

The influence of Dante Alighieri's work on Pre-Renaissance Spanish literature¹

Alina-Viorela PRELIPCEAN

“Ștefan cel Mare” University of Suceava

alinavarvaroi@yahoo.com / alina.prelipcean@litere.usv.ro

Abstract: The present study focuses on the importance of the Spanish translations of Dante Alighieri's work, on its receptivity and impact, but especially on the influence of *The Divine Comedy* on Spanish authors during the Pre-Renaissance period. We will consider how Italian contributed to the modification of Spanish versification, focusing mainly on the poet named Marquis of Santillana, don Íñigo López de Mendoza, one of the first authors who tried to assimilate the vibrant cultural spirit of the work of Dante, who was considered to be a precursor of Humanism.

Keywords: *Dante, Humanism, Marquis de Santillana, Juan de Mena, Pre-Renaissance.*

Each literary era is associated with certain authors, but especially with certain literary influences. The general context that favoured the appearance or the adoption of certain literary directions is also very important. In this paper, we will focus on the fifteenth century, a period of crisis throughout Europe, ideologically motivated by the failure of a series of values that had been maintained during the previous centuries, but that now clash with a new vision of reality and of human life. If we think of the fifteenth century in Europe, we cannot overlook some main figures that shaped and set the tone for the new literary trends.

We deem it fit to begin from the concept of *literary influence* and from the implications it has in the Spanish literature of the so-called “autumn of the Middle Ages”. The growing influence of Italian Humanism in the fourteenth century causes the old theocentric conception of the world to weaken and a focus shift towards the man begins to be perceived, with an anthropocentric view that gradually brings life, art and especially literature closer to the Renaissance, which in Spain reached its grandeur in the sixteenth century. We will focus on those Spanish authors who tried to address the themes and atmosphere of the major work of Dante Alighieri, a prominent figure of the Italian literature.

¹ English translation by Ramona-Olga Iacob, ramonaolgaiacob@yahoo.com

One of the problems that must be carefully defined lies, to a greater extent, in the difficulty of finding the elements that are original and exclusive to Dante's work and which are not, therefore, common literary themes of the time. This difficulty arises from the "globalization" that characterized Romania "the countries in which Romance languages were spoken, languages developed on the territory of the Roman Empire – from the Black Sea to the Atlantic" [Curtius, 2013: 30]. As the German historian Ernst Curtius notes: "in the Middle Ages, in Romania there is a community of culture which extends across language boundaries" [Curtius, 2013: 32]. It is known that Dante also wrote in Provençal and Latin, hence there was a freedom of expression, although, over the centuries, an increasingly clear differentiation of languages happened. As a consequence of it, the habit of using a language other than the mother tongue in writing was lost, while still maintaining the sense of unity offered by the common historical and linguistic roots.

Dante Alighieri (May 26, 1265 – September 14, 1321), the Italian poet considered to be a true Cultural Heritage of Humanity, is perhaps one of the most prolific authors of the Medieval Period, as he managed to synthesize the essence of life and thinking of the people of his time, but also to foretell the dawn of the European Renaissance. Extraordinary for the high art of poetry, for the precise rigor of science, for the speculative intelligence with which he broke the closed gates of ignorance, never defeated in the face of adverse destiny, Dante Alighieri established himself as the deepest and most resonant voice of Medieval literature, herald of modern times. We can say that Dante's poetry played an important role in the design of Renaissance Humanism and in the development of the European cultural tradition as a whole, having a significant impact not only on the poetic and artistic spheres, but also on the philosophical spheres of culture. His literary construction, which consists of a fusion between tragedy and comedy, between epic and lyric, praise and invective satire, a marriage between science and poetry, between sacred and pagan elements, has become a point of reference to many authors from other European spaces.

