As every reader of medieval literature well knows, the Age of Freud was not the only great period of dream analysis in Western science. Another period of intense interest in dream lore or oneiromancy came in the late Middle Ages, an age that was heir to a tremendous body of classical oneiromancy beginning with Plato and Aristotle and including such figures as Artemidorus, Cicero, and Macrobius. The challenge for the Catholic Middle Ages was to make sense of this corpus of authoritative opinion passed on to them by the ancients; to consider, codify, and reconcile the categories of the classical psychologists and encyclopedists with the New Dispensation. Augustine, Aquinas, and scores of other Church fathers in fact succeeded in this hermeneutic task; they reconciled the overwhelmingly sceptical teachings of the Greek and Roman philosophers with the unavoidable evidence of Sacred Scripture, evidence that made absolute scepticism untenable. As we shall see, the seams between classical and patristic approaches to dreams are tidy, if not completely invisible, and the consensus of these writers is remarkably rational, sensible, and close to prevailing modern views on the subject of dreams. In fact, while modern dream writers can be neatly divided into two irreconcilable camps—the pathological and the revelatory—medieval authorities are much more open-minded. As evidence, perhaps, of the perceptual openness that Carolly Erickson describes in *The Medieval Vision*, medieval dream authorities were able to combine a healthy scepticism about dreams as
somatic experiences with a blithe acquiescence to the existence of
dream experiences which were quite other than merely somatic.¹

It was not by accident that medieval Christian oneiromancers and
patristic authorities treated the question of the interpretability of
dreams with such care, for the matter of dream interpretation was a
volatile one on practical levels for the Middle Ages. The early Chris­
tian era, the post-Apostolic centuries, inspired, as we have seen, an
everous number of devotional and eschatological ecstasis writers,
and one might imagine that the trade in apochryphhal visions, ec­
tases, raptures, and apocalypses was brisk in this age. We shall see
that these writers of ersatz revelations had circumstantial Scriptural
authority for their experiences—after all, God had spoken to others
in dreams, so why not to them as well? Soon, however, the Church
grew larger and more strictly institutionalized and, as evidence as
early as the Epistles of Saint Paul testifies, the central authority of
the Church was constantly plagued with strange divergences or
dangerous positions held by far-flung outposts of the new religion
and spawned, often, by somebody's vision, extracorporeal expe­
rience, or dreams. The evidence in the Patrologia Latina for the
development of this conservative position on dreams and visions is
spotty at best, but what we do have suggests that warnings to the
credulous are virtually as old as the Church itself.² At any rate, by the
fourth century, Augustine can announce without bitterness (in De
Genesi ad Litteram) that the age of miracles is past and that we are
never on safe ground believing that our dreams are inspired. The
necessity of this position at the managerial level is obvious and un­
remarkable; what is important about the Church's ultimate conser­
vatism on the dream question is that it allowed the Middle Ages to
draw on, legitimize, and therefore perpetuate a strikingly uniform
classical scepticism about dreams, a classical-patristic detente that
codified dreams into a scientific taxonomy in the interstices of
which the poetic form developed.

Classical Scepticism

As it seems everything else does, dream science begins with Plato.³
Plato was extremely cautious about dreams, recognizing both the
danger inherent in the vivid, effective dream and the predictable rational objections to uncritical credulousness.\(^4\) He often alludes to Socrates’ dreams, the most famous of which is his dream that his own execution would be delayed until the return of the ceremonial ship from Delos (Crito, section 43). Even this dream, however, like several others in the dialogues, receives little serious comment from either Plato or Socrates and seems principally intended as dramatic and sympathetic, the literary device of a literate philosopher. A more pointed discussion of dreams can be found in the Timaeus, a mystic psychological assertion that would prove the foundation for the Neo-Platonic apocalypses of the twelfth century:

No man, when in his wits, attains prophetic truth and inspiration; but when he receives the inspired word, either his intelligence is enthralled in sleep or he is demented by some distemper or possession. And he who would understand what he remembers to have been said, whether in a dream or when he was awake, by the prophetic and inspired nature, or would determine by reason the meaning of the apparitions which he has seen, and what indications they afford to this man or to that, of past, present or future good or evil, must first recover his wits. But, while he continues demented, he cannot judge of the visions which he sees or the words which he utters; the ancient saying is very true—that “only a man who has his wits can act or judge about himself and his own affairs,” and for this reason it is customary to appoint interpreters to be judges of the true inspiration.\(^5\)

Even this statement, however, must be viewed with a certain circumspection. Plato is acknowledging the existence of a category and offering an explanation of its existence, but he carefully surrounds the acknowledgment of the revelatory dream with insistent reminders about the necessity of rational control and with cautions about the uncertainty of the visionary state. His persistent references to dementia, the cautions implicit in the beginning of the quotation, and the final suggestions concerning professional oneiromancers radically delimit the possibilities opened by the statement, so much so that Socrates, in another mood, might say the same things only to conclude that, given the dangers and uncertainties, revelation through dreams is not worth the effort.

Plato considers dreams again in the Republic, but this time the
thrust is thoroughly sceptical. Near the end of the treatise, Socrates describes the appetites of the Despotic Man, appetites which

... bestir themselves in dreams, when the gentler part of the soul slumbers and the control of reason is withdrawn; then the wild beast in us, full-fed with meat or drink, becomes rampant and shakes off sleep to go in quest of what will gratify its own instincts.  

The passage continues, describing the outrages the Despotic Man commits "in phantasy," but comes to acknowledge, in fairness, that

It is otherwise with a man sound in body and mind, who, before he goes to sleep, awakens the reason within him to feed on high thoughts and questionings in collected meditation.

The paragraph concludes, however, with an unmistakable warning to even such pure men, a warning which, in fact, apologizes for the preceding digression on the rare revelatory dream:

However, we have been carried away from our point, which is that in every one of us, even those who seem most respectable, there exist desires, terrible in their untamed lawlessness, which reveal themselves in dreams.

This final position is remarkably close to the standard Christian teaching in the high Middle Ages: the revelatory dream is a real category, representing a phenomenon that exists in fact, but such dreams are exceedingly rare and the everyday dreams of mere mortals ought never to be assumed to be communications from the gods. They are indices of a man’s nature (and may therefore be precious or admirable if that nature is so), but only the very purest natures might hope to attain some transcendent truth through them.

It is difficult to find another classical authority as open-minded about dreams as Plato. Aristotle, in two short tracts in the Parva Naturalia, is considerably less sanguine about even the possibility of the revelatory or miraculous dream and treats dreams as thoroughly physiological phenomena. The longer and more important of these two tracts, Peri enypnion (On Dreams), acknowledges with Plato that the dream operates in the absence of the senses and rational faculties but offers an uncompromising psychological explanation for its origin:
Imagination was agreed to be a movement produced by perception in a state of activity, and the dream seems to be some sort of mental picture (for we call a mental picture appearing in sleep a dream, either simply so or, at any rate, in some sense); it is clear that dreaming belongs to the sensitive faculty and is related to it in the same way as imagination.\(^9\)

With typical Aristotelean closure, the discussion concludes "from all this that a dream is one form of mental image, which occurs in sleep,"\(^10\) a position which Aristotle amplifies in *On Prophecy in Sleep*, a short and summary dismissal of its topic:

Generally speaking, seeing that some of the lower animals also dream, dreams cannot be sent by God, nor is this the cause of their appearance, but they are miraculous, for human nature is miraculous, though it is not divine.\(^11\)

While this extreme position was not entirely acceptable to later classical authorities (and certainly not to Christian ones), the eminence of Aristotle and the rational, clinical approach he took to the dream question exerted a profound conservative influence on later opinions. His emphasis on the physiological causes for dreams, taken with similar assertions in Plato's *Republic*, established a solid sceptical position which was passed on to Latin authorities such as Lucretius and Cicero.

