

Ascending to the third heaven? A missing tradition of Latin mysticism

Csaba NÉMETH*

Abstract

The Second Epistle to Corinthians mentions someone (traditionally identified with the Apostle) having been caught up to the third heaven, to paradise (2Cor 12: 1-4). The elliptic narrative hints at an extraordinary case that might have involved some kind of immediate experience of God; the present study investigates whether Latin interpretations of the text utilised this potential to create a paradigm for personal spiritual experiences. The authoritative interpretation (based on Augustinian principles and developed into the doctrine of raptus) has not created such a paradigm, since the meaning attributed to the text – an immediate intellectual vision of the substance of God – denoted a spiritual experience applicable mostly to Saint Paul alone. Besides this traditional interpretation there existed other isolated ones that converted the rapture narrative into a paradigm of potential and personal experiences, but these interpretations (by Ambrose and Richard of Saint-Victor) had no influence on, or were even contrary, to the accepted one.

Keywords: exegesis, 2Cor 12: 1-4, rapture, raptus, Saint Paul, Augustine, Ambrose, Richard of Saint-Victor, Thomas Gallus, Bonaventure, David of Augsburg

Introduction

The immediate experience of God, if communicated, is necessarily connected to verbal forms of expression: to metaphors, images, allegories, sometimes even to narratives. What can be stated about such experience (either as theoretical formulation or description of the experience itself) also depends on theological and anthropological premises. The present paper, on the one hand, addresses a theoretical problem: namely, how a particular imagery (in this case, that of the rapture into the third heaven) becomes unsuitable to express personal spiritual experiences. Advices encouraging the reader to enter into the shining darkness, or to expect, kiss or follow the Bridegroom are fairly common in spiritual literature: but suggestions to ascend into one or other heaven(s) are extremely rare. At the first sight, the imagery of Paul's rapture into the third heaven (mentioned in 2Cor 12: 1-4) seems to be an unlikely candidate for such purposes. I will argue two main points. First that this impression is justified: after the early thirteenth century, actual

* The present study was supported by Hungarian National Research Fund (OTKA) grant K 101503; I also relied on my earlier researches made possible by the grant OTKA K 81278. I thank Veerle Fraeters for calling my attention to the *Vita Beatrix* thus giving me an invaluable example.

spiritual experiences cannot be expressed by the rapture imagery, due to exegetical and doctrinal developments. The second point I will argue is that this condition is neither necessary nor self-evident. Outside the extant and continuous tradition there existed a few authors who indeed considered Paul's rapture as a model (or a prefiguration) – in other words, for them rapture was a paradigm of spiritual experience. These interpretations by Ambrose and Richard of Saint-Victor had no influence on the exegetical tradition based on Augustine. What makes them special is their testimony that rapture into the third heaven was one of the potential paradigms of spirituality (like Brautmystik or the Areopagitic mysticism). In Richard's case I also attempt to show that this isolation was not accidental: his paradigm became inappropriate as the imagery of raptus became unsuitable to express personal immediate experience of God.

1. Rapture as exception: the regular reading and its context

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians (12:2-4) describes an unusual experience: someone known by Paul (but whose name he does not disclose) was caught up to the third heaven, into paradise where he heard words which are secret and which may not be communicated.¹ The text suggests some unusual spiritual experience. In the Latin tradition the interpretation of these elliptic and obscure words present a special case where the exegesis of a particular scriptural text largely coincided with the elaboration of a theological doctrine. The following historical sketch will show that for majority of Latin theologians the rapture narrative indeed expressed a personal experience of God – but a special one, limited to Paul himself and a very few others.

1. The regular reading: exegesis and doctrines

The Western interpretation of the rapture narrative was substantially defined by a handful of ideas compiled from two works of Augustine, the *De Genesi ad litteram XII* and *Letter 147*.² Here only the most relevant ones may be shortly mentioned, but before doing so, it

¹ See 2Cor 12: 2 *Scio hominem in Christo ante annos quattuordecim sive in corpore nescio sive extra corpus nescio Deus scit raptum eiusmodi usque ad tertium caelum; 3 et scio huiusmodi hominem sive in corpore sive extra corpus nescio Deus scit; 4 quoniam raptus est in paradysum et audivit verba ineffabilia quae non licet homini loqui*. Notice the two equally attested variants: many Latin authors, including Ambrose and Augustine, read here “unutterable” (*ineffabilia*) words, but others (among them Gregory the Great, Bede, Petrus Damiani, and Richard of Saint-Victor), read “secret” words, *arcana verba*.

² For the *De Genesi ad litteram XII*, see CSEL 28/1, 379-434; for Ep. 147, see CSEL 44; for the individual medieval commentaries mentioned below, see as follows: Haimo, PL 117: 660C-664A; Bruno: PL 153: 273-274; Hervaeus: PL 181: 1112A-1114D; Peter Lombard, *Collectanea* on 2Cor 12: 1-4, PL 192: 79B-83B (cf. PL 191: 1328AC). For the doctrinal history of twelfth- and early thirteenth-century theories on Paul's rapture, see Nikolaus Wicki's monograph: *Die Lehre von der himmlischen Seligkeit in der mittelalterlichen Scholastik von Petrus Lombardus bis Thomas Aquin* (Freiburg, Switzerland, 1954, Universitäts-Verlag), 161-174. A book chapter of mine gives an overview of the subject, extending to the Patristic and monastic interpretations of the narrative: *Paulus Raptus to Raptus Pauli: Paul's rapture (2Cor 12:2-4) in the Pre-Scholastic and Scholastic Theologies*, in Steven R. Cartwright (ed.): *A companion to St. Paul in the Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2012, Brill), 349-392. The present paper focuses on a theoretical problem so that complement that historical overview; related subjects tangentially mentioned here are discussed there with the appropriate references.

must be remembered that the Biblical narrative mentions only rapture (into the third heaven or into paradise) and audition of secret words, without any reference to a vision of God. A characteristic element of nearly all Western interpretations is that Paul indeed has seen God. This element goes back to Augustine: it was him who reformulated the rapture narrative according to a visual paradigm, involving a vision of God. Through allegorical reading he also turned the three “heavens” of the text into three different kinds of cognition, termed as “visions” (that is corporeal, imaginary or spiritual, and intellectual visions; see *De Genesi ad litt.* XII, vi-vii). Due to these changes, Paul’s scriptural rapture into the third heaven obtained a new meaning: an ecstatic rapture to the highest kind of cognition, that is, to a direct cognition (an immediate vision) of God through intellectual vision (hearing secret words has not much place in this theory). Augustine also added to Paul’s ecstatic experience a historical dimension. Conceived as a vision, it became comparable with Old Testament theophanies: and since the Apostle is a crucial figure of salvation history, it is superior to them (see *Letter 147*). Paul was temporarily elevated to the immediate (or “face-to-face,” as in 1Cor 13:12) vision of God what is the reward of the Blessed. Augustine also remarks: to “certain saints” this vision was granted even before their corporeal death (though he means here principally Paul).³

Medieval interpretations of the rapture narrative were based on these Augustinian premises. From the Carolingian period onward, passages from *Letter 147* and *De Genesi ad litt. XII.* were transcribed into the commentaries on the Second Corinthians, as the works of Haymo of Halberstadt (d. 853), Bruno the Carthusian (d. 1101), Hervaeus of Déols/Bourg-Dieu (d. 1150), Gilbert of Poitiers (d. 1154) and Peter Lombard (d. 1160) attest. This also meant that Augustine’s doctrinal insights defined (or substantially limited) the exegesis of the *locus*. Eleventh- and twelfth-century monastic exegesis created three more exegetical interpretations so that by the mid-twelfth century the sentence “Paul was caught up into the third heaven” had four different but simultaneously valid explanations: a) Paul was caught up into the *empyreum* (that is, into the spiritual heaven beyond the aerial one and the firmament) where angels and the blessed souls enjoy the vision of God; b) he was caught up to the “heaven” of intellectual vision (beyond the corporeal and imaginary forms of vision (as Augustine teaches); c) Paul was caught up to the “heaven” of the third, and highest, angelic order and saw God as the angels of the highest hierarchies do; and, finally, d) he was caught up, beyond the cognition of heavenly bodies and heavenly spirits, to the “heaven” of the cognition of the Godhead.

