

"Langage de Canaan": Human and Divine Communication in d'Aubigné's Preface to His *Meditations sur les Pseaumes*

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The nature and role of language were the subject of much reflection and debate in sixteenth-century France, for Renaissance humanism conceived of man's knowledge of and relation to himself and his world in terms of language. While it is true that every century has been preoccupied with language in one way or another--from the medieval debates over the capacity of verse and prose to represent truth to the experiments of the surrealists in the twentieth century--as a result of the "rediscovery" and veneration of ancient texts in the original language coupled with the rise of the vernacular, questions about the importance and role of language were a most pressing concern for Renaissance scholars.¹ This was especially true since sixteenth-century man had, as Claude-Gilbert Dubois says, a "vision synchronique et globale du phénomène linguistique" (16). In other words, language was not an entity existing on its own and separable from the rest of reality. Words and things were inextricably intertwined, and language did not simply represent or signify a world exterior to it but rather actually revealed and expressed the realities it named.² Moreover, this understanding and apprehension of the world through language led also to the understanding and apprehension of the divine, since, through the profoundly analogical world view of the Renaissance, man and the physical world around him were considered mirrors of the unseen, spiritual world. In this manner, language was truly an essential element

of life, for through it and only through it came knowledge of the world and of God.

Because of their emphasis on the written and preached Word of God, Reformation thinkers, who for the most part had deep humanist roots,³ were among those profoundly interested in the contemporary debates on language. Preoccupied as they were with spiritual matters, the Reformers were concerned with the relationship between language and spiritual reality and with the role of language in defining one's spiritual identity. One author who shows himself to be acutely aware of the issues regarding language and the spiritual realm is Agrippa d'Aubigné, who, in the preface to his *Meditations sur les Pseaumes* (1588-1626), addresses these issues in a twofold discussion. First, he establishes the necessary, albeit conceptually difficult relationship between divine communication and human language. Then secondly, he summarizes this relationship in the term "langage de Canaan," and invites the reader to experience it by reading the *Meditations*. In this manner, d'Aubigné contributes to the contemporary linguistic debates while preparing his reader to commune with and apprehend the divine through language.

D'Aubigné's discussion of language and spiritual communication comes as part of what Gerard Genette calls the "déclaration d'intention," one of the common functions of a preface (205). D'Aubigné reveals that his goal is to defend Scripture against the claims of those who are too earthly minded:

C'est que parmi les corruptions de ce siecle les stupides, qui en leur ignorance affectee n'ont pensees que terrestres, ou les esprits de vanité qui declament ouvertement contre la Parole de Dieu, la descrient pour estre d'un style grossier, infectans d'un mortel desgoust les oreilles des Grands. Ce langage aussi plein de malice que d'orgueil ne se pouvant combattre par disputes ni remonstrances, pource que les professeurs de l'Atheisme n'advoüent leur impiété qu'à leurs disciples et complices, j'ay estimé estre à propos de faire voir comment parmi les styles les plus élaborés les passages de l'Escriture sont non seulement comme un esmail sur l'or, mais comme des pierreries exquises.... (493)

The *Meditations* are thus the author's counter-attack on the atheists. Although they "déclament ouvertement" and "descrient," their evil has its sources in darkness and secrecy: "n'advoüent leur impiété qu'à leurs

disciples et complices..." and in response to this the author proposes to "faire voir," to "faire paroistre au jour"--a simple presentation of the evidence that will silence the cries of the ignorant. The contrast is clearly established, and the *Meditations* are seen as a light piercing the darkness of others' ignorance. The author is animated not by selfish pompousness, as the "professeurs de l'Atheisme," but by the need of the moment, the imperative to counter the mistaken notions of the atheists, and this will be done not through d'Aubigné's own ingenuity and forcefulness, but rather through a demonstration of the Bible's own inherent qualities. As in *Les Tragiques*, d'Aubigné will only be an instrument, pointing out the true nature of Scripture, which will in and by itself be able to correct the mistaken misconceptions of unbelievers.⁴

