«Totus poema eius ubique mirabiliter figuratus»

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Abstract. This paper explores how metaphors in Dante's *Commedia* can be identified, classified and organized in a database so as to provide thorough and solid data to aid their understanding. All metaphors in the poem are first identified through a linguistic procedure called *MIP* (i.e. *Metaphor Identification Process*), based on the comparison between the contextual and the basic meaning of each word-unit. The metaphors thus identified are later classified based on syntactic, semantic and rhetorical structure criteria, taking into account both medieval explanations of figurative language and the features of Dante's metaphors that have always struck the readers of his poem. The findings from this combined linguistic and stylistic analysis provide evidence to support tenets put forward by some literary scholars (e.g. that metaphors increase in number and complexity throughout the poem) and show that metaphors converge in sections of political and religious invective, where one of the main purposes of the author is to elevate his style. The study suggests that a systematic multi-dimensional analysis of metaphor can shed light on its conceptual importance in a text and raise awareness of all its stylistic traits.

L'articolo presenta i risultati di un ampio studio sulle metafore della *Commedia* di Dante, che sono state identificate, classificate e organizzate in un database per sostanziare una comprensione complessiva e analitica del loro funzionamento. Le metafore del poema sono state inizialmente individuate tramite una procedura di analisi linguistica (MIP, Metaphor Identification Process) basata su un confronto tra il significato contestuale e il significato di base di ciascuna unità. Le metafore così identificate sono state poi classificate secondo parametri sintattici, semantici e di struttura retorica – scelti a partire dalla concezione medievale del linguaggio figurato e tenendo conto delle caratteristiche delle metafore dantesche ritenute più salienti dai lettori della *Commedia*. I risultati di questo intreccio tra analisi linguistica e analisi stilistica confermano solidamente alcune interpretazioni avanzate dagli studiosi (ad esempio riguardo il progressivo aumento delle metafore nel corso del poema e la loro crescente complessità), e dimostrano che le metafore convergono in sezioni di invettiva politica e religiosa, dove uno degli obiettivi principali del poeta è innalzare il suo stile. La ricerca suggerisce che un'analisi sistematica e multidimensionale della metafora può gettare luce sul suo apporto concettuale all'interno di un testo, oltre a rendere l'interprete più consapevole dei diversi aspetti stilistici dell'opera.

State of the art and goals

Dante's *Commedia* has always been considered an intensely figurative piece of poetry: Benvenuto da Imola, one of the most careful readers of the *Commedia* in the 14th century, maintains that Dante made a perfect and appropriate use of poetic representation. His poem, according to Benvenuto, is «ubique mirabiliter figuratus», that is to say marvellously replete with figurative expressions [4]. Since Benvenuto, Dante has often been defined a "poeta metaforicissimo", to put it in Borghini's words ([6], 53), but very few works, amid the endless list of contributions devoted to Dante, have dealt with the subject of his metaphor use.[1] In addition, in most of these inquiries, metaphors have been investigated in a limited and impressionistic fashion: scholars have proven to be more interested in the theoretical background than in the concrete realization of figurative language. Therefore, it is hoped that this article may make a contribution towards filling such a gap in the field of Dante studies.

The goal of the article is to show how a thorough catalogue of all metaphors in Dante's *Commedia* can provide solid data for a detailed and systematic account of metaphor. The aim is to demonstrate that a quantitative approach can be useful in describing some qualitative aspects of poetry which are sometimes considered essentially esthetical, and thus impossible to reduce to analytical data. At the same time, this research presents a concrete literary case study for an approach originally developed within the field of cognitive linguistics. The main hypothesis is that even poetic metaphors can be analytically described by means of a linguistic metaphor identification process combined with a stylistic classification. Since the text analysed is chronologically, linguistically and aesthetically removed from us, present-day readers, this enquiry aims at intertwining medieval and contemporary understanding of the same issue, while also attempting to verify a critical reading through a systematic analysis of data.

The first part of the article introduces both medieval and contemporary categories according to which metaphors were and are classified. The second presents the procedure employed for identifying metaphors in Dante's *Commedia*, and the main tools upon which we can rely in applying this linguistic identification method. The third section explains how metaphors can be classified by using several categories; by means of example, it also shows some major trends in Dante's poem and speculates on their meaning. The final section sets forth some of the main results of this quantitative analysis, pertaining respectively to metaphors' increased use in the course of the poem, to their position within the verse and to their distribution in the *Purgatorio*.

Between medieval and contemporary categories

A linguistic evaluation of meaning is necessary to assess if an utterance is meant to be "improper", that is to say, unproperly applied, or non-literal. This is because, whether it is deliberate or not, a metaphor is an utterance that can be perceived as straying from a linguistic standard or norm. Every rhetorical or stylistic discussion is a further development moving

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1   [13]; [2]; [15]. I provided a complete and critical state of the art on the topic in [31].

beyond the normative and binary appreciation of metaphoricity; it can call into question the interaction between metaphors and their literal context, their effects on the reader, or the discursive strategy within which they are created. From a theoretical point of view, the subsequent phases of our investigation will parallel the progressive instruction in medieval grammar and rhetoric.

