

# A Glimpse Into Dante's Poetics of Language

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The relationship between language and poetry is an important topic in Dante's poetics. In Dante's poetics, language is not merely instrumental; like poetry itself, it possesses its own Eros and movements of Eros. It is precisely on the basis of Eros and the movement of Eros that language and poetry are internally linked in the *Divine Comedy*. This is also where the originality of Dante's poetics lies.

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## Introduction

As is well known, Dante Alighieri, the greatest poet of the Middle Ages, wrote his masterpiece *The Divine Comedy* in Italian vernacular rather than the then-popular literary language, Latin. Dante's choice was undoubtedly deliberate, as he explicitly argued, "The loftiest themes ought to be treated in the noblest manner; and so it is the case that the most lofty vernacular should be employed" (Wu, 1979, p. 170). His treatise "De Vulgari Eloquentia" serves not only as a linguistic work but also as a treatise on poetics. Consequently, the relationship between poetry and language has always been a fundamentally significant topic in the study of Dante's poetics. Chinese scholar Miao Langshan believes that Dante's use of vernacular in *The Divine Comedy* aimed to initiate Italian national language literature (Miao, 1985). German contemporary literary historian Eckart Oehlenschläger, on the other hand, argues that Dante's intention was to create an audience (Dante, 1989, as cited in Caesar, 1989). Neither of these interpretations touches upon the intrinsic relationship between language and poetry in Dante's poetics. This article attempts to explore the inherent connection between poetry and language in Dante's poetics, and the foundation upon which this connection is established.

## Poetics and Eros

"Eros" originally was an important concept in Platonic philosophy, referring to the continual longing rooted in the human soul for truth, goodness, and beauty, possessing a desire and capability that transcends mere physical desires. Later, this concept primarily used to describe the soul and self was elevated by Neoplatonists to a cosmic level of worldview and further integrated into Christian theology in the Middle Ages. Dante was deeply influenced by this theological view of Eros, rich with Neoplatonic hues, and developed his own unique perspective on Eros based on this foundation. It is this perspective on Eros that provides the philosophical basis for Dante's poetic thought and theory of language.

In Dante's view, God is not only the source and mover of all things, but is himself "love".

The great power of the primal love cannot be expressed in speech. He and his son are eternally effulgent with great love. Moved by deep love and with just an instant's gaze upon his son, he in himself and in his mind created all things, so that they exist in the mind or in space. (Alighieri, 2009a, p. 129)

God's creative activity in essence is the overflow of great love. In this overflow of love, God not only creates infinite spiritual beings but also extends love to immortal and mortal beings, transferring the reality of existence from its root based on hierarchy to all potential levels. Therefore, "Whether corruptible or incorruptible, the universe and all therein/are nothing but the reflection of the Idea. This Idea emanates from the heavenly Father full of great love" (Alighieri, 2009a, p. 175). Conversely, everything in the universe comes from divinity, and to a greater or lesser extent contains the essence of God based on its distance from Him. God's love is not only the ultimate basis for the existence and sustenance of everything in the universe, but also the organizing principle permeating through the entire cosmos. It is because of the love permeating every part of the universe that the whole cosmos is aggregated and forms a kind of order.

As finite emanations of God's love overflow, everything in the universe possesses a love given by God, namely innate love. "Innate love absolutely cannot deviate" (Alighieri, 2009b, p. 238). This means that everything has a tendency to return to its origin and move towards goodness, or in other words, has the capacity and inclination to love God. Humans, like other created beings, possess innate love, but unlike other created beings, humans also possess acquired love. This is because among all creatures, except angels, only humans have been endowed by God with free will. The love that arises from human free will is acquired love. Acquired love means that the object and intensity of Eros are freely chosen by the individual. Therefore, "Acquired love can indeed go astray; because of a wrong aim/or excessive or insufficient love" (Alighieri, 2009b, p. 238). When humans choose goodness, that is, God as the object of love, or when they stop at what is less good outside of closeness to God, acquired love and innate love become one, and individuals will not indulge in sinful pleasures or commit sins. When choosing what is less good as the object of love, if one chooses the wrong object or loves excessively or insufficiently, there will be excessiveness, thus causing a deviation from innate love and going against the Creator's intentions. Therefore, "All virtues and all offenses/emanate from love" (Alighieri, 2009b, p. 247), and "every action deserving of punishment and every virtue/must be traced back to your own loving heart" (Alighieri, 2009b, p. 239).

### Language and Eros

It is well known that in an era where Latin was considered the language of high poetry and vernacular languages were viewed as inferior, Dante chose to write the *Divine Comedy* in Italian vernacular. This choice by Dante not only faced considerable skepticism from his contemporaries but also largely contributed to the lack of attention given to the *Divine Comedy* for nearly two hundred years. However, Dante's decision was theoretically grounded; he believed that there existed an intrinsic connection between language and Eros.

According to Dante's view of language, it is not merely a tool for fulfilling interpersonal communication needs but, along with reason and free will, constitutes the ontological foundation of humanity. As early as in "On Vernacular", Dante distinguished the capacity and necessity of language as fundamental distinctions that set humans apart from lesser animals and angels. In the *Divine Comedy*, through the words of the Roman poet Statius, Dante not only explains the origin of human language but also asserts that humans are beings of language. According to Statius' explanation, before the formation of the human soul, the embryo is still "plastic material" and not yet "a person"; only through such a sacred moment can the fetus transform into a "person", that is,

graced by the source of all movement, pleased by the great power of nature/who creates such a masterpiece, and by calling in/a new spirit full of strength it brings forth. In the mind, the new spirit, upon encountering active external matter, absorbs it and blends to form the soul, which on its own/can grow and reflect, self-sufficient. (Huang, 2009, p. 357)

Firstly, it is worth noting that here, the Italian word for “person” is “fante” rather than “gente”, and the former, etymologically, refers to “speaking existences”. This implies that being a speaking entity is an essential definition of being human. Secondly, language originates from God, who bestowed it upon humanity as a gift “in pleasure”. In fact, in “On Vernacular”, Dante directly calls human language “such a great and generous talent from God” (Zhang, 1998, p. 267).

