

Dante and English poetry

Shelley to T. S. Eliot

STEVE ELLIS

‘sì mi fecer de la loro schiera . . .’

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Illustrations

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- 3 Engraving after Kirkup's drawing of the Bargello Dante. From Lyell's *Poems of the 'Vita Nuova' and 'Convito'* (1842).
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- 7 Dante. Plaster cast of the Torrigiani 'death-mask'. Reproduced by permission of the Bodleian Library, Oxford.
- 8 W. B. Yeats. Etching by Augustus John (1907). Frontispiece to *A Vision* (1937). Reproduced by permission of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

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Editions and abbreviations used in the text

Editions

La Commedia, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi, *Le opere di Dante Alighieri*, Edizione nazionale, 7, 4 vols. ([Milan]: Mondadori, 1966–7).

Il Convivio, ed. Maria Simonelli (Bologna: Pàtron, 1966).

De Vulgari Eloquentia, ed. Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, Vol. 1 (Padua: Antenore, 1968).

Epistolae, ed. Paget Toynbee, 2nd ed. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1966).

Monarchia, ed. Pier Giorgio Ricci, Edizione nazionale, 5 ([Milan]: Mondadori, 1965).

Rime, ed. Gianfranco Contini, 3rd ed. (Turin: Einaudi, 1973).

Vita Nuova, ed. Domenico De Robertis (Milan: Ricciardi, 1980).

Abbreviations

(The <i>Commedia</i>)	<i>Conv.</i> <i>Convivio</i>
<i>Inf.</i> <i>Inferno</i>	<i>DVE</i> <i>De Vulgari Eloquentia</i>
<i>Purg.</i> <i>Purgatorio</i>	<i>Ep.</i> <i>Epistolae</i>
<i>Par.</i> <i>Paradiso</i>	<i>Mon.</i> <i>Monarchia</i>
	<i>VN</i> <i>Vita Nuova</i>

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Introduction

In this study I have attempted to show the ways in which a series of modern poets (and some critics) writing in English have regarded Dante, and how their assessments relate to the type of poetry they were themselves producing and seeing produced. This is not primarily a study of Dante's 'influence' on modern poets, if by influence we mean the production of poetry stylistically similar to Dante's own, or the imitation of specific turns of phrase or expressions in his work; a thorough, and indeed enormous, review of such influence was carried out long ago by A. R. Halley, at least for the nineteenth century, though the supposed derivations from Dante he puts forward are not always convincing.¹ In T. S. Eliot's words:

the important debt to Dante does not lie in a poet's borrowings, or adaptations from Dante . . . The important debt does not occur in relation to the number of places in one's writings to which a critic can point a finger, and say, here and there he wrote something which he could not have written unless he had had Dante in mind.²

Although many such borrowings and adaptations are traced in the following pages, it will be seen that the 'important debt' the moderns owe to Dante will often involve us in discussion of his political, religious and ethical thought, of the way characters are presented in the *Commedia*, and of his relationship with Beatrice. These themes in his work have often been strangely interpreted in the light of modern theories of poetry, and several modern poems which in some ways attempt to emulate them have thereby turned out to be significantly different. Another major area of discussion concerns the various modern assessments of the relationship

between Dante's work and that of his contemporaries, with the periodic attempts to close or widen the gap between them. Apart from his work, the events of Dante's life have exercised a considerable fascination in modern times, and the consequences of this are also presented here.

This does not pretend to be a complete study of Dante's significance for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Such a work would also have to take into account a great many prose writers, such as Ruskin, George Eliot, Forster and Joyce, to mention only obvious examples, although the first named has been admirably covered by Martin Bidney and the last by Mary T. Reynolds.³ I feel justified, however, in largely confining my attention to the poets discussed here because of the conspicuous degree of interaction in their ideas about Dante. Such interaction can be positive or negative; that is, we cannot understand Yeats's approach to Dante without some knowledge of Shelley's, upon which it is largely based; nor can we appreciate Eliot's position unless we take into account the nineteenth-century uses of Dante that he repudiated. The work of the seven poets I have chosen to discuss shows, I believe, a greater debt to Dante, of one sort and another, than that of any other major poet during the past two centuries, though I have added comments on Keats and Tennyson where appropriate.

