

Visio latronis conversi (Actus Beati Francisci et sociorum eius, caput XXIX): The Vision as a Purifying Act: Some Comparative Considerations

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Abstract

The inconsistent New Testament representations of the afterworld left a generous space of manifestations for the author interested in the state of the souls after death. At the crossroads of afterworld descriptions in the Hebrew and Graeco-Latin culture and exploiting theses of the canonical or heterodoxic Christian theology, *visiones animarum* are throughout the Early Middle Ages a literary pattern. Initially inserted in comprehensive works, then as autonomous texts, the pattern was meant to illustrate aspects related to particular judgement, the topography of the afterworld, punishments and beatitudes reserved to the souls, etc. Though the *Divina Commedia* is considered a chronological limit and an artistic peak of the medieval *visiones animarum*, this literary lone remained equally attractive in the (immediately) subsequent period. In the lines below, I aim to analyse the vision featured in chapter XXIX of *Actus Beati Francisci et sociorum eius* from the perspective of the topic specific to the genre and the purpose of visions as literary texts and acts of the spirit.

Keywords: *visiones animarum*, Saint Francis, *Actus Beati Francisci...*, the afterworld, soul, purification

1. Introduction

The natural curiosity concerning what is next after the final act of our life has been exploited in almost all the fundamental works of universal literature. With visions or even travels to the afterworld, characters such as Gilgamesh, Hercules, Ulysses, Aeneas, Saint Paul or Dante during the Christian era are credited. Upon enumerating these famous

names, we must consider that – from the end of Antiquity throughout the Middle Ages (but also afterwards), with some exceptions, more or less complex visions had or were ascribed to simple, ordinary individuals. Starting from texts that enjoyed a wide circulation – like *Apocalypsis Petri* or *Apocalypsis/Visio Pauli* (the last was mentioned among the list of the apocryphal texts in *De explanatione fidei* in 382) – based on an entire arsenal of motifs reprised from the Hebrew and Graeco-Latin cultures and that (at the same time) used books and passages of the Old and New Testament (*Genesis*, *John's Apocalypse*, Lk., 16.19-31, 2Cor., 12.2-4 etc.), created over time an actual literary pattern improperly called *visiones animarum* (for they are genuine travels of the soul in the afterworld). As a structure, such a text would be summarised as follows: a very ordinary individual, taken over by sleep or – within a critical pathological state – crossing an episode of “apparent death” temporarily loses the use of bodily senses. During this episode, he travels – always accompanied by a guide – through the spaces of the afterworld: hell, paradise, and, sometimes, intermediary regions between the two extremes. Coming to his senses, he relates his vision and – as the case may be – radically changes his lifestyle. As a general valid purpose, the *visiones animarum* aim to induce in the target public (comprising not only religious people) an attitude as conforming as possible with the precepts of Christian ethics through the diverse representations of what follows after the episode of the particular judgment after death – good or bad, as a reward or a punishment.

The texts of this category were initially included as fragments in more comprehensive works. We may quote an entire series of visions as autonomous texts starting with *Visio Baronti* at the end of the 7th century. A particular narrative structure, various themes, motifs – reprised, enriched, modified, or nuanced by the dogmatic theses they reflect – and purposes are common to multiple productions included in this “genre.” Concerning the Middle Ages visions, *Divina Commedia* is considered a chronological limit and an artistic peak, which does not mean that this narrative pattern did not remain equally dynamic and attractive. It was also used after Dante's work, especially in the (immediately) subsequent period.

The lines below reflect a short text describing a journey to the afterworld, a fragment included in *Actus Beati Francisci et sociorum eius* (chap. XXIX). It was ascribed to Ugolino Brunforte and written between 1327 and 1337; it was translated into Italian towards the end of the same century and became well-known and intensely read under the name *I fioretti di San Francesco*. In my analysis, I will refer to the Latin text re-established by Paul Sabatier (Sabatier 1902). The fragment in chapter XXIX recounts the vision/journey to the afterworld of a former thief converted to a better life who became a member of the Friars Minor. It is perhaps not insignificant to compare this vision – in its fundamental elements – with recurring elements specific to this “genre” to determine whether the purpose of elaborating such a text is the same and if the narrative structure is also altered compared to the traditional pattern.

