

La Contraria Via:

Love as Death in Cavalcanti and the Rime Petrose

Le Rime of both Dante and Cavalcanti are littered with what seem to be conflicting views about life, love, and death both within themselves and in relation to one another. Neither collection was written as a whole by its author, but compiled in retrospect by others; it is problematic to speak of either “work” as something singular and necessarily representative. As a whole, they are ordered, interpretive works of Contini and Barbi and the like; examined individually at close they are richly complex manifestations of the many facets of both Dante and Cavalcanti’s personalities, and of a continuing dialogue between the two poets.

Of particular interest to this essay are Dante’s rime petrose and Cavalcanti’s *Donna me prega* and *Perch’i’ no spero di tornar giammai*--selections that together merit a much closer examination: for the utterly fascinating, sinister uniqueness of the petrose, the boldness and clarity of Cavalcanti’s pervasive love-as-death position in *Donna me prega* and *Perch’i’ no spero di tornar giammai*, and the strikingly similar thematic and stylistic characteristics between all.

Although there is no certainty in which order the four rime petrose were written, Durling and Martinez, in *Time and the Crystal*, suggest that *Io son venuto al punto de la rota* was Dante’s first poesia petrosa since it sets forth his situation and identifies the terms that govern the other three poems. It is somewhat safe to assume a natural order and group the rime petrose because their texts give us very specific clues as to the time they were written--generally considered to be at various points in the winter of 1296-

1297. Their poetic properties are entirely and inarguably intertwined; they concern themselves with the cold, hard stoniness of the beloved woman who it is assumed is not Beatrice. If we resist the temptation to number and order them, it is still possible to consider them as representative of various states of mind at different points in time for Dante; even if he had written them all in one sitting, each poem is a varied approach to the same subject matter.

Io son venuto is probably the most metaphysical of the petrose and was written sometime in December of 1296. If we consider the other three poems as having come after *Io son venuto*, and that in this first poem the poet is at the height of his metaphysicality, then *Così nel mio parlar voglio esser aspro* would fit in well as the ultimate petrose, a culmination of the degradation that takes place throughout the series. Whether Dante intended them to be read as a whole or preferred them to be read separately is not entirely important--the poems together and individually offer clues to a possible side of him that is not portrayed elsewhere.

Durling and Martinez focus on the use of the cosmos and the poems' metaphysical characteristics as a means to fully convey the acerbic state of Dante's persona, "...the negative aspects of his personality and his experience—impulses to violence, violent feelings of frustration, hostility mixed with desire, self-destructive impulses, feelings of subjection to the body and to mortality—are apparently so central to his experience and so powerful that the full force of a cosmic perspective is required for them to be controlled and mastered (Intro., pg. 5)." The poems are littered with "suoni aspri e duri", in an almost complete antithesis to the dolce stil nuovo of the *Vita Nuova*. They are a "celebration of sin."

Io son venuto al punto de la rota is a poem that speaks of a love that does not give vitality and joy but *pesanza* and darkness. Most importantly, it gives the natural world an explicit focus. It contains two pedes and a sirma: ABC, ABC and CDEeDFF. It is winter and the poet is in love. “I have come to the point” signifies that the poet has been on some sort of journey or involved in some activity and that this poem marks the definitive beginning of *something*, if only of the poem itself. Within the first nine verses Venus, Saturn, and the Sun are all called to the stage: the cosmos is invoked. In what Durling and Martinez term “microcosmic poetics”, Dante positions himself and the poem into a larger scheme, dating and placing his poem in some sort of universal context which serves, for the purpose of this essay, to immediately dramatize and give gravitas to all that is to follow. The “star of love” stays back, remote, (4) from the poet as if to watch the ensuing tragedy, and the sun sets and gives way to the “twin-governed”¹ sky, “ci partorisce il geminato cielo (3).” Of the rime petrose, these lines contain the first mention of the light-dark binary that Cavalcanti so tirelessly exploits in his *Rime* and which Dante enthusiastically adopts here. Love does not lead to salvation and God but to death and darkness; love is darkness and darkness is death. It does not offer una diritta via to God, but *la contraria via*. The beloved woman is simply the vehicle through which love, once set in motion, destroys the lover.

