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I

GIUSEPPE MAZZOTTA

Life of Dante

The life of Dante is such a tangle of public and private passions and ordeals experienced over the fifty-six years he lived that it has always been a source of inexhaustible fascination. It is as if everything about his life – its innumerable defeats and its occasional and yet enduring triumphs – belongs to the romantic and alluring realm of legend: a love at first sight that was to last his whole life and inspire lofty poetry; the long, cruel exile from his native Florence because of the civil war ravaging the city; the poem he wrote, the *Divina Commedia*, made of his public and private memories; the turning of himself into an archetypal literary character, such as Ulysses, Faust, or any of those medieval knights errant, journeying over the tortuous paths of a spiritual quest, wrestling with dark powers, and, finally, seeing God face to face.

Many are the reasons why generations of readers have found the story of Dante's life compelling. His relentless self-invention as an unbending prophet of justice and a mythical quester for the divine is certainly one important reason. The fact that in his graphic figurations of the beyond (rare glimpses of which were available in only a few other legendary mythmakers – Homer, Plato, and Virgil) he was an unparalleled poet also greatly heightens our interest in him. Yet none of these reasons truly accounts for what must be called – given the extraordinary number of biographies Dante has elicited over the centuries – the literary phenomenon of "The Life of Dante."

Stories of mythical heroes of literature deeply absorb us either because these heroes are rarely, if ever, wholly human (Gilgamesh, Achilles, Aeneas), or because they display noble, exceptional gifts (Beowulf, Roland, El Cid) that transcend the practice and measure of ordinary life. By the same token, truly great poets have so quickly entered the domain of myth that they leave readers doubtful about the very reality of their existence; did Moses or Homer really exist or are they imaginary authors of actually anonymous texts? In the case of Shakespeare, arguments still rage as to whether or not he truly was who we may like to think he was.

But no such skepticism is warranted for the reality or legal identity of Dante's existence. One suspects that it is exactly this unquestioned reality, the knowledge that he was part of our history and was so much like us, that he was so thoroughly human while at the same time so thoroughly extraordinary as only fictional characters are, that accounts for the persistent fascination he exerts on us. The disparity between, on the one hand, his ordinariness (he was married, had children, was notoriously litigious, unable at times to pay his rent or find credit, craved recognition), and, on the other hand, his larger-than-life visionary powers (his unrelenting sense of justice, his unique ability to stretch the boundaries of the imagination, and the conviction, at once humble and proud, of a prophetic mission) repeatedly triggers the questioning and the desire to know what he was really like.

Accordingly, biographers have tried to define Dante's involvement with the Florentine intellectuals and poets of his time, as well as his role in local politics, which unavoidably reflected and shared in the larger struggles between pope and emperor. They have also tried to assess how real were the shifts in his philosophical and theological allegiances (whether or not he was ever an "Averroist" and what were the limits of his Thomism). And they have not neglected to unearth numberless details about his family circumstances in the effort to grasp the elusive essence of his life.

There is not yet, however, a full-fledged literary biography of Dante that evokes simultaneously the poetic, intellectual, and social topography of both Florence *and* the larger cultural world conjured up in his works. Existing biographies, in effect, beg the question. Is there really a correspondence between life and work? Can we take obscure details Dante writes about himself as clues to his life? And even if we could, what was Dante's relation to his friends, to his wife, to his children, and, perhaps more importantly, to himself? Where did he learn all he knew? When did he discover his poetic vocation? What did "to be a poet" mean to him and to those around him?

These questions have not been altogether ignored by biographers, but, right from the early biographies of Dante to those written in the last few years, they have drawn forth a predictable variety of answers. The answers, no doubt, are chiefly determined by the rhetorical assumptions shaping the biographical genre in itself. One such assumption is that the biographer has grasped the inner, authentic sense of the life to be told and will, thus, make it the principle of the narrative trajectory. Another assumption is that the history of a great poet coincides with the history of his own times; Dante, for instance, to adapt a statement by T. S. Eliot, is part of the consciousness of his age which, in turn, cannot be understood without him. A third assumption is the illusory belief, shared by almost all Dante biographers, that there is a solid, ascertainable correspondence between the facts of the poet's life and

his art. From this standpoint the role of the biographer consists in sifting the documentary evidence and removing all obscurities and ambiguities from the record – did Dante really go to Paris during the years of his exile? Was Brunetto Latini an actual teacher of Dante? Was Dante ever a Franciscan novice? Did he attend both the theological schools of Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella in Florence? And who was the "montanina" for whom Dante, late in his life, wrote exquisite poems?

The only remarkable exception to this pattern of the biographical genre is Giovanni Boccaccio's *Vita di Dante*, a self-conscious fictional work akin to Dante's own *Vita nuova* which responds imaginatively to Dante's steady self-dramatization in his works. Modern biographers of Dante, on the other hand (notably Michele Barbi and Giorgio Petrocchi), have given brilliant and dependable accounts of Dante's life and works, but these accounts are limited, paradoxically, in the measure in which, first, they are not speculative or imaginative enough, and, second, they refrain from giving what can only be, as Boccaccio lucidly grasps, the novelistic sense of Dante's life. It does not come as a surprise to discover, then, that these modern biographical reconstructions deliberately follow in the mold of the highly influential biography of Dante written by the Florentine historian Leonardo Bruni (1369–1444). Bruni's own version of the *Vita di Dante* was written specifically to correct and root in the reality of history the legend concocted by Boccaccio.

Boccaccio's *Vita di Dante*, which was written roughly around 1348 and is, thus, the earliest available biography of Dante, follows an altogether different path. His text has the structural complexity of both a personal poetics and of a romance telling the marvelous birth of the poet (accompanied, as happens in hagiographies, by an omen, such as the mother's prophetic dream). The two rhetorical strands converge in the central, exalted, narrative of the poet's fated growth and of the splendor of his imagination in the face of the severe encroachments of daily cares on the exercise of his craft. Because Boccaccio so often strays and digresses from the presentation of his material to relate his ideas about the sublime nature and essence of poetry, and because he chooses fiction as the dominant mode of his narrative, its literal trustworthiness has been much doubted or maligned since Bruni's stringencies. Nonetheless, in spite of some overt incongruities in Boccaccio's account, the legend he constructs fixes steadily on his central perception of Dante's life as pulled in antithetical directions.

One of these pulls was Dante's insight into the implacable demands of poetry as a total, all-encompassing activity which could provide the metaphysical foundation of the world. The other pull was Dante's experience of the burdens of the daily realities of family, of financial difficulties, of a marriage that, in point of fact, was far less unhappy than Boccaccio himself

thought, and his naive decision to yield to the siren call of involvement in the shadowy, violent perimeter of city politics. The power games of politics, so Boccaccio infers, were Dante's deluded, even if provisional, choice and inexorably brought about his exile. Yet, this tragic mistake notwithstanding, Dante still clung to his faith in his own comprehensive visionary powers to recall the muses from their banishment.

To a civic humanist such as Leonardo Bruni, Boccaccio's celebration of Dante's heroic poetic temper seemed too partial an invention (much like, Bruni says wryly, the *Filocolo* or the *Filostrato* or even the *Fiammetta*). Bruni found Boccaccio's intimation of the poet's necessary disengagement from the responsibilities of the history of Florence an unacceptable way of bypassing the vital, empirical force of poetry, and of confining it to the realm of abstract metaphysical generalizations. Thus, in reaction to Boccaccio, Bruni's *Vita di Dante* presents Dante in the context of the particularities of Florentine intellectual and political life. It is possible that a transaction between Boccaccio's and Bruni's respective narrative techniques and understanding of the poet would convey a sharper view of Dante's life. Yet it must be acknowledged that the biographical paradigm inaugurated by Bruni and deployed by the historical scholarship of a Barbi or a Petrocchi has made a considerable contribution to the preliminary establishment of the facts of Dante's life.

The facts we know for certain are relatively few, but they are firmly established. Dante Alighieri was born in Florence in 1265 (between May 14 and June 13). Of his childhood, spent in Florence, most people recall only what he himself records in his *Vita nuova*, that when he was nine years old he met Beatrice, then eight years old, who died in 1290 (on either June 8 or 19), but whose memory never faded from the poet's mind and who was destined to play a providential role in his poetic vision. But many other things happened to and around Dante during his early years which were bound to affect a precocious and sensitive young man, as he no doubt was, to judge by the intensity of his response to Beatrice.

One can only speculate, for instance, what impression the meeting that took place in Florence in June 1273 between Pope Gregory IX and Charles of Anjou to establish peace between the city's warring factions of Guelfs and Ghibellines made on Dante. One can easily imagine the city's mood on those early summer days (which coincided with the feast of Florence's patron saint, St. John the Baptist), celebrating the dramatic event and calling for a general reconciliation. Everywhere, and for everybody, in Florence it was a feast marked by processions, songs, dances, laughter, jousts, tumblers, clowns, colorful young women and young men, as the poets' recitations of their verses mixed with the clamor of street vendors. Dante himself never refers to this extraordinary public episode which turned out to be nothing

more than a brief interlude in Florence's endless bloody civil wars. But who can say the extent to which, if at all, this spectacular experience of the ritual of peace shaped his imagination of the pageantry at the top of *Purgatorio* or of *Paradiso* as the vision of peace and play? Who can say whether or not it was in the middle of that feast that he discovered his vocation to be a poet?

One would expect this sort of question to be asked by a biographer in the mold of, say, Boccaccio. A sober-minded biographical narrative of the life of Dante, however, would be expected to focus on ascertained, objective events of his early life. Some of these events, like the schooling he received, were fairly ordinary. He went to a grammar school where he was trained in classical Latin and medieval Latin texts, but because at this time his family was of moderate means, he had access both to the poetry and literature that came from Provence and France, and to the medieval vulgarizations of classical material. There were other events in his childhood, however, that could in no way be called ordinary. He lost his mother, Bella, between 1270 and 1273; his father remarried soon after and had three other children who remained close (especially Francesco) to Dante throughout his life. In 1283 Dante's father died, and his death forced Dante to take legal charge of the family. This circumstance, in turn, meant that he could not but become involved in the tense and even exciting realities of Florentine public life.

