Gretchen E. Henderson

The Many Faces of Bea

There are hundreds of her. Here: she poses in shimmering gold, with burnished curls and closed eyes.[1] In another portrait, her gaze fades behind lavender veils. Ghostlike, she rematerializes black and white in a palm-sized chariot. Her eyes widen under a wreathed brow; her arm points toward clouds. Rising, she flits in Saturn-like rings. She's close enough to be vibrating, buzzing, close enough I presume to call her by name:

Bea.

More or less than *Beatrice*, each image is but a trace. "We have only hints and fragments of her story," Charles Williams writes in *The Figure of Beatrice*. Her replication multiplies her potential, like when Sandro Botticelli draws her in *Paradiso* amid tight-furled flames, seeming bees, unfurling angelic wings. Williams continues: "To say [that Beatrice is Dante's Knowing] is not to reduce her actuality nor her femininity. The reason for the insistence on her femininity is simple—it is that this is what Dante insisted on . . . not confined to romantic love of the male-female kind. Wherever the 'stupor' is, there is the beginning of art. Wherever any love is—and some kind of love in every man and woman there must be—there is either affirmation or rejection of image, in one or other form."[2]

"Stupor": illuminated, engraved, printed, woodcut, painted, and sculpted by Sandro Botticelli, William Blake, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Marie Spartali Stillman, Gustave Doré, Salvador Dalí, Tom Phillips (to name only a few "replicators"). And that's not to mention Dante's textual translators: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Laurence Binyon,

Allen Mandelbaum, Robert and Jean Hollander, and so many more. "It may be startling to speak of the *Divine Comedy*," writes Elaine Scarry, "or the *Mona Lisa* as 'a replication' since they are so unprecedented, but the word recalls the fact that something, or someone, gave rise to their creation and remains silently present in the newborn object."[3]

And that "something, or someone" leads me to ponder—beyond Dante—the many faces of Bea. Writers more traveled than I have retraced Dante's road of rendering and reckoning, all the while fleshing out details about his actual life, paying homage to his exiled bones. His physical frame is familiar, thanks to Boccaccio's description: "stooped" with "grave and sedate" gait, "seemly garments," long face with "aquiline" nose, "rather large" eyes, and "heavy" jaws.[4] But Bea is another matter. Her existence has been validated only by "hints and fragments"; otherwise, little is known. Put her imagery side by side in a lineup, and who could know which is the "real" she?

Reading her portraits across centuries, I look about to see: Bea upon Bea, gazing in every direction. Dozens of eyes evade my own. Centuries after Dante's death, I walk within narrow walls strewn with varied off-prints, photocopies, opened pages of her disparate forms. Watching these multifarious portraits, as if Bea were in motion, I wonder about more than the girl who compelled Dante Alighieri to invent a poetic form, to journey through the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, to "say of her what has never been said of any woman."[5] How did someone so singular lead to something so multifold? Touched by a strange and silent stupor, I close my eyes to partake in this moment: of putting Bea away from sight, of trying to see her anew.

Early in *La Vita Nuova*, Dante famously records a dream in which he's visited by Death, and Beatrice is forced to eat his heart. It's a terrifying scene, what a modern reader might consider a metaphoric stalking, followed by a rape. Despite being an admirer of Dante, I shiver upon reading this scene that foretells Beatrice's death, as if she's a sacrificial lamb: binding her physical sacrifice to poetry, blurring her existence with myth. At the same time, I would be naïve to read this scene

literally. For as long as readers have journeyed through Dante's Hell and Purgatory and Heaven, Beatrice has evaded being encapsulated or reduced to any singular reading.

Quite the contrary—and yet many have tried to decipher her riddle. For centuries, scholars have debated the nature of Beatrice's presence and provenance, digging into the poetic tradition that nursed Dante's verse, her literary counterparts (like Lady Philosophy), and annals of her history: from the cost of her dowry when marrying Simone de' Bardi, to the esteemed reputation of her father, Falco Portinari (who founded a hospital serviced by the first nursing staff on record), to the location of her tomb in the Church of Santa Margherita de' Cerchi.[6] The particulars tell us little, ultimately, leading to the same threshold of unknowing, beyond which we must grope through our own lives and times—where Hell no longer lies below, nor Heaven above, but both commingle in our mixed-up midst.

