

# Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies

---

2009

---

Volume 10



**A Journal published by the  
Institute of Anglo-Italian Studies  
University of Malta**

**General Editor: Peter Vassallo**

***Volume Editor: Patricia Ellul-Micallef***



UNIVERSITY  
OF MALTA

FACULTY OF ARTS  
LIBRARY

---

Donated by

*Peter Venzoni*

---



JOURNAL OF ANGLO-ITALIAN STUDIES

Journal  
of  
Anglo-Italian  
Studies

---

2009

---

Volume 10

A Journal published by the  
Institute of Anglo-Italian Studies, University of Malta



**General Editor: Peter Vassallo**

***Volume Editor: Patricia Ellul-Micallef***

First published by Malta University Publishing Ltd. in 2009.

*Email:* mupl@muhc.com.mt

Printed by Progress Press Ltd.

© University of Malta - on behalf of the individual authors.

Typeset and Page Layout by Patricia Ellul-Micallef.

ISSN 1560-2168

All rights reserved; no part of this publication may be reproduced stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior written permission of the Publishers. This book may not be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise disposed of by way of trade in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published without the prior consent of the Publishers.

*From the Editor*

The essays in this volume were delivered as papers at the 6th International Conference on *Britain and Italy: Literary and Cultural Relations* which was held at the University of Malta in September 2008 and jointly convened by Professors Peter Vassallo and Gloria Lauri-Lucente of the Institute of Anglo-Italian Studies, in collaboration with the British Council.

## **Advisory Editorial Board**

Piero Boitani (*University of Rome*)

Peter Brand (*University of Edinburgh*)

Lilla Crisafulli (*University of Bologna*)

David Farley-Hills (*University of Swansea*)

John Gatt Rutter (*La Trobe University*)

Gloria Lauri-Lucente (*University of Malta*)

Francesco Marroni (*University of Pescara*)

Sergio Rossi (*University of Milan*)

Corinna Salvadori Lonergan (*Trinity College, Dublin*)

Valeria Tinkler Villani (*University of Leiden*)

John Woodhouse (*Magdalen College, Oxford*)



## CONTENTS

Romantic 'Dantism,' Travel, Visions and Exile: Byron, Ugo Foscolo and Henry Francis Cary <i>Susan Oliver</i> .....	1
'Admirable for Conciseness and Vigour': Dante and Romantic Epic <i>Michael O'Neill</i> .....	15
John Keats on the Appian Way <i>Nicholas Roe</i> .....	29
'Under Italian skies,' The 6 <sup>th</sup> Duke of Devonshire, Canova and the formation of the Sculpture Gallery at Chatsworth House <i>Alison Yarrington</i> .....	41
Joseph Severn and the establishment of the British Academy in Rome <i>Sue Brown</i> .....	63
'Soft Bastard Latin': Byron and the Attractions of Italian <i>Timothy Webb</i> .....	73
Lady Morgan and Thomas Moore: Irish Perceptions of Italy and the Uses of National Images in the Nineteenth Century <i>Donatella Abbate Badin</i> .....	101
The Italianate Aspect of the Pre-Raphaelite Journal <i>The Germ</i> <i>Valeria Tinkler-Villani</i> .....	113
E.M. Forster, John Ruskin and the 'pernicious charm' of Italy <i>Peter Vassallo</i> .....	125
Anna Banti and Virginia Woolf: A Grammar of Responsibility <i>Lucia Boldrini</i> .....	135
Robert Browning and Enrico Nencioni: A Story of Friendship and Devotion <i>Simonetta Berbeglia</i> .....	151
D'Annunzio as a Reader and Translator of Browning via Shelley <i>Angelo Righetti</i> .....	161
T.S. Eliot and Eugenio Montale: 'Similar Flowers on Distant Branches?' <i>Gloria Lauri-Lucente</i> .....	173

'Translating Style': Tim Parks and the Tradition of Anglo-Italian Literary Relations

*Ivan Callus*..... 189

'I am Montalbano / Montalbano sono': Fluency and Cultural Difference in Translating Andrea Camilleri's Fiction

*Saverio Tomaiuolo*..... 201

## Romantic ‘Dantism,’ Travel, Visions and Exile: Byron, Ugo Foscolo and Henry Francis Cary

*Susan Oliver*

‘Europe? What Europe means to me? [. . .] Increasing numbers of its citizens and adherents will understand themselves as émigrés, exiles, and foreigners.’

*Susan Sontag, ‘The Idea of Europe (One more Elegy)’<sup>1</sup>*

It may seem incongruous to introduce an essay on Romantic Dantism with an epigraph from a twenty-first century collection of essays by Susan Sontag, but the relevance of her words should soon become clear. Sontag’s concern is with population movements across cultural, geographical or political borders, and with forms of self-knowledge that develop out of exile and strangeness. She traces how displacement can give rise to anxieties based on fissures in intercultural understanding, exploring how those anxieties in turn distort channels of communication. The essence of her argument transcends any discreet specificity of time and connects with concerns confronted by Romantic writers, two hundred years earlier. Human beings attempt to understand what is obscure through reference to what is familiar, identifying with what appears to be consistent with their own values and displacing that which threatens those values.

Europe in the early nineteenth century saw population migration and the shifting of national borders on a scale that had not been witnessed for several centuries, largely due to war and the effects of revolution. At the same time, an increased literary fascination with Dante’s *Divina Commedia* occurred, for reasons that I shall argue can be connected to travel and population movement. Whereas British Romantic Dantism has usually been addressed in terms of poetry and the Romantic visionary imagination, I want to think about the ways in which Romantic writers sought to make connections between Dante’s early-fourteenth-century poetry and the concerns of early-nineteenth-century readers about cultural instability. It is not my intention to focus on the fidelity to the original of translations and editions of the *Commedia*, but rather to consider the

---

1 Susan Sontag, *Where the Stress Falls: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 289.

wider cultural poetics of the phenomenon of 'Dantism' and the visions of Anglo-Italian relations that it inspired in writers and readers.

Some definitions should help to clarify a framework for my argument. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the verb to 'Dantize' as meaning 'to imitate Dante', and it cites the first usage of that word in English as occurring as late as 1764 in the annual account of books in the *Annual Register*.<sup>2</sup> As Ralph Pite points out in his influential *The Circle of our Vision: Dante's Presence in English Romantic Poetry*, the Scottish poet Thomas Campbell 'sardonically' referred to 'Dantists' less than three years before his own death in his *Life and Times of Petrarch* (1841) by noting that the epithet had acquired pejorative overtones in the immediately post-Waterloo years.<sup>3</sup> Campbell states that some libertarian intellectuals preferred Dante over Petrarch because the earlier poet was regarded to have written critically of authoritarianism from a position of exile outside of such a system, his renewed popularity (much of which derived from Henry Francis Cary's translation) evincing a 're-awakened spirit of liberty' that was not perceived to be present in the Platonism and mysticism of Petrarch.<sup>4</sup> Such interpretations of the fashion for Italian poetry are premised upon visionary stances that tend either towards material ideologies or aesthetic transcendentalism, refusing to admit any meaningful compromise: the reader is presumed to side either with a Petrarchan lyrical abstraction or with a Dantean narrative of physical loss, hope and redemption. Campbell's assertion falls when it is considered with regard to Byron's work, where a libertarian poet not only holds Dante and Petrarch, but Ariosto, Tasso, Pulci and Boiardo in similar esteem (Walter Scott, who was no radical but Byron's political opposite and literary admirer, similarly read and venerated all of these poets). Investigations of Dantism as a visionary mode representative of a liberal zeitgeist, or 'spirit of the age,' reveal a Europeanist context concerned with what was defined as Dantean principles.<sup>5</sup> Liberal Europeanism and its wider cosmopolitan manifestation, furthermore, existed alongside a literary fashion for travel writing and exploration, at a time when poetry

2 OED online: 'Acct. of Bks. in Ann. Reg. 272/2 Michael Angelo[. . .] is not ashamed, in some of his compositions, to dantize.'

3 Ralph Pite, *The Circle of our Vision: Dante's Presence in English Romantic Poetry* (Oxford. Clarendon, 1994), 47.

4 Thomas Campbell, *Life and Times of Petrarch* (2nd ed. 1843), quoted in Pite, 47.

5 See Herder, Hegel and Hölderlin for German accounts of 'zeitgeist' and William Hazlitt's *The Spirit of the Age* for a British view of liberal intellectualism.

was still the dominant genre in England but when prose travel writing was commanding an increasingly significant market. To put public interest in travel literature into perspective, almost one third of the essays published in the leading British periodicals the *Edinburgh Review* and *Quarterly Review* between 1802 and 1820 were reviews of writing about travel, of one kind or another.<sup>6</sup>

The main English-language study of Dante's presence in British Romantic writing remains Pite's *The Circle of Our Vision*. That study pays close attention to selected works by Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Byron. Pite focusses on evidence that Coleridge's readings of Dante during his 1804-06 residence in Malta (which included the complete *Commedia* and the canzone 'Tre donne al cor mi son venute') resurfaced in a series of essays that he later included in his short-lived periodical *The Friend* (published in 1809 -1810). Discovering a plethora of incidental and ornamental allusions rather than a body of explicit references or quotations, he identifies a re-ordering of symbolic meaning in Coleridge's imagination, which he attributes to the readings of Dante, and which infuses the entire project of *The Friend* from editorial structuring, to punctuation and the intellectual content of individual essays. I want to extend that argument for the purpose of the present essay, contending that the context of travel and of being away from his home nation at the time of that reading of Dante, was not only instrumental in a symbolic reordering of Coleridge's imagination, but can be seen as instrumental to the imagination of other writers from the Romantic period. Indeed, the present paper is not concerned with Coleridge, but will take the idea of a Dantean permeation of the Romantic imagination as a basis for re-considering Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Prophecy of Dante*, and will argue for a contextualized reading of Ugo Foscolo's reviews for the *Edinburgh Review* of two editions of the *Commedia*.

Byron and Foscolo were travellers who each became émigrés, and both are known for their Anglo-Italian cultural experiences. They journeyed in opposite directions from one another across Europe during

---

6 See William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 2004), for a study of the book trade in Romantic period Britain. For discussions of travel writing in the periodical press see Massimiliano Demata 'Prejudiced Knowledge: Travel Writing in the *Edinburgh Review*,' in *British Romanticism and the Edinburgh Review: Bi-Centenary Essays* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002), and Susan Oliver, "'Observations on . . .'" Europe and Europeanism in the *Edinburgh Review* 1802-19,' forthcoming in *Nineteenth-Century Studies*.

the British mid-Regency period, with their paths of flight across the English Channel almost crossing either side of the year of the Battle of Waterloo. Foscolo (who was born in Greece and served in the French Army before his flight to England) travelled to Britain in 1814, whilst Byron left England in 1816 to live in Venice, Ravenna, Pisa, and Genoa before embarking on the ill-fated mission to Missolonghi in Greece that led to his death in 1824. Foscolo's literary reputation was well established in Italy before he came to Britain: his poetry, including the critique of Napoleon's attempt to ban memorialized burial, *Dei Sepolchri*, and prose fiction that culminated in the epistolary narrative of frustrated revolutionary spirit, *Le ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis*, were supplemented by work as a journalist. Byron 'awoke to find himself famous' (the words are his own) in March 1812 when the first two cantos of his poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage: a Romaunt* were published to literary and popular acclaim. Conservative British reviewers responded to *Childe Harold* with suspicion, not least because the archaic nature of the title and the specificity of the subtitle - *a Romaunt* - together with the poet's choice of Spenserian stanzas, promised a poem consistent with nineteenth-century revivals of Italian, French and British Romance traditions that endorsed British military involvement in Europe. Byron confounded those expectations with a hybrid poem that spliced together topographical writing, exploration that digressed beyond known routes of travel and familiar territories, war reportage and social satire, all of which encouraged readers to question the authority of poetic conventions as agencies for underpinning government policy. Digressing from the established routes of the Grand Tour, the fictitious Harold becomes a guide who encourages readers to empathize with what the *Anti-Jacobin Review* deplored as his 'wandering over the world, without any fixed object.'<sup>7</sup> At the end of canto two, Harold is dismayed that he must return to England, leaving his readers in no doubt of his preferred desire to remain in the shifting realms of self-discovery:

'Then must I plunge again into the crowd,  
And follow all that Peace disdains to seek?  
Where Revel calls, and Laughter, vainly loud,  
False to the heart, distorts the hollow cheek,  
To leave the flagging spirit doubly weak!'

(*Childe Harold* 2:XCVII)

---

<sup>7</sup> *Anti-Jacobin Review* (August 1812), 344.

*Childe Harold* is not often discussed in studies of Byron's Dantism, except insofar as it is a precursor to the poet's *Francesca of Rimini* translation, *The Prophecy of Dante*, and the often-identified Dantean passages in *Don Juan*. Yet Henry Fuseli was inspired by *Childe Harold* to make explicit comparisons between Byron's troubled hero and Dante, seeing in each, as Pite notes, 'a troubled and responsive sensibility, withstanding a world whose horrors vex him and whose evils cannot be alleviated.'<sup>8</sup> The importance of travel as a conduit to confronting horror and evil as human failings emerges in *Childe Harold* through a series of locations that disclose the hellish realities of the Peninsular War, the otherness of inland Albania, and the topical matter of Greece's occupation by the Ottomans, to the point of undermining familiar British images of a Europe rooted in Romance literature. Indeed, Byron's satirical take on modern Romance and standard tour literature discloses the dark side of his home nation and of that part of the self that holds such a place in uncritical affection. Chloe Chard has argued that the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century 'device of constructing binary, symmetrical oppositions between the familiar and the foreign' functions as a means of 'translating foreignness' into a discourse that ultimately empowers familiarity. Such an understanding of tour and travel rhetoric is particularly helpful in summarizing the kind of late Enlightenment rationalization against which Byron reacted.<sup>9</sup>

It is not until canto four of *Childe Harold*, published in 1818, that Byron explicitly mentions Dante, admonishing the culture that banished the poet: 'Ungrateful Florence! Dante sleeps afar, / Like Scipio, buried by the upbraiding shore' (LVII). Here, Byron emphasizes the theme of exile that has run through the entire poem in the form of Harold's motivation for travel, identifying his hero with Dante as men who are foreign to one another by nationality but familiar because poets in exile. Difference and familiarity collapse into a single paradigm of understanding that challenges the moral legitimacy of political authority (Florence fails to recognize its ingratitude and is upbraided by Ravenna).

Canto four begins with Harold - or perhaps Byron, for it is notoriously all but impossible to tell the two apart by this point in the poem - standing 'in Venice on the Bridge of Sighs, / A palace and a prison on

---

8 Pite, 44.

9 Chloe Chard, *Pleasure and Guilt on the Grand Tour* (Manchester: Manchester U.P., 1988), 40.

each hand,' as a vision appears before him: 'I saw from out the wave her structures rise / As from the stroke of the enchanter's wand' (3:IV). The reality of the Palazzo Ducale is alluded to, with its damp dungeons and scorching 'leads' sandwiching the sumptuous State rooms, but the image of the poet standing on a bridge, midway between a hell of punishment and despair and the comfort of the Doge's palace bears more rigorous enquiry concerned with hell, purgatory, and heaven and the ways in which travel inspires chains of association: in this instance, such associations urge a critique of the moral integrity of political cultures, with Venice becoming figurative as well as actual. The imagined enchanter reveals a discreet material reality (the decaying splendour of Venice) that is known to readers through countless late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century tour narratives, but also makes known a vision of past, present and future that faze into one another like a secular version of the biblical revelation. Byron's vision leads to empathetic solidarity with Dante's recollection in 'Paradiso' of how 'embolden'd,' he passed on in his travels until his view 'Hover'd the brink of dread infinitude' (*Paradiso*, XXXIII:76). Pantheistically, Byron imagines the eternity of Paradise in the ocean, writing his own topography of infinitude in a surge of hyperbolic imagery that the traveller and reader of travelogues would understand:<sup>10</sup>

'Thou glorious mirror, where the Almighty's form  
Glasses itself in tempests; in all time,  
Calm or convulsed - in breeze, or gale, or storm,  
Icing the pole, or in the torrid clime  
Dark-heaving; - boundless, endless, and sublime -  
The image of Eternity.'

(CLXXXIII)

The stanzas that end canto four, thereby concluding *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, imply that the poet can find only a limited peace, and then only by permanently distancing himself from the flawed society of man: he declares 'My task is done - my song hath ceased - my theme / Has died into an echo; it is fit / The spell should break of this protracted dream' (CLXXXV). Addressing readers who have 'traced the Pilgrim to the scene / Which is his last,' he bids them Farewell, leaving them to work out the moral of the tale and Harold to accept that he must bear his pain: 'with

10 See Chard for a detailed study of Grand Tour rhetoric and descriptive discourses of topography, including the use of hyperbole.

him alone may rest the pain, / If such there were - with you, the moral of his strain' (CLXXXVI). Unlike Dante in the *Commedia*, Harold / Byron does not return to human society, and in common with Dante the poet, he bears the pain of exile to his end.

*Childe Harold's* imagery conveys cultural observations by the traveller that put Byron's *Prophecy of Dante*, published in 1823, into perspective: both poems are deeply concerned with revolution, liberty and Byron's anguished desire to discover a newer, less punitive society. *The Prophecy* was written in response to Byron's readings of the *Commedia*, and was begun whilst the poet - by this point in his life an émigré from Britain living in Italy - was staying at Ravenna, where he visited the Florentine poet's tomb. Indeed, the preface to the *Prophecy* locates the poem in a context of travel premised upon a tour of the tombs of dead poets:

'In the course of a visit to the city of Ravenna in the summer of 1819, it was suggested to the author that having composed something on the subject of Tasso's confinement, he should do the same on Dante's exile, — the tomb of the poet forming one of the principal objects of interest in that city, both to the native and to the stranger.' (*Prophecy*, 'preface')

Whether the *Prophecy* is addressed to Italian readers (as its text purports, although it is written in English) or to English readers (Byron's expressed intention) is a good question. The preface shows Byron undermining binary distinctions of self and otherness, and of nationality, to arrive at a vision which posits all readers as 'travellers' and echoes the end of *Childe Harold*: 'But I perceive that I am deviating into an address to the Italian reader, when my business is with the English one; and be there few or many, I must take my leave of both.' The assimilation of the traveller with the foreign subject is revolutionary, for it removes the preserve of distance that is a feature of picturesque modes of viewing and a means of cultural self-preservation for the British nineteenth-century tourist. Byron's letters and Ravenna journal display his excitement in these years over the formation and co-ordination of factions that would lead to the mid-century *Risorgimento*. Establishing a dialogue between foreign, northern European observers, he reacts indignantly to Schlegel's claim that 'at no time has the greatest and most national of all Italian poets ever been much the favourite of his countrymen,' writing in his Ravenna journal on 29th January 1821, 'Tis false! There have been more editors and

commentators (and imitators, ultimately) of Dante than of all their poets put together. *Not* a favourite! Why, they talk Dante—write Dante—and think and dream Dante at this moment (1821) to an excess, which would be ridiculous, but that he deserves it.<sup>11</sup> Four months earlier, on September 7, 1820, Byron had written to his publisher John Murray urging him to publish his *Prophecy of Dante*, making explicit links between Dantism and the revolutionary cause. That tone of his letter - in which he refers to similar, earlier correspondence - is representative of a torrent of letters sent by Byron to Murray between 1820 and 1823 imploring the publisher not to miss the importance of the moment:

'My last letters will have taught you to expect an explosion here — it was primed and loaded — but they hesitated [. . .] One of our Cities shirked from the league. — I cannot write more at large — for a thousand reasons — Our "*puir hill folk*" offered to strike — and to raise the first banner. But Bologna paused — and now 'tis Autumn and the season half over [. . .] If you want to publish the Prophecy of Dante — you will never have a better time.'<sup>12</sup>

*The Prophecy*, written in terza rima and using a first person narrative that purports to be the voice of Dante, takes the form of a vision of Italy's future, received in the years following the composition of the *Commedia*. The opening lines echo the sentiments referred to earlier at the end of *Childe Harold* canto two, where the traveller who has been changed by his experiences is loathe to end his voyage of discovery and re-entry into familiar society: 'Once more in man's frail world! Which I had left / So long 'twas forgotten; and I feel the weight of clay again' (*Prophecy*, 1-2). Byron's Dante, who here bears a remarkable similarity to Harold, renders almost tangible the pain that accompanies a realization that strangeness, and not merely the familiarity of the known, is found deep within the self. He stresses that exile has not released him from his concerns about the place that is home: 'an exile [is] the saddest of all prisoners, / who has the whole world for a dungeon strong, / Seas, mountains, and the horizon's verge for bars [. . .] I may not overleap the eternal bar / Built up between us' (131-33).

11 *Byron's Letters and Journals*, Leslie A. Marchand (ed.) 12 vols. (London. J. Murray, 1973-1982), VII, 39-40.

12 *BLJ*, 7: 172.

Ugo Foscolo's positive comments on *The Prophecy of Dante* were sent to Byron in Ravenna in 1821 by John Murray, and Byron replied expressing his gratitude for the approbation. Foscolo had gained public acclaim in Britain for his knowledge of Dante, based on his work as a critical essayist, and I want now to consider the part he played in establishing some commonplaces of British Romantic Dantean visions. Under commission from Francis Jeffrey, editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, Foscolo wrote an essay that became seminal to the history of the British reception of Dante. That essay, published in the February 1818 *Edinburgh*, was a review of two editions of the *Divina Commedia*: one was in Italian with a commentary by Nicola Giosafatte Biagioli, published in Paris, and the other was the translation into English by Henry Francis Cary that became the most influential text in British nineteenth-century reception of the *Commedia*. Foscolo's enthusiastic review of Cary's *The Vision; or, Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise of Dante Alighieri*, combined with Coleridge's sanction of the same text in a lecture to the Royal Academy in 1819, ensured Cary's success. (Keats, who is better known for his admiration of Chapman's Homer, wrote that he carried Cary's translation in his knapsack.) In order fully to establish the European context within which Foscolo was working, it is important to appreciate that he wrote his essay in French, because he feared misrepresentation at the hands of insufficiently skilled translators of Italian. The elements of translation, with its cultural shifts, adds weight to the European - rather than nationalistic - perspective of the review. If the process seems cumbersome, the explanation says much about British linguistic and reading habits during the Regency period: French remained the *lingua franca* of literary Europe, although tastes in Britain were changing to include a greater working knowledge of German, Italian and Scandinavian languages.<sup>13</sup> I want now to look at how Foscolo's review established common ground and cultural relevance between Dante's poem and readers in Britain who lacked a knowledge of Italian, but who 'understood' Italy in terms of classical history and Grand tourism. The following two extracts from the review capture the style and symbolic nature of the essay:

---

13 *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* established new ground by publishing translations of European texts. The May 1818 number included an extract from Schiller's *Cassandra*, and the July number incorporated original texts and translations of short poems by Schiller, Klopstock and Körner. John Gibson Lockhart's and R.P. Gillies' interests led to a series of published parallel texts, translations and articles on the works of Northern European, and in particular, on German and Scandinavian authors.

'The poem of Dante is like an immense forest, venerable for its antiquity, and astonishing by the growth of trees which seem to have sprung up at once to their gigantic height by the force of nature, aided by *some unknown art*. It is a forest, curious from the extensive regions which it hides, but frightful from its darkness and its labyrinths.'

'Readers, especially foreign readers, believe, on the faith of the commentators, that they have seen the whole; like the readers of modern travels, who fancy that they know a country from the descriptions of those who have run through it with a road-book and a dictionary.'

These passages posit a clear, Romantic framework within which to examine early-nineteenth century Dantism. Foscolo employs graphic imagery that aligns his writing with the visual qualities of the *Commedia* and that also makes the leap forwards to invoke Romantic tropes of the natural world, sublime astonishment, mysterious agency, and public curiosity about foreign travel. The similes of exploration and astonishment are particularly relevant to the early nineteenth century, when accounts of natural discovery were being published on an unprecedented scale. Foscolo makes connections across time and space that identify with his audience's reading habits. The 'forests of enormous growth' of which he speaks, possibly produced by some 'unknown' art, and the roads, atlases and dictionaries all establish a way of talking about Dante's poetry that likens reading to discovery of strange lands. There is an echo of *Childe Harold's* simile of the enchanter at Venice, rendering known landscapes strangely unnatural and more compelling through art. Furthermore, the vision of an unsettling and overwhelming tree-scape that cautions against the platitudes of commonplace assumption, serves another rhetorical function: it lays bare human vanity as laziness and fanciful folly, and readers of the *Edinburgh* are unlikely to have wanted to identify themselves with those 'readers' that Foscolo admonishes as armchair tourists. The essay displays frustration that fancy and haste too easily eclipse the needs to think and write beyond one's linguistic and cultural experience; yet those latter needs had already emerged for Foscolo as paradigms of understanding rooted in his own experience as an

émigré. He implicitly asks whether readers can 'know' anything of the true nature of a work of literature (or, an aspiring traveller comprehend the marvellous strangeness of a foreign land) if enquiry is limited to the guidelines of familiar taxonomies. Notably, the extracts quoted above do not mention any human life, except that of the implied traveller, whereas the *Commedia* describes populated landscapes: Foscolo's traveller is depicted alone except for the guidance of the author.

The first third of the review is a critical history of commentaries to the *Commedia*, up to the moment of Biagioli's and Cary's editions. I do not want to dwell on that history, although it includes some interesting observations on the interpretive strategies of the Della Cruscan Academy, other than to observe how Foscolo argues that such commentaries comprise a narrative of overdetermination, in which the spirit of Dante's poem is constrained by the ideologies that constructed the commentators. Sounding remarkably like Byron in his rejection of cultural insularity and institutionalized codes of behaviour, Foscolo notes that 'societies bound by institutions, often obliged to respect and sometimes to flatter governments and powerful individuals, can never display independence of mind, or possess the courage necessary for the exertion of genius.'<sup>14</sup> Like Byron, who mistrusted theology rather than the concept of a God, his position is that the *Commedia* is firstly a secular, humanist text with a theological frame narrative, rather than as many commentators saw it, a religious epic concerned with divine judgement and redemption. Salvation and the attainment of Paradise are, for Byron and Foscolo, a state of conscience deriving from remaining true to one's principles in the face of political corruption and oppression. Metaphors and similes of travel and of the traveller's guide in Foscolo's essay emphasize the need for readers to open their imaginations to visions that are unexpected. He comments that Cary 'discovers the will and the Power to do justice to his author' because he 'walks not unfrequently by the side of his master, and sometimes goes beyond him.' The metaphor is one of learning from a guide, but in ways that enable vision rather than restrict its potential. Amongst the passages that Foscolo selects to illustrate Cary's text are four lines from 'Purgatory' that again employ a simile of travel and visions of strangeness that impress themselves on the mind of the traveller:

---

14 *Edinburgh Review*, 29 (February 1818), 455.

‘As on their road  
 The thoughtful pilgrims, overtaking some  
 Not known unto them, turn to them, and look,  
 But stay not; thus approaching from behind,  
 They eyed us as they passed  
 A crowd of spirits, silent and devout.’

(*Purgatorio* XXIII, 14-19)<sup>15</sup>

The simile of ‘eying’ fellow travellers in passing, with a curiosity that hints at a common purpose (pilgrimage) whilst confessing an absence of mutual knowledge, could not be more different from those who run through a country with a road book and dictionary, seeing a series of pre-determined sights. After discussing Cary’s treatment of the two encounters in the *Commedia* that were most frequently the subject of Romantic writing, the ‘pathetic story of Francesca’ and ‘the unrivalled tale of Ugolino,’ Foscolo concludes that History has composed legends, but that in the case of the Dante’s ‘stories,’ they are ready ‘to emerge from obscurity with all their native charms and undiminished lustre.’ Stories - the tales that travellers are privileged to hear in strange realms - become the means of true enlightenment. Cary’s *Vision* is therefore approved as more than just an attempt to make a text available in a different language: Foscolo regarded it as reverential of the ‘native charms’ of Dante’s *Commedia* AND part of a European illumination of liberal-minded understanding.

This essay has used case studies from British and Italian Romantic writing to explore how exile and travel inform readings of Dante’s *Commedia*, and how the *Commedia* in turn informs the mind of the travelling or émigré writer. The aim has been to show how the reception of Dante in early-nineteenth century Britain can usefully be illumined by an understanding of the extent to which writers and readers were thinking about travel and narratives of exploration alongside translations of a work of literature that itself is concerned with journey and discovery. Dante emerges as a profoundly important influence on the Romantic imagination, as the mind attempts to make sense of what exile, foreignness and the idea of ‘home’ might mean in terms of belonging and displacement. The principles and thematic focus of the present study could usefully be applied to the work of other writers of the early nineteenth century, and it would be interesting to compare instances where a more prescriptive

---

<sup>15</sup> Cited in *ER* 29: 471.

approach is taken to Dante's work or Anglo-Italian literary relations. Such studies invite investigation and offer scope for further work on a topic that has been under-investigated in Romantic studies.

*University of Salford*



# ‘Admirable for Conciseness and Vigour’: Dante and Romantic Epic

*Michael O’Neill*

1

‘Onward he moved, I close his steps pursued’: the final line of the first canto of the *Inferno* (132) describes the pilgrim following Virgil, his guide.<sup>1</sup> It might also serve as an epigraph for the close pursuit of Dante in Romantic epic poetry. Even Wordsworth, who later in life (in 1824) was abruptly dismissive of a poet he had not read for many years, finding him on re-reading ‘tedious from many causes,’ concedes that ‘his style I used to think admirable for conciseness and vigour, without abruptness.’<sup>2</sup> Arguably, as a younger poet, Wordsworth, when seeking to imagine unascended heights of modern epic at the close of the Preface to *The Excursion*, offers what is, in effect, not only an allusion to Milton’s hymn to light at the start of Book III of *Paradise Lost* (where Milton is close in tone and temper to the *Paradiso*), but also a condensation of the final cantica:

*If such theme  
May sort with highest objects, then, dread Power,  
Whose gracious favour is the primal source  
Of all illumination, may my Life  
Express the image of a better life ... (99-103)<sup>3</sup>*

- 
- 1 Unless indicated otherwise, the English version of Dante used in this essay is the Cary translation popular with the Romantic poets, in *The Vision, Or Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise of Dante Alighieri*, trans. H. F. Cary (London: Oxford University Press, 1916). The Italian text is quoted from Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Text with Translation, in the Metre of the Original*, by G. L. Bickersteth (Oxford: Shakespeare Head, 1972). English and Italian titles of the three *cantichi* are supplied according to which text is quoted.
  - 2 Wordsworth, letter to W. S. Landor, 21 January 1824; quoted from facsimile and transcription in D. Bindman, S. Hebron, and M. O’Neill, *Dante Rediscovered* (Grasmere: Wordsworth Trust, 2007), 158-9.
  - 3 *The Excursion*, S Bushell, J. A. Butler, and M. C. Jaye (eds.), with the Assistance of D. Garcia (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

Milton addresses 'holy Light, offspring of Heav'n's first born' and asks, 'May I express thee unblamed' (*Paradise Lost*, II. 1, 3), where 'express' means 'represent by symbols' (*OED* v. 2). Wordsworth seems to borrow Milton's verb, but to mean by it 'reveal, betoken' (*OED* v. 3). He may also be recalling Dante's *principio loro* (*Paradiso*, I. 111), rendered by Cary, whose version of the *Paradiso* was published in the same year, 1814, that *The Excursion* appeared, as the 'primal source' (107). Both English poets are fascinated by the relationship between an ultimate origin and poetic 'expression,' and Wordsworth, like Milton, is drawn to the relationship between unity and multitude central in Dante. Operative in Dante, as Auerbach explains, is the Thomist doctrine that

no *one* species of created things can possibly achieve likeness to God. Accordingly a diversity of created things becomes necessary, in order that in their totality they may approach a perfect likeness to God.<sup>4</sup>

*The Excursion* is less clear than the *Commedia* about the 'source' of 'all illumination.' As its title suggests, it accommodates an excursive 'diversity' of stories and reflections, rarely involving a recognition of original glory, though much preoccupied by the semi-delusory 'Glory – beyond all glory ever seen' (III. 729) prompted in the Solitary by the French Revolution, but offering, at best, a misleading 'Confusion infinite of heaven and earth' (III. 730). And yet, in its conviction that there is a 'central peace, subsisting at the heart / Of endless agitation' (IV. 1140-1), *The Excursion* depicts a characteristically Wordsworthian intuition of near-mystical calm. Tellingly, this intuition is abstracted from the sense of divine agency found in Piccarda's famous utterance *la sua voluntade è nostra pace* (*Paradiso*, III. 85), translated by Cary as 'in his will is our tranquillity' (85), and Wordsworth's glimpses of any 'primal source / Of all illumination' are correspondingly fitful, by comparison with Dante's disciplined exploration of gradations and modes of light in the *Paradiso*.

On occasions, then, Dante returns to English Romantic epic like a flitting spectre. Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, that most haunting of unnamed brief epics, voyages on strange seas of thought and feeling that take in inferno, purgatory and, bewitchingly and in semi-hallucinatory mode, paradise. The purgatorial element hardly

4 E. Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. R. Manheim, intro. M. Dirda (1929; New York: New York Review of Books, 2007), 84.

needs illustration, as the mariner undergoes his lonely ordeal, and shades into the infernal. For more direct contact with Dante's *Inferno*, one might consider the stanza-engrossing simile of 'one that on a lonesome road / Doth walk in fear and dread' (446-7), deriving, very possibly, from the account in *Inferno*, XXI of glimpsing 'a devil black, / That running up advanced along the rock' (28-9): 'I turned myself, as one / Impatient to behold that which beheld / He needs must shun, whom sudden fear unmans, / That he his flight delays not for the view' (24-7).<sup>5</sup> In Coleridge, the turning of the verse mimics the compulsion to 'turn' and the greater power of fear that means that the lonesome walker 'turns no more his head, / Because he knows a frightful fiend / Doth close behind him tread' (449-51). In Dante, as translated by Cary, the pilgrim also 'turned' and the writing also relies on repetition, as 'beheld' echoes with 'sudden fear' 'behold.' Dante specifies a cause for the 'fear,' the devil tormenting the corrupt barterers in the fifth gulf of Malebolge; Coleridge does not. The Romantic poet's 'fear' extends beyond any immediate trigger to pervade the poem, an emotion that persists in the reader's mind after the Mariner's account.

For the quasi-hallucinations of paradise in *The Rime*, one might think of the description of the 'seraph-band;' 'each waved his hand:/ It was a heavenly sight! / They stood as signals to the land, / Each one a lovely light' (492-5).<sup>6</sup> In canto XXVIII of the *Paradiso*, Beatrice conducts Dante to the 'wondrous and angelic temple' (48) of the ninth heaven and identifies, amidst the 'circle of fire' (22) which they discern, 'seraphim and cherubim' (93). Again, there are differences. Dante's emphasis, via Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's *De Coelesti Hierarchia* (circa 5<sup>th</sup> century AD), is on the orderings and theological meanings of the sight, how blessedness springs from gazing 'Deeper into the truth' (100) of the 'Godhead' (97), a gaze 'wherein rest is / For every mind' (100-1). Coleridge's 'seraph-band' may bear witness to the Mariner's belief that the cosmos fulfils the opening sentence of the passage from

5 See J. L. Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu* (London. Picador, 1978), 480, for the suggestion of a specific echo and for the observation that a Dantescan parallel with the Coleridgean stanza had been noted, possibly by Seth B. Watson. This paragraph extends material in my essay, "'My Vision Quickening": Dante and Romantic Poetry', in *Dante Rediscovered*, 46.

6 Quoted from the 1817 version, in D. Wu (ed.), *Romanticism: An Anthology*, (3<sup>rd</sup> edn.) (Malden, MA. Blackwell, 2006).

Thomas Burnet which supplies the poem's epigraph and, translated from its seventeenth-century Latin, reads thus: 'I can easily believe that there are more invisible than visible beings in the universe.'<sup>7</sup> *The Rime* itself may make an attempt to 'describe to us,' to borrow words from Burnet's second questioning sentence, 'their families, ranks, affinities, differences, and functions.'<sup>8</sup> But the passage evoking the 'seraph-band' speaks more of the universe's mysteries than of its ultimate coherence. It speaks, too, of the Mariner's imagination, haunted by what evidently he needs to believe, an interlude in the overall drama of suffering, one that may hold out the promise of final beneficence – or may be a near-delusion.

Such Coleridgean adaptations of Dante suggest how the Romantics re-work Dante in their epical endeavours. For them, Dante's great epic obeys a medieval Catholic structure of belief with which their Protestant imaginations can sympathise only in maverick or revisionary ways. What is more sympathetic to them about Dante is the emphasis on the individual struggle towards understanding and the power of imagination displayed by the Italian poet in representing that struggle. At times, Romantic poets suggest that the most valuable aspect of Dante's poetry is its openness to being treated as non-epic. In *The Story of Rimini* Hunt scales down for his own purposes the *Commedia*'s typical epic episode of encounter. Such episodes of encounter lie at the heart of the *Commedia*, and their function and meaning have been beautifully illuminated by Erich Auerbach, who comments that, by contrast with 'this life,' in which 'the very intensity of life in the most vital moments makes self-awareness difficult and renders a true encounter almost impossible,' the dead in Dante 'are the truly living': he continues thus:

though the concrete data of their lives and the atmosphere of their personalities are drawn from their former existences on earth, they manifest them here with a completeness, a concentration, an actuality, which they seldom achieved through their term on earth and assuredly never revealed to anyone else. And so it is that Dante finds them .... the mere fact of seeing and recognizing one another reaches into the deepest foundations of human feeling and creates images of unparalleled poetic force and richness.<sup>9</sup>

---

7 Wu, 694.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Auerbach, 134, 134-5.

Each shade who confronts Dante displays his *habitus*, in Auerbach's Thomist-derived term, '*habitus*' being 'the residuum in man's soul of his soul's history.'<sup>10</sup> Dante's capacity to plumb 'the deepest foundations of human feeling' in such episodes and, in doing so, to create 'images of unparalleled poetic force and richness' is responsible for the epic originality of his work. An affecting example is that of Statius, just after he has completed the end of his purgatorial purification, meeting Dante and Virgil in *Purgatorio*, XXI. Not realising that Virgil is in front of him, he expresses his desire to have lived when Virgil did. The pilgrim, in a touchingly funny moment of human drama, gives the game away by an involuntary smile. Dante enacts, with 'unparalleled' immediacy, the process of a coming together of three poets from different times, a triune meeting resonant with suggestions about the nature of poetic tradition.

The Romantics stage their own versions of an encounter with a poetic master in their many beckonings towards or arguments with Dante. It is the latter that takes place in Hunt's jauntily serious and provocative romances. Hunt engages in implicit ideological dispute with Dante since he reads the Francesca and Paolo episode as showing 'the whole melancholy absurdity of Dante's theology, in spite of itself, falling to nothing before one genuine impulse of the affections.'<sup>11</sup> The writing, for all and by way of its chirpy 'Cockneyfication of Dante,' as I have described it elsewhere,<sup>12</sup> loads the episode with its own weight and meaning: the poem alerts our attention less to the role of choice in preparing irrevocable damnation than to the overwhelming value of the heart's best impulses. Hunt's success in the poem is to render these impulses in a style that captures with finesse the way in which 'conscious' (3. 385) embarrassment passes into passionate surrender.

*The Story of Rimini* positively refutes the values of epic; its partiality is for the localised energies of everyday life, the desires and instincts that compose quotidian existence, and it makes its own quirkily principled swerve away from the grand narrative of heroic quest. Heroism, for Hunt, lies in trusting the heart. But as a spin-off from Dantescan epic, it suggests the hold over the Romantic poetic imagination of a poem admirable for 'conciseness and vigour.' By contrast, *Don Juan*, however

---

10 *Ibid.*, 85.

11 *Poetical Works: 1801-1821*, J. Strachan (ed.), vol. V of *The Selected Writings of Leigh Hunt* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003).

12 "My Vision Quickening," 54.

mock-seriously, presents itself as an epic ('My poem's epic, and is meant to be / Divided in twelve books', I. 200. 1593-4)<sup>13</sup> and again as epic satire ('this Epic Satire,' XIV. 99. 790). Byron does not mention Dante when he asserts - 'A panorama view of hell's in training, / After the style of Virgil and of Homer, / So that my name of Epic's a misnomer' (I. 200. 1598-1600) - but he alludes to the Paolo and Francesca passage at the climactic moment in the Juan and Julia episode in canto 1, one that is central to his view of reality as involving endless struggles between spirit and flesh, where the victory of the latter might ultimately represent a desperate triumph for the former: here Julia shuns religious sublimations for the desire to see Juan: 'No! I'm afraid,' Byron the narrator comments wryly, 'That night the Virgin was no further pray'd' (I. 76. 607-8), that last line trailing an allusion to the moment in Dante's *Inferno* when Paolo and Francesca, having kissed, do not read any more ('In its leaves that day / We read no more,' *Hell*, V. 133-4). Although the allusion may seem glancing, Byron brings into play all the dynamics of judgement and sympathy associated with the Francesca episode.<sup>14</sup>

Elsewhere Dante's grim and yet exultant journey provide Byron with metaphors. But, unlike Dante, Byron's quest is less ordered progress than oceanic rise and fall. Canto X, gateway to the retrospective English cantos of his 'Epic Satire,' marks one of the most broodingly reflective moments in *Don Juan*, and it is both unsurprising and affecting that Dantescan notes are struck at crucial stages. Indeed, the poetry's tangled motives come to the fore in the pull towards and recoil from 'recollection' in this stanza, a stanza that is the more arresting for having only a tenuous relationship with what precedes it (Byron appears to be saying he 'won't describe' (X. 28. 217) an 'outward show of Scarlet' (X. 26. 208)):

And this same state we won't describe: we could  
 Perhaps from hearsay, or from recollection;  
 But getting nigh grim Dante's 'obscure wood,'  
 That horrid equinox, that hateful section  
 Of human years, that half-way house, that rude  
 Hut, whence wise travellers drive with circumspection

13 Unless indicated otherwise, Byron is quoted from the Oxford Authors edition, J. J. McGann (ed.) (Oxford. Oxford University Press, 1986).

14 See Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works* J. J. McGann (ed.), vol. IV (Oxford. Oxford University Press, 1986) for Byron's two versions of the Francesca episode. A relevant discussion may be found in "My Vision Quickening," 53.

Life's sad post-horses o'er the dreary frontier  
 Of age, and looking back to youth, give *one* tear; –  
 I won't describe ... (X. 26-7. 209-17)

As in canto VI, when he says of Dudù that she said

She dreamed a dream, of walking in a wood –  
 A 'wood obscure' like that where Dante found  
 Himself in at the age when all grow good (75. 594-6),

Byron opens with a reference to Dante's *selva oscura* (*Inferno*, 1. 2), *oscura* again rendered more literally by him than by Cary who uses 'gloomy' (*Hell*, 1. 2), and proceeds to evolve a series of images for the uncertainty of life's midway point. He does in order to suggest the ineffectuality of description, and Dante serves as a vantage-point from which spiritual considerations, however ironised, loom menacingly into view. Byron's 'half-way house' condition is mirrored in his stylistic mimicry of being beset by impulses: he might be said to make his own inimitable synthesis out of accents that recall not only Dante but also the Sterne of *Tristram Shandy*, for whom the act of writing battles desperately against the onslaughts of time. As the defiant 'I won't describe,' the long sentence's main verb, plunges across the stanzaic divide, it spurs Byron on to a bravura display of his refusal to 'philosophize' (X. 28. 224):

that is, if I can help

Description; and I won't reflect – that is,  
 If I can stave off thought, which, as a whelp  
 Clings to its teat, sticks to me through the abyss  
 Of this odd labyrinth; or as the kelp  
 Holds by the rock; or as a lover's kiss  
 Drains its first draught of lips; – but, as I said,  
 I *won't* philosophize, and *will* be read. (X. 28. 217-24)

The syntax captures a tragicomic attempt to flee description, reflection, thought, and philosophy. 'I won't' strives with 'I can,' as the verse itself, in its twists and convolutions, enters the 'abyss / Of this odd labyrinth' into which it seeks not to fall. If the 'lover's kiss' that 'Drains its first draught of lips' acts as a further, if distant, reminder of the Francesca episode, the entire passage composes, in its wry, humorous painfulness, an inverted mirror image of the suffering process described in Dante: a process at the centre of which is the labour 'of building a ladder to the

truth,' in Robin Kirkpatrick's phrase.<sup>15</sup> Byron finishes, however, with a return to adamant, impermanent conquest of his existential anxieties: 'but, as I said, / I *won't* philosophize, and *will* be read.' The rhyme between 'I said' and 'will be read' amusingly conveys the accents of someone putting his foot down, and scoring a point - a point that is well taken when the reader considers how Byron was 'read' in his day. At the same time, the very force of 'I *won't* philosophize' may protest too much, especially in the context of *Don Juan* as a whole, with its intermittently explicit and pervasive push to reflect and speculate. Byron, that is, may be implying a contrast with Dante's poetic world, yet he cannot but imply a connection with it, too.

## 2

Dante's own relationship with Virgil, his guide and leader, is not merely one of straightforward homage. In *Purgatorio*, XXX, Dante discovers that 'Virgil had bereaved us of himself' (48), and is left distraught, before Beatrice sets before him further cause for weeping. Virgil, Dante's teacher, the 'master of his art and precursor of his thinking,' in Auerbach's phrase,<sup>16</sup> has vanished from his side: it is a moment of desolate loss:

But Virgil had bereaved us of himself;  
Virgil, my best-loved father; Virgil, he  
To whom I gave me up for safety. (*Purgatory*, III. 48-50)

Cary mimics the triple repetition of 'Virgilio' in the original (49-51), as the purgatorial air resounds with the name of an artist Dante admires and must move beyond. Auerbach denies that Dante worked with any 'historical sense' of the difference between himself and Virgil.<sup>17</sup> But the farewell in the *Purgatorio* shows that Dante does possess such a sense, as not only the pilgrim but also the poet recognises that he must continue on his own. Such a historical sense is among Dante's bequests to the Romantic poets. The Roman poet also vexes the Florentine exile with the question of the virtuous exile, and the question encouraged Shelley

---

<sup>15</sup> R. Kirkpatrick, *Dante: The Divine Comedy* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 56.

<sup>16</sup> Auerbach, 135.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

to read Dante as already halfway against the theological grain. The issue is addressed in *Paradiso*, XIX and XX, where Rhiphaeus 'whom Virgil called *justissimus unus*,' in Shelley's words from *A Defence of Poetry*, is placed: proof for Shelley of Dante's 'heretical caprice in the distribution of rewards and punishments,'<sup>18</sup> but evidence for Dante of 'The grace divine' (*Paradise*, XX. 65).

The attribution by Shelley to Dante of 'heretical caprice' is of a piece with his wish to free Dante's epic poetry from what the Romantic poet regards as his great forebear's 'distorted notions of invisible things.'<sup>19</sup> Just as *terza rima* rocks both forwards and backwards, so Romantic disciples of Dante both simultaneously revise Dante (as Shelley does, seeing him as in some ways a proto-Romantic poet) and concede their inability to match his achievement. On the one hand, Dante is a constant inspiration: his Romantic heirs, it might be said, lend their voice to Dante's own request to the Muses at the start of *Purgatory*: 'here the deadened strain revive' (I. 8). Shelley speaks admiringly of Dante's capacity still to enkindle inspiration: 'His very words are instinct with spirit; each is as a spark, a burning atom of inextinguishable thought; and many yet lie covered in the ashes of their birth, and pregnant with a lightning which has yet found no conductor.' On the other hand, Dante's 'high poetry'<sup>20</sup> is also a reproach; how can it be matched by the contemporary poet? Who among the present can compete with Homer and Dante, for Shelley the only two authentic epic poets, about each of whose 'creations' it is possible to say that they 'bore a defined and intelligible relation to the knowledge, and sentiment, and religion, and political condition of the age in which he lived, and of the ages which followed it'?<sup>21</sup>

Shelley himself was aware that he lived in a culture in which the possibility of 'defined and intelligible' relations between poet and age was extremely complicated, and he appears to deal with this very topic in the following lines of Rousseau in *The Triumph of Life*, lines modelled in their syntactical structure (the triple, anaphoric use of 'Me') on Dante's bewailing of his lost 'Virgil' quoted above:

18 *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works* Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (eds.) (Oxford. Oxford University Press, 2003), 691.

19 *A Defence of Poetry, Shelley: Major Works*, 691.

20 *Ibid.*, 693.

21 *Ibid.*, 692.

Me not the shadow nor the solitude,  
 Me not the falling stream's Lethean song,  
 Me, not the phantom of that early form  
 Which moved upon its motion, - but among  
 The thickest billows of the living storm  
 I plunged, and bared my bosom to the clime  
 Of that cold light, whose airs too soon deform.— (462-8)

Rousseau, exemplar of his age, its hopes, aspirations, torments, despairs, describes his succumbing to life in terms that are both tragic and proud, an active plunging that is also an inescapable divorce from an alluring shape that may have been as much a bewitching delusion, anyway, as a modern version of Beatrice. Shelley draws on Dante for a syntactical shape that is plangent with loss and lament, but it is no criticism of him to say that he forsakes the overall design of Dante's poem. As though that design comes to mind, like a glimpse of a cerulean sky from the depths of a dark abyss, Shelley goes on to describe it as he speaks of

him who from the lowest depths of Hell  
 Through every Paradise and through all glory  
 Love led serene, and who returned to tell

In words of hate and awe the wondrous story  
 How all things are transfigured, except Love ... (472-6)

That gloss suggests a shape, a pilgrimage, a discipline, a process: 'Through every Paradise' is a phrase that recalls Shelley's unsurpassable praise for the way in which Dante continually surpasses himself in the *Paradiso*, 'as by steps he feigns himself to have ascended to the throne of the Supreme Cause.'<sup>22</sup> 'Feigns' implies admiration for artifice and possibly also for the ideological resistance supposedly manifested by Dante, while the idea of a 'Supreme Cause' to one so steeped in Hume as was Shelley suggests that, in the *Paradiso*, we are, for the Romantic, in the realm of what Wallace Stevens will refer to as a Supreme Fiction.

In Rousseau's passage (462-8), the haunting forlornness of the Dantescan gesture is audible. This 'gesture' is a question of the way in which words and rhythms co-operate to create a verbal form in which

---

22 *Ibid.*, 691.

language seems to have been chiselled from the coldest, intensest stone.<sup>23</sup> It exists in a poetic sphere that denies itself the ethical and religious absolutes that serve as columns on which Dante builds the architecture of his *Commedia*. The wording in 'that cold light, whose airs too soon deform,' for example, recalls the weather systems that are also moral barometers in Dante; but it raises the question for Shelley: how can we escape the subjectivism of the modern, indebted to, parallel with, and wholly different from Dante's subjectivism? The issue of possible fault recurs, since it is perplexing to Rousseau and his reader to articulate whether or how what he has done is blameworthy, or to specify an overall moral code that would supply relevant ethical co-ordinates. Here, the writing raises and refuses to answer questions. Should Rousseau have listened more intently to 'Lethaeon song'? Should he not have 'plunged, and bared his bosom to the clime / Of that cold light'? Certainly in doing so he seems to have sealed his own fate, but how should one, how can one, avoid being 'Actor of victim in this wretchedness' (306)? From the perspective of the fragmentary *The Triumph of Life*, a poem that may or may not have entertained quasi-Dantescan epic ambitions, but seems most clearly to have caught the complex lyrical inflections to be heard in the *Commedia*, Dante's poem is fated to seem supremely beyond the purview of the modern poet, a 'wondrous story' whose transfigurations contrast with the disfigurations experienced by the modern poet.

But the *Commedia* supplies the would-be epic poet with a fathom-line, even if its own depths are too deep to measure. Elsewhere, Shelley might circle more easily in Dante's orbit precisely by not pressing too hard on the notion that there are parallels. In *Prometheus Unbound*, a lyrical drama with more than a strain of epic reach, his poetry is magnificently responsive to Dante's example, especially in the *Paradiso*. That great work ends with celebration of the 'love' 'That moves the sun in heaven and all the stars' (*Paradise*, XXIII, 134, 135). Shelley's poem, too, celebrates the fact that 'Familiar acts are beautiful through love' (IV. 403), the poet reminding us in his Preface that his imagery is often 'drawn from the operations of the human mind, or from those external actions by which they are expressed,' a form of imagery found in 'Dante ... more than any other poet.'<sup>24</sup> The concluding lyric of act 2, 'My soul is an enchanted boat'

23 For a remarkable account of Dante's hard-won stylistic 'precision,' see Auerbach, 162ff.

24 Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley: *Major Works*, 230.

(II. V. 72-110) uses such imagery, as it serves as a prelude to the new Utopian poetry of the final two acts, in which Shelley feigns ascension to the throne of a new vision of human beings, 'one harmonious soul of many a soul' (*Prometheus Unbound*, IV. 400).

In *The Fall of Hyperion*, a poem of severe self-scrutiny, in which the poet examines, reworks and passes a judgement on his earlier attempt in the first *Hyperion* to write a Romantic epic, Keats also follows in the wake of Dante's 'proud keel' (*Paradise*, II. 3). He, too, experiences the crisis of ethical identity evident in Shelley's presentation of Rousseau, and he remains 'Lost in a sort of purgatory blind' ('To J. H. Reynolds, Esq.,' 80) as he shows the poet-dreamer trapped 'Without stay or prop / But my own weak mortality' (*The Fall of Hyperion*, I. 388-9), after his encounter with Moneta.<sup>25</sup> Moneta may bring to mind Beatrice chastening Dante in the latter cantos of the *Purgatorio*, but, again, the Dantescan commitment to purposeful trial has given way to something far less sure; progress turns into suspended animation even and especially in Keats's great moment of vision, when the Goddess unveils her face and the poet seems to gaze into the heart of ... well, what? Christ? Art? Inhuman eternity? The Muse? Death?

deathwards progressing  
 To no death was that visage; it had passed  
 The lily and the snow; and beyond these  
 I must not think now, though I saw that face ... (I. 260-3)

That 'though' intrigues, as though the poet was compelled ('must not think') to think of something 'beyond.' Roughly, that something 'beyond' is taking us to a territory away from which *The Fall*, with its own existential anguish and authenticity, turns its face.

But even as Romantic epic turns down the promise of all-encompassing explanation offered by Dante, it relishes ways in which the intensified moment or episode expands beyond itself. This essay has already alluded to canto X of Byron's *Don Juan*, among the indisputable if generically mixed epic achievements of Romanticism. And it seems appropriate to move towards a conclusion by remarking that the canto is among the places where the *Paradiso*, with its opening proud dismissal of those 'who in small bark have following sailed, / Eager to listen, on the adventurous track / Of my proud keel' (*Paradise*, II. 1-3), helps

25 *The Poems of John Keats*, M. Allott (ed.) (London. Longman, 1970).

us grasp the relationship between Dante and Romantic poetry. The Romantics are not among those afraid to 'put out to open sea' (*Paradise*, II. 5) in quest of Dante. The image Dante uses of 'putting out to open sea' is one that is used in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, canto III, for 'wanderers o'er Eternity / Whose bark drives on and on, and anchor'd ne'er shall be' (70. 669-70). The same image marks the reaching beyond human limitations with which Shelley closes *Adonais*, when his 'spirit's bark is driven / Far from the shore' (488-9). Shelley is 'borne darkly, fearfully, afar' (492), his spirit's bark leaving the 'trembling throng' (489) behind, its sails buoyed out by gusts of hope hardly distinguishable from despair. Perhaps paying a wry tribute to his recently dead fellow-poet, whose skiff was evidently not 'sea-worthy,' yet whose poetic courage was undoubted, Byron, too, affirms a quasi-Dantescan dauntlessness:

In the Wind's Eye I have sailed, and sail; but for  
 The stars, I own my telescope is dim;  
 But at the least I have shunned the common shore,  
 And leaving land far out of sight, would skim  
 The Ocean of Eternity: the roar  
 Of breakers has not daunted my slight, trim,  
 But *still* sea-worthy skiff; and she may float  
 Where ships have foundered, as doth many a boat.  
(*Don Juan*, X. 4. 25-32)

Read metapoetically, the stanza supplies appropriate images for the way in which the Romantic epic stays true to its own sense of uncertainty while staying in touch with the sweep, the scope, and the ambition of the *Commedia*. Byron might 'skim / The Ocean of Eternity'; his telescope 'for / the stars' may be 'dim,' reminding us of the Romantic poet's lack of the sure religious compass possessed by Dante, but he ventures on poetic voyages that have their own value. Even as he draws attention to the hazardousness and the haphazardness of such voyages in his final couplet (and brings to mind another sea-journey in the *Commedia*, Ulysses' doomed excursion in *Inferno*, XXVII),<sup>26</sup> he zestfully registers a claim for their epic potential.

