

The Role of Medieval Visions in the Teaching of Dante's *Divine Comedy*

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Abstract—In the field of medieval literature, the *Divine Comedy* occupies a special role. Its reading and analysis is particularly challenging for students, especially international students, who are often completely lacking in the basic cultural reference points needed to understand this medieval poetic text, which represents Dante's opinion and the general medieval mentality in many ways: religious, political, literary, philosophical, artistic, etc. This article proposes to follow an innovative approach in introducing the work to Asian students by using a genre-based context examining visionary medieval literature, a collection of heterogeneous texts in which the main theme is a journey through the Christian afterworld. The article seeks to emphasize the advantages of this didactic approach by reintroducing Dante's work into a broader cultural and literary context and providing a series of elements through which students can analyze the text and its overall structure in depth.

Keywords—didactics of literature, *Divine Comedy*, genre-based approach, visions

INTRODUCTION

In a European literatures course the first period normally encountered by students is the medieval one, characterized often by an intentionally "obscure" language and socio-cultural elements that require a wide contextualization such as the Christian doctrine, the feudal structure, the communal society, the birth of national states, the political equilibrium between the papacy and the empire, the vision of the "other", the concepts of life, love, war, etc. On the one hand, despite its duration, over 1000 years, culturally speaking the Middle Ages is a quite homogeneous period, but on the other hand there are various conflicting elements that sometimes collide and communicate with each other: new national literatures and medieval Latin literature, Christianity and classical world, corporality and spirituality, secular and religious world, high literature and low literature, chivalric/courteous world and communal world, etc. One of the symbols of this series of elements that come and live together harmoniously is certainly the *Divine Comedy*, a literary work considered unique by virtue of an incredible heterogeneity of content, yet managed in such a way as to create a harmonious and unified work, the point of arrival for so much of the medieval literature and the culture it expresses. This greatness, however, brings a price: the *Divine Comedy* is an extremely complex work that can mislead any reader for both its vastness and its numerous reading keys (literal, didactic, allegorical, etc.) we must always keep in mind. This literary work has to be approached with the appropriate tools, tools

that allow the reader to contextualize each element and to understand its position both within the work and the cultural spider web made of references to other works, literary but not only, beliefs, rituals and mentality in that historical period, etc.

OBJECTIVES

The main purpose of this paper is to reflect on the creation of a didactic path based on a genre-based literary approach, in our case centered around visionary literature, relating to the reading and analysis of the *Divine Comedy*. We want to demonstrate how this approach to the didactics of the *Divine Comedy* is far more advantageous than the traditional historicist approach that has as its starting point Stilnovist literature and the previous works of Dante, because to really understand a literary work it is necessary put it in a wider cultural context. We also want to give literary dignity to visionary literature, which has been excluded from the "official" medieval literary canon for too long in terms of its content, which allows us a window to the Christian medieval vision of the afterworld, among other insights (into politics, philosophy, etc.).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Does a genre-based approach have advantages over the traditional historicist one? And if so, what are they?
2. Is it possible to apply this approach to the reading and analysis of the *Divine Comedy*? What benefits does the inclusion of the *Divine Comedy* bring into the visionary genre?
3. How can we arrange a didactic path starting from the aforementioned assumptions?

DIDACTIC APPROACHES TO THE *DIVINE COMEDY*

Dante's masterpiece, the *Divine Comedy* (1320), is a 100 *cantos*-long poem that describes the author's allegorical and educational travels through the three domains of the afterlife (Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven) and perfectly represents medieval society and culture almost in its entirety.

When we introduce the work to students, due to its width and complexity we must consider the question of how we should guide students to fully appreciate such a lengthy text in terms of both form and content, regardless of the amount of time available.

Normally, the preparatory lessons start from the figure of Dante as a young *Dolce Stil Novo* poet and eventually arrive at the maturity of his *Comedy*; sometimes we introduce the figure of the poet with the story of his years of exile, and then we mention his production of essays, such as the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, necessary to understand the linguistic importance of his masterpiece. Finally, we arrive to the summary description of the geography of *Comedy*, and we start diving into the “stylistic” reading and analyzing every single tercet from a wide selection of *cantos*.