2. Vision summary

Of the three robbers converted by Saint Francis through Angelo – a novice who became, through his merits, a “guardian” (*guardianus*¹) – the last survivor subjects himself to a drastic penitential regime, at the end of which he has a vision which (as narrative structure) is part of what we call *visio animarum*. One day, after the celebration specific to the canonical hour of the Matins, contrary to his habits, he felt the need to sleep (the text says *tentatio somnolentiae* as if he thus transgressed the divine precepts). He fell into the temptation and, during his sleep, became the subject of a *visio animae* during which he crossed a seemingly infernal space (or at least whose features suggest the inferno) and then visited a place that may be assimilated, by all means, to paradise.

In the first space, accompanied by an angelic spirit, he fell from the top of a high mountain with sharp stones and large rocks into the abyss, rolling down from stone to stone until he reached an immense plain covered with thorns and brambles. He then entered a burning furnace and crossed a slippery bridge while serpents, scorpions, and dragons flowed underneath. With the angel's help, he got to the middle of the bridge, and then he grew wings to fly; he knocked at the gate of the place he had entered and managed to get in following an

intervention by St Francis. The vision ends with the command to return to Earth for seven days and atone and then to return to the world of the blessed forever. It is precisely what follows: the chapter ends with a brief description of the moment when Saint Francis comes from paradise to accompany the soul of his departed brother to eternal happiness.

3. Brief comparative analysis of the themes

It is worth noting that, just like in all the other visions, there is an *auctor narrator* and an *auctor scriptor*. The *Auctor scriptor* is Ugolino Brunforte (cca 1260-1345), a Friars Minor member who reunited in *Actus Beati Francisci et sociorum eius*, a series of stories regarding the great deeds of the Order's founder. The *auctor narrator* is the guardian (*guardianus*) of the community where the "beneficiary" of the vision lived and to whom the latter told of his ecstatic experience. It is, thus, an account of account, not directly from the source, as it occurs with most visions (e.g., Curma's vision featured by Augustine in *De cura gerenda pro mortuis* or many of the visions recounted by Gregory the Great in *Dialogues IV*, or *Visio Tnugdali* written by Marcus de Regensburg, etc.). The detail is significant insofar as the *auctor narrator* is in charge of the contents. In contrast, the *auctor scriptor* – through his personal view of the story – may direct the reading of the chapter by highlighting or enshrouding others. Or, in this case, we cannot even ascribe the contents to the "beneficiary" of the vision.

In the ancient Graeco-Latin literature, only the heroes made journeys to the afterworld: Hercules, Theseus, Orpheus, Ulysses, Aeneas, etc. In the medieval *visiones animarum*, the protagonists of these journeys are ordinary individuals of the lower middle class – Barontus, Fursa, Wetti, Tnugdali, etc. – whose biography holds nothing spectacular. I wonder whether this should be related to the famous verse of Lk., 10:21 (*Confiteor tibi, Pater... quod revelasti ea parvulis* etc.). In Plutarch, though, there are two analogous situations: in the vision of Thespesios/Aridaios (*De sera numinis vindicta*, 22-33) and that of Timarchos (*De genio Socratis*, 21-22, where Timarchos seems to be an invented character). Anyway, the protagonist of this ecstatic journey is equally bland; hence, the author does not "bother" to tell his name, not even his friar-

name. He mentions that he is a former thief converted at the initiative of St Francis and the efforts of a fellow friar, Angelus (“Angel”); he survives his fellow companions before the conversion, and towards the end of his life, he has the joy of this vision. Nothing else seems to count in this character’s life but the fact that, once he became a member of the Order, he observed their way of life to such an extent that he practised asceticism flawlessly: *ter in septimana panem et aquam tantummodo manducabat ... contentus tantum una tunicula incedebat discalciatus* etc.

