

Dino S. Cervigni

The Rhetoric of Words, Names, and Silence

The fundamental theme of the *Commedia* — voyage — can be viewed from a perspective that stems from the medieval theory of signs. In fact, the protagonist's journey from Hell to Purgatory to Heaven, analyzed by Singleton and Freccero, can also be viewed in terms of what characterizes or fails to characterize the wayfarer in *Inferno* 1, and what typifies the divinity in *Paradiso* 33. Speech is what distinguishes human beings, as we read in Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*; God, who in biblical and patristic writings is often called the *Verbum* (Jo. 1:1), is the protagonist's ultimate goal. The *Commedia*, therefore, can be read from the perspective of what characterizes human beings most uniquely: the *word* of the Pilgrim in his voyage to the divinity, who is the Word, *Logos*, or *Verbum*. The *word* and the *Verbum* mark, therefore, the beginning and the end of the *Commedia*.

Accordingly, the Pilgrim's silent entrance into the text (*Inf.* 1:1-63) implies a peculiar absence, brought about by humankind's sin and the attendant confusion of languages; the Pilgrim's silence in *Paradiso* 33, on the contrary, signifies the presence of the *Verbum*, who illumines the protagonist inwardly.

Within this general context of the *word's* voyage to the *Verbum*, my study focuses at first on the initial phase of this experience: the Pilgrim's journey to the Anti-word, that is, Lucifer. My analysis seeks 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 two wayfarers' 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.

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. Lucifer, the arch-rival or Anti-Christ, is, therefore, the Anti-word par excellence. All the encounters with the infernal guardians rest on a system of verbal signs and allusions, verbal presence and absence, words and silence. In such a system, not a single element exists without its counterpart. And yet, the two wayfarers' journey unfolds despite or because of the confrontation that invariably ensues between words and words, characters that are present in that specific utterance situation and characters that are absent at that given moment but present in the Dantean macrotext.

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 completely silent about the manner of his crossing. What the reader knows is that the crossing took place, although its manner is left mysterious. The reader also knows that the divinity's benevolence accompanies the two wayfarers, although its manner of intervention defies a facile interpretation. Thus the text evidences not a narrative pause but rather a narrative break, which distances the two wayfarers' arrival at the Acheron and Virgil's words to Charon from the goal of the episode: the Pilgrim's crossing of the river. Such a narrative break

produces a rupture between words or signifiers and the action and purpose at which they aim. Such a dichotomy is bridged neither by Virgil, nor the Pilgrim, nor Charon, but affects permanently the text, which, more than being mysterious, is silenced. The episode's resolution — namely, the Pilgrim's crossing of the Acheron — leaves such a silence intact, while transcending the text and calling for an appropriate interpretive strategy. As in the episode of Lucifer, who utters no word, the text's silence in *Inferno* 3 becomes Dante the narrator's most effective manner to render poetically the condition of the Pilgrim and the mystery that involves his entrance into the afterlife.

Virgil's macro-discourse with the infernal guardians, from Charon to Geryon, bears out some essential characteristics: most importantly for our purpose, it never encounters the addressee's total acquiescence, and it refers and defers, for the journey's continuation, to the power of a higher word. The self-deferring structure of the Virgilian macro-discourse is evidenced by Beatrice's discourse in *Inferno* 2, where her word's authority shifts from Beatrice herself to Lucia, then to the unnamed lady, the *donna gentile* (typically identified with Mary), and finally to the divinity, whose *harsh judgment* Mary shatters (*Inf.* 2:96). The journey's continuation repeats this pattern of deferrals inherent in Beatrice's discourse until such moments when Beatrice takes over Virgil's role (*Purg.* 30), Saint Bernard takes over Beatrice's (*Par.* 29), and Mary takes over Saint Bernard's (*Par.* 33). All roles defer and refer to Dante's ultimate, silent encounter with the divinity at the very end of *Paradiso* 33.

