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### Dream Visions as a Safe Space for Purgatorial Speculation

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Research Seminar

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## Dream Visions as a Safe Space for Purgatorial Speculation

### **Introduction**

When I was fifteen, I grew infatuated with Catholicism. No one in my family is Catholic, nor any of my friends at that time. I had stumbled into the ancient Christian authors out of what I thought was simple religious devotion. This, it turns out, was my first academic passion; I began reading everything I could, studying the history and how it has changed over time. When I was around sixteen, I discovered Dante's *Purgatorio*. I was in love. Climbing the steps of the mountain, sweating off sins, and finally plunging into the final fire of love at the peak. However, I soon discovered that my love for purgatory was atypical for most southern Baptist adolescents. This dissonance created in me a lasting appreciation of the subject, regardless of my beliefs, that has reached its culmination here.

This project has had a more crooked history than most. I first set out to write a microhistory of the only Latin Catholic Church in Arkansas. However, not hearing back from the priest made it a bit harder to move forward. Dejectedly I scrounged over other topics, finally settling on the shift in Protestant perspectives on purgatory. Only, I had not finally settled. I was quickly bogged down in issues of scope and method. Then I had the idea to study purgatory through the very medium I had encountered it, literature. The project, thus, is an intellectual history tracing the development of the doctrine of purgatory through the dream vision genre. To speak of "development" makes it sound linear. It is anything but linear. The story below is one of

change, discourse, and revision. This specific genre allowed for a safe speculative space in which the author could express their ideas of purgatory to a wider audience – but not just purgatory. Each text contains hints of the authors' theories on space (in the Cartesian sense, non-stellar), soul, and the human condition.

Dream visions are a specific type of story in which a person in the story either sleeps or dies, has a vision while unconscious, and then relates the vision later on. The term as it is typically used applies to medieval literature, but I have expanded it here because the Medieval practice based itself in Classical sources and similar styles can be found across all of Christian history. Our texts come from both purely literary documents like Dante's *Purgatorio* and also from accounts that purport to be factual like the *Vision of Drythelm* found in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. For this broadening of genre into both factual and fictitious realms simultaneously I have relied on Luise White's *Speaking with Vampires*. The cases seem to be more analogous in the Middle Ages, when the literary models began appearing, but the genre in early forms existed at the beginning of Christianity in the West.

My work here does not take too much effort to understand; we will simply examine each of these sources in turn and see how the general trend of purgatory's presentation in this genre has changed over time. In these texts at least, we see a fairly open purgatory at its inception, a narrowing in late antiquity, and then an opening again from Dante into Lewis. The pattern found here is significant in that it was produced by people influential to their theological circles and those after them; however, the sheer number of Christians that believe in purgatory from the second century down to the twentieth is so great, that any general pattern cannot be applied to all places and times. Based on the texts and analysis provided, I will argue that the dream vision is more than an obscure medieval literary form but is a forum for discourse present across the two

thousand years of Christian history. This form has been alive in Western Christianity for so long partially because of the dangers that have faced religious speculation for so long. Furthermore, I will attempt to prove that if we hope to understand the nature of religious belief of ages past, specifically those related to purgatory but not restrained to this, this literary genre is a rich field that has largely been neglected by people outside of Medieval studies.

We will begin by going over my methods and practice in research for this project. Next I will provide an overview of the historiography, and how that influences my own work. After those preliminaries are finished, I will move into the bulk of my research where I will present each text I have examined and attempt to notify continuities and discontinuities among them. Once they have been sufficiently handled, I will consider some future topics of research related to this work and how everything ties together.

### **Methodology**

My method of conducting research was rather simple. I read primary sources that fell into the scope of this project and the relevant histories of the times and places that produced them. I also have researched similar works within the dream vision genre or works close to that in an effort to better get a grip of what kind of works I was handling. While the process was simple, the main issues were found in trying to limit the scope of the paper, and select which sources to use for the final product. After dealing with the issues of scope, the availability of sources presented another problem that, at this stage, proved insurmountable.

My in-depth reading focused mainly on five works, the *Passion of Perpetua*, the *Vision of Drythelm* found in Bede's *History*, Dante Alighieri's *Purgatorio*, John Henry Newman's *Vision of Gerontius*, and C. S. Lewis's *Great Divorce*. These works, from the innumerable amount of writings on purgatory written over the past two millennia, were selected because they all fell into

a somewhat smaller category – the dream vision. This name is misleading in that the typical Medieval dream vision did not come into existence until the middle ages, and most all of our works fall outside of that time period. However, each of these do participate in that type of writing in that the story written down was received or purported to be received in a vision while the author or giver of the story was asleep.

I selected this specific type of story for a few reasons. First, the genre allowed for a mixing of fiction and reality. Some of the earlier accounts of dreams were presented as fact, even though they were crafted in a very specific genre. The authors and tellers allowed themselves to follow the general trend of the genre in telling their stories, while adding their own elements to it. This allowed for the creation of new ideas in the religious sphere by giving the author a safe speculative space. By couching their ideas about the afterlife in vision, they could hide behind symbolism and the weirdness of dreams without putting their orthodoxy on the line.