...e Amor, che sue ragne
ritira in alto pel vento che poggia,
non m’abbandona, si e bella donna
questa crudel che m’è data per donna (23-26).”

¹ Joseph Tusiani’s English translation of the word “geminato”

Love's reign knows no limits, it is a storm that the lover finds himself unsuccessfully, but very willingly, battling. The skies, stars, and all of the natural elements brought together in *lo son venuto* serve to form love's playground. Dante does not run from this battle or from the woman but instead embraces her and embraces her cold stoniness. He welcomes the war that love has waged on him and invites it to continue:

...e io de la mia guerra
non son però tornato un passo a retro,
né vo' tornar; ché, se 'l martiro è dolce,
la morte de' passare ogni altro dolce (62-65).

It is winter, yet the poet loves. He asks the canzone what will become of him in the spring, when love rains down on the earth from all of the skies but he has been in love all winter long. It seems almost a proud declaration of his own uniqueness, for whereas the rest of the world may recede into the shadows come the biting cold and harsh brutality of winter, Dante steps out to challenge his most ruthless enemy.

In *Al poco giorno e al gran cerchio d'ombra*, the shortest of the four petrose and the only real sestina, Dante's love grows stronger as the winter progresses and his life appears, in an ironic inversion of terms, to "grow deader". A dark, pulsating energy pervades. He loves a little more and lives a little less; he is quickly approaching his mortal end through the love of this beautiful woman, but not yet quite running towards it, as we see in *Così nel mio parlar* ("...poi non mi sarebb'atra/ la morte, ov'io per sua bellezza corro (55-56)").

The themes of *Al poco giorno* are almost *infernal*, while the language is somewhat *paradisal*. The rhyme scheme is ABCDEF and the lines are written in hendecasyllable. Dante uses rhyme-words rather than actual rhymes; that is, he repeats each line's final word. The terms *donna* and *petra* enter and conclude the verses with growing urgency and the *sestina* form concedes to the sense of stagnation that the poet evokes. Dante later pays tribute to Arnaut Daniel in *Purgatorio* XXVI for the invention of the *sestina* and very gainfully adapts it here.

Whereas Dante employed very few metaphors and similes in the almost asexual *Vita Nuova*, we find many in the *rime petrose*. The lexicon is much more vast; the text is rich with colors and images of nature, natural elements, and instances of contrasting light and darkness. The word 'ombra' is set in motion in the first verse of *Al poco giorno* and serves the rest of the poem well in driving home the idea of darkness and shade. Quite appropriately, it is juxtaposed by the word 'verde', a color representing life and vitality. Dante's longing is no longer rooted in a woman that is like a stone but in a stone that speaks and hears as if it were a woman, a woman that is as cold and dark as snow that lies in the shade. "Similmente questa nova donna/ si sta gelata come neve a l'ombra...(7-8)" It becomes increasingly hard to distinguish woman and stone and *erba* and *ombra*. Each final word of the *sestina*, while reinforcing the key images of the poem, also serves to convolute it.

Dante's one *sestina petrosa* does not have a unifying word that really dominates the verses of the poem unlike in *Amor, tu vedi ben* and *Al poco giorno* (*verde*). In *Amor, tu vedi ben*, the words *donna*, *petra*, *freddo*, *luce*, and *tempo* reign over their respective stanzas and share verses throughout. *Petra* is used a grand total of thirteen times.

Dante embraces the cold and seems to desire it. As Cavalcanti does in several of his own rime, Dante speaks directly to love, the subject of his poem, deriding him in an almost desperate need for approbation. "Amor, tu vedi ben che questa donna/ la tua vertu non cura in alcun tempo...(1-2)" He compares his lady to a wild beast, "sí che non par ch'ell'abbia cor di donna/ ma di qual fiera l'ha d'amor più freddo...(7-8), and to a precious stone. While we see that Dante is slowly beginning to loathe and scorn this woman, he very steadfastly acknowledges her great worth.

