

Inner Space and Outer Regions in Medieval Meditative and Visionary Literature

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Abstract

This essay investigates the role space demarcation played in meditative and visionary practices of the Middle Ages. I suggest that a pattern of planer centricity evolved that allowed the mind to access a vertical axis of contemplation. Moving to the center of a geographic ring allowed the visionary to cultivate a theo-expectant mood that facilitated his or her spiritual experience. I use St. Francis's experience at Mount La Verna and Dante's descriptions of his beatific visions to illustrate this pattern.

Keywords

Assisi, Dante, *"The Little Flowers of St. Francis"*, templum, inner sanctum, *Paradiso*, visionary, meditation



Before discussing my work proper, I want quickly to discuss its boundaries. This paper is not a summary of all the various types of medieval visions. Nor is it about the modern neurological explanations that have been offered to explain these events. All of this is beyond my scope. Rather, I want to develop a simple description of how some visions in the Middle Ages may have been patterned for some mystics—namely St. Francis of Assisi—and how some poets—namely, Dante—may have used the pattern.

In a thoroughly informative article about medieval visions, Barbara Newman talks of spontaneous visions, which were a surprise to the visionary (like the vision given to Saul [St. Paul] on route to Damascus¹) and of cultivated ones, which, as Newman says, were “the fruits of a complex spiritual discipline [. . .] involving

¹ Acts 9:3-7. Even though he is certainly not from the Middle Ages, I mention St. Paul here and elsewhere because of his influence upon the medieval vision, influence stemming from the sacred text.

disciplines of memory, perception, reading, and attention."² It is to these cultivated visions that I want to direct our attention. In particular I want to examine visions which were connected to, and perhaps generated by, a certain space—the inner sanctum.

As far as origins go, I believe that for medieval Western culture the concept of the sacred inner sanctum derived most strongly from the Mosaic Tabernacle's Holy of Holies, for the object of the cultivated medieval vision was always some form of the holy family of God (i.e., Christ or Mary) or of God himself, the same God whom Moses met in the Tabernacle. This Tabernacle's Holy of Holies was bounded with curtains entwined with gold and was more or less central within the Tabernacle, which in turn was exactly central to the layout of the wandering Israelite camp. Furthermore, all around the Tabernacle was a space of cleared land where none could dwell.³ Thus the Holy of Holies was a central, cleared, privileged place where one could directly communicate with the divine.

And yet the basic idea of such place of encounter is, I suppose, as old as humanity. Our myths of antiquity are full of sacred spaces where one could meet the numinous: rivers, mountains, caves, woods. Moreover, the ancients often cleared plots of earth and outlined them with boundary stones to honor the presence of some god who was believed to occupy or visit that space. Often this delineation was carried out by an auger, whose job it was to examine the heavens from this space. This bounded area was one of the original meanings of the word *templum*. According to Joan Brahnham's "Sacred Space under Erasure in Ancient Synagogues and Early Churches,"⁴ far later and more sophisticated versions of these boundary lines include much of the chancel work found in many Middle Eastern synagogues and Western-world cathedrals.

Furthermore, Paul Piehler in his book *The Visionary Landscape: A Study in*

² Newman 3.

³ "The LORD said to Moses and Aaron: 'The Israelites are to camp around the Tent of Meeting some distance away from it [. . .]' (Numbers 2:1-2). Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the New International Version.

⁴ Brahnham, *passim*.

Medieval Literature points out that “[w]e find the gods and goddesses first located in sacred groves (Lat. *templum*), and then in time usually ‘civilized’ into inhabiting sacred houses (also *templum*) in the cities.”⁵ Two things to note about this are, first, that our word *temple*, which we associate with a closed space, is etymologically associated with an outdoor space, and, second, that many of these sacred spaces turned into enclosed sanctums (i.e., the *templum* as building)⁶. These enclosed spaces soon became foci for other buildings, and by the time of the Middle Ages, the church (read, *templum*) was usually the center of the town. This lends support to the idea that for the human collective mind, a genuine bounded sanctum is always somehow, whether consciously or subconsciously, laden with centrality.

