

RECONSTRUCTING THE DANTEAN LINGUISTIC UNIVERSE:  
A RECONSIDERATION OF THE *DE VULGARI ELOQUENTIA*

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In my training as a linguist, I learned to look upon Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia* with a certain awe, largely thanks to the influence of R. H. Robins' *A Short History of Linguistics* (1967). Robins credits Dante's very incomplete 1303 Latin treatise on writing in the Italian vernacular with both the inauguration of Romance linguistic studies and the discovery of the existence of linguistic change and differentiation. I must say that I had accepted this view until I came upon Marcel Danesi's article reevaluating the linguistic contribution of Dante in Roger Wright's anthology, *Latin and Romance in the Early Middle Ages* (1991). It seemed to me, however, that Danesi went too far in diminishing Italy's greatest poet's place in the history of linguistics, and from that point on I determined that I must undertake a close study of the work with the end of making my own balanced assessment of Dante's contribution.

The scholarly literature turned out to be of limited assistance, there appearing to have been a tradition of misinterpreting the *De vulgari eloquentia*. Since his lifetime, Italian scholars had looked upon Dante as the first champion of the Italian vernacular, and upon this treatise as the prime exposition of his views on the subject. This only began to change when the prominent nineteenth-century writer Manzoni declared that it was by no means Dante's intention in this work to promote a general Italian literary language, but rather to find a form of vernacular language suitable for writing certain very specific genres of poetry. Yet the exploitation of Dante as a political and cultural icon during the period of Italian unification could not help but have a lasting effect on subsequent scholarship. The twentieth-century literature has, as a result, often tended to be more narrowly focused on the issue of the Italian vernacular than Dante's far-ranging treatise warrants. By far the strangest treatments were those attached to some recent English translations, such as that of Marianne Shapiro (1990), who sees the work as a metaphor for Dante's exile from Florence, or that of Warman Welliver (1981), who proposes that the work is a deliberate intellectual fraud fiendishly devised to confuse the reader as much as possible.<sup>1</sup> More balanced views can be found in the

commentaries attached to Aristide Marigo's (1938) and especially Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo's (1968) Italian translations, or to the recent English translation of Steven Botterill (1996).

There have, however, been some notable modern attempts to assess the contribution of Dante's treatise to the growth of linguistic science, such as Luigi Peirone's short *Il 'De vulgari eloquentia' e la linguistica moderna* (1975), and Ileana Pagani's more extensive *La teoria linguistica di Dante* (1982), which takes into account other writings of Dante relevant to language. To this, one should add the article of Danesi mentioned above, which addresses itself more to the over-evaluation of Dante's contribution as described in works written in English. Danesi inveighs against the tendency of modern linguists to read into Dante ideas which he could not possibly have had, specifically the concepts of "Vulgar Latin" as the ancestor of the Romance languages and the family-tree theory of language relationship. He sees the *De vulgari* as no more than an attempt at language classification.

The one thing that all these treatments have in common, from the most appreciative to the most critical, is that they tend to see Dante as a precursor of modern linguistic ideas. But I think we do Dante a great disservice to view his work in this way. When we examine the *De vulgari eloquentia* through the lens of modern linguistic ideas, even if we follow Danesi and prevent ourselves from seeing things that are not there, still our vision will be restricted to those scraps of modern ideas that we may find. We consequently miss the rich panoply of Christian medieval ideas that Dante weaves into his own unique perspective on language, as well as the complex ways in which his insights were both enhanced and limited by his worldview. It goes without saying that Dante's view of language is very different from our own, but it might well be worth examining as a valid alternative view. In fact, it is conceivable that Dante may have seen certain things about language more clearly than we do, for the very reason that he was not limited to what a modern linguistic viewpoint would have led him to see. There is, then, a chance that he might even be able to teach us some things about language.

It would be a good idea at this point to give an overview of the *De vulgari eloquentia*. Because it is a treatise, Dante wrote it in Latin, as was appropriate for such a work in his time. The whole is divided into two short books, the first complete, with 19 chapters, the second incomplete, with 14 chapters, the last trailing off in the middle of a paragraph. The first book is devoted to the nature of vernacular language and its suitability for poetic purposes. It begins with a

