

SYMBOL IS THE MESSAGE: McLUHAN AND POETIC COMMUNICATION (PURGATORIO, XXIV)

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Abstract

Il saggio si focalizza sulla funzione comunicativa che Dante attribuisce al medium poetico nel Purgatorio, là dove il colloquio con poeti e rimatori documenta l'evoluzione della comunicazione poetica verso la modernità. Tale aspetto è colto da McLuhan nel Capitolo 16 della Galassia Gutenberg, in cui sono citati i versi 52-54 di Purgatorio, XXIV in cui il poeta dichiara la novità del suo principio poetico. Le riflessioni di McLuhan si innestano su quelle di Ezra Pound sviluppate nell'ABC del leggere, in cui il riferimento purgatoriale al «miglior fabbro del parlar materno» (Purg. XXVI:117, ripreso da Eliot in epigrafe al The Waste Land), esprime il potere diacronico del linguaggio poetico. Per McLuhan il dialogo tra Dante e Bonagiunta Orbicciani attesta il modo nuovo di dare forma e voce all'esperienza sociale. "Artistic and verbal fidelity to the very modes of experience is the secret of the sweet new style" (McLuhan, 1962:130). Di qui la concezione della comunicazione simbolista come medium euristico a tutto tondo, ispirato alla connessione tra arte, cultura e società. Anche grazie al «lungo studio» dantesco, McLuhan intuisce la possibilità di considerare il simbolo come messaggio, in grado di agevolare la comprensione degli sviluppi mediali dell'era tipografica e della civiltà elettrica.

Keywords: Sociology of literature, symbolism, poetic principle, cultural communication, language

1. McLuhan between Dante and Pound: Symbol as a social probe

In his most brilliant books as well as in his critical essays, McLuhan interlaces his sociological reflections with the literary insights nurtured during his first academic training. The relationship between

media culture and past communication may result closer than previously thought. The development of verbal and written interaction can be related to the need to make informative exchanges more reliable and efficient. The study of ancient poets and modern novelists is not in contrast with the prospect of probing the origins of printed and media civilizations, made possible by the invention of the press and electricity¹.

McLuhan is deeply persuaded of the influence fuelled by the ancient oral communicative patterns on modern civilization, as the Scholastic engagement and academic growth in the Middle Ages confirm. The scriptural exegesis ensured a sort of intellectual continuity of classical humanism in monastic environments, especially thanks to those thinkers capable of exploiting the legacy of ancient rhetoricians, as in the cases of Erasmus, Lorenzo Valla, Coluccio Salutati and Gioviano Pontano. At that time the amanuensis focused on the oral contents of daily life, to the extent that words needed to be translated into signs just to be shared and transmitted.

McLuhan emphasises the influence that any medium or technological device may have on human linguistic proficiency:

Languages being that form of technology constituted by dilation or uttering (outring) of all our senses at once, are themselves immediately subject to the impact or intrusion of any mechanically extended sense. That is, writing affects speech directly, not only its accident and syntax but also its enunciation and social issues (McLuhan, 2011b:41).

The social dimension of linguistic processes is highlighted by McLuhan through the analysis of rhetorical patterns featuring ancient times and in particular monastic schools, in which grammar “served, above all, to establish oral fidelity” (McLuhan, 2011b:107). The practice of *dictamina* and *pronuntiationes* attests the cleverness of monks in enabling their students to learn the art of transcription. In fact, they had no books available: “The medieval student had to be

¹ For further information, see Gamaleri (2013).

paleographer, editor, and publisher of the authors he read” (McLuhan, 2011b:107).

The thorough dictation of words turned monastic schools into an assembly line, which required students and teachers to arrange the didactic tools of their courses. Thanks to the reading of Istvan Hajnal's *L'enseignement de l'écriture aux universités médiévales* (1959), McLuhan delves into the mystery of oral communication at the time of the birth of universities when portable cheap books were lacking. The Scholastic art of dictation started to be threatened by the Thomist practice of dialogue, inherited from classical tradition and Christian doctrine.

In this sense, McLuhan remarks on the expressive shift from Cicero's *De oratore* to St. Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*, which were both destined to influence Dante's poetical, philosophical and linguistic works. “The clash was between the old form of dictation or the new form of dialogue and oral disputation” (McLuhan, 2011:109). Dante's *Convivio* is but the exaltation of the art of dialogue, specifically devoted to the analysis of new poetic patterns growing up soon after the advent of the *dolce stil novo*².

Ahead of the serialisation and repeatability techniques fostered by typography, artists realise the social impact of the poetic medium inspired by the need to shape individual and collective identity. Nonetheless, symbolisation of reality represents the most effective creative process capable of representing human experience, which was often impeded by temptation, fear of sin and longing for immortality. The mystic lesson developed by St. Thomas in his *Summa Theologiae*, along with the rhetoric patterns inherited from Roman culture, endow Dante with the outstanding symbolic sensitivity learned in his transcendent journey. His biblical and mythological proficiency, filtered through the deep knowledge of Roman thinkers (especially Seneca, Cicero, Virgil, Ovid and Statius), is one of the main hallmarks of Dante's symbolism, founded not only on his outstanding visionary mindset, but also on his expressive power³.

² An insightful analysis of Dante's intellectual commitment is provided by Baranski (2000).

³ Dantesque symbolism was carefully analysed by Fletcher (2015).

At the fore is the mission of the catholic humanist analysed by McLuhan in the essay *Catholic Humanism and Modern Letters* (1954) that is focused on the intellectual endeavour by Catholic intellectuals. Referring to Jacques Maritain (1952) and Etienne Gilson (1947), he dwells on the creative process hidden in the practice of rhetoric. Metaphor, in particular, draws the attention of the media scholar: “When we look at any situation through another situation we are using metaphor. This is an intensely intellectual process. And all language arises by this means” (McLuhan, 1999:154).

McLuhan further investigates Maritain's *The Range of Reason*, thus trying to penetrate the concealed dimension of poetic creation. Only the Catholic humanist can probe the inner relationship between myth, rhetoric and symbol, whose symbiosis seems to inspire most modern and contemporary poetry. McLuhan realises that any medium has its own language, whose function is to translate reality into comprehensible signs. This is what William Blake did through his astonishing symbolism. And this is what French symbolist poets aimed to demonstrate by exploring the hidden recesses of our mind. Whenever the artist has recourse to metaphor or other figures of speech, the creative process turns into a translating effort, as challenging as it is mysterious⁴.

