The Literature of Italy in Byron's Poems of 1817-20

Nicholas Halmi

Although travel to Italy was an almost obligatory rite of passage for eighteenth-century *milordi inglesi*, the interests of these tourists were typically restricted to seeing and acquiring antiquities. Earlier travellers, such as Thomas Coryat in 1608 and Milton in 1638, had been more interested in contemporary than in ancient Italy, for they had considered travel and an acquaintance with other nations to be beneficial to their participation in a shared humanistic culture. Coryat had observed Italian life keenly and recorded his impressions minutely, while Milton had frequented the learned academies (where he won approval for his Latin poetry) and met Italian intellectuals, including Galileo, then in his fourth year under house arrest. In the eighteenth century, however, the educational aim of Continental travel narrowed from the broadly humanistic to the more specifically aesthetic, centred on classical art; and often enough even that aim was little more than a pretext for the acquisition of a superficial worldliness on an extended holiday.[1] Johann Joachim Winckelmann complained privately about the philistinism of the nominally distinguished English visitors to whom he was expected, as keeper of the Vatican antiquities and Rome's most prominent antiquarian, to give guided tours of the city.[2] In this increasingly commodified experience of the Italian past, the living contemporary land largely ceased to be of interest to Grand Tourists except insofar as it assisted (or hindered) their sightseeing and collecting. The eighteenth-century Italian

1 F. Haskell, Preface, A. Wilton and I. Bignamini (eds.), *The Grand Tour: The Lure of Italy in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Tate, 1996), pp. 10-12.

2 See, for example, his letter of 15 May 1764 to H. D. Berendis, in *Briefe*, ed. W. Rehm (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1952-7): 'The Duke of York, who was here for 12 days, is the greatest princely brute I know and does no credit to his rank or nation' III, 39-40.

artists most familiar to the English were those who supplied visitors with pictures of themselves and the sights: the portraitist Pompeo Batoni, the view-painters Canaletto and Giovanni Paolo Panini and especially the engravers Giuseppe Vasi and Giovanni Battista Piranesi.

Thus the growth in the popularity of the Grand Tour across the first three quarters of the eighteenth century was not directly matched by an increased interest in Italian literature and history. It was an Italian expatriate, the critic Giuseppe Baretti, who began to revive British interest in Italian literature with his *Remarks on the Italian Language and Writers* and *Dissertation upon the Italian Poetry*, both published in 1753. Translations of Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* by Joseph Higgins and William Hoole followed in 1755 and 1783, while Hoole's 1747 translation of Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* was reprinted seven times between 1764 and 1803. Susannah Dobson's 1775 *Life of Petrarch* stimulated translations of his lyrics; two translations of Dante's *Inferno* – but not of the other canticles – were published in 1782; and Metastasio's poetry became a staple of young ladies' singing lessons. But only in the early nineteenth century, when travel to Italy was impeded by war, did study of the language and literature become more common. This development was motivated, C. P. Brand speculates, by British sympathy for the plight of Italy under foreign occupation and fostered by the presence of literarily active Italian exiles in London, most notably Ugo Foscolo and Antonio Panizzi.[3] Among British Romantic writers, J. H. Frere, Wordsworth, Scott, Coleridge, Southey, Landor, Thomas Campbell, Thomas Moore, Leigh Hunt, J. H. Reynolds, both Shelleys and Felicia Hemans read Italian literature in the original, while Blake, De Quincey and Keats acquired at least a basic knowledge of the language.

Byron's reception of the literature, however, was distinctive in its extent and its dual aspect: not only reading but actively appropriating. His letters and notes to his poems attest to

[3] See *Italy and the English Romantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), pp. 32-45, 49-50.

an interest that extended beyond Dante, Petrarch, Ariosto and Tasso to Pulci, Machiavelli, Bandello and Guarini, among Renaissance writers, Filicaia in the seventeenth century, Forteguerri, Goldoni, Casti and Alfieri among eighteenth-century writers and Monti and Foscolo among his contemporaries. This interest had certainly developed before he travelled to Italy, for Italian-language editions of the *Furioso* and *Liberata*, Bandello's *Novelle*, Dante's *Commedia*, Machiavelli's *Opere* and Petrarch's lyrics, as well as several Italian dictionaries and grammars, were among the books that Byron was compelled to auction off in April 1816 to pay his debts.[4] But only after having visited Ferrara on 19 April 1817, a visit that prompted him to write *The Lament of Tasso*, did he begin to engage with Italian literature poetically.

Focusing on the poems Byron wrote in the years 1817-20, in particular *The Lament of Tasso*, *The Prophecy of Dante*, two stanzas of the fourth canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and the translation of the first canto of Pulci's *Morgante Maggiore*, we can see how Byron exploited both the writings and the figures of Italian writers (especially the exiled Dante and imprisoned Tasso) to construct his own cosmopolitan poetic identity. In a famous essay written in 1839, the Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Mazzini described Bryon as the exemplary poet of subjective life.[5] But Mazzini's understanding of subjectivity in Byron as the projection of a unitary self on to external reality – 'La Poésie va de lui aux objets extérieurs' – is precisely what Byron's poetry contests. Indeed, its construction of the 'Byronic' self is a central element of its social engagement. For in contrast to Wordsworth and Coleridge, who constructed their poetic selves discursively through what Matthew Arnold called 'the dialogue of the mind with itself', Byron did so through a dialogue with the reading public and the larger world: the 'self' that emerges in his poems is a product of the

[4] The auction catalogue is reprinted in *CMP*, pp. 230-45.
[5] See 'Byron et Goethe', in Mazzini, *Scritti editi ed inediti* (Imola: Galeate, 1915), XXI, pp. 199-207, 218, 222-7, 238.

poet's responses to others, past, present and future.[6] Byron himself insisted, in a journal entry of 1813: 'To withdraw *myself* from *myself* (oh that cursed selfishness!) has ever been my sole, my entire, my sincere motive in scribbling at all; and publishing is also the continuance of the same object, by the action it affords to the mind, which else recoils upon itself'.[7] However seriously we take this explanation of his reason for writing, as if anticipating T. S. Eliot's poetics of impersonality, it is a fair description of how he creates his poetic persona – Byron wearing the mask of Byron, so to speak. What is at issue here is not the correspondence (or lack of it) between representation and biographical fact, but the representation itself. And in the poetry Byron wrote between 1817 and 1820 we find him adopting the verse forms and narrative strategies of Italian poets, translating their verse directly, ventriloquising their sorrows and projecting their vindication into a future represented implicitly by the English poet himself.