Second, these safe speculations would become the foundation for popular belief in purgatory. The Catholic Church itself would only give a limited definition of purgatory – if it might even be called that – that gives even less detail than the skimpiest of stories examined here. From the most recent Catechism of the Catholic Church we read:

The Church gives the name *Purgatory* to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned. The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence and Trent. The tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire: As for certain lesser fault, we must believe that, before the Final Judgement, there is a purifying fire.<sup>1</sup>

The rest of the page – yes one page – on purgatory in the *Catechism* is left to reasons why this belief has been believed in, citing the Maccabean literature and hints from the New Testament.

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 291.

The dream vision genre allowed for much needed elaboration of the subject. Since the genre was also often used by highly influential authors like Bede and Dante, it made for an easily selection.

Third, the genre's widespread use over the entirety of Christian history, with undulating popularity, made it a good candidate for tracing the progression of ideas. While as a literary form it did not reach its perfection until the late middle ages with Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's *The Romance of the Rose* and Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* and *House of Fame* and *Book of the Duchess*, it has classical roots. Cicero, writing in the first century B. C. E, gives an account of an encounter Scipio had with his late grandfather Africanus while sleeping one night. Cicero explains that "it frequently happens that our thoughts and conversations react upon us in dreams," giving a naturalistic account of the vision.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of how the vision occurred, it is still the case that the type of things he heard were similar to what Christian writers would hear in their speculative writings on purgatory. Scipio learns what things are most important to God: "Nothing on earth... is more gratifying to that Supreme God... than the establishment of... commonwealths." He also learns the fate of others who have "flown from the bonds of their bodies" and left earth for the stars of the Milky Way. Scipio continues to learn about the heavens and the nature of the planets from his grandfather, as well as receiving admonitions about how to govern himself and his soul in light of this information.<sup>3</sup> While the specific use of a hierarchy of the spheres is not common in the sources I have selected, occurring only in Dante's *Paradiso*, the general outline is remarkably similar to the literary dream vision. The narrator falls asleep, meets a guide, is shown what the afterlife looks like, is directed in how to use that information, and then wakes up to record his or her dream. So, Cicero planted the dream vision genre in Western

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<sup>2</sup> Cicero, Marcus Tullius, "Scipio's Dream," in *Dream Visions and Other Poems*, ed. Kathryn L. Lynch (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 258-264.

<sup>3</sup> Cicero, "Scipio's Dream," 261-264.

literature, Macrobius, a Roman grammarian and philosopher from late antiquity, secured its place, and the genre would continue to be used for its theological flexibility by Christian writers from every epoch of the Christian West.<sup>4</sup>

Lastly, limiting my scope to a particular genre sifted out a lot of the duller theological readings that someone with more patience than I should one day study. I would argue that this is largely why the dream vision has stuck around for so long; while theological disputation has its purpose, it is the nature of the human mind that these will rarely draw the passion needed to secure an idea in a culture's imaginary. As we saw above, there simply isn't much theological doctrine in place that must be believed for faithful Catholics anyways. The human mind needs something more tangible to hold on to, especially in regard to the afterlife. It doesn't take a lengthy study into the different afterlives of other cultures to discover that there are widely different ideas out there, and most with vivid imagery that accompanies their theories. It is imagery and narrative that drive conversion and fervor, not dry scholasticism, for all its worth. Thus, the lack of definition and a need for firm symbols of the afterlife allowed for the dream vision to be prevalent across Christianity's history, making it an important aspect of Christian literature to study.

Now with the selection of genre established, there are a few remaining points about why I selected the specific five pieces that I did. For starters, I wanted a range of pieces from several different time periods. My selection is sufficiently broad on that account, even if there is a lacking from late antiquity, though there are other sources from St. Augustine that supplement that. Apart from period, I also wanted the pieces to be either significant on their own to be the product of people who were significant in the theological or artistic circles of their day or in

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<sup>4</sup> Macrobius, "Commentary on Scipio's Dream," in *Dream Visions and Other Poems*, ed. by Kathryn L. Lynch (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007) 265-268

times after. I think having Bede, Dante, Newman, and Lewis on the list satisfies that requirement. Those were the primary criteria I used for judging which sources to pull from here.

As I mentioned above, translation issues limited my scope to either wildly popular works that would find their way into English or works that were penned in English originally. There is much to be said for the works of other European nations on this subject, but it should be noted here, as it will be below, that the most widely accepted version of purgatory held stems directly from the visions presented in Bede's *Vision of Drythelm* which could better justify the skew in my sources.

