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Edited by

Peter Carravetta

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Held at Stony Brook University, April 23, 2010

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Peter Carravetta

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TOWARD A DANTEAN THEOLOGY OF EROS  
FROM DANTE'S LYRICS TO THE *PARADISO*

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For Paolo Valesio, *poeta-theologus*

In this paper I will discuss some of the connective threads between theology and eros in Dante's poetry, threads that revealed themselves while I was working on my commentary to Dante's youthful lyrics.<sup>1</sup> One of the great pleasures of working on the early Dante is to witness the spiraling process, reminiscent of the deep structure of terza rima itself in its double helix of relentless forward motion and enfolded backward glance, whereby the linguistic and poetic choices of a very young poet are revisited by the older poet later on. It is this revisiting and reimagining, this recuperation of words and ideas from the past and their transportation into new contexts and across ideological fault lines, which I will sketch here. I will offer some instances of the interwoven strands of eros and theology that forge a durable braid linking the alpha and omega of Dante's poetic praxis: on the one hand, the precocious use of theological words and concepts in early love lyrics that find their ultimate expression in the *Paradiso*; on the other, the end-of-life text where the secular, courtly, and erotic language of his youth is strangely and vibrantly alive.

Behind this paper is an agenda that I have been promot-

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<sup>1</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Rime giovanili e della "Vita Nuova"*, ed. and commentary Teodolinda Barolini, with notes by Manuele Gagnolati (Milano: Rizzoli, 2009).

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ing for some years now. We must move Dante studies past its reflexive dualism and focus on what the radical choice of a young mortal female as Dante’s *beatrice* truly signifies. Before proceeding to my readings of specific Dantean texts, I offer a personal preamble on dualism in Dante studies.

In February 2007 I had occasion to participate in the Fordham University Press Centennial Conference, an event that involved bonafide theologians – not historians, but professors at Divinity Schools who preach and practice and write theology. One of the books being celebrated was a collection of essays entitled *Toward a Theology of Eros*, from which I have borrowed the title of this paper.<sup>2</sup> One of the editors, Virginia Burrus, writes in her Introduction that to “reach for a theology of eros is already to question the binary opposition of divine love and human desire momentarily inscribed by Anders Nygren in his magisterial tome *Agape and Eros*, initially penned in the 1930s and reissued in revised form in 1953” (xiii).<sup>3</sup> Burrus continues to cite from and characterize Nygren’s thought:

“There cannot actually be any doubt,” he writes, “that Eros and Agape belong originally to two entirely separate spiritual worlds, between which no direct communication is possible.” Observing that Platonic eros is always already a sublimation of what he names “vulgar Eros,” he insists that there “is no way, not even that of sublimation, which leads over from Eros to Agape.” Neither is more sublime than the other, and neither can be derived from the other; rather the two are born rivals, reflecting fundamentally different orientations. Eros is human-centered, manifesting as an acquisitive desire or longing that charts an upward path

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<sup>2</sup> Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller, eds., *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953).

toward God as its most worthy object and transformative telos. In contrast, agape is God-centered...." (Burrus, xiv)

Nygren posits Augustine as the culprit with respect to the synthesis corrected by the Reformation: "it is Augustine's theology of *caritas*, together with Pseudo-Dionysius's Neoplatonic erotics, that Nygren credits with ultimate responsibility for medieval Christianity's thoroughgoing lapse into a synthetic, and thus counterfeit, theology of love" (xv). This sentence is fascinating to me on a variety of counts. First, as a medievalist, I consider the Christian medieval "lapse into synthetic theology" critiqued by Nygren to be anything but thoroughgoing. Rather, it is only maintained in brief high culture spurts of intensity expressed by the likes of Augustine and Dante, but hardly visible in popular culture, or indeed even in literary culture, which is instead quite unremittingly dualistic. Typically, in fact, an Occitan troubadour would recant the human desire sung in his love poetry and go into a monastery, even rising to become Bishop of Toulouse in the case of Folquet de Marselha. By the same token, when the Italian poet Guittone d'Arezzo, the greatest moral poet prior to Dante in the Italian lyric tradition, decides that he should turn to loving God, the first step is to reject what he calls "carnal voglia" ("carnal desire"). The binary *donna* versus *Dio* expressed with great clarity by the Sicilian founder of the Italian lyric tradition Giacomo da Lentini in his sonnet *Io m'aggio posto in core a Dio servire* is not anomalous within the Italian medieval corpus; rather it is Dante's synthesis of lady and God that, although not without precedents such as the poetry of Guido Guinizzelli, is anomalous in its synthetic reach. Petrarch, arguably the most imitated lyric poet who ever lived, systematically reopens the fissure that Dante seals and passed on the dichotomy between beloved and Beloved to subsequent generations.