In the Middle Ages, grammarians saw tropes as a fault, a deviation from correct and standard linguistic use. According to the widespread definition provided by Isidore of Seville, «metaphora est verbi alicuius usurpata translatio», 'a metaphor is an expropriated transferral of a given word' (*Etymologiae*, 1, 37, 2-4). Those who were learning to read and write in Latin were thus warned to stick within the boundaries of proper language, and to only indulge in tropes when they could prevent their meaning from going astray. The mandatory quality of a text, for grammarians, was *latinitas* or *perspicuitas*: it had to be comprehensible, close to common usage, respectful of what was perceived as a natural link between words and their referents.

It was only in a more sophisticated phase of their career that medieval students were instructed on how to build an elegant and effective discourse. Masters of Rhetoric considered figurative language an instrument to embellish a text beyond the standard language use. The main purposes of rhetorical ornamentation were to make a discourse more persuasive and to ennoble its form, and consequently its significance. It was deemed fundamental especially in those speeches that aimed at either praise or vituperation.

In short, Grammar taught how to «recte loqui», 'speak correctly', while Rhetoric taught how to «ornate loqui», 'speak elegantly' [10]. Late medieval Rhetoric was chiefly applied to letter writing; the hegemonic discipline of *ars dictaminis* found its cornerstone in the concept of *transumptio*, which was both a theory and a practice of ostensibly metaphoric language [18]. Through the latter, *dictatores*, the practitioners of *ars dictaminis*, presented themselves as skilful men of wisdom who could master the intricacies of symbols' production and reception.

Even though we have abandoned a purely prescriptive view,[2] contemporary categories somewhat reproduce similar interests and perspectives. Linguists concentrate on how metaphors constitute a deviation from a more basic, standard meaning in a given context, while stylistic analysis is meant to better characterize these deviations, so as to understand their functions and impact on the addressee. A thriving debate is growing around the concept of metaphor deliberateness.[3] According to such theoretical model, «when metaphor is used deliberately, it also turns into a stylistic device, while all other, non-deliberate metaphor, is simply part of a more general style of language, thought and communication» ([28], 318).

It is fair to say that no metaphor is more deliberate than poetic metaphor. Nonetheless, a stylistic analysis that is not rooted in metaphor's linguistic form would fail to show how figurative language is crafted to convey a certain meaning and effect.[4] On the other hand, an

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2   At least since Richards, who clarified that such a thing as a proper meaning does not exist, and that we can only consider «the constancy of contexts that give a word its meaning» ([25], 11).

3   On this concept, see Steen [29].

4   A pioneering study in the linguistic form of metaphors is Brooke-Rose [9].

exclusively linguistic approach would be too limited in characterising the poet's choice for figurative expressions. In other words, it is only through measuring the degree of meaning variation of each word that we can gain insights into the deliberate use of metaphors and grasp the poet's strategy.

Identification

Therefore, the first step of any research into Dante's metaphors consists in identifying said metaphors. In order to execute this phase in a systematic way, we can turn to a precise linguistic procedure called MIP, Metaphor Identification Process. The procedure allows the researcher to find metaphor-related words by examining a text on a word-by-word basis.

In its original development, the procedure was established to analyse everyday texts and speeches in contemporary English.[5] Since its field of application is mainly corpus linguistic analysis, it is intended to provide a highly reliable method that can be put into practice by every researcher with the same expected results.[6] In order to both reduce the role of individual evaluation and to guarantee coherence, it is recommended that analysts root all of their decisions in the same dictionary of language use.

In applying MIP to a very different purpose and case study, such as an inquiry into Dante's metaphors, some adaptations are required. First of all, the goal is not statistical reliability *per se*, but rather a more informal quantitative survey that can be exploited for qualitative analysis. This means that the application of MIP to the text of Dante's *Commedia* is more useful as a set of guidelines than as a strictly observed procedure. Moreover, the object of analysis is of a very different nature. Since the *Commedia* is an extremely complex 14th century poem, the analyst will look at different features than those occurring in a vast linguistic corpus of contemporary, everyday English texts. Finally, it is impossible to rely on a learner's dictionary, as the poem is written in an artistic variety of medieval Italian. Nevertheless, a few other highly helpful tools are available, as will be discussed presently.

Applying MIP to Dante's Commedia

MIP works as follows. For each lexical unit in the text, it is necessary to establish contextual meaning, that is, «how it applies to an entity, relation, or attribute in the situation evoked by the text». Then we have to determine if the lexical unit has a more basic contemporary meaning in other contexts. Basic meanings tend to be more concrete, related to bodily action, more precise and historically older. If the contextual meaning is significantly different from the basic meaning, and if the relationship between the two meanings can be related to analogy, the lexical unit is to be considered metaphorical ([27], 5-6).

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5   Text analyzed through MIP include, for example, news texts, everyday conversation, fiction and academic discourse; see Steen [27].

