

The
PURPOSE
of PASSION

Dante's Epic Vision of Romantic Love

Kurt Bruner and Jim Ware



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The Purpose of Passion: Dante's Epic Vision of Romantic Love

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To our beloved wives, Joni and Olivia

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INTRODUCTION

Love's Divergent Paths

*If we want to know what's most sacred in this world,
all we need do is look for what is most violently profaned.*

—
*Christopher West, *Theology of the Body for Beginners**

QUICK, NAME YOUR favorite romantic movie.

Got it? Now describe the best scene—the one you anticipate each time you watch. Depending upon your age, likely choices include

Pride and Prejudice when the antagonism between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy melts as he anxiously confesses that she has “bewitched me body and soul—I love, I love, I love you”;

Sleepless in Seattle when Tom Hanks takes Meg Ryan’s hand atop the Empire State Building as his matchmaker son flashes that satisfied grin;

Titanic when Kate Winslet sashes her way through the frigid seawater-filled lower deck to reach Leonardo DiCaprio, or when they embrace in the face of certain death as the massive ship plunges downward;

My Big Fat Greek Wedding when John Corbett tells Nia Vardalos, “When I met you I came alive!” (That line is reminiscent of Tony’s in the *West Side Story*, who comes alive after meeting Maria, the girl whose name became “the most beautiful sound I ever heard. . . .

Say it loud and there's music playing, say it soft and it's almost like praying.")¹

Some consider the popularity of such stories a sign that our culture is overrun with lovesick adolescents rather than levelheaded grown-ups. They hit the pause button on their documentaries long enough to accuse those renting such films of being silly romantics trying to escape reality.

I beg to differ. I don't think we are trying to escape reality. We are trying to connect with it.

Since Adam's first double take at Eve, romantic love has been humanity's universal theme and most pined-after longing. And for good reason. More than any other experience in life, it reveals the purpose and ignites the passion of what it means to be fully human, fully alive.

Ask anyone who has ever had their timid smile returned by that special boy or girl across a crowded room.

Ask the guy who musters up the courage to hope, to call, to ask. Watch him leap for joy as she accepts, and see how long it takes him to lose that giddy grin.

Ask the girl who had lost hope of ever being asked for a date, yet suddenly finds herself holding hands with a man who considers her the loveliest woman on earth.

Or ask the husband and wife marveling at the tiny fingers of their newborn child, weeping as the joy of life rewards their intimate union.

They know.

We all know.

Hopeful Romantics

I knew the day I met a girl named Olivia, the woman who has been my bride these past twenty-five years. I've known

on the days better became worse and back again. I've known in those moments she takes my breath away before we enter intimate bliss. She is my Maria, my Meg Ryan, Julia Roberts, Kate Winslet, and the rest all rolled into one wonderful package. She is also, as I was amazed to discover, my Beatrice—a woman who inspired the “script” all of our favorite romantic movies follow.

That story, written by a fourteenth-century romantic, is titled *The Divine Comedy*. As we will discover, a better title might have been *I Just Met a Girl Named Beatrice*. The script's author—just like Tom Hanks, Hugh Grant, Leonardo DiCaprio, and the rest of us—got swept up into a romantic journey that led him, and his readers, to a marriage made in heaven—literally. And that journey started with a single glance across a crowded room.

It turns out that the person best suited to guide us down lover's lane was an Italian. No surprise there. But he also ranks among the most influential Christian writers of all time. His name was Dante Alighieri. Yes, *that* Dante. You may have been forced to read his works during high school or college. You might recall his frightening portrayal of the afterlife. But don't let his fame for *The Inferno* fool you. Despite his knack for imagining hellish torments, Dante's signature theme was not the horrors of eternal damnation but the hope of romantic love. While he did describe how “the lust of the flesh” can destroy immortal souls, his more dominant emphasis was how a childhood crush can lead us to the very gates of heaven. Whether we find damnation or hope depends upon the choices we make along the way—a theme central to Dante's life and work.

The Scriptures tell us that God is love (1 John 4:8). So as those created in God's image, we are hardwired for a love

that finds its source and aim in Him. We fully live when we fully love. And we fully love when we, like Christ, give ourselves away.

More on that later. For now, it is enough to recognize love as central to what it means to be human. The *imago dei* (image of God) was created male and female, two halves of a whole. That's why Love's magnetic force irresistibly and incessantly draws us toward that special someone who can become our completing opposite, our other half.

This idea is woven into the fabric of every Christian tradition. The late John Paul II, for example, said that "man becomes the image of God not so much in the moment of solitude as in the moment of communion."² Why? Because, as the catechism explains, "God who created man out of love calls him to love—the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. For man is created in the image and likeness of God who is himself love. Since God created man and woman, their mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unending love with which God loves man."³

The Scriptures are filled with marital imagery, describing Israel as God's wife and the church as Christ's bride. Protestant believers routinely celebrate the spiritual significance of romantic love, which is reflected in the opening words of the traditional wedding ceremony: "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God . . . to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony; which is an honorable estate, instituted of God, *signifying unto us the mystical union that is between Christ and his Church.*"⁴

Our attraction to one another is intended to yank us out of self-focused isolation into the kind of intimacy that reflects God's communion with His beloved. With us. That's why the

desire for romantic union is imprinted on, programmed into, and seeded within our very souls. It's the reason we yearn to meet and marry that special someone.

Whether we find true love or ache from its absence, whether we treat sex as a gift or a game, our love life drives us toward or away from God. The forks encountered along love's path literally lead to heaven's highest joys or hell's deepest miseries, a dream come true or a living nightmare. That's why the headlines of history, art, pop culture, and family photos all shout a common truth: romantic love defines our existence—for better or worse.

Better or Worse

Walking love's path is a risky business. From the first step to the last, we navigate confusing emotions and competing impulses that tempt us this way or that. Each fork in the road presents a new challenge, rendering even Cupid's advice less than helpful. The journey of romantic love confronts us with varied choices, each pregnant with positive and negative possibilities.