In all the medieval visions, the main character is accompanied by² a secondary one whose role is to explain to the protégé what he encounters in the afterworld and guide his path. The source of inspiration for this function is, beyond doubt, John’s *Apocalypse*, though angels appear to accompany characters in the Hebrew literature of the Old Testament. Archangel Raphael appears as a secondary character in *The Book of Tobit*, or *The Book of Enoch*, 22, not included in the canon. The same archangel Rafael is featured in later versions (9th-10th centuries) of *Apocalypsis/Visio Pauli* (replacing archangel Michael in older versions) or in *Visio Baronti*, probably due to his name – Rafael/Raphael means “God cured”/Deus sanavit. In our case, it is an angel, *angelus*, which should be seen as part of a pair along with the Angelus who contributed to the character’s conversion. The message would be that if Angelus – namely, an angel – led the three robbers from a despicable life to one lived rigorously in the spirit of asceticism, an angel, too (*angelus* in the text), would lead them to the gates of paradise. From that point on, contrary to what we may expect (in almost all the visions, angels/archangels go into heaven with the soul they guide), only Saint Francis is the friar’s guide. He is the one who delivers the final warning and comes from paradise as a psychopomp character to accompany the deceased’s soul to eternal happiness.

Almost all previous visions entail a numbness of the senses. It may be due to a pathological state causing the temporary loss of the sensitive faculties – as in *Visio Baronti* or *Visio Tnudgali*, whose main characters suffer from collapsing, comas, or catalepsy. It may be due to sleep, as with Sunniulfus, as recounted by Gregory of Tours in *Historiarum libri decem*,

IV.33 (2006, I, 265), with *Visio Wettini* (Dümmler 1884, 267-275) and, of course, with this vision. The fact that for the extramundane – essentially spiritual/immaterial spaces – the language is still specific to sensory experiences used to describe our experiences with the material world is due to theories that assumed the corporeality of the soul (Tertullian, *De anima*), the “double” senses (Origen’s thesis analysed in Rahner 1978, 133-163), or three perceptive levels (Augustine, especially *De Trinitate*, XI; *De Genesi ad litteram*, XII). The second perceptive level – *visio interioris* or *visio spiritualis* – may be assessed in very different contexts: when the corporeal senses are inactive (as dreams while sleeping; as hallucinations within pathological states; as predictions in trances) or when the five senses are operant, but experiencing an intense feeling (fear, desire, etc.). In Augustine, the universe of spiritual vision is immaterial, of similarities, irrespective of the generating causes and circumstances of these visions: dreams, delirium (natural causes), ecstasies, visions (spiritual causes) where subjects lose totally or partially the use of the five corporeal senses. The spaces of this universe are crossed by something resembling the body (like in a dream), and this *simile corpori* perceives through similarities of the senses (*De Genesi ad litteram*, XII, 32.60). However, given their spiritual nature, the joy or pain experienced is authentic, like in a dream. I will not feature the details of all these theories here: it is enough to state that they have found extensive use in describing the afterworld. Furthermore, because they belong to the highest *auctoritates*, they prevent us from reading the *visiones animarum* through the lens of figurative language exclusively.

Consequently, at least based on Augustine’s thesis of *visio spiritualis* or *visio per spiritum hominis*, we should read *ad litteram* almost everything that happens to the protagonist in the afterworld. In most visions, his attitude is passive: like in John’s *Apocalypse*, the main character records what he sees in the extramundane spaces; he experiences feelings of bitterness, compassion, or joy; he is amazed and asks questions to decipher the meanings of what he perceives. Few are the visions where the protagonists are subjected to punishments per se: as examples,³ the first case is that of Saint Jerome. In his vision in *Epistula XXII ad Eustochium*, he complains of having been

