
Dante in Ukrainian literature

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Abstract. I present a brief analysis of the plenitude of Dante-related phenomena in Ukrainian literature. It is demonstrated that the importance of Dante in the Ukrainian literature cannot be attributed solely to translations and enlightenment projects. There are several more reasons. An outcast, a champion of national freedom and a creator of national language on vernacular base, Dante has been very appealing for creators of Ukrainian literature. They have fashioned, and quite consciously, their personas in the image of Dante, often noting – and proclaiming – similarities of their own destinies with that of great Dante. Therefore the Ukrainian literature of the last two centuries – in the Russian and Austrian Empires, in the Soviet Ukraine, exile, and independent Ukraine – is rich with Dantean reminiscences and references.

Keywords: Dante, Ukrainian literature

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1. Introduction

My main goal in this article is to produce an analysis of the plenitude of Dante-related phenomena in Ukrainian literature. Notice that the earliest study on the problem, an overview entitled “Dante in Ukrainian literature”, has appeared in Russian at “Dantean Readings” collection of articles (Moscow, 1971) [1]. It has belonged to a prominent Ukrainian scholar and writer Hryhorii Kochur, once a prisoner of Stalin’s concentration camps, later persecuted for his connections to the dissident movement. The work mentioned above presents a wide panorama of the reception of Dante’s writings in the Ukrainian literature in the 19th and 20th centuries. This insightful and thought-out study based on a vast amount of materials still remains unique in the Ukrainian scholarship. It has greatly influenced the research “Dante in Ukrainian Culture” by a German and Ukrainian scholar Ihor Kostetzky (a.k.a. Eghor Kostetzky), which has been printed in Germany in 1981 [2].

In spite of the said studies, some of the earliest cases of Dante’s reception in Ukraine still remain unknown. In particular, the H. Kochur’s examination starts from the beginning of the 19th century only. Moreover, many texts written by the exile Ukrainian authors and those killed in the Stalin’s purges have been unavailable in 1971 because of censorship. Finally, many interesting phenomena have appeared after 1971. Therefore I have tried to improve the said shortages in my recent Ukrainian-language monograph “Dante in Ukrainian Literature: the experience of reception within the context of the ‘belated nation-building’” (Kyiv, 2003) [3]. The present article offers a brief summary of the monograph, which has earlier been presented at the Dante’s Rhetoric of Space(s) and Contemporary Dante Research Conference (Tallinn, 2013) [4].

2. Dante in Ukraine: primary stages of reception

Dante was highly respected in Renaissance Europe. On the contrary, baroque and classicism saw a drop in the level of interest in Dante: his style was considered old-fashioned, irregular, and barba-

rous. It did not conform to the aesthetic values of the time, while Ariosto and Tasso were regarded as 'exemplary modern poets'. Starting from 1536, even Italy did not produce complete editions of "Divine Comedy" for over 150 years. Therefore, the information about Dante in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (notice that Ukraine was a part of this conglomerate state in the 16th and 17th centuries) was rather scant. His texts were not studied at the universities. A few occasional mentions have enabled me to assume that the Polish authors primarily regarded Dante as a political writer, an author of "The Monarchy" condemned by the Church. As for Russia, no signs of acquaintance with Dante could be found before 1762.

As a consequence, only a few reminiscences about Dante can be found in the Ukrainian manuscripts of the 18th century. The most famous is a note in "The Diary" by Pylyp Orlyk, a Hetman of Ukraine in exile: *"In my horrible life, when the hope on the Lord's grace was the only thing that belonged to me, – I obtained a kind of support from the great lines of the wise Dante"* (see [3], p. 20). It is worth mentioning that P. Orlyk, who was elected as a Hetman after the death of his predecessor I. Mazepa, had to emigrate soon after his attempt at introducing a democratic constitution of Ukraine in 1710 had failed.

The first dated mention of a presence of "Divine Comedy" in a Ukrainian library is concerned with its 1536 copy printed in Venice that belonged to Lavrentiy Horka (1672–1737), a professor of poetics at the Kyiv Mohyla Academy, and later a prior of the Vydubetsky Monastery in Kyiv and a bishop in several Russian towns (see [3], p. 21).