Maybe that's why the Italian word Dante used for love (*amore*) suggests potentiality—like a seed that could sprout beautifully heavenward or twist and gnarl into a hideous mockery of its intended form. *Amore* might become a splendid flower that inspires or a creeping vine that strangles. It all depends upon how we tend love's soil.

- An admiring glance at her beauty or his stature can fan the flame of affection or fuel the inferno of lust, viewing the desired one as a person to love or an object to use.
- Your answer to that invitation to coffee could be a baby step toward lifelong love or a door slammed on any possibility of romance.

- A dinner date can become the foundation of lasting respect or the occasion for a hasty fling that leaves an aftertaste of guilt and shame.
- Every marital spat offers an opportunity to strengthen the relationship by humbly backing down or to dismantle it by flinging biting words and throwing defensive tantrums.

Deep down, we know our love choices carry more significance than meets the eye, as if something mysterious were working in us and on us. We know that each choice can move us closer to or further from the place we yearn to be and the person we hope to become.

Unsatisfied Yearning

The forks along Jonathan's path surfaced a deep yearning he could never fully satisfy. Once or twice he touched around the edges of God's design. But he always found himself choosing the downward slope leading away from joy.

In high school, Jonathan dated his "soul mate" and dreamed of settling down to raise a family together. But the girl's father had a different idea, forcing them to break off the relationship. Jonathan felt cut off from his "happily ever after" destiny. He forgot his heartache, thanks to other willing partners. Despite a religious upbringing that condemned promiscuity, Jonathan had urges and needs that girls seemed willing to satisfy. He eagerly accepted their generous offers.

In his late twenties, Jonathan fell in love with another woman. To his nervous delight, she became pregnant. At first, the thought of being a dad scared him to death. His own father had been an irresponsible jerk, and Jonathan hated the idea of following in his absent footsteps. So he resolved to

break the cycle. His girlfriend and child would give Jonathan a purpose greater than himself, he thought, an opportunity to grow up, commit, and accept the responsibilities of manhood.

But things didn't work out as he had hoped. When the relationship deteriorated, Jonathan—like his father—abandoned the “family” to become a long-distance dad. Over the next few decades, he tracked his child's growth through the occasional photograph and infrequent letters. Lingering sorrow consumed his life. Tasting around the edges of God's design for love didn't satisfy; it couldn't make him feel whole or complete.

I'll never forget the call when we learned Jonathan had reached the bottom of the downward slope, ending his own life while wallowing in regret over what might have been. His death was a heartbreaking reminder that some of love's choices drag us toward the inferno.

Unimagined Bliss

Alicia's mom and dad divorced shortly before her birth—the inevitable fallout of an abusive and angry relationship. So along with her five siblings, Alicia lived in the shadow of abandonment by a man who chose the bottle over his wife and children.

Girls like Alicia are described as being particularly vulnerable to illicit male advances. Little girls need to feel like Daddy's little princess or they may try to fill the void through “acceptance” by lust-driven boys. Nonetheless, Alicia consistently chose the upward path.

High school boys made advances. Flattering? Yes. Tempting? Sometimes. But Alicia knew that she wanted God's best—something that would require patience and self-control.

During college several guys tried to woo Alicia. And while she enjoyed their company, none made her heart skip a beat.

And then one day, she spotted a young man walking across the campus who gave her pause. She glanced his way. He glanced hers. They talked for hours and hours about nothing and everything. When he asked her out on a date, she felt a new excitement—an irresistible draw—a magnetic pull.

Both Alicia and the young man believed that sexual purity before marriage would intensify the beauty and joy of sexual intimacy in marriage. So despite the thrill of each other's touch, they maintained healthy boundaries—considering their relationship a gift from and to their God, something they should protect and save, not waste or trivialize.

By the night of their wedding, Alicia was eager to give herself fully to the man who had treated her with such respect throughout their dating years. During the ceremony, she felt like a cherished princess. After the ceremony, during their honeymoon, and for many years thereafter, both enjoyed unimagined bliss.

Unlawful Indulgence

A lust-consumed man stares at a computer monitor surfing for images he knows it's shameful to enjoy. But he can't help himself; he's irresistibly drawn—no, addicted—to the female form. With each click of the mouse, he pulls up another image that he hopes will satisfy his unquenchable thirst. He can feel his manhood being undermined, his dignity diminished. So he pauses in momentary regret, reaching for the virtue and self-discipline he once possessed. Just as quickly, however, he turns back to the screen to find the next object of his insatiable desire.

A tearful runaway takes a long shower, trying to wash away the shame she feels after her first illicit encounter. Be it the abuse of rape or voluntary promiscuity, the loss of sexual

innocence makes a person feel dirty, violated, ashamed. But that same girl will have a very different reaction after a year of prostitution. A cold stare tells you her heart is resigned to the shame that now defines her existence. A seductive glance suggests an acquired taste for erotic indiscretions. Dark shadows under her eyes and deep facial lines invade the soft, graceful beauty she once possessed. And loud, brazen laughter overtakes the gentle, pretty smile that was so charming just twelve months earlier.

When any of us is first introduced to the illicit pleasures of sin, there is a sick feeling in the pit of our stomachs. Our innocence has been violated—raped by a villain, seduced by an adulterous lover. We are, at first, ashamed. But before long, we forget what innocence is like and begin to prefer our fallen state.

The sad reality of defective love is that it drives us to crave that which should make us cry. The human race has been living in bondage to sin for so long that we cannot even remember the thrilling excitement and passion found in purity. Nor do we remember the intended object of our deepest longings. So we celebrate our addictions, viewing them as keys of liberation rather than chains of enslavement.

