

LIKENESS, BEWILDERMENT, AND SWEETNESS:  
THE ITALIAN PATHWAY TO LYRICAL SCIENCE

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**LIKENESS, BEWILDERMENT, AND SWEETNESS:  
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Scholars have defined Guido Guinizzelli, Guido Cavalcanti, Dante Alighieri, and Michelangelo Buonarroti philosopher-poets, and yet, they have overlooked the implications of such articulation. In my dissertation, I clarify how these authors articulate philosophy and poetry into a single one discipline – a lyric science – devise its thinking tools, and urge us to consider love as the defining experience of human life, and the gateway to knowledge. The results of this experiment can be summarized in four key-terms which name the different chapters of my dissertation: *likeness*, *bewilderment*, *sweetness*, and *excess*.

Chapter 1. “Irresistible likeness: *Al cor gentil rimpaira sempre amor*” is dedicated to Guinizzelli’s poetical manifesto, in which he challenges the primacy of logical argumentation by devising a mode of thinking based on resemblance, *likeness*. Chapter 2. “Bewildering love: *Donna me prega*” deals with Cavalcanti’s response to Guinizzelli’s manifesto, in which he devises a theory of *bewilderment*, an experience of love as destructive, disconnecting, and eventually mortal. However, Cavalcantian love also works positively, since it manifests the basic structures of human’s intellect. Chapter 3 “Unfinished praise: *Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore*” analyzes how Dante lays out the ground work to connect Cavalcanti and Guinizzelli’s approaches into a comprehensive doctrine of love. *Lightness* and *sweetness* are Dante’s provisional

solutions to transforms the deadly experience of love into a positive and salvific one, eventually lay the ground for his opus magnum, the *Comedia*. In chapter 4, I investigate the use of the term *superchio* (“excess”) in Michelangelo’s poetry in relationship to grace, love, and art. Over the course of the analysis two important traits of Michelangelo’s poetry emerge: the use of analogy to structure his verses, and the use of highly antithetical – if not contradictory – logic to express his key concepts concerning art, grace, and love.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born and raised in Naples (Italy), I left my hometown in my twenties, and went out to see the world. My life is a catalog of the cities I lived: Milan, London, Berlin, Rome, Lewisburg, Pittsburgh, and Ithaca. As every respectable “Ulysses,” after more than ten years of wandering, I finally found my Ithaca (NY), and after seven years I’m ready to embark for a new enterprise and see where my life will take me next. I received my bachelor’s and my first master’s degrees in Philosophy, with two theses on Martin Heidegger: the first one on Heidegger’s concept of *tradition* (2007) and the second on his use of *authenticity* (2009) in his early writings and his *opus magnum*, *Being and Time*. On May 2014, I was awarded with a second Master’s, in Italian Literature, from Cornell University.

A mia madre, che m'insegna ogni giorno un significato nuovo dell'amore.

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# Introduction

## 1.

Can there be a philosophical poetry, a poetical philosophy? Can there be a space for the articulation of prose and verse, especially in light of the fact that since Plato, these two realms of language have been seen as mutually exclusive? But what happens – or to be more precise, what happened – when philosophy and poetry simultaneously acted within the same discipline?

In his *Preface to Stanze*, Giorgio Agamben writes that the poets of the *Duecento* thought about the «stanza» of a poem as a «receptacle» that contained the “joy of love” (*joi d’amor*).<sup>1</sup> As he wonders about the content of such joy, he realizes that the understanding of this question is hindered by a fundamental, though forgotten, “schism” (*scissione*) at work in western culture since “its very inception.” This schism underpins “our entire culture” and concerns nothing less than the opposition between philosophy and poetry, between the “philosophic word” and its “poetic” counterpart (respectively, *parola pensante* and *parola poetica*).<sup>2</sup>

Questa scissione è quella fra poesia e filosofia, fra parola poetica e parola pensante, ed essa appartiene così originariamente alla nostra tradizione culturale, che già Platone poteva ai suoi tempi dichiararla «una vecchia inimicizia». [...] [L]a scissione della parola è interpretata nel senso che la poesia possiede il suo oggetto senza conoscerlo e la filosofia lo conosce senza possederlo. La parola occidentale è così divisa fra una parola inconsapevole e come caduta dal cielo, che gode dell’oggetto della conoscenza rappresentandolo nella sua forma bella, e una parola

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<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Stanze: la parola e il fantasma nella cultura occidentale* (Torino: Einaudi, 1977), xii.

<sup>2</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Stanze: la parola e il fantasma nella cultura occidentale*, xiii-xiv.

che ha per sé tutta la serietà e tutta la coscienza, ma che non gode del suo oggetto perché non lo sa rappresentare.

[...] In quanto accettano passivamente questa scissione, la filosofia ha ommesso di elaborare un proprio linguaggio [...] e la poesia non si è data né un metodo né una coscienza di sé.

*The schism in question is the one between poetry and philosophy, between the poetic word and the word of thought. This split belongs so fundamentally to our cultural tradition, that already Plato at his times could declare it an «old enmity». [...] [T]he schism of the word is interpreted in the sense that poetry possess its object without knowing it and philosophy knows it without possessing it. The western word is therefore divided between a word that is oblivious as though fallen from the sky, a word that enjoys her object of knowledge representing it in its beautiful form, and a word that possesses all the seriousness and the awareness, but that does not enjoy its object because it does not know how to represent it. [...] Inasmuch as philosophy and poetry passively accept this schism, philosophy omitted to elaborate her own language, [...] and poetry has found neither a method nor a self-awareness [trans. mine].*

In my dissertation, I have taken up Agamben's problem, and have tried to outline some basic concepts of a unifying discipline that blends philosophy and poetry, a discipline whose "word" is both be "true" and "beautiful," both "inspired" and "aware." I have followed Agamben's assumptions about poetry and philosophy, and have assumed that beauty and inspiration pertain to poetry, while awareness and rationality to philosophy. The result of this assumption is a discipline that combines both truth and beauty, able to both know and enjoy its object. Luckily, my imagination didn't have to work too much, as I found that the experiment of a philosophical-poetry (or a poetical-philosophy) had already been run during the *Duecento*, by authors like Guido Guinizzelli, Guido Cavalcanti, and Dante Alighieri.

Italian lyric poetry of the origins finds its specificity in the very act of being doctrinarian, scientific, philosophical – read: *concerned with and moved simultaneously by truth and beauty, enjoyment and awareness*. Early Italian lyric poetry created a space

for both prose and verse to meet, a space in which the poet/lover/philosopher could, within the few lines of a sonnet or a canzone, condense what would otherwise require pages and pages of prose.

In the search of a name that captured the peculiarity of Guinizzelli, Cavalcanti, and Dante's experience, I have chosen a more general one like "philosophical-poetry" and a more specific one like "lyrical science," where "science" translates to the modern ear one of the old intention of philosophy to be a rigorous, systematic, and rational investigation of reality; and "lyrical" names the particular declination of poetry – love poetry – that these authors decided to use for their experiment.

It is worth noticing that the whole project of constructing a unifying experience of prose and verse can be traced both prior and later with respect the *Duecento*, as an ongoing tendency rather than a single event confined to the life and work of three people. To exemplify this last point, I wrote an excursus on Michelangelo Buonarroti, the sculptor, the painter, the architect, the writer and (*incredibile dictu*) also the philosopher-poet. However, I could have written this chapter on Giordano Bruno or Leopardi, if I wanted to remain in Italy. Or, I could have written this chapter on Parmenides' poem, or on Lucretius, or on Holderlin, and this is just to name the "usual suspects." I am sure that such examples abound within and without the narrow and rather asphyxiating limits of what Agamben defines "our culture," the "western culture," concepts that I have refrained from using as much as I could. And while I have followed Agamben's traces when it came to frame my work, I have also established some distance from his approach.

In this dissertation, I have avoided big categorizations such as "western thought"

“our culture” and the like. I have done so, because I do not possess a clear meaning of these categories. What is the West? And the East? Where is Africa in this narrative? I do not know if the schism that Agamben exclusively projects on the so called “western culture” pertains also other cultures, but it would be absurd to eliminate the possibility and to restrain these concepts only to “us.” Furthermore, my reader should be aware that I have taken Agamben’s assumptions about philosophy and poetry as methodological rather than ontological statements.

2.

While examining Guinizzelli’s, Cavalcanti’s and Dante’s doctrines, I have addressed the question of importance that love played in their compositions. Did these authors have an authentic intention of discussing the nature of love, or was their adherence to this theme simply ‘formal,’ an excuse to say something else? Some scholars approach love as a metaphor, as a way to point elsewhere, to another truth. Such interpretation reduces love to a signifier for something else, a mere vehicle for the poet to speak about issues of greater importance. Challenging this view, my research has queried: Why can’t love be a matter of interest in itself? Namely, why does love need to be treated as a symbol, or signifier instead of something intrinsically worthy of being questioned? Why can’t we face love for what it is: a fundamental part of our existence?

As it will emerge from the following chapters, love plays a fundamental role for these poets as it constitutes a milieu, a *terroir*, i.e. a fertile territory that allows enquiry to blossom and deliver fruits of knowledge. The question of love in Guinizzelli, Cavalcanti, Dante, and Buonarroto is not simply the product of a rhetorical strategy

arising from an homage to tradition. For these authors love was an intimate force that informs the world and keeps it together. Furthermore, to use a technical term borrowed from Heidegger's "fundamental ontology," love was an *existential*, and basic structure of human existence that shapes the way we inhabit the world and enter in contact with the other. For instance, for Guinizelli love is an overarching force that connects the different parts of the universe. In Cavalcanti's case, love is a deadly experience that manifests the limits of our freewill and cognition. For Dante, love becomes the gateway for human salvation and damnation, depending on the intrinsic qualities of the lovers. In Michelangelo instead, love becomes the lens to understand the process of the artistic creation and the way grace operates.

In their lyric poetry, these authors grappled with the same problems that Greek philosophy understood as "love of knowledge" and elaborated in response a powerful *knowledge of love*. These poets understood, centuries before *Sein und Zeit*, that knowledge relies on the enactment a specific way of encounter the other, it is an ethics. Lyric poets believed that in order to know an object you needed to love it first. They understood that love was the gateway for knowledge, and that the only way to know something authentically was to love it. Hence, instead of solely focusing on the object of knowledge per se, they came up with a mode of engagement by which language could manifest its object without appropriating it and making it ready for exploitation. Lyric poets elaborated an ethical system that encompassed language, thought, and practical attitude – a way of *being in the world* – that allowed them to know their object while preserving its integrity.

Italian lyric poetry articulates a *form-of-life* so that manifests its object while respecting it, caring for it, and preserving its integrity.

### 3.

Poetry and philosophy are two different realms of language characterized by different uses and different structures that delimit and shape the space of the validity of these two realms. To expand on Agamben's methodology, I have assumed that their difference can be articulated as a difference in scope, structure, and rhetoric. "Enjoyment," "verse" and a certain use of "images" identify respectively the scope, structure, and the rhetoric of poetry while "truth," "prose," and "syllogism" (the process of drawing conclusion from premises) define philosophy.

However, the difference between the two realms is also structural and rhetorical: poets use the musicality of the verse and the beauty of images to convey their message, while philosophers focus on the structure of the argumentation. While obscurity and ambiguity do not constitute an obstacle for poetical expression, modern philosophy since its very beginning has chosen clarity as the most prominent trait of truth. As we read in Descartes' *First meditation*: "[N]am quidquid clare et distincte percipio, quod est reale et verum, et quod perfectionem aliquam importat totum in ea [i.e. in idea] continetur" ("*[E]verything that I conceive clearly and distinctly is real and true, and what conveys some perfection, is in its entirety contained in this idea*").

But has this been the only case, i.e. are prose and syllogism in philosophy, and verse and images in poetry, the only two viable possibilities of their expression? What happens when the two realms blend? A brief look to the past shows that there have been

moments of synthesis between different styles of expression: the first Greek thinkers expressed themselves in verses and wrote poems. Plato was a dramatist who first burned his tragedies after having met Socrates, but then chose the theatricality of the dialogue and the images of the myth as the means to convey truth. Lucretius too used verses to reveal the nature of things in his *De rerum natura*. So, why Italy? What's so special about the Italian attempt to synthesize philosophy and poetry? With a short answer: the length of compositions, and their theme. Italian lyric poets were able to elaborate a science of love that could speak through the brevity of a sonnet, a canzone, a ballata. Italian poets of the origins were philosopher-poets, or rather, lyric scientists who investigated the world while reflecting on the nature of love; a titanic attempt to tie beauty and truth into a gracious knot. And that was genius, marvel.

4.

I have placed the accent of my research on the poetry mainly because verse is the mode of expression that these authors decided to use to express their reflections. However, the *tertium datur* originated by these experiments cannot and will not simply go under the rubric of "poetry." The science I am talking about originates in the relationship between poetry and philosophy and is nurtured, equally, by both.

I have carried out my research with the guiding hypothesis that yes, one could unify the divorced realms of language and give birth to something extraordinary. Nonetheless, my leading assumptions were strictly formal, empty: I have assumed that the broken pieces of language could come together again for a moment, and I have described what I have seen. I had no idea what to expect, I did not know what it meant

to tie philosophy and love poetry. Eventually, I found some key-experiences – *likeness*, *bewilderment*, *sweetness*, *excess* – and I have written a chapter for each one of them.

Guinizzelli, Cavalcanti, Dante, and Michelangelo used love to root and inscribe the relationship between philosophy and lyric poetry and they gave birth to one of the most daring attempts to rethink human life from scratch, from language, and epistemology, to ethics, and later also history and justice, as Dante will show in the *Comedia*.

At the center of the experience of these Love's fools, there was the articulation of a life based on love, a *form-of-life* which put at his core the lovers' experience for their beloved.<sup>3</sup> They simply asked, can we think life based on love? Could love allow to experience the unity of philosophy and poetry and access to truth and beauty in their wholeness? The experience of a form-of-life based on love yielded the reconfiguration of the human experience in its wholeness and produced something like a loving-subjectivity, a new consciousness of life, a new way of experiencing life, the world, language, knowledge.

As the starting (though non-exhaustive) point of these poets' experiences I used Andreas Capellanus who wrote in his *De amore*, "Quid sit amor - Amor est passio quedam innata procedens ex visione et immoderata cogitatione formae alterius sexus" (*Love is a certain innate passions that proceeds from vision and immoderate thought about the form of the other sex*). For most of the texts I read, love was a painful process,

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<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, women in these poems never get to speak and never get to answer to their beloveds as their lovers keep their ladies in a golden silence. The one sidedness of this experience – the fact that both authors and lovers in the poems were male – constitutes the limits of these texts and of this research.

a deadly experience, a form of enchantment that enslaves the poet to a cruel lady. Furthermore, love dwells in the distance, and cannot endure physical proximity because this taints men's minds. Thus, love needs physical distance and mental/spiritual proximity. It is a kind of love that does not want any tangible concretization. Poets neither request life engagements, nor sexual fulfillment; something that is utterly foreign – if not weird – for a modern reader.

Can one compare love as experienced in these texts to the other kinds that have been transmitted by tradition? Is it Agape? Eros? Philia? None of them or, maybe, a little of each one? (Perhaps, the first move that one should perform during this study, definitely the hardest one, is to unlearn what one thinks they know about love.) Moreover, love is not directed to a real woman made of flesh, bones, etc. It is love for her image, and that means that love happens mainly in the interiority of the poet rather than in his every-day life. Another aid to understanding how lovers relate to their images may come from the *Roman de la rose*, an important text that influenced poetical production in Provence, and later in Italy. In this text two mythological figures emerge as important: Narcissus and Pygmalion. While the former cannot love anyone but his image reflected in the water (not himself, as one is accustomed to hear), the latter is in love with one of his sculptures. In these two cases, love is desire for the external representation of the beloved, or for the artifact that stays in the place of the real person.

Italian lyric of the origins absorbs and reproduces these schemes through the internalizations of the images, these being a product of the interaction between the human's apprehension and the material bodies. Once lovers engage with these images (or, *phantasma*) they undergo a series of mental, and physical changes (loss of color,

loss of self, inclination to anger, sleep deprivation, excruciating pain) that seem to come directly from some medieval medical books describing a disease that went rampant in the monasteries during the Middle Ages: *sindrome atra biliare*, *melanconia*, or *amore hereos*. What is the relationship between the description of the lover in poetry and that of the melancholic in medicine? Did perhaps medicine provide poetry with the character of the lover?

## 5.

*Al cor gentil* constitutes the first point of a journey that leads first to Cavalcanti's *Donna me prega* and then to Dante's *Voi ch'avete intelletto d'amore*. These three *canzoni* are the poetical manifestos of the respective poets and illuminate each other. I offer a holistic reading of the three compositions to show each one is thought as a reply, an expansion, or a critique of the another. If Cavalcanti writes *Donna me prega* as a response to *Al cor gentil*, Dante writes *Donne che avete* in reply to Cavalcanti and Guinizelli. In order to illuminate the context, the theme and the reasons that sparked the *gigantomachia* around love in Italian poetry of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, I analyze the compositions of Guinizelli, Cavalcanti and Dante, in different chapters of the same book, in order to reveal their complex fabric of connections and references that moved their composition.

The trajectory of this dissertation takes its inspiration from *Purgatorio* XI, where Dante synthesizes his relationship with Guinizelli and Cavalcanti with a poignant image.

Credette Cimabue ne la pittura  
tener lo campo, ora ha Giotto il grido  
sì che la fama di colui è scura.

Così ha tolto l'uno all'altro Guido  
la gloria della lingua, e forse è nato  
chi l'uno e l'altro caccerà dal nido.

*Cimabue believed that he possessed the field of painting, but now Giotto has it, so that the fame of the former is obscured. Likewise, Guido [Cavalcanti] took away from Guido [Guinizelli] the glory of the language, and perhaps there has been born someone that will push both of them out of the nest.*<sup>4</sup>

With his rhymes, Guido Cavalcanti wrestles with Guido Guinizelli's primacy and obtains what Dante calls "the glory of language." According to this narrative, the first poet who conquers the "glory of the language" is Guinizelli, who then loses his primacy as Cavalcanti snatches it away, until a third poet – whose identity isn't hard to imagine – will come and put an end to this competition once and for all. It will be Dante Alighieri with his *Comedia* who will ascend to the podium of Italian poetry, reaching a place of primacy that he still enjoys today. Nonetheless, in order to ascend to the podium of Italian poetry, Dante changes the rules of the game by reconfiguring the field, which at the beginning coincided with the realm of lyric poetry. That is to say, Dante gains his primacy over the two Guidos wrestling them outside lyric poetry, in the new battlefield of epic poetry.

What happens next, in later, post-Dante poetical production when it comes to lyric science? Apparently, nothing. After Dante and Cavalcanti, philosophy goes back

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<sup>4</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (New York: Doubleday, 2003) XI, 94-99.

to her ordinary job of seeking truth and lacking enjoyment, and poetry returned to her pure enjoyment while losing the truth. Later love poetry abandoned the radicality of these two authors and repeated their topoi refusing to add anything new to the discussion. Only after a while, with the poems of Michelangelo, another great hybrid figure of Italian culture, the unity of poetry and philosophy tried to emerge again, but the scarce recognition that his poetry has received in the Italian canon - perhaps understandably 'distracted' by his artistic productions - did not allow this model to be developed to the point that it could challenge Petrarch's hegemony. The last part of my thesis will in fact be devoted to identifying and, where possible, reevaluating other figures of this kind.

## 6.

My dissertation is presented in four chapters, which focus respectively on Guido Guinizzelli's *Al cor gentile rimpaira sempre amore*, Guido Cavalcanti's *Donna me prega*, Dante Alighieri's *Donne ch' avete intelletto d'amore*, and Michelangelo's use of *superchio* (excess).

### **Chapter 1, Irresistible likeness: *Al cor gentile rimpaira sempre amore***

With *Al cor gentil rimpaira sempre amore*, Guido Guinizzelli conquers a place of primacy in Italian poetry. *Al cor gentil* is a canzone about knowledge, a canzone about a particular form of knowledge we can access through *likeness*. Likeness is not a thing, or a substance; it is a relationship that allows us to grasp an unknown entity by virtue of a known one. Such use of likeness opens up the possibility for thought that seeks truth

by choosing analogical connections over logical demonstrations, which also shows in the absence of the typical markers of a logical argumentation such as “hence”, “thus”, and “therefore”. With *Al cor gentil*, it’s almost as if Guinizelli is asking: What can I know outside the limits of the classical philosophical means? Can I philosophize (i.e., know the truth) through likeness? To what extent? How far can I get? What kind of truth results from likeness?

I present Guinizelli’s philosophical-poetry as a rigorous, but non-deductive, search for truth: a form of thought hinged upon the concept of *likeness*. In this chapter, I sketch the meaning that *likeness* assumes in this canzone by analyzing the last stanza and then use this term to explain the poem in its entirety. My explication of the poem is supplemented by a discussion of the sonnet *Io voglio del ver’ la mia donna laudare*, in which Guinizelli explicitly deals with the relationship between likeness and truth.

## **Chapter 2, Bewildering love: *Donna me prega***

Cavalcanti’s manifesto, *Donna me prega*, represents a hermeneutical conundrum in its structure, language, philosophical, and poetical implications. I clarify the main points of Cavalcanti’s discourse on love and highlight its challenges without making the text fit a pre-given theory such as ‘Platonism’ or ‘Aristotelianism’. The leading question of my investigation is whether or not *Donna me prega* contributes to our knowledge by offering a “theory of love.”

I read *Donna me prega* (along with other Cavalcanti’s compositions) as a *non-theory of love*, i.e., an approach that sees love as a *irrelatum*, as something that humans cannot enter into contact with. Since Cavalcanti conceives the beloved as an *non-*

*appropriable*, he obsessively reminds us that there is nothing to know about love, and that love exceeds the power of our minds, blinds our knowledge, and consequently destroys our humanity (understood as the capacity to know and to act freely). In order to unlock Cavalcanti's doctrine of love I focus on the concept of *sbigottimento* (*bewilderment*). The analysis of the concept of *bewilderment* happens through the commentary of some of those poems in which this term makes its powerful appearance. In these compositions, love's irresistible force shatters the mind of the lover, who then loses his humanity, experiencing something similar to a living death.

### **Chapter 3, An unfinished praise: *Donne ch' avete intelletto d'amore***

*Donne ch' avete* simultaneously stages a reprise and a rejection of Guinizelli's and Cavalcanti's approaches. *Donne ch' avete* is an unfinished praise of a human being which both raises humans to the level of heaven and lowers heaven to the level of humans, so that both worlds, human and divine, can meet and enjoy perfection. To convey this confluence of worlds, Dante develops Guinizelli's dramatic strategy of comparing his lady to the divine intelligence. However, he actively evades the perils of Cavalcantian *bewilderment*, alerting readers of his intention when he refuses to speak "too loftily" about his lady because he would become fearful. In this canzone, the beloved shows simultaneously the divinity of humans and the humanity of divinity.

In order to glorify his lady and account for her miraculous greatness, Dante must grant her a space in which the object of knowledge is manifested without being appropriated. His beloved will continue to shine over him and the rest of world only so long as she is not fully grasped by the mind of the lover. Dante creates a space – the

greatness of his beloved – in which the power of intellect to know and the capacity language to fully capture its object in words is arrested. Dante does not claim he cannot know his lady, or that he cannot express his beloved: he says he cannot fully know and understand her. He talks about his lady in a way that both acknowledges her greatness and his limits, i.e., a way that will not bring him to the extremes of the experience that we have seen in Cavalcanti.

#### **Chapter 4, Excessive Poetry: The Use of *superchio* in Michelangelo's Verses**

My final chapter aims to understand how Michelangelo, in reconnecting philosophy and lyric poetry, reenacts the search for truth in Guinizelli, Cavalcanti, and Dante's poetry. I analyze the term *superchio*, which appears thirteen times in Michelangelo's poetry and serves to link his poetical reflections on love, grace, and art. I clarify how *superchio* is used to describe: 1) an intimate feeling of the lover before the beloved; 2) the qualifying term for divine grace; and 3) the process of sculpting and, by analogy, the man's salvation thanks to grace.

# PART I. THE QUEST FOR LYRICAL SCIENCE

Just like a star across my sky  
Just like an angel off the page,  
You have appeared to my life,  
Feel like I'll never be the same...  
(C. B. Rae)

## 1. Irresistible likeness: *Al cor gentil rimpaira sempre amor*

### 1.1

The quest for a lyric science starts with Guido Guinizzelli's manifesto *Al cor gentile rimpaira sempre amore*, in which the reader will witness the of a non-deductiive thought entirely based on resemblance, on *likeness*. I will begin my analysis with the commentary on the last stanza.

The last stanza of *Al cor gentil* contains the scene of a trial in which a seemingly infuriated God accuses a lover of having misdirected his praise. It is in this stanza that we can find the hermeneutical key of the entire canzone.

Donna, Deo mi dirà: "Che presomisti?",  
s'iando 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 la laude  
e la Reina del reame degno,  
per cui cessa onne fraude".  
Dir Li porò: "Tenne d'angel sembianza

che fosse del Tuo regno;  
me fu fallo, s'in lei posi amanza".<sup>5</sup>

non

*My Lady, God will say to me while my soul stands before Him: "How dare you? You came across the heavens, all the way to Me, and gave Me as a term of comparison for your profane love; the hymn of praise is appropriate only to Me and the queen of the kingdom, through whom every fraud ceases." Then, I will be able to say to Him: "She had the semblance of an angel coming from Your kingdom; I made no mistake if I loved her."*

Before I proceed with my argument, let me give a brief sketch of what is going on in this scene, based on my own English translation. Since God almighty questions a lover guilty of having likened Him to profane love, he orders the lover to direct his praise towards the only worthy objects: Himself, and the Virgin Mary. At this point, the lover reacts against the accusation, and flips God's own terms: there was no mistake in his verses ("no me fu fallo"), for the lady was similar to an angel. That is to say, the lover justifies himself by rephrasing God's accusation of a wrongful comparison: for the lover, the comparison is right *because* the lady looked like an angel. Hence, there is no mistake in his words. But if the lover isn't wrong, then God is?

The elaboration of *likeness* as the object of the dialogue between God and the lover will guide my reading of this text. Likeness is not a thing, or a substance; it is a relationship that allows us to grasp an unknown entity by virtue of a known premise. Such use of likeness opens up the possibility for thought that seeks truth by choosing analogical connections over logical demonstrations, which also shows in the absence of the typical markers of a logical argumentation such as "hence", "thus", and "therefore."

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<sup>5</sup> Guido Guinizzelli, *Rime*, ed. Luciano Rossi (Torino: Einaudi, 2002), 37. All the citations I am using in this chapter come from this edition. Translations are mine.

With *Al cor gentil*, it's almost as if Guinizzelli is asking: What can I know outside the limits of the classical philosophical means? Can I philosophize (i.e., know the truth) through likeness? To what extent? How far can I get? What kind of truth results from likeness? The first – and provisional – answer to these questions comes from God himself: even if likeness can take thinking very, very far, it is not devoid of risks and misuses. As God himself summarizes: “lo ciel passasti e ‘nfin a me venisti e desti in vano amor Me per semblanti” (*You came across the heavens, and came all the way to me; you gave me as a term of comparison in your profane love*).

Have scholars acknowledged the importance of likeness? It seems not. The importance of likeness has gone unnoticed because scholars have not recognized Guinizzelli's peculiarity as a philosopher-poet. In other words, this hermeneutical failure is rooted in the way scholars – almost subconsciously – consider philosophy as a way of thinking based on some kind of strong logical connections. When scholars use the term ‘philosopher-poet,’ they don't notice that the expression is itself already a challenge, a task that calls us to rethink the ontological status that poetry and philosophy assume when we name them as a unity. If Guinizzelli is a philosopher-poet, then we should ask, What is a philosophical-poetry? And a poetical-philosophy? How are they different? Shouldn't we entirely rethink the meaning of these two terms once we fuse them? Guinizzelli's composition is not logical but rather *analogical* because he is not simply a philosopher; he is a philosopher-poet (or a lyric scientist,) i.e., a figure that articulates a third space between philosophy and poetry. Is Guinizzelli successful? Can there be something like a philosophical-poetry? Can there be a *tertium datur* between poetry and philosophy, lyric and science, prose and verse? Isn't this a paradox, a

contradiction? Don't these two realms of language normally exclude each other? Didn't Plato and Aquinas ban poets from the city?

To classify Guinizelli as a 'philosopher-poet' means to question the limits of philosophy when she speaks in verses, and conversely, the limits of poetry she thinks in philosophical concepts. Scholars have failed to see this paradox, and have used this term irresponsibly, without clarifying what they mean by it. To challenge this view, I shall present Guinizelli's philosophical-poetry as a rigorous, but non-deductive, investigation into truth: a form of thought that moves horizontally by the means of *likeness*.

How does likeness influence Guinizelli's view of love? In *Al cor gentil*, love takes the form of a praise of truth, a rarefied experience of the intellect in which the lover moves away from the passions and bestows his attention upon the perfection of his beloved. Guinizelli's love is a contemplative activity that blends truth and beauty, knowledge and desire. I shall return to this later, and give more detail.

To recapitulate: *Al cor gentil* is a canzone about knowledge, a canzone about a particular form of knowledge that we can access through *likeness*. In this chapter, first I shall sketch the meaning that *likeness* assumes in this canzone by analyzing the last stanza, and then I shall use this term to explain the entire canzone. I shall also discuss the sonnet *Io voglio del ver' la mia donna laudare* in which Guinizelli explicitly deals with the relationship between likeness and truth.

Now, a few *caveats*. First, I must warn my reader that my analysis will be sometimes violent, because I will occasionally explain Guinizelli's compositions with terms that are not contained in them. The violence of my analysis will hinge upon the

way I translate some lines. Also, for reasons of clarity, I will force the Italian verses into the English prose. Second, I reject every interpretation that focuses on morality. Third, my interpretation will not make claims about Guinizzelli's poetry as such, except as regards its concern with truth. Thus, I will limit this chapter to the commentary on Guinizzelli's manifesto and *Io voglio del ver'*, since these are the places where he develops most thoroughly his insights on likeness.

In reality, Guinizzelli's poetry is far more complex and stratified than *Al cor gentil* may lead us to think. The oscillation between pain and joy, the reflection on death and life, and the scrutiny of interiority are only some of the traits of Guinizzelli's poetry as such. For different reasons, scholars like Pietro Pelosi and Antonio Gagliardi read Guinizzelli's oppositions through the lens of "anxiety" (*inquietudine*).<sup>6</sup> While I don't contrast these approaches on Guinizzelli's poetry *per se*, I want to stress the contemplative and dispassionate dimension of *Al cor gentil*: it seems almost as if Guinizzelli found with this canzone a moment of miraculous stillness that allowed him a detached, fulfilled, and serendipitous contemplation.

## 1.2

Let us read the last stanza once more, and from here, start our interpretation.

Donna, Deo mi dirà: "Che presomisti?",  
s'iando 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 la laude

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<sup>6</sup> Pietro Pelosi, *Guido Guinizzelli: Stilnovo inquieto* (Napoli: Liguori, 2000); Antonio Gagliardi, *Guinizzelli, Dante, Petrarca: L'inquietudine del poeta* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2003).

e la Reina del reame 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”.<sup>7</sup>

*My Lady, God will say to me while my soul stands before Him: “How dare you? You came across the heavens, all the way to Me, and gave Me as a term of comparison for your profane love; the hymn of praise is appropriate only to Me and the queen of the kingdom, through whom every fraud ceases.” Then, I will be able to say to Him: “She had the semblance of an angel coming from Your kingdom; I made no mistake if I loved her.”*

Although the last stanza of *Al cor gentil* has been interpreted in a myriad of ways, scholars do not seem to have recognized its real weight within the general economy of the canzone. While some scholars have tried to articulate its sense, some others have simply commented on the possible models that inspired Guinizzelli. For instance, Gianfranco Contini talks about the “theological enormity” (*enormità teologica*) of the comparison between the woman and the angel.<sup>8</sup> He also sees the divine intervention as an ironical self-critique of Guinizzelli’s boldness.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Stefan Hartung sees the last stanza as only “apparently ironic.” Within this frame, the poet’s answer to God is a “self-mitigating” apology that advocates for the necessity of profane love that finds its justification in a godly project. This should also explain to us why Dante favored Guinizzelli over Cavalcanti, and saw in love the possibility of salvation rather than the destruction of reason (the position taken by Cavalcanti).<sup>10</sup> For Giovanni

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<sup>7</sup> Guido Guinizzelli, *Rime*, 37.

<sup>8</sup> Gianfranco Contini, *Poeti del Duecento* (Milano: Ricciardi, 1995), 449.

<sup>9</sup> Contini, *Poeti del Duecento*, 460: “Lo stesso intervento di Dio, inserito in un’ironica autocritica della temerarietà.”

<sup>10</sup> Stefan Hartung, *Guido Guinizzelli e la teologia della grazia*, in Furio Brugnolo and Gianfelice Peron, *Da Guido Guinizzelli a Dante: Nuove Prospettive Sulla Lirica Del*

Federzoni the last stanza of *Al cor gentil* is a moment of triumph for feelings, which comes after, and takes over, the philosophical demonstrations that have occurred thus far: “Here after much and strict philosophy, the human feeling explodes in all its force/power. The poet ... seems to be saying: that lady is angel from *the heavens who came to heart to show miracles*. How could I not adore her, or not feel entirely taken by the lithe love for the beautiful person?”<sup>11</sup> In reading God’s condemnation as an expression of Guinizelli’s Christianity, Gagliardi sees the poet’s response to God as an indication to a “time without guilt” in which the lady is similar to an angel.<sup>12</sup> But *nota bene* that the similarity here is more than a relationship between two images: it is what allows humans to participate in God’s nature.

To summarize: ‘theological enormity’, ‘irony’, ‘absence of irony’, ‘expression of feelings’, ‘justification of profane love’, ‘expression of Christianity’, ‘time without guilt’... If with my interpretation I take into account and redirect, wherever possible, the suggestions from other scholars, the only readings that I would exclude are those who highlight the presence of feelings and passion. Given the absence of any reference to the interiority of the lover, to his pain or his joy, I argue that *Al cor gentil*’s view on love is contemplative and dispassionate; the interiority of the lover as much as any kind of individual residuum drops out of consideration: love is a cosmic force that acts in

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*Duecento : Atti del convegno di studi, Padova-Monselice, 10-12 Maggio 2002* (Padova: Il poligrafo, 2004), 166-167.

<sup>11</sup> Giovanni Federzoni, *La canzone di Guido Guinizelli ‘Al cor gentil ripara sempre amore’* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1905), 29: “Qui dopo tanta spirituale e severa filosofia, scoppia fuori con tutta la sua potenza il sentimento umano. Il rimate [...] par che voglia dire: quella donna è un angelo venuto di cielo in terra a miracol mostrare. Come potrei non adorarla, non sentirmi tutto preso di leggiadro amore per la bella persona?”

<sup>12</sup> Gagliardi, *Guinizelli, Dante, Petrarca: L'inquietudine del poeta*, 59.

analogical agreement with the other forces that populate the universe. Hence, Guinizzelli's exposition of love has very little to do with passion, since love is knowledge, and beauty is truth.

Let me add some words on the translation and the interpretation of this canzone. Given its distance in space and time, this canzone's sentence structure is at times hard to process, and consequently even harder to translate. Let us consider "desti in vano amor Me per semblanti." Translators and scholars agree on the meaning of this sentence, which reads more or less as "you took Me and vain love for resemblant." In God's eyes, the lover is guilty of having made a wrong comparison, of having established a flawed, sinful connection. However, the structure of this sentence seems odd: "desti in vano amor Me per semblanti" literally reads as "(you) gave (*desti*) in vain (*in vano*) love (*amore*) Me (*Me*) for (*per*) resemblant (*semblanti*)." <sup>13</sup> There are two ways of reading this sentence depending on whether we connect "in vain" with "love" or not: 1) "desti *in vano* amor Me per semblanti" (*in vain*, you gave Me [and] love for resemblant); 2) "desti *in vano amor* Me per semblanti" (you gave Me as semblant *for a vain love*). To what is "in vain" referred, to the comparison or to love? Both readings present some problems.

In the first case, Guinizzelli seems to be quoting from *Exodus* 20, 7. In the *Vulgate* we read: "Non assumes nomen Domini Dei tui *in vanum*<sup>14</sup> nec enim habebit insontem Dominus eum qui adsumpserit nomen Domini Dei sui frustra."<sup>15</sup> Here some

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<sup>13</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>14</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> My emphasis.

of the translations: “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God *in vain* for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes (will have taken) His name for nothing.<sup>16</sup> The *New Oxford Annotated* translates: “You shall not make *wrongful* (in vanum) use of the name of the LORD your God, for the lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.”<sup>17</sup> Treccani translates: “Do not call God as witness for things that are empty, vane, or false.”<sup>18</sup> In this case, “in vain” means ‘wrongful’, ‘false’ and – since it violates a commandment – ‘disrespectful’, ‘blasphemous.’ This reading qualifies the lover’s words as sacrilegious and explains why God questions the lover/poet since he seems to violate one of the commandments. This reading is also corroborated by the opening line of the stanza, “Che presomisti?” which, as Gagliardi notices, reminds us of God’s scolding to Adam: “...[E]t secundum opera Adae et secundum praesumptionem illius” (Sirach 35, 24) (...[A]nd according to the work of Adam and according to his presumption”.

Despite its appeal, there are several problems with this translation. First, in the line there is no conjunction, for it says: “you gave in vain love Me for resemblant” as

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<sup>16</sup> Oxford English Dictionary: In the adverbial phrase ‘in vain’, to no effect or purpose; ineffectually, uselessly, vainly. After L. ‘in vanum’, or OF. ‘en vein’ (F. en vain, = It. in vano, Sp. en vano, Pg. em vão).

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/vain>:

“In an improper or irreverent manner: to take God's name in vain.”

<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/vain>:

“(Bible) to use the name of someone, esp God, without due respect or reverence.”

<sup>17</sup> Michael David Coogan, Marc Zvi Brettler, Carol A Newsom, and PHEME PERKINS, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/deuterocanonical Books*. augm. 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> [www.treccani.it/vocabolario/invano/](http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/invano/):

“Non assumes nomen Domini Dei tui in vanum (Esodo XX, 7), tradotto correntemente in ital. «non nominare il nome di Dio invano», ma che originariamente significa «non chiamare Dio a testimoniao per cose vane, futili o false»].”

opposed to “you gave in vain love [and] Me for resemblant”. Second, it is not clear what “to give something in vain” means. The *Vulgata*, which we can assume Guinizzelli was familiar with, uses “assumere” (to assume, to take) which is the opposite of ‘to give.’ Third, there is a difference between ‘Love’ and ‘love’, where the former indicates a divinity and the latter the experience as such. The comparison that comes out of this translation would be between two entities of a different kind (God and the experience of love), as opposed to God and Love. In other words, if God is talking about love as the experience, is the comparison fair? Namely, are love and God two commensurable terms? We are in the realm of speculation here, since we do not have any autograph copy of Guinizzelli’s composition. The transcription of ‘love’ with lower case could very well had been an error of the copier. Furthermore, “in vain” could also mean “uselessly” as it does in standard Italian; but that would also raise a lot of issues, such as the relationship between love and God. If the poet made the comparison “uselessly,” does this mean that love and God do not belong to each other, namely, that God is devoid of love? And, as a follow up, What kind of God would Guinizzelli be referring to? Could God be devoid of love, as the Aristotelian unmoved mover only loved, and never loving? Fourth, in the anthology *Poeti del duecento* the locution “in vain” (spelled as two separate words) appears only in Guinizzelli, while it appears spelled in one word (*invano*) once in *Incontrino dei Fabbrucci*, and once in *Monte Andrea*.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> In Contini, *Poeti del Duecento*:

*Incontrino dei Fabbrucci*:

“ca ben è [s]canoscente  
qual donna fa presente

The second possibility reads the sentence as “desti *in vano amor* Me per semblanti” (*you gave Me as semblant* for a vain love). Luciano Rossi – one of the Italian editors of Guinizzelli’s poems – reads the sentence as “you came to me after you gave Me as a term of comparison for a profane love.”<sup>20</sup> If the explanation seems reasonable, and resolves the issue of the difference between ‘Love’ and ‘love’, on the other hand we should notice that Rossi renders with a singular the adjective “semblanti” (*resemblant*), originally plural in Italian. A justification for Rossi’s choice could be that “semblanti” is in rhyme with “davanti”, and therefore it only looks plural without actually being so.

For this chapter, I shall use this last translation while my reader should keep in mind the imperfection attached to each solution as we proceed through the interpretation of the stanza.

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le sue parole invano  
ond'ha cuor longitano,  
per esser più laudata;  
ma talor n'è blasmata,  
portata in mano in mano.”

Monte Andrea:

“Donna, invano labora  
in cui non è dirittura:  
far tal sementa già frutto no rende;  
ché l'aquistato d'ardire  
puote più tosto fallire  
che laove vera ragione racende.

<sup>20</sup> This is how Rossi reads the entire sentence: “Sei passato al di là del cielo e venuto fino a Me, dopo aver dato, per un amore profano, Me stesso come termine di paragone ...”, Guido Guinizzelli, *Rime*, 37.

### 1.3

As I mentioned above, the last stanza culminates with the scene of God almighty meeting the lover in the heavens. God seems upset with the lover because his wrong comparison led him to a profane love. But is God only condemning here? Isn't he also recognizing some achievement on the lover's part? God does not simply condemn the lover's gesture here, for there is almost an element of recognition in his words as he acknowledges the lover's achievements. That is to say: the lover's words and thoughts brought him far, across the heavens, all the way to God's presence. On the other hand though, God reproaches the lover, and reminds the lover that only God himself and the Virgin Mary are worthy of adoration. One may ask here what "profane love" love is. Probably carnal love, the kind of love that human beings experience for each other: *human*, hence imperfect, faulty, physical, spoiled by passion and 'lower' feelings that can blind humans, and lead them to false knowledge. On the contrary, non-vain love should consist in the rightful praise of God and the Virgin Mary.