The Pilgrim is also enclosed within this self-deferring and other-referring context of Virgil's, Beatrice's, and Saint Bernard's discourse. What often characterizes him during the encounters with the infernal guardians is silence, which finds its correspondent in the inner state of fear, which often takes over his soul and at times overcomes him physically (end of *Inf.* 3 and 5). Thus silence and fear characterize the Pilgrim's condition in hell and reach a climax when he, deprived of both death and life, stands in front of Lucifer (*Inf.* 34:22-27). Silence and fear at first characterize the Pilgrim in front of Beatrice in *Purgatorio* 30 and 31, but then they disappear through Dante's tears and verbal confession of sin.

Virgil's proclamation of Lucifer in *Inferno* 34, "Ecco Dite" ("Behold Dis" 34:20), marks the mimetic rendition of who Lucifer is, while, at the same time, 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 he 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 is rendered most dramatically by his eternal damnation to a form of futile cannibalism. Lucifer's eternal cannibalistic act, which he perpetrates on Brutus, Cassius, and Judas, bears out his eternal inability to accede to the word and his antithetical condition to God's Word, who, having become flesh, offered his body as nourishment to his believers. 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.

3 Cervigni, *The Rhetoric of Words, Names, and Silence in Dante's Commedia*

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. Like 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 concerning his intelligence becomes the text's signal of his rebellious pride and futile attempt to usurp the word. The text, therefore, becomes silent about Lucifer's innermost condition, just as the same text provides a very elaborate description of his external appearance. Hence, the text's silence is the written word's only possibility to render Lucifer's innermost condition. Just as no human word can render God's inner life, so can no human word describe the inner life of the proudest rebel against the divinity.

From *Inferno* 1 to *Purgatorio* 30, the Pilgrim journeys in a nameless condition. His name is proclaimed for the first, and only time, in *Purgatorio* 30 by Beatrice, when she first appears to him. The Pilgrim's namelessness constitutes a form of absence from the text that is counterpointed by the presence of the Pilgrim as a character. The character's presence, however, is being disconfirmed throughout the infernal journey by his namelessness, a sign of his alienation from the *Verbum*, and by the negative nature of his infernal experience.

This disconfirming condition of the Pilgrim, whereby he lacks something that is essential to him as a character and a person, finds a resolution in his encounter with Beatrice, who calls him by name. Beatrice's proclamation marks the reading of the protagonist's name from the book that contains everything. Since the Pilgrim, as every creature, is called to salvation, his name is being read from the book of life. What is most peculiar about Beatrice's proclamation of the Pilgrim's name is that this name is, in fact, being recorded in another book: the *libro* of the *Commedia*. Thus, the text of the *Commedia* — "le carte" ("the pages" *Purg.* 33:139) of the "volume" that Dante the author is in the process of writing — places itself in direct relationship with the book of life where by necessity everybody's name is written. The *Commedia*, where Dante's name is also by necessity recorded (*Purg.* 30:63), becomes analogous to the book of life, where the names of all the elect are written. Nameless because of language's disruption brought about by sin, the Pilgrim is nevertheless called to undertake a journey in order to recover his spiritual life and, therefore, the name he first received at baptism. Thus the recovery of his name assumes a manifold significance: it constitutes the recovery of the Word of God and of the name every Christian receives at baptism with God's grace.

Dante thus undertakes the journey toward the contemplation of the *Verbum* in heaven, which requires a higher grace from the divinity, and a higher narrative craft from Dante the author. Throughout the heavenly journey, Dante is known to all the saints through their ability to read in the "great volume," God, as his ancestor Cacciaguida proclaims (*Par.* 15:50). Not only is his name known to all the blessed; his name, which stands for his whole person, is also loved by them. Dante's name, therefore, becomes synonymous with the Augustinian description of *verbum*: "cum amore notitia" ("knowledge with love" *De Trinitate* IX, X, 15). Insofar as Dante's name is known and

loved, this knowledge with love renders totally unnecessary the proclamation of his name by the saints.

