



*From the Middle Ages  
to modern times*



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DREAMS AND VISIONS



*From the Middle Ages to modern times*

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*"Human life cannot be described well without submerging it in sleep where men dive and where, night after night, it bypasses life like a peninsula surrounded by the sea."*

**Marcel Proust**, *In Search of Lost Time*, Pléiade, II, p. 384.

*"The problems of the mind are naturally limitless, and that of the dream probably has an infinite number of solutions."*

**Marguerite Yourcenar**, *Dreams and Destinies*, Préface, Paris, Gallimard, « Bibliothèque de la Pléiade », 1991, p. 1539.



Somewhere between Proust's need and Yourcenar's dizzying interpretative potential, each time period hope to crack dreams' code with a solution that unites the diversity of dreaming. Historically, Freudian thought and analytic theory taught us to look in our dreams for the trace of a wish yearning to come true, repressed childhood traumas, the disorders and impulses of Love and Death. Today, using MRIs, neuroscience is attempting to analyze patterns of brain activity that may reveal how our brains work. And in the future, perhaps a machine will be able to tell us what we dreamed, without resorting to unreliable human memory... Maybe, despite not being totally comforting, dreams will soon be abandoned to such haruspices of the future which will discover exciting keys to dreams in our brains even if we feel that these various solutions, either separately or even together, cannot fully satisfy our desire to interpret dreams. Looking back on the Middle Ages gives us some perspective on contemporary certainties because dream theorists and plain medieval dreamers showed great inventiveness when interpreting their dreams.

An invitation to dream in the Middle Ages requires consenting to a host of changes, on various levels. First, the triumphant conquest of a unique interpretative truth over the ruins of ancient, now forgotten systems should be abandoned. Moreover, past generations must be credited with having dreamed as much and as well as we have – a sort of bare minimum – but also – and this is what is more difficult for many of our contemporaries – with having been able to make sense of their dreams without reducing them to the mere tricks of convention and rhetoric. Therefore, we will attempt to nuance judging criticism that would assert so assuredly that: "It is incredible how poor dreams were before Romanticism, from Sumer to 1780. For millennia, Humanity did not manage to find more than three or four reasons to express the exuberance, extravagance and fantasy of dreams: a manifestation of God or of the departed, a vision of heaven or hell, an erotic dream" [1].

Lastly, and most importantly, we must extend the borders of dreams to include the shifting frontiers of vision. In the ancient world, for pagans and Christians, there is no clear distinction between dreams and visions, and it is often difficult to differentiate them into our categories using source texts. Both phenomena are daily reality modified by a change of state (sleep and dreams) or an extra or intra-sensory modification (visions). This shift in conscious perception of the outside world of everyday life is conceptualized as a kind of dream-vision continuum in the Middle Ages. In fact, what structures Medieval and Christian dream and vision interpretations is their relationship to truth, i.e., in a predominately Christian society at the time, their relationship to God. This is different from our contemporary approach to dreams and visions, which are defined as relative ideas: visions are seen as an irrational phenomenon of perception that is often disregarded, i.e., a vision does not exist, or is reduced to a medical diagnosis. In other words, every vision is false. Dreams, an experimental reality, are universal in scope; since the «Masters of Suspicion» and the rejection of transcendental truths, every dream is true. By bringing dreams closer to visions, our intention is to offer a journey into the medieval imagination that can enrich the contemporary approach to these phenomena.

[1] Jean Bousquet, *Les thèmes du rêve dans la littérature romantique (France, England, Germany), essay on the genesis and evolution of images*, Paris, M. Didier, 1964, p. 52.

## I. The basis of dreams in the West: the enigma and its interpretation

Despite those living in the Middle Ages rarely reading Greek, they know Homer, much the same as we often do, i.e., at a distance, not because they read Homer's work directly but because they heard the myths that nourished his world and culture, just as they still nourish our own. The *Odyssey* is therefore the starting point needed, because this text provides one of the most successful models of a literary dream, and what will become a dream archetype itself. The famous scene where Penelope, stubbornly faithful, confronts an Odysseus disguised as a beggar, is one we all know. Before Odysseus leaves, Penelope asks the beggar for his opinion about a prophetic dream she had.



“But come now, hear this dream of mine, and interpret it for me.

Twenty geese I have in the house that come forth from the water and eat wheat, and my heart warms with joy as I watch them.