### **Historiography**

Since the Reformation, purgatory has been derided and misunderstood as foolish Romanism as opposed to true Christian doctrine. While much has been said in the religious realm about purgatory, mostly in polemical debates that distort the actual subject, less has been said about purgatory as an idea. However, a few important works have discussed the development of the idea, most notably Jacques Le Goff's *The Birth of Purgatory* and Isabel Moreira's *Heaven's Purge*. While these two works were and are highly influential in any current study of the development of the doctrine, they do so in a way distinct from my own, as we will see below.

### *Relevant Historiographies*

As a religious doctrine and its abstract nature, the study of purgatory is most properly located in the history of ideas. Within the study of religion, purgatory is often not treated by itself, but is added to discussions of other doctrinal or historical developments in the Church. As for doctrine, broad treatments of Christian eschatology, relic cults, prayers for the dead, and the division of sins all had relations to purgatory that is often mentioned in passing. As for historical



developments, the Church's political and economic dominance over Western Europe are often cited as both a cause and effect of the doctrine of purgatory taking root in the religious imaginary of Latin Christians.

Another somewhat disconnected aspect of historical development where purgatory is studied is its appearance in art. Literature in particular has spurred a great deal of study of the doctrine, but this is not typically a historical study, but linguistic and aesthetic. For example, Dante's *Purgatorio* has been talked about probably more than the actual doctrine in an academic setting, and while this is not exactly a part of the historiography proper, it is closely related. For an example of this see Wall's book on purgatory in which he pulls equally as often from an introduction to the *Purgatorio* as from historical monographs on the subject. Jacques Le Goff's work, to be discussed more below, broadened the historiography further into linguistic studies, tracing the words used to describe the doctrine in antique and medieval authors.

### *Methods of Discussion*

As I mentioned above in talking about historiographies, this subject is talked about in a few quite different ways. While religious writers in the protestant tradition often write disparagingly about the idea in polemical pieces, catholic sources typically do so in apologetic works. Catholic apologists will typically include more history than the protestants, if one can believe it, but this is not typically original historical work. The bulk of the serious historical work on purgatory has come from a few primary monographs, and some work on the Church Fathers.

The book that really opened up the contemporary study of purgatory is Le Goff's *The Birth of Purgatory*. In this book he examines the development of the doctrine starting in late antiquity into the late middle ages. His study focuses primarily on literature and the phraseology of the authors; his main point is that purgatory did not become a noun in the Western languages

until the 12<sup>th</sup> century, meaning that it did not become a distinct place in the people's minds until then. The first portion of his book discusses how the idea had related ones in the minds of the Fathers, but that it was always plural and adjectival. Aside from the linguistic evidence, he also stresses the shift in Western Europeans' view of space. When purgatory was finally transfigured into a glorious noun, this marked the peoples' idea of space changing dramatically.

Next, Isabel Moreira's monograph, *Heaven's Purge*, is in part a response to Le Goff. Instead of locating the birth of purgatory at the moment when it was first nounified, she examines the social conditions and symbols that contributed to its various conceptions from late antiquity into the early middle ages. She says that some form of the doctrine has existed since the inception of Christianity, or that the doctrines that were held made it likely for purgatory to develop across the centuries. Her study is particularly interesting for its examination of the son/slave relationship to father/master that was archetypal in the late Roman world. This schema was adopted by Christians and influenced their conception of punishment/education that formed the basis of the belief in purgatory. Her work is important for its reevaluation of Le Goff's thesis while adding to and expanding upon his work.

The last monograph that is especially relevant is Dale's *The Hope of the Early Church*. This book is not focused on purgatory like the other two are, but it does present the eschatological ideas of the Early Church Fathers. This work is a simple collection of different authors from the early church, showcasing what they thought. While it does show us what the early ideas about postmortem purgation were, it is more important for providing the whole systems of beliefs that purgatorial ideas were encased in.

*When and where have scholars written*

Most all of the research done on the development of purgatory has been done in the western world in the last century or so. The research began in French, with Le Goff popularizing the subject, using prior French work, though much of his was original. His participation in the Annales school directed the research of Le Goff and Moreira in their use of social science and tracing the history of ideas in general.

*Why have scholars written*

Scholars have written about purgatory for a number of reasons. First, the religious significance increased with the advent of Protestantism as a defining mark of the different branches of Christianity. Second, the doctrine had economic significance. Third, the doctrine sheds light on important societal and cultural changes.

Since Protestantism has taken root in the West in the last 500 years, scholars have sought to understand the historical development of the doctrine in order to assess its value in the Christian tradition. Understanding the doctrine has been imagined helps us to understand Christianity at different times for different people, allowing for more ecumenism in the present day.

As has already been mentioned, the indulgence crisis was only allowed to take root because of the popular belief in purgatory, which also helped cement the idea in the Western imagination. This crisis was an important moment for the divide of Christianity, understanding the medieval mind, and understanding how money flowed at this time. If anyone wants to get a grasp of these things, they must also know a bit about the doctrine involved.