In order to quiet the attack on biblical language, d'Aubigné proposes to demonstrate its superiority. He continues:

...j'ay estimé estre à propos de faire voir comment parmi les styles les plus elabourés, et dans les discours qui pour le moins sont purgez de barbarie, les passages de l'Escriture sont non seulement comme un esmail sur l'or, mais comme les pierreries exquisés, et relevent le langage le plus eslevé, confirment par axiomes, preuvent par arrest du Ciel, illustrent par exemples, et recreent les esprits qui aiment Dieu par ravissantes lumieres et parfaites beautez. (493)

At first glance one might think that the author is suggesting a sort of stylistic commentary and analysis of biblical passages in order to counter critics' claims that the Bible is written in a "style grossier." However, upon closer examination, one sees that d'Aubigné's approach is much more complicated and involves a complex interaction between style and effect, language and communication of spiritual truth. He begins by speaking of the biblical style in very general, laudatory terms. He presents the Bible as superior in every way, placing it "parmi les styles les plus elabourés, et dans les discours qui pour le moins sont purgez de barbarie..." and thus freely admitting that there are other writings in these categories. However, the first two elements of his description show that even within the overall category of elaborate styles, the Bible is incomparable. First, it is like "un esmail sur l'or." The comparison is most likely referring to enamel and gold together, and not just enamel in itself. Hence, the style and language of the Bible are not just gold alone, a precious substance, but gold that has been

worked over artistically, gold which shines, better than just plain gold. This idea is further developed in the next comparison: "comme les pierreries exquisés." A "pierrerie" is not only a precious stone, but one that has been finished and polished, making it even more valuable. This connotation is intensified by the adjective "exquis," which connotes rarity. With these descriptions d'Aubigné places Scripture in a class of its own.

It is important to recall here that the meditations were composed during the later years of the sixteenth century and the early years of the seventeenth century, and that during this time period there was a shift in the significance of ornamentation that went from exterior beauty to comprehensibility, communicability and effectiveness. Accordingly, while "pierreries" and "or" both have to do with ornamentation and exterior beauty, obviously referring to the actual writing styles of the biblical authors, in what immediately follows it becomes clear that d'Aubigné is concerned not only with the mechanics of style, but also with the effects of Scripture. First of all, he expounds further on the notion already developed in the first two comparisons when he says that the Scripture passages "relevent le langage le plus élevé...." Even the most lofty of discourses is embellished when infused with the Bible; the emphasis here lies not on the beauty of the language itself, but on its valorizing effect. He then continues with three points closely related: "confirment par axiomes, preuvent par arrest du Ciel, illustrent par exemples." These at first seem to be a traditional discussion of style, explaining how the author attempts to create desired effects: he uses axioms, divine judgments, and gives many examples. However, what d'Aubigné is saying here goes far beyond a statement on the types of rhetorical techniques the biblical authors employ. It must be remembered that the subject of the verbs is "les passages de l'Escriture." D'Aubigné is not talking about the authors, but about the text of the Bible itself, and the verbs used here are of extreme importance. He does not say the Scriptures *attempt* to do these things, which again would be a comment on the means employed to reach a certain goal, but the force of "confirment," "preuvent" and "illustrent" is such that it connotes a direct effect upon the reader: things are confirmed to the reader by the axioms presented, the divine judgments given are received as proof, the examples given do illustrate truths for the reader. The reading of Scripture thus always constitutes a performative act, in that what is spoken of in the Scriptures actually takes place as it is enunciated.

While the verbs "confirment," "preuvent" and "illustrent" deal with man's intellectual and emotional capacities, what comes in the last part of the sentence shows that the effect on the reader goes beyond these realms and enters into that of the Spirit: "recreent les esprits." Presented as the apogee of the text's effect on the reader, this spiritual recreation is nothing less than a new life given to the believer. This is said to be done by "ravissantes lumieres et parfaites beautez." "Lumieres" and "beautez" are sufficiently abstract nouns to retain the reader in the lofty world of the Spirit, while nonetheless referring back to the "esmail sur l'or" and the "pierreries exquisés," which were exemplary of the style and discourse of the Bible. In this it is clear that d'Aubigné emphasizes both the formal beauty of biblical language and the effectiveness of its message. He establishes a direct link between human language and expression on the one hand and the spiritual realm on the other hand.

