DANTE'S *EPISTOLA A CAN GRANDE*:
ALLEGORY, DISCOURSE, AND THEIR SEMIOTIC IMPLICATIONS

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Summary. The focus of this study is the semiotic aspect concerning the allegory of the *Commedia*. More specifically, it aims at considering the meta-linguistic functioning of the *Commedia's* allegory and how such a system may be recognized as essentially semiotic in its making. It also attempts to demonstrate how the allegory *in verbis* (allegory of poets) in Dante's *Commedia* partakes of the allegory *in factis* (allegory of theologians) and, thus, Dante's allegory is an outcome of both types of allegory insofar as it recognizes (in Epistle XIII) all the terms of paragraph nine which belong to the rhetorical, philosophical, and theological tradition. All ten terms form the *modus significandi* of the *Commedia* and its allegory is neither entirely *in verbis* nor entirely *in factis* but both, and therefore, it can be legitimately called Dantean. Being an allegorical work, the *Commedia* is dominated by *ratio difficilis* whereby a semiotics of discourse offers directionality to meaning in its state of formation or what we may call signification in progress. In the *Commedia*, allegory brings about the most complex system of values and a semiotics of discourse endeavours to demonstrate how, from such a complex system of values, meaning is produced in the entire opus.

In the *Epistola a Can Grande* Dante tells his patron from Verona that a proper way of reading the *Commedia* must take place according to four senses: literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical. The last two may also be called "allegorical" because they are different from the literal or historical. The four senses or the polysemy according to which the *Commedia* should be read still today constitutes a stumbling block for Dante scholarship. It is an aspect of Dante criticism that hinges upon the allegory and the type of allegory the reader should expect to find in the *Commedia*. The present debate concerning both the authenticity of the *Epistola* and the kind of allegory of the *Commedia* is certainly not conclusive. However, insofar as the *Epistola* is concerned, I find convincing evidence that allows me to ground my view in favour of its authenticity, particularly for those reasons

Robert Hollander adduced on this matter.¹ In the following pages I will attempt to shed light on the meta-linguistic functioning of the *Commedia's* allegory and how such a process may be recognized as essentially semiotic in its making.

A seminal work by Gian Roberto Sarolli already argued some of the aspects which I am going to deal with in this study, particularly those concerning Dante's allegory. Sarolli recognizes that Dante's allegory is a "speciale allegoria" (special allegory) but in essence he keeps the allegory of theologians distinct from that of poets.² His interest is ("mostrare ... la stretta relazione ed interdipendenza ma in forma antitetica che corre tra il senso allegorico dei poeti e quello dei teologi negli *esempla* danteschi"). (to show the close relation and interdependence, yet in an antithetic form, between the allegorical sense of poets and that of theologians in the Dantean *exempla*).³ Further, he leaves no doubt about the fact that the two allegorical systems cannot be mixed, which is the source of mistakes many Dante scholars have made ("son ... gli errori di molti dantisti, per non tacere dei medievalisti che s'ostinano a mescolare i sistemi", 49). Contrary to Sarolli's suggestion, that is, not to mix the two systems, this study aims at pursuing exactly such a direction. Not in the specificity of the senses of the two allegories but insofar as the mode of signifying is concerned, which I find it to be essentially semiotic.

My claim, to a certain degree, is consistent with the position of Teodolinda Barolini, which considers Singleton's dictum: "the fiction of the *Divine Comedy* is that it is not a fiction"⁴ to be viewed as a poetic-nar-

¹ Hollander, *Dante's Epistle to Cangrande*. Regarding the authenticity of the *Epistola*, Hollander says that "we will probably never be in a position to *know* that the Epistle is Dante's, only that it probably is" (3). However, "the cases made against authenticity are not, on their own terms, as convincing as they would have to be in order to turn the argument in their favor; [and]... that the argument for authenticity had already been made more convincingly than its recent opponents have been willing to acknowledge" (1-2). Also, for reasons of "new evidence" that can be drawn from "particulars" of "early commentaries" (2), and in light of the fact that the *Epistola* tells the reader how to read the *Commedia* (despite the opposing view of D'Ovidio, "L'epistola a Cangrande"; Nardi/Hardie, "The Epistle to Cangrande Again"; it is more convincing to second its authenticity. Hollander's thesis is mainly grounded in Mazzoni's studies, "L'Epistola a Cangrande"; "Per l'epistola a Cangrande"; and *Contributi di filologia dantesca*.

² Sarolli, *Prolegomena alla Divina Commedia*, 22.

³ Sarolli, *Prolegomena alla Divina Commedia*, 31. The English translation is mine.

⁴ Singleton, *Dante Studies* 1, 62; Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy*, 11.

rative strategy. According to Barolini, Singleton's statement

does not extend to the suggestion that Dante himself thought his poem a fiction in any simple sense. In my opinion, 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 a 'truth that has the face of a lie'—'un ver c'ha faccia di menzogna.'⁵(11)

Indeed Barolini's scrutiny is a valuable one and Singleton does make a point of this and is rather unequivocal when he says that we "grasp how it avails some things to be false—we may read 'fictive'—in order that they may be true" (64). However, when turning to the allegory, and clearly when discussing the allegory of theologians, Singleton's argument moves in a doubtful and somewhat puzzling direction. He speaks of the first meaning as a "meaning *in verbis*", and that "words have a *real* meaning in pointing to a real event"⁶ (90). There are two things in the above statements that are not quite persuasive and undoubtedly trigger perplexity and call for prudence.⁷ First of all, by making reference to meaning and precisely to "meaning *in verbis*" we are cogently transported into a linguistic space that is proper to the allegory *in verbis* or what is commonly known as the allegory of poets.⁸ For Singleton the allegory of the *Commedia* is "clearly the

⁵ Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy*, 11. See also Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert*, 231, 233; Hollander, *Allegory in Dante's Commedia*, 38-39.

⁶ Emphasis in italics is mine.

⁷ On this specific issue, D. W. Robertson Jr., "Some Medieval Literary Terminology," cited in Hollander, *Allegory in Dante's Commedia*, 49, n. 39, remarked: 'Professor Singleton confuses this distinction [between the allegory of the theologians and the allegory of the poets] with that between the verbal allegory and the allegory of things. It seems obvious, moreover, that the *Divine Comedy* is a poem, not a history, and certainly not a new chapter in Scripture.'

⁸ Although initial attempts to endeavour on allegorical approaches applied to Sacred Scripture may be traced back to St. Augustine and St. Paul, it is the Venerable Bede who for the first time made a clear theoretical distinction between the *allegoria in factis* and the *allegoria in verbis* or *in dictis* in *De schematibus et tropis Sacrae Scripturae liber*, PL 90, cols. 184-85: "notandum sane quod allegoria aliquando factis, aliquando verbis tantummodo fit ... Factis quidem, ut scriptum est: 'Quoniam Abraham duos filios habuit, unum de ancilla, et unum de libera, quae sunt duo Testamenta', ut Apostolus exponit. Verbis autem solummodo, ut, Isai. XI 'Egredietur virga de radice Jesse, et flos de radice eius ascendet', quo significatur de stirpe David per virginem Mariam Dominum Salvatorem fuisse nasciturum." ("It must be pointed out that allegory is sometimes fulfilled through facts others only

‘allegory of theologians’ (as the Letter to Can Grande by its example says it is) that one may only wonder at the continuing efforts made to see it as the ‘allegory of poets’” (90-91). In the allegory of theologians or the allegory *in factis* what forms an event is still transmitted and signified through the written word. Certainly we cannot fail to mention that things themselves may act in the capacity of signs and, even so, the medium of transmission of Holy Scripture remains nevertheless the written word. Now words, according to St. Augustine, are signs (*signa*) “quorum onmins usus in significando est, sicuti sunt verba” (*De doctrina christiana* 1.2.5) (“whose whole function consists in signifying”).⁹ He also states that “quam ob rem omne signum etiam res aliqua est; quod enim nulla res est, omnino nihil est” (1.2.5) (“every sign is also a thing, since what is not a thing does not exist. But it is not true that every thing is also a sign”).¹⁰

The incompatibility we find in Singleton’s argument is that on the one hand he says exactly the way things are regarding the allegory of theologians: “Its first meaning is meaning *in verbis*; its other meaning is a meaning *in facto*, in the event itself” (89-90). On the other hand, he states that the allegory of the *Commedia* is the allegory of theologians and that it is questionable “to see it as the ‘allegory of poets’” (91). He further reinforces this point by saying that the “literal sense which is historical” is “no fiction” (91). But we know that this is not the case because even scriptural allegorism, which is essentially *in factis*, contains the semiotic function *in verbis* or the important task of referentiality. What we should view as fiction regarding the literal sense is that either we deal with Holy Scripture or with the *Commedia*, or even accepting the fact that the allegory therein fixed (in the *Commedia*) is an allegory of theologians, we are for all intents and pur-

through words...Through facts, as it is described: ‘since Abraham had two sons, one from a servant and one from a freewoman, which are the two Testaments’, as the Apostle says. In words only, as in Isaiah: ‘there shall come forth a **rod** out of the **stem** of Jesse, and a **branch** shall grow out of his roots’, with which is signified that from David’s descent through the Virgin Mary, The Lord Savior should be born.”) See also Corti, *Percorsi dell’invenzione: il linguaggio poetico e Dante*, 129, including notes 22, 23.

⁹ For the Latin text and the English translation of all citations from St. Augustine’s *De doctrina cristiana*, I have used Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. Green.

¹⁰ In this instance, St. Augustine’s claim is particularly innovative insofar as he is the first one who adequately deals with signs that are words and things which may act as signs: “Agostino è il primo che si può muovere con disinvoltura tra segni che sono parole e cose che possono agire come segni”, Eco, *Sugli specchi e altri saggi*, 222.

poses dealing with signs: "Omnis doctrina vel rerum est vel signorum, sed res per signa discuntur" (*De doc. chris.* 1.2.4) ("All teaching is teaching of either things or signs, but things are learnt through signs"). Further, "signa divinitus data quae scriptures sanctis continentur per homines nobis indicate sunt qui ea conscripserunt" (*De doc. chris.* 2.2.3) ("even the divinely given signs contained in the holy scriptures have been communicated to us by the human beings who wrote them.") To this extent, signs even if correlated to exercise their function in the literal sense, are unavoidably metaphorical in nature. It is therefore reductive and even erroneous to use a rigorously polarized categorical interpretation regarding the allegorical theory of both the Holy Scripture and the *Commedia*.

