CHAPTER I

Dante and the Lyric Past

Dante is heir to a complex and lively Italian lyric tradition that had its roots in the Provençal poetry nourished by the rivalling courts of twelfth-century southern France. The conventions of troubadour love poetry—based on the notion of the lover's feudal service to "midons" (Italian, *madonna*), his lady, from whom he expects a "guerdon" (Italian, *guiderdone*), or reward—were successfully transplanted to the court of Frederick II in Palermo. Palermo became the capital of the first group of Italian vernacular lyric poets, the so-called Sicilian School; the centralized imperial court did not offer a suitable venue for the transplantation of Provence's contentious political poetry, which was left behind.

The "leader" (Italian, *caposcuola*) of the Sicilian School was Giacomo da Lentini, most likely the inventor of the sonnet (while the Provençal *canso* was the model for the Italian canzone, the sonnet is an Italian, and specifically Sicilian, contribution to the various European lyric genres). Giacomo signs himself "the Notary," referring to his position in the imperial government; this is the title Dante uses for him in *Purgatorio* 24, where the poet Bonagiunta is assigned the task of dividing the Italian lyric tradition between the old—represented by Giacomo, Guittone, and Bonagiunta himself—and the new: the avant-garde poets of the "dolce stil novo" or "sweet new style" (*Purg.* 24.57), as Dante retrospectively baptizes the lyric movement that he helped spearhead in his youth. Like Giacomo, the other Sicilian poets were in the main court functionaries: in the *De vulgari eloquentia* Guido delle Colonne is called "Judge of Messina," while Pier della Vigna, whom Dante places among the suicides in hell, was Frederick's chancellor and private secretary. Their moment in history coincides with Frederick's moment, and the demise of their school essentially coincides with the emperor's death in 1250.

At the heart of troubadour poetry is an unresolved tension between the poet-lover's allegiance to the lady and his allegiance to God; the love-service owed the one inevitably comes into conflict with the love-service owed the other. Giacomo da Lentini renders the conflict with great clarity in this sonnet (*Io m'aggio posto in core a Dio servire*):

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:
che 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.[1]

Giacomo's sonnet exemplifies the courtly dilemma of conflicted desire. In it, the poet deploys the considerable resources of the sonnet as a formal construct in such a way as to highlight and dramatize his theme, which is that he—like the sonnet itself—is "diviso" (8), divided in two.

The Sicilian sonnet is divided into two parts, set off from each other by a change in rhyme: the octave rhymes ABABAB, 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 verse'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 verse 11 to verse 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 verse 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 (this somewhat defensive affirmation of Guittone's worth is the result of centuries of Dante-inspired devalorization of the Aretine), Guittone is responsible for key innovations in the Italian lyric. Stylistically, his *ornatus* derives not just from the Sicilians, but also from first-hand appreciation of Provençal language, meter, and rhetoric. Very important, too, is the political dimension of his work; 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*. And, perhaps most important for Dante, he experienced a religious conversion (becoming a member of the Frati Godenti circa 1265) that is reflected in his verse.

Guittone's poetry moves, by way of the so-called "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. This is a view of Guittone's poetic trajectory, it should be said, that was adopted by his contemporaries, who expressed it in a manuscript tradition that divides his verse according to the headings "Guittone" and "Frate Guittone." 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 also Guido Cavalcanti, who in the sonnet *Da più a uno face un sollegismo* scorns the notion of Guittone as a source of ''insegnamento'' (teaching).

Ora parrà forcefully announces the transition from a poesis inspired by love to one driven by moral didacticism. In the canzone's first two stanzas, Guittone strikes a blow at the inherited problem of the lover-poet's conflicted allegiance, his oscillation between fealty to God and fealty to the lady. Guittone deals with the dilemma of the lover-poet's dual allegiance by rejecting the courtly troubadour ethos and what he brands carnal love for God and moral virtue. He simply repudiates the courtly ethos, first by denying the courtly linkage between love and worth, especially poetic worth:

> Ora parrà s'eo saverò cantare
> e s'eo varrò quanco valer già soglio,
> poi che del tutto Amor fug[g]h' 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,
> che '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 nocchier 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.
(*Ora parrà*, 1–30)

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 open em-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.

Guittone here recommends a life of abstinence from vice and willingness to toil; only thus can one advance one's "state to honor" (*stato ad onore* [26]). The key to Guittone's ethical thinking is "misora"—

moderation—as we see at the end of the second stanza: "Good striving brings honor, as long as one pursues it with measure." Moderation is the concept that allows Guittone to endorse a bourgeois ethic and still be morally secure. It allows him to deploy the verb *acquistare*, "to acquire," in the extraordinary endorsement of a non-ascetic bourgeois life-style that we find in the formulation "aquistare gaudendo" (joyfully acquiring) from Guittone's canzone of exile, *Gente noiosa e villana* (74). A life in which one can take pleasure in acquiring is part of what has been lost from Arezzo, declares *Gente noiosa*, which concludes with the poet looking forward to life in a community that allows him, unlike Arezzo, "to acquire worth and joy and material possessions" (*pregi'* aquistando *e solazzo ed avere* [146]).