*De Rerum Natura* contains an extended discussion of sleep, treating the subject in a clinical manner reminiscent of Aristotle and taking the conventional position that it is a state of partial withdrawal of the senses and the intellect:

```
principio somnus fit ubi est distracta per artus
vis animae partimque foras eicet recessit
et partim contrusa magis concessit in altum.
dissoluuntur enim tum demum membra fluuntque.
nam dubium non est, animai quin opera sit
sensus hic in nobis, quem cum sopor impedit esse,
tum nobis animam perturbatam esse putandum
eicetamque foras; non omnem; namque iacere
eaeterno corpus perfusum frigore leti.
```

First of all, sleep comes to pass when the strength of the soul is scattered about among the limbs, and in part has been cast out abroad and gone its
way, and in part has been pushed back and passed inward deeper within the body. For then indeed the limbs are loosened and droop. For there is no doubt that it is thanks to the soul that this sense exists in us; and when sleep hinders it from being, then we must suppose that the soul is disturbed and cast out abroad; yet not all of it; for then the body would lie bathed in the eternal chill of death.¹²

This notion of sleep as a demi-death, of which this is an early testimony, is an important one for the apocalypse tradition as well as for that of the dream vision, but Lucretius makes in this passage no explicit case for revelation in sleep while strongly suggesting that the resting spirit is typically affected by external waking circumstances; for example,

\[
\text{deinde cibum sequitur somnus, quia, quae facit aer,}
\text{haec eadem cibus, in venas dumdiditur omnis,}
\text{efficit. et mutul sopor ille gravissimus exstat}
\text{quem satar aut lassus capias, quia plurima tum se}
\text{corpora conturbant magno contusa labore.}
\text{fit ratione eadem coniectus partim animai}
\text{altior atque forus ejectus largior eius,}
\text{et divisior inter se ac distractior intust.}
\]

Again, when sleep follows after food, because food brings about just what air does, while it is being spread into all the veins, and the slumber which you take when full or weary, is much heavier because then more bodies than ever are disordered, bruised with the great effort. In the same manner the soul comes to be in part thrust deeper within; it is also more abundantly driven out abroad, and is more divided and torn asunder in itself within.¹³

Lucretius takes up dreams in the next lines, a change of subject that suggests, even before he presents his thesis, that Lucretius views dreams as manifestations of a troubled spirit:

\[
\text{Et quo quisque fere studio devinctus adhaeret}
\text{aut quibus in rebus multum sumus ante morati}
\text{atque in ea ratione fuit contenta magis mens,}
\text{in somnis eadem plerumque videmur obire;}
\text{causidici causas agere et componere leges,}
\text{induperatores pugnare ac proelia obire,}
\text{nautae contractum cum ventis degere duelum,}
\text{nos agere hoc autem et naturam quaeere rerum}
\text{semper et inventam patriis exponere chartis.}
\]
And for the most part to whatever pursuit each man clings and cleaves, or on whatever things we have before spent much time, so that the mind was more strained in the task than is its wont, in our sleep we seem mostly to traffic in the same things; lawyers think that they plead their cases and compose contracts, generals that they fight and engage in battles, sailors that they pass a life of conflict waged with the winds, and we that we pursue our task and seek for the nature of things at all times, and set it forth, when it is found, in writings in our country’s tongue.¹⁴

To emphasize this physiological explanation for dreams, Lucretius turns, in the final lines of the discussion, to the dreams of animals (as Aristotle did)—to sweating horses and panting dogs—and finally to the wet dream. The only allusion in De Rerum Natura to even the possibility of dream-visitation or of revelations in dreams occurs in a semidigression early in the same book (Book Four), as Lucretius introduces the notion of the mental image:

Atque animi quoniam docui natura quid esset et quibus e rebus cum corpore compta vigeret quove modo distracta redirect in ordia prima, nunc agere incipiam tibi, quod vementer ad has res attinet, esse ea quae rerum simulacra vocamus; quae, quasi membranae summo de corpore rerum dereptae, volitant, ulteroque citroque per auras, atque eadem nobis vigilantibus obvia mentis terrificant atque in somnis, cum saepe figuras contuimur miras simulacraque luce carentum, quae nos horribiie languentis saepe sopore excierunt, no forte animas Acherunte reamur effugere aut umbras inter vivos volitare neve aliquid nostri post mortem posse relinqui, cum corpus simul atque animi natura perempta in sua discessum dederint primordia quaeque.

And since I have taught what was the nature of the mind, and whereof composed it grew in union with the body, and in what way rent asunder it passed back into its first-beginnings: now I will begin to tell you what exceedingly nearly concerns this theme, that there are what we call idols of things; which, like films stripped from the outermost body of things, fly forward and backward through the air; and they too when they meet us in waking hours afloat our minds, yea, and in sleep too, when we
often gaze on wondrous shapes, and the idols of those who have lost the light of day, which in awful wise have often roused us, as we lay languid in sleep; lest by chance we should think that souls escape from Acheron, or that shades fly abroad among the living, or that something of us can be left after death, when body alike and the nature of mind have perished and parted asunder into their several first-beginnings.\(^{15}\)

Such a position forecloses the possibility of the dream from Heaven and places the dream phenomenon clearly in the realm of mental, imaginative activities with physical, mundane causes or stimuli.

The crucial link between the seminal Greek authorities and the Middle Ages is Cicero, considered among medievals—recall Dante—to be the universal genius: philosopher, moralist, rhetorician. On the subject of dreams, their causes and their worth, Cicero is as clear-headed and emphatic as Lucretius: despite his having been elected augur in 53 B.C., Cicero wrote (in *De Divinatione*) a blistering attack on the notion of revelation in dreams, lumping oneiromancers together with magicians and other charlatans. The following passage from *De Divinatione* recalls the pointed rejection of Aristotle:

\[ \text{Hi cum sustinetur membris et corpore et sensibus, omni certiori cernunt, cogitant, sentiunt. Cum autem haec subtracta sunt desertusque animis languore corporis, tum agitatur ipse per sese. Itaque in eo et formae versantur et actiones, et multa audiri, multa visi sunt. Haec scilicet in imbecillo remissaque animo multa omnibus modus confusa et variata versantur, maximeque 'reliquiae' rerum earum moventur de quibus vigilantes aut cogitavimus aut egimus;} \]

When the soul is supported by the bodily members and by the five senses its powers of perception, thought, and apprehension are more trustworthy. But when these physical aids are removed and the body is inert in sleep, the soul then moves of itself. And so, in that state, visions flit about it, actions occur and it seems to hear and see many things. When the soul itself is weakened and relaxes many such sights and sounds, you may be sure, are seen and heard in all manner of confusion and diversity. Then especially do the 'remnants' of our waking thoughts and deeds move and stir within our soul.\(^{16}\)

Like all of the others, with the single exception of Aristotle, Cicero takes care elsewhere to allow that the gods do occasionally speak to
us in dreams, but by now the inclusion of this disclaimer seems little more than ceremonial. Indeed, there is remarkable unity among the great dream authorities of antiquity on this important question: the lore shows us undeniably that revelatory dreams do occur, but we are ill-advised to fancy that our own dreams might be such.

