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Byron's Catholic Dante

Alan Rawes

Byron opens *The Prophecy of Dante* with Dante freshly returned from 'God's own skies' (I, 5). This is to place Dante's religion centre stage from the outset, and is not a neutral move. Dante's religion – and especially his Catholicism – was a controversial aspect of the poet that was carefully skirted around both in Britain and elsewhere across Europe. The Romantic period, in Britain and continental Europe, saw a rediscovery but also a considerable reinvention of Dante. In Britain, Dante's politics were foregrounded, while his Catholicism was largely erased. Byron's depiction of Dante is certainly political, and as such of its time. But Byron's emphasis on Dante's Catholicism alongside his politics is not, and this makes Byron's Dante distinctive. This essay aims to spotlight this fact and some of its implications, and will argue in particular that in this distinctive approach to Italy's 'national' poet we learn something fundamental about how Byron read not just Dante but Italian literature more generally – and why he did so.

*

The British Romantic-period side-stepping of Dante's Catholicism is striking and widespread. In 1802, with the first of two translations of *La Divina Commedia* that laid the foundations for the Romantic rediscovery of Dante in Britain, Henry Boyd 'popularised a certain image of Dante' that 'tends to eliminate the autobiographical aspect of Dante's journey and render it a less threatening romance narrative' through, in particular, a 'simplification of Dante's theology'. Boyd's 'preliminary essays', for example, separate 'the [Catholic] superstitions that led the Crusaders to rescue the Holy land' from the 'underlying Christian message' of the Crusades, 'suggesting alternative Protestant interpretations' in a 'domestication of a foreign text' aimed at 'render[ing] the source text acceptable' to Boyd's 'Protestant readers'.[1]

In the wake of Boyd's translation,

> the British reception of Dante was mostly controlled by the Whigs. Crisafulli cogently emphasises the role of Whig critics in promoting a Protestant reading of Dante inspired by his anti-papal invective.[2]

This 'anti-papal invective' could be put to more general political uses. The second of these two foundational Dante translations – Henry Francis Cary's – was published in 1814 and then reprinted in 1819 with a 'Life of Dante', 'Chronological View' of his 'Age' and extensive footnotes. In Cary's translation and 'Life', 'Dante's Catholicism and the religious significance of his allegory are toned down' – Cary 'echoes Boyd's utter rejection of the concept of purgation of the souls', for example – and even the translation's title, *A Vision*, 'as Ralph Pite has pointed out […] seems to have endorsed the eighteenth-century meaning of the word as fiction or dream rather than as "religious experience"'.[3] Cary goes further than Boyd here, though – pushing Boyd's 'Protestant' Dante closer to a Whiggish, political Dante in a medieval world oppressed by Catholicism – the 'zealous and fearless advocate' of 'what he considered the cause of civil and religious liberty',[4] 'opposing papal encroachments as well as French intervention in foreign affairs',[5] and championing 'that higher freedom, which is seated in the will'.[6]

'Anti-papal' here becomes anti-oppression and pro-liberty. And after these translations and their accompanying commentaries, the 'first significant appreciation of Dante by a Romantic critic' was William Hazlitt's,[7] in a review of Simonde de Sismondi's *De la Littérature du Midi de l'Europe* in *The Edinburgh Review* in 1815. Hazlitt agrees with Cary on Dante's emphasis on the 'will' – 'Dante is nothing but power, passion, self will', says Hazlitt – but his way of avoiding the issue of Dante's Catholicism is not so much to tone it down as to largely ignore it:

> The subject, then, which Dante chose for his immortal poem, […] the three kingdoms of the dead, hell, purgatory, and paradise, was in that age most popular of all; at once the most profoundly religious, and the most closely allied to the love of country, of glory, and of party-feelings, inasmuch as all the illustrious dead were to appear on this extraordinary theatre; and in short, by its immensity, the most lofty sublime of any which the mind of man has ever conceived.[8]

Though Hazlitt concedes that Dante's 'subject' is 'profoundly religious', that is all he does – crowding Dante's religion out with politics ('love of country' and 'party-feeling'), 'theatre' and the 'lofty sublime'. And though the word 'glory' might glance at some religious aspect to this sublimity, it is emptied of all content whatsoever as Dante's 'imagination peoples the shades of death, and broods over the barren vastnesses of illimitable space'.[9]

However, for Thomas L. Cooksey, 1818 saw a marked 'transformation' of Dante's 'fate' in Britain that was

> in part a result of the cultural ambience of that time, but it is also in part the result of the popularizing work of three men: Henry Francis Cary, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Ugo Foscolo. In a very real sense, these men were not Dante's promoters or propagators as much as they were his creators. They conditioned the Florentine's nineteenth-century reception by transforming him into their own images, fabricating a 'Romantic' Dante.[10]

