

PURGATORIO 9.19-39:
SYNCRETISM IN THE DREAM SEQUENCE

Prophetic dreams are a traditional feature of epic poetry. Though the dreamer is granted insight into the future, the "manifest content" of his vision often requires interpretation, usually by one conversant with the logic of dream symbolism. On the surface, Dante's dream just before the dawn of his second day on Purgatory presents no difficulty; the descent of the golden eagle and the carrying of Dante to the sphere of fire are described clearly and briefly:

in sogno mi pareva veder sospesa
un'aguglia nel ciel con penne d'oro,
con l'ali aperte e a calare intesa;
ed esser mi pareva là dove fuoro
abbandonati i suoi da Ganimede,
quando fu ratto al sommo consistoro.
Fra me pensava: "Forse questa fiede
pur qui per uso, e forse d'altro loco
disdegna di portarne suso in piede."
Poi mi pareva che, poi rotata un poco,
terribil come folgor discendesse,
e me rapisse suso infino al foco.
Ivi pareva che ella e io ardesse;
e sì lo 'ncendio imaginato cosse,
che convenne che 'l sonno si rompesse.
Non altrimenti Achille si riscosse,
li occhi svegliati rivolgendo in giro
e non sappiendo là dove si fosse,
quando la madre da Chirón a Schiro
trafuggò lui dormendo in le sue braccia,
là onde poi li Greci il dipartiro;
che mi scoss' io, . . .

*(Purg. 9.19-40)*¹

1. This and subsequent quotations of Dante are from the text of Giorgio Petrocchi, as adopted in Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, 3 vols., ed. Charles Singleton (Princeton, 1970-75).

Nor is the message left far to seek. For Virgil, as (unwitting) oneiro-critic, reveals the "latent content," describing (in *Purg.* 9.52-63) how Lucia had borne the sleeping pilgrim to the Gate of Purgatory. The meaning of the dream having been revealed, Dante is immediately relieved,

A guisa d'uom che 'n dubbio si raccerta
e che muta in conforto sua paura,
poi che la verità li è discoperta, . . .
(*Purg.* 9.64-66)

Critics have carefully weighed the significance of the dream sequence in the context of the canticle and of the *Comedy* as a whole. Lucia's allegorical coordinates have been plotted.² The sphere of fire has been identified with the place and process of purgation, and with the Sun of Divine Love in the *Paradiso*. The eagle has been shown to symbolize, besides Lucia, the Roman Empire (as theriomorphically represented by Justinian in *Par.* 6), the eagle of Divine Justice (*Par.* 18-20), and John the Evangelist (*Par.* 26.53: "l'aguglia di Cristo").³ Charles Singleton has perceptively adduced the words of the Lord to Moses in *Exodus* 19.4: "Vos ipsi vidistis, quae fecerim Aegyptiis, quomodo portaverim vos super alas aquilarum, et assumpserim mihi."⁴ The theme of *Exodus* is singularly apt here at the ascent of Dante through the Gate.

But another symbolic dimension, in the allusions to Ganymede and Achilles, has not received critical attention. In a poet less resolutely

2. Cf., e.g., J. B. Fletcher, *Symbolism of the Divine Comedy* (New York, 1921), p. 196: "Lucia, light of Mary's grace bringing penitent self-knowledge and the will to enter into the purgatorial fire . . . Lucia, light of faith leading to charity, Beatrice . . ."

3. Paget Toynbee, *A Dictionary of Proper Names and Notable Matters in the Works of Dante*, rev. Charles Singleton (Oxford, 1968), s.v. "Aquila." These are only the most common and plausible interpretations. H. F. Dunbar, *Symbolism in Medieval Thought and Its Consummation in the Divine Comedy* (New Haven, 1929), p. 216, suggests that "the eagle may here represent Henry VII and the indescribable joy produced by Henry's coronation." See also Richard T. Holbrook's chapter on "The Eagle" in *Dante and the Animal Kingdom* (New York, 1902), pp. 255-63, and G. Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (1954; rpt. New York, 1966), p. 17.

4. See "In Exitu Israel de Aegypto," *78th Annual Report of the Dante Society of America* (1960); rpt. in J. Freccero, ed., *Dante: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1965), pp. 102-21, esp. 120-21.

syncretic than Dante, the reference in this context to the rape of the beautiful Trojan youth by insatiable Jove might seem odd, almost a disfigurement. Critics have mostly contented themselves with superficial indications of similarity between Ganymede and Dante: each is carried off by a divine agent toward communion with the gods, etc. More imaginatively, early commentators found a Neoplatonic moral in the rape: the human mind, freed from the trappings of mortality (*Purg.* 9.10: "quel d'Adamo"), is elevated to intellectual and spiritual union with the divine.⁵ This goes some way to justify Dante's evocation of Olympian promiscuity. But it focuses too narrowly on the actual story of the rape (as told in Virgil, *Aen.* 5.252-57; Ovid, *Met.* 10.155-61; Statius, *Theb.* 1.548-51) and ignores the fact that Ganymede could scarcely have failed to remind Dante of the opening of the *Aeneid*, where the motives of the enraged Juno (*Aen.* 1.11: "tantaene animis caelestibus irae?") are set forth:

manet alta mente repostum
iudicium Paridis spretaeque iniuria formae
et genus inuisum et rapti Ganymedis honores:
his accensa super iactatos aequore toto
Troas, reliquias Danaum atque immitis Achilli,
arcebat longe Latio, multosque per annos
errabant acti fati maria omnia circum.
(*Aen.* 1.26-32)⁶

Dante is always sympathetic to Trojans (note, e.g., the exalted Ripheus in *Par.* 20) because, a true disciple of Virgil, he associates them with the founding of Rome. His representation of the Roman poet's notion of the offense for which Ulysses and Diomedes suffer in Hell is telling in this regard:

e dentro da la lor fiamma si geme
l'agguato del caval che fé la porta
onde uscl de' Romani il gentil seme.
(*Inf.* 26.58-60)

5. So Cristoforo Landino and, following him, Andrea Alciati, Achille Bocchi, and Natale Conte; see the summary of these and earlier authorities in Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (1939; rpt. New York, 1962), pp. 212-18.