Byron's transhistorical identification with these poets derived from a self-consciously historicised sense of alienation from his own time and native land. At the same time, by conjuring up a succession of poets who experienced and opposed tyranny of one kind or another, Byron sought equally to promote the idea of an Italian nation unified by its literary tradition and dedicated to the liberation of the peninsula from foreign domination. But to the extent that it elided the complexities of translating a cultural into a political nationalism, Byron's *certaine idée* (to appropriate de Gaulle's famous phrase) was a wish-fulfilment, betraying an impatient ambition for Italians that they themselves, in their linguistic and cultural and political heterogeneity, could not have realised in the immediate post-Napoleonic years.

[6] See C. Bode, *Selbst-Begründungen: Diskursive Konstruktion von Identität in der Britischen Romantik* (Trier: WVT, 2008), p. 117. Arnold's phrase appears in the preface to his *Poems* (1853).

[7] Journal entry for 28-30 November 1813, in *BLJ*, III, p. 225.

*

In *The Giaour*, *The Corsair* and *The Siege of Corinth*, relying on triangular plots centred on two men and a woman, Byron had used the manifest confrontation between Eastern and Western characters to suggest latent similarities based on the socio-political and gender hierarchies in both European and Eastern nations. This is particularly true of *The Giaour*, in which the Venetian Giaour and Turkish Hassan are drawn into a fatal conflict figured as personal resemblance and cultural self-estrangement. But in his Italian poems Byron implied an increasing detachment from his native land by presenting an identification and engagement with Italy – its language (including regional dialects), its literature, its history, its politics. Whereas in the Eastern tales he had confronted the West with itself through the exotic medium of the East, in the Italian poems of 1817-20 he confronted English readers with a defamiliarised representation of himself through the decidedly less exotic, though still foreign, medium of *italianità*. The irony of Byron's well-known reference in stanza 51 of *Beppo* to selling the English public 'samples of the finest Orientalism' is deeper than many commentators have acknowledged, for these words are uttered not in the declarative mood by the poet *in propria persona* but in the optative by a 'nameless sort' of narrator, an English poet who must content himself with repeating an Italian anecdote in an Italian verse form precisely because he is unable to produce those 'pretty poems never known to fail' in the English market: 'Oh that I had the art of easy writing / What should be easy reading' (*Beppo*, 51-2). In other words, this figure mock-regretfully differentiates himself from the most popular contemporary author of Eastern tales. As the Byron of the fourth canto of *Childe Harold* claims, 'I've taught me other tongues, and in strange eyes / Have made me not a stranger' (8), but it is now in Italy that Byron 'rides out' on 'Autumn evenings', dines on 'becaficas', watches the 'Sun set, sure he'll rise tomorrow', loves (and speaks) 'the language,

that soft bastard Latin' and likes 'the women too' (*Beppo*, 42-5). The poet is so thoroughly assimilated into his adopted land that it has ceased to be alien to him and he to it. Yet, of course, as the adjectives 'other' and 'strange', indicating a residual foreignness, qualify the confident negation of the noun 'stranger', so the poet Byron, writing in English to English readers about Italy and Italian writers, recognised that the Italianness of the persona 'Byron' consisted in an irresolvable dialectic of identity and alterity.

Byron insinuates a Byronic *italianità* in three principal ways: by appropriating Italian texts, whether directly (as in epigraphs) or indirectly (as in translations); by assuming Italian voices, such as Tasso's in *The Lament of Tasso* and Dante's in *The Prophecy of Dante*; and by adopting attitudes or points of view identified as Italian, as in the untroubled elaboration of Venetian customs in *Beppo*. By way of introduction to the complexities of these processes, we might consider an extraordinary passage in the fourth canto of *Childe Harold*. Narrating retrospectively the poet's leisurely journey from Venice to Rome via Ferrara and Florence from April to June 1817, the canto offers an extended affirmation and elaboration (allowing for some geographical licence) of its epigraph from Ariosto's fourth *Satira*:

> Visto ho Toscana, Lombardia, Romagna,
> Quel Monte che divide, a quel che serra
> Italia, e un mare e l'altro, che la bagna.
> (I have seen Tuscany, Lombardy, Romagna, those mountains [the Apennines] that divide and those [the Alps] that cut off Italy, and one sea and the other that bathe her).

