

A Semiotics of Multimodality and Signification in the *Divine Comedy*

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Chapter 5

Modality of Transcendental Signification in the Paradiso

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5 Modality of Transcendental Signification in the *Paradiso*

Dante's *Par.* is a *cantica* that draws particular attention to the *modi significandi*¹ (modes of signification) surfacing from the heightened tension between the limits of human language and the need to put into words a content that deals with divine ineffability. It is reasonable to infer that such is the case and that Dante wanted to make it clear from the very beginning. For a comprehensive view of this matter, we may recall Dante's longing to address this problem from the opening lines of the *DC*:

*O muse, o alto igejno, or m'aiutate;
o mente che scrivesti ciò ch'io vidi,
qui si parrà la tua nobilitate. (Inf. 2.7-9)*

[O Muses, o high genius, help me now;
o memory that set down what I saw,
here shall your excellence reveal itself!]

We find similar occurrence when Dante the poet makes the wayfarer reach the second kingdom. He, more or less reiterates the idea of *Inf.* 2.7–9, and appeals once again to the muses, particularly to “Caliopè”, to help him in his signifying endeavor of the second kingdom:

*Ma qui la morta poesì resurga,
o sante Muse, poi che vostro sono;
e quì Caliopè alquanto surga (Purg. 1.7-9).*

[But here, since I am yours, o holy Muses,
may this poem rise again from Hell's dead realm;
and may Calliope rise somewhat here].

In the *Inf.* Dante beseeches all the muses to help him in his adventurous undertaking. In the *Pur.* he reiterates such a plea and adds a vital detail in the last line of the *terzina*: he mentions “Caliopè” (the most important muse

and the muse that presided over eloquence and epic poetry). In the *Par.*, given the great challenge for signification with which Dante is faced, he appeals directly to the divine source Apollo, the god of poetry, the divine science that, at the beginning of the *Par.*, he is charged also with a figural value; the figural view of divine, transcendental inspiration:

*O buon Apollo, a l'ultimo lavoro
fammi del tuo valor sì fatto vaso,
come dimandi a dar l'amato alloro.*

(Par. 1.13-15)

[O good Apollo, for this final task
make me the vessel of your excellence,
what you, to merit your loved laurel, ask.]

With such a prelude of the third *cantica*, the poet puts much emphasis on the dialectic tension between divine inspiration and human signification, which points unequivocally to a problem of modality and how to find a viable solution to put into words a subject matter of transcendental significance. In the *terzina* above, Dante also suggests that a possible solution is poetry, provided that his plea will be met with a favorable response. As a matter of fact, it does and in the following pages we are going to shed light on how poetry, according to Dante, may carry out and accomplish signification.

5.1 Poetic domain of the verbal mode

In the domain of verbal modality, Dante considers poetry the one and only form of expression capable of actualizing, even if indirectly and for a short-lived moment, ineffable content-stuffs, transcendental signification, an extraordinary undertaking that explores the boundless depth of language.² Poetry is the single, exclusive medium that will grant Dante the privilege to continue providing “*quella materia ond’[egli è] fatto scriba*” (“that matter of which [he is] made the scribe”, *Par.* 10.27). It is in poetry that he finds the *ratio* (condition) of the lost relation between human languages (*modi significandi accidentales*) and Adam’s language before the fall (*modus significandi substantialis*). The chief evidence pointing toward such a vision can be deduced from Adam’s explanation:

*La lingua ch’io parlai fu tutta spenta
innanzi che a l’ovra inconsumabile
fosse la gente di Nembròt attenta:
ché nullo effetto mai razionabile,
per lo piacere uman che rinovella
seguendo il cielo, sempre fu durabile.*

*Opera naturale è ch' uom favella;
 ma così o così, natura lascia
 poi fare a voi secondo che v'abbella.
 Pria ch' i' scendessi a l' infernale ambascia,
 I s'appellava in terra il sommo bene
 onde vien la letizia che mi fascia;
 e El si chiamò poi: e ciò convene,
 ché l'uso d' i mortali è come fronda
 in ramo, che sen va e altra vene.* (Par. 26.124-38, my emphasis in bold)

[The tongue I spoke was all extinct before
 the men of Nimrod set their minds upon
 the unaccomplishable task; for never
 has any thing produced by human reason
 been everlasting—following the heavens,
 men seek the new, they shift their predilections.

That man should speak at all is nature's act,
 but how you speak—in this tongue or in that—
 she leaves to you and to your preference.

Before I was sent down to Hell's torments,
 on earth, the Highest Good—from which derives
 the joy that now enfolds me—was called I;

and then He was called El. Such change must be:
 the ways that mortals take are as the leaves
 upon a branch—one comes, another goes.] (My emphasis in bold)

The important part to notice here is that Adam spoke his primordial language (*modus significandi substantialis*) and that it is man's natural ability to speak ("*Opera naturale è ch' uom favella*"). As the natural ability to speak was entrusted upon human beings, they put it into practice arbitrarily. The arbitrary use of the Adamic language was marked by the biblical event of the confusion of languages (*confusio linguarum*). As a result of this event, humans produced many different languages (*modi faciendi signa accidentales*), yet the post-babelic languages all retained traces of the essential mode of signifying (*modus significandi substantialis*) of the primordial language that Adam once spoke. It is by means of poetry that humans may look for and eventually find those traces of the Adamic language because the poetic word is the only medium of expression; it is the embodied experience of that which it attempts to express as a medium. For it is the vehicle of expression and, at the same time, the very object of expression. From the very beginning of the DC, Dante endeavors to develop and solidify such an awareness by seeking the help of the muses and by openly bringing it to our attention through the recurrent addresses to the reader. This means that both the poet and the reader must find and master their poetic voice. After having found a poetic voice, "*con amendue*" ("with both", Par. 1.17) the

muse and the god of poetry will together supply the poet and the reader with the ultimate inspirational setting “*ne l'aringo rimaso*” (“in the agon that is left”, *Par.* 1.18), and make the word reach a transcendental height. The word will become both the signifier and the embodied object of signification. We may remark in advance that the embodied object will be disclosed only in the final scenes of the *Par.*, where the poetic word cancels itself in the Divine Object and leaves behind an infinite, mystical silence. But let us return to and examine how Dante employs modes of signification that are able to relate to a content-stuff exceeding human comprehension.

5.2 Dante's modal *explanatio per argumenta exemplorum*

Paradise's transcendental content-stuff is the central aspect of the wayfarer's experience. It must be recorded and translated into a comprehensible human language. The poet is faced with a major obstacle of signification. He is compelled to find a way to signify, to narrate impossible events which entail the passing from a human state to a state of transcendence. To do so, Dante the poet relies on a mode that consists of signifying by means of examples (*explanatio per argumenta exemplorum*). This is a strategy of signifying *per aliud* (that which calls to mind on the basis of something else) which was frequently used by scholastic intellectuals. Consistent with this strategy, Dante recalls the mythical tale/example of Glaucus from Ovid.³ In Ovid's tale, the fisherman Glaucus, by ingesting an unknown herb, was suddenly transformed into a sea god. Dante mentions Glaucus' example to tell the reader that he is now in a state that is beyond human comprehension. However, since he speaks through a simile, namely describing Glaucus' tale and not his personal experience, he also describes his experience without actually speaking about it:

... *tal dentro mi fei,*
qual si fé Glauco nel gustar de l'erba
che 'l fé consorto in mar de li altri dèi.
Trasumanar significar per verba
non si poria; però l'esempio basti
a cui esperienza grazia serba. (Par. 1.67-72)

[... within me I was changed
as Glaucus changed, tasting the herb that made
him a companion of the other sea gods.

Passing beyond the human cannot be
worded; let Glaucus serve as simile—
until grace grant you the experience.]

This citation is an indication that Dante knew and used the method of signifying *per aliud*. The same method is also applicable to the allegorical

mode. But, for the time being, let us find out what an *explanatio per argumenta explorum* entails semiotically and how it is formed through such a mode to allow signification to take place.

Dante's ability to utilize the approach of calling to mind on the basis of something else (*per aliud*) removes, first of all, a fundamental semiotic inadequacy. It is Peirce's third incapacity which states that "We have no power of thinking without signs." (CP 5.265) Glaucus' episode removes the human inability of thinking without signs because the example itself stands for codified signification through the Ovidian text. It is endowed with meaning and the model reader envisioned by Dante (as well as even a real reader) could have immediately recognized and compared it to the pilgrim's emotional and mental state. This is possible because human beings possess *Cognitive Types* (CTs) produced by the human cognitive process consisting of a phenomenon of comparison that allows the individual to recognize occurrences that display similarities. According to Eco, it is a "phenomenon of perceptual semiosis" that "cannot be seen and cannot be touched" but it "may be postulated only on the basis of the phenomenon of recognition, identification, and felicitous reference" (2000, 138). Therefore, it is not necessary to name Dante's actual experience, which consists of an extraordinary emotional and mental state of transcendence, in order to make it recognizable. Recognition alone is sufficient when compared to something similar and made available in one's encyclopedic competence. Eco calls it *Nuclear Content* (NC), or what is commonly called "meaning". Eco also draws a distinction between CTs and NC which consists of a fundamental difference for the reason that CTs are private phenomena of perception while NC is public, it is a semiotized content with recognizable signs. CTs are private because belong to the personal domain of perception. In Eco's words, and as we already mentioned before, they are "phenomenon[a] of perceptual semiosis" that "cannot be seen and cannot be touched" but they "may be postulated only on the basis of the phenomenon of recognition, identification, and felicitous reference". (2000, 138) On the other hand, the NC is public because it can be expressed through words and other physical signs. The Ovidian tale of Glaucus stands for NC because it was written down, became conventionalized and celebrated in the Western literary tradition. Often, CTs and NC may coincide, as it happens for the Ovidian tale that Dante used. This is the case when NC, insofar as it is public, becomes the source of an individual's inspiration that takes place as a private phenomenon of recognition *sub specie* CT. (Eco 2000, 138) Dante is in the position of producing a private phenomenon of recognition for himself with personal, transcendental CT because he knew Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Moreover, the *per aliud* approach acknowledged with Glaucus' tale also provides the necessary information to help eliminating Peirce's first and second incapacities, namely that 1) "We have no power of Introspection, but all knowledge of the internal world is derived by hypothetical reasoning from our knowledge of external facts"; 2) "We have no power of Intuition,

but every cognition is determined logically by previous cognitions.” (CP 5.265) This means that the NC of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, which is *de facto* “knowledge of external facts”, triggered introspection and motivated Dante’s personal CT from such a tale under the experience of “*trasumanar*” (passing beyond the human). Dante’s “power of intuition” in this instance is validated by his ability to come up with the idea of correlating Glaucus’ inexplicable transformation to his personal “*trasumanar*” and, thus, being transported into a divine dimension. Furthermore, Glaucus’ tale (NC) that Dante accessed as a public content value (*interpretant*),⁴ as it was being written down by Ovid and before it became public and crystallized into a convention, was itself a CT. Therefore, the modal *explanatio per argumenta exemplorum* is capable of eliminating the three Peircean incapacities and, for Dante’s specific aim, it fulfils the task of telling a story of transcendental nature felicitously. Although Dante’s *trasumanar* cannot be put into words directly, he circumvents such an impossibility and talks about it (*per aliud*) without verbalizing it.

5.3 *Trasumanar, significar per verba si poria*

The witticism purposefully expressed in the title of this section is not an irreverent, condescending rearrangement of Dante’s “*Trasumanar significar per verba / non si poria*” (“Passing beyond the human cannot be worded”, *Par.* 1.70–71) but rather an intimation that addresses the way in which Dante intends to proceed in the unfolding of *Par.*’s narration and, specifically, that which concerns signification. Contrary to what Dante says in the well-known citation mentioned above, namely that “Passing beyond the human cannot be worded”, it is by means of “*verba*” (words), albeit employed exceptionally, that he will be able to signify in the realm of ineffability.

A detail that the reader should not fail to notice is the Italian verb “*potere*” (to be able to) which, in the Tuscan conditional tense and as Dante used it in line 71, is “*poria*”. The fact that Dante used the conditional tense here is a noteworthy detail which points to the general impossibility of signifying by means of words in the *Par.*, which constitutes the premise for a kingdom of transcendental order. Nonetheless, Dante will attempt to signify precisely by means of words since he has been granted a special favor by God (revealed grace) from the beginning of his journey in the afterlife. Moreover, he is aware of the residual traces of the Adamic language (*modus significandi substantialis*) that may still be seized in postlapsarian languages in the form of linguistic universals and rendered comprehensible only through the poetic expression and grounded in the poetic essence of language. At this point, it is important to keep in mind that Dante’s endeavor to signify by using words in an extraordinary manner does not entail knowing God in His own essence. God cannot be known in His essence because (and here I borrow Peirce’s expression) He is “absolutely incognizable” and, as such, even by means of poetic signification,

... the meaning of a word is the conception it conveys, the absolutely incognizable has no meaning because no conception attaches to it. It is, therefore, a meaningless word; and, consequently, whatever is meant by any term as “the real” is cognizable in some degree, and so is of the nature of cognition, in the objective sense of that term.

(CP 5.310)

Therefore, God can be worded only attributively, through what Dante is able to express poetically as a result of provisional and experiential relation with God. The analytic implication of not being able to signify and yet signifying precisely by means of words is indicative of Dante’s effort to ponder over the issue of Being, which cannot be defined in its essence, and of how humans create entities and ontological knowledge about Being. Dante’s pondering on Being is a sort of pre-Heideggerian reflection on Being which the German philosopher describes as follows:

... to work out the question of being adequately, we must make an identity—the enquirer—transparent in his own Being. The very asking of this question is an entity’s mode of *Being*; and as such it gets its essential character from what is enquired about—namely, Being. This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term “*Dasein*”... One can determine the nature of entities in their Being without necessarily having the explicit concept of the meaning Being at one’s disposal.

