

Amour Fou¹

There is a kind of general disease of thinking which always looks for (and finds) what would be called a mental state from which all our acts spring as if from a reservoir.

The *Brown Book*, II.6

Hundreds of years after the death of Dante Alighieri, what do his works have to do with our current Weltanschauung, our lifestyle, our literature? What direct relevance could he possibly have to modern life? These are questions that Leas Leof indirectly takes up and destroys in his latest novel, *Amour Fou*. Published in 2004, it is Leof's fourth novel and is best understood within two contexts: its place within Leof's body of work, and its relation to Dante. Without examining the tradition from which it springs, the novel is bound to come across as difficult and needlessly archaic. But at the same time as Leof uses Dante's *La Vita Nuova* as a springboard and a starting place, he, as narrator, ends up a radically different place *vis-à-vis* 'Love' when compared to Dante.

Over the course of his two-decade career, Leof has always been concerned, directly or obliquely, with the theme of transcendental love, and what it would mean to truly transform one's affection for another not only from the animal lust in which it so frequently has its origins into true love but also thence into an incorporeal, Platonic, divine love. His debut novel, *New Life*, was a straight-forward modern retelling of Dante's own *La Vita Nuova*, although Leof adds new complications; his Beatrice does not die, but moves away. The narrator must decide whether to pursue her or content himself with distant, idealizing, idolatrous praise, a decision made easy for Dante himself by the fact that Beatrice has actually perished. The novel fails because Leof's character woodenly makes the same decision, with no convincing motivation and no development in character throughout the latter stages of the work. But finally, in *Amour Fou*, Leof has fully addressed his recurring theme head-on in a satisfying manner. Through a thorough reexamination of his older material, his influences, and his concepts, Leof produces a compelling account of obsessive, mad, doomed, divine, but ultimately empty love.

Plotwise, Leof's novel is a curious admixture of *La Vita Nuova* and "Porphyria's Lover"; he carves out a world in which the characters dance about one another in a confused haze of misdirected actions,

¹ Leof, Leas. *Amour Fou*. Milan: Manutius, 2004. \$∞.

obscure motives, and unclear goals. But the story itself is rather simple. We are given a snapshot of the life of the novel's prime mover, Sarah Vel, the serene and beautiful daughter of Dr. Vel, a former academic and current owner of the Tabard pub, who is being wooed by three different men: Harry, Luke, and Gabriel. Each of the three men stands in a different relation to her, but she is unsure whether any of them truly love her. As she comes to learn and the reader knows, however, each one does, in his own way; Harry is an earthy sort of fellow, and his manner of courting Sarah is equally earthy. In one memorable scene, Harry decides it would be a splendid idea to

“...challenge you to a wrestling contest! Whoever wins,” he said, thumping his chest, “gets the girl.” Luke stared at him for a second before bursting into laughter, while another patron of the Tabard whispered to his neighbor that he doubted either of them was likely to get a girl any time soon.

It's never really clear whether we are to suppose that Harry differentiates Sarah from any other attractive woman, or if he really loves her. One is inclined to think, however, that he is mostly meant to be merely a slightly more ambiguous instance of the character archetype best represented by Stanley Kowalski from *Streetcar*. The Tabard's barista, Luke, on the other hand, is impatient and sarcastic, refusing to admit that he has any real affection for Sarah, but secretly yearning for her. At night, he pours out his passion in enigmatic epistles, declarations of devotion that are never to be sent, for he burns them upon waking. Finally, Gabriel is too shy to talk to Sarah, but he comes by the Tabard every day in the hope of catching sight of her. He, too, rechannels his emotional energy into writing. In his apartment he keeps a cardholder full of unfinished stories, poems with lines crossed out: scraps of ideas and fragments of dreams, records of the sweet pain which doth move his gentle heart.

