

## CHAPTER 28

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## SHELLEY AND THE ITALIAN TRADITION

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SHELLEY'S interest in the Italian tradition is of singular importance in his development as a writer and thinker. Throughout his literary career, roughly from 1808 to 1822, Shelley encountered, read, studied, conceptualized, and assimilated the work of individual practitioners who, in his estimation, best represented or reflected Italian literary culture.<sup>1</sup> Until March 1818, when Shelley left for Italy, his interaction with the Italians was intermittent, inevitably lacking the immediacy of lived experience in Italy itself. Influenced by his early passion for Enlightenment texts and by Godwin's classically oriented prospectus, Shelley came to the Italians in a less direct manner and allowed his growing acquaintance to embed itself in a general education which encompassed an extensive range of classical literary texts. This pattern was significantly reconfigured once, in self-exile, Shelley adopted Italy as a provisional home, and his response to Italian culture had become vibrant and all-present. At the same time his obsession with ancient Greece and Rome gained in intensity with experience of the remains of the ancient world so visible throughout his travels in Italy. As his direct knowledge increased, so Shelley was able to construct a working model of what Italian authors and artists meant to him and the world, and how they related to each other. That model was increasingly influential and was frequently revised and refined. While Shelley's direct acquaintance with Italian literature was minimal in his early years at Eton and Oxford (1804–11),<sup>2</sup> his penchant for Gothic adventure exposed him to fictional representations of Italy which were typically exaggerated and stereotyped, but which probably created an imaginary conception that laid the grounds for later refinements. While his own prose romances, *Zastrozzi* and *St Irvyne* (1809–10), relied almost entirely on standard literary convention for the portrayal of Italian excesses, the Gothic novel could reflect genuine aspects of Italian culture, as in

<sup>1</sup> The seminal study of Shelley and Italian literature is Timothy Webb, *The Violet in the Crucible* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 276–336.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Jefferson Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols. (London: Edward Moxon, 1858), I, 53.

the case of *Mysterries of Udolpho* and *The Italian*, the latter a favourite with Shelley.<sup>3</sup> These primitive intimations of an Italian cultural context were tacitly (if unconsciously) reinforced by the Italian models that apparently lay behind the Gothic venture in the first place, since Dante's *Inferno* and several of Boccaccio's tales were themselves considered inherently Gothic.<sup>4</sup>

Italian poetry may well have caught Shelley's attention on his reading, in 1812, of Peacock's *The Genius of the Thames* (1810) (*Letters: PBS I*, 325).<sup>5</sup> Among several allusions to *Orlando furioso*, *Gerusalemme liberata*, the *Inferno*, and some verses of Alfieri is a reference to the canzone 'Italia mia', Petrarch's lament for the forsaken patria which, according to Medwin, Shelley later often recited.<sup>6</sup> In the months ahead, Ariosto and Tasso provided the material for Hogg's and Shelley's early studies in Italian (sometime in 1813–14), prompted by a congenial Italianate circle at Bracknell.<sup>7</sup> Since previously Shelley had by his own admission neglected chivalric romance (*Letters: PBS I*, 303, 307), these poetic encounters with Ariosto and Tasso clearly opened up new worlds, bridging the Romantic present with its Italian antecedents. This opening was clearly enhanced by the discovery of Petrarch's oeuvre. Possibly it was Cornelia Turner who gave an intimation of the exquisite bitter-sweet duality of comfort and sorrow that distinguishes Petrarch's unceasing love for Laura, and which, in Italy, Shelley represents in diverse ways.

That Shelley was by these means drawn to Dante is both implied by Hogg and given further credence in his translation of Dante's sonnet 'Guido, vorrei, che tu, e Lappo, ed io' (*Longman*, 1, 451) probably undertaken in late summer 1815,<sup>8</sup> to memorialize a boat trip via Oxford to the source of the Thames at Lechlade. A key feature of this poem is its embrace of a community of like-minded souls, the three poet-friends and their close female companions. The courtly 'gentilezza' of Dante's style and its 'dolce stil novo' articulations ('[...] would grace | With passionate talk [...] | Our time'), is marked by a series of polite subjunctives and conditionals ('would', 'might', 'should', 'might', 'were', etc.) that propose a magic world of 'might-be' and 'would-be'—of poetry itself as of friendship. The decorous fluency of translation, which effortlessly contains the thought in one fourteen-line sentence, seems to result from the elegant influence of mood—that of desire and possibility—over the whole composition, faithfully reproducing the tone and indicating the noble spirit of the original. Notably Shelley avoids Italianisms and is meticulous in sustaining an entirely English form (namely Shakespearian), syntax, and rhythm. The absence of any formal division between octave and sestet gives greater prominence to enchantment ('the bounteous wizard') already adumbrated in Shelley's 'magic ship' and 'charmèd sails' which are absent in the original. This adaptation keeps pastiche or subordination securely at bay, and establishes a firmer meeting ground between Italian Trecento and English Romantic.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Medwin, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols. (London: Thomas Cautley Newby, 1847), I, 30.

<sup>4</sup> Diego Saglia, 'From Gothic Italy to Italy as Gothic Archive: Italian Narratives and the Late Romantic Metrical Tale', *Gothic Studies* 8.1 (2006), 75 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Peacock's later friendship must certainly have advanced Shelley's Italian and classical studies.

<sup>6</sup> Medwin, *Life*, II, 39.

<sup>7</sup> Hogg, *Life*, II, 376–80.

<sup>8</sup> Hogg, *Life*, II, 380.