But forth from the mountain there came a great eagle with crooked beak

and broke all their necks and killed them; and they lay strewn

in a heap in the halls, while he was borne aloft to the bright sky.

Now for my part I wept and wailed, in a dream though it was,

and round me thronged the fair-tressed Achaean women,

as I grieved piteously because the eagle had slain my geese.

Then back he came and perched upon a projecting roof-beam,

and with the voice of a mortal man checked my weeping, and said:

“Be of good cheer, daughter of far-famed Icarius;

this is no dream, but a true vision of good which shall verily find fulfillment.

The geese are the wooers, and I, that before was the eagle,

am now again come back as thy husband,

who will let loose a cruel doom upon all the wooers.”

So he spoke, and sweet sleep released me,

and looking about I saw the geese in the halls,

feeding on wheat beside the trough, where they had before been wont to feed:

Then Odysseus of many wiles answered her and said:

“Lady, in no wise is it possible to wrest this dream aside

and give it another meaning, since verily Odysseus himself has shewn thee

how he will bring it to pass. For the wooers’ destruction

s plain to see, for one and all; not one of them shall escape death and the fates.”

Then wise Penelope answered him again:

“Stranger, dreams verily are baffling and unclear of meaning,

and in no wise do they find fulfillment in all things for men.

For two are the gates of shadowy dreams,

and one is fashioned of horn and one of ivory.

Those dreams that pass through the gate of sawn ivory

deceive men, bringing words that find no fulfillment.

But those that come forth through the gate of polished horn

bring true issues to pass, when any mortal sees them.

But in my case it was not from thence, methinks, that my strange dream came.”

(*Odyssey*, book XIX, v. 560-569, English trans. Samuel Butler, revised by Timothy Power and Gregory Nagy, 1900).

This narrative presents the structuring components of the ancient literary dream: the dream appears above all as an enigma, a kind of mysterious code to be deciphered and it takes the form of a short story with a zoological tone, where the animal kingdom serves to reveal Humanity's truth, equating the narrative of the dream to a fable. Most of all, Penelope formulates a dream law, according to which all dreams must not receive equal treatment. According to a play on the Homeric text that is difficult to translate into English (κέρας, the horn, being close to the verb κραίνω; to satisfy, to fill, where ἐλέφας, ivory, is close to the verb ἐλεφαίρωμαι; to deceive), some dreams are therefore supposed to pass through the deceptive door of ivory, while others pass through the truthful door of horn. But, and this was perhaps less emphasized, at the very moment when Penelope draws the boundaries of the realm of dreams with this image destined to flourish in world literature, the queen of Ithaca seems deaf and blind to the message in the dream that very directly involves her. However, and in a resolutely contemporary manner, the dream provides the means for interpreting itself as a human voice, though of divine origin, clarifies the meaning of an allegory that the disguised Ulysses explains himself. Penelope, skeptical, knows how to explain the general law but does not understand her case in particular. Admittedly, this avoidance is an artistic effect of the poet and not a feminine failing: by creating an expectation and a frustration in his reader, Homer is the architect, through Penelope, of a delay in Ulysses' being recognized, making it more desirable and extending the tension of expectation, the very essence of the *Odyssey*. Structurally, the event delivers another, deeper lesson, because it also shows the paradox of any dreamer: often blind to the meaning of their own dreams, even when such dream does reaches them with some or all of its meaning. In other words, something in the dream always escapes its subject, and no one can be a confident interpreter in the land of dreams.

The biblical dream is no less mysterious. It is also notable that the great prophets of the Old Testament, such as Isaiah or Ezekiel, say little about dreams because prophets are more visionaries than dreamers, and the accounts of prophetic visions form a literary genre of their own mixing what is seen and heard, allegory, its interpretation and prophecy. In comparison, the biblical dream, in its great

literary and doctrinal diversity, as there are no less than forty, is more resistant to interpretation because, in the biblical world, the dream is so often the other face of a lie that it does seem to add anything to the word of God. In Israel, God prefers to express himself using his voice rather than images, besides the fact that priests, repudiating a pagan custom the Jews experienced while captive in Babylon. This moves the Hebrew people away from divination using dreams, and certain biblical books such as Ecclesiastes and Sirach are quick to criticize dreams and dreamers.

