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Power and Language in Dante's Philosophy of Language

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1. Just about everyone thinks that information society does not eliminate alienation-based social relations, but instead renews them in the medium of information production and consumption. This undoubtedly holds for certain fundamental relations, such as various forms of political, economic, and ideological power.

Jeff Bernard did more than most to raise awareness about this. For him—as those familiar with his work know all too well—semiotics was primarily social science, that is to say, *social* semiotics with a double mission. On the one hand, by the rational tools of science, semiotics aimed to describe the social nature of signs, including the “power of signs” and their expropriation to the advantage of those in power. On the other hand, through critical means, semiotics aimed to uncover the power effects of apparently innocent sign uses. In this, Bernard followed our erstwhile common friend, Rossi-Landi. Indeed, Bernard's work, along with others', demonstrates that the “Rossi-Landi School” is still alive.

The recognition that signs, including natural language signs, are tools of power, dates back to the beginnings of thought about language. We need only think back on the Babel-myth, Gorgias and Plato. Rhetoric is the classical place to start examining language as a tool of power. This, of course, depends on how sharply the authors have posed the question, and determined the object of their inquiry. From this angle, too, Dante's poetry and theoretical work—including his unfinished treatise on rhetoric entitled *De vulgari eloquentia*—provide

interesting chapters in the history of rhetoric and the philosophy of language. In what follows, I will examine Dante's theory of the social nature of language and its role in power. In the course of the paper, I will focus on the following:

- Explaining the Babel-myth and linguistic "contrapasso".
- The political aspects of the "illustrious folk-language" program ("volgare illustre").
- Odysseus's speech to his companions in *Hell*, Canto XXVI.

2. Dante discusses the Babel-myth in two places: in *De vulgari eloquentia* and in the Adam-episode of *Paradise*, Canto XXVI. The two discussions offer opposite interpretations: in *De vulgari eloquentia*, the confusion of tongues does not take place until after the construction of the tower has begun. By contrast, in *Paradise*, we hear Adam say that his tongue became extinct before the construction, for "never was any product of the reason durable for ever" ("denn kein vernünftiges Erzeugnis war vonev'ger Dauer" - *Paradise*, XXVI. 127.)<sup>1</sup>

The latter is a remarkable historic interpretation, which expresses in its own way the essential historicity of language. In this paper, I am nevertheless interested in the former interpretation in *De vulgari eloquentia*, which depicts the nature of language in sociolinguistic terms.

Dante's starting point is the hypothesis of division of labor among the builders of the tower: according to him, during the construction process, some of the people gave orders, others drew up drafts, yet others were mining and transporting stones, building and plastering walls, and so on. As the lord's anger descended on them, they could no longer carry on with their work because the uniform language they had used during their work had disappeared in

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<sup>1</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy* (translated by Charles E. Norton). In: *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. Encyclopædia Britannica, Chicago 1984, 147 (henceforth *DC*).

Dante Alighieri, *Divina Commedia*. In: Dante, *Tutte le opere* (a cura di Italo Borzi), Newton, Rome, 1993, 462 (henceforth *DTE*).

the confusion of tongues. We see that this description emphasizes a social aspect of the story: the confusion of tongues made the social coordination of the workers' activity impossible.

The very same hypothesis explains the aftermath of the Babel-catastrophe. According to Dante, the new languages were split by the various branches of the division of labor—for each kind of job in building the great masterpiece, there was a new language to divide mankind.<sup>2</sup>

The story of Babel suggests that the unity or variety of languages is a matter of a battle between god and humans, that linguistic variety is *bad*: God struck a blow to *punish* humans for the builders' lust for power. We see Dante expanding on this idea by appealing to the social aspect of the relationship between language and work. He adds that those workers' tongue became the roughest, who had previously performed the most excellent work.

This enigmatic remark can be construed—in line, so to say, with the Hegelian dialectic of the master-servant relationship—as saying that part of the punishment was the reversal of ruling relationships: those who gave orders before paid an added price through the coarseness of their language and became worse off than their erstwhile subordinates. The additional *linguistic* punishment represents the principle of *contrapasso* (Dante's often used version of the eye for an eye principle, according to which the punishment is the opposite of the committed crime). This is then a case of *linguistic contrapasso*.

