

Limae labor et mora

Opstellen voor Fokke Akkerman
ter gelegenheid van zijn zeventigste verjaardag

Onder redactie van
Zweder von Martels, Piet Steenbakkers
en Arjo Vanderjagt

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PETER MACK

Rudolph Agricola's Christmas Sermon¹

While I have a fairly shrewd idea of Fokke Akkerman's favourite reading matter (Homer, Vergil, Horace, Dante, Shakespeare, Montaigne, Spinoza, of course, and Proust share a shelf of honour in his living room), I also like to imagine that once a year he sits down to read the *Oration on Christ's Nativity*, the most polished composition of his admired compatriot Rudolph Agricola.² The essay that follows is an elaboration of what I would say if he should phone me up one Boxing Day to ask my opinion of the work.

Against the background of the clarity and restraint of most of Agricola's writing, the *Oration on Christ's Nativity* is notable for its exuberance of style and its high degree of amplification. The elaborate full title, *De nativitate seu immensa natalis diei Iesu Christi laetitia oratio*, gives an obvious reason for this. The accent in the whole work is very much on giving voice to the *immensa laetitia* appropriate to this day.

Christ has been born and is with us again, what speech is adequate to our praise? What praise to our joy? What joy to such happiness. We celebrate his birth, whose generation (as the prophet says in wonder)³ who shall declare fully? For he is not only the greatest man, but, which is more sublime than all greatest, is also God, who, since he was born and is born from eternity, has also arranged that he can be said to have been born also today. And just as we live through his life, so we have been born through his birth. He underwent our mortality in order to make us conform with the image of his immortality, raising us up by emptying himself, and made the son of a man in order that he might make us sons of God. These actions are greater than all, unprecedented and to the same degree happy and fortunate for us; their great-

¹ I am grateful to Marc van der Poel for his criticisms and corrections of this article.

² There is no reason to doubt either Agricola's authorship of the sermon or that he delivered it at Christmas 1484. The oration appears both in the Stuttgart manuscript (Württembergische Landesbibliothek Cod. Poet. et Philol. 4° 36, fols 277^v-283^v) which derives from the papers of Agricola's friends the von Plieningen brothers, and is dated to the 1490s, and in Alardus's 1539 edition of Agricola's *Lucubrationes*. Caspar Volland published an edition of the work at Tübingen in 1527, which assigns the impossible date of 1486. See F. Akkerman and A. J. Vanderjagt (eds), *Rodolphus Agricola Phrisius 1444-1485: proceedings of the International Conference at the University of Groningen, 28-30 October 1985* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), pp. 315-17.

³ Isaiah 53, 8. Alardus identifies this and the other quotations and allusions in the text in his excellent commentary, R. Agricola, *Lucubrationes* (Cologne, 1539; repr. Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1967) pp. 125-37 (126).

ness cannot be adequately venerated nor their novelty wondered at, nor are we able either to match with thanks the benefits and gifts we receive or even to embrace them in our memory.⁴

Agricola employs the figure of climax to assert that speech cannot suffice for the praise, praise for the joy, joy for the happiness which Christ's birth brings. The semantic parallel between *natalem* and *generationem* reinforces the equation between what we have to do and what the prophet proclaims to be impossible. The polyptoton of *summus / summo* prepares for the contentio with plocé of *ab aeterno natus* reconciled with *hodie...natus*. *Vita vivimus* and *nati sumus nativitate* are linked by conjugates and chiasmus. Repetition with contrariety adorns the sentence in which Christ undergoes our mortality in order to make us conform to his immortality. This idea is repeated as a brief summary (enumeratio) as he is made the son of man to make us the sons of God. Epithets linked through alliteration, and isocola with zeugma elaborate the impossibility of adequate recollection or recompense. The passage is highly wrought and tightly linked, openly displaying the most artful verbal embellishment. An equally elaborate passage later in the oration is based on Biblical phrases and on contrasts between divine power and infant weakness.

