

## *OTHERWORDLY RURAL DEVELOPMENT*

### **Recensione**

(Eszter Draskóczy: *Alvilágjárások és pokolbeli büntetések. Dante Komédiájának antic és középkori forrásai*. [Underworld Journeys and Penalties in Hell. Ancient and Medieval Sources of Dante's Comedy] Lazi Kiadó. Szeged, 2022.)

In Eszter Draskóczy's monograph, *Alvilágjárások és pokolbeli büntetések – Dante Komédiájának antik és középkori forrásai* [Underworld Journeys and Penalties in Hell – Ancient and Medieval Sources of Dante's Comedy], the author challenges the earlier view that the moral system of the *Comedy* was an innovation of Dante and shows how the Florentine poet's work fits into the genre of visionary literature. Therefore, in the two main parts of her book, Draskóczy examines all possible sources of Dante, the ancient and medieval visions.

In the early nineteenth century, the Italian literary scholar Ugo Foscolo (1778–1827) declared that Dante may just as well have been familiar with all visions as with none of them. Draskóczy's monograph is an attempt to question this statement to provide a way out — a definitive answer. The author is particularly interested in how the Florentine poet used visionary literature in the *Comedy*. Draskóczy therefore also addresses the question of the extent to which the *Comedy* can be regarded as an innovative work, with which textual traditions it is in dialogue, and whether, in the case of the sources used, it is more appropriate to speak of a direct or indirect influence. From a philological point of view, this is a particularly difficult task, and the debate is still unresolved because Dante's relationship with visionary literature makes it

difficult to establish the connections between the texts. Since the visions were on a different literary level in the poet's eyes, he did not attempt to identify them in the same way as the *Aeneid*, for example. It is also important to note that the works were disseminated in several vernacular languages in addition to Latin, in abridged form, and often orally transmitted, so it is not easy to deduce exactly what and how Dante had access to.

To find an answer to her question, Draskóczy reviewed the entire corpus of visionary literature and not only carried out the necessary philological analysis but also translated the texts she analyzed in whole or in part with her colleagues Péter Ertl, Miklós Földvály and Ádám Gyócsi. The volume therefore has a dual purpose. On the one hand, the reader receives a high-quality, well-argued work, demonstrating great commitment to a particular Dantist debate, and on the other hand, is enriched by an anthology of visionary literature. It is worth noting, however, that placing the translations in the monograph and interrupt the main text, rather than in the appendix, is not necessarily a fortunate decision. This sometimes upsets the balance, and it is not always clear whether the work is trying to answer the main question or whether it is trying to provide as much information as possible about the visionary literature by making the source translations more accessible. However, it is precisely thanks to the latter features that Hungarian researchers have gained an indispensable guide. Nevertheless, if the monograph is published in a foreign language, it might be worth experimenting with a restructuring of the text that could make the argument more comprehensible.

Many scholars wrote insightful works about medieval dreams and visions including Peter Dinzelbacher, Barbara Newman, Jean-Claude Schmitt, and Gábor Klaniczay. Draskóczy continues their work to understand the imaginary of the Middle Ages. The volume consists of two main parts. Draskóczy first analyses the ancient sources, then the medieval ones, and finally concludes that several texts could have been amongst Dante's sources, but in an indirect rather than direct way. The corpus of visionary literature thus served both as a scheme for the basic

structure of the *Comedy* and as a frequently invoked source of examples. It is also worth referring to the table at the end of the work (325–345.), in which the sins and the punishments in the analyzed texts are summarized. In this way, the concept of counter-punishment (*contrapasso*), which is particularly important in the case of the *Comedy*, can be analyzed in more detail, that is the increasingly close relationship between sins and punishments. The volume also takes up Jacques le Goff's thesis that the *Comedy* is the culmination of visionary literature. Draskóczy therefore shows how one vision draws on another, how the textual tradition develops, and where Dante borrows from.

An essential element is that the visions have always attempted to depict and criticize contemporary society. Although the *Comedy* was also intended to improve communal life, Dante is more permissive about certain sins than the visions that serve as his sources. For example, although fornication is a cardinal sin, the poet punishes it the least, considering it a crime of excess. Even a prostitute named Rahab is given a place in *Paradise* because, as a spy, her merits in saving the community outweigh her guilt. And although in several visions the bodies of fornicators fall to pieces only to be reassembled so that the punishment can be repeated, in *Inferno* the bodies of factious men tear apart again and again because a feud breaks apart the body of society.