Cavalcanti's address to Dante in the sonnet 'Io vengo il giorno a te infinite volte' (*Longman*, 1, 453–4) was probably also translated at this time. It is notable for its combined praise and blame of Dante and offers both a confirmation of the values of the Florentine school and 'dolce stil' and a forewarning of their easy decline. Shelley could take note of the difficulty of sustaining good fellowship among poets and recognize his own vulnerability, given that Dante himself could so fall from grace in the eyes of his close friend and role model. Dante's 'mild and gentle mind', his disdain for the 'multitude | Of blind and madding men' (an extravagant paraphrase of 'la noiosa gente' = 'the tedious rabble'), and his 'sweet mood' portray his 'gentilezza'. The breakdown in friendship, however seriously meant, is underscored by Shelley's insistent sentence-breaks within the line, which disrupt the formalities of the Italian; and by changes to the meaning that draw on barely perceptible suggestions. Thus Cavalcanti's claim, 'I then loved thee', substitutes for 'Di me parlavi si coralemente' (lit. 'You spoke of me with such affection').<sup>9</sup> That Cavalcanti's sonnet might dispel the 'false Spirit' in Dante dramatizes the urgency of the complaint, and the efficacy of verse in possibly restoring 'thy [Dante's] true integrity' and a communion of 'Spirits' insisted upon more in Shelley's reading than in Cavalcanti's verse. So, in Shelleyan vein, the sonnet credits poetry itself with ameliorative powers and foreshadows Shelley's deeper reflections on the virtues of the Italian tradition in *A Defence of Poetry*.

The translations of the two sonnets may represent a watershed in Shelley's poetic career, preparatory exercises for the venture south, the creative engagement with the Italians on their own soil, and the prospect of realizing true fellowship among lovers, friends, and poets (later, a recurring Shelleyan motif). Repeatedly Shelley planned residence or exile in Italy.<sup>10</sup> In 1815–16 he reread Ariosto and Tasso, as if to re-establish his sense of Italian romance, so heavily influenced by the ascendancy of vernacular poetry in medieval Florence by way of Provence. The liberation of the Golden City in Shelley's long epic romance *Laon and Cythna* (1817) clearly owes something to the example of *Gerusalemme liberata*, as the cities in question, Constantinople and Jerusalem, are both strongholds of Islam and tyranny. Specific parallels have been noticed between the two poems, especially the ultimately victorious sacrifice of Shelley's eponymous protagonists, modelled on that of Sophronia and Olindo (*Longman*, 2, 246). Yet Shelley radically displaces Tasso's epic design. His heroes are freethinking Hellenic revolutionaries-in-love, not Christian crusaders, and Islam is temporarily liberated from its own oppression, and not, as in Tasso's epic, conflated with paganism and conquered by Christianity.

Earlier, in 1814–15, readings of Marino's *Adone* and of Alfieri's recent *Life* and neoclassical tragedies (*Journals: MSW* I, 86, 92, *Letters: PBS* I, 435) would have updated the tradition,<sup>11</sup> redefined it, and extended ties between Italian authors and classical antiquity. It would also have brought to acute awareness the continued Italian subjugation to foreign powers and the nascent quest for liberty in Alfieri's bold resistance to tyranny—both

<sup>9</sup> *Rime di Guido Cavalcanti*, ed. Antonio Cicciaporci (Florence: Presso Niccolò Carli, 1813), 12.

<sup>10</sup> See *Letters: PBS* I, 305 n. 1, 450, 453, 470, 547, 556, 560, 583.

<sup>11</sup> See also review of Hogg's *Memoirs of Prince Alexy Haimatoff* (1814) in *Murray: Prose*, I, 142.

personally and figuratively in his dramas—modelled on the republican virtues of ancient Rome and medieval Florence.

Familiarity with the broader tradition of Italian writers ensured that, on crossing the border into Italy on 30 March 1818, Shelley was well prepared for the enrichment that lay ahead. In the course of his four-and-a-quarter-year sojourn, only terminated by his tragic drowning off the coast of Viareggio on 8 July 1822, his writings provide ample evidence of the wealth upon which Shelley was able to draw. Nevertheless there were at first notable shortcomings in the poet's knowledge. His repeated request for Cary's rendering of the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* in December 1817 (*Letters: PBS* I, 575, 586) points to Shelley's limited acquaintance with the *Commedia* at this time.<sup>12</sup> Enthusiastic reading of the *Purgatorio* in the Cathedral of Milan, shortly after arrival in Italy (*Letters: PBS*, II, 8; *Journals: MWS* I, 205), shows a readiness to imbibe new influences, unusually for Shelley in the context of Catholic worship, but also his need to further his Italian education.

Not surprisingly then, Shelley held to certain bold but imprecise conceptions, even as his horizons expanded. This is evident in two prose pieces in which he began, tentatively, to map out a broader historiography of European enlightenment, and to trace its source in Florence. The fragment 'On the Revival of Literature' published posthumously by Medwin in *The Athenaeum* has been variously assigned by editors to 1815 or later (there is no surviving manuscript).<sup>13</sup> That the piece belongs to the period of early exile is suggested by the strong positioning of Dante and Petrarch in the sketch of a revival in Europe. Increasing knowledge of these poets and their great reputation in Italy would have signalled their historical importance.<sup>14</sup> In the fragment, Shelley's writing is assured but he oversimplifies his account of the spread of learning by Greek monks in exile, and of superstition in the monasteries and cloisters of Europe, following the fall of Constantinople. His leading comment on Dante and Petrarch is, however, significant, since he rightly gives them pride of place as precursors of a literary re-awakening:

The writings of Dante in the thirteenth, and of Petrarch in the fourteenth [centuries], were the bright luminaries which had afforded glimmerings of literary knowledge to the almost benighted traveller toiling up the hill of Fame. (*Athenaeum*, 761)

The indication of a dearth of inspiring literature at the time is inaccurate and ignores Dante's debt to his literary predecessors and contemporaries in Provence and Italy. Nevertheless, the impression of a dark age succeeded by light, first in the writings of Italian 'luminaries', and then subsequently in the 'new and sudden light' ('quantity of learned [Greek] manuscripts') following 'the taking of Constantinople', is foreshadowed by Petrarch, since he applied the term 'darkness' to the Christian era in general, and the resulting

<sup>12</sup> Unlike the *Inferno*, these later volumes (pub. 1814) did not include the Italian text.

