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## Petrarch goes West: Translation and the Literary Canon

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Francesco Petrarca's position as a key literary figure in the history of European lyrical poetry and humanism has, since medieval times, been advanced and promoted through translation and imitation. A study of these phenomena can help to chart the spread of his influence throughout Europe and also to understand how cultures absorb traditions through translations and reworkings. Since the cultural turn, Translation Studies has devoted much attention to the manner in which translation transforms a text in keeping with the linguistic and cultural norms of the target culture.<sup>1</sup> Bassnett has highlighted how a translation is culture bound, intimately tied up with the context in which it is made, while Lefevere's work on translation as rewriting has provided an insight into the cultural interactions and transfers revealed by a study of the text's rewriting in a different culture.<sup>2</sup> The discussion in this article of the translation of Petrarch's work on the western fringes of Europe will demonstrate the appropriation and transformation of the European literary canon to serve domestic ends in Ireland in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, the afterlives of Petrarch's texts will contribute to understanding how translation can introduce novel material to a target culture which in turn transforms the literature in a new social and cultural context. Although the Irish translations of Petrarch (into English) bear some similarities to the British translation tradition, the differences that are highlighted in this study illustrate how translation responds to differing cultural contexts even when dealing with the same linguistic group and timeframe. This case study of translations of Petrarch's poetry in Ireland will thus discuss the reach and influence of the Italian writer, while also examining the ability of translation to refashion the poet according to distinct local trends.

The influence of Petrarch's vernacular poetry (in particular the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (*Rvf*)) on the development of the European literary canon is undoubtedly

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, *Translation, History, and Culture* (London and New York: Pinter Publishers, 1990); Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation, Topics in Translation* (Clevedon and Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

fundamental and profound. It penetrated into the emergent national literatures of almost all European nations and, for a vernacular text, exercised a hitherto unprecedented influence over European letters from very early on. Petrarch's diction, themes and images became "patrimonio di tutti, stile nazionale e internazionale, moneta corrente nel mercato comune della scrittura poetica".<sup>3</sup> When an influential tide of Petrarchism was sweeping most of Renaissance Europe, Ireland, despite being the country with the oldest vernacular tradition of poetry in Western Europe, remained largely untouched by the phenomenon. This was partly because of its insular bardic literary culture, which actively sought to maintain the forms and language of its ancient poetry through a system of formal education and patronage which encouraged a symbiotic relationship between the bardic class and the ruling indigenous aristocracy.<sup>4</sup> Following the collapse of the old order in the early seventeenth century, the traditional forms persisted, although the subject matter changed, and by the time the bards had effectively ceased to exist as a force in the eighteenth century, Petrarch's period of ascendancy as a literary model had also long passed.

In view of this, it is surprising to note that there was a strong, if belated, Irish tradition of translating Petrarch in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The most notable Irish translators of the poet were Lord Charlemont and Henry Boyd. The former's *History of Italian Poetry from Dante to Metastasio* (posthumously published in 1822) contained a large section on Petrarch encompassing the translation of 21 sonnets and a *canzone*. Charlemont discussed his approach to translating Petrarch in an introduction to his work:

As the following Translations were meant, if possible, to convey to the English reader, and more particularly to a few friends ignorant of Italian, an idea of Petrarch's conceptions, expression, and manners, some pains have been taken to render them as literal as the diversity of language would admit. No liberties have been permitted, no deviation from the original has been allowed, which could possibly be avoided, and even the arrangement of the rhyme has been exactly followed, an operation of no small labour, though perhaps of no great merit; at most of none other than that, by confining the translator, it ties him down to a more strict imitation of his author.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Nicola Gardini, *Per una biblioteca indispensabile* (Turin: Einaudi, 2011), p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> For a concise yet detailed account of the socio-cultural context surrounding the decline of the bards and its consequences for literature in Ireland, see Seán Ó Tuama, *Repossessions: Selected Essays on the Irish Poetic Heritage* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), pp. 119-32.

<sup>5</sup> [James Caulfeild, \*Select sonnets of Petrarch: with translations and illustrative notes\* \(Dublin: William Folds and Son, 1822\), p. 1.](#) [James Caulfeild and George Talbot, \*Lord Charlemont's History of Italian Poetry from Dante to Metastasio: A Critical Edition from the Autograph Manuscript\*. 3 vols., \*Mellen Critical Editions and Translations\*, 3 vols \(Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 2000\), 1, pp. 1-2.](#)

From this paratextual information a few features are noteworthy: firstly Charlemont, a member of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, addresses his work to an English readership; secondly, his aim in translating Petrarch is to convey some of Petrarch's conceptions, expressions and manners, making both the form and the content of the Italian's poetry important considerations. Thirdly, Charlemont aims to rigidly adhere to the original text despite the challenges such an approach might pose. Although Charlemont distanced himself from previous 'free' translations of Petrarch, in reality, by choosing to translate mainly sonnets, he was very much in harmony with the British tradition of translating Petrarch in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Charlemont's engagement with the *Rvf* forms part of the tradition of translations from Petrarch which include Nott (1777) and Penn (1797), and bears the traces of 'a certain stilted Augustan elegance'.<sup>7</sup> Another significant Irish translator of Petrarch was Henry Boyd, who, in 1807, issued the first complete English translation of the *Triumphs* (*Triumphs of Petrarch*).<sup>8</sup> Although an obscure figure, Boyd was a remarkable translator whose output also included the first complete English verse translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and major parts of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. He had much in common with Charlemont: both had a general interest in Italian literature; both were part of an Anglo-Irish Protestant élite; and both envisioned the English reading public as the chief audience for their work. Boyd's work was met with scathing reviews which said that 'the insipid pedantry of the original is equalled only by the prosaic flatness of the translation'<sup>9</sup> and Boyd, it was claimed, 'never rises to the sublime'.<sup>10</sup>

These initial Irish translations of Petrarch by Charlemont and Boyd were not written with an Irish readership in mind and therefore can be located within the wider British tradition of Petrarchan translations. As the century progressed, however, Irish writers began to pen translations which emphasised patriotic and religious aspects of Petrarch's poetry, and these rewritings were more closely aligned with emerging trends in Irish society which witnessed growing desires for greater separation from the British hegemony. While C.P. Brand is undoubtedly correct when he writes that 'after about 1825 English interest in

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<sup>6</sup> M. L. McLaughlin, Letizia Panizza, Peter Hainsworth, *Petrarch in Britain: Interpreters, Imitators, and Translators over 700 Years. Proceedings of the British Academy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Edoardo Zuccato, *The Revival of Petrarch in Eighteenth-Century England* (Milano: Arcipelago, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Mortimer, 'Petrarch', in *Encyclopedia of Literary Translation into English*, ed. by Olive Class (London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000), p. 1071.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Boyd, *The Triumphs of Petrarch* (London: Longman, 1807).

<sup>9</sup> Anon, 'Review of the Triumphs of Petrarch, Translated into English Verse by the Rev. Henry Boyd', *The Critical Review* 11 (1807), 379-82.

<sup>10</sup> Anon, 'Review of Henry Boyd's Triumphs of Petrarch', *The Annual Review and History of Literature*, 6 (1808), 581-84.