Second, and related to the first point: given a cultural landscape in which the synthetic view of desire is hard to

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achieve, to the point that unified theories of desire seem in general to withstand with difficulty what seems to be an almost instinctive human reversion to moral Manichaeism, I confess surprise at the idea that a dualistic view is the more correct form of Christianity, or in general of any spiritual system.

There is no doubt that Dante himself utterly rejects the binary opposition of divine love and human desire posited by Nygren, and that he offers a sophisticated and nuanced vision of the Augustinian synthesis that Nygren critiqued. However, Dante’s unified theory of desire has not fared well in the critical reception, and Dante commentaries and readings have not proved up to the task of accepting and preserving the poet’s insistence on paradox. Dante criticism, with fervent exceptions,<sup>4</sup> has remained committed to its own versions of Nygren’s binary “human desire” versus “divine love”: terms like *amore corporale* versus *amore spirituale* litter the commentary tradition and are reemployed by beginning scholars. I hope that one day this way of thinking will be as outdated as a rigidly conceived body/soul dualism has already become among cultural and religious historians of the Middle Ages.<sup>5</sup> Dante’s rejection of dualism should be recuperated as part of a deeper understanding of Christian spiritual thought.

The early sonnet *O voi che per la via d’Amor passate* illustrates both the category of biblical/courtly contamination

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance Christian Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante’s “Comedy”*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), and F. Regina Psaki, “Dante’s Redeemed Eroticism,” *Lectura Dantis* 18–19 (1996): 12–19, “The Sexualized Body in Dante and the Medieval Context,” *Annali di storia dell’esegesi* 13 (1996): 539–50, and “The Sexual Body in Dante’s Celestial Paradise,” in *Imagining Heaven in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jan S. Emerson and Hugh Feiss (New York: Garland, 2000), 47–61.

<sup>5</sup> See Caroline Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).



and the category of courtly language that finds its way into the *Paradiso*. The opening verses – “O voi che per la via d’Amor passate, / attendete e guardate / s’egli è dolor quanto ‘l mio grave” (“O you who walk along the path of Love / behold and see / if there be any grief as deep as mine”<sup>6</sup> [1–3]) – translate *Lamentations* 1:12 (“O vos omnes qui transitis per viam, attendite et videte si est dolor sicut dolor meus”), but insert the words “of Love,” so that the wayfarers who in the Bible travel *per viam* are now traversing the “via d’Amor.” Here Dante both theologizes *courtoisie* and “courtoisifies” the Bible. This dialectical pollination or indeed co-penetration of poetic codes – courtoisification of the Bible and theologizing of *courtoisie* – is the more noteworthy in that *O voi che per la via* is a poem that exists in a redaction that precedes the *Vita Nuova*.<sup>7</sup> Thus, we know with certainty that this kind of *contaminatio* interested Dante even before the theologizing that is the hallmark of the *Vita Nuova*’s prose narrative.

