PETER LEVINE

WHY DANTE DAMNED FRANCESCA DA RIMINI

I

THE VAST MAJORITY of Dante's readers have found Francesca da Rimini an acutely sympathetic figure—a tragic heroine. Yet Dante damned her, pronouncing a stern and challenging moral judgment. His decision to place her in Hell is especially surprising when we consider that she is almost chaste compared to the other souls in the Circle of the Lustful. All she did was to fall in love with her brother-in-law—after being tricked into marriage, if we believe Boccaccio's commentary—and her husband murdered her before she had a chance to repent. Compare Semiramis, the Assyrian queen, who legalized incest in order to justify her own obsession, or the Paris of medieval legend, who lured Achilles into a temple by arranging a sexual encounter and then killed him.

Dante's judgment is especially surprising when we learn that Francesca was a real woman, probably an actual murder victim, and that Dante was closely connected to her family. Late in life, banished from Florence, he found shelter in the home of Guido Novello da Polenta, who was a love poet and Francesca's nephew. Dante thus finished the *Divine Comedy* in the very household where Francesca was born, as part of her family. In the text, she is portrayed vividly and sympathetically, as if Dante had heard much about her. She even utters a phrase that appears in one of Guido Novello's sweet, ingenuous love sonnets. We cannot be sure who originally wrote this phrase, but its appearance in the *Divine Comedy* suggests one of two theories. Either Guido so admired Dante's portrait of his murdered aunt that he quoted her speech from the *Inferno*, or else Dante placed Guido's words in Francesca's mouth as homage to his friend.[1]

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Why then did Dante damn Francesca? Perhaps he was thinking like a philosopher. Actually, philosophers might reach many conclusions about this case, and few would sentence Francesca to eternal torture. But even though philosophers would reach different conclusions, they would all begin reasoning in the same way. They would first *analyze* the story of Paolo and Francesca until the particular details of character and situation could be assessed by a general theory. One of Dante's most important philosophical influences was St. Thomas Aquinas, who argued that adultery was a distinct type of lust, and that lust was a mortal sin (*Summa theoligiae*, II, ii, 154, 8). In fact, adultery was wrong *secundum se* or intrinsically, and not merely because of any harm that it might do in a particular case.[2] Did Paolo and Francesca commit adultery? We could apply the definition that Aquinas borrowed from Pope Leo I: "adultery is committed when by impulse of one's libidinousness or consent of the other party a couple lie together in breach of the marriage vows." We don't know from Dante's account whether Paolo and Francesca "lay together," but Aquinas quotes the Gospel, "Whosoever shall look at a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Aquinas adds: "Much [worse], then, are libidinous kisses and suchlike mortal sins" (ibid., 4).

So it seems that Paolo and Francesca were guilty of adultery, and therefore Minos wrapped his tail around himself twice, categorizing them as lustful sinners, and condemned them to the second circle of Hell. Perhaps Dante felt a personal connection with Francesca, but he disregarded this sentiment, because philosophy told him where she belonged. His moral theory could, however, be challenged on purely philosophical grounds. At the most general level, we could object to his habit of judging each person by one deed that reflects his or her eternal character and that is punished retributively in Hell. Again, Dante's inspiration may be Aquinas, according to whom we develop dispositions (*costume*, in Italian) that incline us toward particular actions. In turn, all of our acts either reinforce or undermine our existing dispositions, so that our characters develop. In the mature behavior of each soul, Dante finds evidence of its *costume*.

Francesca professes an alternative philosophy. She never uses the word "adultery," but explains that her story is one of *love*, which "soon takes hold in the gentle heart" (*Inf.* v, 100).[3] If sensitive people naturally and easily fall in love, then their behavior is excusable. Paolo, for example, could not resist Almighty Love once he beheld Francesca's *bella persona*. She argues, further, that "Love excuses none who're loved from loving" (*Inf.* v, 103). So Francesca's requital is no more voluntary than Paolo's desire: it is an equal and opposite reaction. Francesca thus deduces a moral principle (love is beyond criticism) from a theory about reality (love is omnipotent and natural). Applied to her own case, her philosophy serves as a defense. But it contradicts Christian doctrine, according to which the soul is free to fall and the only irresistible power belongs to *God's* Love, "which moves the sun and all the other stars" (*Par.* xxxiii, 145). For the sake of argument, let's assume that this Christian moral theory is right. Francesca's story, as it is told by the chroniclers and early commentators on Dante, is a clear instance of adultery; and adultery is a voluntary act of immoral love. On that ground, Dante, the author of the *Divine Comedy*, assigns the couple to Hell.

