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Vision in the Anglo-Norman *Voyage of Brendan*

Paper written for presentation at the IMC Leeds, 9 July 2007

The Purpose of this Paper

The Anglo-Norman *Voyage of Brendan* was written either around 1106 or around 1121 and tells of an abbot who wishes to see the marvels of Paradise and the fates of the damned before he dies. He travels on a seven-year cyclical voyage, experiencing many marvels on the way, and succeeds in achieving Paradise. The text focuses on oppositions, such as the land and the sea;¹ this paper considers another opposition: that of sight and blindness. During the course of Brendan's journey, there are places where the emphasis is on vision. The aim of this paper is to discuss three of these locations, those that are particularly relevant to the supernumerary, or late-coming, monks. I shall discuss the importance of vision and what seeing, and equally, of *not* seeing, contributes to the narrative. Where appropriate, I shall compare Benedeit's source, the *Navigatio sancti Brendani*, with the Anglo-Norman version.

Some Definitions of Vision

The Anglo-Norman *Voyage* presents vision in a variety of ways: firstly, we have the concept of being able to see, or visual perception. Vision may be obscured by darkness or smoke, for example, which may prevent the characters from physically seeing what is happening around them. The Anglo-Norman *Voyage* differs from the *Navigatio* in that, in the source text, the devil is invisible save to Brendan.² Instead, in the Anglo-Norman, the monks sleep, and the devil appears under the cover of darkness (ll. 309–26).³ However, something else that is potentially 'not seen' is when a monk conceals a transgression, until such an action is brought to light.

We might also consider 'vision' in the context of Brendan's conception of his journey. At the beginning of the text, he prays to see Paradise and Hell. It is this vision that shows the imagination of Brendan to establish a target, and to understand the necessary steps in order to achieve these targets: in this case, prayer, obedience, hard work and understanding of the divine lessons that are presented to the brethren.

¹ Benedeit, *Le Voyage de Saint Brendan: Édition bilingue, Texte, traduction, Présentation et notes Par Ian Short et Brian Merrilees* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2006), p. 20. Also Robin F. Jones, "The Mechanics of Meaning in the Anglo-Norman *Voyage of Saint Brendan*," *Romanic Review* 71:2 (1980), 105-13.

² John J. O'Meara, 'The Latin Version', in *The Voyage of St Brendan: Representative Versions of the Legend in English Translation*, First Paperback edition, ed. W.R.J. Barron and Glyn S. Burgess (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2005), p. 32.

³ Quotations are taken from the Anglo-Norman version are taken from E.G.R. Waters, *The Anglo-Norman Voyage of St. Brendan by Benedeit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928). All translations are my own.

Brendan also demonstrates the power of prophecy, particularly concerning the fates of the late-coming monks – those monks that join the crew, but who do not complete the voyage. The power of prophecy is, in itself, a form of vision. The fates of these monks are the focus of this paper

Introduction to the text

The Anglo-Norman *Voyage* is based on the ninth-century Latin text, the *Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis*. The composer of the *Voyage* identifies himself in a salutation at the beginning of the text, calling himself 'l'apostoiles danz Benedeit'. Benedeit took an independent attitude to the *Navigatio*: he adapted an essentially monastic narrative into a didactic adventure story. This is achieved by excising liturgical passages, lists of psalms and apparently extraneous passages. At the same time, he enhances and adds drama and description to other encounters. His skill is shown by the structure of his poem: this shows three distinct sections and a supernumerary monk departs in each of these sections. He also pays extensive attention to detail, for example, his use of the four elements and recurring themes such as enormous creatures.⁴ He maintains the original moral of the *Navigatio* by peppering the text with didactic maxims.

In the *Voyage*, Brendan prays for sight, and therefore understanding, of God's marvels. He prays that God should allow him to see Paradise – 'cel lui mustret veablement' - (l.60) but he also wants 'to see hell as well'. Having sought advice from a hermit in the woods who has himself witnessed Paradise, but not experienced it, Brendan chooses fourteen monks as his crew and prepares to depart.

An important theme in the *Navigatio*, which is used, but adapted, by Benedeit, is that of the late-coming monks. Having chosen his crew, Brendan is petitioned by three additional monks to join the voyage. This Brendan allows, although he gives a stark warning that he *foresees* the fates of the monks and 'does not hide' their fate from them, indeed, he reveals that two of the monks will be taken by Satan, and the third, although greatly tempted 'will be well supported by God'. The supernumerary monks do not leave of their own free will, but they do leave at intervals in each third of the text. The departure of the first monk occurs when the monks first make landfall. On the first sea voyage, Benedeit observes that the brethren *lose sight of everything*, apart from the sea and the clouds (ll. 213-4). Later, when approaching paradise, the brethren again lose sight of everything, except the sea and the heavens above them. This suggests that the brethren are focusing on the divine, rather than having their vision obscured by clouds. Thus, Benedeit emphasises from the beginning of the journey the importance of clarity of vision.