There are other examples of *contrapasso*—so characteristic of the *Divine Comedy* throughout—taking on an explicitly linguistic form; let me mention but two.<sup>3</sup> The first is still connected with the story of Babel. Nimrod, who is responsible for the catastrophe, is presented in the *Divine Comedy* with garbled speech: “*Rafel mai amech iyahi almi*,” he cries with a “fierce mouth, to which sweeter psalms were not befitting” (“also began das grosse

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<sup>2</sup> (“Quot quot autem exercitii varietates tendebant ad opus, tot tot ydiomatibus tunc genus humanum disiungitur.”) Dante Alighieri, *De vulgari eloquentia*, VII. (Henceforth *DVE*) In *DTE*, 1025

<sup>3</sup> I give a more extensive analysis of this in: János Kelemen, *A filozófus Dante (The Philosopher Dante)*. Budapest: Atlantisz, 2002. See the chapter entitled “The morality of Language: Linguistic contrapasso,” 122–133.

Maul zu schreien, das nicht geeignet war für sanftre Psalmen” - *Hell*, XXXI, 67–68). Without doubt, his warped speech serves as punishment for the Babel-initiative:

[...] this is Nimrod, because of whose evil thought  
one language only is not used in the world.

Let us leave him alone, and not speak in vain;  
for such is every language to him, as his  
to others which is known to no one.

(*Hell*, XXXI, 77–81.)<sup>4</sup>

(der Nimrod ist's, durch dessen Unterfangen  
nicht eine Sprache nur die Menschen reden.  
So lassen wir ihn; sprechen wär umsonst,  
denn ihm ist jede Sprache wie die seine  
den andren ist, da niemand sie verstehn kann.)

Nimrod's story matches exactly what we have just described: the language of those who were previously superiors becomes coarser. Because Nimrod carried chief responsibility for building the tower, he altogether loses his language and thereby his humanity.

Our second example is about those who commit suicide, whose otherworldly fate is closely analogous with Nimrod's. They turn into trees from which blood and words spurt simultaneously when their branches are broken off.

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<sup>4</sup> DC, 46.

As from a green log that is burning  
 at one of its ends, and drips from the other,  
 and hisses with the air that is escaping,  
 so from that broken twig came out words and blood together;

(*Hell*, XIII, 40–43.)<sup>5</sup>

(Wie, wenn ein grüner Klotz am einen Ende  
 im Feuer liegt, er an dem andern zischt  
 und von der Luft, die sich herausdrängt, stöhnet,  
 so drängten sich aus jenem Bruche Worte  
 und Blut hervor ...)

[...] “Who wast thou, who through so many wounds  
 blowest forth with blood a woeful speech?”

(*Hell*, XIII, 137–138.)<sup>6</sup>

(Wer bist du, dem aus so viel Brüchen  
 die Schmerzensrede und das Blut hervorquillt?)

Like Nimrod, those who commit suicide receive their punishment through their language, the difference being that they lose the *joy* of speech rather than its *sense*. Every word of theirs involves suffering. This is another example of *contrapasso*, for these people had thrown away their lives thereby denying their humanity, their punishment is therefore to suffer *through language*.

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<sup>5</sup> DC, 18.

<sup>6</sup> DC, 19.

3. For a long time, *De vulgari eloquentia* was interpreted as the first formulation of a program for a uniform Italian literary language. Lately we have begun to see more and more clearly that the significance of this text goes well beyond this, as the text contains numerous theoretical statements about the nature of signs and language. Still, undeniably Dante's primary goal was to first characterize Italian dialects and on that basis, illuminate the conditions for developing a poetic tongue for all regions of Italy (a new cultural language to replace Latin, we might say). He called this *volgare illustre*, the illustrious folk-language, and specified four of its features: that it is *illustrious*, *pivotal*, *courtly*, and *official* (*illustre, cardinale, aulicum et curiale*).

For our present purposes, this goal is significant, for it was clear to Dante that a uniform poetic tongue, which is simultaneously a *national* tongue, is a political matter with respect to language's role in power.