discussion of what vernacular language is, as opposed to the Latin literary language, and places its origin in the Garden of Eden, where God gives Adam his first language, which Dante identifies as Hebrew. After a brief mention of the flood, there follows a long discussion of the incident of the Tower of Babel, for Dante the main turning point of linguistic history. Of the diverse languages inflicted upon Man by God, three end up in Europe: one in northern Europe corresponding to the languages of the Slavs, Hungarians, Teutons, Saxons, and English; one in southern Europe corresponding to those of the Provençal/Catalans, northern French, and Italians; and one in eastern Europe corresponding to Greek. The one in southern Europe, Dante divides into three according to their word for "yes": *oc*, *oil*, and *sí*. There follows a discussion of language variability in space and time that reads like something written in the nineteenth century. Dante next surveys fourteen Italian dialects, and rejects them all as unsuitable for poetry, concluding that the best poets already use a vernacular but not one that is associated with a particular place. He then discusses how a vernacular that is to be used for poetry must be illustrious, exemplary, courtly, and suitable for the lawcourts. The second book begins with a discussion of who should use the illustrious vernacular, and what they should use it for, concluding that it is the best poets who should use it, and that they should use it to write *canzoni*, the highest form of vernacular poetry, the only form equivalent to the "tragic style" of classical literature. From here on, the book limits itself to the subject of the *canzone* and the topics suitable for this form: arms, love, and virtue. The components of the *canzone* are determined to be the length of poetic lines, grammatical construction, and vocabulary choice, each of which is treated in turn. The work ends with a discussion of the various aspects of the structure of stanzas, and stops abruptly at a point where the complexities of the subject reach their maximum. From references in the existing text, it appears that future books were to deal with other types of poetry to be written in the other forms of the vernacular, namely *ballate* and sonnets corresponding to the "comic" style to be written in the intermediate form, and elegies, the "elegiac style," in the lower form.

As should be obvious from the above summary, the historical scaffolding of Dante's treatise rests firmly upon the Bible. The biblical account is further amplified with story elements and commentary drawn primarily from St. Augustine and Isidore of Seville. Interspersed with this thoroughly Christian view of history are various details of Dante's own, where he departs from the scriptural account. While fascinating, the study of Dante's sources and how he departs from them

is not relevant here, and is thoroughly covered in the twentieth-century commentaries. In sum, these investigations serve to show that Dante was a late medieval thinker, which should not surprise us. But it is this very fact which tends to be most often lost sight of when scholars attempt to assess his contribution to linguistics, since they tend to focus on those segments of his work that are least medieval, to the exclusion of the rest.

Despite its prominent first book with its extensive exposition on the origin and nature of language, it is generally accepted that *De vulgari eloquentia* is intended as a treatise on the use of vernacular language for the writing of poetry, with particular reference to Italian, though Dante cites examples from Occitan and French as well. Critics often comment on the breadth of Dante's interests, since he insists on placing the vernacular into its religious, historical, social, and political context, which takes him the entire first book, but such breadth was by no means unusual in a scholarly tradition that looked back to Aristotle. This breadth of coverage means, however, that it would be a mistake for us to judge Dante's contribution to linguistics alone, when that contribution could equally well come under the rubrics of dialectology, sociolinguistics, or language planning. It will be the goal of the rest of this paper to demonstrate that Dante's greatest contribution to the study of language was as a keen observer of linguistic variation, and that the parts of his work that seem modern to us are all the products of these empirical observations. However, we will note that when he attempts to provide explanations for these observations, we are once again plunged into a worldview that is thoroughly Christian and medieval.

Let us begin in the middle of chapter IX of Book I, where we find the following statement that could have been taken from a modern anthropology textbook:

. . . et homo sit instabilissimum atque variabilissimum animal, nec durabilis nec continua esse potest, sed sicut alia que nostra sunt, puta mores et habitus, per locorum temporumque distantias variari oportet. (I, ix, 6)<sup>2</sup>

[S]ince human beings are highly unstable and variable animals, our language can be neither durable nor consistent with itself; but, like everything else that belongs to us (such as manners and customs), it must vary according to distances of space and time.<sup>3</sup>

He goes on to expound upon this point, presenting a view of linguistic variation that appears very similar to that which would later arise as the result of nineteenth-century dialectology. Though some writers have claimed that Dante was really only aware of variation in vocabulary, his awareness of phonetic variation in his survey of fourteen Italian dialects, which occupies chapters X through XV, indicates that his understanding went well beyond this. For instance, he disqualifies several Italian dialects as suitable for poetry because of their unpleasant effect upon the ear, such as that of the people of Treviso and Brescia who pronounce consonantal "u" as "f." One might also point to his derogatory treatment of Sardinian on the grounds of what he sees as grammatical flaws as evidence of some awareness of grammatical variation. Just how much he is aware of the extent of dialect variation can be gleaned from this passage at the end of chapter X:

. . . si primas et secundarias et subsecundarias vulgaris Ytalie variationes calcolare velimus, et in hoc minimo mundi angulo non solum ad millenam loquele variationem venire contigerit, sed etiam ad magis ultra. (I, x, 9)

[I]f we wish to calculate the number of primary, and secondary, and still further subordinate varieties of the Italian vernacular, we would find that, even in this tiny corner of the world, the count would take us not only to a thousand different types of speech, but well beyond that figure.

