

The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English

Volume 15 | Issue 1

Article 3

1-1-2013

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Recommended Citation

Valle, Tomás Antonio (2013) "A New Perspective on Dante's Dream of the Siren," *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 3.
Available at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol15/iss1/3>

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A New Perspective on Dante's Dream of the Siren

Keywords

Dante, Italian Literature, the Divine Comedy

A New Perspective on Dante's Dream of the Siren

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The Dream of the Siren in *Purgatorio* 19 raises an interesting problem for Dante as a poet. Dante's image of Beatrice draws him on to the beatific vision, yet the Dream points out the danger of trusting in images and man's tendency to construct Sirens, false images, out of his desires. How, then, can Dante know that Beatrice is a true image and not a Siren? A comparison of the Dream to other portions of the *Comedy* reveals Dante's answer: a true image drives

the Lover to investigate his desires, since these desires bias the imagination and construct false and destructive images. Moreover, such an answer springs from seeing a special relationship between the Dream and the *Comedy* as a whole: namely, that they tell the same story of ensnarement and escape, simply in two different ways—one psychologically and the other poetically.

To reach this insight, the reader must first understand the question which the Dream raises about the image of Beatrice and Dante's answer to that question. Through the Dream, Dante the poet explains how man can project his desires onto an external object, thereby becoming ensnared by a false image. Eventually, though, he is freed through realizing that his desires are at the heart of the image. The Dream carries great importance for three reasons: first, Dante places it in a very important position in the poem. Second, it fills a significant gap in Virgil's Second Discourse on Love. Third and most importantly, with the Dream of the Siren, Dante attempts to resolve the problems latent in his image of Beatrice. Dante must explain how he (and his readers) can trust that the image of Beatrice is not a construction of his own desires. Before understanding Dante's explanation, the reader must examine two souls in Hell trapped by false images: Francesca and Ulysses. Beatrice's rebuke of Dante in Canto 30 of *Purgatorio* shows how different Beatrice's effect on Dante is from the effects of those false images on their creators—that is, she compels him to understand his own desires. This understanding of desire is precisely the protection against projected loves that Dante depicts in his

Dream of the Siren. This, then, is Dante's proof that Beatrice is a true image: she leads him to discover his desires.

In the Dream of the Siren, Dante the poet shows the dangers of projected love but also how the recognition of desires allows one to escape them. When the woman who becomes the Siren¹ first appears, Dante describes her as "stuttering, cross-eyed, and crooked on her feet, with stunted hands, and pallid in color" (*Purgatorio* 19.7-9).² She represents something which in itself ought not to be loved.³ In spite of her hideousness, or perhaps because of it, Dante the pilgrim allows his gaze to linger on her. Dante's gaze then begins to transform the woman: "my gaze loosed her tongue . . . straightened her entirely and gave color to her wan face" (19.11-15). Moreover, Dante's gaze changes her in a specific way so that she looks "just as love desires" (19.15).⁴ Dante's gaze has given to an unfit object of love the appearance of a fit object of love and done so according to Dante's own desires. This can be called "projected love," since by it Dante loves only himself and his own desires, which he has projected onto the woman, rather than the woman herself.⁵

However, once Dante has formed this woman to fit his own desires, he cannot tear himself away from her. As soon as his gaze has changed her, "she began to sing in such a way that [he] could hardly have turned [his] attention from her" (19.16-18). By creating this ideal illusion, Dante ends up deceiving himself and now cannot escape—his love has been bound to this object of desire.⁶ That the woman, having been so shaped by Dante, describes herself as "a sweet

siren” (19.19) fits well: sirens change their songs to fit the desires of the hearer, just as Dante has shaped the woman to appeal to his desires, and no one can resist a siren’s song once he hears it. The Siren’s speech also brings out the danger of Dante’s position: “whoever becomes used to me rarely leaves me, so wholly do I satisfy him” (19.23-24). The Siren tempts Dante to remain, fixated by this projection of his desires, and not to continue in his quest for God. She also tempted Ulysses,⁷ leading him on a restless journey to his own destruction—thus she also tempts to unrest.⁸ Then, in the midst of the Siren’s song, a Lady appears and spurs Virgil, representing Reason,⁹ to reveal the belly of the Siren (representing Dante’s desires)¹⁰ and break the illusion. By making Dante recognize that his own desires are at the heart of the Siren and forcing him to investigate those desires, the Lady has saved Dante from the Siren’s snare.