In this sense, the invention and development of language can be interpreted as an outstanding work of art, more astonishing than any other possible artistic masterpiece: “So that it is a commonplace of the poetic and critical discussion of the last one hundred years to note that human languages themselves are the greatest of all works of art beside which the works of Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Shakespeare are minor variations” (McLuhan, 1999:154).

The creative efforts supported by some great poets of the past were inherited by William Blake and Edgar Allan Poe, who were considered by McLuhan as the founders of modern symbolism. They were both devoted to the recollection and reconstruction of conscious life. In particular, Blake teaches that “we are what we behold”, thus enabling us to understand the great functional shifts residing in the

⁴ For further investigation on McLuhan's interest for literary symbolism, see Lombardinilo (2017:1-35); Lamberti (2012:139-154).

advent of the printed book and perspective. In the same way, Poe is the inventor of *The Poetic Principle*, since he discovered the art of making discoveries. Mallarmé, Valéry, Rimbaud and Baudelaire conceived symbolism as a creative process aiming at probing the depths of our minds through the practice of memory⁵.

Symbolism is a “parataxis” and “a jazz of the intellect”: this means that any possible convergence between mind and expression must enlighten through improvisation and creativity, so as to explore the dim landscapes of mind. This process requires an intellectual upgrade, made possible by means of the thorough investigation of symbols and metaphors moulding the complexity of consciousness. McLuhan points out that some of the greatest poets of all time had recourse to Dante and Milton as well, especially as regards the chance to explore transcendental dimensions.

This is what T.S. Eliot has tried to demonstrate in his *Four Quartets*, whose “rhetorical spirals” are further investigated by McLuhan in an essay published in 1978: “Section IV (memoria) is enriched by Dantesque references and the theme of recall in the prayer ‘for those who were in ships’” (McLuhan, 2011b:73). Along with citations retrieved from Augustine’s *Confessiones*, Dantesque references confirm the cognitive function of Christian symbolism, enriched by T.S. Eliot through an attentive rhetoric structure. Eliot’s poem is introduced by the dedication to Ezra Pound, whom he calls “*il miglior fabbro*”, as Dante defines Arnaut Daniel in *Purgatorio* (XXVI:117).

According to McLuhan, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and James Joyce are the three main experimentalist writers of the twentieth century: all of them share the same interest for Dante’s symbolism interpreted as an unbelievable human and artistic experience. Once again, catholic humanists may recall the different phases of human development, which cannot be understood without the proper analysis of the communicative evolution marking modernity. This is why creation is a sort of memory recollection, enhanced by the increasing of symbolic complexity.

⁵ This relationship between communication and memory in McLuhan’s research was emphasised by Lombardinilo, 2016.

As we will see later on, McLuhan deals with the Dantesque cosmos reading works by Auerbach (1953), Frye (1957) and Milano (1955). Specifically, Pound's *ABC of Reading* provides him with the fundamental aesthetic and historical insights to probe Dante's poem and his revolutionary endeavour, inspired by the need to overcome Provençal tradition. Pound's work represents a kind of handbook made for students and young people eager for instruction in poetry and literature, without any academic interference. His main mission is to explain the real social function of literature across centuries, so as to draw attention to the close connection between poetic communication and social inquiry⁶.

According to Pound, language is the main communicative medium with which men are endowed. Writers are requested to improve and implement the expressive momentum of language in compliance with historical, economic and social paradigms: "Literature does not exist in a vacuum. Writers as such have a definite social function exactly proportioned to their ability AS WRITERS. This is their main use. All other uses are relative, and temporary, and can be estimated only in relation to the views of a particular estimator" (Pound, 1934:32).

Dante is one of the most important interpreters of human uncertainty: his poem becomes an exploration of the concealed spaces of the human mind, which may be entangled with the failed ascent to heaven. Pound's manifold references to Dantesque works and Provençal poets allow us to understand contemporary poetic paths and realise McLuhan's interest in Dante's symbolism, which he further investigates through Blake's visionary brainwaves and Pound's theoretical insights. Furthermore, he pays particular attention to Dante's *Purgatorio*, which can be easily defined as the cantica of the poets, both Italian and Provençal. As Pound ponders, "artists are the antennae of the race" (Pound, 1934:73).

In this sense, Guinizzelli, Cavalcanti, and Dante are the interpreters of a new way to express feelings and sensations, inspired by sentimental struggles and interior rifts. The advent of the "dolce stil novo", recalled by Bonagiunta Orbicciani in *Purgatory* XXIV,

⁶ For further investigation, see Ardizzone (1998). On Dante's visionary modernity, also in relation with his creative endeavour and expressive innovation, see mainly: Ginsberg (1999); Mazzotta (1993); Freccero (1986).

implies the new expressive potentialities generated by the will to give shape to the fluctuations of conscience. This is what McLuhan aims to demonstrate when, in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, he quotes lines 52 to 54 of *Purgatorio* canto XXIV, in which Dante explained the creative process founding his new poetic communication.

Dantesque excursus might at first glance appear out of context here. On the contrary, it is paradigmatic of McLuhan's extravagant argumentative technique, often exploiting literature and symbolism to explain contemporary media interactions. "One reason for dwelling on this point is in order to suggest a deep relation between letters and non-literary forms of expression" (McLuhan, 1999:165). Cinema makes no exception: "In reversing the process of perception even the mechanical camera and projector bring about a mysterious change in everyday experience" (McLuhan, 1999:165).

Electric media are the translators of our everyday experience. Likewise, language is the translator of our interactional life. Intertwining images and words determines the construction of synesthetic patterns permeating our digital civilization. Nevertheless, McLuhan does not neglect the role that Dante and poets of his time played in fueling the poetic revolution culminating in the *Divine Comedy*, whose lasting fascination also resides in the richness of symbolic and rhetorical meanings. This is what McLuhan highlights in his critical essays and above all in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, in which he carefully includes Pound's statement: "I see every reason for studying Provençal verse (a little of it, say thirty or fifty poems) from Guillaume de Poitiers, Bertrand de Born and Sordello. Guido and Dante in Italy, Villon and Chaucer in France and England, had their root in Provence: their art, their artistry, and a good deal of their thought" (Pound, 1934:55-56).