I take this short history of the word *templum* to suggest that the garden, a relatively clear and enclosed space, can also serve as sacred sanctum. J. A. MacCulloch points in his work in the Edinburgh edition of the *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics* that the primitive grove was often viewed as a dark and mysterious holy place, one into which the priests feared to go⁷. Perhaps as man grew more familiar with the divine, the grove became a more familiar place, being cultivated into a sort of garden. Again, perhaps. More persuasively, the Pentateuch claims that before the Mosaic Holy of Holies, Adam (a name which simply means *human being*⁸) met with God in the Garden of Eden. Moreover, medieval lore always placed this Earthly Paradise in a garden in the center of the world.

At this point I wish to pause in order to draw out the abstract of the inner sanctum. This space can be seen as the bull’s eye of a horizontally prone target. The eye is the central clearing surrounded by expanding areas of outer spaces. On the fringes is materiality. This is a tool-based atmosphere. In these spaces one is interested in doing and making, getting and spending. To accomplish these

⁵ Piehler 71.

⁶ Sandra Scham believes that the enclosure came about not only to protect the sacred objects of the sacred place but also to help channel worship into that space. See Scham, *passim*.

⁷ MacCulloch 236-46.

⁸ See entry 120 on page 8 of the Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary in Strong.

purposes, one views the objects of these spaces as tools.

On the other hand, in the inner sanctum—the center of this target—this tool-based attitude is exchanged for an attitude that completely privileges presence. One does not build, accumulate, or manipulate in the inner sanctum. Here the mind is passive and clear in order to receive glimpses of another system of being. Thus, in moving from the outside into the inner sanctum, one moves from a superficial attitude of *I-It* to a more profound attitude of *I-Thou*. This movement can be seen as a sort of pilgrimage, as Scham points out.⁹ and we shall see this pilgrimage undertaken by both St. Francis and Dante.

I believe that this central space, this inner sanctum, is presence-based because for the most part it is depicted in literature as being theo-expectant. A theo-expectant space has a history of divine presence or divine encounter. A well-known archetypal theo-expectant space is Jacob's Bethel, or "House of God."¹⁰ Here the Hebrew patriarch had his famous vision of the ladder to heaven, here he sets up an altar to the God of the vision, and to this place he returned years later, to meet with God again.¹¹

All in all, then, we see that the theo-expectant inner sanctum can be either enclosed or exposed, that it usually was outlined with some sort of boundary, and that it must always be central. Yet although these conditions are necessary, they are not sufficient. For once in the physical inner sanctum the visionary must turn the mind itself into a sort of mental inner sanctum, with its tool-based attitude of materiality pushed to the fringes and a presence-based attitude brought into the

⁹ Scham, *passim*. For a more complex view of this pilgrimage similarity, see "The Vision As a Liminal Phenomenon" in Chapter 2 of Kathryn L. Lynch's book *The High Medieval Dream Vision: Poetry, Philosophy, and Literary Form* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988).

¹⁰ "Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. 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. [. . .] When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, 'Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.' He was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven'" (Genesis 28:10-13a, 16-17).

¹¹ See Genesis 35. The fact that many medieval mystical and meditative writings use the image of Jacob's ladder corroborates my labeling this episode of the Pentateuch as an archetype for the Middle Ages.

cognitive center. This is essentially the act of meditation.¹² Its goal is not a mental space empty of objects (this would give us an unconscious mind) but a mind singularly focuses on recognizing in its objects the hidden traces of divine presence. St. Bonaventure in his *Journey of the Mind to God* points to this focused movement inward when he says, in the first five of his six steps of meditation:

Recall these [. . .] stages of human progress toward the quiet of contemplation. In the first, the soul [is] led to God by going out to external things to admire in them the work of God's creative power. Then, looking at creation, the soul [beholds] God's footprints upon the world's surface: the material world [becomes] a mirror in which it [beholds] its God. Next, turning its attention inward to itself, the soul [begins] to reach God from a consideration of itself as God's created image, and then a further step [is] made when it [begins] to behold God in the mirror of its renovated being.¹³