6   MIP has been tested, for example, on the VU Amsterdam Metaphor Corpus, a metaphor database that can be consulted at http://www.vismet.org/metcor/search/showPage.php?page=start.

As we have seen, MIP recommends relying on dictionaries as much as possible in establishing both the contextual and the basic meaning of a word/expression. Unfortunately, when it comes to identifying metaphors in an older literary text, no such instrument is available. However, other tools can support our understanding of what each word meant, and what was the more likely basic meaning for Dante and his contemporaries. The most useful resource is the TLIO (*Tesoro della Lingua Italiana delle Origini*),[7] a historical dictionary of medieval Italian that provides clear definitions of each word according to medieval occurrences. Since TLIO is still in the making, it is often necessary to interrogate the corpus itself on which TLIO is based, that is to say the OVI (*Opera Vocabolario Italiana*) corpus,[8] which includes more than two thousand literary and non-literary texts from the 13th and 14th centuries.[9] In addition, it is always useful to refer to the *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*, a comprehensive historical dictionary of the Italian language.[10]

To give an example, let us inspect the renowned first verse of the *Commedia*:

> Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita …
> (Inferno 1, 1)
> When I had journeyed half of our life's way …[11]

Leaving aside the very common use of the noun "mezzo", we shall consider the word "cammino". The TLIO provides the following definitions:

> 1 L'atto di spostarsi da un punto all'altro dello spazio; spostamento, viaggio; pellegrinaggio, fuga. […] 2 L'insieme dei luoghi attraversati (o da attraversare) da un soggetto che si muove da un punto all'altro dello spazio; [in partic.:] il percorso lineare compiuto (o da compiere) nello spazio dallo stesso soggetto. […] 2.5 Fig. Insieme di azioni successive (che tendono tutte verso un determinato fine); il tempo in cui tale insieme di azioni viene svolto; processo. 2.6 Fig. Insieme determinato di azioni/situazioni successive, compiute/attraversate dalla stessa persona; il tempo in cui tale insieme di azioni/situazioni ha luogo; il corso degli eventi, della vita.

> 1. The act of moving from one point to another in space; motion, journey; pilgrimage, escape. […] 2. The places one has gone (or has to go) when moving from one location to another; [partic.:] the linear path followed (or to be followed) by a subject moving in space. […] 2.5 Fig. Set of successive actions (all leaning towards the same goal); the timeframe in which this set of actions is accomplished; process. 2.6. Fig. A specific series of successive actions/situations, accomplished/experienced by the same person; the time in which this series of actions/situations takes place; the course of events, of life.

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7   http://tlio.ovi.cnr.it/TLIO/.
8   http://gattoweb.ovi.cnr.it/.
9   The lemmatized OVI corpus includes, as of today (May 15th, 2019), 2.268 texts, for 22.590.236 total occurrences, but it is constantly updated.
10 While it was not available online at the time this research was carried out, a prototype of the GDLI is now searchable at http://www.gdli.it/.
11 The English translation quoted here and elsewhere is Alighieri and Mandelbaum [1].

Of all of the above definitions, the one giving the most likely contextual meaning is the last one, 'successive actions or situations accomplished or experienced by the same person, or the timeframe in which these actions take place, i.e. course of events, life'. On the other hand, the basic meaning of "cammino" seems to be the first one, 'the act of moving from one point to another in space': it is more concrete, more physical and more precise. The two meanings are fairly different: to walk os not the same as to live; but there seems to be a clear analogy between them, for both walking and living in some way imply a directional process. We can therefore mark the word "cammino" as metaphorical. With respect to the so-called CMT (Conceptual Metaphor Theory),[12] the very first metaphor of the poem can be regarded as an exemplary instance of the widespread conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY.[13]

It should be evident that the process of identifying metaphors in such an elaborate way is by no means effortless, especially when it comes to a 14,000-line poem. However, even though figurative language should be considered a spectrum rather than a binary opposition, it is useful to pause and take stock of every single word; by doing so, we avoid getting caught in automatic readings and are able to make as coherent and rational choices as possible. In this case study, there are certainly several instances where researchers would not agree on the metaphoricity of a word-unit. Therefore, this quantitative approach is intended to show trends that can contribute to a qualitative appreciation of Dante's metaphors, rather than to provide clear-cut, self-contained statistics.

Classification

The almost 3,000 metaphors thus identified were then organized in a relational database, comprising two connected tables.[14] In the first table, named "places", we have Dante's text units – that is to say the tercet or tercets within which metaphors were identified – and their relevant coordinates (*cantica*, *canto*, and lines); metaphorical words are highlighted. In the second table, named "metaphors", we have a record for each metaphor. Each record is connected to the corresponding *locus* in the other table, and is further characterized through several fields pertaining to syntax, rhetorical structure and semantics.