But Dante-the-character has a different reaction: he topples headfirst and faints from pity. Not only does he feel compassion for the two wind-blown spirits, but perhaps he realizes that God condemns his pity. His moral reaction clashes with the order of the universe. Although Francesca's case is an example of sin, presumably we are expected to pity her, as Dante does, because of the details that he sees and hears.

Francesca is first described as resembling a mother dove—a sweet image that predisposes us to like her. When she speaks, she appeals to Dante's "courtesy and compassion," thus requesting the same from us. Anyone who turns a deaf ear to her story is not like Dante: a "gracious and benevolent creature." After this *captatio benevolentiae*, she describes her fate: she has been abandoned by the Lord of all Creation (not a gracious creature, apparently), and sentenced to a place where noxious purple air drowns out all conversation. If we imagine ourselves in the same condition—forever—we instinctively rebel against the injustice.

Francesca says that she has been cursed because her actions stained the world with blood. She thereby takes some responsibility for her sins; but far from making us distrust her, this confession suggests that she has repented. It's also an allusion to the story of Pyramus and Thisbe from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[4] If Francesca is like the hapless, naïve Thisbe, then she is to be pitied, not blamed. The allusion, then, is an efficient rhetorical device that may persuade us to feel favorable emotions, just as Dante's dove simile encouraged us to think tenderly of Francesca. By the end of the canto, she has also alluded to Ovid's *Ars amatoria*, Boethius's *Consolation*, the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, the Old French *Lancelot du lac*, Andreas Capellanus, Guido Guinizelli, Dante's own lyric poetry, and possibly Guido Novello. This habit reveals something about her character: she's not an abstract example of "sinner," but a concrete human being with a passionate interest in love poetry.

Only now do we learn that Paolo fell in love first, compelled by the potent combination of his "gentle heart" and Francesca's "fair body." And then, she says, love "seized me for his charm" (*Inf.* v, 104–105). Francesca's sin was minor, practically chaste, and the immediate cause seems innocent enough: she was carried away while reading the *Romance of Lancelot* with the charming Paolo. Dante too was the author of love poetry—specifically, poetry about forbidden love—so how could he *not* pity someone whose fault was to be moved by a romance?

It seems, then, that the message of Francesca's story conflicts with the conclusions of philosophy. Even if we employed a different philosophical theory, one that exonerated Paolo and Francesca, there are surely some stories with which this theory would conflict. In such cases, we must decide whether to listen to philosophy or to literature, to theories or to stories.

II

I should first concede that it's impossible to distinguish between philosophy and literature in general terms, given the enormous diversity within both disciplines over three thousand years. There have even been self-conscious efforts at synthesis, from Plato's dialogues to Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works and Thomas Mann's novels. Dante's son introduced him as "phylosofo poeta Dante Alighieri," and many subsequent critics have seen him as either a philosophical poet or as a poetic philosopher. I will return to the question of synthesis later, but for now it will be illuminating to pose a stark alternative. Certainly, Dante was aware of the firm distinction between philosophy and poetry that both Augustine and Aquinas stressed.[5] According to their (ultimately Platonic) theory, poems show what their narrators see from where they stand, and how it makes them feel. Poets imitate or invent concrete, particular objects, representing them either accurately or with deliberate distortion, using rhetorical devices such as metaphor, allusion, irony, and hyperbole both to describe and to stimulate emotions. Philosophers, on the other hand, seek the underlying structure of the universe, its laws and principles. Philosophy thus exemplifies reason, with its abstract, objective rules and its dispassionate, third-person style. Hell, says Dante, is for those who "place reason below desire" (*Inf.* v, 39). Therefore, it is a sin is to favor poetry over philosophy.

Socrates bans the poets from the ideal state because their work can incite morally inappropriate emotions. Above all, tragic poems can make the world look sorrowful. They often suggest that some situations have no rational solution or meaning and that only pity or fear is appropriate. But Socrates argues that there *is* a rational solution to every moral dilemma. No matter how awful a situation might be, if we respond rationally by choosing the best available option, then we have nothing to be upset about (*Republic* x, 604b–d). Beatrice adopts the same view in Dante's Paradise (*Par.* iv, 103–108).

If Dante considered tragedies while he was writing his own *Commedia*, he might have thought of Tristan and Yseult. In fact, Tristan blows in the same infernal storm that buffets Francesca. According to the Romance, he and Yseult fell in love because of a potion that they tasted in error. Their irresistible, mutual passion clashed with Yseult's marriage vows and Tristan's feudal oaths. This conflict could only be resolved by their simultaneous and voluptuous expiration. The cause of their sin was bad luck, and death was the only solution—a common tragic formula. In Francesca's case, another Arthurian romance is the potion that engenders adultery and death. So literature evidently has the potential to be a poison.

