

CANTO XXXI

BEATRICE CONTINUES TO upbraid Dante, who, nearly incapable of speech, weeping and sighing, finally confesses his guilt; then, overcome by remorse, he faints. Upon regaining consciousness he discovers that Mateldà has drawn him into the stream of Lethe up to his neck. She carries him across and dips his head beneath the surface that he might drink of the waters. Then she leads him, now pure, into the dance of the four lovely maidens who flank Beatrice's chariot. They bring him in turn to Beatrice, and as he stares into her eyes, he sees the reflection of the griffin, manifested now in its one nature, now in the other. Finally the other three attendant ladies induce Beatrice to unveil her mouth to her "faithful one."

- "You, standing there, beyond the sacred stream,"
she cried, not pausing in her eloquence
and turning now the sword point of her words 3
- toward me, who had already felt its blade,
"speak now, is this not true? Speak! You must seal
with your confession this grave charge I make!" 6
- I stood before her paralyzed, confused;
I moved my lips, my throat striving to speak,
but not a single breath of speech escaped. 9
- She hardly paused: "What are you thinking of?
Answer me, now! Your bitter memories
have not as yet been purged within this stream." 12
- My fear and deep chagrin, between them, forced
out of my mouth a miserable "yes"—
only by ears with eyes could it be heard. 15
- A crossbow, drawn with too much tension, snaps,
bowstring and bow together, and the shaft
will strike the target with diminished force; 18
- so I was shattered by the intensity
of my emotions: tears and sighs burst forth,
as I released my voice about to fail. 21

She: "In your journey of desire for me,
 leading you toward that Good beyond which naught
 exists to which a man's heart may aspire, 24
 what pitfalls did you find, what chains stretched out
 across your path, that you felt you were forced
 to abandon every hope of going on? 27
 And what appealed to you, what did you find
 so promising in all those other things
 that made you feel obliged to spend your time 30
 in courting them?" I heaved a bitter sigh,
 and barely found the voice to answer her;
 my lips, with difficulty, shaped the words. 33
 Weeping, I said: "Those things with their false joys,
 offered me by the world, led me astray
 when I no longer saw your countenance." 36
 And she: "Had you kept silent or denied
 what you have just confessed, your guilt would still
 be clear to the great Judge who knows all things. 39
 But when the condemnation of his sin
 bursts from the sinner's lips, here in our Court,
 the grindstone is turned back against the blade. 42
 Still, so that you may truly feel the shame
 of all your sins—so that, another time,
 you will be stronger when the Sirens sing— 45
 master your feelings, listen to my words,
 and you shall learn just how my buried flesh
 was meant to guide you in another way. 48
 You never saw in Nature or in Art
 a beauty like the beauty of my form,
 which clothed me once and now is turned to dust; 51
 and if that perfect beauty disappeared
 when I departed from the world, how could
 another mortal object lure your love? 54
 When you first felt deception's arrow sting,
 you should have rushed to rise and follow me,
 as soon as I lost my deceptive flesh. 57

- No pretty girl or any other brief
attraction should have weighed down your wings,
and left you waiting for another blow. 60
- The fledgling waits a second time, a third,
but not the full-fledged bird: before his eyes
in vain the net is spread, the arrow shot." 63
- As children scolded into silence stand
ashamed, with head bowed staring at the ground,
acknowledging their fault and penitent— 66
- so I stood there. Then she: "If listening
can cause you so much grief, now raise your beard
and look at me and suffer greater grief." 69
- With less resistance is the sturdy oak
uprooted by the winds of storms at home
in Europe or by those that Iarbas blows, 72
- than my soul offered to her curt command
that I look up at her: she called my face
my "beard"! I felt the venom in her words. 75
- And when I raised my head, I did not look
at her, but at those first-created ones:
they had already ceased their rain of flowers. 78
- Then when I turned my unsure eyes once more,
I saw that Beatrice faced the beast
who in two natures is one single being. 81
- Though she was veiled and on the other shore,
lovelier now, she seemed, than when alive
on earth, when she was loveliest of all. 84
- I felt the stabbing pain of my remorse:
what I had loved the most of all the things
that were not she, I hated now the most. 87
- The recognition of my guilt so stunned
my heart, I fainted. What happened then is known
only to her who was the cause of it. 90
- When I revived, that lady I first saw
strolling alone was now bent over me,
saying: "Hold on to me, hold tight." She had 93

