

## CHAPTER ONE

# *Vita Nuova*: The Promise of Writing

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In man, life sets itself the challenge of producing an animal capable of making promises.

—Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*

Chapter 1 undertakes an interpretation of Dante's *Vita nuova* occasioned by the difference that appears in that text when it is read alongside the first essay of Derrida's *The Gift of Death*. Derrida's essay concerns itself with the history of Europe as the history of European religion and European responsibility, which Derrida reads together as a history of secrecy, the history of keeping secrets. Death is the seal of secrecy, the cut made by the impossibility of keeping the promise of life. Read from this perspective, the *Vita nuova* emerges as both a work of religious autobiography, a confession, and as the chronicle of a signal episode in the history of the invention of writing, the emergence of *il dolce stil nuovo*. In both regards, the *Vita nuova* is the account of a conversion, the record of a new identity that Dante takes on by taking responsibility for a secret covenant of promises: the secret of a "Divine" word given as a promise of love, revealed and made flesh in the person of Beatrice, and Dante's secret promise of a human word to be given in writing to memorialize the death of love. This reading of the *Vita nuova* in turn prompts an initial reading of Derrida's *Circumfession* according to the difference that appears in that text when it is read alongside Dante's *Vita nuova*. *Circumfession* is the history of Derrida's conversion in writing, a history of his religion without religion. There he attempts to take responsibility for his deconstructive style of writing as a way of keeping the secret promise of life that had been cut in his flesh at the beginning of his life in the face of the death of his mother.

### THE SECRET OF BEGINNING: A PARABLE

The promise of writing reveals a secret calling. This means that writing is a promising business: it is set to work by the need, the necessity, to make and

keep promises. This necessity is absolute; without promise, nothing happens, neither world nor history. According to Genesis, the Book of Beginning, the history of the world, the universe, unfolds as the making of a promise: Let there be light! Let there be the revelation of something new, a beginning full of promise. Let a new dawn break, and break again and again. The world begins with promise, with the promise of light, revealing together the possibility of a world and of history. Light is the illuminating possibility of world history. Light calls into evidence the possibility of making promises and of keeping promises; that is, light is the calling into existence of persons, the being that is capable of promise making and promise keeping. Light is the calling of, the calling to, freedom. Light illuminates the possibility of the world as the place in which the history of freedom occurs.

The identity of the “person” here includes the possibility and the necessity of both divine and human persons, and also of their correlativity, that is, of their mutual codetermination of every aspect and perspective of the time, space, and history of their relationships as persons. “Divine” signifies the anteriority of promising as the revelation of a call for beginning, the origin of which is not and cannot be revealed but must remain secret, be kept as a secret, as the necessary absolute condition of genesis, of every beginning. Without the keeping of the secret, the very idea of beginning would be meaningless; meaning would never begin to happen as the world and history of persons.

Without keeping its secret, any idea of beginning is meaningless—empty, void, nothing, without possibility, unthinkable, absurd. The secret is in its own keeping, this keeping for itself of this empty nothing, this meaningless absurd, this impossible. The secret anterior to genesis, with which genesis begins, the Secret which is divine because it is absolutely necessary, is an empty secret. It conceals nothing; at least, nothing meaningful, not even the possibility of meaning, for that too is revealed and begins with the word that calls into the void with the promise of light, the promise of meaning that articulates the space and time of the world and history. Genesis: the story of the theory of relativity; the story of light, space, and time as correlative; of human and divine persons, also as correlative. All necessarily emerge together as promising meaning and keeping the secret of promising, which is an empty secret making empty promises that must be kept.

How to keep an empty secret, empty promises? This is the question posed by the calling into existence of the human person, God’s co-conspirator in keeping the empty promise of an empty secret. Humans, too, are persons; like divine persons, they too are capable of making (empty) promises and keeping (empty) secrets. Woman/man made in the image and likeness of God; male and female, another correlation, another conspiracy; another uncertainty principle, history’s first recorded triangle, the first trick of three, the best way to keep the empty promise of an empty secret—dissemination, sowing the seed of difference, which sprouts into weeds among the flowers, planting the

seeds of dissimulation, of deception and discord, calling attention away from the secret hidden at the center of the garden, the tree of life that articulates space and time, situating all involved in a scene of uncertainty where the possibility of the correlation, the site of relation and meaning, is kept hidden, guarded by the trial of prohibition, by calling attention to another site, the site of temptation occasioned by the fruit of secrecy, the knowledge of good and evil, the first fruit of cultivation and of culture, the harvest that fulfills the empty promise of the empty secret: sin, the final seal, which assures that the empty promise of the empty secret will both be kept, empty. Eating—the occasion of sin, the strategy shared by divine and human co-conspirators, designed to give the history of the world the semblance of meaning through substitution, so as not to give away its secret at the beginning.

It is a rather charming story; really quite a comedy, and quite effective: it opens up the possibility of multiple complications, some rather terrifying, altogether effective at sowing further seeds of discord, further distracting from the emptiness of the promise and the secret it keeps. But in the end, all shall be well; all manner of thing shall be well, for the story promises a happy ending. It is necessarily written that way, full of promise and light from the beginning because writing is a promising business, a secret calling to be kept secret in writing, the articulation, according to a certain theory of relativity and principle of uncertainty, of a real possibility, in the end, for meaning to be inscribed in space and time, in the world's history, as a story with a happy ending, a Comedy. The structure of promising, in other words, is faith, hope, and love, the virtues of every religion.

## THE PROMISE OF A NEW LIFE

### Poetry

And it was at that age . . . Poetry arrived in search of me.

I don't know, I don't know where it came from, from winter or a river.

I don't know how or when, no they were not voices,  
they were not words, nor silence, but from a street I  
was summoned, from the branches of night, abruptly,  
from the others, among violent fires or returning alone,  
there I was without a face and it touched me.

I did not know what to say, my mouth had no way  
with names, my eyes were blind, and something  
started in my soul, fever or forgotten wings, and I  
made my own way, deciphering  
that fire, and I wrote the first faint line, without  
substance, pure nonsense, pure wisdom  
of someone who knows nothing, and suddenly I saw  
the heavens unfastened and open, plants, palpitating

plantations, shadow perforate, riddled  
with arrows, fire and flowers, the winding night, the universe.