Coleridge was rather more sympathetic to Dante's Christianity than either Cary or Foscolo. Coleridge wrote about Dante in *Biographia Litteraria* in 1817, which Byron read in the same year,[11] and spoke on the *Divine Comedy* in two lectures in February 1818 and March 1819, which Byron did not attend but about which he might have had reports from, among others, Samuel Rogers, who attended both.[12] We do not have the texts of these lectures, but we do have Coleridge's notes, and can piece together something of Coleridge's argument.[13] Indeed, Antonella Braida has attempted to do precisely this, also drawing on what Coleridge says in *Biographia Litteraria*, and concludes that, though Coleridge 'offers' the *Divine Comedy* 'as an example of the successful union of faith and verse' he also 'finds fault in the union of poetry with doctrine' in the poem, and that, though he 'does not express reservations on the poet's Catholicism', his primary concern is with 'his approach to allegory'. In *Biographia Litteraria*, Braida adds, Coleridge is interested in Dante's 'imaginative' and 'picturesque' power, but also his 'love of liberty and genuine reformation'. Ultimately, Braida points to two possible subjects of at least one of Coleridge's Dante lectures that are suggested by his notes and *Biographia Litteraria*: 'the political involvement and partisanship of Dante and Milton and their different use of images'. Overall, says Braida, 'Coleridge's criticism significantly reinforced the eighteenth-century association of the *Divine Comedy* with the epic tradition by attenuating the crucial issue of the poet's Catholicism'.[14]

Foscolo produced two review articles for *The Edinburgh Review* in 1818 (published in February and September) that 'supplied the English reading public with a new critical approach to the *Divine Comedy*' rooted in Foscolo's intimate knowledge of the 'political readings of the poet [that] abound' in nineteenth-century Italy, and especially those that 'see Dante as the anticlerical scourge of the Pope' and 'supporter of the Empire' – 'in a word, a neo-Ghibelline'.[15] Indeed,

> Foscolo's presence in England after 1816 was extremely influential in promoting a lay, or neo-Ghibelline reading of Dante. Crisafulli has pointed out the significance of Foscolo's anticlericalism which made him particularly welcome in Lord Holland's Whig circle and promoted his own and Dante's reputation despite persistent opposition to Roman Catholicism.[16]

Foscolo, then, gives us a third context for Byron's foregrounding of both Dante's religion alongside those of British literary culture and British political culture (and especially the Whig side of this[17]). This third context is an Italian one – Foscolo was not simply part of, or simply writing for, the British literary scene. He was also enmeshed, though from a distance, in the contemporary Italian literary and political scenes. And in Foscolo's essays, Dante's Whig-friendly *and* essentially Italian 'project' in *Divine Comedy* is

> teaching the Church and States of Italy that the imprudence of the Popes, and the civil wars of the cities, and the consequent introduction of foreign arms, must lead to the eternal slavery and disgrace of the Italians.[18]

The religious aspects of the poem are explained by the 'force of religion' in Dante's 'age', and the idea that Dante 'naturally employed its terrors and the most effective means of touching the passions of his contemporaries'.[19] In Foscolo's most famous poem, Dante is merely 'the exiled Ghibelline';[20] in Foscolo's only novel, Jacopo Ortis tells of how, with his forehead pressed against Dante's tomb in Ravenna, he

> meditated on your high-mindedness, and your love, and your ungrateful native city, and your exile, and your poverty, and your divine intellect.[21]

Perhaps there is an echo of Dante's Catholicism in the word 'divine' here, but ultimately Foscolo contributed to the general British air-brushing out of Dante's Christianity, against which the foregrounding of Dante's religion – indeed Catholicism – in *The Prophecy of Dante* stands in stark contrast.

*

Once more in Man's frail world! which I had left
    So long that 'twas forgotten; and I feel
    The weight of day again, – too soon bereft
Of the Immortal Vision which could heal
My earthly sorrows, and to God's own skies
Lift me from that deep Gulf without repeal,
Where late my ears rung with the damnèd cries
    Of souls in hopeless bale; and from that place
    Of lesser torment, whence men may arise
Pure from the fire to join the Angelic race;
    Midst whom my own bright Beatrice blessed
    My spirit with her light; and to the base
Of the Eternal Triad! First, last, best,

> Mysterious, three, sole, infinite, great God!
> Soul universal! led the mortal guest,
> Unblasted by the Glory, though he trod
> From star to star to reach the almighty throne (I, 1-17)

For Steve Ellis, these lines 'strike a dubious note' because Dante 'never forgets this world; the aim of the *Commedia* is to teach man a religious *and* a political morality'. In the *Convivio*, according to Ellis, Dante is a man 'passionately concerned to pass his knowledge on, to give others the benefit of his studies, just as in the *Commedia*. [...] The *Convivio* is written out of a belief in social man, in citizenship'. However, while Ellis is clearly right to say that Dante's works 'were written with a public intention',[22] Dante himself called *La Divina Commedia* 'a doctrinal work', the 'end' of which is 'to remove those living in this life from the state of misery and lead them to the state of happiness', [23] a happiness that Dante has witnessed himself and reports back on in the *Commedia*, but which is in essence a personal experience far beyond, and unrepresentable to, 'Man's Frail world':

> I was in the heaven that most receives His light, and I saw things which he that descends from it has not the knowledge or the power to tell again, for our intellect, drawing near to its desire, sinks so deep that memory cannot follow it. Nevertheless, so much of the holy kingdom as I was able to treasure in my mind shall now be matter of my song. (*Paradiso*, I, 4-12)[24]