Petrarch declines considerably',<sup>11</sup> it cannot be said that Petrarch disappears completely as a presence in English literature for the remainder of the century. The 1850s saw the publication of the first two complete English versions of the *Rvf*, the first by Captain Robert Guthrie MacGregor as part of his *Indian Leisure* in 1854, and the second in 1859 as part of the popular Bohn Library series. In Ireland, however, the 1830s and '40s saw Petrarch gain a foothold as a literary touchstone among an up-and-coming literary class whose interest in the Italian reflects concerns that have implications beyond the sphere of literature. Not only did Irish translators experiment with Petrarchan form and diction, they also attempted to refashion the popular image of Petrarch by highlighting aspects of his biography that reflected their own political concerns, recasting the 'amorous swain [who] sighed and sung at the fountain of Vaucluse'<sup>12</sup> as a religious and political poet of enduring relevance.

### **Petrarch and literary apprenticeship**

For much of Petrarch's Anglophone fortune, his name was synonymous (for better or for worse) with the sonnet: in the Romantic and Victorian eras, poets grappled with the Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnet tradition, adopting or rejecting it, revering or subverting it. It was a literary tradition that could not be ignored.<sup>13</sup> In Ireland, poets seem to have used translations from Petrarch as a form of literary apprenticeship in which they would engage with a dominant literary form and a compelling European figure. James Clarence Mangan (1803-1849), one of the most famous poets of nineteenth-century Ireland and also its most prolific translator, engaged with Petrarch in this manner in some of his earliest published translations. In 1833 he translated one of the most popular Petrarchan sonnets "Quel rosignuol" (*Rvf* 311);<sup>14</sup> he published "Donna! Che lieta" (*Rvf* 347) in *The Dublin Satirist* on 19 July 1834, and "Padre del ciel" (*Rvf* 62) on 16 August 1834 in the same publication. However, he never again returned to Petrarch. These initial translations had served their

<sup>11</sup> Charles Peter Brand, *Italy and the English Romantics, the Italianate Fashion in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), p. 100.

<sup>12</sup> Quote from Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, cited in M. L. McLaughlin and others, *Petrarch in Britain: Interpreters, Imitators, and Translators over 700 Years*, (Oxford, UK: Published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 324.

<sup>13</sup> Edoardo Zuccato, *Petrarch in Romantic England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); *The Revival of Petrarch in Eighteenth-Century England* (Milan: Arcipelago, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> James Clarence Mangan, 'Sonetto dDi Petrarca', *The Dublin Penny Journal*, 1 (1833), 253. When referring to the Italian originals, reference will be made to their numbering in the *Rerum vulgariarum fragmenta* (*Rvf*) and citations from the *Rvf* will be taken from Giuseppe Savoca's edition *Francesco Petrarca: Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta* (Florence: Olschki, 2008), except for the original of "Quel rosignuol" which is from Marco Santagata ed., *Francesco Petrarca: Canzoniere* (Milan: Mondadori, 2010) as it was probably closer to the source text used by Mangan.

purpose of engaging with the European tradition of the sonnet but Mangan's subsequent literary works and translations were to move in a radically different direction as the writer concentrated on translations of German, Oriental and Irish poetry. Even though Mangan excelled at translating Petrarch into English, it is possible that he found the Petrarchan forms too restrictive, both in terms of metre and rhyme. It could also be possible, given Petrarch's fundamental influence on English literature, that Mangan wished to move away from the very conventional, archetypal English poem, epitomised by the English Elizabethan sonnet tradition into a more radical examination of the creative possibilities offered by translation. An examination of Mangan's first translation of Petrarch however shows great sympathy with the Italian sonnet form and high level of engagement with the literary tradition represented by Petrarch.

### **Yon nightingale**

In his highly-accomplished translation (1833) of the popular Petrarchan sonnet 'Quel rosignuol', Mangan demonstrates both a sensitivity to Petrarch's structure and message, as well as a large degree of technical skill.<sup>15</sup> Adopting the Petrarchan rather than the more common Shakespearean form, Mangan transposes Petrarch's rhyme scheme exactly, limiting himself to six distinct rhymes. Because of the relative ease of unearthing rhyme words in Italian, this is a technical feat rarely attempted in English, let alone achieved with success, and points to Mangan's prowess as a poet and translator. Mangan adopts the iambic pentameter throughout, which was well-established as the English equivalent to the *endecasillabo*, and the default meter for the sonnet since the Earl of Surrey's experiments in sonneteering in the mid-sixteenth century.

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<sup>15</sup> Yon nightingale that pours forth tuneful wail  
For its dear mate, or haply for its young,  
Fills all the vaulted heaven, and echoing dale,  
With such sweet modulated plaintive song;  
Methinks it joins my melancholy tale,  
Reminding me of woe the whole night long:  
That death o'er charms divine could ne'er prevail  
I ween'd but now lament a thought so wrong.  
Who seeks security doth vainly stray:  
Ah me, that unto murky earth should turn  
Those eyes which far outshone the radiant day!  
The precept my hard fortune would convey  
I now perceive; to live to weep, and learn  
Of every bliss below HOW TRANSIENT is the stay!

Petrarch's sonnet opens by recalling one of his favourite myths: that of Procne and Philomela as recounted by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*. The nightingale for Petrarch symbolises a juxtaposition of the violence and pain of loss with the sweetness and serenity of nature and song. The first five lines, which Petrarch uses to set the scene and introduce the parallel between the nocturnal songbird and the lyric poet, are translated faithfully by Mangan. This mirroring of poet and songbird is emphasised in Petrarch through linguistic echoing ('tante note'... *tutta notte*'), as well as the copious alliteration, assonance and consonance in the opening stanza:

*Quel rosignuol che sì soave piagne  
Forse suoi figli o sua cara consorte,  
Di dolcezza empie il cielo e le campagne  
Con tante note sì pietose e scorte;  
E tutta notte par che m'accompagne*

[ll. 1-5; emphasis added]

This sonorous harmony finds an equivalent in Mangan's internal rhyme in the first line, and the alliterations which cluster around lines 4-6.

Yon nightingale that pours forth tuneful wail  
For its dear mate, or haply for its young,  
Fills all the vaulted heaven, and echoing dale,  
With such sweet modulated plaintive song;  
Methinks it joins my melancholy tale,  
Reminding me of woe the whole night long:

The similarities between the *rosignuol* and the poet are undercut by Petrarch's sixth line, in which the bird takes on the role of antagonist, reminding the poet of his 'dura sorte' and that he is the sole author of his own misery. Mangan's nightingale, however, remains a fellow traveller, joining the poet's 'melancholy tale' and reminding him of some general store of 'woe' of which both are partaking. Petrarch gradually reveals the two-fold causes of his misery. Firstly, that he alone is to blame for his foolishness, and secondly, that this foolishness constitutes his refusal to acknowledge the beloved's mortal nature. This gradual reveal is the source of the drama in Petrarch's interior psychological narrative, and culminates in the axiomatic exclamation at the point of the volta: 'O che lieve è ingannar chi s'assecura!'.