(Heidegger 1962, 27)

Although Dante may not avail himself with the linguistic power of wording Being as it is in itself as essence, he nonetheless possesses the verbal aptitude to disclose an ontological knowledge of Being as a provisional, existential entity of Being. His poetic wording of God has the prospect of being something and not standing entirely as an “absolutely incognizable” and absolute unspeakable. In fact, “*le parole son fatte per mostrare quello che non si sa*” (“words are made to reveal what is not known”, *Conv.* 1.2.7), and the speech ability is one thing with humans because “*certam formam locutionis a Deo cum anima prima concreatam fuisse*”, (“God created a certain form of speech together with and for the first soul”, *DVE* 1.6.4). In the realm of time, what we call human speech ability is that which takes place according to *co-gnoscentia* (implying the factual correlation between an expression level and content level). It nonetheless preserves traces of *praescientia* (foreknowledge, suggesting the idea of the word before it was actually made), and if embodied poetically, it may, though ephemerally and marked by limits, partake of transcendental emanations through what the poetic word does not say but only suggests. The seemingly absurd statement concerning the impossibility to signify by means of words and yet signifying precisely by means of words, since “*vuolsi così colà dove si puoteliò*

che si vuole,” (“It is so willed there where is power to do/ That which is willed;” *Inf.* 3.95–96)⁵, sheds light on Dante’s singular view on human knowledge which consists of linguistic acts underlying conceptual contents. Also, on the metalinguistic plane, the seemingly absurd statement punctuates a notable semiotic process:

*“Io veggio che tu credi queste cose
perch’io le dico, ma non vedi come;
si che , se son credute, son ascose.
Fai come quei che la cosa per nome
apprende ben, ma la sua quidditate
veder non può se altri non la prome”.* (*Par.* 20.88-93)

[“...I can see
that, since I speak of them, you do believe
these things but cannot see how they may be;
and thus, though you believe them, they are hidden.
You act as one who apprehends a thing
by name but cannot see its quiddity
unless another set it forth to him.”]

The pilgrim’s comprehension of divine things consists of the fact that he has a special favor granted by God and, consequently, he may recount his experience to the living people on earth. From a semiotic standpoint, the crucial aspect is the description of human knowledge that addresses the act of naming. The very act of naming takes place according to a by-planar process which means that the expression level is the result of an experiential act, but its correlatable content is present only as an interpretant, namely as a signified, an abstract object of signification, as meaning. For this reason, we can say that language problematizes the correlation between a present expression and an absent, not-yet formalized content, insofar as any linguistic act is motivated by the continuous substitution/postponement of its referent. Also, verbal signs are illusory and, as such, make us believe that they produce actual objects of signification. In fact, what we know about verbal signs, and we may at this point borrow Dante’s dictum regarding the literalness of words as “*parole fittizie*” (fictitious words, *Conv.* 2.1.3), do not contain in themselves an actual object for which they stand but they are used in a functioning system of bi-planar correlation between an expression level (signifier) and a content level (signified) that only points to or refers to a signified object. The expression’s physical state always carries its meaning beyond itself. This means that the semiotic system of language does not need the actual object to signify because it entails a process of substitution and postponement of the object itself by means of codified verbal signs. (De Benedictis 2012, 62) Some decades ago, Umberto Eco gave a clear view of such a process when he stated:

A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. This something else does not necessarily have to exist or to actually be somewhere at the moment in which a sign stands in for it. Thus *semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie*. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used “to tell” at all.

(1976a, 7)

Eco’s statement, as I argued elsewhere, essentially

tells us that not only language can be used as an instrument to lie intentionally, but that lying is an intrinsic characteristic of language insofar as verbal signs engage a mechanism of referring. Such a mechanism occurs only abstractly in that it points to ideas and images that are the outcome of our mental processes or what we call the signified. And since the signified is removed from an actual object because it is not physically present, any linguistic act (semiotically) is a lie. Conversely language signs, though intrinsically deceitful, have the primary purpose to represent, to reveal (“*dēloūsi*”, Artistotle 1928, 16a, 28) something, and accordingly become carriers of meaning. With respect to such a function we may say that they produce truth insofar as they reveal something in the form of meaning.

(De Benedictis 2014, 30–31)

Dante is well aware of the semiotic property of language and takes advantage of its *is/is not* bi-planar nature and uses it to speak of the unspeakable. Although the subject of the third *cantica* is unutterable (because it is beyond human comprehension): “*Nel ciel che più de la sua luce prende/fu’ io, e vidi cose che ridire/né sa né può chi di là sù discende;*” (“Within that heaven which most his light receives/Was I, and things beheld which to repeat/Nor knows, nor can, who from above descends”, *Par.* 1.4–6), and because “*tra-sumanar’ significar per verba non si poria*” (“Passing beyond the human cannot be worded”, vv. 70–71), Dante circumvents the unutterable provision of *Par.*’s premise and turns it into a felicitous endeavor since he is able to complete *canto* 1, as well as he writes and completes the remaining thirty-two *canti* on God’s kingdom. He does so by using the simile from Ovid’s mythological tale. Dante uses the simile as follows:

*Nel suo aspetto tal dentro mi fei,
qual si fé Glauco nel gustar de l’erba
che ’l fé consorto in mar de li altri dèi.
Trasumanar significar per verba
non si poria; però l’esempio basti
a cui esperienza grazia serba. (Par. 1. 67-72)*

[In watching her, within me I was changed
as Glaucus changed, tasting the herb that made
him a companion of the other sea gods.

Passing beyond the human cannot be
worded; let Glaucus serve as simile—
until grace grant you the experience.]

At this point, Dante casts himself in the role of the fisherman Glaucus, but instead of “tasting the herb that made him a companion of the other sea gods”, he fixes his gaze onto Beatrice and suddenly he is changed like Glaucus. By fixing his gaze onto Beatrice, Dante is allowed to take a leap into the unknown (this is the part that cannot be worded; it can only be suggested because it is ineffable, it partakes of God’s Divine Essence; it is nevertheless an experience of God’s Grace granted to Dante) and without delay he is able to continue his journey. Dante manages to describe his ineffable experience by means of *explanatio per argumenta exemplorum* (explaining through the use of examples) that, although he is unable to describe his experience directly, since he is face to face with uncodified and uncodifiable linguistic content, he relies on the *exemplum*, a true example, Glaucus’, which makes available for him and the reader a conventionalized meaningful content, because it is linguistically codified in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 13.904–959, and recognized by the Western literary tradition.⁶ We may consider this analogy a creative and felicitous intuition because, although it may appear to be far from the common experience of an average reader, it is nonetheless a relation that the average reader may establish. (Pagliaro 1967, 632)

5.4 Metaphorical mode in the *Paradiso*

A common view of metaphors, mostly poetic metaphors, is characterized by the intent to serve as rhetorical tropes to create semantic links between language signs and the potential meanings they may trigger analogically in order to make one’s prose or poetry noteworthy and effective from a rhetorical standpoint. This is nothing new about metaphors and the way in which they are frequently utilized. Yet, we must add that in the *DC*, and particularly in the *Par.*, metaphors are primarily language signs that stand in for uncodified terms, for terms that do not exist, yet they have the potential, if metaphorically used, to create new semantic relations inhabited by analogies. In this sense, they are a matter of necessity; they are indispensable for the purpose of signification and verbalization of unknown knowledge. In this capacity, we can say that Dante remains faithful to the Aristotelean view of metaphor, particularly that which focusses on “the application of an alien name by transference” based on “analogy”. (*Poetics* 1902, 21.1457b.4) Aristotle further adds that for “some of the terms of the proportion [analogy] there is at times no word in existence” to allow the transference to

happen but, regardless of such a deficiency, “still the metaphor may be used” (21.1457b.7), as in “sowing the god-created light” where we find “sowing” as an act of scattering seeds, “but the action of the sun in scattering his rays is nameless.” (21.1457b.7) This is an example of transference by means of a nameless analogy which is particularly common in the *Par.* and serves two major purposes: 1) it names something that does not have a name and, consequently, verbalizes a non-codified meaning that can be expressed through the sharing of a likeness without actually naming it directly; 2) because transference is nameless and the analogy can be discovered and established, the metaphorical term becomes a tool for the formation of new universes of meaning inhabited by analogies and, in doing so, it becomes also the source for the creation of new ontologies.⁷ In this sense, we may comprehend the true purpose of metaphor which serves Dante to create new forms of signification. It works as a *creative tool* to produce original similarities instead of reusing pre-existing ones.⁸

Dante’s central idea of metaphor and the way in which he mostly used it in the *Par.* is a matter of signs/language and not a matter of cognition. Although Dante does not theorize metaphor explicitly in any of his works, an indirect examination of it is found in the *Conv.* and in his *Ep.* 13 where he deals with allegory. As for the smooth exchange between allegory and metaphor on the issue of basic functioning, I share Ezio Raimondi’s annotation stating that: “*quando parliamo di allegoria dantesca, quando parliamo di figuratività o di misteriosa iconicità del linguaggio dantesco siamo poi nel fondo sempre a trattare di quella che ho chiamato prima la spinta verso la metafora.*” (when we speak of Dantean allegory, when we speak of figurativeness or mysterious iconicity of Dante’s language, in the end we are always dealing with what I called before the impulse toward metaphor)⁹. It is reasonable to formulate Dante’s idea of metaphor even though in the *Conv.* and in the *Ep.* 13 he only speaks of allegory because

the term *metaphor* for many authors—and this is true for Aristotle and Emanuele Tesauro—has served to indicate every rhetorical figure in general; the metaphor, as the Venerable Bede put it: is “a genus of which all other tropes are species.”

(Eco 1984, 87)

Based on what Dante says regarding allegory, we may claim that his conceptual basis of metaphor is semiotic. However, before we begin our examination of Dante’s use of metaphor in the *Par.*, we should first consider his semiotic knowledge of language and how metaphor in Dante is a matter of signs/language.

Dante’s semiotic knowledge of language is clearly documented in the *DVE*: “*Hoc equidem signum est ipsum subjectum nobile de quo loquimur: nam sensuale quid est, in quantum sonus est; rationale vero, in quantum aliquid significare videtur ad placitum.*” (“This sign is precisely the noble

subject of my treatise: for it is sensory in that it is sound and rational in that it can be seen to signify anything, according to man's will." 1.3.3) Also, this passage addresses Dante's theory of language which suggests, like in St. Augustine,¹⁰ the idea of joining together a theory of signs with a theory of language. Both divide the verbal sign into 1) sensory manifestation insofar as it is articulated sound (*vox articulata* or *sonus*); and into 2) *significatio* or that which is apprehended by the mind. In semiotics, such a division can be expressed as (here I am borrowing Eco's definitions) "expression plane" and "content plane". (1976a, 50) The expression plane in Dante's language is the sensory aspect (*sensuale*) or sound (*sonus*), which corresponds to an actual verbal utterance and, by extension, to what is written down. The content plane is that which is apprehended by the mind (*significatio*). It is crucial to keep in mind that we can only address *significatio* by means of referring, yet *significatio* or referent is not a referent itself because it is continually deferred by each attempt of referring to it. This singular characteristic of the content plane unveils its very slippery nature. In fact, if we scrutinize the content plane of a sign, we soon realize that we are faced with a false anti-nomy as the content's referent presents an *is/is not* provision. For it *is* referent insofar as it is able to *refer* to something, we cannot say that meaning does not refer to anything in the sense of being a bare nothingness. Therefore, the referent of meaning *is* because it is endowed with the ability to refer. Yet, as predicate of such a referent, it is incomplete and misleading, it is a kaleidoscopic phenomenon. Thus, the referent of meaning *is not* because it is never a true self, it lacks its own individuality and independence. We can never hold it firm (except in its contingency);¹¹ it is very slippery and driven by a shifting pattern. It is unceasingly postponed by the semiotic system into what is an ever-changing succession of interpretants or into what Eco termed *unlimited semiosis*.¹²

We stated above that Dante's view of metaphor is essentially Aristotelean because it is semiotic in nature and endowed with the faculty of transference of a name to something else. In the matter of transference, transference is noteworthy by means of nameless analogy. This aspect is crucial in the *DC* because a transference from something that can be named to a nameless-other, paired up only by the creation of an analogy through the cognitive effort of coding and decoding, the pairing up of the two sides of the analogy produces the groundwork for the formation of new universes of meaning. Moreover, the first term of the metaphor, or what Richard Lansing called "*visibilia*", are "signs that point directly to the reality of the *invisibilia* which describe their nature by way of analogy. The only access to understand the *invisibilia* is through the *visibilia*"(45)¹³ and "for Dante...human understanding depends on sense perception", as in "Thomas Aquines ... *nihil est in intellectu nisi prius fuerit in sensu*" (45). What this means for Dante is that the "visual perception of reality is a first and necessary step toward apprehension of the unseen world of God's reality" (Lansing 1977, 45). Also, metaphor dwells in the world of signs and for Dante (and what

we know about his view regarding metaphor/allegory), just to reiterate the concept, is a matter of signs/language and not a matter of cognition. Here we need to clarify this point before proceeding further. Saying that metaphor is a matter of signs/language does not mean that cognition is left out from the metaphorical process. On the contrary, it is what guides perception, formulation, and legitimization of the analogy. Cognition is the dominant resource humans use to look for and discover the content of an unnamed content to which, the named part of the metaphor, alludes to. "Aristotle provides the most luminous confirmation of the metaphor's cognitive function when he associates it with *mimesis*." (Eco 1984, 102) Yet, in the Aristotelean sense and in Dante's view, cognition is not a metaphorical relation itself as some contemporary scholars suggested in the 80s and still continue to maintain. For example, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in *Metaphors We Live By* 1980, claimed that "our ordinary conceptual system is metaphoric in nature" (4), and that the "concept is metaphorically structured, the activity is metaphorically structured and, consequently, the language is metaphorically structured." (5) On the contrary, we should say that "[t]hinking...obeys linguistic laws before any logical laws that may exist. In particular, it obeys the semantic laws governing the play of determination between the poles of lexical meaning and textual meaning." (Weinrich 2005, 39-40)

I obviously do not agree with Lakoff/Johnson and agree with Aristotle and Dante for the simple fact that we can indeed demonstrate that language is metaphorical, especially in light of what we said above, while we cannot do the same regarding cognition. As a matter of fact, we can say that Lakoff/Johnson's approach is flawed and it is so because in order to explain how cognition is according to them and in the metaphorical sense, they were forced to buttress their claim in language and not in cognition. For "One way to find out is by looking at language. Since communication is based on the same conceptual system that we use in thinking and acting, language is an important source of evidence for what that system is like." (4) On the contrary, the truth of the matter is that language is indeed a semiotic system and, as a system of signs, it is like other semiotic systems, it is the only source for the creation of metaphors because it is metaphorical itself. Cognition, as a conceptual system, actively guides the process (in terms of abduction, induction, deduction) of perceiving, shaping, and validating the metaphor, but, in itself, it is not "metaphoric in nature". In fact and, as far as I know, no one has been able to prove that cognition is metaphorical itself; and, to further offer legitimacy to our position, we should recall Pierce's third human incapacity, which basically states that "We have no power of thinking without signs." (CP 5.265) Therefore, we can indeed say that the nature of metaphor is semiotic and not neuronitic. And in the realm of metaphorology "of the thousands and thousands of pages written about metaphor, few add anything of substance to the first two or three fundamental concepts stated by Aristotle." (Eco 1984, 88; see also Kirby 1997, 517-554)