According to Dante, the common language, both as master and as power, occupies the highest place. ("Et vulgare de quo loquimur et sublimatum est magistratu et potestae, et suos honore sublimat et Gloria.")<sup>7</sup> To support this claim, Dante appeals to a general, essential characteristic of language's rhetoric use: that language was and still is able to change people's minds and hearts, compelling them to want what they previously did not want, or stop wanting what they previously wanted. ("Et quid maioris potestatis est quam quod humana corda versare potest, ita ut nolentem volentem et volentem nolentem faciat, velut ipsum et fecit et facit.")<sup>8</sup> In other words, given command of an appropriate language, possession of power amounts to an ability to influence others' will.

The four features with which Dante characterizes the illustrious folk-language are more sociological and political than linguistic. The pivotal quality recalls the image of a fixed

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<sup>7</sup> *DVE*, XVII. 1039.

<sup>8</sup> *DVE*, XVII. 1040.

pivot around which a revolving door turns: the entire herd of folk-languages spoken by town-dwellers turns towards it and back. (“sic et universus municipalium grex vulgarium vertitur et revertitur”.)<sup>9</sup> In other words, it reigns as chief among other folk-languages.

There is an even more obvious social and political sense in the “courtly” and “official” qualities of the illustrious folk-language, that is to say, their “aulic” and “curial” character. Their immediate political meaning relates to the absence of a royal court in Dante’s Italy—there is no center of power, even though such a center is what would serve as a fitting residence for an illustrious folk-language. Without this, our illustrious folk-language is without a home, roaming around aimlessly, occasionally happening upon a humble shelter. (“nostrum illustre velut acola peregrinatur et in humilibus hospitatur asilis”.)<sup>10</sup> Naturally, another reading of Dante’s linguistic program is that due to the lack of political unity in Italy, there is no institutional guarantee—comparable to that of the German royal Curia—for its national language, and it is up to the illustrious folk-language (the uniform Italian tongue) to advance Italian political unity. The poet was indeed a supporter of unity. But his political ideal extended beyond national frames to a broader, all-encompassing unity, a world-empire that would, through reason, secure the earthly happiness of humans, and would serve as arbiter in the matters of Italy.<sup>11</sup> For our purposes, however, the important idea in Dante’s work is that the illustrious folk-language can exist without court and curia (as it in fact exists in the shared features of Italian dialects), for through reason, the uniform language can be established.

In sum, Dante thought that language can—in some sense and in the presence of certain features—play the role of central power.

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<sup>9</sup> *DVE*, *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *DVE*, XVIII. 1041.

<sup>11</sup> He devotes his entire discussion on monarchy to this. See Dante Alighieri, *Monarchia*. In: *DTE*, 1071-1081.

4. Dante's poetic texts offer numerous concrete examples of language "inducing the will"—those without will were made to have it, and those willing something were made to give it up. The most splendid example is the Odysseus-episode in *Hell*, Canto XXVI.

The Odysseus of the *Divine Comedy* does not return to Ithaca but with some of his crew, sails out to the open sea, past Hercules' columns, and is shipwrecked at the foot of the mountain of purgatory. According to one interpretation, Dante's hero represents the explorer prototype, for he is spurred on by an all-eclipsing passion and thirst for knowledge to continue his fatal journey:

[...] the ardor which I had  
to become experienced of the world,  
and of the vices of men, of their virtue.

(*Hell*, XVI, 97–99.)<sup>12</sup>

(... jenen Trieb zu dämpfen,  
der mich die Welt und Tugenden wie Laster  
der Menschen weiter noch erkunden hiess.)

He has committed a twofold sin however: he overstepped the forbidden boundary and in addition, a one-sided passion overcomes him, making him forget his fundamental responsibilities, his love towards his wife, children, and father.

neither fondness for my son, nor piety

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<sup>12</sup> DC, 39.

for my old father, nor the due love  
 which should have made Penelope glad, could  
 overcome within me the ardor

(*Hell*, XXVI, 94–97.)<sup>13</sup>

(vermochten nicht die Zärtlichkeit zum Sohne  
 und nicht die Ehrfurcht für den alten Vater,  
 die Liebe nicht, durch die Penelopen  
 zu feuen mir oblag, jenen Trieb zu dämpfen,  
 ...)

