

DANTE

Typology and Narrative

In the first canto of the *Inferno*, the pilgrim begins to ascend the holy mountain only to be driven back by a she-wolf. The pilgrim's situation is then described in the following way (55-58):

E qual è quei che volontieri acquista,
e giugne 'l tempo che perder lo face,
che 'n tutt' i suoi pendier piange e s'attrista;
tal mi fece la bestia senza pace.

And like one who rejoices in his gains
and when the time comes that makes him a loser
has all his thoughts turned to sadness and lamentation;
such did the beast without peace make me.

Charles Singleton comments on this peculiar passage:¹

This figure amounts to a pseudo-simile, common enough in the poem: the "one" of the first term of the comparison is actually not distinguishable from the "other" of the second term, except that the former is given as the generic instance and the latter as the particular. The wayfarer here is precisely such a one, in that he eagerly advances up the slope until he encounters the beast.

What Singleton observes is that there is no exchange in this "simile," and the result is an entirely opaque figure: without the code-switching of

simile and metaphor, no new ideas are generated; no meaning is produced. This curious passage does not provoke any further comment from Singleton except that such "pseudo-similes" are common in the *Divine Comedy*. This and other like passages, however, present an obstacle to our analysis of the epic simile as a device emblematic of various models of signification; for it does not seem possible to evolve any such model from these "exchangeless" similes. It seems that, like the pilgrim, we have made a false start and will have to take an alternate route by identifying a model of signification elsewhere in the poem and then come back to this passage.

Another simile describes the pilgrim's feelings after emerging from the savage wood (*Inf.* I, 22-27):

E come quei che con lena affanata
uscito fuor del pelago alla riva
si vogve all'acqua perigliosa e guata,
così l'animo mio, ch'ancor fuggiva,
si volse a retro a remirar lo passo
che non lasciò già mai persona viva.

And as he who with laboring breath
has escaped from the deep to the shore
turns to the perilous waters and gazes,
so my mind, which was still in flight
turned back to look again at the pass
which never yet let any go alive.

As Singleton has pointed out, this simile is inspired by the biblical episode of the exodus, one of the key moments in salvation history. The "flight" (*fuggiva*), which is a "crossing over" (*passo*) to reach a "desert strand" (29: *piaggia deserta*) evokes the details of the crossing of the Red Sea by the Jews fleeing from Egypt. Singleton further notes that the flight from Egypt was an "established and familiar 'figure' of conversion." In the moral landscape of *Inferno* I, he concludes, the pilgrim's escape from the forest is an escape from sinfulness through God's grace, like the redemption of the Jews from slavery.² In his discussion of this simile, Singleton is interested in the thematics of conversion rather than in a model of signification. He nevertheless alludes to such a model with the word "figure," by which he refers to what Erich Auerbach calls "figural prophecy," what Dante himself terms the "allegory of the theologians,"

but what is better known as biblical typology.³

Biblical typology refers to the interpretation of various events of salvation history as prefigurations of other events of salvation history. Most often, it refers to the view of the New Testament as the fulfillment of the promises "figured" in the Old Testament, but the view of history underlying biblical typology played a major role in Christianity's understanding of its relationship to classical antiquity as well as to the Old Testament Jews. In his Letter to Can Grande, Dante gives a classic example of this type of exegesis:⁴

Qui modus tractandi, ut melius pateat, potest considerari in hiis versibus: "In exitu Israel de Aegypto, domus Iacob de populo barbaro, facta est Iudaea sanctificatio eius, Israel potestas eius" [Ps. 113]. Nam si ad litteram solam inspiciamus, significatur nobis exitus filiorum Israel de Aegypto, tempore Moysis; si ad allegoricam, nobis significatur nostra redemptio facta per Christum; si ad moralem sensum, significatur nobis conversio animae de luctu et miseria peccati ad statum gratiae; si ad anagogicum, significatur exitus animae sanctae ab huius corruptionis servitute ad aeternae gloriae libertatem.

This mode of writing can be exemplified in the following verses: "When Israel came up from the land of Egypt, when the house of Jacob came up from a barbarous land, Judah became his sanctuary, Israel his dominion." For if we look only at the letter, the exodus of the Jews in the time of Moses is signified; if we look at the mystical meaning, it is our redemption through Christ; the moral meaning is the conversion of the soul from sin to the state of grace; the anagogical meaning is our escape from the slavery of corruption to the freedom of eternal glory.

The exodus, that central moment of Israel's history, is here viewed as a real event with its own significance for the Jews *tempore Moysis*; but at the same time, it is a sign pointing to other events central to Christian history: the redemption, conversion and eternal glory. The exodus can be a real event with its own significance in its own context and, at the same time, can signify other events because the world is a divine text, God's book: "Auctor sacrae Scripturae est Deus," says Aquinas, "in cuius potestate est ut non solum voces ad significandum accomodet, sed etiam

res ipsas."⁵ In his article entitled "figura," Auerbach outlines the model of signification which underlines such a view of history:⁶