The choice of these categories hinges on both medieval explanations of figurative language and the features of Dante's metaphors that have always struck the readers of his poem. Besides their position in the verse (*incipit*, centre, rhyme), metaphors were tagged according to their class (implicit, explicit, personification),[15] grammatical categories (nouns, adjectives, verbs),

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12 Conceptual Metaphor Theory is one of the prominent models for metaphor explanation. It was first established by Lakoff and Johnson in the 1980s [21]. For a critical review of its further developments, see Eubanks [12]; Gibbs [16]; Sullivan [30].

13 A discussion of this conceptual metaphor, which also takes into account the *Commedia*'s first verse, can be found in Katz and Taylor [20].

14 The database – a very simple one – was created with Filemaker. An online searchable version of it is in the making.

15 In implicit metaphors the tenor is simply substituted by the vehicle, while explicit metaphors are those where both the vehicle and the tenor are present. «The metaphor itself may take the verbal form

semantics. This latter classification includes 10 semantic macro-categories – such as animal, plant, bodily perception – more detailed micro-categories – such as journey, heat, bird – and *lemmata*. They were identified so as to cover the full range of metaphor vehicles put forward by Dante in the *Commedia*.[16]

Most of these categories were already defined in medieval grammar and rhetoric. A very detailed rhetorical treatise, the early 13th century *Candelabrum* written by Master Bene from Florence, specifies that metaphors could be expressed using either nouns, adjectives or verbs. Bene states that «habuimus quod verbum et adiectivum et substantivum transsumuntur sed quodlibet multis modis» ([3], 7, 25, 2) – 'we find that verbs, adjectives and nouns can be metaphorically transferred in many ways'.

One of Bene's main sources, the renowned *Poetria nova* (1200 ca.) composed by Geoffrey of Vinsauf, had already begun to distinguish between the so-called *collatio aperta* and *collatio occulta* – two terms that point respectively to explicit and hidden, elliptic comparisons (i.e. metaphors) ([14], 247-255). Furthermore, personification is consistently distinct from metaphor in medieval grammar and rhetoric, where it is named "prosopopoeia": it implies the attribution of human features and/or actions to a non-human subject [5]. Finally, it was common praxis to distinguish between animal and non-animal tropes,[17] or between animate and inanimate tropes.[18]

Rhetorical structure

In addition to these categories, it proved useful to introduce a contemporary classification pertaining to rhetorical structure. I adopted a fourfold taxonomy developed in an article authored by Crisp, Heywood and Steen [11] which is in turn based on Mann and Thompson's propositional structure [22]. This classification is rooted in text units, that is to say semi-independent clauses that form semantic wholes presenting a state of affairs as relatively integrated and separated; this category includes main clauses, embedded clauses, non-restrictive relative clauses, adverbial clauses and appositions.

Once the text is divided into T-units, each of these can be described thanks to four binary opposites. These four couples have been established so as to describe recurring patterns in metaphorical expression. Their development takes into account the surface linguistic expression, the context of the whole proposition, and the conceptual mapping implied in each metaphorical utterance. The analysis of each metaphor's rhetorical structure paves the way to our understanding of how the same conceptual mapping can take different linguistic and stylistic forms.

The four binary opposites are the following: restricted vs extended, singular vs multiple, simple

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of an identity statement (X is Y) [...]; a predication or membership statement (X is a G) [...]; or a statement of inclusion (Fs are Gs)» ([19], 2).

16 A similar semantic categorization was proposed in a 19th century study on Dante's similes: see Venturi [32].

17 Isidore of Seville, *Etym.* 1, 37, 2-4.

18 Quintilianus, *Institutio Oratoria* 8, 6, 9-12.

vs complex, pure vs mixed. See the diagram provided in the aforementioned article (Figure 1):
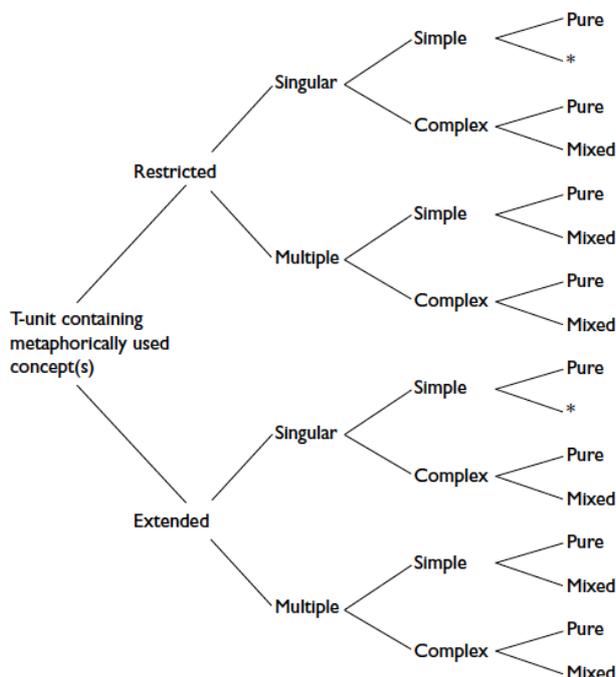

Figure 1: Taxonomy of metaphorical structure (Crisp, Heywood, and Steen 2002, 64).