In order to understand the later developments (which also defines the central problem of the present paper), a few points demand special attention. While all these explanations (including Augustine’s) focus on a concrete event of Saint Paul’s life, only the Augustinian one has real theological importance. Although the “modern” interpretations appear at the authors mentioned above, it was only Peter Lombard’s commentary (the *Collectanea*) that had importance for the future. Finished in 1158, it accumulated all the four explanations, and (like Peter’s own book of sentences) has soon become a textbook used in the classrooms. From the 1160s onward, scholastic interpretations of the rapture narrative were primarily based on the contents of the *Collectanea*.

³ See *Ep.* 147, 13, 31: “et non sit incredibile quibusdam sanctis nondum ita defunctis, ut sepelienda cadavera remaneret, etiam istam excellentiam revelationis fuisse concessam.” CSEL 44, 305.

The exegetical interpretation of the rapture narrative was, however, not identical with its doctrinal meaning. Paul's intellectual vision of God in ecstasy, a vision which was immediate (or "face-to-face" as in 1Cor 13:12) remained the doctrinal equivalent of the scriptural passage, but theologians created a new conceptual framework for it. The doctrinal developments of the first half of the century (most intensive in the 1220s to the 1240s) led to the concept of *raptus*, a contemporary formulation of Augustinian ideas. Here I can mention only the most relevant changes.

Late twelfth-century theologians sensed the ambiguity in Paul's rapture: the vision of God he had was identical neither with that of the Blessed *in patria* nor that of the faithful *in via*. A transient solution to this problem was to attribute him a certain *visio medi(astin)a*: a third form of cognition, that is a "intermediary" vision, "in between" the eschatological vision and the present "vision" of God by faith. This largely unelaborated concept was gradually eradicated from theological thought during the first three decades of the thirteenth century, and the immediate vision of God attributed to Paul became gradually assimilated to the eschatological vision. During the same period, however, the model of eschatological vision (in other words, the background to the interpretation of rapture) also changed. Many twelfth-century authors believed together with Augustine in the two-stage model of eschatology where the full vision of God comes only after the reception of glorified body. In a few decades' time (approximately by the 1240s) the premises had changed: now the accepted model was the one-stage one, where the disembodied souls can see God as he is, in his essence (*per essentiam*), even without their glorified body. Human condition became also conceived in a new way. With the growing influence of Aristotle, from the early thirteenth century onward theologians tacitly accepted that the "natural" state of man (as described by Aristotle) and the present, postlapsarian state (*via*, as perceived by Christian theology) coincide; what is not "natural" and happens through grace is "supernatural." An immediate cognition or vision of God "in this life," under "natural conditions," through "natural" faculties, is impossible. What happened to Paul was not natural but supernatural:⁴ it occurred in a wondrous and supernatural way (*miraculose, supernaturaliter*), through a direct divine intervention.⁵ Since natural faculties cannot cognise God immediately, the Blessed (and also Paul in *raptus*) must obtain a necessary *medium*: a supernatural enhancement on the cognitive faculty by and through which God can be seen immediately.

These doctrinal developments have not changed the character Augustine cast on the rapture narrative: it still described an exceptional event that occurred to an exceptional figure of salvation history. Thirteenth-century and later theologians leave open the possibility of *raptus*, but in a well-guarded way. It is not absolutely impossible: it *may* happen (since it happened to the Apostle) – but it is exceptional and requires an extraordinary intervention of grace (as in the case of the Apostle).

⁴ See for example Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II qu. 175 art. 1 ad 1: "iste modus quod aliquis elevetur ad divina cum abstractione a sensibus, non est homini naturalis" and ad 2: "Unde quod sic elevetur mens a Deo per raptum, non est contra naturam, sed supra facultatem naturae."

⁵ See for example Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I qu. 12 art. 11 ad 2: "sicut Deus miraculose aliquid supernaturaliter in rebus corporeis operatur, ita etiam et supernaturaliter, et praeter communem ordinem, mentes aliquorum in hac carne viventium [...] usque ad visionem suae essentiae elevavit; ut dicit Augustinus, XII super Genes. ad Litt., et in libro de videndo Deum de Moyse, qui fuit magister Iudaeorum, et Paulo, qui fuit magister gentium."

2. Theories on spiritual experiences

Raptus is often discussed in that segment of theological literature which is connected to school theology and theological education (like theological questions and *summae*). The emerging spiritual literature of the period, however, seems to overlook this subject. With references to the “experience” and “experiential cognition of God,” these works deal with the spiritual reality of the readers: they orientate the reader towards a cognition and experience of God, and often give descriptions (even “catalogues”) of the possible spiritual experiences. The silence of these works suggests that even if *raptus* as experience is not impossible, its occurrence is rather improbable.

This attitude, rooted in Augustinian premises, poses special problems for the immediate experience of God. The given theological and anthropological background defines what can (and what cannot) be regarded as possible experiences; but at the same time, the same background also defines what (and how) can be told about these experiences. The examples above demonstrated that *raptus* (that is, the immediate vision of God in this life) was considered an extraordinary and supernatural event. The examples below will demonstrate that spiritual works presented not *raptus* but something else as the highest possible experience of God in this life. Before turning to the examples, it is necessary to mention a few medieval premises which defined the context for the experience of God and its expression.

It was a basic anthropological insight of the thirteenth century that the soul has two aspects, an intellectual/cognitive and an affective (and non-intellectual) one (called, among other names, *intellectus* and *affectus*). The visual metaphor for cognition of God (that is, *seeing* God) became reserved for the activity of the cognitive/intellectual aspect of the soul. In this well-regulated language, a direct vision of God means an immediate (intellectual) cognition of God. This is reserved for the blessed state -- -- and is impossible through “natural” cognitive faculties. The intellectual cognition of God is necessarily limited during this life: the applied visual metaphors talk about inadequate vision (non-seeing, or seeing obscurely) or about indirect, mediated vision (such as seeing God through some mirror, cf. 1Cor 13:12).⁶ This limitation of visual metaphors, however, does not mean that a direct (immediate) *experience* of God was impossible. According to a popular solution elaborated in the early thirteenth century, the immediate experience cannot be an immediate *vision* of God through the cognitive/intellectual aspect of the soul (since that is reserved for *raptus*) -- but it indeed can be an immediate perception (also called “cognition” or “experience”) of God, through the non-intellectual/affective aspect. This also means a difference in expression of the experiences. The affective “cognition” cannot be expressed on a visual language, using metaphors of vision --- -- but it indeed can be expressed through non-visual metaphors.⁷ The fact that even Thomas Aquinas (who was not a noted spiritual author) used the

⁶ The “mirror of the soul” and the “mirror of creatures” are the most traditional “mirrors” for this vision. See, for example, Peter Lombard, *Collectanea* in 1Cor 13:12 (PL 191: 1662D-1663A), based on Augustine, *De Trinitate* XV, ix, 15-16.

