Dante's Three Reflective Dreams*

1. Introduction

Dante scholars have generally considered the three dreams in Pur- gatorio from two points of view. Firstly, since they mark major divisions of the mountain, they have perceived them as important elements in the poet's organization of the cantica. Secondly, since dawn dreams have prophetic qualities, as the poet himself emphasizes, following contemporary belief (Inf. 26.7, Purg. 9.16–18 and 27.92–93), they have seen them as sources of information about future events in the realm. Although interesting connections can be established between the substance of the dreams and later incidents in Purgatory, such rapprochements are only possible once the reader has assimilated these subsequent episodes. At the points in the narrative where the dreams occur, they are as arcane to the reader as they seem to be to the pilgrim-dreamer (Purg. 9.34–48 and 19.40–42, 55–57), and are, thus, characterized by the mystery and the sybilline register which the poet regarded as the basis of the prophetic. In addition, Robert Hollander has pointed out that, at least as regards the dream of the siren, its first structural effect is not prospective, but retrospective. Writing about the second dream, he claims that:

It is a passage which looks back to the first cantos of Inferno; to the central cantos of Purgatorio (the center of the poem as a whole), which discourse on love; to its immediate context which is the discussion and presentation of "Sloth," or better, accidia, the action of the soul which gives physical surrounding and moral necessity to this dream; and to the context of the first Purgatorial dream. ( Allegory 136)

Hollander, however, does not develop this insight, concerned as he is to trace figural patterns in the Comedy. Yet his observation merits further investigation, particularly as the backward-looking feature of Dante's dreams is unusual when compared to dream-passages in other medieval writers. While the intratextual contacts which Hollander recognizes obviously help to integrate the dream of the

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siren into the narrative development of the poem, it seems to me that they are also something more than just simple structural devices. In fact, I shall argue that similar retrospective elements mark the other two Purgatorial dreams, and that the tensions which Dante establishes between the prophetic and other functions of dreaming are consistent with medieval attitudes to dreams and with the general directions of his poem.

2. Dante’s conception of the dream

In the Comedy, despite what one might imagine from reading Dante criticism, the poet is actually ambivalent about the connections between dreams and prophecy. There are five references to this relationship. Two are general allusions to the prophetic power of dreams, which is presented with a certain caution: “Ma se presso il mattin del ver si sogn” (Inf. 26.7, my italics) and “a le sue vision quasi è divina” (Purg. 9.18, my italics). Later it is clearly implied that not all dreams can foresee the future: “il sonno de sovente, / anzi che ’l fatto sia, sa le novelle” (Purg. 27.92–93, my italics). In the other two cases, however, Ugolino (Inf. 33.25–37) and St. Bonaventure (Par. 12.65) are not made to express such doubts, since they refer to specific dreams whose truthfulness was confirmed by subsequent events. The tentativeness with which Dante presents the relationship between dreaming and prophecy reflects a long-established tradition which had its origins in the Old Testament, where only some dreams have divinely instituted prophetic associations, while others are examples of ordinary human activity or can even offer misleading insights. The Church Fathers and Doctors added little to Biblical positions on this point. They continued to distinguish between true and false dreams, and, even more than in the Bible, they presented prophetic dreams as exceptional. In Virgil too, Dante would have found a warning about true and false dreams (Aeneid 6.893–96). Given the weight of these auctoritates, Dante is both orthodox and prudent in expressing reservations about the relationship between dreams and prophecy. The poet, in fact, elsewhere in the Comedy, underlines the intellectual confusion which dreams can bring about: “Qual è colui che suo dannaggio sogn, / che sognando desidera sognare” (Inf. 30.136–37), “sì che non parli più com’ om che sogn” (Purg. 33.33), and “Qual è colui che sognando vede, /
che dopo ’l sìno la passione impressa / rimane, e l’altro a la mente non riede” (Par. 33.58–60). On the other hand, Dante is much more open and consistent about the connections between dreaming and other intellectual activity. His emphasis on the psychological and physiological aspects of dreaming is consistent with developments in medieval Aristotelianism. According to Dante’s major definition of dreams in the Comedy, they are the product of the human mind: “la mente nostra, peregina / più da la carne e men da’ pensier presa, / a le sue vision quasi è divina” (Purg. 9.16–18). At the close of Purgatorio 18, the poet explains how this mental process functions. He stresses the intimate relationship between the information which the pilgrim is granted when he is awake, the thoughts this knowledge stimulates in him, and the subsequent transformation of these waking thoughts into dream matter:

\[
\textit{novo pensiero dentro a me si mise,} \\
\textit{del qual più altri nacquero e diversi;} \\
\textit{e tanto d’uno in altro vaneggiai,} \\
\textit{che li occhi per veghezza ricoprisi,} \\
\textit{e ’l pensamento in sogno trasmutai.}
\]

(Purg. 18.141–45)

Dante, in positing the origins of dreams in the preoccupations of the day, is again drawing from the mainstream of the most illustrious tradition of contemporary dream theory. From Macrobius (lib. 1, c. 3) to Alan of Lille (col. 256), and from Gregory the Great (lib. 4, cap. 48) to the author of the pseudo-Bernardian Liber de modo bene vivendi (cap. 68), this view was repeated time and again; and, in Christian culture, this idea goes back at least as far as St. Augustine: “Igitur ea quae, ut ita dicam, vestigia sui motus animus figit in corpore, possunt et manere, et quemdam quasi habitum facere; quae latenter cum agitata fuerint et concretata, secundum agitantis et contractantis voluntatem, ingerunt nobis cogitationes et somnia” (Epistolae 9.3).

