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The Entrance of Beatrice in Dante's *Purgatorio*: Revelation, Duality and Identity

In Cantos XXIX and XXX of his *Purgatorio*, Dante-poet sets up and then presents what has generally been considered to be the "climax" of his *Divina commedia*: Dante-pilgrim's long-awaited reunion with Beatrice. Of course the entire poem, from Canto I of the *Inferno*, has been in a sense a "set-up" leading to this moment, but in these cantos Dante, like any good showman, steps up and concentrates the sense of anticipation and of revelation, pushing them to the highest levels seen thus far in the poem.

Canto XXIX presents us with a pageant, a processional "masque," to use Dorothy Sayers' characterization (303), a sort of heavenly medieval *sacra rappresentazione*; yet this functions as a prologue, a ritual preparation or "warm up act" to the "main event" of Dante's meeting with Beatrice in Canto XXX, rather like the lavish ritualized processional that precedes a bullfight.

Fascinating as this procession is, with its rich visual symbolism and complex allegorical elements, I have chosen in this essay to focus on the first part of Canto XXX, the actual entrance of Beatrice, and Dante's initial contact with her: it is the moment in the poem when Dante's personal drama is suddenly and finally unveiled. With its direct appeal to the emotions and its dramatic effectiveness, it reveals elements of a modern "profane" drama in Dante in contrast to the sacred allegorical drama which has led us up to it.

Using this passage (approximately the first half of Canto XXX) I hope to investigate, with the help of a variety of commentators, how Dante's unique manipulations of language and poetic structure express the idea of transformation and the underlying theme of duality, which are so fundamental to this moment in the *Commedia*. Within this context I also wish to discuss the meaning of seeing or vision for Dante, as well as the issues of identity and personalization, issues which are crucial not only to this passage but to the entire poem.

The idea of Dante-pilgrim's transition in this part of the *Commedia* from a physical to a spiritual perception of his world (also seen as a transition from the realm of the rational to the realm of faith, or from a personal to a universal orientation) has been discussed by several commentators. Francis Fergusson

proposes that "the break between reason and faith, nature and the supernatural, comes with the flash of light" (185), referring to the moment in Canto XXIX when "un lustro subito trascorse/ da tutte parti per la gran foresta,/ tal che di balenar mi mise in forse" (16-18), and further characterizes the halting of the procession in front of Dante—the moment immediately prior to the start of Canto XXX—as "the point of intersection between time and eternity."¹ Similarly, in the commentary of Umberto Bosco and Giovanni Reggio, Dante's meeting with Beatrice is seen as a "rapporto (o 'ponte') tra umano e extra umano" (508).

Most commentators point to this sequence as the moment in which both the poem's protagonist and the poem itself undergo a transformation from a relationship to their universe as something physical, observable, recordable and rational to a new perception—or revelation—of that universe as something which can only be truly understood, truly "seen" on a spiritual, super-rational, extra-human (or "transhuman") and faith-based level. In verses 7 through 9 we are given one of the many figures of this kind of transformation: "la gente verace,/ venuta prima tra 'l grifone ed esso,/ al carro volse sè come a sua pace . . ." In turning to the chariot (which variously figures the Church and the Advent of Christ) "as to their peace," the "truthful people" are accepting as theirs the will of God, just as Dante-pilgrim's free will "turns to" or is transformed into God's will. Moreover, the fact that the chariot is at this point physically empty, yet nevertheless is the focus of attention of the entire procession, visually expresses the concept of faith in the unseen. Dante-poet, up to this point an observer and reporter of all these events, will very soon become a participant, an inseparable part of the *racconto* on a profoundly personal level. He will become, in a way he has not been before, a character in his own drama.

