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Anne O'Connor

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# *L'Italia: La Terra dei Morti?*

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ANNE O'CONNOR

[. . .] fair Italy!  
Thou art the garden of the world, the home  
Of all Art yields, and Nature can decree;  
Even in thy desert, what is like to thee?  
Thy very weeds are beautiful, thy waste  
More rich than other climes' fertility;  
Thy wreck a glory, and thy ruin graced  
With an immaculate charm which cannot be defaced.

Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1816)

ON 19 FEBRUARY 1826, TWO MEN DREW SWORDS IN THE EARLY MORNING LIGHT outside Porta San Frediano in Florence. On one side stood Gabriele Pepe: experienced soldier, Neapolitan exile resident in Florence and self-proclaimed defender of Italy's honor. On the other side stood Alphonse de Lamartine: romantic poet, French diplomat resident in Florence, and alleged castigator of the Italian nation. The outcome of the duel was predictable from the start;

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*Anne O'Connor is Lecturer in Italian Studies at the National University of Ireland, Galway.*

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Lamartine's years of melancholic musing compared poorly to Pepe's formative experiences in battles and uprisings. Luckily for Lamartine, the event was brief and almost bloodless; the French poet suffered a gash to his right arm and quickly conceded to the Neapolitan.

But why were the two men fighting? Bizarrely, they were fighting over the issue of Italy being the so-called *terra dei morti*. The origins of this duel can be traced to Lamartine's poem *Le Dernier Chant du pèlerinage d'Harold* (1825), an imaginative continuation of Lord Byron's *Childe Harold*; the composition of the latter work had been cut short by the English poet's death in Greece the previous year. It was a brave undertaking to attempt to continue the work of the most famous and romantically popular European poet of the day. Unfortunately for Lamartine, his attempt failed in dramatic fashion, as Italians reacted negatively to the depiction of their country in the Frenchman's poem. In his work, Lamartine presented Italy as a place asleep in the midst of a universe in motion. He called the country a land of the past and called Italians a shadow of a people who had slumped to insignificance. For example, he wrote:

Monument écroulé, que l'écho seul habite!  
 Poussière du passé, qu'un vent stérile agite!  
 Terre, où les fils n'ont plus le sang de leurs aïeux!  
 Où, sur un sol vieilli les hommes naissent vieux;  
 Où le fer avili ne frappe que dans l'ombre;  
 Où sur les fronts voilés plane un nuage sombre;  
 Où l'amour n'est qu'un piège, et la pudeur qu'un fard;  
 Où la ruse a faussé le rayon du regard;  
 Où les mots énervés ne sont qu'un bruit sonore,  
 Un nuage éclaté qui retentit encore!  
 Adieu! Pleure ta chute en vantant tes héros!  
 Sur des bords où la gloire a ranimé leurs os,  
 Je vais chercher ailleurs (pardonne, ombre romaine!)  
 Des hommes, et non pas de la poussière humaine!<sup>1</sup>

Had the *Dernier Chant* enjoyed only mediocre success, then it is possible that Italian nationalists would never have heard of Lamartine's words. Unfortunately for the Frenchman, his poem was immensely popular in France, going through five editions in six months. The theme of Byron was extremely topical only months after the poet's tragic death in Greece. News of Lamartine's work reached Florence, and in the patriotic commotion that

followed, excerpts were widely circulated in salons, theaters, and literary gatherings. With indignation, the Italians read the lines, "Tout dort, et cependant l'univers est debout! / Par le siècle emporté tout marche, ailleurs, partout!"<sup>2</sup> The strength of the reaction to Lamartine can be seen in many contemporary accounts. For example, Barone Poerio wrote to Carlo Troya to say that the "sdegno" against Lamartine was "grande e generale." The Tuscan censor noted that the poem had made a "vivissima impressione" in Florence, while Lamartine himself later recalled that:

Ce poème fit grand bruit. Ce bruit alla jusqu'à Florence [. . .] à peine y fus-je arrivé, qu'une vive émotion patriotique s'éleva contre moi. On traduisit mes vers séparés du cadre; on les fit répandre à profusion dans les salons, au théâtre, dans le peuple.<sup>3</sup>

The Frenchman's timing could not have been worse: he published the *Dernier Chant* in 1825 and in July of that year was appointed secretary to the French delegation in Florence. He had entered the lion's den. Nowhere else in Italy was there such a collection of Italian nationalists. Many were in exile in the city, having been expelled from their own regions for subversive activities. Thus, having published a poem that said that Italy was a sterile land devoid of brave men, Lamartine moved to a city where many were poised to prove him wrong.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, for a person who was to generate such an uproar, Lamartine's function in Florence was diplomatic.