In light of Virgil’s Discourse on Love and the Free Will, this Lady must be Dante’s power of free choice, implanted by God for the purpose of freeing Dante from the danger of projected love.¹¹ In that Discourse, Virgil explains that every soul naturally possesses an “innate . . . power that gives counsel and must guard the threshold of assent” (18.62-63), which well describes the role of the Lady in the Dream. This power of discernment either “accepts or winnows good or evil loves” (18.65-66)—exactly what the Lady does by spurring Virgil to unmask the Siren. Therefore, says Virgil, no matter what love arises in you, “in you is the power to restrain it. This noble power Beatrice understands as free choice” (18.72-74). So, then, the Lady represents

the soul's power of free choice. More importantly than the identities of its characters, though, the Dream resolves into two inverse actions—the projection of desire that ensnares and the recognition of desire that frees.

This interpretation of the Dream of the Siren reveals its critical significance to understanding the *Divine Comedy* as a whole, both by its placement in the poem and by its effects on the preceding Discourses, but even more by the way it relates to Dante's poetic use of Beatrice. The Dream of the Siren occurs immediately after five cantos dealing primarily with love and free will, cantos central to the *Divine Comedy* both in the sense that they form its middle and in the sense that understanding their content sheds light on all the rest of the *Divine Comedy*.¹² Simply by its placement, then, Dante makes the Dream of the Siren stand out to his readers. However, the substance of the Dream, being about love, aids in understanding the Discourses in the five central cantos, especially Virgil's Second Discourse on Love. A critical part of Virgil's explanation of love involves sense apprehension, the first operation of the intellect. According to Virgil, sense apprehension acts by taking an image of something and "unfold[ing] it within you, so that it causes the mind to turn toward it" (18.23-24). This leads to love. However, Virgil does not explain what happens when the unfolding sense perception is somehow corrupted and changed, biased by previous desires, although he admits that this may happen by saying "[love's] matter seems always to be good, but not every seal is good, although the wax be good" (18.37-39). The seal represents the unfolding sense perception,¹³ which

makes its impression on the mind's passive potential for love, represented by the wax. Virgil, while acknowledging that something can go wrong in this process, does not explain how this happens or how to avoid it. The Dream of the Siren fills this gap in the reader's understanding of love by depicting the corruption of perception through self-projection and the power to escape by recognizing one's desires.

Most crucially, however, the Dream also represents the danger implicit in Dante's imagination¹⁴ of Beatrice. Through the entire *Comedy*, Beatrice is an image drawing him up to God.¹⁵ In this way he develops a Christian version of Courtly Love, which would traditionally place the woman in an exalted position so that the lover had to strive to attain her lofty state through a life of service. Dante makes Beatrice a similar figure but changes the goal of a man's striving from an adulterous liaison to nearness to God; he also shifts the focus of his servitude from the woman to God although the service is still because of the woman. However, both versions of Courtly Love, the Dantean and the traditional, share a common weakness: the question of whether or not the woman actually holds the lofty station that Courtly Love gives her. Dante runs the risk of ending his life only to learn that he spent it chasing a false image, that what he thought was Beatrice in fact was only his own construction, based on what he wanted a woman to be. To put it in a different fashion, how can Dante know that he is seeking Beatrice and not simply delaying his search for God, trapped in the arms of a Siren he himself has made? The Dream of the

Siren portrays the very danger lurking in Dante's version of Courtly Love. Thus the problem of projected love presents a real danger to Dante as an author and poet. If he does not want his method of salvation to crumble around him, he must somehow show that Beatrice truly is an image leading him to God or at least that he sees the danger of using Beatrice this way and knows how to avoid it. The Dream of the Siren, then, must play some part in Dante's answer to this.

