

Visions and the Fantastic

Jonas Wellendorf
(CMS, University of Bergen)

Medieval vision literature tells us about the hopes and fears of man for the time to come when this life has passed.¹ The hereafter was a subject of great importance since it was believed that every man would then be punished or rewarded according to his merits. The really bad would go straight to Hell and the really good straight to Heaven. The middle group who were neither good nor bad, and this was the largest group, would undergo a period of painful cleansing or purgation before eventually proceeding to their final destination, Heaven if their sins could be washed away, Hell if they could not.² Man had a number of means at his disposal to shorten this period of temporary purgation. He could grant one or more churches or monasteries a piece of land, for example, or some movable properties. In return the church would enter him in their *ártíðarbók* or *obituarium*, and celebrate the *ártíð* or anniversary of his death with the *Missa defunctorum* for ever and ever, or at least *mæðhan werdhen standher* (DN I nr. 976) 'as long as the world stands' as one of the donations expresses it. The order and the words for the mass is e.g. found in one Norwegian *Manuale* or *Presta handbók* from around 1200 and begins with the words *Requiem eternam dona eis domine et lux perpetua luceat* (ed. Fæhm, 1962, 75).³ It was, however, a costly procedure to be inscribed in the *obituarium* and beyond the means of most. Another way to ensure that one's *ártíð* had at least the possibilities of being remembered was to have a rune stone erected that advertises the date of the *ártíð*. One such inscription from the church of Klepp in Rogaland, Norway, possibly dating from the twelfth century reads:

The anniversary of Ingibjörg Káradóttir is three nights after Cross Mass in the spring. May every man that sees these runes sing Paternoster for her soul. May God help him that does thus.⁴

This inscription, which was carved on the wall of a church, is not directed to the local priest, but it rather calls on the parishioners to sing the Paternoster for the soul; this, it was believed, would also remedy the purgatorial pains.⁵

But how could one know all this about the beyond, since the Bible did not after

¹ Several types of vision literature circulated in the middle ages. In this essay the term 'vision literature' applies only the texts that tell of a journey in and through the otherworld, i.e. the texts Dinzelsbacher (1981) labels 'Type I' in his typology or texts of the same kind as those treated by Carozzi (1993).

² According to some sources all who enter the purgatory will eventually be granted access to Heaven.

³ 'Grant them eternal rest, O Lord, and may perpetual light shine.' The formula in this manuscript lacks the concluding *eis* (...may perpetual light shine upon them).

⁴ *Ártíð er Ingibjargar Káradóttur þrim nóttum eptir Krossmessu um várít. Hverr sá maðr [er] rúnar þessar sér, þá syngi Pater noster fyrir sál hennar. Hjálpi Guð þeim er svá gerir* (N 227).

⁵ See e.g. *Drycthelms leizla* where the angelic guide says about the souls that are not yet ready to enter heaven: *Ma þeim ok stoda allt þat gott er giorzist i heilagre kristni þeim til miskunnar sua sem heilogh messa. ok hegar bæner ok olmosu giorder at þeira pinur verðe skemri ok linarri* (s. 152).

all go into particulars on this topic? According to Gervase of Tilbury (c.1215) the most acceptable way to obtain reliable information about the other world was from witnesses who had been there themselves, and this is exactly what the vision literature offers us. Any other source of information, according to Gervase, might be met with derision.⁶ The vision literature tells about individuals who, during a period of apparent lifelessness have been taken by an otherworldly figure on a journey to see, and sometimes even experience, the otherworldly pleasures and pains. The otherworldly figure, usually an angel or a saint, functions as a guide that explains the sights of the other world for the horrified and amazed visionary. Some texts have quite short descriptions of the infernal and celestial locations, whereas other texts obviously take pleasure in describing the torments with as many graphic details as possible. One such text is *Duggals leizla*, an Old Norse translation from around 1300 of the *Visio Thugdali*, where the first torment is described in terms of a gigantic infernal frying pan and replete with other metaphors from the culinary realms where souls are roasted, mashed and melted.⁷ The frying pan is the first torment in the upper Hell, and even though we may think that this must be a really unpleasant way to spend the afterlife, the angelic guide takes care to underline that the following torments are much worse, and they are indeed. We follow Duggall and his *psychopompus* through a number of rather unpleasant locations, culminating in the depths of the lower Hell where the prince of darkness is being tormented. They then advance to more pleasant regions, and ultimately end up in wondrous surroundings where they witness the glory of the elect.

