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Dante's Evolving Philosophy on Love

In 1295, Dante wrote *La Vita Nuova*, which reads like a journal. In this medley of both prose and verse, Dante expressed his innermost thoughts and emotions towards not only his Love, Beatrice, but also for Love itself. His philosophy on Love is especially complex due to its indefinite nature. Writing *La Vita Nuova* helped Dante work through some of his paradoxical feelings towards the nature of Love. After his exile from Florence in 1302, his thoughts on Love had evolved further as demonstrated by his 1307 poem, *Purgatorio*, the second part of his *Divine Comedy*. Dante emphasizes Love's indefinite and confusing nature through his use of paradox and contradiction. This shows Dante to be a writer of great depth and complexity, capable of tackling the unknown.

In *La Vita Nuova*, Dante has visions and talks to the Lord of Love on multiple occasions. Dante personifies Love as a physical character by which he is both dominated and controlled. In fact, Dante said when talking about his first encounter with Love that "He said many things of which I understood only a few; among them was, I am your master" (VN 6). This truly sets up the tone for their entire relationship. Love is superior to Dante in power, knowledge, and language, and is on a whole other level than Dante. According to *Dante's Invention*, "The spirit at the very heart of Dante's mind has seen this force [Love] and recognized that it is outclassed: from now on this 'stronger god' will be in charge" (Burge 32). This acknowledges that Dante, in fact, did see a class system by which he identified Love as being at a higher rank. On the other hand, by personifying Love, Dante makes him appear to be human. One might think that due to both of their human-like qualities, this would put Love at the same level as Dante. Their distance

yet closeness in being is quite strange and paradoxical, as Dante intended it to be.

Love's ownership of Dante's heart causes Dante's uncontrollable feelings towards Beatrice, the one he has loved since he was nine years old. Upon Love and Dante's first interaction in a vision, The Lord of Love physically held his gracious lady, Beatrice, in his arms. She slept in the Lord's hands, "naked except for a crimson cloth loosely wrapping" her. Her nakedness represents vulnerability and the way Beatrice is depicted as lying down in the hands of Love represents Love's possession of Her, as well as Dante's Love and his heart (VN 6) . Then Dante goes on to explain how The Lord gave his heart away to Beatrice without giving him any say in the matter. Dante writes, "In one of his hands he [the Lord of Love] held a fiery object, and he seemed to say these words: 'Behold your heart.' And after a short while, he seemed to awaken the sleeping one, and through the power of his art made her eat this burning object in his hand. Hesitantly, she ate it" (VN 6). The Lord of Love owns Dante's heart and the capability to give it away as exemplified by literally force-feeding of Dante's heart to Beatrice. This shows how Dante understood Love. As opposed to seeing it as something that came from within him, he saw it as an external being that controls his romantic fascination for others.

Dante claims that nearly all of his actions and emotions were entirely under the control of the Lord of Love, which gives insight into the degree in which Dante believes in free will. Dante would often separate himself from his actions and put the blame on the Lord of Love showing his objection in taking any responsibility. For example, when Dante had a nightmare that led to a weeping meltdown, a group of ladies tried to calm him down. The ladies wanted to know what was the matter, to which he responded: "I shall tell you what happened to me" (VN 48). By saying what "happened to me" instead of "what I did", he not only separates himself from the event but he also victimizes himself. Furthermore, he writes that "Love made me look these

ladies in the eye” (VN 48) as if he had no control over where he was looking. The only thing that Dante truly claims to have done without the control of the Lord of Love was to come up with the idea of using the beautiful women of Florence as shields to prevent people from realizing that his heart actually lies with Beatrice. Dante believed that it was his conscious choice when he said “At once I thought of making this good lady [the first of many fake love interests] a screen for the truth” (VN 9). This shows that Dante has more free will than he might think. However, when his love interest left the city that the Lord of Love called to Dante and spoke these words:

I come from that lady who has been
 your shield for so long a time; I know that she will not
 return soon to your city, and so that heart which I made
 you leave with her I now have with me and I am taking it
 to the lady who will be your new defence as was the previous
 One. (VN 15)

This shows how it’s actually his heart that the Lord of Love has control over. While Dante’s thoughts and decisions are up to him, they are influenced by the Lord of Love’s relocation of his heart’s desires. Love is what inspires Dante to pursue his actions. In *Purgatorio*, Dante has Virgil say that “Every love that’s kindled in you arises of necessity. Still, the power to restrain it lies with you”(XVIII.70-72). This implies that humans need love but who you fall in love with is not up to you, for the Lord of Love controls your heart; your actions, on the other hand, are completely under your control.

