

Journey to the Word  
Silence, Names, and Words in the *Commedia*

Modern times and the Middle Ages share a fundamental interest in signs, language, and discourse. Throughout the twentieth century, this interest has been the constant focus for such interrelated and diverse philosophical and critical trends as structuralism, formalism, semiotics, and postmodern investigations. Also during the Middle Ages, a major thread of coherence in its culture was the reflecting on language as a semiotic system: namely, on the nature, function, and limitations of the verbal sign as a mediator of human communication, understanding, and knowledge.

That the oeuvre of Italy's foremost medieval poet, Dante, especially *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, *Convivio*, and his masterpiece, the *Commedia*, has drawn the attention of contemporary scholars concerned with language is, therefore, inevitable. Among the last decade's many books dealing with Dante's language, the studies of Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo (*Linguistica e retorica di Dante* 1978), Ileana Pagani (*La teoria linguistica di Dante* 1982), and Maria Corti (*Dante a un nuovo crocevia* 1982) stand out most prominently.

In America, a few fundamental books and essays study Dante's concern with language through respecting its medieval context while also (and here lies their novelty) drawing upon the insights of modern critical trends. These are, among others, the studies of John Freccero (*Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*), R. A. Shoaf (*Dante, Chaucer, and the Currency of the Word*), Giuseppe Mazzotta (*Dante, Poet of the Desert*), and several others. Although these scholars develop diverse perspectives, they share a respect for traditional philology, joined by a modern critical sensitivity, with the purpose to show that medieval theories of language and the poets' responses to them are pertinent to the concerns of our own time.

It is precisely within this twofold context — namely, respect for tradition, history, and philology, and attention to modern trends — that I propose to read Dante's *Inferno* and several central moments of the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. I will thus explore Dante's manifold concern with the word and such interrelated concepts as names and silence. Absent at the beginning of the journey when the Pilgrim is alone, silent and lost, the word is present as a mental illumination at the journey's conclusion, when the Pilgrim is inwardly illumined by the vision of the Logos or *Verbum*.

Dino S. Cervigni, *Journey to the Word*

Chapter one: The Journey of the word

Analyzed by Singleton and Freccero from different perspectives, the Pilgrim's journey from Hell to Purgatory to Heaven can also be viewed in terms of what characterizes, or fails to characterize, the protagonist in *Inferno* 1, and what typifies the divinity in *Paradiso* 33. Speech is what distinguishes man, as we read in Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*; God, who in biblical and patristic writings is also called the Verbum (Jo. 1:1), is man's ultimate goal. The *Commedia*, therefore, can be read from the perspective of what characterizes man uniquely: namely, the word. Thus the *Commedia* is the story of the I-character, or the "word," who journeys toward the divinity, the Word or *Verbum*. The word and the *Verbum* mark, therefore, the beginning and the end of the *Commedia*. The Pilgrim's silent entrance into the text implies a peculiar absence, brought about by humankind's sin and the attendant confusion of languages; the Pilgrim's silence at the end of the *Commedia*, on the contrary, signifies the presence of the *Verbum*, who illumines the protagonist inwardly. At first this study deals with the I-character's journey to the Anti-word, that is, Lucifer. In the first four chapters I seek to show how Dante the Poet renders the infernal voyage through the masterful exploitation of voice and silence, proclamation of names or refusal to identify oneself, and the Pilgrim's and Virgil's deferral to the authority of a higher word, which alone can enable the Pilgrim to undertake and continue his journey in spite of all opposition.

Chapter 2: The Pilgrim's Fainting and Poetry's Silence

The journey of the word toward the *Verbum* encounters opposition throughout Hell. All the characters who oppose the Pilgrim can be seen as anti-words, and Lucifer, the arch-rival or Anti-Christ, is the Anti-word par excellence. All the encounters with the infernal guardians rest on a system of verbal signs and allusions, words and silence. The first testing of the Pilgrim (and the author) occurs in *Inferno* 3 along the river Acheron, which the Pilgrim crosses. And yet the text is silent about the manner of his crossing. Thus the text evidences a narrative pause, which distances the two wayfarers' arrival at the Acheron from the goal of the episode: namely, the Pilgrim's crossing of the river. Such a narrative distance produces a rupture between words and the action at which they aim. As in the episode of Lucifer, who never utters a word, the text's silence in *Inferno* 3 becomes the most effective manner to render the condition of the Pilgrim and the mystery that surrounds his entrance into the afterlife. The text's silence about the Pilgrim's crossing of the Acheron can therefore be seen as an illustration of the nature of Dante's

infernal poetry, which he calls “morta,” dead (*Purg.* 1:7). Just as Lucifer is condemned to eternal silence as a parody of his rebellion against the *Verbum*, so is the Pilgrim’s entrance into hell marked by his own and the text’s silence in order to suggest the precariousness of his condition and the peculiar nature of this form of poetry.