*O voi che per la via* tells of a lover who had once been happy, to the point that he became an object of envy and people were speaking of his “leggiadro cor”: “Dio, per qual dignitate / questi così leggiadro lo core have?” (“Good lord, what worthiness / confers upon this one so glad a heart?” [11–12]). But this courtly paradise was unstable, and the following verse brings us to a present in which the poet/lover has lost his joy: “Or ho perduta tutta mia baldanza” (“Now I have lost my sense of confidence” [13]). These verses from *O voi che per la via* contain what is likely Dante’s first use of key courtly terms, the adjective *leggiadro* and the noun *baldanza*; the latter indicates the lover’s confidence and joy in pos-

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<sup>6</sup> The translations are Richard Lansing’s, prepared for the English version of *Rime giovanili e della “Vita Nuova”*, forthcoming from University of Toronto Press.

<sup>7</sup> I cite Dante’s lyrics from the 2005 edition of Domenico De Robertis. We owe a debt of gratitude to De Robertis for having published in pre-*Vita Nuova* redaction the thirteen *Vita Nuova* poems that are thus available.

sessing his lady’s love.<sup>8</sup> Another early poem, *Morte villana*, situated shortly after *O voi che per la via* in the *Vita Nuova*, contains what is likely Dante’s first use of the noun *leggiadria*.<sup>9</sup>

An important lexical conduit of courtliness in Dante’s thought, *leggiadria*, from the Occitan *leujairia*, is the courtly virtue to which Dante will later dedicate the moral canzone *Poscia ch’Amor*, in which he strives to preserve *cortesìa* by wedding courtly values to moral values.<sup>10</sup> Suspended between courtly and moral values, *Poscia ch’Amor* anticipates the *Paradiso*, where courtly values resurface, transformed and rejuvenated. Thus, the *Commedia*’s only use of the word *leggiadria* – a hapax – belongs to a description of the archangel Gabriel: “*Baldezza e leggiadria / quant’esser puote in angelo e in alma, / tutta è in lui*” (“Boldness and cheer, as much as there can be in an angel or a soul, are all in him” [Par. 32.109-111]).<sup>11</sup> The hapax *leggiadria* is paired with *baldezza*, a variant of *baldanza* (in *Con l’altre donne mia vista gabbate* Dante uses *baldezza* in the redaction that precedes the

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<sup>8</sup> Another early sonnet placed by Dante in the *Vita Nuova*, *Con l’altre donne mia vista gabbate*, contains *baldezza* in the redaction that precedes the *Vita Nuova* and *baldanza* in the redaction of the *Vita Nuova*. *Baldanza* occurs in the *rime* again in the *congedo* of *Amor, tu vedi ben*, one of the *rime petrose*.

<sup>9</sup> The adjective *leggiadro* appears in Dante’s lyric poems four times: once in *O voi che per la via* and three times in the canzone *Poscia ch’amor*, dedicated to *leggiadria*. The noun *leggiadria* appears in Dante’s lyric poems seven times: once in *Morte villana*, once in *Per una ghirlandetta*, once in *Sonar braccetti*, three times in the canzone *Poscia ch’Amor*, and once in *Due donne in cima della mente mia*.

<sup>10</sup> On the canzone *Poscia ch’Amor* from this perspective, see my essay “‘Sotto benda’: Gender in the Lyrics of Dante and Guittone d’Arezzo” in *Dante and the Origins of Italian Literary Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), esp. pp. 338-42.

<sup>11</sup> The adjective *leggiadro* appears in the *Commedia* only twice, both times in a courtly setting: “*L’antico sangue e l’opere leggiadre*” (*Purg.*11.61); “*rime d’amore usar dolci e leggiadre*” (*Purg.* 26.99).

*Vita Nuova* and *baldanza* in the redaction of the *Vita Nuova*),<sup>12</sup> so that the *Paradiso* verses bring together the two courtly words that were first in proximity in *O voi che per la via*: “Dio, per qual dignitate / questi così *legiadro* lo cor have? / Or ho perduta tutta mia *baldanza*” (11-13). There is thus a direct lexical path from the courtly paradise of our humble *sonetto rinterzato* to the very different paradise inhabited by Gabriel. And, too, there is no avoiding the courtly – and thus, inevitably, eroticized – halo that as a result adorns the archangel Gabriel in Dante’s paradise.