3. The dream of the siren

Given the poet’s emphasis at the end of Purgatorio 18 on the contacts between dreaming and reflection (and, more generally his emphasis on the pilgrim deliberating on the subject-matter of Virgil’s teaching), it is satisfying to note that much of Dante-personaggio’s
dream of the siren, which follows on immediately at the beginning of Purgatorio 19, is a mosaic put together from elements related to his guide’s earlier account of the functioning of love in human beings. Firstly, “Ne li occhi guercia, e sovra i piè distorta” (19.8) and “la lingua, e poscia tutta la drizzava” (19.13) mimic “ma quando al mal si torce” (17.100) and “e l’anima non va con altro piede, / se dritta o torta va” (18.44–45);11 secondly, “cominciava a cantar sì, che con pena / da lei avrei mio intento rivolto” (19.17–18) parodies “Or, perchè mai non può da la salute / amor del suo subietto volger viso” (17.106–07); and, thirdly, “L’altra prendea, e dinanzi l’apria / fendendo i drappi, e mostravami ’l ventre” (19.31–32) subverts “Or ti puote apparer quant’è nascosa / la veritate” (18.34–35) and “. . . m’hanno amor discoverta” (18.41). In fact, the dream of the siren, in its essence, is largely prefigured in the conclusion to Virgil’s explanation of the genesis of love:

Or ti puote apparer quant’è nascosa
la veritate a la gente ch’avvera
ciascun amore in sè laudabil cosa;
però che forse appar la sua matera
sempre esser buona, ma non ciascun segno
e buono, anco che buona sia la cera.”12

(18.34–39)

The fabric of the dream not only displays its origins,13 but also shows the reflective effort going on in the pilgrim’s mind, thus offering tangible evidence for Dante’s view of dreams as an integral part of mental activity. Even in his sleep, Dante-personaggio goes over what he has heard in order to “search out” its significance as he has been bidden. However, on account of his intellectual limitations—he has still far to travel and much to learn—his thinking is far from clear. He muddles Virgil’s lucid and logical exposition, fashioning it into a disturbing new synthesis. The gap which exists between the original words and their return in the pilgrim’s dream displays the deficiencies of his thought. It is inevitable that he should wake up perturbed (19.40–41, 55–57) and that Virgil should have to reassure him with a further explanation (19.58–60).

The sophisticated rhetorical artistry with which Dante offers a glimpse of his character’s psyche also has more general effects. The poet makes the siren enact allegorically the truth of the doctrinal
matter expounded by Virgil. At the same time, through his use of inter-canto repetitions and antitheses, Dante is able to accompany the moral drama with a concrete, textual demonstration of how what is originally good can be transformed into something bad. Thus, just as people pervert their innate capacity to love when they sin (Purg. 17.91–114), so the siren, a symbol of the perversion of love, ideologically and formally distorts Virgil’s words.

Other elements which make up the dream confirm the reflective state of the sleeping Dante-personaggio. The physical appearance of the siren recalls, too, the Abbot of San Zeno’s description of Giuseppe della Scala: “mal del corpo intero, / e de la mente peggio, e che mal nacque” (Purg. 18.124–25). The Abbot’s is the last major speech Dante-character hears before going to sleep; and thus it is plausible that it should be fresh in his mind. However, moments after the pilgrim has finished listening to the fleetfooted cleric, two of the penitent slothful remind him of Aeneas’s companions who remained with Acestes in Sicily. And these are the very last words of the second day:

E quella che l’affanno non sofferse
fino a la fine col figlio d’Anchise,
se stessa a vita sanza gloria offrse.

(Purg. 18.136–38)

The origins of this event—the deception practised by Iris on the grieving Trojan women—have striking similarities to the imminent dream. The details of Virgil’s story, now refashioned and confused with other memories, also come flooding into the sleeper’s mind stimulated by their earlier periphrastic allusion. Such a reaction on the part of Dante-character is not narratively improbable, since he has been praised for knowing the Aeneid “tutta quanta” (Inf. 20.114). Thus, Iris’s metamorphosis (Aen. 5.618–21) and her unmasking by Pyrgo (5.644–49) foreshadow what happens to the siren. Similarities also exist in their appearances: “Qui voltus vocisque sonus vel gressus eunti” (5.649) adumbrates “e poscia tutta la drizzava / . . . lo smarrito volto / . . . / Poi ch’ella avea ‘l parlar così disciolto, / cominciava a cantar sì, che con pena / da lei avrei mio intento rivolto” (19.13–18). In addition, and providing further evidence of the muddled state of Dante-personaggio, Virgil’s description of the goddess also inspires the arrival of the holy lady: “Divini signa decoris. /
4. The dream of the eagle

Given the central position of the second dream and the ways in which it illustrates the poet’s explanation of the connections between thought and dreaming which preface it, this dream can usefully serve as a guide to the reading of the other two dreams: indeed, links between these dreams and the events which precede them are also discernible. The dream in *Purgatorio* 9, famous for its aura of ambiguity and horror, most notably catches the political resonances of cantos 6–8 which it crystallizes in the imperial symbolism of the eagle. However, the sleeping pilgrim transforms these memories into a nightmare by irrationally superimposing onto the eagle his perfectly rational waking fear of the snake (*Purg.* 8.37–42). That this worry should have made such an impact on him again makes narrative sense. Not only is the threat of the devil an unexpected turn of events in Purgatory, but, before the actual appearance of the angels and the snake, Dante- *personaggio* had listened to the princes singing the hymn *Te lucis ante* (8.13–18) which asks God for protection, so that “Procul recedant somnia, / Et noctium phantasmata; / Hostemque nostrum comprime, / Ne polluantur corpora.” The poet makes explicit these connections between his character’s waking and sleeping worlds by modelling the eagle’s behaviour on the descent and swift protective action of the angels:

... mi parea veder sospesa
un’aguglia nel ciel con penne d’oro
con l’ali aperte a calare intesa
...
... come folgor discendesse
e me rapisse suso...

(Purg. 9.19–21, 29–30)

... e vidi uscir de l’alto e scender giúe
due angeli. ...

