

LOVER AND BELOVED IN *LA VITA NUOVA* 3 AND *PURGATORIO* 9

The purpose of this essay is to show that Dante refashioned in the ninth canto of the *Purgatorio* a visionary experience he had described much earlier in *La Vita Nuova*. Comparison of the two passages reveals the facility with which the poet could harmonize the imagery of earthly emotion with that of transcendent enlightenment.

During his first night on Purgatory, Dante, sleeping in the vale of the rulers, dreams that he is transported by a golden eagle to the sphere of fire, "suso infino al foco" (*Purg.* 9.30).¹ This situation reminds the poet of two mythic analogues: the eagle, "con penne d'oro" (9.20), hovering high above calls to mind Ganymede snatched to high Olympus by the bird of Jupiter;² the pilgrim's later awakening in strange surroundings recalls Achilles' similar disorientation on Scyros. Moreover, as Dante learns from Virgil (*Purg.* 9.46-63), he has in fact, like Achilles, been transported toward safety in the arms of a divine benefactress. Thetis had thought removal "da Chirón a Schiro" (9.37) might afford her son refuge from conscription into the Greek expedition to Troy; while here, in Canto 9, Lucia has carried the poet to the threshold of salvation, the Gate of Purgatory, the entrance to the path toward communion with the Divine Love whose influence pervades the universe, "l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle" (*Par.* 33.145).

In the allusion to Ganymede (*Purg.* 9.22-24) and in the Achilles simile (9.34-39) we encounter apposite pagan variations on the Christian theme of salvation ensured by the love of a benevolent deity. The common elements may be schematized as follows:

1. All citations of the *Commedia* are from Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy* 3 vols., ed. C. Singleton (Princeton, 1970-1975).

2. On the special relevance of the pagan analogies in this passage, see my "Purgatorio 9.19-39: Syncretism in the Dream Sequence," *Classical Folio*, 30 (1976), 203-208.

	Lover	Beloved	Intermediary
The Dream:	God (= Fire)	Dante	Golden Eagle
Allusion 1:	Jupiter	Ganymede	Eagle ³
Allusion 2:	Thetis	Achilles	Thetis
"Reality"	God	Dante	Lucia

This illustrates Dante's syncretic method, applied so consistently in the *Commedia*, but it also represents a working out of possibilities inherent in literary motifs of the courtly love tradition, a tradition to which Dante is closest in his *Vita Nuova*⁴.

In the third chapter of *La Vita Nuova*, Dante relates an eerie and erotically charged dream which, he says, inspired the first poem he discusses, a sonnet—"A ciascun' alma presa e gentil core."⁵ The poet, eighteen years old, is greeted for the first time by his lady; exalted "come inebriato" by the salutation, he witnesses in his sleep that night an epiphany of "Love" (*Amore*), who announces his suzerainty over Dante ("ego dominus tuus"), a fact of which the young poet had been aware since first seeing Beatrice in his (and her) ninth year (see *VN*, chap. 2: "D'allora innanzi dico ch'Amore signoreggio l'anima mia"). The "signore" carries in his arms Beatrice, "la donna della salute":⁶ "Nelle sue braccia mi pareva vedere una persona dormire nuda, salvo che involta mi pareva in un drappo sanguigno leggermente." He also holds in his hand a flaming heart, saying to Dante "Vide cor tuum." Love then feeds the heart of the lady. Finally, his mood changes from joyous to sorrowful, auguring the premature death he foresees for Beatrice; "e cosi piangendo si ricogliea questa donna nelle sue braccia, e con essa mi pareva che se ne gisse verso il cielo."

3. It is not clear whether Dante thinks of the eagle as merely an emissary or an actual metamorphosis of Jupiter: Virgil, *Aen.* 5.252-57 ("louis armiger"), and Ovid, *Mel.* 10.155-61, respectively.

4. See L. F. Mott, *The System of Courtly Love Studied as an Introduction to the Vita Nuova of Dante* (Boston, 1896).

5. All citations of the *Vita Nuova* are from "Temple Classics" edition of T. Okey and P. H. Wicksteed (London, 1906). Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from the third chapter.