If *Vita Nuova* is Dante's ideological treatise on love as a salvific and beatifying force, then the rime petrose just may be a raw and uncensored treatise or homage to his own earthly desires. Of course Dante would never have given us his full thoughts uncensored in the true sense of the word, but with these poems he has gifted us with a real glimpse into his own tempestuous and sensual, indeed sexual, love life: something that we don't see in any of his other works. Le rime petrose speak not to the usual thematic and linguistic ideals of Dante but instead to his passionate and impulsive eros. All that is good and pure of Dante and the *Vita Nuova* comes to a grinding halt in the rime petrose and is replaced by a sexual desire that consumes the poet entirely. Indeed, they are poems about consumption. A desire to "consume" the beloved woman and consummate the love, and the consummatory force of unrequited love.

"Cosi nel mio parlar voglio esser aspro", by far the most desperate and sexually explicit of the four poems, reveals to us a poet that is done being nice. The wrong that the lady pietrosa and love have seemingly conspired to commit against him has fully revealed itself and he can stand it no more. With his eyes, he says, "Guarderei presso e fiso/ per vendicar lo fuggir che mi face;/ e poi le renderei con amore pace (76-78)."

Since love and the lady refuse to yield themselves to the poet and his unbearable sexual desire, he will take the woman by force. For the agonizing pain that she has long inflicted upon him, he will avenge himself and force peace upon her at least. Speaking in the conditional, and hence passive, voice, Dante describes a very *aggressive* scene:

S'io avessi le belle trecce prese,
che fatte son per me scudiscio e ferza,
pigliandole anzi terza,
con esse passerei vespero e squille:
e non sarei pietoso né cortese... (66-70)

For all of the digression from the medieval, and Dantean, norm that Cavalcanti's "atheistic" poetry at times offers us, never does Cavalcanti go so far as to describe in full detail how he would take his beloved by the hair and, essentially, rape her. If some unspoken, high competition existed between Dante and Cavalcanti, as we know it did, then Dante can now rightfully be declared the winner. What Cavalcanti does on and off on an even keel throughout his rime, Dante does on a much larger, and almost caricatural level in the rime petrose. But the detail and exactitude with which Dante describes the violence he craves to inflict upon his beloved does not offer an easy analysis. Gianfranco Contini would insist that while there is certainly an earthly realism present in the rime petrose, its value lies only in its ability to stylistically deliver the end product. Whether the rime petrose are a candid lens through which to view Dante's true inner passions or more a superficial response to Cavalcanti's offending earthly realism, they are poems that must be taken for what they are and considered in their own respect.

Cavalcanti's *Perch'ì no spero di tornar giammai*, concerns itself with the author's moment of death and his plea to his own ballatetta, a plea to this poem, to carry news of his death to his beloved woman. In a sort of "ground zero" of poetics, Cavalcanti turns his poem inside out by personifying its form and actually asking it for a favor. The tenses are all in the present and future and give no hints as to the circumstances leading up to this moment in time. The poet is a destroyed man and his only hope is that his beloved will cry upon hearing news of his death. His only company, and his only comfort, is his own poem:

Tu senti, ballatetta, che la morte
mi stringe sì, che vita m'abbandona;
e senti come 'l cor si sbatte forte
per quel che ciascun spirito ragiona. (17-20)

His heart beats hard and fear is omnipresent. Thoughts of his beloved offer no solace and he admits total defeat, "Tanto e distrutta già la mia persona/ ch'ì non posso soffrire (21-22)." He asks the ballatetta to take his soul at the moment of death, as his body lays still and his spirit parts, and give it to the woman. The organic, physical heart will die with the poet's body, but the soul will remain. With this one strikingly vivid singular image, Cavalcanti reaffirms his own postulation that love is anything *but* life giving: love destroys.