<sup>13</sup> No. 265, 24 November 1832, 761–2. Also published in *The Shelley Papers* (London: Whittaker, Treacher, & Co. 1833), 190–4.

<sup>14</sup> A source was possibly Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. VI, requested in August 1817, *Letters: PBS* I, 552.

denigration of ancient knowledge.<sup>15</sup> Officially regarded as the ‘father of humanism,’ Petrarch’s efforts were to preserve the inheritance of antiquity at all costs, to the point of recovering many ancient manuscripts. Shelley’s readiness to look past Dante’s Christian vision is a notable humanist emphasis since, like Bacon, he is unable to come to terms with scholasticism, which he derides in the rest of the fragment. At this stage, Shelley seems unconcerned with the Aristotelian substructure of the *Commedia*, or the way Dante refines and refigures the scholastic reasoning of Aquinas.

That the heralds of a renaissance were themselves illustrious poets would serve as inspiration to Shelley, who was soon to announce his ‘passion for reforming the world’ in his preface to *Prometheus Unbound* (1819) (*Major Works*, 232).<sup>16</sup> The leading sentence on the Italians in the fragment is isolated and undeveloped, and offset by the main thrust of the piece, which concerns the restoration of Greek literature, ‘the finest the world has ever produced’ (762). A more subtle variant of this argument is taken up in *On the Manners of the Antient Greeks*, written at Bagni di Lucca in July 1818 as preface to Shelley’s translation of the *Symposium*. The essay contextualizes the notion of civilization by exalting the Athenians and their influence, yet conceding limitations in their social practice, most notably in the exclusion of women from the refinements of love (as portrayed in Plato’s dialogue). This dual aspect preserves the primacy of Greek culture in Shelley’s thought over that of the Italian, while asserting that later advancements were founded on Greek conceptions.

Notwithstanding what was achieved in Athens, Shelley’s progressive model allows space for comparative excellence in poetry over the centuries. Assessing the merits of Shakespeare, Dante, Petrarch, and Homer, Shelley finds qualities in the first three that excel even the Greeks. The inclusion of the Italians among the select few here occasions comment on specific talents: that perhaps Dante ‘created imaginations of greater loveliness and energy’ than his predecessors; and that, in what remains of Greek lyric poetry, there is perhaps no ‘equivalent to the sublime and chivalric sensibility of Petrarch.’<sup>17</sup> These brief but carefully chosen distinctions point to uniquely elevating and ennobling attributes. Yet succeeding remarks confine Dante’s excellence to a limited area of his work, and intimate what is meant by the plural ‘imaginations’:

Nor could Dante, deficient in conduct, plan, nature, variety, and temperance, have been brought into comparison with these men, but for those fortunate isles, laden with golden fruit, which alone could tempt any one to embark in the misty ocean of his dark and extravagant fiction. (Notopoulos, ‘Discourse,’ 405)

Notably at odds with Dante’s artistry and temperament, Shelley overlays his comments with Gothic preconceptions of disorderliness, excess, and gloom. He repeats the

<sup>15</sup> Petrarch restored ‘light’ to antiquity at the Church’s expense. See Theodore E. Mommsen, ‘Petrarch’s Conception of the “Dark Ages”’, *Speculum* 17.2 (1942), 226–42.

<sup>16</sup> All Shelley’s poetry and prose will be quoted from *Major Works* unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>17</sup> James A. Notopoulos, ‘A Discourse on the Manners of the Antient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love’, in *The Platonism of Shelley* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1949), 405.

contemporary prejudice against Dante's *Inferno*,<sup>18</sup> giving undue weight to it in comparison to the succeeding canticles, and misconstruing the rich classical foundation of Dante's style and conception of the underworld. It would be hard to say which were all the 'fortunate isles' in question, but undoubtedly the Earthly Paradise at the summit of mount Purgatory corresponds to the Islands of the Blest,<sup>19</sup> to which Shelley playfully alludes, thereby Hellenizing Dante's solemn Christian allegory. The idea of Christianity reverting to its pagan origins is always compelling for Shelley, especially given his classical leanings. As 'alone' might suggest, the 'imaginings' do not seem plentiful as yet. While Dante is already a dominant figure in Shelley's thought, his vision has not yet been grasped, assimilated, or reconstituted in terms fully agreeable to Shelley.

The succeeding year and a half of itinerant residence in Italy—from August 1818 to early January 1820—which embraces Shelley's 'Annus Mirabilis', brought to immediate contemplation the great burgeoning of the arts, the surviving ruins of classical antiquity, and continuities between them. 'The Paradise of exiles' reflected exceptional creativity in a cycle of rise and fall,<sup>20</sup> promising rebirth in spite of inevitable decline. Raphael, Guido Reni, or Salvator Rosa provided imagery of transcendence that Shelley would reconstitute for his non-theistic imaginings in *Prometheus Unbound*, or for tragic character portrayal in *The Cenci*.<sup>21</sup> The Italian poets who dominated the literary landscape in Shelley's mind at this time provided analogues for works that Shelley conceived on his travels—as if he were silently acknowledging his predecessors on home territory, whilst drawing on their example to advance his own vision.

Once settled in Italy, Shelley's interest shifted away from Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* to the poet's character and trials, in the wake of Byron's *Lament of Tasso* in 1817.<sup>22</sup> Tasso's pitiable disappointment in love and suffering at the hands of the tyrannic duke (much of this more legendary than true) provided material at first for an abandoned tragedy,<sup>23</sup> and thereafter for the fictional portrayal of the Maniac in 'Julian and Maddalo'. This tormented character exemplifies the poet-figure whose acute sensitivity to injustice and misfortune brings him to the brink of insanity, but not complete despair or hardened defiance. His wild unmediated soliloquy recalls an encounter in Dante's *Inferno*, signalled by allusions to the lustful in canto 4 and the lament of Francesca da Rimini, though 'hell' in this case is a psychological trauma that has no theological justification. It disturbs the urbane dialectic of infinite potential and cynical determinism represented by Julian and

<sup>18</sup> Hunt reflects contemporary disquietudes regarding Dante in *Stories from the Italian Poets* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1846), I, 1–77.