⁷ It must be noticed that neither the doctrines of the so-called “spiritual senses” nor the language used are thirteenth-century innovations: the novelty lies here in the reflection to the language used. A most clear and explicit formulation can be found in the glosses on the *Celestial Hierarchy* by Thomas Gallus (1224); later authors seem merely to apply this solution without reflecting on the premises.

argument that “tasting belongs to the affect like seeing to the intellect” shows how self-evident these premises had become by the 1250s.⁸

a) Thomas Gallus

Thomas Gallus (d. 1246) is one of the most important early thirteenth-century Latin authors on spirituality. In his famous commentaries on the Canticle, Paul’s rapture is not mentioned anywhere, and it has no place in his own scheme of spiritual ascent (based on the angelic hierarchy) either. In his short treatise *De septem gradibus contemplationis* (which is based on another scheme, that of Giles of Assisi) Paul’s rapture indeed appears, and its relation to spiritual experiences becomes clear.⁹ The scheme of ascent here has six-plus-one subsequent grades: “fire”, “ointment”, “ecstasy”, “speculation” (also called “contemplation” by the text), “tasting” and “rest” (*ignis, unctio, ecstasis, speculatio, gustus, quies*), followed by the state of glory (*gloria*). The first six degrees are continuous: the soul becomes ignited, then anointed, through ecstasy it contemplates, tastes and has its rest: these are experiences accessible in this life.¹⁰ “Speculation” means a grade of cognition when both *intellectus* and *affectus* (more precisely, the *apex intelligentiae* and the *principalis affectio*) are active and both turn toward God. The operation of the intellectual aspect is “speculation:” seeing through a mirror and contemplating the glory of God (cf. 2Cor 3:18). The affective aspect of the soul approaches God directly, through desire, and becomes unified with him.¹¹ The subsequent states, “tasting” and “rest” also belong to this affective experience possible in this life. “Glory,” the ultimate, seventh stage is different from the previous ones: it is known only to “that heavenly Paul” who was caught up to such experiences.¹² Let us remark the strong (but otherwise traditional) contrast: Paul’s experience belongs to the blessed state, and it is clearly separated from whatever is possible in this life.

b) Bonaventure

⁸ *Gustare ad affectum pertinet, sicut videre ad intellectum: In Sent.* III dist. 35 qu. 1. art. 2 sc2.

⁹ Here and elsewhere, if necessary, I used the easily accessible edition of Bonaventure by Peltier: A.C. Peltier (ed.), *S. Bonaventurae opera omnia*, 15 vols (Paris, 1864-1871, Vivés). The accessible version of *De septem gradibus* has been edited among Bonaventure’s works in the Peltier edition, vol. 12, 183-186.

¹⁰ Thomas, *De septem gradibus*: “Primo enim anima ignitur, ignita ungitur, uncta rapitur, rapta speculatur vel contemplatur, contemplans gustat, gustans quiescit. Haec in via possunt acquiri; non tamen subito, sed gradatim. [...] Septimus in patria confertur abundantius, iis qui se in praecedentibus gradibus exercuerunt.” ed. Peltier, vol. 12, 183a.

¹¹ Thomas, *De septem gradibus*: “Contemplantur autem hi duo, scilicet intellectus et affectus; sed intellectus longe dissimiliter ab affectu. Cum enim animus contemplativus, sensibus spiritualibus suspensus, synderesim in specula aeterna extendit, apex intelligentiae et principalis affectio pariter feruntur mutuo in divina se promoventes, et aequaliter ascendentes, illa speculando, haec vero desiderando. Praeurrente autem intelligentia nec ingredi queunte, utpote per speculum videns, foris remanet. Affectus vero quae nescia est speculi, intrans unitur secundum illud: Qui adhaeret Deo, unus spiritus est.” ed. Peltier, vol. 12, 184.

¹² Thomas, *De septem gradibus*: “De septimo [sc. gradu] tutius tacendum censui, quam loquendum, quoniam nulli viatorum ascensus, sive visio hujus gradus patere potuit, nisi illi coelesti Paulo, qui se raptum usque ad hujusmodi per sacram Scripturam asserit. Felix certe [...] Virginis Mariae anima, cui hoc datum est in via, quod nulli sanctorum aliquando possederunt.” ed. Peltier, vol. 12, 185b.

In Bonaventure's writings both the difference between doctrinal theology and spirituality (or mysticism), and their intended harmony, can be observed. In his *Sentences* commentary, an eminently scholarly work by genre (1250-1252), we find a theoretical doctrinal formulation of the possible immediate experience of God as an "experiential cognition of the good and the sweet" which happens in ecstasy and belongs to the gift wisdom (*donum sapientiae*). In this life, even if the gaze of the eye can be fixed on God exclusively, it cannot reach a vision of God (or his light); instead, the gaze "elevates into the divine darkness" (*caligo*, conceived after the *Mystical Theology* of the Areopagite): this affective cognition of God is the experience that may be desired.¹³ The later *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (1259) gives a detailed elaboration of the same theme. The intellectual speculations of the first six chapters prepare for the affective ecstasy outlined in the seventh one. This is the ultimate experience of God that might be expected in this life: it happens through grace when (after intellectual activities are halted) the *apex affectus*, a special affective and cognitive faculty, becomes transferred and transformed into God.¹⁴ The non-intellectual and affective nature of this experience is marked by several oppositions:

"But if you wish to know how these things come about, ask grace not instruction, desire not understanding, the groaning of prayer not diligent reading (*studium lectionis*), the Spouse not the teacher, God not man, darkness not clarity, not light but the fire that totally inflames and carries us into God by ecstatic unctious and burning affections."¹⁵

Grace is opposed to learning, desire opposed to understanding, prayer opposed to the study of the (scriptural) reading (an activity usually connected to meditation, and not merely "diligent reading"). The opposition is expressed by the imagery as well: instead of clear light (*claritas, lux*: the image hints at visibility, and is an equivalent of intellectual cognition), Bonaventure prefers images favouring the other senses: darkness (*caligo*) which prevent vision, and fire which warms us up. The desired cognition is markedly

¹³ *In II Sent.* dist. 23 art. 2 qu. 3 ad 6: "Concedo tamen nihilominus, quod oculi aspectus in Deum figi potest, ita quoad ad nihil aliud aspiciat; attamen non perspiciet vel videbit ipsius lucis claritatem, immo potius elevabitur in caliginem [...] et vocat [sc. Dionysius] istam cognitionem doctam ignorantiam. Haec enim est, in qua mirabiliter inflammat affectio, sicut eis patet, qui aliquoties consueverunt ad anagogicos elevari excessus. Hunc modum cognoscendi arbitror cuilibet viro justo in via esse quaerendum; quodsi Deus aliquid ultra faciet, hoc privilegium est speciale, non legis communis." (ed. Quaracchi, vol. II, 546) For Bonaventure I use the Quaracchi edition (*Doctoris Seraphici S. Bonaventurae opera omnia*, 10 vols. Quaracchi, 1882-1902, Collegium S. Bonaventurae).

¹⁴ *Itinerarium* VII, 4: "In hoc autem transitu, si sit perfectus, oportet quod relinquatur omnes intellectuales operationes, et apex affectus totus transferatur et transformetur in Deum. Hoc autem est mysticum et secretissimum, quod nemo novit, nisi qui accipit, nec accipit nisi qui desiderat, nec desiderat nisi quem ignis Spiritus sancti medullitus inflammat, quem Christus misit in terram." ed. Quaracchi, vol. V, 312.

¹⁵ *Itinerarium* VII, 6: "Si autem quaeras, quomodo haec fiant, interroga gratiam, non doctrinam; desiderium, non intellectum; gemitum orationis, non studium lectionis; sponsum, non magistrum; Deum, non hominem, caliginem, non claritatem; non lucem, sed ignem totaliter inflammantem et in Deum excessivis unctionibus et ardentissimis affectionibus transferentem." (ed. Quaracchi, vol. V, 312), above in Ewert Cousins's translation, from *Bonaventure. The soul's journey into God. The tree of life. The life of St. Francis* (Mahwah NJ, 1978, Paulist Press), here 115.

