

## Transformations of Life and Death in Medieval Visions of the Other World: A Response to Fritz Kemmler\*

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In his article, Fritz Kemmler examines three visionary accounts, originally composed in Latin, that describe journeys to the other world, i.e. to hell, purgatory and heaven, and the return to life on earth. These texts are part of a large body of visionary literature, stretching from the *Visio Sancti Pauli* (late fourth century, translated into Middle English in the twelfth century) to the *Vision of Edmund Leversedge* (1465), and have attracted scholarly attention in recent years.<sup>1</sup>

Visions of the other world show a number of similarities throughout the centuries, striking parallels even with latter-day near-death experiences, as Carol Zaleski and Peter Dinzeltbacher have shown.<sup>2</sup> Dinzeltbacher compares medieval with latter-day visions and concludes that such phenomena seem to have occurred more frequently in the Middle Ages than today and that people then were far less reluctant to believe in the truth of these visions or to change their lives as a result of such experiences (*Mittelalterliche Visionsliteratur* 5-6). Whereas we might expect modern society to lock people who claim to see or hear divine revelations away in mental homes, visionaries such as Hildegard von Bingen were taken seriously by their contemporaries, and their visionary accounts were distributed and discussed by prominent theologians. Comparing medieval with contemporary out-of-body experiences, Dinzeltbacher recognizes identical structural

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For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debate/medieval-visions-of-the-other-world/>>.

elements such as the separation of body and soul, the encounter with an otherworldly guide or the transition from darkness to light. These elements are, however, experienced differently: medieval visionaries claim to have seen Jesus, the Virgin Mary or angels whereas our contemporaries speak more frequently of a divine source of light. The devil, present in most medieval visions of the other world, has by and large disappeared from modern accounts. These differences can be explained if we consider the differences in theology and iconography (*Mittelalterliche Visionsliteratur* 11): spiritual truths were propagated far more vividly than today, which explains the many concrete descriptions of otherworld topography in medieval visions; the reports of visionaries, inversely, influenced the iconography of their times.

At the beginning of his article, Kemmler suggests that “the process of restoration from death is accompanied by pain on various levels” (129), which accounts for his choice of title (“Painful Restoration”). Looking at a number of medieval visions, however, it does not seem as if the visionary’s return from temporary death to life on earth was a particularly painful experience. In his discussion of the *Visio S. Fursei*, Kemmler interprets the visionary’s marks of burning to be a result of his restoration from death (133). The burning, however, does not happen as a consequence of his return, but rather is due to an offence committed during his lifetime—Fursey once accepted a gift from a dying sinner. According to Kemmler, Thurkill, another visionary, also suffers a “painful restoration” because he shows reluctance to return to his former life once he has experienced the glory of paradise (140). “Painful restoration” would have to refer to the visionary’s reclamation from sin (the “death of the soul”)<sup>3</sup> by witnessing the tortures of purgatory and sometimes even experiencing tortures himself.

The visions written, copied and distributed throughout the Middle Ages were meant to warn people of the dangers of indulging in a life of sin. Accordingly, they do not describe an ‘other’ world in the strictest sense of the word; the visions allegedly experienced beyond the boundary of death instead reflect life *in this world*. By depicting infer-

nal 'transformations' of the lives of sinners, medieval visions accuse the mores of their times and promote spiritual reform.

A chronological and cross-cultural comparison of the way questions of death and dying are dealt with results in basically three distinct attitudes.<sup>4</sup> In the first of them, philosophers in ancient Rome and Greece such as Democritus and Epicurus accepted the finality of human life and negated the possibility of life after death, which on the one hand spares us the threat of hell and damnation, but leaves us on the other hand desperate when it comes to the deeper sense of our life on earth. Reflections on the transience of life have led philosophers and poets to dedicate themselves to the joys of life on earth ("Carpe diem") as long as possible without burdensome anxieties of dreadful consequences to follow.

Cultures which believe in life after death offer a second and a third possibility, as they imagine the world beyond death either as a continuation of life on earth or as a realm which perpetuates life on earth but in changed circumstances (hence 'transformation'). Homer's underworld, where souls linger on in an unspectacular form of eternal life after drinking of Lethe, belongs to the first of these two. Concepts which found their way from Celtic mythology into medieval romance, such as the island where Sir Launfal enjoys compensation for the shortcomings of life at Arthur's court or other elfish worlds in which life after death (or abduction into fairy land) continues in eternal boredom are further examples.