God the greatest creator of things, who (as Ecclesiastes says) ascends and descends the heaven, the very same is now observed born in a humble hut. He who holds the wind in his hands, his hands are seen wrapped in cloth and bound with material. He who has bound the waters as if in a garment, lacks even a rattle with which the new-born child is adorned. He who built the ends of the earth, lacks a place on earth on which to rest his head. The one whose name and whose son's name no-one knows,⁵ since it is above all names, and who is elsewhere called the king of kings and lord of lords,⁶ the royal hall of this man (O kindness to be wondered at!) is now a hut; his bed, a crib; his bedding, straw; and his sentries an ox and an ass.⁷

The highest creator is born in a humble hut. With anaphora the verses from Proverbs are matched with corresponding images of infancy: the hands wrapped in cloth; the lack of

⁴ Natus iterum nobis adest Christus, quae oratio laudi nostrae? quae laus gaudio? quod gaudium felicitati tantae sufficiet? Natalem agimus eius, cuius (ut stupens inquit propheta) generationem quis enarrabit? Qui non modo summus homo, sed quod omni summo sublimius, etiam est Deus, quique quum ab aeterno natus sit atque nascatur, fecit etiam ut et hodie dici possit esse natus. Cuius et nos ut vita vivimus, sic nati sumus nativitate: subiit mortalitatem nostram, ut imagini nos immortalitatis suae faceret conformes, exinaniendo seipsum, nos extollens, factusque filius hominis, ut filios nos faceret Dei. Ingentia omnia, inusitata et perinde nobis quoque felicia et fausta, quorumque neque magnitudinem satis venerari neque novitatem stupere, neque fructum muneraque nostra non modo aequare gratia, sed ne memoria quidem complecti quimus. *Lucubrationes*, p. 119.

⁵ Proverbs 30, 4: Quis ascendit in caelum atque descendit? Quis continuit spiritum in manibus suis? Quis colligavit aquas quasi in vestimento? Quis suscitavit omnes terminos terrae? Quod nomen eius est? Et quod nomen filij eius si nosti? Text from *Biblia Latina cum glossa ordinaria*, facsimile of Strasburg 1480/81 edition (Turnhout: Brepols, 1992) II, pp. 688–89. Some editions have *ventos* for *spiritum* and *alligavit* for *colligavit*.

⁶ I Timothy 6, 15.

⁷ Summus ille rerum conditor Deus, qui (ut Ecclesiastes ait) ascendit coelum atque descendit, ille iam in humili tugurio natus conspicitur. Qui continet ventum in manibus suis, illius manus involutae iam pannis, et alligatae fascia cernuntur. Qui alligavit aquas quasi in vestimento, ille ne crepundia quidem habet, quo novus partus eius vestiatur. Qui terminos terrae suscitavit, illi deest in terris quo reclinetur caput suum. Cuius nomen, cuius et filij nomen, nemo novit, quippe quod est supra omne nomen, quique ut alius inquit: Rex est regum dominus dominantium, huius (O miranda benignitas) aula regia iam tugurium est, thalamus est praesepe, lectus foenum, excubitores bos et asinus. *Lucubrationes*, p. 123.

clothes or a place to lay his head. With exclamatio, parison and zeugma, Agricola proclaims that Christ's court is a hut, his bed a manger, his bedding straw and his sentries an ox and an ass. The contrasts are elaborated through dwelling on the details both of praise and of domestic reality in order to amplify the audience's wonder at Christ's generosity to mankind. Agricola produces *copia rerum*, derived from the circumstances and from topical invention, to sustain the abundance of figures.

The contribution of invention to amplification can be illustrated in the immediately following commonplace of night, in which Agricola elaborates implications of the time of Christ's birth. He begins with an exclamation: this was the most happy night, clearer than the brightest day, in which the people who worked in darkness saw the great light and light arose to those living in the shadow of death.⁸ The second sentence is built on a comparison: Christ is the true light, illuminating the darkness and showing the way to happy days. The redemptive power of night is then supported with the testimony of Psalm 19: the day utters words, but the night shows their meaning.⁹ The fourth topic is from time: the night in which Christ was born was set in the night of the year, the longest and coldest of nights. This idea is then developed through allegory: in world history, Christ was born at a time of ignorance, scepticism and vice. This idea is elaborated through adjacents and actions, as the evil of the time is amplified through each of the seven deadly sins. Then the night of the nativity is placed in the different context of the circumstances of Mary's enforced journey, in the depths of winter and when her time was almost upon her.

