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*Seeing Double: Dreams, Visions, and the Duality of Experience and Writing in  
Guibert's 'Monodiae' and Dante's 'Vita Nuova'*

### ABSTRACT

Dreams and visionary experience in medieval literature pose questions such as: What are the true distinctions and connections between human and transcendental knowledge and existence? Where are the boundaries between what is real and universal versus the subjective, human, and personal? How should we define the individual self? In the *Memoirs of Guibert of Nogent*, mental imaginings often assume real-world palpability as they are affirmed by material evidence or are received by the dreamer as real signals from supernatural spirits. Throughout Guibert's "confession," many visionary experiences are substantiated by corporeal proof, the witness of other people, or resultant actions that abide by the message of the dream or visualization. Dante's *Vita Nuova* also contains a number of dreams and visions that provide commentary on signification and representation—an important theme of the work in general, since it is largely a meditation on poetry. Dreams and visions in this text raise the issue of divine versus human, individual thoughts and creations. Dante's writing is not entirely a creative work (as he asserts in the prologue, he is a scribe or editor re-creating the experiences of his life): visions from God, Love, and Beatrice inform his poetry and even "write" his life.

### BIOGRAPHY

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## SEEING DOUBLE: DREAMS, VISIONS, AND THE DUALITY OF EXPERIENCE AND WRITING IN GUIBERT'S *MONODIAE* AND DANTE'S *VITA NUOVA*

Dreams and visions in modern life and books are usually thought of as subjective experiences, intellectual and sensory manifestations of an individual's inner psychological workings. Modern dream theory offers a comprehensive hermeneutical guide to reading dreams and other mental activities—slips of the tongue, forgotten or created memories, even waking hallucinations—completely as individual encounters with one's own subconscious thoughts and emotions. By and large, except in eccentric cases of supposed supernatural intervention, our contemporary dreams and imaginings are understood as representations of our innermost fears and longings.

Yet dreams and visions as they appear in medieval literature seem to serve a wider variety of functions and can be interpreted in diverse ways, not only as evidence of a character's psyche. They do indeed reflect individual, subjective experience and psychology, but they also test the boundaries between subjectivity and objectivity as the distinctions between material reality and intellectual cognizance dissolve. Dreams and visions provide commentary on the duality of humans' experience as subjects of an omniscient, omnipresent divinity and as individuals with the powers of creative invention and free will. On the one hand, visions and dreams within texts can give expression to private ideas and feelings and affirm the uniqueness of the self. The imagination is private, the visionary experience completely personal. On the other hand, they question where one person ends and a universal being begins, for many are acknowledged as portents from the spiritual world and not from a person's subjective creation. Moreover, dreams are not actively constructed by the conscious self; they seem to come from an unknown place outside of consciousness. Visions are ostensibly personalized re-creations of reality in the logos, but medieval dreams often assert strong links between subjectivity and truth.

Thus, dreams and visions in literature point to the problem of representation and writing itself. By calling into question the natures of truth and subjectivity, dreams within texts are devices that refer back to texts, back to the problem of writing—a means of representing or creating truth that is at once wholly real in the totality of books but also removed from truth by the interpretive processes of language. In that sense, visions and dreams are like writing, for they represent reality in terms other than itself (pictures and sounds, including spoken words, which are usually considered arbitrary, that is, bearing no intrinsic relation to the ideas they signify). Dreams are removed from truth by the intermediate mode of transmission: the mind and senses. (In fact, the processes of sensing and knowing so-called objective truths automatically render them subjective, for they have been converted from the purity of the abstract to the altered form of the perceiver. So, human truths are limited to individual subjectivity, and perhaps a dream characterizes the highest possible form of individual intelligence.) A dream framed within a text is like a miniature book within a book, a fictitious creation of reality within another creation. Moreover, the 'medieval artist gained authority ... from the association of his 'makings' with divine acts of creation; correspondence between the three levels of creation—God's nature's, man's—were commonplace, as was the metaphor of the world as a book, which implies its opposite, the book as a kind of little world.'<sup>i</sup> Especially since they can be quite convincing replicas of real life, dreams pose the problem of false and inadequate representation by an over-assuming author with pretensions to godliness. Hence the medieval religious fear of fiction as a false contrivance with the dangerous power of enchantment.