As I argued elsewhere (De Benedictis 2012, 210), the way in which Dante uses the metaphorical language in the *DC* and, most of all in the *Par.*, is geared toward cognition in order to keep the signifying process unfolding. Dante realized, in the Aristotelean sense, that by means of metaphors one can “get hold of new ideas..., it is from metaphors that we can best get hold of something fresh.” (*Rhetorica* 3.9.1410b) And, although he remains anchored to the Christian tradition, his “approach...is to cause the reader to consider afresh the significance of these fundamentally traditional metaphors by changing the linguistic form in which he presents them to us.” (Gibbons 2002, 4) Gibbons’ observation is interesting, especially for what concerns the idea of bringing to the reader’s attention the novelty that Dante proposes in the tradition, but not enough to comprehend the degree of novelty in Dante’s metaphors. (Tomazzoli 2015, 47) According to Tomazzoli, Gibbons’s endeavor is too limited for the relevance of language innovation and prevents him to grasp the complexity of Dante’s metaphor. (2015, 47) Here I would add that the language innovation in the *DC* and what we will be able to gather from the examples in the *Par.*, is an indirect consequence of Dante’s cognitive purpose, and the need to signify verbally that which is beyond wording. Among the contemporary Dante critics, Emilio Pasquini expressed an insightful view regarding Dante’s metaphor and suggested that, although different in its pursuit, Dante’s metaphor aligns in a way with our interpretive landscape for the reason that: “*in Dante, spesso, si ha quasi l’impressione che la realtà venga riscoperta—o addirittura scoperta per la prima volta—con occhi nuovi, quasi adamitici, nella sua rete di analogie.*” (Often, in Dante, one has the impression that reality is rediscovered—or even discovered for the first time—with new eyes, almost Adamic, in its net of analogies.) (182; see also Tomazzoli 2015, 48) In the domain of unutterability, Dante must rely on *necessary metaphors* to avert the language signifying inadequacy. Also, *necessary metaphors* become the main linguistic feature to find a way, the only way, to speak about God, which it can only happen metaphorically, by means of analogies. Some examples of this type are “*infinito eccesso*”, “*prima volontà*”, (infinite excess, Primal Will) of *Par.* 19. 45, 86 or “*prima cagione*” (Primal Cause) of *Par.* 20. 132, by which Dante metaphorically names God. (On this aspect see Ledda 1997, 129) As well as being a vehicle of transference of a not-yet codified content with the power to name something by means of likeness that itself does not have a name, the Dantean metaphor becomes the foundation of Dante’s allegorical and symbolic modes. But let us see first how metaphors work in the *Par.*

Par.’s opening scene is an excellent place in which Dante sets the metaphorical mode that will later serve him profitably in two ways: 1) linguistically he will be able to produce material occurrences of the expression plane that do not exist; 2) the occurrences that do not exist on the expression plane will become cognitive material on the content plane and in the capacity of “nominal essence” (understood in the Lockean sense) in order to

produce signification for the reader, as Dante will be able to describe what he found there.

Dante's appeal to Apollo: "*O buon Apollo, a l'ultimo lavoro fammi del tuo valor si fatto vaso,*" ("O good Apollo, for this final task make me the vessel of your excellence", *Par.* 1.13–14) is a remarkable passage in which Apollo conveys two metaphorical functions: 1) he is the quintessence of poetry; 2) by contextual contiguity he substitutes the Christian God. Within the same citation, Dante places himself in a metaphorical spot with the term "*vaso*" (vessel). What we just said is nothing new, especially if we take the key-terms that vehicle the metaphors, and display some codified semantic nodes connected to them, as in the illustrations below:

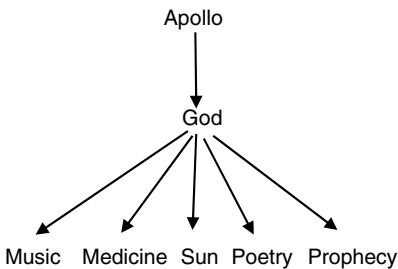


Figure 5.1 Metaphoric nodes of the word "Apollo."

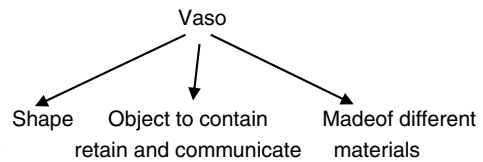


Figure 5.2 Metaphoric nodes of the word "vaso."

The innovative aspect, instead, can be found in Dante's way of using such metaphors. The first thing we look at is the text; it is a poetic text and, as such, it has an aesthetic function that

always posits its own tropes as "first": insofar as it obliges one to see them in a new manner and arranges the quantity of correlations between the various levels of the text so as to permit an ever new interpretation of the specific expression (which never functions alone, but which always interacts with some new aspect of the text).

(Eco 1984, 128)

Given the poetic context and the metonymic/catachrestic substitution of the two terms, the relation of contiguity asks for further relations to fulfil the intention of the text; that is, the text requires a satisfactory reading of itself. In other words, by naively stopping the relation to Apollo, which implies God with the attributive characteristics shown above, as well as those pertaining to "*vaso*", the reader realizes that the text expects additional relations from the metonymic and catachrestic tropes. By stopping at the relations established by the codified semes (the ones from the illustration above), the metaphor is purely ornamental in terms of function, which does not

align with Dante’s purpose, that is, a purpose to find a viable linguistic tool to keep signification unfolding in the *Par*. In this manner, both metonymy and catachresis are meticulously used as “first”: as uncodified, potential semic relations and awaiting to be discovered as the reader spots such relations fitting the context and the structure of the text. The relations that posit new metaphorical semes for reason of signification, which are produced contextually and circumstantially, and formulated according to an encyclopedic regulative idea, yet organized according to a pragmatic provisional dictionary,¹⁴ can be arranged according to the diagram below:

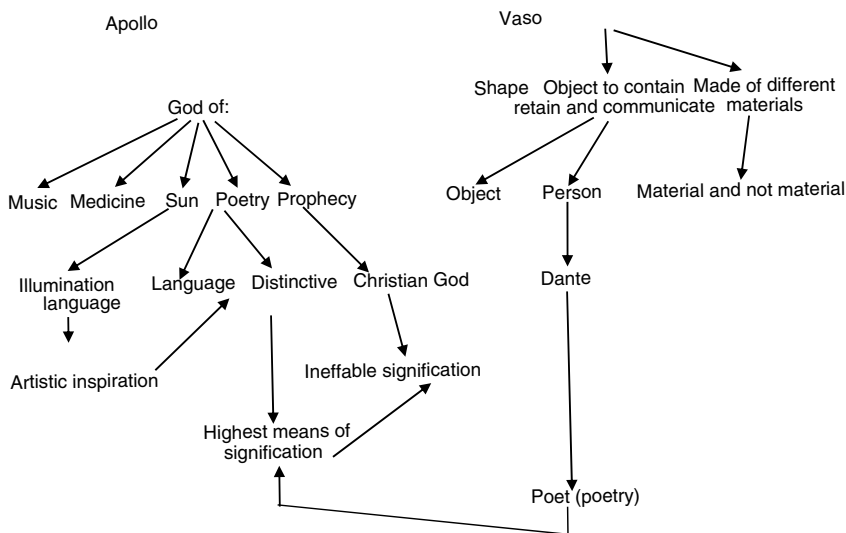


Figure 5.3 Metaphoric nodes of the words “Apollo” and “vaso” with further expandable nodes between the two metaphoric terms.

As we can see, the addition of new semes in Figure 5.3, is motivated by a meticulous interpretive path and legitimized by the contextual and circumstantial properties of the text insofar as the citation (“*O buon Apollo, a l’ultimo lavoro/fammi del tuo valor si fatto vaso,*”), as well as the macro-text of the *Par*. allows for such an epistemological choice. Also, the lexical arrangement in Figure 5.3 is an example of encyclopaedic choice of the interpretive process which is foreseen by the universe of semiosis and organized pragmatically in a local, provisional dictionary. At the same time, the encyclopedic choice, isolated from the universe of semiosis, requires a local organization of the interpretive knowledge, as a structured, provisional dictionary. So, we “presuppose a local dictionary every time we want to recognize and to circumscribe an area of consensus within which a given discourse should stay” (Eco 1984, 85). The “area of consensus” that the connecting arrows above exemplify offer the path for a needed metaphorical

signification insofar as, the micro-text of the citation, constitutes an important part of the preamble connected to the process of signification in the heavenly kingdom and which suggests that signification, for those ineffable *topoi*, may happen only by means of creative transference and allusively.

The initial endeavor is to spot the likeness between the metaphorical term and the potential semantic nodes it may entertain from an entire encyclopedia. When likeness is spotted, the semantic transference from the expression plane occurs in a way that the literal sense of which the metaphorical term is repository is concealed and the metaphorical sense requires, time after time, an interpretive effort. This is so for the creative metaphor which is also the primary type we find in the *DC* and the type in which we are interested. There are even those metaphors that are simply used for ornamentation, among which, some have become completely sterile in that they are not even recognized as metaphors anymore. This is the case when someone addresses another person with the term “honey”. This is a factual metaphor, but it is so overused and abused that no one recognizes it as a metaphor anymore. There can also be the possibility to read into the literal sense of a metaphor, but in this case we can immediately realize from the context in which it is found that it is impractical, flawed and senseless. For example, Dante metaphorically calls Thomas Aquinas “*benedetta fiamma*” (blessed flame) *Par.* 12. 2, Cacciaguیدا “*specchio beato*” (blessed mirror) *Par.* 18. 2, the body of the risen Christ “*lucente sustanza*” (glowing Substance) *Par.* 23. 32, God “*Alfa e O*” (Alpha and Omega) *Par.* 26. 17, and so on. If we take such metaphors and focus strictly on the literal sense, we realize that, literally, they are lying because Aquinas is not a “flame”, Cacciaguیدا is not a “mirror”, Christ is not a “glowing substance”, and God is not the first and the last letter of the Greek alphabet. Yet, if we take them metaphorically, they are legitimate and make perfect sense. Moreover, metaphorical expressions always vehicle exceptional and semantically rich contents. For example, metaphors that connote God in the *Par.* are Alpha and Omega, “*ultima salute*” (ultimate salvation) *Par.* 33. 27, “*eterno lume*” (Eternal Light) *Par.* 33. 43, “*somma luce*” (Highest Light) *Par.* 33.67, “*valore infinito*” (Infinite Goodness) *Par.* 33. 81, “*luce eterna*” (Eternal Light) *Par.* 33.124, and, of course, the most beautiful one that is also the last hendecasyllable of the *DC*: “*l’amore che move il sole e l’altre stelle*” (the Love that moves the sun and the other stars) *Par.* 33. 145. In all these metaphors we find descriptive characteristics that are beyond compare. They communicate something to us, yet they are unfathomable at the same time for their semantic overwhelmingness. By contrast, in those occurrences of the *Par.*, where Dante names God by God’s proper name (“*Dio*”), as in “*a Dio feci olocausto*” (to God my holocaust) *Par.* 14. 89, “*per grazia di Dio*” (by the grace of God) *Par.* 24. 4, “*Io credo in uno Dio*” (I believe in one God) *Par.* 24. 130, “*lo discorrer di Dio sovra quest’acque*” (The going forth of God upon these waters) *Par.* 29. 21, “*de la faccia di Dio*” (by the face of God) *Par.* 29. 77, etc., the reference can be considered semantically poor in all of

them because “a proper name denotes the same thing in all possible worlds” (Kripke 48–49) and, accordingly, it belongs to a semantically poor universe.

From a semiotic consideration, metaphors narcotize the first order of signification (denotation or literal meaning) of the verbal sign. Its intent is to establish new semantic relations creatively. It aims at spotting and creating possible likenesses that the same verbal sign (although it narcotizes its literal meaning) may entertain, through an act of creative transference, possible relations with various semantic nodes of the whole encyclopedia. The metaphorical transference is unpredictable because, creative and not prescriptive, it is free to move in terms of semantic relation, within the same taxonomical category and it is also free to move from category to category if it is foreseen by the encyclopedia. The relation with other semantic nodes can be either codified or uncoded likeness, yet it always privileges one semantic node over others. Based on this underlying pattern of relation that a metaphor can unpredictably entertain with a wide range of semantic nodes of the encyclopedia, the sign’s content value is elevated to a connotative plane, and with the extensive freedom to move within the net of semantic possibilities. In this manner, the sign that vehicles the metaphor is semantically rich. On the other hand, proper names lack such a pattern and for this reason are semantically poor.

But let us see how the text validates such an interpretive choice. Dante’s commitment and responsibility toward the reader is to convey his heavenly experience in the most realistic, intelligible manner. He chose “Apollo” and empowered such a term with a metaphorical connotation for the same reason. He chose to name “Apollo” and not “God” in *Par.*1.13 because the term “Apollo” lends itself to a suitable range of predicables, explicit attributes that have been codified by the cultural tradition of many people and languages. The few semes we used and linked to “Apollo” in Figure 5.1 and Figure 5.3, not only can they be clearly grasped and give determinate representation to meaning, but they may even provide additional semantic nodes to stage an intelligible signification. Also, and most importantly, Dante must remind the reader once again that the only tool that he may avail himself of is poetry to continue his signifying journey in the *Par.* Consequently, by imploring Apollo, Dante accomplishes two important tasks: 1) he clarifies that poetry is the art that makes intelligible even unintelligible content values, though approximately and indirectly; and 2) his poetic ability will be able to verbalize that which is unutterable provided that the divine source and omniscience of poetry (Apollo) grants him such a rare privilege. Further, the metaphorical node that links Apollo with the Christian God, charges the poetic word with boundless evocations in terms of creativity and, thus, capable of conveying the idea of a divine language. Moreover, by adding the second metaphorical term “*vaso*”, (Figure 5.2) Dante puts himself in the position of a receiver, though here “*vaso*” is not just an ordinary object whose faculties are those of receiving, containing, and preserving but rather of an exceptional receiver who is able to apprehend, retain, and

convert into meaningful referents his experience. This means that by charging “*vaso*” with the value of a necessary metaphor, Dante is in the position of saying:

I am the one (since I am a poet) who eventually has the possibility to apprehend, retain, and convert into words my experience of divine order which, by prudently choosing and handling it, that is, by not describing it directly, but rather using the metaphorical resourcefulness of language, I am not limiting it within the boundaries of our finite dependability, which would be erroneous and thus tempering with its true divine nature but, instead, I put it on a metaphorical plane and have only worded the significance of creative transference and allusion (“*vaso*”). This way, I can continue to signify and maintain the heavenly, boundless value of my experience.