And I, infinitesimal being, drunk with the great starry  
void, likeness, image of mystery, felt myself a pure  
part of the abyss, I wheeled with the stars, my heart  
broke loose on the wind.

Pablo Neruda<sup>1</sup>



“In the book of my memory, after the first pages, which are almost blank,  
there is a chapter headed *Incipit vita nova* [here begins a new life].”

(Dante Alighieri, *Vita nuova*, i)<sup>2</sup>

The book of New Life. A new Book of Beginning. Genesis—a book of new beginning(s), of (always) beginning anew. A revelation in writing; a scriptural revelation of a new genesis, a new triangle, a new trick-of-three. A new promise of new writing, in a new style (*il dolce stil nuovo*), a new way of keeping secret. Dante’s *Vita nuova* is a strange work: strange, because it is (almost) altogether new, because it is so promising. It is stranger still because it probably promises too much in writing—in the face of death, it promises a new life, a new beginning. It promises a gift of writing in the face of death, promises in writing the Gift of Death. The promise of writing is the Gift of Death.<sup>3</sup> *Vita nuova* promises to give a new name to the face of the Gift of Death. The Book of Beginning, written in a new way, tracing the beginning of a conversion. The conversion story of the *Vita nuova* tells of conversion deferred, a conversion that ends by promising yet another conversion (for it promises in writing another writing that will require another new beginning). The *Vita nuova* concludes with the lines:

After this sonnet, there appeared to me a marvelous vision in which I saw things which made me decide to write no more of this blessed one until I could do so more worthily. And to this end I apply myself as much as I can, as she indeed knows. Thus, if it shall please Him by whom all things live that my life continue for a few years, I hope to compose concerning her what has never been written in rhyme of any woman. And then may it please Him who is the Lord of courtesy that my soul may go to see the glory of my lady, that is, of the blessed Beatrice, who now in glory beholds the face of Him *qui est per omnia saecula benedictus* (who is eternally blessed). (*Vita nuova*, *xlii*)<sup>4</sup>

Contained here is the promise of a new, “more worthy” writing, the beginning of which would in fact be postponed for more than a decade, despite the reference to being spared “for a few years.” What is the significance of this promise, what secret does it keep that prevents it from being kept for so long? What conversion does it articulate and what conversion does it anticipate, so long in arriving? And, perhaps most important, what should we make of

the prodigious prodigality of this promise? Something absolutely new? Never written before? Of a woman? Impossible!

The promise is predicated on a long series of visions that culminate in the decisive one mentioned but not described in the above citation. This final vision is anticipated not long before by a lesser one, more an “impression” than a vision, though still vivid, which prefigures the manner and matter of the one yet to come:

I seemed to see Beatrice in glory, clothed in the crimson garments in which she first appeared before my eyes, and she seemed as young as when I first saw her. Then I began to think about her and as I recalled her through the sequence of time past my heart began to repent sorrowfully of the desire by which it had so basely allowed itself to be possessed for some days against the constancy of reason; and when this evil desire had been expelled all my thoughts returned once more to their most gracious Beatrice. And I say that from then onwards I began to think of her so much with the whole of my remorseful heart that frequently my sighs made this evident, expressing as they issued what my heart was saying, that is, the name of this most gracious soul and how she had departed from us. (*Vita nuova*, xxxix)

Dante-the-lover prepares the final vision by circling back to the original vision that already contained the seed of the final one. By following in living memory the sequence of time past, he returns to himself again as he had been and as he now begins to be again, to his thoughts of Beatrice as she had been in his eyes in the beginning. And now his tears begin to wash clean again the vision of her that had until this episode been dimmed and obscured for a while by his succumbing to the temptation to seek consolation for his loss of her to death in the pity of the “lady of the window.”<sup>5</sup> Enkindled by his sighs, inarticulately expressing what his heart would say, the name of Beatrice, his eyes become “desirous only of shedding tears” of repentance, expressions of a rethinking, a change of mind, of a conversion. Thus bathed and cleansed, thus baptized, his eyes die by going down into the waters over which the sighs of God had first breathed, in the beginning, the first “inspiration.” From these waters, his eyes emerge to the final vision and the promise it expresses: the promise of new writing, of new tears, to be inscribed in a new style in a new book of his memory.

This final vision contains within itself and reveals its beginning in a new light. Here the structure of the *Vita nuova* becomes apparent. The Dante who writes the work or, more accurately, compiles it, probably in 1292–1293, writes in an attempt to read himself, rereading his poems written at various times probably over the preceding ten years, and trying to “come to himself again,” by rereading and rewriting in narrative commentary what he finds written in the book of his memory.<sup>6</sup> Through this triple inscription, Dante the writer recounts the story of Dante the lover, whose new life begins with his “first vision” of Beatrice “when they were both about nine” (*Vita nuova*, ii). They

were two children at a feast hosted by her father, two children who could not yet see that their names had already been written down together by another in the book of history, divinely prescribed for each other: a new Adam and Eve at a new garden party. From the start, this book is written binocularly to achieve maximal depth of field: one eye angles the story from the perspective of the young lover, the initiate who is being inducted into love's secret ways; the other eye sees from the perspective of the adept, the seer who has already participated in the ecstasy of the mystery. This double vision, however, is itself redoubled: it is a rewriting of what had already been written twice and written differently—first in the book of memory, then in the poems. Now these writings are reinscribed into the prose commentary that constitutes the confessional voice in the work, the poet's voice confessing that he was all along being called. He confesses that he had received a vocation to be the poet of Beatrice. He is trying to confess to being called by Beatrice to see himself in a new light. It is Beatrice who calls, Beatrice who was his beloved Lady; Beatrice who was the inspiration of his poetry; Beatrice who was the "desired of God" and of the Heavenly City; Beatrice who is the threefold arrival of the Gift of Death, the trinitarian revelation of the secret of beginning, the promise of a new life.<sup>7</sup> It would seem, however, that although the writer saw differently than the lover, neither suspected the unpromising and highly improper role of yet another, a third Dante, absent yet present in the writing, on whom still further visions would be visited and of whom another conversion would be required in order to make good his promise to keep the secret of the Gift of Death in a new writing, and thus to remain faithful to his Lady.