For the most part, the ensuing travelogue, with its frequent historical reflections (supplemented by extensive historical notes), offers the perspective of an admiring but not uncritical English observer. Yet Byron also dissolves the distinctions between Englishman and Italian, between foreigner and native, in stanzas 42-3, which are, as his note

acknowledges,[8] a translation of Vincenzo da Filicaja's patriotic sonnet, 'Italia, Italia, O tu coi feo la sorte'. Updating the original 'Gallici armenti' (a reference to French advances along the Po at the start of the War of Spanish Succession in 1701) to the post-Napoleonic 'many-nation'd spoilers' – a change that acknowledges historical particularity within the general pattern of the nation's 'fatal charms' for foreign powers – Byron incorporates Filicaja's lament for occupied Italy into his own poem as if to declare himself an Italian patriot.[9]

Translated into English and transformed from a Petrarch sonnet into two Spenserian stanzas, its origin signalled only in the note, 'Italia, Italia' loses, however, its identity as an Italian poem: it has as it were been colonised by *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Although Byron's commitment to Italian freedom was to manifest itself practically in 1820-1, when he assisted the Ravenna Carbonari in preparing for revolt against the Austrian occupiers, the idea of vicarious patriotism implied in his appropriation of Filicaja's poem is detached from the word's etymological and conventional sense of devotion to one's own land (from the Greek *patrios*, 'of one's fathers'). Byron thus denaturalises patriotism, like national identity itself, treating it as an elective affinity that need not be rooted in the nation or country to which it is directed (and his later Philhellenism demonstrated its transferability). Conceived as a political stance, patriotism is indeed an abstraction – as was, of course, the very 'Italy' apostrophised by Filicaja and Byron, a cultural fiction referring to a non-existent political state and an artificially created national language.

*

[8] See *CPW*, II, p. 234.

[9] See Peter Vassallo, *Byron: The Italian Literary Influence* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), who remarks that Byron likely encountered the sonnet in J. C. L. Simonde de Sismondi's *De la littérature du Midi de l'Europe* (p. 201), one of the works sold in the 1816 auction (see *CMP*, p. 241).

If the interpolated translation assumes Filicaja's voice by appropriating his verse directly, *The Lament of Tasso*, composed immediately after the visit to Ferrara recounted in stanzas 35-41 of *Childe Harold* IV, engages more complexly with the poet whose voice it assumes. Cast as Tasso's reflection on and during his long confinement in the Ospedale di Sant'Anna, ostensibly on account of his madness, by his erstwhile patron Alfonso II d'Este, the poem constitutes, given the liberties Byron takes with the historical record, an act of imaginative projection into the past. As Anna Jameson observed in 1829, while almost 'every sentiment there expressed' may be found in Tasso's minor poems, the figure of Tasso himself 'has been transfused with such a glowing impulse into its new mould, it never seems to have been adapted to another [...] and it has been stamped by a kindred and a master spirit'.[10] Although the extent of Byron's reading of Tasso's lyrics is unknown, the two poems with which Jerome McGann justly suggests *The Lament of Tasso* has the strongest parallels, 'O magnanimo figlio' (addressed to Alfonso) and 'O figlie di Renata' (addressed to the duke's sisters Lucretia and Leonora), were reprinted in an appendix to John Black's *Life of Tasso*, of which Byron had owned a copy in England.[11] Emphasising the contrast between Tasso's former status as an honoured guest and patronised poet and his current status as a prisoner, both of these poems from the years 1579-82 appeal not only to the individual siblings' sense of pity but equally to the aristocratic virtue of courtesy, of which, Tasso implies, his imprisonment is a violation. 'Per me pietade è spenta / e cortesia smarrita, / se 'n te, signor, non nasce e non si trova' ('For me pity is spent and courtesy lost if they do not spring from and exist in you'), he tells the duke, while he seeks to recall the sisters to themselves with the

[10] *The Loves of the Poets* (London: Henry Colburn, 1829), I, p. 326. I owe this reference to McGann's commentary, in *CPW*, IV, p. 479.

[11] See: *CPW*, IV, p. 479; Black, *The Life of Torquato Tasso; with an Historical and Critical Account of His Writings* (London: John Murray, 1810), II, pp. 406-12; *CMP*, p. 236. The poems were reprinted also in Pierantonio Serassi's *Vita di Torquato Tasso*, 2nd ed. (Bergamo: Stamperia Locatelli, 1795), II, pp. 41n. 2 and 41-2 n. 3, a work on which John Cam Hobhouse drew in his *Historical Illustrations of the Fourth Canto of Childe Harold* (London: John Murray, 1818), and they would be discussed in 'The Lyric Poetry of Tasso', published anonymously in *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, 5 (1822), 373-80.

memory of their courtesies to him – 'in voi la memoria / di voi, di me rinnovo; / vostri effeti cortesi' ('In you I renew the memory of yourselves, [as well as] of me; of your courteous acts') – the juxtaposition of 'voi' and 'me' being pointedly paralleled three lines later by that of 'qual son, qual fui' ('what I am, what I was').[12]

Byron preserves the bitterness of these appeals to the Estensi and the starkness of their contrast between Tasso's freedom and imprisonment, the first stanza of *The Lament of Tasso* elaborating on the denial to the poet of light, exercise and the sociable pleasures of dining and conversation. Where Tasso himself, in 'O figlie di Renata', had enumerated these pleasures – 'studi, diporti ed agi, / mense, logge e palagi' ('study, diversion and leisure, meals, arcades and palaces', lines 48-9) – Byron's Tasso acknowledges the psychological effect of their deprivation:

> the mind's canker in its savage mood,
> When the impatient thirst of light and air
> Parches the heart [...].
> [...] Captivity displayed
> Stands scoffing through the never-opened gate,
> Which nothing through its bars admits, save day
> And tasteless food, which I have eaten alone
> Till its unsocial bitterness is gone;
> And I can banquet like a beast of prey,
> Sullen and lonely. (*Lament*, 5-7, 11-17)

Yet the difference between the original Tasso and Byron's is more pronounced than the similarity, for the latter is defiant even in his abjectness, attributing his imprisonment – in accordance with a legend that Byron would have known from Black's *Life* to be without

[12] 'O magnanimo figlio', 27-8, and 'O figlie di Renata', 33-5 and 37, in *Opere di Torquato Tasso*, ed. B. T. Sozzi, 3rd ed. (Turin: UTET, 1974), II, pp. 797, 793-4. All translations of Italian into English in this essay are mine.

