LEON BATTISTA
ALBERTI
AND HIS SOMNIAIIC
TRROUBLES
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“Because I am so melancholy,” Alberti writes, “it is perhaps suitable to live in that place where men go when they dream.” There, so he adds, “one is permitted to rave in safety and to one’s heart’s content.” With such words, Alberti begins one of the earliest dream journeys of the Renaissance, remarkable in its Bosch-like grottesqueness. Entitled Somnium and written as part of a larger work called Intercoenales (Table Talks), the dream was one of about two dozen short dialogues that explore a range of issues from family, love, and politics to life itself. Compiled around 1440, Intercoenales, as the title indicates, was intended to be read *inter coenas et pocula*, that is, “between food and drink,” in other words as entertainment pieces between the courses of a banquet.¹ The dialogues are, however, far from being just entertainment, and Somnium is certainly one of the strangest if not the darkest of these pieces. Coming from a person who is otherwise known as the epitome of the “The Renaissance Man,” its less than optimistic tone is perhaps a bit puzzling.

The dream is, of course, not a real dream, but a literary genre. The fifth century Macrobius codified the different types of dreams in his *Commentary on Scipio’s Dream*. There are five: *insomnium*, a

¹ The translations used in this article are mine. For the full English translation of *Intercoenales* see: *Dinner Pieces*, trans. David Marsh (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1987).
nightmare; visium, a daydream; visio, a prevision of the future; oraculum, a declaration by a venerable person, and finally somnium, a political allegory, which is what we more or less have here. By the beginning of the 13th century, such dreams had begun to be used by philosophers, theologians, saints and lay writers. King Henry I of England, for example, had a somnium in 1130 in which he saw himself attacked by representatives of different elements of society. There is Boccaccio’s Amorosa Visone (1342) and Brunetto Latini’s Tresoretto (1262). Perhaps most relevant is Roman de la Rose by Guillaume de Lorris, composed around 1220, a work known to both Dante and Petrarch, which begins with the lover falling asleep at the end of a beautiful spring day. His various subsequent experiences revolve around the tension between love and suffering, and between the real and the illusory. But Amorosa Visone in fifty cantos is far different from Alberti’s short Somnium. Amorosa Visone is a story of love interspersed with didactic lectures that charts the “victory” of wisdom, glory, wealth, fortune and love. Somnium, though it does address the futilities of love, is a social commentary with a minimum of allegoricalism.

Alberti’s dreamer is a man called Libripeta, whose name means Lover of Books. A scholar and a philosopher, he has just emerged from a type of underworld, and tells his story to an acquaintance, Lepidus, whose name means something like Mr. Charming. Lepidus is the proverbial man about town. But he is not completely devoid of intelligence. At the end of the story, when Lepidus advises Libripeta to “take a bath” and to wash off the stink from the sewer through which he crawled, he is implying that Libripeta should wash off more than just the stink, perhaps even the “wisdom learned from the sewer” (...cloacarium prudentiam...). But it is unlikely that Libripeta can completely cleanse his mind, for his discovery of the terrible truth of life leaves him in a quandary of how to proceed with his knowledge.

Though Libripeta is a character in Alberti’s imagination, he is strikingly close to an autobiographical figure. And this forces us to consider the words in De pictura where Alberti states that “we should paint what we see.” Clearly the instructions to the painter keeps him focused on the real and not on the ‘philosophical’ with all its potential for melancholic despair. The Albertian painter is, of course, told to learn a little oratory and some mathematics, but he is given one and only one book to read, namely De picture itself, thus entrapping the Albertian artist in a
world that allows not a single, dangerous glimpse into the darker realities of life. The artist, just like his work, is a necessary illusion. Between the philosopher and the artist, the one “dreams,” the other paints; the one knows too much, the other not enough. The disaster that is society thus seems to require a cunning between different types of knowing. The painter is not just a skilled artisan, but an ontological construct that perpetuates and even constructs a type of perspectival mythology. The painter embraces the self-interest of self-deception.

