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Diotima and Dante: A Ladder of Love Towards God

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Abstract

Dante's portrayal of Beatrice has long confounded readers, but in mapping a Platonic "ladder of love" in Dante's writing, we invite a new perspective on the problematic of her character. This essay attempts to do this by a comparison of Diotima's account of love in Plato's *Symposium* with Dante's musings on Beatrice in *La Vita Nuova* and the *Divine Comedy*. These accounts are bridged by the influence of Aquinas' *Fourth Way for Proving the Existence of God* on Dante – a work which is inherently Platonic in nature. In drawing this comparison, we find that, in Plato, love is more like a means to the end of contemplating the abstract ideal of beauty, but in Dante, love is instead the resonance of God's own love, a divine power which not only enables ascension but is evidence of ascension's telos – the attraction that all beings have towards their creator. This discussion of Plato and Dante produces new ideas about the character of Beatrice and the extent to which she is cast in either a passive or active light, whether she is an object or a subject. In fact, the answer is the latter in both cases as our perspective shifts from a focus on Dante's love for Beatrice to Beatrice's love for Dante.

§ 0. Introduction

In canonical literature, there remains a predominant theme of love's association with divinity, an idea for which there have been similarities in its representation and accompanying frameworks. This essay will centre on these explicit and implicit frameworks found in the works of Plato and Dante on love's divinity, with reference to their respective works: the *Symposium* (c. 385–370 BC), *La Vita Nuova* (1294), and the *Divine Comedy* (1321). In Plato, this structure exists in Diotima's "ladder of love," in which, by the ascension of each rung, one comes to embody virtue and knowledge

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in the quest to attain a higher form of immortality. In Dante, this conception of love is found in his musings on Beatrice, and by a comparative study with Plato – specifically, through the superimposition of Diotima's "ladder of love" onto Dante's verse – we invite a new perspective on Dante's portrayal of Beatrice. In this perspective, she is found to be a mirror for God's perfection, but also actively engaged in and interested in Dante's salvation. And so, while modern critics are in contention on the portrayal of Beatrice, with some finding it inherently problematic[2] and misogynistic,[3] and others remaining less deterred by the manipulation of her character,[4] our discussion finds that Beatrice is inescapably active within Dante's ladder and, contra Plato, not simply the object of love which is cast off. But like with reading Beatrice's love for Dante as key to his salvation, Dante is also interested in the salvation of us, his readers. In this way, the ladder of love is posited at an extra-textual level. Thereby, this ladder proves helpful, also illustrating Dante's love for us.

§ 1. Diotima's Ladder of Love

Before discussing Dante, it will be instructive to first reproduce Diotima's ladder of love in the *Symposium*.[5] The nature of love as understood through Diotima proves to be a continual striving for the possession of goodness, allowing us to gain immortality at the least in procreation, but most significantly, by way of contemplating absolute beauty. But in understanding Diotima's ladder, we must first clarify her idea of birth and given this, the possibility of the notion of "spiritual pregnancy." Diotima first establishes the metaphor of birth when, answering her question to Socrates, she finds love's purpose to be "physical and mental procreation in an attractive medium."[6] In developing the notion of "spiritual pregnancy," Elizabeth Pender is quick to note that to be "pregnant" in Plato's use means arousal and precedes intercourse. Pregnancy and birth are male-centric, evidenced by Diotima's configuring male attraction, the "desire to give birth, but we find it possible only in an attractive medium, not a repulsive one."[7] Diotima continues by distinguishing between the pregnant in body, whose offspring are children, and the pregnant in mind, whose offspring are virtue and wisdom.[8] Diotima then turns to the pederastic relationship in which intimacy and the transfer of knowledge are

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[2] Robin Kirkpatrick, "Dante's Beatrice and the Politics of Singularity." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 32, no. 1 (1990): 101–119.

[3] Brooke L. Carey, "Le Donne di Dante: An Historical Study of Female Characters in The Divine Comedy", Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects (2007).