Nor does Dante ever need to express *verbally* or *outwardly* his own name in heaven. In fact, during his heavenly journey, he attains understanding (*notitia*) and love (*cum amore*) of the self, namely, of what his name signifies. Such understanding with love can be accomplished only through God and His *Verbum*; and it takes place when the Pilgrim, at the climax of his vision, sees everything in God as it were in a *volume* (*Par.* 33:86), when his mind is struck by a lightning and his will reaches total satisfaction. In God and through the *Verbum*, he 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, in its totality: an understanding and a mental utterance, which are accomplished inwardly and silently.

Beatrice's first and only proclamation of Dante's name occurs outwardly, through a *vox exterior* or *vox corporis* (cf. *De Trinitate* XV, XI, 20). Equaling the condition of the blessed, who have no need to pronounce outwardly his name, the Pilgrim utters inwardly, in silence, his own name when he comes to the full understanding and love of himself, thereby coming as close as humanly possible to the divinity. This unspoken word, which is immanent in the soul, relates to the Word of God, to which man's word must also conform as much as it is humanly possible (*De Trinitate* XV, XI 21).

The Pilgrim enters the text as a nameless and silent character in *Inferno* 1. He re-acquires his name when Beatrice addresses him in *Purgatorio* 30 through a word spoken outwardly and through sounds. The ultimate word, spoken in heaven, is inward and silent, thus approaching God's *Verbum*: the word uttered in eternal silence ("aeterno in silentio *verbum tuum*" "your word in eternal silence" *Confessiones* 11:6.1).

In brief, Dante's poetic strategy encompasses all the possible forms of human discourse: from silence in *Inferno* 1 to silence in *Paradiso* 33: a rhetoric of words, names, and silence.

The presence of the I-character in the three kingdoms of the afterlife, Virgil's mission, and Beatrice's function in Dante's experience: all these elements are grounded in a system of referentiality, which enables each one of them to achieve its intended goal. Accordingly, Virgil is empowered to lead Dante out of the dark forest up to the purgatorial mountaintop; Beatrice to help Dante ascend to the Empyrean; and finally he, Dante, is granted the vision of the divinity by virtue of this system of referentiality: namely, words and actions that *refer* to the divinity, who is present everywhere (*Par.* 1) and whom Dante sees at the end of his journey in *Paradiso* 33.

This system of referentiality entails a language process whereby the threefold macro-discourse carried out within the *Commedia* (by Virgil, Dante, and Beatrice respectively) grounds and justifies itself less by virtue of its own intrinsic strength than by virtue of its constant tension outside itself and to the "Other." The issue, therefore, focuses on the nature of the referent of the three principal characters' macro-discourse and is at once linguistic, epistemological, teleological, and theological. Thus, the extent to which the supreme experience of the I-character and of the blessed constitutes the focus of the *Commedia's* entire verbal discourse, grounds the I-character's quest for knowledge, and ultimately engages the intellectual belief of the author-protagonist.

This study, which focuses primarily on the analysis of the *Commedia's* linguistic system of referentiality and implicitly on its epistemological tension, cannot avoid its theological implications insofar as the divinity, to whom the *Commedia's* macrodiscourse refers, and Dante, who contemplates the divinity, are both silent in *Paradiso* 33. On the one hand, therefore, the *Commedia's* text defers and refers to the divinity throughout its unfolding; on the other hand, the divinity, the end result of this system of referentiality, is also silent, just as is Dante when facing the Trinity.

The verbal signs that portray the two wayfarers' infernal journey point to a referent, which, according to the speakers and the utterance situations, may be enclosed within or outside the first cantica: namely, signs have referents inscribed either within or beyond the infernal world. The referent situated outside the first cantica is seen as superior to the referent posited within the first cantica, which sets itself in opposition to the former.

Referentiality affects the words of those who are permanently relegated in hell in a different manner from those who journey through it or are situated outside it. All utterances of the damned or devils are ultimately self-referential: namely, they are inscribed within the system of signs and referents contained within the first cantica. To be sure, also the verbal signs of the infernal characters have a referent. Thus, the words of the Furies, who in *Inferno* 9 appear on the walls of Dis, contain a referent: the Medusa, whom they summon in order to turn the I-character into stone. And yet, intentionality does not bring about the presence of Medusa: the Furies may well invoke her, and yet she fails to appear, nor is the I-character being turned into stone. The Furies' sign is self-referential in so far as it points to a referent that exists within the same infernal context of those who refer to it.