Here the idea of transition can of course be read on another, theatrical level: as the first entrance of one character and the simultaneous final exit of another, the "changing of the guard" from Virgil to Beatrice. As Charles Singleton observes, Dante neatly expresses this transition in verse 21: "Manibus, oh, date lilia plenis!" ["O, give me lilies with full hand!"]. On its literal level, Singleton notes, it is "an utterance of the welcoming angels," casting flowers for the arrival of Beatrice. Yet it is significantly a quote from Virgil's own *Aenied* (VI, 883), the context being "Anchises' prophecy of the premature death of the youth Marcellus" (Singleton 735). The sense of untimely demise parallels the sudden disappearance of Virgil from Dante's poem, giving the verse a dual significance as "both a farewell to Virgil and a welcome to Beatrice" (Singleton 740).

William Vernon, calling this "the choicest line in the choicest passage of Virgil's great work" goes so far as to "offer the opinion that this is the moment when Virgil vanishes . . ." (506). The search for such pinpoint precision (another commentator even defines the interpolated "oh" in the verse as the exact point

of Virgil's vanishing) clearly seems beside the point. What does seem significant about Virgil's exit is that it is not physically seen by Dante, but discovered after the fact, much as the precise moment of Beatrice's appearance is left somewhat ambiguous, occurring as it does "dentro una nuvola di fiori" (28), her presence being felt before it is actually seen.

If, to extend the theater analogy, we see the universe of Dante's *Commedia* as a great stage, then Virgil slips unnoticed offstage while our attention is cleverly diverted to the visual splendor of the "cloud of flowers" effect, which serves in turn to veil Beatrice's entrance. Dante-*commediografo* has carefully scripted his comedy so that his two guides never appear on stage at the same time (Beatrice's descent to Limbo to plead with Virgil to be Dante's guide is presented by Virgil as exposition, offstage "backstory"). Virgil's Reason cannot interact with Beatrice's Faith, nor is Virgil permitted to be present, even as a silent observer, at his disciple's moment of truth: Dante's penance—the truly hard part—is entrusted to Beatrice alone.

The last flickering vestige of Virgil's presence on this stage—just before the discovery of his final disappearance—is beautifully reflected in verse 48, "conosco i segni dell'antica fiamma," where Dante echoes in *volgare* another line from the *Aeneid*, in which Dido addresses Anna, saying "Adgnosco veteris vestigia flammae" (IV, 23). Like verse 21, this line serves the double function of a final tribute to Virgil and a signal of the awareness of Beatrice's entrance onto the scene. The dying flame of Virgil's Reason becomes the brightening one of Beatrice's Revelation.

The simultaneous exit and entrance, or farewell and welcome, is but one of the many expressions of a prevailing sense of duality that imbues this passage. Though the idea of duality is a presence throughout the *Commedia*, it seems heightened and intensified here, adding to the sense of this scene as a climax for the poem as a whole. Regarding the conception of time here, Fergusson has written:

The movement of the procession gave us time in its passage: now, in the Griffon we get its end and transcendence. For the Incarnation is both the "point of intersection of time and eternity" and the end of time in another sense, the figure of the Second Coming and the Last Judgement. (186)

Time is thus seen in its dual nature: as something finite which comes to an end here, and as something infinite which can never know an end, and just as Virgil makes his exit to be replaced by Beatrice, so does measurable time leave the stage to be superseded by time as something beyond human power to measure or describe. Another aspect of the duality of time is seen in verses 34 through

42, where Dante makes reference to his two most important previous encounters with Beatrice, "gia cotanto/ tempo era stato . . ." (34-35) referring to the last time he laid eyes on her—ten years previously, at the age of twenty five—, and "prima ch'io fuor di puerizia fosse . . ." (42) to their first encounter, when Dante was only nine years old.

In these three tercets, then, two different "sightings" of Beatrice are evoked, in two separate pasts, and in both of them, as in the present vision, Dante was overcome with "stupor, tremando, affranto" (36). It is this strong personal emotion that links the three episodes, giving us a sense of past(s) and present being fused into a unity.