[4] Richard Pearce, "The Eyes of Beatrice." *New Blackfriars* 54, no. 640 (1973), 407–416; Martha C. Nussbaum, "Beatrice's 'Dante': Loving the Individual?" *Apeiron: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science* 26, no. 3/4 (1993), 161–178; Jorge Luis Borges, "Beatrice's Last Smile", trans. Virginia Múzquiz. *Dispositio* 18, no. 45 (1993), 23–25.

[5] Plato, *Symposium*, trans. R. Waterfield (Oxford University Press, 2019).

[6] Plato, *Symposium*, 206 b.

[7] Plato, *Symposium*, 206 c.

[8] Plato, *Symposium*, 209 a.

conflated: in the act of birth, the spiritually pregnant man adopts the knowledge and intellect of his beloved.[9] Pender notes this conflation in her interpretation of "sex" taking place in the presence of the beloved – discussion – and alone – reflecting on discussion.[10] As reproduction is the way that the mortal gains immortality for Diotima,[11] the conflation that is "spiritual pregnancy" must equally grant immortality, but she goes further, observing that "offspring of this relationship are particularly attractive and are closer to immortality than ordinary children", and as she points out, Homer's offspring have certainly outlasted a generation.[12] Diotima then constructs her ladder: first, one should focus on the beauty of the body and beget "beautiful reasoning"[13] – our metaphor is still intact. Then, they will find that the beauty of all bodies is the same, realising that a love of only one body is "ridiculous and petty."[14] Later, they will come to value the beauty of the mind and will be led to see the attractiveness of institutions and morality. Finally, upon facing "the vast sea of beauty … love of knowledge becomes the medium in which he gives birth to plenty of beautiful, expansive reasoning and thinking," from which they may catch a glimpse of absolute beauty.[15] The lover will have ascended from the admiration of earthly things to see true beauty in its divinity and constancy, and by contemplating it, can beget a truer, more beautiful goodness.[16] One way that Pender notes that these children give the father greater capacity for immortality is that, in seeing the true nature of things, he understands true virtue. If we then apply the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, through this understanding he will be able to free his soul and "escape from the realm of becoming to the eternal realm of being."[17] It is through the metaphor of "spiritual pregnancy" that Plato posits his hierarchy and ladder of love, which will be the basis for a comparative interpretation of Dante.

§ 2. Aquinas' Fourth Way and *The Divine Comedy*

In linking Dante with Plato, it is Dante's Thomistic influence that invites comparison with the Platonic model. Though Aquinas himself was an Aristotelian,[18] his Fourth Way for Proving the Existence of God, in the *Summa Theologiae*, is Platonic in nature. This is a key consideration that we will keep in mind in our following reproduction of it. From the "gradation" of things, Aquinas cites that some things are more or less "good, true, noble," and these things are measured in relation to a "maximum." He gives the example of the "hotter" being measured to the thing which is "hottest,"

[9] Plato, *Symposium*, 209 c.
[10] Pender, *Spiritual Pregnancy*, 78.
[11] Plato, *Symposium*, 208 e.
[12] Plato, *Symposium*, 209 c–d.
[13] Plato, *Symposium*, 210 a.
[14] Plato, *Symposium*, 210 b.
[15] Plato, *Symposium*, 210 d.
[16] Plato, *Symposium*, 212 a.
[17] Pender, *Spiritual Pregnancy*, 85.
[18] Robert Pasnau, "Thomas Aquinas," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, May 18, 2023, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aquinas/.

such that there is something "truest" and "noblest." He reasons that the thing which is hottest must be the cause of all other things which are varying degrees of hot, concluding that there must be something which is the cause of all different perfections, which is perfect in infinite degrees, and which he calls God.[19] The influence of this idea on Dante is unmistakably obvious since, in *The Divine Comedy*, we are continually locating ourselves relative to the maximum level of ascension. In Canto XXVIII (Primum Mobile), he sees a singular point of light which is the brightest, and surrounding this point, which is (or is the closest to) God, are nine rings of flame which move more slowly the further away their orbit is from the centre.[20] The ring closest to the point "[possesses] the clearest flame of all / from which the purest spark stood least far off."[21] This circle spins with such rotation, moving "so fast impelled on burning love."[22] Concepts such as purity and velocity approach a perfect level as they are closer to God. Similarly, Beatrice becomes more beautiful and radiant as they approach the Empyrean;[23] her gaze, "that fire from vision,"[24] burns brighter. So too does the light source become more focused and pure, culminating in its all-encompassing essence; not only in the physical, "From that one point / depends both Heaven and all of Nature's world.", but the conceptual too, "For good – the only object of our will – / is gathered up entirely in that one light."[25] In this way, Dante even adopts Aquinas' example of flame and temperature to mark the ascension.

