



Pancorbo, Fernando José¹

JOSEPH PENSO DE VEGA

**La creación de un perfil cultural y literario entre Ámsterdam y Livorno
[Cultural and Literary Creation between Amsterdam and Livorno]**

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The expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 and their forced conversion in Portugal in 1497 began the Sephardic Diaspora and exile leading to the settlement of many Sephardim in North Africa, the Balkans (Sarajevo, Sofia), the Mediterranean under Ottoman control (Thessaloniki, Istanbul, Izmir), the Italian city-states (Ferrara, Livorno, Pisa, Venice), and the Netherlands (Amsterdam, Antwerp). The city of Amsterdam became a cultural epicenter for exiled Sephardic writers during the seventeenth century, such as Manuel (Jacob) de Pina, Miguel (Daniel Levi) de Barrios, Antonio Enríquez Gómez, and Isabel (Rebeca) Correa whose works are included in the Spanish Golden Age Baroque literature. This cultural context serves as the central focus of Pancorbo's first monograph. In his study, the author introduces the reader to Joseph Penso de Vega (1650-1692), mainly known by his work of *Confusión de Confusiones* [Confusion of Confusions] (1687-88), the first text ever written on the stock exchange. Through four chapters Pancorbo analyzes Penso's personal and literary life in Amsterdam and Livorno which led him to become an author between diasporas and the highest example of the so-called Sephardic Baroque prose.

Chapter One "Una vida en cuatro movimientos" [A Life in Four Movements] opens with a thorough biographical reconstruction of Joseph Penso and his family. Pancorbo then discusses several theories about Penso's birthplace. Penso's father, Isaac Penso, was born in Espejo, Cordoba, in 1608, and after having been imprisoned by the Inquisition for Judaizing he managed to escape and flee with his family to Antwerp and then to Amsterdam, where he participated in the religious and commercial life of the city's Sephardic community. From data collected by other authors such as C. Mackay and L. Beltrán, Pancorbo argues that Penso would have been born outside the Iberian Peninsula, probably in Hamburg after 1650, where his family lived briefly before their move to Amsterdam (13-14). This fact is important in understanding Penso's intellectual formation.

As a second-generation Sephardic exile Penso was raised in a diverse multilingual educational environment that included religious instruction (Talmud and Torah), the *Studia Humanitates* models of the late Renaissance, and - grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic - which he acquired later in Italy. Penso's trip to Livorno to work in his father's business at age 20 marked the beginning of his promising literary career. In 1682, he returned to Amsterdam to care for his sick father who died a year later, coinciding with the publication of most of Penso's works written during his time in Livorno.

In the second chapter, "Academia et Ludus Litterarius" [Academy and School], Pancorbo describes Penso's early years in Livorno, where he focused on the family business and held various religious positions within the Sephardic community. Later, motivated by a personal interest in the local culture of the city, he resumed his literary activity which had initially been forged in models of the Spanish Golden Age works. Through translations and discussions in literary sessions he took an interest in works of Italian authors. During this period, he began his interaction with Italian academies such as the *Accademia degli Incogniti* [Academy of the Unknowns] in Venice. His contact with this circle of *litterati* led Penso to found the *Academia de los Sitibundos* [Academy of the Thirsty] in Livorno. This initiative permitted him to enrich and combine his knowledge in Spanish Baroque literature with late Renaissance ideas and influences. The speeches, written during his time in this institution, were religious texts in the form of panegyrics, some dedicated to non-Jewish figures in the European economic-political environment as well as profane pieces presenting questions to be solved by logical foundations and exposed through brilliant rhetorical constructions by Italian authors. Penso's translations of Italian writers were compiled in his work, *Ideas posibles* [Possible ideas], published in Amsterdam in 1692, one year before his death. The text served as an introduction of readings and commentary of classical authors, Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian, previously unknown by the Sephardic academic circles of the city. Penso's return to Amsterdam in 1682 influenced the development of a new rhetoric alternative to the existing *Academia del Temor Divino* [Academy of the Divine Fear] founded by Miguel de Barrios in 1677, which would have been founded after the *Sitibundos* of Livorno. Penso's contribution permitted the discovery of texts by Italian Sephardic scholars such as Judah Moscow Leato, and Saul Levi Morteira, offering "a fresh air that opened the possibility of leaving the narrow and uncomfortable boxes that formed the walls of the rhetoric inherited from the Hispanic tradition" (50). The disappearance of *Academia del Temor Divino* originated the *Academia de los Floridos* [Academy of the Selects] in 1685, in which Penso participated actively and from which twenty-four speeches Penso delivered are preserved today.

