

moment. Ziegler's Nazi bona fides were impeccable: He was entrusted by Hitler with the task of organizing the infamous exhibition of "degenerate art," Cubists, Expressionists, and the like. The present work is said to have hung in the Führer's bedchamber. But however odious a man he might have been, it must be said that Ziegler was an accomplished realist and that there is a beauty of sorts to the present work.

From an art historical perspective, his inclusion in the present show, like that of similarly classical artists, is defensible on several grounds. In recounting the progress of 20th-century art, historians have always indulged in clannish, even cliquish, triage: There is the In Crowd, which includes Picasso, Kandinsky, Pollock, and so on; there are those whose entrée is provisional on good behavior, like Salvador Dali and Andrew Wyeth; and finally there are accomplished realists like Fridel Dethleffs-Edelmann and Antonio Donghi, who never had a chance. But if one refuses to play that game, if one looks at the entire deck of cards laid out face up, it becomes clear that certain artists have been selected or omitted because they did or did not share such formal and intellectual convictions as appeared, until recently, to be nonnegotiable. Surely they cannot rival in consequence the great modern masters; but their purely artistic success is easily equal to that of many painters and sculptors whose names are more familiar to art lovers because they were Modernists, not antimodernists.

Now that Modernism has long since receded into historical canonicity, we are able to see that, politically and even formally, its luminaries shared more with their apparent opponents than has usually been appreciated: in their stylistic self-determination as well as in their sexual explicitness, and in those interludes of realism and Classicism explored in this exhibition. It is a constant of cultural history, though almost never appreciated, that at any given moment apparent antagonists, the followers of Rubens or Poussin, of Wagner or Brahms, of Pollock or Reinhardt, have more in common with one another than either has with anyone who lived in an earlier or later age. ♦

BCA

Dante in Love

Youthful ardor leads to arduous going.

BY CHRISTOPHER BENSON

The great books of the Western canon rest on the presupposition that all the books contained therein are *ipso facto* "great." But what happens if you encounter a book from one of the authors that seems—well, not so great? The initial response is disappointment, like paying a half-month's salary for a dining experience that a food critic likened to the sensations of a supernova, except that your meal ends not with a bang but a whimper. The subsequent response is guilt: Why don't you sense the greatness that *must* be there; is your palette not trained enough to detect the subtleties?

Reading *La Vita Nuova*, Dante's first book, induced this disappointment and guilt because, as loath as I am to say, some of the lyrics don't seem a whole lot more elevated than Katy Perry's hormonal hit "Teenage Dream." If I'm a philistine whose blunted imagination cannot apprehend the beauty, compare the lyrics to yourself.

First, Katy Perry:

*My heart stops
When you look at me
Just one touch
Now baby I believe
This is real
So take a chance
And don't ever look back.*

Now, Dante:

*My face grows pale. I feel my body
shaking.
In the presence of such sweetness, I am
unmanned.*

*I am reduced to total helplessness
and if I could, I'd ask my lady for
help, salvation from this strange duress,
painful, and yet, I must admit, even more
pleasurable than anything I know—
although I cannot speak or tell her so.*

Yes, more than seven centuries separate these lyrics written by twentysomethings, but they both emphasize the physiological and ethical malfunctioning that often accompanies love—or more accurately, lust. Perry invites her lover to put his hands on

her skintight jeans; and to get Freudian, Dante pleads for his lover to ease the conflict between the pleasure principle and the reality principle. Where one indulges the fantasy, owing to the sexual liberation of postmodern America (Perry), the other defers the fantasy, owing to the sexual restraint of medieval Catholicism (Dante). Content aside, the lyrical expression is not that different: breathless, terse, above all youthful.

I'm not alone in my disappointment with Dante's inaugural poetry. The Italian scholar Robert Harrison writes:

The most striking aspect of the *Vita nuova*, for those who do not merely take its canonical stature for granted, or whose perception of the work is not mystified by the fact of its authorship, is the utter seriousness with which the author sets out to dignify and solemnify the rather innocent (and often mediocre) lyric poems that he composed in his youth. The *Vita nuova* gives the impression that Dante was unwilling to allow the poems to stand on their own but strove, through his prose commentary, to give them the sort of weight they lacked in their own right.

