

Calypso's Dreams

Art and journeying in the land of lost things

Jonathan Molinari

Hark Columbina, you can't keep on seeing things that aren't there!

Harlequin

Man as “rational animal” (Arist. *Pol.*, I, 2, 1253a, 9), as “political animal” (Arist. *Pol.*, I, 2, 1253a, 27), as “image of God” (*Gen.* I, 266): what has always been central in Western culture’s questioning on Man is the value of Reason in its capacity to subdue passions, dictate the rules of civil coexistence, explore Nature with the means of logic and science. Reason and intellect are the essential elements that distinguish the human being from the other animals, that raise it above them, that make it an intermediary world placed between the Earth and the Divine. Based on this assumption everything that is not rational is bestial, inhuman, harmful, evil. *In primis* passions, tremendous forces that if not controlled by reason turn man into beast, because they obliterate the very grounds of his superiority: if rational man is superior to the animal precisely because endowed with reason, man blinded by passions is no longer distinguished from any other animal.

In Italian Humanism we find a beautiful image of this struggle between rational man and his phantasms:

“If you see a man bedazzled by the empty forms of the imagination, as by the wiles of Calypso, and through their alluring solicitations made a slave to his own senses, you see a brute and not a man.” (Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*).

There are three elements in this sentence (but other conceptually identical quotations can be found throughout the history of philosophy, from ancient to modern) that point to the abyss into which rational man can fall: imagination, wiles, and the senses. Calypso (whose name comes from the Greek verb *kalýpto*, to conceal) was one of the most beautiful nymphs, the one who conceals, who blinds, who seduces, enchants with the imagination, induces to dreams, transforms the rational animal into *a slave to his own senses*. Calypso’s power has nothing to do with reality, it is not her “real” beauty that enchants, not from there does the danger of her seduction come. Rather, perhaps what Calypso conceals is in fact reality itself, the reality the

rational animal knows how to control and that eludes him when carried away by the beautiful nymph's dreamy seduction. Instead of reality Calypso offers another world that has no longer anything to do with reason, obeys other rules and yields to another gaze: the world of *fantasy, imagination, dream*.

In the Greek world there is a deep-rooted relationship between those three concepts. The word 'fantasy' come from the Greek verb *phaino* (meaning "make see", "show", "reveal", "manifest"): it indicates the imaginative faculty able to represent, to make appear, to form the image of the object itself in an utterly free manner. From the verb *phaino* also derives the Greek term '*phántasma*' (in Latin *spectrum, visum*) which in Greek signifies the object that "is presented", that is shown (*phainetai*) by fantasy, and means "apparition", "vision". Instead Plato designates imagination (*imaginatio*) with the term *eikasia*, and it is considered a faculty different from fantasy: *eikasia* (imagination) regards the images of corporeal things (*eikon*), whereas fantasy regards the image (*phántasma*) it freely represents on its own (*phainetai*) (Plato, *Rep.*, VI, 509d-511e). In Greek culture beside the word *phántasma* we find other names for dreams. The term *oneiros* (in Latin *somnium*) indicates dream as the vision we have while asleep, as opposed to real vision that we have while awake (in Greek the word is *ypar*). Another word for dream is *enypnion* (in Latin *insomnium*) that means the objective fact of having visions while sleeping; the word *orama* (in Latin *visio*) comes from the verb *ordo* that means "to see", "to look", indicates vision as such, that can also occur when awake, as happens with seers; instead *chrematismos* (in Latin *oraculum*) is the premonitory, oracular sign.

Thus the world to which Calypso's "empty forms of the imagination" lead is extremely rich and complex, but one element is obvious: whether this dream is meant in its common usage (as a vision had during sleep), or we consider dream in the sense of hallucination - vision while awake, premonition or clairvoyance - we are always faced with the exact opposite of the world of the rational animal. The "wiles" of the lovely nymph lead man to "the land of dreams", a place where the rational animal does not enter if not accepting all the perils and deceits looming over the unhappiest of all animals: the one who dreams. But what does this strange animal seek, and find, in dreams?

"Seeing the flood of fools of which this time of ours abounds, sickened as I was, it occurred to me that the most congenial place to spend my life, given my habits, would have been the land of dream. There indeed you may rave as much as you please, as you see when you are dreaming. So I went to see a priest expert in magic, and after much pleading at last from him I had

directions leading to the very land to which rush those who dream. And I went there at once." (Leon Battista Alberti, "The Dream", *Intercenales*, IV, 1).