The description of the situation makes crucial reference to Odysseus' and Diomedes' former deceits by means of which the two friends caused the fall of Troy, helping Achilles escape, brought about Deidamia's sorrow, and stole the statue of Athene in Troy. For these sins, the two masters of deceptive speech are punished inside a tongue of flames.

This should serve as the framework for Odysseus' exhortation addressed to his companions before his last journey:

'O brothers,' I said, 'who through  
 a hundred thousand perils have reached the West,  
 to this so brief vigil of your senses  
 which remains wish not to deny  
 the experience, following

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

the sun of the world that has no people.

Consider your origin;

ye were not made to live as brutes,

but to pursue virtue and knowledge.’

(*Hell*, XXVI, 112–120.)<sup>14</sup>

‘O Brüder’, sagt ich, ‘die durch hunderttausend

Gefahren ihr erreicht den fernen Westen,

versagt dem kurzen Abend eurer Sinne,

der euch noch übrig ist, nicht die Erfahrung,

der Bahn der Sonne folgend, jenen Teil

der Welt, der unbewohnt ist, zu erkunden!

Erwägt den Samen, welchem ihr entsprossen:

Ihr seid bestimmt, nicht Tieren gleich zu leben,

nein, Tugend zu erringen und Erkenntnis.“)

Perhaps the most often cited lines of the *Divine Comedy*, first they seem to confirm the heroic image of Dante’s Odysseus shaped by generations of interpreters. Undoubtedly, this image is consistent with *intentio auctoris* as well as *intentio operis*; after all, in the Odysseus figure, we can discern the poet’s portrait and we should also keep in mind that Dante needed a

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* Cf.:

“O frati”, dissi, “che per cento milia  
perigli siete giunti a l’occidente,  
a questa tanto picciola vigilia  
d’i nostri sensi ch’è del rimanente  
non vogliate negar l’esperienza,  
di retro al sol, del mondo sanza gente.

Considerate la vostra semenza:

fatti non foste a viver come bruti,  
ma per seguire virtute e conoscenza”.

(*DTE*, 184.)

large-scale hero with a tragic downfall. But the episode as a whole carries a much more complex meaning than that. Before embarking on a more detailed analysis of the speech, it is well to include Odysseus' commentary about the above lines:

With this little speech I made my companions  
 so keen for the voyage that hardly  
 afterwards could I have held them back.

(*Hell*, XXVI, 121–123.)<sup>15</sup>

(So eifrig machte diese kurze Rede  
 zu Weiterreise alle die Gefährten,  
 dass sie zu halten kaum vermocht ich hätte.)

As one of the countless self-referential passages within the *Divine Comedy*, this commentary unequivocally determines the *genre* of the speech and specifies its purpose: we have at hand an *oration* (“orazion”), the kind of speech that is to meet the highest rhetorical expectations. And the goal, which Odysseus managed to accomplish, was to awaken the desire for a great adventure in his companions, that is, to make them *want* the journey. Based on these considerations, we expect to identify regular rhetoric techniques in the text.

This expectation bears out indeed. At first glance, we can discern an easily identifiable pattern that Dante is following. Odysseus' speech fits into the tradition of antique epic- and story-writing, which often included fictional speeches by generals and statesmen. In the present case, Aeneas' speech to the Trojans serves as model (*Aeneis*, I. 198. etc.), its

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<sup>15</sup> Li miei compagni fec' io sí aguti,  
 con questa orazion picciola, al cammino,  
 che a pena poscia li avrei ritenuti.  
 (*DTE*, 185.)

rhetorical structure faithfully reproduced by Dante. (For example, Aeneas, too, tries to encourage his companions by first reminding them of the dangers they jointly went through: “o socii – neque enim ignari sumus ante malorum – /o passi graviora [...]”).

Odysseus addresses his companions as they reach the Straits of Gibraltar. Recalling the dangers they have faced so far as heroes and brothers, he strengthens their belief that in the little time they have left in their short lives, the only way they can stay true to themselves is by sailing on to the unknown world awaiting their discovery. In short, he appeals to their self-respect, brotherhood, above all, their human dignity. The main element of impression is, of course, carried by the formally imperative last paragraph, according to which the imperative to pass Hercules’ columns follows straightforwardly from a universal moral principle, or from the human essence: humans are essentially different from animals in that they have been created to seek virtue and knowledge.