Although this method certainly has the advantage that it slowly brings the teacher to his or her final goal, which is the comprehension of a text, on the other it tends to increasingly isolate the general work and render it an island of sorts in the midst of an apparently uninhabited literary sea, forcing the students to a guided reading based on an uncritical learning of the content. The historicist vision in isolation will turn out to be too theoretical for students and thus unrelated to the work they’re reading.

With such a monumental, complex and influential work, this “zoom in” approach (from general to specific) may not fully achieve the aim, even for the great variety and difference of styles and themes between the various *cantos*, because the text is an immense crossroads of various philosophical, literary and artistic paths that transcend the figure of Dante Alighieri as a genius. This is also due to the (erroneous) vision of Dante solely as an initiator, the father of many literary innovations; in actuality, his great skill was the task of gathering tensions, ideas and materials and condensing them into a perfectly constructed and organized *unicum*, a point of arrival or hinge of many themes concerning medieval and non-medieval culture and literature.

DEFINITION OF VISION

The experience of a living person in the afterworld begins very early in the Christian tradition (Ledda, 2007; D’Ancona, 2015) with the story of St. Paul of a man caught up in the third heaven in the *Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (II Cor. 12: 2-4).

Though quite vague, it is the first reference to this type of journey, and even in the final part of the Revelation, there are various references to the final judgment, the punishment for those who have acted iniquitously and the celestial Jerusalem. During the Middle Ages there began to spread both descriptions of journeys in the afterworld in texts considered prestigious, such as Saint Gregory’s *Dialogues* (late sixth century) or Beda’s *Ecclesiastical History* (ca. 731) and a multitude of single *visiones*, accounts of travels in the afterworld during an apparent state of sleep, illness or death. These texts cover a considerable amount of time considering that the very first editions of *Visio Pauli* date to the second century, and the sixteenth century is considered the age of permanent closure, but the majority of the works are gathered between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, as shown in the Table 1 (Vanni, 2005).

On a closer inspection of the concept of *katabasis*, however, the medieval Western world has its roots in the classical world: in addition to the contribution made by the VI chapter of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the concept has other

antecedents in the Greek world, with heroes like Ulysses, Hercules and Orpheus having traveled through Hades.

TABLE 1

N°	Vision	Period
1	<i>Visio Sancti Pauli</i>	V-VI Century
2	<i>Visio Sancti Fursei</i>	VII Century
3	<i>Visio Drythelmi</i>	VIII Century
4	<i>Visio Wettini</i>	IX Century
5	<i>Visio Baroncti</i>	IX-X Century
6	<i>Visio Anselii</i>	XI Century
7	<i>Visio Alberici</i>	XII Century
8	<i>Purgatorium Sancti Patricii</i>	XII Century
9	<i>Visio Tnugdali</i>	XII Century
10	<i>Visio Eynsham</i>	XII-XIII Century
11	<i>Visio Thurkilli</i>	XIII Century

The visionary theme gets inspiration from different strands that converge in the foremost exponent of the genre, the *Divine Comedy* (Barolini, 2006). However, if classical texts were recognized as the inspiration of Dante’s work, along with the aforementioned religious and philosophical texts, visions are in some sense excluded for their heterogeneity and their seemingly low literary value.

THE ABSENCE OF VISIONS IN THE DIDACTICS OF THE *DIVINE COMEDY*

When discussing the inspiration for the *Divine Comedy* in the classroom, we tend to first consider Virgil’s *Aeneid* and the earlier works of Dante, then the Aristotelian philosophical texts (such as the *Ethica Nichomachea*) and the medieval scholastic texts (by St. Gregory, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, etc.) and at last the medieval visions, often considered not to be direct inspirations of the work, as having little influence, or as not particularly relevant.

The reasons cited for this low interest are normally the following:

1. The visions are little known texts that are almost never included in anthologies or manuals of literature; i.e. they’re almost always excluded from “official” national literary canons, and it’s hard to find official translations or critical editions.
2. They are in most cases in Latin; therefore, they belong to the medieval Latin tradition, still less known and considered not very interesting because it’s outside the national European literary canons that focus on literature in the national language (French, Spanish, German, etc.).
3. They are extremely heterogeneous texts from a content point of view, and even though they share the same background story (a visit to the dreams of afterlife kingdoms), their single cataloging is complicated.
4. They cover an extremely wide period of time, about six to seven centuries.
5. They cover a relatively large geographical area, ranging from Ireland and England to Germany and Italy.
6. They are considered of little literary value from the formal point of view (they are stylistically quite rough).

