

FILOLOGÍA ITALIANA

SOUNDS OF *INFERNO*

FRANCISCO RAMÍREZ SANTACRUZ
Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla
framirez@post.harvard.edu

ABSTRACT

In the whole *Comedy*, but particularly in *Inferno*, Dante is constantly addressing our sense of hearing. Dante's first impressions of nearly every new circle or ring or character come through the ear. As he proceeds through Hell, he concludes that his eyes are not trustworthy, whereas his ears never let him down. Hell finally reveals itself as the kingdom of voices, of similes based on aural images and of Cantos where the ear functions as the driving force of human actions and relationships. This paper analyzes *Inferno* in terms of its aural nature and argues in favor of reading Dante's text aloud.

KEY WORDS: Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, orality, sense of hearing

Sonidos del *Inferno*

RESUMEN

En toda la *Comedia*, pero particularmente en el *Inferno*, Dante constantemente se está dirigiendo a nuestro sentido del oído. Las primeras impresiones de Dante de cada nuevo círculo, anillo o personaje le llegan a través del oído. Conforme avanza a través del Infierno, se percata de que sus ojos no son de fiar, mientras que sus oídos jamás lo decepcionan. El Infierno finalmente se manifiesta como un reino de voces, de símiles basados en imágenes auditivas y de Cantos donde el oído funciona como la fuerza motriz de las acciones y relaciones humanas. Este trabajo analiza el *Inferno* en términos de su naturaleza auditiva y argumenta a favor de una lectura en voz alta del texto de Dante.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, oralidad, sentido del oído

In the Middle Ages, the ear played a more significant role than nowadays. The news were cried out on the public market, during meal times books were read aloud in monasteries, at the University the students spent their time listening to professors and repeating their lessons, and all examinations were, of course, oral. In such a world where little silence reigned, it should be no surprise that its literature is full of sounds¹. As a matter of fact, books were written not in order to be read silently, but rather in order to be read aloud². Therefore, it is astonishing that such a master-scholar as Leo Spitzer states that Dante's *Commedia* «is not a work to be listened to on the market-place, but read on our respective *banchi*» (SPITZER, 1959: 578).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze *Inferno* in terms of its aural nature. Dante, the character, not only conveys to us what he saw in Hell, but also what he heard. As I intend to show the sense of hearing is at least as important to Dante as it is sight. First, I will focus on Dante's first impressions that very often come through the ear and on the sonorous capacity of the body; second, I will suggest that sound is the element which triggers more easily Dante's emotions and I will examine how a good number of similes presses the reader to aural rather than pictorial considerations; third, I will analyze the relationship between sound and space; and, finally, I will exemplify the previous considerations in Canto v which can be seen as a catalogue of the art of listening.

The fact that Dante's first impressions of nearly every new circle, ring or character come through the ear has been widely acknowledged by various critics³. As Sanguinetti points out, «Dante is obviously emphasizing the darkness of Hell: in that 'starless air', in that 'timeless air' the abyss will reveal itself in its entirety and in its parts to hearing before sight» (SANGUINETI, 1990: 71). For instance, Dante hears the following souls before he sees them: the people in Limbo, the lustful, the arch-heretics, the violent against their neighbors, the suicides and the squanderers, the flatterers, the thieves, the falsifiers and the traitors. His sense of hearing is also the first contact he has with some specific characters such as Homer, Farinata or Guido da Montefeltro. In the whole *Inferno* this first aural contact takes place at least sixteen times.

¹ On orality in general, see Marshal McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, Toronto, University Press, 1962; and Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, London, Methuen, 1982. On oral communication in the Middle Ages in Italy, see Cecil H. Clough, «The Cult of Antiquity: Letters and Letter Collections», in *Cultural Aspects of the Italian Renaissance: Essays in Honour of Paul Oskar Kristeller*, ed. Cecil H. Clough, Manchester, University Press, 1976, pp. 33-67; Elizabeth Eisenstein, «Some Conjectures about the Impact of Printing on Western Society», *Journal of Modern History* 40, 1968, pp. 1-56. On the effects of orality on university life, see Istvan Hajnal, *L'enseignement de l'écriture aux universités médiévales*, Budapest, Académie des sciences d'Hongrie, 1959.

² On reading and composition as predominantly oral activities during the Middle Ages, see Paul Zumthor, «Pour une poétique de la voix», *Poétique*, 10, 1979, pp. 514-524; idem, *La lettre et la voix. De la «littérature» médiévale*, Paris, Seuil, 1987; and Joseph Balogh, ««Voces paginorum». Beiträge zur Geschichte des lauten Lesens und Schreiben», *Philologus*, 82, 1926-27, pp. 84-109 and 202-240; and Paul Saenger, «Silent Reading: Its Impact on Late Medieval Script and Society», *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 13, 1982, pp. 367-414.