Tanto e distrutta già la mia persona,
ch'ì non posso soffrire:
se tu mi vuoi servire,
mena l'anima teo

(molto di cio ti preco)

quando uscira del core. (21-26)

Dante uses a similar image in Chapter 3 of the *Vita Nuova* in a dream scene where a man identifying himself as Dante's "master" appears before him holding Beatrice in his arms, naked except for a crimson cloth. The figure is holding Dante's fiery red heart and makes Beatrice eat it, whereupon the figure begins to weep and they then part for the heavens. Cavalcanti dedicates the sonnet *Vedeste, al mio parere, onne valore* to Dante and explicitly refers to this scene from the *Vita Nuova*: "Di voi lo core ne porto, veggendo/ che vostra donna la morte cadea:/ nodriala dello cor, di cio temendo (9-11)"

If we substitute the word 'heart' or 'core' for the much less tangible anima and sospiro, it is safe to assume that the image of the beloved eating the heart of the lover, or of the lover making this particular sacrifice to his beloved, was an image that originated with Dante and which Cavalcanti at some point thereafter chose to use. He directly addresses the scene from *Vita Nuova* in *Vedeste, al mio parere*, and chooses to employ it in *Perch'ï' no spero*. In *Vita Nuova*, the beloved immediately parts for heaven after having eaten the heart in a metaphorical "renunciation of earthly desires."² Cavalcanti saw this image as a symbolic antidote for the lover's fatal condition. Unfortunately for the poet in *Perch'ï' no spero di tornar giammai*, there is really no hope for a cure or salvation. He asks the ballatetta to carry his soul, that resides in his heart, and news of his death to the beloved at the point of his death with the understanding that they will

² Brown University's Decameron Web discusses the motif of the eaten heart in reference to Luciano Rossi's interpretation

not reach her until *after* he has passed. His one use of the past tense in this poem dramatically closes the third stanza and finalizes the poet's life and love; we understand that he is very specifically dying from *love*:

- Questa vostra servente
vien per istar con voi,
partita da colui
che *fu* servo d'Amore - . (emphasis mine, 33-36)

In the final stanza he directs his words to his own voice, rather than the actual ballatetta: "Tu, voce sbigottita e deboletta/ ch'esci piangendo de lo cor dolente...(37-38)" He is a dying man that has no means and no will to communicate with anyone; the dizzying sort of self-dialogue that occurs only serves to underscore the feverish quality of the ballata and the illness of its author. Insertions of "tu" and "deh" further aid to fragment and decelerate the pace of the poem, aligning themselves with the mood of the "sbigottita" poet. If Cavalcanti's other rime illustrate the consummate melancholy of their author, *Perch'i' no spero di tornar giammai* defines it.

Donna me prega theorizes Cavalcanti's love-as-death philosophy and does it in a much less macabre manner. Scattered throughout his rime are poems that center on death and pain like *Perchi'i no spero* and *Poi che di doglia cor conven* and there are those that leave behind the pain and suffering and exalt the beauty of the beloved, like *Fresca rosa novella* and *Avete 'n vo' li fior' e la verdura*. *Donna me prega* sits squarely somewhere between both Cavalcanti's *love* and *death* poems. It takes a somewhat neutral theoretical approach to the love-as-death ideas presented elsewhere, sensitively

portraying the weighty concepts that may have turned some of his church going readers off.

Death is only explicitly mentioned once in *Donna me prega*, “dolore” never. Cavalcanti does once refer to the spirito “punto” and to love’s vacuous powers, (“For di colore, d’essere diviso/ assiso - ‘n mezzo scuro, luce rade (67-68)”), but for the most part it remains a humble, philosophical discussion of what love actually means.