historical foundation – to the social effrontery of his expressed love for Leonora d'Este. Adopting a variant of the triangular plot he had used in the Eastern Tales, as well as of the wilfulness characteristic of the protagonists of those tales and that of the recently completed *Manfred*, Byron makes the conflict between 'Tasso' and 'Alfonso II' over 'Leonora' (I use inverted commas to emphasise their fictional status) the occasion to present the unfortunate poet as the victim of tyrannical persecution. Whereas the author of 'O figlie di Renata' refers self-abnegatingly to his 'weak words' and 'copious tears' ('Scarse son le parole, / lagrime larghe', lines 44–5), the speaker of *The Lament of Tasso* proudly recalls his poetic achievement in *Gerusalemme liberata*:

> For I have battled with mine agony,
> And made me wings wherewith to overfly
> The narrow circus of my dungeon wall,
> And freed the Holy Sepulchre from thrall,
> And revelled among men and things divine. (21-5)

Uncertain of divine favour ('I thought mine enemies had been but man, / But spirits may be leagued with them – all Earth / Abandons – Heaven forgets me'), 'Tasso' appeals to history for his vindication, trusting in his poetic power to 'make / A future temple of my present cell, / Which nations yet shall visit for my sake' after Estense rule has ended and Ferrara itself fallen into decline (198-200, 219-27).

History is obliging, for the poet's prediction in *The Lament of Tasso* is confirmed by Byron's preface to the poem, which remarks that Tasso's preserved cell is more compelling to visitors to the 'decayed, and depopulated' city than either Ariosto's house or tomb.[13] But as with the translation of Filicaja's sonnet, the assumption of Tasso's voice entails the

[13] *CPW*, IV, p. 116.

replacement of the historical figure with one of Byron's creation, even more mediated, indeed, than the Filicaja of *Childe Harold* since the speaker's verse so loosely resembles Tasso's appeals to the Estensi. Only notionally Italian himself, this figure is posthumously defended by a foreigner, one of those very 'strangers' who, the lamenting poet warns from sixteenth-century Ferrara, will 'wonder o'er thy unpeopled walls' in the future (226). Estranged from his own courtly society, 'Tasso' is thus vindicated, if not by the Lord, then by a lord, and an English one at that.

More is at stake in *The Lament of Tasso*, however, than 'a poetical representation of Byron in a contemporary act of imagining himself as Tasso'.[14] The English poet's identification with the Italian presupposes a commonality between them, the insinuation of which is a concern not only of *The Lament of Tasso* itself but of the stanzas on Ferrara in *Childe Harold* and later of *The Prophecy of Dante*. Discounting Tasso's madness as merely 'imputed' by Alfonso (4) and endorsing the legend of his love for Leonora in order to bring into sharper focus the duke's antagonism towards the poet, Byron treats Tasso's imprisonment not as historically unique but as transhistorically exemplary of the conflictual relationship between poetic genius and contemporary society, particularly its ruling élite (a theme treated more ambivalently by Goethe in his 1790 verse play, *Torquato Tasso*, and more pathetically by Felicia Hemans in her 1828 poem, 'Tasso's Coronation'). Whereas the poet of 'O figlie di Renata' mourns his separation from 'the descendents of Adam' ('Da' nipoti d'Adamo, / oimè!, che mi divide?', 53-4), meaning humanity as a whole, Byron's prophetic Tasso takes solace in the thought of fellowship with future pilgrims to 'this consecrated spot' (240), his empty cell.

[14] J. J. McGann, 'Hero with a Thousand Faces: The Rhetoric of Byronism', *Studies in Romanticism*, 31 (1992), 295-313 (297). In abjuring suicide, 'Tasso' also has a smack of Hamlet, another figure wrongly perceived as mad: 'I would not die / And sanction with self-slaughter the dull lie / Which snared me here' (213-15) – see *Hamlet* I, ii, 132.

That the genius, however despised or abused by his patrons and countrymen, is a member of an imaginary community recognisable only to later generations is reinforced in the stanzas of *Childe Harold* immediately preceding the translation from Filicaja. Observing, as in the preface to *The Lament of Tasso*, Ferrara's current desolation – 'a curse upon the seats / Of former sovereigns' – Byron in his guise as the narrator of *Childe Harold* IV emphasises the contrast between the pettiness of the Este dynasty and the greatness of its court poets:

> Patron or tyrant, as the changing mood
> Of petty power impell'd, of those who wore
> The wreath which Dante's brow alone had worn before. (35)

Neither the brutality of Alfonso d'Este nor the hostility of the sixteenth-century Cruscan poets and Boileau (recalled contemptuously in stanzas 36-8, with a long note by Hobhouse on the Cruscan Lionardo Salviati's motive of gaining favour with the Estensi) could prevent Tasso from receiving his rightful, if posthumous, recognition as one of the trinity of supreme Italian writers, 'paralleled by those, / Thy countrymen, before thee born to shine, the Bards of Hell and Chivalry' (*CHP*, IV, 40). Abstracted from his historical particularities, Tasso joins the exiled Florentine Dante and the Emilian-born Ferrarese Ariosto in epitomising Italian poetry. But the stability of that national identity is immediately compromised by the assertion of another poetic parallel: between Ariosto and Walter Scott. If one is 'the southern Scott, the minstrel who call'd forth / A new creation with his magic line', the other is 'the Ariosto of the North', who sings 'ladye-love and war, romance and knightly worth' (*CHP*, IV, 40). Once again, therefore, *italianità* proves separable from a specific nationality: while in the translation of Filicaja's sonnet the quality is equivalent to an attitude, in stanza 40 it is equivalent to a poetic practice. Although this is not strictly an 'Italy without Italians' – Joseph Luzzi's apt phrase for the pervasive northern European perception of Italy noted in

my first paragraph, as a land inhabited more by monuments and relics than by people[15]– it is certainly an exclusive community to which nationality is not the crucial condition of admission.