The first lines of 'The Dream' in Leon Battista Alberti's *Intercenales*, seem to say that the main reason for dreaming is evasion, flight from a nauseating, stupid, and meaningless reality. And certainly, were it merely this, the dreamer's condition would be rather dismal, almost a coward unable to face reality. Instead it is exactly the opposite: the land of dreams is described as an upside-down world, carnival-like, sometimes grotesque. For example, to cross "the swift river said to be swollen with the tears of the unfortunate", we laugh a lot, using, as though they were rafts, "some old women who in life had been haughty and disdainful". This is a world, that of dreams, which is always inseparable from an aspect of denunciation, the Carnival's typical reversal of all values, hallucination used as a tool for decrying a dystopic and deformed world. Vision and dream mock the stupidity of reality – from Alberti's old women turned into rafts to the Pantagruelic universe of Rabelais –, deform it, and so doing understand it better: in Giulio Malinverni's exhibition the "deformed hallucinations" (in Paolo Gambi's words) lead in this direction the reflection on languages and the meaning of dream.

But far from being a place of sheer escapism, the land of dreams is the land in which truth reveals itself the most pitilessly. It is here man discovers that the world is a mere flow of shadows, that he can laugh at all he thought tragic - himself first of all, his sorrows, time and misfortune -, because imposing itself on everything there is now the essence, umbratile but almost theatrical and comical, of the entire story of Man.

Conversely, the world Alberti speaks of is truer than reality itself and has to do with art and true philosophy. The problem is that the rational animal is unable to describe it, he lacks the words to do so, above all lacks a grammar of the absurd upon which he could build his reasoning. Instead of logical demonstrations he needs metaphors, instead of causal order he needs leaps in space and time, instead of conceptual analysis he needs images. It is a thinking by images that invents by itself its own order in space and time: the world of the animal that dreams is a carnival of reason, but this does not at all mean it is an absurd and meaningless world. In the world of dream, as in the carnival, fantasy dictates the rules, imagination creates it and has the freedom to make it as it likes, only obeying the laws it itself invented.

Once overcome the problem of language and the limits of that (rational) knowledge in which the primacy of man over other animals should consist,

once entered the *land of dream*, we discover a dazzling richness. First of all we find here “*valleys wherein lost things are preserved*”: “*as I told you - Alberti writes – you shall find there all the lost things. Amidst the meadows lie those famous gentle empires we read about; and authority, benefits, loves, riches, and all these things that, once lost, do not return here, in the light of the sun*” (Leon Battista Alberti, ‘Il Sogno’, *Intercenales*, IV, 1)”. Here the sun and light, symbols of truth and good since Plato, express a sad, unhappy reality, marked only by the law of relentless becoming that subjects everything to the laws of time, a reality wherein everything is destined to disappear. The true and the eternal exist only in the fleeting dimension of dream, and in that of art which seizes from time its own object, like in Zanin’s *Rural Cathedrals* shown in this exhibition.

The very unreality of dream becomes the only place where Man can find what he seeks without having to endure the weight of loss, and in this sense dream is more real than reality itself, less fleeting than the light of the sun, that here seems to only point to the unceasing passing of days dragging by and erasing with itself all things. With Paolo Gambi’s verses, inspired by the works of Silvia Infranco and her thoughts on time and memory, we can say that Alberti’s thinking still underscores the opposition between a reality in which “life and death interlock fingers” and dream that instead lives by the “magic of one who stops time”: “down below, reality / up above, all the rest”.

The “land of dream” described by Alberti is the place of lost things, a place extraordinarily similar to Ariosto’s moon:

[SW: avevo trovato un’altra traduzione pero quella proposta dall’autore è più bella]

*Ah, and the tears and sighs of lovers, the hours
That gamblers lose and ignorant men waste,
The plans we make that are well within our powers
But require perseverance if not haste
Before they fade away. And books of ours
That we intended to study rather than taste.
Those can often be heavier losses than
Material things in the life of any man.*

(Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando furioso*, canto XXXIV, 75).

Aristotle's rational animal knows that not even on the moon can he find what he lost: the flask with Orlando's wits, the ancient and sighed-for lovers become docile recollections to laugh about on crossing the river of misfortune, and even – in the fine irony of Alberti's character – “ a portion not small of my brain: that which a little old lady I fell in love with took from me”. A sorry pre-eminency that of the animal that loses forever all he loved and desired. Instead, in the carnival of Reason nothing of the animal that dreams is lost. Fantasy and imagination shall always have a moon or a land of dream in which to seek a world upside-down, that even in its total lack of sensibleness (or perhaps for that very reason, because it does not even aspire to make sense), turns out to be far less cruel than the real one.