Gabriele Pepe became involved in the debate when he penned a pamphlet in 1826 called *Cenno sulla vera intelligenza del verso di Dante "Poscia più che il dolor potè il digiuno."* The Tuscan censor was loathe to allow a printed attack on a member of the diplomatic corps in Florence; indeed attempts in this direction by G. P. Vieusseux had been blocked.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Pepe assumed, correctly it turned out, that hiding a reply to Lamartine in the middle of an article on Dante would increase his chances of escaping the attention of the censor. In *Cenno sulla vera intelligenza*, after discussing the actions of the medieval Pisans, Pepe wrote:

Di sí crassa dappocaggine fora sol capace quel rimatore dell' *Ultimo Canto di Child Harold*. Il quale si sforza di supplire all'estro ond'è vacuo, ed a' concetti degni dell'estro, con baie contro all'Italia; baie che chiameremmo ingiurie, ove, come dice Diomede i colpi de' fiacchi e degli imbelli potessero mai ferire. Però ritorno al subietto. (16)

Pepe's concealed attack proved highly popular: writing to Carlo Troya on 8 February 1826, he told his correspondent that his article on Dante had been selling very well and that it was admired mainly because of the reference to the "codardissimo Lamartine" (Pepe 1980, 388). Like many others, Pepe felt that Lamartine had grossly insulted Italy and then had the impudence or the stupidity to come to Italy as a diplomat. Lamartine's arrival had stoked the indignation already felt by Italians and, according to Pepe, the French poet was ignored when he went out in public.<sup>6</sup> Lamartine was aware of the indignation of the Italian people and found his position in Florence increasingly difficult.<sup>7</sup>

These tensions came to a head when Lamartine, insulted by Pepe's lines, challenged the Neapolitan to a duel. Both parties were aware that dueling was forbidden in Granducal Florence but the challenge was accepted. It was a serious undertaking: Lamartine wrote a will before the event and Pepe worried that he might be exiled from Florence for fighting a foreign dignitary. As previously mentioned, however, the duel was fortunately brief and the Italian emerged victorious from the confrontation. On hearing that a duel had taken place, the police placed Pepe under house arrest pending investigation. Lamartine was subject to diplomatic immunity but Pepe's position was precarious. Nonetheless, public opinion swelled in his favor, as Pepe later wrote to his brother Raffaele:

tutta Firenze prese caldissima parte per me. Molti Signori toscani, quasi tutti i Ministri Esteri, tutta la Legazione Francese, e molti forestieri di distinzione si impegnarono in mio favore pregando il Governo onde non si facesse la menoma molestia. (Pepe 1980 [21 March 1826], 402)

Perhaps for this reason the grand duke ordered that the affair should be forgotten and Pepe was released and celebrated as a hero throughout the peninsula.<sup>8</sup> The Neapolitan's actions in risking his life in defense of an image of Italy illustrate the depth of the feeling generated by the controversy, while the widespread praise of Pepe is an indication of the popularity of resistance to Lamartine's portrayal of the country. The Neapolitan received congratulatory letters from all over Italy, complimenting him on the manner in which he had defended his country's honor. One of these letters came from Carlo Troya, who on 26 February 1826 wrote to Pepe from Rome:

Noi siamo tutti a' tuoi piedi, mio troppo caro e stimato Gabriele. Tu ci hai vendicato, e il tuo trionfo è compiuto. Grazie ti siano rese, mio caro, dell'onor

che tu ci fai, e dell'orgoglio che tu ispiri ai tuoi amici. [. . .] Qui non si parla che di te; i caffè, le società, le bettole, i palagi risuonano tutti di un nome cotanto diletto al mio cuore. (Quoted in Ruberto 1898, 38)

### A CONTINUING DISPUTE

Following such a happy resolution of the duel, it might have seemed possible to consider the case closed, but this did not happen. The issue reverberated for decades and was really laid to rest only with Italian Unification. Lamartine, for one, felt that he had been misunderstood and that the public, which so celebrated Pepe, needed to better comprehend the sentiments he had expressed in *Dernier Chant*. To this end, in 1826 he published an explanation of the work in which he defended his remarks by claiming that he was simply entering into the spirit of Byron and imagining the sentiments that the Englishman would have felt on leaving Italy (Lamartine 1826a, 1826b). In other words, Lamartine sought to distance himself from the controversy by arguing that he had expressed not his own feelings but imaginary ones of Byron. The Frenchman's attempt at self-defense was, however, widely ridiculed, and the debate continued.<sup>9</sup>