Lastly, as has also been mentioned, the development of purgatory tracked ancient ideas of familial and slave relationships. As these ideas fluctuated in the Western world, ideas of the

afterlife did too. Since one of the most significant poets in the world had an entire epic devoted to purgatory, which influenced poets for centuries to come, a historical study of the doctrine is required for understanding this significant cultural masterpiece as well.

### *What perspectives*

Primary perspectives on purgatory are overwhelmingly white and male, and of course Catholic Christians. Of course, this is true for practically any denomination of Christianity when considering the whole two thousand years of development. Adherents of religions like to talk about their beliefs more than anyone. Since the Catholic Church only has male clergy and women, even devout, are not typically highly regarded in theological debates, the perspectives on purgatory are predominately male. Since this was the privileged group of the time, they left many of their beliefs in written form for us to use as data now. Since there is a lot of written material to work with, and little of anything else, most of these perspectives become even more elitist in only presenting those that could both afford the educations to learn to write and the paper to write on. All that being said, other perspectives have leaked through in the written record, but none in the poor man or woman's own voice, only as it was recorded by the wealthy.

### *Conclusion*

The study of purgatory is somewhat limited since it has only been of interest in recent years by students of modern historical methods. The increased secularization of the West has also limited the study of this somewhat obscure and often maligned belief where it is not explicitly tied to economic or social change. Little work has been done on the development of the doctrine on its own terms in the religious realm by actual historians of ideas. Regardless, historians like Le Goff and Moreira have made important contributions to our understanding of this two-thousand-year-old idea. In this project I hope to use their work in supplementing my own research to fill in the

large gaps that I cannot cover, and to provide food for thought as I analyze how the doctrines have been debated.

## **Textual Analysis**

*Perpetua* (202-203 CE)

The first text we receive concerning anything like pcomes from the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, written in the second century. In the passage quoted below we find Perpetua telling the reader about a dream she had concerning her brother Dinocrates. From other portions of the text we find that Dinocrates was only seven when he died, and in all probability, he died a pagan. This last point is interesting for understanding early Christian attitudes towards universalism and post-mortem salvation but is sadly beyond the scope of the current project.

To begin with here are the words of Perpetua describing a dream she had:

I saw Dinocrates going out from a gloomy place, where also there were several others, and he was parched and very thirsty, with a filthy countenance and pallid colour, and the wound on his face which he had when he died. This Dinocrates had been my brother after the flesh, seven years of age? who died miserably with disease — his face being so eaten out with cancer, that his death caused repugnance to all men. For him I had made my prayer, and between him and me there was a large interval, so that neither of us could approach to the other. And moreover, in the same place where Dinocrates was, there was a pool full of water, having its brink higher than was the stature of the boy; and Dinocrates raised himself up as if to drink. And I was grieved that, although that pool held water, still, on account of the height to its brink, he could not drink.<sup>5</sup>

Before diving into the analysis of this passage there are a few points to note. In Le Goff's work, purgatory as a place did not exist in the Western imaginary until around the twelfth century. While I think this is a bit extreme, I also think it would be anachronistic to insist

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<sup>5</sup> Tertullian "The Passion of the Holy Martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas," trans. James Donaldson and Alexander Roberts, *Early Christian Writers*, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/tertullian24.html>.

that what Perpetua had in mind was identical to our idea of purgatory. However, what is described above is at least a precursor to later beliefs or was an expression of early Christian beliefs that would lead to other beliefs with similar expressions later. Because of this, it is necessary to view it as our starting point.

As can be seen in the whole work, Perpetua follows the same pattern as other dream visions, she falls asleep one night, has a detailed vision of the underworld, and then awakes to share her story with the living faithful in an attempt to teach them about some doctrine. Before handling the moral dimensions of the story, we will first examine the physical details of it, what the place is like and what level of interaction there is between the living and the dead.

The place is first described as “gloomy” and filled with several other people. Dinocrates at least is sickly looking, matching the method of his death, being without a redeemed body at this point. It is unclear what the state of the others is, but they are at least also surrounded by gloom and located in the same “place of punishment” as Dinocrates. The punishment seems rather light compared to the punishments Christians would think up in later years, being only thirst and the lack of ability to slake it. Perpetua also makes no mention of temperatures hot or cold, nor does she make any mention of fire – all of which will become staples in the geography of purgatory over the next few centuries.

Turning now to the moral of the story, we find that Perpetua makes her moral rather clear in these lines:

I saw that that place which I had formerly observed to be in gloom was now bright; and Dinocrates, with a clean body well clad, was finding refreshment. And where there had been a wound, I saw a scar; and that pool which I had before seen, I saw now with its margin lowered even to the boy's navel. And one drew

water from the pool incessantly, and upon its brink was a goblet filled with water; and Dinocrates drew near and began to drink from it, and the goblet did not fail. And when he was satisfied, he went away from the water to play joyously, after the manner of children, and I awoke. Then I understood that he was translated from the place of punishment.<sup>6</sup>

Dinocrates is directly aided here and delivered from the proto-purgatory because of his sister's prayers. One might also argue that Perpetua is illustrating the possibility of salvation for the unbaptized, but there would be too much to prove before getting to that point to think that this was the text's primary goal. This same idea will be repeated in other stories about purgatory, but mostly in sermons or arguments instead of with artistic representations, Dante being one notable exception.