It should be added that there is an equally insistent literature in support of the revelatory nature of dreams in Greek and Roman antiquity, but such oneiric speculation was by and large out of the mainstream of classical thought, at least as this was passed down to and understood by the Middle Ages. Divination and incubation were important elements in Greek and Roman religions, but a dispassionate survey of the major intellectual figures of Greece and Rome (emphasizing those widely read in the Middle Ages) shows a deep-seated scepticism about oneiromancy. Thus, authors such as Morton Kelsey are correct in claiming that there was great interest in dream interpretation in Greece and Rome, just as I would be correct in claiming that twentieth century Americans are fascinated with, say, flying saucers (and I could support my claim with a huge bibliography of our tabloid "chronicles"). In neither case, though, is the fascination "official," authoritative, or even representative of the leading minds of the periods. We are, thus, both more accurate and more responsible in concentrating on the classical authors, revered and trusted by medieval thinkers, however unrepresentative of their age and civilization they may be.

The Encyclopedists

Nearly contemporary with Cicero, another tradition in Western oneiromancy begins to surface. The Oneirocriticon of Artemidorus of Daldis (or, sometimes, of Ephesus; second century A. D.) is an important Greek dream manual, possibly showing some familiarity with Cicero but probably deriving from Posidonius and other Eastern sources. A final determination of Artemidorus' sources, such as that conducted by Claes Blum, is unnecessary for our purposes, since his work seems to mark the introduction of this body to the West, and since the seminal discussion of dream analysis in Macrobius' Commentary on the Somnium Scipionis (fourth century) is trace-
able with certainty no further back than to Artemidorus and to the mainstream Greek and Latin authorities just examined.

At first glance, the *Oneirocriticon* seems a striking departure from the brief and summary discussions of dreams in Lucretius and Cicero; it is a complex, carefully organized, five-volume manual for the interpretation of dreams as portents of future events. Nonetheless, the difference between Artemidorus and, say, Cicero, is one of degree and emphasis: while Artemidorus' principal interest is in the revelatory dream, he divides dreams, just as Cicero did, into categories and assigns values and levels of importance to each category.

Accordingly, the first division of the *Oneirocriticon* is one between significant and insignificant dreams, called *oneiros* and *enhypnion* respectively. The precise distinction Artemidorus makes here is important: *oneiri* are significant in the waking world of the dreamer (that is, to present or future conditions) while *enhypnioni* lose their significance when the dreamer awakens (hence "enhypnion" or "in sleep"). *Oneiri* are next subdivided into two classes: the "theorematic" *oneiros*, in which the communication or portent is direct, requiring no interpretation, and the "allegorical" *oneiros*, the true significance of which is veiled or coded. The bulk of the *Oneirocriticon* is, naturally enough, devoted to rules and examples of interpretation of this last allegorical variety.

Artemidorus' classification of dreams was his most important contribution to medieval dream lore. Though unaware of its source, nearly every medieval dream writer used Artemidorus' categories and even his terminology: following Macrobius, the standard term in medieval oneiromancy for a meaningless day residue dream is "*insomnium*" (translating Artemidorus' "*enhypnion*"), and Macrobius even repeats Artemidorus' quaint etymology for the term. Moreover, the division of significant dreams into theorematic and allegorical—or representational and figurative—neatly corresponds to the Macrobean distinction between the *somnium* and the *visio* (respectively), a formal or "generic" distinction which will prove crucial in the eventual "occupation" of this scientific taxonomy by the medieval dream vision.
Above all, however, like the others before him, Artemidorus counsels caution and scepticism in assessing the worth of specific dreams. Even in a treatise as enthusiastic as the *Oneirocriticon* on the subject of dream portents, Artemidorus offers careful and dispassionate advice to would-be oneiromancers, suggesting, for example, that dream analysts consider such factors as the dreamer's homeland and personal habits (Books Four and Five). Thus, if we search for a credulous dream interpreter in the waning years of the classical era, we will not find him in Artemidorus, who was, with Cicero, the most important source of the seminal document for dream interpretation in the later Middle Ages, the *Commentary on the Somnium Scipionis* of Ambrosius Theodosius Macrobius.

Macrobius' commentary on the "Dream of Scipio" is far and away the most influential theoretical treatment of dreams and dream interpretation that the Middle Ages knew and, considering the work as a whole, this is a curious legacy. Macrobius never intended to write a treatise on dream interpretation, a subject which takes up only a few pages in the *Commentary* (and these by way of introduction), and yet it is for these pages that Macrobius is most revered. In fact, the *Commentary on the Somnium Scipionis* is an encyclopedic gloss on the Ciceronian text, a compendium of all knowledge loosely structured as a running commentary on the ecstatic conclusion of Cicero's *Republic*. Operating on the first principle that "there is nothing more complete than this work [the *Somnium*], which embraces the entire body of philosophy," Macrobius uses the topics of Scipio's dream as occasions for lengthy discussions of numerology, mathematics, physical science, astronomy and, naturally enough, dream lore. Thus, early in the *Commentary*, Macrobius comes to terms with the form of the revelation and (essentially glossing the passage quoted earlier), offers his own rather eclectic taxonomy of dreams. According to Macrobius,

omnia quae videre sibi dormientes videntur quinque sunt principales et diversitates et nomina. aut enim est ὁνείρος secundum Graecos quod Latini somnium vocant, aut est ὃραμα quod visio recte appellatur, aut est χορματισμός quod oraculum nuncupatur, aut est ἐνυπνιον quod insomnium dicitur, aut est φάντασμα quod Cicero, quotiens opus hoc nomine fuit, visum vocavit.
All dreams may be classified under five main types: there is the enigmatic dream, in Greek oneiros, in Latin somnium; second, there is the prophetic vision, in Greek horama, in Latin visio; third, there is the oracular dream, in Greek chrematismos, in Latin oraculum; fourth, there is the nightmare, in Greek enhypnion, in Latin insomnium; and last, the apparition, in Greek, phantasma, which Cicero, when he has occasion to use the word, calls "visum."  

Macrobius next goes into some detail on each of the varieties, beginning with the insignificant types:

Nightmares may be caused by physical or mental distress, or anxiety about the future; the patient experiences in dreams vexations similar to those that disturb him during the day. As examples of the mental variety, we might mention the dream of the lover who dreams of possessing his sweetheart or of losing her, or the man who fears the plots or might of an enemy and is confronted with him in his dream or seems to be fleeing him. The physical variety might be illustrated by one who has overindulged in eating or drinking and dreams that he is either choking with food or unburdening himself, or by one who has been suffering from hunger or thirst and dreams that he is craving and searching for food or drink or has found it. Anxiety about the future would cause a man to dream that he is gaining a prominent position or that he is being deprived of it as he feared.  

After making a similar disclaimer on the subject of the phantasma or visum, Macrobius concludes:

The two types just described are of no assistance in foretelling the future; but by means of the other three we are gifted with the powers of divination.
Macrobius next turns to descriptions of these “tribus ceteris,” the three significant varieties:

et est oraculum quidem cum in somnis pares vel alia sancta gravisve persona seu sacerdos vel etiam deus aperte eventurum quid aut non eventurum, faciendum vitandumve denuntiat. visio est autem cum id quis videt quod eodem modo quo apparerat eveniet. amicum peregre commorantem quern non cogitabat visus sibi est reversum videre, et procedenti obvius quem viderat venit in amplexus. depositum in quieta suscepit et matutinus ei precator occurit mandans pecuniae tutelam et fidae custodiae celanda committens. somnium proprie vocatur quod tegit figuris et velat ambagibus non nisi interpretatione intellegendam significacionem rei quae demonstratur, quod quale sit non a nobis expondendum est, cum hoc unus quisque ex usu quid sit agnoscat.