But it is not only this heat imagery that invites comparison; we also find metaphors of mirrors that illustrate this movement of transcendence towards the divine. Colloquially, the mirror is itself often a paraphrase for explaining Aquinas' Fourth Way,[26] and equally throughout the *Summa Theologiae*, there are references to mirrors as the act of perceiving God.[27] As distinct from the purely material objects in the thought of Aristotle, Aquinas is working within the tradition of Plato's theory of Forms in the sense that objects are representations of an unintelligible perfection (indeed, to discuss mirrors and representations brings to mind passages such as Republic 596). Specifically, the Fourth Way consists in seeing the traces of a greater perfection through reflection, but not seeing this greater perfection (God). In the same way, the prisoners in the cave only understand the shadows cast by the fire, but the object itself eludes them.[28] In the *Divine Comedy*, then, Dante's is a quest to ascend closer to God, for he is not content with the shadow cast by fire, nor the

[19] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, (Benziger Bros., 1947), 16.
[20] Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (Penguin, 2007), Canto XXVIII, 13–36.
[21] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXVVIII, 37–38.
[22] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXVIII, 45.
[23] Borges, *Last Smile*, 23; Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXI, 7–12.
[24] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XIV, 41.
[25] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII, 103–104.
[26] Michael Egnor, "Aquinas' Fourth Way: Light in a Mirror," *Evolution News*, May 18, 2023.
[27] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 374–375.
[28] Plato, *Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield, (Oxford University Press, Oxford Scholarly Editions Online, 2019), doi:10.1093/actrade/9780199535767, 514 a–520 a.

reflection in the mirror; he rather seeks to look on and contemplate the greater perfection that is God.

By tracing Dante's theme of the mirror, as borrowed from Aquinas, we can make sense of the journey to divine contemplation as an ascent akin to Diotima's ladder. For Dante, the mirror is an intermediary; he writes, "Fix your mind firm behind those eyes of yours, / and make them both a mirror for that form / that in *this* mirror will appear to you."[29] Dante has here ascended with Beatrice to the seventh heaven (Saturn), and she instructs him thus whilst configuring herself as the mirror for the form of greater perfection. Later, he again illustrates her reflective power when she leaves him in the Empyrean, and he looks above to find her "mirroring eternal rays."[30] Let us note in passing that Beatrice's is an active stance; she is acting as the mirror – this is a thought which we will return to. Finally, having ascended above Beatrice, he looks at God Himself, appearing "like mirrored brilliancy."[31] It is interesting for poet Dante to describe this appearance as "mirrored brilliancy," as it suggests that Dante has still only managed to access a degree of greater perfection, but not God Himself.

If, as we have established, Beatrice is foremost a mirror to God's perfection for Dante, it follows then that this requires that she must be closer to God's perfection, as is certainly made evident throughout. When she meets him in the *Purgatorio*, she says, "'In your desire for me,' she said, / 'which was then leading you to love the Good beyond which we cannot aspire to reach."[32] Ultimately, then, Dante's is a spiritual attraction to Beatrice because she is so close to God's perfection (in a Thomistic sense), and so he seeks to ascend higher through his admiration of her. As Beatrice is so perfect,[33] she has the purity to see and reflect a closer image of God. I would argue that at the time of *La Vita Nuova* Dante is not aware of Beatrice's spiritual significance, but is rather making attempts to capture her beauty, though he is ultimately at a loss for words: "My use of language at this time would not suffice to deal with the material [Beatrice's death] as it should be dealt with."[34] Similarly, "The image of her when she starts to smile / Dissolves within the mind and melts away, / A miracle too rich and strange to hold."[35] After some time, in the *Divine Comedy*, Dante has indeed managed to comprehend and commit to verse Beatrice's

