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Thesis Prospectus: "The Sound of the Heart: Dante's Incarnational Poetics"

Topic, Aims and Scope

My Master's thesis, titled "The Sound of the Heart: Dante's Incarnational Poetics," explores the relations between vernacularity, apophasis and sound with regard to how Dante handles the paradox of ineffability in the *Paradiso*. In short my thesis asks: how can the poem say the unsayable vision of God? This question presents a problem for Dante about the nature of language, representation and poetry. As Augustine succinctly poses the problem in *Sermon 52*:

So what are we to say, brothers, about God? For if you have fully grasped what you want to say, it isn't God. If you have been able to comprehend it, you have comprehended something else instead of God. If you think you have been able to comprehend, your thoughts have deceived you. So he isn't this, if this is what you have understood, but if he is this, then you haven't understood it. So what is it you want to say seeing you haven't been able to understand it? (57).

Because the very subject of his poem is that which cannot be said, Dante cannot simply abandon the poem to silence; there would be no poem otherwise. Rather, Dante is compelled to find a solution to conveying something beyond language using the resources of language itself. But what are these resources of language which allow language to convey something which it ostensibly cannot?

My thesis argues that insofar as the sayable is that which is representational, the possibility for Dante's poem to speak of the ineffable is concomitant with the possibility for a non-representational, that is, expressive form of language. The movement from the representational to the expressive would disentangle the poetic utterance from its own instrumental function as representation, that is, as words, *signum*, standing for things, *res*. The three parts of my thesis -- on vernacularity, apophasis and the sensible/affective role of sound in language -- elaborate the particular conditions under which language becomes expressive and therefore illuminate Dante's solution to the paradox of ineffability in the *Paradiso*.

My project thus aims show that there is to be found in Dante a robust poetics, and indeed theory, of language, difference and representation which goes against the grain of the understanding of the *Commedia* and of Dante, both inside and outside of Dante studies, as an onto-theological poem and poet. By focusing on the non-representational aspects of Dante's language, its performative, sensible and affective dimensions, I will attempt to intervene on a few critical fronts. The first (to be discussed in further detail below) is a question in Dante studies about the nature of truth, allegory and language in the *Commedia*: is it a poetic fiction which points to a higher spiritual truth, or does it literally depict a real experience of the vision of God? My thesis attempts to displace this perennially vexing question for Dantists, one which emerged in the very first commentaries on the poem in the fifteenth century when the attempt was made to classify the *Commedia* as a fiction in order safeguard Dante's legacy from charges of heresy. Moreover, with this project I hope to make a contribution to the ongoing discussion in literary studies about the philosophy of language and representation, a conversation that is both a major legacy of postmodernism and that also has deep roots in the history of western thought,

reaching all the way back to Plato's *Cratylus*, which discusses the nature of language as conventional or necessary. My thesis will attempt to show how Dante's poetry moves this conversation forward and perhaps beyond the dichotomy between representation and thing represented insofar as the *Commedia* explicitly attempts to "represent" the unrepresentable. Hence I use of the term Incarnation in order to give name to the way Dante accomplishes this paradoxical use of language, which does not erase difference, but rather seeks to undo the reduction of language to its utility to refer to things and concepts and therefore to exhibit the way the sayable and unsayable come together in Dante's poetry.

Critical History and Significance to Dante Studies and Literary Studies

The significance of this inquiry into language and representation in Dante strikes at the heart of a centuries-long debate in Dante studies about how to regard the ontological status of the poem: is the reader supposed to take seriously and literally Dante's claims for his poem to be read on the level of scripture? Or is the *Commedia* irreducibly allegorical, that even its claims to truth are a result of the poem's artifice to mimetically represent the divine it speaks of. This debate is known by the two medieval notions of allegory which name both sides. The side which takes the *Commedia* as literal truth, as a literal account of the vision of God, is that of the "allegory of the theologians," which, as explained by Aquinas, is an allegory whose moral or spiritual truth is grounded on its literal truth, as are the events depicted in the Bible. By contrast, the "allegory of the poets" sees the poem as "la bella menzogna," the beautiful lie, which uses the fictive constructions of poetry to point to a truth which the literal text does not itself contain. However, as Barolini and others point out, Dante is "a supremely dialectical poet, who always

