SCRIPTURE AS THEOPHANY IN DANTE'S *PARADISO*

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Writing as Theophany: The Medium as Metaphor for Immediacy

In Canto XVIII of the *Paradiso*, in the sphere of Jupiter, Dante's visionary journey to God features a special kind of vision, a vision of written characters. Thirty-five letters written in the sky make up a sentence, the *incipit* of the Book of Wisdom: DILIGITE IUSTITIAM QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM ("Love Justice, you who rule the earth"). This is a "vision," in other words, that coincides with reading, for its object is an instance of writing. Yet, at the same time, by their conspicuous visibility, the letters absorb interest and rivet attention as immediate presences, as visual spectacles. The effect of the scene as a whole is that of a spectacular divine fireworks in the firmament. Enhancing their aesthetic value for the sense of sight, Dante describes the letters metaphorically as a "painting" ("dipinto"). By a suggestion vested in the visionary power and intensity of the poetry, this experience of direct vision of the literal as revealed to Dante is made to stand, at least provisionally and proleptically, for the vision of God that the whole poem builds up to and is based on. The implication we are teased with is that something

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of the divine vision itself may be directly envisaged in these letters.

The letters seen displayed in the heaven of Jupiter are letters specifically of Scripture—hence, the Word of God. Even more intimately revealing of divinity, the letters are readable as Names of God, and as such they are identifiable, in biblical mystic tradition, with God's essence.[1] Indeed, all letters could be and, in central strands of this tradition, were considered Names of God.[2] This is especially evident in the case of the first three letters of the first word, DILIGITE, which Dante singles out for separate mention in a preliminary description of his vision, when he first relates how the sparkling souls in the heaven formed "now *D*, now *I*, now *L* in its figures" ("or D, or I, or L in sue figure," XVIII, 73-75). Each of these letters is peculiarly recognizable as a name of God: "L," equivalent when pronounced aloud to "El," is a name for God in the Hebrew tongue, whereas "I," according to Dante, was the name that Adam first called God, on earth, before descending to Limbo, as Adam himself explains later on in *Paradiso* XXVI, 133-36.[3] "D," then, reads as abbreviating the name of God, "Deum," in a younger sacred language, the Latin of the Vulgate, not to mention "Dio" in Dante's own vernacular, the language of his "poema sacro."

This reading of the letters highlighted here by Dante—D, I, and L—as Names of God is meant only to suggest one way of accounting for the pervasive, even if elusive, sense that Dante's poetic presencing of Scripture in the heaven demands to be understood as a theophany. For taking them as Names of God is especially conducive to elucidating how what Dante discerns and contemplates in the form of a visual display of letters in the heaven of Jupiter is, in fact, a revelation of the Being and essence of God—albeit in a metaphorical and even pictorial guise. And yet, while Dante may wish to subliminally evoke this theology of the divine Names, on account of its embodying the idea of access through language, and more specifically through the letter, to God's being and essence, the vision strains in every detail to go beyond the nominal and linguistic and to apprehend God in concrete, phenomenal form. The divine presence is intimated not just by a cryptic code of kabbalistic letters for the unutterable, transcendent Name, but is rather displayed openly in rich gothic detail to Dante's sense of sight. Dante's sense of the revelation of God as incarnate in the Word seeks full realization in the words and images of his poetry. Hence the externality and objective, thing-like character of the letters is here thrown flamboyantly into relief.

The dramatic force of Dante's vision of Scripture in the Heaven of Jove evidently resides in the fascination of the immediately visible presence of the letters that Dante gazes upon. The phenomenalization of the letters on the scene of the heaven in its representational space and time is elaborated with

rather extravagant precision and detail and even a touch of sensationalism. The visual concreteness and painting-like quality of the writing Dante sees lend it an objective density that induces critics to invoke the theoretically suggestive moment of words and letters becoming perceptible as things. This motif, in fact, is invoked by Lino Pertile, who describes the reified words as "citation things": "a biblical citation become citation-thing, sign and referent at the same time; in sum, the signifier triumphs" (38).[4] The drawing of attention to the sensible form of the signifier, though certainly not for Dante the defining characteristic of poetic language, as it was for Roman Jakobson,[5] nevertheless evidently can belong to Dante's sense, too, of the peculiar capabilities of such language, capabilities which he exploits in this instance to extraordinary effect. Like Jakobson—and in defiance of St. Augustine—Dante throws into relief the immediately perceptible and concretely present component of these signs as they are used in his poetic language. Beyond Jakobson, moreover, Dante confronts us with the further challenge of understanding this important characteristic of poetic language not just formally and structurally but also scripturally and theologically, that is, as bound up with the vision's status as written and as in some sense revealed—as mediating a manifestation to the senses of the divine essence or the presence of God—in short, as theophany.

Of course, all that Dante sees in Paradise, as well as all that he sees throughout the other world, is theophany. In different ways, the visions of each of the heavens stand for and embody ultimately the divine vision, the *visio Dei*, which they anticipate and preliminarily enact. And even the terrestrial world, as seen in the allegorical perspective of Dante's theological poem and of the Middle Ages generally, is theophany: every aspect of the Creation makes God manifest to the extent that it bears the image or imprint of its Creator.[6] Thus the whole of the universe, and, in its image, the whole of the *Divine Comedy*, is theophany in an inclusive sense. But the *Paradiso* in particular is theophantic in a more selective sense that is intimately and mysteriously related to its scriptural medium. And this is something that Dante concentrates on thematically in the heaven of Jupiter, where the scriptural medium is projected into spectacular relief. Throughout the poem, writing is the medium by which Dante conveys his vision, and the problematic of language's and especially of writing's capacities and incapacities to manifest divinity is diffusely present. But in this heaven in particular, with its thematic focus on a given instance of writing, and specifically of Holy Writ, the question of what its written form means for Dante's vision of God—with its claim to be in some sense a theological "revelation"—becomes exceptionally acute.

In principle, of course, writing is only the means by which Dante conveys

his experience of seeing God—rather than being more directly identifiable with the divine as the object of this experience. Yet, notoriously in the case of the *Paradiso*, and more generally in the case of perhaps all linguistically innovative poetry, the linguistic and scriptural means of representation become indissociable from the matters for which they serve as vehicle. The means itself, in telling ways throughout the *cantica*, tends to turn into the object of the vision. And here, in the heaven of Jove, imaginatively objectifying what is *prima facie* only the material condition of his craft, Dante represents a vision that is not only conveyed by writing but is itself a vision *of* writing. Thus, beyond being its necessary means, writing becomes also the immediate theme and content of Dante's poetic contemplation of a purportedly divine presence.

Ostensibly, it is in its quality as something directly visible that writing assumes such importance for Dante in this scene, hinting at the status of his poem as theophany. Writing's immediately visible presence to the sense of sight epitomizes the kind of direct vision of God that presumably the whole poem strives ultimately to achieve. This immediate presence of language in the form of the written and visible signifier—the letter—comes to stand metaphorically for the unmediated presence and vision of God. In this way, writing becomes the essential metaphor for theophany—at least here in the heaven of Jove. Writing is a medium, to be sure, and its essential function is mediation, but it takes on importance for Dante also as a metaphor for his divine vision: it does this thanks to the immediacy of vision it realizes by virtue of its own literally visible medium, the sensory quality of the written letter. This fully externalized, visible form is exalted by Dante's presentation of the vision as a divine display and painting in the heaven. In the metaphor of painting (XVIII. 92, 109), Dante is actually meditating on writing in a very material sense, focusing on (and identifying it with) its own directly perceptible, visible and viscous medium: a painted image, just like any written letter, is composed of opaque shapes perceived in the phenomenal space of a visual field.

Of course, the metaphor of writing for the *visio Dei* also signals the impossibility of realizing direct vision of anything such as the divine essence. For the sense or meaning of writing remains invisible and a reference always beyond to what is absent and deferred—not present as such in the letter on the page. Writing is a medium that offers sensible signs or ciphers in lieu of the presence of what it signifies. That precisely writing should be featured here as the means of Dante's theophany thus at the same time indicates this theophany's inherent limitations and even "impossibility."

