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## **The Rite-of-Passage Structure in Medieval and Early Modern Visionary Accounts**

**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to apply Arnold van Gennep's and Victor Turner's conceptual scheme of the rite of passage to medieval and early modern visions of the hereafter. Most of the visionary accounts (e.g., *Drythelm's Vision*, *Thurkill's Vision*, *St. Patrick's Purgatory*) share a great deal of similar material. Usually these are stories about a man who is mysteriously taken to the otherworld during his deep sleep, trance, severe sickness or a similar state which, in Carol Zaleski's words, is called a near-death experience. Afterwards a visionary is brought back to tell his community about the things he saw. From such a composition, one can work out that visions, in most cases, have a threefold structure of *rites de passage*: separation (pre-liminal phase), transition (liminal or margin phase) and aggregation (post-liminal phase). A threshold (*limen*) stage between separation from one state and integration into another is a crucial one as it implicates not only transgression but also transformation of a visionary. The liminal phase is being regarded here as a point of entry and exit between zones of this experience. It also includes the suspension of social roles and, by definition, being "not in control." On his return, the visionary can be perceived by the community as a messenger or a prophet, depending on the circumstances.

In the introduction to one of his works, Arnold van Gennep encouraged his readers to apply and test his conceptual scheme of *rite de passage* to their own fields (xxv). In this paper, I am going to accept this invitation, as from the material gathered throughout the years by folklorists, theologians, historians of religion and literature,<sup>1</sup> one can work out a threefold structure in the medieval and early modern eschatological visions of the hereafter. These are stories about a man who is mysteriously taken beyond the world and afterwards he comes back to tell his family, relatives and neighbours about the things he saw in the otherworld. The visions, in most cases, have such a tri-phasic rite-of-passage structure: separation (pre-liminal phase), transition (liminal phase) and aggregation (post-liminal phase). As a matter of fact, in van Gennep's theory, the threshold (Latin *limen*) stage between separation from one state and integration into another, the liminal phase, is a crucial one, as it implies not only transgression but also transformation and metamorphosis, dying and rebirth,

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<sup>1</sup> The scholarship on the visions is vast and the references are only a short catalogue of these works. To some of them this paper is partly indebted.

conversion and change.<sup>2</sup> It also includes the suspension of social roles and, by definition, being “not in control.”

All these features may be found in Latin and vernacular versions of medieval and early modern eschatological visions performed as a journey (“nekyia”) to the otherworld.<sup>3</sup> These narratives attempted to predict future eschatological events, prove one’s holiness or sinfulness, deliver a message from God or a saint to the living, or describe the afterlife.<sup>4</sup> Although the apparitions of the otherworld took varied and complex forms, in general, the visions considered here have some traits in common as they share similar material, ideas and structure. Therefore, in order to apply van Gennep’s and Turner’s theories and present the most common pattern of those visions, I will point out “liminal” elements of their composition as the concept of “liminality” seems to be helpful in understanding the transitional character of the otherworld journeys.

### Pre-liminal Phase: Separation

The so-called pre-liminal phase occurs in special or unusual circumstances. As a rule, a visionary experiences a vision when he is in an emotional or physical “crisis,” i.e., fasting, starvation, dying, stress-related symptoms or other altered states of consciousness. Kroll and Bachrach suggest that some of these experiences are probable psychopathological states, as in

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<sup>2</sup> In the words of Victor Turner, liminality is a place and a time “between and betwixt” (*Forest of Symbols* 93–111). The threshold is being regarded here as a point of entry and exit between zones of a visionary’s experience. According to van Gennep, “rites of passage” accompany important changes in the life and development of an individual or society. In Turner’s view, van Gennep and others have shown that “rites de passage are not confined to culturally defined life-crises but may accompany any change from one state to another” (*Forest of Symbols* 94–95). Kroll and Bachrach present a slightly different approach to the descriptions of visionary experiences as they focus on mental phenomena.

