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84



## WORDLY WISE

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The Semiotics of Discourse  
in *Dante's Commedia*

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RAFFAELE DE BENEDETTIS

In *Wordly Wise: The Semiotics of Discourse in Dante's Commedia*, Raffaele De Benedictis proposes a new critical method in the study of the *Divine Comedy* and Dante's minor works. It systematically and comprehensively addresses the discursive aspect of Dante's works and focuses mainly on the reader, who, along with the author and the text, contributes to the making of discursive paths and discourse-generating functions through the act of reading. This work allows the reader to become acquainted with *how* meaning is generated and whether it is granted legitimacy in the text. Also, in a system of signification, sign function and sign production are not limited to the properties of the mind but are the result of working interactively with the properties of discourse, which provide directionality for the reader's enunciation(s) in action.



**Raffaele De Benedictis** holds a Ph.D. in Italian from the University of Toronto and is Assistant Professor in the Department of Classical and Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at Wayne State University in Detroit. He teaches courses on Dante, literary criticism, and Italian culture. He is the author of *Ordine e struttura musicale nella Divina Commedia* (2000) and of various articles on Dante, semiotics, and Italian culture.

*Advance Praise for* **WORDLY WISE**

“This absolutely original research ... employs so many of my semiotic concepts that I am afraid that my final judgments could be biased. I must in any case admit that De Benedictis’s enquiry on Dante represents, as far as I know, the first complete attempt to analyze the whole of Dante’s poetical achievements and theoretical views by using intensively the instruments provided by a text semiotics. I have particularly appreciated the unexpected meeting between Peirce and Dante. I think that this book can open a further fruitful discussion on the inexhaustible, endless Dantesque heritage. This is an open enquiry about the most open of all open works.”

*Umberto Eco, University of Bologna*

“Perhaps more rigorously than many previous studies, Raffaele De Benedictis’ book succeeds in capturing the novelty of Dante’s discourse. Basing himself on seminal theories of allegory as a discourse that overlaps with hermeneutics and calls into question the role of the reader, De Benedictis, in this splendid work that combines scholarship and a sense of complexity of literary texts, has written an excellent, exciting study of medieval semiotics.”

*Giuseppe Mazzotta, Yale University*

“Raffaele De Benedictis chooses to interpret and understand Dante’s work by submitting it to the filter of the semiotics of discourse. Heuristic and hermeneutic effects of the contemporary semiotic approach appear here so fully. It is not the semiotics of discourse that imposes rules and structures on Dante’s work, but the reverse occurs: artwork appears in all its innovative strength and in the creative power with which it imposes its law on the analysis grid. This is a great analysis, where the reader, installed at the heart of the work, witnesses the implementation of all cognitive and emotive requests addressed to him/her.”

*Jacques Fontanille, University of Limoges, Institut Universitaire de France*



# WORDLY WISE

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Irmengard Rauch  
*General Editor*

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New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern  
Frankfurt • Berlin • Brussels • Vienna • Oxford

Raffaele De Benedictis

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*To my wife Rita,  
and to my children  
Dante, Davide, and Diva,  
who are most precious to me.*

*To my parents who from afar  
may flicker, even if only a dim light,  
on that “absolutely incognizable”.*



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# ABBREVIATIONS

The following list of abbreviations and short forms have been used in notes and parenthetical references within the text:

CP	C.S. Peirce, <i>Collected Papers</i> (e.g., CP, V.265)
Com.	Dante, <i>Commedia</i>
Conv.	Dante, <i>Convio</i> (e.g., Conv. II.ii.3)
Cor.	<i>Corinthians</i> (e.g., Cor. 1:13)
DVE	Dante, <i>De vulgari eloquentia</i> (e.g., DVE II.iv.2–3)
Ep.	<i>Epistola a Can Grande</i> (e.g., Ep. XIII.ix.27)
Ezek.	<i>The Holy Bible, Ezekiel</i> (e.g., Ezek. 1:5–10)
Inf.	Dante, <i>Inferno</i> (e.g., Inf. I.43–5)
Jer.	<i>The Holy Bible, Jeremiah</i> (e.g., Jer.5:6)
Met.	Ovid, <i>Metamorphoses</i> (e.g., Met. XIII. 904–959)
Par.	Dante, <i>Paradiso</i> (e.g., Par. I.64–9)
PL	Migne, ed., <i>Patrologia latina</i> (e.g., PL, vol 82, col.304)
Purg.	Dante, <i>Purgatorio</i> (e.g., Purg. XII.112–14)
ST	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa Theologiae</i> (e.g., ST, Iae-Iae q.12 a. 12= <i>Summa Theologica</i> , pars prima primae partis, questio 12, articulus 12)
VN	Dante, <i>Vita nuova</i> (e.g., VN, XIII.iv)