³ Bilancioni states that «Appena entrato nel vestibolo dell' Inferno, il poeta ode 'orribili favelle' paragonabili al 'turbo che spira'» (BILANCIONI, 1932: 117). Wertheim writes that «As soon as we pass by Minos' baleful glare we know immediately by the anguished cries that rend the air we have entered the infernal kingdom. And the deeper we descend the more dreadful will the wailing become» (WERTHEIM, 1999: 56). Gilson points out that «After passing through Hell's foreboding gate, Dante becomes aware of disparate sighs and cries which reach him through a dark atmosphere and assault his ears in a violent cacophony» (GILSON, 2000: 77).

I will present the sixteen examples in chronological order. From the very first Canto, Virgil warns Dante that he will lead him «ove udirai le disperate strida» (I, 115). Virgil's prediction turns out to be true as soon as Dante finishes reading the inscription above the gate of Hell:

Quivi sospiri, pianti e alti guai
risonavan per l'aere senza stelle,
per ch'io al cominciar ne lagrimai. (iii, 22-24)

One Canto later Dante not only awakens from his first faint to an enormous thunderclap («un greve truono», IV, 2), but he also gives us his first impression of Limbo in aural terms:

Vero è che 'n su la proda mi trovai
de la valle d'abisso dolorosa
che 'ntrono accoglie d'infiniti guai. (iv, 7-9)

Still in the same Canto Dante refers to Homer not as a man, but as a «voce» (iv, 79 and 82). And the first encounter with the lustful is also subordinated to the sense of hearing:

Or incomincian le dolenti note
a farmisi sentire; or son venuto
là dove molto pianto mi percuote. (v, 25-27)

Dante describes a similar situation as he draws near to the city of Dis: «Quivi il lasciammo, che più non ne narro; / ma ne l'orecchie mi percosse un duolo» (viii, 64-65). It is interesting to observe that Dante uses the same verb here as in the last example in order to refer to the act of listening: «percuotere». Once in the city of Dis, Dante, the pilgrim, is struck by the fact that the lids of the tombs are lifted up and that cries emerge from them: «e fuor n'uscivan sì duri lamenti» (ix, 122). Virgil explains to him that the sounds he hears are the «sospiri dolenti» (ix, 126) of the arch-heretics. As it is well-known, Canto x describes one of the most memorable encounters Dante has in Hell. While the pilgrim and his guide are walking along the necropolis of the Epicureans, their conversation is abruptly interrupted by Farinata's words. Thus Dante's acquaintance of Farinata is initiated by the ear and not by sight:

Subitamente questo suono uscìo
d'una de l'arche; però m'acostai,
temendo, un poco più al duca mio. (x, 28-30)

By the same token Dante's first impression of the violent against their neighbors are the «alte strida» (xii, 102) that rise from the boiling ditch, of the suicides the «trarre guai» (xiii, 22) whose source he is not able to identify by himself, and of the squanderers the «romor» (xiii, 111) they provoke on their attempt to flee from the chasing bitches. Later on in the second pouch of *Malebolge* the pilgrim meets the flatterers immersed in excrement only after hearing them snort and make noise with their hands:

Quindi sentimmo gente che si nicchia
ne l'altra bolgia e che col muso scuffa,
e sé medesma con le palme picchia. (xviii, 103-105)

The same pattern is repeated when Dante moves from the sixth into the seventh pouch:

Parlando andava per non parer fievole;
onde una voce uscì de l'altro fosso,
a parole formar disconvenevole. (xxiv, 64-66)

In both cases, Dante hears the next *bolgia* before he actually sees it. When in Canto xxvii Dante meets Guido da Montefeltro, his attention is attracted not by Guido's physical aspect, but by «un confuso suon che fuor n'uscia» (xxvii, 6). Two Cantos later, just after climbing above the final cloister of *Malebolge*, Dante's first impression of the last *bolgia* comes through his ear («lamenti saettaron me diversi», xxix, 43). Finally, Cocytus welcomes the pilgrim by the voice («dicere udi'mi», xxxii, 19) of a soul over which he tramps.