Just search for "Dante" in the archives of the *New York Times*, the *Atlantic*, and other contemporary publications to find references not to the *Commedia* but to Rwanda, Zambia, Croatia, Iraq. More than Dantean scholarship, these figurative references point to something beyond the presence of Bea. Together with the scene where she eats Dante's heart, these references suggest to me, finally: the more I try to seek her, the less I'll know. Or said another way (like Ursula Le Guin writes in *The Left Hand of Darkness*): the exercise will "exhibit the perfect uselessness of knowing the answer to the wrong question."[7]

And so I ask another question, echoing the Gryphon in *Wonderland*, who cries: "Never heard of uglifying! . . . You know what to beautify is, I suppose?"[8] In kind, I wonder: Have I ever seen Bea depicted as anything *but* beautiful? If beauty is singular, why do images of her appear so differently? Do I know what it means "to beautify"? And what of "uglifying"? Bea's beauty—and, I would add, her uncharted deformity—are left to the eye of each beholder, so the many faces of Bea, taken together, suggest what's missing. The seeking of Bea becomes the seeking of "we," ever changing.[9] More than trying to decipher *her*, then, her *ability to change* may serve as a better guide. Compiling her mostly absent pieces leads her (and *me*, with *you*) always to the threshold of an alternative *Vita Nuova*—another "new life"—even if that life in the end isn't hers. Instead, it's *ours*.

☞

Among the anatomical waxes collected at La Specola in Florence (Beatrice's hometown), *Venus* rests on a silky, fringed, pink drape. Lying prone, she is naked except for a string of pearls. From neck to pubis, her removable abdominal skin reveals six additional layers. Paradoxically modest and exhibitionist, this human model (once used to teach medicine) bears a goddess's name, while exposing budding knowledge of the female body. Unlike her counterparts (for instance, Botticelli's vertical *Venus*, rising from her scallop shell), this *Venus's* inlaid strata remind me somehow of the *Inferno*'s tiers. Anatomically waxed, her skin can be peeled down to her innermost, concealed core: embodying "new life" with a uterus full of fetus (whose tiny size, in relation to its developmental stage, defies laws of gestation). Defined by her reproductive capabilities and dressed only in a string of pearls, with a facial expression that's been called "orgasmic," La Specola's *Venus* bears a ridiculous incongruity as a corpse.[10]

Beyond the *Anatomical Venus* in La Specula, my interest in Venus generally—in relation to Bea—is less about *her* than her *variation* across history. Her disparate depicters (including the Irish performance artist, Mary Duffy, who was born without arms and who imitates the *Venus de Milo*) tell us something about ourselves. "This is more a question about the nature of the subject than the qualities of the object," writes Lennard Davis, "more about the observer than the observed."[11] Like fickle fashions, female forms have gone in and out of favor, and icons beyond Venus have borne partial brunt. In artistic renderings of the Virgin Mary, for instance, her lithe and pale form has grown plump and aged variedly as young or old, white or black. Noteworthy, too, has been Mary's resemblance to Venus, particularly when holding a Cupid-like baby Jesus. A single depiction of Mary (of Venus, of Bea) doubles and troubles any singular reading of "the real thing," which holds true for representations generally: secular or sacred, female or male.

