

DANTE ALIGHIERI'S "AMOR, CH'A NULLO AMATO...": AN "EX NIHILO" ACCOUNT OF "A NULLO"

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ABSTRACT

In this brief technical note, we propose a different interpretation of the renewed verse of Dante Alighieri's "Hell": "Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona". We go through the hypothesis that "a nullo" might stand from the Latin "ex nihilo", which means "from nothingness", and discuss the philosophical and textual implications of this novel account.

KEYWORDS: Dante Alighieri; Paolo and Francesca; Hell; Canto V; cosmology; Scholastics.

The verse V, 104 of Dante Alighieri's "Hell" (Giacalone, 1982) is one of the most celebrated not just of the Divine Comedy, but also of the worldwide literature. However, its meaning is still controversial and highly debated. "Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona": the mainstream account points towards the following semantic meaning:

- 1) "Love, which spares none of the loved from loving in return".
- 2) Or "Love, which does not allow not to love back".
- 3) Or "Love, which, when one is loved, does not allow that it be refused".
- 4) Or, taking into account a freerer translation, the verse sounds like this: "if you love someone, that love will give back to you".

In the *Amor Cortese's* framework, summarized by Andrea Cappellano's "De Amore", love is a power which unescapably pushes men towards women and vice versa, so that it forces everyone who is loved to love in turn (Malato 2018). However, this classical reading does not sound logical: why do I have necessarily to love anyone who loves me? Even if we consider the theological issues of a God who loves its Creatures, in a neo-Plotinian reverberation and mirroring of Love among entities equipped with different levels of Being (Katz 1950), the claim "Love, which does not allow not to love back" is against the ordinary experience, in particular when it is referred to the everyday love affairs among human beings.

Therefore, we propose a novel interpretation, according to which the words "a nullo" are taken in the sense of the Latin "ex nihilo", i.e., "from nothing". In Dante's context, "ex nihilo" may stand for different meanings at diverse informative levels. In a more philosophical sense, Dante's "ex nihilo" might refer to the long-standing controversy about the God's Creation "ex nihilo", i.e., a God Who creates with no manipulation of pre-existing matter (Gilson 1955). The idea that "nothing comes from nothing", first appeared in Parmenides' Physics. In the following centuries, Creation ex nihilo became a typical Christian issue (see, e.g., Nemesius and Basilius (1990)) against the Platonic concept of the uncreated matter. During Medieval ages, the proposition "Ex nihilo, nil fit ("out of nothing, comes nothing") was used by Scholastic theologians in order to claim that the Universe needs God as its cause, because something cannot be created from Nothing (Duncan 2011). This account is strictly correlated with the theme of causality, tackled by the 1277's Condemnations. The latter provided a sharp critique of the account of God as the First Cause able to produce just the First Effects (Klima et al., 2007; Marmura 2000). In the Dante's context of the Canto V, "ab nihilo" could stand for "sine causa", in touch with the 1277 Condemnations of Averroes' and Aquinas' philosophy.

Therefore, in the Canto V, Love is described as a power issuing from nothing at all, "ab nihilo". As God is the First Cause who creates the world from nothing, in the same way Love is able to let people fall in love without recognizable causal

relationships and preexisting background. Love, at least in the case of the illegitimate passion that links Paolo and Francesca, arises from absolute ignorance. In this less metaphysical sense, because Alighieri is talking about the adulterous love between a male and a female, “from nothing” might stand for: “ignoring the rules, the canonical laws”. Indeed, at a social context’s level, Dante wants to condemn a love affair taking place out of the sacrament of wedding. Therefore, Love, in the framework of the Canto V, might correspond to the “for del dritto amore” mentioned in (Inf., XXX, 39), i.e., “love as a passion against (out) every rule of the legitimate Love”.

Summarizing, if we consider our account as holding true, or at least possible, the proper semantic meaning of the verse “Amor, ch’a nullo amato amar perdona” would be:

- 1) “Love, which forgives the loved to love from nothingness”.
- 2) Or “Love, which forgives who is loved to love back, against the laws”.
- 3) Or “Love, which allows who is loved to love, also against natural and human laws”.
- 4) Or, in a freerer translation, “The power of love holds also against the natural laws and order, and against God’s will.

Other feasible interpretations, also raising from the same “ex nihilo”’s account suggested by us, could be:

- 1) “Love, which allows, starting from nothing, an individual to love the loved one”.
- 2) Or “Love, which forgives to love from nothingness the loved”.
- 3) Or “Love, which absolves who loves the loved with no reason”.

In summary, a wide-ranging account of Dante’s verse could be: “Love is a strong, unreasonable power outside natural and human laws, which allows one to love another against all odds”.

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