BY THE MID-1830’S, AT THE BEGINNING OF THE VICTORIAN ERA AND DURING HIS most active years in the Oxford Movement, John Henry Newman had written most of his poetry. Many of these poems are devotional or meditative and are grouped in the *Lyra Apostolica*, a work marked by a decidedly Tractarian flavor similar to John Keble’s better known *The Christian Year*. They are also informed by the moralistic poetic theory of Newman’s critical essay “Poetry with Reference to Aristotle’s Poetics” (Pick 133), which may account for the preachiness of their general tone and which justifies this unflattering judgment of Newman’s poetic abilities by his great admirer C. F. Harrold: “...in Newman, the moralist was fiercely at war with the poet. And the moralist won” (270).

However, in the intervening decades, up to the time of the publication of *The Dream of Gerontius* in 1865, Newman’s poetic theory must have matured because in this poem we find evidence of a less didactic conception of the nature and function of poetry. But the absence of didacticism in tone and diction does not mean that Newman abandoned the theological frame of mind so integral to his nature to become suddenly the Christian poet envisioned by T. S. Eliot, one who writes “unconsciously, rather than deliberately and defiantly, Christian” literature (“Religion and Literature” 100). *The Dream* is intrinsically a theological poem which dramatizes a recurrent theme of Newman’s sermons: that in this world we mortals have no lasting city. What makes it different from much religious poetry in the nineteenth century is the artistry with which a subject of the highest didactic nature is handled without the trappings of didacticism so offensive to the modern critical taste. Newman does not preach in *The Dream*; rather, he contemplates through the poetic imagination the eternal verities of his faith by dramatizing one man’s metaphysical transformation. In fact, *The Dream* should be read as an epic journey rather than as a sermon in verse. The poet seems to have heeded the advice of his agnostic brother, Francis, that he try after the unexpected success of the *Apologia* his hand at a religious poem of dramatic proportions in the tradition of Aeschylean tragedy but free of religious propaganda (Mulcahy 21-22).

*The Dream of Gerontius* dramatizes the passage of the central character, a dying, old Christian man, from mortality to immortality through the interaction of four elements: time, the senses, music, and dogma. The first three undergo radical metamorphoses inherent in Gerontius’s changed existence. Dogma alone, as the limited formulation of immutable truths, remains permanent. *The Dream* as a compendium of Newman’s basic beliefs about man’s nature, his purpose on earth, and the higher reality of the unseen spiritual world is what chiefly interests us in this study; not just as a credal statement, but rather as a unique poetic genre which Helen G. Hole has called a “poetry of dogma which conceives of dogma as a mystery appealing to the imagination as well as the reason” (i).

One of the underlying doctrines of *The Dream* is Platonic rather than Christian. Its philosophical frame is suggested by the title and refers to Newman’s long-held conviction, elucidated in the sermon “On the Greatness and Littleness of Human Life,” that all mortal life is but “a serious dream.” The title also suggests a certain ambiguity in
the dream frame of the poem, for it could be said that the dream is, as in Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” the total context of the poem and that it “should be read as a dream, a dream of supersensible things” (Harrold 278). In fact, Esther Pese has found in The Dream affinities with the medieval genre of eschatological dream visions, especially with St. Peter Damian’s eleventh-century hymn “De Die Mortis.”

One can also argue that the dream only begins when Gerontius falls into a comatose state and slowly ceases to hear the suppliant voices of his congregated friends and priest; in which case the dream would begin with line 171, when Gerontius’s dramatic parts are spoken to the end by his Soul. But Newman’s philosophical skepticism about materiality (openly admitted in the first chapter of the Apologia Pro Vita Sua) rather suggests that the dream stops with line 170, when Gerontius actually dies and when the transcendent realities of the spiritual world begin. If this is the author’s intention, then the dream of Gerontius actually occupies the first fourth of the poem when the old man is still amid the shadows of this world and burdened with physical existence. Gerontius’s own words seem to support this thesis:

I went to sleep; and now I am refreshed, A strange refreshment: for I feel in me An inexpressible lightness, and a sense Of freedom, as I were at length myself, And ne’er had been before.... I had a dream; ... (171-179)

This interpretation fits well with the “doctrine of economy” that Newman espouses in the Apologia, or the notion that “the visible things of the creation exist primarily as symbols, ‘economies’, of the invisible” (Weatherby 208). The Dream’s Platonism accounts for more than its view of this world as illusory, as an unreal city; it may very well also account for its singular dearth of natural imagery and for its reliance on sound and hearing.

