Chapter 5

An Aristotelian at the Academy: Simone Porzio and the Problem of Philosophical Vulgarisation

Eva Del Soldato

Philosophy and the vernacular were not irreconcilable even during the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance: in addition to the ‘élite popularization’ of encyclopaedic works, and the vulgarisation of short treatises that often served as a form of exercise for translators, which became common in Europe from the thirteenth century onward,\(^1\) the rebirth of Platonism in late fifteenth century was accompanied by the diffusion of vernacular texts related to it.\(^2\) On the margins of the official *curriculum studiorum*, Renaissance Neoplatonism was not bound to formal schemes and often directed to a wider audience, one that did not necessarily practice philosophy in a specialized form: it encountered tremendous success in courts and humanistic circles thanks to the agreeability of its subjects (love, soul, etc.) and its style.

Instead, the vernacular was substantially neglected where philosophy was traditionally and professionally practiced, viz. at the universities, which continued to focus on an established Latin speaking Aristotelianism. In spite of (rare) patrons like Charles V of France, who, in the second half of the fourteenth century commissioned a series of vernacular translations of Aristotelian works (including *Politics*, *Ethics*, *On the Heavens* and the apocryphal *Economics*) from the professor Nicole Oresme, Aristotle’s ideas had by and large remained

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\(^2\) For the Neoplatonic appreciation of vernacular between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they are significant the cases of Marsilio Ficino and his pupil Francesco Cattani da Diacceto, who both vernacularized by themselves some of their treatises, originally in Latin: see, e.g., Ficino, *El libro dell’amore*, but also the assessment by Varchi, *Vita di Francesco Cattani da Diacceto*, pp. 14–15. See also Buck, *Der Einfluss des Platonismus auf die volkssprachliche Literatur im Florentiner Quattrocento*, 1965. Plato’s dialogues translated in vernacular had a rich printed circulation around 1540s, in particular in Italy and in France, see Schmidt, ‘Traducteurs français de Platon’; E. Garin, *Storia della filosofia italiana*, 2, p. 611. But also cf. for other considerations J. Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 2, pp. 738–96.
locked in the fortress of the university and its lingua franca for centuries. The rigid structure of Aristotelian philosophy, consolidated by medieval scholasticism, was a serious obstacle to a vernacular translation: devoid of the kind of stylistic appeal that humanists valued, weighed down by too many technical expressions, Aristotelian writings were in general only accessible to those who possessed a specialized philosophical background and, correspondingly, knew Latin. There also existed a degree of professional jealousy, the desire of professors to keep the highest theoretical questions away from a popular consumption.

However, in the sixteenth century, it was precisely Aristotelianism which made an important theoretical contribution to an elevated use of the vernacular. The celebrated Mantuan magister Pietro Pomponazzi—who died in 1525—spoke the following words as a character in the Dialogo delle lingue, written around 1542 by a pupil of his, Sperone Speroni:

Più tosto vo’ credere ad Aristotile e alla verità, che lingua alcuna del mondo (sia qual si voglia) non possa aver da sé stessa privilegio di significare i concetti del nostro animo, ma tutto consista nello arbitrio delle persone. Onde chi vorrà parlar di filosofia con parole mantovane o milanesi, non gli può esser disdetto a ragione, più che disdetto gli sia il filosofare e l’intender la cagion delle cose. Vero è che, perché il mondo

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3 Other exceptions are often related to less technical works, and connected to the commission of a noble man: in France, the Meteorology by Mahieu le Vilain (ca. 1275), the lost Politics by Pierre de Paris (ca. 1300) and the later Problemata by Évrart de Conty (ca. 1380). Different examples are the German Categories and On interpretation by Notker (10th century) and the Meteorology by an anonym Florentine (14th century). In the 14th century, multiple versions of the Ethics and Rhetoric were made, too. I also remember the vernacularisation of pseudo-Aristotelian works, alien to the university’s curricula, such as the successful Secretum Secretorum. See, among others, Caroti, ‘Nicole Oresme: dalla “quaestio” alle “glose”; Grant, ‘Nicole Oresme, Aristotle’s On the Heavens, and the Court of Charles V’; Librandi, La «Metaura» d’Aristotele; Lusignan, ‘Nicole Oresme traducteur’; Williams, ‘The Vernacular Tradition of the Pseudo-Aristotelian Secrets of Secrets’. On the case of the Bolognese professor of medicine Taddeo Alderotti (13th c.) as translator of the Ethics, see Gentili, L’uomo aristotelico alle origini della letteratura italiana. A list of Aristotelian Italian vernacularizations is now available on the database of the ‘Vernacular Aristotelianism in Renaissance Italy’ project led by D.A. Lines: http://www.2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/ren/projects/vernaculararistotelianism/database/. See also Bianchi, ‘Per una storia dell’aristotelismo “volgare” nel Rinascimento’.