Yet visions and dreams that most modern readers would consider fantastical are taken very seriously by the characters in medieval texts and play a significant role in examining the realms of subjectivity versus objectivity. Dreams and visions in medieval texts assert truth, for they are not forcefully constructed; no active metacognitive process creates them. The dreamer does not previously know the content of, plan, or generate a visionary experience. Dreams are like internal texts written into the mind, totally real to the individual's perception, and (usually) bringing no meta-awareness of the dream as artificial or creative representation. Rather, they come to the mind almost from an outside source that is beyond the normal human realm of knowing, which is possibly why many dreams are so difficult to interpret. This outside source may be the unconscious making an effort to speak to the conscious, as modern Freudian dream theory asserts. Or the source may be another more sublime being, a transcendental spirit, God. Perhaps what the human mind can feel, intuit, and posit but cannot grasp—the unconscious—is the same as God. (Negative theology supports this notion of God as the *not*, the *not-present*, *not-discernable*.) Therefore, the individual dream, while individually experienced, is not a humanly-created fiction whose meaning can be gleaned through interpretation. In fact, it often seems that the most important aspect of the dream is utterance, the experience itself, and not the subsequent analysis. Mental visualizations are more immediate than the words in books or speech, for they can convey the thoughts, feelings, and appearances of reality without the intercession of language; 'according to Averroes [the 12<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher and theologian], the 'first cause' for the origin of poetry was the soul's need for images in understanding.'<sup>ii</sup> The pictures and sounds of dreams can produce instantaneous reaction and

understanding (even if entrenched meaning is unclear), unlike a text, whose meaning is deferred because words must first be read, translated into ideas, and finally interpreted. A dream or vision can easily be mistaken for waking life, and the dreamer often awakens deeply affected, feeling scared, angry, elated, or having new intelligence in reaction to a realistic dream. These instinctive and intense responses are less possible with external texts, which are knowingly regarded as fabrications and mere representations. Dreams and visions thus become a way of knowing without knowing, unconsciously knowing without the mind recognizing and actively telling itself, 'I know.'

This 'knowing without knowing' is a dualistic, liminal experience much like the dream or vision itself, which is at once textual or representational and real or true. The dreamer is awake while sleeping, the visionary seeing without looking. Accordingly, as Peter Brown notes in *Reading Dreams*,

the state of altered consciousness which the dream vision signals and explores is precisely that of 'betweenness.' It is as if the author of a dream vision is saying: 'I want to focus on the state of being between sleep and wakefulness, death and life, inertia and excitation, natural and artificial states, experience and authority, salvation and damnation, being lost and finding direction, solitude and sociability, private and public, male and female, health and sickness, constraint and liberation, alienation and integration.'<sup>iii</sup>

Such indefinable but conceivable middle grounds evoked by dreaming and visionary experience point to the unknowable but infinite and ever-present: unconsciousness or God. Experience or writing of such therefore connects the mundane with the divine.

Thus, dreams and visionary experience in medieval literature pose epistemological and metaphysical questions such as: What are the true distinctions and connections between human and transcendental knowledge and existence? What are the possibilities of writing and representation? Where are the boundaries between what is real and universal versus the subjective, human, and personal? How should we define the individual self?