The question remains: what's the trouble with singularity? Of Mary, Pietro Amato has said that her changing face "belongs to the history of spirituality."[12] His sentiment implies that Mary's faces (plural) also reflect tensions about spirituality. A case in point: in 1999,

when the *Holy Virgin Mary* by Chris Ofili (a British-Nigerian artist) appeared at the Brooklyn Museum, the painting came under attack—notably by Rudy Giuliani, then mayor of New York—for its use of elephant dung and cutouts of genitalia from pornographic magazines. Justifying the presence of materials, critics described the sacred nature of pachyderms and their dung in Africa and the cutouts as analogous to naked putti in traditional religious art. "I don't feel as though I have to defend it," the artist himself responded. "The people who are attacking this painting are attacking their own interpretation, not mine."[13] (Another article said *Holy Virgin Mary* wouldn't have been attacked if it had been titled "My Friend Mildred.") As Ofili's artwork suggests, benign as representations seem, they have the potential to take on fatal weight. And more has come to pass: beyond defacements of saints during the Reformation, to recent violence against cartoons (of Mohammed in Denmark) and statues (the monumental Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan).[14]

Without knowing if representations of Bea have been attacked, purposefully or inadvertently, I am struck by contemporary invocations to her creator, analogized in the news:

- There were others living among the dead this morning. They were in shock, their bodies shredded by mortar fragments, still breathing. People who had escaped the attack moved slowly and silently through the carnage, a scene out of Dante's hell.[15]
- The boulders here are hard enough that the scavengers who have taken over the abandoned quarry south of downtown prefer not to strike them directly with hammers. . . . At dusk, when three or four blazes spew choking black clouds across the huge pit, the quarry looks like a woodcut out of Dante. A boy named Alone Banda works in this purgatory six days a week.
- In response to the verdict, Mr. Sakic clapped his hands and laughed in derision. . . . He was the protégé of Vjekoslav Luburic, the leader of all Croatian concentration camps, including Jasenovac, a sprawling 150-square-mile conglomeration of several camps. It quickly became known for a brutality that shocked even visiting Nazi officials, one of whom likened it to Dante's hell.
- It's like this every day. Before I know it, I can't see straight, because it's 0400 and I've been at work for 20 hours straight,

> somehow missing dinner again in the process. . . . It's not really like Ground Hog Day; it's more like a level from Dante's Inferno.

And so on. The analogies tell us less about their subjects than our own subjectivity. As if in a funhouse, cumulative Dantes (like many Beas) reveal mirrors of their makers, deforming any singular version of the subject. Which brings us back to Bea's "uncharted deformity." To speak of one of the most beautiful women as *deformed* may seem akin to depicting the Virgin smeared with shit; however, that makes as many assumptions about deformity (and shit) as about Beatrice. There's more *to deform* than common usage suggests: "to mar the appearance, beauty, or excellence of; to make ugly or unsightly; to disfigure, deface."[16] Other definitions bear more elasticity; for instance, in physics, the qualification becomes naturalized: "to alter the form of." *To difform* (*obs. rare*) further obscures negative connotations by suggesting a potentially positive imperative: "to bring out of conformity or agreement: the opposite of *conform*." Breaking the word apart at its roots also stretches its meaning: *de-* provides "the sense of undoing the action of the single verb, or of depriving (anything) of the thing or character therein expressed," paired with *form*, which can range from the visible aspect of a thing ("shape, arrangement of parts"), to its abstract consideration ("one of the elements of the plastic arts"), to behavioral decorum ("often depreciatively: mere outward ceremony or formality"), to "a set or fixed order of words" (as accords with custom, law, or ritual). Deformed another way (by Joyelle McSweeney and Johannes Göransson, referring to the "språkgrotesk"): "A softness, malformation . . . may be penetrated, distended by multiple languages from multiple directions, which is a process, which undermines hierarchies . . . which is becoming."[17] Bea coming: into new forms, to be reformed and deformed further. Deforming my initial question: Are there forms that we think Bea dare not take, if she becomes too unattractive—however defined—to inspire poetry or serve as someone's guide?

Someone so blessedly banal allows us to question not only her, and her representations across history, but also how we represent ourselves. To some degree, we are our gods—at least, we play G–d whenever we presume to judge who is divine or damned, beautiful or

ugly. No longer consulting diagrams of frogs to treat human ailments, or phrenologists' heads to understand the mind, we live at a time when paradoxes persist about the body and its representation, not to mention its care (i.e., "Managed Care"). Millennia after Aristotle correlated outer deformity with inner worth, and centuries after Linnaeus devised a classification for *Homo monstrous*, we often overlook actions that speak louder than politically correct words.

