

MEDIEVAL THEOLOGY

Topic: Reason, Poetry, and Theology:
 “Vernacularity” in Dante and Aquinas
 Convener: Gregory LaNave, Catholic University of America Press
 Moderator: Gregory LaNave, Catholic University of America Press
 Presenter: Denys Turner, Yale University
 Respondent: Peter Casarella, The Catholic University of America

Denys Turner presented a paper arguing that, for Dante, poetry is itself a theological act, and that Dante and Aquinas are closer than is often supposed in their estimation of the theological value of poetry. He began with Dante’s Latin prose work *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, in which Dante, writing in the dead Latin of the Scholastic elite, praises the primacy of the living vernacular over Latin. For Dante, as for Aquinas, the human body is human precisely as communicating meaning: human bodies are language. Human society, therefore, is created and marked by the language in which it communicates. *Grammatica*, the language of Scholastic theology, can mediate only the limited, self-created community of the scholarly elite. Human society requires a different language, and the highest poetic language must be grounded in a stable community. Yet Dante’s search for an ideal vernacular Italian runs up against the fact that there is no unified Italian society. The poetry called for in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* therefore has a very practical purpose: forging by means of poetry the language of a politics which does not yet exist is proleptically to make that politics by means of poetry. The “high” lyric style of poetry is politically performative. Similarly, in the *Commedia* poetry in the mixture of “high” and “low” styles is theologically performative. For Dante, the poetry of the *Comedy* anticipates in time the theological “body” which it describes: the community of the blessed in Paradise.

Although Dante and Thomas share much in common in their general accounts of language and the human, they would appear to part company on the question of the theological value of the poetic—for famously Thomas describes poetry as *infima inter omnes doctrinas*, on account of poetry’s reliance on vulgar metaphor. Yet this passage is often misinterpreted. Thomas, unlike most of the tradition before him, regards the poetic in Scripture (i.e., the use of metaphor) as pertaining to the literal sense, not the allegorical sense. Poetry is the “lowest” of the *doctrinae* in the sense that it is closest to our ordinary ways of groping towards the unutterable and ungraspable mystery of God—but *doctrina* it certainly is. The insistence of the theologically demotic displays an instinct of resistance to a species of theological hyperambition, a sort of pretentiousness of intellect and language, characterized most graphically for Dante by Ulysses’s fate in the eighth circle of hell. What unites Thomas and Dante in a common theological strategy is a shared theological instinct: an excessive striving in the name of theology to press beyond the ordinariness of speech is bound to lead to a bad end, theologically and morally, precisely because it would fracture the bonds binding language in with community, and both in with

God. Though the styles of Thomas and Dante diverge greatly, there does not seem to be between them a serious difference on the estimation of the theological significance of poetry.

To see poetry as theology requires going beyond the polarity of the “living” vernacular and the “dead” *gramatica*. There is a more terrible death of language that Dante envisages: that which is found in the frozen immobility at the end of *Inferno*, in the terminal silence of the lowest regions of hell. At the other end of the axis stands the cessation of speech at the end of *Paradiso*, where the unsayable mystery of the love “that moves the sun and the other stars” stuns all speech into the silence of the apophatic. And in between these two extremes is the silence of the traitor Ugolino, who is mute before his children’s appeal for help because he has lost all relatedness to them; language has ceased to be performative. The noncommunity that is hell can possess only the nonlanguage it deserves.

At the heart of the *Comedy*’s vernacularity is its exposure of the common human tongue to the unspeakable mystery which sustains it. And as the *Comedy* ends in one way, so, Thomas says, does theology itself, and all faith, end in that same silence.

Peter Casarella described his response as three *marginalia* to Turner’s superb *glossae*. With respect to the political significance of the vernacular in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, he notes that Dante’s quest for a single political community is emphatically based on the Tuscan vernacular, and that later humanist defenders of a Christian empire such as Nicholas of Cusa and Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (Pope Pius II) did a far better job than Dante of acknowledging the goodness of a linguistic and cultural diversity with a single *Concordantia catholica*. Drawing on Mark Jordan’s work, Casarella notes that appreciation of the genealogy of Thomas’s study of what Dante calls *gramatica*—according to Jordan, the Benedictine school of Monte Cassino, the University of Naples, and studies in Cologne and Paris with Albert—is essential for considering Thomas as a theologian, and notably for his assessment of the ordering of poetry to theology.

Finally, Casarella highlights the variety of medieval theology written in the vernacular. He notes Dante’s firm theological conviction that Adam’s first word must have been the name of God, concluding that vernacularity is no less theocentric than Scholasticism. Turner’s reading of Dante’s text leaves no doubt about the importance of vernacularity for evaluating the history of medieval theology, and points to the significance of the category for contemporary systematic theology as well.

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