation, was performed in various places in Europe but the best descriptions come from France, Tournai and St Omer, in the early sixteenth century.<sup>35</sup> Mary and Gabriel process to two ‘tabernacles’ covered in white linen, where they are concealed until the time of the ‘performance’. There are also recorded, in St Omer, two ‘heavens’ covered in white linen and sewn with a sun and several stars. The Mass is interspersed with statuesque action between Gabriel and Mary. The ‘heavens’ are there to provide a point of departure for the dove, for which there are minute instructions, great stress being laid on precise timing. The person deputed to lower the dove puts a cord in place and prepares the necessary apparatus of the dove with its candles. The cord, which is lowered into Gabriel’s ‘tabernacle’, is attached to a bell. At the moment when Gabriel sings ‘The Holy Spirit shall come upon you’, the dove descends, and,

[T]he singing-master [*magister cantus*] who shall be in the ‘house’ of the Angel should be very careful about the right time to strike the bell [...], reacting at the beginning of the Gospel so that he who shall be in charge of the lowering of the dove shall be forewarned and get everything necessary ready and light the candles.

The preparation happens at the first striking of the bell, the descent at the second, and the raising of the dove, which hangs there for the rest of the service, at the third.<sup>36</sup> This very precise, not to say fussy, direction argues a concern with appropriateness which spills over into dramatic effectiveness. Once again, angels, height and light are the essentials of heaven, but those involved with the presenting of heaven in liturgical drama are less concerned with ‘actualizing’ and more with suggesting heaven. Celebration is at the centre, not theatre.

Despite touches of variety, the standard elements of the dramatist’s heaven, however elaborate, provide few surprises. What lie behind them are the Bible and centuries of discussion by theologians and depictions by artists. In the encyclopedists’ distillations there are two heavens, the visible and the invisible, but even the visible is so high above us that it cannot be seen; the seven spheres of the Ptolemaic system all emit light in one way or another; the angels *are* light and act as messengers from heaven to earth; God frequently appears in clouds or clouds stand for his presence in the Bible; only music, in many ways the most obvious element, is perhaps a latecomer to heaven.<sup>37</sup> The one common element which I have only referred to in passing is the most essential, God himself; his (often golden) mask, his costume and most importantly his words are alone sufficient to establish heaven. This is particularly so at the Creation, when he is alone. As the play or pageant progresses, he creates all those elements which characterize heaven – the highest of heaven, light, angels, music and later clouds. There is, unfortunately, no direction that gives a full description of how the staging of the Creation was managed. What evidence there is suggests that there was visual spectacle, but the words alone are left:

But onely þe worthely warke of my wyll  
 In my sprete sall enspyre þe mighte of me;  
 And in þe fyrste, faythely, my thoghte to fullfyll,  
 Baynely in my blyssyng I bid at here be  
 A blys al-beledande abowte me,  
 In þe whilke blys I byde at be here  
 Nyen ordres of aungels full clere,  
 In louyng ay-lastande at lowte me.  
*Tunc cantant angeli, ‘Te deum laudamus, te dominum confitemur.’*<sup>38</sup>

Many now might think that these are enough, and no doubt many at the time felt the same, but for those staging the drama ‘actualizing’ heaven, giving it a physical form, seems always to have been the ultimate aim.

## Notes

- 1 The records of the Mercers' Company (later the Merchant Adventurers') are contained in A.F. Johnston and M. Rogerson (eds) *Records of Early English Drama: York* (hereafter *York REED*), 2 vols, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979. The 1433 indenture is on pp.55–6, and the 1526 receipt on pp.241–2 of vol. 1. For a brief description of the workings of the play, see R. Beadle (ed.) *The York Plays*, London: Edward Arnold, 1982, pp.30–9. The Mercers' pageant is on pp.406–15.
- 2 In *York REED*, 'smale' is given as 'finale'. I am grateful to Dr Margaret Rogerson for the correction. There is discussion of possible reconstructions of the Mercers' heaven in A.F. Johnston and M. Dorrell, 'The Doomsday Pageant of the York Mercers, 1433', *Leeds Studies in English* (hereafter *LeedsSE*), 1971, vol. 5, 29–34, and 'The York Mercers and their Pageant of Doomsday, 1433–1526', *LeedsSE*, 1972, vol. 6, 11–36, and P. Meredith, 'The Development of the York Mercers' Pageant Waggon', *Medieval English Theatre* (hereafter *METH*), 1979, vol. 1, 5–18.
- 3 Bishop Abraham's descriptions have appeared in various translations. The most satisfactory English translation is N. Newbigin's in her *Feste d'Oltrarno: Plays in Churches in Fifteenth-Century Florence*, Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento: Studi e Testi, vol. 37, Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1996. Her translation is from the Latin version which accompanies the Russian in J. Krajcar (ed.) *Acta Slavica Concilii Florentini: Narrationes et Documenta*, Concilium Florentinum Documenta et Scriptores, Rome: Pontificium institutum orientalium studiorum, 1976, vol. 11, pp.112–24. Newbigin suggests that the Annunciation play took place in the church of San Felice rather than that usually assumed, Santissima Annunziata (p.7). She also points out that the measurements usually given, based on 1 'sagene' (the Russian unit of measurement used by Abraham) = 7 feet/2.15 metres, are almost certainly mistaken, and that 'sagene' should be reckoned as a yard or 0.91 metres, which fits with the dimensions given by Abraham for the church of Santa Maria del Carmine. For photographs of the models of this theatrical machinery, and that of Brunelleschi, see, for example, E. Battisti, *Brunelleschi: the Complete Work*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1981, pp.302–7.
- 4 Newbigin, *Feste d'Oltrarno*, p.4.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.6.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.7.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp.62–3.
- 10 Perhaps the only way of experiencing today an effect similar to that in Florence in the fifteenth century is to visit Elx, or Elche, in southern Spain for the *Festa d'Agost*. This Assumption play performed in the church of Sta. Maria has many of the characteristics of a medieval play and is, indeed, derived from a fifteenth-century original, though the present church was not begun until 1683. The spectacular raising mechanisms are reminiscent of those described by Bishop Abraham. For a general description, see *Misteri d'Elx: Edicion Inglesa de la Guia de la Festa d'Elx*, Elche: The Patronato Nacional del Misterio de Elche, 1990, and, for more detailed discussion, P.M. King and A. Salvador-Rabaza, 'La Festa d'Elx: the Festival of the Assumption of the Virgin, Elche (Alicante)', *METH*, 1990, vol. 12, pp.4–20; J.C. Garcia, 'Documentary sources for the study of the Festa or Mystery of Elche', *METH*, 1990, vol. 12, pp.21–33; P.M. King, 'La Festa d'Elxre visited: Elx, August 2003', *METH*, 2002, vol. 24, pp.138–40.
- 11 For some discussion of alternative reconstructions, see P. Meredith, 'Original-Staging Productions of English Medieval Plays – Ideals, Evidence and Practice', in F.G. Andersen (ed.) *Popular Drama in Northern Europe in the Later Middle Ages: a Symposium*, Odense: Odense University Press, 1988, pp.65–100 (especially pp.78–84).
- 12 Newbigin, *Feste d'Oltrarno*, pp.75–6.

- 13 P. Meredith and J.E. Tailby (eds) *The Staging of Religious Drama in Europe in the Later Middle Ages: Texts and Documents*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1983, Early Drama, Art, and Music Monographs, vol. 4, p.109. For fiery red clothing and its meaning, see M.C. Seymour *et al.* (eds) *On the Properties of Things, John Trevisa's translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus De Proprietatibus Rerum*, 3 vols, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975 and 1988, pp.64–5.
- 14 W. Tydeman (ed.) *The Medieval European Stage, 500–1550*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p.98.
- 15 R.V.G. Tasker (ed.) Saint Augustine, *The City of God (De Civitate Dei)*, J. Healey (trans.) 2 vols, London: J.M. Dent, 1957, Book XI, chapter 9. See also Seymour *et al.* *On the Properties of Things*, vol. 1, pp.62–3
- 16 Meredith and Tailby, *Staging*, p.93.
- 17 See, for example, the clouds in Filippo Lippi's *Coronation of the Virgin* in Spoleto Cathedral, or Benozzo Gozzoli's *Singing Angels* in the chapel of the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi in Florence, reproduced in M. Holmes, *Fra Filippo Lippi: the Carmelite Painter*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999, plates 165 and 175. The lichen-like clouds appear frequently in England, but there are variations; see, for example, the roof bosses in C.J.P. Cave, *Roof Bosses in Medieval Churches*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948, illustrations 69, 88, 181, 218 (lichen-like), and 163 (naturalistic), 167 (fan-vault-like).
- 18 Meredith and Tailby, *Staging*, p.149: '[horn-blowers] are to set the smoke mechanism working so that the cloud is produced [...] Here the horn blowers are to go secretly into the mountain to get the smoke ready for the cloud.'
- 19 Translation slightly adapted from that in Meredith and Tailby, *Staging*, pp.85–6, by way of the original on p.278.
- 20 R.M. Lumiansky and D. Mills (eds) *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, 2 vols, EETS SS 3 & 9, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974 and 1986, vol. 1, pp.371–6. For the visual effect, see a fourteenth-century English psalter illustration reproduced in L.F. Sandler, *Gothic Manuscripts, 1285–1385*, 2 vols, London: Harvey Miller, and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, vol. 1, facing page 32.
- 21 Tydeman, *Medieval European Stage*, pp.451–2.
- 22 Meredith and Tailby, *Staging*, p.101.
- 23 D.C. Baker, J.L. Murphy and L.B. Hall Jr (eds) *The Late Medieval Religious Plays of Bodleian MSS Digby 133 and E Museo 160*, EETS 283, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, p.76.
- 24 P. Meredith (ed.) *The Mary Play from the N.town Manuscript*, London: Longman, 1987, p.49.
- 25 M. Stevens and A.C. Cawley (eds) *The Towneley Plays*, 2 vols, EETS SS 13 and 14, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, vol. 1, pp.153, 134. For some discussion, see H.A. Watt, 'The Dramatic Unity of the "Secunda Pastorum"', in *Essays and Studies in Honour of Carleton Brown*, New York: New York University Press, 1940, pp.158–66; A. Williams, *The Drama of Medieval England*, East Lansing, MI: Michigan State College Press, 1950, pp.128–9; P. Meredith, 'The Towneley Cycle', in R. Beadle (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp.154–6.
- 26 Meredith and Tailby, *Staging*, p.148.
- 27 Newbigin, *Feste d'Oltrarno*, pp.62, 6.
- 28 Meredith and Tailby, *Staging*, p.71.
- 29 *Ibid.*, pp.83–4 and see the diagrams of the stage lay-out reproduced at the end of the volume.
- 30 Lumiansky and Mills, *Chester*, 1, p. 42.
- 31 The full Latin text is in K. Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 2 vols, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933, vol. 1, pp.484–8. Parts of this description are translated in Tydeman, *Medieval European Stage*, pp.118–20

- 32 From Barnaby Googe's translation of Kirchmeyer's *Regnum Papisticum*; Young, *Drama of the Medieval Church*, vol. 2, p.537.
- 33 Tydeman, *Medieval European Stage*, pp.122–3.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p.125.
- 35 *Ibid.*, pp.118–19.
- 36 *Ibid.*, pp.119–20.
- 37 For the heavens and their light, see Seymour *et al.* *On the Properties of Things*, vol. 1, pp.446–8; for clouds, see, for example, Genesis 9:13–14; Exodus 16:10, 19:9; Matthew 24:30, 26:64; and for music, see R. Rastall, *The Heaven Singing: Music in Early English Drama*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996, pp.180–3.
- 38 Beadle, *York Plays*, p.49.

# 11 Heaven as performance and participation in the *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum* of Hildegard of Bingen

*Stephen D'Evelyn*

Hildegard of Bingen is perhaps best known today for the lyrics which burst into popular view a decade ago. The liturgical quality of these lyrics has often been noted without further comment. The situation is more complicated, however, than it seems at first glance. Hildegard's lyrics were most probably performed in various circumstances, sometimes within the regular Benedictine Office, and often as supplemental to it.

In this chapter, I shall consider four of Hildegard's lyrics, 'O orzchis ecclesia', 'O ignee spiritus', 'Quia felix puericia', and 'O presul vere civitatis'. It is striking that the most vivid examples include descriptions of music. This coincidence, which seems to point to a recurrent pattern in Hildegard's thought, is the focus of my discussion of these lyrics. I shall examine Hildegard's poetic images of heaven in the light of historical and theoretical implications of the lyrics' performance in monastic worship. Jean Leclercq says: '[Monastic life] is considered as an anticipation of celestial life; it is a real beginning of eternal life.'<sup>1</sup> Hildegard's lyrics and their performance present an image of eternal life as wonderfully varied. The imitation of heavenly music and participation in it for Hildegard involve a superabundance of imagery and of melody, even the superabundance of words in verbal coinages that supplement regular language, as we shall see in the first example – all of this diverse abundance partakes of the plenitude of heaven.

Even the liturgical performance of Hildegard's lyrics can present interesting variations from the expected norm. For example, the three songs that Hildegard composed for St Rupert, patron of the monastery she founded, do not constitute an entire Office or Mass as has been implied. Instead they may each have been used as embellishments for the normal Benedictine monastic liturgy, or as part of special Offices in the saint's honour.<sup>2</sup>

I would like to begin with an antiphon that was used in a special ceremony to dedicate a church, probably the church of Hildegard's own Rupertsberg monastery, as Peter Dronke suggests.<sup>3</sup> The incipit of this antiphon is 'O orzchis ecclesia'. Here the church is both earthly structure and heavenly city. This lyric includes five coinages which I have translated according to glosses given in the manuscripts. The lyric reads as follows:

O immeasurable Church,  
 girded with divine armour  
 and adorned with jacinth,  
 you are the fragrance of the stigmata of nations,  
 and the city of all knowledge.  
 Oh, oh, you are anointed too  
 in loud sound,  
 and you are a coruscating jewel-bud.

Hildegard begins by describing the Church with a neologism. As Barbara Newman says, Hildegard's invented word 'orzchis' does not appear in the collection of her invented words, the *lingua ignota*. It is glossed in two other manuscripts as 'immensa' or 'immeasurable'.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the Church is described as bounded, girt by armour. And, as we shall see, Hildegard also evokes the built structure of a church.

The paradox of immeasurability and boundedness is an example of how Hildegard's compositions participate in celestial life. Such paradoxical images can at once have mundane and celestial meaning. This ambiguity is also characteristic of the experience of worship. The idea that the Church is immeasurable and yet can be evoked as an architectural structure, for example, can best be viewed in the light of liturgical space. To reflect on the theory of liturgy, I draw on the work of Catherine Pickstock. She says:

The complexity of liturgical space derives from [...] [the] ambiguous relation with God Himself [...]. For the worshipper is never outside God, for any place which claims to be extra to God is a disappearing place. And yet we are fallen away from God, which means that, although we are never without God, we must nonetheless travel towards Him.<sup>5</sup>

In this lyric, Hildegard's description is also synesthetic. It fuses impressions from different senses. The Church is seen to be girt with the semi-precious stone jacinth of the heavenly Jerusalem's foundations as described in Apocalypse 21:20. But the Church emits a fragrance and sound. Synesthesia crosses normal boundaries and is analogous to the way liturgical space transcends mundane limits in its open-endedness. The synesthetic description also exemplifies the harmony of different parts which maintain their difference. Diversity is characteristic of Hildegard's descriptions of heaven.

After the synesthetic description, Hildegard says that the Church is the city of all knowledge. As well as being an abstract evocation, this is a physical description that goes along with the preceding impressions of sound and fragrance, since Hildegard uses the word 'urbs', which suggests 'physical city', as compared with 'civitas', 'citizenry, community'. This emphasizes the physical structure of the church consecrated with this antiphon. The portrayal of heaven as a city is a common theme in Christian art and literature. And connections have been drawn between representations of heaven in Hildegard's manuscript illuminations and the style of buildings of her community.<sup>6</sup>

Ecclesia is not only the city of all knowledge for Hildegard, she is also the body of the faithful anointed in the loud sound of praise. Here Hildegard uses another invented word, 'crizanta'. This word is glossed as 'uncta', 'anointed', as Barbara Newman observes.<sup>7</sup> I believe that underlying the formation of Hildegard's coinage is an adjectival form of the Greek 'chrisma', which sounds like Hildegard's word, 'crizanta', and which she will have known from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*. There he glosses 'chrisma' as 'unctio'.<sup>8</sup> Hildegard draws upon the *Etymologies* elsewhere in her writings, especially in her natural and cosmological works.<sup>9</sup> Catherine Pickstock describes how our bodies are sanctified as the habitation of the Holy Spirit in liturgy.<sup>10</sup> Taking the Pauline idea of the body as holy and as a dwelling-place of the Holy Spirit, we see how striking is Hildegard's image of the Church as the body of the faithful anointed with celebratory song.<sup>11</sup> The song as a whole shows us the Church as an immeasurable female warrior decorated with the jacinth of the heavenly Jerusalem. She is the heavenly Jerusalem filled with the knowledge of God, and also the earthly church still being ornamented with human knowledge. She is the body of the faithful anointed in the sound of loud angelic voices. This first example showed communal sanctification through song in the church as heavenly city.

I would now like to turn to an image of sanctification on the more individual level. This comes in a hymn for the Holy Spirit, 'O ignee spiritus'.

1  
O fiery Spirit,  
let there be praise for you  
who work  
in the hand-drums and the lutes.

2  
The minds of humans blaze from you,  
and the tents of their souls  
contain their minds' power

3  
from where the will ascends  
and confers taste upon the soul  
and its lantern is desire.

4  
The intellect with the sweetest sound calls to you  
and for you prepares buildings  
along with rationality,  
which toils in golden works.

Important here is the relational space of liturgy. In this hymn, the powers of people's minds are housed in the tents of their souls, and the will draws strength

from the mind to approach the soul, and the soul is guided by desire, which is almost always positive for Hildegard. All these aspects of the person act within the liturgical space of the hymn's performance. The singer has the sense of a little community.

The intellect calls to the Spirit in sweetest sound, through participation in the Holy Spirit itself, who is the source of music. In these strophes, Hildegard draws on two concepts from Boethius's *De institutione musica*.<sup>12</sup> The first concept is *musica instrumentalis*, in which music is latent in the different sorts of instruments.<sup>13</sup> This *musica instrumentalis* concept is reflected in the opening strophe: 'O fiery Spirit, / let there be praise for you / who work / in the hand-drums and the lutes.'

The second concept is the *musica humana*, in which the rational and irrational parts of the soul are related to each other and to the body through consonance.<sup>14</sup> This concept is reflected in the second and third strophes.

In general, these strophes reflect an analogy: as music is to the instrument, so the Holy Spirit is to the intellect.<sup>15</sup> But the strophes resist such a reduction. For Hildegard, minds and bodies and soul and taste and desire work together and the intellect praises the Holy Spirit with sweetest sound. The intellect participates in the harmony of the other members. The intellect also participates in the Spirit's music as it sanctifies with sound the 'buildings' which may be interpreted as bodies as well as architectural structures. But all these aspects of the person are not mapped in a bounded space that can be comprehended as in a diagram. We are reminded of Pickstock's point about liturgical space: 'characters [. . .] [are] seen in relation to one another [. . .] but not as located in a representable or enclosed space'.<sup>16</sup>

For the third example, let us now look at the antiphon 'Quia felix puericia'. It runs this way:

Since happy boyhood  
in the praiseworthy Rupert  
panted after God  
and left the world behind,  
so he gleams in celestial harmony,  
and so too the angelic host  
sings in concert, praising  
the Son of God.

In this lyric, heaven is a 'city' in the sense of a community of angels and saints. The idea of participation is central to the description of heaven.

The facts that the angelic host in heaven sings and St Rupert shines in celestial harmony are related by analogy. Both angels and saint perform their actions because Rupert 'panted after God and left the world behind'. The economy of praise brings heaven and earth together. It is common enough for angels to be described as augmenting human praise.<sup>17</sup> Here Rupert joins the angels in praise for the human-divine Son of God. As we saw in the first example with the image of Ecclesia, Hildegard here uses a synesthetic description. She combines the sight of shining with the sound of harmony.

The phrase ‘celestis armonia’, which Hildegard uses to describe the heavenly harmony in which Rupert shines, is surprisingly uncommon in the writings of antiquity and the Middle Ages. Its source in the pseudo-Apuleian treatise *Asclepius* connects heavenly harmony with human praise. This connection is borne out in Hildegard’s writings. Praise is inseparable from Hildegard’s idea of heavenly harmony. The angelic host, whose harmony Rupert joins, is a traditional liturgical image of praise. The phrase ‘angelica turba’ appears in the Missal as the opening of the Easter *praeconium*. The *praeconium* is the high point of the ceremony of the lighting of the Paschal Candle which symbolizes the Light of Christ. It was sung after the lighting of the candle at midnight on Easter Saturday.<sup>18</sup>

Hildegard’s piece seems to have been sung as a processional antiphon in a supplemental ceremony. It was probably sung on Rupert’s feastday, 27 March, which usually falls during Lent. The background created by the solemn season would have accentuated the joy of these images of heavenly music.

For the last example, let us turn to strophe 4b ff. of a sequence for St Disibod, ‘O presul vere civitatis’. In the first example, we saw the church as the heavenly city gathered in communal song, and in the second example we saw participation in heavenly song on the individual level. In the third example, we saw how participation brings heaven and earth together as the human saint gleams in the heavenly harmony and the angels sing in harmony celebrating the human-divine Christ. Here in the final example we see how music is the way people participate in the construction of the heavenly city. The strophes read as follows:

4b

O Disibod,  
in your light  
through examples of pure sound  
marvellously you built the limbs of  
praise  
in two parts through the Son of man.

5a

On high you stand  
not blushing before the living God  
and you shelter with green dew  
those praising God with this voice:

5b

‘O gentle life  
and o blessed perseverance  
you which in this blessed Disibod  
always built  
the most glorious light  
in the celestial Jerusalem:

6a

Now let there be praise to God  
 working manfully  
 in the form of the beautiful tonsure.

6b

And may the supernal citizens rejoice  
 over those  
 who in this way imitate them.'

At the heart of these strophes lies the structure of analogy. We see the same scene from two points of view, the world and heaven. Hildegard starts with Disibod in the world and then moves to Disibod in the celestial city. The phrase 'limbs of praise in two parts' seems to symbolize several things. It is a swift reference to the performance of sequences, in which two half-choirs alternate, the strophe being sung by one and the antistrophe by the other to the same melody. The image could also have architectural symbolism, as Barbara Newman points out: 'Architecturally, the choir of the monastic church was divided into two parts for antiphonal chant.'<sup>19</sup>

The 'limbs of praise' are analogous to the 'glorious light/ in the celestial Jerusalem' because of the parallel descriptions of building. Rupert built the limbs of praise, and the gentle life and blessed perseverance in him built light in the heavenly city. This is an instance of repetition with difference, one of the principles underpinning sacramental action which Catherine Pickstock describes as 'non-identical repetition continuous with the "original" event'.<sup>20</sup>

I believe that the last three half-strophes, starting with the words 'O sweet life', are actually a small song within the sequence. This is a sort of non-identical repetition of Rupert's 'building the limbs of praise'. In Hildegard's other sequences, 'O Ecclesia' and 'Mathias, sanctus', we find what I believe are also examples of small songs within the larger pieces. I share Peter Dronke's interpretation of these lines, as in the notes for the CD 'Saints'.<sup>21</sup> I noticed that the apostrophic addresses 'O sweet life and o blessed perseverance' that would begin the new song, name specific aspects of St Disibod, rather than invoking the saint as earlier in the sequence either by calling him by name or by using a symbol that represents him.

In the beginning of the new song, the worshippers are described as sheltered by the verdant dew of the saint's protection. Being sheltered by dew would seem impossible in a mundane order, but the worshippers are located in a transcendent space. Their identity is constructed through analogy. Recognizing the small song 'O sweet life' allows us to see the analogous relationship between St Rupert's constructing heaven by 'building the limbs of praise' and the choir's singing. The choir performs praise just as Disibod 'built the limbs of praise'. And the choir describes Rupert's action of building light in the celestial Jerusalem. They illustrate the principle of participation through praise. Catherine Pickstock says, 'To give praise to what is praise-worthy by definition involves participation in

it.<sup>22</sup> The choir can be seen as building the ‘true’ heavenly city through song, as Rupert does.

The pairs of strophes in ‘O presul vere civitatis’ are broadly parallel in their melodic structure, as is typical of classical sequences. However, the melodic and verbal structures of the song do different things. With ‘O sweet life’, a new train of thought starts in the second half-strophe of a pair that mirror each other melodically, and this train of thought carries on through the next pair of strophes. The semantic units are not entirely parallel to the musical units. This problem requires careful interpretation, but the tension between verbal and musical units can be seen to run throughout the sequence, and it appears very often in Hildegard’s other sequences in which strophes are musically parallel.<sup>23</sup> In fact, Hildegard’s musical symmetry is not simple, and she often complicates it with intricate repetitions and new phrases that cross strophe boundaries. All this has the effect of pulling the listener along with expectation and surprise. I have found that this fits within a larger pattern. The way the words flow is not always synchronized with the music. Once we acknowledge the independence of words and music, we can see how Hildegard delights in musical mixing and matching.<sup>24</sup> For example, the melody she composes for her Kyrie is actually a *contrafactum*, a pastiche of elements from the melody of another of her songs, ‘O lucidissima apostolorum turba’.<sup>25</sup> If a listener heard the Kyrie and remembered the melody of ‘O lucidissima apostolorum turba’, the Kyrie might sound as though it were made out of cut-up pieces, even while it is itself a flowing melody. This flexibility with words and music is part of a larger pattern of Hildegard’s aesthetic of praise.

Because it is so different from the other addresses in the earlier part of the sequence, the address at the beginning of the little song ‘O sweet life’ suggests a change of focus from macrocosmic, external images of city and mountain to microcosmic evocations of the saint’s individual inner life. This progression is supported more generally by the idea of difference that would allow words and music to do different things. This difference of the function of words and music is an elegant expression of something that we are likely to miss because of modern tendencies towards unity at the expense of differentiation in our aesthetic conceptions.

The four lyrics we have considered are united by the images of the heavenly city and music, yet we also feel a larger idea in Hildegard’s thought that underlies them. And this larger idea is a response to the larger reality of the heavenly city; and the heavenly city is continually being realized. Peter Dronke puts it this way:

For Hildegard, there is no such thing as an evil, godless city. What Augustine describes as Babylon, *terrena civitas*, is for Hildegard nothing more than signs of where the building of the one true city has not, or not yet, succeeded.<sup>26</sup>

By looking closely at Hildegard’s ways of putting ideas together in her lyrics, we can admire the range of Hildegard’s creative imagination as it expresses

perceptions of the varied harmony of heaven. And in their evocations of heavenly praise, the songs themselves help to build the true, heavenly city.

### **Appendix: Latin texts**

#### ***'O orzchis ecclesia' (carm. 48)***

Item in dedicatione ecclesie

O orzchis ecclesia  
armis divinis precincta  
et iacincto ornata,  
tu es caldemia stigmatum loifolum,  
5 et urbs scientiarum.  
O, o, tu es etiam crizanta  
in alto sono,  
et es chorzta gemma.

#### ***'O ignee spiritus' (carm. 52), str. 1–4***

Ymnus de spiritu sancto

1  
O ignee spiritus,  
laus tibi sit  
qui in timpanis et citharis  
operaris.

2  
5 Mentis hominum de te flagrant,  
et tabernacula animarum eorum  
vires ipsarum continent

3  
unde voluntas ascendit  
et gustum anime tribuit,  
10 et eius lucerna est desiderium.

4  
Intellectus te in dulcissimo sono advocat  
ac edificia tibi  
cum racionalitate parat  
que in aureis operibus sudat.

8 unde sic D] inde sic R

*'Quia felix puericia' (carm. 39)*

<De sancto Ruperto>

Quia felix puericia  
in laudabili Ruperto  
ad deum anhelavit  
et mundum reliquit,  
5 ideo ipse in celesti armonia fulget,  
et ideo etiam angelica turba  
filium dei  
laudando concinit.

*'O Ierusalem' (carm. 59), str. 4b–5b*

4b

O Disibode,  
30 in tuo lumine  
per exempla puri soni  
membra mirifice laudis edificasti  
in duabus partibus  
per filium hominis.

5a

35 In alto stas  
non erubescens ante deum vivum  
et protegis viridi rore  
laudantes deum ista voce.

5b

O dulcis vita  
40 et o beata perseverantia  
que in hoc beato Disibodo gloriosum lumen  
semper edificasti  
in celesti Ierusalem:

6a

Nunc sit laus deo  
45 in forma pulcre tonsure  
viriliter operante.

6b

Et superni cives gaudeant de his  
qui eos hoc modo imitantur.

## Notes

- 1 J. Leclercq, *L'amour des lettres et le désir de Dieu: initiation aux auteurs monastiques du Moyen Age*, in C. Misrahi (trans.) *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1961, 3rd edn 1982, p.66.
- 2 Margot Fassler asserts that when Hildegard moved to the Rupertsberg (in 1147–1148) she composed an office for St Rupert (M. Fassler, 'Composer and Dramatist: "Melodious Singing and the Freshness of Remorse"', in B. Newman (ed.) *Voice of the Living Light*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, pp.149–75 (p.151). For an alternate view of the use of Hildegard's songs that accounts for variations from the most narrowly-defined liturgical practice, see J. Stevens, 'The Musical Individuality of Hildegard's Songs: A Liturgical Shadowland', in C. Burnett and P. Dronke (eds) *Hildegard of Bingen: The Context of Her Thought and Art*, London: The Warburg Institute, 1998, pp.163–88.
- 3 P. Dronke, 'Hildegard's Inventions: Aspects of Her Language and Imagery', in A. Haverkamp (ed.) *Hildegard von Bingen in ihrem historischen Umfeld*, Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2000, pp.299–320 (p.309).
- 4 B. Newman (ed. and trans.) *Saint Hildegard of Bingen Symphonia: A Critical Edition of the Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum (Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations)*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988, 2nd edn 1998, p.316.
- 5 C. Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, p.230.
- 6 See M. Caviness, 'Hildegard as the Designer of the Illustrations of her Works', in C. Burnett and P. Dronke (eds) *Hildegard of Bingen: The Context of Her Thought and Art*, London: The Warburg Institute, 1998, pp.68–83 (p.70).
- 7 B. Newman, *Saint Hildegard of Bingen Symphonia*, p.316.
- 8 Cf. Isidore, *Etymologiarum sive Originum libri XX*, W.M. Lindsay (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911, lib. 6, cap. 19, par. 50: 'Chrisma Graece, Latine unctio nominatur.'
- 9 See H. Liebeschütz, *Das allegorische Weltbild der heiligen Hildegard von Bingen*, rev. ed., Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964, p.70, n. 1, p.71, n. 1; A. Führkötter and A. Carlevaris (eds) *Hildegardis Scivias*, CCCM 43–43A, Turnhout: Brepols, 1978, I.6, ll. 85–6, III.6, l. 826, III.8, ll. 658–9; A. Carlevaris (ed.) *Hildegardis Bingenensis Liber uite meritorm*, CCCM 90, Turnhout: Brepols, 1995, III, ll. 135 and 254, IV, ll. 460–1, 464–5; A. Derolez and P. Dronke (eds) *Hildegardis Bingenensis Liber Divinorum Operum*, CCCM 92, Turnhout: Brepols, 1996, I.4, ll. 268–9, III.2.16, ll. 5ff.
- 10 C. Pickstock, *After Writing*, pp.229–30.
- 11 For example, cf. I Corinthians 1:15ff.
- 12 No record survives of the library at either of Hildegard's monasteries. However, there was a copy of Boethius's treatise on music at the monastery of St Eucharius in Trier where Hildegard travelled and had close ties. See J. Montebaur, *Studien zur Geschichte der Bibliothek der Abtei St Eucharius-Mathias zu Trier*, Freiburg: Herder & Co. GMBH, 1931, p.128.
- 13 G. Friedlein (ed.) *Anicii Manlii Torquati Severini Boetii De institutione arithmetica libri duo. De institutione musica libri quinque. Accedit geometria quae fertur Boetii: E libris manuscriptis*, Leipzig: Teubner, 1867, I.2, p.188.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 More generally, the relation between instruments and singing such as we saw in the lyric is important for Hildegard's ideas about participation in heaven through music. In her famous letter to the prelates of Mainz, she says: 'But in order that mankind should recall that divine sweetness and praise by which, with the angels, Adam was made jubilant in God before he fell, [...] the holy prophets [...] not only composed psalms and canticles, to be sung to kindle the devotion of listeners; but also [...]