The most important thing to notice this far is that with *Al cor gentil* Guinizzelli has completely broken the conventions under which the experience of love is by definition passionate. Lyric poetry is now the description of the interiority of the lover. For this reason, I cannot agree with Giulio Ferroni when in his commentary, on the one hand he acknowledges the sense of rupture with the tradition that comes with *Al cor gentil*, but on the other he claims that this text is not a theoretical manifesto, and has no programmatic scope.<sup>21</sup> The elements of novelty remain even if the topic of the lady-

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<sup>21</sup> In Giulio Ferroni, *L'esperienza letteraria in Italia* (Torino: Einaudi, 2006), 166: "The composition has a strong trait of innovation, both at the level of content and language,

angel is not new, as we can find in Troubadour poets like Guilhelm de S. Gregori and in Giacomo da Lentini and Monte Andrea.<sup>22</sup> On the contrary, the experimentation of this text could not be greater. Of course, Guinizzelli does not invent the theme of the angelic woman (nor does he invent *likeness* as such), but if we were to treat novelty exclusively as a *creatio ex nihilo*, then we could probably give up the entire concept of innovation: we can always trace back a theme or a symbol to some more distant origin. Guinizzelli's novelty has to do mainly with two things: 1) the expansion, and the use of analogical thinking across the entire poem, and 2) the intellectualization of love due to the absence of passion. That is to say, in the lyrical compositions that go from the Sicilian school to Guinizzelli, there had always been attention to the lover's interiority, with some of the poems underlining the pain of the lover or his joy. In both cases, there was an emphasis on the interiority of the lover, on his passion and his passivity in experiencing love. Pietro Pelosi effectively synthesizes the experience of love in Guinizzelli's poetry as perfectly in line with the previous tradition.<sup>23</sup>

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even if it is not a theoretical manifesto, and even if the composition uses the themes of the tradition without having a real programmatical scope." (Pur non trattandosi di un manifesto teorico, pur accogliendo i motivi della tradizione senza porsi un vero intento programmatico, il componimento ha forti caratteri innovatori, a livello sia di contenuto che di linguaggio.)

<sup>22</sup> In Rossi's notes we learn that the topos of the lady-angel comes from the troubadours (Guilhem de S. Gregori, *Dregs et razos*, 22-23 "angel| sembra del ciel") Giacomo da Lentini (Angelica figura | e comprobata | dobiata – di ricura – e di grandezze); Monte Andrea (tenz. 80 Chi ben riguarda, donna, vostre altezze, v. 16 "d'angel sembianza – voi non mancone.")

<sup>23</sup> Pietro Pelosi, *Guido Guinizzelli: Stilnovo Inquieto*. 1. ed. (Napoli: Liguori, 2000), 20: "[I]l bel saluto e lo sguardo gentile uccidono il poeta e l'amore lo assale, gli divide, gli taglia il cuore da parte a parte. Impossibile è parlare nel fuoco d'Amore come avviene a colui che, impotente, assiste alla propria morte. Il colpo d'Amore passa per gli occhi come un fulmine e spezza e fende l'interiorità del poeta, fino a renderlo inerte come una statua d'ottone, che solo all'esterno rende la figura d'uomo. Dolente e sventurato, egli

[T]he beautiful smile and the gentle gaze kill the poet while love assaults him, and split and cut his heart through and through. It is impossible to talk about the fire of Love for the one who, helpless, watches his own death. The blow of Love goes through his eyes like a lightning, and splits the interiority of the poet, until he becomes a statue of brass that only from the outside looks like a man. In pain and wretched, he finds no peace: Love assaults him, knocks him one the ground like a lightning that shatters a wall. The eyes and the heart get to an extreme dialogue in which dominate death and decay, while the eye of the lady flare, and rise to a superhuman thunder that leaves the lover stunned and dismayed. The heart gets rid of the poet until life leaves him by drawing him to extreme and opposite conditions. The “deep thinking” of Love distresses the poet to the point the he dies even if he seems alive. The poet loses his nature, his essence, and his being, to the point that he loses hope to rejoice again: only discouragement, desperation, and solitude.

However, it is not by chance that Pelosi dedicates little attention to *Al cor gentil*. This canzone disrupts this well-established imagery around love that explores the interiority of the lover in so much detail. Against this convention, *Al cor gentil* completely erases the passionate (both painful and joyful) moment of the lover, and focuses instead on the contemplative dimension of the experience. The pain is gone, and death is forgotten: there is no lightning splitting the lover’s heart, no mortal stare, and so on. Gagliardi correctly notes that in *Al cor gentil* not only is the body silenced, but also any relationship with materiality and sensibility. What remains is a highly intellectualized

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non trova pace: Amore lo assale, lo abbatte sulla terra come il fulmine che dirompe un muro. Occhi e cuore giungono a un dialogo estremo in cui morte e disfacimento campeggiano, mentre gli occhi della donna balenano, assurgono d’improvviso ad un fulgore sovrumano che lascia l’amante stordito e sbigottito. Il cuore si spossessa del poeta, lo fa transitare improvvisamente in condizione estreme e opposte, fino a devitalizzarlo. Il “profondo pensare” d’Amore lo angoscia tanto che sembra vivo, ma dentro di sé porta la morte. [...] Il poeta si disnatura, si sradica dalla propria essenza, dal proprio essere, tanto che crede di non poter gioire mai più: solo sconforto, disperazione, solitudine.”

representation of the world constructed on the reciprocal likeness of each plane of reality. It is within this experience of the world that a Sweet New Style becomes possible, a style in which the silence of the body allows love to become a desire of the intellect that transforms lyric poetry into *lauda*.<sup>24</sup> In this highly intellectualized experience, Guinizzelli's main concern is the representation of the world – and hence truth – and love becomes indistinguishable from knowledge as poetry becomes indistinguishable from philosophy, which is from her very beginning – it's worth remembering – “love for knowledge.” In these compositions, ‘love’, ‘poetry’, and ‘philosophy’ are homonymous, as much as ‘lover’, ‘poet’, ‘philosopher’. This assimilation of terms also involves the beloved who is at the same time ‘lady’, ‘truth’, and ‘beauty.’

To recapitulate: the intellectualization of love allows Guinizzelli to move from its traditional representation, and experiment a different style – a Sweet New Style – that thinks through likeness, and transforms the lover's passion (his joy and/or his pain) into the desire of the intellect, i.e., a desire concerned with knowledge, beauty, and truth. A desire that unifies love, knowledge, and poetry; a desire that is authentically philosophical, because literally “in love with knowledge.”

#### 1.4

After God's reproach, it is the lover's turn to speak. This part presents an interesting flip: not only does the poet not apologize for his deeds; he defends his position by using

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<sup>24</sup> Gagliardi, *Guinizzelli, Dante, Petrarca: L'inquietudine del poeta*, 61.

God's very same concept, i.e., likeness. If the object of God's reproach is a wrongful assimilation, then the lover's answer remains based on likeness. According to the lover, there is no mistake in his comparison because his beloved resembles an angel. That is to say: there is no mistake or blasphemy; it is not "vano amore." If these are the terms of the discussion, then, either God is right, and the comparison is wrong, or the comparison is right and hence God is wrong. Could Guinizzelli possibly be suggesting that God is wrong, and that He has misinterpreted the lover's comparison? The terms of accusation and defense coincide: there was a comparison, which is either right or wrong. The solution of this dilemma is left to the reader, because the poet's response also closes the canzone. If God is right, should we conclude that the use of *likeness* is pernicious, and that it leads inevitably to fraud? Is God right in letting the lover know that his tool is extremely powerful but also dangerous because it can lead to blasphemy? Put briefly: is likeness unstoppable, *irresistible*? Or instead, as the poet seems to suggest, is God wrong? Hard to understand. Perhaps, in this last stanza the poet is giving his own interpretation to the canzone, and God's point coincides with Guinizzelli's self-critique.

We could also insinuate a doubt at this point: Is the lover really answering God? If we look at the question, we find that the terms of God's comparison are 'vain love' and Himself, whereas in his reply the lover mentions the lady, and the angel. If we take the lover's answer to be a genuine one then we are left with some interpretive questions: Are love and the lady the same thing? If so, the angelic resemblance could be referred to love, and the answer may sound like: the lady (whose love at the same time) had angelic resemblance. But then, once again, why don't we read 'Love' instead of 'love'? The problem of comparison appears again. Given that the lover answers God talking

about the lady, are we sure that the lover is really answering? Doesn't it look strange to answer God by completely changing the subject? God asks about love and the poet answers about the lady. Perhaps the lover doesn't answer? Is this his strategy to avoid the question?

## 1.5

Before I directly discuss the question of likeness, I would like to spend some time on the sonnet *Io voglio del ver'*, and on the critique it received from Guittone d'Arezzo, because in this sonnet Guinizelli explicitly thematizes the lauda as the connection of truth and likeness. In the explicit mention of truth, we notice how Guinizelli's poetry takes the shape of a philosophical poetry, a poetry that places truth at the center of concern<sup>25</sup>.

Io voglio del ver la mia donna laudare  
Ed assembrarli la rosa e lo giglio:  
più che stella diana splende e pare,  
e ciò ch'è lassù bello a lei somiglio.

Verde river' a lei rasembro a l'âre,  
tutti color' di fior', giano e vermiglio,  
oro ed azzurro e ricche gioi per dare:  
medesmo Amor per lei rafina meglio.

Passa per via adorna, e sí gentile  
ch'abassa orgoglio a cui dona salute,  
e fa'l de nostra fé se non la crede:

e' no lle pò apressare om che sia vile;  
ancor ve dirò c'à maggior vertute:  
null'om pò mal pensar fin che la vede.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Guinizelli thematizes truth as the specific scope of his poetry also in *Tegno de folle 'mpres'*, a lo ver dire.

<sup>26</sup> Guinizelli, *Rime*, 52.

*I want to praise my Lady truthfully, and liken her to the rose and the lily; she appears and shines more than the star Venus, I liken to her what's most beautiful up there. I liken her to the green country and the air, and to all the colors of the flowers, yellow and vermillion, gold and blue and precious stones worthy of being gifted. Thanks to her, Love himself becomes finer. She walks around in beautiful clothes; she looks so noble that she lowers the pride of the one whom she graces, and that she converts him to our faith if he's not yet part of it; and the vile man cannot get close to her. Moreover, I will tell you that she has even greater virtue that no one can have evil thoughts as long as he sees her.*

In the first eight lines of this sonnet, truth, praise, likeness latch on to each other in a garland. The praise of truth of the lady coincides with her assimilation with flowers, and stars. The truth of the lady is communicated through the enumeration of the things that she resembles, and *this* is her praise, a praise that expresses truth by assimilating the lady to the most valuable and beautiful things in the world. It is right here that we get a first sense of how *likeness* works: in order to talk about an unknown object – the lady, in this case – the poet compares her to objects that are already experienced by his audience. Contini notices that Guinizzelli's choice to compare his lady to natural objects is inspired by the *Song of Solomon*. The similarity is also to be found in the use of verbs: “*equitatu meo in curribus Pharaonis adsimilavi te amica mea*” (*I liken you, my darling, to a mare harnessed to one of the chariots of Pharaoh* [my emphasis]).<sup>27</sup> The verbs that indicate likeness – *assemblerli, somiglio, rasebro* (*I liken*) – are all expressed in the first person, almost as if the power of assigning similarities was a prerogative of the poet. Is this the case? Is the lover who disposes of the power of connecting unrelated things, or rather he only discovers such connections? If in this composition this power

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<sup>27</sup> Contini, *Poeti del Duecento*, 472.

seems to be up to the lover, in *Al cor gentil* the poet alternates the use of these verbs in the first person with a third person.

The list of comparisons ends with the triumph of the lady over Love himself. In the primacy of the lady over the god of love we can see again the meaning of God's reproach in *Al cor gentil*: thanks to the lady, even a divinity improves. The praise of the lady was not something new to the genre if we consider the Sicilian School or troubadour poetry. What is new here is Guinizzelli's radicalization of the praise by the use of likeness, a use that scandalized some of his contemporaries such as Guittone d'Arezzo and Bonagiunta Orbicciani, and prompted them to a strong reaction to Guinizzelli's compositions; such reaction is symptomatic of the novelty of Guinizzelli's approach. For instance, Guittone accuses Guinizzelli's of a "filthy mistake" (*laido errore*):

S'eo tale fosse ch'io potesse stare,  
senza riprender me, riprenditore,  
credo farebbi alcuno amendare  
certo, a lo mio parer, d'un laido errore;  
che, quando vol la sua donna laudare,  
le dice ched è bella come fiore,  
e che di gemma o ver di stella pare,  
e che 'n viso di grana ave colore.  
Or tal è pregio per donna avanzare,  
ched a ragione maggio è d'ogni cosa  
che l'omo pote vedere o toccare?

Ché Natura né far pote né osa  
fattura alcuna né maggior né pare,  
for ched alquanto l'om maggior si cosa.<sup>28</sup>

*If I could reproach someone without having to reproach myself [for the same mistake] I would force someone to atone for his filthy mistake. When he says that he wants to praise his lady, he tells her that she is beautiful like a flower,*

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<sup>28</sup> Contini, *Poeti del Duecento*, 35.

*that she looks like a gem or like a star, and [he tells her] that her face is tinged with red. Now, is this a real praise for the lady, since she is rightly greater than everything that a man can see or touch? Nature could not and dares not make anything greater, or at same level than her, except for men who consider themselves better.*

Some scholars have questioned whether the object of Guittone's attack was Guinizelli or not. We can solve the 'dilemma' by noticing that the flowers, the planet, the color red, and the jewels all appear in *Voglio del ver*. Furthermore, the line "quando vuol la sua donna laudare" (*when he wants to praise his lady*) seems a quotation from Guinizelli's "Io voglio del ver la mia donna laudare" (*I want to praise my lady truthfully.*) Guittone agrees with Guinizelli when he considers the lady the higher form of creature, as his canzone XX says,

... Deo che mosse sé sempre a ragione,  
de limo terre l'om fece e formòne,  
e la donna dell'om, siccome appare;  
adonqu'è troppo più naturalmente  
gentil cosa che l'omo e meglio e nata,  
e più sembra ch' amata  
ella fosse da Dio nostro Signore ...

*God, who makes moves always for a good reason, made man from mud, and formed the lady as she appears from man. Thus, she's naturally a much more noble thing, and has a better origin than man, and she appears to be more loved by God our Lord.*

What is the real issue here, given that the two poets agree on the superiority of the lady on the other forms of life? According to Rossi, Guittone's attack is directed at the valorization of *Amor Naturalis*, and the assimilation of the lady to lower forms of life.<sup>29</sup> In other words, Guittone's attacks are against Guinizelli's terms of comparisons, i.e.,

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<sup>29</sup> Guinizelli, *Rime*, 129.

the other side of the likeness. Guittone seems to say: Are we sure that the best way to praise a lady is to compare her with flowers, stars, or gems? Do we really praise a lady when we compare her with inferior forms of life? At this point, Guinizzelli seems trapped both ways, as every term of comparison that he chooses seem to be wrong: if on the one side of the spectrum God tells him that ‘profane love and God’ is a false comparison, we then discover that also on the other side of the spectrum there is a false comparison, as Guittone rejects the assimilation of the lady with lower forms of life.

So, what is Guinizzelli to do? If both higher and lower objects should not be used in praise, then maybe the ‘real’ object of the critique is not the terms of comparison – God or lower forms of life – but rather the comparison in itself. When Guittone accuses Guinizzelli of a filthy mistake, and says: “che, quando vuol la sua donna laudare, le dice ched è bella *come fiore*” (*When he says that he wants to praise his lady, he tells her that she is beautiful like a flower*) we should read as the real element of the contention that “*come*”, the “like-” of *likeness*.

## 1.6

What does it mean to think through likeness? In ordinary language, we do this all the time. For instance, we talk about the “neck of the bottle,” or the “leg of the chair,” to indicate some parts that have some similarity with (or serve a similar purpose of) the human parts. Along the same line, we say that we are “swamped” when we are really busy; that someone is “sharp” when she is very intelligent, or that someone is a “star” when she is famous, or very beautiful, or both. Also, we sometimes ask our listeners “to go beyond” our words, i.e., we tell them “to look for something more.” In other

occasions, like in analogies and metaphors, we use magic words like ‘as’, ‘similar’, ‘like’, ‘to resemble’, ‘to liken’: for instance, a lover may tell his beloved that her lips are “soft *as* roses” or that her skin is “smooth *like* velvet”, etc. All these, are different examples of a kind of talking that happens through similarities.

What exactly do we do when we speak, and think through similarities? First, we combine two different things, one that we don’t know, and one that we know; then, we use the known to illuminate the unknown, hoping that our listener understands us. We hope that, by establishing a comparison, we will render known the unknown, namely, we hope that something distant will come a ‘little closer’ to us, more ‘at hand’, more ‘familiar’ than it was before. The knowledge we reach when we talk and think like this can more or less stable, depending on the strength of the relationship between the two objects: the more similarities between the objects, the more stable and clearer the knowledge. But notice, even if we establish strong similarities, our knowledge is still somehow weak, fragile, for it is never capable of grasping an object in itself: likeness always needs help from elsewhere, it needs a second external element that allows it to manifest the first one. The knowledge derived by likeness is weak because does not demonstrate, or cannot prove anything, it can only show, reveal, make apparent by virtue of what is already evident. We can only say, “Look at x if you want to understand y.” Such a way of thinking is useful to *understand* what stands before us rather than *explaining* it. An explanation does not need comparisons or similarities because is able to master the object in itself, to tell what it is, what is made of, and how: an explanation has already gathered all the information, and needs no external help. For example, when science crystallizes her knowledge, she uses formulas and not comparisons, and this

shows science's certainty, the fact she mastered her object in itself. Let me stress this point once more. At stake with talking, writing, thinking thorough likeness there is an experience of familiarization and closeness: when we use likeness in our discourse, we bring near to us things that are distant by comparing them with things that we are already familiar. In this experience, we somehow domesticate the foreignness and remoteness of the entity that we want to know of, we make it – so to say – less extraneous.

Nonetheless, the power of similarities goes way beyond the ordinary language; it can be used for much higher purposes. An eminent use of likeness is found in the parables of the Gospels. In a recent essay, Giorgio Agamben deals with the use of parables to clarify how we, as humans, experience language. Exploring the relationship between parables and the kingdom of heaven, while he provides some insights on how we should conceive likeness as such, namely as something that has both the power to reveal and conceal something that we are talking about.<sup>30</sup> Let us follow him for a while.

Jesus used parables so much that Matthew wrote that Jesus “told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing,” (Mt. 13, 34,) According to Agamben, the most important parable is the “discourse of the kingdom,” in which Jesus explains to the apostles how they should envision the kingdom of God. In this discourse, there is a direct relationship between how we understand the parables, and how we experience the kingdom of God

Parables have the shape of a simile. “The kingdom of the heavens is similar (*homoia*) to a grain of mustard [...],” “The Kingdom of the heavens looks like (*homoiothe*) a man who sows [...],” (in Mk 4, 26 “The Kingdom of God is like (*outos ... os*) a man who sows”). A parable

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<sup>30</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Il fuoco e il racconto* (Roma: Nottetempo, 2014), 25-37.

institutes a similarity between the Kingdom and something that is found here and now on earth. This means that the experience of the Kingdom goes through the perception of a similarity, and that without the perception of this similarity there is no human understanding of the Kingdom. Hence, its affinity with a parable: parables express the Kingdom of the heavens as a parable because it means, in the first place, the event and the perception of a similarity: with the yeast ... with a hidden treasure ...”<sup>31</sup> [trans. mine]

In the Gospels, parables are a kind of similes that establish a relationship between the kingdom of God and this world: understanding parables becomes necessary for humans insofar as parables connect the world and the heavens. Thus, if they want to enter the kingdom of God, humans need to perceive and understand the meaning of similarity. This relationship also involves some sense of physical closeness, of being at hand, as Agamben reminds us, ‘close’ (*eggys*) comes from a verb that means “at hand.” The understanding of this similarity brings us closer to the kingdom, it makes it *at hand*: “[...] [T]he kingdom of heaven has come close” (Mt. 3,2 e 10,7; Mk. 1,15; Lc 10,9). For Agamben, when we experience parables, closeness and likeness identify with each other: “The likeness of the Kingdom is also a similarity, the Last is, together, both close and alike.”<sup>32</sup> One may ask, Why parables? Why does Jesus express himself in this way?

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<sup>31</sup> Agamben, *Il fuoco e il racconto*, 25-26: “La parabola ha la forma di una similitudine. “Il regno dei cieli è simile (*homoia*) a un chicco di senape...”, “Il Regno dei cieli assomiglia (*homioithe*) a un uomo che semina...” (in Mk 4,26 “Il regno di Dio è così come (*outos ... os*) un uomo che getta il seme...”). La parabola istituisce, cioè una somiglianza tra il Regno e qualcosa che si trova qui e ora sulla terra. Ciò significa che l’esperienza del Regno passa attraverso la percezione di una somiglianza e che senza la percezione di questa somiglianza non si dà per gli uomini comprensione del Regno. Di qui la sua affinità con la parabola: le parabole esprimono il Regno dei cieli come parabola perché esso significa innanzitutto l’evento e la percezione di una somiglianza: col lievito ... col tesoro nascosto ...”

<sup>32</sup> Agamben, *Il fuoco e il racconto*, 28.

Matthew and Luke present two opposite reasons. In the former, we read that parables are used to clarify what is otherwise obscure, while in Luke we read the exact opposite, namely, that Jesus uses parables to confuse people, and protect the mysteries of the reign of God. In Matthew, Jesus introduces a separation between apostles and people, i.e., between those who have a direct knowledge of God, and those one can only have an indirect one. Jesus speaks in parables to the people because they – as opposed to the apostles – were not granted the privilege to know the mystery of the kingdom, and therefore, even if they can see or listen, they cannot grasp the secrets of the heavens.

Then the disciples came and asked him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” He answered, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven but to them it has not been given<sup>33</sup> [...] The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’”

However, – and to Agamben’s own frustration – in Luke the reasons for using parables sound quite opposite: Jesus uses parables to confuse people, and to protect the secrets of the heavens.

Then his disciples asked him what this parable meant. He said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, to that  
‘looking they may not perceive,  
and listening they may not understand.’”<sup>34</sup>

Agamben finds a happy medium between Luke’s and Matthew’s explanations when he, referring to an unspecified “rhetorical module of the antiquity,” states that parables are

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<sup>33</sup> Mt 13, 10-13.

<sup>34</sup> Lk 8, 9-17.

an encrypted discourse that has the goal of hiding its secrets while it manifests them to the people.<sup>35</sup> In other words, a parable tells the truth about something in a way that is obscure to those who cannot grasp its signs. Hence the duplicity of a parable, its oscillation between clarity and darkness, manifestation and dissimulation: only those who grasp similarities can understand parables, while those once who cannot are left in the darkness. This is why the kingdom is close, and at hand, but still so hard to enter: the words that grant its access are right there, but they need to be understood in a certain way. To our discourse, the duplicity of similarities, as a way to both inform and confuse our audience, is key. Let us go back to our canzone, and see other uses of likeness.

## 1.7

In addition to parables, likeness is also the basic mechanism of analogies and metaphors.<sup>36</sup> Those figures of speech constitute the backbone of the thinking that takes place in Guinizzelli's *Al cor gentil*. I shall focus specifically on analogy, since a metaphor is simply an abbreviated analogy as Aristotle shows in the *Poetics*. Before we proceed, it is important to notice that the term 'likeness' as such is not present in Guinizzelli's compositions. Instead, he uses "resemblance" (*sembianza*) in *Al cor gentil*, and "to compare, I liken" *asembrare, rasebro, and somiglio* in *Io voglio del ver'*. In

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<sup>35</sup> Agamben, *Il fuoco e il racconto*, 27.

<sup>36</sup> Even if scholars like Contini in *Poeti del '200*, Carlo Paonazzi in *La maniera mutata: Il "Dolce Stil Novo" tra scrittura e "ars poetica"* (Milano: Vita e pensiero, 1998), and Guglielmo Gorni in *Il nodo della lingua e il verbo d'amore: Studi su Dante e altri Duecentisti* (Firenze: Olschki, 1981) acknowledged Guinizzelli's use of analogy, they did not provide an analysis of the implications that such use has on his poetry.

these compositions Guinzelli fuses philosophy and poetry in a *tertium datur* – a philosophical poetry – that has in analogy the fundamental mechanism of its development.

One of the first formalization of analogy goes back to Aristotle. What is an analogy? In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1131a29-1131b16), Aristotle explains that an analogy is an equality of proportion between at least four terms (the *analogata*) like A, B, C, and D, so that they relate to each other as  $A : B = C : D$ . For instance, if we take four terms like warmth, Florida, cold, and Alaska, we could establish the analogy  $warmth : Florida = cold : Alaska$ , which reads “Warmth is to Florida as cold to Alaska”, or “Florida is as warm as Alaska is cold.” Once a new analogy penetrates into ordinary language, our capacity of connecting objects receives a new possibility, since a new analogy informs a different way of seeing the world. The possibility of analogy resides in likeness, which can be either discovered or crafted by the speaker. One may ask whether analogies are established or discovered, namely, whether the likeness that allows to bring near different things is in the nature of things or in the eyes of the beholder. In other words, are similarities found or established, or – more ‘academically’ stated – are they objective or subjective? This question is apparently a hard one: if it is the speaker’s prerogative to establish likeness, then why do some things lend themselves to be compared and some other do not? Why do some things present characteristics that allow their comparison while some other things do not present such a structure? Otherwise stated, if similarities are subjective, i.e., established by a speaker, then why can’t we just make whatever comparison we want? There can be at least two answers to these questions, a polemical one and a conciliatory one: both of them share an element

of truth. The polemical answer dismisses the questions as irrelevant: it doesn't matter whether we form similarities, or we discover them; what matters is their success, namely whether they have the sufficient force to impose themselves, and produce a change in the ordinary language. Instead, the conciliatory answer advocates for a happy medium: likeness is both objective and subjective; it is both found, and discovered. How? In order for us to compare two entities, they need somehow *already commensurable*, which means that their appearance or structure must not refuse the possibility of the comparison. But then the passage from possibility to reality – or as Aristotle used to say – from potentiality to actuality must be realized by a speaker, who uncovers, and brings into light the hidden similarity. Hence, likeness is both subjective and objective since the possibility of the comparison lies in the things in themselves, but its transformation into reality happens thanks to the speaker. Normally, analogy has a quantitative meaning, but it works also to indicate how different qualities relate to different objects, as in the case “blue is to the sky as green to the sea.” Analogy discovers (or establishes) relations among things that carry different definitions. Ordinary language is filled with similar instances: when we say that someone ‘is sharp,’ the expression presupposes the analogy mind : ability to think = knife : ability to cut. In this case, sharpness is shared both by the person and by the knife, and the result is that ‘person’ and ‘knife’ become homologous in relation to sharpness. Therefore, analogy produces homology, i.e. homology through analogy. Once the analogy enters into the ordinary language, one just uses it, says that “John is a sharp guy”, and forgets that by saying that she means that the property of sharpness is only analogically used to describe a trait of John's mind, and not that we could “use John to cut bread.”

By contrast, analogy tells a truth by discovering similarities between what is distant and unknown, and what is closer and known. For instance, we want to enquire about the nature of God, and his relationship with us we often hear that “God loves us like a father loves his children.” Analogical reasoning moves along a horizontal line, and is complementary to demonstrative and ‘syllogistic’ reasoning used in philosophical demonstrations. This kind of reasoning has a vertical structure:

Every human is mortal  
Socrates is human  
Then, Socrates is mortal

The conclusion derives vertically from the premises, as a cascade. From the top to the bottom (*deduction*), or from the bottom to the top (*induction*.) ‘Mortal’ is the common term in the two premises that allows the connection between ‘human’ and ‘Socrates’ and therefore disappears in the conclusion. Instead, analogy moves horizontally:

God : us = father : children.

Since we want to know how God relates to us (1<sup>st</sup> branch) we consider the relationship between father and children (2<sup>nd</sup> branch). Since father : children is already known to us, we can connect it with the unknown relationship between God and us. If the connection is established and understood, we gain some sort of knowledge about the unknown, a knowledge that gives us some sense of its object without possessing it.

The question that remains, and cannot be answered – unless presupposing the knowledge that one wants to achieve – is *how* we decide in the first place the term of comparison for the unknown. Why did we choose the ‘father’ for our comparison, and

not an ‘airplane’ or a ‘glass?’ Doesn’t the choice of our term of comparison betray some knowledge? More bluntly, if we use analogy to gain knowledge on the unknown by virtue of the known, how can we choose a term of comparison in the first place?

Once the similarity penetrates ordinary language we simply go on use it, and forget that it was an analogy in the first place: then God *becomes* a ‘father’, or a ‘shepherd’, and so on. Of course, the stronger and the better we establish a resemblance between two objects, and the more stable knowledge we achieve, and vice versa. But herein it lies a danger: likeness is *not* identity, and therefore when we use analogies we ought to keep in mind that our knowledge remains indirect, weak, and open to change rather than certain, unshakeable, and objective. Let me make this clear: analogy is essentially superficial, for it refuses the depth and the cascade structure of the syllogism. Analogy is not concerned with definition and ultimate knowledge (the Aristotelian *ti esti*) but rather, she is concerned with building bridges between known and unknown. Analogy substitutes the stringent *hence, therefore, thus* that bind premises and conclusion with the weaker *as ... like*. Rather than being concerned with the answers, analogy is concerned with the questions, for the establishment of a likeness is an apostrophes for the thought to interrogate that similarity rather than accept it as an answer.

Even if some scholars minimize the novelty of Guinizelli, the radicality of this approach was noticed by some of his contemporaries, such as Guittone D’Arezzo and Bonagiunta da Orbicciani, who expressed in verses their doubts on the goodness of this approach. In *Figlio mio diletto*, Guittone responds to one of Guinizelli’s sonnets in

which he calls Guittone “father”. Guittone’s critic mainly focuses on the *lauda*, but what concerns us is the last line:

Figlio mio diletto, in faccia laude  
non con descrezion, sembrame, m’archi:  
lauda sua volonter-non saggio l’aude,  
se tutto laudator giusto, ben marchi.

Per che laudarte te non cor me l’aude,  
tuttoché laude merti e, là u’ de’, marchi;  
laudando, sparte bon de Valor, Laude,  
legge orrando di saggi e non di marchi.

Ma se, che degno sia figlio m’acorgo,  
no amo certo guàire a te dicimi,  
ché volonteri a la tua lauda accorgo.

La grazia tūa che «padre» dicími,  
che figlio tale, assai pago, corgo,  
purché vera sapienzia a poder cimi.<sup>37</sup>

*My dear son, a indiscreet praise transverses my face, the wise doesn’t hear willingly his praise, not even in the case in which his righteous praiser tells the truth. For this reason, my heart doesn’t encourage me to praise you even if you deserve it, and give praise where it’s right; if we honor the rule of the wises and not the one of the fools, an excessive praise separates the righteous from his merit. But if I realize that I am worthy, my dear son, I certainly don’t want to denigrate you, hence I gladly welcome your praise. Thanks to your grace, which calls me ‘father’, I’m delighted to welcome a son like you, as long as you – according to your possibility – cultivate authentic knowledge.*

Guittone’s attitude is ambivalent: if he seems to accept that Guinizzelli calls him “father” on the other hand he criticizes his choice of the *lauda* as the form of his poetry.

Is Guittone being ironical here? In the last line, we get a sense of Guittone’s critique:

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<sup>37</sup> Guittone D’Arezzo, *Le rime di Guittone d’Arezzo*. ed. Francesco Egidi (Bari: Laterza, 1940), 250.

“as long as you – according to your possibility – cultivate authentic knowledge.” That is to say, whether or not Guittone accepts Guinizzelli’s affiliation, he rejects his use of the *lauda*, and doubts that it will lead to true knowledge. So, why is Guinizzelli’s knowledge inauthentic as Guittone’s last line seems to hint? In one of his sonnets, Bonagiunta elaborates on Guinizzelli’s style, and gives us important hints on the philosophical and poetical implications of his approach. According to Bonagiunta, Guinizzelli is guilty of altering the very nature of love poetry.

Voi c’avete mutata la maniera  
de li piacenti ditti de l’amore  
de la forma dell’esser là dov’era,  
per avansare ogn’altro trovatore,

avete fatto como la lumera,  
ch’a le scure partite dà splendore,  
ma non quine ove luce l’alta spera,  
la quale avansa e passa di chiarore.

Così passate voi di sottigliansa,  
e non si può trovar chi ben ispogna,  
cotant’è iscura vostra parlatura.

Ed è tenuta grave ’nsomillianza,  
ancor che ’l senno vegna da Bologna,  
traier canson per forza di scrittura.<sup>38</sup>

*To surpass every other poet you changed the manner of the sayings of love, and [you changed] their form of being; you have acted as a lamp that gives light to the obscure parts but not in Lucca, where it shines the lofty sphere that surpasses in clarity [every other sphere.] In this way, you excel in elegance, and there seem to be no one capable to explain your verses, given how obscure they are. And it is considered a bad extravagance to write a canzone with such a heavy use of quotes, even if the mind comes from Bologna.*

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<sup>38</sup> Bonagiunta Orbicciani, *Rime*, ed. Aldo Menichetti (Firenze: Edizioni del Galluzzo per la Fondazione Ezio Franceschini, 2012), 270.

Bonagiunta's critique of Guinizelli's is radical and totalizing, since it involves his person, the basic assumptions assumption of his poetry, and his style. Because of his *hybris*, and in order to become the greatest poet of all, Guinizelli changed the very nature of lyric poetry. Rossi notices how this change has to do with Guinizelli's adoption of Aristotelian philosophy and its terminology in his compositions. This shows in Bonagiunta's parodist use of the expression "form of being", which refers to Aristotle's distinction between substantial and accidental form. The use of the Aristotelian terminology has such a heavy influence on Guinizelli's clarity that there seem no one to be able to grasp the meaning of his compositions. For Bonagiunta, Aristotle's philosophy looks like a light that illuminates obscure things but that at the same time dims when it is compared to the light of Jesus that shines above every other light.<sup>39</sup> To this attack, Guinizelli responds with the sonnet *Omo ch' è saggio non corre leggero*, in which he defends his philosophical culture and stylistic choices by appealing the multitude of points of view that are possible in the world.

Omo ch'è saggio non corre leggero  
ma a passo grada sí com' vol misura:  
quand'a pensato, riten su' pensiero  
infin a tanto che 'l ver l'asigura.

Foll'è chi crede sol veder lo vero  
e non pensare che altri i pogna cura:  
non se dev'omo tener troppo altero,  
ma dé guardar so stato e sua natura.

Volan ausel' per air di straine guise  
ed an diversi loro operamenti,  
né tutti d'un volar né d'un ardire.

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<sup>39</sup> Guinizelli, *Rime*, 75.

Dēo natura e 'l mondo in grado mise,  
e fe' despari senni e intendimenti:  
perzò ciò ch'omo pensa non dé dire.<sup>40</sup>

*A wise man doesn't rush without pondering, but he proceeds with small steps, and once he has formulated his thought, he holds on to it until reality confirms it. The one who thinks to be the only one to contemplate the truth, while excludes this possibility for others, is a fool. Instead of being arrogant, one must interrogate himself of his own condition. The birds fly in the sky in different ways with different attitudes, not all of them fly the same way, and with the same courage. God hierarchically ordained the world and nature, and he made different minds and understandings; hence, a man must not say what he thinks.*

## 1.7

Other hermeneutical questions arise when we start questioning the validity of an analogy, since in *Al cor gentil* Guinizzelli often makes ill-balanced analogies. How close does the resemblance between the analogata have to be in order for the analogy to work effectively? In other words, what happens when the analogata are unbalanced, namely when the comparison appears ill-formed? Do we have 'less' truth? Can we discard an analogy when it is unbalanced? Interestingly enough, this issue is either gone unnoticed, or has received little importance. Why did that happen? One may argue that the requirement to reduce Guinizzelli's thinking into a perfectly structured and symmetrical edifice has led scholars to overlook this problem. Even when scholars have noticed this problem they then have not spent time analyzing the logic of these imperfections which, as we shall see, are sometimes acknowledged by the poet himself. What do these imperfect analogies mean? What do they signal? Are they intentional, or do they simply signify poor logic on Guinizzelli's behalf?

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<sup>40</sup> Guinizzelli, *Rime*, 79.

Many scholars see Guido Guinizzelli, and the other poets from the Dolce Stil Nuovo as philosopher-poets, that is, poets who in their verses ask questions about truth and use logical demonstrations that uses philosophy.<sup>41</sup> For example, Pelosi sees in Guinizzelli's poetry a logical architecture in which every element finds its justification. According to him, in Guinizzelli, philosophy is "a reflection on the feeling, which inevitably brings to stringent logical demonstrations;" also, the oppositions that animate Guinizzelli's canzone take on the form of a logical discourse that has a strong "theoretical validity, which gives to the context a more elastic shape in appearance, which is in truth more stringent."<sup>42</sup> Along the same line of reasoning, Antonio Gagliardi underlines that in Guinizzelli the Italian language undergoes a process of intellectualization in which scholastic logic encounters rhetoric and the "syllogism takes poetical form."<sup>43</sup> This theoretical approach finds its champion in Ardizzone, who deserves a citation for the clarity and the confidence with which she completely misses the point. In her commentary on *Al cor gentil*, despite she recognizes the presence of analogy, Ardizzone stresses the importance of logical reasoning to the point that she reads the entire canzone as a syllogism:

It is possible to reconstruct for *Al cor gentil* a syllogistic procedure organized into three predications of which the first is placed last: 1) God's law is an activity of light (and love); 2) created entities – written signs of this law – are closer to God to the degree that they are disposed to light and love 3) gentle hearts, because they are naturally predisposed, have this (love-)law written in their hearts [...] Logical relations rule this canzone-manifesto, organized through love-law into a concordance of

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<sup>41</sup> See Francesco De Sanctis, René Wellek, and Grazia Melli Fioravanti, *Storia della letteratura italiana* (Milano: Radici BUR, 2009); Pelosi, *Guinizzelli: stilnovo inquieto*, 3 [my translation]; Gagliardi, *Guinizzelli, Dante, Petrarca : l'inquietudine del poeta*.

<sup>42</sup> Pelosi, *Guido Guinizzelli : stilnovo inquieto*, 3 [my translation].

<sup>43</sup> Gagliardi, *Guinizzelli, Dante, Petrarca : l'inquietudine del poeta*, 9.

physics, ethics, and theology, establishing a new basis for the notion of human nobility.”<sup>44</sup>

Ardizzone sees Guinizzelli’s composition as perfectly linear, logical, i.e., built around premises from which follow a conclusion. It would be interesting to see which kind of definition of syllogism Ardizzone utilizes, since the concept of syllogism involves the possibility to draw a conclusion from some premises in virtue of the presence of clear logical markers like ‘thus’, ‘hence’, ‘therefore’, etc. Nothing allows an analogy to draw a conclusion from a premise or to demonstrate anything: there are no conclusions in analogies, only comparisons. The problem with a syllogistic interpretation of Guinizzelli is that if on the one hand it acknowledges the presence of philosophical thinking in his poems, on the other hand it dismisses its peculiarity. Once we compound in one term the words ‘philosopher’ and ‘poet’ scholars use a ‘default’ interpretation of philosophy and refuse to explain the meaning of such a term. That is to say, What is a philosopher-poet, or a philosophical poetry?

With my interpretation, I do not want to challenge that Guinizzelli was a philosopher-poet, or that his poetry had philosophical concerns. Rather, I want to challenge the meaning of the word ‘philosopher’ in ‘philosopher-poet’, and how scholars use it as a *pass partout* to capture such hybrid figures as the Italian poets in the ‘200, and to indicate the presence of systematic, structured, deductive knowledge in their poetical production. Within the interpretations of the aforementioned scholars

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<sup>44</sup> Maria Luisa Ardizzone, “Guido Guinizzelli’s ‘Al cor Gentil’: A Notary in Search of Written Laws” in *Modern Philology: A Journal Devoted To Research In Medieval And Modern Literature* 94, no. 4 (May 1997): 455-474.

‘philosopher’ and ‘philosophy’ indicate a linear thought that derives consequences from premises. But, is this the only way that thinking is possible? Could we imagine a philosophy that does not deduce or conclude, and still contributes to truth? That is to say, What happens when the movement of thought assumes forms other than the ones that we expect? Is it still philosophy? Attached with the word ‘philosopher’ comes a cluster of assumptions more or less clear to the speaker, that guide his way of accessing its object. But in such cases like this, this set of assumptions hinders the interpretation by blocking the access to the object of knowledge. Once the title ‘philosopher’ is attached to a poet, we see *by default* a set of qualities that are connected with the way we use that word, and are in fact extraneous the text. We should leave the content of ‘philosopher’ as open as possible, and let what we find in the text fill the word with content, and see whether is it true that we can simply overlap the practice of philosophy – which since Plato has happened in prose – and poetry.

So, if Guinizzelli was a thinker, if he expressed his doctrine in verses, and if he used the poetical medium to search for truth, then what is the relationship between philosophy and poetry in his poetry? Does either of the two terms prevail over the other? Should we think of Guinizzelli’s poetry as an “excuse” to convey philosophical concerns? Francesco De Sanctis claims that this kind of production is not yet real poetry since science is its source. He claims that in the early stages of Italian poetry we did not have neither a ‘poet’ nor ‘poetry’, since poetry is just the veil of science.<sup>45</sup> Should we

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<sup>45</sup> De Sanctis, *Storia della letteratura italiana*, 90: “The content is not yet entirely transformed, it is not yet poetry, i.e., life and reality [...] The artist is the philosopher, he is not yet a poet [...] The thought moves, the imagination works. Science generates art.” (Il contenuto non è ancora trasformato interamente, non è ancora poesia, cioè vita

follow this suggestion, and see this poetical composition as just an excuse to talk about something else that at its very base remains different from proper poetical concerns? I disagree with that, and I want to reaffirm the idea that Guinizzelli's production is authentic poetry inasmuch as his considerations are genuinely philosophical, i.e., concerned with supreme objects like truth, good, and beauty. But what kind of a thinker was Guinizzelli? And how (and possibly why) did he use the verse to express his concerns rather than the more established means of the prose? Why did those people write in verse and not in prose if they had such strong inclination to truth?