6. On the particular importance of "salutation" in the troubadours, Dante, and Petrarch, see Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, trans. M. Belgion (rev. ed., 1956; rpt. New York, 1966), p. 111.

Now the personification of Amor is of course a standard feature of courtly love poetry and even the consumption of the lover's heart by his beloved is, in a rather different though equally macabre formulation, a traditional theme, best known from Boccaccio.⁷ But the vivid detail of the theophany, the pyrotechnic éclat of the *signore*, the sleeping lady (beguilingly?—"io riguardando molto intentivamente") nude but for her flimsy, blood-red drapery, and the conceit of the flaming heart combine to make this a "maravigliosa visione" indeed.

I believe Dante reshaped this piece of erotic bizarrerie and used it many years later to different purposes in *Purgatorio* 9. There are verbal resemblances: the verb *parere* repeated in the phrase "mi pareva" with formulaic regularity (eight times in the prose of *VN* 3, four times in *Purg.* 9 at lines 19, 22, 28, 31); the gerund *dormendo* used participially in the sonnet at line 11, and at *Purg.* 9.38; and the near repetition of "Nelle sue braccia mi pareva vedere una persona dormire nuda" at *Purg.* 9.37-38: "la madre . . . trafugò lui dormendo in le sue braccia." But the best evidence of connection is the similar disposition of principals: again the beloved (Beatrice) is conveyed while asleep to the lover (Dante) by an intermediary (Love, the *signore*). Fire, flame, and, by implication, light are attributes of lover and intermediary.

In the *Commedia*, the light of God's love is the sustenance of the soul. Souls on Purgatory cannot ascend at all except under the benignant influence of the "solar" rays of Divine Love.⁸ As we learn in

7. *Decameron* 4.1 and 4.9. Cf. J. E. Matzke, "The Legend of the Eaten Heart," *MLN*, 26 (1911), 1-8, though Mark Musa may be right in warning: "That the theme concerned with a husband's sadistic revenge on an adulterous wife could have inspired the scene in the *Vita Nuova* is impossible," *Dante's Vita Nuova: A Translation and an Essay* (Bloomington, Ind., 1973), p. 189.

8. The classical and medieval exegetical equation "God = Sun" has been documented with vast erudition by H. F. Dunbar, *Symbolism in Medieval Thought and Its Consummation in the Divine Comedy* (New Haven, 1929), passim, and Hugo Rahner, *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*, trans. B. Battershaw (New York, 1963), pp. 89-176, "Under the heading of 'the sun in theological speculations' . . . there is a clear line of development starting with the sentences of St. John's Gospel (1.9; 8.12) that speak of the light of the world, and then going on through the speculations on the Logos by the theologians of Alexandria, right down to the definitions

the *Paradiso*, the more perfectly pure the spirit, the greater its capacity for the Light of Love. This Sun-Light-Christ imagery culminates in the final canto of the *Commedia*: Dante's approach to the end of all desires ("al fine di tutt' i disii," *Par.* 33.46) entails such an enlargement of his visual faculty as to beggar description and defy containment by memory (33.49-57). The direct experience of God, so far as it can be characterized in words, is most like an absolute irradiation of the spirit in the Light of Love. This sublimely rarefied, intellectual or spiritual eucharist is metaphorically presaged in the dream and the "actual" events that occur simultaneously with it in *Purgatorio* 9. And the details of this presentiment of ultimate communion are in turn derived from the eucharistic connotations of *La Vita Nuova* 3, where the "communicant" eats the flesh of the lover: "hoc est corpus meum." This is not parody, or if it is, it is a peculiar, non-blasphemous parody that typifies Dante's ability to exploit the resources of erotic poetry in the interests of producing what C. S. Lewis has called "a noble fusion of sexual and religious experience."⁹