- invented musical instruments of diverse kinds [...] by which the songs could be expressed in multitudinous sounds, so that listeners, aroused and made adept outwardly, might be nurtured within by the forms and qualities of the instruments, as by the meaning of the words performed with them.' (P. Dronke, 'Hildegard of Bingen', in *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (†203) to Marguerite Porete (†1310)*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p.198, ep. 23, ll. 84ff.) Vocal and instrumental music are complementary in the participation in prelapsarian harmony just as the *musica humana* and *musica instrumentalis* complement each other in praise and in the inner life which helps prepare for it.
- 16 Pickstock, *After Writing*, p.229.
- 17 It seems Hildegard most probably has in mind a passage from the Latin translation of the pseudo-Apuleian treatise *Asclepius*, which Hans Liebeschütz first showed to be influential upon her cosmological thinking (Liebeschütz, *Das allegorische Weltbild*, pp.81–2). Compare *Asclepius* 38 (A. D. Nock (ed.) *Corpus Hermeticum*, vol. 2, Paris: Société d'édition 'Les Belles Lettres', 1945): 'And those gods, Trismegistus, who are held to be earthly, of what sort is their power? It comes, Asclepius, from herbs, stones, and spices holding in themselves the natural force of divinity. And they are delighted by frequent sacrifices with hymns and praises and the sweetest sounds resounding together in the style of the celestial harmony (*in modum caelestis harmoniae*).'
- 18 D. Hiley, *Western Plainchant*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, p.38.
- 19 Newman (ed.) *Voice of the Living Light*, p.293.
- 20 Pickstock, *After Writing*, p.160.
- 21 Hildegard von Bingen, 'O Jerusalem', *Sequentia*, Directed by B. Thornton and B. Bagby; Deutsche Harmonia Mundi (BMG Classics) 05472 77353-2, 1998, CD1, no. 9, sleeve notes prepared by P. Dronke.
- 22 Pickstock, *After Writing*, p.39.
- 23 See carm. 54, str. 1b–2a and 5b–6b; carm. 61, str. 2a–3a, 3b–4b; carm. 62, str. 2b–3b and 4b–5; carm. 63, str. 4b–6. If the text edited as carm. 73, for which no music survives, was intended as a sequence, as the disposition of words in the editions by Newman and Berschin/Schipperges implies, then it would seem that the half-strophes 2b–3b constitute a train of thought that would cross the presumed boundary between str. 2b and 3a (see Newman (ed.) *Voice of the Living Light*, p.260; W. Berschin, and S. Schipperges (eds) *Hildegard von Bingen Symphonia: Gedichte und Gesänge Lateinisch und Deutsch*, Gerlingen: Lambert Schneider, 1995, p.208).
- 24 This shows that at least sometimes words and music were conceived of as separate, contrary to the impression given by Margot Fassler (Fassler, 'Composer and Dramatist', p.154).
- 25 I am grateful to Dr Sam Barrett for this observation. See the commentary on carm. 50 in S.M. D'Evelyn, 'A Commentary with Emended Text and Translations of Hildegard of Bingen's "Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum", carm. 1–50', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2003.
- 26 P. Dronke, 'The Symbolic Cities of Hildegard of Bingen', *Journal of Medieval Latin*, 1991, vol. 1, 168–82, (172–3).

## 12 Afterlives now

### A study of *Paradiso* canto 28

*Robin Kirkpatrick*

Is the *Commedia* intended to be an accurate account of how our lives in eternity will eventually be lived? Critics have been so inclined to applaud the descriptive precision of Dante's poetry that one might indeed suppose the author to have intended such an account. Yet, in the perspectives of Christian belief, that can hardly be a plausible view. Faith assures the believer that divine existence is eternal. The same faith requires (and enables) us to live with the truth that the divine existence, on which our own depends, is wholly transcendent to our temporal understanding. As revealed in Christ, the new creation promised by the Creator will be entirely new in being entirely different from anything we know through our experience of earthly realities.

The purpose of the present chapter is to argue, on the evidence of the *Paradiso*, that Dante fully accepts a Christian understanding of our afterlives and, indeed, incorporates its implications into the poetics and *praxis* of the third *cantica*. As will be seen, such an argument in no way diminishes the profound interest that Dante takes in the phenomena of the world. Nor does it detract from the characteristic commitment that Dante displays, in the *Paradiso* as elsewhere, to the proper conduct of human lives in the sphere of time and history. On the contrary, the abandonment of aspirations to an impossible knowledge of eternal existence – whether God's or our own – only sharpens the responsibility that human beings have to the world in which their lives are naturally lived out. However, to fulfil this responsibility entails an attitude of radical dispossession, in which the human mind admits that it can neither appropriate reality nor ever abandon the search for it. Truth, on such an understanding, is to be discovered through the participation in a process rather than through the establishment of descriptive adequations or veridical propositions. It is this process that Dante's narrative at every point in the *Paradiso* seeks to promote.

A particular indication of this is to be found at the conclusion of the canto to which close attention will be paid in the second part of this chapter, canto 28. This canto is concerned throughout with the ordering of the angelic hierarchies and specifically with whether, on a scale of nine, the third place after Seraphim and Cherubim should be occupied by Thrones or by Powers. Behind this is a long tradition of debate going back at least to the time of the Pseudo-Dionysius.<sup>1</sup> Dante himself had been interested in the question since his first discussion of it

in *Convivio* 2:5. And at that early point in his career, the order he adopted was drawn from one of the versions available in the writings of St Gregory. Now at *Paradiso* canto 28, line 133, he pictures the arrival of St Gregory in heaven, who as soon as he opens his eyes in paradise discovers that he had got it wrong – and smiles at himself for his own mistake.<sup>2</sup> The comedy of this episode is only increased when one considers the Dantean *legerdemain* that shuffles off onto the sainted pope a mistake of which he himself had once been guilty.

It would no doubt be possible, in interpreting this passage, to argue that Dante was attempting merely to assert the authority of his own poem and the privilege of his own vision against that of his academic and ecclesiastical competitors. On the other hand, there is a strong sense in this sequence of the poem as it approaches its final phase that human intellect, which is finite in its very constitution, is limited and insufficient when it begins its final ascent to the infinity of God. Simply to focus the discussion on angels is to emphasize this point, since – as will appear in part II of the chapter – any discussion of the knowledge possessed by angels is bound to reveal the limitations of the human mind. At large, the twenty-eighth canto will support a view in which the human thinking is seen to advance towards truth by conversation and slow processes, punctuated (in an essentially comic way) by the surprises to which any mind must be subject, short of a final revelation. Authority, on that understanding, will reside less in affirmation than in an ability to defer affirmation in the interests of a wider inquiry. And Gregory's example in this case would be especially telling. Famously Dante's attitude to the popes of his day displays nothing but contempt for the unholy marriage of power and possession which men such as Boniface VIII had solemnized (see especially *Paradiso* canto 27). But Gregory is no Boniface. Notable not least for his espousal of poverty, Gregory on every occasion at which he appears in the *Commedia* is associated with an event – the salvation of Trajan – which admits that the action of God will always exceed, salvifically, any expectation that human order or authority might imagine. Papal authority is here founded on intellectual poverty and, conversely, on a faith in the abundance of divine existence.

In this perspective, it is hardly surprising that Dante, recognizing the limitations of human thought, should also have recognized the limitations of his own poetic procedures (see *Purgatorio* canto 10 and *Paradiso* canto 20). The detail of his text in canto 28 will reveal the extent to which, in his case as in Gregory's, this recognition carries as much pleasure as it does constraint. But first, there are a number of more general considerations, concerning the poetics and theology of the *Paradiso*, which support the same contention.

In the first place, it is a matter simply of fact, on Dante's understanding, that, however authoritative the text, what the reader sees in the *Paradiso* is absolutely not at all what, in heaven, we shall get. There is no diminution in the third *cantica* of Dante's visual imagination. Indeed, a work which can imagine (in canto 30) the White Rose formed by the souls in God's presence tilted against the curve of the *Primum Mobile* like a hill reflected in a lake, is self-evidently freer and more experimental in its visual range than the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*

ever could be. Moreover, the most original feature of Dante's conception of heaven lies in the schematic use he makes of the planetary heavens – as observed from earth – to provide a fictional geography for his ascent towards God's presence. There is an unmistakable confidence here in the rational constructions that the mind may offer. Yet as early as canto 4 Dante has already indicated the limitations of this mode of vision, or better say the conditions under which such rationality is obliged to operate. Thus one of the earliest doubts that Dante (as protagonist) expresses in the narrative of the third *cantica* concerns the question of whether the souls are indeed ranked according to the hierarchy of the planets, so that the inconstant will pass eternity on the moon, lovers on Venus, the ambitious on Mercury and so on. The answer is that there is no such hierarchy at all in heaven, since all souls are located in the immediate and eternal presence of God. To speak as if there were such a hierarchy is exactly the same, neither more nor less, than to speak, figuratively of God possessing feet and hands:

Così parlar conviensi al vostro ingegno,  
però che solo da sensato apprende  
ciò che fa poscia d' intelletto degno.

Per questo la Scrittura condenscende  
a vostra facultate, e piedi e mano  
attribuisce a Dio, ed altro intende.

E santa Chiesa con aspetto umano  
Gabriel e Michel vi rappresenta,  
e l'altro che Tobia rifece sano.

(To speak in this way fits the human mind.  
For you can only grasp through things you've sensed  
what mind will then present as fit for thought.)

For this same reason, Scripture condescends  
to your capacities, and says that God  
has hands and feet, though meaning otherwise.

So, Holy Church will also represent  
Michael and Gabriel with human face,  
the other, too, who helped heal Tobit's sight.)

(*Paradiso* 4:40–8)

In the perspective, then, of divine existence, the spatial distributions which Dante envisages in the plan of the third *cantica* – and manipulates to extraordinary, even psychedelic effect as the *cantica* proceeds – represent merely an accommodation to the *a priori* categories through which the human mind of author and reader must work while still existing in the sphere of time. Systematic thinking – and the created cosmos which encourages and responds to such thinking – is fundamentally no more than a system of metaphors and conventions of speech. Thus, on the threshold of the *Paradiso* narrative, we are asked

to adopt a mode of reading which allows us to abandon the certitudes – or the eternal travel information – that the text might seem to offer in favour of metaphor. On one view of what reason is, this might seem an outrageous limitation on human competence. Yet it is also the way to another form of rationality, founded upon a rational understanding of what we cannot rationally know about divine existence – which, after all, is logically of a wholly different order from human existence. It is equally the way to the pleasures of that communal inquiry – punctuated by surprises and happy errors – that Dante and St Gregory, St Paul and the pseudo-Dionysius exemplify in their angelology. Truth is to be pursued through a constantly open hermeneutic in which we collaborate with the author himself in the making of always transcendent meaning, and it is into a similar process that readers of the *Paradiso* are drawn by cantos such as the twenty-eighth.

In terms of Dante's poetics, *Paradiso* canto 4 insists realistically on what we cannot do and cannot expect in anticipating the afterlife. There is, however, in terms of faith and theology another reality that permeates Dante's vision of heaven. And this, while emphasizing the need for procedural caution, also reveals the wholly unexpected grounds of an ultimate confidence. This is the reality of the Resurrection that will be announced by the Last Judgement, an unimaginable reality that nonetheless ensures the existence beyond corruption and death of the most imaginable reality of all, that of the human body.

For the Christian, afterlife is the life, not of some spiritual kismet, but rather a direct and personal participation in the resurrected body of Christ's existence. Thus the first doctrine to be enunciated in the *Commedia* – at the end of *Inferno* canto 6 – concerns the Last Judgement and (with rather viciously Aristotelian logic) claims that since, at the Resurrection of the Dead, the bodies of the damned will at last be perfect, they will therefore be able to experience pain all the more perfectly. As always, though, the *Inferno* represents Dante's rough first essay at an issue which will evolve in the course of his poem and receive its most rigorous and humane treatment in the *Paradiso*. Thus one conclusion that is drawn in *Paradiso* canto 19 is that, since the full extent of salvation will only be revealed with the Resurrection of the Dead, we should not presume in terms of human judgement to know who all the redeemed might be – a generous but rather disconcerting conclusion when Dante seems to have spent most of his poem presuming to do precisely that. The same point is made even more forcefully, in relation to the proper conduct of the intellectual life, in a sequence of the *Paradiso* running from canto 10 to canto 15, where Dante depicts the heaven of Christian philosophy. This sequence records the achievements of many Christian thinkers – including even some historians; and Aquinas, of course, plays a notable part in these cantos. Yet the point of arrival is by no means to indicate some supposedly scholastic system as the summit of wisdom but rather to celebrate the resurrection of the body as the ultimate truth we need to acknowledge. At the end of an ecstatically pleasurable hymn to the glorified flesh, the Christian philosophers break out in a great Amen. In Dante's text they are represented as sempiternal flames – and what scholar would not want to be similarly

represented. Yet their ‘Amme’ – rhyming with ‘fiamme’ – displays their ultimate desire to return to bodily form, not for their own sake only but also for the opportunity to see again their dear ones and especially their ‘mummies’ – the rhyme being here the baby-talk ‘mamme’. Even in the greatest of Christian philosophers, faith in the resurrection induces the poverty – but growing potential – of a child at its mother’s breast.

There are theological as well as poetic implications in Dante’s position. And as to these, one may, briefly, turn aside to the always-pertinent and often very Dantean words of Rowan Williams. In an essay entitled ‘Communities of Resurrection’, Williams – providing some authority for the title of the present chapter, ‘Afterlives Now’ – suggests that no Christian afterlife is conceivable unless it involves the redemption and glorification of the world in which we presently live. Nor would it be wrong on this view to suppose that the here-and-now, interpenetrated by the truth of the Resurrection, is already, truly, our afterlife. Few things could be more consistent with a Dante whose perpetual point of reference is the threshing floor of human activity. But Williams moves even closer to Dante when he begins to speak of the consequences of such an understanding for our view of and use of language:

The resurrection of Jesus, in being a restoration of the world’s wholeness, is equally a restoration of language; what is created in the community of the resurrection is not only a vision of humanity before God and with God, but a vision capable of being articulated in word and image, communicated, debated and extended. In this sense the resurrection is indeed a ‘rebirth of images’: beyond the dissolution of vision, the sense of loss, of guilt or alienation from oneself, there is grace given to return to language [. . .] The return to language requires an act of faith; and an acceptance of the probability of failure. It is, as such, an exercise in radical humility.<sup>3</sup>

There are emphases here – upon the rebirth of images, the communality of language and, above all, radical humility – which Dante anticipates, and sustains, throughout the *Paradiso* and which allow one to contest any view that attributes to Dante any over-weaning omniscience or even illusionistic versions of omniscience. For instance, nothing could be clearer than Dante’s seriousness of intent when he declares, as he does in every canto of the *Paradiso*, that he cannot fully say what he had seen in the other world. A whole tradition of apophatic thinking lies behind such declarations; and we should trivialize Dante’s Christianity and equally the character of the language that he develops in the *Paradiso* if we did not recognize this. Yet this is not the obliteration of language and imagery, any more than it is the obliteration of the body. The resurrection demands an abandonment of our familiar forms of language and imagery in the belief that these forms have a greater significance than could ever be delivered solely in the medium of such forms themselves.

Returning from theology to poetics, the force of Williams’s theology can be given specific reference within the traditions of Dante criticism if we revisit

Erich Auerbach's great study '*Figura*', seeking, perhaps, in the light of Williams's theology, to clear away some of the incrustations that have built around Auerbach's often-cited work. For what I have so far been attributing to Dante is in some respects very similar to what Auerbach has designated 'figural realism':

In constant conflict with purely spiritualist and Neoplatonic tendencies was the dominant view in the European Middle Ages: the idea that earthly life is thoroughly real, with the reality of the flesh into which the Logos entered, but that with all its reality it is only the *umbra* and *figura* of the authentic, future ultimate truth, the real reality that will unveil and preserve the *figura*.<sup>4</sup>

Here, then, Auerbach emphatically speaks of a mode of interpretation in which 'reality' is grasped by our capacity to contemplate the specific manifestations of reality as mirrors or lenses for a greater and infinitely undelivered 'beyond'. There are immediate affinities here with that understanding of language and indeed of temporal reality that Dante – and Williams – place at the core of resurrection communities. Yet it is very easy – as scholars over the years have demonstrated – to turn Auerbach's argument on its head and see in it a justification for univocal and authoritative readings of particular *crucis* in the *Commedia*. Time and again, we see Auerbach's insight put to the service of some supposedly final interpretation of Dantean enigmas: why is Cato where he is; what is the function of Statius; how are we to view Beatrice?

That, I take it, is not the thrust of Auerbach's essay. His concern is rather with a mentality than with a message, a practice rather than a product, a way of approaching texts and images which invites us into a communal and never-to-be resolved act of interpretation. However, what Auerbach does not perhaps sufficiently emphasize is that a mentality of this sort – which is not necessarily a purely medieval mode of thought – was and still can be a contribution to the developing life-forms of liturgy and prayer, where words are themselves supported by the communal hermeneutics of charity. Correspondingly, though Auerbach speaks often enough of the future, the tilt of his reference is not, decisively, towards that 'present-future' which Williams identifies by speaking of the Resurrection. Above all, Auerbach does not, I suggest, identify clearly enough the extent to which Dante himself recognized that a mentality of this sort was threatened by a new carnality of mind and a possessiveness of apprehension that was encouraged in part by Florentine capitalism – and at times can be discerned even in the brute realism of some of Dante's own imaginings of hell. Dante's poem is in some measure a constant struggle to release the mind of author and reader alike from a single and self-satisfied optic and to cultivate, in 'radical humility', a generative doubleness of view, a rejection of possessive conclusions in favour of a redeemed and redeeming language of process. But to see this process to the full one needs to turn away from generalities to the particular details of Dante's text.

**Part II: canto 28**

In *Paradiso* canto 28, the smile of St Gregory will prove to be the essentially comic expression of such an understanding. But there is much to be done before that conclusion arrives, in drawing the mind away from its habitual rigidities and in displaying what the alternative might be. Indeed the first note that the canto strikes is polemical, engaging itself unambiguously ‘against’ the ways of thinking that are characteristic of ‘miserable mortals’. It is worth noting that the cantos on either side of canto 28 contain some of the most violent and satirical diatribes in the whole *Commedia*. In canto 29, Dante will insist that Christ did not commission his apostles to go and speak ‘ciance’ to the world – the stuff and nonsense of a tabloid rag – but rather to provide a true foundation for a Christian life. Already in canto 27 St Peter explodes with indignation against those who have turned his sacred resting place into a sewer of corruption. And Beatrice at its conclusion exclaims against the cupidity of the human family which corrupts all forms of discourse: the babbling infant will grow up to cry for the moon with a fluent tongue; the adult will employ the entire stock of its language to curse the mother it knew as a baby, and wish that she were dead (*Paradiso* 27:130–5). Here, in the passage to which Dante alludes in the first lines of canto 28 we are shown the way in which our best resources of mind and word can tragically alienate us from the realm of value and truth. And in that regard a redeemed language will be one that is ready to turn in judgement over language itself – which, incidentally, is something that Williams insists all truly theological language must always do. At the same time, Beatrice is seen as the power that ‘imparadises’ the mind of Dante. So what is ‘paradise’ for Dante? Clearly, if its opposite is cupidity, it must emphatically be a state of dispossession. But dispossession can be a joy, the very condition of creativity. And it is this – between the two polemical cantos on either side of it – that canto 28 is concerned to illustrate.

At the core of the canto is the realization that human beings are no angels – were never meant to be and never will be. To arrive at this realization, however, Dante has to fix his thoughts on the character of angelic intelligence and, contrastively, on the capacities and characteristics of the human mind, particularly in its dealings with the created cosmos. It has been a peculiarity of Dante’s thinking – even an obsession on his part – since the *Vita nuova* to display an especial interest in angels, as when, after Beatrice’s death, he is surprised by certain bigwigs of the city as he sits doodling seraphic figures on his notepad (*Vita nuova*, cap. 34).<sup>5</sup> Even in the relatively scientific and philosophical pages of the *Convivio* Dante introduces the subject and sets up that question concerning the order of the angelic hierarchies and their place in the created order to which he will turn again – and correct – in canto 28. So here – at lines 16 to 38 – the canto describes a vision of the angelic hierarchy, as it moves in eternity around the still point of God’s presence. Then – from line 58 to 78 – the canto discusses the relationship between the spiritual order represented by the angels and the physical order represented by the planetary heavens. Finally – from line

98 to the conclusion – Dante offers his implicitly controversial account of the ranking of Thrones and Dominations above Powers and Principalities.

It will already be clear that, on my view, Dante, so far from offering a conclusion to this much debated issue, is concerned rather to invite us, through his narrative, into a sustained and progressive thought experiment. Still, it is no doubt reasonable to ask: what, on Dante's developing view, *are* angels? In a word – following Aquinas – angels are pure intelligences. Existing beyond space and time, the angels see God directly; they are mirrors to God's truth and no created image in the physical universe stands between their mind and God's. Some of the angels are wholly occupied in contemplation of the Deity. But as the Scriptures tells us, the heavens are full of angelic beings; and there are some among the *almost* infinite number who participate in the running of the universe, acting as mirrors to irradiate the physical world with a sense of the creative love which they witness in God himself. Thus Creation is not merely a convenient scheme for the efficient distribution of matter: as canto 28 confirms, the physical model of the planetary heavens corresponds in all its parts to the spheres of an angelic hierarchy; and the angels communicate to the heavens the will and providential intentions of the God whom Dante will meet face to face in canto 33. The angels are at the very least a guarantee that there is, after all, intelligent life in the universe.

Angels, then, are an essential part of Dante's Christian conception of the created order. But any consideration of angels must also lead us to reflect on our own human position and the character of the human mind. What place do human beings have in the universal scheme? Is there any value in their own specific modes of intelligence? The doctrinal answer is suggested – though in very elliptical form – by two passages in canto 29, one concerning the nature of Creation, the other concerning the differences between angelic and human intelligence. As canto 29, lines 76–81 makes plain, it is particularly important here to distinguish between the angelic mind and the rational mind. At the beginning of this canto Dante offers perhaps his only account of the act of Creation, declaring that God's purpose in creating the universe at all is to make possible the independent existence of all its creatures, so that each 'shining back' – 'risplendendo' – should say 'Subsisto': 'I truly exist'. But the forms of created existence are diverse; and it is the defining characteristic of angels, as Dante will say in *Paradiso* canto 29, lines 76–80, that, enjoying a direct intuition of God, they should not have their vision 'cut' in interrupted sequences. Which is to say that the rational *does* work through split vision and must retrace its way to truth through a graded and logical inspection of each new object in turn: by attention to what Dante significantly calls 'novo obietto' ('new objects'). This, one may add, is similar to the reason why angels, in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, are said not to need words: they do not need the sensuous – or phonetic – signs of language or the sequential patterns of discourse to spell out their meaning.

Now the only conception of heaven that, theologically, can be of any serious concern is one in which heaven is seen as the fulfillment of creative purpose and the ultimate expansion of the possibilities of existence. And if human beings are

to be seen as more than substandard angels, then there must be some sense in which their particular form of life can be brought to fruition, so that 'veder inter-ciso' along with linguistic practice becomes, rather than a disablement, a condition and characteristic of human forms of life. And Dante has been engaging with this question since the *Vita nuova*, where, from its title onward, the very interruptions to sequential understanding that are borne in upon him by the effects of love are eventually recognized as the conditions under which the mind receives 'miraculous' evidence of the providential plan. As Christian beings, human beings are, in the condition of redemption, capable of that unending *vita nuova*, the new life of renewed conversion to a truth of infinite revelation. Christ is the *Logos*, the wisdom that ensures that revelation. But so is Beatrice, in Dante's myth. She, famously, is his God-bearing image. And while some critics, quite mistakenly, represent Beatrice as an angelic being, she is for Dante invariably associated with the Resurrection. Her death in the *Vita nuova* demands assent to that doctrine, thus proving to be a manifestation of redemption rather than erasure or fragmentation. And it is through Beatrice that a mode of human discourse is displayed in which the afterlife-now may properly be approached. Thus the paradise of Dante's text is characterized at line 116 of canto 28 as an 'eternal spring' – a 'primavera sempiterna' – and, as Dante imagines them in canto 14, the bodies of those resurrected at the Last Judgement will be endowed with a physical eye capable of ever-renewed response to an infinity of light. Body itself – measured against the angels – is a realm of dispossession. Yet precisely in that regard it is capable of wonder, an attention to the continually surprising self-revelation of the divine. So, against the language of science and of rational control that Dante has hitherto quite properly employed for so much of his poem, Beatrice in canto 28 encourages a mode of redeemed and resurrected discourse attuned to the new – to miracles and epiphanies, where narrative becomes a sequence of surprise, rather than laborious consequence, and where language is refreshed through a constant play of neologism, recreative allusion and rhythmic crossfire.

To speak first of narrative, canto 28 envisages the implosion of the universe as we – or Dante – might observe it to be, and the corresponding generation of a story-line where ascent matters less than interruption and novelty. The canto is set in the sphere of the *Primum Mobile*. Dante, as protagonist, has now traversed the whole of the created universe; and as poet he is certainly concerned here to affirm his own confidence in the orderliness of the cosmic system which God has fashioned and Aristotle – along with Ptolemy – has taught him to rely upon. On such an understanding, the universe is initiated and sustained in all its harmonious spheres by motions deriving from the Primal Sphere which the protagonist has now entered. The *Primum Mobile* is not itself situated in space and time, even though space and time – which are the fundamental categories of rational thought – are measured by reference to the *Primum Mobile*. So, as Dante says in canto 27, line 115: 'The motions of the *Primum Mobile* are not measured by any other principle; for this is itself the measure of all other motions.' The universe operates in an orderly and efficient way, thank heaven.

And this assures us of one way at least in which we can and should know the universe. For Dante (to quote Pat Boyde who in turn is quoting Aristotle) ‘we know something when we know its primary causes and first principles right back to its elements’.<sup>6</sup> Our rational minds are constituted so as to work at their best in tracing chains of consequence and cause and effect. The *Primum Mobile* is the origin of all such chains; and in a certain sense arriving here Dante arrives at his philosophical origin or home. Significantly, in canto 27 he had introduced an allusion to the figure who always stands as a mirror to his intellectual career, that breaker of bounds, that excitingly perverse self-exile, Ulysses, whose ‘mad flight’ – his ‘folle volo’ – in search of experience takes him away from home into a world of shifting horizons. Truth, it seems, will be reached not by the ill-disciplined enthusiasms of a Ulysses but by the painstaking ascent of the stairway of causes which Dante began in *Inferno* canto 1.

So it is appropriate that canto 28 is punctuated at every turn by the word ‘truth’: *vero*. At line 2, Dante speaks of how the truth which Beatrice revealed in the previous canto showed up the degeneracy of human beings; then at line 8, there is a reference to the way in which truths are established by checking mental impressions against features of the physical world; at line 87, the protagonist enjoys the truth that Beatrice’s discourse has produced; at line 108, is shown to be satisfied not by argument but by a quiet meditation on the truth; and in the last four lines of the canto, the word is used twice to denote the truths which are communicated by divine revelation.

Corresponding to this leitmotif, the diction and imagery of canto 28 is characterized, in one aspect at least, by the language and figures of mathematics. The *Primum Mobile* is both the source of measure and – so to speak – the Last Fact in the universe; and this is reflected here in Dante’s use of the terms we regularly employ in assessing the facts of the world around us – through the vocabulary of number and measure and the geometry of points and circles.

But, comforting as all this may be to the rational mind, does the canto rest content with such a language? Not at all. And to see what else it has to offer in the way of intellectual practice, one should first note that so far we have referred only to those senses of the word ‘truth’ which denote mathematical formulation, experimental testing and, more generally, logical argument. Yet Dante’s list also speaks of the truths available to the contemplative mind, and to those secret truths which the mortal mind enjoys only in divine revelation. Moreover, Dante here concentrates attention not simply upon the things we describe as true but upon the Truth itself: ‘vero’ in this canto is not merely an adjective, applied – as hitherto it has tended to be in the *Commedia* – to things which Dante feels we can rely upon; it is a noun, a name, a substantive.

‘The Truth Itself’: the phrase should inspire a certain dizziness. For, simply, the Truth itself is God himself. The *Primum Mobile* may be the Alpha and Omega of the physical universe. It is not, however, the final goal of Dante’s journey. He will only reach that when, in canto 33, he sees God face to face. And to arrive at that point – which is also the point of Resurrection, of a literal encounter with the expression and being of God – we need first to abandon the

schemes of spatial and temporal cartography which have so far stood Dante in such good stead. And in doing so, we shall prepare to enter a realm in which the relationship of person to person becomes the true determinant of our nature. Such relationship is founded ultimately on the relationship established in the Trinity; and in that sense it requires, as does the concept of the Trinity itself, a full recognition of the place that ‘mystery’ – or ‘newness’ – occupies in our existence and our thoughts about existence. But there is also something very recognizable and immediate about the mysteries of such a truth. They may indeed resist any attempt at a rational estimation or a view from nowhere. They are, however, akin to those truths that medieval English acknowledges as ‘trouthe’, where loyalty, friendship, trust and honour are the characteristic modes of articulation and proof.

The vertiginous shift into a realm of ‘trouthe’ is anticipated in canto 28 by two great narrative events. The first – at line 16 – is the sudden vision of God as a still point at the centre of the angelic hierarchy. At two earlier points in paradise, Dante has received a vision of Christ, seen – momentarily – in canto 14 as the suffering Redeemer of humanity, and in canto 23 as the triumphant leader of all the saints. But here for the first time God is envisaged as Creator of the universe; and that vision is profoundly perplexing. For God as Creator must surely stand outside his creation; that at least is what we should expect from the logic of the physical universe which, as we have seen, traces all motion to the *Primum Mobile*, a sphere at the circumference of all others, and, of course, greater than all others. But God is now seen as a point *inside* all others and infinitely tiny. The utter simplicity of God is itself paradoxical in view of the magnitude and variety of His creation; and though Dante here retains the language of science and geometry, he is also close to the piercing enigmas of the Gospels which declare that the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

Then, of course, there are the angels. At lines 61–78 Beatrice has explained – in a speech to which I shall return – the apparent incongruity between physical dimension and, so to speak, spiritual size: the spheres of the physical heavens are all related to a corresponding sphere of the angelic hierarchy. At first sight, this relationship looks as if it were a matter of inverse proportion – in which the greatest planetary heaven corresponded to the smallest angelic order. But in fact, when properly understood, the proportion is miraculously direct: the spiritual virtue of the angels is expressed in their relative approximation to the infinite intensity and acuity of God Himself; and that leads to a perfect conformity between the grades of the planetary heavens, where dignity is expressed through physical magnitude, and the grades of the angelic orders, where dignity resides in virtue or nearness to God.

So – at line 76 – Beatrice can declare that there is indeed a ‘wonderful’ logic to the relationship between the physical and spiritual universe; and Dante is very pleased to hear it (lines 79–87). But then – at lines 88–96 – in the silence after Beatrice’s discourse, something happens, and vertigo returns again. In a sudden epiphany, the angelic orders – while not breaking ranks – begin to blaze, boil, sparkle and sing. The geometry in which the angels had at first been pinned is wholly transfigured.