- led me into the stream up to my neck;
 now drawing me along she glided light,
 and with a shuttle's ease, across the stream. 96
- Before I reached the sacred bank I heard
Asperges me—so sweetly sung, my mind
 cannot recall, far less my words retell. 99
- The lovely lady, opening her arms,
 embraced my head and dipped it in the stream
 just deep enough to let me drink of it. 102
- She took me from those waters, cleansed, and led
 me to the dance of the four lovely ones,
 who raised their arms to join hands over me. 105
- "Here we are nymphs and in the heavens, stars;
 before Beatrice came into the world
 we were ordained her handmaids. It is for us 108
- to lead you to her eyes. The other three,
 who see more deeply, will instruct your sight,
 as you bathe in her gaze of joyful light," 111
- they sang to me; then they accompanied me
 up to the griffin's breast, while Beatrice
 now faced us from the center of the cart. 114
- "Look deeply, look with all your sight," they said,
 "for now you stand before those emeralds
 from which Love once shot loving darts at you." 117
- A thousand yearning flames of my desire
 held my eyes fixed upon those brilliant eyes
 that held the griffin fixed within their range. 120
- Like sunlight in a mirror, shining back,
 I saw the twofold creature in her eyes,
 reflecting its two natures, separately. 123
- Imagine, reader, how amazed I was
 to see the creature standing there unchanged,
 yet, in its image, changing constantly, 126
- And while my soul, delighted and amazed,
 was tasting of that food which satisfies
 and, at the same time, makes one hungrier, 129

the other three, revealing in their mien
 their more exalted rank, came 'dancing forth
 accompanied by angelic melody. 132

"Turn, Beatrice, turn your sacred eyes,"
 they sang, "and look upon your faithful one
 who came so very far to look at you! 135

Of your own grace grant us this grace: unveil
 your mouth for him, allow him to behold
 that second beauty which you hide from him." 138

O splendor of the eternal living light!
 Who, having drunk at the Parnassian well,
 or become pale within that mountain's shade, 141

could find with all of his poetic gifts
 those words that might describe the way you looked,
 with that harmonious heaven your only veil, 144

when you unveiled yourself to me at last?

NOTES

1. *"You, standing there, beyond the sacred stream:* Beatrice, who had been patient with the angels (XXX, 103-46), changes her tone when she addresses Dante. Perhaps because he stands on the opposite bank of Lethe ("beyond the sacred stream"), and so, as we will see, is still fully conscious of his sins, Beatrice takes this opportunity to indict him mercilessly and to demand a confession. We are reminded of the Beatrice of the *Vita nuova*, not an allegorical figure but a woman whose love has been betrayed. Hence, she confronts Dante, the lover, on a personal level.

That Lethe here is called "sacred stream" reminds us that we are witnessing a sacramental act of penance in this confrontation and in the Pilgrim's subsequent confession, forgiveness, and absolution.

3. *turning now the sword point of her words:* Recalling from the previous canto the metaphor of the wound, "you shall have to weep from yet another wound" (XXX, 56-57), the poet now envisions Beatrice's words as a sword. When she listed the Pilgrim's transgressions, her accusations were indirect: she was

literally addressing the angels. The Pilgrim was "wounded" only with the "blade." Now, addressing him directly, she has turned the "sword point" on him.

7. *I stood before her*: Like the young lover-protagonist of the *Vita nuova*, the Pilgrim is "paralyzed, confused," and appears incapable of completing the necessary steps in the act of penance. (Cf. note to XXVIII, 70.) We know that he has taken the first step (*contritio cordis*), that he is truly sorry for his sins, for his "anguish came pouring forth" (XXX, 99) almost immediately upon seeing Beatrice. But he must also "confess" his sins (*confessio oris*) in order to be forgiven.

10. "*What are you thinking of?*": This question, along with the next two verses, emphasizes Beatrice's continued sternness in the face of the confused Pilgrim. Once before on the journey Dante stood with his head bowed, unable to speak. It was in the circle of the Lustful, Circle Two of Hell, right after he had heard Francesca's eloquent story of her fated love for Paolo, and at that point it was Virgil who asked, "What are you thinking of?" (*Inf.* V, 111). The contrasting mood is important here: Francesca's romantic tale was deceptive; in telling it she used her eloquence wrongly, and the Pilgrim's response was inappropriate. Here, the Pilgrim faces the righteous eloquence of a woman whose love he has wronged.

12. *within this stream*: As we will soon see, the waters of Lethe wash away the memory of sin (on the emotional plane—see note to XXVIII, 128).

14. *a miserable "yes"*: Dante, not as Everyman, but rather like the young lover-protagonist of the *Vita nuova*, begins his confession with the weak sound of one word: "yes." His actual confession occupies one tercet: verses 34–36.