Indeed, Byron's religious Dante, who has 'forgotten' the world, is ultimately truer to *La Divina Commedia* than Ellis's worldly one, for however concerned with the world Dante was, for him 'the end of all desires' (*Paradiso*, XXXIII, 46) is God, the 'Essence' of whose light 'is of such pre-eminence that every good found outside of it is nothing but a light from its radiance' (*Paradiso*, XXVI, 31-33). And Dante's final encounter with God at the end of *Paradiso* is a complete forgetting of absolutely everything else:

> Thus my mind, all rapt, was gazing, fixed, still and intent, and ever enkindled with gazing. At that light one becomes such that it is impossible for him ever to consent that he should turn from it to another sight; for the good which is the object of the will is all gathered in it. (*Paradiso*, XXXIII, p. 483)

Far from 'dubious', then, Byron's 'forgotten' is accurate – and sympathetic to the experience it suggests. This sympathy is heard again in 'could heal / My earthly sorrows', where 'heal' acknowledges redemptive possibilities, and 'sorrows' feels for the speaker where 'sin' might step back and judge him.

Byron's Dante is a Christian, then, but also a Catholic. He not only talks of 'that deep Gulf without repeal' and 'God's own skies' but also, openly and without any toning-down,

the Purgatory glossed over by Boyd and Cary – 'that place / Of lesser torment, whence men may arise / Pure from the fire to join the Angelic race'. There may be a 'dubious' note in 'arise', which potentially sidesteps grace, but this is not a hostile note, while Dante's adoration of Beatrice as a Virgin Mary-like giver of blessings, intercessor between man and God and protector of souls is distinctly Catholic: Beatrice blesses Dante's 'spirit', and leads him to the 'almighty throne' 'unblasted' by its Glory. All this is stressed over and over again in *Paradiso*,[25] suggesting Byron read more of Dante's poem, and read it more attentively, than has been sometimes supposed[26] – as, perhaps, does the 'trod / From star to star', which recalls Beatrice bidding Dante to 'look down and see how much of the universe I have already put beneath thy feet' (*Paradiso*, XXII, 128-29), and *Paradiso*, XXVII, 77-81, where Beatrice instructs Dante to 'Cast thy sight down and look how far thou hast revolved' and Dante 'saw that [he] had moved through the whole arc from the middle to the end'.

These glances back to earth from space must have been one of the sources for Byron's *Cain*, but other details might suggest a slightly less attentive reading of *Paradiso*. Byron's 'first, last, best, / Mysterious, three, sole, infinite, great God' is generic rather than distinctively Dantean, for instance, and 'the almighty throne' does not appear in Dante's encounter with God, which is an encounter with 'Eternal Light', 'Infinite Goodness', and 'the Love that moves the sun and the other stars' (*Paradiso*, XXXIII, 83, 82, 145). On the way to God, in the Crystalline Sphere, Dante does pass the 'Thrones' (*Paradiso*, XXVII, 103-5), the angels of God's judgement, but no 'almighty throne' is mentioned. Byron may have got the word from Sismondi, who describes the 'celestial regions […] ascending in spiral rings, from sphere to sphere, to the throne of Almighty power',[27] but the ultimate source of the word is probably Isaiah, 6.1: 'I saw the Lord sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing on His right and on His left'. [28] However, again, if Byron adds a 'dubious' detail here, no irony creeps into his doing so, and he has Dante almost ecstatic in his Catholic devotion, fresh as he is from his 'Immortal Vision'.

This religious rapture carries over into the lines on Beatrice that follow:

> Oh Beatrice! whose sweet limbs the sod
> So long hath pressed, and the cold marble stone,
> Thou sole pure Seraph of my earliest love,
> Love so ineffable, and so alone,
> That nought on earth could more my bosom move,
> And meeting thee in Heaven was but to meet
> That without which my Soul, like the arkless dove,
> Had wandered still in search of, nor her feet
> Relieved her wing till found; without thy light

My paradise had still been incomplete.
Since my tenth sun gave summer to my sight
Thou wert my Life, the Essence of my thought,
Loved ere I knew the name of Love, and bright
Still in these dim old eyes. (I, 18-31)

This is a very long way from the 'mistress' of *Don Juan* (III, st. 11) and is clearly making an effort to stay true to the Beatrice that Dante presents us with in *La Divina Commedia*, who is Dante's personal guide on, and into, religious thought, feeling and growth. Key details show Byron's effort to stay close to Dante's religious Beatrice. The word 'Seraph', for example, glances at Dante's description of Beatrice as 'this very young angel' in *La Vita Nuova*[29] – which Thomas Medwin says Byron called 'that prayer-book of love',[30] and where Beatrice is

> constantly associated with the angels. During her earthly life, when people saw her pass, 'crowned and clothed with humility', they said: 'This is not a woman, but one of the most beautiful of the angels of heaven'. In a dream of her death [Dante] saw angels flying heaven ward with her soul […] When she really dies he sings:
>
> 'Beatrice is gone up into high Heaven,
> The kingdom where the angels are at peace,
> And lives with them'[31]