At first glance the connection between visions and the fantastic seems more than obvious to a modern reader, but a more careful examination will make this connection much harder to draw. Etymologically 'fantastic' is derived from a Greek

⁶ *Multociens et a multis insultatur, cum penas infernales ante oculos ponimus, quod ea que de altero seculo proponimus friuola sunt, adicientes hec adinuenticia esse ... qualiter enim sciunt qui hec nec uiderunt nec probauerunt?* (p. 758)

⁷ The passage in *Duggals leizla* reads: *«En suo sem þau hoftu leingi geingit og hoftu ecki lios nema þat er stod af einglinum og um sider komu þau i dal einn mikin og miog ogurligan myrkan og allan huldan daudans blinnleik Sa datr uar miog diupur og fullr gloandi gloda og uar lok a honum sex allna þyk og stod meiri bruni af þui enn af ollum glodum þeim sem uoru j dalnum og af þeim dal gek sua full daunn med allzkonar biturleik med siukum þungleik at hann gek yfer allar þær pislir og uandræðilig uolk er su sala hafði fyr þolact þui næst sigu ofan a lokit mikill uesælla manna salna fioldi og brunu þar aa med hardri og langri pisl til þess er þær uoru kolum likari og sidan uoro þær kreistar j gegnum iarnlokitt sem renanda uax gegnum klæði og endurskiptuzi sua odrú sinne til pislá og glodunum til bruna (A p. 25–26), but the kitchen metaphor is even more pronounced in the Latin *Duggals leizla*: *Cumque longius simul pergerent et nullum preter splendorem angeli lumen haberent, tandem uenerunt ad uallem ualde terribilem ac tenebrosam et mortis caligne coopertam. Erat enim ualde profunda et carbonibus ardentibus plena, cooperculum habens ferreum, quod spissitudinem habere uidebatur sex cubitorum, quod nimio ardentis superabat candore carbones. Cujus fetor omnes, quas huc usque passa est anima, superabat tribulationes. Descendebat enim super illam laminam miserrimarum multitudo animarum et illic cremabantur, donec ad modum cremii in sartagine concremati omnino liquiscerent, et, quod est grauius, ita colabantur per predictam laminam, sicut colari solet cera per pannum, et iterum in carbonibus ignis ardentibus renouabantur ad tormentum (Visio Thugdali p. 13).**

verb meaning 'to show, bring forth, make visible' (gr. *phainō*). This bringing forth in the light of day is exactly what we find in the vision literature: An individual is (however unwillingly) chosen to cross the frontier between life and death and see matters usually hidden from man in general. Subsequently he is requested to tell the world, or at least his parish priest, about what he has seen. This retelling of the sights in the beyond lies at the very core of the genre and must be regarded as one of the major purposes of the known visions. During this visionary process two deictic movements are found where what is normally hidden is shown or brought forth to light (*phainō*). The divine power entrusts the vision to the visionary and the visionary divulges the message. What could be more fantastic than this twofold forth bringing? However, the actual use of a term outweighs etymology in most instances, and the term 'the fantastic' is commonly used in ways radically different from the basic etymological meaning. I therefore turn to modern English, where there are two main uses of the term the fantastic: a general one and a more specialised one. The more general of these is the regularly substantivised adjective, which according to *The New Oxford American Dictionary* denotes something 'imaginative or fanciful; remote from reality.' A more specialized employment of the term can be found in the field of literary studies, where Todorov famously defined the fantastic as the sensation of the reader when an event happens in a literary work that cannot be explained by natural laws, and the reader is struck by uncertainty as to whether the event should be explained as an illusion or as the workings of some unknown law of nature: 'The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we chose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvellous' (1973, 25).⁸ These notions of the fantastic fits the vision literature quite well if the texts are read in a decontextualised way as pure literature, whatever that is, but from the perspective of medieval studies it is important to approach the visions from the perspective of their primary intended audience and contextualise them historically.

Prerequisite for the fantastic in these senses is that something happens that violates the laws that govern our surroundings. In a secular, disenchanting modern world the laws believed to govern the world are different from medieval beliefs. Thus an occurrence that we would deem fantastic could in a religious medieval world-view readily be interpreted as an act of God, his emissaries or their opponents. This is particularly true of the events described in the visions. Indeed, that the divine has intervened in human affairs in such instances is not presented as interpretation of fact, but as fact itself. True visions happen at the instigation of God and in this way they are not fantastic occurrences. They might be marvellous but still something perfectly possible. It might not happen very often, but still it happens, 'even in our own times' as the author of one early thirteenth century vision has it (*Visio Thurkilli* p. 2).