[29] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXI, 16–18.
[30] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXI, 71.
[31] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII, 128.
[32] Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Purgatorio*, trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (Penguin, 2007) Canto XXXI, 22–24.
[33] In the canzone of chapter XIX "*Ladies, refined and sensitive*" of *La Vita Nuova*, he describes her as "flesh drawn from clay", that "She is the highest nature can achieve / And by her mold all beauty tests itself", and "whoever speaks with her shall speak with Him" (Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, Canzone, Chapter XXI).
[34] Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, trans. Mark Musa, (Indiana University Press, 1973), 60 (Chapter XXVIII).
[35] Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 38–39 (Chapter XXI).

purity and perfection, and may progress up his ladder, but having climbed higher, in a similar vein, he now fails to comprehend God.

But there is another, albeit interrelated, metaphor for us to contend with, that of the "wings of sight."[36] This metaphor is tied to the metaphor of mirrors since eyes are often described as mirrors also. In Canto XXX, we have an example of this when Beatrice urges Dante to drink from a gem-laden river in the Empyrean. As he does – apparently drinking through his eyelids – he finds that "counterfeited semblance [is] thrown aside", and his view above of heaven is expanded.[37] The most significant use of this metaphor comes at the climax of the *Paradiso*. When Dante sees God in the Empyrean, his only intermediary is the mirror of his eyes.[38] He sees three circling spheres aflame,[39] and "deep in itself, it seemed - as painted now, / in those same hues - to show our human form."[40] We might question how something can become visible when painted in the same hues, as Dante does and strains himself to uncover the mystery of his sight. But alas, he laments that his mortal gaze "were wings that could not rise to that."[41] And like in *La Vita Nuova*, when he asked God to grant him time to capture Beatrice's perfection, he asks now that God sustain him until "[his] soul ascend to behold the glory of its lady."[42] As he writes, he must wait until he can look at the sun without weak eyes.[43] To be close to God must involve tolerating His overwhelming light, and so preparing the gaze and the wings of sight.

But how then is the gaze prepared according to Dante? His personal answer is Beatrice's gaze. At first, in their meeting in the *Purgatorio*, Beatrice reprimands Dante for taking delight merely in "those limbs / in which [she] was enclosed."[44] But she is not only active in her words, indeed even her gaze is rendered a moral crucible, challenging whoever she looks upon, "forcing down his gaze; / He sighs as all his defects flash in mind."[45] This theme of the transformative power of her gaze is continued in the *Paradiso*, as Dante attests, "Held in her look, I, inwardly, was made / what Glaucus, tasting grass, was made to be, / consorting with the other ocean Gods."[46] Her gaze is compared with the mythical power of Glaucus' transformation into a sea God. This is the natural progression of the mirror of one's eyes metaphor, by which I mean to suggest that the gaze of an individual of greater perfection (Beatrice) reflects their greater vision of God onto the person who meets their gaze and is then transformed in this encounter. However, this metaphor of sight and transformation has an even greater potency. I contend that Dante's own gaze is his

[36] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXI, 97.
[37] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXX.
[38] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXI, 16–18.
[39] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII, 115–120.
[40] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII, 130–131.
[41] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII, 139.
[42] Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 86 (Chapter XLII).
[43] Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 84 (Chapter XLI).
[44] Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, Canto XXXI, 50-51.
[45] Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 38 (Chapter XXI).
[46] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto I, 67–69.

verse, and just as Dante is held in the gaze of Beatrice, we, the reader, are held in the gaze of his poetry. He has made our moral and spiritual ascension his task.

§ 3. Dante's Ladder of Love

In Dante's writing, we find the construction of a spiritual ladder in which the reader is involved. As we saw, with ascension, one's sight of God becomes less obscured by layers of reflection, and they gain the sight to see God more clearly. In this way, we already understand the telos of the ladder to be coming closest to God. Dante wishes to help us progress as far as is possible for us, and his poetry is his means of doing so. A clear connection can be drawn between Diotima's ladder and *La Vita Nuova*, where Dante thinks of his "song" as his offspring, "Love's true child,"[47] echoing the notion of "spiritual pregnancy." In his poetry, Dante can be said to have "begotten" a semblance of true goodness, but it is goodness that is reflected by the mirror of verse. The mirror of Dante's eyes is his poetry. This extra-textual rung of his ladder finds us removed from God on multiple levels. I will attempt to concretise the ladder in comparison with Diotima's.

