CHAPTER THREE

ON THE EVE OF NOMINALISM: CONSIGNIFICATION IN ANSELM*

Among the examples Anselm explored in his *De Grammatico* to illustrate paronymous words, the adjective *hodiernum* (today’s) was briefly introduced.¹ Unlike his principal examples, *grammaticus* (literate) or *album* (a white thing), in which both the substance (that which is named paronymously) and the quality (that from which it derives its name) signify, although in different ways, the paronymous quality that *hodiernum* brings to the object or activity so named is temporal in meaning, and therefore, like verbs, so Anselm notes, it consignifies rather than signifies.²

To those familiar with early medieval logic, this is not a particularly remarkable or profound statement on Anselm’s part, which may be why Desmond Henry did not devote much space in his study of *De Grammatico* to Anselm’s theory of consignification. The theory of consignification—an indirect, secondary, or participatory type of signification—was, as a Latin term, at least as old as Priscian and Boethius, and was passed down through the grammatical and logical traditions to the eleventh century and Anselm’s generation. It received increased attention in the twelfth century as logicians began to examine how syncategorematic words (i.e., consignifying words) operated in propositions, and a body of sophismatic literature developed. There would not seem to be any problems, therefore, with what consignification meant, nor how it was used by Anselm or other eleventh- and twelfth-century writers.

But the meaning and history of consignification may not be quite so straight-forward. Two features or problems in particular are worth

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some examination. First, the theory of language and propositional truth associated with the original twelfth-century Nominales in the generation after Anselm depended in part on a theory of consignification. It is important, therefore, to understand consignification in its nominalist context and to compare that development to earlier usage, including that of Anselm. A second problem is that consignification had a double ancestry that affected the way it was applied. This is because the same Latin word, consignificare, and its grammatical variants, was used to translate two different Greek words, synkategorein and prossemainein. Whether or not those words could be used synonymously or interchangeably, the two classic passages in which they occurred, and from which the language of consignification derived, addressed, I think, two different syntactical and logical problems. Moreover, from the standpoint of grammar, some co-signifying words, such as temporal adverbs and temporal adjectives (e.g., hodiernum) also lived a grammatical life on both sides of the dividing line between nouns and verbs.

The Two Realms of Consignification

Starting with the second problem, namely the mixed or twin ancestry of the terms consignificatio and consignificare, Priscian knew them as Latin equivalents for the way in which syncategorematic words function. In the grammatical and logical division between interpretationes, i.e. words such as nouns and verbs that signify or have full signification, and the other, non-signifying, parts of speech, such as prepositions, conjunctions, copulas, etc., the latter signified only in combination (i.e. co-signified) with categorematic words. Thus Priscian in his Institutiones grammaticae translated syncategoremata as consignificantia, and etymological dictionaries today will list that as the first, or original, meaning of consignificare.4

3 The view that these two Greek terms were probably synonyms was suggested by G. Nuchelmans, Theories of the Proposition. Ancient and medieval conceptions of the bearers of truth and falsity (Amsterdam and London, 1973), p. 124. The classic passage in which synkategorein probably lies behind consignificare is Priscian, Institutiones grammaticae, ed. M. Hertz, in Grammatici Latini (Leipzig, 1855), I, p. 54; the other text is Boethius’s translation of and commentary on Aristotle’s Peri hermeneias 3.