This was no easy task. It often brought to light how much the visionary was actually attached to the tool-based outer fringes. For in medieval Christian parlance, this outer fringe is the place at which the objects of creation are elevated above the person of the creator, and it is the fallen mind's duty to get back to this center of presence where the person of God is elevated above the tools God created. As St. Bonaventure put it,

In his primitive constitution man was created by God capable of untroubled contemplation, and for that reason was placed by God in a 'garden of delights.' But, turning his back on the true light in order to pursue the mutable good, he found himself, through his own fault, diminished and removed from his pristine stature [. . .]. As a result man, blinded and bend down, sits in darkness and sees not the light of heaven [. . .].¹⁴

Contrition of some sort was important during this process, for the emotion gave credence to the rational act of the mind to return to the true center. Ramon Lull, a

¹² cf. Newman's cultivated vision.

¹³ Bonaventure in Petry 138-39.

¹⁴ Bonaventure in Petry 134-35.

Spanish contemporary of and sympathizer with Bonaventure, gives us in his romance *Blanquerna* this model picture of a repenting visionary:

When Blanquerna had considered for a great space of time the things set down above, he felt his memory, understanding, and will to be greatly uplifted in contemplation. Yet even so his heart gave no tears to his eyes that they might be bathed in weeping, and therefore did Blanquerna prepare to uplift the powers of his soul still higher than they might multiply devotion the more in his heart, and fill his eyes with weeping and with tears; for high contemplation goes ill save with weeping. Wherefore Blanquerna caused his memory to descend, and to think upon the vileness and the misery of this world, and the sins that are therein, and the great wickedness committed by our father Adam against his Creator [. . .].¹⁵

When this meditative ideal was fully realized within the loaded atmosphere of a theo-expectant physical and mental inner sanctum, a cognitive nexus of divergent spaces often occurred. For here in the center of consciousness the visionary negated the old outer space with its physical objects of tool and received a new outer space, one which brought objects back into play, but objects (as St. Bonaventure points out) primarily of presence. This new outer space—a vision space, if you will—ran along a cosmic axis¹⁶ which was perpendicular to the absolute center of the inner sanctum. Thus, this vision space had the directions up and down, whereas the plane of the inner sanctum did not. This is seen in St. Bonaventure's description of the sixth and last stage of contemplation:

[W]hen the soul shall have reached the sixth step and begun to contemplate the First and Highest Principle of all [. . .] then it shall have contact with spiritual things, so sublime that any comparison with created things becomes impossible [. . .]. Then it will be swept up, not only beyond the wonders

¹⁵ Lull in Petry 167.

¹⁶ Mircea Eliade, throughout her book *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (trans. Willard R. Trask, [San Diego: Harvest, 1987]) makes note of this cosmic axis, as does Jonathan Z. Smith in his first chapter of *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987). My work differs from both in that they focus mainly on the mythological origins or creation of the axis whereas I focus on the actual vision space (and the objects therein) created by the axis.

of all creation, but out of its very self and above it.¹⁷

And it is seen in the culmination of Blanquerna's vision: "Then, after Blanquerna had fixed the powers of his mind [. . .], his mind soared higher."¹⁸

Furthermore, this axis fits with much of Western vision experience, which often allowed the visionary not only the upward direction but also the downward one, when a visit to Hell was necessary for some reason or another. Either the visionary shifted position or the objects constituting the vision were brought to the visionary from above or below. After all, on Jacob's ladder the angels went up and down.

This new type of vertical outer space is not a physical space per se. However, just as the physical inner sanctum led by extension into a development of a mental inner sanctum, just so the cosmic axis of the vision space can find its analog in a cosmic axis of physical space. For when the inward movement toward a physical inner sanctum combines with the upward thrust of a physical cosmic axis, we get a holy mountain. And the mountain as a holy place is certainly borne out in literature: the traditional mountain of the Garden of Eden, Mt. Ararat, Mt. Sinai, Mt. Hebron, Mt. Olivet, the mount of the transfiguration, Mt. Calvary, Mt. Zion, the mount of Ascension, Mt. Moriah, Mt. Sri Pada, Mt. Cassino, Mt. La Verna The names go on. If we were to include all the 'high places' of Canaanite, Hittite, Philistine, and Palestinian worship, to include all the mountain-like structures of the middle and far East, to include the pyramidal structures of Central and South America, and to include the thousands of hill and mountain summits which served as bases for Western European medieval monasteries en masse, we would have a very long list, to be sure.