Mangan reverses the order in which the poet reveals these key pieces of information, making the progression of ideas more logical, but less psychologically jarring. He gives more

prominence to the poet's faulty belief in the beloved's immortality, allowing his seventh line to spill over into the eighth. Petrarch's grammatically obscure seventh line is squeezed into the remainder of Mangan's eighth line ('...but now lament a thought so wrong') in an altogether more prosaic fashion, placing less demands on the reader but at the cost of simplifying the more ambiguous relationship between Petrarch's nightingale and poet. While the poet is present in the first stanza simply as a narrative voice, his presence as a character in the poem is emphatically signalled in each line of the second stanza:

E tutta notte par che *m'accompagne*  
E *mi* rammente la *mia* dura sorte:  
Ch'altri che *me* non ò di ch'*i'* *mi* lagne:  
Chè 'n Dee non *credev'io* regnasse Morte.

[ll. 5-8; emphasis added]

The seventh line emphasises his isolation syntactically, with five out of the eleven words pertaining to himself. This line in Petrarch has been the subject of some dispute among editors throughout the centuries. Modern editors such as Savoca, having consulted Petrarch's original manuscript at the Vatican Library, read the line as 'Ch'altri che me non ho di *ch'i'* mi lagne', whilst earlier editors, among whom Leopardi, whose 1826 edition may well have been consulted by Mangan, give us 'Ch'altri che me non ho di *cui* mi lagne'.<sup>16</sup> We may speculate that a reader of Mangan's sensitivity (assuming that he was capable of deciphering the line) felt the interpretation current in nineteenth-century editions of Petrarch to be at odds with the self-flagellatory tone of the poem, and introduced a distasteful note of self-pity which he thought better to play down in his version by affording more prominence to Petrarch's eighth line.

It is noticeable, too, that Mangan avoids the idolatrous Petrarchan subtext of l. 8: the beloved's charms are divine, but not the beloved herself. Accusations of idolatry had been a feature of Petrarch's reception in England from the time of the Reformation, and remained an insurmountable obstacle for many readers in the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> It is not surprising that a translator who took such pains to preserve Petrarch's structure should handle the sonnet's volta with such dexterity, as Mangan deftly translates Petrarch's *cri de coeur* with the proverbial and poetic 'Who seeks security doth vainly stray'. The sestet sees Mangan resume his faithful translation of the original, with the majuscule 'HOW TRANSIENT' in the final

<sup>16</sup> See Giacomo Leopardi ed., *Rime di Francesco Petrarca* (Colla interpretazione composta dal Conte Giacomo Leopardi) (Milano: Ant. Fort. Stella e figli, 1826), p. 298; Giuseppe Savoca, ed., *Francesco Petrarca: Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta* (Firenze: Olschki, 2008), p. 489.

<sup>17</sup> Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 60.

line indicating a significant authorial or editorial hint to the reader of the great moral of Petrarch's sonnet, and indeed of the *Rvf* as a whole.

Were it not for the apparent ease with which Mangan transposes Petrarch's rhyme scheme to English in 'Yon nightingale', his two subsequent translations of sonnets by Petrarch might have risked tarnishing his reputation as a translator of rare skill and sensitivity. His versions of *Rvf* 347 and *Rvf* 62 seem more experimental in character, as he rejects both the Petrarchan and Shakespearean forms in favour of two differing rhyme schemes which undermine the formal divisions of octave and sestet which he had preserved so carefully in his rendering of 'Quel rosignuol'. The ample evidence of his ability provided by his earliest foray into Petrarchan translation can only lead to the conclusion that what may appear as a disregard for formal concerns in his later works, in fact, represents a desire to push the boundaries of the traditional sonnet in the hope of breaking free from its conventionality. This desire for novelty is probably what eventually persuaded Mangan to abandon Petrarch as a model, and turn his attention to less well-known sources.

That Petrarch represented a form of literary apprenticeship for Mangan can be gleaned from his isolated but accomplished translations, and his choice of popular Petrarchan sonnets for translation. Indeed, in the nineteenth century 'Quel rosignuol' was one of the most popular sonnets of the Italian's canon, bolstered, perhaps, by a more recent literary incarnation of Procne in Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale' (1819). The short but intense engagement with Petrarch is mirrored by other Irish writers, particularly Mangan's contemporary John Francis Waller who published a cycle of four Petrarchan sonnets (signed 'Iota') in the *Dublin University Magazine* in 1836. As with Mangan, Waller demonstrates a burst of Petrarchan activity and then abandons the Italian for other literary wanderings once this literary engagement and apprenticeship has been served. Waller is faithful to Petrarch's form and content and even tries his hand at the Petrarchan rather than the Shakespearean form, a rarity in English outside of Wyatt and Milton. As with Mangan, Waller's translations are presented with no ancillary information, exegetical notes or translative *apologia*. This may be because Petrarch was considered such as well-known figure that no such information was necessary. However, it could also be indicative of a minimal engagement with the Italian author – Petrarch was useful merely as a literary exercise in translation. This hypothesis is borne out by the fact that following this cluster of Petrarchan translations, Waller did not again return to the Italian and, like Mangan, moved on to different literary endeavours.

Other similar examples of isolated Irish translations of Petrarchan sonnets exist: in 1846, Edward Kenealy published two translations from Petrarch in *The Irish Monthly*

*Magazine* ('On the Death of Laura' (*Rvf* 313) and 'Blest spirit who so oft from heaven' (*Rvf* 282)).<sup>18</sup> The *Dublin University Magazine* published two more translations of Petrarchan sonnets ('The west winds breathe' (*Rvf* 310) and 'O Nightingale' (*Rvf* 311)) in July and August 1863. Like the previous works, these translations contain no paratextual information and appear as islands of engagement with Petrarch, translative experiments on a literary journey. It is clear that Irish literary figures were engaging with Petrarch in this period, even if they were not dedicating themselves to repeated translations of his work.<sup>19</sup> The translation of Petrarch by Mangan, Kenealy and Waller testifies to a willingness among Irish authors to engage with the Italian author, and the tradition that he represented. They were dipping their literary toes into the shared patrimony of the European lyric tradition. However, for each of them this was not enough and Mangan in particular turned his gaze elsewhere in order to further his literary experiments.

### **Petrarch: the patriot poet**

While some Irish translators of Petrarch were interested in the Italian as a major author in the European lyric tradition, others saw him primarily as a patriot poet. This particular aspect of the Italian's poetry rarely featured in the Anglophone Petrarchan tradition but it filtered through in Irish translations as exemplified by Martin MacDermott's version of 'Spirto Gentil' in the *Cork Magazine* in 1847, under the heading 'The Patriot-Poets of the Past'. MacDermott entitled his translation, 'Canzone to Cola da Rienzo, beseeching him to restore unto Rome, her ancient liberty'. This is the only Petrarchan translation to appear in the *Cork Magazine* and it is noteworthy that it is not a love poem or sonnet but instead a lengthy and challenging poem in which Petrarch makes some of his most important and influential civic statements. MacDermott also published a 'Historical Note on Petrarch' in the *Cork Magazine* in June 1848. In deliberate and noted contrast to Petrarch's influential eighteenth-century biographer, de Sade, the Irish writer stated quite simply that 'Petrarch was a patriot'.<sup>20</sup> In fact, for MacDermott, Petrarch's tomb is hallowed by 'higher memories' than that of the 'minstrel

<sup>18</sup> Edward Kenealy, 'A Polyglot Paper', *Irish Monthly Magazine*, 211 (1846), 329-32.