non-visual, and its metaphors are non-visual too. This affective ecstasy is the experience which may be sought after, but it is *not* the experience Paul had in his rapture (which involved a vision of God by the intellect): they are two different cases. Holy men and the contemplatives sometimes are caught up to ecstasy, Bonaventure writes elsewhere, sometimes into *raptus*, but the latter happens only to very few.¹⁶ To these few belongs, besides the Apostle, Dionysius the Areopagite.¹⁷

c) David of Augsburg

The Franciscan David of Augsburg (d.1272) was an exact contemporary of Bonaventure. His treatise entitled *De septem processionibus religiosorum* (written after 1240 and popular throughout the Middle Ages) describes the degrees of spiritual progress and the state of the highest perfection (in this life). He also discusses the various spiritual experiences possible¹⁸ but *raptus*, in its terminological sense as a vision of God in himself, is not among them.¹⁹ The highest perfection in this life, according to David, consists in the ecstatic state that unifies God and the human soul.²⁰ He uses traditional terminology to describe this union: it is melting of the soul (*liquefactio*), a loving union, but also a vision of the Truth in itself.²¹ Curiously enough, this vision of the Truth (mentioned only passingly) is not a direct vision of God, although David makes a digression to various forms of vision, largely repeating Augustine's theories. In the treatise David groups the possible spiritual experiences according to the intellectual/affective division of the soul's aspects (certain experiences belong to the former, others to the latter). Two categories belong to the intellect: visions and revelations ("revelation" here means communications of secrets and not revealed visions). David has reservations about both: they may seem signs of sanctity to the unexperienced, but they also may be fictions of the mind, demonic suggestions, or simply fruitless curiosities.²² Concerning visions, David gives a variant of the Augustinian

¹⁶ See Bonaventure, *In III Sent.* dist. 35 qu. 1 co: "actus doni sapientiae partim est cognitivus et partim est affectivus: ita quod in cognitione inchoatur et in affectione consummatur, secundum quod ipse gustus vel saporatio est experimentalis boni et dulcis cognitio. [...] [viri sancti et contemplativi] prae nimia dulcedine modo elevantur in ecstasim, modo sublevantur usque ad raptum, licet hoc contingat paucissimis." (ed. Quaracchi, vol. III, 774). Consider McGinn's observation about rapture in Bonaventure: "[It] is so rare and special that this may explain why Bonaventure did not mention it in the *Itinerarium*, which is best viewed as a general invitation to all Christians to follow the way of Francis leading to *excessus mentis*." In: Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism* (New York, 1998, Crossroad), 112.

¹⁷ See *Collatio III in Hexaameron*, 30 (ed. Quaracchi, vol. V, 348).

¹⁸ I used the older edition of the *De septem processionibus*, printed as *De profectu religiosorum*, ed. Peltier, vol. 12, 327-442.

¹⁹ However, "rapture into contemplation" (*raptus contemplationis*) is one of the names of the momentary state of perfection.

²⁰ See for example *De profectu* II, lxxiii/lxxii: "Haec est hominis in hac vita sublimior perfectio, ut tota anima [...] in Deum collecta unus fiat spiritus cum eo, ut nil meminerit nisi Deum, nil sentiat vel intelligat nisi Deum, et omnes affectus in amoris gaudio uniti, in sola Conditoris fruitione suaviter quiescant." ed. Peltier, vol. 12, 429-430.

²¹ "devoti autem simplices clarius vident veritatem in se." (*De profectu* II, lxxiv/lxxiii, 433)

²² See *De profectu* II, lxxv-lxxvii *passim*. David tangentially names various phenomena which excited his contemporaries, such as blasphemous visions of the Holy Virgin or Christ, revelations about the coming of the Antichrist or the final judgement, the Joachimite prophecies, and so on.

doctrine talking about corporeal, imaginary (subdivided into two categories) and intellectual visions. The last and highest form of cognition is, as in Augustine, the intellectual vision, but it differs from the Augustinian original. David's example for intellectual vision is, besides the enraptured Apostle, John the Divine, the author of the Apocalypse. John's inclusion is a medieval addition to Augustine: John saw divine things by intellectual vision but used images to communicate them. What is more unusual is the description of this intellectual vision. Paul and John saw the Truth itself through the light of the Truth – but unlike Augustine, David does not call this vision a vision of God in *substantia* (or *essentia*) *sua* or a vision of God as he is.²³ He also makes a digression to the various visions of Christ by the devout (occurring as a special consolation or as a sign). This hint to visionary experience marks well the period, but again an omission is what is remarkable for us. By the early 1240s the issue of *raptus* was already thoroughly discussed and its doctrine was largely established – but here it is nearly absent.

3. Rapture as regular exception

So far I tried to demonstrate two points First, that mainstream Western interpretation – due to a special combination of exegesis and doctrinal theology – saw the rapture narrative of Saint Paul as a unique, extraordinary and exceptional case. Second, that in the spiritual literature *raptus* was not considered a possible personal experience: the more-or-less systematic presentations of possible spiritual experiences do not include it (especially not as their highest grade). We can only conjecture that it is absent from these “catalogues” exactly *because* it was considered an extraordinary and unique case. Now I try to demonstrate a third point that is closely connected to the previous ones. With the sole precedent of Paul's rapture, and with the very strong and very specific meaning (namely, an immediate vision of God's essence), “being caught up to the third heaven” seemingly became a predicate used with the greatest caution. Those instances where *raptus* is attributed to any concrete person other than Paul seem to be exceptionally rare.²⁴ The following two examples are such exceptions where *raptus* to the third heaven is presented as a personal experience. My point here is that these “exceptions” are indeed regular and confirm the accepted doctrine: being “caught up” to the third heaven testifies sanctity or authority.

a) The *vita* of Beatrice of Nazareth

Beatrice of Nazareth was a Flemish Cistercian nun (d.1268). She kept a personal journal where she also described her spiritual experiences. Soon after her death a Latin *vita* was

²³ *De profectu* II, lxxvi/lxxv: “Alia visio est intellectualis, qua illuminatus oculus luce veritatis pure ipsam veritatem in se contemplatur, vel intelligit in visione imaginaria veritatem quae in illa significatur: sicut Paulus, cum raptus in paradysum vel in tertium caelum, vidit invisibilia et audivit verba ineffabilia [...] ipsius veritatis splendorem pure intuitus est. Similiter et Joannes Evangelista [...] creditur tamen omnia pure vidisse et intellexisse.” ed. Peltier, vol. 12, 434.

²⁴ I do not consider here examples where someone is “caught up” or “elevated” in spirit to see some vision (what is a rather common element in mystical writings).

written by a hagiographer, based on her journal: it contains an account of her rapture to the third heaven.

The narrative tells that Beatrice became separated from her senses (*carnis sensibus exuta*), and through the ecstasy (*excessus*) of contemplation was caught up into heaven and was transported to the choir of Seraphim. She became conformed to the Seraphim in spirit and shared their service; she saw the nine angelic choirs and (what is somewhat audacious) contemplated the divine essence in its full glory and power.²⁵ She understood that she is joined to God by the bond of love (*caritatis nexus*); she enjoyed the contemplation of the divine presence (*divine contemplatio presentie*) and was absorbed by the presence of the Godhead (*presentia summe deitatis*), but also learned that she must return to her bodily life.

The narrative itself is extraordinary according to the standards of any theologically educated person of the thirteenth century. The sudden detachment from the sense perception, the elevation into the highest angelic hierarchy and, most importantly, the vision of God's *essence* are all elements characteristic of *raptus*, that is, of the concept elaborated by early thirteenth-century theologians. The narrative is followed by an excursus where the hagiographer digresses to the relation of Beatrice's experience and Paul's *raptus*.

The author first he emphasises that Beatrice has indeed reached that pinnacle of apostolic perfection and holiness which Paul possessed, *since* she also had a vision, rightly comparable to Paul's rapture.²⁶ The third heaven into which Paul was caught, he explains, is the third angelic hierarchy consisting of Thrones, Cherubim and Seraphim as in the case of Beatrice (but this is also one of the standard interpretations given by the *Collectanea* and the *Glossa Ordinaria*). He also has to defend the (originally Augustinian) doctrine that Paul contemplated the face of God against the observation that such a thing is not recorded about him (*Paulum ... non autem faciem dei faciem contempatus fuisse describitur*). In order to do so, he recurs to the authority of the "inspired exegetes," and quotes Haymo of Halberstadt's commentary on 2Cor 12: 2-4 to explain the nature of intellectual vision of God and its possibility. Since Haymo's commentary was compiled from Augustine, the hagiographer also finds there an argument for Beatrice: namely that the form of vision which was granted to Paul was not exclusively granted to him but also to other saints.²⁷

²⁵ *Vita Beatricis* II, xix, 172-173: "carnis sensibus exuta, per contemplationis excessum in celestia rapitur, et in sublimem illum diuineque presentie vicissimum chorum Beatrix [...] anima collocatur. Ibi [...] se seraphicum spiritum effectam esse cognovit [...]. Ibi diuinam essentiam in plenitudine glorie sue, perfectissimeque maiestatis sue potentia [...] clara contemplationis acie, si fas est dicere, videre promeruit: et creatorem suum illum intelligens, inexcogitabili delectationis amplexu sibi firmiter inherendo [...] in summa quadam, et humanis sensibus incomprehensibili beatitudine, requieuit." In: Roger De Ganck (ed. and trans.), *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth, 1200-1268*, 3 vols (Kalamazoo MI, 1991, Cistercian Publications), vol. 1, 202 and 204.