## 2.1

After having used the sixth stanza as the theoretical frame for my interpretation, I will now proceed with a brief summary of the canzone, and then with a commentary of each stanza. My movement of my reading will be circular, as I will conclude with a second commentary of the sixth stanza in which I will summarize the results of my argument and get prepared for the transition to the next chapter.

The main theme of *Al cor gentil* is not only that love finds in gentility its proper place to spark, but also that love and gentility enjoy symbiosis and synchronicity. Also, love is at the same time the bond between two human beings, and the force that governs the different planes of reality, and connects the lover with God, even though indirectly, since the lover finds in the beloved the image of an angel. The angelic semblance of the lover allows the poet to praise human love, even if this means to go against God's own

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e realtà [...] L'artista è un filosofo, non è ancora un poeta [...] Il pensiero si muove, l'immaginazione lavora. La scienza genera l'arte.)

words. Ultimately, love is a subversive experience that allows the poet to write the *lauda* of human love, previously only appropriate to God.

Furthermore, the experience of love in this canzone seems both positive and negative (even if this second possibility is only hinted at in the sixth stanza). On the positive side, the lover is engaged in the task of getting to know his beloved, who is at the same time similar to an angel, and for this reason, a manifestation of God and truth. On the negative side, Guinizzelli mentions the possibility of a negative love – the profane love – that we have already discussed earlier. (Even if the opposition between the two kinds of love is only hinted at, it is probably from here that Dante draws upon in the *Comedia* when he views love as a double possibility of salvation and perdition.) But then, this opposition is revoked when the lover claims before God the righteousness and the divinity of profane love, which is allowed by the looks of the beloved.

The concepts related to the interiority of the nobility proclaimed in the poem are not new, for they were formulated by the Ghibellines, who advocated for the priority of the “*probitas morum*” (*the worthiness of character*) over the “*nobilitas generis*” (*nobility of birth*). This discussion was active in the Sicilian School, and then it later became the subject of scholastic discussions.<sup>46</sup> This opposition also appears in the poetry in Dalfi d’Alvernhe, Gace Brule’, Bernart de Ventadorn, and Guittone, but then it finds a final systematization in the *De Amore*: “*amore in morum probitate perfulgentem*” (*love shines in the worthiness of character.*)

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<sup>46</sup> See Fulvio Delle Donne, “Una disputa sulla nobiltà alla corte di Federico II di Svevia,” *Medioevo Romano* 23 (1999): 3-20.

## 2.2

Al cor gentil rimpaira sempre amore  
come l'ausello inselva i·lla verdura;  
né fe' amor anti che gentil core,  
né gentil core anti ch'amor, Natura:  
ch'adesso con' fu 'l sole,  
sí tosto lo splendore fu lucente  
né fu davanti 'l sole;  
e prende amore in gentilezza loco  
cosí propiamente  
come calore in clarità di foco.<sup>47</sup>

*Love always repatriates to the gentle heart, as does the bird to the greenest part of the forest. Nature did not make love before the gentle heart nor the gentle heart before love; as soon as the sun appeared its light was shining; nor did light shine before there was the sun. And, love takes place in the gentle heart just as naturally as heat does in the clarity of fire.*

The first stanza is a ten-line analogy articulated in three minor sub-analogies that share the same first branch. Encased in this analogy is a three-line anaphora that not only counterbalances structurally the three affirmations about love, but also stresses semantically its temporality. Love and the gentle heart (the common branch of the sub-analogies) are compared respectively with: 1) a bird and the forest 2) the sun and its splendor 3) the heat and its clarity. Below, the analogical structure of the first stanza:

Love : gentle heart = bird : forest

Love : gentle heart = sun : splendor

Love : gentle heart = heat : clarity

The three sub-analogies convey three different concepts about love: love goes back to gentleness; love is contemporaneous with gentleness; love has in gentleness its

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<sup>47</sup> Guinizzelli, *Rime*, 33.

natural environment. As we anticipated, a three-branch anaphora starting with the negative particle “né” (not) both balances the affirmative structure of the analogy, and stresses the synchronicity of love and the gentle heart.

Neither (*Né*) Nature made love before the gentle heart  
nor (*né*) the gentle heart before love;  
neither (*né*) light shone before the sun.

The first sub-analogy is two lines long: “Love always repatriates to the gentle heart, as does the bird with the green,” (1-2.) That is to say, the natural place of love is a gentle heart (*cor gentile*), and love acts like a bird that goes back to the forest where it belongs.

In *Al cor gentil* love is a regressive experience: love is not a journey towards something unknown in the future, but rather it is a journey back to where it came from for the first time. According to Rossi and other scholars, “rimpaira” (*repatriates*) comes from *re-impatriat*, and indicates the return to the homeland.<sup>48</sup> Thus, love has a homeland, rather than simply a natural place like the other elements. On the other hand, the form “rimpaira” seems to be an *hapax legomenon* not only in Guinizzelli, but in all the poetry of the *Duecento*. The bird (*ausello*) tropes the lyric ego of the poet, and comes from the Provençal *auzel*, while *inselva* tropes the loftier part of the wood.

The second sub-analogy establishes the contemporaneity of love and the gentle heart (and *not* identity, as Ardizzone and others claim by forcing Dante’s approach on Guinizzelli’s, and confusing the analogic relationship with identity.) “Nature did not

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<sup>48</sup> Guinizzelli, *Rime*, 33.

make love before the gentle heart nor the gentle heart before love; as soon as the sun appeared its light was shining; nor did light shine before there was the sun.” However, the analogy is conceived within an anaphora that stresses the importance of temporality and equilibrates the positive structure of the larger analogy. The anaphora is three lines long, and includes the second sub-analogy:

Né fe’...  
né gentil...  
ch’adesso...  
sì tosto...  
né fu...

The second sub-analogy states the temporality of love and gentle heart, while its intersection with the anaphora – which surrounds, protects, and highlights these verses – suggests the importance of such temporality, which states the synchronicity of the two poles (*love and gentle heart*) of the relationship. Nature made love and the gentle heart at the same time as she made the light and the sun. The contemporaneity of love and the gentle heart makes it hard to understand how to pair the terms of the analogy. There are two possibilities:

Love : gentle heart = sun : splendor (or)

Love : gentle heart = splendor : sun

Which is the analogata for love, the sun or the splendor? And what about the gentle heart? To answer this question, we ought to further interrogate the sub-analogy, and notice that between the sun and the light there is also a relationship of producer and produced, the sun being the producer and the light the product. However, this

relationship also raises a problem of hierarchy, since the producer seems to come ‘before’ the product: if this hypothesis holds then the sun has ontological priority over splendor, because the sun produces the splendor. But notice, also the opposite is true, namely, the product has a priority over its producer. Here is why: if there can be no sun without light (the sun cannot but shine) not all the light is a product of sun (we can have different sources of light). In other words, the light does not need the sun to exist, because it can be produced in other ways; thus, since the light is independent from its producer it also holds a priority over the sun. That is to say, the concept of contemporaneity of the sun and its splendor produces a double relationship of priority of the former over the latter and of the latter over the former. But, the seeming contradiction of a double primacy of the producer over the produced and *vice versa*, finds its justification in time: since the two terms come together, it is impossible to decide which of them comes prior to the other, and, consequently, it is impossible to decide which of the analogata correspond to the heart and which to love.

Then the third and conclusive sub-analogy (lines 8 to 10) compares love and the gentle heart to heat and clarity of fire: “And, love takes place in the gentle heart as naturally as heat does in the clarity of fire.”

Love : gentle heart = heat : clarity of fire

E prende...

così...

come...

Love takes place in gentility *as naturally* as heat in the brightness of fire. Love no longer takes place in the gentle heart, but rather, in kindness. In the same way, heat takes place not in the flame as such but in the light of the flame. The flame contains the light and this generates heat in the same way that the heart contains gentleness.

### 2.3

Foco d'amore in gentil cor s'aprende  
come vertute in petra preziosa,  
che da la stella valora no i discende  
anti che 'l sol la faccia gentil cosa;  
poi che n'è tratto fòre  
per sua forza lo sol ciò che li è vile,  
stella li dà valore:  
cosí lo cor ch'è fatto da natura  
asletto, pur, gentile,  
donna a guisa di stella lo 'nnamora.

*The fire of love kindles in the gentle heart as virtue in a precious stone. [But] [T]he virtue doesn't descend [in the stone] before the sun makes it a noble thing: only after the sun has extracted its impurities, the star gives virtue to the stone. Likewise, the heart is made by nature elected, pure, and gentle, and the lady, like a star, makes it fall in love.*

The second stanza develops an analogy between the interiority of the lover and the exteriority of the universe by comparing the process of receiving gentleness with the one in which a precious stone receives its virtue. In the first two lines, the lover states the comparison between the heart and the precious stone, in the center of the stanza he explains the process by which a stone acquires virtue, and in the last three lines the comparison is reiterated. As we will find, the analogy between the stone and the heart will present some imbalances that will be worth considering. Let us write out our analogy.

“The fire of love kindles in the gentle heart as virtue in a precious stone.”

Fire: gentle heart = virtue : precious stone

The second stanza shows an isomorphic relationship between the inside and the outside world, i.e., between the forces that govern the interiority of the lover and those that govern the exteriority of the universe. The connection between the two different planes of reality is established by gentleness, which not only appears next to the heart but also next to the stone. The fire of love kindles in the gentle heart like virtue in the precious stone. But how does the stone receive its virtue? The process involves an act of pushing out and letting in, and involves respectively the sun and a star. The “gentle” action of the sun purifies the stone and enables it to receive virtue from a star. Each star is able to give one virtue to a specific kind of stone, so that there is direct relationship between each star and each precious stone. The relationship between the stars and the stones is analogically connected with the relationship between the sky and earth, and – since the sky is like the heart – it directly connects the interior realm of the heart with the two exterior realms of the sky and the earth. The analogy is then concluded in the last lines when Guinizzelli compares the way the stone receives its virtue from the star with the way the heart receives love from the lady. (The parallel between the star and the lady begins to hint that the nature of the lady is of a different kind and belongs to a different and higher realm, as we have seen already in the commentary on the last stanza.) However, we notice that if the stone needs purification prior to receiving its virtue, this does not happen to the heart, which nature makes from the start “elected,

pure, and gentle,” (*asletto, pur, gentile*). But if the heart is made pure, we then notice that interior nobility shares the same logic as the nobility of the blood: in both cases, nobility is stable, given once, which means that there is no room for agency left to humans to improve their condition.

To recapitulate, fire sparks in the heart like virtue in the precious stone. But does the virtue in the stone really sparks *like* fire? No, it doesn't. A few lines later, we learn that the virtue of the stone “descends” (*discende*) from the star. One could now ask, Is this analogy well balanced? The answer is, of course, negative, and this is not the only instance where something like that happens: other imbalanced analogies will appear in the canzone. We notice at least two major ones: one concerns the aforementioned difference between “kindling” and “descending”, while the other concerns the process of “acquisition,” which in the stone involves the synergic action of two agents – the sun and the star – whereas in the heart only involves one agent, the lady.

The presence of these imbalances opens up the question of the validity of the analogy, namely the question of the nature of a truth when it is a product of an ill-conceived analogy. In other words, What happens to truth when the analogy is flawed, when the elements on the left of our relation do not behave like those ones on the right? Moreover, and most important: Is truth lessened when it is a product of an imperfect analogy? These questions cannot easily be answered. Maybe, those questions *cannot* be answered at all, since analogy deals with likeness, and not with identity. The sign of identity (=) that we place between the two branches of the analogy does not indicate the identity between two single terms, as in “ $a = b$ ,” but rather it indicates the relationships between that two terms have with another two, “ $a : b = c : d$ .” Furthermore, depending

on the nature of analogy (quantitative or qualitative, for example), there is room for a greater or a lesser number of incongruences between the two branches. That is to say, analogies focus on one – or a set of – properties whose selection excludes those properties that are not part of the comparison. Therefore, if we can say that the comparison between the fire of love and virtue is imbalanced because fire “sparks” while virtue “descends”, on the other hand, we can also notice that the analogy revolves around the concept “of receiving a perfection from without”, shared both by the gentle heart and the precious. For what concerns us right now, I am going to treat those imperfections as ‘questions’, rather than ‘mistakes’. Rather than being the product of Guinizzelli’s poor capacity to articulate comparisons, the imperfect analogies that populate *Al cor gentil* elicit questions that concern the very nature of a thinking through likeness.

## 2.4

Amor per tal ragion sta 'n cor gentile  
per qual lo foco in cima del doplero:  
splendeli al su' diletto, clar, sottile;  
no li stari' altra guisa, tant' è fero.  
Così prava natura  
recontra amor come fa l'aigua il foco  
caldo, per la freddura.  
Amore in gentil cor prender rivera  
per suo consimel loco  
com' adamàs del ferro in la minera.<sup>49</sup>

*Love dwells in the gentle heart in the same way that fire stays on the top of torch.  
The fire shines upwards delightful, bright, and thin, and it couldn't do otherwise  
given how fierce it is. [The] malign nature rejects love like cold water does with*

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<sup>49</sup> Guinizzelli, *Rime*, 35.

*hot fire. Love takes shelter in the gentle heart as its proper place, like iron in the mine.*

The third stanza reiterates some of the concepts that we have already encountered thus far and focuses on gentility as the *locus naturalis* of love. The concepts are, as usual, expressed via analogy. The first and the last analogy compare the natural environment of love respectively to the top of the candle and to the mine as the proper places of fire and iron. Instead, the second analogy introduces an opposition between malign nature and love, which oppose each other as water and fire. Depending on how we read the pair “malign nature” (*prava natura*) we have two different images, both worthy to be mentioned. In the first case, there is *a malign nature* – a bad individual – that rejects gentility as water rejects fire. This reading ‘looks forward’, and anticipates the following stanza, in which the poet compares a bad man to the mud. The other possibility instead ‘looks backwards’, reads “malign nature” as the malign nature – the bad nature – and introduces the distinction between good and bad nature. I shall follow this second option, because the double concept of nature (*nature vs bad nature*) is isomorphic to the double concept of love (*love vs profane love*) that we have encountered in the sixth stanza.

Given what we can construe so far, there seems to be a double concept of nature: a good one (second stanza) that makes the gentle heart elected, pure, and gentle, and a malign one (third stanza) that rejects love like water and fire. At this point we could ask, Since fire and water are not only opposites but also complementary elements, and that malign is the opposite of good, can we also deduce that love is good nature? Probably yes, in *Al cor gentil* the correspondence among the different levels of reality authorizes

us to see love not only as a force of attraction between two individuals, but also a universal and creative force that informs the universe as such. (The adjective ‘good’ is, however, the product of my interpretation: in the poem, we only read “nature” or “malign nature.”) Before analyzing this stanza’s analogies, it is worth noticing that in the previous stanza love and fire appear as one in the expression “fire of love” (*foco d’amor*). Instead, this stanza first disjoins love and fire, and then reestablishes their relationship by showing their analogical connection. This connection is expressed with two sets of set of adjectives, “delightful, clear, and fine” (*diletto, clar, sottile*), and “chosen, pure, and gentle” (*asletto, pur, gentile*.) The two sets of adjectives echo each other: the first one is in the previous stanza and is about love, while the second one is in this stanza and is about the heart. The properties of the heart and love are paralleled also in sound, with the two external terms in rhyme, and the middle terms are in assonance. The choice of assonance over rhyme for the central term probably indicates the strong connection between the two terms and not their identity as a rushed reading of the line may lead one to think. That is to say, if where there is love there is always a fire, not every fire is a fire of love. Let us take a look at three analogies that compose the stanza:

- 1) “Love dwells in the gentle heart in the same way that fire stays on the top of torch.”

Love : gentle heart = fire : torch

- 2) “[The] malign nature rejects love like cold water does with hot fire.”

Malign nature : (good?) love = cold water : hot fire

3) “Love takes shelter in the gentle heart as its proper place, like iron in the mine.”

Love : gentle heart = iron : mine

The first analogy is two lines long, plus two other lines of explication. We learn that the natural place of love is the gentle heart as the top of the torch for the flame. Notice, the analogy is imbalanced when it comes to space; the vertical position and the upward direction of the flame on top of the torch does not match the vertical and downward relationship of container and contained, between gentle heart and love. However, the imbalance is attenuated when we consider that the natural position of the flame on top of the torch suggests that the gentle heart is the lone receptacle of love; and that the upward movement of the flame suggests the natural direction of love towards the sky – and possibly its hubris – towards God.

The second analogy portrays the opposition between a malign nature and love. Wicked nature opposes love as water does with fire. The opposition between wicked nature and love introduces a distinction/opposition: nature/Nature vs malign nature. This distinction is between two natures, an unqualified one against a qualified one (nature/Nature vs malign nature). It is hard to decide whether the spelling of “nature” with an upper or lower case indicates anything. The reduplication of nature, will be echoed in the sixth stanza when God distinguishes and juxtaposes a vain love and (non-vain) one. Then, the third analogy reiterates the concept of the first one, by comparing this time the heart and gentleness with the iron and the mine: love takes place in the gentle heart as iron in the mine.

## 2.5

Fere lo sol lo fango tutto 'l giorno:  
vile reman, né 'l sol perde calore;  
dis' omo alter: 'Gentil per sclatta torno';  
lui semblo al fango, al sol gentil valore:  
ché non dé dar om fé  
che gentilezza sia fòr di coraggio,  
in dignità d'ere',  
se da vertute no à gentil core.  
Com' aigua porta raggio  
e 'l ciel riten le stelle e lo splendore.<sup>50</sup>

*The sun strikes the mud for the entire day: the mud remains vicious as the sun does not lose heat. The arrogant man says: "I have noble origins". I liken him to the mud, and I liken the sun to gentleness. Because no man one should believe that gentleness exists in noble origins, outside the heart, if he doesn't receive a gentle heart from virtue. As the water carries the ray [of light], and the sky contains the stars and the splendor.*

The fourth stanza goes back to the second one, and expands upon the action of the sun on the mud: the sun cannot purify the mud as it happens with the precious stone. Then, the voice of the poet intrudes in the poem, and explains the analogy to the reader. The poet compares the inefficacy of the sun when it shines on the mud to a man who claims that nobility is a birth privilege. The poet explains this idea with two analogies that conclude the stanza: no one should believe that there can be any gentility (which the heart receives from a star) outside the heart. The heart works like a medium, and receives gentleness as water receives a ray of light, and the sky contains the splendor of the stars.

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<sup>50</sup> Guinizzelli, *Rime*, 36.

- I. “The sun strikes the mud for the entire day: the mud remains vile as the sun does not lose heat. The arrogant man says: “I have noble origins”. I liken him to the mud, and I liken the sun to gentleness.”

sun : mud = gentleness : man

- II. “Because no man one should believe that gentleness exists in noble origins, outside the heart, if he doesn’t receive a gentle heart from virtue. As the water carries the ray [of light], and the sky contains the stars and the splendor.”

gentleness : heart = ray : water

gentleness : heart = splendor : sky

The first two lines clarify the limits of the sun’s powers: the sun cannot simply purify anything it shines upon; in fact, in order to enact its function, the sun must shine on something that has the potentiality to become pure. In other cases, like mud, the sun has no possibility to produce any change.<sup>51</sup>

In the following lines, the character of the “arrogant man” (*omo alter*) comes forth, and claims gentleness to be a birthright: it is the *redde rationem* between Guinizzelli and the the vision of nobility as a birthright. Contrary to the dominant view, *Al cor gentil* portrays a concept of nobility that is a product of nature’s (rather mysterious) choice. The different formulation of these lines makes them particularly

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<sup>51</sup> The image of the sun illuminating the mud is also utilized by another author that lived in Guinizzelli’s time. His name is Giovanni Gallense. Dante too uses this image in *Convivio* IV.

important in the economy of the text: Guinizzelli temporarily pauses the impersonal perspective of the narration by intruding in the canzone, shifting from analogical to logical expositions, in which he explaining to the readers what he means with his analogy. (The poet will intervene in the narration also in the last stanza, but this time about the likeness of the lady with an angel.) Guinizzelli's intervention happens in two phases: 1) he takes ownership for instituting the resemblance between the "arrogant man" and the mud: he likens to mud the man who believes in the old concept of nobility; 2) he explains his thinking without resorting to images, marks it with a "because" (*che*), and exhorts his reader to reject the old concept of nobility and to embrace the new one that places nobility in the interiority of heart. No man should believe that there can be gentility outside the heart, which – and here we are back into analogical thinking – lets gentleness (the same as "gentility"?) appear and shine similarly to how water and the sky contain and reveal the light.

## 2.6

Splende 'n la 'ntelligenzia del cielo  
 Deo criator più che ('n) nostr'occhi 'l sole:  
 ella intende suo fattor oltra 'l cielo,  
 e 'l ciel volgiando, a Lui obedir tole;  
 e consegue, al primero,  
 del giusto Deo beato compimento,  
 così dar dovria, al vero,  
 la bella donna, poi che ('n) gli occhi splende  
 del suo gentil, talento  
 che mai di lei obedir non si disprende.<sup>52</sup>

*God the creator shines in the intelligence of the skies our eyes more than the sun in our eyes; she [the Intelligence] understands her Creator above the sky, and obeys him while*

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<sup>52</sup> Guinizzelli, *Rime*, 37.

*moving [this] sky and, by doing so, it receives its fulfillment from the righteous God. So should do the beautiful lady, to tell the truth, since in the eyes of her noble man shines a virtue that never refuses to obey her.*

With the fifth stanza, the analogical thinking that informs the entire canzone comes to an end, and we are confronted with the last, most complicated, and confusing of its analogies. (The sixth stanza, as we have already seen, is the commentary and also the hermeneutical key of the entire canzone.) In this stanza, the philosophical excursus that started from the interiority of the lover and traversed the different realms of reality reaches the theological pinnacle of God and the supreme Intelligence that governs the skies. But at this point there is an interesting turn: what it may seem to be the pulsing heart of the canzone, the relationship between God and the Intelligence, is used instead to illustrate the relationship between the lover and his beloved. That is to say, contrary to what the critics have reconstructed so far, it is *profane love* - not God – that represents the philosophical conundrum of the canzone. The trajectory of the canzone culminates in a final analogy that links the ‘supreme’ and ‘lowest’, the holy and the profane, an analogy that uses the relationship between God and the Intelligence as a paradigm for profane love. With this last analogy, *Al cor gentil* shows the circularity of its movement, a movement that starts from the interiority of the lover and that ends with the relationship between the lover and the beloved.

God : Intelligence = beloved : lover

Our last analogy states that God is to the Intelligence as the beloved to the lover. *Nota bene*, in Italian the word ‘intelligence’ is feminine whereas ‘God’ is –

unsurprisingly – masculine. In my commentary, I will use the feminine pronoun for the Intelligence and the masculine for God. Interestingly, when we move to the second part of the analogy, the genders are reversed, as the beloved is feminine and the lover is masculine. In *Al cor gentil*, love works as a force that subverts the natural order of things by making feminine the masculine, and masculine the feminine. But there is more: as we saw previously, analogical thinking works by clarifying the unknown with the known, i.e., taking a relationship that we know about, and using it to clarify a relationship that we do not know about; now, if we look at the structure of our last analogy, we notice that God and the Intelligence are the known part of the analogy, and this constitutes a revolutionary turn. By phrasing the analogy in such way, Guinizelli places the relationship between man and woman at the core of his investigation. Let me stress that. As we have seen before, in an analogy we use a relationship between two entities that is known to us to clarify another relationship that is obscure; in the analogy, we liken the first relationship with the second so that the knowledge we have about the first relationship illuminates the second one. In our last analogy, we have God and the Intelligence as the *known* branch of our analogy, a branch that we liken to the second one in order to gain some knowledge; but entails that we know something more about God and the Intelligence than we know about human relationships. That is to say: human love is more mysterious than God, and this discovery on Guinizelli's part is what angers God in the sixth stanza, when he accuses the lover of having given Him as a model for profane love. It is not profane love that will be the model for 'celestial' love, it is the opposite, and *this* is why this canzone is so puzzling. Let us unpack that.

When reading the fifth stanza, one would expect the relationship between God

and the Intelligence would be the unknown relationship, a relationship that we clarify when we liken it to the one between a lover and beloved. In this case, profane love would be used as a model to cast light on the loftier mystery of the divinity, in the same way that believers sometimes liken the relationship of God and humans to the one of a benevolent father with his children. But this is not our case, for in the fifth stanza we see happening exactly the opposite: the celestial relationship is at the term of comparison for the profane one, i.e., the known relationship that we use to clarify the unknown one. Over the course of the analogy, we read a pretty detailed explanation of how the loving Intelligence follows God and complies with his orders. This indicates that we do have knowledge about how God relates to the Intelligence, and we use this knowledge for something that is less known to us. This unexpected take that Guinizzelli has on profane love constitutes the surprising outcome of a thought based on the horizontal movement of likeness, a thought that flips the order of things, raising the lowest, lowering the highest, making the feminine masculine and the masculine feminine. Another striking element of this stanza is that, contrary to what has happened thus far, the last analogy is not simply simply stated: it is also questioned and (perhaps) doubted. The use of a conditional “*così dovrebbe ... la donna*” (so should the lady do) points toward this reading. Why use the conditional here? This is the lone use of the conditional tense in the entire poem. Why can't the poet simply say that the lady *does* as the intelligence does, as opposed *should do* what the Intelligence does. Is the poet not sure about his analogy? Let us consider briefly the analogy in more detail.

The first six lines of the fifth stanza portray how God and the Intelligence relate to each other. God shines before the Intelligence more than the sun in our eyes and, by

following God with her eyes, the Intelligence moves the skies according to God's wishes. The Intelligence understands God, who lives beyond the skies, and in so doing, she rotates the sky according to God's will. The consequence of the Intelligence's obedience is her fulfilment: similarly to what happens to a precious stone, which receives her virtue from without, the Intelligence receives her fulfillment from God. (Cavalcanti in *Donna me prega* will address this problem by saying in v. 61 "consieguo merto lo spirito che è punto", i.e., the only merit that the lover can obtain is the pain and the wound in itself.)<sup>53</sup> Once the first branch of the analogy is established, Guinizelli moves on to the second one, and tells us that the beloved and the lover should have a similar relationship, since in the lover's eyes, his beloved shines in the same way. However, if the lover acts like the Intelligence, the parallel is placed in doubt when we read that the lady "should do" (*dovria*) as God does. The presence of a conditional instead of an indicative does not seem to have worried scholars, who have not questioned the meaning of the analogy in the general economy of the canzone. Why doesn't Guinizelli just say that the lady acts like God, and chooses instead a dubitative formula. Was he not sure about the comparison? Was he trying to coerce a behavior from the lady, who could have been reluctant to uniform her behavior on the given model? Was he trying to protect himself from the accusation of blasphemy, or simply, he was being cautious and the conditional is only 'rhetorical'? Furthermore, was he questioning the limits of his own analogy and, by doing that, the limit of *likeness*? It is hard to say. What we know is that dubitative formula only appears in this stanza, in the

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<sup>53</sup> Guido Cavalcanti, *Rime*, ed. Roberto Rea and Emanuele Inglese (Roma: Carocci, 2011), 161.

last analogy, in what seems the highest theoretical point on the entire canzone. Is profane love to be kept as a mystery? It is now time to give one last, conclusive look at the sixth stanza, and close the circle of our reading.

## 2.7

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.»<sup>54</sup>

*My Lady, God will say to me while my soul stands before Him: "How dare you? You came across the heavens, all the way to Me, and gave Me as a term of comparison for your profane love; the hymn of praise is appropriate only to Me and the queen of the kingdom, through whom it ceases every fraud." Then, I will be able to say to Him: "She had the semblance of an angel coming from Your kingdom; I made no mistake if I loved her."*

The last stanza comments on the canzone and on the kind of thinking that has informed it, while it portrays a rather spectacular encounter between God and the lover. God appears both pleased and the outraged towards a lover who stands for his ideas and is not afraid to advocate his position before the angered divinity. In light of what we have said so far, God's ambivalent attitude towards the lover becomes fully intelligible: God acknowledges the power of his thought by stating how far he has travelled, while, on the other hand, He is outraged because He sees that the lover is guilty of some misuse.

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<sup>54</sup> Guinizzelli, *Rime*, 38.

For what we can gather, it seems as if the lover has perverted some sort of natural order of things that has to do with the relationship between language and the worlds. Let us expand on that.

God accuses the lover of having used Him as term of comparison for profane love, but again, what does this mean? In God's view, there seems to be a properness between words and what they express: lofty words express lofty objects, and the loftier kind of poetry – the praise – is only adequate to God and the virgin Mary. We can define as 'natural' this order of things. Hence, by using the praise for an object rather than God and Mary, the lover is guilty of having broken this order that sees an *adeguatio* between language and the world. *Che presomisti?* sounds like "how dare you mortal, to pervert the order that I, God almighty, have set for the world and mix a language and an object that don't share the same kind of origin? How dare you using a *gentle* language for a miserable object? But the lover, who brings to mind Moses when Moses challenges God on Mount Sinai, sticks by his position: he does not accept the natural order of things, breaks it with his poetry and decides to glorify profane love. "No me fu fallo" (*I made no mistake*) is the lover's proud answer. If God and the Virgin (*not* the Intelligence) are the exclusive objects worthy of a praise, then the "Che presomisti ?" becomes perspicuous: it has been presumptuous, arrogant, on the lover's behalf to have misdirected lofty words to a mundane relationship such as the one between the lover and the beloved. "How dare you – *one may paraphrase* – take my name in vain?" The answer is, once again, shocking. Not only does the lover not ask for God's forgiveness, he actually claims to be right, implying a mistake on God's part: "I dared, because that

lady looked like an angel who came from your kingdom, so I – not You – made no mistake with my comparison.”

## INTERMEZZO 1

With Guinizzelli's *irresistible likeness*, love appears as the connecting force of the whole universe. *Likeness* allows the lover/philosopher/scientist to see the intimate connection that underpinning reality as a whole, both 1) horizontally and 2) vertically, i.e., 1) by connecting the different elements of a given plane of reality, and 2) by connecting the different planes of reality.

In a regime of *likeness*, the noble heart witnesses the harmony of a united world, a place where each part plays its note into the symphony of the universe. *Likeness* is expansive and including, because it is always on the quest to find new ways of connection. The expansiveness and ease by which likeness links its elements is based on the very fact that *likeness* sees the difference between two elements always as a connection yet to be made, a new way connect the known with the unknown. In a regime of *likeness* nothing lives in isolation as it is always part of something bigger.

However, unfettered *likeness* brings the lover to compare the beloved to an angel, and perhaps humans discover their inner divinity, a comparison which prompts God's harsh reaction to the lover, a reaction that suggests the gnoseological problems from which Guido Cavalcanti will start his investigation. In diametrical opposition to Guinizzelli's experience, and with the objectivity of the natural scientist, Cavalcanti will introduce the reader to extreme solitude (and misery?) of a possible intellect that cannot establish any likeness, nor feel any enjoyment and proposes a vision of love as a disconnecting, isolating, and ultimately deadly force.

Love is blind, and it will take over your mind  
What you think is love, is truly not  
You need to elevate and find  
(Eve)

## 2. Bewildering love: *Donna me prega*

### 1.1

The second stop of our journey takes us to *Donna me prega*, Guido Cavalcanti's *opus magnum* and manifesto, a hermeneutical conundrum for its structure, language, philosophical, and poetical implications.

With this chapter, I will discuss the main points of Cavalcanti's discourse on love, and highlight its difficulties without making the text fit a pre-given theory such as 'Platonism', 'Aristotelianism', 'Averroism' and so on. While I hold that these schools of thought played an important role in Cavalcanti's poetry, I also believe that a fresh – even though preliminary – understanding of a text can arise only in so far as we are willing to silence what “we already we know” about the text. Does this mean that I shall read the text with a “pure eye,” without any prior assumptions? No. This just means that I shall refuse to bend the text to make it fit some existing school of thought. Is Cavalcanti obscure, ineffable, contradictory? Certainly. However, and in keeping with what I have done with Guinizelli, I shall treat textual problems as *genuine questions* rather than as incongruences on Cavalcanti's part. In other words, instead of teaching the text what it should say, instead of smoothening its asperities and linearizing its thinking, I shall keep

these difficulties and – where possible – use them against us as readers to challenge our way of thinking.

I am guided by the belief that the interpretation of a great text should primarily be an act of listening, an act capable of receiving the words *before* making them fit somewhere. Does it mean that listening is a “pure activity,” and that I shall not fold and bend words as I read them? Does it mean that my reading is promising the ‘unpromisable’, i.e., that it will be *nonviolent*? Not at all: violence is inherent to every interpretation.<sup>55</sup> In ordinary language, when we read a text and try to make some sense of it, we ‘explain’ it, a term that Italian renders with *spiegare*, from *ex-plicare*, literally to ‘un-fold’ what was earlier folded. But to explain and unfold a text, we need to exert pressure, apply force, use our leverage on the words to guide our understanding through the conundrum of meaning: all this finds in violence its primary source.

More specifically, to read *Donna me prega* (and other Cavalcanti’s compositions) I will change the disposition, the structure, and hence the nature of text; I will rethink, reshape, rewrite the entire canzone. I will be violent. But, to paraphrase Kierkegaard – who once said that there’s understanding and understanding – there’s violence and violence. There is an extrinsic and perhaps unnecessary violence, which makes sense of the texts by rounding off, diluting its problems, a violence that reads a

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<sup>55</sup> I’m borrowing this concept, from the zenith and the nadir of 20<sup>th</sup> century thought: Martin Heidegger. See Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problems of Metaphysics*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990): “In order to wring from what the words say, what it is they want to say, every interpretation [*Interpretation*] must necessarily use violence. Such violence, however, cannot be roving arbitrariness. The power of an idea which shines forth must drive and guide the laying-out [*Auslegung*].”

text in light of this or this other theory, a violence that neutralizes contradictions and incongruences as they appear.

However, there is also another kind of violence, an intrinsic one, which is the kind of violence that I'm going for. Hence, my reading will be – once again – violent; at least in three ways: 1) violent against the original language, because I will change the original sounds by forcing them into another language; 2) violent against the style, because in my translations, I shall force poetry out of verse and into prose. I shall linearize the verses by rewriting the sequence of the words, I shall put subject verb and object one after the other so that my reader, and I shall have the impression of getting a clearer – and perhaps misguided – sense by the new arrangement of the words; 3) violent against the target language, because I shall make some nuances in Italian reverberate in English. When translating nouns from Italian to English, I shall maintain the grammatical genders, since the relationship between the different nouns in Italian sometimes shows genders relations that go way beyond the grammar and the syntax of a sentence. So, for instance, when translating “anima” and “cuore” respectively with “soul” and “heart” I shall keep the genders in English and refer to them as “she” and “he.”

The leading question that will orient my investigation is whether or not *Donna me prega* contributes to our knowledge by offering a “theory of love.”

But before we move on, I wish to warn my reader that in talking about Cavalcanti's approach to knowledge I will use “knowledge”, “philosophy,” and “science” quite interchangeably to refer to a way of enquiry that we will frame as a reasoned and grounded “search for truth.” In this regard, Gianfranco Contini and

Roberto Rea seem to doubt Cavalcanti's regard for knowledge. For Contini, Cavalcanti "is not, typically like Dante, a realist of the philosophical language; he is actually a minimalist who uses such language for linguistic and imaginative research, he focuses on the representation and not on knowledge, which, after all, he doubts."<sup>56</sup> To which Rea adds "Furthermore, those compositions respond from time to time to the different exigencies of the dramatization that invest not only the lexicon and the rhetorical structures, but also the very same contents of his poetry."<sup>57</sup>

I don't think that Cavalcanti doubts knowledge per se: what he doubts – or rather, denies – is the possibility for humans to grasp the object of love, and love as such. Which some could summarize as the common knowledge according to which "men will never understand women." Instead, Cavalcanti refers to the object of love to describe the limits of human knowledge from within. In other words, it is not the possibility of knowledge per se that Cavalcanti is worried about; rather, he is worried about describing its limits, which humans encounter when they *fall* in love.

Contrary to Contini and Rea, De Sanctis sees Cavalcanti as primarily invested with knowledge to the point that such interest constitutes a detriment to his poetry. Cavalcanti is "the first real Italian poet worthy of this title, because he is the first to have

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<sup>56</sup> Gianfranco Contini, *Poeti del Duecento* (Milano: Ricciardi, 1995) 490: "Insomma il Cavalcanti non è, come tipicamente Dante, un realista del linguaggio filosofico, bensì un nominalista, che usufruisce quello strumento a fini di euristica linguistica e immaginativa, e non mira alla conoscenza, della quale oltre al resto dubita in sede razionale, ma alla rappresentazione."

<sup>57</sup> Guido Cavalcanti, *Rime*, ed. Roberto Rea and Emanuele Inglese (Roma: Carocci, 2011), 27: "Tanto più che tali realizzazioni rispondono poi di volta in volta alle esigenze della drammatizzazione, che investono non solo il lessico e le strutture retoriche, ma gli stessi contenuti della poesia."

the sense and the object of reality [...] But the glory of the language was not enough for Guido, for whom language and poetry were accessories and simple ornaments: the substance was philosophy.”<sup>58</sup> In order to understand how De Sanctis could articulate two apparently exclusive concepts such as these – namely that Guido was the first Italian poet, and that he had little interest in poetry – we should contextualize De Sanctis’ statements in the more general economy of reading of the Italian poetry of the origins. This point deserves special attention because my reading both accepts and challenges De Sanctis’ approach. I accept De Sanctis’ approach insofar as he sees science as paramount in Cavalcanti’s thought; I instead diverge from De Sanctis in the moment that he defines Cavalcanti’s real poetical moments as those that have little to do with doctrine:

Guido’s glory was where he looked for nothing but relief, an outlet of the soul. It was there that he, without meaning it or wanting it, revealed himself as an artist and a poet. There are men whom their contemporaries and themselves are unable to appreciate. Guido was greater than he himself and his contemporaries ever knew.<sup>59</sup>

De Sanctis seems to assume that poetry and knowledge operate separately. That is to say, poetry ‘does’ poetry and worries about singing, while science worries about truth. In poets like Cavalcanti, when science and poetry meet, we discover that poetry becomes the vest of the truth, a frill, something extrinsic. Why? Because if on the one

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<sup>58</sup> De Sanctis, *Storia della letteratura italiana*, 50.

<sup>59</sup> De Sanctis, *Storia della letteratura italiana*, 50 “La gloria di Guido fu la dove egli non cercò altro che un sollievo e uno sfogo dell’animo. Fu là che egli senza volerlo e saperlo si rivelò artista e poeta. Vi sono uomini che i contemporanei ed essi medesimi sono incapaci di apprezzare. Guido era più grande ch’egli stesso e i suoi contemporanei non sapevano.”

hand De Sanctis recognizes that “Science is the mother of Italian poetry, and its first inspiration comes from the school,” on the other hand he believes that real poetry happens through its emancipation from truth, namely, when poetry expresses the feelings of the soul as opposed to representing external reality.<sup>60</sup> Put briefly, Guido’s greatness lies not in his most doctrinarian compositions, in those folds where he ‘forgets’ philosophy and truth, and freely expresses his inner feelings.

My reading accepts De Sanctis’ premises but draws different conclusions. Counter to the view for which the essence of lyric poetry is the communication of feelings and avoidance of doctrine, I support the idea that early Italian lyric poetry finds its specificity in the very fact of being doctrinarian, scientific, philosophical (read: *concerned with*, and *moved by* truth). The specificity of Italian lyric poetry or, Italian lyric science – consists in the creation of a poetico-philosophical (or lyrico-scientific) space in which the subjectivity (the poet, the lover, the philosopher, the scientist) condenses in the brevity of a sonnet or a canzone what would take otherwise pages and pages of prose. (Whether the Italian experiment succeeds, namely, whether *stilnovisti* succeed in the articulating lyric poetry and philosophy through the production of pieces that are both good poetry and good philosophy, *this*, is a different matter.)

## 1.2

In many ways, *Donna me prega* is the response to a sonnet that Guido Orlandi writes to Cavalcanti:

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<sup>60</sup> De Sanctis, *Storia della letteratura italiana*, 50.

Onde si move, e donde nasce Amore?  
Qual è 'l su' propio, e là 've dimora?  
È sustanzia o accidente? o memora?  
È cagion d'occhi o è voler di core?

Da che procede in suo stato furore  
(come foco si sente che divora)?  
Di che si nutre, domand' io ancora.  
Come e quando e di cui si fa signore?

Che cosa è? – dico – ha e' figura?  
Ha per sé forma, o somiglianza altrui?  
È vita questo amore, od è morte?

Chi 'l serve dé saver di sua natura:  
io domando voi, Guido, di lui:  
odo che molto usate in la sua corte.<sup>61</sup>

*From where does Love come, where is he born? What is his peculiarity, and his true habitat? Is he substance or accident? Or memory? Does he originate in the eyes or is he a desire of the heart? How does the fury of love develop (it feels like fire that devours)? How is Love nourished, I ask once more. How and when and of whom does he become the lord? What is he? – I say – does he have a shape? Does he have a unique form or does he resemble anyone? This love, is he life or death? Whoever serves him ought to be aware of his nature. I ask you, Guido, about him. I hear that you spend a lot of time in his court. [Trans. mine.]*

This sonnet asks a variety of questions about love that go from its origin to its nature; from the way love is kindled in the lover to its appearance; from its status as substance or accident; to its connection to life or death. With his sonnet, Guido Orlandi tests Cavalcanti's knowledge to see whether the time spent in "the court of love" grants Cavalcanti a privileged view on the matter. It is worth noticing that the tone of Orlandi's questions is ontological or, as we would put it today, scientific. Orlandi is not asking

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<sup>61</sup> Valentina Polidori, "Le rime di Guido Orlandi", *Studi di filologia Italiana* 53 (1995): 55-202, 137.

