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The Ethical Aspects of the Concept of 'amore' in Dante's Œuvre

When looking into the ethical concept of Dante, one cannot avoid analysing the important question of the nobility of the soul. In this essay I study the poetry of the 80s and 90s of the Italian *Duecento*, in other words, the years when the *dolce stil nuovo*, the sweet new style, flourished. Dolce stil nuovo rose above the other poetic styles thanks to its novel approach to the concept of love, or *amore*. The approach that the artists of the new form chose was mystical and they attempted to combine the concepts of love and otherworldly happiness. The fundamental notion of these poets was that only a noble mind and pure heart can nurture love, and without this a man is unable to feel love for a woman. At the time, women were seen as an angelic presence on Earth, and were capable of helping their lovers reach for otherworldly happiness. Needless to say that this kind of love could not be a carnal love.

Naturally, at the centre of this study we find Dante's *stilnovismo*. Like many of his contemporaries, Dante also met the dolce stil nuovo. This famous meeting between the Master and the Zeitgeist bore the fruit known as *The New Life*, but elements of stilnovismo can be found in Dante's other works as well, including the *Convivio* and the *Comedy* (let us just think of the canto of Paolo and Francesca). In this paper, I analyse how the sweet new style and its underlying philosophy appear in Dante's œuvre.

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In order to identify the historical and cultural premises for this essay, I should start by outlining the two key roots that combined to allow the Tuscan stilnovismo to flourish; namely, the traditions of the Sicilian literary school and Provençal troubadour poetry. I should also mention the fertile seedbed that provided nourishment to the style, that is, the deep religious fervour that was omnipresent in the Middle Ages. By way of introduction, let us take a closer look at these cultural and historical circumstances.

While Central and Northern Italian cities started to become more and more independent centres of power, Southern Italy would witness the birth of a large

kingdom under the rule of the Swabian Hohenstaufen dynasty during the 12th and the 13th centuries (Romano–Vivanti 2005. 194–196). Under the rule of the Hohenstaufen – and especially under Frederick II – a power system was established that successfully applied the traditions of the German-Norman state structure, thus creating a new governmental structure in Europe. It was a rational, rigorous, modern state with public administration based on strict rules. The reader may rightfully find scant connection between Dante's lyrics of love and the stern rooms of the royal court. However, the court is precisely where it started, as paradoxically, it was the rigours of state that provided the best framework for significant artistic and cultural growth, and in fact it would become the greatest poetry workshop of that place and time. The cold and rigorous royal court offered its officials very little joy and very few opportunities for self-fulfilment, which led them, or forced them, to write poems for their own amusement, the majority of which were love lyrics. Of course, the environment in which they were written had a huge impact on these poems, which often became vehicles for stereotypical characters, as they usually included men subordinating themselves to the women they loved, and swearing allegiance to them, which is analogous to the oath of fealty that served as the basis for the feudal system. In Ugo Dotti's words, it is extremely difficult to find any signs of a spontaneous love or sincere emotion suddenly arising in Sicilian love poetry. Rather, these poems include mannered, reasoned, often enigmatic images (Dotti 1963. 9–10). If we take a look at the provenance of these officials/poets, we can see that they were neither aristocrats, nor church dignitaries. They were mere commoners, who understandably did not define their nobility and qualities based on their origins but based on their actions, and even more importantly on their ability to give and receive love. Consequently, according to this poetic perception, nobility as a social status had to give its place to the nobility of the soul (Dotti 1963. 9–10). Of course, the question of how this literary and cultural wave got from Sicily to Florence has rightly been questioned. And the answer lies in the scientific migration that was taking place in Italy at the time. Medieval universities (especially the University of Bologna and a little later the University of Padua) were rich melting pots of scientific, literary and artistic traditions, and the University of Bologna, for instance – which Dante himself almost certainly attended in the 1280s – demonstrably played an important role in transmitting and spreading Sicilian literary traditions. So it is not surprising that the Dolce Stil Nuovo became well known and appreciated relatively easily and rapidly in Florence as well.