Another problem one incurs by labelling visions fantastic is the possible presence of allegory in the visions. If they are to be read in a strictly allegorical way it

⁸ By common consent the genre of the literary fantastic came into being the second half of the eighteenth century (Cornwell, 1990, 45–47), so to give a medieval vision the label 'fantastic' in this sense would be equally anachronistic as labelling the sagas of Icelanders historical novels. Among later contributions that discuss and refine the work of Todorov I have found the contributions of Brooke-Rose (1981) and Cornwell (1990) particularly useful. Both of these authors maintain the crucial distinction between the fantastic and fantasy.

follows that the events described in the text at the literal level are more or less unimportant or at least subjugated to the allegory, since it is in the reading of the allegory that one might arrive at an intended interpretation of the events described. Think for instance of the fables with talking animals. What matters there is not the fact that the animals talk, even though that might seem fantastic, but rather that the main point of the text does not lie with the talking animals. Todorov (1973, 58–74) also maintains that allegory has no place in the fantastic.⁹ The concept of allegory is of course as difficult to wield as the fantastic, but still it might be worthwhile to take a closer look at allegory in relation to the vision literature.¹⁰

Widely divergent views exist regarding the presence or absence of allegory in the vision literature. One influential work on visions and vision literature (Dinzelsbacher, 1981, 169–184) almost completely denies allegory any role in the vision literature, whereas Ebel (1968, 181–183) rather classifies visions among the allegorical than among the narrative forms. It is true that more often than not the most obvious reading of a particular vision lies in the literal sense, but there are certainly examples of visions that are to be understood in an allegorical sense in addition to the literal one. One such text is the *Gundelinus leizla*, that was translated (twice, it is believed) into Old Norse around 1300.¹¹ They are translated from different versions of the *Visio Gunthelmi*, a Latin text believed to have been composed around 1160 and subsequently circulated in a number of versions. This vision tells the tale of a newly converted monk, Gundelinus (or Guilleme), who regrets his vow and wants to leave the monastery. One night he is attacked by a devil who injures him so violently that he loses consciousness. The monk lies as if dead for a period of three days. During this period he goes on a spiritual journey in the beyond under the guidance of St. Benedict and the archangel Raphael.

The most immediate allegorical part of this text is found at the beginning of Gunthelm's visionary journey. To reach the celestial regions he has to climb a ladder that stretches all the way to Heaven. On each of the steps sit devils who beat him, but under the protecting hand of St. Benedict he manages to reach the top of the ladder. There he finds a chapel, and inside he meets the Virgin Mary, to whom he promises everlasting faithfulness.

The ladder as a symbol of the ascent towards God enjoyed an enormous popularity in the Middle Ages (see e.g. Graf, 2004 and Kretzenbacher, 1971), and is also used (in a different way) in the tradition surrounding St. Óláfr. It is no coincidence that the guide during the ascent of the ladder in *Gundelinus leizla* was St. Benedict, since Gundelinus belonged to the Cistercians, one of the monastic orders that follow the Rule of St. Benedict. Neither is it a coincidence that Gundelinus meets The Virgin in the heavenly chapel, as the Cistercians were particularly devoted to her,

⁹ Brooke-Rose (1981, 68–71) has contested this and does allow for allegory in the fantastic.

¹⁰ It will often be possible to impose an allegorising reading on a text (*allegoresis*), but here allegory is used in the sense of a non-literal meaning built into the text consciously by the author, with the intention and expectation that at least some readers should notice that the text deals with something different from what it appears to be dealing with on the surface.

¹¹ These texts, *Gundelinus leizla A* and *B*, are edited in *Mariu saga* (pp. 534–541 & 1162–1168).

and habitually consecrated their monasteries to her. The ascent of Gunthelm in other words tells us how the road to salvation is beset with pain and dangers, but under the reliable guidance of the Rule of Benedict we will eventually reach the heavenly goal.

This is a literal reading of the allegory incorporated in the text by the author, and a reading that is likely, I should think, to have been met with approval by the immediate and monastic audience of the vision. The text is quite explicit in pointing out that it is a Cistercian monastery the monk joins (*Mariu saga* 534 and 1162), but even in Iceland the monks would have read the text in the same way as I have outlined above, although there were no Cistercian foundations there. As I mentioned, we find in fables, for example, a complete replacement of the literal meaning of the text, but in the example from *Gundelinus leizla* the allegory simply imposes an additional layer of meaning onto the narrative without replacing the literal meaning. The literal sense is not rendered redundant or superfluous by the allegory, but is still there to be read and understood as the part of the narrative that describes the means by which the novice reaches the Otherworld. After having met with Mary, the visionary (and the vision) proceeds in a more or less standard way through the diverse regions of the Otherworld. In this way the possible presence of allegory does not impede the possibilities of the vision literature to enter the realm of the fantastic, because allegory here has a supplementing effect on the narrative rather than a replacing one.