... che da verdi penne
percosses traean dietro a ventilate...
Sentendo fender l'aere a le verdi ali,  
fuggì 'l serpente, e li angeli dier volta,  
suso a le poste rivolando iguali.

(Purg. 8.25–26, 29–30, 106–08)

A recognition of the different points of origin of the first dream enriches our understanding of this event. Given the original positive connotations associated with two of its main elements, the echoes demonstrate that the nightmare is of Dante-personaggio’s own making. He unnecessarily equates the Empire and the angels with the snake, the third source of the dream. It is his inability to distinguish adequately between good and evil—a deficiency which the next three days in Purgatory will help rectify—that brings together in his mind things which he ought to have kept apart. Most previous critics have interpreted the dream in a similar key. They have considered it to be a symbol of the wayfarer’s state: he is not yet ready to cross the wall of fire separating Purgatory from the Earthly Paradise or to pass through the fiery sphere which medieval cosmography placed between the earth’s atmosphere and the circle of the moon; nor is he yet able to assimilate properly the intervention of the divine in his life. This is an excellent reading of the dream-content; yet it ignores the function of the lexical choices which the poet employs to describe the dream in displaying these deficiencies. Dante, by repeating and then synthesizing elements which he had previously presented as separate, not only offers a narratively plausible source for his protagonist’s terror, but, more importantly, he is able to offer an insight into the pilgrim’s limitations and condition at the very moment when the dream is recounted in the poem. The dream-content, on the other hand, can only offer such a perspective when it is combined with later events in the story, for example, when it is measured against Virgil’s explanation of the appearance of St. Lucy (Purg. 9.46–63), or against the travellers’ arrival in the girone of the penitent lustful, or against the vision of the divine eagle in Paradise.¹⁹

5. The dream as mental map: Leah and Rachel

Like the dream of the siren, the pilgrim’s vision of Leah and Rachel is prefaced by his “ruminating” on his adventures as he readies himself for sleep (Purg. 27.91–93). Once again its substance divulges the nature of his thoughts. The dream recalls Forese’s descriptions of his
wife and of his sister. Nella’s virtuous behaviour, “quanto in ben operare è più soletta” (Purg. 23.93), is remembered in Leah’s revelation that “a me l’ovrae appaga” (Purg. 27.108); while Forese’s evocation of Picarda, “La mia sorella, che tra bella e buona / Non so qual fosse più, triunfa lieta / nell’alto Olimpo già di sua corona” (Purg. 24.13–15), affects Dante-personaggio’s vision of both the Biblical sisters: “giovane e bella . . . / ‘Sappia . . . / le belle mani a farmi una ghirlanda / . . . / ma mia suora . . .’” (Purg. 27.97, 100, 102, 104). Forese’s words provide the basic constituents of the last dream. However, elements from the pilgrim’s memorable meeting with Arnaut Daniel also return in his dream, thus underlining more boldly its reflectiveness. In particular, details appear from the Provençal poet’s presentation of himself, “Tan m’abellis vostre cortes deman, / qu’ieu no me puesc ni voil a vos cobrire. / Ieu sui Arnaut, que plor e vau cantan” (Purg. 26.140–42), which the sleeper fashions into the image of Leah: “giovane e bella . . . / donna vedere andar . . . / . . . e cantando dicea: / ‘Sappia qualunque il mio nome dimanda / ch’i’ mi son Lia, e vo movendo intorno / le belle mani . . .’” (Purg. 27.97–102).

As is the case for his treatment of the two earlier dreams, Dante’s recourse to allusion to construct the dream of Leah and Rachel offers a convincing insight into his character’s psychology (as well as evidence of the great care with which he tells his story). By this device he is thus able to give information on matters which the text does not directly address. The three dreams can be interpreted as mental maps, a view which is in keeping with Dante’s ideas on dreaming as an intellectual activity. Rather than glimpses of the future, they are sophisticated signs of the pilgrim’s emotional, intellectual, and spiritual condition at the moments when they occur. They can thus be taken as yardsticks with which to measure his progress. Each dream makes us reflect on the previous day’s journey and on the pilgrim’s relation to it. Thus, in the context of Purgatorio 27, the dream of Leah and Rachel, with its serene atmosphere of harmony, and in contrast to the dark and confused overtones of Purgatorio 9 and 19, reveals a mind which has learnt its lessons well. In particular, given its dependency on elements associated with love, and in accordance both with the pilgrim’s purified state and with his inevitable thoughts of Beatrice stimulated by Virgil’s promises (Purg. 27.36–42, 53–54),
it suggests that he has achieved a balanced and spiritualized view of love. In fact, the dream, on account of its refined insistence on “beautiful ladies,” can be taken as an ideal stilnovist vignette acted out against a lightly sketched, yet highly suggestive locus amoenus. All that the pilgrim has seen, experienced, and memorized on his journey, and most especially on the third day, would point to his understanding the erotic in precisely such terms at this stage in his development. To emphasize and prepare for this idea, the poet earlier had both the pilgrim and Bonagiunta declare that stilnovist conventions are the truest linguistic expression of the internal movements of love and of the relationship between thought and love:

E io a lui: “I’ mi son un che, quando
Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo
ch’e’ ditta dentro vo significando.”

(Purg. 24.52–54)

and

Io veggio ben come le vostre penne
di retro al dittator sen vanno strette,
che de le nostre certo non avvenne;
e qual più a gradire oltre si mette,
non vede più da l’uno a l’altro stilo.

