



JOHN TALBOT DILLON AND HIS LETTERS ON THE ORIGIN OF SPANISH POETRY: A RECONSIDERATION

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In the eighteenth century English men and women of the middle and upper classes began to travel abroad more frequently and widely. These trips took the form not only of the Grand Tour, possible for only the wealthiest of them, but of shorter travels to one or two countries that the less affluent were able to enjoy. Many of them kept diaries or sent letters home that described their experiences, and some published narratives of their journeys on their return. Travel literature became fashionable in this period and sold well to an expanding reading public interested in learning about other cultures. By the end of the century, non-fictional travel accounts were the second best-selling genre in England after the novel.¹ Spain, nevertheless, was not as frequently visited by tourists as the rest of Europe due to the inconveniences of the roads and the cultural backwardness reported by merchants and soldiers who had travelled there, as well as to its lingering political rivalry with England. However, a number of these English “professional” travellers published books about their journeys through Spain. A few of the more popular writers and their works are: Joseph Marshall, *Travels through France and Spain in the Years 1770 and 1771* (1776); William Dalrymple, *Travel Through Spain and Portugal* (1777); Philip Thicknesse, *A Year's Journey through France and Part of Spain* (1777); and Henry Swinburne, *Travels through Spain* (1779).²

One of the constants of English accounts of travel in Spain during this era is the stated or implied superiority of England. Although travel to the Peninsula had increased in the second half of the eighteenth century due to somewhat better relations between England and Spain as well as to improved travel conditions, there remained much prejudice against the neighbor to the south, bias based also on the lingering notion of the Black

¹ Batten 121. His study of statistics concerning books borrowed from the Bristol, England, library from 1773-1784 show that during this period travel books circulated at twice the rate as books on non-travel subjects. For a comprehensive examination of travel writing in England in the second half of the eighteenth century see Turner, *British Travel Writers*.

² See Guerrero for a study of British travellers in Spain in the eighteenth century.

Legend (Baciagalupo 116–18). Hontanilla discusses at length the “perception of Spain as an uncivilized and barbaric country, ruling it out as a member of ‘Enlightened Europe,’” viewing it instead as “the European Other” (120). In particular, there was a widespread aversion to Catholicism, which was seen as superstitious and associated with the Inquisition, perceived as a cruel and dangerous institution. The English distaste for Spain’s overseas imperialism of the past spilled over into criticism of its present government, which Britain considered to be tyrannical and the cause of debilitating economic hardship for the population. But they also saw Spaniards as generally indolent and unwilling to participate in any commercial enterprise that would benefit themselves and the nation. Perhaps one of the strongest objections to travel in Spain was expressed by an anonymous author (identified only as T.M.) in one of two letters he published about his journey there. Frustrated with his experiences, the Englishman summarizes all that is wrong with the country:

Nothing but necessity can induce a man to travel to Spain; he must be an ideot [sic] if he makes the tour of this country from mere curiosity, unless he has a design to publish memoirs of the extravagancies of human nature. In that case, he cannot do better, for he will find everywhere — pride, baseness, poverty, ignorance, bigotry, superstition, and ridiculous ceremony. This is a faithful abstract of the character of the Spaniard.... [T]he common people, the citizens, and the middling gentry, are just the same ostentatious, solemn, vain, poor wretches they were in the time of Philip II (T.M. 251).

Other authors also express clear disdain, such as Dalrymple, who wrote about “the horrid implements of arbitrary power and absurd religion” (58), or Swinburne, who criticized the laziness and general negative example of the *hidalgos* (170).

There was nothing quite like John Talbot Dillon’s accounts of his 1778 journey through Spain, whose title reveals the diverse intentions of its author: *Letters from an English Traveller in Spain, in 1778, on the Origin and Progress of Poetry in that Kingdom; With occasional Reflections on Manners and Customs; And Illustrations of the Romance of Don Quixote*. Dillon stands out against the field of eighteenth-century British travellers to Spain not only for his subject matter, but also because he was much more tolerant than other commentators of the differences in government, religion, and daily life he encountered. His religious tolerance was probably due to the fact that he was Roman Catholic. In fact, he makes no mention in the *Letters* of the country’s religious beliefs. For him the Inquisition is a political institution, and he criticizes it strongly for its harsh treatment of citizens. Dillon’s previous residence in Spain and his proficiency in the language afforded him an understanding and acceptance of the rituals of the lives of Spaniards. Nevertheless, he does show disapproval or ambivalence about

certain things, but this does not dampen his enthusiasm for the country and its people. Like the others who visited Spain, he rebukes the current government for its profligacy, its poor economic policies, and its adherence to inquisitorial policies.

Sir John Talbot Dillon (1734-1806) was the son of an Irish baron of the Holy Roman Empire (a title that he inherited) and an English mother, daughter of the last baronet Wingfield. Despite his paternal inheritance Dillon spent most of his life in England, residing in London, and identified himself as an Englishman. He was an inveterate traveller, voracious reader, and authoritative writer on themes ranging from European history and politics to art, literature, and agriculture. His preferred subject was Spain in all its manifestations and, as we shall see, he was clearly conversant with its literature, the theme he chose for his *Letters*.