16–21. *A crossbow, drawn with too much tension, snaps*: Here the poet has chosen to visualize the Pilgrim's progression from *contritio cordis* to *confessio oris* as a crossbow and string snapping under too much tension. This image is essentially one of "breaking" and so recalls the "melting" or "breaking up" of the snow in the preceding canto (XXX, 85–90) and anticipates the image of the "uprooted" tree later in this canto (70–72). "Breaking" is the literal meaning of "*contritio*" (cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theol.* III, suppl. of Ia. 1, resp.: "Now he that

persists in his own judgment, he is called metaphorically rigid and hard even as what in material things is called hard is that which does not yield to the touch: wherefore anyone is said to be broken when he is torn from his own judgment"). When he actually does confess, the Pilgrim's words are barely audible, said with a "voice about to fail" (21). Thus his words correspond to the "shaft" that strikes its target "with diminished force" (18). See Singleton (1973), p. 759.

23. *that Good: God.*

36. *your countenance:* The Italian reads "*vostro viso.*" Dante will always use the honorific plural *vostro* when addressing his lady Beatrice, though she continues to address him with the familiar *tu* form.

41. *here in our Court:* This is a reference to both the heavenly court, where Beatrice and the angels dwell in the presence of God, and the divine tribunal, before which every man will one day be judged.

42. *the grindstone is turned back against the blade:* Again we have the image of the sword wound (cf. XXXI, 3-4 and XXX, 56-57). Here the grindstone symbolizes mercy as it is "turned back against" or used to blunt the blade of the sword of justice. In the heavenly court, when a sinner openly confesses, God's justice is tempered with mercy. In earthly courts, confession often has very different results.

45. *the Sirens:* Beatrice refers here to those attractions of the world which give false pleasure and recalls that Siren who appears to the Pilgrim in his second dream on the mountain (XIX, 19-24), the same one who turned Ulysses from his true course.

46. *listen to my words:* The Italian reads, "*pon giù il seme del pianger, ed ascolta*" ("put down the seeds of crying and listen"). Now that the Pilgrim has cried properly, he may stop and listen. The injunction is, of course, to listen not to the Sirens, to the lures of false goods, but to the words of Beatrice, bearing the eloquence of Heaven.

55. *When you first felt deception's arrow sting:* The argument here is that Dante should have realized from Beatrice's death that all mortal joys must be deceptive, because transitory, and

therefore unsatisfying. His response should have been to follow Beatrice, no longer mortal, to the source of permanent and true joy in Heaven.

58. *No pretty girl*: The Italian text reads *pargoletta*; the diminutive suffix stresses youth and connects the pretty girl with the young, inexperienced "fledgling" (*augelletto*) of verse 61. Taken together, they begin the emphasis on the immaturity of vision that Dante had displayed after the death of Beatrice. The Pilgrim will soon be even more painfully reminded of his immaturity, when Beatrice refers sarcastically to his beard (75).

The "pretty girl" also refers back to Beatrice's charge that soon after her death, Dante "strayed after others" (XXX, 126). Some scholars have read Dante's attraction to the "pretty girl" as a brief moral lapse, a yielding to the "false pleasure of present things." Others prefer an allegorical interpretation: Dante's lapse was an intellectual one; he was for a time after Beatrice's death attracted to Philosophy, neglecting the Divine Revelation that Beatrice represented.

61. *The fledgling waits a second time, a third*: In the Italian *augelletto*, the diminutive suffix emphasizes the youthfulness and lack of experience of the fledgling. Beatrice's association of Dante's misguided affections with the faults of a young bird may for the moment seem to be a softening of tone on her part. It is not, however, as verse 68 will make clear.

68. *now raise your beard*: Dante is no longer a child, and Beatrice's reference to his beard here is sarcastic. Her intention is to remind him that, even though he has acted as a foolish child and has been chastised as one, he is in fact an adult.

72. *Iarbas*: The south wind. Iarbas or Hearbus was king of the Gaetulias in Libya, North Africa, and an unsuccessful suitor of Dido. (See Virgil *Aen.* IV, 36, 196, 326). The image of the sturdy oak uprooted by the wind continues the image of contrition as "breaking up" (cf. note to 16-21).

75. *I felt the venom in her words*: The painful reference to his beard (68) brings home to the Pilgrim the sarcasm that has been implicit all along in Beatrice's treating him as a naughty child.