Agricola wrote the sermon for Christmas 1484, the only Christmas he spent in the Rhineland with Johann von Dalberg, who had been his pupil from their Italian days but who was then Bishop of Worms. Although we do not know its audience for certain, the reference in the speech to learned men and the parallelism with Agricola's other oration of this period suggest that he may have been addressing the clergy of the diocese of Worms, called together by their Bishop to listen to his friend, the famous humanist, but also a layman.¹⁰ Agricola uses the problem of speaking about the incarnation as one of his main threads of his sermon and one can imagine that this point may also have represented his own difficulty as a layman speaking on a religious festival to an audience of priests. At all events the subject and occasion lead him to construct a highly original plan for his sermon. This can be thought of as containing ten movements, some of which can be grouped together.

Agricola introduces the oration by recalling the custom of celebrating the birth of ordinary men and asking what form of celebration is appropriate for this more significant birthday. This leads to a second movement considering his own position, speaking, be-

⁸ O felicissimam noctem et omni serenissimo purissimoque die clariorem, qua populus qui ambulabat in tenebris vidit lucem magnam et habitantibus in umbra mortis est lux exorta. *Lucubrationes*, p. 123. The second part of the sentence is taken from Isaiah 9, 2: Populus qui ambulabat in tenebris, vidit lucem magnam; Habitantibus in regione umbrae mortis, lux orta est eis. *Biblia Latina* (as in note 5) III, p. 18.

⁹ Dies, inquit rex vates, diei eructat verbum, et nox nocti indicat scientiam. *Lucubrationes*, p. 123. Psalms 19, 3.

¹⁰ L. W. Spitz, A. Benjamin, 'Rudolph Agricola's "Exhortatio ad clerum Wormatiensem"', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 54 (1963), pp. 1-15; P. Mack, 'Theory and practice in Rudolph Agricola', in J. Koopmans et al. (eds), *Rhetoric - Rhétoriqueurs - Rederijkers* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1995), pp. 39-51.

cause custom requires it, on a topic to which no words can be adequate he asks that his audience receive his words with their customary goodwill. His confidence is bolstered by the realisation that he speaks while the infant Christ lies in the crib, but even so in discussing such mysteries only the words of the Bible will do. This introduces the main text of the sermon, from Psalm 118, 23:

This is done by the Lord and it is wonderful in our eyes.¹¹

The two halves of the text generate the next three movements of the sermon. Under *A domino factum est istud*, Agricola considers God's power, over nature and over himself, in the son taking on human form. This aspect of God's power is elaborated through a series of contrasts between divine power and childish weakness.¹² In the next section, God's action is *mirabile in oculis nostris* because it exceeds everything that God has done before. But it is wonderful to our eyes (rather than his) because God can do anything. His sufferings in being human are superior to his actions elsewhere. Following on from this, we wonder at what the lord has done especially because it was done for us, an instance of God's grace towards humanity. The clemency of God exceeds praise, veneration and even naming.

Even so, God's action remains divine in nature. This is shown by the virgin birth, whose reality and meaning is discussed in a separate, sixth, section. Agricola investigates the context of the passage from Isaiah 7 in which the virgin birth is prophesied, to provide reasons against other interpretations of the passage. He confirms this reading by giving reasons for the appropriateness of the saviour being born of a virgin.

After this elaboration of God's power, the seventh section returns to the *persona* of the orator to reopen the question of how to find sufficient words to speak of such actions. Section eight then provides an amplification of the dark winter's night on which Christ was born, section nine a description of the joy of the world (including the words of the angels' song) at Christ's birth. These two sections form a pair contrasting before and after, darkness and light.

