

The Dream of Leah and Rachel: Art and Purification in Dante's *Purgatorio*

By Andrew Frisardi

Just before Dante and his guides the poets Virgil and Statius enter the Earthly Paradise at the summit of Mount Purgatory, Dante has a dream. It is his third and final dream in *Purgatorio*, all of them occurring just before dawn. This is the hour, Dante reminds us, for visionary dreams: ones that alert us to essential reality in symbolic form.¹

In this dream-vision, he sees a beautiful young woman who is gathering spring flowers in a meadow. As she walks along and picks the flowers, Dante hears the words of a song she is singing. The lyrics of the song say that her name is Leah. Still singing, Leah adds that she uses her supple hands to weave a garland of flowers, with which she adorns herself so that she will be pleased at what she sees when she looks in her mirror. Her sister, Rachel, she continues, never tires of gazing into her *own* mirror, which she does all day long, day after day. Leah's song and Dante's dream conclude with these words: "She [Rachel] desires to see her own lovely eyes as I [Leah] do to adorn myself with my hands; seeing [or vision] is her delight, doing [or working] is mine."

Given the timing of this dream, just before Dante enters the Earthly Paradise, it almost certainly is meant to encapsulate something about that place or state of being. As you probably know, Leah and Rachel in the Bible are the wives of the prophet Jacob. In Christian tradition, Leah is a figure for the active life, the life of doing, while Rachel is a figure

¹ *Purgatorio* XXVII.97-108. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

for the contemplative or interior life.² Clearly, Dante's dream imagery refers to this tradition. We also note that Leah is practicing an art—she is weaving a garland. According to the Scholastic thought that informs Dante, art is a virtue or power of the practical intellect, a *knowledge* about how to order materials, in this case flowers, to *make* something, here a garland. That Rachel represents contemplation or vision, we can confirm in a passage of Dante's unfinished work the *Convivio*. Dante uses mirror imagery there to convey the nature of true philosophical speculation or contemplation. He writes that the philosophizing soul “not only contemplates the truth, but, moreover, contemplates its own contemplation and the beauty of that contemplation as well, turning back upon itself and falling in love with itself through the beauty of its first gaze.”³

The word *speculation* is related to Latin for mirror, *speculum*. Here, the mirror is the human soul itself—which is the place, say the theologians, human beings can come to see God.⁴ In *Paradiso* Dante will sometimes refer to the blessed spirits in heaven as mirrors, because they reflect the divine light. And late in *Paradiso*,⁵ Beatrice tells him that God is a unity who breaks into countless mirrors yet who always remains one. The contemplative gaze is in love with these mirrors, and for Dante contemplation is the basis of all art and making. Art requires discernment into the true nature of the thing to be made or represented. As Dante says in the *Convivio*, the artist who wants to represent something “must first perfectly be within that thing's being.”⁶ Therefore some kind of direct seeing relatively undisturbed by the artist's ego is inherent to it. Also fundamental to the idea of art in Dante's culture is the notion that *all* work and making—not just what we call art today—is the practice of art, by which human beings, made in the image of God, further reflect that image. Dante states this parallel between divine art and human art quite explicitly at the beginning of canto X of *Paradiso*, where the reader is urged to gaze on the cosmic

² Importantly, Dante places Rachel next to Beatrice in the Empyrean (*Paradiso* XXXII.8).

³ *Convivio* IV.ii.18. Translations from the *Convivio* are from my annotated edition, *Convivio: A Dual-Language Critical Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), sometimes slightly altered.

⁴ E.g., Richard of St. Victor, *Benjamin Major*, PL 196, col. 5.

⁵ *Paradiso* XXIX.144–45.

⁶ *Convivio* IV.x.8.

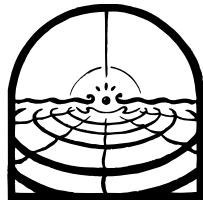
order. The annual path of the sun in relation to the earth, Dante notes with wonder, is so perfectly angled that it enables the succession of the seasons and makes life itself possible on earth. And the cause of this wondrous order is “the art which that master [God] who loves it [the art] within himself” so much that he never takes his eye off what comes into being in this manner: *l'arte / di quel maestro che dentro a sé l'ama*.⁷ In other words, the creation itself is the result of the art that arises from the loving, contemplative gaze of God. Human art is a faint reflection of this ontological and metaphysical reality.

In Dante's dream, Leah and Rachel combined can be seen as figures for artistic mastery. Note that Leah too, after she has made the garland, looks into a mirror. The two feminine figures constitute a continual cycle between contemplation and doing, knowing and making. Dante commentators recognize that this dream, which occurs shortly before the dramatic scenes in the Earthly Paradise, represents the perfecting of the active and contemplative lives necessary for regaining that Paradise. I have not seen any mention, however, of an implied association between this active and contemplative perfection and artistic mastery, understood in the broad sense I have sketched. Yet this association is striking when we note that the dream of Leah and Rachel occurs, not only just *before* Dante's arrival in the Earthly Paradise, but just *after* a series of cantos that feature Dante's meetings with a number of poets who represent his own development in the art of poetry.

We will look at the poet-and-poetry episodes a bit later on. For now, I would like to note that one key scene takes place between Dante's dream and his entry into the Earthly Paradise. In this scene, Virgil tells Dante that, because his will has been purified, it would be wrong now *not* to follow it. Since Virgil's declaration of Dante's newly purified state comes directly after the dream of Leah and Rachel, a connection is implied between the two: art and contemplation on one hand and self-purification on the other. As I mentioned, in Dante's understanding, all art and making requires that the mirror of the artist's soul be polished; the artist can't represent an object if his or her mind doesn't

⁷ *Paradiso* X.10-12.

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