For Guittone, the bourgeois ethic of *aquistare gaudendo*, tempered always by the moderation that precludes the slip into avarice, thus replaces the courtly paradigm put forth by Giacomo da Lentini. In lieu of courtly love, which he has redefined as carnal desire and consequently repudiated, Guittone proposes not monastic withdrawal but a life of civic engagement and joyful (and moderate) acquisition. This bourgeois ethic has important repercussions on the choices Guittone puts forward: although he tells us to reject carnal desire—which is what courtly love becomes when stripped of its sustaining ideology—he does not tell us (as recanting troubadours frequently did) to embrace monastic contemplation. The Guittonian ideal is fostered not in the regional courts of Provence or the imperial court of Palermo, but in the communal life of the emerging Tuscan mercantile class. Recommending a life of measured toil and measured gain, leavened by the pursuit of "honored Wisdom" (*orrato Saver*), Guittone seeks an honored position in the community and 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. In *Voi, ch'avete mutata la maniera*, 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*).[2]

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 (Guinizzelli's *Al cor gentil* is a long way from Cavalcanti's hyperphilosophical *Donna me prega*), 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, for instance, of the correspondence between Guido Cavalcanti and Guido Orlandi, 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 circa 1250; he died in 1300), Dante (1265–1321), Cino (c. 1270–1336 or 1337), and the lesser Lapo Gianni, Gianni Alfani, and Dino Frescobaldi. In characterizing this movement, Bonagiunta was right to point to the yoking of philosophy—indeed theology—to eros. What Bonagiunta could not foresee was the fertility of a conjoining that would effectively dissolve the impasse that drove troubadour poetry and give rise to a theologized courtly love, epitomized by the figure of Dante's Beatrice, the lady who does not separate the lover from God but leads him to God.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Bonagiunta's complaint regarding the theologizing of love was directed at Guinizzelli, and Guinizzelli's canzone *Al cor gentil rempaira sempre amore* is an excellent case in point: its fifth stanza argues that the noble lover should obey his lady in the same way that the angelic intelligence obeys God, thus implicitly setting up analogies between the lover and the heavenly intelligence, on the one hand, and the lady and God, on the other. As though to acknowledge—and simultaneously defuse—the radical thrust of his argument, in the *congedo* Guinizzelli dramatizes an imagined confrontation between himself and God, by whom he stands accused of having dared to make vain semblances of the divine, of having presumed to find traces of God's love in what can only be a "vano amor," a vain earthly love:

> Donna, Deo mi dirà: "Che presomisti?,"
> siando l'alma mia a lui davanti.
> "Lo ciel passasti e 'nfin a Me venisti,
> e desti in vano amor Me per semblanti;
> ch'a Me conven le laude
> e a la reina del regname degno,
> per cui cessa onne fraude."
> Dir Li porò: "Tenne d'angel sembianza
> che fosse del Tuo regno;
> non me fu fallo, s'in lei posi amanza."
> (*Al cor gentil*, 51–60)

> *Lady, God will say to me: "How did you presume?" when my soul will be in front of him. "You passed through the heavens and came all the way to me, and you rendered me through the likenesses of vain love; for to me belong the praises and to the queen of the worthy kingdom, through whom all wickedness dies." I will be able to say to him: "She had the semblance of an angel that was of your kingdom; it was no fault in me, if I placed love in her."*

In other words, Guinizzelli has God tell him that he has gone too far. This poet, who has in fact transgressed, pushing to new latitudes the boundaries of the tradition in which he works, finds a supremely witty way of solidifying his gains, of sanctioning his boldness and concretizing what could have seemed merely a whimsical passing conceit: he stages the trial of his presumption ("Che presomisti?" is God's opening argument), registering the indictment but also therefore the self-defense, the justification that he offers before the divine tribunal. It is simply this: the lady possessed the semblance of an angel, of a creature of God's realm—therefore it was not his fault if he loved her. Thus Guinizzelli both acknowledges the dangers of his audacious yoking of the secular with the divine, and brilliantly defends his analogical procedure. If his original "fault" was a too expansive definition of the likenesses through which we can know God (*e desti in vano amor Me* per semblanti), the defense will rest on just such a likeness (*Tenne d'angel* sembianza). Guinizzelli justifies himself with the same analogies that were his sin in the first place, throwing the blame back on the original writer, God, who in his book of the universe made ladies so like angels.