Some aspects of our dreams are rooted in these biblical dreams. Frightening dreams, our modern nightmares, accompanied by bodily and psychic manifestations, link dreams and fear. Job is a clear example of this. The same is true of dreams as a rite of passage. The most famous is Jacob's dream (Gen. 28):

"Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord, and he said: 'I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, 'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it!' [...] Then Jacob made a vow, saying, 'If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's household, then the Lord will be my God.'"

The narrative contains at least four remarkable elements: first, even if the word does not appear explicitly, the biblical narrator's description of this scene equates to the practice of incubation. Incubation (from the Latin *incubare*: "lying down")

consists of sleeping in the temple of a god to obtain a dream for therapeutic or prophetic purposes. The practice, widely witnessed among Indo-Europeans (Indians, Celts, Germans, etc.) illustrates the idea that dreams can heal. Here, the dream is less about healing and more about showing the hero the transformation of his status by falling asleep on a stone. This change, in which lies the rite of passage aspect of the narrative, is manifested by the ladder or staircase (in Hebrew: "sullam") that rises from earth to heaven, the second remarkable element of the narrative. The very term "staircase" or sullam, which is derived from the root sll, meaning "to fill, to build a way" has only one occurrence in the Bible. A related term is found in the Assyrian world to designate a staircase or ramp connecting the infernal world to the heavenly home of the gods. The ladder or staircase and, consequently, the dream are therefore a meeting point between two worlds. This "transformative" dimension of the dream, which moves from one reality to another or from one degree of consciousness to another higher one, is further exemplified by the presence of angels, the third important element of the narrative. These messengers of God, who ascend and descend from this staircase, undoubtedly reflect a later rewriting of the text of Genesis insofar as Jewish angelology was built gradually, notably under the influence of ancient religions and traditions, particularly Mesopotamian. These angels make a distant God accessible and facilitate communication with him. As such, they represent the positive figures who act in dreams as much as they assist the dreamer's actions. Finally, Jacob's vow to serve God is no less worthy of attention because it is not God who makes the vow's fulfillment conditional on Jacob's loyalty, but Jacob who makes his allegiance dependent on God keeping his promise. Through this rite of passage dream, valid for a man and through him for an entire community of people, dreams' mysterious and sacred dimension are sanctified.



*Illumination of the Master of Egerton, in the Book of Marvels by Jean de Mandeville (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 2810, fol. 161v); the image combines the dream's motive and the Ark which seals the covenant with God. The echo between Jacob's body at the bottom left and the Ark at the top right makes this illumination an illustration of the divine promise.*



The enigma that the dream creates makes interpreters necessary. From Artemidorus of Ephesus to Sigmund Freud, many authors have sought to solve this multiple variable equation. Again, the Bible provides several remarkable archetypal narratives that are part of the royal dream. For example, Joseph, who combines the figure of the dreamer and the interpreter, explains to Pharaoh the meaning of the dream where seven fat cows are devoured on the banks of the Nile by seven lean cows (Genesis 41, 1-32). This interpretation becomes a political act because the announcement of seven good years followed by seven years of famine is a warning to the ruler.



Panel of Pellegrino di Mariano Rossini, second half of the fifteenth century (Cologne, Wallraf Foundation): the dreamer is placed simultaneously in two spaces, the real (the architectural cube) and the dream (on the edge of the Nile, delimited by a circle). The cube appears to be carried by the dream, as if the dreamer were located in his dream, while also having produced it. The image offers a symbolic representation of the dream.

Moreover, the dream of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 2, 1-48 combines political messages, rites of passage and interpretative values in a revolutionary way. When the king summons the kingdom's sages, it is not to ask them to interpret his dream, but to judge whether they are capable of telling it to him. The sages, who recuse themselves, are therefore all executed, and only Daniel receives God's revelation, which is a way of saying that God is therefore not only the sole interpreter of dreams but also the source of human dreams.



Illumination of Daniel in the historical Bible of Guyart des Moulins (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 157, fol. 106v, fourteenth century).

