Virgil’s Discourse on Love in Purgatorio XVIII and Guido Cavalcanti

Guido Cavalcanti is perhaps the most important figure in the Vita Nuova after Beatrice. Dante tells us how their friendship began, his hopes for a reconciliation between Guido and his lady Giovanna, and ultimately, that he is writing the work for his “primo amico.”

What has happened to Guido in the Divine Comedy? Dante speaks of him in an indirect and vague manner in Inferno X, and brief mention is made of him in Purgatorio XI, but only as a part of a wider discourse on pride and fame. Is Dante’s “primo amico” ignored in the Divine Comedy and if so why?

We are not alone when we question what has happened to Guido Cavalcanti. Guido’s father, Cavalcante dei Cavalcanti, is also puzzled when he sees Dante travelling through Hell without “his friend.” Cavalcante asks:

“Se per questo cieco
carcere vai per altezza d’ingegno,
mio figlio ov’è? e perché non è teco?” (Inferno X. 58-60)

Cavalcante expected his son to be journeying along with Dante, and the reader expects to find out more about Dante’s relationship with his best friend Guido. Both the reader and Guido’s father are disappointed. Cavalcante mistakenly assumes that his son is already dead, and the reader, upon completing the Divine Comedy, has few clues, apparently, to indicate what kind of relationship existed between Dante and Guido during the years leading up to Guido’s death in August of 1300 (just four months after the date of Dante’s journey).

It is the thesis of this article that Virgil’s discourse on love in Purgatorio XVIII can tell us much about Dante’s feelings toward Guido. What we will see in Purgatorio XVIII. 13-39 is the poet’s re-
sponse, in the wider sense, to Cavalcante's query as to why his son is not now at Dante's side.²

Cavalcante is in Hell among the heretics because like Guido's father-in-law, Farinata, Cavalcante is an averroist. Can Guido be considered guilty of the same sin of his father and father-in-law? While there has been some disagreement as to whether or not Guido is an averroist, Bruno Nardi's argument in support of Guido's averroism is most compelling (indeed it is the most widely accepted view).³ I quote Mario Marti whose words reflect agreement with Nardi:

Tenace, strenuo a persuasivo a nostro parere, sostenitore dell'averroismo del primo amico di Dante è stato Bruno Nardi, il quale ritornando più volte sull'argomento a lui molto caro, ha sempre meglio precisato e chiarito il proprio pensiero, anche adeguandolo ai progressi filologico-testuali (è per esempio di "pessanza" — "possanza," al v. 24 della canzone), e gagliardamente combattendo ogni interpretazione in senso aristotelico-tomistico o arabo-platonizzante.⁴

Beyond Nardi's keen observations on averroism in Guido's philosophical canzone "Donna me prega," there are a number of other points which lead to an acceptance of Guido's averroism:

1) Paul Oskar Kristeller discovered that Iacopo da Pistoia dedicated his strongly averroistic Questio de felicitate to Guido Cavalcanti. The dedication reads: "viro bene nato et mihi dilecto et pre aliis amico carissimo."⁵ As well, Iacopo's statements are quite similar to a number of passages in "Donna me prega."⁶

2) Guido came from a family of averroists during a period in the late thirteenth century when averroistic thought was widespread among men of letters.

3) Dante's statement in Inferno X that Guido rejected the journey to salvation which is available to every man, preferring to stay in, one might say, his own "dark wood."

4) Boccaccio's words in the Decameron regarding Guido:

Tra le quali brigate n'era una di messer Betto Brunelleschi . . . s'eran molto ingegnati di tirare Guido di messer Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti, e non senza cagione; per ciò che, oltre a quello che egli fu un de' migliori loici che avesse il mondo, e ottimo filosofo naturale. . . . E per ciò che egli alquanto teneva della opinione degli epicurii, si diceva tra la gente volgare che queste sue speculazioni eran solo in cercar si potesse che Iddio non fosse.⁷ (Decameron VI, 9)

Later Boccaccio defines Epicurus' beliefs:
Egli ebbe alcune perverse e detestabili opinioni, perciocché egli negò del tutto l’eternità dell’anima e tenne che quella insieme al corpo morisse come fanno quelle degli animali bruti.  