In a field as large as this much work has, of course, already been done, and I am particularly indebted to that of Paget Toynbee and Frank Kermode, as will be clear. As remarked, however, this book places a particular emphasis on the development, revision and rejection of ideas about Dante since the Romantic period; and by bringing the following poets into juxtaposition I hope to shed new light on these ideas and put into sharper focus the distinctive features of each poet's reaction to Dante. It is particularly the case with Yeats, Pound and Eliot that their respective attitudes to Dante can be explained in part in terms of how they understood their relationship with each other. Thus a good deal of the criticism referred to in the following pages is deficient in its ignoring of the wider context into which Dante's *fortuna* among modern poets may be placed. Dante was of fundamental importance to the seven poets we are concerned with with the sole exception, arguably, of Byron: it is hoped that this study will therefore illuminate some of the central issues of modern poetry over the last two hundred years.

I

Shelley, Dante and freedom

The works of His fingers have borne witness against Him.
(Notes to *Queen Mab*)

Shelley's response to Dante is an influential example of the recurrent modern practice of attending to Dante's 'poetry' while neglecting or discounting his beliefs, the most celebrated example of which is Croce's *La poesia di Dante*, with its distinction between Dante the poet and the far less important 'Dante filosofo e politico' ('Dante the philosopher and politician').¹ Rather than presenting Dante's beliefs, Shelley endows him with his own; and the powerful influence the *Commedia* had on him manifests itself in a poetry whose intention and philosophy is markedly different. The result is important for later writers like Rossetti and especially for Yeats, who tends to confuse the *Commedia* with Shelley's very dissimilar adaptations from it. None of the other poets we shall look at – not even Ezra Pound – had beliefs that were so opposed to Dante's; yet the *Commedia*'s influence on Shelley was arguably greater than on any of the others, excepting Eliot. This contradiction caused Shelley no undue alarm, as we shall see; his ability to negotiate it is typical of several modern writers' ignoring of Dante's philosophy, religion and poetic style in the interests of their own, often highly unusual, interpretations of him.

One of the major examples of Dante's influence is in the final act of *Prometheus Unbound*. Although specific reminiscences of the *Paradiso* – not all of them very convincing – have been pointed out here, the influence might be described as nothing less than the entire act itself.² The first three acts were finished by April 1819 and this last act added as an afterthought towards the end of the year;³ in between Shelley had been reading the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*,⁴ and there seems little doubt that the decision to add a final act celebrating the universal happiness following the tyrant Jupiter's

downfall, and, in words addressed to the Earth: 'The love which paves thy path along the skies' (IV.522),⁵ was a direct outcome of Shelley's response to the *allegrezza* of the *Paradiso* with its 'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle' ('love that moves the sun and the other stars') (xxxiii.145). Thus a passage like the following –

And from the other opening in the wood
Rushes, with loud and whirlwind harmony,
A sphere, which is as many thousand spheres,
Solid as crystal, yet through all its mass
Flow, as through empty space, music and light:
Ten thousand orbs involving and involved,
Purple and azure, white, and green, and golden,
Sphere within sphere . . .

(IV.236–43)

– exhibits no specific source in the *Paradiso*; but that Shelley's 'mystic measure/Of music, and dance, and shapes of light' (IV.77–8) was inspired by Dante's *cantica* would seem undeniable. The fact that one Love centres on the Earth and the other on the stars indicates, however, a major divergence between them which we shall take up shortly, for the *Prometheus* adapts from Dante very much for its own political ideals.

Shelley's affection for the *Paradiso* is highly unusual for his day, especially among English writers; working through Toynbee's invaluable anthology we have to wait until 1825, three years after Shelley's death, before we find an appreciation of the *Paradiso* written in England akin to Shelley's own, namely John Keble's observation of the 'intense effect' the *Paradiso* produces 'by little more than various combinations of *three* leading ideas – light, motion, and music . . .', a statement that could as well be applied to the final act of Shelley's drama.⁶ Among Shelley's contemporaries the sublime horrors of the *Inferno* exercised a fascination that the other two *cantiche* could not sustain, whereas Shelley himself regarded the *Purgatorio* as 'a finer poem' than the *Inferno*.⁷ In his knowledge of the *Vita Nuova*, which he quotes from in the preface to *Epipsychidion* (p. 411), he belonged to an even more select group, and he even made some notes on the *Convivio*.⁸ His greatest admiration was reserved however for the *Paradiso*, especially for its celebration of Beatrice:

Dante understood the secret things of love even more than Petrarch. His *Vita Nuova* is an inexhaustible fountain of purity of sentiment and

language: it is the idealized history of that period, and those intervals of his life which were dedicated to love. His apotheosis of Beatrice in Paradise, and the gradations of his own love and her loveliness, by which as by steps he feigns himself to have ascended to the throne of the Supreme Cause, is the most glorious imagination of modern poetry . . . The [*Paradiso*] is a perpetual hymn to everlasting love.⁹

Even so, the poem unfinished at Shelley's death, *The Triumph of Life*, shows a new note of realism in Shelley's work derived from a fresh study of the *Inferno*.

We may turn then to a comparison of Shelley's 'love which paves' and Dante's 'amor che move', conceptions which may be said to be at the centre of each poet's work. In Mrs Shelley's words:

[Shelley] never mentioned Love but he shed a grace borrowed from his own nature, that scarcely any other poet has bestowed, on that passion . . . he spoke of it as the law of life . . . In his eyes it was the essence of our being, and all woe and pain arose from the war made against it by selfishness, or insensibility, or mistake.¹⁰

One can set beside this the famous Dantean declaration: 'I' mi son un che, quando/Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo/ch'e' ditta dentro vo significando' ('I am one who, when Love breathes in me, takes note, and goes affirming what he dictates to me inwardly') (*Purg.* xxiv. 52-4), but, whereas the manifestations of *Amor* in Dante are gathered together into one great synthesis and, as Shelley points out, 'ascend' from the love of Beatrice to the universal love, Shelley's own work, indeed like his life, shows the problems of fitting love for an individual woman into a wider social and spiritual framework; problems which are exploited in *Epipsychidion* for their dramatic effect, as we shall see. This tension between the personal and universal love is also evident in *The Revolt of Islam*, where Shelley is as much occupied with the romance of Laon and Cythna as he is with the rebellion they are at the centre of: their isolated lovemaking deep in fantastic caverns is no less congenial a subject to him than the celebrations of fellowship among the liberated peoples at the end of canto v; and the eventual failure of the rebellion seems more than compensated for by the paradise the lovers sail to after death in 'The Temple of the Spirit', as the poem ends. We must not forget that Shelley had barely half the life-allowance of Dante in which to 'synthesise' his various ideals; one cannot calculate what he would have achieved had he lived on, though one of his most famous

admirers posited his performing a complete *volte-face* and embracing Christianity.¹¹

The Revolt of Islam takes us to the crux of the Shelley–Dante question, projecting as it does man’s happiness and freedom on earth as the result of the abolition of all external authority and the forgiveness of one’s enemies:

the chastened will
Of virtue sees that justice is the light
Of love, and not revenge, and terror and despite.
(v.xxxiv)

In Dante things are not so straightforward: the first time we come across justice and love referred to together in the *Commedia* is in the inscription above Hell-gate: ‘Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore;/ fecemi la divina podestate,/la somma sapienza e ’l primo amore’ (‘Justice moved my high maker; the divine power, the consummate wisdom and the first love made me’) (*Inf.* III.4–6). This conception of justice has frequently outraged readers of Dante, both in the Romantic period and since.¹² Shelley himself, however, nowhere expresses such a reaction, even though attacks on the concept of Hell – which he regarded as an authoritarian fiction – are loud and frequent in his work (see for example *Queen Mab* IV.208–17). He managed to enjoy the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* without being unduly worried by the *Inferno* because, as *A Defence of Poetry* shows, he worked out a theory of poetry that accommodated what he called such ‘distorted notions’ (*A Defence*, p. 289); and indeed the need to accommodate precisely the *Inferno* was probably an important stimulus in Shelley’s theorising.