As I understand it, Diotima's ladder has four levels:

1. Appreciating the beauty of an individual body.
2. Appreciating the beauty of all bodies.
3. Valuing the beauty of the mind and begetting ideas. (As discussed, Plato's example is that Homer's poetry is his offspring – the irony about the status of poetry is all too apparent.)
4. Love of absolute beauty and knowledge

A representation of Dante's ladder at first glance, and as analogous to Plato, may look like:

1. Contemplation of only the physical beauty of Beatrice in Dante's poetry.
2. Contemplation of God as mediated through Beatrice. Dante comes to see Beatrice as an intermediary for God's perfection, not simply as a beautiful individual.
3. Seeing and contemplating God for oneself.
4. If we take seriously the metaphor of the eyes as mirrors, then this further rung indicates the seeing and contemplating God without the mirror of one's eyes.

Putting the two side by side, we have:

Stage of the Ladder	**Diotima's (Plato's) Ladder of Love**	**Dante's Ladder of Love**
Love of the body	1. Appreciating the	1. Contemplation of only

[47] Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 33 (Chapter XIX).

(concrete/physical)	beauty of an individual body	the physical beauty of Beatrice in Dante's poetry
	2. Appreciating the beauty of all bodies	
Love of ideas/God through an intermediary (approaching the abstract)	3. Valuing the beauty of the mind and begetting ideas. (As discussed, Plato's example is that Homer's poetry is his offspring – the irony about the status of poetry is all too apparent.)	2. Contemplation of God as mediated through Beatrice. Dante comes to see Beatrice as an intermediary for God's perfection, not simply as a beautiful individual.
Love of absolute beauty/God (abstract)	4. Love of absolute beauty and knowledge	3. Seeing and contemplating God
		4. If we take seriously the eyes as mirrors metaphor, then this further rung indicates the seeing and contemplating God without the mirror of one's eyes

Table 1: *A comparative view of the structure of Diotima's and Dante's ladders of love.*

But we must still account for the mirror of Dante's verse, in which case we are one rung even further removed. By way of example, if Dante is on rung two of his ladder when contemplating God through the mirror of Beatrice, we as readers are even further removed because the text is itself a further mirror of God's perfection. Our distance from the *telos* of God would look like:

God → Beatrice → Dante → Dante's verse → us as readers

The lower we are on the ladder, the more layers of mirrors and representations we are engaged with, and therefore the further we are from God, and the more obscured our vision of Him is. We should note in passing, however, that in the construction of Dante's ladder there is a caveat of faith. After all, ascension depends on faith and Virgil, as a pagan, must remain in purgatory.

Importantly, Dante is here interested in our salvation just as Beatrice is interested in his. His writing is firmly on the divine, and it retains some degree of the divine in it which we can access. But what then should we make of Beatrice, and what does the construction of the ladder and discussion with Plato have to bear on contemporary debates about the status of Beatrice?

§ 4. The Question of Beatrice

In the construction of Dante's ladder, Beatrice is herself a mirror towards seeing and knowing God, but is she merely an object of Dante's affection, to be surpassed when Dante can view God without her as a mediator? In Plato, it seems this way, for love is an inherently self-interested pursuit. Indeed, the individual must be rejected in favour of beauty as an abstract and fluid ideal. Beatrice, however, does not exist in this way, for she is herself an abstraction of God's divine beauty, and remains a fluid being as we rise with her into the Primum Mobile. Still, there is a theme amongst those scholars who are critical of Beatrice's portrayal: that in her design, Dante has lost sight of the real Florentine woman, the individual, and projected his own desires onto her figure. This is a position held by Robin Kirkpatrick.[48] Kirkpatrick argues that Beatrice's portrayal is inherently problematic, as the "historical woman becomes a cipher on which the patriarchal will of the writer – be he courtly poet or God – can exert itself."[49] Interestingly, he thinks of Beatrice as a mirror also, but one which Dante uses by projecting his sense of morality and virtue onto, to see reflected back his own flaws and goodness. This reading coheres with Martha Nussbaum's invocation of Gregory Vlastos' criticism of love in the *Symposium*, in which he thinks of the lover's projection as a kind of "spiritual egocentrism" which abstracts versions of people into only their best qualities.[50] But where Vlastos disapproves of Plato, Nussbaum's reading of Dante is more encouraging when we consider the love of Beatrice for Dante.[51]