*Durham University*

26 For the suggestion that Ulysses' voyage might be alluded to by Byron here, I am indebted to Nick Havely.



## John Keats on the Appian Way

*Nicholas Roe*

John Keats's voyage to Italy and death at Rome are enshrined in Anglo-Italian Romantic mythology. Recounted in letters and memoirs, those events are also day-to-day realities that biographers have to reconcile with the 'halo effect' captured in Joseph Severn's famous sketch of the dying poet. Accounts of life aboard the *Maria Crowther* in autumn 1820 are generally done well, thanks to Severn's record of dreadful accommodation, stormy weather, and the tubercular Miss Cotterell who was also in quest of a cure. With Keats arrival at Naples the end is in sight, and biographical narratives accelerate from this point onwards: in a few sentences Robert Gittings and Andrew Motion whisk Keats through a week at Naples, up to Rome, and onto his deathbed.

Keats saw a good deal of life in these weeks, not least on the eight-day, 140 mile trek from Naples to Rome. While modern accounts of Keats's childhood largely follow Sidney Colvin's from 1917, the pattern for his final journey comes from Amy Lowell's biography of 1924.<sup>1</sup> Severn's anecdote about a red-cloaked cardinal shooting birds appears in every biography from Lowell down to Stanley Plumley's just-published *Posthumous Keats*. In 1937 Dorothy Hewlett unaccountably introduced '[c]arcases and skeletons of horses' by the road, and '[g]hastly shrivelled arms and legs of highwaymen ... stuck on posts.'<sup>2</sup> She may have taken these grotesque props from a nineteenth-century travel guide to Italy. Later biographers simply repeat them, Andrew Motion's embellishments being the most lurid: 'Elsewhere they saw the bleached bones of horses lying by the roadside, and gibbets dangling the bodies of bandits who had been hanged.'<sup>3</sup> This is sheer fiction. There is nothing in Sharp's *Life of Joseph Severn* or in any of Severn's memoirs about witnessing such sights. It seems likely that Dorothy Hewlett invented them, or simply

---

1 S. Colvin, *John Keats. His Life and Poetry, His Friends, Critics and After-Fame* (London. Macmillan, 1917) and A. Lowell, *John Keats* 2 vols. (London. Jonathan Cape, 1924). I am grateful to Annalisa Armani for her careful reading of this article and for the valuable suggestions she has contributed to it.

2 D. Hewlett, *Adonais. A Life of John Keats* (London. Hurst and Blackett, 1937 2<sup>nd</sup>. edn. 1938), 360.

3 A. Motion, *Keats* (London. Faber and Faber, 1997), 553.

pasted them into her narrative from another contemporary account she had read, and then everyone joined in.

Instead of looking for 'the grim relic of a dead glory' that foreshadows Keats's demise, this article offers a less sensational account.<sup>4</sup> It attends to the route, the landscapes, and the topographical features that shaped Keats's imagination in these last days as they had done from his childhood. Tracking John Keats on this journey reveals continuities with his earlier life, and can tell us a good deal about his state of mind on arriving at Rome. In this endeavour it is necessary to resist the idea that Keats himself thought his death inevitable. There is evidence that he had some expectation of recovery: he had travelled to Rome to find a cure, and at Naples his passport was visaed, 'Bon pour aller en Angleterre' – 'good to go to England.'<sup>5</sup> Even when death was imminent the last effort of Keats's genius was to resist finality by imagining himself already at that threshold and, characteristically, oriented towards a future that lay beyond. This paper explores how Keats's journey to Rome may have enabled that final triumph of his imagination.

\*

On Tuesday 31 October, the ten-day quarantine over, Keats and Severn went ashore at Naples. Miss Cotterell's brother Charles settled them in comfortable lodgings at the Albergo della Villa di Londra in Via Santa Lucia - a wide, fashionable street between the Palazzo Reale and the Castel dell'Ovo at the harbour entrance. With six storeys and a view across the bay to Vesuvius, the Villa di Londra was a grand eighteenth-century *palazzo* favoured by distinguished foreign visitors (*see figure 1*).

Cotterell had chosen their accommodation carefully: the street's aspect and proximity to the sea meant that clear, healthy air would circulate. After the stifling cabin aboard *Maria Crowther*, the large room seemed likely to give Keats intervals of ease, and on the morning of Wednesday 1 November, he revived sufficiently to begin 'a short calm letter' to Charles Brown. It proved to be one of his most agonized attempts to 'relieve the load of WRETCHEDNESS'; emotionally and imaginatively, he was still enduring the confinement of the voyage.<sup>6</sup> His thoughts turned

4 For 'grim relic' see Hewlett, 360.

5 See the second page of Keats's passport reproduced in A. Lowell, *John Keats*, II, 486.

6 See H. Rollins, (ed.) *The Letters of John Keats* 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1958 repr. 1972), II, 351-2.

obsessively to Fanny Brawne, recalling another sick room in which he had been 'a prisoner' at Hunt's house in Kentish Town. Then he had gazed across meadows to Hampstead with hopes of seeing her; now, all the colour and novelty of Naples could not distract him from the thought that she was lost to him. If he could have 'had her' when in health, he tells Brown, he would have remained well; now, even with a chance of recovery, thwarted passion would kill him. Once his orphaned spirit had buffeted with setbacks, defiantly borne aloft, but now the struggle was with himself: 'O, that something fortunate had ever happened to me or my brothers! – then I might hope, – but despair is forced upon me as a habit.'<sup>7</sup>

That evening, the Cotterells called and stayed through dinner. Keats's mood lightened and, when they left, he repeated to Severn some of what he had written to Brown and went to bed 'much recovered.'<sup>8</sup> He slept long the next morning, Thursday 2 November, woke in good spirits, and made a pun in Italian. Fog and rain shrouded the city although eventually



*Figure 1:* Albergo della Villa di Londra in Via Santa Lucia, Naples. Keats stayed here in November 1820 before setting out for Rome. I suspect that Keats and Severn had a high room on the left of this photograph, giving them a glancing view across the bay to Vesuvius.

<sup>7</sup> *Letters of John Keats*, II, 352.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 354.

the weather lifted and, with windows and shutters open, the clatter of the street carried into the room. Cotterell took Keats by carriage along the Strada di Toledo, where all the noisy life of the city was carried on with cries of 'Pane!' 'Panzarotti!' 'Acqua!' and 'Vino – Vino Rosso!' Here were men haggling over sardines; hungry children at pizza ovens; smoky stalls selling chestnuts; carpenters' benches and shoe-makers' stools; water and lemonade sellers; dogs, chickens, and a pig in the gutter; corner kitchens with steaming pots; dung-carts, carts full of grapes, wagonloads of melons; a bag-pipe player with dancing puppets; two lawyers, arm-in-arm, coming back from court; a monk begging; labourers with striped red caps; letter-writers at portable desks; and then a funeral bier, all crimson and gold, followed by mourners in masks and white gowns.

Beyond the city wall, they took the road to the viewpoint on Capo di Monte, from where they could trace the long curve of the Bay of Naples down to the mountains of Sorrento. On the way Keats had been struck by the sight of roses in a cottage-garden – 'later flowers for the bees' – only to have his praise for the 'exquisite climate' punctured by discovering they had no scent. He started a rant about humbug – 'What is a rose without its fragrance?' – that lasted for the remainder of the drive until, halted close to the Capuan Gate, he watched a group of *lazzaroni* gathered around a cauldron scoop up *maccheroni* with their hands and swallow it in long unbroken strings – 'Glorious sight! How they take it in!'<sup>9</sup> As always, eating – this scene of *lazzaroni* feasting – set Keats to rights.

On Sunday 5 November, Keats and Severn set off to the Palazzo Reale and the church of San Francesco di Paola with its long, semicircular colonnades embracing the Piazza Plebiscito. They watched soldiers parading in front of King Ferdinand, who made the latest of his many declarations of allegiance to the kingdom.<sup>10</sup> This display was a reminder that the city was in the throes of a revolution. Like Louis XVI of France, Ferdinand was a scion of the Bourbon *ancien regime* and he had been deposed in 1806 when Napoleon installed his own brother, Joseph, as a more compliant monarch. After the Battle of Waterloo, Ferdinand returned and ruled despotically until, in July 1820, three months before Keats and Severn arrived, an uprising of the *carbonari* forced the king to accept a new, liberal constitution. Where Naples led, others might follow: dreading the revival of revolution, the Austrians, backed by Prussia and Russia, mobilised to quell insurrection.

9 C. MacFarlane, *Reminiscences of a Literary Life* (London. John Murray, 1917), 14-15.

10 See *The Times* (27 November 1820), 2.

As the Austrian army marched south, the London *Times* reported ‘perfect unanimity’ at Naples and ‘the constitutional spirit raised to the highest.’ The Austrians stood a better chance of stopping the lava erupting from Vesuvius.<sup>11</sup> Keats was sceptical. Ferdinand’s soldiers were ‘not fighting men,’ and, anyway, the king was rumoured to have gone over to the Austrians. While the streets were silent with astonishment at this news, Keats’s libertarian zeal revived.<sup>12</sup>

On the evening after the parade Keats went with Severn to the famous Teatro San Carlo, a few yards beyond the Palazzo Reale. As they approached, Keats surely noticed the fresco above the entrance depicting the nine muses and Keats’s ‘fore-seeing God’ Apollo with a lyre (*see figure 2*).<sup>13</sup> The theatre had been rebuilt after a fire in 1816 and, as they entered the auditorium, the deep red upholstery, golden embellishments and hundreds of candles were dazzling. Overhead, in fresh, bold colour,

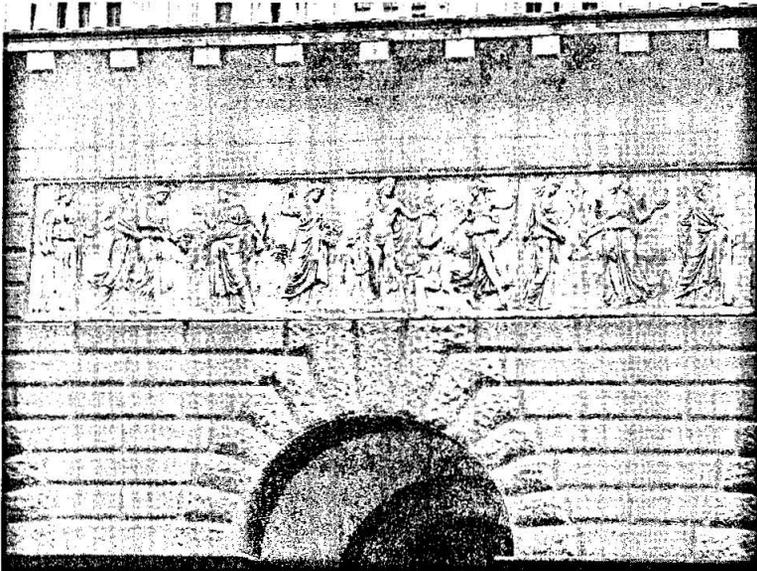


Figure 2: Fresco of Apollo and the Muses at the Teatro San Carlo, Naples.

11 *The Times* (27 November 1820), 2; (4 December 1820), 2; (20 November 1820), 2.

12 Joseph Severn, ‘My Tedious Life.’ See W. Sharp, *The Life and Letters of Joseph Severn* (London. Sampson Low, Marston and Company 1892), 63 and G. F. Scott, (ed.) *Joseph Severn Letters and Memoirs* (Aldershot and Burlington. Ashgate, 2005), 644.

13 *Letters of John Keats*, I, 207.

was Giuseppe Cammarano's celestial pageant of 'Apollo Introducing the Greatest Poets to the Goddess Minerva,' like a scene from an unwritten book of *Hyperion*. At each side of the stage was the life-like statue of a soldier. Here, at last, after all that they had endured on their voyage, was a thrilling vision of painting, poetry, and music thriving in the midst of a liberal revolution. Or so it seemed, for a few moments. When the soldiers sidled away from the stage, content that the audience was passive, Keats exclaimed: 'we'll go to Rome for as I am to die I should not like to leave my ashes in the presence of a people with such miserable politicks.'<sup>14</sup>

Wednesday 8 November. The King reappeared at his residence on Capo di Monte, and remained there during the fine weather that accompanied Keats and Severn to Rome. Today they left Naples through the Capuan Gate, and headed north in a horse-drawn *vettura* along a road lined with myrtle, laurel, cyclamen and, beneath Italian pines, stalls selling melons and chestnuts. On this first day they covered eighteen miles to the walled town of Capua, formerly the greatest Roman settlement in southern Italy on the busy Via Appia from Rome to the port at Brindisi. Here they sought the miserable inn where they spent the night.<sup>15</sup>

On Thursday morning, 9 November, Keats and Severn made their way through throngs of ragged children and beggars, crossed the Volturno river, and continued their journey. From now on the Via Appia would take them past vineyards and olive groves, along the coast, and over mountains reputed to be infested with *banditti*. As Severn walked alongside the *vettura*, they passed through scenes of deep antiquity: fragments of Roman buildings overgrown at the roadside; watchtowers precarious on craggy pinnacles; isolated crosses and chapels; and always, for Keats, the changing skyline as they passed slowly over the worn stones of Via Appia, the eternal road. After the Capuan plain they entered a landscape of hills and deep clefts overgrown with chestnut trees; the road climbed to the village of Cascano and then made a gradual descent to the coast. Perhaps, like many travellers, they spent their second night at the lone inn

14 *Joseph Severn Letters and Memoirs*, 644.

15 The account of the journey to Rome in the following pages makes use of three sources: Henry Coxe, *Picture of Italy; Being a Guide to the Antiquities and Curiosities of that Classical and Interesting Country* (London. Sherwood, Neely and Jones, 1815); Selina Martin, *Narrative of a Three Years' Residence in Italy 1819-22* (London. John Murray, 1828); Henry Matthews, *The Diary of an Invalid: Being the Journal of a tour in pursuit of health in Portugal Italy Switzerland and France in the years 1817 1818 and 1819* (London. John Murray, 1820, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn.).

near St Agatha,<sup>16</sup> and then continued on Friday 10 November to the Roman town of Minturnae where they could see the vestiges of an amphitheatre – tumbled walls and ridges in the earth – and a stretch of the aqueduct that brought water from the Monti Aurunci. The Via Appia next led them around the beautiful coastline to Mola di Gaeta (Formia), where they may have spent Friday night for the inn was reported to be excellent.<sup>17</sup> As Keats knew from reading Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary*, Cicero was assassinated here in 43 B.C. and his tomb, gardens and baths were popular tourist attractions. By reviving scenes and associations from classical antiquity, Keats's journey enabled a revisiting of his own past when he had encountered Rome and Greece through his reading. These vestiges of classical times also seem to have encouraged Keats to think ahead with what he described as 'philosophy.'<sup>18</sup> As always for Keats, being 'on the road' was a process of growth.

Mola was one of the most picturesque towns on the Via Appia, close to the sea-shore with groves of orange and lemon trees, and backed by the craggy slopes of the mountains. When Keats and Severn woke on the morning of 11 November they faced one of the most daunting sections of their route as the road ascended to the mountain stronghold of Itri. This was bandit country, wild, rugged and inaccessible. Most dangerous for Keats was the drop in temperature; as they climbed away from the coast into colder air he furred himself in a rug while the *vettura* slowly made its way into Itri, described then as a 'miserable mass of ruins' gathered beneath the massive walls of a citadel.<sup>19</sup> They pressed on to the top of the pass where the Via Appia crossed the Monte Grande before descending along the side of a ravine. When I walked here in November 2006, the ancient cobbles over which Keats bumped and lurched were visible, worn and rutted by cartwheels where the road winds between terraces of olive trees and dry stone walls. Even in November, wild flowers bloomed at the roadside, butterflies danced, lizards basked.

Leaving the mountains, Keats and Severn entered another fertile valley of vines and groves of olive, orange and lemon trees around Fondi, where the inn was said to have been the palace of a nobleman.<sup>20</sup>

16 See Coxe, *Picture of Italy*, 282.

17 Martin, *Narrative*, 55.

18 *Letters of John Keats*, II, 360.

19 Martin, *Narrative*, 55.

20 *Ibid*, 54-5.

This was their fourth night on a journey that most travellers completed in two or three days, sometimes less: their progress was painfully slow with frequent stops for food and water, to enable Keats to prop himself up comfortably, or so that he could climb down to the roadside if, as he once quipped, 'peedisposed.'<sup>21</sup>

From Fondi they headed to the coast at Terracina, the border town between the Kingdom of Naples and the Papal States, strategically situated where the Monti Ausoni plunge vertically to the sea. Keats could see on the heights the ruin of the so-called Sanctuary of Jupiter and, looming immediately overhead as they rounded the headland, the towering cliff face where Roman engineers quarried to make way for the Via Appia. The Directory of Police visaed Keats's passport as 'good for entry' to the Papal States, and they began the long straight stretch across the malarial Pontine Marshes. To their right was fenland overgrown with brushwood, ditches, and, further off, the ridges of mountains; on their left was the *Decennovium* – a canal, not unlike the New River that flowed in front of Keats's school at Enfield, edged with bulrushes where herons stalked. The town of Mesa was some ten miles from Terracina: perhaps they spent Sunday night here, close to the ruin of the Roman way station, and then pushed on twenty-five miles across the marshes to Velletri, on the lower slopes of the Colli Albani, where they rested overnight.

They had reached the last stage on their journey. When they started their climb over the Colli Albani on Tuesday 14 November, the season had advanced. Leaves were scattered across the road and the air was chilly. All the way Severn had attempted to rally Keats's spirits, picking bunches of flowers from the wayside, laughing at Keats's puns. From the hilltop town of Albano they looked out across the Roman Campagna and glimpsed the dim outline of Rome itself. Ahead of them lay the long, unswerving descent of the Via Appia through a forlorn landscape that would shape Keats's state of mind in his final months. Charles Dickens came here in 1845, and likened the Campagna's 'mounds, and heaps, and hills, of ruin' and 'dark undulating surface' to 'a broad dull Lethe flowing round the walls of Rome, and separating it from all the world!'<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Letters of John Keats*, I, 255.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Dickens, *American Notes and Pictures from Italy* (London. Oxford University Press, 1957 repr. 1966), 396, 408.

As Dickens returned to Rome in the evening, the descent along the Via Appia seemed like a passage into a 'ruined world,' on which 'the sun would never rise again.'<sup>23</sup>

When Keats followed these last dozen miles of the Via Appia he too saw fragments of columns, friezes and pediments; shattered blocks of granite and marble; toppled arches, tumbled walls and broken aqueducts; and mile after mile of mounds and heaps like graves overlaid with turf and feathery grasses and flowers.<sup>24</sup> With Severn he watched as a Cardinal in a crimson cloak shot small birds that were attracted by the glint of a looking-glass. With an owl tethered to a stick, and two footmen relentlessly loading and reloading the guns, this scene of pointless slaughter amid the debris of Rome encapsulated Keats's insight about 'an eternal fierce destruction.'<sup>25</sup> Keats had travelled 140 miles through arduous terrain and, now, this last suburban section of the road surrounded him with the debris of antiquity. The sight of these half-buried ruins would linger with him, as a physical realisation of his conviction that his own life had passed, that he too could 'feel the cold earth upon [him] – the daisies growing over [him].'<sup>26</sup>

As they approached the city the road swerved away from the original route of the Via Appia, so that they entered the city through the Lateran Gate under the gaze of the satyr who glares down, still, from the apex of that archway. Immediately ahead of them was the massive white facade of San Giovanni in Laterano, emblazoned 'Christo Salvatori'; to their right was Santa Scala, the staircase Christ was said to have walked down after his trial in Pontius Pilate's house. Their destination was the centre of the city and they rattled along the narrow Via di San Giovanni through a horde of dogs, beggars, children, pigeons, hooded friars, a fat man in a doorway crooning an air from Mozart, macaroni kitchens, and everywhere the sweet smell of wood smoke and chestnuts. Ahead were the weathered arcades of the Colosseum heaped up with soil and rubble, its stonework pocked and pitted. Beyond this stupendous edifice lay a warren of medieval streets and all the noisy, passionate life of Rome: a portly signore in a felt hat with ribbon and cockade, arguing with a woman selling pancakes, while a little boy feeds sticks into the brazier;

---

23 *Pictures from Italy*, 397.

24 These sights are noted in *Pictures from Italy*, 396.

25 *Joseph Severn Letters and Memoirs*, 644-5; *Letters of John Keats*, II, 359.

26 *Letters of John Keats*, II, 378.

washerwomen at fountains; musicians and singers, hawkers, and children running alongside the *vettura*, until they emerge at the Piazza di Spagna where rooms had already been taken for them on the second floor of the house at No. 26. At Rome, Keats experienced a city that had been ruined centuries before, where life continued vibrantly amid remnants of the past that emerged, like the Arch of Constantine, from the sediment of ages. Perhaps he cast his mind back to his visits to the British Museum, and its gloriously disordered displays drawn from all ages of the world.

Like Keats's Scottish tour of 1818, this final journey demonstrates Keats's physical strength and resilience. Much has been made of his anguished state of mind, drawing mainly on his letter to Charles Brown of 1 November 1820 from Naples. But there is a last, almost playful letter he sent to Brown from Rome at the end of the month. 'I am much better than I was in Quarantine,' he tells Brown, and mentions what he would do 'If I recover.'<sup>27</sup> The 'end' that biographers know so well seemed to Keats at this moment by no means inevitable – there might yet be the prospect of a 'happy lot,' and a return to health. Keats had recovered some of the imaginative pliancy – he calls it 'philosophy' – that enabled him to outface misfortune: 'I have an habitual feeling of my real life having past,' he writes, 'God knows how it would have been – but it appears to me – however, I will not speak of that subject.'<sup>28</sup> Sketched here, albeit not fully voiced, is what he calls the 'knowledge of contrast, feeling for light and shade ... necessary for a poem.'<sup>29</sup> No poem of Keats's was written at Rome, but the impulse to keep life in play continued in his jokes and 'waggery' and puns on the long journey and during his weeks in Rome.<sup>30</sup> Playing with the double meanings of words was a kind of release, as if it might be possible – 'Do I wake or sleep?' – to live beyond the singular fate that was bearing him down.

The approach to Rome – part ruins, part underground, part living still – was a kind of homecoming for Keats, who already thought of his 'real life having passed.'<sup>31</sup> Such misty, indeterminate states – poised, hovering, floating – are typical of Keats, from his early 'Imitation of Spenser' to the still gathering moment of a late poem like 'To Autumn.'

<sup>27</sup> *Letters of John Keats*, II, 359-60.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 359.

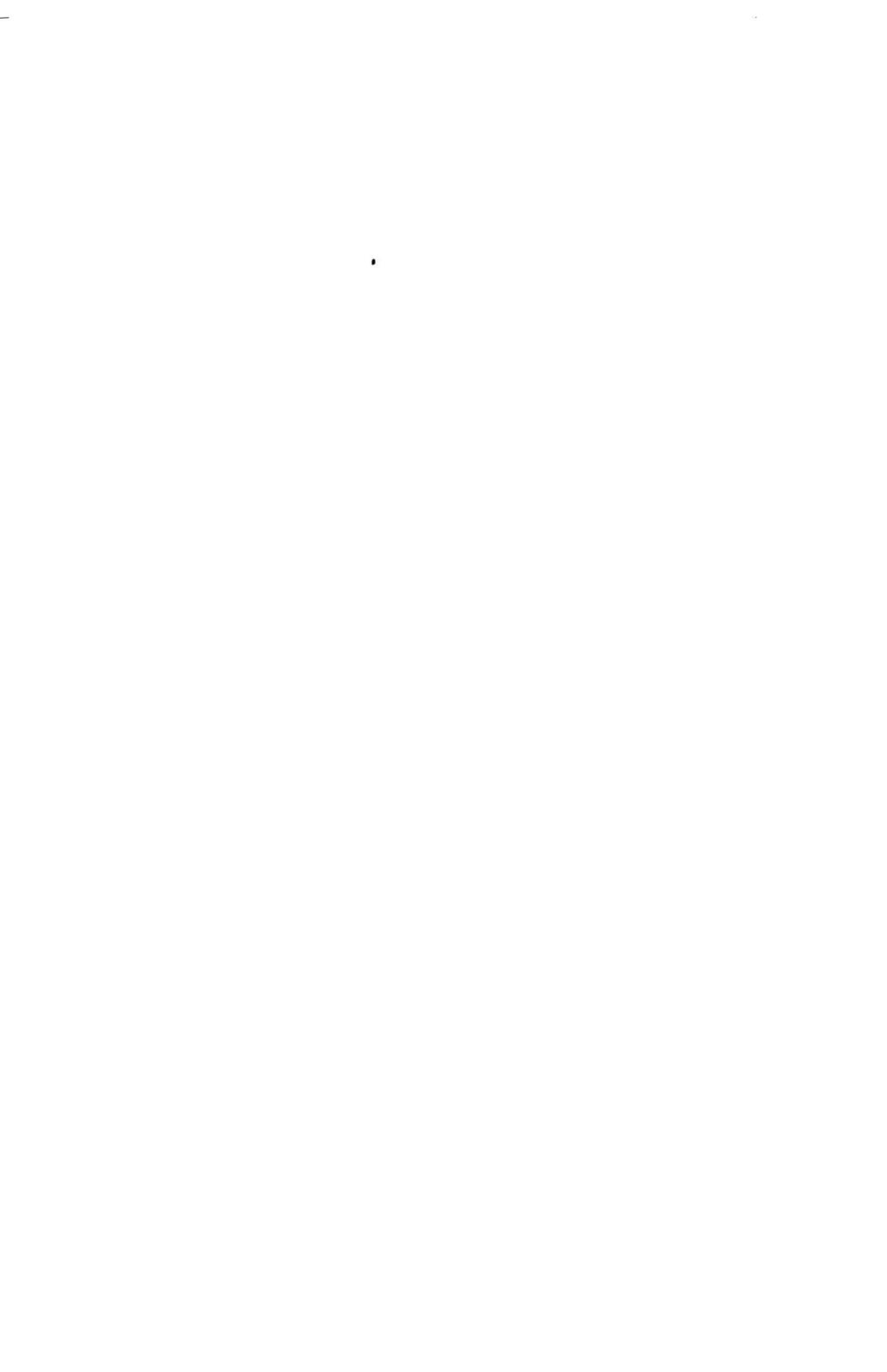
<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 360.

<sup>30</sup> See *Joseph Severn Letters and Memoirs*, 98, 99, 110. Anthony Burgess's novel *Abba Abba* (1977) has Keats plotting a new poem at Rome. My thanks to Michael O'Neill and Tim Webb for this reference.

<sup>31</sup> *Letters of John Keats*, II, 359.

Now, in this later, Roman season, Keats felt better than before. He took exercise on a horse, and for a moment, perhaps, felt himself on a road to recovery in a city that was living a 'posthumous life' like his own.

*University of St. Andrews.*



# 'Under Italian skies,' the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke of Devonshire, Canova and the formation of the Sculpture Gallery at Chatsworth House

*Alison Yarrington*

The passion for marble shown by William Spencer Cavendish, the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke of Devonshire (1790-1858) and its manifestation in his sculpture gallery at Chatsworth House, Derbyshire is a spectacular example of Anglo-Italian cultural exchange.<sup>1</sup> During the Duke's lifetime his collection was widely recognised for its outstanding quality and by the spring of 1834, when the gallery was finished and refurbished, Chatsworth housed arguably the most important collection of contemporary sculpture in the country. The pursuit of pleasure, one that was intimately tied to his love of Italy, motivated the Duke's creation of this elite space. This is evident in diary entries composed whilst he was both conceiving and realising his grand plan for 'improvements' at Chatsworth during the 1820s and '30s and, at the same time, amassing major poetic sculptures sourced from Roman studios. In the summer of 1823 having arrived at Chatsworth from London he wrote of the initial work on the north wing then taking place, 'great progress made here, how I love this place.'<sup>2</sup> An indicator of the enjoyment gained from this activity is also found in his itemising of 'good' and 'bad' events that concluded each year's journal, as well as throughout the entries written whilst he was in residence there. 'My happiness at Chatsworth,' he observed a decade later, when his new sculpture gallery was nearly completed and the work of setting his

---

1 I would like to thank the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire for their enthusiasm and support for the representation of the sculpture gallery. Additional thanks go to colleagues at Chatsworth for their support and help during research for this article, much of which has emerged during our work towards this project. In particular Matthew Hirst, Head of Arts and Historic Collections, Charles Noble, Curator, Fine Arts & Loans, Hannah Obee, Curator, Decorative Arts, Andrew Peppitt and Stuart Band, Archivists.

John Kenworthy-Browne, 'A Ducal Patron of Sculptors,' *Apollo*, ns 96:128 (1972) 322-31, is the standard account of the Chatsworth sculpture collection and the detailed history of the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's commissions from sculptors in Rome.

2 Devonshire Mss, Chatsworth, The Diary of the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke of Devonshire, Thursday 31 July 1823.

sculptural treasures in its interior was beginning, 'is quite different from anywhere else'<sup>3</sup> Time spent in Derbyshire during the summer and autumn months often evoked Italy for him: 'Meeting in hot Italian weather'<sup>4</sup> and 'Italian sky here'<sup>5</sup> he noted during the summer of 1832 and, the following year during a period of particularly brilliant autumn weather, 'The finest Italian day true Chatsworth summer.'<sup>6</sup>

But Italy was more materially present at Chatsworth than any shifting light or meteorological phenomena, most obviously it was visible in the design and arrangement of the sculpture gallery and the references within it to modern and ancient Rome. It was during a visit to the city during the winter months of 1822-23, mourning the recent death of Antonio Canova (1757-1822) and bringing his ideas for his sculpture gallery to fruition with a sensational expenditure on contemporary art, that the Duke decided to adapt features from the Vatican's *Braccio Nuovo* in the fabric of the gallery interior. This newest Roman gallery designed by Rafael Stern, finished by Pasquale Belli and inaugurated in 1822, was much admired by British visitors and residents there. One of the latter, the Duke's stepmother, Elizabeth, Duchess of Devonshire (1758-1824) described it to him as 'beautiful as anything can be – the architecture is perfect, & the effect of it quite extraordinary.'<sup>7</sup> The gallery's primary purpose was to house the ancient statues recently retrieved from Paris, and as such represented Rome's resurgence from Napoleonic rule. An extension of the *Museo Chiaramonti* where Canova had earlier played a key role, this new gallery was conceived and directed by the Cardinal Ercole Consalvi (1757-1824), Pope Pius VII's closest advisor and first minister, a consummate diplomat who was a friend of the Duke, his stepmother and Canova. As Katherine Eustace has discussed in her detailed examination of Canova's emissary to Paris and London during 1815, the sculptor acting as a representative of the Holy See was under the direction of the Cardinal at this crucial time.<sup>8</sup> The Duke's part

3 *Ibid.*, Monday 12 August 1833.

4 *Ibid.*, Tuesday 14 August 1832.

5 *Ibid.*, Friday 21 September 1832.

6 *Ibid.*, Tuesday 1 October 1833.

7 Devonshire Mss, 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Series, 641, Duchess of Devonshire to the Duke of Devonshire, Rome, 3 June 1822; cited by John Martin Robinson, *Cardinal Consalvi 1757-1824* (The Bodley Head, London, 1987), 154, 200, n. 10.

8 Katherine Eustace, '“Questa Scabrosa Missione” Canova in Paris and London in 1815,' *Canova Ideal Heads, Ashmolean Museum Oxford*, (1997), 9-38.

in the artistic, social and political network of post-Napoleonic Rome has a material presence in the Chatsworth sculpture gallery. Bertel Thorvaldsen's bust of Consalvi, a gift from his stepmother, was given an important place in the gallery, at the head of an axis that was centred on Canova's colossal bust of Napoleon and portrait statues of the defeated Emperor's sister and mother, at the far end of which, as part of a memorial to Canova, was the sculptor's bust set high in a niche on the north wall.<sup>9</sup>

The Duke's enthusiasm for the *Braccio Nuovo* is a matter of record: on the 18 December 1822 he drove to the Vatican with his stepmother, 'for the sake of seeing the Braccio nuovo of which the ceiling will suit admirably for the gallery at Chatsworth.'<sup>10</sup> Three weeks later he also visited the *Museo Pio Clementino*, 'feeling greater pleasure there than ever.'<sup>11</sup> This followed another visit to the *Braccio Nuovo*: 'I admire it extremely, and shall imitate much in a small scale at Chatsworth.'<sup>12</sup> During a later audience with the Pope, he records praising the new gallery during their discussion of 'the arts,' after which he visits Consalvi.<sup>13</sup> Clearly, it was not simply the architectural detailing of the ceiling but the mode of sculptural display that attracted him, as well as the spectacular employment of marble. In 1858, the year of the Duke's death, Mrs Hawthorne was to describe the *Braccio Nuovo* in her Roman journal, 'a gallery with mosaic floor, and marble columns and arched niches, in which full-length statues stand – and half-columns of red, oriental granite, surmounted with busts: if it were not for what they contain, the halls of the Vatican would be visited for their own intrinsic splendour and state. But who minds the setting of diamonds?'<sup>14</sup>

9 For an account of Consalvi's life and his programme of public works in Rome after Napoleon's defeat, see Robinson, especially 147-172. Thorvaldsen's marble placed in the Pantheon Rome 1824, was executed from the plaster model (Thorvaldsen Museum, Copenhagen A271) also executed Rome, 1824, of which the Chatsworth bust is a version. Thorvaldsen owned a copy (Thorvaldsen Museum B 98) of Thomas Lawrence's portrait of the Cardinal (1819) at Windsor Castle.

10 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Diary, Wednesday 18 December 1822.

11 *Ibid.*, Sunday 13 January 1823 (misdated as 12<sup>th</sup> in entry). For a discussion of this Museo as 'a site for social and cultural processing' in the later eighteenth century, see Paolo Liverani, 'The Museo Pio-Clementino at the time of the Grand Tour,' *Journal of the History of Collections*, 12 no. 2 (2000), 151-159.

12 *Ibid.*, Saturday 12 January 1823.

13 *Ibid.*, Wednesday 22 January 1823. The Duke then visited Consalvi.

14 Mrs Hawthorne, *Notes in England and Italy* (New York: G.P. Putnam & Son, London: Samson Low & Co., 1871), 271. Journal entry, 15 March 1858. /cont...

It is quite clear that in his ‘braccio nuovo’ the Duke did ‘mind the setting of diamonds’ and his interest in marble was not just a matter of romantic sensibility and aesthetic taste focused upon high art objects. He was also concerned with geology, mineralogy and the promotion of Derbyshire marble and spars found on his estates, notably the ‘nero inglese’ (black Ashford marble) and ‘rosso moderno’ (the ‘Duke’s red’ sourced from his quarries near Newhaven) pieces of which he sent to Rome to be carved by Italian workmen, and his importation of Italian and other stones.<sup>15</sup> He supported the development of *pietre dure* among local craftsmen, an enthusiasm for science and art that was to be embedded at every level of the gallery.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the clearest articulation of the Duke’s interests is found in his *Handbook of Chatsworth and Hardwick* written in 1844:

‘My Gallery was intended for modern sculpture, and I have almost entirely abstained from mixing with it any fragments of antiquity: it was in vain to hope for time or opportunities of collecting really fine ancient marbles. In addition to the statues, my wish was to obtain specimens of all the rare coloured marbles as pedestals for them. Some persons think that the columns, vases, &c., should be removed, as diminishing the effect of the statues. It may be so, but I am too fond of them to make the change.’<sup>17</sup>

The Duke’s avowed ‘love of marble’<sup>18</sup> was an enduring addiction not dissimilar to the ‘porcelain sickness’ of Augustus the Strong. But it

---

/cont. <http://www.eldritchpress.org/nh/mrshnei.html>

- 15 For a discussion of the history of marble working in Derbyshire and the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke’s interest in and promotion of the same see, Trevor Brighton, ‘Marble Works on the Wye at Ashford and Bakewell,’ *Bakewell and District Historical Society Journal*, (1997), vol. 24, 45-70. An appendix (67-71) provides an analysis of the ‘marble, spars etc’ used in the building of the Duke’s new North Wing extracted from the Chatsworth Mss, Building Accounts of the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke 1831-1846. I am most grateful to Stuart Band for bringing this and other material relating to the Ashford Marble Mills to my attention and his always helpful advice.
- 16 Peter Milnes was one of the noted marble workers promoted by the Duke whose work was seen in the Gallery. His Ashford Marble Mill workshops were situated near to the Duke’s more modest Derbyshire ‘retreat’ The Rookery. See, *The Derby Mercury*, 5 September, 1838.
- 17 *Handbook of Chatsworth and Hardwick* (London. privately printed by Frederick Shoberl, Junior, Printer to HRH Prince Albert, 1845), 87-88.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 80.

is clear that he understood his own motivations as a collector to be distinct from the thoughtless and fashionable ‘marblemania’ rife among the *bon ton* in Italy during the immediate post-Waterloo years.<sup>19</sup> Twenty years later when summarising his motives in creating a sculpture gallery he wrote, ‘While beginning my alterations, I made several journeys to Italy, and at Rome the love of marble possesses most people like a new sense. [...] This taste awakened, I did not scruple.’<sup>20</sup> As this statement implies this ‘love of marble’ was both a sensual and sentimental engagement, one that is clear in his development of the Chatsworth gallery and adjoining Orangery.

The purpose-built sculpture gallery was one of a suite of rooms devoted to intellectual and sensory pleasures that were built to both house the Duke’s collections and to facilitate entertainment and amusement at Chatsworth, forming its new north wing. The pulse of the sculpture gallery was triggered by the artistry of Canova, ‘A place that was to receive three of Canova’s grand works excited grand ideas.’<sup>21</sup> The plans for a new dining room and gallery had first been drawn in 1820 and stone from Beeley Moor (part of the extensive Chatsworth estate) arrived on site in June 1821 when building commenced. As John Kenworthy-Browne has shown in his discussion of the Duke as a patron of sculpture, it was Canova’s death in the autumn of 1822 that prompted a crucial visit to Rome, the primary goal of which was to secure the release of *Endymion* from Canova’s studio. This most prized possession was commissioned during his 1819 journey to Rome, and was in a state of near completion when Canova died.

That Canova may not have entirely completed work on *Endymion* was a question that the Duke refused to address, although correspondence with Gaspare Gabrielli (1770-1828) his Roman agent, must have given him pause. Gabrielli had been writing to the Duke on a regular basis keeping him informed of progress on this commission ‘without subject,’ and alerting him to the progress on others. On 9 May 1822 Gabrielli had written of visiting Canova and ‘finding him actually

---

19 I have argued this and discussed the Duke’s interest in geology and mineralogy in a paper presented at The Place of Sculpture Conference organised by the History of Art department and the Ashmolean Museum Oxford University, 27 March 2009.

20 *Handbook*, 80.

21 *Ibid.*, 87. Sculpture by Canova owned by the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke: *Madame Mère* (1804-07), bust of *Laura* (1817-18), *Endymion* (1819-22), *Hebe* (1808-14), colossal head of *Napoleon* (1803-22), bust of *Madame Mère* (1804-07).

employed on finishing the beautiful *Endymion*.' A letter from Gabrielli written shortly after Canova's death, contradicting Cicognara's statement about the statue being finished, stated that the sculptor, 'did not think the statue quite finished but it might be fully so upon any other artists hands, the Head however of that charming statue was finished, to Canova's full satisfaction and so he might, for I assure your Grace that it is the masterpiece of all Canova's Works.'<sup>22</sup>

The Duke was emphatic:

'If evidence were wanting of its having been finished by Canova, I have plenty of letters in my possession that establish that point; but none can be required when you contemplate the admirable perfection of the work. The quality of the marble is so fine, so hard, so crystalline, that Canova would not change it on account of the stain in the arm; that on the cheek he liked, and thought it represented the sunburnt hunter's hue. He had often enquired of me what subject I preferred, and which of his works, and I told him always the sleeping Genius of the Archduchess Christina's tomb at Vienna, and also the Genius on Rezzonico's monument. He accordingly promised me something that I should like still better.'<sup>23</sup>

Canova died on 13 October in Venice and by this date framing and fixing the roof of the rooms in the north wing had begun.<sup>24</sup> On the 24 October the Duke records, 'I loitered about my improvements all day & caught cold.' It was just at this moment of the gallery's transformation from the Duke's imagination to a material reality that in early November he received a letter from Count Leopoldo Cicognara, President of the *Accademia di Venezia* bearing news of Canova's death and of *Endymion*'s completion.<sup>25</sup>

22 Devonshire Mss, Chatsworth, 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Sculpture Account Book, 81.

23 *Handbook*, 104-105.

24 Derek Linstrum, *Sir Jeffry Wyattville, architect to the King* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 155-158 mentions considerable adjustments made to designs for sculpture gallery and suggests that the Duke was perhaps 'encited to emulate the Gallery Wyatt had made for the Duke of Bedford in 1818' (157). Another possible influence in the design for the Orangery may have been that at Belton House (the first designs were made by Wyattville in 1811, another dated 1819). The mortuary chapel designed by Wyattville for Lord Brownlow in the Church of St Peter and St Paul, (designs were shown at the RA in 1816), was the setting for Canova's Monument to Sophia Brownlow, the 1st Earl's wife, who died on 21 February 1814.

25 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Diary, Saturday 9 November 1822.

The sculpture gallery from this point became a site of both possession and loss for the Duke, redolent with those same emotions he described in his journal on arriving in Rome: 'I went with Gabrielli to poor Canovas. I saw Endymion. Deep and sincere grief mixed with the supreme happiness of possessing such a treasure.'<sup>26</sup> Significantly, it was after the Duke's return from Rome in March 1823 that he came to finalise plans for the sculpture gallery with his architect Jeffrey Wyattville,<sup>27</sup> although there were still revisions to be made as new enthusiasms were sated and accommodated. In 1826, after Canova's Roman studio was sold and the plasters and marbles sent to Possagno, the Duke was famously 'bit by gardening,' a ravidity induced by his employment of Joseph Paxton (1801-65) that same year. He therefore asked Wyattville to redraw the sculpture gallery plans to introduce an Orangery, bringing nature and art together under one roof:

'Here happens one of the few deviations, in Sir Jeffrey Wyattville's progress, from his first intentions, that occurred during the progress of the works. The suite of rooms was to have ended with the Statue Gallery. The place of honour for the finest work I might obtain was to have been in the centre, where the door now opens into this place.'<sup>28</sup>

It was on this line, 'the place of honour' that he configured his memorial to Canova.

In December and January of 1822-23 during what can only be described as an orgy of sculpture buying, the Duke ordered, those works that were to form this personal testimony to the sculptor in the gallery.<sup>29</sup> Two days after his arrival in Rome he commissioned a 'Great bust of Canova' which was, in fact, never executed. In January, still immersed in Canovian matters, he ordered from Francesco Benaglia and Rinaldo Rinaldi (1793-1873) copies of the lions from Canova's monument to Pope Clement XIII Rezzonico in St Peter's, that would arrive in Chatsworth in December 1825.<sup>30</sup> A few days later the Duke visited Rinaldi in person

---

26 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Diary, Wednesday 18 December 1822.

27 *Ibid.*, Sunday 18 March 1823. 'Wyatt has been here all the time, everything is nearly settled.'

28 *Handbook*, 106.

29 See Kenworthy-Browne, fn. 1 above.

30 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Diary, Wednesday 15 January 1823: 'Campbell goes on well with my bust. I took Gabrielli out I have ordered the great lions of Canova. Benaglia is to do one & Rinaldi the other. We went to Canovas and Signor Domenico gave me a /cont...

to pay him a first instalment and then went with Gabrielli to St Peter's to look at the lions on the papal tomb, noting that casts needed to allow work to commence had still to be taken.<sup>31</sup>

During these melancholy winter days he was often in the company of other ardent Canovites, Lady Abercorn, his stepmother, the Kinnairds and Mary and Agnes Berry. At Mary Berry's he was introduced to another important collector of Canova's sculpture, 'Monsieur de Sommariva' and the son of the British sculptor who was to play an important part in the arrangement of the sculptures at Chatsworth, 'the young Westmacote.'<sup>32</sup> Days were spent at Canova's studio, looking at *Endymion*, and acquiring other Canova items. The 'highly finished' portrait bust of *Madame Mère* was purchased although he possessed the statue on the grounds that, 'it is the only remaining work of Canovas left complete. I think it is better than the head of the statue.'<sup>33</sup> The Duke was an inveterate souvenir hunter, and tried unceasingly during this winter Roman sojourn to obtain mementos of Canova. On 21 December he records in his Diary going with Lady Abercorn 'at three o'clock to Canovas residence to see the Abate and poor Canovas pictures and apartment. I wanted to buy the great ancient hand which is in the (...) over his home but I fear it is public property. We saw several paintings by him, and I am to have the choice of his favourite bits of marble.' Two days later on Monday 23 December he reports 'I went again to the Abate Canovas and bought poor Canova's favourite bits of ancient marbles 15 of which he had mounted and [...]. I got a drawing of *Endymion* better than that from which the engraving is taken.' Then on the 28 December he visits Canova's studio to give the workmen a present of ten louis.

---

*lcont.* book of poems on his works. He gave [permission] also for a cast to be taken of the lions they are in St Peter's at the tomb of Rezzonico. I went to the Vatican, the Duchess joined me there and we walked – I dined with the Berrys and went to Mme Esterhazys after where we saw Sommarivas gems. He has the singular fancy of having miniatures and gems made from all the statues and fixtures in his possession.'

Chatsworth Mss, 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Sculpture Accounts, 85: Letter from Gabrielli to the Duke, Rome 19 July 1823 includes a p.s. informing the Duke that the lion by Benaglia 'is going on most beautifully and the marble quite perfect.' The lion by Rinaldi was shipped in February 1825 (Sculpture Account Book, 91: letter from Gabrielli to the Duke, Rome, 22 February 1825).

31 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Diary, Tuesday 21 January 1823.

32 *Ibid.*, Sunday 5 January 1823.

33 *Ibid.*, Monday 7 January 1823.

The requiem Mass for Canova held at SS Apostoli, may have prompted the composition of Canova's memorial at Chatsworth. In his diary the Duke recorded 'the church was splendidly adorned the Vienna monument<sup>34</sup> in plaster was opposite the Pieta,<sup>35</sup> the Statue of Religion<sup>36</sup> in the centre and the two lions by the great door. It was tedious and hot with the floor damp, but it was worth seeing – not at all affecting.'<sup>37</sup> But the obsequies of the requiem Mass were such that he returned to look at them again two days later having just heard from Lady Abercorn that she would bequeath him Canova's bust of Napoleon (1803-22). Interestingly the Duke, prompted by Lady Abercorn and his stepmother, gave only £50 to the subscription for Canova's monument, disapproving of the choice of Venice rather than Rome as its site.<sup>38</sup> Returning to England the Duke continued to concern himself with memorialising his 'hero' in the public domain. In September he canvassed for the King's support of the Canova monument in Rome: 'The king well & very kind, I got my job done which was for him to subscribe to Canova's monument at Rome. He has promised but I don't yet know how much. however his name is the thing.'<sup>39</sup> The Duke's powers of persuasion must have been very effective as the King soon agreed to 'carte blanche about the sum.'<sup>40</sup>

In 1833, at the point when the sculptures were being introduced to the gallery copies of Canova's lions were placed on marble plinths to either side of the connecting door from the sculpture gallery to the Orangery, and under niches that housed companion busts of the Duke, by the Rome-based Scot Thomas Campbell (1790-1858), and of Canova, by Rinaldi. He later reflected upon the mixed emotions induced by Canova's death and the cessation of his earthly association with the sculptor in the *Handbook*, 'it was with mingled feelings of grief and exultation, of boundless admiration and recent bereavement, that I first saw my group

---

34 *Monument to Maria Christina of Austria*, 1798-1805, Vienna, Augustinerkirche. The plaster model is in the Gipsoteca, Possagno.

35 Possibly the plaster *Compianto di Cristo* completed in November 1821, Gipsoteca, Possagno.

36 Presumably the plaster model (1814-15) of *La Religione Cattolica*, Accademia di San Luca, Rome.

37 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Diary, Friday 31 January 1823.

38 *Ibid.*, Tuesday 31 December 1822. The Duke records writing to Count Cicognara sending the £50: 'I would not give more, because I disapprove of it not being at Rome.'

39 *Ibid.*, Friday 12 September 1823 (King's Lodge).

40 *Ibid.*, Sunday 14 September 1823.

[Endymion] in the well-known studio, where I had passed so many happy hours with the most talented, the most simple, and most noble-minded of mankind.<sup>41</sup>

Whilst Canova may be seen as the main focus for the evolution of the Chatsworth sculpture gallery, here and in the other rooms of the north wing a heady mix of different kinds of sensation were evoked by a mixture of art, drama, light, taste, music and scent, all variously brought into play. The display of sculpture, as the creation of his homage to Canova shows, was carefully orchestrated, not least through the careful selection of pedestals, columns, vases, tazze, tables and objects crafted from rare coloured marbles, as well as other items that were, in effect, 'souvenirs.' The fall of directional natural light in this top lit space was also important as the sun moved from east to west throughout the day. At night the room was illuminated by two magnificent candelabra bought by the Duke from the Wanstead sale in 1822, by hand-held and static candlelight and by moonlight.<sup>42</sup> The sculptures would have been viewed by torchlight and taper as was the fashion of which instances are recorded as taking place in other European princely collections as far apart as Stockholm and Rome. This 'tenebrism' was at the heart of the romantic reception of contemporary sculpture in the early nineteenth century, a means of the inert marble bodies coming to life as the light flickered across the surfaces, at the same time allowing close connoisseurial examination. In 1819 for example, the year of the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's first visit to Rome, there are two notable accounts of Canova's *Paolina Borghese as Venus Victorious* (1804-08) being viewed by candlelight in the *Palazzo Borghese*, Rome by his artistic friends: Thomas Moore recounts the sculptors Francis Chantrey and Canova viewing the work together with keen professional interest,<sup>43</sup> and Sir Thomas Lawrence records his own examination of this

---

41 *Handbook*, 105.

42 Devonshire Mss, Chatsworth, 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Sculpture Account Book, 165. The items were bought by the Duke's agent/steward George S Ridgway in June 1822. The pair of 'Magnificent carved Gilt' chandeliers were the most costly items purchased at £283. 10s and £309. 15s. The antique statues of Apollo, Domitian and a seated Agrippina with her daughter were purchased for £42, £84, and £105 respectively.

43 I have discussed this viewing of the *Paolina Borghese* in 'Anglo-Italian Attitudes: Chantrey and Canova,' in C.M. Sicca and A. Yarrington, *The Lustrous Trade: Material Culture and the History of Sculpture in England and Italy c. 1700-c. 1860* (London: Leicester University Press, 2000), 132-155.

exquisite sculpted body in the company of Prince Metternich.<sup>44</sup> The fleshly original Paolina Bonaparte Borghese (1780-1825) was Napoleon's loyal sister and a friend of the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke in Rome, such that he commissioned a portrait of her from Campbell as a pendant to Canova's *Madame Mère*. The Duke himself records viewing *Madame Mère* 'by lamplight' when it first arrived at Chatsworth.<sup>45</sup> The Duke delighted in special lighting and theatrical effects as is evident from his description of an evening's entertainment held at Chatsworth in October 1832: 'The waterworks were illuminated & nothing ever were so beautiful & between the acts they were [changed/charged] with different coloured Bengal lights and it was quite different from anything I ever saw [at] Peterhoff.'<sup>46</sup> For evening entertainments he would place 'powerful lamps' in the full-scale copy of the Medici vase by Lorenzo Bartolini (1777-1850) that stood at the centre of the Orangery, emitting a 'magical light' and illuminating the relief. There is also an undated account of a ball held at Devonshire House that also describes the use of fireworks to simulate the effect of Mount Etna erupting much to the amazement of guests.

But perhaps the most tantalising account of lighting a statue for entertainment is that relating to *Endymion* after its arrival with Canova's colossal bust of Napoleon at Devonshire House, London. The Duke wrote of 'Unpacking Endymion - & Ly Abercorns bust - che gioia. Endymion is safe and placed in my dining room, his spear was broken but that does not signify.'<sup>47</sup> Four days later on the evening of Friday 18 July the Duke recorded 'My ball tonight was brilliant, & a light was contrived [for] Endymion which shewed him in perfection.'<sup>48</sup> And in the following days polite society flocked to see the new acquisition.

Although the Chatsworth gallery contained many specific Roman references and associations, there were other, earlier, influences at work in the Duke's concept for the gallery that had begun to fertilise during his travels across a post-war Germany, Scandinavia and Russia during 1817, particularly in the company of his friend Nicolas, Crown prince of Russia. These young aristocrats were passing through a Europe that bore

---

44 D.E. Williams, *The Life and Correspondence of Sir Thomas Lawrence*, 2, (1831), 155-62: Sir Thomas Lawrence to Lysons, 27 June 1819.

45 When the statue arrived at Chatsworth it was placed in the Billiard room, where the Duke records 'we used to come down and look at her by lamplight,' *Handbook*, 34.

46 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Diary, Saturday 20 October 1832.

47 *Ibid.*, Monday 14 July 1823 (Devonshire House).

48 Friday 18 July 1823 (Devonshire House).

the scars of war, seeing the ruins, hearing tales of pillage and change, all testimony to the transient nature of temporal power. The Duke recorded some of his responses to these sights in his *Thought Book* where it is revealed that as reading matter he had taken a *Life of King Charles XII* of Sweden, visiting key sites of the King's battles against Russia in the Great Northern War. (Napoleon with rather different intentions had also carried Voltaire's *History of Charles XII* with him during the French campaign in Russia). In Stockholm, he even acquired a piece of the hat from the clothes that Charles was wearing when he died, and it remains pressed between the pages. It was after these formative experiences that he first seems to have registered the importance and beauty of Canova's works, encountering them in magnificent princely settings and those he records seem to presage the Chatsworth setting. The observations that he makes in this text, particularly those written in at the time (rather than those reminiscences about this visit that were added later) are tinged with melancholy, highlighting encounters with beauty under threat. For example, his account of a visit to Arkhangelskoye, Prince Yusupov's Palace:

I dined there in the Prince's Orangerie for his house was undergoing repair and thorough purification from the French, who pillaged it. [...]. Two beautiful statues by Canova had a narrow escape. The slaves who were removing them saw a party of the enemy coming, and had time and luck sufficient to bury and save them. The remaining statues in the garden lost their noses in the cause. The house is modern and in good taste, there were pictures by Sir Joshua Reynolds and West. Prince Yousouppoff brought the popular artist Gonzagues to Russia, whose painting of stage scenery corridors &c is very good, and a theatre is now building here from his designs. This garden is very pretty and in the gout du pays contains everything. – cottages, games, and a glass manufactory, a column to record the Emperor's having been there last year, and all kinds of flowers and parterres.<sup>49</sup>

There is also a brief visit to Venice where in Byronic fashion a sense of enchantment and decay are indelibly mixed, he then travels to Munich visiting 'Beauharnais,' as he describes the once Viceroy of Italy, noting that he possesses 'the three graces by Canova, and the Magdalen.' He

---

49 Devonshire Mss, Chatsworth, the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's *Thought Book*, 21.

also visited Cassel and it is here that there are two watercolours pasted into the *Thought Book* showing Willhelmshöhe, a setting and building that so echoes the Duke's future alterations to Chatsworth.

