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On Imaginative Activity in Dante's *Vita Nuova*

It was Guglielmo Gorni, who shortly examined the manifestations and functions of vision and imaginative activity in Dante's work in his commentary, added to Dante's work and published in 1996 (Alighieri 1996a. VI–XXXII). Gorni in his analysis examines only the two first visions of the hero-narrator. He declares in a well-established manner that the “mirabil vision” (“mirabile visione”) in the end of the work, which is interpreted by a quite high number of scholars as Dante's allusion to the preparation for writing the *Comedy*, has a different character and aim from the two first visions, appearing in the narration as a description the hero-narrator's dreams. We accept this difference made by Gorni and consider the last paragraph or chapter of the *Vita Nuova* as a metapoetic allusion of Dante-author.

However, there can be found more references to the acts of imagination, vision and fantasy, and it seems worth to make a potential difference between them. Apart from the first two “real” visions of the text, the words *vision*, *imagination* and sometimes the word *fantasy* figure as the work's repeating words. Let's see these word-appearances, and afterwards we will examine the first two visions at the beginning of the text, emphasized by Gorni:¹

1. *imagination*: XV. (8) “sì tosto com'io *imagino* la sua mirabile bellezza, sì tosto mi giugne uno desiderio de *vederla*...”

2. *imagination* and *fantasy*: XXIII. (14)

Così cominciando ad errare la mia *fantasia*, venni ch'io non sapea ove io mi fosse; e *vedere mi pareva* donne andare scapigliate piangendo per via, maravigliosamente triste; e *pareami vedere* lo sole oscurare, sì che le stelle si mostravano di colore ch'elle mi

¹ As it well-known, Gorni in his study developed a new numbering of the chapters of Dante's work on a philological basis. In mine analysis the first Roman numbers sign the traditional chapters, while the Arabic ones follow the so-called Gornian paragraphs.

faceano giudicare che piangessero; e *pareami* che li uccelli volando per l'aria cadessero morti, e che fossero grandissimi terremuoti. E maravigliandomi in cotale *fantasia*, e paventando assai, *imaginai* alcuno amico che mi venisse a dire: “Or non sai? La tua mirabile donna è partita di questo secolo”. Allora cominciai a piangere molto pietosamente; e non solamente piangea *ne la imaginazione*, ma piangea con li occhi, bagnandoli di vere lagrime. *Io imaginava di guardare* verso lo cielo [...] e fue sì forte la erronea *fantasia* [...] e sì forte era la mia *imaginazione*. [...] E parlandomi così, sì mi cessò la forte *fantasia*...

(And see the the hero-narrator' reflection in the next, XXIV. chapter (15): “vana *imaginazione*”.)

3. *imagination*: XXIV. (15) “mi giunse *un'imaginazione* d'Amore...”

4. *imagination*: XXXIX. (28) “quasi ne l'ora de la nona, una forte *imaginazione* in me, che mi parve vedere questa gloriosa Beatrice con quelle vestimenta sanguigne co le quali appariva prima a li occhi miei...”

5. *vision*: XLII. (31) “Appresso questo sonetto appare a me una mirabile *visione*, ne la quale io vidi cose che mi fecero proporre di non dire più di questa benedetta infino a tanto che io potesse piú degnamente trattare di lei.”

We can see that the word *imagination* is prominent in the *Vita Nuova*, and partly followed by the words *vision* and *fantasy*. But what about with the two first visions in the first part of the work? The first one can be read in the first paragraph (by the original philological statement in the 3rd chapter) when the hero-narrator dreams that Amor is bringing the sleeping Beatrice in his arms to him; afterwards Amor wakes her up and makes her to eat the Dante-hero's heart.

III. (1) E pensando di lei, mi sopragiunse uno soave sonno, ne lo quale mi apparve una maravigliosa *visione*: che me pareva vedere ne la mia camera una nebula di colore di fuoco, dentro a la quale io discerneva una figura d'uno signore di pauroso aspetto a chi la guardasse [...]

E mantenenente cominciai a pensare, e trovai che l'ora ne la quale m'era questa *visione* apparita, era la quarta de la notte stata, sì che appare manifestamente ch'ella fue la prima ora de le nove ultime ore de la notte.