When Romanticism superseded Classicism as a dominant style at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, Dante became one of the most widely referenced figures in the European literature. For instance, Englishmen Byron and Blake, Italians Foscolo and Leopardi, Poles Slowacki, Mickiewicz and Krasinski, Russian Pushkin, and Ukrainian Schevchenko were all greatly influenced by Dante.

Parallels in the reception of Dante by the Poles and the Ukrainians seem to be very interesting because of a similar colonial status of the two nations in the first half of the 19th century. A prominent Polish scholar Kalikst Morawski wrote: *"Dante's writings appealed to Polish romantic mentality. In Poland he was read as a Bard of the struggle for freedom and the unification of the split Motherland. Poles that were fighting for their freedom and independence loved him because he was a Patriot"* (see [5], p. 109). Brutal oppression of the occupied Poland also helped raise an interest in Dante, especially owing to his "Inferno".

From this point of view, the situation in Ukraine was absolutely similar. Therefore the Spring of Nations and the Ukrainian National Renaissance have made Dante one of the most popular figures in the Ukrainian poetry. There are many references to Dante in Taras Schevchenko's poetry, both political and lyrical. It is worth noting that one of the masterpieces written during his imprisonment on the Aral Sea has been based on the famous Dante's lines *"There is no greater pain **than** to recall the happy time in misery"* ("Inferno", Canto V).

Nevertheless, there were also essential differences between Ukraine and Poland in the 19th century, especially in the status of their national languages. Despite a dire political situation (Poland was then divided among Russia, Austria and Prussia), the Polish language remained both a vernacular one and a language of elites. On the contrary, the Ukrainian elites were almost totally assimilated by Russians and Poles, while the national identity of common people was not yet shaped.

Some Ukrainian and foreign scholars (e.g., a Russian philosopher V. Lesevych of Ukrainian origins or a Russian poet A. Grigoryev) noted that both A. Dante and the Ukrainian poet T. Schevchenko had similar missions in constructing their national languages basing on vernacular ones. A French scholar Emil Durand wrote in "Journal des Debats" (1876): "*For Ukrainians, Schevchenko was their Dante. But he will hardly reach the glory of Dante*" (see [3], p. 32). The last statement referenced a colonial status of Ukraine that made its culture and literature virtually unknown in Europe.

Some writers of the Ukrainian origins had eventually become the leading figures in the other national literatures. Arguably, Nikolay Gogol (a.k.a. Mykola Hohol in Ukrainian) is the most famous example in this respect: he had chosen to write in Russian, probably because the Ukrainian language at the time was not developed enough to accommodate such a level of prose. However, he was painfully aware of a 'split' between his 'Russian' and 'Ukrainian' souls. From this point of view, a study of Dantean motives in his novel "Dead Souls" could be very fruitful. Notice that N. Gogol himself defined the novel as a 'poem', and it was initially meant to contain three parts, much like "Divine Comedy".

A particular colonial situation with the Ukrainian literature had made the reception of Dante one of the most interesting phenomena in a Ukrainian '*Risorgimento*' of the 19th and 20th centuries. One of the most famous masterpieces by a prominent Ukrainian poet and scholar Ivan Franko, "The Introduction" to his poem "Moses", was written in 1905 in a Dantean '*terza rima*'. The poem was an appeal to the whole Ukrainian nation, obviously reminiscent of Dante's invocations to Italy in "Divine Comedy" (see, e.g., the invocation from Canto VI of "Purgatorio").

In 1898, the first prominent Ukrainian woman writer Lesia Ukrainka wrote a verse entitled "The Forgotten Shadow". This poem was dedicated to Dante's wife. She had shared Dante's years of exile and all his sufferings, and yet, according to this verse, even her name remained unknown: Beatrice "*passed to the Land of Glory over her tears*". Certainly, Lesia Ukrainka knew very well the true biography of Gemma di Manetto Donati, Dante's wife and a sister of Dante's political enemy Corso Donati who did not accompany her husband into emigration. Anyway, the verse became one of the first instances of Ukrainian 'feminist' poetry. Lesia Ukrainka took inspiration for it in the story of Olga, a second wife of a prominent Ukrainian composer Mykola Lysenko. She was talented herself, and a friend of Lesia Ukrainka. The fact that the society treated her as 'just Lysenko's wife' deeply insulted both Olga and Lesia. Therefore Lesia Ukrainka's poem could be read as a first case of feministic criticism of Dante in the Ukrainian literature (see [3], pp. 65–66). It is worthwhile that, aside from "The Forgotten Shadow", Lesia Ukrainka also produced a skilful translation, in '*terza rima*', of the lines 25–51 from Canto V. Unfortunately, this translation was never finished and had remained unpublished until 1945, long after Lesia Ukrainka's death.