In the Preface to his *Letters*, Dillon states his purpose, which is to provide “new matter worthy of the attention of his readers” (iii), a fresh subject that had not already been covered by the many English travellers who had lately written about Spain. Although most of them made passing reference to popular Spanish works such as *Don Quijote*, no one had made literary texts, in particular poetry, the main topic of their writing. In choosing to inform his readers about Spanish letters, Dillon was recasting the previous negative notions about the country that we have just addressed. Despite some of the persistent social problems in Spain that he mentions, he preferred to focus on the high level of its cultural production in the form of poetry, which he at times compares favorably to English verse. He evidently wanted his readers to recognize the literary merit of a country that had a reputation for its lack of sophistication in comparison to most of the rest of Europe.

Familiarity with Spanish literature in England prior to 1700 was almost exclusively through translation of its most widely known works. In the sixteenth century there appeared English versions of *Celestina*, *Amadís de Gaula*, *La Diana*, *Lazarillo de Tormes*, and the poetry of Garcilaso de la Vega and Juan Boscán. The first translation of *Don Quijote* into English was Thomas Shelton’s rendering, Book I in 1612 and Book II in 1620. Most of the learned reading public in England could not enjoy these works in the original, as knowledge of the Spanish language was uncommon in this era. There was a natural affinity for French for historical reasons, and some people had reading knowledge of Italian, but because of the bias against Spain, Castilian was not usually studied at this time. Nevertheless, there is evidence of an incipient interest in learning the language which manifests itself chiefly in the publication of bilingual dictionaries and grammars that began appearing at the end of the sixteenth century. The most influential advocate of the language was Richard Perceval, who in 1591 published the *Bibliotheca Hispanica: Containing a grammar with a dictionarie in Spanish, English, and Latin*. In the prologue Perceval tells his readers that, despite the

proximity of “our British Ile” to Spain, courtiers only knew French and Tuscan, “yet now at length, (I know not how), steps Castile language in, / and craves for credit with the first, though latest she begin” (n.p.). The book was re-edited and expanded with reading selections only eight years later and became a kind of textbook source for those wishing to learn the language. The British travellers who began visiting Spain in the early eighteenth century had little knowledge of the language,³ as Edward Clarke expressed in the Preface to his *Letters concerning the Spanish Nation* (1760–1761): “But how few are there of us, that go out as Spaniards? that have language enough to ask, Which is the way?... This inconvenience will be sensibly felt by every enquiring mind” (iii).

John Talbot Dillon was fluent in Spanish, which made him extraordinary among his contemporaries.⁴ He had apparently developed his skills while living in Spain, as he explains in the preface to his *Travels through Spain* (1781), which, like the *Letters*, was the product of his 1778 visit there:

This was my third voyage to Spain. This journey afforded me great pleasure, from not only being versed in the Spanish language, but having made many friends and acquaintances during my former residence in that kingdom, besides being no stranger to their manner and customs (v).⁵

Apparently Dillon first went to Spain as an adolescent. He attended the Westminster School starting at about the age of eight years, in 1742, until 1747. That same year he enlisted in the Royal Navy, but was discharged in 1749 for an act of insolence against a naval officer. It was apparently after this event—at the age of fifteen—that Dillon went abroad and remained there for perhaps as much as a decade. During this period of his life he lived in Spain and then Belgium, where he married; he spent time in Austria where his brother was an army officer,⁶ and he later visited France, where

³ Skinner discusses the scant knowledge of Spanish in eighteenth-century England, pp. 47-51.

⁴ He was also proficient in several other languages. In a letter that Gregorio Mayans y Siscar wrote to a friend about meeting Dillon in Valencia, he marvelled at the Englishman’s great erudition, including the fact that he knew German, Italian, French, and Portuguese, as well as Spanish (*Epistolario* 15: 671).

⁵ We are further informed in a letter that John Bowle, editor of the 1781 English edition of *Don Quijote*, sent to the poet Thomas Percy in 1777, that Dillon had “lived many years in his youth in Spain [where] he acquired a most perfect knowledge of the language” (Nichols 8: 170).

⁶ During this trip Dillon spent time in Aranjuez with Thomas Robinson, Lord Grantham, English ambassador to the Spanish court. In a June, 1778 letter to his brother that mentioned Dillon, Grantham writes that he does not know the

he had many friends and relatives (William Dillon 1: xvi-xvii). It is not clear when he travelled to Spain for a second time, perhaps in the 1760s or early 1770s.