But this idyllic setting had also been defiled, this time by the Russians who took Cassel in September 1813' [...].

'There is a building containing a marble bath of wonderful beauty within built by the Landgrave Charles – it is surrounded by statues, one of singular beauty had a curious escape, it alone had been sent to Willhelmshöhe by the order of Jerome, and during the bombardment a ball came through the door and shattered the wall in the exact spot where the statue had stood and where it now stands again. The bath, reliefs, and statues all of marble are by the same artist, his name was [blank space].<sup>50</sup>

What is also of interest is what is *not* included in the *Thought Book*. In Stockholm, he makes no mention of the ancient statue of Endymion acquired by King Gustavus III, then one of the most important antiquities displayed in the public *Stenmuseum* – Museum of Stones.<sup>51</sup> This is not to say that he did not visit there, but rather that they did not seem to trigger a response that was set down on paper. Interestingly, he was not attracted to contemporary Swedish sculpture although he much admired Swedish porphyry and at one time considered using it to line the gallery. In Rome during December 1822 he visited 'a Swedish sculptor whom I remembered at Stockholm who has some fine things but his drawing is bad.'<sup>52</sup> It is interesting to note that by 1817 'a small room was created at one end of the Stone Museum' to display 'smaller sketches and studies' by Johan Tobias Sergel (1740-1814) purchased by the state after his death, and his *Cupid and Psyche* 'was placed in the Gallery of the Muses,' a tribute to the sculptor who had died in 1815.<sup>53</sup>

---

50 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's *Thought Book*, 55.

51 For an account of the evolution and arrangement of this museum see, Anne-Marie Leander Touati and Magnus Olausson, *Ancient Sculptures in the Royal Museum: The Eighteenth-century Collection in Stockholm*, Swedish National Arts Museums and Svenska Institutet in Rome, Stockholm (1998), 1.

52 The 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Diary, Tuesday 24 December 1822.

53 *National Museum Stockholm Illustrated Catalogue – Swedish and European Sculpture*, Stockholm: National Museum, (1999), 15. See also Leander Touati and Magnus Olausson, 73, fig. 21, 'Plan of the Museum c. 1817.'

The Chatsworth sculpture gallery's arrangement and the narratives it evoked were woven around the Duke's memories and experiences. The inclusion of Thorvaldsen's bust of Consalvi in the Chatsworth Gallery, and the company that it kept during the Duke's lifetime, marks a network of friendship and diplomacy to which he belonged in Rome. At the same time, melancholy and emotional sensibilities are invoked relating to both personal and temporal loss. The bust of the Cardinal was placed facing a reduced replica in giallo antico of the ancient column of Phocas, commemorating the Duchess's excavations in the Forum, a project that had been arranged by her through the Cardinal no doubt aided by Canova who became President of the General Consultative Committee for the Fine Arts the year that work began.<sup>54</sup> The giallo antico column was placed next to the sculptor's bust of Laura, that the Duke believed to be carved in its entirety by Canova, its acquisition the result of the combined 'entreaties' by himself and the Duchess Elizabeth.<sup>55</sup> These personal associations were furthered through its placement on a column of pale verde antico from the excavation and a birthday gift for her stepson in 1819. This was then surmounted by a smaller marble column from the Parthenon. The Cardinal's bust was tellingly, adjacent to the grouping of portrait statues and busts of the Bonaparte family arranged in the central bay of the west wall: Canova's colossal bust of the hero flanked on either side by seated figures of his mother and sister: the sculptor's seated statue of *Laetitia Bonaparte 'Madame Mère,'* 'unhappy mother of the greatest son' as the Homeric inscription chosen by Lord Holland<sup>56</sup> reads, and *Campbell's Paolina Borghese*. The sense of the transience of earthly power was emphasised by the Duke's placing of the only major sculpture from classical antiquity in the gallery directly across from Napoleon. The colossal head of Alexander the Great, the hero so admired by Napoleon and at the same time the namesake of the Russian hero who had caused the French Emperor's military nemesis and ultimate exile to Elba has to his right Rudolf Schadow's *Filatrice* (1819) on her pedestal of 'a fragment

54 Frank Salmon, "'Storming the Campo Vaccino": British Architects and the Antique Buildings of Rome after Waterloo' *Architectural History*, 38 (1995), 146-175, n.31. 'The inscription on the column had been uncovered in 1813 and the Devonshire clearance began on 19 December 1816.'

55 *Handbook*, 102.

56 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Diary, Tuesday 20 May 1834 (Derby) refers to inscription on the pedestal.

of a column from the Forum at Rome [...] retaining its ancient polish'<sup>57</sup> being placed opposite to *Madame Mère*. 'It should' according to the Duke, 'remind all good Romans of Trajan's Forum, from whence it came.'<sup>58</sup>

Canova's modelling tools, 'an interesting relic' as the Duke described them, came into the Duke's possession through Lady Abercorn. During the Roman winter sojourn of 1822-23 she was often his companion, visiting Canova 'sites' with him and weeping copiously, so much so that the Duke called her 'aqua infelice.' These souvenirs, the means of Canova's artistry, are now set into the wall of the gallery beneath a bust of *Isis Serapis* carved by Roman workmen from Derbyshire Ashford marble. In the early arrangement of the gallery the tools were placed in one of the two tazze purchased from Bartolini that were set to either side of *Napoleon*, possibly a reference to their origins as designs by Bartolini for Napoleon's residence in exile on Elba. One of the Chatsworth tazze was placed upon a column of giallo antico that bore the scars of the fire that destroyed S Paulo fuori le Mura in 1823 and which the Duke had managed to obtain from the ruins. Uniquely in the versions of this statue, a profile of one of the tazze is carved in relief at the centre of the tambourine held by Bartolini's recumbent *Bacchante*. Other intimations of death, mourning and the transience of human life were also present. Medals made for Napoleon from the famous Elba iron that were given to the Duke by Paolina, were set into the rear panel of the statue's pedestal. The bracelet Paolina wore when mourning her brother's death was another gift, this time used to disguise a fracture in the wrist of Thorvaldsen's *Venus*, a commission placed by the Duke in his 1819 visit to Italy.<sup>59</sup> This heavenly being bearing the bracelet was placed across from her earthly counterpart who meditates upon the portrait medallion of her brother. Napoleon's death in 1821 and Canova's the next year, were followed by those of Cardinal Consalvi and the Duchess Elizabeth in 1824, and Paolina in 1825, making this a telling *mise en scène*.

These Napoleonic associations were also carried on the air at Chatsworth that was seasonally perfumed by the four orange trees

---

57 W. Adam, *The Gem of the Peak; or Matlock Bath and its vicinity* (London. Longman & Co, 1845), 139.

58 *Handbook*, 100.

59 Allan Cunningham repaired the breaks in the statue reporting to the Duke that this was complete in a letter of 4 January 1822, see 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Sculpture Account Book, 45.

from the Empress Josephine's collection at Malmaison planted in the Orangery. The scent of these and other rare specimens scented the whole of Chatsworth with their blossoms. And it is in this context that we should remember the experience of viewing sculptures in this location was a sensory experience, of touch, sight, smell and sometimes music.

At the outset, when the Duke's enthusiasm for contemporary sculpture, made clear by his numerous commissions to Rome-based sculptors, was also seen to offer opportunities for British artists and sculptors, vide the enthusiastic involvement of both Francis Chantrey (1781-1841) and Richard Westmacott (1775-1856) in the decoration and arrangement of the gallery.<sup>60</sup> This is made clear in a letter written to the Duke from Rome in September 1826 by the painter Charles Eastlake RA, (1793-1865) a friend of John Gibson (1790-1866) one of the Duke's favoured young British sculptors working in Rome who had recently completed a colossal *Mars and Cupid* (1821-25) on commission for the gallery. Eastlake's letter tells of the near completion of his painting for the Duke, *Isadas the Young Spartan* (1826, Chatsworth House), and requests that it might be exhibited at the RA.<sup>61</sup> In this context he ventures an opinion on the quality of the Duke's newly forming collection of sculpture:

'If the room for the exhibition of sculpture at Somerset House were better lighted & larger I would venture [to] recommend the exhibition of some of the masterly works in marble which have been done for your Grace in Rome – The influence of these things on the public taste and on the efforts of rising artists is incalculable'<sup>62</sup>

This was, of course, not a disinterested request. Although works destined for Chatsworth would be available to the influential social circles in which the Duke participated, and to other interested 'casual' visitors typified by Elizabeth Bennett and her aunt and uncle in *Pride and Prejudice*, it would never be as important as the open, public, marketplace of the RA exhibition or the Duke's private London residence, Devonshire

60 Many artists visited Chatsworth to view the sculptures in the new gallery. On Tuesday 10 October 1833 the Duke records in his diary showing 'young Westmacott' the gallery and the dining room prior to the marbles being moved in.

61 For a description of the subject, see Charles Lock Eastlake, *Contributions to the Literature of the Fine Arts* (London. John Murray, 1870), 107-111. The picture was exhibited at the RA in 1827.

62 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Sculpture Account Book, 51.

House; vide Gibson's earlier entreaty that his *Mars and Cupid*, like *Endymion*, should be viewed in London before removal to Chatsworth.<sup>63</sup>

Although the Duke made many visits to studios during his frequent travels in Italy, and felt that he had a personal relationship with 'his sculptors,'<sup>64</sup> between 1819 and 1828 he relied heavily upon an agent to micro manage his commissions in Rome and to ensure their safe shipment to England once completed. As already indicated, the artist and dealer in marble, Gabrielli played a pivotal role in the successful realisation of the Chatsworth project and his career is one that epitomises how such cultural transactions between Italy and Britain were dependent upon intermediaries. It is not known how the Duke came to employ his agent but they may have met when the artist was employed by Valentine, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lord Cloncurry at Lyons House, County Kildare, a house where the improvements he instigated using the architect Richard Morrison, the sculptor Luigi Antonio Aquisti and from 1805 Gabrielli, were completed by 1820.<sup>65</sup> Lord Cloncurry was another 'bit by marble mania,' evidenced not least by his acquisition of ancient sculpture and other antiquities, among which were three 'columns of red Egyptian granite from the Golden House of Nero, which had latterly ornamented the *Palazzo Farnese* in Rome' and a fourth that had 'originated from the Baths of Titus.'<sup>66</sup> These were, as Massingberd and Sykes have described, used in the central portico of the entrance façade. The 10<sup>th</sup> Earl of Meath was another Irish collector who used Gabrielli as an agent to acquire Italian sculpture, chimney pieces and marbles for Kilruddy, County Wicklow.<sup>67</sup>

---

63 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Sculpture Account Book, 121: Letter from John Gibson to the Duke, Rome, 16 May 1825 eager that his most important commission to date should be seen in London before being removed to Chatsworth: 'I venture to express my great desire that it might be seen in town before it goes to Chatsworth as it is one of the largest works in marble that has been sent to England for many years I should prefer its being seen before my smaller works.'

64 See for example the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Diary, Monday 23 December 1822 when he writes 'The Dss went with me to all my sculptors and were pleased with their works.' And Tuesday 24 December 1822, 'I went to my sculptors to pay them.'

65 Aquisti made decorative panels depicting the story of Icarus for the Orangery at Lyons.

66 Hugh Montgomery Massingberd and Christopher Simon Sykes, *Great Houses of Ireland* (London. Laurence King Publishing, 1999), 247.

67 *Ibid.*, 94, 98. The sculpture gallery designed by William Burn was added in 1852 by the 11<sup>th</sup> Duke who succeeded to the title in 1851, see 99. There was extensive 'remodelling of the 17<sup>th</sup>- century house during 1820-29 in the Tudor revival style' by the architect William Vitruvius Morrison, exactly contemporaneous /cont...

Gabrielli had moved to Dublin in 1808 becoming vice-president of the Royal Dublin Society of Arts in 1811. Returning to Rome after Napoleon's defeat he was elected to the Academy of St Luke in 1817. Although the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke of Devonshire spent little time at Lismore, his Irish house, during the early 1820s he was concerned with politics in Ireland and this activity intermingles with the 'causes of happiness' and those of 'regret and sorrow' in his annual summary for 1822. On the happy side 'my visit to Ireland & everything got through there successfully' is followed immediately by 'The satisfactory progress of the work at Chatsworth' alongside which he cites his success speaking in the House of Lords on the subject of 'Irish Tithes.' His 'journey to Rome. Endymion & enjoyment of Rome' are high points but these were countered by 'The death of Canova.'<sup>68</sup>

By the time the Duke visited Rome, Gabrielli was one of several artists and artisans who specialised in sourcing different varieties of rare marble for sale.<sup>69</sup> The Duke records a visit to Gabrielli's shop in early January 1823 when he 'got some pretty things in ancient stones' and also ordered from him a view of Rome from Monte Mario.<sup>70</sup> They visited the Capitol together to measure the *Isis Serapis* in order that the correct quantity of black Ashford marble could be shipped from Derbyshire for a copy to be made for Chatsworth.<sup>71</sup> In July 1823 Gabrielli made a point of elaborating how difficult it was to source high quality marbles: 'it is however necessary to buy the marbles whenever I can find them, for your Grace knows, how rare and scarce [sic] such articles are, and many besides me are on the look out, as soon as any is offered on sale.'<sup>72</sup> His correspondence also reveals the huge artistic and financial investment that his patron was making in contemporary art, as well as his own tireless activity in the Duke's service.<sup>73</sup> For example, in one letter of 22

---

*/cont.* with the improvements at Chatsworth.

68 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Diary, Tuesday 31 December 1822.

69 See Raniero Gnoli, *Marmora Romana* (Roma. Edizione dell'Elefante, 1988), 106.

70 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Diary, Monday 13 January 1823.

71 *Ibid.*, Tuesday 21 January 1823.

72 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Sculpture Account Book, 85. Letter from Gaspare Gabrielli, Rome, 19 July 1823 to the Duke.

73 Gabrielli was married to an 'English woman' and it may be that she wrote the detailed letters in excellent English that survive. Letter from Freeborn Smith, (Vice) Consul and 'the only resident British Agent' in Rome, 24 June 1828 informing the Duke of Gabrielli's sudden death and offering to manage the outstanding */cont...*

February 1825, Gabrielli lists works that he considers will be ready for shipment to England by the end of April. These include Rinaldi's copy of Canova's *lion*, Joseph Gott's *greyhounds*, Tenerani's *Venus*, Pozzi's *Latona*, Albacini's *Achilles*,<sup>74</sup> and two colossal busts *Ariadne* by Gott and *Achilles* by Rennie.<sup>75</sup> At the same time he reports that Rinaldi was paid for 'Lady Abercorn's bust of Canova.'<sup>76</sup> Perhaps it was his 'painterly eye' that the Duke was using to assemble the rich and varied appearance that he so relished.<sup>77</sup> This delight in colourful effects in the marrying of coloured marble with the white Carrara marble is evident not least in a magnificent pair of porphyry and marble tables that Gabrielli designed and had made for the Duke.<sup>78</sup>

Contained in Gabrielli's letters are many suggestions for pedestals to set off the sculptural 'diamonds' of the Duke's collection. His death in June 1828 meant that some of his proposals for pedestals, notably those for *Endymion* and *Madame Mère*, were never to be realised.<sup>79</sup> In 1822 he had written to the Duke to tell him that he taken measurements for *Endymion* and *Madame Mère*, 'I will with great pleasure undertake the making of the two bases [...] that for the *Endymion* will be of Green Africano, Canova wishes that the base might be rather low and have agreed upon that point as well as of the colour [...] the one of *Madame Mere* will also be of Africano, but different colour.' The day after seeing *Endymion* for the first time the Duke also took care to examine the low

---

*/cont.* commissions that Gabrielli had to realise, see 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Sculpture Account Book, 105.

74 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Sculpture Account Book, 7: receipts for payments from Albacini, 24 June 1823, 8 September.

75 In an earlier letter from Gabrielli to the Duke he writes that Gott had taken upon himself to carve a colossal bust as a pendant to that by Rennie, rather than the 'small size one' that the Duke had originally ordered, 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Sculpture Account Book, 87: letter from Gabrielli to the Duke, Rome, 20 December 1823.

76 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Sculpture Account Book, 91: letter from Gabrielli to the Duke, Rome, 22 February 1825. In an earlier letter (87: 20 December 1823) he reports that Rinaldi's bust of Canova is 'finished' and that he has paid him the 20 Louis still owing.

77 See the letter 23 May 1823 (Sculpture Account Book, 85) where he writes 'I have almost got all the measures of all your Grace's statues, and when I can find pieces of fine kind adapted to the different sizes I have them worked on.'

78 *Ibid.*, 87: Letter from Gaspare Gabrielli to the Duke, Rome, 14 August 1824. The tables were sent with Thorvaldsen's bas reliefs with several pedestals, including that used for Finelli's *Cupid with a butterfly*.

79 The Duke was to keep in touch with the 'poor widow Gabrielli' on his subsequent visits to Rome, see for example his Diary entry for Saturday 22 December 1838.

green africano pedestal. Perhaps these were lost in the same shipment on board the *Io* that included the plasters from which a bronze version of the *Endymion* was to have been cast in Paris.<sup>80</sup> The pedestal for *Madame Mère* was made from local stone and in the event the Duke chose a similar africano to that used under the *Cupid with a butterfly* by Carlo Finelli (1786-1853), a work which according to his diary he had bought in memory of Canova and which he chose to place in the corner of the bay behind *Endymion*.<sup>81</sup> At the time that these letters were received by the Duke it should be remembered that the sculpture gallery was a building site and its internal ordering was still to be determined.

What is clear from Gabrielli's correspondence as a whole is that the Duke sent black marble from Ashford to be carved by Roman workmen with the resulting works sent back to him at Chatsworth in the very early stages of the project.<sup>82</sup> We know that a shipment of this stone had arrived in the port of Leghorn, interestingly with a 'basket of plants,' by December 1823.<sup>83</sup> There is also an instruction from Gabrielli just over two years later when the completed objects from this local stone were on their way home: Gabrielli advising the Duke that a shipment of 'all the objects in marmo nero Inglese' which includes the bust of Isis and Serapis, two tazze copied from the Vatican Museum, Scipio's tomb, two obelisks, a further Tazza [of fluorspar] was ready to depart.<sup>84</sup> The Duke had also sent over white alabaster which, unlike the black Derbyshire marble, Gabrielli declared had 'proved very bad.'<sup>85</sup>

The Duke took enormous care over placing the sculptures in the gallery. The Great Dining room 'opened' on Thursday 10 October 1832.<sup>86</sup> He records in his diary for Friday 9 August 1833 arriving at Chatsworth, 'The Sculpture Gallery finishing and so very beautiful, also the dining room. My improvements!' Then the following day 'Happy day, the

80 John Kenworthy-Browne, see fn. 1 above.

81 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Sculpture Account Book, 95: letter from Gabrielli to the Duke, Rome, 30 July 1825. This reveals that the square pedestal of 'beautiful africano' upon which the statue stands in the Sculpture Gallery was made in Rome.

82 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Sculpture Account Book, 87. Letter from Gaspere Gabrielli to the Duke, Rome, 14 August 1824 reports on progress and that the workmen had found the quality of the marble 'rather hard.'

83 *Ibid.*, 87, Gabrielli, to the Duke, Rome, 20 December 1823.

84 *Ibid.*, 91, Gabrielli to the Duke, Rome, 22 February 1825.

85 *Ibid.*, 87, Gabrielli to the Duke, Rome, 14 August 1824.

86 6<sup>th</sup> Duke's Diary, 1832.

weather perfect. [...] the pleasure ground newly laid out by the Stables is a charming improvement.' On Tuesday 13 August he writes, 'sat in the Orangery & was occupied in Statue Gallery and among my books all day.' The Building Accounts for 17 August 1833 record 'making 'skeleton' figures of statues and vases for the Sculpture Gallery' and the process of fixing works in place can be seen to have taken place throughout that year and well into 1834. The 'two green columns were raised in the Statue Gallery' on Monday 23 September, but as his diaries bear testimony, the Duke who was suffering with a bad knee missed seeing this event but was 'wheeled to see' them on the following day. On Saturday 9 November 1833 he gave a 'grand dinner for the workmen in the statue gallery previous to the marbles being brought in.'<sup>87</sup> After these events he leaves Chatsworth on an extended trip to Naples and Sicily, his plans having been set in place.

Perhaps a fitting postscript to this paper is the annotation made by Leigh Hunt to the Duke's statement at the end of his account of the Gallery published in the *Handbook*,

'the contents of this room afford me great satisfaction and pleasure, and are among the excuses for an extravagance that I can neither deny nor justify, nor (when I look at Endymion) repent.'<sup>88</sup>

Alongside this Hunt writes: 'Can any payment (supposing it to be at the expense of no suffering to anybody) be too great for things that so elevate the mind & give such pleasure for ages, as beautiful works of art? The noble owner of a gallery like this may exclaim with a poet whom he understands & admires,

"Never, believe me,  
Appear the Immortals  
Never alone:  
(that is to say, one good thing brings another)  
"Scarce had I welcom'd the Sorrow beguiler,  
Iacchus! But in came boy Cupid the Smiler:  
Lo! Phoebus the Glorious descends from his throne!  
They Advance, they float in, the Olympians all!  
With Divinities fills my

87 *Ibid.*, Monday 11 November 1833, the Duke records a servants 'ball' taking place in the statue gallery.

88 *Handbook*, 105.

Terrestrial Hall!  
How shall I yield you  
Due entertainment,  
Celestial Quire?

Schiller's "Visit of the Gods" by Coleridge<sup>89</sup>

The Duke's sense of Canova's immortality is certainly present in the Chatsworth Gallery, as is an enduring sense of the transience of human life and political power found in the references to Napoleon and modern Rome. As an act in the drama of one of those evenings devoted to pleasure and entertainment he delighted in at Chatsworth, after dinner he and his guests would enter the sculpture gallery from the Great Dining Room to music played from the anteroom gallery. The perfume of blossoms in the Orangery would fill the air and viewing the gallery and its 'diamonds' under dramatic lighting effects both natural and artificial, they could not fail to notice immediately before them the luminous figure of *Endymion*, and at the far end of the gallery that of *Hebe*, raising her ewer to fill the cup, placed immediately below the colossal bust of the Duke set in its niche on the north wall. From this viewpoint Canova's 'memorial' forms a backdrop to the gallery and through the doors the delights of the Orangery at the centre of which shone the illuminated Borghese vase. Walking towards this they would pass Consalvi's bust before encountering Napoleon and his mother and sister and a host of marble divines and semi-divines.

*University of Glasgow*

---

<sup>89</sup> *Handbook*, 105-108, written in ink across the foot of the pages.

## Joseph Severn and the establishment of the British Academy in Rome

*Sue Brown*

The British were much the most numerous and visible of the visitors who came to Rome when the Continent re-opened for travellers after Napoleon's defeat in 1815. When Keats and Severn arrived in November 1820 there were around 2000 of them.<sup>1</sup> They, but not Keats and Severn, strutted around, lording it over the natives, doing the rounds in their carriages of the galleries, churches and antique ruins, and bursting into spirited renditions of 'God Save the King' when they made it to the top of St. Peter's.<sup>2</sup> For all their evident national pride, however, it was a humiliation to discover that in the art capital of the world, it was the French and Italian academies which dominated with the British artists having no organised means of getting together to refine their skills and promote their presence in Rome. As Charlotte Eaton complained in her study of the Eternal City: 'The illiberality, and the pitiful penurious spirit, our government has always manifested in everything relative to the arts, form a remarkable contrast to its lavish expenditure in other respects.'<sup>3</sup>

Despite the lack of a British Academy in Rome, the tradition of artists coming there from London to study was well-established. Joshua Reynolds arrived in 1757, painting little but storing up an encyclopaedia of visual memories for future use. Fuseli followed, as did Benjamin West and Washington Allston, and, later, Romney and others. Reynolds and then Fuseli, who found his artistic vocation in Rome, drew on what they had seen in formulating an ambitious theory for the new Royal Academy in London which was founded in 1768. This set Michelangelo and Raphael, whose masterpieces were amply displayed in the Vatican, at the head of the pantheon of great artists whose works should be studied and admired, and also sought to establish history painting in the grand manner as the highest form of artistic endeavour. As such

---

1 J. Hale, (ed.) *The Italian Journal of Samuel Rogers* (London. Faber & Faber, 1956), 60.

2 C. Eaton, *Rome in the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh. Hurst, Robinson, 1820), II, 264.

3 *Ibid*, III, 113.

it was to be the putative basis for a new English School of painting which would challenge the existing mastery of the French School.

So, the young artists who came to Rome in the decade after the end of the Napoleonic Wars were mostly aspiring history painters, with heads full of Academy theory, particularly as it was expounded by Fuseli who was both Keeper of the Academy Schools and Professor of Painting. By spring 1821 when Joseph Severn, released from his services at Keats's deathbed, was able to take an active part in artistic life in Rome, he found six British painters working there. The longest and most securely established was Charles Locke Eastlake who had arrived as early as 1816, on the back of his sale for 1000 guineas of a portrait of Napoleon, awaiting transportation to St. Helena. Stiff and self-conscious, Eastlake relaxed in Rome, honing his fine artistic sensibilities and making his way in society, but with no loss of his single-minded concentration on his own development as an artist.<sup>4</sup> He also kept in regular touch with the kingmakers at the Royal Academy and was the unquestioned leader of the painters in Rome.

Seymour Kirkup, a fellow-student at the RA, arrived the same year as Eastlake. Quirky, sociable, cosmopolitan and greatly gifted, Kirkup's private means blunted his artistic ambition. He left some finely drafted portraits and landscapes but lacked the staying power for the long haul of becoming a successful history painter. John Bryant Lane was another early arrival. Unlike Kirkup, he had a great deal of ambition, but less competence. For eight years he laboured behind closed doors on a painting, 'The Massacre of the Innocents,' intended to astonish the world. Its eventual unveiling was a disaster with Lane bundled out of the Papal Estates on a charge of blasphemy. Richard Evans, quarrelsome and unclubbable, had come with a commission from John Nash to paint copies of Raphaels for his new house in Regent's Street. Richard Cook was able to pay his own way to Rome while James Atkins had an aristocratic patron, the Marquess of Londonderry.<sup>5</sup>

If the quality of the painters in Rome varied, the five young sculptors there made an impressive group. John Gibson was their leader.

---

4 See D. Robertson, *Sir Charles Eastlake and the Victorian Art World* (Princeton. Princeton University Press, 1978) for a brilliant portrait of Eastlake's artistic development.

5 K. M. Wells, *The Return of the British Painters to Rome after 1815* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leicester, June 1974).

Unusually, he had by-passed the Academy, encouraged by the RA's own Professor of Sculpture, Flaxman, to go straight to Rome:

'there I should be in the best school in Europe, surrounded by the finest works and by artists of all nations, and there I should have the opportunity of becoming known to the rich English patrons who crowded to Rome every winter, and Canova was generous to young artists of talent.'<sup>6</sup>

And so it proved. Having arrived in October 1817, Gibson was taken into Canova's studio, attended his academy and in 1819 got his first important commission from the Duke of Devonshire. Alongside Gibson in Rome was Richard Westmacott, who would later join his father's busy practice in London and, in time, like his father, become Professor of Sculpture at the RA; the graceful Richard Wyatt, as skilled with his guitar as his mallet; the obliging Thomas Campbell and William Ewing, who had lodgings in Piazza di Spagna and helped Severn nurse Keats. In 1823, they were joined by Joseph Gott, a protégé of Sir Thomas Lawrence, the President of the Royal Academy. Gott, a Yorkshireman, eschewed the neo-Classicism of his fellow-sculptors in Rome, producing charming naturalistic terracotta. He and his family moved in with Severn on their arrival in Rome. Though Gibson has sometimes been awarded the honour of having executed Keats's gravestone, more probably it was the work of Gott.

Joseph Severn<sup>7</sup> came of a very modest artisanal background in Shoreditch, was apprenticed rather reluctantly to an engraver, William Bond, and then after eight years overcame parental opposition to enrol full-time as a student at the Royal Academy in 1815. Though he often struggled there, in 1819 he won the top student honour, the Gold Medal for Historical Painting. In the previous year, the Academy had reinstated its travelling scholarship, which was only open to Gold Medal winners and offered in rotation between the disciplines of painting, sculpture and architecture. Edward Vuillamy, an architect, was its first post-War recipient. In 1821, it would be the turn of a painter. Though Severn was, in effect, the only candidate, he withdrew from the Academy early in 1820 discouraged by the ill-feeling that his Gold Medal success had provoked.

---

6 T. Mathews (ed.), *The Biography of John Gibson RA, Sculptor Rome* (London. Heinemann, 1911), 39.

7 For a full account of his life and career see Sue Brown, *Joseph Severn A Life The Rewards of Friendship* (Oxford. Oxford University Press, 2009).

Instead of working on a submission for the travelling scholarship, he reverted to making a living painting miniatures. Unhappy though he had been at the Academy, Severn had a gift for making friends with remarkable men and was one of the earliest members of the Keats Circle. Were it not for that, he might never have made it to Rome. What gave him the confidence to go there was a suggestion from a mutual friend of his and Keats, William Haslam, that Severn might accompany the invalid Keats to Italy in September 1820. He went at four days notice, never regretted it and, despite the fact that he was already in Rome, won the Academy's travelling fellowship in December 1821. Severn was high-spirited and sociable, ambitious and charming. He quickly became a central member of the British artistic community in Rome. On Christmas Day 1821, both painters and sculptors got together at their own table at the Caffè Greco to toast Severn's success. A week later, at Severn's suggestion, they went off as a body to offer their New Year's greetings to Canova.

Meeting informally as they did, however, they were conscious that they were at a disadvantage by comparison with their French, Italian and German counterparts. If they wanted to keep their hands in at drafting, most were obliged to beg admission to the over-crowded Italian academies. Though Eastlake had an open invitation to attend the French Academy in its luxurious palazzo and gardens at the Villa Medici, it went against the grain with others like Richard Evans to 'owe any part of our education as artists, to the liberality of foreigners, and more particularly the French, who cherished against us at that time all the smothered resentment of a baffled enemy.'<sup>8</sup> There had been earlier but fitful attempts amongst the British artists in Rome to organise themselves. An academy set up by sixteen English and Scottish artists in 1750 lasted five years. In the 1790s, the artists in Rome successfully campaigned together to ensure that they could send their works of art duty free to the UK. But in 1817 when Pope Pius VII, in gratitude for Britain's role in defeating Napoleon, offered the Prince Regent a vacant palazzo as the home for a British academy, there was neither the energy in Rome nor the interest in London to take up the offer.<sup>9</sup> Four years later, however, the situation had changed.

By then, there was a sufficient nucleus of artists in Rome, most of them products of the Academy Schools, who wanted to continue the practice they had learnt there of drawing from antique casts and live

---

<sup>8</sup> Extract from an unsourced article, probably by Richard Evans, quoted in Wells, 178.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

models. There was drive, ambition and leadership, too, notably from Eastlake, Severn and Westmacott. In London they also had a particularly sympathetic President of the Royal Academy. Sir Thomas Lawrence had been prevented by his father from studying in Rome as a young man, but was deeply impressed by all that he saw there when he finally made a triumphal visit in 1819 and subsequently helped a number of young artists to get to Rome. And there were art-loving patrons in Italy prepared to sponsor the new academy.

It began simply enough in December 1821 as a way of sharing the costs of hiring a model for the evening. Initially, they met in Evans's studio but by March 1822 were established in Severn's spacious apartment at 18, Via San Isidoro where they met for regular drawing classes and ordered up a corpse for dissection in one of his lofts as an aid to their anatomical studies. At Carnival that year, the British had made their presence felt, behaving badly, pelting each other with confits, joining in the battle of the tapers, kicking up a row in the theatre and knocking down the partitions between the boxes.<sup>10</sup> This fun and games, however, did not disguise their more serious purpose in getting together. Eastlake wrote to Lawrence at an early stage to let him know about the co-operation that was developing in Rome. Westmacott persuaded the art-loving connoisseur and British Consul in Naples, Sir William Hamilton, to give them a donation of £100 which Severn collected when in Naples in the summer. The Duke of Devonshire, a notable collector who regularly visited Rome, followed suit. Hamilton's donation did not come without strings, however. He wanted the British artists to mount an appeal in Rome, Naples and Florence for an endowment for the nascent academy which would enable it to find permanent premises. The suggestion provoked lively debate. Evans resented the idea of living on charity. Others were concerned about the difficulty of setting up a regular establishment in Rome when none of them knew how long they would be there. The best safeguard would be some formal link with the Academy in London which would guarantee the continuity of the body in Rome. A correspondence was opened with Sir Thomas Lawrence and conducted in parallel by Eastlake and Severn.

Their letters make an interesting contrast. Here in embryo is the inevitable panjandrum of mid-Victorian arts administration, Sir Charles Eastlake, Secretary of the Fine Arts Commission, Director of the National

---

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Severn to Thomas Severn, 24 March 1822 in G. Scott (ed.), *Joseph Severn: Letters and Memoirs* (Aldershot. Ashgate, 2004), 197.

Gallery and President of the Royal Academy, informed, high-minded and sometimes far-sighted, hard-working and conscientious, but essentially cautious. Here, too, in outline is Joseph Severn, British Consul in Rome throughout the turbulent 1860s, impulsive, big-hearted, uncritical, energetic and self-important. Severn initiated the correspondence, writing in best copperplate about the problems of the artists in Rome:

‘Bad models – bad places- and a difficulty of admission...At present as Englishmen we cannot meet together without being noticed: and it is a little pain - tho’ no interruption - that the place and manner of our meeting - should not be more in character with the English nation.’

But beyond asking for the ‘sanction’ of the Royal Academy, Severn had no specific ideas about how the new organisation would be incorporated and asked for guidance from Lawrence.<sup>11</sup> The President’s reply was cautious. He gave them £50 from his own pocket and promised to put Severn’s letter before the RA General Assembly. He also expressed the hope that ‘in some way or other, though on a more limited scale, the English Academy at Rome may yet vie in real usefulness and Dignity, with the other foreign Institutions of this beloved City.’ But he also urged ‘Prudence and Moderation’ and dropped a heavy hint that he would rather do business with ‘my greatly esteemed Friend Mr Eastlake.’<sup>12</sup>

The Academy in London awarded the Rome body £50 a year for three years, the maximum it was allowed to donate to any single cause, the British Institution came forward with £100, Lawrence persuaded George IV to stump up £200 from the Privy Purse, a circular was published in the *Literary Gazette* and trustees appointed in London to manage the subscriptions. In Rome, Eastlake, true to form, set up a committee with himself as secretary, Severn as an improbable treasurer, and Gibson, Westmacott, Kirkup, Lane and Evans as members. Though Lawrence was no longer answering his letters, Severn kept on writing to him with ever more expansive ideas. Why not acquire a building with studios and accommodation for ‘12 or even 20’ young artists selected by the

---

11 *Ibid.*, 212-13. Joseph Severn to Thomas Lawrence, 22 October 1822.

12 Thomas Lawrence to Joseph Severn, 23 December 1822 in W. Sharp, *The Life and Letters of Joseph Severn* (London. Sampson, Low, Morton and Company, 1892), 212-13.

Academy in London to come to Rome for four years and organise biennial art exhibitions of the work of British artists?<sup>13</sup>

In effect, what Severn was proposing was a version of the French Academy in Rome. In practice, much less was done. Though some equipment was bought, premises were not acquired. Instead, the money was spent on making admission free and the rest, at Eastlake's urging, put in the bank. Similarly, though Lawrence was willing to refer to the Academy in London as 'the parent body' and got George IV's agreement to calling the organisation in Rome 'The British Academy of Arts in Rome,' no formal link with the Royal Academy was ever established, nor was the Rome body allowed to use 'Royal' in its title. And though the British Academy aped the practices of the Royal Academy by appointing a Visitor from among its ranks – Joseph Gott was the first – it never had its own Director until Antonio Sciortino, the distinguished Maltese sculptor, was made Honorary Director early in the twentieth century. He retained the title until his death in Malta in 1947, long after the Academy had closed down in 1935 in response to persistent Fascist harassment.<sup>14</sup> By then the Academy subsisted very much in the shadow of the British School in Rome, whose Charter of Incorporation, granted in 1912, included the study and practice of the fine arts and whose development came far closer to the ideal Severn had envisaged in 1822 than the Academy ever could.

From the beginning, despite Severn's ambition, the British Academy of Arts in Rome was never a body to 'look the French in the eye.' As early as 1824, Eastlake and Severn were drifting away, preferring each other's company or finding the collegiate discussion they needed on artistic matters with visiting artists like David Wilkie, Thomas Uwins and William Etty. There were disagreements, too, over whether tests should be imposed on aspiring members as a way of keeping up standards. The dilettante literary man and amateur artist, Charles Brown, Keats's closest friend, who was in Rome staying with Severn in 1824, was miffed at not being able to attend the Academy as of right. He took his revenge in an article in *The Examiner* called 'Actors and Artists in Rome' which disclosed that attendance was sometimes as low as '1 or 2.'<sup>15</sup>

---

13 Joseph Severn to Thomas Lawrence, 19 January 1823 in Scott, 224-26.

14 I. S. Munro, "The British Academy of Arts in Rome," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, XI, 53.

15 C. Brown, "The Wishing Cap No XVI Actors and Artists at Rome," *The Examiner*, 3 October 1824, 626-28.

Nonetheless, though the initial drive and excitement was lost when Eastlake and Westmacott returned to London, the Academy remained in being. Sadly, its papers were lost after their transfer to the British Embassy in 1940 and so much of its subsequent history can only be traced through stray references in the diaries and letters of visitors to Rome. When George Richmond went there in the late 1830s for a sabbatical from his lucrative portrait practice in London, he regularly attended evening classes at the Academy. And in the 1840s with the benefit of a gift from Queen Victoria of £300 and a further grant from the Royal Academy, a drawing master was appointed.<sup>16</sup> There was even talk of making Eastlake its Director, a non-existent post for which Severn also volunteered when promoting his claims to the British Consulship in Rome in 1860. By then the Academy had become the benevolent personal fiefdom of John Gibson. After his death, Severn became a Trustee. Among his papers is a poignant indication of how far the Academy had atrophied by the 1870s. In 1878, he wrote a letter of introduction for a young artist on the back of the nearest piece of paper to hand on his cluttered table. It was an announcement of the Academy's Annual General Meeting with a desperate plea for enough members to attend to make up a quorum.<sup>17</sup> It is unlikely that the 85-year old Severn was one of them.

Why, for all their confidence and ambition in other areas of national life, did the British fail to match the French in the art capital of the world? The failure was the more notable given that, as Holger Hoock has recently argued, the emergence of the Royal Academy at the end of the eighteenth century at the centre of British artistic life, was in itself an act of national assertion against the dominant artistic power and, it was hoped, a means of establishing a school of British historical painting which would eclipse the French. Rome was the inescapable place for the aspiring historical painter to study for there were to be found many of the masterpieces which he had been taught to revere and in a setting which provided ample inspiration. The creation of a formal offshoot of the Academy in the Eternal City would have given momentum to the drive to establish the new British school of history painting.

But the London arts establishment was always equivocal about Rome. Though many artists travelled there and some, like David Wilkie and William Collins, were impressed by the quality of the work that

---

<sup>16</sup> Munro, 47.

<sup>17</sup> Severn papers at the Houghton Library, Harvard University bMS Eng 1434.

painters like Eastlake, Severn and Penry Williams were producing, more generally there was a suspicion that its art market was far less demanding than London's. In Rome, patrons were in generous, expansive mood, prepared to believe that the art works they commissioned or bought partook of the greatness of the pieces they saw around them in galleries, churches and private houses. By the early 1830s, too, the interest in history painting had been overtaken in England by a fondness for genre scenes, and by the end of the decade the mania for Italian landscapes had given way to a passion for German art.

Turner was as equivocal as any. Though he made two highly successful visits to Rome which inspired him to produce a mass of new work, once Eastlake had returned to London in 1830, he lost interest in the artists who remained there. In 1837, a year after John Gibson had been made a full Academician despite his continued stay in Rome, Turner initiated a move in the RA Council to clarify the rules on membership and exclude all non-resident artists from both Associate and full Academician status. His target was the artists in Rome. Penry Williams, who visited London that year, was told that he would certainly be elected to the Academy, but only if he returned to England. Williams thumbed his nose at the Academy, preferring to remain in Rome, even without the magic letters, ARA, after his name.<sup>18</sup> Severn fell between both stools. Having gone back to England in 1841, he then failed by one vote to secure election to the Academy, a failure that contributed to the slow decline of his artistic career in Britain over the next two decades.

The Academy's exclusion of the artists in Rome was of a piece with its failure to create a formal link with the British Academy of Arts in Rome in the 1820s. Clearly, there was insularity and parochialism at the Academy and mistrust of the seductive comforts of Italian life, but there was also a deeper equivocation about Rome, an equivocation which did not trouble the French. For Rome was not only the art capital of the world, but the capital of an alien religion whose dominance over the cultural life of the city both fascinated and repelled British visitors. So, in the end, for all the high, but naive ambitions of its founders, the British Academy of Arts in Rome never measured up to the artistic imperialism of the French Academy there. Nestled comfortably in the heart of Rome and long-persisting, the Academy could never compete with the grand goings-

---

18 D. Webley, *Cast to the Winds: The Life and Work of Penry Williams (1802-1885)* (Aberystwyth. National Library of Wales, 1997).

on at the Villa Medici. Its closest model turned out to be not the French nor even the Italian academies, but that congenial and quintessentially British institution, the gentleman's club.

*London*

# ‘Soft Bastard Latin’: Byron and the Attractions of Italian

*Timothy Webb*

Byron, while you ... / Bandy Venetian slang with the Benzon...  
*William Stuart Rose*

... their own beautiful language...  
*Byron, Dedication to Canto 4 of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

... I am too Italian for Paris in general.  
*Byron, Letter of 13 July 1820<sup>1</sup>*

## 1

Byron's ear for language and for languages is well attested. For Italian, in particular, he had a special affection, cultivated from an early stage in life when he was still living in England. As Peter Vassallo has shown in detail and as Andrew Nicholson has conclusively demonstrated by his editorial work, 'Byron was able to read Italian long before he set foot in Italy.'<sup>2</sup> This knowledgeable interest is demonstrated by the books catalogued for auction in 1816 which included Italian dictionaries, a grammar, Zotti's *Italian Vocabulary* and Graglia's *Guide to Italian* (1803).<sup>3</sup> His knowledge of the language both led to and was increased by his reading of Petrarch, Dante, Ariosto, Tasso, Bembo and Metastasio (all claimed as early as his 1807 reading list)<sup>4</sup> and his engagement with Italian history; in turn, this familiarity with Italian must have helped him to advise on Leigh Hunt's *The Story of Rimini* (which was based on the Paolo and Francesca episode in Canto V of Dante's *Inferno*, and which Byron greatly admired for its

---

1 L. A. Marchand (ed.), *The Letters and Journals of Byron* (1973-1982, 1994) (in further references, BLJ), 6.38; J. J. McGann (ed.), *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works* (Oxford, 1980-93) (in further references, CPW), 2. 123; BLJ, 7. 127.

2 P. Vassallo, *Byron: The Italian Literary Influence* (New York, 1984), 1 (more generally, 1-23); Andrew Nicholson (ed.), *Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose* (Oxford, 1991).

3 Nicholson, *Prose*, 231-54.

4 Nicholson, *Prose*, 3-7.

‘originality– & Italianism’).<sup>5</sup> It provides an explanation for the fact that the opening epigraph of his narrative poem *The Corsair* (taken from Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata*) and the epigraphs to each of its three cantos (all taken from the Paolo and Francesca episode) are couched in untranslated Italian. It also suggests why he was able to explain a flirtation with a singer at the Italian Opera in terms which were unmistakably, if comically, linguistic: ‘whenever Italian is spoken I always strive to repair ye inroads want of practice make[s] in my memory of that dearest of all languages.’<sup>6</sup> And perhaps a shared interest in Italian was one of those factors which drew him, surprisingly, to a friendship with Leigh Hunt.

This dedication to Italian literature, and the study of the language, must have informed his time in Italy, which lasted from October 1816 till he left for Greece in July 1823. Whatever impression Byron may have preferred to give concerning his arbitrary and unscholarly way of life during the Italian years, his commitment to the country’s literature was as unwavering as his application to understanding and speaking its language. Like his friend Percy Bysshe Shelley, he continued to absorb Italian texts but (unlike Shelley) closer proximity to Italians and Italian culture exposed him to aspects of the language which he would not have discovered otherwise and confirmed his original preference for Italian. Not surprisingly, he had an ear for local turns of phrase. In a letter of 19 September 1818 from Venice to Thomas Moore he begins his conclusion: ‘I wish you a good night, with a Venetian benediction, “Benedetto te, e la terra che ti farà!”—“May you be blessed, and the *earth* which you will *make*” is it not pretty?’<sup>7</sup> Byron’s translation seems to take poetic licence but his admiration for the uncompromising formula seems genuine, as is his admiration for the ‘Venetian girl’ from whom he learned it, ‘with large black eyes, a face like Faustina’s, and the figure of a Juno—tall and energetic as a Pythoness, with eyes flashing, and her dark hair streaming in the moonlight’. This animated and potentially violent tutor is unnamed but probably was Margarita Cogni, the Fornarina or baker’s wife, who was the source of so much of Byron’s Venetian. As this passage demonstrates, it was under such influence that Byron moved towards a fuller understanding of the language and a recognition of the virtues of dialect.

---

5 BLJ, 4. 326.

6 BLJ, 6. 217.

7 BLJ, 6. 68-9.

A useful starting point for understanding this erotics of language and for appreciating the virtue of Italian sound, is provided by a famous stanza in *Beppo*, written when Byron was in Venice in latish 1817 and first printed, in England, in 1818. The narrator, who bears some resemblance to 'Byron' but who is also, recognizably, a literary persona, is calculating in traditional fashion the rival merits of Italy and England. To this equation, the language makes a significant contribution:

'I love the language, that soft bastard Latin,  
 Which melts like kisses from a female mouth,  
 And sounds as if it should be writ on satin,  
 With syllables which breathe of the sweet South,  
 And gentle liquids gliding all so pat in,  
 That not a single accent seems uncouth,  
 Like our harsh northern whistling, grunting guttural,  
 Which we're obliged to hiss, and spit, and sputter all.'  
 (lines 345-52)

Like the Pythoness with flashing eyes and streaming hair in the letter to Moore, this stanza presents the attractions of Italian as if they cannot be separated from erotic satisfaction ('kisses from a female mouth.'). Such a powerful conjunction may faithfully register the facts of Byron's own linguistic initiation; but, even in describing the effects of the language in terms of kisses, the stanza concentrates on language as a combination of sounds rather than a system of signs or a conveyor of precise meanings.

At least some of the narrator's responses seem to accord with views which George Gordon, Lord Byron undeniably expressed. For example, in 1821 he admitted the difficulty of pronouncing German: Grillparzer (whose *Sappho* was 'superb and sublime!'), had 'the devil of a name, to be sure for posterity; but they *must* learn to pronounce it.' In the same journal entry, he assessed his own knowledge of German: 'Of the *real* language I know absolutely nothing,— except oaths learned from postillions and officers in a squabble. I can *swear* in German potently, when I like — "Sacrament — Verfluchter — Hundsfott" — and so forth; but I have little of their less energetic conversation.'<sup>8</sup> Here Byron seems to be claiming that German serves him best for the purposes of swearing, but there is an admission that he is excluded from the more thoughtful

---

<sup>8</sup> *BLJ*, 8. 25-6.

stretches of the language. Less than a fortnight later, he recorded in his journal what seems to be a strong anti-German feeling: 'the Germans are on the Po, the Barbarians at the gate, and their masters in council at Leybach (or whatever the eructation of the sound may syllable into a human pronunciation).'<sup>9</sup> In this case, though, Byron's political repugnance cannot easily be separated from his satirical response to the sound of German. As for bastardy, Byron was in line with many other visitors to Italy who were motivated by the search for classical traces which might seem to justify or validate their enterprise. Byron developed the subject in the same journal entry where he discusses the name Grillparzer and the appropriateness of the German language as a medium for swearing. In that entry, he also gave his cynical attention to the advantages of Italian for translating from the classical languages, especially Latin: 'and *there*, the bastardy of their language helps them, as, by way of looking *legitimate*, they ape their fathers' tongue.'<sup>10</sup>

Yet these coincidences and conjunctions distract the reader in ways which are entirely characteristic of Byron's *oeuvre*. Even sophisticated readers are likely to confuse the narrator of *Beppo* with the real-life Byron, who frequently serves as his model and whose views he often shares. Part of Byron did admire the softness of the Italian language and part of him certainly contrasted it with the harshness of the northern languages (after all, Byron may well have had a special ear for such effects since he had spent his formative years in Scotland). Part of him, too, was concerned with the connections between Italian and Latin. But the simplifications of Byron's poetic representation, and the dramatic force of *Beppo's* contrasts, might encourage his readers to ignore his admiration for Venetian slang and its violent emphases. It also neglects the fact that Byron's own account of Margarita Cogni takes evident delight in reporting a kind of Italian speech which could not be writ on satin and cannot be confused with kisses from a female mouth. As his letters show, Byron seems to have derived a pleasurable *frisson* from the energy of Margarita's swearing, which was not in German but in 'explicit Venetian.'

Byron's attitudes to the sound of Italian can be further illustrated by three more examples. The first can be found in the dedicatory essay to the final Canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* which takes the form of an extended tribute to his friend and fellow-traveller John Cam Hobhouse

---

9 *BLJ*, 8. 33.

10 *BLJ*, 8. 25.

and their joint Italian experience, and a celebration of the virtues of Italy. This celebration includes a quotation from Alfieri, which is given entirely in untranslated Italian, and a four-line quotation, still unidentified by scholars, and also in 'their own beautiful language,' which praises the 'paese tutto poetico, che vanta la lingua la più nobile ed insieme la più dolce.'<sup>11</sup> That such a tribute should be expressed in the language which it celebrates is not an accident; nor is the fact that it is included in a dedication to Hobhouse, who would be expected to understand the original Italian.

The second and third examples are centred on the language and its expressive force. On 6 June 1819, Byron wrote to Richard Bellgrave Hoppner, British Consul at Venice, about two 'pretty' epitaphs which he had noticed at Ferrara in the Certosa cemetery ('Cimetry' he writes, repeating the word in the following day's letter to John Murray, suggesting a direct though imperfect translation from the Italian). He was particularly struck by two inscriptions: 'Martini Luigi/ *Implora pace*' and 'Lucrezia Picini/ *Implora eterna quiete*.' He told Hoppner:

'that was all—but it appears to me that these two and three words comprize and compress all that can be said on the subject—and then in Italian they are absolute Music—— They contain doubt—hope—and humility—nothing can be more pathetic than the "implora" and the modesty of the request—they have had enough of life—they want nothing but rest—they implore it—and "eterna quieta"—it is like a Greek inscription in some good old Heathen "City of the dead."—Pray—if I am shovelled into the Lido Church-yard—in your time—let me have the "implora pace" and nothing else for my epitaph—I never met with any antient or modern that pleased me a tenth part so much.'<sup>12</sup>

The following day he returned to the subject in a letter to his publisher John Murray in London. The basic themes are the same, and the reactions and projections of his own burial in the Lido, and some of the phrasing, is the same or closely similar; yet this letter contains some remarkable new details, and the difference of tone strikingly demonstrates how much Byron's correspondence is shaped and inflected to accord with the anticipated reactions of its various recipients and readers.

<sup>11</sup> CPW, 2. 123.

<sup>12</sup> BLJ, 6. 147.

‘Some of the epitaphs at Ferrara pleased me more than the more splendid monuments of Bologna . . . [Byron cites the same two examples]. Can any thing be more full of pathos! those few words say all that can be said or sought—the dead had had enough of life—all they wanted was rest—and this they “*implore*.” there is all the helplessness—and humble hope and deathlike prayer that can arise from the Grave—“*implora pace*.” I hope, whoever may survive me, and shall see me put in the foreigners’ burying-Ground at the Lido—within the fortress by the Adriatic—will see those two words and no more put over me [.] I trust they won’t think of “pickling and bringing me home to Clod or Blunderbuss Hall [.]” I am sure my Bones would not rest in an English grave—or my Clay mix with the earth of that Country: —I believe the thought would drive me mad on my death-bed could I suppose that any of my friends would be base enough to convey my carcase back to your soil—I would not even feed your worms—if I could help it.’<sup>13</sup>

These two letters, both of which react to an experience at Ferrara and envisage a burial at Venice, are richly suggestive about Byron’s attitude to the Italian language. Both emphasize the virtue of simplicity: ‘these two and three words comprize and compress all that can be said on the subject’ (first letter); ‘Those few words say all that can be said or sought’ (second letter). Both select this laconic reticence as appropriate for Byron’s own tombstone: ‘those two words and no more put over me’ (second letter); ‘let me have the “*implora pace*” and nothing else for my epitaph’ (first letter). Both letters explain the simple virtues of the epitaphs though only the first says explicitly, ‘in Italian they are absolute Music.’

The main difference concerns Byron’s imagining of his own funeral. Although the letter to Hoppner avoids any possibility of the sentimental by its seemingly heartless choice of words (‘if I am shovelled into the Lido Church-yard’), the letter to Murray expresses a resistance which is more extensive and much more troubling. In this version, Byron matches the toughness of ‘shovelled’ by the (sadly ironical) quotation from Sheridan’s *The Rivals*; yet most of the passage’s energy is devoted to articulating his hatred of England and his repugnance at the thought of an English grave (‘I would not even feed your worms—if I could help it’). By choice, Byron is an exile from England yet, although he would prefer

---

13 *BLJ*, 6. 149.

an epitaph in Italian, he is under no illusion that, for all his sympathies, he must remain an outsider who will be laid to rest in a burying-ground which is designated for 'foreigners.' The irony becomes even greater if one notices that this nightmare vision of not belonging was written to a fellow-Scot, John Murray, whose offices were fashionably located in Albemarle Street. Like Byron, though in a very different way, Murray had achieved a position not far from the pinnacle of the establishment and, as the poet painfully recognized, he had become part of that English social world from which Byron was necessarily excluded. While the phrasing of 'that Country' allows for the possibility that neither Byron nor Murray could identify with the earth of England, 'your soil' and 'your worms' clearly suggests that Byron identifies Murray with that unhealthy and insularly concentrated Englishness from which he has chosen to escape.

Both passages emphasize passivity and vulnerability, what Byron calls 'the helplessness' of the dead man. Both insist on the affecting simplicity and lack of pretension which characterizes these plain inscriptions, rather than the greater aspirations which may be identified with more splendid monuments: the words are 'a modest request' and express 'humility,' or (as he puts it in the second letter) give a voice to 'humble hope.' Byron's responses here might be compared to those of William Wordsworth in his recent *Essays Upon Epitaphs*. Wordsworth had insisted on the significance of a genuine simplicity and its connection with the moral health of the country. For very different reasons, but with a shared susceptibility, Byron had selected similar virtues; but where Wordsworth had discovered in an English country churchyard an appropriate 'solemnity and pensiveness,' together with an expressive simplicity, Byron identified such attributes in an Italian churchyard and in the musical qualities of the Italian language. Though Byron does not explicitly controvert Wordsworth's claims for the moving force of the English language, his letter to Murray makes clear that his allegiance to the 'few words' of the Italian inscriptions is driven by a fierce resistance to the thought of an English cemetery and a considered preference for the unassuming and dignified grace of the Italian alternative.