# 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 book<sup>1</sup> that in the first canto of the *Paradiso*, Dante was in all likelihood ‘transhumanized’ as a result

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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-the-moment 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 evanescence<sup>2</sup> 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 level<sup>3</sup> (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

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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. “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.

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).<sup>4</sup> For Avalle only "the constant magnitudes" shape "the specific field of application of the semiological methods."<sup>5</sup> 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).<sup>6</sup> 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

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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.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the difference between Avallé’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”<sup>8</sup> 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*

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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 worlds<sup>9</sup> 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)<sup>10</sup> 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,<sup>11</sup> 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

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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 Peirce 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).

of the individual and manifesting itself in a responsive mode. And finally, we will analyze discourse as a performative entity requiring the indissoluble human presence, and entailing those fundamental characteristics of performativity, such as the *locutionary* (meaning of the utterance), *illocutionary* (the intention to accomplish or attempting to accomplish a certain function), and *perlocutionary* (the effect an utterance produces on the receiver).<sup>12</sup>

## 1.2 The Semiotics of Discourse

Why is a semiotics of discourse useful in studying Dante's *Commedia*? For an adequate understanding of the language's function in the *Commedia*, a language that recognizes polysemy, a language that is consistent with the poetic canons of the Middle Ages and ruled by allegory, the critic must follow an interpretive process which is open only insofar as it is closed within pre-established fields of signification or referential categories of signification, directly controlled by the author through the text. In light of these difficulties, the reader needs to become familiar, first of all, with *how* meaning is formed on the basis of a view that recognizes the language of the *Commedia* as 'facts of language' and not simply as "textual facts",<sup>13</sup> and only afterwards s/he may decide *what* to do with it in the text. Thus, the text of the *Commedia* is not a motley collection of signs, but a well structured signifying mechanism, well constructed even on the connotative level, which may only apparently allow a process leaning toward an open-ended interpretation.

What a semiotics of discourse is able to show in this specific study is the process that forms new conjectures, and how an acceptable conjecture can be distinguished from an unacceptable one. Thus, a semiotics of discourse entirely focused on the *Commedia* will function as a sort of guideline to avoid entertaining doubtful conjectures. An in-depth study of a semiotics of discourse will allow a "model reader of the second level"<sup>14</sup> to understand the fundamental mechanism related to how legitimate/illegitimate conjectures that are potentially

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12. James Loxley, *Performativity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 18. This view is John Austin's fundamental position regarding utterances as performative entities, which we find in his twelve lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955. Such lectures are now collected in John L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, ed. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

13. Fontanille, *The Semiotics of Discourse*, 46.

14. Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: Harvard UP, 1994), 27.

foreseeable in the *Commedia* are formed. On the *how* and *what* of such an inquiry a semiotics of discourse is mandatory and certainly able to prove its usefulness.

The term “discourse” has an array of meanings each characterized by the specificity of the discipline or science in which it is used. Discursive meanings are systematically dealt with in such a way as to produce desirable objectives which are consistent with interests and needs of a given research field. Nevertheless, as different as purposes and conclusions are in various fields of human endeavor, one aspect that makes them converge and provide a common ground for all is the situational individuality of discourse. This means that discourse is structurally a dynamic mechanism of speech acts<sup>15</sup> that generates an individual message based on a situational interplay between constitutive elements of language, properly recognized as the Saussurian dimension of *langue*, and an actual utterance by someone as a dimension *parole*. The dichotomy between *langue* and *parole*, as argued by Paul Ricoeur, provides a distinction of task and purpose between the two in that the “message is individual” (*parole*) while “its code is collective” (*langue*).<sup>16</sup>

In analyzing the constitutive elements of discourse, those that are primarily centered on the areas of communication and representation, I will emphasize the importance of *presence*, as the concrete manifestation of utterance connected with the “body proper, a sensing body that is the first form that the actant of enunciation takes.”<sup>17</sup> Thus presence entails the engagement of any possible response structured according to a schema of performativity in which the triggering of improvisation, as a creative response to the immediate environment, and perceptive judgment, as a complex act of interpretation, play a central role. It is from this preliminary step of presence that the condition develops for a generative trajectory of discourse able to produce signs, and by means of signs discourse can be actualized. The actualization of discourse is

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15. Regarding the notion of “speech acts” see John L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, eds. J. O. Urmson, Marina Sbisa (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 6–7; John R. Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970), 16.

16. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: The Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 3.

17. Fontanille, *The Semiotics of Discourse*, 56. In the making of discourse, the actant of the enunciation is the author and/ or the reader of the poetic text insofar as they are both engaged in the actualization of language. In the *Com.* Dante makes a clear point regarding the importance of the reader. There are over all twenty instances in which he addresses the reader as an active part of his textual journey. The Greimasian term “actant”, based on his “actantial model” refers to one of the concurring components, which helps to analyze the real or thematized action of a text. In this specific case it corresponds to the actual reader.

made possible because from a content-based beginning, discourse must move in the direction of a new grammar of expression which is fundamentally a semiotic production. Also, an outstanding characteristic of discourse formation is that of challenging and distorting other existing discourses. In the generative trajectory, there are semiotic aspects of correlation that impact discourse as it is being formed, at the state in which it is-not-yet discourse, namely *ratio facilis* (simple correlation), and *ratio difficilis* (difficult correlation).<sup>18</sup> However, in order to make discourse intelligible, we need to look at discursive schemas, that is, maps of discursive concepts and their relationships, which clarify and provide “the link between what we understand of the discourse and our sensible apprehension of its presence.”<sup>19</sup> The study of discourse taken at the point of becoming intelligible or of being semiotized is immersed in the semiosphere, the “space of meaning-generation” upon which all possible schemas can be assembled, but with clearly defined boundaries in the case of Dante’s *Commedia*.

Discourse, as defined by Fontanille,

is the unit of analysis of semiotics. It permits us to apprehend not only the fixed or conventional products of semiotic activity (signs, for example), but also and above all semiotic acts themselves. Discourse is an enunciation in action, and this action is first of all an act of presence: the instance of discourse is not an automaton that exercises a capacity of language, but a human presence, a sensing body that expresses itself.<sup>20</sup>

Fontanille’s definition is a complex one and apparently presenting a conflict between what he calls “unit of analysis of semiotics” and “enunciation

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18. The aspect of correlation constitutes a central problem concerning the semiotics of discourse in the *Com.* due to the fact that the poem’s text foresees mostly a *ratio difficilis* and even a further complication of the correlation that Eco calls *ratio difficillima* (most difficult correlation). Regarding *ratio difficillima* in poetry see Umberto Eco, *Sugli specchi e altri saggi* (Milano: Bompiani, 1985), 254. We will return to the issue of correlation further down, as well as in all those instances requiring a correlation according to *ratio difficilis* and *ratio difficillima*.

19. Fontanille, *The semiotics of Discourse*, 65. The notion of schema here must be viewed in the Kantian sense, that is, as that which “designates the mediation between concept and image and, more generally, between categories of understanding and sensible phenomena.” (Fontanille, *The semiotics of Discourse*, 66) According to Ernest Cassirer, cited in Fontanille, 66, the role of schema constitutes a central function of language: “Language[. . .] possesses such a ‘schema’—to which it must refer all intellectual representations before they can be sensuously apprehended and represented—in its terms for spatial contents and relations” Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953–1996), 200.

20. Fontanille, *The semiotics of Discourse*, 45.

in action". One may very likely argue that if discourse is a unit which authorizes a semiotic analysis, that is, the analysis of that which is sign, how can it analyze an enunciation in action which is not-yet a sign? A way to come to grips with such a problem is by setting up interpretive coordinates and by concentrating on the process which governs discourse and not on discourse itself taken as enunciation in action. We are authorized to talk about what happens when an individual engages in the production of speech acts because we have an *a priori* knowledge of categories, that is, "a model of organized semantic universe"<sup>21</sup> or categories of signification. Categories of signification constitute the taxonomy and the peculiar way in which we organize the world around us by means of innumerable forms of segmentation reflecting such categories. In this respect, the process that governs discourse is constructed upon that which has already been semiotized, that is, upon categories of signification that are endowed with signs, with a semiotic presence. In the Middle Ages, and more specifically in the *Commedia*, categories of signification are rather ambiguous and problematic, especially when they perform a metaphoric function. They reflect not only the condition of earthly things as metaphors of Divine ineffability, according to the widespread theory of Biblical exegesis, that is, considered on the four levels of interpretation (literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical), but they may also contain further functions, symbolic functions for example, which can appear to be even contradictory if not referenced properly in their cultural systems. A case in point is the lion in the *Inferno*, a metaphor of sin and of the Antichrist:<sup>22</sup>

