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One day in the year 1284 a young man stood on a street in Florence gazing into space with the distant, dreamy look of an 18-year-old poet. He gave the outward appearance of floating in a sea of his own thoughts yet at the same time he was aware of every person who came into his field of vision. He was hoping for a glimpse of Beatrice. He had first seen her nine years ago when she was 8 years old and he was 9. Since that day he had adored her with an intensity that had turned into an independent force, 'Her image, always in my mind, inspired Love to take control of me'.¹ A day had not passed without his hoping to catch sight of her. There must have been many times when the eagerness of his love played tricks with his vision and it turned out not to be her. But on this day there was no doubt. She was walking towards him along the road which borders the River Arno, in the company of two of her friends.

The spot where Dante Alighieri is traditionally said to have been standing when he caught sight of the three women can now be seen from anywhere. A webcam² keeps watch over that corner of the Ponte Santa Trinità. Its constantly updated image is relayed to the internet where it can be viewed from any point on the earth. The bridge provides the foreground for a classically beautiful view of the old city. In the background is the Ponte Vecchio, the more famous shop-laden bridge. Beyond that, on the hilltop, is the ancient Romanesque church of San Miniato al Monte, framed by Tuscan cypresses. There is no indication that the designers of the website had in mind this or any other event in Dante's life when they set up the camera. It was just a good view. But it is

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pleasantly appropriate that the location of such a private moment should now be so universal. Appropriate because, although for now the young poet kept his intense feelings close within him as a well-guarded inner secret, one day they would provide the emotional mainspring of the three-part epic of fantasy fiction known as the *Divine Comedy*^a – they would fuel the story of his journey to the far edge of the universe.

In 1883 the British artist Henry Holiday depicted the scene a little after Dante had seen the women.³ Holiday was a follower of the Pre-Raphaelites, a group who prided themselves on their close observation of the natural world. But, to our eyes, his version of Dante's world is not naturalistic: it is a nineteenth-century view of medieval Florence. The streets and buildings are a little too clean; the women in the scene are too mannered. The positions of their bodies and the drapery of their dresses have been composed into something that is recognisable as art. Holiday was painting an event in the early life of a genius and he has made the entire work reflect the importance of the moment. To the observer at the time, however, the moment would have appeared perfectly ordinary. Anything extraordinary that was happening was going on entirely inside the poet's head. It would take a long time, during which Dante, his city and his world would have to go through cataclysmic changes, before the consequences of his inner thoughts would become visible to the rest of the world.

Holiday's depiction of Dante himself, on the other hand, does seem to have the ring of truth about it. The figure we see is awkward and intense. Everybody

^a Dante himself refers to his work simply as the *Comedy* which is the term we shall use for the rest of this book. The 'Divine' was introduced as a, not wholly inappropriate, mark of respect about two centuries after his death.



who describes him says that he was a very serious man. ‘Melancholy and pensive’ is how his first biographer, the writer Giovanni Boccaccio, puts it. Accounts usually add that he was not unpleasant, quite likeable in fact, but we can well imagine that in his teens that seriousness combined with awkwardness gave a slightly disquieting effect. The figure in the painting is standing in a peculiar way, striking what he may well consider to be a poetic pose.

The women, in their behaviour if not in their dress, would have been much more like their modern successors (who knows, perhaps even their descendants) whom one sees on the streets of Florence today: a trio of girls in their teens, well dressed but not ostentatiously so, absorbed for the most part in their own excited chatter, giving only occasional regard to the citizens around them.

As the girls passed him, Beatrice – quite possibly egged on by her companions – did something provocative. She said hello. Dante describes the effect that this had on him: 'she greeted me so graciously that at that moment I seemed to experience absolute blessedness ... I was so overcome by her sweetness that I left the crowds like a drunkard and went to be alone in my room.'⁴

In other words, Dante had to go and lie down in a darkened room because the girl he loved had said hello to him. This reaction is arguably a little extreme, but among sensitive young poets it is certainly not unique. It is what he describes next which is exceptional. Dante remained in the darkened room and, while the real Beatrice was probably still with her friends discussing the encounter with the intense young man from the Alighieri family, in his imagination she was featuring in a vision.

Dante tells us that he fell into a gentle sleep. He was about to have what is known today as a hypnagogic vision, a vivid hallucination experienced as one drifts in and out of consciousness. Dante notices that the room is becoming suffused with an intense red colour. A huge figure then appears, mumbling words in Latin which Dante cannot make out, apart from the frequently repeated phrase, 'I am your lord'. He becomes aware that the visitor is carrying something: 'In his arms I saw a woman sleeping, naked apart from a blood-coloured cloth lightly wrapped around her. As I looked at her closely, I recognised the lady of the salutation, who had greeted me.'⁵

Dante had a precise visual imagination and we can be sure that in his mind the details of the scene were clear. He knows that Beatrice is naked beneath her diaphanous red covering because he can see the fabric following the curve of her thigh up to her waist and falling gently across her young breasts. He tells us that he then became aware that the Lord of Love was holding something else.