Based on the aforementioned points, Dante further proposes that as a gift from God to humanity, language not only fundamentally connects human beings with God but also reflects changes in that relationship through language and its evolving conditions. According to this correspondence, Dante outlines three conditions of language in “On Vernacular”. The first condition is that as the first speaker, Adam’s “first word is ‘God,’ and nothing else”, and “the first words of humanity were spoken in paradise”, as “joyful sounds” (Zhang, 1998, p. 267). But since humanity’s expulsion from Eden because of sin, “the first sound people make is lamentation” (Zhang, 1998, p. 266). The third condition is that the confusion of languages directly constitutes a punishment. Humans originally used the same language, which later became known as Hebrew, the “sacred language”; thus, they could communicate with each other without any hindrance. Unexpectedly, humanity used this condition to unite and build the Tower of Babel, hoping to reach heaven. God confused their language to punish humanity. Since then, humans have not been able to communicate, and they have moved to form their own “vernacular”. From the “language of Adam” to the vernacular, this kind of language reflects the relationship between God and people.

From the above analysis, Dante establishes standards in “On Vernacular”, attempting to elevate Italian vernacular to the level of poetic language, fundamentally based on theological requirements for vernacular. According to Dante’s theological view of language, it embodies God’s love for humanity and constitutes a fundamental principle of human existence; the condition of human language is determined by humanity’s relationship with God. From an actual perspective, with humanity’s fall, human language correspondingly degraded from its noble nature; from an ideal perspective, if humanity continuously improves its spiritual condition theologically, human language will gradually regain its divinity, returning from the third language state described above to the first. Dante’s theological view of language places demands on Italian vernacular, asserting that it should and can generate an upward movement towards higher realms, ascending towards the ultimate good and continually climbing, ultimately proving its nobility. It can be said that this is precisely why Dante decisively chose to write *The Divine Comedy* in Italian vernacular based on theological reasons.

### **The Eros Movement of Language and Poetics**

At this point, we can reasonably propose that the *Divine Comedy* fundamentally constitutes a movement of erotic desire between poetry and language. Generally speaking, the *Divine Comedy* describes three types of love and two types of erotic desire movements. The former refers to the love of God, pre-existing love, and acquired love, while the latter refers to the movement of Eros from top to bottom and from bottom to top.

In the *Divine Comedy*, poetry acts as an “awakening of love”, involving these three types of love and dynamically transforming them into two movements of erotic desire. The theme of the *Inferno* is primarily the improper acquired love, which grants the pilgrim enlightenment through love. The *Purgatorio*, on the other hand, focuses on pre-existing love, from which the pilgrim gains enlightenment. The *Paradiso* emphasizes the love of

God and its enlightenment upon the pilgrim. Viewing these three parts together, the *Divine Comedy* portrays two movements of erotic desire: one from top to bottom, including the pilgrim's grace received, the understanding of God's love from the universe and its order, and Dante's writing of the *Divine Comedy* upon his return from heaven to earth. The other movement is from bottom to top, gradually progressing from acquired love to pre-existing love and ultimately reaching the love of God.

Here, we analyze in detail the often overlooked two movements of erotic desire in language. The *Divine Comedy* also contains another movement of erotic desire in language, namely, Dante's description of three books in the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*, respectively, which constitute a bottom-up movement of language desire.

In Chapter 5 of the *Inferno*, Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta, lovers forever swept by storms, become permanent residents of the circle of hell for carnal desires because they failed to properly unite reason with desire, losing the goodness of reason. The "source" misleading them to submit reason to desire is a book titled *Lancelot of the Lake*. In Francesca's words, "the book and the author, Galahad, should be blamed", indicating that this book and its author acted as a great mediator. The book describes the illicit love between Lancelot and Guinevere, attempting to unite soul, reason, and love beyond the bounds of law in words. However, the result of Francesca and Paolo reading this book was the separation of reason and love: They ceased reading and began embracing each other. Despite claiming to unite soul and love beyond the bounds of law, the book ironically led Francesca and Paolo astray from reason, directly towards physical union of the sexes.

### Conclusion

Dante's poetics can be summed up as a "poetics of Eros". Dante's thoughts on Eros were not entirely his own creation; in fact, they were rooted in the mature medieval culture of Eros, especially influenced by Bernard of Clairvaux's theology of Eros. What truly sets apart Dante's poetics of Eros is that it does not simply view language as a tool for poetic narrative, but believes that language itself, especially vernacular language, possesses its own aspects of Eros and the movements of Eros. To emphasize this point, we can also call Dante's poetics of Eros a "poetics of language" or a "poetics of vernacular". In this distinctive poetic philosophy, poetry and language are inherently interconnected. If we regard Dante the pilgrim as personifying poetry, then his pilgrimage journey embodies the Eros and movements of Eros in poetry. If we see the poet Dante, returning from heaven to earthly realms, as personifying the vernacular of Italy, then his writing of the fourth book of the *Divine Comedy* actually unfolds the Eros and movements of Eros within language, or specifically within the Italian vernacular. In any case, rooted in Eros and the movements of Eros, poetry and language are intricately linked and integrated, resulting in the work that stands before us—*The Divine Comedy*.

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