In the process of factualizing and fictionalizing Bea, of deliberately erring, I'm following the lead of Lewis Thomas, who wrote in "The Wonderful Mistake": "The capacity to blunder slightly is the real marvel of DNA. . . . Biology needs a better word than 'error' for the driving force in evolution. Or maybe 'error' will do after all, when you remember that it came from an old root meaning to wander about, looking for something."[18] Keeping in mind this notion of "error" as the foundation of our species, I imagine Bea not as singular and stagnant, but multiple and moving: as one who errs, who wanders, who's looking for something. And in looking, there lies potential communication. . . .

In wandering about myself toward this end, the many faces of Bea communicate and teach me to consider subsequent eras that have given her new contexts. After all, the *Commedia* wasn't labeled "Divine" until after Dante's death. Thus, it seems feasible to consider the work's journeyed progression in human terms—replete with joys and sorrows, sincerities and struggles—not only in Dante's day, but also in our own. Like Osip Mandelstam writes: "It is unthinkable to read the cantos of Dante without aiming them in the direction of the present day. They were made for that. They are missiles for capturing the future. They demand commentary in the *futurum*."[19] Mired in interpersonal and intercultural conflicts, our era likewise seems to be manifesting more of Bea's story—in the very struggle of the conjoined body and soul, trying to process its own change.

In *Metamorphosis and Identity*, Caroline Walker Bynum explores the Western obsession with change and personal identity. Speaking of "Change in the Middle Ages," she writes: "explicit, energetic, and confused efforts to understand change seem to me typical of the late

twelfth century, and the terms in which Gerald [of Wales] distinguishes varieties of *mutatio* (inner and outer, nature or substance and appearance, illusion and transformation, metamorphosis and hybrid) figure in major discussions by his contemporaries."[20] Making analogies with the present, she writes: "In our current culture wars, 'identity' tends to have divergent denotations. Nonetheless change is the test, the limit, of all denotations of the term 'identity'. . . . Unless there is some connection, or nexus, between what was and what comes after, we tend to think we have not a change but merely two things."

Body; soul. Black; white. Red; blue. Good; evil. Before; after. Sick; healthy. Abled; disabled. Beautiful; ugly. Inner; outer. Self; other. Platitude and propaganda (and more subtle manifestations between) paint the world in terms of oppositions, rather than as two sides of the same coin. Joseph Campbell famously described the danger of becoming stuck on images, and at times that tendency has contributed to the fervor to destroy them.[21] To know the answer to the wrong question constantly misleads, like John Mandeville observed: "to the one-eyed, those with two eyes will seem deformed, and to those of other religions, Christians will be the cannibals."[22] Patterns elude. In many regards, our only hope is to remain wakeful, to participate in our collective change, to recognize and take responsibility for how we shape and are shaped by one another.

Like a figure in an early anatomical treatise (a lively cadaver displaying her dissected bowels, for instance, gesticulating as if carrying on an animated conversation), I, too, am aiming, literally and figuratively, outside and within: to reanimate more than Bea, more than the Venus or the Virgin.[23] Such icons act as vehicles toward something else. From my Western vantage, the process of renegotiating their actual and potential variations invites me to partake in the "history of spirituality" while trying to recognize an "other" always present but changing within. And so, to some degree, the *Commedia* rests in the eye of this beholder.

