

Infernal Walls and Divine Ladders. Crossing Borders in the Realm of the Dead in Dante and in His Visionary Precursors

My lecture aims to examine the role of these *topoi* of the visionary literature, reused and transformed by Dante. Medieval visionary authors describe the regions of the Underworld confined mostly by “natural” topographical elements and waters, i. e. mountains, valleys, pits, lakes, rivers, and only by a few “constructed objects”, such as walls, bridges, ladders or stairs. Dante – adapting narrative schemes and numerous elements functional to the description of an afterlife journey from the visionary *repertoire* – incorporates many of these topographical elements into the landscapes of his Otherworld. In the *Comedy*, we do not find the wall that most otherworldly travellers climb in the visions or the 'bridge of trial' but they do appear as dividing elements in several hellish places: seven walls encircle the noble castle in the Limbo of the great spirits and the city of Dis is surrounded by iron walls. The ten concentric ditches forming the Malebolge are separated by rock walls, which the author calls walls or bridges, depending on their role. A wall of fire surrounds the Earthly Paradise, which is both the boundary between the 'punishment section' of purgatory and Eden and the place of purification rites. While Hell and Purgatory are mostly visited on foot, the ascension to the heavenly spheres is rarely without means of transport or a ladder which can be either a trial or a link between two realms. Contrary to the examples of tradition, Dante ascends through the power of love, however a heavenly ladder of Paradise appears to the Traveller between two celestial spheres, leading from the heaven of Saturn to the Empyreum. Dante's ladder is not an actual object with an extension, since Paradise is the realm of spiritual beings, but a symbol, already central as an allegory in the Rule of Saint Benedict, the founder of the contemplative monastic order.