Dante Alighieri The Vita Nuova

The Vita Nuova is a work of Italian literature, written in alternating prose and verse, composed in the late 1290s by Dante (1265-1321).

It is many things:
- A story of Desire: the love between Dante and Beatrice
- An anthology of lyric poetry: it collects Dante’s earliest verse, puts the poems in a narrative order, and comments on their occasion, structure, and meaning
- A treatise on literary criticism: it reviews medieval theories of poetry, allegory, authorship, and readership – these theories were originally about LATIN literature; Dante applies them to VERNACULAR, ITALIAN LITERATURE
- An announcement of a literary career: as Dante’s first, major work, it self-consciously calls attention to his literary aspirations; it presents DANTE

Why are we reading it?
- Dante responds directly to the traditions of Christian and secular love we have traced in the course; he constantly questions if love is a good thing or a bad thing; is love like being Narcissus (where the one you fall in love with is only a reflection of yourself); or is love like being Pygmalion (where the one you fall in love with is effectively created or invented or imagined by you)?

KEY POINT: DANTE FALLS IN LOVE WITH SOMEONE HE HARDLY KNOWS SHE IS AS MUCH A CREATION OF HIS IMAGINATION AS A STATUE
Dante also responds to the philosophical questions we have asked in the course: Can love be taught, or only felt? Is there something inside your head that makes you a lover; or are you a blank slate and does love come to you from outside?

Dante also responds to the literary questions we have asked in the course: Does literature bring back the dead? Is reading an education or a distraction? Is poetry a good thing or a bad thing? What does it mean to review your life and retell your own story? Is love a journey, a quest, a pilgrimage, a crusade?

Dante is also worth reading because he represents a kind of writer we have been exploring: the tensions between the public person and the private person; between a person of the city and the political world, on the one hand, and a person of the bedroom and the imaginary world, on the other.
Three things are new to Dante’s world that you need to know

The Rise of Civic Humanism: Dante lived in Florence; it was a city-state that brought together the wealthy and the educated, bankers and scholars, churchmen and political rulers.
City-State culture involved: political intrigue: the rise of commercial wealth and its sponsorship of artistic activity; the city streets and buildings as the site of culture

The Rise of University Scholasticism: beginning in the 12th and 13th centuries, universities emerged in Europe that were designed to teach how philosophical methods could debate matters of ethics, theology, and knowledge. Theology was done through philosophy: that is, through debate and through the comparison of different points of view. The Sic et Non, the yes and no, was the technique of comparing different points of view in making an argument.

The Rise of Vernacular Culture: in the Italian Peninsula, in southern France, and in central European German courts, civic, literary, and intellectual life was increasingly going on in Italian, French, and German. The vernaculars became vehicles for literary eloquence. For Dante, part of his goal is to help make the Florentine version of Italian into a true literary language.
It is thus important to understand that DANTE AND HIS FRIENDS ARE THE EDUCATED CHILDREN OF RELATIVELY AFFLUENT, POLITICAL FAMILIES, WRITING AND WORKING IN ITALIAN AND LIVING IN A CITY:

EDUCATION
FAMILY
AFFLUENCE
POLITICS
VERNACULAR
CITY

THE STRUCTURE OF THE VITA NUOVA:
Dante adapts Boethius’ alternation of prose and verse to review and recast poetry he has already written
Dante adapts Boethius’ concept of Lady Philosophy as an idealized female teacher into the figure of Beatrice
Dante analyzes his own poetry; he analyzes his own life: THE ARGUMENT OF THE VITA NUOVA IS THAT YOUR LIFE IS A BOOK TO BE READ

THUS: DANTE, LIKE AUGUSTINE, CALLS ATTENTION TO THE PHYSICAL MATERIAL CONDITION OF LITERACY AS HIS GOVERNING METAPHOR
Opening of the *Vita Nuova*

In the book of my memory, after the first pages, which are almost blank, there is a section headed, *Incipit vita nova*. Beneath this heading I find the words which it is my intention to copy into this smaller book, or if not all, at least their meaning.