Quite different is the third paradigm of transformation as presented in medieval visions. Concepts such as divine judgement, salvation and damnation, heaven or hell have, of course, a tradition reaching far back into the past.<sup>5</sup> In a number of instances the gospels promise salvation and warn against damnation with relatively sparse detail about what to expect. The authors of medieval visions, by contrast, possessed, as pointed out by Kemmler, "a considerable amount of creative imagination in describing the *terra incognita* of both heaven and hell" (131). Their accounts are spiced with gruesome detail and the contrast between the two alternative regions is extreme, which

made the concept of purgatory, as a sort of bridge between the two, a medieval necessity. Life after death as described in medieval visions reflects, and in one case (*Visio Thurkilli*) even re-enacts life on earth. Such accounts are, however, transformed in ways which point to the motives of those who recorded them in writing and propagated them: members of the clergy who catered both to spiritual curiosity and who wished to promote Christian ethics.

To illustrate this point I will discuss examples of the way lives are transformed in a number of medieval visions, those presented by Kemmler and others originally written in Middle English or translated into Middle English from Latin originals. These texts are (in chronological order): The *Visio S. Fursei* (731), the *Vision of Tundale* (1149), *St. Patrick's Purgatory* (1153), the *Vision of the Monk of Eynsham* (1196), the *Visio Thurkilli* (1206), *A Revelation of Purgatory* (1422), and the *Vision of Edmund Leversedge* (1465).

To begin, let us have a look at the way the boundary between this world and the next is transcended in medieval visions. With the exception of the knight Owein in *St. Patrick's Purgatory*, only souls can cross this border; the visionary's body remains behind in a state resembling death. The return of the visionary's soul from the other world leads to great confusion and excitement amongst bystanders.

The rather succinct report of the vision of St. Fursey simply states that the saint was "snatched from the body," returned to it two days later and taken out of it a second time.<sup>6</sup> *Tundale's Vision* describes the visionary's departure as a "transynge" (l. 41)<sup>7</sup>: he is not at all a saintly figure but a rich man "full of trecherye, / Of pryde, [of] ire & [of] enuye" (ll. 23-24, square brackets in original). His body lies as if dead,<sup>8</sup> with only a little warmth on the left side which leaves his friends in a quandary as to his state. Tundale's soul returns after a couple of days, rejoins his body and the visionary is restored to life. The Monk of Eynsham's vision occurs likewise at a time when the visionary suffers from a severe illness. His brothers find him lying prostrate in the chapter house on Good Friday as if he were dead until his body returns to life on the morning of Easter Sunday. Edmund Leversedge

also leaves his body during extreme sickness. Only Thurkill leaves this world in good health after receiving his heavenly guide as a guest in his house. The exception to the rule that only souls can cross the boundary between this world and the next, the knight Owein in *St. Patrick's Purgatory*, is not at all a saintly figure, as pointed out by Kemmler (135). He enters the nether world voluntarily, in flesh and blood, as an act of penance, after fifteen days of fasting and prayer, despite all warnings of the bishop. This is in fact not a vision but a physical experience, as Owein feels the tortures of purgatory on his body, a fact which leaves us confused because it implies that death is not a precondition for entering the nether world.

The most prominent occurrence in the other world as described in medieval visions is the visionary's confrontation with sins committed during his lifetime, which entail punishment according to their gravity. Some of the visionaries are sinners, some saints, some stand in-between. Thurkill, for example, has not tithed his crop properly and is therefore punished with smelling a most foul stench which emanates from the pitch of hell. Edmund Leversedge is reproached with dressing gaudily, his punishment—temptation rather than torture—addresses only the sin of gallantry, which has led the more recent editor of the vision, Wiesje F. Nijenhuis, to judge that Leversedge's visionary account "reads much more like an ego-document than most medieval visions of the afterlife" (93). Leversedge's vision seems to owe much to contemporary *ars moriendi* literature, to sermons and devotional literature, whereas the standard *topoi* of visionary literature, conventionalised elements such as the otherworldly guide or the torments witnessed by the visionary, appear in truncated form (cf. Nijenhuis 92). In contrast, when confronted with the consequences of his sins, Tundale repents his wickedness and vows to lead a pure life after his return to earth. Apart from witnessing hellish tortures, he himself must undergo punishment for his misdeeds: he once stole a cow that he now has to lead over a long and narrow bridge, a penalty which hurts his feet and puts him at risk of falling into the mouths of nightmarish beasts below.



The above mentioned scene in the *Visio S. Furseyi* is also relevant in this context. As the saint is on his way to heaven, a demon seizes one of the tortured souls and hurls it at Fursey, "hitting him and scorching his shoulder and jaw."<sup>9</sup> The visionary is involved in this man's punishment because he had received some of the dying man's clothing upon his death. The fact that the saint bears the marks of burning suffered on his way to heaven *after* being restored to his body shows that not only the visionary's deeds on earth determine the state of his soul in the nether world, but that experiences in the realm beyond death likewise affect his life after he returns. Thus, whenever he recounts his vision, he sweats as if in the midst of summer.