7. They are considered of little value also from the point of view of content (they're normally quite repetitive and fairly meagre).
8. Many texts are anonymous or produced by writers, in most cases monks, who only produced that single text in their lives.
9. They often originate from inside abbeys and are therefore included in the field of religious literature.
10. Many texts have been transcribed, edited, translated, and repeatedly modified by different authors, so sometimes it is complicated to choose which version we have to take into account.

THE IMPORTANCE OF VISIONS

In reality, this “didactic” ostracism with regard to visions is fairly unjustified because these texts can be extremely useful to students in the process of understanding the medieval cultural universe in various fields for the following reasons:

1. They are almost all quite popular texts, so the various rewrites indicate a wide circulation and diffusion in various countries (for example, the *Purgatory of Saint Patrick*).
2. The previous works of Dante can explain only a small part of the idea behind the *Comedy*, and only the visions constitute tangible proof of afterworld medieval literature's vision of the afterlife, eternal punishments, afterworld geography, etc.
3. Through its heterogeneity, this genre allows us to see the evolution of the theme of the afterworld journey and the various concepts it can illustrate, i.e. the division of realms in the afterlife or the concept of Purgatory (Le Goff, 1986).
4. It allows us to see the concept of medieval Christian sin and punishment as it was seen by the people of the time, an extraordinary testimony of popular medieval religious views.
5. The visions allow us to understand Dante's greatness in comparison with these previous works: even if it is true that the *Comedy* cannot be compared directly with these works in terms of quality, we can see what Dante has added, removed or altered from the tradition of his age.
6. It establish the context of the *Comedy* within a well-defined genre, illuminating how it surpasses that genre and demonstrating that its greatness is not so much in its alleged originality but in its enrichment and harmonization on the grandest imaginable scale of basic medieval cultural material through the creation of something totally new, a sort of perfect synthesis (or *opera omnia*) of medieval culture.

THE HISTORICIST APPROACH AND THE GENRE-BASED APPROACH

When we speak in general of didactics, the essential points to consider are normally what to teach and how to teach it. In the case of teaching foreign literature to international university students, the first question can easily be answered: we teach the so-called classical “canon” of literature inherited, for example, from high school education, a journey

among the main authors and literary movements from the origins to the mid-twentieth century. More complicated are the questions of how the material should be presented to students, what they should do with that material, and what goals they should achieve.

Different approaches to this subject are differentiated by where the teacher focuses the center of attention (writer, text, reader, literary genre, theme, etc.). Several approaches also naturally involve questioning the role of the professor, who will assume different positions depending on the type of teaching proposed: defender of traditional encyclopedic knowledge in the case of a more focused approach to the historical context and the author; technical specialist of metrics, stylistics, narratology, etc. in the case of a text-oriented approach; or mediator and facilitator in the case of a more reader-focused approach.

Until now the dominant approach in the field of European medieval literature has been the historicist one, a vision of literature as a “history of literature” more based on historical and cultural context than on the literary work itself, seen as a sort of “demonstration” of the theoretical part. However, the introduction of Dante's work according to this vision of literature presents a series of problems for international students:

1. The *Divine Comedy* is only seen inside the literary context of its time and its belonging to a single writer, but without ever clarifying its relationships with these two elements. Is there a concomitance of content or style between *Dolce Stil Novo* poems and the *Divine Comedy*?
2. With this approach, the work appears to be a sort of island, disconnected from other previous medieval experiences. Is Dante the first writer to talk about afterworld travel after Virgil's *Aeneid*? Can we find other precursors or is it purely a fruitful creation of the mind of a genius?
3. It gives a small introduction to the ultramundane journey the international students will have to follow and the rules that animate it. What destiny awaits the various souls? How do they consider their condition? What opinion did Dante have about the trip?
4. There is a total lack of confrontation with the culture and the society of the time. We always tell students that the *Divine Comedy* is one of the masterpiece of the Middle Ages, but by what elements should they understand it? How does it embody medieval values?
5. Students struggle to understand the greatness of the work. What is so special about it? Its language, structure, size, originality or uniqueness?