As we can see, the use of a very realistic and comprehensible term, as it is in the case of “*vaso*”, may be charged (on the metaphorical plane) with the power of signifying and transcending its semic sphere because, though it is a realistic term, we need to realize that its intrinsic semantic faculty is such that keeps available (in a concealed and narcotized manner) a rich range of evocations. Among the various evocations and due to necessity, it may even ignite in the human mind overwhelming, limitless, omni-comprehensive, yet meaningful (to an adequate degree) referents. These are referents that cannot be named directly (because of being transcendental) but only alluded to by the empowerment of the word’s metaphorical strength which consists mainly of evocation and transference. And, indeed, overwhelming, limitless, omni-comprehensive is the subject matter of the *Par.*, beginning with the very opening lines:

*La gloria di colui che tutto move
per l’universo penetra, e risplende
in una parte più e meno altrove.
Nel ciel che de la sua luce prende
fu’ io, e vidi cose che ridire
né sa né può chi di là sù discende,
perché appressando sé al suo disire,
nostro intelletto si profonda tanto,
che dietro la memoria non può ire. (Par. 1.1-9)*

[The glory of the One who moves all things
permeates the universe and glows
in one part more and in another less.

I was within the heaven that receives
more of His light; and I saw things that he
who from that height descends, forgets or can

not speak; for nearing its desired end,
our intellect sinks into an abyss
so deep that memory fails to follow it.]

The cosmic exordium and the many ineffable *topoi* that surface throughout the *cantica* are directly imposed by the very nature of the *cantica*'s content value. Dante is required by necessity to come up with a way of signifying that is not only suitable for the Schoolmen of those days, but accessible and realistic enough for an average reader of the vernacular language. Therefore, Dante's priority is to search and eventually find that unhindered spark concealed in the poetic language that will allow him to leave "*segnata*" (inscribed) "*l'ombra del beato regno*" (the shadow of the blessed realm) not only in his "*capo*" (mind) but also inscribed in the linguistic sign that he will produce as he progresses in his journey and, accordingly, leaving it behind for the reader. What the reader has available are only signs, the indirect, substituting reality, the shadow of the blessed kingdom. Dante's major challenge lays between a content value of a transcendental order and the need to signify by means of intelligible-sensory vestiges contained in the historicizeable *signa*. Moreover, Dante's aim has the distinctive trait of necessity and not of a grandiose, personal praise. His wish is to be able to deliver signification according to the Pauline view of human knowledge: "*per speculum in aenigmate*" (through a mirror, indistinctly) and not "*facie ad faciem*" (face to face),¹⁵ not just yet, at least not until *Par.*'s final scene.

In the exordium of the *Par.*, Dante further proposes to signify according to a metaphorical approach that concerns Beatrice and based on the way Dante describes her:

*Beatrice tutta ne l'etterne rote
fissa con li occhi stava; e io in lei
le luci fissi, di là sù remote.
Nel suo aspetto tal dentro mi fei,
qual si fé Glauco nel gustar de l'erba
che 'l fé consorto in mar de li altri dèi. (Par. 1.63-69)*

[The eyes of Beatrice were all intent
on the eternal circles; from the sun,
I turned aside; I set my eyes on her.

In watching her, within me I was changed
as Glaucus changed, tasting the herb that made
him a companion of the other sea gods.]

The simile's detail, as we argued before, consists of an *explanatio per argumenta exemplorum*. Dante becomes like Glaucus by gazing into Beatrice's eyes and, accordingly, he does not need to describe the tale since it is

codified in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Through such an example, Dante is not compelled by the necessity of wording his story; as a matter of fact, he may simply allude to, suggest his ineffable experience. The simile in this opening scene is a further reminder of the metaphorical *modus operandi* that Dante dwells on for signification. But there is more.

Here, worthy of note in relation to the metaphorical mode is the strategy of specular reflection used as a means of language articulation. Dante's transcendental vision takes place by a specular reflection when he looks into Beatrice's eyes. It is in that moment that, by "watching her", within him, an indescribable phenomenon occurred and suddenly led him to cross over the human limits. In this instance, even if specular reflection may be employed as a metaphor, it "cannot be taken as sign" and neither can it "properly be called an image" (Eco 1976a, 202). Specular reflection cannot be taken as a sign or image because

it does not stand *for* something else; on the contrary it stands *in front of* something, it exists not instead of but because of the presence of that something; when that something disappears the pseudo image in the mirror disappears too.

(Eco 1976a, 202; De Benedictis 2012, 188–89)

Even so and irrespective of the shortcomings concerning specular reflections, mainly because they are not able to stand as true signs and/or images, what matters is that Dante used specular reflections quite a few times in the *Par.* In what way did he use specular reflections and for what purpose?

The relevant aspect about specular reflections in the *Par.* is that they hint at an additional form of signification established by the metaphorical mode, although exceptional and unstable in their ephemeral manifestation. Reflected images foresee transference (and here we do not need to go into the field of physics and discuss incoming light (incident rays) and bounced away light (reflected rays) to acknowledge the role of motion and image transference in such a process). The wayfarer's exceptional and ineffable understanding of "*Trasumanar*" is a matter of an indirect (reflected) knowledge. Dante's original contribution to the metaphorical mode through specular reflections is to point out, as a rule, that God cannot be substituted by any linguistic sign because impossible to correlate and therefore, to codify, an inadequate expression with an unknown content. Nonetheless, the linguistic sign, through the metaphorical mode and the added function of reflected transference may only refer to God (source of reflected transference, probability of a denotable meaning) when God is co-present with and while the specular reflection takes place. Dante strengthens and emphasizes this aspect of our human knowledge, which takes place *per speculum in aenigmate*, because it is the only form of expression that may allow him to carry on with signification. Yet, specular images are not able to perform such a function alone and, to avoid this defect, Dante carefully creates them on the

analogical model of the *exemplum*, as in the case of Glaucus. Another occurrence where Dante uses specular reflections as signifying strategy is the one of the angelic Thrones. They communicate God's judgement to heavenly souls yet again by means of specular reflections: "Sù sono specchi, voi dicete Troni/onde refulge a noi Dio giudicante;" ("Above are mirrors Thrones is what you call them/and from them God in judgment shines on us' ", *Par.* 9.61–62). Beatrice's disappearance from the wayfarer's side is another example that punctuates this aspect and, after St. Bernard tells Dante where she is, he looks up and: "...vidi lei che si faceva coronal/reflettendo da sé li etterni rai" ("...[I] saw that round her now a crown took shape as she reflected the eternal rays", *Par.* 31.71–72).

The compelling aspect that supports our claim is the actual layout of *Par.*'s exordium where the poet discusses specular images in connection with Glaucus' *exemplum* and confirms that they may exist and add signification to metaphorical modality only because the example exists. After the pilgrim sees what is reflected into Beatrice's eyes,

*Beatrice tutta ne l'etterne rote
fissa con li occhi stava; e io in lei
le luci fissi, di là sù remote.
Nel suo aspetto tal dentro mi fei,
qual si fé Glauco nel gustar de l'erba... (Par.1. 64-68)*
[The eyes of Beatrice were all intent
on the eternal circles; from the sun,
I turned aside; I set my eyes on her.
In watching her, within me I was changed
as Glaucus changed, tasting the herb...]

he does not say what he sees, but only says that he is changed as Glaucus was and, by the *terzina* that follows in the text, he confirms the pattern of ineffable signification based on specular reflection (*per speculum*) which exists because of and only because it is underpinned by the *exemplum*:

*Trasumanar significar per verba
non si poria; però l'esempio basti
a cui esperienza grazia serba. (Par. 1. 70-72)*
[Passing beyond the human cannot be
worded; let Glaucus serve as simile—
until grace grant you the experience.]

By pairing up *Par.*1.64–68 and *Par.* 1. 70–72, once again we learn that Dante does not say anything, he does not and cannot name what he sees reflected into Beatrice's eyes. Nonetheless, he is able to signify and tells the reader that Glaucus' story may suffice and serve as a simile in order to word

his experience. That is to say, signification remains still in the Pauline sense *per speculum in aenigmate*, but the metaphorical mode, with an added form of transference, as in the case of specular images, gains visibility through poetry and grants Dante the privilege of speaking about God's ineffable kingdom up to the end of his journey, up to the point in which he is "*facie ad faciem*" with God.

Before discussing allegory, which is a more sophisticated way of content transference, one last thing that we may add regarding metaphors in the *DC* and particularly in the *Par.* (as I mentioned in passing near the beginning of section 5.4), is that through metaphors Dante is in the position of creating new relations among existing categories of signification and, therefore, able to suggest new ontological possibilities dwelling in the unexplored domain of language. As content transcends human comprehension in the *Par.*, language becomes exceptionally metaphorical. In *canto* 33 alone, the reader may find over seventy cases of metaphors and similes among which, some are not only the most beautiful but also the most powerful in terms of ineffable signification.

5.5 The allegorical mode

Within reach of the metaphorical domain, allegory has the function to maintain structurally active and according to context and textual circumstances, meaning transference from a codified literal sense to a deeper sense in order to address an uncodifiable, ineffable language. When Dante completed the *cantica* of the *Par.*, he sent it to his patron from Verona Cangrande della Scala and attached a dedicatory/commentary letter to the *cantica* which is known as Dante's *Epistle to Cangrande* (*Ep.* 13). In such a letter Dante tells Cangrande that the correct way to read the *DC* is according to four senses of signification:

Ad evidentiam itaque dicendorum sciendum est quod istius operis non est simplex sensus, ymo dici potest polisemos, hoc est plurium sensum; nam primus sensus est quid habetur per litteram, alius est qui habetur per significata per litteram. Et primus dicitur litteralis, secundus vero allegoricus sive moralis sive anagogicus.

.....
Et quanquam isti sensus, mistici variis appellentur nominibus, generaliter omnes dici possunt allegorici, cum sint a litterali sive historiali diversi.

(Dante 1979b, *Ep.*13.7.20–22)

[For me to be able to present what I am going to say, you must know that the sense of this work is not simple, rather it may be called polysemantic, that is, of many senses; the first sense is that which comes from the letter, the second is that of that which is signified by the letter.

And the first is called the literal, the second allegorical or moral or anagogical.

.....
And though these mystical senses are called by various names, in general all can be called allegorical, because they are different from the literal or the historical.]¹⁶

In a few words Dante tells Cangrande that the *DC* must be read according to four senses and if we put the literal aside for a moment, what he calls allegorical, moral and anagogical are, basically, all senses that belong to the allegorical mode. This is also a common passage on which scholars have focussed their attention concerning Dante's definition of allegory. Also, while we have a fairly clear definition of allegory, we lack a definition of metaphor in Dante. To a certain extent this is understandable because Dante was mainly concerned with giving the *DC* a structural characteristic that would mirror Sacred Scripture's way of writing and which, the latter, is mainly shaped by the allegory of the theologians.

For the purpose of this study, the first thing we should do is to shed light on whether or not there is a difference between metaphor and allegory in Dante. Based on the definition above the critical part is: "*primus sensus est quid habetur per litteram, alius est qui habetur per significata per litteram.*" The detail that clearly establishes the difference is the semantic relatedness between the codified content value of the literal sense (*sensus ...quid abetur per litteram*) and the other (*alius*), that is, the allegorical, the supersense *qui habetur per significata per litteram*. At first sight we are tempted to say that allegory is a good, lengthened metaphor and that there is no difference between the two. Instead, we need to realize that, indeed, there is a subtle difference and it is particularly centered on the mode of signification. The mode of signification of allegory is based on the ever-present, inferred suggestion to the reader to look for a deeper sense in the text which is directly anchored to and contextually authorized by the codified literal sense. In other words, the content value of the letter does not disappear with the pursuit of the allegorical meaning. The literal retains its status as literal meaning and, furthermore, it becomes the verbal embodiment, the *umbra* (shadow) of the allegorical. In a wide-ranging manner and more specifically with the *DC*, the literal sense is the initial, the fundamental point of orientation for the reader to determine whether some language signs have metaphorical or allegorical value within the text's context. On the other hand, the literal level of the metaphor disappears when the metaphorical pursuit of meaning is established, since the literal meaning would become literally absurd. We can literally say that a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf blocked Dante's path and, eventually, be enticed to look deeper for an allegorical significance that we may ascribe to the three animals. Yet, if we say that Dante is a leopard, or a lion, or a

she-wolf, literally, we are lying and, basically, we have just said an absurdity. If we use the elementary rule and say that metaphor reveals by concealing, we can add the other elementary rule and say that allegory reveals by uncovering.

The word “*rota*” (wheel) of *Par.* 1.76 is an instance of the allegorical and not of the metaphorical choice. It is so because if we take such an expression on the literal level, we can immediately realize that the literal sense remains intact. At the same time, we may question ourselves and ask: “How can such a word acquire a deeper meaning insofar as it is demanded by contextual necessity but without erasing the meaning of the letter?” While keeping the literal meaning uncompromised, the referent to which we may attribute “wheel” is something that transcends our finite, temporal faculties. It connotes the “*Primum mobile*” which represents the universal motion and the connecting point between God and the universe. It does not depend on anything and it manifests God’s perfection. It is the origin of time and space and everything that is contained within time and space. Yet, itself, is not contained by anything that exists in time and space. It represents the unfathomable human pathfinder of perfection and functionality, and God’s outpouring of infinite and eternal perfection. As we can see, although the final signification carried by the allegorical sense connotes God’s infinite and eternal perfection, the literal meaning is not erased and tossed out because of no value or purpose, but stands discrete and uncontaminated to additionally vehicle the path for the allegorical sense(s) in a connected manner. That the allegorical senses follow this patten is clearly stated by Dante himself in *Conv.* 2.1.8–12:

... E in dimostrar questo, sempre lo litterale dee andare innanzi, sì come quello ne la cui sentenza li altri sono inchiusi, e senza lo quale sarebbe impossibile ed irazionale intendere a li altri, e massimamente a lo allegorico. È impossibile, però che in ciascuna cosa che ha dentro e di fuori, è impossibile venire al dentro se prima non si viene al di fuori: onde, con ciò sia cosa che ne le scritte [la litterale sentenza] sia sempre lo di fuori, impossibile venire a l’altre, massimamente a l’allegorica, senza prima venire a la litterale... Onde con ciò sia cosa che la litterale sentenza sempre sia subietto e materia de l’altre, massimamente de l’allegorica, impossibile è prima venire a la conoscenza de l’altre che a la sua. Ancora è impossibile però che in ciascuna cosa, naturale ed artificiale, è impossibile procedere, se prima non è fatto lo fondamento,... [O]nde con ciò sia cosa che ’l dimostrare sia edificazione di scienza, e la litterale dimostrazione sia fondamento de l’altre, massimamente de l’allegorica, impossibile è a l’altre venire prima che a quella.