(Purg. 24.58–62)

Dante carefully paves the way for the entry of the stilnuovo into the dream. During the course of three closely related encounters, Dante-personaggio had recognized the intellectual and artistic superiority of the dolce stil novo over other forms of vernacular Italian lyric poetry; he had also been made aware of the especial bonds which tie this verse to love and of his own fundamental achievements in this style. In their conversation, he and Forese had implicitly rejected the conventions of the comico-realistico tradition—that most anti-stilnovist of forms—which had inspired their tenzone on earth. Their subsequent meeting with Bonagiunta, during which the cardinal position of the dolce stil novo was loudly trumpeted, had confirmed that they had been right to acknowledge their earlier poetic and romantic error. Finally, Dante-personaggio’s encounter with Guinizzelli had ratified the stil novo as the supreme Italian vernacular lyric form. These reminders of the values and techniques of the dolce stil novo and of his own stile de la loda, remembered via the
reference to “Donne ch’avete” (Purg. 24.49–51), make a powerful impression on the pilgrim, especially as they are bolstered by many other related events dealing with love: Virgil’s exposition of the proper ways of loving, the penitent lustful, the mention of Beatrice, and the passage through the flames. Their return in the dream is almost “inevitable.” Under these circumstances, intellectually, aesthetically, emotionally, and spiritually the wayfarer on the edges of the Earthly Paradise could not have been capable of a different or more elevated awareness of love and of his own relationship to it than that which he experiences in his dream.

Dante’s handling of the dream emblematically hints at all this, and is a good example of his power of concision and of the Comedy’s polisemia. He takes a few key details from a couple of purgatorial episodes in which the question of love, or more precisely that of love poetry, is raised, and then reworks them into a new narrative which synthesizes the monolingual conventions of the lyric verse of his youth with the plurilingual structures of the Comedy. Dante’s treatment of the landscape of the dream is in the same vein as his presentation of Leah and Rachel, bringing about a fragile, and, as we shall see, temporary harmony between the “lyric” and the “comic” moments of his poetic career. On the one hand, the landscape evokes the pastourelle strand in the stil novo. On the other, its more specifically Edenic and Golden Age attributes are the product of a whole array of natural phenomena already seen by the traveller on his journey: in particular, the setting of the castle in Limbo, the beach of Purgatory, the Valley of Princes (especially 7.73–84), the two trees in the girone of gluttony, one of which, it should be noted, is an offshoot of the Tree of Knowledge: “e noi venimmo al grande arbore adesso, / . . . / legno è più su che fu morso da Eva, / e questa pianta si levò da esso” (Purg. 24.113, 116–17). More generally, the landscape recalls the persistent promise of Eden embedded throughout Purgatory.

The need to seek the kind of alternative explanations which I have suggested for the function and meaning of the dream of Leah and Rachel at the moment at which it occurs in the text, is confirmed by the inconsistencies between its vision and what the pilgrim actually sees and experiences in the Earthly Paradise. The dream offers no clue to the forest, nor to the allegorical obscurity and rigidity of the
procission and of the pageant, nor to the horrific elements of the latter. More crucially, it is quite misleading about Beatrice. Firstly, she is anything but an ideal stilnovist lady on her return; and, in fact, the circumstances of her reappearance, and then her role as eschatological teacher and guide, affirm the deficiencies of stilnovo ideology. The balance Dante has established in the third dream, between the love lyric and the Comedy is accordingly left behind, and the poem moves on to propose more sophisticated solutions. \(^{26}\) Secondly, the dream’s emphasis on Leah, in the light of Virgil’s promises of Beatrice, would suggest that it is she, and not Rachel, who prefigures Dante’s lady, especially as in the poem there has been no forewarning of the meeting with or of the need for Matelda. The connection Leah-Beatrice is further stressed by the presence of Rachel in the dream, who, as we know, is Beatrice’s neighbour in Paradise, “che mi sedea con l’antica Rachele” \(^{\text{Inf. 2.102}}\). The distortion of Beatrice’s future role and behaviour stems again from the fact that, even though Dante-personaggio has travelled far and learnt much, his knowledge, even of the true extent of the nature of love, is still extremely restricted. His state is largely conditioned by Virgil’s intellectual limitations; allegorically this means that the pilgrim cannot see much beyond the range of unenlightened human reason. When Beatrice arrives in triumph, it is her Christian moral severity and her religious connotations which are to the fore. There is no evidence of that femininity, gentleness, and affection which had characterized her visit to Limbo. Such attributes mark the limits of Virgil’s knowledge of Beatrice; and they are especially associated with the qualities of her eyes: “Lucevan li occhi suoi più che la stella” and “li occhi lucenti lagrimando volse” \(^{\text{Inf. 2.55, 116}}\). It is by recalling those unforgettable eyes that Virgil spurs on his companion (“Li occhi suoi già veder parmi,” \(^{\text{Purg. 27.54}}\)), and later bids him, using a formula which tellingly blends the two references from Inferno, to enjoy the beauties of the Earthly Paradise while he awaits Beatrice’s arrival: “Mentre che vegnan lieti li occhi belli / che lagrimando, a te venir mi fenno” \(^{\text{Purg. 27.136–37}}\). \(^{27}\) Virgil and, by extension, the pilgrim are unable to envisage a different sort of Beatrice at this point; nor can either of them see beyond the qualities she shares with Leah. \(^{28}\) The dream thus reveals both Dante-personaggio’s achievements and his deficiencies. Just as he is about to describe a major new stage in
the journey, Dante pauses to provide an assessment of his character in order to help the reader understand the significance and the need for these new experiences.

