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“How Dante Invented Italian”
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1. *Vita Nuova*, ch. 25.3-5, 8

I shall begin by saying that, in ancient times there were no speakers of love writing in the vernacular, the only speakers of love were certain poets in the Latin tongue.... And not many years have passed since these vernacular poets first appeared, [I call them poets too] because to speak with rhyme in the vernacular is the same as to compose [metered] verses in Latin, analogically speaking. And proof that it is but a short time is that if we look the Occitan and Italian literatures, we shall not find any poems written more than 150 years before the present time [i.e., mid-twelfth century]. And the reason that a number of crude writers acquired the reputation of knowing how to speak [of love] was that they were almost the first that spoke [wrote] in the Italian language. And the first one that began to speak as a vernacular poet was moved to do so because he wished to make his words understood to a woman, for whom it was very difficult to comprehend Latin verses.

2. *Inferno* canto 32, lines 1-9

S'io avessi le rime aspre e chioce,
come si converrebbe al tristo buco
sovra 'l qual pontan tutte l'altre rocce,
io premerei di mio concetto il suco
più pienamente; ma perch' io non l'abbo,
non senza tema a dicer mi conduco;
ché non è impresa da pigliare a gabbo
discriver fondo a tutto l'universo,
né da lingua che chiami mamma o babbo.

(If I had the harsh and clucking rhymes such as befit the dreadful hole toward which all of the other rocks point their weight, / I would press out the juice from my concept more fully; but because I lack them, not without fear do bring myself to speak; / for it is no task to take in jest, that of describing the bottom of the universe, nor for one that calls mamma or daddy...)

3. *Convivio* (*The Banquet*) bk 1, chap. 3, par. 4-5

Poi che fu piacere de li cittadini de la bellissima e famosissima figlia di Roma, Fiorenza, di gittarmi fuori del suo dolce seno—nel quale nato e nutrito fui in fino al colmo de la mia vita, e nel quale, con buona pace di quella, desidero con tutto lo cuore di riposare l'animo stancato e terminare lo tempo che m'è dato—per le parti quasi tutte a le quali questa lingua si stende, peregrino, quasi mendicando, sono andato, mostrando contra mia voglia la piaga de la

fortuna, che suole ingiustamente al piagato molte volte essere imputata. Veramente io sono stato legno senza vela e senza governo, portato a diversi porti e foci e liti dal vento secco che vapora la dolorosa povertade.

(From the time when the citizens of Rome's most beautiful and famous daughter, Florence, saw fit to cast me away from her sweet bosom, where I was born and nourished until [the mid-point of my life], and where, with her gracious consent, I desire with all my heart to rest my weary mind and complete my allotted span—I have made my way through almost all the regions to which this language extends, [a pilgrim and stranger], reduced almost to beggary, and showing against my will the wound inflicted by fortune, which is very often imputed unjustly to the one afflicted. I have indeed been a lacking sail and without [helmsman], carried to various ports and rivers mouths and shores by the parching wind raised by painful poverty.)

4. *The Banquet* 1.5.7-10, 12-14

Latin has a permanent form and is not subject to change, while the vernacular is unstable and is subject to change ... Whence we see that in the cities of Italy ... over the course of fifty years many words have died out, or been newly invented, or have changed their form... So much so, I say, that if those who left this life a 1000 years ago were to return now to their cities, they would believe those cities to have been taken over by foreigners, because the language would be so different from theirs. About this I will speak elsewhere in a little book ... on Vernacular Eloquence.

The purpose of speech is to make manifest human ideas and it is ... most successful when it most does that. And Latin makes manifest many more things conceived in our minds than the vernacular is able to, as those who command both kinds of speech know, and thus its power is greater than that of the vernacular... The vernacular follows use, and Latin follows art, whence we must concede that Latin is more beautiful, more powerful, and more noble.