Elsewhere, this sense of the past in the present—this time the ancient past—is evoked in Dante's use of interpolations in Latin: Vernon (504n) and many other commentators have noted the Latin rhyme "senis/venis/plenis" in verses 17, 19 and 21; and Singleton has pointed out the choice of "patre/matre/atre" in verses 50, 52 and 54, suggesting a deliberate striving for a "more ancient sound" (741-42), as these words clearly echo the Latin forms "pater," "mater" and "ater" (the latter meaning "black" or "dark" in Latin). Moreover, these evocations of the Latin past are fittingly integrated into evocations of two different "pasts" of the *Commedia* itself: Dante's acceptance of Virgil's guidance in the early part of the *Inferno* (51), and the cleansing of his tear-darkened cheeks at the outset of the *Purgatorio* (53-54).

The technique a modern-day rapper would call "sampling" (inserting sound-bites copied from other sources—songs, quotes, pop culture miscellanea—into one's music) was being employed centuries earlier by Dante in his experiments with the infant *volgare illustre*, though he extended and developed sampling to a rather higher level than our current versifiers have as yet achieved.

Significantly, two other instances of sampling serve as the loci for the expression of another kind of duality: the much commented upon duality of gender. In verse 11, Dante has one of the "gente verace" sing out "Veni, sponsa de Libano." Singleton notes the origin of this citation as the *Canticle of Canticles* 4:8, and further observes: ". . . our guiding expectation that Beatrice is the one who is to come is now further heightened by this call for a 'sponsa,' in the feminine" (730) Yet a few verses further on (19), we have the welcoming cry "Benedictus qui venis!" in the masculine. The source being sampled here is the scene of Christ's entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in Matthew 21:4-9, and most commentators agree that it too is an allegorical reference to the imminent arrival of Beatrice. Yet the masculine gender stubbornly transposed from the original remains, in the understated words of John S. Carroll, "a difficulty" (quoted by Stambler 364n).

Commentators have confronted this difficulty in a variety of ways. Singleton proposes that Dante is presenting a “deliberate ambiguity” between the identities Beatrice-Christ, but the commentaries of Bosco-Reggio take a somewhat different position, saying that the masculine gender employed here “non prova altro che il carattere rituale dell’apparizione stessa e dei canti che l’accompagnano” (506). This view is echoed by J. S. P. Tatlock, who speaks of the “Benedictus” as “a cry of ceremonial welcome to great personages on earth” (quoted by Singleton 734). This idea that the welcome is meant to be taken in a ritual or generic sense—as opposed to a gender-specific one—seems to parallel the solution suggested by Dorothy Sayers, who cites the frequent use among the Provençal poets of “the masculine title ‘midons’—my liege” in addressing ladies of superior rank and culture (quoted by Stambler 364n).

Cultural rationalizations notwithstanding, it seems to this reader that Singleton has come closest to the mark in suggesting that Dante wanted this incongruity to remain unresolved. By jogging our expectations of gender consistency, he forces the reader to perceive the problem differently, to look beyond the seeming duality of gender and into the possibility of a higher unity, thus reinforcing the process of the (in Fergusson’s words) “turning, or conversion, of the soul, from the inward gaze to the upward gaze” (179). The difficulty encountered here then becomes a foreshadowing of and preparation for the difficulties of Beatrice’s obscure language at the end of the cantic, as well as the cosmic complexities that will greet the reader in the *Paradiso*.

On the threshold of Beatrice’s appearance (and the discovery of Virgil’s disappearance), the ambiguities of gender and gender characteristics come thick and fast. In verses 43-44, Dante turns toward Virgil “col respitto/ col quale il fantolin corre a la mamma,” yet refers to him in verse 50 as “Virgilio dolcissimo padre.” The allusion to Virgil as a mother figure, followed by a paternal characterization, seems to mirror the ambiguities of the “sponsa” and “Benedictus” verses with respect to Beatrice. Furthermore, the sweetness of Virgil’s paternal love seems to be set in contrast not only with the sins of Eve (“l’antica matre” of v. 52), but more importantly with the sternness of Beatrice, whose first words to Dante have a particular—and quite unexpected—sting.

