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The Transcendent Nature of Beauty

According to the author Andreas Capellanus, those without the power of sight are damned to live without love because they cannot gaze upon the beauty of their beloved. Their blindness renders them incapable of contemplating their beloved's aesthetics and elevating their attraction to the more intelligible form of love. This correlation between love and beauty is echoed by Dante in his *libello* when he writes: "Beauty appears then in a woman's form...pleasing to the men's eyes, the sight of her/ awakens in the heart intense desire...[and] eventually gets Love himself to stir" (Dante 16). However, as much as beauty is presented as a possession of the physical, the "excessive meditation upon the beauty of the opposite sex", (Capellanus 28) which is responsible for generating love, implies a transformational process that edifies beauty from the sensual to the comprehensible.

Additionally, this metamorphosis of beauty is not without divine intervention of the Soul. The Soul, which is said to be the "author of the beauty found in the world of sense...makes beautiful to the fullness of their capacity all things whatsoever that it grasps and molds" (Hofstadter 147). Thus, spiritual faculties involved in the metaphysical procession of beauty suggests a goal to a divine destiny. According to Theologian Hugh of St. Victor, "the beautiful leads to God" (Matter 249). This implicitly suggests that the Soul, "a fragment as it were of the Primal Beauty" (Hofstadter 147) directs the lower order beauty of the physical sense to its origin—the Divine or Primal Beauty. In this way, beauty becomes transcendental. The prolonged contemplation of its physical representation inspires spirituality. Using the *Vita Nova* as a case study, I will explore this proposition and substantiate the ability of Beatrice's beauty to provoke

passionate love in Dante, and later transmute it to a divine love and reverence for God as the source of all beauty.

To understand beauty as an instigator of love, we must first investigate medieval thought on the concept of love, a phenomenon inspired by visual precepts. The writer Andreas Capellanus defines it as “an inborn suffering resulting from the sight of and immoderate thinking about an image of the opposite sex” (Cherchi 28). Its tendency to instruct a man into “thinking incessantly about [a woman’s] image...[wondering] about her limbs”, culminating to “[a] lust for her” presents love as an entity that exudes eroticism (Cherchi 28). Its eroticism dates back to the day of its conception, when, according to the Priestess Diotima in the Symposium, its parents were under the influence of “nectar and merriment” (Hofstadter 69) and devised seduction. Love’s description as a sort of malady emanates from its driving force—fear—which drives the lover to be apprehensive about “being rejected because one is poor or ugly” or the “torment of jealousy” when the object of desire is in the hold of another (Cherchi 28). More so, fear as a driving force results from an obsessive want of the object of beauty to come into the ownership of the lover. Since the beautiful is always seen as a manifestation of goodness, and Love as a spirit that mediates “all the intercourse and converse of god with man” (Hofstadter 69), where God is the ultimate source of goodness, Love abridges the lover to the goodness of God or that of the beautiful, and thus becomes the desire for an “everlasting possession of the good” (Hofstadter 72).

Going by the previous definition of love as a desire for the good, the lower order beauty interpreted through visual perception is the physical manifestation of the good that Love seeks to bring to the possession of the lover. In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine recognizes that the things we love win our affection with their grace and beauty. Thus, to further understand this

phenomenon, he raises the question, “What then is the beautiful? And what is beauty?” (St. Augustine 794). According to medieval philosophy, beauty is a hallmark that imitates the imagined in the mind of the Creator; “[it] becomes a sign of God’s handiwork” (Hofstadter xv). In this way, beauty gains a theological connotation and a spiritual obligation of symbolizing the divine. During this medieval time period, aesthetics, contrary to the modern sense, meant “‘knowledge acquired through sensory experiences’, which was the basis of all human knowledge...and thus included the realms of moral and political thought as well as that of the natural world” (Carruthers 17). Therefore, aesthetics was perceived to be pedagogical in nature, in that it held moral responsibility of prompting people to the truth. This idea is echoed by philosopher Albert Hofstadter when he states that, “truth can be gained through what pleases in sight because the beautiful inspires love and the aspiration of love is, if guided by faith, towards the truth” (Hofstadter xv). Not only is the interrelationship between beauty and love aimed at advancing both institutions, but their interdependence is in search of the truth of the divine.