[... In this kind of explication, the literal should always come first, as being the sense in whose meaning the others are enclosed, and without which it would be impossible and illogical to attend to the

other senses, and especially the allegorical. It would be impossible because in everything that has an inside and an outside it is impossible to arrive at the inside without first arriving at the outside; consequently, since in what is written down the literal meaning is always the outside, it is impossible to arrive at the other senses, especially the allegorical, without first arriving at the literal... Consequently, since the literal meaning is always the subject and material of the other senses, especially of the allegorical, it is impossible to come to an understanding of them before coming to an understanding of it. Moreover, it would be impossible because in every natural or artificial thing it is impossible to proceed unless the foundation is laid... [C]onsequently, since explication is the building up of knowledge, and the explication of the literal sense is the foundation of the others, especially of the allegorical, it is impossible to arrive at the other senses without first arriving at it.]

(Dante, *Conv.* 1990a, 41–42)

The literal sense in Dante's treatment is the indispensable linguistic and semiotic foundation even where the text and context require an allegorical schema. For it is "*figura*" (figure), the material "sign" comprehensive of its denotation which remains the same even after the final *denotatum/denotata* have changed into allegory. The literal sense is the logical groundwork upon which we construct allegorical connotations and not the other way around. In fact, the literal sense can exist by itself insofar as it contains the two indispensable semiotic elements: 1) a physical expression plane with 2) a codified *denotatum* of the content plane. Based on these characteristics of the literal sense, can we say the same of the allegorical sense? Of course not! In order to exist, it has to take the "outside" expression plane of the literal. Moreover, the allegorical *denotata*, which do not exist in a codified manner, must be seeded on and discovered by departing from the literal *denotatum*. In semiotic terms, the allegorical senses are comparable to Hjelmslev's "connotative semiotics" (Hjelmslev 1961, 114) or second-order of signification, which consists of a "superelevation of code" or of a recursive process by which the denotative code provides the ground for another code. Or, in Eco's terms: "there is a connotative semiotics when there is a semiotics whose expression plane is another semiotics." (1976a, 55) Thus, the literal expression and literal *denotatum* (meaning) are the textual focus and the point of departure for the reader to look for and discover new meanings (*connotata*). They must be foreseen by the text; they must be tested textually and contextually and, finally, they can be included in a relation of pertinence with the literal sense to which they revert uninterruptedly. To summarize and make this point clearer concerning the allegorical function of "*rota*", we can map it out and represent it according to the following diagram:

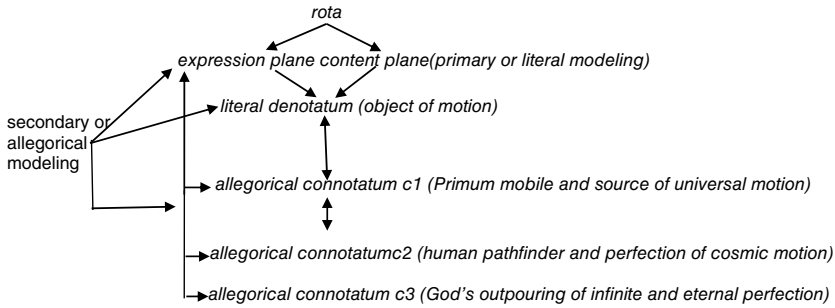


Figure 5.4 Allegorical modeling system between literal denotatum and allegorical connotata C1, C2, C3.

Other words and expressions that may acquire allegorical function can refer to animals, objects, places, and people. The three beasts at the beginning of the *Inf.* (the leopard, the lion, and the she-wolf) preserve their literal meaning because, on the literal plane, Dante might have truly encountered these beasts in a dark forest (dark forest itself is an allegory), but we also know that their deeper meaning is not the literal but the allegorical pertinences that they display. The same thing we can say of human beings when they become “*figura*” or type of something else. This is the case of Dante’s first guide Virgil (human wisdom), or Beatrice (divine love) or San Bernard (supreme mystic and epitome of contemplation), just to mention the three guides of the entire work. As in the case of “*rota*”, they too can be analyzed according to the same modeling system and require the identical linking pattern between the denotative and connotative planes.

Dante’s frame of reference regarding the allegorical mode is the well known biblical Psalm 113: “*In exitu Israel da Egypto*” that the poet cites in *Pur.* 2. 46 and, with the specific purpose to explain the functioning method of the allegory, in *Conv.* 2.1.2–7 and in *Ep.*13.7. 21–22. One important point that we must clarify here is that when we put *Conv.* 2.1.2–7 and *Ep.*13.7.21–22 face to face regarding the allegory of the DC, most scholars¹⁷ have made a clear distinction between the allegory of the poets Dante suggests in the *Conv.* and the allegory of the theologians that he instead proposes in *Ep.* 13. The reason why they made such a distinction (which to a certain extent is reasonable) is based on the particular description Dante gives in the *Conv.* and in *Ep.* 13. In the *Conv.* Dante says:

... [L]e scritte si possono intendere e deonsi esponere massimamente per quattro sensi. L'uno si chiama litterale, [e questo è quello che non si stende più oltre che la lettera de le parole fittizie, sì come sono le favole de li poeti. L'altro si chiama allegorico,]¹⁸ e questo è quello che si nasconde sotto 'l manto di queste favole, ed è una veritate ascosa sotto bella menzogna: sì come quando dice Ovidio che Orfeo facea con la cetera mansuete le fiere, e li arbori e le pietre a sé muovere; che vuol

dire che lo savio uomo con lo strumento de la sua voce fa[r]ia mansuocere e umiliare li crudeli cuori, e fa[r]ia muovere a la sua volontade coloro che non hanno vita di scienza e d'arte: e coloro che non hanno vita ragionevole alcuna sono quasi come pietre. E perché questo nascondimento fosse trovato per li savi, nel penultimo trattato si mostrerà. Veramente li teologi questo senso prendono altrimenti che li poeti; ma però che mia intenzione è qui lo modo del li poeti seguitare, prendo lo senso allegorico secondo che per li poeti è usato.

Lo terzo senso si chiama morale, e questo è quello che li lettori deono intentamente andare appostando per le scritture, ad utilitate di loro e di loro discenti: sì come appostare si può ne lo Evangelio, quando Cristo salio lo monte per trasfigurarsi, che de li dodici Apostoli menò seco li tre; in che moralmente si può intendere che a le secretissime cose noi dovemo avere poca compagnia.

Lo quarto senso si chiama anagogico, cioè sovrasenso, e questo è quando spiritualmente si spone una scrittura, la quale ancora [sia vera] eziandio nel senso letterale, per le cose significate significa de le superne cose del l'eternal gloria: sì come vedere si può in quello canto del Profeta che dice che, ne l'uscita del popolo d'Israel d'Egitto, Giudea è fatta santa e libera. Che avvegna essere vero secondo la lettera sia manifesto, non meno è vero quello che spiritualmente s'intende, cioè che ne l'uscita de l'anima dal peccato, essa sia fatta santa e libera in sua potestate.

(2.1.2-7)

[... [S]criptures¹⁹ can be understood and ought to be expounded principally in four senses. The first is called the literal, and this is that which does not go beyond the literal sense of the fictitious words,²⁰ as in the fables of poet. The next is called the allegorical, and this is the one that is hidden beneath the cloak of these fables, and is a truth hidden beneath a beautiful fiction. Thus Ovid says that with his lyre Orpheus tamed wild beasts and made trees and rocks move toward him, which is to say that the wise man with the instrument of his voice makes cruel hearts grow tender and humble and move to his will those who do not devote their lives to knowledge and art; and those who have no rational life whatsoever are almost like stones. Why this kind of concealment was devised by the wise will be shown in the penultimate book. Indeed the theologians take this sense otherwise than do the poets; but since it is my intention here to follow the method of the poets, I shall take the allegorical sense according to the usage of the poets.

The third sense is called moral, and this is the sense that teachers should intently seek to discover throughout the scriptures, for their own profit and that of their pupils; as, for example, in the Gospel we may discover that when Christ ascended the mountain to be transfigured, of the twelve Apostles he took with him but three, the moral meaning of which is that in matters of great secrecy we should have few companions.

The fourth sense is called anagogical, that is to say, beyond the senses; and this occurs when a scripture is expounded in a spiritual sense which, although it is true also in the literal sense, signifies by means of signified things...²¹ The supernal things of eternal glory, as may be seen in the song of the Prophet which says that when the people of Israel went out of Egypt, Judea was made whole and free. For although it is manifestly true according to the letter, that which is spiritually intended is no less true, namely, that when the soul departs from sin it is made whole and free in its power.]

(1990a, 40–41)

Key-elements that prompted scholars to consider the *Conv.*'s description an allegory of the poets are: "*parole fittizie, sì come sono le favole de li poeti*", "*veritate ascosa sotto bella menzogna*", "*li teologi questo senso prendono altrimenti che li poeti, ma però che mia intenzione è qui lo modo del li poeti seguitare, prendo lo senso allegorico secondo che per li poeti è usato.*" As a result of these findings, Singleton suggested that "Dante abandoned *Convivio* because he came to see that in choosing to build this work [*Comedy*] according to the allegory of poets, he had ventured down a false way." (93) Hence, Singleton's conclusion is that the *DC*'s allegory is an allegory of the theologians. At this point we should question his conclusion and ask ourselves: "Is this a convincing conclusion that makes the allegory of the poets incompatible with the allegory of the theologians which, the latter, is the one Dante expounds in *Ep.* 13?" Not entirely, even though it may appear to be so. In the citation above, there are linguistic details that may shed light on the constitutive elements and descriptive compatibility that we find between the *Conv.* and *Ep.* 13. In order to compare the two descriptions, let us first reproduce the excerpt from *Ep.* 13:

Ad evidentiam itaque dicendorum sciendum est quod istus operis non est simplex sensus, ymo dici potest polisemos, hoc est plurius sensum: nam primus sensus est qui habetur per litteram, alius est qui habetur per significata per litteram. Et primus dicitur litteralis, secundus vero allegoricus sive moralis sive anagogicus. Qui modus tractandi, ut melius pateat, potest considerari in hiis versibus: "In exitu Israel de Egipto, domus Iacob de populo barbaro, facta est Iudea sanctificatio eius, Israel potestas eius". Nam si ad litteram solam inspiciamus, significatur nobis exitus filiorum Israel de Egipto, tempore Moysis; si ad allegoriam, nobis significatur nostra redemptio facta per Christum; si ad moralem sensum, significatur nobis conversio anime de luctu et miseria peccati ad statum gratie; si ad anagogicum, significatur exitus anime sancte ab huius corruptionis servitute ad eterne glorie libertatem. Et quanquam isti sensus mistici variis appellentur nominibus, generaliter omnes dici possunt allegorici, cum sint a litterali sive historiali diversi.

(7. 20–22)

[For me to be able to present what I am going to say, you must know that the sense of this work is not simple, rather it may be called polysemantic, that is, of many senses; the first sense is that which comes from the letter, the second is that of that which is signified by the letter. And the first is called the literal, the second allegorical or moral or anagogical. Which method of treatment, that it may be clearer, can be considered through these words: 'When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a barbarous people, Judea was made his sanctuary, Israel his dominion' (Douay-Rheims, Ps. 113.1–2). If we look at it from the letter alone it means to us the exit of the Children of Israel from Egypt at the time of Moses; if from allegory, it means for us our redemption done by Christ; if from the moral sense, it means to us the conversion of the soul from the struggle and misery of sin to the status of grace; if from the anagogical, it means the leave taking of the blessed soul from the slavery of this corruption to the freedom of eternal glory. And though these mystical senses are called by various names, in general all can be called allegorical, because they are different from the literal or the historical.]

(Marchant's trans. <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/cangrande.english.html>)

What we may consider agreeable and generally accepted features that are present in both descriptions are:

- 1 Scriptures must be expounded according to polysemy ([L]e scrittura... deonsi esponere massimamente per quattro sensi), (istus operis non est simplex sensus, ymo dici potest polisemos);
- 2 the four senses are: literal, allegorical, moral, anagogical (L'uno si chiama litterale,...L'altro si chiama allegorico,... Lo terzo senso si chiama morale,... Lo quarto senso si chiama anagogico), (primus sensus est...litteralis,... secundus vero allegoricus sive moralis sive anagogicus);
- 3 Psalm 113 is cited in both descriptions to explain the four senses (sì come vedere si può in quello canto del Profeta che dice che, ne l'uscita del popolo d'Israel d'Egitto, Giudea è fatta santa e libera), ("In exitu Israel de Egipto, domus Iacob de populo barbaro, facta est Iudea sanctificatio eius, Israel potestas eius");
- 4 the literal sense that does not go beyond the letter is similar in both cases (L'uno si chiama litterale, [e questo è quello che non si stende più oltre che la lettera), (primus sensus est qui habetur per litteram).

The critical points that have generated several speculations and disagreements on this matter are in reference to "*parole fittizie*" (fictitious words) Dante adds to the literal sense and which he compares to "*le favole de li poeti*" (fables of poets). Also, in describing the allegorical sense he says that it is "*quello che si nasconde sotto 'l manto di queste favole, ed è una*

veritate ascosa sotto bella menzogna" (is the one that is hidden beneath the cloak of these fables, and is a truth hidden beneath a beautiful lie). And, as a last point, Dante clearly makes a distinction between the allegory of poets and the allegory of theologians as they all employ the allegorical sense. In the *Conv.* Dante intends to follow the mode of the poets (*Veramente li teologi questo senso prendono altrimenti che li poeti; ma però che mia intenzione è qui lo modo de li poeti seguitare, prendo lo senso allegorico secondo che per li poeti è usato*), (the theologians take this sense otherwise than do the poets; but since it is my intention here to follow the method of the poets, I shall take the allegorical sense according to the usage of the poets).