Figural prophecy implies the interpretation of one worldly event through another; the first signifies the second, the second fulfills the first. Both remain historical events; yet both, looked at in this way, have something provisional and incomplete about them; they point to one another and both point to something in the future, something still to come, which will be the actual, real, and definitive event. This is true not only of the Old Testament prefiguration, which points forward to the Incarnation and the proclamation of the gospel, but also of these latter events, for they too are not the ultimate fulfillment, but themselves are a promise of the end of time and the true kingdom of God. Thus history, with all its concrete force, remains forever a figure, cloaked and needful of interpretation, since even the general direction of interpretation is given through faith. In this light the history of no epoch ever has the practical self-sufficiency which, from the standpoint of primitive man and of modern science, resides in the accomplished fact; all history, rather, remains open and questionable, points to something still concealed, and the tentativeness of events in the figural interpretation is fundamentally different from the tentativeness of events in the modern view of historical development. In the modern view, the provisional event is treated as a step in an unbroken horizontal process; in the figural system, the interpretation is always sought from above; events are seen not in their unbroken relation to one another, but torn apart, individually, each in relation to something other which is promised and not yet present. Whereas in the modern view the event is always self-sufficient and secure, while the interpretation is fundamentally incomplete, in the figural interpretation the fact is subordinated to an interpretation which is fully secured to begin with: the interpretation aligns itself with an ideal model situated in the future and is thus far only promised. This model situated in the future and imitated in the figures...recalls Platonistic notions. It carries us still further. For every model, though incomplete as history, is already fulfilled in God and has existed from all eternity in His providence. The figures in which He cloaked it, and the incarnation in which He revealed their meaning, are therefore prophecies of something that has always been, but which will remain veiled for men until the day when they behold the

saviour *revelata facie*, with the senses as well as in spirit.

I have quoted this remarkable passage at length because it raises a number of issues related to typology. Some things here are already familiar to us. That the interpretation of events is "sought from above," that this interpretation is "fully secured to begin with," and "aligns itself with an ideal model of history" (richtet sich aus nach einem Urbild des Geschehens), does indeed recall Platonistic notions. It also recalls the Vergilian model of signification wherein Augustus is viewed as the cynosure of history, so that past events can be seen as signifiers pointing to him. Vergil's mode of text production is in harmony with this model, being a matter of reproducing the model of culture in the past.

There is clearly a sense in which Vergil's metaleptic "reading" of history as a process leading up to Augustus is similar to the "reading" of Old Testament events as a stage in salvation history preliminary to its fulfillment in Christ, the interpretant of history. But the Archimedean point for Vergil is a present situation, the victory of Augustus. The model of signification is established there by an exercise of power. The Christian, on the other hand, is situated between a past which is still tentative, "open and questionable," and a future which is "thus far only promised" and "will remain veiled for men until they behold the saviour *revelata facie*." This raises the question, in what sense is the interpretation "fully secured to begin with."

Auerbach recognizes that the *Urbild* has a dual existence. On the one hand, it is already fulfilled in God, for whom everything is present, for whom *praescientia* is simply *scientia*. Humans, on the other hand, who experience everything as articulated in time, know divine meaning only in terms of historical categories: promise and fulfillment. At the end of time, when Christ comes to finally fulfill history, divine meaning will be available to us as presence. Until then we know God only in his historical manifestations, the events of salvation history which are "cloaked and needful of interpretation." The mediation between these two perspectives, the means by which the interpretation becomes secured, Auerbach notes, is "given through faith." How then does one acquire faith?

The inspired texts of the Christian tradition provide a mode of access to divine meaning, but they too, being articulated and subject to the heterogenizing influence of time, cannot contain divine meaning. In

order to move from *figura* to *veritas*, it is necessary to receive divine illumination "from above," the gift of faith which is the conversion experience. August figures of the early church were afforded this gift of wisdom, and these figures are the pillars of what became the institutionalization of the conversion experience, the Church. The medieval Church stands in a relation to meaning similar to that of Augustus for the Romans. By an exercise of power (at least in Vergil's version), Augustus became the guarantor of meaning: he established a model of signification. So also, by the exercise of its authority, the Church governs the production of meaning, preserving and maintaining that which has been "handed down." Guided by the Holy Spirit, the teaching magisterium establishes a canon of inspired texts and secures their interpretation on the basis of ancient testimony.⁷ This does not mean that personal revelations become extinct, but rather that the Church provides the framework within which they occur and are understood.

The mediation that the Church provides between God and his people, however, is communal. It assures us that, in general, everything is unfolding as it should. The situation can be compared to a drama in which the Church is the stage manager and God is the author. The Christian finds himself hurled into the middle of this text and is called upon to play out his role. Although the outline of the plot is known to all, no one is exactly sure what his role is. The Church can provide a more and more complex stage apparatus, but it too is ignorant of the outcome with regard to each individual. Although the interpretation of history as a whole is fully secured in the Church's teaching, interpretation as it relates to day-to-day living is anything but secure. The first canto of the *Divine Comedy* articulates this existential situation. The pilgrim finds himself lost in sinfulness and ignorance; but he finds hope of divine illumination when he sees the sun over the top of the blessed mountain. In terms of the exodus imagery, the lighted mountaintop suggests Mt. Sinai, which Moses climbed to see God face-to-face. But the pilgrim finds that not everyone is granted direct access to divine wisdom. He is driven back down the mountain by a *lupa*. Then Vergil appears and tells the pilgrim that there is another road he must take to find the illumination that he seeks; and after this prologue, the *Divine Comedy* begins.