Like Dante, Cavalcanti also makes use of the planets in setting the stage for the poem when he speaks about that part where memory is formed, “come/ diaffan da lume, - d’una scuritate/ la qual da Marte - vene, e fa demora (15-18):”. Cavalcanti’s use, however, seems less of an invocation of the cosmos or aggrandizement of his own passions and more a scientific attempt at explaining earthly love. Love is an absence of light for Cavalcanti but it is not static: “Move, cangiando - color, riso in pianto,/ e la figura - co paura - storna (46-47) It is fear-inducing, virtue-impeding, and found in “gente di valor” (49). It is interesting that something so negative and self-destructive should be found in gentle hearts and people of great worth and it leaves us only to reason that that which is being destroyed by its powers is something of supreme valor.

It is loss of virtuous reason that Cavalcanti so feared losing. If we look at the poem’s central theme of death being an accidental occurrence, it is loss of power and control that the lover must fight against. It is a loss of pride above all that results from an accidental piercing from “beauty’s arrow”. It is this definition of love as accident that Ardizzone discusses in *The Other Middle Ages*. It suggests, she says, “a connection between the fields of logic and physics...between the two fields in which Cavalcanti was traditionally said to excel...(pg.50)” *Donna me prega* is not simply the fruit of a passing

poetic moment but a rational and logically grounded treatise on an irrational and illogical subject--passion. Dino del Garbo analyzed the important role of natural philosopher that Cavalcanti's persona plays in *Donna me prega* and helped garner the necessary understanding of his work that was so crucial to its widespread reception.

Ardizzone discusses a "theory of passion" in *Donna me prega* that develops eight theses in response to eight basic corresponding Aristotelian categories: 1) in which part does love have its seat, 2) what generates love, 3) what is its virtue, 4) what is its power, 5) what is its essence, 6) what is its movement, 7) in what does its pleasure consist, and 8) is it visible? (pg. 51). Logically employing these categories, she says, serve to "bring love into the domain of the philosophy of nature...(pg. 51)" Like nature, love is an untamable creature, an irrational entity all its own.

More prevalent in the ballata grande *Veggio negli occhi de la donna mia* than in *Donna me prega* is the idea that love first enters the body through the eyes and that they are the vehicle necessary for the accident of love to occur. Much attention has been given to this notion as being central to Cavalcanti and *Donna me prega*, but while it dominates, for example, *Veggio negli occhi* and *Posso degli occhi miei novella dire*, it is but a passing reference in *Donna me prega*. There are only four instances of variations for the word sight or seeing in the poem, and of those four one could be substituted for the word "find" with little difference ("ancor di lui vedrai/ che 'n gente di valor lo piu si trova (48-49)"). Only three instances explicitly address the lover's ability to see--not insignificant, for sure, but certainly not central. Sight's significance in this poem is a far cry from the four and five instances of sight and eyes in poems much shorter than

Donna me prega. Eighteen out of 52 of Cavalcanti's rime contain variations of the verb "to see" in the first line--*Donna me prega*, interestingly, is not one of them.

As we see with *Perch'i' no spero*, the poet turns to speak to the poem in the ultimate stanza of *Donna me prega*, something that is easy to see as a sort of lonely last stab at engaging the poem and engaging the reader. He urges the canzone to go where it pleases. He conjectures that his will be a poem to which only lovers will be privy and that, once praised by gentle hearts, will not want to stay with any others of a lesser being.

Le rime petrose, *Donna me prega*, and *Perch'i' no spero di tornar giammai* are a representative selection of the deathly human condition that Cavalcanti and Dante sought to convey. While Cavalcanti treated this subject matter throughout most of his work, for Dante it was a far stray from the norm. In a moment of competitive spirit Dante may have one upped his friend and rival. The idea of "woman as ideal" is long gone in the petrose and Cavalcanti's death poems and is replaced, in Cavalcanti, with a philosophical and antithetical "woman/love-as-death" position; in Dante, it is replaced with an unreservedly acrid abatement of woman's life-giving properties. Dante comes off as an angry and grating poet, bent on revenge; Cavalcanti, the cool Aristotelian protege. To whatever extent they purposed death as a theme in these selected poems, all six offer something quite welcome to the courtly tradition: *la contraria via*.

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