The philosophical context of The Dream furthers its basic premise that in this world we have no lasting city. The poem does not deviate from its theological orientation. Geoffrey Wamsley, for example, says that the best commentary on The Dream is to be found in the Oxford sermons of Newman’s Anglican period (174). Certainly the notion of life as a dream, as a deceptive shadow, is found in an early Anglican sermon collected in Plain and Parochial Sermons. “On the Greatness and Littleness of Human Life,” mentioned earlier in this study, contains the doctrinal roots of The Dream, as the following passage shows:

We should remember that [this life] is scarcely more than an accident of our being - that it is no part of ourselves, who are immortal spirits, independent of time and space, and that this life is but a sort of outward stage, on which we act for a time.... We should consider ourselves to be in this world in no fuller sense than players in any game are in the game; and life to be a sort of dream, as detached and as different from our real external existence, as a dream differs from waking; a serious dream, indeed, as affording a means of judging us, yet in itself a kind of shadow without substance.... (A Newman Treasury 148)

To the extent that the general doctrine embodied in the poem is traditionally Christian, Wamsley’s thesis about the Anglican roots of The Dream is acceptable. But apart from the belief that this world is a transitory stage where our souls are tried, common indeed to various Christian and non-Christian traditions, the pivotal doctrine of expiation or purgation is too distinctly Roman to warrant fully Wamsley’s assertion.

Doctrine informs more than The Dream’s content, however. It influences its tone and technique as well. The artistry of the poem consists mainly of a dramatic contrast between the transformations attendant on Gerontius’s death and the immutable religious truths which Newman unfolds through dramatic narrations and litanies. The principal of these are the nature of angelic existence, the importance of intercessory prayer, the ineffable triune Godhead, the sufferings of the damned, and the need for the particular judgment and purgatorial expiation before entering the Beatific Vision.
Closely related to The Dream’s dogma are certain insights into the spiritual life that render it less abstract. For example, the poem opens with a consideration of the experience of dying and the temptation to despair as death becomes imminent. Gerontius expresses a “new feeling, never felt before” (6) and in a “strange innermost abandonment” (9) beseeches Jesus and Mary to help him in his extremity. Besides undergoing the traumatic separation of body and soul, “This emptying out of each constituent/And natural force, by which I come to be” (11-12), he succumbs, even if only momentarily, to the sin of despair, the most serious sin against the Holy Ghost. His last moments on earth, ostensibly the most decisive of his mortal existence, are fraught with spiritual perils, with the temptation to a nihilistic loss of faith. At one point Gerontius declares:

... but must needs decay
And drop out of universal frame
Into that shapeless, scopeless, blank abyss,
That utter nothingness, of which I came...
(22-25)

Gerontius’ desolation, however, is only a bitter part of his necessary transition to judgment and ultimately to blessedness. He soon recovers his former Christian perspective with the aid of his earthly friends and of his Guardian Angel. The Catholic doctrine of the communion of the saints is thus dramatized as the members of the Church Militant, gathered around the dying man, intone a somewhat shortened and modified litany of the saints in one of the many liturgical moments of this poem: “Kyrie Eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison./Holy Mary pray for him./All holy angels, pray for him” (29-31). In fact, liturgical elements function in The Dream, together with description and narration, as an artistic medium for the non-didactic exposition of dogma. There are many other instances of intercessory prayer in this poem (particularly in the case of the Angel of the Agony at the Judgment), typically in the form of highly musical litanies. So dependent is The Dream on cadence, rhythm and harmony that Sir Edward Elgar found it ideally suited for an oratorio and Fernand Laloux used its text for a musical dramatic poem first performed in London in 1951 (Pick 129).