The rhetoric effect is reinforced as the story of Odysseus’ last journey begins with our hero leaving the captivity of Circe, who had turned his companions into animals. (“When I departed from Circe, / who had detained me more than a year there [...]” “Als Circe ich verlassen, welche länger mich als ein Jahr dort bei Gaeta festhielt ...“ - *Hell*, XXVI, 91, etc.) Thus Odysseus promises a road from the sensual existence of brutes leading to the rational existence of humans.

But there is something Odysseus is not telling. Even though he persuades his companions by recalling the dangers they faced so far, he does not say that it is forbidden to sail past the Gibraltar and that the ocean has greater dangers in store for them than any they had seen. He influences their will by exposing them to mortal danger. His exquisite speech therefore fits right into the sequence of his previous deceitful, fraudulent speeches, for which he must suffer in hell.

From the perspective of our inquiry, it is of secondary importance to decide which layer of meaning we take to be decisive in the Odysseus-episode: whether we prefer the positive interpretation depicting Odysseus as the hero of knowledge and the prototypical explorer, or the negative, portraying him as the master of fraud, deceit, and intrigue, a *fandi fictor*.<sup>16</sup> Our judgment does not alter the fact that he possesses the power of words, which he uses to direct others' will.

According to the negative interpretation, Odysseus' sins are set in language and use language, abusing the power of language. This interpretation is signified by the punishment he is dealt, in which the logic of linguistic *contrapasso* is easily discernible. It cannot escape our attention that the tongue of flames enclosing him and Diomedes is in reality producing *language spoken by and in a tongue*:

The greater horn of the ancient flame began to wag  
 murmuring, even as a flame that the wind wearies.  
 Then waving its tip to and fro,  
 as if it were the tongue that spoke,  
 it cast forth a voice, and said:

(*Hell*, XXVI, 85–90.)<sup>17</sup>

(Da hub das grosser Horn der alten Flamme  
 zu flackern un dabei zu brausen an,  
 der Flamme gleich, die mit dem Winde kämpfet.

<sup>16</sup> This interpretation has been coherently developed by Giorgio Padoan. See Giorgio Padoan, "Ulisse «fandi fictor» e le vie della sapienza", in: G. PADOAN, *Il pio Enea, l'empio ulisse*, Longo Ed., Ravenna 1977.

<sup>17</sup> *DC*, 39. In the original the middle part goes as follows:

indi la cima qua e lá menando,  
 come fosse la lingua che parlasse,  
 gittó voce di fuori e disse: [...]  
 (*DTE*, 184.)

Dann regte sie die Spitze hin und wieder,  
als ob zum Reden sie die Zunge wäre,  
und ihre Stimm' erscholl in diesen Worten:  
...)

“Come fosse la lingua che parlasse”: These are Dante’s original words describing the situation (Line 90). Odysseus appears as a tongue of flames. He committed his crimes with language and within language, and turning into a tongue of flames is his punishment.

Kedves Jimmy, Küldöm a németre fordítandó absztrakt szövegét. Szeretettel, Zsófi

Die Erkenntnis, dass die Zeichen Machtmittel sind, fällt mit dem Beginn des Denkens über die Sprache zusammen. Der klassische Rahmen der Untersuchung der Sprache als Machtmittel ist die Rhetorik, natürlich davon abhängig, wie scharf von den einzigen Autoren die Frage gestellt und auf welche Weise der Gegenstand der Rhetorik bestimmt wurde. Die poetischen und theoretischen Arbeiten von Dante, zwischen ihnen seine unbeendete Abhandlung *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, stellen auch von diesem Gesichtspunkt ein wichtiges und interessantes Kapitel der Geschichte der Rhetorik und Sprachphilosophie dar. Im Nachfolgenden werde ich Dante's Theorie über die moralischen Aspekte und über die Machtfunktion der Sprache untersuchen. Besondere Aufmerksamkeit werde ich den folgenden Themen widmen: die Dantesche Deutung des babelischen Mythos; Sünde und Sühne in der Sprache; die politischen Aspekte des Programmes der „ausgezeichneten Volkssprache“ ("volgare illustre"); die Rede von Odysseus an seine Genossen im Gesang XXVI. der Hölle.