The Florentine meeting of 1273 between the pope and the emperor, arranged to mark the reconciliation of the popular factions, had no noticeable practical effects on the mood of the city, nor did it manage to efface the tragic memories of the defeat of Montaperti (1260), recalled in *Inferno* 10. Montaperti meant the defeat of the Guelfs, and also that Dante, a Guelf, came to life in a Ghibelline city. In terms of Florence's public mood, moreover, the defeat simply crushed the spirit of the city and marked Florence's loss of its hegemony over its neighboring cities. Public life was a persistent danger zone punctuated by the almost daily battles between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines. At the same time, the implacable, bitter resentments of the popular social classes against the entrenched interests of the magnates added a new and generalized turbulence, beyond the rivalries and feuds of the nobility (the Donati versus the Cerchi), to the city's political tensions. Dante, who had entered by necessity this political arena with its intractable problems, was soon to stumble against a host of unpredictable snares.

There is no doubt that Dante at first responded with enthusiasm and genuine excitement to the lure and prestige of public life. Public life was characterized in the Florence of the 1280s by the mingling of aristocrats, office-holders of the commune, men of letters and educators, poets and rich merchants. In concrete terms, it meant, for Dante, friendship with the prominent, cosmopolitan intellectual Brunetto Latini, the highly valued intimacy

whole of Tuscany to papal control. This factor alone possibly constitutes the background against which Dante's further political involvement is to be seen. In this same year (1295) he enrolled in a guild, and on several occasions opposed Boniface's exactions on Florence.

Dante's political career reached its acme in 1300 (June 15–August 15) when he was one of the city's six priors. Leonardo Bruni's biography records a lost epistle of Dante in which the by-now exiled poet, taking stock of his life's disappointments, sees the cause of all his misfortunes in the decisions taken while he was a prior. In his *Cronica* (I, xxi) Dino Compagni, himself both a witness and protagonist of the times, registers the crisis that crippled the city's political life during these months: the violent clashes between the magnates and the representatives of the popular government. As a punitive measure for the violence, the priors agreed to send the leaders of the warring factions (Black and White Guelfs) into exile. Among the exiles was Dante's own friend, Guido Cavalcanti, who died late in August of that year.

The events that followed the priors' momentous decision are so muddled and complex that a simplification is necessary. As soon as Dante's tenure expired, his successors recalled the Whites from their exile. Pope Boniface VIII, angered by the decision which he saw as favoring his enemies, solicited Charles of Valois, the brother of Philip, then king of France, to intervene militarily in Italy. When Charles was in Italy, the Florentines dispatched three emissaries to the papal court in Rome to persuade the pope to keep the French king from entering Tuscany. One of the ambassadors was Dante who, perhaps while in Rome, was sentenced to death on March 10, 1302. Dante went into exile, which was to last until his death in 1321.

The remaining nineteen years of his life were the most painful for the poet. So dark were they, that the romantic image of the fugitive poet, roaming around like a "rudderless ship" and a "beggar" (*Convivio* I, iii, 4–5), captures the fact that we cannot even trace with any great precision his constantly shifting, precarious whereabouts. We know that at first he variously plotted and conspired a military seizure of Florence; and that he went from one city to another: Forlì in 1302; Verona in 1303; Arezzo, where, according to Petrarch, he met his exiled father, Ser Petracco; Treviso; Padua, where in 1305 he met Giotto at work in the Scrovegni Chapel – and one is left to imagine the exchanges between them; Venice; Lunigiana, where he worked for a time for the Malaspinas; Lucca in 1307–09; and many other places – only some of which are real – until he settled once again in Verona in 1312, and from Verona moved in 1319 to his last refuge in Ravenna.

But for all its harshness, exile turned out to be for Dante a blessing in disguise, nothing less than the central, decisive experience of his life. His texts always speak of his exile as a darkening time and as a ravage of the

spirit. But from 1302 to 1321, from the year of his exile to the year of his death, Dante's history is essentially the history of his works, and they cannot be understood without understanding the bleak clarity exile brought to his vision. He knew despair and almost certainly he contemplated suicide. But because everything was now lost, nothing was lost. He abandoned the shallow illusion of a return to Florence by military action, and retreated from the grim, squalid quarters where other Florentine expatriates spun endless, wicked conspiracies of revenge.

Dante soon discovered, or simply accepted, that the exile they all bewailed as a tragic fatality need not be construed as a hopeless, unalterable condition. In the depths of his despair he saw the futility and falseness of despair. For his friend Guido Cavalcanti, the exile to Sarzana that Dante himself had a few years earlier decreed was the irremediable experience of no return, tantamount to the premonition of an imminent death. Guido's great exilic poem, "Perch'i' no spero di tornar giammai, ballatetta, in Toscana," is the tragic figuration of a mind yielding to despair's grip and ultimate unreality. For Dante, on the contrary, as his own exilic song, "Tre donne," exemplifies, hopelessness is illusory because it denies the reality and the possibilities of the future, and exile becomes the providential condition wherein he recognizes the necessity to transcend the particularisms of local history. The way out of the darkness of partial and relative viewpoints, as he was ceaselessly to argue in the two major works he started but never finished in the early stages of his nomadic existence, the *De vulgari eloquentia* and the *Convivio*, is a universal standpoint.

He must have longed during this time for an impossible restoration of his honor and his property, for the irrevocably lost security of a family life, for the conversations with his sweet friends along the banks of the river at the hour of dusk, and for a world of ordinary concerns. But he never let nostalgia stand in the way of his obstinate and absolute moral convictions. He continued to weave his voice into the web of intellectual-practical discourses, and undertook to write the *De vulgari eloquentia* and the *Convivio*. In the *Convivio*, the lyrical fluidity and cadences of the *Vita nuova* are now bracketed as the provisional, radiant compulsion of a solitary mind. He never rejects his past, but now strives for a new discipline of thought and for the rational bounds of a universalizing philosophical-theological discourse. The *De vulgari eloquentia* envisions the vitality of the vernacular as the root and bark of the politics, law, poetry, and theology of the whole of Italy. The *Convivio*, on the other hand, presents itself as an ethics and, as such, recalls both the teachings Dante received from Brunetto Latini and the commentary of St. Thomas Aquinas on Aristotle's *Ethics*. From the viewpoint of Dante's own existential concerns, the *Convivio* addresses the issue of the relationship

between philosophy and political power (the intellectual and the emperor), and focuses on the range of moral values that shape the fabric of our life.

From 1308 to 1313, a historical enterprise dominated the stages of international politics and was at the center of Dante's own political passions and dreams. He seems to have all along understood the necessity of the empire as the sole reasonable warranty against the sinister spirals of violence splintering all cities. He sensed in the event at hand a real possibility for his abstract design. In November of 1308, the electors of Germany agreed to have Henry VII of Luxemburg crowned as emperor. Henry, who was on his way to Rome where in 1312 he would be crowned by the pope, was expected to redress the political imbroglios in the various Italian cities of the north and of Tuscany. Dante himself hailed his arrival as a new messianic advent. He met the emperor, and this meeting renewed and nourished, at least for a while, as one can infer from his political *Epistolae*, Dante's moral vision of the necessity of empire that comes to maturation in the political tract, *Monarchia*, perhaps written around 1316.

By the time of Henry's descent to Italy, Dante had finished writing both *Inferno* and most of *Purgatorio*. Around June of 1312 he moved back to the court of Cangrande in Verona, drawn to it, no doubt, by the legendary hospitality of the prince and by his devotion to the Ghibelline cause whose legitimacy Dante endorsed. During his stay in Verona, a city of great culture that celebrated, for instance, the arrival of a manuscript of the Veronese Catullus' *Carmina*, he started (in 1315) *Paradiso*, and when he was halfway through (*Paradiso* 17 is a glittering celebration of Cangrande's generosity and, retrospectively, a farewell to him) he took his leave. In 1319 Guido Novello of Polenta invited him to move to Ravenna, and Dante accepted.

Why did he leave Verona and go to Ravenna? We do not really know. In a famous letter to Boccaccio, Petrarch sharply suggests that it had become intolerable to Dante to be confused with the Veronese court's actors, buffoons, and parasites. Their bibulousness and hoaxes were as far a cry from his childhood memories of Florence's spontaneous feasts as they were from his understanding of *theologia ludens*, the insight into the deeply "comic" essence of God's creation and grace, which the whole of the *Divina Commedia* unveils and represents over and against the vast pageant of horrors it foregrounds. Nonetheless, the break with Cangrande was not definitive. It was to Cangrande that Dante addressed the letter (the attribution of which, by what must be termed academics' recurrent suspicions, has again been contested) that masterfully explicates the complex principles of composition of *Paradiso* and, implicitly, of the whole poem. And he was also to return to Verona to read on January 20, 1320, a Sunday, his *Quaestio de aqua et terra*.

We do not know exactly why he agreed to come to Ravenna, but, in hindsight, it was inevitable that he should come. By this time Ravenna was like an after-thought of the Roman empire and lived in the after-glow of its Byzantine art. For a man like Dante, who more than ever roamed in a world of internal phantasms and broken dreams, and who needed the most concentrated effort to finish the *Divina Commedia*, the dreamy immobility of Ravenna, the quality of posthumousness it conveyed, was the right place for his imagination. The dense woods of pine trees near the city; the tombs and reliquaries of the Caesars; the memory of Boethius and of the Emperor Justinian; the spiritual presence of the contemplative Peter Damian in the Benedictine abbeys surrounding the city; the riddle of shadows and the prodigy of the golden light in the mosaics of San Vitale and Sant' Apollinare in Classe (replicas of which Dante saw in Venice and Torcello) – these are the images of Ravenna that Dante evokes and crystallizes in the conclusive part of *Purgatorio* and in those parts of *Paradiso* he wrote or revised while in Ravenna.

It would not be entirely correct to suggest that the *genius loci* of Ravenna was merely the twilight, sepulchral sense that emanated from it and spoke so powerfully to the inward-looking, ageing poet. In the mosaics of Ravenna's basilicas, with their figurations of the Pantocrator (God as the all-ruling Father) hovering over the hierarchies of angels and saints, the Virgin Mary, and the extended narrative of the life of Christ (altogether different from that in the Scrovegni Chapel), Dante saw a confirmation of the esthetic-theological principles that shape his poem: his poetic vision, like Byzantine art, is the microcosmic recapitulation of the totality of the world.

