THE REPRESENTATION OF THE AFTERLIFE FROM HOMER TO DANTE

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This dissertation was written at the end of the first year of my doctoral research into the popular representation of the afterlife before Dante and its relationship to the *Comedy*. The aim of the dissertation was to provide a convenient summary of the popular afterlife tradition from Homer to Dante.

My doctoral thesis was published by Cambridge University Press as *Dante and the Medieval Other World* in 1990, and reprinted in 2007. In 2012 it was translated into Italian by Luca Marzocchi and published by Salerno Editrice as *Dante e l'Aldilà medievale*. The book includes a chronological table of the principal represeentations of the other world in both literature and art, along with brief summaries of the main texts, but the present essay provides a more detailed and perhaps readable account.

Some of the Latin texts have subsequently been translated into English and collected in Eileen Gardiner's helpful collection *Visions of Heaven & Hell Before Dante*¸ Italica Press 1989.

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PART I
REPRESENTATIONS OF THE AFTERLIFE FROM HOMER TO ST PAUL

1. Belief in Survival after Death

For very many centuries before the first written representations of the abode of the dead, people had held strong beliefs concerning survival after death and the nature of the realm of the dead. The first signs of these beliefs occur in the early practice of burial: the Neanderthals are known to have buried the dead with respect, and throughout the prehistoric age individuals were buried with such objects as might serve them in their future existence. The practice perhaps reached a climax in the tombs of Ur in Mesopotamia around 2000 B.C., where royalty were provided not only with furniture, musical instruments, crockery, and ornaments, but also with freshly killed servants.

The first scholar to observe that this early practice of burial, in its simplest form, must have been the origin of the belief in the underworld of the dead was Cicero. In his *Tusculan Disputations* Cicero remarks upon the smallness of the step required to lead man from mere observance of a rite to belief in survival after that rite: 'In terram enim cadentibus corporibus iisque humo tectis, e quo dictum est humari, sub terra censebant reliquam vitam agi mortuorum.' (I xvi) From the general belief in the survival of the dead, the view gained strength that the tomb became the new dwelling of the departed. Thus Etruscan burial places were invariably built on the same plan as their houses, and Roman epitaphs clearly stated that the inhabitant of the tomb lived on them. One reads: 'domum aeternum ubi aevum degerent' (quoted Cumont 1922, 48). The practice of feeding the dead, in their tombs, with fresh food and drink grew up in Greece, and indeed survived in the Balkans until the last century.

From this it was but short step to the belief that the dead live on not in the tomb but in a collective underground land. This land features in the religion of many peoples, from the Egyptians onwards. Hence the belief developed that the tomb functioned as a kind of antechamber, from which the dead man gained access to vast caverns beneath the crust of the earth. At this point the afterlife becomes a suitable subject for literature; and before it underwent further transformations, the subterranean underworld was recorded in the writings of the Old Testament and of Homer.

However, before passing to the early Greek poets, it will be perhaps helpful to examine briefly the beliefs and practices of the ancient Egyptians; these precede, chronologically, the Greeks, and were later to exert a profound influence on them and thus on all later literature.

2. Egyptian Practice and Belief

There are several important aspects of Egyptian belief which from the earliest times down to the close of classical paganism influenced Western culture; these are most conveniently dealt with as they occur, but can be profitably outlined here.

Firstly, Ancient Egypt was the first society to develop the concept of sin on earth and retribution after death; from this concept followed naturally the idea of a specific place of torment in which that retribution should be exacted. The motif of the weighing of souls, which lasted right through to the Middle Ages, derives from here. By about 2400 B.C. it was expected that a man would have to defend himself against accusations after death, and from 1600 onwards he was subjected to weighing in scales. Evidence of these beliefs is to be found in the texts left in the tombs, known collectively as the Book of the Dead; they often contain a long list of denials for the dead man to recite in his self-defence. By 300 B.C. it was believed that innocence alone guarantees a happy afterlife.

Secondly, the Egyptians had a number of mystery religions, foreshadowing those of classical Greece; these enhanced the belief in a happy afterworld, access to which was possible only to the initiated.

Thirdly, it was from the East in general, and Egypt in particular, that the doctrine of celestial immortality spread to the West; it was to have particular impact upon the later Greeks and upon Roman thought, carried principally by the mystery religions.

Finally, it was in Egypt that the concept of a descent to the underworld originated; the goddess Ishtar was the first to undertake such a journey. In Egypt too the pattern of a journey to the west had its first origin; it has been said that

'the Egyptian pattern of a journey to the West and the residence in an underworld heaven has been thought the origin of this pattern wherever else it occurs' (Jackson Knight 1970, p. 33).

3. Early Greek belief from Homer to Plato

Before the time of Homer, belief in a heaven with the name of Elysion had already become established, although it is not known exactly when it was first conceived. It may derive from the earlier Aegean civilization ruled by Crete. This heaven, variously known as the Elysian Fields, Isles of the Blessed, and Elysion or Elysium, is situated in a remote part of the world, on the earth’s surface or underground, or in the sky. Sometimes these various different locations were confused, and the dead were believed to survive both underground and in a land to the west. Initially the Elysian Fields may have represented the paradise to which the suitably qualified were admitted at death; by the time of Homer, however, they had become the dwelling of those related to the gods. Thus Menelaus is permitted to travel there, as son-in-law of Zeus, instead of joining all the other dead in the underworld.

The main passage in Homer, however, to deal with the realm of the dead occurs in Book XI of the *Odyssey*, which is concerned with the journey made by Odysseus at the instruction of Circe. After digging a trench and making the appropriate sacrifice blood was believed to be the seat of the soul and thus to revitalize the dead - Odysseus is able to question the dead who flock towards him, and principally the prophet Teiresias. Others follow: Odysseus's mother, then other noble women.

These dead are insubstantial, shadowy figures; Odysseus attempts to embrace his mother, but fails. There is little to define the location of the place, and little distinction between the various inhabitants. But three characteristics of the book are perhaps worthy of special attention. Firstly, the rivers mentioned; these constitute the only topographical description of the underworld - if indeed it is an underworld; Homer leaves us in some doubt concerning the extent to which the dead came to Odysseus or the extent to which he went to them. These rivers became part of the common stock of the underworld tradition. Secondly, Homer gives us the first representation of souls undergoing torment: we see Tityos, Tantalus and Sisyphus, who also recur in later literature, but who do not seem to fit very well into the overall conception of the shadowy world of obliteration; it has been suggested that they may have belonged to popular belief and thus could not be excluded from a complete description of the underworld (Cavendish 1977). Thirdly, Homer suggests that not all the dead come here; we see the ghost of Heracles and are told that he himself banquets with the gods. From Homer we are therefore left with a picture of a shadowy world of half life, with a suggestion of a place of torment, and another suggestion of a place for the hero.

Homer's representation of one underworld for all began, in the course of the sixth century B.C., to seem inadequate. People clearly began to feel that some form of reward or punishment was a logical necessity in the afterlife; this is the next stage in the development of the doctrine of the underworld, which we shall see had its parallel in the Hebrew civilisation. The medium for the development of these ideas was the various Greek mystery religions which grew up. In these mystery religions, dramatic performances formed a part of worship, in imitation of the Egyptian mysteries. It seems probable that these performances represented the future life, the rewards of Elysium and the torments of what became known as Tartarus. These soon developed into literary devices, with the aims of revealing the nature of the future life, and of descending into the depths to rescue people from the underworld.

The most famous of these mysteries were those of Eleusis, practised from before 600 B.C. to almost the end of the fourth century A.D. Others were the mysteries of Orphism, Pythagoreanism and the cult of Dionysus. All are connected with the Egyptian cults of Osiris, Isis and Mithras. All included rituals of purification, and emphasized the value of the ritual rather than of moral integrity beforehand. All are fertility and death cults, with the doctrine of reincarnation as an important element.

One of the most significant from the point of view of later belief is the mystery of Orphism, believed to have been founded by Orpheus, who descended to the underworld to bring back Eurydice. Initiates underwent ritual purification, and believed in successive reincarnations until such time as they would emerge as a pure spirit. They would then dwell among the stars. It was a movement of reform, and perhaps a necessary stage in any religion, representing as it does a change from ritual worship with sacrifices to a more spiritual relationship of the individual with the divinity. It was to have a profound impact on subsequent thought, introducing for the first time the concepts of personal sin, transmigration of souls and monotheism. In literature the writers it influenced most were Pindar, and then Plato. Pindar offers his readers the peaceful Isles of the Blessed where the virtuous dwell between successive reincarnations, and permanently thereafter; or, alternatively, a realm of suffering and punishment. But despite the new stress on virtue, the inhabitants of the Isles of the Blessed are predominantly rulers and high status individuals.

In the work of Plato, these Orphic beliefs form an undercurrent the extent of which is difficult to define. To this undercurrent was added that of Pythagoreanism, in many ways similar, the essential contribution of which was the

concept of transmigration into the bodies of animals. This was not Greek in origin, deriving possibly from Egypt, as Heterodotus states, or from India.

Plato has four main eschatological myths, which occur in the *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Republic* and *Phaedrus*. They are not entirely consistent one with another, and nor are they to be taken as literal statements of Plato's beliefs at any one time. But they do afford a number of interesting doctrines which were to be redeveloped in subsequent writings.

In the *Gorgias* myth, Plato is concerned chiefly with judgement after death. He outlines, through the character of Socrates, the system under Cronus, when men were judged while still alive, and assigned then to the Isles of the Blessed or to Tartarus, and explains the disadvantages of such a system, whereby the external trappings of the soul determined its fate. Socrates continues to expound the system under Zeus, who instituted Rhadamanthys, Aeacus and Minos as judges, to whom the naked soul is presented after death for judgement, blotched by its crimes or shining with its virtue.

In the *Phaedo*, the subject of which is the immortality of the soul, we are given a complex, partly allegorical, account of the topography of the afterworld and the various destinations available within it. Homer's rivers and seas are adopted and slightly transformed. The most important aspect of the myth, however, is the clear triple division of the dead. The incurably wicked are plunged into Tartarus for ever; those who lived indifferently are purged in the Acherusian lake, while the curably guilty are purged in Tartarus; and the exceptionally good go straight to a pure dwelling above (or, in the case of the philosopher, somewhere even better, details of which are not given). It does not require much imagination to see that this triple division re-emerge in Christian doctrine.

The third of Plato's eschatological myths comes in the *Republic*: the myth of Er the Pamphilian. It is an account of a journey made by Er after his death in battle and prior to his coming to life again twelve days later. It has three essential elements: the judgement of the dead, the cosmology of the universe, and the doctrine of reincarnation. Concerning the first of these, we are told that each soul must pay tenfold retribution for every crime committed in life, or will receive tenfold rewards; after a certain period in which this takes place, it will be reincarnated. Exceptionally wicked souls are denied this possibility. The nature of the structure of the universe is expressed in a highly obscure and allegorical manner; the fundamental concept seems to be that the eight spheres hang one inside another and emit a note of constant pitch. Finally, each soul is made to choose from a number of possible lives, under the supervision of the three Fates, and is sent, via a drink from the Lethe, back to earth.

The last of the myths, that of the *Phaedrus*, is also concerned with the doctrine of reincarnation. It constitutes a development with respect to the myth of Er; the lives available for choice to the souls are grouped into nine categories, in descending order of goodness; and reincarnations are interspersed with a thousand years of rewards or punishments. The philosopher is liberated after three earthly lives; otherwise after ten.

It is not possible to ascertain the precise debt of Plato to Orphism and Pythagoreanism; this remains a matter of debate. But the central concept of reincarnation derives from here, as do many of the details. Plato, in contrast to other writers on the subject of individual destiny after death, can be tied down neither to sources nor to definite doctrines; all that he states as indubitable is the doctrine of immortality. The rest has been described as 'such an imaginative picture of the afterlife of souls as will satisfy the ethical demand for discrimination between the righteous and the wicked' (Hackforth 1955, pp. 171-2).

4. Rome and the adoption of early Greek poetic belief

By the time that Greek influence began to reach the Roman world, there was already a firmly established set of ingredients for the depiction of the afterlife. The shades of the newly dead descend into the earth, where they receive judgement; they are then consigned either to Tartarus, the realm of punishment governed by Pluto, or to the Elysian Fields, the Isles of the Blessed from which they will depart for further reincarnations until such time as they attain sufficient purity to be granted permanent residence. This picture, together with other vital elements of Greek culture, including Orphism and Pythagoreanism, spread into Rome from the time of the first Greek settlements in Italy and Sicily. The Etruscans too contributed elements to Roman belief, which perhaps would not have developed very far if it had been left to its own devices. From the Etruscans, who belonged to an old Asiatic tradition and who emphasized the pains of hell rather than the delights of heaven, the Romans seem to have taken little directly; from the Greeks, on the other hand, an enormous amount. They adopted almost wholesale the mythological elements of the Greek underworld; a straight line leads us from Homer to Virgil and on to Statius, with subsidiary borrowings from Plato, Orphism and Pythagoreanism.