Pound's poetic lesson, together with Frye's literary teaching, allows McLuhan to realise how relevant the understanding of medieval poetry is to cope with electric media, so as to probe the shifting process leading from oral to mainstream and digital words. This is one of the main endeavours of media scholars, who ought to be focused on the practice of memory and recollection. "I think it relevant to observe here that it is especially the job of the catholic humanist to build bridges between the arts and society today"

(McLuhan, 1999:174). This is what Dante did in his time, thus perpetually bridging space, time and poetry⁷.

2. McLuhan and Dante: poetic communication as inner dictation

As mentioned above, in the first chapters of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* McLuhan dwells on the learning skills implemented in medieval universities. Thanks to Hajnal's work, the sociologist can further investigate the rhetoric patterns founding the study of *trivium* and *quadrivium*, along with the learning strategies pursued by teachers and professors in classrooms⁸.

The lack of popular books and handbooks obliged teachers to dictate their lessons, so as to allow their students to arrange their didactic texts. Clergymen, professors, lawyers and doctors were required to replace written communications with oral messages, inasmuch as amanuenses, copyists and scribes were expensive and their work was not immune from imperfections. This is what Walter Ong (1971) highlighted in reference to the pre-typographic era, which was ruled by oral interactions and a very limited repeatability and circulation of messages. Therefore, dictation was the most secure way to supply students with the necessary didactic tools produced by the intensive cooperation between teachers and listeners⁹.

As a result, this is one of the most important aspects featuring ancient oratory: "The Ciceronian concept of *doctus orator* and of eloquence as a kind of wisdom, as knowledge in action, became the basic charter of medieval education thanks to Augustine" (McLuhan, 2011b:113). By quoting H.-I. Marrou's *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique* (1938), McLuhan emphasises the importance that Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* had in the construction of Catholic humanism, with particular regard to the exegesis of the Scriptures.

⁷ On the interdisciplinary dimension of Dante's *Comedy*, see Kleinhenz, 2015.

⁸ McLuhan's rhetorical interests were underlined by Gronbeck, 1981.

⁹ The practice of dictation highlighted the oral mindset of the time, and was fed by the miniaturist craftsmanship and scholastic theology. On the cognitive and educational strategies developed in medieval schools, see: Rosso, 2018.

Likewise, Cicero's *De oratore* was the founding text of Roman oratory, along with Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*. In many cases, medieval scholars and poets succeeded in shaping a new form of syncretism, founded on the re-elaboration of classical culture and the construction of a symbolic sensitivity dealing with the celebration of God. In ancient universities, grammar and philology became encyclopedic disciplines, since they were attended in compliance with Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*.

Cicero and Augustine have to be considered as two fundamental pillars of Dante's education, as his prose essays clearly show. Specifically, the *Convivio* represents a sort of theoretical treatise about poetry communication and the role of the catholic artist in the era of Scholasticism and academic expansion, when the advent of medieval communities enhanced new social, economic and cultural values¹⁰. Disputes and sermons had to persuade listeners of the need to trust in God and his will. In the meantime, the new poetical patterns supported by the *dolce stil novo* were functional to share a new form of sentimental consciousness.

McLuhan highlights the communicative cornerstone of medieval society founded on dictation, whose development was strictly connected to the practice of rhetoric, grammar, philology and philosophy. Nonetheless, the *dictamen* was not only aimed at the production of "usable private editions". As Hajnal has pointed out, "the expression *modus pronuntiantium* was not used in the statutes simply to designate a course procedure of speaking aloud and duly articulating the words. It was a technical term" (McLuhan, 2011b:111), since it was linked to the act of writing silently and reading aloud. However, the transcription of a dictated speech was not a copying exercise and it gave the student the opportunity to filter and re-shape the contents of lessons.

This is what happens when we social actors have to remember the content of something we listen to without the aid of notes. In these cases, the power of memory allows us to recollect some passages or the general contents of what has been heard, which can then be reproduced according to human sensitivity and expressive habits. This

¹⁰ Ancient cities were sociologically analysed by Sennett, 1994.

is true for the university lessons or academic conferences during which listeners try to translate what they hear into notebooks:

Writing in the mode of dictation did not constitute a copying exercise as simple as might at first appear. It is a curious fact but it is precisely owing to this system that studies had been able to revive and a new literature was born in the heart of these Faculties. For every professor strove to give to the matter taught a new form suited to its own assumptions and inherent conceptions; and mostly he dictated to his students the results of these personal insights. That is how the university movement, from its inception, appears to us now as really modern. (McLuhan, 2011b:111)

New didactic patterns of medieval universities were engendered by permanent cooperation inside the classroom, in which different capabilities of listening might alter or compromise the proper reproducibility of teaching. This is also true for poetic inspiration: according to Dante, Cavalcanti and Guinizzelli, it was to be found in the correspondence between listening and writing. This is what Dante pinpoints in the *Convivio* and some topical cantos of the *Purgatorio*, in which the poet encounters numerous colleagues, with whom he talks about his innovative poetry¹¹.

In the light of his critical commitment, McLuhan never ceases his homage to Dante, while also giving thanks to Pound and Eliot's mediation and Blake's filter (Powe, 2014:110-168). At the fore are the emotional and expressive effects of Dantesque symbolism, fed by a permanent visionary flow and an endless allegorical reflux. McLuhan is aware of the influence of ancient poetry on modern civilizations, especially in reference to the semiotic and lyrical way of giving shape to the interior life of human beings. Furthermore, Dante aims to point out the importance of study in highlighting the creative effort leading from Provençal culture to the Sicilian and Tuscan

¹¹ For a wider interpretation of Dante's poetic encounters in the *Purgatorio* see Lombardinilo, 2017:93-122.

lyrical schools. Therefore, “it is hardly surprising that most Latin poets appear in the *Inferno*, whereas Provençal and medieval poets appear in the *Purgatorio*, whence their whispers constantly address the celestial intelligences of the *Paradiso*” (Lombardinilo, 2017:112-113).