5. *The Banquet* (1.9.4-5)

I say that clearly one can see that Latin gives its benefits to very few, but the vernacular truly serves the needs of many ... and these are princes, barons, knights and many other noble persons, not only men but also women ... who speak vernacular but not the language of lettered people [i.e., Latin]

6. *The Banquet* (1.13.3-5)

The fact is that a human being has two perfections: . . . the first makes him *be*, the second makes him *be good*, and if my own [vernacular] speech was the cause of both in me, then I have received the greatest benefit from it . . . This my vernacular was the uniter of my parents [those who generated me], because they spoke using it. . . Clearly then it participated in my generation. Furthermore, this my vernacular introduced me into the ways of knowledge, which is the final perfection, inasmuch as with it I entered into the knowledge of Latin, which was expounded to me using it.

7. *The Banquet* 1.10.12

People will be led to recognize the [great] goodness of the Italian vernacular: they will see the power it has as it expresses the most sublime and [newest; strangest] ideas aptly, fully, and attractively

8. *The Banquet* 1.13.6

Ciascuna cosa studia naturalmente la sua conservazione, e ciò posso così mostrare; onde, se lo volgare per sé studiare potesse, studierebbe a quella; e quella sarebbe, acconciare sé a più stabilità, e più stabilità non si potrebbe avere che in legar sé con numero con rime. E questo medesimo studio è stato mio . . .

(Everything naturally pursues its own perpetuation . . . [T]hus, if the vernacular were able to pursue its own ends, it would pursue that one, and it would consist in preparing itself for greater stability, and greater stability could not be obtained than by binding itself with numbers [meter] and with rhymes. And this same pursuit has been my own . . .)

9. *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (*On Eloquence in the Vernacular*), bk. 1, chap. 1, par. 1-3

Since I find that no one before myself has dealt in any way with the theory of eloquence in the vernacular, and since we can plainly see that such eloquence is necessary to everyone—for not only men, but also women and children strive to acquire it, as far as nature allows—I shall try . . . to say something useful but about the language of the people who speak the vulgar tongue. . . Vernacular language is that which we learn without any formal instruction, by imitating our nurses. There also exists another kind of language . . . called *gramatica* [grammar] and. . . knowledge of its rules . . . 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; and third because it is natural to us, while the other is . . . artificial

10. *On Eloquence*, 1.9.11

This was the point from which the inventors of the [faculty] of grammar began; for their *gramatica* is nothing less than a certain immutable identity of language [speech] in different times and places. Its rules [have] been formulated [so that] it cannot change. So those who devised this language [that is, rule-governed “gramatica”], did so lest, through changes in language dependent on the arbitrary judgment of individuals, we should become either unable, or, at best, only partially able, to enter into contact with the deeds and authoritative writings of the ancients . . .

11. *On Eloquence*, 1.10.7

Italy alone presents a range of at least fourteen different vernaculars. All these vernaculars vary internally, so that [for example] the Tuscan of Siena is distinguished from that of Arezzo. . . For this reason we would find that even in this tiny corner of the world, the count would take us to a thousand different types of speech. . . (1.10.7)

12. *On Eloquence*

Amid the cacophony of the many varieties of Italian speech, let us hunt for the . . . illustrious vernacular

(1.11.1)

The most noble actions among those performed by Italians are proper to no one Italian city, but are common to them all: among these we can now place the use of the vernacular that we were hunting. . . , which has left its scent in every city but made its home in none. . . 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 vernaculars of all the Italian cities can be . . . compared.

(1.16.4, 6)

That it [the illustrious vernacular] raises to honor is readily apparent. Does not the fame of its devotees exceed that of any king, marquis, count or warlord? . . . And I myself have know how greatly it [the illustrious vernacular] increases the glory of those who serve it, I who, for the sake of that glory’s sweetness, [pay no attention to my exile].