We call a dream oracular (oraculum) in which a parent, or a pious or revered man, or a priest, or even a god clearly reveals what will or will not transpire, and what action to take or to avoid. We call a dream a prophetic vision (visio) if it actually comes true. For example, a man dreams of the return of a friend who has been staying in a foreign land thoughts of whom never enter his mind. He goes out and presently meets this friend and embraces him. Or in his dream he agrees to accept a deposit, and early the next day a man runs anxiously to him, charging him with the safekeeping of his money and committing secrets to his trust. By an enigmatic dream (somnium) we mean one that conceals with strange shapes and veils with ambiguity the true meaning of the information being offered, and requires an interpretation for its understanding. We need not explain further the nature of this dream since everyone knows from experience what it is.²¹ [emphasis mine]

Macrobius concludes this passage by referring to the five varieties of somnia outlined by Artemidorus—personal, alien, social, public, and universal—and offers brief commentaries on each.

Such was the authoritative classification for dreams for over a millennium. Later writers might alter the Macrobean categories slightly, but except for such minor alterations and shifts in emphasis, the taxonomy stays intact through Freud and even Edgar Cayce. Macrobius clearly recognizes that the dream is often the fulfillment of a wish, the product of transmuted thoughts, experiences, and desires, yet he simultaneously maintains that, at special times to special people, the same dreams are vehicles for divine communication.

The taxonomy, while seemingly very neat, raises more questions
than it answers: how, for example, are we to tell if a dream that fits the formal description of a visio (or oraculum or somnium), yet is possibly traceable to day residue (and hence is an insignificant insomnium), is worthy of interpretation? How, for example, should I interpret last night’s dream that a distinguished colleague had praised this book? Formally, the dream is a visio since it seems to reveal the future directly and clearly (“apertly,” Chaucer would say); at the same time, though, the dream is also manifestly the fulfillment of its dreamer’s wish and thus an insomnium. What are we to do with such commonplace dream experiences (and the even more common one of the somnium-insomnium, the enigmatic dream interpreted to portend the fulfillment of a wish)?

Macrobius does not answer this sort of question explicitly, but his implied answer, gleaned from the quotations just presented, would seem to be that the possibility that a dream might have originated in the waking concerns of the dreamer is, in and of itself, sufficient to raise questions about its authenticity. This at least would seem to be the medieval interpretation, not only because it is a point heavily emphasized by medieval dream writers, but also, paradoxically, because it helps account for the separate existence of the “apocalypse tradition” with formal constraints very different from those of the dream vision. The insistence on the waking state of the visionary, on his serenity, and especially on minutiae such as his fasting prior to the experience, when viewed in light of Macrobius’ taxonomy, suggests that the apocalypse conventions developed as means of protecting holy experience from “disqualification by causes” when judged according to standards such as Macrobius’

Thus, Macrobius’ categories are (or at least were interpreted by medievals to be) extremely conservative, all but precluding the possibility of a dream-revelation except under extraordinarily “sterile” and controlled circumstances. Otherwise, it would seem that, according to Macrobius, we ought never to consider our dreams revelatory.

Select Medieval Authorities

With all of its inconsistencies and contradictions, the dream taxonomy which reached fruition in the Commentary on the Somnium
Scipionis suited the purposes of medieval dream writers perfectly, for it contained all of the elements required by their ancient theology and their contemporary philosophical scepticism. In the Liber de Spiritu et Anima, for example, St. Augustine repeats Macrobius' fivefold classification almost verbatim:

Of those experiences which sleepers seem to have, there are five varieties: oraculum, visio, somnium, insomnium, and phantasma. It is an oraculum when in sleep a parent or a holy and respectable person, a priest or even God Himself announces what shall or shall not come to pass, or what one should or should not do. It is a visio when that which is revealed happens in the very way it appeared in the dream. A somnium is made of images and cannot be understood without interpretation. It is an insomnium when that which oppressed the person awake returns to afflict him when asleep; for example, some disturbance from food or drink, or certain avocations or arts, or certain infirmities. It follows of an avocation when that in which one labors is what one dreams of; and images of those very arts impressed on the waking mind appear in sleep. Likewise, certain dreams result from various infirmities, and are also affected by various habits or bodily humors. Some dreams are sanguine, some choleric, some phlegmatic, some melancholic. Some see red and other colors, others only black and white. It is a phantasma when, barely asleep, one thinks himself still awake and seems to see fleet images or various flitting shapes, sometimes joyful, sometimes troubled.22

I quote the passage at length both to show Augustine's great unac-
knowned debt to Macrobius and to his system and also to illustrate his conscious decision to emphasize the somatic dream (the *insomnium*) in this expanded version of his original. Leaving out Macrobius’ charming case of the dream of the return of the long missed friend “quern non cogitabant” and his other examples of prophetic or premonitory dreams, Augustine chooses to expand on the *insomnium*, stressing the range of everyday preoccupations (*studia et artes*) which can bring on such dreams. Similar remarks can be found in the *Confessions*, only five chapters away from Augustine’s recollections of his mother’s dream of the young man on the rule (discussed earlier, in chapter 1):

> Cibus in somnis simillimus est cibus vigilantium, quo tamen dormientes non aluntur; dormienti enim: atilla nec similia erant nullo modo tibi, sicut nunc mihi locuta es; quia illa erant corporalia phantasmata, falsa corpora, quibus certiora sunt vera corpora ista quae videmus visuo carneo, sive coelestia sive terrestria: cum pecudibus et voltilibus videmus haec; et certiora sunt, quam cum imaginamur ea. Et rursus certior imaginamur ea, quam ex eis suspicamur alia grandiora, et infinita quae omnio nulla sunt, qualibus ego tunc pasebar inanibus; et non pasebar.

Food in dreams is very much like the food of waking men, but sleepers are not fed by it: they merely sleep. But those fantasies [i.e., the teachings of the Manichees] were in nowise similar to you, as you have now told me, because they were corporeal fantasies, false bodies, and real bodies, whether in the heavens or on earth, are more certain than they. These things we behold in common with beasts of the field and birds of the air, and they are more certain than those which we conjure up in imagination. Again, there is more certainty when we fashion mental images of these real things than when by means of them we picture vaster or unlimited bodies that do not exist at all. On such empty phantoms I was fed—and yet I was not fed.²³

Elsewhere in his writings, Augustine is equally careful to maintain what was rapidly becoming the orthodox viewpoint, acknowledging the miraculous nature of the dreams recorded in Scripture while lambasting at every turn credulous beliefs in one’s own dreams. In *De Cura pro Mortibus*, for example, Augustine discounts dream visitations from the dead, explaining that the images of loved ones produced in the dreamer’s mind are purely phantasmal.²⁴

Thus, while Augustine can credit a divine source to Monica’s
dream, he is careful in more analytical contexts to maintain a thoroughgoing scepticism about dreams. Even in his exegesis of the Pauline ecstasis in Book 12 of De Genesi ad Litteram, Augustine carefully prefaces his remarks on the three levels of vision with a brief discussion of dreams and their relationship to the mind of the dreamer:

Quis enim cum a somno evigilaverit, non continuo sentiat imaginaria fuisse quae videbat, quamvis cum ea videret dormiens, a vigilantium corporalibus visis discernere non valebat? Quanquam mihi accidisse scio, et ob hab etiam aliis accidere potuisse vel posse non dubito, ut in somnis videns, in somnis me videre sentirem; illasque imagines, quae ipsam nostram consensionem ludificare consueverunt, non esse vera corpora, sed in somnis eas praesentari firmissime, etiam dormiens, tenerem atque sentirem.