When Dante speaks of "parole fittizie" ("fictive words") in *Convivio* 2.1.3, he speaks as a semiotician and his notion of words is that they are fictitious because they do not contain in themselves the actual object for which they stand, but they are used in a functioning system which requires a bi-planar correlation between an expression level (signifier) and a content level (signified) which points or refers to a signified object. This means that the semiotic system of language does not need the actual object to signify because it entails a process of substitution and of postponement of the object itself by means of the codified verbal sign. Hence, words can create the principle of reality even in the absence of the actual object. Dante's notion of words as signs and that signs *signify arbitrarily*¹¹ is stated in the *De vulgari eloquentia*: "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" (1.3.3) ("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.") The semiotic system, even according to Dante, foresees the two planes of correlation in order to allow signification to take place.

Dante's preoccupation with signification and the polysemic order carried by allegory, is devoted to the *form* of the literal sense, and not so much to *what* the literal sense means. From this standpoint, "parole fittizie" ("fictive words") do not compromise or suppress the historical truth signified by the literalness of the word but they instead address the *form*, the *process* employed by the word-medium which is a *fictive* one. The literal sense contained in the theory of four senses common throughout the middle ages and condensed in the distich attributed to Nicholas de Lyra or to Augustine of Dacia: "Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, / Moralis

¹¹ Emphasis in italics is mine.

quid agas, quo tendas anagogia” (“The letter teaches the events, allegory [teaches] what you should believe, The moral [teaches] what you should do, anagogy [teaches] where you should be going”)¹² is and remains unaltered in terms of *what* the four senses of signification are. Dante’s “fictive words” must not be taken as indicative of *fictive meaning*. As a matter of fact he follows canonically the four senses of scriptural writing. What instead he endeavours to mean by it is again the *way* in which words signify. The aspect of *fiction* is in the process and not in the end; the *intent* of the expression is *true* although its expression-content viewed as a semio-linguistic system is *fictitious*. It is “veritate ascosa sotto bella menzogna” (*Conv.* 2.1.3) (“truth hidden beneath a beautiful lie.”)¹³ Such a paradoxical view is not a contradiction or the opposition of *fiction* and *truth*, but rather their coexistence insofar as *truth* cannot be transmitted without the employment of the linguistic system which happens to be *fictitious* by its very nature.

If we look at writing as a medium, and approach it from a semiotic perspective, not only does it bring to the fore the quality of linguistic truth therein contained but it elucidates and endorses the *process* of the theory of the four senses. Writing, like history, contains its truth. It manifests itself through the effort and the intent of *signifying*. The literal sense is writing’s basic form of signification and as such it contains a form of *signified* truth, which is in agreement and maintains the quality of synonymy with history, as the one we find in Hugh of St. Victor’s description: “historia est rerum gestarum narratio, quae in prima significatione litterae continetur” (“history is the narration of events which is contained in the first or the literal sense of meaning”).¹⁴ However, in the exegetical tradition of the Middle Ages, the historical or literal truth finds its fulfillment in spiritual truth which is allegorical. Therefore not all Scripture can be taken in the literal sense. Noteworthy examples of major exegetical figures advising not to take literally certain passages of Scripture can be found throughout the Christian Middle Ages. Significant, on this point, is Hugh of St. Victor’s assertion: “Sunt quaedam loca in divina pagina, quae secundum litteram

¹² Cited in Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, part 1, vol. 1, 23; Eco, *Sugli specchi*, 216.

¹³ From Lansing’ translation of the *Convivio*, I substituted “fiction” with “lie” in the quotation because I found it to be closer to the Italian “menzogna”.

¹⁴ Hugh of St. Victor, *De sacramentis Christianae Fidei*. For a standard definition of history in the Middle Ages which is based on the Latin grammarians see Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*. “Historia est narratio rei gestae per quam ea quae in praeterito facta sunt, dignoscuntur” (“History is the narration of events by which those things which were done in the past are sorted out.”)

legi non possunt, quae magna discretione discernere oportet, ne vel per negligentiam aliqua praetereamus, aut per importunam diligentiam ad id, ad quod scripta non sunt, violenter intorqueamus” (“There are certain places in the divine page which cannot be read literally and which it is necessary that we construe with great judgment, so that we may not either overlook some things through negligence or, through misplaced diligence, violently twist them into something they were not written to say.”)¹⁵ Further with a pertinent and meaningful image Hugh adds: “per umbram venit a corpus. Figuram disce, et invenies veritatem” (VI, cap.3, *PL* 176, col. 801c) (“following the shadow, one comes to the body: learn the figure, and you will come to the truth.”) A parallel passage we find in Dante’s *De monarchia*: “Hoc viso, ad meliorem huius et aliarum inferius factarum solutionum evidentiam advertendum quod circa sensum mysticum dupliciter errare contingit: aut querendo ipsum ubi non est, aut accipiendo aliter quam accipi debeat” (3.4.6) (“With this procedure in mind, we can better criticize this and the following arguments if we call attention to two types of fallacious appeals to a mystic interpretation: either looking for it where it does not exist, or accepting a meaning which is improper.”)¹⁶

In the excerpt from Hugh of St. Victor, the letter is not pushed aside and excluded from the content-truth simply because a literal reading is not allowed or because it does not make sense. On the contrary, it is the point of departure of the *signifying process*, which actively partakes in the formation of a legitimate meaning which is beyond the letter, and yet the meaning does not discard the letter because in order for the meaning to be actualized (or reach the ultimate stage that we call truth) the letter must coexist with the meaning itself. In the instance in which the letter does not allow the literal reading, its specific function aims at, and contributes to, the shaping of the dynamics of signification. Put differently, as the letter is unable to contain truth, for the fact that it is not spiritual truth itself, it nevertheless upholds an active role in the making of the spiritual truth/meaning. St. Augustine, who greatly influenced Hugh of St. Victor and Dante, put this notion in plain semiotic terms:

Qui enim sequitur litteram, translata verba sicut propria tenet, neque illud quod proprio verbo significatur refert ad aliam significationem. Sed

¹⁵ Hugh of St. Victor, *Eruditionis didascalicae*. For a comprehensive view of all those exegetes who maintained that not everything in Scripture can be taken literally see de Lubac, 439-51.

¹⁶ For the English translation of the *De Monarchia*, I used Alighieri, *On World Government* (*De monarchia*), 41.

si ‘sabbatum’ audieret, verbi gratia, non intelligit nisi unum diem de septem qui continuo volumine repetuntur; et cum audierit ‘sacrificium’, non excedit cogitatione illud quod fieri de victimis pecorum terrenisque fructibus solet. Ea demum est miserabilis animae servitus, signa pro rebus accipere et supra creaturam corpoream oculum mentis ad hauriendum aeternum lumen levare non posse. (*De doc. chris.* 3.5.9)

(A person who follows the letter understands metaphorical words as literal, and does not relate what the literal word signifies to any other meaning. On hearing the word ‘sabbath’, for example, he interprets it simply as one of the seven days which repeat themselves in a continuous cycle; and on hearing the word ‘sacrifice’ his thoughts do not pass beyond the rituals performed with sacrificial beasts or fruits of the earth. It is, then, a miserable kind of spiritual slavery to interpret signs as things and to be incapable of raising the mind’s eye above the physical creation so as to absorb the eternal light.)

Here St. Augustine is clearly making the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical use of words, and how the reader requires employing a denotative semiotics in order to get hold of a connotative semiotics and, ultimately, decode its meaning. But more importantly, such a citation is telling the reader that words must be taken as signs and *not* “signa pro rebus accipere” (“signs as things”). It is therefore an issue concerning the mode of signifying of Scripture which is unmistakably semiotic.

With such a notion in mind, we may return to Dante and clarify his view of the literal sense. In Dante’s case, the issue is not whether or not he recognizes the literal-historical value of writing from a cultural, philosophical, and theological standpoint, but rather that Dante’s treatment of the letter is strictly dealt with on a linguistic level and in a semiotic fashion. In Dante the literal sense remains consistent with the exegetical tradition of his time. What we find to be relevant instead is the attempt to emphasize the linguistic *process* of the literal sense, as much as St. Augustine does in the passage above, which is incontrovertibly semiotic in nature. Thus, when Dante speaks of a possible coexistence of lie and truth, as in “parole fittizie” (“fictitious words”) and “veritade ascosa sotto bella menzogna”, (“truth hidden beneath a beautiful lie”), he is in effect preoccupied with the semiotic functioning of language. These quotations from *Convivio* 2.1.3 have often been cited in relation to the *Epistola* in order to study and explain the allegory of the *Commedia*.

Now, we may return to Singleton and perhaps offer that valuable piece of information he was looking for, and for some reason he did not provide, in order to make the allegory of poets, and its mode of signifying, coexist

in a new mode of signifying with the allegory of theologians in the *Commedia*. But before we do so, let us survey another discrepancy present in Singleton's analysis. Taking the *Epistola* as the foundation of his explanation for the allegory of the *Commedia*, Singleton claims that the allegory contained in the poem is that of the theologians because the example used to explain the four senses in the *Epistola* is taken from Scripture, and "since Scripture is cited, the first or literal sense cannot be fictive but must be true and, in this instance, historical." (88) To support this claim Singleton cites only paragraphs 7-8 of the *Epistola's accessus* and leaves out, strangely enough, paragraph 9, which explains the "modus tractandi" of the poem and which holds forth: "Forma sive modus tractandi est poeticus, fictivus, descriptivus, digressivus, transumptivus, et cum hoc diffinitivus, divisivus, probativus, improbativus, et exemplorum positivus" (13.9.27) ("The form of treatment is poetical, fictive, descriptive, digressive, transumptive [metaphorical], and equally definitive, divisive, probative, improbative, and exemplificative.") The first five terms belong to the category of the rhetorical tradition, while the remaining five to the philosophical and theological tradition.¹⁷ The issue of the "modus tractandi" emerging from the *Epistola* is a seminal aspect which proves to be particularly useful in relation to the ongoing debate over Dante's allegory. For it not only may clarify how Dante's mentioning of the allegory of poets in the *Convivio* is not in contradiction with what he states in the *Epistola*, regarding the allegory of the *Commedia*, but it more importantly allows the reader to comprehend that those constitutive elements proper to the allegory of poets and those which are proper to the allegory of theologians must, more or less and according to the needs of signification, coexist in the making of his poem. The piece of information Singleton did not provide from his treatment of the *Commedia's* allegory is contained in the *modus tractandi*, which only from a semiotic stance can be evinced and validated even hermeneutically.