Cavalcanti for a poetical representation of love, nor he is asking Cavalcanti to prove himself as a poet; rather, Orlandi is throwing down his gauntlet at Cavalcanti and challenging him to prove his knowledge about the very nature of love. For his part, Cavalcanti does not pull back from the confrontation. He writes *Donna me prega*, and answers point by point all the questions posed by Orlandi. If we keep in mind the polemical occasion that gave rise to (or even stimulated) the composition of *Donna me prega*, then it is easier to understand why this canzone seems a unique text in the *Stilnovo*, and in some way why it is so dry when we compare it to other Cavalcanti's compositions. In this canzone, there is almost no room for imagination or dramatization. The weeping lover we oftentimes see in lyric poetry leaves his place to an authoritative professor who lectures *in verse* about the nature of love. In the same fashion, the rich imagery that animates lyric poetry thus far leaves its place for the scientific method that Cavalcanti uses to describe a phenomenon within the limits of human reason, i.e., without assuming the help of any superior entity.

### 1.3

In this chapter, I read *Donna me prega* (along with other Cavalcanti's compositions) as a *non-theory of love*, i.e., an approach that sees love as a *irrelatum*, as something that humans cannot enter into contact with. Since Cavalcanti conceives the beloved as an *unappropriable*, he obsessively reminds us that there is nothing to know about love, that love exceeds our minds' powers, blinds our knowledge, and consequently destroys our humanity, understood as the capacity to know and to act freely. Within this approach, the concept of *sbigottimento* (*bewilderment*) plays a key role in unlocking Cavalcanti's

doctrine. Even if the term is absent in the canzone, we can still trace its presence in the description of the limits of knowledge as such; that is to say, the limits against which the lover slams when trying to appropriate his beloved. The analysis of the concept of *sbigottimento* will happen through the comment of some of those poems in which this term makes its powerful appearance. In these compositions, love's irresistible force shatters the mind of the lover, who then loses his humanity, and becomes something similar to a living death. However, if the lover laments the loss of his mind, then what is the status of his narration? Where does he get his authority? How can we believe his words, the words of a fool? If love is bewilderment, if love implies the destruction of knowledge, then what kind of gesture is Cavalcanti's when he decides to write a doctrinal text? Is he being ironic? Is the theory to be taken *cum grano salis*? Or rather, is there at stake in *Donna me prega* something similar to what we found in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, when he says, "My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)"? Should we throw away *Donna me prega* after we have understood it?

Once we clarify the importance of the concept and experience bewilderment, we shall be able to get a better sense of how Cavalcanti joins poetry and philosophy. In *Donna me prega*, he names his method of investigation a "natural dimostramento" (*natural demonstration*). What does this mean?

Furthermore, if Cavalcanti takes away the primacy of poetry from Guinizelli, then is fair to ask, how Cavalcanti relates to Guido Guinizelli? In what

way is his poetry different and similar to Guinizelli's? How does a poetics of *natural dimostramento* relate to the poetics of *likeness* that we witnessed in the previous chapter?

#### 1.4

How was Cavalcanti's poetry received during his times? What was the reaction of his contemporaries? Interestingly enough, Cavalcanti's poetry received criticism very similar to that received by Guinizelli. Guido Orlandi summarized his critiques in a sonnet that doubts Cavalcanti's understanding of love, articulating his objections along two main trajectories: 1) Cavalcanti makes his poetry too lofty and artificial, and 2) he personifies love.

Per troppa sottiglianza il fil si rompe,  
e 'l grosso ferma l'arcone al tenèro;  
e se la guarda non dirizz' al vero,  
in te forse t'avèn, che cheri pompe;

e qual non pon ben diritto lo son pe'  
traballa spesso, non loquendo intero;

.....  
.....  
ch'Amor sincero – non piange né ride:  
in ciò conduce spesso omo o fema,  
per signoraggio prende e divide.

E tu 'l feristi? e no·lli par la sema?  
Ovidio leggi: più di te ne vide!  
Dal mio balestro guarda e aggi tema.<sup>62</sup>

*The thread breaks for too much subtlety, and the thick thread blocks the arch  
[of the crossbow] of the handle and the aim does not target the truth, as it*

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<sup>62</sup>Polidori, "Le rime di Guido Orlandi", 126.

*happens to you, who looks for high rhetorical artifices. He who does not keep a firm foot often wobbles, and ends up producing broken sentences. [...] Because authentic Love neither cries nor laughs, as He often brings man or woman to this, thorough his authority he takes them or divides them. And you wounded Him? And the scar isn't visible? Read Ovid: he saw more than you. Look (take aim) from my crossbow, and be careful. [Trans mine.]*

In this sonnet, Orlandi directs two different attacks against Cavalcanti. First, Cavalcanti is guilty of subtlety that obscures; second, Cavalcanti misinterprets the nature of love because he personifies it in his compositions. I am going to focus on the first part of the sonnet in which Orlandi accuses Cavalcanti of too much subtlety, since the second part of Orlandi's accusations finds in *Donna me prega* its appropriate response (i.e., love is not a god, and its personification is just a product of Cavalcanti's poetical exigencies).

The sonnet develops around the analogy between a crossbow and Cavalcanti's poetry. According to Orlandi, we have a well-functioning crossbow when the string is thick enough, and when we aim the crossbow at the right target namely truth. In Cavalcanti's case, the crossbow is ill functioning: namely, his poetry is too subtle and unclear; moreover, the aim is off because Cavalcanti favors stylistic artifices to truth. Then, Orlandi compares Cavalcanti's poetical attitude to a bad hunter with an unstable stance, which, by extension, means that his poetry is not rooted in solid argumentations, but rather in rhetorical subtleties that jeopardize clarity: "He who does not keep a firm foot often wobbles, and ends up producing broken sentences." It is worth noticing that Orlandi works under the assumption that poetry is a form of reasoning, that verses constitute the elements of an argumentation, and that the scope of poetry is truth. But isn't this strange? Is Orlandi saying that lyric poetry is a form of argumentation? And how can this be? Isn't poetry supposed to *sing* and philosophy to *think*? And also, how

is it possible for the dense structure of poetry to function as the logical steps of an argument? How can lyric poetry aspire to the logical solidity of a philosophical argumentation or, conversely, how can lengthy logical argumentation be summarized in something as short and concise as a sonnet or a canzone? The fact that in his response, *Di vil matera mi conven parlare* (It is convenient for me to talk about gross matter) Cavalcanti does not contradict Orlandi on his assumptions, suggests that he as well must have shared a similar understanding of poetry.

A possible summary of Cavalcanti's approach to poetry comes from a sonnet (XLVII) in which he attacks Guittone d'Arezzo, and accuses him of being incapable of composing sound arguments.

Da più a uno face un sollegismo,  
i maggiore e minor mezzo si pone,  
che pruova necessario, senza rismo:  
da ciò ti parti forse di ragione?

Nel profferer che cade 'n barbarismo  
difetto di saver ti dà cagione;  
e come far poteresti un sofismo  
per silabate carte, fra Guittone?

Per te non fu giammai una figura:  
non fori' aposto il tuo argomento;  
induri quando più dici; e pon' cura,

ché 'ntes' ho che compon' d'insegnamento  
volume: e fòr principio ha da natura.  
Fa' ch'om no rida il tuo proponimento!<sup>63</sup>

*Without a rhythm/rhyme/verse, going from many [things] to one produces a syllogism, and one puts the [terminus] medium both in the major and minor premise, so that [the conclusion] is proved necessary. Perhaps, do you*

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<sup>63</sup> Cavalcanti, *Rime*, 246.

*reasonably distance yourself from this [method]? Lack of knowledge is the reason for your pronouncements, which often falls into barbarism. And [if this is the case] how could you then make a sophism in verses, friar Guittone? There was never any figure thanks to you; and your reasoning will never be in good shape. The more you say the more [your reasoning] becomes incomprehensible. Rumor has it that you are writing a treatise that takes his principles outside nature. Please, make it in a way that no one will ridicule your project!*

Let us unpack Cavalcanti's argument, and clarify his terminology. In the first quatrain, Cavalcanti explains how to compose an Aristotelian syllogism, a construction that has provided throughout history a solid foundation to thinking. (Note that Aristotle explains the syllogism as the instrument of philosophical reasoning in prose, but he does not seem to address the possibility of its use in verse.) In a syllogism, we go from a plurality of sentences on a subject ("going from many [things] to one produces a syllogism") to the singularity of a conclusion. We obtain a conclusion by connecting a major premise with a minor premise via a middle term. The major premise and minor premises are respectively the sentences with wider and narrower claims; the middle term is the connector of the two premises that disappears in the conclusion. The classical example being:

Every man is mortal (**major premise**)  
Socrates is a man (**minor premise**)  
Thus, Socrates is mortal. (**conclusion**)

The middle term 'man,' which appears both in the major and minor premises, plays the role to connect the two propositions in the conclusion, which follows necessarily. Of course, the necessity of the conclusion does not entail its truth, which can only be given by true premises; in other words, we obtain a true and sound syllogism when we

coherently connect two true premises in a true conclusion. For instance, and contrary to the limitations described above, we could say:

Every human has two eyes  
My dog has two eyes  
Thus, my dog is human

In this case, even if the conclusion follows necessarily from the premises, that still does not suffice for its truth. That means that the coherence of reasoning is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the truth of a syllogism. For instance, tradition defines as “sophism” a syllogism with sound logic, but with false conclusion.

In his attack against Guittone, Cavalcanti specifies that the syllogism that he has described does not have “rismo,” a term that Rea in his notes reads as “rhythm, rhyme, verse,” that is to say, “rismo” is the poetical element of the syllogism.<sup>64</sup> Cavalcanti also mentions a different type of syllogism (“sofismo per sillabate carte,” (literally *rhymed sophism*), and leaves out a fourth type “rhymed syllogism,” i.e., a true argument built in rhymes, which I believe is how he conceives his poetry. Cavalcanti accuses Guittone of being incapable of building a sound argument, and in fact, in the second quatrain, he rhetorically wonders how Guittone could even compose a rhymed sophism, since his poetry incurs egregious mistakes (*barbarismo*) due to his ignorance. In other words, not only is Guittone incapable of composing a true rhymed syllogism (to which Cavalcanti seems to hint when speaking about sophisms), he is also incapable of composing a rhymed sophism or a syllogism as such! (“You never made a figure, and your argument/reasoning will never be in good shape.”)

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<sup>64</sup> Cavalcanti, *Rime*, 247.

Guittone's situation is aggravated by the fact that, despite his deficiencies, he is composing a treatise in which he follows a principle that deviates from the "natural principle" (*principio di natura*) being this the principle that guides humans in the construction of arguments based on the limits of human reason, i.e., without the reference to supernatural entities. Such principle will also inform the "natural demonstration" (*natural dimostramento*), i.e., Cavalcanti's rhetorical strategy in *Donna me prega*.

To summarize, Cavalcanti seems to understand the task of his poetry as the natural representation of truth via the articulation of a versified syllogism. This approach will bar the lover from gaining any positive insight on his beloved; as we shall see, the Cavalcantian beloved will appear essentially *beyond nature*, excessive, and therefore unattainable, insuperably distant, beyond human reach. In his quest for the beloved, the bewildered lover will experience the disarticulation of his humanity, i.e., the disconnection between his soul and his body, the death of his mind, the reduction of his voice to pure lament. On the other hand, the adherence to a "natural principle" will grant us the possibility for scanning the depths of the human subjectivity along its various articulations (body-soul/mind, language-reality, human intellect-possible intellect, etc.) and allow the lover (and us with him) to grasp the extent to which his sensibility perceives, his mind thinks, and his voice speaks.

## 1.5

Studying a text from the Middle Age today feels like deciphering a hieroglyphic. Maria Corti perfectly encapsulates the sense of dismay that we feel before a medieval text,

when she says that “From the Middle Ages have come to us the wrecks of a violent shipwreck.”<sup>65</sup> Puzzling over the pieces from this shipwreck is then the work of the scholar, who is called to make choices by adding or subtracting pieces in order to deliver to the reader a picture of what it may have been before the shipwreck.

As a result, Cavalcanti scholarship today grapples with the impossibility of considering Cavalcanti’s thought in and of itself. In order to deliver a complete explanation of his thought, scholars often use pieces that come from other puzzles. We can summarize the tendencies of scholarship as follows: 1) We tend to see Cavalcanti in connection with Dante and/or the Stilnovists; and 2) We tend to read Cavalcanti’s thought in light of Platonism, Aristotelianism, Averroism, etc.<sup>66</sup> These approaches have some limitations. When we emphasize Cavalcanti’s connection with other authors, such connections both allow and block our understanding. They allow understanding insofar as they bring something obscure to a more familiar conceptual space; but such connections also impede our understanding, because they smooth out contradictions and dissonant elements, and let context and comparison to external elements overshadow the singularity of the author. But we want to keep contradictions and dissonances because they keep us vigilant, they keep us thinking.

In this regard, the approaches of Bruno Nardi, Maria Corti, and Jody Enders all agree to connect Cavalcanti to some sort of preexisting philosophy – Averroism for the

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<sup>65</sup> Maria Corti, *Scritti su Cavalcanti e Dante: La felicità mentale; percorsi dell'invenzione e altri saggi* (Torino: Einaudi, 2003), 10.

<sup>66</sup> For instance, when Gennaro Sasso wants to comment on Cavalcanti’s philosophical poetry, he chooses the frame of *Inferno V*, see Sasso, *Dante, Guido e Francesca* (Roma: Viella, 2008).

first two, Platonism for the third one.<sup>67</sup> If reading Cavalcanti in light of other poets is helpful because it gives us a sense of the cultural milieu in which he was operating, on the other hand, this approach forces us to see Cavalcanti through Dante's eyes, or in light of what we know of the Stilnovists. Likewise, the connection of Cavalcanti with preexisting philosophies such as Platonism, Aristotelianism, Averroism, etc. surely helps us to contextualize his thought with respect to other philosophies, but then it also hinders us from coming to terms with what he wrote.

## 1.6

More congenial to my reading will be those interpretations that emphasize Cavalcanti's novelty, rather than his belonging to this or that school. Just to give an example, I will mention Emanuele Inglese and Mauro Scarabelli's contributions. According to Inglese, Cavalcanti deeply changes Italian poetry, even if his fame is obscured by Dante.

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<sup>67</sup> Corti, 11. For instance, Maria Corti defines as “[A] secular, speculative with inclinations to Epicureism (read radical) and he is a natural philosopher, i.e., with experience of physical realities”, while she denounces the mistake (*errore di fondo*) of today's interpretations when they ascribe “fundamental hybridity” to Cavalcanti. On her part, Jody Enders, in “Rhetoric and Dialectic in Guido Cavalcanti's ‘Donna me Prega’” *Stanford Italian Review* 5 (1985): 161-74, 172, reads *Donna me prega* in light of Plato's rhetoric and dialectic, with particular attention to the *Phaedrus*: “The definition of love and the dialectical method which permits its discovery fuse to create an epistemological system: the nature of love becomes a metaphor for the true philosophical subject of the poem – the presentation of a new method of enquiry.” According to her, there is a very important analogical structure that underlies *Donna me prega*: “there is indeed a crucial analogical structure in play here; but, as I suggested earlier, its rhetorical function is not focused outwardly on an audience, but inwardly on the literary genre that has provided a context for defining love. Cavalcanti has incorporated his epistemology into the pre-existing poetic tradition of the lyric. Therefore, if his mimesis of philosophy does not in fact function rhetorically ... but to transmit a new theory of love. ... Cavalcanti calls upon Platonic rhetoric to communicate a new poetic of love that is dialectically expressed.”

Cavalcanti's poetical novelty is the "definitive overtaking of the Courtly tropoi through the internalization of lyric discourse" (*definitivo sorpassamento della dimensione cortese attraverso l'interiorizzazione del discorso lirico*), an internalization that entails the lover's folding in himself and the disappearance of the physical dimension of the lady.<sup>68</sup> In other words, with Cavalcanti, the lover withdraws into himself and becomes the narrator of his subjectivity and his obsession about his beloved, who in turn loses all her carnality and is reduced to a pure mental image. But if this is the case, if Cavalcanti does renew poetry, then why does tradition fail to account for his merit? For Inglese, this is due mainly to three reasons: Cavalcanti's inclusion in the Stilnovist tradition; Cavalcanti's closeness to Dante (which then becomes a rivalry that ended up with the victory of the latter); Cavalcanti's exclusivity as a philosopher plastically expressed by Benvenuto da Imola: "Fuerunt duo lumina Florentiae, unus philosophus, alter poeta (Florence had two lights, one was a philosopher, and the other was a poet.)"

Along a similar line of reasoning, for Mauro Scarabelli, Cavalcanti places love poetry on a completely new base by taking distance from both Guittone and Guinizelli.<sup>69</sup> Cavalcanti's "devastating polemical force" and "astonishing founding capacity" allow him to "rebuild love poetry on a completely new ground." Cavalcanti's novelty consists in his scientific approach to love, which explains this phenomenon with the laws of physics rather than with angelic or godly manifestations. No scholar has captured more effectively the particular status of love than Scarabelli, when he says:

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<sup>68</sup> Cavalcanti, *Rime*, 14.

<sup>69</sup> Mauro Scarabelli, "Una nuova scienza d'amore: Proposte di lettura per 'Donna me prega'" *Italianistica* 35: 3 (2006): 47-56.

“the loving passion is a feeling without which human life seems crippled, but that at the same time is irredeemably opposed to that rational dimension, the only dimension that differentiates man from brute animals.”<sup>70</sup> Scarabelli finds a fundamental aporia at the base of human life: the absence of love cripples human life while its presence destroys it; so is the paradoxical status of love in Cavalcanti according to Scarabelli. In *Donna me prega*, the distinction “between the lover and the philosopher is recomposed within an absolutely crystalline construction of poetry and thought that reveals itself first as noble act of love (everything starts from the response to a lady’s prayer, or rather, of the Lady par excellence) that at the same time will not deviate [...] from the path inscribed by scientific knowledge [...]”<sup>71</sup>

## 1.7

As we said earlier, one key-term of Cavalcanti’s poetry – *sbigottimento* – will orient our entire investigation. We shall spend some time discussing the etymology of this term, and how Cavalcanti introduced it for the first time in the Italian lyrical poetry. We will then analyze how *sbigottimento* works within Cavalcanti’s poetry, and how it functions as the key to unlock *Donna me prega*’s “theory” of love.

Before we proceed, a *caveat*. The order of Cavalcanti’s poems in the current editions often creates the impression that his poetry follows a certain line of evolution,

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<sup>70</sup> “La passione amorosa è un sentimento senza il quale la vita umana sembra monca, ma che risulta essere irrimediabilmente contrapposto a quella dimensione razionale che è l’unica a differenziare l’uomo dagli animali bruti”, Scarabelli, *Una nuova scienza d’amore*, 53.

<sup>71</sup> Scarabelli, “Una nuova scienza d’amore”, 54.

thus encouraging us to “connect the dots” and come up with a comprehensive interpretation of Cavalcanti’s poetical thought. For instance, Robert Pogue Harrison synthesizes with few strokes the meaning of Cavalcanti’s poetry as follows:

Cavalcanti portrays love almost exclusively in negative terms as a force of bewilderment, disorder, and dissolution. ... 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 essence, love figures in Cavalcanti’s poetry as the overwhelming experience of one’s own precarious finitude, if not death.<sup>72</sup>

In my opinion, Harrison is both right and wrong. While I do not exclude the possibility of a general interpretation of Cavalcanti’s poetry per se, I wish to point out that if we propose such an interpretation its claim ought to be soft, ‘weak’, open to revision. Let me explain. Cavalcanti’s experience of love is generally understood as negative: love is a destructive passion that brings first despair, and eventually death to the lover. But if this is the case, if love is a destructive experience, then how should we read Cavalcanti’s poems that do not describe a destructive experience of love? Take for example *Posso degli occhi miei novella dire* (I can relate a good news about my eyes, XXV.)

Posso degli occhi miei novella dire,  
la quale è tale che piace sì al core  
che di dolcezza ne sospir’ Amore.  
Questo novo plager che ’l meo cor sente  
fu tratto sol d’una donna veduta,  
la qual è sì gentil e avenente  
e tanta adorna, che ’l cor la saluta.

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<sup>72</sup> Robert Pogue Harrison, “Approaching the Vita Nuova,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 38.

Non è la sua biltate canosciuta  
da gente vile, ché lo suo colore  
chiama intelletto di troppo valore.

Io veggio che negli occhi suoi risplende  
una virtù d'amor tanto gentile,  
ch'ogni dolce piacer vi si comprende;  
e move a loro un'anima sottile,  
rispetto della quale ogn'altra è vile:  
e non si pò di lei giudicar fòre  
altro che dir: «Questo è novo splendore».

Va', ballatetta, e la mia donna trova,  
e tanto li domanda di merzede,  
che gli occhi di pietà verso te mova  
per quel che 'n lei ha tutta la sua fede;  
e s'ella questa grazia ti concede,  
mandi una voce d'allegrezza fòre,  
che mostri quella che t'ha fatto onore.<sup>73</sup>

*I can relate a good news of my eyes, which is such that my heart likes so much that Love himself sighs of sweetness. This new pleasure that my heart feels was all taken from a woman I saw. This woman is so noble and attractive and so elegant that my heart greets her. Her beauty cannot be known by vile people, because her appearance needs too powerful an intellect. I see that in her eyes there shines a virtue of love so noble that encompasses every sweet pleasure; and moves in them a fine soul compared to which every other soul is vile: and one cannot judge it except by saying: «This is an original splendor». Go, my little ballata, find my lady, and request her mercy until she moves towards you her merciful eyes for he who has in her all his faith; and if she grants you such grace, you shall send forth a joyful voice that reveals the the lady who brought you honor.*

In this poem, the lover sings the positivity of his experience while pointing out the magnificent qualities of his beloved. Her beauty is an object of knowledge that the intellect of the vile man cannot grasp – a theme that we have already encountered with Guinizelli. Rea has also drawn attention to this matter and has underlined the

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<sup>73</sup> Cavalcanti, *Rime*, 137.

multifaceted dimension of Cavalcanti's representation of love: "What appears certain to me is that the Cavalcanti's representation of love [...] read as a whole, with its euphoric moments alternated with its more intense painful outbursts [...] allows a different mode to experience this passion, way more contradictory and vital [...]"<sup>74</sup>

If on the one hand the lover in *Posso degli occhi* excludes the vile person from the possibility of grasping the attributes of the lady (a denial that reappears in *Donna me prega*.) on the other hand the lover remains silent about the intellect of the noble person. Is the lover hinting at the possibility that the noble person is perhaps capable of knowing the virtue of his beloved? While the possibility of grasping the virtues of the beloved is firmly excluded in most of Cavalcanti's compositions, in this poem such exclusion does not take place. How are we to contextualize such poem with the others? Is Cavalcanti contradicting himself? Is he exploring other possibilities? Did he simply change his mind? Was he having a "good day" when he composed this ballata? Does this composition conflict with the others, or does it perhaps indicate a point of evolution in Cavalcanti's production? Why is this ballata placed only in the middle of the Italian edition? Wouldn't have made more sense to place this ballata at the beginning of Cavalcanti's production? In this case, one could have said that at the beginning, Cavalcanti had an early 'Guinizellian' phase which then he abandoned for a darker view on love. So, what is the answer? To be honest, I don't believe we can have a definite answer to these questions, because we do not possess a finished anthology in which Cavalcanti established the exact order of his compositions. Even if the order that we

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<sup>74</sup> Cavalcanti, *Rime*, 27.

have today is a product of surely serious and reasoned philological reconstructions, reconstructions will always be such, and therefore, our claims should never forget their fragile ground.

## 1.8

Let us spend some time on the etymology of the term ‘sbigottire.’ Italian dictionary Devoto-Oli distinguishes a transitive use of “putting someone in a state of deep perturbation, or overwhelmed sense of being lost, leaving the person speechless and almost incapable to react,” and an intransitive one of “remaining speechless, almost in disbelief, flabbergasted, disconcerted.”<sup>75</sup> The history of this term has its own charm, especially if we consider that its etymology is still uncertain. So the *Dizionario Etimologico della Lingua Italiana* (DELI) summarizes all the hypothesis found thus far:

Sbigottire: deeply upset in a way that you almost lose the capacity to react (adv. 1292, Giamboni *Vizi e Virtù* 87), *trans. and refl.* deep concern, to lose hope. (*sbaguttire*: end of cent. XII, *Ritmo Laurenziano*; *sbigottire*: end of cent. XIII, *Novellino*) [...] Voice of unknown origin. The DEI thinks that “maybe from the anti. Fr. *esbahir* (mod. Fr. *ébair*, Prov. *esbair* resembling *bagutta*.” Mignorini-Duro “Maybe derived from the ancient \**bagutta* ‘mask’ (cfr. ‘*bautta*’), accosted to *bigot*.” Devoto: “From the Old French *esbahir* mixed with *bigotto*.” All these hypotheses are similar and quite weak: the approximation to *bigot* is to be excluded because this is a French term from the Settecento.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Giacomo Devoto, e Giancarlo Oli, *Il Devoto-Oli, Vocabolario della lingua italiana 2007*, (ed. cd-rom), (Firenze: Le-Monnier, 2006) “Mettere in uno stato di turbamento profondo o di attonito smarrimento, lasciando interdetto e quasi incapace di reagire”, “Restare interdetto, quasi incredulo; sbalordirsi, sconcertarsi.”

<sup>76</sup> Manlio Cortelazzo, Michele A. Cortelazzo, and Paolo Zolli, *Il nuovo etimologico DELI-dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1999). “Sbigottire: turbare profondamente in modo da far quasi perdere la capacità di reagire (av. 1292, Giamboni *Vizi e Virtù* 87), *intr e rifl.* turbarsi profondamente, perdersi

To summarize: *esbahir*, *bautta*, and *bigot* are the three most important hypotheses considered from the DELI. But first, a *caveat*. When we establish the etymology of a term, we must explain both its meaning and morphology: only in this case, unless there are unusual exceptions, the etymology of a word can find scientific ground. Instead, with *superchio*, we mainly have two hypotheses, one that explains this term semantically but not morphologically, and one that addresses it morphologically but not semantically. Let us see them briefly.

According to Roberto Rea, ‘sbigottire’ comes from the Occitan ‘esbahir’. He justifies his hypothesis with the morphological similarity of the two terms, and their semantic dimension: ‘sbigottire’ is in fact the Italian translation of the Occitan ‘esbahir’. However, this etymology is far from being the most convincing. In fact, it is not clear how the morpheme *-got-* at the center of ‘sbigottire’ could have originated in the transition from ‘esbahir’, especially if we consider the phonetic changes that the Romance languages underwent as they were differentiating from Latin.<sup>77</sup> If on the one

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d’animo. (*sbaguttire*: fine sec. XII, *Ritmo Laurenziano*; *sbigottire*: fine sec. XIII, *Novellino*)” [...] “Vc. d’orig sconosciuta. Il DEI la ritiene “forse dall’ant. fr. *esbahir* (fr. mod. *ébair*), prov. *esbair* avvicinato a *bagutta*.” Migliorini-Duro “forse der. di un ant. \**bagutta* ‘maschera’ (cfr. *bautta*), raccostato a *bigotto*.” Devoto “dal fr. ant. *esbahir* incr. con *bigotto*.” Si tratta di ipotesi affini tutte molto labili: comunque escluso per ragioni cronologiche, l’accostamento a *bigotto*, che è un francesismo del settecento [...]” Dante Olivieri, *Dizionario etimologico italiano, concordato coi dialetti, le lingue straniere e la topo-onomastica* (Milano: Ceshina 1953). Cfr. Bruno Migliorini e Aldo Duro, *Prontuario etimologico della lingua italiana* (Torino: G.B. Paravia, 1950). Giacomo Devoto, Gian Carlo Oli, *Nuovissimo vocabolario illustrato della lingua italiana* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1997).

<sup>77</sup> See Roberto Rea, “Per il lessico di Guido Cavalcanti: *sbigottire*,” *Critica del testo* VI/3 (2003), 933-58; Ti Alkire and Carol Rosen, *Romance Languages: a historical introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

hand the connection with *esbahir* is semantically correct, since it perfectly translates into ‘sbigottire’, on the other hand we should exclude a direct relationship of derivation. Furthermore, the GDLI and Mistral attest that *esbahir* gave birth in Italian to ‘sbaire’ through the subtraction of the prosthetic vowel ‘e-’ at the beginning of the word; this change was largely proved in Italian.<sup>78</sup>

As regards the connection between ‘sbigottire’ and \**bagutta / bautta / baùta*, this connection is also to be excluded for chronological reasons, since these terms all indicate a cape (or a mask) that was used during the Venetian Carnival in the ‘700.<sup>79</sup> We also saw how the Devoto-Oli connects ‘sbigottire’ to ‘bigot’ in two instances, the first time posing the direct derivation of latter from the former, and another time overlapping *esbahir* and ‘bigot’.<sup>80</sup> Even if this operation makes sense from a morphological standpoint, we ought to exclude the relationship between ‘sbigottire’ and ‘bigot’ because this time the hypothesis appears unjustified at the semantic level. Contrary to what Battaglia asserts, the relation to ‘bigotto’ should not be excluded for chronological reasons, since this term appears way before the fifteenth century, as it appears in Wace in 1155 or in Girard de Roussillon.<sup>81</sup> Again, the reason we should

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<sup>78</sup> Salvatore Battaglia, e Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti, *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* (Torino: Unione tipografico-editrice torinese, 1961). Frédéric Mistral, *Lou trézor dóu Felibrige; ou Dictionnaire provençal-français, embrassant les divers dialectes de la langue d'oc moderne*. (Aix-en-Provence: Veuve Remondet-Aubin, 1879).

<sup>79</sup> Bruno Migliorini and Aldo Duro, *Prontuario etimologico della lingua italiana* (Torino: G.B. Paravia, 1950).

<sup>80</sup> Devoto, *Il Devoto-Oli, Vocabolario della lingua italiana 2007*, (ed. cd-rom), (Firenze: Le-Monnier, 2006) “Forse der. di bigotto, con s- intensivo, nel senso di ‘andare in estasi, in delirio’, come manifestazione di religiosità fanatica | sec. XIII.”

<sup>81</sup> “Voce di origine incerta: generalmente è ritenuta deriv. dal fr. ant. *esbahir* (mod. *ébair*) e provenz. *esbair* ‘sbalordire’, con raccostamento ora a *bagutta* ora a *bigatto*,

exclude a relationship between ‘*sbigottire*’ and ‘bigot’ is strictly semantic: the fact that the term ‘bigot’ (whose etymology is also uncertain) indicates ‘the Normans’ or – as in

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oppure direttamente a *bagutta* con l’influsso di *bigotto* (l’accostamento a bigotto è tuttavia da escludere per ragioni cronologiche).

<sup>81</sup> Cfr. Jean Dubois, Henri Mitterand, e Albert Dauzat, *Dictionnaire étymologique & historique du français*, (Paris: Larousse, 2006): “Bigot “1155, Wace, surnom injurieux adressé aux Normands; XV, ‘devot’; juron anc. angl. *bī god*, par Dieu (*Godon*, Anglais, XIV s., de *god-dam*); *bigot* est aussi un surnom (XI - XIV s.); or Alain Rey, and Paul Robert, *Le grand Robert de la langue française* (Paris:Le Robert, 2000). <http://libproxy.tulane.edu:2048/login?url=http://symano.demarque.com/Access/connExt.php?idRelPC=512071.>; Ayto, John (Author). *Word Origins: The Hidden Histories of English Words from A to Z*.

Huntingdon, GBR: A & C Black, 2005. p 60.

<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/cornell/Doc?id=10240735&ppg=71>

“According to the 12th-century Anglo-Norman chronicler Wace, bigot was a contemptuous term applied by the French to the Normans, but it is far from clear where this came from, whether it is the same word as present-day bigot, and, if it is, how it came to mean ‘narrowminded person’.

*Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition on CD-ROM (v. 4.0)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2009) “In OF. Bigot appears first in the romance of Girart de Roussillon (12th c.) as the proper name of some people, apparently of the south of Gaul. Hence already in the 17th c. it was suggested by Caseneuve, that it might be an OF. form of Wisigothus, Visigoth; the relations between the Visigoths of Toulouse who were Arians, and the Franks who were Catholics, being such as readily to attach to the name of the former the connotation of ‘detestable foreigner’ or ‘foreign heretic.’ But modern Romanic scholars find phonetic difficulties, besides that there is no evidence that the name Wisigothi was preserved in the vulgar tongue. Slender support to some connexion with the Goths is suggested by the med.L. form Bigothi (Du Cange). Whether the Sp. bigote, moustache, is in any way connected, cannot be decided. According to Wace bigoz, bigos was applied opprobriously by the French to the Normans, which shows that the word had then acquired some connotative force; the legend that it originated in the refusal of Hrolf or Rollo to kiss the foot of Charles the Simple, when, in the words of the 12th c. chronicler, ‘lingua Anglica (!!!) respondit Ne se, bi got, quod interpretatur Ne per Deum’ (No by God!), is absurdly incongruous with facts. The opprobrious sense in Wace was certainly not that of ‘superstitious’ or ‘hypocrite,’ as in later F. and Eng.; materials to show how the latter was developed are wanting, but there is evidence to show that the feminine bigote was subsequently applied in opprobrium to the Beguines (see Beguta, Bigutta, in Du Cange): our first quotation identifies bigot with begin or beguine. In early times the word became a Norman family name as in Roger Bigod earl of Norfolk.”

France some century later – ‘religious fanatics’ does not explain its use in Italian to signify ‘dismay’ or ‘bewilderment’.

## 1.9

As Roberto Rea points out, the introduction of the series *sbigottire*, *sbigottito*, *sbigottitamente*, *isbigottito* in Italian lyric poetry is due to Guido Cavalcanti.<sup>82</sup> Below, is the list of occurrences in Cavalcanti’s poetry.

1. *Deh, spiriti miei, quando mi vedete | con tanta pena, come non mandate | fuor della mente parole adornate | di pianto, dolorose e sbigottite?* “Alas, my spirits, when you see me in such a great pain how can you not emit from the mind painful and bewildered words dressed in tears?” (VI)
2. *L’anima mia vilment’ è sbigottita | de la battaglia ch’è [l]’ave dal core: | che s’ella sente pur un poco Amore | più presso a lui che non sòle, ella more.* “My soul is so miserably bewildered from the battle that she [my soul] receives from the heart that if she feels Love closer than usual to it [the heart], she dies.” (VII)
3. *Amor, c’ha le bellezze sue vedute | mi sbigottisce sì, che sofferire | non può lo cor sentendola venire [...].* “Love, who saw her beauty, bewilders me in such a way that my heart cannot stand when she comes [...].” (IX)
4. [...] «*Questi sono in figura | d’un che si more sbigottitamente*». “[...] «These are images of how one dies in bewilderment.” (IX)
5. *Noi siàn le triste penne isbigottite, | le cesoiuzze e ’l coltellin dolente, | ch’avemo scritte dolorosamente | quelle parole che vo’ avete udite.* “We are the sad and bewildered pens, the little shears and the suffering little knife, [we are] those ones that have written in sorrow those words that you have heard.” (XVIII)
6. *E trasse poi de li occhi tuo’ sospiri, | i qua’ me saettò nel cor sì forte, | ch’i’ mi partì’ sbigottito fuggendo.* “And [it] took sighs from your eyes that threw such strong flashes of lightning that I escaped bewildered.” (XXI)

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<sup>82</sup> Rea, *Per il lessico di Guido Cavalcanti*, 891.

7. *Poi che mi vider così sbigottito, | disse l'una, che rise: | «Guarda come conquise | forza d'amor costui.»* “Since they saw me so bewildered, one woman said laughing: «Look how the power of love conquered this man.»” (XXX)
8. *Tu, voce sbigottita e deboletta | ch'esci piangendo de lo cor dolente | coll'anima e con questa ballatetta | va' ragionando della strutta mente.* “You, bewildered and weak voice, who comes out of the heart in tears, go with the soul and this little ballata, and talk about the destroyed mind.” (XXXV)

As Rea says: “the series of terms (six times in a participle, once as a verb, and once as an adverb) is used by Guido to express the deep and violent bewilderment that invades the ego, while mortally upsetting the psycho-physical faculties, in the moment that the ego sees the lady.”<sup>83</sup> By translating ‘*esbair*,’ a term codified by Cercamon in the troubadour lyric, which indicates the bewilderment, the aphasia, and the loss of the lover’s mental faculties in the presence of his beloved, Cavalcanti introduces a term largely unknown in the lyric tradition.<sup>84</sup> Later, the use of these terms continued in other

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<sup>83</sup> Rea, *Per il lessico di Guido Cavalcanti*, 886. “La serie (sei volte il participio in funzione aggettivale, una volta il verbo, una volta l’avverbio) è adoperata da Guido per esprimere il profondo e violento sgomento che invade l’io, stravolgendone a morte le facoltà psicofisiche, al momento della vista della donna.”

<sup>84</sup> *Il trovatore Cercamon*, ed. Valeria Tortoreto, (Modena: Mucchi, 1981). In Cercamon’s *Quand l’aura doussa* we read: “[Q]uan suy ab lieys si m’esbahis / qu’ieu no ill sai dire mon talan, / e quan m’en vauc, vejaire m’es / que tot perda ’l sen e ’l saber” (*[W]hen I am with her, I feel so bewildered that I cannot speak my desire, and when I leave, it feels like I lose my judgment and my knowledge*).

Stilnovists, like Dante<sup>85</sup>, and went all the way to Petrarch.<sup>86</sup>

In *L'anima mia vilment'è sbigottita*, the lover describes bewilderment as the effect of the unbearable presence of the lady, a presence which destroys his mind and his body. The process of bewilderment almost kills the lover, and reduces his voice into an ongoing lament. For the bewildered lover, the entire world shrinks down to himself, his pain, and his lady. In this sonnet, we witness the sinister power of bewilderment as *excessive, deadly* and *subversive*. Excessive, because it exceeds the sensitivity of the lover; deadly because reduces the lover almost to death; subversive, because it turns into tears even the laughter of the happiest man.

L'anima mia vilment'è sbigottita  
de la battaglia ch'e[l] ave dal core:  
che s'ella sente pur un poco Amore  
più presso a lui che non sòle, ella more.

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<sup>85</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Vita nova*, ed. Guido Gorni (Torino: Einaudi 1996) Dante Alighieri, *Rime*, ed. Domenico De Robertis, 5 vol, (Firenze: Edizione nazionale Società dantesca italiana, 2002). As we see in *Ciò che m'incontra*, “[P]eccato face chi allora mi vede, / se l’anima sbigottita non conforta” (*[H]e who sees me sins if he doe not comfort my bewildered soul*); *Tre donne intorno al cor*, “Ciascuna par dolente e sbigottita / come persona discacciata e stanca (*Each one looks in pain and bewildered as a tired and rejected*). Dante uses disbigottito also in the *Vita Nuova*. In Vn XXIII 22 36 Io presi tanto smarrimento allora, / ch'io chiusi li occhi vilmente gravati, l'avverbio sottolinea l'abbattimento, lo sconforto morale da cui D. è colto al pensiero che Beatrice possa morire. Ha senso analogo nelle parole rivolte dal nuovo pensiero d'amore per la Donna gentile all'anima, nel commento a Cv II Voi che 'ntendendo 40-41 (Tu non se' morta, ma se' ismarrita, / anima nostra, che sì ti lamenti): la cagione per che morta ti pare essere, si è uno smarrimento nel quale se' caduta vilmente per questa donna che è apparita (X 3; e si ricordi quanto D. immagina di dire a sé stesso a proposito della medesima vicenda, in Vn XXXVIII 2 Deo, che pensero è questo, che in così vile modo vuole consolare me...?). E così in XXXIX 2.]

<sup>86</sup> “[F]ermo le piante sbigottito et smorto” (*I stop my feet bewildered and exhausted*) XVI, 3; “[E]t da la famigliula sbigottita” (*[A]nd the bewildered little family*); XV, 7; “[D]’un quasi vivo et sbigottito sasso” (*[O]f an almost alive and bewildered rock*) XXIII, 80.

Sta come quella che non ha valore,  
ch'è per temenza da lo cor partita;  
e chi vedesse com'ell'è fuggita  
diria per certo: «questi non ha vita.»

Per li occhi venne la battaglia in pria,  
che ruppe ogni valore immantenente  
sì che del colpo fu strutta la mente

Qualunqu'è quei che più allegrezza sente,  
se vedesse li spiriti fuggir via,  
di grande sua pietate piangeria.<sup>87</sup>

*My soul is so miserably bewildered by the battle that she [my soul] receives from my heart that if she perceives Love a little closer than he normally is, she may die. She stands as the one who doesn't have physical strength/force to live/courage, since she fled from the heart because of fear; and whoever should see how she fled would certainly say: "This man has no life." First the battle came from the eyes, and immediately destroyed all physical strength so that the blast destroyed the mind. Whoever is the happiest, he would cry out of his great compassion, if he were to see how the spirits ran away.*

The sonnet begins with the lover's confession of bewilderment. The first characteristic of this experience is the hypersensitivity of the lover to the presence of Love. (Note, that Love here, with a capital 'L,' is the personification of what we call "the experience of love.") The image of the proximity of Love is used to describe the feelings of the lover, so that when the lover laments that he cannot tolerate to be any closer to Love, he is pointing to the overwhelming intensity of his feelings. It is worth noticing that while denouncing the excess of his presence, the lover also mentions the habitual proximity of Love and, by that, he seems to hint to a 'reasonable closeness', i.e. a reasonable measure of love that he can tolerate. When we read "if [my soul] feels Love a little

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<sup>87</sup> Cavalcanti, *Rime*, 68.

closer than he normally is,” we are told simultaneously that, there is a space-intensity whose limit ought not to be crossed or it will bring about the death of the lover, and that there is also an area of intensity within which the presence of Love is tolerable.