l'ora del tempo e la dolce stagione;  
 ma non sì che paura non mi desse  
 la vista che m'apparve d'un leone. (I.43–45)

[that beast before me with his speckled skin;

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21. Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of language* (London: MacMillan Press, 1984), 106.

22. Regarding the lion as a metaphor of the Antichrist see St. Peter's *Epistle* 1.5.8 in which the devil is described as a lion: "tamquam leo rugiens circuit, quaerens quem devoret"; as well as see various commentaries of the *Com.* in the *Dartmouth Dante Project*: Graziolo Bambaglioli's commentary (1324), *Inf.* I.44–47; L'Ottimo Commento (3) (1338), *Inf.* I.31–43; Anonimo Fiorentino's commentary (1400[?]), *Inf.* I.44–48; Giacomo Poletto's commentary (1894), *Inf.* I.44–48; Giovanni Fallani's commentary (1965), *Inf.* I.45. From now on the *Dartmouth Dante Project* will be cited as *DDP*.

but hope was hardly able to prevent  
the fear I felt when I beheld a lion.]<sup>23</sup>

In this initial scene the lion is one of the three beasts that prevents Dante the pilgrim from continuing on his journey, the one that along with the leopard and the she-wolf would have eventually pushed Dante back in the dark forest: “that I had often to turn back again” (“*ch’i’ fui per ritornar più volte vòlto*”) “where the sun is speechless” (“*là dove ‘l sol tace*”),<sup>24</sup> if Virgil had not gone to rescue him on Beatrice’s request.

In the mystical procession taking place at the summit of the *Purgatorio*, the lion, which acquires the value of a *figura Christi*, is contained in the double nature of the Griffon. Here the Griffon is represented as eagle and lion. According to Isidore of Seville, it stands for Christ in his human and divine nature. He is a lion for its kingdom and stronghold (“*Leo, pro regno et fortitudine*”); he is eagle because after his death he ascended to heaven again (“*Aquila, propter quod post resurrectionem ad astra remeavit*”):<sup>25</sup>

Lo spazio dentro a lor quattro contenne  
un carro, in su due rote, triunfale,  
ch’al collo d’un grifon tirato venne. (XXIX.106–08)

[The space between the four of them contained  
a chariot-triumphal-on two wheels,  
tied to a griffin’s neck and drawn by him.]

A further instance of the lion as a salvific figure is implicit in the mentioning of the four animals in *Purgatorio*. XXIX.92–93, where Dante references *Ezek.* 1:5–10:

- 5: Also out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance; they had the likeness of a man.
- 6: And every one had four faces, and every one had four wings.
- 7: And their feet were straight feet; and the sole of their feet was like the sole of a calf’s foot: and they sparkled like the color of burnished brass.

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23. Allen Mandelbaum’s English translation, *Digital Dante*, 9 June 2010 <<http://dante.ilt.columbia.edu/comedy/index.html>>. From now on, all translated passages from the *Commedia* will be from Mandelbaum’s translation unless otherwise specified.

24. *Inf.* I.36, 60.

25. See Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae* VII.2, in *PL*, vol. 82, col. 304, online posting by *Documenta Catholica Omnia*, 11 June 2010 <[http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/04/z/\\_0560-0636\\_Isidorus\\_Hispaliensis\\_Etymologiarum\\_Libri\\_Viginti\\_MLT.pdf.html](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/04/z/_0560-0636_Isidorus_Hispaliensis_Etymologiarum_Libri_Viginti_MLT.pdf.html)>.

8: And they had the hands of a man under their wings on their four sides; and they four had their faces and their wings.

9: Their wings were joined one to another; they turned not when they went; they went every one straight forward.

