Await no further word or sign from me: your will is free, erect, and whole— to act against that will would be to err: therefore I crown and mix you over yourself."

FROM CANTO XXX

Summary Dante has arrived at the earthly paradise on the top of Mount Purgatory and finally sees Beatrice, drawn in a chariot as the centerpiece of an elaborate pageant. These lines describe his first exchange with her:

I have at times seen all the eastern sky becoming rose as day began and seen, adorned in lovely blue, the rest of heaven; and seen the sun's face rise as veiled that it was tempered by the mist and could permit the eye to look at length upon it; so within a cloud of flowers that were cast by the angelic hands and there rose up and then fell back, outside and in the chariot, a woman showed herself to me; above a white veil, she was crowned with olive boughs; her cape was green; her dress beneath, flame-red.4

Within her presence, I had once been used to feeling—trembling—wonder, dissolution; but that was long ago. Still, though my soul, now she was veiled, could not see her directly, by way of hidden force that she could move, I felt the mighty power of old love. As soon as that deep force had struck my vision the power that, when I had not yet left my boyhood, had already transfixed me, I turned around and to my left—just as a little child, afraid or in distress, will hurry to his mother—anxiously, to say to Virgil: "I am left with less than one drop of my blood that does not tremble: I recognize the sign of the old flame." But Virgil had deprived us of himself, Virgil, the gentlest father, Virgil, to whom I gave my self for my salvation, and even all our ancient mother lost was not enough to keep my cheeks, though washed with dew, from darkening again with tears.

"Dante, though Virgil's leaving you, do not weep, for another sword must yet inflict." Just like an admiral who goes to stern and powe to see the officers who guide the other ships, encouraging their tasks, so, on the left side of the chariot (I'd turned around when I had heard my name— which, of necessity, I transcribe here), I saw the lady who had first appeared to me beneath the veil of the angelic flowers look at me across the stream. Although the veil she wore—down from her head, which was encrusted by Minerva's leaves—did not allow her to be seen distinctly, her stance still regal and disdainful, she continued, just as one who speaks but keeps until the end the fiercest parts of speech: "Look here! For I am Beatrice, I am! Did you not know that man is happy here?"

My lowered eyes caught sight of the clear stream, but when I saw myself reflected there, such shame weighed on my brow, my eyes drew back and toward the grass; just as a mother seems bash to her child, so did she seem to me—how bitter is the savor of stern pity! Her words were done.
you are the noonday torch of charity,
yet still it still distills within
my heart the sweetness that was born of it.
So is the snow, beneath the sun, unsealed?
And so, on the light leaves, beneath the wind,
the oases the Sibyl wrote were lost."
O Highest Light, You, raised so far above
the minds of mortals, to my memory
give back something of Your epiphanies,
and make my tongue so powerful that I
may leave to people of the future one
glam of the glory that is Yours, for by
returning somewhat to my memory
and echoing awhile within these lines,
your victory will be more understood.
The living joy that I endured was so
acute that I believe I should have gone
astray had my eyes turned away from it.
I can recall that, because of this,
was bolder in sustaining it until
my vision reached the Infinite-Goodness.
O grace abounding, through which I presumed
to set my eyes on the Eternal Light
so long that I spent all my sight on it!
In its profundity I saw—ingathered
and bound by love into one single volume—
what, in the universe, seems separate, scattered:
substances, accidents, and dispositions
as if conjoined—in such a way that what
I tell is only rudimentary.
I think I saw the universal shape
which that knot takes; for, speaking this, I feel
it is joy that is more ample. That one moment
brings more forgetfulness to me than twenty-
five centuries have brought to the endeavor
that startled Neptune with the Argo's shadows
So was my mind—completely rapt, intent,
steadfast, and motionless—gazing: and it
grew ever more entranced as it watched.
Whoever sees that Light is soon made such
that it would be impossible for him
to set that Light aside for other sight;
big because the good, the object of the will,
is fully gathered in that Light; outside
that Light, what there is perfect is defective.
what little I recall is to be told,
from this point on, in words more weak than those
of one whose infant tongue still bathes at the breast.

---

3. Myth. 4. In Amorci 2 Yael describes how the Sibyl of Gerusia voted down the future on beans
that the wind then scattered. 5. In the philosophical tradition followed by Dante, a substance is that
which subsists in and of itself, an accident exists only as a property or an attribute of a substance, and their
essences in the way substances and accidents are bound together. 6. The voyage of Jove and the
Argonauts after the golden fleece was thought to have occurred about 1300 B.C. (see below 1138-47.)
And not because more than one simple semblance was in the Living Light at which I gazed—for it is always what it was before—but through my sight, which as I gazed grew stronger, that sole appearance, even as I feared, seemed to be changing. In the deep and bright essence of that exalted Light, three circles appeared to run; they had three different colors, but all of them were of the same dimension; one circle seemed reflected by the second, as rainbow is by rainbow, and the third seemed fire breathed equally by those two circles.