Virgil's depiction of the Homeric underworld comes in the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, where Aeneas, sent by the Cumaean Sibyl as Odysseus was by Circe, crosses the Acheron, ferried by the Greek Charon, meets a number of well-known shades, fails to embrace his father, as did Odysseus his mother, and returns to the living world. To this

Homeric picture, however, elements and refinements are added. The underworld includes both Tartarus and Elysium, the latter of which has its own underground sun - this doubtless a composite solution to the double location of Elysium, in both the underworld and the distant seas. The doctrine of transmigration is expounded by Anchises, who explains that Elysium contains many temporary inhabitants, and few permanent ones. Tartarus is to some extent divided into classes of the wicked; and it is for the first time preceded by a neutral realm, occupied by those whose death poses problems of classification.

In Plato's *Phaedo* there had been an area, the Acherusian lake, set aside for the indifferent, and Er had told us that he had discovered the fate of those who died in infancy, adding however that this did not seem worth revealing. But Virgil is the first to develop these suggestions; his neutral realm houses various problematic cases which will continue to give trouble well into the Middle Ages. These include children, those wrongly condemned to death, those who in innocence committed suicide, those whose death was caused by love, and those killed in battle. Virgil thus develops the doctrines of his Greek predecessors; 'in the eschatological passages of his poetry he all the time indicates that what he is saying is what Homer, Pythagoras, Pindar or Plato might have said if they had gone a step forward or had had the opportunity which lapse of time had given to him, Vergil, their inheritor' (Jackson Knight 1970, pp 127-28).

Virgil's successors followed closely in these footsteps. Ovid's scattered references to the afterlife are all traditional; Lucan and Statius too introduce few innovations. Lucan, however, is aware of the alternative beliefs; in a passage of his *Pharsalia* he outlines the tenets of the Druids:

> Soils nosse deos et caeli numina vobis
> Aut solis nescire datum; nemora alta remotis
> Incolitis lucis; vobis auctoribus umbrae
> non tacitas Erebi sedes Ditisque profundi
> Pallida regna petunt: regit idem spiritus artus
> Orbe allo.
> (Pharsalia I 452-57)

In Book VI he returns to the Homeric tradition; Pompey's son begs the witch Erichtho to summon Death to reveal the outcome of the war; she compromises by bringing back to life a soldier who has just died and descended to the underworld. He paints a picture of a shadowy realm, where no man is differentiated from his neighbour except in so far as all are divided between sunny Elysium and the gloomy remainder of Hades. In the ninth book, on the other hand, Homer's suggestion that Heracles dwelt in the air with the gods is taken up; we learn that the spirit of Pompey, on death, soared upwards towards the starry spheres, where it reached its final abode in the heart of Cato.

Statius too sticks to the Homeric and Virgilian tradition. Book IV is a direct descendant of the eleventh of the *Odyssey* and the sixth of the *Aeneid*. Its subject is the consultation of Tiresias by Polynices and Tydeus; Tiresias summons the inhabitants of Hades in order to discover the outcome of the struggle for Thebes. The ghost-like shades drift up, attracted by the blood of the sacrificed animals, and produce the required information; to ensure that they do not merely give an account of the nature of the underworld, Tiresias lists the things of which he is already aware and which he does not wish to hear. This list gives us a useful summary of the standard elements of Hades: it includes Scyllas, Centaurs, Giants, Tityos, Ixion, and two others who are obviously the Homeric Tantalus and Sisyphus. These are added to in the eighth book of the *Thebaid*, in which Amphiaraus the prophet is received into Hades; he meets Charon and the Styx, Pluto (the lord of Erebus) in judgement, Furies, Fates, Minos and others.

It is therefore clear that the early Greek poetic representations of the afterlife continued to exercise a considerable influence several centuries later in Rome. The poets who adopted the Greek legends were, however, not entirely representative of the thought of their times; simultaneously others were following the trend of more recent Greek thought.

5. Late Greek philosophy and its influence on Roman concepts of the afterlife

From the second century B.C. onwards, Greek philosophical ideas were adopted in Rome; these beliefs modified, and indeed largely destroyed, the previous concept of the nature of the afterlife. Democritus's theories of the disintegration of the body after death, Aristotle's emphasis on reason as the essence of humanity, and Epicurus's atomic theory all combined to introduce a new scepticism into Roman thought. This scepticism is best expressed in the writings of Lucretius and of Cicero.

Lucretius was a follower of Epicurus and his philosophical system; and in the *De rerum natura* he seeks to show how an Epicurean happiness can be attained without any belief in an afterlife; this he defines as the product of

superstition and fear, and the root of evil. He treats the subject of these beliefs in the third book, where he takes as his starting point the fact that we cease to exist after death; he then dismisses the concept of transmigration, arguing that even were the atoms which compose us to be reassembled in the same combination at some future time, we should no longer have our same identity, and thus cannot be said to survive. He condemns as illogical the universal fear of being devoured after death - a fear which in other writers and in popular belief generally gave rise to a large number of torments of hell which gradually became accepted as standard. Finally, his most interesting contribution to the subject of the afterlife lies in his allegorical interpretation of the torments popularly believed to exist there. The boulder which he slightly unorthodoxly attributes to Tantalus represents the fear of the gods and of one's own doom; the vultures plucking at the liver of Tityos are an externalization of the passion which devours him, and so on. This reinterpretation of the standard torments of Tartarus is important and interesting in several ways. Firstly, it constitutes a natural stage in the development of a religion, in which elements no longer literally acceptable are attributed with a symbolic meaning, which brings them back into the fold of contemporary beliefs. Secondly, Lucretius's work at this point constitutes an almost exact reversal of the beliefs and doctrines propounded in Plato's *Phaedo*, without seeming to do so; to Plato's conviction of the immortality of the soul he opposes a statement of its mortality, and to the Platonic expositions of the torments of the dead, of the happy existence in the Elysian Fields, and of transmigration he opposes an explanation which turns these into allegorical representations of the misery or happiness of human life on earth, or in the case of transmigration as simple irrelevancies. Although he does not fit clearly into any chronological line of development of beliefs on the afterlife - as do, for example, Homer, Virgil and Statius - these doctrines do not come to an end with Lucretius alone; both Boethius and then Dante conceive of the torments of the damned as being essentially an externalization of their own internal state. And such a doctrine is, as we shall see, not unrelated to the concept of what Dante is to call *contrapasso*.

Cicero is equally sceptical about the beliefs on the afterlife, but less original in his treatment of them; the first book of the *Tusculan Disputations* consists essentially in a critical survey of the various beliefs which have been held on the subject. His importance in this field lies in his very full exposition of Platonic theory, particularly that of the *Phaedo* which deals with the immortality of the soul; and in his explanation of the doctrines of the Stoics.

Stoicism to some extent rescued Roman philosophy from the conclusion that there was no real afterlife. In the late classical Greek period, Eastern thought had introduced the concept that beings might live on in space, among the stars; this is a long established doctrine in the East, dating from perhaps the sixth century B.C. It had already passed into Pythagorean theory; now it was to reach Rome through the Stoics. The Stoics believed that the entire world is animated by a divine fire, and therefore that the soul too was infused by this fiery principle. They, together with Lucretius, had concluded that even the future recombination of the same elements as had once formed on particular soul could not in any way constitute a rebirth; they also postulated that if the soul were animated by a fiery principle, it could not possibly descend into the earth on death, but would instead naturally ascend into the air. Here they continue to exist until at some time they dissolve into the elements which formed them. Cicero expounds this doctrine in the *Tusculan Disputations*: the soul ascends at death through the atmosphere; 'Quam regionem cum superavit animus naturamque sui similem contigit et agnovit, iunctis ex anima temui et ex ardore solis temperato ignibus insistit et finem altius se efferendi facit' (I xix). Here, in its natural home, it remains.

The other school of thought, much influenced by Stoicism, to preserve and develop belief in the afterlife was that of the Neo-Pythagoreans. Pythagoreanism itself had come to an end in the fourth century B.C.; it was now reborn in the first century B.C., first in Italy and then in Alexandria, where it received many eastern elements into its thought. In a sense, they too adopted the method used by Lucretius, not dismissing outright but allegorising; but they did so in a much less revolutionary manner. Although the term Neo-Pythagoreanism embraces a large number of different positions and beliefs, most of its followers seem to have believed that the soul rose after death into the air; it passed through the atmosphere (known allegorically as hell in previous myth) and moved on up to the sphere of the moon, passing through other spheres which had been presented allegorically as the journey across the Styx in Charon’s boat; here it reached the boundary of immortality and mortality, and it is hence to be concluded that the moon, and its companion the sun, represent the mythical Elysian Fields and Isles of the Blessed. Hades is the lower atmosphere, in which the souls of the wicked were condemned to wander; their torments, as in Lucretius, are but the external representation of their inner passions. This concept of the sublunar world as the abode of those dominated by earthly passions was also to prove important in later literature.

By this time, the concept of an underground Hades had largely been abolished. And some maintained that the Isles of the Blessed lay in the southern hemisphere of the earth.

These ideas were transmitted by Posidonius in the second century A.D. He introduced elements from Pythagoreanism and from Eastern cults into stoicism, and the results were perpetuated until the time of Copernicus. Posidonius expounded the doctrines of the Ptolemaic universe, with the earth placed in the centre, surrounded by an atmosphere or the elements which stretched to the moon; above the moon circled the other seven planets. The whole was enclosed by the heaven of the fixed stars. This was the system which, thanks to further strengthening by Eastern beliefs, was to be expounded by Plutarch and transmitted to the Middle Ages.

6. Eastern influence and the final moulding of the classical otherworld

Several elements of Eastern religion contributed to the final formulation of the classical otherworld. First among these was the general identification, upon which we have already touched, between man and the stars; each man was believed to have his own, and this he inhabited after death. This belief is ancient, probably deriving from the sixth century in Persia, and we have already seen its influence in Greek thought, particularly that of Plato and the Stoics. The notion has been suggested to have developed from stone age worship of the sun and the moon - a worship which survives even now in the mountains of Sicily among the shepherds. In ancient Egypt a king was believed to ascend from his pyramid with the aid of a ladder to his home in the sky.

Secondly, the concept of the moon as the dwelling of souls is Eastern in origin. This we have already examined; the belief leaves its mark on Roman funerary urns, in which the crescent is often represented.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the Eastern mystery religions exerted great influence, and it was from these that the formulae which were to be accepted as definitive were taken. It was in the first century A.D. that the mysteries, especially that of Mithras, spread in the Roman world; its doctrine is of Chaldeo-Persian origin, and promises an afterlife of happiness to the initiate. It was received eagerly by a society weary of doubt and scepticism, willing to believe in a doctrine according to which the soul of the good man rose through the heavenly spheres to the summit of the heavens. These doctrines merged with those, not dissimilar, of Neo-Pythagoreanism.

At this period the new beliefs are recorded in the writings of Plutarch, whose *Moralia* contain two legends of the afterlife. Working in the second century, Plutarch has absorbed the new ideas, and yet retained many of the old ones, especially those of the Platonic tradition. In the essay 'De sera numinis vindicta', Plutarch offers us a myth in the Platonic fashion to illustrate the punishments of the soul after death. Thespesius undertakes a journey during a three day concussion; he witnesses the judgement of pure and impure souls (their innocence or guilt apparent from their appearance, as in the *Phaedrus*), and learns that these are divided into the curable, those who have already suffered on earth, and the incurable; the first two categories undergo purgative punishments in the shadow of the earth. The wicked suffer various torments, including immersion in lakes of metal for the avaricious (a constant element of Eastern hells); they then, in accordance with Pythagorean doctrine, depart for rebirth in animals.

In Plutarch's other afterlife myth, occurring in the essay 'De genie Socratis', Timarchus travels up into the heavens in a similar manner; from there he looks down into an abyss, Hades, which is in fact none other than the earth; and sees its shadow, which he recognizes as Styx. He learns that souls bob about among the stars until attracted by their defects into the earth's shadow, from which they are drawn down to another reincarnation on earth.

At this stage, therefore, all has been moved up into the heavens. The final adjustment is made by the influence of Persian Mazdeism. It was in this religion that the final separation between the light-filled kingdom of the good and the dark realm of evil was made. Mazdeism was spread into the Roman world by the mysteries of Mithras which we have already discussed; the dualist conception of two opposing armies of good and evil spirits became established. Thus the abode of the good was forever separated from that of the wicked, one being located in the heavens above, the other in the ground below. And this was the basic scheme which was adopted by the Church and thus propagated into the Middle Ages. And so we have returned to the early Greek division of the dead into Elysium and Tartarus. It was adopted by Neoplatonism, and became the only model of the afterlife.