The approach of subdividing literary genres, in this case the “visionary” one, theoretically presents the following advantages (Stagi Scarpa, 2005):

1. It establishes a link with other texts, placing the text within a literary tradition with which it can be compared.
2. The characteristics and the specificities of the genre are well defined.
3. Students are provided with analytical tools and can establish analytical criteria. This point is essential for international students, who may rely on rough reading or intuitions acquired from their native cultures.
4. We can see the evolution of a genre over the centuries thereby provide students with the context and

understanding of the historical, social and cultural factors that influenced it.

5. It highlights that a literary work is the fusion of a series of “internal” elements (the creativity of the single artist) and “external” (authors and previous trends, characteristics of a given genre, history, society, etc.).

The question we should now ask ourselves is whether the teaching of the *Divine Comedy* be conducted using such an approach, and if so, how and why it would be.

In this way, by analyzing Dante’s masterpiece as a visionary text, we insert the literary work in an intertextual and comparative approach, and we focus only on the process of reading, analysis and comparison that should be the basis of teaching literature. Only through a continuous dialogue with various texts and their internal and external components can we appreciate and value every single reading. Clearly there will be a (chrono)logical order to guide the student, but only by creating a vast web of references towards the “other(s)” can we contextualize a work, giving it the right position and fair value through guiding criteria that can give a real meaning to the reading act. Only in this way can we overcome the problem of the text seeming disconnected from the “world”, a problem that unfortunately leads to learning for realities that are “meaningless” as they are not connected to anything, which prevents the student from seeing the text in its true complexity and appreciating the evolution of the literary history of a country as a whole.

PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATIONS

We can see how, within our approach to genres, the visions can be used in different ways, among which the simplest is searching for frequent elements within the various works and analyzing their evolution. For the list of works listed in Table 1, we can extract the following topics for analysis: the characteristics of the protagonists, their sins, the presence of a guide, the presence of guardian monsters, the structure of the ultramundane geography, the relationship with other souls, and the obligation to denounce (or rather to bear witness to) the living. Starting from these ideas, it is possible to create paths where Dante’s work is either the starting point or the point of arrival; we can propose a path of selected readings from which students will have to extract the common themes and analyze any differences and similarities. These elements could also be widened and linked to previous general expertise about culture at the time, examining how individuals are considered or interpreted.

Starting from an essay of Barolini on the visionary topic (2006), as an example of a didactic unit, we now examine the last cultural element mentioned above, namely the obligation of *denuntiatio* (denunciation):

- With students, we can start reading the II *canto* of *Hell* and the XXXIII of *Purgatory*, in both of which cases the guides (first Virgil and then Beatrice) refer to a mission: seeing, remembering and illustrating the journey in the human world to warn sinners.
- We can connect these reading fragments to other visionary texts perhaps previously introduced, such as *Wetti’s Vision*, *Thurkill’s Vision* and the *Apocalypse of Paul*, in all three of which cases, albeit in slightly different ways, an angel

commands the protagonist to bear witness to the living what he has seen in the kingdoms of the afterworld to save as many souls as possible.

- Then we can ask students to work on differences and similarities between these texts and that of the *Divine Comedy* and to think about why this element is so present in the genre and in the medieval world in general. The reprimand is softer in Dante’s text and in St. Paul’s, while it is more aggressive for Wetti (Ganz, 2000) and Thurkill, but in all four cases the verb “to witness”, or a synonym, appears.
- Students can then reflect on why a medieval author would want to write a visionary text, who the ideal recipient is, why it is sometimes impossible to explain everything that has been seen, and the need to express through metaphors, allegories, etc.
- We can expand the argument by referring to the didactic function of art in the Middle Ages (widening the theme in art history) or to prophecy in religious literature (e.g. Gioacchino da Fiore, quoted by Dante in *Paradiso*).
- Finally, we can propose as a home exercise or final exam the reading and analysis of other fragments or a relatively short complete vision (e.g. the vision of Alberico or Tundalo) where this theme develops in a similar way.