The categories we have considered, the theologizing of a courtly lexicon and biblical/courtly *contaminatio*, expand into the “courtoisification” not just of language but of the celestial *mise-en-scène*, as we find in the early canzone *Donne ch’avete*, where all of heaven clamors for the lady: “Lo cielo, che non have altro difetto / che d’aver lei, al suo signor la chiede, / e ciascun santo ne grida merzede” (“Heaven, whose only imperfection is / the lack of her, implores its Lord to ask / for her, and all saints favor this request” [19–21]). Given that the core conceit of these verses, a defect in heaven, is, as Foster and Boyde put it, “theologically absurd,”<sup>13</sup> I prefer to speak of a will to “theologize” on the part of the young Dante, rather than of true theology. But the early idea stayed with him and was eventually expressed with more theological correctness in *Paradiso* 30, where Dante writes that the beauty of Beatrice is such “che solo il suo fattor tutta la goda” (“that only her Creator enjoys all of it” [*Par.* 30.21]).

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<sup>12</sup> Dante seems in the *Commedia* to have resolved his uncertainty as to *baldezza* versus *baldanza* in favor of *baldezza*: in the *Commedia* we find *baldanza* only in the *Inferno*, referring to Virgilio’s loss of confidence in front of the devils at the gates of Dis (“Li occhi a la terra e le ciglia avea rase / d’ogne *baldanza*” [*Inf.* 8.118-19]), while *baldezza* is reserved for *Paradiso*, where it indicates a supremely positive confidence (*Par.* 16.17 and 32.109).

<sup>13</sup> See Foster and Boyde, *Dante’s Lyric Poetry*, vol. 2 (Commentary), p. 100.

The use of the celestial *mise-en-scène* is not in itself innovative; it was used by Guinizelli in *Al cor gentil* and by Dante in the canzone *Lo doloroso amor*, where he details the situation of his soul when it has arrived before the divine tribunal as a means of expressing the tragic violence of his feelings. Thus, in *Lo doloroso amor* he writes that if God does not pardon the soul its sins, it will depart with the punishments it deserves (“e se del suo peccar pace no i rende, / partirassi col tormentar ch’è degna” [“and should He grant its sin no amnesty, / it will depart with torments that are just”] [35–36]), but in such a way as to not be afraid (“sì-cche non ne paventa” “but which it does not dread” [37]). How can it be that the soul of the poet will not be afraid of the punishments of hell? In a reprise of Giacomo da Lentini’s Sicilian topos of the image of the lady painted in the heart of the lover, the poet explains that his soul will be so intent on imagining his lady that it will not feel any pain: “e starà tanto attenta / d’immaginar colei per cui s’è mossa, / che nulla pena averà che ella senta” (“it will be so intent / on contemplating her who made it leave / that there will be no pain that it might feel” [38–40]).

*Lo doloroso amor* is one of the very few of Dante’s lyrics to contain the name “Beatrice”,<sup>14</sup> and in it Dante thematizes the name and the issue of naming, albeit in a negative fashion that will be surprising to readers of the *Commedia*: “Per quella moro c’ha nome Beatrice” (“I die for her whose name is Beatrice” [*Lo doloroso amor*, 14]). *Lo doloroso amor* will reverberate in Dante’s memory in the seventh canto of *Paradiso*, where we find, as in the canzone, the link between the name of Beatrice, first divided “pur per *Be* e per *ice*” (*Par.* 7.14) and

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<sup>14</sup> In the lyrics that do not belong to the *Vita Nuova*, the name “Beatrice” appears only in *Lo doloroso amor*; in those belonging to the *Vita Nuova* it appears twice in the canzone *Li occhi dolenti* and once in the sonnet *Oltre la spera*, while the sonnet *Deh pellegrini* contains the noun “beatrice.” The diminutive “Bice” appears only in the sonnet *Io mi senti’ svegliar*, placed in the *Vita Nuova*.

then written whole in verse 16, and the hyperbole of the lover who does not feel the punishments of hell:

Ma quella reverenza che *s'indonna*  
di tutto me, pur *per Be e per ice*,  
mi richinava come l'uom ch'assonna.  
Poco sofferse me cotal *Beatrice*  
e cominciò, raggiandomi d'un riso  
tal, che nel foco faria l'uom felice...