One interesting point to note is the contradiction Perpetua gives us concerning placement. In the beginning we see the place described as dark and gloomy, and then later we see that that same place is now bright and clear. However, in the last line, we are told that Dinocrates has been "translated from the place of punishment," suggesting that he is now located somewhere distinct from his first location. This same struggle between the placement of purgatory will be argued over for the next several centuries, and never fully solved. It is enough to note for now that there is a tension between purgatory being a place on its own and purgatory simply being in the person's subjective experience of the general post-mortem condition, whatever that may be.

*Bede (672/3-735)*<sup>7</sup>

Leaving Perpetua behind, we come now to our first substantial look at an idea of something like purgatory. Whereas Perpetua was detailed in her account of what happened, yet lacking in any

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<sup>6</sup> Tertullian, "The Passion of the Holy Martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas."

<sup>7</sup> Adapted in part from: Tucker Lane Douglass "The Search for Mere Purgatory," Honors thesis, (Ouachita Baptist University, 2020) 22-24.

formal theological framework in which to situate her ideas, Bede is writing as a theologian and historian of the Church. As such, he pulls from earlier ideas, particularly from St. Augustine, and uses them to embellish his story of Drythelm, which he uses as an argument against other Christian theories. It was from stories like this one that the idea of purgatory was spread across the Continent, though not only by this means.

Bede's adoption of several Augustinian ideas can be clearly seen in the *Vision of Drythelm* recorded in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. Here, our author recounts the vision of a monk who was said to have seen the afterlife. Drythelm is a holy man who dies one night. Upon his death, his soul is guided by a heavenly spirit to four different places for the dead. The first is a valley of extreme weather that contains Christians who committed grave sins (*scelera*). The second a pit filled with fire. The third a paradise distinct from heaven. And the last heaven itself. After he has been duly educated about what awaits all souls after death, he revives in his country cottage.<sup>8</sup> The influence of Cicero's *Scipio's Dream* is evident. They share several of the same features, and this piece marks the beginning of what all of the later pieces will hold in common. This is also further evidence that Macrobius, writing two hundred years after Perpetua, was influential in making that specific passage of Cicero important to a wider audience.

Before even getting to Bede's formal theological arguments for purgatory, in this story we see several older ideas getting formed into a consistent literary whole. Four destinations for the four types of souls exist, the good, mostly good, mostly bad, and just bad. Bede broadens heaven's doors from Augustine's work by allowing the top three groups into heaven instead of only two as the former did, but only after assigning punishment to the mostly bad group. Le Goff sees this as a wholly punitive measure; those souls in the valley are in a punishment without any

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1984) 113-114.



purgative effect.<sup>9</sup> Moreira, however, sees this harsh punishment through the lens of the son/slave relationship that the Christian has to God and, thus, sees this harsh corporeal punishment as having a purgative end after all.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Moreira sees Bede's model as "an orthodox variation on universalism" solely because he saw these severe corporeal punishments as a way an omnipotent father/master might teach an eternal lesson.<sup>11</sup>

Moreira also notes one important development in Bede's theory, stemming from Augustine, that pushed Origenism farther away: his removal of the fire's automatic function. In dividing the other world into four distinct areas, the valley with one type of fire, the pit with another, and the other two with no fire at all, Bede diverged from typical accounts of the purgatorial fire. First Corinthians 3 was a foundational passage to many apologists of purgatory, many of whom identified a probative and purgative aspect in the one flame after death. Bede, however, in accordance with Jerome and Augustine, did not use that passage or many of the other famous passages in formulating his doctrine of purgation.<sup>12</sup> Denying this, as well as asserting the role of intercession in lessening the pains of purgation, "removed from [the fire] the capacity to burn sin automatically as a kind of universal barrier through which all souls pass."<sup>13</sup> So here we see Bede asserting that the initial judgement of souls is done at the moment of death where they are assigned to one of these four destinations.

Lastly, Bede hints at something like the Alexandrian idea of the *schola animarum* when the heavenly spirit explains to Drythelm what he saw in the meadow:

[The souls in the meadow] are received of those who depart from the body practicing good works; but they are not in such a state of perfection that they deserve to be received immediately into the kingdom of heaven; nevertheless all

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<sup>9</sup> Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, 115

<sup>10</sup> Isabel Moreira, *Heaven's Purge* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010) 155.

<sup>11</sup> Moreira, *Heaven's Purge*, 165.