With this logic that is not logical, with a thinking through images nurtured on the metaphor and the vertigo of reason, it then becomes possible to *see* once again the sunflowers in Arles and discover that they also, like all those things that Reason believed were lost, are alive and will live forever in the aesthetic play of imagination and dream. I say see and not *remember*, because in this case imagination does not reproduce but creates. The dream that imagination and artistic fantasy construct is not reproduction, is not repetition, is not recollection: it is a new reality, a new possibility of reality that the artist creates only out of the rules he has chosen. This is what Quayola does when on his moon - so to say - with the rules he chooses for his art, he rediscovers and brings down here the Laocoon or the Nature on which Van Gogh laid his eyes during his last years at Arles. In this Alberti is categorical: in the world of dream and imagination there is everything, and no possibility of reality, no hope, no weeping is lost. The artist has the privilege and the burden of inventing the manner whereby he can show others what is hidden on that moon.

So now from this angle Calypso with her enchantments does not blind Man but opens his eyes onto a vaster reality. Calypso, who can annihilate and blind him, can also endow him with a sharper sight, lead him to the land of dream and find there not only all that is lost, but also all that could be and was not. The world of art and the boundless unfulfilled possibilities is the one upon which the lovely nymph lays her eyes, and the animal who dreams is free to let himself be blinded and turn into a beast, or free himself in the aesthetic contemplation that transforms him into something almost godlike.

This tragic condition of being between two abysses – having to choose whether to live like an animal or like a man in the noblest, most beautiful sense

– characterizes not only the ethical reflection on the question of freedom (to be free I must be able to do evil, I must experience the tragedy that can plumb me into the abyss or uplift me to heaven), but since Plato it is also a *topos* of the reflection on art. Beside imagination, fantasy and dream, madness is one of the keys to this tragedy. In other words: there are two ways to go on Calypso's moon: or like madmen blinded by "vain designs", or in the Socratic-heroic furor of the artist. There are two Venuses, they are the different types of madness in Plato's *Symposium*, that define dream in its irreducible ambiguity. The crude Venus, the exasperation of the senses, the madness of the sick, make dream a delirious end in itself, uncommunicable and pathological. Instead, true beauty, aesthetic contemplation of beauty, the divine madness of the poet and the true philosopher uplift the dream to a way towards Truth - and, in this sense, delirious because ordinary reality is meaningless, whereas dream is not.

But how can we tell them apart? How can we distinguish the dream that brings us raving, meaningless enchantments, from the dream that tells the truth, from the work that redesigns and brings about what without it would be but an unexpressed and lost possibility, a flask of wits on an inaccessible moon? We might answer with Schopenhauer that it all depends on how we read the book of life and dream: "Life and dreams are the leaves of the same book. The systematic reading of the book is real life. Idly turning the leaves is dreaming." (Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, I, 5). *Systematic reading* is what distinguishes the reality of dream, it is *the thread* running through the works of Maurizio Pellegrin, who seems to tell us: "Follow the course / It's a map / In the scenery of memory" (the verses are again by Paolo Gambi, in the poem dedicated to Pellegrin's work); the question of how this thread should be conceived runs through all modern philosophical thinking, from Descartes to Leibnitz, from Voltaire to Kant and Schopenhauer. In *Life is a Dream* Calderón de la Barca claims that "A question may arise at any moment / Which is true and which is false". (Act III, scene X). And it seems impossible to reply, because "as our time is equally divided between sleeping and waking, in either field of existence the soul contends that the thoughts that are present at the time are true; and during one half of our lives we affirm the truth of the one, and, during the other half, of the other; and are equally confident of both." (Plato, *Theaetetus*, 158c).

So then perhaps the only criteria for knowing if Calypso is leading us to raving or to the enchantments of a deeper truth is to ask ourselves how we are reading our book, what is the order of the pages we are leafing through. To

think about dreams, about “acts of imagination” free from the systematic order of living, of space, of time, of the order of causes and effects, but led by the rules of imagination itself. And in this exhibition Donzelli makes us reflect on who is the author of these rules and how they are built and rebuilt. What eyes are needed to see the *land of dream*? Or better said: what kind of gaze guides us in the world of the imagination and artistic fantasy, where all the possibilities exist, live, live all over again, and manifest themselves? And whose eyes are they? Of the artist, who robs the moon and reinvents what we thought lost, like Ariosto’s flask of wits or of someone who, with another “act of the imagination” (another dream, in a certain sense), observes the work? Who puts order in the pages of these dreams?

There are at least two orders that enable us to understand whether Calypso is making us rave or leading us through fantasy to see deeper truths. The first of these has to do with history. Raving does not have a history, does not fit in any pattern, has no precedents, no influences. It is episodic, pathological, and solipsistic. Artistic imagination, instead, refers to one’s own vision nurtured by one’s own history, it is in history that it finds its own “thread”, the order that distinguishes it from raving, the communication tools that emancipate it from the futility of solipsism. Stravinsky knew this and so did Kundera speaking of Stravinsky.