whipped for proving to be more of a Ciceronian than a Christian. The most illustrative example remains that of Tnugdali in *Visio Tnugdali* – the angel abandons the character several times and leaves him to suffer some of the punishments he deserves (according to Christian ethics); each time, though, he cures him of all the injuries caused by physical pain. It is precisely what happens in the text I analyse here; the character experiences some punishments, but the angel's interventions cure him every time. Tnugdali's punishment occurs in a definite infernal space, while the friar's experiences happen in a less concrete area. If we read these parts in relation to the last sentence of the chapter ("Saint Francis came to him, and conducted his soul to life eternal in the kingdom of the blessed"), we would assume it was purgatory rather than hell. We should also note that the purpose of the vision is, in this case, to purify the soul and prepare it for a happy life, which is in dissonance with the declared or suggested purposes of previous visions.

In most visions, authors focus on the moment when the soul leaves the body and the subsequent instances. In *Visio Baronti*, for example, there is even a size/shape of the soul, which Barontus sees as a young bird when it steps from an egg (*ut pullus aviculae, quando de ovo egreditur*). We find the same comparison, with different nuances, in Athanasios the Great, *Vita Antonii*, 66 (available in the Latin Occident due to the translation made by Evagrius Antiochenus) or Gregory the Great, *Dialogorum liber/Dialogues*, IV.11. Furthermore, in many visions, the soul leaving the body is followed by an ardent conflict between angels and demons: each group claims the soul by invoking its merits or faults. Naturally, the dispute is solved by consulting a higher authority (in *Visio Baronti*, Saint Peter) and always by saving the soul in question. However, this moment is not featured in the short vision analysed here. The author is not interested in the dispute that may work as a judiciary procedure: as he falls asleep, he goes to the afterworld on top of a mountain. Something similar happens in the above-cited Sunniulf's vision: the abbot falls asleep and finds himself in hell, on the banks of a river of fire.

Particularly in autonomous visions (not included in more comprehensive works), topography plays a unique role. The

afterworld is divided into two cardinal spaces – heaven and hell – to which a third and even a fourth intermediary space was added. It all began with an interpretation of a thesis by Augustine (featured and commented in Le Goff 2014, 97-109), according to which the regions of the afterworld are populated by four categories of souls: the very bad, the not very bad, the not very good, and the very good. Except for these intermediary categories, the state of which is between happiness and pain⁴, the very bad and the very good go to hell and heaven, respectively, based on a topography connected with genuine taxonomies of sins and merits. Hence, hell and heaven are also structured according to a hierarchy varying from one period to another, from one author to another. For instance, in *Visio Tnugdali* (written in 1149, comprising one of the most articulate and logical topographies), hell has two levels⁵: the higher hell is for the souls of those guilty of murder, perfidy, pride, greed, robbery, etc. (a special place with harsher punishments is reserved to those who committed these sins but were men of God); the lower hell comprises the non-believers and those who did not hope in the divine mercy; at the very bottom of hell there is Lucifer, *princeps tenebrarum*. There is then the “moderate punishment of the not very bad” and the “plain of joy” for the not very good. Symmetrically, heaven has levels of holiness separated by walls: the glory of spouses, martyrs, people of God, chaste persons etc.; on top of this hierarchy is the Creator himself. However, Ugolino Brunforte does not seem concerned with such thick details: to him, the afterworld is bipolar: there is a place of punishment (featuring a steep mountain, a plain full of thorns and brambles, a furnace and a bridge) and a place of reward (seen as a city)⁶. Concerning the pace of punishment, it may be hell or purgatory; besides the demons around the furnace, nothing else suggests hell; there is only one sin mentioned (compared to the more or less complex taxonomies of the previous visions), related to a biographical episode of Saint Francis (predicting a famine). As for paradise, the author of the vision is interested only in the presence of former Friars Minor members (especially Saint Francis and his first two disciples, Bernardus and Egidius). It is a way of saying that the rigours of the Regulation are a guarantee of eternal life, where never-ending joy replaces the temporary suffering of

the mundane world. The noble wealth of paradise will compensate for the assumed poverty. Saint Francis no longer wears the tunic specific to the order but “a most wonderful cloak adorned with beautiful stars” *chlamide toto stellis pulcherrimis decorato*⁷.