<sup>19</sup> Although he did not translate Petrarch, the level to which the Italian poet had become part of a common literary canon, can be seen by the many volumes of Petrarch's poetry and biographies of the Italian poet owned by Thomas Moore, the renowned nineteenth-century Irish poet. See for example the many Petrarchan works included in 'The Library of Thomas Moore' which was left to the Royal Irish Academy by his widow:

<http://ria.daradev.dara.link/library-thomas-moore-hon-mria-1779-1852>.

<sup>20</sup> Martin MacDermott, 'Historical Note on Petrarch', *Cork Magazine* (1848), 505-06.

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lover of Hugues de Sade'. The Irishman presents Petrarch as imbued with classical civic virtues and highlights his patriotic attributes rather than his love poetry:

[Petrarch] might nourish his warmer fancies on the memories of Laura; might twist every laurel bush he met in his walks into an image of her *he thought* he loved; but deeper and stronger than this imagined, yet most melodious passion, was his worship of the heroes and heroic virtues of antiquity. He had fed his soul on the old stories of Roman freedom. (505)

Such an interpretation of the Italian tied in with MacDermott's own world view: he was a member of the patriotic movement Young Ireland and was involved in nationalist activity throughout the century, working in both the literary and diplomatic realms in order to secure greater independence for Ireland. Interestingly he also translated poetry from the French poet Béranger, poetry which had a distinctly patriotic undertone and it is this patriotic interest which makes MacDermott's translation of Petrarch's 'Spirto gentil' a significant moment in the history of translation of Petrarch in Ireland.

### **Spirto gentil**

'Spirto gentil' (*Rvf* 53) was thought for many years to be addressed to the popular Roman leader and Tribune Cola di Rienzo (c. 1313-1354). While modern editors, such as Santagata and Hainsworth, are sceptical, this theory was universally accepted by Petrarch's editors both before and during MacDermott's lifetime, and the translator would have had no reason to think otherwise.<sup>21</sup> Even if Cola is not the historical addressee, however, the characterisation of the 'spirto gentil' as the saviour of Rome, a medieval reincarnation of the heroes of antiquity who would bring to an end the factional strife which had plagued Rome for decades and restore the Eternal City to her rightful place as *caput mundi*, was certainly not incompatible with the image that Cola projected of himself, nor with the role which Petrarch hoped he would adopt in Roman political life after his installation as Tribune in 1347.<sup>22</sup>

The *canzone* highlights the contrast between the glorious past of classical antiquity and the ubiquitous decadence and vice of present-day politics and society. In this particular instance, Petrarch invokes the spirit of ancient Roman heroes who embodied the ideals of liberty and patriotism, comparing them with the warmongering aristocratic families whose

<sup>21</sup> Marco Santagata ed., *Francesco Petrarca: Canzoniere* (Milano: Mondadori, 2010), pp. 275-6; Peter Hainsworth, *The Essential Petrarch* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2010), p. 29.

<sup>22</sup> See Francesco Petrarca, *Epistolae De Rebus Familiaribus Et Variarum*, 3 vols (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1859-1863), [\[add volume\]](#), p. 48; *Le Familiari*, 4 vols (Firenze: Sansoni, 1933-1942), [\[add vol.1\]](#), pp. 11, 16, 1.

struggles for power had brought about Rome's current unhappy state, and caused even the Papacy to seek refuge in France. Rome is personified as an abandoned or widowed wife, and the 'spirto gentil' as a returning husband coming to her aid. Such a conceit would have resonated with Irish writers familiar with the Aisling tradition, in which Ireland appeared to the poet in a vision as a woman awaiting the return of her husband, usually identified with the head of the Catholic House of Stuart. Even though canzoni are rarely translated into English (a notable exception being Thomas Wyatt's early imitation of *Rvf* 37, 'So feeble is the thread' (c.1538)), it is not difficult to imagine how a poem which seemed to anticipate the Aisling, calling for a liberating political figure to revive the fortunes of an oppressed people, would have appealed to a Young Irelander with a literary bent such as MacDermott.

Despite MacDermott's status as a poet, he completely disregards Petrarch's metrical structure. Petrarch's seven stanzas each contain sixteen lines, half containing eleven syllables and half seven, with an intricate rhyming scheme of *AbBCBaaCcddEeDFF*, followed by an eight-line *congedo* (*abbCcBDD*). MacDermott amplifies and reduces to varying degrees, resulting in stanzas of between thirteen and twenty lines. The iambic pentameter appears most frequently, and anchors the poem rhythmically. This rhythm is disrupted haphazardly, but not necessarily ineffectively, by shorter lines of inconsistent meter. Although this disregard for the formal integrity of the original would seem to suggest a lack of concern for the technical aspect of the poetry, MacDermott's primary technical goal is to accommodate copious end-rhymes, which are preserved throughout, though not in any recognised or systematic metrical pattern. As a general rule, the attempt to preserve rhyme above all else frequently results in a substandard translation. Nevertheless, the liberty which MacDermott has allowed himself in formal terms allows him to integrate the rhymes in a manner which only occasionally seems forced. It does appear, however, that MacDermott was more interested in what Petrarch had to say in this poem than the way in which he said it. *Rvf* 53, for MacDermott, functions primarily as a well-constructed edifice in which to house Petrarch's patriotic sentiments, and, in an age in which a newly-married Matthew Arnold was conducting his early experiments in free verse at Dover Beach, MacDermott's insistence on rhyme has a buttressing effect on this structure, allowing his translation to function as a poem despite having dispensed with other foundational poetic materials such as regular metre and form.

Petrarch's language is typically complex. The opening sentence occupies the first nine lines of the poem and recalls Virgil (both structurally and linguistically), Lucan, St. Paul, St.

Augustine, Cino da Pistoia and other works both in Latin and Italian by Petrarch himself.<sup>23</sup> Leaving aside the many layers of subtext and allusion present, only a translator with a very high level of expertise in Italian could discern the literal meaning of some passages of the poem, and indeed MacDermott appears to have had neither the requisite linguistic facility for the task at hand nor the benefit of an editor who could have untangled some of the more intricate verses on his behalf. He displays in some places, either by omission or poetic licence, an element of anticlericalism, yet, if it was his intention to denigrate the Church, his imperfect comprehension causes him to miss perhaps the most cutting of Petrarch's jibes at the Papacy outside of his 'Babylonian' sonnets (*Rvf.* 136-38). This occurs in ll. 80-84 of the original, in which Petrarch bewails the current ruling class of Rome and encourages the 'spirto gentil' to come to the city's aid:

Ai nova gente oltra misura altera,  
Irreverente a tanta et a tal madre.  
Tu marito, tu padre,  
Ogni soccorso di tua man s'attende,  
Che 'l maggior padre ad altr'opera intende.

MacDermott translates this passage as follows:

Alas! how fallen are we,  
Irreverent to so great, so good a Mother!  
Thou, father, husband, brother: -  
Whatever aid we hope must come from thee  
Whom God hath marked for glorious destiny.