76. *And when I raised my head*: While Dante has been standing shamefaced, "with head bowed staring at the ground" (65),

the scene around him has changed significantly. When he finally responds to Beatrice's command to look up, he still does not have the courage to look directly at her and so fixes his gaze instead on the angels. His first inkling of the changed scene comes when he notices that they have stopped showering flowers. The "rain of flowers" had earlier been associated with a veil (XXX, 31-33), one of two that stand between Dante and the face of his beloved Beatrice. Now that the Pilgrim has freely confessed his sins, the first of those veils is removed. The change of scene and the removal of the first veil signify the new perspective that the repentant Pilgrim has achieved.

80-81. *I saw that Beatrice faced the beast*: Beatrice had been standing motionless on the chariot, behind its left rail (XXX, 61), facing the Pilgrim, who stood on the other side of the stream. Even while addressing the angels, Beatrice had not changed her position (XXX, 100-102). Now, still on the chariot, she has turned and is facing the back of the griffin, the beast "who in two natures is one single being." Here those "two natures" are symbolic of the two natures of Christ: divine and human (cf. note to XXIX, 113-14).

83. *lovelier now, she seemed, than when alive*: Now that she is gazing on the griffin, Beatrice has taken on a beauty that far surpasses even her great beauty "when alive on earth." When she was alive, Dante tells us in the *Vita nuova*, Beatrice was not only a woman but one of the most beautiful angels of Heaven. This mixture of divine and human beauty in Beatrice continues the symbolism of the dual nature of Christ. Just as the young Dante of the *Vita nuova* was not able to comprehend fully the human and divine role of Beatrice, so here, at this point in the action at the top of the mountain of Purgatory, the poet still does not see perfectly his beloved lady through her veil.

89. *I fainted*: Fully aware at last of the extent of his guilt and the full import of his sins, the Pilgrim faints, unable to endure such complete recognition of his errors. Earlier (XXX, 76-78) the Pilgrim was so ashamed that he could not bear to see his own reflection in the water at his feet.

Close to the beginning of his journey the Pilgrim twice fainted (*Inf.* III and V) when he was overwhelmed by emotion. Dante the Poet uses all three of these faints as devices of transition or scene shifting, moving the Pilgrim, unaware, from one geographical location to awaken in another.

The Pilgrim awakens from his faint to find himself being drawn by Matelda across Lethe, the river of oblivion. He is submerged up to his neck. Matelda, for her part, is walking on the surface of the water with the Pilgrim clinging to her. Is she perhaps walking backwards, bent over the body she is drawing and holding his head as he clings to her legs? In any case, before they reach the far bank, where Beatrice is waiting, Matelda opens her arms, allowing the Pilgrim's head momentarily to be submerged in Lethe's cleansing waters.

91. *that lady I first saw*: Matelda. Although she was introduced as early as Canto XXVIII (40), Dante has not yet named her and will not until the closing canto (XXXIII, 119). Matelda seems to be assigned the task of administering the waters of Lethe and Eunoë to all those souls who reach the Earthly Paradise. That she does not perform the task only for the Pilgrim will be demonstrated in *Purg.* XXXIII, 134-35, when she invites Statius, too, to drink from the waters of Eunoë.

95-96. *now drawing me along*: Matelda's walking on the water cannot help but remind us of Christ's similar miracle. She is here a *figura Christi*, cleansing man of his sins. She draws the Pilgrim "with a shuttle's ease," i.e., as easily as a shuttle passes back and forth, lightly and rapidly, in the process of weaving cloth.

98. *Asperges me*: "Cleanse me of sin," from Psalm 51:7 (Vulg. 50:9): "Cleanse me of sin with hyssop, that I may be purified; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." The *Asperges* is sung at the beginning of the Mass, when the priest sprinkles the people with holy water. Here, presumably, it is sung by the angels on the far bank. These lines are part of a longer prayer of repentance, in which David asks the Lord for mercy and forgiveness of his sins. Here they signify the completion of the Pilgrim's personal confession, for his immersion now washes off the final stains of the sins he has confessed to Beatrice.

101-102. *dipped it in the stream . . . to let me drink of it*: The act of drinking the water of Lethe, it should be noted, is different from being immersed in the river. Immersion cleanses the Pilgrim's soul of the guilt remaining from the sins he confessed to Beatrice; it is the last step of his personal confession. His

drinking from the waters of Lethe (the "river of oblivion") is part of the ritual that every soul that reaches the summit must perform; it takes away the emotional memory of sin just as drinking of the waters of Eunoë, which the Pilgrim and Statius will do later on (XXXIII, 133-35), restores the memory of all good deeds.