A number of interesting points can be derived from this view of the prologue. To begin with, this scene has implications for the relationship between knowledge and narrative. Whatever the allegorical identity of

the *lupa*, it is clear that had she not intervened, we would have no *Divine Comedy*. Had the pilgrim reached the top of the mountain, he would have achieved that supra-temporal perspective, the *kairos*, from which one sees as God sees. Past and future would have collapsed into a single vision of divine meaning. The seeking after divine knowledge is the movement toward the moment when all movement ceases: in human terms, the fullness of meaning in the divine presence is silence. When St. Paul was caught up into heaven, he heard "unspeakable words," not fit for man to utter (2 Cor. 12:4). So in the opening lines of the *Paradiso*, Dante notes that he has seen things in the highest heaven "which whoso descends from up there has neither the knowledge nor the power to relate." Narrative and human language collapse in the face of divine meaning. The figural model of signification creates a serious problem for the narrative poet; there is only one "narrative" which it is capable of producing: the narrative of God which is salvation history.

Whether the first canto of the *Inferno* represents general or specific events in Dante's personal experience or not, it is possible to see in it a representation of the narrative problematics of the *Divine Comedy*. Dante seeks to disclose in his poem divine significance and he therefore adopts as his model of signification the divine plan. But given this, he can do no more than reiterate that which has been handed down; he can do no more than quote God's book. The typological simile of lines 22-27 does in fact cite the event of salvation history which, in conjunction with its fulfillment in Christ, reveals in a general way God's plan for mankind. But this is not enough. Since mankind has not yet reached the top of the mountain, does not yet see from the *eschaton*, the interpretative perspective which would reveal to any one person *his or her* role in the unfolding drama is still lacking.

Although some have interpreted the *lupa* to be the papal Curia,⁸ it is not necessary to see in the first canto's portrayal of the Christian's existential situation an attack on the mediating role of the Church, but rather a realization of the limits of that role. Although comforted and chastened by the Church, each person must still make his or her own way to divine wisdom. The *Confessions* of Augustine, a work which witnesses to God's salvific plan, ends in the following way (13, 38):

But You who are Goodness itself and lack no goodness are
forever at rest, since You are your own repose. What man

can teach another this? What angel can teach it to another angel? What angel can teach it to a man? It must be asked of You, sought from You, knocked for of You. Thus, thus it will be received, thus it will be found, thus the door will be opened.

The *Confessions* is a book about the gift of faith and divine illumination; but, however powerful it is as a witness and as an inspiration, the very nature of the knowledge celebrated there makes it impossible to be articulated in human language, lies beyond the pale of narrative. What then of the rest of us who are denied direct access to the top of the mountain? How are we to find personal confirmation of our faith?

It is at this moment of *aporia* when the pilgrim encounters Vergil, who tells him of "another way" to achieve his desire. The textual implication of this scene is that although the model of signification of the *Comedy* is that of typology, the mode of text production is different from that model. In the final chapter of "figura" Auerbach asserts that the figural structure predominates the *Divine Comedy*, but he does not fully face up to the problem this poses for writing (67):

The *Comedy* is a vision which regards and proclaims the figural truth as already fulfilled, and what constitutes its distinctive character is precisely that, fully in the spirit of figural interpretation, it attaches the truth perceived in the vision to historical, earthly events.

It is true that the *Comedy's* portrayal of the afterlife claims to be an account from the perspective of the *eschaton*, an account in which signifiers are aligned to their signifieds. But the *Comedy* is not produced *by* a vision, it is the production *of* a vision. Had the pilgrim reached the top of the mountain, *then* he would have had a vision--but then he would have had nothing to tell us. It is only after this attempt fails that it becomes necessary to try another route and write the *Divine Comedy*.

What this means is that the authorial voice who is ostensibly reporting what he saw from the perspective of the end of the poem is, in fact, created along the way. The situation of the poet is the literary analogue of the Christian trying to feel his way to the *eschaton* from which he can know his role in God's plan. "It is Dante's fiction," notes Freccero, "that the author's existence precedes that of the poem, as though the experience had been concluded before the poem were begun.

In reality, however, the experience of the pilgrim and the creation of the authorial voice take place at the same time, in the writing of the poem."⁹ The fiction of the poem is that it produces meaning according to the typological model of signification, as God does, with the interpretation fully secured to begin with. But a text in the process of being written is just as "insecure" as the Christian trying to ascertain God's will as he or she lives from day to day.

The next task is to identify the mode of text production of Dante's poem; but already we can state in a preliminary fashion the role of the pseudo-simile with which we began. The fact that it lies between the failed attempt at direct access to divine knowledge and the appearance of Vergil suggests that it functions as a hinge between the model of signification and the mode of text production. The pseudo-simile is the perfect adjunct to the *aporia* of the pilgrim; for, like the figural model itself, the pseudo-simile is a form of meaning production which, in this case, fails to produce meaning. We all know that meaning is up there on top of the brightly lit mountain, but somehow for the pilgrim it has fizzled.

Abduction and *ratio difficilis*

The *Divine Comedy* poses the problem of its own production in a way that brings into sharp focus the dialectic between codes and messages. Let us reconsider briefly the "history" of the simile as it has been set forth above. When Apollonius uses epic similes in the *Argonautica*, he is, in a sense, "reading" Homer's similes. Homer had said "they are like wolves"; in his imitations, Apollonius asks, "in what way are they like wolves?" The posing of this question involves a particular aspect of the labor of sign production: *code making*.¹⁰ The interpretation of Homer by Apollonius consists of the constitution of sememes into formal models so that they can become functives in a correlation. A correlation is the code which establishes equivalences between the pertinent features of two sememes by exchange.