<sup>19</sup> Hesiod, Pindar, Euripides, Herodotus, Plato, and Plutarch, amongst others, refer to these Islands (also associated with the Hesperides and Elysian Fields). The reference in *Symposium* (180b) was probably fresh in Shelley's mind. Purgatory is itself a mountain-island.

<sup>20</sup> See *Julian and Maddalo*, 57 and *Letters: PBS II*, 170.

<sup>21</sup> The rare union of 'energy and gentleness' in the portrait of Beatrice Cenci echoes Shelley's praise of Dante (Preface to *The Cenci*, 319).

<sup>22</sup> At Ferrara (November 1818), Shelley observed Tasso's handwriting and the dungeon where he was imprisoned. See *Letters: PBS II*, 46–8.

<sup>23</sup> See 'Scene for *Tasso*', 'Silence; oh well are Death and Sleep and thou', and 'Song for *Tasso*', *Longman*, 2, 365–70, 445–6.

Maddalo (fictional versions of Shelley himself and Byron) and suggests a ‘raw’ middle position that encompasses both theories, without negating either.

In ‘Lines Written among the Euganean Hills’, the Petrarchan rhythmic modulation back and forth, from sorrow to joy, in pursuit of the ideal, provides the leitmotif of the paradisaical ‘green isle’ in a ‘sea of misery’ which besets the solitary mariner in his ‘frail bark’ (331) (cf. ‘frale barca [...] in alto mar senza governo’, *Canzoniere* 132, 10). Further it provides the model (as drawn from his canzone ‘Italia mia’) for the lament of an Italian decline, seen by each poet from very different perspectives. In Petrarch’s case it is antiquity that represents the lost ideal, but (not without irony) in Shelley’s it is Padua and resplendent Venice, seen from afar in the Hills near Arqua, where Petrarch himself found sanctuary and a final resting place. One of the ‘flowering isles’ (335) that completes the poem is an ‘imagination’ of community, refuge, and remedial influence that re-proposes Dantean imaginings, anticipating the *invitation au voyage* to Emily in *Epipsychidion*.

In *Prometheus Unbound*, Dante provides the paradigm that, in a subversive form, could take Shelley confidently beyond the constraints of Aeschylean necessity. Dante’s epic progression from Hell to Paradise could be stripped of its Catholic trappings, and assume a mythic structure that allowed for Promethean liberation and transcendence of the human predicament within the limits of mortality, and without any recourse to an all-powerful creator. In fact it was the supreme deity who (in the form of the archetypal tyrant, Jupiter) had, in Shelley’s epic, to be removed—an effect that, in Dante’s case, would have destroyed his vision. The ensuing demise of the tyrant is mocked by the erasure of the curse of Hell: “All hope abandon, ye who enter here”, III. iv. 136, citing *Inferno* 3. 9. The Tuscan pilgrim’s ascent through purgatory to earthly paradise is, in Asia’s passage to Demogorgon, inverted as a descent from her Indian vale to the very source of unbounded potential for change: a ‘god’ who is not creative but makes provision for the occluded ‘Life of Life’ to be restored. In the celebratory last act, which re-imagines Dante’s elevated conception, ‘Paradise’ reconfigures earthly delight as a timeless cosmic event, a consequence of liberation from theism and its equally oppressive ideological correlatives.<sup>24</sup>

The ‘summum bonum’ of ‘delight’ prompted a further inclusion in Shelley’s pantheon. In a letter to Hunt of 27 September 1819, Shelley calls Boccaccio ‘in the high sense of the word, a poet’ and ‘this most divine writer’ (*Letters: PBS* II, 121–2), appropriating an appellation which Boccaccio himself conferred upon Dante’s *Commedia*.<sup>25</sup> Divinity in this case is translated back into terms appropriate for Shelley. Each introduction to a new day in the *Decameron* is ‘the morning of life stript of that mist of familiarity which makes it obscure to us’. That sense of life free from the encrustations of time is not far from the primordial delight that is unmasked and restored to the earth and humanity in *Prometheus Unbound*, and later marks the exordium of *The Triumph of Life*: ‘and the mask | Of darkness fell from the awakened Earth’ (604, ll. 3–4). The phantasmagoric

<sup>24</sup> For extended intertextual commentaries, see Alan Weinberg, *Shelley’s Italian Experience* (London: Macmillan, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> See Richard Lansing (ed.), *The Dante Encyclopedia* (New York, Garland, 2000), 113.

vision of relentless obscuring triumph is superimposed upon this primal renewal, as though it did not belong to it. The frame-story's 'lieta brigata' ('happy band') in *Decameron* inspires Shelley's dream of pleasurable companionship, earlier foreshadowed in Dante's sonnet. Boccaccio's light touch is attractive because it produces 'serious meanings of a very beautiful kind' (*Letters: PBS II*, 122). This style is an advance on Ariosto who, together with Tasso, Shelley now considers as 'children of a later and a colder day', when 'the corrupting blight of tyranny was already hanging on every bud of genius'. Nevertheless, the light spirit of Boccaccio and Ariosto (and its transmutation in Byron's *Don Juan* or Forteguerra's *Il Ricciardetto*) is present in Shelley's translation of 'Hymn to Mercury' and in 'The Witch of Atlas' (July–August 1820), which adopt *ottava rima*, the rhyme scheme most commonly identified with Ariosto but which Boccaccio himself invented.<sup>26</sup> Boccaccio's 'deep sense of the fair ideal of human life' had great appeal for Shelley. Its 'moral casuistry' was 'the opposite of the Christian, Stoical, ready made and worldly system of morals' that Shelley always deplored (122).

