

The Romantic Reception of Dante and the Configuration of “Europe”*

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That Dante was an inspiring significance and held in high esteem by the English Romantics is well established. William Hazlitt bestowed on Dante the appellation “the father of modern poetry” (17), while Shelley declared that Dante united the ancient and the modern worlds as “the first awakener of entranced Europe” (499). Less clearly documented, however, is the intriguing coincidence of the Romantic admiration of Dante and the configuration of the concept of “Europe,” though less “Europe” in the sense of a constructed collective identity than as a rebirth of new nations. Acclaimed via the validating hallmarks of “modern” and “Europe,” Dante’s centralization grew not only as the consensual originator of Italian poetry, but also as an initiating force behind modern European literature.

The Romantic terrain of modern Europe was to be identified within integrated national cultures and, simultaneously, as Shelley defines it, as “one great mind” (493), where different national bodies of knowledge formulated an intellectual circulation of ideas as if they were organs functioning within a larger body of organizations. Europe was to be consolidated by the coexistence of the universal and the particular, having clearly delineated and wide trajectories within which to circulate diverse ideas.

From this perspective, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* was designated as completely modern in that, as Coleridge argues, “the Whole . . . is altogether a Feeling, in which all the thousand several impressions lose themselves as in a universal Solvent” (qtd. in Zuccato 95). Through the Romantic creation and endorsement of a modern Dante, I argue that Europe was redefined and redirected towards a new formation of individuality and nationhood.

I

Ugo Foscolo, one of the most influential voices in the transformation of Dante into the first great European poet, provided a succinct justification of a burgeoning commentary on the *Comedy* in the February 1818 issue of the *Edinburgh Review*:

Perhaps our observations may suggest a new method of undertaking, with more advantage, a work which we think necessary, not only to Italy, but to other nations; because it is in the age of Dante, and principally from the influence of his genius, that we may date the commencement of the literary history of Europe. (Review 454)

Foscolo’s critical interest was largely based on locating Dante studies in the context of European literary history, and he prepared the way for the Florentine to stand as the first poet to galvanize early nineteenth-century critics into specifying the modernity of European literature.

In a letter to Foscolo on 8 May of 1818, Francis Jeffrey touches significantly on a new European taste:

I am not so ignorant of Mr. Foscolo’s character as to feel any *surprise* at the vivacity of his fancy or the graces of his style — but I confess I was not quite prepared for a taste so little marked with any national peculiarity as to appear even in this distant land not so much a foreign as an

European one. . . ." (Foscolo, *Epistolario* 317-18; italics in original).

The term "Europe" or "European" emerges just as a new sensibility in approaches to literary history was being embraced (Braida 67).

Conventionally, "Europe" might have connoted the geographical and historical unity of the major states, countries, and empires of the continent. As Henry Hallam noted in his *View of the State of Europe during the Middle Ages*, early political harmony or discord became the conditions within a Europe of established states. Specifying the invasion of Naples by Charles VIII, Hallam argues that it was "the event that first engaged the principal states of Europe in relations of alliance or hostility which may be deduced to the present day" (vi-v). However, in the wake of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, the preeminent national and political concerns became focused on the reorganization of European nations. Once again, Europeans were faced with the complex ideological process of re-constituting their own nation states. Therefore, the contemporary question of political organization ran parallel to the emerging ideas for a definition of European literature (Fairer 5). The Romantic rediscovery of Dante was at the heart of generating this definition, while the poet also gained a fresh ascendancy in the fashioning of the continent's new and developing countries.

It is worth noting that until the early nineteenth century, Dante's poetry had been construed as the grotesque and the gloomy framed with a compound of heterogeneous genres and discourses. The contemporaneous moment was marked by endorsement of literary criteria of the French school, which was attentive to formalistic unity, stressing harmony, proportion and decorum. Therefore, the Romantic evaluation of Dante provided a turning point to veer the impression of the Gothic Dante to the father of modern poetry (Cignatta 71-73). As the Italian critic, Francesco Torti argued, the *Divine Comedy* could be perceived as a new kind of poetry, not rooted in neo-classical conventions. Torti centralizes Dante's originality: "Dante invented a new kind of poem, as he did a new genre of poetry; he is as original in his plot as he is in the details of the execution; he is the creator of his ideas, as he is of the language with which he expresses them" (429).