[But that reverence that rules all of me, even just with *Be* and with *ice*, made me bow like a man falling asleep. Beatrice didn't let me suffer for long, and she began, dazzling me with a smile such that would make a man happy in the fire... (*Par.* 7.13-18)]

Here are the vestiges of *Lo doloroso amor* in *Paradiso* 7: the courtly world that is invoked in the neologism "*s'indonna*" (*Par.* 7.13); the reference to the *nomen* as a *signum*, the name made sign by the division into syllables, *Be* and *ice*, the name that we "see written", as in the words of *Lo doloroso amor*: "Quel dolce nome che mi fa il cor agro, / tutte fiate ch'i' lo vedrò scritto" (*Lo doloroso amor*, 15-16); and above all the description of the lady's laughter, capable of immunizing her lover from the pains of hell: "un riso / tal, che nel foco faria l'uom felice" (*Par.* 7.17-18).

The courtliness of Dante's *Paradiso* will require more investigation if we are to understand the deep social implications of the ongoing expression of feudal values on the part of a poet who grew up in an urban commune. My focus is on the ways in which the *cortesia* of *Paradiso* supports the creation of a non-boundary between eros and divine love, impulses that Dante places on a continuum. Let us now turn to the theology that we can see *in potentia* in secular and courtly verse: the category of theological ideas that we can

trace back to early texts where these ideas appear as poetry that is not yet overtly theological. I am referring to secular poems – not overtly theologized like *Donne ch'avete* (in bono) and *Lo doloroso amor* (in malo) – that are nonetheless witnesses to the *longue durée* of Dante's theological thought. One such is the great sonnet on friendship *Guido, i' vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io*. Perhaps not surprisingly, given that friendship is a subset of love, *Guido, i' vorrei* tackles issues that will haunt Dante throughout his life, in particular the tension between the self and the other, a variant of the metaphysical problem of the one and the many. *Guido, i' vorrei* is about the desire for non-difference, for complete reciprocity and transparency. From the names and pronouns of the first verse that indicate the ontologically individual state of the three friends – Guido, Lapo, and Dante himself are three separate subjects, even grammatically – we pass to the unitary state in the plural verb at the beginning of the second verse: “Guido, i' vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io / fossimo presi per incantamento” (“Guido, I wish that Lapo, you, and I / were carried off by some enchanter's spell” [1-2]). The *three* identities, whose individuality is signified by the pronouns “io” and “tu,” will become part of *one* unity, carried off in *one* boat. Already we hear in this program a distant announcement of the many attempts in the *Paradiso* to give poetic life to the idea that the Three will become One while always remaining Three.

In the octave of *Guido, i' vorrei*, Dante imagines a state of complete and achronic harmony, in which the friends are protected from the flux of time and the multiple; the dream in fact includes immortality as well, living “*sempre in un talento*” – always in one desire. In this state of atemporality, of absolute non-difference (for time is what condemns us to difference: “Lo tempo, secondo che dice Aristotile nel quarto de la Fisica, è 'numero di movimento, secondo prima e poi” [*Convivio* 4.2.6]), the desire for further harmony – “*star insieme*” – can only grow: this is a virtuous circularity, in which living always according to a single desire will make

the desire to continue living together ever stronger. The sonnet imagines individuals that, while still remaining individuals – while still remaining Dante, Guido, and Lapo – are capable of suspending their every individual desire, and thus avoiding every “impedimento,” every conflict. Dante proposes to eliminate the different wills of the three protagonists, without however nullifying the ontologically separate and irreducible beings indicated through the succession of names and pronouns. We have here, projected onto a profane and magical screen, a reality that is only verifiable in theological or supernatural terms: in daily reality, our separate identities necessarily imply divergent wills, hence conflict. Outside of a supernatural context, perfect unity is not possible without violating individual identity.