But that is another story, yet to be told. The story of this promise still needs to be traced back to its promising beginning of a new life and a new style of writing, the revelation of a new way of keeping a secret. The First Vision, recounted in *Vita nuova* ii, is the seminal one of the lover's first sight of Beatrice, whom the writer already identifies as the woman whom "my mind [now] beholds in glory," though that beholding has yet to germinate into the form of vision that it will take in the writing of the *Paradiso*, with Beatrice taking her proper place in the White Rose of the Empyrean. Dressed "in a very noble color, a decorous and delicate crimson," he recognizes her as a divine revelation. He knows this by the style of writing by which she is inscribed into the book of his memory. "The moment I saw her, I say in all truth that the vital spirit, which dwells in the inmost depth of the heart, began to tremble so violently that I felt the vibration alarmingly in my pulses." This revelation is traced by its pulse strokes in his heart and blood, "even in the weakest of them." He undergoes tremendous trembling of blood-writing, articulated without words in the fleshy tablet of the heart with the violence, the violation, the transgressive, incising bite that is characteristic of the divine style of wording itself: it always marks itself in the flesh first, cutting open a bloody trace with which it binds and ties its victim (Beatrice wears a girdle over the crimson, "trimmed in a matter suited to her tender age," the victim

bound for sacrifice; another Iphigenia, another Isaac).<sup>8</sup> His trembling heart utters the words that are wrung out of it by the master power that keeps the secret of the divine, the secret of the beginning, enclosed within itself as it expresses itself in the flesh of another. *Ecce deus fortiori me, qui veniens dominabitur mihi*. "Behold a god of greater power than mine, who comes to lord it over me." This is how the secret writes itself in the flesh: the Lord, the dominator, exercises its dominion by "taking place," happening as the subjugation of the fleshy tablet, there to disseminate itself by conjugating, verbalizing itself in the pulse-strokes of blood-writing.

The conquest quickly spreads to a new front: "At this point, the spirit of the senses which dwells on high in the place to which all our sense perceptions are carried, was filled with amazement and, speaking especially to the spirit of vision said, 'Now your joy has been revealed.'" The power transgresses further along the path that life follows to the eyes that sustain a second blow—the envisioning of revelation. This further transgression, transferring the blow of power, inspires a new register, reaches a new registry, and transcribes itself into yet another style of writing: "Whereupon the natural spirit which dwells where our nourishment is digested, began to weep and, weeping, said, 'Woe to me! For I shall often be impeded from now on.'" This must have been something like the way YHWH's Spirit breathed life into the inert clay of Adam, violating the dumb dirt with blow after blow, inspiring it with senses and articulating it with various strokes, inscribing it with different styles of writing. But with a difference: here in Dante's vision the woman comes first and the man is induced through her, as seems more natural, or at least more familiar. Furthermore, this water-writing in tears is an unresponsive, irresponsible substitute for inspiration of the Spirit that first breathed over the waters and inscribed in them the secret promise of life. This substitute water-writing in tears blurs the vision and registers itself as the dismay of digestion, that dyspepsia that inhibits eating, the presence of the other that discomforts the void within the place of the secret where the fruit is buried after it is eaten, substituting flesh for the hunger for the word that must be kept secret, substituting a watery ink that vanishes for the lasting stain of blood. Eating flesh—flesh of fruit, flesh of animal, flesh of men—all flesh-eating is a sorry substitution, an empty promise of the empty secret which is the only food that truly sustains life—the secret revelation encrypted in the vision of the sole source of the soul's vital joy. Only the eating of flesh made word again will turn the water of tears into the wine-blood of joy, turn the salt of tears into the bread-flesh of life. Eucharist—the conversion of eating from animal nourishment into feasting as celebration, the change in the signification of eating that Dante will have to inscribe in the promised writing, is already inscribed, prefigured, in the biopsychology of this passage.

The text of *Vita nuova*, ii continues, "From then on indeed Love ruled over my soul, which was thus wedded to him early in life, and he began to acquire such assurance and mastery over me, owing to the power which my imagination gave him, that I was obliged to fulfill all his wishes perfectly."

Inscribing itself in the fleshy tablet of the body, the divine power consummates its nuptials with the soul, its voice inspiring the cords of imagination to resonate and amplify its significance, and impregnates it with the seeds of new visions yet to come. Dante's imagination grows big with the promise of new life written in the virgin blood of that wedding night. Domination, mastery to the point of servitude, even enslavement: the pattern of divine power written into human flesh, that kenotic emptying out that St. Paul transcribes, the secret that is constantly kept by reinscription into human flesh. The transgressive and violent impropriety of this pattern had long ago been given a proper name: Incarnation.<sup>9</sup>

Dante the poet recognizes that in one sense, the lover's revelation is an old story, recorded countless times in old testaments: "I often went in search of her, and I saw that in all her ways she was so praiseworthy and noble that indeed the words of the poet Homer might have been said of her, 'she did not seem the daughter of a mortal man, but of a god.'" Yet the poet recognizes too the note of an irony that registers its trace here, planting a seed that will germinate only much later, "Though her image, which was always present in my mind, incited Love to dominate me, its influence was so noble that it never allowed Love to guide me without the faithful council of reason, in everything in which such counsel was useful to hear." The dominion of Love here, however triumphant, is circumscribed by the prescription of another style of inscription, another as yet ungerminated seed of conversion that will produce in imagination other figures of mastery and direction that come to life in the *Commedia*. The voice of reason, which prescribes another rule to which the Love of the "praiseworthy and noble" pays heed, is yet to be figured forth, and the style of its writing yet to be traced out in imagination in this episode of Dante's conversion story.

*Vita nuova* traces the secret of beginning ambiguously inscribed in the promise of Dante's writing and in Dante's promise of writing. It is the Book of Genesis in the scriptural testaments of Dante the poet, the Book of the Dead in the confessional testimony of Dante the lover, the Book of Revelation in which the Secret calling, the vocation to conversion and new life, is inscribed into the heart, viscera, eyes, and mind of Dante, the child of the Promise of Writing. But the promise of writing is always and only fulfilled through the Gift of Death, which pays the price for the an-economy<sup>10</sup>, the prodigious prodigality and hyperbolic excess of the promise of a genuinely new beginning, of a true singularity and singular truth. A promise is always an act of impropriety and importunity; whatever it promises, it draws on credit, offering present property as collateral for future gift. But the asymmetry between its structural elements, property and gift, present and future, reveals the impossibility of promising, the unpromising possibility contained within the structure of promising itself: its necessary, secret emptiness. The promise is a substitution, a subterfuge that tries to draw attention away from the impropriety of the future, which we do not yet have, and the expropriation of the past, which

we no longer have. It plants a seed that germinates into the fruit of promise, which is “attractive to the eye and good to eat,” because it promises present knowledge. Knowledge seems to offer the promise of enabling the one who eats to ingest the past and future whole, transforming the one into the other, digesting the otherness of the Other and transmogrifying it into one’s present property—“Ye shall be as gods.” (Much as Ouranos, Kronos, and Zeus all had to do, that is, ingest everything, including their own offspring, in the ultimately futile attempt to stabilize their fateful dominion.)