(Comento all’Inferno X)

Finally, there are Guido’s extant courtly love poems. The bulk of his courtly poetry addresses itself to his dominas, Monna Vanna, or Giovanna. Sometime before 1290 Guido abandoned his lady, as is made apparent in Chapter 24 of the Vita Nuova. Dante endeavors to reconcile this pair, but to no avail. Chapter 24 is crucial for our understanding of Dante’s feelings for Guido. Guido’s ex-lady, Giovanna, is called, “for that day,” John the Baptist, and Beatrice is called Christ. The passage reads:

E lo nome di questa donna era Giovanna, salvo che per la sua biel’tade, secondo che altri crede, imposto l’era nome Primavera; e così era chiamata. E appresso lei, guardando, vidi venire la mirabile Beatrice. Queste donne andaro presso di me così l’una appresso l’altra, e parve che Amore mi parlassel nel cuore, e dicesse: “Quella prima è nominata Primavera solo per questa venuta d’oggi; ché io mossi lo imponentore del nome a chiamarla così Primavera, cioè prima verrà lo die che Beatrice si mostrerà dopo la imaginazione del suo fedele. E se anche vogli considerare lo primo nome suo, tanto è quanto dire prima verrà, però che lo suo nome Giovanna è da quello Giovanni lo quale precedette la verace luce, dicendo: ‘Ego vox clamantis in deserto: parate viam Domini.’ “ (Vita Nuova. XXIV)

Guido never does return to Giovanna. Instead he goes on to write his philosophical canzone, “Donna me prega.”

Does Dante ever communicate to Guido after his unsuccessful effort to reconcile Guido and Giovanna? The importance of Giovanna re-emerges, briefly, in Inferno X, with Dante’s response to Cavalcante’s query regarding the whereabouts of his son:

E io a lui: “Da me stesso non vegno: colui ch’attende là per qui mi mena, forse cui Guido vostro ebbe a disdegno.” (Inferno X. 61-63)

Cavalcante misunderstood Dante’s use of the past remote “ebbe.” He thinks that his son is dead. Actually, Dante is referring to a moment in the past when “perhaps” Guido decided to give up the “diritta via” which would have led to what Beatrice represents, namely salvation.

If one could be more precise still, it is possible that the moment of Guido’s abandonment of the “diritta via” occurred in Chapter
24 of the *Vita Nuova*. Giovanna's words are very clear, as were those of John the Baptist. By keeping Giovanna, Guido was to prepare himself for the coming of Beatrice or, "per questa venuta d'oggi," Christ. Guido did not listen to Giovanna's cry in the desert and consequently, as Dante puts it, he held Beatrice (as the one representing Christ) in disdain.

Dante dedicated the *Vita Nuova* to Guido because he hoped that Guido would learn something from Dante's own experiences. If he did, Guido would return to Giovanna and the type of poetry which included her. Of course this attempt fails. Guido abandons courtly love poetry for the philosophy of "Donna me prega."

There is therefore a disagreement on what should be the goal of their poetry. For Dante it is Beatrice, that vehicle which leads to salvation. Dante wanted Guido to follow a similar road with Giovanna. Instead he abandons Giovanna for the averroistic philosophy reflected in "Donna me prega."¹⁰

While Beatrice remains all important for Dante's poetics, Guido's poetry, which once influenced Dante so, is barely mentioned again. There are two passages in the *Divine Comedy* where Dante speaks of courtly love at some length: *Purgatorio* XXIV. 49-63, and *Purgatorio* XXVI. 91-148. Much of the discussion revolves around the differences between the old, clumsy style of Guittone d'Arezzo and his followers and the "sweet new style" which Dante practices. Dante's condemnation of the "guittoniani" is reminiscent of his words in the *Vita Nuova* XXV which read:

... però che grande vergogna sarebbe a colui che rimasse cose sotto vesta di figura o di colore rettorico, e poscia, domandato, non sapesse denuedere le sue parole da cotale vesta, in guisa che avessero verace intendimento. E questo mio primo amico e io ne sapemo bene di quelli che così rimano stoltamente. (*Vita Nuova*. XXV)

There is one striking difference. In the *Vita Nuova* it is Dante and Guido Cavalcanti who cannot abide the "guittoniani." In the *Divine Comedy*, while the words are similar, Cavalcanti is not even mentioned.