The melancholy of *Guido, i' vorrei* is inherent in the fact that this dream of avoiding difference remains a dream, even in the language of the poet that recounts it. The similarities with certain passages from *Paradiso* are instructive: in *Paradiso* these desires are related in the present or the future, while *Guido, i' vorrei* inhabits the conditional from beginning to end. In *Paradiso* these are not dreams, but imagined realities, in the same way that in *Paradiso* Piccarda's verse is not “*vorrei che nella sua volentade fosse nostra pace*” (“I wish that in His will *were* our peace”) but “*n la sua volentade è nostra pace*” (“in His will *is* our peace” [*Par.* 3.85]).

Another youthful and secular poem with latent theological content is the courtly canzone *La dispietata mente che pur mira*. Particularly interesting here from our perspective is the Dantean variation of the Sicilian topos of the image of the lady painted in the heart of the lover. In the canzone, Dante compares the duty of the lady to the lover, who carries her image painted in his heart, to the duty of God to human beings, created in His image:

E certo la sua doglia più m'incende  
 quand'io mi penso ben, donna, che voi



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per man d'Amor là entro *pinta* sète:  
così e voi dovete  
vie maggiormente aver cura di lui,  
ché Que' da cui convien che 'l ben s'appari  
per *l'immagine* sua ne tien più cari.

[And more intensely is its pain inflamed  
when I reflect, my lady, that it's you  
inside who's painted by the hand of Love.  
And so indeed you must  
devote to its wellbeing much greater care,  
for He from Whom we learn about the good,  
holds us more dear because we bear His image  
(*La dispietata mente*, 20–26)]

The poet declares that the suffering of his heart increases when he thinks that the lady's image is painted there. The lady should take care of the heart on which her image is impressed, just as God takes care of us human beings because he sees in us His own image. Dante has radically transformed the ancient Sicilian topos of the lady painted on the heart of her beloved, moving it in a theological direction through the analogy between the lover who bears the lady's image impressed upon his heart and the human creature who bears the divine image of his Creator impressed upon him.

At the end of the *Paradiso* the image of the lady painted in the heart of the lover becomes the human image painted in the “heart” of the Trinity, that is, our image painted in Christ. The second of the three circumferences seen by the pilgrim, the one that represents Christ, “*parve pinta*” – “*pinta*” is a word that originates with Giacomo da Lentini's *Meravigliosamente* – “*de la nostra effige*” (“appeared painted with our effigy” [*Par.* 33.131]). The word “effige,” deriving from *effingere*, “to paint,” here substitutes the word more typical in the lyric tradition, “*figura*” (as in Giacomo's “*nfra*



lo core meo / porto la tua *figura*" ["within my heart I carry your image" [*Meravigliosamente*, 8–9)], and reinforces the meaning of "pinta." As if to underline the path that leads from the old lyric topos to *Paradiso*, the only other use of "effige" in the *Commedia* refers to the "effige" of Beatrice in *Paradiso* 31: "ché s'ua *effige* / non discend'ea a me per mezzo mista" ("her image / came down undimmed by anything between" [*Par.* 31.77-78]). The final incarnation of the lyric lady and the theology of the incarnation are linked by a meditation on image-making and on the relationship between image and reality, between the flesh and the spirit, that has its roots for Dante in Giacomo's *Meravigliosamente*.