Dante's poem, like the liturgical representations of the Ravenna basilicas, is an esthetic theology of the totality of history, eclectically made up of elements from the theologies and philosophies of Augustine, Albert the Great, Aquinas, Aristotle, and so on, but never reducible to any of them. If anything, actually, like the Greco-Byzantine art of the Ravenna basilicas and like Giotto's frescoes Dante had seen in Padua, all of which aim at inducing contemplation, his poem has its inevitable foundation in the contemplative theology of Benedict, Peter Damian, and Bernard of Clairvaux. As these contemplatives fully understood, and as Dante lucidly shows in his poem, poetry opposes the political world of partisan and partial interests and can only stem from the contemplation of the whole.

Dante's theoretical attitude, so marked in the final years of his life, never meant that he forgot the world and its cares. To presume this would be to falsify or altogether miss the essence of contemplation which always encompasses and underlies the sphere of moral action. This contemplative mode, however, accounts for the relative tranquility and for the real, if narrow, quiet

the poet enjoyed in the last years of his life in Ravenna. His material needs were generously handled by Guido Novello for whom Dante undertook a number of missions; all of his children, even some of his grandchildren, and most likely his wife, Gemma Donati, were finally with him. Because of Guido Novello's generosity, his children's economic future looked bright, and this no doubt somewhat placated the poet's anxieties. He was also surrounded, as Giovanni Boccaccio reports, by disciples such as Pier Giardino, Giovanni Quirini, and Bernardino Canaccio; academics from Bologna, such as Giovanni del Virgilio, acknowledged his achievements and were eager to see him – the two of them even exchanged *Eclogues* that give a direct view into Dante's detachment from the idyllic pursuits of bland academic games called for by Giovanni and into his steady adherence to the summons of his sumptuous vision of glory.

It was here in Ravenna that, his poem finally completed, on returning from a trip to Venice, Dante died on September 13, 1321. It is usually said that death is the irreducible experience that unveils the meaning of a life. But because we do not know how Dante died – the fear and the joy this poet of the afterlife experienced at the point of his own death – the inner core of his life seems destined to remain impenetrable. Its public dimension, on the other hand, is a matter of record: the funerals he received, like the elegies written for the occasion by his admirers, were spectacular tributes to the passing of a rare man.

It cannot surprise us to find out that Dante's death marked the beginning of an effort to bring him back into the mythical memories of the living and to capture the vanished shape of his physical reality. Possibly as a way of tempering the dominantly legendary tone in his *Life of Dante*, Boccaccio goes out of his way to evoke the traits of Dante's physical appearance – his middle height, aquiline nose, large eyes, dark complexion, thick, black hair – as if the portrait could both root him in the reality of fact, and lead us to grasp the elusive secret of Dante's soul. Sometime later Domenico di Michelino drew a portrait of Dante, now hanging in Florence's Duomo, which figures the distance between the poet and his city. In his left hand the poet holds open the *Divina Commedia* as a gift to Florence, while with his right hand he points to the three realms of the beyond. The gates of the city, by contrast, remain shut. The secret of his soul, no doubt, is to be found in that gift.

SUGGESTED READING

Boccaccio's and Bruni's lives of Dante are available in *The Early Lives of Dante*, translated by Philip H. Wicksteed (London: Alexander Moring, 1904) and in a 1901 translation by James Robinson, published by Ungar (Milestones of Thought) in 1963 and frequently reprinted, most recently by Haskell House in 1974. Vincenzo

other. The conflict is rendered with great clarity in this sonnet by Giacomo da Lentini:

Io m'aggio posto in core a Dio servire,
com'io potesse gire in paradiso,
al santo loco ch'aggio audito dire,
u' si mantien sollazzo, gioco e riso.

Sanza mia donna non vi voria gire,
quella c'ha blonda testa e claro viso,
ché sanza lei non poteria gaudere,
estando da la mia donna diviso.

Ma no lo dico a tale intendimento,
perch'io peccato ci volesse fare;
se non veder lo suo bel portamento

e lo bel viso e 'l morbido sguardare:
ché lo mi teria in gran consolamento,
veggendo la mia donna in ghiora stare.

(I have proposed in my heart to serve God, that I might go to paradise, to the holy place of which I have heard said that there are maintained pleasure, play, and laughter. Without my lady I do not wish to go, the one who has a blond head and a clear face, since without her I could not take pleasure, being from my lady divided. But I do not say this with such an intention, that I would want to commit a sin; but rather because I would want to see her beautiful comportment and her beautiful face and her sweet glance: for it would keep me in great consolation, to see my lady be in glory.)

This poem both exemplifies the courtly thematic of conflicted desire, and provides an object lesson in the deployment of the sonnet as a formal construct. The Sicilian sonnet is divided into two parts, set off from each other by a change in rhyme: the octave rhymes ABABABAB, and the sextet rhymes CDCDCD. While there are possible variations in the rhyme scheme of the sextet (it could be CDECDE, for instance), there is always a switch at this point from the A and B rhymes to a new set of rhymes; there is always, in other words, a cleavage, created by rhyme, between the first eight verses and the latter six. It is this cleavage that "Io m'aggio posto" exploits in such paradigmatic fashion. Giacomo has perfectly fused form and content: the divisions inherent in the sonnet form express the divisions experienced by the poet-lover, who is himself "diviso" in the octave's last word. Moreover, subdivisions within the octave, divisible into two quatrains, and the sextet, divisible into two tercets (or, in this case, just as plausibly into three couplets), are also fully exploited in order to render the two poles of the poet-lover's divided allegiance.

As compared to the canzone, the lyric genre that allows for narrative development and forward movement, the sonnet's compact fourteen-verse form epitomizes a moment, a thought, or a problematic by approaching it from two dialectical perspectives: in a classic Italian sonnet, an issue is posed in the octave, and in some way reconsidered or resolved in the sextet. Looking at Giacomo's poem, we see that the first quatrain identifies one pole of the poet's desire: he wants to serve God, to go to paradise. His yearning does not at this stage seem conflicted, and the entire first quatrain could be placed under the rubric "Dio": "Io m'aggio posto in core a *Dio* servire." With hindsight we can see that the potential for conflict is already present in the fourth line's very secular – and very courtly – definition of paradise as a place that offers "sollazzo, gioco e riso": a trio lexically and morally associated not with the pleasures of paradise, but with the pleasures of the court. But the fact that there is an alternative pole of desire, an alternative claim on the lover's fealty, is not made evident until we reach the second quatrain, which belongs to the "donna" as much as the first quatrain belongs to "Dio": "Sanza mia *donna* non vi voria gire." Without her he does not want to go to paradise; the octave has neatly posed the problem with which the sextet must now deal. And in fact there is a sharp turn toward orthodoxy in the sextet's first couplet, in the initial adversative "Ma," and in the recognition that the lover's stance harbors a potential for sin, "peccato"; but a second adversative, "se non," follows on the heels of the first, negating its negation and reestablishing the poet's will to let the lady dominate. What follows is the listing of those literally "dominant" attributes (as in attributes pertaining to the *domina*) whose absence would render paradise intolerable, a concatenation of three adjective plus noun copulae that gains in momentum and power by being somewhat (in contrast to the otherwise relentlessly clipped syntactical standards of this poem) run on from line 11 to line 12: "lo suo bel portamento/e lo bel viso e 'l morbido sguardare." The lady is in the ascendant, and the poem concludes with a poetic resolution that makes the point that there is no ideological resolution to be had. Although the last line brings together the two terms of the conflict (the lady and "glory," or the lady and paradise), they are yoked in a kind of secularized beatific vision that affirms the poet-lover's commitment not to "Dio," but to the "donna": paradise is only desirable if it affords the opportunity to see "la mia donna in ghiora stare."

From Sicily the lyric moved north to the communes of Tuscany, where it was cultivated by poets like Bonagiunta da Lucca, Dante's purgatorial poetic taxonomist, and Guittone d'Arezzo (d. 1294), the *caposcuola* of the Tuscan School. Although consistently reviled by Dante for his "municipal" language and excessively ornate and cumbersomely convoluted verse, Guittone set

the standard for Tuscan poets to follow, or – in the case of Dante and his fellow practitioners of the "sweet new style" – to refuse to follow. (From a lexical and stylistic perspective, in fact, the new style is best characterized precisely in terms of its rejection of the rhetorical and stylistic norms popularized by Guittone, through a process of winnowing that generated a refined but limited lexical and stylistic range.) A genuinely important poet who rewards study on his own terms, Guittone is responsible for key innovations in the Italian lyric: his *ornatus* derives not just from the Sicilians, but from first-hand appreciation of Provençal language, meter, and rhetoric; as a politically involved citizen of Arezzo, he is the first Italian poet to use the lyric as a forum for political concerns, in the tradition of the Provençal *sirventes*; he experienced a religious conversion (becoming a member of the Frati Godenti *c.* 1265) that is reflected in his verse, which moves, by way of the conversion canzone "Ora parrà s'eo saverò cantare," from love poetry to moral and ethical poetry, and even to religious lauds in honor of St. Francis and St. Dominic. Guittone is thus the first Italian poet to trace in his career a trajectory like that of Dante's (albeit without the epic dimension), and to embrace in his lyrics issues as diverse as the nature of love, in both its secular and divine manifestations, the moral code, with its virtues and vices, and the vicissitudes of Aretine and Florentine politics. Perhaps most significantly, Guittone's thematic innovations are at the service of his bourgeois didacticism, his view of himself as a moral *auctoritas*, a teacher; it is this stance that particularly infuriates his younger rivals, not only Dante but Guido Cavalcanti, who in the sonnet "Da più a uno face un sollegismo" scorns the notion of Guittone as a source of "insegnamento" ("teaching").

As we can see from the first two stanzas of "Ora parrà," Guittone deals with the problem of the lover-poet's dual allegiance by rejecting the troubadour ethos and what he brands carnal love for God and moral virtue:

> Ora parrà s'eo saverò cantare
> e s'eo varrò quanto valer già soglio,
> poi che del tutto Amor fuggh' e disvoglio,
> e più che cosa mai forte mi spare:
> ch'a om tenuto saggio audo contare
> che trovare – non sa né valer punto
> omo d'Amor non punto;
> ma' che digiunto – da vertà mi pare,
> se lo pensare – a lo parlare – sembra,
> ché 'n tutte parte ove distringe Amore
> regge follore – in loco di savere:
> donque como valere
> pò, né piacer – di guisa alcuna fiore,

poi dal Fattor – d'ogni valor – disembra
e al contrar d'ogni mainer' asembra?