6. Contrast and repetition in the three dreams

The sophistication of the third dream and its sense of harmony separate it from the tensions and confusion which define its two predecessors. Its striking difference in tone, content, and presentation, when compared with the dreams of the eagle and of the siren, are its most visible and accessible characteristics. In view of its prophetic deficiencies, they are also possibly its most revealing traits, since they are a record of the enormous progress which the pilgrim has made during his travels through Purgatory. Such contrasts are many. Stylistically, the lyricism and stilnovism of the final dream conflict with the harsh, even infernal sounds used to describe the siren (Purg. 19.7–15, 31–33) and the descent of the eagle (Purg. 9.27–33). Where a certain similarity of tone and vocabulary is present, as with the siren’s song (Purg. 9.16–24) and Leah’s words (Purg. 27.99–108), this helps underscore the differences between the singers and their songs. The last dream is quite free of the kind of negative terms found in the other two: in Purgatorio 9, for example, “terribil” (29), “rapisse” (30), “io ardesse” (31); in Purgatorio 19, for example, “femmina balba” (7), “smarrito volto” (14), “fendendo” (32), “puzzo” (33). The dream of Leah and Rachel is characterized by an overwhelming sense of order and harmony, while the others are marred by conflict, violence, and opposition. As Hollander writes, it is “singularly untroubled. . . , relatively brief and simple, full of the kind of lovingness” which has escaped the “threat of sensuality which causes disorder and death” (Allegory 149, 154). On the other hand, such sensuality is directly depicted in the siren and is implicit in the eagle via the reference to Ganymede. Hollander’s point is further supported by the pilgrim’s untroubled waking in Purgatorio 27, and by the absence in the third dream of the theme of captivity which marks the other two. Furthermore, the dominating presence of Leah and Rachel in the final dream is a significant development in the actual presence of positive female figures in the dreams. This also distinguishes it from the others. Earlier, Lucy had appeared in the first dream only by analogy, while the anonymous “donna . . .
santa e presta” had to share the stage with the sirens, whose deformities are the reverse of Leah’s beauty. Finally, the Biblical origins of the third dream again underline its separateness and superiority: it is less ostentatiously learned yet much more sophisticated and complex than the other two.

As I briefly mentioned earlier, similarities, as well as contrasting elements, are apparent in the presentation and subject-matter of the three dreams: for example, the common stress on the hour of dreaming formulaically introduced by “Ne l’ora che” (Purg. 9.13; 19.1; 27.94); the hints implicit in all three that the journey is on the verge of ending (the pilgrim-Ganymede’s impending arrival in Paradise-Olympus, the siren’s boast that “e qual meco s’ausa, / rado sen parte; si tutto l’appago!” [Purg. 19.23–24], and the recovery of Eden and Beatrice hinted at in the third dream); and, most notably, their common dependence on intratextual elements. However, as with the rapprochement between Leah and the siren, these shared features do not confuse the three dreams, but help to confirm the changes that have occurred within Dante-personaggio since the last time he slept. Thus, the poet organizes all three dreams around the same structure of intratextual recapitulation and other common elements, because this permits him to create, within a single unified system, a differentiated yet coherent and concrete record of the internal development of the pilgrim and of the ways in which, as Momigliano says, “quell’ombra solenna che è il Dante dei primi due canti dell’Inferno si è concretata e svolta in una personalità ricca e salda” (469) by the time he reaches the edge of the holy wood.

It is, in fact, interesting to note that, in organizing the three dreams, Dante appears to have followed the hierarchy which St. Thomas had established for prophetic dreams and visions. This not only establishes further distinctions between the dreams, but also supports the view that they reveal the changes which the pilgrim undergoes during his three days in Purgatory. St. Thomas writes:

Secundo autem diversificantur gradus prophetiae quantum ad expressionem signorum imaginabilium, quibus veritas intelligibilis exprimitur. Et quia signa maxime expressa intelligibilis veritatis sunt verba, ideo altior gradus prophetiae videtur, quando propheta audit verba exprimentia intelligibilem veritatem sive in vigilando, sive in dormiendo, quam quando videt aliquas res significativas veritatis, sicut septem spicae plenae significant septem annos ubertatis, Gen. 41. In quibus etiam signis tanto videtur prophetia esse
altior, quos signa sunt magis expressa; sicut quando Jeremias vidit incendium civitatis sub similitudine ollae succensae, sicut dicitur Jerem. I.—Tertio autem ostenditur altior esse gradus prophetiae, quando prophetarum non solum videt signa verborum vel factorum, sed etiam videt vel in vigilando vel in dormiendo aliquem sibi colloquentem, aut aliquid demonstratum, quia per hoc ostenditur quod mens prophetarum magis appropinquat ad causam revelantem.—Quarto autem potest attendi altitudo gradus proprietatis ex conditione ejus qui videtur. Nam altior gradus prophetiae est, si ille qui loquitur vel demonstrat, videatur in vigilando vel in dormiendo; in specie angeli quam si videatur in specie hominis: et adhuc altior, si videatur in dormiendo vel in vigilando in specie Dei, secundum illud Isaiæ 6, I: Vidi Dominum sendentem. (Summa theol. IIa–IIæ, q. 174, art. 3)

Dante too moves from silent signa—albeit highly expressive ones on account of the presence of fire as in Aquinas’s example—to dreams in which things are shown and spoken by women of ever-higher rank and whose appearance becomes increasingly more attractive.30