Key terms from manuscript culture:

Book of my memory: *libro de la mia memoria*
Section: *rubrica*
*Incipit vita nova*: the title is in LATIN; the word “incipit,” here begins, is used in medieval books to refer to the title of the work
Beneath this heading: *sotto la quale rubrica*
Copy: *assemplare*
Smaller book: *libello*
Meaning: *sentenzia*

Dante makes the act of remembering his life an act of reading; memory is a codex, an illuminated manuscript, with RUBRICS: rubric is from the Latin *rubricare*, to write In red: a rubric is a title written in red.
N quella parte Alberoniam memoria donata abiacque pese fi
prorise loggev, finveva una rubrica, liqual dier. Inapu una nove,
Sono liqual so eraro ferite, liqual dier emi intenti do
somperque inquesti libelli. Esesto tutte almeno adavoro fantasando. No
ue fare qua appresso abone si unmente era tornato alcalo delabec
quasi una medesimo par, quatro alofia propria gloriore, quando
almitn deh apriente prima lagebsu, liena Alano mete liqual fu Isomol
si chamato Beatrice, liqual rissarono chesi chiamare. Esesto inquesti
sa gria suus triste cheno se tep bascallo era mossi, nersi, si parte e
riente deliscia par, lane dizinga. Esesto quasi dalprimo liu nona
non appare esse edo landi quasi delalfime limeno nona, pare eftist
amboblissimo color, unile edoche sanguigno, estra corneta alaquem ehehoa
so ginosimmis, eti femenue. Inquel punto liu tenntre delaparte del
una liqual amara nella fanciulla chamen Alami cuore, corneto avamare si
fortemente chesura, nchementi pesto amboblisse. Esesto anala diu questa
parole. Erei dis morto me, qui uenien dominabibilin megui. Inquel punto
lasperta amabile liqual amara nellam chamen nellelique, gliu piron, sin
frit printu leñes pesso, famome amanuare ari, molto lapelnde spezzal
mente abisper, delina saus, questa parole. Aparro, jam tennebulo nehra.
Inquel punto lasperta realle, liqual amara inquel punto tenntre san-
mediante nostro, corneto amare su enando diu questa parole. Hai
mai gia frequente spedita on denezee. dollor una duiche chenove sa
anemage liena amma liqual fu allar, fistra disfusata. Esesto aprare
sopra, come senaria, cento, sanguina, pleitura della liena Amme una
agnatone, chena comena saus tutti liuus piaceri, copnotamente Emi cona
liena norte usber, che corshe saspre questa anquela ginosimmis. Onbno
mellama paiera marble volg lade termi cada, diu nobili chindabhi
portomen, escofetti deh sipta, dve questa paiba dizer homero. Ella na
parv, specie dian mortuale ma didio, categra delaflia amage liqual
continuamente inua morte doesse balsame amare, amagare, amare, me
 tutta una era diu nobiliissima uerdi, chenenni onseffe amare miragge

AND FINALLY, BEFORE WE ACTUALLY BEGIN, WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND HOW DANTE AND HIS POETIC PEERS WERE REINVENTING LOVE

LOVE WAS A FEATURE OF THE INTELLECT, A MATTER OF MIND

The key phrase in Italian literature of the time is “cor gentil,” the gentle heart; but it means more than that; it means a heart that is guided by moral and social principles; a heart that is governed by the head

Gentilezza is not gentleness or even gentility; it is a moral virtue

Dante and his teachers and friends made love a matter of the inner, intellectual life a psychological condition with philosophical implications

They thus moved love poetry away from the aristocratic play of courtly love as in the Romance of the Rose, and gave it intellectual, moral, and theological heft

They also moved love away from the court and its sites of play (the joust, the garden) and located it in the city. City, civic values (public morality, virtuous moderation, the commercial support of the arts) became the values of love and love poetry as well
SO NOW, we can journey through Dante’s *Vita Nuova*

Key passages, topics, and terms

Part I: the book of memory: remembering as a form of reading; learning as a form of copying; Dante the poet as Dante the scribe

Part II: the figure of Beatrice; she is nine years old; she is both a literal, absolutely real-seeming person AND at the same time an allegorical figure, dressed in symbolic garments