All signs uttered by the Dantean hell's inhabitants ground their meaning either in a referential context whose boundaries are included within *Inferno* 1-34 or in the extra-textual context of their utterers' past earthly lives. In both instances, hell's context is separated from and opposed to the divinity, and all signs uttered by hell's inhabitants never cross hell's boundaries: namely, they never point to the purgatorial or heavenly kingdoms, from which they are excluded; or if they do, they do so in order to signify a world which is inimical and unreachable. The obvious fact that none of hell's inhabitants ascends to Mount Purgatory, let alone to Heaven, proves the self-referentiality of their language.

Hell's failure of self-referentiality can be proved from the relationship between "salary" and "work" proposed by Saussure and further discussed by Benveniste (*Problèmes de linguistique générale* 2: 101-02). Saussure compares the relationship between signifier and signified to that of salary and work, which Benveniste expands to that of language and society. In the Dantean hell's sign system, the Saussurean relation between salary and work is reversed and parodied: the damned are in fact in a forced labor camp, their work is their torment, and their torment is their salary. By the same token, in hell language no longer is what Benveniste suggests: namely, "un système productif" (*Problèmes de linguistique générale* 2: 100) and "relation de communication interhumaine" (103), insofar as the inhabitants' activity is the production of their suffering and their verbal communication aims at each other's destruction.

All signs whose referent is enclosed within the boundaries of the infernal text or context are ultimately doomed to failure whenever they are opposed by signs whose referent is situated outside the infernal text. To the extent in which Virgil's and the I-character's word is other-referential — namely, referring and deferring to the word of Beatrice, Lucy, Mary, or God — the two wayfarers' utterance may be opposed and challenged but cannot be separated or removed from their point of reference.

Although normally the infernal guardians' word sets itself in contrast to the word of Virgil and the Pilgrim, the infernal sign neither is nor can be totally deprived of any referent: by its very nature, every sign relates to the origin of all signs, the Word, whether through a positive or de-ferential relationship or through a negative or sundering link (Augustine, *De Trinitate* 15: 11.20). By virtue of this twofold possibility, either a de-ferential or a sundering relationship with the origin of all words, two systems of signs emerge: the first one, inscribed within the world of the first cantica, is self-referential and intentionally in opposition to its primordial other-referentiality; the second one, which seeks to move outside the world of the first cantica, is other-referential and intentionally seeking unity with the Other.

As the Other, whom the Pilgrim is allowed to join in *Paradiso* 33, is the protagonist's ultimate referent, so is Lucifer, the *rex inferni*, the ultimate referent of all infernal characters. The two wayfarers' encounters with the infernal guardians in their downward journey to the bottom of hell and finally their vision of Lucifer, best evidence the two systems of self-and-other-referentiality which are at work within the first cantica.

Whereas hell's inhabitants never cross beyond hell's boundaries, and their signs are permanently marked by self-referentiality, the I-character's language ascends, with its utterer, from hell to purgatory to heaven, thereby proving Dante the character's ability to break away from hell's self-referentiality and to open up to a system of a continuously deferred referentiality.

Also in *Paradiso* 33 the text presents a deferral of meaning: from the Pilgrim to Bernard, from Bernard to Mary, and from Mary to the divinity, in whose vision the Pilgrim attains the goal of everything he ever wanted to attain. Ultimately, therefore, this deferral of meaning, which begins in *Inferno* 1, comes to a closure, which is illustrated by the metaphor of the wheel at the end of the poem (*Par.* 33:144).

And yet, as the continued deferral of meaning that runs through the *Commedia* comes to closure, at the same time it is also left open. The narrator, in fact, more often and forcefully than in any other part of the poem, proclaims his inability to render through words what the Pilgrim sees. Thus, what the Pilgrim sees and ought to constitute the basis of the closure, the author/Pilgrim either cannot remember (33:94-96) or cannot describe.