In fact, the *congedo* of *Al cor gentil*, with its stated likeness between ladies and angels, backs off somewhat from the canzone's fifth stanza, with its implied likeness between the lady and God himself. The net result of the poem, nonetheless, is to take the possibility of similitude between the lady and the divine much more seriously than it had been taken heretofore, to take her "angelic" qualities out of the realm of amorous hyperbole and into the realm of bona fide theological speculation. With respect to the impasse of troubadour poetry, evoked by Guinizzelli in the "Donna, Deo" conjunction with which the *congedo* begins, we could say that the explicit dramatization of the conflict in *Al cor gentil* goes a long way toward removing it as a problem. In sharp contrast to the troubadours, whose careers are frequently capped by recanting both love and love poetry and retiring to a monastery; in contrast to Giacomo da Lentini, who airs the conflict at its most conflictual in the sonnet *Io m'aggio posto in core a Dio servire*; in contrast to Guittone, who in a bourgeois Italian variation of the troubadour model rejects love but without retiring from secular life; in contrast to all the above, Guinizzelli provides a first step toward the "solution": he begins the process of making the lady more like God so that the two poles of the dilemma are conflated, with the result that the lover does not have to choose between them.

Likeness and similitude are Guinizzelli's modes of choice, paving the way for the *Vita nuova* and ultimately the *Commedia,* where similitude will give way to metaphor, as Dante conflates into one the two poles of his desire, making the journey to Beatrice coincide with the journey to God, and collapsing much farther than theology would warrant the distinction between the lady—the luminous and numinous sign of God's presence on earth—and the ultimate being whose significance she figures forth. In the sonnet *Io vogl' del ver la mia donna laudare* (I want in truth to praise my lady), Guinizzelli's theologically ennobled lady possesses literally beatific effects: when she passes by, she lowers pride in anyone she greets, makes a believer of anyone who is not, serves as a barometer of moral worth—since she cannot be approached 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*.[3] In that work Dante builds on and further radicalizes Guinizzelli's theologized courtly love to construct 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. While Guinizzelli's *Io vogl' del ver la mia donna laudare* offers us a lady whose effects are morally edifying and in themselves miraculous, it does not conjure an ontological miracle, as does Dante's sonnet *Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare*. One could say that the work of *Tanto gentile* is to elide the poet out of the poem—the "I" is present only in the possessive "mia" in "la donna mia" of the second verse, while the "I" is the first word and driving force of Guinizzelli's sonnet—and to show forth the lady in her miraculous essence, to make her glory visible, apparent, and manifest:

> Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare
> la donna mia quand'ella altrui saluta,
> ch'ogne lingua deven tremando muta,
> e li occhi no l'ardiscon di guardare.
> 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*, 5–8)
>
> *So noble and so honorable appears my lady when she greets someone that each tongue falls tremblingly mute and eyes do not dare to gaze. She passes by, hearing herself praised, benignly dressed in humility; and she appears to be a thing that has 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*), and this is the path called Guido Cavalcanti. Guido's poetic *disaventura* (to use one of his key words) can be considered a dead end in two ways: first, with respect to its ideology, which conceives love as a dead-end passion, a subrational 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* (inter alios) 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 conven ch'i' porti*. 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 noncarnal 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* [*VN* 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?) (*Purg.* 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 *sonetti rinterzati* 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* [*VN* 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* [*VN* 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. The statement "la mia lingua parlò quasi come per sé stessa mossa" (my tongue spoke almost as if moved by itself) (*VN* 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) (*Purg.* 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") (*Purg*. 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.[4] 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 owed 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 in any way, and that are referred to simply as the *Rime* or "Lyric Poems" (since they were never collected, they have no authorial title). This wonderful collection of sonnets, ballate, and canzoni, traditionally consisting of eighty-eight poems of definite attribution, but expanded in De Robertis's edition of 2002 by eight more poems, was written over a span of approximately twenty-five years, from circa 1283 to circa 1307–8, that is, from Dante's teens to after the *Inferno* was already begun.[5] The *Rime* bring 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* express 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 the lyrics 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 a 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.[6] This expansion 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;[7] 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 *Doglia mi reca*; and late love poetry, such as the correspondence sonnets exchanged with Cino da Pistoia and the canzone *Amor, da che convien*. Although Dante's lyrics are sometimes valued less than the more mono-tonal and unified productions of, say, a Cavalcanti or a Petrarch, it is precisely their infinite variety that is the key to Dante's greatness; they are—with the prose works written during these years—the worthy and necessary prerequisites for a work as nonfinite as the *Commedia*.