preserves both horns of whatever dilemma he is confronting,” and as such, my thesis seeks another explanation that does not remain caught in the binary between truth and fiction in the debate between the two allegories (159). The dialectical, or what I will call the nondual aspects of Dante’s response to this question about the truth/fiction of the *Commedia* is seen in its perhaps most “literal” instance, among many other self-reflexive moments in the poem, when Dante “swears” on his own poem that he actually sees the winged beast named Geryon rise up out of the inferno: “ma qui tacer nol posso; e per le note / di questa comedia, lettor, ti giuro... ch’i’ vidi per quell’ aere grosso e scuro / venir notando una figura in suso, / maravigliosa ad ogne cor sicuro” [But here I cannot conceal it, and by the notes of this comedy, reader, I swear to you...that I saw, through that thick dark air, a figure come swimming upward, fearful to the most confident heart] (*Inf.* 16. 127-8, 130-1). Dante’s swearing on his own poem while also addressing the reader directly is a gesture which seems to infinitely oscillate between the notions of truth and fiction: is the reader supposed to understand this assertion as a poetic ploy, or as utterly unironic? This interpretive undecidability allows Dante to present *both* views at once, rather than one or the other. That in Dante truth has the shape of fiction and fiction the shape of truth illustrates one sense in which Dante’s poetry is incarnational, which refers to this both/and structure of Dante’s poetry, an aspect central to Dante’s solution to the paradox of ineffability.

Conceiving Dante’s poetics as incarnational is, then, a way in which to not only counter readings of the *Commedia* that rely on a logocentric framework, but also to raise larger questions about difference and representation which are the contemporary inheritances of postmodern theory. By examining the paradox of ineffability and unrepresentability, my thesis seeks to make an intervention into this discussion about the “truth” of the poem and wherein such truth may lie.

The major claim is that the poem's "truth" is not guaranteed by an onto-theological understanding of the poem, on which *both* the allegory of the poets and theologians stake their claims. If the poem is "literally" true as well as allegorically true, as in the "allegory of the theologians," this position is grounded upon a divine guarantee of the truth the poem discloses. The "allegory of the poets," which reads the poem as literally fiction but allegorically true, renders the economy of meaning in the poem as ultimately referring to a transcendental signified, that is, God. Instead, I argue that the truth of poem is neither of these, but is incarnational, that is, immanent to language itself. In other words (and which I will show in greater detail below), the reflexivity and performativity of Dante's poetics reveals the way the very materiality of the signifier can, paradoxically, convey something ineffable. This claim attempts to reopen some of the major debates about signification and representation which have been considered settled, or at least have become part of the standard *doxa* in literary studies: that language is differential, that truth is always mediated, that there is an irreducible gap between representation and what is represented.

The work of Christian Moevs provides the backbone of my thinking of the Incarnation, and thus Dante's poetics, as nondual, and how this presents a crucial response to contemporary issues in literary studies. In "God's Feet and Hands" Moevs describes the dominant holdover from the Enlightenment in contemporary thought as a "psycho-physical dualism," whose materialism results in a permanent rupture between the mind and body and also attributes representational structures to our access to reality itself, as in Kant's idealism (2-3). By circumscribing the limits of representation, Dante demonstrates in his poetry how nonduality signifies the unity in diversity of binaries such as "creator/creation, God/soul, form/matter" (3).

Thus, the meaning of Incarnation is precisely that which signifies that “each of these dualities, so real to human conceptual understanding, is ultimately one, or rather, not two” (3). Understanding the Incarnation as nonduality allows my reading of Dante’s response to ineffability to take shape; in short, there is no irreparable duality between the sayable and the unsayable, but through apophatic language, that is, the negation of representation, the unsayable may be “said.”