10: As for the likeness of their faces, they four had the face of a man, and the face of a lion, on the right side: and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four also had the face of an eagle.<sup>26</sup>

Eco draws a clear picture on this point and sheds light on the level of ambiguity that the code presents:

The code is ambiguous, nevertheless, since of all properties there are to choose from it chooses only a few, and those are contradictory. The lion erases his tracks with his tail to throw the hunters off his track and is thus a figure of Christ canceling the traces of sin; but in Psalm 21 the terrible mouth of the beast—“*Salva me de ore leonis*”—becomes a metaphor of Hell, and “*per leonem antichristum intelligitur*” definitively.

Even though medieval Neoplatonism was not aware of it (but the medieval rationalists, from Abelard to Ockham, would not fail to realize this), the universe, which seems to be *rhizomatic* or a mazelike network of real properties, is in effect a mazelike network of *cultural* properties, and those properties are attributed both to the earthly beings and to the heavenly beings in order that metaphorical substitutions may be possible.<sup>27</sup>

Here Eco emphasizes the Aristotelian principle of the *analogia entis* (analogy of being) used by Thomas Aquinas as an act of participation of created beings with their cause. In this way, things contain figural and metaphorical values from their essence, from the way in which God made them. However, the literal sense of the Sacred Scriptures is true only according to its figural value. Though, present in the Sacred Scriptures is also the parabolic (metaphorical) value, which maintains its consistency with classical rhetoric.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, Aquinas has to come to terms with the way in which we speak of God, and says that we can only speak in terms of relationship insofar as God

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26. *The Holy Bible, King James Version*, 2000, online posting 12 June 2010 <<http://www.bartleby.com/108/>>. From now on the same version and edition will be used unless otherwise specified.

27. Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of language*, 104.

28. The literal sense of the Sacred Scriptures is subdivided into figural and metaphorical values. The figural value is the true meaning of the letter because, by means of the figure, Scriptures foretell a future event. The parabolic (metaphorical) value instead only represents, signifies fictitiously and, thus, remains consistent with classical rhetoric insofar as it aims at that which is verisimilar and not to that which is actually true.

is the cause of all things, and creatures derive from such a cause.<sup>29</sup> In this way Aquinas continues Aristotle's non-distinction between linguistic categories and categories of being. Even though Aquinas does not provide a satisfying answer regarding how we come to know God, Eco provides us with a persuasive semiotic answer which does not threaten the Thomistic orthodoxy by stating that "analogy speaks only of the knowledge that men have of reality, of their way of naming concepts, and not of reality itself."<sup>30</sup>

This view leads us to examine the theory of knowledge expounded by Peirce, and in particular with the part dealing with the "four incapacities" of which the second and the third are fundamentally relevant to our analysis. In discussing such incapacities, Peirce states that: "We have no power of intuition, but every cognition is determined logically by previous cognitions", and that: "we have no power of thinking without signs."<sup>31</sup> The initial point for a semiotics of discourse regarding the *Commedia* is therefore the perception of the sensible and intelligible linked with already-existing categories of signification whereby the enunciation in action becomes sign only when it reaches the end of its course; it is a speech act semiotized *a posteriori*. Yet it is exactly this undefined aspect of language that interests us the most because it is the dynamism of the utterance in its process of becoming that allows us to grasp the poetical dimension of language, its transcendental knowledge that the *Commedia* contains, that which is-not-yet-meaning in order to offer something new, a sort of truth that can only be taken as such through the illusion of the verbal medium. Dante's *Commedia* is a journey in the afterlife, and it is true insofar as it is able to create possible worlds by means of discursive illusions. Thus, truth here must be viewed as that which is produced by words, a sort of nominal essence of a thing being named, which comes into existence insofar as it is being named and not because of its real essence. As such, truth is what we can call the *nominal essence* of Dante's journey in the afterlife and "is in itself a digest, a summary, an elaboration of the signified thing." (Eco, *A Theory of semiotics*, 166)

In the *Epistola a Cangrande*, Dante tells his patron from Verona how to read his work. In doing so and at the point in which he discusses its *modus tractandi* he states that, among other things, it is poetical and fictitious: "the mode of treatment is poetic, fictive, descriptive, digressive, transumptive; and

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29. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Iae, q.12, a. 12.

30. Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of language*, 105.

31. Peirce, *CP*, V.265.