However enigmatic this vision might seem, we know that it is a literary *topos*: Gorni mentions as a possible sort of it for example the Provençal Guilhelm de Cabenstanz's poetry (Alighieri 1996a. XXXII). From another aspect, the act of eating of the other's heart can be interpreted as an event of union of two persons. And the union between Dante-hero and Beatrice constitutes the main topic

and the aim of the whole work called *Vita Nuova*. Consequently, this initial vision takes the role of the motive power of the narration in the work.

The other one uses all the formulations of *imagination* and *vision*:

IX. (4) E però lo dolcissimo signore, lo quale mi signoreggiava per la virtù de la gentilissima donna, ne la mia *imaginazione* apparve come peregrino leggermente vestito e di vili drappi. [...] *A me parve* che Amore mi chiamasse, e dicessemi queste parole [...] E dette queste parole, disparve questa mia *imaginazione*.

XII. (5) Avenne quasi nel mezzo de lo mio dormire che *me parve vedere* ne la mia camera lungo me sedere uno giovane vestito di bianchissime vestimenta, e pensando molto quanto a la vista sua, mi riguardava là ov'io giacea [...]

Ondo io ricordandomi, trovai che questa *visione* m'era apparita ne la nona ora del die.

(In XIII. [6] Appresso di questo soprascritta *visione*...)

And we should stop here for a while, because the construction of the *Vita Nuova* from a certain point of view seems to represent the composition of an archaic or mythical narration. As Olga Frejdenberg, researcher of the origins of Antique Greek literature states, the formation of narration has as his origo the *image*. She emphasizes that visions representing the ancient forms of narration and the stories with visions have a visual character and testimony that the origin of narration is hidden in *showing an event, seen personally by the story-teller* (Фрейденберг 2008b. 353–354). So the way of creation of the ancient story leads from the „show” of a vision to narration, more simply: from image to words. The so called „I-narration” has been created by the image or images of the world, firstly in form of ekphrasis and vision, and afterwards has become narration.

Still remaining at the thought of myth, we can admit with Kerényi and Eliade, that images and symbols represent a special, not conceptual, not rational form of cognition. This revelation seems to repeat in the modern hermeneutic theory, too: Gottfried Boehm argues that cognitive power of *deixis* consists in the act of showing: the shown object shows itself as it is alike. The act of showing constructs a new space for cognition, essential feature of which can be named *intentionality* (Boehm 2014. 19–36).

If the essence of an ancient narration can be revealed in the show of a vision, of an image seen by the story-teller, it can be identified with exploration of Logos, as Frejdenberg writes. Narration, when its cognitive essence changes, loses his nature of Logos and “image”. In that moment narration remains like an image, but, in the meantime, it obtains a conceptual nature: it can be revealed in the appearance of a *two time-representation*, in representation of past and present (Фрейденберг 2008b. 359–360).

The *vision* interrupts narration and interprets its topic. In that way results a conceptual generalization. The show of a vision gradually becomes a comparison, then allegory or symbol, and, in the end, a metaphor (Фрейденберг 2008b. 353). Dante's *Vita Nuova* in this sense may be considered as an example for the origin of allegory, symbol and, last but not least, the origin of metaphor.

The archaic narration emerges from atemporality. Narration by our modern concepts reaches its form when past become separated from present. The forms of atemporality of narration are the *frame* and the visioned *image* (Фрейденберг 2008b. 353). The role of the image seems clear in Dante's work (it is quite enough to think about the two first visions or the images drawn by the hero-narrator); what regards the frame, it can be easily demonstrated, considering Beatrice's two imaginary appearances in the beginning and quite in the end of the text, in both text-places in blood-coloured clothes. And also the Latin words in the beginning and in the end of the text ("*Incipit vita nova*", "*qui est per omnia secula benedictus*") fulfils the function of frame.

The archaic narration is a mythical story-telling which has well-formed characterizing features. One of these is that the story "speaks" about the hero, *who is the narrator itself*. The talk is going on the narrator, personally, and on his acts and passive behaviours, victories and faults. In that process direct speech begins to separate within itself the indirect narration from the absolved or experienced events (Фрейденберг 2008b. 364). Consequently, the image gradually becomes to be a *concept* in the process of narration.