Such is the far-too-common reality of fallen humanity. The enticement and enslavement of sin pulls us deeper into the abyss of self-gratification. C. S. Lewis described this abyss as “an ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure.”⁵ Along the way we lose sight of who and what we were made to be. We adopt habits more suited to animals than to children of God. In the worst cases, the virus of one person’s unlawful indulgence becomes the shameful abuse of another. The beautiful picture of our deepest aspirations becomes violently profaned.

Unexpected Redemption

Susan's innocence was stolen at a very early age. A trusted father figure used her preadolescent body to selfishly empty his passions. And so her virginity, that priceless gift intended for her future husband, became the discarded object of another man's lust. And as the story too often goes, she was similarly abused by several other men after that. Throughout her teen and young adult years, Susan tried satisfying desires awakened too early through one illicit relationship after another.

Susan later encountered the gospel of Jesus Christ—launching her into a new day in which “old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17, *KJV*). Before long she met and married a Christian man who treated her like a lady rather than an object. But her past exploits kept her enslaved to an identity of shame and regret that robbed their relationship of the kind of playful intimacy that purity allows. The memories of past encounters left disfiguring scars on the masterpiece their union might otherwise have reflected. She felt, in a word, dirty.

As a child, Susan was wrongly shoved down a pathway of shame. Confronting her own forks in the road, she later made choices that further diminished her capacity for marital joy. But as she discovered, God is in the business of repairing what is broken, restoring what is taken, and redeeming what has been corrupted. Including lost innocence.

Over the years, Susan made choices that gradually released her from the bondage of her past. She found a measure of freedom by forgiving her abuser. She felt the cleansing power of grace by acknowledging and confessing years of self-abuse. She dedicated herself to giving the man she married uninhibited devotion—and by extension, a taste of the kind of love every person yearns to experience.

The stories are endless. Every person ever born has a tale to tell. For better or worse, choices made along love's path define our existence.

Properly positioned, magnets unite. They draw together unaided as two halves of a single whole. The same is true in romantic love. Properly focused, romantic love draws us toward completion. How? By inviting us to place someone else at the center of our universe. Defective love moves a person down the wrong path by focusing on "me." It flips the magnet around, so to speak, turning its uniting potential into a separating force.

No wonder Jesus said that we find our life only when we give it away. He was calling us to redirect love's focus from self-satisfaction to self-sacrifice.

Guided Tour

So what about your love life? How can you nurture its seed into blossoming flowers rather than life-strangling vines? How does a thrilling encounter with that mysterious stranger suggest falling in love with the God of all mystery? Our quest to answer such questions drew us into a surprising place—a fictional world imagined by a man who, as much as anyone in history, understood the all-encompassing meaning of *amore*.

In the past, Jim Ware and I have partnered to provide readers a scene-by-scene tour through such great book series as *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In this volume, we turn to the works of a man who inspired the writings of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis and helped frame their understanding of the gospel itself. In fact, my favorite books by C. S. Lewis, including *The Great Divorce*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *The Screwtape Letters*, were profoundly shaped by *The Divine Comedy*.

To be honest, I did not always associate Dante with romance. But he, perhaps more than any other writer in history, connects the dots between the ups, downs, highs, and lows of human romance and the mountains, valleys, slopes, and ravines of humanity's spiritual quest. In my case he transformed the scenes of my relationship with Olivia into an icon of God's romance with humanity. That's why we recommend Dante as the best guide to discovering the purpose of passion.

Dante considered romantic love *the central theme* of human existence—both in this life and beyond. That's why his journey, like ours, begins with a seemingly silly boyhood crush in a bustling Italian village. That crush later hurls Dante into a spellbinding adventure through the underworld of *Inferno*, a purifying trek up Mount *Purgatory*, and the ultimate bliss of *Paradise*.

As we accompany our guide through these strange, imaginative worlds, we will encounter profound and sometimes troubling insights into the mysterious purpose of romantic love. It is a purpose rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ, namely, to draw men and women into the arms of their ultimate suitor, God Himself.

Before our first stop we offer a quick overview of the route we intend to travel. The three sections of this book reflect the chronology of Dante's writings—starting with “Love Kindled”—a look at how and why romantic love invades our unsuspecting lives.

We draw these scenes from *La Vita Nuova* (*The New Life*), a book Dante wrote years before tackling his masterwork, *The Divine Comedy*.

Our second section (“Love Gone Astray”) is based upon Dante's most famous work, *Inferno*. Here we discover the tragic

consequences of defective love—including the downward pathways often chosen on love’s perilous path.

Finally, in part three we will join Dante on the upward climb back toward love’s intended destiny (*Purgatory*) and ascend toward “Love Fulfilled” where we discover the true and eternal object of our affections (*Paradise*).

Each reflection opens with a creative retelling of a scene from *The New Life* or *The Divine Comedy* from which we connect the dots between human romance and the epic love story between God and His people. At the end of each of the three sections, we will take a break from our journey in order to reflect upon how Dante’s encounters inform our own. These “Getting Personal” sections pose penetrating questions intended to drive home Dante’s sometimes lofty ideals by making them practical in the real-life experience of dating, marriage, and Christian devotion.

We should note that Dante’s works are imaginative fiction. They were not intended to be works of theology or doctrine, and they contain ideas of the afterlife that are clearly speculative. While some Christian traditions resonate with Dante’s portrayal of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise more than others, his fictionalized scenes should be understood as literary devices expressing a greater theme, not as dogmatic teaching.

With that, we begin our journey. May Dante’s Romantic Vision ignite within you, as it has in us, a greater fire of godly passion—no matter where you find yourself on love’s journey.



PART 1

Love Kindled

La Vita Nuova (The New Life)

Incipit vita nova.

The new life begins.

LA VITA NUOVA, CHAPTER I, TRANS. MARK MUSA

CAPTIVE

Ecce deus fortior me, qui veniens dominabitur mihi.

