

THE LAMENT FOR ITALY: BYRON, DANTE AND A. D. HOPE

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Byron's relationship with Italian poetry has been the subject of much scholarly study, including book-length works by Peter Vassallo and Peter Cochran. His interest in Dante's poetry has naturally come under close scrutiny and I owe a great debt to those who have gone before me in exploring this field. My intention here is to make some specific observations on the way Dante is brought into the Byronic world, both by direct translation but perhaps more importantly by self-identification. But I would also like to explore the way this cross-cultural engagement was fruitfully developed by a writer from the other side of the planet, the Australian poet A. D. Hope, who carried on a dialogue with both Dante and Byron in his *Letter from Italy*, written in the 1950s.

Of course, the influence of Dante on Byron was nothing like as important as that of Pulci, Berni or Casti, or even that of Ariosto and Tasso. These poets all wrote in *ottava rima* and no-one is going to claim that *The Prophecy of Dante* is as important a poem as *Don Juan*. The discovery of *terza rima* did not revolutionize Byron's poetry, as did that of *ottava rima*. Nonetheless, his interest in Dante's form is worth studying, even if only as a "metrical experiment," to use the definition he himself gave in the Preface to *The Prophecy*. The experiment was to be taken up by Shelley, with far greater success; the "Ode to the West Wind" and "The Triumph of Life" are among his greatest works.

Both poets translated passages from Dante; Shelley did versions of the sonnet to Guido Calvacanti, the first Canzone from the *Convito*, the section on Matilda in Canto 28 of *Purgatorio*, and he also corrected a translation by Medwin of the Ugolino canto in the *Inferno*. Byron translated part of Canto 5 of the *Inferno*, at the behest of Teresa. However, his interest in this canto actually preceded his arrival in Italy. Possibly inspired by Leigh Hunt's poem *The Story of Rimini* (which Hunt was working on in

prison between 1813 and 1815, with the help of Byron), he used quotations from the canto as epigraphs to *The Corsair*, even if, as Peter Cochran points out, the relevance of the lines chosen is far from clear (9).

Peter Vassallo suggests that “the episode of Francesca da Rimini in the fifth Canto of the *Inferno* was a literary objective correlative with his affair with his half-sister” (24). Equally strong personal reasons would prompt his translation of the canto a few years later. Indeed, an interest in Dante was to be an important factor in his love affair with Teresa right from the very start. It was the first talking point between them, when they met in the salon of Contessa Benzon (1819). In her biography of Byron Teresa introduces the Dantesque note even before describing the actual encounter between the two of them, making an extended comparison between the two poets:

How long Beatrice’s godlike lover had wandered in the “dark wood” he does not tell us. When Lord Byron was there he would have been even younger, only twenty-nine, and his passage through the wood must have been swift indeed. He would only have made a brief expedition there—the merest reconnaissance. Who can vouch for it that the majority of great men have not also been forced to traverse the dark wood? (130)

This, of course, prepares us for the notion that Byron’s sense of disorientation was because he lacked a Beatrice to act as lodestar. When the couple finally meet, their conversation turns naturally to Dante:

When she told him that she came from Ravenna, where she spent a part of the year, Lord Byron answered that he wished to visit Ravenna because of Dante’s tomb and Francesca da Rimini. There - upon Dante became the subject of their conversation. (137)

And in case we start to suspect that the Dantesque motif is pushed essentially by Teresa, we need only look at Byron’s first letter to her (22nd April 1819) to see that this was not the case: “piuttosto che il Cielo privo di te preferirei l’Inferno di quel’ Grande sepolto in tua Città, basta che tu fosti meco come Francesca col’suo Amante.”¹ (*BLJ*, VI, 110–111)

¹ Rather than Heaven without you, I should prefer the Inferno of that Great Man buried in your city, so long as you were with me, as Francesca was with her lover. (*BLJ*, VI, 112)

It is clear, therefore, that Canto V continues to resonate for him—perhaps even more powerfully than ever.

Byron's most detailed remarks on Dante are to be found, unsurprisingly, in his Ravenna Journal. On January 29th 1821 he reports his dissatisfaction with some remarks by Schlegel on the Italian poet:

Of Dante he says that "at no time has the greatest and most national of all Italian poets ever been much the favourite of his countrymen." '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. (*BLJ*, VIII, 39)

Taking issue with Schlegel's accusation that Dante lacked "gentle feelings" he provides a list of characters and episodes from *The Divine Comedy* that prove the opposite, beginning, naturally enough, with Francesca of Rimini, and remarking that "there is gentleness in Dante beyond all gentleness, when he is tender" (39). It is almost as if he has taken Schlegel's criticism as a personal affront.

Byron and Teresa Guiccioli see themselves, therefore, not only as Paolo and Francesca, but also as Dante and Beatrice. This helps to explain the whole conception of *The Prophecy of Dante*, which is based on a very close personal identification with the poet. Dante, speaking in the first person in the poem, presents himself as the poet in exile, addressing his own people and making political prophecies. The poem was written when Byron himself was becoming closely involved in the Carbonari movement, and he presents the medieval poet as already foreseeing the rise of Italian nationalism. (Similarly, in *Marino Faliero*, the medieval Doge foresees the fall of Venice to Napoleon.)

The vicissitudes of the translation of *The Prophecy of Dante* also throw an interesting light on the personal involvement that Byron felt with the subject of his poem. It was to be translated by Michele Leoni, who had already translated Canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*; in the preface to *The Prophecy* Byron actually expresses some reservations about this former translation:

Amongst the inconveniences of authors in the present day, it is difficult for any who have a name, good or bad, to escape translation. I have had the fortune to see the fourth canto of *Childe*

Harold translated into Italian *versi sciolti*— that is, a poem written in the *Spenserian stanza* into *blank verse*, without regard to the natural divisions of the stanza, or of the sense.

As it turned out Michele Leoni was not to be the only poet to translate *The Prophecy* during Byron's lifetime. Towards the end of his long Italian exile Byron was thrilled to hear of another translation, this time by a writer who is generally considered as one of the great Italian exiles: Lorenzo Da Ponte (1749–1838). He had been the librettist for Mozart's three greatest Italian operas (*Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Così Fan Tutte*, and *Don Giovanni*), as well as an interesting poet and remarkable memoirist in his own right. However, it was not Da Ponte's former literary achievements that aroused Byron's enthusiasm; indeed, as Da Ponte had fallen into comparative obscurity after his departure for America (1805), it is possible Byron was entirely unfamiliar with his name. It was rather the present circumstances of the translator that appealed to him, as he indicated in a letter to the French bookseller Jean Antoine Galignani on March 26th, 1823:

I have by me an Italian translation by an *Italian in America*—printed at New York—of the “Prophecy of Dante.”—The Singularity of the circumstances of an Englishman's composing a poem in the character of Dante—in and on Italy—and of an *Italian's* translating it in *America*—(which they dare not do in Italy—under the Austrian Scoundrels) makes me wish to have it reprinted at Paris.—It is published with the original text.— (*BLJ, Supplementary Volume*, 69–70)

Byron clearly approved of Da Ponte's choice to respect the form of the original poem (as Leoni had not done), but mostly it is the wonderful cross-cultural implications of the venture that strike him: it gave Byron the sense of belonging to a kind of community of exiles. Da Ponte himself expressed something of the same concept in his own remarks in his address to Byron:

una certa analogia che (salve le debite proporzioni) mi parve trovare tra le vicende di un Dante e le mie, mi spinsero ed invogliarono ad un lavoro che non senza molta trepidazione oso presentarvi. (*La profezia* 187)²

² A certain analogy which (apart from the proportions) struck me as existing between the affairs of Dante and my own, drove me and attracted me to this work, which not without much trepidation I dare to present to you (*my translation*).

In his own Preface to the poem Byron had himself expressed a certain trepidation about assuming the voice of Dante, stating that he knew “what would be thought in England of an Italian imitator of Milton, or if a translation of Monti, or Pindemonte, or Arici, should be held up to the rising generation as a model for their future poetical essays.” However, he then added:

But I perceive that I am deviating into an address to the Italian reader, when my business is with the English one, and be they few or many, I must take leave of both.

And this, of course, is an important point. Byron, while speaking from Italy, about Italy, in the voice of Italy’s greatest poet, is really addressing English readers. Even as Byron concerns himself with Dante’s role in forging the national language, which is one of the great themes of the poem, it becomes clear that what really interests him is his own response to this language, and the relationship between the two languages and cultures.

This is most clearly expressed in the dedicatory sonnet that precedes *The Prophecy*:

LADY! If for the cold and cloudy clime
Where I was born, but where I would not die,
Of the great Poet—Sire of Italy
I dare to build the imitative rhyme,
Harsh Runic copy of the South’s sublime,
THOU art the cause; and howsoever I
Fall short of his immortal harmony,
Thy gentle heart will pardon me the crime.
Thou, in the pride of Beauty and of Youth,
Spak’st; and for thee to speak and be obeyed
Are one; but only in the sunny South
Such sounds are uttered, and such charms displayed,
So sweet a language from so fair a mouth—
Ah! To what effort would it not persuade?

As we read these lines we can hardly fail to be reminded of the great stanza in *Beppo*:

I love the language, that soft bastard Latin,
Which melts like kisses from a female mouth,
And sounds as though 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.

(*Beppo* 44)

And this prompts a question: why is the *Beppo* stanza so much more effective, so much more memorable?

The most obvious answer would be that the *ottava rima* lines are quite simply funnier. This, in fact, is not a minor consideration. It all comes down to the fact that Byron's greatest poetry is his comic poetry—or, at least, his poetry in which the element of comedy is always potentially present. But what does the comedy consist of here? Well, it is intrinsically bound up with the very form of the *ottava rima* stanza: after six lines of delicate Latinate sibilants and labials, we get the sudden comic reversal of the final couplet, crammed with explosive consonants. The “Runic” here is both “Harsh” and hilarious. In the sonnet he employs similar tactics, but without the same brilliance; there is none of the subtle wit that turns the very sounds of the language into the act of sex: “And gentle liquids gliding all so pat in...” Of course, part of the joke is his own technical brilliance; even as he praises the sensuous sounds of Italian, he does so using English, and thus in fact disproving that the language, if handled by a fine writer, is limited to a “whistling grunting Guttural.”

In *Beppo*, this linguistic comedy is all part of a larger game of inter-cultural comparisons, which begins with the epigraphic quotation from *As You Like It*:

Rosalind: Farewell, Monsieur Traveller: Look you lisp, and wear strange suits; disable all the benefits of your own country; be out of love with your Nativity, and almost chide God for making you that countenance you are; or I will scarce think that you have swam in a *Gondola*. (Act IV, Scene 1).

With this epigraph Byron makes it clear that in this poem he is going to lisp and wear strange suits. One of these is the Italian *ottava rima*, which he succeeds in donning with a casual insouciance that no other English poet has ever matched. The same thing never happens with the *terza rima* of Dante, which remains forever a rather stiff fit for him.

We can see this both in the respectable but uninspired verses of *The Prophecy*, and in the translation of the Francesca da Rimini episode, in which the rhymes often seem a little forced, and the syntax awkward. Although Byron clearly considered it important to respect the form of the original poem (this was another reason why he clearly preferred Da Ponte's translation over that of Leoni), he actually succeeds in making his greatest tribute to Dante when he allows himself some licence as regards the form. In Canto III of *Don Juan* there is a stanza which is modelled very closely on the opening lines of Canto VIII of *Il Purgatorio*:

Soft Hour! which wakes the wish and melts the heart
 Of those who sail the Seas, on the first day
 When they from their sweet friends are torn apart;
 Or fills with love the pilgrim on his way
 As the far Bell of Vesper makes him start,
 Seeming to weep the dying Day's decay;
 Is this a fancy which our Reason scorns?
 Ah! Surely! Nothing dies but Something mourns!

(III, 108)

Here are the lines from *Il Purgatorio*:

Era già l'ora che volge il disio
 ai naviganti, e 'ntenerisce il cuore
 lo di ch'han detto ai dolci amici addio;
 e che lo nuovo peregrin d'amore
 punge, se ode squilla di lontano,
 che paia il giorno pianger che si more.

(*Il purgatorio*, VIII, 1–6)

It could be said that Byron sentimentalizes Dante's lines, particularly with the addition of the exclamatory couplet. Nonetheless the lines have a fluidity and naturalness of movement quite lacking in his *terza rima* translation. The context is also important; this stanza comes after the series of wonderful stanzas devoted to the twilight hour, beginning with "Ave Maria" (Stz. 102). These stanzas themselves had developed out of a description of Juan and Haidée resting after their feast; Byron moves from their story to a series of personal reflections, musing on his own situation as he writes the poem. He locates himself very precisely, both geographically and temporally:

Sweet hour of Twilight! —in the Solitude
 Of the Pine forest, and the silent Shore
 Which bounds Ravenna's immemorial wood.

(III, 105)

The mention of Ravenna's wood evokes literary memories, from Boccaccio and Dryden, and this leads naturally into this stanza, with its translation from the greatest writer associated with Ravenna, even if he is not explicitly named. After the Dantesque stanza, he passes onto a reflection on Nero: even in his case "Some hands unseen strewed flowers upon his tomb."

But at this point the narrator pulls himself up short and exclaims:

But I'm digressing; what on earth has Nero,
 Or any suchlike Sovereign buffoons,
 To do with the transactions of my hero...

(III, 110)

All of this is a perfect example of the fluidity and malleability of *Don Juan*, qualities that are intrinsic to the very form of the poem. It can be argued that he achieves a greater sense of communion with Dante, and thus with the Italian world, in these charmingly rambling stanzas than he does in the constrained and solemn *terza rima* of *The Prophecy*. It is clearly the spirit that counts, rather than strict fidelity to the form.

This reflection can serve, conveniently enough, to lead towards a consideration of the relationship between the Australian poet, A. D. Hope, and the British and Italian poets. Hope, among other things, wrote one of the finest tributes to multilingualism, in his poem *The Tongues*, one of the sections of his *Western Elegies*; this section is written successfully in the challenging form of dactylic hexameter:

But the man who thinks in two tongues wins his mind free of a
 bondage
 Which a sole speech imposes on all his thinking and feeling;
 Translate as he will, what is said in the one never matches the other
 Precisely in ambience and reach, so his soul grows still and attentive,
 Aware, beyond any one speech, of a metaphysics of meaning
 Which teaches that not mere words but the heart is what must be
 translated.

(*Selected Poems* 240)

A number of interesting analogies can be found between Hope and Byron. As with Byron, people discuss endlessly whether Hope belongs more to the classical or the romantic tradition. He was a great love poet and also a keen admirer of Pope. In an early poem, "The Damnation of Byron," he had paid curious tribute to Byron's erotic conquests, and in one of his late poems, in a book entitled *A Book of Answers*, he gave the Ocean the chance to respond to Byron, using the Spenserian stanza of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

However, I want to concentrate on a poem written by Hope in the 1950s, *A Letter from Italy*, one of the first successful revivals of *ottava rima* in English in the Byronic spirit after Auden³ (Yeats had used *ottava rima* to great effect in such works as "Sailing to Byzantium," but these look directly to serious Italian models, like Tasso, rather than to the comic intermediary of *Don Juan*). Hope's poem is a personal and discursive poem, very much in the Byronic manner. Hope wrote an extremely important essay on the discursive mode in poetry—and more particularly on the loss of it in the 20th century; he claimed that the only poet in whom traces of the mode could still be found was Robert Frost; however, he himself can undoubtedly be considered a poet in the discursive tradition.

Hope alludes to Byron several times in the course of his poem, although curiously enough it is Byron's work in the Spenserian stanza, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* that seems to engage his attention most strongly. His use of the *ottava rima* form is assured and witty. His topic is the age-old one of the dizzying effect of Rome and its civilisation on the foreign visitor. This helps to explain his interest in Canto IV of *Childe Harold*. Hope's main concern is to avoid the besetting fault of all such travel-poetry:

Yet travelling poets, even at the best,
Are apt to turn out bores or something worse;
Even *Childe Harold*, it must be confessed,
Is sometimes merely Baedeker in verse;
And for a new antipodean guest
Rome, as a subject, daunts if not deters;

³ Auden's *Letter to Lord Byron*, of course, is actually in Rhyme Royal, rather than *ottava rima*; however, it can be said to have opened the way for later poets, like Hope and Kenneth Koch, to write fully fledged *ottava rima* poems in the Byronic spirit. Auden's essays on Byron also give the most cogent explanation of the liberating effect that *ottava rima* had on Byron.

But I, since she demands my tribute, can
At least contrive to write some lines that scan.

(*Collected Poems* 130)

This stanza gives a clear indication of the central concern behind this poem. The poem was written just eight years after the Australian critic A. A. Phillips had invented the term “cultural cringe” to define the inferiority complex that he claimed was felt by many Australians with regard to European culture. Hope did perhaps more than any other Australian writer to prove that the “cringe” was unjustified, even if he showed a keen understanding of its causes. His response to the problem consists in the way he shows full mastery of all the tools of the western tradition of poetry. Essential to this endeavour is a certain degree of understatement, as in the modest unassertiveness of the final couplet in this stanza. In the stanza that follows, he describes *ottava rima* as “just the thing” for “easy-going verse” (130).

This is a homage to that improvisational side of Byron: “But the fact is that I have nothing planned,/Unless it were to be a moment merry,/A novel word in my vocabulary” (*Don Juan*, IV, 5). In what seems like pure Byronic digression Hope moves from some fairly light, Baedeker-like anecdotes to a meditation on his journey to Italy as a search for roots—or, more potently, for “the source”: “That source is Italy, and hers is Rome,/The *fons et origo* of Western Man” (142). He then moves towards a reflection on the very source of mythology, drawing on Byron’s account of his visit to Lake Nemi and on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*. He recounts his own visit to that same numinous spot, which, he claims, gave a sense of “direction and control” to the last canto of Byron’s poem, after the “desultory scenic stroll” of the earlier cantos (143). It seems clear that Hope’s poem enacts on a smaller scale the tonal shift he sees as characterising *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*.

And under this impulsion from the place,
I seemed constrained before I came to drink,
To pour some wine upon the water’s face,
Later, to strip and wade out from the brink.
Was it a plea for chrism or for grace?
An expiation? More than these, I think
I was possessed, and what possessed me there
Was Europe’s oldest ritual of prayer. (144)

However, it is the concluding stanzas I want to concentrate on, when he takes up the theme—and the note—of the Dantesque “Lament for Italy,” even while declaring that it is “not for me/Perhaps to try to emulate my betters./The tragic theme, the bough of prophecy /I leave to Dante, Ariosto, Byron,/Whose ages range from gold to brass to iron” (146).

Lest anyone think that this is too disparaging an association for Byron, it should be noted that Hope at once declares that his own is “the age of plastics and alloys/Which bring combustion engines in their train...” His final stanzas will thus be devoted to the noises of contemporary Italy; here is the key stanza:

Though Dante found it crowded, hot and smelly,
His first impressions and most lasting were:
Accenti d'ira, orribili favelle,
The sounds of torment, discord and despair,
Screams from the tortured and the brute bass belly—
Chuckle of demons; yet if I might dare
Cap Dante I should give for “Hell let loose”
The din Italian motor-bikes produce. (147)

We have already seen how he has chosen to ruminate on Byron's most solemn poetical themes while adopting the form of Byron's comic poetry; here he goes even further. He allows himself to play with some of Dante's most terrible lines, from Canto III of *L'inferno*, where the poet describes the first sounds heard after passing through the gates of hell; he transforms these lines into a comic feminine rhyme in the English tradition, and ends with a couplet that seems at first sight bathetic.

But Hope is not being solely comic here; or rather, the comedy conceals a theme that is meant entirely seriously. The sound of the “mechanic bellow” of the motor-bike is a symbol of what has gone wrong with the world; Hope's ecological concerns, which inform much of his poetry, come forcefully into play here. The “bellow” is “the final, brutal voice of naked power” (147).

He quotes Dante's bitter denunciation of the Italy of his day in the famous line: “Serva Italia di dolore ostello” from *Purgatorio* VI:

Ahi serva Italia, di dolore ostello,
nave senza nocchiere in gran tempesta,
non donna di province, ma bordello!⁴

⁴ Ah, Italy enslaved, hostel of misery, ship with no helmsman in a great tempest, not a mistress among the provinces but a brothel! (*My translation*)

The barbarous sounds of modern Italy are compared with the voice of medieval Italy, as he addresses Dante directly: “You, who spoke for Europe in your day.” And he asks the rhetorical question: “Who speaks for Europe now?”

Again it is the fact that Hope is speaking as an outsider that adds pungency to his question; although Australian he feels himself an heir to European culture, and he laments the tragic decay of that culture. The final lines in this poem, which, like Byron’s major works, is another great fruit of cross-cultural stimuli and influences, are devoted to the loss of a civilizing voice:

The parables of history can show
Surely no sadder irony than this
Which brings that noble, intellectual voice
To drown in trivial and distracting noise. (148)

Hope is usually very precise in his rhymes; I think it is no accident that, as he concludes his poem with a reflection on the cacophony of modern Italy, he allows it to end on an imperfect and jarring half-rhyme.

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