

EDMUND COLLEDGE O.S.A., *"If all the world were paper" Henry Suso's use of a much-travelled commonplace*, in «Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum» (ISSN 0391-7320), 50, (1980), pp. 113-116.

Url: <https://heyjoe.fbk.eu/index.php/afp>

Questo articolo è stato digitalizzato della Biblioteca Fondazione Bruno Kessler, in collaborazione con l'Institutum Historicum Ordinis Praedicatorum all'interno del portale [HeyJoe](https://heyjoe.fbk.eu) - *History, Religion and Philosophy Journals Online Access*. HeyJoe è un progetto di digitalizzazione di riviste storiche, delle discipline filosofico-religiose e affini per le quali non esiste una versione elettronica.

This article was digitized by the Bruno Kessler Foundation Library in collaboration with the Institutum Historicum Ordinis Praedicatorum as part of the [HeyJoe](https://heyjoe.fbk.eu) portal - *History, Religion, and Philosophy Journals Online Access*. HeyJoe is a project dedicated to digitizing historical journals in the fields of philosophy, religion, and related disciplines for which no electronic version exists.



Nota copyright

Tutto il materiale contenuto nel sito [HeyJoe](#), compreso il presente PDF, è rilasciato sotto licenza [Creative Commons](#) Attribuzione-Non commerciale-Non opere derivate 4.0 Internazionale. Pertanto è possibile liberamente scaricare, stampare, fotocopiare e distribuire questo articolo e gli altri presenti nel sito, purché si attribuisca in maniera corretta la paternità dell'opera, non la si utilizzi per fini commerciali e non la si trasformi o modifichi.

Copyright notice

All materials on the [HeyJoe](#) website, including the present PDF file, are made available under a [Creative Commons](#) Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. You are free to download, print, copy, and share this file and any other on this website, as long as you give appropriate credit. You may not use this material for commercial purposes. If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you may not distribute the modified material.



“ IF ALL THE WORLD WERE PAPER ”
HENRY SUSO’S USE
OF A MUCH-TRAVELLED COMMONPLACE

BY
EDMUND COLLEDGE O.S.A.

Now that we are at last able to read Henry Suso’s *Horologium* in a critical edition, and to benefit by its editor’s erudition¹, new prospects are opening for us; and we can see for the first time Suso’s virtues as a spiritual writer, and how often he has been misunderstood and misinterpreted.

The Disciple’s visions of Hell, *De cruciatibus infernalibus*, and of Heaven, *De gaudiis supercaelestibus*², have frequently been compared with Dante’s treatments of the same themes; but this is banal and superficial, and ignores the very long mediaeval tradition on which both Suso and Dante could draw. We now know what was probably Suso’s chief inspiration for his chapter on Hell; and this was not the *Divine Comedy*.

In the *Horologium*’s Book I, chapter 4, “How the soul, which had lost her spouse through sin, finds him beneath the cross through penitence when she is helped by Christ’s Passion”³, as she laments her own ill-spent life and the loss of her good name, Suso, using the *Quis mihi det* of Canticles 8.1 which has already become one of his *Leitmotive*, makes her exclaim:

Quis mihi det membranas caeli habentes latitudinem, atramentum maris excedens quantitatem, et calamos tot quot arborum folia et pratorum gramina, ut perstringere possem dolorem, simulque damnum irrecoverabile quod incurri, quia dilectum meum dereliqui⁴.

¹ Pius Künzle, O.P.: Heinrich Seuses « *Horologium Sapientiae* »; erste kritische Ausgabe unter Benützung der Vorarbeiten von Dominikus Planzer O.P. (*Spicilegium Friburgense, Texte zur Geschichte des kirchlichen Lebens* 23, Freiburg, Switzerland, 1977).

² Book I chapters 10. 11; Künzle, pp. 454-468.

³ Künzle, pp. 395-403.

⁴ Künzle, p. 399.

It would seem that the most probable source which Suso used for this conceit was the sensationally successful account of a pilgrim's visit to "St. Patrick's Purgatory" at Lough Derg in Ireland and of what he saw there, *Visiones Georgii: visiones quas in purgatorio sancti Patricii vidit Georgius miles de Ungaria A.D. MCCCLIII*⁶. We need not here be detained by the date assigned to this work; it is certainly a late mediaeval editor's attempt to give it a spurious appearance of modernity. In Ward's not wholly satisfactory account, "Visions of Heaven and Hell"⁷, where, very rightly, he begins with what is generally considered the oldest of such compositions, the *Visio Pauli*⁸, he gives much prominence to a "Purgatory" found in manuscripts written in England from the late thirteenth century onwards, and he observes that one of these forms of text was that used by Matthew Paris in his abridgment of the story which he incorporated in his *Chronica maiora*, c. A.D. 1200⁹. Ward and Brandes both remark on a French version of the same epoch; but, now that we have Hammerich's excellent edition to consult, it is very plain that, its "1353" date notwithstanding, the "George of Hungary" version is earlier by far than that said in its prologue to have been made by "frater H. monachorum de Saltereia minimus"⁹, from which all the texts known to have circulated in England and France derive.