103-105. *She took me from those waters, cleansed and led:* The word "cleansed" stresses the spiritual purifying powers of this "sacred river." Matelda now leads the Pilgrim to Beatrice's handmaids, the four cardinal virtues (Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance), who are dancing at the left wheel of the chariot. There he stands at the center of their dance while the four join hands, as though forming a crown, over his head. Each handmaid in this way signifies her infusing of the Pilgrim with her own special virtue, thus protecting him from its opposite vice.

106-14. *"Here we are nymphs and in the heavens, stars":* The handmaids are referring to their position as four stars in the sky above the south pole. They are the stars the Pilgrim noticed at the very beginning of his journey up the mount, but which the Poet did not elaborate on at the time (*Purg.* I, 23-24): it was merely noted that they were seen by Adam and Eve from Eden and had been seen by no one else since then. In song they tell the Pilgrim that they will lead him to stand in front of the griffin, where he will see Beatrice—who is now standing at the front of the chariot and is turned toward the left, though her eyes remain fixed on the two-natured beast. They will later be joined by the other three handmaids, the three theological virtues, who have been dancing at the chariot's right wheel, and who will soon move toward the front to join Beatrice. The Pilgrim faces the front ("the breast") of the griffin which is drawing the chariot, and sees Beatrice standing on the chariot, toward the front, gazing at the griffin from behind. We are being prepared by this stance for the new role Beatrice is about to assume: that of Sapiientia or Wisdom.

116. *now you stand before those emeralds:* Beatrice's eyes are green, symbolizing Hope. Here we are presented with a clear indication of Beatrice's two interconnected roles in the poem. The Pilgrim is reminded first of the Beatrice of the *Vita nuova* ("a thousand yearning flames of my desire," 118), the woman

whose love should have sufficed to teach him to aspire to the Ultimate Good. But when he actually does look into Beatrice's eyes (119), the Pilgrim sees the image of the griffin. One of Beatrice's other roles, then, is that of Revelation. The mystery of Christ's dual nature is still beyond the Pilgrim's understanding, and so, allegorically, he is as yet unable to gaze directly at the griffin, the symbol of those two natures. But he can begin to comprehend through Beatrice's (Revelation's) green eyes.

122. *I saw the twofold creature in her eyes*: The Pilgrim encounters in Beatrice's eyes, as in a mirror, the mystery of Christ's dual nature. The words of Paul (I Cor. 13:12) come to mind: *Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate*. "We see now through a mirror in an obscure way."

Just as Christ is both God and man in one, and at the same time, so he is represented by the griffin, which is part eagle and part lion. The Pilgrim can "see" the two natures of the beast imaged in Beatrice's eyes (123), but he cannot comprehend their oneness; hence the natures are visible to him only alternately ("separately," 123) and not simultaneously. He can only marvel at the mysteriousness of oneness by describing an image that changes natures (from eagle to lion and back again) while the creature itself remains unchanged (125-27).

128-29. *that food which satisfies*: Dante is paraphrasing the words of Sapientia in Ecclus. 24:21: "They that eat me shall yet be hungry, and they that drink me shall yet be thirsty." The food that makes one hungrier is the Truth that comes through Revelation (Beatrice) and that points always to something higher, to Christ himself.

134. *"and look upon your faithful one"*: Now that his wanderings from the path Beatrice first set for him in the *Vita nuova* have been forgiven, the Pilgrim can truly be called Beatrice's "faithful one." In Canto II of the *Inferno* (97-99) the Pilgrim was also called "faithful," indicating that even then, beneath his wanderings, there had always been an unconscious faithfulness that had been guiding his steps back to his beloved Beatrice.

136. *unveil*: The action of unveiling further indicates Beatrice's symbolic role as Revelation.

138. *that second beauty*: Beatrice's smile, i.e., salvation. The first beauty was that of her emerald eyes, the "ancient flame" of

hope and the means by which wisdom and truth were demonstrated. With Beatrice's smile comes the unveiled or inner light of wisdom: the promise of salvation for all mankind.

141. *or become pale within that mountain's shade*: Dante is referring to those who, like himself, labor tirelessly at mastering the art of poetry. Even the best of poets would have difficulty describing the unveiled beauty of Beatrice.

144. *with that harmonious heaven your only veil*: Heaven here refers to the seven streamers of light from the seven golden candlesticks. These streamers, symbolizing the seven gifts of the Spirit of the Lord, were first described by the Pilgrim as "seven bands of light" (XXIX, 77). Now, however, with the unveiling of Beatrice, the Pilgrim sees the harmony of the seven gifts, which together form a "heaven" that overshadows the entire procession in general and Beatrice in particular. Such "harmony" is again an indication of the Pilgrim's growing ability to glimpse briefly the larger design of God.