No doubt, Dante's intention constitutes an attempt to communicate Divine Truth which claims no precedents in regards to the form of treatment used, insofar as it aims at maintaining consistency with Scripture and, at the same time, uses the poetic form as the only viable medium to be able to do so. Singleton says: "But the kind of allegory to which the example from Scriptures given in the Letter to Can Grande points is not an allegory of 'this for that,' but an allegory of 'this *and* that,' of this sense plus that sense." Rightly so, Singleton's argument is legitimate and points out the content value of Dante's allegory, which is indisputably aligned

¹⁷ See Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 233.

with that of the philosophical and theological tradition. Nonetheless, in the *Epistola* it is clearly stated that equally important is the form of treatment used in the poem, which happens to contain, as we have seen already, the “poeticus, fictivus, descriptivus, digressivus, transumptivus” (“poetical, fictive, descriptive, digressive, transumptive [metaphorical]”) elements. In a hermeneutic perspective, even if the one and only aim is that of grasping Truth *in factis*, as the allegory of theologians claims to represent and, undoubtedly, does represent, we nonetheless must come to terms with the *modus significandi* which is consequential to the *modus tractandi* to which Dante calls attention in the *Epistola*. What has been overlooked regarding this matter is that the allegory of poets Dante intends to follow in the *Convivio* is not only a part of the philosophical account of the *canzone* referring to the third art of the *trivium* (rhetoric), but more significantly to the semio-linguistic function rhetoric plays in language and its signifying process. The importance of the allegory of poets discussed in the *Convivio* provides an explanation regarding the necessary and systematic presence of the *modus tractandi* in poetry. It is what rules the formal part of language, the truth *in verbis*, without which Dante in the *Commedia* would never have been able to communicate the Truth *in factis* or what we may call the Truth of the allegory of theologians. Dante’s initial preoccupation regarding the signification of Divine Truth is a linguistic one upon which he spends great effort in telling the reader that the mode of treatment is a key factor in order to adequately comprehend the “poema sacro”.

The mode of treatment is grounded in semiotics because before Dante is able to put into words Divine Truth, and consequently duly ready to transmit it to the reader, he must have acquired, as he did, according to what he tells us in the *Convivio* and in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, a clear competence of the “sign-function” and “sign-production” of the verbal medium. An acquired competence of the sign-function entails the correlation of an expression and of a content. A “sign is always an element of an *expression plane* conventionally correlated to one (or several) elements of a *content plane*” (Eco, *A Theory*, 48). The state of the linguistic medium, even if looking at only the literal sense, may be possible and certainly brought into being only as a result of a bi-planar correlation of these two planes. Thus, the literal sense as well as the allegorical (theological or poetic) one is a matter that entails the coexistence of *this* expression plane and *that* content plane, and not just *this* or *that* plane. In reality and contrary to what Singleton states, whether we speak of the allegory of poets or of the allegory of theologians, the fundamental point is that they are both embedded in language and both subject to the same semiotic process in order to produce truth.

The ongoing debate regarding the allegory of the *Commedia* could open a new interpretive path if the whole issue of the allegory were studied in a semiotic manner. One further instance in Singleton's study that requires attention is the passage in which he states: "words have a *real meaning* in pointing to a *real event*; the event in its turn, has meaning because events wrought by God are themselves as words yielding a meaning, a higher and spiritual sense." (90)¹⁸ In reality human language, according to Dante, is a repository of both attributes. The "real meaning" for Dante is truth, and even the allegory of poets which is taken as "*veritate ascosa sotto bella menzogna*" ("truth hidden under a beautiful lie") contains a true, "real meaning". Any meaning which is the result of a codified correlation is "real meaning", although the medium itself (language) is a fictitious entity. The fact that any meaning must be considered as real meaning grows from the necessity that for Dante only humans presented a need for verbal communication ("*solī homīni datum est loqui, cum solum sibi necessarium fuerit*", *D.V.E.* 1.2.1), and consequently having the intent "*nostre mentis enucleare aliis conceptum*" (*D.V.E.* 1.2.3) ("to communicate to others the concepts formed in our minds.") The need and intent to communicate, to manifest ("*dēloūsi*") something is to say that a manifest meaning is self-evident, it cannot be detached from its cause and, therefore, it is "real" insofar as its ontological function is concerned. We must also take into account the human deliberate intent to produce false meaning, but that is a case of probable accidental occurrences which do not compromise the ontological aspect of language. In other words, even if there is intent to produce false meaning, the ontological aspect of language still remains unaltered for the simple fact that it nonetheless manifests something, it being either true or false. Through the verbal language there is no way of finding out whether someone is lying or telling the truth because the object is being substituted by the linguistic sign. The sign stands in the place of the object, and the object is not only substituted by the sign but also postponed for the reason that it is not an actual object but only an idea of the object. The ontology of meaning intrinsic in the sign-function is well exemplified by Eco who maintains that:

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

¹⁸ The emphasis in italics is mine.

cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used 'to tell' at all.¹⁹

As much as the "real meaning", the "real event" is a linguistic reality in the *Commedia* and thus it must be considered within the sphere of the *modi significandi*. The event in Dante is not an actual object which must necessarily display a concrete happening but rather a speech act that produces the image/event through meaning and which becomes "real event" insofar as it is capable of producing the principle of reality through meaning. Dante understood very well this semiotic concept of language and put it at the service of poetry.

In terms of interpretive strategy, the semiotic concept illustrated above can be explained even according to the well known figural hermeneutics that Erich Auerbach expounded in his famous essay "*Figura*". Such a figural hermeneutics is clearly summed up in the following passage:

the idea that earthly life is thoroughly real, with the reality of the flesh into which the Logos entered, but that with all its reality it is only *umbra* and *figura* of the authentic, future, ultimate truth, the real reality that will unveil and preserve the *figura*. In this way the individual earthly event is not regarded as a definitive self-sufficient reality, nor as a link in a chain of development in which single events or combinations of events perpetually give rise to new events, but viewed primarily in immediate vertical connection with a divine order which encompass it, which on some future day will itself be concrete reality; so that the earthly event is a prophecy or *figura* of a part of a wholly divine reality that will be enacted in the future. But this reality is not only future; it is always present in the eye of God and in the other world, which is to say that in transcendence the revealed and true reality is present at all times, or timelessly. Dante's work is an attempt to give a poetic and at the same time systematic picture of the world in this light.²⁰

¹⁹ Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 7.

²⁰ Auerbach, *Scene from the Drama of European Literature*, 72. Regarding figural and allegorical interpretation, Auerbach points out that "since in figural interpretation one thing stands for another, since one thing represents and signifies the other, figural interpretation is 'allegorical' in the widest sense" (54). Nonetheless, he makes a distinction between the two and his point is that figural interpretation reveals itself to us "by the historicity both of the sign and what it signifies." Whereas "[m]ost of the allegories we find in literature or art represent a virtue (e.g., wisdom), or a passion (jealousy), an institution (justice), or at most a very general synthesis of historical phenomena (peace, the fatherland)—never a definite event in its full historicity." (54) The medieval exegetical tradition inherited primarily Tertullian's historical method which promoted figural interpretation. Nonetheless visibly influential, though less than Tertullian's, was

What we may extrapolate from Auerbach's passage is that while *historia*, *littera*, or that which occurs in the world (in the form of signified reality through the literal sense) does indeed partake of the true future event from the perspective of this earthly world, yet it is not the event itself, the "definitive self-sufficient reality", but only the "related event", the prophecy, the verbal sign of Scripture which correlates the true signification represented by the future event in the afterlife, and the latter, in turn, produces its effect in retrospect in order to guide humans on the right path of this temporal voyage. This hermeneutic exposition is in reality a widespread medieval theory of allegory: "its roots go back to Saint Paul ('videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate, tunc autem facie ad faciem' [We see now through a glass in a dark manner; but then face to face.]), and it was developed by Saint Jerome, Augustine, Bede, Scotus Erigena, Hugh and Richard of Saint Victor, Alain of Lille, Bonaventure, Aquinas, and others in such a way as to represent a cardinal point of medieval poetics."²¹

Auerbach's view and the state of relativeness of *figura* with the true, future event finds its primary modeling system in the verbal medium which, in essence, is the outcome of a semiotic correlation. The historicity of *figura* or *littera* is within the literalness of the verbal medium, actualized through its literal status, regardless of the fact that interpretation is focused on Scripture or on Dante's *Commedia*. There is no shade of doubt, no one can deny the historical state of the literalness rooted in the verbal medium. Now the literal sense brings into the picture the issue of denotation which in Dante's time was rather ambiguous, and today also presents a paradoxical condition between *intentional* and *extensional* semantics.²² However, the "Schoolmen distinguished (at least until the fourteen century),

Origen's allegorical method. Both methods of interpretation contributed to the advancement and progress of scriptural polysemy (Auerbach, 36). On this point and in a strictly linguistic sense concerning the retrospective assignment of meaning, see Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 30-32; also Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 5.265.

²¹ Eco, *The Open Work*, 5.