7. The Afterlife in the Old Testament

Hebrew and Christian literature develops in much the, same way as that of the classical world, in many points receiving direct influence from it. The Old Testament offers few details of any specific doctrine concerning the realm of the dead, and the few that there are present a gloomy land very similar to the Homeric underworld; and the New Testament, though more specific about the separation of the blessed from the wicked, offers little more in the way of concrete topographical detail. The afterlife remained a subject for popular belief alone, and hence flourished in the apocryphal literature of both testaments; it was this literature which was to constitute the direct source of the many medieval legends which culminated in the *Comedy* of Dante.

Hebrew belief concerning the afterlife seems to have developed in exactly the same way as that of the pre-Homeric Greeks; primitive ancestor worship led to a stress on the importance of burial, aided perhaps by the inbuilt fear of being devoured after death which Lucretius ridiculed. Family graves were believed to be the new home of the departed; it followed that their sheer number required a more extensive underground abode, and the concept of the underworld was born. This underworld the Hebrew lore called Sheol. It, like Homer's underworld, is a gloomy land where the dead are not in any way differentiated one from another with respect to their moral worth; they retain their earthly rank and observe earthly customs. This lack of reward and punishment is wholly consonant with

contemporary beliefs; emphasis was placed on the eschatology of the nation as a whole, and not on that of the individual, whose particular fate therefore became irrelevant. Only later did it become a matter of concern.

The nature of the underworld is described in Job 10.21-2: 'Antequam vadam, et non revertar, Ad terram tenebrosam, et opertam mortis caligine: Terram miseriae et tenebrarum, Ubi umbra mortis et nullus ordo. Sed sempiternus horror inhabit'. It is a land of oblivion, 'terra oblivionis' (Ps. 87.13), located underground, and with no classification among the inhabitants, an 'inferus subter' to which the Lord will come; we read:

> Inferus subter conturbatus est
> In occursam adventus tui;
> Suscitavit tibi gigantes.
> Omnes principes terrae
> Surrexerunt de soliis suis,
> Omnes principes nationum.
> (Isaiah 14.9)

However, although the Old Testament itself offers no suggestion of punishment in the underworld, it is not difficult to imagine how this concept arose in the apocryphal literature; in Psalm 139 we read a plea for salvation from those who oppress, for 'Acuerunt linguas suas sicut serpentis; Venenum aspidum sub labiis eorum' (139.4); and it is asked: 'Cadent super eos carbones, In ignem deiicies eos' (139.11).

8. Intertestamental literature

The apocrypha of the Old Testament were written between the second century B.C. and the first century A.D. This is a period of Greek domination, and hence of Greek influence, and is generally known as the Hellenistic Age of Judaism. It began after Alexander of Macedon's conquest of the Persian Empire in the late fourth century B.C. Its influence was profound; Greek-speaking Jews fused Semitic and Hellenic culture, and many of apocryphal works were produced as a result. A further factor which caused departure from the previous Hebrew view of the afterlife was to be found in the changed political situation; the Jews were under considerable oppression during the period, and hence the concept of a future life in which the crimes and virtue of this life go unpunished and unrewarded no longer seemed satisfactory.

The earliest of the apocryphal works is the *First Book of Enoch*, written about 167-78 B.C. It was the first to adapt the old doctrine of Sheol to provide some solution to the question of God's justice and of undeserved suffering at the hands of the wicked. It is a composite work, which was to have a formative influence on the Apocalypse of Baruch and that of Esdra. In it, Sheol becomes not the realm to which all the dead are assigned, but an intermediate abode until judgement shall occur. It is therefore divided into four areas, corresponding to four categories of dead: the righteous, who will be resurrected; the wicked who suffered no retribution while still on earth, and who will be resurrected for punishment; the wicked already punished in life, who will remain here; and those who were murdered. Thus after judgement, some will remain in Sheol, some will suffer punishment in a valley of ravines, and some will enter a garden of righteousness. For the first time, some indication of sins deserving punishment is given: kings, the unjustly rich, idolaters, evil-makers, those who make false measures, those who build by the toils of others, oppressors and murderers.

The works of the next two centuries present further developments in the division of the afterworld. Sheol, originally the abode of all the dead, and now the place where all await judgement prior to separation, becomes the waiting room for the wicked alone, the good having already taken up residence in paradise. This first appears in a work of the first century A.D. which is directly influenced by the *First Book of Enoch*; this is the *Second Book of Enoch*, or the *Book of Secrets of Enoch*. Here Egyptian elements are also prominent; the work was written in Alexandria. Enoch journeys up through the spheres, in which both the wicked and the blessed will eventually be located. In the third heaven, as is to be the case with subsequent literature, Enoch sees a land of milk and honey in which dwell the 'righteous and compassionate'; he also sees, to the North in the same heaven, a place of torment prepared for the wicked, whose sins are listed as in *1 Enoch*, but with more details. They include in addition to those already listed, sodomy, magic-making, theft, lying, envy and rancour. Further heavens are revealed to house the angels, seasons, zodiac, soldiers of Satan and the Lord. This is thus the first Hellenistic Jewish work to incorporate the eastern plurality of heavens; it is a motif which will be repeated, most notably in the book known as *3 Baruch*.

There are several books of Baruch, of which *3 Baruch* is a Greek apocalypse, written in the second century A.D. as a reworking of a Jewish original. It is closely connected with *2 Enoch* and with the *Apocalypse of Paul*. It contains both Jewish and Christian elements, and also bears witness to Eastern influence, notably in its plurality of heavens. It contains long doctrinal explanations of the nature of the sun and moon and their courses, but apart from a view of

the gates of the heavens which have written upon them the names of those who are to be admitted, contains little in the way of eschatological material.

The next main apocalyptic work of the intertestamental period is the Book known as *IV Esdras*, of which there exists a further derivative version. This reverses the celestial advances made by the last two works, and gives us the first representation of a Tartarus in which punishment is already in progress. Esdras is taken gradually deeper into the pit of Tartarus, and each time he descends a further number of steps, he comes to a further punishment. Here for perhaps the first time we meet the concept of fitting the punishment to the crime; Herod sits on a throne of fire, those who would not repent are tormented by fiery pivots which turn in their ears, and women who aborted or maltreated their children are afflicted with animals which suck at their breasts. A brief journey to paradise reveals its occupants to be Enoch, Elias, Moses, Peter, Paul, Luke, Matthew, the righteous and the patriarchs. Much of this material is pre-Christian.

The last work of the intertestamental period is the *Testament of Abraham*. It is Jewish, survives in Greek and was written in the first or second century. In it we are given a brief view of the preliminary sorting of the dead; they are taken to the East, where they either walk through a narrow gate which leads to paradise, or are driven through a broad one which leads to the realm of punishment. It has also been thought to contain some Egyptian elements, notably an appearance of Death in the form of a monster; Egyptian lore contained a wealth of such animal monsters, and is indeed perhaps the main source for these in Christian literature of the other world. It also contains the motif of the weighing of souls - two angels perform this operation in between the two gates of the otherworld supervised by Abel. Finally, Abraham sees a speaking cypress in paradise; in Eastern belief the cypress gave oracles, and the trees of paradise in general sometime were able to praise God with human voices.

It is therefore clear that a number of different cultures combined to produce the constituent elements of the intertestamental representations of the afterlife, and that there is no one coherent doctrine. In some cases, different beliefs are found in the same work. Yet various though they are, these early works gave rise to certain fundamental Christian beliefs, and acted as source material for the more influential visions of the New Testament apocrypha.

9. The New Testament

The various relevant New Testament passages, excluding that of the Apocalypse which provides a large number of images which were to become part of the stock of standard elements for the medieval eschatological writer, add little to what had already been said in the Old Testament. Some passages indicate a continuing belief in the tradition of indiscriminate descent to Sheol: the tradition that Christ will descend to the depths to release the good among them is expressed in *Matthew* 12.40: 'erit Filius hominis in corde terrae trebus diebus et tribus noctibus'. Other passages suggest that the blessed enter at death into a temporary paradise: 'vidi turbam magnam, quam dinumerare nemo poterat ex omnibus gentibus, et tribibus, et populis, et linguis: stantes ante thronum, et in conspectu Agni amicti stolis albis, et palme in manibus eorum' (Rev. 7.9); these are they who gave their lives for the Lord. And yet further passages imply that the blessed enter immediately into a permanent paradise; it is to this paradise, located in the same third heaven which we saw in *2 Enoch*, that Paul was rapt, according to his description in *2 Corinthians*.

When we come to consider belief concerning the realm of punishment, we find an equally transitional situation. The three abodes which have been transmitted by tradition are all represented; Tartarus appears to be the abode where the fallen angels are punished (a category also represented in the intertestamental writings), Gehenna the final place of punishment for the wicked. Here fire is the means of torment, having first emerged in the Hellenistic period of Jewish history 'et iudicatum de singulis secundum opera ipsorum. Et infernos et mors missi sunt in stagnum ignis. Haec est mors secunda. Et qui non inventus est in libro scriptus, missus est in stagnum ignis' (Rev. 20.13-15). Finally, Hades is an intermediate abode for all; in Luke 16, the rich man looks across at Abraham and Lazarus, and learns from the former that the two parts of the place must remain separate; that for the blessed is Abraham's bosom.

10. The New Testament Apocrypha

The apocrypha of the New Testament grew up for a number of reasons. One such was to compensate for the lack of information in the New Testament concerning the life of Christ and the nature of the afterlife; another was to replace the heathen poetry which the early Christians were discouraged from reading. They are thus in effect the first popular Christian stories, told not because they were believed to be literally true, but for entertainment and diversion. For this reason they were self-excluding when it came to the question of their relation to canonical literature; to understand why this was so, one has only to compare the brief statement by Paul in 2 Corinthians 12 that he was rapt up to the third heaven, and the lengthy *Apocalypse of Peter*, full of details of torment and hell-fire.

The earliest of these works which has come down to us is the *Apocalypse of Peter*. Written in the second century in Greek, surviving in two fragments and an Ethiopic translation, it was extremely popular among early Christians, and widely influential; it can be seen without exaggeration as the father of the medieval legends of the afterlife – although its main source would seem to be the Greek tradition; the torments described are more closely related to those of Tartarus than to the Jewish Sheol, and the concept of the life of the blessed is akin to the early Greek Elysian Fields and the Isles of the Blessed.

In the longer Greek fragment, the main part of the apocalypse is devoted to a description of the place of punishment. Here the concept of *contrapasso* begins to be developed in greater detail than previously (see *IV Esdras*), and the various classes of sinners are clearly separated. First of all Peter sees blasphemers hanging by their tongues above fire; perverters of righteousness in a lake of flaming mire; adulterers hanging by their hair or feet over mire; murderers afflicted by snakes and worms; those who conceive and carry out abortion, whose eyes are pierced by sparks of fire coming from the children who watch them; persecutors of the righteous; blasphemers again, and slanderers, who gnaw their lips and receive red-hot iron in their eyes; false witnesses who also gnaw their tongs and have fire in their mouths; the rich, who roll on re-hot pebbles; usurers, immersed up to their knees in a lake of blood, pitch and fire; homosexuals and lesbians, hurled repeatedly down a cliff and then driven up again; idolaters standing in fire, and backsliders - and here the fragment breaks off. The Ethiopic version adds further groups: those who did not obey their parents and elders, lapsed virgins, disobedient servants, insincere almsgivers, and sorcerers; these all reappear in the *Apocalypse of Paul*. This version then ends with two visions of heaven; one of the blessed in Elysium, and one of an earthly paradise. The saints wear crowns of flowers and sing songs of praise in a sunlit land which could have come from Pindar.