As shown in *La Vita Nuova*, the Lord of Love and Dante depend on each other, for one can not work without the other. Dante suggests that the Lord of Love depends on the objects of his chosen affection to exercise his full power and control over Dante. Dante says that the Lord

of Love “ruled over me through the power of the very gracious lady [Beatrice]” (VN 15). This shows that Love alone, without Beatrice, is not strong enough to persuade or manipulate Dante. Without a body to work through, the Lord of Love has no affect on him. Interestingly enough, Dante speaks of the Lord of Love as if “he possessed a body, further still, as if he were a man” (VN 52) but when people ask whether or not he admits to the Lord of Love being a human entity, he denies it. Shortly after, Dante provides reasoning as to why it is understandable that people might have interpreted his portrayal of the Lord of Love as they did. He brings up specific instances where he depicts the Lord of Love with qualities he associates with being human such as locomotion, laughter, and the ability to speak. As confusing as this might seem, one can come to understand that all of these human-like qualities are obtained by the Lord of Love through the work of other human beings, which become the object of Dante’s affection at The Lord of Love’s direction. According to Burge, the Lord of Love “emanated from Beatrice and entered into him” (32). This can then be further analyzed to assume that when Dante talks to the Lord of Love, he is talking to him through the physical body of someone else; in this case Beatrice. “Love does not exist in itself as a substance” (VN 52) but more so an essence or spirit making a home of the hearts of humans.

However, it is also possible that Dante believes that humans depend on the Lord of Love. According to *Dante In Love* by A.N. Wilson, “Dante believed that love encompassed all things, that it was the force which moved the sun and other stars” (13). Therefore, because love is in all things, humans cannot function without love. The Lord of Love even told Dante that “I am like the center of a circle, equidistant from all points on the circumference, but you are not” (VN 19). This quote shows the Lord of Love’s separation from Dante, but more importantly, it represents how dependent the world is on love. Love is (ironically) at the heart of all things for nothing can

exist without it. Another good example of the uncertainty of possession and dependency between the Lord of Love and Dante, is when Dante said “Love wept within my heart which is his home”, which can then be interpreted one of two ways (VN 49): It is possible that because Dante’s heart belongs to The Lord of Love as a home, the Lord of Love is possessing Dante’s heart. On the other hand, it is also very possible that Dante’s heart is caring for and sheltering the Lord of Love showing how dependent the Lord of Love is of Dante. The Lord of Love paradoxically owns yet is also owned by Dante.

In *La Vita Nuova*, Dante depicts the Lord of Love as having either a noble or a sexual nature. The love that entered the body of Beatrice was of a noble nature as opposed to a sexual nature because according to Burge, “theory says that the noble variety of love only occurred when it entered the body of someone with a refined soul”(32). This implies that Beatrice’s soul was identified as pure and that Dante’s intentions were good. This also suggests The Lord of Love to have been noble enough “not to lead him astray” (Burge 32).

Some of Dante’s views on love evolved throughout his life while other aspects of it remained the same. Initially, in *La Vita Nuova*, Dante saw the Lord of Love as “good since he diverts the mind of his faithful from all evil things” (23). Paradoxically in this work, Dante also saw the Lord of Love as evil, because the more one is loyal to Him, the more suffering one must endure. To Dante, love and the gracious heart became one and the same, and love is central to the existence of all things. Love is not a substance and works through others. In terms of the word “love” itself, Dante could not fathom why it sounds so sweet when its effect is just the opposite. It seems as though Dante believed that love was the cause of all the pain and suffering in his life.

Dante mentions how love disabled him, making him weak. He wrote, “After that vision my

natural spirit began to slacken in its working for I had become wholly absorbed in the thought of this most gracious lady. It was but a short time before I became so weak and so frail that many of my friends were concerned about my appearance” (7). This shows how love was taking a physical toll on him.