But in *Paradiso*, the association with 'angels' is more particularly an association with the Seraphim. We see Beatrice 'peculiarly at home' in 'the sphere of the Seraphim' in Canto XXVIII, for example, where Dante is

> At pains to associate her exceptionally with this sphere of angels. In all the lower sphere it is the spirits met within them who tell of them; here Beatrice alone is Dante's instructor.[32]

Numerous other little details see Byron pushing off from the idea of Beatrice as Dante's 'mistress', and steering instead towards a purely spiritual Beatrice. Ellis takes issue with Byron's 'nought on earth could more my bosom move' because we

> in fact know very well that other things *could* Dante's bosom move after he lost Beatrice; indeed this is the entire point of Dante's undertaking his journey in the *Commedia*, for the pursuit of types of 'falso piacere' ('false pleasures') after Beatrice's death led him into the dark wood that she rescues him from.[33]

Yet what saves the line from cliché is the phrase 'on earth', which, even while praising Beatrice, implicitly subordinates her to God. Meeting her in Heaven it is 'my soul' she speaks to, a soul described in obvious biblical terms – 'arkless dove' – rather than romantic terms. And while 'without thy light / My paradise had still been incomplete' might well read as a

romantic commonplace, it is in fact precisely Dantean. Dante over and over again stresses his absolute dependence on Beatrice for advancing, step by step, through the heavenly spheres, but it is repeatedly and specifically her 'light' that directs him towards to greater light of God.[34]

Byron's stress on Dante's religion surfaces elsewhere in the poem, and at interesting moments. It extends to Dante's description of Tasso, for example, or, more especially, Tasso's account of the crusades in *Gerusalemme liberata*. Tasso, prophesies Dante,

Shall pour his soul out o'er Jerusalem;
He, too, shall sing of Arms, and Christian blood
Shed where Christ bled for man; and his high harp
Shall, by the willow over Jordan's flood,
Receive a song of Sion, and the sharp
Conflict, and final triumph of the brave
And pious, and the strife of Hell to warp
Their hearts from their great purpose, until wave
The red-cross banners where the first red Cross
Was crimsoned from His veins who dies to save,
Shall be his sacred argument. (III, 120-130)

This is, on one level, straightforward prophecy – Tasso did, of course, write about all of these things. But a clear endorsement on Dante's part of the crusaders' religious cause is voiced, too, in 'where Christ bled for man', 'the brave and pious', 'their great purpose', 'His veins who dies to save', 'sacred argument'. While other aspects of the poem may well be read as evidence that 'Byron's poetry of analytic self-projection reaches its culminating form' in *The Prophecy of Dante*,[35] this voice is clearly not Byron's, nor is Byron here projecting his own position through the figure of Dante, analytically or otherwise. Rather this is an attempt to dramatize the Christian, Catholic mindset of the Dante who placed the crusaders on Mars in *Paradiso*, above even theologians and of a 'higher blessedness' (XIV, 84) than them since 'spiritual fortitude', the 'pain and bearing of pain or death for the love of God', is 'greater than all knowledge of God'.[36] And Byron is very precisely Dantean when he relates the shedding of 'Christian blood' to where 'Christ bled for men', since the 'daring and sacrifice' of these men,[37] whose 'glory' inspires Dante to make a 'sacrifice' (XIV, 92) of himself, form 'a cross' of 'two beams' 'in the depth of Mars' which 'flame forth Christ' (XIV, 104, 95, 100-1, 104). For Dante, this 'glory' is a form of 'sacrificial love, the mark of the crusader' and as such a direct, 'sacred' answer to Christ's own sacrifice.[38] And no Byronic irony creeps in here either, but, rather, a use of biblical allusion puts Byron's own reading at the service of

‘pious’ Dantean sentiment – the ‘harp’, the ‘willow’, ‘Jordan’s flood’ and the ‘song of Sion’ do not appear in Dante, but do in the King James bible.

If this un-Byronic voice is an echo of Dante’s, ‘Shall pour his soul out o’er Jerusalem’ is also an echo of Tasso’s voice as Byron dramatized this in the earlier ‘The Lament of Tasso’, where Tasso tells the reader that he has

> pour’d my spirit over Palestine,
> In honour of the sacred war for Him,
> The God who was on earth and is in heaven,
> For he has strengthen’d me in heart and limb,
> That through this sufferance I might be forgiven,
> I have employ’d my penance to record
> How Salem’s shrine was won, and how adored. (‘The Lament of Tasso’, 24-32)

Byron may be vaguely recalling and lazily repeating himself here, but something more interesting might be going on instead, since this echo signals a sameness – or, better perhaps, continuity – that ties Dante and Tasso together not simply as Italian writers but as religious, Catholic ones. This is seen in a shared endorsing of ‘the sacred war’ of the Crusades but also, and more importantly, in a shared sense of contemplating past or future worlds as essentially a religious activity with spiritual results. Byron’s Tasso writes seeking to be ‘forgiven’, to find that God has ‘strengthen’d [me] in heart and limb’. Byron’s Dante writes as the ‘voice from out the Wilderness’, moved by ‘that spirit’ that ‘was on’ ‘the seers of Israel’ (II, 8-12) to tell the world ‘Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’,[39] but lamenting most of all being ‘bereft / Of the immortal Vision which could heal / My earthly sorrows’ on his return to ‘Man’s frail world’.