However, the various litanies of The Dream serve other than musical and rhetorical functions. The “Sanctus fortis, Sanctus Deus” (72-107), taken from the Good Friday liturgy, is an example of Newman’s harmonious blending of the confessional and the liturgical. It is Gerontius’ creed and final affirmation of the faith that is to bring him to salvation. Here he gives assent to belief in the Trinity: “God is three, God is One”; in the incarnation and the hypostatic union: “And next acknowledge duly Manhood taken by the Son”; in redemptive grace: “And I trust and hope most fully/In that Manhood Crucified”; in the divine institution of the church: “And I hold in veneration,/For the love of him alone, Holy Church, as His Creation,/And her teachings as His own”; and finally in angelic creation and intercessory prayer: “Adoration aye be given,/With and through the angelic host.”

The Dream has other musical elements besides the litanies of the first part. These are the hymns of the angelic choirs - five in all - which recount, after the invariable antiphon of praise, the trajectory of mankind's fall, its redemption through the incarnation and passion of Christ, its regeneration by sanctifying grace, and the justice of purgatorial expiation for forgiven sins. As in the litanies, in the angelic hymns musical and doctrinal elements function harmoniously in Gerontius’ transition. But the rhetoric of divine truth in the second part is narrative rather than confessional. The hymns become biblical in tone rather than liturgical and contain a very brief history of salvation. Ina Rae Hark has observed that the angelic accounts differ further from the static, earlier litanies in their progressive notion of time and history, reflective of “the Christian view of history as having a beginning, a middle, and an end - a progression from Creation to Judgment” (20). But the artistic continuity between the two is to be found in the combination of religious truth and lyrical intensity, which Newman considered indispensable in good poetry (Watson 179).

In dramatic contrast to the lofty and harmonious poetry of the litanies, hymns, and antiphons (most of evident ecclesiastical origins) is the dissonance of the demonic choirs Gerontius encounters as he approaches the seat of judgment. Here, too, poetic form reflects doctrinal truth. The demons’ incoherent diction and syntax reflect the traditional Christian teaching about infernal chaos, but occasionally Newman allows their parts some lucidity in order to reveal their hatred of Christian piety.
and their cynical free-thinking. They appear in this drama as eloquent exponents of the anti-dogmatic principle which Newman tells us in the *Apologia* was the real enemy of the Puseyites during the years of the Tractarian Movement. Their subjectivism and irreverence become the unmistakable mark of the damned:

The mind bold/And independent,
The purpose free,/So we are told, Must
not think/To have the ascendant. What’s a
saint?/One whose breath Doth the air
taint/Before his death;
A bundle of bones,/Which fools adore...
(447-458)

The inclusion of the fallen angels serves a double purpose here: to offer in their blasphemous songs of irregular and harsh rhythms a dramatic contrast to the harmony of the angels’ hymns recounting the interaction of God and man, and to portray vividly the doctrine of free will so pivotal in this poem. Like man, like Gerontius, the fallen angels once had a choice between God and hell. Now, however, there is no merciful second chance for them through redemption and purgation. In just proportion to their superior angelic intelligence, their choice is final.

Newman presents the scriptural and ecclesial teaching on angelic existence without preaching, although, as Wamsley points out, they were for him “not mythical figures or ... figments of the human mind but... objects of belief” (177). The angels in this poem serve both as dramatic chorus and as a poetic response, however subtle, to Victorian materialism and skepticism regarding the supernatural order. For Newman the angels are emblematic of that unseen, real world that his Christian Platonism suggests.

