P. M. Mehtonen and Jaana Vaahtera

Noble Negation: The Value of Linguistic Spaces in Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*

Riassunto: Cominciando dall'intrigante, per il lettore, descrizione del locale del primo Discorso, il *De vulgari eloquentia* di Dante Alighieri (c. 1304–1305) conduce chi lo legge attraverso una serie di ambigui commenti sui luoghi e spazi (*curia, aula*) legati al vernacolo illustre. Questo crea nuovi spazi linguistici nell'immaginazione del lettore: cammini paralleli del pensiero, congetture, suspence. Il presente saggio intende sostenere che l'affermazione e susseguente negazione – o denarrazione – dei luoghi, più o meno concreti, trasferisce la discussione di Dante, e ugualmente la lingua discussa, in uno spazio più astratto, dove la formalizzazione del volgare, o vernacolo illustre, si realizza.

L'ingegnosa funzione degli spazi alternativi che emerge risulta essere sotto stimata se essi devono essere ridotti puramente al risultato di singole metafore o alla riluttanza di Dante a prendere posizione in una controversia di carattere teologico sull'origine del linguaggio. Una simile variante di narrazione non affermativa rende possibile a Dante di assegnare all'illustre vernacolo un somigliante vuoto ontologico tra l'essere e il non essere come nel caso del riferimento biblico alle prime lingue umane. L'ambiguo spazio che di conseguenza risulta essere creato per il volgare illustre è il luogo dove il volgare può essere soggetto alla razionale investigazione dantesca.

Keywords: Dante, vernacular poetics, negation, denarration

D ante's *De vulgari eloquentia*, an unfinished work written ca. 1304–1305, is the Poet's display of virtuosity concerning both the history of language and vernacular poetry. It was composed in Latin, at that time the language of serious scholarship, and in aiming to usurp the authority of Cicero, Horace and the

medieval *artes poeticae* in the field of new vernacular poetics, Dante both acknowledged his doctrinal as well as stylistic debts to these *auctores* and consciously disappointed the Latinate readers' expectations of a treatment that would echo the three important sources of medieval commentary tradition and *poetriae*: Horace's *Poetria vetus* (that is, the "old" school of *Ars poetica*), Cicero's *De inventione* and the (anonymous) *Rhetorica ad Herennium*.[1] At the beginning of the fourteenth century, the earlier northern activity in the European study of rhetoric and poetics was giving way to the ascendancy of Italy in the production of rhetorical genres and textbooks. Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia* belongs to a turbulent era of different influences in both rhetoric and poetics. On the one hand, the treatise is still quite at home in the scholastic tradition. Aristotle's growing impact, also in poetics and rhetoric, was a fairly recent development, along with the Latin translation (1256) of the Arab philosopher Avërroes' commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics* and William of Moerbeke's translation from the Greek (1278). On the other hand, *De vulgari eloquentia* slightly predates the earliest humanistic defences of poetry by Petrarch and Boccaccio, whose ideas of the essence of poetic language were also shaped by a merging of traditions rather than a

[1]Z. G. Barański rightly observes that the *DVE* resembles very little the traditional manuals of rhetoric and particularly the *artes dictaminis* and *poetriae*, despite the fact that these greatly influenced it. Elsewhere he stresses Horace's influence on Dante, and deems it likely that Dante knew Horace's *Ars poetica* both directly and through the commentary tradition. Z. G. Barański, "*Sole nuovo, luce nuova*". *Saggi sul rinnovamento culturale in Dante* (Torino: Scriptorium, 1996), 89; Z. G. Barański, "*Magister satiricus*: Preliminary Notes on Dante, Horace and the Middle Ages," in J. C. Barnes and M. Zaccarello, eds, *Language and Style in Dante. Seven essays* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013), 13–61 (p. 46).

clear theoretical paradigm.[2] No wonder, then, that in the area of language, "Dante defies any labeling" or repeats "the paradox and subversive hypotext" in earlier linguistic theories, as he combines empiric observation and scholastic reasoning.[3] Among Dante's other contemporary work the *Convivio* (ca. 1304–1307) contains similar themes as those presented in the first part of the *De vulgari eloquentia*.[4]

What is striking in this treatise on vernacular poetry is Dante's way of creating sustained rhetorical themes and reverting to them as he proceeds, now affirming, but in the next instance denying them. We would illustrate this by singling out some forms and devices of negation that Dante chose in order to construct the textual level of Latin doctrine appropriate for the promotion of the noble vernacular. The *De vulgari eloquentia* abounds in spaces and places, both real and unreal, concrete and abstract, involved in a rhetorically prosecuted inquiry. Some of these spaces, particularly in the first book of the treatise that explores the history and nature of the illustrious vernacular, are both highly appreciated by Dante the narrator and, nevertheless, simultaneously denied or at least rendered ambiguous. At times the first person speaker (sometimes singular, mostly plural[5]) proceeds as if in the plot of the vernacular romance narrative, developing loops

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[2]V. Cox, "Ciceronian Rhetoric in Late Medieval Italy: The Latin and Vernacular Traditions" and P. Mehtonen, "Poetics, Narration and Imitation: Rhetoric as *ars aplicabilis*", both in V. Cox and J. O. Ward, eds, *The Rhetoric of Cicero in Its Medieval and Early Renaissance Commentary Tradition* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2006), 109–43 and 289–312.