*

Across these two poems, then, Byron is interested in a Christianised notion of poetic imagining through the figures of both Tasso and Dante. But where, in ‘The Lament of Tasso’, this is left to stand as a depiction of Tasso *per se*, in *The Prophecy of Dante* Byron has Dante develop a model of poets more generally based on the idea of religious devotion’s ‘strengthening’ and ‘healing’ effects:

> For, formed of far too penetrable stuff,
> These birds of Paradise but long to flee
> Back to their native mansion, soon to find
> Earth’s mist with their pure pinions not agree,

And die degraded; for the mind
    Succumbs to long infection, and despair,
    And vulture Passions flying close behind,
Await the moment to assail and tear;
    And when, at length, the winged wanderers stoop,
    Then is the Prey-birds' triumph, then they share
The spoil, o'erpowered at length by one fell swoop.
    Yet some have been untouched who learned to bear,
    Some whom no Power could ever force to droop,
Who could resist themselves even, hardest care!
    And task most hopeless; but some such have been,
    And if my name amongst the number were,
That Destiny austere, and yet serene,
    Were prouder than more dazzling fame unblessed. (III, 168-85)

Both Byron's Tasso and Byron's Dante are evoked in the notion of poetic 'birds of Paradise' who find their 'pinions' do not 'agree' with the earth. Dante returns from his 'Immortal Vision' to 'Man's frail world' lamenting with 'what a weight upon [his] brow / The sense of earth and earthly things come[s] back' (I, 130-1). Tasso, with his 'eagle spirit' of a 'child of Song' (I, 2), returns from his 'pleasant task' (II, 1) of 'record[ing] / How Salem's shrine was won' to 'the narrow circus of [his] dungeon wall' (I, 23). But a third poet is evoked here, a poet with whom Tasso and Dante are implicitly merged in these lines – the Byron of *Childe Harold* who laments over the fact that while the imagination offers a world in which 'earth, and earth-born jars, / And human frailties' are 'forgotten quite',

            This clay will sink
    Its spark immortal, envying it the light
    To which it mounts as if to break the link
That keeps us from yon heaven which woos us to its brink. (*CHP*, III, st. 14)

Indeed, this movement from moments of poetic 'divinity' in which the 'gods become as mortals, and man's fate / Has moments like their brightest' to moments when 'the weight / Of earth recoils upon us' (*CHP*, IV, 52) and the 'divinity' is lost, is a repeated motif of *Childe Harold* – a simultaneous celebration of 'Our right of thought – our last and only place of refuge', the 'faculty divine', and lament over 'thoughts' being 'cabin'd cribbed, confined, / And bred in darkness' (*CHP*, IV, 127).

Byron is quietly identifying Tasso and Dante with himself in these lines, then, as poets who have, like him, 'made [themselves] wings wherewith to overfly / The narrow circus' of mortality ('Lament of Tasso', I, 22-3) only to repeatedly 'fall' back 'upon the thorns of life' and 'bleed', to quote another poet fascinated by this mental dynamic.[40] The identification goes further, too – all three writers are victims not just of their own mortality but of the

human world to which that mortality returns them. When ‘the winged wanderers stoop, / Then is the Prey-birds’ triumph, then they share / The spoil, o’erpowered at length by one fell swoop’: for Dante the Prey-bird is Florence; for Tasso Alfonso, Duke of Este; for Byron the ‘reptile crew’ in Britain who threw their ‘mighty wrongs’, ‘petty perfidy’ and ‘venom’ – Byron has Dante use this same word about Florence (I, 67) – at him after the break-up of his marriage (*CHP,* IV, 136).

The implicit alignment of Byron, Dante and Tasso goes further yet – if all are ‘birds of Paradise’ who, as such, suffer their own mortality while also being victims of ‘overpowering’ human judgement, then they are all also among those who have ‘learned to bear’, ‘whom no Power could ever force to droop’ – heroes of fortitude and survival. This shared heroism extends the association of Byron, Dante and Tasso to the Byronic Hero. Manfred, for example, ‘can bear – / However wretchedly, ’tis still to bear – / In life what others could not brook to dream, / But perish in their slumber’ (II, I, 75-78). And precisely because of this superhuman ability to bear ‘the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’, he can not only ‘deny’ the ‘powers’ who come to collect him at his death but also ‘defy’ them to do their worst (III, iv, 120).