Indeed, *Purgatorio* is the real cantica of poets featuring as it does a significant concentration of rhymers and versifiers. As a result, Dante has the chance to encounter some of the most important troubadour poets: Giraut de Borneil, Bertran de Born, Folchetto di Marsiglia, Aimeric de Belenoi, Aimeric de Peguilhan, Sordello da Goito, Arnaut Daniel. He can talk to or about his friends and poetic masters, Bonagiunta Orbicciani, Guido Guinizzelli and Guido Cavalcanti. Needless to say, Dante is also accompanied by Virgil and Statius and all around them music and sounds create a dreamlike atmosphere¹².

The manifold references to artists, especially poets, attest the great importance that Dante attributes to those lyricists who stimulated his poetical training. In the *Purgatorio*, Dante investigates the communicative dimension of art, embracing not only poetry, but also art and music. In this connection, the miniaturist Oderisi da Gubbio plays a relevant role in Canto XI of *Purgatorio*, where Dante meets with Cimabue and Giotto as well. The musician Casella is the main character of Canto II of *Purgatorio*: Dante can hear him while he plays the lyric *Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona*, taken from *Convivio*'s third book.

Poetry, painting and music are closely interlaced, thus engendering that communicative effect achieved by Dante through the communicative power of the poetic medium. Considered in its entirety, Dante's poem provides three different perspectives: the *Inferno* can be interpreted as the jail of damned people, the *Purgatorio* as the kingdom of artists, the *Paradiso* as the reign of saints. Poets are a median category encumbered by those guilty of sin and supported by the hope of salvation: “Some of them are greedy or stingy, others are prodigal or lustful, but every soul tries to recover

¹² Scrivano (1997:63-103) provides a remarkable interpretation of Statius as Dante's “travelling companion”.

the light of survival, encumbered with the mystery of human destiny” (Lombardinilo, 2017:108).

Their medium is the language. This is why McLuhan pays attention to the encounter between Dante and Guido Guinizzelli, who was a poetic master for him and for those lyricists who were never involved in the production of love rhymes (“odo nomar se stesso il padre / mio e de li altri miei miglior che mai / rime d’amor usar dolci e leggiadre”) (*Purgatorio*, XXVI:97-99). Dante’s verses are a relevant testing ground, as McLuhan proves through the study of Pound’s *Cantos* and Eliot’s *Four Quartets*.

Imbued with countless symbols and concealed meanings, contemporary communication cannot, however, be understood without dealing with the influence of Dante’s message, founded in the offset of art, vision and experience. His endeavour was to incarnate the divine mystery in human words thanks to a remarkable creative effort. And the myth of Incarnation is the real goal of the catholic humanist, whose social task is to accomplish the divine project of heaven on earth: “I suggest that our faith in the Incarnation has an immediate relevance to our art, science, and philosophy. Since the Incarnation all men have been taken up into the poetry of God, the Divine Logos, the Word, His Son. But Christians alone know this” (McLuhan, 1999:169).

Through the insights of Eliot and Blake, McLuhan realises that Dantesque symbolism is more than a poetical habit supported by specific semiotic pressures. Symbolism is a creative elaboration inspired by the interrelating of analogies, myths and symbols. In particular, symbolism is a parataxis, whose function is to rid the mind of any syntactic bonds. In *Purgatorio* XXIV, Dante explains the mental process ruling his poetry. Bonagiunta Orbicciani celebrates him as the inventor of *nove rime*. The dialogue between them supplies the reader with an outstanding chance to delve into Dante’s poetic laboratory, observed as a communicative hotbed.

McLuhan is focused on Dante’s skill in translating into words the supernatural world, featured by desperation and bliss, death and resurrection as well. Darkness and light are the different sides of the same medal, coined in the secret landscapes of the human mind. In medieval universities and monastic schools, careful listening was the

only way to catch the deep essence of words and make the dictation a reliable reproducible process. Likewise, the poetic effort requires a very attentive ear for inner inspiration, especially when love becomes the main interlocutor. Every communicative act is founded on the possibility to put into words the flow of thought, sensations and feelings animating our daily experience¹³.

In this account, the *Purgatorio* supplies us with countless reflections about the communicative process engendering poetry. This is what Dante explains to Bonagiunta when he confides that his secret resides in the fact that he is the “scribe of love”, ready to write when “he dictates”. This sounds like a declaration of poetics, which marks the difference from other poets of his time.

McLuhan quotes those verses taken from *Purgatorio* XXIV, in which Bonagiunta Orbicciani mentions Guittone d'Arezzo, Stefano Protonotaro and the *dolce stil novo* school. They were guilty of underestimating the inner voice of sentiments. According to McLuhan, Dante's encounter with Bonagiunta gains an essentially cultural meaning, in reference to the dialectics between the Scholastic technique of argumentation and the pre-humanistic perception of social spaces. Dante assumes that modern poetry should aim to give form and substance to thought, even when it sounds confused and chaotic¹⁴.

McLuhan reproduces Dante's verses in the chapter on the transition from the medieval visual mindset to the Renaissance typographic outlook. The title of the chapter epigrammatically synthesises his analysis approach: “The sheer increase in the quantity of information movement favoured the visual organisation of knowledge and the rise of perspective even before typography” (McLuhan, 2011b:128). Once again, McLuhan dwells on the learning

¹³ For a more specific reflection, see Eco, 2012; Oliva, 1991. Dante's theory of symbolism reveals a high communicative influence on McLuhan and other important poets of the twentieth century, namely Pound and T.S. Eliot, who developed a huge expressive power conveying the complexity of human existence. This is truer from a contemporary point of view, especially when taking into account the everlasting fascination radiating from Dante's vision and epiphanies. For some fundamental interpretations of Dante's visionary prowess, see: Auerbach, 2007.