7. The dream of prophecy

Though I have underlined the prophetic deficiencies of the pilgrim’s dreams, and especially those of his vision of Leah and Rachel, it is also undeniable that, for instance, the third dream does prefigure, with a certain degree of accuracy, both Matelda and the early part of the scene in the Earthly Paradise. In the same way, the dream of the eagle prepares for the pilgrim’s resistance at the wall of fire, while that of the siren foreshadows his successful negotiation of the last three purgatorial gironi. However, as with the third dream, their overall prophetic status is questionable. The first dream most specifically embodies an event contemporaneous to it, namely, St. Lucy carrying the sleeping pilgrim to the Gate of Purgatory, while the second one does not refer to any single recognizable event, only to a number of general ones: the nature of the sinful dispositions purged on the last three gironi, Dante-personaggio’s relationship to these sins, the roles of reason and grace in overcoming their snares. Despite the problems affecting the precise prophetic coordinates of the dreams, I should not like to deny that they have this function. To do this would go against both Dante’s own stated belief and the connections which can be established between the dreams and what follows in the poem. Furthermore, in the light of the care with which the poet approaches the general question of the visionary power of
dreaming, it is clear that he wishes to stress the actual prophetic status of the pilgrims’s three dreams, and thus to underline the uniqueness of his journey. My argument rather is that this aspect should not be exclusively and mechanically applied. Such inflexibility is alien to Dante’s practices in the Comedy. I believe that the main reason why he calls the traditional prophetic powers of the *somnia* into question both in theory and in practice, is to ensure that the reader seeks out the full connotative potential they have in his poem. In fact, in the light of my discussion, I wonder whether when Dante defines the nature of dreaming as “la mente nostra, peregrina / piú da la carne e men da’ pensier presa, / a le sue vision quasi è divina” (*Purg.* 9.16–18), “la mente nostra” does not have a double meaning, so that it refers not just to “our mind,” but also to “our memory,” a meaning which mente has elsewhere in the Comedy.31 Such a reading is also supported by the reference in the previous terzina to the nightingale which at dawn remembers its sufferings (*Purg.* 9.13–15), the very same hour when the human mente is at its sharpest.

8. Conclusion

Symbolically the dreams do project into the future; however, in their form, they remain firmly in the present and recall the past. With great subtlety, Dante, throughout his poem, modulates the temporal rhythms of his narrative and establishes structural connections across its whole area. The organization of the three dreams and their positioning in the text are an example of this; they are also a small clue towards a solution of that “central critical problem,” highlighted, among others, by Sapegno, “of how the Comedy is to be read as a unified whole” (8). A concentration on the “prophetic” effects of the dreams, important as these are, grants only a partial insight into their structural functions and into their connotative range. Nor does it demonstrate how the poet’s theoretical statements and accounts of dreams in the Comedy synthesize much of the contemporary debate on the subject, and occasionally even add to it. Finally, the customary reading of the dreams conceals the care and genius with which Dante imbues the dreamer’s visions with psychological realism. As the repetitions confirm, the dreams emerge out of the pilgrim’s memories of his journey. They, therefore, do not only offer the kind of general meanings which the classical, Biblical, and
Christian traditions saw as characteristic of certain dreams ("somniat symbolica et metaphorica" [Albertus Magnus lib. 3, tr. 1, cap. 10]), but, in a highly original move, they are also a symbolic measure of the "private" world of Dante-personaggio. In this way, Dante intuits and makes use of characteristics of the dream which Freud was to study systematically and to stress 600 years later:

If I examine my own experience on the subject of the origin of the elements included in the content of dreams, I must begin with an assertion that in every dream it is possible to find a point of contact with the experiences of the previous day. This view is confirmed by every dream that I look into, whether my own or anyone else's. Bearing this fact in mind, I am able, on occasion, to begin a dream's interpretation by looking for the event of the previous day which set it in motion. (249)

and, like Freud, Dante also distinguishes between two different layers of the dream:

The dream-thoughts and the [manifest] dream-content are presented to us like two versions of the same subject-matter in two different languages. Or, more properly, the dream-content seems like a transcript of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression, whose characters and syntactic laws it is our business to discover by comparing the original and the translation. The dream-thoughts are immediately comprehensible, as soon as we have learnt them. The dream-content, on the other hand, is expressed as it were in a pictographic script, the characters of which have to be transposed individually into the language of the dream-thoughts. If we attempted to read these characters according to their symbolic relation, we should clearly be led into error. (381–82) \(^{(38)}\)

As in psychoanalysis, the signifiers of the pilgrim's dreams are the means to "disentangle" his fears, desires, and knowledge.

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NOTES

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1 On the dreams in the Commedia, see Busetto, who primarily compares Dante's views with those of Albertus Magnus in the De somno et vigilia; Speroni;
Norton; Stella; Cervigni, Dante's Poetry of Dreams. See also the essays on Purgatorio 9, 19, and 27 in the standard collections of Lecturae Dantis. In addition, see Raimondi; Marin; Cervigni, “Demonic and Angelic Forces” and “The Pilgrim’s Dream.” See also Tateò’s entries on “sognare” and “sogno” in the Enciclopedia Dantesca. On dreams in the Middle Ages, see Chenu; Le Goff; Braet (with an excellent bibliography); Fischer, I sogni nel Medioevo. All references to the Comedy are taken from Petrocchi’s critical edition.

2 Mineo writes that “L’oscurità è appunto un elemento del genere profetico” (179).

3 Although there is a sixth reference to dreaming and prophecy in the Comedy, namely, the allusion to the dream of St. Dominic’s mother (Par. 12.60), this does not belong to the tradition of the prophetic morning dream, but to that of the prophetic dream of the pregnant woman; see Lanzoni.

4 Dante is quite certain that dreams do have prophetic qualities in both the Vita Nuova (2.1–8 and 12.1–9) and in the Convivio (2.8.13); see also Appendix 5 to Book 2 of the Convivio (249–52); Mineo 103–41; Hollander “Vita Nuova”; Baldelli.

5 “Sonno” here does not primarily mean “sleep”; it is rather Dante’s vernacular rendering of somnium, which, since Macrobius’s gloss on this word, as part of his survey of different kinds of dreams, had been extensively used in the Middle Ages to refer to prophetic symbolic dreams: “Somnium proprie vocatur, quod tegit figuris et velat ambagibus non nisi interpretatione intellegendam significacionem rei quae demonstratur” (1.3.10). For an especially pertinent example of the medieval fortuna of Macrobius’s categorization of dreams, see Guido da Pisa 18–20; and “Lorenzo l’apparve [to Elisabetta] nel sonno” (Boccaccio 4.5.12). Furthermore, it is clear from the context of the passage in Purgatorio 27—“Si ruminando e si mirando quelle, / mi prese il sonno; il sonno che sovente, / anzi che ’l fatto sia, sa le novelle” (91–93)—that the epizeuxis of sonno is used to distinguish between two different physiological stages: the falling asleep and the dreaming. The fact that Dante is using a calque on somnium, when he raises doubts about the relationship between dreams and prophecy, makes his uncertainty all the more striking.