Dante heightens his critique by daring to imagine what tragic lovers would experience beyond the grave. Whereas Tristan and Yseult clung together for a few moments in death's embrace, Paolo and Francesca "will never be parted." They are for ever panting, and for ever young. By making their death scene infinitely long, Dante heightens the pathos—pushes it to such an extreme, in fact, that he deflates the whole romantic-love tradition. In romantic verse, lovers commonly yearn for perfect union, just as religious mystics sometimes strive to lose their separate identities altogether and merge with God. Since actual union is impossible on earth, the Tristan myth and similar stories suggest that death alone can bring lovers together.[6] But for orthodox Christians, love is always an ethical relationship among distinct souls. Even in heaven, the saved retain their identities as their relationships with God become perfect. Dante indicates what ideal love is like when he explains how his Lady, Beatrice, would treat him in Purgatory. Far from merging her soul with his in ecstasy, she chides him for his sins—thereby showing concern for his specific history and the future of his soul (hers is already saved).[7] Meanwhile, down in Hell, Paolo and

Francesca must remain separate characters for all eternity, but their punishment for having wanted to merge is to be permanently coupled. Dante suggests that death is not a satisfactory resolution to the pathos of romantic love, so it's better to do what reason and morality demand. There would be no tragedy, only the happy-ending of salvation, if people would avoid sin in the first place. And this is always possible for rational agents.

Literature clashes with philosophy whenever it depicts inappropriate pathos—a serious danger, since skilful storytellers can make us sympathize with almost anyone. Poets and novelists also differ from most philosophers in their attitude toward metaphors, similes, and symbols that are not literally true. Aquinas writes, "To go forward with various similes and representations is proper to poetry, which is the feeblest of all disciplines. Thus to use similes is not suited to [theology]." According to Aquinas, only God has license to write metaphorically, as He does in Scripture (*Summa theol.* I, i, ix.). Dante uses literary tropes, but with an important qualification that aligns him with Aquinas. "It would," he writes, "be a great embarrassment if someone wrote a poem and placed something under the cover of a figure or a rhetorical coloring, and then, when asked, didn't know how to strip his words of this cover so as to reveal the intended truth."[8] Apparently, each rhetorical figure points to a meaning that could be stated in plain words. If this is true, then metaphors (which are half-lies) are illegitimate unless their moral or spiritual meaning is both true and obvious.

But what about the *Divine Comedy*, a concrete story that is not literally true, and that is full of pathos? No one can read the accounts of human beings under eternal torture without feeling some sympathy for the damned and some anger at the God who contrived this Hell. Such pity fills Dante's eyes with intoxicating tears and forces him to block his ears; it pains him even in recollection; and it tempts him to write without moral restraint (*Inf.* xxix, 44; xvi, 12; xxvi, 19). But all this is quite immoral. Hell was made by the "divine authority, highest wisdom, and first love" (*Inf.* iii, 5–6). As Virgil asks, "Who can be more nefarious than he who brings compassion to bear on God's judgment?" (*Inf.* xx, 29–30).

Dante learns better as he ascends toward heaven; his language grows less vivid and concrete as his subjects become more virtuous. He's on the right track in Purgatory, where he "consoles himself" at the sight of God's "*just* punishment," and tells his readers, "I do not want you to stray from your good purpose when you hear how God requires debts to be paid; attend not to the form of correction, but to the outcome"

(*Purg.* xxi, 6; x, 106–110). Already, the narrative dwells less on sinners' emotions than on general questions, such as the taxonomy of sin and the relationship between freedom and evil. By the time Dante reaches *Paradiso,* the poem is largely an excuse for theological treatises by dead saints.

Finally, at the highest point in Heaven, Dante beholds Divine Love itself. What he sees is a metaphysical theory articulated in the vocabulary of scholastic philosophy, although it is paradoxical and beyond the power of human minds to grasp:

> In that profundity I saw confined,
> sewn with love into a book's cohesion
> that which in the universe is unbound:
> substances, accidents, their disposition—
> all but combined in such a way
> that what I say gives scant illumination.
> (*Par.* xxxiii, 85–90)

Augustine, Aquinas, and other medieval authorities had warned about the dangers of metaphor. But Dante's description of the universe as a book justifies his own poetry. Viewed from Paradise, all of the concrete, emotional details that he has seen are mere parts of a divine whole that exceeds human reason or speech. This is true, for example, of Francesca da Rimini, whose disposition (*costume*) was that of a romantic lover. She should not be pitied as an individual, but viewed as a necessary component of a perfect totality.