6. R. A. B. Mynors, ed., *P. Vergili Maronis Opera* (Oxford, 1969).

While the eagle of *Purgatorio* 9 recalls the release of Israel and the movement toward the Promised Land, the mention of Trojan Ganymede should conjure up as well the anger of Juno and the harried movement of the Aeneadae toward the promised lands ("arua . . . semper cedentia retro") of Ausonia: "tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem" (*Aen.* 1.33).

The Achilles-on-Scyrus simile (*Purg.* 9.34 ff.) is set against this same background of Trojan exodus. Odysseus' detection of the draft-evading Achilles (see Ovid, *Met.* 13.162 ff.; Statius, *Achill.* 2.167 ff.) surmounted an obstacle that might have prevented the fall of Troy.⁷ The conscription of Achilles despite the best efforts of his mother sealed the fate of Hector and, with him, of Troy itself, just as Juno's enmity over Paris' Venereal predilections and Jove's pederasty induced in her an anti-Trojan bias that would last until the death of Turnus in Italy.⁸

The coming home of the errant soul from sin and mortality to the heavenly city of the saved is thus related, in the dream sequence, to the great exodus of sacred history (Israel out of Egypt) and to that of secular history (*Roma aeterna* out of the ashes of *Ilium superbum*).

There is a further point of comparison between the golden eagle and Achilles—purification. In the emblematic zoology of the Middle Ages, the eagle was iconographically associated with purgation. Isidore of Seville etymologizes:

Aquila ab acumine oculorum vocata. Tanti enim contuitus esse dicitur, ut cum super maria immobili pinna feratur nec humanis pateat obtutibus, de tanta sublimitate pisciculos natare videat, ac

7. Compare the calming of contrary winds by the sacrifice of Iphigenia at Aulis or, ten years later, the successful mission to retrieve Philoctetes and the wondrous bow bequeathed him by Hercules on Oeta.

8. Note the terms of Juno's final capitulation in *Aen.* 12.808-28, esp. 826-28:

"sit Latium, sint Albani per saecula reges,
sit Romana potens Itala uirtute propago:
occidit, occideritque sinas cum nomine Troia."

Cf. Horace, *Carm.* 3.3.37 ff.:

"dum longus inter saeviat Ilion
Romamque pontus, qualibet exsules
in parte regnanto beati . . ."

tormenti instar descendens raptam praedam pinnis ad litus pertrahat. Nam et contra radium solis fertur obtutum non flectere; unde et pullos suos ungue suspensos radiis solis obicit, et quos viderit immobilem tenere aciem, ut dignos genere conservat; si quos vero inflectere obtutum, quasi degeneres abicit.⁹

So too, Dante is tested, tried by fire, as he will be repeatedly in his journey to God.¹⁰ Before the soul may gain admission "al sommo consistoro," it must prove itself pure.

The young Achilles too, like the fledgling eagle, was subjected to a cleansing process. The future hero ended up on Scyrus because of his mother's solicitations for his well-being. The *locus classicus* for that story—Statius' *Achilleid*—is also the earliest extant literary source for the tale of Thetis' immersion of her infant son in the dread Styx (*Achill.* 1.133 ff., 2.266-71).¹¹

9. W. M. Lindsay, ed., *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum Libri XX* (Oxford, 1911), 12.7.10-11; the passage is repeated nearly verbatim in Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1142), *De Bestiis* 2.56 and is the archetype of similar descriptions in many bestiaries—see Florence McCulloch, *Mediaeval Latin and French Bestiaries*, Univ. of North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures, No. 33 (Chapel Hill, 1962), pp. 113-15.

10. Until he can at last (in *Par.* 33) successfully emulate Beatrice, who gazes unflinchingly at the divine Sun (cf. *Par.* 1.48: "aguglia si non li s'afisse unquanco").

11. A still closer parallel to the eagle's trial by fire is the version according to which "Thetis was determined to have an immortal child . . . Seven children were born, and one after another their mother threw them into fire, or according to others, a boiling cauldron, either to test their powers or to burn away the mortal part that they had inherited from their father. At last Peleus interfered, and the baby Achilles was either saved from destruction or prevented from becoming fully immortal"—H. J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* (6th ed. 1953; rpt. New York, 1959), p. 26; see also W. H. Roscher, ed., *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* (Leipzig, 1884-1937), s.v. "Achilleus," col. 24. But the sources for this version are all Greek: Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 4.865-84; Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 3.13.6—see Sir James Frazer's note ad loc. and a characteristically eclectic appendix, "Putting Children on the Fire," in his Loeb edition of *The Library* (Cambridge, Mass., 1921), II, 311-17. It is unlikely that Varro Atacinus (b. 82 B.C.) could have transmitted the story to the Latin Middle Ages in his (lost) translation of Apollonius. Nor is there much point in citing the similar story of the infant Triptolemus in Ovid, *Fasti* 4.549 ff.

Dante shares with Achilles not only the disorientation of awakening in a strange place, but also the loving concern of a divine benefactress willing and able even to intercede with the Supreme Being (cf. Thetis in *Iliad* 1). As the long-suffering Nereid undertook to make her son immortal, so Beatrice, here through Lucia, takes steps to bring Dante into the number of the saved.

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