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The Wounds of War: Puvis de Chavannes' *The Dream*

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In *The Dream* (fig. 1) by Puvis de Chavannes from 1883, what is presented in a nightscape involving a slumbering traveler who is visited by three luminous vestiges representing Love, Glory and Wealth.¹ Scholars have noted that such representations of these three often appear in Western literature in regards to worldly desires, which could allude to the success of the artist at his current level of production.² However, noting the extent of the influence of Renaissance and Medieval imagery on Puvis, and his commitment to French government commissions, there is likely a more political interpretation to the meaning of *The Dream*. While France had been under a constant state of reconstruction under the reign of Napoleon III, the Franco-Prussian War not only included Puvis in its fight against the invasive efforts of Germany, but also set the tone for allegorical paintings and battle scenes for years after.³ This paper will detangle the link between the interpretations of allegory and dream imagery used in *The Dream* in terms of the influence of despair left after the Franco-Prussian war. By using a retrospective look on development of religious medieval and Renaissance allegory, the poetic influence of the concept of “triumphal allegories” and other philosophical notions of morality, what can be seen in the content of *The Dream* aligns with similar patriotic efforts of modern France in reconstructing a national ideology.

1. Amiee Brown Price, *Pierre Puvis de Chavannes II: A Catalogue Raisonne of the Painted Work* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 270.

2. Ibid., 270.

3. John Milner, *Art, War and Revolution in France 1870-1871: Myth, Reportage and Reality* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 215.

Puvis and Allegory

Throughout Puvis' artistic career, he frequently aimed to adapt allegory in modern society, mainly in regards to mural commissions (fig. 2). More often than not, his early attempts were met with ridicule or scorn such as with *Le Jeu*, being Puvis' attempt to embody a modern past time of in the Second Republic, gambling. *Le Jeu* with her seemingly treacherous gaze received negative reviews and came across as somewhat blasphemous in terms of classical imagery.⁴ However, as the Franco-Prussian war ensued, Puvis began representing France during its besieged moments such as in *Le Balloon* and *Le Pigeon* (fig. 3 & 4).⁵ Once the war ended, being an embarrassing blemish of failure tactilely for France, Puvis' allegorical maturity condensed in moral encouragement with *Hope* (fig. 5). This highly esteemed painting was subtly referencing destruction while the dominating image includes a youthful girl figure embodying purity in the face of devastation.⁶ By the time *The Dream* was painted, roughly ten years after the Franco-Prussian War, the establishment of the Third Republic in France had many artistic implications in regards to commissions for public building. Imagery preferred by some of the more conservative republicans in regards to public art led Puvis to his success and somewhat stable establishment by the eighteen-eighties. One theme often occurring in such commissions had its imagery in religious subject matter, which in itself had an extensive history of allegorical precedents.

A Brief History of Allegory

Allegory in art came around as means to express concepts in a human form to relate to the viewer abstract principles, such

4. John Milner, *Art, War and Revolution in France*, 133.

5. *Ibid.*, 163-64.

6. *Ibid.*, 170. Suggestions of a French landscape include the flowers included in the painting, which is reminiscent of the countryside of France. Also the oak branch held by Hope has a French symbolic meaning associated with "valor, civic pride, and civic triumph."

as humility and justice.⁷ Allegory was often used in art to glorify morality, or at least to point towards what was to be striven for. These ideas stemmed from a root that came from a basic concept of good versus evil. While the significance of Roman and Grecian allegory is immense in terms of their gods and goddesses, for the sake of this argument what will be focused on instead are the influences seen from the medieval period. What came into fruition for allegory in early Christian art was a separate body of imagery divorced from a respective polytheistic deity for interpretation (fig. 6). The integration of allegory began with two particular circles of allegorical signs during the early phase of Christian art, both of which utilized a common personality of a ruler with an “allegory” to align his respective conquest, in the name of Christianity. One pictorial mode involved juxtaposing seasonal “virtues” next to a personage to imply a natural cosmological order and the second mode involved using deified virtues, such as the inspiring muses.⁸ Around the mid-ninth century, the Cardinal virtues were a free-standing set of visually noted allegories able to hold a weight of their own without the aid of explanation in illuminated manuscripts.⁹ And by the Carolingian times, the attributes of said Cardinal virtues were established, and also loosely given similar totems used in Roman times, such as Justice and her scales (fig. 7 and fig. 8).¹⁰ These ideas emanated in illuminated manuscripts were the very tools used in art to glorify Christian rulers and conquests, politically aligning their efforts towards a greater “good.” As in the example of the fresco, *Allegory of Good Government* (fig. 7), a commentary is made involving the dialog between hierarchy of city and allegorical concepts, united by the interaction between country

7. What seemingly began the interest of allegorical use in the medieval arts seemed to have sprung from *Psychomachia* by Prudentius, the first medieval poem to actively use allegory in the sense of attributing a human form to these ideas of allegory. Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Medieval Art* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 1964), 1.

8. Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *Allegories of the Virtues*, 28.

9. *Ibid.*, 31. As seen in the battling virtues and vices in the *Psychomachia*, these cardinal virtues that appeared in manuscripts initially were depicted in warrior-like clothing, with maybe a symbol but more often with a descriptive ‘name’ banner to help identify their presence within the scene of the illustrations.

10. *Ibid.*, 55.

and her citizens. The two bodies of the individual and the whole parallel Lorenzetti's use of "virtues" and express morally in a way to promote the continuity of government.¹¹ The poetic momentum of medieval literature elaborated on such proposed triumphal virtues, giving their expression more weight in iconography.

Religious to Poetic Allegory

The poetic connotations of allegorical devices in Dante's *Divine Comedy* have been debated in a similar way as to the separation of the theological and poetic nature of allegory in Puvis' *The Dream*.¹² (fig. 9) Poetry is often seen a source for some of Puvis' inspiration in his previous work, such as in the moral agony with the internal struggle of religious dedication and the temptation of love in the main character in Lamartine's epic poem *Jocelyn* seen in Puvis' *La Solitude*.¹³ And as an extension of this poetic notion, the allegories of Love, Glory and Wealth appear in the works of Boccaccio's *Amorosa Visione* and Petrarch's *Trifoni*. Dante's *Divine Comedy* influenced the structure and imagery of the triumphal allegories¹⁴ of both of these poets and displayed the break away from pure theology towards personal interpretation, a modern notion of the time.¹⁵ The more poetic extension of this example of the *Divine Comedy* is expressed in the "triumphal virtues" of Boccaccio's *Amorosa Visione*. Within Boccaccio's poem,

11. Another medieval poem of intense interest to 19th Century France, was the legendary La chanson de Roland, which is the oldest surviving 'French' poem, from the year 1100 CE. French scholars began seeing the character Roland as the ideal French citizen. See Isabel N. DiVanna, "Politicizing National Literature: the Scholarly Debate around La Chanson de Roland in the Nineteenth Century," *Historical Research*, 84 no 223 (February 2011), 110.

12. See Charles S. Singleton, "Dante's Allegory," *Speculum* 25, no. 1 (Jan 1950): 79.

13. Brown Price, Aimee. *Pierre Puvis de Chavannes II: A Catalogue Raisonne of the Painted Work*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 53.

14. The origins of these 'triumphal allegories' came from Plato's *Republic*, a philosophical work which greatly delves into the philosophy of man and city.

15. Dante noted a separation of poetic allegory from theological allegory in such works as the *Divine Comedy*. And the difference herein lies in what is perceived as real allegory as opposed to pure fiction, created by the poet. See Charles S. Singleton, "Dante's Allegory," 78.

we see parallels in content: a dream, Love, Glory, and Wealth. But what we don't see in comparison to Puvis' work seems all the more interesting as the missing allegory of the set from Boccaccio: Wisdom. The remaining figures in Puvis' compilation could then imply that wisdom has yet to be attained. Within *Visione*, the narrator is led by a female guide to a plane of divine happiness, but must choose a path to take: one path being a staircase straight to pure divine truth while the other passes through the realms of human conceit of Wisdom, Glory, Wealth, and Love. All of these concepts are included in Plato's theory of the tripartite soul, and in turn, Boccaccio's illustration of these ideas note the power they have in influence; the protagonist's failure to take the first true and noble path gives the reader the notions of a type of fall from grace. With this tale, the moral lesson implies to look past narcissistic gain of the individual towards the betterment of the soul or what is considered the greater body of importance. Similar medieval tales of such an internal struggle became widely popular in Puvis' France, as medieval literature took note of such topics of "loyalty, betrayal, and noble death" to promote "views of French monarchic patriotism."¹⁶ Such concepts of Love, Glory, Wealth, and Wisdom are very particular to the poet on a personal level, more so than perhaps to the theologian but in turn can be aligning in thought with the aims of the state. Medieval dream-poetry was a genre often used as an expression to relay the desires of a person by using the medium of a dream to incorporate multiple realities, a reflection that must also be in consideration for Puvis' *The Dream*. Using the medium of *The Dream*, Puvis is allowed to convey concepts that are deemed either noble or ideal for a man and in turn can be reflected an ideal French citizen.