The whole *Comedy,* then, is a journey from literature to philosophy, from emotion to reason, from metaphor to abstract language, from concrete instance to general rule, from fictional memoir to speculative theology, from perspective to the thing-in-itself. If Dante has synthesized narrative and philosophy, it is by telling a story about overcoming all stories.

III

I have argued that Dante equates reason with philosophy, and desire with poetry, and consequently he condemns his own pity for Francesca. We readers should ignore all the pretty similes and the language about "gentle hearts," "sweet sighing," and "deep passion." The text is a moral test. We will pass if we feel no pity except when reason tells us that someone deserves it. Francesca, having committed a mortal sin, is fit for punishment, not for sympathy.

It is possible to adopt exactly the opposite position, preferring personal emotion over dispassionate reason, narrative over theory, and particular cases over abstract generalizations. Longfellow baldly stated the Romantics' preference: "It is the heart, and not the brain / That to the highest doth attain." The story of Paolo and Francesca became very popular in Longfellow's century, because the Romantics sympathized with the doomed lovers. Keats dreamt that *he* had kissed Francesca, and when he awoke, he turned his dream into a sonnet: "Pale were the lips I kiss'd, and fair the form / I floated with, about that melancholy storm." The Romantics deliberately ignored the overall lesson of the *Divine Comedy*—that it is sinful to allow desire to prevail over reason. "O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!" Keats wrote.[9]

Like Dante, I think that our moral judgments should be rational. We shouldn't assess people *as we want to,* but should look for reasons and explanations for every judgment. Our emotions can obviously be improper, whereas our reasons can be tested, considered, debated with other people, and thereby improved. So it is wrong to make reason a slave of the passions.

But I don't agree that philosophy is necessarily more reasonable than literature. Why should we rely only upon thought that happens to be abstract, general, and theoretical? Consider Francesca's greeting:

> O gracious and benevolent creature,
> moving through mulberry air to visit
> us, who dyed the world a bloody color,
> if we had a friend in the universe's lord
> we'd pray to him to grant you peace,
> since you took pity on our bitter plight.
> (*Inf.* v, 88–93)

Here she uses several logical connectives to link concrete images, references, and ideas into a single sentence whose deliberate purpose is to move us. This is surely evidence of a rational intellect. Like her, we can tell stories or use metaphors with good sense—or we can apply general rules in a completely irrational way. For example, just when King Lear is losing his mind, he starts to make broad philosophical pronouncements: "Man's life's as cheap as beast's," and so on (II.iv.271).

Moral philosophy aims to tell us in advance what facts are going to be morally relevant in any case that we may encounter. Benthamite utilitarians advise us to concentrate on only one fact in all cases: the net change in happiness. But philosophers need not be monomaniacs like Bentham. Aquinas wrote thousands of pages, carefully distinguishing the virtues, vices, sins, sacraments, meritorious acts, and other categories that could be relevant in select circumstances. Nevertheless, he sought a finite list of moral concepts.

If such concepts were clearly defined, and each one ruled a separate territory, then we could solve any ethical problem by correctly analyzing the case at hand and applying the appropriate concept. Given the morally relevant facts of her case, Francesca's story would either be an example of "adultery" or an instance of "love." Or both words might apply, but one would outrank the other. I don't believe, however, that most moral terms are clearly defined.[10] "Love" is hopelessly vague and polysemous. As for "adultery," we can understand it in one of two ways. First, it can mean "sexual relations outside of an existing marriage." Then the word will deserve a negative ring, because we will often use it along with other pejorative terms: "betrayal," "egoism," "hurt," "deceit." However, alternative vocabulary, such as "love," "liberation," or even "duty," might be more appropriate under specific circumstances. Twelfth- and thirteenth-century theologians noted that God sometimes commands or excuses particular instances of sexual infidelity, as He did in the cases of Reuben, Gideon, and other righteous Israelites. Perhaps, then, the prohibition on adultery is a rule-of-thumb generalization, derived from the majority of concrete stories about infidelity, and not a categorical principle.

