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Alexandra Paradzick
Loyola Marymount University

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Visionary Account of Purgatory

By Alexandra Paradzick

Abstract: This paper is a recreation of a visionary journey that was popular around the 14th century, with the protagonist specifically travelling to the realm of Purgatory. The story has the same tropes as other stories in their genre. Specifically, the protagonist is not fully dead when they enter the realm, they are explained the “rules” of this realm by an angelic guide, they witness others suffering before suffering themselves, and are then sent back to the physical world affected by their journey. The story itself is a tool to show how the living and the dead were linked, with prayers helping those suffering in the realm of Purgatory; specifically making it easier and faster for them to move from the temporary realm of Purgatory to the permanent realm of Heaven. As Purgatory is a very tricky realm to find a visual reference for, aside from Dante’s accepted mountain, this version of the middle realm is of my own making. While incorporating ideas found throughout past accounts, such as the idea of the level of suffering dependent on the level of sin and the fact that Heaven and Hell have an intense impact on the senses, a majority of this presentation of the landscape is original. The story clocks in at around five pages, focusing more on the journey through the realm and the explanations about how the afterlife works rather than the life the protagonist is living before the near-death state. Unlike characters who go to Hell, Purgatory is not so much about changing your ways as it is realizing your duty to your fellow man. Visits to Hell are about learning to be a better person, but visits to Purgatory are about learning how to help everyone else. I have demonstrated this fact by not having the protagonist decide to be a better person when they return for their journey, but have them focus on the fact that as soon as they get well, they decide that they will begin praying. Yes, they suffer at some point doing the story, but the general idea of these sorts of stories is that if you pray for the people suffering in Purgatory then once you die people will pray for you as well; similar to the idea of karma. The angelic guide takes time to explain this to the protagonist, and also the reader, and presents a visual representation of living prayers helping the dead in the form of colorful bubbles in an almost completely gray landscape. By using said visual representation the hope is to further drive home the connection between the living and the dead, something that was incredibly important to those that were living in such a highly religious time. Overall, this work focuses not only on the horror that occurs in the middle realm, but the general sense of hope that was associated with it. After all, Purgatory was specifically known as a temporary place, and the only way to go was upwards toward Heaven; it is a place of penance, not torture.

Keywords: Purgatory, Visionary Journey

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I could not tell you how it came over me; I can only say that at one moment I was walking, as corporeal as you, and the next I had collapsed. It seemed I had become something that was no longer physical, as if my body was made from air itself, the world around me very white and foggy. Light was coming from behind me, a warm golden color that stayed persistent at my back, and so I turned to see what was trying to welcome me to this strange place.

What stood before me I would describe as a creature before saying they were human. Though man-like in shape, with the appropriate number of limbs, but with an otherworldly beauty that was neither feminine nor masculine. Wrapped in white and with eyes not only on their face but lining their cheeks and arms all the way to the palms of their hands. Protruding from the back were shifting shapes of light and shadow each, which looked to be of feathers, though I could not look at them long. Looking at them head on made it feel as if a ring of pain had formed its way across my brow, made spots of colors dance before my eyes.

There is a reason that in scripture angels always say, “Be not afraid.”

It had a mouth, this angel, though it did not use it. Instead, their voice rang clear as a bell in my mind, easing the ache that came from staring at them. *You are here to learn*, they said to me, as I looked at this land of nothingness.

“Learn of what?” I questioned them, with fear and curiosity. At the time I was scared that such a divine being would not appreciate questions, would take it as me questioning God, but they seemed prepared to answer. Their arms, shining so bright I was blinded for a moment, opened to encompass all around us.

“Am I dead?”

Just barely, but not completely. It was then I felt the faint echo of a heart beating within my chest, like the quiet tap of rain on stone, and tried to touch the pulse. My own hand passed through my body, a twinge of pain worming its way up the column of my spine. I did not ask if by the end of this lesson I would be completely dead. It seemed like a dangerous question to ask.

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“Where are we?” I said instead and watched as the angel made the fog clinging to the ground disappear with a flick of the wrist. I could see where we were now, and it frightened me. We were standing in a forest, some trees blackened with burns and others leaking sap as they rotted from the inside out. The ground was not so much dirt as it was a brown sludge, a thing that bubbled and popped more like liquid. Bodies, naked and achingly thin, were submerged; slowly they tried to claw their way out, mouths tinged blue from cold, the mud clouding their eyes and sitting under their tongues. Some of them winced, as if in pain, while others steadily worked themselves free; they crawled away from the light of my escort as if it would burn them. A wind from the south carried the smell of ash and rot, and when I turned towards it, I only saw a bleeding red light on the horizon.

Purgatory, said the voice in my head. The middle ground, I had been taught, between Heaven and Hell. This place looked much more hellish than I had imagined, if the souls around me were any hint as to what all this realm was like. The only sounds were the sucking noises of skin separating from mud, and the whimpers of those that could not force themselves to get up. To me, at that moment, I thought I was being deceived. Surely, this was Hell.