Similar to Moevs, my reading also builds off of William Franke, who in *Dante’s Interpretive Journey* is also concerned with postmodern theories of language and representation, as well as the debate between the allegories of the poets and theologians. Franke shifts this debate by emphasizing how the self-consciousness of Dante’s text and the performativity of Dante’s addresses to the reader elicit a participatory dimension of the text that does not fully dispense with the representational, but certainly exceeds it. I will also argue that there is a non-representational dimension of Dante’s poetry to be found in the very mode of its utterance, that is, in its apophaticism. But in contrast to Franke, I will attempt to think this non-representational dimension of language primarily from the standpoint of Dante’s language itself, rather than from its revelatory potential in the hermeneutic act of reading.

Thus my thesis engages the critical conversation which relates Dante’s performative poetics to the principle of Incarnation. For this, Marcia Colish’s landmark study on medieval conceptions of language, along with the Dantists Kevin Brownlee and Denys Turner, will be essential reference points to build on yet also push back on. In *The Mirror of Language* Colish examines the development of the theory of the *verbum cordis/interius* in Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas and Dante. And though the notion of the inner word is essential to my reading of Dante’s poetics as non-representational, it will not rely on how Colish describes the inner word

as providing a “redeemed rhetoric,” the notion that language can be restored to a prelapsarian, integral relation between the word and thing. The view that Dante’s language renews a “fallen” language is refuted in my reading as a whole, and specifically in my reading of Dante’s understanding of the vernacular and the mutability of language. If at its essence, language is subject to contingency and change, then there can be no one specific language which has the privilege of being sacred or integral. Rather, I argue with Denys Turner that Incarnation signals the possibility within all language(s) for the materiality of the signifier to become foregrounded through apophasis, and thus lacking a signified, conveys a sense of the ineffable precisely because the utterance lacks a determinate signified. There is no redemption as restoration of a prelapsarian perfect language; rather, there is only Incarnation -- of the divine *in* the finite, of the unsayable *within* the sayable.

Regarding Brownlee, the point is similar. His work makes the critical connection my thesis also makes in seeing the evolution of Dante’s understanding of Adamic speech as related to a linguistic notion of the Incarnation. However, insofar as Brownlee also reduces Incarnation to a concept of redemption, my project will push back on his reading. Conversely, I attempt to show that Dante does not dismiss the “fallenness” language and its function to represent, but negates the possibility for its “fullness,” that is the possibility for language to signify the divine using representational structures. While I agree with Brownlee that *Paradiso* XXVI is essential for Dante’s securing the legitimacy of the vernacular, what I will attempt to engage is precisely *what that means* -- that Dante is paradoxically asserting the mutability and contingency of language as the very condition of possibility for any sense of the divine-as-ineffable to be conveyed in language.

Apart from the notions of linguistic performativity and the Incarnation, my thesis is in conversation with Dante criticism which focuses on Dante's use of the vernacular in relation to his poetics. Insofar as my thesis relates the vernacular to the the *verbum cordis*, or word of the heart -- i.e. language in its affective dimension -- my project intersects with the work of Elena Lombardi and Tristan Kay, who illustrate Dante's inheritance of the tradition of the vernacular love lyric as revealing a complex intertwining of language and desire in the *Commedia*. This conversation is important to my project because it enables me to tie in the significance of the vernacular as the language of earthly, romantic desire, but also of ineffable, divine love.

Outline of the Argument and Specific Readings/Contributions

Part I: The Vernacular and Originary Language

In discussing the nature of Adamic speech and the nature of the vernacular, the first part of my thesis seeks to show that Dante rules out the possibility of accessing a perfect, sacred language which somehow overcomes the paradox of representation facing his poem. In other words, Dante's vernacularity demonstrates that a perfect language, that is, a transparent representational medium is impossible, and that the essence of language is mutability and difference.