A canzone like *Donne ch'avete* features not only the overtly theologized mise-en-scène that we have discussed but a more latent theology. The fourth stanza of *Donne ch'avete* begins with the provocative question of a new interlocutor, Love: "Dice di lei Amor: 'Cosa mortale/ come esser pò sì adorna e sì pura?'" ("Love says of her, 'How can a mortal thing / become so perfect and so beautiful?'" [43–44]). Mortality and purity, values that are usually antithetical (mortality equals corruption), are here united. This is the stanza that according to the *Vita Nuova* prose is about "la nobilitate del suo corpo" ("the nobility of her body" VN XIX.18 [10.29]) and it is important to note the dignity that Dante here confers upon the body, the "cosa mortale" that is not eliminated or absorbed or sublimated but consecrated: this "cosa mortale" is – Love teaches – so wondrous and pure, "sì adorna e sì pura" (44), that "Dio ne 'ntenda di far cosa nova" ("God means to make of her a new and wondrous thing" [46]). The two facts – the lady's mortality and her miraculousness, her newness with respect to all other beings – are in this way tightly linked, even by the *dispositio* of the verses, where "cosa mortale" and "cosa nova" mirror one another:

Dice di lei Amor: "*Cosa mortale*  
come esser pò sì adorna e sì pura?"

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Poi la riguarda, e fra se stesso giura  
che Dio ne 'ntenda di far *cosa nova*

[Love says of her: “How can a mortal thing  
be so attractive and as well so pure?”  
He look at her and to himself he swears  
that God intends to make a thing that’s new.

(*Donne ch’avete* 43-46)]

The fourth stanza of *Donne ch’avete* presents a lady who is a miraculous being but who conserves at the same time the characteristics of a mortal woman: “Color di perle ha quasi, in forma quale / convene a donna aver, non for misura: / ella è quanto de ben pò far natura” (“Her color is like pearl, of such a hue / as well befits a lady, not too much. / She is the best that nature can create” [47–49]). She is not, like the Cavalcantian lady of *Fresca rosa novella*, “*oltra natura*” (“beyond nature” [31]). Instead, she is the best that nature can create: “ella è quanto de ben pò far natura” (49).

Dante does not deny the lady’s mortality in the canzone that confirms her radical exceptionality. Her mortality is essential, as will be seen in the meeting with Beatrice in *Purgatorio* 31, where “*cosa mortale*” echoes our canzone: “e se ‘l sommo piacer sì ti fallio / per la mia morte, qual *cosa mortale* / dovea poi trarre te nel suo disio?” (“and if the highest beauty thus failed you with my death, what mortal thing should later have drawn you to desire it?” [*Purg.* 31.52–54]). In the end, Dante’s great discovery with regard to his lady lies precisely in her being both “*cosa mortale*” and “*cosa nova*”: simultaneously inside and outside of the natural order.

The conflation of “*cosa mortale*” and “*cosa nova*” is pre-figured by the conflation with which *Donne ch’avete* begins, the radical copula “*intelletto d’amore*,” whose fusion of intellect and will anticipates *Paradiso*. We need only think – to give two stunning examples among the many possible – of

the fusion of the faculties of intellect and will in the verses “Imagini, chi bene intender cupe” (“Imagine, you who desire to understand” [*Par.* 13.1]), where “intender” is the verb of the intellect and “cupe” is the verb of desire, and “Affetto al suo piacer, quel contemplante” (“Absorbed in his pleasure, that contemplative” [*Par.* 32.1]), where the first clause coincides with desire and the second with the intellect. The mystical fusion of the faculties at the end of *Paradiso* is anticipated by the preposition *di* in the *iunctura* “intelletto d’amore,” an early intuition of the achieved theology behind *Paradiso* 30’s magnificent verses: “luce intellettuale, piena d’amore / amor di vero ben, pien di letizia” (“intellectual light, full of love, / love of true good, full of joy” [*Par.* 40-41]).

