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“SE NON...” (*INF.* 9.9) AND “I VOSTRI MALI...” (23.109): INTERPRETATIVE ISSUES OF INFERNAL *APOSIOPESES*

Abstract: In *Inferno*, silence is always disruptive: it bespeaks not only a disunity between self and world but also, crucially, between self and Word. By virtue of their damnation, after all, the souls in Hell have set themselves at an insuperable distance from the Logos. An important way in which disruptive silences manifest themselves in the first *cantica* is in moments of *aposiopesis* which originate not from the damned souls, but from Virgil and from Dante himself. These elliptical moments in *Inferno* are entirely self-imposed, and it is partly for this reason that they have deeply unsettling implications on Dante’s successful passage through Hell, bound up as they are with miscommunication, misinterpretation, and the *cantica*’s overarching threat of linguistic collapse.

Keywords: Dante, *Inferno*, silence, interpretation, *aposiopesis*.

Introduction

To examine the phenomenon of silence in the *Commedia*, a poem so overtly predicated on the salvific power of language, may at first seem counterintuitive to the point of being needlessly contrarian. As so often happens, however, many of the poem’s fundamental concepts can only be fully appreciated by paying close attention to their opposites. The late Harold Bloom, writing not on Dante but on Shakespeare, suggests that “Increasingly [...] what he leaves out becomes much more important than what he puts in, and so he takes literature beyond its own limits” (viii). While scholarship has stressed that *Vita nuova* is characterised as much by what Dante chooses to exclude as by what he includes, it has yet to seriously consider the *Commedia* from a similar critical perspective.¹ Bloom’s statement is as applicable to the *Commedia* as it is to any of Shakespeare’s plays: the poem frequently extends its mimetic reach by pointing towards what it does not contain. This is as true of its investment in the language of prophecy and futurity as it is in the conspicuous absence of certain characters like Guido Cavalcanti, alluded to in Dante’s encounter with Guido’s father in *Inferno* 10. It is also true of things which the poem pointedly leaves unsaid.

Steven Bindeman, in his preliminary remarks on artistic silences, raises a series of pertinent questions as to what exactly is at stake when silence is under discussion (1). He posits that silence in art exists in a liminal space between the substantial and the metaphysical; between presence and absence; between something and nothing. While his enquiry into silence does not mention Dante or

¹ On omission in *Vita nuova* see, for instance, Harrison (35).