But how does all this relate to St. Francis of Assisi and to Dante? In the fall of 1224, roughly two years before his death, St. Francis and a few companions traveled to the top of Mt. La Verna in order to spend 40 days in preparation for Michaelmas. This mountain is situated in the center of the Tuscan Appenines. At

¹⁷ Bonaventure in Petry 138-39.

¹⁸ Lull in Petry 169.

the peak of the mountain, in a clearing of the bush and brush, is a large, sheer, inaccessible outcropping of rock rising to the sky. It is here, at the side of this central, un-accessible obtrusion, where St. Francis found his inner sanctum. He separated himself from his companions, using a nearby chasm which transected the path as a boundary line (allowing only one Brother Leo to daily cross the small bridge to bring him food¹⁹) and dedicated himself to meditation and contrition, that is to say, to creating a proper mental inner sanctum. As the sacred day of the Elevation of the Holy Cross (14 September) drew near, St. Francis, according to the Sabatier biography, "doubled his fastings and prayers."²⁰ I take this to indicate a theo-expectancy entertained by St. Francis. Then, at dawn of the holy-day, he received his seraphic vision of the crucifixion. The axis opened and the object of vision descended to the visionary. A few days later, as he left the mountain, the saint "alighted from his horse, and kneeling upon the earth, his face turned toward the mountain, [said] 'Adieu, [. . .] mountain of God, sacred mountain, *mons coagulatus, mons pinguis, mons in quo bene placitum est Deo habitare.*'"²¹ Clearly, this mountain had become a sacred space.

And what of Dante? Dante the Pilgrim in *Purgatorio* spends three full days climbing to the center of the purgatorial mountain, which itself is situated in the very center of the southern hemisphere of Dante's geography. On the dawn of the fourth day, he leads Virgil and Statius into the holy copse, "the luxuriant forest evergreen"²² of the Earthly Paradise, situated at the peak of the mountain. He travels deep into the forest until he hits a boundary stream, the stream Lethe, which serves a chancel separating Dante from the true center. Nevertheless, at this inner edge of the holy space, Dante does receive visions of things (chariots, candlesticks, glowing colors in the sky, bands of saints dressed in white, etc.), all designed to point his mind to the inner truths of Christianity figured by the apparitions. Thus Dante enters a mode of meditation in which he searches for God in the objects

¹⁹ "The Little Flowers" 108.

²⁰ Sabatier 295.

²¹ Sabatier 295.

²² *Purgatorio* 28.2.

which were wont to occupy an outer space.

While in this mode and still on the far side of the boundary stream, Dante is forced to remember how he once embraced the realm of tools instead of the realm of presence, how he turned from the spiritual road which Beatrice pointed out in her life and death and instead embraced the road of politics and poetic fame. This is his act of contrition and it causes him so much grief that he faints. When he wakes up, he is being carried across the boundary stream and into the inner sanctum proper of the Earthly Paradise. Once this has taken place, Dante is able to move to the center of his mental inner sanctum: he curtails his focus onto particular, singular objects and receives visions via those objects: he sees the dual nature of Christ in the eyes of the griffin and the divine love of God in the smile of Beatrice.²³

These are the visions Dante the Pilgrim receives at this cognitive nexus developed in the inner sanctum on the top of Mt. Purgatorio, and they illustrate an important characteristic of the vision space produced by the nexus: the objects in the vision space are signs pointing to presence. Clearly the eyes of the griffin are not Christ, and clearly the smile of Beatrice is not God, yet Dante is pointed to these underlying realities by these signs, and he does not fail to recognize this. Likewise, St. Francis of Assisi is well aware of the sign nature of the visions. He describes one of his visions of Christ at Mt. La Verna as follows: “[T]he blessed Christ *appeared* [. . .] in the *similitude* and *form* of a most fair youth”.²⁴ Furthermore, he describes his last vision before receiving the stigmata as consisting of a seraph which had “the *form* of a man crucified”²⁵ (emphases mine).