[ll. 97-101]

The first thing to note is that, while Petrarch directs his accusation of mistreatment of Rome towards the 'nova gente' (that is, the contemporary noble families of Rome whom he had addressed at the beginning of the stanza), MacDermott speaks in the first-person plural, including the poet in the 'we' that demonstrates irreverence to 'so good a Mother'. Petrarch became a Roman citizen upon his coronation as Poet Laureate in 1341, some years after the date of composition for *Rvf* 53 proposed by Santagata, and as such it would not have been appropriate for him to implicate himself in this alleged negligence. Of course, MacDermott would have assumed this poem to have been written after Petrarch's coronation, around the time of Cola's Tribunate beginning in 1347, so there is some logic in this shift in narrative

<sup>23</sup> Santagata, *Francesco Petrarca*, 2010, pp. 277-78.

perspective. However, if this translation is intended to function as a call to arms to an Irish Cola di Rienzo, MacDermott's 'we' implies a commentary on recent Irish history as well as the contemporary political landscape.

More tellingly, however, MacDermott's translation of the final line of this passage illustrates both his imperfect Italian and his concept of the mission of the national saviour. Petrarch's 'maggior padre' is the Pope, not God. Petrarch is implying that the Pope, by remaining in Avignon, is in dereliction of his duty to Rome. MacDermott misses this reference, possibly reading 'alta' for 'altra' and mistaking 'che' for a relative pronoun rather than the shortened form of 'perché'. In doing so, he allows the reader to relocate the poem from late Medieval Rome to nineteenth-century Ireland unproblematically, and strengthens the theory that he himself had forged a similar link across space and time in his reading of *Rvf* 53.

Though it constitutes MacDermott's own addition to l. 84 of 'Spirto gentil', the concept of destiny does feature in Petrarch's original, in the guise of 'Fortuna'. However, the nature of its interaction with the addressee of the *canzone* differs significantly from source to target text. Petrarch's first reference to 'Fortuna' comes in the opening lines of the seventh stanza, the final one before the closing *congedo*:

Rade volte advien ch'a alte imprese  
Fortuna ingiuriosa non contrasti,  
Ch'agli animosi fatti mal s'accorda.  
Ora sgombrando 'l passo, onde tu intrasti,  
Famisi perdonar molt'altre offese,  
Ch'almen qui da se stessa si discorda.  
[*Rvf* 53, ll. 85-90]

MacDermott's equivalent reads:

Yet seldom haps it but that high emprise,  
By fortune's envious hand is maimed and marred:  
Fortune and Fame are immemorial foes!  
But now the gate behind thee she hath barred;  
And where the steps whereby thou entered'st rose,  
A chasm, yawning, lies!  
Thou can'st not back  
On thy forsaken track,  
But fortune points the way unto the skies!

[ll. 102-110]

Petrarch remains suspicious of 'Fortuna', cautiously forgiving her for past offences while recognising the part she has played in facilitating the addressee's rise to public office. His fate is by no means assured, however, and Petrarch offers no guarantee that 'Fortuna' will not subsequently undermine this latest 'alta impresa'. MacDermott amplifies this passage considerably, and appears to misunderstand 'sgombrando', taking it to mean an act of obstruction rather than one which has cleared the path thus far. Petrarch's 'Fortuna' opens the way for the 'spirto gentil', whose end remains uncertain. MacDermott's 'Fortune', on the other hand, bars the way behind the hero, leaving him with no choice but to complete the task to which he has been ordained both by her here and by God in the previous passage. This is typical of MacDermott's romanticisation of the quasi-Messianic mission of the national saviour, which is heightened by a taste for melodrama that may have as much to do with contemporary Romantic literary tastes as MacDermott's desire, common to many English translators of Petrarch regardless of historical era, to imbue Petrarch's somewhat minimalist or abstract imagery with greater emotional immediacy. Examples of this amplificatory strategy can be found throughout the translation, particularly in passages which physically describe Rome's personified form and at junctures where Petrarch appeals either to Rome or to the 'spirto gentil'; for example: 'Vecchia, otiosa et lenta,/ Dormirà sempre, et non fia chi la svegli?'[ll. 12-13] becomes:

Thou art so old, so slothful, and so slow!  
Shalt thou sleep ever? –  
And will no *brave endeavour*  
*Drag thee out, shivering, into the noontide air?*  
[ll. 15-18; emphasis added]

Elsewhere, Brutus, the great symbol of commitment to the liberty of Republican Rome, described by Petrarch simply as 'fedel' (l. 37), becomes 'stern and freedom-loving' in MacDermott (l. 49); while Fabritius, who simply speaks ('dice', l. 42) in Petrarch's poem, can be heard in MacDermott's version 'triumphing for the Freed' (l. 55). Similarly, the 'ben locato officio' (l. 39) to which the 'spirto gentil' has been called, becomes for MacDermott some unspecified and yet-to-be-completed 'glorious deed' (l. 52). The overall effect of these variations and additions, particularly in concert with the divine ordination of his salvatory

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mission, is to surround MacDermott's 'fine spirit' with considerably more fanfare than Petrarch's 'spirto gentil'.<sup>24</sup>

### **Patriotic translations**

Significantly, MacDermott's translation and article on Petrarch were published in 1848 at a time when Ireland was experiencing the Great Famine and revolutions against established authority were occurring across Europe. MacDermott prefaces his article on Petrarch with the assertion that it would be useful to awaken again one of the 'great voices of the past' now that the eyes of Europe are turned with hope towards Rome and Italy (505). For the Irish anxiously observing the developments on the continent, Petrarch was seen as an emblematic Italian poet, articulating the civic desires of a country. To emphasise this point, Petrarch was likened to the Irish poet, Thomas Moore, author of *The Irish Melodies* who had recently become famous and hugely popular as the poet of Ireland, the singer of a distinctly Irish literary heritage. The search for these national poets is captured in a hyperbolic homage to Thomas Moore which starts 'Greece may boast of her Pindar, her Sappho, and her Anacreon; Rome of her Horace; Modern Italy of her Petrarch; France of her Béranger; Scotland of her Burns and Cambell; England of her Gray, her Dryden, and her Tennyson; but the Green Isle of the West can boast of a bard in whom the different excellencies of all are united'.<sup>25</sup> In this comparison, Moore, Béranger and Petrarch all feature as 'national' poets and it is understandable why the Young Irelander MacDermott chose to translate the latter two in order to further a nationalist cause.

In this focus on a patriotic Petrarch, the Irish translators and commentators constructed their own Petrarchan tradition, choosing the elements of the poet which fitted into their world view of the time. It is a choice which reflects developments in nineteenth-century Ireland and is perhaps best illustrated by the absence of the 'patriotic Petrarch' from Lord Charlemont's late eighteenth-century translations of Petrarch. Although he translated a large amount of Petrarch's poetry, Charlemont did not translate 'Spirto gentil' or other patriotic poetry by the Italian; the aristocratic translator preferred instead to work on the sonnets and love poetry. With the emergence of new nationalist movements in the nineteenth century, literary figures sought alternative narratives to the ones generated in the British press and

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<sup>24</sup> MacDermott's translation was well received: in a review of the work in *The Examiner* (1 December 1847), the reviewer said, 'The Patriot-poets of the Past is a very free and forcible translation from the Italian of Petrarch and does Mr. Martin MacDermott great credit'.