The crisis of mimesis—or perhaps better stated, the crisis that is mimesis—becomes even more complex when we take into consideration the famous treatise De re aedificatoria. Scholars when studying this work have missed a rather important component, a description in Book 8 of a carefully-planned journey from the countryside to the center of town. In Chapters 1 and 2 of the book, the author is on the outskirts of the city. Traveling along a highway he views “houses and villas, a fine hill, now a river, now a spring, now a clearing.” He soon comes upon great and noble sepulchers of important families, and then upon monuments to the heroes of the city. In Chapter 3 he passes other graveyards with obelisks, pyramids and small chapels. In Chapter 4 he even pauses to read some inspiring and noteworthy inscriptions on these monuments. Then he describes, in Chapter 5, large watchtowers just outside the city, testament to the city’s strength. At the beginning of the next chapter, he announces: “It is now time to make our entrance into the city.” Going through the city gates and over bridges and following the streets, he observes the bustling squares, the protected porticoes and the various types of markets. Then in Chapter 7 he comes to public theaters and other places of diversion and amusement along with amphitheaters and public walks. Finally he comes to the center of the city, where he sees the senate house, the temple, shady groves and lakes for swimming and finally—and how could it be otherwise—a library.

These two ‘walks,’ the one in Somnium and the other in De re aedificatoria, seem to be set against each other. The first one takes place in the underbelly of the city where Libripeta traverses a large volcanic garbage dump; there he sees things that are thrown away—everything that is “except stupidity.” The other walk takes place in a world at peace with itself and portrays a society in an untroubled condition. Here too, there are precedents, such as that great masterpiece of visualization, The
Allegory of Good and Bad Government (1338) by Ambrogio Lorenzett in the Siena Town Hall. On the one wall of the Sala dei Nove the fresco shows the virtues lined up along with the elegant figures of Justice and Truth. The city behind them is home to busy merchants and to men and women doing their daily tasks. There is a wedding procession, and maidens can be seen dancing gracefully. On the other side of the room, we see an image haunted by the self-assured presence of the demonic tyrant holding a dagger in his hand. The city is in disrepair and to one side a woman is sawing herself in half.

This means that if we take Alberti’s De pictura and De re aedificatoria as stand-alone writings, we will come to the predictable conclusion that these texts are ‘the first’ such treatises on their respective topics and that the primary reference is to Latin antiquity. Somnium changes all of that. It shows a much more plausible continuity not just with medieval worldviews, but also with the powerful dualism of good and evil. Alberti, however, is not arguing for a religious resolution to evil nor are we dealing here with the conventional theological view that knowing evil helps us understand the value of good. What makes his approach different, and perhaps one can say modern, is that the knowledge of good and evil are separate and distinct epistemological realms. The Albertian architect and painter have to operate without knowing of the truth of social reality. Thus, unlike a medieval morality tale, and unlike the Sala dei Nove where the two worlds are equipoised, here evil does not release itself into the higher metaphysics of good. It exists in its own world, meaning that Libripeta struggles with the resultant melancholy and its concomitant “safety of madness” that will never resolve itself into redemption. As Lepidus so artfully points out, Libripeta will always keep his books “under lock and key.”

Alberti was well aware of the ancient satirist tradition that aimed to expose the vices of a world. But I would hold that to locate Somnium in that context does not go far enough. Somnium evokes an underlying fear, one that is so potent in Alberti’s mind, that it has to remain fully compartmentalized. There is no reconciliation of opposing forces and this means that the project of an edifying morality has collapsed into two distinct operations, the one suitable to philosophy and to the soul of the melancholic, and the other suitable to aesthetics and to the activities of the artist and architect. It is not the medieval both-and, but an all-together new, either-or. Aesthetics—i.e.
the theory and practice of art and architecture—has to be operative as an extension of the ideology of the ‘good’, but to perform in this way it has to be cleaved from other more esoteric forms of theory and practice. Perhaps it is here that we can see the seed of an emerging crisis in architecture about its theoretical purpose in the urban and social sphere.

LEPIDUS Great Gods! Is that really you, Libripeta? What’s going on here? Why are you covered with foul mud? Where are coming from? Where are you going?