It was a commonplace of eighteenth-century English travel literature that authors presented their texts in the epistolary mode, either as fictional letters to “friends” or real missives sent to family and acquaintances on a variety of subjects and later published for a wider audience. There was a distinction made between the two kinds of communication, “familiar letters” (those directed at a private audience), and other epistolary texts written with the general public in mind. The latter was a tradition dating from at least the seventeenth century, which included letters of a historical, scientific, and philosophical nature (Smith 79-80). It was a convention that the reading public readily accepted, as readers of the era —especially reviewers who commented in journals about the published texts— were not concerned about this literary pose. Regarding a series of letters about a journey through Italy published in 1766, a reviewer wrote: “Whether they were actually written to different correspondents in England, or composed from the author’s minutes since his return, is a matter of no importance to the public. They have indeed much the air of being wrote on the spot from whence they are dated” (Griffiths 439). Other examples of the genre are clearly fictional, such as Montesquieu’s novel *Lettres persannes* (1721), in which two Persian gentleman travelling through France write letters home critical of Christian society, and José Cadalso’s fictional *Cartas marruecas* (1789), which recounts the correspondence of the Moroccan Gazel, who is critical of Spanish customs and policies.

Dillon exploited both methods of letter writing in his *Travels* and the *Letters*, both published in 1781. For the *Travels* he adopted the method of directing his series of letters to the public at large, following the example of William Bowles (1705–1780), whose work *An Introduction to the Natural History and Physical Geography of Spain* (1775) Dillon had used as the basis for his own book. As he explains in the preface to *Travels*, Dillon decided to improve on this popular and now rare book by giving it a more orderly structure by geographical region, by incorporating comments from his own observations and experiences, and by explaining “the ambiguity of the Spanish language” that Bowles was unfamiliar with. He also acknowledges his use of the *Viage de España* (1775) by Antonio Ponz, a painter and writer who served as Secretary of the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, incorporating the artist’s remarks about art and architecture. The combination of Bowles’s report on natural and geographical considerations, Ponz’s aesthetic descriptions, and Dillon’s own reflections on the Spanish

English traveller’s past employment, but does know that he was once attached to the Court of Vienna (Wrest Park L30/15/54/48).

people and their customs, make his *Travels* an extraordinary work for its time. Its appeal to "the English reader" (as Dillon refers to his public several times in the preface) is apparent in the numerous favorable reviews that appear in English publications, which hailed the book as the most complete portrait of Spain that had been published to date.

In his *Letters* Dillon adopts the familiar epistolary mode, addressing the correspondence to an unidentified friend with whom he had travelled in Italy. Unless Dillon was a very good poser, it would seem that this individual was not a fictional acquaintance. He makes reference to this person's recent travels in France and his return to England, which Dillon claims to have followed via news of the ship that transported him. He also comments to this friend that he has purchased a book for him and has sent it along with a particular letter. Nevertheless, despite the familiar-letter form of this series of texts, it is clear that Dillon wrote them with a mind to their later publication for a wider audience. In the preface to the printed edition he refers to the fact the these letters "are offered to the public" (*Letters* iii).

It seems clear by the contents of the *Letters* that Dillon first wrote them during his travels in 1778, probably sending them to his friend along the way; nevertheless, the texts that appeared in the published edition are evidently expanded versions of the originals. In these new narratives he added quotes as well as his own commentary and musings about the development of Spanish verse. There existed at the time no sole source that could supply Dillon with all of this material, so, as we shall see, he selected information from a wide assortment of books. In his letters Dillon would have the reader believe that the texts were written as he travelled from city to city, but the sheer number of the quotes and references he makes in them belies this literary pose. It would have been quite extraordinary for Dillon to have traversed the countryside with so many tomes in tow, some consisting of 500–800 pages of text. He also carried a copy of *Don Quijote*, which he apparently never travelled without and which he quotes frequently in both *Travels* and *Letters*.

The nineteen letters that comprise this book are dated from 2 May, apparently soon after Dillon's arrival in Spain, until 10 December of the same year. Written from Barcelona, the first text informs us that Dillon had travelled on an English ship to that city from Genoa, where he had taken leave of the friend to whom he addressed all the letters. From Barcelona he went to Valencia, where he remained until early June. From June until late August or early September Dillon resided in Madrid and its environs, with short stays in Toledo, the Escorial, and St. Ildefonso (La Granja), the summer residence of the royal family and the place where he met Lord Grantham. After Madrid he travelled to Burgos, and by 10 October found himself in Bilbao, "which closes my expedition through the Spanish dominions" (296); but he is still there on 10 December, having remained "longer than expected" (304). This is Dillon's last letter of the series, but

mention of him in a Grantham letter of 20 January 1779 indicates his continued presence in Spain at that time (Wrest Park L30/15/66/28).

The year 1778 was perhaps a risky time for an Englishman to sail the waters between England, Italy, and Spain, as Dillon notes several times in his letters. His main concern were the French, who were allied with the American colonies; Spain would enter the fray as an ally of France early in 1779. In the *Letters* Dillon effectively sums up the state of affairs in June of 1778:

[T]he French flatter themselves to have in a manner secured to themselves, the possession of America, under the veil of an alliance with the congress; and the Spaniards fondly conceive that Gibraltar will fall an easy prey into their hands; how egregiously they are deceived in this. (119)

His knowledge of history is evident in his recollection of the previous hostilities between England, France and Spain dating from the Spanish War of Succession, when Gibraltar changed ownership. He refers in particular to the Battle of Almanza, where in 1707 the French and Spanish defeated the English, who had been abandoned by their Portuguese allies. This desertion reminds Dillon of English assistance to Portugal in their Restoration War against Spain, when in 1663 their reinforcements helped the Portuguese carry the day at the Battle of Ameixial.⁷