The oration concludes with a return to the orator's problem: what praise is sufficient to equal these extraordinary events? Faced with such a task he first reverts to the words of his

¹¹ *A domino factum est istud et est mirabile in oculis nostris.*

¹² Agricola probably owes most to Christian tradition in this section and in those later sections which return to the theme of the mystery of the incarnation. As major sources of the oration Alardus mentions Chrysostom's *10th Homily on John*, which does not seem especially fruitful for Agricola and (pseudo-) St Basil's *Oration on the Nativity*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.P. Migne, vol. 31 (Paris, 1857) cols 1457-76, which follows the sequence of the first two chapters of Matthew, referring to related texts mainly from Isaiah and Luke. The organisation of Agricola's *Oration* is very different. Four of the topics of St Basil's *Oration* appear also in Agricola's: the inadequacy of the human mind to contemplate Christ's incarnation and of human language to express it (1459-60A-B, 1473-74B; *Lucubrationes*, pp. 119, 121); refusal of the Jewish commentators suggestion that Isaiah meant 'girl' rather than 'virgin', because God would need to give an exceptional event as a sign (1465-66C-D; p. 122); exhortation to express joy and quotation of the angels' words (1471-72C; pp. 118, 124-25) and exclamation of God's goodness (1473-74C; 119, 123). Only the first two seem significant. The reasons which St. Basil gives for the virgin birth (1463-64) are different from those given by Agricola (p. 122). My slender reading in the older Latin hymns (for example the Christmas hymns attributed to Venantius Fortunatus) suggests to me that they may have been a source through which some traditional ideas about the nativity reached Agricola, but I have no idea which of these hymns he could have known, in Frisia, Italy or Heidelberg.

main text before announcing that he cannot do better than follow the words of the angels, which therefore close the oration:

Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men of good will.¹³

These ten movements can be considered as falling into four main sections: an introduction to the occasion and to the speaker's task, an exploration of the text from Psalms, subdivided according to the phrases and their implications; an enquiry into the difficulty of response and the nature of the event; and a conclusion, in which an answer is given. This structure combines elements from the four-part classical oration with the basic outline of the medieval thematic sermon.

<i>Title</i>	<i>lines</i>	<i>component</i>
1 Introduction: how shall we celebrate Christ's birth?	16	Exordium
2 How can I speak? Principal text (Psalm 118, 23)	32	
3 It was done by the Lord: God's power	23	Text
4 Wonderful in our eyes: exceeds our measure	32	analysed
5 For our benefit: God's clemency	22	
6 Divine Magnitude remains: Virgin Birth	31	
7 How can we find sufficient words?	17	Question
8 Night of ignorance and sin	44	debated
9 Birth and joy: Second text (Luke 2, 14)	14	
10 Obligation to praise: both texts	26	Peroration

Whatever questions could be raised about the placing of the divisions and the titles given,¹⁴ this analysis brings out two aspects of the organisation of the speech. Much of the sermon is constructed around its principal text, placing the text in context, bringing out its meaning and at the end affirming its importance. Equally, two questions dominate the oration: the question named by *De inventione dialectica* as central to the epideictic genre: how shall we react to this event?¹⁵ and the question facing Agricola, what words can I find that are adequate to this epochal event and our immense joy at it? The second text (more expected in this context than the principal text) is offered as the proper Christian response to both questions.

Another way of thinking about the structure of the piece is to consider the different types of material it contains and organises. At several points in the sermon Agricola narates in different ways the central and traditional events of the incarnation (the infinite God taking on human limitations, the virgin birth, the winter journey, the stable with the shepherds and angels). Each time these elements are framed as contributions to different arguments: what can be said about these events? what is the nature of God's power?

¹³ Gloria in excelsis deo, et in terris pax hominibus bonae voluntatis. *Lucubrations*, p. 125, Luke 2, 14.

¹⁴ There is room for debate, for example, about the placing of the division between sections 3 and 4. By the end of the sentence beginning 'Quid ni de summo caelo?' (p. 120), Agricola has certainly shifted to discussing the second half of the text ('necesse est mirabile sit in oculis nostris') but much of the sentence is devoted to what God has done. Equally one could argue about where on page 124 to locate the transition from elaborating the dark night to describing the circumstances and joy of the birth, but there is a transition here and it ought to be registered in an analysis of the work's structure.