Byron laughed at and despised those who did not understand the language and especially those who behaved with the typical bluster of the ignorant and ruffled foreigner. So he records a deliciously embarrassing episode concerning his lawyer John Hanson ('Spooney' in Byron-speak) who ventured to visit him in Venice:

'He is a queer fish—the Customs House Officers wanted to examine or have money—he would not pay—they opened every thing. —“Ay—Ay—(said he) look away—*Carts Carts*” that was his phrase for *papers* with a strong English emphasis & accent on the *s* and he actually made them turn over all the Newstead & Rochdale—& Jew—& Chancery papers exclaiming “*Carts Carts*” & came off triumphant with paying a *Centime*—the Officers giving up the matter in despair—finding nothing else—& not being able to translate what they found.’<sup>14</sup>

Although (as usual) Byron was exasperated by the intrusive and officious behaviour of the customs controllers, and although by his own admission he was close to feeling sympathy for the unfortunate English visitor, he records the encounter in a vividly dramatized letter to Hobhouse which does not spare Hanson's linguistic ineptitude.

Such incompetence in managing the challenges of the everyday language (combined, very often, with confidence which was totally unjustified) was often displayed by the objects of Byron's scorn. In another letter to Hobhouse, of 25 September 1820, he displays his contempt for Henry Peter Brougham, a fellow-Scot and a notable Whig lawyer, 'the Miscreant Brougham,' whom he had once been invited to meet at lunch in Horsemonger Lane Gaol but whom he found increasingly offensive and hoped eventually to challenge to a duel: 'Brougham says "*discorso*" is *not* Italian! Oh rare! it—and "*discorrere*" are as common as "*cazzo*",—and I suppose that fellow thinks "*conversazione*" means conversation-'.<sup>15</sup> This outburst can be collated with a revealing passage in a letter to Hobhouse in the course of which Byron refers to William Lamb 'with his "*Corni Cazzo da Seno!*" (as we Venetians say—it means—Penis *in earnest*—a sad way of swearing).'<sup>16</sup> Byron's invocation of *cazzo* in the first letter

14 *BLJ*, 6. 77-8.

15 *BLJ*, 7. 180. For Byron's description of a *conversazione*, see *BLJ*, 6. 147.

16 *BLJ*, 6. 107.

offers evidence of his own first-hand knowledge of everyday Italian parlance, which undercuts Brougham's misplaced authority, while its blunt physicality, its foreignness, and its vernacular excessiveness (which Byron - and Hobhouse - take for granted) constitute a humiliating context for the lawyer's primness and linguistic ignorance. A sad way of swearing, perhaps, but a token of Italian, or more properly Venetian, reality.

A third, though different, case is that of William Sotheby, 'that old rotten Medlar of Rhyme' or 'that venerable Mokanna' (as Byron called him), who as a writer of travel books might have been expected to possess a greater knowledge of the language than apparently he did. In a letter to Murray of 15 July 1817, Byron ruthlessly described him as 'An old tiresome blockhead—blundering through Italy without a word of the language—or of any language except the wretched affectations of our own which he called English'.<sup>17</sup> In a verse letter of 8 January 1818, also to Murray, he is amusingly cruel at the expense of the author of *Farewell to Italy* (which had been included in his own collection): 'You could hardly begin with a less work, / For the pompous rascallion/ Who don't speak Italian/ Nor French, must have scribbled by guesswork.'<sup>18</sup> The rhyme between 'rascallion' and 'Italian' is comically reductive, as is the curious word 'rascallion' itself. Sotheby also features, in ways which might have resulted in legal action, in *Beppo* where he is mentioned, recognizably, as 'Botherby.' In his unfinished prose essay, 'Italy, or *not* Corinna,' which dates from 1820, and is clearly designed to set Italian realities against the idealized imaginings of Germaine de Staël, Byron again allows himself more fun at the expense of Sotheby (who now is thinly disguised as 'Solemnboy'): '[the Solemnboys] much about the same period began to travel—the young ladies for improvement, the old lady—for company, and Mr. Solemnboy himself at the age of Sixty for the acquisition of languages—being addicted to translation.'<sup>19</sup>

Against such culpable, if comical, ignorance, he set the examples of himself, domiciled (if not always domesticated) in Italy since October 1816, and especially of his friend, John Cam Hobhouse. Hobhouse had accompanied Byron on his Italian travels and when he first discovered Venice; was the dedicatee of the final canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, devoted to Italy, for which he compiled an extensive volume of detailed

17 *BLJ*, 7. 172; 5. 252; 5. 253.

18 *BLJ*, 6.3.

19 Nicholson, *Prose*, 86.

notes; and, more generally, acted as Byron's consultant on matters Italian. In the dedication, Byron publicly remembered how he and Hobhouse had ridden their horses round the walls of Rome; in a later letter, he reminded his friend: 'You know how often under the Mira elms, and by the Adriatic on the Lido [both Venetian locations]—we have discussed that question [attitudes towards Alexander Pope] and lamented the villainous Cant which at present would decry him.'<sup>20</sup> In one letter, Byron explicitly assumes Hobhouse's Italian knowledge: 'you know Italy—& Venice—& may imagine—that such a thing is as likely to raise a new war—as ever the raption of the Sabines.'<sup>21</sup> Byron indicated his recognition of Hobhouse's qualifications and their shared Italian experience by sending him a long sequence of letters which regularly make use of untranslated Italian words and phrases and occasionally even substitute Italian terms for English (for instance, 'Ingesi' instead of 'English,' 'Maggio' instead of 'May,' 'her Maestà instead of 'her Majesty'), all three foreign words unsignalled by italics or inverted commas.<sup>22</sup> This epistolary use of Italian can be paralleled, at least up to a point, in the letters of Mary Shelley to Maria Gisborne, Jane Williams and Leigh Hunt (to whom she even writes a whole letter in Italian),<sup>23</sup> which differ strikingly from those of her husband directed to correspondents in England (including Leigh Hunt).

Occasionally, Byron employs English words, which are directly transposed from the Italian. For example, on 19 January 1819 he advises Hobhouse: 'above all don't *diffide* in yourself—nor be nervous about your *health*;' while again, on 6 April, he reveals to Hobhouse his anxieties about Teresa Guiccioli: 'if She should plant me—and I should make a "fiasco" never could I show my face on the Piazza;' and, on 3 June, he expresses his uncertainty about his travel plans: 'whether I shall go on as far as that city [Rimini] and Ravenna—or *ferm* me in Bologna till the people I was going to see come there ... is more than I can pretend to say' (*BLJ*, 6. 93, 107, 145). Byron must have made up the verb *diffide* on the basis of the Italian word *diffidare* (which is the opposite of feeling confident); while the unusual verb 'plant' must derive from *piantare* (which means 'abandon, stand up, leave in the lurch'). In both these cases, Byron expects Hobhouse

20 *BLJ*, 7. 63.

21 *BLJ*, 6. 96.

22 *BLJ*, 6. 19, 20; 7. 177.

23 B. T. Bennett (ed.), *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, I (Baltimore and London, 1980), 162-4.

to recognize the Italian origins of his 'English' words, just as he does not need to explain the social significance of the Piazza in Venice. Likewise, he would have expected Hobhouse to understand the Italian word *fermarsì* (to stop, remain), even though it seems egregious and, unlike *diffide*, it fills no significant gap in English usage. Other examples do not bother to translate the crucial Italian word, resulting in a curious if easily intelligible linguistic mixture. So, Hobhouse is reminded how he 'stampatoed the copies of the Epic-maker's [Tasso's] washing list' (6. 145-6); while on another occasion, Byron admits that he has been 'very much "agitato" with some circumstances of a domestic description' (7. 50).

Much more frequently, he uses untranslated words or even phrases which were usually expressive of the facts of Italian (or Venetian) culture but did not always suggest an obvious English equivalent. So his letters include the following: 'a *Caravaggiote* of the Segatis' (6. 20), *Siora* (6.21; elsewhere (11. 79) identified as 'Venetian dialect'), 'relazione' (6.25), 'Governatrice' (6.41), 'Siserana' and 'Seicentisti' (6. 63), 'Polichinello of an Attorneo' (6. 72), 'a *Cazzo*' (6. 89), 'Ladro-& porco fottuto' (6.92; see 6. 97), 'Capo d' opera' (6. 96), 'frittered down into a regular Cicisbeo' (6. 108), *posteriore* (6. 132), 'inedita' (6. 188), 'Gelosie' (6. 188), 'fatti miei' (6. 189), 'locanda' (6. 189), 'Asso' and 'Re' [terms in a card-game], (7. 51), 'fatto la corte,' (7. 52), '*delicaci*,' (7. 115), '*Musici*' (7.153), 'sbor[s]avo? mai' (7. 153). Occasionally, he introduces an English plural, as in 'Attorneos' (7. 71; see 'conversaciones' (5.145) in a letter to Augusta Leigh). Sometimes he expects a higher level of Italian in his correspondent. Many readers could hazard an interpretation of 'these are but "dicerie" & may be true or no' (6. 130), but not so many could feel confident of precisely understanding Byron's account of his own vulnerability at Ravenna where, as he noted (7. 123) 'we expect on one side or the other a few Stilletate—or Sc<h>ioppettate.' In at least two letters, he allows himself to capture the energy of Venetian cursing: 'Porca buzzerena' (6. 131) and, more descriptively, 'bestemmiando nobilmente' and 'maledetto scopalotto' (5. 143). On the proof sheets of the dedication to Canto 4 of *Childe Harold* (which, as we have seen, had a very particular relevance to Hobhouse), Byron expressed his impatience: 'I find some Italian words most damnably "strappazzate"' (6. 16). It is entirely appropriate that Byron should crystallize his frustration in the treatment of Italian words in the form of an Italian word which, itself,

would be a puzzle to most of his printers and readers but would cause no problems to Hobhouse, to whom it was actually addressed.

Byron's use of this word, like many of the other Italianisms listed above, was a compliment to Hobhouse and his understanding of Italian and an assertion of intimacy based on shared linguistic knowledge which was not common among the English or even the Byron circle. On occasion, Byron went even further. In one letter, he reported to Hobhouse without translation (6. 8): 'the honourable company with Rizzo at their head have since owned that "*aveva ragione quel diavolo.*"' In another letter, he quoted 'the words of my Romagnola [Teresa Guiccioli] (speaking of Ravenna & the way of life there which is more licentious than most here)' (6. 132): 'Ciò ti mostri una Quadri morale del' Paese; e ti basta.' On a visit to Ferrara, he quoted a line from *Orlando Furioso* and Alfieri's manuscript annotation (6. 145). On another occasion, he told Hobhouse a story concerning a young man who greeted a Bologna Sausage by bowing low and exclaiming: '*Vi riverisco mio Cognato.*' He added (6. 132): 'Translate—and expound this to Scrope—and to "the Creature Dougal" [Douglas Kinnaird]'. The next day he realized that he had made a mistake and asked Murray to pass on the correct version (6.133): '*Vi riveresco Signor Cognato.*' It was entirely appropriate, therefore, when he ventured some notations of Venetian slang, that the recipient was Hobhouse (6. 97): '—Cazzo—Corpo—ed' anche &c. —Sangue di &c. O! Marie! Can' della Madonna tixe un Gran &c. &c. &c.' Having objected to the 'cutting & slashing' of *Don Juan* and quoted the actress Susan Boyce, Byron concluded this postscript pointedly: 'Capite? Or in Venetian has tu *Capio?* –' Hobhouse, too, was expected to recognize and understand a quotation from Dante (6.131).

Other correspondents found their letters flavoured with the occasional Italianism. For instance, as the British Consul in Venice, Richard Belgrave Hoppner could not have been surprised by an untranslated Italian word, such as *riscaldato* (6. 234). Thomas Moore, who received an enthusiastic account of Venetian slang (with translations) and who visited Byron in Venice, was expected to understand the occasional Italian word, such as *povero* (5.147) or 'estro' (5. 131; also used in a letter to Murray (5.157)); and sometimes more (for instance, 'to see "in quanti piedi di acqua siamo"' (7. 126)). Alexander Scott (who had competed in the famous swimming-contest) was told that 'I am "*rimasto!!!*"' and informed how Teresa Guiccioli's brother advised against a 'relazione'

with Byron since he 'had for *'molti anni'* confined (incarcerato) my wife in *'un suo castello'* in England of mine out of revenge!!!' (6. 180). John Murray was sometimes treated as if he could read Italian though Byron usually remembered his linguistic limitations: for example, after a passage in Italian of nearly eight lines by Michele Leoni, who had translated a canto of *Childe Harold*, he adds: 'Rose will translate this to you' (7. 97). In another letter, he comments (7. 103): 'he is very capable of employing "*Sicarii*"—this is Latin—as well as Italian—so you can understand it.' (For further consideration of the use of Venetian in letters to Murray, see Section 4 below.) Even Teresa Guiccioli, the recipient of numerous letters in Italian, is expected to know her Dante (it seems that the Paolo and Francesca episode might be appropriate, at least in some ways, to her affair with Byron) (6. 129, 7. 209). A knowledge of Tasso was also required, since one of Byron's Italian letters (7. 170) begins by quoting (with a telling change from 'suoi' to 'miei') the line from *Gerusalemme Liberata* which had provided an epigraph for *The Corsair*. In spite of such assumed recognitions, Teresa's Italian background did not qualify her (at least, in Byron's view) to understand *cadreghe*, the Venetian word for chairs - '*questa non è parola di Santa Chiara ma di San' Marco*' (7. 142-3).

3

On 6 April 1819 Byron wrote to London in terms which must have surprised the publisher of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan*, whatever his reservations about Byron's poetic achievement:

'... I mean to write my best work in *Italian*—& it will take me nine years more thoroughly to master the language—& then if my fancy exists & I exist too—I will try what I *can* do *really*.'<sup>24</sup>

Sadly, Byron himself had ceased to exist long before the nine-year period of linguistic training was over. Yet, even if he qualifies his intentions by introducing a term which is apparently deflating or conciliatory, his assertion is more than merely 'fanciful' or an emollient device to hold John Murray at bay. Although Byron usually preferred to give the impression that his linguistic attainments were the result of life-experience and of

---

24 *BLJ*, 6. 105.

chance, a different model is envisaged in the course of this extraordinary sentence. His letters prove that he had been in Italy since October 1816; now he sees a period of nine years from April 1819 as necessary if he is 'thoroughly to master the language.' Even if 'nine years' seems to carry something of the numerical patterns of the fable, the unusual emphasis on application implies a serious and particular commitment. The ultimate goal involves the literary language but such an objective can only be reached by means of a long period of study involving the whole range of Italian expression, from literary texts to idioms and everyday usage.

This dedication to the claims of a major project is curiously reminiscent of the period of preparation for the writing of a poetic epic calculated by Coleridge; but, in the case of Byron, the preparatory period is required for purposes which are specifically linguistic, even if the ultimate consequences are literary. The shift of emphasis is entirely deliberate since Byron's claim appears after a lengthy passage in which he resists the wishes of Murray and Ugo Foscolo that he should produce a poem of epic dimensions:

'So you and Mr. Foscolo &c. want me to undertake what you call a "great work" an Epic poem I suppose or some such pyramid. —I'll try no such thing—I hate tasks—and then "seven or eight years!" God send us all well this day three months—let alone years—if one's years can't be better employed than in sweating poesy—a man had better be a ditcher. —And works too! —is Childe Harold nothing?'"<sup>25</sup>

Seen in this context, Byron's plan can be interpreted as, at least in some ways, adversarial: the choice of nine years can now be interpreted, among other things, as a period which is longer than seven or eight (in fact, Murray wrote 'six or Eight');<sup>26</sup> the forward projection admits the uncertainty of such planning, whether it be initiated by Murray or by Byron himself; and the hard work which might be demanded by poetic enterprises is more properly, though less ostentatiously, directed towards linguistic preparation. While resisting proposals from London, Byron is formulating an alternative challenge which might ultimately produce his 'best work' and demonstrate what he '*can do really*,' but the undertaking must involve a high level of sustained commitment.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> A. Nicholson (ed.), *The Letters of John Murray to Lord Byron* (Liverpool, 2007), 267-9.

Two further, but much later, letters throw particular light on the nature and extent of Byron's linguistic ambitions. On 14 September 1821 he instructed Lady Byron in England about the education of his daughter Ada:

'You will not forget to let her learn Italian—& be *musical*—that is if she has an ear & a heart for the latter. —The former will not be difficult, and perhaps by the time that she and I may meet (if ever we meet) it will be nearly necessary to converse with me—for I write English now with more facility than I speak it—from hearing it but seldom. It is the reverse with my Italian which I can speak fluently—but write incorrectly—having never studied it & only acquired it by ear. —I keep up my English as well as I can by scribbling however.'<sup>27</sup>

On the surface, Byron's requirements for Ada – music and Italian – are in keeping with the usual refinements expected of fashionable English young ladies. But, as Annabella Milbanke well knew, Italian carried a particular resonance in these circumstances since it was the language in which her exiled husband expressed himself, at least in speech ('which I can speak fluently'), and the medium through which father and daughter might eventually communicate. Byron's letter stresses his isolation and, particularly, his distancing in space and time from English normalities. Even his grasp of spoken English is rapidly disappearing ('I write English now with more facility than I speak it—from hearing it but seldom'). The diagnosis of Byron's situation as an English (or Scottish) writer in Italy is both poignant and suggestive. The author of *Beppo*, *Marino Faliero*, *The Two Foscari* and *Cain*, not to mention the animated and open-ended *Don Juan*, the incomparable letters and a number of shorter poems from this period, is reduced to characterizing his writing as something which exists in a different dimension from everyday speech; his writing which is often so close to the quick of the spoken language becomes nostalgic and antiquarian ('I keep up my English as well as I can by scribbling however'). Here Byron presents himself as isolated but proud and resolute: the aristocratic devaluation of writing as 'scribbling' is at least partly balanced or even overwritten by his determination not to give in ('I keep up my English').

---

27 *BLJ*, 8. 210. On the previous day, Byron had asked Augusta Leigh to present Ada with a golden locket bearing the Italian inscription '*Il Sangue non è mai Acqua*,' which he translated 'Blood is never water' (*BLJ*, 8. 209).

The second letter was also written from Ravenna in 1821, this time slightly earlier (9 March), to Douglas Kinnaird.

'You ask me why I don't go to Paris? —Ask the trustees? —But independent of that consideration—though I read & comprehend French with far more ease & pleasure than Italian—(which is a heavy language to read in *prose*) yet my foreign speech is Italian—and my way of life very little adapted to the eternal French vivaciousness—& gregarious loquacity.... Besides I am in some measure familiarized & domesticated in Italy, —where I put my daughter [Allegra, not Ada, who was his concern in the letter to Lady Byron] the other day in a Convent for education.'<sup>28</sup>

This passage suggestively illuminates the nature of Byron's allegiance to Italian in ways which might not be suspected from a reading of the letter to Lady Melbourne. Like many of his contemporaries, certainly those who were sufficiently fortunate to share his class and educational background, Byron took a knowledge of French for granted, but regarded the language as shallow and superficial. His rejection of French (which was shared with others such as Coleridge and Percy Shelley) is based on a reading of French character, a generalization about nationality; French is dismissively characterized as over-animated — 'the eternal French vivaciousness—& gregarious loquacity.' This interpretation equates language and nation and therefore offers an interpretation of Frenchness which may well be questioned but which is shaped by the impress of recognizable attitudes. Byron also distinguishes (rightly but indicatively) between written and spoken versions of language: he admits that he can read and comprehend French 'with far more ease & pleasure than Italian.' He also concedes that Italian prose is hard to read — 'a heavy language.' His ultimate allegiance is to the language he speaks in social situations — 'my foreign speech is Italian.' And, clinchingly and conclusively, this loyalty is based not on arbitrary preference but on habituation to a way of life: as he tells Kinnaird, 'I am in some measure familiarized & domesticated in Italy.' As he later expressed it to Teresa Guiccioli, he was 'Italianized by my long stay in your Climate.'<sup>29</sup>

---

28 *BLJ*, 8. 91.

29 *BLJ*, 11. 137. See *BLJ*, 7.171, 180.

The word 'familiarized' is a particularly happy choice. Primarily, it signifies in this case, 'belonging to a family, since Byron prided himself on a close relationship with the Gambas (the family of Teresa Guiccioli, whose brother accompanied him to Greece). Byron must have been aware of its other, more common, meaning - to make well-known, frequent or customary. It was precisely because he had become a member of an Italian family that he finally understood from the inside the realities of Italian life; the foreign and the exotic had now been translated into the customary, the everyday, the undramatically recognizable.

## 4

Byron's claim that he was familiarized and domesticated was made in a letter of early 1821 when he was in Ravenna, but for some years he had preferred Italy to England and insisted that, although he was a foreigner, he had a privileged understanding of Italian culture. This feeling of possessive pride was particularly strong during the years when he lived in or near Venice and took a special interest in Veneziano (or, as he said in a letter to James Wedderburn Webster, 'delight in the dialect & naiveté of the people').<sup>30</sup> For his illegitimate daughter Allegra, he selected a name which was, as he proudly reported, 'Venetian.'<sup>31</sup> When the young Allegra came to visit him in Palazzo Mocenigo, he reported to his half-sister in England: 'She is English—but speaks nothing but Venetian—"Bon di papa" &c. &c. she is very droll.'<sup>32</sup> On one occasion, when providing an example of Venetian slang, he produced the suggestive if slightly misleading formula, 'as we Venetians say'<sup>33</sup> (compare Shelley's 'noi Pisani' when reviewing a performance by Sgricci); while on another, he instructed his publisher that 'the long walls of Palestrina and Malamocco' in his letter on Bowles should be glossed ' "*I Murazzi*" which is their Venetian title.'<sup>34</sup>

Veneziano was the only mode of linguistic communication with most Venetians he knew or encountered, especially with Margarita Cogni. The tribute to the special sound-quality of the Italian language in *Beppo* seems to suit exactly the kind of tutelage which was involved in this

---

30 *BLJ*, 6. 66.

31 *BLJ*, 6. 7.

32 *BLJ*, 6. 223.

33 *BLJ*, 6. 107.

34 *BLJ*, 8. 77.

relationship, but the composition of the poem seems to antedate their tempestuous affair, which indicates that its generalized praise is probably the result of an accumulation of Venetian amatory experiences rather than a reaction to any specific example. Although the stanza features in a poem which is subtitled 'A Venetian Story,' the language it celebrates is Italian rather than 'Veneziano,' to which Byron was strongly attracted. Unlike recent linguists, he did not divide this phenomenon into a complicated plural (or *dialetti*), but thought of Venetian as a single language which gave expression to a strong local culture. As early as November 1816 he told John Murray 'I am studying out of curiosity the *Venetian* dialect—which is very naïve—soft & peculiar—though not at all classical.'<sup>35</sup> On 4 December he reported to Murray again: 'As for Italian I am fluent enough, even in it's Venetian modification—which is something like the Somersetshire version of English—and as for the more classical dialects—I had not forgot my former practice in it during my voyaging.'<sup>36</sup> More than a year later, he illustrated the operations of the Venetian dialect in a letter first printed by Thomas Moore to whom it was addressed. He explains how the 'Guerra di Candia' [War of Candia or Crete which took place in 1669] still features in ordinary Venetian speech: 'Is it not odd, that the lower order of Venetians should still allude proverbially to that famous contest, so glorious and so fatal to the Republic?' (After a twenty-five-year siege, the Turks had defeated the Venetians.) He continues:

'They have singular expressions, like all Italians. For example, "Viscere"—as we should say, "my love," or "my heart," as an expression of tenderness. Also, "I would go for you into the midst of a hundred *knives*."—"*Mazza ben*." Excessive attachment,—literally, "I wish you well even to killing." Then you say (instead of our way, "do you think I would do you such harm?") "do you think I would *assassinate* you in such a manner?"—"Tempo *perfido*," bad weather; "*Strade perfide*," bad roads, —with a thousand other allusions and metaphors, taken from the state and society of habits in the middle ages.'

Fearing that his interpretations might be exaggerated, he adds a provisional caution:

---

<sup>35</sup> *BLJ*, 5. 133.

<sup>36</sup> *BLJ*, 5. 138.

'I am not so sure about *mazza*, whether it don't mean *massa*, i.e. a great deal, a *mass*, instead of the interpretation I have given it. But of the other phrases I am sure.'<sup>37</sup>

Whatever his reservations, and whatever his initial reactions that it was 'soft & peculiar,' Byron was increasingly sure that Venetian gave expression to an innate violence which was characteristic of many Venetians. While this assessment must have been based on a range of evidence, it seems to have been inspired by the women with whom he had affairs, especially by Margarita Cogni, of whom he once told Thomas Moore: 'I am sure if I put a poniard into the hand of this one [of those women who may be made any thing], she would plunge it where I told her,—and into *me*, if I offended her.'<sup>38</sup> In a response to John Murray written long after the event, Byron remembered their first meeting when he and Hobhouse were 'sauntering on horseback along the Brenta one evening' and observed two girls among a group of peasants:

'Whether they remarked us looking at them or no—I know not—but one of them called out to me in Venetian—"Why do not you who relieve others—think of us also?"—I turned round and answered her—"Cara—tu sei troppo bella e giovane per aver' bisogno del' soccorso mio"—she answered—"[" if you saw my hut and my food—you would not say so ["]"—All this passed half jestingly— and I saw no more of her for some days...'<sup>39</sup>

Byron was captivated by her directness, her ferocity (she was, he recalled, 'somewhat fierce and "prepotente" that is—overbearing'), her person, her eyes, and her 'Venetian face.'

'She was two & twenty years old—and never having had children—had not spoilt her figure—nor *anything else*—which is I assure you—a great desideration in a hot climate where they grow relaxed and doughy and *flumpity* in a short time after breeding. ... She was besides a thorough Venetian in her dialect—in her thoughts—in her countenance—in every thing—with all their naïveté and Pantaloon humour. —Besides she could neither read nor write ...'<sup>40</sup>

37 *BLJ*, 6. 23. For my own study of Venetian, I owe special debts to Gregory Dowling, Tiziana Buxton and Mair Parry.

38 *BLJ*, 6. 69.

39 *BLJ*, 6. 193.

40 *Ibid.*

Among Margarita Cogni's virtues was the fact that she incarnated Venice in various ways, including her dialect. Noting the violent and extreme jealousy, which made her family nickname *la Mora* pleasingly significant to a student of English literature, Byron also recorded the possessive behaviour of 'her booby husband': 'I told him to take her in the devil's name—but she would not stir—& made him a long speech in the Venetian dialect which was more entertaining to anybody than to him to whom it was addressed.'<sup>41</sup>

The first of these stories (and the character sketch) was told for the benefit of John Murray and the second for Augusta Leigh; both are striking because they invoke Venetian ('called out to me in Venetian', 'a long speech in the Venetian dialect') but avoid direct quotation. In the long letter to John Murray (from which the first quotation is taken), Byron describes Margarita Cogni and her behaviour but, at first, continues this practice of suggesting the force of Venetian at a verbal distance. So he retails Margarita's reaction to Marianna Segati, with whom at the time he was in 'relazione' (or, as he conveniently translates it, in French, 'liaison'):

'Margarita threw back her veil (*fazziolo*) and replied in very explicit Venetian: "*You are not his wife: I am not his wife—you are his Donna—and I am his donna—your husband is a cuckold—and mine is another; —for the rest, what right have you to reproach me?...*"'<sup>42</sup>

This speech in 'very explicit Venetian' continues for some lines and at the end Byron comments, in an aside, 'which I translate as it was related to me by a byestander.' Slightly later, Byron refers to Margarita's injured husband as 'that "becco Ettico,"' which he translates for Murray's benefit as 'consumptive cuckold.' He also tells Murray about her taste in fashion:

'Then she would have her gowns with a *tail*—like a lady forsooth—nothing would serve her—but "*l'abito colla coua*", or *cua*, (that is the Venetian for "*la Coda*" the tail or train) and as her cursed pronunciation of the word made me laugh—there was an end of all controversy—and she dragged this diabolical tail after her every where.'<sup>43</sup>

---

41 *BLJ*, 6. 70.

42 *BLJ*, 6. 194.

43 *BLJ*, 6. 195.

Although Margarita's Venetian is one of those features which characterize her, and apparently fascinate Byron, it is not till later in the letter to Murray that her speech is transcribed directly. On his way home to the Palazzo Mocenigo, Byron had been delayed by a heavy and dramatic squall.

'On seeing me safe—she did not wait to greet me as might be expected—but calling out to me—"Ah! Can' della Madonna xe esto il tempo per andar' al Lido?" (ah! Dog of the Virgin!—is this a time to go to Lido?) ran into the house—and solaced herself with scolding the boatmen for not foreseeing the "temporale."'<sup>44</sup>

In a slightly later letter to Murray, Byron confesses that he might have been in error in his transcription of the precise details of this Venetian speech:

'I believe that I mistook or mistated one of her phrases in my letter—it should have been—"Can' della Madonna—cosa vus' tu? esto non e tempo per andar' a Lido"—I do not remember how I had worded it in my letter—but have a general idea of having blundered.'

In this revised version, Byron also includes a further detail which had not featured in the first letter:

'... I omitted to tell you her answer when I reproached her for snatching Madame Contarini's mask at the Cavalchina. —I represented to her that she was a lady of high birth—"una dama" &c. —She answered—"se Ella e dama *mi io* son' *Veneziana*"—"If she is a lady—I am a Venetian"'—<sup>45</sup>

In recalling Margarita Cogni in the first letter, he had also remembered another incident marked by the dramatic use of language:

'She was quick in reply—as for instance;—one day when she had made me very angry with beating somebody or other—I called her a *Cow* (*Cow* in Italian is a sad affront and tantamount to the feminine of dog in English) I called her "*Vacca*" she turned round—curtsied—and answered "*Vacca tua—'Celenza*" (i.e. *Eccellenza*) *your Cow*—please your Excellency.'<sup>46</sup>

---

44 *BLJ*, 6. 196.

45 *BLJ*, 6. 205 (both quotations).

46 *BLJ*, 6. 197.

In all three examples, the translations are those of Byron himself who seems concerned both to present the words of Margarita in all their Venetian forcefulness and to make sure that Murray is in a position to understand. There is an interesting contrast here with the earlier letter to Hobhouse which seems to take pleasure in the direct and vivid nature of Venetian language itself and employs no aid to understanding.

Such gratified immersion in the linguistic element makes a striking contrast to the attitude of Leigh Hunt who, for some time, shared Byron's palazzo in Pisa. Hunt hired a tutor in Italian but he was well aware of his inadequacies and praised the tolerance of Teresa Guiccioli's brother, Pietro Gamba, for his own relative incompetence in spoken Italian.

'... when I apologized to him for running on in my bad Italian; [he] would reassure me with the best grace in the world, and say it was delightful to him to converse with me, for I gave him "*hope*." The Italians are very kind to bad speakers of their language, and ought to shame us in that matter. I confess, I can never hear a foreigner speak bad English without such a tendency to laugh as puts me to the torture; whereas I have never known an Italian's gravity disturbed by the most ludicrous mistakes ... I have known them even repeat your mistakes with an unconscious look, as if they were proper expressions. I remember walking once with my young acquaintance, Luigi Gianetti, of Pisa, all the way from Florence to Maiano, and holding a long ethical discourse on the superiority of the "good clever man" to the "bad clever man," in the course of which I must have uttered a thousand malapropisms, not one of which did he give me a sense of by a smile.'<sup>47</sup>

Hunt was critical of Byron's manner of speaking Italian (according to Hunt's version, he usually tried to speak with his mouth shut), but unknowingly he may have been jealous of his friend's fluency and linguistic flair. Self-consciously, but honestly, he recorded the awkwardness of his own first efforts at speaking a language which he could read with ease. Although he was a close friend of Vincent Novello, whose father had immigrated from Piedmont, and although he was a passionate advocate of the virtues of Italian literature, Hunt was

---

47 Leigh Hunt, *Lord Byron and Some of his Contemporaries*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (1828), 1, 38-9.

aware that his approach to the spoken language was, at least at first, not only stilted but absurdly literary. Of Teresa Guiccioli he recorded:

'I was told, that her Romagnese dialect was observable; but to me, at that time, all Italian in a lady's mouth was Tuscan pearl; and she trolled it over her lip, pure or not, with that sort of conscious grace, which seems to belong to the Italian language as a matter of right. I amused her with speaking bad Italian out of Ariosto, and saying *speme* for *speranza*; in which she good-naturedly found something pleasant and *pellegrino*; keeping all the while that considerate countenance, for which a foreigner has so much reason to be grateful.'<sup>48</sup>

It is not difficult to recognize at the beginning of this passage the attitude towards Italian which is expressed by *Beppo*'s narrator. Disarmingly, though, Hunt is also prepared to describe his own bad Italian as well as Teresa Guiccioli's tolerance (which seems to have rivalled that of her brother and the unspecified Italians of Hunt's generalized eulogy). Hunt's Italian had been acquired from books (even though Mary Shelley had written him a long letter in Italian) and was self-consciously literary. It had even served as a solace and a recurrent resource when he was in prison. Now that he found himself in contemporary Italy, it seemed embarrassingly old-fashioned. In this way, as in many others, he differed from Byron, who was well-acquainted with the literary language but also enjoyed, and revelled in, the attractions of the oral. The contrast between Hunt and Byron in such matters is significant. Byron's decision to embrace the living language in Italy finds a suggestive parallel in his unusual allegiance to modern Greek, or Romaic; to this contemporary version of the Greek language, he accorded an immediate importance which frequently overrode, though it did not replace, the classical Greek of his education.

5

For all his interest in Veneziano and in Italian, Byron did not produce work for publication in either version of the language. His friend Percy Bysshe Shelley managed a short story called 'Una Favola,' a review of a performance by Tommaso Sgricci, the lyric 'Buona Notte,' and (for the instruction of Emilia Viviani) Italian translations of a number

---

48 Hunt, *Lord Byron and Some of his Contemporaries*, 1. 66-7.

of passages in his own poems. Although he lived longer and spent more time in Italy, Byron never achieved anything comparable. Yet he did write a large number of letters in Italian. Some of these are official or linked to official business. There are letters to Teresa Guiccioli's father and brother and one to the Neapolitan Insurgents. More surprisingly, although Byron was capable of writing in Greek (see his letter of 24 February 1824 to General Andreas Londos), he also conducted much of his Greek correspondence in Italian. As he explained, in his last extant letter to Teresa Guiccioli: 'To the English and Greeks—I generally write in Italian—from a Spirit of contradiction, I suppose—and to show that I am Italianized by my long stay in your Climate.'<sup>49</sup> There are Italian letters addressed to Greek Deputies (a Loan Agreement), the General Government of Greece, Greek Captains of Privateers, the *Chronica Greca*, Demetrius Parucca, Yusuff Pasha, and the polyglot Prince Alexander Mavrocordatos, who was briefly President of Greece. Byron knew (and disliked) the *Telegrafo Greco* but, from experience, he was already well aware that Italian was widely spoken in the Levant, where he had first encountered it as a living language. So as early as 25 September 1812 he had confided in Lady Melbourne: 'She besides does not speak English, & to me nothing but Italian, a great point, for from certain coincidences the very sound of that language is Music to me.'<sup>50</sup> Many years later, he told John Bowring, Secretary of the London Greek Committee, that he could prove useful in the Levant, partly because of his 'familiarity with the Italian language (which is there universally spoken—or at least to the same extent with French in the more polished parts of the Continent).' Later in the same letter he advised: 'Officers who had previously served in the Mediterranean would be preferable—as some knowledge of *Italian* is nearly indispensable.'<sup>51</sup>

This survey excludes Byron's most significant writing in the Italian language. His letters in Italian to Teresa Guiccioli represent something different and distinctive in his *oeuvre* but, for whatever reason, they still have not been accorded the detailed scholarly and critical attention which they deserve. The total is considerable: there are thirty letters in Vol. 6 of his correspondence, eighty-five in Vol. 7, twenty in Vol. 8, only one in Vol. 9 (correspondence was not necessary because the couple were

---

49 *BLJ*, 11. 137.

50 *BLJ*, 2. 208.

51 *BLJ*, 10. 168, 170.

living together at that period), and five in Vol. 10; there are also fifteen letters or notes in English (one in Vol. 10, fourteen in Vol. 11), written after Byron set out for Greece. One of these has a long postscript in Italian but the change in language was deliberate - as Byron told Teresa: 'I write in English as you desired, and I suppose that you are as well acquainted with that language as at Genoa.' Again, later, he explained: 'I write to you in English without apologies—as you say you have become a great proficient in that language of birds.'<sup>52</sup> A number of the communications in Italian are brief and might be classified as notes (like many of the messages from Greece, which are postscripts to letters from Pietro Gamba), but a substantial number must qualify as letters on the full scale. In sum, these letters alone add up to a total of 142 (including the bilingual letter).

Byron may not have lived long enough to produce his 'best work' in Italian but his letters to Teresa Guiccioli constitute a substantial and impressive achievement, not least in an acquired language. Although his letter to Murray was certainly directed towards an outcome which would be worthy of publication and which could be classified as 'literary,' the Italian letters show an attentiveness to the language and an exceptional flair for linguistic modes which may have been influenced by printed models but which were closer to the practices of vernacular speech. This body of letters also allows Byron to give expression to sides of his character which might not so readily have found expression in English. Their general tone has something of the unrestrained momentum of his other letters but gives voice to a range of feelings which is not easily associated with the poet of *Don Juan*. This can be well illustrated by a postscript which he adds to his letter of 15 June 1819. In it he begins by apologizing for the fact that he may have answered 'troppo *Inglesamente*' [too Englishly]. He continues: 'ma io non son' venuto in Italia per parlare di me stesso e dei fatti miei—ma piuttosto a dimenticare la mia vita *oltramontana*—e sopra tutto—per *amarti—te*—la mia unica ed ultima delizia' [but I have not come to Italy to speak of myself and my own doings—but rather to forget my life of *beyond the mountains*—and, above all—to love you, —you— my only and last delight].<sup>53</sup> This declaration in an intimate correspondence in a foreign language throws light on Byron's use of Italian as a medium which could liberate him from ultramontane

52 *BLJ*, 11. 18, 137. See also: 'I forget that I must write to you in English by your own request' (11.78).

53 *BLJ*, 6. 158-9.

considerations (in a later letter, in English, he even insists on his northern qualifications when describing himself as ‘an ultramontane, little skilled in the set phrase of Tuscany’).<sup>54</sup> This linguistic medium could also allow him, as the letter eloquently does, to express without qualification the nature of his love for Teresa. Perhaps Teresa herself had freed him from such constraints; but there is a strong case for claiming that it was the coincidence of his feelings with his recognition of the untrodden possibilities of the Italian language for a foreigner which enabled him to express an uncynical view of life at the time he was writing *Don Juan*, the Italian plays, and the letters in English.

As a European traveller and a committed exile, Byron was acutely aware of the difficulties and challenges generated by linguistic difference. The potentially comical side of this recurrent reminder of foreignness can be found in a number of letters: for example, there is Byron’s account of calling at a house for James Wedderburn Webster and asking for him ‘in much *better Italian* than is spoken at *Genoa*’ [Byron is writing from Albaro, not far from the town], but failing to communicate with the servants, even with the help of Count Gamba, who ‘repeated the *name* himself—as well as an Italian can repeat a name with four consonants in it.’<sup>55</sup> There is also his encounter near Ravenna with an old woman who expresses her age as ‘Tre croci,’ which puzzles Byron (‘though myself a decent Italian’) and causes him to consult his groom.<sup>56</sup> Most striking of all, perhaps, is the anecdote concerning Teresa Guiccioli’s difficulty in understanding a passage in *Don Juan*:

‘... she stumbled by mere chance on the 138<sup>th</sup> Stanza of the first Canto—and asked me what it meant—I told her—nothing but “your husband is coming” as I said this in Italian with some emphasis—she started up in a fright—and said “*Oh My God—is he coming?*” thinking it was *her own* who either was or ought to have been at the theatre.—You may suppose we laughed when she found out the mistake.’<sup>57</sup>

But the most subtle, and delicate, examples concern Germaine de Staël’s novel *Corinne*, or *Corinna* in the Italian version which was read by Teresa. Byron even told Augusta Leigh: ‘she was romantic—and had

---

<sup>54</sup> *BLJ*, 8. 14.

<sup>55</sup> *BLJ*, 10. 18-19.

<sup>56</sup> *BLJ*, 8. 35.

<sup>57</sup> *BLJ*, 6. 239.

read "*Corinna*"—in short she was a kind of Italian Caroline Lamb—but very pretty and gentle.<sup>58</sup> He annotated Teresa's copy, mainly with his own name or signature. One annotation, however, was written in English:

I knew Madame de Stael well—better than She knew Italy;—but I little thought that one day I should think with her thoughts in the country where she has laid the scene of her most attractive production. —She is sometimes right and often wrong about Italy and England—but almost always true in delineating the heart, which is but of one nation and of no country or rather of all.<sup>59</sup>

This note is appropriated and given a firm identity in time and space: 'Byron. Bologna. /August 23<sup>rd</sup> 1819.' On the same day Byron wrote another note to Teresa, which was also in English, although Byron could have followed his normal practice of writing to her in Italian since he was well aware that she had not yet mastered his own language. He begins:

'My dearest Teresa—I have read this book in your garden;—my Love—you were absent—or I could not have read it. —It is a favourite book of yours—and the writer was a friend of mine. — You will not understand these English words— and *others* will not understand them—which is the reason I have not scribbled them in Italian—but you will recognize the hand-writing of him who passionately loved you—and you will divine that over a book which was yours—he could only think of love. In *that word* beautiful in all languages—but most so in yours—*Amor mio*—is comprized my existence here and hereafter.'<sup>60</sup>

Of course, this letter illustrates something of the intensity of Byron's feeling for Teresa but it is interesting that, at the very height of his devotion, he reveals the strength of his passion by concealing it in what to Italians was a foreign language. He even feels free to leave his declaration in public because he is sure that it will not be understood. There is a graceful tribute to the expressiveness of Italian - 'Amor mio' was a formulation which often opened his letters to Teresa and seems to have guided him, just as 'implora pace' suggested an unostentatious inscription for his imagined tombstone. In their choice of the words 'comprize and compress' (or simply 'comprized'), both examples also

---

58 *BLJ*, 6. 248.

59 Nicholson, *Prose*, p. 223.

60 *BLJ*, 6. 215.

concentrate on the language's combination of reticence and uncomplicated suggestiveness. Yet while the letter pays homage to the beauty of Italian, Byron's behaviour in this instance also suggests he recognized that, because he had not been born an Italian, he could take advantage of his British status; yet, as he must also have recognized, however great his admiration or his linguistic endeavours, he must remain a foreigner and, for all its musicality and expressive charms, 'soft bastard Latin' could never be more than an acquired language.

*University of Bristol*

# Lady Morgan and Thomas Moore: Irish Perceptions of Italy and the Uses of National Images in the Nineteenth Century

*Donatella Abbate Badin*

Constructions of diversity are dictated by epistemological and political reasons and have different uses at different times. Literary Italy does not correspond to a geopolitical entity but is a construction based as much on what has been written about it as on what people have seen. The 'made-in-Ireland' Italy that reached the Romantic writers of the first half of the nineteenth century was a composite construction reflecting conflicting loyalties since it comprised on the one hand the stereotypes inherited from the Ascendancy tradition and on the other images of Italy as bearing a special relationship to Ireland.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the epistemological and political reasons for constructing an image of Italy in Ireland at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were quite special and, as to the past, what had been experienced and written by the English about Italy did not totally coincide with what had been experienced and written by the Irish.

The special relationship is quite evident in the way two of the most famous Irish literary figures of the Romantic age, namely Lady Morgan in her travelogue, *Italy*, and Thomas Moore in some of his poems, confronted and assimilated the otherness of Italy in new and contrasting ways by expressing, falsifying or promoting Italian identity and, indirectly, using it to define Irish identity and concerns. At a time when both Italy and Ireland were under foreign rule but had started to trace their sense of identity to their culture and traditions, national images, stereotypes and clichés regarding

---

1 Among the examples of the special relationship between Ireland and Italy one could cite the monastery-founding Irish monks (St. Columban being the foremost) colonizing the peninsula from North to South or the Irish colleges in Rome and elsewhere providing an education to Catholic students banned from Protestant universities (St. Oliver Plunkett, among others). 'The flight of the earls' in the 17<sup>th</sup> century led Hugh O'Neill and other exiles to Rome where they received hospitality from the Pope Pius V. Daniel O'Connell's dying wish was to have his heart buried in Rome. From such premises was born a much closer relationship. On the other hand, Irish travelogues wavered between italophobia and italophilia much like those of English travellers and Irish Gothic tales, also like the English, contained the usual proportion of the sublime and of native villainy.

Italy presented the two writers with a mirror to reflect resemblance rather than difference, even though at times the mirror was a distorting one.

The two authors were contemporaries and friends and shared a similar fate. Lady Morgan, née Sydney Owenson, was the daughter of an Irish actor who obtained tremendous success in her day by writing national tales – *The Wild Irish Girl* (1807) for one – which provided her English audience with a sentimental view of Ireland and its grievances. Tom Moore, the author of *Irish Melodies*, was once considered the National Bard as he evoked (like Morgan) a Romantic past and created a sense of loss in his songs which in those days resounded in every living-room that had a piano. Both having risen from modest origins to the peak of success thanks to their sentimental nationalism, they later fell very low in critical esteem (although there is now a revival) and were both accused, as Campbell writes, of ‘sycophancy to the English aristocracy.’<sup>2</sup>

In 1819, Morgan was sent to Italy by her publisher, Colburn, to report, in the wake of her success, on such a controversial issue as post-Napoleonic Italy. Her monumental travelogue, *Italy*, published in 1821, was for several decades the most widespread guidebook on the country and also one of the most sympathetic. Even Byron praised it in a letter to Tom Moore: ‘[H]er work is fearless and excellent on the subject of Italy.’<sup>3</sup>

Moore took refuge in Italy while waiting for legal action for the sums embezzled by his deputy in the Bermudas, for which he was made responsible. While in Italy in 1819, he stayed with his friend Byron in Venice and when in Rome visited the Morgans daily as well as Turner, Eastlake and Canova. The notes he jotted down (often in his carriage) during his rather brief stay were used for the composition of *Fables for the Holy Alliance* and *Rhymes on the Road* published together in 1820 and supposedly ‘extracted from the journal of a travelling member of the Poco-curante Society’<sup>4</sup> a telling name since it indicates, ‘a careless

2 M. Campbell, *Lady Morgan: The Life and Times of Sydney Owenson* (London. Pandora Press, 1988), 4. Campbell also quotes William Hazlitt’s accusation to Moore of having converted ‘the wild harp of Erin into a musical snuff-box.’

3 G. Byron, *Letters and Journals* 12 vols. L. A. Marchand (ed.) (London. John Murray, 1973–1982), VII, 170.

4 *Fables for the Holy Alliance* and *Rhymes on the Road* ‘extracted from the journal of a travelling member of the Poco-curante Society’ are part of vol. VII of *The Poetical Works of Thomas Moore, Collected by Himself*, 10 vols. (London. Longmans, 1840–41).

or indifferent person; one who shows little interest or concern.’<sup>5</sup> This is exactly what Moore was vis-à-vis Italy.

Morgan’s and Moore’s visit to Italy occurred at a time when the first insurrectional movements were brewing and the political aspirations of the Italians had added a new appeal for Whig travellers besides the usual attraction represented by ruins, art and the sublime in nature. It was fashionable for liberal English writers to express sympathy for the recent manifestations of what Morgan called a ‘pining for liberty’ which had repeatedly emerged during the long history of the country’s foreign occupation. Indeed, Morgan, as well as several other Irish writers, had thought of Italy as a country characterized by an ardent love of freedom similar to that of Ireland and she showed genuine concern about what she called its ‘regeneration,’ declaring that the writing of her book was intended as ‘a mission of doing good by telling truth according to our impressions. ... I feel though we had a grand vocation: of our earnest truthfulness I have no doubt, but in our power for aiding the great cause, the regeneration of Italy, we feel little confidence.’<sup>6</sup> Part of her sympathy was due to her discerning similar pressures from historical and political forces in Ireland and Italy; Moore, on the contrary, perceived no such similarity. Indeed, on several occasions, recorded in his verse and in his *Journal*,<sup>7</sup> he implied that it compared poorly with Ireland. Moreover, he was wary of taking position on thorny political issues because the similarity of circumstances, if alluded to, might endanger his acceptance by an English audience. The way the two authors deal with some episodes of Italian history which had also polarized the sympathetic feelings of many Romantic writers, namely the Neapolitan insurrection of 1820 and the fall of the Republic of Venice to Austria in 1797 (validated in 1815 by the Holy Alliance), can help prove that their vision of Italy was determined by their attitude towards Ireland (and consequently towards England).

Moore’s democratic feelings, so ready to be roused in other circumstances, were not offended by Austria’s acquisition of the old Republic of Venice (as Wordsworth, Byron and Morgan were) nor did he feel any thrill for the eruption of the Neapolitan revolution of 1820-

---

<sup>5</sup> OED definition.

<sup>6</sup> Lady Morgan, *Passages from my Autobiography* (London: Bentley, 1859), 131.

<sup>7</sup> *The Journal of Thomas Moore*, 6 vols., W. S. Dowden (ed.) (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1983-91).

1821 in spite of a liberalism which made him welcome similar eruptions in Spain and Greece. Inherited preconceptions or an excess of prudence make him describe Italians as cowardly in his lines about the Neapolitan insurrection or cruelly despotic in the poem about the fall of Venice.

In 1820, in the wake of Spain (1812), Naples had risen against the Bourbon monarchy forcing Ferdinand I to accede to the people's demands for a constitution. As soon as the king had granted it, however, he left for his in-laws in Austria and, with the blessing of the Holy Alliance, returned with an army of 50.000 men that easily crushed the 8.000-strong Neapolitan force. Less than a year after the outbreak of the revolution, the victorious King would dismiss the parliament, tear up the constitution and imprison and execute the rebels.

Unlike Morgan, with her pathos-laden pages, and Shelley who in his 'Ode to Naples' saw in the event a regenerative return to Italy's republican past and the promise of similar eruptions spreading elsewhere (as in fact happened in Turin the following year), Moore writing after the tragic conclusion of the rebellion, attributed the failure of the short-lived insurrection to one of the proverbial vices of Italians, cowardice, making Naples the only exception in an irresistible chain reaction of reforms triggered by the Spanish revolution. In the poem 'The Torch of Liberty,' contained in *Fables of the Holy Alliance*, Moore points an accusing finger:

'Who next received the flame? Alas,  
Unworthy Naples—shame of shames,  
That ever through such hands should pass  
That brightest of all earthly flames!

Scarce had her fingers touched the torch,  
When, frightened by the sparks it shed,  
Nor waiting even to feel the scorch,  
She dropped it to the earth—and fled.'<sup>8</sup>

Even harsher are the 'Lines on the Entry of the Austrians into Naples.' Inspired by a sanctimonious but abstract love of liberty they end up piling insults on those who had made a stand but whom he calls 'slaves,' 'dastards,' 'cowards,' 'beasts' vowing them to eternal ignominy:

---

8 Moore, VII, 321-324.

'Oh shame! that in such a proud moment of life,  
Worth the hist'ry of ages, when, had you but hurled  
One bolt at your tyrant invader, that strife  
Between freemen and tyrants had spread through the world—

That then—oh! Disgrace upon manhood—ev'n then,  
You should falter, should cling to you pitiful breath;  
Cow'r down into beasts, when you might have stood men,  
And prefer the slave's life of prostration to death.'<sup>9</sup>

While a broad rhetoric about liberty can be heard in the two poems, Moore seems to evade the real question of responsibilities and facts and relies on clichés. When, instead, the fight for liberty took place in the past, his attitude was different as can be seen in the poem inspired by another similar revolutionary event, Cola di Rienzo's establishment of a republic in Rome in 1347 during the Papacy's exile in Avignon. Although the reaction of feudal forces soon obliged Cola to renounce the title of tribune and retreat to Castel Gandolfo and although later, on his return to Rome, he disappointed the people who hoped he would lead them again (he, too, thus, 'dropping the torch'), the episode struck a sympathetic chord in the Irish poet who called the uprising 'a proud moment' and hailed the outbreak of the insurrection with all the sentimentalism and rhetoric displayed in *Irish Melodies*:

'Tis o'er—the dawn of our deliverance breaks!  
Up from his sleep of centuries awakes  
The Genius of the Old Republic, free  
As first he stood, in chainless majesty.  
And sends his voice through ages yet to come,  
Proclaiming Rome, Rome, Rome, Eternal Rome.'<sup>10</sup>

Faced with two similar insurrections leading to short-lived republics, Moore found himself despising the more recent one and expressing scorn for the Neapolitan patriots who had to give in to superior forces, and paying tribute to the event which occurred 500 years previously, although Cola di Rienzo's role had been rather ambiguous and the revolution just as abortive as the one in Naples.

---

9 *Ibid.*, VII., 361.

10 *Ibid.*, VII, 325-330.

Moore was often accused of having ‘sold out’ to the powerful London elite transforming nationalist rhetoric into a money-making enterprise but avoiding positions which might have shown him as too radical.<sup>11</sup> Sympathy for an actual rebellion against England’s allies might have seemed inappropriate and politically unwise while he could give free vent to sentimental republicanism for a case which, being past, was symbolic and did not ruffle any feathers. Behind such wariness lay his status as an Irishman who had obtained success among the English.

The Jacobin Lady Morgan, instead, praised the recent uprisings as the ‘grandest moral spectacle ever given to the contemplation of humanity: for, if “a good man struggling with adversity” be a noble object, what is a great nation (or nations) struggling for rights and independence!!’<sup>12</sup> Such fervour was clearly occasioned by her liberal feelings but, in her case, also by her attitude towards a rebellious Ireland and the overbearing English in Ireland.

Far from considering Neapolitans cowardly, as did Moore, she underlines the fact that they were ‘goaded to madness by suffering and oppression’<sup>13</sup> thus rejecting the bad reputation that was attached to Neapolitans. Morgan is aware that generalizations are constructions often dictated by expediency and she gives a daring explanation, for example, of the charge of ‘inherent viciousness’ raised against Neapolitans, which could also apply to Irish people:

‘[C]onquered nations are always subjects of slander to their foreign masters, who seek to sanction their own injustice by assuming the worthlessness of their victims. The base and bigoted descendants of Charles the Fifth, having maddened or degraded the Neapolitans by a delegated and odious government, well suited to produce such an effect, assigned the results of their own despotism to the idiosyncrasy of a people.’<sup>14</sup>

11 The apparent indifference to the fate of the rebels coupled with declared radical feelings reminds one of Moore’s surprising public silence about the massacre of Peterloo noted by Ronan Kelly. Trying to explain it, Moore’s biographer remarks that ‘The truth, perhaps, is [...] his desire to do nothing that might jeopardize a favourable resolution of the Bermuda issue.’ See R. Kelly, *Bard of Erin: The Life of Thomas Moore* (Dublin. Penguin Ireland, 2008), 346. A similar explanation could be given for Moore’s attitude towards Naples.

12 Morgan, *Italy* 1<sup>st</sup> edition 2 vols. (London. Colburn, 1821), II. xxvi. 478.

13 *Ibid.*, II. xxiv.383.

14 *Ibid.*, II. xxiv. 383.