Restricted vs extended metaphors

We speak of an extended, as opposed to restricted, metaphorical unit when the metaphorical mapping is continued in the next unit. Scholars long maintained that one of the most distinctive aspects of Dante's use of metaphors was the frequency of extended metaphors, sometimes known, a bit misleadingly, as "transumptiones". In fact, we can now state that these metaphors are only one of three types, and that the majority of metaphorical words is, on the contrary, fairly isolated in a literal context, and is generally expressed by a verb.[19] Verbal, restricted metaphors tend to confer a greater dynamicity to the text: unlike noun metaphors, where something is replaced, verbal metaphors enrich the characterization of an action, superimposing a new semantic field onto it.

Here we consider a very brief example:

> «non vi si pensa quanto sangue costa
> seminarla nel mondo»

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19 The prominence of verb metaphors was already put forward in Robey [26].

(Paradiso 29, 91-2)
«There, they devote no thought to how much blood it costs to sow it in the world».

In these two verses Beatrice is deploring people who do not realize how much blood was shed in spreading the Scriptures. She uses the verb "seminare", 'to sow'. The simple action of preaching the Bible is instantly coloured through this restricted, verbal metaphor pertaining to the agricultural semantic field. The metaphor invites readers to go beyond the simple referential meaning and to picture in their mind the Apostles sowing a field for faith to blossom and grow.

The same metaphor can be found in a more extended instance a few *cantos* earlier:

«Ché tu intrasti povero e digiuno
in campo, a seminar la buona pianta
 che fu già vite e ora è fatta pruno»
(Par. 24, 109-111)
 «For you were poor and hungry when you found the field and sowed the good plant –
once a vine and now a thorn».

This account of Saint Peter's preaching involves several attributes that are aligned with the agricultural metaphor, thus painting a broader fresco with a compelling spiritual meaning. In other words, by extending the very same metaphor, Dante provides a different effect: if the first metaphor adds a delicate nuance by conveying a merely episodic transfer, the second instance enlarges the picture enough to let it resonate with a biblical parable, such as that of the vineyard.

Singular vs multiple metaphors

Let us return to our fourfold taxonomy. We have a multiple, as opposed to singular, metaphorical unit when the metaphorical proposition contains more than one metaphorical semantic item, such as an adjective completing a noun. David Gibbons, in his monograph on Dante's metaphors, observed that a widespread technique in Dante's oeuvre «involves the careful deployment of adjectives, demonstrative pronouns and relative clauses in order to qualify individual metaphorical words» ([15], 81). In fact, multiple metaphors are almost as many as singular metaphors, but the first structure is far more common than the other two: multiple metaphors composed of a noun+adjective phrase are very frequent, while the structure involving a relative clause – which is called complex metaphor in our classification, as we will observe later – is fairly uncommon.

The reason why these metaphors are so frequent is that by adding an adjective, the metaphor is better integrated into the literal text, while it is also made more comprehensible. In these verses, for example, contemplative souls are pinpointed in this way:

«Questi altri fuochi tutti contemplanti
uomini fuoro, accesi di quel caldo
che fa nascere i fiori e ' frutti santi»
(Par. 22, 46-8)

«These other flames were all contemplatives, men who were kindled by the heat that brings to birth the holy flowers, the holy fruits».

We would not entirely understand what is signified by the metaphor of the fruits and flowers were it not for the adjective "santo", 'holy', which clarifies that zealous spirits produce holy works and deeds.

By means of adding an adjective, Dante can produce metaphors that convey diametrically opposed meanings. This is the case for certain bird metaphors. In the *Inferno* «malvagio uccello» ('filthy bird', *Inf.* 22, 96) designates one of Malebolge's devils, while a few cantos later «tanto uccello» ('so vast a bird', *Inf.* 34, 47) alludes to Lucifer himself – as does the proverbial expression «ma tale uccel nel becchetto s'annida» ('but such a bird nests in that cowl', *Par.* 29, 117). Conversely, the very same metaphor is attributed to the angel of *Purgatorio* 2, referred to as «uccel divino» ('bird divine', *Purg.* 2, 38). These metaphors rest on a very common and simple analogy, according to which both angels and demons, being able to fly, can be related to birds; by clarifying whether such a bird is filthy or divine, Dante adds more context for his readers to interpret these metaphors in the correct way.

Simple vs complex metaphors

Thirdly, we have a complex, as opposed to simple, metaphorical unit when there is a downgraded proposition, itself containing a metaphorical item, which is dependent on the main metaphorical unit. These, as we have already noted, are fairly rare: only one in ten metaphors in Dante's *Commedia* displays such an elaborate structure. In these verses, for example, Dante praises Virgil while questioning him about his identity:

«Or se' tu quel Virgilio e quella fonte
 che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?»
(Inf. 1, 79-80)
«And are you then that Virgil, you the fountain that freely pours so rich a stream of speech?».

From the metaphor of the fountain derives the dependent – and extended – image of the stream of speech. The effect, as can be easily seen, is generally very lofty.