But then, if there is a place where love is tolerable, does this mean that bewilderment can also be tolerable? Can the lover still both safe and bewildered when Love keeps himself within appropriate distance? Can there be a ‘golden mean’ of love? And of bewilderment? Are love and bewilderment the same thing? It’s hard to tell. Probably, if we consider the kind of intellectual elite that Cavalcanti is addressing in *Donna me prega* (“I intend my talk to the knowledgeable man, because I don’t hope that a man with an ungentle heart can access any knowledge”) we can deduce that love and bewilderment can overlap but do not simply identify. Since there are at least two kinds of people (the “knowledgeable man” and the man with “an ungentle heart,”) there are probably at least two kinds of love: the love of the gentle man (i.e. love-bewilderment), and the love of the ungentle man which may or may not be connected to bewilderment. Unfortunately, since this and other texts don’t seem to be concerned with the herd, we do not know if the possibility of this feeling is extended to the ordinary man. (As we will see later, although we can find in Cavalcanti some advancement with respect to Guinizelli’s concept of nobility, namely a passage from a concept of nobility as *bestowed* from the stars to a nobility that seem to be acquired through the dedication of the *studium*, Cavalcanti’s composition are still filled with a rather disturbing sense of intellectual superiority.)

If love varies depending on the nature of the lover, then we can argue that love is a concept with different possibilities of actualization, which depend on the specific

subject that “falls in love.” Hence, there should be love without bewilderment, which is, possibly, the kind of love felt by the ordinary man. On the other hand, the possibility of bewilderment without love remains unexplored, since this concept does not seem appear in Cavalcanti, given his interest in speaking to a qualified kind of man, the knowledgeable man, rather than his counterpart, the non-noble man. In other words, as it happens in many of Cavalcanti’s poems, the characterization of love seems to allow us to conclude that within these kind of compositions, love and bewilderment are the same thing.

To summarize the first quatrain, bewilderment is an experience that pertains to a specific kind of lover, that brings to the limit, and almost exceeds the resistance of the lover; it is the experience of maximization of his sensitivity beyond which there is only death. Bewilderment is *excessive*.

The second quatrain builds on the mortal power of love with the image of the soul that flees from the heart. The comparison between the (almost) deadly power of love is present in many other Cavalcanti’s compositions that tackle negatively the experience of love. Bewilderment is so strong that it annihilates the lover’s physical strength, and forces his soul out of his body. People who see the bewildered lover think that he is dead. It is important to keep in mind that Cavalcanti does not push the deadly power of love all the way through: the lover *almost* dies since his soul is compared to someone without physical strength. In this sonnet, there is the first textual asperity on our path, namely an ambiguity that concerns the term *valor*, a term that in modern Italian means “value” or “worth” but that among its other older meanings we can find

“courage” and “physical strength.”<sup>88</sup> Depending on how we choose to translate *valor*, with courage or physical strength, the line can assume different meaning. Is there a right way to translate? In my opinion, both readings are possible and justifiable within the text. The quatrain reads: “She stands as the one who doesn’t have physical strength/courage, since she fled from the heart because of fear; and whoever should see how she fled would certainly say: «*This man has no life*» (*Sta come quella che non ha valore | ch’è per temenza da lo cor partita; | e chi vedesse com’ell’è fuggita | diria per certo: «questi non ha vita*»)) In the first case, we can translate “Sta come quella che non ha valore”, with “She stands as the one who doesn’t have courage.” Such reading agrees with the next line, “since she fled from the heart.” In brief, the soul escapes her body because she is afraid of love. However, in the second case, if we remember what the first quatrain says about death, and match it with what comes after, we would then read, “She stands as the one who doesn’t have physical strength/force to live/courage, and whoever should see how she fled would certainly say: «This man has no life.»” In this case, we have to conclude that “*valor*” has to mean “physical strength” or “life,” otherwise the verse “This man has no life” would make no sense. Once again, both readings are possible, and probably they are both right due to the ambiguity of the word *valor*. An ‘inclusive’ approach to this ambiguity could be to accept simultaneously both interpretations of *valor*, and say that the bewildered soul deserts the heart due to her fear

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<sup>88</sup> See Treccani On line <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/valore/> c. ant. Forza, capacità fisica e psichica: *E così smorto, d’onne valor voto, Vegno a vedervi, credendo guerire* (Dante); *lei, dolce cadente Sopra di te, col tuo valor sostieni, E al pranzo l’accompagna* (Parini); *di più far lamento Valor non mi restò* (Leopardi); anche, forza di qualche singola facoltà, come la vista: *io ti fiammeggio nel caldo d’amore ..., Sì che del viso tuo [= della tua vista, dei tuoi occhi] vinco il v.* (Dante).

of Love, and that her escape is deadly, because when the soul leaves the heart, the person dies. Bewilderment is *deadly*.

The first tercet describes how bewilderment took place, and what were the outcomes. Bewilderment is a quick battle – a blitzkrieg – that starts from the eyes, quickly blasts the lover, destroying his life and his mind. This time we find an ambiguity in the expression “through the eyes” (*per li occhi*) which can be read in two ways, both interesting, both right. *Whose* eyes are we talking about? In the first case, “through the eyes” is referring to the gaze of the lady which brings the sensitivity of the lover to its limits; a step closer, a little more intensity would be enough to kill him. This reading brings the attention to the subversion of gender roles in this poem, for the lover acts as the mere recipient of the action (the passive principle) while the beloved acts as the giver (the active principle). In the second case, “through the eyes” refers to the eyes of the lover who receive the image of the lady. I believe that both readings are right and they both can be simultaneously possible due to the ambiguity of the text – through *whose* eyes? – and can both find evidence in the general doctrine of love in use that around that time.

However, if we accept the second interpretation, and expand on it, we find that the experience of love portrayed in this poem tells more than the pain of the lover. Despite its dark tones, this sonnet also teaches us something about the regular process of intellection, which begins with the acquisition of images and leads after several passages to the knowledge of a given object. Even if this is not the place to describe Cavalcanti’s epistemology, with its connections with Aristotle and Averroes, what matters at this point is his deviation from the courtly model of knowledge, according to

which once the image penetrates the lover's eyes, it goes to the heart. For Cavalcanti, the image goes from the eyes to the mind (which is part of the sensitive soul) and can then be further processed until it gets to the possible intellect (one for the entire humankind) that grants the possibility of knowledge. However, we need to bear in mind that in the process of intellection the image needs to be of a certain intensity (the golden mean); the mind's power of acquisition is not limitless. In the case of bewilderment, the image of the beloved gets through the eyes of the lover, destroys his mind, undermining the possibility of knowledge. Put differently, the mortal potentiality of love actualizes itself in the extreme weakness of the lover, who lies like the one who "has no life," as like the one whose "mind was destroyed."

The second tercet describes the effect of bewilderment on the observer. This experience is so strong that it can bring the happiest man to tears: "Whoever is the happiest, he would cry out of his great compassion, if he were to see how the spirits ran away." Probably, this is an inverse of a passage from Luke (6, 20-25), where Jesus describes the subverting effects of love: "Blessed are you who are | hungry now, | for you will be filled. | Blessed are you who weep now, | for you will laugh. | ... | Woe to you who are full now | for you will be hungry. | Woe to you are laughing now, | for you will mourn and weep. Cavalcanti's verse reverses the meaning of this passage which stresses the promise of a positive future that comes with loving God. Instead, in *L'anima mia* we witness the same action but with the inverse meaning: the power of love as bewilderment is so strong that transforms into tears even the joy of the happiest man. As we saw earlier with the genders, the power of love subverts the order and it transforms things into their opposites. Bewilderment is *subversive*.

## 1.10

What happens to the body of the lover when bewilderment takes place? This experience severs the articulation between the body and the soul, and allows the emergence of a bare existence, a *nuda vita*.<sup>89</sup> In other words, Cavalcanti flips the Christian concept of the immortality of the soul, shifting it to the body. In these rhymes, the body of the lover seems to resist death, while instead the soul and the mind become mortal entities. This theme is not novel; the specter of a *reasonless human life* constellates Western culture at least since Aristotle, and extends all the way to Primo Levi's testimony of the *muselman*.<sup>90</sup> And yet one may ask, What does it mean that humanity in a human is being destroyed? If 'humanity' coincides with "reason," "mind," or a specific act of the mind such as thinking, can we really isolate what makes humans *human*? The sinister shadow of a human-non-human life lurks in Cavalcanti's rhymes about love.

Tu m'hai sì piena di dolor la mente,  
che l'anima si briga di partire,  
e li sospir' che manda 'l cor dolente  
mostrano agli occhi ch'è non può soffrire.

Amor, che lo tuo grande valor sente,  
dice: «E' mi duol che ti convien morire  
per questa bella donna, ché niente  
per che Pietate di te voglia udire.»

I' vo come colui ch'è fuor di vita,  
che pare, a chi lo sguarda, ch'om sia  
fatto di rame o di pietra o di legno,

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<sup>89</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita* (Torino: Einaudi, 2005).

<sup>90</sup> See Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2014).

che si conduca sol per maestria  
e porti nel core una ferita  
che sia, com'egli è morto, aperto segno.<sup>91</sup>

*You [have filled] my mind with so much pain that the soul is in a rush to leave it. And the sighs that the suffering heart sends show to the eyes that he cannot take it anymore. Love, who can feel your great worth says: «It pains me that you to die for this beautiful lady, because it appears that Compassion does not want to hear anything about you.» I go as one who is lifeless, one who appears to whoever looks at him carefully like a man made of copper or stone or wood, man who moves only by a mechanical artifice and carries in his heart a wound that is a manifest sign of how he died.*

The first two quatrains tell us that the pain of love is visible through the eyes, which work as a window on the state of mind of the lover. Once again, the lover's sensitivity has reached its maximum, and his eyes manifest to the world the sighs of his exhausted heart. This experience is so hopeless that even Love, moved by the pain of the lover, admits that he must die. The comparison of the lover to a dead person reappears in this sonnet, and presents a similar structure of *L'anima mia* with two differences: 1) the verb choice, which then gives rise to 2) the opposition between the use of linear imagery against a non-linear one. In *L'anima mia* the soul stands like a dead person: "She stands as the one who doesn't have physical strength/force to live/courage" (*Sta come quella che non ha valore*), while in *Tu m'hai sì piena...* the lover goes around like a dead person "I go as one who is lifeless" (*I' vo come colui ch'è fuor di vita.*) Note, how in Cavalcanti the analogical structure that informed Guinizzelli's thought almost disappears; there is almost no room for the analogical *like* (*così, come*) as the only term of comparison left

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<sup>91</sup> Cavalcanti, *Rime*, 72.

is death.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, the different verb choice allows two different kinds of imagery, a linear and easy-to-grasp one, and a seemingly non-linear – if not contradictory – one. In the first case, the soul lies there as a dead man; the image is clear, linear: a dead body lies on the ground, lifeless, immobile, and is used as a term of comparison for the bewildered lover. In the second case, however, the comparison is between the lover and the someone who walks around despite being dead. But how is this possible? How can someone be dead and simultaneously being walking around? Isn't it a prerogative of living people to walk around, as opposed to dead people, who just lie there immobile? If a dead person can walk around, then what kind of death is the lover (and Cavalcanti) referring to? Is Cavalcanti playing the concept of death and life against each other to reach some sort of space of indistinction between the two such as “living-death,” or “dying-life?” Is he perhaps separating the life of the body from the life of the soul to say that the body can continue to live even after the soul is dead? Are we witnessing another subversion of Christian doctrine, according to which only the body dies while the soul enjoys eternal life?

Nonetheless, the importance of this sonnet resides in the two tercets, which reference the particular concept of death that is at stake in these compositions such that another element is added to our relation: to fall in love = to be bewildered = to die. The characterization of death also clarifies the function of love as a severing force, namely a power that disconnects the elements that constitute the human being as a whole, and allows the emergence of the aforementioned human-non-human life.

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<sup>92</sup> The word *così* (like) is virtually absent from Cavalcanti poetry, as the analogical movement that characterized Guinizelli's thought.

*I go as one who is lifeless, one who appears to whoever looks at him carefully like a man made of copper or stone or wood, a man who moves only by a mechanical artifice and carries in his heart a wound that is a manifest sign of how he died.*

This image of “*a man made of copper or stone or wood*” goes back at least to Guinizzelli.

[R]magno statüa d’otono  
ove vita né spirto non ricorre,  
se non che la figura d’omo rende [...] <sup>93</sup>

*Here I have become a statue of copper where there is neither life nor spirit, and there is only the shadow of a man [...]*

and Guittone d’Arezzo

[E]d ha lassato il corpo quasi morto,  
che va e vene, ma non può parlare;  
ed ogn’om guarda, né vede chi sia.  
Ma par che viva come legno torto,  
poiché non posso in me più ritornare [...] <sup>94</sup>

*[A]nd it left the body almost dead, a body which comes and goes, but cannot talk anymore, and for everyone who looks at him no one can see who it is. It seems that he [the lover] lives like a twisted piece of wood, since I can no longer go back to myself.)*

In both poets, the image of the copper/wooden man indicates the result of a process in which humanity has reached complete destruction. The intrinsic kinesis of life, the

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<sup>93</sup> Guinizzelli, *Rime*, 6, 12-14.

<sup>94</sup> Guittone D’Arezzo, *Le rime di Guittone d’Arezzo*. ed. Francesco Egidi (Bari: Laterza, 1940), 206.

ability of a living body to move itself by itself gets captured, separated from the body, and reconnected to a principle that resides outside the body. Since movement happens only by virtue of a “mechanical artifice,” the body has lost connection with the soul, and the lover has become the caricature of a human being, the specter of itself.

In the process of bewilderment, the lover experiences something analogous to death, for he walks around as someone without life. This experience is the closest that one can get to one’s own death. But again, what kind of death are we talking about? There can be at least three readings of death that we can visualize along a spectrum with two extremes and a middle point. 1) In the first extreme, death is the end of life as such; in the second extreme, death is a metaphor for a state of exhaustion; and in the middle point, death is the cessation of knowledge, the interruption of thinking, a moment in which the cognitive process is hindered, and cannot be carried out. These readings respectively belong to Dino del Garbo, Contini, and Inglese. In reading *Donna me prega*, Dino del Garbo takes “death” to be literal, as the complete cessation of the human being: “this passion can alter the body, and often induces death” (*potest hec passio corpus alterare, quod multotiens inducit mortem.*)<sup>95</sup> Contrary to this reading, Contini reads “death” metaphorically, as “a state of compromised and limited vitality” (*uno stato di limitata e compromessa vitalità.*) Rea instead (following Giovanni Boccaccio in *Decameron* VI, 9) takes a middle point, and reads “death” as the destruction of reason, as the brutalization of humanity. I will use Inglese as a starting point to my reading:

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<sup>95</sup> Enrico Fenzi, *La canzone d'amore di Guido Cavalcanti e i suoi antichi commenti* (Genova: Il melangolo, 1999), 75.

Death is the cessation of intellectual activity, as it is true that «to live, for the man, is to use reason.» Particularly, for an Averroist like Guido, since the passion of love occupies the sensitive soul, it also hinders the possibility of establishing a *continuity* with the intellect, and by doing that, it also impedes the fruition of the only possible *happiness*: «*quam continue, sicut possibile est homini, intelligere substantias separatas*» (Giacomo da Pistoia, *De felicitate, cap. XI*) (when in continuity [with the possible intellect], it is possible for the man who know separate substances).<sup>96</sup>

Rea finds a middle ground between the two extreme interpretations I mentioned above, and sees death both as the “death of humanity,” and the “death of knowledge.” Knowledge (or rationality) has been recognized in the philosophical tradition as the main trait of that being that even today is called the “knowing man” (*homo sapiens*). Thus, “death” for Cavalcanti is the death of knowledge, and hence, since knowledge is humanity’s distinctive trait, the death of humanity. Contrary to what is portrayed in *Al cor gentil* (namely that love is a connecting force that brings closer what was earlier separated) and also contrary to an ordinary experience of love seen as an encounter between two parts, in Cavalcanti, love is as an isolating force that works to ensure not only the lover is separated from his beloved, but also the lover is separated from other men,<sup>97</sup> the lover’s mind from his body, and the lover’s intellect from the possible

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<sup>96</sup> Cavalcanti, *Rime*, 157: “[M]orte è cessazione dell’attività intellettuale, com’è vero che «vivere, nell’uomo è ragione usare». In particolare, per un averroista come Guido, la passione d’amore occupando l’anima sensitiva, le impedisce di stabilire una *continuatio* con l’intelletto, e così interdice la fruizione del sommo bene per l’uomo, il godimento della sola possibile *felicitas*: «*quam continue, sicut possibile est homini, intelligere substantias separatas*» (Giacomo da Pistoia, *De felicitate, cap. XI*).”

<sup>97</sup> Dante reflects on the lover’s isolation from his fellow men in *Sonar brachetti e cacciatori aizzare*, Dante Alighieri, *Rime giovanili e della Vita Nuova*, ed. Manuele Gragnolati (Milano: Rizzoli, 2009), 171.

Sonar brachetti e cacciatori aizzare,

intellect (one for the whole mankind.) Rather than unifying and bringing together, love in Cavalcanti disarticulates and disjoins a human's experience of wholeness by hindering every kind of connection. What Rea leaves unexplored in his analysis of Cavalcanti's concept of death is the question of whether there is a viable concept of human life that takes into account the lack of its chief attribute (reason) and whether this state is reversible. Let us start from the question of whether the lover can come back from it the death caused by love. The ordinary experience of love suggests that yes, we can come back from such state. We fall in and out of love many times in our life, so why not? Of course, we can come back, and move on! But then, one may ask, Is this discourse on love and death to be taken seriously, or rather, it is a metaphor, a rhetorical effect, a dramatization? In other words, when Cavalcanti is talking about death, is he *for real* or he's just being *dramatic*?

Since I am trying to offer a reading that does not domesticate the issue raised by the texts, I take the nouns 'death' and 'love' quite seriously, as opposed to seeing them as metaphors as for instance Maria Luisa Ardizzone. In her book, Ardizzone supports

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lepri levare ed isgridar le genti  
e di guinzagli uscir veltri correnti,  
per belle piagge volger e 'mboccare,  
assai credo che deggia dilettere  
libero core e van d'intendimenti

Ed io, fra gli amorosi pensamenti,  
d'uno sono schernito in tale affare,  
e dicemi esto motto per usanza:  
«Or ecco leggiadria di gentil core  
per una sì selvaggia diletanza  
lasciar le donne e lor gaia sembianza!»  
Allor, temendo non che 'l senta Amore,  
prendo vergogna, onde mi ven pesanza.

the idea of a metaphorical dimension of love in Cavalcanti. According to Ardizzone, Cavalcanti's interest in logic is connected to the diffusion of Arabic culture in Europe, a culture that connected poetry and rhetoric as part of logic and saw poetry as "the weakest form of argumentation."<sup>98</sup> The Arabs' approach to poetry would then justify Cavalcanti's rhetorical strategy by which he brings together poetry and philosophy. But Cavalcanti goes further, and also applies logic to optics and gives birth to "the impenetrability of Guido's canzone *Donna me prega*."<sup>99</sup> Cavalcanti's poetry mediates among *scientiae eloquentiae*, physics, and metaphysics. Since Arabs used metaphor as a kind of syllogism, then in order to understand Cavalcanti, we should understand how Arabs used metaphors. According to Ardizzone "Cavalcanti uses poetry as a special kind of logic ... it also shows that Guido look at poetry as a being a special kind of *scientia media*."<sup>100</sup> In conclusion, "His discourse is about love. But love in Cavalcanti is a *metaphor* for the nature and essence of human beings."<sup>101</sup>

My reservations with Ardizzone's approach to love has to do with the very definition of love as a metaphor, with the consequent minimization of the importance of this experience. In a metaphor, the literal meaning of the words stands for something else: it is not to be taken in itself, but only insofar as it is pointing elsewhere, to another truth. The outcome of such interpretation is that love becomes the signifier for

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<sup>98</sup> Maria Luisa Ardizzone, *Guido Cavalcanti: The Other Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 11.

<sup>99</sup> Ardizzone, *Guido Cavalcanti: The Other Middle Ages*, 40.

<sup>100</sup> Ardizzone, *Guido Cavalcanti: The Other Middle Ages*, 40.

<sup>101</sup> Ardizzone, *Guido Cavalcanti: The Other Middle Ages*, 40, my emphasis.

something else; love is not important for itself, but rather, for the fact that allows the poet to speak about what really would matter to him. To challenge this view, one may ask, Why can't love be a matter of interest in itself, namely, why does love need to be treated as a sign for something else instead of something intrinsically worthy of being questioned? Why do we retreat before love? Why can't we face love for what it, namely, a fundamental part of our existence? In my view, rather than a metaphor, love should be seen as a milieu or even a *terroir*, i.e. a fertile territory that allows enquiry to blossom and deliver fruits of knowledge. In other words, the question of love in Cavalcanti, Guinizzelli, and Dante is not simply the product of a rhetorical strategy that is due to some sort of homage to tradition. Love is a privileged space that allows the emergence of some fundamental truths about the world and ourselves. For Guinizzelli, love is an overarching force that connects and keeps together the different parts of the universe. Instead, in Cavalcanti's case, love is the space in which our finitude appears, freewill stumbles, and knowledge crumbles. Love shows that the human being is a whole insofar as it is granted the connection among its constituent parts: soul and the body, mind and possible intellect, the actions and the free will, the individual, and other fellow men. Love severs those relationships, and folds the lover in a sort of absolute solitude in which he experiences and grasps the limits of his finitude. Love is that experience in which human beings can enter into contact – almost touch – the limits of their own beings. Love shows us who we are, how our capacities are limited, our freedom/free will/will to know is finite, and fragile, and not omnipotent, as Dante will later believe.

To return to our discussion, What is a copper man? What is this seemingly *out-of-life* human being? What is to be out of life, and yet still alive? Is the lover a zombie,

a living death? Rea mentions that the loss of the intellectual capacities with the consequent disconnection of the lover from the possible intellect equals to the loss of intellectual happiness (let us not forget that within Aristotelian, philosophy intellectual happiness is the ultimate goal for humanity). In the *Convivio*, Dante explains the condition of this kind of death as follows: “[H]ence, by taking away the ultimate potentiality of the soul, i.e., reason, [the human being] is not human anymore, but becomes a thing with only a sensitive soul, i.e., a brute animal” (*così levando l’ultima potenza dell’anima, cioè la ragione, non rimane piu’ uomo, ma cosa con anima sensitiva solamente, cioè animale bruto*) (Cv IV, vii, 15).<sup>102</sup>

To summarize, a copper man is someone that walks around 1) as if he was dead, and, 2) whose actions are dictated from without, “thanks to a mechanical artifice.”<sup>103</sup> The idea that the copper man lover needs to receive instructions from outside suggests that not only his intellectual capacities have been damaged, but also his ethical ones. In other words, falling in love in Cavalcantian terms also entails a destruction of free will, i.e., the capacity to individually decide upon our own actions: the disconnection between the possible intellect and the human individual mind undermines simultaneously the cognitive and the ethical abilities of the lover. Incapable of knowing anything as much as to freely act upon anything, the Cavalcantian lover becomes in the best case scenario the caricature of a human being, a soulless body, a brute animal, “a thing with only a

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<sup>102</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Convivio*, in *Opere Minori*, ed. Cesare Vasoli and Domenico De Robertis, (Milano-Napoli: Ricciardi, 1988), 149.

<sup>103</sup> Cavalcanti, *Rime*, 74: “*per maestria*: ‘grazie a un artificio meccanico’.

sensitive soul,” a shadow that walks around, carries a visible sign of his death, and how it happened.

### 1.11

Bewilderment’s lack of knowledge implies that Cavalcanti’s reflections do not claim to be a content-oriented theory of love; rather, there are a sequence of steps that taken as a whole indicate the conditions under which knowledge comes to an end – touches its impossibility. Put differently, Cavalcanti’s non-doctrine of love proves its object as unattainable, inappropriable. With the following examples, I further clarify the nature of *bewilderment* as an event that exceeds the lover’s capacity to perceive the beloved, and speak about her. Bewilderment is the experience of the extraordinary, of the excessive: bewilderment is that which surpasses the lover’s capacity to know, and recount what goes “beyond nature.” In the poems that follow (respectively, I, IV, and IX), the lover cannot articulate what happens after bewilderment, he can only recall what happens before and during. But then memory hits the breaking point where human faculties stop functioning. Perhaps, this is the reason why the lover folds in upon himself and obsesses about his own feelings. The attempt of grasping the lover, i.e. the object of knowledge, fails miserably, and leaves the lover only with himself, his thoughts, his feelings and the rock-hard limit of his experience. In *Fresca rosa novella*, the poem that opens the Italian edition of his *Rime*, we can already see some of the themes that will later appear in *Donna me prega*, namely the impossibility of the lover to think and to express the qualities of his beloved which since the very beginning manifest themselves as beyond nature (*oltra natura*).

[T]anto adorna parete  
ch'eo non saccio contare:  
e chi poria pensare – oltra natura?<sup>104</sup>

*You look so adorned that I cannot tell: and who could think beyond nature?*

Such themes are furtherly developed in *Chi è questa che vèn, ch'ogn'om la mira*, where the poet uses the entire sonnet to elaborate his feelings and his beloved's qualities.

Chi è questa che vèn, ch'ogn'om la mira,  
che fa tremare di chiaritate l'âre  
e mena seco Amor, sì che parlare  
null'omo pote ma ciascun sospira?

O Deo, che sembra quando li occhi gira!  
dical' Amor, ch'i' nol savria contare:  
cotanto d'umiltà donna mi pare,  
c'ogn'altra ver' di lei i' la chiam' ira.

Non si poria contar la sua piagenza,  
ch'a le' s'inchin' ogni gentil vertute,  
e la Beltate per sua dea la mostra.

Non fu sì alta già la mente nostra  
e non si pose 'n noi tanta salute,  
che propiamente n'aviàn canoscenza.<sup>105</sup>

*Who is this lady who comes and every man looks upon her, who makes the air tremble with her brightness, and brings Love with her so that none who sees her, can speak but each one sighs? Oh God, what she looks like when she turns her eyes! Let Love say it, because I would not know how to recount: she seems a lady with so much humility that all compared to her seem full of wrath. No one could recount her beauty, to the point that every, noble virtue bows down before her and Beauty indicates her as her goddess. Our mind was never lofty enough and we never gained enough grace that we could fully know her.*

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<sup>104</sup> Cavalcanti, *Rime*, 47.

<sup>105</sup> Cavalcanti, *Rime*, 56.

Also in *Io non pensava che lo cor giammai* the lover obsesses on his beloved's exceptional qualities and their deadly effects on his soul.

Di questa donna non si può contare:  
ché di tante bellezze adorna vène,  
che mente di qua giù no la sostiene  
sì che la veggia lo 'ntelletto nostro.  
Tant'è gentil, che, quand'eo penso bene,  
l'anima sento per lo cor tremare,  
sì come quella che non pò durare  
davanti al gran valor ch'e' i llei dimostro.<sup>106</sup>

*Non one can recount anything about this lady: she comes adorned with so many virtues that our mind down here cannot sustain her so that our intellect could see her. She is so noble that, when I ponder her deeply, I feel my soul trembling through my heart, in a way that she cannot endure before the great worth that I show to her.*

As we have anticipated, the lover's memory extends until a certain point and then becomes the confession of its own failure. The lover remembers the lady full of virtues, so noble that as she walks by, she makes the air tremble. The sum of these qualities constitutes a sensory overload on the lover's part, who then hits the limit of his grasp: he cannot describe or know any further, as he is left with a mind that cannot think, and voice that cannot speak (...[O]ur mind over here cannot sustain her ... No one could recount her beauty.) The excessiveness of love comes back in *Donna me prega* when Cavalcanti talks about the "beyond measure" (*oltra misura*) that constitutes the marker of the experience of love. If *sbigottimento* equals the death of knowledge, then its corollary is the impossibility for the lover to talk about his beloved, and the reduction

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<sup>106</sup> Cavalcanti, *Rime*, 79.

of his voice to a pure sigh. If much of the scholarship takes the references to the exceptionality of the beloved as mere hyperboles, I instead take them as the clear indicators of the finitude of the human experience. The vision of the beloved provokes a short circuit, a sensory overload that destroys the lover's ordinary perception of the world. The beloved is so replete with attributes that his mind, his body, and his voice cannot withstand her. But why is that? One could argue that Cavalcanti's negativity about love is the product of a 'modern', non-theistic approach to the human experience that sees humanity as something finite. Our capacity to experience an object *qua* the capacity to sense another being, rationally process such experience, and be able to talk about it are finite. Put differently, in order for an object to be perceived, known, and told, its properties must fall within a spectrum of intensity that describes the limits within which a given experience can take place. Therefore, when the properties of such object exceed our capacities, then our sensitivity fails, our knowledge stops, and our communication is halted. Only pain and sighs are, respectively, the right feeling and expression of such experience. As when our eyes cannot withstand the light of the sun, the sensitivity of the lover fails in the presence of his beloved, and completely obscures his faculties. Bewilderment is an obscuring force, a darkening influence, a blackening light that cuts across the lover's connections. For this reason, there can be no theory of love but only the lover's pain, ignorance, and sighs.

In the closing lines of *Chi è questa che vèn* the lover confesses his impotence to know his beloved due to the limits of his mind: "Our mind was never lofty enough and we never gained enough grace that we could fully know her." Rea explains that "mind" (*mente*) according to the Aristotelian and Averroist philosophy indicates "the part of the

sensitive soul” that is in charge of the “cognitive faculties.” The mind is so “painfully obscured” by the passion that it cannot complete the process of intellection.<sup>107</sup> The process of intellection is further clarified in *Io non pensava che lo cor giammai*, where the lover opposes the “mind down here” (*mente di qua giù*) with “our intellect” (*lo ‘ntelletto nostro*) and sketches the process of knowledge as something that happens both within and without the human mind: knowledge is the product of cooperation between the human mind (or human intellect, as one and mortal for each individual) and the possible intellect (transcendent, one for the whole humankind.) The mind “over here” senses the object, and gradually strips it of its sensory attributes until it becomes a nude image, which then gets process by “our intellect.” The lover tells us that the beauty of his beloved is such that our mind cannot sustain it, and hence our intellect cannot grasp it. Any attempt of the lover to know his beloved is doomed to failure, and produces that trembling of the soul, that holy fear that we have already discussed above.

Perhaps – but this is only a hypothesis – Cavalcanti here is representing what for a lack of better term we can call “the divine” or “the beyond nature” while rejecting the help of faith and remaining within the limits of nature. It seems as if Cavalcanti is asking: What happens if we try to describe what goes beyond experience while remaining within its territory, without crossing its limits? Our sense, our connection to the world fails, and all we have left with is darkness, impotence, silence – and sighs. The presence of the lover burns our senses, defeats our mind, turns into sighs our voice: when in love, the totality of our experience spins freely. However, once the lover the

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<sup>107</sup> Cavalcanti, *Rime*, 59.

lover's capacities have been left empty, he also acquires the possibility of gaining real insights about himself, and can start philosophizing.

In his *Symposium* and his *Phaedrus*, Plato puts love at the beginning of the philosophical investigation: philosophy is nothing but *love of knowledge*. At the beginning of his *Metaphysics*, Plato's best student places wonder at the beginning of philosophy.<sup>108</sup> The concept of specific state of mind as a necessary condition for inquiry keeps circulating through history until Martin Heidegger elaborates the concepts of "anxiety" (*Angst*) and later "profound boredom" (*tiefe Langeweile*) as the fundamental emotions to start philosophizing.<sup>109</sup> Couldn't Cavalcanti be dealing with a similar issue, namely, couldn't he be looking for a gateway to knowledge? Is bewilderment Cavalcanti's version of "wonder"? Maybe Cavalcanti is reformulating Plato's and Aristotle's concepts and has found in bewilderment an emotion of similar intensity that can ignite in humans the same drive for knowledge. As we have seen, the very same experience that denies knowledge of beloved to the lover opens the way to self-knowledge. Even in its darkest manifestations, love remains the gateway to every genuine philosophy, as wonder (in all its reformulations) remains the motor of its enquiry.

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<sup>108</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982b 13, in Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984): "For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize..."

<sup>109</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ed. Joan Stambaugh, and Dennis J Schmidt, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), and Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

## 2.1

Donna me prega, – per ch’eo voglio dire  
d’un accidente, – che sovente è fero  
ed è sì altero, – ch’è chiamato “amore”:  
sì chi lo nega – possa ’l ver sentire!  
Ed a presente – canoscente – chero,  
perch’io no spero – ch’om di basso core  
a tal ragione porti canoscenza:  
che senza – naural dimostramento  
non ho talento – di voler provare  
là dov’è posa e chi lo fa creare  
e qual sia sua vertute e sua potenza,  
l’essenza – poi e ciascun suo movimento,  
e ’l piacimento – che ’l fa dire «amare»,  
e s’omo per veder lo po’ mostrare.<sup>110</sup>

*A lady beseeches me, so I wish to talk about an accident named «love» that is often ferocious and prideful: so that whoever denies it, may hear the truth! I intend my talk for the knowledgeable man, because I do not hope that a man with a base heart can access any knowledge. For without [the method of] natural demonstration I have no desire to want to prove where [love] is situated and who brings it to life, what its virtue are and its might, its essence, and then each of its movements, and the pleasure that makes us say «to love» and if it is possible to make it visible to sight.*

“A lady beseeches me, so I wish to talk about an accident named ‘love’ that is often ferocious and prideful: so that whoever denies it, may hear the truth!” Since its very inception, *Donna me prega* appears as a response and a development to Guinizzelli’s manifesto *Al cor gentil*. Like Guinizzelli, Cavalcanti sees his poetry as a philosophical enterprise concerned with truth. But unlike Guinizzelli, Cavalcanti chooses a different way to communicate his thinking, a way that rejects analogy and assumes the traits of a “natural demonstration,” i.e., a method of exposition that hinges upon explanations based on nature and rejects the intervention of supernatural forces. Rather than

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<sup>110</sup> Cavalcanti, *Rime*, 151.

establishing connections among the different planes of reality, this composition focuses exclusively on the interiority of the lover and the symptomatology of his passion. Even if the term *sbigottimento* does not appear in *Donna me prega*, this canzone is a detailed articulation of the bewilderment that we have found in the other compositions discussed above.

Concerning the writing style adopted for this composition, it is worth noting Cavalcanti's crafty use of adverbs, which create a sort of "ironic veil" that warns his reader that what she is about to learn happens proximally and for the most part. That is to say, the particular space in which Cavalcanti decides to articulate his reflections is not science, but something approximating it. For instance, we read that love "is often ferocious and prideful," or that "[f]rom its potentiality death often follows." That is to say, this is how love is *often times*, not every time. Cavalcanti puts those adverbs there to warn his reader from the very beginning that due to the very nature of the particular love that he is describing, *Donna me prega* cannot be a science, but only an approximation to it, and that the object of its descriptions is only a *particular* kind of love, and not love as such.

Cavalcanti's manifesto starts with a prayer from a lady who beseeches him to reveal the nature of love, an "accident" that is "often ferocious and prideful." In this first line, we learn something fundamental about the nature of love, namely, that love is an "accident." What does it mean that love is an accident? It is reasonable to think that Cavalcanti here is operating within the Aristotelian ontology in order to appeal to his educated audience, In Aristotle's *Metaphysics* we read that "being is said in many ways:" being as true and false, being as categories, being as actuality and potentiality,

being as an accident (in anc. Greek *simbebekos*.) So, first and foremost, ‘accident’ is one of the four fundamental qualifications of being. In the *Metaphysics* (1025a14-1025a29) Aristotle explains the meaning of ‘accident’ as follows:

We call an accident that which attaches to something and can be truly asserted, but neither of necessity nor usually, e.g. if one in digging a hole for a plant found treasure. This—the finding of treasure—happens by accident to the man who digs the hole; for neither does the one come of necessity from the other or after the other, nor, if a man plants, does he usually find treasure. And a musical man might be white; but since this does not happen of necessity nor usually, we call it an accident. Therefore, since there are attributes and they attach to a subject, and some of them attach in a particular place and at a particular time, whatever attaches to a subject, but not because it is this subject, at this time or in this place, will be an accident. Therefore, there is no definite cause for an accident, but a chance cause, i.e. an indefinite one. Going to Aegina was an accident, if the man went not in order to get there, but because he was carried out of his way by a storm or captured by pirates. The accident has happened or exists, not in virtue of itself, however, but of something else; for the storm was the cause of his coming to a place for which he was not sailing, and this was Aegina. ‘Accident’ has also another meaning, i.e. what attaches to each thing in virtue of itself but is not in its substance, as having its angles equal to two right angles attaches to the triangle. And accidents of this sort may be eternal, but no accident of the other sort is. This is explained elsewhere.

Some pages later (1026a34-1026b26), Aristotle adds some important details

Since ‘being’ has many meanings, we must first say regarding the accidental, that there can be no scientific treatment of it.

[...]

The accidental is obviously akin to non-being.

[...]

[R]egarding the accidental, what is its nature and from what causes it proceeds; for it will perhaps at the same time become clear why there is no science of it.

As we see, there are at least two meanings of ‘accident.’ It is not the place to delve into the philosophical meaning of this term and its ontological ramifications, to which Gennaro Sasso has dedicated an entire book.<sup>111</sup> I will focus briefly on the first meaning because of its pertinence to our discussion, and leave it to the interest of my reader to research more on the topic. With some simplifications, we can say that an accident is a certain quality that we may find in something and on some occasions. Because of its non-persistent presence, an accident cannot and does not belong to the essence of a thing and to its core definition, which the Aristotelian philosophy expresses *per genus et differentiam*. Furthermore, we notice that an accident always needs some pre-existing subject to which is going to be predicated, namely, an accident does not exist per se but is always the ‘accident-of’ something else. As Aristotle puts it, a musician can happen to be white, but being ‘white’ is not part of the definition of being a musician (who, as we know, can have skin of whatever color.) And ‘white’ cannot exist alone, but needs some existing object that can receive the quality of ‘being white.’

Since the presence of an accident is not necessary to the existence of the thing, the cause of the accident will be a chance-cause, i.e., an indefinite cause. (The cause is at the same time the principle that originates the existence of an entity and the definition that captures its essential qualities, i.e., *per genus et differentiam*.) The fortuity of the accident makes its presence completely unpredictable (we don’t know what is the skin color of the next musician that we’re going to meet). Consequently, the lack of predictability excludes the possibility of building a scientific knowledge of the accident,

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<sup>111</sup> Sasso, *Dante, Guido e Francesca*.

since a scientific definition needs the grasp the recurring and hence, essential qualities of an entity, and not the accidental ones. Put briefly, of an accident there is no scientific knowledge, no systematic treatment.

Let's recapitulate. By naming love an "accident," Cavalcanti means at least that 1) love does not exist per se, but always as a modification of a subject, a lover, who can receive the modification, by falling in love; 2) because of its nature, love only possesses an indefinite or accidental cause: there can be no scientific knowledge of love, but its study will grasp only what is proximal and for the most part.

Moving on a different matter, to understand this canzone, we need to be aware of some changes that differentiate this and Cavalcanti's other compositions, changes that all contribute to make *Donna me prega* an *unicum* in the panorama of Italian lyric poetry. To list them briefly: the narrator, the personification of love, his audience, how they determine the object of the composition, and the rhetorical strategy of its delivery.

In the previously discussed poems, Cavalcanti utilizes the fiction of the lover to discuss the nature of love: the lover plays the role of a witness by talking in first person of his feelings and his experience. This time however, Cavalcanti opts for an 'objective,' non-first-person strategy in which the narrator deposes the mask of the lover/witness, and wears the one of the professor who lectures in verses. With a corresponding movement on the object's point of view, we move from a personification of love to its objectification; from 'Love' to 'love,' from a god to an object of the investigation. Cavalcanti's embrace of the scientific approach pushes lyric poetry towards its boundaries. While reading *Donna me prega*, one could even ask if this composition still belongs to lyric poetry. In fact, can we still call 'lyric' that observes and describes from

afar the feeling of the lover, who is treated like the object of observation, instead of having him speaking directly to his listeners? Is a poem still 'lyric' a poetry if it lectures about truth instead of singing?

"I intend my talk for the knowledgeable man, because I do not hope that a man with a base heart can access any knowledge." The subject/object shift also involves redefinition of the audience: if a professor is speaking, then his audience can only be made of peers and students, people who have some interest in knowledge. In fact, *Donna me prega* is not a composition for anyone, for it focuses exclusively on the "knowledgeable man" (*canoscente*) a concept that the narrator opposes to the "base" man (*om di basso core*) literally "man of a low heart." By doing this, Cavalcanti introduces a *caesura* that divides in two the concept of man. The reference to the vile heart allows us to deduce that the opposition between "knowledgeable" and "vile" hides nothing but a reconfiguration of Guinizzelli's opposition noble vs vile (*gentile-vile*.) How does he do that? By opposing "vile" and "knowledgeable," Cavalcanti is creating a reaction between opposites that we have to make explicit if want to understand. The opposites are 'ignorant' vs 'knowledgeable,' and 'base' vs 'noble.' By opposing apparently different concepts Cavalcanti fuses and rearticulates Guinizzelli's nobility (*gentilezza*) with knowledge, and shows that they are in fact synonyms: knowledge produces nobility while ignorance produces a "base heart."

The caesura and opposition between knowledgeable and non-knowledgeable men allows us also to postulate a caesura in the nature of love. Love that can happen (not must but *can*, Cavalcanti uses adverbs of frequency very carefully) to the knowledgeable man, and a love that happens to the ignorant man. While the kind of love

that Cavalcanti is describing can happen only to the educated man (probably due to the development of a different kind of feelings that his formation allows) I think we can exclude that the uneducated man is able to experience such kind of passion.

Consequently, the reconfiguration of nobleness with knowledge introduces a dynamism to Guinizzelli's static opposition which potentially opens it to broader pool of human beings. It is important to remember that nobility, in Guinizzelli, is a property bestowed by a star on the heart of the lover; it is a destiny, something upon which men have no power, *either you have it or not*. Instead, in Cavalcanti, nobility assumes the dynamic characteristic of the *studium*, something that changes over time by improving or worsening. In addition to being dynamic, knowledge is also egalitarian: virtually, every man can become knowledgeable, since knowledge is the product of the human activity rather than a gift bestowed from the sky.