6 See Ehrlich.

7 See Souvay 155; Braet 23–33. St. Augustine’s twelfth book of his De Genesi ad litteram offers a notable and vigorous example of patristic views on the genera visionum (cols 453–86); see also Dulaey.

8 See especially Albertus Magnus (lib. 9), and Thomas Aquinas (Ila-2ae, q. 95, art. 6).

9 Baldelli writes that in the Vita Nuova “appare poi certo che tali immaginazioni [dreams and fantasies] abbiano . . . carattere profetico, quando siano preparate, per così dire, da intenso pensamento” (1), and he quotes “. . . puossimi a pensare di questa cortesissima. E pensando di lei, mi sopragiunse uno soave sonno, ne lo quale m’apparve una meravigliosa visione” (3.2–3). All references to the Vita Nuova are taken from De Robertis’s edition.
10 For example, at the end of *Purgatorio* 17, Virgil encourages the pilgrim to reflect further and in private on the lesson on love which he has just heard: “ma come tripartito si ragiona, / tacciolo, accio che tu per te ne cerchi” (138–39). I shall argue that Dante-*personaggio* is doing precisely this as he falls asleep (*Purg.* 18.141–45).

11 The repetition of these particular words is an excellent example of how meticulous Dante is in constructing the dream. Lines 44 and 45 are spoken not by Virgil but by the pilgrim, and express a doubt that has arisen in his mind (“m’ha fatto di dubbiar più pregno,” *Purg.* 18.42) which his guide cannot properly resolve (46–48). It is, therefore, quite appropriate that this concern should continue to trouble him. See below for a fuller discussion of the ways in which Dante ensures that what the pilgrim remembers is narratively plausible.

12 Even Virgil’s metaphor of the “mal tardato remo” (17.87) seems to peep through in the dream, since it may lurk behind the siren’s reference to Ulysses (19.22–24).

13 Umberto Bosco claims that “il sogno non è che la riproposta figurata della necessità, affermata nei canti XVII–XVIII, di scoprire e respingere il brutto e il male che possono nascondersi sotto le apparenze del bello e di bene che le nostre inclinazioni ai piaceri terreni ci propongono” (315). Hollander is even more specific in making this point: “the siren comes, not only from Dante’s reading in Ulysses literature, but from the text of Virgil’s discourse on love” (*Allegory* 140; however he only quotes the example of *Purg.* 18.44–45 discussed above). On the other hand, Margherita De Bonfils Templer argues that “se consideriamo il sogno solo come ‘profetico’ . . . delle tre forme di amore deviante delle ultime cornici, finiamo coll’offuscare la funzione ch’esso ha, nel contesto poetico del *Purgatorio*, di coronamento di tutto il lungo ragionare che l’ha anticipato nei tre canti precedenti” (42).

14 For a fuller discussion and bibliography on classical and medieval theories of *dispositio*, see Barański, “*Inferno* VI. 73” (11–13).

15 There are other less explicit contacts between the dream and earlier episodes of the *Comedy*: (i) Hollander compares the latter part of the dream with the situation in *Inferno* 2.49ff (*Allegory* 141–43); (ii) “quand’ una donna apparve santa e presta” which immediately asks a question (*Purg.* 19.26–29) recalls “surse in mia visione una fanciulla [Lavinia]” who too asks a question (*Purg.* 17.34–36).

16 Note also the relationship between “Nam mihi Cassandreae per somnum vatis imago” (*Aen.* 5.636) and “mi venne in sogno una femmina” (*Purg.* 19.7). This borrowing raises an interesting critical problem. Line 7 does not properly belong to the dream; it is more precisely an example of the poet’s knowledge of Virgil, as, in effect, are the other borrowings from *Aeneid* 5. However, since these can also be coherently associated with Dante-*personaggio’s* memory (“l’alta mia tragedia . . . / . . . che la sai tutta quanta,” *Inf.* 20.113–14), they reveal a suggestive area in the *Comedy* where the poet and the character
overlap. In fact, a similar point can be made for all the intratextual allusions I discuss in this article. They are evidence of Dante’s remarkable memory of his own text, a feature noted by Contini; yet, at the same time, they are also evidence of Dante-personaggio’s “mind,” since the poet employs the echoes in the dreams in a manner which is consistent with the psychological development of his character.

17 Piero Cali notes that “from the incursion by the serpent into ‘la picciola vallea’ (Purg. viii.98) of the Kings and Princes . . . springs the dream of Purgatorio ix” (104).

18 The entire hymn is given in Singleton, Purgatorio: 2. Commentary 161, from where I take my quotation.

19 The dream of the eagle, by “displacing” an unspoken waking preoccupation (Purg. 8.40–42) into a new symbolic narrative, suggestively embodies an avant la lettre example of Freud’s theory of the “return of the repressed.” Furthermore, Virgil, like the psychoanalyst, decodes the “latent dream-content” (Purg. 9.46–63), thus helping to dispel his “patient’s” anxiety: “A guisa d’uom che ’n dubbio si raccerta / e che muta in conforto sua paura, / poi che la verità li è discoperta, / mi cambia’ io; e come sanza cura / vide me ’l duca mio . . .” (Purg. 9.64–6).

20 Dante’s presentation of the two dreams of the Vita Nuova does not rely on intratextual borrowings, although their origins are nominally to be found in events which precede them. The first is stimulated by the meeting with Beatrice (3.1–3), the second by the character’s appeal to Amore for help (12.2).