In the *Memoirs or Monodiae* ('solitary songs') of Guibert of Nogent, mental imaginings often assume real-world palpability as they are affirmed by material evidence, or they are received by the dreamer as real signals from supernatural spirits. Throughout Guibert's 'confession,' many visionary experiences are substantiated by corporeal proof, the witness of other people, or resultant actions that abide by the message of the dream or visualization. As such bearers of reality or objectivity, the visions and dreams in Guibert's writing are considered the product of some place or being other than the individual's subjective creation: divine spirits provide premonitions, guidance, and warnings. Humans such as Guibert, his mother, and other clerics and nuns receive divine auguries in dreams and visits from demonic spirits, and tangible physical evidence or subsequent actions testify to the reality of what would otherwise be considered subjective visionary experiences. These passages therefore call into question the links and bounds between personal and divine thoughts, establishing a strong connection between earthly and heavenly ideas and activities. Within the context of Guibert's written quest for self-knowledge, Guibert's dreams and visions help to resolve his search for the meaning of individuality as it has been arbitrarily given him by forces outside of human control. Personally-directed omens connect the person with his divine maker and thus help to reconcile the issue of individuality with divine omnipotence. In writing his own life, creating an autobiography that renders his existence as something more than just God's doing, Guibert's accounts of dreams and visions also reflect the act of writing and subjectively representing truth. As he reads and interprets dreams and visions like literary texts, Guibert mirrors his own process of self-writing or making the self known to itself. He also asserts the value of individuality by revealing dreams and visions as important to the subjective mind. Just as Guibert's personal visions are completely real and meaningful to his own life, the authority of the individual author is asserted by virtue of the act of utterance or writing itself. Since it has produced a creative work, the human mind behind the text may be authority enough for us to consider its significance worthy.

A central function of the dreams and visions in Guibert's *Monodiae* is their ability to reveal future and current events, especially to guide humans toward good and away from evil. Guibert's own path as an abbot and pious man is shaped by such revelatory and premonitory dreams and visions (both his own and his mother's), and as Guibert is careful to stress that God is the source of his revelatory dreams, he writes into his life a divine purpose. Thus, the role of many of the dreams and visions in the *Monodiae* is to construct Guibert's autobiography in a meaningful way. As Guibert is maturing and enduring the trials and temptations of the world, his mother's dreams reflect the state of his spirit:

O dear God, who cares for all, you made these things clear to your servant, my mother. Whatever direction, sound or unsound, my fragile conscience turned, your judgment, O Lord, allowed her an

immediate vision of its very state. And since dreams are known to 'come with much business' {Eccles. 5.3} ... my mother's dreams were elicited ... by a genuine concern for my spiritual well-being. Whenever an unpious dream disturbed her most pious mind—and she was an extraordinarily subtle and perceptive interpreter in such cases—she would interpret the acute discomfort these dreams brought her as a sign. Then she would summon me and talk in private about my activities.... Since I was accustomed never to deny her the mutual understanding we shared, I would readily confess all the ways my spirit had grown sluggish, following the tenor of her dreams.... Whenever she admonished me, I would immediately and sincerely promise to correct myself.<sup>iv</sup>

God's dream-message to Guibert's mother helps to correct the young clergyman's deeds and thoughts via his confession and penance. God has monitored Guibert and provided his mother with revealing and warning visions to improve her son's behavior, and Guibert acknowledges and thanks God for this dream service. God's involvement in spiritually connecting mother and son for a sacred purpose unites the three in a sort of holy trinity. But this passage not only highlights the connection between the divine spirit and human souls, it emphasizes the importance of human bonds and personal choices. The 'mutual understanding' and emotional bond between mother and son and Guibert's mother's role as a wise mentor and spiritual guide are strengthened by these visions. While dreams are considered portents to be taken seriously because they are products of the heavenly realm, Guibert decides to act according to his mother's advice and strong feelings: his free will and his mother's distress and guidance are examples of individual, not divine, creations. The importance of human emotions, human relationships, and human love is buttressed but not superseded by God's intervention through dreams. Guibert reinforces the value of people's love and compassion, secondarily supported by God's power to provide knowledge through visions, as he notes of another caring friend:

Likewise my tutor, who also nurtured an indelible affection for me in his heart, was enlightened by many visions you [God] revealed to him.... Thus, by God's special grace, both of them [mother and tutor] were able to prophesy my future sorrows and joys, terrifying me in one sense but comforting me in another. I was therefore spared that hidden evil that you miraculously revealed only to those who loved me, and I sometimes rejoiced at the prospect of living a better life.<sup>v</sup>

Love between individuals allows Guibert's mother and tutor to receive visionary warnings. Human relationships guide Guibert toward spiritual salvation and also provide him with a meaningful individuality that is at once divinely sanctioned and independently functional and significant.