As God's love sets the universe in motion, so Beatrice's love for Dante is the catalyst for his salvation. As Nussbaum posits, Beatrice's love for Dante shows in her concern for his salvation, and thus she is the one who sends for Virgil to lead him through the *Inferno*, because it is only after the spiritual crucible that is the *Inferno*, that Dante's will is made "healthy, upright, free and whole."[52] We can think of Beatrice as instigating movement based on love, this instigation being predicated upon a higher order of movement that Dante grasps at the end of the *Commedia*, "But now my will and my desire were turned, / as wheels that move in equilibrium, / by love that moves the sun and other stars."[53] Like the arrangement of gears in a watch, divine love sets in progress a trickling of motion which reaches down to Dante through Beatrice. In Kirkpatrick's reading, we understand love only as the indulgent love of Dante for Beatrice, but we do not consider the love of Beatrice for Dante, and more importantly, the divine power that resides in the lover's gaze. The same gaze would force Dante to view his own defects in the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, as previously discussed. If there was a question about how one empowers their wings of sight, the answer must be that it is the gaze of the lover which prepares them for that blinding light and for salvation. In terms of the ladder, Beatrice's is an unselfish

[48] Kirkpatrick, *Politics of Singularity*, 101–119.
[49] Kirkpatrick, *Politics of Singularity*, 101.
[50] Nussbaum, *Loving the Individual*, 166.
[51] Nussbaum, *Loving the Individual*, 168–176.
[52] Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, Canto XXVII, 140; Nussbaum, *Loving the Individual*, 168–169.
[53] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII, 143–145.

love for Dante that is not concerned for her own ascension but understands its necessity for his, leveraging her higher position to help him climb. Not only can we consider Beatrice a rung or a mirror to God's greater perfection, but if she is this, then she is also a hand reaching down to help Dante climb. It is fitting then that her love for Dante is routinely described as the love of a mother for her child, and like a mother, her love does not abate when Dante can see with his own wings, so she joins in prayer for him to view God.[54]

§ 5. Conclusion

By way of summary, Dante's own extra-textual "ladder of love" consists in his writing to us and contemplation of increasing gradations of perfection until the ultimate telos of attempting to view God Himself. This analysis relies heavily on Dante's adoption of Aquinas' Fourth Way, which is inherently Platonic in its structure. Importantly, compared with Plato, the ladder I have posited in Dante is an extra-textual one. Dante makes possible our contemplation of God as reflected through his verse. Against the thinking of Diotima, the individual for Dante is not an inactive object who is projected upon, and there is no possibility that we can consider love to be like the self-interested, perhaps even callous, picture that we find in Plato. This is true when one considers Beatrice's love for Dante, which is replicated in Dante's love for us. I have argued further that the import of this discussion has garnered a new perspective of Beatrice, who is not merely a rung on the ladder, but rather an active agent in his salvation. This becomes especially salient through the interconnected metaphors of sight, mirrors, ascension and light.

There is one telling moment in the text that seems to capture perfectly the differences between Diotima's conception of love and Dante's. In his ascension in the *Paradiso*, the sun becomes more brilliant and he recounts, "I set my love so wholly on that Sun / that He, in oblivion, eclipsed even Beatrice. / This did not trouble her. She smiled at it."[55] In Plato, this eclipse of the individual by greater beauty is welcomed. But in Dante, when Beatrice is surpassed in the ascent, she smiles out of her love for him, and Dante, as attested to by any passage of his writing, never does lose sight of her in the blinding light.

[54] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII, 38–39.
[55] Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto X, 59–61.

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