In order to gain a better understanding of the context in which his ideas were propagated and his ideologies were disseminated, we must take into account both the trade and financial relations between the countries we tackle in the current study, and the contacts that will naturally take place in times of war for supremacy and control of foreign territories. There was an obvious connection between Italy and Spain at that time. An important event that may have initiated this connection between the two countries took place in 1282: the massacre known as the "Sicilian Vespers" (*Vísperas Sicilianas*). On March 30, the second day of Easter in 1282, at Vespers, in Palermo, the capital of the Kingdom of Sicily, a riot broke out against the French King Charles I of Anjou and his reign, which had begun in Italy in 1266. It all began when a woman was assaulted by a French soldier. The revolt also spread to the neighbouring town of Corleone and it was encouraged by King Peter III of Aragon and by the Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII the Palaeologus and led to the assassination of over thirty thousand Frenchmen. Following this tragic event, which led to the end of the reign of Charles I of Anjou, King Peter III of Aragon

began occupying Sicily and proclaimed himself King of Sicily in Palermo on September 4, 1282. However, France truly lost its hegemony in the years to come, through its failures during the Hundred Years' War (1339 - 1453) and the Pope's return to Rome. Italy thus became the centre of literary interest in Europe.

Another particularly important aspect to which we must refer is the fact that of all the important ties between the two states, the religious one was perhaps the most important in strengthening the ties between Spain and Italy. At that time, Pope Calixtus III was the first elected pope of Spanish origin (1455) and, along with Alexander VI, the second Catalan Sovereign Pontiff (elected in 1492), was a fundamental factor in strengthening the bonds between Rome and Spain, especially those related to cultural movements.

Why is there a strong Italian influence present in Spanish literature? The situation in Spain, which has seen countless internal riots throughout history, has contributed to a stagnation, to a delay in both economical and literary evolution, compared to other countries, such as Italy. Several kings accede to the throne. The medieval clashes between the monarchy and the aristocracy, between cities, the nobility and the kings on the one hand, the struggles of kings and nobility against the peasantry and the serfs on the other, continue throughout the period leading from the reign of Juan II (1406-1454) to the Catholic Monarchs. The literary critic Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo states that:

„no hubo día sin revueltas, conspiraciones, ligas, quebrantamientos de la fe jurada, venganzas feroces y desolaciones de las tierras; [...] Rara vez se pelea por la grande empresa nacional; los moros parecen olvidados, porque no son ya temibles; la lucha continua, la única que apasiona los ánimos, es la interna, en la cual rara vez se confiesan los verdaderos motivos que impelen a cada uno de los contendientes. [...] Los restantes celan sus personales medros y acrecentamiento, cayendo sobre los pueblos y los campos como nube de langostas. Todos los lazos de la organizacion social de la Edad Media parecen flojos y proximos a desatarse” (“there were no days without revolts, conspiracies, deals, breaches of sworn faith, ferocious revenge and destruction of the lands; [...] Rarely do they fight for the great national company; the Moors seem forgotten, because they are no longer fearsome; the continuous fight, the only one that excites the spirits, is the internal one, in which the true motives that drive each of the contenders are rarely confessed. [...] The others are jealous of their personal progress and growth, befalling on towns and fields like a cloud of locusts. All the ties of the social organization of the Middle Ages seem loose and about to be untied”) [Menéndez y Pelayo, 1938: 45-46]

During this vast period, after the dynasty of the Counts of Barcelona disappeared in Aragon with Martin the Humane², in 1440, the Compromise at Caspe determined that the crown of Aragon and the county of Catalonia should be granted to Ferdinand I. His son, Alfonso V, conquered Naples in 1443, a date of overwhelming importance not only for the Spanish culture, but also for the entire Renaissance history, because it was then that the beginnings of Renaissance

² Martin the Humane (1356-1410) – king of Aragón, Catalonia and Sicily, after the death of which the Crown was offered to Ferdinand of Antequera.

reached the Iberian Peninsula and also various elements of Hispanic culture, with a significant influence, entered Italy. During the reign of Alfonso V, the first Hispanic school of Humanism was set and developed in Spanish culture.