There is a fundamental difference between complex and multiple metaphor: while the latter «extends the realization of a metaphor across a main proposition, complex metaphor extends it within a proposition that is itself dependent on a metaphorical semantic item within that main proposition» ([11], 62.). Consequently, multiple metaphors are perceived as a single entity, even though the metaphorical word is enriched by further connotations that apply beyond the single word-unit. On the other hand, in complex metaphors the dependence of the subordinate clause relies on the semantic proximity guaranteed by the metaphorical transfer, which thus becomes fundamental for the existence of the subordinate clause itself.

Pure vs mixed metaphors

Lastly, a mixed as opposed to pure metaphorical proposition contains metaphorical items deriving from two different source domains.[20] In another passage, Dante also names his guide in these terms:

> «Sole che sani ogni vista turbata»
> (Inf. 11, 91)
> «O sun that heals all sight that is perplexed».

To begin with, we have the metaphor of Virgil as a sun, and, immediately after that, the medical metaphor of the wisdom that heals all sight – with sight being another metaphor for knowledge. While the meaning of this designation is comprehensible, a careful reading of its components reveals the great semantic entanglement expressed in just a single verse.

Another significant mixed metaphor can be found at the very beginning of the poem, where Dante evokes the difficulty of describing as harsh an experience as the dark forest:

> Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura
> esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte
> che nel pensier rinova la paura!
> (*Inf.* 1, 4-6)
> Ah, how hard it is to tell the nature of that wood, savage, sour and harsh – the very thought of it renews my fear!

To convey the overwhelming sensory and spiritual experience of the allegorical dark wood, Dante lays out three metaphors pertaining to the same tenor – the wood itself and the poetic enterprise of putting it into words – but appealing to both touch and taste. The effect is spectacularly various and almost alienating.

Mixed metaphors are therefore particularly interesting, for they create a very intense semantic overlap; they are even rarer than complex metaphors. This means that in most cases Dante's figurative language relies on rhapsodic tropes or, conversely, on metaphors coherently and harmoniously extended beyond the single word.

Findings

Thanks to this database, the almost 3,000 metaphors in Dante's *Commedia* could be described within a systematic frame and according to a great variety of criteria. Among the main outcomes, it is now possible to confirm a general impression put forward by Dante scholars: metaphors tend to become more frequent and more extended throughout the poem.[21]

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20 Some scholars have questioned the very existence of mixed metaphors in the framework of CMT. See a recent volume devoted to these metaphors: [17].

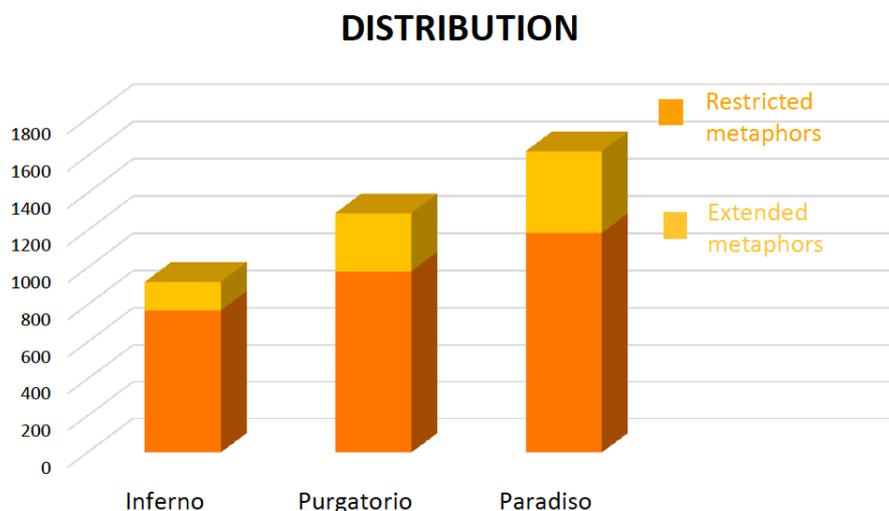21 See for instance [23], 206-207.

DISTRIBUTION

Figure 2: Distribution of restricted and extended metaphors in Dante's *Commedia*

Figure 2 shows the distribution of metaphors in the three *cantiche*. It proves that extended metaphors increase not only in absolute, but also in relative terms. Hence, we can observe a significant development in the complexity of figurative language. This can both explain and be explained by the broader picture of the style peculiar to each *cantica*.

To put it briefly, the *Inferno* contains a more realistic narrative, where metaphors are an episodic tool for sudden comical parenthesis involving a broad range of terrestrial vehicles. The *Purgatorio*, with its liturgical atmosphere, develops a series of more repetitive figurative clusters whose aim is to outline the progressive ascent towards the Heavens. And lastly, the third *cantica* paints very broad figurative frescoes, where human history is embraced from a celestial perspective. These passages are frequently associated with animal and vegetal metaphors, in an extraordinary appropriation of biblical forms that marks the distance between the corrupted present and the natural world; such metaphors are more often than not extremely extended and sustained.