The scholastics adopted a different approach, however. They argued that "adultery" meant *unjustified* sex out of wedlock. Thus, even though the Ten Commandments forbade adultery *secundum se*, some cases of extramarital sex could be excused.[11] If we follow this second route, then we can declare adultery (and murder, lying, theft, and other sins) to be wrong in all cases, but we will have achieved this result by using the words only when the acts are unjustified. We will possess a moral theory composed of prohibitions, but their definitions will be circular. Kant reasons much the same way when, following scholastic practice, he distinguishes between a "lie" (*mendacium*), which always violates moral law, and a mere "untruth" (*falsiloquium*), which is permissible.[12]

No matter which of these approaches we take to defining "adultery," we must admit that philosophy gives us little guidance. By reading the Bible or by applying the Categorical Imperative, we can discover that adultery, lying, and murder are wrong intrinsically. But we cannot tell which acts are murders instead of homicides, or lies instead of untruths, or cases of adultery instead of examples of love, pity, freedom or happiness. So there is no escaping our responsibility to make concrete judgments of particular cases. We make such judgments by devising detailed, perceptive stories, metaphors, and analogies that show us what considerations are salient, and what moral words we ought to use to describe the events in question. To be sure, more than one story can be told about most situations. Indeed, several stories *should* be told, and then we must deliberate. This requires weighing narratives, considering their perceptiveness, accuracy, completeness, consistency, impartiality, and other values that we are accustomed to citing when we evaluate literature. The results, unfortunately, are rarely certain. But certainty is purchased only at the price of simplification.

Philosophy asks us to apply general rules, and in the process we may forget details that are morally relevant. So, for example, if we define Francesca's behavior as "adultery," we lose sight of the unusual circumstances, such as the fact that she was murdered before she could repent. And even if she was guilty of adultery, that's not *all* that we could say about her. She was unfaithful, perhaps, but also spirited, passionate, tender. Philosophy can make us too quick to judge (or to excuse)—too apt to reduce complex individuals to simple formulas.[13]

Still, if philosophy presents moral dangers, aren't there also risks inherent in story-telling? There are many, including the possibility that any narrative may be too ambiguous to guide action, may be misunderstood by careless readers, or may deliberately advance pernicious doctrines. Even if fiction teaches us empathy for concrete characters, this is not necessarily a moral advantage, because sadists as much as saints want to know how other people think.[14] But philosophy has also failed to make its adepts into good people, and has taught immoral doctrines. Aristotle condoned slavery, gentle Hume was a racist, and Heidegger was beneath contempt. Nor are philosophical arguments so clear that everyone must interpret them alike. It seems, then, that no mental discipline will guarantee moral results. At best, literature helps us to understand the interior life of concrete fictional characters, thereby cultivating an interpretive and empathetic skill that is useful if we want to act sensitively in our own lives. This skill will prove equally useful if we choose to act cruelly, playing on the weaknesses of our fellow human beings. Still, when people behave viciously, it is sometimes because of a philosophical or theological doctrine.

The best solution, then, is not to replace stories with theories, but to build fair procedures of judgment. In law courts, for example, we allow both sides to call and question witnesses; we exclude interested parties from juries; and we separate the roles of judge, juror, and counselor. Similarly, in moral discussions, we can strive to make the procedures fair and rational, so that many perspectives can be considered without prejudice. One of our goals should be to identify the best stories and interpretations, and here Dante has useful advice.

IV

Francesca is depicted as a person who thinks almost entirely in the terms of romantic literature. Practically every word she says is quoted from the popular fiction of her day, whether the *dolce stil nuovo* of Dante and Guido Guinizelli, or such French prose romances as *Lancelot du lac.* Given the popularity of these works, Francesca is like a modern person who speaks entirely in lines borrowed from top-forty songs.

In other words, she speaks in clichés. Clichés are generally seen as the opposite of good writing—as an aesthetic failing—but Hannah Arendt has described their power to produce (or to excuse) true evil. On trial in Jerusalem, Adolf Eichmann remarked that the Holocaust was "One of the greatest crimes in the history of humanity."[15] He also said that he wanted "to make peace with his former enemies" and that he "would gladly hang [himself] in public as a warning example for all anti-Semites on this earth." Arendt writes that these remarks were "self-fabricated stock phrases" popular among Germans after 1945. They were as "devoid of reality as those [official Nazi] clichés by which the people had lived for twelve years; and you could almost see what an 'extraordinary sense of elation' it gave to the speaker the moment [each one] popped out of his mouth. His mind was filled to the brim with such sentences" (p. 53). In fact, she writes, "he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché" (p. 48).

