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Dante's first book (his libello, or "little book," as he calls it), marks the beginning of a tendency that will dominate his literary career as a whole - the tendency to edit the self. All of Dante's major works - the Vita nuova, the Convivio, the De vulgari eloquentia, and of course the Divina Commedia - share this pattern of self-commentary on the part of an author who, for some reason, was never content merely to write poetry, but who also felt the need to instruct his reader about how that poetry came into being and how it should be read. Dante's work has been taken seriously by his readers over the centuries, to be sure, but it is fair to say that no one has ever taken it more seriously than the author himself.

The most striking aspect of the Vita nuova, for those who do not merely take its canonical stature for granted, or whose perception of the work is not mystified by the fact of its authorship, is the utter seriousness with which the author sets out to dignify and solemnify the rather innocent (and often mediocre) lyric poems that he composed in his youth. The Vita nuova gives the impression that Dante was unwilling to allow the poems to stand on their own but strove, through his prose commentary, to give them the sort of weight they lacked in their own right. There is far more to the libello than this, as we shall see, but it is important to state at the outset that we are dealing here with an author who had an inordinate anxiety about defining, self-consciously and for the most part retrogressively, the nature and ambitions of his literary vocation.

Taken on their own, the poems of the Vita nuova tell a somewhat different story than the one Dante narrates in the prose. It is the story of a young poet whose first experiments in the lyric medium were largely determined by the literary traditions he inherited in the late 1280s. These traditions include the Sicilian School (which in effect invented a literary language for Italy by transcribing the Provençal lyric conventions into a courtly, supra-regional idiom); Guittone d'Arezzo's inelegant but linguistically innovative municipal verse (later derided by Dante, but whose influence was considerable at the 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 "palindomic," 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 , for example, Dante admits that when his first screen lady left Florence, he was "distracted 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 , 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).

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), 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). 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 Guinizelli (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 Guinizelli, 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 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 with the realm of materiality (this, in a highly over-simplified formula, is Cavalcanti's so-called Averroism). This transcendent realm is accessible only to abstract contemplation, which must remain free from the compulsions of appetition. The love passion is potentially destructive to the degree that it arouses the lover's appetites - which seek possession - and hence disturbs the serenity of reflection. In a word, the passion engendered by love misdirects the lover's desire toward the woman herself, thus disabling reason's capacity to contemplate the universals in all their abstract ideality.

Hence Cavalcanti did not believe that any woman could embody love in the absolute sense, given that all her admirable qualities (which inspire love in the first place) are impersonal attributes which other women may also exhibit and which ultimately pertain to the non-material order. This is a form of Platonism, to be sure, but in Cavalcanti's poetry it takes on a uniquely lyrical pathos as the lover laments, in exquisite verse, the psychic disorder and victimization he suffers at the hands of a sinister and destructive passion.

The *Vita nuova* rehearses, in a persuasive way, the drama of love as Cavalcanti conceived of it. Dante's description of the disruption of his "spirits" on the occasion of his first vision of Beatrice is Cavalcantian through and through. So is the "marvelous vision" in chapter , in which Beatrice lies in the arms of the lord of love, who holds Dante's flaming heart in his hand - a heart which he then feeds to Beatrice against her will (Cavalcanti had used the image of a burning heart in one of his poems, "Perché non fuoro a me gli occhi dispenti"). The rigorous association of love with death in his vision is strictly Cavalcantian - an association that also recurs in many of the poems - and hence it is no accident that Dante's friendship with the older poet was inaugurated as a result of this dark and dubious dream.

With the exception of a brief interlude, during which Dante resolves to write only poems that praise Beatrice, almost all of the poems of the *Vita nuova* describe Dante's experience of love in Cavalcantian terms of disruption and discombobulation. Even the lexicon is Cavalcantian: words like "sbigottito" ("bewildered"), "struggere" ("to destroy"), "grave" ("grave"), "plorare" ("to cry"), "orranza" ("honor"), and so on. Dante's "battle of the thoughts," which occurs both toward the beginning and at the end of the narrative, is also typically Cavalcantian. And last but not least, the obsessive theme of death, which pervades both the poems and the prose, is as sure an indication as any that we find ourselves here in Cavalcanti's psychic theater of self-dispossession and victimization.

And yet despite the Cavalcantianism that haunts it, or perhaps even because of it, the *Vita nuova* remains Dante's polemical declaration of independence from his "first friend." In her salvific status Beatrice contradicts and disqualifies the pessimistic notion of love as victimization. Dante's insistence on her miraculous grace, her utter singularity, and her non-substitutability by other women, as it were, conveys a message to Cavalcanti to the effect that Dante repudiates the despair that characterizes his friend's psychology and stakes his very salvation on his woman's incarnation of love. This is why it is essential that the *Vita nuova* should both glorify Beatrice and at the same time tell the story of how she triumphed over all her rivals in love. It is only through Dante's multiplication of his loves that Beatrice's singularity and authenticity can be effectively dramatized and confirmed. The episode of the "gentle lady" is especially crucial to Dante's declaration of faith, for it affirms that, even in her absence, Beatrice cannot be replaced by another woman.

