# The Meeting in a Dream

Having traversed the circles of Hell and the arduous terraces of Purgatory, Dante, now in the earthly Paradise, sees Beatrice at last. Ozanam speculates that this scene (certainly one of the most astonishing that literature has achieved) is the primal nucleus of the *Commedia*. My purpose here is to narrate the scene, summarize the comments of the scholiasts, and make an observation—perhaps a new one—of a psychological nature.

On the morning of the thirteenth day of April of the year 1300, the penultimate day of his journey, Dante, his labors complete, enters the earthly Paradise that crowns the summit of Purgatory. He has seen the temporal fire and the eternal, he has crossed through a wall of flame, his will is free and upright. Virgil has crowned and mitred him over himself (*"per ch'io te sovra te corono e mitrio"*). Along the paths of the ancient garden he reaches a river purer than any other, though the trees allow neither sun nor moon to shine on it. A melody runs through the air, and on the other bank a mysterious procession advances. Twenty-four elders, dressed in white garments, and four animals, each plumed with six wings that are studded with open eyes, go before a triumphal chariot drawn by a griffin; on the right are three women, dancing, one of them so red that in a fire she would barely be visible to us; to the left are four more women, dressed in purple, one of them with three eyes. The coach stops, and a veiled woman appears; her dress is the color of living flame. Not by sight, but by the bewilderment of his spirit and the fear in his blood, Dante understands that she is Beatrice. On the threshold of Glory, he feels the love that so often had pierced him in Florence. Like an abashed child, he seeks Virgil's protection, but Virgil is no longer next to him.

*Ma Virgilia n'avea lasciati scemi*
*di sè, Virgilio dolcissimo patre,*

*Virgilio a cui per mia salute die'mi.*
[But Virgil had left us bereft/of himself, Virgil sweetest father,/Virgil to whom I gave myself for my salvation.]

Beatrice calls out his name imperiously. She tells him he should not be weeping for Virgil's disappearance but for his own sins. She asks him ironically how he has condescended to set foot in a place where man is happy. The air has become populated with angels; Beatrice, implacable, enumerates the errors of Dante's ways to them. She says she searched for him in dreams, but in vain, for he had fallen so low that there was no other means for his salvation except to show him the eternally damned. Dante lowers his eyes, mortified; he stammers and weeps. As the fabulous beings listen, Beatrice forces him to make a public confession. . . . Such, in my bad prose, is the aching scene of the first meeting with Beatrice in Paradise. It is curious, as Theophil Spoerri observes (*Einführung in die Göttliche Komödie*, Zurich, 1946): "Undoubtedly Dante himself had envisioned this meeting differently. Nothing in the preceding pages indicates that the greatest humiliation of his life awaits him there."

The commentators decipher the scene figure by figure. The four and twenty preliminary elders of Revelations 4:4 are the twenty-four books of the Old Testament, according to St. Jerome's *Prologus Galeatus*. The animals with six wings are the apostles (Tommaseo) or the Gospels (Lombardi). The six wings are the six laws (Pietro di Dante) or the dispersion of holy doctrine in the six directions of space (Francesco da Buti). The chariot is the universal Church; its two wheels are the two Testaments (Buti) or the active and the contemplative life (Benvenuto da Imola) or St. Dominic and St. Francis (*Paradiso* XII, 106–11) or Justice and Pity (Luigi Pietrobono). The griffin—lion and eagle—is Christ, because of the hypostatic union of the Word with human nature; Didron maintains that it is the Pope "who as pontiff or eagle rises to the throne of God to receive his orders and like a lion or king walks the earth with strength and vigor." The women who dance on the right are the theological virtues; those who dance on the left are the cardinal virtues. The woman with three eyes is Prudence, who sees past, present, and future. Beatrice emerges and Virgil disappears because Virgil is reason and Beatrice faith. Also, according to Vitali, because classical culture was replaced by Christian culture.