That God communicates directly with the believer through the Bible was certainly a commonplace for Protestants. Also, that God should communicate even through a bad Latin translation was not all that surprising, for, as Calvin says in his commentary on Genesis:

Il y a une bonté merveilleuse de Dieu qui reluit en ce que les gens communiquent entre eux de part et d'autre par divers langages, et principalement en ce qu'il a publié un Evangile par toute la terre en diverses langues et a appris à ses Apôtres à parler divers langages; par ce moyen, ceux qui auparavant étaient misérablement divisés ont été conjoints par l'unité de la foi. (184)

Calvin's emphasis is on the message that comes through the words, and not on the words themselves: one signified coming through many signifiers. D'Aubigné, on the other hand, focuses on the necessary relationship between the two: divine self-disclosure and human language.⁵ This concern for language is reinforced in the final paragraph of the preface, where he discusses why he chooses "tu" instead of "vous." The issue is really one of interpretation, for God's revelation of himself as a person is from the Bible, and the basic question is if the divine "you" should be rendered as "vous" or "tu." For d'Aubigné, "Vous estes Dieu" is wrong, because God is revealed as "un et seul." "Vous" is also wrong, because its usage is less majestic than that of "Toy." Calling God "vous" thus represents both a

theological error and a lack of respect and commitment. Hence, the issue is really of great importance, for the choice of a single word can have vast implications. The "tu/vous" controversy" is a striking example of the fact that man's knowledge of and relationship with God is necessarily a matter of language, here specifically the French language, with its distinction between "vous" and "tu."

The difficulties of this phenomenon do not go unnoticed by d'Aubigné. In the middle of the "vous/tu" discussion he says:

Je sçay que l'on s'excuse en la mollesse des langues Françoises, Angloises et Flamandes, ou autres imperfections qu'on fait passer pour loi. J'ay pris plus de plaisir aux anciennes harangues faites aux Rois, et aux poètes de la volée de Ronsard: (puis qu'il n'y a que du langage) ceux-là parlans à tout ce qu'ils ont voulu séparer du vulgaire, ont pris les termes masles de l'unité.... (494)

While the phrase "puisqu'il n'y a que du langage" immediately refers to poets like Ronsard, it is clear from the context that it also refers to the larger question at hand. D'Aubigné recognizes the limits of human language. When he states that they are "imperfections," he is echoing a common belief that because of the Fall, which eventually resulted in Babel, the original correspondence between the sign and the referent that was present in Adam's language was lost.⁶ Claude-Gilbert Dubois, reflecting on Calvin's commentary of Genesis cited above, says "tout le problème pour les Protestants ... consistera à faire le meilleur usage des outils imparfaits qui ont été légués malgré le péché et, en même temps, par le péché: il s'agit de retrouver le sens derrière le signe et sa diversité" (56). While d'Aubigné is certainly concerned with the "le sens derrière le signe," he seems to be more preoccupied with the fact that this "sens" can come *only* through the "signes." Hence, "puisqu'il n'y a que du langage," one must work with these fallen languages, because it is all there is for expression; these languages are still the only possible vehicles of communication among men. And since God has chosen to reveal and explain himself through language, it is also a necessary part of divine revelation. These comments do not explain how the relationship between language and the spiritual realm works; they simply underscore the fact that the two cannot be separated.