Dante not only hears a lot, but he also hears very carefully. As Bilancioni correctly has noticed, Dante «Distingue la lingua, il discorso, l'accento, la voce, le pronunzie, che la disperazione inaspriva» (BILANCIONI, 1932: 147). For Dante every sound that reaches his ears loses its neutrality and gains a specific intention. Or to put it another way, Dante knew that the real meaning of words might not be in the subject matter, but in the tone or accent. As we shall see, our poet characterizes many of the voices or sounds emitted by the mouth. For instance, Beatrice speaks «con angelica voce» (ii, 57). When Dante enters Hell, his ears transform the aural chaos into «parole di dolore, accenti d'ira, / voci alte e fioche» (iii, 26-27). In his short stay in the castle of Limbo, the pilgrim realizes that its inhabitants speak infrequently, but when they do they speak «con voci soavi» (iv, 114). Dante manages to attract Francesca and Paolo to him not by what he says to them, but through an «affettüoso grido» (v, 87). In Canto vii he refers to Plutus' voice as a «voce chioccia» (vii, 2), and in the same Canto he describes in great detail the attempts of the sullen to speak: «Quest' inno sì gorgolian ne la strozza, / ché dir nol posson con parola integra» (vii, 125-126). The onomatopoeic effect by the word *gorgolian* stresses the importance of sound above lexical meaning. In the next Canto, Dante writes that the fallen angels yell «stizzosamente» (viii, 83) at him and Virgil. The fact that the real meaning of words might sometimes be in the way they are pronounced is again emphasized in the episode of the insolent demons:

ma nondimen paura il suo dir dienne,
perch' io traeva la parola tronca
forse a peggior sentenza che non tenne. (ix, 13-15)

In the same way, when Dante wants to show that Farinata is an extremely haughty character, he initially focuses on the tone he uses during their conversation:

Com' io al piè de la sua tomba fui,
guardommi un poco, e poi, quasi sdegnoso,
mi dimandò: «Chi fuor li maggior tui?» (x, 40-42)

To a certain extent, Dante is not only showing us the psychology of Farinata through the tone of his inquiry, but he is also giving the reader a hint on how to pronounce Farinata's words. An analogous case happens when Dante comments on Virgil's aggressive address to Capaneus:

Allora il duca mio parlò di forza
 tanto, chi' non l'avea sì forte udito:
 «O Capaneo, in ciò che non s'ammorza
 la tua superbia, se' tu più punito; [...]»(xiv, 61-64)

Here again the reader is told which tone to use in order to give life to Virgil's words. Pope Nicholas III talks «sospirando e con voce di pianto» (xix, 65), Guido da Montefeltro expresses himself with «parole grame» (xxvii, 15) and, finally, when Virgil scolds Dante for listening to the brawl between Master Adam and Sinon he uses a similar hostile tone to the one he employed in front of Capaneus:

Ad ascoltarli er' io del tutto fisso,
 quando 'l maestro mi disse: «Or pur mira,
 che per poco che teco non mi risso!» (xxx, 130-133)

Then again when Dante speaks of a «suon di man» (iii, 27) at the gate of Hell, he is reminding us of the sonorous capacity of the body. As Merleau-Ponty has pointed out, the body is «un être sonore comme le cristal, le métal et beaucoup d'autres substances» (cited by DUFRENNE, 1987: 92). The souls of *Inferno* produce a variety of sounds with their bodies whose loudness is often mitigated by the cries and howls. The little devils of *Malebolge* make a crushing noise with their teeth («digrignan li denti», xxi, 131), and their leader, Barbariccia, in a climatic comic passage of the *Commedia*, gives a sonorous application to a peculiar part of his body: «ed elli avea del cul fatto trombetta» (xxi, 139). The vulgar effect of this action is emphasized through the fact that *trombetta* immediately reminds us of «l'angelica tromba» (vi, 95). Barbariccia, thus, is making fun and a parody of the divine instrument which will announce the Final Judgement. Lansing highlights the sounds made by the souls in the fifth *bolgia*: «the Barrators too have a system of communication by whistling [«quand' io suffolerò, com' è nostro uso», xxii, 104] for announcing when the coast is clear of Devils and temporary escape from the boiling pitch possible» (LANSING, 1977: 60). These two examples show that what might seem noise to an outsider is sound, i.e., noise with information for the insider: the devils are ordered to march, and the barrators use whistling to communicate themselves. Probably the most famous noise made by a human body in the whole *Inferno* belongs to Master Adam. During their quarrel Sinon hits Master Adam's belly and «Quella sonò come fosse un tamburo» (xxx, 103).

Canto III not only presents the pilgrim's first faint, but it also shows the compassion he is able to feel for the condemned spirits. The most striking fact, however, is that the sense which triggers Dante's pity is not sight, but the sense of hearing:

Quivi sospiri, pianti e alti guai
 risonavan per l'aere senza stelle,
 per ch'io al cominciar ne lagrimai. (iii, 22-24)

Dante weeps because his ears are being hit by horrible lamentations. This will happen several times during his journey. Somehow it seems as if Dante's heart is more easily accessible through the ear than through the eyes. Never in the whole *Inferno* is Dante so overwhelmed by what he sees that he is forced to close his eyes, whereas in Canto XXIX he has to cover his ears with his hands in order not to pass out:

lamenti saettaron me diversi,
che di pietà ferrati avean li strali;
ond' io li orecchi con le man copersi. (xxix, 43-45)