The totality of God never recedes, however. Dreams and visions support human contact with and subjection to the divine. Guibert's mother's dreams reinforce his consecration at birth to the Virgin Mary:

She dreamed she was in our church of our abbey at Fly, which is called Saint-Germer.... She was saddened to see me and this once great church in such a state of abandon. But all of a sudden she saw a woman of unparalleled beauty and majesty walking up the middle of the church toward the altar.... My mother understood immediately that this was the blessed Mother of God ... pointing her dazzling white finger at me, she said: 'As to this one, I brought him here and made him into a monk. In no way shall I permit him to be taken away.'<sup>vi</sup>

Upon hearing his mother's account of this dream, 'the meaning of the dream seemed so clear that [Guibert] put an end to [his] notions of aimless travel and was never again attracted by the thought of changing monasteries' (57). Thus, this dream has consequences for Guibert's life in the material world.

Visions also rededicate Guibert's mother to chastity and God. She renounces the world in response to visionary experience.

In the dead of a dark night, as she lay awake in her bed filled with this unbearable anxiety, the Devil, whose custom it is to attack those who are weakened by grief appeared all of a sudden and lay upon her, crushing her with his tremendous weight until she was almost dead. The pressure began to suffocate her, she was completely deprived of bodily movement, and her voice could not utter a single sound. Unable to speak but free of mind, she could only implore the help of God. And suddenly from the head of the bed, a spirit, undoubtedly a benevolent one, began to cry out in a voice as affectionate as it was clear, 'Holy Mary, help!' ... this spirit had violently hurled himself against the foe ... and threw him to the floor with a fierce noise.... When divine power had overcome the evil one, the pious spirit ... said to her, 'See to it that you are a good woman!'<sup>vii</sup>

This is the vision that commits Guibert's mother to the 'sake of a greater love' and causes her to 'remain a continent widow' and enter a monastery. God's intercession through the apparent appearance of the angel shapes the course of a human woman's life.

Most interesting is the way Guibert figures this episode with the devil and the good spirit. He presents it as completely real, evidenced by the near suffocation caused by the crushing pressure of the devil's body, 'fierce noise' and shaking created by the skirmish between two supernatural beings, and the woman's direct reaction to the experience (she heeds the words of the spirit as if they truly apply to her life). Reason denies the material existence of such spirits and would ascribe this episode to visionary experience or dreaming, but Guibert contends it is entirely real. Guibert's rational skepticism toward the cult of relics does not extend to representation in general: he trusts dreams and visions. Since dreams are, in one respect, illustrations, and since the infinite cannot be wholly known by mundane representations, it follows that a vision could not symbolize or embody God any more than a relic object could contain a saint's spirit. Yet Guibert presents dreams and visions as direct correspondence from the celestial realm that are not subject to the intermediation of words or secondary signifiers (as when Guibert's mother 'implore[s] to God' during this vision without speaking). The dualism between intellectual and physical disappears; the experience is neither real nor unreal; the boundary between reality and subjectivity evaporates. While it is an unnatural event, how can we attribute this devil sighting to the mother's emotional distress and subjective creation if even the house servants are woken by the clamor of the conflict? Guibert's narrative detail places the vision in a liminal context, his mother awake in the 'dead of the dark night.' She is not sleeping because of her emotional anguish, nor is she fully in the mental light of day. It is just this state of 'betweenness,' this 'middleness' between 'sleep and wakefulness' and 'salvation and damnation' that makes the woman susceptible to tugging from the devil and the angel.<sup>viii</sup> Moreover, this liminal state allows transcendence of the usual physical constraints of positive materialism. Whether this is a completely imaginary vision or actual physical encounter with incarnate spirits is unclear, but it is not really the question. The important point is that Guibert's mother has sensed and conceptualized the supernatural. Her mind has known the devil and the angel, whose words 'she kept engrained forever in her memory.' Guibert's love of learning and reverence for the logos as the highest means of knowing underpins the value of this episode as one that has left a mental imprint and steered his mother's life toward holiness.