*

Such a community is what Percy Shelley envisioned as the audience of *The Prophecy of Dante*, composed in 1819-20 but published (despite Byron's importuning of John Murray) only in April 1821: 'the subject, no less than the style, is addressed to the few, and [...] will only be *fully* appreciated by the select readers of many generations'.[16] Shelley's anticipation of a transhistorical readership perhaps responds to the temporal scheme of the poem itself, which like *The Lament of Tasso* employs a 'telescoping of history' (as Carla Pomarè calls it[17]) whereby the speaker, a historical figure, makes predictions that the poem's reader, for whom the future envisaged by the speaker is now the past, knows to have been fulfilled – a technique that Dante himself had used in the *Commedia*, as had Milton in the last two books of *Paradise Lost*.[18] Future readers, Shelley must have thought, would recall past readers of *The Prophecy of Dante*, just as 'Dante' in the poem looks forward to those successors 'who will not sing in vain', namely Petrarch and the 'two greater still than he', Ariosto and Tasso (*Prophecy*, I, 9, 107). But Byron evidently hoped for a larger contemporary readership, as much Italian as English, for he conceived the poem, as his letters and conversations about it attest, to be an intervention in Italian politics: 'The time for the *Dante* would be now', he

[15] See *Romantic Europe and the Ghost of Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), chapter 2.
[16] Letter to Byron of 14 September 1821, in *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), II, p. 347.
[17] *Byron and the Discourses of History* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 138, 149.
[18] This parallel with the *Commedia* was pointed out by B. Taylor in 'Byron's Use of Dante in *The Prophecy of Dante*', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 28 (1979), 102-19 (107-8).

wrote to Murray on 17 August 1820, 'as Italy is on the eve of great things'.[19] Since an Italian translation of the fourth canto of *Childe Harold* (mentioned by Byron in the preface to *The Prophecy of Dante*) had been published within a year of the English edition, he could reasonably expect that this poem, too, once published, would be quickly translated and circulated in Italy. Hence the (slightly aggressive) apology in the preface for adopting *terza rima*, the verse form of the *Commedia*: 'I would request the Italian reader to remember that when I have failed in the imitation of his great "Padre Alighier," I have failed in imitating that which all study and few understand'.[20]

If that translation of *Childe Harold* was, as Byron claimed to Thomas Medwin, well received because Italians regarded it 'in a political light, and they indulged in [his] dream of liberty, and the resurrection of Italy', then *The Prophecy of Dante*, which Byron told Medwin 'was intended for the Italians and the Guiccioli', endorsed the cause of Italy's liberation from foreign rule more fully and explicitly.[21] Shifting focus as he proceeds from the personal in canto I to the national in canto II, Byron's Dante associates the condition of exile with a detachment from historicity: 'I am not of this people, nor this age' (I, 143). Though exiled, he is 'free' (I, 176); though mortal, he has composed a poem that will be read through the ages (I, 144-8); though no longer Tuscan, he is fully Italian (II, 19-20, 33). Estrangement from his 'native soil' (I, 41) – which Byron admitted to Medwin to be a basis of his own identification with the poet[22] – has given him 'an external life beyond [his] fate' (IV, 13), a position as it were outside history from which he acquires a vision of Italian history, not only from antiquity to the Middle Ages but beyond to the post-Napoleonic occupation: 'the veil of coming centuries / Is rent, – a thousand years which yet supine / Lie like the ocean waves ere

[19] *BLJ*, VII, p. 158.
[20] *CPW*, IV, pp. 214-5.
[21] *Medwin's Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest Lovell, Jr (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 159.
[22] Ibid., p. 158.

winds arise, / [...] Float from eternity into these eyes' (II, 35-9). This vision, which is largely a litany of war and domination by foreign powers – 'The Goth hath been, – the German, Frank, and Hun / Are yet to come' (II, 70–1) – is unified both temporally, in encompassing the past and future, and politically, in subsuming the different peoples and states of the peninsula under the single name 'Italia'. Beginning canto II by predicting his own role in unifying Italy linguistically – 'We can have but one country, and even yet / Thou'rt mine – my bones shall be within thy breast, / My soul within thy language' (II, 19-21), 'Dante' concludes the canto by addressing those to whom his predictive powers do not extend, Byron's contemporaries, with the warning that they shall not 'break the chain' of occupation and oppression unless they overcome 'Doubt and Discord' among themselves: 'we, / Her sons, may do this with *one* deed – Unite!' (IV, 138, 139, 144-5).

Speaking a foreign tongue, given to him by a foreign poet in exile from his own nation, this Dante advises future Italians to escape from their past. The poetic self he fashions in *The Prophecy of Dante*, though obviously fictional, is a product of the historical poet's posthumous reception, a process culminating in Byron's identification with him and projection of a post-Napoleonic Italian nationalism on to him. The poem's combination, whose relative novelty Byron's preface avers, of *terza rima* with the English language is singularly appropriate, for the political programme adumbrated in the 'prophecy' is equally dependent on the exiled Florentine and the self-exiled Englishman. In contrast to *The Lament of Tasso*, which implicitly grants Byron himself the role of Tasso's posthumous liberator, fulfilling the poem's prophecy with his pilgrimage to the poet's preserved cell, *The Prophecy of Dante*, which articulates a political aspiration to be realised beyond the poem's own time of composition, conveys a less affirmative, more ambivalent sense of the poetic self. If Dante requires Byron's intervention to be turned into the advocate of a free and unified Italy, then Byron in turn requires Italian literary figures of incontestable eminence to enlist as points of

reference in inculcating a sense of nationhood. The role that Byron assigns himself here is less of a liberator than of an interpreter, elaborating the political implications of a long literary tradition grounded in a shared language. It is a role whose success the 'prophecy' itself does not, because it cannot, vindicate.