These stylistic traits can be related to a fundamental aspect of the *Commedia*. The whole poem portrays a path ascending from a contingent and individual dimension towards an eternal, divine perspective. It is a cognitive path, as well as a spiritual one, and this provides a powerful connection between what the pilgrim sees in his extramundane experience on the one hand, and what the poet recounts on the other hand. Irma Brandeis first suggested that the development of metaphors and similes can be associated with to the protagonist's evolving perceptions:

> in other words, the imagery of metaphor and analogy reflects the growth of the pilgrim's understanding in his progress from the dark wood of spiritual blindness, through gradual acquisitions of insight into universal order, to the point where he can not only "read" all the scattered pages of the "book" of the universe, but can see in a single glance the whole

restored.[22]

This is the reason why the poem's style evolves as sketched, and this is the reason why metaphors evolve from scattered and disparate analogies into a progressively more extended, complex and intertwined rhetorical framework.

Additionally, it can be shown that approximatively 65% of metaphorical words are rhyme-words (see Figure 3).

This remarkable trend can be explained through several concurrent factors. Firstly metrical constraints impose the signifier over the signified, and metaphors extend the range of possible semantic equivalents, thus aiding the author in finding a fitting rhyme-word. But rhyme-words also stand out of the text for their pre-eminent and memorable position: placing a metaphor at the end of the verse increases its impact. Hence, in rhyme-words Dante insists on strong semantic turnings and creates powerful tension by choosing rare words or creating unexpected images.[23]
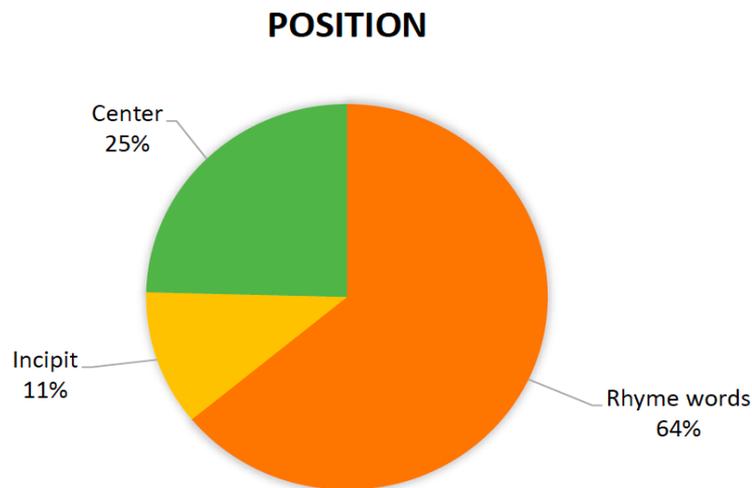
POSITION

Figure 3: Position of metaphors in Dante's *Commedia*

Thirdly, the interconnected structure of the tercet confers a certain verticality on rhyme-words that corroborates and is corroborated by the vertiginous semantic and cognitive effect derived from metaphorical substitution. Rhyme-words can sometimes constitute a proper vertical code, where each blank space at the end of the verse signals how the reader should extend the meaning by acknowledging and exploring the metaphorical transfer. This is all the more

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22 [7], 558. See also [8].

23 On rhyme-words in the *Commedia*, see Punzi [24].

evident in some extraordinary cases, where rich or equivocal rhymes link metaphors that are already connected from a semantic point of view. See this tercet, for example:

> «Sanguinoso esce de la triste selva;
> lasciala tal, che di qui a mille anni
> ne lo stato primaio non si rinselva»
> (Purg. 14, 64-6)
> «Bloody, he comes out from the wood he's plundered, leaving it such that in a thousand
> years it will not be the forest that it was».

The translation does not do justice to the sophisticated wordplay between the noun "selva" ('wood') and the verb "rinselva" ('to grow back into a wood'). In addition, the semantic continuity between the two vegetal metaphors is further reinforced through the rich rhyme.