To understand why Lamartine was so criticized, one must examine the larger context and the culture within which he wrote. In the early nineteenth century, Italy was the foremost tourist attraction in Europe. Travelers converged there from all over the world, many writing travel accounts, novels, and poetry based on their experiences and observations. Italians were very aware of this literary output, which on the whole they rejected, since they felt it to be generally inaccurate and unflattering. Time after time, educated Italians were generally dismayed by the observations made on the state of their country, its backwardness, and the fickle morals of Italian women. A common topic of discussion in travel literature was the lowly state of Italy and the poor condition of its contemporaries when compared with their illustrious forefathers.<sup>10</sup> Nelson Moe (2002, 2004) has observed that the emergence of a view of the south of Europe as an inferior region started to take hold in the seventeenth century and gained particular currency in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was quite usual in travel accounts to describe Italians as a backward race, a characterization much resented by the educated elite who read these works. Throughout the 1820s writers for the Florentine journal *Antologia* had rejected travel narratives in literature that criticized their country, and they derided foreign travel articles published in the journal.<sup>11</sup>

They would not allow themselves to be criticized by foreigners, who, they felt, had only a cursory knowledge of their country. It was no surprise, then, that Lamartine should have encountered such a reaction in Florence; for years, the intellectuals of the *Antologia* had been rebuffing the sort of view that he expressed in *Dernier Chant*.<sup>12</sup> The literary output from travelers to Italy has received concerted critical attention in recent years, as it has rightly been identified as a valuable source of cultural interaction and reflection. Buzard has observed that “anti-tourism” “has offered an important, even exemplary way of regarding one’s own cultural experiences as authentic and unique, setting them against a backdrop of always assumed tourist vulgarity, repetition and ignorance” (1993, 5). The Pepe-Lamartine affair sits well in this context. On the one side is the perceived tourist, incapable of making meaningful contact with the local milieu, on the other the native who is forced to examine and defend the local cultural experience.

Clearly, Lamartine’s criticism of nineteenth-century Italy was not unique—a point that the Frenchman utilized in his defense, claiming that he was reproached for saying things that were applauded when uttered by others (1881 [18 February 1826], 323). There is much truth to this statement, as many foreigners and Italians had expressed sentiments similar to those proffered by the French poet. Madame de Staël, for example, had contended that the dead were the only glorious property left to Italy.<sup>13</sup> Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold* contains lengthy attacks on various Italian cities. Others called the country degenerate and fallen, and the discussions on Italy’s decay were numerous.<sup>14</sup> Samuel Rogers’s poem *Italy* (1842) contains ideas close to those expressed by Lamartine:

O Italy, how beautiful thou art!  
 Yet I could weep—for thou art lying, alas,  
 Low in the dust; and we admire thee now  
 As we admire the beautiful in death.

(Rogers 1842, 41)<sup>15</sup>

Lamartine was, therefore, only one of many foreigners who termed Italy the land of the dead; yet his work was targeted by Italians for recrimination. What distinguished his writing from that of others was the timing of its publication, its popularity, and the author’s physical presence in Florence at a time when the international image of Italy was defended by many patriots. His case was therefore much more animated and enduring. Lamartine’s harsh

words were seen as an especially egregious instance of foreign ignorance, ingratitude, and unfairness. The French poet also erred in that his words offered no sense of hope to Italians and offered no comfort for the future. Lamartine was held to have portrayed the Italians as ignoble and worthy of scorn; in contrast, Byron was perceived to have sympathized with Italy's fate and encouraged the country to raise itself to a higher destiny.<sup>16</sup> Lamartine was not a flamboyant hero who had given his life for the liberty of another country; he was a French diplomat resident in Florence and therefore a much easier target.

### THE ITALIAN TRADITION

Lamartine further argued in his defense that many Italian poets used the same rhetoric when lamenting the state of their own country. In this, too, he had a point. The French poet claimed that Petrarch, Monti, and Alfieri had expressed similar sentiments, but, importantly, "*ce que l'on se pardonne en famille, on ne le pardonne pas à un étranger*" (in Jannone 1912, 36). From Dante onward, Italian poets had urged people into action through harsh words and recriminations. Foreigners such as Lamartine were familiar with this tradition and some felt that their work would be a natural continuation of a trusted formula.<sup>17</sup> Gabriele Pepe, so offended by Lamartine calling Italy the land of the past, had himself written poetry lamenting the state of Italy, and in 1813 had written about nineteenth-century Rome being a pitiful contrast to its former glories (1976). His attitude in these pieces was similar in tone and content to Lamartine and yet it was the work of a man who presented himself as Lamartine's adversary. Italians were allowed to lament the state of their country, as this was seen as an incitement to action. Foreigners lamenting the state of Italy, meanwhile, were seen to be indulging in derision. Giuseppe Mazzini, for example, contended in his 1841 essay on the decline of art in Italy:

Ma, con l'aiuto di Dio, lo vinceremo; non ci lasceremo schiacciare da queste rovine: costruiremo su di esse. Non dite che l'Arte è morta; [. . .] Noi lo sappiamo fin troppo che la notte è scura; ma l'ora più scura della notte è quella che sta più prossima all'alba, e la Provvidenza farà splendere il giorno. (1993, 23)