Plato and the Tripartite Soul

With this idea of the relationship of man and society, in regards to their place among their peers, it is vital to note Plato's idea of the Tripartite Soul. Here we can begin to dissect the

16. Isabel N. DiVanna, "Politicizing National Literature: The Scholarly Debate Around La Chanson de Roland in the Nineteenth Century," *Historical Research*, 84 no 223 (February 2011), 116.

meaning of the painting's allegory in terms of "the personal" as opposed to "the Biblical." Plato describes the soul as being divided into three parts: Love of wisdom (reason/knowledge), Love of gain (pleasure), and Love of valor (honor). These facets described by Plato state that when these parts of the soul are in balance a holistic human being is produced who is good, but when a disparity between the three occurs, the soul's overriding thirst of personal gain may impart from the control of one's reason and sense of valor, depriving a person's drive of Wisdom, for Wealth. Similarly, Plato's *Republic* translates such an analogy by first relating these factors in terms of what makes a city "good" and then transcribes this analogy to the individual.¹⁷ While Neo-Platonist thought was widely popular through the Medieval period and on, this same idea of condensed morality was exactly the type of reasoning used for reforms of modern day France.

Fusion of Neo-Platonism in Dream Representation and Modernity

Neo-Platonist interest revived a combination of a "superior knowledge of philosophers as well as prophets."¹⁸ This same concept of universalization is similarly translated during the Romantic period, in lieu of the changes in belief brought by the science of the Enlightenment. During this time, the French Revolution procured a desire to produce a reformed "religion of pure reason", as put by Friedrich Schleiermacher, German theologian and philosopher of the Romantic period. He goes on to claim that, "innovation within the self to the infinite that transcends the normal bounds of consciousness communicates a deep sense of dependency, a deep sense of the lost and restored totality."¹⁹ This same sense of loss was seen yet again in France, as the blow of the Franco-Prussian war left the city of Paris to

17. Plato, *The Republic*, Book IV, trans. Richard W. Sterling, William C. Scott, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 129.

18. Maria Ruvoldt, *The Italian Renaissance Imagery of Inspiration: Metaphors of Sex, Sleep, and Dreams*, (Cambridge University Press, 2004) 14.

19. *Romanticism and the Religious Crisis* (The Open University, 2009), Audio podcast.

reconstruct their foundations. The sort of Catholic conservatism prevalent politically in France in the nineteenth century would venerate such distilled symbolism of the soul and looked to modernize France with a sort of religious momentum via rediscovering medieval literature and by extension, Renaissance literature and art. A Renaissance pictorial convention used to depict this aforementioned “self to the infinite” imagery of divine inspiration is attributed to the dreamer. (fig. 10) As seen in Sperandio’s poet medal of *Tito Strozzi*, the journey of the self results “...in separation of the soul from the body, a state of ecstasy of which sleep is one manifestation.”²⁰ This portrayal of sleep under the laurel tree, communicated iconographically a poet’s skill in creativity and inspiration. Likewise, depicting the poet in discomfort relayed a theme of melancholia, also attributed with have divine inspirational powers.

Melancholia

The portrayal of the sleeper in a melancholic manner exemplifies the struggle of the poet, as it “[recasts] physical inactivity as a sign of spiritual transcendence.”²¹ With this combined conceptually bound interdependency of melancholy, sleep, and inspiration in Renaissance dream theory, the quality of dreams one was thought to have was a large reflection of character on the individual and could exemplify spiritual superiority if in balance with the soul.²² The idea of melancholia (fig. 16) seen in the early and high Renaissance was also prominent in medieval

20. Maria Ruvoldt, *The Italian Renaissance Imagery of Inspiration*, 14.

21. Ibid, 14.

22. Ibid, 16. . “True dreams occur only when the soul is not dominated by the material body. Through the dream, the sleeper achieves union with the divine. As a result, true dreams are a sign of spiritual superiority. Only certain types of individuals, it follows, are likely to receive true dreams. Dreaming, a universal and democratic activity becomes an indicator of character; a means of evaluating the worth of ‘an individual’” And as its opposite in Maria Ruvoldt, *The Italian Renaissance Imagery of Inspiration*, 15 “...false dreams are the result of physical overindulgence or imbalance, a sign that the body and its needs dominate the dreamer”. This idea of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ dreams deal with dream-ideology that is developed further in modern terms such as with the philosophical and pseudo-scientific work by Sigmund Freud in the early 1900s.