Before reaching heaven’s gates, the protagonist must cross a bridge underneath which monstrous creatures loom. Concerning medieval Christian literature, Ciccarese (2003, 145, n. 26) believes that Gregory the Great used this motif for the first time in his *Dialogues*, IV, 37.10. Still, we cannot correlate this *pons probationis* and the Chinvat bridge (Culianu 1979), connecting the earth and the sky in the Zoroastrian culture. Anyway, associated with the river of fire (a Jewish motif, as per Culianu 1979), *pons probationis* becomes a recurring topic of visions. It is present in *Visio Sunniulfi*, *Visio Baronti*, *Epistula X Eadburgae abbatis* by Bonifacius (of 717) etc.; in *Visio Tnugdali*, there are even two *pontes probationis* in two distinct spaces: one in hell, and the other in the median region between hell and heaven. This bridge functions like a selection grid because it is incredibly narrow (sometimes associated with other obstacles: nails, as in *Visio Tnugdali* or the fact that it is shiny, thus slippery, like the bridge within the vision I study here). Only the righteous can cross it, while those burdened by sins end up in the river below for their temporary or eternal punishment⁸. The protagonist of the vision in *Actus Beati Francisci* reaches the middle of the bridge with angelic assistance; abandoned there, he prays for divine mercy. The first two pairs of wings growing from his prayer are wasted because he hastens to the angel. He had the patience to wait for the last pair to develop fully and enable him to fly.

Not only did this unusual image draw my attention, but that it took 150 years for the wings to grow (at least according to the protagonist). This period is perceived and measured differently in our world: the entire vision lasts from the Matutinum to the Prima, canonical moments a few hours apart. In *Navigatio Sancti Brendani abbatis* (chap. I), a similar thing occurs: fifteen days in *Terra Repromissionis Sanctorum* are a year in our world. I have tried to interpret this difference (Anonymous 2018, 230-238) from both Augustine’s perception of the time and mostly Boethius, and the differences between the

profane and the sacred time (Eliade 1963), between χρόνος (physical, measurable time) and καιρός (*tempus speciale*, characteristic to mystical experiences and theophanies). However, the details provided by Ugolino Brunforte are too few to extend here the same ideas as for *Navigatio Sancti Brendani abbatis*. Moreover, *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, the more extended time is the profane (χρόνος), the reverse of what happens here. However, Mircea Eliade's conclusion is still valid: "For religious man time too, like space, is neither homogeneous nor continuous" because he lives in two types of time (Eliade 1963, 68).

The narrative ends with the protagonist returning to our world for seven⁹ days, "much against his will"/*cum taedio*. Thus, the author reprises another recurring motif of the visions *contemptus mundi*/the contempt of the world experienced by those who felt eternal joy. At the end of the seven days, the fever got the best of him, and he died; subsequently, Saint Francis led him to paradise.

4. Conclusions

Ugolino Brunforte has a great insight into the medieval world of visions/*visiones animarum* and these texts' defining themes and motifs. The ultimate purpose of these productions was the betterment of the behaviour of those reading or listening to the story (by featuring in as many details as possible the punishments entailed by the transgressions from Christian morals, as well as the rewards for the ones worthy). These works are especially welcomed in religious settings; thus, the author must have been familiar at least with the most famous of them – not only *Visio Tnugdali* – a best-seller of its time (with over 40 translations into vernacular languages between the mid-12th century, when it was written, and the early 15th century). He features the same episodes of the protagonist's actual suffering with the consent of the angel accompanying him in his journey. Furthermore, it is worth noting the personal touch of the author concerning the common themes: he suppresses some (*e.g.*, the soul exiting the body, the dispute between angels and demons), he compresses others (*e.g.*, the absence of hell, the very brief presentation of paradise, and the topography of the afterworld in general). He features

others from the perspective of adapting all the themes to the purpose ascribed to the vision by himself as the *auctor scriptor* or by the protagonist when he told his experience.