The otherwise smooth and fairly predictable arc of the story is interrupted when the novel takes an abrupt and bizarre turn approximately two thirds of the way through: Sarah is murdered by Gabriel. The motivation with which we are presented is that, while he is sitting one day in the Tabard (perusing, perhaps, some pages of Browning), Sarah unexpectedly alights at Gabriel's table. After speaking with him – for one of the only times in the novel – for a few minutes, she moves off to talk to Luke. Gabriel is transfixed by the notion that he is as close to realizing his dream of romance with Sarah as he's ever likely to be. Like the narrator in Browning's "Porphyria's Lover," he strangles Sarah with her own hair when she wanders off into the restroom area.

The significance of this act is explored in the montage-like final third of the novel, in which the entirety of Gabriel's life flashes before our eyes. In the amoral world of a novel, authors are free to explore

the consequences of abhorrent actions without worrying about their immoral aspects, and Leof takes full advantage of this capacity.

It is in this final third that the book takes on the meditative qualities that make comparing it with *La Vita Nuova* so fruitful. The nature of the love which Dante bears for Beatrice begins in, we can assume, physical passion (setting aside his claim to have loved her at first sight when they were nine years of age). However much of a repressed view of it there might be in the *Vita Nuova*, we always have the sensual dream in section three: “In his arms it seemed to me that a person was sleeping, covered only with a blood-covered cloth. . .” However, Dante moves beyond this to distant adoration (the situation resembles that of Einstein’s “spukhafte Fernwirkung”) of Beatrice. Eventually his love essentially undergoes a transformation from the merely human to the divine, and, in his poems of adoration, Beatrice and Love become, in part, codewords for God.

In the same way, we are shown the evolution of the love in the life in Sarah Vel. However, it is not one man’s passion which is transformed. Rather, Leof’s narrative shows us how one can force one’s love upon another, how unwelcome love can be thrust upon one. Harry is a buffoon, but Luke is little better, and Gabriel is perhaps worse still. None of them are willing to face up to the true reality of the situation – Sarah is neither a sex object nor an idol – and so she is unable to come to grips with the nature of their feelings for her, even had she wished to return any of them. The diverse types of their love are used by Leof to illustrate the gaping gap between his own conception of what love ought to be and that espoused by Dante. Harry’s is rejected by her, but Luke’s is merely unknown to her. Gabriel, on the other hand, who loves only a vision of Sarah, an idealized portrait standing in for the divine, destroys the thing he loves.

In Dante’s work, conflating the object of love with the divine is seen as a good thing. In *La Vita Nuova*, it is only through doing so that Dante is able to come to peace with Beatrice’s denial of the salutation, her death, and so on, while in the *Divina Commedia*, it is the key to Dante’s trip through paradise. We move from the sonnet in part three of *La Vita Nuova*, in which Dante depicts the dream quoted from above, to the

But, Leof seems to conclude, to make love divine is to cheapen and destroy it. What is divine is necessarily eternal, but Gabriel discovers that he doesn’t really have anything left to adore after Sarah is dead:

Staring across the table at a bottle of whiskey. Pacing around his room. Pulling out those notecards – oh, those notecards, *pleine de poesie* – and watching them flutter to the floor like so many ashes. Endless days of nothing but regret.

In such ways Gabriel passed the months. He was the very figure of emptiness, unconsolated by his bountiful memories. One curious thought always occupied his

mind: that if he could speak to Sarah just once more, what he would say would be, “Shine like a mirror reflecting, like the sun shines – something that comes from above when all that remains falls below.” But the futility of even this image – that of Sarah shining eternally – struck him like a dead weight whenever it pressed to firmly upon his mind.

Love is something more than transcendent feeling, something which requires a tangible object, not only memories and ideas. Instead, Gabriel thinks that he will be able to wield his divine, Platonic love for Sarah as an apotropaic symbol with which he can ward off the troubles of the world, and that, by reducing Sarah to nothing more than such an idea, he will capture her true essence and encase it permanence. Leof shows how mistaken this view is; he reveals the hollowness of the timelessness achieved by “Porphyria’s Lover,” by Dante, and by Gabriel. Dante would, of course, not agree with his conclusions, but we should pay attention to the startlingly different ways in which Dante and Leof make use of the idea of divine love in their works.