²⁶ *Vita Beatricis* II, xix, 175: "Attende, lector, magna esse valde que dicimus: et eo nostris temporibus utique rariora, quo pauciores ad apostolice iam perfectionis apicem conscendere videamus. Quid enim, nisi ad apostolice sanctitatis culmen Beatricem nostram ascendisse dixerimus, que [...] illius eterne beatitudinis premia, momentanee quedam experientia, degustavit. Legimus quippe [...] Paulum [...] raptum usque <in> tertium celum [...] quod ab hac visione non multum discrepare coniciet si fuerit qui ad plenum apostolice visionis modum et ordinem investiget." *The Life*, vol. 1, 204.

²⁷ For Haymo's original text see PL 117: 662D and 663B. The hagiographer's words on Paul's vision, *Quibus utique verbis hanc visionis excellentiam, quam apostolo datam exposuit, aliis etiam sanctis conferri*

In this way the hagiographer creates a remarkable circle of mutual confirmation and justification connecting Beatrice's experience, the Biblical text, and its accepted (Augustinian) theological interpretation. On the one hand, Beatrice's rapture into heaven and her experience (and therefore her sanctity as well) are justified by the Pauline rapture narrative; on the other hand, Beatrice's unquestioned vision of God also justifies Paul's assumed (that is, non-scriptural) vision of God. Finally, the quoted *auctoritas* of Haymo (what is basically a selection of Augustine) validates the visions of both Paul and Beatrice.

b) The *Commedia* of Dante

In the *Commedia*, Dante uses a great number of theological and scriptural allusions in order to construct his image as *poeta theologus*, but his "all-embracing model," as Teodolinda Barolini observed, is the enraptured Paul.²⁸ For now, it is sufficient to mark the most remarkable parallels. The *Paradiso* describes Dante's journey through heavens and culminates in a vision of God; the ascent ends in the Empyreum (like Paul's ascent in the commentary tradition). Even if Dante first does not dare to compare himself to Paul (*Inf.* II, 32: *Io non Paulo sono*), his later allusions to 2Cor 12:2-4 are explicit. At the beginning of *Paradiso* he states that he returned from heaven where saw things that are unutterable (*Par.* I, 4-6: *Nel ciel ... fu' io, e vidi cose che ridire / né sa né può chi di là sù discende*). The *Letter to Can Grande* (whose author might have been Dante himself) even explains these lines (*Epistle* 13, 28, 77-79). Here we find a theoretical explanation for the ineffability addressed by the poem: the commentary uses the *locus* of 2Cor 12: 2-4 as a scriptural example for the experience Dante had (*hoc insinuat nobis per Apostolum ad Corinthios loquentem*). At a later point of the *Paradiso* (I, 67-75), Dante even addresses his own uncertainty as to whether he ascended in body or not, thus imitating Paul's repeated doubt on the same (2Cor 12: 2-3).

* * *

The two examples came from the period when the authoritative doctrine on *raptus* was already solidified (the *Vita Beatricis* was written c. 1270, the *Paradiso* was finished in 1321). However different genres these texts belong to (the *Vita* being a hagiographical work while the *Commedia* is a literary or theological fiction), the texts function in a similar way. By comparing their personal experience to Paul's rapture, both examples add, ultimately, more authenticity and authority to the person. Beatrice and Dante shared the exceptional and unique experience of Paul, the participation in glory and the vision of God before death. This also points out a particular feature of the accepted theory of *raptus*: being "caught up" to paradise (or the third heaven) is extraordinary *because* it

posse minime denegavit (in De Ganck's translation: "By these words he by no means denied that the excellent vision which he explained was granted to the Apostle, could be granted to other saints." [208/209]) explain the passage Augustine's *Ep.* 147, 13, 31 (see quoted above in note 3).

²⁸ See *The Undivine Comedy. Dethologizing Dante* of Teodolinda Barolini (Princeton NJ, 1992, Princeton University Press), esp. chap. 7 "Nonfalse errors and the true dreams of the evangelist" (here 149).

realises something normally impossible, and *because* it can occur only through direct divine intervention.

These examples, considered together with the doctrinal and exegetical considerations outlined above, may explain why Paul's rapture could not become a paradigm for immediate experience of God. In the Latin tradition the rapture narrative soon obtained a well-defined doctrinal content from Augustine that focused on it as an extraordinary event in an extraordinary person's life. This exclusive interpretation was perpetuated by the exegesis of the passage, and from the thirteenth century, the authoritative interpretation presented a modernised form of it. In this reading, being "caught up to the third heaven" (that is, seeing God immediately) is considered either an impossibility (by human means), or its opposite: a miracle (through grace). Since it is extraordinary (in other words, it is not part of the order of things), the spiritual literature does not count it as a real possibility either.

The more interesting cases are those where rapture is considered not in the duality of miracle/impossibility but as pattern for the just ones or the contemplatives, who indeed can be, or used to be, caught up to the third heaven. These rare cases are found outside the Augustinian tradition outlined so far.

2. Rapture as model: irregular readings

The Augustinian tradition gave a characteristic meaning to the rapture narrative. It had, on the one hand, a well-defined theoretical and doctrinal interpretation (what in its ultimate form became the doctrine of *raptus*) – in this way, the narrative describes an act of a supernatural, ecstatic intellectual vision of God in his substance (something possible otherwise only in the blessed state). On the other hand, it was a unique and extraordinary event but from the life of the Apostle: rapture (and later *raptus*) belonged properly to Paul, and nearly exclusively to him. The implication is that rapture was an extraordinary gift of grace – therefore "being enraptured into the third heaven" became a predicate not only equivalent with "seeing God immediately" but also implied a comparison to Paul.

However accepted and authoritative this interpretation became, its premises are far from self-evident. The two examples below present different readings, where the rapture to the third heaven and the historical person of Paul are not so exclusively connected. Based on different premises, in these texts Paul is not the sole representative of a miracle: instead, his rapture is seen as template for spiritual experience. Without the Augustinian undertones of salvation history, the modality of these text is also different: "being caught up into the third heaven" (although with different meanings) becomes a real possibility, even an aim proposed to the reader.

a) Ambrose, *De Paradiso*

The *De Paradiso* of Saint Ambrose contains an unconventional interpretation of Saint Paul's rapture. At the outset of the treatise Ambrose mentions Paul's rapture into paradise with some reservation: he observes the difficulties involved and, finally, leaves the

question undisputed, turning instead to the Genesis description of paradise. The difficulties he mentions outline a general attitude toward Paul's case: *only* Paul was able to see paradise during this life or perhaps, at the most, someone like Paul), and he was not permitted to tell the words he heard there, so it must remain Paul's secret.²⁹ While these reflexions emphasise the extraordinary, unique and secret nature of Paul's experience, later in the treatise Ambrose gives an interpretation which makes it far less unique, by stating that *any* just person may be caught up to paradise as a reward for their merits.