²² Abelard's *Logica ingredientibus*, in Geyer, *Abaelards philosophische Schriften*, we find for the first time "significatio de rebus" ("signification of things") and "significatio de intellectibus" ("signification of the intellect"), but he does not make a clear distinction between the two. What he calls "significatio de rebus" takes the thing, the object, as the primary focus of signification, and the distinction is clearly extensional because objects are the totality of extension. On the other hand, "significatio de intellectibus" is signification proper and pertains to intention insofar as it is a process that generates a concept of the mind, and as such it belongs to the intentional sphere.

between meaning ('significare') and naming ('appellare'), and used 'connotation' not as opposed to 'denotation' but as an additional form of signification."²³ Thus, the literal sense is a denotative matter which has already been codified. The expression level and the content level have already accomplished their necessary correlation (codification). Signification is present, and consequently no future linguistic event is required in order for signification to take place. The human presence is nonetheless required in the literal sense in order for codification to be actualized, but not in the way of and with the challenge one finds in figural or allegorical interpretation,²⁴ simply because those speech acts engaged in the process of signification, in the literal sense, do not require an abductive effort exerted by the human presence since they are used as ready-made repertoires of signification, which preserve, even in their state of ready-made repertoires of signification, the synonymic and metonymic utility to provide ground for the construction of connotations. On the other hand, the figural or allegorical interpretation, which is the central point of our discussion, requires a much more complicated semiotic system. First, it uses the same expression level of the literal sense; second, the correlation between the expression level and the content level is not a ready-made repertoire of signification, as the correlated state of the literal sense; third, the human presence (reader) which partakes in the codification process is primarily a matter of abductive endeavour; fourth, the correlation between the expression level (already present) and the content level (not yet present) must proceed according to the encyclopedic competence of the reader and without straying from pre-ordained semantic fields recognized and endorsed by medieval hermeneutics or exegesis. The true future event is therefore a matter of finding signification, and signification in this sense and as the

²³ On this point and on the whole issue of denotation see Eco's essay on "Denotation", in *On the Medieval theory of Signs*, 46.

²⁴ In my treatment I make no distinction between figural and allegorical interpretation, and further on I will also include the typological (contrary to what Charity, *Events and Their Afterlife*, 199, does regarding typological and allegorical interpretation) for the fact that even the *littera* of the allegory of poets is true and conforms to historicity insofar as its literalness is concerned. The actualized literalness contains a meaning, it demonstrates something and as such it is true. The "bella menzogna" ("beautiful lie") of *Convivio* 2.1.3, if examined carefully, has nothing to do with the lie of the literal or historical sense of the allegory of poets. It instead aims at revealing the semiotic functioning of language, which is intrinsically fictitious. Dante's passage in *Convivio* aims at demonstrating this aspect of language and not the fictitious literal sense of the allegory of poets.

embodiment of the true event can only be grasped as it occurs, at the critical point of becoming itself. This semio-linguistic outlook is what I call the semiotics of discourse which we will endeavour to discuss later on and as the last point of this study.

A close view of Auerbach's figural interpretation is shared by Charity with what he calls "typological exegesis". In his treatment of the subject, Charity also makes a clear distinction between the relationship embodied in typology and in allegory:

it is one thing to call a relationship 'typological' and another to call it 'allegorical'; for the relationship which typology embodies is, to our minds at least, a dialectical rather than a direct representational one. One thing does not mean another in typology; it involves it, or has inferences for it, or suggests it, and it does all these things for no other reason than that there is a real, existential parallel, as well as a certain historical dependency and continuity between the events which typology relates. Allegory, on the other hand (especially as a literary mode), involves not history so much as *sententiae*, spiritual truth rather than unrepeatable happenings, and it generally appears to depend on a devaluation of the 'letter' for the sake of the general truth which the letter figuratively expresses.(199)

Charity's claim regarding typology and that it contains a "dialectical" representational function, where, instead, allegory contains a "direct" one is somewhat questionable if applied to Dante's allegory. His argument based on the fact that in typology "one thing does not mean another" but it includes it, "has inferences for it", contains "a real, existential parallel, as well as a certain historical dependency and continuity between events which typology relates" is true. Nonetheless, it is also true that allegory (and the way Dante used it), as much as typology, is endowed with "dialectical" representational function. Contrary to this, we are accustomed to treat allegory as that which is other. As a matter of fact, and to complicate this point even more, Dante too, in paragraph 7 of the *Epistola*, provides the reader with his definition of allegory and states that "*allegoria dicitur ab 'alleon' grece, quod in latinum dicitur 'alienum', sive 'diversum'*" ("allegory comes from Greek 'alleon', which in Latin means 'other' or 'different'").²⁵ But is this indeed a comprehensive notion which authorizes us to take allegory as a process responding to "this for that"?

²⁵ The English translation of the *Epistola a Cangrande* is from the electronic posting by James Marchant.

On the level of communication and for one semiotic aspect, “this for that” is true insofar as in order to codify a meaning we require an expression level and a content level, be it literal or allegorical. Therefore we have *this which stands for that*. The letter loses its central role (but is not cut off from the system) in order to emphasize the meaning that the letter expresses. This is indeed the kind of explanation Dante provides in the *Epistola* but it is limited and confined within the context in which it is used. This is a context that discusses the meaning of the *Commedia* through its four senses (which, in essence, are two, the literal and the allegorical, since the moral and anagogical must also be considered allegorical). Dante’s purpose here is specific; he is speaking of senses of signification and precisely of their content value. In fact his aim is meaning, the object of signification of allegory, and leaves out its epistemological implication. Yet this does not imply that Dante’s comprehensive notion of allegory is representative of the process responding to “this for that”. In fact if this were the case, what he states in *Convivio* 2.1.6, that is, “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 litterale, per le cose significate significa de le superne cose del l’eternal gloria” (“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 things signified a part of the supernal things of eternal glory”)²⁶ would result in a lack of theoretical consistency and even in a clear contradiction. The key point here is that Dante speaks of truth in the “literal sense” even regarding the allegory of poets. In fact, just before this passage he states that: “ma però che mia intenzione è qui lo modo de li poeti seguitare, prendo lo senso allegorico secondo che per li poeti è usato” (2.1.4) (“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 poets.”) On this matter of the *Convivio*, Singleton proposed that “Dante abandoned *Convivio* because he came to see that in choosing to build this work according to the allegory of poets, he had ventured down a false way” (93). Therefore building an interpretive case on *Convivio*, according to Singleton, is nearly pointless. It is true that he left it unfinished, but saying that Dante changed his position regarding the fact that he left the *Convivio* unfinished is purely speculation. Singleton himself admitted it: “We do not know why Dante gave up the work [*Convivio*] before it was hardly under way. We do not know. We are therefore free to speculate” (92).

²⁶ The emphasis in italics is mine.

As Singleton said: "We do not know", and probably we will never know why Dante did not finish the *Convivio*. However, this interpretive impasse, and more specifically that which concerns the problematic historical truth of the literal sense for the allegory of poets, could, in my view, be removed if we carefully study the *Convivio*, the *De vulgari eloquentia*, and the *Epistola* from a semiotic standpoint having the specific aim of focusing on the epistemological process applicable to the verbal sign. By this claim I can certainly anticipate the objection of the reader who will bring into discussion the passage in which Dante discusses the allegorical exposition of the first *canzone* of the *Convivio*: "Voi che 'ntendendo il terzo ciel movete" where he openly states that "Veramente li teologi questo senso prendono altrimenti che li poeti" (2.1.4) ("Indeed the theologians take this sense otherwise than do poets"). The questions we should ask and answer at this point are: if in the *Convivio* Dante chooses to follow the allegory of poets and in the *Epistola* the allegory of theologians what type of allegory did he use in the *Commedia*? And is the literal truth of allegory only something which is pertinent to the allegory of theologians or is it pertinent also to the allegory of poets?

The fact that Dante chose Psalm CXIII ("In exitu Isral de Egypto") as an example to explain the polysemy of the *Commedia* does not mean that *he* strictly used the allegory of theologians, nor does such an example constitute binding evidence to conclude that the allegorical sense is that of the theologians. In the *Convivio* he used the same example (as well as in *Purgatorio* 2. 46) and in addition to that (in the *Convivio*) he clearly tells the reader that his intention was to follow the allegory of poets. Once more, is this enough evidence to say that the allegory of the *Commedia* is an allegory of poets? In my view, Dante used resourcefully both types of allegory and in such a way that where the text of the "poema sacro" requires it, we may realize that it is crafted in an unparalleled manner and we are authorized to call such an allegory Dantean.²⁷ Indications in support of this view can be found in the *Epistola*. In Paragraph 9, where Dante discusses

²⁷ Hollander in *Allegory*, 38-39, gives all the indications of moving in the same direction. Regarding the issue of allegory in the *Conv.* he argues: "Dante was capable of making, and did in fact make, some clear distinction between the two kinds of allegory—a distinction which has been often forgotten, lost, or misunderstood during the six centuries since he wrote—there is one reason why he might conclude his essay on allegory in *Convivio* by eradicating, or at least weakening, his own distinction, bringing the two kinds of allegory together after having previously kept them apart, and it is this: although he admits that the poetry of *Convivio* is a *bella menzogna*, he also insists that it is of such high purport

the “*modus tractandi*” of the poem, he states: “Forma sive modus tractandi est poeticus, fictivus, descriptivus, digressivus, transumptivus, et cum hoc diffinitivus, divisivus, probativus, improbativus, et exemplorum positivus” (13.9.27) (“The form of treatment is poetical, fictive, descriptive, digressive, transumptive [metaphorical], and equally definitive, divisive, probative, improbative, and exemplificative.”) As we already argued on a similar point near the beginning of this study, the first five terms belong to the category of the rhetorical tradition, while the remaining five to the philosophical and theological tradition. We therefore find here laid out the entire variety of modes of treatment for both the allegory of poets and the allegory of theologians. If indeed Dante’s aim is to use skilfully all these *modi*, the allegory of the *Commedia* overlaps that of poets and theologians and makes their constitutive elements, some of which more and others less, coexist in his poetry. This means that the allegory of poets in the *Convivio* is not in contradiction with what he states in the *Epistola* regarding the allegory of the *Commedia*, but it more importantly allows the reader to comprehend that these constitutive *modi* must all be available and contribute to the making of the allegorical sense. For this reason we may call the allegory of the *Commedia* Dantean and not poetical or theological.