*Here is a deity stronger than I; who,
coming, shall rule over me.*

La Vita Nuova, chapter II; trans. Dante Gabriel Rossetti

FLORENCE IN THE YEAR 1283 was a bustling city of proud nobles and prosperous merchants: a multihued harlequin carnival of a town, where men in dark gowns and women in bright dresses hurried arm in arm through the narrow, winding streets; where tall houses of honey-colored stone lifted red-tiled roofs high above white marble fountains and beds of red geraniums; where black and gold pennants flew atop the square bell towers and painted placards swung creaking in the shadowed doorways of the shops; where, in the spring-time of the year, fresh-faced boys and girls danced underneath a cloudless sky in the piazza, which was adorned with ribbons and flowers.

At such a time and on such a day, while leaning on a balustrade at the corner of the Via Tavolini and the Via de' Cerchi, Dante looked up and saw her coming. She was dressed all in white. So light was her step that she seemed

to float between her two matronly companions. At the sight of her his heart stood still, for this was *Beatrice*. The same Beatrice he had seen on another spring day when he was nine and she was only eight years old. As she drew near, all the color and pageantry of Florence faded from his view in the light of her emerald eyes.

Instantly he was swept up into the memory of that distant but unforgettable day. Again he saw her as he had seen her then: a slim young girl in a blood-red dress, her forehead smooth, her eyes bright, the daylight soft upon her hair. Again he heard a voice that said, “Now your bliss draws near!”

He trembled and swayed. He felt his mouth go dry. And still she came, nearer every moment, more radiant and more beautiful at every step. With a thrill of terror he realized that she saw *him*, too—that she was, in fact, looking straight at him, her eyes sparkling, the corners of her mouth turned slightly upward, her head inclined modestly in his direction. So close was she now that he could smell her perfume and see the gold highlights in her hair. He backed away, stammering. And then, as she passed, she turned and spoke:

“*Buon pomeriggio*,” she said. “Good day to you, Dante.”

It was the ninth hour; and though the afternoon was only half gone, the air grew dark around him. Blindly Dante stumbled from the place. Heedless of everyone and everything, he wandered through the streets until at last he found the door to his house and staggered into his room.

There he fell senseless upon the bed, his head filled with fevered visions. A fiery cloud. A woman wrapped in red cloth. A man of “fearsome aspect” with a flaming object in his hand. “I am Love!” said the man. “Behold your heart!” Dante awoke in a cold sweat.

Outside his window the sky was dark. A single star shone above the roofs of the neighboring houses. He rose, blundered against the desk, groped for a pen, and wrote:

*A ciascun' alma presa e gentil core . . .
To every captive soul and loving heart . . .*¹

It was the beginning of a new chapter. His life would never be the same.



Boy meets girl. Boy falls in love. Boy's world is turned upside down and inside out.

It's the theme of a thousand poems, the refrain of a million popular songs. It's the commonest thread in the entire tapestry of human experience, the most familiar, most frequently repeated tale in the world. But it may also be the most mysterious and most poorly understood—at least where its *eternal* implications are concerned.

The first time we meet Dante Alighieri—in *La Vita Nuova* (*The New Life*), the earliest of his extant literary works—he is a boy in love. When next we see him, in the third chapter of the same book, he is a *young man* in love. By the time he crosses our path again, at the entrance to Hell in the opening cantos of the *Inferno*, he is in many ways a very different person: older, wiser, sadder. But he is still an incurable romantic. For wherever this man goes and whatever he does, he is always the devoted servant of Love.

This is where we have to begin if we want to understand the author of *The Divine Comedy*. The first thing we need to know about Dante is that he lived his entire life as the slave and captive of Love. He was Love's secretary, Love's

stenographer. He was a writer who, “when Love inspires me, takes careful note and then, gives form to what he dictates in my heart.”² Dante’s poetry, the highest and most perfect expression of the “sweet new style” of fourteenth-century Italian verse, represents the pinnacle and fullest flowering of the medieval tradition of courtly romance. Romantic love was the creed of his existence, the theme of his thoughts.

It all started on a street corner in Florence. It began in the simplest way such a story can possibly begin: with a girl. Dante was smitten with Beatrice at first sight. The instant he saw her coming, something exploded in his soul. It was a fireworks display to rival anything ever sparked between Lancelot and Guinevere, Tristan and Isolde, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, or Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. The result was a spiritual “stupor” that produced within his nine-year-old brain an all-consuming “sense of reverence and a desire to know more.”³ So overwhelming was the experience that he forever after regarded it as the occasion of his *rebirth*—the point at which his “new life” had begun.⁴

Such is the potency of Romantic Love. The Bible is no stranger to the power of this intoxicating fire. What Dante felt upon seeing Beatrice for the first time is the same feeling King Solomon experienced when he looked at his Shulamite bride and cried,

You have ravished my heart,
 My sister, my spouse;
 You have ravished my heart
 With one look of your eyes. (Song of Solomon 4:9)

The explosive nature of romantic love shows up even in modern popular culture. This was the same sweet cataclysm, for example, that shook young Beaver Cleaver's world when he fell under the spell of Miss Canfield, his second-grade teacher. Love compelled Beaver to do things he never would have done under any other circumstances. He passed out spelling books. He stayed after school cleaning chalkboards and beating out erasers. He endured the teasing and ridicule of his friends. When his older brother, Wally, confessed that he, too, had once fallen for an "older woman," Beaver asked the obvious question: "Did you ever get over her?" "No," was Wally's reply. And Beaver, with a solemn nod, said, "I don't think I'll ever get over Miss Canfield either."⁵

In a certain sense, we can be sure that he never did. For Love, as Dante discovered in his terrible dream, is an exacting and unrelenting taskmaster. Love, by its very nature, makes grandiose claims of everlasting permanence. Love, as Solomon understood, is the most formidable force in the world. It irreversibly changes the human heart. It binds its victims with gentle cords and bands of sweet affection (Hosea 11:4). Its grip is as tenacious as the grip of death itself (Song of Solomon 8:6). Once it lays hold of you, it never lets go (Hosea 11:8). It follows you through all your ways, seeks you through joy and pain, and obliges you to live with open hands and heart. It takes possession of your entire life.