These biblical dreams help us to understand a dimension of dreams that our contemporary interpretations often lead us to dismissing with excessive consistency, i.e., the social significance of all dreams, which, far from referring only to the dreamer's subjective perspective, also means something to the community at large. Joseph and Daniel incarnate two figures of the "wise courtier," which ascribes their dreams to the Eastern genre of "court stories" or "courtier tales," in which a character with humble beginnings, e.g., prisoner, slave or foreigner, is summoned before a powerful character to answer a question or solve a difficult problem. At the end of this trial, punished in the event of a wrong answer, the humble interpreter receives, should he triumph, half of the kingdom, the king's daughter, the insignia or the clothes of an important rank. In addition to their role as entertainment, these dream interpretations fulfill a social function. They help a diaspora of people, like the Jewish people, to learn how a foreigner must behave in the pagan context of a royal court. These stories, mirrors of the prince that one must know how to decipher, also create a figure of the interpreter that is different from those of other magicians. Where pagans interpreted dreams as a known list of cases with dream keys, the Jewish textual interpreter is visited by divine grace. By passing the interpretation of dreams onto a caste of professionals, these biblical narratives give a charismatic glow to dreams.

## II. Fantasy, horror and wonder: dreams and visions of the afterlife.

It only takes one step to go from dreams to visions, and curiosity about the afterlife is often enough reason to take that step in the Middle Ages. This interest in the afterlife and the shape it takes undoubtedly constitute a constant of the human spirit: in all civilizations, the interest piqued by our destiny after death appeals to the most primitive emotions and the least rational human instincts. Fear and fascination come together when confronted with this mystery, but, at the same time, these emotions inspire the most refined achievements of art, as if our humanity were challenged by death and the secrets of the afterlife, whether they are just curtains of smoke covering the void or veils concealing the very real backstage of our sublunary theatre.



Conques Abbey, lintel, Satan and infernal punishments (Twelfth century)



Torcello, mosaic of the back façade, Satan on his throne and Hell (late eleventh century)



Western literature also ascribes to a journey transcending our spatio-temporal planes to discovering the setting of the afterlife. From Virgil's accounts of Aeneas' sojourn in Hell to the Emperor's visiting the maternal shadow in Act II of Claudel's *Rest of the Seventh Day*, the afterlife has constantly provided a privileged setting for poets' fictions. Unsurprisingly, the Christian Middle Ages did not make the afterlife a uniquely poetic subject, but a reality of faith, justified by a description used didactically. Without diving too deep into visual arts, which saw scenes of eschatological theatre fill churches, on mosaics, frescoes and in the illuminations of manuscripts, literature offers an overabundant harvest: didactic and theological works, novels, fables and theatre contain many medieval journeys into the afterlife, and the theme clearly reaches apotheosis in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Without entering into the very complex debate as to whether Dante's text represents the crowning achievement of a literary tradition in which the poet inscribes his work or whether the latter breaks, more or less voluntarily, with his literary predecessors, we will offer a summary on the basis of the multiple works devoted to this genre, while focusing on an example of the fourteenth century with the Dominican Henri Suso, deliberately chosen from outside the time period generally assigned to this genre.

### The Greats of the Genre

We must therefore begin by defining what these journeys to the afterlife mean for the Latin Middle Ages. Claude Carozzi, who will be our guiding light along this journey, connects the vision of the setting of the afterlife with that of the soul's journey: simply visiting Heaven or Hell is not enough to belong to this genre. In fact, Claude Carozzi separates the pagan heroic tradition and the vernacular of medieval journeys (including Dante's *Comedy*) from medieval Latin traditions: in the first two cases, which the historian excludes, it is the man as a whole who travels, whereas in the medieval Latin tradition, it is the soul detached from the body that travels and returns to the body of the seer, though not without the paradox of these itinerant and often suffering souls' status. On this basis, Claude Carozzi lists nearly fifty Latin texts that range from late Antiquity to the thirteenth century.

The genre defined in this way remains popular, though probably with a few intermittent periods, due to the period's general context which was wont to losing documents and less favorable to literary life. The *Vision of Saint Paul*, which comes from a third century Greek version that inspired at least eight Latin versions as early as the fifth century, is the basis for the genre and flourishes in the form of abridged versions or translations in all the great vernaculars of the Middle Ages. The sixth and seventh centuries produce less than the eighth and ninth centuries. And if the tenth and eleventh centuries are less rich in afterlife journeys, they are followed by the bloom of the twelfth century where, in the words of Jacques le Goff, we see "the great rise of folklore linked with promoting lay people." Towards the middle of the thirteenth century, the genre takes a more personal direction: the visions lose a little of their didactic and normative aspects, and the teaching journey becomes a dialogue between God and the visionary. Women even appear among those gratified with such visions, which something new compare with the previous time period.