<sup>25</sup> Anon, 'Moore as Lyric Poet', *The Nation*, 25 April 1874.

publication trade.<sup>26</sup> One means of creating a distinctly Irish tradition was the creation of original works of literature; another option, however, was the importation through translation of different models from Europe which could be moulded to suit Irish needs.

### **Petrarch the Religious Poet**

The patriotic dimension to Petrarch's work was but one defining element of the Irish appropriation and domestication of the Italian poet; the other very significant point of focus for Irish translators and interpreters of Petrarch was the religious dimension. The Irish focus on religion is in stark contrast with the Anglophone tradition where religion is markedly absent from Petrarch translations and biographies. It may be that this element was suppressed by Petrarch's earliest imitators in France and England who tended to be either Protestant or at the very least sympathetic to the Reformist cause. Particularly in England, Petrarch's 'Italianness' was enough of an obstacle to his acceptance as a poetic model, without adding another layer of Popery. The Elizabethan educator Roger Ascham said in this regard: 'More Papists be made by your merry books of Italy than by your earnest books of Louvain'.<sup>27</sup> Even among his Italian imitators, however, Petrarch's position in the Church was of little to no relevance: the major promoter of Petrarch in Italy, Pietro Bembo (himself a Cardinal, and the writer who did the most to ensure Petrarch's literary canonisation), was entirely unconcerned with this aspect of his biography.

For the Irish, however, Petrarch's religion was a crucial aspect to his biography and featured prominently in discussions of the author as the century progressed. An example of this religious interest emerges in the discussion by Irish literary figures of Petrarch's status as a lay cleric. Francis Mahony, a writer, translator and ordained priest, details this aspect of Petrarch's life in his introduction to his translations: '[Petrarch] belonged to "my order" and though the union of the *priest* and the *poet* [...] is an old association, the instances in the Roman Catholic priesthood have been too rare not to prize the solitary example of sacerdotal minstrelsy in the archdeacon of Parma'.<sup>28</sup> Mahony was not the only writer to highlight this, however: Martin MacDermott mentions that Petrarch took the religious habit,<sup>29</sup> and in *The*

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<sup>26</sup> Other Irish interpretations in this period of Petrarch as a patriot poet appear in Jeremiah Donovan, *Rome, Ancient and Modern, and Its Environs*, (Rome: C. Puccinelli, 1842), p. iii; Charles Patrick Meehan, 'Recollections of Italian Vacations', *Irish Catholic Magazine*, (1847), 283-90.

<sup>27</sup> Lawrence Ryan ed., *The Schoolmaster (1570) by Roger Ascham, Folger Shakespeare Library* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1974), p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Francis Mahony, *The Reliques of Father Prout* (London: J. Fraser, 1836), p. 208.

<sup>29</sup> Martin MacDermott, 'Historical Note on Petrarch', *Cork Magazine* (1848), 505-6.

*Nation* it was reported that ‘Petrarch, who was a secular clergyman, enjoyed several ecclesiastical preferments. He was canon of Lombes, archdeacon of Parma, and canon of the Cathedral of Padua’.<sup>30</sup>

The promotion in Ireland of Petrarch as a clergyman was however complicated by the controversy surrounding his private life, in particular his passion for an (allegedly) married woman. Discussions on Laura’s marital status were a mainstay of eighteenth and nineteenth-century biographers of the poet and Irish commentators were firmly of the belief that Laura could not possibly have been married. One Irish writer said that Petrarch had composed 318 sonnets, 59 *canzoni* and 6 *trionfi* entirely on the subject of his passion for Laura, and in all these writings, there is not a single passage which intimates that Laura was married. He therefore claims that it is ‘to the last degree’ unlikely that the poet who had devoted himself to chronicle every particular of her life and person would have omitted a fact so important as this. He continues:

Petrarch’s moral character, according to the evidence of all his contemporaries, was of the most exemplary and even rigid cast, and the purely ideal nature of the passion which he regarded his mistress is clearly evidenced throughout all his sonnets. Those addressed to her during life breathe the purest and noblest affection; and in those written after her death, he represents their virtuous attachment as continued in heaven.<sup>31</sup>

In this context, it is highly significant that the author of this article chose to conclude his discussion with a translation of Petrarch’s ‘Hymn to the Virgin’ which is described as ‘perhaps the most perfect of his compositions’. ‘Vergine Bella’ (The Hymn to the Virgin) is the concluding *canzone* of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* and has been the subject of much controversy since its original composition. Depending on the reader’s viewpoint, it has been interpreted on the one hand as a genuine plea for intercession to the Virgin, and on the other as a sublimation of Petrarch’s erotic desire for Laura. The ‘solution’ to the spiritual conflict upon which the *Canzoniere* is founded was always a problem in the English tradition. Spenser’s response was to close his *Amoretti* with a marriage hymn, drawing on contemporary Protestant theology which denied the inherent sinfulness of what the prominent Reformation theologian Heinrich Bullinger called ‘the work of matrimonye’.<sup>32</sup> The Irish, in contrast, were very happy with this ‘religious’ conclusion to the *Canzoniere* and so (in the

<sup>30</sup> Anon, ‘Petrarch’, *The Nation*, 28 August 1858.

<sup>31</sup> Anon, ‘Petrarch’, *The Nation*, 28 August 1858. [Ibid.](#)

<sup>32</sup> Carrie Euler, ‘Heinrich Bullinger, Marriage and the English Reformation: “The Christen State of Matrimonye” in England, 1540-53’, *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 34 (2003), 367-93, (p. 372).

words of the translator) translated it 'literally' for publication. In fact, the short extract from the tenth and final stanza of *Rvf* 366 that was published by the writer in *The Nation* is far from a literal rendering of the source text, the corresponding section of which reads:

Vergine humana et nemica d'orgoglio,  
Del comune principio amor t'induca:  
Miserere d'un cor contrito humile.  
Che se poca mortal terra caduca  
amar con sì mirabil fede soglio,  
che devrò far di te, cosa gentile?

[ll. 118-23]

O Blessed Virgin, paragon of clemency, let thy Almighty Son's example excite thee to show mercy to an humble and contrite heart; for if with such strength and ardour of affection I have been capable of loving a frail mortal, what mayest thou not conclude must be my devotion towards thee, the bright example of all excellence!

The 'literal' translation clearly deviates from the original very early on, substituting 'blessed' for 'humana'. Similarly, Petrarch goes on to refer to the 'Vergine' as 'nemica d'orgoglio', a reference to the sin of pride which he believes he has committed through his desire for both Laura and literary fame. This establishes a contrast between the 'primo giovanile errore' of his youth and the 'cor contrito humile' of his old age, as well as making it particularly appropriate to appeal to the Virgin under such circumstances. In the translation, she is called a 'paragon of clemency', a phrase that has no equivalent in Petrarch's original.

