CONCLUSION: LANGUAGE AND THE ASCENSUS MENTIS AD DEUM

The poverty of our human intellect generally produces an abundance of words, for more talk is spent in search than in discovery.

Augustine, Confessions 12.1.

Language

What is striking about the theories of language and uses of linguistic models discussed in this study is that they do not posit or attempt to create a perfect language. The shared conviction of all three authors is that words do not and cannot capture reality, that they do not map onto things in one-to-one and unambiguous ways. This is perhaps why none of these figures nor indeed any medieval thinkers figure in Umberto Eco’s recent book, The Search for the Perfect Language.¹ I take it that different models of the perfect language such as the ones Eco explores are attempts to create an absolutely transparent language, to have it deliver, without standing in the way of the signified. With regard to the period stretching from Augustine through the entire span of the Middle Ages prior to Dante and Raymond Lull, Eco mentions only the medieval belief in the fall from the perfect language in the Genesis story of the Tower of Babel and the notion that Adam, possessed of this perfect language, named the creatures of the earth. Eco seems almost puzzled that Augustine, for example, shows no desire to return to or reconstruct this perfect language. In my view that is exactly the point in Augustine and his followers: that no language, be it Latin, Hebrew, or one yet to be engineered, is or could become a perfect language, one which can perfectly and without remainder represent the world.

None of the thinkers considered in this volume see their project as only or primarily cleaning up ordinary language with the tools of logic so that it can correctly mirror the structure of things. In the logical commentaries Boethius tries to mediate but not erase the difference between words and

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things, and language remains asymmetrically related to things. Even at the end of the Consolation’s careful steps toward transforming language and understanding, we discover that the ambiguities of language cannot be disposed of. For though in some sense Boethius reaches a higher perspective from which words more closely correspond to the reality of things, he and Lady Philosophy find that they cannot fully understand it and, thus, cannot remain there.

Abelard and Alan’s rewriting of Boethius take trends in Boethius in two different directions. One strain in Boethius is the Neoplatonically inspired exploration of the metaphysics of God; this becomes Alan’s obsession. Where Boethius sees the possibility of working from the metaphysics of this world (which he expresses in Aristotelian terms) to the metaphysics of God, Alan concentrates on the incommensurability of one with the other, on the impossibility of creating a transition that does not negate the reality of one realm or the other, this world or God. Boethius’s pluralistic and optimistic vision is that both God and the world can be real, that words can somehow be stretched from one to the other. Alan seems to engage in the same project, but, we see in the end, only to show its failure. Alan thus focuses on the ways in which theological language breaks all the rules of grammar and logic. Alan’s reflection on language is governed almost exclusively by the conviction that the project of refining language until it reaches God, its ultimate and most worthwhile object, is an irretrievably complicated and necessarily interminable one.

The other strain in Boethius is his commitment to this world and to the logic and language that describe it, to careful distinctions and step by step argument. This is the element taken over and transformed in Abelard. Abelard breaks down the narrative connecting word, thought, and thing Boethius had constructed in his account of universals. Abelard points out the difference between grammatical (ordinary) language and dialectic; while the former describes the surface of language, the latter sees beyond it to the deeper structure of things. Yet he does not propose to reform language in accord with this picture. Rather he leaves the complexity of language and of correspondence intact. In his theologies Abelard calls attention to the ambiguity of ordinary language not in order to dissolve it but to show that theological language is analogously ambiguous. Where Boethius attempts to give at least some small glimpse of God through and in words, Abelard disjoins the divine nature from the words used to describe it. Heresies are refuted and the truth of propositions describing God and the Trinity is saved but without offering access to God’s nature.

Abelard and Alan are certainly more pessimistic than Boethius about language and its ability to represent God and the world, but in this they are simply extending and exaggerating tendencies already present in Boethius.