<sup>3</sup> As most visions share a lot of common material (Gardiner xiv), their content can be well epitomized in the vision of Barontus, which is both an exemplification and the quintessence of a typical account. Yitzhak Hen summarizes the vision as follows: “One morning while returning to his cell immediately after Matins, Barontus felt dizzy and lost consciousness for twenty-four hours, during which he was attacked by demons, rescued by the Angel Raphael, brought in front of St. Peter, and was given permission to continue his earthly life. Shortly after regaining consciousness, Barontus told his fellow monks what he had experienced during his visit to the other-world, and his story was recorded in what is now known as the *Visio Baronti*” (477). See Levison for the Latin text and Hillgarth for the English translation.

<sup>4</sup> Though the German scholar Peter Dinzelbacher claims in his studies on medieval visions that there is a difference between vision and revelation (when the elements of the supernatural appear in real life), one must remember that Latin terms *visio*, *somnium* and *revelatio* were used interchangeably.

the vision of Salvius: “One day as Salvius lay on his bed, gasping for breath and weakened by a high temperature, his cell was suddenly filled with a bright light and the walls seemed to shake” (Kroll and Bachrach 43; Gregory of Tours 386).

In most cases, a visionary’s soul is separated from the body and taken to the otherworld during a deep sleep, dream, trance, short-term death, severe illness<sup>5</sup> or any other superconscious state, which Carol Zaleski calls a near-death experience (*Life; Otherworld*). Sometimes there is no separation as the entire body is taken to the other world (for example, in *St. Patrick’s Purgatory*); however, in most cases the soul leaves the body and a visionary appears to be as if dead. On the other hand, he may appear half-alive as some signs of breathing or carnal warmth might still remain. For instance, when St. Julian arrives and takes Thurkill’s soul to visit the other world, his body stays behind in his bed, rigid and motionless, scarcely breathing: “Let your body rest on the bed. It is only your spirit that is to go with me. So that your body does not appear to be dead, I will inspire the breath of life into you” (Gardiner 220).<sup>6</sup> Guibert of Nogent writes about his mother’s vision in a similar vein: “One summer night . . . after she had stretched out on her narrow bench and had begun to sink into sleep, her soul seemed to leave her body without her losing her senses” (qtd. in Benton 93).

Who are visionaries? A brief preface to the text of a vision usually consists of information about life and social status of the visionary, for example: “There was a certain man of simple habits who was as hospitable as his humble means would allow. He lived in a town called Tunsted in the diocese of London” (Gardiner 219), or

[w]hile Sigebert still governed the kingdom there came from Ireland a holy man named Furseus, renowned both for his words and actions remarkable for exceptional virtues, for he wanted to live as a stranger for our Lord wherever an opportunity should offer itself. (Gardiner 51)

As a rule, no special qualification is needed to be granted a vision of the other world, neither sanctity, nor age, nor learning, nor membership of any particular estate (Schmidt 50). Indeed, anybody, even the godless, could be granted experiences of the world beyond for the benefit of himself and the others. Thus, there are visions experienced by holy or good men (Furseus,

<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, it may happen that some of these states coincided.

<sup>6</sup> I refer to Gardiner for the English versions of the visions. The volume contains English translations of twelve visions of the hereafter and is especially helpful for comparison between texts and for finding their structural similarities. The brief but competent introduction is useful in researching visionary accounts of the otherworld. See Botterill for a review of Gardiner’s work.

Drythelm), monks (Wetti, Monk of Melrose, Monk of Evesham, Barontus), knights (Owen, Tundale, George of Hungary), peasants (Thurkill, Gottschalk), poor women (*mulier paupercula*) or youngsters (Orm, Alberic).<sup>7</sup>

### Liminal Phase: Rite de Marge

A visionary, now with the soul separated from his body, is situated “between and betwixt.” The liminal phase of the otherworld journey starts here. None of the visionaries chooses this state voluntarily, but they are granted with this experience by force. It means that a visionary is engaged with a vision unexpectedly and surprisingly, like Piotr Pęgowski of Mazosz, the protagonist of an early Polish vision, taken by force to heaven (albeit in his body). The introduction to this *visio* consists of the details of his capture. On the fourth day of March, on Tuesday, while coming back from Poznań via Kalisz, he stayed overnight at an inn. After supper, he agreed with his servant to leave early in the morning the next day and went upstairs to his bedroom. After praying to the almighty God, he got to sleep. But suddenly a very strong wind, with heavy rain and thunder, took the man and he disappeared for three days. When his servant woke up the next morning and noticed Pęgowski’s absence, he set on the journey back home on his own presuming that his master had left earlier (Sokolski, *Straszliwe widzenie*).