This theme of exemplarity is continued when the translator asks the Virgin to look towards her 'Almighty Son's example' as an inspiration to take pity on the poet. Petrarch's phrase 'del comune principio amor t'induca' can be interpreted to refer either to the love that resides in both the poet and the Virgin as a characteristic of their common human origins; or as the love for God, from which all other love flows. The translator's foregrounding of Christ's sacrifice, however, is not altogether out of place in the context of the narrative of the *Rvf* or of this *canzone* in particular, as Petrarch's phraseology reminds us of the 'comune dolor' of *Rvf* 3, at which point his love for Laura began when he first caught sight of her during a Good Friday Mass in Avignon on 6 April, 1327. Nonetheless, the overall effect of the translator's deviations is to exalt the Virgin (making her 'blessed' rather than 'humana'), and to gloss over Petrarch's sinfulness, purging the translation of any allusion, however

obtuse, to the poet's former pride. Similarly, the embellishment of Petrarch's 'cosa gentile', translated as 'bright example of all excellence', is incompatible with Petrarch's focus on the Virgin's humanity. Given the way in which the translator manipulates the source text, it is surprising that this particular section was chosen for translation, as there are a variety of other points in Petrarch's text in which his apostrophisation of the Virgin is more conventional and corresponds more closely with the tone which the translator strikes in his rendering, not least the fourth stanza, which reads:

Vergine santa, d'ogni gratia piena,  
Che per vera et altissima humiltate  
Salisti al ciel onde miei preghi ascolti,  
Tu partoristi il fonte di pietate,  
Et di giustitia il sol, che rasserena  
Il secol pien d'errori oscuri et folti:

[ll. 40-45]

[Blessed Virgin, full of every grace, / who through true and most high humility / ascended to Heaven from where you listen to my prayers, / You bore the source of mercy, / and the sun of justice, who brings peace / to this time full of dark and copious errors.]

It may be that the section which the translator chose is one of the few that makes reference to Laura, the 'poca mortal terra' which the translator renders as 'frail mortal'. The translator may have wished to present a religious Petrarch, but one who still remained recognisable to his readership as the lover of Laura, who is referenced in somewhat pathetic, though not overtly hostile, terms.

Another section from translation of Petrarch's Hymn to Mary appeared in 1859 in *The Harp*; it is introduced with the lines 'The poet having repented, invoketh Mary, and imploreth her to succour him in life and death':

Virgin most fair! Who clothed in rays of morn  
And diadem'd with stars, did'st so outshine  
The sun's best radiance, that with light o'erborne,  
He merged his glory in the beams of thine! –  
To *Thee* my words of lowly love would soar,  
But may not wing their flight, without thine aid,  
And His who for our sakes was born of Thee.

Thee we invoke, Help in adversity!  
 Who, ever hearest, when the heart doth pour  
 In faith to thee it's [sic] grief. Oh, holiest Maid!  
 If ever earthly sorrow such as mine  
 Hath moved they pitying heart, to me be given  
 They help in life's stern battle. Maid Divine,  
 Tho' dust am I, and thou the Queen of Heaven!<sup>4</sup>

Though the English rhyme scheme is unconventional, this translation of Petrarch nevertheless has an identifiable symmetry. Bookended by alternating 4 line sections: (ABAB and FGFG), the middle six lines interlock in a pattern of CDEECD. From this perspective, the translation appears as a sonnet that has been dismantled and put back together somewhat haphazardly, with the sestet dividing the two quartets that would usually make up the octave. As with MacDermott's translation of 'Spirto gentil', the content appears to outweigh the formal structures in importance for the Irish translator. Petrarch's emphasis on love in this *canzone* raises a number of questions regarding the spirit in which this closing hymn is to be interpreted. Critics have drawn parallels between the figure of the 'Vergine bella' and Laura, and have accused Petrarch of merely sublimating his erotic desire for a mortal being (which he was always careful to characterise as chaste) into a conventional, pure love for God and the divine. More sympathetic readers assert that Petrarch, in his old age, has come to a true understanding of the love appropriate to a good Christian, and is expressing this in his last hour on being faced with his own mortality.<sup>33</sup> In this reading, the conventional 'Amor mi spinge' is easily relocated from a pagan to a Christian context, as Biblical and theological writings provide the subtext to Petrarch's work, rather than classical texts in which Amor' appears as Cupid. The Irish translator thus translates 'Amor' in l. 4 as 'my lowly love', adding an alliterative flourish but still situating the poet's love within the context of Christian humility. More problematic, however, are the erotic undertones present in l. 6, 'colui ch'amando in te si pose'. The physicality of the 'loving' that Petrarch describes is part of what renders this particular *canzone* so ambiguous and potentially blasphemous, and it is noticeable that this formulation is studiously avoided by the Irish translator, who provides a conventional alternative ('And His who for our sakes was born of Thee') whose formulation leans heavily on the Nicene Creed:

Et incarnátus est de Spírítu Sancto

<sup>33</sup> Santagata, *Francesco Petrarca*, pp. 1417-18.

*Ex María Virgine, et homo factus est.*

*Crucifixus étiam pro nobis...*

[emphasis added]

[And through the Holy Spirit became incarnate / From the Virgin Mary, and was made man. / He was also crucified for us...]

The translator of *Rvf* 366 has cut off any potentially blasphemous avenues of interpretation of Petrarch's poetry for his readers.

As with the patriotic interpretations of Petrarch, the dates of publication of these translations are important as they occurred at a time in Ireland when the Catholic religion was in the midst of a so-called devotional revolution in the middle decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup> As the Irish became increasingly influenced by Papal Rome, they were quite happy to accept and promote the image of Petrarch as a priest-poet and as a virtuous articulator of religious sentiments. The translation trends are an indication of increasing dominance of Catholicism in Ireland; indeed in the same volume of *The Harp*, (an Irish Catholic monthly magazine) in which 'Virgin most fair' was published, it was declared that like Siamese twins, Irish Catholicity and Irish Nationality have been inseparably united: 'Destroy one, and shall the other live?'.<sup>35</sup>

### Usurping Tradition

While various approaches have emerged in Irish translations of Petrarch (Anglo-Irish translations, literary apprenticeships, political translations and religious translations), there are always figures who revel in usurping traditions and in dismantling dominant literary models. Francis Mahony, who published under the pseudonym Fr. Prout, is one of these Irish figures and his translations from Petrarch reveal a singular literary voice with a unique interpretation of the Italian poet. Where Charlemont, Boyd, Mangan and Waller abided closely to the Petrarchan form, Mahony dismantled it, and, in justifying his actions, he claimed that the sonnet was an 'unnational poetic structure, and as little suited to our northern languages as the Italian villa-style of Palladio to our climate'.<sup>36</sup> The first practical manifestation of this hostility to the traditional sonnet form is evidenced by Mahony's

<sup>34</sup> Emmet Larkin, 'The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-75', *The American Historical Review*, 77 (1972), 625-52; Emmet J. Larkin, *The Making of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, 1850-1860*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

<sup>35</sup> Anon, 'To Our Readers', *The Harp: An Irish Catholic Monthly Magazine*, 1 (1859).