¹⁴ For a reliable analysis of Dante's linguistic research refer to Tavoni, 2013.

engagement of medieval students who were asked to analyse the process enabling poets to probe the magmatic fluctuations of mind:

The student of medieval poetry could readily parallel these features. The *dolce stil novo* of Dante and others was achieved, as Dante explains, by looking within and following the very contours and process of passionate thought. It is in Canto XXIV of the *Purgatorio* that Dante says:

“Count of me but as one
Who am the scribe of love; that when he breathes,
Take up my pen, and, as he dictates, write.”

To which his friend Forese replies:

“Brother!” said he, “the hindrance, which one held
The notary, with Guittone and myself,
Short of that new and sweeter style I hear,
Is now disclosed: I see now ye your plumes
Stretch, as the inditer guides them”.

Artistic and verbal fidelity to the very modes of experience is the secret of the sweet new style.
(McLuhan, 2011b:130)

The new poetic school fueled by Dante, Guinizzelli and Cavalcanti was inspired by the convergence between words and sentiments. Furthermore, it was filtered by sorrow and mysticism. This is what McLuhan realises in line with the exegetic model suggested by Pound: they both mention Dante's poetical paradigms to stress the link between lyric expression and cultural environment, so as to penetrate the concealed depths of the spirit. In other words, “the descent of the poet in the afterworld turns into an extraordinary journey into the mystery of human existence, tainted by the illusion of immortality driven by love, faith and study. These are the three main

factors that trigger such a metaphysical ambition, sometimes hampered by the chains of fortune” (Lombardinilo, 2017:120).

The conversation between Dante and Bonagiunta, who was one of the most relevant versifiers of the thirteenth century, marks the passage from the old poetic style to the new lyric mindset shaped by the “dolce stil novo”. It is needless to remark on McLuhan’s mistake in replacing Bonagiunta with Forese. Nevertheless, Bonagiunta is fully aware of the revolutionary impact of Dante’s “canzone”, built in compliance with a thorough expressive research. As a matter of fact, Bonagiunta asks Dante the pilgrim to confirm his poetical identity: “Ma di s’i veggio qui colui che fore / trasse le nove rime, cominciando / ‘Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore’. / E io a lui: ‘I’ mi son un che, quando / amor spira, noto, e a quel modo / ch’e’ ditta dentro vo’ significando” (*Purgatorio*, XXIV:49-51).

This is the trademark of the new poetic school attended by Dante and his followers engaged in the representation of the mysteries of love. Bonagiunta complains about the fact that Stefano Protonotaro, Guittone d’Arezzo and he did not pay attention to what love, called the “inditer”, had to communicate to them. Through Dante’s lines, McLuhan focuses on the hindrances that often do not allow the expression of what is not explainable, because of the obstacles intrinsic in the art of narration¹⁵.

On the one hand, there is the modern poet who is capable of translating into verses what Love dictates, trying to listen carefully and shaping into signs the sentimental flow. On the other, the old-style poet has regrets about his poetic engagement that is far from being innovative. The reason lies in the underestimation of the role played by Love in determining the courses of life, often ruled by the force of sentimental impulses. This is why Bonagiunta calls Love the “inditer”, in Italian “il dittator”, he who dictates, whose etymological origin has to do with the verb “dettare”, dictate. This is an aspect perhaps neglected by McLuhan, whose work shows the recursive presence of the concept of dictation. The latter is used in reference to

¹⁵ Gordon (2010) provided a faithful analysis of McLuhan aesthetic and narrative interests.

the learning strategy in use in universities and monastic schools and with regard to the dictating process engendering the *dolce stil novo*¹⁶.

Dictation does not imply mechanical transcription: it requires attentive listening and thorough elaboration of what is heard. Of course, the person dictating is expected to be respected and listened to, like the “dictator” imposing norms and rules. Indeed, the dictator is a person whose role is to “dictate” and impose his point of view. For Dante, Love is a special dictator to whom the poet has to listen carefully so as to scan the inner words coming from the heart. The expressive research of the artist is fed by the need to find “a maximum of explicitness”, as McLuhan underlines quoting Panofsky’s *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (1957). This is true for the poet and the architect as well, inasmuch as the transition from the Scholastic to the humanistic mind is featured by a different way of conceiving social environments and human experience.

This transition is shown by the advent of Renaissance architecture, whose bare harmony may stand in contrast to Gothic installations. One of the most relevant protagonists of this aesthetic renovation was Giorgio Vasari, whose masterpiece, the Uffizi building, is not far from the church of Santa Maria del Fiore (built by Filippo Brunelleschi) and its astonishing bell tower (built one century earlier by Giotto). Thanks to Panofsky’s and Ivins’ (1946) reflections, McLuhan finds out that, besides the perfect proportions reached by the science of perspective, humanists searched for the most suitable “diction” in writing, thus pointing to the social and communicative role played by the art of listening and transcription remarked upon by Dante to Bonagiunta.

The decline of the medieval world is marked not only by the representative innovations introduced by perspective, but also by the new linguistic paradigms defined by humanist scholars, of whom Dante and Petrarch were the forerunners, in search of the perfect linguistic tone¹⁷. Architecture provides the proper exemplum of this transition, involving the way to observe things and translating them

¹⁶ An analysis of Bonagiunta’s influence on Dante’s poetry was carried out by Pertile, 1994.

¹⁷ Both Patota (2015) and Nardi (1983) dwell on Dante and Petrarch’s influence on modern Italian language.

into words and images: “Where the humanistic mind demanded a maximum of ‘harmony’ (impeccable diction in writing, impeccable proportion, so sorely missed in Gothic structures by Vasari, in architecture), the Scholastic mind demanded a maximum of explicitness. It accepted and insisted upon a gratuitous clarification of function through form just as it accepted and insisted upon a gratuitous clarification of thought through language” (McLuhan, 2011b:130).

In this account, the social function of poetry is to clarify thought through words and especially symbols which might be arranged according to a rhetoric legacy duly renewed to comply with the expressive needs of modernity. Dantesque symbolism shows that this research may lack “explicitness”: this kind of research requires huge semantic efforts, especially when it is focused on what has not been uttered, such as the mystery of God and Love. Inner dictation implies inspiration and listening so as to grasp the secret meanings of spiritual life. This is why McLuhan assumes that “Artistic and verbal fidelity to the very modes of experience is the secret of the sweet new style”.