What Dante implicitly admits with this theophany in the form of a vision of writing is that seeing God—God's direct self-revelation in a blaze of light and glory—could only be a form of "writing," that is, of indirectly signifying divinity. Whatever one might see would still be in need of being read, that is, deciphered according to its divine significance, and the presence of God would thus still be only signified rather than being simply, immediately, present—plainly laid open to view. Whatever could appear directly before human eyes or intellect could not be God per se in an absolute presence. Even another human being is never revealed in the direct way that only an object of purely visual perception, a shape or a color, can be exhaustively revealed. Persons always infinitely transcend any of their immediate, concrete manifestations. Transcendence belongs to the very structure of any possible encounter with God and with others alike. This barrier is built into the metaphor of writing used for the divine vision.

As in the troubadour tradition of *trobar clus*, or "closed form," so also in philosophical tradition, specifically that of Plato's *Phaedrus*, writing is normally, or at least very often, considered an opaque medium that, at best, can only indirectly and inadequately convey the mind's intentions. It is removed further than speech from any reality that it is supposed to represent. Thus it is not only in our own day that writing has become a chief emblem of the impossibility of realizing presence in any pure form, let alone as the absolute of "divine presence."[7] The medieval world was well aware of writing as a medium inescapably devoid of the concrete presence of the objects it represents. Such a principle was rendered commonplace by Augustine's theory of signs, erected on the fundamental distinction between *res* and *signum*. The absence of the object designated by the linguistic sign, compounded in the written sign or letter by the removal from any actual manifestation of voice in which intention or meaning could be immediately embodied in the presence of the mind and its thought, is implicitly recognized, for example, by Isidore of Seville at the beginning of his *Etymologiarum*: "But letters are indexes of things, signs of words, and they have such power that, when said to us, they speak without voice of absent things" ("Litterae autem sunt indices rerum, signa verborum, quibus tanta vis est, ut nobis dicta absentium sine voce loquantur" [314. 74-75]). Even nearer to Dante, Thomas Aquinas explains writing as necessary to man living in society because of his need to be able to abstract from the here and now.[8] Thus, *prima facie*, writing represents *anything but* immediacy and presence.

There is, then, a provocative irony in Dante's singling out writing as the medium for his realization of a vision of divine presence—not only by relying on writing out of practical necessity, but also by elevating it to a position of spectacular thematic relief in this segment of his poem. For to be present in this manner, through being signified by written characters, is a very ambiguous way of being present indeed. It means being present in

a form that emblematically signifies at the same time the absence of what is represented. God is made present and visible, paradoxically, in writing, which is itself constituted by the absence of what it signifies. The idea of seeing God, and *a fortiori* that of being spoken to by him, connotes some sort of immediacy and presence, whereas writing is widely recognized as the medium of absence and deferral. The impossibility of capturing the divine presence in any representation whatever is rendered explicit in Dante's writing throughout the *Paradiso* by his continual recourse to the ineffability topos. That writing, as a form of signifying a *res* in its absence, should turn out to be fundamental to the poem's manifestation of a divine presence, then, is only a special case of the general paradox that its very ineffability should prove to be integral to Dante's poetic expression of the divine revelation he lays claim to in the *Paradiso*.

A final acknowledgment that envisioning God cannot but be tantamount to a totalized vision of the emblematic medium, writing, comes with a final vision of God at the end of the whole poem: it is a vision of a book—in fact, a vision of the whole world as a book, all substances and accidents throughout the universe bound together in one volume (XXXIII. 85-90). The experience of the world itself, if read as a book, is divine revelation and can identify itself with the experience of God. The *Commedia* may in the end offer no other way to experience God. Although Dante retains, at least at the levels of myth and metaphor, the quest for a direct intuition of the divine essence, what he concretely realizes in his poem is vision of a different kind, vision in effect that is writing. The mediations themselves, rather than any discrete essence to be isolated as an object of intellection, become the divine vision, the vision of the poem.[9] The final vision of the total writing of the universe in a book suggests as much.

The zero-degree of writing that is concentrated directly on presentation of itself as sheer immediacy—and not as medium of some content other than itself—can be achieved through poetry, with all its resources for visual and sensuous realization of experience. Poetry and particularly its incarnation in writing, Dante seems to suggest, may be able to exceed, or at least displace, the epistemological barriers of signification that are written into logical semantics, as well as into dogmatic theology—and thereby make the impossible come to pass. The potentiality for realizing the divine in the immediate presence of the medium of writing is played out by poetry especially by virtue of its propensity for sensuous expression and concrete creation. Dante focuses so intensely and exclusively on the medium (writing) that it disappears as mediation and becomes present in its immediacy. This is possible because, rigorously considered, Dante's writing in the *Paradiso* has no object. What it mediates cannot be objectified. God is, by definition,

what exceeds every possibility of objectification and finite expression.

Concentrated meditation on the theological limits inherent in writing as a medium is what, at the same time, makes the miracle of divine vision possible and, as Dante sees it, perhaps even makes it come to pass. For writing happens to be just what Dante's poem is made out of and in an immediate sense *is*. Writing is also what the poem manifests itself as directly to the physical sense of sight. Dante, accordingly, portrays himself as intensely aware of writing as integral to his achieving in his poem a purportedly unmediated experience of divinity. In fact, Dante's acute sensitivity to and concentration on his scriptural medium shows itself throughout the *Paradiso* to be fundamental to his whole imaginative conception of the possibility of envisioning God and of experiencing the divine presence.

Whereas vision posits a unique object, writing is a differential system. To see the divine vision as writing is not to doubt or deny its authenticity, but rather to redefine it in terms not of perception of an object but of relations within a web of significances, a text. The *visio Dei*, Dante's text argues, is such a writing, if it is anything. God manifests himself not as a discrete object but as a play of significances, as a signifying. In some sense, throughout the *Paradiso* the vision is the poem, the written text itself—although text here must be understood to be not just a material artifact but a mysterious and inexhaustible inter-animation of significances. And in the heaven of Jove the vision's content itself peculiarly and conspicuously thematizes this astonishing equivalence.

The immediacy of writing as a visible object, together with its representing a form of mediation par excellence, sets up the paradox upon which this whole scene, and indeed the whole poem, pivots. Mediation itself becomes immediate and absolute. In this case, where vision is supposedly of God, there can be no object to be represented. The Absolute and Infinite can be comprehended in no finite object of representation. Rather, the infinity and absoluteness of the medium itself serves to intimate divinity as an unrepresentable non-object. By taking itself as object, language fulfills its irrepressible formal propensity to represent, or at least intend, some object. And yet it designates no external object that would delimit it. Not as any represented thing, but rather in its own inherent and unlimited potency for representing, language is infinite, and this makes it a good metaphor for and even a manifestation of the unrepresentable infinity of divinity.

The medium of representation is never fully present as such in the form of a separate, discrete object, yet indirectly it is *in* everything that *is* represented, and it is present in these representations as an indivisible whole. Like such a medium, God is present everywhere, sustaining the very being of all that is, albeit nowhere discretely as an object.[10] This suggests why Dante's

metaphors for God are fundamentally metaphors of language all the way to the "final" vision of the book in *Paradiso* XXXIII. 85-93. Language is the paradigmatic medium, indeed the medium of mediums. It is the nature of language, as a system of interconnected differences, to be all active and impinging at once on any given instance or unit of language. The medium itself and as a whole is necessarily present in all representations within that medium. In fact, it is what is most immediately present. Just as language or writing as medium is present in everything written, so the presence of God is at least diffusely apprehended as a presence of the infinite in every finite, individual existence. Dante's description of the essence of God in letters makes vivid and visible how, in the case of the experience of God, the medium is the most present of all that is experienced. Such a metaphysical analogy contributes to making language and specifically writing the privileged metaphor for Dante's poetic representations of the vision and presence of God.

The Presence of Writing in Speech: Speaking as Sparking

In Dante's vision, writing, taken initially as medium—and paradoxically just because of its being a medium—turns into a transcendent *reality* (*res*) in which divinity can purportedly be envisioned as present: divinity is not just the absent signified but is actively present in the event of signifying. Dante tells us in the first tercet describing what he saw in this heaven that it was "the love which was there" ("l'amor che lì era") that "signified" ("segnare") to his eyes "our speech" ("nostra favella"), which he sees written:

> Io vidi in quella giovial facella
> lo sfavillar de l'amor che lì era
> segnare a li occhi miei nostra favella.
> (XVIII. 70-72)
>
> (I saw in that jovial torch
> the sparkling of the love that was there
> signify to my eyes our speech.)