“History. Can we still draw on that obsolete authority? What I am about to say is a purely personal avowal: as a novelist, I have always felt myself to be within history, that is to say, partway along a road, in dialogue with those who precede me and even perhaps (but less so) with those still to come. [...] Here I am making a declaration of involvement in the history of the novel, whereas all my novels breathe a hatred of history, of that hostile, inhuman force that – uninvited, unwanted – invades our lives from the outside and destroys them. Yet there is nothing inconsistent in this double attitude, because the history of humanity and the history of the novel are two very different things. The former is not man’s to determine, it takes over like an alien force he cannot control. Whereas the history of the novel (or of painting, of music) is born of man’s freedom, of his wholly personal creations, of his own choice.” (Milan Kundera, ‘The Story of the Novel as Revenge on History’, in *Testaments Betrayed*)

The work of art, at least according to Kundera, is always an intrinsic part of its own history, but not following laws imposed from outside, nor at random: instead this relationship follows a precise order, a thread, based on the artist’s free *choice*. It is never a page idly read as in Schopenhauer’s book of life and dreams, but is the artist’s freedom that numbers the pages according to the rules of his own art.

The “thread” that binds the work of art to its history is what distinguishes it from the solipsist fantasy and raving as an end in itself, but is also the point

when the entire history of an art rewinds upon itself renewing itself. It is in this sense that according to Kundera “in Stravinsky’s work, European music travelled back over its own thousand-years life.”

“Without a doubt, Stravinsky, like all the others, bore within him the wound of his emigration; without a doubt his artistic evolution would have taken a different path if he had been able to stay where he was born. In fact, the start of his journey, through the history of music, coincides roughly with the moment when his native country ceases to exist for him: having understood that no country could replace it, he finds his only homeland, his only home was music, all of music by all musicians, the very history of music, there he decided to establish himself, to take root, to live; there he ultimately found his only compatriots, his only intimates, his only neighbours, from Pérotin to Webern: it is with them that he began a long conversation which ended only with his death”. (M. Kundera, ‘Stravinsky at home’, in *Testaments Betrayed*).

The question is always the same: how can we distinguish the Calypso who leads to solipsistic raving from the one who, precisely with the rules of fantasy and the enchantment of dream, leads us to better see reality itself?

The first element, as we said, is history, is the relation between the work of art and the past and the future of art itself, is the order the artist freely creates within this history and that places the work within a trajectory that arises from “the freedom of Man, of his entirely personal creations, of his choices” (M. Kundera, ‘The Story of the Novel as Revenge on History’, in *Testaments Betrayed*). Insofar as it is a human product, created by human liberty and freely set within a human history (and not divine, not transcendent, not determined by any other law than the one the artist chooses), the work of art belongs to humankind itself and not the single individual.

The second element becomes clearer precisely starting from the image of the history of an art as the artist’s homeland used by Kundera concerning Stravinsky. Who inhabits this native land? Because were it a land that welcomes only artists we would still be in the uncommunicable solitude of dreams for the few, of works that would certainly have their own logic in the trajectories of reciprocal interaction the artist creates freely out of the principles of his art - meaning tools guiding the relationship between his works and the past and the future of this art -, yet we would not be far from a collective raving for a few initiates. For Calypso’s fantasy, rather than deceiving, to lead to the truth, this native land has to be populated by all humankind and this humankind share in the construction of the history this work belongs to. A truth for a few is not a truth, it remains ephemeral, and no

one can say whether it is truly truth or “empty forms of the imagination”, to recall our first quotation from Giovanni Pico.

So then in Stravinsky’s native land all the listeners of all music and all the musicians have a home. Just as in Kundera’s homeland all the readers of all the novels of all the novelists dwell. Of course the reader, as observer or listener, is always a “conjectural figure”, but this obviously does not deprive him of his own citizenship in that “artistic homeland” that so resembles Ariosto’s moon and Alberti’s land of dreams. To tell the truth, this native land would not exist at all were it not for the eyes of the one observing it. The very works that compose it would dissolve in the silence of forms without relation and meaning: “There is indeed the silence that separates things among themselves – as Maurizio Donzelli observed –, but at the same time also a whole world stirred by expectation and desire, that has something to do with the appeal – to pause – to observe what implicitly each thing actually is, insofar as it exists” (Maurizio Donzelli, *Una Conversazione*, Marignana Arte, no.1). Only the observer can overcome this “silence that separates things”, because only his fantasy (again in the Greek sense, the faculty to *make appear*) is the element that ultimately unites colors to forms, connects perceptions to memories, images to concepts and emotions, in the endless striving to comprehend what is truly concealed in Calypso’s dreams.