The search for the divine in the *Vita Nova* is propelled by the emphasis of imaging heavenly beings in the figure of Beatrice. This is in accordance to Christian mythology, where the creation of man and woman was presided by God’s will to “make man in [His] own image, and after [His] likeness” (Genesis 1:26). Theologian Richard Viladesau expounds on this corporeal relationship by equating it to the occurrence of “[seeing] a reflection in a mirror or a representation in a painting or in a sculptor” (Viladesau 90). In this respect, the “outer exterior image” of Beatrice “[is] understood to be an image of things beyond itself”, in this case, an image of God. For this reason, during the first anniversary of Beatrice’s death, Dante’s reminiscence of her causes him to “sketch an angel on some board” (Dante 48). According to the literary critic Charles Williams, an image succeeds when it derives from something higher than

itself and represents that greatness from which it derives. Likewise, Beatrice's bodily representation borrows from the higher state that it is modelled after and causes Dante to render the memory of her, not in her lower order form but in the Primal Beauty that she mirrors. Additionally, Dante infers that "she is no mere mortal woman...[but] one of the beautiful angels in heaven" (Dante 38). The imaging of Beatrice as a demi-god iterates the life of Christ. Just as Jesus pulled crowds during his famous sermons such as the Sermon on the Mount or His preaching on the Sea of Galilee, this same popularity is apparent "when [Beatrice] passed along the street [and] people ran to see her" (Dante 38). Therefore, Beatrice's popularity is an embodiment of Christ's spiritual following, making Dante her faithful disciple tasked with spreading her "Gospel". In this manner, theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar's assertion that "from the beautiful the way must also lead into the religious dimension" (Balthasar 34) parallels Beatrice's experience as a rendition of Christ.

In addition to imaging, beauty in the Vita Nova is also manifested in numerical patterns, symmetrical order and linear positioning. In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle voices that the "mathematical sciences" are involved in attributing "order and symmetry and definiteness" as the "chief forms" of beauty. (Hofstadter 96). This is depicted in the company that Beatrice keeps, whose composition exhibits a "harmonious arrangement of parts", which, according to St Augustine, exhibits beauty (O'Connell 15). During Dante's second sighting of Beatrice, he recalls her "passing along a street" whilst "dressed in pure white, between two gracious women, both of whom were older than she" (Dante 4). The positioning of Beatrice as the pivot of the whole company of gracious women is allegorical to the centrality of her existence. Not only does her central position inform her important role, but the impact of her "intoxicatingly lovely" greeting, which caused Dante "to see to the farthest reaches of beatitude" and "to [feel] such

bliss that [he] withdrew from people as if [he] were drunk” is a sign of her divine potential (Dante 4). What’s more, the arrangement of the trio parallels the biblical event of Christ’s crucifixion in Golgotha, where “they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left” (Luke 23:33). Christ’s central positioning, just like Beatrice’s, symbolized the fundamental role he would play in salvation through the completion of his death. In a similar way, Beatrice’s centrality borrows from Christ’s divine role and acts as a prophecy of the spiritual influence she is to have on Dante. It is through this borrowing that Beatrice’s presence is able to trigger Dante into a supernatural experience—his transfiguration—where he “sensed the appearance of a marvelous trembling that started on the left side of [his] chest and spread rapidly throughout the entire body” and his “dead spirits [were] now resurrected” (Dante 17). Like Christ, Beatrice awakened and gave life to the inner being of Dante, acting as a savior in her own capacity.

Not only does the linear arrangement of the company of Beatrice highlight her as the divinely appointed, but it also arrays her as the “ultimate truth”, a moral goal that aesthetics is thought to accomplish. During one of the occasions that Dante and Beatrice are situated in the same vicinity, Dante is “positioned in such a way that [he] [sees] [his] beatitude”. His field of vision is a “direct line”, where in the middle sits “a gracious and very attractive woman who [keeps] looking at [him] wondering about [his] gaze” which mistakenly rests on the gracious lady instead of Beatrice (Dante 6). Dante later uses the gracious lady situated at the midpoint as a “screen for the truth” (Dante 6) in hiding his love for Beatrice. As much as the gracious lady conceals Beatrice as Dante’s truth, she also serves as the lens through which Dante perceives the figure of Beatrice. It is important to note that this lady is most prominently noted for her beauty, and as such acts as “screen” that metaphorically interprets Beatrice as a spectacle that commands

Dante's love. She is the rendition of a lower order beauty that ultimately leads the perceiver, Dante, to the truth. This iterates Hofstadter's claim of the interrelationship between love and beauty in search of the truth, the truth being Beatrice. In this respect, the gracious lady serves two paradoxical roles—a screen that hinders everyone from the truth, and a lens through which Dante realizes his truth. Thus, she brings to light the perspective that beauty is a higher derivative of a primary sense experience.