It is not by chance, therefore, that Dante's polemical gestures toward Guido Cavalcanti became most

poignant at precisely that moment in the text when Beatrice's incarnational status is affirmed most decisively. The reference is to the dramatic scene in chapter 24 of the *Vita nuova*. Let us turn to it.

Dante is sitting in some public place and feels a tremor in his heart. He has a vision of the lord of love, who tells him to be joyous. Then he sees a woman named Giovanna walking down the street, followed by Beatrice. Giovanna was the woman loved by Cavalcanti, who gave her the nickname "Primavera" in one of his poems. The lord of love tells Dante that he inspired Cavalcanti to give her that name for this occasion alone, when she would precede Beatrice on the streets of Florence ("prima verrà" in Italian means "she will come first"). He then interprets her real name, Giovanna, by reference to John the Baptist, the prophet who preceded Christ. Finally, he tells Dante that anyone who considers Beatrice properly would call her love itself, "because of the great similitude she bears to me." With these words this figure of speech - the lord of love - disappears from the *Vita nuova* altogether. Love and Beatrice have become absolutely identified with one another, and at the heart of this identification lies an analogy with Christ.

In this passage Dante makes a point of mentioning that, at the time, he believed that Cavalcanti still loved Giovanna. He was in fact mistaken. Dante's "first friend" ("first" like Giovanna, who "comes first" or precedes Beatrice) had already become disillusioned with Giovanna. His heart was already elsewhere. Such inconstancy on Guido's part was of course consistent with his disillusioning conception of love, for, as we have seen, he believed that what one admired in a noble woman were transcendent qualities that did not belong to her person in any inherent or substantial way. It is significant, therefore, that precisely at this critical juncture of the *Vita nuova* Dante affirms Beatrice's personhood most forcefully - a personhood 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 prodigious phenomenology of the effects of disorder and privation which love brings about in the self, foreshadowing its death. The poetry of the *Vita nuova* for the most part shares Cavalcanti's preoccupation with the self's finitude, yet the prose narrative revises the postures adopted by Dante in his poems and offers a radically different answer to the question of love's nature. That answer did not come easily. It came as the result of a profound crisis in Dante's life. That crisis was the death of Beatrice.

The death of Beatrice came as a shock to Dante. The fact that he refuses to comment on the event in the *Vita nuova* (see chapter 28) indicates to what extent he was at a loss to account for its meaning. The difference between Dante and Cavalcanti is that Dante experienced the death of the other, namely Beatrice, while Cavalcanti remained obsessed with the idea (unrepresentable in itself) of his own death. Beatrice's death was thus something of a scandal, in the sense that it exposed the fact that death was not merely a poetic trope for a subjectivistic poetry, but a brutal reality that put life as a whole into crisis.

The *Vita nuova* is Dante's response to the crisis of finitude which Beatrice's death revealed as the human condition as such. It is fair to say that, for the rest of his career, Dante continued to respond to this crisis in one form or another. It is also fair to say that his aggravated sense of such a crisis made of him the most profoundly Christian of poets in our literary tradition. In the final analysis, the *Vita nuova* is Dante's account of how he discovered the prospect of salvation in the death of Beatrice. The Christological associations that accrue around the figure of Beatrice in the book serve to emphasize Dante's faith that her life was not in vain, that her personhood was not accidental, that her beauty was not a bewitching illusion but rather was congruent with the cosmic order as such. In other words, for Dante, Beatrice was the evidence of grace in the midst of a condition of disgrace. Cavalcanti despaired of the possibility of such saving grace, which explains, among other things, why Dante evokes his presence in the circle of the heretics in *Inferno*, where those who believed that the soul dies with the body are punished.

Expressed otherwise, we could say that the crisis that informs the *Vita nuova* takes the form of two alternatives: either Beatrice's life was nothing more than a passing illusion, in which case we are all damned; or else the grace she manifested in her person while alive was a revelation of some prospect that lies ahead, in which case the possibility of salvation remains open. It is this latter alternative that the *Vita nuova* embraces (thus it is one of the most risky works of literature in history). The prospect that lies ahead is the same one that interrupts the narrative of the *Vita nuova* so abruptly, inspiring Dante to remain silent. But even as he vows to remain silent in the last chapter, he promises to continue his speech once he has found a way 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.

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