Like Dante, the apostle Paul was a slave and captive of Love. He did the things he did because he was *compelled* or *constrained* by the Love of Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:14). Though a leader of almost unparalleled authority in the early church, Paul consistently referred to himself as a "servant" and a "prisoner" of Christ (Ephesians 3:1), the same Christ who loved him and gave His life for him

(Galatians 2:20). He said that Love is the one great obligation laid upon all who sincerely desire to follow the King of kings (Romans 13:8).

Is it fair to speak of *this* love and Dante's infatuation for Beatrice in the same breath? If we follow our poet far enough, we will learn that his answer to this question is *yes*. More than that, we will discover that this *yes* is central to the meaning of his poetry. For *eros* (romantic love) and *agape* ("charity" or divine love),⁶ while distinct in many ways, are not, after all, two different plants of two different species. They are, in fact, branches of one and the same tree—a tree whose roots go down to the well at the heart of the world. To put it another way, love is Love wherever you find it. The magnetism of the girl in the red dress is just a reflection, an emanation, an extension of the Power "that moves the sun and the other stars."⁷

Like most young romantics, Dante had no idea what he was getting into when he fell for Beatrice Portinari. But then how was he to know? Who could have told him that his romantic inclinations might turn out to be his salvation? That his devotion to the young lady with the stunning emerald eyes would eventually lead him down through the depths of hell, up the steep sides of the holy mountain, and out into the crystal spheres of the heavens beyond?

But we're getting ahead of our story.

REFLECTION

Love is a life-changing force.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

Romance and the Christian Imagination

. . . only a shell, a husk of meaning,
From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled.

—
T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

AS AN EARNEST young believer caught up in the fires of the Jesus Movement of the early 1970s, my wife received a special gift from an equally fervent young Christian friend: a small, enameled cross bearing a brightly painted image of the tree of life. I remember how she loved that little cross. She wore it everywhere. For weeks no one ever saw her without it. She was heartbroken when it suddenly turned up missing.

That friend had an explanation for this disappointing turn of events. “You obviously loved it too much,” she said, “so the Lord took it away. Our God is a jealous God. He doesn’t want *anything* usurping His place in our affections. Natural loves can’t be allowed to stand in the way. Jesus comes first.”

This was a bit hard to swallow. Yes, she had loved the cross, but not for its own sake. She had loved it because it *meant* something. For her, it symbolized and embodied important transcendent realities: friendship, generosity,

beauty, grace. It wasn't just a piece of remarkable craftsmanship—it was a striking and intensely personal reminder of the life-giving love of a dying Savior. As such, it had a way of turning her thoughts toward heaven. She knew intuitively that the reasons for her attachment to it were anything but blameworthy. But she wasn't able to verbalize any of this at the time.

So she received her friend's reproach without a word of protest.

Too Much Love?

Somehow this incident came to mind as I was pondering the closing scene of Dante's *Divine Comedy*—the one in which, according to Charles Williams, “all the images are moving sweetly and strongly into God.”¹ As I mulled it over, I was struck again with the thought that it was in fact Dante's fierce attachment to a “natural love”—his fascination with a visible, earthly, and human reflection of the divine goodness and grace—that led him at last to the consummation of his spiritual pilgrimage.

I remembered, too, the rebuke he had received from his lover at the top of Mount Purgatory, and I saw how different it was from the reproof of my wife's youthful friend. For Beatrice never accused Dante of loving her *too much*. She never said that God had taken her away in order to punish the poet for his idolizing devotion. On the contrary, she faulted him for his faithlessness. She told him in effect that *he hadn't loved her enough*. She insisted that even after her death he should have remained true to her memory by clinging to the *eternal* significance of her “buried flesh.” Only by taking her exhortation to heart was he able to redirect his footsteps to heaven.

There can be no mistaking the central message of this story. *Genuine love is something of which we can never have too much.* As long as it is pure, as long as its trajectory remains straight and true, love must eventually lead us aright. If it is clean, wholesome, appropriate, and selfless, then a passion for something or someone other than ourselves inevitably carries about it a certain aura of holiness. It always represents a step, however feeble and small, in the direction of the Great Lover of our souls.

Images Rejected . . . and Affirmed

To state the same principle in different terms, Dante tells us that there is a definite place for images in the life of Christian devotion. That is to say, he asserts the value of the imagination—the image-making and image-embracing faculty of the human psyche. He agrees with A. W. Tozer that, when it comes to our relationship with God, “we learn by using what we already know as a bridge over which we pass to the unknown.”² In so doing, he places himself squarely on one side of a debate that has been raging almost since the beginning of church history, a controversy between the adherents of two divergent pathways of spiritual growth and progress: what Charles Williams calls the way of “the Rejection of Images” and the way of “the Affirmation of Images.”³

My wife’s friend was a firm believer in the pathway of Rejection. Fearful of loving anything more than she loved God, she fastidiously observed the Old Testament proscription against “any graven image, or any likeness” (Exodus 20:4, KJV). Like Ulrich Zwingli, the stern Swiss Reformer, she was an iconoclast—an unrelenting smasher of “religious” symbols. Like the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the great classic of medieval mysticism, she was convinced that the secret

of Christian perfection is to “hate to think of anything but God Himself,” to “try to forget all created things that He ever made . . . so that your thought and longing do not reach out to them.”⁴ Like the psalmist, she was painfully anxious to be able to say, “Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You” (Psalm 73:25).