The interpretations I have mentioned are undoubtedly worthy of consideration. In logical (not poetic) terms they provide an amply rigorous justification of the text's ambiguous features. Carlo Steiner, after supporting

certain of them, writes: "A woman with three eyes is a monster, but the Poet does not submit here to the restraints of art, because it matters much more to him to express the moralities he holds dear. Unmistakable proof that in the soul of this greatest of artists, it was not art that occupied the first place, but love of the Good." Less effusively, Vitali corroborates this view: "His zeal for allegorizing drives Dante to inventions of dubious beauty."

Two facts seem to me to be indisputable. Dante wanted the procession to be beautiful (*"Non che Roma di carro così bello, rallegrasse Affricano"* [Not only did Rome with a chariot so splendid never gladden an Africanus]) and the procession is of a convoluted ugliness. A griffin tied to a chariot, animals with wings that are spotted with open eyes, a green woman, another who is crimson, another with three eyes, a man walking in his sleep: such things seem better suited to the circles of the Inferno than to the realms of Glory. Their horror is undiminished even by the fact that some of these figures proceed from the books of the prophets (*"ma leggi Ezechiel che li dipigne"* [but read Ezekiel who depicts them]) and others from the Revelation of St. John. My reproach is not an anachronism; the other paradisiacal scenes exclude any element of the monstrous.[1]

All the commentators have emphasized Beatrice's severity; some, the ugliness of certain emblems. For me, both anomalies derive from a common origin. This is obviously no more than a conjecture, which I will sketch out in a few words.

To fall in love is to create a religion with a fallible god. That Dante professed an idolatrous adoration for Beatrice is a truth that cannot be contradicted; that she once mocked and on another occasion snubbed him are facts registered in the *Vita nuova.* Some would maintain that these facts are the images of others; if so, this would further reinforce our certainty of an unhappy and superstitious love. With Beatrice dead, Beatrice lost forever, Dante, to assuage his sorrow, played with the fiction of meeting her again. It is my belief that he constructed the triple architecture of his poem in order to insert this encounter into it. What then happened is what often happens in dreams: they are stained by sad obstructions. Such was Dante's case. Forever denied Beatrice, he dreamed of Beatrice, but dreamed her as terribly severe, dreamed her as inaccessible, dreamed her in a chariot pulled by a

[1]Having written this, I read in the glosses of Francesco Torraca that in a certain Italian bestiary the griffin is a symbol of the devil *("Per lo Grifone intendo lo nemico").* I don't know if it is permissible to add that in the Exeter Codex, the panther, a beast with a melodious voice and delicate breath, is a symbol of the Redeemer.

lion that was a bird and that was all bird or all lion while Beatrice's eyes were awaiting him (*Purgatorio* XXXI, 121). Such images can prefigure a nightmare; and it is a nightmare that begins here and will expand in the next canto. Beatrice disappears; an eagle, a she-fox, and a dragon attack the chariot, and its wheels and body grow feathers: the chariot then sprouts seven heads ("*Trasformato così 'l dificio santo/mise fuor teste*" [Thus transformed, the holy structure put forth heads upon its parts]); a giant and a harlot usurp Beatrice's place.[2]

Beatrice existed infinitely for Dante. Dante very little, perhaps not at all, for Beatrice. All of us tend to forget, out of pity, out of veneration, this grievous discord which for Dante was unforgettable. Reading and rereading the vicissitudes of his illusory meeting, I think of the two lovers that Alighieri dreamed in the hurricane of the second circle and who, whether or not he understood or wanted them to be, were obscure emblems of the joy he did not attain. I think of Paolo and Francesca, forever united in their Inferno: "*questi, che mai da me non fia diviso*" [this one, who never shall be parted from me]. With appalling love, with anxiety, with admiration, with envy.

*[1948]* *[EA]*

[2]It could be objected that such ugliness is the reverse of a preceding "Beauty." Of course, but it is significant. . . . Allegorically, the eagle's aggression represents the first persecutions; the she-fox, heresy; the dragon, Satan or Mohammed or the Antichrist; the heads, the deadly sins (Benvenuto da Imola) or the sacraments (Buti); the giant, Philippe IV, known as Philippe le Beau, king of France.