When we ask exactly *what* is present or represented in this heaven, then these initial verses of the scene in Jove answer that Dante sees "the sparkling of the love that was there" ("lo sfavillar de l'amor che lì era"). Ultimately, this is a manifestation of the presence of God, who is Love (I John 4: 8), or of the souls who receive, reflect, and transmit this Love, or perhaps both, the one in and through the other. In any case, God's presence is not a simple presence, as of a particular object, but is rather displaced into a complex phenomenon of signifying. To be exact, what this signifying gives Dante

to see is not as such the love that is there but "the sparking" ("lo sfavillar") of this love, a visible display that sparkles and in so doing "signifies" ("segnare"). The love that signifies in this way manifests itself as letter, and the signifying letter becomes a visual event in Dante's poem. By this means, the love which "was there" in and through its own act of signifying, that is, as a semiological event, takes on externality and appears, that is, becomes a theophany in the form of the lively sparking of what are later called "living lights" ("vive luci") that constitute the medium of this mode of signification (XX. 10).

These visual signals constitute the presence of the divine, although they do so in a signifying that is a play between presence and absence, not the simple presence of any discrete substance. In this play of signifiers, the presence of the divine is not unequivocally localizable. It appears always only in a flash pointing elsewhere and playing off other signifiers. On theological, or more precisely negative theological principles, God's total transcendence means that there will always be something that does not and cannot become manifest in the divine vision. Dante interprets this principle semiologically: he presents the divine vision as a semiological event, a vision of signifying by writing that discloses and at the same time disguises, that reveals and conceals.

A tantalizing question as to the semiological mode of God's presence in this canto's poetic realization or "performance" of Scripture is opened up by the striking fact that the letters signified to Dante's eyes are actually designated not as writing but as "speech." "Nostra favella" should probably be taken to mean human speech generally. For Dante sees letters not of his own vernacular idiom but of Latin, and yet, even so, the love of God that is present in this heaven is signified in a language that is recognizably "ours." The force of the "nostra," to this extent, seems to be to emphasize the mediation of a divine presence or sense into a human form of language. Of course, the speech that one sees is, in fact, writing. As the immediately following sentence unequivocally shows, the "speech" that is envisaged here as seen actually consists in nothing other than written characters, 'D,' 'I,' 'L,' and so forth. But the designation of this communication by letters as "speech" is nonetheless too plain and deliberate to be ignored.

The equivalence of the Scriptural letters Dante sees with language *spoken* by God, hinting that the writing Dante sees is really an indirect form of God's *speech*, is confirmed a few lines later, when, in describing his reception of the vision letter by letter, Dante writes, "I noted the parts thus, as they appeared to me *dictated*" ("io notai / le parti sì, come mi parver *dette*." XVIII. 89-90). Here, while a metaphor of writing or "noting down" is used to denote Dante's own receiving and remembering of the verbal message

communicated to him, a metaphor of speech or dictation is used for the divine manifestation itself in the form of written characters. This tendency to reciprocal substitution between writing and speech – the one being consistently called in to substitute metaphorically for the other – is an index of Dante's profound apprehension of how speech and writing, with their respective connotations of presence and absence, transparency and opacity, immediacy of spirit versus material mediation, are intrinsically connected and mutually interpenetrating.

What, specifically, does it mean that what Dante perceives is really speech, even though it presents itself to him literally in the form of writing? God is directly present here as if speaking, his love revealing itself in the transparency of speech to the mind immediately communicating what it intends. Indeed, even their graphic visuality does not, after all, in Dante's view remove the fiery signs from the nature of speech. On the contrary, this medium is so transparent to intention as to be tantamount to speech. The painterly visibility of the letters itself suggests the analogy of a divine Painter perfectly in control of the visual medium he manipulates for the purpose of portraying his ideas: "Quei che dipinge lì, non ha chi 'l guidi: / ma esso guida..." ("He who paints there has no one to guide him; rather, he guides...." 109-11).

The point of the painting image here is to illustrate God's direct and deliberate command over the manifestation underway in the heaven, as in general over all of nature. The figure of God as painter, moreover, works as a metaphorical equivalent for the idea of an author who writes simply at will, without being conditioned by anything exterior. This author writes or paints as if he were simply to speak his mind without hindrance or resistance. So, in the end, this emphasis on God's free self-expression in "painting" the letters – as in creating nature and controlling it – tends to turn writing back into "speech" in the sense of the spontaneous and immediate expression of the mind unencumbered by any extraneous medium, what in philosophical tradition has figured as the pure transparency of voice to the mind or soul.[11] The medium becomes so fully conformed to the will and intent of the one who uses it as to utterly lose all status as external and other. Even in becoming a fully external, visible manifestation, this writing remains fully transparent and obedient to the mind it expresses, and to this extent it remains essentially speech. Despite the implication of absence and indirectness inherent in the written vision, Dante still reminds us insistently that the visual displays that he perceives are signs coming directly from God. God's mind is present in them just as if they were God's own speech.

Although in this heaven, if anywhere, the specifically written character of God's Word, as well as of Dante's written imitation and interpretation

of it, is paramount, nevertheless Dante invites us to read this writing as in essence an extension of the speech of God. This need not in itself be so surprising, for God's self-revelation, even as written in the Bible, is understood traditionally as his Word, *Verbum Dei*. The phrase from the biblical book of Wisdom that Dante sees can be qualified as the "Word of God" expressed in "our," that is, in human language, since this can be said of the Bible itself as a whole and in all its parts. It is especially with respect to its unity and source in God that Scripture, especially within a Christian incarnational perspective, is grasped as God's *utterance* of his Being in the Word. And yet this in no way attenuates the essential "writtenness," along with the accompanying reified visuality, of the revelation Dante envisages. Precisely the written medium is key to achieving the immediacy that eminently characterizes Dante's vision of God and that makes it apt to be called God's "speech." It is by being seen in the directly visible form of writing that the divine presence in language actually shows and makes itself present. It is most emphatically as opaque, spatialized, pictorial phenomena that the letters are depicted as fully in correspondence with the divine intention.

The extraordinary burden of Dante's vision is that it embraces without reserve the consequences of writing that are most devastating to any purportedly immediate and unified meaning of speech. Dante fully admits the dependency of speech, even divine speech, on what is in essence written signification, and at the same time he reaffirms his faith ("credo") that the writing of the universe that he sees exemplified here is, after all, the Word of God, and as such perfectly one with itself. This visionary epistemology of the written word, moreover, is inseparable from an apotheosis of justice. Dante declares his faith that there is an overarching, unified order to the world, even though we are able to perceive this order essentially only as writing, where every putative message or meaning is delivered over to the random chaos as which it appears through its external form and medium.

Fascinating and most theoretically challenging about the vision of writing in Jove is the way Dante couples his apprehension of writing as a visual display in space and, moreover, in a sensuous, material medium subject to contingency with his notion of speech as a direct, uninhibited expression of mind and as governed by an unabashedly transcendental intention. In Dante's vision, the full realization of the divine intention and its ideality – what naturally induces to description in terms of speech – takes place conspicuously, deliberately, and programmatically in and through the contingent materiality of the written. Dante's implying that writing, his medium, becomes the speech of God, a direct revelation or theophany, insists on the apparent contingencies built into writing that then unveil themselves as dictated by a transcendent agency, as immediate manifestations of divine

intent. The fact that this signifying appears to be beyond any calculable intention that could control or account for it is supposed to signify precisely a higher, a divine intentionality.

The theme of contingency in the nature of letters is highlighted right from the heaven of Jove's second tercet by a simile of far-reaching and practically systematic significance in the *Commedia*, that of birds in their flight forming patterns resembling letters. The birds are depicted taking wing from a riverbank upon which they have fed, jubilant in their mutual "congratulation":

> E come augelli surti di rivera,
> quasi congratulando a lor pastore,
> fanno di sé or tonda or altra schiera....
> (*Paradiso* XVIII, 73-75)
> (And as birds risen up from banks,
> as if congratulating one another on their good fare,
> make of themselves by turns a round- or other-shaped swarm....)