[3]A. Mazzocco, *Linguistic Theories in Dante and the Humanists. Studies of Language and Intellectual History in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Italy* (Leiden, New York, Köln: Brill, 1993), 6; M. Amsler, *Affective Literacies. Writing and Multilingualism in the Late Middle Ages* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 80; also Z. G. Barański, *Dante e i segni. Saggi per una storia intellettuale di Dante Alighieri* (Napoli: Liguori Editore, 2000), 22–7.

[4]For instance A. Schiaffini describes the *DVE* as "opera gemella del *Convivio*": "Dante, retorica, medioevo", in *Atti del congresso internazionale di studi Danteschi*, a cura della Società Dantesca Italiana e dell'Associazione internazionale per gli studi di lingua e letteratura italiana e sotto il patrocinio dei comuni di Firenze, Verona e Ravenna (Firenze: Sansoni, 1966), 155–86 (p. 162). However, for discussions regarding the fruitfulness of paralleling and analysing the two treatises together see E. Grønlie, "The Domestication of Vernacular Poetry: Measuring Authority in the *De vulgari eloquentia*," in U. Falkeid, ed., *Dante: A Critical Reappraisal* (Oslo: Unipub, 2008), 145–175 (p. 149) and I. Rosier-Catach, intr. and critical commentary: Dante Alighieri, *De l'éloquence en vulgaire*, trans. A. Grondeux, R. Imbach and I. Rosier-Catach (Paris: Fayard, 2011), 31–5.

[5]See for instance Rosier-Catach (cited in n. 4 above) *ad loc*. 1.4.4 concerning *titubo*. The use of the first person singular by Dante is rare: here, it is due to the original idea presented by Dante. Similarly, Fenzi *ad loc*. 1.4.1 concerning *existimo*. Dante Alighieri, *De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. E. Fenzi, in *Le opere*, vol. III, eds E. Fenzi with L. Formisano and F. Montuori (Roma: Salerno Editrice, 2012).

of alternative spaces and suspense. Some alternatives are never chosen or realized:

> And from this we can confidently deduce where the first speech was uttered: for I have clearly shown that, if God's spirit was breathed into man outside Paradise, then it was outside Paradise that he spoke; if indeed inside, then the place of the first speech was in Paradise itself. (*De vulgari eloquentia*, henceforth *DVE* in the references, 1.5.3; trans. Botterill)[6]

By arguing quite literally from both sides, such a rhetorical strategy of ambiguity here and elsewhere in the treatise creates new linguistic spaces: parallel lines of thought and conjecture. In the passage quoted above, Dante answers one of the questions he had posed earlier concerning the person of the very first speaker – what he said, to whom, where and when.[7] Yet, the fact that the other questions receive an unambiguous response[8] renders the mysterious answer regarding the place of the first speech act even more conspicuous. Bearing in mind that the spatial uncertainty here is to a significant degree of Dante's own making,[9] one may also see the relevance of the passage in relation to other ambiguous, undefined or non-existent places.

The quoted passage reflects even grander puzzles or uncertainties in the themes of the *De vulgari eloquentia*. Despite the efforts of

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[6]*Et hinc penitus elicere possumus locum illum ubi effutita est prima locutio: quoniam, si extra paradisum afflatus est homo, extra, si vero intra, intra fuisse locum prime locutionis convicimus.* (*DVE* 1.5.3). All translations from the *DVE* into English are by Botterill: Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. and trans. by S. Botterill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). For Dante's original approach concerning the theme of the passage see Tavoni *ad loc.* 1.5.3 (and Rosier-Catach, cited in n. 4 above, who follows Tavoni); Dante seems to consider the moment of the creation of Adam as different from the moment when God's spirit was breathed into Adam. Dante Alighieri, *De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. M. Tavoni, in Dante Alighieri, *Opere*, vol. I (Milano: Arnaldo Mondadori Editore, 2011).

[7]*DVE* 1.4.1. The questions are familiar from the *circumstantiae* of rhetoric (see e.g. Fenzi, cited in n. 5 above, *ad loc.* 1.4.1).

[8]Although Dante's answers are clear, they are not necessarily the standard ones. Compare, for instance, *DVE* 1.4.2–3 and *Genesis* 2.16 regarding the first speaker. See Fenzi (cited in n. 5 above), *ad loc.* 1.4.2 on Dante's interpretation of *locutio*. On Dante's originality in the interpretation of biblical matters related to the first human language, see P. V. Mengaldo, *Linguistica e retorica di Dante* (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1978), 34. Barański, for his part, pays attention to the passages of *Genesis* related to language that Dante leaves unmentioned. Dante's interpretation of the *Genesis* here differs from the exegesis of his time and this is something that contemporary readers could not but notice. These omissions, according to Barański, are intentional (*Sole nuovo*, cited in n. 1 above, 93–5).

