Brian Nowlin


**Dante's Oneiric Flights as *Non Falsi Errori* (not false errors):**
**The Form of Content and the Content of Form in *The Divine Comedy***

Perhaps the most mind-bending simile of the hundreds found in *The Divine Comedy* occurs in *Inferno* 30.136, at which point Dante attempts to capture the quality of a shame so great that it communicates itself in silence: "Even as one who dreams that he is harmed / and, dreaming, wishes he were dreaming, thus / desiring that which is, as if it were not, / so I became within my speechlessness: / I wanted to excuse myself and did / excuse myself, although I knew it not" (30.136-141). In this complex trope of a dream within a dream, Dante evokes a dream that is real despite not being recognized as such: the dreamer, unaware that he is dreaming, desires "that which is, as if it were not." This simile, by raising implications regarding the truth of dreams, and by highlighting the riddled connection between dreams and desire, foreshadows the three dreams that take place in *Purgatorio*. In the *Commedia*'s middle canticle, dreams and visions become a primary mode through which both Dante the pilgrim experiences the mountain of Purgatory and, at the same time, Dante the poet narrates this experience. In other words, the three dreams of *Purgatorio* function simultaneously as form and content, indirectly raising questions as to the nature of the truth-claims of Dante's poem as a whole. By representing the three dreams of Dante the pilgrim, Dante the poet is overtly representing representations, which indeed may be the overriding effort of the entire *Commedia*. Closely examining the three dreams of *Purgatorio* will thus reveal implications regarding the nature of Dante's poem—its form—and the nature of human and divine love – its content. Ultimately it will be seen that these two aspects of the poem are one and the same, for in both form and content Dante intends his poem to be a reflection of the light of cosmic truth—a light in which subject and object, seer and seen, discover their interconnectedness.

Since the terms "form" and "content" carry immense critical baggage, pertinent facets of the critical conversation vis-à-vis *The Divine Comedy* can help clarify their use here. Charles Singleton's memorable claim that "the fiction of the *Divine Comedy* is that it is not a fiction" (62) cuts to the core of an issue that has dominated Dante criticism, namely, the dialectic between theology and poetry in Dante's poem. Is Dante using poetic images to clothe a theological allegory, and if so, can one separate the two vis-à-vis their respective truth? Or are the poetic images themselves the best expression of an authentic vision of the ineffable that Dante has represented in language? Teodolinda Barolini sums up this "fundamental question" facing readers of Dante's poem:

> How are we to respond to the poet's insistence that he is telling us the truth? Logically prior to this query stands another that we cannot answer, but on which we may speculate: Did Dante himself believe in the literal truth of those things for which he claims literal truth? (4)

Though modern readers may scoff at the notion that Dante literally believed in the specific events of the pilgrim's journey, the critic Bruno Nardi urges the necessity of directly confronting the unsettling question of how Dante viewed the status of his poem: Did Dante believe he was a divinely-inspired prophet? Nardi argues that many critics err in attempting drastically to distinguish "what Dante writes as a poet from what Dante thinks as a theologian, or rather, in substance, between the literal sense, intentionally devalued, and the allegorical sense, the only true sense, the one that is hidden under the veil of fictitious words" (27).

It would appear that Dante himself weighs in on the issue of the *Commedia*'s literal versus allegorical dimension. In his Letter to Can Grande, Dante elaborates upon *The Divine Comedy*'s polysemousness, claiming that "it is one sense which we get through the letter, and another which we get through the thing the letter signifies; and the first is called literal, but the second allegorical or mystic." Dante further divides the allegorical sense of his poem into the

moral and anagogical, and he provides a specific definition of his poem's literal sense ("the state of souls after death") and its allegorical meaning ("man, as by good or ill deserts, in the exercise of the freedom of his choice, he becomes liable to rewarding or punishing justice"). Though Dante therefore offers a useful hermeneutical tool for reading his poem, he does not specifically relegate the literal dimension to mere fiction, to a poetic imaging of a deeper allegorical truth. As Giorgio Padoan points out regarding the Letter to Can Grande: "The essential fact is that the Epistle—precisely as we have seen for the *Commedia*—explicitly affirms that it treats not a metaphoric voyage, or the imagination of fantasy, but rather a true 'elevation to heaven'" (43). Padoan further claims that the Letter invokes several biblical visions as models for the *Divine Comedy*, including the abduction to heaven of St. Paul, the vision that St. Peter, St. James, and St. John had of the transfiguration of Christ, and the vision of God's glory experienced by Ezekial (44).