Many great believers have followed this road: Gideon, Elijah, St. Anthony of the desert, Francis of Assisi, Augustine of Hippo, John Calvin, and John Knox. So far as it goes, it is a time-honored and perfectly legitimate method of pursuing purity of heart. But there is another way.

The Eye of the Beholder

The lamp of the body is the eye. Therefore, when your eye is good, your whole body also is full of light. But when your eye is bad, your body also is full of darkness. (Luke 11:34)

With these words, Jesus does more than acknowledge the impact of visual imagery upon the human spirit. He also suggests that such imagery is virtually inescapable. We can't avoid looking at the world and seeing the many attractive things with which it is filled. Nor can we fully prevent our “thought and longing”—our imagination—from “reach[ing] out to them.” The way of Rejection, then, is exceedingly difficult to follow. But the path of Affirmation lies open to all who are capable of understanding that, ultimately, good and evil reside not in the image but in the eye. It's *how* we look and *how* we see that makes all the difference.

This is precisely the lesson Dante learns during the course of his trek through the circles, terraces, and spheres

of the afterlife. The eye that insists on looking with selfishness, lust, or greed must descend with Francesca, Brunetto, and Geryon into the realms of infernal darkness. But the eye that is practiced to discern the invisible attributes of the unseen God in the tangible things He has made (Romans 1:20)—*that* eye will eventually pierce the mysteries of the Kingdom of glory. This is why our poet can refer to his Florentine girl as a ray of human “sunlight.”⁵ This is how he is able to speak of his eyes as “the gates she entered with the fire that burns me still.”⁶

Man: The Image of God

The images to which the imagination can fasten itself are virtually unlimited in number and kind. They can assume the shape of a good daydream or an oft-told tale. They can jump out at us from Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata*, Keats’s *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, or Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*. Sometimes they flash like lightning across the heavens. On other occasions they creep silently out of the smallest and most secret corners of the mind. Any one of them—a windswept moon or an evening of rain, a dim childhood memory or a twinge of homesickness—can become a reflection, a hint, a suggestion of Something beyond itself. Any one of them may represent an invitation to an encounter with the God who alone can address the deepest longings of the heart.

And yet, for all that, there is good reason for the scriptural prohibition of “likenesses.” For the imagination, like the rest of human nature, is easily led astray. It quickly forgets that the meaning of the universe is wrapped up not in the material stuff of which the world is made—gems and stars, houses and lands, the words of the poets or the tresses of a fresh young girl—but in *personality*. It loses sight of the fact that you and

I are designed to find our destiny within the context of an I-Thou relationship.

To put it another way, the Bible forbids man-made representations of the deity for the simple reason that they are superfluous. They are superfluous because God has *already given* us a picture of Himself—in *one another* (Matthew 25:37-40). “God created man *as* His image,” says the Hebrew text of Genesis 1:27, “*as* the image of God created He him.”⁷ Translated in this way, the familiar passage becomes a strikingly bold assertion. It makes the shocking claim that man himself *is* a copy or a graphic image of the Creator—a formal, visible, and understandable representation of who God is and what He is really like.

Man as Male and Female

This biblical teaching has profound and far-reaching implications. It explains why the image to which the human imagination most naturally and readily gravitates is that of *another person*. It reveals why the soul of every landscape is a story and the heart of every story a human character. It illuminates the reason for the timeless appeal of the most winsome and popular stories of all—tales of love and romance. For while the nature of God can be perceived in *any* interpersonal relationship, the fact remains that the light of divine *Agape* is reflected with unique brilliance in the mirror of human *Amore*: the mature love of a man for a woman and a woman for a man.

This is not just Dante’s idea. It is a recurrent scriptural theme. We find it in Solomon’s passion for the Shulamite woman and Hosea’s pursuit of the faithless Gomer. It shows up in the language of the prophets, who love to portray Yahweh as a possessive husband and Israel as His wandering bride. It confronts us in Paul’s description of marriage as a

transcendent mystery, an icon of Christ's relationship with His church. It is the basis for Revelation's depiction of the celestial wedding feast.

Ultimately, it all goes back to the *imago dei*—the image of God in man. “God created man as His own image,” says Genesis, “as the image of God He created him”; and then, significantly, the text adds, “*male and female He created them*” (emphasis added). Here, too, is a tremendous mystery. For what these words seem to suggest is that, in some way we cannot completely grasp or explain, God's self-portrait comes through most clearly in the maleness and femaleness of humankind. It receives its fullest expression in the division of the sexes and in their quest for complement, reunion, and fulfillment in marriage and romantic love.

The End . . . and the Beginning

I suppose this is the real reason my wife and her little enameled cross rose up before my mind's eye when I began looking for a way to bring our travels with Dante to a meaningful conclusion. I wasn't really thinking about what the cross had meant to Joni. I was realizing what Joni means to me. As the images of the poet's story converged—the bright smile and flashing eyes of Beatrice mingling with and superimposing themselves upon the beauty of Piccarda, the piety of Bernard, the glory of the Celestial Rose, and the brilliance of the concentric circles of light—it was to be expected that another smile and another pair of eyes should thrust themselves upon my imagination. In that instant it was inevitable that my thoughts and feelings should be drawn to the one who has been for me not only friend and lover, not merely an object of passion or the goal of desire, but a tangible, embraceable, and ever-present icon of God's love embodied in human flesh.

For in the final analysis, I am not altogether unlike Dante Alighieri. I, too, saw a girl at a strategic point in life's journey. I, too, discovered in that moment what it means to be intoxicated with love, lifted out of self, taken captive by *Amore*. Though I am in many respects quite different from the medieval Italian poet, there is nevertheless this important point of similarity between us: before seeing the girl, I was in a very real sense trapped alone within the confines of an imagination too narrow to accommodate the richness of the divine imagery filling the world around me. Like Dante, I "needed a human being to launch [my] return to the land of the living."⁸ I saw a girl, and for more than thirty-five years she has filled this vital role in my life. She was and is my Beatrice—the wife of my youth and the companion of my quest.