Both history and current events have Dillon concerned about travelling. He is anxious to hear of his friend's safe return to England, passing with the "utmost expedition through France" (15). He claims to have made a narrow escape himself on his journey to Spain, commenting on a possible "accident" that would have caused his ship to stop at Marseilles, where it "would have been seized and ourselves become the dupes of a perfidious and inveterate enemy! but thank God we have had the good fortune to avoid their deceitful wiles" (16). Dillon is likewise concerned about his journey home at the end of the year, as "the din of war is constantly in my ears"; if he dies on his voyage he will have done so "gloriously in defence of my country, my beloved country, whose rights I fervently wish may ever remain inviolate!" (307). While he realizes that his safety at sea is at risk, Dillon apparently felt secure enough in his previous knowledge of Spain, its language, and its people. During his journey he does not mention any concern about his personal safety, only the usual discomforts of the road.

Dillon's preface to the *Letters* identifies his subject as the origins of Spanish poetry, a "new matter" for his readers. He is quick to establish an authoritative voice not only on this topic, but on other literary works as well. He is well acquainted with the contents of Don Quijote's library, and

⁷ A long footnote quotes John Colbatch's account of these events, with its claims that Portugal's victory was owing only to the intervention of Charles II (76-87, n. a.)

refers to some of the books found in it as well as their latest editions and places of publication. (As we shall see later, Dillon had a rather thorough knowledge of Cervantes's novel.) In the remaining two pages of the preface he quotes three eminent authors: an unnamed, "great and learned French writer" (Montesquieu) who wrote that "the Spaniards have but one book, and that one, shews the ridicule of all the others";⁸ Alexander Pope, and his *Essay on Criticism* ("To him the wite of Greece and Rome was known, / And ev'ry author's merit but his own"); and Jonathan Swift, who mocked some writers in his "A Tale of the Tub" ("The most accomplished way of using books at present is, to serve them as some do lords, learn their titles, and then brag of their acquaintance"). What begins to emerge in the preface is a portrait of John Talbot Dillon that will reconfirm itself throughout these letters, that of a very learned man in possession of an extensive knowledge of English, Spanish, and French literature, European history, natural history, and nobility. As we shall see, the 322 pages that comprise the published edition of the letters are the product not only of high-level skills in the Spanish language, but of considerable research and personal familiarity concerning, in particular, the history of Spanish verse, English-Spanish relations over the centuries; parallels between English and Spanish literature; the norms of *hidalguía*, and the workings of the Inquisition.⁹

What Dillon produced in the *Letters* is evidently the first history of Spanish poetry (or any form of Spanish literature) in English. The book has been largely overlooked by modern criticism because it has been considered an unoriginal work, based entirely on a few texts on the same topic that had been recently published in Spain. George Ticknor, the American scholar who published the first comprehensive history of Spanish literature in English in 1849, owned a copy of the *Letters* but does not seem to have read it very well, for he wrote of it, "Large masses of this book are pilfered from Velasquez's *Origenes de la poesía castellana* —and I doubt not much of the rest

⁸ Montesquieu laments that the spirit of Spain cannot be found in its books, with one exception: "Le seul de leurs livres qui soit bon est celui qui a fait voir le ridicule de tous les autres" (247).

⁹ Dillon was an indefatigable researcher and writer. His other books included: a history of King Pedro I *el Cruel* (1778); an account of the monarchs Alfonso VIII and Leonor of Castile (1800); a "critical memoir" of the French Revolution (1790); a political survey of the Roman Empire (1782); a translation of the German painter Anton Raphael Mengs's letters to Antonio Ponz on the art of painting (1782); and a translation of a French book concerning "foreign agriculture" (1796). There is mention also of other works he was preparing for publication: an edition of Camões's *Lusiadas* (see n. 17); a translation of Mayans's biography of the sixteenth-century polymath Antonio Agustín (1734) and of his *Carta del origen del Derecho Español* (1745).

from Sarmiento's and Sedano's prefaces" (*Catalogue* 119). Ticknor apparently read only the preface of Dillon's book, in which the Englishman confirms that he consulted for his study Joseph Luis Velázquez's *Orígenes de la poesía castellana* (1754) (a title which informed his own), Juan López de Sedano's *Parnaso español*, and Fr. Martín Sarmiento's *Memorias para la historia de la poesía y poetas españoles*. Otis Green, who wrote the only study dedicated solely to the *Letters* (1971) (essentially a summary of the contents of each of the nineteen letters), also cited Dillon's reliance on these texts, and concluded that "many of his judgments must of necessity be derivative" (259). But Ticknor and Green were unaware that the *Letters* were not simply the product of a few received ideas about Spanish poetry. In fact, Dillon quoted, consulted, or specifically mentioned in his study nearly fifty books: literary texts by Spanish, Portuguese, French, and English authors; collections of verse such as *cancioneros* and *romanceros*; histories of Spanish poetry; dictionaries and grammars of the Spanish, Portuguese, and Basque languages; histories of Spain; treatises on *hidalguía*; and church history.¹⁰