Now it is tempting to describe such moments as these in terms of drama, pressure and tension insofar as they directly challenge intellectual and linguistic habit. But on reflection this is, I think, the wrong vocabulary. The canto does indeed contain many words and images which denote strain, restraint, circumscription, knotting and tugging – as for instance at lines 12, 27, 58 and 129. And this may remind us of how close we are to the reference Dante made in canto 27, lines 82–4 to Ulysses, that great breaker of bonds. But the whole point is that the very circles and lines which to the mind of a Ulysses might look like boundaries and limits are now perceived as the rope work – or ‘rigging’ – of the universal system. In any case, the protagonist is now about to pass beyond any such constraint; and in that light, the imagery of strain has no real application. In a word the canto describes not pressure but play: the universe here becomes a great didactic toy, its workings exposed to view for intelligence to delight in. That is what the angels do; at line 126 Dante speaks of the ‘angelic games’, the ‘angelici ludi’. Beyond the fixed structure of the universe the angels display a continual activity of mind which summons the resources of language to defy any conventional or rational polarity. And the canto itself should represent for the reader a similar sort of game of a kind adapted to human intelligence.

The first section of the canto – running from line 1 to line 15 – provides a link with canto 27 but also establishes a difference. Harking back to Beatrice’s great diatribe against greed and moral decadence, the first line – built upon its aggressive ‘*ncontro*’ – promises a stark opposition between temporal life and truth and generates a rhythmic energy which moves over the first line break and concludes on a note of prophetic wrath with the phrase ‘wretched mortals’: ‘*miseri mortali*’. This phrase may have a Virgilian origin (instances are to be found in *Aeneid* Book 11 and *Georgics* Book 3). There is, however, no Virgilian pathos in the phrase. This is Virgilianism transformed; and here for a moment – as in much of canto 27 – Dante is close to the indignant tonalities of the *Inferno*: he remains in the *Paradiso* the man who could say, in the *Convivio*, that false arguments are to be answered with the knife.

But anger and zeal can always be converted in Dante to love; and this conversion begins with the ‘aperse’ of line 2: the vistas of truth open up; ‘vero’ is held triumphantly aloft at the end of the line; and line 3 flourishes the neologism ‘*mparadisa*’ at its centre. Usually – as at line 39 or 120 – neologisms are located emphatically at the ends of lines: here, its central position effects the tonal modulation and draws attention from the polarity of truth and untruth to the play of relationship between Dante’s mind and Beatrice, who is the incarnation of truth.

But we are still seven lines away from a main verb; and in the intervening clauses, Dante begins to enact the first rhetorical and imaginative game of the canto. One notes, first, in lines 7–8 the alliteration and repetition of ‘*veder*’: ‘*vetro*’; ‘*vero*’: ‘*vede*’. Conceptual clarity and efficient syntax are never at odds in the *Paradiso* with decoration of phrase. Nonetheless, there is a certain shimmer here to the conceptual scheme. Note, for instance, how the word ‘glass’ – which might imply illusion – flirts, so to speak, phonetically with the word ‘*vero*’ – or truth. The point is that here – as throughout the canto – there can be

no useful opposition between the spectral and the true: the reflection of the still point in Beatrice's eyes exactly corresponds to the actual point; moreover, while Dante's simile compares the behaviour of physical light – in mirrors and flames – with the behaviour of intellectual light – in God and his creatures – here, too, the parallel seems to admit no distinction. As in the discussion of the angels, the miraculous – or 'comic' – conclusion is not that the prototype differs from its successors, but that properly understood, there is a perfect congruence.

In these lines Dante converts images of physical phenomena to the celebration of spiritual truths; and similarly in lines 10–14 he recuperates and reapplies to his present purpose the language of the early *Vita nuova*. The personification of 'Amor' is one indication of this, as is the reference to the 'cords' which bind the lover. Even the references at line 10 to memory and at line 14 to a 'volume' remind one that the *Vita nuova* is Dante's 'book of memory'. But these two references also alert one to the text of two other volumes on which the words of canto 28 are, so to speak, superimposed. There are the pages of universal fact which in *Paradiso* canto 33 Dante will see bound together in one volume; there is also the book of the Scriptures: for as the imagery of seeing and 'looking-glasses' must already have suggested, Dante throughout this canto is referring implicitly to St Paul, who speaks of our seeing 'through a glass darkly'; and at line 138, St Paul – who enjoyed a direct vision of the angelic hierarchies – is finally admitted as the authority which Dante has followed in this canto. But even if authority does reside in St Paul and ultimately the 'book of the universe', this does not in canto 28 discredit the play of subsidiary texts – redeemed, even resurrected, one might say, in the liberating pattern of this new progression.

Now at line 18 a single intensely simple event interrupts the linguistic and textual thread that Dante has been weaving: the truth is seen as a single point. And with the word 'point' Dante alludes to a pattern of narrative and intellectual action which recurs at crucial moments from the beginning to the end of the *Commedia*: the truth may be approached through sequences of experience, argument and discourse, but at the last will be known in a moment not of consolation but rather of crisis. So in *Paradiso* canto 33 Dante can say that he has forgotten more that was contained within – again – a single point of ecstatic vision than could be experienced in twenty-five years of waking life. So, too, meeting Beatrice on the top of Mount Purgatory, there comes a moment when Dante must meet the 'point' of Beatrice's reproving words, and answer her with the pangs of conscience rather than the speeches of explanation or excuse. But the most surprising connection of all, perhaps, is the connection between *Paradise* canto 28 and *Inferno* canto 5. As the eye of the protagonist is threatened with defeat at this moment, so Francesca is defeated by the 'point' in the book which leads her into liaison with Paolo. Her failure is not lust – or not simply lust – but an intellectual failure at a point of crisis. Reading of Guinivere's smile, and of the kiss that follows from it, Francesca falls into sympathetic confusion, and finally attracts the murderous hatred of her husband. Dante, in *Paradiso* canto 27, has himself just seen the universe smiling upon it: line 4 reads 'and the universe seemed to smile upon me'. But that smile has been won by an accurate and careful reading of the universal book. And now,

when the ‘punto’ is revealed, the mind is not overthrown. The sharpness of the point, says Dante, would cause any human eye to close. But there is no representation of blindness here, as there was in *Paradiso* canto 26. Instead, while registering the ardour and intensity of the moment, Dante proceeds to spell out, character by character, the new page in the universe which has just turned.

Lines 22–39 contain the first display of mathematical poetry in the canto, concentrating upon number and the calculation of velocities. There is indeed a verbal or rhythmic pleasure to be gained here even from the observation of deceleration; so in lines 34–6 one notes the speed and pressure of the enjambements as Dante describes an ever-slower motion:

E questo era d’un altro circumcinto,  
e quel dal terzo, e’l terzo poi dal quarto,  
dal quinto il quarto, e poi dal sesto il quinto.

Sopra seguiva il settimo sí sparto  
già di larghezza, che ‘l messo di Iuno  
intero a contenerlo, sarebbe arto.

Così l’ottavo e ‘l nono; e ciascheduno  
più tardo si movea, secondo ch’era  
in numero distante più da l’uno.

(This was, in orbit, bounded by the next,  
by that, a third, the third, then, by a fourth,  
by five that four, and then by six that five.

Then, round all these, a seventh ran, so stretched  
to generous breadth that Juno’s messenger  
the rainbow-arc, would hardly hold the all of it.

Likewise, the eighth and ninth. And each of these  
moved still more slowly as the count went on,  
running, in number, outward from the one.)

But even this passage is not all mathematics, or at least not classical mathematics. For one thing, the imagery of these verses enunciates its own principle of uncertainty. In the simile of line 22 to 24, mists and vapours congregate, while at 32, the rainbow is taken as a template or measure. As we shall see, such references to natural flux and process grow stronger. But here note the ‘Forse’ – ‘perhaps’ – at line 22, and more especially – at line 39 – the ‘credo’ matched against the neologism ‘s’invera’.

Here, where ‘credo’ might be expected to have its full sense of ‘believe’ – in a context where much is a matter of faith – the word is delightfully weakened to a colloquial insert, expressing tentative deference; against this acknowledgement of human perplexity, ‘s’invera’ strives to denote the angelic ability to become ‘inward’ of the truth and consubstantial with it.

But doubts and human limitations do not matter now: that is the comedy of the canto. So Beatrice sees the doubts of the protagonist, and proceeds to

demonstrate that the human mind can habituate itself to the certainty of uncertainty. Doubt and contemplative intelligence may seem as incongruous as the angelic orders and the planetary heavens; but they are not.

So in one rapid and concentrated stroke Beatrice presents the formula which ought to solve Dante's doubts. The emphasis upon the knowledge gained by 'seeing': the authoritative 'Mira' requires the protagonist to 'gaze' or 'direct' the eye; and linguistically the passage ends – at some distance from rational analysis – with a splendidly compressed tautology-cum-pun: by virtue of its love for the 'punto' of God, the circle closest to that point is said at line 45 to be itself 'punto' – or 'impelled' to become as much like the point as it can.

This formula – dominated by imperatives – concerns only the highest circle and should really be enough for Dante to calculate the other relationships in the angelic hierarchy. But Dante is concerned with the connection which we have already considered between the angelic and planetary orders: how does the Ghost enter the Machine. And in expressing this question Dante descends to two cloudy subjunctive constructions.

The first of these – at lines 46–51 – expresses the failed hypothesis that the greater heavenly circle should correspond to the greater planetary heaven: such proportions are meat and drink to the rational mind; and if this had been confirmed, Dante – line 48 – would have been fed full of the truth: 'sazio'. But desire must have its end – line 52 – in a space beyond any such definitions. So the second conditional clause entertains the notion of a temple whose limits are those only of love and light. Oddly – but characteristically – Dante employs his expectation of this transcendent realm to assert the necessity – 'convienmi' (line 55) – of knowing as much as he can about the mechanics of the lower order.

We have already spoken about the explanation that Dante now receives. So, of lines 58–78, we need only say that here the play of mathematical relationship, rhetoric and rhythmic energy reaches its climax. So at lines 67–9 Beatrice celebrates the perfect proportion of intense virtue and physical magnitude with an unwavering repetition of 'maggior' – animated by alliterations on 'm' and 'c'. And the climax to which this rises is not (as it would, for instance, have been in 'Land of Hope and Glory') a climax of 'wider still and wider' but a perception of perfectly calibrated equality:

Maggior bontà vuol far maggior salute;  
maggior salute maggior corpo cape,  
s'elli ha le parti igualmente compiute.

(A greater goodness means a greater health.  
A greater health is held in greater limbs,  
if these, throughout, are perfect equally.)

Now, whether or not you feel liberated by this, Dante does. And there follows – at lines 79–87 – a wonderful evocation of the satisfaction and freshness of mind which any one, surely, must feel on solving a question which they have

longed to see answered: Dante's mind is now as clear as a sky blown clean by a cold north wind. The psychological pattern is here one that Dante regularly associates with the influence of Beatrice. So in *Purgatorio* canto 24, Dante explains that the simplicity and fluency of his own style depend upon his unfailing attention to the simple spiritual purposes which love alone can dictate. Other poets – to use Dante's own image – may 'knot themselves' up in intellectual and rhetorical complexity. Dante himself, in his 'sweet new style', understands how to disentangle that knot. But in the present passage – at line 58 – there is also a 'knot', the 'knotty' problem of how the angels are 'knotted' to the planets. The solution of this problem – in the light of Beatrice and the Still Point – produces, in the Boreas verses, yet another version of the 'sweet new style'.

But note that within canto 28 itself something new has happened. We have seen before that the geometry of the canto is intertwined with images of natural process; and here – especially at lines 82–3 – the 'drama' of Dante's mind is expressed through a vocabulary of vapours, turbulence and final calm. At the same time – as if anticipating some eighteenth-century map – the North Wind, Boreas, is personified, blowing – almost chubbily – from its 'gentler' cheek. We have already seen Love personified at line 12. And the temptation is to think that, now as then, Dante were making a confessedly decorative use of a somewhat outdated rhetorical palate.

Yet the truth is we are now close to a point in the *Paradiso* where the human face as an object of devotion will assume an infinitely greater authority than any mathematical figure, or even the anthropomorphic metaphors of the Scriptures. And when in canto 30 Dante does pass into the empyrean, where he will see the face of God, he prepares himself for that vision by contemplating the faces of the saints: the saints are arranged in the presence of God according to the tiers of a great white rose; and geometry is not negated by that circular flowering; but Dante's emphasis now is upon an order which is the organic order of growth, and above all upon the names, identities and faces of the saints who are now no longer veiled or masked in light.

So it is not, I hope, absurd to suggest that when – at line 74 – Beatrice speaks of 'measure' she is already beginning to use the language of a tailor's tape or cut-out. In canto 33, Dante has spoken of the *Primum Mobile* as the royal surcoat of the planetary system. And that is it: the universe is clothing for the body of divine purpose. But to understand this, we must learn from the angels – and learn not only how to do without the regularities of rational thought but also how to know something through pure intention and love.

Thus, at line 88, Dante's cool, clear admiration for the truth which Beatrice has delivered – shining like a star in the sky – is yet again unsettled. Talk gives way to happening; and the light of Beatrice's reply is replaced by a white-hot turbulence of sparkling fire – line 90 – as each angel declares its particular presence to Dante. Number and any chessboard notion of order here self-destruct so that if Dante were to calculate how many angels there were – or are – using the squares of the chessboard as his calculus, the sum would be more than the 'doppiar de li scacchi' – which is to say it would exceed two to the power of

sixty-four. Even mathematicians agree that this number is pretty big. And Dante registers the way in which the conventions of measure may outdo their own usefulness by returning to the wittier medium of linguistic invention: the angels 's'immilla': they en-thousand themselves.

So yet again the protagonist is perplexed – line 97. But the text here expands and develops yet further. Certainly, number remains the skeleton of the answer which Beatrice proceeds to offer: the hierarchy of angels consists of three interactive groups of three. But the gestures and melodies of this body are expressed in quite different terms.

For one thing, the names of the constituent groups themselves come into prominence, so that by line 121, there is an epic or Homeric pleasure in the catalogue itself:

In essa geracia son l'altre dee:  
prima Dominazioni, e poi Virtudi;  
l'ordine terzo di Potestadi èe.

(The other gods in this hierarchic rank,  
are firstly Dominations, Virtues next,  
then, thirdly, there's the Order of the Powers.)

These are the lesser gods – the 'altre dee'. But each as a 'god' is a Truth in itself: the name denotes and celebrates the presence of that truth, while the elemental verb 'to be' acquires particular resonance as it rhymes with 'dee' in the phrase: 'Potestadi èe'.

Such simplicity as this has its place in the canto as a linguistic equivalent of the still, utterly simple, point around which the heavens all move. But that still point is also the origin of all the diversity and multiplicity, both physical and spiritual, that Dante sees in creation. And linguistically the canto reflects this, too. We have already seen something of the rhetorical game which Dante here plays with devices of alliteration, neologism and archaism. And this aspect of the canto reaches its climax in the passage from line 115–20:

L'altro ternaro, che così germoglia  
in questa primavera sempiterna  
che notturno Ariete non dispoglia,  
perpetualmente 'Osanna' sberna  
con tre melode, che suonano in tree  
ordini di letizia onde s'interna.

(The second triad where the sap thus flows  
within this sempiternal spring-time season –  
which night-ascendent Aries never spoils –  
perpetually sings out that winter's done,  
'Osanna!' in three tunes that sound in three  
orders of happiness, each en-threeing here.)

These verses are built not upon the potency of the verb 'to be' but upon the equal – if vertiginous – potency of the negative 'non'. The second grouping of three – 'l'altro ternaro' – sings like birds in springtime. But their springtime is sempiternal; and this is defined – at line 117 – by virtue of the fact that such a spring *never* leads on – as it would in the natural cycle of seasons, to any autumn. When the constellation of the Ram (Aries) rises at night – 'notturmo Ariete' – (which is to say between the 21 September and 21 October), then the leaves fall from the trees. But this does *not* happen in heaven.

Now here one sees a formula which is repeated throughout the *Paradiso*. This *cantica* is probably richer than either the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* in its reference to natural phenomena. And whenever such references occur, their appropriateness depends upon a calculation we are invited to make, on the grounds of a 'non' across the distance between heavenly and divine realities: heaven is like this, but *not* this. The twenty-eighth canto is, at large, Dante's clearest statement of this formula; for, as we have seen, at line 56 it invites us to consider how the model and its manifestations do not go according to one plan. But once the calculation is understood, one need have no hesitation in relying upon natural phenomena in our approach to God. These phenomena are tokens, emblems, icons of the truth, which anyone who knows what 'not' really means will be able, as it were, to 'tie in' to the scheme of eternal truth. And the same may be said of language as well. Language, too – in a familiar phrase – is a system of signs. And once that much is understood we are free to enjoy to the full the pleasures that play in the possibilities of words.

So in these lines there is first the pleasure of melodic or phonetic pattern as the emphatic sounds of 'r', 'n' and 't' interweave with the unemphatic 'g', 'm' and 's': as, for instance, in 'l'altro ternaro' and 'notturmo Ariete' against 'germoglia' and 'primavera sempiterna'. So, too, the vowel modulates from the open 'altro', 'ternaro', and 'Ariete' to the closed 'o' and 'u' of 'germoglia' and 'notturmo'.

Then, likewise, there is the lexical pleasure of the phrase 'Osanna' where the Hebraic cry of triumph is linked with a word from the Occitan troubadours signifying the twittering of birds at the end of winter: 'sberna' here goes back to the Latin *ex-hibernare*, to 'ex-hibernate' or 'come out of winter'. But this pleasure in turn points back to the underlying density of image and concept in the passage. A 'sempiternal spring' is, of course, a paradox: spring is spring, for us, because it does not last; to speak of the 'primavera sempiterna' is to speak of the inconceivable – an ever-new beginning. Now this is enough to send a shimmer through the science of the canto; and here, as in the Boreas passage, one notes how rich the reference is to images of growth and process. Indeed, even words seem now on the point of losing their essential definiteness; note, for instance, how the boundaries of words dissolve, so that, beneath any logical progression, syllables tend to be haunted by the echoes of preceding syllables, as, for example, when 'tern' in 'ternaro' becomes 'tern' in 'sempiterna' and 'turn' in 'notturmo'. Dante is rarely so close to the realm of incantation. But clarity itself is a part of this chant. The word 'three' here may point us to a wordless and

numberless contemplation of the Trinity; it also celebrates the human power to say 'three' and enjoy saying it. It is that enjoyment – that pleasure in the text – which is here discovered as the alternative to angelology or Gregorian debate. There is much here too that might delight an old-fashioned deconstructionalist. But as so often the real nature of deconstruction is to be observed in the working practices of prayer and praise – which are, as pursued in a canto such as canto 28, the afterlife-now.

## Notes

- 1 See D. Keck, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- 2 G. Petrocchi (ed.) *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, Florence: Mondadori, 1994. All references to the *Commedia* are to this edition.
- 3 R. Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982, pp.65–6.
- 4 E. Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, R. Mannheim (trans.) Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973, pp.71–2.
- 5 M. Barbi *et al.* (eds) *Vita nuova*, Testo critica della societa dantesca, Florence: Le Monnier, 1960, p.41.
- 6 P. Boyde, *Dante Philomythes and Philosopher*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p.51.

## 13 The artifice of eternity

### Speaking of heaven in three medieval poems

*Barbara Newman*

Margery Kempe, the fifteenth-century English mystic and gadfly, had a habit of elevating the conversational tone at dinner by announcing, 'It is full merry in heaven!' Her companions, when they could take no more of this, would respond, 'Why do you talk so of the joy that is in heaven? You don't know it, and you haven't been there any more than we have.'<sup>1</sup> Not for the last time, Margery had confronted the difficulty of speaking the unspeakable, in this case to an audience that would have preferred it to remain unspoken. Unlike Kempe's table companions, however, many medieval readers were so eager to hear about the bliss of heaven that they were prepared to believe anyone who did claim to have been there, or at least to have caught a glimpse from afar.

Speaking of heaven is really a way of speaking about God insofar as human beings can experience him, and thus presses against the limits of language and thought. 'A man's reach should exceed his grasp,' as Browning said, 'or what's a heaven for?'<sup>2</sup> His question applies pre-eminently to poets, who in the Middle Ages found the portrayal of heaven a supreme and invigorating challenge to the reach of their art. Hell is much easier to imagine, being closer to our experience on earth. Our capacity to endure pain seems almost as boundless as our skill in inflicting it, and extreme suffering stretches our sense of time to the limits. So all we need to do to imagine hell is take a moment of physical or mental torture, which seems subjectively endless, and conceive it as objectively so. But heaven? If pain stretches time, happiness makes us all too conscious of its brevity: the more intense our joys, the more intensely we perceive that they are fleeting. Nor can we readily imagine *perfect* joy, even for an instant. Goethe's Faust is so certain he will never come to such bliss, never say to some moment, 'Verweile doch! du bist so schön!', that he stakes his life on this.<sup>3</sup> Any sadist can invent a hell, but it took Dante to write the *Paradiso* – and even so, his *Inferno* is the perennial classroom favourite.

To imagine heaven, it is not enough to extrapolate from earthly pleasures. We need to think about the very nature of happiness – which means, in Christian terms, to do theology. According to the novelist and theologian Frederick Buechner, all Christianity is 'wishful thinking' – not just thought coloured by desire, but desire giving impetus to thought – and this is particularly true when we think of heaven.<sup>4</sup> It is no accident that, in works of the Christian

imagination, heavens are more theological than hells. They are also much rarer, not to say rarefied.<sup>5</sup> In the medieval poems I will discuss here, the pleasures of imagining heaven, as of dwelling there, are exquisitely theological. And the poems, like the heavens themselves, are works of consummate artfulness. Far from aiming at the kind of art that conceals art, the celestial poetics of the Middle Ages revelled in its artificiality.<sup>6</sup> These poems are characterized by an intensely self-conscious style that carries poetic language to its limits, achieving a brilliant, glossy finish that makes opacity itself a mode of translucence. As a way of teasing out some features of this celestial poetics, which reached its apogee in the fourteenth century, I will look at three poems written in three different languages, each constructed around a particular vision of heaven and a celestial Lady. The apex of my study is the Middle English *Pearl* (c.1375–1385), which shares some tantalizing affinities with one much larger poem and one smaller one. The larger poem is of course Dante's *Paradiso*, which the *Pearl* poet almost certainly knew.<sup>7</sup> The smaller, less obvious one is the Middle High German *Marienleich*, dating from around 1300.<sup>8</sup> Its principal speaker is the Lady of heaven, but its most compelling similarities with *Pearl* are less thematic than formal – a virtuoso formalist aesthetic, a common debt to the Song of Songs and the Apocalypse, and a pervasive eroticism, which is problematized in one poem and unabashed in the other.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike Dante and the *Pearl* poet, the author of the *Marienleich* may need some introduction. Heinrich von Meißen, better known as Frauenlob (d. 1318), was a composer–poet and itinerant minstrel who performed at the courts of Prague and Mainz, among others. A deeply philosophical poet indebted to Alan of Lille, he was also a supreme master of the aureate style known in German as *geblümte Rede*.<sup>10</sup> His *Marienleich* is, in Patrick Diehl's words, 'the equivalent of Milton's "Lycidas" or Hopkins's "Wreck of the Deutschland" or Crane's "The Bridge": a conscious try for a masterpiece, in the highest style and form available, that stretched the poet's powers to the utmost'.<sup>11</sup> A vision-poem, though not an otherworld journey, it sings of a blessed Lady in eight strophes in the poet's voice, then continues with twelve strophes in her own voice, composed in the style of the biblical Wisdom poems. Interestingly, never is the Lady expressly identified as Mary (even the title *Marienleich* is editorial). Although the speaker is the Virgin in her triple aspect as bride of God, divine mother, and woman clothed with the sun, she also assumes the roles of other Christian poetic goddesses such as Sapientia, Natura, and Frau Minne.<sup>12</sup> A composite figure, the Lady not only reveals the way to heaven but herself embodies it, as she proclaims: 'I take the starry heaven's measure / and guide its motions; / within the firmament I fix / the stars in constellations. / I weave their courses through the skies, / through me the planets set and rise.'<sup>13</sup> Like Beatrice and the *Pearl* Maiden, she provides the poet–narrator with a visionary and discursive point of entry into the heavens.

In pursuing this comparison across linguistic boundaries, I do not claim to have discovered a unified vision in these very disparate poems, but I think they

suggest some common stylistic choices and theological concerns that the theme of heaven evoked for the most accomplished poets of the age. In this essay I will highlight three of them: (1) the quest for formal perfection through and beyond language; (2) the question of humanism, or the status of earthly knowledge and justice vis-à-vis the rewards of the blessed; and (3) the transfigured woman, who supplies the singular voice of heaven, in relation to the whole.

### The artifice of eternity

In accord with classical rhetoric, medieval poets agreed that a high style suited a lofty subject, heaven being the loftiest of all. But in this very special case, high style serves a paradoxical function, being simultaneously mimetic and anti-mimetic. On the one hand, the exceptional beauties lavished on form and language should evoke the beauty of heaven itself. On the other hand, a poetic language so highly wrought that it is always calling attention to itself, and thus to the poet's skill, must constantly remind the reader that the poem is an artifact, a supreme effort at self-transcendence, rather than the transcendence by grace that constitutes heaven. So a self-conscious, often self-referential striving for grandeur is among the hallmarks of celestial poetics.

As Jeffrey Burton Russell has shown, the concept of heaven draws on ideas of unfallen nature, such as the Golden Age or Garden of Eden, but also on the celestial City as an image of art, or nature perfected by grace.<sup>14</sup> Heaven can be conceived as either arch-natural or supernatural. Fallen language, however, can evoke one of these possibilities more easily than the other. Dante might dream of an Adamic language,<sup>15</sup> while the *Pearl* poet chooses a speechless infant to exemplify the innocent who are 'saved by right', yet poetic language cannot return to some original innocence.<sup>16</sup> Even if a poet were to seek childlike simplicity unmarred by any rhetorical striving after effects, the likely result would be not Edenic purity but merely a colloquial vernacular, which would not achieve the goal of evoking heaven since vernacular poetry in the fourteenth century was still in constant danger of slipping into 'low style' simply because it was not Latin. So the only direction to go was up, into a realm of high artifice that stands in the same relation to ordinary speech as a liturgical procession to a stroll down the lane. 'Natural' language could be retained only as direct speech framed within an overarching structure of poetic discourse. We see this tension in some polemical moments of the *Paradiso* and still more clearly in *Pearl*, in the contrast between the Maiden's blunt, even rude vernacular and the supremely artificial structure that contains her.<sup>17</sup>

Among the formal techniques of celestial poetics are elaborate rhyme schemes, aureate diction, numerology, appeals to the ineffable, and circular form. As many critics have noted, Dante's invention of *terza rima* makes his great poem at once linear and cyclical, with the progression of rhymes sustaining the forward motion of the narrative even as the tercets circle around each other like the celestial spheres.<sup>18</sup>

- a esso ricominciò: ‘A questo regno  
 b no sali mai chi non credette ’n **Cristo**,  
 a vel pria vel poi ch’el si chiavasse al legno.  
 b Ma vedi: molti gridan “Cristo, **Cristo!**”  
 c che saranno in giudicio assai men prope  
 b a lui, che tal che non conosce **Cristo.**’

(*Paradiso* 19.103–8)<sup>19</sup>

It began again: ‘To this kingdom  
 none ever rose who did not believe in Christ,  
 either before or after He was nailed to the tree.  
 But note, many cry “Christ, Christ!”  
 who shall be far less near to Him at the Judgement  
 than such as know not Christ.’

Even at the microcosmic level, the poem mirrors the dialectic between historical time and eternal beatitude that is among its themes.

*Pearl* within its smaller compass achieves an even more daunting formal symmetry. Its elegant twelve-line stanzas, rhyming in the pattern abab-abab-bcbc, are grouped in cantos of five stanzas apiece, chained together by repetition of the same c-rhyme in all five stanzas and by the use of keywords that recur in the first and last line of each stanza.

‘Al lys in Hym to dyȝt and **deme.**’

‘All lies in Him, Your Lord and  
**Judge.**’

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| <p>a Thenne <b>demed</b> I to þat damyselle:<br/>         b ‘Ne worþe no wrathþe vnto my Lorde,<br/>         a If rapely I raue, spornande in spelle:<br/>         b My herte watz al with mysse remorde,<br/>         a As wallande water gotz out of welle.<br/>         b I do me ay in Hys mysrecorde.<br/>         a Rebuke me neuer with wordez felle,<br/>         b Paȝ I forloyne, my dere endorde,<br/>         b Bot kyþez me kyndely your coumforde,<br/>         c Pytosly þenkande vpon þysse:<br/>         b Of care and me ȝe made acorde,<br/>         c Pat er watz grounde of alle my <b>blysse.</b>’</p> | <p>That gem I answered as I<br/> <b>judged:</b><br/>         ‘I’d neither God were wroth<br/>         with me<br/>         Nor that in reckless rant I raged.<br/>         My heaving heart in agony,<br/>         As water from a well, deluged.<br/>         I recommend to God’s mercy<br/>         My soul: Forgive my sacrilege<br/>         Of mourning most indulgently.<br/>         O show me your sweet sanctity.<br/>         With mercy, maid, remember<br/>         this:<br/>         You racked my soul relentlessly,<br/>         On whom was based my only<br/> <b>bliss.</b>’</p> |
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‘My **blysse**, my bale, ȝe han ben boþe.’ ‘My **bliss** and bane have you  
 been both.’

(canto 7.360–73)<sup>20</sup>

This pattern of stanza linkage, known as concatenation, creates a flexible refrain within each canto as the repeated keyword becomes a focus for wordplay and thematic exploration. Further, the keyword in the last line of each canto is repeated in the first line of the next, binding the cantos both internally and successively like a chain of pearls. The last line of the poem, 'Ande precious perlez vnto His pay', echoes its first line, 'Perle plesaunte to prynces paye', completing a perfect circle. In this way the poem itself becomes a kind of pearl, 'endelez rounde' (l. 738) like its subject.

As in the *Commedia*, the verbal patterning of *Pearl* is closely linked to its geometry and numerology, number being essential to medieval conceptions of beauty.<sup>21</sup> That which could not be said in words might be stated in figures. If the pearl is a perfect sphere, the New Jerusalem of the poet's vision is a perfect cube, as described in the Apocalypse. 'The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its breadth' and height (Apocalypse 21:16), each measuring twelve furlongs – with twelve gates of pearl for the twelve tribes of Israel, and twelve jewelled foundations for the twelve apostles. Not only does *Pearl* employ twelve-line stanzas, but the centrality of this number to the whole architecture of the poem is unmistakable. With its twenty cantos of sixty lines apiece, *Pearl* would have had exactly 1200 lines and 100 stanzas, making a perfect square, were it not for one significant break in the pattern. In canto 15, which describes the procession of 144 000 virgins who follow the Lamb (Apocalypse 14:1–4), the poet has inserted an extra stanza, bringing the total number of lines to 1212 – and twelve squared is of course 144.<sup>22</sup> In consequence, the total number of stanzas rises to 101, moving beyond the perfect square to start again with one, the principle of eternally new beginning, even as the last line of the poem circles back to the first.<sup>23</sup> It happens that 101 is also a prime number, imitating the divine perfection of indivisibility.<sup>24</sup> What the poet has accomplished with this pattern is a numerical equivalent of squaring the circle, superimposing the square number of the celestial City on the circular form of eternity, the 'endelez rounde'. This numerical patterning can plausibly be read as a response to Dante, who gave thirty-three cantos to each canticle of his poem – thirty-three being the sacred number of the earthly years of Christ – for what would have been a total of ninety-nine. Nine, the square of the Trinity, is the number assigned to Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova*,<sup>25</sup> and the *Commedia* describes nine circles in hell that parodically mirror the nine spheres of heaven. But the first canto of the *Inferno*, which introduces the entire poem, raises the total number of cantos to 100, so that here too a 'round' and a 'square' number seem to coincide. Not by coincidence, the squaring of the circle is precisely the paradox Dante chooses at the end of the *Paradiso* to evoke the ineffable union of Christ's human form with the Trinity (*Paradiso* 33.133–8).<sup>26</sup>

The formal patterns of the *Marienleich* are equally striking, though they have been less studied. The German *Leich* is a form analogous to the Latin sequence, with its complex principle of strophic responson.<sup>27</sup> Each of the poem's twenty strophes is divided in two halves that mirror each other exactly in their melodies, rhyme schemes, line lengths, number of lines, and placement of caesuras – but these features change with every pair. For example, the first strophe comprises

two quatrains rhyming abab, but with the second, *Frauenlob* moves to one of the virtuosic rhyme schemes that are typical of this poem.

x	Nu merket,	Now see
a	wie sie trüge,	how she
a	die gefüge,	so meekly
a	der naturen zu genüge:	bowed to Nature's ways.
b'	mit dem sie was gebürdet,	With visionary gaze
c-c	den sach sie vor ir sitzen mit witzen	she saw the child in her womb
d'	in siben liuchteren	enthroned amid lampstands seven,
x	und sach in	and yet again she saw him
e'	doch besundert	in the form of a Lamb
f'	in eines lammes wise	high on Mount Zion,
g'	uf Sion, dem berge gehiuren.	the mount of heaven.
x	Sie tet rechte	She did
a	als sie solde,	as she should,
a	ja, die holde	noble and good,
a	trug den blumen sam ein tolde.	bore a flower like a sceptre.
b'	vrouwe, ob ir muter würdet	Lady, if you would be
c-c	des lammes und der tuben, iur trubem	mother of both Lamb and Dove,
d'	ir liezet iuch sweren?	could you bear the weight
x	da von mich	of the vineyard's grape?
e'	nicht enwundert,	I'll not be amazed
f'	ob iuch die selbe spise	if the fruit of that vine
g'	kan wol zu der fruchte gestiuren.	makes you fruitful from above.