<sup>12</sup> Moreira, *Heaven's Purge*, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Moreira, *Heaven's Purge*, 164

of them at the Day of Judgement will enter into the presence of Christ and the joys of the heavenly kingdom.<sup>14</sup>

Here we see holy souls who are not being punished for their sins like those in the valley are, but are, nevertheless, growing in perfection until they are ready to enter heaven. I say that this must be something like the *schola animarum* along with Moreira simply because there is no purging of sins going on via corporal punishment, yet there seem to be moral growth happening. The simple explanation for this must be some kind of education, either formally or just from interacting with the other holy souls there. While it cannot be said that Bede appropriates this idea to the extent that Clement and Origen do, it is still present in a modified degree.

The differences between Perpetua and Bede are stark. Perpetua's gloomy place of punishment, while being spot on with our usual idea of purgatory, is conspicuous for wholly lacking fire and punishing spirits. Bede, however, gets us closer to home. He has fire, frost, demons, and weeping, all of the terrible things we associate with this place. Bede also takes a more sophisticated look at separating people out in the afterlife, thanks to his theological forerunners. The moral of the two stories is also different. Perpetua sought to educate people on the efficacy of prayers for the dead, while Bede seemed to be teaching us how the different categories of people would fare after death. The five hundred years between the writing of these two stories was rich in theological innovation; this makes it all the more remarkable for the continuities between the two stories, marking purgatory as a central Christian idea, even if hotly debated over the years.

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<sup>14</sup> Moreira, *Heaven's Purge*, 154

*Dante* (1265-1321)

The pinnacle of literary achievement in representing Purgatory, indeed maybe the whole of the Christian afterlife, is certainly found in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In many ways Dante is a perfecting of what Bede sketched in his *Vision*. The *Comedy* features three distinct geographical areas, hell being beneath the earth, purgatory a mountain on it opposite Jerusalem, and heaven partially on the physical planets and stars. In this section I will outline in the geographical aspects of Dante's purgatory as distinct from its predecessors, and how it carries on Bede's tradition and solidifies it as *the* model of purgatory.

Dante's geography is complicated to say the least. One can barely read the *Purgatorio* without the help of drawings of spheres and the placements of the zodiacal signs above. Be that as it may, it is nonetheless true that Dante is still on earth at this point, though on a strange piece of it. In the fourth canto Dante describes the view after having climbed a bit:

There we sat, facing eastward, to survey  
 the trail we had just climbed; for oftentimes  
 a backward look comforts one on the way.  
 I looked down first to the low-lying shore,  
 then upward to the sun – and stopped amazed,  
 for it was from the left its arrows bore. (IV. 52-57)<sup>15</sup>

It is clear here that Dante and Virgil are very much still on the planet; they are climbing mountains and looking out over the ocean. Like both Perpetua and Bede, this place is described in physical terms, but Dante's is by far the most realistic and, thus, most likely to actually be physical. This could be a result of what Le Goff says is the refinement or creation of the concept of space in the medieval mind. As I have said above, I am not sure that Le Goff is wholly correct, but his assessment seems to have some merit with Dante's far more vibrant use of space and location throughout his *Comedy*, not only the *Purgatorio*.

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<sup>15</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: Signet Classics, 2009) 32.

This refinement of space is not contrary to Bede's formalization of the doctrine, but rather embellishes it. Bede characterizes the punishments of purgatory in chaotic and amorphous images. He has a path dividing "burning flames" from "bitter snow driving in all directions." Souls were construed as "dusky flames" that "[rose] as though from a great pit and [fell] back into it again," like embers rising from a campfire and descending back into the flame.<sup>16</sup> This, from a spatial level, could not be more different from the rigid order of Dante's rings of hell, cornices of purgatory, and spheres of heaven.

There is, however, a complication in understanding Dante's place in this discourse. He is a poet at heart, as can be seen by his writing of one of the world's greatest works. While I am sure he only wished to present truth in his *Comedy*, questions ought to be asked about the nature of that truth. Almost every aspect of Dante's *Comedy* is allegorical, so while he does think he is presenting truth with his words, it is truth couched in symbols and hidden from plain sight. It shouldn't be said that he genuinely thought that any of the specific punishments of the *Inferno* or *Purgatorio* or the rewards of the *Paradiso* are what they actually are, but that they are approximations of what types of things will be received. This distances Dante's work from Bede's and Perpetua's. The latter authors seemed more intent on providing some specific doctrinal truth, while Dante aims for the heart of the matter. And yet, the matter gets even more complicated from the standpoint of an intellectual history because Dante's *Comedy* will become practically canonical in the ensuing years.

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<sup>16</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, trans. Leo Shirley-Price (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1993) 290.

*Newman* (1801-1890)

Newman's *Dream of Gerontius* is another rough match for our genre, but sufficiently related to be of use. Its primary importance, along with Bede's *Vision of Drythelm* above, is that it showcases the polemical aspect of the genre. Theological writers who use this medium are attempting to convey a specific message (or messages when talking about Dante). Newman uses all the important conventions of the genre and uses them in such a way as to debate with other authors writing in this same vein. Newman's particular influence in this work is Dante, endorsing and combatting ideas found in the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. While our primary focus in this project is to note the development in the discourse surrounding purgatory through this genre, Newman's comments on the afterlife in general are also important for exhibiting the strengths of this form as a whole. While our typical method has been to assess the geographic features of the models and then the theory supporting its other features, Newman's model is unique for its basic lack of geography. His work is comprised of a dialogue between a soul and its attending angel, with the songs of heavenly and infernal being interspersed throughout.

