BERKELEY INSIGHTS IN LINGUISTICS AND SEMIOTICS

84

and the second

WORDLY WISE

THE REPORT OF THE PARTY OF THE

amanum

month

in the second

The Semiotics of Discourse

RAFFAELE DE BENEDIGTIS

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR A SEMIOTICS OF DISCOURSE IN DANTE

1.1 Preamble

When the trained reader of Dante comes across a new monograph concerning contemporary Dantean scholarship, one possible reaction could be skepticism, leading to a reading imbued with a sense of suspicion. For s/he does not know if the monograph really has something to say that has not already been said in seven hundred years of research, considering the fact that Dante major work is, after the Bible, the most read and studied text in Western culture; or if instead this might just be an attempt to re-invent Dante and his works in order to justify the writing of a new book. On the other hand, Dante and Dante studies continue to reveal new levels of understanding which make this continual pursuit worthwhile. This means that we do not necessarily have to express absurdities, or that we can, without consequences, afford to say absurdities in order to guarantee the publication and the felicitous reception of a new work. In a way, this was indeed the case for the well known British Dante scholar Barbara Reynolds, who claimed in her fairly recent book¹ that in the first canto of the *Paradiso*, Dante was in all likelihood 'transhumanized' as a result

^{1.} Barbara Reynolds, Dante: The Poet, the Political Thinker, the Man (London: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2006), 339.

of being under the effect of *Cannabis sativa*. Reynolds' claim, rather daring for a Dante scholar, even inspired ironic lines by creative, mocking, spur-of-themoment poets which circulated on the internet, such as:

> Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita, mi ritrovai con una canna in mano ché la dritta mente era svanita, e or mi sforzo esser serio invano: ah, dolce aroma aspro e forte che al fumar mi porti lontano! (Divina Canna)

[Midway upon the journey of our life I found myself with a joint in my hand, For my right mind had been lost. Now I endeavor to be serious in vain Oh, sweet sour strong aroma, That through smoking you waft me away!] (Divine Joint)

On a serious note, what I attempt to analyze in this work is instead *how* words when combined in a particular manner contribute to the making of certain codes, and the sort of dynamism produced by the unavoidable tension emerging from immanence and evanescence² in the *Commedia*; that is, between codified signification (the text) and the un-codified, unpredictable, act (discourse) generated by the reader through reading. In other words, Dante is faced with the problem of dealing with a subject matter that no one before him attempted to put into writing. He has to come to terms with a problem of correlation between a content level³ (the outcome of his existential experience in the beyond) which claims no precedents, and the need to find an adequate means of expression in order to signify that which is beyond words. The reader at this point may ask: what is the meaning of "discourse" in this particular instance? As it is envisioned in this study, discourse is going to be used as the single, individual act of verbal communication that attempts to

^{2.} For an explanation of "immanence" and "evanescence", as well as for all other terms see the Glossary of Special Terms and Expressions at the end of this book.

^{3. &}quot;Expression level" and "content level" or "expression plane" and "content plane" are the two fundamental constituents of signs, also called "*functives*", which, by means of a correlation, form the code (meaning). See Umberto Eco, A *Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979), 48–49.

CHAPTER ONE

clarify its internal dynamic process, which mediates between the intentions of the author embedded in the text, the text itself, and the reader. In light of this definition, discourse aims at discovering possible interpretive paths that an interpreter seeks to validate in the text. It is by means of discourse that the reader is able to generate such paths through the unrepeatable act of reading. In a second moment, the reader's obligation is to take into account the intention of the author, the text, and the ontological fruition of the act of reading simultaneously, and test them over and over in order to guarantee their textual dependability.

A few decades ago, D'Arco Silvio Avalle magisterially dealt with the concept of "theme" or the nodal textual points of "structure" and "system" regarding the semiological levels in the Commedia. Nonetheless, he ascribed his method to "the constant magnitudes" of the literary work which are directly connected with the Saussurian notion of *langue* (or the language-system shared by a community of speakers).⁴ For Avalle only "the constant magnitudes" shape "the specific field of application of the semiological methods."⁵ Thus, his enquiry consisted of identifying textual "patterns" that can be connected to a form of social conventionality and mythical archetypes upon which Dante constructed his literary work as an act of *parole* (or the individual speech act made possible by the language).⁶ More specifically, his entire investigation is focused on autonomous constant magnitudes or autonomous secondary patterning models, which, in relation to discourse, lack a comprehensive observation of the semiotic investigation insofar as it leaves out the level of *parole*, a dimension of the primary patterning model, as a further investigative dimension that, in conjunction with the secondary patterning models, contributes in forming the dynamic aspect of discourse itself. Further, Avalle's model is conceived as a set of separate units, a sort of discontinuous semiotics dealt with case by case according to a pattern of cultural systems or what he called "macro signs". Whereas I propose a continuum model in light of the fact that meaning is generated by the interplay of all linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Thus, discursive semiotics tends primarily toward "a general syntax of discursive operations" in that the "universe of signification" is seen as a "praxis rather

^{4.} Ferdinand De Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, eds. Charles Bally, Albert Reidling, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 16.