If Boccaccio is not 'equal [...] to Dante or Petrarch', he now stands with them as 'the productions of the vigour of the infancy of a new nation' (122). Abandoning his view of these poets as rarefied, isolated figures, Shelley now identifies them with the political freedom that prevailed in the communes of medieval Florence (to which all three poets are linked by birth and language).<sup>27</sup> Thus the poets are 'rivulets from the same spring as that which fed the greatness of the republics of Florence and Pisa' (122). An image-complex ('vigour', 'infancy', 'rivulets', 'spring') is central to Shelley's conception here and in subsequent analysis. Autonomy emanates from the first beginnings of nationhood, naturally free from archaic hegemonies. A vitalizing force, like a river at its source, streams without impediment into governance and literary creation, allowing each to realize its potential 'greatness'. Later achievements in the arts result from 'obscure channels'. This paradigm implicitly underplays the later revival of learning, which now seems a foreign tributary that fed into the river, rather than the other way round.

These ideas form the kernel of the argument in *A Philosophical View of Reform* (Florence, late 1819–January 1820). Change is a necessity as the creative will and vitality of the people are stifled in a system of ingrained oppression and privilege. The example of Florence and Pisa gives indication of the promise that suitably awaits England if it were to reform on republican principles. More precise in matters of historical detail, following Sismondi's *Histoire des républiques italiennes*,<sup>28</sup> Shelley is careful to indicate how the predations of 'the all-surrounding tyranny' of Popedom or Empire were resisted and neutralized by Florence in particular. Thus 'Freedom had one citadel wherein it could find refuge from a world which was its enemy' (637). A solitary Promethean sanctuary, holding out against all odds, reveals what is at stake if exceptional creativity is to occur. The sense of tragic beleaguering (echoing Jupiter's stranglehold in *Prometheus*

<sup>26</sup> See e.g. *Teseide* (c.1340) and *Filostrato* (1335/40). For the burlesque influence of Forteguerra, see Weinberg, 'Il Ricciardetto and Shelley's *The Witch of Atlas*', *Studi d'Italianistica nell'Africa australe* 3.4/4.1 (1990–1), 32–42.

<sup>27</sup> In 'Della tirannide', Alfieri likewise insists that creativity thrives on free governance.

<sup>28</sup> See *Letters: PBS II*, 485, *Journals: MWS I*, 247–8.

*Unbound*) is nevertheless countered by an extraordinary result, namely, ‘the undisputed superiority of Italy in literature and the arts over all its contemporary nations’. Now, for the first time, Dante stands out as the exemplary author, his writings ‘distinguish[ed] from all other poets’ in their capacity ‘to unite energy and beauty’ (637). In this reading, the great scope and intensity of Dante’s vision is at one with its artistry. From this point on, Dante becomes the key figure in Shelley’s thinking about his own poetry and literature in general.

A slightly earlier letter to Hunt (24 August 1819) anticipates this new concentration on Dante. Here, there are just a ‘few distasteful passages of the *Inferno*’ while ‘exquisite tenderness & sensibility & ideal beauty’ elevate Dante above all other poets except Shakespeare (*Letters: PBS II*, 112). The ‘flowering isles’ which previously seemed dispersed are now exempla of what Dante achieves more generally in the succeeding canticles. It is probably on this account that Shelley attempted translations of two of the episodes he mentions: ‘the Spirit coming over the sea in a boat’ from *Purgatorio* 1, and ‘Matilda gathering flowers’ from *Purgatorio* 28. 112. The dating of these attempts is uncertain but the evidence points to the following spring of 1820 (*BSM V*, p. xlv). The first is just three lines, but the second covers the first fifty-one lines of canto 28 and is a rough incomplete draft.<sup>29</sup> This latter literally portrays a ‘flowering isle’: the scene is one of perpetual spring in the calm and protective seclusion of the *divina foresta* in contrast to the *selva oscura* (‘dark wood’) of *Inferno* 1, in which Dante loses his way. Along the river bank bears a *genius loci*, Matilda, ‘singing’ and ‘gathering flowers’ as she moves (*Webb*, 314), to whom Dante is led without fear by some benign influence.

In context, the passage is an immediate prelude to the restoration of Beatrice’s love for the pilgrim, his cleansing from sin, and his vision of the gryphon and Church triumphant. On their own, however, the lines are free of any obvious links with pilgrimage or the broader scope of the *Commedia*. This works to Shelley’s advantage. It allows him to focus on the extract as if it had less to do with Christian or prelapsarian emblems than with the earthly ideal itself and its elusiveness. At the end of canto 28, Matilda concedes that the poets of old foreshadowed the Christian paradise in the myth of the golden age. This was perhaps Shelley’s lead. He could attempt to emulate Dante, as a lesson in the art of poetry, by using *terza rima*, and finding an English analogue for Dante’s visual lucidity, stylistic elegance, architectural symmetry, and magisterial poise of narration. In Shelley’s translation, there are strikingly few Miltonisms, unlike Cary, and the style, receptive to measured rhythm and cumulative syntax, allows the scenic description to unfold clearly and naturally, *terzina* by *terzina*, until the sudden appearance of Matilda. Accord, such as Shelley achieves, is the necessary ground for difference, since he also displaces Dante’s emphasis: updating him in terms of Romantic predilections, or back-dating him to the pre-Christian roots which Dante had assimilated and transformed. Shelley intensifies the impact of the scene with emotive modifiers (‘bare’, ‘blithe’, ‘perfect’, ‘bleak’, ‘turbid’, ‘charmed’, ‘blank’, ‘besprent’, ‘[b]right’) and enjambments that, at times, hurry the pace. Complementing this process, the link between Matilda and Proserpine

<sup>29</sup> Text in *Webb*, 313–14.

in the concluding *terzina* submerges the implicit theme of the Fall, bringing out rather the inevitable loss of spring and the grief of mother earth, for whom her daughter is ‘more dear’, a phrase absent in Dante. Shelley bridges past and present by interweaving Milton’s famous reference to Proserpine ‘gathering flours’,<sup>30</sup> implicitly reversing Milton’s Christian parable as well as Dante’s. Overall, Shelley continues to assimilate Dante’s voice to his own, thus anticipating the narrative style in *The Triumph of Life*.