Each half-strophe in this pair has eleven lines, with the rhyme pattern x, a, a, a, b', c-c, d', x, e', f', g'. But the a-rhymes link lines within a half-strophe; the c-rhymes are internal; and the b, d, e, f, and g-syllables rhyme across the strophic pair, while two x-lines in each half-strophe are unrhymed. Succeeding strophes spin endless variations without becoming any simpler.

*Frauenlob* also used numerology as a structuring principle just as his Italian and English peers did. The seventh strophe, for instance, allegorizes the seven lampstands of the Apocalypse as seven virtues of Mary, while the eighteenth (i.e. twice nine) has nine lines in each half and treats the nine choirs of angels. In the nineteenth strophe the poet sets an exegetical riddle: the Lady proclaims herself to be the bed of Solomon, guarded by sixty strong men (cantide 3:7). This number is then broken down to signify the inhabitants of heaven: twenty-four elders, twelve apostles, nine angelic orders, three patriarchs, four evangelists, and a mysterious eight more whose sum constitutes sixty.

nu secht, ich binz daz bette Salomones	Look! I am the bed of Solomon,
rich hochswebendes lones,	rich in sublime rewards,
daz die sechzic starken ummehalden:	flanked by sixty knights with
	swords.

vier und zweinzic ist der wisen alden, niur zwelfe sint der boten, die des cristentumes walden, der ordenunge niune sint, die nie min lop volzalten,  dri patriarchen, vier ewangelisten wunder stalten, noch sint ir achte, den ich sache, daz ir heilikeit min berndez lop bewache.	Twenty-four are the wise elders, twelve the apostles, Christendom's lords. Nine are the angel orders that have never fathomed my praise. Patriarchs three, evangelists four, are wonder-workers evermore. Eight more stand at my command: their holiness guards my fruitful praise.
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(strophe 19a.7–16)

Although the poem does not have an obviously symbolic number of lines, Christoph März has shown that its overarching structure is indeed symbolic if one counts not the lines, which are irregular in length, but the feet or stresses.<sup>28</sup> The metrical pattern is intertwined with the work's musical structure, which follows the cycle of eight modes or tonalities used in plainchant. The first strophe is composed in the first mode, the second in the second mode, and so forth. After this cycle is completed with the eighth strophe, it begins anew in the ninth and unfolds again through the sixteenth. Thus the composition as a whole employs a 'double *cursus*' pattern, with a third half-*cursus* informing strophes seventeen through to twenty. If we count the stresses per half-strophe, the total number of stresses in the first *cursus* is 296, while the number in the second is 592, exactly twice as many. Adding the 312 stresses in the final half-*cursus*, we reach a total of 1200 – the same symbolic number that looms so large in *Pearl*. This also happens to be the number of Solomon's *pacifici* ('those who find peace with God') at the end of the Song of Songs (8:12), a biblical text cited no fewer than sixty times in the poem. In addition to all the apocalyptic twelves we noted apropos of *Pearl*, there are also twelve gemstones in the Lady's crown, which Frauenlob mentions in the first strophe and describes at length in the last, giving his work an appropriately circular form.

The *Marienleich* and *Pearl* share another interesting mathematical feature. In the *Marienleich*, a change of speakers divides the poem into two unequal parts, one with eight strophes and the other with twelve. The musical *cursus* pattern reinforces this sectioning. Both eight and twelve are significant 'heavenly' numbers, eight suggesting the 'eighth day' of the general resurrection<sup>29</sup> and twelve, as we have seen, the New Jerusalem. *Pearl* likewise is divided into sections of twelve and eight by the sole break in its system of concatenation, for the keyword of canto 12 does not reappear in the first line of canto 13. Most editors have assumed a scribal error at this point, and the now-standard edition of Andrew and Waldron emends the offending line.<sup>30</sup> Yet it is just possible that the break is deliberate. If so, it bisects the poem to create a chiasmic pattern: the last

eight cantos recount a vision of the twelve-gated city, while the first twelve introduce the poem's setting in August, the eighth month of the year, and treat the theology of baptism, a sacrament linked with the eighth day and the octagonal font. Such a pattern would add yet another layer of complexity to this most intricate poem ever wrought in English.

I will touch more briefly on other stylistic features shared by our poets. *Pearl* is noted for its arcane alliterative word-choard and the *Marienleich* bristles with cruxes, since complicated rhyme schemes require an exotic lexicon to meet their demands. Both Frauenlob and the *Pearl* poet were inveterate punsters whose wordplay is a figure of thought rather than humour.<sup>31</sup> Frauenlob loved to coin neologisms, with a particular penchant for transforming nouns and adjectives into verbs. Though the vocabulary of the *Paradiso* is less consistently esoteric, heaven's strangeness is also signalled by neologisms. Many of these convey its unique nature as a 'spiritual place' in which, despite bodily appearances conceded for the sake of representation, the blessed truly reside not in space but in the mind of God, and by consequence, coinhere in one another. In the heaven of Venus, Dante asks one spirit why, being telepathic and thus able to perceive Dante's unspoken thoughts, he waits for him to ask a question instead of preempting it with the answer.

'Dio vede tutto, e tuo veder **s'inluia**',  
 diss' io 'beato spirto, sì che nulla  
 voglia di sè a te puot'esser fuia.  
 Dunque la voce tua [. . .]  
 perchè non satisface a' miei disii?  
 Già non attendere' io tua dimanda,  
 s'io **m'intuasse**, come tu **t'inmii**.'  
 (*Paradiso* 9.73–81)

'God sees all, and your sight **in-hims** itself',  
 I said, 'blessed spirit, so that no wish  
 can be hidden from you.  
 Why then does your voice [. . .]  
 not satisfy my desires?  
 I would not wait for your question  
 could I **in-you** myself as you **in-me** yourself.' (translation altered)

To devise a new language for this novel mode of knowing, Dante wrenches personal pronouns into verbs: the Italian is no less strange than the translation. Similar locutions are sprinkled throughout the canticle, signifying the incomprehensibly transparent nature of selfhood among the blessed.<sup>32</sup>

The first of Dante's neologisms is the famous *trasumanar* of canto 1, which is also the first of his ineffability topoi: 'Trasumanar significar *per verba* / non si poria' (*Paradiso* 1.71–2). 'Passing beyond the human cannot be signified in words' – but in saying this, of course, Dante has to use words.<sup>33</sup> Let me be

somewhat iconoclastic and suggest that 'ineffability' as such has been over-rated as a signifier of the divine. A vision of heaven is not necessarily more resistant to words than the taste of chocolate or the experience of a Bach fugue; and the jargon of wine connoisseurs is as mystifying to a teetotaler as flights of visionary rapture to a sceptic. This is not to deny that language has its limits; but we may too readily confuse the limitations of speech itself with our own linguistic shortcomings. After all, a speaker has no need to say 'words fail me' when they plainly do. Perhaps only Dante has ever fully earned the right to the ineffability topoi that cluster toward the end of the *Paradiso*, culminating in the poet's self-comparison to 'un fante / che bagni ancor la lingua alla mammella' (*Paradiso* 33.107–8) – 'an infant who yet bathes his tongue at the breast'. The main function of such tropes, I believe, is not to stress the poverty of the poet's language but to vouch for the authenticity of his experience. If his tongue falls so far short of his memory, and the memory itself of his fleeting vision, that henceforth he is doomed to hopeless failure, then the reader is compelled to believe that his vision was in fact real and not a construction made of words in the first place.<sup>34</sup> Celestial poetics, as I have said, is both mimetic and anti-mimetic. Calling attention to any failure of mimesis forcefully asserts the reality of its object. At the same time it challenges the reader to a strenuous act of imagination, for perchance the mind's eye or the heart's desire will be able to find a way where the poet's words can only beckon.

### Humanism, divine justice, and celestial rewards

A more familiar rationale for the ineffability topos is the claim that language falls short because the mind itself does. No finite intellect can grasp the infinite being of God, or even the privileged experience that may be granted in a moment of grace. Although visions of heaven need not be explicitly visions of God, they are at least experiences of his presence, which is the *sine qua non* of heaven.<sup>35</sup> They are at the same time experiences of transfigured community, of the knowledge and love of others untainted by sin, ignorance, or the frailties of the mortal body. Yet, since frailty, ignorance, and sin are inescapable facets of our earthly consciousness, the social dimension of heaven challenges the imagination as radically as its theological aspect.

Dante and the *Pearl* poet both address the vast disparities between human desire and heavenly fulfillment, human reason and celestial truth, human judgement and divine justice. No clear consensus has yet emerged from the frequent comparisons between them. I will argue that, despite the *Pearl* poet's many reminiscences of Dante, he is finally the more sceptical and less humanistic of the two – and surely also the more characteristic of the age. As R.A. Shoaf has remarked, 'Dante believes that form can contain transgression and transform it into transcendence, if only through enormous effort of imagination and will', whereas the *Pearl* poet sets 'a darker emphasis on the recalcitrance of nature, uncertain of the reformability of the will'. Or, from a different angle, 'Dante

believes eros can encourage, enable, and sustain transcendence; the *Pearl* poet is less secure about what nature can bear or perform.<sup>36</sup>

One sharp divide lies in the degree to which the two celestial voyagers comprehend what they see. Dante, for all his disclaimers, shows an astonishing boldness in this regard: it is not until his *poema sacro* (*Paradiso* 25.1) reaches the beatific vision and the hypostatic union – the ultimate mysteries of faith – that he insists so strenuously on its limits. Until the last canto, the *Paradiso*'s confident disclosure of heavenly secrets is enabled by its fiction: the pilgrim Dante has already been purified by the ascent of Mount Purgatory, the penance of Beatrice's reproach at its summit, and the waters of Lethe and Eunoë, so that by the time he enters the celestial spheres, his awareness is no longer marred by sin. Setting out to boldly go where no man has gone before, not just to the third heaven like Paul, but to the very highest, Dante presents himself as a man wholly transformed by grace. Just as the fisherman Glaucus of old ate the herb of immortality and became a sea-god, so Dante, transfigured by the gaze of Beatrice, has passed beyond the bounds of mortality to become as the blessed are (*Paradiso* 1.67–9). Henceforth his curiosity about the heavens is not presumption but an intellectual virtue, affording scope for the blessed spirits to reveal new truths.<sup>37</sup> The device of dating the pilgrim's journey to 1300, more than a decade before the time of writing, allows the poet to place accurate prophecies in the mouths of the blessed, thus reinforcing their authority. Hence all the pilgrim's questions, whether of history, science, or theology, receive answers from those who gaze into the mind of God and perceive truth at its source, untrammelled by the limits of biblical revelation. Dante's imagery of the wheeling spheres and the celestial rose owes nothing to Scripture, while Beatrice's answers draw on current theological thought and intervene with confidence to resolve disputed questions. The *Pearl* Maiden, by contrast, hews closely to her biblical sources, just as the Dreamer's vision of the New Jerusalem clings with almost obsessive fidelity to the words of 'þe Apocalyppez, þe apostel John' (canto 17).

Further, although the Maiden is Beatrician in her celestial authority and beauty, the Dreamer is decidedly not Dantesque. Instead, he is as Dante might have been had he been snatched directly from the *selva selvaggia* into paradise, without the intervening voyage through hell and purgatory. Far from assenting joyously to the Maiden as Dante in heaven does to Beatrice, the Dreamer continues to resist her doctrine, so that instead of an authoritative revelation, *Pearl* yields a theological debate between two unequal partners. Insofar as the Dreamer represents what earth can grasp of heaven, the poem represents earthly knowledge as materialistic, self-righteous, and self-pitying, while to his earthly eyes the Maiden's heavenly knowing seems heartless and 'vnresounable' (590). Like the blessed in the *Paradiso*, she and her peers 'þurȝoutly hauen cnawying' (859), but despite her best efforts she cannot communicate this knowledge to the Dreamer. Their two minds never truly meet, nor does he like Dante ever attain the goal of his desire. Even at its best, earthly knowledge remains starkly opposed to the values of heaven.

We can see the distinction between Dante's humanism and the *Pearl* poet's anti-humanism most clearly when we pose that burning fourteenth-century question, 'Who then can be saved?' Dante addresses the fate of the 'righteous heathen' in all three canticles, inventing the ineffably sad and noble Limbo for the philosophers and poets, dramatizing the redemption of Statius in the *Purgatorio*, and placing the sanctified pagans Trajan and Ripheus in the heaven of justice (*Paradiso* 20). Without denying that faith in Christ is the only way to salvation, Dante's instructors here reveal that God may bestow saving faith in secret on any just soul he chooses, even if he has never heard of Christ in the flesh. The salvation of the Emperor Trajan through a miraculous intervention by Pope Gregory the Great was widely accepted,<sup>38</sup> but that of Ripheus – an obscure Trojan hero from the *Aeneid* – amounts to a private revelation vouchsafed solely to display the wideness of God's mercy. Although Dante denies himself the pleasure of announcing Virgil's salvation, he is prepared to take Virgil as seriously when he proclaims Ripheus 'the most just among the Trojans'<sup>39</sup> as he takes St Paul who declares that 'the just shall live by faith' (Romans 1:17).

While Dante worries about deserving pagans who lack Christian faith, *Pearl* is preoccupied with the complementary problem of Christians who lack works, that is, baptized infants who die before they can acquire any merit. The *Pearl* Maiden resolves this problem, to her own satisfaction if not the Dreamer's, by expounding Christ's parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16). Her choice of this text as the chief peg for her teaching doubly counteracts any humanistic tendencies that might be lurking in the poem. First, she offers plain evangelical doctrine in lieu of the courtly, sentimental, and visionary modes preferred by the Dreamer. To his bedazzled senses, the kingdom of heaven is like a glittering parkland or a royal pageant; to her cool and lucid mind, it is like a landowner hiring workers at harvest time. Paradoxically, her discourse is by far the earthier of the two. Second and more crucially, the Maiden privileges a democracy of grace over a hierarchy of merit. No medieval discussion of heaven could escape this issue, for exegetes agreed that the scheme of heavenly rewards somehow compassed both equality and hierarchy.<sup>40</sup> On the one hand, all the saved must partake fully of the beatific vision (the equal 'denarius' of the parable), yet on the other, Paul had written that 'star differs from star in glory' (1 Corinthians 15:41). Fourteenth-century theologians vigorously debated the issue of grace, merits, and rewards.<sup>41</sup> The whole system of the *Paradiso* is brilliantly designed to demonstrate differing glories, while, as Piccarda explains in canto 3, each of the blessed remains content with the measure of bliss that is his or her own.<sup>42</sup> *Pearl* places an almost polemical emphasis on the complementary doctrine, for in paradise even 'the least of these' is exalted to the rank of 'kyng and quene by cortaysye' (468). All the blessed spirits we see appear identical in reward and merit.

As John Bowers has argued, the *Pearl* poet betrays his royalist sympathies in his treatment of the vineyard parable.<sup>43</sup> Like other Ricardian poets, he seems to have sided firmly with the landowning class in the economic crisis that followed the Black Death. Depopulation had led to an agricultural labour shortage that

empowered peasants to throw off old manorial obligations and negotiate for higher wages. Against their rebellion the *Pearl* Maiden speaks on behalf of the landlord, who is of course a figure of God, ascribing the day labourers' demands for extra pay to envy. Regardless of the seemingly better deals obtained by other workers, they are still bound by the terms of their original contract. This is indeed the literal sense of the parable. But to the Dreamer, the landowner's decision to grant equal pay for unequal work is a glaring injustice:

‘Now he þat stod þe long day stable,	‘If one worked more in toil and trouble
And þou to payment com hym before,	Yet you're rewarded first, then for
Penne þe lasse in werke to take more able,	Less work more wealth is payable.
And euer þe lenger þe lasse þe more.’	So more is less and less is more!’

*(Pearl, 597–600)*

If ‘payment’ stands for heavenly rewards, it seems only fair for those who have worked hardest and longest in God's vineyard to earn the most. For the Dreamer, as for Dante, heaven is indeed a hierarchy based on merit. But the *Pearl* Maiden rejects this common-sense justice. To her, heaven is both a democracy of grace where all are equal and merit makes no claims, and a reverse hierarchy where the last shall be first and less *is* more. Those who have worked the least – labourers hired at the eleventh hour, or children dying in infancy – do get proportionally more than those who have toiled through the heat of the day.<sup>44</sup> On the Maiden's account there is a good reason for this: the so-called righteous deserve no more than an innocent child because, in reality, no one *is* righteous. The longer the lifetime, the greater the sin and therefore the *less* the merit. Even those who strive most zealously for perfection can be saved only through penance and grace. This, by the way, is the same conclusion Sir Gawain reaches after his encounter with the Green Knight,<sup>45</sup> so we can probably take the doctrine as the poet's own.

Interestingly, Dante also includes baptized infants in the *Paradiso* (32.40–84), but he differs from the *Pearl* poet in representing them as children even in heaven, rather than the mature men and women that Augustine had judged they would be.<sup>46</sup> Grace gives them perfect bliss, but it is the degree of bliss that befits their childlike stature, and they are still differentiated in merits.<sup>47</sup> So, while Dante and the *Pearl* poet both insist that ‘Þe grace of God is gret gret inoghe’ (canto 11) to save even those who lack explicit Christian faith, there is a telling difference between the *Pearl* Maiden and Ripheus the Trojan as exempla. In the case of Ripheus, grace rewards heroic striving for justice with the gift of saving faith; in *Pearl*, grace rewards the baptismal innocence it confers, and the less human striving has to do with it, the better. In the end, *Pearl* grants the Dreamer a heavenly vision chiefly to assert how little mortals can grasp of heaven's ways.

The *Marienleich* does not address the question of grace versus merits, except

to present the Virgin conventionally as a refuge for sinners and a force for their transformation. But Frauenlob found his own way to intervene on the humanist side of the debate. One extremely common version of the ineffability topos maintains that language, and indeed all human knowledge, comes to a standstill before the mystery of the Incarnation. In a well-known twelfth-century lyric, 'On the Incarnation and the Seven Arts', Alan of Lille showed how each of the liberal arts in turn was overthrown by the paradoxes of the God-man and the Virgin Mother, which defy their most basic axioms.<sup>48</sup> But Frauenlob set out to prove the opposite: Mary, as the embodiment of Sapientia, is the consummation of all arts, both verbal and mathematical. Thus three elaborate strophes of the poem are devoted to the *artes*, including metaphysics and Aristotelian logic, using the technical terms of each to describe the Incarnation. Grammar, for instance, is vindicated when the eternal verb (*verbum* or *wort*) becomes a noun (*nomen* or *name*) in Mary's womb, enabling the union of eternal and temporal, divine and human, to be qualified as a linguistic event:

Daz wort mir von der höhe quam  
und ward in mir ein so gebenediter nam:  
der name hie wart, daz wort was ane werden ie.  
von disen zwein ein rede wart gevlochten,  
der min witze tochten.  
ein meinen truc  
die rede in ir, daz disputirete ich genuc,  
als mich der vrone bote sprach.  
mich wunderte e, wie daz geschach.  
daz wunder mir der engel brach.  
wan er bewisete ez in warer sprüche vach:  
der nider ein grunt, der mitte ein zil, der höhe ein dach  
nam in mir bernder künste nar.

(strophe 16b.14–26)

The Word came down from on high  
and became an ever-blessed Name.  
In me that Name became;  
the Word knew no becoming.  
From these two a speech was braided  
while I debated  
the meaning of God's coming.  
I wondered how this could be?  
The angel showed me the mystery  
in a web of sayings true:  
the ground of what lies below,  
the bound of what lies between,  
the roof of what lies above –  
all this I nursed with a scholar's love.

The unified speech (*rede*) braided from the divine Word and the human name of Jesus is the rhetoric of heaven, whose meaning Mary ‘disputes’ with the angel like a skilled dialectician. As the *künste font* or ‘wellspring of arts’ (6.14), Frauenlob’s learned, self-revealing Lady proves herself sister less to the *Pearl* Maiden than to Beatrice.

### The bride in and as the city

The ultimate source for the Christian *imaginaire* of heaven is the Apocalypse, that dizzying text where, in little more than a chapter, St John the Divine unveils a bride who is also a city which is also a paradisaical garden. The figure of the Woman as a concrete universal, the singular representative of an entire people, is not original with John. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, especially in the prophetic books, Israel is figured as God’s beloved son, his captive daughter, or most often, his alternately cherished and repudiated wife.<sup>49</sup> In Ephesians it was a disciple of St Paul who extended the ancient marriage of God and Israel to encompass the union of Christ and the Church, his bride ‘without spot or wrinkle’ (Ephesians 5:27). This metaphor would have a long, chequered history in Christian exegesis and mysticism, marked by a tension between the explicitly collective meaning of the biblical text and the pull of a gendered literalism, which always sought to refer the bridal symbol back to a concrete woman, such as the Mother of God or a virgin martyr, or else to that metaphorical woman, the soul. In all three of our poems, the voice of heaven is an individual bride of God who is also, by synecdoche, a figure for all the blessed. I would like to end by considering, not the much-analysed relationship between the woman and her poet-lover, but her role vis-à-vis the communion of saints.

This is clearest in the *Marienleich*, where the bride is the apocalyptic woman clothed with the sun and crowned with the stars (Apocalypse 12:1). At the outset the poet equates the twelve stars in the Lady’s crown with the jewels of the New Jerusalem, and she goes on to identify herself as both the royal palace and the city of God:

Ich bin erkennig, nennig, kurz,  
des höchsten küneges sedelburg.  
min türne nieman kan gewinnen.  
min zinnen  
uz und innen  
sint mit liljen wiz gepinset.  
des trones wesen mir hilflich zinset.  
min gazzen sint geblümet.  
    swer mich nümet,  
ein balsem den durchgümet.

I am famed, acclaimed, adored,  
the palace of the highest Lord.  
My towers none can storm.  
Without, within,  
white lilies trim  
my ramparts strong.  
The tribute of the Throne is mine.  
My lanes are lined with flowers,  
a taste of balsam overpowers  
everyone who names me.

(strophe 10a.1–9)

Ich binz der sterne von Jacop,  
an mir so lit der hochgeherten engel  
lop.  
ich binz die groze gotes stat,  
von der sant Augustin so vil  
gesprochen hat.

I am the star of Jacob,  
mine is the honoured angels'  
praise.  
I am the city of God on high –  
St Augustine spoke much of me.

(strophe 15a.1–4)

The convergence of bride and city has a double sense. As Mother of God, Mary is the dwelling place of Christ, just as the celestial city is; hence their metaphorical equivalence. But as Wisdom, she is herself exalted to divine status, the saviour of those who honour her. To praise her is to share in her glory and thus to dwell in the city of which St Augustine spoke so much. Throughout the poem the Lady addresses her 'friends' who play the role of chorus, like the daughters of Jerusalem in the Song of Songs. In strophe 8 the citizens of heaven cry to God with one voice for Mary's coronation: 'Let the queen reign at your right. / The apple that she bears grows ripe.'<sup>50</sup> In return, she promises heaven to all her followers:

swaz die propheten alle kunden  
– ir wort, ir rede sie uf mich bunden –  
ich bir, niur himel minen friunden.  
gein mir so lan die ingesigel alle ir rigel,  
swie vaste er sie behalte.

All that the prophets prophesied –  
of me alone their words were said.  
I bring but heaven to my friends.  
All locks fly open before me,  
however great their artistry.

(strophe 13b.33–7)

The culmination of the *Marienleich*, as of *Pearl*, is a vision of the holy city with its gemstones. But in the German text these gems are the Lady's personal jewels, which she wears for their beauty and their *virtus*. Her glorification in this guise prepares for the full and explicit statement of Frauenlob's Mariology, which he delays until the final, climactic strophe. Here with more audacity than orthodoxy he proclaims that Mary, like her Son, is at once fully divine and fully human.

zwischen menscheit unde gote  
sten ich rechte mitten uf der marke:  
der vater ummehelset mich,  
der sun verslozzten lit in minem sarke.  
rubinröte gab er mir mit Simeonis swerte,  
den smaragd ich in kiusche truc,  
der saphir zierte mich genuc.  
des herten vluches adamas zerbrochen wart  
mit sinem blute, sust er mich gewerte.

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sin **topasieren** mir in reiner lüste quam,  
 do **calcedonete** ich, daz ez der züchte zam, [. . .]  
 alsust ich menschlich gotlich wart,  
 ja gotlich menschlich, daz hat er getichen.  
 vröut iuch alle, vröut iuch immer miner balsamiten!  
 ich volles wunsches wurzesmac,  
 min mitsam granatin bejac  
 den brasem des trostes heilsam an iuch strichen muz,  
 sust werdet ir des himels margariten.  
 (strophe 20.10–18, 23–4, 30–6)

Between God and humankind  
 I stand on the borderline:  
 the Father embraces me,  
 the Son is locked in my shrine.  
 With Simeon's sword he gave me ruby red;  
 emerald I wore in chastity,  
 sapphire sanctified my beauty.  
 The adamant curse was cut by his blood,  
 in this way he preserved me.

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 He came **topazing** me with utmost courtesy,  
 I **chalcedoned** to him with maiden modesty [. . .]  
 For, human, I became divine,  
 divine and human – such was his will.  
 Rejoice then always, one and all!  
 I am the fragrance of deep desire.  
 When the merits of my garnet pure  
 heal you with comfort of chrysoprase,  
 you shall be pearls of paradise.

To assure that no one misses his point, Frauenlob underlines it with neologisms which, like Dante's pronouns transmuted into verbs, alert the reader that something remarkable is happening. Two of the apocalyptic gems, topaz and chalcedony, morph into verb forms distilling the courtship of the God-man and his Virgin Mother: 'sin topasieren mir in reiner lüste quam, / do calcedonete ich, daz ez der züchte zam.' 'He came topazing me with utmost courtesy, / I chalcedoned to him with maiden modesty.' Frauenlob, who had at least dabbled in every art from logic to alchemy, had doubtless read enough church history to know it was the fifth-century Council of Chalcedon that had defined Christ as 'truly God and truly man, of a rational soul and body, consubstantial with the Father as regards his divinity, and consubstantial with us as regards his humanity'.<sup>51</sup> The poet's arresting verbal formula highlights his radical theology, for just six lines after 'I chalcedoned to him' we hear Mary's declaration of her dual nature as woman and goddess: 'For, human, I became divine, / divine and

human – such was his will. / Rejoice then always, one and all!’ The Lady ends her long discourse by promising her disciples incorporation into the city she personifies. ‘Sust werdet ir des himels margariten’, ‘you shall be pearls of paradise’ – or in English, ‘precious perlez vnto his pay’. The *Marienleich* ends at exactly the same point as *Pearl*.

The Maiden of the English poem is a brilliantly overdetermined symbol of all things heavenly. Although she herself is but a single redeemed soul, she is metaphorically identified with the ‘pearl of great price’, the pearly gates, and the pearl of virginity or innocence. The jewel she signifies is ‘endelez rounde’ like the poem, white like the Lamb of God, round *and* white like the eucharistic host elevated by priest and poet in the final stanza. Her presence transforms the garden of paradise into a jewel-box, and her nature as Pearl reciprocally constitutes the Dreamer’s identity as ‘jeweller’, prompting their debate about corruptible versus incorruptible value. But while the Dreamer is happy to accept his dead daughter’s transformation from mortal rose into immortal pearl (269–72), he has more difficulty with her status as a concrete universal, a figure not uniquely blessed but representative of all saints. Throughout the poem he clings to her individual identity as his daughter, and so to their singular relationship: ‘Queresoouer I jugged gemmez gaye / I sette hyr sengeley in synglure’ (7–8). To the ‘joylez juelere’, his little girl must implausibly be the unique Queen of heaven and Bride of God if she is to be bride or queen at all – ‘a makelez may and maskellez’ (780). Yet the Maiden retorts that although she is indeed ‘maskelles’ or spotless, she is certainly not ‘makelez’ or peerless, but merely one of 144 000 identical brides and queens.

In the Dreamer’s climactic vision, he sees this marvel with his own eyes: the virgins who follow the Lamb are ‘coronde [...] alle of þe same fasoun, / Depaynt in perlez and wedez qwyte / [...] And alle in sute her liuréz wasse’ (1101–2, 1108). Like servants dressed in the livery of the same Lord, they are as visually identical as pearls on a string. Similarly, when they lift up their voices in the ‘new song’ of virginity, they ring out in mighty unison. In more than twenty lines devoted to the *canticum novum* (873–92, 1124–6), not a single word suggests harmony – in contrast to Frauenlob’s angels, whose song is gorgeously polyphonic (strophe 18a). This paean of and to unity finally takes effect: the Dreamer, awaking in his failed attempt to cross the stream, at last resigns his individual loss and individual bliss into the hands of God, resolving henceforth to find solace in the universal. His ‘priuy’ pearl is irretrievably gone, but another pearl, the body of Christ ‘Pat in þe forme of bred and wyn / Þe preste vus schewez vch a daye’ (1209–10), remains available to all so that all – including the Dreamer and the reader – may now become ‘precious perlez vnto His pay’. Only in this final transition from singular to plural, from personal grief to common hope, does this most powerfully individual of English poems fulfill its destiny as a universal *consolatio*.

The contrast with Dante is again instructive. If we believe the *Vita Nuova*, the *Paradiso* originated, like *Pearl*, in an act of mourning.<sup>52</sup> Bereft at the death of Beatrice, Dante lamented her in sonnets for a while, but a ‘miraculous vision’

persuaded him to desist until he could say of her what had never yet been said of any woman. According to the fiction of the *Commedia*, Dante's insatiable longing for Beatrice is the force that propels his journey, prompting him to overcome his fear and follow Virgil into hell, pass through the wall of fire in purgatory, and so forth. When he does at last see her, she scathingly rebukes him. *Purgatorio* 30–1 may well have inspired the analogous scene in which the *Pearl* Maiden rebukes the Dreamer; but if so, the two reproaches make opposing charges. The Maiden chastises the Dreamer for his continued obsession with her, while Beatrice scolds Dante for being *insufficiently* obsessed, for having let other women and other pursuits distract him from his loss. This contrast points back to the overriding difference we have noted between the two celestial visions. While *Pearl* insists on the equality and uniformity of the blessed, Dante insists on their diversity and inequality. Hence, if the Dreamer's progress depends on relinquishing his Pearl by accepting her as just one among a throng of blessed souls, each an identical figure of the City, Dante's progress lies in reclaiming his personal love for Beatrice and pursuing her to the end. So, at the climax of the Dreamer's vision, the *Pearl* Maiden disappears into the procession of undifferentiated virgins; but at the corresponding point of Dante's, Beatrice regains her individual seat 'in the third circle from the highest tier', enthroned beside Rachel (*Paradiso* 31.67–9; 32.7–9).