3. First translations

The Ukrainian poets of the 19th century read Dante mainly in his Russian and Polish or, sometimes, German translations. Some of them (e.g., P. Kulish, I. Franko and Lesia Ukrainka) had enough Italian to read Dante in the original. The attempts to translate "Divine Comedy" into Ukrainian in the 19th century were something more than just a way to give the Ukrainian audience a chance to read the Dante's masterpiece in their native language. The Ukrainian intellectuals could read Dante either in Russian and Polish, or in Italian, whereas the common people were hardly interesting in reading him at all since, at the beginning of the 20th century, 80 per cent of the Ukrainian population were illiterate. Hence, when the Ukrainian authors had finally produced

translations of Dante in the 19th century, their goal was not bringing the texts to a new audience but rather making their audience appreciate the capacity of their native language in expressing these familiar texts (see [6]).

It is worth noting that the decree the Emperor Alexander II signed in the German town of Bad Ems in 1876 had banned printing of any translations into Ukrainian in the Russian Empire. The ban was upheld more or less strictly till 1905. The governmental policy meant relegating the status of the Ukrainian language to a 'dialect for home use only', and thus stopping a spread of 'Ukrainian separatism'. Because of this, the earliest translations into Ukrainian were printed in Lviv. The city was then a part of the Austrian Empire and the governmental policies towards the Ukrainian language and culture were more liberal under Habsburgs' rule.

The end of the 19th century saw the appearance of the first Ukrainian translations of Dante. The first Ukrainian translator of "Divine Comedy", Volodymyr Samiylenko, used a 'blank verse'. He had printed the first ten cantos of "Inferno" in Lviv in 1892–96. Later on, this unfinished translation was reprinted several times as a separate book. In 1913, I. Franko's monograph "Dante Alighieri: Life of the poet and a selection from his poetry" had been published in Kyiv [7]. I. Franko presented many pieces of the Dante's poetry from "Vita Nova" and "Divine Comedy" in his own translations. He also created a wide panorama of the culture of Mediaeval Europe. In many respects, the book was similar in its structure to Ezra Pound's "The Spirit of Romance" (1910), which was also about Dante. However, the Ukrainian author had likely no idea about the E. Pound's book. Moreover, the main parts of the I. Franko's monograph were published in magazines in 1907–09, i.e. before the E. Pound's book appeared ([3], pp. 57–58).

Obviously, the Ukrainian Modernist writers such as I. Franko and Lesia Ukrainka were trying to raise the status of the Ukrainian language and literature through their translations of Dante, who was one of the central writers of the Western literary canon. I. Franko had stated this clearly in the preface to his book about Dante.

4. 'Soviet' versus 'anti-Soviet' Dante

During the early days of the Soviet Union, Dante was regarded as a regressive clerical author. However, as early as in the middle of 1930s, the official ideological evaluation had changed radically: Dante was proclaimed to be one of the most progressive authors in the world literature and a bard of the Italians' fight against social and national oppressions. This happened mainly due to the fact that Dante turned out to be a favourite poet of K. Marx and F. Engels, the two 'founding fathers' of the Marxism. Therefore, Dante had become a part of a great Soviet project for 'enlightenment of workers and peasants'. The prefaces to all popular editions of the Dante's texts in the USSR started with the quote by F. Engels who treasured Dante as the "*last poet of Middle Ages and the first poet of Modernity*", as stated in his "Introduction" to the Italian edition of "Communist Manifesto" (1893).

A good new translation of "Divine Comedy" into Russian done by Mikhail Lozinskiy had appeared in 1939–1944. Translations into the languages of the 'Soviet republics' were later promoted as examples of 'flourishing Soviet national cultures'. The first complete Ukrainian translation of "Inferno" by Petro Karmansky and Maksym Rylsky was published in Kyiv in 1956. Unlike the earlier translations in 'blank verse' by I. Franko and V. Samiylenko, this translation strictly adhered to '*terza rima*'. Another half-finished translation by Mykhailo Dray-Khmara (who died in 1939 at the Kolyma concentration camp, after having been accused of 'Ukrainian nationalism') had disappeared in the NKVD archives. Finally, the first complete translation of "Divine Comedy" into Ukrainian performed in '*terza rima*' by Yevhen Drobiazko had appeared in 1976.