The Irish writer was quite familiar with these tactics exemplified by a long tradition of slander and accusations raised against her people which harked back to the works of Giraldus Cambrensis and Spenser. Made wise by her own experience, in the chapters about Naples she lashes out against all essentialisms:

‘It is a calumny against Providence and a solecism in philosophy, to assert that there are nations so marked by physical tendencies to evil, so instinctively devoted to particular vices, that they remain unredeemable by good laws, incorrigible by wise institutes [...] It has been the fashion to accuse the Neapolitans of an inherent viciousness, over which external circumstances could hold no control; but the prejudice has only obtained currency in European opinion, since that country has been the slave of Spain.’<sup>15</sup>

Substitute Irish for Neapolitan and what she could not have written openly in her national tales is there to be read between the lines of her travelogue. Not only is her refusal of negative stereotypes against the Neapolitan people coloured by her Irishness, but also the sympathy for the Neapolitan cause has Irish origins. Naples and Ireland are especially brought together by the evocation of the Jacobin revolution of 1799, as ephemeral as the 1798 rising in Ireland and like it a bearer of a new awareness and new aspirations which in Ireland resurfaced in 1803 with Robert Emmett’s rebellion and in Naples in 1820. Even the pathos-laden rhetorical device of recording the deathbed words of the 1799 Neapolitan heroes reminds us of the use Irish nationalists have made to our day of William Orr’s dying words or of Robert Emmet’s epitaph. Moreover, the strong blame for England’s role in support of the Bourbon despots, epitomized by the behaviour of Admiral Nelson and Lady Hamilton in the earlier revolution and by the full adhesion to the Holy Alliance policies in the more recent one, allows her to subtly encode criticism of England as suppressor of all aspirations to freedom, including those of Ireland.

Such criticism is explicit in her words of warning to those (including possibly Moore) who disapproved of the uprisings in Naples: ‘let those who rejoice in the defeat of the Neapolitan patriots of 1821, remember the fate of those who were exposed to the royal clemency of Ferdinand the Fourth, in 1799.’<sup>16</sup> Indeed her sarcasm towards the English governmental

---

15 *Ibid.*, II. xxiv. 382-383.

16 *Ibid.*, II. xxiii. 377.

and conservative press siding with the oppressors is cutting as is her admonishment of England lest it should deny its long constitutionalist and liberal tradition:

‘[E]ven now, while the scaffold is raised in Turin, and the tribunal is opened at Naples, while nations, goaded to madness by suffering and oppression, are called on to the judgment-seats of runaway kings, (restored by foreign bayonets to their thrones,) to answer for the crime of *self-defence*—England, safe in her insular retreat from continental commotions, hears the organ of her government [*The Courier*], her constitutional government applaud the avenging tyrants of Italy, calling on them “*to beware of unwise mercy,*” and reminding them, (least the hatchet *should* fall tardily, or the rope slacken, or the dungeon close,) that “*indemnity for the past—security for the future demands blood.*”

Aye—“Shed blood enough, old Renault.”

To the “OLD RENAULTS” of Naples and Piedmont such advice is needless!—but, oh! Land of the Russells and the Hampdens, it is hard it should come from you!!<sup>17</sup>

Morgan knew all too well England’s many lapses from her democratic tradition since the betrayal of human and civil rights in Ireland was an omnipresent reality for her, whether she gathered material for her national tales, thought of the 1801 abolition of the Irish Parliament or busied herself on behalf of Catholic Emancipation.

The other event that had polarized the sympathies of Romantic writers was the fall of Venice. In 1797, the over 1000-year-old republic of Venice had been consigned to Austria by Napoleon (indeed, as Morgan writes ‘bartered like a bale of goods’)<sup>18</sup> and, except for the ten-year Napoleonic parenthesis, was to remain in the hands of the Habsburgs until 1866. Although its ancient institutions had declined, it remained in the eyes of Morgan ‘the greatest monument which Liberty has left of its means and its powers’<sup>19</sup> and the changeover from independent republicanism, although a watered-down republicanism, to a much hated

17 *Ibid.*, II.xx. 270.

18 *Ibid.*, II. xxvi. 477.

19 *Ibid.*, II. xxvi. 478.

Austrian dominion elicited ardent words of sympathy from Morgan herself as well as from many literati including Wordsworth and Byron.<sup>20</sup>

Morgan, although aware that '[t]he passive indifference of the Venetians has armed a large portion of society against the sympathy which their present fallen and miserable condition is calculated to excite,'<sup>21</sup> is in agreement with Byron who considered the fall of Venice 'shameful to the nations' and especially to Albion, 'the Ocean queen.'<sup>22</sup> She too feels that the most democratic, constitutional monarchy and most advanced capitalist country of the time is siding with the most reactionary feudal elements in continental Europe instead of supporting the most progressive. Indeed, she calls England 'the political scavenger of Europe' because it sides with the Holy Alliance whose 'intentions are fully displayed in the fate of Poland, of Saxony, of Genoa, of Sicily, Parga, Naples, and Piedmont; and in the actual military occupation of the peninsula of Italy.'<sup>23</sup> The chapter on Venice, ending the two volumes of *Italy* closes with an ominous warning to England not to consort with the offenders of Constitutional and civil liberties, in which one more conclusive instance of the triangular relation between Italy, Ireland and England is evident.

Far from sharing Morgan's and Byron's indignation against England and compassion for Venice, Moore refuses to take a sympathetic stance regarding the fall of Venice and the failure of the Holy Alliance to return it to its independent, republican state, a fate which he considers a proper retribution for its arrogant Past. He may be prompted by hard historical realism, but the fact remains that he did not choose to adhere to the narrative of his contemporaries but, rather, to that held by Tories and supporters of the Holy Alliance:

---

20 See for instance William Wordsworth's sonnet 'On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic' or Lord Byron's first twenty-five stanzas of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto IV.

21 Morgan, *Italy*, II. xxvi. 477.

22 See Lord Byron, *Childe Harold*, IV, xvii

'thy lot

Is shameful to the nations -- most of all,

Albion, to thee: the Ocean queen should not

Abandon Ocean's children; in the fall

Of Venice think of thine, despite thy watery wall.'

23 Morgan, *Italy*, II. xxvi 477.

'Mourn not for Venice—let her rest  
 In ruin, 'mong those States unblest,  
 Beneath whose gilded hoofs of pride,  
 Where'er they trampled, Freedom died.  
 No—let us keep our tears for them,  
     Where'er they pine, whose fall hath been  
 Not from a blood-stained diadem,  
     Like that which decked this ocean-queen,  
 But from high daring in the cause  
     Of human Rights—the only good  
 And blessed strife, in which man draws  
     His mighty sword on land or flood.' <sup>24</sup>

Moore proclaims his loyalty to liberal ideals in his usual sentimental and evasive way by giving generic praise of them whose 'fall hath been [...] from high daring in the cause / Of human Rights.' However, as in the case of Naples, he avoids committing himself in the defence of touchy contemporary issues.

The difference between the two authors lies in fact in the prudence displayed in dealing with the images of Italy per se and in the uses made of such images for a coded discussion of Irish politics. 'A complex apologia for the absence of a definite political position in Moore's work as a whole' can be seen in his poem 'Blame not the Bard,' as W. J. McCormack suggests.<sup>25</sup> Moore attributes the bard's lack of involvement not only to the situation of Ireland itself whose 'pride has gone by' (he had used a similar argument about Venice) but also to the dangerousness of taking position, for 'tis treason to love her, and death to defend.' In conclusion, he asks the reader to 'blame not the bard, if in pleasure's soft dream / he should try to forget what he never can heal.'<sup>26</sup> What sort of danger would befall those who took a political position in that epoch is clarified by Seamus Deane who points out in *Strange Country* that '[t]he one element that had to be erased was the revolutionary element; for once that appeared, the commercialisation failed and Ireland became a territory as Other [for England] as revolutionary France.'<sup>27</sup> By these standards,

<sup>24</sup> Moore, VII. 316-320.

<sup>25</sup> W. J. McCormack, *Sheridan Le Fanu and Victorian Ireland* (Dublin. Lilliput, 1991), 11.

<sup>26</sup> Moore, VII, 348-349.

<sup>27</sup> S. Deane, *Strange Country* (Oxford. Clarendon Press, 1997), 67.

even too much sympathy for the Italian revolutionary movement could signify revolutionary involvement at home and be detrimental to the success of Moore's work. The same applies to other Irish writers (as for instance the Maturins, father and son) who also dealt cautiously with the fashionable topic of Italy.

Morgan, on the contrary, maybe because she was financially more secure or because she had discovered that scandal sells, or indeed, was 'fearless' as Byron suggested, is quite open in her espousal of revolutionaries and independence fighters only trying to tone down the transgressive impact of her work by repeatedly using the ploy of presenting herself as a sentimental and naive woman: 'in a woman's work, sex may plead its privilege; and [...] if the heart will occasionally make itself a party in the concern, its intrusions may be pardoned.'<sup>28</sup> By adopting a female point of view which exonerates her from being seen as fully responsible and excuses her excesses, the author extends feelings regarding Ireland to an Italian context thus finding a way to write a patriotic and progressive tract without running too many risks.

Clearly, whether Morgan and Moore take position in favour of Italy or not or whether they espouse or refute England's long and articulate tradition of clichés about Italy, their standpoint is conditioned by Ireland's colonial status. Irish Italy, codified in thought and language, conditioned by social and historical factors, becomes in their hands a powerful metaphor used for testing and transgressing the boundaries of the community in a global dimension.

*University of Turin*



---

28 Morgan, *Italy*, I. v. 71.



# The Italianate Aspect of the Pre-Raphaelite Journal *The Germ*

*Valeria Tinkler-Villani*

*The Germ: Thoughts towards Nature in Poetry, Literature and Art* was a magazine started by the seven members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, or PRB, in 1850. It was conceived as a tool for attracting the public's attention to the Brotherhood's work and publicizing its views on art. The Brotherhood wanted to reform English painting and the magazine was meant to communicate this new vision in terms of poetry, woodcut illustrations and discussions of art, thus opening out a relatively narrow focus on painting into a broader artistic spectrum. The magazine did not succeed in spreading its message to a wide audience. Of the 500 copies of the second issue only 40 were actually sold. After the failure of the first two issues, in an attempt to make the periodical more professional the title was changed for issues three and four to a variation on the subtitle: *Art and Poetry: Being Thoughts towards Nature, Conducted principally by Artists*.<sup>1</sup> Then the magazine folded. In 1869 Edmund Gosse referred to it as a 'charming and pathetic failure,' a 'forlorn little periodical.'<sup>2</sup> Yet it received many reviews, which means that it did reach a considerable number of critics. More importantly, it functioned as a forum in which members of the Brotherhood attempted a clear formulation of their views and thus clarified them. *The Germ* in fact became a powerhouse of creative activity for its contributors and for those loosely connected to them. Since this includes the Rossettis, and since one major tenet of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood is a return to the aesthetics of early Italian art, the cultural link between Italian and English culture would seem a given. In this article I intend to explore this issue more closely.

The PRB was meant as a very secret society, as indicated by the urgent and insistent attempts to discover the identity of the culprit once the meaning of the initials had become common knowledge. This disclosure was most likely one of the consequences of the foundation of

- 
- 1 Following current use, however, for the sake of brevity I will refer to the magazine in general as *The Germ*.
  - 2 Quoted in J. Ashcroft Noble, 'A Pre-Raphaelite Magazine,' in *The Germ: Thoughts towards Nature in Poetry, Literature and Art, 1850*, facsimile reprint by T. Mosher, (Portland, ME, 1898), xv.

*The Germ*, since the setting up of a magazine had needed a larger number of members, which grew to twelve acolytes. Clearly, the planning of a magazine opened the group to the input of others. The title itself was the suggestion of a young painter, William Cave Thomas, who was not a member of the Brotherhood, but must have joined the discussions. Also, in the first number, under the table of contents, there is an invitation for any author of unpublished material 'appearing to coincide with the views in which this Periodical is established' to submit their poem or essay.<sup>3</sup> Christina Rossetti also joined in the preparations of the magazine, at least at the beginning.<sup>4</sup> If the PRB was a closed society, *The Germ* was not.

The so-called failure of *The Germ* in 1850 corresponds to the folding of the Brotherhood which is considered to have taken place in the same year. It is part of my argument that this failure and folding are in fact a fundamental point of change in Pre-Raphaelitism which will prove fruitful and influential in English letters. One major element of this change occurs in *The Germ* and it is precisely the shift from an intimate narrow secrecy to an entrance into the public sphere. Such an opening out includes the exploration of multiple forms of creativity and also includes a cosmopolitanism within which Italian matters are particularly relevant. I will first consider how *The Germ* offered a process of growth on a personal level for some of the contributors and then move to a consideration of some aspects of language and of aesthetics.

As Lorna Huett points out in her essay 'Among the Unknown Public: Household Words, All the Year Round and the Mass-Market Weekly Periodical in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,' 'a struggle for self-definition and for meaning was an inherent part of the writing, editing, design and marketing of every journal.'<sup>5</sup> This is true of *The Germ*.

Self-definition took many forms, one of them being the very title of the envisaged magazine. Lists of possibilities were drawn up; these included 'The Acorn' and 'The Seed.' Clearly, the Brotherhood wanted to present their venture as a little thing, a seed cast abroad, but one that would germinate. Another suggested title was 'The Sower,' a word which focuses rather on the reforming spirit of the group.<sup>6</sup> Similar in nature is the

3 Ashcroft Noble, 'A Pre-Raphaelite Magazine,' n.p.

4 J. Marsh, *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography* (London. Jonathan Cape, 1994), 109.

5 See [muse.jhu.edu/journals/victorian\\_periodicals\\_review/v038/38.1huett.pdf](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/victorian_periodicals_review/v038/38.1huett.pdf), 61.

6 Appendix 4, 'Titles for *The Germ* and Cover Sonnet,' in *cont.* ...

question of the price. This was one of the three aspects of the magazine to be considered first: already on the 13<sup>th</sup> of August 1849 the *P.R.B. Journal* records: 'a project for a monthly 6d. magazine' with an etching.<sup>7</sup> At the actual first meeting on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August the envisaged price had doubled to one shilling (that is, twelve pence);<sup>8</sup> it was only more than a month later, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September, that Dante Gabriel Rossetti discussed the magazine with printers and so faced the practicalities of expenses.<sup>9</sup> The envisaged price, therefore, had little to do with financial matters, but rather with how this paper and therefore its contributors were to enter the varied world of Victorian letters. If self-definition was important for the magazine, it was equally important for the individuals contributing to it who were mostly very young and beginning their careers and acutely so, for the only woman contributor, Christina Rossetti.

Jan Marsh has shown how determined and shrewd Christina Rossetti was, around 1860, about getting her work published, although she mainly relied on her brothers for direct contact with publishers. This taste for publication was developed in *The Germ*, in which seven of her poems appeared. In the first number all names were omitted. After the first number, a partly-signed list of articles was inserted inside the wrapper. Christina appeared under the name Ellen Alleyn, which, according to William Michael Rossetti, was a 'concoction' of Dante Gabriel.<sup>10</sup> Christina decided to stick to the pseudonym for all the four numbers, therefore giving it her assent. It is striking how different this name is from her own: she did not retreat behind a male pseudonym, as she so easily could have done, and so gender was not a problem for her. What is noticeable is that all the strong consonants typical of the name Christina Rossetti are avoided, and even some vowels. She is as

---

*/cont.* W. E. Federman (ed.), *The P.R.B. Journal: William Michael Rossetti's Diary of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, 1849-1853* (Oxford. The Clarendon Press, 1975), 114-15.

7 *The P.R.B. Journal*, *ibid.*, 10.

8 '.... the magazine should be increased to 40 pages, 2 etchings and 1/- each number.'; *ibid.*, 11.

9 *ibid.*, 15.

10 *THE GERM: Thoughts towards Nature in Poetry, Literature and Art, being A FACSIMILE REPRINT OF THE PRE-RAPHAELITE BROTHERHOOD PUBLISHED IN 1850, WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY WILLIAM MICHAEL ROSSETTI, LONDON, ELLIOT STOCK, 1901*, 21; subsequent references will be in the text to this edition by issue and page number; also available at Project Gutenberg (<ftp://sunsite.informatikrwthachen.de/pub/mirror/ibiblio/Gutenberg/1/7/6/4/17649/17649-h/17649-h.htm>).

distanced from her own Italian-sounding name and therefore origins, as it is possible to be. She had appeared in her own name in the volume *Verses*, privately printed by her grandfather, Polidori, in 1847, but *The Germ* signalled her entrance and sustained presence in the public sphere. It is from this safe platform that she made a firm and final choice. Just as throughout her life she kept her Italian poems secret, so she firmly presented herself as an English poet. Behind this persona she found the freedom, encouragement and satisfaction of seeing her work in print.

Dante Gabriel made a very different choice. Until 1850, he had been publicly active mainly as a painter and he signed his canvases as Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Privately, he was always called Gabriel by his family, and often called himself that also in formal correspondence – for example, in the letter in which he first approached Robert Browning in 1847. Here he introduces himself as a ‘most enthusiastic admirer of [Browning’s] works’ who can ‘no longer restrain himself from intruding upon’ him, ‘at the risk of being considered presumptuous.’ He presents himself as a very discerning reader of poetry, with no reference to his being a painter, recounting, in this letter, how in the British Library he has come across the poem ‘Pauline, a Fragment of a Confession’ and noticed a striking similarity with Browning’s ‘first acknowledged work,’ ‘Paracelsus.’ After expressing the hope that his doubt will be resolved by a reply from Browning (which did in fact follow), he signs himself ‘your distant respectful admirer, Gabriel Rossetti.’<sup>11</sup> Here, ‘Dante’ does not appear even as a middle name. From the second issue of *The Germ* onwards, some other contributors, apart from Christina, also used pseudonyms. Gabriel did not, and in fact confirmed his artistic persona by signing his contributions as ‘Dante Gabriel Rossetti,’ thus again stressing his Italian origin, unifying his two artistic personae of painter and poet and declaring an affiliation with the great Italian Poet. In *The Germ* Dante Gabriel published the prose piece ‘Hand and Soul,’ and also ‘My Sister’s Sleep,’ ‘The Blessed Damozel’ and ‘Poems for Pictures,’ all poems for which he is famous.

I am now turning from matters concerning the individual contributors to matters of aesthetics and language. ‘Poems for Pictures’ was published in the fourth and last issue of *The Germ*; two of the five poems are on paintings by Italian artists – ‘A Dance of Nymphs, by Andrea

11 The letter appears in full in A. A. Adrian, ‘The Browning-Rossetti Friendship: Some Unpublished Letters,’ *PMLA*, 73/5, Part 1 (Dec., 1958), 538 ff.

Mantegna' and 'A Venetian Pastoral, by Giorgione,' both at the Louvre. We also find mention of Italian art in the fourth issue, in the discussion entitled 'A Dialogue on Art' by John Orchard and, much more directly, in the second issue, in 'The Purpose and Tendency of Early Italian Art,' an essay by John Seward, the pseudonym of Frederick George Stephens. Stephens was to become quite an influential figure in the arts. In particular, he was later art critic of the *Athenaeum* for 40 years, to be followed in 1901 by Roger Fry.<sup>12</sup> In the essay, he wrote for *The Germ*, Stephens focuses on the strengths of the early Italian painters and mentions the work of Ghiberti and of the painters Benozzo Gozzoli, Fra Angelico, Giotto, Masaccio, Ghirlandaio, Baccio della Porta and Orcagna. The achievement of these painters is clearly linked to that of their contemporary heirs, the Pre-Raphaelites, when he proceeds to stress the necessary break contemporary painters have to make with the current establishment:

'If we are not to depart from established principles, how are we to advance at all?' (II:59)

Indeed, referring to traditional teaching at art schools, he says:

'Let us have the mind and the mind's-workings, not the remains of earnest thought which has been frittered away by a long dreary course of preparatory study, by which all life has been evaporated.' (II:60)

Further, Stephens extracts from Italian painting those values which in his view English painters need to learn and which could be summarized as 'energy and dignity,' and a 'firm attachment to truth.' More specifically,

'By a determination to represent the thing and the whole of the thing, by training himself to the deepest observation of its fact and detail, enabling himself to reproduce, as far as possible, nature herself, the painter will best evince his share of faith.' (II:59)

He does not advocate a nostalgic return to the past. As he points out,

'The sciences have become almost exact within the present century. Geology and chemistry are almost re-instituted. And how has this been done but by bringing greater knowledge to

---

<sup>12</sup> We are familiar with Stephens' handsome features, since he was the model for Millais's Ferdinand, in *Ferdinand Lured by Ariel*.

bear upon a wider range of experiment; by being precise in the search after truth?' (II:61)

A range of experiment is precisely what the magazine offered: it was a space where painters, poets and other artists could attempt creative experiments which involved the interdependence of different arts. Collinson published in *The Germ* both an etching and a poem; Ford Madox Brown is represented by an etching and a discussion on art; Thomas Woolner, a sculptor, published a poem. As for Dante Gabriel, for 'The Girlhood of Mary Virgin,' which he painted in Holman Hunt's studio in 1849, he wrote two sonnets which he attached in gold leaf to the frame of the painting as 'an accompanying textual component.' He might have been inspired by Raphael, who had written some sonnets on the back of sketches for paintings.

Moreover, these artists could place their experimentation within a European cultural setting. *The Germ* projects a striking combination of a tightly knit group of artists and an open, cosmopolitan culture. I am referring to the dialogues and essays on art, but especially to Dante Gabriel's 'Sonnets for Pictures.' But, interestingly, Dante Gabriel also airs in *The Germ* a much less highbrow use of language, in a text which is difficult to place in terms of genre. On the last page of *The Germ* there was a statement of intent:

'This Periodical will consist of original Poems, Stories to develop thought and principle, Essays concerning Art and other subjects, and analytic Reviews of current Literature—particularly of Poetry.' (see, for example, I:47; II:96)

The contribution by Stephens I have just described, is a straightforward essay. The text I want to focus on in the rest of this article develops similar ideas to those expressed by Stephens, but is not presented as an essay on art, perhaps it is a story to develop thought and principle, some have called it a 'poem in prose.' It is perhaps the most intriguing and fruitful of the texts in *The Germ*, and in it Italian art and language play a crucial role. It is, of course, Rossetti's 'Hand and Soul.'

Through *The Germ* magazine, the young reformers of literature and art were trying to inform and improve the outside world. However, as James Ashcroft Noble stated in 1898, 'The magazine differs totally and very pleasantly from the typical sectarian organ – which is, as a rule, too polemical for endurance by non-polemical people – in addressing [the readers] not in logical hortative fashion, but allusively through images of

the imagination rather than mere conceptions of the intellect.'<sup>13</sup> This is a good description of Rossetti's method in 'Hand and Soul.'

'Hand and Soul' opens in Italian with an epigram from a lesser known early Italian poet, a friend of Dante:

'Rivolsimi in quel lato  
Là 'nde venia la voce,  
E parvemi una luce  
Che lucea quanto stella:  
La mia mente era quella.'

– *Bonaggiunta Urbiciani* (1250).<sup>14</sup>

'Hand and Soul' continues with a vivid account of the life and work of the painter Chiaro dell'Erma – or Chiaro di Messer Bello dell' Erma. We follow his growth as a painter and as a man, from the town of Arezzo, where he was born and lived as a wealthy young man, to Pisa, where he goes in order to apprentice himself to the painter Giunta Pisano, whose hard, almost still Byzantine art disappoints him. He therefore gives himself up to the pleasures of the senses – in an imitation perhaps of an aspect of Raphael's life. He is shaken out of sensual pleasures by the arrival on the scene of Bonaventura (presumably Berlinghieri), who paints as Chiaro himself had intended to. Chiaro picks up the brush again and becomes famous thanks to his passionate art in pursuit of truth, but then moves into a different phase, a hard impersonal symbolic art not enjoyed by the common man but favoured by critics. Disappointed by the powerlessness of art, especially symbolic art, over real life, especially when he witnesses a bloody civil strife which starts in Florence right underneath his painting entitled 'Peace,' he is rescued by the appearance of a woman, his own embodied soul and clearly an echo of Dante's Beatrice. This woman urges him to paint using both his hand and his soul – that is, his senses and heart. Chiaro reproduces this woman on a small canvas. At this point the narrative stops; the tale shifts to the present tense of 1847 and to what seems to be the personal appearance of the author, perhaps Dante Gabriel himself, presumably attempting to study this very picture in the last two

13 Ashcroft Noble, 'A Pre-Raphaelite Magazine,' xix.

14 I:23; 'I turned to that side / There from whence came the voice / And to me appeared a light / Which shone like a star./ And it was my own mind.' The translations from Italian are my own.

or three pages of the tale, of which the following are extracts. The setting is the Pitti, which is described as being in a state of chaos because of refurbishment, so that the paintings on show are hung without any order:

'In the Spring of 1847 I was at Florence. [...]

One picture, that I saw that Spring, I shall not easily forget. It was among those, I believe, brought from the other rooms, and had been hung, obviously out of all chronology, immediately beneath that head by Raphael so long known as the "Berrettino," and now said to be the portrait of Cecco Ciulli.

[...]

The next day I was there again; but this time a circle of students was round the spot, all copying the "Berrettino." I contrived, however, to find a place whence I could see *my* picture, and where I seemed to be in nobody's way. For some minutes I remained undisturbed; and then I heard, in an English voice: "Might I beg of you, sir, to stand a little more to this side, as you interrupt my view."

I felt vexed, for, standing where he asked me, a glare struck on the picture from the windows, and I could not see it. However, the request was reasonably made, and from a countryman; so I complied, and turning away, stood by his easel. I knew it was not worth while, yet I referred in some way to the work underneath the one he was copying. He did not laugh, but he smiled as we do in England: "*Very* odd, is it not?" said he.

The other students near us were all continental; and seeing an Englishman select an Englishman to speak with, conceived, I suppose, that he could understand no language but his own. They had evidently been noticing the interest which the little picture appeared to excite in me.

One of them, an Italian, said something to another who stood next to him. He spoke with a Genoese accent, and I lost the sense in the villainous dialect. "Che so?" replied the other, lifting his eyebrows towards the figure; "roba mistica: 'st' Inglesi son matti sul misticismo: somiglia alle nebbie di là. Li fa pensare alla patria,

'E intenerisce il core

*Lo di ch' han detto ai dolci amici adio.*”

“*La notte, vuoi dire,*” said a third.<sup>15</sup>

There was a general laugh. My compatriot was evidently a novice in the language, and did not take in what was said. I remained silent, being amused.

“*Et toi donc?*” said he who had quoted Dante, turning to a student, whose birthplace was unmistakable even had he been addressed in any other language: “*que dis-tu de ce genre-là?*”

“*Moi?*” returned the Frenchman, [...] “*Je dis, mon cher, que c'est une spécialité dont je me fiche pas mal. Je tiens que quand on ne comprend pas une chose, c'est qu' elle ne signifie rien.*”<sup>16</sup>

My reader thinks possibly that the French student was right.  
(my italics; I:32-3)

At the close of this linguistic tour de force, where national stereotypes are linked to language and to values in painting, Rossetti draws us into his text and faces us with a challenge, for each one of us must ask oneself: do I number myself as one of his readers? Especially in his own day, how many of ‘his readers’ could indeed read this passage? Would they feel they were able to agree with the French student, or disagree? And do we, today, feel we are meant to agree, or disagree? At its close, the text draws us into its dynamics which are full of ambiguities, the most obvious of which – taking a step back – is the fusion of fact and fiction. You might be surprised to hear that many readers, including art critics, believed Chiaro to be an historical figure, an existing painter. I must confess that I had to put it into Google. In addition, there is mention of two main art scholars, D’Agincourt and Dr. Aemmster; the former could

---

15 “Who knows?” replied the other, lifting his eyebrows towards the figure; “mystical stuff: the English are mad about mysticism: it looks like the fogs over there. It reminds them of their homeland, ‘and melts their thoughtful heart, / Who in the morn have bid sweet friends farewell.’” “In the night, you mean.”

The translation of Dante (*Purgatory VIII*, 2-3) is from H.F. Cary’s *Vision* (London. Frederick Warne & Sons, 1886), 130.

16 “What about you?”[...] “What do you say about that genre?” “Who, me?” returned the Frenchman, [...] “I say, my dear chap, that it’s a speciality I don’t give a damn about. I think that when one doesn’t understand something it’s because it doesn’t mean anything.”

refer to the famous French scholar, author of the ‘Histoire de l’art par les monuments,’ published posthumously in 1824, but the second is fictional. I hope some of the readers of this article will be able help me with the head by Raphael ‘so long known as the “Berrettino,”’ since I was unable to ascertain whether there is any such painting. Here Rossetti is teasing his readers, confusing them with fact mixed with fiction. And then at the end, we have the Italian conversation quoted above, which includes a quotation from Dante.

Most of us will be familiar with the quotation from *Purgatorio* used by the student; but did Rossetti’s readers know it, and were they so familiar with Italian as to be able to switch from the words in the quotation to a jocular remark about day and night (*my italics in the quotation*)? And did their Italian stretch to switching from the language of Dante to the colloquialisms of the conversation (‘Che so?’; ‘roba mistica’; ‘st’Inglese’)?<sup>17</sup> The text plays with time, with genre (since it follows the same trajectory as Stephens’ essay, but in a narrative and dramatic manner), and also with language registers. The gamut is complete, from the Genoese dialect unrecorded because not understood even by this cosmopolitan speaker, to the language of Dante. The English is similarly varied, and the further we proceed into the story of Chiaro, the more archaic the English becomes. As in some Gothic fiction, it is as if a medieval manuscript is being reproduced. The setting, also, reflects this creative chaos, with the disruption of proper artistic order at the Pitti, which is one of those most august of Victorian institutions – a museum.

The text is full of speakers: consider the beginning and end of the text. The opening epigram by Bonaggiunta Urbiciani not only presents the reader with words in Italian, it also adds yet another voice to the range included in the piece and it extends the range of the discussion on pictorial art that will follow into the poetry of Dante and his circle. The text closes with a mixture of mainly colloquial English, Italian and French. It is a text of many voices, suggesting and unlocking layer under layer of conceptual structures.

In *Sopra il reale: Osmosi Interartistiche nel Preraffaellismo e nel simbolismo inglese*, Paola Spinozzi argues that the Pre-Raphaelites prepared the way for, and sometimes developed, principles of Modernism mainly in the reciprocal illumination of the arts. I think my discussion

---

17 The French is similarly colloquial.

supports her arguments, adding further evidence and broadening her definitions.<sup>18</sup> But I would like to conclude with some more speculative remarks, for which I return to Robert Browning. He replied to Dante Gabriel's letter. The two poets met four years later, in 1851, and while the Brownings were in London, they all met regularly. Although I have no evidence that Browning read *The Germ*, his poem 'One Word More (to E.B.B.)' (1855) seems richer when placed in the context of Rossetti's, and the magazine's close focus on and broad exploration of, the interdependence of the arts and the complex search for a language to describe such exploration:

'[...]

II

Rafael made a century of sonnets,  
Made and wrote them in a certain volume  
Dinted with the silver-pointed pencil  
Else he only used to draw Madonnas: [...]

V

Dante once prepared to paint an angel:

...

[...]

While he mused and traced it and retraced it,

[...]

In there broke the folk of his Inferno.

Says he—"Certain people of importance

[...]

Entered and would seize, forsooth, the poet."

Says the poet – "Then I stopped my painting."

VI

You and I would rather see that angel,

Painted by the tenderness of Dante,

Would we not? – than read a fresh Inferno.

[...]

VIII

What of Rafael's sonnets, Dante's picture?

---

18 P. Spinozzi, *Sopra il reale: Osmosi Interartistiche nel Preraffaelitismo e nel simbolismo inglese* (Firenze. Alinea Editrice, 2005).

## IX

This: no artist lives and loves, that longs not  
 Once, and only once, and for One only,  
 (Ah, the prize!) to find his love a language  
 Fit and fair and simple and sufficient –  
 Using nature that's an art to others,  
 Not, this one time, art that's turned his nature.  
 Ay, of all the artists living, loving,  
 None but would forego his proper dowry, –  
 Does he paint? he fain would write a poem –  
 Does he write? he fain would paint a picture,  
 Put to proof art alien to the artist's,  
 Once, and only once, and for One only,  
 So to be the man and leave the artist,  
 Save the man's joy, miss the artist's sorrow.<sup>19</sup>

I like to think that Browning's own sentiments and arguments in this poem – about the artist and his creativity and the sharing of the latter with a soulmate, the search for a language, the role and very meaning of *nature* – and in other poems in similar vein, illustrate the extent to which the Pre-Raphaelites made Raphael and Dante, Italian art and poetry, the yeast that has helped English letters flourish.

*University of Leiden*

---

<sup>19</sup> *Robert Browning's Poems and Plays*, introduction by J. Bryson, 4 vols, II (London. Dent & Sons: Everyman's Library, 1956), 445-46.

## E.M. Forster, John Ruskin and the 'pernicious charm' of Italy

*Peter Vassallo*

E.M. Forster's Italy before the time of his writing *a Room with a View* (1908) was Italy seen and experienced in 1901 in the not so pleasant company of his mother and old ladies full of solicitous advice.<sup>1</sup> For the young Cambridge graduate it was the Italy of spontaneity where the dolce 'si' sounded everywhere, utterly distinct and remote from dull English provincial life (represented by dreary Sawston in *Where Angels Fear To Tread* (1905)), where the dominant sound, in Forster's view, was 'naou.' It was the Italy where the predisposed traveller, mainly female, could break away from the rigidity of convention and propriety and abandon herself to the sensations of the moment or immersion into the spontaneous elemental forces of life. It was that Italy where repressed young English women could submit to the enthralling lure of the unknown, where spirited women like Lucy Honeychurch, Lilia Herriton and, later, D.H. Lawrence's Alvina Houghton (in *The Lost Girl*) could discover their inner selves. Both Forster's Lilia and Lawrence's Alvina will eventually become disillusioned when they experience marriage to an Italian and are consequently exposed to Italy's gender conventions. Lilia enclosed in decent and safe security is unable to visit friends or to have tea parties and Lawrence's rebellious Alvina is eventually transformed or transmogrified into a submissively docile wife, smothered in the embrace of the remote village of Pescocalascio in the Abruzzi, happily doing the washing up in the kitchen – an ending to *The Lost Girl* which infuriated Katherine Mansfield who called it a 'disgrace.'<sup>2</sup>

Italy was also that foreign country where the unsuspecting traveller was waylaid and overwhelmed by the genius of the place and the mystery of the landscape. In the short stories, two of Forster's characters affected by the mysterious Italian landscape are Harold in 'Albergo Empedocle' who is suddenly and inexplicably possessed by the spirit of ancient Greece still prevailing in Agrigento in Sicily (Magna Graecia) and the recalcitrant boy

---

1 See P.N. Furbank, *E.M. Forster: A Life* (London. Sphere Books, 1978), 82-85.

2 Katherine Mansfield, *The Scrapbook of Katherine Mansfield* J.M. Murry (ed.) (London. Constable, 1939), 156.

Eustace on the hills near Ravello on the Amalfi coast (in 'A Story of a Panic') inexplicably possessed by the spirit of Pan when a sudden mysterious gust of wind sends the picnicking stuffy, old English travellers into a panic and Eustace into the embrace of Gennaro the fisherman turned part-time waiter. Forster's homoerotic theme is subtly introduced here, as it is in most of his novels, except *Maurice* (1914) where the theme of homosexuality is brought to the fore.

The spontaneity of Italy, to which both Forster and Lawrence responded, was not circumscribed by the popular Baedeker or Murray guide books which shepherded the acquiescent tourist along the beaten track pointing to *objets d'art* to be appreciated or ignored. It enticed suitably predisposed English characters like Lilia Herriton, her brother-in-law Philip, and particularly Lucy Honeychurch to respond to the genius of the place (unlike Lucy's stuffy chaperone Charlotte who seems to have brought the English climate to Florence in her baggage).

Earlier in 1869 Sir Leslie Stephen in an essay on 'Vacation' in the *Cornhill Magazine* had despised the ordinary British traveller's over-dependence on the new Murray handbooks for guidance:

'The ordinary tourist has no judgment, admires what the infallible Murray orders him to admire... The tourist never diverges one hair's breadth from the beaten track of his predecessors.'<sup>3</sup>

Forster must have shared Leslie Stephen's disdain of handbook guides to Italy for in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* he pokes fun at the Baedeker guides which regulated one's response to the sights of Tuscany, an ironic stance which is evident in his well-known Baedeker-like account of Monteriano (San Geminiano) which the formidable Mrs Herriton feels she must consult after her disappointment in finding no reference to Monteriano in Byron's *Childe Harold*. Forster's second novel *A Room with a View* (1908) engages with Baedeker and his heroine's spiritual education really begins when she walks aimlessly down the narrow streets of Florence without a Baedeker. Forster's strategy in his early novels especially in *A Room with a View* is to make most of his characters embodiments of diverse attitudes towards the Other and to play these off against each other. Italy is an escape from the dullness

3 'Vacation' in *Men, Books and Mountains: Essays by Leslie Stephen*, S.Ullman (ed.) (Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press, 1956), 174.

of Edwardian provincial life as with Lilia or with Philip Herriton, or a seductive siren ensnaring the unsuspecting English traveller – as in Caroline Abbott's spinsterish view or Charlotte Bartlett's blinkered outlook; the place where the lower classes could assume airs and graces as the cockney Signora of the Pension Bertolini; or the treasure trove of Art and Culture where the aesthete can display his cultural superiority as with Cecil Vyse; or a romantic setting for a trashy novel as with those written by Miss Lavish; or a living monument to the past as in Mr Beebe's Arcadian view; or a Ruskinian disdain of the present as in the Rev Cuthbert Eager's attitude; or the land which could be culturally appropriated, as in the case of the wealthy patronising Anglo-Florentines, or the realm of possibilities and desire of fresh experience and perception as with Lucy Honeychurch whose name appropriately evokes Arnoldian notions of sweetness and light.

Writing in the first decade of the twentieth century, Forster was aware that Murray's handbooks and Baedeker's popular guidebooks had become established constraints on the British traveller's perception of the Other. Italy was inscribed in Murray's and Baedeker's Italy but Italian Italy, as he realized from his own experience, often eluded the travellers' grasp. There was, however, another dominant cultural authority against whose presence the intelligent and perceptive traveller had to contend and this was the presiding presence of John Ruskin who was revered, in his time and later, as the most influential commentator on Italian art and cultural history.

Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (1843) was an attempt to raise the education of the eye and to propagate among cultured Victorians a kind of moral pedagogy of the eye while instilling in the general reader a sense of aesthetic appreciation of the principles of proper perception and the appreciation of art.<sup>4</sup> One of the early devotees at the shrine of Ruskin was Charlotte Brontë who acknowledged the fact that *Modern Painters* had provoked in her a sort of visual epiphany in that it had activated a dormant perception – before Ruskin, she admitted that she had been walking blindfold – 'this book seems to give me eyes,' she wrote.<sup>5</sup> Many

4 On the subject of Ruskin's pervasive influence see Francis O'Gorman, 'Ruskin, Vernon Lee and the Cultural Possession of Italy,' *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies* Vol. 7 (2002), 81-107. See also Dinah Birch, *Ruskin's Myths* (Oxford. Clarendon Press, 1988) and Hilary Fraser, 'Ruskin, Italy and the Past' in Martin McLaughlin (ed.) *Britain and Italy: From Romanticism to Modernism* (Oxford. EHRC, 2000), 87-106.

5 Quoted in Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin: The Early Years* (London. Yale University Press, 1985), 73.

readers afterwards shared Brontë's feelings about Ruskin's book which was then regarded as something of a revelation. Ruskin's Italian Tour of 1845 had occasioned essays on the Medieval and Renaissance art of Northern Italy and his *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853) established him as the undisputed authority on Italian art and aesthetics, to such an extent that writers felt that it would have been an impertinence to write on Venice after Ruskin. Henry James writing in 1900 in his own *Italian Hours* was to acknowledge Ruskin's pervasive influence in the North of Italy 'It is Mr Ruskin who beyond anyone helps us to enjoy.'<sup>6</sup>

*The Stones of Venice* (Volume I) was a prophetic warning to England that she might undergo the same decline as the great Venetian republic. It was Ruskin's firm belief that the sign of spiritual decline of the Venetian city-state was its movement away from Gothic to the Renaissance style, arguing that the Gothic style permitted and even demanded the freedom, individuality and spontaneity of its workers and therefore represented a finer moral society.<sup>7</sup> Ruskin's lectures at the University of Oxford in the 1870s on Tuscan art established him as the foremost living authority on Italy and Italian art. His religious (Protestant) readings had made Tuscany synonymous with Christian Medievalism and pious medieval faith. Indeed, in his view the Italian Renaissance was indirectly responsible for the degradation of modern industrial Britain. Ruskin's appropriation of medieval Italy compelled his readers and admirers to perceive Italy through his writings. Margaret Oliphant found herself engaging with the spirit of Ruskin when she contemplated her book *The Makers of Venice* in the mid-1880s and judged him an 'amiable but determined autocrat' who wrote a discourse of 'oppressive conviction.'<sup>8</sup>

Forster's *A Room with a View* was an attempt to shake off the dominant and domineering spirit of Ruskin which asserted itself on the British traveller in Italy in the second half of the nineteenth century into

6 On James's 'engaging' with Ruskin see Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism and Commodity Culture* (Stanford. Stanford University Press, 1990), 91-101.

7 On Ruskin's 'moral aesthetics' see Nicholas Shrimpton 'Ruskin and the Aesthetes,' in Dinah Birch (ed.) *Ruskin and the Dawn of the Modern* (Oxford. Oxford University Press, 1999), 131-151.

8 See Francis O'Gorman "'Amiable but determined autocracy': Margaret Oliphant, Venice and the Inheritance of Ruskin" in *Unfolding the South: Nineteenth-century British women writers and artists in Italy* Alison Chapman and Jane Stabler (eds.) (Manchester. Manchester University Press, 2003), 184-201.

the first decade of the twentieth. Ruskin the revered arbiter of aesthetics had become a sort of cultural icon for the uninitiated traveller in the north of Italy. His *Mornings in Florence*, significantly subtitled simple studies of Christian Art for English Travellers (1875-1877), was meant to be an essential *vademecum* and, in some respects, an informed alternative to the ubiquitous Baedeker (that 'orthodox Baedeker-bestarred Italy') which the young Forster had used on his first trip to Italy, as well as a corrective to Murray's popular handbook for travellers. In Ruskin's *Mornings in Florence* exhortations take on the semblance of commands as the reader is urged to appreciate monuments of Florence which the author singles out as worthy of special attention. Ruskin focuses on Santa Croce and the monuments to be rigorously appreciated, underscoring the point, in every chapter, that Italy, unlike industrialized England, was never dislocated from her past. Lucca, as perceived by Ruskin, is a case in point – its link with the past seen in its architecture where a Roman amphitheatre is converted into a fish market while the original contours remain preserved. His prose fluctuates from the expositional to the preceptorial as he engages with Murray's handbook at every turn. Here are a few instances:

'By judicious restoration, as Murray usually calls it, there is no saying how much you have lost'

or

'get this little bit of geography, and architectural fact, well into your mind'

or

'Your Murray Guide tells you that the frescoes in this chapel were painted between 1296 and 1304 but [...] that statement is not altogether tenable.'<sup>9</sup>

Forster's first skirmish with Ruskin occurs in an early chapter when the Rev Eager's lecture on Santa Croce to a group of expatriate Anglo-Florentines, is interrupted by Old Emerson, a crusading atheist and socialist pamphleteer, who insists that the church was not built by

---

9 John Ruskin, *Mornings in Florence* (Massachusetts: Indy Publishers, 2007), 5, 6. On Forster's ambivalent attitude to contemporary guidebooks see James Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, and the Ways to 'Culture'* (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1993), 284-331.

faith (as the Rev Eager, echoing Ruskin, had argued) but by underpaid workers. Forster's point being that Ruskin's idealization of the Medieval lost sight of the actualities of daily living.<sup>10</sup>

It is also significant that Forster should make Lucy shed her Edwardian code of formalized behaviour outside Santa Croce in the open air where she can follow Old Emerson's homespun philosophical advice to 'spread her thoughts in the sunlight' where Italian Italy eventually asserts herself. Lucy must be weaned from Ruskin's patriarchal evocations (and Symbolic/religious readings) of Italy's past. The omniscient narrator's ironical comments underscore this fact. Indeed, Lucy wandering through Santa Croce alone feels at a loss when, without a guide, there was no one to tell her which of the sepulchral slabs that paved the nave was the one 'most praised by Mr Ruskin.'

Italy's education of Lucy takes place outside Ruskin's Santa Croce. 'For one ravishing moment Italy appeared' – this epiphany is made to take place in a piazza not given much importance by Ruskin.<sup>11</sup> This is the Square of the Santissima Annunziata where Lucy's attention is caught by the divine babies in living terracotta – those 'medallions of swaddled infants' sculpted by Andrea della Robbia over Brunelleschi's loggia of the Spedale degli Innocenti which Forster associates with the Florentine Renaissance – as distinct from Ruskin's austere Santa Croce. In this crucial scene, sensuality predominates over Ruskinian morality – a note struck by the phrase ('their [the infants'] sensual limbs bursting from the garments of charity'). Renaissance *joie de vivre* is pitted triumphantly against Ruskin's sober, ascetic medievalism represented in this novel by Cecil Vyse who is described in medieval terms and who remains disagreeably supercilious to the very end, aestheticising Lucy, in artistic terms, as if she were just emerging from a painting by Leonardo.<sup>12</sup>

Italy's 'pernicious charm' lures Lucy away from Baedeker-inscribed Santa Croce, and Ruskin's tutelage, out into the open piazza of the Santissima Annunziata with its sensuous Renaissance architecture. The scene in fact distinctly privileges what Ruskin had censured.

10 On Forster's engaging with Ruskin in *A Room with a View* see Penelope Gay, 'Forster and Ruskin: The Ambivalent Connection' *Southern Review*, 11, (1978), 283-295. See also Michael L. Ross, *Storied Cities: Literary Imaginings of Florence, Venice and Rome* (London. Greenwood Press, 1994), 79-91.

11 E.M. Forster, *A Room with a View* (Harmondsworth. Penguin, 1990), 39.

12 *Ibid.*, 106.

But spontaneity implies emotional response to life, passion and sudden inexplicable eruptions of violence – the disconcerting submerged aspect of the Other. Lucy is made an unwilling witness to a violent scene in which an Italian stabs his friend over a squabble about a debt of 'cinque lire.' (Lawrence was to write a similar explosive scene in *Aaron's Rod* where the peace and tranquillity of the Piazza della Signoria is disrupted by a violent explosion which symbolically destroys Aaron Sisson's talisman – his flute, and puts an abrupt end to his dreamy evocations of Renaissance Florence).<sup>13</sup> Lucy is rescued by the philosophical George Emerson (appropriately named after the American philosopher, advocate of spiritual individualism) but the blood on her coloured prints of Italian art (Giotto, Botticelli Fra Angelico, della Robbia babies and Guido Reni Madonnas, an assortment of the sacred and profane) is invested with symbolic meaning. Art is not the genteel cultural commodity the Victorians reduced it to but, as Forster's novel implies, is entangled in the body's desires and the pagan gods and goddesses as depicted in Renaissance art, as far as Forster was concerned, were still presences in Italy in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is, in fact, a knifing incident among two Italian street brawlers in the Piazza della Signoria that throws Lucy into the supportive arms of George Emerson.

These eruptive scenes of unexpected violence are meant to celebrate Italy's liberating power over the body and the soul and are Forster's subtle way of introducing the latent theme of class prejudice and sexual deviance. Philip in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* finds himself 'bound by ties of almost alarming intimacy' to the handsome but feckless Gino who had been married to his sister-in-law.<sup>14</sup> The homoerotic theme is reintroduced in *A Room With a View* where Lucy, a surrogate for Forster himself, is rescued from bourgeois respectability (and that censorious Mrs Grundy) by pagan, democratic Italy where Pan still abides and the cab-boy and his girlfriend can be perceived and described in terms of Renaissance neo-classical Phaeton and Proserpina. This in contrast to the Ruskinian medieval attitude which lingers disconcertingly in Edwardian England

---

13 D.H. Lawrence, *Aaron's Rod* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976), 328.

14 On Forster's subtle introduction of the homosexual theme in *A Room with a View* see John Pemble, *The Mediterranean Passion: Victorians and Edwardians in the South* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987), 160-164. See also Robert Aldrich, *The Seduction of the Mediterranean: Writing Art and Homosexual Fantasy* (London, Routledge, 1993), 93-99.

where English ladies were cast into the role of the medieval damsel who had to be rescued and protected, patriarchally, from the evils of the world which lay outside the Victorian castle of propriety. Lucy, later, still under the intoxication of her Italian experience, breaks off her engagement to the aesthete Cecil Vyse declaring her woman's right to face the truth but not at second hand 'to shield me, she tells her fiancé, is an insult.' This is not merely a rejection of her fiancé but an act of defiance against over-protective Ruskinian patriarchy.

Italy eventually triumphs over Tunbridge Wells when an enlightened Lucy later returns to her hometown and Summer Street where she is made to reflect on Ruskin's aesthetic prescriptions – especially his championing of the Gothic – and its pernicious influence on English provincial architecture. Those semi-detached villas named 'Cissie' and 'Albert' with their names 'picked out in shaded Gothic' and their assorted pseudo-Gothic columns built by Mr Flack the local builder in the manner recommended by Ruskin – for the reader is told that Mr Flack 'had read his Ruskin.'<sup>15</sup> He had in fact inscribed his wife's initials in the capitals outside the porches. In *Howards End* Ruskinian doctrinaire concepts are ironically introduced at the point where Leonard Bast returns to his dingy flat from his encounter with the Schlegel sisters and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony to read Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* which he hoped would allow him to 'push out of the grey waters and see the Universe' thereby enabling himself to climb a rung in the social ladder.<sup>16</sup> Forster makes him suffer the fate of those who aspire beyond their social condition and who try to come to culture too suddenly. Bast, as is known, is literally crushed by books in the end. For all his liberal outlook Forster was ensconced in the class prejudices of the Edwardian intellectuals of his day. He seemed to have had misgivings about Ruskin's beneficial influence on the working classes in his endeavour to popularize high art.

Rather unexpectedly, Ruskin's Italy appears in *A Passage to India* (1924) where Fielding, fleeing from the monstrous and extraordinary experience of India with its chaos and muddle finds temporary solace in the beauty of form in a brief visit to Venice (Chapter XXXII). The

<sup>15</sup> *A Room with a View*, 121.

<sup>16</sup> E.M. Forster, *Howards End* (Harmondsworth. Penguin, 1973), 154. For Forster's ambivalent attitude towards the working classes see Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven. Yale University Press, 2001), 404-406.

buildings of Venice the reader is told, 'stood in the right place whereas in poor India everything is placed wrong.'<sup>17</sup> A passage half way through this brief chapter is strongly reminiscent of Ruskin's writings on Venice. Forster implies here that Fielding's experience of the 'joys of form' in Venice identifies him as an admirer of Ruskin's aesthetics since this chapter bristles with distinct resonances of Ruskin's own observations on Venice. Venice, in Fielding's view, is testimony to 'the harmony between the works of man and the earth that upholds them, the civilization that has escaped muddle, the spirit in a reasonable form with flesh and blood subsisting.'

Fielding is represented here, not as a liberal Edwardian willing to transcend the confines of class and nation in order to understand the Other (in this case India), but an English tourist who adheres to the aesthetics of harmony and perceives a contrast with the muddle and chaos of the Orient. This prefigures the ending in which Fielding and Aziz, while trying to patch up their quarrel go for their last ride in the Mau jungle and become aware of the subliminal forces which keep them and their horses apart. Forster seems to suggest that Ruskinian aesthetics of form, signified by the churches of Venice holding the entrance to the Grand Canal, the Santa Maria de la Salute, are tied with late Victorian notions of decorum and propriety which at the time of his writing of *A Passage to India* in 1924 underpinned the civilized, artificial surface of the Raj and prevented liberal Edwardians like Fielding from reaching out to the Other.

*University of Malta*

---

17 E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (Harmondsworth. Penguin, 2005), 265.



# Anna Banti and Virginia Woolf: A Grammar of Responsibility

*Lucia Boldrini*

This paper considers the dialogue that Anna Banti establishes with two female artists, two of her elders and models: the writer Virginia Woolf, and the Renaissance painter Artemisia Gentileschi. But first, let me set the scene – two scenes in fact, striking in their contrast, haunting in their combination.

The first is the beginning of Banti's *Artemisia* (1947): it is 1944 and the narrator – a projection of Banti herself – is sitting in her nightgown on the ground in the Giardino de' Boboli, in Florence, where she has taken refuge having escaped the destruction of her home; she hears a voice: 'non piangere,' 'don't cry.' The Allied troops were entering Florence, the German army were leaving, blowing up bridges before abandoning the town, and the narrator's home, her possessions, her nearly completed manuscript of Artemisia Gentileschi were lost under the rubble. The voice that chides and comforts her is Artemisia's, a painter from three centuries earlier who was raped as a young woman, denounced her rapist in a trial, had to undergo torture to prove that she was telling the truth, was subjected to the humiliation of a gynaecological examination in the court to prove that she had lost her virginity to the rapist, and who went on to become a famous painter, controversial and defiant in her life, sought after by patrons and pupils.

“Non piangere.” Nel silenzio che divide l'uno dall'altro i miei singhiozzi, questa voce figura una ragazzetta che abbia corso in salita e voglia scaricarsi subito di un'imbasciata pressante. Non alzo la testa. “Non piangere”: la rapidità dello sdrucchiolo rimbalza ora come un chicco di grandine, messaggio, nell'ardore estivo, di alti freddi cieli. Non alzo la testa, nessuno mi è vicino.’

“Don't cry.” In the silence that separates each of my sobs this voice conjures up the image of a young girl who has been running uphill and who wishes to deliver an urgent message as quickly as possible. I do not raise my head. “Don't cry”: the suddenness of these two syllables bounces back now like a

hailstone, a harbinger, in the heat of summer, of high, cold skies.  
I do not raise my head; there is no one beside me.<sup>1</sup>

Although this 'hailstone,' 'harbinger [...] of high, cold skies' describes the shock of hearing young Artemisia's words, unexpectedly generated by the writer's imagination, they also evoke what is perhaps one of the most often quoted passages on the twentieth century's sense of crisis and the effects of war on literature's (in)ability to communicate experience:

'Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? [...] A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath those clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.'<sup>2</sup>

Banti, a fragile body shaking with sobs, forced by the violence of destructive explosions from what is familiar, from her home, her work by the irruption of history into the present of her life, hears a voice, like a hailstone out of an open cold sky, that comforts her: 'don't cry.'

The second image is that of a woman writing at her table, in a nicely furnished room. I see her illuminated by a lamp, surrounded by books in a comfortable study: an image, you will have recognised, inspired by the famous claim by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) that in order to be a writer, a woman needs a room of her own and a substantial income: 'it is necessary to have five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door if you are to write fiction or poetry.'<sup>3</sup>

These two scenes could not be more different: on the one hand, a woman with nothing left, whose efforts at writing have just been destroyed, reduced to sleeping in the open space of a public garden, let alone able to find refuge in a room of her own to pursue her literary interests; on the other, someone who advocates the necessity of economic and physical comfort for the possibility of becoming a writer and an intellectual. It

1 Anna Banti, *Artemisia* [1947] (Milan. Bompiani, 1989), 9. English edition: Banti, *Artemisia* trans. Shirley D'Ardia Caracciolo (London. Serpent's Tail, 2004), 23.

2 Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov' [1936], in *Illuminations* Hanna Arendt (ed.), trans. Harry Zorn (London. Pimlico, 1999), 83-107: 84.