The second section of *The Dream* is an extensive expostulation of the nature and mission of guardian angels. Gerontius is accompanied in his journey to the judgment by his Guardian Angel, always by his side on earth but now made manifest and accompanied by music. He instructs Gerontius and guides him in the sensory and psychological adaptations he must make after the severance of death. Gerontius’ former confusion about time and space (“I hear no more the busy beat of time.... Nor does one moment differ from the next” [176, 178]) begins to dispel with the angelic aid as he perceives the qualities of subtlety and agility which theologians traditionally attribute to incorporeal existence:

Over the surface of my subtle being,
As though I were a sphere ... a uniform
And gentle pressure tells me I am not Self-moving, but borne forward ... (228-232)

But Gerontius’ angel does more than coach his expanded understanding; he serves a catechetical function as well.

As the angel concludes the task of guiding his charge to judgment, he leaves Gerontius with a final catechism - uttered in rather Miltonic tones - concerning the grandeur of God and all His creation, the significance of the Fall, the effects of original sin, man’s dual nature, the immense gulf between human and angelic existence, the relationship of the guardian angels to their charges, the mystery of redemption, the particular and general judgments, and, most important to Gerontius’ imminent experience, the nature of purgatory as a state of being outside time and space. But the Guardian Angel is unable, somewhat like Virgil in his inability to guide Dante through Paradise, to explain the ineffable mystery of God. The failure of analysis with reference to God is a significant reminder by Newman of the ultimate limitations of dogma as linguistic attempts to express transcendent truths. Therefore, the Guardian Angel impresses upon Gerontius the decorum of purgation as a requisite for enjoying the Beatific Vision.

The Guardian Angel is Gerontius’ co-protagonist, and their relationship must be understood within the larger context of the doctrine of the communion of the saints which is, in fact, the infrastructure of *The Dream*. The mutual charity of the members of the Church in her three dimensions - the Church Militant on earth, the Church Suffering in purgatory, and the Church Triumphant in heaven - is central to both the plot and the theme. Intercessory prayer sets Gerontius’ passage in motion as his friends and priest pray by his death-bed; the Guardian Angel conducts him and entrusts him to the Angels of Purgatory until the end of his purgation, when he will return to lead him to the *mysterium tremendum* (Wamsley 178) in Paradise; and the spiritual drama closes with echoes of the intercession of the members of the Church Militant: “I hear the voices that I left on earth” (827). *The Dream’s* vision has, in short, the specific context of Newman’s ecclesiology and theology.
Despite its specific doctrinal content, however, The Dream has the universal appeal of a spiritual epic, complete with the epic agon and the epic journey. Its doctrines serve as the means to moral truths about the human soul and its destiny. It reflects the advice of Newman’s free-thinking brother Francis in a letter dated October 15, 1864 which suggested its form and purpose as “merely Catholic as coming from the heart without conscious object [of propaganda]” and hence no more offensive to a non-Catholic audience than “the paganism of Aeschylus or Sophocles” (Mulcahy 23). Even men radically different from Newman in creed and temperament could accept the spiritual vision of The Dream. Gladstone, Swinburne, and Newman’s public enemy, Charles Kingsley, for example, were among those who read and praised it. Swinburne admired “the force, the fervor, the tense energy” (Harrold 278) in the poem and Kingsley had this to say in a letter to Sir William Cope dated May 1868:

I read the Dream with awe and admiration. However utterly I may differ from the entourage in which Dr. Newman’s present creed surrounds the central idea, I must feel that the central idea is as true, as it is noble, and it, as I suppose, is this: The longing of the soul to behold the Deity ... that the soul is ready, even glad, to be hurled back to any depth, to endure any pain, from the moment it becomes aware of God’s actual perfection and its own impurity and meanness (270).

Newman’s epitaph summarizes the trajectory in The Dream: Ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem; or in the words of Charles Reading, the hero of Newman’s novel Loss and Gain, “Coming out of the shadows into realities” (Barry 170-171). Its power lies in its ability to excite in the reader, especially in the Christian reader, that “poetical view of things” which Newman considered the duty of Christians (Wamsley 185). Its appeal stems from its majestic portrayal of a spiritual drama, or what Louis Martz calls “an interior drama of the mind” (330), which sustains without didacticism or propaganda a frank colloquium between the soul and supersensible realities.

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