In the *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante's treatise on language and poetics written several years before the *Commedia*, the question of the vernacular is tied to that of Adamic speech, the origin of language. What is important about Dante's understanding of originary language is that the medieval commonplace that Dante works from in the *De vulgari*, and then later reworks in the *Paradiso*, is the idea that Adam's language, being endowed to him directly from God, is thus

a necessary language, a language which is immutable and retains a non-arbitrary relation between the *res* and *signum*. Adam's language is immutable insofar as it is passed down without alteration from God to Adam, from Adam to the peoples that spoke the universal language prior to Babel, and then to the Israelites who inherited Adamic speech after the *confusio linguarum*, the dispersion of languages after Babel. Moreover, Adamic speech establishes an integral relation between word and thing in the naming of the animals: Adam calls the animals by the names which are inherent or essentially an aspect of the animals themselves: "appellavitque Adam nominibus suis" [Adam called them (the animals) by *their* names (Gen. 2.20)]. The animals' names seem to inhere in their very being, which Adam brings out in language. And in the *De vulgari*, Dante amplifies this idea by adding to the Genesis story that Adam's first word is the name of God, claiming not only that it would be absurd for Adam to name anything before God, since he was made for and by God, but that the uttering of God's name should "have begun with a cry of joy... since there is no joy outside God, but all joy is in God, and since God Himself is joy itself" (*DVE* 1.4.4). Here, Adam's cry of joy in issuing God's name realizes an immanent identity with God himself, as joy itself. Thus, this idea of Adamic speech puts forward a conception of language as a perfectly transparent representational medium, one founded on the identity between *res* and *signum*.

And so the nature of Adam's language as integral and immutable links up with the problematic of the vernacular language, the mother-tongue, and *gramatica*, the standardized and formalized form of the sacred languages -- Latin, Greek and Hebrew. The essence of the vernacular is its mutability, that it changes according to geography, history, and social mores. Significantly for this inquiry, in the *De vulgari* Dante states that the vernacular is the first

language human beings used -- “quia prima fuit humano generi usitata” (*DVE* 1.1.4). However, he still attributes immutability to Adamic speech, that is, originary language. And this sets up a contradiction: because the vernacular is typified by its mutability, by definition, the vernacular cannot be the language “prima fuit humano generi usitata” if Adam’s language, originary language, is immutable. In *Paradiso* XXVI, Dante revises this inconsistency and describes Adamic speech as being “fu tutta spenta,” entirely extinguished before Nimrod and his subjects built the Tower of Babel. In this canto Dante also emphasizes how language is based on convention, that is, the “abbella” or desire or whim of people. Hence original language is of the vernacular: a mutable and constructed medium. This is significant insofar as one of the revolutionary aspects of the *Commedia* is that in its very writing it makes the argument for the legitimacy of vernacular language to convey the most exalted of subjects: God Himself. Thus I argue that Dante’s conception of language as the vernacular, insofar as this means language is irreducibly differential and contingent, is essential to how he approaches the problem of ineffability and unrepresentability at the heart of his poetic project. In short, the vernacular rules out a logocentric guarantee of the poem’s claim to spiritual truth.

Part II: Apophasis and the Paradoxes of Representation

Part two of my thesis will discuss the relationship between apophasis and representation. This section will emphasize the performativity of Dante’s language and thus how, in Dante, apophasis is not simply negative language about God (i.e. saying God is not x, y, or z), but that it ruptures the very signifying capacity of language as such. This notion of apophasis builds off of the work of Denys Turner who characterizes apophasis as “not a particular metaphoric repertoire

to which one refers, but the failure of language as such, the failure of all metaphor, whether negative or affirmative” (293). Given that part one establishes that there exists no sacred language which Dante could draw upon to represent the divine, apophasis is significant for Dante’s poetics in the sense that apophatic language acts as a meta-language which self-reflexively refers to language’s own representational function, and thus to its failure to represent the divine. By emptying the signifier of its signified, the word becomes not a conduit of representation but, paradoxically, of the expression of that which cannot be represented. I will argue, then, that Dante’s apophaticism is essential for making clear what I am terming Dante’s incarnational poetics.