In Dante’s 14th century *Purgatorio* however, these perceptions of love evolve. Dante saw love as either natural or of the mind: natural referring to man’s instinctual pure thoughts and intentions, as well as the desire for good, “which for rational beings that is God” (XVII. pg 383) and of the mind, which is achievable only by angels and humans, referring to a love that the mind forces into existence which may lead sin. According to Dante, there were three kinds of sinful love: “choosing the wrong object for their love, loving the good deficiently, and loving the good excessively” (*Purgatorio* 384). The belief that love manifests itself in both virtuous deeds and evil deeds can be found in both *La Vita Nuova* and *Purgatorio*.

Another aspect of love that Dante mentions both in *La Vita Nuova* and *Purgatorio*, is that love has color. However, Dante never specifies what color it truly is. It’s possible that Dante himself is unsure, but “commentators debate whether this is red or white” (*Purgatorio* 424). In *La Vita Nuova*, Dante believes that love’s color is a pale white; the same as the skin color of his love, Beatrice’s, face. Whenever one of Dante’s many female fascinations would look at him, “her face became compassionate and of a pale colour, almost like that of Love, so that many times I [Dante] was reminded of most worthy lady [Beatrice] who always displayed a similar colour” (VN 73). This shows just how uncertain Dante is himself of the actual color of love. He never actually reveals what color love is to him in *La Vita Nuova*, only that the color of a pale face is close to it (as assumed by the word “almost”). Although color is an unknown when it comes to love, it does hold a certain amount of importance to him. In *Purgatorio*, *Canto XXIX*,

color is also used to represent the three theological virtues. As the story goes, three ladies dance by a chariot. These ladies are of three different colors. One is red (representing charity), one is green (representing hope), and the last one is white (representing faith). White in *La Vita Nuova* is used when describing the color of love but in *Purgatorio*, it's used to represent faith. This shows that there is a connection between faith and love.

Dante was an educated man in his day whose writings were greatly influenced by the philosophy of Albert the Great, Plato, and St. Augustine. Albertus Magnus, also known as Albert the Great, a 1280 catholic saint, thought that “the human soul is illumined by the divine Intelligence” (“Dante Alighieri - Philosophical”). In other words, only God can bring goodness into the lives of humans. Albert also didn't see the soul as the essence of man, but as connected to the body through the mental and physical order. But there is also an old-fashioned, twelfth-century, force in Dante's thinking, of late-antique Neo-Platonism, which greatly influenced him around the time that he wrote *La Vita Nuova*, which states that “the experience of Love becomes a means to self-realization, and an awareness of the hierarchy of forces operative in the universe at large enables the human mind to participate in the divine” (“Dante Alighieri - Philosophical”). This shows that *the Lord of Love* can be a positive thing because it can actually bring you closer to God, encouraging Dante's emphasis on love in his writing. St. Augustine, born in A.D. 354, goes even further and writes about the gospel of John which states that “God is Love” (1 John 4:16). He believed that human beings are the union of soul and body and that all humans are born with original sin as consequence for the sins of Adam and Eve. According to *the Trinity*, “If a man is full of Love, what is he full of but God?” (St. Augustine 255).

Some believe that the soul survives only through God so to them it would seem only natural to desire the strongest possible union with Him. Dante, influenced by Albert the Great

and St. Augustine, believed that this union of humans with God is only made possible through love, for love, according to *Dante's Conception of Love*, "It is what the soul finds fitting as an object of love which reveals what is within the soul, its state and quality" (Mazzeo 149). Dante's obsession with love and the Lord of Love is then evident as coming from his desire to unite with God.

Dante, a writer with paradoxical, contradictory, ever evolving, and complex views on love, who has been influenced by multiple religious figures, his love for Beatrice Portinari, and his desire to unite with God, used writing as a way to delve deeper into the understanding of love. In the Middle Ages, Christian faith used the word "love" to describe the life and activity of God, while today, "we leave it to pop singers to tell us what Love is" (Wilson 9). Dante however, had a desire to cut deeper under the surface than just the basic ideas of Catholic Religion and brought up huge unanswerable questions. Dante appears to have been a seeker of truths and meaning who did not mind if he was always coherent as he progressed along his path of thinking. He was not as interested in providing clear and concise answers as he was just addressing these big philosophical questions which he accomplished in the form of bold statements. These statements, which often times contradicted with one another, reveal Dante to be not only a man of absurd complexity, but also as a man with a need for guidelines, rules, and structure.

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