To understand Dante's answer, one must first understand his depictions of those ensnared by false images. The episode of Francesca and Paolo exemplifies how Courtly Love can influence one to construct a false image that leads to indolence and lust. Reading about Lancelot's Courtly Love relationship with Guinevere, they conceive the desire to have such a relationship themselves. Just as, in the Courtly Love tradition, Lancelot is beset by love (*Inferno* 5.128), so Francesca insists that Love is the actor in her sin. Moreover, at the critical moment when Paolo kisses Francesca in imitation of Lancelot,¹⁶ they take for themselves the roles of the characters, projecting their desire for a Courtly Lover onto the other person—Francesca imagining Paolo to be another Lancelot and Paolo imagining Francesca to be another Guinevere. Reinforcing this, they even project the traditional role of “go-between” onto the book they read.¹⁷ This false image they have created leads them to dally in *acedia*, slothful languor, and indolent lust—“that day we read there no further” (5.138).

Dante's Ulysses represents another victim of the Siren—that is, another projector of his desires onto the

outside world, leading him on an epic, yet deadly, journey. He is driven (and drives his men) by “ardor . . . to gain experience of the world and of human vices and worth” out onto the “deep, open sea alone” (*Inferno* 26.97-99, 100). The Siren identifies herself as the one who enchants “sailors on the deep sea” and who “turned Ulysses from his course, desirous of [her] song” (*Purgatorio* 19.20, 22-3). For that reason Ulysses also has trapped himself in a projected image. This false image compels Ulysses to go on a quest seeking it, which eventually brings him to Purgatory, where he is destroyed. Ulysses, in contrast to the indolent Francesca, exemplifies the opposite manifestation of *acedia*, that of restless activity.¹⁸

Comparing Francesca and Ulysses’ responses to their false images with Dante’s response to Beatrice shows Dante’s distinction between false and true images: the lover responds to true images by understanding his own desires. In *Purgatorio* 30, Beatrice explains her function as an image in Dante’s life: “For a time I sustained him with my countenance: showing him my youthful eyes, I led him with me, turned in the right direction” (30.121). However, after Beatrice’s death, Dante “turned his steps along a way not true, following false images of good, which keep no promise fully” (130-132). To save him from these, Beatrice had to “show him the lost people” (138). Here she references the beginning of *Inferno*, when she begged Virgil to lead Dante through Hell. Unlike Francesca’s image, which impels her to indolence, and Ulysses’ image, which impels him on a restless wandering towards Purgatory, Dante’s image of

Beatrice sends him down to Hell. Moreover, this journey to Hell represents an introspective understanding of Dante's own desires. All the sins in Hell are generated by desire, since "love must be the seed in you of every virtue and of every action that deserves punishment" (*Purgatorio* 17.104-5). As Dante learns by example the natures of the sins punished in Hell, so he learns the natures of the desires which lead to them, desires which also live in him (this is one possible reason why Dante often reflects the sin he is observing). This is the distinction between false and true images, between the Siren and Beatrice: the one provokes *acedia*,¹⁹ the other an epic quest to understand the nature of desire.

The second action in the Dream of the Siren, the revelation of desire, represents this quest into Hell to understand the desires. The simple fact that Virgil plays a leading role in both actions shows the correlation.²⁰ Moreover, as said above, the revealing of the belly as the source of desire shows that revelation of desire destroys the false image. In addition, the focus on the body of the Siren relates to the image of Hell as a body with Satan at the belly.²¹ Dante's awakening after the Dream represents the sort of moral awakening that follows from Dante's emerging above ground at the end of the *Inferno*. The invocation at the beginning of *Purgatorio* also relates: "But here let dead poetry rise up again, O holy muses" (1.7-8). This transition between cantica represents Dante's awakening from his false imaginations through understanding his desires and his rebirth with new strength to affirm true images and to love

aright.