[9]As Tavoni (cited in n. 6 above) *ad loc.* 1.5.3 makes clear.

scholars, the nature of the illustrious vernacular – the main topic of the first part of the treatise, before the vernacular poetics in the second, with examples from Bertran de Born, Arnaut Daniel, Giraut de Borneil, Cino da Pistoia, Guido Guinizzelli, Guido Cavalcanti and others – has eluded unanimous interpretation. It has been asked, for instance, whether the illustrious vernacular is the common vernacular of Italy or just the language of the canzone; and whether it is the combination of the best elements in the existing Italian idiom or an abstraction.[10] It is, in any case, clear that Dante's discussion of the first Adamic language is an integral part of the argument of the *De vulgari eloquentia*, not just an appealing introduction to matters related to language. Barański has stressed Dante's aim to imitate the modes of the *Deus artifex* in every field of knowledge and to find the form and structure most suitable for the analysis of specific issues, including linguistic ones. For Dante, there is a strong moral aspect to language which makes the biblical matters of the first part of the *De vulgari eloquentia* important for the treatise as a whole.[11] Such (po)etics was likewise a crucial element in the preceding medieval *poetriae*, and this aspect should be kept in mind in scrutinizing the more technical linguistic features. The focus in the present article is on the textual and rhetorical tactics of using spatial images and negation in order to enhance the significance of the Adamic language and its relation to the illustrious vernacular. These devices preserve the ambiguity and plurality of the "doctrines" offered by the Latin treatise on vernacular matters.

Narrative negation

... perhaps throw out a few dark hints, which should be scattered around and made as varied as possible, because if you make a single definite assertion you will have to prove it or risk losing your case. (Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 7.2.12)

In the first book of the *De vulgari eloquentia* Dante uses the affirmative words, *oc*, *oïl* and *sì*, as the basis of his typology of the three romance

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[10]Mazzocco claims that Dante's illustrious vernacular is the restoration of the proto-vernacular of all the Italian vernaculars, accomplished by Dante himself and other *doctores*: it is a natural and therefore changeable language (*Linguistic Theories*, cited in n. 3 above, 119, 138–43); see also Rosier-Catach (cited in n. 4 above), 60–4.

[11]Barański, *Dante e i segni* (cited in n. 3 above), 82–4 and *Sole nuovo* (cited in n. 1 above), 87–93. For the poet as "un nuovo (e più perfetto) Adamo": U. Eco, *La ricerca della lingua perfetta nella cultura Europea* (Bari: Laterza, 1993), 53.

vernaculars, the Occitan (Provençal), the French and the Italian.[12] Affirmation, however, does not become the dominant mode of argumentation as the author proceeds to offer a series of spatial comparisons and metaphors in describing the emerging illustrious vernacular. Instead, as will be demonstrated in the next section, Dante's treatise vacillates between affirming and negating in a way that makes this vacillation itself a consistent device. In terms of modern poetics it may be analysed as a variant of *denarration*, or verbal negation, where something (in our cases: spatial matter) is affirmed and denied almost simultaneously.[13] Such interplay was not unknown to the Latin masters of rhetoric and poetics, as transmitted in the medieval commentary traditions. Already in the classical tradition, the methods of telling, untelling and not telling were expounded by Cicero and especially Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* (*The Orator's Education*) more thoroughly than by the other cornerstones of Latin eloquence. As aptly put by Christopher Craig, *Institutio* is "the most extensive treatment of Latin rhetoric of when and how one may persuade an audience by not saying what one means."[14] The tradition of the appropriate tropes of denying or obfuscating (e.g. *occultatio* or *paralipsis*, *emphasis*, *aposiopesis*) continued to be discussed in the medieval arts of poetry (Geoffrey of Vinsauf, John of Garland)[15] and practiced in both Latin and vernacular medieval poetry. Fine artistic examples abound in the vernacular troubadour poetry, where clarity was not considered a merit (e.g. *trobar clus*, Arnaut Daniel, and the other poets admired by Dante in the *DVE*). Thus in choosing to analyse Dante in the suggested way, this essay by no means amplifies the uniqueness of *De vulgari eloquentia* but rather seeks to render its specific contribution to a long tradition.

The spatial rhetoric and linguistics of the *De vulgari eloquentia* have received much less scholarly attention than the actual topography of

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[12]*DVE* 1.8.5–6; 1.9.2; 1.10.1–2. Dante had predecessors in distinguishing the three groups on the basis of the affirmative. For this, as well as his problematic statement that it is the Hispanic (*ut puta Yspani*) that say *oc*, see P. V. Mengaldo, ed., Dante Alighieri, *De vulgari eloquentia*, in *Opere minori*, vol. II (Milano, Napoli: Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, 1979), *ad loc*. 1.8.5; Tavoni (cited in n. 6 above), *ad loc*. 1.8.5.

[13]B. Richardson, "Denarration in Fiction: Erasing the Story in Beckett and Others," *Narrative* 9:2 (2001): 169–75.

[14]C. Craig, "Quintilian on Not Saying What One Means (*Inst*. 9.2.73–74)", in L. Calboli Montefusco, ed., *Papers on Rhetoric* VI (Roma: Herder Editrice, 2004), 101–15 (p. 101).

[15]For instance Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria nova*, trans. M. F. Nims (Toronto: PIMS, 1967), 58. The Latin text in E. Faral, *Les arts poétiques du XIIe et du XIIIe siècle* (Paris: Édouard Champion, 1924).

the Romance dialects, as presented in the treatise, or the visually eng-
aging cosmological spatiality of the *Divine Comedy*.[16] Among Dante's
works the *De vulgari eloquentia* is the most difficult to position in terms
of time and place.[17] This concurs with the view this essay seeks to
promote as it explores the well-nigh inaccessible places created by
Dante. His artful interplay of affirmation and negation exemplifies
the widely acknowledged contradictions and rhetorical tactics of the
De vulgari eloquentia and *Convivio*.[18] The instances of spatial denarration
generate a need to explore the meaning of this fairly technical linguistic
device in the broader plan of Dante's prose. This essay will argue that
the affirmation and subsequent negation of the more or less concrete
places liberates the discussion as well as the language discussed to a
nobler, more abstract space. There the formalization of the *vulgare*, or
noble vernacular, can take place through the rational investigation
initiated by Dante in *De vulgari eloquentia* 1.16.1.[19] The vernacular *utopos*
is simultaneously an *atopos*.

The public and linguistic spaces of *vulgare*

With his predilection for scholastic or pseudo-scholastic distinc-
tions in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante calls the *vulgare* he pursues
illustre, cardinale, aulicum, and *curiale* at the beginning of the most
revealing part of the first book of the treatise:

> So we have found what we were seeking: we can define the illustrious,
> cardinal, aulic, and curial vernacular in Italy as that which belongs to
> every Italian city yet seems to belong to none, and against which the

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[16]E.g. F. Bruni, "Nota su la geografia di Dante nel '*De vulgari eloquentia*'", in
Dante Alighieri, Le opere, vol. III (cited in n. 5 above), 243–61. Barański, (*Sole nuovo*,
cited in n. 1 above, 85) stresses also the moral (exegetic) aspects of the geography of
languages as presented in the *DVE*. For the spheres in the *Divine Comedy* see the chap-
ter "Dante's Other World: Topography and Demography", in J. A. Scott, *Understand-
ing Dante* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 213–30.

[17]See Mengaldo (cited in n. 12 above), 19–23. The *DVE* is assumed, but without
certainty, to have been written in Bologna. Tavoni argues that it was written *for*
Bologna (cited in n. 6 above), 1067, 1113–16; see also Fenzi, *Introduzione* (cited in
n. 5 above), xxiii.

[18]A good overview of the study of such contradictions is included in A. R. Ascoli,
"*Neminem ante nos*: Historicity and Authority in the *De vulgari eloquentia*", *Annali
d'italianistica* 8 (1990): 186–231 (pp. 194–5, 198).

[19]On the formalization of the *vulgare* as Dante's goal, see Grønlie, "The Domes-
tication" (cited in n. 4 above), 145–75.

vernaculars of all the cities of the Italians can be measured, weighed, and compared. (*DVE* 1.16.6)[20]

The first epithet "illustrious" conveys notions of illumination, power and honour, the second derives from the word for the hinge of a door, *cardo*, and embodies the notion of the noble *vulgare* guiding and regulating the other dialects.[21] In whatever direction the hinge moves, the door moves inwards and outwards with it. Thus there is both stability and variation in this movement. The discussion of these epithets concerns the purely linguistic side of the *vulgare* in *De vulgari eloquentia* 1.17–18, while through the remaining two epithets Dante explores the political and social aspects related to the vernacular.[22] The epithets *aulicum*, and *curiale* derive respectively from *aula* and *curia*, both of them, at least potentially, material buildings. While there seems to be universal agreement among scholars on *aula* as a physical place,[23] that is, the royal court or the palace, *curia* is understood either as the law-court, the seat of justice of a country[24], or then as a functional unity of the people participating in political, administrative or judicial activity – for instance, the council of the king[25]; or even a spiritual place related to the *vulgare* as "la vraie Curie qui rassemble en sa propre demeure tous ceux qui communiquent entre eux par ce même *logos* qui apprend aux Italiens la règle de leurs devoirs".[26] Thus, *curia* is an abstract concept, not a physical place. Even when *curia* is associated with a particular historical court – that of Frederick II in Sicily or of Albert of Austria[27] – the scholars stress, instead of a concrete imperial

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[20]*Itaque, adepti quod querebamus, dicimus illustre, cardinale, aulicum et curiale vulgare in Latio, quod omnis latie civitatis est et nullius esse videtur, et quo municipalia vulgaria omnia Latinorum mensurantur et ponderantur et comparantur.* (*DVE* 1.16.6)

[21]E.g. Tavoni (cited in n. 6 above), *ad loc*. 1.17.2 and 4–5; 1.18.1.

[22]Fenzi (cited in n. 5 above) *ad loc*. 1.18.4.

[23]Albeit "virtuale" as Fenzi calls it (cited in n. 5 above) *ad loc*. 1.18.4.

[24]The interpretation found in Botterill (cited in n. 6 above) *ad loc*. 1.18.4 note 95.