The overwhelming breadth of the great medieval epic's poetic invention is further acclaimed in the extended metaphors of Foscolo's review:

The poem of Dante is like an immense forest, venerable for its antiquity, and astonishing by the growth of trees which seem to have sprung up at once to their gigantic height by the force of nature, aided *by some unknown art*. (454; italics in original)

The *Comedy*, posited here as a natural, even supernatural, force, is dramatically proclaimed as the advent of a poetry attributed to "*some unknown art*," engendering the birth of a new literary paradigm, and dynamically disrupting the soil which embeds the classical literary heritage. By way of remarkable contiguity with the commitment to the re-positioning of Dante comes Francis Palgrave's chauvinistic symbolism in the interests of sustaining the English literary tradition:

It has been our good fortune, that the canonical succession of genius among us has never been interrupted, but has been transmitted, in regular descent, from the first fathers of poetry and eloquence, to the present inheritors of their glories. . . . The rugged and moss-grown oaks of the sacred forest are still standing in green old age, in the midst of the towering and vigorous stems which have sprung from the same roots, and have been nourished in the same healthy soil. (305)

Just as the nationalistic construction of English literary history was established in the post-Napoleonic period, so Palgrave's "sacred forest" is given the Burkean emphasis of "roots" and "soil." Against the homogeneous formulation of national taste, Italian poetry is seen to exhibit "unknown" and foreign qualities, which could plant the new, alternative roots of "European" taste in English soil.

Moreover, it is this "unknown" mode of the *Comedy* that articulates the modernity of European literature. Beyond the dismissive references to the lack of decorum in the *Comedy*, Romantic critics confirmed Dante's originality by acknowledging the intensity of his passion and individuality.¹ Friedrich Schelling recognizes Dante's "absolute individuality" in the supremacy of the artistic and cultural

achievement of the *Comedy* (411), despite the parameters governing its creation:

[T]he individual gives shape and unity to that portion of the world which is revealed to him [Dante], and out of the materials of his time, its history, and its science, creates his own mythology." (412)

Coleridge's approach to Dante is in alignment with that of Schelling, and finds the origins of modern poetry in "subjectivity":

And it is this inwardness or subjectivity, which principally and most fundamentally distinguishes all the classic from all the modern poetry. (442)

These analyses in the service of establishing Dante's modernity aimed to determine an individuality rooted in history and in the culture of his age. By locating modernity in the subjective expression of feeling, rather than in a lack of sophistication, Romantic criticism instigated a new European literature.

More importantly, the modernity attributed to the *Comedy* preserves the interaction between the personal and the universal; Foscolo declared the universal applicability of Dante's individuality:

He has brought together those of both sexes—of all religions—of all occupations—of all nations—and of all ages; yet he never takes them in masses—he always presents them as individuals. (Review 457)

Dante's universal quality is not only based on the comprehensive range of his concerns, but also derives from the energy and passion to highlight and record the individuality of his own age. The poem's intensity of feeling, and the deep attachment to the individual is not antithetical to a universal vision. As Schelling argued, "the peculiar excellence of each separate part is authenticated and recognized only through its harmony with the whole" (419). Coleridge also referred to Dante's profundity of feeling conjoined with "the universal feeling" (444), observing that "[i]n this canto [canto III of the *Inferno*] all the images are distinct, and even vividly distinct; but there is a total impression of infinity; the wholeness is not in vision or conception, but in an inner feeling of totality, and absolute being" (445).

Vitality, the Romantic critics saw the *Comedy* as an intense articulation of the particular on the one hand, and a dynamic expression of universality on the other. Therefore, in the argument about modernity and the redefinition of European literature, the harmonious correspondence between the particular and the universal raised an all-important issue, which infiltrated the debates surrounding the political reshaping of the modern European nation-state in the post-Napoleonic period, this being the crucial resolution of conflict, and then rapprochement between nationalistic political claims and the more general totalizing claims for a common European culture. The literary and political issues of the particular and the universal were embedded in the overlapping discourses concerning the single state and the autonomous self (Bone 126).