Singleton lays particular emphasis on this sternness in his reading (740, 742), whereas other commentators read Beatrice’s first words in a somewhat more equivocal light. Bosco and Reggio, while noting the “aspro rimprovero” of Beatrice’s words, go on to assert that “il vocativo iniziale [the naming of Dante] è, nonostante tutto, segno di affetto” (516). This reading of a familial affection on Beatrice’s part, an affection that will serve to soften the harshness of her subsequent diatribe, is echoed by Stambler, who refers to her “non piangere ancora” (56) with its “mixture of fostering love and minatory reproach” (259).

In the latter reading we can see more fullness, more "completeness" in Beatrice in relation to Virgil, for, though both of them have gender ambiguities clinging to them, Beatrice alone contains the opposing attributes "aspro/dolce," the duality of harshness and nurturing, within her being. Virgil's sweet incompleteness must give way to Beatrice's "pietade acerba" (81), her "tough love," if you will, for this final leg of Dante's journey.

As we read further on into the canto we can see that Beatrice's severity appears less surprising when we consider it as a reaction to another incongruity: Dante's tears of grief at Virgil's loss, shed in the midst of all this Edenic bliss. As Stambler states, Dante "contravenes the law and quality of the place by being unable to be happy even here" (260). His tears represent the last obstacle, the last vestige of his attachment to a personal, human frame of reference. They stain, or "darken," his previous purification (see v. 54) and thus represent a *colpa*, or flaw, in that purification process. This *colpa* requires an instant counterbalancing, which is provided in the form of Beatrice's sternness. And yet this sternness reinforces the sense of duality here, creating a "paradiso problematico," or to quote Stambler again, "a feeling that the serpent still lurks somewhere in the garden" (259). The resolution of this duality can be achieved only through Dante's penance, which indeed begins here with his contrition. It is Dante's own *contrapasso*, the balancing of his sorrow with his sin (the "no pain, no gain" formula), which will take on an almost mathematical precision.

Since Dante's penance initiates another episode of his journey, it does not concern us here. There is still much to be said about the threshold to that final episode, and how it prefigures what is ultimately revealed there. Revelation, in its most fundamental significance, requires seeing, vision, and Dante in these verses has a good deal to tell us about the meaning of vision, in both its earthly-physical and its allegorical-divine senses.

At the very beginning of the canto, we are presented again with the image of the seven candles that initiated the procession: ". . . il settentrion del primo cielo/ che nè accaso mai seppe nè orto/ nè d'altra nebbia che di colpa velo" (1-3). As Stambler tells us,

the Septentrion of the candles differs from the one visible to mankind [the Ursa Minor] in being not subject to rising or setting or in being veiled by any atmospheric disturbance—only sin [*colpa*] has acted as a veil to hide it from men. (256-57)

True vision, true clarity of sight, can occur only in the absence of sin, in a pure state.

Dante expresses this by juxtaposing the natural world (the stars which can be veiled by clouds) with the supernatural (the seven candles that are beyond the

rules of nature, yet can be veiled by man's sins). This image of a veil obscuring our true seeing is a crucial one, which will recur throughout the remainder of the canto. It serves as the fundamental visual expression of Dante's relationship to Beatrice here, the obstacle that only his penance can remove. Even the tears which darken Dante's cheeks in verses 53-54 can be read as a veil of sin coming from his own eyes, separating him from Beatrice and Revelation, for which indeed she will upbraid him in the following tercet.

In verses 22 through 33, this veiling metaphor is expressed in some of the most beautiful lines in the canticle, if not the entire poem. First we see a lovely roseate sunrise, watching "la faccia del sol nascere ombrata,/ sì che per temperanza di vapori/ l'occhio la sostenea lunga fiata" (25-27), then the metaphor is revealed as Beatrice appears "dentro una nuvola di fiori" (28) and behind yet another "candido vel" (31). Dante masterfully conveys the idea that, just as the sun needs to be veiled in order for the human eye to endure it, so is it necessary to temper the brightness of God, of divine truth, so that, in the words of Ottimo, "l'occhio, cioè l'intelletto umano possa, mediante la mistica e figurativa Scrittura, sofferire li raggi e la chiaritate della divina Scrittura" (cited by Vernon 508n).

