

Sperone Speroni (1500-1588)

Excerpt from the *Dialogue on Languages* (Venice: 1542) [transl. by Eugenio Refini]

Sperone Speroni stages a dialogue between the Greek scholar Janus Lascaris (1445-1535) and the Mantuan philosopher Pietro Pomponazzi (1462-1525), also known as 'Peretto Mantovano'. The dialogue, which concerns the vernacular translation of Aristotelian works, is related by an unknown character (the so called 'Scolare', scholar) in the context of a main dialogue involving some key figures of the 16th century debate on the employment of Latin and the vernacular (Pietro Bembo, Lazzaro Bonamico). Lascaris champions a sort of conservative position and criticises Peretto's desire for the 'vernacularisation' of philosophy and sciences.

LASCARIS Excellence, what are you teaching this year?

PERETTO I am lecturing on Aristotle's meteorological four books, sir.

LASCARIS What an interesting subject! Nonetheless, what about the commentators you have been turning to?

5 PERETTO Well, Latin commentators are not that good, but a colleague of mine supplied me with the commentary by Alexander of Aphrodisias.

LASCARIS That is a very good choice, since Alexander is a sort of second Aristotle. So you are able to read Greek! I did not think so...

PERETTO As a matter of fact, I used a Latin translation.

10 LASCARIS This is not going to help you.

PERETTO Why then?

LASCARIS Because Alexander of Aphrodisias, which is Greek, when turned into Latin, is as different from himself as a dead man from a living one.

PERETTO You are probably right, but I did not use to pay attention to such an aspect. I
15 thought Alexander would have been helping me in Latin and vernacular (should a vernacular version exist!) as well as the original Greek text used to help Greek people in the study of Aristotle. That is why I began to study it.

LASCARIS Of course reading it in Latin is better than nothing. However, your knowledge
20 would be wider and deeper should you be able to read Aristotle and Alexander in the language they used to write in.

PERETTO Why?

LASCARIS Because what they said is better expressed in their own language than in others' languages.

PERETTO If I had been Greek, you would have been right. Nonetheless, I find quite
25 improper that a man from northern Italy as I am is asked to study Greek in order to become a philosopher: learning would thus be even more demanding than it actually is. I think it easier just to study logic or philosophy without studying grammar (and above all Greek grammar!).

LASCARIS If you had been right, you should not have been studying Latin nor Greek,
30 just caring about your own vernacular language from Mantua and using it for

philosophising.

PERETTO I wish one day all the philosophical and scientific books originally written in Greek, Latin and Hebrew will be available in the vernacular: this would be very helpful to scholars and we would have a larger number of excellent philosophers than
5 we have nowadays.

LASCARIS I do not understand what you mean.

PERETTO I just care about Italians' honour wishing the next generations will be able to have what I did not.

LASCARIS Let me understand what you mean, please.

10 PERETTO Sure, but please answer first this question: why scholars are nowadays less excellent than in the past? It should be quite the reverse, for it is easier to increase one's knowledge when one can count on previous learning.

LASCARIS Let's just say that we are going from bad to worse.

PERETTO That is true, but for many reasons. The most relevant is that nowadays we
15 usually waste the best years of our lives in studying Greek and Latin which are thus the cause of our ignorance. If we spent more time in studying philosophy rather than learning Greek and Latin, our times would have their own Platos and Aristotles. We forget instead our age, spending ten or twenty years in learning Greek, Latin and – for God's sake! – Tuscan vernacular. After those years we turn to philosophy, but it
20 is too late, for we are no more suitable for philosophical speculation. Modern philosophy can't thus be more than a portrait of the ancient one. Therefore, although potentially talented as the ancients were, we have a smaller knowledge because of the time we spent just in following fables and words. Modern philosophy is thus nothing but an imitation of the ancient one.

25 LASCARIS So, if language learning is useless, shall we give it up?

PERETTO Not yet, for arts and sciences are still in Latins and Greeks' hands. We shall however do all we can in order to make it possible that people will be able to approach every subject in any language.

LASCARIS Do you mean you would philosophise in the vernacular without caring about
30 Greek and Latin?

PERETTO You got it! And I would like to have all the Greek and Latin authors translated into the vernacular.

LASCARIS Translating Aristotle from Greek into north Italian vernacular would be as dishonouring as transplanting an orange or an olive from a beautifully cultivated
35 garden into a thornbushes wood. Moreover, philosophical matters are suitable for shoulders much different from the vernacular ones.

PERETTO I think that all the languages have exactly the same value and are formed by

native speakers in order to reach the very same goal. I would not like you to be speaking about them as a nature matter, for they are mere conventions artificially set up by men. We use them as manifestations of our thoughts. Since objects created by nature and their knowledge are everywhere the same, the great variety of languages is just created by the large variety of men's attitudes and wills (such variety is rightly called the tower of Babel). Languages do not grow up as plants or vegetables and they are not weak or strong by nature, for they just result from men's will. Native language is thus one's most useful resource in getting in touch with others. Vernacular translations of Aristotelian philosophical works would make them closer to modern readers letting them deal with such texts more easily and more deeply than they are nowadays able to do.

LASCARIS Different languages are suitable for expressing different notions: some languages are able to express ignorant people's mind, some others fit in with erudite matters. Greek is so suitable for the expression of philosophical issues that it seems to be a creation of nature itself rather a mere human convention: if you don't wish to agree with me, trust what Plato says about language in his dialogue *Cratylus*. Greek language is in connection with disciplines as light is with colours: without light our mind wouldn't be able to see anything.