### Chapter 3: Virgil’s Discourse and the Human Word’s Self-deferring Nature

Virgil’s macro-discourse, which includes his addresses to Dante, the infernal guardians, the damned, and the purgatorians, bears out two essential characteristics: it never encounters the addressee’s total acquiescence, and, most importantly, it refers and defers, for the journey’s continuation and the instruction of the Pilgrim, to the power of a higher word. This self-deferring nature of the word characterizes not only Virgil, but also Beatrice and all other speakers of the *Commedia*. Thus, at the beginning of the story, the authority of Beatrice’s discourse in *Inferno* 2 is shifted from Beatrice herself to Lucia, then to the unnamed lady traditionally identified with Mary, and ultimately to the divinity, whose harsh judgment the unnamed lady shatters (*Inf.* 2:96). Similarly, at the end of the story, Beatrice gives the way to Bernard, Bernard intercedes with Mary for Dante, and Mary silently obtains to him the beatific vision. The conclusion of the *Commedia*, that is, the Pilgrim’s silent, inner illumination by the divinity, proposes Dante’s medieval conception of the deferring nature of the word, of understanding, and of rationality, which the author grounds in the divinity.

### Chapter 4: Lucifer or the Denial of the Word

Virgil’s proclamation of Lucifer in *Inferno* 34, “Behold Dis,” marks the mimetic rendition of who Lucifer is, while contrasting him to his primordial condition, which the name itself still signifies. Lucifer’s eternal punishment, namely, his eternal deprivation of the word, constitutes the most powerful disconfirmation of his primordial attempt against the *Verbum*. Although Lucifer is endowed with the physical ability to utter sounds and words, he is eternally prevented from doing so. Lucifer’s defeat and condemnation to silence are rendered most dramatically by his eternal damnation to a form of futile cannibalism, which he perpetrates on Brutus, Cassius, and Judas. Precisely because Lucifer at the beginning of time rebelled against God and against the Word, Lucifer now parodies the Word and is condemned to eternal silence.

Although the text describes Lucifer as deprived of the external word, the text refuses to respond to any query whether or not Lucifer is endowed with the mental word, that is, whether he understands or not. Therefore, in a manner analogous to God, Lucifer is also inscrutable and ultimately ineffable, albeit in a parodic manner and for opposite reasons. Whereas God's inscrutability and ineffability are essential attributes of the divinity, the Dantean Lucifer's imperviousness to any explanation as to his intelligence becomes the text's signal of his rebellious pride and futile attempt to usurp the word. Hence, the text's silence (another manifestation of the deadness of Dante's poetry in the *Inferno*) is the written word's only possibility to render Lucifer's innermost condition. Just as no human word can render God's inner life, likewise no human word can describe the inner life of the proudest rebel against the divinity.

#### Chapter 5: Beatrice's Act of Naming

Just as in the *Inferno*, so also throughout most of the second cantica the I-character journeys in a nameless condition: the narrator refers to him by means of pronouns and periphrases, silences his name when the damned and the purgatorians inquire about it, and has the souls who already know the protagonist refrain from uttering his name. Finally, in *Purgatorio* 30:55 Beatrice calls Dante by name for the first and only time. I argue that the absence and presence of Dante's name are a manifestation of his inner condition. In fact, throughout the Middle Ages a relationship exists between *grammatica* and ethics, between one's word and one's moral conduct, and obviously between the human being, who is characterized by speech, and the divinity, who is described as the Word. Consequently, Beatrice's first and unique calling of Dante by name must be associated with another unique experience at the beginning of his life, Dante's birth, baptism, and christening: namely, the beginning of an individual's life at the natural, spiritual, and semantic levels all at once. Beatrice's act of naming carries a "dogmatic value," as Spitzer suggested several decades ago. Thus Beatrice carries out a function analogous to that of Christ (Singleton) also in terms of language. The voice of Beatrice enables Dante to return to a redeemed state, which brings back to the I-character the name he was given at birth at the moment of baptism.

#### Conclusion: Toward the Dissolution of All Words as External Signs

Throughout the heavenly journey, Dante is known to all the saints through their reading in the "great volume" of God (*Par.* 15:50). Thus not only is his name known to all the blessed; it is also loved by them.

Dante's name, therefore, becomes synonymous with the Augustinian definition of *verbum*: namely, "cum amore notitia" ("knowledge with love" *De Trinitate* 9: 10.15). This knowledge with love renders totally unnecessary the proclamation of Dante's name, and anticipates the dissolution of all words as signs to be uttered externally. In God and through the *Verbum*, Dante is able to understand the divinity as fully as a creature can; by the same token, he is also able to understand himself and his name: an understanding and a mental utterance which are accomplished inwardly and silently. In the last moment of the story, the divinity communicates with Dante not through names and words as they are usually understood (consisting of two elements, a rational element, *verbum rationale*, and an externally perceptible element, *sensuale*) but rather through an inner illumination. Dante's and the text's silence at the end of the *Commedia* (contrary to what takes place at its beginning) proposes a totality, which the medieval author believes to be possible only through the presence of the divinity.

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