In this observation, the veil metaphor is extended to include Dante's figurative language itself, the metaphor, allegory and other devices he utilizes to wrap this truth, this vision, in allusion and indirection. It would be difficult to find a more classic example of the use of allusion and indirection than the presentation of the entrance of Beatrice, the personification of this divine vision. The gradual lifting of the various physical, linguistic and cognitive veils is extended with elaborate subtlety and care over the entire first half of the canto. It is not until verse 73 that this lady behind the veils is explicitly self-identified as Beatrice, and even then she will not be completely visually unveiled to Dante's longing eyes until the end of the following canto. By contrast, the disappearance of Virgil is presented with a painful suddenness, and the sharp pang of tearful regret that Dante feels by having missed actually seeing Virgil's final exit is a fitting initiation to the penance he will now serve under Beatrice.

In both Virgil's exit and Beatrice's entrance, then, the physical faculty of sight is either lacking or impaired. Like the empty chariot, it is the thing **not** seen, or incompletely seen, which will take on enormous significance for both Dante and the reader. While the various veils that obscure Beatrice are, on a more literal level, obstacles to direct vision, they are also, on a deeper level, a means or a vehicle for allowing perception or awareness of the vision to take place at all in the imperfect human soul—or intellect—in Purgatory. By contrast, the souls of the sinners in the Inferno, being under the earth, are deprived of any vision of the divine truth whatsoever. Those on their way to achieving Paradise,

however, are motivated toward their salvation by this visual enticement, which will only become clear, direct vision at the completion of the purification process.

The veiling, then, has a didactic function, and its effect on Dante can already be seen in verses 37 through 39, where his spirit "sanza de li occhi aver più conoscenza,/ per occulta virtù che da lei mosse,/ d'antico amor senti la gran potenza." As Grandgent comments, ". . . before he sees [Beatrice's] features, Dante recognizes her by the love that fills him" (582). Ever the fast learner, Dante is already benefiting from the lesson of the veil, Beatrice's "occulta virtù," by feeling his "old love's great power" (Singleton's translation v.39, p. 329), rather than relying on his eyes alone for "conoscenza." In preparation for Paradise, he is developing higher ways of seeing as he begins to embrace the spiritual and metaphysical and let go of the merely physical and rational. Only with this new seeing can Dante's love for Beatrice be transformed into *agape*, the ethical, universal love which does not require a visible object (in the earthly sense) to be evoked, yet which provides the generating force necessary to lift him into the heavenly spheres.

This spiritual recognition of the lady behind the veil is confirmed in verse 55, when, at last, Beatrice speaks. There is virtually no commentator who has failed to take note of the highly significant fact that the first word Beatrice utters at this long-awaited moment is Dante's own name, and that it is moreover the first and only appearance of his name in the entire poem. Its positioning here seems designed for deliberate dramatic emphasis, even shock, and the debate on its significance has taken several different forms. Citing Dante's own subsequent reference to this self-naming "che di necessità qui si registra" in verse 63, Singleton notes:

Dante's confession to Beatrice . . . in this canto and the next, is a **personal** confession. We are not to seek to read it as Everyman's. And this unique naming of Dante as the protagonist declares as much: such is its necessity.

(743-44)

Thus the self-naming in Singleton's reading is used to separate the two Dantes in the reader's mind, to make a distinction between Dante-pilgrim, in his allegorical function, and Dante-poet, the individual whose personal confession we are about to hear.

The "necessità" is interpreted somewhat differently in the Bosco-Reggio commentaries. In the note to verse 63 they suggest that "Il nome qui è necessario forse anche per legare più strettamente la vicenda del Paradiso terrestre con quella terrena del suo amore" (Bosco-Reggio 517, n. 63). This view is supported in their introduction to the canto, where they discuss of the manner in which

il privato e il terreno, restando tali, possano acquistare carattere universale e religioso. . . . [Dante] parte sempre dalla sua persona, per immediatamente trascenderla, . . . [e quindi risulta che] l'azione salvifica e la situazione biografica sono una cosa sola. (Bosco-Reggio 508)