If one consciously chooses to describe objects which exist in this nexus only according to how they appeared, then one consciously chooses to treat these objects as objects *per signum*, not *per se*. Yet we get the sense that the visionary was experiencing something beyond the sign, for even though all that is received is

²³ Purgatorio, Cantos 29-31

²⁴ “*The Little Flowers*” 25.

²⁵ “*The Little Flowers*” 114.

sign—and the visionary knows this—the respect given to the sign and the response generated by it is the type of respect one gives to presence itself, not sign, which by definition is tool. In short, the visionary always looks beyond the sign to being, to presence.

For example, as mentioned above, St. Francis of Assisi travels up Mt. La Verna; spends quite a bit of time finding the central space (the inner sanctum) both physically and mentally, and finally sees the crucified seraph. What I did not mention is his conclusion of the real identity of the seraph:

St Francis, beholding this, was sore afeard, and yet was he filled with sweetness and sorrow mingled with wonder. Joy had he, exceeding great, at the gracious aspect of Christ that appeared to him thus familiarly and looked on him so graciously; but, on the other hand, seeing him nailed upon the cross, he suffered unspeakable grief and compassion.²⁶

Clearly the text tells us the seraph appeared, yet equally as clear is the text that St. Francis saw Christ through the seraph. The seraph, then, was sign. It had to be: to a person as devout as St. Francis, having anybody else on the cross but Christ would have been outright sacrilege, cause enough to suspect the vision as demonic trickery.

Dante treats his beatific visions as St. Francis does his. Dante is told by Beatrice in Canto 4.34-42 of the *Paradiso* that the souls in the Moon (and, for that matter, everywhere else in the spheres) are really in the rose-wheel of the Empyrean and that they appear in the Moon “not because this post / has been assigned them, but to symbolize / that they stand lowest in the Heavenly host. / So must one speak to mortal imperfection, / which only from the *sensible* apprehends / whatever it then makes fit for intellection.” These souls are signs. Yet as seen by how he approaches the apparitions and addresses them, Dante does not denigrate them for being mere signs. Equally as important, he refuses to take them for more than what they really are: simply phenomenological pointers to something

²⁶ “*The Little Flowers*” 114.

ontologically beyond.²⁷ And for both Dante and St. Francis, the something beyond was God, their articulation of absolute presence.

As I have tried to show here, and as C. S. Lewis much more effectively shows in his *The Discarded Image*, the space created by this axis was real to many of the writers of the Middle Ages, affecting how they shaped their narrative objects, where they allowed them to exist, and how they expected their audience to interpret them. This applies to obvious adherents like Bonaventure and Assisi, to the serious minded, theologically driven poet like Dante, to even to someone as playful and as slippery Chaucer. As people who must live and die in this outer space which is the modern landscape, I think we should strive to look for the absolute presence behind the objects we encounter. That is to say, we should learn to do in our mundane outer spaces what St. Francis and Dante did in their vision spaces (which, as we saw was a sort of outer space)—to look beyond the objects to some sign of absolute presence. We must re-learn how to do this, for it goes without gainsaying that ours is an empiric age which has little room for the cosmic axis. This is a shame because it means that the vast majority of us have lost a dimension of meaning and, perhaps, of reality. If we next lose the ability to recognize presence for what it is, we will gain only in our ability to treat that that which we encounter in our spaces as tools through-and-through. A lonely situation, indeed.



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"*The Little Flowers of St. Francis*" and *the Life of St. Francis with the "Mirror of Perfection."*

²⁷ This analysis fits well with something I found on page 215 in Bernard McGinn's "The Changing Shape of Late Medieval Mysticism": "The mystical path is characterized by an immediacy of relation to God alone and the transformation this effects in the consciousness of the recipient—not by visions or auditions, which constitute at best, as Antoine Vergote puts it, *'the remnants of perceptual experiences or surpassed imaginative productions and premonitions of the union they anticipate and desire'*" (emphases mine).

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