<sup>36</sup> Francis Mahony, *The Reliques of Father Prout* (London: J. Fraser, 1836), p. 226.

decision to translate ‘Una candida cerva’ (*Rvf* 125) using fourteeners couplets (257-59).<sup>37</sup> This naturally endows a jauntiness to the verse which is quite at odds with Petrarch’s stately *endecasillabo*, and is exacerbated by the translator’s insistence on preserving an internal rhyme between the fourth and eighth stresses in each line. The formal division between octave and sestet, which Mangan had recognised as so crucial to the Petrarchan form, is eradicated, as Mahony produces a 16-line poem of four 4-line stanzas. In *The Reliques of Father Prout*, Mahony had previously used the same meter to translate a passage from the third canto of Dante’s *Inferno* (227-30). The overall effect of translating a passage from the *Commedia* and one of Petrarch’s most celebrated sonnets using the same meter is to endow these two very different exempla of late medieval Italian poetry with a uniformity that is nowhere present in the originals. The goal may have been to present the reader with a more ‘Dantean’ Petrarch, given that the more robust aesthetic exemplified by the *Commedia* (and particularly the *Inferno*) appeared to be more palatable to the Romantics than Petrarch’s, whose sonnets in particular were considered somewhat effete by critics of the age (most notably Coleridge, who criticised Petrarch’s work for failing to excite ‘a gush of manly feeling’).<sup>38</sup>

In another translation from Petrarch by Mahony (‘I’ vo piangendo’ (*Rvf* 365)) the translator continues to disregard Petrarch’s structure: he abandons the fourteeners couplet in favour of alternating fourteeners and iambic trimetres. Yet, the most striking thing about his translation is his diction. Whereas the original strikes a penitential but desperate tone, the translation presents Petrarch almost in a state of religious rapture:

Si che s’io vissi in guerra ed in tempesta,  
Mora in pace ed in porto; e se la stanza  
Fu vana, almen sia la partita onesta.  
A quel poco di viver che m’avanza  
Ed al morir degni esser tua man presta:  
Tu sai ben ch’ ‘n altrui non ho speranza.  
(ll. 9-14)

But from his wanderings reclaimed, with full, with throbbing heart  
Thy truant has returned;  
Oh! be the idol and the hour that led him to depart

<sup>37</sup> Page references are to *The Reliques of Father Prout* (London: J. Fraser, 1836).

<sup>38</sup> M. L. McLaughlin et al., *Petrarch in Britain*, p. 327.

From Thee, for ever mourned.  
If I have dwelt remote, if I have loved the tents of guilt –  
To they fond arms restored,  
Here let me die! On whom can my eternal hopes be built,  
SAVE UPON THEE, O LORD!<sup>39</sup>

Mahony felt that few passages from Italian poets could bear to be submitted to the test of translation (273) and he similarly radically changed a sonnet by Michelangelo into an unrecognisable form in his English translation (283). In his essay on “‘The Songs of Italy’, he says that the *canzoni* are the most exquisite of Petrarch’s productions and ‘far surpass in harmony and poetic merit’ the sonnets (207). He supports this claim by translating the lengthy ‘Chiare, fresche, e dolci acque’ (*Rvf* 126). Although he abandons all links to Petrarch’s original structures, he says of the content: ‘in this graceful effusion of tender feelings, to which a responsive chord must vibrate in every breast, and compared with which the most admired of modern love-ditties will seem paltry and vulgar, the tenderness, the exalted passion, the fervid glow of a noble heart, and the mysterious workings of a most gifted mind, exhibit themselves in every stanza.’ (212-3) Whereas previous Irish translators of Petrarch seem to react to the Italian because of his stylistic prowess and his position in the European lyric canon, Mahony has a very personal reaction to the content and overall effect of Petrarch’s poetry, resulting in a new and divergent rewriting of the Italian poet.

Even though Mahony’s translations of Petrarch are the most individual and free interpretations of the Italian’s poetry published in Ireland in the nineteenth century, they nonetheless show some links to contemporary trends. As previously mentioned, the Irishman felt affinity with Petrarch due to their communal status as priest-poets. Mahony felt that following the death of Laura, Petrarch’s thoughts appear to have been ‘decidedly religious’ (285). He translates the opening stanza of ‘Canzone dopo la morte di Donna Laura’ (*Rvf* 359; ‘Quando il soave mio fido conforto’) in order to show how Petrarch’s poetry after her death was imbued with pious sentiments, with Laura as an angelic essence who would point his way to heaven (285-286). In common with other Irish Catholic translators, Mahony interpreted Laura as a spiritual presence, a muse for both poetry and piety. Mahony’s translation of ‘I’ vo piangendo’ (*Rvf* 365) is presented as the climax of the collection, encapsulating Petrarch’s final rejection of the pleasures of the sublunar world and a definitive embrace of Christian values. Mahony calls “‘I’ vo piangendo’ an ‘an act of contrition’ by

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<sup>39</sup> Mahony, *The Reliques of Fr. Prout*, p. 228.

Petrarch (and indeed, he entitles his translation ‘The repentance of Petrarcha’). In the Irishman’s religious interpretation, Petrarch has renounced the pleasing illusion of earthly affection for Laura, a pursuit that was unworthy of a clergyman, and has instead embraced the path of spiritual piety (287). Mahony says of his interpretation of Petrarch’s muse (and his reasons for translating Petrarch’s verse):

Laura is to me the same being of exalted excellence and cherished purity; and, in echoing from this remote Irish hill the strains of [Petrarch’s] immortal lyre, I hope to share the blessing which he has bequeathed to all who should advance and extend the fame of his beloved. (249)

## Conclusion

That the belated Irish reception of Petrarch, and particularly the *Rvf*, takes place against a political backdrop of a concerted attempt at nation-building invites parallels to be drawn with the Renaissance engagement with Petrarch in Henrician and Elizabethan England. Whilst Elizabethan poets such as Sidney and Spenser, in particular, struggled to accommodate a model whose message was tainted by its reliance on Augustinian theology and orthodox Mariology within a Reformed literary and aesthetic system, the Irish Romantic Petrarchans were forced to ask themselves how the elements of Petrarch’s message to which they were sympathetic could be effectively transmitted without being undermined by the conventionality of the Italian’s original medium. For MacDermott, this meant ignoring the formal integrity of the source text altogether in order to focus on the patriotic elements of ‘Spirto gentil’, while for Mangan and Mahony, experimental meters and rhyme schemes had to be deployed in order for Petrarch to sound an original tone.

Mangan’s reluctance to persist with his successful experimentation in the classic Petrarchan form signals a desire to dissociate himself from what he and many of his contemporaries saw as the ersatzness of Petrarch’s earlier translators and imitators. His eventual abandonment of Petrarch as a model illustrates the impossibility of achieving such an outcome without undertaking a full-scale rebellion against poetic form *per se*. Mahony goes a step further, presenting the reader with a Petrarch who differs not only from his imitators, but whose voice and manner of address is almost unrecognisable from the poet of the *Rvf* himself. The development of an alternative Irish voice on Petrarch received an important and individual articulation in Mahony’s work, and the general distaste for the sonnet form among Petrarch’s Irish translators would resurface in the work of the next

significant Irish writer to engage with Petrarch: John Millington Synge, whose *Some Sonnets from Laura in Death* (1909) radically deconstructed Petrarch's sonnets by means of a series of prose translations written in the folk-speech made famous by his plays. Synge's rebellion against Petrarchan form and diction constitutes a violent attack on the foundations of English lyric poetry and this poetic path had been paved by the Irish translators of the previous century who had embraced and challenged the Petrarchan poetic form in their refashionings of the Italian poet.