The tension between Dante-as-poet versus Dante-as-prophet—a tension perhaps characteristic of all revealed truths that must inevitably re-present themselves in language—depends upon an assumption of irreconcilability between poetry and prophecy. This assumption need not be accepted if Dante is viewed as self-consciously using poetry to represent a vision that he indeed believes to be true but that can only be rendered poetically; and further, if the poetic conceit required for the task must disguise itself as utterly real (Singleton's notion of a fiction of non-fiction). Such a merging of the poet and the prophet appears to occur in *The Divine Comedy*'s "remarkable fusion of absolute certainty about content with self-consciousness about the human artistry that is its vehicle (Barolini, 14)… For "not polarized as either theologus or poeta, Dante holds the aporias and contradictions of a prophetically inspired poem… within the rigorous embrace of paradox" (13). In other words, form and content invisibly coalesce in

Dante's poem because of the nature of that which Dante is attempting to represent. Yet what exactly is represented in *The Divine Comedy*, and why does this representation seem simultaneously to be the very ground of representation itself? Examining Dante's representation of his dreams sheds light on these thorny problems.

While railing against Florence in *Inferno* 26, Dante writes: "But if the dreams dreamt close to dawn are true, / then little time will pass before you feel / what Prato and the others crave for you" (7-9). By proposing the truthfulness of early-morning dreams, Dante sets the stage for the three dreams in *Purgatorio*, all of which occur near dawn. When narrating the first dream, a dream in and during which a dramatic change in location occurs, Dante goes so far as to suggest that dreams allow the intellect to approach—and even blend with—the divine: "when, free to wander farther from the flesh / and less held fast by cares, our intellect's / envisionings become almost divine— / in dream I seemed to see an eagle poised, / with golden pinions, in the sky" (9.16-18). Dante envisions the eagle as his soul recedes deeper into itself and thereby approaches its connection with the divine, a paradox only when the divine origin of the human soul is denied.

The "almost divine" envisioning power of the dream appears to relate to the ecstatic vision that Dante experiences[1] on the Third Terrace, about which he comments: "And when my soul returned outside itself / and met the things outside it that are real, / I then could recognize my not false errors" (15.115-117). Dante the pilgrim's dreams and visions, though removed from the "real" outer world, are "not false errors" (*non falsi errori*) that carry a transcendental truth that must in turn be represented by Dante the poet. As Dante says in conversation with Bonagiunta de Lucca on the Sixth Terrance: "'I am one who, when Love breathes / in me, takes

[1] Dante will later explicitly refer to his second dream as a "vision" (see *Purgatorio* 19.56), which further links the three dreams to the various visions in the canticle.

note; what he, within, dictates, / I, in that way, without, would speak and shape'" (24.52-54). For Dante, *poiesis* thus involves using language to shape the not false errors that divine love breathes into the echoing halls of internal human vision. The content of a particular human vision, experienced in the workings of fantasy, is therefore linked directly to divine will: "O fantasy, you that at times would snatch / us so from outward things – we notice nothing / although a thousand trumpets sound around us— / who moves you when the senses do not spur you? / A light that finds its form in Heaven moves you— / directly or led downward by God's will" (17.13-18).

Upon waking from his initial dream, in which the golden eagle swoops down and carries him to the fire's orbit, Dante is told by Virgil that Lucia has brought about an actual change in location, carrying Dante's sleeping body to Purgatory. "'Then she and sleep together took their leave'" (9.63), Virgil says. How does the reality of the dream (the eagle) relate to the reality outside of the dream (Lucia)? Why does Dante the poet split Canto IX into a dreaming and a waking section, each characterized by analogous action? Though some readers may mine the allegorical depths of the dream, connecting the dream-eagle to the eagle appearing in the procession moving through the Earthly Paradise, Dante may primarily be presenting the eagle as a not false error that is the visionary analogue to the actual presence of the heaven-sent—and therefore not *directly* representable in humanly understandable terms—Lucia. By representing the dream-eagle in his poem, Dante the poet is thereby representing a representation (rendering in poetic words a representation experienced as a dream-image but having its source in transcendent reality), providing in a single Canto a reflection upon the method of *The Divine Comedy* in its entirety. If Dante's *Commedia* attempts poetically to capture the truth of a vision of God, Canto IX demonstrates the reality of the correspondence between poetry and truth. As

the eagle is to Lucia, so Dante's poem is to a vision of God – a vision that can only be presented through the indirect imitation of poetry. The notion that the dreams in Dante's poem may point to *The Divine Comedy* itself being inspired by a dream-like vision finds textual support in Dante the poet describing Dante the pilgrim as being in a sleep-like state at his journey's beginning and shortly before its end.[2]

Dante's third and final dream, in which Leah appears and differentiates her active making ("'I apply my lovely hands to fashion / a garland of the flowers I have gathered'" (27.101-102)) and her sister Rachel's passive gazing ("'she is content with seeing, I with labor'" (108)), further embodies in an image the act of *poiesis* central to Dante's art. Just as both sisters watch their respective activities in a mirror, their dream-image in toto mirrors the simultaneous acts of receptive vision and poetic shaping that may well characterize Dante's activity in writing *The Divine Comedy*.