This kind of activity strengthens literary competence (Sanz Pastor, 2006) composed of, in addition to cultural knowledge, an assortment of competences across various fields (Del Col, 2005):

- Knowledge: learning the operative principles of both general and literary texts; having theoretical and cultural reference points
- Skills: the ability to analyze, link, classify, and reformulate
- The ability to appreciate: taking pleasure from reading, developing critical skills, being able to identify oneself in the recipient of a given text
- The ability to learn: grasping the general meaning of the text, making hypotheses, transferring what we’ve learned to new contexts

In fact, through the genre-based approach, the student gains the necessary knowledge both in deductive (applying the learnt elements when reading the text) and inductive (extracting ideas through reading, analyzing and comparing) ways, acquires the reading keys needed to interpret the literary text through a continuous work of comparison by inserting it into its historical-literary context. The full comprehension of the text leads to the pleasure of reading and the discussion of some of the themes within this genre also allows one to better understand the expectations and evolution of the recipients because it starts with the mentality/culture of the age.

FINAL RESULTS

The genre-based approach provides a clearer view of the medieval culture in which the *Divine Comedy* was written because we connect it to texts that are useful to better understand the characteristics and evolution of the cultural themes dealt with in the work.

Considering the *Divine Comedy* as a work of visionary literature, for too long ill-treated, puts the work back in the proper cultural context, rendering it the point of arrival of this genre.

Through a didactic path that is centered on this element, we aim to focus attention on the reading process, and the students, through a comparative and intertextual vision of literature, will achieve independent reading and can use the same keys to interpret other similar texts

LIMITATIONS

On the subject of the relationship between the visions and the *Divine Comedy* there remains the eternal dilemma of which visions Dante knew and what his opinion of them was. It is likely that these questions will remain unanswered, but the lack of this data does not make the comparisons worthless because the main data is given by the works as a whole, and the direct comparison with a single vision is almost misleading and somewhat sterile, especially for the quantitative and qualitative difference: we are not interested in knowing what Dante has “copied” and from who, and because it is a meaningless question given the immense variety and complexity of his work, but in what literary-cultural climate he built his work and how his predecessors had faced up to the same “genre”.

The other criticism that is often addressed to the genre-based approach is the risk of general flattening due to a relative reduction in the importance of the historical context, i.e. by focusing more on the genre than on the historical events it is likely to create a cauldron of texts endowed with similar elements but little differentiable on the timeline. While it is true that there is a risk for genres covering a large range of time and geographic areas (like the novel or the epic poem), in the case of visions the risk is easily overlooked by their perfect inclusion in a single historical era, The Middle Ages, which despite its lasting over 1000 years, presents a certain homogeneity of mentality and themes, and the visions have a geographical concentration, almost always in the same areas (Irish-British, German or Italian), with a high

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percentage of texts produced in the same “social” environment, the monastic context (Ciccarese, 1987).

The last accusation is the risk of an excessive technicality while seeking common and discordant elements within multiple works. A literary work cannot be considered a simple sum of elements, as mentioned earlier, in fact in the case of the comparison between the *Comedy* and earlier visions we are not looking for a simple comparison of different elements but rather want students to find and analyze a set of elements to reflect on them and obtain tools they can use to achieve independent reading of various works of this genre, especially the *Divine Comedy*, our true point of arrival and final target.

CONCLUSIONS

The *Divine Comedy* didactic based on a vision-centered approach presents various advantages for the student, especially as it allows him or her to analyze the main themes of Dante's work, which becomes the point of arrival of all previous literature and not the isolated result of a lonely genius. This reveals how Dante's greatness resides not so much in his extraordinary creative capacity, but above all in his ability to condense and mix different sources by inserting them into a harmonious and credible structure. This breakdown of the work, alongside more traditional approaches (such as historicist and stylistic), will surely provide a more conscious reading and analysis to avoid the effects of fragmentation and misunderstanding during the reading and analysis of a work with such historical and cultural breadth and depth. This aid is even more valuable when the work is offered to students from non-Western cultures, who may lack any point of reference regarding the socio-religious structure of medieval Europe. This paper is just an example of the many possible applications for this kind of approach to the *Divine Comedy*, and it is also possible to combine various genres in the reading of fragments/*cantos*: visionary literature, didactic literature, allegorical literature, travel literature, etc.