Bilancioni comments the above passage as follows: «La sensazione di un suono o di una luce rappresenta tanto vivace, pronta e forse esaltata passione per il suo organismo che nel poeta quasi sconfina con un senso doloroso» (BINLANCIONI, 1932: 101). Nevertheless, the sounds of Hell will not only make Dante experience pity, but they will also inflict fear and pain on him. If we go back to the moment in Canto III where Dante starts to weep, we realize that he is terrified by the sighs and loud cries, as he promptly admits: «E io ch'avea d'orror la testa cinta, / dissi: «Maestro, che è quel ch'i' odo?»» (III, 31-32). Five Cantos later, Dante is filled with dismay by the «suon de le parole maladette» (VIII, 95) that the demons utter. By the same token the three Furies make Dante shudder not because of their appearance but because of the sounds they emit:

Con l'unghie si fendea ciascuna il petto;
battiensi a palme e gridavan sì alto,
ch'i' mi strinsi al poeta per sospetto. (ix, 49-51)

Sometimes, the emotion of fear is evoked through a combination of different senses; one of them is, of course, the sense of hearing. Miller claims that «Sight, touch, and hearing combine to create the eerie tone of fear when Dante sees and breaks off a branch of a tree in the forest of suicides» (MILLER, 1996: 82):

sì de la scheggia rotta usciva insieme
parole e sangue; ond' io lasciai la cima
cadere, e stetti come l'uom che teme. (xiii, 43-45)

Another example in which hearing and sight combine is when the pilgrim and his guide descend into *Malebolge* on Geryon's back: «però ch'i' vidi fuochi e senti' pianti; / ond' io tremando tutto mi raccoscio» (xvii, 122-123).

As I said before, sound can not only cause fear, but also pain. On this matter, Dante, the pilgrim, is not alone. Cerberus barks so loud that the gluttonous «ch'esser vorrebber sorde» (vi, 33) just like Dante who has to cover his ears with his hands. Then again, the punishment of the avaricious and the prodigal consists of rolling weights in semicircles in opposite directions and of one little detail which tends to get forgotten: they shout at each other simultaneously («gridandosi anche loro ontoso metro», vii, 33). Likewise, the usurer, Reginaldo Scrovegni, doesn't complain to Dante about the rain of fire he has to endure, but about the cries of his neighbors: «Con questi Fiorentin son padoano: / spesse fiate mi 'ntronan li orecchi / gridando» (xvii, 70-72). Finally, hardly any other sound in *Inferno* has so tragic consequences as the one in the second-last Canto; when Count Ugolino says «e io senti' chiavar l'uscio di sotto / a l'orribile torre» (xxxiii, 46), he is hearing death knocking at his door.

If the gluttonous and Reginaldo Scrovegni wished to be deaf in order to ignore Cerberus' barks or the wails of the Florentines, Dante, the pilgrim, would certainly share their desire during his meeting with Farinata or Vanni Fucci. Since Dante brags that his ancestors were always able to return to Florence after having been expelled, whereas Farinata's relatives had to endure a long lasting exile, Farinata prophesies that Dante him-

self will learn, as Farinata's ancestors did, «quanto quell' arte pesa» (x, 81). A single line is enough to leave Dante «smarrito» (x, 125). Virgil recognizes the devastating effect Farinata's words have on the pilgrim and comforts him with the promise that Beatrice will explain his lifetime's journey to him. In addition to Farinata, the thief, Vanni Fucci, prophesies exile to Dante. In revenge for having been recognized in so miserable a state by Dante, the Pistoian asks him to listen carefully («apri li orecchi al mio annunzio, e odi», xxiv, 142). Fucci forecasts to Dante several major military defeats of the Whites and rejoices at the thought of seeing Dante suffering: «E detto l'ho perché doler ti debbia!» (xxiv, 151). In other words, Dante has been deeply hurt, and this suffering reached his heart through the ears.

In the first Canto of the *Commedia* Virgil, as it is well-known, advises Dante on which path to follow in order to leave the dark forest. He also gives Dante a hint of what to expect of this new journey and encourages the pilgrim to follow him

ove udirai le disperate strida,
vedrai li antichi spiriti dolenti,
ch'a la seconda morte ciascun gridà. (I, 115-117)