While Gerontius does actually die, his soul in the beginning doesn't realize this. "I went to sleep," he says, which suggests that Newman was casting this poem as a dream vision, even if it is not technically one since the soul does not awake on earth again, but in heaven. In that same verse-paragraph Gerontius said "I had a dream," as he hears the prayers of the people at his deathbed from an increasing distance. He draws a parallel to Dante two paragraphs later in debating over whether he is alive or not:

Am I alive or dead? I am not dead,  
 But in the body still; for I possess  
 A sort of confidence which clings to me,  
 That each particular organ holds its place  
 As heretofore, combining with the rest  
 Into one symmetry, that wraps me round,

And make me man (II. 25-31)<sup>17</sup>

Dante makes it clear that he is alive at every point in the *Comedy*, having the spirits note his shadows in contrast to their own lacking. Furthermore, Dante's spirits have ephemeral bodies just as Gerontius appears to himself to have. For Dante even confuses them for real:

One came forward to embrace me, and his face  
 shone with such joyous love that, seeing it,  
 I moved to greet him with a like embrace.  
 O solid-seeming shadows! Three times there  
 I clasped my hands behind him, and three times  
 I drew them to my breast through empty air. (II. 76-81)<sup>18</sup>

And two paragraphs later Gerontius describes his situation in Dantean terms, seeing himself as though he "were a sphere,/ and able to be accosted thus" (II. 59-60). However, this is merely *Gerontius'* idea of what is happening, before having met his angelic guide. The angel says nothing about the sphericallity of Gerontius, but requites his claim to being enfleshed:

Nor touch, nor taste, nor hearing hast thou now;  
 Thou livest in a world of sign and types,  
 The presentations of the most holy truths,  
 Living and strong, which now encompass thee. (IV. 138-141)<sup>19</sup>

Whatever Gerontius thought he knew was wrong. Keeping with the genre, and specifically the conventions introduced by Dante, Gerontius' angel corrects false beliefs instead of only introducing new correct ones. Newman continues his assault on aspects of Dante's theory, taking to task the presence of the divine in purgatory:

*Angel.* Though, till that Beatific Vision, thou art blind;  
 For e'en thy purgatory, which comes like fire,  
 Is fire without light.  
*Soul.* His will be done!  
 I am not worth e'er to see again  
 The face of day; far less His countenance,

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<sup>17</sup> John Henry Newman, "The Dream of Gerontius," Newman Reader, <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/verses/gerontius.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> John Henry Newman, "The Dream of Gerontius."

Who is the very sun. (IV. 174-179)<sup>20</sup>

Gerontius, again, thought he had some idea about the afterlife and the nature of purgatory – based off of Dante’s version. However, as the angel tells him, and Gerontius accepts, there is no light at all in purgatory. It is a lonely place, dark, and the tool of “Everlasting Love” that “doth burn ere it transform” (IV. 205-206). Newman’s choice of the image of the sun is deliberate here; recalling Dante’s allegorical use of the sun as God’s presence throughout the *Comedy*, it was always visible as Dante traveled through purgatory, giving him encouragement along the way.

Newman understands the genre possibly better than any of our other authors. He uses the historical presence of earlier narratives in his own to show where his theories match or stray from others. Since the rock-solid ideas about purgatory in the Catholic Church are very few and can equally accommodate Newman as Dante, Newman uses his poem as a chance to challenge ideas about the afterlife that had taken primacy in the five centuries since Dante wrote. The dream vision here, better than anywhere, can be clearly seen as a forum for discourse about theological matters. If we are looking for a moral in Newman’s work, besides the general refinements of Christian ideas, we could also pull from this an admonition to speculation. Newman himself thought much about religious things, converting from Anglicanism to Catholicism; such a conversion experience would not have been possible without a freedom of mind to search into religious matters without fear of retribution. Indeed, Newman is trying to tell us that no matter how sophisticated, nuanced, or even beautiful one’s ideas about the afterlife are, they’re wrong – or at least debatable.

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<sup>20</sup> John Henry Newman, “The Dream of Gerontius.”

*Lewis* (1898-1963)

C. S. Lewis is beloved by Christians of all different types across the English-speaking world, particularly so by American evangelicals. One might think it strange, then, that Lewis believed in purgatory and says so in a few places across his body of work. The chief piece we will be looking at here is his *Great Divorce*, but there are other passages in his *Letters to Malcolm* that offer greater insight into his beliefs. Following our typical method, I will analyze the theory via the geography of the dream and look at other completing touches to the theory.