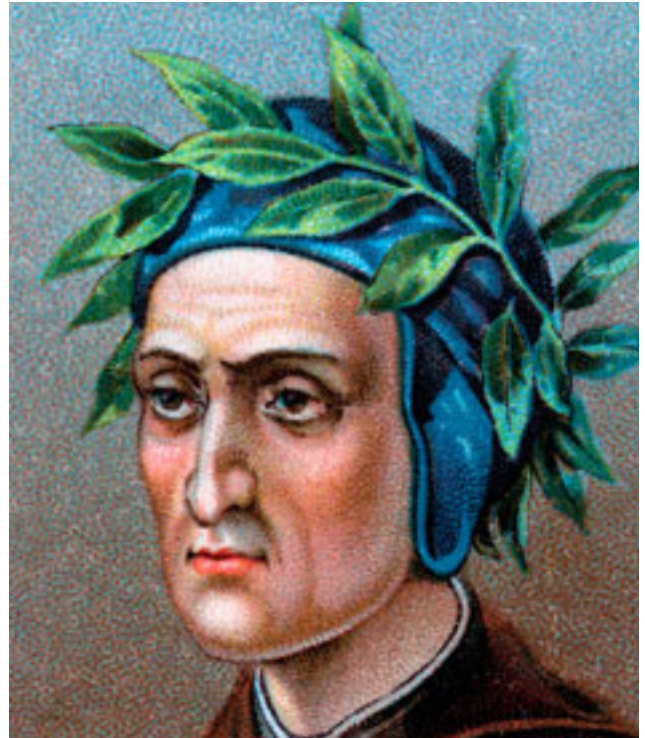
Judging these poems "innocent (and often mediocre)" is ageism, plain

La Vita Nuova
by Dante Alighieri
translated by David R. Slavitt
Harvard, 160 pp., \$18.95

Christopher Benson writes for Books & Culture, Christianity Today, and Image.



Katy Perry



Dante Alighieri

and simple. But a prejudice against the young can be fair when there's evidence of inexperience. According to Harrison, Dante provides his own evidence by self-consciously and retrogressively defining "the nature and ambition of his literary vocation." *La Vita Nuova* is a book within a book: His "little book" compiles, copies, and comments upon what is written in "the book of my memory." The commentator seems insecure with the author, who's trying to find not only his voice but his leitmotif as well. Under the rubric *Incipit vita nova* (a new life begins), Dante anxiously enters a career with words after finding his muse in a Florentine woman named Beatrice, who blurs the line between fact and allegory.

While the smitten Dante of *La Vita Nuova* doesn't reward the reader like the world-weary Dante of *La Divina Commedia*, we're still witness to the initial ascent of the soul's journey toward God, a journey that gets entangled in the irregular heartbeats of erotic love. Following the autobiographical breakthrough of Augustine's *Confessions*, this story narrates Dante's youthful obsession with Beatrice, whom he first sees in church, an important location because it symbolizes the intersection

of *eros* and *agape*. Although I'm skeptical about a nine-year-old who testifies, "It was from that moment that Love tyrannized my soul which in no time had wedded itself to him," he becomes the slave of Cupid—the personification of the Latin noun *cupido* (desire). The burden of slavery goes so far that, after his second sighting at age 18, Love feeds his burning heart to Beatrice in a dream. And what better way to evoke the violent upheaval of *eros* than an image of forced cannibalism?

Sickened with longing for his "young angel," Dante invents a "screen" to hide his feelings for Beatrice: Other women are selected as public objects of his attention. If this lad had been on Freud's sofa, these screen ladies would be diagnosed as sublimation, the superego's policing of the unruly id. Whether the screen intensifies or diffuses his love for Beatrice is up for debate, but at the end, it's clear that Beatrice has triumphed over her rivals, albeit in death rather than in life. Anguished over the loss, Dante courts death so he can be near Beatrice again. Eventually, he realizes that the incorporeal Beatrice is superior to the corporeal Beatrice because she was given to him as a rung

in the ladder toward heaven, as a face to behold, dimly or brilliantly, "the face of him *qui est per omnia secula benedictus*" (who is blessed for all eternity). Overcoming the self-referential narcissism of youth, the poet has begun, in good Platonic fashion, to govern the appetites of his heart through the reasons of his soul, leading him out of grief and closer to glory.

Translations of *La Divina Commedia* abound, but *La Vita Nuova* has been somewhat neglected. Ralph Waldo Emerson was the first to translate it into English; Dante Gabriel Rossetti liberally translated the *libello* and idolized Beatrice in his paintings, who was modeled after his deceased wife, most notably in *Beata Beatrix*. In our day Mark Musa's prose and blank verse translation has become the standard. If you want your verse to rhyme, as it does in the original Italian, then this new translation of David Slavitt's will be welcome. Rhyming hazards the risk of distortion through subtraction and addition, a risk that Slavitt accepts because the fun is working "within the constraints of the forms." The prose commentary of *La Vita Nuova*, which Slavitt rightly describes as "unnecessary and boring,"

BRYAN BEDDER / GETTY IMAGES; CORBIS ART

is rendered in a clear and direct manner, bringing attention to where it belongs: to the poetry.