Does not everyone, when awake, still feel that the images he saw while asleep were real? Who is really able to distinguish between what he has seen asleep and waking, corporeal sights? I know these things have happened to me and I have no doubt that they have happened to others (and will continue to happen): when I dream certain sights, I also dream that I see them in fact. These images, with whose games we are all familiar, are not corporeal, but when I am asleep, they surely seem so to me, such that I can hold and feel them.

Even the word “somnium” occurs only rarely after this point in the De Genesi ad Litteram, as Augustine analyzes Paul’s rapture into the third Heaven: the word consistently used for the experience, not surprisingly, is “visio,” a term sanctified by the Visio Sancti Pauli and one which short-circuits Macrobius’ categories. Even so, Augustine interrupts himself again in the exegesis to detail the several varieties of revelatory experience in terms which subtly recall Macrobius:

Ego visa ista omnia visis comparo somniantium. Sicut enim aliquando et haec falsa, aliquando autem vera sunt, aliquando perturbata, aliquando tranquilla; ipsa autem vera, aliquando futuris omnino similia, vel aperte dicta, aliquando obscuris significationibus et quasi figuratis locutionibus praenuntiata: sic etiam illa omnia.

I might compare these visions to those experienced in dreams. Some are false, some true; some unsettled, some serene. Some offer images of the
future, sometimes plainly announced, while at other times the prophecies are given through enigmatic meanings or figurative pronouncements.  

Though here the decided emphasis is on revelatory or significant experiences (the *visio* suggested by “aperte,” the *somnium* by “obscursis,” and the *oraculum* by “figuratis locutionibus”), Augustine still begins with the ubiquitous disclaimer, “aliquando . . . haec falsa.”

Writing not long after Augustine, Gregory the Great is considerably less open-minded than even Augustine was, reflecting the growing official conservatism on the dream question, which Morton Kelsey calls “The Coming of Darkness.” From the point of view of dream enthusiasts, the term is apt, for there seems to develop at this stage of patristic writings a concerted attempt on the part of the Church establishment to minimize (though not, of course, to eliminate thoroughly) the possibility of the significant, revelatory dream:

> Aliquando namque somnia ventris plenitudine, vel inanitate, aliquando vero illusione, aliquando cogitatione simul et illusione, aliquando revelatione, aliquando autem cogitatione simul et revelatione generantur.

Dreams are generated either by a full stomach or by an empty one, or by illusions, or by our thoughts combined with illusions, or by revelations, or by our thoughts combined with revelations.  

This statement seems intentionally confused, featuring the sort of manic randomness we associate with the Prologue to Book One of the *Hous of Fame*: Gregory carefully includes “revelationes” among the possible causes for dreams, but he does so in a singularly unpromising way, refusing even to give this worthy cause single status in his list. Still, however sceptical this statement may seem, it is only so by degree and, considering the insistence of Augustine on mundane causes for dreams, a small degree at that. Given this attitude—acknowledgment of revelation in dreams but contrived pessimism about identifying such agency—it is not surprising that Gregory next repeats advice as old as Aristotle, Cicero, and Cato:

> Somnia etenim nisi plerunque ab occulto hoste per illusionem fieren, nequaquam hoc vir sapiens indicaret dicens: Multos errare fecerunt
If dreams did not frequently come from illusions of the Devil, the wise man surely would not have said, "For dreams have led many astray, and vain illusions as well" (Ecclesiasticus 34: 7), or "You shall not divine or observe dreams" (Leviticus 19: 26), words which anathemize those who dabble in auguries.28

This attitude toward dreams became the standard one among the Church Fathers in the succeeding centuries of the Middle Ages, of whom I shall include only two examples before turning to Thomas Aquinas’ mature Scholastic view. Writing in the ninth century Commentary on Ecclesiastes, Rhabanus Maurus includes a dismissal of dream credulity as memorable and shrill as can be found in the period:

Vana spes, et mendacium viro insensato; et somnia extollunt imprudentes. Quasi qui apprehendit umbram, et persequitur ventum: sic et qui attendit as visa mendacia. Hoc secundum hoc visio somniorum; ante faciem hominis, similitudo alterius hominis. Ab immundo quis mundabitur? et a mendace quid verum dicitur?

A vain hope and a lie to insensate men; dreams only coddle fools. Like those who attend to shadows and those who follow the very wind—such as these pay heed to lying visions. What can be learned from such visions in sleep?—before the face of man, but the image of man himself. And who can be cleansed by filth? And who can learn the truth from a liar?29

Addressing his sister in the Liber de Modo Bene Vivendi, Bernard of Clairvaux uses some of the same imagery as Rhabanus did, equating dream credulity with folly, though doing so more positively and gently:

Qui in somniis vel augurliis speram suam ponit, non confidit in Deo: et talis est quis ille qui ventum sequitur, aut umbram apprehendere nitis tur. Auguria mendacia, et somnia deceptoria, ultraque vana sunt. Non debemus credere somniis, ne forte decipiamur in illis. Spes nostra in Deo semper sit fissa, et de somniis nulla nobis sit cura.

He who puts his faith in dreams or divinations has none in God; he is
like one who follows the wind or who tries to grab at shadows. Lying divinations and deceptive dreams are equally vain. Let us not believe in dreams lest we be ensnared by them. Let our faith rest ever firm in God, and let us care nothing for dreams.30

Thomas Aquinas and the Summa Theologicae might well serve as the watershed for this discussion, since the later Middle Ages saw the return of a substantial part of Aristotle’s work largely through Thomas’ Christianizing mirror, and since Thomas has no trouble discovering the total scepticism of “The Philosopher” on dreams. There is no extended discussion of dreams and oneiromancy themselves in the Summa (a fact I take to be significant in itself), but Thomas’ fugitive statements on dreams and dream interpretation may be collected to give a clear picture of his (very negative) thinking. The best known passage in the Summa, la. III; 3, responsio, explains how “angeli revelant aliqua in somnis”:

Unde Aristoteles, assignans causam apparitionis somniorum, dicit quod, cum animal dormit, descendente plurimo sanguine ad principium sensitivum, simul descendunt motus, idest impressiones relegatae ex sensibilibus, quae in spiritibus sensualibus conservatur, et movent principium sensitivum, ita quod fit quaedam apparitio, ac si tunc principium sensitivum a rebus ipsis exterioribus mutaretur. Et tanta potest esse commotio spirituum et humorum, quod hujusmodi apparitiones etiam vigilantibus fiunt: sicut patet in phreneticis, et in alis hujusmodi. Sicut igitur hoc fit per naturalem commotionem humorum; et quandoque etiam per voluntatem hominis, qui voluntarie imaginatur quod prius senserat; ita etiam hoc potest fieri virtute angeli boni vel mali, quandoque quidem cum alienatione a corporeis sensibus, quandoque autem absque tali alienatione.

Hence Aristotle says, in analysing the cause of dream images, that when an animal is sleeping most of the blood descends to its seat and sense movements accompany this. In other words, the impressions left from the objects of the senses are retained in the animal spirits and induce change in the seat of the senses. And thus a kind of image is produced as though the seat of the senses were at that moment being caused to change by external objects themselves. In fact, the disturbance of the spirits and humors may be so great that hallucinations of this sort may occur even in those who are awake as, for example, in the insane and the like. Therefore, just as this happens through a natural disturbance of the
humors, and sometimes through the will (as when a man deliberately
imagines what he had previously experienced), so also this can occur
through the power of good and bad angels, both at times when we are
disconnected from our bodily senses and at other times when we are
connected with them.31

This is a crucial passage because it effectively collapses Macrobius'
distinction by causes" by sensibly claiming that God can use any­
thing, even human physiology, for His purposes; it does not, how­
ever, engender hopes that such divine intervention can be recog­
nized for what it is.