The answer to the second question, whether the literal truth of allegory is something pertinent to the allegory of theologians only or if it is pertinent also to the allegory of poets is a point of fundamental importance. From the outset we can say that even the allegory of poets contains literal truth, provided that we do not make the mistake of comprehending the literal sense confined within the boundaries of meaning-seeking, but rather trying to emphasize how the literal sense brings about knowledge, and, therefore, looking at it from an epistemological point of view. Moreover, it indirectly provides a new answer for Hollander’s question posed in *Allegory*:

How can Dante claim that a poem made up of *parole fittizie*, a poem which is *bella menzogna*, a poem of which the literal sense is not historical [true], that such a poem has *four* senses, including two of the senses

that it can have the kind of significance usually found only in Scripture.” Moreover, this notion of allegory Dante expounds in the *Conv.*, according to Hollander, is also at work in the *Divine Comedy*: “And so here, [in the *Divine Comedy*] 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” (245). See also Barolini’s *The Undivine Comedy*, 11, where she states 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 a ‘truth that has the face of a lie’—‘un ver c’ha faccia di menzogna’”.

which are precisely reserved for Holy Scripture, as he himself has apparently reserved them in the previous commentary?(38)

Hollander's answer is that in the *Convivio* Dante did not choose to draw a bold distinction between the two types of allegory, although he knew very well and was clearly aware of such a distinction. He concludes that: "although he [Dante] admits that the poetry of *Convivio* is a *bella menzogna*, he also insists that it is of such high purport that it can have the kind of significance usually found only in Scripture"(38-39). Therefore, the reason for this choice is to make the "poetry of *Convivio* a hybrid", which eventually will serve Dante methodically in the *Commedia*. This conclusion is well taken and hardly challengeable, but the "bella menzogna" attached to the poetry of the *Convivio* for the ultimate purpose of affirming that the literal sense is a lie, I find it difficult to accept.

My position instead is that Dante here is philosophically and semiotically pondering the epistemological function of language. He is concerned with the mode of signification and all the possibilities exploitable from the signic power of language in relation to human presence. Barolini's intelligent suggestion, although she does not pursue a semiotic treatment of the matter under discussion, gives nonetheless all the indications of moving in the same direction: "Dante describes his poem as a 'ver c'ha faccia di menzogna,' situating the *menzogna* of art within the framework of a prophetic stature that guarantees truth" (13). Now the "*menzogna* of art" is the text itself insofar as it is "an artefact", and primarily because it is a verbal medium. Even though we are limited by a textual *lacuna* in this passage of the *Convivio* and, therefore, have no other choice but to follow the editors in the way in which they accepted and filled the *lacuna*; but at the same time we find no ground to argue against it, and thus pay particular attention to the expression "parole fittizie" ("fictive words") that Dante uses. If carefully scrutinized, such an expression does not show any indication of referring to the fictiveness of the literal sense regarding the allegory of poets. The text says: "L'uno si chiama litterale, [e questo è quello che non si stende più oltre che la lettera de le parole fittizie,]" ("The first is called literal, and this is the sense that does not go beyond the letter of [fictive words]").²⁸ Instead it gives us all the indications to contain a semiotic and epistemological imprint of language and the need to tell his reader this state of things.

²⁸ The words appearing in the original translation of Dante's *Convivio* (*The Banquet*), trans. Lansing, are: "la lettera delle parole fittizie" which are translated as "the surface of the letter". I deem such a translation to be inaccurate. I therefore replaced "the surface of the letter with "the letter of fictive words".

Dante's "parole fittizie" provide the dialectic order for an understanding of how both truth and lie, having the ultimate purpose of leading to truth, may be transmitted by means of the verbal medium. But even if only truth is intended, words nonetheless remain "fictive words" insofar as they carry intrinsically the fictive component which can never be detached from words themselves. Verbal signs are dominated by a semiotic system which entails the correlation of a sign and a content. Signs alone cannot signify if they have not been correlated to content. They are both required to form reciprocally and to complete the system of referring in order to allow signification to take place. Dante's critics, in my view, have overlooked this detail to concentrate their attention on the senses of signification as the final step, the end of the semiotic process, instead of looking also at the process itself concurrently and inclusively. A view having wide consensus among critics has been that of equating "fictive words" with "fictive" literal sense for the allegory of poets. And certainly we may account for the existence of a credible logic for doing so: "fictive words" hence "fictive" literal sense. But in reality the verbal medium, taken as a system of signification, does not follow the general deductive pattern. It instead follows the logic of the opposite: "fictive", hence true. This means that while words are intrinsically fictive because they are arbitrary constructs and always incomplete until correlated to content and, in turn, the content is never the true object but only an image of it because it is signified, hence removed from the true object, words nonetheless may be considered true insofar as they have the power to demonstrate, to signify something which produces the principle of reality. In light of this aspect, Singleton's proverbial statement, though contextualized differently, that is, "the fiction of the *Commedia* is that it is not a fiction", is not just a matter applicable to the allegory of theologians but something which encompasses also the allegory of poets regarding its literal sense. And more so language, viewed as a system of signification, provides this type of logic and the possibility for the reader to come to grips with the epistemological power of language. In addition, the literal sense, either we speak of the allegory of poets or the allegory of theologians, is an already-codified signification that, in a semiotic system, is always true insofar as it stands as the indispensable denotation, the already-present, basic form of meaning, upon which possible connotations of the allegorical sense can be built. The level of truth contained in the literal sense is therefore guaranteed by the existence of its elementary, dictionary, or to use a Barthesian expression, its "zero degree" meaning.

The "parole fittizie" constitute a crucial epistemological point regarding Dante's theory of allegory and of language which leads the reader to

focus not only on the distinction between the allegory of poets and the allegory of theologians, but more importantly it leads the reader to discover his own (Dante's) conception of allegory. With this point in mind, we may realize that the fundamental tenets of language expounded in the *De vulgari eloquentia* are consistent with the *Convivio*, as much as the *Convivio* points out a related continuity with the *Epistola* regarding the type of allegory (Dantean) he used in the making of the *Commedia*.

Important studies regarding this issue, primarily those centered on Auerbach's figural hermeneutics, Singleton's allegorical theory of interpretation, and Charity's typological exegesis, all come to terms with the literal sense of Holy Scripture and affirm its historical or literal truth. However, my view of Dante's purpose regarding this matter is chiefly that of defining a type of allegory which would serve the purpose of talking about transcendental truth in a poetic manner, but not in the way that was customary for the tradition of poetic allegory, so as to take "veritade ascosa sotto bella menzogna" (*Convivio* 2.1.3) ("truth hidden beneath a beautiful lie") but rather as truth resting upon the literal sense and inclusively extended to the allegorical sense for reasons directly connected to the need of signifying transcendently.

What is the consistency and the thematic connection between the *Convivio* and the *De vulgari eloquentia* as far as Dante's allegory is concerned? The point is a subtle one if we consider the more general purpose of both treatises and their desired objectives, but by bringing them close together on this issue, they are certainly of decisive significance regarding the information we may gather on the allegory. What we may focus our attention upon is Dante's scrupulous investigation of the epistemological utility of language.

If in the *Convivio* Dante makes reference to this matter while illustrating the four senses of signification, in the *De vulgari eloquentia* his treatment is quite direct and more in-depth, since the two major topics of investigation are the artificial languages and the eminent vernacular (poetry) concerning their power of signifying. The terms of comparison are the "*parole fittizie*" ("fictive words") of the *Convivio* and the two statements of the *De vulgari eloquentia*, where in the first he defines poetry as "*fictio rethorica musicaque poita*" ("a fiction that is composed according to the rules of poetic and musical art") and in the second he gives a description of the linguistic "*signum ... in quantum aliquid significare videtur ad placitum*" ("sign ... that it can be seen to signify anything, according to man's will.") The relationship between the two treatises and distinctively what unites the statements above provides the ground for what is their condition

of having the possibility to signify arbitrarily in historical reality (*ex institutione*) and the power to generate a form of truth simultaneously by means of poetry.

The relevant point here consists of finding the epistemological specificity of “fictive” as an intrinsic attribute of the verbal/poetic medium and arbitrariness as its mode of signifying truth. On this aspect, in addition to the Aristotelian and Augustinian reverberations, Dante was particularly influenced by the most recent modist ideas, according to which there are accidental modes of signifying (*modi significandi accidentales*), which are based on the arbitrary/conventional relationship between a signifier and a signified. But there are also, and nonetheless, the substantial modes of signifying (*modi significandi substantiales*) that are innate, do not need to be learned, are motivated modes of signification or what may be called natural linguistic rules of humans that function as linguistic universals. Regarding this aspect, Dante does not dwell on the issues of whether linguistic universals are semantic or syntactic or both, but rather on the fact that they are simply inborn in humans. Thus, the thematic aspect regarding the modes of signifying contained in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, along with his definition of poetry as “fictio rethorica musicaque poita”, put us in the position of crafting intertextually a semio-linguistic annotation with the “parole fitizie” of the *Convivio*. At the same time, they give us supporting evidence to recognize that Dante’s intention too, predominantly in the *Convivio*, was a semio-linguistic one as far as his handling of the four senses of signification. More specifically, the inherent fictiveness of words/poetry and, at the same time, their purpose to signify, to point out something (even transcendently, as it will be the case in the *Commedia*) exemplify well both the arbitrariness of the *modi significandi accidentales* (in that the verbal sign is in relation with the *res significata* and not with the *res in se*) which is a constitutive characteristic of imperfect human languages, and the need to search for and find meaning, or what we may call truth insofar as signification is concerned. Thus, the semio-linguistic system utilized in a poetic form would put Dante in the position of finding again the vanished rapport of necessity between the *signa* and the *res*, as in the prelapsarian language represented by the *modi significandi substantiales*. In the attempt to bring together arbitrariness and necessity in the correlation between the *signa* and the *res*, Dante embarks on an original theory of signs, whereby both modes of signifying, that is, accidental and substantial must be embedded in the form of understanding of humans, which is in itself a semiotic process. And for Dante this was attainable only by means of the eminent vernacular which is essentially an ephemeral moment of poetic intuition and creation.

For it is not an actual language but rather that which is the unlimited and unprecedented signifying power of language.

Some time ago, Maria Simonelli already argued that Dante's notion of allegory developed out of the cultural climate of his age, above all from the influential ideas from Bologna, and from the tradition established by Prudentius' *Psychomachia* in which "[l]'allegoria non è più soltanto una metafora, ma una verità intellettuale racchiusa nella trama sensibile delle parole" (the allegory is not only a metaphor anymore, but an intellectual truth contained in the sensory plot of words).²⁹ She continues:

Anche la posizione dantesca va colta su questo sfondo culturale, senza per ciò equivocarla con lo sfondo medesimo. Pilastro stabilissimo di ogni definizione dell'allegoria, per Dante come per ogni altro, è che l'allegoria non è scindibile dalla lettera; pur travalicandola, ne partecipa.