When Eichmann told a "hard-luck story" of slow advancement within the SS, he apparently expected his Israeli police interrogator to show "normal, human" sympathy for him (p. 50). Similarly, when he visited a Jewish acquaintance named Storfer in Auschwitz, he recalled: "We had a normal, human encounter. He told me of his grief and sorrow: I said: 'Well, my dear old friend, we [!] certainly got it! What rotten luck!'" He arranged relatively easy work for Storfer—sweeping gravel paths—and then asked:

> "'Will that be all right, Mr. Storfer? Will that suit you?' Whereupon he was very pleased, and we shook hands, and then he was given the broom and sat down on his bench. It was a great inner joy to me that I could at least see the man with whom I had worked for so many long years, and that we could speak with one another." Six weeks after this normal, human encounter, Storfer was dead—not gassed, apparently, but shot. (p. 51)

If Arendt is to be believed, Eichmann's total reliance on clichés permitted him to ignore the smoke from the Auschwitz ovens and to believe that Storfer was "very pleased." Eichmann's "inability to think," she writes, was an "inability to look at anything from the other fellow's point of view" (pp. 48–49). Since the circumstances were extraordinary, we shouldn't immediately conclude from this example that clichés are pernicious. It's one thing to rely on stock phrases when you're in love, and quite another thing when you're the logistical mastermind of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, there is always a *risk* that clichés will prevent us from exercising judgment and seeing the details of the world around us. Banal stories can be at least as harmful as philosophical generalizations. And even *Hamlet* or the Gospels can be misread as treasuries of cliché.

Consider Francesca. She is not in love with Paolo, for she hardly knows him. Her speech to Dante tells us nothing about his character except that he has a gentle heart (a medieval commonplace) and that he is attracted to her. She doesn't even utter his name. She thinks she's in love with Paolo because she has been soaked in the platitudes of romantic poetry. She's really in love with the *idea* of a courtly suitor, not with the actual human being who's reading poetry with her. It's not his character that makes her love him, but the book that they're reading together. In her mind, Paolo becomes Sir Lancelot, and she become Guinivere.

Love ought to be a bond between two whole human beings. This requires some mutual knowledge of the other's thoughts, plans, and values, without which we cannot act sensitively. It is not an automatic "fit" between people, as in the case of Pyramus and Thisbe, nor an accident, like the potion-induced passion of Tristan and Yseult, but rather something that we create through effort and adjustment. When people are attracted only physically, we call it "lust"—the sin that is punished in the second circle of Dante's Hell. I'm suggesting that, far from loving Paolo, Francesca feels for him a kind of lust. It's not his body that attracts her, but his superficial resemblance to characters from romantic fiction.

To say that love ought to be a bond between whole persons is to propose a normative definition. I am not claiming that such love generally produces better results, but that it *is* better—more admirable. This is a philosophical theory. But it will mean nothing to people who don't already know what a loving relationship is. We gain that kind of knowledge from narratives, both real and fictional, and not from abstract arguments. Furthermore, one can freely doubt a philosophical opinion. But well-told, concrete stories are highly persuasive.

Francesca has read a great deal, including many excellent works that she can quote at will. Thus, if literature can help make readers morally sensitive, we would expect Francesca to be a fine person. Unfortunately, she has *misread* every literary work that she cites, and her poor interpretations reflect badly on her character.

Take the passage from *Lancelot du lac* that she blames for her fall. In the *Roman*, Lancelot is so nervous that he becomes mute and almost faints. Meanwhile, his friend Gallehaut engages in a long, coy colloquy with Guinivere. The actual kiss is studied and awkward: Gallehaut shields Guinivere and Lancelot so that the Lady of Malahaut won't see them, but she does. In the known versions of the *Roman*, Lancelot is bashful and passive to the point of foolishness, and the Queen makes all the advances.[16] But Francesca recites the text as she remembers it—"the desired smile then was kissed by the ardent lover (*da cotanto amante*)"—thereby making the initiator clearly male. Barbara Vinken argues, "Francesca must have kissed Paolo and is trying, through false citation, to obliterate her initiative."[17]

We cannot be sure of this, because we don't know how Dante imagined the original scene (if indeed he had anything precise in mind). But Francesca certainly seems unwilling to read the romance correctly. At least in recollection, she confuses it with other episodes from the courtly-love tradition, such as the one in which Tristan kisses Yseult while they play chess together. The details of the Lancelot story fade in her mind, to be replaced with a generic formula: damsel taken by ardent knight. Perhaps this is because she wants to shift the blame from Guinivere to Lancelot. Or perhaps it is because she reads literature as a set of clichés.