I have previously referred to this passage as the first example of how Dante gets acquainted with Hell through his ear. However, this is only half the truth. The Mantuan poet explicitly says that Dante will *hear* and *see* ancient spirits asking for a second death. A journey through Hell is, thus, a journey through Dante's five senses—in this particular case the sight and the sense of hearing. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Virgil puts *udirai* first and then *vedrai*. We can either think that the order of the verbs does not change the meaning of what Dante, the author, is trying to convey to his reader or we can assume that the syntax plays a major role in the semantics. I incline myself for the second option. As a matter of fact, I would sustain that for Dante, in many cases, seeing is a consequence of hearing and not inversely. I intend to prove my assertion with more examples. Lucia, called upon by the Virgin Mary, asks Beatrice to assist Dante: «Non odi tu la pietà del suo pianto, / non vedi tu la morte che 'l combatte[?]» (II, 106-107). Lucia obviously believes that Dante's anguished cries are more heartrending than what Beatrice can perceive with her eyes. Another example: Dante has just seen how Filippo Argenti was dismembered by the muddy sinners, when he hears the first sounds coming from the city of Dis: «ma ne l'orecchie mi percosse un duolo, / per ch'io avante l'occhio intento sbarro» (VIII, 65-66). In this case the verbs *to hear* and *to see* yield their place to *l'orecchie* and *l'occhio*, but the pattern basically remains the same: Dante hears first and then he sees. When the pilgrim enters the ring of the suicides, he wonders why he is not able to identify the source of the sounds around him: «Io sentia d'ogne parte trarre guai / e non vedea persona che 'l facesse» (XIII, 22-23). Dante has to put all his faith in his sense of hearing and do without his sight. Similarly, as Dante descends on Geryon's back to *Malebolge*, he feels the wind on his face and again his desire to see is a consequence of hearing:

Io sentia già da la man destra il gorgo
far sotto noi un orribile scroscio,
per che con li occhi'n giù la testa sporgo. (XVII, 118-120)

In Canto xxxii we find once more a syntactic construction where hearing precedes seeing. The example, however, might not seem quite obvious at first sight:

dicere *udi*'mi: «Guarda come passi:
va sì, che tu non calchi con le piante
le teste de' fratei miseri lassi.»
Per ch'io mi volsi, e *vidimi* davante
e sotto i piedi un lago che per gelo
avea di vetro e non d'acqua sembiante. (xxxii, 19-24; my italics)

If we only look at the words pronounced by Dante, the character, we will be able to identify the same syntactic construction that we have been analyzing so far. Dante hears first and sees afterwards. Niccoli has some very interesting remarks regarding the use of *to hear* in connection with *to see*: «Il Mattalia (a *If* IV 79) ha osservato che l'uso di udire in stretta correlazione con «vedere» risale a uno schema espressivo largamente attestato nell'*Apocalisse* (cfr. *Apoc.* 10, 1 e 4 «Et vidi alium angelum... et audiui vocem de caelo...»)» (NICCOLI, 1976: 789). Consequently, Niccoli offers several examples taken from the *Commedia* and from other works by the poet in order to prove his assertion:

Vn XXIV 10 dice come...io vidi e udio certe cose; Rime dubbie XIX 1 Visto aggio scritto e odito cantare / d'Amor; Cv IV xxv 5 lo stupore è uno stordimento d'animo per grandi e maravigliose cose vedere o udire o per alcuno modo sentire; If I 115 e trarrotti di qui per loco eterno; / ove **udirai** leperate strida, / **vedrai** li antichi spiriti dolenti; Pg I 69 de l'alto scende virtù che m'aiuta / condurlo a vederti e a udiri; Pd XIX 10 io vidi e anche udi' parlar lo rostro; Fiore VI 3 'n poca d'or sì forte isvanio / ched i' nol vidi poi né no ll'udio (NICCOLI, 1976: 789; my emphasis).

If we look at the syntactic organization of the verbs *to see* and *to hear* in the above citation, it should be quite clear why I quoted Niccoli so extensively. Every example but one places *to see* in front of *to hear*. And the example that breaks the rule is taken from *Inferno*. In my opinion, I have offered an explanation of this anomaly in the previous pages which I would summarize like this: Dante not only borrows a syntactic construction from the Holy Scriptures and secularizes it in *Inferno*, but he also reverses it and changes its meaning. In the *Revelations* seeing might be more important than hearing, but not in Dante's *Inferno* where the latter plays a fundamental role⁴.

While Gilson states that «Dante's similes have long been admired for their visual potency and pictorial sensibility; and given the frequency, richness, and dramatic force of his visual imagery, it is hardly surprising that the poem has exercised an enduring influence on the visual arts» (GILSON, 2000: 75), Lansing suggests that «there are [...] both a good number of similes whose purpose has little to do with defining visual realities, and many whose particular details press the reader to thematic rather than pictorial considerations» (LANSING, 1977: 11). Lansing goes on saying that «Many of Dante's similes are extraordinarily suggestive of a full range of associations in which the visual often gives way to the conceptual» (LANSING, 1977: 11). Accordingly, Lansing insists «that the vis-

⁴ It should be noted, for the sake of accuracy, that there is at least one example in *Inferno* where Dante uses this syntactic construction in the orthodox way: «Se voi volete vedere o udire» (xxii, 97).

ible keeps pointing to the invisible, that behind the image lies an idea, a lesson, a symbolic reality» (LANSING, 1977: 168). I would agree with Lansing's opinion provided that his last statement is further developed: Dante's similes press the reader's imagination not only beyond the visual, but also beyond the aural into the realm of ideas and knowledge. In brief, I suggest looking at the similes *sub specie auris*, since the visual aspect has been widely studied.