After their return, visionaries change their ways of life (Owein, for example, departs on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and devotes the rest of his life to religion; Tundale asks to be taken under monastic order) and warn their audiences to forsake sin (e.g. Edmund of Leversedge). Thurkill at first is reluctant to share his experience, but does so after being admonished by St. Julian, revealing an eloquence rather unusual for a simple peasant. The devils, interestingly, are loathe to give Thurkill's spirit access to the infernal regions in which he could be an eyewitness to torture, arguing that this knowledge, if spread amongst mankind, would threaten the 'job security' of the infernal workforce since human beings would certainly refrain from sin if they were to learn its dreadful consequences. Some visions offer suggestions for what can be done to relieve suffering souls from their pains: the *Vision of the Monk of Eynsham*, for instance, promotes praying and offering masses for the dead. *A Revelation of Purgatory* gives particularly detailed instructions of what could be done to relieve the soul of a fellow nun tormented in purgatory, such as offering specified masses, psalms and hymns. The *Vision of Charles the Fat*, an earlier text composed in Latin,<sup>10</sup> goes so far as to interfere with contemporary politics, warning against partaking in wars and announcing the succession of the Holy Roman Empire (*Visio Caroli* 112-16).

These instances point to the fact that this world and the world beyond death are interrelated, a belief which is best illustrated in the

*Vision of Tundale*. In this quite substantial visionary account, hell is divided into compartments for the punishments of particular sins, beginning with murderers, followed by spies and traitors, and followed by the proud, the greedy, robbers and thieves, gluttons and fornicators<sup>11</sup>: Tundale is shocked to see monks amongst the tormented. This reaction, we could argue, reflects contemporary suppositions such as the repressed realities in medieval society at the time of composition. The ranking of sins into mortal or venial ones, along with the prominence of particular 'crimes' such as 'fornication'<sup>12</sup> is accomplished in accordance with the medieval concept of the Seven Deadly Sins or Capital Vices. Heaven is likewise subdivided, with the faithfully married on the lowest level, martyrs, virgins and the defenders and builders of churches on the upper levels.

The conditions of this world may also be reflected inversely in the nether world, as in the *Vision of the Monk of Eynsham*, where those who lived in worldly dignity suffer worst, especially judges and prelates,<sup>13</sup> which reflects the words of the evangelist Matthew (19:30): "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." The 'other' world thus mirrors the state of this world and the eschatology of medieval visions reverses the social order of the here and now.

In his analysis of the *Visio Thurkilli*, Kemmler points us to a rather peculiar passage on the 'theatre of hell.' Here devils view a spectacle that involves sinners re-enacting their sins. At first a proud man is forced to perform gestures of pride such as stretching his neck or rising on tiptoe—to the great merriment of his infernal audience, who afterwards tear the damned soul to pieces. Next a priest who neglected his duties is mutilated by the devils. A soldier provides a particularly entertaining spectacle when he shakes his spear against the devils and drives his horse to meet them, and they gleefully dismount him and tear him up. A corrupt lawyer accepts presents and money which suddenly becomes burning hot. He has to swallow and throw up the coins before recollecting them all over again. The climax of this 'show' is undoubtedly the scene of two adulterers who perform their act of love to the amusement of the devils. Their love turns to

hatred and they begin tearing at each other in a frenzy. Kemmler believes that this may have been considered too “licentious” for the ears of laymen in the early thirteenth century (140-41), which might be the reason that the text was locked away and has been preserved in only four manuscripts. Unlike *Tundale* or the *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*, it was not translated into the vernacular languages or spread over Europe. This vision imagines the souls of deceased sinners stuck in their sins; their suffering in hell reflects their deeds on earth. Thus, their punishments are to be frozen in states of guilt, a nightmarish vision which reminds us of the creatures Sir Orfeo meets at the court of the king of fairies, frozen in their agonies of death.

I would like to conclude with reflections on the relationship between this world and the next and the attitude towards death as shown in the texts discussed above. In some respects, visions of the other world, often classified with saints’ lives, are similar to the Middle English death lyrics<sup>14</sup> which likewise warn the reader against the dangers of dying in sin and eternal damnation.<sup>15</sup> The visions give us a taste of this dreaded life after death, the quality of which depends on the life we have led on earth. If we are to live both here and there, we may ask, which of the two lives is the real one, and which the reflection? Whereas Middle English lyrics point to the transience of this life and conclude that life after death is our true existence, the visions present life after death as a reflection of life on earth.