The *Rime* contain the traces of Dante's stylistic and ideological experimentation. The *tenzone* of scurrilous sonnets exchanged between Dante and his friend Forese Donati, for instance, was long denied a place among Dante's works because of its base content, considered inappropriate for the refined poet of the *Vita nuova* and yet, without it, we would be hard put to trace the passage from the tightly circumscribed world of the *Vita nuova* to the all-inclusive cosmos of the *Commedia.*[8] Nor does the *tenzone*'s lowly content obscure the archetypal signs of Dante's poetic mastery, evidenced by the compact vigor and concise force of his diction, and the effortless energy with which one insult springs from another. Whereas Forese requires a full sonnet to accuse Dante of being a bounder who lives off the charity of others, Dante characteristically packs an insult into each verse of the opening quatrain of *Bicci novel*, which tells Forese that (1) he is a bastard, (2) his mother is dishonored, (3) he is a glutton, and (4) to support his gluttony he is a thief:

> Bicci novel, figliuol di non so cui
> (s'i' non ne domandasse monna Tessa),
> giù per la gola tanta roba hai messa
> ch'a forza ti convien tòrre l'altrui.
> (*Bicci novel*, 1–4)

Young Bicci, son of I don't know who [short of asking my lady Tessa], you've stuffed so much down your gorge that you're driven to take from others.[9]

Stylistically, the *Rime* demonstrate continuities converging in the *Commedia*: thus, we can discern in the *tenzone* the seeds of a later vulgar and realistic style associated with *Inferno*. Ideologically, however, the *Rime* offer fascinating examples of discontinuities: thus, the early and generically stilnovist canzoni *E' m'incresce di me* and *Lo doloroso amor* testify to the possibility of an anti–*Vita nuova*, a Cavalcantian *Vita nuova*, whose Beatrice brings not life but death. In *Lo* *doloroso amor* Dante declares "Per quella moro c'ha nome Beatrice" (I die because of her whose name is Beatrice), a scandalous enough assertion for a poet whose career is forged on the notion that "Per quella vivo c'ha nome Beatrice." And in *E' m'incresce di me*, the birth of a lady who possesses "homicidal eyes" (*occhi micidiali*) is described in language resonant of the *Vita nuova*:

> Lo giorno che costei nel mondo venne,
> secondo che si trova
> nel libro de la mente che vien meno,
> la mia persona pargola sostenne
> una passïon nova,
> tal ch'io rimasi di paura pieno
> (*E' m'incresce di me*, 57–61)

> *The day that she came into the world, according to what is found in the book of my mind that is passing away, my childish body sustained a new emotion, such that I remained full of fear.*

From the perspective of the *Vita nuova* or the *Commedia,* where Cavalcanti is ideologically discounted, what we find here is an impossible hybrid, a fusion of elements that in the more canonical texts are kept separate. There are elements typical of the *Vita nuova*: the treatment of Beatrice's presence, in this case her birth, as a historically and literally miraculous event; the reference to the protagonist's "book of memory," in which the events of his life have been recorded; his juvenile susceptibility to a "passïon" defined as "nova," that is, miraculous, unexpected, totally new. But these elements are joined, as they would not be in the *Vita nuova,* to Cavalcantian stylemes: the book of his mind is failing, passing away, while the "passïon nova" fills the lover with that most Cavalcantian of emotions, fear.

Dante cannot be pigeonholed; his lyrics are salutary reminders that the dialectical twists of his itinerary cannot be flattened into a straightforward progress. We must remember Dante's sonnet to Cino da Pistoia, *Io sono stato con Amore insieme*, written most likely between 1303 and 1306, and thus a decade or so after the spiritualized love of the *Vita nuova*, in which he characterizes love as an overriding force that dominates reason and free will, and admits to having first experienced such love in his ninth year, that is vis-à-vis Beatrice:

> Io sono stato con Amore insieme
> da la circulazione del sol mia nona,

> e so com'egli affrena e come sprona,
> e come sotto lui si ride e geme.
> Chi ragione o virtù contra gli sprieme,
> fa come que che 'n la tempesta sona
> (*Io sono stato*, 1–6)

> *I have been together with Love since my ninth revolution of the sun, and I know how he curbs and how he spurs, and how under him one laughs and groans. He who puts forth reason or virtue against him does as one who makes noise during a tempest.*

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" (*Inf.* 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,* 2:323). 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.
> (*Amor, da che convien*, 61–66)

> *To this state, Love, you have reduced me, up in 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; in *Inferno* 5 ineluctable 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 referred to as Dante's canzone on avarice, and therefore characterized as "stumbling" upon its main theme rather late,[10] in fact deliberately sets out to graft a discourse on avarice onto its courtly (actually anticourtly) introduction.

Doglia mi reca begins aggressively, 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 nonvirtuous 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.
>
> (*Doglia mi reca*, 69–84)

> *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) (*Con*. 3.15.9). 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" (*Purg.* 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 Vergil 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 spiraling 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 one hundred canzoni stitched together, we can better grasp both the later Dante's vertiginous distance from, and remarkable fidelity to, his lyric past.