At the same time, the above contemporary issues might be linked to the German idealist theory of organicism, which in turn evokes the historical binaries of the Enlightenment mechanisms ranged against Romantic organicism. As David Fairer argues, the junction between German idealism and British Romanticism continues to endorse such ideas as transcendence and formal unity by using organicism as a powerful myth of creative imagination (15-17). However, I wish to propose alternatively the emergence of the interdependent concepts of the part and the whole as grounded in the empirical imperative of the *Comedy*.² Rather than being based on an abstract notion of organization, Dante's strength of poetic imagery and distinctive similes acquire a completeness of vision derived from physical and emotional sensation, which renders the cosmos of the *Comedy* its great sympathy.

Reference to the extravagant passions and feelings in the *Comedy* thrives in the criticism from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century. Eighteenth century critics such as Joseph Warton and William Hayley employed the term "pathetic" to explain the emotional effects aroused in the reader, with the pathetic contingent on the sublime (Crisafulli 106). Warton identified the originality and sublimity of the *Inferno*, asserting:

[P]erhaps the *Inferno* of Dante is the next composition to the *Iliad*, in point of originality and

sublimity. And with regard to the Pathetic, let this tale stand as a testimony of his abilities: (203) Hayley observes a "Pathetic Tenderness" in Dante as he maintains "his wild Vision" (3.100, 81). This revised approach to reading Dante in the late eighteenth century reclaimed intensity and passion, culminating in the pathetic rather than the gloomy and the obscure.

A meld of "bold inventions" and "ludicrous excesses" became a reconfiguration of the *Comedy* throughout the eighteenth century, which developed as a dynamic of the new mode of poetry for the early nineteenth century (Caesar 402). Coleridge declares in his comments on Dante that "you may perceive that the faults of great authors are generically excellencies carried to an excess" (447). Hazlitt, similarly, discerns the unity of "the absolutely local and individual with greatest wildness and mysticism" in the excessive poetic visions which are to form the Romantic imagination (18).

II

Keats's *Hyperion* project, by way of major example, is a serious attempt to appropriate the superlative poetic authority of the *Comedy* by endorsing Dante's intensive imagery of physical and emotional sensation. In other words, Keats's aesthetic preoccupations in *Hyperion* afford a crucial insight to construe the integration between the particular and the universal in Dante's *Inferno*. In his own epic venture of *Hyperion*, Keats was to gauge the antithesis between awesome dignity of the fallen Titans and pathos in their painful suffering. Keats's oscillating poetics between the sublime and the pathetic signifies what the poet sees as the historical existence of human beings. In doing so, Keats seemed to recast the dignity of the Titans invoked by Miltonic sublime into the human pathos deeply buried in Dantean physical imagery by visually constructing corporeal representation of the ancient Gods.³ The heavy physicality of the Titans and the repulsiveness of their bodies are presented through a series of medical and scientific tropes:

Dungeon'd in opaque element, to keep
Their clenched teeth still clench'd, and all their limbs
Lock'd up like veins of metal, cramp't and screw'd;
Without a motion, save of their big hearts
Heaving in pain, and horribly convuls'd
With sanguine feverous boiling gurge of pulse. (*Hyperion* 2.23-28)

Keats's imagery of deformed bodies closely interacts with the tormented figures in Cary's translation of the *Inferno*:

From out the mouth
Of every one emerged a sinner's feet,
And of the legs high upward as the calf.
The rest beneath was hid. On either foot
The soles were burning; whence the flexile joints
Glanced with such violent motion, as had snapped
Asunder cords or twisted withes. As flame,
Feeding on unctuous matter, glides along
The surface, scarcely touching where it moves;
So here, from heel to point, glided the flames. (19.23-32)

The imagery resonates in Keats, sharing the significant features of the fragmentation of bodily parts into "calf," "legs," or "joints" and the "violent motion" of convulsion. The overtly corporeal visions represent an imaginative sphere in which we perceive the empirical sensation imbued with the Romantic truth of human pathos.