3 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* [1929] (London. Penguin, 1945), 103.

is a stark contrast that nevertheless seals a literary relationship across time, bridging different but in some ways comparable moments: one writing in the aftermath of the Great War and as universal suffrage was being extended in Britain to all women in 1928, the other during and then immediately after the Second World War, when voting rights were finally extended to women in Italy; yet both recognising the struggle that women still had to face to have equal rights as writers, as intellectuals, and as members of society.

So on the one hand, rubble; on the other, five hundred pounds a year and a room of one's own. Let me add a third image: it is that of another woman, Marguerite Duras, who recalls, at the opening of the diary that she kept during the liberation of Paris, the episode when, working for the Bureau Central de Renseignement et d'Action, she sat at a small table at the Gare d'Orsay in Paris, interviewing refugees and gathering information to pass on to the families, and three officers came up to her and told her that she and her colleagues could work, if they wanted, standing up, but they cannot have the table.<sup>4</sup>

Introducing this incident with words that recall Benjamin's inability to narrate experience for those who return from the war ('War leaves no time for memories. Rather than having stories to tell, we are left with the impossibility of telling stories'), Denis Hollier reads this episode as an allegory of the way war removes the support structures, the foundations on which writing relies, when writers, at times of destruction, of catastrophe, have nothing to fall back on, nothing stable on which to write.<sup>5</sup> This, however, is precisely what generates literature: 'literature turns toward war [...] because it sees war as what threatens – or promises – to take away its conditions of possibility,' writes Hollier,<sup>6</sup> this time echoing Maurice Blanchot's assertion that 'literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question,' when its very possibility of existence, its right to exist, is in doubt; when the negation of the 'thing itself' inherent in the

---

4 Marguerite Duras, *The War: A Memoir* trans. Barbara Bray (New York. The New Press, 1986), 10-13.

5 Denis Hollier, *Absent Without Leave: French Literature under the Threat of War* trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass., and London. Harvard University Press, 1997), 4.

6 *Ibid.*, 4.

symbolic nature of language shows how literature ‘gain[s] from death the possibility of speaking the truth of speech.’<sup>7</sup>

What greater impossibility for literature, what more exact description of war’s removal of the condition for writing, than a woman sobbing in her nightgown in a public garden, whose home, whose table, ink, and even the manuscript have been destroyed by the bombs, but who nevertheless finds in literature – in *her* Artemisia – the possibility and the necessity of writing? But this is in many ways what Woolf writes of, too, even if it may at first sight seem like an appeal for comfort and privilege. Women who write must do so to create themselves out of a void of traditions, of language, of the structures that can support their efforts, that can give them the confidence to write but also the right to be read (‘they had no tradition behind them [...] there was no common sentence ready for her use’).<sup>8</sup> Thus, Woolf concludes, women must write to *support* themselves – to create their tables as it were, their own traditions, a language to rest on comfortably, not just materially but in order to expand the possibilities of their imagination, for themselves and for others who will follow. This writing is all the more urgent and all the more valuable precisely because women currently lack such support: they write out of nothing.

Anna Banti, who wrote repeatedly about Virginia Woolf and translated *Jacob’s Room* into Italian,<sup>9</sup> in particular recognised the force of Woolf’s views on the opportunities for women to be writers, and on the responsibility of the woman intellectual (‘La responsabilità della donna intellettuale’ is the title of one of the essays where she cites Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*) to open a path for others – not just other women but other disenfranchised members of society.<sup>10</sup>

7 Maurice Blanchot, ‘Literature and the Right to Death’ [1949] in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction & Literary Essays* George Quasha (ed.), trans. Lydia Davis, Paul Auster and Robert Lambertson (New York. Station Hill, 1999), 359-399: 359, 378.

8 Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 76.

9 See e.g. Banti’s essays ‘Umanità della Woolf,’ *Paragone* 28 (1952), 45-53, republished in *Opinioni* (Milan. Il Saggiatore, 1961), 66-74; ‘Il testamento di Virginia Woolf,’ *Paragone* 168 (1963), 100-104; and her translation of Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* as *La camera di Giacobbe* (Milan. Mondadori, 1950), republished in 1980 as *La camera di Jacob*.

10 Anna Banti, ‘La responsabilità della donna intellettuale,’ in *Le donne e la cultura* Ada Marchesini Gobetti et al (eds.), introduction by Sibilla Aleramo (Rome. Edizioni Noi Donne, 1953), 89-93.

When we speak of the role of the intellectual in society, especially in the immediate post-war period, it is inevitable that one thinks of Jean-Paul Sartre's *What is Literature?* (1948), probably the most important intervention on the subject of *littérature engagée*, committed literature.<sup>11</sup> Banti's sense of commitment as a writer is very strong. There is, for example, the commitment to unflinching honesty in demythologising the rhetoric of Italian unification in the novel *Noi Credevamo*, a bitter reflection on the unification of Italy in the Risorgimento that, narrated through the voice of one of its disillusioned 'heroes' (based on a relative of Banti herself, in the typical mixture of fictional and biographical / historical material that we find in much of her work), exposes the political power games, hypocrisy and betrayal masked under the enthusiasm for the liberation and unification of the country and its official triumphal accounts.<sup>12</sup> There is the commitment to analysing her own writing, to exploring of her own preoccupations and motivations as a woman and as a writer (in *Artemisia*, and especially in the largely autobiographical *Un grido lacerante*).<sup>13</sup> There is a commitment to confronting the ethical implications of the method that has been chosen to give voice to historical women (in the case of Artemisia, as I shall argue below, but also, to a good extent, in the case of Marguerite d'Orléans and Violante in *La camicia bruciata*, another novel in which the narrator writes about a historical female character and engages in a dialogue with her).<sup>14</sup> While it would be difficult to find in Banti's precious, carefully constructed prose, any confirmation of Sartre's dislike for 'poetic prose,'<sup>15</sup> her sense of the responsibility of the artist towards the preservation of the clarity of the language also championed by Sartre is expressed in the preface 'Al lettore' ('To the Reader') of *Artemisia*, which Banti describes as 'il tentativo d'immettere nella palude bastarda dell'italiano letterario in corso

---

11 Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* [1948] trans. Bernard Frechtman (London and New York. Routledge, 2001). Maurice Blanchot's 'Literature and the Right to Death,' quoted above, as well as other important essays such as Theodor W. Adorno's 'Commitment' [1962] in *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 2 (New York. Columbia University Press, 1992), 76-94 were more or less direct responses to Sartre's intervention.

12 Banti, *Noi Credevamo* (Milan. Mondadori, 1967).

13 Banti, *Un grido lacerante* (Milan. Rizzoli, 1981).

14 Banti, *La camicia bruciata* (Milan. Mondadori, 1973).

15 Sartre deploringly describes this as 'using words for the obscure harmonics which resound about them and which are made up of vague meanings which are in contradiction with the clear meaning,' *What is Literature?* 219.

vecchie e potabilissime fonti dell'uso popolare nostrano' ('an attempt at infusing into the polluted [bastard] swamp of contemporary literature the pure spring waters of our [popular] language as it once was').<sup>16</sup> These words, while echoing Manzoni's famous declaration that in his revisions of *I promessi sposi* he had rinsed his language in the waters of the Arno,<sup>17</sup> also chime in with Sartre's contemporaneous enjoining the writer/intellectual to call a spade a spade, to express clear messages, to restore to the language the precision that had been lost under the hypocrisy of the propaganda of war and of fascist occupation: 'If words are sick,' he writes in 'The Situation of the Writer in 1947,' 'it is up to us to cure them.'<sup>18</sup> It is, indeed, Banti's literary and theoretical engagement with realism and with Manzoni's practice of and reflections on the historical novel that sustain her literary and social commitment.<sup>19</sup>

This emphasis on clear, exact, realist use of language appears to lead into the opposite direction from the one taken by Woolf, whose stylistic experimentalism rejected what she called the materialism of realist writers who, she claimed, believed in the ability of conventional language and forms (calling a spade a spade, to use Sartre's expression) to convey reality accurately; while for Woolf reality is, famously, the luminous halo, not the series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged of which she writes in 'Modern Fiction' (1925).<sup>20</sup> And indeed for some critics herein lies a major difference between Banti and Woolf.

The use of the meandering style, the weaving in and out of different consciousnesses, is closely related for Woolf to this intellectual, literary, and even political purpose. When, in their ongoing diatribe, Arnold Bennett accused Woolf, in his review of *A Room of One's Own*, of being unable to resist 'the floral enticement' and straying off the path of straightforward realist narrative ('whereas a woman cannot walk through a meadow in

16 Banti, *Artemisia*, 7; *Artemisia* trans. S. d'Ardia Caracciolo, 21 (the emendations in square brackets are mine).

17 See Alessandro Manzoni, *Lettere* Cesare Arieti (ed.), 3 vols. (Milan. Mondadori, 1970), I, 438.

18 Sartre, 218-19.

19 On this, see also Paola Carù, "'Uno sguardo acuto dalla storia': Anna Banti's Historical Writings," in *Gendering Italian Fiction: Feminist Revisions of Italian History* Maria Ornella Marotti and Gabriella Brooke (eds.) (Madison. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, London. Associated University Presses, 1999), 87-101.

20 Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction' [1925], in *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life: Selected Essays, Volume Two*, Rachel Bowlby (ed.) (London. Penguin, 1993), 5-12.

June without wandering all over the place to pick attractive blossoms, a man can. Virginia Woolf cannot resist the floral enticement'),<sup>21</sup> one must wonder whether he was at all aware that, for Woolf, straying off the gravel path onto the lawn was a transparent allegory of her intentional pursuit of a narrative technique that departed from the straight, realist, beaten path of her (male) Victorian and Edwardian predecessors and which was, precisely, part of the rebellion against patriarchy and against the gender inequality that also prevented her from entering the library and acquiring an equal education.

Banti frequently indicates Woolf as one of her models and emphasises the importance that the earlier writer had for her thought and for her work (despite her rejection of the label of 'feminism') and critics have also identified direct influences and intertextual relationships in the works of the two writers (for example, between *Artemisia* and *Orlando*).<sup>22</sup> Others, however, have emphasised how Banti – by comparison with Virginia Woolf's greater formal and stylistic experimentalism, which, as I have just argued, is directly related to her greater freedom from, or rebellion against, a patriarchal literary tradition – is still too tied to the realism of the Italian, mainly male, tradition of the historical novel, in the wake of Alessandro Manzoni (a debt that indeed Banti quite freely acknowledges in her several essays on Manzoni and the *romanzo storico*); and, stylistically, to the elitist (also mainly male) tradition of the *prosa d'arte*. From this perspective, her open admiration for Woolf is deemed by some to be contradicted by her practice. Nicoletta Careddu, for example, in an insightful essay on Banti's translation of *Jacob's Room*, finds that while the Italian writer admires her predecessor's engagement with social and political issues and her polemical reflections on the exclusion of

---

21 Arnold Bennett, 'Queen of the High-Brows,' *The Evening Standard*, 28 November 1929, in *The Evening Standard Years: Books and Persons 1926-1931*, Andrew Mylett (ed.) (London: Chatto & Windus, 1974), 326-328: 327. In this article Bennett denies the "feud" between them, and praises Woolf for writing well, then proceeds to criticise her quite fiercely.

22 See the essays by Banti on Woolf cited in previous footnotes; and the essays collected in Daria Valentini and Paola Carù (eds.), *Beyond Artemisia: Female Subjectivity, History, and Culture in Anna Banti* (Chapel Hill, NC: Annali d'Italianistica, 2003), many of which discuss Banti's interest in and similarities with Woolf; see in particular Daria Valentini, 'Female Bonding in Banti's Fiction,' 49-62; Sharon Wood, 'Deconstructing Historical Narrative: The "tragedia coniugale" of Banti's *La Camicia Bruciata*,' 89-108; and Paola Carù, 'The "Unaware" Feminist Intellectual: Anna Banti and Feminism,' 111-132.

women from history, she nevertheless fails to grasp the similar import of Woolf's high modernist, adventurously experimentalist style, attempting instead to domesticate it into a much more traditional realist writing, thus demonstrating an inconsistency between her theory and her practice in translating Woolf.<sup>23</sup>

It is not my intention to dispute these views – in fact I find them acute and persuasive. However, one may also argue that the terms to consider when we look at Woolf and Banti should not be just realism (seen as adherence to the stylistic conventions of a male tradition) vs. modernism (seen as innovative practices that write against that tradition). It may be useful also to compare what Woolf writes in her essay 'The New Biography' about the impossible but necessary reconciliation of the 'granite' of fact and the 'rainbow' of personality in biography, and what Banti argues, in her essay on 'Romanzo e romanzo storico,' about the role of fact and its representation in the novel, drawing a tripartite distinction between the 'historical' or 'actual fact' ('fatto avvenuto'), the 'invented fact' ('fatto inventato') and the 'supposed' or 'presumed fact' ('fatto supposto') that, thanks to the intervention of memory, elevates the 'raw' 'historical fact' above the order of the chronicle, allowing for an effective understanding of and engagement with the actual historical conditions portrayed.<sup>24</sup> It is through the necessary negotiations of the 'supposed fact' that an acknowledgement emerges (an acknowledgement of the necessity of responsibility and commitment *as a literary writer*) that the experience of real, historical loss and destruction cannot be evaded. And it is in this acknowledgement that the 'granite,' the stoniness of rubble, in its intractable materiality, *generates* the 'rainbow' of imagined, presumed reality, enabling an effective reflection on individual historical experience and on the historical connection between different individuals (like Banti and Artemisia), but also, as I shall go on to argue, leading to the recognition of what is ultimately the irreducible singularity of individual experience.

23 Nicoletta Careddu, 'Modernism Misunderstood: Anna Banti Translates Virginia Woolf,' *Comparative Literature* 56.1 (2004) 57-76.

24 Virginia Woolf, 'The New Biography' [1927], in *Granite and Rainbow* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1988), 149-155; Anna Banti, 'Romanzo e romanzo storico' (originally published in *Paragone* 20 (1951), 3-7), in *Opinioni* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1961), 38-43: 40, 42. On this see Wood, 94; Paola Giuli, 'Anna Banti's *Artemisia*: Reinscribing the Female Gaze in Italian Literature,' *West Virginia University Philological Papers* 48, (2001-2002), 71-83; and Paola Carù, "'Uno sguardo acuto dalla storia.'"

The rubble and the loss point to the fragility of the material, its lack of solidity, of stability, of safety. A room and five hundred pounds a year do not save the house from the bombs, the manuscript from destruction. But precisely because they cannot save us materially, they also point to the necessity of the imagination – the rainbow – in order for the individual to survive as an individual, a writer and a subject, and a human being among other human beings, full of compassion for their plight. Thus if Banti's renovation of literary form may appear less adventurous than Woolf's, it is in fact also sustained by a constant critical engagement that involves her much more directly in her subject matter, more personally – literally in the first person as a woman with a particular duty towards language, reality, history and female subjects – and which also leads her to question the stability of the experiential, historical subject. I would claim that her stylistic choices too support this engagement, undermining at the same time the stability of the realist subject.<sup>25</sup>

To illustrate this, I would like to focus on one particular aspect, Banti's use of the grammatical first person in *Artemisia* – a first person that sometimes represents herself as narrator of *Artemisia*, other times is taken over by *Artemisia*; others yet it starts as *Artemisia* but slips back into the narrator (a narrator that always remains very close to Banti herself), or vice versa, and which constantly alternates with a grammatical third person that however is also never stable, at times slipping into the first, sometimes developing into an explicit dialogue between the two women, between the narrator-Banti and her imagined reconstruction of the doubly lost *Artemisia* (the *Artemisia* here presented is as much a reconstruction of the previous lost construction as it is of the historical woman painter). As I shall argue below, this dialogue between the narrator-Banti and *Artemisia*, often pleading, sometimes defiant, at times a quarrel, also raises a crucial ethical question about the very technique of giving voice to another individual – a technique that we find in such (at times controversial) novels as Robert Graves's *The Story of Mary*

---

25 Susanna Scarparo reads the rewriting of female history in the novel as a collaborative enterprise by *Artemisia* and Banti, and as a metafictional challenge to the truth of official (male) history. While I do not at all dispute this reading, I am more interested in this essay to analyse the linguistic form that this challenge takes, and its implications for the subject and its participation in history. See Susanna Scarparo, 'Artemisia: The Invention of a "Real" Woman,' *Italica* 79.3 (2002), 363-378.

*Powell, Wife to Mr Milton* (1943),<sup>26</sup> William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967),<sup>27</sup> or Peter Carey's more recent *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000),<sup>28</sup> and which Woolf never adopts in *Orlando*<sup>29</sup> or *Flush*,<sup>30</sup> both subtitled 'A Biography' and both written in the third person.

Banti's prose does not present itself as the frontal or ironic attack on patriarchal literary forms that Woolf privileges in her 'biographies' (one may also think of the 'biography' of Judith Shakespeare in *A Room of One's Own*), but it does respond, *personally*, to the character-as-person, the historical, once flesh-and-blood living being that she represents in her work – we may take the word 'represent' both in the literary-artistic sense, and in the legal sense of speaking for someone in front of the 'jury of readers' and of 'history' (a context that is especially appropriate for Artemisia, both the accuser and the victim of a court case and of an unjust humiliating system). For there is a double responsibility involved in this: while this practice follows the ethical impulse to give voice to someone whose story may have been silenced, misinterpreted, or forgotten,<sup>31</sup> at the same time it raises the ethical question of the right to appropriate someone else's voice, identity, subjectivity (the controversy over Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is a case in point), in order to reinterpret it from our own point of view, and maybe for our own ends or needs – as Banti does in calling Artemisia to her aid when her world has literally collapsed around her and all seems lost.

Let us then return to the dialogism intrinsic in the use and the oscillations of the grammatical person in *Artemisia*, a dialogism that is neither quite Socratic, though it is maieutic in giving birth to a new subjectivity, nor quite Bakhtinian, though it points to the intrinsic polyphony of the genre of the fictional auto/biography. This dialogism is especially prominent in the first half of the novel, where the text abounds with questions that the two women ask each other, injunctions, requests,

26 Robert Graves, *The Story of Mary Powell, Wife to Mr Milton* (London. Cassell, 1943).

27 William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (New York. Random House, 1967).

28 Peter Carey, *True History of the Kelly Gang* [2000] (London. Faber, 2001).

29 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* [1928] (London. The Hogarth Press, 1978).

30 Virginia Woolf, *Flush: A Biography* (London. The Hogarth Press, 1933).

31 And in so doing follows a similar impulse to that which also sustains works as diverse as the rewritings of literary classics such as Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London. Deutsch, 1966) or J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (London. Secker & Warburg, 1986) or the fictional autobiographies listed above.

answers, encouragements, sometimes bickering. The reconstruction – of *Artemisia* the manuscript, of Artemisia the historical figure and wronged exceptional woman, and of the narrator-Banti herself after the trauma and destruction of war – thus takes place through this reciprocal, relational, dialogic nature of the narrative representation, the weaving in and out of the first and third person, often also addressing each other in the second, as if the unsettling, traumatic experience that each had undergone (war, rape) had destabilised the subject and broken it into myriad fragments to be reconstructed. Out of loss, the need to continue writing, the reciprocal questionings that give birth to the new individual, rising again from the rubble, from the destruction, the descent into the hell of war and violence.

But then, exactly half-way through the novel, when some time has passed since the destruction of the bombs of 1944, when the narrator finds herself to be stronger, when the house and the room and the table to write on have been rebuilt – when women get the vote in Italy at last, and at least formally, they acquire the freedom and the rights that they had not had before, and while continuing to fight for equality also must recognise their greater privilege over those who preceded them – then, there comes the moment of letting go, of recognition and respect for the integrity, unknowability, separateness of the other woman:

‘Son scadute le franchigie della guerra [...] solo oggi m’ accorgo di averle mancato di rispetto e che il suo vagheggiato consenso è, da lungo tempo, un’ assenza. [...] Provo ancora una volta a commuoverla. [...] Artemisia non risponde, la sua lontananza è senza misura, stellare. [...] Mi ravvedo; e dopo un anno che le rovine son rovine, né mostrano di poter essere di più o di meno di tante altre antiche, mi restringo alla mia memoria corta per condannare l’arbitrio presuntuoso di dividere con una morta di tre secoli i terrori del mio tempo. Piove sulle rovine che ho pianto [...] Le due tombe di Artemisia, quella vera e quella fittizia, sono adesso eguali, polvere respirata. Sappiamo, una volta di più, di esser poveri [...]. Per questa ragione, non più esaltata, ma in segreta espiazione, la storia di Artemisia continua.’

‘The immunities granted by war [...] have ended [...] only today do I realize that I lacked respect in her regard and that what I longingly took to be her consent has been, for a long time now, her absence. [...] I try once more to move her. [...]

There is no reply from Artemisia; she is immeasurably distant, light years away. [...] I acknowledge my mistakes; and now that the ruins have been ruins for a year and show no sign of being in any way different from so many other, ancient ones, I limit myself to the short span of my own memory, condemning my presumptuous idea of trying to share the terrors of my own epoch with a woman who has been dead for three centuries. It is raining on the ruins over which I wept [...] Artemisia's two graves, the real and the fictitious, are now the same, breathed-in dust. We have found out once again that we are poor, and the poor must learn to persevere. For this reason, and not for any more exalted one, but in secret expiation, I will continue the story of Artemisia [the story of Artemisia continues].<sup>32</sup>

And thus in the second half of the novel the story continues, in the third person, as a novelised biography and no longer as dialogue or exchange<sup>33</sup> – except one final, brief moment, when Artemisia, having completed a self-portrait as an allegory of *The Art of Painting* and, in Banti's interpretation, having given herself the features of the young Neapolitan painter Annella de Rosa, who had been killed by her husband, acknowledges Banti's courage as a woman artist:

‘Ma la mano di Artemisia è forte e Annella non se ne libera. Ritratto o no, una donna che dipinge nel milleseicentoquaranta è un atto di coraggio, vale per Annella e per alter cento almeno, fino ad oggi. “Vale anche per te” conclude, al lume di candela, nella stanza che la guerra ha reso fosca, un suono brusco e secco. Un libro si è chiuso, di scatto.’

32 Banti, *Artemisia*, 101-105; *Artemisia* trans. S. d'Ardia Caracciolo, 135-139 (the emendation in square brackets is mine).

33 Of course, I do not mean to say that the narrator does not recognise the other's integrity and autonomy until she has returned to normality, the rubble has been cleared out, and she has a room of her own again – until, that is, she no longer needs Artemisia to help her through her own trauma. The recognition of our debts, as modern women, to those that have come before us and have fought for recognition of their dignity as women is there all along, together with the acknowledgement of the historical conditions and conditioning of the individual's existence. See, for example, ‘La nostra povera libertà si lega all'umile libertà di una vergine che nel milleseicentoundici non ha se non quella del proprio corpo integro e non può capacitarsi in eterno di averla perduta.’ (Banti, *Artemisia*, 22); (‘Our paltry freedom is linked to the humble freedom of a virgin who, in the year sixteen hundred and eleven, has only the freedom of her own intact body, the eternal loss of which she cannot ever come to terms with.’ *Artemisia* trans. S. d'Ardia Caracciolo, 39).

'But Artemisia's hand is strong and Annella cannot free herself. Whether it is a self-portrait or not, a woman who paints in sixteen hundred and forty is very courageous, and this counts for Annella and for at least a hundred others, right up to the present. "It counts for you too," she concludes, by the light of a candle, in this room rendered gloomy by war, a short, sharp sound. A book has been closed, suddenly.'<sup>34</sup>

The dead painter addresses the writer one last time. It is a moment that mirrors that initial 'non piangere,' now uttered however from the perspective of experience and of mutual recognition: no longer the young girl comforting a woman sobbing, with nothing left, but the acknowledgment of Banti's courage in having rebuilt herself into a writer, of Artemisia's strength in having persevered to make herself into an artist. These words re-state the connection between them across the centuries and with all the women artists (including Woolf, surely) who have had to struggle, who continue to reclaim such recognition, in a 'dilatarsi della personalità,' an 'expansion of personality' similar to that which Banti finds in Woolf's identification in *A Room of One's Own* with Lady Winchelsea, Aphra Benn, Jane Austen and so on, including the poor and hypothetical Judith Shakespeare.<sup>35</sup> Whose room is it, illuminated by a candle, made gloomy by war? Which war, indeed, the Second World War, which is now past, or the Thirty Years' War, which was draining the resources of the English court, where Artemisia had a room, and a candle by which to work? The former has so far been the normal referent of the expression 'the war,' but it is probably the latter that is being referenced now. In effect, however, this is a room for all women: poorer, gloomier than those of the men, with just a candle to work by; the war that threatens the artist with the risk of 'having nothing to fall back on,'<sup>36</sup> is for women a perpetual one.

Apart from this further, crucial, and final moment of dialogic exchange between the two women (and that as we have just seen extends the chain to Annella, and to all other women artists and writers, and which marks its finality by the sharp sudden shutting of the book), the second half of the book is essentially a third-person account, following that clear moment of recognition of the essential independence of each

---

34 Banti, *Artemisia*, 182; *Artemisia* trans. S. d'Ardia Caracciolo, 232.

35 Banti, 'Il Testamento di Virginia Woolf,' 102.

36 Hollier, 4.

individual, of the autonomous right not to be *represented* by another, appropriated for another's own ends; of the essential separateness of each human being – which is not individualistic solipsism but an ethical acknowledgement of the other's integrity and the only position from which the trans-historical and inter-personal relationship can be one of awareness and respectful responsiveness – which, I would argue, is precisely the point of having Artemisia address the narrator one final time towards the end of the novel.

Banti thus returns to the biography of the other, of Artemisia, in the third person, interrupting the dialogue and the impersonation and allowing the other to be presented more objectively, at some distance, *because* she now has a room of her own again, her house, her table to rest on, the comfortable income that allow her to *choose* to write – just like Woolf, who never lacked a room of her own and a comfortable income and who had chosen the third person to represent her characters in the novels that she had called 'biographies' in order to attack the patriarchal genre of biography, with its delusions of the objective (male) biographer that reveals the truth about another, and its notion of the worthy subject of biography (that is, again, male, upper class, and a public figure). So Woolf uses the third person throughout in her fictional biographies, Banti *returns* to the third person in her fictional auto/biography – and allows her narrator and her character a final exchange in order to reiterate this courageous achievement of the possession of a room, however gloomily lit, however precarious.

Yet, neither Banti's nor Woolf's is ever quite a comfortable third person, objective, mastering the subject as the traditional male narrators that Woolf mocks in her 'biographies.' During one of Orlando's escapades in the eighteenth century, after he has become a woman but feels equally comfortable donning male clothes and visiting Nell and the other prostitutes at night, we are informed that

'[...] many were the fine tales told and many amusing observations they made, for it cannot be denied that when women get together – but hist – they are always careful to see that the doors are shut and that not a word of it gets into print. All they desire is – but hist again – is that not a man's step on the stair? All they desire, we were about to say when the gentleman took the very words out of our mouths.'<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Woolf, *Orlando*, 198.

These words, significantly, quoted by Banti in one of her essays,<sup>38</sup> show an interesting sliding from the third person plural that describes the women (such as 'they made,' 'they are careful,' 'they desire') to a first person plural in a sort of 'royal we' that should signify authority and mastery ('we were about to say'), to end up finally with a very odd 'our mouths' that gives up any pretence of being the authoritative *pluralis maiestatis* and suddenly indicates instead a complicity of the narrator with the women of the group who fall silent at the approach of 'the gentleman.' The exclusivity of the room and the possibility for women to speak is always under the threat of the arrival of a man (that this is a man who is coming to avail himself of the services of a prostitute is telling).

So, in *Orlando* the third person's pretence to objectivity crumbles, and in *Artemisia*, the return to the third person constantly remains under the shadow of that earlier dialogue, that dialogic 'I' which dominates the first half of the text and renounces any pretence to mastery in an *expiation* for and an acknowledgement of the narrator's own vulnerability, and which re-emerges as the sign of a reciprocal acknowledgement and a respect for the integrity, courage and vulnerability of the other. In neither Woolf nor Banti is the grammatical third person thus a mark of objectivity; it signals, rather, a grammar of responsibility that tries to capture the rainbow-like refractions of subjectivity, while recognising both the granite-like inescapable singularity of individual experience, and the strength to be drawn from the mutual recognition of individual courage.

*Goldsmiths University of London*

---

38 See Banti, 'Umanità della Woolf,' 51.



# Robert Browning and Enrico Nencioni: A Story of Friendship and Devotion

*Simonetta Berbeglia*

Enrico Nencioni learned of Robert Browning's death from Edith Story Peruzzi. In a few lines written in haste, the Marchesa Peruzzi broke the news of the death of 'the Great Poet' to one of his most fervent admirers.<sup>1</sup> This was fitting because it had been Edith's father, the American sculptor William Wetmore Story, who had introduced Enrico Nencioni to Robert Browning. In the summer of 1859, while the Storys were in *villeggiatura* at Villa Belvedere in the countryside near Siena, the Brownings were staying half a mile off in another villa and Walter Savage Landor was 'at a stone's cast'<sup>2</sup> away. On one of the neighbouring hills Enrico Nencioni, pressed for money, was spending his summer tutoring the son of Count Augusto de' Gori Pannillini, a Sienese nobleman. It was on a soft August evening, in the garden of the cool Villa Belvedere, that the twenty-two-year-old Enrico, an avid reader of English authors and a poet himself, was admitted into the circle of those he considered 'enlightened spirits.'<sup>3</sup>

With the end of the summer, the delightful Sienese evenings on the lawns of the old villas came to a close and Enrico Nencioni, inspired by their memory, started his struggle into the world of letters. Although he longed for an academic career, he never achieved his desire. Having no university degree and being responsible for his mother and his sister, he was often compelled to work as a private tutor to support his family. Teaching, however, did not prevent him from reading the works of his contemporaries or from writing his own poems. Through the recommendation of a friend, Ferdinando Martini, Nencioni succeeded in publishing an article on Robert Browning in the July 1867 issue of the *Nuova Antologia*. The editor, Francesco Protonotari, presented with the article on Browning and another one on Tennyson, had sarcastically remarked: 'Eh - se dovessimo parlare di tutti gli straccioni d'oltr'Alpe, si starebbe freschi!' [Heaven forbid that

---

1 Biblioteca Marucelliana Firenze (cited hereafter as MARU), Fondo Nencioni, CNe. II. 243, 3.

2 F. G. Kenyon (ed.), *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 2 vols. (London. Smith, Elder & Co., 1897), II, 334.

3 Enrico Nencioni, *Medaglioni* (Firenze. Bemporad, 1897), 164.



ENRICO NENCIONI, letterato,

we have to speak about all those scribblers from beyond the Alps!]<sup>4</sup>

The attitude of the editor of the *Nuova Antologia* explains what Nencioni complained about at the beginning of his article *Roberto Browning: contemporary English Literature* was ignored in Italy while everything coming from France was devoured. Nencioni wrote that, with the exception of Byron, Walter Scott or Macaulay, the names of the

great writers flourishing in England were unknown in Italy. He suggested that the Italians could study English writers with great profit, because there were in them many outstanding qualities missing in Italian Literature, such as originality, seriousness and nobility. The article was a tribute to Browning whom Nencioni praised for being, simultaneously, a poet, a philosopher and a word-painter. Browning's works should be regarded as examples for young poets who should learn to watch attentively and think intensely before writing, not to fawn on fashionable opinions or passions, and to confront courageously the lack of popularity for the love and respect of Art.<sup>5</sup>

After this first experience as a literary critic, Enrico Nencioni kept silent for twelve years until, in 1879, Ferdinando Martini invited him to join the staff of the *Fanfulla della Domenica*, a journal he had founded in Rome. The newly married Nencioni and his wife Talia moved to Rome. The years spent in the newborn capital of Italy were the happiest of their life. The brilliant literary atmosphere infused him with an enthusiasm which produced a volume of poems, *Poesie* (1880), and a long series of essays.

4 S. Pantazzi, 'Enrico Nencioni, William Wetmore Story and Vernon Lee,' *English Miscellany*, 10 (1959), 249-260.

5 Enrico Nencioni, 'Roberto Browning,' *Saggi critici di letteratura inglese* (Firenze. Le Monnier, 1910), 1-18.

Because of his work spreading the knowledge of English contemporary Literature in the most prestigious periodicals of the 1880s, Nencioni established his reputation as a literary critic. However, after Martini left the *Fanfulla*, he could no more rely on a permanent income, and the money he occasionally earned by his writings failed to guarantee him financial security. Once again Martini came to his rescue and, in 1883, he managed to obtain for his friend a post as a teacher at Istituto Superiore di Magistero, a girls' school in Florence. Nevertheless Nencioni always retained a nostalgic longing for his Roman days; in the spring of 1883 he wrote to Count Gégé Primoli:

'Qui a Firenze mi trovo solo, o peggio che solo. I sedicenti letterati, i professori di qua, sono la crema della pedanteria: e non ce n'è uno con cui parlar d'arte, senza sentire dir cose da farsi il segno della croce, o da far la pelle d'oca. E io vivo solo, coi miei libri.'<sup>6</sup>

[Here in Florence I feel lonely, worse than lonely. The would-be men of letters, the local professors, are the cream of pedantry: and there is not a single one with whom you can talk about Art without hearing things that horrify you or make your flesh creep. And I live alone, with my books.]

and in 1888, in a letter to Alessandro Ademollo:

'Io sto bene, le lezioni vanno benissimo, ma... ci crederà? Io soffro la nostalgia di Roma... (che i fiorentini non mi sentano!)'  
[I am fine, teaching is all right, but... can you believe me? I feel homesick for Rome... (may the Florentines not hear me!).]<sup>7</sup>

Nencioni's interest in Browning had never waned. On 25 December 1881, the *Fanfulla della Domenica* led with his article *La Vigilia di Natale*, where he confessed he used to read Browning's *Christmas-Eve and Easter Day* every year at Christmas. Focusing on the poet's mastery in dealing with the sublime as well as with the coarse and the grotesque, Nencioni selected lines from *Christmas Eve*. Under the headline *Nella cappella di Monte Sion*, he translated Browning's description of an English dissenting chapel of the lowest kind, while the lines offering a view of St. Peter's

6 M. Spaziani, *Con Gégé Primoli nella Roma bizantina* (Roma. Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1962), 92.

7 Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale Firenze, Carteggi, C.V. 84, 131.

during High Mass were translated under the heading *In San Pietro*.<sup>8</sup> A year later, Nencioni translated and adapted for children Browning's *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*. The story was published under the title *Il flauto magico* in the December 1882 issue of the *Giornale per i bambini*, one of the first Italian magazines for children where Collodi was serializing his *Pinocchio*.<sup>9</sup>

When, in 1884 Telemaco Signorini, a *macchiaiolo* painter, wrote from London:

'Teri fui a far visita al direttore dell'Accademia Sir Frederic Leighton e vi trovai il figlio di Browning. Parlai sempre di te con lui e Giovedì prossimo vuol presentarmi a papà, chè vedrò con molto piacere un italiano e un amico tuo, chè sempre ti legge nella *Fanfulla*.'<sup>10</sup>

[Yesterday I paid a visit to the President of the Academy, Sir Frederic Leighton, and there I met Browning's son. We spent our time talking about you and next Thursday he would like to introduce me to his father whom I will be very pleased to meet being an Italian and a friend of yours, as he always reads your articles in the *Fanfulla*.]

Nencioni replied to him quoting from Browning's *A Toccata of Galuppi's*:

'T'invidio la fortuna di stringere la mano all'*unico* Browning. Quando lo conobbi personalmente a Marciano (villa Story) non sapevo bene *con chi* parlavo...

Poi lessi ammirai e feci *propaganda brownninghiana* in Italia fin dal 1866, con gli scritti, e a viva voce... (e tu ne sai qualche cosa...).

Non so se egli ha visto quei vari miei articoli. Nel Numero ultimo, 1° Maggio, della *Nuova Antologia* ho un articolo su *Aurora Leigh* della signora Browning.

Presenta tu al grande poeta i miei affettuosi e riverenti saluti.

8 Enrico Nencioni, 'La Vigilia di Natale,' *Fanfulla della Domenica*, 25 December 1881.

9 Enrico Nencioni, 'Il flauto magico,' *Giornale per i bambini*, 51 (1882), 804-806.

10 MARU, Fondo Nencioni, CNe. II. 301, 3.

Saluta Browning figlio. Mi pare di vederlo bambino coi riccioli biondi fin sulle spalle – galoppava sopra un cavallino bianco fra Villa Orr e il Palazzo dei Diavoli. Nel 1860! (pur troppo!) 24 anni fa! “I feel chilly, and grown old...”<sup>11</sup>

[I envy you because you were so lucky to shake hands with Browning, the *unrivalled*. When I met him at Marciano (Villa Story) I had no idea *who* I was talking *with*... / Then I have read, I have admired and I have spread *Browningsque propaganda* in Italy since 1866, writing and giving talks (you know...). / I do not know whether he has ever read those several articles of mine. In the latest issue, 1<sup>st</sup> May, of the *Nuova Antologia*, there is an article of mine on Mrs. Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. / Please give the great poet my warm respectful regards. / Give my regards to his son. I remember him as a child with long fair curls. He rode his white pony between Villa Orr and the Palazzo dei Diavoli. In 1860! (alas!) 24 years ago! ‘I feel chilly, and grown old’]

In Florence, thanks to Signorini, Nencioni became an *habitué* of Vernon Lee's salon at Casa Paget (then at 5, Via Garibaldi) where he had the opportunity to share his great admiration for Browning with his hostess. The Italian professor ‘with his thin Tuscan face’<sup>12</sup> and ‘his Franciscan mind’<sup>13</sup> fully agreed with Violet Paget about the brilliance of *The Ring and the Book*. Through her, Nencioni sent Browning a copy of *Le giustizie*, a book where the execution of Guido Franceschini and his four companions, described in *The Ring and the Book*, was recorded.<sup>14</sup> On 28 October 1885, in a letter from Venice to Miss Paget, the poet wrote:

‘I am very much obliged to you for the book- *Le Giustizie*- which Mr Nencioni has so generously deprived himself of on my behalf, through your intervention. It interests me greatly, and in other respects than its mention of the Franceschini execution. Will you still further extend your goodness to me by assuring that gentleman of my gratitude for this and the many instances of his sympathy with which I have been conversant for years

11 Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale Firenze, Carteggi, C.V. 471, 5.

12 V. Colby, *Vernon Lee. A Literary Biography* (University of Virginia Press, 2003), 133.

13 Pantazzi, 255.

14 A. Ademollo, *Le giustizie a Roma dal 1674 al 1739 e dal 1796 al 1840* (Roma. Tip. Forzani e C., 1881).

past? I even remember my first impression of him at Siena – how long since! Pray tell him that if I ever see Rome again my first endeavour will be to look on the friendly face, not merely listen to the kind words and only too indulgent criticism.’<sup>15</sup>

Two months later, on 16 December 1885, Nencioni’s article on *The Ring and the Book* was published in the *Nuova Antologia*. In it he immediately stressed the greatness of the poem: ‘Here is a dramatic psychological poem which is the masterpiece of one of the greatest intellects that honours art and humanity.’<sup>16</sup> Although the idea germinated in Florence, although the story was set between Arezzo and Rome and although the characters were Italian, Nencioni lamented that, in Italy, critics and readers ignored a poem which had opened new horizons in modern art and was a miracle of historical reconstruction, emotional rapport and psychological analysis, all expressed in great poetry. And his admiration for *The Ring and the Book* would be restated three years later in his article *Roma e gli scrittori inglesi*,<sup>17</sup> in which he praised Browning for being the most faithful painter of the Roman landscape, and compared his poem to a seventeenth-century engraving where the baroque grandeur of Rome was immortalized.

However, it was not in Rome but in Venice that Robert Browning and Enrico Nencioni met again in October 1888. The Italian *professore* was accompanied by his favourite pupil Carlo Placci, who had reviewed Browning’s *Ferishtah’s Fancies* for the *Domenica del Fracassa*<sup>18</sup> and had already met the poet on several occasions. From Ca’ Alvisi, Browning sent a card to the Grand Hotel:

‘Carissimo Signor Placci,

mi farò un piacere di farle una visita fra un quarto d’ora, avendo il desiderio il più vivo di vederla - come di vedere Sig. Nencioni che mi ha dato tante prove di vera amicizia.’<sup>19</sup>

15 MARU, Fondo Nencioni, CNe. II. 45, 1. Colby, 82, wrongly said that Vernon Lee found *Le Giustizie* on a bookstall in Florence.

16 D. Bisignano, ‘Enrico Nencioni and Robert Browning,’ *English Miscellany*, 14 (1963), 195-210.

17 Enrico Nencioni, ‘Roma e gli scrittori inglesi,’ *Saggi critici di letteratura inglese* (Firenze. Le Monnier, 1910), 184-203.

18 ‘L’ultimo libro di R. Browning e la Nuova Scuola Poetica Inglese,’ *Domenica del Fracassa*, I, 2 August 1885; *Domenica del Fracassa*, II, 9 August 1885.

19 MARU, Fondo Nencioni, CNe. II. 46, 1.

[Dearest Mr. Placci, I would be very glad to pay you a visit in a quarter of an hour as I am longing to see you - as well as to meet Mr. Nencioni who has so often shown me to be a true friend.]

The following day Nencioni wrote to his wife:

‘Ieri il Browning, saputo da un biglietto del Placci che ero qui a Venezia, e che sarei andato a riverirlo, mi prevenne (lui Browning!) e venne al Grand Hotel, e mi buttò le braccia al collo, e mi dette due baci!... Pensa, o moglie, che ora le mie labbra sono consacrate!... Che cosa mi disse te lo dirò a voce... Ha sempre letto tutto quello che ho scritto nella *Nuova Antologia* e nel *Fanfulla della Domenica*. Mi ha invitato a pranzo per stasera. Stasera dunque alle sette pranzerò col più grande poeta vivente in Europa. Quale felicità!...’<sup>20</sup>

[Yesterday, Browning, after learning from a note from Placci that I was in Venice and that I was going to pay him my respects, pre-empted me and came to the Grand Hotel, and he threw his arms round my neck, and he kissed me twice! ... Just think, wife, that now my lips are hallowed! ... When I come back, I will tell you what he told me... He has always read everything I have written in the *Nuova Antologia* and in the *Fanfulla della Domenica*. He invited me to dine with him tonight. So, tonight, at seven, I will dine with the greatest living poet in Europe. How happy I am!...]

In 1902, Katharine Bronson would recall how the poet had welcomed Nencioni ‘with genuine gratitude and pleasure’ as ‘the only Italian who has thoroughly mastered the difficulties of Browning’s poetry, certainly the only one who has translated and written essays upon it.’ She added that ‘Italian recognition of his work was especially gratifying’ for Browning. The poet had confessed ‘with his usual frank geniality’ that, after reading Nencioni’s first piece of criticism in the *Fanfulla della Domenica*, he had subscribed to the paper at once.<sup>21</sup> Mrs. Bronson also remembered what the *professore* said aside to her: ‘I have studied Browning since my early youth, when first I saw him in Siena. I

20 Pantazzi, 253-254.

21 Browning mentions his subscription to the *Fanfulla della Domenica* in a letter from London to John W. Field of 20 December 1881: ‘The *Fanfulla* arrives regularly to our great satisfaction, and gives a touch of Italy to the whole week.’ See W. C. De Vane & K. L. Knickerbocker (eds.), *New Letters of Robert Browning* (London: John Murray, 1951), 269-270.

consider that his work has qualities not to be found even in Shakespeare; in fact in some respects I regard him as the superior of the two.' After the two Italians had left, she reported Nencioni's words to Browning who frowned and shook his head impatiently while replying: 'No, no, no; I won't hear that. No one in the world will ever approach Shakespeare; never.' 'Nevertheless, he must have been somewhat pleased by what, in his modesty, he found an exaggerated expression of admiration.'<sup>22</sup>

Nencioni would write about his memorable dinner at Ca' Alvisi in the article *Roberto Browning e l'Italia* which he published in the *Nuova Antologia* on the poet's death. His was the tone of someone remembering an old friend. He paid Browning a simple dignified tribute: 'Egli lottò trent'anni con indomabile perseveranza: egli fu un vero eroe nel senso Carlyaliano della parola. Lavorò sicuro dell'avvenire, fidando del tempo, il gran giustiziere.'<sup>23</sup> [For thirty years he struggled with indomitable perseverance: he was a true hero in the Carlylean sense of the word. He worked trusting in the future, confiding in time, the great avenger.] A copy of the article was sent to Mrs. Bronson, who replied promising 'a souvenir of the immortal poet - a locket with some of his beautiful silver hair.'<sup>24</sup> In the letter accompanying the reliquary Katharine Bronson remarked how she and Nencioni were united in their devotion to the poet - she was the one who knew his 'social side,' while the Italian professor could 'follow and study his intricate and difficult poetic inspirations.' She admitted the poet's reluctance to talk of his literary work and she confessed that, when he was her guest at Asolo, he liked reading poetry aloud, not his own, but Coleridge's, Shelley's or Keats,' there being no Shakespeare in Mrs. Bronson's library. She added that she was translating Browning's *Ponte dell'Angelo* into Italian, fancying the poem would interest the Venetians 'as being one of their own legends.' She would treasure Nencioni's opinion on her project and value his help to make her translation 'smooth enough to print.'<sup>25</sup>

A year later, in a note in English scribbled down possibly to collect his thoughts for a future article, Nencioni went back once again to that

22 M. Meredith (ed.), *More Than Friend. The Letters of Robert Browning to Katharine de Kay Bronson* (Winfield. Wedgestone Press, 1985), 157-158.

23 Enrico Nencioni, 'Roberto Browning e l'Italia,' *Saggi critici di letteratura inglese*, 36-53.

24 MARU, Fondo Nencioni, CNe. II. 44, 1.

25 MARU, Fondo Nencioni, CNe. II. 44, 2.

evening in Venice when he had confessed to the poet he used his works to draw solace and courage in difficult times: 'I found in Browning an ever-flowing current of strong, right-thinking earnestness, on which I tided over "the black minute."' <sup>26</sup> He also sketched a physical description of his hero:

'There was the compact and well proportioned figure, in its perfectly harmonious setting of costume and surroundings; the noble grey head, so finely set on a robust form, the clear and trenchant light of the blue eyes, keen, yet so kindly and full; the manliness of aspect, before which all bent the head, the ringing tones of a voice never to be forgotten. The complexion perfectly clear, of the tint of an old ivory carving.' <sup>27</sup>

Enrico Nencioni died in Livorno on 25 August 1896. The following year a collection of his essays on English Literature was published with a foreword written by his old schoolfellow and lifelong friend, Giosuè Carducci. A copy of *Saggi critici di letteratura inglese* was given to Robert Barrett Browning by 'his old and affectionate friend,' Edith Marion Peruzzi. <sup>28</sup>

Today Nencioni is a forgotten figure, posterity has denied him 'a place of importance in the field of English studies in Italy' and condemned him as over-estimated by his contemporaries. Although he has been praised for his amazing knowledge of English verse, for being a stimulating eloquent lecturer, and for writing about the Brownings, Tennyson, Rossetti, Swinburne and other English authors at a time when they were attacked in their own country and ignored in Italy, Nencioni's criticism has been regarded as 'the effusion of a fervent and happy lover of art,' <sup>29</sup> of a reader '*au hasard*,' <sup>30</sup> lacking in intellectual rigour and philosophical understanding. Such criticism could just as easily be levelled against English critics of the period like Sidney Colvin, Buxton Forman or even Chesterton. Detailed textual study was not then the fashion. What distinguishes Nencioni from his English contemporaries

---

26 Robert Browning, *Prospice*, 22.

27 MARU, Fondo Nencioni, D 47, 3.

28 P. Kelley & B. A. Coley (eds.) *The Browning Collections. A Reconstruction with Other Memorabilia* (Winfield. Wedgestone Press, 1984), A1724.

29 Bisignano, 195-196.

30 G. A. Borgese, *Storia della Critica Romantica in Italia* (Milano. Il Saggiatore, 1965), 255.

is his unswerving enthusiasm and commitment to Browning's poetry, as well as his understanding of Browning's aims and methods. In this, Nencioni was ahead of his time. It is ironic that he and the Frenchman, Joseph Milsand, were Browning's champions, long before Mrs Sutherland Orr began explaining his poetry to a sceptical English public. A zealous devotee, the *professore* did his best to parry all the blows of the poet's critics. Explaining and justifying the difficulties of Browning's poetry was for Nencioni a kind of sacred mission. For him Browning's apparent obscurity was caused 'dalla novità degli argomenti, e dal modo sempre originale con cui il poeta li tratta' [by the novelty of the topics, and by the original manner in which the poet always dealt with them].<sup>31</sup> He addressed those readers who consider Browning obscure as those 'pei quali la poesia è come il sigaro d'avana o il sorbetto *alla vaniglia* dopo pranzo' [who regard poetry as being like a Havana cigar or a vanilla sorbet after dinner]. Thomas Moore or Longfellow would perfectly suit their demands, while Browning shares his audience with Aeschylus, Dante, Shakespeare and Goethe, whose readers 'sono avvezzi a *pensare* leggendo' [are used to *thinking* while reading].<sup>32</sup> Quoting the epilogue of the second series of *Dramatic Idyls*, the Italian professor declared that Browning's poems were 'surface hard and bare,' but in their lines 'broods - what the after age / Knows and names a pine, a nation's heritage.'<sup>33</sup>

The relationship between Enrico Nencioni and Robert Browning may be considered as a pleasant example of Anglo-Italian literary friendship. Both of them gained a lot by their association. If Browning found in Nencioni the perfect champion of his poetry, the Italian critic regarded his connection with the poet as the golden link in the chain of personal contact he had with English and American authors through the intermediary of the Storys and Vernon Lee.

### Arezzo

31 Enrico Nencioni, *Saggi critici di letteratura inglese*, 17.

32 *Ibid.*, 20-21.

33 Robert Browning, *Touch him ne'er so lightly*, 7-10.

# D'Annunzio as a Reader and Translator of Browning via Shelley

*Angelo Righetti*

In his essay entitled *D'Annunzio e la letteratura anglosassone* (1963) Mario Praz mentions Browning in the context of d'Annunzio's reading, borrowing or drawing inspiration from nineteenth-century English poets:

'Dei grandi poeti inglesi dell'Ottocento [d'A.] cita Robert Browning per la sua breve poesia su Shelley, *Memorabilia*, che traduce, nel primo dei due articoli "Per il monumento al generale Garibaldi," sul *Mattino* del' 11-12 luglio 1892, e per un verso di *Confessions* nelle "Giornate romane" sulla *Tribuna* del 21 dicembre 1884.<sup>1</sup>

The latter allusion actually refers to the two final lines of the poem (from *Dramatic Personae*, 1864):

How sad and bad and mad it was –  
But then, how it was sweet!

jocularly cited in a semi-autobiographical page, under the disguise of a gourmet, Donna Claribel, as:

How sad and mad and bad it is  
But *now* how it is sweet!

– with her apology in brackets: 'Oh amico Browning, perdonami il *now* e l'*'is!*' (author's emphasis). Donna Claribel has just been describing in detail a sumptuous dinner with a variety of game on the menu that has nothing to do with the quotation taken from a dramatic lyric telling the

---

1 *Cfr. Il patto col serpente* (Milano. Mondadori, 1972), 418. For the quote from *Confessions*, *cfr. Gabriele d'Annunzio, Scritti giornalistici, 1882-1888*, A. Andreoli (ed.). Testi raccolti e trascritti da F. Roncoroni, (Milano. Mondadori, 1996) vol. 1, 211. Incidentally, the Lady's name is taken from Tennyson's 'Lady Claribel: a Melody,' the opening lines of which are quoted to picture the woman as an avid reader (like d'Annunzio) of English poetry. All the Browning quotes are drawn from Robert Browning: *The Poems* J. Pettigrew (ed.) supplemented and completed by T. J. Collins (New Haven and London. Yale UP, 1981), vol. 1.

story of a bygone and possibly thwarted love-affair. Not much, one is tempted to say, but both references are intriguing as they indicate that the Italian poet has a certain familiarity with the Victorian poet, or at least with some of his poems which he may have first come by through his acquaintance with Enrico Nencioni, one of Browning's correspondents and early translators into Italian.

Shelley is the link between the two poets, and *Memorabilia*, a poem from *Men and Women* (1855) testifies, over twenty years after *Pauline* (1833), to Browning's lifelong attachment to his romantic father ranging from an earlier infatuation, to a critical assessment in his 'Essay on Percy Bysshe Shelley' (1851-52), and despite later, ethical and philosophical objections against him as a character.

The romantic poet's name often crops up in d'Annunzio's non-fiction – for instance his commemoration of the centenary of Shelley's birth and a long review of De Bosis's translations – and especially in *Il piacere* (1889), in which passages from his poetry are briefly cited in English, but more often translated, summarized or alluded to in Italian,<sup>2</sup> given d'Annunzio's 'rudimentary'<sup>3</sup> English.

Although Praz emphasizes d'Annunzio's scarce knowledge of English, both spoken and written, this does not stop the poet from divining, perhaps less the letter than the spirit of Shelley's poetry, alongside with that of Swinburne, read in French, and Tennyson – for whom he wrote a deeply felt commemorative article in 1892. Further confirmation of this comes from his splendid translation of the latter's *Tears, idle tears* albeit deprived, in Praz's words, of its 'melodia naturale,'<sup>4</sup> in *Il trionfo della morte*: 'Egli [Giorgio Aurispa] lesse i pensieri del poeta sciolti dalla loro melodia natale'<sup>5</sup> – where the main character of the novel seems to echo d'Annunzio the poet-craftsman who is conscious of the inextricability of sound and sense, of signifier and signified in poetry.

As I have already stated, d'Annunzio's reading experience of Shelley, Tennyson and Browning had been encouraged by Italian

2 *Il patto col serpente*, 402. Cfr. the articles on Shelley in *Scritti giornalistici*, vol. 2, 57-64 and 65-71.

3 *Ibid.*, 400.

4 *Ibid.*, 418.

5 Cfr. *Il trionfo della morte*, in *Prose di romanzo* (Milano. Mondadori, 1942), vol I, 789. Praz, quoting d'Annunzio from memory uses the qualifier 'naturale' ('natural') instead of the original 'natale' ('native').

translations, the work of Giuseppe Chiarini and Adolfo De Bosis,<sup>6</sup> but especially Nencioni,<sup>7</sup> who must have excited the poet's curiosity by translating some passages from *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* for the periodical *Fanfulla della domenica* to which d'Annunzio frequently contributed articles in the early 1880s. These two longish poems, written and published by Browning in the early 1850s, though relevant as the expression of a Non-conformist's attitude towards various denominations of Christianity, were not his most representative, if one compares them with the poems contained in *Men and Women*, the crowning achievement of his early maturity. And yet translations in prose provided d'Annunzio with the opportunity of browsing through Browning's poetry, and possibly of marking out a Browning of *his own* from the Victorian's abundant and variegated *oeuvre*.

For instance, he must have been impressed by *Two in the Campagna*, a poem not mentioned in Praz's essay, as he apparently overlooked a passage from *Il piacere*,<sup>8</sup> where Clara Green, the English sentimental demi-mondaine, and lover of Andrea Sperelli (the novel's hero), addresses him 'tenendo le mani di lui tra le sue' and protests her love (in English), 'I love you more than any words can say, Andrew':<sup>9</sup> my suggestion is that in the context, d'Annunzio produces a non-metaphorical transference of one of the poem's semantically crucial final lines (48-49) centred on the celebration of the 'moment, one and infinite' when the lover opens his heart and mind to his silent enigmatic woman whose pale reflection is to be seen here in Andrea's vague and absent-minded silence:

I pluck the rose  
 And love it more than tongue can speak –  
 Then the good moment goes. (emphasis added).