Cicero's text can be seen as a further reading which takes as its starting point the production of codes. Given the constitution of sememes into models and the code which correlates them into a sign function, the Ciceronian analyst elaborates a subcode which authenticates the exchange process. Apollonius indicates how wolves are like men; Cicero

accepts this analysis and adds that they are alike in this way *because they are συγγενῶν*: because they are generated by the same underlying *Logos*.¹¹ As an interpretative process, the Ciceronian function is comparable to induction wherein one produces from examples (*paradeigmata*) a more general statement of relationships (*ratio, logos*). This we have seen to be Cicero's conception of the republic; and although the *Ratio* is produced by Cicero's analysis of history (is the *telos* of his inductive process), he nevertheless posits it as immanent in nature, as the origin of the historical process. This metaleptic reversal is possible precisely because the *Ratio* itself lies outside of the process of production. The *Ratio* is timeless and constant, its temporal manifestations being only *simulacra*.

The *Aeneid* portrays Augustus as the *telos* of a historical process, a *telos* which is represented as existing all along in the will of Jupiter. This portrayal, as we have seen, is also metaleptic, since it is Augustus' victory which is in fact the generator of the productive process: a process which "recognizes" Augustus in the past and future. Whereas Cicero produces inductively a *Logos* which is then posited as prior, Vergil's *Logos* is given to begin with and then posited as a result. In both cases, the principle of intelligibility lies outside of the process of production; in both cases, "lateral" exchange has been thrust into the background making the focus of interest a *law*, whether generative or teleological. Production occurs either "down" from or "up" toward a law which is static and transcendent.

The *Divine Comedy* problematizes the relationship between law and production and can serve as a critique of the dichotomy outlined above. In the first canto the existence of a transcendent *Logos* is posited only to be represented as inaccessible. Production in the *Comedy* does not occur in respect to a transcendent law, but in its absence--in fact it occurs because of its absence. The fiction of the *Divine Comedy* is that there are two Dantes: one who is a reader on his way to the *Logos*, the other who is an author and who, by virtue of a prior revelation, is reproducing the *Logos*. But as the first canto suggests, the *Logos* is neither the starting point of a deductive process, nor the *telos* of an inductive process, but the instrument of what Eco calls an *abductive* process.¹²

Unlike deduction, which moves "down" from a general proposition to a result, or induction, which moves "up" from a number of cases to a

general proposition, abduction is a kind of inferential procedure in which hypotheses are advanced to account for uncoded circumstances and complex contents. Faced with uncoded circumstances,

the interpreter is obliged to recognize that the message does not rely on previous codes and yet that it must be understandable; if it is so, non-explicit conventions must exist; if not yet in existence, they have to exist (or to be posited). Their apparent absence postulates their necessity (Eco, 129).

Abduction can take two forms, which Eco calls undercoding and overcoding. Undercoding proceeds by hypothesis from non-existent codes to potential codes. Overcoding proceeds by hypothesis from existing codes to more analytic subcodes. In both cases, abduction

represents the first step of a metalinguistic operation destined to enrich a code.... A consistently interpreted ambiguous uncoded context gives rise, if accepted by society, to a convention, and thus to a coded coupling. That context becomes step by step a ready made sentence, just as a metaphor, which at first has to be abductionally interpreted, becomes step-by-step a catachresis (Eco, 132-33).

Eco's notion of abduction summarizes the various aspects of sign production which we have identified as different functions of the epic simile. Undercoding, the movement from non-existent to potential codes, is what makes up the Apollonian function; overcoding, the movement from existing codes to a subcode, the Ciceronian. The hardening of a subcode into an accepted convention so that it is perceived as governing the code from which it was originally derived is the Vergilian function. Eco's discussion of abduction also makes it clear that the separation of these types of sign production is rather artificial and that examples of "pure" undercoding or overcoding occur rarely, if ever (Eco thus proposes the term "extra-coding" to cover both movements at once), and that the most conventional cliché is still an open form potentially able to be invigorated by a novel reading. The nature of abduction is a back and forth affair in which hypotheses are advanced, tested and modified. When Cicero claims that the *ratio* of the republic is grounded in nature, or when Vergil claims that Augustus' victory was fated, we recognize

these as attempts to anchor the process of unlimited semiosis in some non-semiotic *primum mobile*.

What is interesting about the *Divine Comedy* is that although the existence of a *primum mobile* is certainly posited, it is nevertheless rejected as a text-constitutive force. As the poem begins, the poet has not yet had a revelation: he is both pilgrim and author, subject and object, reader and writer. What this means is that the process of interpretation is simultaneously the process of production. Despite the fiction that the *Divine Comedy* is produced in respect to a transcendental law, by an interpretation which is "secured to begin with," it is rather a case of radical invention, in which expressions must be established according to a content which does not yet exist as such. It is thus a case of rule-changing creativity (abduction) as opposed to a case of rule-governed creativity (induction, deduction). The semiotic analogue of this opposition in Eco's theory of sign production is *ratio difficilis* vs. *ratio facilis*.