The context is Ambrose's answer to a question: why are different animals also located in paradise, if being there was (and is) such a great gift from God to men?³⁰ To solve this problem, Ambrose presents an allegorical (tropological) interpretation of paradise. Paradise itself is the human mind; the wild and domestic animals refer to the irrational motions of the body, while the birds refer to the vain thoughts of mind. Adam was given the duty, together with the adequate faculty (*sensus*), in order to know everything and judge all of them. He failed, and the punishment of his wrong judgement (*poena pravi iudicii*) was that he was cast out of paradise. In the direct continuation of this thought, Ambrose's commentary outlines the possible return to paradise:

“Hence the just (*justi*) are caught up into paradise, just as Paul was caught up into paradise and heard unutterable words. And if by the vigor of your mind you are caught up from the first heaven to the second and from the second to the third (this happens because each and every man is first of all corporeal; secondly, he is of sensual nature; and thirdly, he is spiritual); if you are caught up to the third heaven in order to see the brilliance of spiritual grace (because the sensual man does not perceive the things that are of the Spirit, and for that reason the ascent into the third heaven is necessary for you in order that you be caught up into paradise), then you will be caught up, without incurring danger, in order that you may be able to pass judgement on all things, because the spiritual man judges all things and he himself is judged by no man.”³¹

What Ambrose's exegesis proposes here, is an ascent to paradise by virtue – what is also a (limited and temporary) reversal of the Fall. The three heaven seem to designate here

²⁹ *De Paradiso* I, 1: “Ergo si huiusmodi paradisus est, ut eum solus Paulus aut uix aliquis Pauli similis, cum in uita degeret, uidere potuerit [...] quo tandem modo nos paradisi situm potuerimus absolvere, quem nec uidere potuimus, et, si potuissemus uiderem tamen prohiberemur aliis intimare [...] et ideo relinquamus Pauli esse secretum.” CSEL 32/1, 265-266.

³⁰ *De Paradiso* XI, 51: “set quia plerosque mouet [...] quomodo si uel primo magnum munus dei fuit circa homines, ut in paradiso homines collocarentur, uel postea magnorum remuneratio uideretur esse meritorum, ut ad paradysum iustus unusquisque rapiatur, dicuntur etiam bestiae et pecora agri et uolatilia caeli in paradiso fuisse.” CSEL 32/1, 308.

³¹ *De Paradiso* XI, 53: “denique iusti in paradysum rapiuntur, sicut Paulus raptus est in paradysum et audiuit uerba ineffabilia. et tu si a primo caelo ad secundum, a secundo caelo ad tertium mentis tuae uigore rapiaris, hoc est quia primum unusquisque homo est corporalis, secundo animalis, tertio spiritalis, si ita rapiaris ad tertium caelum, ut uideas fulgorem gratiae spiritalis - animalis enim homo quae sunt spiritus nescit, et ideo tertii caeli ascensio tibi est necessaria, ut rapiaris in paradysum - rapiaris iam sine periculo, ut possis diiudicare omnia, quia spiritalis diiudicat omnia, ipse autem a nemine diiudicatur [cf. 1Cor 2:15].” (CSEL 32/1, 309-310). I gave above a heavily modified translation of Savage, from John J. Savage (tr.): *St. Ambrose. Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel*. The Fathers of the Church vol. 42 (New York, 1961, Catholic University of America Press), here 321.

three stages of development (from being corporeal to becoming spiritual). The ascent (or rapture) to the third heaven of spiritual state is followed by another rapture to the paradise where, like Adam, the just man (*justus*) can pass judgement on everything. This interpretation set Paul's rapture (and rapture itself) into a new light. While the opening lines of the *De paradiso* talked about limitation, and mentioned "Paul alone, or at the most someone similar to Paul" (*solus Paulus vel vix Paulo similis*), here Ambrose talks not about a singular rapture that occurred only to Paul but about an indefinite multitude of just men (*justi, justus unusquisque, quicumque*) who can be or are "caught up to paradise".³² The way Ambrose addresses the reader also suggests the possibility, even the expectation, of such rapture: "the ascent into the third heaven is necessary for you" (*tertii caeli ascensio tibi est necessaria, ut rapiaris in paradisum*).

b) Richard of Saint-Victor

In the writings of Richard of Saint-Victor, references to Paul's rapture occur unusually often.³³ In all these instances, Richard quotes Paul's words as a testimony of contemplation in ecstasy. From the references to the three heavens and rapture evolve a complex allegory connecting theological anthropology, contemplation, epistemology and ontology. In *Beniamin minor* Richard distinguishes three degrees of the possible cognition of God in this life; the three degrees (seeing God by faith, by reason and by contemplation) belong to the three heavens so that seeing God by contemplation (which is beyond reason) belongs to the third heaven.³⁴ Elsewhere the third heaven (or the heaven of heavens) is the region of the eternal and inaccessible light that cannot be approached by reason: when human mind is caught up into this heaven, it becomes deified and assimilated to God.³⁵

Richard's numerous (although scattered) remarks make clear that the experience called by him "contemplation" is the most immediate experience of God possible in this life (although its theological formulation remains insufficient). This occurred to Paul, but not only to him. Richard fully identifies Paul's rapture and contemplation: Paul's rapture

³² Notice that 9 of the 13 manuscripts considered by the edition give the variant "justi in paradisum saepe rapiuntur;" cf. *De Paradiso* XI, 53: "quicumque fuerit in paradiso ascensione uirtutis, audiet mysteria Dei arcana illa atque secreta" CSEL 32/1, 310 (l. 19).

³³ The theme appears several times in Richard's writings, see *Beniamin maior* III, viii-x, *Beniamin minor* 74, *De exterminatione*, the prologue of the *De Trinitate*, *De IV gradibus* 37, *Adnotatio in Ps. 121*. For a detailed analysis of the heaven allegories of Richard see Németh, Paulus raptus, 375-383.

³⁴ *Beniamin minor* lxxiv: "Possumus tamen illa quae in hac vita haberi potest, Dei cognitionem, tribus gradibus distinguere, et secundum triplicem graduum differentiam per tres coelos dividere. Aliter siquidem Deus videtur per fidem, aliter cognoscitur per rationem, atque aliter cernitur per contemplationem. Prima ergo visio ad primum coelum, secunda ad secundum, tertia pertinet ad tertium. Prima est infra rationem, tertia supra rationem." PL 196: 53C.

³⁵ *De IV gradibus*, 37: "In secundo itaque gradu, ut dictum est, celum celorum lumenque illud inaccessible videri potest sed adiri non potest [...]. Denique et apostolus ad illam eterni luminis regionem se raptum fuisse gloriatur. Scio, inquit, hominem in Christo, sive in corpore sive extra corpus nescio, Deus scit, raptum hujusmodi usque ad tertium celum." In Gervais Dumeige (ed.): *Ives, Épitre a Severin sur la charité. Richard de Saint-Victor, Les quatre degrés de la violente charité* (Paris, 1955, Vrin), 165/167 cf. PL 196: 1220D). See also *De IV gradibus*, 38: "Tertius itaque amoris gradus est quando mens hominis in illam rapitur divini luminis abyssum, ita ut humanus animus in hoc statu exteriorum omnium oblitus penitus nesciat seipsum totusque transeat in Deum suum." ed. Dumeige, 167, cf. PL 196: 1220D.

was contemplation in ecstasy – but, conversely, ecstatic contemplation is a rapture into the third heaven, too. The other, even more striking feature, especially in comparison to the Augustinian tradition, is that this experience is not restricted to Paul. Whenever Richard quotes 2Cor 12:2-4, Paul’s words serve as testimony of contemplation in ecstasy. This is not a distant theoretical possibility, as the following passage (*Beniamin maior* III, iv) indicates:

“For when Paul, or a person similar to Paul, is raised up above himself and snatched up (*rapitur*) to the third heaven, certainly he does not investigate by his own spirit those hidden things about which no person is allowed to speak, but God reveals them to him through His own Spirit.”³⁶

Being “caught up to the third heaven” is not a theoretical construction here: both Paul and those people who are similar to Paul (meaning the contemplatives, the intended audience of Richard’s spiritual writings) are “caught up”. Among all the references to rapture and three heavens, the prologue of the *De Trinitate* has the greatest explanatory value. Here in a single paragraph Richard makes explicit the connections between contemplative ascent, Paul’s rapture, and the role of Christ in this entire complex of ideas.³⁷

“[L]et us erect that sublime ladder of contemplation, and let us put on wings as eagles, with which we can hover above earthly realities and rise to heavenly realities. Let us taste not the things that are on the earth but heavenly realities, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Let us follow the lead of Paul, who flew up to the secrets of the third heaven, where he heard secrets which he was not able to speak to men. Let us ascend after our head. For this purpose Christ ascended to heaven, that he might provoke our desire and draw it after him. Christ ascended, and the Spirit of Christ descended. For this purpose Christ ascended to heaven, that he might provoke our desire and draw it after him. Christ ascended, and the Spirit of Christ descended. For this purpose Christ sent his Spirit to us, that he might raise our spirit toward him. Christ ascended bodily, let us ascend mentally. And so, his ascension was corporeal, but ours is spiritual. [...]”