Dantesque symbolism implies a visual polycentrism, outstandingly embodied by the stained-glass windows in Gothic cathedrals. The ascent from the earthly condition to the transcendent environment is symbolised by the vertical development of Gothic churches, compelling the believer to interpret the complex metaphorical pattern of architecture. The art of copying manuscripts ceases as soon as the invention of the press wipes out the fascinating but slow and expensive activity of the amanuensis. The “unified pictorial space” created by the press becomes incompatible with the universalistic experience lived by Dante through the profound renovation of poetic communication and lyric symbolism¹⁸.

This is what McLuhan notices in quoting Dante himself, thus endowing his poetics with an absolute creative impact on Western civilization. This impact was confirmed by the legacy of Eliot and Pound. As a matter of fact, Bonagiunta was already aware of Dante’s innovative work, as he confirms when he calls him the author of the “new rhymes”. Bonagiunta is legitimated to make that statement,

¹⁸ For further investigation see McDougal, 1985; Lo Castro, 1968.

since he was one of the most relevant versifiers of his time. McLuhan quotes the rhymed conversation between these experts, Dante and Bonagiunta, in the construction of poetical modernity already analysed by Curtius in terms of textual interconnections¹⁹.

Dante has no hesitation in confessing the secret of his art, which resides in the ability to hear and transcribe the words pronounced by his dictator. It is likely that McLuhan did not pay attention to the rhetorical trick inspired by the different declination of the verb “dictate”. Surely, he realised the creative meaning of Dantesque words, destined to inspire the creative process of Romantic and Symbolist poets submerged in print and electric society. ‘Behind the scenes’, we see the offset between verbal fidelity and modes of experience. These modes were shaped by the poet long before the clash “between the old form of dictation or the new form of dialogue and oral disputation” (McLuhan 2011b:109). This is what happens when a new medium appears, especially in the presence of a deep functional shift: the fading of Medieval art of memory reveals the communicative impact of Gutenberg’s invention, to the extent that it fuelled a radical transition from oral to visual cognitive patterns²⁰.

3. From Dante to Pound: Poets as the “antennae of the race”

By quoting the aforementioned lines of *Purgatorio* XXIV, McLuhan aims to investigate the expressive and semiotic shifts engendered by the evolution of lyric paradigms, closely connected to specific social and communicative patterns. The study of media implies the analysis of linguistic frameworks diffused when a new medium appears²¹.

Any form of art allows us to endow human expression with a universal insight, as with the great masterpieces of all times. Dante makes no exception, as McLuhan points out underlining the separation between his medieval education and his humanist mindset: “A sculpturally contoured universalism of experience such as Dante’s

¹⁹ See Curtius, 1953.

²⁰ See Yates, 2011; Carruthers, 2008.

²¹ An attentive focus on McLuhan’s media sensitivity was developed by De Kerckhove, 1998.

is quite incompatible with the unified pictorial space which houses the Gutenberg configuration ahead. For the modalities of mechanical writing and the technology of movable types were not kind to synesthesia or 'the sculpture of rhyme'" (McLuhan, 2011b:131).

The *Purgatorio* is not only the cantica of the poets, but also the place of sculptural representations, as the exempla of virtue illustrated in the seven frames of the cantica show. In canto XXVI of *Purgatorio*, the Angel of Chastity hints at the examples of purity and lust punished as sculptured in marble bas-reliefs. In that place Guido Guinizelli and Arnaut Daniel atone for their sins. Interrelation between images and words is one of the most significant of Dante's aesthetic insights, destined to be developed by Renaissance and Baroque art.

His main model is Ovid, even though his poetic guide is seemingly Virgil. This is what Pound highlights in the *ABC of Reading*: "Virgil was the official literature of the Middle Ages, but 'everybody' went on reading Ovid. Dante makes all his acknowledgements to Virgil (having appreciated the best of him), but the direct and indirect effect of Ovid on Dante's actual writing is possibly greater than Virgil's" (Pound, 1934:45). Dante owes his mythological education to Ovid alone, whose deep knowledge of ancient myth made him a sort of encyclopedic source for all who wrote about classic myth, both in the Renaissance and Baroque period. Ovid laid the foundations of iconographic poetry, inspired to translate into words the unfathomable metamorphosis of human bodies through God's will.

Dante's endeavour has to do with the representation of inner feelings as well, especially those inspired by Love and its heartbreaking power. The main feature of the "dolce stil novo" has to do with the construction of sentimental myth, in which Love rises to become the image of a real Dictator and Dominus. In *Purgatorio* XXIV, Dante and Bonagiunta talk about Love and its vibrating presence, which is dictatorial and dictating as well. According to Pound (1934:32), the social function of poets resides in the expressive sensitivity so rooted in human life.

McLuhan is aware of the heuristic power of Dantesque symbolism since it is embedded in the writing experimentalism of the catholic humanist, who tries to understand the communicative complexity at

the basis of our electric modernity. Somehow he assures us (as Pound does) that poets and writers are the “antennae of the race”, whose function is to receive external signals and transform them into signs, linguistic or visual. Dante, like Virgil, Homer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Milton, Wordsworth and Eliot are the immortal transformers of human impulses into aesthetic creations, nourished by the universal breath of art²².

Nonetheless, the transition from Scholastic explicitness to Renaissance harmony marks the advent of the typographic mindset which is rooted in the visual depth and linearity of perspective. The modern legacy of the “dolce stil novo” shows how universal the lesson of high poetry can be. Real art is always tethered to the capability of a poet to become a reliable “antenna” of the race. When Eliot dedicated *The Waste Land* to Ezra Pound, his aim was to eternalise the role played by Pound in revising and arranging his poem. He paradigmatically recalled him with the same words used by Dante – in the presence of Guido Cavalcanti – to invoke Arnaut Daniel, “il miglior fabbro del parlar materno”.

The same expression is used by Pound in the *ABC of Reading* before quoting some of Daniel's strophes: “The best smith, as Dante called Arnaut Daniel, made the birds sing IN HIS WORDS; I don't mean that he merely referred to birds singing” (Pound, 1934:53). The smith is the artist, the creator, the demiurge, who has the privilege to hear and translate the concealed words of the heart. Daniel succeeded in reproducing the singing of birds by exploiting the expressive power of onomatopoeia, metaphor and alliteration. Pound stressed as much as possible the influence of Provençal poets on Dante and his followers, so as to accept “il lungo studio” carried out by modern poets to renew poetic communication²³.