For people such as Mazzini, the decline of Italy contained within itself the seeds of the country's own renewal. It was on these ruins that the future



would be built. Many Italians felt that foreigners did not understand this subtlety, preferring to come to Italy and gaze at the country as though it were a mummified object. In the same essay, for example, Mazzini says that a "dead nation" satisfies the desires of many tourists:

Altri, turisti titolari, eroi del diletterismo, hanno acquistato le loro ammirazioni già belle preparate nelle Guide del viaggiatore o nei libri di coloro che li hanno preceduti; [. . .] Questi, poeti voluttuosamente malinconici, eleganti tragici da sofà, hanno bisogno di una *nazione morta*; ieri la Grecia, oggi l'Italia; è così bella una nazione morta! A ogni modo, meno molesta di una nazione che soffre—e la seppellirebbero con le loro mani profumate di muschio, non foss'altro per il piacere di comporne l'epitafio. (1993, 23)

This caustic attitude toward foreigners is indicative of the treatment that Lamartine received but is also illustrative of Italian awareness of the perception of their country as a suffering land whose honor needed to be defended.

### LITERARY REPLIES

Pepe was not alone in replying to Lamartine. An examination of these reactions gives an indication of the sensitivity to image prevalent in this era. Writers used many similar themes and motifs in their efforts to create an idea of vitality, and the works written in response to Lamartine's *Dernier Chant* show a desire among many Italians to inaugurate a time of renewal and hope.

The first response came from Pietro Giordani in 1826. However, it was so overt and controversial that Vieusseux rejected it for publication even before submitting it to the censor; it was published only in 1857, as part of Giordani's collected works. Another response was that of Giuseppe Borghi, who in 1826 wrote a long poem in *terzine* for the *Antologia*. Borghi, a member of the Accademia della Crusca, was more successful than Giordani in having his poem approved by Vieusseux for publication; indeed, the editor introduced Borghi's work with these calming words:

Servirà fors'anche a far chiaro quanto nelle attuali circostanze disconvenisse, ad un francese specialmente, l'insultare all'Italia, come ha fatto senza motivo il continuatore di Child Harold di Lord Byron. (Quoted in Jannone 1912, 20)

The poem did not, however, pass the censor.<sup>18</sup>

Due to the difficulties with censorship, writers had to look outside of Italy for publication, and, ironically, the first published response to Lamartine was printed in 1832 in Paris. The work of the Italian exile Carlo Guaita, it was titled *L'addio d'Aroldo all'Italia*. This was followed ten years later by one of the most celebrated interventions in the debate, namely, the Tuscan satirist Giuseppe Giusti's *La terra dei morti*.<sup>19</sup> These works by Giordani, Borghi, Guaita, and Giusti aimed to defend Italy from Lamartine's attack and used similar strategies to that end. First of all, they were steadfast in their assertion that Italy was a vibrant country. Secondly, they were the work of people who had been extremely irked by Lamartine's words; their anger, for example, is evidenced by Giordani's insults aimed at the French poet, whom he terms "Insolente e disumano ipocrita" and "signor poetarello diplomatico" (Giordani 1857, quoted in Jannone 1912, 16). Finally, all of the writers rejected the finality of the associations of the land of the dead, arguing instead, using traditional nationalistic imagery, that the Italian situation showed signs of hope and renewal.

In particular, each reply to Lamartine showed extreme sensitivity to the perception of Italy by foreigners, who were both attacked and ridiculed. Giusti focused on the irony of the situation in which foreigners came to Italy from northern climates in search of health but then proceeded to call the country the "land of the dead":

O voi, genti piovute  
 Di là dai vivi, dite,  
 Con che faccia venite  
 Tra i morti per salute?  
 Sentite, o prima o poi  
 Quest'aria vi fa male,  
 Quest'aria anco per voi  
 È un'aria sepolcrale.

(Giusti, "La terra dei morti," l. 65-72)

Furthermore, the writers lamented the fact they were subject to the insults of foreigners who were the very people who also occupied and subjected their land. Lamartine had placed the blame for Italy's lowliness on her citizens; he had called them shadows of people, not men. In reply to this accusation, Italians claimed that the situation was beyond their control: Italy's condition was the fault of outsiders who had invaded and plundered the country.

Both Giordani and Borghi believed that other nations who insulted Italy were jealous of her privileged position in the history of humanity. Giusti exclaimed that foreigners stood guard over Italy, bayonets poised: “Come! Guardate i morti / Con tanta gelosia?” (85-86). Italians were willing to admit the lowly state of Italy on these terms, as it entailed very little blame on the current generation. Rather, the blame could be placed upon the foreigners who had attacked the country time after time. In the *Dernier Chant*, Lamartine had contrasted Greek revolutionary activity with Italian lethargy. By focusing on the fact that Italy was an occupied country, held under the yoke of foreign powers, nationalists could better defend these accusations of inaction. The “perfido straniero” (Borghi 1826, l. 122), rather than the native, was the cause of Italy’s woes.