If the vision of *Vita nuova*, ii is the vision of creation and the revelation of its promise of new life, *Vita nuova*, iii is the revelation of the ambiguity of that promise born of its emptiness, of the seductive, tempting power of the secret of promising as the beginning of a hopeless economy of debt and deception. It reveals the history of an eating that neither nourishes nor satisfies, yet which reveals a new possibility for the story, tracing a new chapter in the water-writing, a trail of tears and sweat, a new transcription in blood-writing, as blood sacrifice and bloodbath. The seed of this new writing is planted in the second vision of *Vita nuova*. That seed will not germinate, however, or flower or bear the fruit of difference, a different way of eating and writing, until long years of gestation have passed. Then the alchemy of the soul, like the pregnancy of the womb, brings forth something singular and new: the an-economy of conversion—changing the blood, sweat, and tears by which must be earned the daily bread, that which substitutes as food but does not satisfy, into the bread of life by which the promise is converted and kept through the revelation of the Gift of Death, through the experience of forgiveness as a new way of keeping promises and secrets in writing. Forgiveness means always beginning anew: the deferred conversion of the poet of the *Vita nuova* becomes the pilgrim’s journey of conversion reimaged in the *Commedia*.

The vision of *Vita nuova*, iii is terrible: it is a further revelation of the Secret calling for the promise of writing, the promise written in the blood, the blood of sacrifice. It is a vision of “heart-eating,” of the violence that tries to redeem the debt of substitution through the economy of sacrifice, succumbing to the temptation to consume and devour the promise of writing and digest it as present property expressed in writing. Situated as occurring “exactly nine years” after the first vision, the second is recorded in the same divine space, the doubled square of time-space that bespeaks the reciprocity of the relationship that locates the religious dimension of human existence. The vision occurs improperly, that is, as a dream, the unconscious articulation of a desire that is temporally (temporarily) dissociated from the voice of reason, at liberty to express itself without regard to the responsibility to discipline itself according to the word made flesh appearing as the restraining presence of the other—Beatrice as she appeared in the flesh: nine years prior in the first vision, and again in the flesh on the day preceding this dream. Yet it is her flesh made word that supplies the occasion for the dream, itself a continuation of a revelry that becomes the substitute feast for her living word:

When exactly nine years had passed since this gracious being appeared to me, as I have described, it happened that on the last day of this intervening period, this marvel appeared before me again, dressed in pure white walking between two other women of distinguished bearing, both older than herself. As they walked down the street she turned her eyes toward me *where I stood in fearing and trembling*, and with her ineffable courtesy, which is now rewarded in eternal life, she greeted me. *As this was the first time she had ever spoken to me, I was filled with such joy that, my senses reeling, I had withdrawn from the sight of others. So I returned to the loneliness of my room and began to think about this gracious person.* (*Vita nuova*, iii; emphasis added)

The location of the episode in the square of divine time-space (nine equals three times three, the Trinitarian figure “squared,” rectified with its human image) is redoubled by the location of Beatrice herself appearing as the central member of the trinity of women, securing her figural identity as the revelatory word, her “*salute*,”<sup>11</sup> the “greeting” which is recognized as expressive of her role as the embodied promise of his salvation, the annunciation of his new life communicated in the script of her eyes that behold him in “fear and trembling,” prefiguring the act of fevered imagination in which the dream will rescript her promising greeting in the idiom of sacrifice. Before his eyes, the dream-vision will encrypt her actual appearance in the flesh inscribing it in the image of sacrifice as a substitute for the Gift of Death. The purity of the white in which she is dressed is the color appropriate to the innocence of the victim to be offered in sacrifice. But something goes wrong. In a parodic echo of the visionary biopsychology of *Vita nuova* ii discussed earlier, Dante withdraws from the sight of others into the privacy of his own room, and attempts to secret himself away into the reverie (senses reeling) of an enclosed space, a secret garden of earthly delights, the seductively tempting delight of thinking his own thoughts as a substitute for her lost presence in the flesh-made-word of her greeting. He sleepily begins to lose himself in the project of transforming his private property (“the loneliness of my room”) into sacred precincts to set the scene for a liturgical ritual of his own devising. The stage is set for the fateful drama about to unfold: the encryption of the Secret calling in the promise of writing, the substitution of another secret, the secret Dante dreams up in the crypt of his own private property, the encrypted substitution imaginatively kept secret by role reversal: male for female, tempted for tempter, victim for priest/executioner. The duplicity of this encrypted substitution is signaled and signified by the “redress” that Beatrice undergoes in the dream for transgressing the boundary confines of Dante the unconscious lover’s private garden-party world of exclusion of the other (“the loneliness of my room”) with the violence of her address (*salute*). Now Beatrice is dressed again in the crimson-blood red of the passion of her first appearance before the word of her greeting had transgressed the silence, piercing the virginal hymen of his hearing, which had not yet been ravished as had his seeing and tasting/

smelling (eating) within the first vision. This rapture/ravishment stains her white garment blood red and ignites the bonfire of desire for the sacrificial holocaust his secret substitution of his dream image for the reality of her flesh made word would call for:

As I thought of her I fell asleep and a marvelous vision appeared to me. In my room I seemed to see a cloud the color of fire and in the cloud a lordly figure frightening to behold, yet in himself, it seemed to me, he was filled with a marvelous Joy. He said many things of which I understood only a few, among them were the words: *Ego dominus tuus* (I am your Master). In his arms I seemed to see a naked figure, sleeping, wrapped lightly in a crimson cloth. Gazing intently I saw it was she who had bestowed her greeting on me that day. In one hand the standing figure held a fiery object, and he seemed to say, *Vide cor tuum* (Behold your heart). After a little while I thought he awakened her who slept and prevailed on her to eat the glowing object in his hand. Reluctantly and hesitantly she did so. A few moments later his happiness turned to bitter grief, and, weeping, he gathered the figure in his arms and together they seemed to ascend into the heavens. I felt such anguish at their departure that my light sleep was broken, and I awoke. (*Vita nuova*, iii)