Indeed, at times Byron’s Dante is very much a Byronic Hero. For Ellis, ‘Dante’s exile, together with the profound inner woe resulting from the loss of Beatrice, fitted him beautifully for the Byronic role’.[41] I am not so sure that Byron Byronises Dante’s loss of Beatrice, for reasons explored above – and, indeed, we see the very thought of Beatrice counter Dante’s impulse to avenge himself in *The Prophecy of Dante*,[42] not inspire it, as does the loss of a lover for Byronic Heroes such as the Giaour. In terms of his exile from Florence, however, we hear the Byronic Hero in the idea of Dante having ‘no repose / But on the pillow of Revenge – Revenge’ (I, 112-3), and hear him too in the particular pain we see Dante suffer in exile:

These things are not made for forgetfulness […] too raw
The wound, too deep the wrong, and the distress
Of such endurance too prolonged (I, 92-5);

For I have been too long and deeply wrecked
On the lone rock of desolate Despair (I, 132-3);

Tis the doom
Of spirits of my order to be racked
In life, to wear their hearts out, and consume
Their days in endless strife, and die alone (I, 148-52);

For the mind
Succumbs to long infection, and despair,
And vulture Passions flying close behind,
Await the moment to assail and tear (III, 172-75).

On the other hand, there is Dante's Manfred-like defiance: 'For mine is not a nature to be bent / By tyrannous faction, and the brawling crowd […] they have not yet / Quenched the old exile's spirit' (I, 34-42); 'They made an Exile – not a Slave of me!' (I, 178). Byron's Dante, in other words, suffers the same pain as the Byronic Hero. To this extent we might say that Byron's Dante is after all a Romantic recreation of the original. But it is here that Byron's attention to Dante's Catholicism becomes most significant, because it is precisely in relation to Dante's 'Byronic' suffering at the hands of Florence that religion steps in to 'strengthen' and 'heal'. Those who learn to 'bear' can also 'resist themselves even, hardest care!' Dante demonstrates such resisting of the self at very specific moments in the poem, each related to his feelings for Florence. Most forcefully, Dante cries:

Though […] my lone breast may burn
At times with evil feelings hot and harsh,
And sometimes the last pangs of a vile foe
Writhe in a dream before me, and o'erarch
My brow with hopes of triumph, – let them go!
Such are the last infirmities of those
Who long have suffered more than mortal woe,
And yet being mortal still, have no repose
But on the pillow of Revenge – Revenge
[…] Great God!
Take these thoughts from me – to thy hands I yield
My many wrongs, and thine Almighty rod
Will fall on those who smote me – be my shield!
As thou has been in peril, and in pain,
In turbulent cities, and the tented field –
In toil, and many troubles borne in vain
For Florence, – I appeal from her to Thee!
Thee, whom I late saw in thy loftiest reign,
Even in that glorious vision, which to see
And live was never granted until now,
And yet thou hast permitted this to me. (I, 104-29)

In letting go the 'evil', 'hot', 'harsh' 'dream' of taking 'Revenge' on Florence, Dante relinquishes his own will and 'yields' to that of God – 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord' (Romans 12:19). 'Healed' of his 'last infirmity' – able to 'let it go' – he is 'strengthened' by his memory of his own 'glorious

vision' of God's 'loftiest reign' and his gratitude for God's grace 'never granted until now' but granted to him. Poetic vision opens the poet up to a Christian release and redemption.

Briefly, then, Byron's Dante models a Byronic Hero who escapes his Byronic state through a resisting of the self, born of Christian faith. Ultimately, the 'task' of resisting the self is a 'task most hopeless' even for Dante. 'That Destiny austere, and yet serene', is one that Dante would be 'prouder' of 'than more dazzling fame unblessed', but, in fact, Dante's '*if* my name amongst the number were' points to a final Byronising of Dante. For, in the end, Byron's Dante does not 'resist' himself, but, like the Byron of *Childe Harold*, ultimately takes his revenge on his oppressors and does so through poetry:

> the vengeance of my verse,
> The hate of injuries which every year
> Makes greater, and accumulates my curse,
> Shall live, outliving all thou holdest dear –
> Thy pride, thy wealth, they freedom, and even *that*,
> The most infernal of all evils here,
> The sway of petty tyrants in a state. (IV, 111-18)

This is to turn the very poetic vision – *La Divina Commedia* – that earlier 'healed' Dante's last infirmity – the dream of vengeance – into the means of achieving that vengeance. It is to transform the complaints of a victim into a damning indictment of the oppressor before the court of history. It has a dynamic very like that of the forgiveness curse of *Childe Haro*ld IV, which forgives but remains a 'curse' of its recipients, with Byron seeking to 'pile on human heads the mountain' of that curse (*CHP*, IV, 134-5). Byron has Tasso do a version of this too,[43] and, in the end, Dante, Tasso and the Byron of *Childe Harold* all embody an idea of the poet as a figure of earthly, historical power over tyrants and oppressors.

And yet, we see a 'Byronic-Hero Dante' push beyond any previous Byronic Hero towards a new kind of strength and health, and do so through religious faith. Byron, like his contemporaries, clearly ended up 'transforming' Dante and 'fabricating a "Romantic" Dante'. But this, I suggest, is not the culmination of the rest of *The Prophecy of Dante* so much as falling away from its sustained, sympathetic attention to Dante's religious faith. Nevertheless, sustained, sympathetic attentiveness is a feature of Byron's engagement with Italian literature more generally.