Not long after, the marriage between Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile achieved the state unity of Spain, focusing very much on territorial conquests (Africa, Italy). Socially, the coexistence of the three cultures (Jewish, Christian and Muslim) is broken, especially after the creation of the Inquisition in 1478 and after the expulsion of Jews by the Catholic Monarchs (1492). At the foundation of Spanish politics, therefore, was an exacerbated religious absolutism, established at the expense of national culture and economy. This was the framework in which the roads to Renaissance were opened in Spain. While the Catholic Monarchs focused their attention on enforcing imperial absolutism, characterized by a policy of conquest and domination, at a universal level, the humanities, mathematics, astronomy, geography were developing. In this greater context, Spain did not stand out with remarkable progress, but only tried to take over cultural elements that were somewhat at hand. The introduction of the printing press in 1470 favoured access to foreign literature and also made the multiplication of translations from Latin, Italian, Arabic and Greek possible. Scholars and pedagogues are called from abroad to improve research, while Spanish scholars visit and attend schools in Italy and France. However, in Spain, the government and political organization systems were still hostile to cultural movements and to the development of literature.

In the second part of this paper, we will turn our attention to the literary movements and forms that left their mark on Spanish literature during the Pre-Renaissance period. "The most important literary phenomenon of the fifth century, which imprints a special character on the whole era, is the predominance of the *Italian influence*. It began in the fourteenth century, with the translation of Boccaccio's *The Fall of the Princes*, and was favoured by the growing circulation in Spain of the works of the three great Italian writers and poets: Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio" [Chabas, 1971: 90].

As I mentioned before, the year 1443, the year of the conquest of Naples by the Spanish king Alfonso V, is a year of special significance precisely due to the intensification of this influence coming from Italy, an influence that had a *conceptual orientation*, – Dante's allegory merging with the neoplatonic conception of the meaning of love expressed by Petrarch – and a *formal orientation*, if we consider the refreshment of the Castilian lyrical prosody (the introduction of the 11-syllable verse). In the Italian Renaissance influence, however, there is a deeper content, which exceeded the limits of lyrical activity and set up a broader intellectual activity, something that existed in the Latin works and in the philological works of Petrarch and Boccaccio: the closeness to the Greco-Latin culture and to classical Antiquity.

Due to the unstable context and the constant turmoil in Spain, Humanism appeared here later than in Europe, with a much more limited field of achievement and influence even in the sixteenth century. Renaissance Humanism was a movement

of the young European bourgeoisie, especially of the Italian bourgeoisie. The Spanish one did not reach the level of development of the Italian one in the fifteenth century nor even in the sixteenth century. However, there was a Pre-Renaissance Spanish Humanism in the 15th century, a century of anticipation. Virgil, Homer, Seneca and Plato are translated by Enrique de Villena and Juan de Mena among others.

Although medieval forms persist and their ideological patterns continue to retain their viability, they are acted out or transfigured into new attitudes. In the XI-XIII centuries the classical world was configured in a Christian perspective, in the XV century Dante's allegorical vision of the other world is intertwined with the ancient spirit of the classical mythological world. Even drama will begin to acquire in the 15th century the shape of a national genre. It will overcome its medieval features, energized, just as other genres, by Italian influence and, generally, by the new Renaissance views on life, but drama will not completely lose its religious and popular roots. The Italian literature that Dante announced would soon become the predominant literature, and the Italian language was to be the main language for the dissemination of literature in Europe.

We can speak of a first Spanish Renaissance that had the poets who were part of the *Italianized School* in the foreground, such as Garcilaso de la Vega and Juan Boscan, who had the task of introducing in Spain the poetic forms and common themes treated in Italian lyric. Here is where the poems with profane tendency, typical of the poet Petrarch, belong. By severing ties with Europe, books from Italy and other countries became inaccessible and, gradually, another form of literature emerged: letters and various genres developed in Spain at the time. The literature of the Spanish Renaissance has well-defined peculiarities, based on medieval poetry.