The simile of the birds in flight as letters depicts the miraculous emergence out of apparently irrational, instinctual motions, of order, the order of speech as established by the law of the letter. It thereby brings the order of revelation by means of words to rest symbolically upon what is apparently the chaos of natural contingency. As it occurs in *Purgatorio* XXIV, 64-66 ("Come li augei che vernan lungo 'l Nilo..."), the model for this topos of birds' flight patterns as letters is a passage in Lucan's *Pharsaglia* (V, 711-13), which depicts specifically cranes forming figures in their flight from the frozen Strymon to the Nile: "Strymona sic gelidum bruma pellente relinquunt / Poturae te, Nile, grues, primoque volatu / Effingunt varias *casu* monstrante figuras..." ("As when cranes by pale fog leave the frozen Strymon and to your doors, Nile, having first flown, make various figures as shown *by chance*..."). Lucan emphasizes that the figures are formed by chance ("casu"), and in the following lines he describes how, conglomerated from random confusion ("Confusos temere inmixtae glomerantur in orbes") and beaten by the wind, finally the letter is dissolved and the birds dispersed ("Et turbata perit dispersis littera pinnis"). This mysterious connection between legible order and random chance is precisely the thematic line developed by Dante.

Kenneth Knoespel brings forth examples from texts of Isidore of Seville, Hugh of Saint Victor, and others of the considerable tradition in the Middle Ages and Renaissance of perceiving flocks of cranes on the wing as forming the shapes of letters, their flight formations being proverbial for their "ordine litterato," their being ordered as letters.[12] He demonstrates particularly the communitarian connotations of the crane topos, as it develops against a background of patristic and monastic exegetical literature in which cranes served, among other things, as a model for orderly community life and conformity on the part of separate and potentially anarchic individuals to the needs of the collectivity. This illuminates how the image belongs to Dante's exploration of the socio-political essence of writing and letters.

The simile of the birds, serving to describe the flight of the souls that come together to form the letters of the scriptural message that Dante reads in the heaven of Jove, forms the final link in a series of similes likening birds to letters in the *Divine Comedy*. In *Inferno* V, 46-47, the simile of the cranes creates what Knoespel calls "only an illusion of order," whereas in the *Purgatorio* it connotes the ordered discipline of moral correction and redemption. In the *Paradiso*, the birds as letters reveal the divine order of nature and history as expressed in the scriptural injunction to "Love justice, you who rule the earth." As it evolves from *Inferno* V, through *Purgatorio* XXIV and XXVI, to its apotheosis here in *Paradiso* XVIII, the simile connotes the uncanny fact of order issuing from chaos and intelligible meaning from blind instinct. However, Dante ups the ante of this phenomenon of chance motion resolving into an ordered configuration by adding the theme of the dispersion of form in time as revealing an eternal meaning. The order in question is thus made transcendent—it embodies a divine justice.

Since writing as theophany is made to represent some kind of an opening to an eternal presence and a transcendent, divine intention, it is quite remarkable that in representing writing Dante should highlight its apparent contingency. Dante's imagery attempts the impossible—to represent the unrepresentable, transcendent order of the divine—by rendering all manifest order insufficient, that is, by giving up on representing divine order, except through representations of chaos.

The potential of writing to subvert or distort pure intentions stems principally from its materiality and contingency, which Dante foregrounds and poetically exploits. At the same time, however, he emphasizes this script's ideality and capacity for bearing the transcendency of "sense," its encoding a meaning that is nothing less than the revelation of universal divine justice. It is precisely the theophany's contingent quality that determines the inadequacy of all our schemes and categories to comprehend it. Transcendence is manifest to us through radical contingency—what utterly escapes and exceeds our ability to grasp it rationally. What we cannot account for, what to our perception appears totally random and arbitrary, is used by Dante—in a gesture common to primordial religions—to indicate an act of God. Thus Dante uses metaphors of contingency drawn from apparently mindless, chaotic events in nature that he believes actually to be providentially guided. Here, in heaven, their contingency is revealed as only

apparent. Analogously, here in heaven Dante sees his faith in an inscrutable providence at work in history confirmed, even if it normally proves humanly impossible to discern any pattern of justice beneath the apparent chaos of events.[13]

The paradox of representing order by contingency is apt because any order that can be apprehended and expressed as such would be inadequate to express the divine mind and its incomprehensible plan and dispensation of an inscrutable order in the universe. The divine nature and its order transcend all human order and are incommensurate with it. As Isaiah prophesied, his ways are infinitely above our ways: "To whom then will ye liken God? or what likeness will ye compare unto him?" (40: 18; cf. 55: 9). And as Pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite, quoting his teacher "Hierotheus," writes about the perfect order of divinity, "It sets the boundaries of all sources and orders and yet it is rooted above every source and order."[14]

This contingent, yet transcendent writing signals a short-circuiting and, in effect, a deconstruction of linguistic mediation. There is no calculable relation between signified and signifiers—which have become thereby merely traces of the Unrepresentable.[15] Sparking is the key image in which these ideas are imagined. The far-reaching consequences of the imagery of sparking as a deconstruction of conventional, that is, intentional semantic signification perhaps become fully evident only in the light of radical modern creations of poetic language, such as those of Mallarmé, whose language veritably "scintillates" with sensation that signifies beyond all semantic reckonings of sense. Mallarmé throws poetic art open to chance with a toss of the dice that no stroke of art can master ("Jamais un coup de dés n'abolira le hazard"). Yet poetry's shattering, splintering, or sparking of sense into infinite constellations of sensation is realized almost as powerfully as it ever will be already by Dante.

Speaking as Sparking

Dante uses the imagery of the chance action or random play of the spark as resolving into and revealing a transcendent order to intimate that, despite appearances, all is guided by the hand of Providence and is governed in the end, therefore, by divine justice. Furthermore, since the sparks form letters, clearly the order in question, as revealed by the imagery of sparking, is closely connected to the order of language. Indeed, by the mutation of a single letter, "speech" ("favella") is deformed into "spark" ("favilla"). Similarly, a key word for speaking ("favellare") is transmuted by a slight alteration into the word for sparking ("sfavillare"). The ear is actually obliged to connect

speaking ("favellare") with sparking ("sfavillare") by the occurrence of both words in the opening *terzina* of the Heaven of Jove in consecutive verses ("I saw in that jovial torch / the speaking-sparking [sfavillar] of the love that was there / signify to my eyes our speech [favella]" XVIII, 70-72). This phonetic modulation, at the level of the signifier, between the word for sparking and that for speaking reverberates with hints of a fusion, at the level of signified meaning, between the concepts of speaking and of sparking. Sparking infiltrates speech. By this subtle, subliminal phonetic suggestion, speaking is grammatologically wedded to—or contaminated by—sparking. The poetry insinuates that speech is in essence a sort of sparking.

Most conspicuously, sparking entails the random motion of a multitude of elements, and the phonetic connection between sparking and speaking suggests that the order of speech is itself the result of something like the chance motion of particles in the universe of Lucretius or of Democritus, who, as *Inferno* IV, 136 recalls, "subjects the world to chance" ("che 'l mondo a caso pone"). These atomist philosophers themselves had hinted that the same randomness applies, perhaps even in a primary sense, to the universe of language. The term *stoicheia*, meaning literally "elements," was used by the Stoics, following the atomists, for the letters of the alphabet, as well as for the elements of the universe.[16] The cosmic order was understood thus on the basis of the analogy with language as a conjunction of material elements. This combination could be construed as given over to chance (as by the atomists, including Lucretius) or as governed by fate (as it was for the Stoics). But whether fate or chance was postulated as the ruling principle of the universe, in either case language with its material "elements" was seen as a universe in itself and as the paradigm for the universe as a whole.

Dante is clearly sensitive to and even transmits the strongly negative connotation of this doctrine as denying Christian faith in divine providence as a free, intelligent planning of the universe and all that happens within it. But it also challenges him to the bold gesture of actually basing his demonstration of providence and justice in the heaven of Jove on imagery precisely of the sort of random motion of particles envisioned by pagan philosophers that he elsewhere condemns. He thereby incorporates the most antithetical vision imaginable into his vision of divine Justice. Rather than denying and refusing it, Dante admits this metaphysic of irrational motion into his own world-view, absorbing it so as to show that it has itself a deeper basis after all in divine providence as disclosed by Christian revelation.