The only other relevant apocryphal work extant from the first century A.D. is the *Acts of Thomas*, which was very much influenced by the *Apocalypse of Peter*. It is fundamentally a long romance, and recounts the travels of Thomas in India; it is in Greek, although possibly the original was written in Syriac; other versions exist in Latin, Armenian and Ethiopic. The sixth act is the one which interests us; it describes Thomas's restoration to life of a young woman killed by her lover when she refused his offer of a chaste relationship, and her account of the vision of hell which she had while dead. Almost all of the details of this vision of hell are derived from Peter. The infernal region is divided into a series of chasms, in which various classes of sinner are tormented, with differing degrees of contrapasso. In the first is the sin at the cause of the dispute: those 'who have exchanged the intercourse of man and wife' hang on wheels of fire, reminding us of the classical torment of Ixion. Adulterous women sit in mud and worms in the second chasm; in the third, sinners are hung by parts of the body appropriate to their sins, smoked by sulphur. These include slanderers, hung by the tongue; the shameless, hung by the hair; thieves and the self-interested hung by the hands; and 'those who lightly and eagerly ran in wicked ways', hung by the feet. This perhaps constitutes the clearest example yet of the principle of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

The next work, also directly influenced by Peter, and whose name alone clearly proclaims its debts to classical literature, is the *Sibylline Oracles*. These have been defined as 'a collection of prophecies or wise sayings in Greek hexameter verse combining elements pagan, Jewish, and Christian' (Buttrick 1962). The second of the fifteen books is concerned with the Day of Judgement and the subsequent fates of the damned and the blessed, all of whom have hitherto been kept in Hades. A long list of sins is given, but these are not linked to specific punishments, only vague suggestions of fire, swords, darkness and animals being given. More details than previously are given of the nature of the condition of the blessed: they shall go to a timeless realm of light, where they will find fountains of wine, honey, and milk; there will be no change of the seasons, no death, time or darkness.

Written in the same century as the second book of the *Sibylline Oracles*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, a book much less popular in tone, has a didactic function; it is concerned with the problem of repentance and forgiveness for post-baptismal sins. It is very long, and divided into visions, mandates or commandments, and similitudes or parables. It is the latter which are of most interest, and particularly the ninth. This is in the form of a vision of twelve mountains, each of which represents a different state of sin or goodness, and has a corresponding appearance; the mountain representing the most heinous group, those of apostates and blasphemers, is pitch black and lifeless; that representing the most virtuous and holy is completely white, and an air of joy reigns. This work obviously stands a little outside the mainstream of representations of the other world, but the mountain motif was to become a standard element of future works.

In the third century another work was written, which proved to have a decisive influence on the future conception of the nature of paradise: the *Narrative of Zosimus* concerning the Life of the Blessed. This work, in moving away from the concentration of its predecessors on the realm of the damned, foreshadows the change in emphasis which was to take place in the literature of the early Christian community; it too was however influenced by the *Apocalypse of Peter*. Zosimus, having been informed that his prayer to see the life of the blessed has been heard and answered, walks for 40 days and comes to what was to become the standard river barrier of medieval literature, the Eumeles; he is lifted over this by two tree-tops, and set down in a level, flowery place where he meets the elders who dwell

there. They describe their daily life: they pray continuously, eat fruit produced from the earth and drink sweet water which is exuded from the trees, and never have to work. Here there is no time, illness or fatigue; at the appointed time they leave their bodies and ascend to the realm of the angels.

Dating from the next century we have the *Apocalypse of Thomas*, and some time later the *Gospel of Nicodemus* (probably the fifth century) and the *Apocalypse of the Virgin* (a ninth century compilation). The first of these is mainly concerned with the end of the world, but includes the statement that the Earthly Paradise was until this time surrounded by a wall of fire; the Gospel of Nicodemus or Acts of Pilate is in its second part an account of the Harrowing of Hell, and as such popularized the subject for the rest of the Middle Ages, and the late *Apocalypse of the Virgin* is fundamentally a reworking of the *Apocalypse of Paul*, with which we shall conclude our investigation. It does however provide a surer indication of the survival of these legends into later centuries.

11. Early Christian literature

The apocrypha of the first centuries A.D. were not, however, the sole vehicles for the expression of popular belief on the afterlife; there is also a certain amount of literature produced by the early Christian martyrs. This literature tends to concentrate on the promise of paradise rather than on the more graphic torments of hell, both presumably because the belief therein was one of the main factors in enabling the martyrs to proceed voluntarily to their deaths - as indeed the main doctrine of Plato's *Phaedo* is the immortality of the soul, presented by Socrates, whose imminent death appeared only to strengthen his convictions - and because the pagans of the early Christian era were more likely to be converted by promises of eternal reward than by threats of eternal punishment, perhaps more alarming to an already convinced audience. Furthermore, in early Christian belief, salvation was reputed to be attained not by moral purity, but by an intense emotional-experience, not unlike one once described for the Eleusinian mysteries by Plutarch. Only when it became clear that the Second Coming was to occur rather later than had at first been believed did a new selective emphasis on virtuous conduct come into operation.

The two most important of these visions are the vision of Carpus, reported in Dionysus the Areopagite, *Epistola VIII*, and those of Perpetua and Saturus, recounted by Perpetua herself and presented to us by her redactor Tertullian. The vision of Carpus is short, and recounted to emphasize the doctrines of ecclesiastical obedience to one's superiors, and the mercy of God. Carpus sees the heavens open, revealing Jesus, and the earth split, to reveal a chasm in which two men are about to be engulfed for their sins; Jesus rescues them. This tells us little, apart from the fact that heaven is in the sky and hell underground.

The visions of Perpetua, on the other hand, are fuller, and apparently based on historical events. They occur in the period preceding the day appointed for her and her companions to be thrown to the animals. The first vision is of a ladder which leads up to heaven, clearly based on Jacob's ladder and the various popular legends related to it; metal spikes protrude from the sides, and a savage beast guards its base. Saturus ascends this successfully, and Perpetua follows; at the top she finds an 'immensum horti' in which dwell men dressed in white and a shepherd - reminiscent of the shepherd who appears to Hermas. The second vision is of her brother Dinocrates, who died as a child from a face wound; she sees him , in a Tantalus-like situation, unable to reach the water in a 'cisterna' beside him. She prays, and sees him cured of his wound and drinking in paradise. This vision has been interpreted as an early advocation of the necessity of baptism and the efficacy of prayers for the dead who have not received it. Finally, the vision of Saturus in the same work provides us with a further glimpse of the early Christian paradise. Saturus sees a garden, 'arbores habens rosae et omne genus flores'; the leaves of these trees sing - as in Egyptian belief and the *Testament of Abraham*. Here he meets angels, and then previous martyrs known to him, and a bishop and presbyter who tell him to reform his people. The details of this place are similar to those of the *Apocalypse of John*, which was doubtless the source; it has also been suggested that Saturus was influenced by the *Apocalypse of Peter* (Robinson 1891).

12. *The Vision of Paul*

We may suitably conclude this survey of early doctrines of the afterlife by examining the most important single work on the subject to have been written in the period we have been discussing. This is the *Vision of Paul*, a composite work written in the third century in Greek, largely based upon the Apocalypse of Peter. Its importance lies in the fact that through the many Latin redactions which were made up until the twelfth century, it was able to transmit to medieval writers many of the classical, Eastern and apocryphal elements which had been bound together in the previous literature. Inspired from the words of 2 Corinthians 12, where Paul tells us that he was 'raptum (...) usque ad tertium caelum', the Long Latin version which provides us with the best idea of the original Greek, and acts as the source for most of the medieval redactions, launches into a complex and full description of the torments of hell and the nature of paradise. First we are shown the dwellings of the Righteous, located in the City of Christ and reached

over the classical Acherusian lake. It has concentric circles of golden walls, and rivers of milk, honey, wine and oil, possibly derived from those of 2 Enoch. Here dwell the blessed, located according to the degree of their virtue. Then Paul sees the abode of the wicked, reached by way of the Platonic Oceanus which encircles the earth, and made up essentially of fiery rivers, pits, ice and snow, serpents and worms, and a pit with seven seals. In these places many categories of sinners are punished, large numbers of them deriving from the Apocalypse of Peter, and many of the punishments showing a particular suitability for the precise crime involved. To examine all these in detail would require an exhaustive analysis and a great deal of space, and would be most profitably undertaken in conjunction with the later redactions of the apocalypse. But it is in any case at this work that the culminating point of classical and apocryphal writings on the other world is reached; and this is the point of departure for the Middle Ages.

PART II
REPRESENTATIONS OF THE AFTERLIFE FROM THE APOCALYPSE OF PAUL TO THE *DIVINE COMEDY*

1. Introduction

Between the third century AD, when the *Apocalypse of Paul* is believed to have been written, and the thirteenth, when the *Comedy* of Dante was completed, there stretches a long line of Christian visions and accounts of the other World; a line which can furthermore be extended backwards into the age or classical literature. This tradition has hitherto been regarded as a continuously developing genre, in which certain standard elements and *topoi* recur, on each occasion with greater complexity; a genre which culminates in the *Comedy*, the definitive statement never to be superseded. Thus the classical writings on the afterlife provided a 'literary property room' (Patch 1950, p. 80) for the early Christian writers, who then added elements from certain books of the Bible, notably the Apocalypse; and a ball was set in motion which, continually given momentum by the production of new visions and accounts of the other world, gradually increased speed until it had gained sufficient energy to generate the *Comedy* of Dante.

The majority of the early critics, when considering the relation between the other world genre and the *Comedy*, have viewed the tradition in this way. In 1839 Ozanam, correcting the previous impression that the *Comedy* was the product of isolated genius and bore no relation to previous literature, stated that 'la fable poétique de la Divine Comédie remonte par une tradition non interrompue aux libres inventions du cycle légendaire' (p. 341); in 1855 he added that Dante's achievement was 'd'avoir mis sa marque, la marque de l'unité, sur un sujet immense, dont les éléments mobiles roulaient depuis bientot six mille ans dans la pensée des hommes' (p. 415). In his article of 1842, Labitte is of much the same opinion, specifying furthermore that with Dante the genre ends: 'le poète avait fait de la vision son inaliénable domaine; c'était une forme désormais fixée en lui, et qui ne devait pas avoir à subir d'épreuves nouvelles' (p. 741).

Such a viewpoint, according to which a continuous development is given definitive form by the creation of the *Comedy*, has however been implicitly revised, if not refuted, by later criticism. There is a very strong sense in which the discontinuity in the genre is more important than the continuity: it can be said that the vision literature grows out not only from previous tradition, but more importantly from its own historical and cultural context. In each period, the writers of the vision legends may be said to start afresh. As we shall see, the early Christians concentrated mainly on the rewards brought by faith, thus providing encouragement in a time of persecution; as Christianity became established, the visions became more strictly didactic, serving the purpose 'of teaching dogmatic views and of urging men to live righteously' (MacCulloch 1912, p. 3). In the Carolingian era, the determining factor was political - 'la vision va devenir une arme entre les mains des évèques contre les princes, puis entre les mains des moines contre les évèques' (Labitte 1842, p. 717) - or ecclesiastical; 'la Visione di questa forma non invita tanto al pentimento del peccato, quanto al pagamento delle decime' (D'Ancona 1874, p. 68). As we approach the twelfth century, the vision becomes instead a vehicle for mysticism and theology; and in the thirteenth for satire and ridicule. At this point several traditions meet, and vision literature becomes but one tributary of a new river: 'l'arte ecclesiastica od apocalittica, ossia la letteratura religiosa delle visioni, è in procinto di prendere contatto colla poesia profana ed allegorica dei grammatici e dei retori, ossia con quelle delle visioni filosofiche' (Vossler 1927, p 208-09). The *Comedy* is thus the result of an established genre, but which developed discontinuously, drawing into itself matieral from other, previously unrelated, genres.

The distinction between these two views of the literature of the afterlife is of fundamental importance when considering the relation between that literature and the *Comedy*, in three senses. Firstly, Dante was not writing the definitive work in one particular genre; he was writing in a particular historical and cultural situation, which began approximately at the beginning of the twelfth century, and which saw a number of turning points in the attitude both to poetry and to the other world. It is here that the continuity is to be sought rather than in the tradition of the previous two thousand years. Secondly, despite this major break in continuity, Dante's poem does, in its multiplicity of purpose, reflect the various purposes - didactic, political, theological - of earlier periods of vision literature, and can thus be profitably examined in relation to these. Rather than constituting a climax to the tradition, the *Comedy*'s constituent parts can be linked to trends in visions from this or that period, and its genesis be reassessed. Thirdly, and finally, there are many elements and *topoi* which do recur throughout the visions, as a framework rather than as indicators of the essential aims and meaning of the works in which they occur; a consideration of the extent to which Dante adopted these constant elements from the tradition as a whole, and the extent to which he innovated,

will also provide greater understanding of the *Comedy*. To these three points we shall return after a brief survey of the principal legends of the afterlife between Paul and Dante.

The *Apocalypse of Paul*, the major early Christian vision of the afterlife, is based upon the verses of 2 Corinthians 12, in which Paul revealed that he had been 'raptum (...) usque tertium caelum' (vs 3); it is believed to be derived from a Greek original of the third century AD. A number of Latin manuscripts have survived, the oldest being of the eighth century; from this developed at least eight medieval redactions in Latin, and many more translations into the vernacular.