In the *Conv.*, the definition of the literal sense contains "fictitious words" (*è quello che non si stende più oltre che la lettera de le parole fittizie*),²² and because Dante includes "*parole fittizie*" in the definition, we assume that also the sense/meaning of fictitious words is fictitious. This type of reasoning follows the pattern: if P (fictitious words) is true, then Q (literal sense) is true and, consequently, fictitious words imply fictitious sense/meaning. Such a pattern has only the appearance of good logic which, fundamentally, is an example of flawed logic because here we are dealing with language, and language entails a bi-planar model that consists of an expression plane and a content plane. Fictitious words point toward the issue of lying and lying with language is not an obvious matter. As a medium of communication and signification, language partakes of the metaphorical mode, and its physical condition, be it written or spoken, always transfers, carries its meaning beyond itself. This way, language problematizes the correlation between a physically present expression and a non-physical, abstract content, insofar as any linguistic act is driven by the continuous substitution/postponement of its referent. For this reason, we must acknowledge that verbal signs are illusory and, as such, make us believe that they supply an actual object of signification but this is not the case. The object is illusory, it is an intrinsic lie of which verbal signs are repositories. Instead, the logic we must apply to language is first of all a logic that challenges the Aristotelean principle of non-contradiction (*Metaphysics* 4. 3. 1005b, 19–20), which predicates that: "it is impossible for the same thing to belong and not to belong at the same time to the same thing and in the same respect". The verbal sign challenges such a principle by concurrently eluding the rule of non-contradiction and retaining the ability to remain logical. That is, if according to Aristotle we cannot predicate about the same object that *is* and *is not* in the same time and in the same respect, with the verbal sign this is possible. It is possible due to the dualistic nature of sign and specifically for that which concerns meaning. When we look at the content plane of a sign, we soon realize that we are faced with an illusory antinomy as the meaning's referent presents an *is/is not* provision. For it *is* referent insofar as it is able to *refer* to something, and indeed it is so because we cannot say that meaning does not refer to anything in the sense of being a bare nothingness. Yet, it is incomplete

and challengeable as a predicate because it is not a true self. As such, we must say that the referent of meaning *is not* because it lacks its own individuality and independence. We can never hold it firm; it is very slippery and constantly changed and postponed by the semiotic process. The distinction that the verbal sign *is/is not* in terms of reference serves the purpose to understand its logical value based on referentiality and to shed light on how we acquire knowledge of the world through the verbal medium. Moreover, according to the power of referentiality, the verbal medium is endowed with the possibility of lying and telling the truth simultaneously. What all this means is that “*parole fittizie*” Dante uses to define the literal sense in the *Conv.* point toward the *mode* in which words signify, as well as they are an indication that he was fully aware of the semiotic function of language.²³ He considers words fictitious because they themselves are not the actual object. They instead represent, substitute the object and stand in the place of the object. While this fictitious and deceitful dimension of words is ever-present in language, they have the primary purpose to represent, to reveal (“*dēloūsi*”)²⁴ something, which semiotically is what we call *interpretant* or signified (sense, meaning). The adjective “*fittizie*” denotes the process of signification and not the sense or meaning of words. Meaning is *true* but, since it is unconditionally tied to the expression plane and partakes of a semio-linguistic system, it is also *fictitious*.

With this new frame of reference in mind and taking into account that Dante here is essentially talking about the way in which language works as a means of signification, if we take “*primus sensus est qui habetur per litteram*” (the first sense is that which comes from the letter), we realize that even in *Ep.* 13, Dante treats the literal sense as a vehicle for signification. Words are not autoreferential objects insofar as meaning is concerned, they are not the *verbum incarnatum* (the incarnate word) as Singleton argued (93), but semiotic material. In fact, in the same passage Dante also adds: “*Nam si ad litteram solam inspiciamus, significatur nobis exitus filiorum Israel de Egipto, tempore Moysis*” (If we look at it from the letter alone *it means*²⁵ to us the exit of the Children of Israel from Egypt at the time of Moses).

The important detail in the definition is “signification” which addresses what “it means” and not what “it is”. Now, even if we cite the classical definition of the allegory of theologians by Thomas Aquinas we persistently bump up against signification:

*Auctor Sacrae Scripturae est Deus, in cuius potestate est ut non solum voces ad **significandum** accommodet, quod etiam homo facere potest, sed etiam res ipsas. Et ideo cum in omnibus scientiis voces **significant**, hoc habet proprium ista scientia, quod ipsae res **significatae** per voces, etiam **significant** aliquid. Illa ergo prima **significatio**, qua voces **significant** res, pertinet ad primum sensum, qui est sensus historicus vel litteralis. Illa vero **significatio** qua res **significatae** per voces, iterum res alias **significant**, dicitur sensus spiritualis, qui super litteralem fundatur et eum supponit.*

(*Summa Theologica* (ST), 1.1.10, resp. My emphasis in bold)

[The author of Sacred Scripture is God, who has it in His power to use not only words for *signifying* (which even a man can do), but also the very things themselves. And so even though words are used to *signify* in all the sciences, it is peculiar to the science of sacred doctrine that the things *signified* by its words likewise *signify* something themselves. Thus, the first type of *signification*, by which words *signify* things, pertains to the first sense, which is the historical or literal sense. On the other hand, the type of *signification* by which the things *signified* by words in turn *signify* other things, is called the spiritual sense, which is built upon the literal sense and presupposes it.]²⁶ (My emphasis in italics)

The fundamental aspect of the entire citation is “signification”, etymologically from “*signum facere*” (making signs, mostly verbal signs), and signs stand in for something, they stand in for meaning, their physical presence is to vehicle meaning, but meaning is not the physical sign itself. We cannot take the sentence: “*Auctor Sacrae Scripturae est Deus*” as a scene in which God is physically present as an author, but rather as an idea (meaning) denoting inspiration. This example is to point out that even Aquinas must stay within language, he cannot step out of it and dismiss its rules when language is a major player responsible for the creation of reality of the external world. Moreover, even the parabolic sense (which is fictitious and comparable to the fables of poets) is engendered in the literal sense according to Aquinas: “...*sensus parabolicus sub litterali continetur; nam per voces significatur aliquid proprie et aliquid figurative. Nec est litteralis sensus ipsa figura; sed id quod est figuratum.*” (ST 1.1.10, rep. 3) (“The parabolic sense is included under the literal sense. For in a parable something is properly signified by the words and something is figuratively signified; and the literal sense is not the figure itself, but rather that which the figure is a figure of.”)²⁷ Also, in relation to the subdivision Aquinas makes in the literal and the spiritual senses, Singleton cited St. Augustine’s *De trinitate* 15.9.15 in which he uses the description *in verbis* and *in facto* to refer respectively to the literal and the allegorical senses. And, indeed, St. Augustine says: “*Sed ubi allegoriam nominavit Apostolus, non in verbis eam reperit, sed in facto*”²⁸ (“But when the apostle spoke of an allegory, he does not find it in the words, but in the fact”).²⁹ What St. Augustine is saying here is that the true sense (*in facto*) does not dwell in words themselves (*in verbis*) but in what they actually mean; and since he is speaking of the allegorical mode, the meaning that vehicles interpretation (true meaning) must be allegorical. And this is not all! According to St. Augustine, “*Omines doctrina vel rerum est vel signorum, sed res per signa discuntur.*”³⁰ (“All instruction is either about things or about signs; but things are learned by means of signs.”)³¹ Moreover, “*signa divinitus data quae Scripturis sanctis continentur per homines nobis indicate sunt qui ea conscripserunt.*”³² (“even the signs which have been given us of God, and which are contained in the Holy Scriptures, were made known to us through men — those, namely, who wrote the

Scriptures.”)³³ That is to say that even with Scriptures and the allegory of theologians, the latter being addressed as allegory *in factis*, that which forms the event of such an allegory is a matter of language; it is carried and signified through the human written word. Therefore, “*est miserabilis animae servitus, signa pro rebus accipere; et supra creaturam corpoream, oculum mentis ad hauriendum aeternum lumen levare non posse.*” (DDC 3.5.9) (“it is surely a miserable slavery of the soul to take signs for things, and to be unable to lift the eye of the mind above what is corporeal and created, that it may drink in eternal light.”)³⁴ In short, the fundamental aspect with St. Augustine’s remarks is that we are dealing with language that is made up of words and words must be taken as signs and *not* signs as things (“*signa pro rebus accipere*”). It is a semiotic punctuation of the signifying system of language that does not make a distinction between a poetic way of writing and God’s inspired way of writing.³⁵

Let us now return to Dante and, more importantly, we need to note that even in the *Conv.* where Dante openly speaks of the allegory of the poets, the literal sense is not different from the one we find in *Ep.13* which, the latter, according to Singleton is, to be sure, an allegory of the theologians. In the *Conv.* Dante states:

... *E in dimostrar questo, sempre lo litterale dee andare innanzi, sì come quello ne la cui sentenza li altri sono inchiusi, e senza lo quale sarebbe impossibile ed irrazionale intendere a li altri, e massimamente a lo allegorico.*

(2.1.8)

[... In this kind of explication the literal should always come first, as being the sense in whose meaning the others are enclosed, and without which it would be impossible and illogical to attend to the other senses, and especially the allegorical.]

By recognizing that in *Ep. 13* the allegory of the theologians treats the literal sense as the embodiment of the allegorical, what is the difference between the literal sense of *Ep. 13* and that of the *Conv.*? There is no difference. As a matter of fact, in the *Conv.* Dante plainly states that the literal sense is the embodiment of all others, particularly of the allegorical. Therefore, and I agree with Singleton that the allegory of the theologians follows the patten of “this and that”, and that in the *DC* we may find the same patten. Nonetheless, the statement Dante makes in the *Conv.* (which refers to the allegory of the poets) is similar to that of *Ep. 13* regarding the literal sense. Why, then, does Singleton say that it follows the pattern of “this for that” and not of “this and that” like in *Ep. 13*, since we have an embodiment of the literal sense in both cases? The literal sense contained in the theory of four senses that was common in the Middle Ages and condensed in the distich attributed to Nicholas of Lyre or to Augustine of

Dacia that: “*Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, / Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia*”³⁶ (The letter teaches the event, allegory [teaches] what you should believe, the moral [teaches] what you should do, anagogy [teaches] where you should be going) remains the same in terms of *what* the four senses are).

Also, and as Robert Hollander remarked (1969, 38): “How can Dante claim that the poem made up of *parole fittizie*, a poem which is *bella menzogna*, a poem which the literal sense is not historical [true], that such a poem has *four* senses, including two of the senses which are precisely reserved for Holy Scripture, as he himself has apparently reserved them in the previous commentary?” And the answer Hollander provides is that “although he [Dante] admits that the poetry of *Convivio* is a *bella menzogna*, he also insists that it is of such a high purport that it can have the kind of significance usually found only in Scripture.” (1969, 38–39) And finally concludes by staking his position and saying that in the *DC*, “in a very clear example of Dante’s use of the allegory of the poets, we find that the technique is combined with the allegory of the theologians.” (1969, 245) A similar view is also offered by Teodolinda Barolini in saying that “Dante self-consciously used the means of fiction—poetic and narrative strategies—in the service of a vision he believed to be true, thus creating the hybrid he defined ‘truth that has the face of a lie’—‘un ver c’ha faccia di menzogna’.” (1992, 11) By the same token, I would like to add that the difference dwells in two aspects: 1) poets take words that function in a true linguistic, semiotic system while theologians take words as true objects, as the *verbum incarnatum*. Giuseppe Mazzotta, nuanced this aspect with a slightly different view, yet he hinted at the same aspect by remarking that fiction and historicity must be viewed as acting together because the literal sense, as all other senses of signification, is tied to the act of reading and “reading is an imaginary operation in which truth and fiction, far from being mutually exclusive categories, are simultaneously engendered by the ambiguous structure of metaphoric language”. (1979, 233) 2) Poets may often use the allegorical mode, not necessarily in a strict allegorical sense but in a more general metaphorical way whereby the transference of meaning from the metaphorical word cannot, in a meaningful way, be linked to and be traceable to the literal sense. In fact, if we take the example Aristotle uses in *Rhetoric* 1405a, where he says that “pirates...call themselves ‘purveyors’” of commercial goods, the analogy with “merchants” is witty but difficult to spot and it has nothing to do with the literal sense. But by taking a step in this direction, we have moved away from the domain of allegory and entered that of metaphor. This aspect is also the central characteristic that distinguishes metaphor from allegory.

In the language system, either we are dealing with the allegory of the poets or the allegory of the theologians, truth and lie cannot be envisioned as separate, autonomous entities which act independently from one another, but they are entities that act together. Therefore, the “distinction between

poetic allegory and theological allegory depends not on an intrinsic separation of truth and lies in the literal sense, but on an act of interpretation: ‘the theologians take the literal sense otherwise than poets do.’” (Mazzotta 1979, 235) And here I would add that the act of interpretation must take into account the philosophical implication of verbal signs as units of a semiotic system which must observe Dante’s *modus significandi* in that language is: “*sensuale signum et rationale...nam sensuale quid est, in quantum sonus est; rationale vero, in quantum aliquid significare videtur ad placitum.*” (DVE 1.3.2–3) (“rational and sensory sign...for it is sensory in that it is sound and rational in that it can be seen to signify anything, according to man’s will.”) Based on what we have been discussing so far, we can say, and certainly share Sarolli’s view, that the allegory of the DC is a special allegory (“*speciale allegoria*”, 22), and also that there is a close relationship and interdependence between the allegory of the poets and the allegory of the theologians (31), but not that the two allegorical systems cannot be mixed, particularly in reference to the semiotic-linguistic construction and mode of signification. As a matter of fact and by supporting the view that *Ep.* 13 is authentic, the “*modus tractandi*” Dante expounds therein (9.27) is: “*poeticus, fictivus, descriptivus, digressivus, transumptivus*” (poetical, fictive, descriptive, digressive, transumptive [metaphorical]), which are characteristics of the poetic discourse and do not act alone, (at least according to the way in which Dante presents them in *Ep.* 13), but they are joint with the: “*diffinitivus, divisivus, probativus, improbativus, et exemplorum positivus*” (definitive, divisive, probative, improbative, and exemplificative) which are characteristics that tradition ascribes to the philosophical and theological discourse. (See Curtius 1953, 233) Unlike what Sarolli claims, Dante does mix them and accomplishes it in a way that is exceptional and groundbreaking insofar as the textual quality of the DC is concerned. Based on the evidence he gives in *Ep.* 13, we can add that he strategically used key-characteristics of both allegories and crafted the text in an unparalleled manner that, by cross-referencing *Conv.*, *Ep.* 13, DVE, and the DC, we can realize that his allegory is distinctively Dantean.³⁷