Translation of the canzone ‘Voi che’ntendendo il terzo ciel movete’,<sup>31</sup> in the summer or autumn of 1820, brought Shelley closer to Dante’s intensely personal autobiography of love, rendered in the form of an ‘idealized history’. In the canzone, the poet’s love of an angelic figure (Beatrice) is supplanted by a new, powerfully attractive ‘donna gentile’. Sensing betrayal, Dante submits to a seemingly irresistible influence, that of the intelligence that ‘moves’ the third Heaven (Venus). Submission is not achieved without an intense struggle. The dynamics of love and their metaphysical machinery, reinforced by Shelley’s later reading of *Vita nuova* (January 1821, *Journals: MWS I*, 351), provided a model for his own ‘idealized history’, soon to find renewed expression in *Epipsychidion* (February 1821).<sup>32</sup>

Dante’s commentary on the canzone in Book 2 of *Convivio* would have further guided Shelley in finding a suitable poetic mode and rationale for his own ‘platonics’.<sup>33</sup> Significantly, Dante’s distinction between literal and allegorical meanings disallows the crude assumption that a personified beloved must necessarily be a person. Thus the ‘donna gentile’ turns out to be an abstraction, Lady Philosophy, and not a flesh and blood rival of Beatrice. It is on these grounds that the relationship with ‘Emily’ in *Epipsychidion* should not be reduced to an ordinary affair of passion, but rather be regarded as imbued with ‘platonic’ significance. The union of the Lady with Beatrice in the *Commedia* eventually resolves Dante’s dilemma, prefiguring Emily, both ‘Seraph’ and oracle of the wisdom of ‘True Love’ that, like Charity in *Purgatorio* 15. 55–7, is infinitely expansive, increasing the more it is shared.

Shelley’s translation of ‘Voi che’ntendendo’ attempts to trace and undergo Dante’s poetic thought-process: it is complete (but for a single line in the third stanza) and the form, structure, and diction adhere to the original, except where Shelley’s understanding seems inexact. His risk of the word ‘intelligent’ (for the participle *intendendo*) in the first line underlines Dante’s reference to the Angelic Intelligences, and is not a personal emphasis. Likewise the ‘third heaven’ belongs strictly to Dante’s Ptolomeic cosmology (founded in Aristotelian physics), as does the ‘glorious lady throned aloft’ (Beatrice at the feet of God (*nostro Sire*; lit. ‘our Lord’)) which Shelley, without any sign of dissent, translates ‘our Father’. Care for such detail continues in the reference to ‘her | Who came on the refulgence of your sphere [=stella, Venus],<sup>34</sup> displacing the ‘bright seraph [=angela] sitting crowned on high’.<sup>35</sup> Dante presents love as a primal stellar force which entirely captivates and illuminates the soul, and finds its true expression in poetry

<sup>30</sup> *Paradise Lost*, IV. 269. <sup>31</sup> Text in *Webb*, 292–3.

<sup>32</sup> See also the Italian prose-poem ‘Una favola’ (1820–1).

<sup>33</sup> Shelley annotated the *Convivio* in 1820.

<sup>34</sup> See *Epipsychidion*, 116–17.

<sup>35</sup> *Webb*, 292.

(since the planet Venus is the sphere of Love and Rhetoric). In *Epipsychidion*, Shelley's 'platonics' are re-imagined in the language and philosophy of Dante which, in contrast to the Socratic dialogues, wholly affirm poetry and the feminine embodiment of the beloved, whether human or intellectual or both.

In the advertisement to *Epipsychidion*, Shelley quotes the entire last stanza or *congedo* of his translation of 'Voi ch'ntendendo'. The *congedo* speaks for Dante as for Shelley, establishing their accord. Acknowledging the difficulty of understanding love's metaphysics, the Dantean frame device requires that art should be a stimulus for further insight: it enjoins the mystified reader to 'own that thou [the poem] art beautiful'. Shelley's fluent and elegant rendering of Dante's lines departs finally from the original by insisting that those who miss the poet's meaning are 'dull' or 'base' (293).<sup>36</sup> In this way he exalts his work above the common reader with a disdain that is Petrarchan rather than Dantean.

Written in the aftermath of *Epipsychidion*, *A Defence of Poetry* (February to March 1821) recapitulates Shelley's estimation of the Italian tradition and advances it significantly. The five major Italian poets—Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Ariosto, and Tasso—are again considered in their varying contexts: chivalry, the revival of learning, republicanism, love, imagination, idealized vision, etc. However the contexts are now themselves occasions for a celebration of poetry.

Within a historical overview anchored in the exceptional achievements of Homer and the Greek tragedians, Dante yet takes centre stage and is of all writers the key exemplar of Shelley's theoretical argument: that poetry is in the forefront of knowledge and human advance. Remarks on the Italian poets occur in the light of Dante's eminence. An exception seems made for Petrarch who, in the introductory discussion of the 'religion of love', receives glowing tribute. Reiteration of Petrarch's excellence in conveying 'the delight which is in the grief of Love' (690) is emphatic and eloquent. It indicates that, in *Epipsychidion*, the exuberance yet sense of inadequacy or imperfection of the Shelleyan persona, caught up in overwhelming admiration for Emily's divine presence and the quest to exalt and to unite with it, is a Petrarchan as much as Dantean derivative. So too is the constant juxtaposition of transcendence and mortality. In fact, Emily has much in common with Laura as a figuration of intellectual beauty or of poetry itself.<sup>37</sup>

Yet Dante is said to have 'understood the secret things of love even more than Petrarch'. While in *Vita nuova* his 'idealized history' is an 'inexhaustible fountain of purity of sentiment and language', its further treatment in the *Commedia* is more elevated. In this work, Dante's 'apotheosis of Beatrice in Paradise and the gradations of his own love and her loveliness, by which as by steps he feigns himself to have ascended to the throne of the Supreme Cause, is the most glorious imagination of modern poetry' (690–1).