Another radical assertion of the objectivity of a subjective visionary experience lies in the dream of the nun at the abbey at Caen:

In her sleep, she saw the fireplace of the house ablaze with a tremendous fire, and in the midst of the flames the [sinful] dead nun [who had refused to confess] was not only on fire, she was also being beaten with a hammer by two evil spirits .... While the nun lay watching the great torment that her unhappy sister was suffering, a blow of the hammer blew shards right into her eye. The burning sensation caused by the burning spark woke her up. And she realized that what she had seen in her mind she had literally felt in her body. The lesion in her eye was there to confirm the truth of her vision.<sup>ix</sup>

Of course, this dream is a divine or subconscious message—a portent from an invisible place—to avert sin and inspire virtue in the nun. It also testifies to the reality of subjective experience for the individual and the reality of one person's imagination as it ramifies in the outside world. As the mental experience of the dream is conflated with its tangible effect on the body, the wound, subjectivity becomes substantial. If God is the provider of dreams and visions, then all experiences participate in a higher order and can thus bear a consequential relation to the rest of the world. If human knowledge is connected to and known by God, and God provides all human minds with fundamental concepts, then one person's private ideas are connected to those of all other people. No individual can truly know or create something new that others have never known before. Perhaps Guibert is literally asserting this universality of ideas as the nun's dream becomes visible to the outside world through a corporal marker.

The liminality of dreams and visions and doubleness of their metaphysical possibilities (spiritual and material) reflect Guibert's own introspective process and struggle against the ever-present evil within himself that threatens to overcome his good morality. If a dream or vision is like a mirror, it reflects both its own nature and the nature of the surrounding world.<sup>x</sup> That is, dreams create a world of their own and also replicate outside reality. Guibert's visions of demons and angelic spirits suggest both an external contest for his soul in the spiritual realm and an inner conflict between conscience and vice. That dreaming and visionary experience are major themes in the *Monodiae* is fitting and self-referential, for the process of self-writing forces the autobiographer to examine the boundaries between subjectivity and eternal truths. Positioning himself within an order that links the mundane and the divine, Guibert figures dreams and visions as the direct bridge between the two.

Dante's *Vita Nuova* also examines the relationship of humans to divinity through the lens of non-verbal communication. The work contains a number of dreams and visions that provide commentary on signification and representation, an important theme of the work in general since it is largely a meditation on poetry. Throughout, Dante has many visions and dreams that he interprets or promises to interpret as texts (thus

highlighting the deferral of knowledge brought about by linguistic transmission), yet many of these are immediately known without need of interpretation. Another characteristic of Dante's dreams and visions is their liminality or ambiguity in terms of wakefulness versus sleep and subjectivity versus reality. Most importantly, Dante's imaginings seem to come from a divine source, carry the message of loyalty to the apparently divine Beatrice, and provide poetic inspiration. His dreams also effect the realization of his personal love for Beatrice, which is almost totally in the mind. Because of Beatrice's connection to the angels, dreams and visions in this text raise the issue of divine versus human, individual thoughts and creations. Dante's writing is not entirely a writer's creative work (as he seems to assert in the prologue, he is a scribe or editor re-creating the experiences of his life): visions from God, Love, and Beatrice inform his poetry and even write his life. His poems, like his dreams, are a combination of human and divine creation.