In the first part, Draskóczy concentrates on three models in the case of the ancient sources. The first two are explicitly presented in the work when, at the beginning of his journey, Dante doubts the grace granted to him and declares that '*I am neither Aeneas nor Paul*' (II, 31). The aim of the traveler is therefore to transcend these two role models, to become a new Aeneas and a new Paul. The more he descends, the more he ascends spiritually, accumulating more and more merits in the process. However, Draskóczy also points out that it was not only the '*descensio*' (descent) of Aeneas and the '*ascensio*' (ascent) of Paul that made him a model for the Florentine poet, but that the images associated with these two figures may have been present in the work

in more complex ways. For example, in the case of Aeneas, it is also important to the poet that they both cross over into the afterlife in the flesh, so that the journey requires not only spiritual but also physical strength. This is also reflected in the term *virtù*, which evokes nuances of meaning such as virtue, strength, competence, and manhood. Aeneas' piety also makes him suitable for the journey, as a story recorded by Timaeus (356/350-260 BC) shows: while others are taking treasures from besieged Troy, Aeneas takes his own father on his back, and after the Greeks allow him to take another turn for this honorable deed, he still takes not gold but the household gods from his home. In the case of Aeneas we see a heroic and initiatory descent, in the case of Paul it is much more important to see a vision with moral goals. Draskóczy points out that the experience of Paul can be transcended, for example, the motif of blindness is also present in *Paradise*, but thanks to Beatrice, the traveler regains his sight. However, it is not only the *Bible* that may have inspired the passages about Paul. Dante's son has also referred to his father's reading of the 3rd century apocryphal work *The Vision of St Paul the Apostle*. Here we meet for the first time an otherworldly guide, who becomes the second character of the work. In my opinion, the most interesting section of the first part is the analysis of a hidden, unspoken anti-model: Orpheus. In this case, it is important to note that he is not only a traveler in the otherworld but also a poet, and additionally considered by medieval tradition as a pre-scriptural Christian. According to the latter tradition, the words of Christ acted on the irrational soul of people, just as Orpheus tamed the wild beasts with his music. In contrast to him, Christ brought his love, humanity, up from the depths, while Orpheus looked back, that is fell back into a sinful condition. According to Draskóczy, Orpheus is present in the *Comedy* in a macrotextual way and thus Dante refers to the textual tradition that interprets his character. On the other hand, Orpheus is an anti-model, because although Dante repeats the transgression of the man and looks back, he ultimately corrects the hero's mistake and thus transcends it. For example, when Dante directs his gaze towards his beloved, this is no longer a sign of sin but of redemption.

In the second part, Draskóczy deals with medieval visionary literature, looking through the corpus from the 4th to the 13th century and listing a number of detailed observations. The main aim of the chapter is to show how the genre of visionary literature developed, and what parts of the texts may be a predecessor of the *Comedy*. I will highlight just a few of these. The most important early medieval visionaries are discussed firstly in the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great and secondly in Bede the Venerable's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. In the case of St. Gregory, a monk named Petrus is confronted with the fact that hell is full of worldly authorities, so that the vision is also intended to serve as a political warning. But this is also the first appearance of the motif of the bridge challenge and the scented field, which had a lasting influence on the way the topography of the afterlife was presented in other visions. As well as consolidating the traditional elements, Bede also introduces innovations. For example, the guide in the afterlife reads the thoughts of those being guided. Furthermore, a soldier cannot change his own life despite traveling to the otherworld because he is overcome by despair, that is, he is immersed in the cardinal sin of restlessness, yet his example can still guide others toward salvation.

The *Visions of Wetti* tells the story of the journey of the Abbot of Reichenau to the afterlife. The work has both a prose and a verse transcription, with the first version being more severe in its treatment of the abbot while the second is more lenient. However – and this is particularly important for the *Comedy* – the counter-punishment and the representation of contemporaries in the otherworld are common motifs in both versions. For example, Charlemagne (r. 768–814), who died only a decade before the prose version was written, despite being a Frankish emperor, appears in hell as a fornicator whose genitals, bitten off in vain by a raging monster, grow back so that the punishment can be repeated. In *The Vision of Alberico*, a snow-white bird captures the traveler when it nips his hair in its beak. Dante may refer to this scene in *Purgatory*, when the poet is carried to the heights by a golden eagle. *The Vision of Tundal* depicts a young knight

who is forced to go to hell because of his gluttony, fornication, and the theft of a cow. He is guided by an angel who gives him some fatherly advice and with whom he has an intimate relationship, which is extremely rare in visions, and could therefore be one of the inspirations for the Dante-Virgil duo. More than two hundred manuscripts and numerous extracts of the story have been preserved and were easily accessible to the Florentine poet. *The Vision of Thurkill* describes the afterlife journey of a peasant who, like Dante, meets many relatives and acquaintances, but also notices unfinished chairs that the living are carving for themselves with their sins, underlining the main aim of the work: to move the living towards a more salvific life. And in the case of *The Steps of Muhammad*, the author may have drawn on a non-Christian vision. Draskóczy lists several common motifs, for example, both Muhammad and Dante sweat because of the compassion felt for those suffering in the underworld.

In conclusion, the volume not only deals with a specific issue but also serves as a handbook. Dante seems to have drawn extensively from visionary literature, but some questions are still difficult to answer, such as which motifs appear in multiple texts, and precisely because of the interplay among visions, the Florentine poet did not need to know the specific text or even its extraction. But Draskóczy's work can also help to clarify these questions. Finally, although the main virtue of the work is the analysis of the interplay of motifs, it might have been possible in some cases to have emphasised more clearly which are the most and least likely matches.