Some visions go so far as to locate the entrance to this ‘other’ world in the west. *St. Patrick’s Purgatory*, for example, names Station Island as a concrete location. With the exception of the visionary, however, no one can enter the other world while still alive on earth. One of two major differences between this world and the other is of course that in death, the dividing line, our souls leave our bodies. It may therefore strike us to read in the visions that souls are punished in a very corporeal manner, with physical tortures. The ‘bodies’ of souls (the phrase as such is paradoxical) are mutilated, torn apart or swallowed by infernal monsters, but, to the despair of the damned soul, always restored so that the torture can go on infinitely. The other difference is



that souls in hell no longer have an opportunity to change anything about the spiritual state in which they left this world. They are 'frozen' in their sinfulness and suffer eternal punishment for misdeeds committed in time.

As Kemmler has pointed out, the gospels do not mention details of life in heaven or hell. Medieval visions of the other world propose to fill these gaps with drastic images of physical pain. They are a long-lived, widespread (ca. 200 manuscript copies of the *Visio Tundali* have survived!) and highly influential medieval genre. They certainly offer more than mere evidence of the religious mindset of our ancestors; many of them are carefully crafted works of literature which address their readers' interests and needs in multiple ways and deserve a good deal more attention from modern scholarship.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I would like to mention Peter Dinzeltbacher's contributions to this field. His publications include *Die Jenseitsbrücke im Mittelalter*, *Vision und Visionsliteratur im Mittelalter* and *Mittelalterliche Visionsliteratur: Eine Anthologie*.

<sup>2</sup>See Zaleski; and Dinzeltbacher, "Mittelalterliche Vision und moderne Sterbeforschung." Dinzeltbacher also distinguishes between singular visions of the other world (type 1), most of which date from the early centuries until 1200, and visions experienced by medieval mystics (type 2) which became prominent from the twelfth century onwards; see *Mittelalterliche Visionsliteratur* 21. The precondition is usually a severe illness, which links visions of this type closely with the accounts of near-death experiences collected by psychologists such as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in the twentieth century.

<sup>3</sup>Kemmler outlines this concept on 130.

<sup>4</sup>On this topic see Dinzeltbacher, "Mentalitätsgeschichtliche Aspekte"; and Galler.

<sup>5</sup>See, e.g., Minois.

<sup>6</sup>"raptus est e corpore [...] reductus in corpore," *Bede's Ecclesiastical History* 270-71.

<sup>7</sup>*The Vision of Tundale*, l. 41. *The Vision of Tundale* is said to have taken place in Cork, Ireland in 1148, and was originally composed in Latin (*Visio Tnugdali*) by

Marcus, an Irish Benedictine monk, in Regensburg and translated into numerous languages including Middle English. The Middle English translation survives in five manuscripts, one of them is British Library Cotton Caligula A ii, used by Mearns for his 1985 ed. According to the online *Middle English Dictionary*, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED46847>, the word “transynge” designates “an intermediate state between life and death; the passing from life to death; also, a stupefied condition, trance.” One of the manuscripts reads “travaylinge”; see Mearns’s ed. 82.

<sup>8</sup>“And he laye deed þer as a stane” (l. 102).

<sup>9</sup>See Kemmler 132-33; the incident is told in *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History* on 273-75.

<sup>10</sup>The vision occurred in 885 and is recorded in the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* of William of Malmesbury (c. 1095-1143); see Gardiner 247.

<sup>11</sup>Gardiner points out that this description of hell is the most fully and consistently developed one before Dante’s *Inferno* (253).

<sup>12</sup>The *Visio Wettini* from 824 shows a particular interest in homosexuality (“sodomy”) on which the visionary blames the spread of diseases.

<sup>13</sup>“For Y sawe them that were clerkys, monkys, noonys, lay-men and lay-wemen, so mekyl lesse ordende and put to peynys, howe mekyl the lesse they had before of worldely dygnyte and prosperyte. In trowthe, Y sawe hem greuyd in a more specyal bittirnesse of peynys aboue other, the whyche Y knewe in my tyme were iugys and prelatys of other”; *The Revelation of the Monk of Eynsham* ll. 696-702.

<sup>14</sup>See *English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century, Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century and Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century*.

<sup>15</sup>“Three Sorrowful Things” is an example of the way Middle English lyrics articulate the fear of death:

Wanne ich þenche þinges þre  
 ne mai neure bliþe be:  
 þat on is ich sal awe,  
 þat oþer is ich ne wot wilk day.  
 þat þridde is mi meste kare,  
 i ne woth nevre wuder i sal fare.      (*English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century* 19)

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