⁴ Glyn S. Burgess, 'Les fonctions des quatre éléments dans le *Voyage de saint Brendan* par Benedeit,' *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale X^e-XII^e siècles* 38 (1995), 3-22; Glyn S. Burgess, 'The Use of Animals in Benedeit's Version of the Brendan Legend,' *The Brendan Legend: Texts and Versions*, eds. Glyn S. Burgess and Clara Strijbosch (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 31-32.

The First Supernumerary – the Deserted City

When the brethren first make landfall, they find a deserted city with marbled palaces. One of the messages of this passage is that God provides for all necessities, and to demonstrate this, the monks find a store of food and drink. Brendan's warning is for the monks not to take too much 'n'en prengez trop'. As with Brendan's ability to foresee the fates of the supernumeraries at the beginning of the narrative, he also foresees the monks' transgression when they arrive at the Deserted City. The supernumerary fails to understand how serious this warning is: Benedeit interjects at this point 'Ast vos Sathan qui l'un seduit' – 'behold how Satan seduces one of them'. Benedeit, on occasions, tells the audience to 'behold' and thus emphasises that an important event is happening. Brendan, who stays awake when the other monks are sleeping, witnesses a devil offering the supernumerary a golden goblet: one might consider that watching over the monks is a suitable, even necessary, role for the abbot, but again, Benedeit says that Brendan has the ability to see without a candle: 'sanz candeile tut le vetheit' (l.324). This is a God-given gift, which means that he can watch over his flock in times of spiritual darkness. 'Quar quant ço Deus li voir mustrer,/ Sur ço ne cirge alumer' (l. 325-6).

In the *Voyage*, Brendan normally knows more than his brethren: he has foreknowledge, for example, that the monks will find a landing place in three days' time. Later, he stays safely in his boat leaving the monks to go ashore on an 'island' that is, in fact, an enormous fish. Glyn Burgess observes that Brendan chooses not to share his foreknowledge with the brethren, but instead allows them to experience the terror of the moving island for themselves.⁵ Here, the monks were never in any real danger; however, in the Deserted Citadel, the physical restraints of darkness have been removed: when God wishes him to see an indiscretion – and the very soul of a monk in his care is at stake – Brendan does not need a light. This is an additional detail included by Benedeit: Brendan seeing without aid of a candle is not in the *Navigatio*.

As well as the physical darkness which Brendan overcomes, this is also a time of spiritual blindness for the supernumerary: his soul is potentially forfeit for stealing in the face of a direct warning from the abbot. This is repeated as the brethren leave the city: 'seignurs, vus pri, n'en portez rien od vus d'ici' (l. 329-30). The darkness of the deserted city is a metaphor for spiritual blindness: the devil is concealed from all save Brendan and the transgressing supernumerary (and the audience). Brendan can see, and *foresee*, with God's help. Yet, even in the face of temptation and the resulting potential for damnation, the brethren are blind. Ultimately, blindness is not only the physical restriction of being unable to see in the dark: in this instance Brendan stays awake when the other monks sleep – this occurs again later when the brethren are overcome by the effects of an intoxicating spring. They drink despite a warning – again – from Brendan, and sleep for up to three days. Once again, Brendan stays awake.

⁵ G.S. Burgess, 'Savoir and Faire in the Anglo-Norman *Voyage Of St Brendan*', *French Studies* XLIX (July 1995) No. 3: 257–74, p. 263.

Brendan's actions in this encounter succeed in saving the soul of the transgressing monk. Having been discovered, the monk confesses. Then, as Benedeit observes, *visible to all*, the devil is expelled from the transgressing monk (l.341). Thus, once the transgression has been discovered, all of the brethren are able to see, and, more importantly, are able to learn from the supernumerary's mistakes. For Benedeit, there is a link between darkness and lack of spiritual understanding: this is particularly shown elsewhere, for example when the brethren find an apparently supernatural crystal column in the sea, the top of which reaches the clouds 'Desqu'as nües muntout en sus' (l. 1073); or the fact that the youth commands them to turn back from the mountain in Paradise because they possess too little knowledge to understand it: 'Quar poi estes a ço savant' (l.1794). Therefore, in the darkness of the deserted citadel the monk commits his transgression. One further link between darkness and immorality, in the *Navigatio*, is that the devil takes the form of an Ethiopian child, also called a *puer niger*.

By contrast to the transgression, the narrative highlights that once the monk has been absolved and has received communion '*in the sight of all*, death takes him [and] the spirit goes to Paradise'. Clarity of vision is of critical importance: one of the maxims in the *Voyage* is Brendan telling the monks 'the more you see these wonders, the better you will believe in God' (ll. 475-6). Therefore, once the lesson has been learned, *all* the monks are symbolically able to see the devil and the monk achieving salvation, which serves to reinforce their faith.