One might say that from the beginning, if we look at *Queen Mab* and its Notes, the need for such an accommodation is present in Shelley’s blistering attack on Christianity: ‘Milton’s poem alone will give permanency to the remembrance of its absurdities’ (Notes, p. 821). More specifically the defence of ‘Necessity! thou mother of the world!’ in the Notes against the ‘advocates of free-will’ (pp. 809–12), among whom Dante – whose work was unknown to Shelley at the time – is a major figure (see *Purg.* XVI.67–84), hardly points to a future rapprochement between the two. Love and authority of any kind are affirmed to be incompatible: ‘Love withers under constraint: its very essence is liberty: it is compatible neither with obedience, jealousy, nor fear’ (p. 806), whereas for Dante

love has to be regulated by obedience, since man is liable to be attracted towards the wrong things 'se guida o fren non torce suo amore' ('unless guide or rein directs his love') (*Purg.* xvi.93). Dante's love, of course, is ultimately directed at a Being whose existence Shelley denied but whom he made use of as a personification of tyranny *against* whom love is pitted; this rebelliousness is suggested as the cause of Prince Athanase's 'mysterious grief':

God's displeasure, like a darkness, fell
On souls like his, which owned no higher law
Than love; love calm, steadfast, invincible

By mortal fear or supernatural awe . . .

(ll. 94-7)

It must be said, though, that Shelley's unfavourable conception of a God 'Girt round with storms and shadows . . .' (*The Revolt of Islam* x.xl) is Miltonic; yet even the radiance of the *Paradiso* embodies a hierarchical system Shelley could scarcely have approved of, for his 'own heart' told him that 'Love makes all things equal' (*Epipsychidion* ll. 126-7). But there are degrees of nearness to God in the *Paradiso*, as Beatrice explains: the blessed 'differentemente han dolce vita/per sentir più e men l'eterno spiro' ('have different shares in the sweet life, through feeling the eternal breath less and more') (iv.35-6), and the 'dolce vita', as Piccarda has previously pointed out, involves precisely the acquiescence in a 'higher law' which Shelley's heroes reject unconditionally:

Anzi è formale ad esto beato esse
tenersi dentro a la divina voglia,
per ch'una fansi nostre voglie stesse.

(Rather it is the essence of this blessed existence that we keep within the bounds of the divine will, so that our own wills are made one.)

(III.79-81)

Indeed, it is hardly necessary to spell out the absolute contrast between the poet whose major work insists on the necessity of political and spiritual authority and obedience to them and the one who adored 'Eldest of things, divine Equality!' (*The Revolt of Islam* v.li.3) and detested all obedience, seen as 'Bane of all genius, virtue, freedom, truth' (*Queen Mab* III.178). The contrast is clearest in *Queen Mab* and its Notes where Shelley's attention is firmly

focussed on political denunciations and remedies: if man had followed 'the impulses of unerring nature', including a natural, that is vegetarian, diet (Notes, pp. 807, 826ff), then his 'freeborn soul' would never have fallen victim to the 'oppressors' heel' of priests and kings that tramples it in *The Revolt of Islam* (VIII.vii). Institutions like marriage and religion were the mechanisms of a tyrannical government and had no place originally in the uncorrupted natural order to which Shelley desired a return. As Shelley got older he had reservations about *Queen Mab*, arising in part no doubt from his reading of Plato and Dante: 'in all that concerns moral and political speculation, as well as in the subtler discriminations of metaphysical and religious doctrine, it is . . . crude and immature'. But he remained 'a devoted enemy to religious, political and domestic oppression', and thus held to the notion of the 'freeborn soul' (*Letters*, II, 304-5; quoted in *Poetical Works*, p. 838).

Dante, of course, believed the soul was freeborn too, but in a very specific way: it had the freedom to choose between right and wrong and thus to decide where it spent eternity. In order for the 'libero arbitrio' to exercise its choice wisely it needs law and instruction, the *freno*. Dante had no belief in the possibility of returning to 'unerring nature':

Esce di mano a lui che la vagheggia
prima che sia, a guisa di fanciulla
che piangendo e ridendo pargoleggia,
l'anima semplicetta che sa nulla,
salvo che, mossa da lieto fattore,
volontier torna a ciò che la trastulla.
Di picciol bene in pria sente sapore;
quivi s'inganna, e dietro ad esso corre,
se guida o fren non torce suo amore.

(From the hand of him who delights in it before its creation the simple little soul comes, like a child both laughing and crying and knowing nothing except to turn willingly to that which pleases it, having been created by a happy maker. In trivial joys it first takes pleasure; here it falls into error, and runs after them unless guide or rein directs its love.)