LIBRIPETA Me? I came from down there.

LEPIDUS What? From that fetid sewer? My god man.

LIBRIPETA Ha! Ha! Ha!

LEPIDUS Madman!

LIBRIPETA Not at all. Indeed, you should know that the greatest wisdom moved me to down there.
LEPIDUS I understand: you probably heard that some ancient tomes were in the sewer, and so you descended into it because you are so dedicated to collecting books.

LIBRIPETA Your limpid thought Lepidus, always did lack the salt of wit.

LEPIDUS Insults of this kind do not please us uneducated ones whom you publicly call ‘demented’ and ‘insipid’. Nonetheless, tell me about the sewer-wisdom of yours.

LIBRIPETA You want to hear?

LEPIDUS Yes.

LIBRIPETA I will tell you then. While reflecting on the flood of fools in which thus age abounds, I had the idea in my typical melancholic way (in mentem moribus) that the most suitable place to live was where men go when they dream. There you are safely permitted to rave, just as dreamers do, to your heart’s content. I therefore visited a certain priest, who was clearly learned in the art of magic and from him I learned how to use a set of exalted spells to set out for that province to which dreamers fly. Immediately I hastened to go there.

LEPIDUS And thus you remained awake in
LIBRIPETA: Does it seem remarkable to you?

LEPIDUS: Like nothing else.

LIBRIPETA: You will find the observations I made in that land even more remarkable. I saw rivers, mountains, meadows, fields, whose aspect would cause you to gape. These observations are incredible even to mention. They belong in the writings of a philosopher!

LEPIDUS: There you have it! Since you consider our whole age unable to speak for itself and wish yourself to be regarded as a philosopher, you can't neglect this opportunity. I know you will fulfill your philosopher's duty by recounting your dream.

LIBRIPETA: I wish my talents would suffice to pursue this matter! For I want to describe all the other things, but especially that river which is located at the entrance of the land and which is by far the most remarkable of all the things I could tell or even conceive.

LEPIDUS: Was it perhaps some dark river like Lethe? Or did it flow with the Stygian waters?
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LEPIDUS And thus you remained awake in
the midst of dreamers? What a remarkable story!

LIBRIPETA Does it seem remarkable to you?

LEPIDUS Like nothing else.

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LEPIDUS Was it perhaps some dark river like Lethe? Or did it flow with the Stygian waters?
LIBRIPETA  No it was nothing like that. The incredible thing was the sight of countless faces rolling along in its waters. Some were pale visages of unhappy invalids, others were jovial and pleasantly ruddy. Some others were emaciated and wrinkled, or had deformed eyes, noses, mouths, teeth, hair or chins. It was a vision of horror, stupefaction and monstrosity! But do you know by what remarkable method I used to cross the river! I had to roll up into a compact ball and tumble across, just as a stone rolls down a steep hill.

LEPIDUS  Ridiculous.

LIBRIPETA  Don’t say it’s ridiculous. It is really dangerous. For some of the visages are quite sharp. If I myself, accustomed as I am to struggling and contending with men by assailing them with my very teeth, did not have a thick skin—from all the bites I’ve received—you would now see me totally lacerated. After I crossed the river unscathed, I thanked the gods above.

LEPIDUS  You must have a thick skin indeed if no teeth can injure you. But what happened when you crossed the river?
LIBRIPETA That’s a very long story fit for a treatise. In that place there is a valley where lost things are kept.

LEPIDUS Oh, were the wasted hours of man’s lives kept there also? How many of your years did you recognize? Tell me.

LIBRIPETA It was all there. And what you will find most remarkable, I even came across a not inconsiderable part of my own brain, which a little woman whom I once loved had knocked out of me. If it were permitted (one is not allowed to remove anything from there) I would have refilled the right half of my head which is now just empty and void.

LEPIDUS Take care that you don’t regard as empty what is replete with madness! What happened then? Are the lost liberal arts and ancient works of Latin literature lying about in that place?