While attacking negative foreign criticism, the Italian writers also sought to create positive images of their country by listing the names of great Italians and mentioning Italian achievements. Guaita believed that his country was an illustrious land that should be honored for its achievements: “Poi crescendo in età, seppi che grande / Genitrice d’eroi fu Italia un tempo!” (l. 408-9). This favored theme among Italian patriots highlighted Italy’s past and its influence in the creation of European civilization. As Giusti wrote, “[. . .] eravamo grandi / e là non eran nati” (l. 95-96). It pained patriots such as Giusti that natives of formerly “barbarian” counties would come and criticize the mother of civilization. Italy was therefore presented not as the land of the dead but instead a “fresco paese” (Guaita 1832, l. 715) that was the cornerstone of European civilization. Guaita commented:

[. . .] qui, qui pure avanza!  
 Ma silenziosamente progredisce,  
 Con passo misurato, sulle tombe  
 E sotto gli archi venerandi. Sallo  
 Ch’è figlio di quei secoli famosi  
 Che dormon dentro l’urne, e sotto gli archi!  
 Tempo verrà, nè lungi è forse, un grido  
 Generoso emettendo, ei desteralli;  
 Stupiranno al trionfo, ed al silenzio  
 Reduci della morte, esclameranno;  
 —In ver non fummo tanto grandi, noi!

Italy is advancing, the poem is saying, but in her own particular manner; her progress encompasses the graves of the past and the monuments of previous achievement. This imagery uses the language of death in order to promote an idea of growth and hope. The descriptions connect with themes of renewal and it is understood that a new day will shortly arrive for Italy. Carlo Guaita's words give a good indication of the manner in which a contrasting image of Italy was developed in response to Lamartine.

It can therefore be seen that in reaction to Lamartine, several Italian writers developed an ideal image of Italy. These literary responses contained details of Italian achievement and dismissed any Italian silence as a result of oppression and censorship. Through its history and its ruins, Italy was presented as a sleeping beauty, and the writers put themselves forward as noble princes who would rouse this beauty from her slumber. They exaggerated the content of foreign attacks, used powerful nationalistic vocabulary, and reiterated the idea that misery was enforced by those who criticized. Responding to Lamartine, the writers defined their love of country and issued words of comfort. The ideal image of Italy that emerged was sentimental and hopeful; and in an unusual twist, this image was to subsequently receive one of its best articulations from Lamartine.

### ***LA PERTE DE L'ANIO: THE ACCEPTABLE IMAGE***

Having failed to placate Italians with his apologies and explanations, Lamartine wrote a poem in 1827 entitled *La Perte de l'Anio*, in which he presented a different picture of Italy. Carlo Guaita had appealed to Lamartine to speak to Italy with words of peace and comfort, and the Frenchman certainly did this in his new Italian poetic creation. Importantly, the poem was published in the *Antologia* in 1827, and thus constituted a public apology to Italians. As the poet later explained,

J'écrivis ces vers avec le coeur d'un Italien; et comme j'avais contristé, un an ou deux avant, cette terre, je profitai avec empressement de cette circonstance pour me réconcilier avec elle.<sup>20</sup>

It is significant that the poem was published by this journal, as it shows Lamartine's reconciliation with the main cultural group in Florence. Indeed, Vieuzeux introduced *La Perte de l'Anio* by praising Lamartine as one of the foremost French poets. He continued:

Questa composizione [. . .] non c'interessa soltanto pel suo merito poetico. In essa l'autore parla dell'Italia nostra, e ne parla in modo che ben ci prova che, abbandonandosi al proprio sentimento, ei non può che meritare la nostra gratitudine. (101)

The *Giornale arcadico* welcomed the publication, saying that it went some way toward making amends for the insults that the French poet had previously “vomited” onto Italy (*Giornale arcadico di scienze, lettere ed arti* 37 [1828]: 383).

In the new poem, Italy is portrayed as the place in which glory was born, the source of all nations and a mother to all countries. Ruins are depicted in a different fashion here than in the *Dernier Chant*: whereas before, they were seen as indicators of decay, in *La Perte de l'Anio*, Italy is the place where “l’histoire du monde est écrite en ruines” (l. 90). Unlike the *Dernier Chant*, ruins are not reminders of former greatness, nor is the past an overwhelming burden. Instead, the past is a part of Italy and is the reason why the country deserves admiration from other nations. In fact, the Frenchman resorts to outright flattery:

Source des nations! Reine! Mère commune!!  
 Tu n'est pas seulement chère aux nobles enfans  
 Que ta verte viellesse a porté dans ses flancs,  
 De tes ennemis même enviée, et chérie,  
 De tout ce qui naît grand ton ombre est la patrie!<sup>21</sup>

(98-102)

Lamartine had found a formula and image more acceptable to Italian patriots; he still had a long way to go before he could convert those critics who referred to his previous work as villainy, but it was at least a start. In his new work, the poet still talks about ruins but the vocabulary is now couched in unadulterated praise. In *La Perte de l'Anio*, Italy is sentimentalized and romanticized, which is what the patriots wanted to hear: they clamored for an Italy that lived *with* her past but not *in* her past.