Hence follows the opportunity to study Provençal versifiers like Sordello, Bertran de Born, Guillaume de Poitiers, who laid the foundations of modern poetic art. Pound is particularly keen on the rhythmic experimentalism supported by the old poets, so important for the “dolce stil novo”, whose Provençal origins have a cultural

²² Pound's poetic influence was probed by Dennis, 2000.

²³ This is what Pound (2015) highlighted about Dante's poetic innovation.

meaning: "For the specific difference between Provence and Italy or the 'progress' from Arnaut Daniel to Sordello, to Cavalcanti and Dante, the reader who cannot and will not read Italian, can, if he like, refer to my descriptive criticism. Without knowing Dante, Guido Cavalcanti and Villon, no one can judge the attained maxima of certain kinds of writing" (Pound, 1934:57).

Pound suggests that any attempt to improve writing skills might fail without the proper knowledge of ancient poets. He called them "the antennae of the race" and translators of human perceptions. Of course, the task of any antenna is to codify the electric signals hovering in the air. Likewise, the poet is the scrivener of the individual and collective mind, constantly producing meanings to be transcribed. The invention of the press supplies the artist with a renewed aesthetic mindset fueled by the repeatability and reproducibility potentialities of a new medium (Gordon, 2010:29-69).

This is why McLuhan opens *The Gutenberg Galaxy* with a quotation from Shakespeare's *King Lear* and rounds it off with a focus on Mallarmé's poetry, soon after having further investigated the meaning of Blake's verses, "The Seven Nations fled before him: they became what they beheld" (*Jerusalem*, 32, 14). By exploiting Dante's universal poetic engagement, Blake "makes quite explicit that when sense ratios change, men change" (McLuhan, 2011b:299).

This happens when a new medium breaks into a social environment and rapidly permeates human interactions, shifting perceptive skills and tactile habits. This is what Alexander Pope highlights in *The Dunciad* and Edgar Allan Poe emphasises in *The Poetic Principle*: the latter is indicated by McLuhan as the fundamental theoretical manifesto of symbolist literature²⁴. His most important insight has to do with the creative momentum allowing the poet to recover memory fragments and foresee the future: "To put the thing briefly, Poe saw that poetry should be written backward. One must begin with the effect that is to be achieved and then seek out the means for obtaining that effect and no other effect. Thus the same insight which enabled Poe to be the inventor of symbolist poetry also made him the inventor of detective fiction" (McLuhan, 1999:156).

²⁴ On McLuhan's symbolist engagement refer to Lamberti (2012:220-222).

In this way the reader feels directly involved in the poetic process, since it aims to build social identity through the recollection of past events. Like the detective who reaches the solution of his case just investigating the previous facts, the symbolist poet starts from the creative facts to probe the unfathomable fluctuations of mind: "This is why he will always say that the poem is not about anything; it is something. It doesn't say anything; it does something" (McLuhan, 1999:157).

Dante's poem does not simply narrate the poet's supernatural journey, it is the journey itself, especially thanks to the outstanding capability of exploiting the semiotic potentialities of language. The pilgrim reveals to Bonagiunta the central role played by the poet's listening skills and discloses the importance of the transcribing process enabling him to convey into linguistic signs the dictated sounds coming from within. McLuhan interprets Dante as an incomparable communication scholar, as he is so involved in the attempt to find the best way to match emotions and words.

The reproducibility of sounds and images is the challenging endeavour of the artist, as Pound properly remarks: "Dante says: 'A canzone is a composition of words set to Music' (fabrication verborum armonizatorum). I don't know any better point to start from" (Pound, 1934:31). Explicitness does not exclude harmony, as the Renaissance courtly poets knew. Convergence between words and music becomes the main task of the modern artist, provided that he possesses the necessary aesthetic and expressive sensitivity. What Pound ponders about Dante's capability of involving the reader in the creative process may anticipate McLuhan's insights about the symbolist poet, "who makes of the poem not a vehicle for views, ideas, feelings, but a situation which involves the reader directly in the poetic process" (McLuhan, 1999:157).

This is what Pound wrote in 1934 in *The ABC of Writing* about the aforementioned definition of "canzone": "Dante's statement is the better place to begin because it starts the reader or hearer from what he actually sees or hears, instead of distracting his mind from that actuality to something which can only be approximately deduced or conjectured FROM the actuality, and for which the evidence can be

nothing save the particular and limited extent of the actuality” (Pound, 1934:31).

Both Pound and McLuhan focus on the reader’s emotional involvement and both dwell on the actuality that poetry should reproduce yet without distracting the audience from the inner meanings nestling in human actuality. Needless to say, Pound is specifically interested in the communicative impact of Dantesque symbolism, to the extent that it becomes an outstanding creative medium for some of the most relevant contemporary writers²⁵.

Furthermore, McLuhan learns from Pound (and from Blake and Poe as well) that poetry implies a thorough recollection of past poetical patterns, in particular those built when the amanuensis society began to decline because of the incoming revolution hastened by the invention of the press and perspective. Nonetheless, Dante overcame the visual and acoustic boundaries of his time, as McLuhan points out in *Space, Time and Poetry* (1955), an essay focused on the pursuit of writing in the contemporary age: “What appears to the eye as a flat space decorated with images and symbols is immediately felt in depth as a boundless inner or mental space” (McLuhan, 2005:7).

The representation of what cannot be reproduced or told through human senses is made possible by the genius of great poets carrying the language beyond its expressive boundaries. This may come true through the practice of “il lungo studio e ‘l grande amore” (*Inferno*, I:83-84) enabling the poet to rise above the human ordeal and become a real “antenna” of the race. By means of Pound’s critical lesson, McLuhan confirms that such great poets as Dante may help us probe the social phenomena which led to our electric modernity, since every historical age has been marked by precise semiotic and communicative structures that the poet tried to share with the audience²⁶.