Dante's very first dream of Beatrice ascending toward heaven is one instance that alerts the reader to the linguistic-literary mode of delayed signification: 'The true interpretation of the dream I described was not perceived by anyone then, but now it is very clear to even the least sophisticated.'<sup>xi</sup> The reader and Dante come to recognize this dream, in retrospect, as a premonition of Beatrice's impending death. Once we know the truth of her departure, this dream is fully illuminated as a prophecy from a source outside of Dante's conscious awareness. Yet the dream is not merely a representative text or sign to be deciphered secondarily. It causes Dante to feel 'such anguish ... that my sleep could not endure; it was broken and I awakened.'<sup>xii</sup> The first-person narrative continues as Dante immediately 'began to reflect' and then consults the lyric poets, asking for interpretations of the vision in a sonnet addressed to 'every loving heart.' However, the message of the dream, in the plenitude of the dream world, needs no decoding. Its literal depiction is a truth of its own: in some reality beyond Dante's waking life, a 'lordly man' who calls himself Dante's 'master' shows Dante's burning heart to him and compels Beatrice to eat it, then takes her up to heaven. These visions are very real to the dreamer, for he awakens in anguish. That Beatrice soon after dies, fulfilling the premonition, is secondary. The loss and distance of Beatrice is keenly felt by Dante's soul all along, and the experience of the dream is authority enough for Dante's feelings and understanding of loss. His reaction to the dream—a sonnet asking for poets' interpretations—reflects his faith in poetry as philosophy, a belief in the 'synthesis of poetic imagery and higher truth.'<sup>xiii</sup> Yet because no one, not even the most 'sophisticated' and 'famous' of the poets, was able to find the 'true interpretation of the dream,' Dante's subjectivity and direct correspondence with the supernatural source of his vision gain superiority over the powers of others' reason and analysis. 'The dream vision ... given its biblical status as a mode of communication with God,'<sup>xiv</sup> signals the highest form of knowledge.

Sometimes, this divine knowledge seems unattainable. Vision transcends language, for instance, when Dante falls 'asleep like a little boy crying from a spanking' (note the transformation of age creating an out-of-body experience) and sees the 'Lord of all virtues.'<sup>xv</sup> God or Love, 'dressed in the whitest clothes,' is a recognizable form, one Dante has seen many times before in his sleep. The image is identifiable. Yet when the divinity utters an abstract statement in Latin ('I am like the center of a circle, equidistant from all points on the circumference'), the meaning is obscure to Dante.<sup>xvi</sup> When Love speaks in Italian, however, Dante comprehends and can then follow his advice (to write a poem clarifying his devotion to Beatrice). Both the limitations and powers of language are evident here. Latin, the language of divinity, is obscure, but the vernacular is comprehensible to the human listener. In fact, Italian functions very well in communicating the ideas of Love, and Dante then heeds Love's orders, which are made perfectly clear through language. The strength of human language (the vernacular) is asserted through this dream, especially because Love encourages Dante to compose a ballad.

Thus, poetry is a way for humans to know the divine. Not only is Dante's writing divinely inspired, it exalts him as an individual by connecting him to the transcendental through creative innovation. For Dante, poetry is the highest form of representation, practically a dream or knowledge of its own.

Words, like hands, are given to man alone among all creatures for his expression and self-definition... to enable man to participate in the divinity of creation through creative acts of his own. As Dante was to write, angels do not need [words], animals would have no use for them. But man, whose nature is more 'to make himself felt than to feel sensations' {Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia*}, becomes something of a god when he creates. The Hermetic texts, known and valued by many writers of the High Middle Ages ... make a similar point. Man alone has a double nature, one formed of elements, one of divinity. In his imitation of divine creation, one aspect of which is his use of God's gift of the word, he realizes the potential of his first [physical] and higher nature and, above all, asserts the unity of both.<sup>xvii</sup>

In fact, Dante's response to each of his visions is a poem. While the purpose of the poems following the visions is ostensibly interpretation or commentary on the dreams in a form most similar to their nature—liminal, neither mundane nor divine—the poems also simply recreate visions, rewrite the dreamer's experience in terms most

like the divine dream-message. Only the experienced or initiated can fully understand the poem or the dream that prompts it, for neither poem nor dream is a mundane, well-known occurrence. Writing poetry, particularly based on visionary experience, is a means for the 'medieval artist [to gain] authority ... from the association of his own 'makings' with divine acts of creation.'<sup>xviii</sup> Poems, like dreams, require intuition and tuning with the divine to understand, for normal modes of signification and analysis are not adequate to the task.

