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Dante Alighieri

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If we talk about Dante Alighieri, one of the most famous and influential poet from fourteenth century, his most important work would certainly be the Divine Comedy. Some of the later critics believe that the image of early Renaissance Florence portrayed in Dante's work is so unique that it set him aside from any other poets of his time. Even Petrarch, who was born not so much later, had a completely different world view. He embraced the change in Renaissance and did not cling on to the past nostalgically like Dante did.<sup>1</sup> However, the impact from linguistic aspect of the Divine Comedy is proved to be more significant than the work itself. Dante had used his Florentine dialect to write his literary works instead of traditional Latin. The language which later became Italian's national language has shaped linguistic culture of Italy in many ways. Not only that it unified Italy in a linguistic sense, but it also set precedence for later literary writers to write in their native dialect. Therefore, without doubt, Dante Alighieri's most important contribution to mankind was the formation of Italian language.

In order to understand the significance of Dante's Italian poem, we must first get the picture of the historical context of Italian in the time of Dante. Italy around early fourteenth century is a phase of transition from Middle Age to Renaissance. Like any other countries in Europe at the time, Italy was separated into different city-

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<sup>1</sup> Bergin, Thomas G. *From Time to Eternity*. 1967. P. 1-18.

states with great diversity in political ideologies, language, and culture.<sup>2</sup> Each city-state, with its own ruler, was proudly patriotic. They believed that their own dialect were superior to others and represented true Italian language.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as transition brought opportunities for economic wealth and power, a constant struggle for power between different classes was inevitable. Commoners who gained wealth from trade started to challenge the former aristocrats' power.<sup>4</sup> In a diversified and controversial state like this, it was hard to unify the whole country, let alone to have a national language that represents the entire country. Other than that, in literature aspect, at the period of Renaissance, there was an attempt to revive Classical Roman literature.<sup>5</sup> All literature written at the time was all in Latin as a legacy from the church. People's intellects were judged based on their knowledge of Latin.<sup>6</sup> Vulgar languages or languages spoken by the people were considered not suitable for high level literature. With all these elements combined, it is clear that Dante's use of Florentine dialect could create such a tremendous impact on Italy.

Dante's work had established Italian's national language. During the start of Renaissance period, all literature can be enjoyed only by a few Latin literate.<sup>7</sup> Common Italians at the time communicated to each other using their native dialect and can barely read or write Latin. Therefore, one of the immediate effects after the Divine Comedy was published is that a mediocre Italian literate person can now read this epic poem. As a result, the poem was read by all people from all city-states in

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<sup>2</sup> Gilbert, William. *Renaissance and Reformation*. Lawrence KS: Carrie. 27 Jan. 2011. <[http://vlib.iue.it/carrie/texts/carrie\\_books/gilbert/03.html](http://vlib.iue.it/carrie/texts/carrie_books/gilbert/03.html)>

<sup>3</sup> Website Contributors. "History of the Italian Language." *About.Com: Need. Know. Accomplish*. 27 Jan 2011. <<http://italian.about.com/library/weekly/aa060699a.htm>>

<sup>4</sup> Website Contributors. "The dynamic culture of Middle Ages." *International World History Project*. 27 Jan. 2011. <[http://history-world.org/dynamic\\_culture\\_of\\_medieval\\_euro.htm](http://history-world.org/dynamic_culture_of_medieval_euro.htm)>

<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia Contributors. "Renaissance" *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 27 Jan. 2011. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renaissance>>

<sup>6</sup> Richard L. De Molen, *The Meaning of the Renaissance and Reformation*. 1974. Page 42-45

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Storr Cohen, Thomas Vance Cohen. *Daily Life in Renaissance Italy*. 2001. Page 135-142

Italy. Since there had never been a single dialect that was so widespread on a national level before, Dante gave an idea of how a unified national Italian language should be like. The idea is further emphasized by later Renaissance writers, Petrarch and Boccaccio. They, too, used Dante's Florentine dialect in their literature, which later become well-known and marked their places in Italian literature history.<sup>8</sup> Then later on, after Italy fully became a country in nineteenth century, Dante's Florentine dialect has been taught in school nationwide.<sup>9</sup> With the expansion of education throughout the country, people started to accept this language as Italian national language. Thus, Dante had established Italian language through his epic poem, the Divine Comedy.

Dante also had a great influence on Italian literature. He had a different ideology from his peers, he believed that vulgar language is more noble than Latin. As expressed in his work, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante stressed the importance of mother tongue. He believed that language that was spoken since birth should be held higher than language that was learned later.<sup>10</sup> In other words, vulgar languages are more suitable in writing literature comparing to Latin. However, he did not have such extreme idea as to completely abandon Latin. In fact, he even wrote *De Vulgari Eloquentia* in Latin so the idea would be taken seriously from other writers.<sup>11</sup> His belief that vulgar language should be a literary language had influenced later writers to write in dialect as well. Even in humanism period, Dante's vernacular language lived on. Machiavelli, a humanist writer, had also used Dante's version of Florentine

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<sup>8</sup> Wikipedia Contributors. "Petrarch" *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 27 Jan. 2011.  
< <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petrarch>>

<sup>9</sup> Website Contributors. "History of the Italian Language." *About.Com: Need. Know. Accomplish*. 27 Jan 2011. <<http://italian.about.com/library/weekly/aa060699c.htm>>

<sup>10</sup> Website Contributors. "De Vulgari Eloquentia." *Dante Alighieri on the Web*. 27 Jan 2011.  
< <http://www.greatdante.net/vulgari.html>>

<sup>11</sup> Wikipedia Contributors. "De Vulgari Eloquentia." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 31 Jan. 2011.  
< [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/De\\_vulgari\\_eloquentia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/De_vulgari_eloquentia) >

dialect in his work and had a substantial analysis about the origin of the language.<sup>12</sup> This proved that Dante had created the long lasting linguistic effect as the language was still continued being used after his time.

Dante's linguistic patriotism had enabled him to create such a daunting Italian literature which affected us significantly. The language later became a national language and guided later literary works. This also helps preserving Dante's own native language. If not because of Dante, Florentine language could be lost after its popularity among people had faded as many generations passed. If all people wholeheartedly embraced Latin, Italian would have never become literary language. Also, if no one had started an initial step to reform literary language, the process of language unification and the creation of national language might have had taken much longer time. Moreover, it is clear that Italian language is now a part of Italian's cultural identity, how we differentiate Italy from other European countries. Italy would not be Italy today without Italian language. Hence, Dante Alighieri's most important gift to mankind was the formation of Italian language.

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<sup>12</sup> Gilbert, William. *Renaissance and Reformation*. Lawrence KS: Carrie. 31 Jan. 2011. <[http://vlib.iue.it/carrie/texts/carrie\\_books/gilbert/06.html](http://vlib.iue.it/carrie/texts/carrie_books/gilbert/06.html)>