[25]See the Glossaire in Rosier-Catach (cited in n. 4 above), *s.v. aulicum* & *s.v. curiale*. The latter is indeed, in French, *la cour*, but not the physical court or palace: it is to be understood in the sense of "l'ensemble du personnel qui y assure les fonctions de gouvernement avec le souverain" (*s.v. curiale*). According to Sjöberg, *curia* is the immaterial court, or, even, the ideal court. *Om vältalighet på folkspråket. De vulgari eloquentia*, intr. G. Sjöberg, trans. E. Cullhed and G. Sjöberg (Stockholm: Italienska Kulturinstitutet "C. M. Lerici", 2012), 18. See also Tavoni (cited in n. 6 above) *ad loc*. 1.18.4.

[26]R. Dragonetti. "La Conception du langage poétique dans le 'De vulgari eloquentia' de Dante", *Romanica Gandensia* 9 (Gent 1961): 9–77 (p. 51).

[27]Fenzi (cited in n. 5 above) *ad loc*. 1.18.4; Botterill (cited in n. 6 above) *ad loc*. 1.18.5 note 96. Albert of Austria appears in *Purgatory* 6.97–105 as an icon of political

building, the geographical dissemination or "decentred centre" of this government.[28]

From the point of view of Dante's strategy of denarration, however, it matters little whether or not *curia* really refers to a potentially material place. What is significant is that Dante places the *vulgare* in these textual spaces which he further characterizes by negation and non-existence: in Italy there is neither *aula* nor *curia* (1.18.3–5). By denarrating the actual existence of the *loci* already attached to the noble vernacular, the *De vulgari eloquentia* continues the spatial game begun with the discussion of the scene of the very first speech act (1.5.3 discussed above). Dante involves these "emptied" spaces in a rhetorical device that seeks to drive home his point, the value or status of the noble vernacular. In addition to the political dimension of the (regrettable) absence of these institutions, there is thus more to Dante's use of *aula* and *curia* than conveying a political message. After the first affirmation in the passage 1.16.6, quoted above, the reader follows the interplay of negation and further affirmation.

NEGATION

"because we have no court" (*cum aula vacemus* 1.18.3)

"since we have no such tribunal" (*cum curia careamus* 1.18.5)

2ND AFFIRMATION

"we do have one" (*curiam habemus* 1.18.5)

On a conceptual level, it is this vacillating existence that makes *aula* and *curia* suitable places for the *vulgare*, together with the qualities and values conveyed through their characteristics:

CHARACTERISTICS

aula   common to all; honoured governor; owned by none; worthy
(*comunis, gubernatrix augusta, proprium ulli, dignum*)

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confusion who has laid "the garden of the Empire waste" (trans. D. L. Sayers: *Purgatory*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1959).

[28]Mallette as discussed by Grønlie, "The Domestication" (cited in n. 4 above), 166–7.

curia   balanced assessment; scales; well balanced; united parts;
           reason; physically scattered
           (*librata regula, statera, bene libratum, membra unita, ratio, corporali-
           ter dispersa*)

The passages in question are also involved in the project of the *De
vulgari eloquentia* as Dante's autocommentary,[29] presenting Dante
personally in this rhetoric of illustrious language and uncertain space
or place.

> The reason for calling the vernacular 'aulic', on the other hand, is that *if
> we Italians had a royal court*, it would make its home in the court's pal-
> ace. For if the court is the shared home of the entire kingdom, and
> the honoured governor of every part of it, it is fitting *that everything that
> is common to all yet owned by none should frequent the court* and live there;
> and indeed *no other dwelling-place would be worthy of such a resident.* And
> this certainly seems to be *true of this vernacular of which I speak.* So this is
> why those who frequent any royal court always speak an illustrious
> vernacular; it is also why our *illustrious vernacular wanders around like
> a homeless stranger*, finding hospitality in more humble homes – *because
> we have no court.* (*DVE* 1.18.2–3; italics added.)[30]

The rhetoric of the *aula* is unambiguously negative only insofar as
Dante the Exile desires to draw attention to his personal as well as
his political plight. The *vulgare illustre*, like Dante himself, "wanders
around like a homeless stranger". Apart from these words of lamenta-
tion, it is, nevertheless, in a positive tone that Dante speaks about the
vulgare as *aulicum*: the *aula* is the noblest of abodes and would be – if
such existed in Italy – the seat of the illustrious *vulgare* and its users.
It is important to appreciate that the nobility of the greatest vernacular
is connected to the idea of the royal court as somehow common to all.
This "common to all" does not mean something really in the posses-
sion of each and every one. The negation of the space where the *vulgare
aulicum* should have its home seems to magnify, not belittle, the value
of the space and its occupant.

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[29]According to Mengaldo (cited in n. 12 above, p. 12) the *DVE*, too, is in its own
way an *autocommento*.

[30]*Quia vero aulicum nominamus illud causa est quod, si aulam nos Ytali haberemus,
palatinum foret. Nam si aula totius regni comunis est domus et omnium regni partium guber-
natrix augusta, quicquid tale est ut omnibus sit comune nec proprium ulli, conveniens est ut
in ea conversetur et habitet, nec aliquod aliud habitaculum tanto dignum est habitante: hoc
nempe videtur esse id de quo loquimur vulgare. Et hinc est quod in regiis omnibus conversan-
tes semper illustri vulgari locuntur; hinc etiam est quod nostrum illustre velut accola peregri-
natur et in humilibus hospitatur asilis, cum aula vacemus* (*DVE* 1.18.2–3).