It will not prove too much to say that the dream vision recounted here sets in motion Dante's "salvation history," that is, both the history of his "original sin" and the long history of his conversion, repentance, forgiveness, and resurrection that is inscribed in the *Vita nuova* and *Commedia*, the "Old and New" confessional testaments that comprise his "scriptural revelation." In this passage Dante and Beatrice figure Adam and Eve, though their identities are partially encrypted in the reversal of gender roles noted above. The full anticipatory significance of this claim, especially with regard to the *Commedia*, must await further explication, but this much can be asserted here with substantial textual reliability: when Dante "came to (find) himself again," astray in the Dark Wood in the opening lines of the *Commedia*, "the straightway having disappeared," at some moment of oblivion when he was "so full of sleep" that he failed to recognize the substitution of a "false" for and a "true" way of envisioning both Beatrice and himself, this is the moment which the Pilgrim unwittingly, and the poet in the full consciousness of the final vision, is recalling, reconstituting, reliving, submitting for conversion. This is the moment of "original sin" in writing, in the writing on his heart, in his senses, in his memory, in his imagination, in his blood, in his poetry and his self-interpretation, of which Beatrice will convict him in their encounter in *Purgatorio*, xxx–xxxi, for which he will shed tears of repentance and receive forgiveness, thereby allowing the promise of writing, its secret calling, to be resurrected in the "new life" which the conversion recounted in *Vita nuova* only dimly prefigures.

The vision described here concerns the ironic history of eating; it recapitulates salvation history as the mirror play of the origin and growth of sin, while

at the same time and through the same events revealing the dissemination and germination of the growth of forgiveness and redemption. Together these perspectives form one account of the history of the (empty) Secret of Beginning, the story of the Impossible which calls for and promises, in writing, the Gift of Death. This ironic history of eating turns on the necessary ambiguity of its structure as substitution: to eat means to substitute the death of the Other for the empty promise of life. Eating is both necessary and impossible. The flesh of the Other can be consumed and digested to be transformed into the proper property of one's own flesh, but the death of the Other cannot be appropriated, so that, in attempting to feed on it, the empty stomach of life becomes engorged and must expel the other/death (the work of mourning) in order to become free again, open, empty, for the proper impropriety of its own death, for the giving of death as a Gift, for-giving its own death rather than feeding on the substituted death of the Other. Life is fed only by faith, hope, and love consumed as the word made flesh of the Other, given as the Gift of Death.

This ironic history of eating as substitution, ambiguously signifying both transgression and forgiveness, is also the history of gender and sexuality, equally ambiguous in their significance. Sexuality and gender, both biologically and psychologically configured, are movements of substitution. Reproductively, the life of the child substitutes for the life of the parents, which is sacrificed for the life of the child; erotically, lovers feed on the flesh of the other immolated by the fire of passion for the (substitute) death of the other in his or her orgasmic climax, while paying the price, making the sacrifice of one's own (substitute) orgasm-death (Sartre's sexuality as sado-masochism). Eating and sexuality: both exhibit the ambiguity of their sacrificial structure. Sacrifice here is but an element of the structural dynamics of the original sin of substitution. All eating, all intercourse—always sinful and in need of forgiveness (St. Augustine was right at least to this extent: sexuality (as eating) is the "original sin"; but apparently he did not also recognize it also as the original scene of forgiveness).

In the dream, Beatrice is required by the god Amor to eat Dante's burning heart, which she does reluctantly and hesitatingly. While both the sexual and the eucharistic connotations in the image are clear, it is precisely the structure of sacrificial substitution that calls for attention here. Dante's unconscious (sleeping) imagination scripts itself in the role of male sacrificial victim whose heart, on which Love has already inscribed its secret, is consumed both by the fiery passion which is the aura of love's divine necessity and by Beatrice's feeding on his orgasmic death. But it is Beatrice who wears the blood sash/slash of the love wound, she who bears the blood-mark on the sacrificial victim, "reluctantly and hesitantly." It is a scene of rape: her mouth is raped by dominating Love that forces the phallus of its words of dominating power, inscribed on Dante's heart, into her mouth and down her throat, gorging the emptiness of her stomach/open wound with the food of substitution: his death for hers; the forced violence of an uninvited intercourse, an inhospitable last supper. The

violence of this transgression is revealed immediately as the guilty conscience of Amor, whose complicity as instigator and intermediary, indeed as pimp, is unmistakable when his joy quickly turns to “bitter grief” as “weeping, he gathered the figure [of Beatrice] in his arms and together they seem to ascend into the heavens.” The image is one of postcoital embrace, which ironically is interpreted by Dante the writer as a heavenly ascent, instead of the descent into the oblivion of sleep, the death of desire following its satiating climax, which postpones the necessary work of mourning. The standard interpretation in the literature of the *Vita nuova* of this onset of grief and anguish is that it foreshadows the multiple deaths of Beatrice to Dante, which the text will recount: first, her marriage to another, then her physical death, and finally her death as his Muse of poetic inspiration in the long years that follow the promise with which the *Vita nuova* concludes, “to write of her what never has been written in rhyme of woman before.” This is, in itself, certainly valid; but as the *Commedia* will eventually make clear, the grief and anguish that the dream displays are also an unconscious registry of Dante’s guilty conscience for his authorship of this masque in which he encrypts his own identity as Eve, Beatrice’s as Adam, and Amor’s as the beguiling serpent. They are envisioned as a trinity of substitution, the substitute Trinity that distracts in guilty sleep from the conscious awareness of the original Trinity in which the secret promise of life is kept. This loss of consciousness of the empty secret, engorged by feeding on the death of the Other, incurs the guilty debt, the bad conscience of substitution and will require the work of mourning expressed in the promise of writing to convert the loss of joy and its substitution by grief and anguish into the figure of resurrection. The transformation of death into gift, one’s own death taken on oneself freely in full consciousness, given as food by the Other, in the an-economy of forgiveness.

