

ON VERNACULARITY

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Abstract. Attention to the tensions between vernacular and cosmopolitan languages has been growing in recent years. This article discusses various aspects of vernacularity, focusing on Dante's classic treatise, as well on twentieth-century authors, and reflects on its significance for how one understands 'world literature'.

Keywords: vernacularity; world literature; Dante

Attention to the potential of the vernacular as a particular lens through which we can examine (world) literature has been on the rise.¹⁾ Dante's role in the early European debates on the vernacular is often, and rightly, singled out, and here I wish to consider some of the implications of his treatise for how we could shift the discussion of world literature away from a focus on the stable, finished text and towards an understanding of world literature as a universe of inherently unstable and incomplete texts and their interactions and appropriations. In addition, I also dwell briefly on two examples (Cavafy and Gombrowicz), in which vernacularity has a different origin and manifestation.

Of course, Dante was not the first to write on the vernacular; in Europe, probably the most significant short treatise preceding Dante's is that by Raimon Vidal, written very early in the thirteenth century.²⁾ (Vidal wrote his piece on the poetry and grammar of the Troubadours in Occitan, a language which Dante himself would later honour in his *Divine Comedy* by composing in it a sequence of nine lines, which the Provençal poet Arnaut Daniel delivers in the *Purgatorio* in accord with Dante's metric form.³⁾ But Dante's unfinished treatise, *De vulgari eloquentia*, is remarkable in at least two respects, on which I wish to dwell in some detail here.

To begin with, Dante's is a text that still allows us – a perhaps unlikely ally in this endeavour – to complicate the habitual evolutionary scheme, according to which the vernacular succeeds the cosmopolitan. This scheme would be familiar to students of world literature from Sheldon Pollock's breath-taking book on the fortunes of Sanskrit (2006). To be sure, Pollock carefully establishes various scenarios under which the cosmopolitan and the vernacular can and do co-exist; this dialectic of the two formations (as much linguistic as they are cultural, more broadly speaking) and their overlap is also noted by Alexander Beecroft in his work on the ecologies of

world literature (2015). But the story Pollock tells is nonetheless that of a millennium of cosmopolitan languages disrupted by a millennium of vernaculars, which in turn is being brought to a close by the ubiquity of English. This evolutionary line may or may not be unproblematic from our modern vantage point (this question should be left for another time); but from Dante's point of view it would be a rather secular, and thus somewhat feeble, line, and one that proceeds in the context of a still somewhat rigid distinction between cosmopolitan and vernacular.

For Dante, whom we often tend to read as unadulterated champion of the vernacular (he begins his *De Vulgari Eloquentia* by declaring it “nobler” than Latin, primary, and more natural), cosmopolitan and vernacular are not such absolutes, for in the fullness of biblical time their opposition is a relatively recent occurrence. From Dante's religious perspective, the differentiation between cosmopolitan and vernacular only emerged “as the punishment of confusion” (I.8),⁴ following humanity's hubris in attempting to erect the Tower of Babel. Before that, humans only had one “form of speech” (I.6), and the only question that seems to have tormented Dante with reference to that language was not how it was used (the presumption of homogeneity seemed unshaken in that regard), but who was the first to speak it: a woman or a man (I.4). The truly universal language for Dante must have been Hebrew, the rest – the long shadow the exile from Paradise casts on language – is a history of powerful transregional languages (Latin being one such language for him, Greek another), of which various vernaculars exfoliate. This proliferation of vernaculars is a process that, far from celebrating, Dante, from a Christian perspective, attributes to the woefully imperfect nature of man as “a most unstable and changeable animal,” whose language “cannot be durable or lasting but must vary according to time and place” (I.9).

The lesson that emerges, I suppose, is that the pivotal discrimination for Dante is not that between vernacular and cosmopolitan (the latter is our later terminological construct; Dante does not refer to “cosmopolitan” languages), but between vernaculars and languages, such as Latin, that have “grammar ... incapable of variation” (I.9), i.e. codified and stable usage. No longer praising the vernacular unequivocally, Dante later in the essay stresses the capacity of codified languages to better negotiate time and space (and thus be more cosmopolitan, as we would put it today), furnishing access to “knowledge of the opinions and deeds of the ancients, or of those whom distance makes different from ourselves” (I.9).