The second supernumerary – Smithy of Hell

There are a number of points on the journey where natural phenomena reach from the earth to the heavens, rising so high that they are obscured by clouds. Earlier, I mentioned the Crystal column as an example of this. Another such instance is at the smithy of hell – a smoke-capped mountain where the second supernumerary is lost. Recent scholarship has identified this location as a volcano symbolising the mouth of hell, and Benedeit enjoys engaging in vivid descriptions: 'the dark land ... of cloud and fog ... smoking with putrid flames ... surrounded by great blackness'. As I discussed the concept of vision, morality and spiritual understanding being interlinked in relation to the deserted citadel, we see that this is barely disguised imagery.

Despite the obscurity of the clouds, the brethren clearly see the 'gloomy valley' which spews 'burning rocks and flames' to the extent that it takes away the light of the day (l. 1134). With these vivid descriptions in mind (Benedeit dedicates some fifty lines to the descriptions of hell and the demon) it seems reasonable to assume that the brethren have grown through the knowledge gained in their previous encounters to understand the nature of hell, and the importance of contrition. However, it is at this point in the *Voyage* that the second of the supernumeraries leaves the crew.

A parallel in the Navigatio and the second supernumerary in the Anglo-Norman Voyage

I need to make a small aside here, because it is the *third* supernumerary that leaves at the smoke-capped mountain in Benedeit's source tale. In the *Navigatio* the *second* supernumerary departs to join the chanting monks on the Island of the Three Choirs and this is a blessing. The episode of the Three Choirs is a curious scene and I have argued elsewhere that Benedeit omitted it not only because its inclusion slowed the pace of the narrative, but also because of the long lists of psalms, which had an overly ecclesiastical flavour that he avoided.⁶ I suggest that the scene of the Three Choirs in the *Navigatio* was alluding to Irish source material and parallels that Benedeit did not fully understand. It is while the Three Choirs are singing that a blinding cloud descends; however, the cloud is one of brightness, rather than obscurity. The appearance of the cloud could refer to the two witnesses that are killed by the Abyssal beast in Revelation and ascend to heaven in a cloud. Thus, in this instance, the cloud represents salvation. Brendan, who is equally blinded by the cloud, must learn all the divine lessons of the ocean before he can fully understand the implications of what has happened. This is an example of the monks reaching the limits of their human ability to comprehend the information presented to them. This is seen again in Paradise, where, in the *Navigatio*, the monks cannot cross a river, and in the Anglo-Norman *Voyage*, they cannot go any nearer the mountain upon which Paradise is situated. However, on the Island of Three Choirs, Brendan realises that one of the supernumeraries is to be saved.

Returning now to the passage concerning the damnation of the second supernumerary in the *Voyage*: the monk leaps out of their vessel on the shore of hell for a reason that the brethren 'do not know', but nor do they recover him. They all hear his last words: 'I am now being snatched away from you on account of my sins'. Thus, the supernumerary acknowledges his sin, but, unlike the first transgressor he does not make his confession: he cannot achieve paradise. However, only Brendan witnesses what has happened 'sul l'abes des uilz le vit' (l.1202):⁷ he sees a hundred demons dragging the supernumerary away.

It is at this point that the smoke that surrounds the mountain clears and all the brethren are able to see 'hell quite open' (l. 1210). Thus, the brethren do not see the moment of damnation, but they see the results of it: hell discharges 'fire and flames, burning poles and blades of metal, pitch and sulphur right up to the clouds, and receives then back, for they belong to it'. There is no escape for the souls that have been claimed by hell. In addition to witnessing this, they later hear a graphic description about torments in the two hells from Judas Iscariot. (In the *Navigatio*, Judas says that he observed the arrival and torment of the supernumerary, and that hell was so overjoyed that it sent forth a plume of fire – the volcano erupting). A later parallel in the *Voyage* is that a barrier of mist conceals Paradise (l. 1650). This serves to prevent

⁶ J.S. Mackley, *The Legend of Brendan: A Comparative Study of the Latin and Anglo-Norman Versions* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 11.

⁷ Waters has 'abes' – here Short and Merrilees's suggestion of 'l'abes' makes it clearer.

Brendan approaching Paradise until he has learned the mysteries of the ocean, when, like the smoke-capped mountain, the cloud symbolically parts so that the crew can find their way.

I have discussed Judas's tortures elsewhere;⁸ suffice it to say that, in the Anglo-Norman *Voyage*, they are graphic and would scare even the most complacent into contrition. Judas says six times that he 'saw' how painfully Jesus had been treated because of the betrayal, so he repents, but also despairs and hangs himself. Judas cites six tortures of Jesus, which parallel the six days of torment that he suffers in the two hells.