Remarkably, if we juxtapose *Al cor gentil* and *Donna me prega* with respect to the concept of "gentilezza," we notice that in these two compositions the concept of nobility seems to be under continuous expansion and re-elaboration, a process that we can tag with the provisional title of "interiorization and democratization of nobility." With respect to tradition, Guinizzelli's first and fundamental move is the interiorization of nobility. In other words, he first disarticulates nobility from its original space of social status as an exterior quality that humans inherit from one another a power. Then, Guinizzelli rearticulates nobility within the space of the interiority of the lover as a quality of the heart, not of birth. Nonetheless, nobility in Guinizzelli still remains still a rigid property, out of human reach: you either have it bestowed upon you or not. With Cavalcanti however, we have a second, fundamental, move: by making nobility

coincide with knowledge, he opens it to all men, he democratizes it. In fact, virtually every man who has access to culture can become knowledgeable. (As we shall see in the last stanza, the process of “interiorization and democratization of nobility” also seems to refer to women, although we cannot really say if, for Cavalcanti, women have the possibility of becoming knowledgeable.)

“For without [the method of] natural demonstration I have no desire to want to prove where [love] is situated and who brings it to life, what its virtue are and its might, its essence, and then each of its movements, and the pleasure that makes us say «to love», and if is it possible to make it visible to sight.” The professor explicitly addresses his specific audience, the knowledgeable ones, because they are the only ones who can grasp the fine arguments about love that are about to be delivered through the method of “natural demonstration” (*natural dimostramento*,) i.e., a method that searches and expresses the nature of love without making reference to super- or extra-natural phenomena of any sort.

The last lines of the stanza are programmatic, and depict the overall trajectory the canzone, which Cavalcanti seems to have structured in response to Guido Orlandi’s sonnet mentioned above. Over the course of the discussion, we will learn where love comes from, how is it kindled, that are its virtue and its essence, what is the characteristic movement and enjoyment the we label under the term ‘love,’ and whether we can represent love as a physical object detectable to the sight.

## 2.2

In quella parte – dove sta la memora  
prende suo stato, – sì formato – come  
diaffan da lume, – d’una scuritate  
la qual da Marte – vène, e fa demora.  
Elli è creato – da sensato; – nom’è,  
d’alma costume – e de cor volontate.  
Vèn da veduta forma che s’intende,  
che prende – nel possibile intelletto,  
come in subietto, – loco e dimoranza;  
in quella parte mai non ha posanza,  
perché da qualitate non descende  
(resplende – in sé perpetual effetto:  
non ha diletto – ma consideranza);  
sì ch’ e’ non pote largir simiglianza.<sup>112</sup>

*[Love] takes its state in that part where the memory is, and thus formed, like a diaphanous light is comes from a darkness that comes from Mars. [Love] comes from a form that we see and understand, [a form] which takes place and dwells [both] in the possible intellect [and] in the subject; [however, love] never dwells in that part [the possible intellect] because [love] does not come from a quality ([the possible intellect] shines in itself as a constant actuality: it has no enjoyment, but only understanding) so that it [the possible intellect] cannot establish any likeness.*

The core of this stanza is to clarify the physical nature of love. Cavalcantian love is a phenomenon that stays physical through and through, a passion that can never ascend to the level of the intellect, and hence never become object of intellection.

“[I]t has no pleasure, but only understanding) so that it [the possible intellect] cannot establish any likeness.” Starting our commentary with the last line, we notice how Cavalcanti is both continuing and undoing Guinizelli’s discourse on love: we move from an approach on love as an overarching phenomenon that informs the entire

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<sup>112</sup> Cavalcanti, *Rime*, 153.

universe, to an approach that not only rejects the possibility to know love, but also justifies this exclusion with both the very structure of love and the intellect. The possible intellect, the one that all human beings share and to which we connect every time we think, is not capable of liking anything nor it is capable of to establish similarities (as it happens in *Al cor gentil*). Incapable of *likeness* the possible intellect is condemned to an absolute, irredeemable, solitude.

“Love] takes its state in that part where the memory resides, and its formed similarly to a diaphanous [i.e.] from a darkness that comes from Mars and [in the memory] remains.” In the beginning of the second stanza, we read that love takes place in the same space where memory is situated. The process of formation of the passion of love is compared with the progression from potentiality to actuality that takes place in the diaphanous, i.e. a process that allows the light to get through a transparent body. Therefore, the mind receives the dark influx of love in the same way that the diaphanous receives light. This influx comes from Mars and it is received, as we said, in the same chamber of the brain that hosts memory.

Before we move on, we need to understand that talking about a dark influx coming from Mars means that the normal process of acquisition of images is interrupted. A dark influx is not a “dark light,” but rather the absence of light (as much as ignorance is the *absence* and not an alternative form of knowledge.) Aristotle explains this concept in the *De anima* when he mentions that the way bodies get illuminated involves a

process of actualization.<sup>113</sup> Therefore, the fact that we receive a dark influx, means that the clarity of knowledge has been interrupted, that someone “turned off the lights” of the intellect. In this sense, love is the articulation of a zone of ignorance that works in symmetrical opposition with the process of knowledge. This process takes place – as we shall see – when the noble man takes too much liking into a woman, i.e., when an image that passes through the eyes generates an excessive pleasure. The event of love coincides with the obtenebration of the sensitive soul that falls under the influx of Mars. Why Mars? Giorgio Inglese explains that Mars is the origin of the *virtus irascibilis*, i.e., the desire to dispose an object according to one’s wishes, a desire that blinds our wisdom when experienced in excess.<sup>114</sup> According to Cavalcanti, love is not the desire to enjoy an object, but a blinding fury of possession destined to leave us unsatisfied.

“[Love] comes from a form that we see and understand, [a form] which takes place and dwells [both] in the possible intellect [and] in the subject.” Love is a name for both an activity of the soul and the desire of the heart that comes from a sensible object. Note that Cavalcanti explains to us how love works by referring to and flipping the ordinary way that knowledge takes place. Normally, first we see a sensible object, from which we extract a perception that undergoes a number of passages that strip it from its sensitive attributes (what Scholastics once called *denudatio*). Only then, is the purified image taken to the possible intellect and does it become knowledge. However, in the case of passion of love, things go differently: the process of intellection stops at some

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<sup>113</sup> See Aristotle, *De Anima* 418b 5-10, in Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>114</sup> Cavalcanti, *Rime*, 153.

point and the image of the beloved never ascends to the possible intellect, which has no physical qualities, has no contact with the body, and hence no sensibility, which pertains to the body.

### 2.3

Non è vertute, – ma da quella vène  
ch'è perfezione – (che se pone – tale),  
non razionale, – ma sente, dico.  
For di salute – giudicar mantene,  
che la 'ntenzione – per ragione vale:  
discerne male – in cui è vizio amico.  
Di sua potenza segue spesso morte,  
se forte – la virtù fosse impedita,  
la quale aita – la contraria via:  
non perché oppost'a naturale sia:  
ma, quanto che da buon perfetto tort'è,  
per sorte, – non pò dire om ch'aggia vita,  
che stabilita – non ha signoria.  
A simel pò valer quand'om l'oblia.<sup>115</sup>

*I say that [love] is not a virtue – which is perfection – but it comes from it [a virtue] (so, self-established) not a rational one, but a sensitive one. Love leads the judgment out of health because desire and image take over reason; and he who is friend with vice thinks poorly. From its potentiality death often follows if by chance the virtue was to be strongly hindered, [the virtue] which helps the contrary way [OR “if by chance the virtue that helps the contrary way was to be strongly hindered, from its [love’s] potentiality would often follow death]: not because [the contrary way] is the opposite of the natural one. But when [a man] is taken away from the supreme good by [a negative] fate, he cannot say that he is alive, since – as we established – he has lost his self-control. Something similar happens when one forgets [the supreme good].*

In the third stanza, Cavalcanti further elaborates on the sensitive nature of love by presenting it as a disease of the mind that can destroy our humanity. To present such

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<sup>115</sup> Cavalcanti, *Rime*, 156.

concepts, Cavalcanti introduces the ambiguous concept of death, which – as we’ve seen – creates some interesting hermeneutical problems. As I said earlier, I take the term ‘death’ as the death of the humanity, i.e. the loss of reason, human beings’ distinctive trait. “[Love] leads the judgment out of health because desire and image take over reason; and he who is friend with vice thinks poorly.” Love originates from a sensitive quality that, once it reaches the dedicated chamber of the brain, produces a disease of the mind. In this stanza Cavalcanti uses “intenzione” (*intention, desire and image*) as a term of a vast semantic space that involves simultaneously logic, gnoseology, and ethics. Leaving the logical meaning aside for its irrelevance to our discussion, we can say (making large approximations) that Cavalcanti is once again playing on the ambiguity of the word “intenzione” by blending its gnoseological and ethical dimensions. In the gnoseological sense, “intenzione” is the non-sensible content of the sensation, namely the image that we extract from the object when we perceive it, in this case, the image of the lady. In the ethical sense, “intenzione” has to do with the relationship between the human desire and a given end, it is roughly the “desire.” Therefore, in one sense the image, once perceived, takes over. On the other end, the strong desire takes over reason. As we see, both interpretations work, since love simultaneously obscures the mind and impedes the will.

“From its potentiality death often follows if by chance the virtue was to be strongly hindered, [the virtue] which helps the contrary way [OR “if by chance the virtue that helps the contrary way was to be strongly hindered, from its [love’s] potentiality would often follow death].” The idea of an overlap between the gnoseological and ethical dimension continues in these lines, with the term “virtue.” As previously with

“intenzione,” I take the term “virtue” to have both a metaphysical and ethical sense: on one hand virtue is the perfection of a potentiality (its actuality); on the other hand, however, virtue maintains its ethical sense of an action brought to its perfection. The idea that virtue can be “strongly hindered” while informing us about love, also reveals something about how the mind works, namely that its healthy operation hinges upon the acquisition of intentions (images and desires) of a certain intensity, i.e., intentions that do not overpower the mind and allow it to function properly. And that tells us something about our finitude as human beings. What really matters here is the stress on the finitude that characterizes us as human beings, i.e. our humanity is finite because it is the product of a delicate balance that can be infringed when the delicate equilibrium of its working parts is placed under excessive forces. In other words, while describing the symptoms of love, Cavalcanti is showing us the limits of our reason, a reason that can be twisted, dragged away from its natural aim when some stronger cause hijacks its regular course. Within this frame, staying human is not a given, it is not something acquired once and for all, but it is a delicate balance that needs to be preserved from excessive forces. In fact, “[W]hen [a man] is taken away from the supreme good by [a negative] fate, he cannot say that he is alive, since – as we established – he has lost his self-control.”

Borrowing from Aristotle’s language, we can say that love is an “irrational potentiality” – although with some limitations. I will limit myself to say that in *Metaphysics IX*, Aristotle describes the pair potentiality-actuality as one of the meanings of Being. Potentiality can be rational and irrational, with the former having two possible actualities, while the latter has only one. Rational potentialities can either actuate or not, i.e. when the agent and patient meet, the potentiality can either actuate or not. For

instance, when a doctor and a patient meet, the doctor can either cure or not cure (or kill) the patient.<sup>116</sup> On the other hand, irrational potentialities have only one possible outcome. When agent and patient meet, potentialities cannot but actuate. For instance, fire has the potentiality only to burn, and if someone gets close enough to the fire, fire cannot but burn the person. The difference between the two potentialities, lies in the fact that rational potentialities are governed by the will, which each time decides which of the two opposites should actuate. Since Cavalcantian love happens without the intervention of reason (love is the failure of reason,) and since love is a potentiality whose actuality is often death, we may assume that love is an irrational potentiality, but with the *caveat* that death follows only often, not all the time.

## 2.4

L'essere è quando – lo voler è tanto  
 ch'oltra misura – di natura – torna:  
 poi non s'adorna – di riposo mai.  
 Move, cangiando – color, riso in pianto,  
 e la figura – con paura – storna.  
 Poco soggiorna. – Ancor di lui vedrai  
 che 'n gente di valor lo più si trova.  
 La nova – qualità move sospiri  
 e voi ch'om miri – in un formato loco,  
 destandos' ira la qual manda foco  
 (imagnar nol pote om che nol prova),  
 né mova – già, però ch'a lui si tiri,  
 e non si giri – per trovarvi gioco:  
 né cert' ha ' <n> mente gran saver, né poco.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> To be more precise, we should say that rational potentialities can either actuate positively or negatively, which means that both positive and negative are ways of actuation. The reason for that resides in the nature of potentiality itself, which according to *Metaphysics* IX, 4 must always actuate. A potentiality that never actuates is not a potentiality but an impossibility,

<sup>117</sup> Cavalcanti, *Rime*, 158.

*The being [of love] is when the desire is such that goes beyond the measure of nature, and becomes restless. [Love] disfigures the face [of the lover] with fear while changing its color, and [changing] laughter into tears. [Love] brings little joy, and you shall see it the most in noble people. The new quality [of love] produces sighs and it compels that a man to look into a given place [of the memory] while it awakes a fury that emits fire. (No one can imagine this, unless he experiences it.) [The new quality] wants the man not to move even if he is attracted [by what he sees], not to turn away to find some ease. Certainly, the mind does not retain wisdom, great or little.*

The fourth stanza is divided into two parts, a metaphysical definition (with the limitations that we have discussed in first stanza,) followed by the description of the visible effects that love produces on the lover.

The essence of love consists of an excessive desire that fills the lover with fear and shakes him deeply. The inner imbalance generated by this passion is such that it goes beyond imagination: love is by definition *unrepresentable*.

“The being [of love] is when the desire is such that goes beyond the measure of nature, and becomes restless.” (*L’essere è quando – lo voler è tanto | ch’oltra misura – di natura – torna: | poi non s’adorna – di riposo mai.*)<sup>118</sup> I find this formulation odd: one would expect a defining sentence like “the being [of love] is...” be followed by the components of the definition, as in “the being of x is y, k, and z...” And yet, Cavalcanti writes “the being [of love] is *when*...” With the use of the temporal adverb instead of a list of qualities that one would expect in a definition, Cavalcanti reminds us that the discourse on love is not a “what,” is more a “how” and a “when” than a “what”: love is

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<sup>118</sup> In the first stanza, Cavalcanti tells us that he is going to talk about the essence of love. Here instead, he talks about the being. I take it that, for Cavalcanti, the essence of something and its being are the same thing.

not an entity; it is an excessive intensity that happens in a particular moment. Love is a perversion of reason that originates in the excessive desire that breaks the regular psycho-physical equilibrium, and manifests itself on the body of the lover.

“[Love] disfigures the face [of the lover] with fear while changing its color, and [changing] laughter into tears.” The excessive desire shows on the body of the lover, as he becomes restless, incapable of finding peace. Love disfigures the lover’s face, fills him with fear, and transforms his laughter in tears. Love is an overturning and deeply transformative experience in which the lover loses all the distinctive traits of his humanity and becomes a shadow of himself.

“[The new quality] wants the man not to move even if he is attracted [from what he sees], not to turn away to find some ease. Certainly, the mind does not retain wisdom, great or little.” The new quality makes the lover sigh and compels him to keep his gaze on the image of the beloved. In this way wrath awakes. For Cavalcanti, love is a kind of a wrath, a mania (monomania), a fixation that constrains the lover.

“The new quality [of love] produces sighs and it compels that a man to look into a given place [of the memory] while it awakes a fury that emits fire. (No one can imagine this, unless he experiences it.)” Love is also impossible to imagine for those one who have never experienced it. In one sense, love is not imaginable because it is each time the accident of a subject, and for this reason, only that subject can really know what is happening to him. Possibly, “imaginare” here is used as a technical term. In the *De Anima*, the imagination mediates between the sensibility and the intellect, i.e. translates the perceptions into forms which the intellect processes and understands in order to obtain knowledge. That someone cannot imagine means that love can never be the

object of intellection. But also, consider the fact that love cannot be object of the imagination because, there is not an 'object-love' to be imagined, but only a dysfunction of the mind and the body.

The lover is forced to gaze upon the image of his beloved, and as he does that, he gets stuck in this gaze because he cannot move but at the same time he feels attracted. Love is a sort of stalemate. The image traps the lover, he cannot move, he has no space to move, cannot look anywhere else. Love is the bewildering gaze of the Medusa, who petrifies whoever happens to look at her.

## 2.5

De simil tragge – compression sguardo  
che fa parere – lo piacere – certo.  
Non po' coverto – star, quand'è sì giunto.  
Non già selvagge – le bieltà sono dardo,  
che tal volere – per temere – è sperto.  
Consiegue merto – spirito ch'è punto!  
E non si po' conoscer per lo viso  
compriso: – bianco in tale obietto cade;  
e, chi ben aude, – forma non si vede:  
dunque'elli meno, che da lei procede.  
For di colore, d'essere diviso,  
assiso – in mezzo scuro, luce rade.  
For d'ogne fraude – dico, degno di fede,  
che solo di costui nasce mercede!<sup>119</sup>

*From a person of a similar temperament comes a gaze that presents pleasure as a certain thing. When it arrives in such way, it [i.e., love or the 'promise' of its pleasure] cannot be hidden. Beautiful [noble] women – and not the [beautiful] uncouth ones – are arrows [so that] the desire is experienced through fear [i.e., the lover experiences desire through fear]. The stung soul obtains worthiness. [Love] cannot be known through a visible face [i.e., love has no face], [because] the [perceived] object falls off of white [i.e., the intellectual visibility of this*

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<sup>119</sup> Cavalcanti, *Rime*, 159.

*object – its being white –disappears] the one who listens carefully [knows that] the form is invisible, and even less visible is love which comes from it [the form]. [Love is] colorless, insubstantial, seated in the midst of darkness, skirting the light. I say – free of all fraud and worthy of trust – that only from it [love] there is reward!*

*Donna me prega*'s last stanza is a conundrum filled with linguistic, syntactic, and theoretical obscurities that – consistent with the work done thus far – I will try to highlight and ponder, rather than solve. In this fifth stanza, not only does the accidental nature of love prove to be beyond reason, its exposition also becomes problematic. To begin with our analysis, we can observe some fundamental shifts in language and in the narrating voice. (At some level, this stanza presents itself as an exercise *in actu* of the obscuring power of love in which language tries to adhere mimetically as much as possible to its object.<sup>120</sup>)

Cavalcanti reintroduces the figurative language that we have already encountered in his previous poems, a language that for *Donna me prega* he had chosen to put aside in order obtain a more scientific approach consistent with the method of natural demonstration.

The language of this last stanza goes from strictly philosophical to a hybrid of technical and figurative terms. Furthermore, we also find a shift in the narrating voice in which the objective and professorial voice that has been lecturing thus far, leaves the place for the voice of a firsthand witness, the lover, the one who has experienced love

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<sup>120</sup> The English rendering of this stanza proves particularly difficult, and for this reason, I have tried to find a balance between the difficult task of translating and explaining by heavily relying on the use of square parenthesis. In this regard, I have opted for a translation that is as literal as possible while providing its explanation next to it, in square brackets.

and claims “free of all fraud and worthy of trust” that along with the pain of love also comes a “reward” (*merto*) for the lover.

To give a quick outline of its structure, the last stanza provides us with the last information about the phenomenology of love, by adding something more on the way love is kindled, and how it manifests on some lovers. Cavalcanti also reaffirms the accidental nature of love by writing that love is “divided from the being.” That is to say, love does not exist independently, but as an accident of the lover, i.e. a modification of the subject, something that happens to the lover, which is like saying, “there is no love, but only people *in love*.”

“From a person of a similar temperament comes a gaze that presents pleasure as a certain thing. When it arrives in such way, it [i.e., love or the ‘promise’ of its pleasure] cannot be hidden. Beautiful [noble] women – and not the [beautiful] uncouth ones – are arrows [so that] the desire is experienced through fear [i.e., the lover experiences desire through fear (of rejection?)]. The stung soul obtains worthiness.” Love sparks as a promise of pleasure when two people of similar temperaments exchange a gaze. Once it is kindled, it is impossible to hide. However, the promise of pleasure seems to be betrayed by its realization (there seems to be no pleasure with love, only fear).

It is worth noticing that is not certain whether is love or the ‘promise’ pleasure that are impossible to hide. Is it love that cannot be hidden or the appearance of pleasure as a certain thing? “[It] [i.e., love or pleasure] cannot be hidden when it arrives in such way.” Probably, both solutions work simultaneously. In fact, Cavalcantian love happens in the complete absence of the beloved, *in interiore homine*, and hence we can also understand it as a promise of pleasure that manifests itself on the body of the lover.

Immediately thereafter, Cavalcanti comes back to the peculiarity and the exclusiveness of the people who are affected by the passion that he is describing. The introduction of a similarity between the temperaments of the lover and the beloved is striking because it introduces a degree of reciprocity between the lover and the beloved. As we have noticed before, the entire canzone is exclusively focused on the interiority of the lover, leaving the beloved completely outside the discussion, with the only exception of these brief references in which he opposes “beautiful” to “uncouth” women. In order to be able to sting the lover, and make him fall in love, women must be beautiful. But what kind of beautiful women are we talking about? Cavalcanti here introduces another *caesura*, as he did in the first stanza when he opposed vile and knowledgeable men, which is presented this time by opposing “beautiful” and “uncouth” women. This caesura needs some patient unpacking.

The opposition of “bieltà” and “selvage” is not a simple opposition between beautiful and ugly women. If we want to get a sense of what is going on in this line, we have to develop and unfold the opposition within which Cavalcanti is working, since “selvaggio” (*uncouth, rustic*) is not the opposite of “bieltà” (*beauty*). First, let us reconstruct the opposites; on the one side, we have [*nobili*] vs *selvage* (*noble vs uncouth women*), and on the other we have *bieltà* vs [*bruttezze*] (*beautiful-ugly women*). Thus, since we are talking about women, we will have possibly qualifications of women 1) uncouth and beautiful; 2) uncouth and ugly; 3) noble and beautiful 4) noble and ugly.

Let us read what Cavalcanti writes one more time: “Beautiful [noble] women – and not the [beautiful] uncouth ones – are arrows...” The kind of love that Cavalcanti is talking about concerns the noble women, which have to match the noble/knowledgeable

man of the first stanza. But then, the women need to be beautiful because only a beautiful image can be a promise of pleasure to the lover, in fact, “The stung soul obtains worthiness.” Once the arrow of love stings the lover he receives worthiness (*merto*). This an interesting line because it seems to subvert the meaning of the whole experience described thus far: the negativity and the mortality related to the experience of love are reconfigured as a positive experience, i.e., joy and mercy come from all that pain. Is Cavalcanti being ironic, or does he really think that joy and mercy can come from a disease? Furthermore, the lover does not specify about the temporality of the reward, namely, whether the reward happens simultaneously with the pain, or after the pain once the lover survives the experience, or – as I tend to think – the reward *is* the pain as much as the pain *is* the reward.

“[Love] cannot be known through a visible face [i.e., love has no face], [because] the [perceived] object falls off of white [i.e., the intellectual visibility of this object – its being white –disappears] the one who listens carefully [knows that] the form is invisible, and even less visible is love which comes from it [the form]. [Love is] colorless, insubstantial, seated in the midst of darkness, skirting the light. I say – free of all fraud and worthy of trust – that only from it [love] there is reward!” The phenomenon of love as such dwells right in the middle of a difficult articulation of opposites – *a dialectic?* – between lightness and darkness, knowledge and ignorance, being per se, and being for another, and the comprehension of such dynamic is fundamental to understand Cavalcanti’s discourse in its entirety.

To recapitulate, love is an accident of the subject, i.e., love does not exist per se, but only insofar as a modification of subject, a deterioration of his psycho-physical

balance. The ontological status of love also comports its aporetic status between visibility and invisibility. We do not perceive love in itself (because it doesn't exist) but in other, as the list of symptoms that *often* manifest on the body of the lover. Hence, there is no real science of love, but only the observation and understanding of what happens to the lover proximally and for the most part. For this reason, love cannot be seen, it has no "visible face" for it is colorless and being-less (*d'esser diviso*).

The subsequent two lines summarize the knowledge that we have achieved during the canzone, that is, love is colorless and being-less, love is dark and darkening at the same time. But there is a twist: Cavalcanti claims the position of the witness, and tells us that only from this experience can there be a reward. However, to say this, Cavalcanti takes off the mask of the teacher to wear the one of the lover and claim the authority of the witness, almost as if the entire discourse so far would not suffice. In the last lines, the lover reconfigures positively the experience described this far: it is only from this obscurity, this death, and this disease that we can achieve mercy. That is to say, the price for undergoing the pain of love is nothing but reward, or mercy, though in a non- theological sense. Love has the power to subvert our experience of the world, for it first turns into laughter into tears (as we saw in *L'anima mia vilment'è sbigotita*) and destroys the mind of the lover, but then it also capable of going the opposite way, namely from death and destruction to worthiness and reward.

## 2.6

Tu puoi sicuramente gir, canzone,  
là 've te piace, ch'io t'ho sì adornata  
ch'assai laudata – sarà tua ragione

da le persone – ch'hanno intendimento.  
Di star con l'altre tu non hai talento.<sup>121</sup>

*Canzone, you can certainly go there where you will, for I have adorned you in such a way that your reasoning will be praised by people who have understanding. You have no desire to be with anybody else.*

In the last lines, Cavalcanti addresses directly his canzone and indirectly his readership, a selected group of human beings who have a shared interest in knowledge. The canzone is 'free' to go anywhere she wants, having in mind that "her reasoning" (*la tua ragione*) will be praised by the knowledgeable people who have understanding of love. To indicate the peculiarity of his canzone and the specificity of the work that it took to compose her, Cavalcanti uses a term "adorned" (*adornata*) a term that normally poets use to describe the virtues of their ladies, virtues that can both be physical and spiritual. In this regard, *Donna me prega* is "adorned" i.e., equipped both with the physical and spiritual attributes that render her – like a lady – worthy of being praised by the right kind of men, i.e., those ones who have understanding. In this way, with the address to his special readership, the whole canzone comes to an end, and we, modern readers – probably as ignorant as our predecessors in matters of love – are left bewildered, wondering, and wandering in the dark – and often deadly – mazes of love.

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<sup>121</sup> Cavalcanti, *Rime*, 161.

## INTERMEZZO 2

*Bewilderment* lies as the foundation of Cavalcanti's experience of love, an experience that reorients Guinizelli's research 1) from the objectivity of the world to the subjectivity of the lover; 2) from a concept of nobility as a given, to a concept of nobility as the product of human effort. Unsurprisingly, this new configuration of nobility proves particularly dangerous as the new lover/knowledgeable man appears particularly vulnerable to the deadly gaze of his beloved. Concerning this last point, one could speculate on the reason why this gaze is only "often" mortal, as opposed to mortal *tout court*. Does Cavalcanti imply that someone can be immune, or even come back from *bewilderment*? And how? How does one return to life from the stunning gaze of Medusa? Furthermore, what is Cavalcanti really telling us when he says: "*No one can imagine this, unless he experiences it*"? Did Cavalcanti go through this experience? How did he come back, or rather, could he come back, did he come back? How could he come back from death? Could he do it alone or did he receive help?

Whether he meant it or not, Cavalcanti built his main concepts – love as deadly, the demonic lady, nobility as product, the possible and lone intellect – in diametrical opposition of what in the previous chapter I described as Guinizelli's *irresistible likeness*. In the next chapter, the reader will see how Dante's titanic mission will consist into using both *likeness* and *bewilderment* as the building blocks of a new experience of love, to show how the salvation of the lover is linked to a deadly experience on his behalf. To put brief, most of Dante's contribution will consist into a reorganization and systematization of these opposite concepts into a new whole - a *new life* – whose core experience will be represented by the journey of a lover who breaks the chains of

*bewilderment* and accesses the salvific power of *likeness*; a journey of such difficulty that Dante himself will only sketch into his *unfinished praise* (*Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore*) and that will be able to complete only much later, through the composition of his opus magnum, the *Comedia*.

Meraviglioso,  
Ma come non ti accorgi  
Di quanto il mondo sia,  
Meraviglioso.  
(Negramaro)

### 3. Unfinished praise: *Donne ch' avete intelletto d'amore*

#### 1.1

Our *quête* to the origin of philosophical poetry brings us to *Donne ch' avete intelletto d'amore*, young Dante's manifesto. Following Guinizzelli, Dante conceives his canzone as *true praise*,<sup>122</sup> a composition that describes true facts in verses by unifying philosophy and poetry, prose and verse, and truth and beauty; such form of expression serves the purpose of what in the course of this work I tried to define as “lyric science” or as “scientific lyric.”

Both the greatness and the limits of the Italian experiment consisted in the fact that those poets chose to articulate their knowledge of the self and the world within the limits and the *tropoi* prescribed by the existing lyric poetry. In other words, instead of

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<sup>122</sup> For *true praise* I refer to a form of expression that aims to tell the truth in verses and that within the Italian tradition finds in *Voglio del ver'* its very first explicit theorization. *Nota bene*, I'm not saying that prior to *Voglio del ver'* no other text from another tradition attempted similar experiment. For instance, the poem of Parmenides, and the *De Rerum Natura* dealt with similar issues. However, these experiments were created in a realm outside lyric poetry, i.e., the specific realm of the Italian lyric of the origins. For this reason, my claims are limited to the Italian landscape, in which, *Voglio del ver'* occupies the position of privilege for its explicit theorization of the unity of truth and singing. Without this text, Cavalcanti and Dante's poetico-philosophical experiments would be unintelligible.

composing long poems, dialogues, or other hybrid forms, these authors expressed their knowledge within the brevity of a sonnet, a canzone, a ballata, and while talking about love. In some way, these authors constructed an alternative and complementary discipline to the Greek experience known as philosophy: if the Greek approach to knowledge is “love of wisdom,” the Italian approach can be labelled instead as a “wisdom of love.”

In this regard, *Donne ch'avete* (but that could be said about the *Vita Nuova* in general) is Dante's first attempt to synthesize and systematize his teachers' thought into a new form. Unfortunately, the experiment of a lyric science ends the moment Dante abandons the realm of lyric poetry and opts for a different form of expression that leads to the composition of his *Comedia*. We will see how the experiment of a lyric science will be revitalized by someone like Michelangelo Buonarroti, though only a few centuries later.

## 1.2

This chapter should start with a *caveat*. What Dante experiments here with *Donne ch'avete* is just an attempt, a sketch, a provisional way to build on his predecessors' efforts. Later in his career, Dante abandons the task of a lyric science, and opts for a different style of poetry that on the one hand overcomes the limits of lyric poetry, but on the other hand 'goes back' to a form of expression reminiscent of previous attempts to synthesize philosophy and poetry. Therefore, this chapter will only be concerned with sketching the main points of Dante's strategy in the *Vita Nuova*, and will leave to another occasion the analysis of the *Comedia*.

As the *Vita Nuova* unfolds, and the lover experiences the different phases of love, he gets to a point where bewilderment seizes him and threatens his life. As the lover tries to stay alive and seeks salvation in his beloved, he is also aware that her gaze could put an end to his life.

Spesse fiate vegnonmi a la mente  
l' oscure qualità ch' Amor mi dona  
e vienmene pietà, sì che sovente  
io dico: «Lasso, avien egli a persona

ch' Amor m' assale subitanamente  
sì che la vita quasi m' abbandona?».  
Campami un spirto vivo solamente  
e que' riman perché di voi ragiona.

Poscia mi sforzo, ché mi voglio atare,  
e così smorto, d'onne valor vòto,  
vegno a vedervi, credendo guerire;

e, se i' levo gli occhi per guardare,  
nel cor mi si comincia uno tremuoto,  
che fa de' polsi l'anima partire.<sup>123</sup>

*Oftentimes, the obscure qualities that Love bestows upon me come to my mind, and then comes pity, so that I often wonder: "Ah! How can this happen to someone"? Love assaults me suddenly, so that life almost abandons me: only one spirit remains alive to talk about you. Then I struggle, because I want to help myself, and so, all pale and lifeless I come to see you, believing that it will cure me. And if I raise my eyes to gaze you, a tremor makes my soul leave my veins.*

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<sup>123</sup> All the citations of the *Vita Nuova* are taken from Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, ed. Stefano Carrai (Milano: RCS, 2009), 83. This is edition based on the Chigiano L.VIII. 305. Translations are mine.

In the sonnet prior to the introduction of the “new matter” (*nova materia*) the lover’s journey reaches its nadir, as he almost dies. Bewilderment strikes the lover and pushes almost all the spirits out of his body, with the exception for one spirit that wants to talk about the beloved. The lover wants to gaze to his lady because he thinks that she will save his life. But, he does not dare to raise his eyes, because he knows that the vision would provoke a deadly shock in him. At this point, the situation stalls: the bewildered lover needs salvation, and yet he cannot receive it since his condition does not allow him to bear the presence of his beloved. What should the lover do? Should he raise his eyes and receive the last blow, or remain in his state of *bewilderment*? But how can the lover overcome the power of *bewilderment* and bear the gaze of his lady, i.e., how can Dante push the boundaries of lyric poetry against the limits set by his “first friend” Cavalcanti? Tristan Kay notices that, rather than blocking the lover’s journey, this “impasse” pushes him to elevate his level of consciousness and to regenerate his experience of love: “[Dante] shows how the conventional limitations of the lyric tradition are, in his writing, overcome; how lyric desire is radically reformulated. Impasse thus acts not as a marker of limitation but as a stimulus of transcendence [...] Impasse is employed in the *libello* to a constructive end...”<sup>124</sup> While I agree with Kay’s understanding of the text, I would like to note that, quite shockingly, Dante does not communicate *how* he gets out of *bewilderment*; he only says that he changed<sup>125</sup>:

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<sup>124</sup> Tristan Kay, “Redefining the ‘Matera Amoris’: Dante’s *Vita Nuova* and Guittone’s (Anti-) Courtly ‘Canzoniere,’” *Italianist* 29:3 (2009): 369-399; 385. A modified version of this article appears as a book chapter in Kay’s book, *Dante’s Lyric Redemption: Eros, Salvation, Vernacular Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>125</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, 85.

[A] me convenne ripigliare materia nuova e piu' nobile che la passata; [...]  
[It] is convenient to me to resume new matter more noble matter than  
the previous

Yes, Dante does say that his “Lord of love” has placed beatitude in what “cannot fail [the lover]” namely, “in the words that praise [his] lady,”<sup>126</sup> and yet, I find this solution insufficient, similar to the use of the *genius ex-machina* to solve problems that were getting way too complicated. How do we come back from death? If Medusa turns us into stones, how do we regain our flesh? Did the lover really experience *bewilderment*?

Dante comes back to this issue even in the *Comedia*, in *Inferno IX*, but the fact that Virgil covers the eyes of the pilgrim allows us to question the validity of the entire operation, namely, that the lover is able to get out of *bewilderment*.

«Volgiti 'n dietro e tien lo viso chiuso;  
ché se 'l Gorgón si mostra e tu 'l vedessi,  
nulla sarebbe di tornar mai suso».

Così disse 'l maestro; ed elli stessi  
mi volse, e non si tenne a le mie mani,  
che con le sue ancor non mi chiudessi.<sup>127</sup>

«Turn back, and keep your eyes shut, for if the Gorgon head appears and should you see it, all chance for your return above is lost. » While my master spoke he turned me round and, still not trusting to my hands, covered my face with his hands also.

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<sup>126</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, 86.

<sup>127</sup> *Inferno IX*, 55-60 in Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 153.

As double pair of hands wrap Dante's eyes to avoid his eyes to enter in contact with the Medusa, whose gaze not even Virgil can tolerate. The avoidance of the Medusa's gaze suggests, if one considers the gaze of the Gorgon as Cavalcanti's bewilderment, that Dante does *not* experience or does not yet solve the riddles placed by his "first friend." How does the lover regain humanity once his beloved destroys it? How does one regain his life once Medusa has stunned him? Can we come back from *bewilderment*, the stunning abyss of love, or avoidance is the only solution?

To continue with the discussion, the praise of the beloved functions as a point of departure of the "new matter" (*nova materia*) in which the focus of the lover shifts from the description of his feelings to the praise of his lady, though in a completely new way. With the introduction of a "new matter," the lover gains control over his happiness, morphs his *cupiditas* into *caritas*, and accesses a kind of love capable of breaking the spell of bewilderment and opening the door to salvation.

How does the scholarship react to Dante's manifesto? *Donne ch'avete*'s novel approach did not go undetected. For instance, Teodolinda Barolini defines Dante's manifesto a "stylistic triumph" and a "conceptual breakthrough," where one witnesses Dante's emancipation from Provençal tradition and from Cavalcanti.<sup>128</sup> With my contribution, while I accept the element of novelty that Dante's canzone brings, I instead would like to focus on the theoretical continuity between him and his predecessor, in

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<sup>128</sup> Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 42.

hopes to show how such a daunting enterprise as a lyric science can only be fully understood if one see it as the product of a common effort, as opposed to the act of a single individual.

In fact, despite the brilliance of his composition, the Florentine's manifesto appears more the sketch of a project than a definitive and satisfactory solution. Dante himself is aware of that, as he begins *Donne ch'avete* declaring the incompleteness of his praise. Why couldn't he finish? What stopped Dante from achieving the conclusion of his composition? What kind of theoretical and expressive problems was he dealing with? Dante seems to be compelled to choose between Guinizelli's or Cavalcanti's approach, which often appear mutually exclusive: Is love a source of salvation or perdition? Is the beloved the angel of salvation, or the harbinger of death? Can *likeness* transport the lover to the highest truth, or rather, a *bewildered* death is the only possible outcome for the lover? Is nobility a form of grace or the product of human effort?

Dante gets out of the alternative between Guinizelli and Cavalcanti by choosing them both, and by laying the ground for an approach that favors wholeness over partiality; an approach that instead of smoothening the contradictions between its parts connects them into a larger whole, toward a novel formulation of love. Specifically, Dante accepts both views on love and connects them through the stream of time that takes the lover to move from love as deadly force to love as a saving grace. In this way, *bewilderment* and *likeness* become the two extremes, the nadir and the zenith of the entire narrative that informs the *Vita Nuova*. By reformulating the question of love as the process of construction of a loving consciousness, Cavalcanti and Guinizelli's discoveries become the different stages of a journey that leads the lover to the discovery

of authentic, selfless, and utterly transformative love. In this sense, the composition of the *Vita Nuova* does nothing but show that one can reach a new life and experience salvation only by going through a physical and spiritual journey: from the pits of Cavalcanti's deadly love to Guinizelli's realm of universal connection.

*Donne ch'avete*'s strength consists in its capacity to derive a new project simply through the reconceptualization of his predecessors' experiences within the limits of time. Dante's capacity of reformulating old problems has been noticed by J.F. Took, who explained how Dante could dismantle anything he wanted, and then rearrange it again and admire the novelty.<sup>129</sup> The *Vita Nuova* is exemplary in this regard, as Dante reaches a "new kind of literary and speculative activity" to explore the new realm of poetry and philosophy. Took calls this style "neo-courtly" and finds it passionately lived and subject now to systematic statement. After being an *Ars amatoria*, or the source of both spiritual and mental destruction, love becomes a good thing, a transformative experience that saves you: "a person in love grows to the practice of performing numerous services becomingly all."<sup>130</sup>

Hence, the composition of the *Vita Nuova*, the story the formation of a loving consciousness capable of reconciling opposites – prose and poetry, singing and commentary, perdition and salvation, *bewilderment* and *likeness* – into a new, salvific experience.

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<sup>129</sup> John F. Took, *Dante, Lyric Poet and Philosopher: An Introduction to the Minor Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

<sup>130</sup> Took, *Dante, Lyric Poet and Philosopher*, 5.

### 1.3

How does Dante reformulate his predecessors' experiences? In Guinizzelli's *Al cor gentil*, love is *likeness*, i.e. both an epistemological and ontological principle that connects the different levels of reality and makes them intelligible to us. Since *likeness*' connecting principle is similarity, then no single element of reality remains isolated: stones, lovers, and gods share commonalities that we can access to expand our knowledge. *Likeness*' power is such that is able to connect different worlds, no matter how distant they may be. Furthermore, *likeness* allows Guinizzelli to elaborate on the 'classic' concept of nobility (*gentilezza*) understood mainly as a socio-economical marker, and transfer some of its properties from the exteriority of the law to the interiority of the lover. In other words, rather than simply moving nobility from objectivity to subjectivity, Guinizzelli stretches its meaning and develops a concept that is both exterior and interior, even though the accent is placed on the interior. While remaining a principle of separation between the many and the few, Guinizzelli's turns nobility into an intimate property that pertains to the heart, not to the last name; by doing so, he expands the potential number of people that can enter in this realm.

Cavalcanti's *Donna me prega* takes up Guinizzelli's work, and pushes it – though in symmetrical opposition – toward new boundaries. For instance, love in *Donna me prega* substitutes *Al cor gentil*'s universal sense of connection with a deep – often mortal – disconnection. Love is *bewilderment*, a dark force from “whose potentiality often follows death.” Furthermore, rather than an angel, Cavalcanti's beloved assumes the traits of a Medusa, a stunning vision which disfigures the lover and reduces him to a living corpse. However, *bewilderment*'s effect is twofold: while disconnecting the

lover from the world, *bewilderment* forces the lover to connect with his interiority and experience the limits of his subjectivity. In this sense, Cavalcanti's bewildering love becomes the gateway for both self-knowledge and knowledge-of-the-self.

With regard to Guinizelli's concept of nobility, Cavalcanti transforms this concept into an acquirable good through human effort, nobility becomes a synonym of being knowledgeable. For Cavalcanti, noble people are the knowledgeable ones, i.e., those people who undergo the discipline of studying. In other words, one can achieve nobility/knowledge not because a God or a planet bestows it upon them, but because their hard work. In sum, the picture that emerges if one compares Guinizelli's and Cavalcanti's manifestos one against the other is striking for the opposition of its constituting parts. Love emerges either as beautiful or horrible, as connecting or disconnecting force, as *likeness* or *bewilderment*.