Even Dante's position must be seized on this cultural background, but without confusing it with the cultural background itself. The most firm pillar of any allegorical definition for Dante, as well as for any other, is that *allegory is not separable from the letter, though crossing it, it partakes of it*.³⁰

Since the allegory cannot be separated from the letter, as much as the allegory of theologians includes the same condition, the path upon which Simonelli leads the reader here, which I completely share, is that Dante's allegory, the indispensable rhetorical tool he will skilfully use in the making of the *Commedia*, does not provide and neither does it legitimize a bipolar opposition of a rhetorical process *in facto* of theologians and the one *in verbis* of poets. This is so because if Dante allowed such a distinction, he had to come to terms with the insurmountable obstacle of the allegory of theologians which was on the one hand truth in itself because *in facto*, but on the other hand it had received the entitlement of existence only insofar as it lived through the verbal medium, and therefore could not avoid the intrinsic fictiveness of words. Although Holy Scripture is inspired by God, it is nonetheless through humans and their verbal medium (*modi significandi accidentales*) that it is revealed to them. As for the modes of signification, according to Dante, both the allegory of the Holy Scripture and the *Commedia* cannot carry absolute truth in the literal sense or viewed as omni-comprehensive *in facto* but true in light of the fulfillment of the

²⁹ "Allegoria e simbolismo dal *Convivio* alla *Commedia* sullo sfondo della cultura bolognese," in *Dante e Bologna ai tempi di Dante*, 212. The English translation from the Italian is mine.

³⁰ The emphasis in italics and the translation from the Italian are mine, 212.

future event for the Holy Scripture, and true for the *Commedia* for its poetic delivery as the only possible form of fulfillment of the divine experience.

The symbiotic relationship between the letter and the allegory is overtly endorsed in the *Convivio* where Dante explains that in order to demonstrate the allegorical sense one must always begin from that which is known best, the immediate sense of the letter, and than move on to what is less known or not known at all:

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 *inrazionale* 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 scritture [la litterale sentenza] sia sempre lo di fuori, *impossibile* venire a l'altre, massimamente a l'allegorica, senza prima venire a la litterale. (2.1.8-10)³¹

(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.)

There are two significant aspects contained in the above citation: the first is that Dante speaks of the linguistic production of meaning in philosophical terms and according to a logical pattern; and two, that the literal sense, even where the text requires looking for the allegorical one, which must always be there, cannot be dissociated from the signifying process otherwise it is “impossible to arrive” at “the allegorical”. Dante’s remark on the logical way of proceeding in order to acquire knowledge is an indication of the semiotic treatment of the language.³² According to Dante, the literal sense is logically the foundation upon which we construct allegori-

³¹ Emphasis in italics is mine.

³² Regarding Dante’s “sign-based hermeneutics”, Barański in “Dante’s Signs: An Introduction to Medieval Semiotics and Dante,” *Dante and the Middle Ages*, 156, wrote: “there is little doubt in my mind that, when he wrote the *Commedia* (and also at other points in his life), the poet believed that a sign-based hermeneutics, with its emphasis on knowledge as a God-given process of illumination *per creaturas ad Creatorem*, offered the best mode of understanding.”

cal connotations and not vice versa. The literal sense can exist by itself, without the allegorical sense because it is repository of a denotation;³³ it lives in a state of codified meaning. Quite different is the allegorical sense, which cannot exist without the literal one. It entails what we could compare to Hjelmslev's "connotative semiotics" or second-order of signification,³⁴ which consists of a "superelevation of codes" or what we may call a recursive process by which the denotative code provides the ground for another code. Or said with Eco: "there is a connotative semiotics when there is a semiotics whose expression plane is another semiotics" (*A Theory*, 55). Thus, the semiotics of the literal sense is the point of departure from which new semantic fields may be foreseen by the reader and whose primary endeavour is to look for them and test their rapport of pertinence with the semiotics of the literal sense. The whole process of foreseeing and testing the new correlation must take place within the encyclopedic universe of medieval culture.

Dante's insistence on the fact that "la litterale sentenza sempre sia subietto e materia de l'altre, massimamente de l'allegorica" (*Conv.* 2.1.11) ("the literal meaning is always the subject and the material of the other senses, especially of the allegorical"), and that it is impossible to understand the other senses before coming to an understanding of the literal one ("impossibile è prima venire a la conoscenza de l'altre che a la sua" (2.1.11), is a further corroboration and clear evidence pointing in the direction of the "first order of signification" (denotation). For this reason, again, Dante's attempt is to make the semiotics of the allegorical sense *inclusive* and not *exclusive* of the semiotics of the literal one. The "nascosa veritate" ("hidden truth") with which he closes chapter 1 of the second book of the *Convivio* is indicative of a foreseeable production of a connotative code modeled on and directly guided by the denotation of the literal sense. As a result, the pursuable truth hidden within the allegory responds remarkably to the "second-order of signification" or what Eco calls "connotative semiotics".

Are there theoretical differences between the *Convivio* and the *Epistola* a propos of the allegory? Although Dante scholars are still divided on this issue due to some suspected philological incongruities emerging between the *Convivio* and the *Epistola*, we are nonetheless in the position of affirming that for what concerns a theory of interpretation, which was Dante's

³³ Even though it is difficult to draw a clear distinction between denotation and connotation according to modern semiotics, Dante clearly aims at making such a distinction stand out in the *Convivio*.

³⁴ Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, 114.

chief pursuit, there is instead theoretical continuity and most certainly consistency.

In terms of continuity, attention should be given to *fictivus*, which is one of the initial adjectives we come across in the ninth paragraph of the *Epistola* with reference to the exposition of the “*modus tractandi*”. The textual presence of *fictivus* in the *Epistola* immediately recalls the “fictive words” of *Convivio*, and in fact it works in the same capacity of the latter insofar as it points out the intrinsic characteristic of the verbal medium whose purpose is to produce meaning by means of a semiotic process which itself entails a dimension of fictiveness. Also, the adjective *fictivus* as one aspect of the “*modus tractandi*” is a central element and the point of departure of the *poeticus*. Put differently and in the specificity of the *Epistola*, the term *poeticus* understood in the sense of creating with words, cannot be divided from the *fictivus* because the latter is an intrinsic, fundamental characteristic of words; it is the condition of a bi-planar correlation which allows the artistic intuition and creation to take place and to manifest itself in a pattern of verbal courses and recourses. The codified correlation, in the end, produces only other verbal *signa*. This is also the reason explaining the elementary rule of interpretation for which the allegory, according to Dante, cannot be separated from or kept distinct from its letter.

A point worth noting in the *Epistola* is also Eco’s annotation of Dante’s use of *significata* concerning the polysemy of the *Commedia* and which some translations “more or less subconsciously, attenuate”.

Per esempio la traduzione di A. Frugoni e di G. Brugnoli, nell’edizione Ricciardi delle opera minori fa dire a Dante ‘il primo significato è quello che si ha della lettera del testo, l’altro è quello che si ha da quello che si volle significare con la lettera del testo’. Se così fosse, Dante sarebbe assai ortodossamente tomista, perché parlerebbe di un significato parabolico, inteso dall’autore, che quindi potrebbe essere ridotto, in termini tomistici, al significato letterale (e pertanto l’*Epistola* starebbe ancora parlando dell’allegoria dei poeti e non di quella dei teologi). Ma il testo latino recita: ‘alius est qui abetur per significata per litteram’ e qui sembra proprio che Dante voglia parlare ‘delle cose che sono significate dalla lettera’ e quindi di una allegoria *in factis*. Se avesse voluto parlare del senso inteso non avrebbe usato il neutro ‘significata’ ma una espressione come ‘sententiam’, che nel lessico medievale vuole dire appunto il senso dell’enunciato (inteso o no che esso sia).³⁵

(For example the translation of A. Frugoni and G. Brugnoli in the Ricciardi edition of the minor works has Dante saying: ‘the first mean-

³⁵ Eco, *Sugli specchi*, 232-33.

ing is the one which comes from the letter of the text, the other is the one which was intended to signify through the letter of the text'. If this were the case, Dante would be orthodoxly Thomist because he would be speaking of a parabolic meaning, understood by the author, and that could be reduced, in Thomistic terms, to the literal meaning (and therefore the Epistle would be still talking about the allegory of poets and not of that of theologians). But the Latin text says: 'alius est qui abetur per significata per litteram' and here it seems that Dante wants to talk about 'things which are signified by the letter' and therefore pertaining to an allegory *in factis*. If he wanted to speak of the sense instead, he would not have used the neuter *significata* but rather an expression such as *sententiam*, which in the medieval lexicon refers precisely to the sense of enunciation (being it understood or not).³⁶

In the above citation, Eco uncovers a key semiotic point but for some reason he does not discuss it. Perhaps because his focus is to demonstrate that in Dante's allegory coexist all ten characteristics that are listed in paragraph 9 and which are proper to the poetic and to the philosophical-theological discourse. That is, characteristics that belong to both the allegory of poets and the allegory of theologians. But if we look closely at the specific context in which *significata* is found in the *Epistola*, we realize that such a neuter is used in a technical sense and in a strictly semiotic manner. It foresees an entire process of codification of meaning grounded in the signic condition of the literal sense. It is a linguistic state of correlated meaning, it already contains a *denotatum* which is a required condition in order to provide the ground (ground not in the Peircian sense of pre-codification) for and to open up to further possible codifications (*connotata*). The specific role of *significata* in this instance, and the reason why Dante chooses it instead of a sense of enunciation, such as *sententiam* as suggested by Eco, is a way of indicating how a polysemic model works and which in turn reiterates the continued consistency between the *Convivio* and the *Epistola* vis-à-vis his theory of interpretation. In other words, if we take the example of Psalm 113 in which the psalmist declaims: 'When Israel went out of Egypt' (*In exitu Israel de Egipto*) we may construct the following pattern which serves as an illustration and a clarification of the interpretive value of '*significata*':

³⁶ The English translation from the Italian is mine, as well as the emphasis in italics for *significata* and *sententiam*. For the Italian translation of Epistle XIII to which Eco refers see Alighieri, *Opere minori*, vol. 2, 611.