The Ukrainian literature of the 20th century contains the two main discourses of Dante, the 'Soviet' and 'anti-Soviet' ones. The first treats Dante as a great progressive poet who helps the people of USSR fighting for justice and social liberation in the whole world. The second discourse involves Dante as a great champion of liberation of nations from foreign oppression who calls Ukrainians to rise against Moscow. It is quite obvious that the first discourse was dominant in the Soviet Ukraine. In fact, it was the only possible treatment for a long time. On the other hand, the second opinion became dominant for the political *émigré* Ukrainian writers.

The 'Soviet' discourse of Dante had started with the poetic lines "*Like Dante in hell, I am standing among the criminals and bandits*" (1922). The relevant poem by Pavlo Tychyna, once a brilliant symbolist and later a notorious bard of communism, was quick to condemn the poet's former friends who afterwards became the poets of Ukrainian emigration ('*bandits and criminals*'). It was included in all secondary-school textbooks of the Soviet Ukrainian literature.

However, many Soviet poets managed to use Dante's name within the official discourse in order to support the status of Ukrainian literature and underscore that it can be compared not only to the 'Great Russian literature' but to the European ones, too. Sometimes the name of Dante, an officially permitted Christian writer in the atheist state, was invoked to rehabilitate the oeuvre of those Ukrainian composers and artists who worked mainly for the Church.

The champion of this approach was M. Rylsky (1895–1964), a brilliant poet and translator who, though also accused of 'nationalism', had by chance escaped a fate of his colleagues being shot, starved or killed by the hard labour in the camps. He did everything in his powers to incorporate Dante, alongside Shakespeare and Homer, into the official project of communist enlightenment in Ukraine. And he had succeeded. "*Comrade Melnikov* (a high-ranking Communist party boss in Ukraine – M. S.) *takes an interest in my translation of Dante*", – wrote M. Rylsky in his letter from 1952 (see [3], p. 103). M. Rylsky was the first to finish and publish a complete Ukrainian translation of "*Inferno*" (1956) based on an earlier translation by a Western Ukrainian modernist P. Karmansky, which he improved significantly.

Numerous Ukrainian poets who have left Ukraine after it failed to get independence in 1917–1921 and lived in the West (mainly in Poland, Czechoslovakia and France), used to invoke Dante as a bard of freedom and national independence. Sometimes they directly imitated "*Divine Comedy*". The most obvious example was a great poem "*The Ashes of Empires*" by Yuriy Klen. It presented a vast panorama of Ukrainian history of the first half of the 20th century under the Soviet and Nazi occupations, partly in '*terza rima*' and with direct references to the Dante's poem. The poem by Yu. Klen written in 1943–1947 was highly admired by the emigrant critics of the older generation. However, it was not respected highly by the critics of younger generation because of its length and a regular structure.

I was the first in attempting to make a comparative reading of "*The Ashes of Empires*" and the last of the "*Four Quartets*" by T. S. Eliot, "*Little Gidding*". The structure of the two poems is rather similar. In both of them, Dante appears to convey ruination. The infernal landscape of the two poems correlates in many details, although Yu. Klen who started his work in the occupied Europe had almost no chances to read the Eliot's poem. The parallels were probably motivated by similar spiritual experiences of the two poets during the European catastrophe.

5. Political approach substituted by an aesthetic one

A name-dropping tradition with Dante in the Ukrainian political documents existed till the very recent times. So, a Ukrainian *émigré* scholar Yuriy Starosolsky wrote in 1956: "*Why is there no*

monument to Taras Shevchenko, a Ukrainian Dante, in Washington?”). In 2000 A. Matvienko, a Ukrainian MP and one of the leaders of the right-wing opposition, referred to “Inferno” (Canto III) in his political speech, detailing a miserable destiny of ‘neutral’ players in the Ukrainian politics of the time and implying that many intellectuals, though criticizing President Kuchma’s dictatorship, did not dare to proclaim themselves as opposition. In poetry this approach could be traced in a poem written by a dissident writer Mykola Rudenko in 1978: he compared Mordovia, a region where the Soviet concentration camps were located, to “*Dante’s land*”.