This, of course, is not the end of our story. It is just the beginning. When all is said and done, *every* image must be recognized for what it is—"only a shell, a husk of meaning." This applies to a lifelong romance as surely as it does to a lingering sunset or a haunting snatch of birdsong. The significance of such things does not lie within the things themselves. Their purpose will break forth and be revealed only when the *real* quest has been achieved. That's why what Dante called "high fantasy" must ultimately fail.⁹ And that's why Joni and I will never understand the full meaning of our love for one another until it has been completely eclipsed in the glory of the Beatific Vision.



ENDNOTES

Introduction: Love's Divergent Paths (Kurt Bruner)

1. "Maria," music by Leonard Bernstein, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim © 1956, 1957 Amberson Holdings LLC and Stephen Sondheim. Copyright renewed by Leonard Bernstein Music Publishing Company, publisher.
 2. Christopher West, *Theology of the Body for Beginners* (West Chester, PA: Ascension Press, 2004), 25.
 3. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 447.
 4. *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1928), 300, emphasis added.
 5. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Bantam Classics, 1995), 26.
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Part 1: Love Kindled (*La Vita Nuova/The New Life*)

Captive

1. Dante, *La Vita Nuova*, trans. Mark Musa (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973), chapter III; 6.
2. Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, Vol. 2, *Purgatory* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981, 1985), canto XXIV, lines 52–54; 259.
3. Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice* (Berkeley, CA: Apocryphile Press, 2005), 7.
4. Dante, *La Vita Nuova*, ed. and trans. Stanley Appelbaum (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2006), 3.
5. "Beaver's Crush," *Leave It To Beaver*, Season 1, DVD (Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2005).
6. Cf. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1960).
7. *The Portable Dante*, ed. Paolo Milano (New York: The Viking Press, 1947); *Paradiso* (trans. Laurence Binyon), canto XXXIII, line 145; 544.

Bereft

1. *La Vita Nuova/The New Life*, trans. Stanley Appelbaum, 69.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "In Memoriam A. H. H.," xxvii, in *Idylls of the King and a Selection of Poems* (New York: Signet Classics, 1961), 302.

4. Samuel Butler, *The Way of All Flesh* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2004), 262.
5. Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), 217.
6. *Ibid.*, 209.
7. *Ibid.*, 211, emphasis in original.
8. Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice*, 38.
9. *Purgatory*, trans. Mark Musa, canto XXXI, lines 47–48.

Betrayal

1. *La Vita Nuova/The New Life*, trans. Stanley Appelbaum, chapter XLII; 97.
2. Some have actually suggested that Gemma was the “Lady in the Window.” See Paget Toynbee, *Dante Alighieri: His Life and Works*, 67, note 1. The marriage remained intact throughout Dante’s lifetime (though in estrangement during the years of his exile) and produced four children.
3. At the time of her death, our poet’s ideal woman had been married to Simone dei Bardi, a Florentine banker, for more than three years.
4. Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 20.
5. Charles Williams, *Religion and Love in Dante: The Theology of Romantic Love* (Westminster: Dacre Press, n.d.), 7. Rereleased by Kessinger Publishing, 2007.
6. *La Vita Nuova*, chapter XI; trans. Stanley Appelbaum.
7. Williams, *Religion and Love in Dante*, 9–10.
8. *The Divine Comedy: Hell*, trans. Dorothy Sayers (New York: Penguin Books, 1955), 95.

Part 2: Love Gone Astray (*Inferno*)

Another Way

1. Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, Vol. 1, *Inferno*, trans. Mark Musa (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), canto I, lines 77–78.
2. *Ibid.*, lines 94–95.
3. *Purgatory*, canto XXX, lines 136–138.

Chain of Love

1. *The Inferno*, canto III, 8–9.
2. The Apostles’ Creed.
3. *La Vita Nuova*, chapter XIX, trans. Dante Gabriel Rossetti; in *The Portable Dante*.
4. *Purgatory*, cantos XXVII, XXVIII, and following.
5. For this imagery, see Daniel Chanan Matt, trans., *Zohar: The Book of*

Enlightenment (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), “The Birth of Moses,” 100; also note, 237.

Off-Center

1. Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 117.
2. “Many critics, taken in like the Pilgrim by Francesca’s smooth speech, have asserted that she and Paolo in their love have ‘conquered’ Hell because they are still together. But their togetherness is certainly part of their punishment.” *Inferno*, trans. Mark Musa; canto V, notes, 118.
3. Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 7.
4. *Inferno*, canto V, lines 55 and 63.
5. Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 117.
6. *Ibid.*, 48.
7. *Ibid.*, 164.

Surprise, Surprise!

1. *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*. Directed by Gore Verbinski; written by Ted Elliott, Terry Rossio, Stuart Beattie, and Jay Wolpert. Walt Disney Pictures, 2003.
2. *Inferno*, trans. Mark Musa, canto VI, line 81.
3. *Inferno*, trans. Dorothy Sayers, canto VI, lines 85–86.
4. Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 130.
5. *Inferno*, trans. Mark Musa, canto XV, lines 82–85; trans. Dorothy Sayers, 86–87.
6. T. S. Eliot, “Dante,” in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1922; Great Books Online, www.bartleby.com/200/sw14/html), 4.
7. Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 130.
8. Quote in final sentence taken from *Inferno*, trans. Stanley Appelbaum, canto XV, line 69.

Hidden Beast

1. Paget Toynbee, *Dante Alighieri: His Life and Works* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005), 48, footnote 1. The reference is to *Commento di Francesco da Buti sopra la Divina Commedia di Dante Alighieri*, completed 1385 and 1395, published at Pisa, 1858–1862, by Crescentino Giannini. See also *Paradise*, canto XI, line 87.
2. See *Inferno*, canto I, for the significance of the leopard.
3. It’s worth adding here that Dante, by his own request, was buried in the habit of a Franciscan monk.