No less than the *Pearl* Maiden, Beatrice is a bride of God. 'Amanza del primo amante', Dante calls her, 'Beloved of the first Lover' – and he even adds, 'o diva!' (*Paradiso* 4.118). But the bridal metaphor does not dominate the *Paradiso* as it does *Pearl*. In fact, the chief function of such passages may be to renounce any claim to exclusive possession of the beloved, such as the *Pearl* Dreamer continues to make. Only Beatrice's Maker, Dante declares, can fully enjoy her beauty (*Paradiso* 30.21). It is less through her bridal status than through her persistent individuality that Beatrice becomes representative – not only of Grace or Theology or Revelation, but of redeemed humanity. The *Paradiso* consummates but also corrects for the exalted status Dante bestowed on her in the *Vita Nuova*, where she is at once a type of Christ and the poet's personal beatitude. In the earthly paradise she retains both roles more explicitly than before, reflecting the double nature of the Griffin in her resplendent eyes (*Purgatorio* 31.121–6). Yet as she and Dante ascend through the spheres, he must learn that 'not *only* in [her] eyes is Paradise' (*Paradiso* 18.21). If she is a reflection of heaven's light and a sacrament of grace, so too is each of the other blessed spirits, for every saint is an image of Christ while only Christ is an image of the whole. After Beatrice has finished her task, Dante takes leave of her with a prayer such as the *Pearl* Maiden, I suspect, would not have countenanced from the Dreamer, for it still credits her rather than Christ with descending to hell for his salvation (*Paradiso* 31.79–81). Yet we have seen Virgil play a comparable salvific role for Statius, and Virgil is not even saved. Moreover, Dante implies in his final prayer that if God will grant him words to skirt the edge of the ineffable, his own poem could fill that role for readers yet unborn (*Paradiso* 33.67–75) – as it most assuredly has. We may extrapolate from this,

but especially from the centrality of Beatrice, that in Dante's heaven each soul is the potential saviour of some other, through and in the image of the one Saviour of all. It is in this sense that Beatrice is most fully a concrete universal, and a challenge to all subsequent heavens.

## Notes

- 1 *The Book of Margery Kempe*, B.A. Windeatt (trans.) Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985, ch. 3, p.46.
- 2 Robert Browning, 'Andrea del Sarto', ll. 97–8, in M.H. Abrams, S. Greenblatt *et al.* (eds) *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th edn, *Major Authors*, New York: Norton, 2001, p.2053.
- 3 'Stay awhile! you are so fair' (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, E. Trunz (ed.) 16th edn, Munich: Beck, 1996, l. 1700).
- 4 F. Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, New York: Harper & Row, 1973, p.96.
- 5 For a broad if somewhat eccentric history of Christian heavens, see C. McDannell and B. Lang, *Heaven: A History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988. Briefer but more theologically informed is J.B. Russell, *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. For a sampling of Christian, classical, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, and secular writings on heaven see C. and P. Zaleski (eds) *The Book of Heaven: An Anthology of Writings from Ancient to Modern Times*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- 6 For a different application of the Yeatsian 'artifice of eternity' to medieval Christian texts, see the provocative work by M.B. Pranger, *The Artificiality of Christianity: Essays on the Poetics of Monasticism*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- 7 This speculation was raised as early as Charles Osgood's edition, *The Pearl: A Middle English Poem*, Boston: Heath, 1906. For other comparisons with Dante see P.M. Kean, *The Pearl: An Interpretation*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967, pp.89–113, 120–32; I. Bishop, *Pearl in Its Setting: A Critical Study of the Structure and Meaning of the Middle English Poem*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1968; R. Parr, 'Rhetoric and Symbol in the Pearl', *Studies in Medieval Culture*, 1970, vol. 3, 177–87; T. Bogdanos, *Pearl: Image of the Ineffable*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983; W. Ginsberg, 'Place and Dialectic in Pearl and Dante's Paradiso', *ELH*, 1988, vol. 55, 731–53; R. Payne, *The Influence of Dante on Medieval English Dream Visions*, New York: Peter Lang, 1989, pp.27–57; and R.A. Shoaf, 'Purgatorio and Pearl: Transgression and Transcendence', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 1990, vol. 32, 152–68.
- 8 Frauenlob (Heinrich von Meißen), *Leichs, Sangsprüche, Lieder*, K. Stackmann and K. Bertau (eds) 2 vols, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981, I, pp.236–83. Translations are taken from my forthcoming book, *Frauenlob's Song of Songs: A Medieval German Poet and His Masterpiece*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006.
- 9 See K. Gärtner, 'Das Hohelied in Frauenlobs Marienleich', in W. Schröder (ed.) *Wolfram-Studien X: Cambriger 'Frauenlob'-Kolloquium 1986*, Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1988, pp.105–16; T.R. Jackson, ' Erotische Metaphorik und geistliche Dichtung: Bemerkungen zu Frauenlobs Marienleich', in Schröder (ed.) *Wolfram-Studien X*, pp.80–6; Burghart Wachinger, 'Frauenlobs Cantica canticorum', in W. Haug and B. Wachinger (eds) *Literatur, Artes und Philosophie*, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1992, pp.23–43; R.-H. Steinmetz, *Liebe als universales Prinzip bei Frauenlob: Ein volkssprachlicher Weltentwurf in der europäischen Dichtung um 1300*, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1994; M. Egidì, *Höfische Liebe: Entwürfe der Sangspruchdichtung*.

- Literarische Verfahrensweisen von Reinmar von Zweter bis Frauenlob*, Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 2002.
- 10 R. Kraye, *Frauenlob und die Natur-Allegorese: Motivgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*, Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1960; C. Huber, *Die Aufnahme und Verarbeitung des Alanus ab Insulis in mittelhochdeutschen Dichtungen*, Munich: Artemis, 1988, pp.136–99; G. Hübner, *Lobblumen: Studien zur Genese und Funktion der ‘Geblünten Rede’*, Tübingen: A. Francke, 2000, pp.289–390.
  - 11 P. Diehl, *The Medieval European Religious Lyric: An Ars Poetica*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985, p.97.
  - 12 On these figures see B. Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.
  - 13 ‘[i]ch binz aller himel mezzen / und swaz ir snelle hat besezzen; / wie gestecket in die firme / sint die sterne, daz ich tirme, / die sich werren mit der irre, / inguz, wandel, nehe, virre.’ *Marienleich*, strophe 17b, ll. 20–5.
  - 14 Russell, *History of Heaven*, pp.31–3. See also McDannell and Lang, *Heaven*, pp.70–80.
  - 15 A. Mazzocco, ‘“La lingua ch’io parlai fu tutta spenta”: Dante’s Reappraisal of the Adamic Language (*Paradiso* XXVI.124–38)’, in *Linguistic Theories in Dante and the Humanists*, Leiden: Brill, 1993, pp.159–79.
  - 16 Perhaps the first poetic work to succeed in this vein – one of a small handful – was William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence*, which had to await the new poetics of Romanticism. A century later, the pre-Raphaelites sometimes tried to evoke paradisaical innocence through Victorian medievalism, but they relied on a deliberately archaizing style at least as self-conscious as that of medieval poets themselves.
  - 17 On ‘low’ elements in the poem’s style see A.H. Schotter, ‘Vernacular Style and the Word of God: The Incarnational Art of *Pearl*’, in P. Hawkins and A.H. Schotter (eds) *Ineffability: Naming the Unnamable from Dante to Beckett*, New York: AMS Press, 1984, pp.23–34.
  - 18 On the thematic significance of *terza rima* see J.S.P. Tatlock, ‘Dante’s *Terza Rima*’, *PMLA*, 1936, vol. 51, 895–903; J. Freccero, ‘The Significance of the *Terza Rima*’, in R. Jacoff (ed.) *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986, pp.258–71; and T. Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, p.25. As this example indicates, *Cristo* rhymes only with itself throughout the poem.
  - 19 All quotations are from Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, J. Sinclair (ed. and trans.) New York: Oxford University Press, 1939.
  - 20 Citations are from M. Andrew and R. Waldron (eds) *The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet*, C. Finch (trans.), Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993. On the formal elements see S.G. Fein, ‘Twelve-Line Stanza Forms in Middle English and the Date of *Pearl*’, *Speculum*, 1997, vol. 72, 367–98.
  - 21 Numerological studies include V. Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1938, esp. pp.136–201 on Dante; C.O. Chapman, ‘Numerical Symbolism in Dante and the *Pearl*’, *MLN*, 1939, vol. 54, 256–9; P.M. Kean, ‘Numerical Composition in *Pearl*’, *Notes & Queries*, 1965, vol. 210, 49–51; M.-S. Røstvig, ‘Numerical Composition in *Pearl*: A Theory’, *English Studies*, 1967, vol. 48, 326–32; C. Singleton, ‘The Poet’s Number at the Center’, *MLN*, 1971, vol. 86, 1–10; J. Guzzardo, *Dante: Numerological Studies*, New York: Peter Lang, 1987; B. Vanderwielen, ‘The Significance of Numbers in the Structuring of Dante’s *Commedia*’, in R. Surles (ed.) *Medieval Numerology: A Book of Essays*, New York: Garland, 1993, pp.77–91; J. Secor, ‘Three Dances of Three: The *Imago Trinitatis* in Dante’s *Commedia*’, in Surles, *Medieval Numerology*, pp.93–104; and most recently and ambitiously, E. Condren, *The Numerical Universe of the Gawain-Pearl Poet: Beyond Phi*, Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002.
  - 22 E.V. Gordon proposed that the last stanza in canto 15, consisting of lines 901–12, was

- otiose. Gordon found the evidence for numerical symbolism in the poem ‘unconvincing’ (*Pearl*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1953, p.88 n. 2).
- 23 Røstvig, ‘Numerical Composition’, p.328.
  - 24 Condren, *Numerical Universe*, p.18.
  - 25 Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nova*, G. Gorni (ed.) Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1996, ch. 29.
  - 26 B. Nolan, *The Gothic Visionary Perspective*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977, p.198.
  - 27 Diehl, *Medieval European Religious Lyric*, p.96; O. Sayce, *The Medieval German Lyric, 1150–1300: The Development of Its Themes and Forms in Their European Context*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1982, pp.346–68.
  - 28 C. März, *Frauenlobs Marienleich: Untersuchungen zur spätmittelalterlichen Monodie*, Erlangen: Palm & Enke, 1987, pp.74–6.
  - 29 Cf. Augustine: ‘The seventh [day] will be our Sabbath, whose end will not be an evening, but the Lord’s Day, an eighth day, as it were, which is to last for ever, a day consecrated by the resurrection of Christ, foreshadowing the eternal rest not only of the spirit but of the body also.’ (*City of God* 22.30, H. Bettenson [trans.] Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, p.1091). As a further index to the significance of numerology, *The City of God* is divided into twenty-two books, just as the Apocalypse is divided into twenty-two chapters and Psalm 119 into twenty-two sections, in accord with the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.
  - 30 Line 721 in the unique manuscript (London, British Library, Cotton Nero A.x) reads ‘Jesus con calle to hym hys mylde’ (‘Jesus called his gentle disciples to himself’), thus omitting the keyword *ryzt*. Andrew and Waldron emend to ‘Ryzt con calle to Hym Hys mylde’, equating Jesus with personified Ryzt or Justice (notes, p.351).
  - 31 M. Donner, ‘Word Play and Word Form in *Pearl*’, *Chaucer Review*, 1989, vol. 24, 166–83; S. Tomasch, ‘A “Pearl” Punnology’, *JEGP*, 1989, vol. 88, 1–20.
  - 32 C. Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante*, London: Faber & Faber, 1943, p.204.
  - 33 P. Hawkins, ‘Dante’s *Paradiso* and the Dialectic of Ineffability’, in Hawkins and Schotter (eds) *Ineffability*, pp.5–21.
  - 34 ‘If the highest poetic words say they cannot say, then what cannot be expressed must exist, must ever maintain a reality outside these verbal and imaginative constructions that say they cannot say.’ (A.C. Watts, ‘*Pearl*, Inexpressibility, and Poems of Human Loss’, *PMLA*, 1984, vol. 99, 26.
  - 35 The idea of the ‘beatific vision’ as the essence of heavenly bliss was affirmed most influentially by Thomas Aquinas: ‘beatitudo aeterna, in visione Dei consistens’ (*Summa theologiae*, London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1963, vol. 5.136 (1a.23.7.ad 3). See also Russell, *History of Heaven*, pp.129–39.
  - 36 Shoaf, ‘*Purgatorio* and *Pearl*’, p.161.
  - 37 On Dante’s ‘poetics of the new’ see Barolini, *Undivine Comedy*, pp.21–6.
  - 38 Langland gives a highly polemical account of Trajan’s salvation in *Piers Plowman*, Passus XI, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text*, A.V.C. Schmidt (ed.) London: Dent, 1995, pp.173–4. ‘Troianus, a trewe knyght’, insists that he was delivered from hell “nought thorough preiere of a pope but for his pure truthe”, on account of the ‘love and leautee of [his] lawful domes.’ Gregory’s role is reduced to that of witness. In the Middle English *Saint Erkenwald*, ascribed by some critics to the *Pearl* poet, Pope Gregory’s miracle is transferred to St Erkenwald, bishop of London, who raises an anonymous just judge from the dead and baptizes him with his tears. An edition by Clifford Peterson is included in Andrew and Waldron, *Pearl*, pp.323–39.
  - 39 ‘[c]adit et Ripheus, iustissimus unus / qui fuit in Teucris et servantissimus aequi / (dis aliter visum)’. Virgil’s ‘dis aliter visum’ may have given Dante his clue for Ripheus’s salvation: to mortals the hero seemed to fall, but ‘to the gods it seemed otherwise’ (Virgil, *Aeneid*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978, 2, ll. 426–8).
  - 40 Here again the *locus classicus* is Augustine, *City of God*, 22.30: ‘But what will be the

- grades of honour and glory here, appropriate to degrees of merit? Who is capable of imagining them, not to speak of describing them? But there will be such distinctions; of that there can be no doubt. And here also that blessed City will find in itself a great blessing, in that no inferior will feel envy of his superior, any more than the other angels are envious of the archangels' (trans. Bettenson, p.1088).
- 41 G. Leff, *Bradwardine and the Pelagians: A Study of His De causa dei and Its Opponents*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957, pp.140–60; H. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963; A. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1987, pp.69–93.
- 42 M. Cogan, *The Design in the Wax: The Structure of the Divine Comedy and Its Meaning*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999, pp.153–75.
- 43 J. Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), pp.41–9. For a reading more sympathetic to the Dreamer's view of the parable see J. Rhodes, *Poetry Does Theology: Chaucer, Grosseteste, and the Pearl-Poet*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001, pp.125–45.
- 44 The *Pearl* poet's interpretation of the eleventh-hour labourers as children dying in infancy is a novel one. The main lines of medieval exegesis, running from Augustine, Gregory, Bede, and Hrabanus Maurus through Hugh of St-Victor and Innocent III, interpret these workers as either Gentile converts or individuals converted to faith and penitence in old age.
- 45 After the chastened Gawain's confession at the Green Chapel ('Now am I fawty and false'), the Green Knight plays the part of a Christian priest, accepting Gawain's repentance and offering absolution: 'þou art confessed so clene, beknownen of þy mysses, / And hatz þe penaunce apert of þe poynt of myn egge, / I halde þe polysed of þat plyȝt and pured as clene / As Pou hadez neuer forfeted syþen þou watz fyrst borne' (Andrew and Waldron, *Pearl*, ll. 2391–4). Despite this declaration and the hero's welcome he receives from the Round Table, Gawain responds as though his adventures had merited nothing but shame.
- 46 Augustine, *City of God*, 22.14, pp.1054–5.
- 47 B. Nardi, 'I Bambini nella candida rosa dei beati', in *Nel Mondo di Dante*, Rome: Edizioni di 'Storia e Letteratura', 1944, pp.317–34.
- 48 Alan of Lille, 'Rhythmus de Incarnatione et de septem artibus', M.-Th. d'Alverny (ed.), 'Alain de Lille et la "Theologia"', in *L'Homme devant Dieu: Mélanges offerts au Père Henri de Lubac*, 3 vols, Paris: Aubier, 1964, II, pp.111–28 (edition, pp.126–8). There is a faulty edition in *Patrologia Latina*, ccx.577–580.
- 49 Isaiah 54 and 62; Ezekiel 16; Hosea 1–4; Lamentations of Jeremiah. On the allegorized Song of Songs see A. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.
- 50 '[i]r gelf, ir lut ist: "cröna, künig, cröne. / ir richsen wol / zimt, als ez sol, / zu diner zeswen siten. / der aphel, den sie treit, beginnet ziten"' (strophe 8a.5–9).
- 51 'Sequentes igitur sanctos Patres, unum eundemque confiteri Filium Dominum nostrum Iesum Christum consonanter omnes docemus, eundem perfectum in deitate, eundem perfectum in humanitate, Deum vere et hominem vere, eundem ex anima rationali et corpore, consubstantialem Patri secundum deitatem et consubstantialem nobis eundem secundum humanitatem.' 'Definitio', in Heinrich Denzinger (ed.) *Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, 33rd edn, Freiburg: Herder, 1965, p.108.
- 52 Nolan, *Gothic Visionary Perspective*, pp.84–123; Watts, 'Pearl, Inexpressibility, and Poems of Human Loss'; Astell, *Song of Songs*, pp.119–35; D. Aers, 'The Self Mourning: Reflections on *Pearl*', *Speculum*, 1993, vol. 68, 54–73.

**Part V**

**Vernacular  
appropriations**



## 14 Exchanging blood for wine

### Envisaging heaven in Irish bardic poetry<sup>1</sup>

*Salvador Ryan*

Recent years have witnessed an explosion of interest in the area of late medieval popular religion.<sup>2</sup> Although the term has often been difficult to define (and this has generated its own controversy) there seems now to be a general acceptance that it consists of the engagement of individuals and groups, both lay and ordained, learned and unlearned, with divine mysteries, resulting in the perpetual growth of various forms of devotion and ritual. Fortunately, an ever-increasing body of scholarship continues to unearth valuable and hitherto overlooked sources as evidence of what men and, increasingly, women thought about their God. Probably the most valuable source for late medieval popular religion in Ireland, but one which has only recently attracted serious attention, is a body of religious poetry composed between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries by Gaelic Irish professional poets.<sup>3</sup> Out of a surviving corpus of 2000 bardic poems, some 400 are specifically devoted to religious themes. Interestingly (and contrary to popular perception) late medieval Gaelic Ireland was not merely a bastion of what is currently dubiously termed ‘Celtic spirituality’; rather, it participated fully in devotional trends evidenced right across late medieval and early modern Europe, being exposed to ongoing continental influences, particularly through the medium of extensive networks of mendicant friars (and before them, Cistercian monks) who adopted and promulgated the latest European devotional fads. The works of the bardic poets display both knowledge and appreciation of these while, at the same time, conforming to a strict and rigid literary form for over 400 years. What follows is a discussion of the idea of heaven as portrayed by professional Gaelic Irish poets. As I argue below, the evidence suggests two complementary influences on the bardic conceptualization of heaven: one that pertains to the life and vocational experience of native poets, and another that belongs to a wider contemporary European devotional tradition.

First, it is worth introducing the bardic poet and his trade.<sup>4</sup> From the eleventh or twelfth centuries onwards, praise poetry composed by professional versifiers became increasingly important in Gaelic society. Wealthy Gaelic patrons commissioned poets to compose panegyrics in their honour, praising their attributes as chieftains and princes of their territory. They included the qualities of wisdom, physical beauty, martial skill, and generosity and, of course, justice. The formal eulogy of rulers belongs to a common Indo-European institution in

which court poets appraise their patron's performance in terms of an image of the ideal ruler. The patron thus praised was then, in some sense, obliged to adopt the characteristics for which he received the praise, and if he already possessed them in abundance, was encouraged to continue to live up to the ideal model of rule.<sup>5</sup> Late medieval bardic poetry was quite formulaic, leading to a constant repetition of epithets, metaphors and stock motifs over some 400 years. However, despite their rigid style, individual bardic poems often disguised quite particular messages behind a veneer of familiarity. The poems were routinely recited in public or semi-public settings, most often at a banquet given by a wealthy chieftain during which his munificence would be rolled out for all his guests to see and would be further impressed on their minds by the *reacaire* or reciter of an encomium in the host's honour.

The composition of bardic religious poetry differed little in style from its secular equivalent, borrowing most of the same imagery to praise what, in this instance, was a heavenly patron. Bardic poets sometimes committed themselves to dedicating a tithe (or one tenth) of their art to God. They might compose poems for a local ecclesiastical patron, in celebration of a church feast day (to be performed at a church service for instance) or in payment for bed and board at a monastery when the poet reached the latter years of his life and suddenly felt the need to attend to religious duties. The fact that the form and shape of the religious praise poem resembled its secular counterpart so closely was not a uniquely Irish phenomenon, as demonstrated by Rosemary Woolf in her discussion of the adoption of the forms of secular lyrics for religious use in Europe.<sup>6</sup> However, the comparison between secular and religious works should not end with a discussion of form and style. Closer examination reveals the religious bardic poem to be a multilayered work that could be understood at many different levels. It is my concern here to demonstrate that the bardic description of heaven was influenced not only by the frequently constructed image of an ideal chieftain's banquet but also by the wider theological and devotional concerns of late medieval Europe.

### **The earthly banquet**

Perhaps the most effective way in which poets described the generosity of their patrons involved referring to the quality of the feasts they hosted and, more particularly, the liberality with which they dispensed alcohol. A chieftain's general welcome for all guests, illustrative of the absence of stinginess, was also appreciated. The following examples provide a flavour of poets praising their patrons for these characteristics. A poem entitled *Fa urraidh labhras lec Them-rach*, in praise of Maoileachlainn Ó Ceallaigh, lord of Uí Mhaine (1381–1401) describes him as generous but discerning wine importer: 'Wine is dispensed from swollen vats leaving people in a drunken slumber on the hillside; the rivers of Ireland transport your sweet red wines to you.'<sup>7</sup> The sixteenth-century Fermanagh poet, Ciothruadh Ó hEoghusa, in a poem entitled *Buime na bhfileadh fuil Ruarcach* in praise of Aodh Ó Ruairc of Breifne, alludes to the equality with

which all guests are treated at the banquet: ‘Sleep-inducing wine is drunk from ornamented vessels in the court of Aodh; the king by his elbow got nothing that the furthest man from him doesn’t get.’<sup>8</sup> The generosity of Aodh Ó Domhnaill (d. 1592) of Tír Chonaill is similarly portrayed in a poem entitled *Éire a ngioll re hAodh Engach* by Cú Uladh Mac an Bhaird: ‘Feasts in the king’s house are enjoyed without supervision and no one measures the amount of wine consumed; [overflowing] wine conceals the ornamentation of the goblet and tests the strength of the cupbearer’s wrist.’<sup>9</sup>

Frequently, a female figure (usually the chieftain’s wife or daughter) is mentioned as being particularly attentive to the drinking needs of the banquet guests. In the following example a whole poem, entitled *Dúthaigh deoradh magh Maine*, is devoted to Órlaidh, daughter of Muirchertach Ó Ceallaigh (1424–1467?) by the renowned fifteenth-century poet, Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn: ‘Thou shalt exalt Ceallach’s race by the way thou shalt give lavishly thy banquet wine, giving it away in big goblets when the banquet is over.’<sup>10</sup> The welcome extended by chieftains to banquet guests is usually acknowledged by reference to the lack of a doorkeeper barring one’s entry. A mid-fourteenth-century poem entitled *Do tóghbhadh meirge Murchaidh* by Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh in honour of Murchadh, son of Eoghan Ó Madadháin (d. 1371) remarks, tongue in cheek: ‘If that thronged household is lacking anything I know not of it, unless it is the fact that it has no doorkeeper to secure its entrance.’<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the early seventeenth-century poet, Cormac Ó hUiginn, in the poem *Beag mhaireas dár ndedhdhaoinibh* for Meath patron, Teabóid Dillon, notes: ‘Though this descendant of Séamus who radiates harmony has many an abundance of staff, who in his house is without a burden [of work to do] apart from his bouncer?’<sup>12</sup> In essence, then, the key to a good banquet in the eyes of a bardic poet consisted of a welcome at the door, fine, sweet wine in abundance and parity of treatment. These very qualities would, in turn, be identified as what one could expect to find in the banquet of all banquets: heaven.

### The heavenly banquet

In order to trace more closely the relationship between secular and religious portrayals of the Gaelic Irish feast or banquet, we must first note that, in medieval bardic religious verse, Christ is depicted as coming into power (attaining the chieftainship of his people) on the cross at Calvary, having defeated his enemy (the devil) in battle.<sup>13</sup> Christ’s ancestral territory (the world) is displayed as having been taken over by the plunderer demon in the Garden of Eden where Original Sin was first committed. Christ’s battle to win back his territory is invariably presented in terms of a warrior chieftain riding into battle on his horse (the cross), during which he suffers many wounds, including a heart wound, but fights on.<sup>14</sup> In many fifteenth and sixteenth-century bardic poems, vivid descriptions are to be found of his bloodied five wounds, in keeping with the *genre* of affective piety promoted by the continental mendicant orders.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, in the Johannine tradition of the New Testament, Christ attains kingship on the

cross, wresting power from his adversary.<sup>16</sup> His first task as king is to pursue a *creach* or raid on hell and to take its hostages to himself. The unidentified composer of the poem *Crann toruidh croch an Choimhdhe* colourfully describes the scene: ‘This was the cross with which he broke down the doors on the demons; with this cross he broke down our foe’s door and took us from him and marched off with us as his booty on Sunday.’<sup>17</sup>

Understanding this action of Christ upon assuming power posed no difficulties for Gaelic Irish audiences as they were familiar with what was most certainly normal practice for newly-inaugurated native chieftains who, after the necessary ritual had been completed, followed it with a *creach riogh* or ‘king’s raid’ which involved the taking of a great prey.<sup>18</sup> The process of inauguration culminated in a celebratory feasting. The castle which Christ builds and where the centre of power lies (heaven), is constructed with only three nails (those with which he was affixed to the cross of crucifixion) according to a poem entitled *Do-ní éanmhac ionad cloinne* by the sixteenth-century poet Maolmhuire, son of Cairbre Ó hUiginn, inextricably linking the heavenly house with the crucifixion and death which preceded it: ‘He built Heaven’s holy house – eye has not seen its like; with three nails Heaven’s lord fortified for us a castle large enough for us all.’<sup>19</sup> The importance of the nails as symbols of salvation should be considered in the light of general devotion to the instruments of the passion (including the hammer, ladder, dice, sponge, lance, crown of thorns, etc.), which was current in late medieval continental Europe (including Britain and Ireland), manifesting itself in spiritual literature, relics and religious iconography.<sup>20</sup>

Like all Gaelic chieftains fresh from victory in battle, Christ is depicted as organizing a celebratory feast in his newly constructed dwelling. Although the concept of the eschatological banquet has its origin in Messianic Judaism and is carried over into the writings of the New Testament, it is difficult not to suspect that Christ’s banquet as described by the bardic poets has more than a little Gaelic flavour to it.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the oft-quoted observation of Voltaire (1694–1778) that ‘If God created us in His image, we have more than returned the compliment’ appears quite apt here as a way of explaining how different societies are capable of fashioning the heavenly in distinctly local styles. Depictions of the heavenly banquet in bardic religious poetry remain remarkably similar to descriptions of the feasts of renowned chieftains in secular verse.

### **The bouncer-less banquet**

First, there is a welcome for all and the familiar absence of a doorkeeper. This is expressed well in the poem *Fada an chuimhneise ar chóir nDé* by sixteenth-century poet, Uaithne Ó Cobhthaigh: ‘He prepared for us a feast hall and a feast great enough for the whole world; we enter a tavern without waiting to be invited!’<sup>22</sup> Cormac Ruadh Ó hUiginn, who composed no later than the fifteenth century, in a poem entitled *Cara na hÉigne Íosa*, asserts that the welcome found in heaven surpasses that on earth: ‘His household ever welcomes newcomers; ’tis more hospitable than folk here; greater the fellowship in Heaven.’<sup>23</sup> Perhaps

Ó hUiginn was smarting from having been refused entry to some earthly feast when he composed these lines and wanted to take a swipe at the offender, as bardic poets were accustomed to do. The bardic convention of welcome for all at the chieftain's feast could be used quite effectively in religious poetry to impress a catechetical point upon its hearers, as exemplified in the following admonition against being uncharitable, judgemental and even presumptuous, found in the poem *Dion cloinne i n-éag a n-athar* by the sixteenth-century poet, Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh: 'We cannot tell the number who will muster round our noble leader; [therefore] till the feast be ordered and spread before us [in heaven] we should treat with honour those who are still erring.'<sup>24</sup> In another poem (*Fíú a bheatha bás Tighearna*) the same poet, in a more penitential tone, pleads with Christ not to take revenge for humanity's (and more particularly his) part in the Lord's wounding on Calvary. He petitions him not to allow it to affect the traditional welcome extended by rulers to guests at banquet feasts: 'To refuse pardon to the stranger [guest at the banquet] is a poor satisfaction to thee for thy deep wound [. . .] strangers should be treated with indulgence.'<sup>25</sup>

In a different approach, Tadhg Óg Ó Dálaigh, in a sixteenth-century poem *Ní chuain ghabhála grás Dé*, uses the absence of a doorkeeper image as a way of warning his listeners not to be apathetic towards the salvation won for them on the cross – and to duly claim their heavenly inheritance: 'Twere foolish for a crowd not to storm a great hall left open during a feast.'<sup>26</sup> Earlier in the same poem, Ó Dálaigh places the blame for those who lose heaven not on the generous Lord but rather on his unresponsive invitees: 'If we, thy race, are not sharing thy banquet, 'tis not through fault of thine in the matter of inviting us.'<sup>27</sup> The disappointment of Christ when his guests do not turn up is captured in Muirchertach Ó Cobhthaigh's sixteenth-century poem *Dlighidh liaigh leigheas a charad*: 'When men feel inclined to reject the banquet [of salvation], the supervising of the banquet board is no pleasant task [for Christ].'<sup>28</sup> His kinsman, Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh, in the poem *Mairg nach taithigh go teagh riogh*, condemns such indifference in the line 'Shame for us not to go to the banquet of the true undisputed Lord.'<sup>29</sup> Such a positive soteriology, which places the responsibility for gaining heaven squarely on the initiative of the invitee, is reminiscent of the parable of the great feast in Luke 14:12–24 and Matthew 22:1–14, in which all of the invited guests offer excuses and do not turn up. Some poets, like Maolmhuire, son of Cairbre Ó hUiginn in the poem *Do-ní éanmhac ionad cloinne*, readily admit their complacency. In Ó hUiginn's case, he is not particularly interested in entering heaven but, at the same time, does not wish to go to hell: 'I cannot get from God – and this is the most I dare ask – to be neither in Heaven nor in Hell; being outside Heaven is not what I dread but that God will not let me remain there [without sending me to Hell].'<sup>30</sup>

In summary, then, bardic poets portray the heavenly feast as always open to guests and strangers alike, requiring only the will of the individual to attend. Christ, the host, welcomes all. However, one poet (Uaithne Ó Cobhthaigh in the poem *Fada an chuimhneise ar chóir nDé*) allows for the possibility of an overcrowded banquet hall, while immediately allaying his hearer's fears by

mentioning the solution to the problem: ‘When Heaven’s castle was getting crowded a lady was put in charge over it.’<sup>31</sup> This lady, of course, represents the Virgin Mary whose cult as advocate was at its height in fifteenth and early sixteenth-century Europe and who, in Eamon Duffy’s words had ‘a soft spot for worthless scoundrels’.<sup>32</sup> Just as it was common to praise a patron’s spouse or daughter in secular verse, so, too, in religious composition, Christ’s spouse, the Blessed Virgin is eulogized.