21 Glyn Norton observes that “as in the preceding dream of Canto 9, the mental preoccupations of the diurnal world are to intrude upon the matter of the dream [of canto 19]” (356), and earlier he notes the poem’s need for “a periodical recapitulation of mental states and attitudes to prepare for the final revelation of some ultimate truth” (351). Despite the emphasis on retrospection in the title of his article, Norton does not enter upon a detailed discussion of how the dreams actually connect with what precedes them. See also Armour 125; Ferrante 220; Cervigni, Dante’s Poetry of Dreams.

22 For a general discussion of Dante’s recovery of dolce stil novo forms in Purgatorio, see Bosco.

23 See Pertile.

24 See Singleton, Journey to Beatrice; Battaglia.

25 Bruno Porcelli goes as far as to label all three dreams “preavvisi di aspettazioni fallaci” (288).

26 Scholars are increasingly coming to realize that it is a primary feature of Dante’s extremely original elaboration of the rhetorical category of the “comic” that it can accommodate and exploit within its structures other traditionally “non-comic” registers, and, at the same time, supersede them by highlighting the deficiencies of their conventions; see, for example, Barberi Squarotti: Barchiesi; Iannucci; Picone; Hollander, Il Virgilio dantesco. Dante’s Commedia is not simply a plurilingual text, nor even a pluristylistic and a plurirhetor-
ical one, but one which proposes a radically new artistic language, style, and rhetoric. The implications of this are too complex to develop here. The problem of the nature of Dante’s views on the “comic” is the subject of a book I am preparing; for a preliminary discussion, see Barański, “Re-viewing Dante.”

27 A clue that Beatrice should be associated with Rachel rather than Leah is available in the dream, namely, the reference to Rachel’s “belli occhi” (Purg. 27.106).

28 Singleton was the first, as far as I know, to recognize that Beatrice combines the attributes of both Leah and Rachel: “the dream of Leah and Rachel is fulfilled at the summit: Leah is attained when that justice is reached to which Virgil guides; and Rachel, who is contemplation, is attained in Beatrice. And yet, no sooner have we said as much than we are obliged to recognize, in the matter of Leah as the active life and justice, that Leah is really attained, in final perfection, with Beatrice” (Journey to Beatrice 123).

29 Differences naturally exist between the first two dreams, not least because of the changes which have taken place in the pilgrim. However, they are not as marked as those which divide both of them from the final dream. For example, the dream of the eagle is born of an irrational impulse while that of the siren is more closely associated with rational thought; the greater narrative complexity of this second dream; and the introduction of a lyrical register into the latter (Purg. 19.15–24).

30 There is another suggestive point of contact between St. Thomas’s discussion of dreams in the Summa theologica and Dante’s presentation of the dreams in Purgatorio. St. Thomas argues that there are four causes of dreams: “Sciendum est ergo quod somniorum causa quandoque quidem est interius, quandoque autem exterius. Interior autem somniorum causa est duplex.—Una quidem animalis, in quantum scilicet ea occurrunt hominis phantasiae in dormiendo circa quae ejus cogitatio et affectio fuit immorata in vigilando; et talis causa somniorum non est causa futorum eventuum; unde hujusmodi somnia per accidens se habent ad futuros eventus; et si quandoque simul concurrant, erit casuale.—Quandoque vero causa intriseca somniorum est corporalis: nam ex interiori dispositione corporis formatur aliquid motus in phantasia conveniens tali dispositioni; sicut homini in quo abundant frigidiores aeque abundant frigidiores somnia, occurrunt in somniis quod sit in aqua vel nive; et propeter hoc medici dicunt esse intendendum somnii ad cognoscendum interioris dispositiones. Causa autem somniorum exterior similiter est duplex, scilicet corporalis et spiritualis.—Corporalis quidem in quantum imaginatio dormientis immutatur vel ab aere continentii, vel ex impressione coelestis corporis; ut sic dormienti aliquae phantasiae apparent conformes coelestium dispositioni. Spiritualis autem causa est quandoque quidem a Deo, qui ministerio angelorum aliquae hominis vel qui ministratur in somniis, secundum illud Num. 12, 6: Si quis fuerit inter vos propheta Domini, in visione apparebo ei, vel per somnium loquar ad illum” (11a-2ae, q. 95, art. 6; italics in original). Dante’s dreams, too, as
I have argued in this article, are brought about by St. Thomas’s first “interior” influence: however, Dante and Thomas obviously disagree about the prophetic status of such dreams. This is not the only instance where the poet absorbs the theologian’s lesson on dreams only to adapt it to his own needs. Thus, Dante’s dreams can also be seen to be stimulated by St. Thomas’s two “exterior” causes: the heavens at the hour of their occurrence (“Ne l’ora che . . .”) and God, since, whatever their limitations in this direction they do, in Ugolino’s words, “rip away the veil of the future.” In addition, Dante, as regards the dream of the eagle, invents a further cause behind this dream, namely a direct physical action on the sleeper—St. Lucy transporting him to the Gate of Purgatory. That the second “interior” cause—the physiological one—finds no place in Purgatory is not surprising, as it would have been narratively and allegorically inconsistent for the pilgrim to suffer illness in this realm.

31 See Maiërù, “memoria” and “mente.”

32 Freud is adamant about the originality of his discovery of the disjunction between “dream-thoughts” and “manifest dream-content”: “We have introduced a new class of psychical material between the manifest content of dreams and the conclusions of our enquiry: namely, their latent content, or (as we say) the ‘dream-thoughts,’ arrived at by means of our procedure. It is from these dream-thoughts and not from a dream’s manifest content that we disentangle its meaning” (381). However, it is clear that Dante appreciated such distinctions when he came to compose his three purgatorial dreams; and, though the poet owed much to contemporary dream theory, I have been unable to find a possible source for this aspect of their presentation.

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