Naturally, 13th century Tuscan love poetry, which Dante later dubbed the sweet new style, seems to originate from other roots as well. In terms of its development and its central theme, 11th century Provençal troubadour poetry can most definitely be seen as one of these roots, as it also places emphasis on the subordinate relationship of the poet to the woman he loves (Viscardi 1993. 11). For the sake of historical accuracy, it is of course worth noting that the two

key roots I have mentioned already had their own literary predecessors. Indeed, interpreting nobility as the predisposition of the individual for spiritual nobility had long literary and philosophical traditions, thanks to Aristotle, Seneca, Juvenal, Boethius and others.

Besides the literary traditions that form the two key roots, the flourishing of the Tuscan stilnovismo was rooted in the fertile seedbed of medieval religious fervour. The idea – that is considered almost a cliché today – that Christianity was ever-present in medieval European society, contributing to the birth of Europe, once again is not compromised (Le Goff 2003. 31–61). This is because love can most definitely be considered the central theme of the sweet new style. In fact, it was an entirely new concept of love based on religious transcendence, which was to replace the affective concept of previous historical eras. In the following sections I analyse this concept of love in detail.

Once the traditions of the Sicilian literary school and Provençal troubadour poetry reached Tuscany, it was not long before Dante came into contact with them, and he could not escape being affected by them and indeed he went on to become one of the most significant representatives of stilnovismo. But Dante was not alone, and it is also worth mentioning Guido Cavalcanti, Lapo Gianni, Gianni Alfani, Cino da Pistoia and Dino Frescobaldi as other adherents to the style. These poets did not form an actual literary school, although their subject matter, their themes and their answers brought them together into one movement. Dante, and other poets considered representatives of the sweet new style wished to abandon the pagan eroticism passed down through the Middle Ages by classical antiquity and wanted to fill their poems with something deeper and more substantial than a simple appraisal of the physical form. This resulted in the birth of the concept of the angel-like woman (*donna angelicata*), who, with her love, guides her beloved to a higher and purer spiritual dimension, thus helping make himself worthy of standing before God in heaven. This angel-like woman is a major transformation from the female character in pagan antiquity, which awakened carnal desires. In the sweet new style this woman was part of the divine structure and contributed to the eternal salvation of the man that loved her. So love played a central role in the worldview of the new style and became the antithesis of the antique concept of love, as unlike the latter (just think about the Lesbia poems of Catullus) it is free from any physical aspects.

Although Dante was not the only representative of this important style, what distinguishes him from other stilnovists, is that he tried to frame his literary endeavours into a system based on a structured concept. Dante's very first work was *The New Life* (*La Vita nuova*). This text, which is thought to have been written between 1292 and 1294, is where Beatrice makes her first appearance, and her character would go on to provide a framework for Dante's entire œuvre. The title, *The New Life*, means nothing other than the new life following the death of the beloved woman, Beatrice, and the book was inspired by the real-life

Beatrice's death in 1290. The physical and inner description of the female character clearly reflects the female characterisations already known from Provençal troubadour poetry. The woman is noble-minded, pure of heart and virtuous, and she is also the "destroyer of all the vices and the queen of the virtues" (*The New Life* X). Following the description of all the joy and spiritual pain that love brings, the reader is shocked to read of Beatrice's death. As a result of the sudden loss of his beloved, Dante faces an unprecedented emotional crisis, which he is trying to drag himself out of by showing weakness towards the call of other women. Among all the female characters in the book, *Donna gentile*, whose real name could be Lisetta, and who is introduced in chapter XXXV, stands out. She attracted Dante's attention because she looked like Beatrice. The poems in this section are characterized by the writer's constant compunction, as he feels unfaithful to Beatrice and to her memory due to his relationship with other women. Dante's bad conscience is most notably expressed in chapter XXXIX, where he shows deep remorse when thinking about Beatrice. The book ends with the image of the lady looking down from heaven as an angel-like apparition.

In general, the literary canon welcomes Beatrice's character with scepticism. The characterisation is stereotypical, flash-like and symbolic. The Dantist viewpoint therefore started to become a dualist one, according to which a real Beatrice could exist alongside an abstract one that was idealised in Dante's mind and works. The history of literature never misses a chance to mention the daughter of Folco Portinari, Beatrice, who married a rich Florentine banker, Simone de' Bardi at a very young age. It is possible that this noble woman was the very same that Dante showed adoration for in his poems, but it almost unthinkable that this was a sexual love, as Dante had a wife, Gemma Donati, who bore him with several children, and Beatrice also had a husband. The sceptical reader might argue that the fact that they were married to others is no reason to exclude the possibility of a physical aspect to their relationship, but let us keep in mind that this was the Middle Ages, when it was much harder for men and women to meet privately than it is today.