The terms *ratio difficilis* and *ratio facilis* derive their names from the fact that 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*. We 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" (Eco, 183). The production of phonemes, for example, is ruled by a *ratio facilis*, since certain pertinent features are prescribed by the phonological system used as an expressive system for a language in order to produce a token. One type of *ratio difficilis* occurs when an expression-token is directly accorded to its content because the corresponding expression-type does not yet exist (Eco, 188):

The sign producer has a fairly clear idea of *what* he would like to "say," but he does not know *how* to say it; and he cannot know *how* to do so until he has discovered *precisely what* to say. The lack of a definite content-type makes it impossible to find an expression-type, while the lack of an appropriate expression device makes the content vague and inarticulable.

The situation described here by Eco is precisely the "existential situation" of the Christian and the textual problematic articulated in the

first canto of the *Divine Comedy*. The relationship between God and man is, from the standpoint of fallen man, a *ratio difficilis*. Although God's "book" exists completely written in His mind, for the ordinary Christian who has not received divine illumination, it is a discourse which as yet has no satisfactory interpretants. The theological analogue of this crux is the mystery of salvation, in which the Church's tradition has done a balancing act between Pelagianism and Jansenism. Does God save men or do they save themselves? Is there room for free will within a doctrine of predestination? Is man justified by faith or works? If faith is a gift, does anything man does or does not do cause this gift to be given or withheld? All these questions can be summarized in what appears to be a tautology: is grace gratuitous? For our study of the simile, the question can be posed thus: is there exchange between God and man (Pelagianism) or not (Jansenism)? The point here is not that there is an apparent contradiction which must be resolved; rather there is a real contradiction, which for the Christian is a theological mystery, a matter of faith. For the poet, however, it is a contradiction that he must occult in some way: it is an *aporia* out of which he must, if nothing else, simulate an escape. Language, of course, does work; communication does occur; we have, after all, the *Divine Comedy*. How does it all happen?

Since *ratio difficilis* involves the proposal of a correlation not fixed by convention, it may be straight away noted that such sign production may possibly fail: it may be received as noise. To ensure its success, a correlation produced by *ratio difficilis* must be based on something else. But what could this "something else" be if it is not a convention? How does a code come into being? The problem remains puzzling so long as one considers the disposition of the functives of a correlation into the role of expression-form or content-form as in some sense prior to the apportioning function of the code constitutive of the sign-function. In fact we should assert that the coding operation which does the apportioning also establishes the two functives in the role of expression or content.

Let us consider an example. When a beginning language teacher points to an object, such as a window, and says "fenestra," we have a case of *ratio difficilis*, the proposal of a new (to the students, that is) correlation. In this case, the window is the expression-form and the word "fenestra" is the content-form. This new correlation has good prospects for being accepted, because it is based on the conventions of

"mentioning" (Eco, 163-65) and because of the contextual cues (the expectation of the students that they will learn Latin words in a Latin class). A related example of *ratio difficilis*, and one which is found in the *Comedy*, is allegory. An allegorical text establishes a network of relationships among various conventional units (animals, gods and goddesses, etc.) so that these conventional content-forms become expression-forms. The units are manipulated in such a way that signals to the addressee that the rule organizing the discourse is not the usual one governing these units (that is, it is not "about" gods and goddesses) but some other non-explicit rule being articulated for the first time.¹³ There is always the possibility that the reader will not "catch on" and will view the text as a scandalous tale about pagan gods and goddesses. As it happened, certain allegorical correlations (such as Athena = wisdom), at one time produced by a *ratio difficilis*, became in western literature accepted as conventions. By Dante's time, in fact, a number of allegorical codes had become catachreses.

The point of these examples is a proposition fundamental to a "differentialist" view of signification: all language is figurative. Every *ratio facilis* was at one time a *ratio difficilis*; and every *ratio difficilis*, in order to be understood, must be based on some other convention. If *ratio difficilis* must establish correlations between expressive units and content units which do not exist as such, what do these units exist as? An answer suggested by the above examples is that they exist as functives of other correlations. In the first example, the referent of the pointing gesture (the window) becomes the functive of a new correlation in the role of expressive unit; and the Latin expressive unit *fenestra* becomes a functive of that correlation in the role of content unit. In the second example, the content "Athena" has become the expressive form for another element in the sememe of "Athena" (for she was traditionally associated with wisdom) by what rhetoric came to name a metonymy. It can now be seen that the situation of the pilgrim in *Inferno* I is not a peculiar case of sign production, but rather the regular conditions under which signification and communication occur. Abduction is not *one* way to interpret complex texts, but *the* way in which they are interpreted; and the problem of "inspiration" for Dante is a variant of a more general one: how does one write a poem which does not yet exist? What the notion of abduction takes into account is that sign production involves a dialectic between codes and messages (Eco, 139-42).

Typology and Homology

We are now in a better position to understand how the pilgrim finds a "way out" of his dilemma in the first canto. Immediately after the pseudo-simile, he encounters Vergil, not so much a shade, or a man, or even the fulfillment of the *figura* of Vergil, but a text (79-87):

"Or se' tu quel Virgilio e quella fonte
 che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?"
 rispuos' io lui con vergognosa fronte.
 "O delli altri poeti onore e lume,
 vagliami 'l lungo studio e 'l grande amore
 che m' ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume.
 Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore,
 tu se' solo colui da cu' io tolsi
 lo bello stilo che m' ha fatto onore."