Part of the definition of a cliché is that it is portable and recyclable—a ready-made sentiment that shows up in many contexts. When we read a text as a series of clichés, we often commit what Alfred North Whitehead called the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness."[18] This is the fallacy of taking something specific that belongs in one context and applying it elsewhere. It is particularly easy to commit this error when a text contains conventional sentiments and scenarios, or when we misread it that way. Francesca treats the love scene between Lancelot and Guinivere as a cliché, suppressing the peculiarities of that rather odd episode so that it can justify her own behavior.

Strangely enough, Lancelot also commits the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. Before the momentous kiss, Guinivere asks him what originally caused his love. (Dante asks Francesca the same question at *Inf.* v, 118–120.) Lancelot recalls the moment when he left Arthur's court: "I said, 'Adieu, lady.' And you said, 'Adieu, sweet handsome friend [*amis*].' Never after that did courage forsake me. . . . These words comforted me in all my anguish, these words protected me from my evils and guarded me in all perils; these words satisfied all my doubts; these words made me rich in all my great poverty."[19] The Queen replies that she's glad about the results, but actually she didn't mean anything serious. She just uttered a conventional parting to a young knight who was leaving on a mission for her husband. But Lancelot understood *amis* to mean "*amante*," or lover (which is one of its senses). Like Francesca, he believed himself loved, and so loved in return. He thereby transformed an utter commonplace into a specific expression of passion for himself. Francesca does roughly the opposite. She transforms a rather idiosyncratic scene into a paradigm of courtly love, and then uses it to give her own adultery an aura of romance.

When Francesca quotes one of Dante's own sonnets to him in Hell, she chooses a poem that he wrote as a young man and then included in his *Vita nuova*. This book has traditionally been seen as an anthology of excellent verse and a serious autobiography. Following Mark Musa, however, I see it as a critique of the author's own youthful love poetry. Francesca overlooks Dante's self-criticism, and thereby proves herself to be a careless reader of poetry. Indeed, she selects the very poem that Dante thinks is his worst.

On the first page of the *Vita nuova*, Dante's narrator calls Beatrice "the glorious woman of my mind" (*VN*, ii). This phrase aptly describes the subject of his poems, because he does not come to know Beatrice's real character or her desires. Instead, he becomes love-sick, swooning at her distant sight, and asking his friends for a definition of the mighty force, Love, that has appeared to him in allegorical visions. As if to indicate his own solipsism, he offers no descriptions of places, physical objects, clothes, or people other than himself.[20]

When he encounters Beatrice again in *The Divine Comedy*, she says insistently: "Look well! I am, I am Beatrice" (*Purg.* xxx, 73). In the Italian text—*"Guardaci ben! Ben son, ben son Beatrice"*—she repeats the word *ben* three times (meaning "well" and then "I am"). She thereby emphasizes Dante's moral obligation: he must see her as she is. This is just what he fails to do in the *Vita nuova.* He resolves to devote all his verse to praising Beatrice, but there isn't much he can say about a person whom he doesn't know. Consider, for instance, the sonnet that Francesca cites when she meets its author in Hell:

> Love and the gentle heart are one
> As the sage in his *canzon* writes;
> Who dares to be either thing alone
> Is like a soul that reason quits.
>   Nature makes them when amorous:
> Love the master and the heart as home,
> In which the lord when latent sleeps
> For the longest season or the briefest term.
>   Then beauty arrives in wise woman's form
> That pleases the eyes until in the heart
> A desire for the pleasing thing is born,
>   Which fixes there so firmly that
> A loving spirit is aroused.
> And ladies alike to worthy men respond.
>
> (*Vita Nuova,* xx)

Francesca presumably admires this poem because its doctrine supports her case: love is inevitable between gentle hearts. Musa, however, finds it "weakly imitative"—its staleness "unmitigated," its lack of inspiration "obvious," and its last line "sheer bathos."[21] Dante says that this is one of his praise-poems, but he has neither found anything concrete to say about Beatrice, nor has he discovered an allegorical language that can explicate Christian doctrine. Instead, he has offered platitudes from the profane Courtly Love tradition. At the end of the *Vita nuova,* Dante seems to realize that his story has been an ethical and aesthetic failure. Like Francesca, he has loved without reason. The fact that she quotes from his weakest poem shows that she has not absorbed the critical message of the *Vita nuova.*

Faced with failure, Dante has a choice. First, he could renounce the effort to praise Beatrice's beauty as an aspect of her personality or her body; it could "become spiritual" and "spread the light of love across the sky" (*VN,* xxxiii). In other words, Dante could allegorize Beatrice, making her symbolize some general truth. He ends the *Vita nuova* with an account of a "miraculous vision": Beatrice appears transfigured and speaks words that Dante cannot grasp (xlii, xvli). Most commentators think that this vision is spelled out in the *Divine Comedy,* where Beatrice is Dante's guide to theological wisdom.