### **Mary as lady of the house**

Being able to boast of possessing an extravagantly generous and hospitable wife or daughter increased the prestige and legitimacy of Gaelic Irish noblemen – at least according to bardic poets who adopted the practice of including an *envoi* or dedication to a female member of the household in many of their works. One fifteenth-century poem by Tuathal Ó hUiginn, for example, claims that the generosity of Fionnghuala, daughter of Ó Conchobair Failghe, helped to strengthen the entitlement of her husband Aodh Buidhe Ó Néill to the Irish kingship.<sup>33</sup> In a poem entitled *Urra ac oighreacht Éireamhóin*, addressed to Cú Chonnacht Mág Uidhir, lord of Fermanagh 1566–1589, Cú Choigríche Ó Cléirigh includes the following tribute to his wife, Mairghréag:

Nobody ever went dissatisfied from Mairghréag; it is a miracle; no woman is to be compared with her throughout this land of Ireland. It is a fertile distribution to the poets; there is no ebbing of her wealth; the fair stream grows by being drunk; so do her gifts.<sup>34</sup>

Given the evidence discussed above, it would seem natural that poets might mention the Virgin Mary in a similar manner when addressing the subject of Christ’s household. The ease with which poets were able to achieve this, however, was also facilitated by developments in theology and devotional writings outside of the Gaelic Irish world, in particular the renewed interest in the Song of Songs in the twelfth century with the rise of the Cistercian order and the increasing efforts to provide the text with a Marian interpretation.<sup>35</sup> Uaithne Ó Cobhthaigh, addressing the Virgin Mary in the poem *Fada an chuimhneise ar chóir nDé*, presents the feast of heaven as a wedding banquet celebrating her position as spouse of Christ:

Do thou open the palace for me, though a foe, such as I am, deserves to be rejected; cease thy anger while the feast is on; the youth’s spouse is to be proclaimed.

The Virgin will, ’tis certain, know the reason of our gathering, the marriage feast given for her; she sees that name given it.<sup>36</sup>

Gofraidh Ó Cléirigh, who composed no later than the fourteenth century, exclaims in his poem *Fada go dtuighim mo theach*: ‘For the Lord of Heaven –

this gives us hope of generous treatment – a likely spouse was found; the six hosts had no one to save them until they got a sign of hope from the Virgin.<sup>37</sup>

Mary is presented in many bardic poems as mistress of the house of heaven who reserves the right to allocate seats to her clients. Brian Caoch Ó Dálaigh, in a poem entitled *Daingean connradh fa chairt ríogh*, composed no later than 1577, states:

She has saved men from the threat of thy blood; this is, therefore, no time to exclude me from the banquet [of salvation] for 'tis the right of a mistress of a house to invite to a seat within the house; do not, therefore, be over-exacting in the manner of thy wounds.<sup>38</sup>

It was not unusual in secular verse for poets to appeal to a prominent female member of the household to intercede with the principal patron. The late sixteenth-century poet, Eochaidh Ó hEoghusa, in the poem *Neimhchiontach mheise a mhic Thaidhg* composed for Conchobar Mac Diarmuda (who was established as Lord of Maigh Luirg by Aodh Ruadh Ó Domhnaill in 1595), attempts to reconcile himself with Mac Diarmuda by appealing to the mediation of his wife, Mairghréag: 'I will ask Domhnall's daughter to smooth away the anger from thy dark face; she will save me from thy wrath and will earnestly plead for me.'<sup>39</sup> Little wonder, then that the sixteenth-century poet, Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, when speaking of the Virgin Mary in the poem *Maith an bharánta bean ríogh*, asserts that 'a good patron is a king's wife, for she helps her kin'.<sup>40</sup> In a long poem entitled *Léig do chomhmórtas dúinn* by the Cavan Franciscan Eoghan Ó Dubhthaigh, written in 1580 and addressed to Master Sheyne, Protestant bishop of Cork, the status of the Virgin Mary is rigorously defended by contrasting her banquet hall of heaven with that in which Sheyne feeds on a daily basis (Sheyne had reportedly claimed that the Virgin Mary was no more than an ordinary woman). Whereas 'long and spacious is her [Mary's] banqueting hall, with its many musical instruments and abundance of food', Sheyne's residence is a 'sooty shack with a leaking roof'. Whereas Mary's guests are 'full of triumph, full of food and drink, full of joy and charity', Sheyne's house can only boast 'a stale scone, cheese curds and a hunk of food'.<sup>41</sup>

### **An abundance of heavenly wine**

The second, and most important attribute of the heavenly banquet (just as in the case of the earthly feast) was the availability of wine in abundance. There are numerous references to be found in the religious poetry of the bards to the drinking of heavenly wine. However, in this particular case especially, the wine assumes a deeper theological sense, being intimately connected with Christ's shedding of blood on Calvary perpetuated in the Sacrifice of the Eucharist.<sup>42</sup> This is most clearly seen in the use of the term *fiönfhuil* or wine-blood in bardic descriptions of Christ's passion and death. Dating from as early as the eighth century, the term wine-blood occurs frequently in Gaelic religious sources. In an

Irish translation of the twelfth-century *Passion of Longinus* it is stated that both blood and wine came from Christ's pierced side, a reference that does not appear in the original.<sup>43</sup> Although this term is used in bardic secular poetry to describe a patron's noble bloodline, its occurrence in its religious counterpart appears to have eschatological connotations.<sup>44</sup> For example, in describing Christ's drinking of vinegar on the cross, an unidentified poet in the poem *Leigheas an bheatha bás Dé* states: 'The gall which thou wert not bound to drink – our sister [the Blessed Virgin] would have wished more wine in it.'<sup>45</sup>

The wine-blood shed on Calvary was understood to cleanse sin and admit one to the heavenly banquet as noted by Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh in the poem *Deacair aighneas éarca ríogh*: 'To shed the wine-blood of His white hands for our love was an impulse that did not satisfy Him; with His heart's blood, pure wine to be drunk from golden cup, He cleansed our sins.'<sup>46</sup> In pleading for salvation in the poem *Ag so brágha dheit a Dhé*, the fifteenth-century poet Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn, asks God not to avenge his Son's death but to 'pour His wine-blood into the scale' – an action which was understood to redress the balance weighing against mankind at judgement.<sup>47</sup>

In *Deacair aighneas éarca ríogh*, Ó Cobhthaigh links the wounds suffered by Christ on the cross directly to the wine that will be quaffed in heaven: 'All depends on the feast being prepared for us – could [any] feast be greater? – a wine pouring from the Lord's wound, a wine which 'twere well had Adam drunk!'<sup>48</sup> In the poem *Buaine ná beatha bás Dé*, which is found in an early seventeenth-century manuscript, an unidentified poet refers to wine being 'the entrance price to the palace above'<sup>49</sup> while the fourteenth-century poet Gofraidh Ó Cléirigh notes in his poem *Dlighidh iasacht* that 'precious is the blood of those wounds; thou art our hope of the wine feasts'.<sup>50</sup> The sixteenth-century poet, Fearghal Ó Cionga, makes the link more explicit still in the poem *Mairg as urra re héacht ríogh* when he states that 'no feast surpasses this one, the noblest of all pure streams, the intoxicating feast of the wounds, the well-stream of mercy'.<sup>51</sup> Here, then, wine is presented both as a requisite and a reward, in the New Testament tradition of the Kingdom as the 'already' and 'not yet'.

The descriptions of the drinking of wine in heaven are reminiscent of the portrayals of a chieftain's munificence in secular poetry but they, too, contain added layers of significance. In the poem *Fada an chuimhneise ar chóir nDé*, Uaithne Ó Cobhthaigh notes 'how precious is this banquet, banquet where cupbearer never fails'.<sup>52</sup> Cormac Ruadh Ó hUiginn, in his poem *Cara na héighe Íosa*, marvels at 'the banquet which runs not short though all men share it',<sup>53</sup> this is reminiscent of the miraculous feeding narratives in the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 14:13–21; 15:32–8), which are often identified as actualizations of the Messianic banquet. In fact, one poet, Maolmhuire, son of Cairbre Ó hUiginn, impatiently expressed a wish that the heavenly wine-drinking could be actualized for him there and then in a verse from *Do-ní éanmhac ionad cloinne*: 'The royal banquet given by the Lord – it is not easy to imagine its being drunk in Heaven; but can it be sent down on earth to be drunk here?'<sup>54</sup> Mathghamhain Ó

hUiginn, in the sixteenth-century poem *Deacair foghnamh do thoil dá thigh-earna*, pleads for a reward for his verses in the following manner:

May I with earnest heart deserve to reach speedily the castle of God whose household is thronged with nobles; for the most lasting reward of my flowery eulogy is that I may come to Christ whose fresh cheeks are as bright purple.<sup>55</sup>

The Virgin Mary is portrayed in bardic poetry as being particularly well disposed towards the serving of alcohol, especially by the Ó Cobhthaigh school of poets. Again, reminiscent of the feeding narratives, Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh remarks in *Dion cloinne i n-éag a n-athar*: ‘Mary has [for us] a banquet such as was never heard of before; compare it with no other; the more of it is drunk the more plenteous it grows, for He who gives it is the Lord of Heaven.’<sup>56</sup> This insertion may also be linked to the story of the Wedding Feast of Cana (John 2:1–12): after all, it was Mary who requested Christ to transform the water into wine. Indeed, as noted above, it is no coincidence that another member of the Ó Cobhthaigh school, Uaithne, describes the heavenly banquet as ‘the marriage feast given for her’.<sup>57</sup>

The shedding of Christ’s wine-blood on Calvary and the drinking of wine at the heavenly banquet remain inextricably linked in the compositions of late medieval Irish bardic poets. In addition, some like the thirteenth-century Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh emphasize the worthy drinking of Christ’s wine-blood (without sin) in the Eucharist.<sup>58</sup> Later poets such as Fearghal Ó Cionga in *Mairg as urra re héacht ríogh*, sometimes despair at the unconfessed sin that prevents them from entering the wine-feast of heaven: ‘Because of my grave sins I cannot enter to drink of the wine feast; it was astonishing of me to turn my back on the hall yonder when there was a feast being drunk in it.’<sup>59</sup>

Others, like Tadhg Ó Dálaigh in the sixteenth-century poem *Ní chuain gabhála grás Dé*, were more confident of being admitted: ‘Though ’twere fit that a sinner like me be excluded from the palace, ’twould be an unheard of thing for Christ’s breast wound that any guest should be kept out from the feast.’<sup>60</sup>

While religious depictions of heaven were clearly influenced by secular portrayals of a chieftain’s banquet, idealized in descriptions of events such as the holding of a lavish feast at Tara every three years, prepared by the king’s household in the *tech midchúarta*, or banqueting hall, as described in the Middle Irish tract *Suidigud Tellaig Temra*, the process could also work in reverse.<sup>61</sup> The status of a secular chieftain in the later medieval period might be bolstered by terms such as ‘wine-blood’, which now carried a far weightier significance in the light of the renewed emphasis on the composition of Christ’s wounds.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, the wine-blood of secular chieftains now begins to function in a similar fashion to the blood shed by Christ, acting both as the impetus that spurs towards revenge and the means of defence for those who place their trust in it, as can be observed in poems such as that addressed to Art, son of An Calbach Ó Conchobair (d. 1458).<sup>63</sup> In the poem *Aiseag iomshlán do uair Tadhg*, addressed

to Tadhg Ó Conchobair (d. 1403), Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn claims that the mixing of wine and royal blood in the case of this chieftain results in the availability of wine for all his followers. There are echoes of Christ's sacrificial gift of himself in the following verse from the poem: 'As thy royal blood mingles with the wine to redden thy cheek so that thou dost [need to] drink but little of the wine, let all thy friends drink of it.'<sup>64</sup> Similarly, depictions of the wives and daughters of chieftains sometimes imitate portrayals of the Virgin Mary rather than the other way round.<sup>65</sup>

The term 'wine-blood' encapsulated in bardic verse the principal concerns of late medieval Christianity: preoccupation with the details of Christ's passion and death, the reception of the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist and the attainment of eternal salvation. It drew a clear link between what happened on Calvary, what happens at the Eucharist and what (was hoped) would happen in the afterlife. Furthermore, allowing the Virgin Mary authority over its distribution in the heavenly banqueting hall highlighted the importance of the Marian cult of intercession and identified her as the principal dispenser of graces won by Christ. Professional Gaelic Irish poets, throughout the late medieval and into the early modern period, succeeded in discussing such weighty themes, which were central to the contemporary European devotional world, while managing, at the same time, to tuck them away under the guise of the everyday experiences of the Gaelic nobility, thus rendering them accessible and comprehensible to their patrons and all who gathered to hear their verses. Depictions of the heavenly kingdom, perhaps more than any other subject, drew inspiration from a wealth of native imagery, which could be used in a way that closely adhered to doctrine but, most of all, in a way that made sense.

## Notes

- 1 This chapter was completed during the term of a Postdoctoral Fellowship held at the Department of Modern History Maynooth and sponsored by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS) for which support the author is deeply grateful.
- 2 For some recent examples see A. Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages: Religious Beliefs and Devotional Practices*, Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1993; T. Johnson, 'The Recatholicisation of the Upper Palatinate, 1621–circa 1700' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1991); E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c.1400–c.1580*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992; M. Forster, *Catholic Revival in the Age of the Baroque: Religious Identity in Southwest Germany 1550–1750*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001; A. Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; R.W. Scribner, 'Is a history of popular culture possible?', *History of European Ideas*, 1989, vol. 10, 175–91; *idem*, 'Introduction', in R.W. Scribner and T. Johnson (eds) *Popular Religion in Germany and Central Europe, 1400–1800*, New York: Macmillan Press, 1996; C. Marsh, *Popular Religion in Sixteenth-Century England: Holding Their Peace*, New York: Macmillan Press, 1998; S. Ryan, 'Popular Religion in Gaelic Ireland, 1445–1645', 2 vols (unpublished PhD thesis, National University of Ireland Maynooth, 2002); *idem* 'The most traversed bridge: a reconsideration of elite

- and popular religion in late medieval Ireland', in K. Cooper and J. Gregory (eds) *Popular and Elite Religion*, Studies in Church History, 42, Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, forthcoming; W. Frijhoff, 'Epilogue', in W. Frijhoff, *Embodied Belief: Ten Essays on Religious Culture in Dutch History*, J. van Eijnatten and F. Van Lieburg (eds) Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2002, pp.275–89; C. Watkins, "'Folklore" and "Popular religion" in Britain during the Middle Ages', *Folklore*, 2004, vol. 115, 140–50.
- 3 Ryan, 'Popular religion in Gaelic Ireland, 1445–1645'; *idem*, 'A Slighted Source: Rehabilitating Irish Bardic Religious Poetry in Historical Discourse', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 2004, vol. 48, 75–101.
  - 4 The evidence that survives does not allow us sufficient insight into the world of female professional poets.
  - 5 C.A. McKenna, *The Medieval Welsh Religious Lyric: Poems of the Gogynfeirdd, 1137–1282*, Belmont: Ford and Baillie, 1991, pp.4–5.
  - 6 R. Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages*, London and Oxford: Oxford University Press 1968, pp.1–2.
  - 7 'Book of O'Conor Don' (c.1631) f.366a, v.15. For Eugene O'Curry's transcript of this book see Royal Irish Academy, MS 626 (3/C/13); also D. Hyde 'The Book of the O'Conor Don', *Ériu*, 1916, vol. 8, 78–99. The book of O'Conor Don was compiled in the Low Countries in 1631 by Aodh Ó Dochartaigh for Captain Somhairle Mac Donhnaill. This anthology consists of almost 400 folios containing over 300 poems of which about a quarter are religious or didactic. It is now kept at Clonalis House in County Roscommon. I am grateful to Professor Damian McManus for sharing with me the fruits of his research on some unedited poems which he has been working on as part of the Irish-Scottish Academic Initiative Bardic Poetry project, of which he is director at Trinity College Dublin. This project aims to make available all published and unpublished bardic poems in electronic format. All subsequent translations of unedited poems are his.
  - 8 Royal Irish Academy, MS.2 (23/F/16), 'The Book of O'Gara' (c.1655–1659), f.211, v.10. The 'Book of O'Gara' (Royal Irish Academy 23/F/16) was compiled between 1655 and 1659 by Fr Fearghal Ó Gadhra, OSA, in the Low Countries. Of 132 folios, 112 remain intact and contain over 150 poems.
  - 9 National Library of Ireland, MS G 167, f.179, v.9.
  - 10 L. McKenna (ed.) *Aithdiogluim Dána*, 2 vols, Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 1939–1940, poem 11, v.13.
  - 11 L. Mac Cionnaith (ed.) *Diogluim Dána*, Dublin: Government Publication Office, 1938, poem 85, v.47.
  - 12 Trinity College Dublin, MS 1356, p.101, v.8.
  - 13 This portrayal of Christ as a warrior chieftain going to battle on the cross had quite a long history and, in many respects, was supplanted by an increasing fascination with the tortured and beaten Christ who made satisfaction for the dishonour shown by humanity to God by dying in agony on the cross – an approach favoured by Anselm of Canterbury and others. In bardic poetry, however, both depictions of Christ persisted side by side. For a useful introduction to the changing face of Christ from the early to high medieval period see J. Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, pp.95–109; for a more detailed treatment see R. Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800–1200*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, pp.142–93.
  - 14 Similar imagery can be found elsewhere, especially in Old English literature such as the 'Dream of the Rood' text (see 'The Dream of the Rood' in *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse*, Richard Hamer (ed. and trans.) London: Faber and Faber, 1970, pp.161–71).

- 15 See S. Ryan, 'Reign of Blood: Devotion to the Wounds of Christ in Late Medieval Gaelic Ireland', in J. Augusteijn and M. Lyons (eds) *Irish History: a Research Year-book*, Dublin: Four Courts, 2002, pp.137–49; *idem*, 'A Slighted Source', 75–101.
- 16 See especially *Aithdioghluim Dána*, poem 63, vv.5, 7; *ibid.*, poem 64, v.5.
- 17 *Aithdioghluim Dána*, poem 88, v.6.
- 18 E. Fitzpatrick, *Royal Inauguration in Gaelic Ireland, c.1100–1600: a Cultural Landscape Study*, Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2004, p.11.
- 19 *Aithdioghluim Dána*, poem 77, v.15.
- 20 See Ryan, 'Popular Religion in Gaelic Ireland, 1445–1645', I, pp.88–92.
- 21 See, for example, Isaiah 25:6–8; Ezekiel 39:17–20; Matthew 8:5–13; 22:1–14.
- 22 *Aithdioghluim Dána*, poem 68, v.8.
- 23 L. McKenna (ed.) *Dán Dé*, Dublin: Irish Educational Society 1922, poem 21, v.29.
- 24 *Aithdioghluim Dána*, poem 64, v.31
- 25 *Ibid.*, poem 65, v.23.
- 26 *Ibid.*, poem 71, v.24.
- 27 *Ibid.*, v.10.
- 28 *Idem*, 'Christ our Saviour', *Studies* 38, 1949, p.187, v.3.
- 29 *Aithdioghluim Dána*, poem 67, v.2.
- 30 *Ibid.*, poem 77, v.12.
- 31 *Ibid.*, poem 68, v.11.
- 32 Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, p.187; for the advocacy of the Virgin in medieval Gaelic Ireland see S. Ryan, 'The Persuasive Power of a Mother's Breast: The Most Desperate Act of the Virgin Mary's Advocacy', *Studia Hibernica* 2002–2003, vol. 32, 59–74.
- 33 C.M. O'Sullivan, *Hospitality in Medieval Ireland, 900–1500*, Dublin: Four Courts, 2004, pp.78–80.
- 34 D. Greene (ed.) *Duanaire Mhéig Uidhir*, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1972, poem 20, v.22.
- 35 See A.W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990, pp.13–16, 42–73; also Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion*, pp.351–97.
- 36 *Aithdioghluim Dána*, poem 68, vv. 31–2.
- 37 *Ibid.*, poem 62, v.39.
- 38 L. McKenna (ed.) 'Our salvation', *Studies* 38, 1949, p.469, v.31.
- 39 *Aithdioghluim Dána*, poem 34, v.22.
- 40 L. McKenna (ed.) *Dánta do chum Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh*, Dublin: Maunsell and Co., 1919, poem 3, v.1.
- 41 C. Mhág Craith (ed.) *Dán na mbráthar mionúr*, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1980, poem 27, vv. 11, 10a, 16, 10.
- 42 Biblical influences behind such imagery can be found in texts such as Joel 3:2 ff.
- 43 Ryan, 'Reign of blood', p.147.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p.148.
- 45 *Aithdioghluim Dána*, poem 95, v.19.
- 46 *Ibid.*, poem 63, v.21.
- 47 *Dán Dé*, poem 9, v.28.
- 48 *Aithdioghluim Dána*, poem 63, v.39.
- 49 *Ibid.*, poem 86, v.27.
- 50 *Ibid.*, poem 61, v.31.
- 51 *Ibid.*, poem 59, v.37.
- 52 *Ibid.*, poem 68, v.33.
- 53 *Dán Dé*, poem 21, v.28.
- 54 *Aithdioghluim Dána*, poem 77, v.40.
- 55 *Ibid.*, poem 76, v.20.
- 56 *Ibid.*, poem 64, v.33.

- 57 Ibid., poem 68, v.32.  
58 *Dán Dé*, poem 26, v.32.  
59 *Aithdioghluim Dána*, poem 59, v.4.  
60 Ibid., poem 71, v.26.  
61 O'Sullivan, *Hospitality in Medieval Ireland*, p.83.  
62 For the context of this new emphasis see C.W. Bynum, 'The blood of Christ in the later Middle Ages', *Church History*, December, 2002, vol. 71:4, 685–714.  
63 Ryan, 'Reign of blood', p.148.  
64 *Aithdioghluim Dána*, poem 5, v.14.  
65 Ryan, 'Popular Religion in Gaelic Ireland, 1445–1645', I, pp.209–10.

# 15 Chaucer's lovers in metaphorical heaven

*Elizabeth Archibald*

Using heaven as a metaphor for happiness, not least in love, may seem very obvious to us. In a recent 'Freelance' column in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Hugo Williams quoted a popular 1960 hit sung by Eddie Cochran:<sup>1</sup>

The formula for heaven's very simple.  
Just follow the rules and you will see.  
Step one you find a girl to love.  
Step two she falls in love with you.  
Step three, you kiss and hold her tightly.  
Well that sure seems like heaven to me.

These sentiments would have been familiar many centuries ago. In classical literature the lucky lover might feel, or seem to others, like one of the gods, and Byzantine poets used the metaphors of heaven and paradise, like their contemporaries in the West, as Peter Dronke shows in his seminal study of the European love lyric.<sup>2</sup> According to the *Middle English Dictionary* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first appearances of the metaphor in English are in Chaucer's poems, but in fact there are earlier examples. Dronke cites some poems from the early fourteenth-century *Harley Lyrics*.<sup>3</sup> In 'Wiþ longyng y am lad', the final lines are 'hevene y tolde al his / Pat o nyht were hire gest' (I would reckon the whole of heaven his who for one night might be her guest); Dronke remarks on this as an example of the concept of *pleroma*, 'intensity as against mere length, quality as against mere quantity – a homely reflection of the Boethian notion of eternity'.<sup>4</sup> Another poem in the Harley collection, 'Mosti ryden by Rybbesdale', ends in a similar way:<sup>5</sup>

He myhte sayen þat Crist hym seze  
þat myhte nyhtes neh hyre leze,  
heuene he heuede here.

(ll. 82–4)

(He might say that Christ watches over him who could lie by her at night, for he has heaven here.)

Again Dronke comments on the idea of *pleroma*, and adds that having heaven on earth would be 'equivalent to experiencing the Beatific Vision'.<sup>6</sup> These conventional phrases risk blinding us to the interesting and distinctive ways in which Chaucer uses the metaphor, however. In this chapter, I shall discuss the ways he adapts and adds to his sources in using *heaven* and also *paradise* to describe lovers' bliss.

Many sources for such metaphorical uses of these terms in relation to love and marriage were available to Chaucer. Terms for *heaven*, *paradise*, *hell*, *purgatory* and *martyr* appear quite frequently in both Latin and French, in satire and in lyrics and romances. In 'Si linguis angelicis', a twelfth-century love lyric preserved in the *Carmina Burana* manuscript, the consummation so devoutly wished throughout the poem is described as 'paradisi gaudia' (the joys of paradise).<sup>7</sup> The girl in this poem is referred to as the Rose; the same metaphor is used in the thirteenth-century *Roman de la Rose*, where the Lover is described as ascending from hell to paradise when Bel Acueil leads him into the rose garden, but then falling back to hell when Danger chases him away.<sup>8</sup> Chaucer certainly knew the *Roman de la Rose* – it is generally accepted that he translated the first of the three fragments of the Middle English version (A) – so it is one obvious source for his use of religious terms to express the emotions of love (though he does not imitate Jean de Meun's crude final metaphor in which the lover describes the consummation of his passion as the triumph of a pilgrim who uses his staff to force his way into a narrow shrine).<sup>9</sup> Chaucer also knew and used fourteenth-century French poets such as Deschamps, Machaut and Froissart. His earliest long poem, the dream-vision *The Book of the Duchess*, is based in part on Froissart's *Paradys d'Amours*.<sup>10</sup> Deschamps writes of a beloved lady: 'Vous regarder est un droit paradis; / De jour en jour vo beaute renouvelle' (to see you is a real paradise; from day to day your beauty is renewed).<sup>11</sup> This metaphorical use of paradise seems to be well established both in lyric and also in narrative French poetry; for instance, *paradis* is used in the context of love in Chrétien's *Cligès* and *Perceval*, in the *Prise d'Orange*, and in *Floris et Blanchefleur*.<sup>12</sup> It is also present in Italian. In the *Decameron*, for instance, Teodoro is so happy at being reprieved from a death sentence and being allowed to marry his beloved that 'd'Inferno gli parve saltare in Paradiso' (V.7.49: he had the sensation of passing from hell into heaven at a single bound); and Salabaetto thinks he is in paradise when the con woman Jancafiore seduces him at the baths (VIII.10.19).<sup>13</sup> I will return later in this chapter to examples in Dante and Petrarch.

Chaucer was unusual in his knowledge of Italian, but he was certainly not the only English writer in the late fourteenth century who was familiar with French poets and borrowed their metaphors. Gower uses the 'heaven to hell' metaphor in describing the song of the Sirens in his *Confessio amantis* (hereafter *CA*):<sup>14</sup>

For whan the Schipmen leie an Ere  
 Unto the vois, in here avys  
 Thei wene it be a Paradys,  
 Which after is to hem an helle.

Amans, the young lover, thinks his lady's eyes like heaven (VI.771), and her voice too: 'Whan I here of hir vois the stevene, / Me thenketh it is a blisse of hevene' (VI.873–4). He also uses *hevenelich/ hevenely* as a descriptive term for feminine beauty, as Chaucer does too (see for instance *CA* I.3136 and VI.1529; *Troilus* I.104). In comparison with Chaucer, however, Gower rarely uses *paradise* and *hevene* metaphorically.<sup>15</sup> The Gawain-poet has a striking use of *paradise* in the context of happy married love (as opposed to sodomy) in *Cleanness*:<sup>16</sup>

'When two true togeder has tyzȝed hemseluen,  
Bytwene a male and his make [spouse] such merþe schulde come,  
Welnyȝe pure paradys moȝt preue no better.'

The speaker here is God himself.

Religious metaphors are used not only to represent the emotions of the ardent lover or happy husband, but also to make negative comments on marriage (from the man's point of view) in widely read Latin and French texts which Chaucer certainly knew. A key example occurs in the famous *De Coniuge non ducenda* sometimes attributed to Gawain, which was very influential in the later Middle Ages:<sup>17</sup>

Quid dicam breuiter esse coniugium?  
Certe uel tartara, uel purgatorium.  
Non est in tartaro quies uel ocium,  
Nec dolor coniugis habet remedium.

(In brief, to sum up marriage well, / It's either purgatory or hell. / In hell there's neither rest nor peace – / A husband's pains have no release.)

In Matheolus's *Lamentations* and in the French version by Jean Le Fèvre, *Le Livre de Leesce*, Christ expands on the idea of marriage as purgatory when he appears to the writer in a dream:<sup>18</sup>

O! peccatorum quia mortem nolo, redemptor  
Et pugil ipsorum, cum res non debeat emptor  
Emptas tam care pessundare, jamque parare  
Idcirco volui purgatoria plura,  
Ut se purgarent: egros sanat data cura;  
Inter que maius est coniugium [. . .]  
Non est martirium majus quam continuata  
Pena velut tua, conjugii fornace probata.  
Es vere martir [. . .]

(O, since I who am the redeemer and scourge of sinners do not desire their death – for the buyer should not destroy goods bought so dearly – I wanted

to provide for them many purgatories so that they might purify themselves. The prescribed cure heals the sick; among these [torments] the greatest is marriage [. . .] There is no martyrdom worse than continued punishment such as yours, tested in the furnace of marriage. You are truly a martyr [. . .])

Chaucer is very likely to have drawn on this passage (either in Latin or in French) for the conceit of marriage as purgatory for the husband in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. It is striking that in the index to Blamires's useful anthology *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, which includes this stanza from *De Coniuge*, there are eight entries for *hell* and three for *purgatory*, but none for *heaven* or *paradise*.<sup>19</sup> No doubt this is because *paradise* appears in French lyrics and romances to express the lover's hope of happiness, or happiness achieved, whereas the bulk of Blamires's anthology is concerned with criticism of women.

The poetic conceit of love, and even marriage, as a metaphorical heaven or paradise must have been well established by Chaucer's time, for he clearly assumed that his readers/audience would notice the irony in the opening of the *Merchant's Tale*, where there is much play with the idea of marriage as providing the earthly paradise – for January, if not for May.<sup>20</sup> This tale combines earlier accounts of unhappy marriages between young women and old men with the popular fabliau of the wife who cuckolds her blind husband in a fruit tree.<sup>21</sup> It seems to have been Chaucer's brilliant idea to emphasize the parallels with the Fall in the Garden of Eden by introducing into the story numerous references to paradise, both earthly and celestial. In the opening lines of the tale, January's naive concept of marriage as bliss is deftly undermined in two rhyming couplets:

‘Noon oother lyf’, seyde he, ‘is worth a bene,  
For wedlok is so esy and so clene,  
That in this world it is a paradys.’  
Thus seyde this olde knyght, that was so wys.  
(IV.1263–6)<sup>22</sup>

E.T. Donaldson memorably described the second couplet as being ‘as near to a sneer as poetry can come’.<sup>23</sup>

There is further irony when the narrator describes the creation of Eve as Adam's helpmate and comments helpfully:

Heere may ye se, and heerby may ye preve,  
That wyf is mannes helpe, and his confort,  
His paradys terrestre, and his disport.  
So buxom [obedient] and so vertuous is she,  
They moste nedes lyve in unitee.  
(IV.1330–4)

Readers and listeners familiar with the misogynistic literary tradition would have recognized the irony here, and would not have been surprised when

January's friend Justinus sounds a warning note and points out that in fact a wife may be 'youre purgatorie' (IV.1670). But January's main concern is that the bliss of marriage will make him so happy that he may not be eligible for heavenly bliss, because 'I shal have myn hevене in erthe heere' (IV.1647).<sup>24</sup> This is the only metaphorical use of *heaven* in the *Merchant's Tale*. When the wedding night arrives, the aged groom can hardly wait till he and his young bride are left alone in their chamber; then 'Januarie hath faste in armes take / His fresshe May, his paradys, his make [mate, spouse]' (IV.1821–2). However, it takes two to create an erotic paradise, and the narrator is determinedly silent about May's views, though he does give us a heavy hint at the end of the night: he claims not to know what she thought, but vouchsafes that 'She preyseth nat his pleyying worth a bene' (IV.1851, 1854). After May has visited the handsome young squire Damian, who is lying sick in bed for love of her, and has read his love letter, she joins January in bed, but the narrator pointedly refuses to tell us what January did to her, 'Or wheither hire thoughte it paradys or helle' (IV.1963–4). The heaven/hell dichotomy of marital experience is usually presented from the man's point of view. In Chaucer's tales, of course, the focus is very often on the woman (and on the misogyny of patriarchal literary tradition); here the strong implication is that January's paradise is May's hell.