The 'Long Latin' version of the vision consists essentially of two parts: Paul's visit to the abode of the righteous, and his subsequent vision of the realm of the damned. The blessed inhabit the city of Christ, which has twelve concentric gold walls and four rivers, of oil, milk, honey and wine; they are arranged in groups according to the nature of their virtue. The damned are found in a separate part of the third heaven : clergy suffer immersion to varying degrees in a river of fire; close by are blasphemers, sorcerers, adulterers and failed virgins; those who injured the weak stand in ice and snow; those who broke a fast undergo the traditional torment of Tantalus; yet more adulterers hang by their hair and eyebrows; homosexuals suffer in pitch and brimstone. Heathens who gave alms are imprisoned in a pit, yet dressed in white; parents who maltreated their children are turned on a fiery spit; those who renounced the world but who lacked charity are tormented by dragons in an area of fire. Finally, those who denied the Creed are housed in a well with seven seals.

It is clear that many of these elements are derived from classical and apocryphal literature, as well as from the Bible: the 'Tantalus torment' can be traced back to Homer, and the river Oceanus which encircles the earth to Plato's *Phaedo*, while the four rivers of the city of God derive from Genesis, and that city itself from the Apocalypse. The torments of hell are similar to those in the fragmentary *Apocalypse of Peter*.

The influence of the *Apocalypse of Paul* was profound and lasting. Elements from it can be traced in many of the subsequent visions, and possibly in the *Comedy* - for example, the recurrent motif of the graduated immersion of the damned recalls the fate of Dante's wrathful and of his traitors, and the phrase 'andovvi poi lo Vas d'elezione' (Inf. 11.28), has been taken to refer to Paul's apocryphal descent to hell rather than his Biblical ascent to the third heaven. Whether directly known to subsequent authors or not, however, it 'must have exercised on the popular conceptions of the other-world an influence far more deep-seated than that which is manifest from mere quotation and adaptation' (Silverstein 1935, p. 12). Latin redactions were produced and copied continuously until the fourteenth century, each slightly modifying the original document, each concentrating progressively more on the torments of hell to the exclusion of the joys of Paradise. The vision became, in the words of Silverstein, 'a complete Baedeker to the other-world' (p. 5).

The period of the fourth to sixth centuries offers little, at least that is extant; an exception is the vision reported in the life of Pachomius, translated into Latin from an anonymous Greek original. Here Pachomius sees a multitude of monks in a deep, misty valley, some suffering torment, others trying to escape, and a small minority succeeding. He is inspired to write a rule, the first of its kind.

Towards the end of the sixth century, visions of the other world began to be included in other writings, thus ensuring their survival. Gregory of Tours, in his *Historia Francorum*, describes two visions. The first of these is that of Sunniulf, the essential element of which is the Pauline river of fire; it is now crossed by a bridge, over which souls must pass in order to reach a large white house on the other side. This is the first mention of what was to become an almost universal part of hell.

Gregory's second vision is that of Salvius, who falls ill and seems dead, reviving after three days and recounting his journey to heaven: he travelled through the planetary spheres and entered through a gate into a shining place occupied by spirits, until told that the time had come for his return to earth.

At about the same time, Gregory the Great wrote his *Dialogues*, the fourth book of which is concerned with the immortality of the soul, and which as a whole became extremely popular throughout the Middle Ages; and Gregory is himself, like Paul, mentioned in the *Comedy*. it is a popular rather than a scholarly work, although Gregory's acquaintance with classical literature is not without its mark, consisting largely in the description of contemporary visions. The *Dialogues* are extensively referred to in later vision literature, and it has been said that 'one feels that Gregory's eschatological conceptions themselves form a bridge, spanning the gulf between the old world and the new’ (Owen 1970, p. 10).

The first vision reported by Gregory is that of Peter, a Spanish monk who proclaimed himself 'inferni se supplicia adque innumera loca flammarum vidisse' (*Dialogues*, IV 37.21), but gave few other details. Gregory then relates the vision of Stephen, summoned to hell in error for his neighbour Stephen the blacksmith, but who again gave few details. The third vision in Gregory is that of a soldier, who saw a river, black and foul-smelling, crossed by a bridge;

on the other side was a *locus amoenus* populated by souls in white, in which stand golden houses. Gregory specifies that the function of the bridge is to separate the good from the bad: 'haec viro erat in praedicto ponte probatio, ut quisquis per eum iniustorum vellit transire, in tenebroso foetentique fluvio laveretur; iusti viro, quibus culpa non obstiterit, securo per eum gressu ac libero ad loca amoena pervenirent' (IV 37). Here the soldier sees various of his acquaintances.

The bridge of Purgatory, from a 14th century fresco in the church of S Maria, Loreto Aprutino

Gregory's last important contribution to the literature of the other world comes a little later in the fourth book of the *Dialogues*, where he reports the account he heard a young man give of his having see the deacon Paschasius, recently dead, working as an attendant in the baths, and thus purging his sins; the young man prayed for him, returned a few days later and found him no longer there. This is one of the earliest reports of purgatory and the efficacy of prayer for the dead.

The seventh century leaves us only one major vision, that of saint Barontus of Pistoia, believed to have taken place around the year 684. His soul is withdrawn from his body, which seems to die; a new body is acquired from the air - reminding us of Statius' explanation to Dante in Purg. XXV - and he enters, under the guidance of Raphael, into the first gate of Paradise, beyond which he meets members of his monastery. The second gate leads to children and virgins, the third to saints and martyrs, the fourth to a monk named Baudolenum. There follows a struggle between saint Peter and some demons for the soul of Barontus; Peter is victorious. Barontus is now led through hell, where he sees souls bound, wailing and compelled to sit on leaden seats arranged in a circle. Like are grouped with like; these groups include the proud, the luxurious, perjurers, disparagers of others, the envious, murderers, the dishonest, clergy and women. Some of the clergy are known to Barontus. He is then returned to the body. In this vision, Gregory the Great is several times cited.

With the eighth century the production of visions began to increase, both in number and in length. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* contains two; Dante, who certainly knew at least of the existence of Bede (Par. X 131), may have been familiar with both of these. The first, the vision of Furseus, is reported from the Latin life, and assigned to the year 633. Furseus received two visions of the afterlife, separated by three days; the first is of the blessed and the angels; the second, longer, also of the damned. These are tormented in fire. For the first time, Furseus participates in the torment; a devil throws a burning soul at him, leaving a scar, and we are told that he had once taken the man's money.

The second of Bede's visions is that of Drythelm, also reported in Roger of Wendover's *Flores Historiarum* under the year 699. Here we have what is possibly the first Christian vision in which the four distinct realms of hell, purgatory, the Earthly Paradise and the celestial Paradise are described. Drythelm, a Northumbrian, appears to die; a guide with shining face and clothes takes him first to an unnamed area with purgatorial functions; it is a valley of fire and snow, whose inhabitants, those who repented only at death, are plunged from the one to the other, and will be released into heaven only after the Day of Judgment. Drythelm is next taken to hell, a pit of fire; souls are borne up on leaping flames, and then cast down once more, while devils continually bring new souls. This will leave its mark on the vision of Tundale. Devils surround Drythelm and attempt to add him to their victims; he is rescued by his guide. This episode, which is to become a common element of the visions, recalls Dante's Malebolge. Drythelm is next taken to a *locus amoenus* surrounded by a wall, inhabited by souls dressed in white; these are the imperfectly good, who will remain here until the Day or Judgment. Finally, he is given a taste of the pleasures of heaven itself, but not allowed to enter; after which he is returned to his earthly body.

Another eighth century vision, less likely to have been widely known, is that of the Monk of Wenlock, reported at the request or the Abbess of Thanet in a letter from Saint Boniface; Boniface had himself spoken with the monk. When the soul left the body, a struggle took place for its possession between angels and devils, in which individual sins and virtues accuse or praise the monk; this is as we have seen a standard element, and can be traced back to Plato's *Gorgias*, in which the soul's vices and virtues proclaim themselves in its spotted or shining appearance. The monk is

led first to what can be described as upper hell, the first time the distinction between upper and lower is clearly made; it consists of pits of fire, and the souls in it, which will eventually receive eternal rest, appear as lamenting black birds. He passes next through lower hell, the region of eternal punishment, and comes to an Earthly Paradise. Beyond this is the by now familiar river of fire and pitch, crossed by a bridge; those who fall into the river, however, emerge purified or their sins, having been immersed in varying degrees to achieve this. Finally, the monk comes to the heavenly Jerusalem, a shining walled city; which recalls both the canonical Apocalypse and that of Paul. He is told that it is his mission to reveal all that he has seen, an injunction which will become increasingly common, and which indeed survives in Cacciaguida's instruction to Dante, 'tutta tua vision fa manifesta' (Par. XVII 128).

The last major vision of the eighth century is found in the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat, written possibly by St John Damascene, and based on an Indian legend of the life of Buddha; the vision is also recorded in the *Legenda aurea* and the *Speculum Historiale* of Vincent of Beauvais. Josaphat enjoys two visions, one of the righteous and one of the damned. In the first of these he is introduced into a plain of flowers and fruits, where there are thrones of gold and precious stones, and where streams flow in abundance. He comes to a city with walls of gold and parapets of gems, in which winged squadrons of light make music. In the second vision he sees darkness and a fiery furnace containing the 'worm of torment'; souls burn in this, guarded by spirits.

With the ninth century, the age of political and monastic visions begins. It was at this period that teaching concerning the afterlife became an increasing priority. Visions were recorded, and the Last Judgment began to be painted on the West walls of churches. Masses for the dead were celebrated, and the ground was prepared for the full development of the doctrine of Purgatory. In the visions we are now to examine, it must thus be remembered that 'unico fine di questi semplici narratori era l'altrui edificazione, e l'invitare alla penitenza: e loro bastava rammollire gli animi duri e feroci, fortemente commovendoli colia novità e col terrore delle immagini' (D'Ancona 1874, p. 26).

In the year 824 Wetti, Abbot of Reichenau, received a vision which he then had recorded in prose by Hetti; twelve years later it was rewritten by his pupil Walahfrid Strabo, in verse, with the aim of the glorification of the monastery and the furtherance of the career of Walahfrid himself. The account of the actual vision is thus preceded by an outline of the history of the monastery and its abbots.

This vision is an excellent example of the direct influence of one text upon the production of another. Wetti falls ill, takes to his bed, and is visited by evil spirits; he escapes only through the good offices of some radiant monks and an angel in red. He awakens, and asks to have Gregory's *Dialogues* read to him; after this the angel reappears, more suitably clad in white, and the visionary proceeds unhindered. Wetti first visits hell, and comes to a river of fire in which are immersed sinners, receiving different punishments for different sins; Wetti recognized several. Unchaste priests are tied to stakes; the women who committed adultery with them stand opposite in perpetual reminder; both groups are lashed on the genitals at every third dawn. Walahfrid launches at this point into an almost Dantesque diatribe against the sins of the clergy in general. Wetti next passes avaricious monks imprisoned in a fort, undergoing purgation; and comes to a mountain, also purgative. Here a neglectful abbot is ravaged by the weather; Charlemagne (the first appearance of a political figure) suffers for his concubines by having an animal tearing at his genitals; and avaricious counts sit submerged by their wealth, brought here before their death - a foreshadowing perhaps of Dante's Alberigo and Branca d'Orio. The mountain is of the highest significance; it is 'the earliest occurrence in western vision literature of the mountain of purgatory. Though mountains appear in visions from the earliest apocryphal writings, these are holy mountains, not places where souls undergo punishment in preparation for a life of bliss' (Traill 1974 p137). Any suggestion of purgatory has already been noted in Gregory the Great, and the first indication of a separate place of purgation in Bede's account of the vision of Drythelm; this is the first mountain.

Wetti next comes to a heavenly city, where he asks the saints and martyrs to intercede with God on his behalf; he repeats this with the virgins. The voice of Christ warns him that he must first make amends for his sins. At this point Wetti's angel guide explains to him that his mission is the correction of the sins of those with whom he will share his experiences; Wetti demurs, as Dante will demur, and is accused, as will be Dante, of pusillanimity; the angel exclaims in horror:

> Quod summa del sententia iussit,
> Non audes proferre pigro torpore retentus?
> (676-77).

He then delivers himself of a further diatribe against various sins, after which Wetti wakes up. Wetti then writes to his friends to ask for their prayer on his behalf, which is in itself again an important development.

This vision is important for several reasons. In addition to its innovations, discussed above, it is of value as a link between its predecessors and the visions yet to be composed; its debt to Gregory's *Dialogues* is explicitly

acknowledged, and its use of the immersion motif links it with the tradition of the *Apocalypse of Paul*; at one point the angel refers to the apocryphal *Shepherd of Hermas*, likening his role as guide to that of the shepherd. Furthermore, the vision is perhaps the first to have any pretention towards literary merit - contrary to the general trend of Carolingian visions. The most striking aspect is, however, the outspokenness of the condemnation of the monasteries, of the avarice of counts, and of Charlemagne; this is not to be repeated with such forcefulness until we reach the *Comedy*. The vision seems to have enjoyed considerable success; it survives in seven manuscripts.