Elsewhere (at 2a. 2ae; 95, 6), Thomas discourses briefly on the
causes of dreams: internal (physiological or emotional imbalance)
or external (evil spirits, good spirits, God), with only divine causa­
tion valorizing the dream. Thus, on the subject of prophecy, Thomas
is technically open-minded but rhetorically stern:

Sic ergo dicendum quod si quis utatur somniis ad praecognoscend a
futura secundum quod somnia procedunt ex revelatione divina, vel ex
cia naturali, intrinseca sive extrinseca, quantum se potest virtus talis
causae extendere, non erit illicita divinatio. Si autem hujusmodi divinatio
causetur ex revelatione daemonum cum quibus pacta habentur expressa,
quia ad hoc invocantur, vel tacita, quia hujusmodi divinatio extenditur ad
quod se non potest extendere, erit divinatio illicita et superstitionis.

To conclude, if anyone uses dreams to foretell the future when he
knows that they come from a divine revelation, or, observing its limits,
from some natural cause, internal or external, then this is not unlawful
divination. But if the foretelling comes from the disclosure by demons
with whom a pact has been made, whether express, by invoking them, or
tacit, by seeking knowledge out of human reach, then this is superstitious
and unlawful divination.32

The subject of dreams comes up twice more in purely ethical con­
texts in the Summa, specifically on the degree of guilt incurred in
wet dreams (at 2a. 2ae; 154-55 and again at 3a. 80; 7); in the second
discussion, Thomas' psychological explanation for the wet dream
allows monks so afflicted to take the Eucharist the next morning,
provided their dreams were wholly the products of their unconscious
minds.

I conclude this survey of medieval scepticism on the dream ques-
tion with three later authorities whose popularity and importance to medieval thought are hardly questionable: John of Salisbury, Boccaccio, and Bartholomeus Angelicus. It cannot be ascertained, of course, that Chaucer or the Pearl-poet or Langland knew their thinking on dreams, but nonetheless the Polycraticus, the De Casibus Virorum Illustrorum, and the De Proprietatibus Rerum were, in their respective fields, widely admired and revered books thoroughly in the mainstream of philosophical, historical, and medical learning.

John of Salisbury takes up the dream question in Book Two of the Polycraticus, as an example of “Quia Deus signis suam praemunire dignatur creaturam” or of how God by signs deigns to forewarn His creatures, a proof of “divinae miserationis” ("divine pity"): 

Signa etenim interdum vera, interdum falsa sunt. Quis nescit somniorum varias esse significaciones quas et usus approbat et maiorum confirmat auctoritas? In eis utique quoniam somnis est, animales virtutes, scilicet sensus, qui dicuntur corporis et sunt animale quiescunt, sed naturales intenduntur.

At times signs are true; at times false. Who is ignorant of the various meanings of dreams which experience approves and the authority of our forefathers confirms? In dreams especially, since it is the sleeping state, the animal properties (that is to say the senses which are called corporeal but are in reality spiritual) are quiescent, but the natural properties are intensified.

The snippet of traditional psychology which concludes this passage, along with John’s admission that certain dreams do have meaning, seems to promise a clear, practical discussion of the method of differentiating and interpreting dreams. The rhetorical question, “Who is ignorant . . . ” reminds us that John is aware of the existence of true revelations, and the rest of the passage seems a calm prelude to a final, clinical solution to the dream question. The passage seems to promise that psychology and theology, human nature and Biblical tradition can be brought together to solve this vexing problem.

The promise is not fulfilled. What follows this chapter in the Polycraticus is nothing more than Macrobius’ distinction between somnia and insomnia (which asserts that the two sorts of dream are
distinct but not practically differentiable; chapter 15) and a tentative analysis of interpretive principles which somewhat anticipates Freud's notions of transference and condensation (chapter 16). Finally in chapter 17, John's own voice intrudes on the growing but contradictory evidence to introduce a sunny, reasonable conclusion that completely dismantles the edifice of lore:

Sed dum has coniectorum traditiones exequimur, vvereor ne merita non tam coniectioriam exequi, quas aut nulla aut inanis ars est, dormitare videamur. Quisquis enim somniorum sequitur vanitatem, paruum in lege Dei uigilans est, et dum fidei facit dispendium, perniciosissime dormit. Ueritas siquidem ab eo longe facta est, nec eam facilius potest apprehendere quam urionem expungere vel puncto curare carcineam qui caligantibus in meridei palpat.

In describing the methods of the interpreters of dreams, I fear it may seem that I am not describing the art but am myself nodding, for it is no art at all or at best a meaningless one. For whoever involves himself in the deception of dreams is not sufficiently awake to the law of God, suffers a loss of faith, and drowses to his own ruin. Truth is indeed far removed from him, nor can he grasp it any more effectually than he who with blinded eyes gropes his way in broad daylight can lance a boil or treat a cancer.\(^5\)

Boccaccio's approach to dreams is like that of John of Salisbury, though his "solution" to the question is finally not as crashing as that of the Polycraticus. In Book Two of the De Casibus Virorum Illustrorum, Boccaccio introduces dreams in relation to his notions of the soul and of allegory:

Etenim maximus quiddam diuinitatis occultum infixum mortalium animis est. Eoque agente curis sol ti ceu minus corporea depressi inde plura sopito corpore aut visione certissima aut tenui sub velamine audimus vidimusque.

... there is a certain divine something implanted in the souls of men; when the body is asleep, this something is released by our thoughts and is less imprisoned by the solidity of the body. It is then that we hear and see the things that will take place either in actual visions or under the veil of allegory.\(^6\)

Like the first passage quoted from the Polycraticus, this introduction seems to augur well for an open, less totally sceptical consideration of dreams, and, in the paragraphs that follow this one, Boccacc-
cio carefully reminds us of the well-attested dreams of figures such as Simonides, Calpurnia, Atterius, and Pharaoh. All comes, however, to an abrupt, rather open-ended conclusion:

Nolim tamen ab hoc arbitretur quisquam etsi se de corpus somno detinere aut immobile animam semper sua divinitate frui. Quum diuni munere illud sit quando contingit. Variis quippe et plurimis agentibus causis per ambages frequenter deducitur. Et ideo si quandoque visis fides integra adhibenda sit: nam tamen eisdem semper credendum est. Sicur in ceteris inter spemandum credendumque discretionem preuia discernendum est. Ut non negligamus quod ad salutem ostenditur: et convosco innocuis non turbemur.

Of course, no one must believe that every time he dreams there is a divine communication, or that each dream is a present from God. For many reasons a man’s spirit is frequently led into confusing obscurities. Therefore, even if one puts complete faith in dreams, they cannot always be believed. As in everything, above all one should carefully weigh between rejecting a dream or believing in it. In that way we will not neglect anything that is for our benefit, nor, on the other hand, will we be disturbed by something harmless. 37

This is certainly good and sound advice, the chief difficulty of which, we have seen, inheres in that very process, “discernere.”