dream-poetry by depicted the idea of the dreamer and his torturous dance with inspiration. This paradox of divinity and suffering is translated in dreams as being either a longing to be united again with one's lover or the painful longing of a dejected lover elicited in the medieval dream-love poem, such as by Boccaccio and Petrarch's mentioned work. While not necessarily romantic in nature, the idea of an internal struggle is still felt in Puvis' *The Dream* with the desires of worldly success manifested in Love, Glory, and Wealth. This visual display of inactivity was coined as a visual mode used to depict intellectuals such as philosophers, and the combined factor of melancholia emotes a sense of an intellectual dramatic insight.²³ When slumbering, one is able to have a clairvoyant reflection on their desires. The ten years after the war gave the people and government of France enough time to start setting in motion goals towards reestablishment and stabilizing a government, and then rebuilding destroyed buildings and redecorating preexisting ones.

Raphael and the Biblical Imagery

Raphael's work from the High Renaissance is known to have helped efforts to decorate buildings for Catholic regimes, glorifying God and papal rule. This artist of whom Puvis admired on his trips abroad, also did a work of art called *Jacob's Dream* (fig.11) in the Palazzi Pontifici in Rome. The particular topic of Raphael's dream involved Jacob traveling and making a stop to rest in a desert when then sun started to set. Using a stone as his pillow to sleep on, Jacob has a dream where God and angels come to him and tell him that the land he is traveling across will soon be his. This idea of estrangement and reclamation of land may very well serve as the most powerful iconography for this piece in terms of religious justification of a man to his homeland. While the narrative function is not completely mirrored with Puvis' *The Dream*, it does serve as an aid of context towards the position of the slumbering traveler in respect to his landscape. With the idea of a traveler searching for home, these translucent spirits in Puvis' work serve as a promise for future gain. The context of the biblical tale

23. Ibid, 22.

can then translate Love, Glory and Wealth, in terms of civic love, glory of nation and fortune.²⁴ Puvis' involvement in the war and being away from his home city left such feelings of estrangement to be felt on a personal level.

Meissonier and Modern Nostalgia

Puvis was enrolled in the National Guard for the Franco-Prussian war along with many French citizens, and prominent French artists such as Meissonier. Puvis kept in contact with his artist friends in letters such as the ones to Berthe Morisot, who was also dislocated from Paris during the war. In one of these letters, he describes his disdain towards the decline of French efforts first hand:

...I have no other dream but to forget, but for a long time the waters of Lethe have dried up, and the only consolation left [to] us will be to go to a pristine foreign land where the bitter feeling caused by our disasters will be tempered by the respect due to our attitude in defeat.²⁵

This statement sums up not just a personal opinion but reflects a national desire to overlook the havoc wrought upon the people of France, and expresses a disassociation between man and nature via a man versus man conflict.²⁶ Meissonier, also a war veteran, was the quintessential example of an academic French painter, as he not only was in the National Guard of the Franco-Prussian war, but also the Revolution of 1848, and had been extremely

24. The interest in characters with patriotic undertones in literature relates with such a focus of traits. See Isabel N. DiVanna, *Politicizing National Literature*, 116.

25. Denis Rouart . *Berthe Morisot, the Correspondence with Her Family and Friends: Manet, Puvis de Chavannes, Degas, Renoir, and Mallarme*. (London: Moyer Bell Limited, 1987) Letter to Berthe Morisot, June 23 1871, p 78.