Ma chi cantare vole e valer bene,
in suo legno a nochier Diritto pone
e orrato Saver mette al timone,
Dio fa sua stella, e 'n ver Lausor sua spene:
ché grande onor né gran bene no è stato
acquistato – carnal voglia seguendo,
ma promente valendo
e astenendo – *a* vizi' e *a* peccato;
unde 'l sennato – apparecchiato – ognora
de core tutto e di poder dea stare
d'avanzare – lo suo stato ad onore
no schifando labore:
ché già riccor – non dona altrui posare,
ma 'l fa lungiare, – e ben pugnare – onora;
ma tuttavia lo 'ntenda altri a misora.

(Now it will appear if I know how to sing, and if I am worth as much as I was accustomed to be worth, now that I completely flee Love and do not want it, and more than anything else find it very hateful. I have heard it said by a man considered wise that a man not pierced by Love does not know how to write poetry and is worth nothing; but far from the truth this seems to me, if there is concord between thought and word, for in all parts where Love seizes madness is king, in place of wisdom. Therefore how can he have worth or please in any way at all, since from the Maker of all worth he diverges and to the contrary in every way he resembles?

But he who wants to sing well and be worthy should place Justice in his ship as pilot, and put honored Wisdom at the helm, make God his star and place his hope in true Praise: for neither great honor nor great good have been acquired by following carnal desire, but by living as good men and abstaining from vice and from sin. Therefore the wise man must be prepared at all times with all his heart and power to advance his state to honor, not shunning toil; since indeed riches do not give anyone repose but rather distance it, and good striving brings honor, as long as one pursues it with measure.)

This poem displays essential Guittonian traits. Stylistically, the syntax is anything but clear and limpid, and it is rendered even more convoluted by the complex rhyme scheme with its *rimalmezzo*, or rhyme in the center of the verse (marked by modern editors with dashes). Thematically, a bourgeois ethic comes into play, as the poet, following his rejection of the troubadour equation between Love and true worth, exhorts us to pursue civic morality and virtuous moderation: although he tells us on the one hand to reject carnal desire (which is what courtly love becomes when stripped of its sustaining

ideology), he does not tell us on the other to embrace monastic contemplation. The Guittonian ideal is a life of measured toil and measured gain, leavened by the pursuit of "orrato Saver" and the advancement of one's "stato ad onore": an honored position in the community and a wisdom conceived in terms less metaphysical than practical and ethical.

Our historical assessments of the various alliances that both bound these early Italian poets into schools and polarized them as rivals are not merely the product of an arbitrary need to order the unruly past; in the instance of the emerging Italian lyric, the record shows a keen – and frequently barbed – self-consciousness of such groupings on the part of the poets themselves. Thus, in a sonnet attributed to the Tuscan Chiaro Davanzati ("Di penne di paone"), a fellow poet, perhaps Bonagiunta, is accused of dressing himself in poetic finery stolen from the Sicilian Giacomo da Lentini; the same Bonagiunta will accuse Guido Guinizzelli, the Bolognese poet whom Dante hails as the father of the new style in *Purgatorio* 26, of having altered love poetry for the worse, of having "changed the manner of elegant verses of love" ("Voi, ch'avete mutata la maniera/de li plagenti ditti de l'amore"). Considered a "Siculo-Tuscan" for his use of both Sicilian and Guittonian mannerisms, Bonagiunta is unhappy with the newfangled directions in which Guinizzelli is heading: he does not understand what the "wisdom of Bologna" (a reference to that city's university, noted as a center of philosophical study) has to do with love poetry, and he accuses Guinizzelli of writing pretentious, obscure verse whose philosophical subtleties make it impossible to decode. For modern readers, who find Guittone's rhetorical virtuosity so much more of a barrier than Guinizzelli's modest importation of philosophy into poetry, Bonagiunta's critique may seem misdirected, but his sonnet provides an important contemporary view of the poetic movement that Italian literary historiographers, following Dante, have continued to call the *stil novo*. The exchange between Bonagiunta and the forerunner Guinizzelli will be echoed in later exchanges between conservatives and full-fledged *stilnovisti*; we think of the correspondence between Guido Cavalcanti and Guido Orlandi, for instance, or the parodic indictment of the new style found in the sonnets addressed by Onesto degli Onesti to Dante's friend and poetic comrade Cino da Pistoia.

So, what is this new style that created such consternation among those contemporary poets who were not its adherents? Initiated by the older and non-Florentine Guinizzelli (who seems to have died by 1276), the core practitioners are younger and, with the exception of Cino, Florentine: Guido Cavalcanti (the traditional birth year of 1259 has recently been challenged in favor of *c.* 1250; he died in 1300), Dante (1265–1321), Cino (*c.* 1270–1336 or 1337), and the lesser Lapo Gianni, Gianni Alfani, and Dino Frescobaldi.

by anyone base, and prevents evil thoughts, since no man can think evilly while he sees her. This poetics of praise, owed to the lady as a literal beatifier, is the Guinizzellian feature that Dante will exploit for his personal *stil novo* as distilled in the *Vita nuova*. In that work Dante builds on and further radicalizes Guinizzelli's theologized courtly love to confect his Beatrice, a lady whose powers to bless (people know her name, "she who beatifies," "she who gives *beatitudine*," without having ever been told) and whose links to the divine are beyond anything yet envisioned within the lyric tradition:

> Ella si va, sentendosi laudare
> benignamente d'umiltà vestuta;
> e par che sia una cosa venuta
> da cielo in terra a miracol mostrare.
> ("Tanto gentile e tanto
> onesta pare")

(She passes by, hearing herself praised, benignly dressed in humility; and she appears to be a thing come from heaven to earth to show forth a miracle.)

The sacramental and Christological dimensions of the *Vita nuova*'s Beatrice, the fact that she has come from heaven to earth as a manifest miracle, that the portents of her death are the portents of Christ's death, that she *is* the incarnate number nine, take Guinizzelli's solutions an enormous step further along the road from simile ("Tenne d'angel sembianza") to metaphor ("d'umiltà vestuta"), from assimilation to, to appropriation of, the divine.

Along this road that leads in a straight line from the theologized courtly love of the *stil novo* to the incarnational poetics of the *Commedia* there is a magisterial detour, a magnificent dead end (a "*disaventura*," to use his word), and this is the path called Guido Cavalcanti. Guido's poetic *disaventura* can be considered a dead end in two ways: first, with respect to its ideology, which conceives love as a dead-end passion, a sub-rational natural force that leads not to life but to death; second, with respect to its impact on a lyric genealogy that was retroactively pulled into line by the gravitational force of Dante's achievement, which conceives love as a super-rational force that leads not to death but life. So Guido – the "best friend" of the *Vita nuova*, the poet whom both his contemporaries and modern scholarship know as the leader and originator of the *stil novo* movement, a man whose influence over Dante was not just poetic but personal and biographical – was rendered a detour on the highroad of the lyric by the poet of the *Commedia*, a work that bears the traces of its author's need to define himself as *not* Guido Cavalcanti.

The negativity that Dante worked so hard to negate is expressed most explicitly and theoretically in the famous canzone "Donna me prega," where Guido assigns love to that faculty of the soul that is "non razionale, – ma

che sente" ("not rational, but which feels"), that is, to the seat of the passions, the sensitive soul, with the result that love deprives us of reason and judgment, discerns poorly, and induces vice, so that "Di sua potenza segue spesso morte" ("from its power death often follows"). But one need not look only to the philosophical canzone for Cavalcanti's tragic view of love. Although he sings throughout his verse of a lady who is, like Guinizzelli's lady, supremely endowed with worth and beauty, there is a tragic catch. Yes, she is an "angelicata – criatura" ("angelic creature") and "Oltra natura umana" ("Beyond human nature") in the early *ballata* "Fresca rosa novella," "piena di valore" ("full of worth") in the sonnet "Li mie' foll'occhi," possessed of "grande valor" ("great worth") in the sonnet "Tu m'hai sì piena di dolor la mente," and the litany could go on: Cavalcanti's lady is no less potent than Guinizzelli's. The problem is that she is *too* potent with respect to the lover, whose ability to benefit from her worth has been degraded while she has been enhanced. Thus, in the canzone "Io non pensava che lo cor giammai," Love warns the lover of his impending death, caused by her excessive worth and power: "Tu non camperai,/ ché troppo è lo valor di costei forte" ("You will not survive, for too great is the worth of that lady"). The poet-lover is dispossessed, stripped of his vitality, integrity, "valore," his very self: "dirò com'ho perduto ogni valore" ("I will tell how I have lost all worth"), he says in "Poi che di doglia cor." Because of her *troppo* valore, he will lose "ogni valore." From the lover's perspective, therefore, her worth is worthless because he has no access to it; it is in fact worse than worthless because it destroys him. As a result, the education of the lover is not an issue for Cavalcanti: in a context where the will is stripped of all potency, its redirection from the carnal to the transcendent becomes a moot point.