In addition to these many items, Dillon must have owned numerous other texts that he utilized to write the other books on various subjects that we have just mentioned. It would seem that he was in possession of an important library of books, volumes about European history and art, agriculture, and politics, but in particular books in Spanish about Spanish topics.¹¹ Most of the books that he cites in *Letters* were published in the eighteenth century, followed by many others that appeared in the seventeenth, and only a few that dated prior to that. It is particularly noteworthy that in the *Letters* Dillon refers to nine books that had been published within three years prior to his 1778 trip to Spain, which seems to attest to his keen interest in keeping abreast of the latest publications.¹² He may even have bought these books during this journey, as he does occasionally mention a recent purchase or his failure to locate something that he had desired. It is also likely that he acquired many items in his

¹⁰ See the Appendix for a list of these books.

¹¹ Dillon bequeathed to his wife "my Library of Books in every Language of which it may be found to contain as well as Manuscripts, Literary papers, patents and other writings". He left to the Library and Philosophical Society of Manchester (of which he was an honorary member) his collection of papers on agriculture (*Will* 390-91).

¹² While in Valencia Dillon visited the home of Gregorio Mayans, the owner of a "most curious and valuable library" (35) that was of great interest to the Englishman. He marvels over the many scarce manuscripts in Mayans's collection, as well as the translations into Spanish of Greek and Latin classics and numerous texts by unnamed Spanish authors.

library during previous travels in Spain, as there were apparently few Spanish volumes available in England in the 1700s. A study and bibliography of the items that Dillon used to write his books on Spain and its literature might well reveal that he had one of the most important Spanish libraries in England during this era¹³.

Dillon wrote his treatise on Spanish poetry at a time when literary history in Spain was in its earliest stages. He may well have read his friend Mayans's *Rhetorica* (1757) in which the erudite Valencian offered one of the first definitions of the discipline: "La *historia literaria* refiere quáles son los libros buenos y quáles los malos, su método, estilo i uso; los genios i ingenios de sus autores; los medios de promover sus adelantamientos o de impedirlos... (2: 501).¹⁴ As we shall see, Dillon seems to adhere to the tenets of Mayans's definition as he composed his own history of Spanish verse. Using the source materials that we have already mentioned, the Englishman selected authors and works that he considered worthy of inclusion, criticized others for their lack of merit, and omitted entirely some writers that his Spanish predecessors chose to discuss. What Dillon essentially did was to act as arbiter in England of Spanish literary history and the canon of its texts. The fact that his was the first such work to be published in Britain underlines its significance. Knowingly or not, John Talbot Dillon prescribed the first reading list of (mostly) poetry of Spain that English readers could pursue to satisfy their interest.¹⁵ It would be impractical to discuss here everything that Dillon addresses in these nineteen letters. Green has already provided a brief synopsis of what each of them covers, which ranges from verse written in Spain during Roman times through the seventeenth century. Instead, we will focus on the issues that make Dillon's book an important work deserving of more notice than it has received, as it not only represents a first attempt to introduce the

¹³ Glendinning mentions several collectors, among them John Bowle, the editor of *Don Quijote* already mentioned, who had nearly 400 Spanish books in his library. Despite some interest in such texts, the fact that Bowle's collection was unsuccessfully auctioned for two consecutive years after his death attests to the general indifference to Spanish books in the late 1700s. This lack of interest turned around in the first twenty years of the nineteenth century, when political exiles from Spain arrived in England with their libraries, which were bought and sold at a quick pace. Nevertheless, when the exiles returned to the Peninsula in the 1820s they took their libraries with them, causing a dramatic fall in the market for Spanish books in England (70-71).

¹⁴ See Urzainqui for a study of literary criticism in this era.

¹⁵ In this era the genre "poetry" included any text written in verse, including theatrical works. Prose texts were a separate category, called *eloquencia* in eighteenth-century Spain.

English reading public to Spanish poetry, but also serves as a transitional study that ushers in some of the important questions on which literary historians of the nineteenth century will focus.

Before introducing his reader to the subject of Spanish literature, Dillon gives an account of the “common language of Spain” and the other tongues spoken on the peninsula. His information about Catalan, Valencian, Galician, and Basque, as well as foreign influences on Castilian, are gleaned from the introductory materials in the *Diccionario de Autoridades* (1726-39), Covarrubias’s *Tesoro de la Lengua* (1611), and Bernabé José Aldrete’s text on the origins of Castilian (1737). His preference for Castilian over the other languages of Spain emerges in this letter, where he informs his readers about “troubadour poets” who wrote in Valencian, “a dialect of provenzal” (53). After paraphrasing some of Velázquez’s information about their verse, Dillon adds his own judgment about the decline of the popularity of these works, which he links to Columbus’s arrival in “a new world”: “the effeminate Troubadours, and their songs, were entirely forgotten”, eclipsed by the feats of soldiers, heroes, and adventurers (64). Dillon then links the Castilian tongue with his notion of Spanish character as he traces the origins of the language to the twelfth century, “in singing the exploits of heroes, sounding forth the praise of the Deity, and tuning their lyre to the cause of religion” (101-02). He notes the occasional echo of Provençal poets in early Castilian verse, seeing these influences in a negative light, as they are “languid and faint when [they] attempt to describe the thunder of Jove, or the anger of military heroes, with the clangour of war” (103). It is in this masculine world that the Englishman finds the true subject for the Castilian language, for what he labels “the national poetry” (101), a reference to the *Poema de mio Cid* and to epic in general. His knowledge of the exploits of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar are on display in another letter that he dedicates solely to the hero.