Echoing the *Inferno*'s "a gloomy wood" where Dante finds himself "astray / Gone from the path direct" (1.2-3), the beginning of *Hyperion* restates Cary's version of the gateway to everlasting torment:

Deep in the shady sadness of a vale

Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,
 Far from the fiery noon, and eve's one star,
 Sat grey-hair'd Saturn, quiet as a stone,
 Still as the silence round about his lair; (1.1-5)

The Titans communicate their loss of power not in speech, but through their suffering materiality. Divested of immortality, they emerge rather as palpable, visible human bodies with a corporality strongly reminiscent of the *Inferno*.

In fact, Keats celebrated the brief sensuous moment of Dante's similes in the margin of Cary's translation of the *Inferno* with double line-markings (Gittings 144-61). For example, Keats marked the lines in the Canto xiv in the *Inferno* (Gittings 152), where in the burning sand, the sinners were being tormented with the fire, within which a short and beautiful simile embroiders the gloomy scene:

for on the earth some lay supine,
 Some crouching close were seated, others paced
 Incessantly around; the latter tribe
 More numerous, those fewer who beneath
 The torment lay, but louder in their grief.
 O'er all the sand fell slowly wafting down
 Dilated flakes of fire, as flakes of snow
 On Alpine summit, when the wind is hushed (14.20-27)

Terror in the scene of falling flakes of fire is mitigated by the simile of "flakes of snow." As Ralph Pite discerns, Keats frequently attends to the similes in Cary which offer reminiscence of "earthly existence" (135), inscribing such imagery as "brief pathos" in his marginalia to Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Cook 343). Indeed, in his search for "brief pathos," Keats seemed to derive the greatest force from Dante's comprehensive descriptions of physicality, which he in turn applies to the frailty and pathos of human mortality. For Keats, the pathetic qualities of Dantean bodily imagery articulate the intense particularity of the experience of human suffering. This somatic language fosters a communal rather than an autonomous realm grounded in the implicit demands of physicality.

Therefore, the key conception of the correspondence between the particular and the general is devoid of hierarchy. Moreover, Dante's integration between the particular and the universal resides in the intensity of visual imagery entangled with the physicality. As Thomas Macaulay put it in *The Edinburgh Review* (Milbank 25), Dante provides "the exact details" (316). Tactile, physical details are witnessed as virtues: "He [Dante] gives us the shape, the colour, the sound, the smell the taste; he counts the numbers; he measures the size. His similes are the illustrations of a traveler" (316). Macaulay continued: "Dante is the eyewitness and earwitness of that which he relates. He is the very man who has heard the tormented spirits crying out for the second death" (317). The Romantics inaugurated a new paradigm which embraced the Dantean correlation between the particular and the universal through the sensation of empirical and phenomenal vision.⁴

Intriguingly, the Romantic poetry adapted from the *Comedy* mirrors the epic's expansiveness. Dante does not only proleptically assemble various inventions and perspectives for the formation of modern European literature, but is also positioned by the Dante movement as going beyond the hierarchical traits of fixed meanings, established genres, languages, and parochial landscapes. The erasure of certain established limits could be extended to wider cultural, geographical and physical contexts so as to promote the redefinition of "Europe." Above all, it was possible to envision a newly liberated Europe superimposed over the "unknown" land of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

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Notes

1. The debate persisted for Harold Bloom: "Dante imposes his personality on us." See Bloom 3.
2. David Fairer proposes a native eighteenth-century "organic" as an informing empirical concept in his examination of the Lockean tradition of consciousness: "the eighteen-century organic celebrates mixture, not purity," considering "juxtaposition and superimposition as being truer reflections of human experience." See Fairer 1-12. In discussion of the particular and the universal, Paul Stock focuses on Shelley's poems, specifying the poet's general application of Greek history and culture into all places and periods and especially European culture. See Stock 121-47.
3. On my more specific remarks on Dantean physical imagery in *Hyperion*, see Mie Gotoh, "Visuality and Corporeality in the Aesthetics of Feeling: Dante and Poetic Innovation in Keats's *Hyperion*." *Studies in English Literature*, vol. 94, 2017, pp. 1-20.
4. Alternatively, the Romantic appropriation of the *Comedy* could also be seen as behind the revision of a less corporeal, but more of spiritual tone of Dante's infernal vision of suffering, as in Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*. However, even here, the physicality and disfigurement of the frenzied crowd need to be acknowledged.

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