³⁶ Richard, *Beniamin maior* III, iv: “Nam, cum Paulus vel Paulo similis elevatur supra seipsum, rapitur usque ad tertium coelum, profecto arcana illa, quae non licet homini loqui, non investigat per spiritum proprium sed revelat ei Deus per spiritum suum.” Marc-Aeilko Aris (ed.), *Contemplatio: philosophische Studien zum Traktat Benjamin Maior des Richard von St. Viktor* (Frankfurt, 1996, Knecht), 61 = PL 196: 114C. Quoted in Zinn’s translation: Grover A. Zinn (trans.), *Richard of St. Victor. The Twelve Patriarchs. The Mystical Ark. Book Three of The Trinity* (Mahwah NJ, 1979, Paulist Press), 227-228.

³⁷ *De Trinitate, Prologus*: “sublimem illam contemplationis scalam erigamus, assumamus pennas ut aquile, in quibus nos possimus a terrenis suspendere et ad celestia levare. Sapiamus que celestia sunt ubi Christus est ad dexteram Dei sedens. Sequamur quo Paulus precessit, qui usque ad tertii celi secreta volavit, ubi audivit arcana illa que non licet homini loqui. Ascendamus post caput nostrum [*sc.* Christ]. Nam ad hoc ascendit in celum, ut provocaret et post se traheret desiderium nostrum. Christus ascendit, et Spiritus Christi descendit. Ad hoc Christus misit nobis Spiritum suum, ut spiritum nostrum levaret post ipsum; Christus ascendit corpore, nos ascendamus mente. Ascensio itaque illius fuit corporalis, nostra autem sit spiritualis. [...]” Jean Ribailier (ed.), *Richard de Saint-Victor. De Trinitate* (Paris, 1958, Vrin), 82 = PL 196: 889C. English translation of Christopher P. Evans, from Boyd Taylor Coolman and Dale M. Coulter (ed.), *Trinity and Creation. Hugh, Richard and Adam of St. Victor* (New York, 2011, New City Press), 210.

Ascent to heaven is a traditional allegory for contemplation: winged beings (that can elevate from the ground and ascend to the heaven/sky) are also haunting figures for contemplation in Richard's writings: most notably, the perfect contemplatives are not only compared to six-winged Cherub (since they know the six contemplations: *Beniamin maior* I, x), but their mind also must be conformed to the angels (surpassing the limitations of reason, *ibid.* IV, i). Paul's rapture (here ascent) is also a recurring theme. The unexpected element here is the context. Richard creates a typological connection between the ascension of Christ and the rapture of Paul (which also justifies Richard's own usage of the rapture imagery). The (spiritual) ascent into the third heaven was established by Christ: his ascension (in body) was a prefiguration, the model of Paul's ascent (in spirit): but it is also a prefiguration of the reader's (similarly spiritual) ascent. Paul's rapture is literally a precedent here: the reader has to do what Paul did earlier. The translation "let us follow the lead of Paul" does not render the full meaning of *sequamur quo Paulus precessit*. We are expected to follow Paul to that place he already reached before us (that is, to the enthroned Christ). But Paul's ascent itself is an act of imitation of Christ: this imitation is expected from the reader too. This juxtaposition of the Apostle and the reader is rather unthinkable in the Augustinian tradition. In the subsequent passage, Richard explicitly encourages the reader to ascend to the second and then to the third heavens:

"Now, it should not be enough for us to ascend in the contemplation of the mind to the secrets of the first heaven. Let us ascend from the first heaven to the second and from the second heaven to the third. For those who are ascending in contemplation from the visible to the invisible and from the corporeal to the spiritual, a consideration of immortality occurs in the first heaven, a consideration of incorruptibility occurs in the second heaven, and a consideration of eternity occurs in the third heaven. Behold the three regions: immortality, incorruptibility, and eternity. The first is the region of the human spirit, the second is the region of the angelic spirit, and the third is the region of divine spirit."³⁸

The motif of ascent here is integrated into one of the interlocked heaven allegories. The modality of the sentences again suggest the possibility of this necessary ascent into the third heaven. The consideration of the realm of eternity and the divine spirit here may have a concrete reference as the prologue is written to a book on the Holy Trinity.

* * *

In the examples above, Ambrose and Richard of Saint-Victor translated Paul's rapture narrative into a description of a possible personal experience. It happened through what medieval authors called *tropologia*, tropological (or moral) interpretation. Tropological

³⁸ *De Trinitate, Prologus*: "Parum autem nobis debet esse ad primi celi secreta mentis contemplatione ascendere. Ascendamus igitur de primo ad secundum, et de secundo ad tertium. Contemplatione ascendentibus de visibilibus ad invisibilia, de corporalibus ad spiritualia, primo occurrit consideratio immortalitatis, secundo consideratio incorruptibilitatis, tertio consideratio eternitatis. Ecce triplex regio, immortalitatis, incorruptibilitatis, aeternitatis. Prima est regio spiritus humani, secunda spiritus angelici, tertia spiritus divini" ed. Ribailier, 82 = PL 196: 900; translation from Evans, *Trinity and Creation*, 211-212.

reading can turn biblical figures and events into expressions of spiritual or moral experiences (or phenomena) experienced by the individual. In this sense, *tropologia* (or *sensus moralis*) is not limited to moral guidance (contrary to the often quoted verse *moralis quid agas*): it covers the events of the “internal world,” the psychological, moral and spiritual changes in the self. In this way, Paul enraptured into the third heaven can become a figure of spiritual experience: he is a “sample” of what may happen, under certain circumstances, to us.

This approach to the rapture narrative substantially differs from what became the standard one based on a selection of Augustine’s thoughts. As the examples above showed, both Ambrose and Richard counted with and accepted the possibility of a rapture into the third heaven (following the example of Paul), even encouraged their readers to that experience (what may be called an “inclusive” interpretation); in Augustine’s case, the possibility was radically reduced to Paul, Moses and some unnamed saints (“exclusive” interpretation). The difference between the two kinds of reading is crucial, since only the “inclusive” ones can serve as paradigms for possible spiritual experiences. A full understanding of what makes the difference would involve extensive studies into anthropological and theological subjects. Now we can focus on a single crucial element, the aspect of salvation history that is present in the Augustinian but remarkably absent from the other readings. Augustine connected Paul’s rapture not only to intellectual vision and ecstasy (treating them as epistemological and psychological realities) but also to the vision of God and its (salvation) historical contexts. The direct vision attributed to Paul is extraordinary since it is impossible (except by direct divine intervention); but also because Augustine denies such vision to Old Testament patriarchs. This necessarily raised the stakes on the predicate “being caught up to the third heaven.” Such grace is exceptional so that the persons who obtain it must also be exceptional. Augustine refers to them as “saints” – and in his tradition, after him almost no one dared to attribute such rapture to anyone: the hagiographer of Beatrice seems to be unusually bold in this respect.