(*Purg.* XVI.85-93)

Only under a universal emperor, as Marco Lombardo goes on to tell Dante, can the 'legge per fren porre' ('law that puts a rein') on the *arbitrio* be enforced properly, a theory spelt out much more fully in the *Monarchia* which stresses the need for a political system that

preserves 'hec libertas [arbitrii] sive principium hoc totius nostre libertatis [quod] est maximum donum humane nature a Deo collatum' ('this liberty of the will or foundation of all our liberty which is the greatest gift assigned by God to humanity') (I.xii.6). Monarchy was a term that particularly attracted Shelley's loathing; although both poets shared an aversion to the crowned heads of their own day, Shelley also, of course, had no affection for the Dantean ideal of Imperial Rome.

Before turning to *A Defence of Poetry*, which also manages to be, in Corrado Zacchetti's words, a 'difesa di Dante' ('defence of Dante'),¹³ we may look at *Epipsychidion*, which draws on Dante's presentation of Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia* in the interests of Shelley's own conception of love. The poem takes little note of the extended significance Beatrice comes to have for Dante in his mature work and has the effect of dislodging her from her Christian setting; though Dante feigned through her 'to have ascended to the throne of the Supreme Cause' as Shelley said in *A Defence*, Shelley's own hero founders on his journey, partly because he has no very clear idea where he might be going, his failure in this sense constituting the poem's tremendous, Icarus-type conclusion:

Woe is me!
The wingèd words on which my soul would pierce
Into the height of Love's rare Universe,
Are chains of lead around its flight of fire –
I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire!

(ll. 587–91)

Emilia is a 'Seraph of Heaven!' (l. 21), just as Dante, to choose a quatrain from one of the most famous sonnets of the *Vita Nuova*, celebrated Beatrice –

Ella si va, sentendosi laudare,
benignamente d'umiltà vestuta;
e par che sia una cosa venuta
de cielo in terra a miracol mostrare.

(She goes along, hearing herself praised, clothed benignly in humility; and seems something come from heaven to earth to demonstrate a miracle.)
(xxvi.6)

– but there is a deliberate quality of excess in Shelley's descriptions which contrasts with the smooth control of Dante's 'dolce stil' as

Epipsychidion gets to work on raising both Shelley's lady and his own imagination to a pitch of ungovernable excitement:

Seraph of Heaven! too gentle to be human,
 Veiling beneath that radiant form of woman
 All that is insupportable in thee
 Of light, and love, and immortality!
 Sweet Benediction in the eternal Curse!
 Veiled Glory of this lampless Universe!
 Thou Moon beyond the clouds! Thou living Form
 Among the Dead! Thou Star above the Storm!
 Thou Wonder, and thou Beauty, and thou Terror!
 (ll. 21-9)

In spite then of Shelley's references to the *Vita Nuova* in his preface to the poem, his rapturousness is based much more on the *Paradiso*:

See where she stands! a mortal shape indued
 With love and life and light and deity,
 And motion which may change but cannot die;
 An image of some bright Eternity;
 A shadow of some golden dream; a Splendour
 Leaving the third sphere pilotless . . .
 (ll. 112-17)

This attempt to find 'in a mortal image the likeness of what is perhaps eternal' (which Shelley later confessed to be an 'error' – *Letters*, II, 434), and thus to invest, in Dante's terms, the Beatrice of the *Vita Nuova* with the full glory of the Paradisal Beatrice, is exploited for its dramatic qualities in the poem: there are no 'gradations' on the ascent into 'Love's rare Universe' but one headlong rush; and the hero is burnt up in the process. Witnessing his end one is reminded of T. S. Eliot's comment on the *Vita Nuova*, which goes some way towards suggesting the great difference between it and *Epipsychidion*: 'There is . . . a practical sense of realities behind it, which is anti-romantic: not to expect more from *life* than it can give or more from *human* beings than they can give; to look to *death* for what life cannot give.'¹⁴ The women in Shelley's poetry are often several sizes larger than life however: one is reminded of that extraordinary scene in *The Revolt of Islam* where Laon, surrounded by entire battalions of the tyrants' army, is snatched to safety by Cythna: