

DANTE - ON THE VERNACULAR ELOQUENCE

Book One

I

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, inspired by the Word that comes from above, to say something useful about the language of people who speak the vulgar tongue, hoping thereby to enlighten somewhat the understanding of those who walk the streets like the blind, ever thinking that what lies ahead is behind them. Yet, in so doing, I shall not bring to so large a cup only the water of my own thinking, but shall add to it more potent ingredients, taken or extracted from elsewhere, so that from these I may concoct the sweetest possible mead.

But since it is required of any theoretical treatment that it not leave its basis implicit, but declare it openly, so that it may be clear with what its argument is concerned, I say, hastening to deal with the question, that I call 'vernacular language' that which infants acquire from those around them when they first begin to distinguish sounds: or, to put it more succinctly, I declare that vernacular 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*.¹ The Greeks 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.

And this more noble kind of language is what I intend to discuss.

VIII

The confusion of languages recorded above leads me, on no trivial grounds, to the opinion that it was then that human beings were first scattered throughout the whole world, into every temperate zone and habitable region, right to its furthest corners. And since the principal root from which the human race has grown was planted in the East, and from there our growth has spread, through many branches and in all directions, finally reaching the furthest limits of the West, perhaps it was then that the rivers of all Europe, or at least some of them, first refreshed the throats of rational beings. But, whether they were arriving then for the first time, or whether they had been born in Europe and were now returning there, these people brought with them a tripartite language. Of those who brought it, some found their way to southern Europe and some to northern; and a third group, whom we now call Greeks, settled partly in Europe and partly in Asia.²⁴

Later, from this tripartite language (which had been received in that vengeful confusion),²⁵ different vernaculars developed, as I shall show below. For in that whole area that extends from the mouth of the Danube (or the Meotide marshes)²⁶ to the westernmost shores of England, and which is defined by the boundaries of the Italians and the French,²⁷ and by the ocean, only one language prevailed, although later it was split up into many vernaculars by the Slavs, the Hungarians, the Teutons, the Saxons, the English, and several other nations. Only one sign of their common origin remains in almost all of them, namely that nearly all the nations listed above, when they answer in the affirmative, say *io*. Starting from the furthest point reached by this vernacular (that is, from the boundary of the Hungarians towards the east), another occupied all the rest of what, from there onwards, is called Europe; and it stretches even beyond that.

All the rest of Europe that was not dominated by these two vernaculars was held by a third, although nowadays this itself seems to be divided in three: for some now say *oc*, some *oïl*, and some *si*, when they answer in the affirmative; and these are the Hispanic,²⁸ the French, and the Italians. Yet the sign that the vernaculars of these three peoples derive from one and the same language is plainly apparent: for they can be seen to use the same words to signify many things, such as 'God', 'heaven', 'love', 'sea', 'earth', 'is', 'lives', 'dies', 'loves', and almost all others. Of these peoples, those who say *oc* live in the western part of southern Europe, beginning from the boundaries of the Genoese. Those who say *si*, however, live to the east of those boundaries, all the way to that outcrop of Italy from which the gulf of the Adriatic begins, and in Sicily. But those who say *oïl* live some what to the north of these others, for to the east they have the Germans, on the west and north they are hemmed in by the English sea,²⁹ and by the mountains of Aragon, and to the south they are enclosed by the people of Provence and the slopes of the Apennines.

XVII

Now, however, it becomes necessary to explain why what we have found should be given the epithets 'illustrious', 'cardinal', 'aulic', and 'curial', and by so doing I shall reveal more clearly what the phenomenon is in itself.

First of all, therefore, I shall explain what I mean when I use the term 'illustrious', and why it is applied to the vernacular. Now when we call something 'illustrious', we mean that it gives off light or reflects the light that it receives from elsewhere: and we call men 'illustrious' in this sense, either because, enlightened by power, they shine forth in justice and charity upon other people, or because, excellently taught, they teach most excellently, like Seneca or Numa Pompilius.⁹³ And this vernacular of which I speak is both sublime in learning and power, and capable of exalting those who use it in honour and glory.

That it is sublime in learning is clear when we see it emerge, so outstanding, so lucid, so perfect and so civilised, from among so many ugly words used by Italians, so many convoluted constructions, so many defective formations, and so many barbarous pronunciations – as Cino da Pistoia and his friend show us in their *canzoni*.

That it is exalted in power is plain. And what greater power could there be than that which can melt the hearts of human beings, so as to make the unwilling willing and the willing unwilling, as it has done and still does?

That it raises to honour is readily apparent. Does not the fame of its devotees exceed that of any king, marquis, count or warlord? There is no need to prove this. And I myself have known how greatly it increases the glory of those who serve it. I who, for the sake of that glory's sweetness, have the experience of exile behind me.

For all these reasons we are right to call this vernacular 'illustrious'.

XVIII

Nor are we without justification if we adorn this illustrious vernacular with our second epithet, by calling it 'cardinal'.⁹⁴ For, just as the whole structure of a door obeys its hinge, so that in whatever direction the hinge moves, the door moves with it, whether it opens towards the inside or the outside, so the whole flock of languages spoken in the cities of Italy turns this way or that, moves or stands still, at the behest of this vernacular, which thus shows itself to be the true head of their family. Does it not daily dig up thorn-bushes growing in the Italian forest? Does it not daily make new grafts or prick out seedlings? What else do its gardeners do, if they are not uprooting or planting, as I said earlier? For this reason it has fully earned the right to deck itself out with so noble an epithet.

The reason for calling this vernacular 'aulic', on the other hand, is that if we Italians had a royal court, it would make its home in the court's palace. 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 resi-

dent. 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.

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'.⁹⁵

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 Germany⁹⁶ – 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.

XIX

So now we can say that this vernacular, which has been shown to be illustrious, cardinal, aulic, and⁹⁷ curial, is the vernacular that is called Italian. For, just as one vernacular can be identified as belonging to Cremona, so can another that belongs to Lombardy; and just as one can be identified that belongs to Lombardy, so can another that belongs to the whole left-hand side of Italy; and just as all these can be identified in this way, so can that which belongs to Italy as a whole. And just as the first is called Cremonese, the second Lombard, and the third half-Italian, so this last, which belongs to all Italy, is called the Italian vernacular. This is the language used by the illustrious authors who have written vernacular poetry in Italy, whether they came from Sicily, Apulia, Tuscany, Romagna, Lombardy, or either of the Marches.

And since my intention, as I promised at the beginning of this work, is to teach a theory of the effective use of the vernacular, I have begun with this form of it, as being the most excellent; and I shall go on, in the following books,⁹⁸ to discuss the following questions: whom I think worthy of using this language, for what purpose, in what manner, where, when, and what audience they should address. Having clarified all this, I shall attempt to throw some light on the question of the less important vernaculars, descending step by step until I reach the language that belongs to a single family.