To stress how apophasis disrupts the entire economy of representation, I will connect the thread of Dante’s conception of the vernacular as mutable and contingent to his reading of the Tower of Babel story and then on to his apophaticism. In light of Dante’s critique that no human language could attain to the status of a sacred language which would be an immutable and transparent representational medium, then what is punished at Babel is the pride of an absolute representation, that is, the pride in rendering a human sign, the Tower, as standing for or representing the divine. As Dante describes in the *De vulgari*, Nimrod’s motivation for building the Tower is to construct a sign which by reaching the heavens would not only equal God, but would supersede Him (*DVE* 1.7.4). Then, through a reading of Dante’s acrostic in *Purgatorio* XII, I will show how Dante represents this Babelic desire for what Nichols calls “linguistic self-sufficiency” while at the same time displaying the “self-insufficiency” of language, that is, of all forms of human representation. The acrostic is a culmination of a sequence of three cantos on the terrace of pride which elaborates pride as a vice which distorts reality. And on this terrace,

Dante and Virgil encounter bas-reliefs of the *exempla* of pride and humility that are so lifelike that the boundary between the *res* and *signum* is blurred, an effect which is made manifest in the confusion of Dante's sensory experience: the statues appear to speak, engraved choruses appear to sing, and the mere image of incense actually perfumes. These statues, it turns out, were made by God himself, and are his "visible speech" -- the upshot being that only God's art can actually *be* real, that only God's form of representation can actually give life to the things represented. Hence, by forming his own "visible speech" via the acrostic, Dante performatively shows the confusion of Babelic pride in taking the Tower as a sign superior to the heavens, since, in truth, the limit of human forms of representation, no matter how real or transparent, are only mimetic resemblances of a pure form of representation. Here, Dante shows again the impossibility for art, and by extension poetry, to transparently represent, to write a "visible speech."

In light of this meditation on the very nature of *poiesis*, the meaning and purpose of Dante's apophatic language is to display a linguistic and artistic humility before the ineffable: to self-consciously recognize and perform in the poetry itself the fact that the ineffable is truly ineffable, that there is no magical way language can convey it. And most importantly, that this lays the very foundation by which Dante conceives of language as incarnational: in order for the poem to truly convey the divine, language must be truly human, and representation truly finite. In this sense, I argue that apophasis makes language what Giuseppe Mazzotta calls "an immanent analogue of the Incarnation": by emptying itself of conceptuality and negating even its own capacity to signify, apophatic language resembles kenosis and Crucifixion, the humility of Christ's becoming human, suffering and dying (Mazzotta 6). In Dante, poetry displays an

apophatic humility before the ineffable, and thus actually speaks of what cannot be spoken, exalting not the poet but the poem, not representation but language itself.

Part III: Poetry as Incarnational: Sound and Affect as Alternative Structures to Representation

Through a discussion of Augustine and Aquinas' notion of the *verbum cordis* or *interius*, the inner word, or word of the heart, I will attempt to show how apophasis allows for the ineffable to inhere in the sensible and affective dimensions of language, rather than the conceptual and representational. This section will turn around a reading of Dante's apophatic address to God: O highest Light, that rise so far beyond / the concepts of mortals, lend again / to my memory a little of how you appeared / ... and (*re*)*sound* a little in these verses."¹ The double sense of "*sonare*," as both auditory "sounding" and as "resounding," an echoing, shows how a trace of the Word reverberates in the word, in what Bachelard calls the reverberation of the poetic image: "In this reverberation, the poetic image will have a sonority of being. The poet speaks on the threshold of being. Therefore, in order to determine the being of an image, we shall have to experience its reverberation in the manner of...phenomenology" (xvi). This will precipitate an analysis of the way sound functions in the last canto of the *Paradiso* as a material and therefore incarnational medium by which love, "L'amor" is conveyed. In Dante, as Montemaggi points out, love becomes synonymous with unknowability, it cannot be fully captured or understood in a logic of intellectual understanding. Thus the last line of the *Paradiso* XXXIII -- "L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle" [the Love which moves the sun and other

¹ "O somma luce che tanto ti levi / da' concetti mortali, a la mia mente / ripresta un poco di quel che parevi... e *sonare* un poco in questi versi" (Par. XXXIII 67-9, 74, emphasis added)

stars] -- as the circumlocution of the name of God, functions as a Bachelardian reverberation of the poetic image, where having lost the ability to say anything more of the vision of God, the vision becomes the utterance of love itself, which does not refer to anything outside of itself, except the reader's own experience of the affective vibration of the word "love."

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