6 Cfr. 2 above.

7 Cfr. *Il patto col serpente*, 330-34 for Praz's hardly sympathetic sketch of Nencioni. Enrico Nencioni, besides translating Browning's poetry and commenting on it in *Il Fanfulla della domenica*, had been in touch with and a correspondent of the poet and had actually met him in Venice in the 1880s. Cfr. *New Letters of Robert Browning* W. C. De Vane and K. L. Knickerbocker (eds.) (New Haven, Conn. Yale UP, 1950), 269-70; Katherine De Kay Bronson, who often hosted Browning in Venice and Asolo, described their meeting in a biographical article published in *The Century Magazine*, LXIII (1904), 579-80; see also D. Bisignano, 'Enrico Nencioni and Robert Browning,' *English Miscellany*, XIV (1963), 195-210.

8 Cfr. *Prose di Romanzi*, 248.

9 Note that Clara anglicizes Andrea's name as d'Annunzio italianizes Browning's into Roberto.

To go a little further, and show how his reading made grist for his poetic mill, I would like to add that d'Annunzio was influenced by *In Three Days*, a poem from *Men and Women* that stages the ups and downs of hope and despair, of illusion and fear on the part of the male lover that he may not be able to meet his loved one.

In his discontinuous memoir *Il libro segreto* (published as late as 1935 – d'Annunzio died in 1938),<sup>10</sup> the Browning cue comes yet again through a Shelleyan memory conjuring up the dread of 'death by water' in the repetition of the same time expression in an anaphoric or epiphoric position in both texts:

*Fra tre giorni* posso essere in fondo al Carnaro, e rigettato sopra una spiaggia di Veglia, di Cherso, dell'Istria orientale.

*fra tre giorni* posso essere anch'io, come lo Shelley della mia adolescenza qualcosa di ricco e strano, 'something rich and strange,' o un livido cadavere introvabile, in una casacca di pelle...<sup>11</sup> (emphasis added)

The brief passage combines the autobiographical narrative of the poet facing death in a desperate military enterprise with various subtexts and several reading suggestions from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, i.e. Ariel's song, 'Full fathom five thy father lies,' almost a *leitmotiv* in d'Annunzio's prose whenever Shelley is involved, to the reports on Shelley's defaced corpse being found on the Versilia sands, as told by Captain Trelawney and Byron's correspondence.<sup>12</sup>

The warrior-vates envisions the alternative between a sought-after heroic death foreshadowing metamorphosis and rebirth and the anticipation of the revulsion for a likely shameful, anonymous drowning, whereas for Browning the alternative lies in the hope of love and the despair of rejection, synonymous with impending doom, e.g. the lover looking forward to meeting his beloved and fearing the dream may not come true:

10 *Cfr. Il patto col serpente*, 406-7. The complete title of the book is: *Cento e cento e cento e cento pagine del libro segreto di Gabriele d'Annunzio tentato di morire* (1935), in *Prose di ricerca* A. Andreoli and G. Zanetti (eds.) (Milano. Mondadori, 2005), vol 1.

11 *Cfr. Il libro segreto*, 1805.

12 D'Annunzio's 'casacca di pelle' recalls Byron's words at the revolting sight of Shelley's 'body [...] totally disfigured & in a state of putrefaction': *cfr. Byron's Letters and Journals* L. A. Marchand (ed.) (London. Murray, 1979), vol. 9 (*In the Wind's Eye*), 185 (letter dated July 19, 1822).

So, I shall see her in *three days*

[...]

What great fear, should one say, “*Three days*  
That change the world might change as well  
Your fortune;”

[...]

*Three days* and one short night beside  
May throw no shadow on your ways;  
(emphasis added)

D'Annunzio's translation of *Memorabilia* was occasioned by the heated debate over the project for a monument to Garibaldi to be erected in Naples, and by the poet's preoccupation and even indignation that 'possa essere difformata l'effigie del Liberatore'<sup>13</sup> by an inadequate memorial. D'Annunzio's idea of the hero was most likely derived from Carlyle, whose major work, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* he was reading in a French translation about the same time.<sup>14</sup> The Italian poet's emphasis is laid on the book that deals with the hero – one of the manifestations of the divine in history – as poet (Dante and Shakespeare first and foremost), and Browning's poem, a homage to his cherished Shelley, is still within the bounds of an idealistic conception, shared in turn by d'Annunzio, who quotes Shelley's *Ode to Naples* almost as an epigraph to his translation of the Victorian's poem. Here are the actual words of introduction to the translation:

... è possibile che Napoli, questo cuore umano sempre  
palpitante nudo sotto l'occhio senza palpebra del cielo [Naples!  
Thou Heart of men which ever beats / Naked, beneath the lidless  
eye of Heaven!], come canta Percy Shelley nell'ode immortale,  
veda senza indignazione difformata l'effigie del Liberatore?  
(author's emphasis)

13 See *Il mattino*, 11-12 July 1892, in *Scritti giornalistici* (1889-1938), A. Andreoli (ed.) (Milano. Mondadori, 2003) (texts collected by G. Zanetti), vol. 2, 30-34. The paper, founded by Eduardo Scarfoglio and Matilde Serao in the same year, has been Naples' daily to this day.

14 Cfr. B. Garvin, 'D'Annunzio and Joyce: l'eroe come stilista,' *Quaderni danunziani*, (n.s., 1987), 1-2, 351, 354 and ff. Garvin has noticed that d'A owned two copies of a French translation of Carlyle's work, one of which, published in 1888, has underlinings and marginal notes and bears a signed inscription by the poet: 'Gli eroi sono i trasfiguratori della terra e i generatori del pensiero.'

Una breve ma suggestiva e intuitiva poesia di Roberto Browning, a proposito dello Shelley, mi torna alla memoria quando penso alla figura dell'eroe, che molti viventi hanno veduta e che pure è già così lontana e così alta nel cielo ideale (*see translation below*). Questa poesia mi aiuta molto a rappresentare quel sentimento di lontananza e di quasi soprannaturale mistero che suscita in noi il nome dell'eroe mai veduto.<sup>15</sup>

D'Annunzio's reflections consider the connection of primitive societies and heroes, to point out that only golden ages can afford heroes, and includes the 'young' and 'primitive' Italian nation which subjected Garibaldi to a process of mythical transfiguration soon after his death. That is why:

'transfigurato e ingigantito, pochi minuti dopo la morte,  
Garibaldi è assunto nel coro eroico, e sembra divino,'<sup>16</sup>

where one can observe the conflation of classical (the hero received among the gods) and Christian idiom – the assumption of the Virgin Mary and the burial song, *in paradisum deducant te angeli*. To be fashionable, one should talk here of intertextuality and/or hybridization ... while more modestly, I would call this patchwork poetics.

For the purpose of this paper, d'Annunzio's prose translation will be given the typographic layout of a poetic text, following Browning's original four quatrains, the intention being to take a step further the model of his translation of Tennyson's *Tears, idle tears* to be found in *Il trionfo della morte* where it is presented as a sequence of lines/sentences spaced by dashes, with a view to visually suggesting the features and extent of the poet's appropriation of the poem, as well as the distance, the scarcely to be filled gap between two languages and two expressive worlds that are worth enquiring into:

### *Memorabilia*

#### I

- 1 Ah, did you once see Shelley plain,
- 2 And did he stop and speak to you,
- 3 And did you speak to him again?
- 4 How strange it seems and new!

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. *Il Mattino in Scritti giornalistici*, 31-32.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

II

5 But you were living before that,  
6 And also you are living after;  
7 And the memory I started at –  
8 My starting moves your laughter.

III

9 I crossed a moor, with a name of its own,  
10 And a certain use in the world no doubt,  
11 Yet a hand's-breadth of it shines alone  
12 'Mid the blank miles round about:

IV

13 For there I picked up on the heather  
14 And there I put inside my breast  
15 A moulted feather, an eagle-feather!  
16 Well, I forget the rest.

\*\*\*\*\*

1 Ah, dunque un giorno voi lo vedeste in viso,  
2 ed egli si fermò e vi parlò,  
3 e voi anche gli parlaste?  
4 Come questo sembra strano e nuovo!

5 Ma voi eravate vivo prima che questo accadesse;  
6 e siete vivo ancora, dopo.  
7 E il ricordo che mi fa trasalire...  
8 Voi ridete al mio sussulto! –

9 Traversavo una landa, che aveva un nome proprio  
10 e una certa utilità nel mondo, senza dubbio;  
11 e pure a pena ne brilla quanto la palma di una mano,  
12 al centro di pallidi luoghi in torno;  
13 poiché là io raccolsi tra le eriche  
14 e là io misi nel mio petto  
15 una piuma perduta, una piuma d'aquila! –  
16 Bene, io dimentico il resto.

*Memorabilia* brings to a close the first volume of *Men and Women* under Shelley's star, as the collection's creative impulse is triggered off by a

Shelleyan reminiscence in 'Love among the Ruins.'<sup>17</sup> The poetic 'I' addressing the stranger/'you' who has already spoken to him ('Ah, did you see Shelley plain?' ...) is identified with Browning and his youthful idolization of the romantic poet. Of the four quatrains making up the poem, the first two introduce – as an experience in time – the opposition of the poetic 'I' to his interlocutor who saw Shelley plain: the former's emotion is compared to the latter's unawareness/indifference, that is, the chance acquaintance with Shelley of one does not match the indelible imprinting of his poetry on the other. The third and fourth stanzas suggest the experience of a numinous presence on a spatial plane, as the 'hand's-breadth that shines' in the 'moor's ... blank miles' is the spot where a sign of this presence, the 'eagle-feather' was dropped, and it is the poetic 'I's' privilege to pick it up thanks to his symbolic investment in the poet's endorsement of the natural object that finally points to a supernatural order of things.

The translation, stripped of its 'native melody,' to use d'Annunzio's words, is faithful on the whole, an 'autonomous echo' of the original.<sup>18</sup> To begin with, the use of 'voi' for 'you' (what today would be rendered by 'lei') implies, as is natural with a stranger, a distancing, patronizing and/or scornful attitude on the part of the addresser, and rules out the possibility – that could be envisaged by the use of 'tu' – of an emotional kinship between 'I' and 'you': the former's questions signifying that he might have liked to share his view of Shelley, the latter's direct experience of meeting the poet proving that he was and remains unimpressed.

This paper does not pinpoint possible misreadings in d'Annunzio's version. The intention is, above all, to examine the nature of the poet's solutions within the bounds of a prose translation that has been segmented into 'lines' for ease of reference – setting off from the working hypothesis that this is perhaps an interim elaboration, capable of improvement, a 'cartoon' for further experiments towards a piece of work that ideally, in a poetic translation, should consider signifiers as much as signifieds and mimetically match sound with sense. An

17 *Cfr. Rome and Nature* in P.B. Shelley, *Poesie* (English texts facing translations), G. Conte (ed.) (Milano. Rizzoli, 1989), 180-81.

18 *Cfr. Agostino Lombardo's* genial and paradoxical definition in 'Tradurre Shakespeare' (originally suggested by Walter Benjamin), in *Venezia e le lingue e letterature straniere* S. Perosa, M. Calderaro, S. Regazzoni (eds.) (Roma. Bulzoni, 1991), 411. Hereafter emphasis on Italian words quoted from d'Annunzio's translation will be mine.

exploration of the two sides of the coin is not essential for the purposes of d'Annunzio's article as the translation is restricted to a discursive practice, a pretext to bind Browning's poem to an end relating a work of moral-aesthetic suasion of the poet's readership on the embattled issue of the monument to Garibaldi as hero and nation-builder.

And yet the segmentation of d'Annunzio's text into 16 numbered 'lines' and a partition into four imitation four-line stanzas highlights the texture of the translation: each line has from two to four main stresses and a number of syllables slightly below or less often above the endecasyllabic Italian staple line, with the exception of lines 5 and 11 that can be subdivided into two parts of three-stressed lines each. Lines 9 and 10 out measure the endecasyllable of which the prose rhythm is a replica of the original in the description of a desolate 'landa' ('moor') – admittedly not the ideal site for a numinous epiphany. Otherwise, d'Annunzio adopts a sequence of prose-poem cadences with a plain speech intonation, doubling the English (apart from rhyme) in the series of dramatic questions making up the first three lines/sentences ending the 'stanza' in an exclamation, to express wonder and incredulity: 'un giorno ... voi lo vedeste... voi gli parlaste... nuovo!' where the emphasis is laid on *voi*, and especially on *anche* that adequately renders Browning's 'again' carrying the unusual semantic connotation of response/reaction. This indirectly tells the reader that though d'Annunzio had no specialist knowledge of English he could at least probe the original through the competent use of a dictionary. Incidentally, to repeat, the insistence on *voi* related to the addressee to point out surprise, wonder, incredulity on the part of the addresser at Shelley's having dealt with an inadequate interlocutor, makes the '*vi parlò*' less consistent with the other two occurrences: instead of '*vi parlò*,' '*a voi parlò*' would better accord with the final '*strano e nuovo*.'

In the second imitation quatrain, line 5 is a little longer owing to an explicative circumstantial expansion: in the original the vagueness of the deictic 'that,' within the sintagma 'before that,' condensing the contents of the opening quatrain (meeting the stranger, the dialogue, the poetic 'I's' response) is opposed to 'after' which shadows implicitly the same deictic 'that' and devalues, almost annihilates the time that precedes and follows the meeting. In d'Annunzio's version the addition of the verb marking an event, '*prima che questo accadesse*' is a discursive amplification that disrupts the plain rhythm and synthetic form of the sentences in Browning's text, modulated on breathing and cadenced on expressive

pauses marked by appropriate punctuation. And yet d'Annunzio seems conscious of this rhythmical-semantic rupture as well as of the strong caesura, for the poetic 'I' speaking, between the vision of the past and the banality of the present: the gap is filled by the 'moment, one and infinite' (seeing Shelley plain), signalled by a suspension that separates – by providing a suprasegmental trait of spoken and acted words – the 'siete vivo *ancora*,' from 'dopo,' closing line 6.

In so doing the translator restates the clash of the two planes of time and related modes of existence and structures of feeling, of which the poetic 'I' is well aware, whereas his interlocutor was and remains unaware, and through a device that privileges the speech intonation d'Annunzio compensates for the 'loss' brought about by the discursive slant of line 5. Further on (ll. 7-8) the translation highlights the dismayed attitude of the addresser, conveyed by the bidirectional orientation of the sentence(s) in 'I started at / My starting,' through the use of anacoluthon, marking both the interruption of the syntactic sequence and the suspension of speech. In these lines the meaning is summed up of the initial exclamation/interjection in both texts (l. 4), as well as the difference in the modes of experience of addresser and addressee with the added, explicit recognition of the impossibility of communicating a condition of mutual understanding and sharing between them: *sussulto* exhibits the speaker's emotion without having to utter a word, and explains the unreconciled positions of 'I' and 'you.'

Once he has rendered the basic contrast by producing a replica of the anacoluthon 'I started at / my starting' d'Annunzio, as is often the case with poets-translators, prefers variation on the lexical level by selecting two words semantically cognate: *trasalire* (verb) / *sussulto* (noun), but preserving the opposition past vs present/verbal noun of the original in the infinitive vs noun in Italian, though emphasizing in the present tense *mi fa trasalire* the reverberation of memory on the present that is fully justified because the feelings of surprise/incredulity/wonder are still there for the poetic 'I,' compared to the past simple of the English poem recalling an incident that has no bearing on the stranger.<sup>19</sup>

19 In Italian the *passato prossimo*, the equivalent of the Present Perfect in English can be an adequate way out in overcoming a difficulty often encountered in the translation of English past tenses, because of the uncertainty due to the overlapping of *passato remoto*, *imperfetto* and *passato prossimo*. In this case 'mi ha fatto trasalire' would be a reflection on the connectedness of past and present experience as conveyed /cont. ...

Besides, d'Annunzio in translating the meaning of the two final lines of the first part of the lyric is closer to the regular structure of the original (4-stress lines for each of the 3 lines composing each quatrain, followed by a 3-stress line on the 4th) in the anomalous endecasyllable of line 7, based on three tone-syllables, the third, seventh and tenth, whereas the following line, split into two parts, with two strong stresses each can be read as an attempt at sprung rhythm in Italian verse, with two percussive stresses while the rest of the line is either proclitic or enclitic.

A literal translation characterizes the two opening lines of the third stanza by introducing an ordinary spatial experience, an empty space, 'una landa.' D'Annunzio solves the double opposition: emptiness/darkness vs fullness/shines ('hand's-breadth') by producing with 'palma della mano' an exact calque, a word-for-word translation that results in an overtranslation in the shift. Yet the poet's option does not seem to be a mere coincidence, as he appears to have sensed a difficulty here, since by choosing 'palma della mano,' 'palm' in English, instead of *palmo* for 'hand's-breadth' – both indicating a unity of measurement – i.e. a tiny spot vs 'blank miles' synonymous with a long distance, he is forced to replace the literal translation of 'blank miles' = 'vuote miglia/desolate miglia' with a more general *luoghi*, albeit consistent with the semantic choice of a word-for-word version.

D'Annunzio makes one more semantic addition to the text, the sign of an interpretation in progress, relevant for its rhythmical quality too, by translating 'blank' – the qualifier of 'miles' belonging to the same semantic area of 'moor'/'landa' with 'pallidi' connected with an undisclosed opposition: 'shines'/'brilla' vs 'pallidi,' recalling 'palma' through an alliterative play too – which is certainly validated by a bilingual dictionary, but it is even more validated by the Italian poet's 'metabolization' of Shelley's poetry: 'pallidi' is more Shelleyan and more in tune with the tenor of the poem as a clue to the romantic poet as it is a calque of one of his favourite and ever recurrent adjectives, 'pale.'

The last imitation quatrain given converts the semantic core of Browning's homage to Shelley and preserves its syntactic structure as

---

*lcont.* by the past tense of line 7 ('I started') and the present tense of line 8 ('moves').  
*lcont.* For a keen reading of the relationship between Shelley and Browning starting from *Memorabilia*, see also H. F. Tucker, 'Memorabilia: Mnemonic Imagination in Shelley and Browning,' in *Studies in Romanticism*, 19, (Fall 1988), 285, especially 285-87 and 323-25.

well: the replica of the suspension of/suspense on the natural object that shines over the 'landa' ('pallidi luoghi in torno') commits the rest to oblivion, and this is what actually happens since the whole significance of the poem and the contrasting approaches to seeing 'Shelley plain' of addresser and addressee converge on 'moulted feather,' 'piuma perduta, piuma d'aquila,' symbolic of a final epiphany in which *that* moment and *that* place are exalted, and time and space transfigured.

D'Annunzio in his comment on the poem sees a 'quasi soprannaturale mistero' in the recognition. As a matter of fact, by translating 'moulted feather' with 'piuma perduta' (instead of 'piuma di muda,' one of the feathers a bird naturally sheds) d'Annunzio gives a technically less correct translation of 'moulted,' but creates a shift on the level of signifiers with an assonance and an alliteration, *piuma perduta* – that links up with '*pallidi*' and '*palma*.' The shift aptly recovers the semantic substance of the original, although Browning plays on the notion of discarding implied by 'moulted,' and emphasizes the poetic 'I's' suggestion/awe of a numinous presence from a little sign signalling a gift from above and superfluity, so much more his merit in realizing it. But in both texts, original and translation the difference in sensitiveness and sensibility of 'I' and 'you' is clear enough, the rift between the man whose blindness stops him from recognizing the numen although he sees him 'plain,' whereas the poetic 'I' divines it by transfiguring the minimal signs a 'spirit-sensed' supernatural presence drops on natural objects (the hyphenated qualifier is adapted from Browning's 'House' and is the equivalent of 'intuitiva,' d'Annunzio's synthetic definition of *Memorabilia*).

D'Annunzio's version is an interesting experiment and bears witness to a non-marginal, non-casual reading of Browning's poetry, even though it is set as a precious stone in a cultural-political-rhetorical debate. It is only to be regretted that the poet has not left to posterity more translations from Browning. Thus, readers must be content with this 'piuma perduta,' in the knowledge that it is 'divine' Gabriele's gift, 'una piuma d'aquila.'

## T.S. Eliot and Eugenio Montale: 'Similar Flowers on Distant Branches?'

*Gloria Lauri-Lucente*

The following study will treat the relationship between T.S. Eliot and Eugenio Montale as a stubbornly elusive enigma which has bedevilled literary critics since the late 1940s. It is divided into two distinct parts. The first part will discuss a well-known essay by Mario Praz which set in motion the idea of a direct influence on Montale by Eliot.<sup>1</sup> Montale's reaction to the notions set forth by Praz will then be examined via a discussion of some of his theoretical formulations in prose. In seeking to develop a general framework for comparison between Eliot and Montale, the first part of the study will include references to both Harold Bloom's notions on the anxiety of influence and also to the phenomenon of heterotextuality as defined by Claudio Guillén. The second part of the study will move from methodological reflections of a more general nature to the analysis of Montale's verse, which is addressed to numerous distinct beloveds in differing periods of his poetic production, all of them appearing and reappearing at various points as though in multiple metamorphoses of one basic female figure. The progression along a line of objects, one metamorphosed into the other, seems gradual and filtered over time even as elements of change appear dramatically new, creating the odd mixture of motion on the surface of underlying stasis that results in the particular texture of Montale's verse. The contrast between two of these female objects of desire, Clizia and Mosca, will show how the influence model becomes progressively less viable in the discussion of Montale's later works as the poet distances himself from his theory of the suppression of the 'occasione spinta,' or the 'propelling occasion,' which critics have frequently equated with Eliot's formulation of the 'objective correlative.'

---

1 M. Praz, 'T. S. Eliot and Eugenio Montale,' R. March and M. J. Tambimuttu (eds.) *T. S. Eliot. A Symposium* (London. PL Editions Poetry, 1948), 244-248. This commemorative volume was published in honour of Eliot on his sixtieth birthday. For an extensive discussion of Praz's essay, see C. Huffman, *Montale and the Occasions of Poetry* (Princeton, New Jersey. Princeton U.P., 1983), 3-6.

The controversy surrounding the relationship between the two poets can be traced to a 1948 essay entitled 'T.S. Eliot and Eugenio Montale,' in which Praz discusses the question of 'parallels in history' and writes that if the principle of Plutarch's *Lives* were to be applied to literature, 'we might walk as through a gallery of portraits arranged in groups according to more or less evident affinities, and wonder at the mystery of the growth of the human tree, which causes similar flowers to blossom at the same time in distant and apparently unrelated branches.'<sup>2</sup> Praz then extends the parallel to Eliot and Montale, two poets from distant worlds with a strong 'family likeness' whose works are inspired by a 'kindred' spirit.'<sup>3</sup> He goes on to imply that while some 'initial' affinities which impart to their verse 'the same character of subdued translucency, of beauty and tenderness laboriously distilled from the crucible of sorrow' may have predated any type of contact between them, other parallels seem to be the result of a more direct influence of Eliot on Montale.<sup>4</sup> In outlining these parallels which Montale might have drawn from Eliot, such as the inclusion of quotations of a foreign language within the texture of a poem, or the insertion of notes which shed light on the meaning of a text, Praz focuses primarily on Montale's ability to indirectly express through correlation his inner feelings by finding 'the emotional equivalent of thought' in objects which are often alluded to only in their essential features.<sup>5</sup> Such an ability, Praz says, allows Montale to externalize his emotions through indirect expression in ways that are strikingly reminiscent of Eliot. Praz writes:

It is remarkable that Montale, who had known Dante from his early youth, should nevertheless have developed a formula very close to the correlative objective through his reading of Eliot's verse. For in the thirties Montale, growing fully aware of Eliot's power, without loss of originality enriched his own technique with devices strongly reminiscent of Eliot.<sup>6</sup>

The essay by Praz is of special import for a number of reasons. In a vein that is strikingly reminiscent of Ludwig Wittgenstein's theory of family resemblance, it furnishes the basis for an area of studies in the

---

2 Praz, 244.

3 *Ibid.*, 246.

4 *Ibid.*, 248.

5 *Ibid.*, 247.

6 *Ibid.*, 246.

criticism of Montale which concentrates on the strong 'family likeness' between the two poets. As Claire de C. L. Huffman writes, since Praz's essay, 'the view that Montale is "the Italian T.S. Eliot" has become something of an unchallenged literary commonplace.'<sup>7</sup> Perhaps more significant than the essay by Praz within the present context, however, is another essay of the same year entitled 'Eliot and Ourselves,' in which Montale addresses in expository formulations some of the notions set forth by Praz.<sup>8</sup> This essay is particularly instructive in helping us chart the series of family resemblances and divergences, parallels and contrasts, between the two poets. To use Romano Luperini's words, Montale's depiction of Eliot can almost be described as a 'self-portrait'<sup>9</sup> or, perhaps better still, as the portrayal of a specular relationship which strives to mirror itself in the object being depicted while maintaining a certain distance from it. In such a portrayal, an elusive resemblance to Eliot resulting from a practice of concealment and differentiation as regards repetition and representation can be strongly discerned. Indeed, Montale's discussion of Eliot seems to be deeply engaged in a subtle interplay between the presence of the model and its absence, and the similarity to the predecessor deliberately challenges recognition of the hidden resonances while striving to conceal them, as the poet attempts to find his own distinctive voice. Montale thus acknowledges the existence of an 'immediate closeness' with Eliot even while he disclaims a profound knowledge of his works.<sup>10</sup> Within this interplay of differentiation and identification, Montale first says that he can pay homage to Eliot 'not by a deep study of his work,' which he is hardly able to undertake 'owing to lack of documentation,' but only by "bearing witness."<sup>11</sup> At the same time, however, though he reiterates that he cannot be considered as 'a real expert in Eliot studies,'<sup>12</sup> he is also careful to add that his translation of 'A Song for Simeon' in 1929 and 'La figlia che piange' in 1933, two poems lent to him by Praz from the *Aerial Poems* series, was largely responsible for having introduced Eliot

---

7 Huffman, 4.

8 E. Montale, 'Eliot and Ourselves,' in R. March and M. J. Tambimuttu (eds.), 190-195. This essay had originally come out in Italian as 'Eliot e noi,' *L'immagine*, I, 5 (Nov-Dec, 1947).

9 R. Luperini, *Montale o l'identità negata* (Napoli. Liguori, 1984), 169.

10 Montale, 'Eliot and Ourselves,' 191.

11 *Ibid.*, 190.

12 *Ibid.*, 191.

to the Italian readers.<sup>13</sup> Before he translated these two poems, Montale writes, he had been familiar only with some early lyrics of Eliot's so-called Laforgue period, more specifically with *Portrait of a Lady* and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, which he had read in French translation. He also notes that it was the 'miglior fabbro' Ezra Pound who helped him read *The Waste Land*, *Ash Wednesday*, *The Four Quartets*, and the interludes for the plays, which he describes as 'the part of Eliot's work the Italian reader finds harder to judge.'<sup>14</sup>

By disclaiming a profound knowledge of Eliot's works, Montale seems to be implying that any affinities which his writings might bear with those of Eliot are purely incidental. What appears to have been merely inferred in 'Eliot and Ourselves' is unequivocally reiterated in a series of articles and interviews from the sixties and seventies in which Montale strives to dispel the widespread notion that his poetry was directly influenced by Eliot, in particular, by his poetics of the 'objective correlative.' Objectivity, Montale claims, had already been an essential trait of his verse before he became familiar with Eliot's famous assertion that 'the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative" [...] a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula for that *particular* emotion.'<sup>15</sup> He goes on to say that he does not believe that Eliot's theory of the 'objective correlative' existed when he formulated his poetics of objectivity, which was the result of 'instinct,' rather than a specific 'theory.'<sup>16</sup> Montale writes:

Ammesso che in arte esista una bilancia tra il di fuori e il di dentro, tra l'occasione e l'opera-oggetto, bisognava esprimere l'oggetto e tacere l'occasione-spinta. Un modo nuovo, non parnassiano, di immergere il lettore in *medias res*, un totale assorbimento delle intenzioni nei risultati oggettivi. Anche qui, fui mosso dall'istinto non da una teoria (quella eliotiana del 'correlativo oggettivo' non credo esistesse ancora, nel '28, quando il mio *Arsenio* fu pubblicato nel "Criterion.")

13 *Ibid.*, 190.

14 *Ibid.*, 190-191.

15 T. S. Eliot, 'Hamlet,' *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot* F. Kermode (ed.) (New York. Harcourt, 1975), 48.

16 E. Montale, 'Intenzioni (Intervista immaginaria),' in *Sulla poesia* (Milano. Mondadori, 1976), 567.

Working on the supposition that a balance can be struck in art between the 'outside' and the 'inside,' between the occasion and the work-as-object, it was necessary to express the object and suppress the propelling occasion behind it. A new, non-Parnassian mode, to plunge the reader *in medias res*, a total absorption of one's intentions in objective results. Here, too, I was driven by instinct, not by a theory (I do not believe Eliot's theory of the 'objective correlative' existed yet, when, in 1928, my poem 'Arsenio' was published in *Criterion*.)<sup>17</sup>

Though it is Montale himself who dismisses the possibility of having been directly influenced by Eliot, the validity of that dismissal still has to be ascertained. In the light of Bloom's assertion that 'all poets, weak and strong, agree in denying any share in the anxiety of influence,'<sup>18</sup> and that 'more than ever, contemporary poets insist that they are telling the truth in their work, and more than ever they tell continuous lies, particularly about their relationships to one another, and most consistently about their relations to their precursors,'<sup>19</sup> Montale's dismissal could be interpreted as the 'poet's melancholy at his lack of priority.'<sup>20</sup> An affliction of this type of Bloomian melancholy would explain Montale's concern to claim precedence over Eliot with regard to his theory of objectivity. It could also shed light on Montale's observations regarding the need to maintain a proper distance between model and copy which, as he contends, is one of the necessary features giving rise to 'valid originality.'<sup>21</sup> Significantly enough, it is from Eliot, the very poet from whom he strives to distance himself, that Montale draws his formulations on the individuality of the poetic voice and its relationship with tradition. As this remarkable passage on the thematics of resemblance and originality demonstrates, the desire to establish the distinctive originality of the poetic voice, despite any affinities with other poets, is undeniably a crucial issue for Montale:

Valid originality, as Eliot has warned us, is not originality which has no resemblance with anyone else: it is what is irreducible to similarities and is conditioned and guaranteed by them.<sup>22</sup>

---

17 *Ibid.*

18 H. Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1976), 10.

19 *Ibid.*

20 H. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1966), 96.

21 Montale, 'Eliot and Ourselves,' 194.

22 *Ibid.*

In more ways than one, within Bloom's story of intra-poetic relationships, Montale's formulations on Eliot can be read as a symptom of 'a disease of self-consciousness,' which manifests itself as 'an obsessive reasoning and comparing, presumably of one's own work to the precursor's poetic influence.'<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, against Bloom's diagnosis of the disease afflicting the melancholic poet, and drawing on Guillén's reappraisal of the notion of influence which takes into consideration the unconscious echoes and reverberations making up a literary work, it is possible to argue that Montale's affinities with Eliot might well have been the result of 'an involuntary reminiscence [...] of the kind that affects only the initial "vocabulary" of a poet.'<sup>24</sup> It is this vocabulary, which consists of 'the sum of the elements preserved in the memory or sensibility of the poet before the genesis of a particular poem begins, and which are available indifferently to all his later writing,'<sup>25</sup> that could have given rise to the 'immediate closeness' with Eliot that Montale refers to in 'Eliot and Ourselves,' whose poetry, like Valéry's, he says cannot be easily forgotten 'even after a long lapse of cultivation.'<sup>26</sup>

Whether or not an argument for direct influence can be substantiated, in trying to determine the nature of Montale's relationship with Eliot, it is crucial to bear in mind the possibility that the striking affinities between the two poets could have derived less from direct influence than from shared influences. Thus, if Montale's poetry does not furnish definitive proof of being directly influenced by Eliot, the study of the relationship between the two poets should broaden its investigation and take into account the phenomenon of 'heterotextuality,' as defined by Guillén. Elaborating on Julia Kristeva's notion of 'intertextuality,' which construes the text as 'the absorption and transformation of another, and also on Roland Barthes's idea of the 'intertext' construed as 'a general field of anonymous formulas, whose origin can seldom be located, of unconscious or automatic citations, given without quotation marks,' Guillén suggests that 'the text of a literary work is heterotextual,' insofar as it is 'penetrated by alterity, by words other than its own.'<sup>27</sup>

23 Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, 10.

24 C. Guillén, *Literature as System. Essays toward the Theory of Literary History* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton U.P., 1971), 38.

25 *Ibid.*

26 Montale, 'Eliot and Ourselves,' 191.

27 C. Guillén, *The Challenge of Comparative Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard U.P., 1993), 245-246.

The phenomenon of heterotextuality is of undeniable relevance in helping us place within a meaningful context the observations not only of those critics who allege that Eliot directly influenced Montale but also of all those who dispute such a claim. In arguing that Eliot did not furnish a direct source for Montale's poetry, Patricia M. Gathercole draws on the notion of shared cultural influences or, to use once again Guillén's terminology, of the 'involuntary reminiscences' making up the vocabulary of a literary work. Within this framework, Gathercole argues that although 'Montale's admiration for Eliot cannot be questioned,' whether Eliot's influence on Montale really existed or whether each poet 'drew unconsciously upon the general body of concepts current in his generation must remain a matter of conjecture.'<sup>28</sup> She goes on to say that the differences between the two poets are even more revealing than the actual affinities. Gathercole writes:

The differences between the work of the two masters are still more striking. In Eliot we find a constant evolution of mood: from the utter despair of *The Waste Land* he progresses steadily to the Christian hope of *Ash Wednesday* [...] Montale, on the other hand, seems to enter a period of even darker despair, of complete indifference. A totally negative attitude toward life, an emptiness, a nothingness and hell itself seems to colour his view of the world about him.<sup>29</sup>

Largely echoing Gathercole's observations, Rachel Meoli Toulmin also contends that the striking affinities between the two poets could have been the result of shared influences:

Tutto sommato, sentiamo che la presa di contatto di Montale con Eliot non è dipesa tanto dalle versioni delle *Aerial Poems*, quanto da un contesto culturale più generale: dall'eredità poetica europea comune ai due poeti e dalla conoscenza di Praz, di Pound, e più tardi dello stesso Eliot. L'affinità tra i due scrittori ci pare sia di carattere generale, di atmosfera, ed è difficile reperire dei luoghi in cui Eliot, anche attraverso le versioni, abbia esercitato un'influenza precisa sul poeta italiano.<sup>30</sup>

---

28 P. Gathercole, 'Two Kindred Spirits: Eugenio Montale and T.S. Eliot,' *Italica*, 3 (1955), 170-172.

29 *Ibid.*, 174-175.

30 R. Meoli Toulmin, 'Shakespeare and Eliot nelle versioni di Eugenio Montale,' *Belfagor*, 26 (1971), 466.

All things considered, we feel that Montale's contact with Eliot did not arise from his versions of the *Aerial Poems*, but rather from a more widespread cultural context: from the European poetic legacy shared by the two poets, from his acquaintance with Praz, with Pound, and later on, with Eliot himself. The affinity between the two authors seem to be of a more general nature, one of atmosphere, and it is difficult to identify those instances in which Eliot, even through the translation of his works, actually influenced the Italian poet.

Both Gathercole's and Meoli Toulmin's observations are taken up and elaborated by George Talbot who states in unequivocal terms that by and large, the affinities with Eliot which, it has been claimed, appeared in Montale's poetry in the 1930s and 1940s, are 'incidental' and the influences are 'illusory.'<sup>31</sup>

Observations like those of Gathercole, Meoli Toulmin and Talbot raise an important question: when focusing on the relationship between Eliot and Montale, should the customary investigation of influences be abandoned in favour of the study of parallelisms? In that case, should the criticism of Montale refrain from engaging in the project of tracking direct influences? Interestingly enough, although Eliot's direct influence on Montale has been both alleged and contested in equally convincing terms, from Mario Praz to Romano Luperini, from Laura Barile and Christine Ott to Laura Caretti and Paola Sica, to mention only a few, the tendency in the criticism of Montale has been to focus more on the affinities between the two poets and less on the differences that distinguish their works. In particular, it has been repeatedly noted that Montale seems to be drawing on Eliot's theory of the 'objective correlative' when he formulates a poetics which works on the supposition that 'one has to express the object and suppress the propelling occasion behind it' in order to strike a balance in art between immanence and transcendence, "between the "outside" and the "inside," between 'the occasion and the work-as-object.'<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, one cannot help but notice that in discussing Eliot's refusal 'to include the logical links' connecting the images of a poem to one other, Montale seems to be discussing his own poetics based on the suppression of the propelling occasion.<sup>33</sup> The same can be said for his definition of the 'poeta

31 G. Talbot, *Montale's 'Mestiere Vile'* (Dublin. Irish Academic Press, 1995), 72.

32 See Montale, 'Intenzioni' (Intervista immaginaria), 561-569.

33 Montale, *Sulla poesia*, 394.

*oscuro*, or 'obscure poet,' which could be applied both to himself and to Eliot. Montale describes the methodological procedure of the 'obscure poet' in the following terms:

Il supposto poeta *oscuro* è [...] colui che lavora il proprio poema come un oggetto, accumulandovi d'istinto sensi e soprasensi, conciliandovi dentro gl'inconciliabili, fino a farne il più fermo, il più irripetibile, il più definito correlativo della propria esperienza interiore.<sup>34</sup>

The *obscure* poet is supposedly [...] he who moulds his own poem as he would an object, instinctively accumulating in it sensory and supersensory things, reconciling within it the irreconcilable, until he makes of it the most resolute, unrepeatable, and definitive correlative of his own interior experience.

At this juncture, it becomes clear that it is not always easy to establish with certainty whether or not the relationship between Eliot and Montale is based on a series of similarities and parallelisms on the one hand, or direct influences and sources on the other. Praz himself acknowledges that while offering 'a tempting playground for speculation,' parallels in history are 'apt to be misleading.'<sup>35</sup> Moreover, as Huffman observes, by frequently resorting to Eliot's terminology, Montale actually lends support to critics who have used 'the elusive term "objective correlative" in yet more elusive ways to reaffirm the allegation of similarity, whether in general poetic qualities or in isolated poetic techniques.'<sup>36</sup> One should also consider the fact that Montale's long-standing relationship with Eliot underwent a series of permutations and oscillations characterized by sudden outbursts of antipathy interspersed with moments of profound admiration.<sup>37</sup> In many instances, therefore, it is not always possible to avoid conflating involuntary and voluntary influences which, as Guillén rightly states, are "not indivisible."<sup>38</sup> In sum, as Huffman notes, 'it is exceedingly difficult to say whether Eliot's poetry and criticism, of undoubted interest to Montale from the late 1920s on, catalyzed some of the modernist changes in the

---

34 *Ibid.*, 560.

35 Praz, 244.

36 Huffman, 4.

37 L. Barile, *Adorate mie larve. Montale e la poesia anglosassone* (Bologna. Il Mulino, 1990), 51.

38 Guillén, *Literature as System*, 34.

poems of *Le occasioni*, or whether Montale recognized some of his own poetic intentions in Eliot's poetry and literary theories.<sup>39</sup>

Notwithstanding the ultimately irreconcilable nature of the conflicting views surrounding the nature of Eliot's influence on Montale, one can still discern a certain degree of convergence even among those critics who reject the existence of a direct link between the two poets. These convergent views focus primarily on Montale's reading, or re-reading, of Dante via Eliot. To address such a crucial issue, it is important to turn once again to the essay 'Eliot and Ourselves.' In outlining some of the characteristics of Eliot's verse, which include 'the discovery of the great tradition of English metaphysical poetry,' and his 'genuinely personal [...] sprung rhythm,' Montale isolates one feature: Eliot's contribution, like Valéry's before him, at least in Italy, 'to renewed contact with the high European tradition which had been lost for many years,' a contact which recalled 'Italian readers to a less superficial knowledge of their patrimony in poetry and to a closer sense of their classical spirit.'<sup>40</sup>

Drawing on Montale's observations vis-à-vis Eliot's contribution in Italy, Talbot who, as we have seen, argues that by and large the affinities between the two poets are purely coincidental, acknowledges that 'what Montale did derive from Eliot was a new way of looking at Dante and the *stilnovisti*.'<sup>41</sup> Though I should add that it is not possible to ascertain if Montale's poetry actually derived its objectivity from Dante via Eliot, or if both Eliot's and Montale's works independently draw their objectivity from Dante and the *stilnovo*. In what follows I will strive to examine Montale's revisitation or 'renewed contact' with the literature of the Trecento via a discussion of the Dantesque Clizia, the ethereal, winged female figure of *Le occasioni* and *La bufera*, the two collections from the late twenties and the thirties in which the influence of Eliot's metaphysical poetry on Montale has been largely discerned. As Sica writes, 'L'influenza della corrente metafisica eliotiana [...] in connessione a precise scelte estetiche e culturali, emerge con particolare enfasi nelle *Occasioni* e decresce in *Finisterre*.' ('The influence of Eliot's metaphysical poetry [...] with regard to specific cultural and aesthetic choices, emerges in a pronounced way in the *Occasioni* and diminishes with *Finisterre*').<sup>42</sup>

39 Huffman, 5.

40 Montale, 'Eliot and Ourselves,' 193.

41 Talbot, 72.

42 P. Sica, 'Un'altra America: echi eliotiani nella poesie fiorentine di /cont. ...

Following the discussion of Clizia, I will then turn to the profane, domestic Mosca who haunts the poet's memory as an anti-Beatrice or anti-Clizia in *Xenia*, the collection of love poems conceived in the mid-sixties by Montale as an expiatory votive offering to his departed wife, Drusilla Tanzi. While shedding light on Montale's increasing uncertainty about the viability of rhetorical constructs, and thus of poetry itself in the modern era, as we shall see the contrast between Clizia and Mosca is particularly useful in the discussion of the Eliot-Montale link, be that link intentional or unintentional, conscious or unconscious. More specifically, the contrast between the two female figures will show how the influence model is no longer viable in Montale's later works. In fact, by the time Montale reaches the end of his poetic career, the female figure has been stripped of her numinous function and is unable to provide the poet with an 'occasion' of grace, a glimpse of 'truth,' a 'varco,' or an imminent escape. In her 'mute visite,' or 'mute visitations,' Mosca can only help Montale quietly celebrate the power of memory as he resignedly rejects poetry's dominant mythologies.

The *senhal* name Clizia recalls the Ovidian story of the nymph Clytie who keeps her eyes fixed on the Sun-god with whom she has desperately fallen in love until she wastes away in despair. The purely personal story of fidelity and stoicism of the Ovidian Clizia, whose heliotropic stance makes her lean toward the light and away from darkness, is metamorphosed into 'a parable of ethical self-transcendence, through which the poet addresses mankind.'<sup>43</sup> The allegorical tension underlying the poems dedicated to Clizia originates from Montale's choice to express the object and suppress the impelling occasion giving rise to it, a procedure which, as we have seen, bears striking affinities with Eliot's refusal to include the logical links between one object and another.<sup>44</sup> An example of this technique whereby the poet expresses an emotion objectively by concealing its 'propelling occasion' is 'La primavera hitleriana,' in which the idealized beloved emerges out of the personalized, erotic 'occasion' and is metamorphosed into the chosen one. As she transcends her personal

---

*icont.* Eugenio Montale,' *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies*, 5 (1997), 275.

43 R. J. West, *Eugenio Montale. Poet on the Edge* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London. Harvard U.P., 1981), 44. For my reading of Clizia and Mosca, I am indebted to West as well as to G. Cambon, *Eugenio Montale's Poetry. A Dream in Reason's Presence* (Princeton, New Jersey. Princeton U. P., 1982) and G. Biasin, *Montale, Debussy and Modernism* (Princeton, New Jersey. Princeton U.P., 1989).

44 On this procedure, see Montale, 'Intenzioni (Intervista immaginaria),' 561-569.

plight in the name of a universal spirituality, the poet exhorts her to focus on the fountainhead of all values, the 'Other' or 'Lui':

[...] Guarda ancora  
 in alto, Clizia, e` la tua sorte, tu  
 che il non mutato amor mutata serbi,  
 fino a che il cieco sole che in te porti  
 si abbacini nell'Altro e si distrugga  
 in Lui, per tutti.<sup>45</sup>

[...] Look up, again  
 Clizia, it's your destiny,  
 changed one harbouring your unchanged love,  
 until the blind sun you bear within you  
 is blinded in the Other and consumed  
 in Him, for all.

Like Beatrice who, in the opening canto of the *Paradiso*, gazes eaglelike at the burning sun, the image of the omnipotent Deity, while Dante the pilgrim gazes upon her and undergoes a process of 'trasumanar,' Clizia, radiating with intellectual light, becomes the vital chain which links the gaze of everyone ('tutti') with that of the Deity ('Lui'). With her opposing 'eyes of steel,' or 'occhi d'acciaio,'<sup>46</sup> Clizia, the poet's guiding blazon, triumphantly emerges with blinding light in the midst of darkness. As Sica comments, Montale's Clizia, like Eliot's Lady in *Ash Wednesday*, is 'a woman refashioned from the Christian Medieval repertory, [...] a *figura* of salvation.'<sup>47</sup> For Clizia alone, a physical-metaphysical, absent-present figure and locus for an imaginary state of sheer transfiguration, can defy Nazi persecution by imparting a heraldic token, an imagistic flash, or 'the lost sign' which endows the poet with a privileged form of perception capable of transforming the phenomenal world into a transcendent sphere. Poetry thus becomes, as in Eliot's objective correlative, the contemplation of and the search for familiar objects or sights through which the presence of the beloved, though only glimpsed momentarily, can furnish a metaphysical source of meaning and an antidote to temporal contingency.

45 Citations from Montale's poetry are taken from *Montale. Tutte le poesie*, G. Zampa (ed.) (Milano, Mondadori, 1984). The English translation is mine.

46 See the poem 'Nuove stanze.'

47 P. Sica, *Modernist Forms of Rejuvenation. Eugenio Montale and T.S. Eliot* (Firenze, Olschki, 2003), 107.

The poet awaits not so much Clizia as a possible configuration of the female figure or, as Montale puts it, 'un emblema, una citazione occulta, un senhal,' ('an emblem, an occult citation, a senhal') which she alone can impart.<sup>48</sup> In and through Clizia, who is conceived as a sign pointing towards a transcendent reality, Montale apprehends the opportunity to redeem the fallen existence of humanity by restoring to it a lost plenitude. To quote Sica once again:

Quest'assente nuova Beatrice, è l'unico punto di riferimento nel frastornante flusso del divenire. Costei è il prezioso tu a cui rivolgersi, perchè infonde la speranza di ricostruire, attraverso la poesia, valori e significati oggettivi che le opere di un passato rivalutato da Eliot ancora trasmettono, ma che la predominante cultura contemporanea italiana non ha conservato.<sup>49</sup>

This new absent Beatrice is the only point of reference in the confusing flux of being. She is the precious you to whom he can turn, because she instills the hope of reconstructing, through poetry, values and objective meanings which the works of the past rediscovered by Eliot can still transmit, but which the predominant contemporary culture in Italy has not preserved.

As opposed to Clizia, Mosca is not endowed with the ability to allow the poetic voice to transcend the merely personal and reach the prophetic heights of such poems as 'La primavera hitleriana.' In contrast to the ontology underlying the poems addressed to Clizia in which Montale allows the object to express the emotions of the poet without explaining what gave rise to them, each individual poem dedicated to Mosca originates from precise anecdotal events whose 'propelling occasion' is not concealed. Thus, the subdued narration of the domestic everyday events Montale once shared with his wife replaces the allegorical tension of the poems addressed to Clizia with an 'empty allegory.'<sup>50</sup> Quietly but relentlessly, Mosca haunts the poet's memory as an anti-Beatrice or an anti-Clizia, and the moments of blinding revelation in the poems dedicated to Clizia subside into a flickering light of consciousness. Unlike Montale's earlier collections in which the poetic experience is construed as a gift for discerning the potential of transfiguration in everyday objects, in the phenomenal world of *Xenia*, no traces of the noumenal can be discerned.

48 Montale, 'Due sciacalli al guinzaglio,' *Sulla poesia*, 84-87.

49 Sica, 'Echi eliotiani,' 270.

50 R. Luperini, *Storia di Montale* (Roma, Bari. Laterza, 1986), 216.

Having distanced himself from the mystical overtones of *Le occasioni* and *La Bufera*, Montale substitutes the elevated style by a disenchanted, unmetrical, and antilyrical use of free verse. In a flat, discursive vein, the poet contemplates the sight of familiar objects which bring to mind Mosca, ‘un insetto miope,’ or ‘a myopic insect,’ whose obscure, impenetrable vitality is similar to that possessed by animals or insects. Her ‘senso infallibile,’ or ‘infallible insight,’ enables her to overcome her short-sightedness while her ‘radar di pipistrello’ (‘bat’s radar’) allows her to avoid any obstacles, even in the dark. In one of the most moving *xenion* entitled ‘Ho sceso, dandoti il braccio, almeno un milione di scale,’ Montale pays tribute to Mosca’s gift of perception, which enables her to see and understand notwithstanding her diminished physical eyesight. Though her eyes, unlike Clizia’s ‘eyes of steel’ are ‘so hazy,’ during the years the poet shared with Mosca ‘the only real eyes’ were hers:

Ho sceso, dandoti il braccio, almeno un milione di scale  
 e ora che non ci sei è il vuoto ad ogni gradino.  
 Anche così è stato breve il nostro lungo viaggio.  
 Il mio dura tuttora, né più mi occorrono  
 le coincidenze, le prenotazioni,  
 le trappole, gli scorni di chi crede  
 che la realtà sia quella che si vede.

Ho sceso milioni di scale dandoti il braccio  
 non già perché con quattr’occhi forse si vede di più.  
 Con te le ho scese perché sapevo che di noi due  
 le sole vere pupille, sebbene tanto offuscate,  
 erano le tue. (*Xenia*, II, 5)

I’ve descended at least a million stairs, your arm in mine,  
 and now that you are not here, there’s an emptiness at every step.  
 Even so our long journey was brief.  
 My journey continues, with no need  
 for bookings, connections,  
 ruses, the disdain of those who believe  
 that reality is what one sees.

I’ve descended millions of stairs, your arm in mine,  
 not because with four eyes one can see better.  
 I went down the stairs with you because I knew  
 that the only real eyes, however hazy,  
 were yours.

The bitter weight of bereavement brings with it a heightened awareness of the limits of poetry. Towards the end of his poetic career, as Montale becomes more desolately conscious of the impossibility of infusing meaning into the meaningless, his tenacious belief in the power of poetry becomes faint and distorted, and his methodological procedure completely distances itself from his earlier works which bore so many striking affinities with Eliot. And yet, any discussion on Montale invariably conjures up Eliot's name in a type of struggle that Bloom himself probably could not have envisioned better. That this struggle involves not only two strong equals, but rather two strong equals living in the same age, is what gives it a distinctive cast. To conclude, I would like to draw an analogy between Montale's relationship with Eliot and two other strong equals living in the same age, namely, Dante and Petrarch. In the *Collatio laureationis*, or *Coronation Oration*, Petrarch equates poetry with illustrious examples of Greek and Roman warfare in a type of warfare that ultimately leads to the same rewards as poetry, which is to say, glory and immortality. In his discourse, which focuses on the metamorphosis of prior traditions into new ones, Petrarch is particularly eloquent on the temporal distance separating a model from its imitation. As opposed to Plato, who values exclusively the original and progressively denies the value of its declining representations or reproductions, Petrarch views positively the temporal progression of any notion of imitation and values each step of the subsequent reproduction of a model which, in turn, can be supplanted by the imitation itself. However, for such a process to take place – a process which allows the old to be transformed into the new through the poetic agon – a certain degree of temporal distance separating the model from an imitation is required. The lack of such a distance separating Petrarch from Dante could account for his reticence to discuss his older contemporary. It could also explain Montale's reiterated denial of having been directly influenced by Eliot, for such an admission might have been misconstrued as an acknowledgment on his part that he was indeed merely an 'Italian T.S. Eliot' rather than a distinctive poet with his own distinctive voice.



‘Translating Style’:  
Tim Parks  
and the Tradition of Anglo-Italian Literary Relations

*Ivan Callus*

Scholarship examining the figure of the English writer in Italy as well as the impact of Italy on the English imagination has always featured prominently within the *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies*. This is therefore an appropriate context in which to ask why it may seem that in recent years there have been comparatively few English writers whose work is significantly shaped by what Alice Leccese Powers referred to some time ago as the phenomenality of ‘Italy in Mind.’<sup>1</sup> Of course, that impression risks appearing ill-informed. To suggest that there may currently be a crisis in the tradition upholding the immediacy of Italy and of Italian culture within the English literary imagination is to overlook the work of Tim Parks (who provides the focus for this paper), or Marina Warner, or Simon Mawer, or Lisa St Aubin de Teran, or Tobias Jones. Italian life and culture features prominently in the texts of all these writers. However, despite the reassurance which the work of these authors provides, as well as that emerging from others who could doubtless be invoked here, I am not entirely persuaded that the idea that Italy may somehow have become less pervasively present to the English literary imagination, superficial as that impression may be, is entirely to be dismissed. More extended research might assess more closely the degree to which that idea, so open to the charge of misrepresentation and even fatuousness, is at all tenable. It would need to indicate some of the methodological difficulties in identifying any kind of decline at all within cultural relations and cultural memory. It will acknowledge that to admit that any attempt to ‘read’ supposed shifts in the literary imagination, or the process whereby any such shifts register in the mind of that amorphous being, the common reader, must be very brave. It could try to bring to the fore the implications, for this questioning, of Jacques Derrida’s critique, in works like *Of Spirit* (1987) and *The Other Heading* (1991), of the supposed native genius within any literary or cultural tradition, and of what Derrida

---

1 See A. L. Powers, *Italy in Mind: An Anthology* (New York. Vintage, 1997).

calls 'philosophical anthropologies.'<sup>2</sup> And it could explore why the work of Tim Parks is so strategically important when rethinking Anglo-Italian literary relations and assessing the continuing affinities between *literary* anthropologies in England and Italy. What I can try to explore in this paper are some aspects related to this last point—all the rest is deferred.

So: why is Parks such a key figure in considerations of contemporary Anglo-Italian literary relations? Much of his relevance stems from the fact that he is a living English writer whose work is intimately shaped by contexts, themes and experiences that are profoundly Italian. Indeed, almost his entire corpus is determined in some way by evocations of Italy and by an imaginative or critical engagement with Italian manners and culture and literature and art. The nature of his achievement is therefore more than merely incidental here. Ironically, however, it is rendered problematic by the fact that the public and critical reception in Britain of Parks's work, which takes in literary fiction, translation, criticism and journalism, is one of the little mysteries of the contemporary politics of literary reputation. Together with Jim Crace, he is probably the best example of an English writer whose achievements have been much more readily acknowledged abroad than back home. He commands significant respect in Germany, for instance, where his publishers, Fischer, have expressed bemusement at the way in which his work is routinely overlooked in Britain. We are, indeed, quite possibly looking at the relative neglect in Britain of one of the contemporary stalwarts of Anglo-Italian literary relations. Those with a keener eye on these things will know Parks as the translator into English of works by Moravia, Calasso, Calvino and Tabucchi, as well as a commentator on figures as diverse as Dante, Machiavelli, Garibaldi, and Leopardi and on controversial times and episodes within Italian history—notably in *Medici Money* (2005), an account of aspects of banking in Renaissance Florence, and in his novel *Destiny* (1999), which in its fictive portrayal of Giulio Andreotti surely contains one of the most unappealing depictions of Italian politics in all literature. Further afield, in the United States he is a frequently invited speaker in places like Berkeley or Princeton or Harvard on issues relating to literary translation and contemporary narrative, most recently in connection with his translation for Penguin of Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532), while his views on the work of *other* translators of

2 J. Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. G. Bennington (Chicago and London. University of Chicago Press, 1991), 22.