Following Slavitt's preference for viewing translations as performances, permit me to treat one moment from the famous canzone in Chapter 19. Here, Dante glorifies Beatrice to the point of blasphemy.

*An angel speaks to the Mind of God to report
that there is a marvel on earth both strange
and rare
whose actions arise from a radiant soul
down there,
the glow of which illuminates the sky
even to paradise's heights. In short,
our only lack in heaven is her fair
and splendid presence. All the saints
declare
that the Lord must take some action to
rectify
this defect promptly. Fortunately, I
can announce that Pity speaks to God as
well:
His judgment is that the lady ought to
dwell
on earth for a while longer: "It is my
will that he say to the souls in hell that this
was the vision he had of hope of heaven's
bliss."*

Yeats compared the relationship between form and content to the inseparability of dance and dancer. Form actually generates meaning rather than just containing it. Slavitt's rhymed verse achieves efficient pace and pleasurable repetition, but there's a monotony about the beat that seems ill-suited to the rapturous mood. His diction is clunky, throwing off rhythm and meaning. We might expect such phrases as "in short" to be deployed at the end of a business luncheon, not as a summary of your lover's attributes. *Defect*, used as a synonym for *lack*, connotes more than an absence in heaven, implying a failure of God. The verbs *declare*, *must*, and *rectify* in this sentence—*All the saints declare / that the Lord must take some action to rectify / this defect promptly*—turn the saints into outraged customers and the Lord into an incompetent CEO, as if Google's website had crashed. Compared with Musa's sublime phrase "a living miracle," Slavitt exalts Beatrice as "a marvel on earth both strange and rare," which could make her a carnival sideshow

rather than *the highest nature can achieve / And by her mold all beauty tests itself*, as Musa puts it later. The personification of Pity creates some ambiguity about who's speaking when it's clearly God. Divine speech dictates crystalline syntax, as in Musa's *the hope of heaven's blessed*. Instead, we get jumbled syntax in Slavitt's *the vision he had of hope of heaven's bliss*.

At this critical moment, and elsewhere in the performance, the rhymed verse struggles to communicate what we ought to be hearing, though secular ears may be largely deaf to the shock of Dante's extravagant use of sacred language in reference to Beatrice. In this canzone, a mortal woman achieves beati-

fication prior to death. Angels and saints conspire to fix the cosmological misalignment. Love itself says, *Upon her face you see depicted Love, / There where none dares to hold his gaze too long*, as if Love fires himself from the job because of her epiphany. Is all this poetic hyperbole? Perhaps it crosses what Robert Harrison calls "the limits of sacrilege."

The live question for any reader of *La Vita Nuova* ought to be this: Has Dante argued that erotic love is *the* royal road to union with God? If Beatrice is a means of coming closer to God, *eros* redeems the lover. If, however, she's an end in herself, *eros* damns the lover because it has become an idol rather than a burnt offering. ♦

BCA

Coincidence?

They think not, neither do they know.

BY JAMES KIRCHICK

To understand the conspiratorial mindset, it helps to be the subject of one.

I had that experience in early 2008, after publishing an article exposing newsletters published by the Texas congressman and gadfly presidential candidate Ron Paul in the late 1970s through the mid-'90s.

At one point circulated to nearly a million subscribers in the pre-Internet age, the newsletters were characterized (I wrote) by an "obsession with conspiracies, sympathy for the right-wing militia movement, and deeply held bigotry against blacks, Jews, and gays." Released on the day of the New Hampshire primary, the article caused a small tremor in the presidential race. Paul claimed that he was not their author, nor aware of their content. Most respectable lib-

ertarians at places such as the Cato Institute and *Reason* quickly disassociated themselves from a man they had formerly lauded as a standard-bearer.

But to Paul's diehard supporters, there was something more nefarious at play. They wanted to know how I got my hands on these newsletters. The answer, as I had explained, was simple: I plugged Paul's

name into WorldCat, an online library catalogue, which led me to locate collections of the newsletters housed at the University of Kansas (where they are stored in one of the country's most expansive collections of extreme right-wing political documents) and the Wisconsin Historical Society.

But the Paul obsessives were not satisfied by so prosaic an explanation and within a day of my article being posted online had devised their own theory. Individuals at the Cato Institute, corrupted by their exposure to power in Washington, and more committed to

Voodoo Histories
*The Role of the Conspiracy Theory
in Shaping Modern History*
by David Aaronovitch
Riverhead, 400 pp., \$26.95

*James Kirchick is writer-at-large for
Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.*