There is another mechanism of substitution at work in the writing of the dream vision. In the first major movement of *Vita nuova* (i–xviii) Dante the writer portrays Love as an independent entity, separately embodied and endowed not just with agency, but with dominant power and initiative, and this is undoubtedly accurate to the experience recorded in the book of his memory. Gradually, however, beginning in the second and culminating in the third movements of the *Vita nuova*, Dante comes to recognize the figure of Amor as the projection of his own need, his enthrallment to the passion of his own desire, and indeed of his own will to power. In other words, as the *Vita nuova* progresses, Dante the writer begins to suspect unwillingly and hesitantly that Amor is an idol, a false identity. Amor becomes the shadow in his imagination of the authentic power of the Other that has transgressed the boundaries of his heart, his senses, and his mind, a transgression which, impossibly, demands avenging. In much the same way, Cain avenges himself on Abel by murdering him on account of Cain’s guilty conscience over the debt he incurs through his substitution of blemished meat for the best grain food offered by Abel—the image being itself a parable of degrees of self-deception and

oblivion pertaining to the sacrificial structure of substitution as it relates to both eating and sexuality—since the brothers would, of necessity, have been at least potential sexual rivals for their sisters.<sup>12</sup> And as the figure of incest is necessarily involved in the story of Genesis, so must it be in the reading of *Vita nuova* as Dante's Book of Genesis. Amor, functioning as the avenging angel of Dante's unconscious imagination in rescripting the story of his own violation and sacrificial wounding (the extraction of his heart) by that same Amor, rapes and wounds Beatrice.

But Amor, in its initiative and mastery over Dante, must be read as more than the externalization of Dante's own libidinal, instinctive desires. Amor is also the instinct and impulse to writing. It is the impulse that leaves him in grief and anguish and that, when he returns to consciousness, shocked by that horrifically bad dream, prompts Dante to turn to writing as a means of working out that grief and anguish over the double violation that produces the violence of the dream. He writes a sonnet, further encrypting in it the text of substitution already encoded by his imagination in the dream. Again attributing the power and initiative to Amor, Dante decides to disseminate the cryptic message in writing, inviting interpretation, and thereby diffusing responsibility for the original scripting, giving it out over the substitute signature of Amor:

To every captive soul and gentle lover  
 Into whose sight this present rhyme may chance,  
 That, writing back, each may expound its sense,  
 Greetings in love, who is their Lord, I offer. (*Vita nuova*, iii)

A further substitution, a deeper encryption: dissemination in writing, initiating an economy of circulation among a "captive" audience further ensuring that the secret calling of the promise of writing will be kept secret. And indeed, it is. "This sonnet drew replies from many, who all had different opinions as to its meaning. Among those who replied was someone whom I call my closest friend [Calvalcante]; he wrote a sonnet beginning: "*In my opinion you beheld all virtue*" (*Vita nuova*, iii). Now the tomb of the guilty, encrypted substitution is sealed; there is no going back, only forward, through writing.

This pattern of substitution continues and intensifies throughout the remainder of the first movement of *Vita nuova* (v–xviii). Driven by the impulse to encryption and masking as a way of keeping its guilty secret, the writing of the poetry and its interpretation devises another substitution, that of screening Dante's enthrallment to the love of Beatrice behind the simulation of romantic devotion to first one, then another lady, so as to deflect public attention away from its actual but secret object. Dante adopts dissimulation as the occasion and style of writing both the poems and their later interpretation. This seals the contract in writing between Dante and Amor. It also clarifies the identity of both figures in this first melodramatic episode of the secret calling to enter into the larger drama of conversion contained in the promise of writing. Dante

the love-slave and the lordly Amor are the dissociated elements of a concretely existing personal freedom, the historical *person* Dante, to whom the vocation to writing and the call to conversion are addressed as the truth of the revelation he experiences in the *person* of Beatrice. In this larger configuration both the Incarnational and the Trinitarian structures that are central to and pervasive in Dante's poetic work become apparent: *the word is made flesh and the flesh is made word again*. As an historical person, Beatrice incarnates for Dante the revelation of Divine Love (dimly figured in the *Vita nuova* as Amor). This trinity of personal freedoms configure the historical time-space of incarnation, that is, the Divine Word revealed in the flesh and, through the Gift of Death, that flesh resurrected into spirit, the tongue of fire that inspires and articulates the conversion of the Divine Word into the human Word: a new life, a converted pattern of substitution, a redeemed pattern of eating. Resurrection reveals Love as the impossible truth of life, the Gift of Death, the secret that is always empty because history only begins as the pouring-itself-out of Love in forgiveness. Divine Love articulates itself as the resurrection of life through the Gift of Death, given as forgiveness. Resurrection configures itself historically in the trinitarian and incarnational patterns of human personal identity. Freedom names this patterning of personal existence as the experience of absolute or total responsibility for transcribing and encrypting the revelation of the divine Word of Love into the flesh and blood of human personal identity. Resurrection is written in the flesh of human personal identity through the experience of conversion to the freedom that transcribes the divine Word of Love into Spirit, articulated by the human Word. Spirit is the resurrection of the flesh as word, the word through which the Gift of Death is forgiven. Spirit keeps the secret of life by encrypting it in the human Word. Freedom names the total responsibility for human identity that gives itself the Gift of Death as the Spirit of Resurrection.

The dynamic of this freedom as conversion to total responsibility for personal identity is already prefigured, though dimly and in dissociation, in the historical situation of Dante's writing of the *Vita nuova* with its story of Amor, Beatrice and the writer himself. In it, Amor certainly figures the god of love, but also the god of writing: he is flesh-writing, blood-writing, water-writing. Amor figures the divinity of writing, divine writing incised and inscribed into human experience. Amor is the love of writing and the writing of love into human history as a new revelation, a new beginning. Dante has his heart in writing because love has been written into his heart; through the love of writing, his heart is open to becoming the location to which this revelation can be historically traced. But Amor is only a figure of Divine Love in the history of writing and is therefore an idol, a local pagan deity, historically situated by the event of its revelation as a figure. Amor is a substitute for the Divine Word of Love, and its revelation inaugurates an historical epoch, rather than initiating history itself, a figure of genesis that keeps the Secret of Beginning by sharing it without possessing its truth.