The potentially realistic elements of the relationship between Dante and Beatrice are very well demonstrated in Alessandro Barbero's recent Dante monography. Mostly referring to Boccaccio's *Trattatello in laude di Dante*, Barbero first tells us the story of the relationship between the young Dante and Beatrice. He then analyses the relationship from a psychological point of view. According to this analysis, they first met in spring 1274 at a public feast, when Dante was nine years old and little Beatrice had just turned eight. Barbero reminds us here that even though men and women did not celebrate together in the Middle Ages, this did not apply to children, which is why it was feasible for a young master Dante to meet miss Beatrice. Beatrice was wearing a crimson dress (a detail greatly emphasised by our writer), which was the first thing to attract Dante's attention, who fell in love with the girl immediately. Child psychology helps us

out here, as the first, idealised love, free of any sexual attraction can, and often does, develop at this age. Children of this age are usually attracted by physical traits, such as a smile, a lock of hair, a gesture, or even a remarkable crimson dress (Barbero 2020. 19–30). Nine years later, in 1283, when Dante was eighteen and Beatrice seventeen, Dante catches a glimpse of her again. Beatrice is now married but she waves to poet. After meeting the young woman, Dante has an erotic dream that he describes in chapter III of *The New Life*:

> In his arms I thought I saw a sleeping person, naked but for a crimson silken cloth that seemed to be draped about her, who, when I looked closely, I realised was the lady of the saving gesture, she who earlier that day had deigned to salute me. (*The New Life* III.)

The lines again confirm that Dante did indeed meet the real Beatrice. There might have been an abstract Beatrice as well, who only existed in Dante's poetic world, although it is impossible to completely separate the two. Here Dante probably reaches back to the traditions of Provençal troubadour poetry written in the Occitan language. The troubadours would choose a real, but unattainable noble lady of the royal court – usually the wife of the lord of the castle – whom they idealised and whom they wrote poems to. This theory is supported by the choice of the name as well. *Beatrice*, in medieval Tuscan as well as in modern Italian, is the substantivised form of the adjective *beato, -a* ('blessed') and means "she who brings blessing". It is worth noting that this name appears often in Provençal poetry, for example in the troubadour song of Raimbaut de Vaqueiras, *Kalenda Maya*, in which the beloved woman is also called *Beatriz*. This all supports the idea of an idealised Beatrice living in Dante's poetic universe, in co-existence with the real physical person. The symbolic character is further demonstrated by the numbers divisible by three that appear in the biography, all referring to the Trinity.

As mentioned before, this love – whether earthly or heavenly – comes to an end with Beatrice's sudden death. Her demise is not described in detail, and the reader gets the impression that it is all just a flash preparing them for the lady's reappearance in the Earthly Paradise in the *Divine Comedy*. Canto XXX of the *Purgatorio*, where Beatrice, showered in flower petals, is resurrected (remember the famous lines: "Manibus, oh, date lïlïa plenis" – *Purg.* XXX. 21), practically echoes the following lines in *The New Life:* "[…] a wonderful vision appeared to me, in which I saw things which made me resolve to speak no more of this blessed one, until I could more worthily treat her" (*The New Life* XLIII).

It is worth noting the tripartite structure of the text, once again referring to the Trinity, takes the form of the thesis–antithesis–synthesis model. The thesis of the idealised, platonic love for Beatrice is denied by the antithesis of the physical attraction towards Donna gentile. This emotional deviation is even-

tually balanced by remorse, the synthesis of Beatrice's appearance and a later reference made to her return in the *Divine Comedy* (Szabó 2008. 21).

Due to the specific structure of Dante's love lyric, a certain branch of Dantists, including Giovanni Pascoli,[1] René Guénon[2] and Luigi Valli[3] have always been particularly interested in the esoteric aspects of Dante's concept of love, especially at the rise of the 20th century. These writers assume that Dante could have been a member of an initiatic group *Fedeli d'Amore*, which was inspired by the traditions of the Knights Templar and that of the Rosicrucians, and as such was considered one of the predecessors of Freemasonry. According to these interpretations, Dante's love lyric actually uses a secret language to express and spread certain esoteric doctrines. Although these interpretations are definitely justified and, as such, need to be respected, they are not in the scope of this paper.