A similar rhetorical game of hide-and-seek takes place in Dante's discussion of *curia*. With the epithet *curialis*, Dante conveys the idea of something measured or weighed: the *vulgare*, in fact, has been weighed in the *curia* of Italy although, as Dante hastens to add, there is no such *curia*.

> It is right to call this vernacular 'curial', because the essence of being curial is no more than *providing a balanced assessment of whatever has to be dealt with*; and because the scales on which this assessment is carried out are usually found only in the most *authoritative of tribunals*, whatever is well balanced in our actions is called 'curial'. Therefore, since this vernacular has been assessed before *the most excellent tribunal in Italy*, it deserves to be called 'curial'. Yet it seems contradictory to say that it has been assessed in the most excellent tribunal in Italy, since *we have no such tribunal*. The answer to this is simple. For although it is true that *there is no such tribunal in Italy* – in the sense of a single institution, like that of the king of Germany – *yet its constituent elements are not lacking*. And just as the elements of the German tribunal are united under a single monarch, so those of the Italian have been *brought together by the gracious light of reason*. So it would not be true to say that the Italians lack a tribunal altogether, even though we lack a monarch, because *we do have one, but its physical components are scattered*. (*DVE* 1.18.4–5; italics added.)[31]

This is indeed one of the climaxes of Dante's verbal negation that try the reader's patience: although there is no such *curia*, the members of such a (non-existent) *curia* after all are not non-existent but united by *ratio*, reason. Here, we might think of Dante himself, to whom "the whole world is a homeland, like the sea to the fish."[32] Moreover, in the second part of the *De vulgari eloquentia*, where vernacular poets and poetry are discussed with abundant examples, Dante regards himself as the Italian "poet of rectitude," representing the most

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[31]*Est etiam merito curiale dicendum, quia curialitas nil aliud est quam librata regula eorum que peragenda sunt: et quia statera huiusmodi librationis tantum in excellentissimis curiis esse solet, hinc est quod quicquid in actibus nostris bene libratum est, curiale dicatur. Unde cum istud in excellentissima Ytalorum curia sit libratum, dici curiale meretur. Sed dicere quod in excellentissima Ytalorum curia sit libratum, videtur nugatio, cum curia careamus. Ad quod facile respondetur: nam licet curia, secundum quod unita accipitur, ut curia regis Alamannie, in Ytalia non sit, membra tamen eius non desunt; et sicut membra illius uno Principe uniuntur, sic membra huius gratioso lumine rationis unita sunt. Quare falsum esset dicere curia carere Ytalos, quanquam Principe careamus, quoniam curiam habemus, licet corporaliter sit dispersa* (*DVE* 1.18.4–5).

[32]*DVE* 1.6.3: *cui mundus est patria velut piscibus equor*; cf. Ovidius, *Fasti* 1.493: *Omne solum forti patria est, ut piscibus aequor.*

valuable theme of poetry, virtue (*virtus*).[33] He is, no doubt, to be considered a qualified model member of the eminent albeit non-existent, *curia* depicted above. Thus the well-structured spatial negation and ambiguity Dante creates here concur with a view of this phase of Dante's poetic career and the *De vulgari eloquentia* – composed around the same time as the *Convivio* but before the *Commedia* – as illustrating, according to J. A. Scott, "a highly selective, purist moment in the writer's career, at a time when [the exiled] Dante saw himself above all as the poet of ethics and moral rectitude (2.2.8)."[34] Dante concludes the discussion of the places by claiming that there is indeed a *curia*, "but its physical components are scattered". There is thus a second affirmation following the negation. This fragmentary existence, of course, refers to the few chosen individuals, users of both *ratio* and the *vulgare illustre*, like Dante himself, who might form the *curia* that does not so far exist.[35] It is significant that the individuals capable of using *ratio* remain in the ambivalent space of the *curia*. These individuals are, in fact, the true authorities of the *De vulgari eloquentia*: it has even been suggested that the vernacular verses of poetry, composed by Dante and those of his ilk so frequently cited in the treatise, function largely in the manner of citations from authoritative sources that are otherwise relatively scarce in this treatise.[36] The lines of poetry and their authors, the poets, provide the "balanced assessment" (*librata regula*) needed in the case of the illustrious *vulgare*. For these poets, Dante creates the noble and yet somehow ineffable space called *curia*.

As a place or space, *curia* is even more ambiguous or utopian than the *aula*. At the same time, *curia* is something very concrete, since it consists of the great poets and their works in which the illustrious vernacular resides. Thus, the spatially non-existent *curia* serves Dante in

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[33]There are three main themes or arguments in poetry: besides virtue (*virtus*), also physical love (*venus*) and well-being (*salus*). Dante discusses these in *DVE* 2.2.7–8. See e.g. Fenzi, *Introduzione* (cited in n. 5 above, xxiii) on Dante as *cantor rectitudinis*, and on the political and poetical implications of this. On Dante's political poets see C. E. Honess, "Dante's Knowledge of Florentine History", in J. C. Barnes and J. Petrie, eds, *Dante and His Literary Precursors. Twelve Essays* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), 117–151 (pp. 118–119).