It is a commonplace that Dante is the first great vernacular poet of postantiquity Europe, the originator of *il dolce stil nuovo*, a precursor of Renaissance humanism and of the modern conception of self. He is also acknowledged as the legitimator of individual experience as the substance of epic poetry, paving the way for both modern drama and the novel. Dante's heart, senses, and mind, all inscribed with love for Beatrice, are the location for a new revelation in writing, a new style of writing that, marked by the love of writing and the writing of love as the trace-marks of a new possibility for human personal identity. Amor is the local deity of this new historical situation of writing.

In chapter xxv of *Vita nuova*, Dante briefly sketches out the boundaries of the historical situation of writing in which he found himself and through which he would later "refind" himself (*Inf.*, i, 2). At the same time, from the developed perspective of the second movement of the *Vita nuova*, he acknowledges, at least to a certain extent, that Amor, the god of love/writing, is not an independent entity, but inheres in his experience of love/writing and is the familiar spirit of its historical practice:

At this point someone whose objections are worthy of the fullest attention might be mystified by the way I speak of love as though it were thing in itself, and not only a substance endowed with understanding but also a physical substance, which is demonstrably false; for love is not in itself a substance at all, but an accident in a substance. . . . To clarify this matter, in a manner that is useful to the present purpose, it should first be understood that in ancient times the theme of love was not taken as a subject for verses in the vernacular, but there were authors who wrote on love, namely, certain poets who composed in Latin; this means that among us . . . those who wrote of love were not vernacular but learned poets. It is not very many years ago since the first vernacular poets appeared. . . . That it is not long ago that this happened can be shown to be the case if we study the literature of the *langue d'oc* and of the *lingua del sì*, for there is nothing written in these languages earlier than 150 years ago. . . . The first to write as a vernacular poet was moved to do so because he wished to make his verses intelligible to a lady who found it difficult to understand Latin. This is an argument against those who compose in rhyme on themes other than love, *because this manner of composition was invented from the beginning for the purpose of writing of love.* (*Vita nuova*, xxv; emphasis added)

This is a strangely didactic, almost pedantic excursus, breaking both the poetic and narrative flow of the work. It offers, however, a clarification of Dante's self-understanding, his sense of his own historical situation and that of his writing, which obviously he took to be crucial to interpreting the work: the divinity of Amor inheres in and is inseparable from *the style of writing poetic rhymes in the vernacular for the purpose of communicating one's experience of love and of taking personal responsibility for it*. The sense of personal responsibility for explaining

the meaning of that which one writes and establishing its claim to authority on that basis, emerges forcefully in Dante's conclusion to the excursus:

And lest any uneducated person should assume too much, I will add that the Latin poets did not write in this manner without good reason, nor should those who compose in rhyme, if they cannot justify what they say; for it would be a disgrace if someone composing in rhyme introduced a figure of speech or rhetorical ornament, and then on being asked could not divest his words of such covering so as to reveal a true meaning. My most intimate friend [Cavalcante] and I know quite a number who compose rhymes in this stupid manner. (*Vita nuova*, xxv)

As has been well documented, the tradition of vernacular rhymes, "no older than 150 years," to which Dante refers under the appellation of the *langue d'oc* and the *lingua del si*, is the style of composition practiced by the Provençal troubadours beginning in the 12th century and shortly communicated to Italy and other regions. The subject matter of these rhymes was of course love, but it was a very specific dispensation of love, inscribed in the rubrics of the literature of the Courtly Love tradition. Both the style of love and the style of poetry that we might say was, broadly paraphrasing the spirit of Dante's magisterial pronouncement, hypostatically united with it, blossomed from the culture and code of chivalry that took as its canonical scripture the Arthurian legends. The Courtly Love tradition and the style of poetry that disseminated it have been identified as epoch-making in the cultural evolution of Europe and the West because together they constitute the revelation of a new possibility for imagining the meaning of human existence: the emergence of the conception of personal identity in function of the freedom of responsibility in relationship to other such responsible freedoms. As Dante says, the structure of this conception of personal identity and its transcendent, or divine, element of freedom as total responsibility to the Other, existed only by its accidental inherence in the written "substance" of the Romantic literature of that time. A closely related conception of personal identity had no doubt been inscribed into the Christian doctrines of Resurrection, Incarnation, and Trinity. The effective significance of these doctrines, however, had become progressively more dysfunctional, distorted in their effective significance as they were by having been encrypted into the larger cultural idiom and discourse of Catholic Europe under the influence of Byzantine liturgical, spiritual, and artistic styles of expression. The Byzantine style expressed a religious sensibility that placed greater emphasis on the mystical, transcendent, and otherworldly elements of divinity, and proportionately less on the explicitly incarnational and experiential.

Drawing ultimately if indirectly on the Platonic doctrine of the *ascesis* of the soul (*Symposium* and *Phaedrus*), the educatory disciplining of the soul's desire (Eros) for Beauty in order to rise through the ascending orders of being to mystical union with the One source of every beautiful image, the Courtly

Love tradition manifests the ambiguity that is central to that (neo-)Platonic doctrine: the ascent of Eros, as an educational discipline, is empowered by a drive that simultaneously affirms and negates the images of beauty on which it feeds. Eros affirms the image in so far as the image awakens in the soul the memory of the vision of Beauty that it once enjoyed, but from which it has fallen, thus resurrecting in the soul the spiritual vision that had sunken into oblivion beneath the weight of material embodiment. At the same time, however, it negates the image in the dynamism of transcendence, which, tasting the poison in that on which it feeds, scenting death in the finitude of Beauty's limited capacity to infuse the dross of matter with its immaterial radiance, soon grows restless with the urge to surpass its satisfaction by seeking higher and more transparent images of Beauty. One of the most significant, indeed perhaps the critical, manifestation of this primal ambiguity of the experience of love, which originates in the Secret that love keeps in giving all its gifts—that, radiant with promise though they be, that promise necessarily remains empty—is the ambiguity of sexual gender identity. Whether in the sexual ethos of Plato's Greece or the altogether differently stylized courtly mores of feudal chivalry, the "flight from woman," as Jung terms this dynamism, is apparent. Revelation and dissociation, inspiration and temptation, the scripting of the role of woman as Other historically situates the Courtly Love tradition and Dante's *Vita nuova* in a moment that is both timeless in the sense of being utterly original, and timely in the sense of announcing an epochal change in the history of the Other, specifically the sexually gendered other, in the evolution of both a concept and characterization of human personal identity. The argument can and has been made that in the Courtly Love tradition the idea that human identity is realized for the first time, not through participation in any social group or institutional structure, but rather through the bonds of personal responsibility within an interpersonal relationship, and that among the types of such relationship, romantic love enjoys a unique revelatory privilege.<sup>13</sup>