These somewhat theoretical reflections are followed by an invitation to the reader: "c'est assés que par cette Epistre je convie mon Lecteur à

eslever (en simplicité du langage de Canaan) ses pensees à Dieu..." (494). All that d'Aubigné has talked about in the preface is summarized and finds its ultimate meaning in this invitation, for in it the discussion of language and communication with God is brought down to a personal, practical level for the reader, preparing him for a meaningful reading of the *Meditations*. The key condition of this preparation involves the notion of language: one must commune with God in the "langage de Canaan." The term was familiar to Protestants and very significant for them. On one level it was a reference to the Protestant emphasis on reading and appropriating Scripture, since in the sixteenth century "language of Canaan" referred to the language of reformed believers, which was studded with biblical quotations and phraseology. This appropriation of God's Word was necessarily an appropriation of language, i.e. the vocabulary and style and rhetoric of the Bible, and although it involved much more than meaningless repetition of words, it was fundamentally tied to them. Interestingly enough, it is this necessary role of words and language that made possible the abuse of the "langage de Canaan." D'Aubigné recounts, for example, in his *Histoire Universelle* that Catherine de Medici attempted to "speak" the "langage de Canaan" in order to influence positively Protestant representatives, which means for d'Aubigné that she was concentrating on the words themselves and not their true significance.

For Protestants the true significance of biblical language was ultimately found in the reference to Canaan. The persecuted Huguenots readily identified with the persecuted Israelites, and Canaan thus became the symbol of the kingdom promised to the elect (Weber 938). Hence, the "langage de Canaan" was the language of those destined to inherit the kingdom. Since in the sixteenth century the notion of language was a key element in the definition of one's identity, for Protestants, speaking the "langage de Canaan" signified and assured their identity as inhabitants of the kingdom of God, his chosen people. This kingdom represented for them both a present reality and a future hope, for the reformed understanding of the kingdom of God was that Christ had inaugurated it spiritually in his first coming and would bring its fulfillment in his second coming. Calvin sums it up thus in the *Institution*:

Ainsi, Christ, afin de fonder notre espérance sur les cieux, prononce que son royaume n'est pas de ce monde. Bref,

quand chacun de nous entend dire que le règne de Christ est spirituel...il se doit transporter à l'espérance d'une meilleure vie, et se tenir assuré que s'il est maintenant sous la protection de Jésus-Christ, c'est pour en recevoir le fruit entier au siècle à venir.⁷ (250)

The "langage de Canaan," as the language of the Kingdom of God, thus connoted an identification with Christ's eternal reign, which was for the Huguenots a powerful source of comfort and encouragement for the present, and of hope for complete union with God in the future.

In the final phrases of the preface, d'Aubigné describes the power of the "langage de Canaan" by focusing on what God does in the life of the reader. God's interventions and actions listed by d'Aubigné represent two movements, one involving the *hic et nunc* reality of the Kingdom of God, and the other involving its future aspects. The description of the first movement begins with "au sein duquel y a propitiation, qui se tient volon tiers près des coeurs desolez, qui n'oublie jamais la clameur de ceux qui le supplient" (494). The image is one of an intimate encounter between two people, and it speaks of the *present* character of the kingdom in both senses of the word: the here and now reality of life on earth, which involves much pain, and also the nearness of God in this pain. The second movement is intimately linked with the first, while at the same time bringing in the future aspect of the heavenly kingdom. D'Aubigné continues: "qui ne souffre point justice estre foulee, et en qui seul aux temps calamiteux se trouve conseil et consolation." The references are obviously to the present, in which there is much calamity and injustice. However, the promise of sure and complete consolation comes from being assured that God will bring about final justice for his chosen people in the future. These are truths concerning the Kingdom of God that can be known and counted on only through the "langage de Canaan."