Now the passage in the *Vita Nuova* does not conform exactly to the scheme of constituent units I have diagrammed above. In particular *Amore* displays qualities both of lover and of intermediary. Like Lucia (and the Light of Love emanated from God), he effects communion; also similarly, he is "angelic" in the etymological sense of that word. In another place (VN 12), he is pictured in terms reminiscent of Mark's description of the angel at the tomb of the resurrected Christ: "Avvenne quasi nel mezzo del mio dormire, che mi pareva vedere nella mia camera lungo me sedere un giovane vestito di bianchissime vestimenta . . ."; compare Mark 16.5: "viderunt juvenem sedentem in dextris coopertum

of the Council of Nicaea, which spoke of the everlasting Word as 'lumen de lumine' and ultimately to the wonderful thoughts in Augustine's theology of the Trinity" (p. 99). Cf. M. Bambeck, *Göttliche Komödie und Exegese* (Berlin, 1975), pp. 201-207.

9. *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford, 1936), p. 21. Cf. R. G. Williams, "Love and Death in Medieval and Renaissance Literature," in *Images of Love and Death in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art* (Ann Arbor, 1976), p. 24: "It is not necessary to suppose that the language of courtly love is even in Dante devoid of sexual reference; it is rather that the discourse progressively refers beyond sexual love to the striving of the mind for truth, and the desire of the soul for God."

stola candida."¹⁰ But he is also the "Lord" ("ego dominus tuus"); his own selfdescription recalls Patristic definitions of God: "Ego tamquam centrum circuli, cui simili modo se habent circumferentiae partes" (VN 12) and anticipates Dante's culminating geometrical intimations of divinity in the *Paradiso* (33.115-45).¹¹ Finally, the hierophany in *La Vita Nuova* 3 has affinities with the gospel accounts of the transfiguration on Mount Hermon.¹²

This ambiguity¹³ perhaps indicates the initial step by which a personified force of venerable antiquity,¹⁴ prominently revived in the poetry of courtly love, was finally assimilated into Dante's conception of a far more transcendent manifestation of that force. Dante can, in the *Commedia*, better convey the nature of Divine Love because of the intensity of the love he had felt and expressed for Beatrice through the adaptation in the *Vita Nuova* of the conventions of *cortesia*.

The *Vita Nuova* is in reality the necessary preliminary stage of Dante's concept of reality, its very germ, and a necessary prologue to the *Divine Comedy*. For Dante became what he was and is, the Christian poet of an earthly reality preserved in transcendence, in a per-

10. This similarity was noted long ago by F. Wickhoff, "Die Gestalt Amors in der Phantasie des Italienischen Mittelalters," *Jahrb. d. König. Preus. Kunstsam.*, 11 (1890), 41-53; see E. Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (1939; rpt. New York, 1962), pp. 101-103.

11. E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W. R. Trask (1953; rpt. New York, 1963), p. 353: "A philosophical showpiece is Love's self-definition . . . a modification of Alan's seventh 'theological rule' (*PL*, CCX, 627 A): 'God is an intelligible sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.' This speculative formula obtained wide currency in the thirteenth century. Dante need not have taken it directly from Alan. But it shows that even as a youth he was interested in philosophy and theology." Musa (note 7 above), pp. 114-16, 186-87.

12. See esp. Matt. 17.2, 5-6.

13. Musa (note 7 above), esp. pp. 106-34, has penetrating thoughts on what he calls the "Greater" and "Lesser Aspect" of Love.

14. Dante, rather self-consciously, stresses the antiquity of the technique of personification, a "figura o colore rettorico," in VN 25. Cf. C. S. Lewis (note 9 above), p. 47: "It seems chilling to be told that *Amor* in the *Vita Nuova* is only a personification; we would willingly believe that Dante, like a modern romantic, feels himself to be reaching after some transcendental reality which the forms of discursive thought cannot contain. It is quite certain, however, that Dante feels nothing of the kind."

fection decreed by divine judgment, through the experience of his youth, and the *Vita Nuova* is the record of this experience.¹⁵

I would add to these words of Erich Auerbach only that they hold for the poet's handling of individual narrative themes as well as for his intellectual evolution in general.

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15. E. Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. R. Manheim (Chicago, 1961), p. 63.

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