The vernacular is thus a language that has not been codified. Dante mentions that Italy has at least fourteen vernaculars (I.10), and he believes his mission ought to be to hunt for the “most decorous and illustrious of them” (I.11). What is on the agenda here is an elevation of the vernacular towards a certain normativity that would render the local use of any one of these fourteen vernaculars insufficiently representative of the Italian language as a whole. This yet to be identified “illustrious” vernacular is compared to an elusive “panther” (I.16) that everyone is “stalking” without finding it

(for some commentators, the panther is one of Dante's similes for God); this higher vernacular "belongs to every city" but is the property of none, and by it "the municipal vernaculars of all Italy are weighed, measured, and compared" (I.16).

It is vital to realise that Dante's discourse on the vernacular is far from free of notions of hierarchy and normativity. At the end of Book 1 he hints at what he calls "the lesser vernaculars" (I.19), descending by degrees to the language of a single family. And the entire second (unfinished) Book is a powerful exercise in re-normativising the vernacular by drafting a prescriptive poetics that allows and disallows its specific uses in literature. Although the "illustrious Italian vernacular" may be used for both prose and verse, Dante clearly privileges verse over prose (II.1), and so begins the second Book with an exposition of its proper use in poetry. Dante's starting point here is the quality of the poet: "the best vernacular" is "appropriate only for those who possess learning and intellect"⁵⁾ (II.1). Having established that "only the most excellent poets should use the illustrious vernacular" (II.2), Dante further introduces, explicitly following Horace's *Ars poetica*, a thematic filter: only "the highest things" (II.4) are worthy of the highest vernacular and the corresponding tragic style; these subjects are "security, love, and virtue" ("security" here stands for the thematic compass of war and defence). Lower subjects invite the comic style, for which "sometimes the lowest, sometimes the middle form of the vernacular is adopted"; and the lowest ones are the preserve of the elegiac style, which "calls for only the humblest vernacular" (II.4). This gradation of subject matter, style, and the respective vernacular (highest; middle; lowest), which Dante promised to elaborate on in the unwritten fourth Book of his treatise, is then mapped onto the repertoire of genres: *canzone* is declared nobler than the ballad, and the ballad nobler than the sonnet (II.3).

The vernacular is thus at once liberated and trapped in renewed normativity. This is mirrored in the very material that Dante relies upon to exemplify the various uses of the vernacular. He refers to some thirty vernacular poets, most of them Italian, the rest Provençal and French, some his contemporaries, some preceding him, but none by more than about 150 years.⁶⁾ His canon of vernacular writing, (if this phrase is not a contradiction in terms), is thus rather fresh; it is the literature of his own time. Projected onto that screen of contemporaneity, however, are recurrent shadows from the deeper canon: works by Aristotle, Horace, and Virgil are all directly mentioned, with Boethius and Augustine also present in the background. Dante is vernacular and classic in the same breath, embracing the potential of "vulgar speech" and seeking to realign it with examples of nobility and decorum.

This may be another way of endorsing Engels' verdict from his 1893 preface to the Italian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, in which he concluded that Dante was "both the last poet of the Middle Ages and the first poet of modern times" (2006, 37). (Marx was also an avid reader of Dante's *Comedy*, to which he referred more than once in his writings.⁷⁾ Gramsci would echo this formula in his prison notebooks:

“Isn’t the *Divine Comedy*, to some extent, the swan song of the Middle Ages but also a harbinger of the new age and the new history?” (1991 – 2007, vol. 3, 48).

Yet the impact of Dante’s work was not immediate; *De Vulgari Eloquentia* remained virtually unknown until the sixteenth century, when both the Latin text and an Italian translation were printed (the latter before the former), and their gradual appropriation commenced. What is more, Petrarch’s literary domination, which from the mid-fourteenth century helped Latin regain its authoritative position, constituted, in Martin McLaughlin’s apt characterisation, “a linguistic counterrevolution” (2005, 612). The neat evolutionary line of a cosmopolitan language being supplanted irrevocably by the vernacular is thus proving incapable of accommodating the zig-zags of history and the staying power of Latin. To lend further emphasis to this picture of contradiction and complexity, we also need to consider that Dante wrote his treatise on eloquence in the vernacular whilst in exile; chronologically, the time of its creation is embedded within his work on another unfinished treatise, the *Convivio*, in which – contrary to what he would state in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* – Dante asserts, in Italian, the superiority of Latin over the vernacular. As noted by Albert Ascoli, (who seeks to reconcile this disagreement of the poet with himself), Dante praises the vernacular in Latin and the Latin language in Italian.⁸⁾