Bartholomeus Anglicus, a central figure in the history of medicine in the Middle Ages who wrote about a hundred years after John of Salisbury, will conclude this brief anthology of medieval dream authorities. Bartholomeus is predictably specific about the causes of dreams, citing Aristotle and Augustine’s De Genesi ad Litteram (Book 12; see pages 65–66 above) in his eclectic, derivative discussion. His formal pronouncements on dreams (in John of Trevisa’s translation) have the same peremptory ring that sounded earlier in John of Salisbury, as well as his subterranean perplexity:

Also somtyme sweuenes beþ trewe and somtyme fals, somtyme clere and playne and somtyme troublly. Sweuenes þat beþ trewe buþ somtyme opun and playne and somtyme iwrappid in figuratif, mistik, and dim and derke tokenynge and bodinges, as it ferde in Pharaoes sweuene. 38

However,

Somtyme Satanas his aungel desgisþ hym as þeyþ he were an angel of liht and makeþ siche images to begile and deceyue man to his purpos, whanne me trowþ him in doinges þat beþ opunlich goode . . . .

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Also divers sweuenes come of diuers causes, somtyme of complexioun, as he pat is sanguineus hab glad and likinge sweuenes, malancolius metip of sorwe, colericus of fire and of firy pinges, and fleumaticus of reyne and snowe, and of watres and of watery pinges and of spire such. And so eueriche man metip sweuenes acordinge to his complexioun, witt, and age. So sei Constantius. And somtyme sweuenes come of appetit, affecioun, and desire, as he pat is anhongred metip of mete, and a dronken man pat is aburst metip of drinke, ...\textsuperscript{39}

Thus, like Macrobius, Augustine, and all the others before him, Bartholomeus admits that there may be some dreams, under rare circumstances, that come from God and may contain wisdom, but by now this gesture is no more than ceremonial. The admission is stated briefly and the theological justification—something like "divine pity"—is surely included, but the bulk of the discussion is devoted to the everyday somatic dream, the worthless, sometimes beguiling and troubling dream from which Alcuin prays to be spared:

Domini Jesu Christi, miserere mei et cohibe in me omnis iniquiae concupiscientiae motum; ut non me compellat corruptellarum turpitudines perpetrare, quae per imaginines animales me usque ad carnis fluxum in somnis conantur seducere.

O Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me and abide with me in all my various trials and to all my goals. Let me not be compelled to endure the disgraces of the corrupters who, through creatures of my mind, try to move me in sleep towards the dissolution of my very flesh.\textsuperscript{40}

One wonders what Pertelote might have said to Alcuin.

Assessing the Evidence

Several facts can be deduced from the foregoing, very fragmentary anthology of classical and medieval dream writers. The first fact is that medieval, and especially patristic writers were caught in a curious doctrinal-philosophical tangle. The weight of the classical evidence (excluding an Arab-mystical tradition based on Artemidorus) was decidedly sceptical, probably itself a reaction to flourishing mystery cults and popular credulity in Greece and Rome. The classical authorities were aware of the canonical dream visitations from the gods but were unwilling to accord these a central place in their dis-
cussions, fearing that ignorant men would be led astray by credulous beliefs that Jove or Venus might visit them too in sleep. Thus, the great medieval authority on nearly everything, Cicero, is the source of the scepticism in Macrobius, to which the encyclopedist added a “Platonic” ambivalence for what we shall see were rhetorical and not scientific reasons.

This collision of philosophical common sense and mystical tradition among classical dream writers took its toll on their descendents in the Middle Ages and is half of the reason why the medieval authorities sound so fey and discontinuous on the dream question. The discontinuity, the latent and inherent contradictions in the classical and medieval taxonomies, first becomes visible in Macrobius. Seeking to elevate the *Somnium Scipionis* in the beginning of his commentary, Macrobius sets out his five categories as we have seen only to do remarkable violence to them a page or so later:

hoc ergo quod Scipio vidisse se rettulit et tria illa quae sola probabilia sunt genera principalitatis amplectitur, et omnes ipsius somnii species attingit, est enim oraculum quia Paulus et Africanus uterque pares, sancti gravesque ambo nec alieni a sacerdotio, quid illi eventurum esset denuntiaverunt; est visio quia loca ipsa in quibus post corpus vel qualis futurus esset aspexit; est somnium quia rerum quae illi narratae sunt altitudo tecta profunditate prudentiae non potest nobis nisi scientia interpretationis aperiri.

The dream which Scipio reports that he saw embraces the three reliable types mentioned above, and also has to do with all five varieties of the enigmatic dream [after Artemidorus: personal, alien, and so on]. It is oracular since the two men who appeared before him and revealed his future, Aemilius Paulus and Scipio the Elder, were both his father, both pious and revered men, and were both affiliated with the priesthood. It is a prophetic dream since Scipio saw the regions of his abode after death and his future condition. It is an enigmatic dream because the truths revealed to him were couched in words that hid their profound meaning and could not be comprehended without skillful interpretation. 41

What are we to make of this or, more to the point, what might some poor journeyman oneiromancer of twelfth century France or England make of it? Macrobius seems impressed—and expects his readers to be impressed—that the *Somnium Scipionis* embraces all
"three reliable types mentioned above," but, far from adding literal dignity and credibility to the dream, this embrasure would cause a would-be dream interpreter no little unrest (as would, say, three alibis). More than this, Macrobius makes this odd proclamation on the significance(s?) of the *Somnium Scipionis* heedless of the inescapable contrary evidence in the text itself:

hie mihi—credo equidem ex hoc quod eramus locuti; fit enim fere ut cognitiones sermonesque nostri variant aliquid in somno tale, . . . Africanus se ostendit ea forma quae mihi ex imagine eius quam ex ipso erat notior; . . .

And then—(I suppose it was a result of what we had been talking about; for it happens often that the things that we have been thinking and speaking of bring about something in our sleep . . .)—Africanus stood there before me, in figure familiar to me from his bust rather than from life . . . .

Cicero himself seems to leave open the possibility that the *Somnium Scipionis* is really the "Insomnium Scipionis," a day residue dream. The long conversation with Masinissa before retiring, along with the telling remark that Africanus appeared not as in life but as his statue looked, strongly suggests something other than supernatural causation for Macrobius' *locus classicus*.

Macrobius is predictably silent on this difficulty, refusing to allow it to obtrude on the dream's philosophic worth. The dream is worthy, as I suggested earlier, because it is inherently excellent, because it contains palpable truths, and because it is a great man's dream. To claim more of it than this is dangerous.

Such a dream, in fact, beggars the categories, and violates the taxonomy by locating itself in the seam or gap in the five-part scheme: the revelatory types (*visio*, *oraculum*, and *somnium*), are characterized formally or "generically" according to their contents—they are either clear vision, dream conversation, or enigmatic vision—while the insignificant types (*insomnium* and *visum*) are identified externally or "symptomatically"—either as the effect of some physical or emotional imbalance or as occurring between waking and sleep. Macrobius' *decision* to judge the *Somnium Scipionis* formally rather than symptomatically (disregarding Scipio's own suggestion) and the contradictions attendant on that decision are
alarming evidence that, despite their neatness, Macrobius’ categories simply do not wash.