How incomplete is speech, how weak, when set against my thought! And this, to what I saw is such—to call it little is too much.

Eternal Light, You only dwell within Yourself, and only You know You; Self-knowing. Self-known, You love and smile upon Yourself!

That circle—which, forgotten so, appeared in You as light reflected—when my eyes had watched it with attention for some time, within itself and colored like itself, to me seemed painted with our eyfgy, so that my sight was set on it completely.

As the geometer intently seeks to correct it, which he cannot reach, through thought on thought, the principle he needs, so I searched that strange sight: I wished to see the way in which our human effigy suited the circle and found place in it—and my own wings were far too weak for that. But then my mind was struck by light that flashed and, with this light, received what it had asked. Here force failed my high fantasy; but my desire and will were moved already—like a wheel revolving uniformly—by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.1

1. Signifying the Trinity.
2. Dante serves to see a human image in the center of the Godhead. 9. The problem of constructing a square equal to one in a circle is a geometrically insoluble mathematical problem in Euclidean geometry, the extent of the cut-out to form a square is high because it is equal to the area of the circle.
3. As in the Inferno and the Purgatorio, the last word of the Paradiso is seen, meaning us to the perspective of the human gazing up at that which is beyond the human.

GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO
1313–1375

The Decameron by Giovanni Boccaccio has a reputation as a rich classic, and certainly many of its stories—including some selected here—deal with sexual misadven- tur. But it also gathers into its hundred stories the diversity and energy that made part of fourteenth-century Italy one of the great cultural resources of medieval Europe. With his professor Dante and his slightly older contemporary Petrarch, Boccaccio estab-

lished Italy and specifically Florence as a center of literary production that influenced European writing for centuries.

Boccaccio was born in Tuscany, probably in Florence, to a merchant and banker who did not marry the child's mother until some five years later. At fourteen he was sent to Naples, where his father made him spend six years studying arithmetic and then, when it became clear that Boccaccio would not make a successful merchant, sent him six years preparing for a career as a lawyer. But this enterprise also failed, and Boccaccio was drawn to the sophisticated circle of writers and scholars that the ruler of another Italy, Robert of Anjou, had assembled into a court that was the most advanced cultural center of its time. Although known to modern readers almost excus-

pently through the Decameron, Boccaccio wrote primarily other courtly tales of love in Italian verse or learned treatises on subjects such as history, classical mythology, and geography in Latin prose. Along with Petrarch, Boccaccio was one of the many medieval writers who worked to revive the literary heritage of the classical world. In a poem called the Florio he produced the first vernacular version of a classical epic, initiating a tradition that was to culminate in Milton's Paradise Lost, and he sponsored the first translation of Homer from Greek (in this case into Latin). The humanist was to come to fruition in the Renaissance and it is one of its most important medi-

cular inspirations in the work of Boccaccio.

The Decameron represents another aspect of Boccaccio's literary personality. Listing the collection, written between 1350 and 1353, in a specific historical con- text, Boccaccio first describes the devastating effects of the Black Death in 1348–

50 on Florence. Indeed, while the plague killed at least one-third of the European population (as well as millions elsewhere in the world), in Florence the death rate was as high as 76 percent. For Boccaccio the effect of this unprecedented disaster was the destruction of both the social fabric of the city and the moral restraints on individual behavior. In response, he posits an alternative society by describing how seven young ladies of good family are joined by three young men and retreat from the cramped city to a beautiful country estate, where they restore themselves with well-

regulated pleasures. Among their recreations is a tale-telling game for ten days each member of the group tells a story, creating the hundred stories that comprise the Decameron.

But if Boccaccio presents these tales as an alternative to the social and moral collapse of plague-stricken Florence, he also insists that their goal is above all to give pleasure. In this he sets his work in opposition to that of one of his own literary heroes, Dante. Much of Boccaccio's work is heavily influenced by Dante, and near the end of his life he both wrote a treatise celebrating Dante and delivered a set of lectures commenting in detail on the first twenty-eight cantos of the Inferno. Yet the Decameron is an implicitly anti-Dantean work. Its division into one hundred tales echoes Dante's division of his Commedia into one hundred cantos, and Boccaccio gives his work an alternative title—"Prince Galeotto"—that refers to a crucial moment in the Inferno. In canto 5 of the Inferno Francesca explains to Dante that she and her brothers-in-law Paolo and Francesca fell in love while reading the story of Lucrèce and Guinaevre. She blames the look for their fall, calling it a Galeotto: she is referring to the bright in the Aristotelian court who served as a go-between for the lovers. Dante is implying here that reading, and especially reading for pleasure, can be morally dangerous. Yet