The passage in the Book of Wisdom from which Dante takes his cue in this heaven of the just souls itself turns specifically on the imagery of sparking: "Fulgebunt justi, et tamquam scintillae in arundineto discurrent" ("The just shall shine, even like sparks running about in a field of reeds,"

Wisdom 3: 7). The Scriptural source whose *incipit* serves as the theme-text and visionary object of this canto thus furnishes also the *Leitmotif* of its imagery. The force of the spark image as it occurs in the Book of Wisdom resides in the strong contrast between the paltry material, the sparks in a field of humble growth, and the splendor of justice that shines out of their apparently random, disorganized shootings to and fro. And this precisely is the spirit of Dante's recreation of the scene blazoning Justice in the heaven of Jove gloriously out of the midst of innumerable blessedly humble souls' haphazard yet concerted sparking. It is also striking that this random motion is described in the Latin Vulgate that Dante uses by the word "discurrent," that is, ambiguously as a running around or as "discoursing." This *double entendre* already forges the link between the order of material motion and that of speech or writing that is a key feature of Dante's vision. In the next heaven Dante will again depict shooting stars as "discoursing" with sudden spontaneity ("discorre ad ora ad ora sùbito fuoco," XV. 14) in the firmament of Mars.

In this way, the apparently random interaction of particles in sparking becomes a peculiarly privileged image for representing the intricate and basically arbitrary and accidental patterns of sound that produce meaning in speech. Speech is concretized by Dante's imagery as a form of sparking, of random motion of particles bursting with unpredictable energies. This sparking, for all the seeming arbitrariness and uncontrollability of its individual particles, is orchestrated, nevertheless, to form meaningful patterns, particularly the harmonies of the poem and also a sentence from Scripture. Thus an ideality of sense is produced by the radically material, unstable, and irregular phenomenon of the spark. In this respect, "speech" is understood to be like writing, that is, to be an effect of meaning produced by material elements in themselves radically contingent and meaningless.

In this image of sparking, then, the poem offers an image of the universe and also of itself. The poem itself is an explosion of sparks that miraculously form into the perfect order of the speech that communicates Paradise. The divine order of Paradise can be embodied in the verbal order, or rather disorder, of the poem only on condition of the poem's being, humanly considered, a phenomenon of random sparking. For its order must be incalculable, that is, it must transcend any finite, human, conventional order and spring up as a mystery from the uncontrolled release of energies in speech. That much is expressed by the imagery of sparking, which is pervasive throughout the *Paradiso*.

The spark imagery, in fact, reverberates all through the third *cantica*: virtually everything in Paradise is touched in the end by the visual language of sparking. It is, however, in the heaven of Jove and in Canto XVIII itself that

the spark image for speech and its miraculous powers achieves its intensest realization, culminating in a startling poetic apotheosis. The sparks Dante here witnesses form speech as the "faville" become constituents of the letters of the alphabet, "our language" ("nostra favella"), as they are called in the opening verses. Speaking as sparking here subsumes the evidently random emission of sparks within the order of language and speech, which is itself, in turn, the basis for the whole political and social order. At the same time, conversely, speech is brought into intrinsic contact with what appears to be a completely uncontrolled burst of sheer energy. Innumerable sparks are pictured rising up helter-skelter from firebrands that have been violently struck while burning:

> Poi, come nel percuoter d'i ciocchi arsi
> surgono innumerabili faville,
> onde li stolti sogliono agurarsi:....
> (100-02)
> (Then, as when burning logs are struck
> innumerable sparks surge up,
> whence fools are accustomed to practice augury:....)

The double aspect of the spark image as representing paradoxically ordered contingency is most unmistakably significant and literally striking, after its first punning appearance in introducing the "jovial" heaven, at the final stage of the vision of the verse from *Wisdom*, in its concluding letter, **M**. The image is wrought to an explosive climax at the moment when the last of the letters Dante sees, the gothic **M**, is transformed by this metaphorical combustion to become the new symbol of total world order, a scintillating blazon for Dante's theory of Monarchy.[17] This graphic image becomes pictorial as the **M** then suddenly metamorphoses into the image of an eagle's head and neck—unmistakably the escutcheon of empire.

> e quietata ciascuna in suo loco,
> la testa e 'l collo d'un aguglia vidi
> rappresentare a quel distinto foco.
> (XVIII. 106-8)
> (and when each one quieted in its place,
> I saw the head and neck of an eagle
> represented by that distinct fire.)

The emblem of universal imperial order emerges astonishingly out of an image of chaotic and violent release of uncontrolled energies, an explosive sparking. Dante exalts the chance play and blind violence of the striking of the log, but also the preordained plan that is realized thereby, as the fol-

lowing verses make explicit:

> resurger parver quindi più di mille
> luci e salir qual assai e qual poco,
> si come 'l sol che l'accende sortille
> (XVIII. 103-05)
>
> thence more than a thousand lights
> seemed to surge and rise, some much and some little,
> as the sun that ignites them allots.)

The countless particles ("più di mille") are differentiated in an apparently arbitrary way ("qual assai e qual poco"), and yet divinity operates by assigning lots ("sortille") behind the scenes.

This invisible hand was present in the bird metaphor, too, specifically in the reference to "the power which is the formal principle of being in nests," a power which is recognized as from God ("e da lui si rammenta / quella virtù ch'è forma per li nidi," XVIII. 110-11). As in the case of the birds in flight forming into letters, so again with the sparks composing speech, a phenomenon of mass and chance is given a unified, determinate, legible form. These are reminders of how the Creator orders the instinctual behavior of animals and the mindless motion of matter alike to his supremely intelligent ends. Here again, Dante unfailingly emphasizes that the phenomenal forms he sees written have a meaning determined by the control and intention of the divine Author. All this tends to turn writing back into speech, or to comprehend writing as a secondary materialization and externalization of speech.

Still, however much it may be possible to see this writing as essentially a form of speech, as an articulation of what the author presently means, Dante insists that the Word of God is revealed here in an unmistakably and irreducibly *written* form. He could hardly have made this point more *graphic*. The fact that in this "speech" the letters are formed out of what is at first an apparently random activity, from an uncontrolled release of elemental or instinctual energies, suggests something radical about the very grounds and nature of speech. The most compact way of expressing the insight depicted here is to say that speech is based on writing. The implication, indeed, is that speech, at least divine speech, is to be understood radically as a kind of writing, where writing inflects sense with external elements subject to contingency.

Completely relinquishing the deliberate, ideal intentions of speech as destroyed and overtaken by the random chances of matter in writing nevertheless enables order and intention—even divine providence—to reappear, transfigured, and as expressing something beyond ordinary comprehension.

Truly transcendent intentionality beyond every worldly order can only come out of what cannot but seem chaos to any finite intelligence. Dante's text thereby proclaims an order beyond its own invented order and beyond any human capacity to impose order.

Dante describes the order of the heaven as reposing upon random sparking of letters that, at least to us, cannot but appear as chaos. Although the program of the poem brings all this back to harmony in perfect order dictated from above, the revelation *in writing* is not thereby canceled out. The sense that writing is inherently contingent and precarious remains throughout the poem to its very end with the allusion to the leaves of Sybil scattering to the winds as an image for the poem itself in its ultimate failure to synthesize and unify its contents and Dante's experience. Dante recognizes this as an ineluctable consequence simply of its being written. There is, of course, a higher instance of unity in the lightning bolt from above (XXXIII. 141), in which the divine vision is purportedly achieved, yet this exceeds representation and expression and even mortal life. And Dante still has to live and write his experience in worldly terms.

It is precisely this worldly fragmentation and exposure of his vision that is then transfigured by some higher, incomprehensible power in the experience of paradise or divine presence that the poem recreates. When all human, artificial forms imposing order break down, then the really miraculous and transcendent order underlying the apparent chaos of the world and history finally breaks through like the day dawning to disperse the darkness of night (see *incipit* to Canto XX). The break-down of all manifest order—order that can be made legible through humanly comprehensible codes—becomes an apotheosis of a transcendent, albeit a latent order.

Paradoxically, the material or visible manifestation of divinity must be totally contingent in order to make manifest the absolute transcendence and necessary Being of God. Only the contingency of everything—of every *thing*—clears the field for things altogether to become a manifestation of the transcendent, absolute, and necessary God, who is no thing. Only this revelation of all things as contingent could make discernible—by its absence from all objective appearances—a non-contingent ground on which they all depend.

Thus, if Dante exposes his grand vision of unity and divine presence astonishingly as writing at this juncture in Jove, it is not just that writing offers an attractive image with which to decorate the sky. Writing represents the break-down into material parts and contingent events of the whole scheme and order of the cosmos, which in Dante's poem is indeed nothing if not written. The insistence on the writtenness of the vision in this heaven is the exposure of its radical vulnerability to dismemberment and dispersion, its

apparent disorder in any finite perspective, its propensity to disintegration. But precisely therein—in its self-subversion—lies writing's capacity to allude to a transcendence of any definable, finite order of things.