In Canto III we probably have the first simile based on an aural image:
 Diverse lingue, orribili favelle,
 parole di dolore, accenti d'ira,
 volti alte e fioche, e suon di man con elle
 facevano un tumulto, il qual s'aggira
 sempre in quell' aura senza tempo tinta,
 come la rena quando turbo spira. (III, 25-30)

The simile starts with an enumeration of terrifying sounds. Venturi points out the «stupenda gradazione dal più al meno. Prima nota i linguaggi, poi le pronunzie, poi le parole, l'accento, la voce, il suono» (VENTURI, 1889: 44). Secondly, Dante reduces the whole enumeration to one single word: *tumulto*. But our poet not only wants to emphasize the confusing noise that reaches his ears, he also aims at conveying his experience of space. Don Ihde reminds us, as cited by Dufrenne, that «the field shapes of sound include both directionality and surroundability» (DUFRENNE, 1987: 86). Our poet is giving us the latter through the simile of the sand that eddies when a whirlwind swirls. The readers have the impression of being engulfed by the cries that have materialized themselves in wind and sand. Therefore, space and sound cannot be separated in the *Commedia*.

There are at least 16 more similes based on aural images, like the previous one, scattered through the thirty-four Cantos of *Inferno*: sea bellowing beneath a tempest (v, 25-30), chanting cranes (v, 46-49), Cerberus barking (vi, 28-33), wild wind bearing off branches (ix, 64-72), log that catches fire (xiii, 40-43), the chase and the hunter (xiii, 111-117), murmur of waters (xvi, 1-3), cascade (xvi, 94-105), the friar who confesses an assassin (xix, 49-51), Barbariccia's signal (xxii, 1-12), mother who is awakened by a roar (xxiii, 37-39), the Sicilian bull (xxvii, 7-15), sufferings of the sick (xxix, 46-51), Roland's horn (xxxi, 12-18), the frozen Danube (xxxii, 25-30), and the croaking frog (xxxii, 31-36). As can be appreciated some similes are only three lines long, others stretch over twelve lines, and there is one case in which one simile follows another (xxxii). Basically, the similes can be divided into three groups depending on the object or subject they evoke: nature, history or literature, and extraordinary life situation. Finally, Dante's journey is a journey of self-discovery and of learning, and one fundamental aspect of this learning is how to decipher and make sense out of the noises he encounters in Hell. For the pilgrim noise is information, but in order to get access to that information, noise must first be tamed through the intellect and this he achieves with these similes. In this sense, the simile functions as a vehicle of knowledge: when the reader reaches the last line of *Inferno*, Dante has taught him to listen.

Everything that has been analyzed so far comes up in one single Canto. As a matter of fact, Canto v is a catalogue of the art of listening. Dante is about to tell us how he entered the Second Circle when the whining of the sinners («e tanto più dolor, che punge a

guaio», 3) produces an unforgettable first impression. One line later the pilgrim draws our attention to the sonorous capacity of the body. If in *Malebolge* we will hear how the little devils «digrignan li denti» (xxi, 131), here we meet Minos gnashing his teeth («Stavvi Minòs orribilmente, e ringhia», 4). The spirits confess their sins in front of Minos who judges and sends them to the appropriate circle of Hell («dicono e *odono* e poi son giù volte», 15; my italics). As soon as Minos catches sight of the pilgrim and his guide, he warns Dante of venturing himself any further into Hell. Virgil, however, immediately silences the guardian and tells him that their journey has been willed by God. Minos shuts up, Hell does not. New lamentations beat against Dante's ears:

Or incomincian le dolenti note
a farmisi sentire; or son venuto
là dove molto pianto mi percuote. (25-27)

These notes of desperation and the crying reinforce Dante's first impressions of the Second Circle. And, as we shall see and hear later, there is hardly another Canto where crying happens more often than in this one. The next three lines of Canto v are devoted to a simile based on an aural image:

Io venni in loco d'ogne luce muto,
che mugghia come fa mar per tempesta,
se da contrari venti è combattuto. (28-30)

Dante chooses a maritime situation in order to trigger the imagination of his reader; water and wind combine to create a sound characteristic of devastation and destruction. Commenting this simile Bilancioni highlights the alliteration:

Nell'oscurità che si addensa al primo verso col reiterarsi degli *u* e nelle dilaceranti dissonanze del secondo, sentiamo l'orrore e lo spavento del luogo, spavento e orrore che si fan maggiori nell'immagine sconfinata e quasi caotica, tumultuante fragorosa nelle undici sillabe seguenti (BILANCIONI, 1932: 106).