Augustine’s ambivalence on dreams is surprisingly like that of Macrobius. Like his pagan counterpart, Augustine knew that dreams were, for the great majority of people, the merest imaginative refuse, but, again like Macrobius, he was categorically prevented from discounting the dream altogether, for the evidence of occasional dream-visitations (in Scripture at the very least) was incontrovertible. Thus, we find the strange contradictions of Book Three of the Confessions, in which Augustine first derides credulous belief in dreams and then fervently recounts that of his mother. The categories of Augustine, like the fivefold taxonomy of Macrobius, are almost secondary, created by the exigencies of doctrine and common sense rather than by a direct experiential or intellectual encounter with the phenomena. The multiplicity of causes for dreams in Augustine—God, angels, demons, fumosity, and so on—hides an underlying conservative need to retain the fundamentals of doctrine without opening the door to wild, illogical, and potentially dangerous credulity in dreams. Rhabanus Maurus and Gregory the Great may be allowed their purple prose on the dream question because, like Augustine in the De Genesi ad Litteram, their large task in these tracts (Moralia in Job and Commentary on Ecclesiastes) was the exegesis of a Biblical text in which dreams were shown to be revelatory. As if to counterweight the implied approval of the hermeneutic text itself, both writers include excessive denials that other dreams, our dreams, can portend as these of the Old Testament did.

This “doublethink” on the dream question became institutionalized in the later Middle Ages, as the three final examples, from different disciplines, indicate. With the right hand, John of Salisbury and Boccaccio can blithely introduce the dream as a vehicle of divine communication and can list the significant dreams canonized by doctrine and tradition, provided they take all (or nearly all) of the others away with the left. Bartholomeus Anglicus can do the same, with that wonderfully quirky turn of phrase surely borrowed from John of Salisbury: “Also somtyme sweuenes bep trewe and som-
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tymes fals." Such a locution could stand as the sum of medieval knowledge of the subject of dreams. In the West at least, there was no practical, usable prescriptive taxonomy of dreams: for all the theories and categories, rules and schemes, there are two and only two firm, though facetious precepts:

I All significant dreams are significant.
II All pathological dreams are pathological.

Such "rules" inhere, once again, for reasons totally extrinsic to dream lore; they were the absolutely necessary precepts which allowed oneiromancy to coexist with theology and science. When a dream was excellent, such as Scipio's or Monica's, ways were found to declare it so; when dreams were subversive or revolutionary (or so enigmatic that they could be so interpreted), their believers could be shown that, because their dreams are the fulfillment of their wishes or the "reliquiae" of their daily concerns, their dreams were merely somatic experiences.

Having taken a look at the body of dream lore that was available to late medieval thinkers, we are now in a position to apply this lore to the dream vision. What my two Orwellian precepts amount to is a grand suppression—the suppression of the relevant dream. The argument runs like this: if dreams caused by emotional unrest or obsession are insignificant, then it follows that the dreams of persons admitting to such discomfitures are somatic, or at least one is safest in assuming so. To put it slightly more harshly, if a person's dream promises the fulfillment of a wish or the realization of fear—if the dreamer has any emotional investment in the content of the dream whatever—then the dream is meaningless.

This premise is tacitly supported by the apocalypse literature surveyed in chapter 2, where the vision-narrators took great pains to demonstrate that the visionaries were not asleep and, moreover, were level-headed holy men and women whose minds were as free from anxiety as their stomachs were free from pollutants. Strabo's elaborate introduction to the Visio Wettini is the summa for such
conventions: the narrative doggedly established that Brother Wetti was holy, at peace, awake, and fasting when he had his vision. Thus, his vision is credible *qua* vision because he was a fit vessel for Divine indwelling. Dream vision narrators, on the other hand, are conventionally in turmoil. *Piers Plowman* begins with a restless soul on Malvern Hills:

> In a somer seson whan soft was the sonne
> I shope me in shroudes as I a shepe were;
> In habite as an heremite vnholye of workes
> Went wyde in his world wondes to here.
> Ac on a May morynge on Maluerne hulles
> Me byfyl a ferly, of fairy me thoughte:
> I was very forwardred and went me to reste
> Vnder a brode banke bi a bornes side,
> And as I lay and lened and loked in pe wateres,
> I slombred in a slepyng, it sweyued so merye.\(^{43}\)

In *Pearl*, the narrator weeps and grieves, "fordolked of luf-daungere":

> Bifore bat spot my honde I spenned
> For care ful colde bat to me cast;
> A deuely dele in my hert denned,
> Paȝ resoun sette myseluen sayt.
> I playned my perle bat her wart spenned
> Wyth fyrce skylle3 bat faste faget;
> Paȝ kynde of Kryst me comfort kenned,
> My wrecched wylle in wo ay wraȝte.\(^{44}\)

Chaucer's narrators also suffer anxiety, the best of example being that of the narrator of the *Book of the Duchess* (the case of the *Hous of Fame* will be discussed a bit later):

> I have gret wonder, be this lyght,
> How that I lyve, for day ne nyght
> I may nat slepe wel nygh noght;
> I have so many an ydel thoght,
> Purely for defaute of slep,
That, by my trouthe, I take no kep
Of nothing, how hyt cometh or gooth,
Ne me nys nothyng leef not looth.

(lines 1–8)

This strikingly consistent feature of dream vision prologues is powerful evidence that the dreams reported in poems are meant to be seen symptomatically as *insomnia* or everyday somatic dreams. Even given the careful arguments of Bloomfield, Koonce, Newman, and others—that some or all of these poems represent fictive *somnium* or *visiones* or *oracula*—it is difficult to overcome the simple fact of their dreamers' discomfiture in the light of passages like this from Macrobius:

> est enim ἐνυπνοῦν quotiens cura oppressi animi corporisve sive fortunae, qualis vigilantem fatigaverat, talem se ingerit dormienti: animi, si amator deliciis suis aut fruentem se videat aut carentem, . . .

Nightmares may be caused by mental or physical distress, or anxiety about the future: the patient experiences in dreams vexations similar to those that disturb him during the day. As examples of the mental variety, we might mention the dream of the lover who dreams of possessing his sweetheart or of losing her, . . .

Thus, the dream vision is, considering symptoms or external indicators, clearly an *insomniurn*, a somatic dream in which "the patient experiences vexations" traceable to the sketchy but always sufficient details which we know of the dreamer's life. The content of such dreams is never described by medieval oneiromancers—what purpose would it serve?—but we may assume that Macrobean *insomnia* would be full of alien and enigmatic images or *figmenta* recognizable and comprehensible only to the dreamer.

And that is precisely the point, precisely the place where the dream vision breaks loose from the twin dream taxonomies we have been examining: the poems always record experiences that are never finally alien or incomprehensible: the *Roman de la Rose* and *Pearl* come to deal realistically with universal verities like love and the desire for life after death; *Piers Plowman* confronts the social, political, and religious corruption of fourteenth century England; the
Book of the Duchess speaks to all who mourn Blanche of Lancaster and all others who must someday mourn someone. In short, while the poems undeniably fit the external description of the insignificant insomnium, they fit with equal ease the internal or formal features of the visio, the oraculum, and especially the somnium: intrinsically and spiritually, the dream vision is a revelation, for, like the Somnium Scipionis, its content is worthy, its truth universal.

This means that the late medieval dream vision is a consciously constructed anomaly which deconstructs the literary and scientific dream taxonomies by occupying the impossible space between the pathological and the divine, the somatic and the significant. It draws its unique energy and vitality from this deconstruction for, if it were merely a fictive revelation (not somatic), it would then be simply a fictive pronouncement of truth; and if it were merely a somatic dream (not significant), then it would be self-admittedly irrelevant. Thus it is both and neither: the dream vision is the impossible record of one whose life and whose dreams are just like ours, whose dream in the course of its narration becomes ours, a self-conscious fiction that announces and celebrates its fictionality, thereby attaining a higher "rhetorical" truth.

The examination of these new contradictions, of truth in fiction and of the rectitude of the mind’s own images, is the subject of the next chapter. We conclude this discussion and preview that next, however, by recalling Rhabanus Maurus: "Who can be cleansed by filth? And who can learn the truth from a liar?" Who indeed?