May is not just the innocent victim of an old man's lust; when January constructs his pleasure garden for amorous privacy, she smuggles in Damian and has sex with him in a pear tree into which January, now blind, has helped her to climb. Many critics have commented on the parallels with the Garden of Eden story here, which may well account for Chaucer's preference for *paradise* rather than *heaven*. January's earthly paradise is both literal (the garden) and figurative (the supposed joys of marital sex). When he is cuckolded in his own garden, he is expelled from paradise – though in his metaphorical blindness he never seems to realize this – and May lives up to women's traditional reputation for destroying man's happiness. In the *Nun's Priest's Tale* the narrator complains about women in proverbial style:

Wommennes conseil been ful ofte colde;  
 Wommannes conseil broghte us first to wo  
 And made Adam fro Paradys to go,  
 Ther as he was ful myrie and wel at ese.  
 (VII.3256–9)

Here again, it is man's needs that are considered, not woman's. Chaucer's genius in the *Merchant's Tale* is to present a popular tale of a cheating wife in such a way that we sympathize considerably, though not entirely, with her, at least in the first part of the tale when she is clearly the victim; though we cannot condone her brazen adultery, we understand that she has been driven to it not just by lust but also by January's behaviour and attitudes. She is entitled to some paradise too, and this does not mean enduring the pawings of a scratchy-skinned, droopy-jowled, lecherous and jealous old man. I agree with Donaldson's summary of the

poem: 'the *Merchant's Tale* was most carefully written to present the kind of world that can come into being if a man's approach to love and marriage is wholly mercantile and selfish'.<sup>25</sup> Part of Chaucer's strategy is the perversion of the religious ideals of marriage and of paradise, emphasized by January's inappropriate quotation of lines from the *Song of Songs* (IV.2138–48).<sup>26</sup>

Elsewhere in the *Canterbury Tales* there are few other instances of these metaphors of heaven and hell and paradise and purgatory. I have already referred to the Wife of Bath's grim boast about her fourth husband, the 'revelour', that 'in erthe I was his purgatorie' (III.489). In the *Knight's Tale*, several of the metaphors are used in unexpected ways to convey the pains of unrequited love and jealousy. When the imprisoned Arcite is freed at the request of Piritous, he is devastated, for from his prison window he could see his beloved Emily in the garden every day; now he must go into exile, leaving his cousin and rival Palemon with the blissful view, even if still in prison. Arcite laments:

'Now is my prisoun worse than biforn;  
Now is me shape eternally to dwelle  
Noght in purgatorie, but in helle.'  
(I.1224–6)

As for the imprisoned Palemon, says Arcite, bitterly,

'Thyn is the victorie of this aventure.  
Ful blissfully in prison maistow dure –  
In prison? Certes nay, but in paradys!'  
(I.1235–7)

There is nothing comparable to these paradoxes in Chaucer's source, Boccaccio's *Il Teseida*.<sup>27</sup>

The main text I want to discuss is the other long tale which Chaucer adapted from a version by Boccaccio, *Troilus and Criseyde* (hereafter *Troilus*), where he does make frequent use of these metaphors, in quite ambivalent and problematic ways, in the pagan setting of the Trojan War.<sup>28</sup> In contrast to the *Merchant's Tale*, Chaucer only uses *paradise* twice in relation to love in *Troilus* (a very long poem); but there are many metaphorical instances of *heaven*. When I have discussed some specific examples, I will return to this discrepancy of usage and suggest some possible reasons for it.

At the very beginning of Book I Chaucer introduces the idea of heaven for lovers, but in a very ambivalent way. The narrator presents himself as 'I, that God of Loves servantz serve' (I.15), a parody of the papal epistolary phrase 'servant of the servants of Christ'. In the lines that follow, he urges those of his readers who are lovers to sympathize with the emotions to be described, and further to pray for all unrequited lovers like Troilus 'that Love hem bringe in hevене to solas' (31). As for those whose love is hopeless, the narrator urges happy lovers 'thus biddeth God, for his benignite, / So graunte hem soone owt of

this world to pace, / That ben despeired out of Loves grace' (40–2). These opening stanzas, which have no equivalent in Boccaccio's version, seem to draw heavily on liturgical language; should we assume that the God of Love here is Cupid and that *hevene* and *grace* are being used purely metaphorically, or is there some room for ambivalence and ambiguity? On a first reading, one might well assume that Chaucer, like so many writers before him, is simply borrowing the language of Christianity and applying it to erotic love. C.S. Lewis argued that this was part of Chaucer's medievalization of his story, and of his adaptation of Boccaccio (who has an entirely different introduction). For Lewis, religious adoration of the beloved was a crucial aspect of courtly love.<sup>29</sup> He argued that 'it is this quasi-religious element in the content, and this liturgical element in the diction, which Chaucer found lacking in his original at the very opening of the book and which he supplied'. Lewis drew attention to the phrase 'That Love hem brynge in hevene to solas' (31) as 'particularly instructive'.<sup>30</sup>

Alcuin Blamires takes a rather different tack. In a recent study of the *Canterbury Tales* he notes that 'Chaucer has a strategic eye for opportunities to collide his narratives with religious materials'.<sup>31</sup> In an earlier essay on *Troilus*, he argued that 'We should probably distinguish two modes of amatory-religious discourse, which coexist in an uneasy relationship'.<sup>32</sup> One is a form of 'courtly wit relating theology and love' which was popular in the Middle Ages, 'self-consciously urbane, jocosely pseudo-pious'. The other is more reverential and seems earnest in its admiration for what Blamires describes as 'a "celestial" potential in amorous love'.<sup>33</sup> Blamires treats each form separately in his essay, but for the reader of *Troilus* it is not always easy to be sure which type of rhetoric is being used. The ending of the poem, with its apparent rejection of secular love and the world and its insistence on devotion to Christ and the Virgin, makes the interpretation of the opening even more complex. When Troilus dies, he ascends to the eighth sphere,

[. . .] And fully gan despise  
 This wrecched world, and held al vanite  
 To respect of the pleyn felicite  
 That is in hevene above [. . .]  
 (V.1816–19)

This is the last occurrence of *hevene* in the poem, and it is an entirely literal, Christian one. As many critics have noted, Chaucer deliberately refrains from sending Troilus to hell, though the rhyme invites this:

And forth he wente, shortly for to telle,  
 Ther as Mercurye sorted hym to dwelle.  
 (V.1826–7)

Heaven is not mentioned in the final stanzas, which consist of fervent prayers to the Trinity for mercy; in the final line the narrator appeals to Christ 'For love of

mayde and moder thyn benigne' (V.1869). This certainly focuses the reader's attention on judgement and salvation, on Christian values and divine love. Much critical ink has been spilt on the ending of the *Troilus*. Is it an inevitable conclusion to the poem? Did Chaucer always mean us to see Criseyde as the incarnation of *voluptas* leading the masculine principle of reason into temptation, as D.W. Robertson claimed?<sup>34</sup> Can we disregard the earlier passages evoking and praising love as the force which makes the world go round (especially in the Proem to Book III)? Or is the narrator so horrified by the tragic end of his story that the result is 'a kind of nervous breakdown in poetry', as Donaldson puts it?<sup>35</sup> How is the final Palinode to be reconciled with the appeal to secular lovers and the punning use of erotic/liturgical language in the opening stanzas, the ambiguous references to the God of Love and heaven and grace? Is Donaldson right in arguing that the final prayer leads 'towards heaven, indeed, but towards heaven through human experience'?<sup>36</sup>

Metaphorical uses of *hevene* elsewhere in *Troilus* might seem at first glance much less problematic. When Troilus is hidden in Pandarus's house on a night when Criseyde will be staying there, Pandarus gives him instructions which we do not hear, and then adds 'Make the redy anon, / For thow shalt into hevене blisse wende' (III.703–4). Whatever Troilus may think this means, it is clear to the reader that Pandarus wants to get the lovers into bed together for the first time; earlier on, he had told Troilus 'love a womman that she woot [knows] it noght, / And she wol quyte [requite] it that thow shalt nat fele' (I.807–8).<sup>37</sup> When Troilus hides in Pandarus's house, he does not intend to consummate his love for Criseyde, apparently; he only joins her in bed when he faints with emotion and is literally thrown in by Pandarus. But when he finds himself holding his beloved in his arms at last, he thanks the gods, and the narrator comments: 'Thus sondry peynes brynngen folk in hevене' (III.1204).

Heaven is invoked again a few lines later as Troilus explores Criseyde's beautiful body:

Hire armes smale, hire streghte bak and softe,  
 Hire sydes longe, fleshly, smothe, and white  
 He gan to stroke, and good thrift bad ful ofte  
 Hire snowissh throte, hire brestes rounde and lite.  
 Thus in this hevene he gan hym to delite [. . .]  
 (III.1247–51)

The narrator's comments suggest a vicarious, almost voyeuristic pleasure in this love scene:

O blisful nyght, of hem so longe isought,  
 How blithe unto hem bothe two thow weere!  
 Why nad I swich oon with my soule ybought,  
 Ye, or the leeste joie that was theree?  
 Away, thou foule daunger and thow feere,

And lat hem in this hevene blisse dwelle,  
 That is so heigh that al ne kan I telle.  
 (III.1317–23)

These references to heaven in Book III of Chaucer's poem have no equivalent in his main source, Boccaccio's *Filostrato*. Chaucer has clearly drawn on Boccaccio's description of the blissful consummation, but Boccaccio's narrator is not envious of the lovers, and the strikingly inappropriate Christian metaphors are all Chaucer's additions:

O dolce notte, e molto disiata,  
 chente fostú alli due lieti amanti!  
 Se la sciēza mi fosse donata  
 che ebber li poeti tutti quanti,  
 per me non potrebbe esser disegnata.  
 Pensisel chi fu mai cotanto avanti  
 mercè d'Amor, quanto furon costoro,  
 e saprá 'n parte la letizia loro.  
 (III.33)

(O sweet night and much desired, what did you mean to the two lovers! If the skill of all the poets were given to me, I could not describe it. Let him who was rewarded by Love in the past think about it, and he will know in part how great their bliss was.)

Here 'hevene blisse' represents Boccaccio's 'letizia', a word which, like *blisse*, can be used in both Christian and secular contexts. Chaucer uses *blisse*, and sometimes *hevene blisse*, quite frequently in *Troilus*; but only this once is there a clear parallel in Boccaccio's version.<sup>38</sup> Early on, Troilus questions the value of Pandarus's advice, since he is such an unsuccessful lover himself: 'thou koudest nevere in love thiselven wisse. / How devel maistow brynge me to blisse?' (I.622–3); in the equivalent passage Boccaccio uses 'soddisfare', a term with no explicit religious connotations (II.9).

In Chaucer's *Troilus*, *hevene* is sometimes linked with other Christian terms, such as *soule*, *martir* and *helle*. In Book IV, when Criseyde is to be returned to the Greeks and Troilus is agonizing over what to do, Pandarus says in exasperation:

'Lat nat this wrecched wo thyn herte gnawe,  
 But manly sette the world on six and sevene,  
 And if thow deye a martyr, go to hevene.'  
 (IV.621–3)

Boccaccio uses the concept of martyrdom rather differently, and his Pandaro takes a less positive view of it. He urges Troilo not to allow himself to be martyred by giving in to grief:

‘[. . .] e virilmente  
 t’opponi a questo tormento feroce,  
 e vogli innanzi esser ripreso alquanto,  
 che con martir morire in tristo pianto.’  
 (IV.72)

(and manfully resist this fierce torment, and be willing to receive some blame rather than to die a martyr, lamenting sadly.)

There is no mention here of heaven as a reward for martyrdom, which is presented as a fate to be avoided if possible.

Lovers can be elevated from hell to heaven, or precipitated from heaven to hell. After the first blissful night together, Troilus thanks Pandarus warmly for his help: ‘Thow hast in hevene ybrought my soule at reste / Fro Flegitoun, the fery flood of helle’ (III.1599–1600). This is very close to Boccaccio’s ‘tu m’hai d’inferno messo in paradiso’ (III.56). As Windeatt points out in his note, Chaucer makes two additions here: the link between heaven and rest, and the classical term for hell. It is also interesting that Chaucer prefers *hevene* to *paradise* (a point to which I shall return). When separation looms, Criseyde weeps, ‘Remembryng hir, from hevene into which helle / She fallen was, syn she forgoth the syghte / Of Troilus’ (IV.712–14). When Troilus writes to her in the last book, he describes how ‘myn ese ek woxen helle is’ (V.1376), and ‘to me youre absence is an helle’ (1396); there is nothing comparable in Boccaccio. The opposite emotional shift, from hell to heaven, is described by Chaucer several times in other poems. In the *Legend of Good Women*, when Aeneas arrives in Carthage and is lavishly entertained by Dido, the narrator comments:

This Eneas is come to paradys  
 Out of the swolow of Helle, and thus in joye  
 Remembreth hym of his estat in Troye.  
 (LGW 1103–5)

As I noted earlier, one possible source is the *Roman de la Rose*; the Lover’s emotional ups and downs in the Middle English *Romaunt of the Rose* are described in similar language (lines 3620–2 and 4136–7, though this section is probably not by Chaucer).

It is striking that Chaucer uses *paradise* much less frequently than *heaven*, and rarely in the transferred sense of the attainment of erotic joy (this is true of Gower too, though he uses both terms less often than Chaucer). *Paradise* appears only thirty-nine times overall in Chaucer’s work.<sup>39</sup> As a metaphor about love it occurs once in the *Knight’s Tale*, four times in the *Merchant’s Tale*, only twice in *Troilus*, and once in the *Legend of Good Women*. *Heaven* is used hundreds of times, however, and in *Troilus* alone there are at least nine instances of the metaphorical erotic use, none of which appears in Boccaccio’s version. The relative rarity of *paradise* is all the more surprising because it is frequently used

by French writers whom Chaucer certainly knew, such as Guillaume de Lorris, Deschamps, Froissart and Machaut; *ciel* does not have the ambiguous resonance in French that *heaven* does in English. In Italian, however, it is noteworthy that in the *Canzoniere* Petrarch uses *cielo* as well as *paradiso* in the context of erotic love: ‘felice l’alma che per voi sospire, lumi di ciel’ (poem 71, l. 68: happy the soul that breathes through you, lights of heaven); ‘vostr’ occhi un dolce lume / che mi mostra la via ch’ al ciel conduce’ (poem 72, l. 3: your eyes are a sweet light which shows me the way that leads to heaven); ‘credendo esser in ciel’ (poem 126, l. 63: believing [myself] to be in heaven).<sup>40</sup> In Dante *cielo* is used much more frequently than *paradiso* (both unambiguously in the theological context), but Beatrice famously tells Dante that paradise is not just in her eyes – ‘non pur nei miei occhi è paradiso’ (*Paradiso* 18.20–1). Chaucer adapted this line for his Criseyde in one of his only two uses of *paradis* in the whole of the *Troilus*: ‘Lo, trewely, they writen that hire syen, / That Paradys stood formed in her yēn’ (V.817).<sup>41</sup> I wonder how much Chaucer was influenced by Dante in his choice of terms, and also by Boethius, who never uses *paradisus* in the *Consolation of Philosophy*, which Chaucer translated.<sup>42</sup>

Jane Roberts has noted that *paradise* was a very late borrowing in Old English; *neorxenawang* is the Old English term, but did not survive into standard Middle English use.<sup>43</sup> Chaucer did use *paradise*, as we have seen, but was it less well established, or did he prefer words of English origin, where there was a choice? This is a complex question which cannot be answered here. Derek Brewer does note that in one of Chaucer’s earliest works, *The Book of the Duchess*, he sometimes prefers English words to Romance equivalents of terms in his source texts (the example discussed is *merveil/wonder*).<sup>44</sup> As I have already pointed out, Chaucer quite often uses *hevene* in combination with *blisse*, and he also uses *blisse* and *blissful* very frequently in secular contexts, not least erotic ones. Perhaps the alliterative possibilities of *heaven* were appealing, not least when it is contrasted with *hell*; was the pairing of *paradise* with *purgatory* less attractive?<sup>45</sup>

Both in *Troilus* and in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer also uses *heaven* in a very unusual way in the formula ‘it was an hevene for to heere/see’. This formula occurs twice in the *Squire’s Tale*: the musical entertainment at Cambuskyan’s court ‘is lyk an hevene for to heere’ (V.271), and the falcon crossed in love reports of the tercelet who deceived her that ‘His manere was an hevene for to see’ (V.558). The same formula appears in *Troilus* several times. When Troilus rides by Criseyde’s window on his return from battle, he is so heroic, young and vigorous that ‘it was an heven upon hym for to see’ (II.637). When Antigone sings to Criseyde and her maidens, ‘it an heven was her vois to here’ (II.826). When Troilus talks to Pandarus about Criseyde in his happiness after the consummation of his love, ‘It was an hevene his wordes for to here’ (III.1742), even before he starts singing. Where does this formula come from? In the notes to the *Riverside Chaucer*, all these examples are cross-referenced without any further explanation. Chaucer seems to be the first writer to use this formula in Middle English; it does not occur in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*.

Presumably Chaucer borrowed the idea from his French sources, though they use *paradis*. For instance, Deschamps writes to a lady: 'vos regarder est un droit paradis / de jour en jour vo beaute renouvelle'.<sup>46</sup> Boccaccio uses a similar phrase in the *Decameron*: 'E sappiate che quelle camere paiono un paradiso a veder, tanto son belle' (VIII. 9.25: 'Now these rooms, mark you, are so glorious to behold that you'd swear you were in Paradise itself').<sup>47</sup> But I have not yet found any examples of the syntactical form 'it was heaven/paradise to see' earlier than some sixteenth-century French examples. *Paradys* would fit in Chaucer's formula – 'it was an hevene for to see' or 'it was a paradys to see' – though Ad Putter thinks that *hevene* was a more malleable word in metrical terms than *paradis*; he points out that *hevene* could be pronounced (and scanned) either as a monosyllabic word or as disyllabic. Alliteration might account for the choice of 'hevene for to heere', which might then have led by analogy to the comparable, though non-alliterative, 'hevene for to see'. (A pendant to that might be the intriguing alliterative phrase 'bathen in bliss', which occurs at the end of the *Wife of Bath's Tale* [V.1253] and twice in *Troilus* [II.849 and IV.208].) Davis comments that generally for Chaucer 'choice between a pair of words closely similar in meaning, one Romance and one native, is clearly determined by sound rather than sense'.<sup>48</sup>

In *Troilus and Criseyde* Chaucer succeeds wonderfully in evoking the heaven and hell of young love. Whether or not Chaucer is commenting on the conventions of 'courtly love' in his use of religious language to describe the emotions of lovers, and however we read the ending of the poem, those who know the Troy story already must find it hard to resist the feeling that Troilus is living for much of the poem in a fool's paradise. According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, this phrase is first found in the Paston Letters, about 1462. Surely if Chaucer had known it, he would have used it both for the satirical paradise of the *Merchant's Tale* and for the tragic paradise of *Troilus*.<sup>49</sup>

## Notes

- 1 *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 July 2005, p.14.
- 2 P. Dronke, *Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love Lyric*, 2nd edn, 2 vols, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968, s.v. *heaven* and *paradise* in his index of motifs and images; see also Chapter 2, 'The Background of Ideas', pp.57–97.
- 3 References are taken from G.L. Brook (ed.) *The Harley Lyrics*, 2nd edn, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1956.
- 4 Brook, *Harley Lyrics*, p.34, ll. 39–40; Dronke, *Latin*, I, pp.122–3.
- 5 Brook, *Harley Lyrics*, pp.37–9; at line 58 the breasts of the beloved are compared to apples from paradise.
- 6 Dronke, *Latin*, I, pp.123–4.
- 7 For text, translation and commentary see Dronke, *Latin*, I, pp.318–31; the quotation is taken from stanza 30 (p.322).
- 8 *Le Roman de la Rose*, F. Lecoy (ed.), *Classiques français du moyen âge*, 3 vols, Paris: Champion, 1976–1979, I, pp.102–3 and 116, ll. 3335–6, 3775.
- 9 See *Romaunt of the Rose B*, in L.D. Benson (ed.) *The Riverside Chaucer*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, pp.725, 730, ll. 3621–2, 4136–7. Fragments B and C can no longer be confidently attributed to Chaucer.

- 10 See *Jean Froissart: An Anthology of Narrative and Lyric Poetry*, K.M. Figg with R.B. Palmer (ed. and trans.), London: Routledge, 2001, pp.35–101. At lines 1245–9, Pity tells how the lover praises his lady as ‘un paradis / Garni donnour / Et de delis’ (a paradise adorned with honour and delights). See also *Chaucer’s Dream Poetry: Sources and Analogues*, B.A. Windeatt (ed. and trans.), Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1982.
- 11 Cited in La Curne de Sainte Palaye, *Dictionnaire historique de l’ancien langage français*, 10 vols, Paris: Champion, 1875–1882, s.v. *paradis*.
- 12 See the examples in A. Tobler and E. Lommatzsch, *Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch*, Berlin: Steiner, 1925–, s.v. *paradis*.
- 13 Boccaccio, *Decameron*, V. Branca (ed.) *Boccaccio: Tutte le Opere*, 10 vols, Milan: Mondadori, 1964–, IV, pp.500, 767; G.H. McWilliam (trans.), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, pp.456, 669.
- 14 John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, I, lines 500–3, G.C. Macaulay (ed.) in *The English Works of John Gower*, 2 vols, EETS ES 81–2, 2 vols, London: Oxford University Press, 1900–1901. See *A Concordance to John Gower’s Confessio Amantis*, J.D. Pickles and J.L. Dawson (eds), Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987.
- 15 Sometimes they appear in non-amorous contexts: Sompnolence thinks himself in heaven when he is asleep and dreaming (IV.2734–7).
- 16 *Cleanness*, in M. Andrew and R. Waldron (eds) *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, York Medieval Texts, London: E. Arnold, 1978, ll. 703–5. I am grateful to Ad Putter and Myra Stokes for this reference.
- 17 *Gawain on Marriage*, stanza J20, A.G. Rigg, (ed. and trans.) Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1986, pp.96–7. See the note on *Wife of Bath’s Prologue* line 489 in Benson, *Riverside Chaucer*.
- 18 *Les Lamentations de Mathéolus et le Livre de Leesce de Jehan Le Fèvre*, A.G. van Hamel (ed.), 2 vols, Paris: Bouillon, 1892, I, p.206 (Matheolus, ll. 3028–9, 3032–5; expanded by Le Fèvre, ll. 1673–715). I use the translation of Matheolus given in Benson, *Riverside Chaucer*, note on *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, ll. 489–90 by Christine Ryan Hilary (p.869), and have added my own translation of the last three lines quoted.
- 19 A. Blamires (ed.) *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992. It is noteworthy that *hell* appears much less frequently than *heaven* and *paradise* in the love lyrics discussed by Dronke.
- 20 See for instance the comments of K.A. Bleeth in ‘The Image of Paradise in the *Merchant’s Tale*’, in L.D. Benson (ed.) *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974, pp.45–60; G. Dempster, *Dramatic Irony in Chaucer*, London: Stanford University Press, 1932, pp.46–58; J.A. Burrow, ‘Irony in the *Merchant’s Tale*’, *Anglia*, 1957, vol. 75, 199–208; P. Olson, ‘Chaucer’s Merchant and January’s “Hevene in erthe heere”’, *English Literary History*, 1961, vol. 28:3, 203–14; J. Richardson, *Blameth Nat Me: A Study of Imagery in Chaucer’s Fabliaux*, The Hague: Mouton, 1970, pp.123–46; M.D. Cherniss, ‘The Clerk’s Tale and Envoy, the Wife of Bath’s Purgatory, and the *Merchant’s Tale*’, *Chaucer Review*, 1972, vol. 6:4, 245–51.
- 21 See the notes on the *Merchant’s Tale* in Benson, *Riverside Chaucer*, and W.F. Bryan and G. Dempster (eds) *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1941, reprinted 1958, pp.333–56; and now also R.M. Coreale and M. Hamel (eds) *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales II*, Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2005. Many of the source texts on marriage are included in Blamires, *Women Defamed*.
- 22 All references to Chaucer are to Benson, *Riverside Chaucer*. *Canterbury Tales* is cited by fragment and line number.
- 23 E.T. Donaldson, ‘The Effect of the *Merchant’s Tale*’, in *Speaking of Chaucer*, London: Athlone Press, 1970, pp.30–45 (p.37).

- 24 Ad Putter and Myra Stokes have pointed out to me that the irony is deepened here by the medieval belief that marriage, unlike the other six sacraments, originated in the Garden of Eden; see H.A. Kelly, *Love and Marriage in the Age of Chaucer*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975, pp.246–7.
- 25 Donaldson, 'The Effect of the *Merchant's Tale*', p.45.
- 26 Bleeth points out that in this tale the *hortus conclusus* of the *Song of Songs*, evoked by January's 'olde lewed wordes' at ll. 2138–49, turns into a *paradisus voluptatis*; see Bleeth, 'The Image of Paradise', p.59.
- 27 For the relevant passages in Boccaccio, see *Chaucer's Boccaccio – Sources of Troilus, and the Knight's and Franklin's Tales*, N. Havely (trans.), Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1980, p.115.
- 28 Boccaccio's text is usefully presented in parallel with Chaucer's in B.A. Windeatt (ed.) *Troilus and Criseyde*, Harlow: Longman, 1984; Italian quotations are taken from this edition, and translations from Havely's *Chaucer's Boccaccio*.
- 29 C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, London: Oxford University Press, 1936, reprinted 1977, pp.18–22.
- 30 C.S. Lewis, 'What Chaucer really did to *Il Filostrato*', *Essays and Studies*, 1932, vol. 17, 56–75, reprinted in C.D. Benson, *Critical Essays on Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde and his Major Early Poems*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991, pp.8–22 (see pp.14–16); on Chaucer's use of Boccaccio see also B.A. Windeatt, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: Troilus and Criseyde*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, pp.50–72.
- 31 A. Blamires, *The Canterbury Tales*, The Critics Debate, London: Macmillan, 1987, p.67. He makes this comment apropos the *Friar's Tale* and *Pardoner's Tale*, but it seems to me to apply to *Troilus* too.
- 32 A. Blamires, 'The "Religion of Love" in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and Medieval Visual Art', in K.J. Höltgen et al. (eds) *Word and Visual Imagination: Studies in the Interaction of English Literature and the Visual Arts*, Erlangen: Universitätsbund Erlangen-Nürnberg, 1988, pp.11–31 (see pp.12–13).
- 33 Blamires, 'The "Religion of Love"', p.25.
- 34 D.W. Robertson, Jr, *A Preface to Chaucer*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962, pp.472–501, reprinted in Benson, *Critical Essays on Troilus*, pp.68–91.
- 35 Donaldson, 'The Ending of *Troilus*', in *Speaking of Chaucer*, pp.84–101 (p.91).
- 36 Donaldson, 'The Ending', p.101.
- 37 On Pandarus's intentions see E. Archibald, 'Declarations of "Entente" in *Troilus and Criseyde*', *Chaucer Review*, 1991, vol. 25, 190–213 (pp.195–203).
- 38 In the *Canterbury Tales* he uses *hevene* and *blisse* together only a few times, in religious contexts – the tales of the Pardoner and the Parson. For further discussion of *blisse* see N. Davis, 'Chaucer and Fourteenth-Century English', in D.S. Brewer (ed.) *Writers and their Background: Geoffrey Chaucer*, London: G. Bell, 1974, pp.58–84 (pp.76–7).
- 39 See J.S.P. Tatlock and A.G. Kennedy (eds) *Concordance to the Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, Washington: Carnegie Institute, 1927, reprinted Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1963.
- 40 *Concordanze del Canzoniere di Francesco Petrarca*, 2 vols, Florence: Accademia della Crusca, 1971, s.v. *cielo*.
- 41 E.H. Wilkins and T.G. Bergin (eds) *A Concordance to the Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1965. On Beatrice's comment see E. Kirk, "'Paradis Stood Formed in Hire Yën": Courty Love and Chaucer's Re-Vision of Dante', in M. Carruthers and E. Kirk (eds) *Acts of Interpretation: The Text in its Contexts 700–1600: Essays on Medieval and Renaissance Literature in Honor of E. Talbot Donaldson*, Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1982, pp.257–77.
- 42 L. Cooper, *A Concordance of Boethius*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1928.
- 43 J. Roberts, 'A Preliminary "Heaven" Index for Old English', in *Sources and*

*Relations: Studies in Honour of J. E. Cross*, published as *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 16 (1985), pp.208–19.

- 44 D.S. Brewer, 'English and European Traditions', in D.S. Brewer (ed.) *Chaucer and Chaucerians*, London: Nelson, 1966, pp.1–38 (pp.2–3). On the complexity of the interplay between Romance and English vocabulary in Chaucer, see also Davis, 'Chaucer and Fourteenth-Century English', and more recently C. Cannon, *The Making of Chaucer's English: A Study of Words*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- 45 Myra Stokes and Ad Putter have suggested to me that *paradis* as a specific reference to the Garden of Eden might have seemed over-precise, and too biblical in its resonance, when the amorous analogy merely requires the sense 'bliss'.
- 46 See note 11 above.
- 47 Boccaccio, *Decameron*, Branca (ed.), p.748; McWilliam (trans.), p.653.
- 48 Davis, 'Chaucer and Fourteenth-Century English', p.75.
- 49 I am grateful to my colleagues John Burrow, Ad Putter and Myra Stokes for their helpful comments on earlier drafts.

## 16 The influence of visions of the otherworld on some medieval romances

*Ad Putter*

The popularity of visions of heaven and hell in the Middle Ages is evident not only from the voluminousness of Latin and vernacular vision literature but also from the influence of that literature on apparently unrelated genres.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I shall discuss this influence by means of some revealing examples from medieval romances in various languages from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. I hope to show that the poets of these romances made intelligent use of vision literature. I begin by looking briefly at some romances that make brief comparisons with heaven or show a precise recollection of apocalyptic visions. The second section is devoted to the pioneer of Arthurian romance, Chrétien de Troyes, who playfully draws on vision literature in his *Chevalier de la Charrete* (*Lancelot*) and *Cligés*.

### Castles in romance and the castle of heaven

That romance writers should have been familiar with visions of heaven is not in itself surprising. The principal authority here was, after all, the Bible and, in particular, the Book of Revelation, which lurks in the background of a number of castle descriptions in medieval romance. In addition to the visions of heaven contained in the canonical books of scripture, later apocryphal visions associated with other apostles (notably St Peter and St Paul) enjoyed wide circulation. Finally, in the high Middle Ages, the fabulous journeys to the otherworld described in *Tundale's Vision*, *St Patrick's Purgatory*, and the *Voyage of St Brendan* took vision literature to the top of the bestsellers' charts: originally written in the twelfth century, all three survive in many copies, in the original Latin as well as in translations into various vernacular languages (French, English, Dutch, German, and others).

For purposes of classification, bibliographers find it convenient to group vision literature with religious material and romances with secular tales,<sup>2</sup> but the division is rather artificial:<sup>3</sup> the two genres often sit side by side in medieval codices, sharing the same metrical forms; and both were read for entertainment. *St Patrick's Purgatory* illustrates the difficulty of separating the two. Some time after the composition of the original version, Henry of Sawtry's *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*, Marie de France read the *Tractatus* and recognized its entertainment value, as Michael Curley notes: 'Marie saw that Owen's

voyage to Saint Patrick's Purgatory was essentially a chivalric *aventure*, in which a knight puts his virtue to an extraordinary test of endurance.<sup>4</sup> To make the book 'comprehensible and appropriate to lay people' (*ententables / a la laie gent e convenables*, ll. 2299–3000), she put the Latin prose into French octosyllabic rhyming couplets, that is, into the same verse form that she used for her lays (short romance narratives). The secularization of form and language is matched by a change in content. In the Latin the protagonist is a knight who, having overcome various tribulations in the otherworld, becomes a monk (like the author, who was an English Cistercian); in Marie, he begins and ends as a knight – which might tell us something about Marie's intended audience. In the best-known Middle English version, known as *Owayne Miles* (c.1325),<sup>5</sup> the generic affiliations of the story or 'rime', as the author calls it (29:6), have become even more indeterminate: the title ('Owen the Knight') reeks of romance rather than pious legend, as does the description of the protagonist, a 'doughti man and swiþe wight' (29:5), 'Wel michel he coupe of batayle' (30:4); the verse form (tail-rhyme) is typically associated with the popular metrical romances; and the text has come down to us in the Auchinleck manuscript, where it is surrounded by Middle English romances such as *The King of Tars* and *Amis and Amiloun*. Visions of the otherworld were mainstream material, and it is doubtful whether medieval writers made any clear conceptual distinction between romances and otherworld visions.