¹⁵ R. Agricola, *De inventione dialectica* (Cologne, 1539; repr. Nieuwkoop : De Graaf, 1967) pp. 244-46.

why is it wonderful to humans? why was Christ born at night? These arguments lead up to the final retelling in which the emphasis is on the joy aroused at the time of the nativity. At several points, too, Agricola discusses the role of the speaker and his own verbal response to these events. This is matched with an array of quotations from the Bible, many of them from texts associated with the liturgy of Christmas Day.¹⁶

One of the recurrent features of the sermon is comparison of different actions involving different viewpoints. Some actions are greater than others, but equally events which seem astonishing from one point of view seem more explicable when reconsidered from another. These comparisons are part of a process of amplification, in which one view of the nativity is made to seem more impressive because it presents the nativity as greater than other extraordinary events.¹⁷ This is the main strategy of sections three to five of the sermon.

Agricola elaborates the significance of the incarnation through two comparisons. Setting out from the text, he explains that what God has done could only be done by someone powerful. This is supported by instances of God's control over the wild forces of nature. He adds that God's power is not merely a matter of strength, in the creation it is also connected with craftsmanship and creativity. Great though these are, they are instances of God's power over finite things. The really astonishing demonstration of God's power is his power over himself, when the father's co-eternal equal, the Son, takes on himself the servile form of man, 'hoc est revera quod a domino dicere possumus factum'.¹⁸ Agricola then amplifies what Christ did in descending from infinite power and immortality to the fragility of the human condition and concludes that in magnitude and novelty this exceeded everything else God has done.

Yes indeed, from the height of heaven. For he descended from the lap of the father, who holds in his fist heaven and all that is in it, and although he was infinite, incomprehensible, immortal and impassible, did not shudder at the confines of the virgin's body and did not think it unbecoming to his majesty to undergo the condition of our weakness and to take on the same shape as us, exposed to all anguish, capable of all griefs and miseries, and so that I may say it in one word, God that he was he was made not merely a man, but (as he said of himself) a worm, weakened and trampled on for the salvation of all of us. Therefore this is what should be wonderful in our eyes, because it exceeds the greatness and novelty of all the created things from the beginning of time which we admire.¹⁹

¹⁶ For example the *Sarum Missale* includes among the lessons and chants for the services of Christmas day: Isaiah 9, Luke 2 and John 1. It is hard to imagine that these texts can ever have been absent from the liturgy of Christmas day. These texts will also remind Fokke of Handel's *Messiah*.

¹⁷ Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, VIII.4; Erasmus, *De copia*, II, method 9, *Opera omnia*, I, 6, ed. B. Knott (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1988), pp. 218-20.

¹⁸ *Lucubrationes*, p. 120.

¹⁹ Quid ni de summo coelo? qui ex sinu patris, coelum et omnia quae in eo sunt pugillo continentis descendit, cumque infinitus, incomprehensibilis, immortalis, impassibilis esset, non exhorruit virginei corporis angustias, nec alienum a maiestate sua putavit fragilitatis nostrae conditionem subire et assumere figmenti similitudinem nostri, omnibus expositam doloribus, luctuum omnium miseriarumque capacem, et ut in uno verbo dicam, Deus cum esset, homo nedum, sed (ut de seipso affirmavit) vermis est factus, atterendus pro omnium nostrum salute, atque conculcandus, hoc ergo necesse est mirabile sit in oculis nostris, quippe quod magnitudinem et novitatem omnium eorum quaecunque a primo rerum exordio facta miramur, excedit. *Lucubrationes*, p. 120.

The second set of comparisons begins from the reference to the creation in the last line and embraces the notion of viewpoint introduced by *in oculis nostris*. In comparison with our powers, it was astonishing for God to create the world, but for God it was not so special.²⁰ He merely applied his infinite power to finite objects. Even the miracles, which Agricola enumerates from the New Testament, and which are a cause of wonder to us because they exceed our powers of intelligence, were not so surprising in him. What was astonishing was to take on human weakness. This was as much superior to everything else as God who underwent it excels everyone else.²¹ To this Agricola then adds a further shift of viewpoint. God's action is not so much to be wondered at for its greatness as venerated and worshipped for its goodness.²² We should venerate it especially because it was done for us. In order to prove and amplify the goodness of the nativity for humankind Agricola makes a further comparison between the requirements of the law and the benefits of God's clemency in making possible the ascent of humans to heaven:

it exceeds every measure of kindness and love, for which one can find not only no proper praise and veneration but even no sufficiently worthy name.²³

The comparisons which Agricola introduces all serve to amplify the importance of the nativity to his audience, thus in turn putting more pressure on his initial question of how to react and what words to use. By framing some of these comparisons in terms of the difference between human and divine viewpoints, he reinforces the problem of finding adequate resources of understanding and response.