If the first and last dreams in *Purgatorio* reveal implications regarding the poetic form of *The Divine Comedy* vis-à-vis the content of what the poem aims to represent, the second dream helps specify this content. In other words, if the first and third dreams exemplify the act of representing a representation (the poem's central method), the second dream sheds light on the necessity of this method (the poem's form) based on what specifically is represented. The second dream gets at the heart of the poem, so to speak, which is indeed the education of the heart. In Dante's dream of the siren and the saintly lady, the pilgrim undergoes a lesson in vision that is perhaps the overarching action (in the Aristotelian sense) imitated in the poem. The

[2] I should note that in reading Milton, both *Paradise Lost* and his prose work *On Christian Doctrine*, I find it similarly suggested that the only way poetically to render the divine is to represent a representation, to represent the divine not in esse but as it has already been accommodated to human understanding.

dream offers clues as to the manner in which disordered love, aimed at a false good, can be redirected.

In his dream of the siren, Dante's faulty vision transforms a stammering, crippled woman into the smooth-talking, beautiful siren who led Ulysses astray. An alert and saintly woman appears, however, and summons Virgil, who, with "his eyes intent upon that honest one" (19.30), exposes the stench, the ugliness lurking beneath the siren's apparent beauty. The Virgil of "real life," not of the dream, comments on Dante's dream and overtly links it to the various kinds of disordered desire that Dante will see on the remaining three Terraces: "'The one you saw,' he said, 'that ancient witch— / for her alone one must atone above; / you saw how man can free himself from her'" (19.58-60). Specifically, Dante frees himself from the siren in the dream thanks to the counseling power of Virgil, which in turn is evoked by the saintly woman. The saintly woman appears to represent the workings of conscience, a uniquely Christian notion of an infallible divine force serving to prod a human being into allowing his Virgilian intellectual faculty to recognize the danger in a false good. The combined effort of Virgil (the guiding power of the intellect) and the saintly woman (conscience) seems to succeed because Virgil never takes his eyes off of his saintly summoner. Similarly, after counseling Dante about his dream, the "real life" Virgil urges Dante to "'fasten your eyes upon the lure that's spun / by the eternal King with His great spheres'" (61-62). These gestures of turning away from the false good toward the truly good are mirrored as well in Beatrice's gesture in *Purgatorio* 31, Mary's gesture in *Paradiso* 33, and indeed in Dante's final vision of the divine. When Dante sets his eyes upon the Eternal Light, he receives a mystical vision of the interconnectedness of human and divine love: "I wished to see / the way in which our human effigy / suited the circle and found place in it— / and my own wings were far too weak for that. / But then my mind was

struck by light that flashed / and, with this light, received what it had asked" (Paradiso 33.136-141).

This divine light, which can strike the human intellect through dream and vision and thus provide a representation of itself, is the representation of the representational faculty, the ground of the poetic act, and indeed the ultimate object that Dante attempts to represent in his poem. To put it most strikingly: in *The Divine Comedy*, Dante seems to propose a divine basis for the human poetic faculty; for in Dante's mystical vision of God, the poet and the pilgrim merge, and in the glare of God's light divine apprehension becomes indistinguishable from poetic expression.

This paper attempts, through a close look at Dante's oneiric flights in *Purgatorio*, a rapprochement of sorts between, on the one hand, the modern critical attempt to elucidate Dante's "fiction of non-fiction," his elaborate poetic theology in which the truth of a divine vision is represented in the not false errors of poetry; and on the other hand, the ground, namely, the mystical light of the divine, which Dante himself saw as the basis of both his poetic activity – dictating its form – and the seemingly unrepresentable entity that he attempted to represent – dictating that his poem's specific *content* be in a sense the nature of poetic *form* itself. Such a rapprochement implies that Dante's *Divine Comedy* locates poetic activity (*poiesis*) in theology and theological revelation in poetry, an idea certainly open to many objections from poets as well as theologians. The pilgrim's dreams in *Purgatorio* may after all serve solely as allegories foreshadowing events occurring later in the canticle. In such a case, this paper has read too much into Dante's dreams. However, if Dante's dreams are not only allegories but themselves reflect upon the poetic activity in which Dante is engaged even as he narrates them – in other words, if they are allegories of allegory – then their mode of presentation and their specific

content would be crucial for understanding both the poetry and the theology of *The Divine Comedy*.

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[3] The Nardi and Padoan sources are quoted extensively and translated into English in Barolini.