On this account, Pound’s opinion is clear: “Good writers are those who keep the language efficient. That is to say, keep it accurate, keep it clear. It doesn’t matter whether the good writer wants to be useful, or whether the bad writer wants to do harm” (Pound, 1934:32). Dante

²⁵ Moevs (2005) provides an insightful analysis of Dantesque metaphysics.

²⁶ On McLuhan’s “digital” insights refer to Borrelli, 2012.

made the language an immortal medium, so functional as to portray the inexplicable landscapes of the human mind. This is the main task of the Catholic humanist nowadays, entangled in the communicative hypertrophy of the connected society²⁷.

4. Conclusion

In the story of human communication, the invention of perspective and the press is as important as the diffusion of electricity, destined to change our sensorial and functional skills profoundly. The way writers adapted to these epochal changes provide the scholar of communication with the interpretative keys of the convergence between society, art and language. Symbolism and myth are interpreted by McLuhan as outstanding heuristic media capable of building “bridges between the arts and society today”.

From Dante to Mallarmé, symbolism can be interpreted as a real “parataxis” enabling us to probe the mental facts by closely listening to consciousness. The poet is but he who listens to the interior dictator whose words have to be transcribed without any psychological restraints. Writing is closely dependent on the capability of grasping the inner sounds of the dictating voice that inspires the poetic process²⁸. This is what McLuhan remarks in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* by quoting the rhymed conversation between Dante and Bonagiunta Orbicciani, when the poet is required to reveal the secret of his “new rhymes”. His poetic experience is absolutely universal and paradigmatic, as his modern readers show. Pound and Eliot (1929) are both involved in a poetic process which exploits Dantesque symbolism to empower the probing impact of poetry. It consists in looking backwards and recollecting the memory fragments scattered all along the path of civilization. Therefore, poetry is not about something, but it is something, as Poe and symbolist poets attest through their creative engagement. According to McLuhan, symbolist poets had the creative intuition of literature as a reflection of electric

²⁷ The negative effects of communicative hypertrophy had already been pointed out by Czitrom, 2010.

²⁸ For a thorough reflection on Dante's diffusion in America see Caputo, 2003.

and industrial modernity. The metaphor of the *paysage interieur* was closely related to the increasing complexity of the human mind²⁹.

This is what McLuhan wants to show by donning the guise of the catholic humanist, whose mission is to understand the social and communicative changes enhanced by electric media and specifically television. The quote from *Purgatorio*, explaining the creative process of Dantesque symbolism, implies a close reflection about our median condition, featured by the fear of the abyss (hell) and the longing to reach happiness and bliss (heaven). The poets found in the second cantica seem to expiate their insufficient poetic renovation. Nonetheless, they deserved to be named and recognised. This is true for Arnaut Daniel, “il miglior fabbro del parlar materno”, and for all the other Provençal poets named by Dante, including Sordello, Guittone, Cavalcanti and Guinizelli.

They are the smiths of the new art enhanced by Dante thanks to the semiotic practice of listening and transcribing. Once again McLuhan alludes to the catholic humanist: “Machiavelli showed us the way to a new circle of the Inferno. Knowledge of the creative process in art, science, and cognition shows us either to the earthly paradise or to complete madness. It is to be either the top of Mount Purgatory or the abyss” (McLuhan, 1999:160).

Mount Purgatory becomes the metaphor of our physical and psychic precariousness. It is the symbol of our unsatisfied eagerness for eternity that only art can fulfill. Indeed, Dante's *Purgatorio* is the cantica of human afflictions and hopes, expressed by the supernatural power of poetry. All poets encountered by Dante symbolise the communicative effort to depict the complexity of human condition, filtered through the lens of language. This is what Pound highlights about the linguistic care of the Middle Ages: “In the middle ages when there wasn't any material science, as we now understand it, when human knowledge could not make automobiles run, or electricity carry language through the air, etc., etc., in short, when

²⁹ See Lamberti, 2012:137: “McLuhan's encounter with new forms of communication started with Mallarmé and the symbolist poets, and continued with Joyce and the other modernist writers. He was fascinated by their attempts to elaborate words to render their own reality so as to match the new spirit of their time, a spirit inscribed inside an unprecedented and overwhelming technological change”.

learning consisted in little more than splitting up of terminology, there was a good deal of care for terminology, and the general exactitude in the use of abstract terms may have been (probably was) higher” (Pound, 1934:19-20).

This is why the scholar of communication should primarily study the relationship between technology and linguistic patterns, inasmuch as the diffusion of a new medium implies relevant functional shifts of our senses. Dante can still teach us that poetry’s mystery resides in the chance to look backward at our origins and recollect the racked fragments of our consciousness which have been overwhelmed by hectic technological development³⁰. Thus, McLuhan can assume that “the poetic process is a reversal, a retracting of the stages of human cognition” (McLuhan, 1999:157).

This is what Blake, Poe, Pound and Eliot learned from “the long study” of Dante’s poem, which can still provide some useful heuristic insights to decipher our media complexity. Literature and communication come together every time man recognises the duty to understand the psychic landscapes influencing the daily act: “He who would discuss humanism and literature today must know something about the history of the media of human communication, because so rapidly have the media changed of late that print and letters have been dethroned by radio, TV, movies, and mechanised pictorial communication in general” (McLuhan, 1999:161).

In this account, Dante continues to be one of the most fascinating and reliable “antennas” of the race, suspended between reality and imagination³¹. Hence follows that the symbol is the message, long before the advent of digital and analogical culture, that “liquidated 2,000 years of manuscript culture” (McLuhan, 1999:161). Dante made it possible through the synesthetic practice of self-effacement and patient watchfulness, connected to the art of listening and transcript. At the fore is the multi-sensorial society marked by interlacing of sounds, images and words, which are mingled together

³⁰ For a wider interpretation of Dante’s communicative experimentalism, see Lucrezi (2008) and Girard (1977).

³¹ Singleton (1977) provided a fundamental interpretation of Dante’s work.

by the symbolic force of digital devices, to the extent that symbols are the messages of our psychic imaginary³².

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³² This is what Jenkins (2006) insightfully pinpointed in reference to the convergent culture of our times.

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