Another less straightforward way in which the visions are to be understood in non-literal or figurative terms regards the plastic representations of locations and conditions in the otherworld. The souls are incorporeal beings and at the same time they are described as undergoing some quite corporeal torments in the visions. A question that naturally rises from this seemingly paradoxical situation is how an incorporeal being such as a soul can suffer corporeal torments?¹² This question is rarely hinted at in the vision literature itself, but one text that does touch upon this and present a solution of sorts is the *Tractatus de purgatorio sancti Patricii* written c.1180–1184 by H[enry] of Sawtry (*Tractatus* p. lxxxiv).¹³ In the prologue Henry writes as follows:

¹² This problem is likely to have surfaced time and again, and the standard medieval handbooks did provide answers. For example, Gregory the Great cannot see why the immaterial soul cannot be kept in corporeal fire after the death of the body: the soul was, after all, kept in the corporeal body while on earth. In Old Norse: *Petrvs. Hverso ma því of trua, at licamligr eldr megí halda á olicamligom hlut? Gregorivs. Ef haldasc ma olicamligr andi i lifanda licam mannz, fvr því megí þa eigi eptir andlat licamligr eldr of halda olicamligom anda? (Viðræður Gregors mikla p. 244)* and in Latin: *PETRVS. Et qua ratione credendum est quia rem incorpoream tenere ignis corporeus possit? GREGORIVS. Si uiuentis hominis incorporeus spiritus tenetur in corpore, cur non post mortem, cum incorporeus sit spiritus, etiam corporeo igne teneatur? (Dialogi IV p. 100)*. Another view is presented by the *magister* in *Elucidarius* (III, 11), who states that the souls in purgatory suffer for their sins in the shape they bore in the world. In Old Norse: *Discipulus. með hverre áá stionv ero ander j pislvm. Magister. j asionv likams þess er þær hofdv her* and in Latin: *D. – Quali forma sunt ibi positi? M. – In forma corporum quam hic gesserunt (Elucidarius p. 121)*, which is to say that the souls wear corporal figures while in the torments.

¹³ This text shares many characteristics with the vision literature, but is not itself a vision in a strict sense, since the protagonist travels through the purgatory *in corpore*.

However, the people whose souls leave their bodies and then return to them by divine order are given some signs, which are similar to material things but are intended to represent spiritual ones. If these souls did not see these signs in this manner and through these means, they would not on any account be able to communicate these things after their return while living in the body and knowing only material things. This is why, in this account, a mortal and material man tells how he saw spiritual things under the aspect and form of material things (Trans. Picard, 1985: 45).¹⁴

The torments we read about in the vision literature are not, according to this view, the real torments themselves, but merely representations of the torments in corporeal terms so as to make them understandable for the living, and in particular 'for the betterment of the simple folk (trans. Picard, 1985, 43).'¹⁵ This corporeal clothing of the torments happens already at the stage of the first deictic movement of the text, so that the visionary is not shown the torments themselves, but merely their representations. When Henry declares that everything seen in the text is merely a series of bodily representations of the otherworldly reality he effectively pulls the carpet from under any literal understanding of the events described in the text as well as their representation in the text.¹⁶

It is uncertain whether this text was known to an Old Norse audience, but the author of the *Tractatus* is here, as Spilling (1975, 209–212) has shown, primarily following *De sacramentis christiane fidei* XVI, 2 (PL 176, 580–584) of Hugh of St. Victor, who is sceptical about the eagerness of man to know 'all these things that should rather be feared than inquired about'.¹⁷ Hugh mentions in particular 'rivers, flames, bridges, ships, houses, forests, meadows, flowers, black people, white [people] etc., just as they usually look in this world'; likewise they are drawn by the hands, dragged by the feet, hanged by the neck, whipped, thrown headlong and other things of the same sort.¹⁸ However, all these things are, according to Hugh, merely signs visionaries see so as to be able to explain them to the living.¹⁹ But whether or not those

¹⁴ *Ab eis tamen, quorum anime a corporibus exeunt et iterum iubente Deo ad corpora redeunt, signa quedam corporalibus similia ad demonstrationem spiritualium nuntiantur, quia, nisi in talibus et per talia ab animabus corporibus exutis uiderentur, nullo modo ab eisdem, ad corpora reuersis, in corpore uiuentibus et corporalia tantum scientibus, intimarentur. Vnde et in hac narratione a corporali et mortali homine spiritalia dicuntur uideri quasi in specie et forma corporali (Tractatus p. 122–123).*

¹⁵ *...ad profectum simplicium (Tractatus p. 121).*

¹⁶ It is uncertain how deeply rooted this conviction was in the author, for at the end of the *Tractatus* he lets his protagonist, Owein, claim that he has seen the torments with his corporeal eyes as well as endured them bodily (*...corporeis oculis se uidisse et corporaliter hec pertulisse constantissime testatur*, p. 150). One would think that Henry would have reiterated his argument from the prologue at this point, but he leaves the claim of the protagonist unchallenged.