After examining various accounts of purgatory, it becomes apparent that what the Christian believes about purgatory is symptomatic of their other deeply held beliefs, religious or secular. So, Lewis felt sure that this life was not all that a person was given to choose or reject goodness, and that is evident in his theory of purgatory. Lewis has all souls deposited in the same space at their death, the Grey Town. When the resident attendant spirit, in Lewis' case George MacDonald, is asked about the final judgement, he enlightens the sojourner about the nature of the geography:

If they leave the grey town behind it will not have been Hell. To any that leave it, it is Purgatory. And yet perhaps ye had better not call this country Heaven. *Not Deep Heaven*, ye understand... Ye can call it the Shadow of Life... And ye can call those sad streets in the town yonder the Valley of the Shadow of Death: but to those who remain there they will have been Hell even from the beginning.<sup>21</sup>

So, Lewis echoes the spatial blending of Perpetua. Purgatory is not really distinct from Hell but is only a matter of one's subjective experience. We don't see in Lewis the categorization of sinners and the blessed like we find in Dante, but we do see a four-part demarcation of space, if only softly. There is hell/purgatory, the Valley of the Shadow of Death, the Valley of the Shadow of Life, and deep heaven. Four spaces for four different conditions. These match

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<sup>21</sup> Lewis, C. S., *The Great Divorce*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2001) 68.



perfectly with the older categorization of Augustine and Bede, though in Lewis they are less strict. Lewis' spaces match the wholly wicked, the mostly wicked, the mostly good, and the wholly good.

Lewis, like Newman, understands the genre as a discourse, while others have used it as a hammer. In the preface to his book he beseeches the reader to keep an open mind about the text and not to read any of it as having any semblance of factuality beyond what the images represent:

I beg readers to remember this is fantasy. It has of course – or I intended it to have – a moral. But the transmortal conditions are solely an imaginative supposal: they are not even a guess or a speculation at what may actually await us. The last thing I wish is to arouse factual curiosity about the details of the after-world.<sup>22</sup>

Lewis uses a different sense of “speculation” here. He sees his work as giving us a rough estimate of what the central principles of Christianity might produce in terms of an afterlife. It seems fitting, then, that Lewis, along with Newman, takes a softer approach to their symbols. While Newman dumps geography out the window altogether, Lewis makes a similar move, but is not as extreme. Their reluctance to offer anything but negative answers to older theories or softer theories of their own seems to stem from this attitude towards the genre.

### **Directions for Future Research**

These five sources provide a wealth of knowledge on how purgatory has been crafted by speculative storytelling. However, there are many more stories out there that have been created over the past two thousand years. There are two primary limiting factors to my study that should spur further research on this topic for myself or others interested – the issue of translation and those lost pieces not yet found.

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<sup>22</sup> Lewis, C. S., *The Great Divorce*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2001) x.

As I mentioned in my methodology above, most of the texts written in this genre about purgatory were not written in English. Indeed, English did not even exist when much of the important texts about this subject were written. So, there is much work to be done in translating texts that might fall into the broad category of dream vision so that other historians may sift through them here. Along with this goes the task of discovering lost texts that might fall into this category, specifically in the first five to seven hundred years of Christianity, since these could give us a better idea of what types of proto-purgatories existed before it really came into its own in the Middle Ages.

Aside from these limiting factors, more studies like this should be done in the literature concerning purgatory, and how the dream visions can help us build models of how people understood the world around them in general. As I said in my introduction, this genre has largely been left to Medievalists who, while important, are not the majority of society. I have attempted to show in this paper that this genre is wider than its Medieval instantiations, and carry with it more than just archaic religious ideas.

## **Conclusion**

It is fitting that Lewis should be our last example of the genre, for he understands its literary features as well as its importance to the cultural life of Western Christianity. In many ways each of these dream visions are representations of the cultures that produced them. Perpetua's story showed us the concern for the pagan as well as Christian, and allowed us to see what the afterlife looked like before the formalization of Christian doctrine. Bede gave us a glimpse of what the afterlife looked like *with* the formalization of Christian doctrines. Dante perfected Bede's vision with the continent's improved idea of space and the influx of classical learning. Newman brought the ability to discount centuries old traditional beliefs while affirming the core of that

doctrine. And Lewis brought the universalist aspect of Christianity back after experiencing firsthand the obvious denial of the “Christian continent’s” moral superiority over other areas of the world with the First and Second World Wars.

Purgatory as contained in these dream visions, then, is not merely an abstract, unverifiable religious claim that has no bearing on the living, but is rather a distillation of what these people thought about the world in general. Each of these authors brought a different understanding of their environment, the human condition, and the place of humans in their environment. We may say with Cicero, “it frequently happens that our thoughts and conversations react upon us in dreams.” Indeed, they do. Indeed, they did. In understanding the dream visions of these writers, and the countless others that were neglected here, we get another view of the world, and, thus, enlarge our own.

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