The Christian tradition comes to Agricola's aid as he confronts the problem of expressing the magnitude of the mystery of the incarnation by providing Biblical texts for quotation and allusion. In the *Oration on Christ's Nativity* Agricola uses quotations from the Bible in three distinct ways. As one would expect in a sermon the principal text provides a good deal of the structure of the speech, particularly in sections three to five, but also in linking the beginning and end of the sermon.

In section six a Biblical text becomes the object of textual analysis. In order that Christ's divine greatness should not be obscured when he took on human form he was born of a virgin. Agricola quotes Isaiah's prophecy:

Listen, says Isaiah, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and his name shall be called Emmanuel.²⁴

He opposes the Jewish slanderer who interprets the text to mean not *virgo* but *adolescens-tula*.²⁵ Rather than attempt a philological argument, Agricola analyses the context in

²⁰ Stupendum fortasse sit istud, si modo virium nostrarum metiamur; at si deum aestimamus, quid est quod miremur? *Lucubrationes*, p. 120.

²¹ [...] id prorsus tantum supra omnia est, quantum is qui fecit hoc, quique ipse subiit, omnibus antecellit. *Lucubrationes*, p. 121.

²² At vero hoc amplissimum Dei opus quum tantum sit, non tamen magis est magnitudine sua stupendum quam venerandum colendumque bonitate. *Lucubrationes*, p. 121.

²³ id omnem benignitatis amorisque modum excedit, cui non modo non laudem, non venerationem, sed ne nomen quidem quisquam satis dignum queat invenire. *Lucubrationes*, p. 122.

²⁴ Ecce, inquit Isaias, virgo concipiet et pariet filium, et vocabitur nomen eius Emmanuel. *Lucubrationes*, p. 122. Isaiah 7, 14.

Isaiah 7. Since God had said that he would give Ahas a new and unheard of sign, the meaning of the text must be 'a virgin shall conceive' because something which happens all the time, namely young girls giving birth, could not be regarded as a new sign. Agricola then suggests that the existence of this Jewish misinterpretation confirms another of Isaiah's prophecies that the chosen people will hear and not understand and will see and not perceive.²⁶ Having rejected the alternative explanation on grounds of context, Agricola provides three positive reasons for the appropriateness of the virgin birth.

The third and most important way in which Agricola uses quotations from the Bible is to enrich the texture of his speech, both by using quotations to support and amplify arguments and by drawing stylistic distinction from the language of the Bible. Agricola elaborates God's power with a quotation from Psalm 19, proves that nature did not require God's intervention with a verse from Psalm 119, and explores the difficulty of speaking about the nativity by citing Isaiah 53.²⁷ This is also the way in which he uses his two allusions to classical writers, to confirm God's power.²⁸ He draws on Isaiah 7 and Psalm 19 for language to describe the night and on Proverbs 30 for a series of phrases to express God's power in contrast with the weakness of the infant Christ.²⁹ When he wants to provide a striking physical image for Christ's descent into humanity, he borrows the idea of becoming a worm from Psalm 22.³⁰ In speaking of God holding everything in the palm of his hand he draws on Isaiah 40.³¹ He uses Biblical references to explain the presence of the ox and the ass as sentries in the stable.

The ox knows his owner and the ass knows the stable of his master, though both are simple and ignorant compared to other animals. It is no wonder that it should be like this: You have hidden this from the wise and revealed it to children, and he who did not want the ox and the ass joined to one plough, now brings them together as the witnesses of his birth.³²

According to Agricola, God chose this conjunction to emphasize that however different people are in their ceremonies and customs none are excluded from the nativity and from the joy of that night.