Dante elaborates the majority of his philosophical theses in books III and IV of the *Convivio*, which was written during his exile, roughly between 1304 and 1307. When examining book III, we immediately discover a quite exact definition of love: "Love, taken in its true sense and subtly considered, is nothing but the spiritual union of the soul and the thing which is loved" (*Convivio* III. 2). According to Dante, in the case of living beings, love is always directed at something. Plants are usually attached to a certain place, animals are able to express emotions towards one another, whereas humans love creatures that are close to their Creator, God. That is why men direct their love at the idealised, angelic woman, who, by her heavenly nature, is a creature close to God. Consequently, by spiritually uniting with the heavenly woman, men find the Lord as well. Eventually this completes the logical circle that forms the basis of the philosophy of love Dante shared with the stilnovists (Cseke 2011. 269), which is seen as either impressive or nearly inhuman depending on the viewpoint. Naturally, this kind of rationalisation of love has its own literary background. The biggest bestseller of its time, *Roman de la Rose*, written in langue d'oïl, also tried to rationalise love, and present the burning, passionate, instinctive feeling as something negative. This idea appears in the anonymous sonnet cycle, *Fiore o detto d'Amore* as well, which some actually attribute to Dante himself.

Concerning the human soul Dante argues that it is the most noble among the souls of all beings, as it is the human soul that was given the largest portion of divine nature, and since its existence also depends on God, its aim is to form a spiritual union with Him. According to the poet, this reveals a lot about humans: "This union is what we call love, whereby we are able to know

[1] Pascoli 1898.
[2] Guénon1925.
[3] Valli 1928.

the quality of the soul within by seeing outside it those things which it loves" (*Convivio* III. 2). Indeed, this feeling cannot be born in any soul. In order to explain the phenomenon, Dante refers to Aristotle's treatise *On the Soul*, according to which the soul has three potentials; namely, nutritive, sensible and rational. The human soul includes all three potentials and is the most perfect, and through the potential of reasoning the human soul is part of the divine nature as eternal intelligence.

Besides being Dante's most well-known work, the *Comedy* is also his last work. Accordingly, the content and images depicted in the poem reflect a mature Dante. From certain points of view, however, the work reaches back to the basics, thus providing a framework and – unbeknownst to Dante himself – a closing chapter for his entire œuvre. After several decades of not mentioning Beatrice, she unexpectedly reappears in the *Comedy*, and with her come stilnovist themes again, such as the concept of the noble heart or the image of the angel-like woman. Naturally, Beatrice is not depicted in the same way as she was in *The New Life*. Dante suggests that after her death, the lady rose to the kingdom of heaven to help and, if needed, redirect men who once adored her to the right earthly path. It is known that based on the fiction of the *Divine Comedy* it was Beatrice who assured that Dante would not get lost once and for all in the dark wood symbolising sin, and that, as such, following the purge that was the journey through the afterlife, Dante would deservedly reach the Earthly Paradise. Beatrice's appearance is therefore understood as the victory of the angel-like woman concept: she is the one with whom Dante proves – even if within the framework of literary fiction – the verity of the idea that he had established in his stilnovist period decades earlier.

The elements of the new style can be discovered in several parts of the *Comedy* but are most pronounced in the *terza rimas* of Canto V in the *Inferno*. In this canto, Dante does not apply his stilnovist theories to his own love – as he did in *The New Life* – but rather to the love of Paolo and Francesca. The reader might get the impression that Dante intended to experiment with the ideas he developed while writing *The New Life* in one of the cantos of the *Divine Comedy*, and then examine it from this external point of view.

If we take a look at Canto V of the *Inferno*, we can immediately see that the sinful souls are tossed and whirled by the winds, which is a *contrapasso* referring to their sin of loving improperly and immorally, just drifting with the feeling. In other words we can say that these souls experienced their feelings according to the antique concept of love, and therefore subordinated their rational mind to carnal pleasures, which equated to a moral failure. Dante discovers the characters of Paolo Malatesta and Francesca da Polenta among the lascivious. The love story of Paolo and Francesca was regarded – especially in the age of romanticism – as a symbol of the glorious victory of love over feudal and dynastic conventions, which might convey a message to the modern man as well.

Some argue that this romantic reading, which was still quite popular even during the 20th century, reflects an obsolete, honeyed and improper interpretation, and overlooks the real concepts of stilnovismo.

Francesca's famous anaphoric lines read as follows:

Love, that can quickly seize the gentle heart,
took hold of him because of the fair body
taken from me – how that was done still wounds me.
Love, that releases no beloved from loving,
took hold of me so strongly through his beauty
that, as you see, it has not left me yet.
Love led the two of us unto one death.
(*Inf.* V. 100–106.)

Francesca demonstrates that in terms of stilnovismo she possesses relatively good, but not sufficient knowledge. The quoted *terza rimas* recall certain lines of Guinizzelli's love lyric. However, despite a thorough knowledge of these lines, the interpretation is wrong. Béla Hoffmann argues that the interpretation of Francesca is a superficial one, which tries to apply transcendence-based stilnovist ideas to her emotions towards Paolo, conceived in sin and infidelity. Of course, we could interfere and ask how the love between Paolo and Francesca could be sinful given that it was based on pure emotions, and as such could not be displeasing for stilnovists either. But this reasoning would omit the principle of the new style which states that love may only be born in a pure heart, and this purity precludes any infidelity. And besides falling into the sin of lust, the sinners in Canto V of the *Inferno* were also unfaithful: Francesca sinned against marital fidelity, whilst Paolo – by reciprocating his sister-in-law's feelings – sinned against fraternal fidelity. After hearing Francesca's monologue, the poet bends his head in shame:

These words were borne across from them to us.
When I had listened to those injured souls,
I bent my head and held it low until
the poet asked of me: "What are you thinking?"
(*Inf.* V. 108–111)

Francesca's deviation from the right path reminds Dante of the path he almost went along. As if suddenly, from the depths of our mind, Dante's words from the dark wood echo in our ears: "I was so full of sleep just at / the point where I abandoned the true path" (*Inf.* I. 11–12). The words of Vergilius when introducing the unearthly traveller to Cato of Utica also come to mind: "This man had yet to see his final evening? / but, through his folly, little time was left / before

he did – he was so close to it" (*Purg.* I. 58–60). Dante and Francesca share a thing in common: abandoning the right path to walk towards failure. But there is also an important difference between them. As opposed to Francesca, Dante repents of his sins, which comes thanks to the angelic woman, Beatrice. This angel of his is no other female creature but the woman he fell in love with back when he was a child, and who intervened at the right moment so that Dante would not get lost in the dark wood, symbolising sin, in Canto I of the *Inferno*. Beatrice, worthy of her name, meaning "she who brings happiness", indeed guides Dante to salvation and close to God. When the woman appears we read "Benedictus qui venis" (*Purg.* XXX. 19). With this sentence the poet undoubtedly evokes Jesus's entry into Jerusalem from the Gospel of John: "Benedictus qui venis in nomine Domini" (John 12,13). Thereby Beatrice, like a new saviour, takes Christ's place (Cseke 2011. 266).

When seeing Dante again, the angel-like creature reprimands him for his deviation:

> arrow of things deceptive struck you, then
> you surely should have lifted up your wings
> to follow me, no longer such a thing.
> No green young girl or other novelty –
> such brief delight – should have weighed down your wings
> awaiting further shafts. The fledgling bird
>
> (*Purg.* XXXI. 55–60).

In conclusion we can say that in the *Divine Comedy* we are witness to the distinction made between two widespread concepts of troubadour poetry, *fin'amor* and *fals'amor* ('true love' and 'false love'). Following the death of Beatrice, Dante indeed chose the wrong path, and having forgotten the woman, turned towards fals'amor, which means he started to look for the company of women such as Donna gentile who could never have led him to God. But fals'amor can be seen between Paolo and Francesca as well. In the *terza rimas* of the *Divine Comedy* Francesca tries to justify her own sinful love with the stilnovist concept of love. However, this is a mistake as she cannot differentiate between the stilnovist fin'amor and the fals'amor she experienced.

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