When Dante speaks in the *De vulgari eloquentia* of the finest exponents of the "sweet new style," he usually narrows them down to two: Cino da Pistoia and himself. Guido is rarely cited. An example of Dante's abandonment of Guido in favor of Cino occurs when he is discussing the language "del sì":

Tertia quoque, (que) Latinorum est, se duobus privilegiis actestatur preesse: primo quidem quod quid dulcius subtiliusque poetati vulgariter sunt, hii familiares et domestici sui sunt, puta Cynus Pistoriensis et amicus eius; secundo quia magis videtur inniti gramatice que comunes est, quod rationabiler inspicientibus videtur gravissimum argumentum. 

(De vulgari eloquencia. I. X. 4)

The evidence is pronounced. Sometime after Dante wrote the Vita Nuova and before he wrote the Divine Comedy and the De vulgari eloquentia, there was a split between Guido and Dante.

Dante-poet wishes to speak about Guido’s averroism in Inferno X, but in a subtle manner. In fact, he does it so subtly that it contributes to this episode’s reputation as one of the most controversial in the Divine Comedy. Dante has a problem. He must speak about Guido’s sin of averroism, and yet he does not want to condemn outright the man he once called his “first friend.” He solves this problem partially by dating the action before Guido’s death. By dating his work at Easter of 1300 he steers clear of this issue. Yet, the sense of Dante’s words in Inferno X is unmistakable. Guido is not going to repent of his sin of heresy before his death.

Dante wishes to avoid confronting Guido by name; however he must condemn his averroism. By means of Virgil’s discourse on love in Purgatorio XVIII, Dante-poet is able to recall “Donna me prega” to the reader and its averroistic discourse, without directly mentioning its author.

There are three signals in Virgil’s discourse which should turn the reader’s attention to “Donna me prega”:
1) The similarity between the “ti prego” (Purgatorio XVIII.13) and the “Donna me prega,” and that in both instances there are two parties involved: the student who requests the learned one to either “dire d’un accidente . . . ch’è chiamato amore” (“Donna me prega,” 1-3) or “che mi dimostri amore” (Purgatorio XVIII.14).
2) Virgil’s discourse on love refers to two of Cavalcanti’s eight themes from “Donna me prega” (the second and the seventh).
3) Both preceding and following Virgil’s discourse on love, he condemns averroists. “Donna me prega” is the most widely circulated discourse on love in Dante’s day and it contains averroistic thought.

As mentioned earlier, the “ti prego” is the opening to Virgil’s discourse, and it is the first clue that the reader ought to have “Donna me prega” in mind while reading the words which follow. How strongly can one base an argument on a verb “pregare”? “Pregare” is not a common verb in the Divine Comedy. Here
is the only instance in which Dante-pilgrim adopts "pregare" when he asks any of his guides to expound on an issue. One possible exception is Inferno XIV.92, but there no philosophical discourse follows. It is noteworthy that with all of Dante-pilgrim's "dubbi" in the Paradiso, not once does he employ "pregare" when he asks Beatrice for an explanation.\(^\text{11}\)