*

Caroline Franklin has argued that, with his translation of the first canto of Pulci's *Morgante Maggiore*, Byron sought on the one hand to contribute to the effort of the Shelleys and Leigh Hunt to create 'a cosmopolitan canon of writers who championed liberty' as a counterweight to the politically conservative appropriation of Shakespeare and other Renaissance dramatists by Coleridge and William Gifford, and on the other hand to reclaim satiric comedy as a moral instrument from the 'pioneering anti-Jacobin wits Frere and William Stewart Rose' (one the author of a mock-heroic Arthurian adaptation of Pulci, the other a translator of Ariosto and Casti).[23] In *The Prophecy of Dante*, with an eye to an Italian as well as an English audience, Byron has Dante prophesy a canon established by the endurance of its poetry in public esteem through time and despite the suffering of the poets themselves and the hostility of their immediate contemporaries – Petrarch tormented by love (III, 202), Ariosto and Tasso subjected to 'penury and pain' (III, 151) and Dante himself, of course, '[r]ipp'd from all kindred, from all home, all things / That make communion sweet, and soften pain' (I, 164-5). What distinguishes these writers, the few who sing of liberty 'and soar upon that eagle's wing, / And look in the sun's face with eagle's gaze / All free and fearless as the feather'd king' (III, 70-2), from those whom the speaker consigns to the inferno of oblivion is a refusal

[23] 'Cosmopolitanism and Catholic Culture: Byron, Italian Poetry, and *The Liberal*', in L. Bandiera and D. Saglia (eds.), *British Romanticism and Italian Literature: Translating, Reviewing, Rewriting* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 255-68 (p. 255).

to prostitute their genius to patrons and rulers with false praise (III, 73-97).[24] Thus 'Dante', having remained unattracted by 'the tyrannous fraction, and the bawling crowd' and unwilling to 'make men's fickle breath the wind that blows / [His] sail' (I, 35, 55–6), proclaims his intellectual freedom in lines recalling Byron's assertion, in canto III of *Childe Harold*, that

> I have not loved the world, nor the world me;
> I have not flattered its rank breath, nor bow'd
> To its idolatries a patient knee. (113)

Petrarch, Dante foresees, will receive the laureate's crown not only for his love poetry but for 'his higher song / Of Freedom' (III, 104-5).

In this way, but also in others, *The Prophecy of Dante* is more fully engaged than *The Lament of Tasso* with Italian literature and history. Written at Teresea Guiccioli's request (as the preface obliquely informs us) and possibly in response to Giuseppe Bossi's poetic appeal of 1817 to Byron to take up the cause of 'Italia oppressa' (as Peter Vassallo suggests), the poem makes numerous references to passages in Dante's writings (some noted by Byron himself).[25] The patriotic sentiment, 'I would have had my Florence great and free' (II, 59), for example, alludes to the famous *canzone* in which the personifications of divine and human justice and the law, having themselves been banished from the world, comfort Dante and prompt him to consider his exile an honour – 'l'essilio che m'è dato, onor mi tengo' ('the exile that is inflicted on me, I hold as an honour'). The rhetorical question, 'What have I done

[24] One can easily imagine that Byron had Southey in mind when he composed the condemnation of poetical flatterers in canto III, and doubtless he did; but Thomas Moore records an omitted tercet – 'The prostitution of his Muse and wife, / [...] Shall shalt his bread and gives him means of life' – about a living Italian poet, certainly Vincenzo Monti, whom Byron had met and considered the 'Judas of Parnassus' because of his political temporising (*Life, Letters, and Journals of Lord Byron* (London: John Murray, 1838), p. 438). See also Byron's letter to Teresa Guiccioli of 7 August 1820, in *BLJ*, VII, p. 151.

[25] See *CPW*, IV, p. 214 and Vassallo, *Byron: The Italian Literary Influence*, pp. 35-6. Byron was sent a copy of Bossi's pseudonymously published *Versi*, including 'Al Lord Byron, celebre poeta inglese', in June 1817.

to thee, my people?' (IV, 141), is a direct translation from a letter attributed to Dante by his humanist biographer Leonardo Bruni. And the antepenultimate and penultimate tercets (IV, 145-50), in which the speaker anticipates never returning to Florence, are reminiscent of another letter expressing Dante's willingness to remain permanently in exile rather than pay for a pardon from the Florentine government.[26] Beyond its reliance on Dante's own works, *The Prophecy of Dante* adheres closely to Giulio Perticari's 1819 defence, in *Dell'Amor patrio di Dante*, of the poet as a patriot despite his bitter invectives against his fellow Florentines; and it implicitly aligns Alfieri (who had died in 1803) with a Dantean opposition to tyranny by alluding in the preface to the Piedmontese poet's sonnet on Dante's tomb ('O gran Padre Alighier') and in canto III (lines 80-3) to his refusal, recounted in his autobiography, to meet the king of Sardinia in 1784 because 'one who enters a tyrant's house makes himself a slave'.[27] But for all its engagement with Italian texts and historical figures, the poem's prophecy does not include the realisation of the ideal on whose behalf it enlists the great national poets, Italy's self-liberation from foreign domination.

The disjunction between political vision and action is one of several that haunt the poem. 'Dante' anticipates a two-fold compensation for his involuntary exile from Florence, one personal in the vindication of his cultural centrality, the other national in the establishment of an independent Italy. Although the former is affirmed (if through the agency of a foreign poet) in the literary vision at the centre of canto III, its desired connection to the latter – the linguistically unifying poetry of Dante and his chosen successors inspiring the political unification of Italy – is questioned at both the beginning and the end of the canto. If the broader compensation, not being clearly foreseeable, must be deferred till the arrival of a

[26] Dante, *Rime* no. 47 ('Tre donne intorno al cor'), 76, in *Opere minori*, ed. D. de Robertis *et al*. (Milan: Ricciardi, 1979-84), I, pp. 454-9 (see also Byron's note on Dante, in *CPW*, IV, p. 141); *Epistole*, no. 12, in *Opere minori*, II, p. 596.