It is worth to consider the role of the "explicit images" articulated in the text. The second one in the XL. chapter (or in the 29th paragraph) does not describe, only mentions the famous image of Christ, conserved in Veronica's scarf. We could say, here the word *image* realizes his archaic meaning: the image means *imitation*, an exact copy of the "original", of the „real thing" (Фрейденберг 2008a. 307). As Mircea Eliade stresses, the word *imago (image)* has a linguistic relationship with the word *imitor*, meaning 'imitate, reproduce' (Eliade 1991. 24). But, as it is known, this reproduction obtains a new character in the artistic work: the factual *mimesis* of reality becomes an illusory reflection of a real phenomenon. In the new phase of literature the image does not aspire to follow "truly" the so called reality any more: the interpretative way of thinking becomes much more important. And, as Frejdenberg emphasizes, this is the way of the *generation of a metaphor*: the original meaning and the meaning of its transmission were identical earlier, but this identity was later replaced by the illusion of it, by the illusory appearance of imagination. This transmission could not be effectuated if the concrete and real identity (Frejdenberg's example: the way, the road as a factual road) had not been changed to an apparent and abstract identity (the way, the road as the "way of life" or "way of thinking"). So in the artistic work *mimesis* achieves a new nature: this is the starting point to construct the "image" of the world which is already intentionally illusory and can "embrace" every visual

form of reality (Фрейденберг 2008a. 308–310). But one can realize a quite similar thought in Ricœur's works (Ricœur 1975a, Ricœur 1975b).

After this theoretical argumentation the text-places articulating the words *imagination* or "*I imagine(d)*" in Dante's work can be read as signs of a double or metaphorical meaning, as signs of the narrator's creative poetic activity. Since Dante here renews the medieval genre *prosiemtrum*, treating and explaining his own lyrical pieces, constructing an original and personal story not only about Beatrice, but first of all about himself. In the *Vita Nuova* one can definitely separate the so called schematic *sujet*, inherited from the Middle Ages, and the original and personal poetic achievement (Веселовский 1940. 493–501). The *artist creans* appeared towards the end of the Middle Ages as a sort of *alter deus*, as it is often declared. Umberto Eco also sees a new approach to the artistic process, citing Purgatory's twentieth chapter 52–54, where the poet declares that he conserves what Amor dictates to him word by word. In this gesture we can reveal a very new consideration of the act of invention:

(Ma di s'i' veggio qui colui che fore
Trasse le nove rime, cominciando
"Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore".)
E io a lui: „I' mi son un, che quando
Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo
Ch'e' dita dentro vo significando.
(*Purg.* XXIV. 49–54 [Dante and Bonagiunta].)

From this aspect John Took's opinion can be evaluated very considerable: he directly interprets the *Vita Nuova* „as Dante's characteristic tendency towards self-organization” by the way of “self-interrogation” and “self-education in and through the words” (Took 1990. 43–44). And that is why we can't agree with the statement of Leo Spitzer who stresses – in one of his studies on the *Vita Nuova* – that fantastic activity of a poet is only a work of memory, a reproducing memory. In his opinion, Dante speaking about visions should be conceived only as an act of repeating, without the liberty of poetry borning *hic et nunc* (Spitzer 1992. 54).²

It is rather interesting that Spitzer uses only the word *fantasy* and not *imagination*, however there should be some difference between the structure of sense in the two lexems. The word *fantasy* appears in Dante's work only in the 23rd chapter (in the 14th paragraph) and seems to have some “negative” character (“errare la mia fantasia”, “erronea fantasia”, and when Dante uses the word *imagination*

² “L'attività fantastica del poeta si presenta solo come un ricordare, per così dire, riproduttivo: strano stato di cose per un poeta che a noi pare aver difeso e affermato come nessun altro il diritto all'attività produttiva della fantasia umana [...] Quando Dante racconta una visione, ciò è per lui un ripetere; non domina in lui la libertà della poesia che nasce *hic et nunc*.”

as a synonym of that „mistaking” fantasy, imagination also gets a negative attribute: “vana imaginazione”) (Iser 1993).³ As if fantasy was a quite arbitrary, a freely rambling activity without any limit, or to say, without a *form*, which could give it its frames. While imagination appears as an active creating potentiality which forms as lyric poems of the opera, as the narration, and, finally, the whole work. We can remember Eliade’s words, emphasizing that imaginative faculty makes certain the balance between the individual and collective psyches; who has an imaginative power, enjoys a rich internal world and an endless and spontaneous stream of images. However, spontaneity does not mean an arbitrary fantastic activity. The word *imagination* derives from *imago*, as Eliade stresses, so our imagination imitates, reproduces, reactivates and repeats the “Images” as models without end. To have an imaginative activity it means to see the world in his totality. That is why the power and “mission” of the images reveal and show everything what resists to conceptual thinking (Eliade 1991. 24).