The transcendental nature of dreams (and therefore godly talent of the dream poet) also lies in their lack of definite placement in the physical or spiritual realm; they seem to overlap the two. Considering that 'some day the most gracious Beatrice will surely have to die,' Dante 'went so out of [his] head that [he] closed [his] eyes and began to have these imaginings' of horrible ladies' faces telling him, 'You are dead.'<sup>xix</sup> This almost deliberate indulgence in imagination causes Dante to forget where he is. Lying in bed, he envisions the outdoors: streets, a fantastically-colored sky, birds, and earthquakes. Forgetting his physical placement in the material world, Dante's imaginative experience is a virtual death. The poet willfully takes himself beyond earth. The forced nature of this vision, pretending to die along with Beatrice (as, in hindsight, Dante knows that Beatrice has passed), helps to connect Dante to his beloved by illustrating their deaths contemporaneously.

Dante's imagining of Love as a 'pilgrim lightly and poorly clad'<sup>xx</sup> also challenges the boundaries between subjective imagination and objective truth. At first, Love takes shape in Dante's mind, but then the imaginary pilgrim interacts with the environment (looking at the ground and at a stream).<sup>xxi</sup> Is Dante just thinking about or really seeing the Love-pilgrim? Dante seems to willfully project a human body of Love onto the physical landscape and actually hears him speak. Then, the image is reintegrated into Dante's self as Dante assumes the pilgrim's pensive demeanor. The confusion of vision and willful imagination comments on the nature of visionary experience. Though dreams and visions are usually believed to come from a heavenly realm, Dante actively creates a vision, thus asserting the productive powers of the human mind and of the poet in particular. Imagination is here ambiguous, neither fully original to the subjective individual nor to an outside provider; the vision is neither fully mental nor fully physical. The portrayal of a pilgrim—one who has left his usual home to seek a closer union with God—further the idea that liminality and loss of definitions can allow one to enter divine territory. As Dante notes of the 'betweenness' required to reach that sacred space or heavenly ground of love, one must place his feet 'on those boundaries of life beyond which no one can go further and hope to return.'<sup>xxii</sup>

The trope of the 'beautiful stream' recurs as Dante is 'walking down a road along which ran a very clear stream.'<sup>xxiii</sup> The water causes Dante to be 'seized by the desire to compose poetry' and brings about his reflection on how best to write. Deep in thought and reflecting, Dante's tongue moves 'almost of its own accord,' providing him with the first lines of a new *canzone*. This spontaneous speech is almost a visionary experience, since it comes from outside of the poet and suggests something that had not occurred to him before. As the poetry speaks itself, Dante suggests it is of divine origin, and his poetic authority is elevated above and beyond the poet himself. Yet this inspiration from almost nowhere is prompted by the image of the flowing stream, whose clear water could be compared to a mirror. Dante's gaze in the water-mirror reveals to him his inner desire to write and thus brings about the outwardly composed line of poetry. Looking into the stream, Dante gains both an understanding of his subjective state as well as an external truth. The dual reflective or representational capabilities of the stream also suggest the powers of writing, which is another means of reflecting both external realities and creating its own truths. As Dante looks in the stream and learns about his subjective self and the objective world, he explores the idea of writing as both a complete construction unto itself and a representational form on top of reality. Thus, the stream-mirror is not just a means of self-reflection for the writer but, in examining the possibilities of writing, is self-referential for the text itself.

The goal of looking into a mirror is in part self-knowledge, and the dream poem does mirror itself, examining its own constructs and movement. Medieval mirrors, however, serve not only to reflect the self, but also to reveal information about the world beyond the self. Similarly, the self-conscious dream poem is not independent of the external reality or truth it tries to represent. In its self-reflexive movements, dream visions raise ... questions about how literature grasps and represents real and true entities existing outside a strictly poetic realm. The dream poem's self-reflexivity, in other words, often leads it into questions of epistemology.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Dante's visions and poetry can achieve more than the usual modes of representation because they are divinely inspired and speak in a heavenly idiom.