“National poetry” is a term that Dillon repeats several times in this letter, and he uses it as a standard by which to measure the merit of poetic forms that came later, in particular the sonnet, madrigal, *canción*, *terceto* and *octava rima* of Italian influence, “different from the ancient *Coplas* of Spain” (110).¹⁶ Dillon’s disdain for these and other forms that appeared in the Golden Age is clear in his comment on the “variety of inventions which sprang up in a barbarous age” (117). Dillon praises Cristóbal de Castillejo’s

¹⁶ Dillon equates the *copla* with the *redondilla*, which he correctly identifies as a form of great antiquity, and which was adopted “in the national poetry”. Navarro Tomás writes that the *redondilla* was the result of the division of hemistichs into two separate lines, with the resulting rhyme *abab*. As Dillon suggests, it was indeed an old form having appeared in medieval Latin poetry before the definitive development of the Romance languages. It remained in the Castilian repertoire throughout the Middle Ages and beyond (90).

“national pride” which caused him to object to the newer forms that Boscán and Garcilaso had adopted, inveighing “against those who quitted the Spanish metre to adopt the Italian” (169). He admires Alfonso X of Castile for having “introduced the national language into all public writings” (123). But his comments about national language and literature are not limited to the Castilian tongue. After discussing poetry written in Galician that appears in the *Cancionero de Baena*, Dillon goes on to locate the moment in peninsular history when Portugal became an independent kingdom and the Portuguese idiom became a “variation” of Galician, which gave it a “national character” (88). He then praises Luis Camões, author of the *Lusiadas*, a work which “alone, would have been sufficient, to perpetuate the poetical character of his country” (91).¹⁷

The fact that Dillon was reflecting and writing authoritatively on issues of national language, literature, and character in 1781 is significant. In making these observations he anticipates an important argument that sustained the earliest histories of Spanish literature, those written by Friedrich Bouterwek, Simonde de Sismondi, and George Ticknor.¹⁸ Bouterwek finds in things “ancient” and Castilian the “national spirit” and the “national character” of Spain (605-06). Sismondi generally follows suit, adding commentary about outside influences on the Spanish people and their literature, but nevertheless makes a strong statement about the *Poema de mio Cid*, that “[n]othing that has since appeared can justly demand our unqualified admiration” (243). But perhaps Dillon’s ideas are most closely aligned with those of Ticknor, who some seventy years later would write of his preference for Castilian while dismissing Provençal and Italian influences on its poetry (1: 356-57). Like Bouterwek (with whom he had studied in Groningen) and Sismondi, Ticknor espoused the philosophy that literature was essentially a manifestation of a nation’s character.

Even before these nineteenth-century debates about character and literature, there was already brewing in Europe in the mid-1700s a nascent sentiment of nationalism. In Dillon’s England this was accompanied by disdain for absolutist governments that would discourage nationalistic tendencies, and a new importance placed on individual experience instead of the order and moderation that neoclassical ideals called for. Neoclassicism was becoming outmoded in literature, with a new emphasis on the genius and originality of authors rather than considerations of morality and decorum. In England this meant a newfound appreciation for

¹⁷ In a September 1782 letter to Robert Waddilove, chaplain to Lord Grantham, Dillon mentions that he is preparing a “magnificent” edition of this work (Wrest Park L30/15/66/69). There is no evidence that it was published.

¹⁸ See Ríos-Font for a thorough discussion of the issues in the works of these literary historians.

authors such as Chaucer and Shakespeare. “Genius” is, in fact, a word that Dillon uses a number of times in the *Letters* to describe authors and their works, and a word that Mayans singled out in his definition of literary history. It is clear from the context in which the word appears that the Englishman understands genius as a natural ability, the power to create something original that causes admiration in others. Lope and Cervantes each merit the appellation three times in the course of the *Letters*, as well as Francisco de Quevedo, Garcilaso de la Vega, Juan del Encina, Pierre Corneille, the music theorist Francisco de Salinas, and Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, “a natural genius... [who] writ that little piece *the life of Lazarillo de Tormes*” (163-64). There were, on the other hand, those authors whom Dillon discredited for introducing “false taste” to Spanish letters, whose exaggerated imitation of the Italian models led to the decline of Castilian poetry in the seventeenth century. Chief among them were Luis de Góngora and “Lorenzo” Gracián, who, “by their awkward and ignorant presumption, substituted obscure and unknown expressions to a new and turgid dialect... [I]o such a low state was genius reduced by these vandals” (204-05). In this opinion Dillon might have been influenced by Mayans, whose 1727 *Oración* seems to have set the stage for the disdain for Baroque poetry that became generalized in the eighteenth century. But Dillon extrapolated further, seeing the correspondence between the “droop” of Spanish literature and the “universal langour” in the country that characterized the end of the House of Austria and the arrival of the Bourbon dynasty. He laments the alteration of the “Spanish character”, whose gravity was exchanged for the “gay and effeminate modes of Versailles” (206). This, too, is a comment that shows Dillon’s concern with nationalism, in this case with a certain anxiety about the infiltration of French sensibilities in Spain’s cultural life. Perhaps this remark was fueled as well by the current enmity between England and France that Dillon refers to several times in these texts. But what it clearly means is that he linked the country’s literary output with historical events, inferring that these events informed Spanish literature for better or for worse.