These two constructs — the *word* and the *Verbum* — comprise all the elements inscribed within the text and allow for a virtually endless gamut of possibilities linking, but also distancing, the two. Thus, in *Inferno* 1 the *word* enters the text as a silent character; in *Paradiso* 33 the *word* also leaves the text as a silent character.

The *word's* silent entrance into, and its silent exit from the text, however, take place within two dynamically opposed situations. The character's silent entrance into the text

implies a vacuum, which calls for fullness, or an absence, which calls for a presence: in brief, the silent *word* calls for the *Verbum*.

The journey of the *word* toward the *Verbum* is opposed: all the characters who emerge as obstacles along the voyage can be seen as *anti-words*. The arch-rival, Lucifer or Anti-Christ, is, therefore, the *Anti-Word* par excellence. The Pilgrim encounters him precisely at the center of the universe.

The *word* is capable of journeying toward the *Word* not on his own strength but through a contrast reference to his ultimate goal. The *word's* journey, therefore, is based on a constant network of allusions, references, and deferrals to the *Verbum*. The journey of the *word* toward the *Verbum* is based on tension and dynamic movement.

The journey of the *word* toward the *Verbum* unfolds as an endless deferment of presence (Raman Selden 96). In order to help the Pilgrim attain his ultimate goal, his guides — primarily Virgil but also Beatrice, and Bernard — must constantly refer and defer to the higher *Word*. From *Inferno* 1 to *Paradiso* 33, all the words by the guides and messengers are inscribed within the *Commedia* with the purpose of directing the Pilgrim toward his encounter with the *Verbum*.

Throughout the journey, the divinity, the *Verbum*, comes in contact with the Pilgrim, the *word*, through other characters, who *speak* to the protagonist.

The essential moments of the Pilgrim's journey, therefore, are always situated within a situation of utterance: Every encounter unfolds either as a *dia-logue*, a *counter-logue*, or a *pro-logue* between the *word* and the other *words* in view of the final encounter with the *Word*.

At the end, what characterizes the encounter between the *word* and the *Verbum* is their silence: neither speaks or is heard. This silence is a lack of words *qua* external signs, but in fact it emphasizes the non-verbal communication attained between the *word* and the *Verbum* at the end of *Paradiso* 33.

Despite the presence of this non-verbal communication between the *word* and the *Verbum* in *Paradiso* 33, the canto's dominant mode, after St. Bernard's prayer to the Virgin, is nevertheless one of silence. Such an absence of the word corresponds to, and is emphasized by, the author's repeated inability to render the vision of the divinity by means of the written word. Despite such repeated statements of verbal inadequacy and/or inability, the author nevertheless never gives up his task as a poet or creator of words, and seeks to describe through diverse verbal constructs what, according to his own words, no creature can describe.

Paradiso 33, therefore, is the ultimate confirmation and disconfirmation of all verbal communication. As the attainment of the Pilgrim's goal, the canto documents the encounter of the *word* with the *Verbum* by virtue of a gift the former receives from the latter. Such an encounter, although non-verbal or outwardly silent, is *dia-logical* and *pro-logical* at the highest level and situates the creature in direct contact with the creator.

Such a situation, therefore, entails a mental mode of communication between the creature and the creator: a form of communication that can be understood by the creature. But such a mode of communication goes also beyond man's normal modes of communication, the spoken and written word. In fact, no spoken words are uttered, and

the written word is recognized as inadequate. The journey's conclusion, therefore, evinces, at the same time, attainment and partial failure, word and silence, construction and deconstruction, *dia-logue* and *a-logue*.

Dante the I-character has in fact attained his journey's goal, and has been granted the vision of the divinity. Dante the author, on the other hand, must aver his inability to remember and describe fully. Partial memory and partial writing constitute the creature's lot, for being able to remember fully and to describe fully constitute the attribute of the divinity, for whom everything is present and who utters only one, eternal, and all-encompassing Word.