[34]Scott, *Understanding Dante* (cited in n. 16 above), 57.

[35]E.g. Tavoni (cited in n. 6 above) *ad loc*, 1.18.4–5.

[36]On the scarcity of citations and references to authorities in the *DVE*, see Mengaldo (cited in n. 12 above), 34–6, who observes that this may be due to the novelty of the subject and also to the unrevised state of the treatise. Or, Mengaldo continues, it may be an intentional stylistic choice since continuous reference to authorities is deemed a stylistic vice; in the *DVE* the authorities are of a different kind – the verses of poetry written in *vulgare*, repeatedly cited by Dante.

forming the *curia* of the poets, who are central to the second book of the *De vulgari eloquentia*.[37]

The negation of these places which, nonetheless, are highly valued seems to serve the notion of something elusive, scattered, and yet identifiable and precious. This brings us back to the passage we started with (*DVE* 1.5.3): it is obvious that the first speech act took place and that there is an immense value inherent in it – yet, its place is left unclear. This ambiguous message is conveyed in the almost religious language of apophasis, that is, the expression of negative theology) where affirmation and negation are not mutually exclusive but serve the purposes of a meaningful paradox. Indeed, the illustrious *vulgare* itself is to be found in no particular region but is omnipresent, as we saw earlier (1.16.6 quoted above). Here it is tempting to perceive a connection between the deliberately created confusion concerning the birthplace of the Adamic language and the fact that the nature of this language as presented in the *De vulgari eloquentia* (i.e. created by God, unchangeable) is, possibly, an invention of Dante's own.[38] His ideas born in the construction of the concept of the illustrious vernacular likewise needed an ambiguous space where they could be freely developed.

The universal existence and particular non-existence explains why the illustrious vernacular is so noble, not to be used by just anyone or anywhere. Similarly, the *aula* and the *curia*, were they to be found in Italy, would certainly not be places for all and sundry.[39] These places are accessible only to those united in the use of *ratio* and capable of rising above the particular to the space inhabited by what is common or general. In order to do this, one must eschew the particular.[40] Dante mentions on several occasions the abandonment of dialect in favour of the illustrious *vulgare* and uses in these contexts vocabulary, especially the verb *divertere*, that implies a space and if not its negation, then at least its abandonment.[41]

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[37]See Fenzi, *Introduzione* (cited in n. 5 above, xxxiv) on the function of *curia* in Dante's discourse.

[38]According to Mazzocco (*Linguistic Theories*, cited in. n. 3 above, 160–8) Dante followed in the *DVE* especially St Augustine concerning the Adamic language and the interpretation of the *Genesis*, but renewed the tradition by stating that the pre-Babel language was unchangeable and created by God. In the *Paradiso* XXVII he has retracted his opinion and follows the scholastics, especially Thomas Aquinas, in stating that the Adamic language was created by Adam.

[39]See *DVE* 2.1.4 for the restriction regarding the use of the *vulgare illustre*.

[40]See e.g. Fenzi (cited in n. 5 above) *ad loc.* 1.16.1 on the abandoning of the empirical or inductive method in favour of deduction in investigating the vernacular.

[41]1.13.5 *a propria diverterunt*; 1.14.3 *a proprio poetando divertisse*; 1.14.7 *divertere a materno*; 1.15.2 *patrium vulgare deseruit*; 1.15.6 *a proprio divertissent*. In postclassical or

We might conjecture that this digression from the particular to the common is somehow equivalent to digressing towards something that, simultaneously, exists and does not exist, in other words: something like the *curia*. The *vulgare illustre* is not the language of just any individual. It is beyond doubt, however, that Dante himself and also some others made use of it – and in this sense it does indeed exist, and its existence is, in fact, a noble one.

SPATIAL STRATEGIES

These structures of negation in the first part of the *De vulgari eloquentia* are reminiscent of the device or trope of denarration as described in rhetorically oriented modern poetics. It is a form of narrative negation in which an author or a narrator denies significant aspects of his narrative formerly presented as given.[42] Because of its striking and confusing effect on the reader, denarration or the denarrated is easy to point out as a technical linguistic device, as has been attempted in this essay. In terms of communication, denarration does not – initially – seem to make any sense at all, as the narrator vacillating between yes and no seems to contradict himself or meekly shrink from making a single affirmative statement. However, such contradictions and hypothetical linguistic spaces fulfil various functions and often serve the broader aims of interpretation in the rhetorical composition of a text. They serve both "to enhance one's sense of the narrator's reliability" and at the same time make the reader wonder "whether the narrator is incompetent, disoriented, devious, or insane."[43] In Dante, too, the sustained rhetorical strategy of denarration creates new authorial spaces: alternative lines of thought, conjectures, utopian yet-to-be linguistic and political *loci*.