Moreover, symmetry is also manifested in the repetitive appearance of the number nine in Dante's *libello*. The appearance of the number nine in Beatrice's life path is confirmed to have a significance by Dante, in that "she herself was this number". Since the root of nine is the three, a number accorded to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, Beatrice, just like the Trinity, is "a miracle" (Dante 42). In addition to its Trinitarian implications, the appearance of the nine parallels metaphysical occurrences of mystic energy. This is seen during Dante's first sighting of Beatrice, when "she was at the beginning of her ninth year" and he "almost at the end of [his] ninth" (Dante 3). It was at this point that Dante's spirit "started to tremble so powerfully that its disturbance reached all the way to the slightest of [his] pulses" and "Love dominated [his] soul" and "began to rule [him] with such confidence and power" (Dante 4). The spiritual impact of this occasion is the possession of Dante's heart by the lord Love, who would rule him in further matters concerning his beatitude. Additionally, nine years later, after Beatrice salutes Dante at the ninth hour, Dante falls into a deep sleep while contemplating his beloved, and has a "tremendous vision" where he sees Beatrice "naked but for a crimson cloth" and eating a "burning heart" (Dante 5). The number nine causes Dante to have spiritual apparitions that may have carried prophetic meaning, thereby holding true to its relation to the miraculous power of the Trinitarian three. Adding to the evidence that points to the spiritual significance of the

patterns of the number nine are Dante's imaginings triggered by thoughts of Beatrice. During the Dante's sickness on "exactly the ninth day...a thought about [his] lady came over [him]" and he "started to suffer like someone in a delirium, imagining things" after contemplating her inevitable death (Dante 30). In his delirious state, he envisioned "a multitude of angels ascending" with "pure-white cloud[s]" in their hands, singing "'Osana in excelsis'" (Dante 31). He recognizes supernatural forces such as Death and angels and comprehends Beatrice as a heavenly rendition of her former self. This goes to show the significance of the nine as a number that fosters and situates divine experiences.

Similarly, the three, a root of the nine, also stirs mystical experiences in biblical accounts. First off, the during the crucifixion of Christ, "darkness came over the whole land...for the sun stopped shining" at three in the afternoon and "the curtain of the temple was torn in two" (Matthew 23:44-45). The number three factors into the time when Christ gave up his spirit, creating a divinely inspired reaction of the ripping of the temple curtain and the darkening of the sun. Likewise, his resurrection, which took place on the third day after his death, called for the appearance of heavenly beings—"two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning" (Luke 24:4)—to tell his disciples that he had risen from the dead. Additionally, it is on the third day that the prophecy of his death and resurrection by prophets such as Isaiah and his promise to the Pharisees to "destroy this man-made temple, and in three days...[and] build another that is made without hands" (Mark 14:58)—signifying the rebirth of the church of Christ—came to pass. Just as the number nine in the *Vita Nova* inspires divine visions and experiences, its factor, the three is believed to hold spiritual significance in the timeline of Christ's life.

Having established the imaging of divine beings in the figure of Beatrice, the symmetrical order of peoples and events, and the iteration of the Trinitarian numerical as

manifestations of beauty, the transition of Dante's erotic love to a divine reverence for God becomes apparent. This transformation is more precisely an ascension of the hierarchy of beauty where "the beauty of creation [is] arranged in a hierarchy of greater and greater beauty leading to God". Beatrice's outward beauty "functions as a lure, a kind of attractive power forcing the spirit up to God" (Mazzeo 439). Her divine allurements is packaged in her depiction as a "speculum Christi" which causes Dante to "[see] in an excellent though material creature the mirror of God" (Branca 128). For this reason, Dante decides to make "the subject matter for [his] poetry...praise for this most gracious of women" (Dante 22), echoing St Augustine's declaration to God that "Great art Thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised... And Thee would man praise" (St. Augustine 25, 26) and the Psalmist's iterative message—"Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise His holy name" (Psalms 103:1). Just as God deserves praise, Beatrice as a mirror of God attracts praise. Not only so, but Dante's fixated worship on Beatrice ultimately leads him to a plea for salvation when the epilogue of his *libello* is an intercession—"if it be pleasing to Him who is the Lord of benevolence and grace, may [his] soul go to contemplate the glory of its lady" where she "gazes in glory into the face of Him" (Dante 58). This profiles Dante's course of love as a "religious pilgrimage...from the Old Jerusalem to the New", the new being redemption in heaven where his gracious lady resides (Nolan 64). Thus, the passionate love of Dante, which at the beginning of the book "[is] of the stumbling courtly lover" ultimately "[progresses] towards salvation" and by advancing even after death and into a divine and indefinite heavenly environment "transcends the limitations of time and space" (Nolan 52). This progression and transcendence sublimates erotic love to divine love and reverence.

In conclusion, the transcendence of beauty begins at the physical attribution and symmetrical ordering of the life of Beatrice in likeness to that of Christ. The points of parallelism

hold a concentration of divine love and reverence for the God as the Primal Beauty and source of all lower order beauty. Thus, the praise and love Dante allots to Beatrice are ultimately directed to God. In this way, Beatrice serves as a lower-order “idol” representation of God, neither mortal nor immortal but a “mediator between the material nature of man and divine transcendence” (Branca 128). In the end, Beatrice, through her beauty, stays true to her divine mission and leads Dante to seek God. Therefore, the beauty of beings and other earthly creations is divinely ordained by God to keep his creation at hand.

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