The third supernumerary – Mysteriously vanishing

The third and final supernumerary leaves the crew presumably after Brendan's discourse with Judas: the brethren do not notice the moment that it happens: they only realise later when they 'count their number'. It should be noted that the twelve-line scene describing the monk's disappearance is very much of Benedeit's invention to explain the departure of the third monk, as he omitted the scene of the Island of the Three Choirs which explains the fate of one of the supernumeraries in the *Navigatio*.

Brendan's initial prophecy for the supernumeraries is not completely fulfilled. For the monk who mysteriously vanishes, the fate is uncertain whether it is 'either for rest or for torment'. At the beginning, Brendan said that Satan would have two of the supernumeraries; the third, presumably the supernumerary who transgressed at the Deserted City, would be sustained by God.

The text says that the monks are perplexed – *enserrét* – by the monk's disappearance. Where, earlier in the narrative, the audience have shared knowledge with Brendan – sight that is denied the brethren – it has not happened on this occasion. The monk has vanished, and we do not know what has occurred. However, the text clearly states that Brendan *knows everything* – 'l'abes ... qui tut le sout' (l. 1505) – Brendan states that 'God has done with him what pleased him, which suggests that he *does* know what has happened. Coming as it does, immediately after Judas's descriptions of the two hells and Benedeit's description of Judas being dragged away by a thousand devils, this scene suggests that the third supernumerary has received the same fate. This is particularly noteworthy when one considers that because Brendan procured an additional day of respite for Judas, the devils wanted – and were denied – to inflict twice the suffering on Judas. It is reasonable to consider that the transgressing monk was taken to ensure that double punishment was meted and shared. Therefore, the third supernumerary could be suffering to the same extent as Judas in his return to hell.

Clarity of vision allows us to learn, but can also lead to complacency. Uncertainty – which is what Benedeit achieves in this scene – leads to speculation and fear, and leaves the audience in a state of anxiety concerning their own souls.

⁸ J.S. Mackley, 'The Torturer's 'Art' in the Judas Episode of Benedeit's *Voyage of St Brendan*', *Notes & Queries* 54 (March 2007):24–27.

Limitations

I have restricted this discussion of vision to the fates of the supernumeraries. An attempt to cover all of the aspects of vision, as suggested by the title of this paper, would require much longer than the time allowed in this session. If space had permitted, I should have liked to have discussed the individual instances that Benedeit uses the term 'vision' and 'sight' – a linguistic analysis; and then to look at instances where the characters are prevented from seeing something, either because of clouds, mist, fog, smoke, darkness and anything that might hinder sight and understanding – the textual analysis. One thing that I hope that I have made clear from the examples I have presented is that in this entertaining but essentially didactic text, vision and spiritual understanding are linked. Although the fog that surrounds paradise separates to form a path when the monks have learned the mysteries of the ocean and they are guided by their divine helper, there are four other milestones on the journey to Paradise where the monks are unable to see, and therefore fully comprehend, the information that is presented to them: for those familiar with the text, these 'milestones' are: the tree in the Paradise of birds; the crystal column; the smoke-covered mountain; and the mountain in Paradise.

Conclusion

The analysis of sight and vision is of principal importance when further unlocking the text of Benedeit's version of the *Voyage of Brendan*. When considering the fates of the supernumeraries, in the first instance, Brendan alone witnesses the transgression and only when the crime has been revealed can the other monks see the devil and the monk's soul achieving salvation. On the second occasion, the brethren hear the damnation of the monk, but only Brendan *sees* the supernumerary being dragged to his fate. Finally, no one witnesses the fate of the third monk, but, coming immediately after an episode discussing damnation, and the arrival of devils to drag Judas to the two hells. The other crewmembers associate this disappearance with the fates of the other supernumeraries and understand that he has left the crew as Brendan predicted. Thus, the supernumeraries represent the state of the soul after death: the first confesses, receives absolution and his soul achieves heaven; the second acknowledges sin but does not (indeed cannot) receive absolution and is therefore damned. In the third case, the fate of the soul is unknown, which, no matter how pious a life we lead, is still the fate of most of us. However, coming so quickly after Judas's detailed description of the two hells, it serves to scare the layman into contrition. Brendan's desire was to *see* Paradise and hell, and allows the audience to witness salvation and damnation along with him. Ironically, sight can lead to complacency, and Benedeit prevents the brethren, and the audience with them, from understanding *all* that is happening in the text. To conclude with a quotation from John's gospel, which I feel was prevalent in Benedeit's mind when he was considering the importance of sight: 'if you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now you claim you can see, your guilt remains' (John 9. 41).