Dillon also saw lack of genius in much earlier works, such as those of Gonzalo de Berceo. Like Velázquez, whose work he uses for a summary of Berceo’s texts, Dillon comments on the unrefined nature of Castilian verse in the thirteenth century, especially poetry on religious themes, in contrast to the heroic deeds of the national poetry that he admired in an earlier letter. Although he recognizes Berceo’s importance as the first known poet in Castilian, he dismisses the literary merit of his verse as well as that of “other monkish writers, [who] without any feeling for the true graces of poetry, were delighted with jingling sounds, thinking with consonance and rhyme to supply the place of genius and fancy” (114).

In the title of his book Dillon refers to *Don Quijote* as well as to poetry, and his enthusiasm for the novel and its author is evident throughout his

text, as it was in his *Travels*. His reading public was well acquainted with the *Quijote*, as it enjoyed great popularity in England in the 1700s. The book also found its way into travel narratives such as Swinburne's, Twiss's, and Dalrymple's, who recalled its episodes while they visited the sites where they took place. These are remarks casually made, based on clichés of the protagonist's physique or his haplessness. Dillon's references to the book and author are erudite, as they reveal a deep appreciation for Cervantes's merit not only as a novelist but also as a literary historian. Dillon was also familiar with the prologue that Cervantes wrote for his *comedias*, in which he commented on Spanish plays and playwrights that preceded him, in particular his admiration for the actor and playwright Lope de Rueda. He calls Cervantes "that immortal genius, . . . the contemporary of Shakespear, and I will almost venture to add, in every respect his equal" (60). Dillon's familiarity with the novel, its translations, and the Spanish language are evident in a digression on the inability of translators Peter Motteux and Tobias Smollett to recognize and render its puns and other word-play (96). But it is important to note that Dillon was disappointed in Spanish editions of *Don Quijote*, as he expresses in Letter XIII:

[A]fter reviewing such a variety of commentators which the Spanish language affords, I lament that the great Cervantes is no longer understood by his countrymen, and that this classic writer, so well acquainted with the inmost recesses of the human heart, and who abounds with the most beautiful allegories, yet remains without a single commentator! (229)

In both the *Travels* and the *Letters* Dillon tells his readers of seeking out romances of chivalry mentioned in the *Quijote*, and his frustration at not finding them for sale. In the *Letters* he mentions the emotion of being on the Barcelona shore where the unlucky hero was defeated by the Caballero de la Blanca Luna; he also sets out to find the "Olivera de Valencia", a place mentioned briefly in the third chapter of Book I. Such was the level of detail with which he read and researched Cervantes's novel.¹⁹ His contemporaries recognized Dillon as a *Quijote* scholar, particularly John Bowle, who received from him a great deal of assistance with his translation of the novel, in particular "a very large Collection of Notes critical historical with Illustrations of Don Quijote, explaining all the hard words & difficult passages" (Truman 17). Joseph (Giuseppe) Baretti, an Italian lexicographer and literary critic who took Bowle to task for his poor knowledge of

¹⁹ He was also amused by the fact that some Spaniards thought that Don Quijote was a real person. A Manchegan girl commented that she heard he had died just recently, and a field officer affirmed that he had been "a Colonel of the Regiment of Flanders" (79).

Spanish, suggested to him that he send the manuscript to Dillon, “beg of him to correct it, and give him *Carte Blanche*” (239).²⁰

Dillon also discourses on many a subject not related to literature. One of them is nobility, to which he dedicates a twenty-two page letter. It is noteworthy that, unlike Swinburne and some of the other English travellers who wrote about Spain, Dillon does not disparage *hidalgos*. On the contrary, he writes about *hidalguía* with admiration, frequently quoting from or paraphrasing many texts, such as the *Siete Partidas* and Hernando Mexía’s 1492 *Nobiliario vero*, as well as other treatises on the theme. He identifies the different categories of *hidalguía*, lists eighteen privileges that *hidalgos* enjoy, explains what *grandees* are, and refers his readers interested in lineages to the work of Felipe III’s genealogist, who “drew up a tree of one hundred and eighteen descents, from Adam down to that sovereign” (294).²¹ Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Dillon’s letter on nobility is his reference to Don Diego de Miranda, the *hidalgo* who makes an appearance in *Don Quijote*. In response to an inquiry about his person, Don Diego describes his many positive qualities and Christian devotion. Together with the history of the institution and its merits is the image of the Spanish *hidalgo* that Dillon apparently wanted the English readers to appreciate. In fact, this long letter seems an apologia meant to correct previously held notions about the Spanish nobility.