Within my small apartment (in the "City of Angels," apropos for seeking the pseudo-celestial), all this beseeching leads me not to open my eyes, but to listen: beyond the hum of traffic on the 405 freeway,

honking and barking dogs, recorded choral music, muffled voices rising from the sidewalk, to the sound of her name in my mouth, spoken more toward the Italian: "Bee-che." It sounds slightly like "bitch," with more charm. *Bice. Beatrice. Bea.* Lolling her name along my tongue, I vary her syllables with other words in which "bea" nests: *beautiful, be(a)stial, beatitude,* which reminds me of Jack Kerouac's claim: "*Beat* doesn't mean tired, or bushed, so much as it means *beato*, the Italian for *beatific*: to be in a state of beatitude, like Saint Francis, trying to love all life, trying to be utterly sincere with everyone, practicing endurance, kindness, cultivating joy of heart. How can this be done in our mad modern world of multiplicities and millions? By practicing a little solitude, going off by yourself once in a while to store up that most precious of golds: the vibrations of sincerity."[24] And so I try—

Using the hand as directive, my words attempt to do more than trace a "self," to reach outside and within the body of this essay toward events beyond Bea, to myself, to you.[25] Today in these pages; tomorrow in some other way. In *Decreation*, Anne Carson maps the writings of Sappho, Marguerite Porete, and Simone Weil to describe how "Love dares the self to leave itself behind." Carson describes the three writers' "tellings" as "a function of self," in which each "feels moved to create a sort of dream of distance in which the self is displaced from the centre of the work and the teller disappears into the telling." "Decreation" (a neologism of Weil's) is "an undoing of the creature in us—that creature enclosed in self and defined by self. But to undo the self one must move through self, to the very inside of its definition . . . [as Marguerite Porete says], 'For everything that one can tell of God or write, no less than what one can think . . . is as much lying as it is telling the truth.'"[26]

In offering multifold portraits of Bea, I try to move through her, through my "self, to the very inside of its definition"—flawed as that attempt (and notion of self) may be—to both embrace and evade definition, offering instead a series of gestures that manifest a self-in-motion: living and changing. Inviting the same of you. Having puzzled over "the perfect uselessness of knowing the answer to the wrong question," what remains—of Bea, of me, of we—brings the end back to the beginning, as a means of getting lost. I am getting lost, as described by Rebecca Solnit in *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*: "That thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you is usually what

you need to find, and finding it is a matter of getting lost."[27] Having lost *who* ("the real she"?) to address *how* and *why*, I find ultimately not *Bea* (noun), *me*, or even *we* (pronoun), but *be* (verb). The many faces of Bea beget Be. *To be or not to be*, was that all I need to ask? Or, what words might invite you to get lost in whatever way you need? I leave you to ask these words:

Notes

[1]Artistic renderings of Beatrice appear in many sources, including *Images of the Journey in Dante's Divine Comedy*, eds. Charles H. Taylor and Patricia Finley (New Haven: Yale UP, 1997).

[2]Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante* (New York: Octagon, 1972) 226, 232.

[3]Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999) 9-10.

[4]Boccaccio, *Vita di Dante*, qtd. in Dante Alighieri's *La Vita Nuova*, trans. Dante Gabriel Rossetti (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2001) vi.

[5]Qtd. in Jorge Luis Borges, "Beatrice's Last Smile," *The Total Library*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York: Penguin, 2001) 303.

[6]Dante and Beatrice continue to provoke the modern imagination, as seen in a multitude of recent accounts, including Albert Russell Ascoli's *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*; Barbara Reynolds's *Dante: The Poet, the Political Thinker, The Man*; Harriet Rubin's *Dante in Love*; and David Kirby's "The Goat Paths of Italy: Dante's Search for Beatrice" in *Ultra-Talk: Johnny Cash, The Mafia, Shakespeare, Drum Music, St. Teresa of Avila, and 17 Other Colossal Topics of Conversation.*

[7]Ursula Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (New York: Ace, 2000) 70.

[8]Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass* (New York: Signet Classic, 1960) 91.

[9]To read Beatrice literally is to feel her absence; even when she's most physically present in the *Commedia*—in *Paradiso*—she's most vocal as a ventriloquist. Perhaps that's why Mark Strand has said the *Paradiso* is "not poetry." (Qtd. in Rubin, *Dante in Love*, 157.)