### A CONTINUING REACTION

Despite Lamartine's rewriting, the issue of the “land of the dead” lingered; the debate gained its own momentum and dynamic, and the words *terra dei*

*morti* became a popular trigger for Italian indignation. The matter was aggravated when Lamartine made an untimely intervention in the *Rivista Euganea* in 1857, in which he called Dante an “obscure” and “excessively Tuscan” poet, and the *Divina Commedia* “un mauvais livre” (Lamartine 1857, 37). In the 1850s, Italians used Dante to prove the greatness of Italy and the extent of its potential. Therefore, to attack the author of the *Divina Commedia* was to attack Italy, bringing upon oneself the ire of many of the country’s intellectuals. As was to be expected, there was much reaction to Lamartine’s assertions.<sup>22</sup> In the *Rivista Euganea*, Giovanni Prati replied to Lamartine using the imagery favored by many Italian nationalists, and stating firstly that “il seminare la beffa sulle sepolture di viventi o di morti, non è cosa degna nè d’uomo cristiano nè di uomo civile,” and then adding:

Ed io temerei davvero di offendere il più gran sepolcro del mondo se credessi che quelle ceneri abbian bisogno di patrocinio. Tutta la nazione si leva intorno a quel sepolcro, per avvertirci semplicemente, o Signore, che voi avete oltraggiato un nome ch’ella adora in ginocchio, e ritta in piedi pronunzia con tranquillità alterezza, per farvi chinare la testa ed arrossire. (Prati 1857, 31)

In defending their country and their poet, Italians promoted the idea that their past and present were in harmony. So when Lamartine insulted Italy’s past, he offended its present. The French poet had not learned that a past that might appear obscure and distant to him could be held dearly by many in Italy and indeed be used as a basis for future renewal and hope.

### LA TERRA DEI VIVI

The issue of Lamartine’s assertions only faded in the 1860s with Unification. Writers now sought to show those of Lamartine’s persuasion that both the spirit of Dante and the spirit of Italy were alive and flourishing. In 1861, a French critic, Marc Monnier, even published a book called *L’Italia è la terra dei morti?* in which he defended Italy from the accusation of being the land of the dead. This book was warmly received, especially when the author called the phrase *la terra dei morti* a “crudele ingiustizia” (2). Italians produced similar works. For example, Paolo Garelli and Giuseppe Scilabba-Gullo wrote poems titled, respectively, “A Lamartine” (1857) and “Dante ed Alfieri” (1859); in the latter the “profana voce” rising from the Seine was lambasted (Scilabba-Gullo, 1859, 198).

Emblematic of these celebratory verses is, however, the poem published in 1862 by D. F. Franceschini, titled *La terra dei vivi: Risposta alla terra dei morti di Giuseppe Giusti* (Franceschini 1862, 1–5). For Franceschini, the debate about Italy being the land of the dead is firmly in the past. The chains have been broken and all that matters now is freedom:

Se gente viva o morta  
 Noi siamo, il dirà la storia;  
 La libertà, la gloria  
 La patria il RE, ne importa.

(17-20)

Requiems need not be offered for Italy, instead it is now Austria who is in need of funerary rites. Furthermore, the foreigners who come to Italy will no longer have to withstand an “aria sepolcrale”; new events have made the sepulcher a place for rejoicing:

Opere cittadine,  
 Esempi maestosi  
 Dite, fra le ruine,  
 La nostra Apoteosi!  
 Qui d'Arno in sulla fossa  
 Ove il vampiro inquieto  
 Scarniva infino all'ossa  
 Il tosco sepolcreto.

Superbo un monumento  
 S'inalza ai rai del sole  
 Tetragono a ogni vento:  
 Le rose, le viole,  
 I pampani, gli olivi  
 Tersero il nostro pianto:  
 Vè il caro camposanto  
 Sulla terra dei vivi!!

(97-112)

That it took so long for the controversy to die, however, shows that Lamartine's assertions had touched a nerve in Italians. There was no doubt

disillusionment in Italy over the state of the country and its position as an occupied land. This disillusionment translated into anger when a foreigner pointed out Italian deficiencies. The many responses to Lamartine over the years bring to mind the phrase “the lady doth protest too much.” That Italians felt the need to counteract the assertions made by Lamartine showed that the country was alive and well, on the one hand, and, on the other, that the French poet may have struck a nerve of truth.