Turning back to the second vision of our hero-narrator in the XII. chapter (or in the 5. paragraph), here we can see (or read) Amor’s another visit where he carries on talks with Dante. This vision has a significant importance from the aspect of the linguistic processes of the text, since Amor at first starts to speak in Latin language and Dante does not understand the meaning of his sentence, so he asks him in Italian (“»Che è ciò, signore, che mi parli con tanta oscuritade?»”). After that Amor answers to him in Vulgar language, too, and this fact is stressed in the narration: “E quelli mi dicea in parole volgari...” Moreover, Amor here calls upon Dante to write poems “in rhymes”, so that in Vulgar (Italian) language and gives him an advice which can be considered as a little lyrical theory, since he advises him the adequate use of the figure of apostrophe (“queste parole fa che siano quasi un mezzo, sì che tu non parli a lei immediatamente, che non è degno; e non le mandare in parte, senza me, ove potessero essere intese da lei...”). So this vision appears directly as a start of the conscious poetic activity of the hero-narrator (Manni 2013. 31–36).⁴

From the examples of *vision*, *imagination*, *fantasia* and *image*, enumerated in the beginning of this paper, the 40. chapter is still missing.⁵ This chapter explicates the topic of *drawing* and *figure* – the latter can be understood as visual,

³ It is well-known that some theories of literature define “imaginery” as an authentic territory of poetic activity – see for example, Wolfgang Iser.

⁴ The appearances of the number 9, aiming to Beatrice, create more connection between the two dreams of the Dante-hero-narrator. As for the importance of vulgar language, see one of the most recent publications: Manni 2013, with special emphasis on the pages 31–32.

⁵ XXXIV. (23) “io mi sedea [...] ricordandomi a lei, *disegnava* uno angelo sopra certe tovallette [...] ritornai mi a la mia opera, cioè del *disegnare figure* d’angeli: e facendo ciò, mi venne uno pensiero di *parole*, quasi per annovale, e scrivere a costoro li quali erano venuti a me; e dissi allora questo sonetto, lo quale comincia: *Era venuta*; lo quale ha due cominciamenti...”

XL. (29) “in quello tempo che molta gente va per *vedere* quella *immagine* benedetta la quale Iesu Cristo lasciò a noi per essempro de la sua bellissima *figura*...”

drawn figure, or as a spoken or written one, too –, and finally the subject of words. It seems to represent the change of narration from the image to the word, a crossing from the drawn, pictorial figures to the figures of speech and language, and consequently, to the creation of lyric poetry. (“ritornaimi a la mia opera, cioè del *disegnare figure* d’angeli: e facendo ciò, mi venne uno pensiero di *parole*, quasi per annovale, e *scrivere* a costoro li quali erano venuti a me; e dissi allora questo sonetto, lo quale comincia: *Era venuta*; lo quale ha due cominciamenti...”). As if it demonstrated the division of the artistic activity into to „parts”: into a visual, pictorial and a verbal one. Consequently, it cannot be only an accident that we can find the only lyric poem (a sonnet) with two beginnings exactly here. This double-beginning sonnet seems to symbolize the reduplication of the imaginary artistic activity. Nearly like Boehm illuminated the strict connection between *image* and *word*, with the help of etymology: he revealed that in the most of Indo-European languages the verbs meaning ‘to say, to tell’ or ‘to show’ have a common root. This root is *dik*, which in the Sanskrit (*dic*) means ‘to show, to let see’, in the ancient Greek *daikumi* has the sense ‘I show’, in the Latin *dico*-, ‘I say’, and in the Gothic language *gateikon* means ‘to show, to sign, to publish, to utter’ (Boehm 2014. 35).

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