A similar pattern emerges if one looks at the beloved and her relationship to nobility. The beloved is both an angel or a Medusa, a gateway for either heaven or hell, she either saves the lover with the touch of her grace, or destroys him with her mortal gaze. Unsurprisingly, for Dante, the beloved keeps both powers of salvation and damnation and administers them differently depending on the status of the receiving heart, whether it be noble or not noble.

#### 1.4

A vast number of scholars have measured themselves with *Donne ch'avete*, and have underlined its originality and its importance especially with respect to Dante's later production. While critics generally seem to agree over the exceptionality of this

composition, some of them – perhaps betraying some sort of age prejudice – find this young Dante’s manifesto still immature, and even logically flawed.

For instance, Teodolinda Barolini reads *Donne che avete* as a “theologized canzone,” i.e., a canzone in which Dante surreptitiously transfers non-theological concepts into the realm of theology.<sup>131</sup> According to Barolini, “[it] is preferable to talk about theologized canzone instead of theological canzone because this does not represent a correct use of the theological discourse, but rather, it represents the desire of theologizing a courtly discourse<sup>132</sup>. Echoing Foster-Boyde, who defined some concepts “theologically absurd,”<sup>133</sup> Barolini goes on and warns us not to take literally some of these verses, but rather to use them as a measure of the internal contradictions of this canzone, and its exuberant “theological immaturity.”<sup>134</sup>

While I accept Barolini’s acknowledgment of contradictions within the text, I would like to flip its intention upside down, and propose a reading of *Donne ch’avete* that takes seriously Dante’s language and the challenges that he proposes. What if young Dante knew exactly what he was doing with his concepts? What if, rather than misusing

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<sup>131</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Rime giovanili e della Vita Nuova*, 303: “The substance of the canzone is in itself completely radical, completely innovative, and completely theologized.” (*[L]a sostanza della canzone è di per sé pienamente radicale, pienamente innovativa, pienamente teologizzata*).

<sup>132</sup> Dante, *Rime giovanili e della Vita Nuova*, “It is preferable do talk about a theologized canzone rather than a theological canzone because it is not an accurate use of a theological discourse but rather, the desire of theologizing a courtly discourse” (*E’ preferibile parlare di canzone teologizzata invece di canzone teologica perché non si tratta di uso accurato di un discorso teologico quanto della voglia di teologizzare un discorso cortese*.) 303.

<sup>133</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Dante’s Lyric Poetry*, ed. Kenelm Foster and Patrick Boyde (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967).

<sup>134</sup> Dante, *Rime giovanili e della Vita Nuova*, “le contraddizioni interne e l’esuberante immaturità teologica di questa canzone,” 309.

concepts, he was instead reformulating them? What if contradiction was Dante's gateway to reach a complete definition of love?

For instance, in *Time and the Crystal*, Robert Durling and Ronald Martinez show that Dante had a rather clear theological structure when he was composing the *Vita Nuova*; in fact, he had in mind Boethius and other Neoplatonic writers.<sup>135</sup> To be specific, Durling and Martinez trace the origin of *Donne ch' avete*'s narrative structure in the *De consolatione Philosophia*, specifically in *O qui perpetua mundum ratione gubernas*. They show how Dante bases his commentary on the concept of "division" as it emerges from the Neoplatonic structure *mone-prodos-epistrophe*.<sup>136</sup> As they note: "in any case, there is no question about Dante's knowledge of Boethius, and his reading of the *Consolatio* may in fact be sufficient to account for *Vita Nuova* 19."<sup>137</sup>

My reading sees Dante's exaggerations as tools to expand our consciousness, our thinking, the way we process logical coherence when we engage with the world around us. Rather than betraying its weaknesses, hyperboles, contradictions, and youthful exuberance manifest the pulsing heart of Dante's manifesto. To those who use contradiction to disqualify thinking, I would like to remind them that not only did Michelangelo do something similar in his poems, but also some centuries later, there was certain philosopher in Germany who used contradiction as the engine of both thinking and history: his name was Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

In *Donne ch' avete* strong opposition – even contradiction – becomes the formula

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<sup>135</sup> Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez, *Time and the Crystal: Studies in Dante's Rime Petrose* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>136</sup> Durling, and Martinez, *Time and the Crystal*, 54.

<sup>137</sup> Durling, and Martinez, *Time and the Crystal*, 57.

of truth, the engine of thinking, and – as we will see in the next section – the device that bridges different worlds and allows Dante to show us the humanity of heaven and the divinity of humans.

## 1.5

Since in the opening lines of *Donne ch'avete*'s first stanza, Dante sketches *the new matter* of his poetry with the confidence of the most seasoned painter; for this reason, I will use the first stanza (which is also the *Proemio*) as the canon of my interpretation. Concerning the specifics of *Donne ch'avete*'s originality, I will say that, with strict respect to the content, this composition doesn't really offer anything radically new. Rather, the novelty of this composition resides in how Dante arranges and composes the pieces of his argument, and offers them to the reader in a seemingly new appearance. In other words, young Dante's manifesto is nothing but a recasting of Guinizzelli and Cavalcanti's doctrines on love through the lens of *lightness* and *sweetness*, respectively the reinterpretations of *likeness* and *bewilderment*.

Donne ch' avete intelletto d'amore,  
io vo' con voi de la mia donna dire,  
non perch' io creda sua lauda finire,  
ma ragionar per isfogar la mente.  
Io dico che, pensando 'l suo valore,  
Amor sì dolce mi si fa sentire  
che, s'io allora non perdessi ardire,  
farei parlando innamorar la gente.  
E io non vo' parlare sì altamente  
ch'io divenisse per temenza vile,  
ma tratterò del suo stato gentile,  
a rispetto di lei, leggermente,  
donne e donzelle amorse, con voi,

ché non è cosa da parlarne altrui.<sup>138</sup>

*Ladies who have understanding of love, I want to talk with you about my lady, not because I presume to offer her definitive praise, but to vent my mind/to express my thoughts. I say that when I think about her worth, I sense Love so sweetly that, if I did not lose my courage, I would – with my words – enamor the people. And I do not want to talk so loftily that I would become vile because of fear; but with respect to her I shall discuss her noble status lightly; with you lovable ladies and maidens, because this is not a matter to discuss with anyone else.*

*Lightness* is Dante's take on *likeness* insofar as the new experience of love is a connecting force that uplifts us to the highest realm, to heaven. Dante personifies *likeness'* connecting force into the character of Beatrice. However, contrary to Guinizzelli's angelic beloved, Beatrice does not simply have the semblance of an angel; she is the feminine personification of Jesus, an extraordinary being, both human and divine, able to cast salvation or damnation on humans. Beatrice's exceptionality connects the opposite across different realms of reality, humanity and divinity, salvation and damnation find a new articulation into Beatrice's character. *Lightness* also indicates the way the lover talks about his beloved, as he will not expect anything anymore from her; he will gain his happiness exclusively from talking about her lightly, by using a form of discourse with the sole aim of truthfully represent her glorious virtues.

*Sweetness*, on the other hand, is Dante's reformulation of *bewilderment* in so far as he keeps the overwhelming power of the lover as it emerged in Cavalcanti's manifesto – that is, her capacity to destroy the lover's heart and reduce him to silence – and turns it into something positive. As we read from the *Proemio*, the lover's heart is

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<sup>138</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, 89.

filled with sweetness as he thinks about his lady, a feeling that overpowers him, and that almost reduces him to silence. Luckily, the lover's experience is such that he can still find the words to share it with us, and educate us about the nature of his beloved.

Concerning the bare content of the *Proemio*, the lover/poet chooses as interlocutors a group of ladies knowledgeable in the matter of love, to vent his mind/discuss about his lady. As the lover thinks about the worthiness of his beloved, an overwhelming sweetness fills his heart, and hinders him from speaking and finishing her praise; if only he could utter his words, he would make people fall in love. And yet, the lover finds a way of discussing the nobility of his beloved: he will avoid a lofty way of reasoning, and will talk about her lightly, with an appropriate register, i.e., not too high, in order to avoid an excessive fear to take over him and make him vile.

Another point of interest in *Donne ch'avete* concerns the opposition between the said the and unsaid (or saying and hinting?) that appears in the first few lines. Dante writes that he 1) wants to "vent [his] mind" (*isfogar la mente*); that 2) he cannot finish his lady's praise; and that 3) he will discuss about his lady lightly. Dante's need of expression seems to succumb to this overwhelming *sweetness* that takes away his courage to speak; and yet, the lover finds the strength to turn his silence into Beatrice's praise. The experience of sweetness – excessive and overwhelming – is nothing but a reformulation of *bewilderment*. Instead of discarding Cavalcanti's results, Dante saves and transforms *bewilderment's* fundamental traits into a positive experience: first, by making it appear as the defining experience of love before the *materia nova*, and then, carrying out its powerful elements into a new articulation with the exception that this time it carries salvific traits. In other words, while keeping the main traits of

Cavalcantian love Dante finds his way to flip its deadly effects by morphing it into something ‘positive’, desirable. In sum, Cavalcanti is never left out of the equation, he is just reformulated in a positive light; in this way, the lover’s overwhelming feeling becomes the distinctive trait of an elevating experience of love that projects him into the realm of salvation.

Concerning the effects that such experience produces on language, one can notice how sweetness introduces a fracture in his speech between words that come “first” and words that come “second;” between words that are announced but cannot be said, and words that spring out of that silence. What is the content of the lover’s first words and what is their relationship with those that follow? And how do these “second” words relate to the feeling of sweetness? How does one reconcile the impossibility of saying with the necessity of having to say? Maybe, but this is just a hypothesis, those words that ‘come first’ are the direct expression of the lover’s feelings and the ones that come second are the mediation that the lover finds in order not to remain silent.

Notably, the hindrance experienced by the poet contradicts the seamless speech he talks about in the opening lines of chapter X, when he describes his creative process in *Donne ch’avete*.

Avenne poi che, passando per un cammino lungo lo quale sen già un rivo chiaro molto, a me iunse tanta volontade di dire ched io cominciai a pensare lo modo ch’io tenesse, e pensai che parlare di lei non si convenia ched io facesse sed io non parlassi a donne in seconda persona, e non ad ogni donna, ma solamente a coloro che sono gentile e che non sono pure femine. Allora dico che la mia lingua parlò quasi come per se stessa mossa, e disse: «*Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore*». <sup>139</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, 88.

*And then it happened that while I was walking along a path that followed a transparent stream, there came to me such a strong desire to speak that I started thinking about a way to do that; then I realized that speaking about her it was not appropriate for me unless I addressed ladies in the second person, and not every lady, but only those ones who are noble and not just women. Then, I say that my tongue spoke almost as if it moved by itself, and said: Ladies who have understanding of love.*

The lover/poet walks on the shore of a transparent stream and experiences an epiphany that dictates the proper way for him to formulate the praise of his lady. As we saw for Cavalcanti, the discussion about the beloved needs an informed audience capable of understanding its subtleties; and yet, contrary to Cavalcanti, Dante chooses a female audience, made of ladies, the only ones who have understanding of love.

Furthermore, though unable to finish his praise, the lover will vent his mind and discuss about his beloved lightly. Is there a connection between venting and non-finishing, venting and praising? Is the lover venting because he cannot finish? Or maybe venting is the only form of expression an *unfinished praise* can take?

In the next paragraphs, I will continue my reading of the *Proemio* while trying to illuminate Dante's relationship with Guinizelli and Cavalcanti to see how the Florentine navigates between the opposite points of view of his predecessors, towards a unifying theory of love.

## 1.6

“Oh ladies who have understanding of love, I want to talk with you about my lady, not because I presume to offer her definitive praise, but to vent my mind/to express my thoughts.” The first four and the last five lines – the lines in which Dante engages with

the two Guido – surround lines 5-8, Dante's own contribution, which places the experience of sweetness and lightness at the core of his manifesto. The lover addresses his female audience and declares the reason behind the composition of this canzone. His talk will take the shape of a praise, but of a special kind: this will be an unfinished praise, i.e., a praise in which the lover will not presume to utter definitive words on the matter he discusses. As shown thus far, *Donne ch'avete* simultaneously reprises and expands on Guinizzelli's and Cavalcanti's doctrines.

The opening verse, "*Oh ladies who have understanding of love,*" must have sounded like blasphemy to Cavalcanti. Didn't he exclude, once and for all the possibility of understanding love? Didn't he establish that love cannot be understood because it is not a real object, but rather a modification of the subject? Is Dante contradicting Cavalcanti, and reaffirming the ontological status of love while telling us that love exists per se and not as a modification of the subject? One would be tempted to respond positively to such a hypothesis; and yet we are not authorized to do this, because Dante remains silent about the nature of love: he does not negate nor accepts the existence of love as an independent being. While he mentions love both as a concept and a personification, he then leaves his readers wondering about his real intention behind his choice.

*Donne ch'avete* reprises *Al cor gentil* in the sense that the speaker goes back to being a lover, and the style of the canzone goes back to being the praise of a lady, though of a special kind. But contrary to Guinizzelli, Dante's praise will be *unfinished*. Why? Probably, because the author does not believe that at this stage he possesses the type of language that allows to represent the lady's significance in its entirety, and because he

is aware that to fully express the awesomeness of his lady, he needs to allow a space in which language can express its object without appropriating it or exploiting it. Such interpretation allows us to explain why the new kind of love that Dante is trying to describe does not involve receiving anything in return, even if this is just a salutation. In other words, to glorify his lady, Dante must grant her a space of non-appropriability, i.e., a space where knowledge advances until a certain point and then comes to a halt and becomes a celebration of its object. The lover talks about his lady in a way that is capable at the same time to acknowledge both her greatness and his limits, i.e., a way that will not bring him to the dangerous extremes that we have seen in Cavalcanti.

Following Guinizelli, Dante too imagines his manifesto as true praise, i.e., a way of expressing truth in verses. But contrary to Guinizelli, he does not finish. Why? Maybe, because the lover does not believe his words can exhaust the lady's significance? Possibly. But what else? One can only imagine why Dante could not finish his praise. Maybe Dante felt he was missing other components to complete his praise, that he was missing the right words or the right tone. For example, one hurdle to complete his praise must have been the lack of an appropriate language capable of unifying the different realms of reality, and in fact, I find that the *Vita Nuova* presents a language still fundamentally grounded in distinction between prose and verse, with the former being used to explain the latter. The *Convivio* too presents a similar configuration of language when it comes to the distinction and opposition between prose and verse. Probably, the alternation of two different realms of language must have felt still insufficient to Dante, who later pushed for a stronger, more cohesive solution. It will be only later that Dante will finish his praise by forging a single language capable of

absorbing both the function of verse and prose, capable of simultaneously singing and describing truth, a language whose style will appear lower than lyric, an intermediate language apt for a *Comedia*. Such need for a lower language becomes evident especially if we turn to the lines where Dante specifically addresses the need to lower the “loftiness” of language.

### 1.7

“I would – with my words – enamor the people. And I do not want to talk so loftily that I would become vile because of fear; but with respect to her I shall discuss her noble status lightly; with you lovable ladies and maidens, because this is not a matter to discuss with anyone else.” Dante announces the radical break from his “first friend” since at the very beginning of the canzone: the understanding of love is possible and finds noble women of virtually any age its front runners.

After having said that he will not give a definitive praise of his lady, he states his unwillingness to adopt a too lofty speech. However, the word choice tells us that he does not exclude loftiness as such: Dante does not say that he *cannot* talk in a lofty way; he says that he *does not* want to talk in a too lofty way. Dante’s strategy moves along the lines of a double movement of rejection and acceptance, that is to say, while acknowledging the bewildering powers of his beloved, Dante finds a way to limit their effect through a certain word choice. Keeping the discourse on a lower level will allow the lover to stay away from the deadly extremes of *bewilderment*.

If in negative terms, the lover states that he cannot finish his praise and that his language will be not too lofty, then in positive terms, one can argue that Dante is still

writing a praise and that he is still adopting a lofty speech. Dante transforms the *immoderata cogitatione* that characterized *Donna me prega* into a light discussion, during which the lover will ponder the noble state of his lady and inform us about her worth. In other words, Dante here is calling for moderation in efforts to temperate the excess that characterized Cavalcanti's experience. Keeping the discourse on a lower register enables the lover to stay away from the deadly extremes of *bewilderment* and opens the door to salvation.

In the same line of going simultaneously with and against Cavalcanti, Dante addresses an audience made of educated younger and older ladies who have understanding of love. In *Donna me prega*, the audience is made exclusively of knowledgeable men, and the main teaching of the canzone concerns the impossibility of understanding love. Instead, in *Donne ch' avete* the audience is formed by younger and older ladies, elected privileged listeners due to their understanding.

To recapitulate: with Guinizelli and against him Dante is making a praise, this praise will be non-definitive, *unfinished*, while with Cavalcanti and against him the lover will make his praise in a lofty manner, but not to the point that his own words will lead him into bewilderment.

## 1.8

"I say that when I think about her worth, I sense Love so sweetly that, if I did not lose my courage, I would – with my words – enamor the people." The central part of the stanza announces Dante's contribution to the discussion over nobleness that worked as one the main ground in *Al cor gentil* and *Donna me prega*. The lover tells us that he will

focus on the noble state (*stato gentile*) and that this experience is sweet. This indication tells us that on the one end, Dante is grappling with the concept of nobility (*gentilezza*), while on the other hand, he describes the experience of his lady as sweet -- *unbearably* sweet, I'm tempted to say. What are lightness and sweetness? Unfortunately, Dante does not elaborate on this concept any further, leaving the reader with the work of interpretation. Due to its intensity and its relationship to fear, the experience of sweetness seems to point toward some sort of *bewilderment*, but not such as the one explored by Cavalcanti. Dante transforms the negative effects of fear – the key feeling at the center of *Donna me prega* – into the beneficial effects of sweetness, the new term at the core of the experience of the lover. Despite being overwhelming and scary, love becomes sweet, positive, and – as we shall see later in the second part of this chapter – capable of saving people.

## 1.9

To conclude this first part, I will elaborate on the status of the lover in *Donne ch'avete*. In *Al cor gentil*, one finds a complete overlap between the poet and the narrating voice, so that the lover, poet, and narrating voice all coincide in the lyric “I”. To these layers, *Donna me prega* adds another one: the teacher. The lover/poet/narrating voice ascends the podium of knowledge and lectures other educated people – seemingly men – about the metaphysical nature of love. Instead, in *Donne ch'avete* there is a shift-non-shift that concerns the gender of those who possess knowledge. I talk about “shift-non-shift” because the narrating voice does not claim knowledge about love and seems to leave it to a group of ladies deemed knowledgeable of love; but then these ladies remain silent

for the entire duration of the canzone and leave the narrator doing all the talking. What is Dante trying to do here? Is he really claiming that noble ladies exclusively possess the knowledge of love? But if this is the case, why don't they speak? Is perhaps Dante suggesting that poets and lover simply fumble in the darkness when they speak about love because its knowledge pertains exclusively to ladies? Is the knowledge of love, after all, a mystery sealed behind women's sealed lips?

## 2.1

Angelo clama in divino intelletto  
e dice: «Sire, nel mondo si vede  
maraviglia nell'atto che procede  
d'un'anima che 'nfin quassù risplende».  
Lo cielo, che non à altro difetto  
che d'aver lei, al suo signor la chiede,  
e ciascun santo ne grida merzede.  
Sola Pietà nostra parte difende,  
che parla Dio, che di madonna intende:  
«Diletti mie, or sofferite in pace  
che vostra speme sia quanto me piace  
là dov'è alcun che perder lei s'attende,  
e dirà ne lo inferno: - O mal nati,  
io vidi la speranza de' beati!»<sup>140</sup>

*An angel invokes the divine intellect and says: «My Lord, one sees in the world a wonder coming from the act that comes forth from a soul that shines all the way up here.» Heaven – which has no other imperfection than being without her – pleads for her to its lord, and every saint loudly demands this grace. Only Pity defends our parts, so that God speaks referring to my lady: «My beloveds, now you shall suffer in peace, for your hope may be as long as I please there, where one is who foresees her loss and will say in hell – Alas evil born, I saw the hope of the blessed!»*

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<sup>140</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, 90.

The second stanza focuses on the effects that the lady has on the heavenly creatures. To represent such effects, Dante re-enacts Guinizelli's dramatic strategy in the last two stanzas of *Al cor gentil*, by staging a discussion that involves an angel and God. However, Dante pushes the exceptionality of his Beatrice beyond the mere likeness with an angel, to the point of representing her as the missing element in paradise, the element that produces wonder, pain, and desire among the heavenly creatures who feel compelled to ask God to take her life. But God, won by his pity for humans, tells his creatures that they need to wait for that to happen.

What is the function of Beatrice within the whole economy of the canzone? The lady in this canzone works as dispositive of truth, as it unveils the true nature of creatures that come to her presence. Once creatures – both celestial and human – look at her, they are forced to come to term with their own intimate reality, with what they really are. In the case of heaven, the lady unmask the creatures' imperfection and shows how even in heaven there can still be selfishness, desire, lack of love, and even pain. In the case of humans, the people will be confronted with their own true self: while noble women and men will be saved and showed the road to salvation, vile people will face the destruction of their minds.

Beatrice also manifests the human possibility to achieve awesomeness. Dante's beloved links celestial and terrestrial worlds by showing respectively heaven's humanity and humanity's divinity, showing how deeply interconnected these two worlds are, and how they act as one being the truth of the other. In other words, the lady shows the human face of the heaven and, simultaneously, the divine face of earth. The powers of the beloved are *irresistible* and *bewildering*: they cut across the differences

between terrestrial and celestial realms by affecting both realms, though in a different fashion. While in the first case, the beloved manifests a residual of humanity in heaven, in the second case she manifests differently across various people, depending on whether they are noble or not. In the first case, the lady inspires good actions and saves people, while in the second case, she acts as a force of destruction that freezes people's mind.

“An angel invokes the divine intellect and says: «My Lord, one sees in the world a wonder coming from the act that comes forth from a soul that shines all the way up here.” In these lines, we see an angel who calls God's attention on the exceptionality of a lady on earth. The term used is “clamare” (*to call*), a term that gives origin to the modern “chiamare” in Italian. Despite the several meanings of “clamare” – and having in mind what happens in the next stanza – I take “clamare” to mean “to invoke,” as in the angel asks God to help him with something that his intellect cannot come to grips with. The angel sees a wonder that proceeds from the actuality of a soul and that shines all the way to heaven. (One could ask at this point if Dante is going back to the origins, comparing the Beatrice's beauty to the Aristotelian wonder, i.e., the doorway to philosophy?)

“Heaven – which has no other imperfection than being without her – pleads for her to its lord, and every saint loudly demands for this grace.” *Donne ch' avete* finds new meaning for old imagery: if in *Al cor gentil* the blasphemous comparison between the lady and the divine intelligence scandalizes God, in *Donne ch' avete*, this comparison is brought to its extremes: the lover says that heaven lacks perfection because of the lady's absence. The power of this image is worth pondering upon: the

heaven lacks perfection due to the absence of mortal creature. What does this mean? What does it mean that the paradise lacks a human creature? How can a human creature add anything to the perfection of the whole heaven? Is this blasphemy? Is this a way to insinuate doubt in heaven's perfect happiness? Is Dante trying to glorify human life here by saying that despite its imperfection, human life can reach such beauty and wonder to force the whole heaven to desire it, to be jealous about it? Is Dante challenging canonical Christianity and introducing a female version of Jesus?

Dante seems to envision a degree of divinity in humans and a degree of humanity in heaven: on the one hand, and despite her humanity, the beloved possesses some attribute that make her desirable in heaven; on the other hand, and despite their divinity, divine creatures have no problem acting in their own interest, rather when they ask God to bring her in heaven.

“Only Pity defends our parts, so that God speaks referring to my lady: «My beloveds, now you shall suffer in peace, for your hope may be as long as I please there, where one is who foresees her loss and will say in hell – Alas evil born, I saw the hope of the blessed ones!»” The voice of the angels raises almost in unison in asking God to provide them with the presence of the lady. Only Pity, the personification of God's love, raises against the angels' request, and advocates for the right of the people on earth to enjoy Beatrice's presence. God then speaks to the creatures in heaven and says that they need to “suffer in peace” because he will keep her on earth, where there is someone who is about to lose her, and who will talk about her in hell.

## 2.2

Madonna è desiata in sommo cielo:  
or vò di sua virtù farvi sapere.  
Dico qual vuol gentil donna parere  
vada con lei, che quando va per via  
gitta nei cor villani Amore un gelo  
per che ogne lor pensiero aghiaccia e pere,  
e qual soffrisse di starla a vedere  
diverria nobil cosa o si morria.  
E quando trova alcun che degno sia  
di veder lei, quei prova sua vertute  
che li avien ciò che li dona in salute  
e sì l'umilia c'ogni offesa obblia.  
Ancor l'è Dio, per maggior grazia, dato  
che non pò mal finir chi l'è parlato.<sup>141</sup>

*My lady is desired in highest heaven: now I want to inform you about her virtue/potentiality/ essential property. I say to any lady who wants to appear noble to go with her, for when she walks, Love casts a frost into the vile hearts that freezes and kills all their thoughts; and when one endures to look at her he either turns into a noble thing, or dies. And when she finds someone worthy of beholding her, he experiences her virtue and finds that what she gives him turns into a saving grace. And she humbles him so much that he forgets every offense. God has given her a greater grace: the one who has spoken to her cannot end in evil.*

Like a crescendo, the discussion on the divinity of the beloved reaches its climax in this new stanza, when one reads that the beloved is “desired in the heavens.” In the following lines, the lover continues to describe the effects of the lady on other creatures, with the difference that this time he turns to Beatrice’s effect on humans, and aims to unveil her *virtù* (*virtues* but also, *potentiality* and *essential properties*.)<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, 91.

<sup>142</sup> See Philippe Delhaye-Giorgio Stabile, *Virtù*, in Umberto Bosco, *Enciclopedia Dantesca* (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 1970).

“My lady is desired in highest heaven: now I want to inform you about her virtue/potentiality/ essential property.” The first line recapitulates and reinstates the discussion in the previous stanza: the lady is desired in heaven. Note the radicality of the sentence -- she is *desired*. Not “noticed” or “valued;” she is “desired,” to the point that the all the divine creatures have no hesitation to request that God bring her to them. How can heaven, where all the souls and creature experience perfection request that God take the life of woman? Why such selfishness? Is there a critique of power here, by showing that even in heaven creatures can get greedy or merciless when it comes to their own interest? And what does this say about the heavenly creatures? Is one to assume that they lack love, and that the everlasting presence of God does not make them kinder, more loving, -- and lovable? Moreover, how should one read “desired”? What kind of desire is to be expected in heaven, where the souls are supposed to enjoy a state of perfect happiness? Is Dante introducing an element of carnality, if not sexuality in the divine realm? Is he trying to say heaven after all is not that divine, and by contrast, that earth is not so human? Is Dante trying to show that the two worlds are one the secret content of the other, namely, that heavens contain earth and earth contains heavens?

“I say to any lady who wants to appear noble to go with her, for when she walks, Love casts a frost into the vile hearts that freezes and kills all their thoughts; and when one endures to look at her he either turns into a noble thing, or die.” These lines present a surprising strategy, as Dante, rather than enumerating and describing the attributes of his lady, focuses on the effect she has on the other people and leaves her attributes to the following stanza. Beatrice represents for noble women a model of virtue that bestow her benefic properties on those who choose to be in her presence: if women want to

appear noble, if they want to gain nobility, they must go with her. This passage seems to suggest that nobility is a quality that one could obtain simply by enjoying someone's presence, a sort of nobility by osmosis. What really is lacking at this point is Dante's own elaboration of nobility. What is nobility for Dante? How does it differ (if it does) from Guinizelli or Cavalcanti's takes?

Furthermore, the power of the lady resembles Cavalcanti's *bewilderment*; with the exception that this time the effect of her gaze is twofold as it either leads to salvation or damnation. The beloved's awesomeness works like a double edge sword, i.e., to its inspiring and ennobling power corresponds an equally awesome power of destruction that acts upon the vile hearts (*cori villani*) that happen to be in her presence. Unsurprisingly, the effects of the beloved on the vile hearts are devastating: she freezes the thoughts and destroys the minds of those who happen to be unworthy of her presence. Also, if the enjoyment of Beatrice's presence constitutes the condition under which hearts become noble, one also sees how being able to withstand such presence is not a given, and how it actually represents the wall that sets nobility apart from peasantry

Since the first part of the stanza explicitly addresses women, the shift of focus on "vile hearts" creates the hermeneutic problem of understanding whose hearts is the lover talking about. Is he still referring to women, or to men? Are men the only one who can have a vile heart and experience the destructive powers of Beatrice, or this can happen also to other women?

"And when she finds someone worthy of beholding her, he experiences her virtue and finds that what she gives him turns into a saving grace. And she humbles him so much that he forgets every offense. God has given her a greater grace: the one who

has spoken to her cannot end in evil.” The remaining part of the stanza expands on the beloved’s effects on men. While in the first part of the stanza Dante may suggest that also ladies may be involved in the experience of dealing with the gaze of the lady, in this part the discussion seems definitely to concern men, as Dante talks about being “worthy” (*degno*) as the characteristic that a man needs to have in order to be able to gaze upon the lady. Should one take Dante’s use of worthiness as a marker of the difference between women and men when it comes to how they experience Beatrice’s gaze? Is the capacity to bear the lady’s vision (for women) different from the worthiness bear her vision (for men?) two separate things? Could this be a way to imagine how nobility changes, depending on the gender?

### 2.3

Dice di lei Amor: «Cosa mortale  
Come esser può sì adorna e sì pura?».  
Poi la riguarda e fra se stesso giura  
che Dio ne ’ntenda di far cosa nova.  
Color di perle à quasi, in forma quale  
convene a donna aver, non for misura;  
ella è quanto de ben pò far Natura:  
per essempro di lei bieltà si prova.  
Degli occhi suoi, come ch’ella li mova,  
escono spiriti d’amore infiammati  
che feron li occhi a qual che alor la guati  
e passan sì che ’l cor ciascun retrova.  
Voi le vedete Amor pinto nel viso,  
là ove non pote alcun mirarla fiso.<sup>143</sup>

*Loves says about her: «How can a mortal being be so adorned and pure? » Then he looks at her again, and silently swears that God intends to do something new of her. She almost has the color of pearls, a color that is appropriate for women to have not beyond measure. She is the best that Nature can make: one*

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<sup>143</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, 91.

*experiences beauty through her example. From her eyes, however she moves them, come out inflamed spirits of love that wound the eyes of who gazes upon her, and they pass through so that each one finds the heart. You all can see Love depicted on her face, there where no one can gaze upon her fixedly.*

“Loves says about her: «How can a mortal being be so adorned and pure? » Then he looks at her again, and silently swears that God intends to do something new of her.” In the beginning of this stanza, a personified Love notices Beatrice’s exceptionality, and interprets it a sign of a divine plan. Love himself is struck and wonders how is it possible for a human being to be so adorned and pure he believes that God must have a plan for Beatrice. In the previous stanza, we learn that Beatrice has incredible powers that range from saving to destroying other human beings; therefore, Love’s question has a positive answer: there is a godly plan for Beatrice.

“She almost has the color of pearls, a color that is appropriate for women to have not beyond measure. She is the best that Nature can make: one experiences beauty through her example.” The lover describes Beatrice’s skin color as almost the one of the pearls, and adds that this is the color that is more convenient for a lady to have, though not “beyond measure.” Dante uses his beloved to set a model for all other women who aspire to be noble. Maybe this is the novelty of Dante’s approach when it comes to nobility? In this sense, nobility would not be a gift, nor something we acquire through knowledge, but rather, something we gain through following a good example, so long as we have a noble heart?

Concerning Beatrice’s description, the lover tells us the intensity of her color must be measured, contained. But why? Why should an extraordinary being with extraordinary powers be measured when it comes to her appearance? I take that Dante’s

polemical object is – again – Cavalcanti and the other poets who saw the dangers of connecting love with excess. Once more, contrary to Cavalcanti – and in accordance with Guinizelli – Dante tries to show that despite its indubitably destructive power, love has for the noble heart a salvific value. In effort to find a balance, Dante operates both to absorb and supersede Cavalcanti’s conception of love. He rejects Cavalcanti’s conception of nobility as knowledge possessed by men, and at the same time, extends its possibility to ladies too (as Cavalcanti was somehow hinting but didn’t then fully elaborate in *Donna me prega*). Though the experience of *bewilderment* still exists, its power is contained and directed to those who are unworthy of the beloved’s presence.

“From her eyes, however she moves them, come out inflamed spirits of love that wound the eyes of who gazes upon her, and they pass through so that each one finds the heart. You all can see Love depicted on her face, there where no one can gaze upon her fixedly.” We have already encountered this image, which belongs to the classical iconography portraying the phenomenology of love. Spirits come from the lady’s eyes and wound the eyes of the ones who gaze upon her; the spirits travel all the way to the heart of the man. One thing worth asking at this point, would be whether the spirits access only men or also women’s heart. While in Guinizelli and Cavalcanti the gender relations between lover and beloved seem straightforward, in Dante’s case one could pause, and ask: are we sure that Beatrice bewildering eyes exclusively work on men? Doesn’t Beatrice, after all, also destroys women’s minds? Doesn’t she freeze the vile heart of those who have a vile heart? And, since there are noble ladies, can’t one infer that there are also vile ladies, who experience the destructive effects of Beatrice’s gaze?

## 2.4

Canzone, io so che tu girai parlando  
a donne assai, quand'io t'avrò avanzata;  
or t'ammonisco, perch'io t'avrò allevata  
per figliuola d'Amor giovane e piana,  
che là ove giugni tu diche pregando:  
«Insegnatemi gir, ch'io son mandata  
a quella di cui loda io so' adornata».  
E, se non vuoi andar sì come vana,  
non restare ove sia gente villana,  
ingegnati, se puoi, d'esser palese  
solo con donne o con uomo cortese,  
che ti menranno là per via tostana.  
Tu troverai Amor con esso lei:  
raccomandami a lui, come tu dei.<sup>144</sup>

*Canzone, I know that once I have set you forth, you will go and speak to many ladies; but now I urge you, because I have raised you young and fair as a child of Love so that wherever you arrive you ask, beseeching: «Teach me where to go, because I am sent to her of whom I am the adorned praise.» And if you do not want to go in vain, do not stay where there are vile people. Find a way, if you can, to manifest yourself only to ladies or a courtly man who will swiftly send you to her. You will find Love with her. Commend me to him as you must.*

In the closing stanza, Dante sends off his canzone on a quest to find his beloved. Since Dante is aware that the journey will be filled with encounters and adventures that can lead astray, he admonishes his canzone to spend time only with noble people, whether they be women or men.

“Canzone, I know that once I have set you forth, you will go and speak to many ladies; but now I urge you, because I have raised you young and fair as a child of Love

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<sup>144</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, 92.

so that wherever you arrive you ask, beseeching: «Teach me where to go, because I am sent to her of whom I am the adorned praise.»” The lover instructs his canzone to find her addressee, Beatrice. The lover informs us that he envisioned the composition of this text as raising a child: the canzone is a “child of Love,” who is now off for a journey to find Beatrice, of whom the canzone is the adorned praise.

“And if you do not want to go in vain, do not stay where there are vile people. Find a way, if you can, to manifest yourself only to ladies or a courtly man who will swiftly send you to her. You will find Love with her. Commend me to him as you must.” One learns from the Lover’s instructions that the path the canzone is going to go through is non-linear. Not every person the canzone will meet is going to be able to contribute to her mission. Only noble people will be able to help the canzone to find the beloved, and for this reason, the canzone is expressively instructed not to spend time with vile people because they will slow down her journey. Only ladies or a courtly man will have the capacity to send the canzone to Beatrice. The lover concludes his instructions by ordering the canzone to recommend him to Love once she finds him in Beatrice’s presence.

### INTERMEZZO 3.

Dante's attempt to build a lyric science on the shoulder of his predecessors proves grandiose, though insufficient. The young Florentine ultimately seems to lack the definite conceptual apparatus and the proper language to articulate a durable solution for his enterprise. Nonetheless, Dante's attempt proves successful when it comes to combining the opposite properties of *bewilderment* and *likeness* into a whole. In fact, if we take Beatrice for example, we find that she is both Guinizzelli's angel and Cavalcanti's Medusa, both being able to connect worlds and to precipitate vile hearts to the abyss. But Beatrice is even more, since Dante expands on her positive attributes by flipping the Medusa's negative aspect into positive ones. Hence, since Medusa destroys the with her gaze, Beatrice is then also capable of dispensing grace to the noble hearts. Since she can both save and condemn, Beatrice is quite possibly a female version of Jesus, a divine messenger sent to Earth to redeem and lose his creatures. But if Beatrice is godly, then her *true praise* is nothing but the ontological description of her divine attributes, the list of her onto-theological qualities.

Unfortunately, the interplay of Cavalcantian and Guinizzellian symmetry that this chapter attempted to reconstruct does not fully display at every level of the *Vita nuova*. When it comes to nobility, for instance, it is not sure how this is received, whether it is a gift or the reward for an effort. Dante claims that the lover experiences bliss when he stops expecting anything in return from his lady and focuses exclusively in singing her praise. However, this change in the lover's approach doesn't happen through his own volition, but rather as a decision of Love who "places all [his] bliss into

what cannot fail [the lover.]”<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, although the Cavalcantian reference to knowledge is still present, its possession is being placed in the hands of the ladies, whose voice, unfortunately, we never get to hear.

Another limit of Dante’s solution consists in how he deals with the opposition between prose and verse, a divarication which remains present during the entire text. Though Dante uses both ‘languages’ in his composition, the position of the prose remains ancillary with respect to the verse. The definitive solution to the opposition of prose and verse will only manifest much later, when in the *Comedia* Dante will abandon the distinction of prose and verse, will craft a language powerful enough to display the potentiality of both prose and verse, and will add another fundamental dimension of love -- the public dimension. In the *Comedia*, truth and beauty will be joined by another essential component of human existence – justice – whose introduction will push Dante’s poetry outside the limity of lyric poetry, and add another layer of identity to lover/poet/philosopher, the pilgrim. But this is another story.

Unfortunately, the next Italian champion of lyric poetry, Francesco Petrarca, will eviscerate his verses from any intention of truth, any attempt of synthesis. With Petrarca’s affirmation in the Italian pantheon, poetry and philosophy will go back to their ordinary opposition, and wait for another messenger who will take charge of their reunification. But this is another story.

This chapter concludes the core of our investigation, and provides a preliminary overview of the lyric science whose main concepts we tried to sketch over the course of

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<sup>145</sup> Dante, *Vita Nuova*, 87.

this dissertation. In the next chapter, on Michelangelo's *excessive poetry*, the reader will appreciate how another philosopher-poet (and sculptor, painter, architect, writer, etc.) uses his poetry as a laboratory to revitalize the experiment of the *Duecento*. The scope of this chapter will be show how the need to close the gap between poetry and philosophy, the necessity to reach a knowledgeable beauty and an inspired truth (and perhaps, a loving justice?) represents a tendency – a need – rather than an isolated event, like a Ulysses, who never gives up the idea get back to his home, his Ithaca.

## PART II: EXCURSUS

### Excessive poetry:

#### The use of *superchio* in Michelangelo's verses

##### 1.1

The term *superchio*, more or less translatable as 'excessive', appears in Michelangelo's poetry a total of thirteen times, mainly as an adjective, but also as a noun (three times), and once as an adverb. Here is a list of its occurrences.<sup>146</sup>

1. *quand'el superchio ardor troppo l'accende* (45); "when the excessive heat lightens up [the heart] too much"
2. *l'infinita beltà, 'l superchio lume* (113); "infinite beauty, excessive light"
3. *d'un superchio piacer morte n'aspetta* (148); "death comes right after an excessive pleasure"

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<sup>146</sup> Translations above are mine. Following one of the most recent English translations, Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Poetry of Michelangelo: An Annotated Translation*, ed. and trans. James M. Saslow (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.) I consistently translate *superchio* as 'excess' or 'excessive'. All quotations from the Italian are taken from Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Rime*, ed. Enzo Noè Girardi (Bari: Laterza, 1960), and all translations, unless otherwise indicated, come from Saslow's edition.

4. *con tal superchia aita* (149); “with such an excessive help”
5. *con superchia pietà mi rasserena* (150); “it reassures me with her excessive mercy”
6. *c’al don superchio debil virtù muore* (150); “under the excessive gift the weak virtue dies”
7. *col suo superchio, e solo a quello arriva* (151); “with its excess, and only to that it gets”
8. *cela il superchio della propria carne* (152); “it hides the excess of its own flesh”
9. *tornan superchi al cuor gli spirti sparti* (157); “the lost spirits come back in excess to the heart”
10. *l’umil peccato che ’l superchio bene* (162); “the humble sin than the excessive good”
11. *l’arme degli anni e de’ superchi giorni* (182); “the weapons of the excessive years, and days”
12. *se ’l poco accresce, e ’l mie superchio lima* (236); “if it increases it a bit, it also smoothens my excess”
13. *c’ogni superchio indugio amor perdoni* (294); “may love forgive every excessive delay”

The importance of this term for Michelangelo's poetry seems to have gone undetected on scholars' radars, to the point that the anthologies published in languages other than Italian either leave the term untranslated<sup>147</sup>, or exclude the poems that contain it.<sup>148</sup> In this paper I would like to challenge this exclusion and show how the term plays a strategic role in some of the crucial moments of Michelangelo's poetry, especially when it refers to grace or art.

I shall begin with its etymology. *Superchio* comes from the vulgar Latin \*superculum, a non-attested voice based on the Latin adjective *superus* and the adverb *super* which mean literally "over", or "what remains over", "what goes beyond", "what surpasses."<sup>149</sup> Perhaps *excessive* – from *excedere*<sup>150</sup> – best renders its meaning in

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<sup>147</sup> Poem 113, in Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Complete Poems of Michelangelo*, ed. and trans. Joseph Tusiani (New York: Noonday Press, 1960); Poem 157, in Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Poesies*, ed. and trans. Michel Orcel (France: Impr. Nationale, 1993); poems 150, 151, 182, and 236 in Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Sämtliche Gedichte: Italienisch und deutsch*, ed. and trans. Michael Engelhard (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verl, 1992).