Finally, a close reading of how metaphors' frequency and typology are organized in relation to specific episodes demonstrates that the weight of metaphors is linked to the oscillation between styles, and that specific content and styles correspond to specific semantic fields and structures. While Dante's readers have always held that metaphors in the *Commedia* are mostly employed to express the ineffable, our data show that they instead converge and intensify in sections of political and religious invective, where the main purpose of the author is to raise his style as to confer gravity on such compelling issues. This is another reason for the increasing frequency and complexity of metaphors throughout the whole poem, as these passages are far more frequent and more developed in the *Paradiso*. Such connection is particularly evident when we look at the *Purgatorio* (see Figure 4).
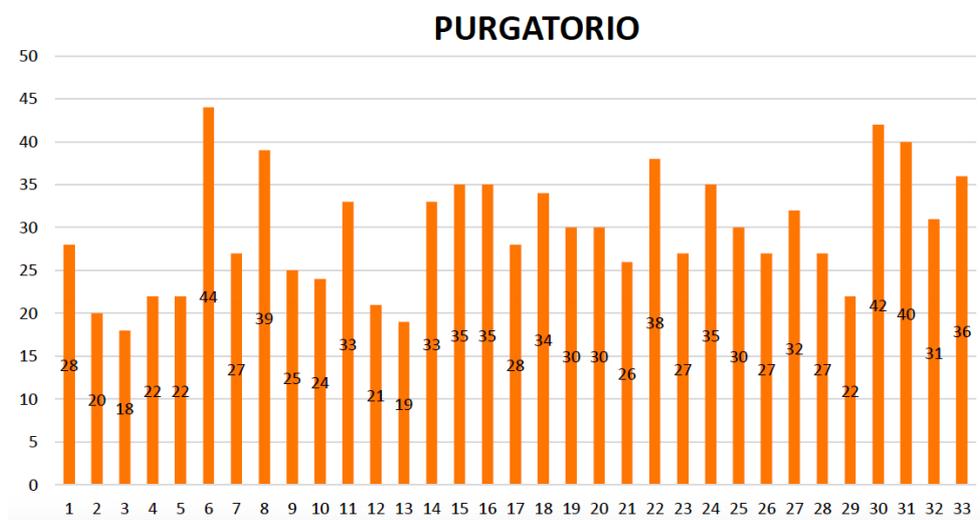

Figure 4: Metaphorical occurrences in the *Purgatorio*

We can observe an extraordinarily thick figurative fabric in the sixth *canto*, where Dante suddenly bursts into a biting reproach about the current condition of Italy. With 44 metaphors,

including a number of complex, mixed and extended metaphors, this canto rises considerably above the average 29 metaphors per *canto* we witness in the rest of the *cantica*. The other highly metaphorical *canto*, as is shown in the chart, is the thirtieth, where Dante is fiercely reproached by Beatrice for his sins.

On both occasions, Dante aims to confer a prominent poetic dignity to his discourse. This dignity is not necessarily synonymous with high style: many of these metaphors are, on the contrary, fairly violent, sometimes even trivial. They seem to be developed for the sake of fuelling the readers' feelings with powerful and evocative images.

The first outburst of Dante's invective in *canto* 6 is exemplary in this respect:

> Ahi serva Italia, di dolore ostello,
> nave sanza nocchiere in gran tempesta,
> non donna di province, ma bordello!
> (Purg. 6, 76-78)
> Ah, abject Italy, you inn of sorrows, you ship without a helmsman in harsh seas, no queen
> of provinces but of bordellos!

Italy is first personified and depicted as a servant, then objectified and represented through the two images of the inn of sorrows and the ship adrift in harsh seas, and finally further degraded with the most shameful metaphor of the queen transformed into a whore. In this tercet, metaphors climax from sore to vibrant and, finally, vexed, in a frantic stockpiling of images that is meant to express all the poet's distress.

At the same time, metaphoric invectives also sublimate human contingent situations towards a more universal, natural dimension, where the eternal fight between good and evil is at stake. We can consider, for example, a proverb flavored tercet in Beatrice's rebuke:

> «Ma tanto più maligno e più silvestro
> si fa 'l terren col mal seme e non cólto,
> quant'elli ha più di buon vigor terrestro»
> (Purg. 30, 118-120)
> «But where the soil has finer vigor, there precisely – when untilled or badly seeded – will
> that terrain grow wilder and more noxious».

The very specific human history that links Dante to his beloved Beatrice is here transformed into natural law, once again resonant with biblical echoes. It is not only Dante's obstinacy in his errors that Beatrice is pinpointing, but the very nature of obstinacy itself. In this way, the protagonist's individual path assumes a more universal meaning, one that readers can fruitfully take as a wide-ranging warning.

Conclusions

In conclusion, metaphors follow a great variety of uses and functions, and a quantitative

approach has proven to be crucial in conferring substance to a more complex and systematic critical evaluation of how, where and why metaphors are used in Dante's *Commedia*. It is only thanks to an accurate identification and classification, and to a searchable digital tool, that we can organize and dissect such extensive material. By grounding a qualitative description in quantitative analysis, it is possible to not only lend weight to otherwise intuitive critical readings, but also to discover patterns that have been largely ignored.

At the same time, the intertwining of linguistic and stylistic analysis has prompted a constant reflection on how metaphors connect signifier and signified, that is to say how they concretely work in conveying a richer meaning. This includes not only an extended semantic reference, but also a specific pragmatic function within a given context. As we have just seen, a qualitative and quantitative account of poetic metaphors makes it possible to understand trends in a wider framework, going beyond the description of a single metaphorical utterance and considering the poem as a whole, with its peculiar features, scope and rhetorical strategies.

The appreciation of particular shifts such as those we have described makes it possible to speculate on their cause. This is how we can connect the linguistic surface of a text with its style, structure and conceptual import. When it comes to metaphor, it is all the more fascinating to become aware of how formal aspects often depend on and/or elicit cognitive unfolding. Dante's *Commedia* is exemplary in its developing of an incredibly coherent figurative frame.

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