Part III: Nine years later, Dante sees her again (this is May, 1283; Dante is 18); she is dressed in white; she is on the street; she looks at him; she says hi; ninth hour of the day; goes back to his room; has a vision; writes a poem

The Poem in Part III: the purpose of quoting the poem is not only to record the dream; it is to illustrate how to read the poem, using critical analysis; Dante is both a writer and a literary critic here

Part IV: love is a sickness: compare Boethius who needs a doctor

Parts V and VI: Dante develops his “screen love” a way of protecting Beatrice and pretending to love someone else

Part VII: Dante sounds like Boethius; cast down, writing sorrowful poetry on the departure of Beatrice

The Poem in Part VII: very Boethian: uses the image of the road: the road of Love: *via d’Amore*

Like Boethius, Dante is inarticulate here
Part IX: Dante travels from Florence; he seems to meet a traveler (a pilgrim); it is a kind of visionary meeting; very realistic; also very allegorical; the Poem repeats this imagery, meeting Love himself, like a pilgrim, coming along his path.

Part XII: Love comes in a vision to Dante’s room; he CALLS DANTE BY NAME (very important); he speaks in Latin; Dante thinks he speaks “in an obscure manner”; and then LOVE SPEAKS IN ITALIAN: “he replied in the vernacular” (Dante’s word is volgari, the vulgar tongue); and guess what? The vision happened at the ninth hour of the day!

THE NUMBER 9 IS VERY IMPORTANT. Words for “nine” or “ninth” appear 22 times in the Vita Nuova. 3x3: trinity x trinity. The structure of the work 31 poems arranged in a pattern
10 short
1 long
4 short 1 long 4 short
10 short
10-1-9-1-10

Dante keeps writing, feeling, and moving along on the same path, until Part XIX: when he seems to have a new beginning; it is a real but also an allegorical moment; stream of clear water; my tongue spoke; returns to the city; writes the very important poem here: the poem is the centerpiece of the book and of Dante’s new life.
Ladies who know by insight what love is

Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore

Love is a matter of knowledge, of intelligence
Love poetry is an intellectual activity
This is an example of what Dante and his friends called the dolce stil nuovo, the sweet new style
This kind of poetry does not simply talk about the experience of love (see Romance of the Rose)
It talks about knowledge, intelligence, or inner comprehension of love

The structure of the poem: Each stanza begins, in Italian, with a proper name or important person of address:

Donne: the ladies of the world
Angelo: the angel of the Lord
Madonna: my own lady, but of course, the earthly lady as a figure of the Madonna
Amor: Love personified who talks of the lady
Canzone: the poem itself, now addressed directly in the second person; Dante makes the poem itself into a kind of person
So, at this point, the purpose of the book is to elevate love: to take it out of the world of courtly, erotic play and game (like the *Romance of the Rose*) and make it something, quite simply, holy.

As Dante will put it in the poem in Part XX:

Love and the noble heart are but one thing

Amore e ‘l cor gentil sono una cosa

This is the fundamental principle of Dante and his circle, the “stilnovisti”

AND SO:

What we see so far is a book that is about love and that exemplifies love poetry
A Book designed to tell a literal story in great detail
But also a book designed to tell an allegorical story in equal richness

In this activity, Dante is not unique: he is working in a tradition of VISUAL ARTS, PRACTICED BY HIS CONTEMPORARY, THE GREAT PAINTER

GIOTTO DI BODONE (1267-1337)
This is Giotto’s portrait of Dante. It is the earliest documented portrait drawn from personal knowledge of a European writer whose name we know. This portrait is part of a larger fresco sequence representing paradise, now in Florence, Italy. Giotto met Dante, and this portrait probably comes from the early 1330s.
Giotto
*Kiss of Judas*
1304-6

Scrovegni Chapel
Padua, Italy

Giotto brought a new realism to the human face and form while at the same time sustaining allegorical and spiritual meaning.
Everyday reality is as important as spiritual history.

Both surface realism and deeper meaning work together to create a new kind of ‘reality’ for Giotto.

Dante’s verbal art works in the same way.