In the early nineteenth century many Italian nationalists had pointed out the shortcomings of their homeland. They had been unable to make any significant change before 1826; indeed, memories of miserable defeats in the uprisings of 1820 and 1821 were very fresh in their minds. Therefore, when an outsider voiced a negative opinion, it forced Italians to prove their patriotism and to show the world that they were not going to take all of their misfortunes lying down.

Alphonse de Lamartine survived both physical and literary attacks; his legacy was to make Italians think about the state of their country, how it was to be revived, and its image in the eyes of the world. In fact, the controversy surrounding the *terra dei morti* forced Italians to consider how they would deal with the burden of the past and its representation. Italian patriots used this accusation to fire their emotion in order to create a different image, not an image of death and finality but rather of memory and a future. Whereas outsiders saw ruins, decay, and contemporary misery, Italians saw potent memories that allowed them to express the vitality of their country.

## NOTES

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1. “Crumbling monument, inhabited only by echoes! / Dust of the past rustled only by a sterile wind! / Land, where the sons no longer possess the blood of their ancestors! / Where on old soil, men are born old; / Where debased swords strike only in the shadows; / Where a dark cloud hangs over veiled faces; / Where love is but a trap and propriety is but a burden; / Where craftiness has distorted bright gazes; / Where heated words are but an echoing noise, / A shattered cloud lingers! / Farewell! Mourn your fall while celebrating your heroes! / On the ship where glory has reanimated their bones, / Apologies to great Roman shadows, but I will look elsewhere / For men rather than human dust.”



2. "All sleep, and yet the universe is in movement! / Everywhere else, throughout the century, all progress!"
3. "The poem generated a great furor, and this furor reached Florence [. . .] as soon as I arrived there a great patriotic sentiment rose against me. My verses were translated out of context; they were widely circulated in the salons, at the theater, and among the people" (Foscolo Benedetto 1953, 294). For documentation of the reaction of the Italian public, see Ruberto (1898, 22–53); Foscolo Benedetto (1953, 271–303); and Lamartine (1881, 1: 321–32).
4. Pietro Giordani said in 1826, "Non pochi vorrebbero che io mi sbrighassi di rispondere a quel francese che vi fa ridere. Il quale dopo averci insultati co' suoi versi è venuto ad insultarci colla sua faccia" (quoted in Giordani 1857, 106).
5. As Pepe wrote to his brother Raffaele on 21 March 1826, "Molti prosatori e poeti volevan pubblicare articoli e satire in risposta al calunniatore dell'Italia; ma il Governo Granducale, pei riguardi debiti ad un diplomato Francese, non concedeva il permesso della stampa" (Pepe 1980, 400).
6. Pepe wrote at that time, "Trattavasi con un Francese il quale aveva dipinti gli Italiani come assassini, buoni a dar solo pugnolate di notte ed a tradimento, bisognava dunque fargli vedere col fatto che gli Italiani son più Cavalieri de' Francesi" (to his brother Raffaele, 21 March 1826; Pepe 1980, 400).
7. On 23 February 1826, Lamartine wrote to the duke of Montmorency: "l'opinion italienne, d'abord un peu sourde, avait fini par se monter à un très haut point d'exaltation contre moi. J'ignore si quelque jalousie de cour n'avait pas favorisé l'explosion de ces sentiments hostiles. Quoi qu'il en soit, ma position devenait pénible et des représailles de nation à nation semblaient rendre un éclat inevitable" (Lamartine 1881, 1: 326).
8. As Pepe wrote in a letter dated 10 March 1826 to his brother Raffaele, "finalmente lo stesso Presidente di Polizia, nel dirmi che nulla avessi a temere di molestie, mi fece i suoi complimenti sul modo nobile e generoso con cui mi era condotto in un fatto cui ero stato provocato" (Pepe 1980, 398).
9. An unsigned article in the *Giornale arcadico* (Rome, vol. 29 [1826]: 407–8) reacted to Lamartine's excuse in this manner: "E così per iscolparsi dall'accusa d'aver ingiurato l'Italia ha ingiurato Lord Byron ed ha turbato le ceneri di chi non può più rispondergli." See also Galli (1907–8, 255).
10. For his part, Franco Venturi (1973) has also charted these negative views of Italy, particularly as concerns the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For further examples of this style of writing on Italy, see Formisano (2002) and Pemble (1988).
11. Much of the commentary on travel literature has been a one-sided discourse in which the views of the traveler are expressed and discussed. The reaction of the locals to such visitors has often been ignored even though it was an important field of European interaction in the nineteenth century. For a detailed account of a particular instance of how this interaction impacted on locals see O'Brien (2002). For a