Vulnerability, helplessness, insecurity and the loss of one’s identity are typical of the transition within the liminal phase of the rites of passage when a visionary is, by definition, “not in control.” For instance, when Tundale’s soul left his body, being aware of the sins committed, he grew terrified and he did not know what he might do. He feared something, but he did not know what he feared. This is why spiritual directors and counselors are often sought in times of transition. The visionary needs outward support and encouragement to endure liminal space so he is provided with a guide (“psychopompos”). A psychopompos may be the guardian angel, a saint, an indeterminate ghost or a person wearing a white robe. This is how Drythelm describes his guide: “He who led me had a shining countenance and a bright garment, and we went on silently toward, I thought the place where the sun rises on the solstice” (Gardiner 58). The psychopompos is responsible for conducting a soul from place to place, informing about things he sees and explaining the meaning of the journey:

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<sup>7</sup> Research by Kroll and Bachrach indicates that visions were experienced by a saintly person (not segregated by gender – 15% of visions they examined), male (royal, secular rank or bishop – 20%), unnamed male or without rank (40%), woman of rank (7%) and without rank (9%) (43).

I began to think that this perhaps might be hell, whose intolerable flames I had often heard discussed. My guide, who went before me, answered my thought saying: "Do not believe it, for this is not the hell you imagine." (Gardiner 58)

Not only in Orm's account but also in *Visio Sancti Pauli* (*St. Paul's Vision*)<sup>8</sup> it is Archangel Michael who serves as a guide: when St. Paul was in prison, Archangel Michael took him up to the Lord and showed him earth, heaven and hell. Paul saw many people sunk in the stream of fire. Then Paul cried and asked the angel who those people were. The angel answered that these were those who had committed fraud, theft, debauchery; they had not attended church and had not done penance. The way of presenting the state of the damned by a set of statements describing the torments, their causes and consequences are known in rhetoric as *explanationes demonstrativi*.

The guide also serves as a protector, preventing a soul from being hurt by the demons encountered in hell or healing the soul after it has been wounded (Gardiner xvi). For instance, a hermit revived from death and testified that he had been to hell where he saw several powerful men dangling in fire. Just as he too was being dragged into the flames, an angel in a shining garment came to his rescue and sent him back to life with the words echoed in several medieval visions: "[L]eave, and consider carefully how you will live from now on" (Zaleski, *Otherworld* 76). A psychopompos as a spirit-guide leading or escorting souls in the otherworld is a genuine liminal figure. Belonging to the hereafter, he has knowledge reaching far beyond the otherworld. The psychopompos as a usual element of the visionary's experience has his origin in the Book of the Watchers, a part of the famous Books of Enoch dating back to the third century BC, where angel Uriel and other archangels accompany Enoch in his apocalyptic journey (Sokolski, *Pielgrzymi* 49).

During the journey, which in fact is an out-of-body experience, a visionary (*recte* his soul) accompanied by the guide, visits the otherworld and can see the torments of hell and purgatory or joys of heaven, encounters demons and even experiences some tortures. Usually visionaries in the course of their visions are led to watch the torments of hell first and joys of heavens afterwards, as the sequence of places visited has some psychological meaning. For instance, the first place of punishment to which a monk of Evesham is brought by his guide, St. Nicolas, is a marsh of hard mud where sinners of both sexes are undergoing torment (Dod 253). These torments are usually of physical, or rather sensory