As I noted at the outset, we have created in Dante studies a critical edifice that has never properly accommodated the eroticized language that Dante uses in paradise, language that he uses to characterize not only Beatrice but also the Transcendent Principle itself. The suggestion that there is an erotic component to Dante’s love – that love is best expressed through language that is sometimes eroticized – is not an idea that easily acquires traction in our critical tradition. To illustrate what I mean, I will conclude by sharing a very witty joke from the Italian University milieu, which came to me courtesy of Paolo Valesio. The joke takes the form of a box with a pharmacological appearance; on the box is inscribed, as though the name of the medication within, the first verse of Dante’s famous stilnovist sonnet *Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare*. The sonnet of Dante’s youth is literally (in the world of this literary joke) a contraceptive. Reading the sonnet is prescribed to diminish and eliminate sexual desire, thus preventing conception; the package contains dosages of the poem to be taken daily according to a strict schedule. The medication is composed of 14 hendecasyllables and one concept, “l’amor platonico” (“platonic love”): “Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare, contiene 14 endecasillabi (11 sillabe x 14 versi) ed un concetto, l’amor platonico.”

Under the heading “interazioni” the instructions explain that the contraceptive efficacy of *Tanto gentile* will be impaired if taken contemporaneously with other treatments, poems or prose of erotic content, of ambivalent significance, as for example the erotic *pastorella* of Guido Cavalcanti, *In un boschetto*, Boccaccio’s *Ninfale fiesolano*, the Introduction to Day 4 of the *Decameron*, and Boiardo’s *Amorum libri*: “Meditazioni irregolari ed una diminuzione della sicurezza contraccettiva si possono verificare allorché i contraccettivi orali siano stati assunti contemporaneamente ad altri trattamenti quali poesie e/o prose di contenuto erotico, di significato ambiguo, d’inno all’amor venereo (es. *In un boschetto* trova’ pastorella dei laboratori G. Cavalcanti s.p.a.; *Ninfale fiesolano* o l’introduzione del giorno IV del *Decameron* della G. Boccaccio s.r.l.; gli *Amorum Libri* del gruppo M. & M. Boiardo s.p.a.).”

Here, in extremely concentrated and witty form, we have the fundamental cliché that infuses so much discussion of the concept of love in Dante. And we see moreover that the cliché has triumphed: it has entered the cultural imaginary as a given. Our task is to disseminate and make equally clichéd a more accurate assessment. First of all, the poem *Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare* deserves a more nuanced reading: the lover’s sigh has clear erotic connotations in the courtly lyric, and the sonnet’s famous concluding command that the lover express himself in a sigh – “Sospira” – is not therefore without a subtle but irreducible eroticism. Moreover, as we have discussed, Dante is a poet who has no qualms about importing physical erotics into the transcendent sphere, creating in *Paradiso* his own theology of eros. Thus he depicts divine co-penetration with magnificent neologisms, forging verbs from the pronouns *lui*, *mi*, and *tu*: “Dio vede tutto, e tuo veder s’inluia ... s’io m’intuassi, come tu t’inmii” (“God sees everything, and your sight in-hims itself ... if I were to in-you myself, as you in-me yourself” [*Par.* 8.73, 81]).

Dante does not seem able, or willing, to discuss love without reference to eros. In the examination on *caritas* ad-

ministered by St. John, the apostle examiner poses a question regarding God's love whose language – “with how many teeth does this love bite you?” – echoes the erotic aggression of one of the *rime petrose*. The Italian verse, “con quanti denti questo amor ti morde” (*Par.* 26.51), closely echoes “co li denti d'Amor già mi manduca” from the youthful canzone of violent and deadly eros, *Così nel mio parlar* (32). Dante challenges us to fashion for ourselves a divinity that does not disembrace human eros, but rather makes it one with *l'ultima salute*. *L'eros s'inleia, la salute s'inluia*.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The verb is based on *Paradiso* 22.127, “prima che tu più t’inlei” (“before you more in-her yourself,” where the “her” referred to is “l’ultima salute,” “the final blessedness” of *Par.* 22.124).

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