This way the lexical meaning is strengthened by the sound of the words. It should also be noted that the simile contributes to convey to the reader a sense of space; like the simile of the sand that eddies when a whirlwind swirls the sound created by the tempest suggests surroundability. Additionally, the simile offers a case of synesthesia when Dante writes that he reached a place «d'ogne luce muto» (28).

At the beginning Dante does not seem to bother much about how the sinners are incessantly driven up and down; he appears to be more concerned about their wails («quivi le strida, il compianto, il lamento; / bestemmian quivi la virtù divina», 35-36). The pilgrim is, beyond doubt, overwhelmed by what he hears and sees. After stressing the fact that the lustful have no hope for rest, Dante insists again on the sounds he perceives from the sinners:

E come i gru van cantando lor lai,
faccendo in aere di sé lunga riga,
così vid' io venir, traendo guai,
ombre portate da la detta briga; (46-49)

Now our poet does not search his image in the world of the elements, but in the kingdom of animals. As we know, he does so in several occasions (vi, 28-33; xxvii, 7-15;

xxxii, 31-36). After the simile, the pilgrim wants to know the identity of the people who are buffeted by the violent storm; Virgil complies with Dante's request and singles some of them out: Cleopatra, Helen, Dido, and Achilles are among those who couldn't restrain themselves from loving lustfully. Here again Dante is struck by pity:

Poscia ch'io ebbi 'l mio dottore udito
nomar le donne antiche e' cavalieri,
pietà mi giunse, e fui quasi smarrito. (70-72)

I wish to underline the importance of three words: *udito*, *pietà* and *smarrito*. The feelings of pity and of bewilderment are a direct consequence of Dante's hearing. The reader will, of course, remember the last time the pilgrim experienced pity as a result of his hearing («Quivi sospiri, pianti e alti guai / risonavan per l'aere senza stelle, / per ch'io al cominciar ne lagrimai», III, 22-24). And Dante's bewildered state, provoked through the action of hearing, will repeat itself after Farinata's prophesy. Dante is so confused after that crucial conversation that Virgil asks him: «Perché se' tu sì smarrito?» (X, 125).

Of all the souls who Dante sees in the storm he picks up two contemporaries to talk to. But before starting to speak with them, the Florentine indirectly makes a reference to the sound that engulfs him. He does this by mentioning twice the word *vento* («e paion sì al vento esser leggieri», 75; «Sì tosto come il vento a noi li piega», 79). We can either choose to be passive readers or to give sound to Dante's words at least in our imagination. The poet is asking us to reproduce in our minds the environment of the Second Circle, and this means that, while we move from one line to the next, we have to hear this terrible storm beating against our own ears. In brief, the incessant wind is the background sound of this circle. This becomes evident a couple of *terzine* later when Francesca answers Dante and explains what it means for them to leave the violent storm («mentre che 'l vento, come fa, ci tace», 96). Francesca does not say that their bodies are exhausted by the eternal and violent movement they are submitted to, but she suggests that their ears have had enough. And more importantly, to be outside of the *bufera infernal* means to be able to talk and to communicate their love. I shall return to this point later on when I will analyze the way Francesca and Paolo fell in love. At the present moment, however, it is more relevant to keep in mind that by mentioning that the wind is silent, Dante states that every time he has used that word before in this Canto the reader was supposed to add some sound to it in his imagination. I think it is hardly necessary to insist anymore on the surroundability that is suggested by the image of the wild wind.

Now let us go back to the moment where Dante addresses the lovers for the first time. As soon as Francesca and Paolo get closer, Dante urges them to speak with him: «mossi la voce: «O anime affannate, / venite a noi parlar, s'altri nol niega!»» (80-81). Not only does Dante make use of one of the most representative verbs of the *Commedia* like *muovere*, but he also shows one more time his awareness of how sound, in this case a voice, contributes to create the sense of space in Hell. And he does it with just one word! Zumthor is more explicit on this matter:

A body is there, one that speaks: the body is represented by a voice emanating from within; it is the most supple and least restricted part of the body because it goes beyond the body by its variable and playful acoustics. [...]

Such is the paradox of voice. It constitutes an event in the world of sound just as bodily movement does in the visual and tactile world (ZUMTHOR, 1990: 7).

Thus, *moissi la voce* projects the Florentine into space, into the *bufera infernal*, somehow joining Francesca and Paolo for a brief moment in their destiny.