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<sup>8</sup> *Visio Sancti Pauli* is one of the most popular apocryphal writings, widespread all over Europe from early medieval times. It was probably based on the biblical quotation from Paul's second letter to Corinthians: "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago – whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows – such a man was caught up to the third heaven" (2 Cor. 12.2). The vision influenced further development of eschatological imagination and is considered as one of the sources of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

nature, as the souls are tormented by demons in freezing-cold ice or immense fire according to the sins committed. The monk of Evesham reports the unbearable punishment of the souls in a dramatic way:

Endless were the kinds of punishment which I saw; some were roasted before fire, others were fried in pans, red hot nails were driven to their bones. . . . I saw those wretched beings destroyed by a hundred or more different kinds of torture. . . . The side of the mountain overhanging one part of the lake sent forth fire to the heavens; on the opposite promontory of the same hill there was such an intense cold caused by snow, hail and raging storm that I thought I had never before seen anything more torturing than the cold at that place. (Dante 433–34)

In some visions, the souls are grouped together, as in more elaborate works there are separate places and torments for each type of sin, like in Tundale's or Thurkill's visions:

Blessed Julian conducted him altogether unhurt through the fire to the lake; and the two then walked together on the road that led from the church through the middle of the flames. No wood supplied the fuel for this fire, but the sort of flame seen in a fiercely-heated oven rose and was diffused over the whole space. It consumed the black and spotted spirits for either a shorter or longer period, according to the degree of their crimes. The spirits who had escaped the fire descended into that cold salty lake . . . Some of these were immersed over the head, some up to the neck, some to the chest and arms, others up to the navel, some up to the knees. . . . (Gardiner 222)

The aim of presenting these torments to a visionary during his journey through hell is not only to overwhelm him. Occasionally the protagonist of a vision, for example Tundale, experiences some of those tortures in order to be illuminated on their qualities and features, and to experience a kind of purification, as liminality is a phase of transition and transformation. In the course of this experience, a visionary gains some knowledge and is able to inform his friends, neighbours and relatives on his return about the reality and nature of hellish punishment.

Next, a visionary ascends to heaven, where he sees eternal joys of the blessed. Heaven is usually presented as a splendid city with houses and palaces made of precious stones and diamonds or a spacious garden full of delicacies. Heaven as a *locus amoenus* is presented to a visionary as a real place of safety and abundance that can be earned through a virtuous life, a place to be desired. This is a site of profusion that compensates the lack of economy and social privileges on the earth, and where little ones can find justice.

We are dealing primarily with visual experience in all the cases. The visions use forms such as "I saw," "I spotted," "I noticed," "I watched," "I observed." Both lay people and clergymen who were the addressees of visionary accounts wondered about sensual delights and displeasures of the otherworld. Using this

kind of stylistics justified the genuine experience of the protagonist, who was not only the narrator (in the most cases) but also an “eye-witness” of the joys and torments in the hereafter. Special emphasis in these works is also often put on the visionary’s experience of the hereafter through his other senses, such as smell, hearing and even taste. Drythelm says:

After standing there a long time in fear, not knowing what to do, I heard behind me the noise of a most hideous and wretched lamentation, and at the same time a loud laughing, like that of rude multitude insulting captured enemies. I observed a gang of evil spirits. (Gardiner 59)

But when Drythelm enters heaven, he can smell the fragrant odour, see the bright light and hear the sound of sweet singing. It shows that a vision, even though in most cases experienced beyond the visionary’s body, is presented as a totally physical experience. As far as visions of the blessed are concerned, the heavenly sight is an augmentation of the ordinary vision where a soul with high spatial acuity is able not only to move from one place to another but also to admire bright colours of heaven, see through the opaque objects, and thus fully enjoy the bliss of heaven.