^{5.} Avalle, Modelli semiologici nella Commedia di Dante (Milano: Bompiani, 1975), 6.

^{6.} De Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, 14.

than as a stable set of fixed forms."⁷ Therefore, the difference between Avalle's work and the one I propose here rests on the issue of a method whose working hypothesis attempts to provide a new hermeneutic awareness of Dante's *Commedia*. With this method, the semiotics of discourse takes jointly into account the level of *langue* and the level of *parole* seen as an active interplay working toward the production of meaning. As such, the text comes alive and fulfils its principal literary function which consists essentially of examining it as a type of process, as a dynamic mechanism that can be adequately analyzed in its manifold epistemic manifestations.

As a method it endeavors to shed light on the problem of ineffability as the poet adopts the technique of auto-exegesis through the "parallel episode"⁸ related to the modes of signification. Nevertheless, discourse is not any type of intuition the reader may come up with, but it is rather the exercise of one's competence vis-à-vis the text and guided by the cultural, and encyclopedic competence that Dante's oeuvre requires as a product of the Middle Ages. The contribution of semiotics in this matter is invaluable for the fact that it investigates the relations of codifiable paths surfacing as discourse in relation with already codified meanings of the text. Reading in this respect acquires a central role. Through reading the semiotician focuses on the signifying power of the text and on the arrangement of potential discursive paths which will eventually manifest themselves as possible new content levels. In the Commedia, the semiotics of discourse is primarily an endeavor to anatomize such a singular process emerging from Dante's poetry, the one that moves from possible codifiable senses (discursive paths) to codified content (the text) by means of a dialectic interaction of the aforementioned elements, that is, the authorial intention, the text, and the act of reading.

As a critical viewpoint, the semiotics of discourse must be brought to the meta-linguistic plane of Dante's poetic language, which looks mainly at *how*

^{7.} Jaques Fontanille, *The Semiotics of Discourse*, trans. Heidi Bostic (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), xx. See also Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1980), 36.

^{8.} Regarding Dante's technical reflection on his poetry see Gianfranco Contini, Un'idea di Dante (Torino: Einaudi, 1976), 4. For the Dantean auto-exegesis see Zygmunt G. Baranski's chapter, "L'(anti)-retorica di Dante: note sullo sperimentalismo e sulla poetica della Commedia," in "Sole nuovo, luce nuova", Saggi sul rinnovamento culturale in Dante, 15–40 (Torino: Scriptorium, 1996). For a detailed analysis on the technique of the parallel episode see Amilcare A. Iannucci's chapter "Autoesegesi dantesca: la tecnica dell'episodio parallelo' (Inferno XV–Purgatorio XI)," in Forma ed evento nella Divina commedia, 83–114 (Roma: Bulzoni, 1984).

certain discursive paths can legitimately be formed for the sake of signifying about the world in the beyond, and particularly about *Paradiso*'s ineffability.

In the following pages, we will therefore attempt to explain those relevant aspects of the semiotics of discourse which seem to be dominating Dante's works. and in particular the Commedia. Thus, we will look at discourse's ambiguity apparently emerging from the state of signification in progress which is controlled by the "enunciation in action" and codified meanings contained in the text. How the intrinsic fictive characteristic of language, and more so Dante's polysemous language (allegory) of the Commedia, which looks at the fictive (fictivus) as an important referential presence of the linguistic sign on which new possible worlds⁹ can be envisioned. What the function of *causality* is or the orientation of the semiotic praxis that focuses on similarity between literal typology and the power of hosting pertinent symbols. How the Peircian notion of "unlimited semiosis" (interpretant)¹⁰ works as a system and as a process in order to understand causality and similarity and the influence they have on the generative trajectory of discourse. How abduction,¹¹ in the Peircian sense, works and how it forms "explanatory hypotheses" which is a central aspect of discourse allowing new semiotic courses to be explored and tested in order to confirm their validity. Further, in the pursuit of discourse, improvisation is another vital characteristic which begins with the reader's presence. It can be defined as a natural characteristic of all individuals. It is a performative, extemporaneous act relying on the shared availability of all external signs impacting the inner world

^{9.} Possible worlds are imaginary, cultural constructs which can be used to explain any individual's "world-creating and/or world-representing acts as forming beliefs, wishing, dreaming, making forecasts, and inventing stories", Marie-Laure Ryan, "The Modal Structure of Narrative Universes," *Poetics Today* 6 (1985): 722.

^{10.} See Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990), 35–36 who also coined the expression "unlimited semiosis" based on Charles Sanders Peirce's notion of "sign" and more specifically on that of the "interpretant". Although Pierce does not explicitly use such an expression he certainly promotes it insofar as for him a sign is: "Anything which determines something else (its *interpretant*) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its *object*) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum* . . . If the series of successive interpretants comes to an end, the sign is thereby rendered imperfect, at least." (*Collected Papers*, eds. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, vols. I–VI, ed. Arthur W. Burks, vols. VII-VIII (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1931–1958), see vol. II. 303. From now on, Peirce's works will be cited as CP.

^{11.} Regarding abduction, Peirce says that it "is the process of forming an explanatory hypothesis. It is the only logical operation which introduces any new idea", (Peirce, *CP*, V.171).