It is timely to study exactly what elements of "Donna me prega" are averroistic before turning to Virgil's condemnation and discourse on love.\(^\text{12}\) For this study, the most important part of "Donna me prega" is the second stanza:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{In quella parte} — \\
\text{dove sta memora} — \\
\text{prende suo stato,} — \\
\text{— sì formato,} — \\
\text{— come} \\
\text{d'una scuritate} \\
\text{la qual da Marte — vène, e fa demora;} \\
\text{— ha sensato — nome,} \\
\text{— di cor volontate.} \\
\text{Vèn da veduta forma che s'intende,} \\
\text{— che prende — nel possibile intelletto,} \\
\text{— come in subietto,} — \\
\text{— loco e dimoranza.} \\
\text{In quella parte mai non ha possanza} \\
\text{— perché da qualitate non descende;} \\
\text{— resplende — in sé perpetual effetto:} \\
\text{— non ha dietto, — ma consideranza,} \\
\text{— sì che non pote largir simiglianza.}\(^\text{13}\)
\end{align*}
\]

Guido states that love inhabits the sensitive soul, and he explains in lines 15 to 20 that the sensitive soul is the area where the memory lies. Averroes maintains that the memory is one of the five internal senses of the sensitive soul, as opposed to Augustine's view which sees the memory (along with the intelligence and the will) as a faculty of the rational soul.

In lines 21 to 25 Guido turns to the possible intellect. The averroists define the possible intellect as an immortal substance, separate from the human body, which man borrows for his lifetime. Averroes' exact words are:

\[
\text{Si enim esset admixtus etc., idest, si enim esset virtus in corpore tunc} \\
\text{esset aliqua dispositio aut aliqua qualitas, et, si haberet qualitatem, tunc} \\
\text{illa qualitas aut attribueretur calido aut frigido, scilicet complexioni in eo} \\
\text{quod est complexio; aut esset qualitas existens in complexione, tantum} \\
\text{addita complexioni, sicut est de anima sensibili et sibi similibus.}\(^\text{14}\)
\]

\((\text{Comm. 6 De Anima III. 16-22})\)
When Guido declares that the possible intellect "da qualitate non discende" he is saying that it does not derive from a mixture of the four body humors. Therefore, it is divorced from the body and its functions.

He maintains furthermore in line 26 that the possible intellect is eternal, and in line 27 adds that the possible intellect is not related to any passion of the sensitive soul, since, in itself, "non ha diletto" ("diletto" being a passion).

This discourse, that the possible intellect is not a part of the human body, sustained by the averroists and Guido Cavalcanti, was at direct variance with the teachings of the Church. On March 7, 1277, Etienne Tempier, Bishop of Paris, at the behest of Pope John XXI, documented the arguments of the averroists which conflict with Christian theology, and listed two hundred and nine errors in his Condemnation. The seventh error is precisely the averroistic view discussed above:

Quod intellectus non est forma corporis nixi sicut nauta navis, nec est perfectio essentialis hominis.

Virgil's discourse in Purgatorio XVIII, like Guido's in "Donna me prega," is based on Aristotle and here there are distinct parallels. The disagreement, however, is an important one, and one which reflects much of the philosophical turbulence of the thirteenth century. Cavalcanti's explanation is that of Aristotle as interpreted by Averroes (as was related above), while Virgil's words are those of Aristotle as interpreted by St. Thomas Aquinas. The opposition of the one to the other becomes clear if the two passages are viewed side by side:

"donna me prega" — 21-25
Vèn da veduta forma che
[si'tende,
che prende — nel possibile
[intelletto,
come in subietto, — loco e
[dimoranza.
In quella parte mai non ha
[possanza
perché da qualitate non
[descende;

Purgatorio XVIII. 22-24
Vostra apprensiva da esser verace
tragge intenzione, e dentro a voi
[la spiega
sì che l'animo ad essa volger
[face;
In Guido’s last line he states that the possible intellect is separate from the body, therefore agreeing with Averroes. In Dante the possible intellect does not exist as a separate substance. St. Thomas Aquinas argues against the possible intellect in his Commentary to Aristotle’s *De Anima*:

All these indications show that he did not assert that the intellect was a separate substance.