### **Post-liminal Phase: Aggregation**

As the middle one in the threefold structure, the liminal phase depends not only on the pre- but also on the post-liminal phase. That is why the aggregation or, in other words, the return of a visionary to life and reality is so important in this three-phase composition. A visionary, having walked through liminality and coming out the other side, is different forever. By his *communitas*, he is considered to have undergone a change and become someone different from what he used to be before. When relatives try to give Thurkill some water by force on Sunday evening, he suddenly comes to and speaks the word *Benedicite*, which he had never done before, and tells his relatives and the village priest of the revelations which were granted to him during his two-day trance.

Having been brought to life, a visionary, usually previously a sinner, traumatized with this experience, changes his life, and often undergoes a profound alteration as enlightenment, illumination and purgation of a visionary are the main purposes of a vision. As Gardiner points out, the protagonist is in many cases threatened with the torments that he will suffer if he does not amend his life when he is returned to his body (xx). The result of the vision is often a remarkable conversion, which is, after all, the primary characteristic of religious experience. Consequently, visionaries sell their possessions, give all their belongings and property to the poor, join monasteries, set off on a pilgrimage, travel to Jerusalem and then spend the remainder of their days in penance,

poverty and prayer (Gardiner xxiii). Drythelm concludes his journey in the following way: "I am now truly risen from death, where I was held, and permitted again to live among people, but not as I used to; I am to live in a very different manner from before" (Gardiner 57). In effect, after distributing his wealth among the poor, he joined the monastery and spent the rest of his life in meditation in a private dwelling and "his life declared that he had seen many things either to be dread or desired" (Gardiner 57).

Visionaries may also take up preaching the Gospel or retire as hermits. Stephen, for example, confessed to Gregory the Great that he had never believed the stories about hell and punishment but that his brief visit to the infernal court had changed his mind:

The angel . . . spoke to him in this manner: "Go back again, and from now on look carefully after yourself and how you lead your life." After these words his body grew warm little by little. Waking out of this sleep of everlasting death, he reported all those things that happened around him. Then he devoted himself to such fasting and vigils that although he said nothing, his very life and conversion still spoke of the torments that he had seen and still feared. (Gardiner 47)

But what we are dealing here with is not only a religious experience of an individual. Repentance and reformation are expected from those whom a visionary knows or is about to meet on his return. The visionary acts as a messenger and an informer, and tells his family, neighbours and local community what he has seen in order to change their lives and bring them to moral conversion. Encouraged by a visionary, they all are supposed to benefit from his experience. However, sometimes a visionary is supposed to refrain from informing the others what he saw during his otherworld journey or is banned from reporting his experience. This, for instance, happens to Orm. Usually quasi-heretic information, like *apokatastasis* or *refrigerium* (cf. *St. Peter's Apocalypse*), was subject to such a *prohibitio*. However, the protagonist is normally instructed by his guide on what he is expected to do and say after returning to life.

In an attempt to express himself and to convince his audience that he had actually had a vision and had not just been sleeping for a few days, the visionary has to rely on the words that would come to mind, words that made sense to his listeners. Obviously there is a gap between a vision itself and its narration by a visionary who has to describe a deeply religious experience that may not actually be describable in words (Zaleski, *Otherworld* 190; Gardiner xxv).<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, however, some of the protagonists can prove their journey and convince their audience about the existence of the otherworld by actual signs.

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<sup>9</sup> I am concerned here mainly with the structure of visions and not with a vision as a literary genre.

For instance, Furseus proves *per experimentum* that he suffered actual physical punishment by bringing back the scars of torture experienced in his vision:

When he was restored to his body, and throughout his whole life, on his shoulder and jaw he bore the mark of the fire that he had felt in his soul, visible to all men. In an amazing way his flesh publicly showed what the soul had suffered in private. (Gardiner 55)

Such evidence may help with conversion and leads to a better moral existence.

The threefold structure is present in most literary visions and resembles that of the *rite de passage* where the liminal phase is vital for the pilgrim's conversion. On the other hand, liminality should not be considered uncritically. I am aware that eschatological visions sometimes do not respect perfectly the idea of liminality and *communitas* as presented by van Gennep and Turner. However, I have tried to show the benefits of applying this anthropological method to the analysis of descriptions of visionary experiences from medieval and early modern writings.

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