5.6 The symbolic mode

A relevant aspect that concerns symbol is that the medieval tradition did not classify it separately nor did it make a clear distinction from allegory, figurality, and typology.³⁸ Dante belonged to the same tradition and did not make a clear distinction either. As such, we cannot claim that Dante carried out an explicit segmentation of these tropes and attributed to each specific figurative functions. It is not until the German romantic period and romantic idealism that the term symbol acquired distinctive attention and was considered as an inseparable thing between expression and content, which, in essence, is the work of art itself. With the *internal coherence* of the artistic arrangement, the work of art signifies itself; it signifies its internal

and organic harmony. For this reason, it appears to be untranslatable, “indefinable” or “intransitive”.³⁹ Also, due to the inseparable state of expression and content, whose true content is the work of art itself, insofar as it may stimulate innumerable interpretations, the expression is retained in order to understand the work of art in a deeper manner according to Kant (Eco 1984, 220). Also, for Wackenroder every work of art is an infinite illusion (Eco 1984, 220). With Schelling, the work of art is directly called “symbol” in the sense of hypotyposes (things that are not present but represented as present through self-presentation and analogy), which means that the symbolic image is not only the signified idea but the idea itself and the essence of art. (Eco 1984, 220) Now, if we take the scheme (particularly the scientific scheme) by which the general allows one to arrive at the particular, and keeping in mind that with the allegory from the particular we arrive at the general, with the aesthetic symbol one may achieve the co-presence of both and the subtleties of both methods. (Eco 1984, 221)

According to the same aesthetic view, Goethe draws a distinction between symbol and allegory. “The allegorical [mode] designates directly, whereas the symbolic indirectly.” (Goethe 1902–12, 94) Allegory is transitive, while symbol is intransitive. Allegory addresses the intellect, while symbol addresses perception. Allegory is arbitrary and conventional, while symbol is immediate and motivated. Symbol is a natural image (*bild*) universally understandable. Allegory uses the particular as an example of the general, whereas symbol embodies the general in the particular. Symbol accomplishes the convergence of contraries, it signifies many things at once, it speaks the unspeakable because its content escapes reason. (Eco 1984, 221) Moreover:

Symbolism transforms the experience into an idea, and an idea into an image, in a way in which the idea expressed by the image will always remain interminably active and unattainable and, although expressible in many languages, it remains inexpressible. Allegory transforms the experience in a concept, and a concept into an image, but in a way in which the concept is always defined, contained, and expressible by the image.⁴⁰

Such a distinction, as Eco argues, is typical of romantic aestheticism, which focusses on the effect that the work of art produces, but not on the way in which such an effect is produced. It does not single out the artifice, but only describes the experience embedded in the charm of the artifice. Therefore, it does not explain the “mystery” of art, but only tells the experience of someone who thinks to be taken by the mystery of art. (1984, 221) There is no clear separation between semantic interpretation and aesthetic interpretation; that is, between what is a semiotic phenomenon and what is an aesthetic phenomenon. Also, an aesthetic phenomenon cannot be entirely addressed semiotically. (Eco 1984, 222) The problem that we are faced with

is the way in which the symbol signifies and how we may explain the symbol's possible signification. In other words, we want to find out how signification occurs in a symbol and how it is motivated and directly accomplished through its *expression*. With Hegel, we begin to spot the idea of symbol as an external reality which is suddenly accessible to intuition. Yet, the focus is not how such a reality is perceived by intuition in its immediacy, but rather as it can be comprehended in a wider, more universalizing manner. As such, this view of symbol requires the careful distinction between the *signified* and its *expression*.⁴¹ Nevertheless, and with the provision that symbol is a sign, it does not allow an arbitrary relation between the signified and its expression because, as a sign, it must exhibit, even if imperfectly and ambiguously, an analogical resemblance with the content it conveys. Imperfection and ambiguity are important characteristics because when something is taken as a symbol, humans look for and find in it private insights that do not contain absolute validity for the simple fact that they are private⁴² and not absolute, but that humans attach to them superior feelings of something that is fundamental and universal. (Eco 1984, 224) Therefore, the symbolic sign behaves differently than a typical verbal sign because the correlation between expression and meaning is equivocally analogical and unconventional (private symbol), and equivocally analogical and conventional for the average, public symbol. We will analyze these aspects in detail further down. For now, let us look at the importance of the symbolic mode in the *Par.*

In the opening paragraph of this section, we said that the medieval tradition did not classify symbol separately and neither did it make a clear distinction from allegory, figuralism, and typology. Dante belonged to the same tradition and did not make a clear distinction either. For this reason, we cannot claim that Dante carried out an explicit segmentation of symbol and, consequently, attributed to it specific figurative functions. Be that as it may, if we deliberately assign a specific modal function to symbol, we are not forcing misreading of Dante's text, but we instead attempt to bring to light, reasonably, what the text itself legitimizes as specifically symbolic, namely what the text actually says by singling out symbol from allegory, figure, and type, and of which not even the author was aware according to such a separate segmentation. Symbol inhabits the *DC*; it is a textual evidence that produces interpretations, and we may as well endeavor to understand how it works without compromising or manipulating the medieval semantic fidelity of the text.

A verbal symbol that the reader finds in all the three *cantiche*, though with different connotative implications, is the term "*barca*" (boat) *Inf.* 8.25, *Par.* 2.1, *Par.* 8.80, *Par.* 11.119, *Par.* 16.96, along with its range of synonymy including: "*nave*" (vessel) *Inf.* 3.82, "*navicella*" (little vessel) *Inf.* 17.100, *Pur.* 1.2, *Pur.* 32.129, "*naviglio*" (big boat) *Par.* 2.14. What we find to be certain in these terms is that we do have an expression to which a literal content is correlated to each one. They are codified and formalized conventionally. In

this respect we can say that, like allegory, a symbol keeps the literal sense as provision for the creation and interpretation of the symbolic. Yet, unlike allegory, a symbol behaves in a way that the symbolic expression, in our case “*barca*”, is correlated to a “*content nebula*”, which means that the expression can be correlated (by both sender and receiver) to a wide range of semantic fields and their properties that would be difficult to structure in a particular cultural encyclopedia. (Eco 1984, 225) Therefore, when we come across the term “*barca*” in the *DC*, we want to establish first of all if it is used in the symbolic mode and then proceed to find the most reasonable correlation, and certainly helping ourselves with already codified associations, of which, some common and pertinent ones are: the ship of the Argonauts, Odysseus’ ship, the ship of Aeneas, Noah’s Ark, the “golden ship” of Saint Paul in the *Visio Pauli*, etc. Moreover, by looking at one of the particulars that the semantic field “*barca*” allows, we identify “*legno*” (wood) and, given the freedom of transference from semantic field to semantic field, one may symbolically correlate it with “dark wood” of *Inf.* 1.2, “tree of wisdom” of *Pur.* 24.116, “laurel tree” *Par.* 1.25 and, of course, without neglecting the term “*legno*”, which suggests the symbolic connotation of the “cross” in the Christian tradition and, indeed, with specific occurrences in the *DC* through the actual use of “*croce*” (cross) and “*crocifisso*” (crucifix). But this is not all. Granting that we have the literal correlation between the expression and the content based on the examples we just mentioned, what creates a state of “*content nebula*” (as far as correlation is concerned) is that both producer and interpreter of symbols have the flexibility to attach to the expression their own vague meanings without abiding by the language’s strict semantic rules and correct interpretation. Symbol projects a sort of imperfection of the sign which gives all the impression of destabilizing the semiotic relation between a present expression and a vague, almost absent content. (Eco 1984, 230; see also Fortuna and Gagnolati 2010, 243)

If we focus on the mystical overtone of the *Par.*, the symbolic mode can be described as the point in which the expression of the symbol, which is also the part that is present, when paired with its vague, nebulous content, converges toward content and the two semiotic planes become one thing. According to this pattern, the semiotic system is faced with its greatest challenge in terms of correlation because the expression can be at the same time expression and content and, in turn, the content be content and expression. This sort of challenge and *ratio impossibilis* is such when the sign that has a symbolic function is not taken symbolically, and which it may result to be flawed and useless. Instead, for the person who lives the symbolic experience and the symbolic sign that properly vehicles it, it is and/or it may be different. On this point, Eco argues that the sensation of that which is carried by the expression, although ambiguous and overwhelming, is present and lives in the expression. (1984, 231) In reading Holy Scripture, and Dante’s *Par.*,

letters and names are not [only] conventional means of communication. They are far more. Each one of them represents a concentration of energy and expresses a wealth of meaning which cannot be translated, or not fully at least, into human language.

(Scholem, Eng. trans. 1965, 36; Eco 1984, Eng. trans. 1984, 153)

A close depiction of this landscape we find outlined in *Par.* 33.121–23:

*Oh quanto è corto il dire e come fioco
al mio concetto! E questo, a quel ch'ì vidi,
è tanto, che non basta a dicer 'poco'.*

[How incomplete is speech, how weak, when set
against my thought! And this, to what I saw,
is such—to call it little is too much.]

Moreover, the spectacle of *Par.* 18.70–108 is a compelling testimony of the making of a symbolic sign:

*Io vidi in quella giovial facella
lo sfavillar de l'amor che lì era
segnare a li occhi miei nostra favella,
E come augelli surti di rivera,
quasi congratulando a lor pasture,
fanno di sé or tonda or altra schiera,
sì dentro ai lumi sante creature
volitando cantavano, e faciensi
or D, or I, or L in sue figure.
Prima, cantando, a sua nota moviensi;
poi, diventando l'un di questi segni,
un poco s'arrestavano e taciensi.
O diva Pegasëa che li 'gegni
fai gloriosi e rendili longevi,
ed essi teco le cittadi e ' regni,
illustrami di te, sì ch'io rilevi
le lor figure com'io l'ho concette:
paia tua possa in questi versi brevi!
Mostrarsi dunque in cinque volte sette
vocali e consonanti; e io notai
le parti sì, come mi parver dette.
'DILIGITE IUSTITIAM' primai
fur verbo e nome di tutto 'l dipinto;
'QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM', fur sezzai.
Pocia ne l'emme del vocabol quinto
rimasero ordinate; sì che Giove*

pareva argento lì d'oro distinto.

*E vidi scendere altre luci Dove
era il colmo del l'emme, e lì quietarsi
cantando credo, il ben ch'a sé le move.*

*Poi, come nel percuoter d'i ciocchi arsi
surgono innumerabili faville,*

onde li stolti soglioni agurarsi,

resurger parver quindi più di mille

*luci salir, qual assai e qual poco,
sì come 'l sol che l'accende sortille;*

*e quietata ciascuna in suo loco,
la testa e 'l collo d'un'aguglia vidi
rappresentare a quel distinto foco.*

[I saw within that torch of Jupiter
the sparkling of the love that it contained
design before my eyes the signs we speak.

And just as birds that rise from riverbanks,
as if rejoicing after feeding there,
will form a round flock or another shape,

so, in their lights, the saintly beings sang
and, in their flight, the figures that they spelled
were now a D, now I, and now an L.

First, they moved to the rhythm of their song;
then, after they had finished forming one
letter, they halted for a while, in silence.

O godly Pegasea, you who give
to genius glory and long life, as it,
through you, gives these to kingdoms and to cities,
give me your light that I may emphasize
these signs as I inscribed them in my mind:
your power—may it appear in these brief lines!

Those blessed spirits took the shape of five
times seven vowels and consonants, and I
noted the parts as they were spelled for me.

DILIGITE IUSTITIAM were the verb
and noun that first appeared in that depiction;
QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM followed after.

Then, having formed the M of the fifth word,
those spirits kept their order; Jupiter's
silver, at that point, seemed embossed with gold.

And I saw other lights descending on
the apex of the M and, settling, singing—
I think—the Good that draws them to Itself.

Then, as innumerable sparks rise up

when one strikes burning logs (and in those sparks
fools have a way of reading auguries),
 from that M seemed to surge more than a thousand
lights; and they climbed, some high, some low, just as
the Sun that kindles them assigned positions.
With each light settled quietly in place,
I saw that the array of fire had shaped
the image of an eagle's head and neck.

In the sphere of Jupiter, the blessed souls make themselves visible to Dante the wayfarer as shining lights and by staging a choreographic spectacle of lights. Based on the rhythm of what they were singing and their precise motion, produce shapes in the sky that are fashioned in the likeness of alphabetic letters. The wayfarer initially identifies a *D*, an *I*, and an *L*. Later, in order to be able to actually transcribe all the shapes that the blessed souls formed with thirty-five letters, appearing distinctively five times and marking five distinctive words: “*DILIGITE IUSTITIAM QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM*” (Love justice you who rule the earth), which is also the first verse of the Book of Wisdom, all end up gathering and dwelling on the *M* of “*TERRAM*” in a way that, with an accurate motion, transform the *M* of the Gothic type, into a concrete, eagle-like symbol. It is a transformation that can be rendered in three, distinctive steps, as in the illustration below:

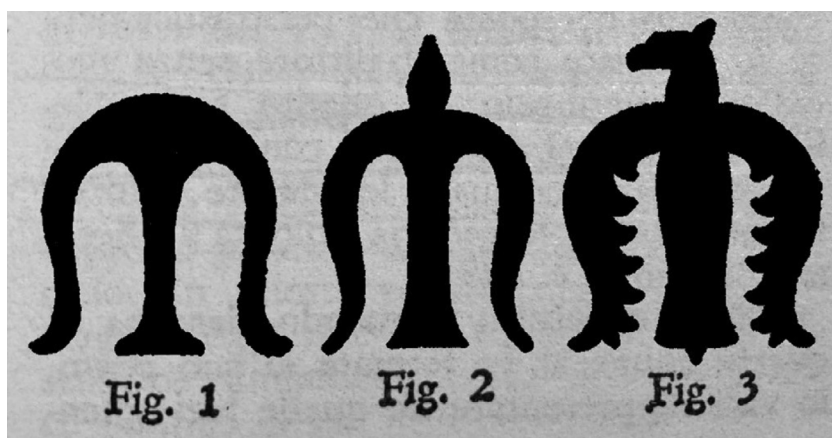


Figure 5.5 Transformation of the alphabetic letter “m” into an eagle symbol.⁴³

This extraordinary spectacle of a three-step creation of symbol is mostly helpful for our inquiry because it shows how to distinguish a symbol from other tropes. Prior to the creation of the symbol, Dante says that in the torch of Jupiter, the sparkling love drew, therein, before his eyes, “*nostra favella*” (the signs we speak), namely alphabetic signs. In fact, as the blessed

souls were singing and flying, the figures they formed were “*or D, or I, or L*” (now a D, now I, and now an L). What is remarkable about such a scene is that the analog nature of what Dante sees in the sphere of Jupiter is transformed into digital, alphabetic signs (D, I, L). Further down in the text, in the three-step process, the alphabetic sign *M* of “*TERRAM*” (initially digital insofar as it is an alphabetic letter, and Dante in fact speaks of an alphabetic letter: “*l’emme del vocabol quinto*” (the *M* of the fifth word)) becomes a true image, an *analogon* of the eagle. At this particular juncture of *Par.* 18, Dante knowingly or unknowingly suggests a semiotic construct of the symbolic mode. He does so by focusing and dwelling on the *M*, which initially is a true alphabetic letter, as it is shown in Figure 5.1 of the illustration. It is a sign that stands for the eleventh letter of the Italian alphabet. Yet, as soon as the *M* is fully depicted, other blessed souls descend on the apex of the *M* endeavoring to paint something that begins to show an indistinct visual transparency of an actual object (Figure 5.2). “With each light settled quietly in place,” Dante “saw that the array of fire had shaped the image of an eagle’s head and neck” (Figure 5.3). In semiotic terms, this process describes a progression by which the expression plane (alphabetic letter) transitions into a content plane (the actual depiction of an eagle) and, though it preserves its integrity of functioning as a sign even after it is transformed from an alphabetic letter into an actual depiction of the eagle, the transformation process itself stages a gradual transparency of a true eagle. It describes the semiotic attempt to make the expression plane and content plane converge in the progression and unfolding of narration. The two distinctive planes ultimately overlap; they become interchangeable and equivocal as a unit of signification. It is a scenario that, more or less, contains a similar, crucial characteristic of the symbolic mode which is aligned with it according to the same semiotic path and dominated by a *ratio difficilis* due to its vague, equivocal content.