[27] Alfieri, *Vita*, ed. Giulio Cattaneo (Milan: Garzanti, 2000), p. 224. The poem's connections with Perticari and Alfieri are examined by Vassallo, *Byron: The Italian Literary Influence*, pp. 30-8.

'being – and even yet he may be born – / The mortal saviour who shall set thee free' (III, 53-4), then how comforting can the narrower compensation be? Must a 'heritage enriching all who breathe / With the wealth of a genuine poet's soul' (III, 154-5) be its own 'recompense' (III, 165), because it is 'the whole / Of such men's destiny beneath the sun' (III, 159-60)? The canto ends without contradicting the melancholy thought that poetry makes nothing happen.

Canto III thus enacts within itself the disjunction between the hopeful exhortations of canto II, which assume the imminent possibility of the expulsion of the Austrians from Italian territory, and the sober reflections of canto IV, in which 'Dante', foreseeing Julius II's ill-treatment of Michelangelo, concedes the inability of art, even that created by geniuses, to inspire moral change in tyrants, 'who but take her for a toy' (VI, 85). The appearance in this canto of the Renaissance pope as a self-serving artistic patron makes more striking the omission in canto II of the Catholic Church as a temporal power adamantly opposed to revolutionary movements on the peninsula – indeed, Romagna was one of the territories restored to papal rule by the Congress of Vienna and Austrian troops were permitted to garrison in Ferrara and Comacchio to suppress any uprising in the papal territory.[28] Though it suited his propagandistic purposes to present Italy as a land oppressed by the puppet princes and occupying armies of foreign states, particularly Austria, Byron was scarcely unaware – especially given his role in 1820-1 as an unofficial intermediary between the Ravenna Carbonari and Count Giuseppe Alborghetti, the secretary to the papal legate of Romagna – that the national liberation he supported required rebellion also against the reactionary power at the country's very heart. And if the poem avoids implicating the Church directly in Italy's post-Napoleonic condition, the appeal at the end of canto II, quoted earlier, to overcome

[28] See C. Duggan, *The Force of Destiny: A History of Italy since 1796* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), pp. 74-5. Byron's assumption, confided to his journal on 20 February 1821, that the pope's anathema against the Carbonari (shown to him by Alborghetti before its publication) would encourage 'a general and immediate rise of the whole nation' proved unfounded (*BLJ*, VIII, pp. 48-9).

internal division still acknowledges the inadequacy of the dichotomy between Italians and foreigners asserted earlier in the canto's narrative of the country's history. When discord among Italians themselves, as in the civil strife characteristic of the city-states of Dante's time (which increased their vulnerability to foreign intervention) or the fractiousness of the Carboneria in Byron's time, constitutes a major obstacle to their constituting themselves as a nation, how stable a category is Italian nationality?

Unsurprisingly, *The Prophecy of Dante* concludes not with a triumphant vision of national unity, but with the relatively modest hope that the poet himself will be acknowledged by a prophet long after his death, even if his prophecy itself has been ignored:

> I may not overleap the eternal bar
> Built up between us, and will die alone,
> Beholding, with the dark eye of a seer,
> The evil days to gifted souls foreshown,
> Foretelling them to those that will not hear,
> As in the old time [i.e., Dante's own], till the hour be come
> When Truth shall strike their eyes through many a tear,
> And make them own the Prophet in his tomb. (IV,148–54)

Stephen Cheeke has sensitively analysed the ambiguity in the last line of the verb 'own', which conveys a sense both of recognition – Italians identifying themselves as such in confirming Dante to be their national poet – and of possession.[29] From the perspective of the poem's speaker, such possession consists in a future generation's reclaiming of him from his exile by unifying Italy, but from Byron's perspective it consists in appropriating Dante and transforming him into an advocate for a political vision of which the Florentine was assuredly innocent. 'The dust she', Italy, 'dooms to scatter' (I, 75) is transferred to *The Prophecy of*

[29] *Byron and Place: History, Translation, Nostalgia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), p. 136.

Dante and, as it were, then thrown back in the faces of Dante's countrymen. On 7 September 1820 Byron wrote to Murray that 'the Huns [Austrians] are on the Po – but if once they pass it on their march to Naples – all Italy will rise behind them [...]. If you want to publish the Prophecy of Dante – you will never have a better time'.[30] But if, as Cheeke argues, 'Dante's' anticipation of future vindication embodies Byron's 'fantasy of success for his poem with an Italian audience' – and he did write to Hobhouse on 17 October 1820 that the Carbonari rebellion in Naples had 'acted as an Advertisement' for the poem[31] – the defensive preface betrays an anxiety about ventriloquising the national poet in his own verse form in order to encourage his countrymen to accomplish a political objective that, at the time, Byron wished for them more than they wished for themselves.[32]

On 24 February 1821, Austrian troops having in fact crossed the Po and marched south through the papal lands towards Naples, Byron received intelligence that the Neapolitan rebellion had collapsed, its leaders betrayed and the populace unmoved: 'thus the Italians are always lost for lack of unity among themselves'.[33] By 1 May whatever hope he may have entertained that he might become poetically or militarily a 'mortal saviour' of Italy was definitively dashed, as his journal entry confirms,[34] and in July Teresa Guiccioli's brother and father, who had initiated Byron into the Ravenna Carbonari, were condemned to Dante's own fate of exile from their native territory (although in their case *to* Florence). The sense of urgency with which Byron had encouraged the publication of *The Prophecy of Dante* in the autumn of 1820 was lost by the time the poem was actually published on 21 April 1821 in the same volume as *Marino Faliero*, rather than, as Byron had urged in January of that year, with

[30] *BLJ*, VII, p. 172.
[31] *BLJ*, VII, p. 205.
[32] Duggan observes that the revolutions in Naples, Piedmont, and Lombardy in 1820-1 failed in part because their well-born leaders, mostly officers or intellectuals, had failed to secure the support of the local populations (see *The Force of Destiny*, pp. 83-5).
[33] Journal entry for 24 February 1821, in *BLJ*, VIII, p. 49.
[34] Journal entry for 1 May 1821, in *BLJ*, VIII, p. 106.

his translation of Pulci.[35] But he remained proud of the translation, which he boasted was 'the very best thing I ever wrote',[36] and was exasperated by Murray's prevarications concerning the work's publication, on account of Pulci's supposed indecency and irreligion.[37] Composed between late October 1819 and late February 1820, it was eventually published, accompanied by the Italian text, not by Murray but by John Hunt in the fourth and final issue of *The Liberal* in April 1823.