The Parts of Speech: Mediation and Contingency

What is writing from our point of view is speech from God's point of view, and Dante is able to glimpse the continuity between the two in the exalted vision of Canto XVIII. While writing effects an obvious interruption of the transparency of speech, this transparency is recovered at another level as a higher immediacy or a "vision" represented as a revelation in writing. Rather than writing's deflecting and dissimulating speech, speech in this heaven subsumes writing and turns its underlying chaos into a more transcendent order, its externality into a more internal, visionary immediacy. The concrete, visible form of the writing becomes a metaphor for the immediacy of the vision of God, that is, ultimately, for God's own vision, in which we may be given to participate.

We have seen that Dante's attempt to present the medium as unmediated revelation relies on images of contingency. In contingency, all mediation breaks down: literally *con-tingere* is an immediate touching together without any middle. Dante's stress on the contingency of the medium disencumbers it, in the first instance, of any functions extraneous to and transcending it as medium and rather presents it simply on its own as an immediate presence. As contingent, the medium becomes present in and for itself. Whatever is contingent is presented as simply there, as given, as unbounded by any reason or necessity.

It is crucial for Dante to represent the contingency of his medium, namely, writing, in order to present metaphorically the unmediated reality of God. In theory, the medium as such has a purely instrumental role. There is presumably nothing in it that is not subjected to the higher purposes of a controlling mind. However, the motion of sparks is invoked as a metaphor for Dante's medium of writing in order to suggest a random, uncontrolled, unmediated fact. That this medium of the divine Mind should itself be manifest, precisely in its contingency, as an immediate presence, constitutes a spectacular sort of reversal of the ordinary, earthly logic of mediation, turning it into a kind of higher immediacy. It is this reversal of mediation into immediacy that Dante is dramatizing programmatically in this heaven and in capillary fashion throughout the poem.

Through the dialectical interpenetration of writing and speech, writing is exalted to the status of a superior, whole, unmediated, and therefore also

authoritative revelation, as in the religions of the book. This is what Derrida leaves out of his history of writing as always the secondary, derivative, and underprivileged partner of a binary opposition with speech. Derrida's view holds only for a certain tradition of logos philosophy. In broad strands of Western culture traceable to Egyptian origins, writing has also been viewed as containing an unfathomable plenitude of meaning and power. It has been credited with magical powers: the written character has been thought to contain the essences of things and to command their interactions.

Writing, by virtue of its visible markers, brings untold mysteries out of the depths of being to the surface of perception. Written marks condense infinite content and potency into finite, empirical forms. These forms harbor an unmasterable force. That is why attempts are often made to manipulate them by techniques of magic. This temptation seems inevitable once such written signs are seen as inhabited by a divine power that is humanly incalculable, even though they remain nevertheless accessible as finite and contingent in their empirical givenness. Dante does not efface or even attenuate, nay, he highlights the contingency of writing at the same time as he exalts its almighty power and command of Creation—and above all its revelation of universal justice.

We have seen how, in the climax of Canto XVIII, the wholeness and intentionality of speech are fused in Dante's imaginings with the blind explosiveness of sparking in all its unpredictable dynamism. Much necessarily intervenes, given the essential nature of writing as mediation, before we can come to this moment of recuperation of wholeness and immediacy of the divine intention appearing in the visionary form of a writing that is theophany. The opaqueness of writing as a contingent, material medium that intervenes and disperses the immediacy of speech must be further pursued in Dante's thematizing of the grammatical "parts of speech." With this image, Dante emphasizes the break-down of language as a stream of speech into fragments that is characteristic of writing.

This representation of writing and its differences actually constitutes the thematic core of Dante's vision of Scripture as theophany. In relation to it, the motifs examined to this point reveal themselves as but preparatory. Riding the crest of epic and biblical similes that build in dramatic intensity, Dante rises to the main description of his vision of writing with a "dunque," meaning something like "now then," punctuating his transition into the vision itself. The actual vision of the complete sentence of Scripture in the eighteenth canto of the *Paradiso*, then, is articulated as follows:

> Mostrarsi dunque in cinque volte sette
> vocali e consonanti; e io notai

le parti sì, come mi parver dette.
'DILIGITE IUSTITIAM' primai
fu verbo e nome di tutto 'l dipinto:
'QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM' fur sezzai.
Poscia ne l'emme del vocabol quinto
rimasero ordinate; sì che Giove
pareva argento lì d'oro distinto.
(XVIII. 88-96)
(Now five times seven vowels and consonants
showed themselves; and I noted
the parts, even as they appeared to me dictated.
'DILIGITE IUSTITIAM,' were first,
the verb and noun of the whole painting;
'QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM' were the completion.
Then in the M of the fifth word
they [the souls] remained arrayed: so that Jove
appeared there to be silver chased with gold.)

The pictorial verve and audacity of this vision, which is literally "painted," that is, made up out of letters that are metaphorically a painting ("dipinto"), can be felt to be in tension with the prosaic articulation of the description in precise, and perhaps even somewhat pedantic grammatical terms. We cannot but be struck by the analytical exactness and minute descriptive detail of Dante's perception of the inspired words of Wisdom, even in this literally flaming blaze of a celestial theophany. Attention to the mechanics of grammar, vowels and consonants, noun and verb, is conspicuous and meticulous in this otherwise overtly splashy, showy scene featuring giant letters broad-brushed over the canvas of the heaven. The scene has been singled out by critics like Pertile, for instance, as "one of the most stupefying events of the whole poem."[18] Yet in the throes of this visionary intensity, Dante notes in a curious, perhaps even incongruous way what in the grammar class are called the "parts of speech" ("Partis orationis"). His own text in fact describes the language he observes as "parts as they appeared to me spoken" ("le parti sì, come mi parver dette"). Scripture is thus disassembled into the separate letters of the vision, which are analyzed into conventional grammatical categories.

The language of revelation would seem *prima facie* to lend itself to being understood as simultaneous presence, a flash of lightning in which all is immediately apparent and manifest—and indeed such imagery is also employed intensively by Dante, signally for his "final" vision in "un folgore" (a lightning bolt) before he loses consciousness at the end of the poem. But in the vision of Scripture in the Heaven of Jove, which anticipates this final vision, Dante perceives language rather as an ensemble of parts in the manner, and using the terms, specifically of grammatical analysis.

Why does Dante see this Scriptural phrase as a composite of noun and verb, vowel and consonant, five times seven *letters*? To what exactly is he drawing attention? And what does this imply about the language in which revelation is communicated? What, for example, does this visual dissection imply about the representation of God's absolute simplicity and unity? Unity is manifest in this theophany as a multiplicity of chaotically jostling sparks and through parts of speech divided into series of binary opposites. In addition to the grammatical categories of noun and verb, vowel and consonant, the theme sentence itself is divided into two contrastive parts, a main clause (DILIGITE IUSTITIAM) and a relative clause beginning with "who" (QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM). Moreover, the numerical binary of five times and seven and the contrastive color scheme of gold and silver reinforce the principle that only significant differences can be perceived, not positive terms or attributes as such.

This sort of parceled perception in terms of binary oppositions is all the more provocative, since it is conjoined with a visionary immediacy and wholeness ("tutto 'l dipinto") flaunted as something spectacular in the scene Dante contemplates. Yet the rapturous transport of the scene notwithstanding, Dante relentlessly insists on how speech, in the line from Scripture that he views, is broken up into parts. And these are described from a specifically grammatical point of view. Dante's description evidently brings out a systematic patterning by means of formal distinctions in accordance with "the parts of speech." Language is taken no longer simply as an indivisible whole, at least not in its phenomenal appearance and mode of presentation.

In this visionary grammatical anatomy, Dante brings the deep structures of mediation by which language generates unified significance to the surface. He grants us to look upon its mediating mechanisms (predication of subject by verb, articulation of vowel by consonant, qualification of statement by relative clause) as immediate objects of vision. The means by which language mediates meaning are presented as meaningful in their own right and are displayed in their immediacy as objects of vision—particularly through their names.

What Dante's vision of God in the heaven of Jupiter directly and concretely presents, then, is a vision of the mediations of language. It presents these mediations in their immediacy, as if they could be an object of vision. Dante gazes at Scripture presented in its articulation into the parts of speech by which its meaning is mediated. This anatomy of language and specifically of writing shows its structures of mediation and shows them as objects of vision, as immediate presences, by naming the grammatical structures through which language is mediated and through which we experience

meaning when we read.