Most crucial is that all of these characteristics of Dante's dreams and poetry—their divine inspiration, self-contained reality and completeness, and ability to communicate with heavenly spirits—strengthen his love for Beatrice. In Dante's dreams or waking visions, Love (the god figure) appears on many occasions to give Dante

orders. Dante follows Love's command because Love carries the young man's heart and controls its destination. Dante even takes dictation from Love, poetically transcribing such explicit instruction as 'I want you to write a poem in which you mention the power I have over you through her, and the fact that ever since you were a boy you belonged to her.'<sup>xxv</sup> Thus, Dante's poems for Beatrice following these visions of Love have divine patronage. The poet's art is heavily influenced by the love he feels as a result of Love's hegemony and support.

Visions of Beatrice herself are central to Dante's 'lovemaking,' since his is a love fulfilled by intense longing, physical distance, and worship of Beatrice as an idea. Dante's dreams effect the realization of his personal love for Beatrice and reinforce the individuality of the poet in his personal desire and love for a unique soul. Beatrice's first appearance, practically a vision in an ethereal context, activates a strong response in each of Dante's body systems. With religious language—the now glorious lady of my mind—evoking the spiritual glory of the resurrected soul, Dante's first vision of Beatrice prefigures her death, thereby creating poetic authority from all-knowing hindsight.<sup>xxvi</sup> Visions of Dante's beloved are more real than her corporeal being, and her death paradoxically makes her more fully real and able to be possessed by Dante, more deeply lovable as a spirit. The first apparition of Beatrice as a young girl returns to Dante's mind after her death, and this transformative vision corrects Dante's wandering eye and frees him from the lust he feels for another woman:

[T]here arose in me against this adversary of reason a strong vision in which I seemed to see that glorious Beatrice in those crimson garments with which she first appeared to my eyes, and she seemed young, of the same age when I first saw her.... remembering her in the sequence of past times, my heart began remorsefully to repent of the desire by which it had unworthily let itself be possessed for some time contrary to firm reason; and once I had rejected this evil desire, all my thoughts returned back to their most gracious Beatrice.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Thus, even after her death, Beatrice's spiritual image is more real and lovable than a living human. Heavenly intercession provides mental sightings that bond Dante to Beatrice's spirit and reaffirm his original faith and love for the 'blessed one.' Moreover, Dante equates reason with his heavenly-ordained love for Beatrice, as if Love is a rational god whose commands can be resolved with human intellectual powers.

By reconciling human reason and divine authority in this way, Dante asserts the unity of both, just as Guibert positions himself within an order that links the mundane and the divine through visionary experience. As dreams, visions, and writing enable people to join in the divinity of creation through creative acts of their own, human subjectivity becomes eternal truth.

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## REFERENCES

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<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> Peter Brown, *Reading Dreams: The Interpretation of Dreams from Chaucer to Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 45.

<sup>iv</sup> Guibert of Nogent, *A Monk's Confession: The Memoirs of Guibert of Nogent* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 54.

<sup>v</sup> Guibert, *Memoirs*, 54.

<sup>vi</sup> Guibert, *Memoirs*, 56.

<sup>vii</sup> Guibert, *Memoirs*, 41.

<sup>viii</sup> Brown, *Reading Dreams*, 45.

<sup>ix</sup> Guibert, *Memoirs*, 86.

<sup>x</sup> Steven Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 137.

<sup>xi</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992), 7.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xiii</sup> Lynch, *Medieval Dream Vision*, 34.

<sup>xiv</sup> Brown, *Reading Dreams*, 47.

<sup>xv</sup> Dante, *Vita Nuova*, 19.

<sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xvii</sup> Lynch, *Medieval Dream Vision*, 41.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

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- <sup>xix</sup> Dante, *Vita Nuova*, 46.  
<sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.  
<sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.  
<sup>xxiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.  
<sup>xxiv</sup> Kruger, *Dreaming*, 137.  
<sup>xxv</sup> Dante, *Vita Nuova*, 20.  
<sup>xxvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.  
<sup>xxvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.