One of the broader functions of denarration is that it may become "part of a larger kind of serious gamesmanship between the affirmation and denial of identities – individual, ontological, epistemological, or referential."[44] It is tempting and rewarding to assume this also to be the case in Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*. The specific linguistic cases discussed above rely on the ontology and meontology – being, non-being, becoming – of languages as described in the Bible. In Dante's

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late Latin, the verb *divertere* meant both 'to divorce' and 'to go different ways', 'to part'.

[42]Richardson, "Denarration in Fiction" (cited in n. 13 above).

[43]Richardson, "Denarration in Fiction" (cited in n. 13 above), 169.

[44]Richardson, "Denarration in Fiction" (cited in n. 13 above), 173.

depiction of these ontological spaces the frequent use of non-affirmative and hypothetical structures comes as no surprise. His strategy in discussing the place of the first Adamic speech (1.5.3), as quoted at the beginning of this essay, is quite remarkable in its outright deception. Dante first assures the reader that "we can confidently deduce where the first speech was uttered" but what follows seems to deny this, since it emerges that, as to the place, there are two alternatives that practically cover every place imaginable: the first speech act took place either outside Paradise or in Paradise itself. Dante concludes this hardly informative statement with an ironic *convicimus* ("for I have clearly shown that"), which seems almost derisive of the reader.

The function of such alternative spaces is underestimated if they are taken merely to be a result of Dante's disinclination to take issue in a theological controversy regarding the place where Adam was created.[45] Apart from possibly avoiding excessively specific theological issues, such variation of non-affirmative narration enables Dante to bring illustrious vernacular into a similar ontological void between being and non-being as does the biblical history of the first human languages. The significance of the discourse concerning the first language for Dante's promotion of the new illustrious vernacular is an extensive topic;[46] suffice it here to acknowledge that Dante purposely constructs a rhetorical if not a logical link between the Adamic language and the illustrious vernacular. He accomplishes this by creating similar spaces for both the Adamic language and the illustrious vernacular. The ambiguous space thus created for the illustrious *vulgare* is where it

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[45]E.g. Cecchin *ad loc*. 1.5.3 states that here Dante leaves the question open; there was, indeed, discussion on the place of the creation of Adam, although the common view was that he was created outside Paradise. Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. S. Cecchin (Milano: TEA – I Tascabili degli Editori Associati, 1988); see also Mengaldo, cited in n. 12 above, *ad loc*. 1.5.3. See, however, Tavoni (cited in n. 6 above) *ad loc*. 1.5.3 who explains how Dante sees the creation of Adam and the moment when God's spirit was breathed into him as separate, therefore taking place in potentially different places.

[46]Maria Corti has indeed claimed that while the Adamic language was both natural and universal, the languages born after the tower of Babel were variable and particular and thus, in the medieval thinking, less valuable than the universal. In Dante's theory, however, as argued by Corti, the poet of the *dolce stile* aims at a vernacular language that is both natural and universal. See Maria Corti, "Les notions de 'langue universelle' et de "langue poétique" chez Dante Alighieri", in H. Geckkeler, B. Schlieben, L. J., Trabant, H. Weydt, eds, *Logos semantikos. Studia linguistica in honorem Eugenio Coseriu 1921–1981* (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1981), 31–9 (pp. 36, 38–9). For criticism of Corti's ideas and the nature of the illustrious vernacular designed by Dante, see e.g. A. R. Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 137–42, 146–9.

can be subjected to rational scrutiny. This ontology and knowledge is, moreover, fundamentally spatial, something that Dante the Pilgrim was soon to experience in the chapters of the *Divine Comedy*, written in the noble vernacular. The fact that the chosen language was to be, after all, based on the dialect of Florence, does not surprise the reader tackling the denarrative turns of the *De vulgari eloquentia*.

The Latin *loci* of vernacular literature

Dante's illustrious vernacular is indeed a "metaphysical entity" and a "linguistic unity that may be reached by all noble souls aided by study and discretion."[47] However, in the *De vulgari eloquentia* this entity is deeply rooted in the earthly places and organizations that – as linguistic elements – are described as an impressive web of negation and affirmation. This Latin (pseudo-)apophatic *ars poetica* comments on linguistic variation and Italy's lack of political unity in a sustained rhetoric of ambiguity and denarration.

In the process of working on these sections in Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*, the authors of this essay could not decide whether to use "place" or "space" to refer to Dante's *aula* and *curia*. This could be a significant hesitation. Despite the material meanings and associations attached to these places, they do not quite fit the medieval architectonic metaphor of "text as a building" or "composition as construction," the metaphor common in both medieval literature and the Latin arts of poetry predating Dante's treatise.[48] As if Dante were manipulating this metaphor as well – by both applying and abandoning it, in order to invent new Latin metaphors for the description of the noble vernacular yet to come.

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[47]Scott, *Understanding Dante* (cited in n. 16 above), 59.
[48]E.g. D. Cowling, *Building the Text: Architecture as Metaphor in Late Medieval and Early Modern France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). In both *Convivio* and the *DVE* Dante uses the traditional metaphors of "building" or "binding" language and a poem; see *DVE* 1.6.7 and 2.8.5; for discussion of these e.g. Ascoli, "*Neminem ante nos*" (cited in n. 18 above), 216.