²⁵ Alardus tells us that Agricola has in mind the commentator Haalma and cites a passage from Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum* arguing against *adolescentula* as a translation of the Hebrew word *alma*. *Lucubrationes*, pp. 131–32.

²⁶ *Lucubrationes*, p. 122. Isaiah 6, 9.

²⁷ *Lucubrationes*, pp. 120, 121, 119.

²⁸ In quam sententiam et a gentili vate, hominum repertor dictus est, et alius itidem opificem rerum eum et imaginem mundi melioris vocavit. *Lucubrationes*, p. 120. Vergil, *Aeneid* 12, 829; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1, 79.

²⁹ *Lucubrationes*, p. 123. These examples are discussed at notes 7 and 8 above.

³⁰ homo nedum, sed (ut de seipso affirmavit) vermis est factus. *Lucubrationes*, p. 120. Psalm 22, 6.

³¹ coelum et omnia quae in eo sunt pugillo continentis. *Lucubrationes*, p. 120. Quis mensus est pugillo aquas, et caelos palmo ponderavit. Isaiah 40, 12. *Biblia Latina*, III, p. 62.

³² Bos cognovit possessorem suum, et asinus praesepe domini sui, utrunque simplex et rude inter caetera animalia. Sic est nimirum: Abscondisti a sapientibus haec, et revelasti ea parvulis, et is qui noluit bovem et asinum uni aratro iungi, adhibuit nunc eos iunctos nativitatibus suae testes. *Lucubrationes*, p. 123. Isaiah 1, 3: Cognovit bos possessorem suum, et asinus praesepe domini sui. Israel autem me non cognovit; Matthew 11, 25: Confiteor tibi, Pater, Domine caeli et terrae, quia abscondisti haec a sapientibus et prudentibus, et revelasti ea parvulis; Deuteronomy 22, 10: Non arabis in bove simul et asino. *Biblia Latina*, III, p. 2; IV, p. 42; I, p. 403.

At several points in the oration Agricola alludes to his own position. At the outset he asks first how he and his audience should respond to the nativity and what speech will suffice. The final section is almost wholly given over to the same question. And in the middle, shortly after saying that no name can be found for God's kindness and love he asks who can find words adequate to God's actions:

Who can describe such a thing with any speech, with any sufficiently suitable words? Without doubt the praise it deserves surpasses human language to the same degree that the created thing exceeds the powers of man.³³

A worthy praise would be beyond the resources of human language. Beside this theoretical approach to his task he speaks also of his personal situation, speaking as a learned man among others (*nos doctissimi viri*), presumably also as a layman to the assembled clergy of the diocese of Worms, of which his friend and patron Johann von Dalberg was Bishop. He asks his audience to receive his speech with their customary kindness and to grant him in such a large matter the grace which they have extended to him in smaller things.³⁴ But the speech also calls into question the capacity of learned men, recalling that God hid things from the wise to reveal them to the simple,³⁵ and noting the confusion of the wise as one of the features of the dark night into which Christ was born.³⁶

The difficulty of the task and the problem of learning do nothing to dispense Agricola from the obligation of speaking. But this can also turn into a kind of comfort. Nothing is sufficient, because human understanding and speech is too weak to express the magnitude of God, but nothing is insufficient as long as it is spoken with piety and purity, because God can extract praise from the mouths of infants.

I am obliged by ancient custom to explain to you in detail in this place about the happiness of this day. For whatever is said about it, nothing is sufficient and nothing is not sufficient, for I think, as I say, that nothing is enough, because all thought, and human language even more so, is placed below the magnitude of this day; on the other hand anything is sufficient because whatever is said piously and with pure feeling, he who can draw praise from the mouths of babes and sucklings, can think sufficiently well said.³⁷

Taking his cue from the second principal text, Agricola explains that while God has established glory in heaven and given peace on earth, it is up to living people to provide glory and praise for him on earth:

³³ Quis rem tantam ulla oratione, ullis satis commode queat prosequi verbis? Profecto digna laus eius tantum sermonem superat humanum, quantum quod factum est excedit hominis vires. *Lucubrationes*, pp. 122-23.