PERETTO I rather trust Aristotle when he says that no language has a sort of natural privilege in expressing our thoughts. Everything connected with language resides instead in human will. That is why preventing someone from dealing with philosophy in the vernacular means preventing him from philosophising at all. Since men have been using Greek and Latin in approaching philosophical matters for centuries, most people are of the opinion that we can't do otherwise. Vernacular is consequently only used for “vulgar” subjects. We prefer to express the great mysteries of ancient philosophy by means of others' languages than using the living voice of ours. Nobody, though aware of such a mistake, dares to pick at it. I wish in the future someone will manage such goods and be able to bring into our language the fruits of philosophy and the sciences which we are nowadays prevented from tasting and enjoying.

LASCARIS The person who will translate philosophy from the language of Athens into the vernacular will not be glorious, but blameworthy and get tired by such disastrous project.

PERETTO He will certainly get tired, since he will be undertaking a challenging venture, but he will not be blameworthy. After some initial criticism, the number of people approving his project will increase more and more – as it happened to Jesus Christ, who was at first blamed by some hypocrites and later recognised and adored as God and Our Saviour.

LASCARIS You made a merchant become a messiah! Why don't you become the Redeemer of our vernacular language?

PERETTO Because too late I knew the truth and now my strength does not fit with my will.

LASCARIS So – as I Hope – you are joking!

PERETTO Sir, the reasons I produced above clearly show that I am not joking at all, for
5 they are quite serious. The knowledge of languages is not that difficult: one does not
need to be clever in order to learn them. Cicero and Demosthenes, who used to speak
eloquently, did not address themselves just to erudite people: silly men among
Athenians and Romans did understand them as well. We spend years and years in
learning Greek and Latin not because of their innate difficulty: we turn to words
10 while human intellect would prefer to improve his knowledge of things. The
difficulty of language learning thus resides in the contrast between our natural
inclination to things and the study itself, which makes us waste time in dealing with
words. This is worth-censuring since the study of languages is not intellectual
nourishment, but the pale shadow of it.

15 LASCARIS While you were talking like that, I was thinking about Aristotle's philosophy
being written and discussed in north Italian vernacular among all sorts of miserable
people such as porters, farmers, boatmen and others speaking with the strangest
accents I've ever heard. In the meantime I visualised in my mind mother Philosophy
herself, wearing poor Romagnol clothes and complaining of Aristotle's disdain for
20 her excellence. I imagined Aristotle as well who denied having disregarded her and
declared his love for her. He stated to have been living as a Greek, not as an Italian
from Brescia or Bergamo. That is why he wrote philosophical works in Greek.
According to him, people thinking it different are undoubtedly wrong. I would have
liked you to be attending such a vision.

25 PERETTO If I had been there, I would have told Philosophy she should not complain of
her vernacular diffusion which makes her more widely praiseworthy than before. If
she was not ashamed to dwell in northern Italians' intellect, she would not be
ashamed to be practised in Italian language. India, Scythia and Egypt, where she
used to live with pleasure, gave birth to men much stranger than contemporary
30 people coming from Mantua or Bologna. She has been definitely banished from our
world by the study of Greek and Latin. Nature is whenever and wherever the same:
since she creates all the creatures – wise men as well as dull ones – all the creatures
have the same right to know her. Animals express their feelings by means of
different sounds. Men shall do the same even better using their own various
35 languages. Languages were not set up in order to help nature, but in order to let us
communicate and reach that happiness which lies in knowledge itself, not in the
sound of words. That is the reason why men shall use that language which is the
easiest to learn. If only the all of us would naturally speak the same language! Men
shall write and speak the way which is closer to nature, that means using the
40 language they naturally learnt as children. As regards Aristotle's eloquence, I would
tell him that I do not care about it, since I am just interested in the rightness of his

subject matter. I also would tell him that Nature chose him as her son in virtue of his cleverness and understanding of her, not because he came from Athens. The truth he found as well as his method do not change when language changes. His name, when sorted from his actual knowledge, is of little value. Finally we would like to read his books in our language as Greeks could read them in their own: we aim at reading and understanding his works in order not to become Athenians, but philosophers. With such an answer I would have left him.

LASCARIS Say whatever you want. I still hope that it won't happen to see Aristotle transferred into the vernacular!

10 PERETTO I complain of our times in which one cares much more about looking than actually being wise. Just one way – in every language – drives towards the truth: leaving it aside, we usually follow an other way which drives us far from our real goal. One persuades himself of knowing everything about a subject when he knows which words were employed to name it by Cicero, Plinius, Lucretius and Vergil among the Latin writers, Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes and Aeschines among the Greeks. Contemporary scholars deal with the words of ancient writer as they were the real object of knowledge, making Latin and Greek look like divine languages. They think of vernacular as a sort of inhuman language totally unsuitable for intellectual discourse. Their opinion is probably based on the fact that we learn it naturally, while we have to spend many years in learning Greek and Latin which are supposed to be more suitable for sciences and philosophy than our own language. This silly opinion is so strong that many of them think it enough to use Greek in order to become philosophers, as if Aristotle's spirit – like an elf in a crystal bottle – resided in the Greek alphabet and was meant to inspire them by means of Greek letters. I saw some of such scholars who, completely lacking in philosophical knowledge, dared to publicly lecture on Aristotle's books just trusting their language skills. In their opinion translations of Aristotelian works from Greek into the vernacular would be a waste of time, for they do not care to be understood by many people. I wish future students to experience what I could not: more erudite people, certainly less ambitious than nowadays scholars, will aim at being celebrated in their own countries, without caring about being renown somewhere else. When philosophers will use the same language common people employ, sciences and philosophy will become of common knowledge, since their value is not in words but in human intellects.