The education of the lover is, however, very much the point in the *Vita nuova*: Beatrice is a living lady of this earth, and yet the lover has to be weaned from desiring even as non-carnal an earthly reward as Beatrice's greeting. Unlike Cavalcanti's lady, a carrier of death, Beatrice is truly a *beatrice*, a carrier of life, but the *beatitudine* she brings is not of easy access. To find the blessedness/happiness offered by Beatrice the lover must redefine his very idea of what happiness is. It can have nothing to do with possession (even of the most metaphorical sort), since the possession of any mortal object of desire will necessarily fail him when that object succumbs to its mortality – in short, when it dies. Like Augustine after the death of his friend, he must learn the error of "loving a man that must die as though he were not to die" ("diligendo moriturum ac si non moriturum," *Confessions* 4, 8). Similarly, and painfully, the lover of the *Vita nuova* must learn to locate his happiness in "that which cannot fail me" ("quello che non mi puote venire meno," *Vita nuova* 18, 4), a lesson that constitutes a theologizing of the

troubadour *guerdon* along Augustinian lines: because the lady and thus her greeting are mortal and will die, they are objects of desire that – for all their relative perfection – will finally fail him. Therefore the lover must learn to redirect his longing to that which cannot fail him, namely the transcendent part of her with which he can be reunited in God, the part that may indeed serve to lead him to God. Viewed from this perspective, the *Vita nuova* is nothing less than a courtly medieval inflection of the Augustinian paradigm whereby life – new life – is achieved by mastering the lesson of death. The *Vita nuova* teaches us, in the words of Dylan Thomas, that "after the first death there is no other" (from "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London"); having encountered the lesson of mortality once, when Beatrice dies, the lover should not need to be taught it again. This is in fact the burden of Beatrice's rebuke to the pilgrim when she meets him in the Earthly Paradise: "e se 'l sommo piacer sì ti fallio/per la mia morte, qual cosa mortale/dovea poi trarre te nel suo disio?" ("and if the supreme pleasure thus failed you, with my death, what mortal thing should then have drawn you into desire?," *Purgatorio* 31, 52–54).

Formally, the *Vita nuova* is a collection of previously written lyrics that, sometime after the death of Beatrice in 1290, most likely in 1292–94, Dante set in a prose frame. The lyrics are chosen with an eye to telling the story of the lover's development, his gradual realization of Beatrice's sacramental significance as a visible sign of invisible grace. They also tell an idealized story of the poet's development, tracing Dante's lyric itinerary from his early Guittonianism (see the so-called double sonnets of chapters 7 and 8), through his Cavalcantianism (see the sonnet that begins with the hapax "Cavalcando" in chapter 9, the *ballata* – Cavalcanti's form par excellence – of chapter 12, and the Cavalcantian torments of the sonnets in chapters 14–16), to the discovery – with some help from Guido Guinizzelli – of his own voice in the canzone "Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore." Prior to the inspired composition of "Donne ch'avete," the poet-lover undergoes the inquisition that induces him to declare that he no longer desires that which is bound to fail him, but instead has centered his desire "in those words that praise my lady" ("In quelle parole che lodano la donna mia," *Vita nuova* 18, 6). The lover's conversion, from one desire (the possession of her greeting) to another (the ability to praise her, to celebrate the miracle of her sacramental existence), is here explicitly stated in poetic terms, is indeed presented as a poet's conversion as well, since his desire for a transcendent Beatrice is formulated as a desire for the words with which to laud her. The *Vita nuova*'s key spiritual lesson is thus aligned with a poetic manifesto for what Dante will call "the style of her praise" ("lo stilo de la sua loda," *Vita nuova* 25, 4).

The first poem we encounter after the conversion of chapter 18 is the canzone "Donne ch'avete," whose incipit is visited upon the poet in a divine dictation akin to that described by Dante as the source of his "nove rime" in *Purgatorio* 24; "la mia lingua parlò quasi come per sé stessa mossa" ("my tongue spoke almost as if moved by itself," *Vita nuova* 19, 2) adumbrates the *Purgatorio*'s famous profession of poetic faith: "I' mi son un che, quando/Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo/ch'e' ditta dentro vo significando" ("I am one who, when Love inspires me, takes note, and in that fashion that Love dictates goes signifying," *Purgatorio* 24, 52–54). "Donne ch'avete" is canonized in the purgatorial encounter with Bonagiunta as the prescriptive example of the *stil novo*, the fountainhead and beginning of the "new rhymes," as though the lyric tradition had no past but originated with "le nove rime, *cominciando*/'Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore'" ("the new rhymes, *beginning* 'Ladies who have intellect of love,'" *Purgatorio* 24, 50–51; my italics). The authorized version of Dante's lyric past recounted implicitly by the *Vita nuova* is thus confirmed by the *Commedia*, where a selective view of the lyric tradition is put forward through the network of presences and absences, encounters, statements, and echoes that make up the complicated tissue of the *Commedia*'s vernacular memory.

In brief, the *Commedia*'s version of Dante's lyric past is as follows. The influence of previous moral/didactic/political poetry is discounted. Dante denigrates the strongest Italian precursor in this vein, Guittone, first in the generic distancing of himself from all "old" schools that is put into the mouth of Bonagiunta in *Purgatorio* 24, then again in *Purgatorio* 26, where – using Guinizzelli as his spokesperson this time – he singles out the Aretine for attack, ascribing Guittone's erstwhile preeminence to outmoded tastes. In the same passage, Guinizzelli takes the opportunity to refer in less than glowing terms to Giraut de Bornelh, the Provençal poet whose treatment of moral themes Dante had cited with approbation in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, calling him a poet of "rectitude" and as such the troubadour equivalent of himself. *Purgatorio* 26 thus handily liquidates Dante's major vernacular lyric precursors in the moral/didactic mode. Dante also fails to acknowledge Guittone's political verse, championing as a political lyricist instead the lesser poet Sordello in an episode that is not without clear intertextual links to the displaced Aretine. With regard to the influence of previous vernacular love poets, the history of Dante's poetic indebtedness is rewritten in a way that gives disproportionate importance to Guinizzelli: the poetic "father" of *Purgatorio* 26 absorbs some of the credit due to Guido Cavalcanti as the major stylistic force in the forging of the *stil novo*. Dante's tribute to the love poet Arnaut Daniel, on the other hand, also in *Purgatorio* 26, is not inconsistent with the influence of the inventor of the sestina on the poet of

the *petrose*; but it is worth noting that the exaltation of the Provençal love poet, Arnaut, is at the expense of the Provençal moral poet, Giraut.

Neither the *Vita nuova* nor the *Commedia* intends to tell the full story regarding Dante's lyric past. For that, we have to turn to the lyrics that Dante left as lyrics, that he never pressed into the service of any larger enterprise or ordered among themselves in any way, and that scholars refer to as the *Rime*. This wonderful collection of eighty-nine poems of definite attribution – sonnets, *ballate*, and canzoni written over a span of approximately twenty-five years (from *c.* 1283 to *c.* 1307–08), that is, from Dante's teens to after the *Inferno* was already begun – brings us as close as we can come to the poet's inner workshop, to glimpsing the ways by which Dante became Dante. These poems testify to the paths not taken, and also help us to see more freshly and vividly when, how, and by what slow process of accretion he embarked on the paths he did take. Moreover, the *Rime* embody the essence of a poetic adventurer; they remind us that Dante's hallmark is his never-ceasing experimentalism, his linguistic and stylistic voracity.

Because they vary so greatly among themselves, editors have found it convenient to order them under rough chronological headings, as follows: very early poems written in the Tuscan manner (e.g., the *tenzone* with Dante da Maiano); early poems experimenting in a variety of manners, from the Sicilian (e.g., the canzone "La dispietata mente"), to the playful realism associated with poets such as Folgòre da San Gimignano (e.g., the sonnet "Sonar bracchetti"), to the light strains of the Cavalcantian *ballata* (e.g., the *ballata* "Per una ghirlandetta"); poems of the time of the *Vita nuova*, and – whether or not included in the *libello* – written in the style we associate with the *stil novo* (a style that includes, for instance, the love poems dedicated in the *Convivio* to, but in my opinion not originally written for, Lady Philosophy). Through the *stil novo* phase, Dante's poetic agenda is, as Foster and Boyde point out in their edition, one of contraction and refinement; he eliminates both lexically and stylistically to achieve the refined purity of the high *stil novo*. The phase of contraction gives way around 1295 to the expansion, both lexical and stylistic, that will characterize the rest of Dante's poetic career and that is pioneered in the following groups of lyrics: the *tenzone* with Forese Donati, written before Forese's death in 1296; the so-called *rime petrose*, or "stony" poems, about a stony, hard, and ice-cold lady, "la pietra," dated internally by "Io son venuto" to December of 1296; moral and doctrinal verse, written most likely between 1295 and 1300, such as the canzone on true nobility, "Le dolci rime," and the canzone on the esteemed courtly quality of *leggiadria*, "Poscia ch'Amor." Finally, there are the great lyrics of exile: the canzone that treats Dante's own exile, "Tre donne"; powerful late moral verse, such as the canzone on avarice, "Doglia mi reca"; and

"Sotto lui si ride e geme": here the lover is literally "beneath" love's dominion, literally *sommesso*, to use the verb that in *Inferno* 5 characterizes the lustful, those who submit reason to desire: "che la ragion sommettono al talento" (*Inferno* 5, 39). As Foster and Boyde comment: "This is the more remarkable in that Dante is now about forty years old and has behind him not only the *Vita nuova* with its story of an entirely sublimated 'heavenly' love, but also the series of canzoni that more or less directly celebrated a love that had its seat in the mind of intellect" (*Dante's Lyric Poetry*, II, p. 323). By the same token, Dante's last canzone is no tribute to sublimation, but "Amor, da che convien pur ch'io mi doglia," a Cavalcantian testament to deadly Eros that has been infused with a decidedly non-Cavalcantian vigor. The poet finds himself in the mountains of the Casentino, in the valley of the Arno where Love's power exerts its greatest strength; here Love works him over (the untranslatable "Così m'hai concio"), kneading him, reducing him to a pulp:

> Così m'hai concio, Amore, in mezzo l'alpi,
> ne la valle del fiume
> lungo il qual sempre sopra me se' forte:
> qui vivo e morto, come vuoi, mi palpi,
> merzé del fiero lume
> che sfolgorando fa via a la morte.

(To this state, Love, you have reduced me, among the mountains, in the valley of the river along which you are always strong over me; here, just as you will, you knead me, both alive and dead, thanks to the fierce light that flashing opens the road to death.)