These words are echoed in Fergusson's reading, where he asserts that Virgil's exit

. . . reduces Dante to the immediate truth of his own being. And now, for the first and only time, Beatrice calls him by name, "Dante" (line 55), as though to wake him and us from the dream of the vision and the poem. Dante the pilgrim and Dante the mortal man are one. (187)

The sense of a joining of the two Dantes, of a duality being finally reconciled, which these readings reflect, seems to me stronger than the sense Singleton tries to convey of an intentional separation of the individual and the allegorical identities of Dante. It would be useful here to cite Dante's own *Convivio* for an elaboration on the "necessarie cagioni" for an author's self-naming. The first justification he gives is "quando senza ragionare di sè grande infamia o pericolo non si può cessare" (I.ii.12), going on to cite the example of Boethius defending himself against "la perpetuale infamia del suo essilio." The second justification is when "grandissima utilidade ne segue altrui per via di dottrina" (I.ii.14), here illustrating his point with the example of Augustine in his *Confessions*. Applying this second reason, Dante's self-naming can be read as support of the claim to emblematic status of his personal story as recorded in the *Commedia*, a reading consonant with the idea of the resolution (and ultimate transcendence) of Dante's dual identity.

The self-ordaining and self-privileging inherent in this act of setting himself up as an exemplar has a flip side for Dante, for, as other commentators have observed, there is a distinct element of self-humiliation and shame in his self-naming. Mark Musa, refuting the suggestion that "the naming of the Pilgrim has a lofty, solemn significance suggesting a second baptism," maintains: "Most critics believe that Beatrice is naming him to his shame."² Indeed Grandgent's commentary supports this reading, observing that ". . . without this humiliating record of his identity, his confession—which is not merely an incident in the fiction but also a real admission, before the world, of real sin - would have been incomplete" (582-83).

The act of recording one's name, and by extension the very act of writing becomes, for Dante, an act of penance, for by writing—his name, his story—Dante is, in a sense, forced to see himself. This idea of being forced to confront oneself, to one's shame, is moreover visually echoed further on when Dante casts

his eyes downward toward the river during Beatrice's rebuke, "ma veggendomi in esso, i trassi a l'erba,/ tanta vergogna mi gravò la fronte" (77-78).

Grandgent notes: "Contrition is caused by seeing our real selves" (586). The name that Dante-poet has written on the page will be there for himself and all readers to see, and the reflection of himself with which Dante-pilgrim is confronted is equally unavoidable. Both Dantes thus experience the impossibility of escape from the self, the inevitability of one's own identity and one's own shame.

As mentioned above, Dante, by breaking (or at least bending) the rules of rhetoric in naming himself, creates a deliberate effect: he dramatically thrusts the register of the poem into a much more immediate, modern, almost profane dimension. Yet instead of reducing the allegory to a purely personal drama, Dante succeeds in fusing the allegorical and the personal, in reconciling perhaps the most important duality of the poem: that of his own identity.

For when Dante-poet becomes a participant, a character in his own drama, the literary distance between poet and pilgrim ceases to be relevant to the reader. By giving this climactic moment what T.S. Eliot called "the greatest personal intensity in the whole poem" (263), Dante is allowing the reader a new access to the poem. It is as if the first person in this first-person narrative is finally being revealed to the reader, just as Beatrice is finally being revealed to Dante the author/protagonist. This revelation, in turn, allows us a kind of catharsis as we experience with Dante the tears of his contrition, his true purification.

At the same time, the revelation wakes us, to recall Fergusson's characterization, as if from a dream. It is the dream not only of the poem, but in the words of the poet, "di nostra vita," ours and his. And the wakeful state in which we now find ourselves is one where the dualities are reconciled and transcended, where the past is the present, the father is the mother, and the pilgrim is the poet—prepared at last for Paradise.

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Notes

¹Fergusson 187; though he appears to be quoting from an unidentified Charles Singleton essay.

²Musa 326. It is interesting to note that Beatrice speaks not only Dante's name, but Virgil's and her own as well (v. 73), all within the context of harsh rebuke and shame for Dante.

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