In fact, the concluding sentences of the preface give not so much a description as an illustration of the "language of Canaan," which is a fitting conclusion to all d'Aubigné has said. These final phrases, full as they are of biblical language, constitute in effect a personal appropriation of this language, through which the actions talked about actually occur. Speaking these verses into one's situation is not a mere citation (like Catherine de Medicis' "language de Canaan"), but rather a spiritual act which encompasses both expressing pain and sorrow and, in turn, receiving comfort from God. While the judgment spoken of

refers to a future reality, it is spoken in the present tense because its proclamation is already the judgment itself, even if all of its ramifications are not immediately seen. Thus, the appropriation of this language becomes a narration of something that takes place in and through it. It is a use of language which, as Jacques Ellul describes, "fait entrer dans notre réalité visible, concrete, mesurable, analysable ce Tout Autre, qui l'assume, la limite, la mesure et lui donne une autre dimension." (123).⁸

Upon reading the preface to the *Meditations*, the reader thus finds himself ushered into this "autre dimension." After a theoretical consideration of language and spiritual reality, d'Aubigné brings the discussion down to a practical level and leads the reader into an encounter with God, showing that it is through language that God enters into our world and transforms it, building his kingdom. This introduction to the *Meditations sur les Pseaumes* is thus an explanation and a reminder of the fact that each reading of the meditations will be a participation in the ongoing recreation of the world and the establishment of ultimate reality, through language.

NOTES

¹ For a discussion of language in the sixteenth century, see Claude-Gilbert Dubois, *Mythe et langage au XVIe siècle* (Paris: Ducros, 1970), Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), and Michel de Certeau, *La Fable Mystique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982).

² See esp. Foucault, chaps. 2-4, pp. 32-136.

³ See Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Co., 1987).

⁴ In the preface to *Les Tragiques*, one learns that it is not really d'Aubigné who is the author, because "Dieu mesme a donné l'argument" (20). D'Aubigné is in this manner merely a scribe transmitting his master's message; the contents of the poem thus reveal God's interpretation of the events of the times, and evil is significantly combatted by revealing its eventual and complete judgment and destruction by God.

⁵Interestingly enough, d'Aubigné does not mention the Holy Spirit, who, Protestants believed, brings the Scriptures alive for the believer. D'Aubigné's belief in the role of the Spirit is evident in the meditations themselves, and the fact that he does not mention the Holy Spirit specifically in this preface (he does mention the spiritual realm) only highlights his interest in the necessary role of language in spiritual communication. At least in the preface, the fact that one reaches things divine from things human is more important than exactly how this happens.

⁶ It was believed that as a result of the Fall and, more specifically, Babel, no single language could capture the world in all of its complexity. Babel was thus the origin of man's linguistic confusion and the reminder of God's curse on humanity, but at the same time it was the reminder of the time before Babel, before the Fall, a time when there was indeed a true correspondence between the sign and the referent. Calvin comments on the first chapter of Genesis:

chaque espece était venue en la présence d'Adam et il leur avait imposé les noms, non point à la volée, mais par connaissance certaine....Quant aux noms qu'Adam a imposés, je ne doute point qu'il n'y eût tres bonne raison en chascun. Mais leur usage, comme de beaucoup d'autres bonnes choses, est aboli (58).

Adam's language was one of "connaissance certaine"; language and knowledge were one and the same. Such a language had thus existed in the past, before Babel, and man had to deal with the cleavage between his own fallen language and that former, ideal one.

⁷Calvin comments further, "Ce que nous avons dit, que la nature et utilité du règne de Jésus-Christ ne se peut autrement comprendre de nous, que quand nous le connaissons être spirituel, se vérifie assez parce que notre condition est misérable tout le cours de la vie présente, où il nous faut batailler sous la croix. Que nous profiterait-il donc d'être assemblés sous l'empire du Roi céleste, si le fruit de cette grâce ne s'étendait plus loin que l'état de la vie terrienne? Il nous convient donc de savoir que tout ce qui nous est promis de félicité en Jésus-Christ n'est point attaché aux commodités externes, pour nous faire

vivre joyeusement et en repos, nous faire fleurir en richesses, nous égayer à notre aise et sans souci, et jouir des délices que la chair a accoutumé de rechercher: mais plutôt que le tout se doit rapporter à la vie céleste" (31).

⁸ Ellul is referring to what he calls "le témoin de la parole de Dieu," which corresponds nicely to d'Aubigné's use of "langage de Canaan" in the *Meditations*.

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