The tropological reading, as it is without the burden of (salvation) history, results in an “inclusive” interpretation. Rapture into the third heaven becomes a general pattern, and Paul’s rapture is only one realisation of it (even if the meaning of rapture and the three heavens varies). In the works of Richard (who discussed the theme more extensively), this typological relation between Paul’s rapture and the reader’s potential experiences become more explicit. The non-historical interpretation leads to another, remarkably “un-Augustinian” consequence: although Paul is a central figure for Richard, the spiritual experience he attributes to him is not unique. A similar or identical contemplative ecstasy is attributed to Benjamin (cf. Ps. 67 [68]: 28: *Beniamin adolescentulus in extasi*) and to Abraham in his vision of the three men at Mamre (Gen. 18).

From a historical perspective, the tropological reading of Ambrose and Richard exerted no discernible influence, either on the exegetical or the doctrinal interpretation of the rapture narrative. In the long run no interpretation could rival the Augustinian one discussed above: the freedom of interpretation (which certainly existed until the early thirteenth century) did not grant success or general acceptance. Ambrose’s interpretation was quoted by Eriugena (*Periphyseon* IV, 18) and Richard’s one has a rough parallel in Achard of Saint-Victor (*Sermo* XIV): but these seem to be all the instances of

tropological interpretation. Their case was not unique: the interpretations of Origen, Gregory the Great, Eriugena and other, less well-known authors had the same fate, as did Augustine's other interpretations which were not presented in the *De Genesi ad litteram* and *Letter 147*.³⁹ The most plausible reasons for their isolation are institutional and doctrinal. The 2Cor 12: 1-4 very early obtained a detailed explanation from Augustine, an unquestionable authority; then the formation of scholastic tradition solidified it and built above it the ultimate theological doctrine of *raptus*. After that period, a substantially different interpretation would necessarily conflict with established doctrine. This can be seen, although indirectly, in the reception of Richard, whose writings made him an authority on contemplation.

Thirteenth-century authors often quoted his definitions and systematic presentation of contemplation (*Beniamin maior* I), his observations on ecstasy (*Beniamin maior* V) and love (esp. *De IV gradibus*), or the organic development of virtues (*Beniamin minor*), even if some of his insights conflicted with their premises. Being an authority, Richard was not openly criticised or directly rejected: instead, his sentences were adapted to the positions of later authors through selective quotation and reinterpretation. Typical examples for this practice can be found at authors representing affective spirituality (such as Thomas Gallus, Hugh of Balma, Rudolph of Biberach). They quote Richard's theories on contemplation as a system of intellectual cognition but inferior to the affective, unitive cognition of God. A final, less typical example from Antony of Padua (d. 1231) may reveal why Richard's interpretation could not become accepted.

Antony was an early Franciscan who, as Jean Châtillon demonstrated, used passages from Richard's spiritual works in his own sermons (written late 1210s to 1231). Châtillon exposed that Antony, by selectively quoting and altering the original, expressed his affective spirituality through Richard's texts.⁴⁰ Based on the observations and examples of Châtillon I try to show how Antony's alterations also express a conflict of premises regarding an immediate experience of God (and its formulation). Richard's *Adnotatio in Ps. 121* contains one of those instances where Paul's words refer to contemplative ecstasy (*excessus*), to the state when the mind of the "perfect ones" is caught up to the third heaven (that is, to eternal joy and the state of glory). Antony transcribes Richard's related allegories of heavens but leaves out both those parts which identify *excessus* with Paul's rapture and those terms of the original (*rapi*, *raptus*) which could evoke the term *raptus*. The other example is *Beniamin maior* IV, xi where Richard describes ecstasy (*excessus*) as a *quasi facie ad faciem* vision (cf. 1Cor 13:12), as contemplation of God and the light of the supreme Wisdom, occurring without mirror and enigma (cf. 1Cor 13:12). While the original suggest some kind of immediate vision of God in ecstasy, Antony's own text drops the reference to 1Cor 13:12, and speaks only about a vision of the light. The intention behind the alterations becomes clear if we consider again some thirteenth-century premises. In that period, ecstasy (especially the affective ecstasy by love) belonged to the possible and desired spiritual (and

³⁹ For an overview of these readings see Németh, Paulus raptus, 356-369.

⁴⁰ For the text parallels with Antony's *Sermo in circumcissione* and *Sermo de sanctis Apostolis Petro et Paulo* see the article Saint Antoine de Padoue et les victorins, in Jean Châtillon: *Le mouvement canonial au moyen âge: réforme de l'Église, spiritualité et culture*. Études réunies par Patrice Sicard (Turnhout, 1992, Brepols), 255-292, here 281-292.

psychological) experiences; the immediate vision of God was reserved for *raptus*, and “contemplation” usually meant a mediated vision (that is, a limited intellectual cognition) of God. Reading this way, the first example shows Antony’s attempt to separate Paul’s rapture (conceived as *raptus*) from that ecstasy which may occur to contemplatives, so that the unique and extraordinary status of Paul’s rapture can be preserved. In the second case he removes the element of the direct (immediate) vision of God from the context of contemplation and ecstasy (since such vision is possible in *raptus* only). The alterations reveal the problem with Richard’s theory: he connected these elements too closely and made a vision of God too accessible. The tacit distinction between the possible spiritual experiences and the improbable event of *raptus* is a feature characteristic of virtually all thirteenth-century theologians: the difference is that “mystical authors” offer more details on the possible experiences while “scholastic theologians” elaborate the theoretical background of the improbable case.

Conclusion

In the history of spirituality, scriptural passages and images often served as templates to formulate spiritual experiences: bridal mysticism is based on images from the Cantic. ; Moses’ climbing at Mount Sinai, then entering the shining darkness, also served as an image defining paradigms. Besides these well-established paradigms, Saint Paul’s rapture offers a more revealing case. The scriptural narrative of someone raptured into the third heaven suggests an extraordinary event that potentially could be interpreted as an immediate experience of God. Whether (and if so, how) this potential was realised by the medieval Western tradition was the question. The investigation brought mixed results.

The “exclusive” interpretation of the rapture narrative (represented by the Augustinian tradition) could not serve as a paradigm for personal “mystical” experiences, since it reduced rapture to a few saints (most notably to Saint Paul himself). When thirteenth-century spirituality (which developed alongside this tradition) offered formulations for an immediate experience of God, *raptus* (involving a direct vision of God) was not considered; the resulting solutions avoid the concept of seeing God and prefer a non-visual imagery. In this tradition, “being enraptured to the third heaven” is a formal option: theoretically it is open to the believer (if God works a miracle), but practically it cannot be predicated of anyone but Paul (and the “saints” mentioned by Augustine). Dante imitates Paul in his theological fiction, and seemingly attributes this experience to himself, to gain authority; in the *Vita* of Beatrice her saintly life and visionary experience of rapture confirm each other.

The existence of an “inclusive” reading of the rapture narrative also has been pointed out through texts of Ambrose (*De Paradiso*) and Richard of Saint-Victor. These interpretations were based on the tropological reading of the text and lacked that element of salvation history which made the traditional one so exclusive. In these cases, Paul becomes (in typological sense) a figure, and “being caught up into the third heaven” becomes a real possibility, even an aim proposed to the reader (which cannot be reached without grace). These interpretations can serve as a paradigm for spiritual experiences, even if the exact meaning of rapture varies in them. The two kinds of reading, “inclusive” and “exclusive” are unreconcilable. The “exclusive” reading formed a tradition and

became gradually the normative interpretation of the passage, embedded into Church doctrine, but could not serve as paradigm. The “inclusive” readings offered a possible paradigm but had remain isolated, without influencing the other tradition. The conflict between the two readings therefore never became explicit. By the thirteenth century, Ambrose’s interpretation was long forgotten, and Richard’s works were read as spiritual readings (without direct influence on actual theology); the Augustinian principles of “exclusive” reading became part of Church doctrine and affective spirituality offered a new paradigm for the immediate experience of God. These conditions make especially valuable the example of Antony of Padua who, quoting selectively Richard’s texts, removes those elements which are contrary to the “exclusive” Augustinian interpretation. This example also reveals why rapture into the third heaven could not become a successful paradigm for spiritual experience in the Latin tradition.