Indeed it is astonishing how easily some have let themselves be deceived by his calling the intellect ‘separate’; for the text itself makes it perfectly clear what he means, — namely that, unlike the senses, the intellect has no bodily organ. For the nobility of the human soul transcends the scope and limits of bodily matter. Hence it enjoys a certain activity in which bodily matter has no share; the potentiality to which activity is without a bodily organ; and in this sense only is it a ‘separate’ intellect.17

(Comm. to *De Anima*. III.iv. 698-9)

St. Thomas’ “some” refers to Averroes’ Commentary of the *De Anima*. In a sense Dante is imitating St. Thomas’ way of writing. Just as St. Thomas corrects Averroes’ Commentary on Aristotle’s *De Anima* by rejecting the possible intellect as a separate substance, so too, on a poetic plane Dante corrects Guido’s “Donna me prega” by rejecting the possible intellect as a separate substance in *Purgatorio* XVIII.18

Before and after Virgil’s discourse, he confronts the averroists. Let us study Virgil’s words in this context:

“Drizza” disse, “ver’ me l’agute luci
de lo ‘ntelletto, e fieti manifesto
l’error de’ ciechi che si fanno duci.
L’animo, ch’è creato ad amar presto,
ad ogne cosa è mobile che piace,
tosto che dal piacere in atto è desto.
Vostra apprensiva da esser verace
tragge intenzione, e dentro a voi la spiega,
sí che l’animo ad essa volger face;
e se, rivolto, inver’ di lei si piega,
quel piegare è amor, quell’ è natura
che per piacer di novo in voi si lega.
Poi, come ‘l foco movesi in altura
per la sua forma ch’è nata a saline
là dove piú in sua matera dura,
cosí l’animo preso entra in disire,
ch’è moto spiritale, e mai non posa
fin che la cosa amata il fa gioire.
Or ti puote apparer quant’è nascosa
la veritate a la gente ch'avvera

ciascun amore in sé laudabil cosa,

però che forse appar la sua matera

sempre esser buona, ma non ciascun segno

è buono, ancor che buona sia la cera." (Purgatorio XVIII. 16-39)

The "gente" in line 35 refers to the epicureans or the averroists (it is to be recalled that Dante and his contemporaries commonly adopted the term "epicurean" when speaking of the averroistic view of the soul). They would be the same averroists whom Virgil denounces in line 18 as the "ciechi che si fanno duci."^°

If we can identify the "ciechi," the question arises, who are the "duci"? Furthermore, is there one "duce" in particular?^° Dante gives us some clues concerning the identity of the principal "duce":

1) He is an averroist.
2) He often expounds on love.
3) He is so expert at his discourse on love that he leads others.

We have already seen that Guido Cavalcanti is an averroist, he is currently the most famous love poet (see Purgatorio XI. 97-99), and that this famous poet had much influence on others through "Donna me prega."

For Dante it is paramount that the corrupting influence of "Donna me prega" come to an end. Even though Guido is already dead when Dante writes the Divine Comedy, "Donna me prega" is circulating widely and spreading averroistic thought. It is for this reason that Virgil directly rejects averroists before and after his discourse.

Dante is very deliberate when it comes to Guido, as he wishes to remain loyal to the man who was once his "first friend," and yet the influence of "Donna me prega" must cease. Such "duci" must not be allowed to lead Dante's contemporaries into sin. It is no coincidence that Virgil's discourse on love comes at the very center of the Divine Comedy. What more fitting place for Dante to speak his last words on Guido, the one to whom he dedicated his Vita Nuova.

In Paradiso XXVI Dante-pilgrim himself temporarily becomes one of the "ciechi." During an examination on what he has learned about love, he is momentarily blinded (to recall, perhaps, the blindness of love or the blindfolded Cupid). Is there anything to infer from Dante's blindness? Dante is told that he must entrust
himself to Beatrice because she possesses, in her look, the virtue to cure blindness which Ananias possessed in his hands when he cured St. Paul’s blindness (Acts 9: 17-18). This is the same Beatrice who cured the erring Dante’s blindness once before, and she would have cured Guido’s blindness as well. But Guido preferred to use his “altezza d’ingegno” for a very different purpose: to lead others in a false direction. So we are left with Guido’s blindness, alluded to in Inferno X and condemned in Purgatorio XVIII.