It is important to note that the cult lyric poetry of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries has been preserved almost exclusively in collections called *Cancioneros* (Songbooks). Lope de Stúñiga (1415-1465), soldier and poet, gathered in such a *cancionero* the best poets at the court of the Aragonese king Alfonso V, poets who show a profound influence of Dante. The songbook was first published only in 1872.

But perhaps the most important Spanish writer to manifest a growing influence of Dante is the so-called Marquis de Santillana (1398-1458), Don Íñigo López de Mendoza. His work, *El Infierno de los enamorados* (*Lovers' Hell*), is worth mentioning for the fact that it was the inspiration of many similar works in Spain, including *Sepulcro de amor* (*The Tomb of Love*) by Guevara and *Infierno de amor* (*The Hell of Love*) by Sánchez de Badajoz. From his great number of lyrical poems, the 42 sonnets written in Italian stand out, not all equally interesting and valuable, but many of great beauty and characterized by an original feeling. Moreover, together they mark an important moment of change in Spanish versification due to Italian influence. *Cien proverbios* (*The Hundred Proverbs*), or *Centiloquio*, are worth mentioning in particular, one hundred and one stanzas made of combinations of long and short verses (*de pie quebrado*). But the main interest of the Marquis de Santillana's poetry lies in the kind

of compositions in which the lyrical poet is predominant and which are so close to the reader's sensitivity that they are still read with pleasure nowadays.

Juan de Mena (1411-1456) is another famous name in Spanish literature, considered to be the first lucid stylist to try to refresh the language by enriching the lexicon and by restructuring the syntax. For these happy accomplishments he could rely on his knowledge of classical literature as well as of Italian literature. This knowledge is also expressed in the overwhelming influence that the author of the *Divine Comedy* exerted on him, an influence equal to that of the Latin classics, especially Virgil. His famous work *Laberhynto de Fortuna* (*The Labyrinth of Fortune*) is an allegorical poem depicting the poet's journey to the Palace of Fortune in the chariot of Belona³ pulled by dragons. We thus witness a symbolic and Dante-like vision of the dramatic character of history, the shaping of the seven planetary circles and a journey through the three cycles of time: the present, the past and the future.

Speaking about the response to the *Divine Comedy* in Spain, literary critics point out that this work enjoyed a wide dissemination in the era, although for a limited period of time. Paolo Savj-López showed in one of his studies that not long before the appearance of the *Divine Comedy*, two works appeared in Spain containing descriptions of the unseen world, one of Paradise and one of Hell. The first work to which he refers would have been *La vida de Santa Oria* (*Life of Santa Oria*), a book in which Paradise is described through three visions of the protagonist who gives the title of the book. The second work that circulated in those times is *Libro de Alexandre*, with an anonymous author, thought to be a translation of *Alexandreis* of Walter of Châtillon, but with elements adapted to the Christian reader, specific to Spain. In it some descriptions of Hell stand out. Therefore, we can consider that, in Spain, the ground was somewhat prepared for a good reception of Dante's work that would mark and definitively influence the writers of the Pre-Renaissance.

To conclude, the influence of the great poet Dante Alighieri, along with that of other medieval Italian poets, was a constant in the fifteenth century Spanish, representing the inspiration for important poets of the time. Seven centuries after the death of the greatest poet of Italy and one of the greatest poets of the world, we can say that Dante remains a basic pillar not only of Spanish literature, but of universal literature, who managed to impose himself, to conquer glory and endure.

“The lines and colours of reality have shaped and illuminated the people and the facts of his contemporaneity in the most artistic and realistic way. A truly supreme reason and intelligence knew how to order, coordinate and discipline all the visual and auditory sensations, all the dreams and longings of the Poet and the flight of his great fantasy” [Balaci, 1969: VII-VIII].

³ Belona, the Roman goddess of war.

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