Another ninth century vision, or rather series of visions, is that of Anskar, written by his contemporary Bishop Rimbert. Anskar received visions from early childhood, which encouraged him to devote his life to the evangelization of the Danes and Swedes. Rimbert records eleven of Anskar's visions, of which some are of considerable interest. Most are clearly aimed at explaining Anskar's mission to him. Two of the visions are of Christ and the Passion, two of people known to Anskar, one of the apostle Peter who tells Anskar of his mission, and the remainder are concerned with Anskar's future state and activities. Of all these visions, it is the second which is of particular interest to the study of Dante. In this, Anskar dreams of his own death, and of being met by Peter and John; these send him to suffer the fire of purgatory for his sins, after which he is sent to the east, where he learns that the blessed contemplate Christ, and that this constitutes their beatitude. The first thing that overwhelms Anskar at this moment is a great light, 'lux inaccessibilis nimiae atque immensae claritatis' (3.22), in which the blessed contemplate the divine; 'ipse quoque quodammodo erat in omnibus, et omnes in eo; ipse omnia exterius circumdabat, ipse omnes interius satiando regebat; ipse superius protegebat, ipse inferius sustinebat' (3.23). Dante too sees a great light;

> A quella luce cotal si diventa,
> che volgersi da lei per altro aspetto
> impossibil che mai si consenta.
> (Par. XXXIII 100-02)

Rimbert continues: 'circa sedentes vero splendor ab ipso procedens, similis arcul nubium tendebatur'; Dante:

> Nella profonda e chiara sussistenza
> dell 'alto lume parvermi tre giri
> di tre colori e d'una contenenza;
> e l'un dall'altro come iri da iri
> parea reflesso. (Par. XXXIII 115-18)

In the midst of this light, Anskar discovers that the blessed contemplate Christ, 'la nostra effige' (Par XXXIII 131); but here his senses allow him to see no more. From the light 'ubi mihi maiestas omnipotentis Dei nemine monstrante esse videbatur ' emerges a voice, telling him to return with the crown of martyrdom. 'All'alta fantasia qui manco possa', and Anskar can only excuse himself with the words: 'Et licet aliqua visus sim de tanta duicedine dulcedinum earasse, fateor tamen, quia nequaquam stilus tanta exprimere potuit, quanta animus sentit' (3.24).

In the second half of the ninth century, Hincmar recorded the vision of Bernoldus; it is typical of the monastic and political visions of the time. Bernoldus visits first a place of purgative torment, where he sees no fewer than eighty-one bishops, and Charles the Bald; his prayer for these brings their release. The text of the vision mentions some of its sources; these include Gregory's *Dialogues*, Bede, Boniface and Wetti.

Another political vision is that enjoyed by Charles the Fat, recorded in William of Malmesbury's *De Rebus Gestis Anglorum*. It is said to have been written as 'a piece of political propaganda to strengthen the claims of Louis III to the imperial crown' (Owen 1970 p178); in Paradise Charles sees Lothaire and Louis, the first of whom explains to Charles that the empire must pass next to his grandson, also named Louis. The vision of Paradise is preceded by one of hell and purgatory; in the former Charles meets schismatics, homicides, thieves and the avaricious, and in the latter kings, including his own father.

The century closes with two brief visions, those of an English presbyter, which is little more than a sermon exhorting the audience to righteousness and almsgiving, and of a poor woman, who sees Charles the Fat and other ruling figures in hell, and a high wall inscribed with the names of those permitted to enter the Earthly Paradise behind it.

For the next two centuries, the tenth and eleventh, the flow of visions of the afterlife is considerably lessened, although the documents that there are do play an important part in the tradition.

The main production of the tenth century is the Irish voyage of Brendan, a 'sorte d'Odyssée monacale' (Ozanam 1983 p334), which goes back in popular legend to the sixth century. Despite the assertion of Labitte that Dante 'qui savait tout ce qu'on savait de son temps, avait du connaitre le *Voyage de saint Brendan*' (Labitte 1842, p. 726), there does not seem to be much point of contact between the voyage and the *Comedy*. It is 'a story of Christian visionary character, combined with adventure reports of early Irish seafarers, embellished with tales and sagas of folklore, and

spiced with classical reminiscences' (Selmer 1959, p. xxv). Brendan was a fifth-century saint who undertook many journeys in order to found monasteries in Ireland and Scotland; the *Navigatio* is the much elaborated account of these journeys. Brendan is said to have sailed for seven years, during which time he and his companions visit a number of islands, including one occupied by birds (the neutral angels), one which turns out to be a whale, reminiscent of Leviathan, one which is inhabited by a monastic community, one of sheep, and two which seem to represent hell. The final destination is the 'terra repromissionis sanctorum'. The *Navigatio* soon enjoyed great popularity on the continent, where it was repeatedly copied and widely translated.

There are a number of accounts which have not been precisely dated, although it seems clear that they belong to either the tenth or the eleventh century. The first of these is the vision of Fulbert, recorded in a short poem; the essential element is the struggle between devils and angels for the soul. In this case the devils meet no opposition.

This motif is also strongly present in the vision of an anonymous monk of Rheims, as recorded by Ansellus scholasticus. The monk is instructed by Christ, who descends from the cross before which the monk kneels in prayer, to follow him on his journey to hell; the monk witnesses the liberation of the good souls imprisoned there - a continuation of the tradition transmitted especially by the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*. He is then given a devil as escort and told he must return through hell; during his journey he is repeatedly menaced by other devils. This episode recalls two from the *Comedy* - the attack of the devils on Dante outside Dis, and the escort provided in the bolgia of the barrators. However, a similarity of this nature is perhaps better regarded as a recurrence of the same popular tradition than as an instance of direct borrowing; it seems unnecessary to state that 'certes, l'auteur de la Divine Comédie fut original; mais il avait eu de modestes précurseurs: Ansel de Saint-Germain d'Auxerre est l'un d'eux (Leclercq 1969 p. 190) - an indirect precursor, but not necessarily a direct one.

A short satirical vision, that of Heriger, is the first of its kind, and is probably of the eleventh century; it reports a vision of the saints in Paradise, indulging in food and drink, presided over by Peter as chief cook. It is of interest in two ways: firstly, it foreshadows the satirical works to be produced by the thirteenth and fourteenth century writers of Prance, and secondly, it indicates that there was a certain amount of hostility to the abuse of the vision genre at the time.

Also probably in the eleventh century, Othlo, a German Benedictine monk, compiled his *Liber Visionum*, consisting of both his own visions and those of others; it includes such well-known accounts as that of Drythelm, and mentions the *Dialogues* of Gregory. The visions add little that is new to the tradition.

There remain two other eleventh century texts; the first is the vision of Walkelin, contained in the eighth book of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Ordericus Vitalis, and assigned to the year 1091. In it Walkelin, on his way back home one night from a visit to a sick man, is overtaken by the army of the dead, in which he sees several people of his acquaintance, including his own dead brother who requests that further prayers be said on his behalf. The last text is a sermon of Gregory VII, a passage from which bears a remarkable resemblance to *Inferno* XIX: Gregory tells of a ladder in the flames of hell, on which stand a family of successive counts, each one taking, on his death, the upper rung of the ladder, thus forcing the others to move down further into the flames. The sin is hereditary, and secular - the first count on the ladder secured Church land for his own race - whereas Dante's pit for Popes regards office rather than birth, but the principle is similar.

With the twelfth century we reach the age in which the vision literature of the other world comes to a climax. Visions are more frequent, and longer; they make extensive use of previous tradition, but no longer use it for ecclesiastical - in a material sense - or political purposes. They become more exclusively religious in an individual rather than a collective sense; and more conscious of themselves as literary productions with certain obligatory *topoi*, than in previous centuries. At the same time, their abundance of concrete detail fits them for a popular, rather than educated, audience; and so gradually they become less sincere and more fabulous; 'giacché quanto piú incolti sono gli uomini, tanto piú volentieri credono alle profezie, ai miracoli ad alle favole: anzi, non sentono alcuna differenza fra edificazione religiosa e divertimento fantastico' (Vossler 1927 p. 203).

The earliest of these twelfth century visions is that of Alberic of Montecassino, who at the age of nine, in 1110, had a vision of hell and paradise; this was first written down in the monastery by a monk Guido, and later corrected by Peter the Deacon at Alberic's dictation. This is the vision on which critics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have most exercised their faculties, at times with extraordinary results which we shall examine later. Alberic's other world is divided into four sections: ante-hell, the Earthly Paradise and the Celestial heavens. In the first of these, Alberic, lifted by a dove and guided by Peter, sees first babies undergoing purgation, then the lustful immersed to varying degrees in a valley of ice; a thorny valley follows, where women who refused milk or committed adultery are punished. Alberic passes next through an area in which he sees an iron ladder with burning steps; a sulphurous furnace for tyrants and women who tried to abort their babies - a category which goes back to the *Apocalypse of Peter* and thus the beginning of the genre; a fiery lake for homicides; a cauldron of boiling metals for parishioners who tolerated a lax priest. These torments all seem to be purgative; and at this point we come to the mouth of hell,

where a 'worm' is chained, sucking in and breathing out soul-like flies born up and down on flames. Hell itself is composed of lakes of fire and sulphurous water, of darkness, serpents and dragons; thieves are tormented in burning chains, and Alberic himself is threatened by the devils. The exit from hell is marked by a river, crossed by the by now traditional bridge. Alberic passes to the Earthly Paradise, a 'campus amoenus' in which the righteous await the Day of Judgment, and paradise itself in the middle. We meet Benedict - Alberic is of course a Benedictine - and a group of monks. Alberic then travels through the planetary spheres: the Moon, Mars, Mercury, the Sun, Jupiter, Venus and Saturn; in the last of these is the throne of God and the dwelling place of the cherubim. The vision has been described as 'a palpable conglomeration of the ideas of its predecessors', but deemed worthy of attention 'for the reason that it is, in its Purgatory, more complete than any other vision here recorded' (Dods 1903,p.219). The main difference lies in the speech of Benedict on the vice of monks - a topic which will find further amplification in the *Comedy*.

Another vision granted to a boy is that recorded by Vincent of Beauvais in the *Speculum Historiale* : the vision of the Boy William. William is led by a 'virum splendidum' to a dark valley of fire and freezing water, where souls plunge from one to the other - reminiscent of Drythelm. Others sit in fiery chairs and are forced to eat burning coins - a traditional punishment for avarice, which was to find its way in the fourteenth century into the fresco of the Collegiata at San Gimignano in Tuscany. Beside these, devils thrust man-shaped 'carnes' or 'lessi dolenti' (Inf.XXI 135) into a cauldron; others are thrust into fire, others fixed to rotating wheels - which go back to Homer's Ixion - by the genitals, and others suffer the torment of Tantalus, also Homeric in origin. Here upper hell gives way to the pit of flames which is lower hell; Satan is visible among the fire. William is then led to Paradise, a 'domus rotonda' in which are seated twelve companies of the blessed. Here explicit reference is made to the canonical Apocalypse.

A few years after the second writing of the vision of Alberic, an Irish knight named Tundale seems to die for three days, during which he is transported on a journey through the other world. This vision was far more widely known than that of Alberic, being translated into many languages and widely copied; it has been described as 'il capolavoro della sua specie' (Rajna 1892 p. 166).

The vision, 'ad edificationem multorum conscriptum', begins with an assessment of the character of Tundale, a knight possessing many worldly virtues, but with a sinful soul; it has the effect of turning his mind from the 'presenti cose' and causing him to reform. After the usual struggle between devils and an angel for his soul, Tundale is taken to a valley in which fry homicides, parricides and fratricides; this is followed by a mountain, crossed by a path with fire on one side and ice on the other, on which ambushers and traitors are pursued by devils with forks, and which again goes back to Drythelm. Another valley, where the proud attempt to cross a plank bridge, is succeeded by a fire-breathing monster who goes by the name of Acherons. At this point Tundale is again threatened by devils, and rescued by his guide. They come to a pond in which thieves are immersed, and a second, nail-covered, bridge. This is the scene of one of the most memorable incidents in the vision literature: Tundale, who once stole a cow, is forced to lead one across the bridge. This is so narrow that each time the knight takes a step forward, the cow is in danger of falling off; and each time he successfully pushes the cow forwards, Tundale himself loses his balance. The episode reaches a crisis point when they arrive at the high point of the bridge: they meet a thief, laden with the wheat he stole, coming in the opposite direction. Tundale is deemed to have taken the point, and suddenly finds himself on the other side.