The symbolic mode is dominated by *ratio difficilis* because the sign that is used as a symbol is vague and unpredictable as vague and unpredictable is its production. In our specific case, the eagle Dante depicts in the sphere of Jupiter, a representation that he hints at the reader to take as a symbol is a clear example of it, although the naïve reader would take it otherwise and consider it a waste of energy and a plain ornamentation that does not affect or compromise the literal reading. But the experienced reader, upon spotting a symbolic possibility carried by the eagle and authorized by the text, the correlation between the expression plane and content plane becomes problematic because dominated by *ratio difficilis*. In fact, the symbolic mode always involves an “*invention* process applied to a *recognition*.” (Eco 1984, 252) What this means is that although the reader recognizes the eagle as such, its very expression plane staged by Dante, can be used, textually, unpredictably and ambiguously by both the author and the reader provided that it has legitimacy and relevance in the text and that it will never yield to a final interpretation. We can take a broad view and say that the eagle is the symbol of justice, Roman imperial

justice, and so on. But if we take the compositional process in the formation of the eagle as Dante describes it, with tiny details regarding the depiction's trajectory and gradience of lights, especially when he describes the multitudes of those blessed souls shining light more around the neck and head and less through the lower body of the eagle, we will never be able to pin down a clear correlation between the expression plane and the content plane. This is so on the part of the author who generated the symbol, as well as on the part of the reader who attempts to decode it. The symbolic mode is dubious and unpredictable, especially at its pristine state, namely when it is still private and entails an inventive insight in its formation process. Therefore, the pictorial enunciation of the eagle taken as a symbol aims at granting value to that which is not said, to that which is not correlated conventionally between the expression plane and content plane, but merely allows the maker and decoder of the symbol to produce meaning, in the manner of a "*content nebula*". It is that which the symbolic sign does not say but makes it only interpretable. On this account, the symbolic value of the eagle standing for justice provides a richer and deeper meaning of the alphabetical expression "IUSTITIAM" that immediately precedes the eagle-symbol in the text. The materialization of the eagle through the pictorial becoming and taken at this critical hermeneutic juncture epitomizes a "*content nebula*" of the idea of justice that spans unclearly from human to transcendental and divine justice which consists of the appearance of meaning but that meaning, at the same time, cannot be adequately expressed verbally. This is indeed an interesting novelty insofar as Dante attempts to introduce a profound and original concept of justice under the influence of the eagle-symbol by which the pictorial expression submits itself to a *nebula* of possibilities in terms of signification.

Similarly to the eagle of *Par.* 18, there are other instances in which Dante uses the symbolic mode: the mystical rose of *Par.* 30–32 for example, the symbolic function of light that floods the entire third *cantica*, and so on. We do not need to dwell on further examples because Dante's use of such a modality seems to be clear enough and does not constitute, entirely, a separate modality of signification but upholds the allegorical mode and, the symbol itself, dissolves in it when considered in the totality of Dante's work. We may conclude by adding that in the *Par.* the symbolic mode helps the poet to put into words his transcendental experience. In the case of light, it is particularly dominant in the final scene of the *Par.* where "eternal light" (this is the actual expression Dante uses) cannot be correlated to a clear content: "O luce eterna che sola in te sidi,/sola t'intendi, e da te intelletta e intendente te ami e arridi!" (Eternal Light, You only dwell within/ Yourself, and only You know You; Self-knowing,/ Self-known, You love and smile upon Yourself!) *Par.* 33.124–26, but only to a *nebula* of possible correlations. The symbol will endure a "*content nebula*", inexhaustible signification, and preserve its pristine characteristics for the purpose of signaling the imminent and inexplicable, yet deeply significant scene in which the pilgrim is face to face with God before releasing the reader from the text's interpretive journey.

Notes

- 1 For a detailed insight on *modi significandi* see Chapter 2 of my 2012; See also Maria Corti 1981, 69–86.
- 2 Dante's vision, as Don Quixote's "extraordinary vision" is "achieved by his going down below the ground" and, by that very vision pattern, "lifts man as close as possible to the divine perspective, whereby human beings can overcome all difficulties and impose their infinite will on the world." Mazzotta 2001, 93.
- 3 *Metamorphoses* 1922, 13.898–968. Online posting, 20 August 2019
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0028%3Abook%3D13>
- 4 *Interpretant* is the signified or the object of signification, the meaning, the cultural unit of a codified sign.
- 5 For this citation I have used Longfellow's translation. Online posting 2 September 2020 <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/inferno/inferno-3/>
- 6 Concerning the strategy of signifying *per aliud*, Sara Fortuna and Manuele Gragnolati cite Barolini who defines that which cannot be named "jumping textuality", a condition "which is, as Dante explicitly claims, a necessity for the poetry of *Paradiso*: 'e così, figurando il paradiso,/convien saltar lo sacrato poema,/come chi trova suo cammin reciso.' [And so, in representing *Paradise*,/the sacred poem must make is leap across,/ as does a man who find his path cut off] (Par. XXIII, 61–63)" (Fortuna and Gragnolati 2010, 234; see also Barolini 1992, 48–53, 218–56).
- 7 Here I am using "ontologies" in terms of semantic relations that modify and enrich the existing categorial organization of a part of the encyclopedic knowledge, and not used in the strict philosophical sense.
- 8 For metaphor's power of creative similarities, see Black 37. Also, regarding analogical models, see Hesse 1966, It. trans. 1980, 150; Corti 1987, 14.
- 9 Raimondi 101–102 with my English translation. See also Cerroni 30; Tomazzoli 2015, 51, 58.
- 10 *De dialectica* 1975, 89–91. See also Manetti 158, and n. 3 at p. 178.
- 11 "Contingency" here refers to the absence of necessity or to that which is without having to be (necessarily) so. Any content value that is the outcome of a predication is a contingency. For example, "John laughs" is the content plane of a contingent predication. This is also what Aristotle calls *apophansis* or predicative assertion (*De Interpretatione* 16a, 10). See also Emanuele Severino 2007, 160–62.
- 12 *Unlimited semiosis* is an expression coined by Eco. It refers to the type of relation in the semiotic system taking place between sign (signifier) and its interpretant (signified). He borrowed this idea from Peirce's model of *intepretant* according to which it (the *interpretant*) is endlessly commutable insofar as it is capable of referring to something else and, consequently, the *interpretant* itself can become a signifier for further signifieds and so on *ad infinitum*. However, the reader is reminded that *unlimited semiosis* is viewed and allowed as a system. As a process, it is not unlimited because in "the course of a semiotic process we want to know only what is relevant according to a given *universe of discourse*", (Eco 1990, 28).
- 13 *From Image to Idea: A Study of the Simile in Dante's Commedia* (Ravenna: Longo, 1977) 45.
- 14 Eco 1984, 84. Eco's view of the encyclopedia is grounded in D'Alembert's conception and organization of the *Encyclopédie*. According to D'Alembert, the "general system of the sciences and arts is a kind of labyrinth... Our system of knowledge is ultimately made up of different branches, many of which have simple meeting place and since in departing from this point it is not possible to simultaneously embark on all the roads, the determination of the choice is up to the nature of the individual spirit...However, the same thing does not occur in

the encyclopedic order of our knowledge which consists in reuniting this knowledge in the smallest possible space and in placing the philosopher above this vast labyrinth in a very elevated point of perspective which would enable him to view with a single glance his object of speculation and those operations which can perform on those objects to distinguish the general branches of human knowledge and the points dividing it and uniting it and even to detect at times the secret paths which unite it. It is a kind of world map which must show the principal countries, their position and their reciprocal dependencies. It must show the road in a straight line which goes from one point to another; a road often interrupted by a thousand obstacles which might only be noticed in each country by travelers and its inhabitants and which could only be shown in a detailed map. These partial maps will be the different articles of the encyclopedia and the tree or figurative system will be its world map. Yet like overall maps of the world on which we live, the objects are more or less adjacent to one another and they present different perspectives according to the point of view of the geographer composing the map. In a similar way, the form of the encyclopedic tree will depend on the perspective we impose on it to examine the cultural universe. One can therefore imagine as many different systems of human knowledge as there are cartographic projections.” (D’Alembert 1751, “Discours préliminaire”, cited in Eco, 1984, 82–83) This to say that, for D’Alembert and Eco, encyclopedic knowledge is rhizomatic, it is “an inconceivable globality... [and the]...universe of semiosis, that is, the universe of human culture must be conceived and structured like a labyrinth”, a rhizomatic labyrinth, “a *network of interpretants*” (Eco Eco 1984, 83). Yet, once we have concentrated on a particular object, we must include it “in a given class, thus ‘freezing’ its representation in the format of a provisional dictionary....[Therefore]...*the encyclopedia is a semantic concept and the dictionary a pragmatic device.*” (Eco 1984, 84)

- 15 St. Paul, 1 *Corinthians* 13:12, *The Latin Vulgate*. Online posting 27 January 2021 <https://www.biblestudytools.com/vul/1-corinthians/13.html>
- 16 English translation by James Marchant. Online posting 3 February 2021 <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/cangrande.english.html>
- 17 See, for example Singleton 1980, 92–93; Charity 1966; Auerbach 1959; Sarolli 1971; Croce 1948, 329–38; Greene 1957, 129–35; Nardi 1944, 55–61; Schiaffini 1958, 379–89; Paparelli 1975, 53–138; Pépin 1970; Pagliaro 1967, 467–527; Barbi 1956, 115–40; Hollander 1969; Giannantonio 1969; Damon 1961, 144–49.
- 18 This bracketed part in the Italian text is where there is a textual lacuna. It is this very part that contains the critical statements: “parole fittizie” and “come sono le favole de li poeti”.
- 19 Here I changed Lansing’s “writings” with “[S]criptures” to which Dante refers in the Italian text.
- 20 Here, too, I changed Lansing’s translation from: “this is the sense that does not go beyond the surface of the letter,” to “this is that which does not go beyond the literal sense of the fictitious words”.
- 21 In Lansing’s translation I have changed: “signifies by means of the things signified a part of the supernal things of the eternal glory” to “signifies by means of signified things... the supernal things of eternal glory”. The accuracy of word choice and fidelity of meaning in the Italian text is a crucial point to better grasp Dante’s technique in the construction of allegory.
- 22 For the purpose of clarity, the part in which Dante uses “*parole fittizie*” in the *Conv.* is the one where the text presents its lacuna. In spite of it, as Singleton argued, “no one who knows the general argument of the whole work will, I think, make serious objections to the way the editors of the accepted critical text have filled the lacuna.” (84)

- 23 For a detailed view of Dante's knowledge of semiotics and for being a semiotic critic of language himself see my 2012, particularly ch. 2.
- 24 Aristotle 1928, 16a, 28.
- 25 My emphasis in bold in the Latin text and in italics in the English translation.
- 26 Online posting of the *ST*'s translation 18 Feb. 2021 <https://www3.nd.edu/~afredos/summa-translation/Part%201/st1-ques01.pdf>
- 27 Online posting of the English translation 20 Feb. 2021 <https://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/summa-translation/Part%201/st1-ques01.pdf>
- 28 Online posting 20 Feb. 2021 <http://www.augustinus.it/latino/trinita/index2.htm>
- 29 Online posting of the English translation 20 Feb. 2021 <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/130115.htm>
- 30 *De Doctrina Christiana* (DDC) 1.2.2. Online posting 20 Feb. 2021 https://www.augustinus.it/latino/dottrina_cristiana/index2.htm.
- 31 Online posting of to the English translation 20 Feb. 2021 <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/doctrine.iv.ii.ii.html>
- 32 DDC 2.2.3. Online posting 20 Feb. 2021 https://www.augustinus.it/latino/dottrina_cristiana/index2.htm.
- 33 *De Doctrina Christiana*, online posting of the English translation 20 Feb. 2021 <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/doctrine.iv.iii.iii.html>
- 34 Online posting of the English translation 20 Feb. 2021 https://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/doctrine.vi_2.html
- 35 The same semiotic system is applicable to Singleton's allegory of the theologians (14, 90) Charity's typological exegesis (199), Auerbach's figural hermeneutics (1959, 72).
- 36 Cited in De Lubac vol. 1, 23; Eco 1985, 216.
- 37 Hollander 1969, 38–39, gives clear indication of moving in the same direction.
- 38 We can find many examples that used allegory and symbol as synonymous both in the classical world and in the Middle Ages in Auerbach 1944, 1963; Pépin 1958, 1970; Eco (2007) 124.
- 39 See Todorov 1977, cited in Eco 1984, 220.
- 40 Goethe 1926, nn. 1112–13, cited in Eco 1984, 221. My English translation.
- 41 Hegel 1955, it. trans. 1976, 344; Eco 1984, 223.
- 42 This is true for symbols that are viewed in a state of Hegelian pre-art, as an external reality which is suddenly accessible to intuition or, semiotically speaking, as the expression that the individuals use and whose content is dubious and unconventional.
- 43 The illustration is taken from Giuseppe Giacalone's commentary to *Par.* 18.97, p. 309. Also, The gradual change of the letter M into the image of an eagle was initially created by Giovanni Andrea Scartazzini in his commentary of the *DC*. It was further reproposeed by Giuseppe Vandelli. Online posting 4 January 2023 <https://www.dantepoliglotta.it/the-heavenly-eagles-words/?lang=en>

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