"Art thou then that Vergil and that fount
 which pours forth so broad a stream of speech?"
 replied I with bashful front to him.
 "O honor and light of the other poets!
 May the long study avail me and the great love,
 which have made me search thy volume!
 Thou art my master and my author;
 thou alone art he from whom I took
 the fair style that has done me honor."

As a text, Vergil has many things to offer Dante as he begins his own narrative. Book Four of the *Aeneid* was, for the Middle Ages, a portrait of passion overcome; Aeneas was a man who renounced individual desire for a providential destiny. Book Six was a highly overcoded *katabasis* into the afterworld, the outline of which is still recognizable in the *Comedy*. Most important, perhaps, Vergil offered a content-form that Dante could use as an expression-form for the "Kingdom of God": the ideal form of government represented in the *Aeneid* as the empire under Augustus.¹⁴ Vergil's words about paradise in the first canto are a paradigm of this portrayal by means of imperial imagery (124-29):

"chè quello *imperator* che là su *regna*,
 perch' io fu' ribellante alla sua legge,

non vuol che 'n sua città per me si venga.
In tutte parti impera e quivi regge;
 quivi è la sua città e l'alto seggio:
 oh felice colui cu' ivi elegge!"

"For that *emperor who reigns* there above
 because I was rebellious to His law,
 wills it not that through me any one should come into His
city.
In all parts He governs and there *He reigns*:
 there is His city and *His lofty throne.*
 O happy the man He chooses to go there!"

In the *De Monarchia*, Dante suggests there is a homology between the kingdoms of God and man, and the Roman empire is there singled out as the clearest manifestation of the monarchial ideal. In the *Comedy*, the poet who celebrated the golden age of Rome, himself an unwitting messianic poet in his fourth *Eclogue*, comes to the aid of Dante to mediate his portrayal of the Kingdom of God.

This homology, however, is not without problems. Earth and after-world are homologous in the sense that everything is produced by one and the same *Logos*: the will of God. This is the claim of typology, that everything in this life is connected to and fulfilled in the afterlife. Earth and heaven are *not* homologous in the sense that there is no exchange between them: the relationship is not reciprocal. One is subject to the heterogenizing influence of time; the other is timeless. One is *figura*; the other is *veritas*. The *logos* of earthly life cannot be understood in *comparison* to the afterlife, but only as the former is subsumed and fulfilled in the latter. The assertion of the *De Monarchia* that there is a mandate from God for a temporal order with a temporal goal in some sense independent of (and therefore possibly homologous in the second sense to) the eternal order and the eternal goal of man assumes that this world has its own *logos*. This leads in the direction of Pelagianism. Indeed, in Augustine, the Doctor of Grace, we find a quite different view of the relationship between the "city of God" and the "earthly city." They are not, for Augustine, homologous but antinomous, for "a man cannot serve two masters." Again we are faced with contradictory claims that do not seem reconcilable and both of which have good authority in the words of Christ. For there are parables (*parabolai*) in which Christ ostensibly compares the kingdom of God to various earthly things; but when asked

the purpose of the parables, indeed in the same passage, he denies that they actually produce meaning at all (Mark 4:11-12):

To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again and be forgiven.

The point, again, is not to resolve this contradiction by valorizing one or the other position, but rather to note that this contradiction is Dante's problem in the *Comedy*; he has, on the one hand, a signification system which leads to silence (typology) and on the other, one which cannot produce divine meaning (the homology of comparison).

Since valorizing one or the other of these two types of meaning production would dissolve the text, the solution of the *Divine Comedy* is to move forward in a way that vacillates between them. The *Comedy* claims to be a representation in human, time-bound terms of the divine and eternal. Since this is impossible, what it does is precipitate divine meaning indirectly. The dialectic between the pilgrim and the authorial voice is the dialectic between homology and typology. The pilgrim moves along, inspecting signs and producing hypotheses about their significance. The presence of the authorial voice authenticates these hypotheses as one who has already made it to the top. But the authorial voice, of course, has not made it to the top and is only hypostasized along the way. This is the characteristic movement of abduction: the hypothetical reconstruction of the process by which an initially unreadable text is produced. The pilgrim's "progress" is from signs to sign-systems; the authorial voice moves from sign-systems to signs. The former produces, for example, immortal bodies as analogues for the dead souls in hell; the latter recognizes that, however absurd this is as representation, it is true "typologically."

The typological model thus, in a sense, "leans" on the model of exchange, for typology is of itself incapable of producing a narrative.¹⁵ The structure of exchange, on the other hand, is expert at producing isotopies and symmetries by which things can be seen as related to one another. Once this is done, typology can step in with its claim that all things are bound together by one *Logos*, that the net result of all exchange is zero. Everything in the *Comedy* must be represented in terms of exchange in order to be represented at all; but against this representational imperative is the typological claim that everything is abiding presence. Thus, whatever is introduced into the poem must produce something else to "balance it out," so that the result will be that homeostasis which is characteristic of the supra-temporal perspective.