In addition to contributions potentially from Islam and the East, these texts combine two types of influences: ancient, it is the katabasis or sacred missions which see the hero, with his body, descend into Hell and win a qualifying contest which confers him a particular status or strengthens him, where the Middle Ages prefer apparent death and the rapture of the soul. Hercules saves Theseus from the underworld; Orpheus tries to bring Eurydice or Aeneas, speaking with his father, back to life. The Middle Ages were not unaware of these katabases. For example, Nicodemus' preaching in which Christ saved the righteous or Saint Patrick's Purgatory where the hero faced the perils of a descent into Hell.



Paleo-Christian apocalypses have their place, too, as well as the works of Pope Gregory I (Saint Gregory the Great) and Bede the Venerable. Pope Gregory I notably introduces the trial bridge: to reach the shore where the blessed dwell, souls must take a dangerous passage that will cause many of them to fall into the river of perdition. In his Ecclesiastical History (III, 19 and V, 12), Bede tells two detailed stories: the Irish Saint Fursey contemplates the hellish valley where four fires represent the four vices; at the center, there is a fight between angels and demons to grasp the visitor's soul. As for the monk Drithelm, he travels through the different eschatological zones (the wells of Gehenna, purgatory, heaven) along a route that will become a classic legend. Therefore, this trip is also a topic of hagiography, making it possible to highlight the remarkable destiny of a saint.

Extending the post-mortem justice of the Greco-Roman world, the Middle Ages emphasize the educational value of punishment and its proportionality: the punishment fits the place and severity of the sin. But Medieval texts place more emphasis than ancient works on punishments because they are overwhelmingly works to build the power of the Church. This explains why they alternate frightening descriptions of sorrows and seductive images of rewards to better persuade humanity away from sin and toward salvation. Writers' imaginations were more inspired by punishments than by rewards: happy people don't have stories, even after death, and especially Saint Paul's prescriptions on ineffable secrets had to persuade listeners from defiling, even in their imaginations, the kingdom of heaven. Such texts do not provide profound thought on salvation: the subjects most discussed in schools are generally ignored, e.g., the nature of purgatory fire or the quality of God's vision. Therefore, there is no science for salvation or soteriology, strictly speaking, therein but common beliefs staged to elicit emotions. Purgatory's presence in these texts indicates the expansion of this belief in a third place dedicated to the atonement of the least serious sins. When it is described, heaven is God's luminous home when it is shown, it is often depicted using the visual repertoire of Revelation. Saints reside in a fortified city, made of precious stones that shine with a supernatural light because they are embodied by God. These Elysian Fields are those of an eternal golden age, a Christianized locus amoenus that knows no suffering or need.

Given the time period and the genre, the authors are members of the clergy, often Regular clerics but also Secular prelates that use visionaries' techniques. Such authority figures' endorsement was undoubtedly necessary to authenticate stories that may have seemed too fantastic to be true for some believers, as attested in the ninth century by Hincmar, archbishop of Reims' introduction, placing his narrative under the cumulative patronage of Saints Gregory, Bede and Boniface. Visionaries were actually responsible for seeking assistance for tormented souls from the living once they have returned to earth. Clerical works, such texts were therefore part of the salvation economy through which the Church, as mediating institution, multiplied the votes of masses, offerings and prayers.

Travels often, though not always, took the form of a walk with three stops: hell, purgatory and heaven, with varying lengths of stays: one hour for the last Carolingian emperor, Charles the Fat; often one night, which allows the seer to come to their senses by early morning, and sometimes more than a week. Three ways of starting the journey are worth noting: (i) the dream; (ii) the rapture or raptus; (iii) more rarely, a real descent into hell through an actual opening.

The genre's appeal is at least threefold. First, these texts inform us about the state of ancient mindsets. Second, they provide a window into Medieval imaginations. Third, the compensatory value of these works of unbridled imagination in which sinners are punished, including kings and prelates, was to bring some consolation to ordinary people in real life. Afterlife is certainly not a carnival, but the sentences of the last judgment, faithful to the inversion of values advocated by Christianity, establish a spiritual order that goes against worldly hierarchies and undoubtedly made it possible to openly talk about the destructive impulses of death and hatred, otherwise difficult to express in a society that was supposed to be united in the bond of charity.

In this way, these journeys are also how society and the state of the world were talked about and reshaped. Despite the inevitably stereotypical nature of such moralizing discourse, certain ideas and repetitions provide information about the era's state of mind regarding its environment, for those who know how to read these texts.