It isn't, said the angel, for they had read my thoughts as if I had turned to them and spoken out loud. They raised one gleaming hand and pointed to that red horizon. *Hell is that way. I understand the confusion.*

“Did these people...come from Hell?” I asked, watching as a man in front of me sunk deeper. He did not bother to move, and the mud gained him by another inch.

Can angels laugh? The humming noise that touched my mind seemed like a laugh.

No. These poor lambs are on their way to Paradise. They must earn it, perhaps more than most. The angel pointed north, farther into the forest. *Come. There is more for you to see.*

I could not tell you how long we walked, though I noted that my feet did not touch the ground. I was levitating a few inches above it, moving as swiftly as the angel through the woods. Slowly the trees around us changed, as well as the souls that moved along with us.

Instead of being burned or rotting they were green, saplings spreading upwards towards a slate gray sky. The mud was not as soupy as it once was, now appearing to have the consistency of wet clay. The souls

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were still naked, no longer submerged or crawling on all fours, but walking with the mud coming up to their shins. They moved much more vigorously than those behind us, trudging at a steady pace, and when we passed, they leaned closer to the divine light of the angel like it was a warm fire. Some lifted their hands in greeting, and some paused in their walking to curl around their middles with pain written across their faces. Some fell to their knees. Some breathed heavily as blood dripped from their noses or mouths; I watched in pity as cuts opened themselves upon the back of a man for several minutes before closing, leaving his skin as smooth as marble. “Why do they suffer?” I asked when it appeared as if the angel was also watching the cut man heal.

They are not damned enough to suffer in Hell, not pure enough to rest in Heaven. Here they walk, cleansing themselves through pain, until the gates open to them.

“That’s horrible,” I said, because it was even if their pain ended, and the blood that dripped onto the ground was soaked up into the mud like wine.

It is what they deserve. Besides, you can always help them. With this the angel placed a hand on my shoulder, and my vision became much sharper. I could see the blackness in the core of the souls, slowly edging away; in the air were small bubbles of all colors. They filled the sky, like strange stars, and they settled on the souls and popped, the colors fighting against the blackness and acting like some sort of balm. The angel removed their hand, and I once again only saw the grayness and souls in mud. *Prayers,* the angel answered, though I had not voiced the question, *from those still living. It helps them, it destroys the sins.*

I felt coldness on my legs up to my shins, a biting pain that seeped into my bones, made my toes feel like they were going to snap off. I looked down and found myself in the mud. “Why?” I asked, not looking at the angel.

So that you know what it is like, was all they said. The angel did not outpace me, they stayed with me as I dragged myself along. For strange five-minute intervals I felt a sharp pain at my wrist, and when I looked, there were cuts opening on my arms of their own accord. After these minutes had passed the blood would run into the mud or soak back into my skin, and the cuts would close, and I would feel only the cold at my feet. I did not speak to the angel, but found myself leaning closer and closer, for the divine light was so warm and safe compared to the dampness of the mud.

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The trees turned from saplings to full grown giants, green and smelling of nature. The dirt turned hard packed, and the angel released me from the mud, so I was once again floating a few inches off the ground. Pine needles littered the earth, and the souls here only had minor inconvenience with their walking. Maybe their heels would drag, or toes sink, but they simply marched on and on with no hardships. These souls turned to the angel and waved and smiled, too focused on the grand golden light of the horizon to worry about the divine being passing them.

Like how in the south the wind had carried the scent of Hell, this carried with it the smell of Heaven. The wind was warm and smelled of freshly bloomed flowers, and there was sunlight that was slicing the cloudy sky. If I listened hard, I could hear the faint notes of music, tinny and small as if coming from deep inside a cave. We came to the edge of the woods, the souls walking past, some running while laughter sprung from their lips. In the distance was something shining high in the sky, as if on top of a mountain, the clouds a pristine white instead of gray.

I knew it was beautiful, and I knew then I was looking upon the kingdom of Heaven.

“Will we go there?” I asked, in hope, for who does not want to see the gates of paradise? The angel shook their head, those shadow and light wings twitching behind them, their many eyes locked onto me. *This is where your journey ends*, they said, and touched me on the forehead. That faint pulse that had been fluttering beneath my ribs grew stronger and stronger. Rather than feeling like some imaginary thing, it became a roar in my ears, and I watched the angel disappear in front of me; they smeared into color as if being washed away by water.

When I awoke, I was told I had been found at the side of the road, sitting in a weak state, asleep for three days. It felt as if I had only spent hours with the angel, and yet time had passed much faster. I ate and drank, regaining strength to my material body, and so sat to write this account.

After, if I am to believe this vision to have any weight, I think I shall pray.

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