Dante's proof of his image's truth, then, is that it has sent him on this quest to understand his desires, rather than leaving him in *acedia*. This knowledge of the desires, which are the bias of the imagination, cannot deceive Dante, and therefore his quest purifies his mind of false images and allows him to love Beatrice aright. And yet this line of thought can develop even more: indeed, just as Dante's descent into Hell represents his investigation of his own desires, so the entire Dream is the psychological microcosm of the *Comedy*, and the *Comedy* is the poetic and autobiographical macrocosm of the Dream. All the features of the Dream are present in the *Comedy*: the soul ensnared by the false image, the female guardian who alerts the rational element, and the ensuing examination of the very blackest desires of the soul. The Dream deals with all these in a much quicker, simpler way, while the *Comedy* deals with them in a thorough and richly allegorical manner. The *Comedy*, unlike the Dream, begins in medias res, only revealing how Dante fell into the moral quagmire of *Inferno* 1 through later discussions such as Beatrice's reproof in *Purgatorio* 30. The Dream, while explaining how Dante became ensnared, does not depict the education in love and the ascent to beatitude in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, rather ending with Dante's rebirth upon exiting Hell. Once this relationship between the Dream and the *Comedy* is understood, the question²² of whether the mysterious Lady is free will or Beatrice becomes clear—understood at a purely psychological level she represents free will, but at

any poetic level the inspiring force of free will must take on the character of the Beloved. Free will acts, and only love creates action: free will (understood as the faculty that distinguishes good and evil loves) *is* the Beloved acting upon the Lover.

From this microcosm-macrocosm relationship, I would draw two other conclusions related to Dante as an author. First, and more daringly, I propose that the Dream of the Siren is in fact the origin or seed of the *Comedy* as a whole, an original idea that Dante then expanded. The Dream contains all of *Inferno* in reduced form, as well as events before the *Comedy*'s *in medias res* beginning. What it lacks from the entire *Comedy* is *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, which makes perfect sense if the Dream were Dante's starting point, his first imaginative experiment with some of the dominant themes of the poem. Moreover, the fact that the *Comedy* begins in the style of a dream-narrative²³ also ties it to the Dream. As a second and more likely conclusion, I suggest that the *Comedy* be considered as Dante's systematic purification of his own imagination and desires. If we take seriously what Dante the poet reveals about his life and accept that at some point he became trapped by his own imaginings—the false images of good mentioned by Beatrice in *Purgatorio* 30—but realized his own ensnarement, we can then read the entire *Comedy* as an honest attempt by Dante as a person to understand the nature of his desires and to learn to love in truth and purity, unbiased by desire.

Notes

¹ I believe that we should distinguish between the woman who becomes the Siren and the Siren herself. Robert Durling's comment that the "Siren, then, does not correspond to any external object of desire . . . but rather to a particular attitude toward external goods" (*Purgatorio* 317) misses this point and, for that reason, confuses the person of the Siren with the first action of the Dream, the projection.

² All quotations from and references to the text of the *Comedy* itself refer to the Durling translation. In the footnotes, that and the other editions of the *Comedy* are cited for the editors' commentary.

³ This may be either an evil or a lesser good. For this reason, the Dream of the Siren can be seen as describing the origin of all the vices in Purgatory. Virgil's statement in lines 58-60 does not contradict this, only implying that more is repented of below. Moreover, see Durling (320) on why Virgil should not be trusted here.

⁴ More important than what color this actually is—a blend of rose and white, according to Charles Singleton (449)—is the significance of the word "desires." As Durling (318) says, "what the dreamer desires is what he sees"—Dante's own desires determine the form of the Siren.

⁵ See Dorothy Sayers' excellent discussion of this action on pages 220-1.

⁶ For why the Pilgrim cannot pull himself away, see Virgil's explanation of love at 18.25-31. Also relevant is the parallel between the Siren and the medieval succubus, "intercourse with which saps the strength and

destroys the life” (Sayers 220).