Finally, the visions also offer policy from “the afterlife’s own words” in that they add to the advice that notables could read in princes’ mirrors their own threats. Among political visions that were very popular in the Carolingian era, there is unequivocally the Vision of Wettin where Emperor Charlemagne finds himself in purgatory to atone for his lust. In another vision, Hincmar, archbishop of Reims speaks, shortly after the death of Emperor Charles the Bald, of Bernold’s experience of discovering Charles himself lying in the mud, being eaten by worms. The Emperor would probably regret not having listened to Hincmar’s advice better during his lifetime. Charles the Fat’s vision is also a well-known example of political prophecy, even “apophecy” as it tells what should happen after the fact.

So far, we have deliberately prolonged the suspense and beaten around the bush of hell without entering. It is time to start this journey by choosing an example that is out of step with the traditional chronology - a way of nuancing the general information just provided.

### Henri Suso’s Visions

It has often been said, with caveats, that this genre disappeared or changed significantly in nature as of the thirteenth century, due to changes in the conceptions of the afterlife and human nature. This was alluded to above. Visions were losing their didactic function, and allegories, building momentum, were becoming more popular with readers who no longer believed that the human soul could access the afterlife. Without being able to definitively assert it, we wonder if this conclusion, stemming from rationalization, reflects our current knowledge of Latin documents in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries rather than the reality of the Middle Ages. This situation is complex. To better illustrate this, we have chosen an example that is still not very well known in this context - the chapter that the Dominican friar, Henry Suso devotes to the vision of hell in the Clock of Wisdom at the very same time that Dante’s Comedy starts circulating.

To give some context, here is some information about its author. Born in Swabia around 1295, Henry von Berg grew up near Lake Constance among wealthy patricians. A gifted student, he completed his training with the Dominicans in Strasbourg, then in Cologne in the 1320s. At that time, he also became friends with Meister Eckhart, who reassured him of his Dominican vocation, even if this friendship later led to his being barred from teaching. A turning point in his religious life occurred at 40 when he renounced the most extreme ascetic practices and opted for inner mortification. Spiritual but fully engaged in the conflicts of his time, the Dominican also took sides in the conflict opposing Pope John XXII and Emperor Louis IV of Bavaria. He went into exile with part of his community. When he finally returned to Lake Constance, Henry Suso was accused by a woman of being the father of her baby and left the city again in 1347. Returning to working as an itinerant preacher, Suso notably stayed in the city of Ulm, where he died on January 25, 1366. Henry Suso, as we can see, had an eventful life and when we know how to read his works, we can see echoes of current events, even in Hell.

Suso is known for one work in Latin, in particular, that we will study here, the Clock of Wisdom (*Horologium Sapientiae*). The Latin translation of Suso’s work originally in German was written in 1333-1337 for the friars of his order and quickly became one of the most popular books about spirituality at the end of the Middle Ages with 233 preserved Latin manuscripts. Given its subject matter, Suso’s Clock is part of the literary genre of the Clock of Passion where each stage of Christ’s sufferings is distributed according to a precise cycle of time. Twenty-four materiae or chapters corresponding to the twenty-four hours in a day comprise Suso’s text. The chapters are divided into two books containing respectively sixteen and eight materiae to differentiate between the hours of day and night.



## Henri Suso, *L' Horloge de la Sagesse*

Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, ms. IV 111, f. 13v



Suso's tenth hour of the day describes a visit to Hell, the status of which is not very clear if we follow what Suso says in the introduction:

"As he was deeply learned and had dissociated his mind, as much as he could, from material realities, he saw from afar, in a vision with the eyes of faith, a region full of shadows, the unknown and genuinely terrifying. As he shuddered, wondering what it was, he was told: 'This area that you see is the place reserved for forthcoming sorrows: different souls, after departing the body, receive punishment for their various sins; some for their purification, others for their eternal damnation.' And as for the souls, he was then shown the different kinds of torments, and other similar ones, which are so horrible and frightening that no words could describe them and no human faculty could fully comprehend them. When he came to, he had the impression that he was returning from another world due to the emotional power of the vision, for a time, overwhelming fear and horror weighed him down,

rendering him a man half-dead." (English trans. C. Marler of French translation by C. Giraud, *Écrits spirituels du Moyen Âge, Writings of the Middle Ages*, Paris, Gallimard, 2019, p. 597)