The journey continues; Tundale is shown an oven-like house in which the gluttonous and fornicators are tortured. Once again, he is made to participate in the torments as a necessary stage in his own purification - a process also found, although in a much refined way, in the *Comedy.* He next comes to a frozen lake on which sits a monster who devours and excretes unchaste priests. These become pregnant, men as well as women, and give birth to serpents which issue forth from their entire skin surface. Here it is tempting to see a precursor of the last cantos of the *Inferno*, and particularly of the sections dealing with thieves and traitors.

At this point Tundale comes to a steep downward path; he passes Vulcan's smithy, in which souls replace molten metal, and the guide explains that they have now descended to lower hell. Here the souls come when they have suffered all the above torments; here they find Satan, chained to a grate and breathing fire in which are borne myriads of souls, many of whom Tundale recognizes.

Pol de Limbourg's Satan, from the Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry, based on the Vision of Tundale

Finally we reach Paradise. A door admits Tundale into a *locus amoenus* in which he finds the fountain of life; here those

sinners released from the torments of hell must wait before being allowed to join the company of the blessed. We meet two repentant tyrants, Conchober and Donachus, and King Cormachus. A silver wall encloses those who maintained a correct conjugal relationship, and a gold wall encloses the martyrs. Tundale then comes to a large tree, in whose branches birds sing and fruit hangs; 'hec arbor typus est sancte ecclesie'. The last wall, of precious stones, surrounds the nine angelic orders; from here Tundale, like Dante in the canto of the *Paradiso* which deals with the angelic orders, is given a bird's eye view of the earth. The vision ends with the spectacle of saint Patrick - Tundale was Irish - seated with four bishops; beside them is a single empty 'gran seggio' (Par. XXX 133) which awaits the occupancy of a further bishop, still alive.

The sources of the vision of Tundale are manifold, and have not yet been thoroughly studied. There are clearly classical reminiscences, particularly in the forge of Vulcan and in the name of the monster Acherons; the concentric walls of heaven recall these of the vision of Paul, and the valley of heat and cold goes back to Drythelm. Other elements have been traced back to Plutarch's vision of Thespesius, to the *Apocalypse of Esdras*, and to the *Aeneid*. The greatest difficulty in the study of sources is, as always, the impossibility of ascertaining the extent to which the influence of previous writings was indirect; it is aggravated by the popular nature, and therefore propensity for oral transmission, of the subject matter. And the same problem arises when one considers the vision in relation to the *Comedy*; there are a striking number of incidents and elements which find some correspondence in Dante, yet critics have disagreed on the relevance of these correspondences. D'Ancona notes the similarity between the angel guide of Tundale, 'a longe venientem quasi stellam lucidissimam' and the angel of Purg. XII, also coming 'bianco vestito e nella faccia quale Par tremolando mattutina stella' (D'Ancona 1874, p. 51); Vossler on the other had believes that the vision of Tundale 'in ogni caso non può aver influito come opera d'arte, sibbene tutt'al più indirettamente, come tradizione popolare, allo stesso modo di molte altre visioni' (Vossler 1927, p. 201). This is a problem to which we shall return.

In 1161, twelve years after the vision of Tundale, a novice monk called Gunthelm received a vision which was recorded both by Helinandus in his *Chronicon*, and later by Vincent of Beauvais in the *Speculum Historiale*. Gunthelm, a Cistercian, is guided by Benedict first to a chapel suspended in the air, in which he finds the Virgin Mary and a company of the blessed; she has sent for him to warn him of his insufficient dedication. From here, Gunthelm is taken by Raphael to the garden of Paradise, in which he finds Adam; and to hell, a region of darkness in which he sees a variety of torments, the most notable of which is that of a thief, compelled to ride a burning horse, with a goat which he had stolen tied around his neck, and a monk's habit - he had desired to take the cloth without repenting his sins - trailing behind. Judas is also among the damned, tied to the fiery wheel of Ixion.

The vision of Gunthelm was closely followed by that of Owen, a knight who descended into the cave long known as St Patrick's Purgatory; his story was written down by Henry of Saltrey, and later included in both the *Speculum Historiale* and the *Legenda Aurea*. The legend again presents several points of correspondence with the *Comedy*, such that it has even been said, with possibly a slight excess of enthusiasm; that 'les rapprochemens sont trop faciles pour qu'il soit besoin de les indiquer' (Labitte 1842, P. 730). St Patrick's Purgatory had been for several centuries popularly held to constitute an entrance to the underworld, and whoever dared spend a night there alone was believed to undergo complete purgation or his sins. Owen obtains permission from the local bishop, and decides to risk the adventure.

On entering, he is immediately assailed by demons, but is rescued by one of fifteen men in white. He is taken first to purgatory, divided into four fields of torment. In the first field he sees man nailed to the ground and whipped by demons; in the second they are nailed the other way up and tormented by dragons, serpents and toads; in the third by freezing wind. In the fourth field a vast variety of punishments meets his gaze; these include suspension in fiery chains by various parts of the body, and hanging by various organs over fire. Owen next sees an iron wheel of fire with sinners fixed to it; a house of liquid metal baths; a mountain and an icy river. He passes by the entrance to hell, and crosses the steep, slippery bridge. This leads him to the Earthly Paradise, surrounded by a high wall with a gate of precious metals. Inside he finds a field of flowers and grasses, over which walk clergy dressed in their ecclesiastical robes. A bright, clear light bathes the garden, and choirs sing songs of praise. The inhabitants are effulgent to varying degrees, as the blessed of Dante will be: 'sicut stella differt a stella in claritate, ita erat quaedam differentia concors in eorum vestium et vultum claritatis venustate' (ch XI). Two archbishops explain to Owen that this is the Earthly Paradise, and that its inhabitants will later be admitted to the Celestial Paradise.

Henry's sources are perhaps as complex as those of the *Vision of Tundale*; they include Matthew Paris, who wrote an earlier version of the legend, Bede - Drythelm is mentioned - Gregory the Great and the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*. The diffusion of the legend is also complex; it spread rapidly throughout Europe, being translated by Marie de France among others. To this day there is a well in Orvieto, built in the Renaissance by Sangallo, named the 'pozzo di San Patrizio'.

In 1188 a Holstein peasant named Godeschalc goes into a trance which lasts for five days; during this period his soul is taken on a journey through the other world. He crosses a thorny plain barefoot - the merciful are issued with

shoes by an angel - and goes over a river in which those who did not help others are cut by iron spikes. A junction separates those destined for hell from those on their way to heaven; Godeshalc follows first the road to hell and then that to heaven. In hell he meets a large number of people, and witnesses various punishments; the most interesting and original aspect of these encounters lies in their personal nature. They become digressions on the lives of the subjects, stories within a story, in a way we have not previously experienced. They are far removed from the figures of Dante's *Inferno*, but do constitute a step in that direction.

The last major vision of the twelfth century is that ascribed to a monk of Eynsham, near Oxford, written down by the sub-prior Adam in the year of its occurrence, 1196. It took place at Easter, the exact timing being, as in the *Comedy*, very carefully specified: from Maundy Thursday to Easter Saturday. The monk's guide is Saint Nicholas.

He is taken first through hell and purgatory, which are combined; here there are three separate areas of torment. In each one the monk meets many people formerly of his acquaintance. The first area consists of a marsh, within which sinners circulate, suffering different torments for their different and various sins. The torments become progressively lighter. The second area is a mountain with a dark valley containing a stagnant river, surrounded by fire on one side and ice on the other; sinners move between river, fire and ice, and are much disfigured as a result. This is purgative. Here they meet a goldsmith who relates how Nicholas saved him from eternal damnation. In the third area of torment, a field of sulphurous smoke containing pitch, worms, devils and molten metals, sodomites are punished. They too are greatly disfigured, although the monk does manage to identify and converse with a lawyer he knew in childhood; an interesting forerunner of Dante’s encounter with Brunetto Latini.

We pass to Paradise, the essential element of which is the vision enjoyed by all the blessed of the Passion - similar in aim to the vision in Dante's heaven of Mars, though infinitely more refined. A gate leads to the higher heavens, in which Christ sits enthroned. At this point the monk is told he must return to the body.

Although we have now exhausted the major twelfth century visions, there are a number of texts remaining which, although belonging to a different tradition, are relevant to the study of the other world as represented before the time of Dante. The most important of these tributaries which, as we have seen, watered the new river as it flowed towards the *Comedy*, is the *Anticlaudianus* of Alan of Lille. Despite the fact that 'l'autore parte da concetti opposti a quelli di Dante' (Torraca 1921, p. 281), it is nonetheless the case that the poem does offer many points of contact with the *Comedy*.

The *Anticlaudianus* consists essentially of the journey up through the heavens to God, undertaken at the instigation of Nature, in order to complete the creation of the perfect man. This ascent is undertaken with the aid of various guides: Ratio, a *puella* and Rides. These guides are obviously close in concept and function to Dante's Virgil, Beatrice and Bernard. Secondly, the ascent through the planetary heavens is marked by a series of considerations on such problematical topics as the moon's spots, the nature of the Trinity, the paradoxical nature of Mary as virgin mother, and the divine and yet human nature of Christ; all of these play an important part in the *Paradiso*. The ascent is undertaken in a chariot, ultimately derived from the tradition of Neoplatonism, which recalls the chariot of Dante's Earthly Paradise; this has been interpreted (Dronke 1981) as the Platonic vehicle brought by Beatrice in which Dante's soul is enabled to make a similar ascent. And the climax of the Anticlaudianus is the sudden understanding of the divine mind given to Phronesis, which recalls the final vision of Dante.

The very beginning of the thirteenth century gives us the *Vision of Thurkill*, related by Ralph of Coggeshall, but also contained in Roger of Wendover's *Flores Historiarum* and Matthew of Paris's *Chronicus Maioribus*. It begins with references to previous visions, especially those recorded by Gregory the Great, and recently those of Owen, Tundale, and the monk of Eynsham.

Thurkill, a countryman of Essex, is guided by Julian the Hospitalier, and taken first to a basilica, the abode of all those who have recently died. The blessed are resplendent, the mediocre spotted, and the wicked black - exactly as in the *Gorgias* of Plato. To the east of the basilica is the fire of Purgatory, beyond which a bridge leads to a mountain of joy.

Thurkill is introduced next to a devils' theatre in hell; here sinners sit in seats of iron and fire, awaiting their turn to be dragged into the centre of the theatre and tormented. We witness a sample of this torment, and then proceed to lower hell, divided into four sections. Here sinners boil, freeze, suffer a sulphurous stench or are immersed in black, salt water.

They return to the temple, where Thurkill recognizes, among others, his father, and then move towards the east, where they find a *locus amoenus*. Here four streams flow from a fountain, and Adam sits beneath a tree; with one eye he laughs, with the other he cries. He reminds us perhaps of Dante's Old Man of Crete. The last thing Thurkill sees is a temple of gold; he then returns to the body.

There are several other popular visions of the other world dating from the thirteenth century, but on the whole the genre had already reached its climax in the twelfth, and little that is new was subsequently added. "Etienne de Bourbon records several minor and episodic visions in his *Anecdotes historiques*, but most of the thirteenth century productions were satirical - and this is of course the period in which drama, particularly in France, began to include more or less comic episodes in which the devils of hell played a prominent part. It is indeed to the French that we must look when considering the satirical works of the afterlife: Rutebeuf's *Voye de Paradis*, Raoul de Houdan's work of the same title, and his *Songe d'enfer*; and Huon de Mery's *Tournoiernent Antecrist*. Here we find a two-fold satire: of contemporary society, and of the serious vision literature of previous centuries.

From the above survey of the main literary productions taking the afterlife as their subject matter, it is clear that while on the one hand there was a well-defined and closely followed tradition, which provided a framework and a set of basic ingredients for the visionary and his redactor, the accounts of the other world do nevertheless fall into several distinct groups. These groups, while being distinguishable principally by their aims, correspond to specific historical periods; it is important to bear this historical and cultural division in mind when considering the relationship between the various texts and the *Comedy*.

3. Past Criticism

Those critics who have examined the relationship between the *Comedy* and previous representations of the afterlife, working in the majority of cases at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, are divisible into two distinct groups. The first of these groups concerned itself with the relation between Dante and the tradition as a whole; having defined the *Comedy* as the 'formule définitive' (Labitte 1842, p. 705) of the other world literature, the critics tried to draw a continuous line backwards, suggesting as they did so that previous visions were but earlier stages in the evolution of the *Comedy*, each century coming a little closer to the perfection it was to reach only in Dante. The principal proponents of this thesis were Ozanam and Labitte, followed at an interval of fifty years by Dods.