However, the ‘political’ approach to Dante has been substituted by ‘aesthetic’ one in the Ukrainian literature of the last decades. References to Dante’s biography and oeuvre still abound in the recent Ukrainian poems and novels, while a national tradition probably makes Dante one of the most widely referenced foreign writers in Ukraine, and a symbol of European culture in general. Now the Dantean motives are mainly treated in a quite post-modern manner, though the ‘political references’ to the Prophetic and Martyred Poet can still be found in the writings by some authors of the older generation, like a prominent poet of the 1960s generation Lina Kostenko.

The poetry of Vasyl Stus (1938–1985), a brilliant poet and a dissident who has died in an Ural concentration camp in the first month of Gorbachev’s ‘perestroika’, is among the most interesting Dante-related phenomena of the modern Ukrainian literature. The only direct mention of Dante can be found in his 1965 poem dedicated to the poet’s arrested friend Ivan Svitlychnyi: “*I cannot stay without Ivan’s smile*”. Then V. Stus addresses his imprisoned friend as follows: “*For I love your Nezval and Dante and I’m willingly intending toward the ninth circle*”. Later on, V. Stus spent over eleven years in the camps where he finally died on the eve of the ‘perestroika’. His poems written in the camps are not engaged politically. They contain both transcendent and historical motives. The sources that had given life to Dante’s great poem are spontaneously transferred into a modern Ukrainian speech. Dante-related texts of the younger Ukrainian writers such as Yuriy Andruchovych, Oleksandr Irvanets and others are very ‘post-modernistic’ and reminiscent of the essay on Dante occurring in the diary of a prominent Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz.

The latest Ukrainian translation of “Inferno” accomplished in ‘*terza rima*’ by the author of this article in 1992–2010 [8] revolves around the attempts to use some archaic elements of Ukrainian lexicon and the prosody of the baroque times, since no Ukrainian verses from the Dante’s times have survived. The main goal of this translation is to diverge from certain ‘academicism’ of the P. Karmansky’s and M. Rylsky’s, as well as Ye. Drobiazko’s texts, not only to reproduce adequately the matter and the poetical form of the Dante’s masterpiece, but also to give readers the idea of a living and still not chilled ‘magma’ of the Italian language created by the poet – in a combination of various styles, from the highest to low, – and sometimes even in certain deviations from the fixed literary norms of today. This translation printed as a book in 2013 has been marked with a “Dante. Ravenna. Italia” Project “Lauro Dantesco” sign [9].

6. Conclusion

As follows from the present study, the importance of Dante in the Ukrainian literature cannot be reduced only to various translations and enlightenment projects. There are many other influences. Being an outcast, a fighter for the national freedom and a creator of the new national language basing on vernacular origins, Dante has been appealing for the creators of Ukrainian national literature. They consciously fashioned their personas in the image of Dante. Moreover, they often noted – and proclaimed – similarities among their own destinies and the destiny of the great Italian. As a result, the Ukrainian literature of the last two centuries is rich with Dantean reminis-

cences and references. This applies to all the components of the Ukrainian literature, including those referred to the Russian and Austrian Empires, the Soviet Ukraine, the Ukrainian exile, and independent Ukraine. The Dantean imagery has played an important part in creating the Europe's image in the Ukrainian culture. It is also demonstrated that the reception of Dante in the Ukrainian literature has been strongly correlating with the process of 'belated nation-building' in Ukraine.

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Анотація. Дано короткий аналіз сукупності пов'язаних з Данте явищ української літератури. Показано, що важливість Данте для української літератури зумовлена не лише перекладацьким чи просвітницьким проектами. Існує й декілька інших чинників. Данте як вигнанець, борець за національне визволення, творець нової національної мови на народній основі тощо був дуже промовистою постаттю для творців нової української літератури. Вони свідомо "приміряли" себе до образу Данте, часто помічаючи – і проголошуючи – подібність своєї власної долі до долі великого Данте. Через те українська література двох останніх століть – в Російській та Австрійській імперіях, у Радянській Україні, в екзилі і в незалежній Україні – багата на дантівські ремінісценції та посилання.