The love-death of "Amor, da che convien," the ineluctable force against which (as explained in "Io sono stato") neither reason nor virtue can prevail, resurfaces in the *Commedia*'s story of Paolo and Francesca, wherein unopposable passion leads to death and damnation. Nor is the condemnation that awaits those unruly lovers without antecedents in the lyrics; roughly contemporaneous with "Io sono stato" and "Amor, da che convien" is the canzone "Doglia mi reca ne lo core ardire," whose indictment of passion ungoverned by virtue and reason inhabits a moral framework that is highly suggestive vis-à-vis the *Commedia*. The breadth and complexity of this canzone can be inferred from its juxtaposition of a courtly discourse with a more strictly ethical and moralizing bent; like Guittone in "Ora parrà," but much more systematically, Dante links carnal desire to desire for wealth, thus exploding the courtly ethos that would privilege love over baser desires and illuminating the common ground of all concupiscence. In the second stanza of "Ora

parrà," cited earlier, Guittone rejects the pursuit of "carnal voglia" ("carnal desire") and recommends a life of abstinence from vice and willingness to toil; then, in an apparent non sequitur, he tells us that "riches do not give anyone repose but rather distance it, and good striving brings honor, as long as one pursues it with measure." Guittone is concerned lest, having exhorted us to reject carnal desire, he may seem – in his pursuit of the good life – to endorse the equally pernicious desire for material gain. The recognition that a repudiation of carnal desire – lust – must not be an endorsement of material desire – avarice – leads to the second stanza's concluding injunction against "riccor" ("riches"), and sets the stage for the fourth stanza's dramatic assertion that it is not we who possess gold but gold that possesses us: "Non manti acquistan l'oro,/ ma l'oro loro" ("Not many acquire gold, but gold acquires them"). In other words, Guittone first demystifies courtly love, calling it lust, carnal desire, and then links it to other forms of immoderate and excessive desire, all rooted in cupidity. It is this conflation between lust and greed, love and avarice, that is the key to "Doglia mi reca," a canzone which, although frequently and not incorrectly referred to as Dante's canzone on avarice, and therefore characterized as "stumbling" upon its main theme rather late (Foster and Boyde, *Dante's Lyric Poetry*, II, p. 305), in fact deliberately sets out to graft a discourse on avarice onto its courtly (actually anti-courtly) introduction.

"Doglia mi reca" begins, aggressively enough, by refusing to exculpate women from their share of the moral blame in matters of love; it is their duty to deny their love to men who cannot match in virtue what women offer in beauty. Acknowledging that he will speak "parole quasi contra tutta gente" ("words against almost everyone"), Dante inveighs, in the poem's first stanza, against the "base desire" ("vil vostro disire") that would permit a woman to love an unworthy man. He then announces, in the second stanza, that men have distanced themselves from virtue, and are therefore not men but evil beasts that resemble men ("omo no, mala bestia ch'om simiglia"); although virtue is the only "possession" worth having, men enslave themselves to vice. The submerged logical link between the phases of this argument is desire: we move from the ladies' "vil disire" for non-virtuous men in the first stanza, to virtue, the "possession che sempre giova" ("possession that is always beneficial"), that is, the only possession worth desiring, in the second. The point is that men enslave themselves through their desire; by not desiring to possess virtue, the only possession of real worth, and by desiring to possess what is not virtuous, they are doubly enslaved, being, as the third stanza puts it, slaves "not of a lord, but of a base slave": "Servo non di signor, ma di vil servo." Once we grasp the logic that links the two phases of the argument, the courtly to the moral, both

viewed as discourses of desire, the fourth stanza's engagement of issues not normally associated with poems addressed to "donne" is less startling: the man whom the ladies are not supposed to love, the man enslaved to vice, is now compared to the miser in pursuit of wealth. In verses whose irascible energy adumbrates the *Commedia*, Dante depicts the "mad desire" ("folle volere") that induces a man to run after that which can never give him satisfaction:

> Corre l'avaro, ma più fugge pace:
> oh mente cieca, che non pò vedere
> lo suo folle volere
> che 'l numero, ch'ognora a passar bada,
> che 'nfinito vaneggia.
> Ecco giunta colei che ne pareggia:
> dimmi, che hai tu fatto,
> cieco avaro disfatto?
> Rispondimi, se puoi, altro che "Nulla."
> Maladetta tua culla,
> che lusingò cotanti sonni invano;
> maladetto lo tuo perduto pane,
> che non si perde al cane:
> ché da sera e da mane
> hai raunato e stretto ad ambo mano
> ciò che sì tosto si rifà lontano.

(The miser runs, but peace flees faster: oh blind mind, whose mad desire cannot see that the number, which it seeks always to pass, stretches to infinity. Now here is the one who makes us all equal: tell me, what have you done, blind undone miser? Answer me, if you can, other than "Nothing." Cursed be your cradle, which flattered so many dreams in vain; cursed be the bread lost on you, which is not lost on a dog – for evening and morning you have gathered and held with both hands that which so quickly distances itself again.)

The force and vitality of this passage alert us to the fact that Dante has here tapped into a wellspring of his poetic identity. Indeed, the same miser recurs in the *Convivio*, presented in very similar terms: "e in questo errore cade l'avaro maladetto, e non s'accorge che desidera sé sempre desiderare, andando dietro al numero impossibile a giugnere" ("and into this error falls the cursed miser, and he does not realize that he desires himself always to desire, going after the number impossible to reach," *Convivio* III, xv, 9). The miser is a figure through whom Dante explores the possibility of expanding the problematic of desire from the courtly and private to the social and public; from this perspective, the miser is an emblem of the transition from the *Vita nuova* to the *Commedia*. When, in the final stanza of "Doglia mi

reca," Dante readdresses himself to the ladies, and denounces anyone who allows herself to be loved by such a man as he has described, he also ties together the poem's threads of desire into one knot of concupiscence: the depraved call by the name of "love" what is really mere bestial appetite ("chiamando amore appetito di fera"); they believe love to be "outside of the garden of reason" ("e crede amor fuor d'orto di ragione"). Dante has here welded the lover and the miser, and in so doing he has created a node of enormous significance for his future, no less than an adumbration of that she-wolf whose cupidity subtends both the lust of Paolo and Francesca and the political corruption of Florence. Courtly literature offers us many examples of lovers whose passion is outside of reason's garden, who are impelled by the "folle volere" that drives the miser, but courtly literature never dreams of calling the immoderate lover a miser; nor would the protagonist of Dante's sonnet "Io sono stato," which boldly proclaims that reason has no power against love, expect to find himself compared to an *avaro maladetto*! By making the comparison, Dante skewers courtly values, as Guittone had done before him, and then goes further: the comparison of the lover to the miser lays the foundation for the moral edifice of the *Commedia*, which is based on the notion of desire or love as the motive force for *all* our actions. Misdirected or immoderate desire leads to sin, and is therefore the distant origin for what we witness in Hell, where the misshapen desire has crystallized into act, as well as the more proximate origin for what we witness in Purgatory, where the soul's desires and dispositions are still visible in uncrystallized form. Love is, in fact, the impulse to which we can reduce all good action and its contrary: "amore, a cui reduci/ogne buono operare e 'l suo contraro" (*Purgatorio* 18, 14–15).

I will conclude this discussion of the significance of "Doglia mi reca" with a formal coda. The *Commedia* is a poem of epic dimension, epic scale, and yet it is also the most lyric of epics: it is the epic of the "I." Not only its first-person narrator, but also the lyricized narrative texture that is ever more present (for, with due respect to Croce, the "lyrical" canticle is not *Inferno*, but *Paradiso*) are indices of a lyric past that Dante chose never to leave behind. One feature of the *Commedia* that points to Dante's vernacular and lyric roots is the canto: why does Dante choose to invent the division into cantos, rather than divide his epic into long books of the sort Virgil uses in the *Aeneid*? Conceptually, I believe that the choice of the canto is connected to Dante's obsession with the new; the division into cantos renders the spiralling rhythm of new dawns and new dusks, the incessant new beginnings and endings that punctuate the line of becoming, the "cammin di nostra vita." Formally, I believe that the roots of the canto are to be sought in Dante's vernacular apprenticeship. A long canzone is roughly the length of a canto;

indeed, at 158 lines "Doglia mi reca" is longer than most cantos. When we think of the *Commedia* as 100 canzoni stitched together, we can better grasp both the later Dante's vertiginous distance from, and his remarkable fidelity to, his lyric past.

SUGGESTED READING

The twentieth century produced three great editions of Dante's lyrics, each magisterial in its own way. The fruits of Michele Barbi's long philological and historical labors are to be found in two volumes published after his death: M. Barbi and F. Maggini, eds., *Rime della Vita nuova e della giovinezza* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1956); M. Barbi and V. Pernicone, eds., *Rime della maturità e dell'esilio* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1969). Gianfranco Contini's *Rime* of 1946 (Milan: Einaudi, 2nd edn., 1965) remains unsurpassed for the pithiness and elegance of its formulations. Most useful for its comprehensiveness and for the clarity of the portrait that emerges of the early Italian lyric schools is the edition of Kenelm Foster and Patrick Boyde: *Dante's Lyric Poetry*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

This editorial enterprise culminated with the publication in 2002 of Domenico De Robertis' monumental five-volume edition of Dante lyrics: *Dante Alighieri: Rime*, in *Le Opere di Dante Alighieri*, Edizione Nazionale a cura della Società Dantesca Italiana, ed. Domenico De Robertis, 5 vols. (Firenze: Le Lettere, 2002). The five *tomi* are divided into three *volumi*: Volume I, *I documenti*, consisting of two *tomi*, offers a full review of the hundreds of manuscripts and early print editions in which Dante's lyrics were transcribed; Volume II, *Introduzione*, consisting of two *tomi*, comprises De Robertis' critical introduction to the *rime*; and Volume III, *Testi*, consisting of one *tomo*, presents the texts. De Robertis has added to the canon eight poems whose attribution was classified as dubious by previous editors. The enormous value of the documentary evidence he makes available is, however, compromised by what I consider a serious error in the matter of ordering the poems: De Robertis forsakes the chronological criterion for ordering adopted by his twentieth-century predecessors in favor of a bow to the editorial tradition, which divided the poems by genre, beginning with canzoni. For a full discussion of these editions, their choices, and the hermeneutical and cultural implications thereof, see Teodolinda Barolini, "Editing Dante's *Rime* and Italian Cultural History: Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarca . . . Barbi, Contini, Foster-Boyde, De Robertis," *Lettere Italiane* 56 (2004): 509–42.