For Dante, the pilgrim, there is no doubt that his «affettüoso grido» (87) is the reason why the lovers consent to talk to him. Francesca, taking advantage of the calm and silence, is willing to hear and speak: «Di quel che udire e che parlar vi piace, / noi udiremo e parleremo a voi» (94-95). Francesca goes on to give a short autobiography. As it happened 40 lines earlier when Virgil identified for Dante some of the sinners in the Second Circle and our poet was struck by pity, so does it again after Dante listens to Francesca:

Quand' io intesi quell' anime offense,
china' il viso, e tanto il tenni basso,
fin che 'l poeta mi disse: «Che pense?» (109-111)

But Dante can hardly think. His heart has been deeply touched and therefore he admits: «Francesca, i tuoi martiri / a lagrimar mi fanno tristo e pio» (116-117). The pattern, thus, has repeated itself: as a result of his hearing Dante experiences pity which would confirm my assumption that his heart is more easily accessible through the ear than through the eye.

Francesca's autobiography makes Dante burn with curiosity; he wants to know exactly how she and Paolo fell in love. When Dante asks Francesca to remember for him those days in which love was born in her heart, he refers to that time in aural terms («tempo d'i dolci sospiri», 118). And the pilgrim could not have referred in any other terms to that happy time, since *this* time, *this* particular moment is being experienced by him also in aural terms through the cries and the weeping. Francesca agrees to reveal the most important moment of her life to Dante, but not without giving him a warning: «dirò come colui che piange e dice» (126). Hence, she confirms that this is the time of weeping. As a matter of fact, in no other Canto will Dante hear so much crying like in this one; the act of crying appears or is referred to in lines 3, 27, 48, 117, 126 and 140. And while the sound of the wind has been the background music so far, in this climatic moment crying takes over: «Mentre che l'uno spirto questo disse, / l'altro piangëa» (139-140). Francesca remembers how she and Paolo fell in love while reading about Queen Guinevere and Lancelot. If thirty lines earlier «Amor, ch'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende» (100) and «Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona» (103) had been Francesca's explanation for her behaviour, now the act of reading («leggiavamo», 127, «lettura», 131, «leggemmo», 133, «leggemmo», 138) becomes essential in order to understand how that love, that releases no beloved from loving, was born. Indeed, Francesca and Paolo are victims of their ears, since they fell in love through reading aloud. Francesca tells in such an extraordinary and heartrending way her story that it is hardly difficult to comprehend why Paolo fell in love with her and her voice while she was reading to him. «La voce di Francesca ha come una misteriosa rispondenza sentimentale e l'umanità di lei assurge subito a un *pathos* universo. E quanta umiltà, quanta bontà, quanto terrore nell' espressività lirica della parola che fluisce dalla sua anima», states Bilancioni (BILANCIONI, 1932: 113). It is true that the *bufera infernal* represents an adequate *contrapasso* for those whose love life was a violent storm, but in the particular case of Francesca and Paolo we

have to ask ourselves if the *contrapasso* has a slightly different meaning. To live in the *bufera infernal* means to be buffeted incessantly, but it also means to be exposed to an extremely powerful noise that impedes any attempt of oral communication. Francesca and Paolo catch sight of each other, but they are unable to hear that element which opened their hearts to love: their voices. It seems to me that for them this is a more terrible punishment than to be driven up and down without rest by the wind. Paolo fell in love with Francesca due to the power of her voice, and Dante, the pilgrim? We will never know, but there is no doubt that he was fascinated to a great extent by this young woman who spoke to him in the sweetest manner. The pilgrim dies metaphorically at the end of Francesca's tale («io venni men così com' io morisse», 141), but the Canto does not end there. Dante adds an extra line which somehow repeats what he has already said, namely that he fainted. But if we hear rather than read that last sentence, we understand that its meaning goes beyond the lexical: «E caddi come corpo morto cade», 142. The alliterations on *c*, *o* and *r* are a perfect support of the image of the body falling and pounding against the floor. This is Dante's final note of a Canto full of sounds.

John Ahern claims that

There is, in fact, considerable evidence that persons outside the usual medieval literary public sang the *Comedy*. Petrarch writing to Boccaccio (1359) claimed that the «ignorant [*idiotae*]... in shops and the market place» knew Dante. He spoke of Dante's «long-standing popularity ... acclaimed in the theatres and cross-roads of the city» (*Familiars* 21.5) and noted how the «unskilled tongues of his admirers defiled the poem in performance [*pronuntiando*]» (AHERN, 1997: 215).

To conclude, taking into consideration the aural nature of Dante's *Inferno*, it is not difficult to understand its capacity to attract an oral audience. Unlike modern readers, the people who listened to the performances of the *Comedy* made of Dante's words a journey through their five senses. For 21st century readers of medieval texts, it is certainly imperative to stop to be silent scanners and become active readers if we are to understand that the meaning of a work of literature goes far beyond the printed page.

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