Other topics that Dillon writes about are characteristic of travel narratives. His letters begin and end with a description of the place he is writing from, with details of the journey there, Spanish customs and traditions, and current events, including comments about the royal family. He is a natural storyteller who enjoys entertaining his reader with colorful sketches of cities and towns, anecdotes of adventures, and some comments about himself as well. He explains how to outfit oneself for travel in order to avoid the inconveniences of the road that his fellow countrymen had complained about in their own accounts of Spain. We learn that the profession of innkeeper was a public office in many parts of Spain, and that private persons could be punished for lodging travellers; that inns did not provide food or wine, and that the weary wayfarer had to purchase these items at “appointed places” at some expense (27-29). Dillon reports that fireworks had been abolished in Valencia, and that unemployed men found work at a newly created job, walking the streets from eleven at night until

²⁰ Baretta was appalled when he met Bowle, “who declared without blushing, that he could not utter a syllable of Spanish, not understand a word of it, when spoken. A special Editor ... that does neither speak, nor understand the language of the book he is going to publish!” (5-6).

²¹ Diego Matute de Peñafiel Contreras, *Prosapia de Christo*, 1614. It seems that Dillon was able to find all of the information in this letter in one source, most likely from the fourth volume of Benito Feijoo’s *Theatro crítico universal*.

dawn, crying out the hour, the weather, and the fact that all is *sereno*, for which they were called *sereneros* (52-53). There is a lively three-page account of a Madrid *tertulia* (156-58). Guests do not form one conversational group, but disperse to different rooms of a house where, fueled by refreshments of all kinds, they participate in “a variety of pleasing subjects”, play card games, listen to guitar music, or engage in flirtations. Dillon emphasizes the liveliness, the cordiality, and the good humor that characterized the *tertulias* he had attended.²² Dillon’s erudition, intelligence, humor, and generous spirit are all implicitly on display throughout the *Letters*. Most of his remarks about his journey have to do with interactions with other people, but occasionally he says something about himself: he tried to learn Basque, but failed; that despite his heritage he does not speak Irish; that he is full of passion and curiosity; and that he bought an Andalusian horse, which he describes with evident fondness.

The last letter of the series is unlike the others in that it does not follow the same epistolary format, with the date, place, and reference to Dillon’s surroundings. It is evidently his translation of the *auto da fe* that took place in November, 1778, concerning Pablo de Olavide, a Lima-born lawyer and viceroy in Peru. Olavide’s reformist policies met with the opposition of conservative members of the Spanish government, and his association with Voltaire and Rousseau earned him a reputation as an advocate of French Enlightenment ideals. In 1775 the Inquisition charged him with heresy for being disrespectful of the Spanish clergy and of Catholicism in general, and for having read prohibited books. Olavide was sentenced to eight years in a monastery in 1778. His trial and imprisonment caused great concern among enlightened thinkers in Spain and elsewhere. Dillon presents the English translation of the trial and sentence with no comment whatsoever. While his motives for adding this text to the *Letters* on poetry cannot be known for sure, it seems that he wished to inform his readers about a very recent event, expecting that they would find it outrageous and sympathize with Olavide’s plight, as Dillon himself apparently did. Unlike his defense of the Spanish nobility, he makes no apology for the policies of the Inquisition.

Dillon’s *Letters* offered the English reading public a fresh perspective on Spain. In addition to providing them with the first history of Spanish poetry accessible to them —no small thing— his information about the country, its people, and its traditions seem designed as a corrective, a conscious effort to dispel damaging myths and lingering prejudices about Spain. It is difficult to gauge the impact of the book. We do know that his *Travels*, published at the same time, were widely read and appreciated, so it

²² This is quite unlike Dalrymple’s opinion that *tertulias* were dull, that people gorged on sweets, and that they were gambling dens (15).

might stand to reason that the *Letters* were also purchased and read.²³ We do know that this book was important to Robert Southey, the renowned poet who was fluent in Spanish, conversant with its literature, and the translator of the *Chronicle of the Cid* (1808). In a 1796 letter to the editor of the *Monthly Magazine*, Southey wrote that Dillon's *Letters* on Spanish poetry "will give the reader a good general view of the subject.... His work has been the companion of my studies: I have derived pleasure and instruction from it, and have only to regret, that by not extending it, he has left a less able pen to attempt the supplement" (453).

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²³ In 1810 the anonymous *Essai sur la Littérature Espagnole* was published in Paris. Most of the book is easily recognizable as an almost verbatim translation of Dillon's *Letters*, with a few changes: the author eliminated the epistolary elements of the original text; replaced Dillon's introduction with a prologue which comments on the merit of some Spanish literary works despite the general lack of erudition in Spain; often combined several chapters into one; and mentioned a few more authors, such as Tomás de Iriarte and Juan Meléndez Valdés. The publication of this book seems to indicate growing interest in Spanish literature among French readers in the early nineteenth century, at a time when Spain was fighting for its independence from France.

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