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NOTES

1 All quotations from the Divine Comedy are from La Commedia secondo l’antica vulgata, a cura di Giorgio Petrocchi (Milano: Mondadori, 1966-67); all quotations from Dante’s minor works are taken from Tutte le opere, a cura di Fredi Chiappelli (Milano: Mursia, 1965), which reflects the critical edition of the Società Dantesca Italiana.

2 This article develops brief points in Lloyd H. Howard, “Guido Cavalcanti: An Introductory Essay and a Commentary,” DAI, 37 (1977), 6472A (Johns Hopkins), 63-65.


7 This quotation is from Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio, a cura di Vittore Branca (Verona: Mondadori, 1967).

8 Giovanni Boccaccio, Comento alla Divina Comedia, a cura di D. Guerri (Bari: Laterza, 1918), p. 45. For further discussion on this point see Bruno Nardi, Dante e la cultura medievale (Bari: Laterza, 1949), pp. 127-29.

9 I agree with the majority of modern scholars who accept the “cui” in line 63 as a dative, not an accusative, meaning that Beatrice, not Virgil, is the one held in disdain by Guido. Two studies that have done much to convince many Dantists are those of S.A. Chimenez, “Il disdegno di Guido e i suoi interpreti,” Orientamenti culturali, I (1945); A. Pagliaro, “Il disdegno di Guido,” Letterature moderne, 1 (1950).

10 For further analysis of this discussion see Lloyd Howard, “Giovanna as John the Baptist and the ‘disdegno’ of Guido,” Quaderni d’italianistica, II. 1 (1981), 63-70.
11 For other uses of “pregare” in the Divino Comedy see Inf. XXVI. 65, Purg. XVI. 61, Purg. XXV. 29, Purg. XXVIII. 82, Par. XXII. 58, Par. XXXIII. 30, Par. XXXIII. 34. In all of these examples there is no reflection of the usage that one would most expect: Dante “begging” his guide for an explanation.

12 See Nardi, “Noterella polemica sull’averroismo di Guido Cavalcanti,” 59-67, for a discussion on averroism in “Donna me prega.”

13 All quotations of Cavalcanti’s poetry are taken from Gianfranco Contini, Poeti del Duecento, I-II (Milano: Ricciardi, 1960), II, pp. 487-567, which basically reproduces Guido Favati’s critical edition.


15 It is noteworthy that along with Tempier’s condemnation of averroism, he also condemns the De amore of Andreas Capellanus. Is there a link between averroism and courtly love poetry in the mind of Tempier?


18 See Purg. XXV. 61-75, where Dante deals directly with, and condemns, the averroistic view of the possible intellect.


20 As far as Dante’s contemporaries were concerned, averroists and epicureans were the same. See Boccaccio’s words earlier on in this study where he makes it clear that epicureans, like averroists, do not believe in the immortality of one’s personal soul.

21 Dante expounds upon his reference to the “blind” epicureans in the Convivio I, xi, 4-6. Also, see Mathew 15:14: “Caeci sunt et duces caecorum: caecus autem, si caeco ducatum praestet, ambo in foveam cadunt.”

22 Gianfranco Contini, “Cavalcanti in Dante,” Varianti e altra linguistica (Torino: Einaudi, 1970), pp. 433-35; Mario Marti, Poeti del Dolce stil nuovo (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1969), p. 343. Marti interprets the following words of Gianni Alfani as metaphorically alluding to Cavalcanti’s fame as an expert on love, which must derive from the circulation of “Donna me prega”: “Po’ fa sì ch’entri ne la mente a Guido / perch’ egli è sol colui che vede Amore.” For further substantiation on this same point see Alfani’s “Guido, quel Gianni ch’a te fu l’altrieri” and Cavalcanti’s response “Gianni, quel Guido salute.”

23 Nardi, Dante e la cultura medievale, p. 92.