But another course is open to Dante: to write about someone in particular. His subject could be the dead Beatrice, a living person, a historical character, a figment of his imagination, or himself. But he would have to use reason to describe this person well. The necessary type of reason would not comprehend general truths; it would understand individuals in their specificity. And no one could do that better than the perceptive, inventive, compassionate, judgmental, humorous, earthy author of the *Inferno.*

It seems, then, that there are two explanations for Dante's decision to damn Paolo and Francesca. Perhaps he was thinking like a philosopher, suspicious of passion and of narrative. His abstract reason told him that Francesca was guilty, and he wanted to warn us that stories can mislead by making us sympathize with particular people who have violated general laws. But it's also possible that Dante was thinking like a great poet, one who saw literature's capacity to describe concrete individuals perceptively and revealingly. Literary descriptions encourage us to feel appropriate emotions, whether sympathy and fear or scorn and anger. We can thereby learn empathy and judgment, which are indispensable skills if we want to act morally. But if stories have value, they also have risks. Whereas philosophy can prevent us from thinking by giving us abstract laws to apply by rote, so bad fiction contains clichés and stereotypes that get in the way of thinking and judging accurately. In that case, the moral of Canto V is to use stories for moral guidance: but only *good* stories, well and carefully read.

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND, COLLEGE PARK

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1. Compare *Inf.* v, 135, *"che mai da me non fia diviso,"* and Guido Novello's Sonnet XII, line 13, *"che già da me non fia diviso."* This similarity, writes Eugenio Chiarini, "by itself seems to establish a very special rapport between the lord [of Ravenna] and the poet of Francesca" (Chiarini, "Ravenna" in the *Enciclopedia Dantesca* [Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1970–1973], vol. 4, p. 860).

2. See John F. Dedek, "Intrinsically Evil Acts: An Historical Study of the Mind of St. Thomas," *The Thomist* 43 (1979): 385–413.

3. I translate the *Divine Comedy* from the edition of Emilio Pasquini and Antonio Quaglio (Milan: Garzanti, 1987).

4. That Dante associates the story of Pyramus and Thisbe with the staining power of blood is clear from *Purg.* xxvii, 37–39, and *Purg.* xxxiii, 69.

5. See, e.g., *De doctrina christiana*, IV, 4–7; *Summa theol.* I, i, ix.

6. This is the theme of Denis de Rougement, *Love in the Western World*, trans. Montgomery Belgion (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

7. See Martha C. Nussbaum, "Beatrice's 'Dante': Loving the Individual?" *Apeiron* 26 (1993): 170–71.

8. Dante Alighieri, *Vita nuova* (*VN*), XXV, pp. 57–58, in *Vita nuova, rime*, edited by Fredi Chiappelli (Milan: Mursia, 1978).

9. Keats to Bailey, November 22, 1817, in Hyder Edward Rollins, ed., *The Letters of John Keats* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), vol. I, p. 185.

10. For a much fuller version of the following argument, see Peter Levine, *Living Without Philosophy: On Narrative, Rhetoric, and Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), chap. 1.

11. Dedek, pp. 408–9.

12. *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 229. For the scholastic background, see Dedek, p. 412.

13. On the dangers of quick judgment, see Aquinas's speech to Dante at *Paradiso* xiii, 112–42. In Paradise, this systematic theologian becomes a biographer of St. Francis.

14. For this and other arguments, see Richard A. Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism," PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE 21 (1997): 1–27.

15. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 1994), p. 22.

16. See Anna Hatcher and Mark Musa, "The Kiss: *Inferno* V and the Old French Prose *Lancelot*," *Comparative Literature* 20(1968): 97–109 and Barbara Vinken, "*Encore*: Francesca da Rimini; Rhetoric of Seduction—Seduction of Rhetoric," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 3(1988): 404.

17. Vinken, p. 405.

18. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Free Press, 1967), pp. 58–59.

19. I translate from H. Oskar Sommer, ed., *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances*, vol. 3, *Le Livre de Lancelot del lac* (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1910), part I, p. 261. (See p. 131 for the scene that Lancelot is recalling.)

20. Mark Musa, *Dante's Vita Nuova: A Translation and an Essay* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 100. Much of the following discussion relies on Musa.

21. Musa, p. 150.