LIBRIPETA They’re also, as I said. There you will find anything that has been lost. Indeed, in the middle of the valley are all the ancient tyrants of mankind: authority, charity, love, riches, and all things of this sort which never turn up again once they are lost.
LEPIDUS  How did you distinguish charity from the rest since in your whole life you have never shown it toward anyone and you have never regarded anything given to you by a charitable soul as an act of charity?

LIBRIPETA  I wouldn’t have recognized anything, since almost everything there was different from what I would have imagined, if not for the custodians of the place who informed me about such matters.

LEPIDUS  How’s that?

LIBRIPETA  Well, in the middle of the valley they were all heaped up in a pile, and if you were to see this pile you would disdain it.

LEPIDUS  Really?

LIBRIPETA  Yes, there are great bags of free speech, lies and the sound of flutes and horns. Next to these are charitable acts and these take the form of gold and silver hooks. Then, there are certain lead wings, which are said to be human authority. Next, there are manacles and chains that burn, and these are said to be love. Then, in the dust the names of countless citizens are written with a stylus: these they say are riches. Finally, to make a long story short, you will find any
conceivable thing there—except stupidity.

LEPIDUS Well my good man. I am now ready to confess that your journey is suitable for a philosophical treatise.

LIBRIPETA So, do you wish to hear the rest?

LEPIDUS Yes please tell me. For although you reek, I enjoy listening to you. Continue your story.

LIBRIPETA I will. Nearby a very tall mountain rises out of the plain. From this mountain they say all sorts of desirable and longed-for things boil as though from a cauldron. Around the mountain itself belches forth from its summit now this object, now that. These things then chance to roll down one side or the other. But I was not at all pleased by the sight of these things. Through some negligence or satiety or boredom with so many things that were appearing left and right I let many things of this sort pass without notice. At length I came to a place not far from the mountain, where a very swift stream ran. This stream, they say, grew out of the tears of mourners and wretched human beings I cannot easily tell you with what amusement I crossed this stream. For certain old women were condemned to transport men
across. While they were alive they were proud and haughty young maidens, but in old age they were superstitious and evil crones. You will laugh when I tell you how I came across.

LEPIDUS More! I want nothing but to laugh and to hear anything pertaining to this journey of yours.

LIBRIPETA I will humor you then. There are those old women reclining in the nude on the shore. You fix your knees in the cavity of their groins, take hold of their ears, and with the old woman below, you direct your vessel wherever you wish using her head as a rudder. She paddles with her heels and hands.

LEPIDUS If anyone is deserving of a shipwreck, it’s you. Tell me: did you go under again and again or not?

LIBRIPETA Not at all. To understand why, you should know an interesting fact that I learned in the midst of my philosophical studies. The lungs inside make it possible for swimmers to stay above water. A scrofulous woman has two sets of lungs, one in her kidney and another in her privates. In addition the fact that women’s heads are completely empty contributes greatly to their
ability to stay afloat. Do you understand now?

LEPIDUS If you have any sense you will go right back into the sewer. With this journey you have contributed more to philosophy than you have in your entire career, more than your great library could—the one you keep under lock and key. But answer me this: Is it really safe to entrust yourself in such ridiculous circumstances to the constancy and trustworthiness of a woman?

LIBRIPETA As a matter of fact, this voyage was quite safe and convenient for me. My old flame immediately presented herself and smiled a toothless grin at me. You would have admired her diligence in the way she steered me with utter reliability. I thanked her kindly and as soon as I set foot on the opposite shore I saw green meadows where, instead of turf and blades of grass, men’s hair and beards, women’s glowing locks, and the fur of animals, and even lion’s manes grew up. In fact, you could see nothing in this field other than hair of this sort! Great Gods! How many dreamers I saw there! All of them digging up some sort of roots which they eat though they seem neither wise nor well-informed to do so. I spent much time there, but then a
great mass of lice flew up from the field and nearly ate me alive. My only salvation lay in finding an escape. And so I took to my heals and found my escape, raving as I was from experiences in such a place, where it was offered: the fates provided this sewer to me.

LEPIDUS Get going then, and take a bath, and I will return to those friends of mine whom you call insane and uncouth.