Speculative grammar in Dante's day was engaged in probing how language works to bring unified sense out of its structurally diverse components and even out of material elements.[19] Dante brings its terms and concepts to the visible surface of events in his narrative. These terms are still basically valid for modern structural linguistics. As Ferdinand de Saussure was to show in his seminal formulations, binary opposition is the structure by which linguistic sense is produced. And this is exactly how Dante presents language in his vision: as a series of binary oppositions.

These mediating structures must be examined in light of linguistics and grammatical theory for what they reveal about the nature of divinity in its possibility of being manifest to us. However, first of all it is important to realize that to see God in linguistic mediation is a strong statement in favor of a manner of seeing God that departs from traditional substance metaphysics narrowly conceived. God is perceived in and as mediation such as it is performed by language and seen in the grammar of writing. This suggests that we should try to see God in the mediations in which we and our understanding are inextricably immersed. God is present in our always mediated perception of the universe —but his presence is discernible to us only as writing. This type of insight can be sharpened by structuralist and post-structuralist understandings of language, which stress that meaning arises from difference—from the differences of mutually defined terms —and has no positive existence as a discrete entity or pure presence. It is found always only in mediations of meaning and never becomes directly present as such.

Grammar analyzes language into parts and disperses its sense into a system of differences. Only in the mediation, by speculative self-reflection, of such coordinated differentials as noun and verb, consonant and vowel, is unified meaning generated. Speculative grammar abstracts from concrete elements as meaningful in themselves and derives meaning from formal differentials within the system. Yet Dante wishes at the same time to affirm the transcendent unity of linguistic sense: for this purpose, he uses the figure of the immediacy of vision. He also evokes a kabbalistic magic in the means, an immediate, sensible music in the letters themselves, each of which is literally, that is, audibly dancing "to its note" ("a sua nota moviensi").

Writing is seen by Dante as a higher immediacy than speech that nevertheless turns out to consist in nothing but mediation. It is not, after all, just the reified form or image of the letter, but the mediating activity of structures of writing that Dante concretely envisages at the core of his vision of writing. What is explicitly envisioned is not even an activity of mediation so much as the differential structures that are at work generating significance. Not

any concrete visible presence but the invisibility of a system of differences is revealed thereby as the generating source of the significances displayed in the heaven and as signifying the presence of "the love that was there."

The principles of this differential production of meaning that are operative in Dante's vision need to be placed within the frame of speculative grammar and, furthermore, of a negative theology in order to approach Dante's understanding of them. Negative theology reminds us that none of the poem's representations are adequate to represent God; they signify rather what they cannot represent. The divine source of all meaning is itself a perfect unity; however, it cannot be grasped as such, but can be apprehended and expressed only through its difference from everything that *can* be comprehended and expressed.[20]

Infinite Script: Endless Mediation as Metaphor for Divinity

The grammatically analyzed mode in which language is presented in Dante's written vision illustrates the proclivity of writing to shiver and splinter meaning into its constitutive elements, to partition the presumed wholeness of sense as it occurs originally in oral communication and in the indivisible event of understanding. What Dante especially emphasizes in his description of the vision of Scripture in the heaven of Jupiter is the way that writing breaks language down into its component parts. By doing so, Dante places into evidence the grammatical anatomy of language as intrinsic to its transfigured appearance in this authoritative revelation of universal justice. It is precisely the secondary, mediated aspects of language —its composition out of differentiated and coordinated parts of speech —that become conspicuous in Dante's inspired vision of the transcendent speech of Scripture.

We saw earlier that the reification of language in the spectacle of the letter circumvents its function as mediating a sense or meaning in order to turn the medium into an immediate presence, the substance of the vision itself. This foregrounding of the means of mediation at first tends to make them disappear as means and become visible as objects of contemplation in their own right. They present a "whole painting" ("tutto 'l dipinto"). As such, the letters are no longer mediations but become an immediate vision. Yet, when Dante elaborates his vision in more detail, this immediate vision opens up into a display of grammatical parts: the image in the heaven presents the endless mediation of the whole by its parts.

We have interpreted the immediacy of the vision as a metaphor for the unmediated divine vision, but its content turns out to be nothing other

than mediation. This happens again at the end of the poem when the vision of God turns out to be a volume ("un volume") in which the universe is compacted with all its substances and accidents conflated together in one bond of love (XXXIII. 85-90). The divine essence is revealed here as the mediation of everything in the universe—in the Creation, as well as, paradigmatically, in the universe of language, the book.

It is, then, precisely mediation—writing as mediation—that is the divine vision as this text presents it. To see God, "the Love that was there," is practically equivalent to seeing the mutual determination of all things together through the mediating structures of language. God is present, or at least appears, as this mediation that makes everything connect with everything else: writing, as the visible medium of this mediation, makes the nature of the divine manifest.

Whereas we emphasized at the outset of our examination of this heaven that Dante presents his medium, which is writing and specifically the letter, as an immediate object of vision, now we see that what he sees in writing is precisely the structures by which it mediates its various elements in producing a unified sense. Earlier we saw how mediation and the medium, writing, by virtue of being made into the object of vision, became a metaphor for the immediacy of seeing God, the divine vision. Now we see that this mediation, having become an object of vision, is no longer just the fact of the written letter but the concrete workings of language as mediation, its structures and mechanisms, which mediate between its various component parts in generating meaning.

Dante has a prescient grasp of how language can display no ultimate ground of meaning that is not identical with its own mediations. In his vision in Jupiter, and actually throughout the poem, just these mediations are what we see in their immediacy. Of course, Dante understands the terms of grammar or linguistics as metaphors for theology; a certain common dogmatic theology would posit hypostases or divine persons that underwrite sense or meaning as well as being. What Dante's poem reveals, however, is the mediating activity of language. Language, as mediation, therewith becomes a poetic revelation of divine presence in and as the interdependence and connectedness of all things. It is as if divinity were simply—or at least were to appear as—the significant interconnectedness of things that is revealed in language. God's transcendence in this perspective would be the transcendence of the process of mediation itself to all the elements that are mediated within it.

To say that God is in or appears in these mediations is not to reduce him to something merely worldly. The process of mediation is endless; it is open and infinite. We never exhaustively perceive what is present in it, since it leads to inexhaustible, unforeseen further mediations. This means, furthermore, that we can never definitively comprehend God. We cannot, therefore, abide with any abstraction telling us what God is, not even with the concept of the Unrepresentable or the Incomprehensible. We must rather find this unmediated, unrepresentable God always present again in new and different ways in the mediations in which our lives are totally enveloped. When we become aware of these mediations *as* mediations of an infinite, incomprehensible whole, which to us is manifest only negatively, in the contingency of our life in the world, then we live them as relating us to something else that cannot as such be mediated, something that cannot be grasped, not even as "the Unmediated." This is what Dante envisions as immediate vision, but only in the mediations of his vision of writing.

God's appearing as letters in the theophany of the heaven of Jupiter transforms into his appearing in the mediations of language. Usually mediation operates unobserved, as attention is focused on what is mediated, but Dante's vision features the means of mediation as object. Of course, it may not exactly be the medium or writing as an object that is what most fascinates him and us. It is rather something that is not in the end objectifiable—mediation in its infinity—that is the source of unlimited power and fascination.

Grammar, as an analysis of language into its component parts, is ultimately aimed at letting the wholeness of sense spring forth from an articulation into complexity. Grammar is presented in Dante's poem not as a law governing its expressions but as figuring in a playful display—the random play of sparks in speech, or of material elements in the inscription of letters. Miraculously, from these irrational sparkings and shootings, the rational order of language in grammar appears in its specular unity and wholeness. Here a certain total self-reflexivity of language becomes the generating source of the dynamism of the letter. By reflecting on itself in this way, language reflects a total order that entails an inscrutable justice in the universe. Writing, as the paradigm *par excellence* of such endless self-mediation, becomes the revelation of God, his self-manifestation here in the heaven of Jupiter.

To my mind, what this text is saying is that the mediation taking place in language and specifically writing, so as to project unity of sense, is itself the presence of God such as it can be experienced by us. In the vision of Dante's poem, God is experienced not as a separate individual but in and through the mutual connections of things, the relations in and through which all things are created or become what they are ("ciascuna cosa qual ell'è diventa," XX. 78). This kind of unity through interconnectedness is then experienced paradigmatically in the case of writing as a differential

system.