This is an example of interior vision, using the classic process of the guide being Eternal Wisdom in the text which leads the visionary. However, when compared to earlier in the literary genre, where the visionary truly went with his soul to these lands, here it seems to be the opposite. The lands of the afterlife are shown to the soul and the journey seems to be purely interior. That being said, to get to heaven, Suso claims having reached the Emphyrean, i.e., the supreme and immobile sky, and hopes to stay in this residence of blessed spirits, which suggests an actual movement of the soul, at least. The ambivalent nature of this vision further exposes the difficulty of drawing watertight boundaries between dreams and visions, desires and realities. In any case, when compare with previous literature, Suso's proves to be innovative in that it shows a static spectacle because this striking description, a hypotyposis in rhetoric, offers a panoramic view rather than a journey to a specific place:

"So he looked down, and an unbearable stench came from the area. Hammers banged, deep darkness appeared in heaps where the horrible faces of demons could be seen. There were pleas and moans, and successive evils mercilessly tore the ungodly apart. They went from icy water to crushing heat. He reflected on divine judgments' fairness and scope and noticed, through the anguish oppressing his heart and the drops of sweat with which the horror of this vision permeated him, that everyone was tormented by their sins. Those who had lived their lives in a foolish and unjust way, were tormented based on what they had done," (aforementioned translation, p. 598).

Nevertheless, the vision's content seems to fit the genre perfectly: the various senses of smell, hearing and sight are included, and Suso uses some topics drawn from the tried and tested repertoire from Antiquity that the Middle Ages notably expands upon. There are the different elements of fire, metal, tar and sulfur; weather events; animals such as lions, bears, snakes and other reptiles; objects that inflict «instrumental» punishments; feelings from sounds coming from all kinds of cries and moans. The author employs the aesthetic of excess (everything is huge) and vast spaces open up in the imagination like perspectives from Piranesi's prisons. Much like his predecessors, Suso therefore magnifies, condenses and combines natural elements at their most superlative.

As in the Carolingian or later texts, the rationality and proportionality of punishments also serve to articulate a discourse on the powerful and no doubt on the author's relatives: the typology of the deadly sins is certainly a classic – Suso attacks pride, greed, lust and greed one after the other – while bringing them up to date because, in condemning theft, Suso discreetly reminds readers that he belongs to a mendicant order.

"Thieves, robbers and their accomplices, those who in their lifetime had stolen from the poor and friends of God or who had unduly afflicted them with torments, were led with violence to the forks of Hell – a punishment beyond human understanding – and were hung and tortured there. However, they did not die, but they suffered indescribably."

The Dominican friar does not forget the sins of language:

"Moreover, certain men who, though they appeared to be lambs, had hidden a lion's spirit, who like rabid dogs had attacked the servants of God with gossip, slander or disturbing words, and had offended their fellow men with unjust persecutions, were prey to the harsh biting of infernal dogs in the same place."

The reader cannot help but think that this passage is a way of settling the scores internally, and that it is meant for the many enemies that Suso could have had in his own religious family. Without being Savonarola, the Dominican also gives a privileged view of the torments suffered by "ungodly judges, unjust leaders, clerics with shameful greed, lascivious monks, violent lay people". These exemplary punishments, doled out ad status, mainly affect those who should serve as a model for Christians.

Therefore, it appears that Suso, far from testifying to some "disenchantment of the world", reinforces the didactic purpose of the genre because, while safeguarding the afterlife's ineffable rights, he seeks to make the spectacle captivating, perhaps in line with "visibility requirement" that Jérôme Baschet discerns in the figurative arts of the same time period. To make the reader sensitive to damnation's immeasurable immensity from their perception of time, Suso, a wise preacher, uses a kind of example that he seems to have invented:

"Make this impossible supposition: if there were a stone so large that it would fill the whole circumference of the sky, and a small bird, of a very small size, a hundred thousand years later, removed from this stone with its beak the equivalent of a tenth of a grain of millet, and again after a hundred thousand

years would do as before, for a tenth and so on, so that in a million years the stone would not have diminished more than the size of a grain of millet. What pain! How unhappy we are! We would be grateful if, once the stone had completely disappeared after so long, the sentence of our eternal damnation came to an end. But, alas, divine justice utterly refuses this consolation to the damned" (aforementioned translation, p. 601).