Of course, the writers of chivalric romances were not in the business of describing the religious otherworld, but they nevertheless make common cause with the writers of otherworld visions in one important respect. Romance writers, too, had to find ways of making their fictional world 'other', supremely beautiful, or supremely perilous, and in their attempt to create an imaginary world surpassing normal expectations they frequently gave it a touch of otherworldliness. The convergence between secular and religious otherworlds is well illustrated by the Middle English romance *Sir Orfeo* (c.1330). Orfeo's wife Heurodis has been abducted by the Fairy King, and Sir Orfeo goes in pursuit of her. After many years in the wilderness, he sees her and follows her into the realm of fairy, where the Fairy King lives in a splendid castle:

Amidde þe lond a castel he sizþe  
 Riche & real & wonder heizþe:  
 Al þe vt-mast wal  
 As clere & schine as cristal;  
 An hundred tours þer were about,  
 Degiselich [strange] and bataild stout;  
 Þe butras com out of þe diche  
 Of rede gold y-arched riche;  
 Þe vousour [vaulting] was anowrned [adorned] al  
 Of iche maner diuers aumal [enamel].  
 Wiþ-in þer wer wide wones,  
 Al of precieuse stones;

Pe werst piler on to biholde  
Was al of burnist gold.  
Al þat lond was euer liȝt,  
For when it schuld be þerk and niȝt  
Pe riche stones liȝt gonne  
As briȝt as doþ at none þe sonne.  
No man may telle, no þenche in þouȝt,  
Pe riche werk þat þer was wrouȝt:  
Bi al þing him þink þat it is  
Pe proude court of Paradis.

(*Sir Orfeo*, Auchinleck MS, 355–76)<sup>6</sup>

The sumptuousness and richness of the Fairy castle defy the imagination. The pillars are of gold, the rooms within are made of precious stones, and the land is radiant with light, even at night. It is suspiciously like heaven. And when the poet finally moves from hyperbole to the ineffable – ‘No man may telle, no þenche in þouȝt, / Pe riche werk þat þer was wrouȝt’ – that latent analogy becomes explicit:

Bi al þing him þink þat it is  
Pe proude court of Paradis.

Heaven is the place beyond all superlatives. And since writers of romance strive to create superlative worlds they often come close to transporting us to ‘the proud court of paradise’.

In the tale of *Thomas of Erceldoune*, also from the fourteenth century, this convergence is taken a step further. The tale begins when Thomas sees a lady beautiful beyond description:

If I solde sitt to domesdaye,  
With my tonge to wrobbe and wrye [twist and wriggle],  
Certanely, alle hir araye  
Never bese discryved for mee!

(37–40)<sup>7</sup>

The same logic of the superlative that leads Orfeo to identify the fairy castle as the ‘court of Paradis’ makes Thomas conclude that this lady must be the Queen of heaven – which is how he addresses her:

Lufly lady, rewe on mee,  
Qwene of heuen, als þou wel may!  
(87–8)

The lady replies that she is not the Queen of heaven, not being quite of such ‘high degree’ – though she is indeed a queen from another country, a secular

otherworld, to which she eventually leads Thomas. They enter the fairy realm through a mountain, and after a three-day ordeal arrive in a beautiful meadow, where the fruit is always ripe and where birds always sing. The meadow is traversed by four paths, the first leading to heaven, the second to paradise, the third to purgatory, and the fourth to hell. The fairy queen's castle stands on a hilltop overlooking these four pathways:

Seese þou ʒone faire waye,  
 Pat lygges over ʒone heghe mountayne?  
 ʒone is þe waye to heven for aye,  
 When synfull sawles are passede þer payne.

Seese þou nowe ʒone oþer waye,  
 Pat lygges lawe undir ʒone rysse? [wood]  
 ʒone es þe waye, þe sothe to saye,  
 Unto þe joye of paradyse.

Seese þou ʒone thirde waye,  
 Pat ligges undir ʒone grene playne?  
 ʒone es þe waye, with tene and traye  
 Whare synfull saulis suffiris þaire payne.

Seese þou nowe ʒone ferthe waye,  
 Pat lygges over ʒone felle  
 ʒone es þe waye, so waylawaye,  
 Unto þe birnande fyre of helle.

Seese þou ʒone faire castelle,  
 Pat standes appon ʒone heghe hill?  
 Of towne and tower it beris þe belle [is the best];  
 In erþe es none lyke þertill.

(201–20)

In this bizarre ‘mapping’ of the otherworld, the roads to the afterlife run past the castle of fairy land. This ‘folk cosmology’ presumably reflects popular beliefs about the location of the fairy world.<sup>8</sup> Naively superstitious though such beliefs may be, they nevertheless recognize the connections between the constructs of the fairy world and the religious otherworld. The poet of *Thomas of Erceldoune* merely takes these connections literally and actualizes them in a cosmos where the fairy world is geographically intermediate between our world and the afterlife, ‘ambiguous between air and Earth’, as C.S. Lewis put it.<sup>9</sup>

While *Orfeo* and *Erceldoune* hint broadly at the interrelationship between the world of romance and the otherworld, other poets seem to have borrowed specific details from descriptions of heaven for use in their romances. As *Orfeo* indicates, descriptions of castles, in particular, seem to have made poets think of

heaven. Particularly revealing in this regard is the fascination of romance writers with the number that is the key to heaven: the number twelve. The obsession with twelve is due to St John's Apocalypse, where everything in heaven comes in dozens. So John sees a city that measures 12,000 square furlongs, with walls of 144 cubits, with twelve gates guarded by twelve angels, with twelve foundations adorned by twelve precious stones, and so on (Apocalypse 21:12–21).<sup>10</sup> In medieval romance, evocations of the legendary city of Ilium (Troy) honour their debt to the Book of Revelation by itemizing the city's riches in twelves. In the *Roman de Troie* (c.1165), the cleric Benoît de St Maure writes that the Chamber of Beauties in Ilium was adorned with *twelve* different jewels (*doze pieres gemeles*), which he proceeds to list:

Ço fu safirs et sardina,  
Topace, prasme, crisolite,  
Maraude, beriz, ametiste,  
Jaspe, rubis, chiere sardoine,  
Charbocles clers et calcedoine, –  
D'icestes ot de lonc, de lé,  
Enz la Chambre mout grant plenté.  
(II, 14636–42)<sup>11</sup>

(They were sapphire and sardius, topaz, chrysoprasus and chrysolite, emerald, beryl, amethyst, jasper, ruby, and precious sardonyx, carbuncle clear and chalcedony – of these there was great plenty in the room, throughout its length and breadth.)

The numerology is spoiled if we read the passage too carefully (for there are actually *thirteen* stones in the list, the twelve jewels as listed in St John's Apocalypse plus the fashionable carbuncle, which was believed to emit light). Benoît seems to have rigged the count by treating the carbuncle as supernumerary. There is some scholarly disagreement amongst experts about whether Benoît took his list directly from the Book of Revelation or indirectly from the *Roman de Thèbes* (which contains a similar catalogue), but Edmond Faral must be right when he argued the former.<sup>12</sup> The clinching proof he omits to mention is that Benoît introduces the jewels as the stones 'which God selected as the most beautiful ones when he named them precious' (*Que Deus en eslist as plus beles, / Quant precioses les noma*, 14634–5). We are surely meant to recall the catalogue of jewels in the Book of Revelation, which begins: 'And the foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with all manners of precious stones. The first foundation was jasper: the second, sapphire; the third, a chalcedony: the fourth, an emerald' (Apocalypse 21:19). God indeed called the stones 'precious' (*lapide pretioso* in the Vulgate).

And the implied comparison with heaven continues. Inside Ilium's Chamber of Beauties there are statues of beautiful young men; anyone looking at them would have thought 'that they are angels from paradise' (*qu'angle fussent de Paradis*, 14680).

Another romance that toys with the number twelve is the thirteenth-century Middle Dutch romance of *Walewein* (=Gawain).<sup>13</sup> This romance conjures up a fabulous castle (watered by a Fountain of Youth, which flows straight from paradise) that has twelve gateways – inspired, one suspects, by Apocalypse 21:12: ‘And it had a wall great and high, having twelve gates’. To make the castle impregnable, the keep is surrounded by twelve concentric walls: *daer gaan. xij. mure / omme* (3460–1).<sup>14</sup> This detail is curiously reminiscent of the *Vision of St Paul*, a text so well known, also to vernacular poets such as Dante and Chaucer, that Theodore Silverstein called it the medieval ‘Baedeker to the Otherworld’:<sup>15</sup>

I entered the city of Christ. It was all gold and twelve walls encircled it, and there were twelve towers inside it [. . .] The angel answered and said to me: ‘The second is better than the first, and likewise the third is better than the second; for one excels the other right up to the twelfth wall.’<sup>16</sup>

Transplanted to the word of romance, the twelve-walled construction can provide excellent opportunities for the display of supernatural heroism. The poets of *Walewein* (Penninc and Vostaert) place a pretty girl inside, and then show how Gawain fights his way in, against ever-greater odds. This is heaven as romance playground.

### The otherworld in Chrétien de Troyes

In the twelfth-century Arthurian romances of Chrétien de Troyes, the influence of otherworld manifests itself in rather subtler ways. I shall be concerned with two of his romances, the *Chevalier de la charrete* and *Cligés*. In the *Chevalier de la charrete*, Lancelot goes in search of Guinevere, who has been abducted by the evil knight Meleagant:

uns chevaliers molt forz et granz,  
filz le roi de Gorre, l’a prise,  
et si l’a el reume mise  
don nus estranges ne retourne.  
(*Chevalier de la charrete*, 637–41)<sup>17</sup>

([Meleagant], a very strong and big knight, the son of the king of Gorre, has taken her and has put her in the realm from which no stranger returns.)

The epithet of Gorre as the ‘Land of No Return’ hints at a resemblance with the underworld. Lancelot, whose role is that of the messianic hero, must enter this realm to liberate its captives. As D.D.R. Owen has already observed, the episode is a ‘diffuse rehandling in profane terms of the story the Harrowing [of hell] as found in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*’.<sup>18</sup> Chrétien playfully develops the comparison between Gorre and the otherworld when he makes the hero cross a perilous

bridge to gain access to the land of Gorre. The bridge consists of the blade of a sword:

Au pié del pont, qui molt est max,  
sont descendu de lor chevax,  
et voient l'eve felenesse,  
noire et bruiant, roide et espesse,  
tant leide et tant espoantable  
*con se fust li fluns au deable,*  
et tant perilleuse et parfonde  
qu'il n'est riens nule an tot le monde,  
s'ele i cheoit, ne fust alee  
ausi com an la mer betee.  
Et li ponz qui est an travers  
estoit de toz autres divers;  
qu'ainz tex ne fu ne ja mes n'iert.  
Einz ne fu, qui voir m'an requiert,  
si max pont ne si male planche:  
d'une espee forbie et blanche  
estoit li ponz sur le l'eve froide;  
mes l'espee estoit forz et roide,  
et avoit deus lances de lonc.

(3007–23)

(At the foot of that bridge, which was very dangerous, they dismounted and saw the treacherous water, black and roaring, swift and seething, and as repulsive and frightening as if it were the Devil's stream, and so dangerous and deep that there was nothing in all the whole world that, if it were to fall in, would not be lost just as if it had fallen into the Liver Sea. And the bridge across it was different from all others, there was not, nor ever will be, anything like it. But, if you were to ask me to the truth about it, there was never so dangerous a bridge nor so unsuitable a crossing. The bridge across the icy water was made of a sharp and gleaming sword, but it was strong and stiff and as long as two poles.)

To make things worse, on the other side of the bridge the company can make out two ferocious lions who stand ready to devour anyone who might manage to survive the crossing alive. Ignoring his friends' sensible advice to go back home, Lancelot crosses on his naked hands and feet, bleeding profusely, only to find out when he has reached the other side that the lions he thought he had seen have disappeared:

A la grant dolor c'on li fist  
s'an passe outre et a grant destrece;  
mains et genolz et piez se blece [. . .]

Lors li remanbre et resovient  
 des deux lyons qu'il i cuidoit  
 avoir veüz quant il estoit  
 de l'autre part; lors s'i esgarde:  
 n'i avoit nes une leisarde,  
 ne riens nule qui mal li face.

(3112–23)

(He crossed in great pain and with great distress, wounding his hands, his knees, and his feet. Then he remembers and recalls the two lions that he thought he had seen there when he was still on the other side. Then he looks: there was not even a lizard, or anything that could do him harm.)

The lions have been an optical illusion, which is dispelled as soon as Lancelot has made the heroic decision to venture the crossing.

As is typical in romance,<sup>19</sup> the objective realities of the outside world are subordinated to the inner world of the hero, so that obstacles and dangers mysteriously vanish once the hero has conquered his fear. But Chrétien's landscape is also patently modelled on the religious otherworld, where (according to many visitors' reports) souls must go across a perilous bridge to reach heaven. The *locus classicus* for the motif of the bridge-test is Gregory's *Dialogues* (c.600), which reports the vision of a certain soldier, who in a near-death experience found himself transported to the otherworld:

pons erat, sub quo niger adque caligosus foetoris intolerabilis nebulam exhalans fluvius decurrebat. transacto autem ponte, amoena erant prata [. . .] erat in praedicto ponte probatio, ut quisquis per eum iniustorum vellit transire, in tenebroso foetentique fluvio laberetur; iusti viro, quibus culpa non obsisterit, securo per eum gressu ac libero ad loca amoena pervenirent.

(IV, 37)<sup>20</sup>

(There was a bridge, underneath which there ran a black and murky river which gave off a cloud of intolerable stench, but beyond the bridge there were pleasant meadows [. . .] on that aforesaid bridge there was a trial, that if anyone who was unjust wanted to cross it, he would fall into the dark and stinking river; while anyone just, who was not impeded by guilt, could go across it safely and without hindrance to the pleasant places.)

The basic outline of Chrétien's Sword Bridge is already given in Gregory. First, there is the bridge across the dark and horrible river (symbolizing hell in Gregory), and, second, there is the mysterious interconnection between the outside world and inner integrity, between geographical position and moral disposition.

Chrétien's simile for the river – 'as if it were the Devil's stream' – clearly acknowledges his debt to visions of heaven and hell, but since Gregory's *Dialogues* gave wide currency to the motif of the Bridge Test,<sup>21</sup> it is difficult to be certain of Chrétien's exact source. Alexandre Micha has argued that Chrétien used Marie de France's vernacular version of *St Patrick's Purgatory*,<sup>22</sup> which also features a perilous bridge:

Tant le traistrent qu'il le menerent  
A une ewe, qu'il li mustrent,  
horrible et parfonde et puant [. . .]  
'Par desur cele ewe a un punt  
Mult perillus a cels qu'i vunt;  
sur cel punt te covient aler [. . .]  
Le punt vus estuet esprover  
cum vus porrez ultre passer [. . .]  
D'altre part li punz esteit teus,  
si estreiz que nuls huem mortels  
pur nule rien ne se tenist,  
Ço li fu vis, qu'il ne chaïst.  
(Marie de France, *Espurgatoire Seint Patriz*, 1325–46)

(So they [the devils] dragged him away to show him a horrible, deep, and stinking river [. . .] 'Over this river there is a bridge, perilous to those who cross it. You must cross this bridge [. . .]' The second danger was this: so narrow was it that no mortal could manage to stay on it, it seemed to him, without falling off.)

But the similarities are, I think, general, and the chronology makes direct borrowing from Marie extremely unlikely. Chrétien's *Charrete* is usually dated to the late 1170s,<sup>23</sup> while Marie's *Purgatoire* was probably written shortly after 1190, a decade (at most) after the composition of the Latin original, and so is therefore also unlikely to have been Chrétien's source.<sup>24</sup> I think it much more likely that Chrétien knew the equally popular *Visio Tnugdali* (c.1150), not only in view of the chronology but also because Chrétien and *Tundale's Vision* share some of the same sadistic details. Like *St Patrick's Purgatory*, *Tundale's Vision* describes the experiences of a knight who is taken on a tour of heaven and hell. In the course of his journey, Tundale has to cross a perilous bridge:

Euntes inde longius viderunt stagnum amplum valde et tempestuosum, eius fluctus elati non permitteant cernere coelum. Per lacum stagni pons multum angustus erat, et longus usque ad duo millaria. Latitudo eius erat unius palmi [. . .] Eratque tabula illa plena clavis ferreis acutissimis insertis, qui omnium transeuntium pedes perforabant. Omnes bestiae ad illum pontem conveniebant, ut inde cibum sumerent.<sup>25</sup>

(After they had gone a long way they saw a full and tempestuous lake, whose waters were so high that they did not allow the sky to be seen. Across the expanse of the lake there was an extremely narrow bridge, and two miles long. It was as wide as the palm of a hand. The surface of the bridge was pierced with very sharp iron nails, which slashed the feet of all those who would cross it. All the beasts assembled at the bridge, to take their dinner there.)

The similarities between this bridge and Chrétien's Sword Bridge are much closer: the surface is designed to cut the feet of anyone crossing it, slashing Lancelot and Tundale's feet as they go across; wild beasts assemble to feast on their flesh. And regardless of whether or not Chrétien knew *Tundale's Vision*, the measurement of the bridge's size in the latter (*et longus usque ad duo miliaria*) usefully alerts us to the possibility that the measurements of the Sword Bridge (*et avoit deus lances de lonc*) may be similarly precise: *lance* may not mean 'lance' in the modern sense (as seems to be generally assumed) but may represent the obsolete measurement of length, comparable to the 'spear' or 'pole' (five and a half yards).<sup>26</sup>

A second passage that suggests Chrétien's familiarity with visions of the otherworld is the wonderful episode of the magic tower in *Cligés*. Towards the end of the romance, the hero Cligés elopes with the Emperor's wife Fénice. To escape from her husband Fénice feigns death by drinking a magic potion and is buried, as a 'holy thing', in a sepulchre, guarded by the emperor's soldiers. At midnight, before the third day of her 'death', Cligés opens up the tomb while the guards are asleep. As D.D.R. Owen has argued, Chrétien has 'modelled the whole of this episode of shammed death and revival on the account, probably the scriptural account, of Christ's passion and resurrection'.<sup>27</sup> I think that these religious allusions continue after Fénice's 'resurrection', when the couple take refuge in a magic tower. Like the sepulchre, the tower has been built by the magician Jehan, for whom nothing is impossible. To help realize the lovers' fantasy that they can live together without interference from the outside world, he fashions for them a supernatural tower that has no visible entrances. Proud of his own artifice, Jehan explains the secret of his art:

Ceste torz, si con vos verrez,  
 Ne ja l'uis trover n'i porrez  
 Ne antree de nule part.  
 Par tel engin et par tel art  
 Est fez li huis de peirre dure  
 Que ja n'i troveroiz jointure.  
 (*Cligés*, 5521–6)<sup>28</sup>

(As you can see, in this tower you will never be able to find a door nor an entry in any way. The door is made of hard stone but in such a way that you will never be able to see the joints.)

When Cligés and Fenice get tired of being locked away in a tower, Jehan waves his magic wand again, opens another invisible door, and reveals to the couple the loveliest garden they have ever seen:

Lors vet Jehanz ovrir un huis  
Tel que je ne sai, ne ne puis  
La façon dire ne retraire.  
Nus forz Jehan le poïst faire.  
Ne ja nus dire ne seüst  
Que huis ne fenestre i eüst,  
tant con li huis ne fust overz,  
Si estoit celez et coverz.

(6297–6305)

(Then Jehan proceeds to open a door – I don’t know what kind of door, and cannot say how he did it. Only Jehan could have done it. And no one could have said there was a door or window in it, for, unless the door was open, it was hidden and concealed.)

To ensure the lovers’ privacy, the orchard, which has a pear tree for shade, is enclosed by a wall; and this wall, Chrétien assures us, is so high that no one can possibly scale it:

Et li vergiers est clos antor  
de haut mur qui tient a la tor,  
Si que riens nule n’i montast.

(And the garden was enclosed by a high wall connected to the tower, so that no one could mount it.)

All this is too good to be true, as Chrétien knew, and the fantasy is promptly punctured when the couple are discovered by a knight who climbs up the wall. ‘At this point’, writes Peter Haidu, ‘we exit quickly from this *locus amoenissimus*, this hidden paradise on earth, this magical creation.’<sup>29</sup> Haidu’s term for the magical tower and garden, ‘this hidden paradise on earth’, is very apt, perhaps more so than he himself realizes. For just as in the preceding episode of Fénice’s death and resurrection, Chrétien flirts outrageously with sacred analogues. The enclosed garden and the fruit tree need no comment, but some other hints do. When Jehan first takes Cligés round the castle, his words evoke paradise itself:

‘Sire’, fet il, ‘ci ous nos somes,  
N’ot onques de trestoz les homes  
Que Dex a fez fors que nos deus,  
Et s’est si aesiez cist leus  
Con vos verroiz jusqu’a n’a gaires.’

(5553–7)

(‘My Lord’, he said, ‘no one created by God has ever set foot in this place apart from we two, and the place is most agreeable, as you will soon see.’)

Adam and Eve might have said that to each other.

The interesting detail concerning the absence of any visible doors, windows, or indeed joints of any sort is another hint. This motif is commonplace in vision literature.<sup>30</sup> To my knowledge, it first occurs in the apocryphal *Shepherd of Hermas* (2nd cent. CE), which describes the building of the great tower of the righteous: ‘The stones fitted in their joining with the other stones; and they adhered so closely one with another that their joining could not possibly be detected; and the building of the tower appeared as it were built of one stone’ (V.3.ii).<sup>31</sup>

An amplified and widely available description of the jointless walls surrounding the fields of paradise can be found in Bede’s story of Drythelm’s vision in his *Ecclesiastical History*:

Cumque me in luce aperto duceret, vidi ante nos murum permaximum, cuius neque longitudine hinc vel inde neque altitudine ullus esse terminus videretur. Coepi autem mirari quare ad murum accederemus, cum in eo nullum ianuam uel fenestram uel ascensum alicubi conspicerem. Cum ergo pervenissemus ad murum, statim nescio quo ordine fuimus in summitate eius.<sup>32</sup>

(When he led me in open light, I saw before us an extremely high wall. There seemed to be no limit to its length and height in every direction. I began to wonder why we were headed towards it, since I could see no door, no window, nor any ascent anywhere in it. But when we had reached the wall, we suddenly stood on top of it – how I do not know.)

The *Vision of Tundale*, from which Chrétien may have got the idea of a Sword Bridge, gave the motif even wider currency:

Et cum paululum processissent, viderent murum nimis altum et nimis praeclarem [. . .] Et cum nulla porta ibi apparet, Tundalus tamen nescius quomodo intravit et circumspiciens vidit choros sanctorum.<sup>33</sup>

(And after they had walked a little further, they saw a wall very high and very bright [. . .] And although no door was visible in it, Tundale entered, how he did not know, and looking around he saw the choirs of saints.)

The possibility that Chrétien was familiar with such episodes may explain the curious dénouement of the tower episode in *Cligés*. Just thirty lines after Chrétien has told us that the wall is insurmountable (*riens nule n’i montast*), a knight called Bertrand, who happens to be hawking in the vicinity, does the impossible, without apparent effort:

Tantost se vet au mur aerdre  
Et fet tant que oltre s’an passe.

Soz l'ante vit dormir a masse  
Fenice et Cligés nu a nu.  
(6360–3)

(Then he begins to climb the wall until he comes to the top. Beneath the tree he sees Fenice and Cligés sleeping naked in each other's arms.)

Recognized by Bertrand as the infamous runaways, Cligés and Fenice must flee and leave behind their fantasy world: Paradise Lost.

Gaston Paris made an essential point about the passage when he protested: 'Ici l'incohérence est vraiment par trop choquante: comment ce mur infranchissable devient-il tout à coup si facile à franchir?' ('Here the incoherence is really far too shocking: how can this unscalable wall suddenly become so easy to climb?').<sup>34</sup> Peter Haidu quite properly comes to Chrétien's defence by arguing that the 'incoherence' allows Chrétien to celebrate the artist's licence in the world of his own making: writers of fiction can build castles in the air and shatter the illusion when they please. But the analogues from Bede and the *Vision of Tundale* also enable us to appreciate the enigma as a humorous variation on the fantastical approaches to heaven in vision literature, where climbing the wall of paradise seems impossible at one moment, but is mysteriously achieved in the next – 'how I do not know'.

Writing about the hyperbolic tendencies of romance in general, Pamela Gradon observes that:

The superlatives of the romance technique [...] remove the narrative from the realm of common experience [...] And as they move from the realms of common experience the romance writers, of necessity, move into the realms of analogy: those realms in which, as in the realm of religious experience, actuality can be described only by metaphor.<sup>35</sup>

No metaphor illustrates this movement away from 'common experience' better than that of heaven. Whether it be in the simile of *Orfeo*, in Erceldoune's confusion of the fairy mistress with the 'Qwene of heven', or in description of castles with twelve jewels, or twelve gates and twelve walls (inspired by St John's and St Paul's Apocalypse), heaven dazzles the imagination, and medieval writers of romance were drawn, and draw us, towards heaven for that reason. The greatest French poet of romance, Chrétien de Troyes, brings the otherworld into his romances with characteristic audacity. D.D.R. Owen has shown that the plots and situations of the *Chevalier de la charrete* and *Cligés* show Chrétien thinking, methodically and irreverently, in eschatological terms. His allusions to visions of the otherworld are verbal realizations of this way of thinking. The episode of the Sword Bridge in his *Charrete* was evidently inspired by visions of the otherworld. I have suggested that he may have got the idea from the *Vision of Tundale* rather than from Marie de France's *Espurgatoire*. In *Cligés*, Jehan's magical tower is like a lovers' paradise, and Chrétien may have

encouraged that comparison by creating a number of similarities between Cligés and Fénice's hideout and heaven (the tower without doors or joints, the surmounting of the insurmountable wall). Chrétien was, I think, envisaging heaven; and in exiling the lovers from their paradise he may have wanted to remind us that we cannot have our heaven on earth.

## Notes

- 1 Two good general studies of visions of the otherworld are H.R. Patch, *The Other World According to Descriptions in Medieval Literature*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950, and P. Dinzelbacher, *Vision und Visionsliteratur im Mittelalter*, Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1981. For a fuller bibliography (providing comprehensive coverage of the Middle English tradition, and a select bibliography of writings on Latin and continental visions) see R. Easting, *Visions of the Other World in Middle English*, Annotated Bibliographies of Old and Middle English Literature, 3, Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1997. A convenient anthology of visions in translation is E. Gardiner (ed.) *Visions of Heaven and Hell*, New York: Ithaca, 1989.
- 2 For example, in J. Burke Severs and A.E. Hartung (eds) *Manual of the Writings of Middle English*, New Haven: University of Connecticut Press, 1967–, otherworld visions are treated in a section on saints' legends (in vol. 2).
- 3 The point has been made by E. Willson, *The Middle English Visits to the Other World and their Relation to the Metrical Romances*, Chicago: University of Chicago Libraries, 1917.
- 4 M.J. Curley (ed. and trans.) *Saint Patrick's Purgatory; A Poem by Marie de France*, Tempe: Arizona State University Press, 1997, p.33. All subsequent quotations and translations from Marie's *Espurgatoire Seint Patriz* are taken from this edition.
- 5 See R. Easting (ed.) *St Patrick's Purgatory*, EETS OS 298, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. This edition contains a good discussion of the 'romance elements', in Easting's phrase (see pp.lv–lvii).
- 6 A.J. Bliss (ed.) *Sir Orfeo*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1954. I have adopted Bliss's suggested emendation of *auowed* to *anowrned*.
- 7 A. Brandl (ed.) *Thomas of Erceldoune*, Berlin: Wiedmann, 1880.
- 8 Brandl, *Thomas of Erceldoune*, p.24.
- 9 C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964, p.122.
- 10 All references to the Bible are to the Douay version.
- 11 Benoît de Sainte-Maure, *Roman de Troie*, L. Constans (ed.), 4 vols, Paris: SATF, 1904–12.
- 12 E. Faral, *Recherches sur les sources latines des contes et romans courtois du Moyen Age*, Paris: Champion, 1913, pp.352–3.
- 13 For a fuller discussion see A. Putter, 'Walewein in the Otherworld and the Land of Prester John', in B. Besamusca and K. Busby (eds) *Originality and Tradition in the Middle Dutch Roman van Walewein*, *Arthurian Literature* 1999, vol. 17, 79–99, reprinted in *Digitale Bibliotheek der Nederlandse Letteren*, 2004: <http://dbnl.org/tekst/>.
- 14 D.F. Johnson and G.H.M. Claasens (eds) *Roman van Walewein*, *Arthurian Archives*, VI, Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2000.
- 15 T. Silverstein (ed.) *Visio Sancti Pauli*, London: Christophers, 1935, p.5.
- 16 M.R. James (trans.) *St Paul's Apocalypse*, in Gardner (ed.) *Visions*, pp.30–3.
- 17 M. Roques (ed.) *Le chevalier de la charrete*, *Classiques français du moyen âge*, 86, Paris: Champion, 1983.
- 18 R.C. Johnston and D.D.R. Owen (eds) *Two Old French Gauvain Romances*, Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1972, p.4.

- 19 As Erich Auerbach remarked, in romance the world is 'specifically designed to give the knight an opportunity to prove himself': 'The Knight Sets Forth' in his *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, W. Trask (trans.), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953, p.136.
- 20 U. Moricca (ed.) *Gregorii Magni Dialogi*, Rome: Instituto Storico Italiano, 1924, pp.278–9.
- 21 There is an excellent study of the motif by P. Dinzlacher, *Die Jenseitsbrücke im Mittelalter*, Vienna: Verband der wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaften Österreichs, 1973.
- 22 A. Micha, 'Sur les sources de la *Charrette*', *Romania*, 1950, vol. 71, 345–58.
- 23 See A. Fourier, 'Encore la chronologie des oeuvres de Chrétien de Troyes', *Bulletin Bibliographique de la Société Internationale Arthurienne*, 1950, vol. 2, 69–88. A later date (1188) has been suggested by C. Luttrell (who thinks *Erec* post-dates Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus*). For references and a good summary of the scholarship see J.J. Duggan, *The Romances of Chrétien de Troyes*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001, pp.8–23.
- 24 On the date of Marie's *Espurgatoire* see the introduction by Curley (ed.), *Saint Patrick's Purgatory*. Marie de France refers to 'Saint Malachy' (l. 2074), who was officially canonized in 1190. For the date of the Latin original see R. Easting, 'The Date and Dedication of the *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*', *Speculum*, 1978, vol. 53, 778–881.
- 25 I cite Tundale's vision from Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum Historiale*, Douay, 1624, pp.1127–33.
- 26 See A. Tobler and E. Lommatzsch, *Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch*, Berlin, Steiner, 1925–, s.v. *lance*. The passage from Chrétien's *Charrete* is not given amongst the examples.
- 27 D.D.R. Owen, 'Profanity and its Purpose in Chrétien's *Cligés* and *Lancelot*', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 1970, vol. 6, 37–48 (40).
- 28 A. Micha (ed.) *Cligés*, *Classiques français du moyen âge*, 84, Paris: Champion, 1982.
- 29 P. Haidu, *Aesthetic Distance in Chrétien de Troyes; Irony and Comedy in Cliges and Perceval*, Geneva: Droz, 1968, p.101.
- 30 In addition to the examples below, see Boso of Durham's vision (described in Robert Easting's chapter).
- 31 J.B. Lightfoot (ed. and trans.) *The Apostolic Fathers*, London: Macmillan, 1891. As noted by Beverly Kienle in her chapter, *The Shepherd of Hermas* was widely disseminated in the Middle Ages.
- 32 Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (eds and trans.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969, pp.492–3.
- 33 Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum Historiale*, p.1132.
- 34 G. Paris, *Mélanges de littérature française du moyen âge*, Paris: Champion, 1912, p.305.
- 35 P. Gradon, *Form and Style in Early English Literature*, London: Methuen, 1971, p.226.

# Index

This index contains the names of medieval authors and anonymous medieval texts, as well as small number of references to significant historical persons and places. The index also covers the main topics and themes addressed in the book. Modern scholars discussed or named in the text are included but the index does not include names cited in bibliographical references or general acknowledgements.

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