Fig. 1

As we can see from the illustration, the primary modeling of motion which is made specific and intelligible by the *denotatum* (meaning) of the literal sense, must always be there; for Dante it cannot be circumvented so as to allow a direct correlation of the expression level of ‘When Israel went out of Egypt’ with one of the connotations. The *denotatum* of the literal sense is indispensable for the construction of connotations c1, c2, c3. Dante leaves no doubt on this mandatory step and says it openly with the utmost terminological precision: “nam primus sensus est qui habetur per litteram, alius est qui habetur per significata per litteram” (*Epistola*, 13.7) (“the first sense is that which comes from the letter, the second is that of that which is *signified by the letter*”).³⁸ In this instance, Dante’s choice to use *significata* therefore is not fortuitous but clearly thought out in order to address an already correlated meaning grounded in the literal signified. In such a specific context, Dante knew very well that he could not use other expressions but *significata* for the creation of connotations. He could have opted for *sententiam* instead of *significata* (certainly *sententiam* would have responded very well to the production of sense in an enunciation) but impossible from a semio-linguistic standpoint because connotations can only be created on existing codified meanings. Further, Dante’s specific ter-

³⁷ For the general notion of semiotic “primary” and “secondary modeling” I used Sebeok/Danesi, *The Forms of Meaning*, 59.

³⁸ The emphasis in italics is mine.

minological choice demonstrates a theoretical compliance, as far as his exegetical view is concerned, with that which he had already expounded in the *Convivio*.

The theoretical parallelism between the *Epistola* and the *Convivio*, specifically on the issue of meaning formation that we have been discussing so far, is substantiated by Dante's account of the fourth sense of polysemy:

Lo quarto senso si chiama anagogico, cioè sovrasenso; e questo è quando spiritualmente si pone una scrittura, la quale ancora [sia vera] eziandio nel senso litterale, per le cose significate significa de le superne cose de l'eternal Gloria. Sì come vedere si può in quello canto del Profeta che dice che, ne l'uscita del popol d'Israel d'Egitto, Giudea è fatta santa e libera. Ché avvegna essere vero secondo la lettera sia manifesto, non meno è vero quello che spiritualmente s'intende, cioè che ne l'uscita dell'anima dal peccato, essa sia fatta santa e libera in sua potestate. E in dimostrar questo, sempre lo litterale dee andare innanzi, sì come quello nella cui sentenza li altri sono inchiusi, e senza lo quale sarebbe impossibile ed irazionale intendere a li altri, e massimamente a lo allegorico. (*Conv.* 2.1.6-9)

(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 the things signified [the supernal things] of the 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 [sanctified] and [made] 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 [sanctified] and [made] free in its power. 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.)³⁹

It is clear here that once the anagogical sense is formed, whose central meaning is to free the soul from the bondage of sin, the literal *denotatum* is not tossed away, it encloses the anagogical connotation (and the same thing is true for the allegorical and the moral senses). Therefore the truth/meaning about which Dante speaks, the one that is true in the literal sense, as much as in the anagogical sense, is indivisible and partakes in

³⁹ The words enclosed in the parentheses are mine and constitute a modification of Lansing's translation of the *Convivio*, which I deem to be a closer translation of the Italian original text. The emphasis in italics is also mine.

the formation of all allegorical connotations. To sum up the state of inclusiveness of literal truth in the formation of connotations we may use the aid of the following illustration:⁴⁰

Fig.2

The above diagram constitutes a synthesis of what we have been saying so far regarding the isomorphic process that exists semiotically between figuralism, typology, and allegory as far as Dante's epistemological outlook is concerned. The first triangle is a representation of the triadic correlation of the literal sense whereby the *signa* trigger a mental image through *cogitatio* and the mental image manifests itself in the form of signified (*res1*). The up-side-down triangle is embedded in the primary modeling of the literal sense and only by means of this condition, new possible signifieds (which are aimed at by figuralism, typology, and allegory equally) may be actualized as ultimate signified (*res2*) and specifically as connotations *c1*, *c2*, *c3* in the case of allegory. Therefore, in order to establish a correlation of the second modeling level or to grasp what we may call the ultimate signified, Dante's allegory follows semiotically the same pattern of correlation required for figuralism and typology. Figural historicity according to Auerbach is only a prophecy, a historical shadow that requires the occurrence of the ultimate event which will take place sometime in the future. For typology, certain names and facts of the Old Testament directly tied to history are only incomplete types; they foretell and relate the ultimate

⁴⁰ The illustration is taken from the graphic model used by Martin Irvine, in "Interpretation and the Semiotics of Allegory in Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Augustine", 59. However, my illustration contains two major differences from Irvine's original use which are required to adequately describe Dante's semiotic model of allegory. The first difference is that there is no direct relation between the sign-vehicle (*signa*) and the object (*res1*) and it conforms essentially to a Peircian triangle; the second difference is that Irvine uses it for the typological model and only on the semantic level, whereas I extend it also to the allegorical one but in the specificity of a semiotic model.

event. As we can see, figural hermeneutics and typological exegesis are both entrenched in the verbal medium, and thus either we refer to *figure* or to *type*, their primary modeling level is synonymous with a literal correlated signified, which encompasses the possibility for the future event to take place. The literal signified of the Dantean allegory responds to the same linguistic task and contains a truth/meaning to allow the allegorical sense to disclose transcendental truth.

At this point and in light of what we have been discussing so far, we must come to terms unavoidably with the phase of dialectic engagement between meaning and sense which is the notable state for the production of discourse, or what Fontanille calls: "a whole of which the signification does not result from the simple addition or combination of the signification of its parts. ... [It] is ... an instance of analysis where the production, that is to say the enunciation, cannot be dissociated from its product, the utterance." (47) Hence, either we speak of figuralism, typology, or allegory regarding Dante's *Commedia*, they all must be completed by a persuable correlation of sense that is not intelligibly present in the text. And this is possible by never losing sight of the literal semiotics since it is the signifying model for allegory, the signifying figure for figuralism, and the signifying type for typology.

To say that "[a]llegory and typology are polar opposites representing many of the most fundamental structural oppositions of all sign-functions" and that allegory "functions on the vertical axis of signification [intension] and correspondences among general terms, whereas typology operates in the horizontal axis of reference [extension] and the contiguity of distinct agents and events in sacred history" (Irvine, 60) is true in relation to segmentation and to a level of isolated semanticity. But it is incomplete insofar as the discursive organization of the semiotic process is concerned. To correlate a type to its future event in order to accomplish the typological cycle, or to correlate a signified to its allegorical sense, means to take into account the whole relatable and "continuous flux of concrete semiotic production" (Fontanille, 47). In this instance, typology and allegory are both influenced by a tension of verticality and horizontality, that is, by a tension between intension, understood "as any property or quality or state of affairs connoted by a word", and extension, understood as actual instances of things to which extension applies. This is a fundamental condition required for generating both typological and allegorical discourses,⁴¹ since

⁴¹ It is important to keep in mind that, according to Jacques Geninasca quoted in Fontanille, *The Semiotics of Discourse*, 47, there is a difference between "tex-

both productions are inscribed in the verbal medium and made intelligible in the form of text.

Moreover, we are entitled to speak of typology and allegory because they are in a state of incompleteness. Upon the actual occurrence and the closing of the semiotic cycle of both typology and allegory, or by a movement from their state of *sensus* to that of *significatio*, we realize that we cannot use such terms anymore because typology is de-typologized and allegory de-allegorized.⁴² The second modeling step from the previous condition of *sensus typologicus* or *allegoricus* has turned into denotation (*significatio*) which is also what eliminates the typological and allegorical provisions.

But before this happens, the semiotic space related to *sensus* stands as a point of liminal directionality on the path to *significatio*. It is the phase in which the codification of meaning has not taken place yet; it is in its process of becoming through the validation of a dynamic interaction of its discursive functions. At this stage the text, with the active engagement of the reader and through its “textual units”, has reached an orientation for itself. The initial “textual units” are being screened, evaluated and in due course retained only those endowed with characteristics of pertinency and which are able to contribute to the formation of “discursive units”. For Dante, having an understanding of the whole semiotic system governing the formation of meaning and discourse meant to have control of all possible ways of interpreting his work and producing knowledge through the verbal medium. His idea of allegory and the way in which he will apply it to the *Commedia* aims at shedding light on this chief purpose. Within the realm of producing and decoding meaning, the *Commedia*’s primary reason is that of providing a type of knowledge that, while using previous knowledge, challenges it and strives for the achievement of a new one in order to find a way to transcendental truth.⁴³ The Dantean allegory, for this reason, becomes an instrument of knowledge. It is that which generates analogies among semantic fields of the cultural encyclopaedia and that which is likely knowable linguistically by an effort of abduction.

Dante the author knows very well that in order to be able to leave a

tual units” and “discursive units”. For the former “are not necessarily pertinent from the perspective of semantic interpretation”, while the latter do comply and work toward such pertinency.

⁴² For the notion and necessity of “de-allegorizing” the religious texts see Irvine, *Interpretation and the Semiotics of Allegory*, 40.

⁴³ Poetry in general viewed as an instrument of knowledge is part of the commentary tradition of the Middle Ages. On this point see Barański, *Dante e i segni*, 31.

sign for posterity aiming at transcendental truth (“per far segno”) and to provide the condition for the reader to decode such a transcendental truth (which is not in the sign since it contains only indications of the “sensato appendere”) has to come to terms with all those intervening factors that contribute to the formation of pursuable signification. To do this, (even though Dante does not say it in these terms) he must exploit, as he does, the basic power and function of a semiotics of discourse as a process.⁴⁴ Such a process begins in a state of already existing linguistic signs. The *Commedia*’s specific purpose is to speak of transcendental truth in a way that claims no precedents. In order to do so, Dante uses signs as tools at the service of his gnoseological needs; that is, he utilizes signs to address and, possibly, to overcome the problem of signification of transcendental knowledge. Yet, human knowledge is rooted in cognoscence (*cognoscentia*), which entails and provides only an analogical or mediated knowledge of transcendental truth. Direct knowledge of God is unattainable because it stems from prescience (*praescientia*), which appertains only to God and angels. *Praescientia* is that which humans do not have and constitutes a problematization of knowledge, since: “cum grossitie atque opacitate mortalis corporis humanus spiritus sit obtentus. Oportuit ergo genus humanum ad comunicandas inter se conceptiones suas aliquid rationale signum et sensuale habere” (*D.V.E.* 1.3.1-2) (“the grossness and opacity of the mortal body block the way of the human spirit. Therefore, in order to communicate their mental conceptions to one another, men had to have some kind of rational and sensory sign.”) And, therefore, Dante selects the verbal medium as the most effective means, though recognizing its imperfection and limitation, to correlate in a faint approximation *cognoscentia* and *praescientia*.