[10]See *The Color of Life: Polychromy in Sculpture from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Roberta Panzanelli (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2008) 158-60: "Halfway between artwork and artifact, between scientific tool and uncanny simulacrum, the *Anatomical Venus* elicits responses that are as varied as contradictory: she has been defined as drugged, ecstatic, resigned, aroused, indifferent, inviting disclosure, and passively or openly erotic."

[11]Lennard J. Davis, "Nude Venuses, Medusa's Body, and Phantom Limbs," *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*, eds. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997) 52.

[12]Qtd. in Ulrike Mills and Pietro Amato, *The Mother of God: Art Celebrates Mary*

([Vatican City]: Monumenti, Musei e Gallerie Pontificie, 2001) 15. Amato also refers to Saint Augustine's words from *De Trinitate*: "We do not know the face of Mary."

[13]Qtd. in Carol Vogel, "Holding Fast to His Inspiration; An Artist Tries to Keep His Cool in the Face of Angry Criticism," *New York Times* 28 Sept. 1999. A century earlier, in *The Education of Henry Adams*, Henry Adams compared the Virgin with the Dynamo, trying to quantify what intangible forces lead people outside of themselves.

[14]See Michael Kimmelman, "A Startling New Lesson in the Power of Imagery," *New York Times* 8 Feb. 2006; and "A Madonna's Many Meanings in the Art World," *New York Times* 5 Oct. 1999. See also David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991).

[15]Raymond Bonner, "Rebels in Rwanda Call a Cease-Fire; Exodus Continues," *New York Times* 19 July 1994. Extracting three lines from this news article and those that follow, I take my cue from *Novels in Three Lines* by Félix Fénéon (1861–1944), trans. Luc Sante (New York: New York Review Books, 2007). Subsequent news excerpts come from: Michael Wines, "Africa Adds to Miserable Ranks of Child Workers," *New York Times* 24 Aug. 2006; Douglas Martin, "Dinko Sakic, Who Led WWII Death Camp, Dies at 86," *New York Times* 23 July 2008; Anonymous, "The Secret Letter From Iraq," *Time*, ed. Sally B. Donnelly, 6 Oct. 2006; Web, 17 Nov. 2008.

[16]"Deform," *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989).

[17]Joyelle McSweeney and Johannes Göransson, "Find Us with the Lemurs: Disability and the Språkgrotesk," *XCP: Cross-Cultural Poetics* 20 (2008): 84.

[18]Lewis Thomas, "The Wonderful Mistake," *Being Human*, ed. Leon Kass (New York: Norton, 2004) 32.

[19]Osip Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," *Selected Poems*, trans. Clarence Brown and W.S. Merwin (New York: New York Review Books, 1973) 129.

[20]Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: Zone Books, 2001) 18-20.

[21]In "The Journey Inward," Joseph Campbell describes the danger of "reading the metaphor in terms of the denotation instead of the connotation. . . . When your mind is simply trapped by the image out there so that you never make the reference to yourself, you have misread the image." See Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988) 57. Moyers also quotes Campbell in an interview with Terry Gross on *Fresh Air* the day after the election of Barack Obama for U.S. president: "If you want to change the world, you change the metaphor."

[22]Bynum 73.

[23]This description comes from John Bell, celebrated surgeon from Edinburgh (1763-1820), cited in Lyle Massey's "On Waxes and Wombs," *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*, ed. Roberta Panzanelli (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2008) 100.

[24]Qtd. in Peter Gilmour, "Blessed are the beatniks," *U.S. Catholic* 64.3 (1999): 7.

[25]In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari distinguish between "tracing"

and "mapping": "What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real. The map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious" (13).

[26]Anne Carson, "Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete and Simone Weil Tell God," *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (New York: Knopf, 2005) 173, 179, 181.

[27]Solnit goes on to explain the origin of "lost," from the Old Norse *los*, meaning "the disbanding of an army": "I worry now that many people never disband their armies, never go beyond what they know. Advertising, alarmist news, technology, incessant busyness, and the design of public and private space conspire to make it so." Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (New York: Viking, 2005) 6-7.

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