Also in this first group must be considered those critics who reacted against this viewpoint and went to the opposite extreme; principal among these is Torraca. Torraca's view was that 'Dante <u>non</u> <u>ha</u> precursori' (Torraca 1921, P. 307). Other critics considered the similarities between Dante and the tradition as a whole; Torraca considered the differences, and concluded that these were such as to justify the statement that Dante neither knew nor used the vision literature. He took Fritzsche's outline of some forty visions (Fritzsche 1886-37) as evidence that the genre was a minor one, exclaiming that 'in circa mille anni, mezza Europa ne produce in media <u>quattro</u> appena ogni secolo' (p. 299) - whereas surely what is relevant is the diffusion, not the production, of the visions, even if one assumes that all those produced have survived to the present day. He further argued that only one of the visions, that of Alberic, was written in Italy - but medieval culture did not observe national boundaries; only nine of the twenty-four sages in the Heaven of the Sun were born on Italian soil. Torraca concludes his refutation with the unanswerable: 'D'altra parte, non vorremmo già figurarci Dante come uno studioso de' tempi nostri che prima di accingersi a un lavoro, s'informa della <u>bibliografia</u> dell'argomento e, con le tasche piene di quaderni e di taccuini, va "esplorando le bibloteche".' p. 299-300).

The second group of critics concerned itself with the tradition as a whole, but with the relation between the *Comedy* and single visions; each time a new vision was discovered, it would be jumped upon as the source of Dante's poem, on the principle that the vision, being earlier, must have influenced the formation of the *Comedy*, being later. The vision of Alberic has been the main protagonist in this exercise. In 1752, Mazocchi became the first to suggest a relation between the two works; he notes the affinity between the *Comedy* and the vision, 'quam facile mox Dantes Aligerius est imitatus in ea, quam Comoediam vocant' (quoted Cosmo 1891, p. 68). The argument was taken up by Bottari in the following year; he concludes, after a study of the two works, that 'fa di mestieri il dire, o che ambedue si sieno incontrati a concepire i medesimi pensieri, o che Dante, avendo letta questa Visione, da essa abbia tratte alcune delle sue tante finzioni e l'idea tutta di questi tre regni' (Bottari 1753, P. 152). The cause was pursued by Di Costanzo in 1800, by Cancellieri, who first published the text of Alberic, in 1814, and by De Vivo in 1899. Since then, no full length studies have been published.

As in the first group, a tendency towards the opposite extreme may also be identified with these critics. The shining example in this respect is that of Guercio, a pupil of Torraca, whose study of the relevance of the previous visions for an understanding of the *Comedy* is conducted 'in limiti piu modesti del consueti' (Vossler 1927, p. 187). Guercio's starting point is that Dante is unlikely to have relied on the visions, since he never mentions them. With heavy sarcasm he writes: 'Non è poi vero che il Poeta si sia mostrato ingrato verso i suoi precursori. Se non li ha glorificati, additandoli alla folla de' lettori tra le "luculenti gioie" del Paradiso, segretamente, come un cattolico occulto, ha acceso davanti au suoi piccoli un devoto moccoletto. Con poetico artifizio si compiacque di appiattarli "sotto il velame de li versi strani", non tanto, per, che il fiuto del critico non potesse presto o tardi scovarli' (Guercio 1909, P. 9-0). Guercio is perfectly correct in refuting the excesses of previous attempts to demonstrate Dante's plagiarism: he

remarks that the fact that both Dante and Alberic are accompanied by a guide is not significant; 'chi s'è mai imbattuto in una narrazione di viaggio vera o immaginario dove non abbia avuta la sua parte la guida, sia pure, come ai giorni nostri, "tascabile"?' (p. 23); he suggests that the dove which lifts Alberic is not to be regarded as the necessary source for the eagle which lifts Dante, the dove being eminently Benedictine and the eagle eminently classical; he indicates that ladders were in wide literary use, and observes finally that the supposed linguistic borrowings of Dante from Alberic are better accounted for by the supposition that 'due imagini sorelle siano servite ad Alberico e a Dante per illustrare due concetti... fratelli' (p. 48). But Guercio, like Torraca, is too keen to prove his point.

It seems clear that those critics who have considered the relationship between the *Comedy* and the 'oltretomba' visions of previous centuries have in their extremism generally fallen, as it were, to either side of the stool.

4. The relationship between the vision literature of the other world and the *Comedy*: Conclusions

Bearing in mind the errors of previous criticism, it becomes necessary to consider in what way one might profitably approach the comparative study of the medieval representations of the afterlife and the *Comedy*. We have already seen that there are three important factors in the context of which such a study must be undertaken.

Firstly, the *Comedy* belongs to a particular historical and cultural period. The aim of the study is to distinguish the individual from the traditional in the poem, and thus to come to a more accurate assessment of it, on the principle that everything is understood in terms of what it is not as well as of what it is; and it seems abundantly clear that what it is not is a bigger and better vision of the afterlife perched on the shoulders of all previous visions. The twelfth century saw a number of turning points, both in thought and, consequently, in art and literature. These are intimately interconnected, and represented a fundamental change in attitudes towards life and therefore towards death; they are such that any artistic or literary representation of the other world which follows them is necessarily radically different from any which precedes them, and thus discontinuity becomes as important as continuity.

In the twelfth century, therefore, a change in the attitude towards the individual and towards individual morality and responsibility occurred. This had been anticipated by the clergy of the Carolingian age, but on the popular level the individual had continued to believe in a happy afterlife guaranteed not so much by his good works as by his correct participation in the rites of the Church. Death did not inspire fear and apprehension; 'regret for life goes hand in hand with a simple acceptance of imminent death' (Ariès 1983, P. 15); a death seen not as the moment at which the individual will be judged, 'but as the passage from one collectivity to another. Roland dies in peace on the battlefield of Ronceval, offering his glove to heaven in an act of homage; he passes from being the vassal of Charlemagne to being that of God. But in the twelfth century 'a new model appeared, the model or the death of the self. (...) Death was redefined as the end and curtailment of an individual life' (Ariès p. 394). This was reflected immediately in art. Before the twelfth century, churches bore representations of the Christ of the Apocalypse and the Second Coming, the emphasis being on salvation. One has but to think of the mosaics of Ravenna, Monreale and Palermo. In the twelfth century, a second scene was added to this: the Last Judgment, and the separation of the blessed from the damned. The mosaics of Torcello cathedral (right) provide an example of this. In the thirteenth, the idea of judgment became paramount, and Christ, although still represented above the judgment scene, is now shown primarily as judge, and not as saviour. Giotto's Last Judgment at Padua observes this tradition.

The Last Judgment, Torcello Cathedral

This movement had a profound impact on both the Church and the vision literature. The structure of the Mass was altered, with a new emphasis on intervention for the dead, not previously considered necessary. And, above all, the way was paved for the full development of the concept of purgatory. Both classical paganism and Jewish belief had seen the immediate state of the soul after death as a neutral one; the Homeric Hades and the Jewish Sheol are shadowy realms in which souls exist in a state of semi-oblivion. Popular tradition received this belief, and for many centuries held that the soul went to a place of waiting, variously defined as Abraham's bosom, the *interim refrigerium* and the *requies*, until the Day of Judgment; a belief which, furthermore, was not contradicted by the

theologians, who were concerned more with the final state of the soul after that judgment than with what happened before it. Increasingly, however, and particularly after the twelfth century, this period of waiting came to be replaced with the concept of Purgatory - a change which would not have been possible without the new emphasis on individual morality. Thus in the various visions we see a new elaboration of the concept of payment. Drythelm's rudimentary system of purgation - alternation between fire and ice until the Day of Judgment - is replaced by Alberic's confused but detailed purgative system: outer hell seems to be purgative, inner hell eternal. A bridge and a plain of thorns are introduced as specifically purgative devices, and various classes of sinners undergoing purgation are identified. At the end of the same century, the monk of Eynsham offers a yet better developed Purgatory; all one's sins must be purged, and there are three separate areas in which this occurs. It is furthermore specifically stated that purgation may be shortened by prayer from the living, good works during one's life, and suffering - a kind of advance purgation - before death. We are told: 'Quam ob causam quicquid spiritibus de hoc mundo migrantium munditie equitat ique contrarium inheserit, in illa seculo purgari necesse habet, ut purificatis per supplicia aditus pateat beate quietis, et in quietis loco, peramplius et perfectius ex desiderio divine visionis dignificatis animabus, introitus reseretur glorie celestis' (chapter XXX).

This gradual development of the doctrine of purgation reaches a climax in Dante, whose representation of the purgatorial mountain is also predominantly literary, rather than theological. It is perhaps the clearest example of. the need to study the *Comedy* in its popular literary context.

The second factor to bear in mind when considering the relation between the *Comedy* and previous visions of the afterlife is that although, as we have seen, the poem is not to be considered merely as the last in a line of similar but inferior texts in one particular genre, it is nonetheless intimately related to that genre. A study of the relation between them will add perspective and provide a control experiment by which to assess the component parts of the *Comedy* in relation to specific periods in the tradition where each element was paramount. D'Ancona has already suggested that the previous tradition is best considered in three groups, not necessarily chronological: contemplative or monastic visions, inspired by religious zeal (for example, the texts of Paul, Brendan, Tundale, Patrick's Purgatory and Alberic); political visions (mostly Carolingian); and poetical visions (the satirical productions in the vernacular). Dante's poem clearly contains elements corresponding to all three groups, and they can thus be used to provide an introduction to the study of the *Comedy*.

This brings us to the related question of the genesis of the *Comedy* and its conformity to, or deviation from previous tradition; a matter which is the subject of a brief but excellent study by Zabughin (1922). Zabughin traces the original idea of the poem to the desire expressed in the *Vita Nuova* to say of Beatrice what has never been said before of any woman. He then suggests that the early concept of the *Comedy* was of a work very much more akin to the previous literary visions, and furthermore that this leaves its mark on the completed and revised work. He suggests, as did Boccaccio, that the *Inferno* was originally conceived not in terms of an Aristotelian classification of sins, but in those of the seven capital vices, and that indeed this primitive *Inferno* is constituted by the first seven cantos of the poem, each of which deals with one of the seven vices. He then surmises that 'dall'inferno dei sette peccati Dante intendesse passare direttamente, attraverso una zona di fuoco, simile a quella che divampò attorno a S. Furseo al suo calare in terra, su "alle beate genti",' (p. 8), and that he would have proceeded to a Paradise composed essentially of the rose, an eminently medieval symbol resplendent in the Gothic cathedrals and in the Roman de la Rose. The *Inferno* would therefore correspond more closely to the vision tradition, retaining most conventional elements, and the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* deviate more interestingly from this. One might suggest that as the plan of the *Comedy* developed, then to the original concept was gradually added the philosophical element, the religious didacticism and the political message, all present in previous visions, and that a comparative study of these elements will alone permit an accurate assessment of the particular qualities of the poem. The acquisition of nobility is a process that may, in Dante's view, be compared to the grafting of a new scion onto old stock: 'là dove questo seme (nobility) dal principio non cade, si puote inducere nel suo processo, si che perviene a questo frutto; ed è uno modo quasi d'insetare l'altrui natura sopra diversa radice' (*Convivio* IV xxii 12); the improvement of the Italian language by the addition of the *volgare illustre* to the dialects is likewise a grafting process ('Nonne cotidie vel plantas inserit vel plantaria plantat?' - *De Vulgari Eloquentia* I xviii 1); and so the writing of the *Comedy* may be seen as the grafting of new elements onto the stock of previous representations of the other world. To assess the growth of the new elements it is necessary to have a thorough grasp of the direction of growth from which they deviate.

To do this we are required to return to the third factor to be borne in mind when studying the relation between the poem and the visions: that although the contents of the *Comedy* are sufficiently innovative to enable critics to largely ignore the popular vision tradition, there are nonetheless many structural elements and *topoi* which do recur throughout the tradition and in Dante. These include such topographical motifs as the wood, the castle, the tomb, the infernal rivers; structural elements such as the classification of sins or the relation between the Earthly and the celestial paradises, and other aspects such as the nature of the punishments and the idea of *contrapasso*, the concept of beatitude or the nature of purgation.

In conclusion, there remains the key question of whether Dante had access to the vision literature or not. It cannot be conclusively proved, although many of the texts were included among the writings of such major authors as Bede, Gregory the Great, Vincent of Beauvais, Jacopo da Voragine; or contained in the libraries of monasteries and churches. In a sense, it does not matter, since 'one of the hardest problems in dealing with the history of vision literature, and possibly the most futile, is to attempt to determine in any given vision the extent of conscious borrowing of elements from earlier visions' (Traill 1974 p12). The visions, and the various iconographical representations, are not in themselves the source material; they are the evidence for that source material, which is popular in nature and existent in people's minds rather than in libraries; together they provide us with an idea of the popular conception of the other world; and whereas it may become clear that Dante had direct knowledge of the main texts, this is not a matter of fundamental concern.

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