In George's sixteenth vision, "Of various pains of Purgatory", he is shown a burning lake, and "the three hundred principal and most horrible methods of punishment":

quod si totum celum esset pergamenum et omnes stelle celi et omnia folia arborum et herbarum essent scriptores et tota maris rippa esset attramentum et omnes angeli dei cum predictis stellis et arborum et herbarum folijs essent conscriptores, scriptores et attramenta non sufficerent ad scribendum et notificandum hominibus penas purgatorij¹⁰

⁶ Ed. L. L. Hammerich, Det kgl. Danske Videnskabernes selskab; Historisk-filologiske Meddelelser, XVIII, 2, 1930.

⁷ Catalogue of Romances in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Museum II, (London, 1893).

⁸ See Herman Brandes: *Visio S. Pauli: ein Beitrag zur Visionslitteratur* (Halle, 1885).

⁹ Ed. H. R. Luard, Rolls Series 2, 1874, pp. 192-203.

⁹ MS British Library Royal 13 B. XIII, f. 100^d; "Saltereia" is Saltrey in Huntingdonshire.

¹⁰ Hammerich, p. 167.

It must be said at once that there are many sources from which Suso could have acquired this hyperbole, for it is a commonplace which seems to have spread throughout the mediaeval world. Iona and Peter Opie have written learnedly and exhaustively of it in the form in which, mysteriously, it has been preserved as a nursery rhyme, "If all the world were paper / And all the sea were ink", as did Reinhold Köhler, though they have not observed its appearance in "St. Patrick's Purgatory", because, no doubt, of the relatively recent publication of Hammerich's edition. The Opies and Köhler tell us that it is found in a composition attributed to Rabbi Jochanan ben Zacchai, said to have been the tutor of Josephus. Justly, they point to its affinities with John 21.25, and indicate two parallels in the Koran. And the Opies recount that Edward Dodwell, the early nineteenth-century archaeologist and traveller, tells how in Athens he heard a love-song:

Νὰ ἦταυε ὁ οὐραυδὸς χαρτὴ καὶ ἡ θάλασσα μελαίνη,
Διὰ νὰ γράφειν τοὺς πόνους μου ἄπομι δὲν ἐφθαινε,

which he found "singularly hyperbolic and ridiculous".

Doubtless there will be other scholars who know of yet further recordings, in the East or the West, of this commonplace. Yet, of them all, it is very probable that it was Suso's intention to treat in his book of Heaven and Hell which drew him to the "Visions of George", and that it was there that he found the notion. Tastes change; and some readers today, unlike Dodwell, may find the conceit engagingly "metaphysical". Against this there will be few who do not now consider "George's" horrific, gloating descriptions of sinners' sufferings repellent; and for them, Suso will have little more to recommend him. But what he was doing was in his day universally acceptable.

We find a striking example in John V. Fleming's perceptive and stimulating study of the iconography of the *Roman de la Rose*¹³, where he abundantly proves his contention that, in seeking to understand mediaeval men's appreciation of their literature, we must treat illustrated copies of their books as we have hitherto regarded their glossed texts; the glosses and the pictures both have much to tell us of how the poets

¹¹ The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes (Oxford, rev., 1977), no. 548.

¹² « Und wenn der Himmel wär' Papier » (Kleinere Schriften zur neueren Literaturgeschichte, Volkskunde und Wortforschung, ed. Johannes Bolte, vol. 3, Berlin, 1900, pp. 293-318).

¹³ The "Roman de la Rose": a Study in Allegory and Iconography (Princeton 1969).

and the thinkers spoke to their minds. This is admirably sustained and illustrated by his Fig. 7, reproducing MS Valencia 387, f. 137^r, a miniature running the width of the page, and showing, to accompany the sermon by Genius in the *Roman*, "Heaven and Hell". Right, Heaven is shown as a sheepfold, safely enclosed by hurdles, which a file of sheep is entering, headed by an Agnus Dei. In it the Good Shepherd presides, looking out and leaning on a stout club. Left, sheep are being driven towards a gaping pit by horned devils with barbed tails and cloven hooves. This is very much an interpretation, a "gloss" upon Genius's sermon. It is true that the preacher does make passing mention of the shepherd, the sheep and the devils¹⁴; but the illustrator has ignored, in the sermon, its pseudo-classical adornments, and emphasized in it the Christian allusions, there veiled and here made prominent. This is how the men of the Middle Ages thought and felt; and, perhaps, they were better Bible Christians than we are now. No-one was ever to be more eloquent about hell fire than was the Good Shepherd himself¹⁵.

¹⁴ Ernest Langlois, ed.: *Le Roman de la Rose* (Paris, 1924), vol. 5, 11. 19463 e.s.

¹⁵ I am, as always, grateful to the Humanities Research Council of Canada, whose continued support of my work has made possible visits to the chief European collections of manuscripts and printed books, and to the constant help and advice of my collaborator, J. C. Marler.