To understand it better, we must differentiate between the account of the vision and the purpose of the vision as such. Whereas the goal of the story is almost invariably¹⁰ the one mentioned above (to induce a desirable change of attitude and behaviour from the readers or audience), the purpose of the vision is more nuanced. Some visions aim to radically change the protagonist's lifestyle (*Visio Tnugdali*) or specific aspects (*Epistula XXII ad Eustochium* by Jerome). Some visions wish to convey a severe message to the protagonist's entourage (in *Visio Wettini*, where Wetti dies right after accounting his experiences) or visions granted to the "beneficiaries" as a reward for a worthy life (*Visio Salvii* in *Historiarum libri decem*, VII.1, by Gregory of Tours). The text I analyse here has none of the goals above: Ugolino Brunforte has a two-fold purpose for the vision. Firstly, it confirms the idea that the honest observance of the Order's Regulation is a guarantee of accessing the blessed life after death (the vision of chap. XXIX is thus consonant with the one featured in chap. XXII). Secondly, the vision has a purifying function; namely, through the suffering experienced during the vision, the soul expiates all residue of guilt and directly joins the paradise with many other blessed souls. It is expressed explicitly, though briefly, in the last sentence of the chapter: "After seven days, [...] Saint Francis came to him and conducted his soul to life eternal" after being purified by that vision with the angel's guidance (*in visione predicta angelo ducente purgatam*). Therefore, the long but temporary suffering in purgatory no longer takes time after death but is anticipated and condensed in the anthumous experience of a vision lasting a few hours.

NOTES

¹ Of German origin, used in medieval Latin, the term *guardianus* designated in The Order of Friars the person in charge of managing a local community, unlike the *custos* and *minister* referring to the higher hierarchical levels (The Order of Friars Minor 2019, 5-8).

² With some minor exceptions (*Visio Salvii* in *Historiarum libri decem*, VII.1, by Gregory of Tours, featuring two angels; or *Visio Fursei* in *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, III.19, by Bede the Venerable, where there are three angels).

³ The goal of my comparisons is to be illustrative, not exhaustive.

⁴ At least as an intention: in most cases, suffering is mitigated and temporary.

⁵ There are divisions of hell described as early as the third century, in *Apocalypsis/Visio Pauli*, featuring a well where fall all those who did not believe in Christ's incarnation; or later, as in *Visio Drythelmi* (Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, V.12), when an angel warns Drythelmus that the upper parts of hell and the lower parts of heaven are not the actual hell or heaven; all souls here must wait for the Final Judgment.

⁶ A recurring theme in the medieval *visiones animarum*. M.P. Ciccarese (2003, 32) identifies the first description of paradise as a city in *The Book of Enoch*, 14. 8-25, and he believes this fragment was a source of inspiration for the entire Christian literature.

⁷ The passage reminds me of another brief vision within chapter XXII of the book: a novice who wanted to leave the Order because he hated the simple tunic saw, in a vision, St Francis along with a multitude of disciples, all in bright attires; the curious novice is told that "these splendid vestments have been given to us in exchange for the coarse tunic we wore with so much patience."

⁸ For the visions written after *Epistula X* by Bonifacius, according to Ciccarese (2003, 364, n. 17), they associate the *pons probationis* with purgatory, not hell.

⁹ The number should be interpreted according to its symbolical value. As per Isidore of Seville (*Liber numerorum qui in Sanctis Scripturis occurrunt*), seven is associated with the present life and, of course, with the Holy Spirit and its seven gifts.

¹⁰ Some of the visions presented by Gregory the Great in *Dialogues*, IV, may be seen as exemplified supporting opinions on salvation.

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