In addition, Suso, rather dramatically, stages a particular figure as the culprit that the reader is supposed to identify with using a pathetic description of the whole process of damnation:

"O sweet father, who begot me in this world, O sweet mother, who nursed me at your motherly breast, O all my friends and dear companions, farewell, my bowels, for here comes the hour of the most bitter separation, even more bitter than any death. Goodbye world, goodbye companions that I honored with a tender favor. Here we are led to the terrible, infernal gibbet, here we are dragged to dreadful torment, and we will never see you again joyful! O tears, running endlessly; my eyes, weep, and all my bowels, mourn for this woeful separation that keeps us from the sovereign good, from this glorious and joyful face, from the company of angels, and from the very happy number of the chosen, to place us with the miserable, cursed and cruel company of the damned who must be tortured endlessly. O frenetic hands, O inner groans of many hearts, O gnashing of teeth and tremendous quivering of spirits, O countless weeping and moaning, O eternal clamor, lasting forever and never ending, which will always be again and will never be completed! Our miserable eyes will only see misery; our ears will only hear only misfortune: misfortune and sorrow. O tender hearts, see this interminable and cruel eternity, Mourn it and weep!"

This description composes what historians of emotions rightly call an "emotional script", a journey through emotions that the reader is supposed to experience in turn by identifying with them.

This vision of the afterlife is therefore above all a sermon about the afterlife. Consequently, it is possible to question the decline of the traditional vision as it seems that authors such as the Dominicans were perfectly suited to revitalize it, if it were to be revitalized, or to continue this genre by adapting it to their pastoral needs. But, in the end, it cannot be ruled out that Henri Suso was an exception, and it would probably be overkill to proclaim the visionary

genre's apotheosis. This example does at least have the merit of drawing attention to the late-medieval persistence of the literature of vision and to the need for a wide-ranging investigation into Medieval Latin devotional literature of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which – and this is a certainty – is clearly undervalued.

### Conclusion

We still have to question the scope of these texts and their relevance to us. More than for other Medieval works, we have to re-acclimate in order to appreciate these works, because the forms that dreams and journeys in the afterlife take are very far from our ways of thinking. We no longer solidly believe in the soul, and we believe even less in the afterlife. If, with surrealism and André Breton, we asserted that "Afterlife is fully in this life", this literary genre undoubtedly leads us to turn that statement on its head: for the Medieval visionaries, this life is fully in the afterlife. This supposedly faithful projection is a precious gift for historians. However, in my opinion, the difficulty of clearer scans and harmonizing these texts with historically changes in representation resist all efforts to create a systematic approach.

In literature, it may be simpler: intertextuality is something so common to these stories of dreams and visions that the reader can wonder if it does not very quickly lead to a form of self-referencing, a criterion that is relevant enough to define a literary genre. In laymen's terms, as its history progresses, dreams and visions gradually become a vision of the vision: the dreamer or the visionary becoming someone who sees what others saw before them. This serves to prove private revelations, which are otherwise hard to authenticate. This building up of dreams and visions forces us to call one of the most common and difficult preconceived notions into question, that what happens to us is considered to be unique and a strictly individual experience. Dreams are not an exception to this trend. Freudian interpretations reinforce this belief in our dreams' absolute uniqueness by searching for the key to interpretation in each individual's history. Because who wants to dream like their neighbor does? This journey into our medieval dream and visionary heritage can help to give the splendid isolation of our contemporary dreams more nuance, leading us to consider dreams as complex cultural constructions that conceal what Jung and analytical psychology call archetypes. Dreams and visions therefore draw from a repertoire in the

collective imagination that would allow us to go back to the sources of a collective sub-consciousness and to identify certain constants throughout human history.

Finally, in addition to the pleasure of decoding these texts, the reader cannot help but to be struck by the powerful emotional effects of each work. This array of dreams and visions makes up a kind of bouquet of poisonous flowers where "the pleasure and trouble"; to use a title from the late Jacques Le Brun, spices up the menu of this eschatological feast. This theatre of impulses, where the reader frightens themselves while playing, was seems to also be intended to be catharsis and a kind of intimate knowledge. For us, the true heirs of the "disenchantment of the world", perhaps only a simple guilty pleasure remains, that, as the poet says, of

**"Diving to the bottom of the abyss, Hell or Heaven, what does it matter?"**

**At the bottom of the Unknown to find something new!"**

*(The Flowers of Evil, "The Journey")*



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