What Dante envisages in his vision of writing in the heaven of Jupiter is indeed the presence or the appearing of God. God is present as the mediation that operates at every point in our language, as well as in the differential grammar of the Creation. Divinity is visible above all in writing, but that is because writing as mediation is also essentially what we live in our lives as finite creatures. We deal with one another and our world always through mediations that are traversed by what to us is unmasterable contingency, and yet these mediations and contingencies, Dante suggests, belong to a higher unity or synthesis that is beyond what we can comprehend.

The vision of God, then, is mediation. God is envisaged in the mediation of all things by one another. This mediation is revealed particularly through language. Yet by presencing mediation in language as an object of vision, Dante recognizes that the true nature of the divine vision is immediacy, not mediation. What he presents is not *simply* mediation but its negation in a vision of immediacy. Dante does not identify the divine vision simply with mediation, but represents mediation as immediacy. In this regard, the vision presents a *coincidentia oppositorum*.

The mediations are negated as mediations and are made to appear as immediate presences. By presenting mediations of language in the place that has been prepared for the unmediated vision of God, Dante suggests that God, the Unmediated, is to be seen in the mediations of language. However, the unmediated appears not finally in these mediations, which are finite phenomena, but in their effacing themselves as mediations in order to gesture towards what they are not and cannot represent or mediate. God is seen in mediation, but only in the moment in which it fails as mediation and opens in the direction of the unmediated.

What is seen of God are mediations—language, writing. But these mediations are not content simply to be mediations. Taken as a whole, they call for and refer to the unmediated. God is what you do *not* see in the phenomena of the universe and of language. Nevertheless, these phenomena allow you to see that there is something more in relation to which they as a whole are negated. Mediations are revealed as transitory and negative in their own being, as dependent upon and referred to something other than themselves—the unmediated. This unmediated becomes manifest as a material presence of the medium. The mediation of writing is inextricable from its contingency and materiality: the order it displays is not just an ideal form of the mind, but penetrates an intractably external and material reality. This order cannot be imposed by a subjective act of consciousness; it requires the unlimited power over all being of a Creator.

The poem sports and dis-plays its scriptural medium in order to stage-

manage an experience through metaphor of the unmediated, which is the divine vision. Dante sees in the articulation of his medium into incomprehensible complexity, which nevertheless inscribes a higher order, the best or perhaps the only means of conveying the transcendent wholeness—the vision of God—that he has been given to envision and believe. His flaunting of his medium is designed ultimately to make it disappear as medium, so that we are left face to face with at least the place prepared for the Unmediated. Only mediation which subverts itself as mediation to become the metaphor of unmediated presence can be the appearing of God—theophany. The unmediated presence of God is the Unrepresentable that Dante never tires of acknowledging through the obsessively repeated forms of the ineffability topos. But in this case the Unrepresentable coincides with, or at least appears as, the unrepresentable totality of representations mediating the divine message and meaning of the whole poem. The technical virtuosity of Dante's descriptions plays out all the possibilities of representation to the limit where representation finishes and points beyond itself to what it cannot represent.

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NOTES

1. The mystical contemplation of Names of God as a peculiarly privileged way of contemplating the divine essence or being is perhaps most often associated with the Jewish mysticism of the Kabbalah, but it has a long tradition of influence in Christian theology as well. It is typically mixed there with Neoplatonic philosophical reflection on God's Names, as represented eminently by Dionysius the Areopagite's *De divinis nominibus*. For a wide spectrum of views on the theology of the divine Names, see the essays in *L'analyse du langage théologique: le nom de Dieu*, ed. Enrico Castelli.

2. See, for instance, Gershom Scholem's "Der Name Gottes und die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala": "Gott—darf man vielleicht sagen—ist für die Kabbalisten zugleich der kürzeste und der längste Name. Der kürzeste, weil *schon jeder einzelne Buchstabe für sich selber einen Namen darstellt*. Der längste, weil er in der Gesamtheit der ganzen Tora sich erst als allumfassend ausspricht" (270). My italics. "...every individual letter by itself represents a Name [of God]."

3. This pronouncement from Adam's own mouth revises the statement in *De vulgari eloquentia* that "God,... that is, *El*" ("Deus...scilicet *El*") had been the first syllable uttered by Adam ("prima vox primi loquentis," I, iv). At the time he wrote *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante held the original language of Adam to have been Hebrew and hence the Hebrew word "El" to have been Adam's original name for God. Still, the statement confirms the status of "I," together with "I," as letters peculiarly apt to serve as Names of God. It may also be

significant for Dante that "I" equals "1" and therewith the One or supreme, ineffable God of Neoplatonic tradition.

4. "una citazione biblica divenuta citazione-cosa, segno e referente allo stesso tempo: tuttavia insomma il significante . . ." Lino Pertile, "*Paradiso* XVIII tra autobiografia e scrittura sacra." The pictorial quality of the letters, which are to metamorphose into the emblem of the eagle, is drawn out with particular felicity by Gaetano Marcovaldi: "Dalla scrittura che è già dipinta, passiamo a un emblema che è figura viva." "Il Canto XVIII del *Paradiso*," 19-37.

5. See Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics: Closing Statement," for instance.

6. This commonplace is expressed, for example, in the widely circulated verses of Alan of Lille: "Omnis mundi creatura / Quasi liber et pictura / Nobis est et speculum." *Patrologia Latina* CCX, 579A.

7. The works of Jacques Derrida, starting from *De la grammatologie*, have led the way in developing such a concept of writing as inimical to the philosophical goal of realizing the presence of truth or being as a *parousia*.

8. Aristotle, *On Interpretation, Commentary by St. Thomas and Cajetan*, Lesson II, 2-5.

9. This is one index of the "secularity" of Dante's revolutionary vision. In this regard, Dante concurs with Thomas Aquinas that human knowledge of God is indirect: God is known only from his Creation, from creatures. See *Summa Theologica* Ia, Quaestio 12: "Quomodo Deus a nobis cognoscitur."

10. This sort of metaphysical conception of God is current in Scholastic philosophy. God is frequently described as a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere—following the formulation attributed originally to Empedocles and transmitted in Hermetic tradition, for example, in the *Liber XXIV philosophorum*.

11. These polarized connotations of speech as immediate transparency or presence of mind and writing as removed from presence are traced through Western philosophical tradition since Plato by Derrida, most fully in *De la grammatologie*.

12. Kenneth Knoespel, "When the Sky Was Paper: Dante's Cranes and Reading as Migration," (178).

13. In *Convivio* IV, iv, Dante refers to "divine providence, which is above every human reason" ("la divina providenza, che è sopra ogni ragione").

14. *The Divine Names* 648C.

15. For the notion of the trace as a reference to what cannot be represented, see Emmanuel Levinas, "La Trace de l'Autre."

16. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 985 B 13-19 and K. Von Fritz, *Philosophie und sprachlicher Ausdruck bei Demokrit, Plato, und Aristoteles*, p. 24ff. Dante is likely to have been informed more directly by Cicero, *De natura deorum* I, 66: "Ista enim flagitia Democriti sive etiam ante Leucippi, esse corpuscula quaedam levia, alia aspera, rutunda alia, partim autem angulata et hamata, curvata quaedam et quasi aduncа, ex iis effectum esse caelum atque terram nulla cogente natura, sed concursu quodam fortuito."

17. Other possible meanings, including Mary (a mediator), are suggested by Federica Brunori Deigan and Elisa Liberatori Prati, "'L'emme del vocabol quinto': Allegory of Language, History, and Literature in Dante's *Paradiso* 18."

The M also links with the humanism of uoMo in the acrostic of Purgatory XII.

18. The phrase, "uno degli eventi più sbalorditivi di tutto il poema," is quoted from Pertile, "*Paradiso* XVIII tra autobiografia e scrittura sacra," (38).

19. On speculative grammar, see G. L. Bursill-Hall, *Speculative Grammars of the Middle Ages: The Doctrine of Partes Orationis of the Modistae*.

20. It is well to remember here that traditions of negative theology are a crucial matrix

for the thought of Derrida, Blanchot, Foucault, Irigaray, and others among the thinkers of difference whose reflections have enriched our contemporary consciousness of the philosophical and theological implications of writing.