¹⁷ *Sed haec omnia [i.e. what happens after death] magis timenda sunt, quam quaerenda (PL 176 coll. 580).*

¹⁸ *Flumina, flammas, pontes, naves, domos, nemora, prata, flores, homines nigros, candidos etc. qualia in hoc mundo uideri et haberi solent [...] manibus trahi, pedibus deduci, collo suspendi, flagellari, praecipitari, et alia huiusmodi (PL 176 coll. 582).*

¹⁹ This idea occurs already in Augustine's *De cura pro mortuis gerenda* (PL 40 coll.

who are not destined to be brought back to life, see and feel the actual torments or merely their representations, there is no way of knowing, he says.²⁰ Even if the *Tractatus* was unknown in Norway and Iceland during the Middle Ages,²¹ there is a good possibility that the text of Hugh of St. Victor was known in Norway and Iceland, considering the well known and close connections between Scandinavia and the Victorines in Paris (see Gunnar Harðarson, 1995, 1–37). Seen in this way the visions become narrative representations of possible experiences of representations of the conditions of the souls after death, and thus hardly texts that are to be understood literally.

This interpretation of the visions is the learned one and rarely surfaces in the visions themselves. The *Tractatus* declares that this is done for the 'simple folks', but many visions, such as e.g. *Gundelinus leizla* and *Visio Tmugdali* with equally tangible descriptions are certainly primarily directed at a monastic audience. In sum: the visions occupy a rather polyvalent position where both a literal and an oblique understanding of the texts as well as their possible historical background seem to be possible, and consequently the possible fantastic element becomes at best ambiguous as well.

If we will insist on labelling the visions fantastic, it has to be done in yet another way, and we have to proceed a bit further into the sphere of medieval learning, and I am afraid further afield from Old Norse, namely to the theory of vision as it was current from Augustine and onwards.²² His theory of vision does not deal with experiences such as those described in the vision literature, but rather with vision or perception in a much broader sense. Augustine distinguished between three kinds of vision. There was *corporeal vision*, the normal sight, and *intellectual vision* that 'occurs when God is seen in His own nature, as the rational and intellectual part of man is able to conceive of him' (Minnis, 2005, 245). A biblical example of this kind of vision is the rapture of Paul to the third heaven. This kind of vision is never false. The third kind of vision, *spiritual vision*, occupies the place between the two others. This is where the fantastic enters since this kind of vision was denoted *vision spiritualis seu imaginaria*, and Latin *imaginatio* was the translation of Greek *phantasia*. In spiritual vision one sees with the mind's eye 'not a body but an image of a body' (Minnis, 2005, 245). This kind of vision could occur either while one was awake or asleep. A biblical example of spiritual vision was when Moses saw the burning bush that was not consumed by the fire and, according to Augustine, the *Apocalypse of John* belonged in this category as well; it is in this category that we must place the experiences described in the vision literature. Intellectual vision was the most exalted kind, whereas the spiritual vision was less prestigious. This kind of vision was held in lower esteem because, 'imagination is [...] as potentially misleading as it is wonderful. Phantasies

604) where Augustine narrates and comments upon a visionary experience by a certain Curma. See also further quotations and comments on the same theme by Carozzi (1994, 540–557).

²⁰ *Utrum autem animae quae hinc amplius non reversurae exeunt, secundum hunc modum illa videant aut sentiant, omnino dubium est* (PL 176 coll. 584).

²¹ We do not know of any translations or Latin mss of the text.

²² The following draws in the main on the presentation by Minnis in *Medieval Imagination and Memory* (2005, in particular 243–246).

can be so powerful that, far from prompting man to perform good moral actions, they can cause him to act against his better judgment; thus imagination can override reason (Minnis, 2005, 243).' Spiritual visions might stem from God, but they might have other sources as well, in this way they are not immediately trustworthy. Through the Latin translation of *phantasia* as *imaginatio* the vision literature could be classified as fantastic, in the sense that the texts describe images of other things, but then again, most texts would.

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