In the end, what matters here is the overall morale of the story: whether superior or inferior to Latin, the vernacular is conceived of, in both treatises, relationally (vis-à-vis Latin), and not as fixed substance. There are no features intrinsic to the vernacular; its characteristics only emerge in relation to another language; as Meg Worley has put it, “vernacularity is not a quality but a relationship” (2003, 19). The vernacular therefore has no political identity of its own, I should add: its energies have been manipulated and mobilised to defend both *völkisch* nationalism and left-leaning discourses of equality and popular resistance to oppression; and the tireless translation factories of world literature have often repurposed it as a conduit of marketable exoticism.

I wish to conclude by very briefly bringing into play two examples of vernacularisation in world literature, in which the vernacular defines itself vis-à-vis not a dominant cosmopolitan language, but another articulation of the same national language. Modern Greek, from the early nineteenth century into the late 1970s, presents the historian of vernacularity with a rather interesting case. The vernacular here continues to be present and recognisable as a register within an already emancipated and codified national language. The vernacular in the case of Modern Greek persists within a situation of protracted diglossia, the carving out of two different versions of the language, *katharevousa* (seeking a compromise between Modern Greek and the older cosmopolitan Greek of the Hellenistic period) and *dimotiki* (the colloquial vernacular variety of Modern Greek). Students of world literature should be particularly attentive to this self-alienation of what are usually taken to be stable, homogenous, and unitary national languages.

Linguistic and cultural foreignness does not always flood in from outside; it can also be produced from within the seemingly unitary body of the national language. Constantine Cavafy, a poet born in Alexandria to Greek parents who would spend his life in what was eventually to emerge as independent Egypt, with spells in England and Constantinople, often mixed *katharevousa* (literally, “purified”) and *dimotiki* (“popular,” “of the people”) in his poetry (while also writing some early poems entirely in *katharevousa*). Here the question of translation looms large: how could one convey the deliberate deployment of two linguistic registers, one vernacular and one artfully bent towards the archaic? W. H. Auden, one of Cavafy’s many Anglo-American admirers in the twentieth century⁹ (Cavafy’s poetry was discovered for the Anglophone reader by E. M. Forster), discusses this difficulty in his introduction to the 1961 selection of Cavafy’s poetry in translation: “The most original aspect of his style, the mixture, both in his vocabulary and his syntax, of demotic and purist Greek, is untranslatable. In English there is nothing comparable to the rivalry between demotic and purist, a rivalry that has excited high passions, both literary and political. We have only Standard English on the one side and regional dialects on the other, and it is impossible for a translator to reproduce this stylistic effect or for an English poet to profit from it” (1961, viii). Note here Auden’s attention to the inner temporal clash staged by *katharevousa* and *dimotiki*, which can hardly find a match in the spatial distinction between a national language and its dialects. When Cavafy chooses to combine *katharevousa* and *dimotiki*, he simultaneously writes in both the standard language and in the vernacular within it, pursuing the interplay and the tensions between them without having to resort to regional dialects to body forth the vernacular.

My second and final example of the self-alienation of national languages in ways that re-enact the vernacular comes from an exilic writer, the novelist and playwright Witold Gombrowicz (Dante wrote on the vernacular whilst in exile; Cavafy deployed its resources as a diasporic poet; Gombrowicz experimented with it after deciding to miss the boat from Argentina to his native Poland). Exilic and diasporic writing have the capacity of estranging language from its identity as a *national language*; they thus lay the foundations of world literature, which would be unthinkable without destabilizing the sacrosanct (but, in fact, historically produced and thus limited) Western model of identity between a single national language and its corresponding national literature. In a sense, the main protagonist of exilic writing is language itself; we cannot really comprehend the history of world literature, unless we understand what happens to language as it travels across political, cultural, and linguistic borders – and across itself. The two principal scenarios are well-known: either embracing the language of the new cultural milieu (Nabokov is one salient example that stands for many, even though – remarkably – his first English-language novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, was written in France, not in the United States), or continuing to deploy the language of