(1.17.5-6)

The reason for calling this illustrious vernacular aulic ... is that if we Italians has a royal court, it would make its home in the court's palace.... [But because we have no such central government] our illustrious vernacular wanders around like a homeless stranger finding hospitality in humbler homes—because we have no court

(1.18.2-3)

This is the language used by the illustrious authors who have written vernacular poetry in Italian, whether they came from Sicily, Apulia, Tuscany, Romagna, Lombardy or either of the Marches (1.19.1)

13. *The Banquet* (1.13.11-12)

Così rivolgendo li occhi a dietro, e raccogliendo le ragioni prenotate, puotesi vedere ... [che] questo sarà quello pane orzato del quale si satolleranno migliaia, e a me ne soperchieranno le sporte piene. Questo sarà luce nuova, sole nuovo, lo quale surgerà là dove l'usato tramonterà, e darà lume a coloro che sono in tenebre e in oscuritate, per lo usato sole che a loro non luce

(So if one casts one's eye back over what has been said, and gathers together [the reasons which have been noted down], it is clear that this [Italian]... will be that fine barley bread on which thousands will amply satisfy their hunger, while for me there will be basketsful left over to enjoy. This will be a new light, a new sun which will rise to take the place of the old sun [i.e., Latin] which is setting, and give light to those now lost in darkness because for them the old sun sheds no light)

14. *Inferno* canto 1, lines 64-87

Quando vidi costui nel gran deserto,
«Miserere di me», gridai a lui,
«qual che tu sii, od ombra od omo certo!».

.....
Poeta fui, e cantai di quel giusto
figliuol d'Anchise che venne di Troia,
poi che 'l superbo Ilión fu combusto.

.....
«Or se' tu quel Virgilio e quella fonte
che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?»,
rispuos' io lui con vergognosa fronte.
«O de li altri poeti onore e lume,
vagliami 'l lungo studio e 'l grande amore
che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume.

“Tu se’ lo mio maestro e ‘l mio autore,
tu se’ solo colui da cui io tolsi

lo bello stilo che m’ha fatto onore
(When I saw him [Virgil] in the great wilderness, “Have pity on me,” I cried to him, “whatever you may be, whether shade or true man!” He replied, “Not a man, I was formerly

a man, and my parents were Lombards, Mantuans both by birth. I was a poet, and I sang of that just son of Anchises who came from Troy, when proud Ilion was destroyed by fire. “Now are you that Virgil, that fountain which spreads forth so broad a river of speech?” I replied with shamefast brow. “O honor and light of the other poets, let my long study and great love avail me, that has caused me to search through your volume. You are my master and my author, you alone are he from whom I have taken the lovely style that has won me honor.”

15. *Purgatorio* canto 30, lines 43-57

Volsimi a la sinistra col respitto
col quale il fantolin corre a la mamma
quando ha paura o quando elli è afflitto,
per dicere a Virgilio: 'Men che dramma
di sangue m'è rimaso che non tremi:
conosco i segni de l'antica fiamma'.

Ma Virgilio n'avea lasciati scemi
di sé,
Virgilio a cui per mia salute die'mi;

.....
«Dante, perché Virgilio se ne vada,
non pianger anco, non piangere ancora;
ché pianger ti conven per altra spada».

(I turned to the left with the appeal that a little boy runs to his mamma when he is afraid or when he is hurt. / to say to Virgil, “Less than a drop of blood is left me that is not trembling: I recognize the signs of the ancient flame [of his love for Beatrice]! / But Virgil had left us deprived of himself—Virgil most sweet father to whom I gave myself for my salvation—, / ... / “Dante, though Virgil depart, do not weep yet, do not weep yet, for you must weep to another sword)

(Translations of the *Divine Comedy* are by Robert M. Durling [Oxford University Press, 1996-2011]; translations of *On Eloquence in the Vernacular* are by Steven Botterill [Cambridge University Press, 1996]; translations of *Vita Nuova* and *The Banquet* are my own)

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