For Dante, however, the full authority for this revelatory privilege does not rest solely with the credibility of the literature of Courtly Love. Rather, for him it receives its full incarnational figure, and with that its full sovereignty over his imagination, through its embodiment in the life and spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi. Indeed, it will become apparent that as influential in Dante's personal and poetic formation as St. Augustine unmistakably was, St. Francis is at least as powerful a force of imagination, and in certain crucial respects, ultimately more compelling for Dante. St. Francis's "*Vita nuova*," his conversion story, revolves around the trinity of the courteous son of a cloth merchant, inflamed with youthful dreams of knightly glory, the God of love who speaks to Francis in the image of the crucified one in the ruined chapel of San Damiano, and the image of the beloved woman to whom Francis is espoused in mystical marriage, Lady Poverty.<sup>14</sup>

In Canto xi of *Paradiso*, Dante recounts his own version of the form that the bliss of this nuptial union takes in the life of St. Francis in a passage that is

crucial for understanding the conversion of Dante's imagination, and particularly his conversion to a new, yet old image of Beatrice as the incarnation of Divine Love in the last movement of the *Commedia*. From the perspective of that advanced stage of his journey, it is possible to recognize the full ambiguity, in the form of dissociation, at work in Dante's image of Beatrice as revelation. From the beginning, her image expresses the risk of life, both its joy and sorrow, both its promise and its portent of death, both salvation and bereavement, inspiration and accusation. As has been shown, the first movement of *Vita nuova*, portrays the ambivalent dominion of the lover by the Lord of love, Amor, through the constrained instrumentality of the beloved. The poet/commentator is first captivated by love and then conscripted into the slave-labor of devising patterns of substitution in writing that distract him from the work of mourning, which is the proper, albeit impossible, vocation to which love is dedicated. In *Vita nuova*, xvii, Dante announces a renunciation of the dirge-work of recounting the pains of his love-wound and the taking up of a "new theme, one more lofty than the last."

Dante announces this new theme in *Vita nuova*, xviii on the occasion of a dialogue between the poet and "certain ladies" who "knew my heart well," because "through my appearance many people had learned the secret of my heart." In this exchange, Dante is brought to the realization of the incompleteness, and therefore, the unworthiness of his prior theme, the suffering of love, due to the pattern of substitution and concealment at work in his writing until then.

"Ladies, the aim of my love was once the greeting of one of whom perhaps you are aware, and in that resided all my blessedness and joy, for it was the aim and end of all my desires; but ever since she saw fit to deny me her greeting, my lord Love, in his mercy, has placed all my hope of that same joy in something which cannot fail me." (*Vita nuova*, xviii)

Importuned to reveal this new, more reliable source of joy, he responds, "in those words that praise my lady." His interlocutors press him on the point, charging that his prior writing must have had another, more self-serving motivation. There then occurs a conversion in writing: "Then I, thinking of these words that shamed me, departed from these ladies saying to myself, "Since there is so much bliss in those words that praise my lady, why have I ever spoken otherwise." He goes on to recount that for some time thereafter he feared that he had now undertaken "a theme too lofty for myself, so that I dare not begin writing," and remained frozen between "the desire to write and the fear of beginning" (*Vita nuova*, xviii).<sup>15</sup>

The poem that emerges from this experience of conversion, the canzone, "*Donne, che avete intelletto d'Amore*" (Ladies, refined and sensitive in Love), is generally identified by scholars as the official inauguration of "*il dolce stilo nuovo*," the "sweet new style" of poetry that not only sets a new course for European literature and wins for Dante the imitative admiration of Boccaccio,

Petrarca and of poets down to the present, but equally significantly discloses the specifically religious trajectory of the journey of personal transformation on which he is embarked. The turn to praise, the proper style of worship, is a turn toward transcendence. It is gesture of fidelity in keeping the Secret in the promise of writing, a turning, still partial and incomplete, away from a lesser image of Beauty to a higher one, from a lower, cruder pattern of substitution to a less opaque, more translucent one. The substitution of Dante's own words of praise for Beatrice in place of his reliance on the word of her greeting, her "*salute*," marks a new form of responsibility emerging out of his experience of repentance, of thinking again about the promise of writing, of turning to a more promising style of writing, of putting on a changed mind (*metanoia*), which allows for both a new style of love and a new style of writing. This transformation takes the form of substituting a higher desire and a higher "reason" as the motive force for his love/writing than the more cramped and confined desire and reason that required her word to move his word. The canzone explains:

To the all-knowing mind an angel prays:  
 "Lord, in the world a miracle proceeds  
 In act and visible, from a soul's deeds,  
 Whose splendor reaches to this very height."  
 One imperfection only Heaven has:  
 The lack of her; so now for her it pleads,  
 And every saint with clamour intercedes.  
 Only compassion is our advocate.  
 God understands to whom their prayers relate  
 And answers them: "My loved ones, bear in peace  
 That she, your hope, remain until I please  
 Where one knows he must lose her, soon or late,  
 And who will say in Hell: "Souls unconfessed!  
 I have seen the hope of Heaven's blessed."

My lady is desired in highest Heaven;  
 Now of her excellence I'd have you hear. (*Vita nuova*, xix)<sup>16</sup>

"My lady is desired in highest heaven." The new pattern of substitution inscribed here is "more worthy" only to the extent that it is more transparent: according to him, his words are moved into writing not by his desire for her word, *but by heaven's desire for her*. Nevertheless, his explanation of his motivation still hides the empty secret of his own desire, veiled in the ambiguity of whatever is "owned," behind a substitute, an idol. Beatrice is portrayed as a "living miracle" on earth whose light reaches "as far as here." In this way, she reveals the pattern of incarnation anew: Beatrice as the figure of Jesus, who makes the power of Divine Love palpably present on earth, reversing the vector of cosmic time-space by shifting its directionality *from earth to heaven*.