In one of his hands he held something that was all on fire, and he said, 'Behold your heart'.⁶

The fact that the phantom lord can hold Dante's flaming heart in one hand while still cradling the unconscious Beatrice in the crook of his other arm indicates (if, like Dante, we visualise the scene precisely) that the sleeping girl was in the arms of an immense giant. The action that follows would be the main talking point of any feature film which was to include the scene. It would be endlessly discussed until it became an icon of notoriety independent of the movie from which it came. Dante's description is brief: 'When he had stayed there for some time, he awoke the sleeping woman and forced her to eat the burning thing in his hand; and she ate it, with great misgivings.'⁷

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Described in words, it can be passed over quickly: 'Beatrice eats the flaming heart of Dante.' There is something almost comical about the sentence. But as we try to visualise it the picture becomes more sinister. If we imagine, for a minute, the close-up: a real piece of glistening meat which the massive lord introduces into Beatrice's reluctant but ultimately acquiescent mouth while all the time angry flames lick around it, we see something grotesque and frightening. This is an image of sexual violation. There is nothing in the literature of the age up to then to match the shock of this vision. It is an image calculated to provoke both disgust and fascination in the reader.

This is Dante's first vision (he was to have many others) and there is more to it than just a startling, slightly nasty image. It has the hallmark skill which Dante would be so slow to deploy: the gift of constructing a detailed, consistent, imaginative world. The scene has a direct effect on its audience but at the same time invites a symbolic interpretation which remains ambiguous and subtle. It can even be read in different ways with completely opposite meanings. In one sense Beatrice is apparently graphically violated by being force-fed a heart but, on the other hand, it is Dante who has had his heart removed in the first place and Beatrice who eats it, so he has also been consumed. Have we witnessed the destruction of love or its consummation? The scene ends equally mysteriously: 'In a short time his joyfulness changed to the bitterest weeping; and so, lamenting, he clasped the lady in his arms and turned away with her up to Heaven.'⁸

Dante himself calls it a vision but we might prefer to say it was a product of his unconscious. Such things are believed nowadays to be messages from concealed areas of the mind. Whatever signal in this case may have been bubbling up from the depths of the young poet's soul, one message is clear: he had a gift for dramatic visual narrative. But, for the moment, Dante ignored his gift and did something very unusual for a man who in his later life would demonstrate scant familiarity with the concept of modesty: he asked for help from other writers.

He circulated a poem which begins with the line 'To every captive soul and noble heart' in which, having asked the reader for an opinion, he describes what he saw:

Already the third hour was almost over,
That time when all the stars were shining bright,
When unexpectedly Love came in sight,
Whose memory alone fills me with horror.

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Yet Love seemed happy, holding in one hand
This heart of mine, while in his arms he had
My lady wrapped in cloth, and sleeping sound.

Then he awakened her, and reverently
Fed her my blazing heart. She was afraid.
I watched him weeping as he went away.⁴

(J.G. Nichols (trans.), *The New Life*, III)

The poem went to members of the group of Italian poets who are known to history as the *Fedeli d'Amore*, the Faithful Followers of Love. Many of them replied (also in verse) with various options for the symbolic meaning of monster, heart, robe etc. One of them was a man called Guido Cavalcanti, the unofficial leader of the group, who later became Dante's best friend. He says that the Lord of Love 'took your heart away when he saw that your lady's death might well be close at hand' and it was out of this fear that he fed her the heart. Fellow poet Cino da Pistoia offers a completely different analysis. He suggests that, in feeding the heart to Beatrice, Love was 'bringing your two hearts together'. As interpretations these are both, at the most, plausible but neither of them has quite got the point. Both poets seem to have moved, as did all^b the *Fedeli* who replied to Dante's poem, straight from words on the page to symbols in the mind without pausing in between to notice the cinematic quality of the vision itself.

Their problem was that Dante's vision was a true original. It did not have footholds or reference points to anchor it within an existing intellectual framework. Those who search for such things will always have difficulties with it. It has even recently been dismissed by an eminent English Dante scholar as 'an adolescent fantasy'. But the opposite is the case. Dante was clever and knowledgeable but there is nothing unique about that. He had an outstanding

b All except one of them. Dante da Maiano (Dante, which means something like 'giver', was quite a common name at the time), a doctor by trade, at least grasped the carnal nature of the imagery. He chose to give a medical interpretation of the vision and replied that Dante was obviously getting a little overexcited. He wrote him a sonnet advising him to '*lavi la tua coglia largamente*', 'wash your testicles thoroughly' (one gets the feeling he is talking about cold water). He does not attempt to interpret the vision further. With this remark Dante da Maiano probably identifies himself as temperamentally unsuited to be a member of the Faithful Followers of Love, but to be able to raise a smile after 700 years is surely an achievement.

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facility with words, which was an exceptional gift, but even that does not, in itself, amount to an invention to which every future novelist and film-maker must acknowledge a debt. To achieve that would require the originality inherent in that piece of imagined drama which, although unheeded and unrecognised at first, is at the heart of his greatness.

But at the time the intense young poet wanted more than anything to become one of the *Fedeli*. He was not yet ready to exploit his unique talent. He would only be in a position to do that after two hard decades of progressively painful misfortune had passed and he was in the middle of his journey through life.