On Dante's lyrics in general, see Patrick Boyde, *Dante's Style in His Lyric Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971). On the *rime petrose* in particular, see the impressively encyclopedic study by Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez, *Time and the Crystal: Studies in Dante's Rime petrose* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). On the *tenzone* with Forese Donati, see Susan Noakes, "Virility, Nobility, and Banking: The Crossing of Discourses in the *Tenzone* with Forese," in Teodolinda Barolini and H. Wayne Storey, eds., *Dante for the New Millennium* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), pp. 241–58. Christopher Kleinhenz provides a thorough review of the cultivators of the early sonnet in *The Early Italian Sonnet: The First Century (1220–1321)* (Lecce: Milella, 1986). On the material aspects of the lyric tradition and the implications for interpretation, see H. Wayne Storey, *Transcription and Visual Poetics in the Early Italian Lyric* (New York: Garland Press,

time); Guido Guinizzelli's refined, intellectualistic love poetry; and, most important for the *Vita nuova*, Guido Cavalcanti's exquisitely abstract and rarefied lyricism of the self. With respect to these influences, Dante's early poetry does not reveal any great originality. Only on occasion does a truly distinct voice break through in some of the lyrics. Nevertheless, it is clear that, from the very beginning, this voice was seeking to find itself – to express its own singularity, as it were – and the *Vita nuova*, in its sustained effort at self-commentary, testifies to the earnestness of this quest on the part of the young poet.

From this perspective it also seems clear that the prose dimension of the *Vita nuova* confesses, quite openly and dramatically, that Dante's first attempts to find his poetic voice were not altogether successful, indeed, that they were marked by an intrinsic failure. The last chapter of the *libello*, in which Dante declares that he has decided to remain silent until he finds a way to say of Beatrice what has never been said of any woman, indicates that the author is looking to the future for the true fulfillment of his literary vocation. In other words, the *Vita nuova*, as a self-editing document, ends with the author's gesture of cancelling or disqualifying his literary endeavors up until that time. It announces, in effect: "I was mistaken. I did not understand what I was really up to. My efforts have led to an impasse, at which I now find myself, and I have written this little book in order to say that, whatever my love for Beatrice was all about, I have not yet been able to express it adequately." In short, the prose narrative of the *Vita nuova* is ultimately "palinodic," or self-revisionary. Thus it is a typically Dantean work insofar as Dante never ceased, throughout his career, to revise, and in some sense rewrite, his past. Up until the end, when he finally embarked upon the *Divina Commedia*, he was forever trying to find his way out of a "dark wood" of past errors.

What is fascinating about the *Vita nuova* is the complex and subtle story it tells of Dante's youthful errors. These errors are manifold in nature and in what follows we shall examine the ways in which the *libello* seeks to represent them, interpret them, and recount the ways the author went about overcoming them. On the basis of Dante's own critical self-commentary, then, we shall try to delineate certain essential features of the work that every reader of the *Vita nuova* should keep in mind when approaching its elusive, and at times bizarre, narrative.

For a book composed in the thirteenth century, the *Vita nuova* is at bottom shocking, even blasphemous, in the way it glorifies a mortal woman named Beatrice. The daring of Dante's liberal use of the language of sacrality with reference to Beatrice does not abash us sufficiently, since we take it for granted by now, but the fact is that such a work, in its historical context,

approaches the limits of sacrilege. As far as we know, the *Vita nuova* was never condemned or burned by the authorities (probably because it had a very restricted audience – Dante's fellow poets, for the most part); nevertheless we should keep in mind that, at the time, it was potentially as scandalous a work of literature for the general public as, say, D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, which in 1915 was banned in England because of its obscenity.

Here too, however, there is a considerable discrepancy between the poems and the prose of the *Vita nuova*. In some of the poems Dante indeed uses religious or Christological analogies to speak of Beatrice (see, for example, the canzone "Donna pietosa," in chapter 23), but the degree to which he does so is minimal compared to the all-out glorification of Beatrice that occurs in the prose. Taken in their own right, the poems merely further the idealizing rhetoric of the medieval lyric tradition. The troubadours, for instance, were masters at such rhetoric when they praised the perfections of their ladies; the poets of the Sicilian School took over this same rhetoric and gave it an Italian inflection. Shortly thereafter Guido Guinizzelli, in his famous canzone "Al cor gentile," took the idealizing rhetoric even further when he spoke of his lady as a divine angel; yet even in his case the analogies between love and the cosmic order remained on the level of poetic tropes. Given these precedents, Dante's angelification of Beatrice in the canzone "Donne ch'avete" (chapter 19), for example, exasperates but does not break with this well-established tradition. Even the Christological analogies in "Donna pietosa," though daring in themselves, implicitly appeal to the poetic license of the idealizing lyric.

In the case of the *Vita nuova*'s prose, however, we can no longer assume that we are in the realm of mere rhetoric when Dante assures us that Beatrice was a miracle (as evidenced by her associations with the number nine), or that her greeting had a salvific power. Dante's glorification of Beatrice in the prose goes beyond the bounds of mere idealization. It asks us to take seriously the suggestion that she was no ordinary woman, that she was the singular incarnation of transcendence, and that she was nothing less than Dante's spiritual salvation itself. These are weighty, and somewhat shocking, claims to make about a mortal woman, yet the *Vita nuova* insists on their truth-value. In short, the *Vita nuova* represents, among other things, Dante's resolute attempt to *literalize* a poetic trope (the ideal woman) and to equate Beatrice with the prospect of transcendence itself.

However, one of the great paradoxes of this text (there are more than one) is that the narrative deliberately strains the reader's credibility, not only by virtue of its extravagant claims about Beatrice, but also because it belies at the same time that it affirms these claims. The story of Dante's blunders and errors with regard to Beatrice while she was alive cast into doubt the author's

reliability as a witness to the events he lived through at the time. Let us see why this is so.

In the early chapters of the *Vita nuova*, for example, we are told that his vision of Beatrice on the streets of Florence had an overwhelming effect on the young Dante, and that from the moment he first saw her, love took complete possession of his soul and lorded over it with "the faithful counsel of reason." This claim promptly reveals its irony in the subsequent chapters, which recount Dante's decision to use so-called "screen ladies" to help conceal the identity of the woman he loved. We are asked to believe that these screen ladies were nothing more than that – screens – but the narrative in fact reveals that the author here is merely trying to screen the truth of these parallel love affairs, if we may call them that, from his reader. In chapter 7, for example, Dante admits that when his first screen lady left Florence, he was "distraught at the loss of my beautiful defense." He says that he became dispirited, "more than I myself would have thought [possible]" before the departure. He then records a sonnet of lament he wrote on that occasion, claiming that he wrote it merely to preserve appearances, yet the sonnet is a persuasive confession of lovelornness. Where is the boundary here between appearance and reality? Are we really to believe that this lady was no more than a screen, or is it not more likely that Dante's devotion to Beatrice at the time was less than total – that his amorous sentiments were aimed in more than one direction?

The case of the second screen lady, described in chapter 10, seems to confirm the latter suspicion. Here Dante admits that in a short time he turned her into such an effective screen for his true love that many people began to gossip about the brashness of his behavior with regard to this new woman – behavior, we are told, which went beyond the bounds of courtesy. We are not informed of the precise nature of Dante's behavior, but it was obviously scandalous or distasteful enough to cause Beatrice to deny her greetings to Dante in public, whether out of jealousy or moral indignation we cannot say. The least we can say about it is that it was not typical of someone who was utterly and totally devoted to Beatrice at the time. Nor can we say that love was lording over him with the "faithful counsel of reason" in this case (it was the lord of love, after all, who advised Dante to take up with this new woman – chapter 9).

Finally, after Beatrice's death Dante falls in love with yet another woman, the so-called "gentle lady," who threatens to supplant Beatrice in Dante's affections altogether. It is not clear how long his new affair lasted (I use the term "affair" in the sentimental sense), but Dante tells us that one day he had a vision of Beatrice in which she appeared to him in the guise in which he had seen her for the first time, at nine years of age, and that this image

was overwhelming enough to cause him to repudiate his new love and turn all his thoughts and affections to the memory of Beatrice. Shortly thereafter the *Vita nuova* ends with Dante having had yet another "miraculous vision" of Beatrice, a vision which inspires him to remain silent until he can speak of her more adequately.

There is no doubt that Beatrice triumphs over her rivals by the end of the *Vita nuova*, yet this outcome should not be allowed to obscure the fact that Dante's "book of memory" is at once a testimony of his singular love for Beatrice as well as the story of his multiple loves both before and after her death. Meanwhile it turns out that the "lord" of love, who presumably dictated Dante's behavior with the "faithful counsel of reason," made a mess of his tutelage. At one point, we recall, he advised Dante to seek out a new screen lady (chapter 9), but when it became clear that this (bad) advice led to Beatrice's alienation from Dante, he reversed his counsel and advised him to lay aside the simulations ("tempus est ut pretermictantur simulacra nostra," chapter 12). In other words, this lord is revealed in due course as an impostor. He is the very figure of Dante's blunders and errors with regard to Beatrice, and in fact he disappears from the narrative in chapter 24 after announcing to Dante, in unambiguous terms, that Beatrice herself is love – thus rendering himself superfluous.

The foregoing remarks have put us in a position where we can begin to approach the deeper core of the *Vita nuova*. This core is pervaded by a simple, yet obsessive, question: "What is love?" It is the question that engaged Guido Guinizzelli (whom Dante cites as an authority in the sonnet of chapter 20) when he presumed to define love in speculative, cosmic terms in his canzone "Al cor gentil." Thanks to Guinizzelli, the question of love's nature became the dominant preoccupation of the younger generation of learned, intellectual poets to which Dante belonged – the so-called *stilnovist* poets (Cavalcanti, Dante, Cino da Pistoia, Lapo, and others). Guido Cavalcanti – Dante's "first friend" to whom the *Vita nuova* is dedicated – was particularly obsessed with the question, so much so that his entire poetic corpus represents a continuous effort to define, describe, and come to terms with the essence of this "accident," as he calls it in his famous poem "Donna me prega."

It is impossible to understand the *Vita nuova* (a story about Dante's multiple loves which ends with Beatrice's glorious triumph) without understanding the extent to which this question – "What is love?" – utterly absorbed the literary community of which Dante was a member at the time. The *Vita nuova* is nothing less than Dante's own answer to that question. It is an answer that goes by the name of Beatrice. But to understand the meaning of Dante's answer it is necessary to fathom the question, which requires some

knowledge of what exactly it is that Dante is responding to in the *Vita nuova* when he equates Beatrice with love itself. He is responding above all to his "first friend," Guido Cavalcanti.