³⁴ *Lucubrationes*, p. 119.

³⁵ See above at note 32.

³⁶ Alii quo facilius se tam perplexis et sinuosis quaestionibus, quae de deo proferuntur evolverunt, non esse penitus quicquam, id quod deum dicimus contendebant. *Lucubrationes*, p. 124.

³⁷ Quum sit autem mihi ex prisco more de huius diei laetitia paulo pluribus hoc loco disserendum, de qua quicquid disseritur nihil satis est, et nihil non est satis; sic enim sentio ut dico nihil satis est, quod omnis cogitatio, nedum oratio humana, infra illius diei magnitudinem est posita, contra quoque nihil non satis, quod quidquid pio puroque dicitur affectu, ille satis dictum putat, qui ex ore infantium et lactentium perficit laudem. *Lucubrationes*, p. 119. Matthew 21, 16.

Now we are alive, now we have been reborn with him, now it is fitting that we should bless him for this continuously forever. Therefore what could anyone think more joyful or more to be expressed with pious emotion than this most fortunate time of this night?³⁸

In response to the obligation that we face, nothing can be happier and nothing more likely to induce feelings of piety than to think of that night. So the first tactic of the conclusion is to revisit yet again the winter night turned to joy, the crying baby comforted by his mother's arms. By repeating the story, by meditating on it, we elicit a suitable mental response. Such repetition is one of the tactics of amplification, which is so central to all the writing of this oration. By amplification Agricola makes the familiar events he retells seem more impressive, explaining the magnitude of the events both to clarify the impossibility of the task of speaking, and, in another way, to begin to make a response. For the topos of inexpressibility is itself part of amplification.³⁹

Having rehearsed the events and summarised the angels' message, Agricola at first finds himself and his audience at a loss and urges them to repeat the principal text, acknowledging the wonder of God's actions. Then he restates his dilemma. He can find no words to commend the joy of this time to them. He cannot remain silent and yet only the one who performed this action could praise it adequately.

What shall we do? Let us follow our leaders the angels; let us think, repeat and sing together, with all our spirits, all our breast, all our voice, that sound (*vocem*) conveyed from heaven, chanted by the heavenly armies, received by those on earth as an augury of the greatest happiness; let us believe that those who share knowledge of divine mysteries have proclaimed a most joyful event with equally fortunate words. Let us imitate them and let us say, at all times but especially in the most happy days of his renewed birth, repeating that song immediately: Glory to God on high and on earth peace to men of good will.⁴⁰

The way to respond is to follow the lead of the angels, to repeat their words in thought and voice. Only by meditating on the scene of the nativity, as he has throughout the sermon, by filling mind and belief with its significance, and by repeating (as he so often says) the words of the angels can he overcome the inadequacy of expression to the magnitude of the event. But since such repetition can only be effective when the significance of the events and the problems they pose are understood, the words Agricola himself finds and the amplifications he so artfully performs, are necessary as well as, in themselves, inadequate.

³⁸ nunc vivimus, nunc renati sumus cum illo, nunc licet ut illi ex hoc nunc in seculum usque benedicamus. Itaque quid posset quisquam laetius, aut pio magis affectu prosequendum cogitare, quam hoc noctis huius felicissimum tempus? *Lucubrationes*, p. 125.

³⁹ Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, VIII.4.5; St Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, I. 6; E.R. Curtius, *European literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W.R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953), pp. 159–65 recognises the inevitability of this trope in describing God.

⁴⁰ Quid faciemus? angelos sequamur duces, vocem illam de coelo perlatam, ab exercitibus decantatam coelestibus, a terris auspicem summae felicitatis acceptam, illam totis animis, toto pectore, tota voce cogitemus, repetamus, concinamus, credamus illos divinorum conscios arcanorum, rem felicissimam faustissimis quoque praedicasse verbis, illos imitemur, et quum omni tempore, tum praecipue laetissimis his novi puerperii diebus, carmen illud subinde repetentes dicamus: Gloria in excelsis deo, et in terris pax hominibus bonae voluntatis. *Lucubrationes*, p. 125.