Shelley dissolves the superstructure of Dante's vision to reveal the anagogical progression of the full narrative. In so doing he unsuspectingly points forward to the apotheosis

<sup>36</sup> Citing *Vita nuova* in the 'Advertisement', Shelley implies that the esoteric meaning of his poem is plainly intelligible and that he could explain it without difficulty.

<sup>37</sup> See e.g. 'Thou Harmony of Nature's art' (30), or 'A Metaphor of Spring and Youth and Morning' (120).

of Keats in *Adonais* (April to June 1821), depicted as arising out of the elegist's gradual ascent from mortal sorrow to affirmation of the immortality of poets (the third Heaven). In the *Defence*, the ladder of ascent portrays, in finely imagined sequence, the exalted divinity of Beatrice, the pilgrim's measured advance from Hell to Paradise, the bond of love that marks the journey's progress, and fulfilment in the loftiest realm of being. The association of Beatrice with the Supreme Cause registers Dante's originality and daring, laying bare his refined conception of the divine will, and underlining the motive force of 'loveliness' as imaged in the figure of sublime feminine beauty. Stylistically, Shelley imaginatively relives his assertion, thus eliding the centuries that separate the two poets. In one small detail—the unobtrusive phrase 'he feigns himself'—Shelley adopts the very advanced view that Dante's journey is a fictional, and not a true, mystic experience. 'Feigning', for Shelley, throws the emphasis on 'glorious imagination' as an integral body of thought (now encompassing the whole poem and not specific scenes) in accordance with his defence more broadly, and eschews literal-mindedness, even on the most elevated plane of signification. The glorification of Beatrice is a destabilizing construct, however much Dante may have personally subscribed to it or allowed his vision to be conditioned by it.

Shelley's greater regard for the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* matches his conviction that triumphant love and chivalry have liberated women from ancient constraints, by sensitizing human consciousness. In this context, Shelley re-envisioned Ariosto and Tasso more positively, regarding them jointly with Dante and Petrarch, and their great successors of more recent times, as having 'celebrated the dominion of love; planting as it were trophies in the human mind of that sublimest victory over sensuality and force' (691). The fusion of romance and epic results in the subjection of superheroes to the elixir, love, in both *Orlando* and *Gerusalemme*. Recognition of the powerful civilizing influence of love poets culminates in a germinal idea: that 'The poetry of Dante may be considered as the bridge thrown over the stream of time which unites the modern and the ancient world.' At a decisive point of transmission, continuity is ensured, and the past freshly absorbed into modern consciousness. Ancient thought (providing the framework and scaffolding for Dante's conceptions) is preserved and integrated into a personalized and feminized imaginary that is foreign to the classical world, but characterizes our own. The image of 'time' recalls Shelley's earlier analogy of source and flow in the letter to Hunt, the stream now extending beyond Florence into the distant past and forward to the immediate present, where Dante's influence holds sway.

Aware that cultural transmission could not be free of ostensible barriers, Shelley adds a significant rider:

The distorted notions of invisible things which Dante and his rival Milton have idealized are merely the mask and the mantle in which these great poets walk through eternity enveloped and disguised. (691)

A similar use of 'mask and mantle' describes Beatrice Cenci's 'crimes and miseries' (Preface to *The Cenci*, 319) which circumstances did not permit her to avoid, but which also did not break her spirit. Shelley understands that the theology espoused by Dante

and Milton was an expedient, masking an epic truth that remains viable for all time. Dante's adherence to the Catholic system of the afterlife, predicated on divine judgement with its eternally direful as well as benign consequences, provides the theological and moral framework for his poem. Its rigorous application in the *Commedia*, structurally and thematically, as an idealized construct, does not preclude exceptions, deviations, or adaptations that test out the framework to the limit. Shelley gives the prime instance of Riphæus who, though a pagan, earns his place in Paradise among the just Christian saints for single-handedly defending Troy at the cost of his life. Virgil, on the other hand, is excluded from salvation, let alone Paradise, yet, for Dante, he is his guide and leader: the exemplary poet, the figure of reason, the advocate of Rome and Empire, and the legendary prophet of Christianity. Aptly, Dante's source for Riphæus is the *Aeneid* (a work of fiction), where Virgil himself calls him 'justissimus unus', as Shelley points out, lamenting the injustice of the gods. The extraordinary disparity between these two figures, Riphæus and Virgil, creates a dramatic tension in the *Commedia* that seems unresolvable, but may surreptitiously open the door to all possibilities. Remarking mischievously, but acutely, that Dante 'observ[es] a most heretical caprice in his distribution of rewards and punishments' (691), Shelley once more underlines the challenge to orthodoxy that Dante, like Milton, has written into his poem whilst maintaining the semblance of outward conformity. Calling Christianity 'the modern mythology', Shelley deflates its claim to historic truth and permanence but, with reversed logic, acknowledges its poetic potential. This eventually extinct 'superstition' will only remain interesting for future historians because 'it will have been stamped with the eternity of genius' (692).

In fellowship with Milton and Homer (as second 'among the sons of light' (*Adonais*, 36)) Dante is an epic poet whose works '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: developing itself in correspondence with their development' (692).