26. What became a store for inspiration following the war, were realms of the past. In such a case, "...the middle ages became a sacred haven, a simpler time in the inception and development of the French state. Problems of the past were easier to solve than present ones. For political reasons, as well as to help create a common memory of the French past, scholars and government therefore worked together to make medieval studies a widespread interest." See Isabel N. DiVanna, *Politicizing National Literature*, 118.

successful throughout his life with military paintings.²⁷ Two of his works represent an introspective look towards the attitudes felt with both the immediate reception and the then delayed idealization of war with time. In his *The Barricade, Rue de la Mortellerie* (fig. 12), Meissonier depicts the gruesome aftermath of the 1848 Revolution. Presented to the Salon of 1850, the image was powerful and still prodded at a recent wound to the Salon-goers as it was to Meissonier, however; his *The Siege of Paris, 1870* (fig. 13) was part of the momentum of the eighteen-eighties to memorialize the soldiers who fought in a more nostalgic, re-idolizing lens. By using a bold allegory for France, enshrined in lion's skin, displaying an aggressive stand among the arrangement of figures, there a focus on the of potential victory using the allegory as weight to ground the message. Likewise, Eduard Detaille's *The Dream* (fig. 14) depicts a dream of glory in the face of battle, contextualized during a point of rest on the battle field of the Franco-Prussia War.²⁸ While Puvis' *The Dream* coincides with a more passive motion of inactivity by using sleep, the vehicle is still an ideology along the lines of a mass nationalist effort to rebuild a French image.

Dynamic forms of nationalism were the driving force in most academic art in Puvis' time, using classical motifs and emotional history scenes to appeal to their viewers and their intellectual facilities. Modernity, war aside, was causing enough strife to call into question previously held beliefs as technological and societal roles were changing. Conservatism in art during such turbulent times may have seemed digressive to those who were in the eclectic avant-garde circles. But when taken into perspective, conservatism reveals insecurities that transcend the art world and in turn show a deeper fear of instability beyond the face value of material world and transcend into spiritual or philosophical issues. One way to alleviate such a painful reality was reflection of the

27. John Milner. *Art, War and Revolution in France, 1870-1871: Myth, Reportage, and Reality*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 2.

28. This particular painting would go on to win an award from the Salon of 1888 in Paris and be picked to represent France in the 1889 Universal Exhibition. Detaille's *Dream* was praised by republicans of France and was bought by the state.

past, as an effort to reshape the future.²⁹ Popular art of the time included ‘peasant pinups’ or the glorified peasant class like that of Jules Breton (fig. 15) by alluding to the simplicity of life that was being eroded away by the growth and changes brought by industry. Even in literature, there was pooled a focus of the Medieval past to shape modern thought for the future.³⁰ What Puvis’ *The Dream* accomplishes, is a fusion of the efforts of the poet and the artist in their venture to rationalize and simplify what has become more convoluted in modernity in terms of their place in society and how they can glorify or contribute to it.

29. Interesting to note, there was also an air of competition in regards to rediscovering a nation’s history. There was a fear that the Germans would overrule them in efforts to rebuild history. “This hurt [France’s] national pride and their sense of entitlement to their own past. As early as 1930, then, historians started putting their work to good use by attempting to develop a wider understanding if their national literature and history.” Isabel N. DiVanna, *Politicizing National Literature*, 117.

30. “In the four years from 1876 to 1879, 250 new chairs of literature and history, supported by university libraries, were endowed. Journals dedicated to medieval culture came slowly into being.” Denis Hollier, *A New History of French Literature*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 11.

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Figures



Figure 1. Puvis de Chavannes, *The Dream*, 1883. Oil on canvas.



Figure 2. Puvis de Chavannes, *Le Jeu*, 1868.



Figure 3. Puvis de Chavannes, *Le Balloon*, 1871. Oil on canvas. 64 $\frac{1}{4}$ in x 44 $\frac{1}{4}$ in



Figure 4. Puvis de Chavannes, *Le Pigeon*. Oil on canvas. 64 $\frac{1}{4}$ in x 44 $\frac{1}{4}$ in



Figure 5. Puvis de Chavannes, *Hope*, 1872. Oil on canvas.



Figure 6. *Virtues and Human Examples*, 1165.



Figure 7. Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Allegory of Good Government*, 1339.



Figure 8. Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *The Effects of Good Government in the City and in the Country*, 1339.



Figure 9. Puvis de Chavannes, *La Solitude*, 1857.



Figure 10. Sperandio, *Tito Strozzi*, 1473.



Figure 11. Raphael, *Jacob's Dream*, 1518, Fresco.



Figure 1. Jean-Louis Ernest Meissonier, *The Barricade, Rue de la Mortellerie, June 1848*, 1849. Oil on canvas.



Figure 5. Jean-Louis Ernest Meissonier. *The Siege of Paris (1870-1871)*, 1884. Oil on canvas.



Figure 14. Eduard Detaille, *The Dream*, 1888. Oil on canvas.