A particularly interesting example of this process is the *lupa* in canto I of the *Inferno*. The she-wolf has traditionally been taken to be the allegorical figure of *cupiditas*, which we learn in the *De Monarchia* is "especially contrary to justice" (I, 11: *notandum est quod iustitiae maxime contrarietur cupiditas*). In fact, the universal temporal monarch for whom Dante argues will be just because, ruling and possessing everything, he will have nothing to covet:

Ubi ergo non est quod possit optari, impossibile est ibi cupiditatem esse...sed Monarchum non habet quod possit optare...ex quo sequitur, quod Monarchum sincerissimum inter mortales iustitiae possit esse subjectum.

Where there is nothing which could be desired, there avarice is impossible...but the monarch has nothing which he could desire...from which, it follows that the Monarch would possess justice most fully among mortals.

The *lupa*, it seems, is exchange gone mad, for she "has intercourse with many" and is "never sated" (97-101):

e ha natura sì malvagia e ria,
che mai non empie la bramosa voglia,
e dopo 'l pasto ha più fame che pria.
Molti son li animali a cui s'ammoglia,
e più saranno ancora.

And she has a nature so vicious and malignant
that her greedy appetite is never sated,

and after food she is hungrier than before.
 Many are the creatures with which she has intercourse
 and there will be more to come.

Now the claim of typology is that everything is part of the divine plan. From the supra-temporal perspective of God, everything is in its place and signifying in the way that God wills it. How can human language, based on the structure of exchange, give an account of this claim? It does so by producing something to neutralize the *lupa*, something which has no appetite at all (100-4):

Molti son li animali a cui s'ammoglia,
 e più saranno ancora, infin che 'l Veltro
 verrà, che la farà morir con doglia.
 Questi non ciberà terra nè peltro,
 ma sapienza, amore e virtute.

Many are the creatures with which she has intercourse
 and there will be more to come, until the hound
 comes that shall bring her to miserable death.
 He shall not feed on land or pelf
 but on wisdom, love and virtue.

The *veltro*,¹⁶ as a male domesticated version of the *lupa*, is produced by what Riffaterre would call the conversion of a descriptive system. But the operation of such a conversion does not result in an antinomy which marks off culture from non-culture, as it did in Homer, but rather in a *concordia discors*. In the perspective which typology ascribes to God, the pair is an unchanging and complementary unity. The *lupa* is not anti-culture or even non-culture, but already, in the eyes of God, "culture." The relationship between the *lupa* and the *veltro* is, in human terms, a negative homology (female--male, wild--domesticated, appetite--no appetite); but homology is an articulated version of what for God is just "Logos." The *Comedy* tries to produce ("lead forth") in narrative form the homeostasis that typology claims to be the true nature of all things. But the "true" articulation of this homeostasis is silence;¹⁷ divine meaning cannot be "produced" for it is immanent. Since Dante cannot produce the homeostatic vision of God, he instead establishes symmetries: if you come across a *lupa*, look around for a *veltro*. The *Comedy* uses the only resources available to language, the exchange of "figurative" language; but exchange is always, so to speak, "under

erasure" in the *Divine Comedy*, always recognized as inadequate to the task.

The *Comedy* is a vast *momento mori* proclaiming that what men do in this life is "typologically" related to their fate in the afterlife. But, as we learn in the *Letter to Can Grande*, the *Comedy* does not produce this relationship logically (according to a *logos*), but *rhetorically* (*Epistle X*, 16):

Genus vero philosophiae sub quo hic (sc. the *Comedy*) in toto et parte proceditur, est morale negotium, sive ethica. quia non ad speculandum, sed ad opus incoeptum est totum. Nam si in aliquo loco vel passu pertractatur ad modum speculativi negotii, hoc non est gratia speculativi negotii, sed gratia operis.

The part of philosophy under which the whole work moves forward is that of moral duty or ethics. For the whole work was begun not for the sake of speculation, but for the sake of effecting change. So if here or there something is introduced in the mode of speculation, this is not for speculation's sake, but for the sake of influencing the reader.

What these sentences tell us is that the *Comedy* does not concern itself with causes and effects as they relate to the *Logos*, but causes as they relate to effects of persuasion. Dante is not concerned whether his picture of the afterworld is "true" in an objective sense (*ad speculandum*); but whether he represents the claim of typology that this world will be judged in the next persuasively (*ad opus*). The difference between the latter and the former is the difference between making it to the top of the *diletto monte* and writing the *Divine Comedy*. It is the difference between having a vision of the *Logos* and persuading others that there is a *Logos*. Since the correlation between life and afterlife is a *ratio difficilis*, the portrayal in the *Comedy* "leans," as it has often been noted, on rhetorical conventions. Lovers who are "carried away" by the "winds of passion," as the saying goes, are literally blown around by winds in hell (*Inf.* 5). A. C. Charity calls this operation of the *contrapasso* "figural realism," an apt name. For if man's earthly life is a *figura* which is fulfilled in the next life, the souls in the *Comedy* are reifications of figures of speech. In this way the associations and relationships of language make the *ratio difficilis* persuasive as typological truth.

Propulsion and the *Divine Comedy*

If we return to the pseudo-simile of canto I, the significance of its juxtaposition with the typological simile can now be seen. The exodus simile projects a pattern of action which leads to the silent reception of meaning. The pilgrim should, as this simile suggests, make it to the top of the mountain, like Moses, and see Truth face-to-face. But this does not work; meaning is not available to the pilgrim in this way. But if he does not receive illumination "from above," the alternative, working one's way "up" by the exchange of the simile, it is recognized, does not work either. The pseudo-simile does not produce any more meaning for the pilgrim than did the typological one. The rescue mission of Vergil, we have suggested, implies that although divine meaning is not available in either of these two ways, poetry has the power to do the next best thing: produce a persuasive argument for the existence of divine Meaning.