Italian masterpieces are also eagerly canvassed, as seen in his polemic with Robert Hollander over the latter's outlook on the *Divina Commedia* and of Virginia Brown's translation of Boccaccio's *Famous Women*.<sup>3</sup> This aspect of Parks's work does inform his other persona in Britain, where he has contributed reviews on related issues to *The Guardian* or *The London Review of Books* to complement his literary journalism in *The New York Review of Books* and *The New Yorker*, for which he has written on figures like Boccaccio, Eugenio Saba, Elsa Morante, Mario Sironi and many others. Clearly, therefore English readerships who know Parks as a humorist on Italian manners through the delightfully rueful portrayal of his own experience of supporting his favourite football team in *A Season with Verona* (2002), or through his very funny vignettes in *Italian Neighbours* (1992), or perhaps through his darkly comic satire of EU institutions in his novel *Europa* (1997), have only an incomplete picture of his work.

What I therefore propose to do in this paper, in the space available, is to offer some brief reflections on how one distinct aspect of Parks's work can assist in thinking through Anglo-Italian literary relations in a manner that both resources and deviates from the ways of comparatism. I shall not be able to do more than to simply present some avenues for debate, but I hope that some interesting questions will emerge here. I shall not be speaking about Parks as a commentator on Italian manners—nor about his achievements as a writer of fiction, though I do think they are noteworthy.<sup>4</sup> Instead, my focus will be on Parks's reflections on literary translation. With Parks being both a theorist and a practitioner of literary translation, as well as a writer with strong Anglo-Italian literary affinities, those reflections appear to provide an appropriate object of study within this conference. In particular, I would like to emphasise certain points which emerge from his book *Translating Style* (1998).

*Translating Style* is made up of a series of reflections on the experience of Parks's lectures within Italian universities on the theory and practice of literary translation, and the insights he derived from that. The reason why this is important here will of course be clear. Style

---

3 See, for instance, the exchanges between Parks and Hollander in the 5 December, 2002 issue of *The New York Review of Books*.

4 On that topic, see I. Callus, 'Comparatism and (Auto)thanatography: Death and Mourning in Blanchot, Derrida, and Tim Parks,' *Comparative Critical Studies*, 1 (2004), 337-58.

is that which we are accustomed to thinking of in terms of a defining individuality. We know that there are few things that are harder to render into another language than literary style. We like to think of literary style as a delimiting effect, a self-identifying genius, a shaping spirit elusive to capture, which informs but goes beyond content and semantics, and whose utter intractability to translation is both the bane and the challenge of those translators who seek to do justice to it, to be faithful to this fugitive effect of literariness whose housedness lies only within the one language in which it comes, possibly, to irreproducible being. To this thinking, style is a signature. And signatures, as we know, are beyond translation. This can explain why Derrida, in *Signéponge/Signsponge*, speaks of the ethical need for criticism to configure itself as 'uniquely Pongean' when coming to terms with such a singular body of work as that of the French poet Francis Ponge.<sup>5</sup> It explains why Derrida urges the importance of the realisation that what is most untranslatable is what it is most important to translate. And, to extrapolate glibly from Derrida's *The Monolingualism of the Other* (1996), it may also explain why the other, in the end, is always monolingual. Perhaps, indeed, any unique style or genius in expression must be monolingual. Hence the unique appeal to English ears, historically, of the Italian language—which provides the focus for Timothy Webb's paper within these proceedings—is in the end coextensive with this monolingualism, which then contrives to double up as the invitation to translation, to the other language, to the other tradition, to writing and reimagination by the other. It is arguable, therefore, that nothing is more indicative of the rude health (or otherwise) of Anglo-Italian literary relations than the energy and vibrancy with which translation currently mediates itself across the two literary traditions, seeking to do justice to their respective singularity, but also to specific singularities associable with specific authors.

I shall try to problematise this later. Meanwhile, Parks's reaction to all that is refreshingly pragmatic. He stresses that his book, *Translating Style*, will not be overburdened by the theory of translation. The essays in the volume are, indeed, wonderfully accessible and slyly deft in their lightness of touch. The lightness of effect and the engaging air of Parks's critical style, however, are provocative and far-reaching in their insight. Nowhere is this more evident than in the way with which Parks allows

---

5 J. Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, trans. R. Rand (New York and Guildford. Columbia University Press, 1984), *passim*.

his work, throughout, to resonate with a crucial ambiguity resident in the title. The title can be heard in two different ways. One can hear it as *Translating Style*, with the accent on the first syllable of *translating*. This allows one to think immediately of the imponderables of how to go about rendering in one language the style of a text or utterance in another. But the title can also be heard as *Translating Style*, with the accent transferred to the second syllable. This allows one to think of the style with which one goes about the practice of translation. Of course, as you will have intuited, there is a fascinating question that immediately arises here—and which within these pages has already been addressed fascinatingly by Saverio Tomaiuolo, in his paper on the translation of Andrea Camilleri's work. Can a translator, or a translation, permit themselves style? Should not the act of translation be itself styleless if it is not to misrepresent the style of *the original* in configuring the style of *the translation*? Is not style precisely what translation cannot permit itself?

The instinctive reaction to these questions is *yes*. If we are tempted to qualify that reaction at all it is probably only to say that a translating style, if and where it exists, should be unobtrusive, that it should restrict itself to matters of 'workstyle,' and that it should not indulge anything that might conceivably impair the grand if impossible objective of absolute faithfulness to the original. The dangers of a translator having a style are, indeed, borne out by this famous statement of Joseph Brodsky on Constance Garnett: 'The reason English-speaking readers can barely tell the difference between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky is that they aren't reading the prose of either one. They're reading Constance Garnett.'<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the reason why we want different translations of key works of literature, surely, is not because our imagination is fired or excited by the possibility of greater 'accuracy,' whatever that might mean, in rendering Manzoni or Tolstoy or Proust into other languages. If we think that it is desirable to revise such great translators as Archibald Colquhoun, or Constance Garnett, or C. K. Scott Moncrieff, it is surely because we are curious to see whether the signature effects of Manzoni, Tolstoy or Proust, which have to do as much with style as with the re-presentation of an imaginative world entire, can be successfully and productively readdressed in a manner that might service reinterpretation. Otherwise what would be the sense of waiting to see, for instance, how Parks fares with translating Machiavelli,

6 Quoted in D. Remnick, 'The Translation Wars,' *The New Yorker*, 7 November 2005.

and how it is precisely that his attempt revises that of George Bull? Indeed, when we are dissatisfied with a literary translation, it is surely because signature effects in the original, which have to do with aspects other than style but which perhaps are overwhelmingly, in the end, about style, remain invisible in the target language.

Let us see how all this plays out in Parks's *Translating Style* (1997). Parks reflects on both *translating* style and *translating* style. In other words, he looks at the problems of how to go about rendering style into the target language, and he also looks at the style that can be brought to the practice of translation. And he does this in essays focused on English modernists, specifically, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Henry Green, Barbara Pym and Samuel Beckett. His choice of the moderns is striking, of course. Here are not only some of the greats of the English canon, but also some quite unique stylists, their work and their imagined worlds immersed in an Englishness that is diversely toned and pitched but that is likely to come across as essentially untranslatable. And I mention this because we know, of course, that together with story and theme *and* style what must be translated when these authors are rendered in other languages is, so to speak, an anthropology too—a culture entire, even—as well as the vision and the totality that we are pleased to articulate in terms of, for instance, 'the Lawrentian,' or 'the Joycean.'

Let me explain the method of Parks's grappling with that problem. Here we should remember that what he is intent on is the *practice* of translation, and how actual translation helps in theorisation. Parks explains that 'for the last five or six years I have been playing the game of inviting students to look at the same passage in English and Italian and to tell me which is the original and which the translation.'<sup>7</sup> He demonstrates this through a series of examples. Perhaps one of the most fascinating of these involves the following passage, which Parks first used with 'a class of Italian teachers of English literature following a British Council seminar, hence intelligent, skilled and highly motivated' (9). Firstly, the Italian:

Di lì a qualche minuto il treno percorreva gli squallidi sobborghi della città. Tutti i passeggeri erano all'erta, in attesa di evadere dal convoglio. Finalmente entrarono sotto l'enorme arco della stazione, nell'ombra terribile e immensa della città. B si chiuse in se stesso: ormai era preso.

7 T. Parks, *Translating Style* (London, Cassell, 1998), 1. Further quotations from this work are given within parentheses in the main text.

Now, the English:

In a few minutes the train was running through the disgrace of outspread suburbia. Everybody in the carriage was on the alert, waiting to escape. At last they were under the huge arch of the station, in the tremendous shadow of the town. B shut himself together – he was in now. (9)

Parks reveals:

Of twenty students asked to consider this passage eighteen thought that the source language was Italian. [...] The text, they felt, must be an Italian original. In fact, it is taken from D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*.

I have since repeated this experiment with numerous classes and the results are always the same.

The implications of this are many, and have much to do with what might be called the forensics of literary translation. Parks handles that with remarkable astuteness, not least when he clinically replays and analyses the students' reasons for their conclusions. I shall not go into the main findings there, which Parks explores over half his introduction and a full chapter. But I feel I must quote this excerpt:

'[W]e can say that while it is essential for a translator to have a sense of the function of a text, its intentions, its context, this turns out to be extremely problematic with literary texts, which are famous for their complexity and ambivalence. [...] In the literary text syntax and lexis will often combine or collide with the semantic surface precisely in order to generate that richness, and, frequently, ambiguity, which we associate with literature, and which indeed would seem essential if poem or novel is to offer a satisfying vision of a phenomenon as complex and elusive as a life. In this sense, complexity, or ambivalence, can be seen as just another element in the literary text's mimetic vocation. For our own literary purposes, we might say more crudely that in the literary text an awful lot of things may be happening at once, perhaps contradicting each other, perhaps qualifying each other, and that as a result the translator may find that it is not possible to express all of these complications simultaneously in the target language. The idea that inspires [*Translating Style*] is that by looking at original and translation side by side and identifying those areas where translation turned out to be problematic, we can achieve a better appreciation of

the original's qualities and complexities, and likewise of that phenomenon we call translation.' (12-13)

There are a few further points I myself would add, and they come from witnessing Parks deploy this methodology of juxtaposing original and translation and drawing the resulting conclusions across an entire book. Firstly, in any evolved meditation on literary translation, the apparently distinct dynamics of 'translating style' and 'translating style' become co-implicated. Parks, who has himself been described as a 'stylish translator,' is both reflecting on the work of the translation of style in his study and demonstrating different kinds of translation styles, doing this through an extensive catalogue of examples, often focusing on comparisons between different attempts at translating the same passage. Secondly, Parks's demonstration in the previous example, where the mistaken students were unwittingly identifying those elements in the passage which define Lawrence's style, but classing them in their minds as irregular English, recalls to us poststructuralist orthodoxies on 'this strange institution called literature,' as Derrida calls it.<sup>8</sup> Literature, we are told, is a discourse apart, unusual in its capacity to make irregular language desirable, and thereby singular, thereby untranslatable, so that it becomes, in fact, an aggregate of singularities, of untranslatable utterances. And, I suspect, the fact is that we do not want to let go of the idea that certain works might be untranslatable. This fits in with humanist conceptions of the aura of the literary work of art. In the literary realm, supreme greatness, we like to believe, is supremely untranslatable, so that we are always in wait for the supreme translation which never arrives, independently of how many translators do. But it also fits in with poststructuralist views on the strangeness and difference of literature: qualities which, we are told, are coextensive with the signature, event and context of literature, coextensive with the untranslatable character of literature.<sup>9</sup> By a curious paradox with which we are becoming familiar, that makes literature a priority for translation, open to serial and never definitive translation. I have some misgivings here on whether it is in fact possible to equate style with singularity and with the untranslatable quite so smoothly, but let me suppress them to indicate, instead, that in *Translating Style* Parks

8 J. Derrida, 'This Strange Institution Called Literature,' in *Acts of Literature*, D. Attridge (ed.) (New York and London. Routledge, 1992), 1-75.

9 See J. Derrida, 'Signature, Event, Context,' in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago and London. University of Chicago Press, 1982), 307-30.

appears to bear out the idea that the translation of the original is never quite entirely satisfactory, never quite as ineffable, never quite as artistic, so to speak. Here are some instances of that:

In a novel [like *Ulysses*] where the traditional narrative line is very much in the background while the language sparkles blindingly in the fore, a medium too bright to see through, reading the translation has the effect of putting on dark glasses. All is slightly clearer, slightly less exhilarating. (89).

[W]e can say that a text which seeks to escape a classical 'houseness' in language is a text which unavoidably draws attention to and starts to be about that language ... from which it flees. It is this element of Lawrence's text ... which is lost, and for the most part inevitably, in an Italian that seems all too at home with itself and the conventional patterns of mind it enshrines. (46)

So confusing is the English that at one place the Italian translator failed to follow the syntax, thus writing something that is syntactically clearer than the original, but that ultimately makes less sense. (207)

Nobody, I suspect, is ever closer to a text, than he who wrestles with the problem of how to rewrite it with all its layers and nuances in another language. An analysis of that rewriting is the next best thing. (238)

None of this will surprise us much. But there is something about Parks's book that will. Cumulatively, the examples prompt one further and quite intriguing insight. This is that while it is true that certain attempts at translation of very individually styled passages can lead to laughable outcomes (of which Parks gives many delightful examples in his book), at its best successful literary translation (of which Parks also provides examples) can be so effective that it can unsettle readerly and critical pieties about the relations between original and translation, and about the assumption that certain articulations and their evocations remain particular to the original and irreproducible across languages. This has any number of implications, of course, for conceptions of style as signature, and suggests that sometimes the term *untranslatable* can be too glibly uttered. Let us consider the fact that Parks provides a number of examples where knowledgeable readers not in the know were unable to distinguish

between original and translation. Quite simply, we are as impressed by how good some of the translations are, how close to the original, as by their failure to achieve coincidence with that original, a failure which everything we know and sense about literature keys us to expect. What does this tell us? Even if the expressed drift of Parks's study is to confirm that translation is never quite adequate, there arises an odd feeling, after reading Parks's book, that he is offering very tentatively, never openly expressed, an undeclared thought-experiment. There is the barely distinct sensation that we are in fact being asked to consider the possibility of the impossible perfect translation, the idea that such a translation is always almost within reach, configurable and achievable.

I must confess that I have absolutely no idea what to make of this. While casting around for a conclusion that could in some way respond to it, I found myself unable to come up with anything appropriate. There was, to be sure, an awesomely confident and utterly inane suggestion on one website, which suggested that 'A perfect translation should translate all words keeping the idiomatic expressions and general meaning without losing or adding content.'<sup>10</sup> Lack of doubt is a wonderful thing. Beyond that, I looked at a number of works I have used in other contexts on translation, singularity, signature and style, from Benjamin to Venuti, from Derrida to Blanchot. Nothing. Let me therefore, buy some time. I shall return to this, but only after having arrived at some safer conclusions.

Hence: how does all this impact on the tradition of Anglo-Italian literary relations? I started off by raising the issue—perhaps, in truth, it is a non-issue—of whether writers in Britain currently are quite as mindful of Italian culture as they might be. I hope to have indicated that Parks's work is quite sufficient to provide some reassurance on that, though of course one writer does not a season of literary relations make. In any case, the vibrancy or otherwise of the relations between two distinct literary traditions does not come down, simply, to whether writers from either tradition continue to derive inspiration from and reimagine the other. It is not simply, then, to put it crudely, a question of a lean phase, of worrying whether there are enough English writers still who are Italy-minded and enough Italian writers who are England-minded. It depends on a broader and more complex set of factors. Translation is one of those factors, because it helps determine the very possibility of cross-currents,

---

10 [http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What\\_are\\_the\\_qualities\\_of\\_the\\_perfect\\_translation](http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_are_the_qualities_of_the_perfect_translation)  
Accessed 18 May 2009.

of the very readability of one tradition to the other. We know, too, that if one tradition is to engage with another it does not do so simply through processes of translation. Translation, in fact, is only one resource—after all, it is always possible, at least for some, to go directly to the original. There are, indeed, other processes at work in the literary relations between any two traditions. There are processes of literary influence, of artistic adaptation, of poetic or novelistic reimagination, of creative memory and re-evocation, of critical interpretation, of belle lettristic appreciation, etc, through which singularities, temperaments, tendencies, traits, tones and *styles* unique to one culture are reworked and made available within the affordances of another. And, in the case of English engagement with Italian literature, Parks does appear to have participated in all those processes.

Back, then, and to conclude, to the issue of the import of the possibility of the perfect translation. The best response that I can offer is this, and it is tame. The scope and space for literary relations is the scope and space of difference. Absolutely adequate or perfect translation is, in fact, absolute curtailment and containment of that difference. Literary relations arise from responses to that difference, but not from the wish to reduce, appropriate or denature it, or bring its otherness round to sameness. Style and its apparent monolingualism, guarantee against perfect reproduction in the language of the other, allay the collapse of difference, and drive the dynamic of differentiation itself. And yet, in the end, the mistakes of Parks's students in identifying the styles of the Italian or the English, which might seem to place in crisis the transparency of Englishness, say, or the Italianate, suggest that it is after all not style which determines identity and affiliation to the one language, the one literature, the one tradition in which a text can come to dwell, but something else, perhaps tone, perhaps culture (though I shudder to open that particular can of worms). Who knows? There is one thing that I do know. If the perfect translation is not possible, translation and any tradition of literary and cultural relations can only hope to continue to fail better in their attempt at greater fidelity to the other. To 'fail better,' we shall all remember, is an imperative from Beckett. And Beckett, as we know, was one author who translated himself, and in whose work, as Parks shows us, 'everything was changed, in order that it remain the same' (142).



‘I am Montalbano/Montalbano sono’:  
Fluency and Cultural Difference in Translating  
Andrea Camilleri’s Fiction

*Saverio Tomaiuolo*

In one of his most famous compositions titled *Lingua e dialettu* (*Language and Dialect*), Sicilian poet Ignazio Buttitta (1899-1997) complains of the gradual disappearance of dialects, comparing his language to a guitar losing a string every day:<sup>1</sup>

Un populu  
diventa poviru e servu  
quannu ci arrobbanu a lingua  
additata di padri:  
è persu pi sempri.

A nation  
turns poor and servile,  
when they steal its language,  
handed down by its fathers:  
it is lost forever.

Diventa poviru e servu  
quanno i paroli non figghianu paroli  
e si mancianu tra d’iddi.  
Mi nn’ addugno ora,  
mentri accordu a chitarra du dialettu  
ca perdi na corda lo jornu.

It becomes poor and servile,  
when words don’t create words  
and consume each other.  
I notice it now  
as I am tuning the guitar of the dialect  
which loses a string every day.

It is interesting here to notice that the same year Buttitta died (1997), the ‘stolen’ Sicilian dialect which seemed to be ‘lost forever’ began acquiring a new status in Italy thanks to the success of Andrea Camilleri’s most famous fictional character: Inspector Salvo Montalbano. After *La forma dell’acqua* (1994), *Il cane di terracotta* (1996) and *Il ladro di merendine* (1996), Montalbano’s fourth investigation in *La voce del violino* (published in 1997) contributed in fact to strengthen his success. A former drama director, a screenwriter for the Italian public service radio and television network RAI and the writer of linguistically experimental

---

1 Quoted in H. W. Haller, ‘Innovative Transitions: Exploring Italy’s Literary Dialects,’ in K. B. Reynolds, D. Brancato, P. Chirumbolo and F. Calabrese (eds.), *Transitions. Prospettive di studio sulle trasformazioni letterarie e linguistiche nella cultura italiana* (Firenze. Cadmo, 2004), 9. The English version of Buttitta’s poem is included in H. W. Haller, *The Other Italy. The Literary Canon in Dialect* (Toronto. University of Toronto Press, 1999), 304.

novels in Sicilian dialect such as *Il corso delle cose* (1978), *La strage dimenticata* (1984) and *Il birraio di Preston* (1995), Camilleri had been relatively unnoticed by the vast reading public before the Montalbano cycle. The success of the fictions featuring the inspector from Vigata not only favoured Camilleri's other literary works but also launched him in the Italian television mainstream (with a series of 14 TV episodes directed by Alberto Sironi and broadcast from 1997 to 2006, with Luca Zingaretti playing Montalbano) and on the international book market. To misquote from Buttitta, in Italy and abroad the Sicilian dialect seemed to be 'tuned' to the sound of Montalbano's voice. Anthropologist Antonino Buttitta, son of the poet Ignazio Buttitta, explains part of the reason for the national and international appeal of this Sicilian police inspector by focusing on the mythical quality of the Montalbano stories. For Buttitta 'il commissario Montalbano, convertito dai lettori di Camilleri in simbolo con forte carica mitica, quanto più resta radicato nel suo spazio etnico (ambienti, parole, cibi e così via), tanto più assume connotati universali e dunque familiari a lettori delle più diverse culture.'<sup>2</sup> However, if this were true in the case of Camilleri's *stories*, the problem arises and complicates with Camilleri's peculiar *discourse* (to use Seymour Chatman's famous distinction), since the 'what' looks inevitably determined by the 'how.' Thus, it follows that, before concentrating on the translation of the Montalbano cycle in English, it is necessary to understand the nature of Camilleri's linguistic strategies, whose origin date back to a prestigious literary tradition which includes Giovanni Verga, Luigi Pirandello, Leonardo Sciascia, Stefano D'Arrigo and non-Sicilian writers such as Carlo Emilio Gadda.

As far as its grammatical, syntactic and lexical structure is concerned, Camilleri's language is far from being a 'simple' Sicilian dialect. As usually happens with writers who deliberately choose to make use of a recognizable local dialect, Camilleri's can be seen as a literary construct rather than a mimetic attempt at reproducing the Sicilian dialect *per se*. Maria Corti states in fact that '[ogni] scrittore compromesso con il dialetto crea il suo dialetto, che non è quasi mai quello effettivamente parlato.'<sup>3</sup> While on the one hand the grammatical structure is generally indebted to the Sicilian positioning of verbs at the

2 A. Buttitta, 'Introduzione,' in A. Buttitta (ed.), *Il caso Camilleri. Letteratura e storia* (Palermo. Sellerio, 2004), 16.

3 M. Corti, 'Dialetti in appello,' in G. L. Beccaria (ed.), *Letteratura e dialetto* (Bologna. Zanichelli, 1975), 180.

end of sentences, Camilleri varies its linguistic registers according to the discursive event (dialogue, monologue, free indirect speech etc...), to the narrative setting (if novels are placed in the past or in the present) or to the genre he is working with (historical narrations, traditional fictions or crime novels). There is not a single and uniform Camilleri style, but multiple variations of the same recurrent traits. In this sense, the three main linguistic strategies employed by Camilleri are *code switching* (the juxtaposition of different languages corresponding to the 'nature' of each character), *code mixing* (the deliberate inclusion of dialect-based words in an Italian discourse) and in particular *hybridation*. Words such as *travaglio* (composed of the Sicilian *travagghiu* plus the Italian *lavoro*), *criato* (the Sicilian *criatu* plus the Italian *creato*), *arrisbigliò* (the Sicilian *arrisbigghiari* plus the Italian *risvegliò*) or *catafero* (*cataferu* plus *cadavere*) are only a few examples of Camilleri's ability at creating neologisms out of pre-existing terms in his peculiar 'interlanguage'.<sup>4</sup> In many autobiographical pieces and interviews, Camilleri admits that the basis for his language is the 'dialetto borghese' from Agrigento – also spoken by his family – considered by Luigi Pirandello as the most suitable one for literary works. While Camilleri's syntax draws inspiration from Giovanni Verga and from novels such as *I Malavoglia* (also known in English as *The House by the Medlar Tree*) or *Mastro Don Gesualdo*, his mentor Leonardo Sciascia – who first discouraged him from experimenting with language<sup>5</sup> – taught him the importance of allusions and ambiguities as narrative means (as he shows in the creation of peculiarly Sicilian crime stories such as *Il giorno della civetta* or *A ciascuno il suo*). As far as Gadda is concerned, Camilleri appreciates more his 'rebellious' decision (in the drowsy Italian literary world of the late fifties) to employ a mixture of dialects and registers in *Quer pasticciaccio*

4 For Carla Marcato '[le] interferenze del dialetto sull'italiano creano una varietà intermedia che si definisce interlingua. In quanto prodotto di un contatto tra due sistemi linguistici, quindi un sistema in cui convivono regole della lingua materna e di quella che si apprende.' *Dialetti, dialetto e italiano* (Bologna. Il Mulino, 2007), 107.

5 'Mi ricordo che diedi da leggere *Un filo di fumo* a Leonardo Sciascia [...]. "Bello, è bello," mi disse, e fu una grande soddisfazione, "ma ci metti certe parole!" Obiettai che anche Pirandello, nella costruzione delle frasi, adoperava una struttura siciliana.' M. Sorgi, *La testa ci fa dire. Dialogo con Andrea Camilleri* (Palermo. Sellerio, 2000), 117.

*brutto de via Merulana* (1957), rather than his linguistic choices, whose aim was often satirical and polemical against the fascist regime.

In the afterword titled 'Mani avanti' included in Editor Sellerio's revised edition of his first novel *Il corso delle cose* (originally published by Lalli in 1978), Camilleri traces back the origins of his successful stylistic choices and of his decision to 'translate' his Italian words into Sicilian ideogemes:

'Mi feci persuaso, dopo qualche tentativo di scrittura, che le parole che adoperavo non mi appartenevano interamente. Me ne ero servito, questo sì, ma erano le stesse che trovo pronte per redigere una domanda in carta bollata o un biglietto d'auguri. Quando cercavo una frase o una parola che più si avvicinava a quello che avevo in mente di scrivere immediatamente invece la trovavo nel mio dialetto o meglio nel "parlato" quotidiano di casa mia [...]. Ero a questo punto, quando tornai a imbattermi nel gaddiano *Pasticciaccio*: credo [...] di non dovere nulla a Gadda, la sua scrittura muove da assai più lontano, ha sottili motivazioni e persegue fini assai più ampi dei miei. Molto devo invece al suo esempio: mi rese libero da dubbi ed esitazioni.'

The Montalbano novels and short stories display all the linguistic strategies of Camilleri's literary productions plus some interesting novelties, such as Agatino Catarella's unintentional linguistic jokes, misspellings (in particular of names) and misunderstandings, which probably represent one of the most innovative elements in the whole narrative cycle. The language adopted by the switchboard operator at the local police station of Vigata – a character inspired by the dramatic tradition of the *zanni* – relieves on many occasions the narrative (and linguistic) tension of the story by introducing comic asides. Furthermore, it gives Camilleri the opportunity to push his creative experimentation with Sicilian dialect to its extremes. Along with Catarella's 'macaronic language,' the varieties of Camilleri's linguistic registers range from the local dialect (used when quoting proverbs or adopted by characters from the lower classes, by peasants, and in particular by Montalbano's

---

6 A. Camilleri, 'Mani avanti,' in *Il corso delle cose* (Palermo. Sellerio, 1998), 141-2. For Simona Demontis Camilleri's decision to use and to experiment with the Sicilian dialect is motivated by the 'inadequacy' of the actual anodyne Italian Language to be 'subtle' and to express a heartfelt vivacity. *I colori della letteratura. Un'indagine sul caso Camilleri* (Milano. Rizzoli, 2001), 27.

housemaid Adelina) to Montalbano's mixed 'interlanguage,'<sup>7</sup> from the officialese of political and institutional authorities (sometimes imitated with a satirical intent by Montalbano) to Livia's perfectly sounding Italian, although the inspector's girlfriend comes from Genoa.

If we look at Camilleri's macrotext in chronological order, the reduction of linguistic explanations of Sicilian words or the gradual removal of Italian paraphrases of local expressions becomes evident. In fact, in view of the narrative pact he has been establishing with his more affectionate readers, it seems that in the latest Montalbano stories Camilleri has deliberately omitted those (meta)linguistic clarifications which were necessary at the beginning of the Montalbano cycle. While he never explained the meaning of words such as *taliare* (to look carefully), *addirumare* (to light a cigarette), *cabasisi* (a vulgar expression for testicles), *tanticchia* (a bit), *ralogio* (watch or clock) *busillisi* (a jigsaw puzzle, a riddle, an enigma) or *spiare* (to say) – since the context of enunciation helped and helps deciphering them – he decided in *La forma dell'acqua* to illustrate in detail the meaning of *accuttufare* (to beat someone or to escape from the world and from its responsibilities) and *tambasiare* (to loiter in a room, doing nothing and wasting time). Thanks to such intelligent strategies Camilleri's novels have succeeded in being understood by different categories of (low, middle or high-brow) readers coming from different areas of Italy and not exclusively of a Southern or Sicilian origin, creating a commonly-shared and easily recognizable code. In the words of Simona Demontis, '[le] spiegazioni di tipo lessicale ricorrono con maggior frequenza nei primi romanzi di Montalbano, il che dimostra ancora una certa ritrosia da parte dell'autore ad 'abbandonare' il lettore al suo personale linguaggio [...]. L'autore, dunque, utilizzando segni metanarrativi spiega soprattutto particolarità del codice linguistico.'<sup>8</sup>

7 With reference to Montalbano's 'mixed variety', Jana Vizmulder-Zocco says that '[this] elaboration is not the original Sicilian heard in Sicily today nor it is the local Sicilian variety. The mechanism of making Sicilian sound like Italian is transparent: Italian grammatical morphemes are attached to Sicilian lexical roots. Sicilian grammatical morphemes are left intact where they sound like Italian.' 'Tradition and Innovation without a Revolution: Andrea Camilleri's Singlossia,' in K. B. Reynolds, D. Brancato, P. Chirumbolo and F. Calabrese (eds.), *Transitions*, 21-22. As for Catarella's 'macaronic' language, *ibid.*, 22.

8 Demontis, 65.

been successful (by 2002 *La forma dell'acqua* had already sold more than 80.000 copies), Dominique Vittoz and Serge Quadruppani have been engaged in translating Camilleri's fictional works in a creative way. Vittoz borrowed terms and expressions from Lyon for *La stagione della caccia* and *Un filo di fumo*, while with reference to Camilleri's *Il re di Girgenti* she opted for an almost-Molièresque language to imitate its archaic Sicilian dialect. As for Serge Quadruppani, the French official translator of the Montalbano cycle, he makes use of a vocabulary from the South of France which for him is full of memories of the past. Quadruppani was in fact born in Provence but lives as an exile in Paris, in a way like Camilleri himself (born in Agrigento but living in Rome).<sup>11</sup>

As far as English-speaking countries are concerned, Camilleri's Montalbano novels edited by Sellerio have been translated (up to *La luna di carta*) by American poet Stephen Sartarelli for the prestigious publishing house Penguin.<sup>12</sup> Although Camilleri's sales in Anglophone countries are not as high as, for instance, in France (the writer admits that 'Non vendo molto, anzi direi quasi niente se non pochissimo negli Stati Uniti. Neanche col commissario Montalbano'; *Intervista*), he is however considered a first-rate crime novelist to the point that after the publication of *The Patience of the Spider* he has been included in the '50 crime writers to read before you die' list compiled by the *Daily Telegraph* in February 2008. Camilleri is in the company of Agatha Christie, Conan Doyle, Patricia Highsmith, Ed McBain, Wilkie Collins and Georges Simenon in a list which excludes, for instance, famous writers of blockbuster novels such as Patricia Cornwell and Jeffrey Deaver. But the aim here is not to

11 See also D. Vittoz, 'Quale francese per tradurre l'italiano di Camilleri? Una proposta non pacifica' in A. Buttita, *Il caso Camilleri*, 187-199 and S. Quadruppani, 'Il caso Camilleri in Francia. Le ragioni di un successo,' *Ibid.*, 200-5.

12 The Italian editions considered here (published by Sellerio in Palermo and translated by Stephen Sartarelli for Basingstoke-New York publisher Penguin) are: *La forma dell'acqua*, (1994), indicated with FA (*The Shape of Water*, (2003), indicated with SW); *Il cane di terracotta*, (1996), CT (*The Terracotta Dog*, (2004), TD); *Il ladro di merendine*, (1996), LM (*The Snack Thief*, (2004), ST); *La voce del violino*, (1997), VV (*The Voice of the Violin*, (2005), VV1); *La gita a Tindari*, (2000), GT (*Excursion to Tindari*, (2006), ET); *L'odore della notte*, (2001), ON (*The Scent of the Night*, (2007), SN); *Il giro di boa*, (2003), GB (*Rounding the Mark*, (2007), RM); *La pazienza del ragno*, (2004), PR (*The Patience of the Spider*, (2007), PS) and *La luna di carta*, (2005), LC (*The Paper Moon*, (2008), PM). Stephen Sartarelli has also translated important Italian poets, novelists, essayists and journalists such as Umberto Saba, Pierpaolo Pasolini, Francesca Duranti, Giacomo Casanova and Gianni Riotta.

reflect upon the reasons for the contrast between the number of sales and critical appraisal. Rather, it is to offer a (meta)translating analysis of the strategies adopted by Sartarelli and in particular of what motivates and determines them.

The back covers of the Penguin editions of the Montalbano cycle are illuminating in this sense. These textual 'thresholds' represent in fact an important element to introduce one to Sartarelli's translating method and to the way it has been perceived by readers and critics:

'Sly and witty [...] Montalbano must pick his way through a labyrinth of corruption, false clues, vendettas – and delicious meals. The result is funny and intriguing with a fluent translation by New York poet Stephen Sartarelli' (*The Observer*).

'This savagely funny police procedural proves that sardonic laughter is a sound that translates ever so smoothly into English' (*New York Times Book Review*).

'Stephen Sartarelli's translation from the idiosyncratic Sicilian dialect savours the earthy idiom and pungent characterizations that Camilleri uses to cushion the impact of his story' (*New York Times*).

'Camilleri once again thrills with his fluid storytelling and quirky characters' (*Publishers Weekly*).

These paratexts, taken from the reviews of Anglo-American newspapers and magazines, have to be considered zones 'not only of transition but also of transaction,' since for Gerard Genette they are 'a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that [...] is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it.'<sup>13</sup> Almost all reviewers agree that Sartarelli's translation is 'fluent' and capable of translating 'smoothly' Camilleri's interlanguage into English. Sartarelli becomes even *invisible* the moment Camilleri's own storytelling (and not its actual translation) is labelled as 'fluid.' These opinions can be read in the light of Lawrence Venuti's ideas on what he calls and denounces as the 'illusion of transparency':

---

13 G. Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. J. E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. *Seuils* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, collection Poétique, 1987).

'A translated text [...] is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers, and readers when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer's personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text – the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the original.'<sup>14</sup>

Between the lines of the concepts of invisibility and of the idea of fluency Lawrence Venuti denounces the pressures of contemporary Anglo-American editorial politics, whose subtle mechanisms of power (in a Foucaultian sense) tend in some cases to accept only potentially translatable texts or force translators to domesticate linguistically 'deviant' works.<sup>15</sup>

As a matter of fact, Sartarelli chooses to offer his readers a 'transparent' version of Camilleri's problematic mixture of linguistic codes and registers, although behind its 'fluent' surface there is a serious study of the language and register used by other fictional detectives in American literature and culture:

'When beginning to work on Camilleri, my first concern was to (re)familiarize myself with the "detective" genre, particularly the English-language (and more specifically American) practitioners of it, so that I would feel at greater ease with the sort of language common to the genre. I had immediately noticed that, despite the dialect, the spare, lean style typical of the Montalbano books was similar, and perhaps owed something, to the American "hard-boiled" style of Hammett, Chandler and their heirs, and so I wanted this imprint to show in my choice of words in the translation as well.'<sup>16</sup>

Sartarelli's translations are marked by the presence of a selected number of italicized Sicilian words and expressions (in particular exclamations such as *Mudunnuzza santa!* some proverbs and the names

14 L. Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility. A History of Translation* (London and New York, Routledge, 1995) 1.

15 '[The] translator's invisibility at once enacts and masks an insidious domestication of foreign texts, rewriting them in the transparent discourse that prevails in English and that selects precisely those foreign texts amenable to fluent translating.' Venuti, 16-7.

16 Personal telematic interview with Stephen Sartarelli dated late July 2008, from now on indicated by *Interview*.

of typical Sicilian food). To counterbalance this generally target-oriented approach Sartarelli includes at the end of each edition detailed explanatory notes to introduce readers to Sicilian expressions which have not been translated, to intertextual allusions to other writers and in particular to the sociocultural context which informs Camilleri's writings (references to the Italian political system, to famous trials such as the so-called 'Mani Pulite' etc...). Sartarelli approaches Camilleri's language and narration through a basically domesticating method – to refer again to Venuti's ideas – which is exceptionally involving but that sometimes runs the risk of simplifying the deliberate nebulous syntactic (and as a consequence semantic) structure of Camilleri's novels. The opening paragraphs of *La forma dell'acqua* exemplify some of Sartarelli's translation strategies:

Lume d'alba non filtrava nel cortiglio della "Splendor," la società che aveva in appalto la nettezza urbana di Vigàta, una nuvolaglia bassa e densa cummigliava completamente il cielo come se fosse stato tirato un telone grigio da cornicione a cornicione, foglia non si cataminava, il vento di scirocco tardava ad arrisbigliarsi dal suo sonno piombino, già si faticava a cangiare parole [...].

Pino e Saro si avviarono verso il posto di lavoro ammuttando ognuno il proprio carrello. Per arrivare alla mànnara ci voleva una mezz'orata di strada se fatta a pedi lento come loro stavano facendo. Il primo quarto d'ora se lo passarono mutàngheri, già sudati e impicciaticci. Poi fu Saro a rompere il silenzio. 'Questo Pecorilla è un cornuto' proclamò.

'Un gradissimo cornuto' rinforzò Pino. (FA, 9; 12)

No light of daybreak filtered yet into the courtyard of Splendour, the company under government contract to collect trash in the town of Vigàta. A low, dense mass of clouds completely covered the sky as though a great grey tarpaulin had been drawn from one corner to another. Not a single leaf fluttered. The sirocco was late to rise from its leaden sleep, yet people already struggled to exchange a few words [...].

Pino and Saro headed toward their assigned work sector, each pushing its own cart. To get to the Pasture took half an hour, if one was slow of foot as they were. The first fifteen minutes they spent without speaking, already sweaty and sticky. It was Saro who broke the silence.

'That Pecorilla is a bastard,' he announced.

'A fucking bastard,' clarified Pino. (SW, 3; 7-8)

The first element which emerges is Sartarelli's normalization of Camilleri's Sicilian-sounding syntax, whose most relevant and recurring characteristic is the presence of the verb at the end of the sentence ('Lume d'alba non filtrava'). Verbs such as 'cummigliava,' 'cataminava,' 'arrisbigliarsi' and 'ammuttando' – which will recur in Camilleri's macrotext – are fluently translated with 'covered,' 'fluttered,' 'to rise' and 'pushing.' But the most striking difference occurs with the offensive epithet 'cornuto,' translated by 'bastard,' a term which partially misses the allusion to an eventual (and much blamed in Sicilian culture) conjugal unfaithfulness. Rather than (re)working on syntax Sartarelli thus chooses to convey the local colour through the use of an American English his readers could easily identify with:

[...] I try as much as possible to recuperate in the translations those specific colourings that the use of dialect in certain contexts creates, even while sacrificing of necessity the vehicle of dialect per se. In the early going I also made the decision to give the more slangy aspects of the dialogues a New York-Brooklynese cast; however artificial, this seemed like a "natural" fit, since a considerable percentage of New York City and Brooklyn policemen are, or used to be, Italian-American or Sicilian-American, a fact often recognizable from their speech patterns.' (*Interview*)

On other occasions Sartarelli shows his ability in translating humorous pieces such as the song of thanks to engineer Luparello, sung by the children of the Belfi orphanage ('quant'è buono, quant'è bello / l'ingegnere Luparello'; FA, 33 becomes 'What a good man / What a fine fellow / Is our dear / Signor Luparello'; SW, 38). The same happens when he avoids awkward situations, as in the case of the sentence 'zara zabara per dirla in dialetto o *mutatis mutandis* per dirla in latino' (FA, 79), translated '*mutatis mutandis* – or *zara zabara*, to say it in Sicilian' (SW, 107). From these first examples it is possible to infer that Sartarelli's translating method is a mixed one, with the prevalence of a 'domesticating' strategy over a foreignizing one (in particular in his first editions) which is never too drastic. Although Camilleri's language is far from being simple and linear, the setting of his narrative (the 'exotic' landscapes of Sicily), the allusions to local Italian food and in particular the general formal patterns which he shares with other famous crime fiction writers, make his Montalbano novels editorially palatable. This also justifies the fact

that an important publisher such as Penguin – unlike other foreign non-Anglo-American publishers – has only recently commissioned Sartarelli to translate other important novels such as *Il birraio di Preston*, *La stagione della caccia*, *La concessione del telefono* and *Il re di Girgenti*, Camilleri's most ambitious (and also most linguistically complex) work to date.

According to readers and critics, Camilleri's style has evolved and complicated in the course of his novels. If the incipit of the third Montalbano novel *Il ladro di merendine* seems to confirm the writer's increased level of experimentation at a lexical and syntactical level, Sartarelli's 'transparent' translation moves halfway between a fluent rendering of the source text and a foreignizing reworking on register (see for instance the verb *sbafato* translated with *wolfing down*):

S'arrisbigliò malamente: i linzòla, nel sudatizzo del sonno agitato per via del mezzo chilo di sarde a beccafico che la sera avanti si era sbafato, gli si erano strettamente arravugliate torno corno il corpo, gli parse d'essere addiventato una mummia. (LM, 9)

He woke up in a bad way. The sheets, during the sweaty, restless sleep that had followed his wolfing down three pounds of sardines *a beccafico* the previous evening, had wound themselves tightly round his body, making him feel like a mummy. (ST, 3)

Considered by many readers and critics among the best novels of the Montalbano cycle, *Gita a Tindari* includes a large number of Sicilian terms and, in particular, a typical Sicilian-like syntactic structure based upon a repetitive use of subordinate clauses. This latter feature is due to the fact that Camilleri is using the free indirect speech to reproduce Montalbano's thoughts. The difference between the syntactic construction of the source text and the syntactic reconstruction of the target text is evident:

Che fosse vigilante, se ne faceva capace dal fatto che la testa gli funzionava secondo logica e non seguendo l'assurdo labirinto del sogno, che sentiva il regolare sciabordio del mare, che un venticello di prim'alba trasiva dalla finestra spalancata. Ma continuava ostinatamente a tenere gli occhi inserrati, sapeva che tutto il malumore che lo macerava dintra sarebbe sbommicato fora appena aperti gli occhi, facendogli fare o dire minchiate delle quali doppo avrebbe dovuto pentirsi. (GT, 9)

He realized he was awake, as his mind was functioning logically and not following the absurd labyrinths of dream. He could hear the rhythmic swashing of the sea; a pre-dawn breeze was blowing through the open window. Yet he stubbornly kept his eyes closed, knowing that the ill humour boiling inside him would come spewing out the moment he opened his eyes, leading him to say or to do something stupid he would later regret. (ET, 3)

The same reflections can be applied to other passages taken from Camilleri's other novels, in particular when the source text (as for instance in *Giro di Boa*) is characterized by a massive presence of 'interlinguistic' features whose foreign nature Sartarelli either renders successfully<sup>17</sup> or tends to normalize, as in this case:

Nuttata fitusa, 'nfami, tutta un arramazarsi, un votati e rivoltati, un addrumisciti e un arrisbigliati, un susiti e un curcati. E non per colpa di una mangiatina eccessiva di purpi a strascinasali o di sarde a beccafico fatta la sira avanti, perché almeno una scascione di quell'affannata insonnia ci sarebbe stata, invece, nossignore, manco questa soddisfazione poteva pigliarsi, la sira avanti aviva avuto lo stomaco accusi stritto che non ci sarebbe passato manco un filo d'erba. (GB, 5)

Stinking, treacherous night. Thrashing and turning, twisting and drifting off one minute, jolting awake and then lying back down – and it wasn't from having bolted down too much octopus *a strascinasali* or sardines *a beccafico* the evening before. No, he did't even have that satisfaction. The evening before, his stomach had twisted up so tight that not even a blade of grass could have slipped through. (RM, 3)

However, the aim of this survey is neither to suggest the ultimate way to translate Camilleri's macrotext nor to judge Sartarelli's merits

17 In *L'odore della notte* the sentence 'Si ricordò che era sempre stato goloso e ingordo fin da picciriddo, tanto che suo padre lo chiamava "liccu cannaruto," che significava esattamente goloso e ingordo' (ON, 93), has been successfully translated 'He remembered he'd always been a glutton and a gourmand, ever since childhood. In fact his father used to call him *liccu cannarutu*, which means just that, glutton and gourmand' (SN, 94). In other cases, Sartarelli succeeds in finding out a corresponding allusion to a cultural reference which would have been lost, as with 'il tutto con la velocità di una comica di *Ridolini* o di Charlot' (LC, 9, my italics), which becomes 'all at the slapstick speed of *Larry Sermon* or *Charlie Chaplin*.' (PM, 1, my italics)

as a translator. Rather, the analysis of his translating method represents a necessary means through which it is possible to look at the 'effects' to better understand the 'causes' and the reasons behind them. And these 'causes' are inevitably related to the editorial market and to its laws, in particular with writers who have been successful in their own countries, and who have been imported by foreign publishers into another cultural (and linguistic) context. In an essay about his own translations of Camilleri, Sartarelli comes to a point where he admits to the pressures exerted upon his linguistic choices by the textual revisors and editors of his translations, who have to 'approve' it for publication.<sup>18</sup> As a consequence, many of Sartarelli's discursive strategies are directly or indirectly influenced by the translational norms of the editors and, besides them, of the publisher. In the contemporary editorial market and particularly in the case of prestigious publishers – where the number of sales represents one of the guiding principles – the work of translators is based upon a negotiation between their loyalty to the text and the publisher's 'translation policy' and with those factors 'that govern the choice of text types; or even of individual texts, to be imported through translation into a particular culture/language at a particular point in time.'<sup>19</sup>

In particular, it is with Agatino Catarella's 'macaronic' idiolect or with other minor characters' incursions into Sicilian – such as for example Montalbano's housemaid Adelina's – that Sartarelli succeeds in finding a corresponding (often humorous) effect which does not domesticate Camilleri's language but turns it into something rich and strange.<sup>20</sup> As

---

18 '[Nell']interminabile corso di produzione editoriale, appena i controllori di testi – gli *editors*, appunto, i correttori, che sono il più delle volte correttrici – incontrano qualcosa fuori dal normale, un vocabolo, una costruzione sintattica, un'allusione, qualcosa non dico di sbagliato, ma semplicemente d'insolito, vogliono subito sopprimerla e ricorrere alla soluzione più comune e facile.' S. Sartarelli, 'L'alterità linguistica di Camilleri in inglese,' in A. Buttitta, *Il Caso Camilleri. Letteratura e storia*, 214.

19 Gideon Toury, 'The Nature and Role of Norms in Translation,' in L. Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 202. According to Lawrence Venuti '[since] the 1970s [...] the drive to invest in bestsellers has become so prevalent as to focus the publisher's attention on foreign texts that were commercially successful in their native cultures, allowing the editorial and translating process to be guided by the hope of a similar performance in a different language and culture.' *The Scandals of Translation. Towards an Ethics of Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 124.

20 As for humour and comic jokes, Sartarelli admits that: '[what] is probably /cont. ...

for Catarella's mixture of misspelled Italian, bureaucratese and Sicilian dialect, Sartarelli uses a Brooklynese accent 'with occasional echoes of the character of Curly from the old slapstick comic series of short films of *The Three Stooges*' (*Interview*) which mirrors Camilleri's carnivalesque linguistic strategy. The problem arises (and is partially solved by Sartarelli) when there are comic misunderstandings or in the course of the surreal dialogues between Catarella and inspector Montalbano, as in the following example:

'Dottori, lei putacaso mi saprebbi fari la nominata di un medico di quelli che sono specialisti?'

'Specialisti di cosa, Catarè?'

'Di *malatia venerea* [...]. Io m'arricordo che questa malatia mi venne quando ero ancora nico, non avevo manco sei o sette anni.'

'Ma che mischia mi vai contando, Catarè'. Sei sicuro che si tratta di una malattia venerea?'

'Sicurissimo, dotori. *Va e viene, va e viene. Venerea.*'

(CT, 25-6, my italics)

'Chief, could you by any chance be able to give me the name of one of those doctors called specialists?'

'Specialists in what, Cat?'

'*Gonorrhoea* [...]. As I remember, I got it first when I was still a li'l thing, not yet six or seven years old.'

'What the hell are you saying, Cat? Are you sure you mean gonorrhoea?'

'Absolutely. Had it all my life, on and off. *It's here and gone, here and gone. Gonorrhoea.*' (TD, 23-4, my italics)

In the translations following *Il cane di terracotta* (the first novel featuring Catarella) it is also possible to notice a gradual change (or more specifically, a deliberate 'worsening') of Catarella's grammar and lexicon, thanks to which this character probably becomes the one through whom Sartarelli can put his translating method to the test. Sartarelli creates for him a specific and recognizable Catarellian idiolect (with recurring expressions such as 'poissonally in poison,' which translates the

---

*/cont.* most difficult to render when translating Camilleri is the comic effect he obtains from the use of dialect and slang. [...] In Camilleri, this problem gains an added dimension when the vehicle of the humour is specific to the language used.' (*Interview*).

notorious 'di pirsona pirsonalmente') that the other characters, including Montalbano, are partially lacking:

'Pronti, dottori? È lei di lei personalmente? [...] Ah dottori, ci devo quomunicari una cosa d'importanzia strema. Mi chiamò dalla Quistura di Montilusa il commissario dottori che di nome si chiama Tontona.'

'Tortona.'

'Come si chiama, si chiama. Quello. Lui dice che io devo affriquentari un concorso d'*informaticcia*. Lei che ne dice?'

(VV, 36-7, my italics)

'Hullo, Chief? *Izzatchoo y'self in poisson?* [...] Oh, Chief, I got another streamly impoitant ting to tell ya. Somebody from Montelusa central called to talk to me in poisson, Inspector Whatsizname, Tontona.'

'Tortona.'

'Whatever's 'is name. Him. Says I gotta take *a concourse in pewters*. Whattya think, boss?'

(VV1, 39, my italics)

Sartarelli turns the original 'informaticcia' (which of course stands for 'informatica') into 'pewters,' a word which calls to mind 'computers,' preserving the semantic level of the comic dialogue between Catarella and Montalbano. The same happens also with *La luna di carta*, where the term 'password' is misspelled 'la guardia ai passi' (LC, 64) and translated into 'the lass word.' (PM, 56)

As for Adelina, the translation of the written notes she leaves in the Marinella House for Montalbano is particularly interesting. Here Sartarelli replaces the housemaid's markedly Sicilian grammar and lexicon (mixed with an attempted use of correct Italian) with an American eye-dialect:

Il prigattere Fassio mà dito che ogghi vossia sini torna a la casa. Ci pigghio parti e cunsolazione. Il prigattere mà dito chi lo deve tiniri leggio. Adelina. (CT, 187)

Sargint Fazio said you was comin home today. I am hapy and releved. The sargint also said for me to feed you lite foods, Adelina. (TD, 224)

Totori, ci manno adari adenzia a la me niputi. Cuncetta ca è picciotta abbirsata e faccinerà a ca ci prepara macari anichi cosa di amangiari io tonno passannadumani. (ON, 88)

“My inspector. Im sending my neece Concetta to help out. She’s a smart an hard workin girl an she gonna make you sometin to eat too. I come back day afta tomorra.” (SN, 89) ·

This brief survey of the English editions of Camilleri’s novels has shown that the need not to alienate a large number of readers from a big international publishing company such as Penguin has (directly or indirectly) led Sartarelli to reduce linguistic experiments and to render Camilleri’s idiosyncratic style in a prevalently ‘fluid’ manner. In Catarella and Adelina’s cases, Sartarelli’s linguistic ability in searching for equivalents has allowed him to search for ‘visible’ and ‘foreignizing’ solutions which sometimes counterbalance his (partial) ‘invisibility’ in the translated texts.

Like Carlo Emilio Gadda before him, Camilleri is probably one of the most difficult contemporary Italian writers to translate into English, in particular because the English Language lacks the presence of strongly recognizable dialects like the Sicilian or the Roman one (as in Gadda’s case). Gadda’s example is here useful to mention, since William Weaver – the translator of *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* – was the name Camilleri had in mind when he first heard of the decision to publish an English translation of his Montalbano cycle (*Intervista*). In *That Awful Mess on the via Merulana* Weaver solved the ‘messy’ problem he had to face with a work on style and register, in order to imitate the satirical spirit which pervaded Gadda’s novel.<sup>21</sup>

Sartarelli and Weaver’s solutions are not of course permanent and inemendable versions but only attempts at reconfiguring Camilleri and Gadda’s language into English. Of course, it is impossible to think of a perfect equivalence between a source text and a target text, given that translations are – in Theo Hermans’s opinion – ‘forever repeatable’ and that equivalence is not an actual goal but rather a guiding principle.<sup>22</sup> Like any form of critical activity, translation is an endless search of meaning, where

21 See C. E. Gadda, *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* (Milano. Garzanti, 2006) and *That Awful Mess on the via Merulana*, translated by W. Weaver, introduction by I. Calvino (New York. New York Review Books, 2000). The first edition of Weaver’s translation is dated 1965. For Valeria Petrocchi, Weaver’s richness in the use of vocabulary ‘non è inferiore a quella di Gadda’ and ‘supplisce efficacemente alla mancata traduzione del dialetto.’ V. Petrocchi, ‘Aporie traduttive: il caso di *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*,’ *InTRAlinea*, 8 (2006) www.intralineait.it.

22 T. Hermans, *The Conference of the Tongues* (Manchester, UK and Kinderhook, NY, USA. St. Jerome Publishing, 2007), 26-7.

even losses and mistakes are the traces of the desire to find an identity between the writer's language (and ideas) and those of the translator/reader. Coming back to Ignazio Buttitta's poem on dialect, only this repeatable search can help a culture and a language save its 'strings' from extinction. Or, moving to the American poet James Merrill and to his poem *Lost in Translation* (1972), it is up to readers to realize that each translation is always a victory against silence and that nothing is really lost in translation:

But nothing's lost. Or else: all is translation  
And every bit of us is lost in it.  
And in that loss a self-effacing tree,  
Colour of context, imperceptibly  
Rustling with its angel, turns the waste  
To shade and fibre, milk and memory.<sup>23</sup>

*University of Cassino*

---

23 J. Merrill, *A Different Person. A Memoir* (New York. Knopf, 1993), 117.

## **Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies**

*Editor: Peter Vassallo*

*The Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies is an interdisciplinary Journal published by the Institute of Anglo-Italian Studies of the University of Malta. It is devoted to current research in the history of cultural relations between Britain and Italy from 1300 to the present.*

*Articles focus on cross-cultural literary and historical studies as well as on related disciplines such as History of Art and Architecture.*

*The Journal welcomes submissions in the form of articles up to 10,000 words. The editors are sympathetic to a broad range of critical and theoretical approaches.*

*Editorial correspondence is to be addressed to Professor Peter Vassallo,  
Institute of Anglo-Italian Studies,  
University of Malta, Msida MSD 2080, Malta.*

*Email: [angloitalian@um.edu.mt](mailto:angloitalian@um.edu.mt)*

*Website: <http://www.um.edu.mt/angloitalian>*

*Journal Website:*

*<http://www.um.edu.mt/angloitalian/journal>*

### **Subscription Rates:**

*Individuals: Euros 17.20, £Stg 15, US\$ 30*

*Institutions: Euros 22.70, £Stg 20, US\$ 40*