⁷ In the *Odyssey* and other extant accounts of the travels of Odysseus, he resists the temptation of the Siren and eventually makes his way home, so most Dante scholars have tried to find an alternative source for Dante’s version of the myth. No one, in my research, seems to believe that Dante intentionally changed the Ulysses myth here to make a point. However, if we take the words of the Siren to be true, then Dante’s Ulysses was destroyed by the same type of projected desire that now threatens the Pilgrim, a conclusion much more intriguing than simply that the Siren is a liar. See Durling (324), who comes so close to, yet strays so far from, realizing this when he says that the Siren may be part of what led Ulysses on his fatal voyage, but then interprets her as “fascination with the sensual surface of things.”

⁸ The significance of this double-temptation (Dante’s immobility and Ulysses’s frantic questing) relates to the double-nature of *acedia*, or sloth. Idle suspension and restless activity are, at heart, the same thing. See the restlessness of desire at 18.31-33.

⁹ See Sayers (221). In Dreams, where the characters are normally allegorical, characters (such as Virgil) who should be read with a more complex approach to their identity in the rest of the poem can be read in a more purely allegorical way.

¹⁰ The common reading that makes this a sexual reference (Durling 319) stops at the obvious. Since the belly is the seat of the desires and the Siren is a construct based on Dante’s desires, Virgil reveals to Dante that the Siren is composed (under her deceptive

exterior) of his own desires. The stench, while a sexual reference, is also the odor of falsity or, perhaps, as Giuseppe Mazzotta argues, “the unmistakable stench of death forever lurking at the heart of the suspended, self-enclosed circle of romance” (145)—recalling the succubus parallel combining sexual temptation and death.

¹¹ Mazzotta (145) and others take the Lady to be Beatrice, with powerfully significant results. However, the Dream of the Siren is a psychological drama, and Beatrice herself does not exist in Dante’s mind. One could argue that it is the image itself of Beatrice, but since the Dream calls into question the veracity of man’s formation of images, this would be counter-productive for Dante. Moreover, I cannot believe that Dante artistically would be willing to bring Beatrice substantially into the poem so close to the much anticipated coming of Beatrice in Canto 30. Considering the wealth of parallels, however, I will not say for certain that the Lady and Beatrice are not the same: it depends on how closely you are willing to unify the Dream and the *Comedy* itself, as will be discussed later. However, the primary reading in the context of the psychology of love must identify her as divinely-given free will.

¹² For an astonishing discussion of Dante’s artistic perfection in these cantos, see Durling (610).

¹³ Here I disagree with Singleton, if I understand him rightly. He takes the seal to represent the object of love itself (420). However, again assuming that I understand Singleton’s explanation of the Thomistic view of love correctly, it is the intention (or image) which is received

by the mind and makes an impression on it (412-14).

¹⁴ “Imagination” here means the creation of an image out of something in the world.

¹⁵ An expansive, though by no means daring judgment: see, for instance, Sayers 311.

¹⁶ For a fuller explanation of who kisses whom, see Durling (*Inferno* 99). However, whether or not Francesca is avoiding responsibility for her action by lying, the two lovers still play the roles of Lancelot and Guinevere.

¹⁷ See 5.137 and Durling’s note (*Inferno* 99).

¹⁸ See footnote 8 above.

¹⁹ *Acedia* represents a refusal to accept reality as God has made it—it is the sin most allied with—and hence follows from, the affirmation of false images. This is why (as well as for structural reasons—see footnote 12) Dante places the Dream of the Siren on the Terrace of Sloth (*acedia*).

²⁰ The textual ambiguity (see Mark Musa 210) of whether the Lady or Virgil reveals the Siren’s belly fits the correlation to the larger action of the poem—Virgil leads Dante through Hell, but actually it is not Virgil but Beatrice, Lucia, Mary, and ultimately God who do so.

²¹ See Durling (*Inferno* 552-5 and 576-7) for the evidence behind this image.

²² See footnote 11.

²³ See Durling (*Inferno* 34).

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