The second canto of *Inferno* provides a sort of symmetry to the first canto, and a solution to the textual problematics of the Comedy is there proposed. As the pilgrim begins, he suddenly has a moment of self-doubt, described by a pseudo-simile (II, 37-42):

E qual è quei che disvuol ciò che volle
 e per novi pensier cangia proposta,
 sì che dal cominciar tutto si tolle
 tal mi fec' io in quella oscura costa,
 perchè, pensando, consumai la 'mpressa
 che fu nel cominciar cotanto tosta.

And like one who unwills what he has willed
 and with new thoughts changes his resolve,
 so that he quite gives up the thing he had begun,
 such did I become on that dark slope,
 for by thinking on it I rendered null the undertaking
 that had been so suddenly embarked upon.

Vergil responds by telling the pilgrim that *tre donne benedette* (124) have acted from on high so that his text production could move forward. These three ladies recall the *tre fieri* which block the pilgrim's ascent in canto I.¹⁸ Just as those three beasts, who allegorically sum up man's fallen nature, block the pilgrim's access to the *Logos*, so these three ladies give

Dante the "word" to go forward with his poem. After Dante hears of this heavenly aid, there follows the first "epic" simile of the poem (127-30):

Quali i fioretti, dal notturno gelo
chinati e chiusi, poi che 'l sol li 'mbianca
si drizzan tutti aperti in loro stello,
tal mi fec' io di mia virtute stanca.

As little flowers, by chill of night
bent down and closed, when the sun brightens them,
straighten and all unfold upon their stems
such from my faint strength did I become.

This simile of self constitution is clearly a counterpoint to the *aporia* of the preceding pseudo-simile (*di mia virtute stanca*). What mediates this "conversion," however, is not divine illumination, but the persuasive power of love poetry. The fact that the "word" is given through three *donne* and that the whole passage recalls the *Vita Nuova*¹⁹ indicates that the *Comedy* will achieve its end rhetorically (*ad opus*), not theologically (*ad speculandum*); that it will be enthymemic, not syllogistic; that it will move the reader, not prove things to him. Only in this way can exchange become part of a discourse which can be "understood" only by faith.

This opposition between what *is* and what is *persuasive* comes to a climax in the last canto of the *Paradiso*. As the pilgrim/author tries to see/remember the vision of God, words, as we would expect, fail him (*Par. XXXIII, 55-63*):

Da quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio
che 'l parlar nostro, ch'a tal vista cede,
e cede la memoria a tanto oltraggio.
Qual è colui che somniando vede,
che dopo il sogno la passione impressa
rimane, e l'altro alla mente non riede,
cotal son io, chè quasi tutta cessa
mia visione, ed ancor mi distilla
nel core il dolce che nacque da essa.

From that moment on my vision was greater
than our speech, which fails at such a sight,
and memory too fails at such excess.
Like him that sees in a dream

and after the dream the passion wrought by it remains
but the rest returns not to mind
Such am I; for my vision almost wholly fades
and still there drops in my heart
the sweetness that was born of it.

The ultimate experience of the *Comedy*, the moment toward which the poem has been converging, just as we get to it, slips away. The pilgrim cannot see it and the author cannot remember it. All that remains is the *conviction* that something happened, the effect of that something. And although conviction is an object of faith, effects of persuasion are the objects of poetry.

In the *Divine Comedy*, the epic simile plays a role that, for the most part, has not been central since Homer. As we noted above, Homer's similes were *propulsive*; that is, what for his imitators was basically a *formal* device, productive insofar as it related to organizing and producing meaning as a model, Homer's similes were text-formative elements which propelled the narrative forward in various ways, particularly when the proairesis became inadequate for one reason or another. It is not surprising that Dante's similes should rejuvenate this Homeric function more explicitly than his predecessors, for clearly Dante's narrative dilemma is also one in which the "logic of action" (proairesis) is constantly problematic. As in Homer, the simile helps Dante to "get the story told." The existential situation of the Christian (how to do the will of God, how to live an "authentic" existence) is the same problem as that of the poet (how do you write a poem which has not yet been written); that is, when you sit down in front of a blank piece of paper, what propulsive mechanism can get you started and get you through to the end. The anxiety of the pilgrim who does not find divine illumination is the anxiety of the poet who has not found "inspiration." The textual production of a *veltro* from a *lupa* does not rely on revelation, but on a semiotic mechanism made possible by the propulsion inherent in sign systems structured according to an inferential model.

The function of the simile in the *Comedy* shows that the poem is not produced *by* a vision (or any objective correlative of a vision), but is the production *of* a vision; or perhaps more accurately, the *Comedy* is production *aimed toward* a vision. Language in the *Comedy* is "on the way" toward something. Language can move forward and the faith of the pilgrim is that it is moving toward something, although that something

cannot be articulated. It is a small wonder that the Romantics, who were so fascinated with the notions of transcendence and inspiration, were attracted to Dante, the poet whose text poses in such a poignant way the problem of poetic *creation*: creation understood here as production *ex nihilo*.

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