Within a year of arriving in Italy, Byron completed *Manfred* and *Childe Harold* IV, works which mark both a culmination and (temporary) killing-off of the Byronic Hero that had dominated Byron's poetry from *Childe Harold* I and II to *The Giaour*, *The Corsair*, *Lara* and *The Prisoner of Chillon*. However, the Byronic Hero went on to have an 'after-life' in a

series of poems on Italian subjects in which we see him inflected in a number of 'Italianised' ways – imprisoned as Tasso, Veniced in *Beppo*, translated into Pulci's Renaissance epic hero, Orlando,[44] Catholicised and nationalised as Dante in *The Prophecy of Dante*, and, later, cast as a tragic hero in the figure of Marino Faliero, alienated from the world, tortured by the memory of injustice, and bent on revenge. In each of these texts we can clearly see Byron exploring new potential ways forward for both his own lead character and himself as a poet. In 'The Lament of Tasso', the imprisoned Byronic Hero is granted a love which, though unrequited and a love for which he is punished, 'knows not despair' (111) and lends him 'vigour […] to foil the ingenuity of pain' (146-8). In *Beppo*, the Byronic Hero returns from his Byronic adventures in the East to settle back happily into a festive, comedic Venetian world of *cavalieri serventi* and sexually empowered women and become best friends with his wife's lover. In Byron's translation of Pulci's *Morgante Maggiore*, subtle 'Byronizations' of Pulci's Orlando align the Byronic Hero 'with a literary tradition reaching back to the Renaissance and beyond',[45] paving the way for a fourteenth-century revolutionary Byronic Hero, Marino Faliero, to become, unlike Manfred, the 'dupe' and 'prey' of the 'greater criminals' – here worldly and historical rather than other-worldly and 'spiritual' – that punish him for his 'crimes' with 'other crimes' (*Manfred*, III, iv, 123-4, 138).

However, what is most striking in these texts is the fact that in each one Byron looks to an Italian literary model for these potential new ways forward for himself and his hero – Tasso, Casti's *Novelle Galanti* in the case of *Beppo*,[46] Pulci, Alfieri in the case of *Marino Faliero*,[47] and, of course, Dante in *The Prophecy of Dante*. And Byron's unusual attention to Dante's Catholicism tells us a lot about how he went about looking to these Italian models. It tells us that he did not turn to them merely in order to recreate them, transform them, appropriate them for a political cause or 'party', domesticate them, 'Romanticise' them or even Byronise them. He might end up doing any or all of these things, and certainly appropriates Dante for a political cause when he has him tell Italy to 'Unite' (II, 145). However, Byron's engagement with Dante's Catholicism shows that he also looked to Italian literary models for ways of recreating, transforming, extending – Italianising – his own writing. In the end, we might want to say that *The Prophecy of Dante*'s exploration of Dante's Catholicism was the least successful of these experiments with Italian literary precedents, since, ultimately, Byron here falls back into his own, old ways of thinking. Yet, for a brief moment, Byron does allow a 'Byronic Hero' to move on from bearing alienation, painful memory and the desire for revenge and into a Catholicism-inspired resisting of self, relinquishing of the will and

yielding to 'Great God'. In that moment we glimpse how open-mindedly Byron read Italian literature – and, perhaps, something of his motivation for avidly reading so much of it.

NOTES

[1] Antonella Braida, *Dante and the Romantics* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 31, 32, 33, 34.
[2] Braida, *Dante and the Romantics*, p. 59, citing Edoardo Crisafulli, *The Vision of Dante* (Market Harborough: Troubadour Press, 2003), Chapter 5, pp. 265-325.
[3] Braida *Dante and the Romantics*, p. 44, citing Ralph Pite, *The Circle of Our Vision: Dante's Presence in Romantic Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 14-16.
[4] Henry Francis Cary, *The Divine Comedy being The Vision of Dante Alighieri* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. xxxvi.
[5] Alison Milbanke, *Dante and the Victorians* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 20.
[6] Cary, *The Divine Comedy*, p. xxxvi.
[7] Braida, *Dante and the Romantics,* p. 67.
[8] William Hazlitt, 'Review of *De la Littérature du Midi de l'Europe*. Par J. C. L. Simonde de Sismondi, 4 Tom. Paris 1813', *Edinburgh Review*, 25 (1815) 31-63 (47).
[9] Hazlitt, Review of *De la Littérature du Midi de l'Europe*, 47.
[10] 'Dante's England: The Contribution of Cary, Coleridge and Foscolo to the British Reception of Dante', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 20:4 (1984), 355-81 (355-6).
[11] See Byron's letter to John Murray of 17 September 1817, in *BLJ*, V, p. 267.
[12] See Braida, *Dante and the Romantics*, p. 68.
[13] See Kathleen Coburn (ed.), The *Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 6 vols (New York: Princeton, 1957-89), III, p. 4498.
[14] Braida, *Dante and the Romantics*, pp. 73-77.
[15] Braida, *Dante and the Romantics*, pp. 67, 77.
[16] Braida, *Dante and the Romantics*, pp. 78.
[17] 'Dante's disputes with political orthodoxies is, for these readers, matched by his apparent dissent from Catholic orthodoxy. For Foscolo and other liberals, the spirit of liberty was opposed to the "age of cloisters" as much as to "tyrannical governments". Political and religious opposition went hand in hand, in part because the Tory establishment was routinely but fiercely orthodox' (Pite, *The Circle of Our Vision*, p. 48).
[18] Foscolo, 'Observations concerning the Question of the Originality of the Poem of Dante', *The Edinburgh Review*, 30 (Sept 1818), 317-50 (321).
[19] Foscolo, 'Observations', 326.
[20] 'Sepulchres', line 174 ('Ghibellin fuggiasco'), in Ugo Foscolo, *Sepulchres*, trans. by J. G. Nichols (London: Oneworld Classics, 2009).
[21] *Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis*, trans. by J. G. Nichols (London: Hesperus, 2002), p. 115.
[22] Steve Ellis, 'Dante as the Byronic Hero', in *Dante and English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 36-65 (pp. 61, 54, 55).
[23] Letter to 'Il Signor Can Grande della Scala', in *Tutte le Opere*, ed. by Fredi Chiappelli (Milan: U. Mursia, 1965), pp. 890-98 (pp. 892, 894): 'un'opera dottrinale'; 'il fine del tutto e della parte è togliere dallo stato di miseria i viventi in questa vita e condurli allo stato della felicità' (my translations).