The great compass of the epic imagination points to the lesser scope of most other authors, and makes clear the demands of speaking in the present, and prophetically. Shelley registers Dante's European consciousness, his awareness of the fluctuations and dynamics of the broader culture he inhabited, and his incorporation of dramatically changing times into his broader vision. Shelley was no less ambitious than Dante and, in mapping out the latter's task, he was identifying the road that lay ahead for him, and establishing his poetic lineage. In *Prometheus Unbound* Shelley had adopted the epic mode for lyric drama, and an archetypal design that reflected, as well as revised, the fatalistic compromise of the Aeschylean model and the redemptive schema of the *Commedia*; in *The Triumph of Life*, which followed a year after the *Defence*, in April to June 1822, he would embrace the task of epic poet in narrative, largely by following in Dante's footsteps.

As progenitor of reform par excellence, Dante preceded Milton in assimilating and preserving 'the ancient religion of the civilized world' (692) (Shelley's inversion for 'classical myth'), while as first religious reformer, in advance of Luther, he fiercely condemned church abuses. In this context, Dante's prominence in Shelley's pantheon is

firmly reinforced: he was ‘the first awakener of entranced Europe,’ removing the spell of centuries of dormancy, superstition, and subjection. His instrument was the creation of Tuscan, musical and persuasive, ‘out of a chaos of inharmonious barbarisms.’ Refining his suggestion that the Renaissance was a replenished tributary of its source in Florence, Shelley adds that Dante congregated other ‘great spirits’ like himself to preside ‘over the resurrection of learning’ (693). The instance of a single mind drawing others to it as overseers of the revival, ensuring its success, broadens Shelley’s earlier conception, indicating that the Renaissance might never have taken place were it not for the humanist poets Petrarch and Boccaccio, who, inspired by Dante’s example, paved the way forward. The inference is that the advancement of knowledge in society is precarious, the contribution of poets towards its attainment vital.

By calling Dante ‘the Lucifer of the starry flock which in the thirteenth century shone forth from republican Italy, as from a heaven, into the darkness of the benighted world’ (693), Shelley reinvents the *Paradiso* as a heretical manifesto of the sanctity of love and far-reaching thought (Venus/Lucifer), shared by a confraternity of like minds (‘starry flock’), whose poetic insight and refinement put to shame the barbarity of Europe. The extravagantly brilliant final salute to Dante, that his every word ‘is as a spark, a burning atom of inextinguishable thought’ (693), draws on the stellar imagery, identifying an innate power and self-sustaining quality of light that can ignite other minds for all time; just as Dante, in *Paradiso* 1. 34, writes of his poetry that ‘poca favilla gran fiamma seconda’ (‘a small spark creates a large flame’). So, too, in *Adonais*, the ‘transmitted effluence’ of the immortals will continue ‘So long as fire outlives the parent spark’ (408). Fittingly Shelley now turns his mind to the precision and vitality of a single word (for which Dante is renowned) and not the overall vision, inasmuch as the former inheres in the latter, and is yet itself unbounded in significance.

*The Triumph of Life* is a draft fragment that for many marks the tragic incompleteness of Shelley’s life and works. But there is also a sense in which ‘fragmentariness’ was an abiding truth for Shelley, whose ideals were well beyond ordinary reach—as may be inferred from his apotheosis of Dante in the heaven of poets. While death itself intervened in the case of *The Triumph of Life*, the poem did, in some sense, fulfil the poet’s career, bringing to fruition, in some 548 lines of masterly, yet scarcely revised verse, Shelley’s ever-increasing affinity with the Italians, and especially Dante. The *Triumph* is saturated with the presence of Dante, to an extent that must be unique in world literature. Not only is it interwoven with the *Commedia*, but its formidable use of *terza rima* and stylistic imitation are constant signals of Dante’s example. The degree of this immersion has been charted in detail and its conflation with the iconography of Roman conquest as well as Petrarch’s *Trionfi* made clear.<sup>38</sup> Naturally, one cannot underestimate the importance of Petrarch whose successive liberating ‘triumphs’ provide the principal model for Shelley’s single, condensed, enslaving ‘conquest’, twice envisioned as in a waking dream, within which Dantean elements, both thematic and formal, are, at every point, inlaid. But it is Dante who seems to be the presiding genius of the poem and this is indicated in repeated,

<sup>38</sup> See Weinberg, *Shelley’s Italian Experience*, 202–42.

mainly purgatorial motifs, and to the passing homage to Dante which appears close to the end of the fragment:

[...] Behold a wonder worthy of the rhyme  
 ‘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 [...].’  
 (471–6)

In their precise condensation of the whole of the poet’s journey, these lines, spoken by Rousseau, seem to echo the several terse reminders to Dante by Virgil of the groundplan of his journey and Beatrice’s guidance, so that the map of the whole is always in his and the reader’s mind, and neither can lose their way. The steadiness of the writing, the exceptional abstract clarity of the diction (unusual in English poetry), and the unfolding syntax are also Dantean trademarks. The distinct English idiom is infused with Tuscan directness and flair. Yet Shelley reinforces his own independence, allowing the sense to cross over the *terzine*, in order to release Dante’s composed and certain progress into the flow and texture of Shelley’s own troubled vision—at this point in the narrative disturbingly redolent of Dante’s Hell—within which the similitude (itself Dantean) is framed. The *Commedia* seems to stand outside Shelley’s text as exemplary—to function on a different plane of signification wherein Dante’s vision is both lived and retold—and yet not to be allowed that freedom, least of all because the entire poem is so filled with Dantean echoes (the disillusioned and defeated Rousseau replacing Virgil as Shelley’s guide to what lies ahead). The strategic positioning and verbal emphasis of ‘Love led serene’ (ironically recalling the triple ‘Amor’ tercets in *Inferno* 5. 100–8) and the play on ‘serene’ as attribute of Love, mode of its operation, and sign of the pilgrim’s well-being, leave unanswered questions as to whether this is the beacon for which Shelley has been searching. Certainly, love’s unique surpassing of transfiguration endows it with exceptional ‘virtue’. One is left with the poignant impression that, to the very end of Shelley’s life, Dante still pointed the way forward or beyond.

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