In chapter three, "Iudaica Rhetorica, sive de ratione educandi" [Jewish Rhetoric, on the Art of Education], Pancorbo turns to explaining the origins of rhetorical texts written by Penso. Without leaving aside the Hispanic sermonary tradition, Penso aimed to forge a cultural and multilingual connection of sources in his writings including Spanish and Portuguese authors, and Italian Jewish scholars such as Judah Moscato and León (Judah Aryeh) of Modena. Among the production of Penso's rhetorical works are exegetic sermons with a didactic purpose. The incorporations made by the author are the insertion of entertainment features drawn from classical rhetoric, combining the classic prosopopoeia and the epistle genre of the Ovidian tradition without breaking the barriers of heterodoxy (91). The result was his book *Ideas posibles* published in 1692, the same year of Penso's death, which marked the end of his intercultural literary activity which had begun in the early 1670s. The text gathered six translations written by Penso inspired by model authors he read and emulated, adapting the themes and content to the cultural and religious background of his readers and offering an alternative to the rhetorical resources used by Penso's colleagues in Amsterdam.

In the final chapter, "De autos, comedias, novelas y diálogos" [On *Autos*, Comedies, Novels and Dialogues], Pancorbo offers new hypotheses about the cultural influence of the Spanish Golden Century narrative and Italian tradition as the main literary frameworks of Penso's work. References to Spanish authors are appreciated in his first work *'Asire ha-Tikvah* or *Prisioneros de la Esperanza* [Prisoners of Hope]. The text, written in 1667, three years after Penso's move to Livorno, was later published in Amsterdam in 1673 and portrays a moral-allegorical drama written in Hebrew under the pattern of the Spanish Golden Age *auto sacramental*, short drama representations on the mystery of the Eucharist. The play serves as an example of the "process of adapting and reformulating sacramental *autos* to the moral needs of Amsterdam's Sephardic culture" by presenting a playful but doctrinal tone bringing readers of his community closer to the path of true Judaism (123). To do so, Penso incorporates rhetorical and literary techniques from Calderón de la Barca and Lope de Vega, whose works frequently circulated among Sephardic readers, but he divides the play in three parts instead of one and omits the term 'sermon' commonly used in these works to diffuse the Christian content and bond this genre embodied. In 1683, he published *Rumbos peligrosos* [Dangerous Paths], a collection of three short novels inspired by the *Novelas Ejemplares* [Exemplary novels] of Cervantes and Lope de Vega.

Again, Penso includes variations that do not fully fit the unit of time and structure of the Spanish Golden Age novels, presenting his own technical, thematic and stylistic variation approaches. In order to avoid problems of censorship within his community, he published his work under his Christian name, Joseph de Vega, and changed the place of publication from Amsterdam to Antwerp (127).

Pancorbo dedicates the last pages of the chapter to analyzing Penso's best-known work, *Confusion of Confusions* (1687-88), written under economic stress Penso experienced due to fraudulent financial transactions. Pancorbo argues that while the nature of the work was intended for commercial purposes, it is the first time that Penso combined, in a single text, the classical, religious, Spanish and Italian sources in a novel manner, again using his Christian name to attract a wider audience and avoid censorship. The play consists of four dialogues between three interlocutors – a sharp philosopher, a discreet merchant and an erudite shareholder – in an unspecified place, probably a public room or park. The combination of characters allows Penso to exercise various types of didactic, controversial and argumentative dialogues drawn from multiple literary sources. The work's title has led to several interpretations related to external factors surrounding Penso's social life, including the 1687 Stock Exchange collapse and the impact of false Messianism led by Sabbatai Zevi in 1666. Pancorbo argues again the influence of Spanish author Calderón de la Barca and the allegorical names of some of his works such as *La dama duende* [The Phantom Lady], or *La vida es sueño* [Life is a Dream] as the motif for the title chosen by Penso. In terms of content and style there are references from figures of the Italian Renaissance such as Giulio Cesare Scaligero, philosophical quotes by philosopher Emanuel Tesauro and speeches by Giovan Francesco Loredano of the Venetian academy. The use of these sources allows to conceive the text not as a fictional autobiography but as an innovative work where the author sought originality and exploration of literary boundaries (162).

The result of this work permits an in-depth exploration from a multidisciplinary perspective of the literary production of one of the most important writers of the European Sephardi Baroque. Joseph Penso embodies the features of an intermediary author of cultures who nurtured and combined various literary traditions acquired in the Sephardic communities of Amsterdam and Livorno: Spanish Golden Age literature, Talmudic and Torah studies, late Renaissance Italian authors, classical rhetoric, and economics, among others. Pancorbo's extensive study of Penso's literary career helps readers understand the process of interculturality in the Jewish community of seventeenth-century Amsterdam in search of a new sense of religious, cultural and social identity.

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