one's pre-exilic environment. There is, however, a third powerful way. Witold Gombrowicz, who has a place in the extended canon of Western modernism, elected to do something different. His short novel, *Trans-Atlantyk*, published in Paris in 1953, is written in a language that deliberately reactivates the resources and the ostentatious patina of the Baroque period and of Romanticism, while adding to the mix a vernacular *skaz*-like handling of language (*gawęda*). (Again, this Polish non-Polish poses significant challenges for the translator.¹⁰) The result is a language that emphatically liberates and estranges both Gombrowicz and his readers from the Polish that was written and spoken in Poland in the early 1950s, i.e. from Polish as the language of the nation (*the national language*). This purposefully odd language, not recognisable as the national language shared by Gombrowicz's contemporaries, yet still identifiable as an iteration of Polish, is the compass his readers must use in order to be led, by Gombrowicz himself (who compares himself to Moses in his diary), out of their Polishness.¹¹ Exilic writing is thus inextricably bound up with, and participating in, the making of world literature – by disaggregating language and nation, and by emplotting mobility, multiplicity, and foreignness. In Gombrowicz's case, this disaggregation proceeds through the unexpected channels of archaization and vernacularity attained in the effects of secondary orality.

By way of conclusion I wish to go back to the central finding of this short essay: The vernacular is a language that has not yet been codified. There resides, it seems to me, the most powerful lesson vernacularity can teach us as we engage with world literature. The not-yet-codified is just a linguistic shorthand for a different mode of cultural production and consumption that we need to be able to name and ponder. The vernacular should become a way of referring to a particular status of language and literature: the pre-codified, the not-yet-ready, the non-finalised, that which is still in flux. The vernacular opens up the space for discussing language, literature, and culture in *statu nascendi*; this is its truly subversive potential that can begin to generate a new understanding of world literature – not as the circulation of finished works commodified in books sold and purchased on the global market, but as the movement of texts, genres, and artistic conventions in the making, a world literature in becoming, seen from the *longue durée* of its existence. That *longue durée* perspective would suggest that the autonomous, self-contained, and authorially stable works of literature are but a recent invention, and perhaps even a short-lived one when measured by the standards of a much longer – and today reinvigorated – tradition of texts without authors, or with more than one, often disputed, authors, texts without a secure home in a book, or sharing that home with other texts, or living in parts in multiple abodes – illustrated manuscripts, sermons, textual reenactments through theatre, recitation and dance, dismembered and reassembled with other texts in blogs and on the social media. The vernacular could serve as a symbolic pointer to this powerful and inexhaustible spring of literary creativity, unregulated and uncaptured, resisting codification and also – not always – the dubious honour of its commodification.¹²

NOTES

1. See, e.g. Gould (2018) and Kullberg and Watson (2022).
2. For an English translation, by Marianne Shapiro, see her book *De vulgari eloquentia, Dante's book of exile* (1990, 113 – 126).
3. See Alison Cornish, *Vernacular Translation in Dante's Italy: Illiterate Literature* (2011, 73; 155).
4. References throughout are to Shapiro's translation of Dante's text, with the first number referring to the relevant book, the second to the relevant section in that book.
5. *Ingenium* in Dante's Latin, sometimes also translated as "genius" or "natural talent."
6. The information here is based on Sally Purcell's introduction in Dante, *Literature in the Vernacular* (1981, 8).
7. For a reading of Vol. 1 of *Das Kapital* that (rather metaphorically and perhaps relying too much on analogy and association) sees it as modelled on Dante's Inferno, see William Clare Roberts, *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital*, (2017).
8. See the argument in Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (2008).
9. On the Anglo-American fascination with Kavafy's poetry, see Nikolaou (2020).
10. There are two English translations, by Carolyn French and Nina Karsov (1994), and by Danuta Borhardt (2014), both published by Yale UP.
11. Cf. Gombrowicz's diary entry: "A hundred years ago, a Lithuanian poet [Mickiewicz] forged the shape of the Polish spirit and today, I, like Moses, am leading Poles out of the slavery of that form. I am leading the Pole out of himself" (Witold Gombrowicz, *Diary*, 3 vols., trans. Lillian Vallee, Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1988 – 1993, Vol. 1, 36).
12. I discuss this processual understanding of world literature in my article "Beyond Circulation" in *Universal Localities: The Languages of World Literature* (2022).

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