Only someone who had traveled extensively in Italy and paid close attention to linguistic differences could have made this observation. Yet, when he goes on to explain the causes of this variability, he attributes them to imperfections in human nature resulting from the punishment for the sin of pride at the Tower of Babel. Through this punishment, the gift of the divine language, Hebrew, was lost, and languages had to be reconstituted by human beings themselves and so bear the imprint of their imperfections, one of which was variability.<sup>4</sup> Thus, we see that his observations are empirical, and his explanations are biblical.

To anyone who would assert that Dante was no more than an observer and classifier of dialects, we need only counter with his opening sentence of chapter IX:

Nos autem oportet quam nunc habemus rationem periclitari, cum inquirere intendamus de hiis in quibus nullius autoritate fulcimur, hoc est de unius eiusdemque a principio ydiomatis variatione secuta. (I, ix, 1)

Now I must undertake to risk whatever intelligence I possess, since I intend to enquire into matters in which I can be supported by no authority—that is, into the process of change by which one and the same language became many.

He illustrates this process with a specific example, the tripartite language of southern Europe, the parts of which he classifies according to the word for “yes.” To prove that these are forms of the same speech, he points to many similarities in vocabulary, which he exemplifies with the word “amor.” When he goes on to explain why this proves that they were once one language, the explanation is again biblical: “This agreement denies the very confusion that was hurled down from heaven at the time of the building of Babel” (I, ix, 4). In other words, God would never have punished the builders of Babel by giving them very similar languages; therefore the differences must have arisen later as the result of changes in language. Though his proof ultimately relies on biblical authority, his explicit correlation of temporal and spatial variation is undeniable. There is evidence from the *Convivio* (I, v, 9) that Dante had observed language change in his own lifetime, and the correlation of this observation with dialect variation must be recognized as a theoretical leap of some significance.<sup>5</sup>

If Dante understood all this, why might anyone dispute his paternity in the birth of historical and Romance linguistics? There does seem to be one good reason: there is no evidence that Dante identified the “original language” from which the three descended with Latin. He never even gives this original language a name. In truth, we actually have strong reasons to believe that he was sure it was not Latin.

For Dante, Latin represented a species of language entirely distinct from vernacular language, as we can see in this famous passage from the beginning of Book I:

. . . vulgarem locutionem appellamus eam qua infantes assuefiunt ab assistentibus cum primitus distinguere voces incipiunt; vel, quod brevius dici potest, vulgarem locutionem asserimus quam sine omni regola nutricem imitantes accipimus. Est et inde alia locutio secundaria nobis, quam Romani gramaticam vocaverunt. Hanc quidem secundariam

Greci habent et alii, sed non omnes: ad habitum vero huius pauci perveniunt, quia non nisi per spatium temporis et studii assiduitatem regulamur et doctrinamur in illa. Harum quoque duarum nobilior est vulgaris: tum quia prima fuit humano generi usitata; tum quia totus orbis ipsa perfruitur, licet in diversas prolationes et vocabula sit divisa; tum quia naturalis est nobis, cum illa potius artificialis existat.  
(I, i, 2-4)

[V]ernacular language is that which we learn without any formal instruction, by imitating our nurses. There also exists another kind of language, at one remove from us, which the Romans called *grammatica*. The Greek and some—but not all—other peoples also have this secondary kind of language. Few, however, achieve complete fluency in it, since knowledge of its rules and theory can only be developed through dedication to a lengthy course of study. Of these two kinds of language, the more noble is the vernacular: first, because it was the language originally used by the human race; second, because the whole world employs it, though with different pronunciations and using different words; and third, because it is natural to us, while the other is, in contrast, artificial.

We would be quite correct in seeing in this quote an assertion of the priority of spoken language over written language, the very idea that launched the field of descriptive linguistics at the beginning of the twentieth century. But more relevant to us here is the fact that he is making a corresponding statement about the nature of the Latin literary language: that it is a language governed by rules that one learns in school. This was obviously true in Dante's time, but he does also imply that the same was the case for the ancient Romans. In other words, as far as he was concerned, Latin was never a vernacular. This is far from an accepted idea in modern times, where Medieval Latin is viewed as a survival of the language of ancient Rome, which had formerly existed in both spoken and written form. There is no trace of such an idea here. How could such a good observer of language, as Dante was, miss such a connection?