- wider discussion of the more general impact of travel on the city of Florence see O'Brien (2003); for an analysis of this theme in the era of the Grand Tour, see Bignamini (2000).
12. In the *Antologia*, one anonymous critic commented on a travel writer: "Egli, contro le solite prevenzioni degli stranieri, trova in noi un popolo nuovo, rivolto seriamente alle cose utili" (Review 1822).
  13. As she wrote in her novel *Corinne*: "elle vit venir sous les voûtes de jeunes prêtres qui chantaient à voix basse et se promenaient lentement autour du chœur; elle demanda à l'un d'eux ce que signifiait cette cérémonie: *Nous prions pour nos morts*, lui répondit-il—Oui, vous avez raison, pensa Corinne, de les appeler *vos morts*: c'est la seule propriété glorieuse qui vous reste" (Staël 1819, 214).
  14. See, as a typical example, Waldie (1820, xix).
  15. It seems clear that some foreigners enjoyed the poetic suggestiveness of death in Italy. Elsewhere in *Italy*, Rogers writes, "To me, I do confess, reflect a gloom, / A sadness round; yet one I would not lose; / Being in unison with all things else / In this, this land of shadows, where we live / More in past times than present, where the ground, / League beyond league, like one great cemetery, / Is covered o'er with mouldering monuments; / And, let the living wander as they will, / They cannot leave the footsteps of the dead" (1842, 146–47).
  16. In a contemporary review of Lord Byron's work, one anonymous Italian wrote: "Lord Byron parlando della nostra Italia ha temprato il miele coll'assenzio" (*Giornale arcadico* 3 [July–September 1819]: 141). Silvio Pellico expressed a similar view: "il personaggio che figura in questo poema [Childe Harold] è un viaggiatore scozzese, il quale dopo aver pellegrinato in altre parti d'Europa, visita l'Italia, e celebra tutto ciò che questa penisola ha di mirabile o d'infelice" (1819, 1).
  17. A contemporary, Francesco Domenico Guerrazzi, for example, pronounced the following words during an 1848 funeral oration: "Dove sono, o mia patria, i tuoi uomini grandi? Tu non puoi presentare altro che cenere [. . .] e cenere sempre? Dove sono i tuoi Dei? Che cosa hai fatto degli altissimi destini dalla Provvidenza alla tua destra commessi? Come hai conservato la eredità romana? Dove le aquile? Il Campidoglio dove? La terra stessa sembra impaziente di sopportare le codarde generazioni ed emana effluvi pestiferi per ispegnerle tutte. [. . .] Ma queste cose erano state dette e replicate mille volte, e nessuno avrebbe voluto ascoltarle; parvero appunto singulti di strige sopra una terra di morti" (1848, 110). Guerrazzi can use this vocabulary as it is clear he has Italy's interests at heart. The passage is a good example of the widespread use of the language of death for regenerative purposes. Such imagery was meant to incite change. Many Italians wrote on sepulchral themes in these years; indeed, Terenzio Mamiani described Italians in 1828 as, "Questi codardi che non fur mai vivi" (1864, 105).
  18. The poem was eventually published in Florence (Borghi, 1841). For the history and fortunes of Borghi's work see Foscolo Benedetto's detailed discussion (1953, 271–90). There were also various private letters on the theme of the *terra dei morti* that have

- subsequently come to light as many of these letters have been collected by Jannone (1912, 18–71) and Galli (1907–8, 253–69).
19. Giusti's poem was published in 1841 and some, most notably Plinio Carli, have argued that the time lapse between Lamartine's *Dernier Chant* and Giusti's work would lead one to conclude that there was not a direct link between the two. Carli's arguments are unconvincing, however, because it is clear from Giusti's language and timing that he is responding to the debate on the *terra dei morti* phrasing that had its origins with Lamartine. In fact, the late publication of Borghi's work bridges this gap and explains the renewed interest in the subject almost 20 years after it was first broached. For further analysis, see Foscolo Benedetto (1940), who draws attention to the many similarities between the work of Borghi and that of Giusti.
  20. "I wrote these verses with the heart of an Italian; and as I had saddened this country a year or two previously, I assiduously took advantage of this circumstance to reconcile myself with this land" (quoted in Ruberto 1898, 5). Originally in *Antologia* 25, no. 75 (March 1827). Elena Aschieri calls *La Perte de l'Anio* "una vera e propria ritrazione" (2000, 35).
  21. "Source of nations! Queen! Mother of all!! / You are not merely cherished by the noble children / Your mature years have borne to you, / Envied and cherished even by your enemies, / Your shadow is homeland to all that is born great!"
  22. For example, the *Rivista di Firenze* published a long reply in which Lamartine's remarks were refuted one by one, and concluded with the assertion that the French poet had no understanding of Dante (vol. 1 [1857]: 40). The debate continued throughout 1857 in the *Rivista Euganea* with interventions from Niccolò Tommaseo and Agostino Palesa.

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