*

In contrast to *The Lament of Tasso* and *The Prophecy of Dante*, in which the English poet effectively grants himself at least as prominent a role as those of the Italian poets he ventriloquises, the *Morgante Maggiore* is, as Byron's editor E. H. Coleridge described it, 'the offering of a disciple to a master'.[38] If in the two dramatic monologues Byron sought to present his claim to *italianità* by justifying Dante and Tasso posthumously against their contemporary Italian antagonists, in the *Morgante* he sought, as Vassallo argues, indirectly to justify the style of *Don Juan*, the first two cantos of which had been criticised by reviewers as impious, by presenting as directly as his translating skills permitted Pulci's 'half-serious rhyme' (*DJ*, IV, 6).[39] Referring in his advertisement for the poem, perhaps written in response to Murray's anxieties about the translation, to the recent Pulcian adaptations of J. H. Merivale (*Orlando in Roncesvalles*, published in 1814) and Frere (*Whistlecraft*, published in 1817), Byron designated the Italian poet 'the founder of a new style of poetry lately sprung

[35] Letter to John Murray of 19 January 1821, in *BLJ*, VIII, p. 65.
[36] Letter to John Murray of 12 September 1821, in *BLJ*, VIII, p. 206.
[37] See Byron's letters to Murray of 23 April 1820 and 1 March 1821, in *BLJ*, VII, p. 83, VIII, p. 86.
[38] Introduction to the *Morgante*, *The Works of Lord Byron*, ed. E. H. Coleridge and R. E. Prothero (London: John Murray, 1898-1904), IV, p. 280 (quoted by McGann, in *CPW*, IV, p. 509).
[39] Vassallo, *Byron: The Italian Literary Influence*, pp. 151-3.

up in England'.[40] But unlike both Frere, who preserved Pulci's humour but carefully avoided his engagement with religious topics, and Merivale, who did more nearly the opposite, Byron conveyed as a totality Pulci's combination of levity and seriousness, a combination that Ugo Foscolo, in an article published in English in 1819, attributed to the desire to 'adhere to the forms and subjects of the popular story-tellers' while simultaneously rendering such materials 'interesting and sublime'.[41]

In the poem's advertisement Byron addresses Pulci's irreverence explicitly in terms that were consistent with, even if not influenced by, Foscolo's argument. That the poet ridiculed monastic life does not demonstrate him to be irreligious, for neither the poet nor the poem would have fared well had the humour at the expense of religious figures been interpreted in Pulci's time or subsequently as derision of the Catholic religion itself.[42] The poem's juxtaposition of the sacred and the secular, of solemnity and jocularity, was its solution to the difficulty referred to in the Horatian epigraph to canto I of *Don Juan*, namely of finding a way to speak suitably of common things ('Difficile est proprie communia dicere'), which in fifteenth-century Italy obviously included religion. Aligning the Italian poet with Fielding and Scott in the treatment of religious figures, describing him almost as if he were an English poet, Byron implies that Pulci had anticipated a serio-comic style that British writers since the mid-eighteenth century were beginning to make their own. The implications of this defence of the *Morgante* for the reception of *Don Juan* remain unstated, however, for Byron is at pains in his advertisement, as indeed in the translation itself, to subordinate himself to Pulci. While the first paragraph of the advertisement suggests that the Italian poet may be closer to British writers than is evident from his tone, the second paragraph modestly claims that his translator may be further from a mastery of Italian than is evident from the

[40] *CPW*, IV, p. 247.
[41] 'Narrative and Romantic Poems of the Italians', in Foscolo, *Opere*, ed. Franco Gavazzeni (Milan: Ricciardi, 1981), II, pp. 1567-1726 (p. 1646).
[42] See *CPW*, IV, p. 247.

translation: Byron 'was induced to make the experiment partly by his love for, and partial intercourse with, the Italian language, of which it is so easy to acquire a slight knowledge, and with which it is so nearly impossible for a foreigner to become accurately conversant'.[43] But just as Byron seems to reassert the national and linguistic boundaries that his first paragraph called into question, he introduces a subtle ambiguity in his final sentence:

> The translator wished also to present in an English dress a part at least of a poem never yet rendered into a northern language; at the same time that it has been the original of some of the most celebrated productions on this side of the Alps, as well as of those recent experiments in poetry in England, which have already been mentioned.[44]

Leaving unmentioned his own ongoing experiment in poetry, published on the northern side of the Alps – the fourth canto of which, published in 1821, acknowledged Pulci as 'the sire of the half-serious rhyme' (*DJ*, IV, 6) and a model – Byron locates himself on the southern side, thus allowing *Don Juan* to be understood as one of those 'most celebrated productions' of a literary heritage extending back to Pulci through Tasso and Ariosto. The division between Englishman and Italian is blurred, though not wholly effaced, as Byron simultaneously affirms his foreignness with respect to the Italian language and his sense of belonging to Italy, to 'this side of the Alps'. It was not by representing an Italian poet to Italians but by mediating an Italian poem to the English that Byron was able to construct a truly cosmopolitan poetic identity for himself in Italy.

[43] *CPW*, IV, p. 248.
[44] Ibid.