He most likely missed the connection because it would violate his assertion of the universal variability of language in space and time. If the original unified language had been Latin, then this language would have had to be uniform over all of southern Europe, a patent absurdity

to Dante, as it is to us. Furthermore, the time of the ancient Romans would have had to have been immediately after the dispersal from Babel, which is no less ridiculous. The only conclusion one can draw from this is that the original language could not have been Latin. The ancient Romans must have spoken ancient vernaculars and learned Latin in school. Where Latin came from he explains thus:

Hinc moti sunt inventores grammatice facultatis: que quidem grammatice nichil aliud est quam quedam inalterabilis locutionis ydemptitas diversibus temporibus atque locis. Hec cum de comuni consensu multarum gentium fuerit regulata, nulli singulari arbitrio videtur obnoxia, et per consequens nec variabilis esse potest. Adinvenerunt ergo illam ne, propter variationem sermonis arbitrio singularium fluitantis, vel nullo modo vel saltim imperfecte antiquorum actingeremus auctoritates et gesta, sive illorum quos a nobis locorum diversitas facit esse diversos. (I, ix, 11)

This was the point from which the inventors of the art of grammar began: for their *grammatica* is nothing less than a certain immutable identity of language in different times and places. Its rules having been formulated with the common consent of many people, it can be subject to no individual will; and, as a result, it cannot change. So those who devised this language did so lest . . . we should become unable, or, at best, only partially able, to enter into contact with the deeds and authoritative writings of the ancients, or of those whose difference of location makes them different from us.

Who the inventors of the art of grammar were, he never does say. We assume he is thinking of the ancient Roman grammarians, but this is never explicitly stated. Neither does he tell us when *grammatica* was invented; though the implication is that after this, the language did not change.

We can hardly blame Dante for not having a concept of "Vulgar Latin," since the positing of this theoretical ancestor of Romance would not appear for five centuries. He certainly would never have given it that name, since for him "vulgar" and "Latin" were contradictory terms which he frequently opposed to one another. We should give him credit, however, for perceiving something about literary languages that is often forgotten by modern linguists—that is, their artificiality. No doubt, he had divined the artificiality of Latin by observing uniformity



in the language of the classical authors despite distances in space and time, and so knew Latin could not have been a vernacular. He was right, of course. The “Vulgar Latin” of the modern theorists was a hypothetical protolanguage deduced from its Romance descendants, representing what was, in reality, a dialect continuum that spanned the later Roman Empire. To believe in such a language requires a suspension of disbelief that is difficult even for modern linguists, and that probably would have been impossible for a keen observer of language variation such as Dante. His linguistic universe, in which dialect continua evolved into dialect continua, was, in fact, a more subtle and complex universe than that of the later family-tree theorists, where unitary protolanguages could split neatly into multiple daughter languages.

Dante had also somehow guessed at the negotiation and compromise that goes into the establishment of literary languages: “rules formulated with the common consent of many peoples.” He did not guess at the deliberate archaism that is often adopted in the creation of a literary language in order to achieve that consent. Perhaps the greatest irony is that it was Dante’s own written *volgare* which would be selected nearly three centuries later as the permanent basis of literary Italian, partly because of its archaism and consequent similarity to many dialects, but mostly because of the prestige with which he himself had endowed it through his poetic masterpiece. When scholars of the sixteenth century found themselves pressured by a growing literature and publishing industry to resolve the “questione della lingua” and settle upon one of the many existing Italian written vernaculars as the standard literary language, it was this compromise solution proposed by Pietro Bembo that was eventually adopted.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Shapiro presents a view that Dante's accounts of the Garden of Eden, the Fall, and the Tower of Babel are metaphors for the topos of "exile," while, in fact, they are the only parts of Genesis relevant to language, and so Dante had no choice but to discuss them. Welliver's assertion that the maddening aspects of Dante's Latin were deliberate attempts to confuse the reader hinges on the premise that Dante was a poet and so should have known better, but he seems to ignore the fact that Dante clearly did not view Latin as a suitable language for Italians to write poetry in, and that he himself refrained from doing so. The *De vulgari eloquentia* is definitely written in the style of a philosophical treatise and is thoroughly prosaic.

<sup>2</sup> All Latin text is from Marigo (1938).

<sup>3</sup> All English translations are from Botterill (1996).

<sup>4</sup> Dante makes the assumption here that Hebrew was exempt from the instability inherent in all vernacular languages. By the time he wrote the *Paradiso*, however, he had changed his mind and decided that Hebrew had been a vernacular like any other (*Paradiso* XXVI, 133-38).

<sup>5</sup> *Onde vedemo ne le cittadi d'Italia, se bene volemo agguardare, da cinquanta anni in qua molti vocabuli essere spenti e nati e variati; onde se 'l picciol tempo così transmuta, molto più transmuta lo maggiore.*

"Thus in the cities of Italy, if we care to take a close look, we find that within the last fifty years many words have become obsolete, been born, and been altered; if a short period of time changes language, much more does a greater period change it." (trans. Lansing 1990)

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