<sup>148</sup> Cfr. poems 152 and 162 in Buonarroti, *Poesies*, and poem 151 in Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Rimas: (1507-1555)*, ed. and trans. Manuel J. Santayana (Madrid: Editorial, 2012).

<sup>149</sup> Cfr. Devoto Oli on-line < Lat. volg. \*superculum, der. di super 'sopra' | sec. XIII; and Manlio Cortellazzo, Michele A. Cortellazzo, and Paolo Zolli, *Il nuovo etimologico DELI-dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1999); or Tullio De Mauro and Marco Mancini, *Garzanti etimologico: I grandi dizionari* (Milano: Garzanti linguistica, 2000.) Giacomo Devoto and Gian Carlo Oli, *Il dizionario della lingua italiana* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1995). See also Oxford English Dictionary Second Edition on CD-ROM (v. 4.0) (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009) L. super- = the adv. and prep. super above, on the top (of), beyond, besides, in addition, used in composition with the various meanings detailed below. (Cf. the related Skr. upari-, Gr. ὑπερ- hyper-, OE. ofer-, etc. over-.) An interesting suggestion to keep in mind comes from the German translator Engelhard, who translates *superchio* as *übermässig* which means "above the measure, unmeasurable."

<sup>150</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* Second Edition on CD-ROM (v. 4.0), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) ME. exceden, ad. F. excēder, ad. L. excēd-ēre to go out, exceed, etc., f. ex- out + cēdēre to go.

English. According to the *Dizionario Etimologico della Lingua Italiana*, *superchio* first appears in Dante's *Vita nuova* (XI, 3), although some occurrences ensue in Monte Andrea de la Firenze, Cino da Pistoia, and Guido Cavalcanti. *Superchio* also appears several times in Petrarch's *Canzoniere*.<sup>151</sup> Given the veneration that Michelangelo had for Dante and Petrarch, it is likely that he borrowed from them the use of this term. With respect to English translations, here is a brief list of attempts to cope with this term:

John Symonds translates: 150 "joy so poignant", and 151 "superfluous shell."  
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Joseph Tusiani translates the expressions of *superchio* each time differently (or not at all) depending on the context : 45 (no translation); 113 (no translation); 148 "unpromised joy"; 149 "so much grace"; 150 "more grace than now"; 150

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<sup>151</sup> DELI; Dante Alighieri, *Vita nuova*, ed. Michele Barbi (Firenze: Bemporad, 1932), XI: "E quando questa gentilissima salute salutava, non che Amore fosse tal mezzo che potesse obumbrare a me la intollerabile beatitudine, ma elli quasi per soverchio di dolcezza divenia tale, che lo mio corpo, lo quale era tutto allora sotto lo suo reggimento, molte volte si movea come cosa grave inanimata"; Luciano Lovera, *Concordanza della "Commedia" di Dante Alighieri*, 3 vols. (Torino: Einaudi, 1975); *Purgatorio* 15. 13-15 "Ond'io levai le mani inver' la cima | De le mie ciglia, e fecimi 'l solecchio, | che del soverchio visibile lima"; *Purgatorio* 17. 52-54 "Ma come al sol che nostra vista grava | e per soverchio sua figura vela, | così la mia virtù quivi mancava."

Monte Andrea da Firenze, in *Poeti del Duecento*, ed. Gianfranco Contini, 2 vols. (Milano: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1960)

*Tenzon con messer Tommaso da Faenza* "[T]ant'è il soperchio, convene mostrarne."

Cino da Pistoia, in *Poeti del Duecento*, IX "che per soverchio de lo su' valore."

Giuseppe Savoca, Bartolo Calderone, *Concordanza del "Canzoniere" di Francesco Petrarca*, 2 vols. (Firenze: Olschki, 2011), "altri ch'io stesso e 'l desiar soverchio?" (70); "quando un soverchio orgoglio" (105); "ch'i' temo, lasso, no 'l soverchio affanno" (107); "ma 'l soverchio piacer, che s'attraversa" (143); "l'ingegno offeso dal soverchio lume" (248).

<sup>152</sup> Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Sonnets*, ed., and trans. John Addington Symonds (London: Vision, 1950).

“fortune’s lavish touch”; 151 “in its care”; 152 “the involucre of our flesh”; 162 (no translation); 236 “files off my dross”; 294 “so long.”<sup>153</sup>

James Saslow finds a different solution; he chooses the word ‘excess’ and uses it consistently: 45 “excessive ardor”; 113 “exceeding light”; 148 “excess of delight”; 150 “excessive gifts”; 150 “excessive mercy”; 151 “its excess”; 152 “excess mass of its own flesh”; 157 “in excess”; 162 “sheer good”; 182 “excess days”; 236 “my excess”; 294 “excess delay.”<sup>154</sup>

What did Michelangelo mean when he used this term? We might begin by looking at poems 45, 149, and 152, where *superchio* indicates respectively: the feeling of the poet before he receives divine grace (poem 45, an incomplete *terza rima*); the main property of this grace (madrigal 145); the quantity of marble that needs to be removed to create a sculpture, and analogically, the excess of sin (madrigal 152).

## 1.2

Many scholars see Michelangelo as a “philosopher.” For example, Saslow claims Michelangelo is not a lyric poet since “his writing takes the form of a philosophical discourse prompted by the particulars of his experience,”<sup>155</sup> and Charles de Tolnay defines Michelangelo as a *penseur*, an artist-philosopher.<sup>156</sup> Along the same line of reasoning, the German translator Michael Engelhard comments that Michelangelo’s thought is not abstract or “logical,” but rather a direct consequence of his originary

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<sup>153</sup> Tusiani, *The Complete Poems of Michelangelo*.

<sup>154</sup> Saslow, *The Poetry of Michelangelo*.

<sup>155</sup> Saslow, *The Poetry of Michelangelo*, 23.

<sup>156</sup> Charles De Tolnay, *The Youth of Michelangelo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943), 10.

experience (*Urerlebnis*) of beauty which underscores the totality of his artistic and poetical production.<sup>157</sup> Engelhard argues that although Michelangelo's poetry is replete with thought-like markers such as "because" (*denn or weil*) and "since ... then" (*wenn ... dann*), logic, or rather, linear logic should not be the standard (*Mass*) by which his thought is to be measured: "[His poetry] is not determined by an abstract, free-floating (*freischwebenden*) logic. Rather, from a standpoint of absolute power his language creates a poetical space in which feeling (*Gefühle*), thinking (*Gedanken*), and imagination (*Bilder*) mutually create and define their connections (*Bezüge*)."<sup>158</sup> For this reason, a thorough examination of the philosophical value of Michelangelo's poetry should simultaneously consider structure, sound, rhetoric, and truth, and should measure their effect on the "philosophical content" of the poems. (For the present essay, I focus chiefly on the 'structure' of the poems, namely on analogy and antithesis, in relation to their rhetorical complexity.)

Scholars agree that the rhetorical devices most frequently found in Michelangelo's poetry are antithesis, paradox, oxymoron, enjambment, ellipsis, and anastrophe.<sup>159</sup> Enzo Noè Girardi characterizes Michelangelo's use of language and images as the reason for his reputation of a complex and difficult poet. The complexity and difficulty of his poetry involves what Girardi calls a spiritualization

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<sup>157</sup> Engelhard, *Sämtliche Gedichte*.

<sup>158</sup> *Wer diese Gedanken mit dem Mass der "Logik" misst, hat sie nicht verstanden*: 396-397.

<sup>159</sup> Saslow, *The Poetry of Michelangelo*, 41; Enzo Noè Girardi, *Studi sulle rime di Michelangiolo* (Milano: L'Eroica, 1964), 66; Christopher Ryan, *The Poetry of Michelangelo: An Introduction* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998), 241.

(*spiritualizzazione*) of language itself, which consists in the use of enjambment, antithesis, ellipsis, etc. as instruments to *enhance* language. According to Girardi, the acknowledgement of Michelangelo's obscurity needs to be paired with the interpretation of Michelangelo's use of language, especially with respect to its symbolic dimension. That is to say: the obscurity of his language is the byproduct of its symbolic charge. As Girardi himself writes, Michelangelo's enhancement of the symbolic value of his language (*potenziamento del valore simbolico dei vocaboli*) occurs at the expense of its immediate semantic function (*funzione semantica*), which weakens univocal meaning and at the same time, opens up to multiple interpretations.<sup>160</sup>

Following Girardi's interpretation, Paola Mastrocola goes further and identifies the prime characteristic of Michelangelo's poetry – the *non-finito* – as the means by which his poetry preserves the potentiality of the idea in its integrity.<sup>161</sup> According to Mastrocola these poems show a real “style of reasoning” (*stile del ragionamento*) since “the syntactical structures propose in each single text the *same* [my emphasis] logical form of thought and come to the same result of contradiction and inversion.”<sup>162</sup> The strategy through which thinking is articulated is the succession of a premise and an affirmation, which is then negated by an antithesis. The markers of this structure are “if”, “then”, and “but” (*se, allora, ma*), so that the structure appears as: *if it's true that ...then it's also true that ... but instead it happens that*. A structure of this kind appears in the sonnet fragment 52. Mastrocola paraphrases these verses as: “*If* death is a return

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<sup>160</sup> Girardi, *Studi su Michelangiolo scrittore*, 66.

<sup>161</sup> Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Rime e lettere*, ed. Paola Mastrocola (Torino: UTET, 1992), 31.

<sup>162</sup> Mastrocola, *Rime e lettere*, 26.

to the heaven, *then* it makes sense to kill ourselves; *but* a human being is not capable of resurrecting as a phoenix, *therefore* I comply with (*indugio*) killing myself.”<sup>163</sup> This structure creates a “double line of reasoning” which culminates in two divergent, paradoxical conclusions about death: death is a return to heaven on a spiritual level, but it is also the end of life, if one understands it in a physical sense. A similar structure is to be found in sonnet 123 and in various *Rime* to Vittoria Colonna. Trying to expand – rather than contradict – what Mastrocola identifies as the overarching scheme of Michelangelo’s poetry, I would like to emphasize another structure that plays an important role in Michelangelo’s poetical thinking and that finds its markers in the pair *così ... come*. I refer to analogy, the same structure we have encountered with Guinizzelli’s *Al cor gentil*.<sup>164</sup>

Poem 45 starts with a triangular relationship that, through a double movement which goes from within to without and back again, analogically constructs the concept of harmony as the result of two conflicting forces such as crying and sighing, cold and hot, water and fire.

Ben doverrieno al sospirar mie tanto  
 esser seco oramai le fonti e’ fiumi,  
 s’i’ non gli rinfrescassi col mie pianto.  
 Così talvolta i nostri eterni lumi,  
 l’un caldo e l’altro freddo ne ristora,  
 acciò che ’l mondo più non si consumi.  
 E similmente il cor che s’innamora,

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<sup>163</sup> “Se la morte è un ritorno al cielo, allora è giusto uccidersi; ma l’uomo non è come la fenice in grado di resuscitare e quindi io indugio a uccidermi” Mastrocola, *Rime e lettere*, 26, my emphasis.

<sup>164</sup> For a more detailed discussion about analogy and its implications with respect to thinking see the chapter on Guinizzelli.

quand'el superchio ardor troppo l'accende,  
l'umor degli occhi il temprà, che non mora.

By now the springs and the streams would certainly have had to dry up from my sighing so much if I did not replenish them with my weeping. In this way, by turns, our eternal lamps the one hot and the other cold, revive us so that the world will not be worn out further.

The three branches of the analogy are equally distributed in these nine lines. The first branch connects the poet to the world of nature by describing hyperbolically the equilibrium between the poet's sighs and tears. The feeling of pain is gigantic, exaggerated: if the poet's sighs were not matched by his tears, they would dry up the earth's waters and there would be no more rivers or springs left. The second branch of the analogy deals instead with the stars (*ecterni lumi*, translated above as "eternal lamps") that allow the existence of the world by balancing the heat and the cold. If in the first simile one can see the poet's state of mind as a balance between crying and sighing (the sighs would dry out the entire world if his tears would not give back the water evaporated), in the second simile the equilibrium becomes 'astronomical' and involves a similar relationship between the stars.

However, the third branch of the analogy introduces a new object of investigation. In this poem, the experience of falling in love is linked to the concept of an excessive fire (*superchio ardor*). This experience is extreme and fatal, but enjoys at the same time a perfect balance. In this case, the opposite forces are the heat provoked by the (excessive) ardor that lightens a (too strong) flame, and a liquid (*umore*) that

allows the poet to continue to live.<sup>165</sup> The experience of love produces a desire for death that paradoxically prolongs life instead of shortening it. What is the meaning of “il tempra”: “temprare”<sup>166</sup> (*to strengthen*) or “temperare”<sup>167</sup> (*to mitigate*)? Does the pronoun ‘il’ (= “lo”) refer to the heart or the fire? Does the liquid of the eyes (= “tears”) strengthen the heart or does it mitigate the flame? Or perhaps both? Independently of how one reads it, what’s important is the conclusion (“che non mora”) so that *it* does not die [it = the heart and consequently the poet]. The equilibrium of forces that runs through the entire poem ends up prolonging the life of the poet beyond his will. He desires death, but the pleasure that comes from this wish keeps him alive. The logic of the events is antithetical, almost twisted: the more the poet wants to die, the more death gives him pleasure and prolongs his life, since “what gives pleasure doesn’t hurt” (12) (“ché chi diletta non offende.”)

In this third part of the analogy, one finds that there is an excessive heat (*superchio ardor*) that excessively (*troppo*) lightens up the heart. The element of excess is then reiterated in line 15 with “troppo dolor,” too much pain. To schematize, the markers of the excess are *superchio ardor ... troppo l'accende ... troppo dolor*. In sum, there is too much heat for the heart; this heat produces too much flame which then provokes too much pain. But, since this is an analogy built around the concept of equilibrium of opposite forces, there also needs to be some “excessive cold” capable at

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<sup>165</sup> Saslow’s translation: *excessive ardor*; Engelhard’s translation: *Brennt allzu heiß*.

<sup>166</sup> Devoto-Oli, “Lat. *temperare* | sec. XVI.”

<sup>167</sup> Devoto-Oli, “dal lat. *temperare* der. di *tempus* ‘tempo’, forse nel significato antico di ‘taglio’; quindi, originariamente, ‘tagliare (al fine di mescolare e armonizzare)’ | sec. XIII.”

the same time of extinguishing the fire and generating excessive joy. Perhaps, it is not far-fetched to construe another *superchio* that pertains to the water, given that the poem mentions the liquid of the eyes that mitigates the fire. If that holds, if harmony is the result, then the mortal concatenation of events caused by the pain and desire of death must also be balanced by an opposite force that results in a pleasurable prolongation of the life of the poet:

La morte e 'l duol, ch'i' bramo e cerco, rende  
un contento avenir, che non mi lassa  
morir; ché chi dilecta non offende.  
Onde la navicella del mie no passa,  
com'io vorrei, a vederti a quella riva  
che 'l corpo per a tempo di qua lassa.  
Troppo dolor vuol pur ch'i' campi e viva,  
qual più ch'altri veloce andando vede,  
che dopo gli altri al fin del giorno arriva.  
Crudel pietate e spietata mercede  
me lascio vivo, e te da me disciolse  
rompendo, e non mancando nostra fede  
e la memoria a me non solo non tolse

.....[the text is unfinished]

Death and grief, which I long for and seek, make for a happy future that will not let me die, for those who give pleasure do no harm. Therefore, my little boat will not cross over to see you, as I would like, to that shore that leaves my body on this side yet a while. Excess of pain still makes me survive and live, like one who, going faster than all others, sees himself reaching the end of his days after them. Cruel mercy and merciless grace left me alive and cut you off from me, breaking but not extinguishing our bond: | and not only did they deprive me of your memory.

The excess of pain and the desire for death evolve into pleasure and longer life; the strong desire to die results in an equally strong affirmation which doesn't diminish life, but rather increases it, as the desire for death and the pain raises. The contradiction, or better, the polemical relationship between the two opposite powers culminates in the dynamic point of equilibrium of the figure of "cruel mercy, merciless salvation" *crudel pietate spietata mercede*, a single element in which, once more, two competing elements coexist. However, the result of the opposition does not generate balance, but rather sanctions – even indirectly – the victory of one element, life. This last part needs some explanation.

The first nine lines of poem 45 point towards a concept of harmony analogically built as the dynamic result of two polemical opposites. Sighs and tears, heat and cold, fire and water, are contrasting forces that balance each other and reach a mutual conservation: there would be no more water left if tears would not occur, and vice versa. However, not all the pairs of opposites are constructed in the same way.<sup>168</sup> (It is important to note that this poem – like many others – shows signs of revisions, almost as if Michelangelo considered poetry as an art in which it was never possible to write a conclusive word.) The first three pairs of opposites pave the way for two more pairs of opposites – pain and joy (*dolore-dilecta*), life and death (*vita-morte*) – that, contrary to what has happened so far, do not simply contrast each other but, by emerging *one from*

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<sup>168</sup> On Michelangelo's approach to poetry as a form of "writing by the means of adding" see Ida Campeggiani, *Le varianti della poesia di Michelangelo, Scrivere per via porre* (Lucca: Maria Pacini Fazzi Editore, 2012); see also William J. Kennedy, *Petrarchism at Work: Contextual Economies in the Age of Shakespeare* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 100-32.

*the other*, sanction simultaneously the victory of the ‘positive’ opposite over the ‘negative’, the primacy of the latter over the former. The future prospective of death and pain (*morte e 'l duol*) make the poet happy, joyful, and this results in a prolongation of his life. In other words, the poet suffers and wants to die, but the thought of death makes him happy and turns his desire of death into a reaffirmation of life. The excessive pain (*troppo dolor*) produces life (*me lascio vivo*), it makes the poet live longer than the other people who suffer less, and in doing so, it decrees the victory of life over death as well as the primacy of death over life as its cause, origin, point of departure.

To conclude, poem 45 is made of analogies that apparently are similarly constructed as balances of opposites, but that in fact present different meaning and logical implications, depending on their position within the poem itself. The first three analogies then introduce other contrasting forces which build their oppositions differently, i.e., in a way that one opposition does not simply contrast with the other, but rather emerges from it. The poem sees the metamorphosis of pain into joy and death into life as an effect of the *crudel pietade spietata mercede*, the supreme principle that seems to guide what happens to the poet: a principle that will be addressed in the next section of this essay.

### 1.3

The concept of *spietata mercede* changes as we approach madrigal 149 where the question of an “excessive grace” (*superchia aita*) complicates the poem’s argument.<sup>169</sup> This poem constitutes the center of a triptych (148, 149, 150), in which the three pieces share the same theme and a generally similar structure. The image of the excessive flame that fires up the heart reappears in these lines that refer to a lady “full of grace” (*di grazie piena*) who blinds people with the splendor of her gift. Excess (*superchia*) and fire (*fiamma*) appear again. But this time, the flame mentioned in these verses is the flame of grace, which introduces us to another instance of *superchio*.

Non posso non mancar d’ingegno e d’arte  
a chi mi to’ la vita  
con tal superchia aita,  
che d’assai men mercé più se ne prende.  
D’allor l’alma mie parte  
com’ochio offeso da chi troppo splende,  
e sopra me trascende  
a l’impossibil mie; per farmi pari  
al minor don m’alza; e qui convien ch’impari  
che quel ch’i’ posso ingrato a llei mi mena.  
Questa, di grazie piena,  
n’abonda e ’nfiamma altrui d’un certo foco,  
che ’l troppo con meno caldo arde che ’l poco.

I can’t help seeming to lack talent and art to her who cares my life with such excessive help that one would get more out of much less mercy. Although my soul departs like an eye hurt by one who shines too much, and rises up above me to what’s out of my reach, it doesn’t raise me with it to make me equal to the smallest gift of my lofty, calm lady: from which I should learn that what I can do

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<sup>169</sup> Saslow’s translation: *excessive help*; Engelhard’s translation: the exact words are not translated.

leaves me unworthy of her. This lady, full of grace, has so much that she light others with a limited fire, for too much burns with less heat than does a little.

This poem, dedicated to Vittoria Colonna, shows the effect of grace on the poet by exploring where grace takes him and beyond what limit it pushes him. What happens to the poet under grace? A mystical experience takes place: the soul detaches from the body and brings the poet beyond his ordinary possibilities, or as the poem suggests, it enables him to transcend what he has earlier found to be impossible. This is to say, the excessive grace renders possible for the poet what is normally impossible, as he transcends *his own* impossibilities (*impossibil mie*). The soul's detachment from the body is introduced by an imperfect analogy: "d'allora l'alma mie parte | com'ochio offeso da chi troppo splende | e sopra me trascende | a l'impossibil mie | ... then my soul departs | as a wounded eye by a too shiny object | and takes me above \ over \ beyond (trascende) my impossibilities."

Curiously, the analogy is barely apparent: if the eye transmits a too bright light, it simply burns (temporarily or permanently) rather than transcending itself. The analogy could be stronger – though this remains just a hypothesis — if one should read *partire* as *de-partire* as in modern Italian *dipartita*, which indicates the death of someone. But in this case the reading of the poem would be even more complicated: "my soul leaves" would become "my soul dies" as a wounded-eye retreats from a too bright thing.

The grace of this lady is excessive (*superchia aita*) and deadly, since it literally takes the poet's life away (*mi to' la vita.*) We have encountered a possibility of some

salvation, but this time it is not antithesis (*spietata mercede*) that qualifies this possibility, but rather the excess of mercy (*superchia aita*). The poet laments his situation by saying that there would be more advantage for him if this infusion of grace had been weaker. There is a paradox here: How can anyone ask for “less salvation”, “less grace”? What would that mean? What does it mean to say that the grace is too much, to the point that it kills its receiver? Moreover, what kind of grace is a grace that kills? What are these paradoxes trying to suggest? Let us consider what the other two poems say about this issue:

148

Con più certa salute  
men grazia, donna, mi terrie ancor vivo;

...

Doppia mercé mie picciola virtute  
di tanto vince che l'adombra e tolle;

Less grace from you, my lady, would keep me alive with more certainty of safety, | ... | your double graciousness so overcomes | my little strength that it eclipses and robs it.

150

Non men di grazia, donna, che di gran doglia  
ancide alcun, che 'l furto a morte mena

...

Simil se tuo mercé, più che ma' soglia,  
nella miseria mie d'affanni piena,  
con superchia pietà mi rasserena,  
par, più che 'l pianger, la vita mi toglia.

Great mercy, my lady, no less than great pain can kill someone who's brought to death for theft, | ... | Likewise, if your grace greater than I'm used to in my miserable life, so full of troubles, should quiet me with an excessive mercy, then it seems to take my life more than my tears do.

In 148 we have a double grace (of the lady) facing a small virtue (of the poet). The result of this encounter is death: the poet would be still alive (*terrie ancor vivo*) and in good health (*con più certa salute*) had there been less grace. The double grace shadows, annihilates, and destroys the small (*living*) virtue of the poet.

In sonnet 150 the image is reiterated: grace condemns someone to death no less than theft. A significant difference appears if one compares poem 150 to the other two poems, with respect to the theme of the deadly effect of grace. In poem 150 the deadly power of grace is mitigated by the verb “seems” (*par*). The experience of grace is so strong that he feels *as if* he is dying (but not really): “Similarly, when your mercy ... with its excessive piety comforts me, it seems like (*par*) is taking life away from me, rather than just the tears.” More than taking away the tears, the mercy of the lady seems (*par*) to take his life away. Either this sentence alone is enough to challenge the others, or it provides their explanation. But it is very hard to decide. One possibility, a ‘strong’ reading, could be that the terms of the argument compete with each other in the polemical way described above. For the second possibility, a ‘weaker’ reading, the terms would coincide with each other to explain the argument more clearly. A third – more intriguing – possibility might be that both ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ operate simultaneously. The inconsistent use of the verbs makes the point particularly difficult

and each use may suggest one of the different possibilities sketched above: in poem 148 the mood chosen is conditional (*terrie ancor vivo, pecto serie manco molle*) and would correspond to the first hypothesis; in madrigal 149, the verbs are all in the indicative (*to' la vita, l'alma mia parte... e sopra me trascende*), and could point to the second hypothesis; while in sonnet 150 one finds the subjunctive (*par, più che 'l pianger la vita mi toglia*), and that could correspond to the third, more complex, hypothesis.

Whether or not grace is deadly or “almost” deadly, the problem still remains and it pushes us to reconsider the ordinary meaning of the word “grace” as well as the possibility of its deliverance. Given the overabundance of grace on one hand and the weakness, the fragility of the poet on the other, can one still think that deliverance is possible? In other words: How can grace be delivered if the poles of this exchange are so out of balance, with grace being so strong and vital virtue so weak? Can the poet really be saved and can salvation really take place given that the poet himself laments the intensity of grace? Along the same line of reasoning, poem 148 reads:

Il troppo è vano e folle;  
...  
Quel ch'a vo lice a mme, donna, dispiace:  
chi si dà altrui, ch'altrui non si promecta,  
d'un superchio piacer morte n'aspecta

Too much is foolish and useless, | ... | What's permitted to you, lady, is bad for me: for one who gives others what they do not hope for should expect their death from an excess of delight.

The closing lines of sonnet 150 read:

Tal suo beltà, ch'Amore e 'l ciel qui folce,  
se mi vuol vivo affreni il gran contento,  
ch'al don superchio debil virtù muore.

So is your beauty, which Love and heaven sustain here wants me to live, let it  
curb its great pleasure, for from excessive gifts frail strength dies.

There is a tension – or a friction – between giving and receiving grace: what is licit (*lice*), natural, for the lady – giving grace – generates pain for the poet (*dispiace*): an excessive pleasure is forbearer of death, *d'un superchio piacer morte n'aspetta*.

Clearly, the gift of grace is too great and it brings a too great emotion to the poet that is, in turn, too weak to receive it. As poem 148 tells us, “too much is useless and foolish” and death is the result of an unexpected grace. Sonnet 150 reiterates that a weak virtue dies under an excessive gift. But, again, this death is pleasurable (*superchio piacer*) and joyful (*gran contento*). How are we to read these competing claims? How is the poet’s “death” to be understood? Is the poet spiritually dead? Is his poetry to be taken as some sort of *post-mortem* testimony? Or perhaps one should read here the reference to a grace that opens up some sort of new life? In sum, is this a way of quoting Paul when he refers to the death of the flesh and the new life of the spirit? What kind of salvation comes from a deadly grace? And, is this indirect request of the *just measure* of grace a way of saying that the grace has not been delivered? Perhaps a solution to the question would come from the possibility that deliverance is granted from another excess on the material, physical, and corporeal side of the poet, “the excess of my flesh” *il superchio della mia carne*. As we shall see in the next section, the gift of salvation is possible because grace is delivered by removing the *superchio* of the poet’s flesh: as the

sculptor with a raw block of marble, the lady saves the poet by chiseling grace, so to speak, out of him.

#### 1.4

It is now time to turn to Michelangelo's view on the mode of deliverance of grace, which is taken directly from the way he imagines the process of carving a sculpture: the lover receives salvation in the same way than an artist sculpts a block of marble. That is to say: salvation comes from without as an external force that intervenes to fill in the gap between the lover's will and his actions, "contraria ho l'arte al disiato effecto (151)." Once again, Michelangelo uses *superchio* as a key term to define this time the object of the attention of the sculptor – and the lady – during the process of creation. The aim of the sculptor is fixed on the *superchio*, which in this case refers the superfluous matter that needs to be removed. If the removal of *superchio* allows the sculptor to create a statue, then it is also an act of removal that allows the lady to liberate the lover from his material fetters.<sup>170</sup> In analyzing this instance of *superchio* I shall focus mainly on madrigal 152, with some references to sonnet 151 and madrigal 111.

Sì come per levar, donna, si pone  
in pietra alpestra e dura  
una viva figura,

che là più cresce u' più la pietra scema;

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<sup>170</sup> Saslow's translation: *excess mass of its own flesh*; Engelhard's translation: *das Übermaß der Fleisches*, Orcel's French translation: *le superflue de notre chair*.

tal alcun' opre buone,  
per l'alma che pur trema,  
cela il superchio della propria carne  
co' l'inculta sua cruda e dura scorza.  
Tu pur dalle mie streme parti puo' sol levarne,  
ch'in me non è di me voler né forza.

Just as, by taking away, lady, one puts into hard and alpine stone a figure that's alive and that grows larger wherever the stone decreases so too are any good deeds of the soul that still trembles concealed by the excess of mass of its own flesh, which forms a husk that's coarse and crude and hard. You alone can still take them out from within my outer shell, for I haven't the will or strength within myself.

Even in this poem analogy plays a fundamental role, and its grasp is key to understanding the dictate of the poem. The analogy starts with *Si* at the beginning of the composition and develops its first member through line 4; the second member, of equal length, starts with *tal* and ends with line 8. The last three lines of the poem, from *tu* till the end, reiterate what has been already established by the analogy. Here is a sketch of the analogy: *sculptor* : *block of marble* = *woman* : *man*, i.e. as the artist sculpts the marble as the woman sculpts the man. Actually, things are a little more complicated than that, and we shall give some attention to the implications of this structure.

The first part of the analogy states: “*Si* come per levar, donna, si pone | In pietra alpestra e dura | Una viva figura, |che là più cresce u' più la pietra scema.” According to Mastrocola and others, the process of creation coincides with taking away the excess of matter that encases the statue.<sup>171</sup> Thus, removing the matter in excess allows the artist

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<sup>171</sup> Mastrocola, *Rime e lettere*, 197; Saslow, *The Poetry of Michelangelo*, 35; Robert J. Clements, *The Poetry of Michelangelo* (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 61.

to liberate the sculpture. *Nota bene*, the word *superchio* does not appear in the first branch of the analogy, although we can construct its presence by comparing this first to the second branch of the analogy. In sonnet 151 one finds a similar view:

Non ha l'ottimo artista alcun concetto  
ch'un marmo solo in sé non circoscriva  
col suo superchio, e solo a quello arriva  
la man che ubbidisce all'intelletto.

Not even the best artist has any conception | that a single marble block does not  
contain | within its excess, and that is only attained | by the hand that obeys to  
the intellect.

Despite the number of confusing negations, the meaning of the verses is still clear: *superchio* here indicates the amount of superfluous stone wrapped around the statue that needs to be removed by the artist who eliminates what exceeds the right amount. Despite the apparent clarity of this concept, a closer look at the text reveals that the vision of sculpting exclusively as taking away is true, but only partial, because it does not take into account the other half of the process, i.e., adding to. Through taking something away ... one puts something in: “Si come per levar ... si pone.” In other words, the creative action is twofold, and *not* single-sided. Through the removal, *per levar*, “by the means of removing” the artist at the same time puts (or adds) (*pone*) a living image into hard stone. Scholars who see the process of sculpting exclusively in opposition to painting tend to favor only one part of the process. For instance, in her notes to the poem, Mastrocola explains how “si pone,” (one puts) really means “si ottiene” (one

obtains).<sup>172</sup> Mastrocola goes on and justifies this view with letter 213 in which Michelangelo responds to Benedetto Varchi – the author of a lecture debating whether painting or sculpting was the supreme art. According to the first part of Mastrocola’s interpretation, we should read: “oh lady, through removing [sculpting] one obtains a living figure [a sculpture] from the hard rock [a living figure] which grows the more as the stone diminishes.” Concerning the second part of Mastrocola’s argument, in the letter 213, Michelangelo claims the superiority of sculpture over painting, “però a me soleva parere che la scultura fussi la lanterna della pictura, e che da l’una a l’altra fussi quella differenza che è dal sole a la luna” (it seemed to me that sculpture was the lantern [= the source of light] of painting, and that between the two of them there was the same difference that one can find between the sun and the moon). But then he claims to have changed his mind after having read Varchi’s lecture. A few lines later, Michelangelo distinguishes between sculpting and painting: “Io intendo per scultura quella che si fa per forza di levare; quella che si fa per via di porre è simile alla pictura” (I see sculpture as what one does in force of taking away; what one does by the means of putting is similar to painting). According to this letter, sculpting is a form of violence that takes away, as opposed to painting that happens through putting into or upon.

Mastrocola’s interpretation makes perfect sense: if *si pone* means “one puts,” and *viva figura* means “sculpture,” then the meaning of those lines is something like “as the artist takes away the excess of the stone, he obtains a sculpture.” But is this what the text says? Following the structure of Mastrocola’s argument, my objection will be

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<sup>172</sup> See Girardi, *Rime*, 333, Buonarroti, *Rime e lettere*, 198; see also Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Rime*, ed. Matteo Residori (Milano: Mondadori, 1998), 264.

structured in two moments; I will argue that in these lines *porre* keeps its ordinary meaning ('to put'), and Michelangelo's letter 213 actually says the opposite of what Mastrocola claims it saying. Concerning the meaning of *porre*, it is not certain how such a verb, from the Latin *ponere*, could imply something like "to obtain." Dictionaries do not confirm such use.<sup>173</sup> Instead, I suggest to read this line keeping the ordinary meaning of *porre* as 'to put' or 'to add,' and see the *viva figura* not as the sculpture itself but as the concept, *concepto*, the art-form rather than the sculpture. The *viva figura* is the form that manifests itself in the sculpture more and more, as the stone diminishes: "oh lady, through removing one puts a living figure in a hard rock [a figure] which manifests itself more as the stone diminishes." In other words, the production of the statue coincides with the manifestation or the actualization of the concept: the sculpture is the object that manifests the art-form that has been put into it. Concerning letter 213, I find it really difficult to justify the interpretation of a poem through an extra-poetical text such as a letter without any regard to its circumstances, period and occasion of composition. In this regard, I would argue that letter 213 is not an essay on art, and that the simple opposition between "removing" and "putting" could have been dictated by the necessity of that moment to quickly defining – and opposing – sculpture and painting. Furthermore, the reference to the opposition between sculpting and painting reiterates the contrary of what tries to prove: if 'sculpting' is to 'painting' what 'taking away' is to 'adding,' then the meaning of the verb *porre* is once again – "to put", not "to obtain!"

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<sup>173</sup> Salvatore Battaglia and Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti, *Grande Dizionario Della Lingua Italiana* (Torino: UTET, 1961), Cortelazzo, *Il nuovo etimologico DELI-dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana*, Devoto, *Il dizionario della lingua italiana*.

A stronger interpretation of these lines emerges from taking into precise account the historical definition of the verb *porre* for which *ottenere* does not appear to be one of its attested meanings. The poem claims that removing and putting (*per levare ... si pone*) happen simultaneously: through the act of taking away the artist instills a living image in the stone, an image that grows more as the stone in excess diminishes.

For the second part of the analogy we have: “tal alcun’ opre buone, | per l’alma che pur trema, | cela il superchio della propria carne | co’ l’inculta sua cruda e dura scorza.” Good deeds are possible through the soul (*per l’alma*), but as the work of art lays in the rough stone, they lay in the body hidden by the excess of its flesh, and therefore need an external hand to be liberated: “Tu pur dalle mie streme parti puo’ sol levarne, | ch’in me non è di me voler né forza.” The second branch of the analogy leads to an inversion of the artist from being the active to being a passive principle. Once out of his realm, the masterful artist becomes idle, passive as a block of marble, and incapable of any will or strength to pursue good deed. (In the same fashion in sonnet 151 one finds: “contraria ho l’arte al disiato effetto.”) Sculpting and grace are analogically constructed as the same thing: as blocks of marble need an external cause to become works of art, so men are passive, deficient in will and strength, and need therefore an external force: salvation can come only from without, as a gesture of love from a lady who treats the poet like a block of marble, and sculpts the good actions, so to say, *out of him*.

How should we take the comparison between the artist and the block of marble? If the removal of stone uncovers the work of art, and so is the same true of the good deed, then where is the soul of the poet located? In other words, if the second branch of

the analogy has to hold with the first one, with the good deeds being construed as what is hidden from the “*superchio della propria carne*” (*the excess of his flesh*), then where is the soul located? A possible solution would be to identify the soul with the good deeds along the image of the first branch. In other words, the lady has to remove the excess of flesh which hides the tremulous soul (*l'alma che pur trema*) which at same time refers to the good deeds awaiting to be liberated. But then, what is this removal of flesh? What does *superchio* mean here? Superfluous, useless, as the stone? But then, how does this apply to the human body? Does it mean that the lady has to free the man from his bodily constrictions and get rid of the superfluous body in order to let the soul emerge? In other words, does the lady's grace eliminate the bodily man in order to manifest his spiritual dimension? But again, if one is to take the analogy seriously, she has to remember that when sculpting, the artist does not remove *all* the stone (there would be no sculpture otherwise) but only the quantity in excess. In other words, the living figure is put into the stone and reveals itself insofar as only the excess is taken away. Not all the stone is to be removed, for it is the receptacle of the living image: the problem focuses upon the excess that needs to be mitigated, tamed, by the action of the artist. At this point, one might play the Platonic card, and say that all the flesh is to be removed because the “flesh is the prison of the soul,” and so on... But that would conflict with the analogy of the sculpture: not all the stone is to be removed, just the portion in excess. Then, what does it mean to remove the *superchio* of flesh? Is it vice, sin? Probably, but then, in the passage between the first and the second branch of the analogy, the meaning of *superchio* changes from ‘superfluous’ to ‘excessive’, in the sense of lacking control, as needing some sort of external constriction to regain control.

We can of course find in Michelangelo's *Rime* other examples that evoke the passivity of the poet. One is his call for external action as evoked in madrigal 111: "Disegna in me di fuora | com'io fo in pietra od in candido foglio, | che nulla ha dentro, e evvi ciò ch'io voglio" Even here there is an analogy: (*tu*) : *me* (Michelangelo) = io : *pietra* (or *candido foglio*). Again, the artist is an empty receptacle, a formless matter, a blank sheet on which someone needs to write. The poetical and artistic capacities of the poet and artist are contrasted by the incapacity of the moral agent. Another example comes from the last line: "nulla ha dentro, e evvi ciò ch'io voglio" (it has nothing inside and yet (*evvi*) there is everything that I need.) The sheet is empty and yet there is everything that Michelangelo wants. How should we take this equation between nothingness and totality? Nothing *is* or *becomes* everything under the gaze of the artist? Once again, the logic at stake within the poems appears highly antithetical, beset by competing claims. Yet, these claims prove to be productive of richly complex meanings.

Going back to madrigal 152, the second term of the analogy *artist* : *marble* = *woman* : *man* introduces an inversion of the position between the lady and the sculptor. As the artist sculpts the marble to liberate (carve the figure of) a lady, so does the lady with the artist to liberate what is good in him. But there is also something more: during his work, the artist puts a living image (*una figura viva*) in the stone (or produces it, depending on how one reads it), making the statue a living creature. This representation reverses the image that we have received from antiquity, namely that the stone is a sign of death (as in the story of Medusa, which Cavalcanti, Dante, and Petrarch had evoked to deepen the philosophical complexity of their poetry). But if that is true, if the sculptor can grant life to the stone, then it should also be the same with the lady-sculptress and

the man. The text is not explicit, and therefore, we are forced to hazard some guesses. As the lover does with the stone, the beloved *should* put a soul into the artist and transform him into a living thing from the inanimate block of marble that he was previously. Does this mean that Michelangelo thought that men without the intervention of women (or lovers) were empty, soul-less bodies? Poem 240 says that “Art wills this lady’s face | to live down here as long | as years go by, in only in living stone” (Sol d’una pietra viva | l’arte vuol che qui viva | al par degli anni il volto di costei). With the story of Medusa, in all its variations until Petrarch, the imagery of the stone and the petrification is always deadly. Instead, Michelangelo suggests that there is a possibility, through art, to instill a soul into a stone and turn it into a living thing.

To conclude, my analysis has focused mainly on three elements of Michelangelo’s poetry: the use of *superchio*, analogy, and antithesis, being the first a concept, and the second and the third the structures used for its expression. With the use of *superchio* the poet gestures towards qualities associated with women and men, respectively the grace-givers and the grace-receivers. No matter which side of the opposition one occupies, the human beings who populate Michelangelo’s verses are excessive creatures, and their experience of love is extreme, simultaneously deadly and life-giving.

If the presence of such themes in Michelangelo’s poetry allows us to see him as a *poetical-thinker*, we should be careful with how we handle this expression, since it may foster the idea of some systematical thinking in Michelangelo’s compositions. Despite his use of poetry to reflect on philosophical issues, I am reluctant to call Michelangelo's view on grace, art, or love a *theory*, for two reasons: 1) we do not possess

a definitive version of Michelangelo's poems published in his lifetime, for he continued to develop his thinking throughout the thirty or forty years when he produced most of his manuscripts (roughly the late 1520s until his death in 1564); 2) the word 'theory' today suggests a set of systematically structured and organized reflections that was probably alien to the intentions of Michelangelo's poetry. Perhaps *poetical*-reflections, meditations, or thoughts, *shards* (or *glimpses*) of truth are more apt expressions to describe Michelangelo's contributions.

For this reason, I have not sought systematical thinking in these verses, and I have entertained the idea of Michelangelo being a hybrid figure between a poet, a philosopher, and an artist who *needed* verses to express the immense imaginative power of his mind. This may explain why Michelangelo favored open-ended, and highly antithetical analogies over more conventional structures of thought: those structures were the best fit for his irresistible, *superchia*, imagination. In other words, poetical expression through the use of images, analogies, metaphors, rhymes, and so on, constituted for him a better means of expression than prose. But *nota bene*, the use of these devices should not be acknowledged as something that weakens the force of thinking, as sort of handicap of the mind. Rather, Michelangelo's poetry should be read as trying to recognize his genuine contributions to thinking, *in force* of their rhetorical organization, and avoiding the immediate reduction to some former thinker. Having that in mind, I have tried to focus on and evaluate these modes of expression as another possible way of thinking, more fragile and perhaps more exposed to errors and contradictions. But surely more *beautiful*.

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