The semiotics of discourse understood as the single, individual, linguistic act attempting to clarify its internal, dynamic, signic process, which mediates between the intentions of the author embedded in the text, the text itself, and the reader in his/her existential state of presence, is a central epistemological point for Dante in his attempt to signify that which transcends human knowledge. By employing all the rhetorical resources and through the effort of making the *Commedia* a real journey in the afterlife, Dante succeeds in conveying a sense of a true and lived experience. The recourse to discourse, and above all regarding its fundamental aspect of human, physical presence, is well emphasized in the *Commedia* by Dante’s

⁴⁴ Regarding the view that Dante’s *Commedia* is a semiotic poem *par excellence* see Barański, *Dante e i segni*, 73.

direct attendance as the major character of his journey. This aspect is further validated by Dante's discursive interactions with his guides and the countless souls he encounters on his journey in the three kingdoms. Also, by an act of reading, the empirical reader is able to re-enact *similar* (not identical) discursive paths having the specific purpose of decoding existing content-units and concurrently attempting to conceive in the form of re-codification a poetic experience dominated by a *ratio difficilis*.

Where the allegorical interpretation is required in the *Commedia*, a close look at the semiotic process governing discourse allows the reader to understand the fundamental mechanism regarding the *how* of legitimate meaning formation through the interplay of Saussure's dichotomous condition of *langue* and *parole*. This is also what Paul Ricoeur argued in distinguishing *langue* in which the "code is collective" and *parole* in which "the message is individual."⁴⁵ More specifically, as put by Jacques Fontanille, discourse:

is the unit of analysis of semiotics. It permits us to apprehend not only the fixed or conventional products of semiotic activity (signs, for example), but also and above all semiotic acts themselves. Discourse is an enunciation in action, and this action is first of all an act of presence: the instance of discourse is not an automaton that exercises a capacity of language, but a human presence, a sensing body that expresses itself. (45)

A propos of sign production, Eco argues that it may occur according to *ratio facilis* and *ratio difficilis*. We may have a case of *ratio facilis* "when an expression-token is accorded to an expression-type, duly recorded by an expression system and, as such, foreseen by a given code."⁴⁶ As "an enunciation in action", discourse is dominated by *ratio difficilis*. Semiotically, "there is a case of *ratio difficilis* when an expression-token is directly accorded to its content, whether because the expression-type does not exist as yet or because the expression-type is identical with the content-type. In other words, there is *ratio difficilis* when *the expression-type coincides with the sememe* conveyed by the expression-token" (Eco, 183). Put in more accessible terms, we can say that the expression-token is the actual occurrence of an expression directly accorded to its content because on the one hand perhaps it does not have a codified expression-model (expression-type) to serve as a modeling expression; on the other hand, the expression-model (expres-

⁴⁵ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 3.

⁴⁶ For a theory of sign production and the function of *ratio facilis* and *ratio difficilis* see *A Theory of Semiotics*, 183.

sion-type) is lacking the content of the actual occurrence (content-token) and it is therefore identical with the content-model (content-type). In other words, "all expressions are produced according to a type; i.e. they are tokens of a type. The relationship between an expression-type and an expression-token is the sign function's type/token *ratio*."⁴⁷ But discourse, as we can see, subverts this pattern and being dominated by *ratio difficilis*, the relationship is based on a token/token or type/type *ratio*. Looking at this characteristic of discourse, we can say that it is "a *content-nebula* which cannot be analyzed into recognizable and definable content units. ... [it] has no satisfactory interpretants" (*A Theory*, 188) because it is a textual condition that is not coded yet nor is it segmented into precise units. "It has to be *invented*." As such it is a case of "*rule-changing creativity*" (*A Theory*, 188).

An articulation dominated by *ratio difficilis* is indeed a problematic articulation and the *Commedia* does present such characteristics. Before Dante the author adopts adequate ways of signifying (*modi significandi*) for the existential condition of postlapsarian man attempting to establish a relationship with God's transcendental reality and, therefore, providing Dante the pilgrim and the reader with effective verbal means of signification, he (Dante the author) must first come to terms with ways of producing signs (*modi faciendi signa*). How does Dante do it? By means of metaphorical substitutions and the metaphorical use of language which ultimately set their narrative overtones with allegory. In the *Commedia* allegory is a clear example of *ratio difficilis*. Through the concrete act of producing the text, Dante establishes a system of relations with many conventional units; that is, with units that are already *codified* (historical people, animals, mythological figures, etc.) so that these conventional units understood as existing content-forms become new expression-forms. By adopting such content-forms into new expression-forms, Dante manipulates the system of correlation in such a way that it claims no precedent and consequently becomes a case of *rule-changing creativity*.⁴⁸ Thus, the newly manipulated system reaches the addressee as something unusual, ambiguous, as a *content-nebula* which contains some non-explicit rules that must be articulated for the first time.⁴⁹

The act of articulating for the first time content-forms into new expression forms puts Dante the pilgrim and the reader face to face with a semi-

⁴⁷ Nimis, *Narrative Semiotics in the Epic Tradition*, 149.

⁴⁸ See Nimis, *Narrative Semiotics in the Epic Tradition*, 151; Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 188.

⁴⁹ On this point see Riffaterre's notion of "indirection", *Semiotics of Poetry*, 1-6; Nimis, *Narrative Semiotics in the Epic Tradition*, 151, note 13.

otic condition of discourse captured in progress, and thus in the process of being articulated. It is by means of allegory dominated by *ratio difficilis*, and in its specificity of *rule-changing creativity*, that Dante the author manages to establish a mode of signifying of man's postlapsarian condition vis-à-vis God's transcendental truth. Also, in order for Dante to invent new expression-forms he must depart from already codified content-forms because as Peirce argues, "We have no power of intuition, but every cognition is determined logically by previous cognitions", and that: "we have no power of thinking without signs."⁵⁰ Therefore, the initial point of *rule-changing creativity* is linked with already-existing categories of signification whereby the enunciation in action (discourse) becomes sign only when it reaches the end of its course; it is a speech act semiotized *a posteriori*.

Dante's use of allegory as being simultaneously the means to produce signs (*modi faciendi signa*) and the modes of signifying (*modi significandi*) is overtly manifest from the beginning of the *Commedia*. The "the dark woods" ("selva oscura") of *Inf.* 1.2, sets without delay an allegorical pattern in motion in order to make Dante the pilgrim, and the reader with him, aware of a content-level which, for the first time, is using an expression-form that is not codified. The already-codified content-unit, that is, the denotation of the "selva oscura", serves as the initial point of "cognition", the source upon which new signs can be fashioned. It is a necessary condition that provides the opportunity to formulate abductions or the required inferential acts which, metonymically, are able to entertain new, possible, not-yet-codified correlations. The sememe of the "selva oscura", being itself a recognized semantic-type, works as the basis to construct new non-conventional types referring to unknown semantic-tokens. Nonetheless, these unknown semantic-tokens entertain a relation with the denotation of the semantic-type of the "selva oscura" according to what Aristotle calls non-apophantic sememe (any meaning that is not synthesis, that is, that which constitutes a single concept not correlated in a judgement: black, dark, sin, absence, imprisonment, impasse, etc.) and apophantic sememe (any meaning that is the product of a synthesis and correlated in a judgment: absence of light, lack of movement, fear of obscurity and displacement, absence of divine grace, etc.).⁵¹ As we can see, by establishing new correlations, Dante is able to invent new possible worlds which do not necessarily require a syl-

⁵⁰ Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 5.265.

⁵¹ Aristotle, *De interpretazione* 1,2,3.16a,16b, and 4.17a; Severino, *L'identità della follia*, 161-62.

logistic truth but only an enthymemic one.

In light of its allegorical function, the “*selva oscura*” is endowed with the power of producing an array of semantic-tokens recognizable by pertinent semantic fields of the cultural encyclopaedia of Dante’s time. Through the “*selva oscura*” the reader is in the position of formulating new correlations and legitimizing content-units such as damnation of the human soul, realm of sin, absence of divine grace and, interestingly enough, even correlating it with the inability of language to signify as a result of its degenerate state. The allegorical overtone of the “*selva oscura*” and Pluto’s inability to speak is a linguistic one indicative of the impossibility to produce meaning. The impasse and the displacement set forth by the “*selva oscura*” at the beginning of *Inferno* is not only physical but also linguistic. It is a narrative obstacle guided by the allegory that needs to be there and removed in due time in order to allow Dante’s journey to move toward its desired end.

We may conclude by saying that the *Commedia* is a polysemic work and, as such, ruled by allegory. The selective labelling of Dante’s allegory, and the conviction of recognizing it as either the allegory of poets or the allegory of theologians by reputable Dante scholars requires a new focus if analyzed from a semiotic standpoint. As a matter of fact, the allegory of the *Commedia*, as argued in this study, is uniquely Dantean, and it includes characteristics which are proper to the allegory of poets and to the allegory of theologians. This aspect is textually substantiated by the *Convivio*, the *Epistola*, and the *De vulgari eloquentia*. The alleged philological discrepancies emerging between the *Convivio* and the *Epistola* responsible for the critical dispute centered on the allegory of the *Commedia* is a trivial point of criticism instead of a factual one. The mode of treatment (“modus tractandi”) explained in the *Epistola* is a seminal aspect which confirms that the allegory of poets in the *Convivio* is not in contradiction with what he states in the *Epistola* (and we take the *Epistola* as authentic), but it rather allows the reader to realize that those constitutive elements of the allegory of poets and those of the allegory of theologians must, more or less and according to the needs of signification, coexist in the making of Dante’s allegory and, in turn, Dante’s allegory in the making of the *Commedia*.

If Dante’s central desire in the *Commedia* is that of producing meaning about transcendental truth, if it is his incessant effort to affirm the *logos* through discourse and its signic power, it is also true that in the end, the speech act semiotized *a posteriori*, that is, the actual production of the *logos*

becomes its very defeat. But at this point it does not matter because if indeed the reader has been able to keep up with the text so far, it is also true that the uninterrupted search for *conoscentia*, upon reaching the crucial point of being face to face with God, is converted into *praescientia* and the *logos* into nothingness.

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