[24] All translations of *La Divina Commedia* are quoted from Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, Italian text with translation and comment by John D. Sinclair, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).

[25] It is Beatrice who first bids Virgil to lead Dante through hell and purgatory (*Inferno*, II, 58-74), since she is in heaven. Beatrice takes over as Dante's guide through heaven in the Earthly Paradise at the top of Purgatory (see *Purgatorio*, canto XXVIII), teaching him, refining and enlarging his consciousness, directing him towards God – she 'imparadises' his mind (*Purgatorio*, XXVIII, 1) – though she does not, in the end, lead him to the God himself – St Bernard does this, through the grace of the Virgin Mary (see *Paradiso*, canto XXXIII, 1-54). As his guide, however, Beatrice repeatedly protects him from the 'Glory' of heaven – often in the form of light – that would otherwise overwhelm him – see, for example, *Paradiso*, I (58-67) and XVIII (7-21).

[26] In Byron's poetry, 'we find a greater restriction in his range of references to Dante than in Shelley's' and 'a certain sort of casualness in Byron's responses: he labels Dante "The Bard of Hell" in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (IV, xl), and this indicates the restricted nature of his interest in him […] And even this Hell can hardly be said to be always taken seriously […] It was useful in providing a little Gothic atmosphere or, as here [*Don Juan*, XVI, 116], comedy' (Ellis, 'Dante as the Byronic Hero', p. 38-9).

[27] *Historical View of the Literature of the South of Europe*, trans. by Thomas Roscoe, 2 vols (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1850), I, p. 255.

[28] Byron associated *The Prophecy of Dante* with Isaiah, writing in a letter to John Murray that, if *The Prophecy* was 'approved', he would 'go on like Isaiah' (5 March 1820?, *BLJ*, VII, p. 57).

[29] *Tutte le Opere*, p. 266: 'questa Angiola Giovanissima' (my translation).

[30] *Medwin's Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. by Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 160.

[31] Sinclair, *Paradiso*, p. 411, quoting *La Vita Nuova* in translation.

[32] Sinclair, *Paradiso*, p. 411.

[33] Ellis, 'Dante as the Byronic Hero', p. 60.

[34] See, for example: *Purgatorio*, XXVIII, 64-66, XXXI, 139-45, XXXII, 9-12; *Paradiso*, V, 1-4, XVIII, 14-21, XXI, 7-15, XXIII, 22-24, XXX, 70-81, XXXI, 76-78.

[35] Jerome McGann, *Don Juan in Context* (London: John Murray, 1976), pp. 47 (see pages 46-50 for McGann's argument in full).

[36] Sinclair, *Paradiso*, p. 211.

[37] Sinclair, *Paradiso*, p. 213.

[38] Sinclair, *Paradiso*, p. 211.

[39] 'In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea. And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness' (Matthew, 3.1-3)

[40] P. B. Shelley, 'Ode to the West Wind', 54.

[41] 'Dante as the Byronic Hero', p. 47.

[42] 'For thine [sake], / My own Beatrice, I would hardly take / Vengeance upon the land which once was mine, / And still is hallowed by thy dust's return, / Which would protect the murderess like a shrine, / And save ten thousand does by thy sole urn' (I, 98-103).

[43] See 'Lament of Tasso', lines 219-27

[44] See Alan Rawes, '"From the Italian": Byron's Translation of Pulci's *Morgante Maggiore*', *Litteraria Pragensia*, 23:46 (2013), 6-22.

[45] See Rawes, '"From the Italian"', pp. 13-16, 21.

[46] See Peter Vassallo, *Byron: The Italian Literary Influence* (New York: St Martin's, 1984), Chapter 3, 'The Libertine as Artist: Giambattista Casti's *Novelle Galanti* and *Beppo*', pp. 43-63.

[47] See Alan Rawes, 'Romanticism's Tyrannical Revolutions: Alfieri, Byron and the Shelleys', *European Romantic Review* 32:2 (2021), 123-44.