There is irony in the fact that Dante dedicates the *Vita nuova* to Cavalcanti, for the book figures ultimately as his polemic with his older friend on the nature of love. When Dante began writing lyrics, Cavalcanti was the most original and compelling of Italian poets to date. He was Dante's senior by seven years, and, in addition to his lyric genius and recondite knowledge of philosophy, he was also a dashing aristocrat who belonged to one of the most powerful Florentine families. In short, Dante's literary career began under the spell of Cavalcanti. The poems of the *Vita nuova*, if not the prose, show that the "first friend" was by far the most decisive influence on him at the time. Dante's initial experience of love, as it is figured in the *Vita nuova*, is so Cavalcantian in nature as to be merely derivative and, in that sense, banal. There is every indication that, at the start, Dante wholly adopted and thus reconfirmed Cavalcanti's answer to the question "What is love?" Let us consider that answer.

Cavalcanti portrays love almost exclusively in negative terms, as a force of bewilderment, disorder, and dissolution. The lyric subject that speaks in his poems about the effects of love on the lover invariably describes a drama of self-dispossession. Love is a form of violation, if not violence, shattering the fragile core of the self and leading it to the brink of death. In the lover who suffers its effects occurs an upheaval of the equilibrium of the various "spirits" that regulate life (see Dante's description of such an upheaval in chapter 2 of the *Vita nuova*, which recounts his first vision of Beatrice). The lover pales, languishes, despairs, and sighs his life away when this passion takes possession of his body and soul. In essence, love figures in Cavalcanti's poetry as the overwhelming experience of one's own precarious finitude, if not death.

Cavalcanti elaborated his conception of love in abstract, philosophical terms in his poem "Donna me prega," which assigns love to the realm of the appetites. By arousing an inordinate and anarchic desire in the lover, love leads to states of ire, blindness, and *tristitia*, or melancholy. The danger of this passion lies in the fundamental misunderstanding it brings about in the lover's psyche, for the lover has a tendency to confuse the true object of love with the woman who inspires it. While the woman *inspires* love, she cannot answer its longings. For Cavalcanti, the beloved is nothing more than a bewitching illusion. She *seems* to possess in her person the ideal beauty that love desires, but in truth the beauty she manifests does not belong to her at all. Like all ideal qualities (truth, virtue, beatitude), her beauty belongs to a radically transcendent realm of universality which has no substantial links

that is in every way incarnational and hypostatic. It is here, in a chapter that evokes the presence of Cavalcanti most deliberately, that Dante stakes his claim. The claim is that Beatrice does not manifest love merely accidentally or temporarily (as Cavalcanti would have it), but that she is the substantial embodiment of love itself.

From this point on, until her death, Beatrice's splendor attains its height. In the next two chapters Dante goes on to describe the bliss that he, as well as others, experienced in her presence – a presence that he assures us was miraculous in nature. Unfortunately it was also a presence of which he would soon find himself deprived. When her early death removes Beatrice from the world, Dante succumbs to grief, confusion, and paralysis. He even lapses back into a sombre Cavalcantianism, as in the episode with the "gentle lady," but by the end of the *Vita nuova* the memory of Beatrice intervenes to put him on a new track. After his "miraculous vision" of Beatrice in heaven, a whole new prospect – existential, spiritual, and no doubt literary – seems to open up for him. We do not know the precise nature of this prospect, for the book ends with Dante's vow of silence and his promise to write of Beatrice in the future what has never been written of any woman. Does this promise allude to the *Divina Commedia*? It is impossible to know. We are told only that a revelation took place. The most we can conclude from this suspended ending is that it does not terminate the story as much as project it into a new, unrealized horizon altogether. In other words, the "book of memory" ends at the threshold of a new beginning that transcends memory insofar as it extends into the future. Since the *Vita nuova* cannot presume to record what lies beyond the bounds of memory, it ends in a silence that is full of anticipation of future speech.

Whatever the nature of the new life promised by such a future, such a prospect, there is no question that it stands in a decisive relation to the past. The new life in question has been rendered possible (if not actual) by Dante's retrospective coming to terms with (and overcoming of) the errors and misunderstandings of his past. The book we have just read is precisely that retrospective self-editing digest that prepares the way for another itinerary altogether. To speculate about the future itinerary is feckless and superfluous (Dante scholars have all too readily assumed it was nothing less than the *Divina Commedia*, but there is no basis for such speculation in the text). All we can say is that, in the *Vita nuova*, Dante acknowledges, and claims to have overcome, his past errors, not the least of which, as we have seen, was his tendency to confuse his vocation, both as a poet and a lover, with that of his "first friend."

What is love? We have seen that for Cavalcanti it amounted to the drama of the lover's intimations of his own finitude. Cavalcanti's poetry is a prodigous

to speak of this woman more adequately. That is Dante's way of saying the story is over only for those who decide to foreclose its ending.

SUGGESTED READING

Book-length studies of Dante's *Vita nuova* in English include Charles S. Singleton's classic, *An Essay on the Vita nuova* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949; rpt, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); J. E. Shaw's *Essays on the Vita nuova* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1929); Jerome Mazzaro's *The Figure of Dante: An Essay on the Vita nuova* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); and Robert P. Harrison's *The Body of Beatrice* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). For a classic book-length study in Italian, see Domenico De Robertis' *Il libro della Vita nuova* (Florence: Sansoni, 1961). A fine collection of diverse essays on the *Vita nuova* is to be found in the special issue of *Dante Studies* 92 (1974), as well as the special issue of *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* (Spring 1990) edited by David Wallace. One of the best individual essays on the *Vita nuova* in English is Giuseppe Mazzotta's "The Language of Poetry in the *Vita nuova*," *Rivista di studi italiani* 1 (1983): 3–14.

The issue of personality is also raised by the problem of the *prosopopeia* (that is, the allegorical personification) of Amore which was the initial pretext for the digression on ancient and modern poetry. Dante's point is that Love, the central – first destructive, then salvific – force that, in conjunction with Beatrice, dominates Dante's life, is not an externalized being at all, but a part of himself. To the extent that Love has now been transformed into a positive, inspiring force, with roots in divinity, the function of this masking is to represent as an impersonal, visionary impetus something located personally in Dante-*dicitore* on his way to true authorial status.

The complex relationship between personality and authorship is far more explicitly articulated in the post-exilic, pre-comedic, work, *Convivio*, where Dante deploys for the first time the technical terminology of authority most commonly used in late medieval Latin culture. The declared aim of the treatise is far higher than that of *Vita nuova*. Having previously restricted vernacular poetry to the subject of heterosexual love, with (relatively uneducated) women as the primary audience, Dante now claims for a series of his vernacular canzoni the power to transmit to an Italian-speaking audience, primarily male, the ethical truths articulated in classical philosophy, and especially in the works of *the* philosophical author, Aristotle. This, he says, will appear in a series of prose commentaries on his canzoni that expose an allegorical, ethical content hidden beneath literal songs of love.

In book 1 of *Convivio*, Dante sets out to explain two constituent features of his treatise, both of which tend to compromise whatever "authority" he may possess. First, he needs to explain his pervasive first-person singular presence in the work, when (classical) rhetoric excludes this on the grounds that personalized discourse compromises the credibility of any argument (1, 2–4). Second, he needs to explain the use of vernacular (i.e., proto-Italian), a contingent, historically mutable, non-prestigious language, rather than *grammatica*, i.e., Latin, a rule-governed language that transcends time, place, and person, whose character as the normative language of intellectual authority he particularly stresses (1, 5–13). Ironically, his explanation of the former problem only emphasizes the question of the incompatibility of personality with authority. He says that his exile, which has brought him personally into the presence of many people who had only known him through his works, has diminished his own stature and that of the said works, precisely because personal presence compromises credibility. The remedy, however, can only be that of a protracted self-justification: a first person singular writing to counter the negative effect of personal presence.

The justification of the use of Italian is far more lengthy and elaborate, and I only have space here to call attention to a couple of important issues it raises. First of all, despite Dante's deferential subordination of the vernacular

Perhaps just as significant, from this point of view, is the digression within a digression dedicated to the poetic *autore* from *avieo* that immediately precedes the etymology of *autore* from *autenim*:

> This word, namely "autore," can descend from one of two sources. One is a verb no longer much used in grammar [i.e., Latin], namely "auieo" which means as much as "to bind words." And whoever looks carefully at it *in its first person singular form* will see that it openly demonstrates this meaning, because it is made up only of the bonds of words, that is, only of the five vowels, that are the soul and bond of every word, and composed of them in a mobile form that figures the image of a bond . . . And inasmuch as "autore" derives from this verb, it is taken to refer to the poets alone, who with musical art have bound together their words: and with this meaning we are not concerned at present. (4, 6)

The ostensible function of the digression is to separate the purely formal "authority" of the poet from the moral and intellectual content offered up under the aegis of the philosophical "autore" from *autentim*. This is a curious, and curiously self-deprecating, gesture, however, since (1) Dante is nothing if not a poet, but there is no overt indication that this type of authority concerns him or his canzoni at all; and (2) the whole point of the *Convivio* is to argue for the philosophical content of Dante's canzoni, so that the separation of poetic and philosophical *autori* seems counter-productive.

There are, however, compelling internal reasons to think that the disclaimer Dante offers is disingenuous, part of the ongoing rhetorical process of concealing and revealing his ambitions simultaneously. Notably, if we look back at the discussion of poetic language at the end of book 1, we see that this definition responds very closely to Dante's affirmation of his mission to bind together the vernacular into an authoritative language through the use of "rhythm and rhyme," which he there clearly posits as the *sine qua non* for proving that Italian is capable of expressing the same (philosophical) concepts as Latin. In other words, at the very moment when he distinguishes one kind of authorship from another, he is implying their inextricable connection. Similarly, at the very moment when he is defining the role of the *autore* in impersonal terms and placing himself in the role not of the *auctor* but of one who humbly believes and obeys authoritative words, he also leaves a hint, hidden in plain sight, of a very different role for himself as individual author. The etymon, *avieo*, he carefully emphasizes, is the first-person singular form of this Latin verb. In other words, he is saying, in quotation marks, "I [Dante] author."