Final Destination

1. NBC News, “Scott Peterson Sentenced to Death,” March 17, 2005, see <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/7204523/>.
2. “Little Omie Wise,” trad.; as performed by Doc Watson. Based on the true

story of the murder of Naomi Wise by her lover Jonathan Lewis in Deep River, Randolph County, NC, in 1808. Reprinted in *The Songs of Doc Watson* (Oak Publications, 1998), 40–41. Other traditional ballads of this type include “The Banks of the Ohio,” “The Lone Green Valley,” “The Knoxville Girl,” “The Wexford Girl,” “The Cruel Miller,” and “Down in the Willow Garden.”

3. Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 144.
4. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1943, 1945, 1952), 49–50.
5. Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 142–144.

Getting Personal: When Love Goes Astray

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Harper One, 2001), 96.
 2. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 102.
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Part 3: Love Fulfilled (*Purgatory* and *Paradise*)

Press On!

1. Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 145.
2. *Purgatory*, trans. Mark Musa, canto XVIII, lines 103–104.
3. The *canzone* is found in Book III of Dante’s unfinished work, the *Convivio*.
4. *La Vita Nuova*, chapter XIX.
5. *Inferno*, trans. Mark Musa, canto III, lines 17–18.
6. Williams, *Religion and Love in Dante*, 25.

The Seed

1. *Purgatory*, trans. Mark Musa, canto XVII, lines 127–129.
2. As in the famous prayer of Augustine: “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find peace in You.” *Confessions*, I, I; trans. Rex Warner (New York: Mentor Books, 1963), 17.
3. Peter J. Leithart, *Ascent to Love: A Guide to Dante’s Divine Comedy* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), 108.
4. *Purgatory*, trans. Dorothy Sayers, canto XVIII, lines 43–45.
5. *La Vita Nuova*, canto XIX.
6. *Purgatory*, canto II, line 112.
7. Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 163.
8. *Purgatory*, trans. Mark Musa, canto XVIII, lines 73–75.

A Rude Welcome

1. With the exception of Sir Galahad, of course.
2. See Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 183.

3. Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 183.
4. *Purgatory*, trans. John Ciardi, canto XXXI, lines 121–123.

Contentment

1. See Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 96–97.
2. For a detailed and scholarly treatment of this cosmological scheme, see C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964).
3. Forese Donati appears on the Terrace of the Gluttons in *Purgatorio*, canto XXIII.
4. *La Vita Nuova*, canto XII.
5. Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 196.
6. Francis Schaeffer, *True Spirituality* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1971), 161.
7. Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 195.
8. *Ibid.*, 196.

Upside Down and Inside Out

1. *Primum Mobile* is Latin for “First Mover.” As the outermost sphere of the physical cosmos, it stands closest to the *Empyrean*, the abode of God Himself. Its rapid rotation, driven by love of the Creator, sets all the other spheres in motion.
2. Shel Silverstein, “Falling Up,” in *Falling Up* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 7.
3. See C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* (London: Collins, 1974), 148.
4. *Paradise*, trans. Mark Musa, canto I, lines 124–126.
5. Attributed to St. Bonaventure; see Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 24.
6. Smith is a strangely winsome character who in some ways bears an odd resemblance to Dante. “I have become a pilgrim,” he says, “to cure myself of being an exile.”
7. G. K. Chesterton, *Manalive* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2000), 100.
8. *Ibid.*, 121–122.
9. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, “The Dry Salvages,” III (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc., 1943, 1971), 41.

The Center of the Circle

1. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), architect of the medieval cult of the adoration of the Virgin and founder of what was perhaps the most influential new monastic order of the Middle Ages, the Cistercians, devoted eighteen years of his life to his literary masterpiece, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*. For a highly readable selection of these sermons, see *Talks on the Song of Songs*, trans. Bernard Bangle (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2002).

2. The Athanasian Creed.
3. Italian “*s’io m’intuassi, come tu t’inmii.*” *Paradise*, canto IX, line 81. A literal translation of the Italian renders *inyou* and *inme* as one word each.
4. Charles Williams, *The Descent of the Dove: A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 131.
5. Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 97.
6. As, most notably, in Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Frances Horgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
7. Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 11.
8. *Paradise*, trans. John Ciardi, canto XXXIII, lines 124–126.
9. *Paradise*, trans. Dorothy Sayers, canto XXXIII, line 145.

Getting Personal: When Love Seeks Fulfillment

1. Council of Trent summary from *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 463.
2. West, *Theology of the Body for Beginners*, 12.

Afterthoughts: Romance and the Christian Imagination (Jim Ware)

1. Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice*, chapter 6.
2. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1961), 6.
3. See Williams, *The Descent of the Dove*, 129.
4. *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works*, trans. Clifton Wolters (New York: Penguin Books, 1961, 1978), 61.
5. *Paradise*, trans. Mark Musa, canto XXX, line 74.
6. *Ibid.*, canto XXVI, lines 14–15.
7. See D. J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968), 53–103. Clines argues that the Hebrew preposition *be* (“in”) in the phrases *betsalmenu*, “in our image,” and *betsalmo*, “in his image,” should be taken as an instance of “*beth* essentialiae” or “*beth* of the essence.” “Thus we may say that according to Genesis 1, man does not *have* the image of God, nor is he made *in* the image of God, but is himself the image of God.” Yes, that image was obscured in the Fall; however, Jesus came to earth as the perfect image of his Father. And in Christ, the blurred image of God shines out of us, his followers, as our love becomes an expression of his love.
8. Janine Langan, “The Christian Imagination,” in *The Christian Imagination*, ed. Leland Ryken (Colorado Springs, CO: Shaw Books, 2002), 74.
9. *Paradise*, trans. Mark Musa, canto XXXIII, line 142.

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