



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Wordsworth's and Southey's Translations of Michelangelo,  
1805–6

Thomas Owens

MLN, Volume 132, Number 1, January 2017 (Italian Issue) , pp. 68-75 (Article)



Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2017.0003>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/652009>

# Wordsworth's and Southey's Translations of Michelangelo, 1805–6



*Thomas Owens*

On Christmas Day, 1804, William Wordsworth wrote to Sir George Beaumont detailing his current and projected work on two poems: one, nearly complete in thirteen-book form, “on my earlier life or the growth of my own mind” (known to us as *The Prelude*); the other, never finished, and “to be called . . . ‘The Recluse’ . . . concerning Man, Nature, and society.”<sup>1</sup> The letter is the earliest mention of Wordsworth’s plans to translate some of Michelangelo’s poetry for Richard Duppa, a project he undertook jointly with Robert Southey: “Duppa is publishing a life of Michael Angelo and I received from him a few days ago two proof sheets of an Appendix which contains the poems of M. A – which I shall read, and translate one or two of them. If I can do it with decent success. I have peeped into the sonnets, and they do not appear at all unworthy of their great Author.”<sup>2</sup> Duppa’s *Life and*

I am grateful to Professor Stephen Gill at Lincoln College, Oxford; Dr Micha Lazarus at Trinity College, Cambridge; and the anonymous reviewer for their advice and comments on this article.

<sup>1</sup>*The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, The Early Years 1787–1805*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Chester L. Shaver, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1967) 518.

<sup>2</sup>*Letters of Wordsworth* 517. Duppa first visited Wordsworth “Perhaps between Sept 23 and Oct 7” in 1804; see Mark L. Reed, *Wordsworth: The Chronology of the Middle Years 1800–1815* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1975) 270 and n46. Wordsworth was taught Italian as an undergraduate at St John’s College, Cambridge (1787–91) by Agostino Isola; see June Sturrock, “Wordsworth’s Italian Teacher,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 67 (1985): 797–812. Wordsworth’s annotated edition of *Pieces Selected from the Italian Poets by Agostino Isola and Translated into English verse by some Gentlemen of the*

*Literary Works of Michel Angelo Buonarroti* was first published in 1806; Southey contributed translations of three sonnets and a madrigal and Wordsworth one sonnet: “Ben può talor col mio ardente desio.”<sup>3</sup> A fair copy of the latter was transcribed for Beaumont by Dorothy Wordsworth in October 1805 in a letter which referred back to Wordsworth’s discussion of Michelangelo “some time ago” at Christmas 1804. Ten months later, by October 1805, Wordsworth had “attempted at least fifteen of the sonnets but could not anywhere succeed,” considering them to be “the most difficult to construe I ever met with,” and sending Beaumont “the only one I was able to finish.”<sup>4</sup> Before the publication of *Poems, in Two Volumes* in 1807, however, Wordsworth met with a little more reward for his efforts and three translations of Michelangelo, counting the one which featured in Duppa’s volume, made it into the “Miscellaneous Sonnets” of that collection.<sup>5</sup>

Jared Curtis’ editorial notes to these poems in the Cornell Wordsworth edition state that Wordsworth translated sonnets 60 (“Ben può talor col mio ardente desio”), 52 (“Non vider gli occhi miei cosa mortale”), and 89 (“Ben sarien dolce le preghiere mie”) respectively.<sup>6</sup> This statement is liable to cause some confusion. Curtis’ numbering, though not stated explicitly, follows that of the seminal 1863 edition of Michelangelo’s *Rime*, in which Cesare Guasti returned to the poet’s manuscripts in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana and the Buonarroti Archive to re-construct the original base texts for the sonnets. This numerical scheme does not accord with that given in Duppa’s “Appendix,” proof sheets of which Wordsworth received and worked from in December 1804, which numbers the sonnets as follows: “X,” “II,” “CXVI.” This has a significant bearing on Wordsworth’s and Southey’s translations of Michelangelo in 1805–6. Duppa’s edition produced Michelangelo’s sonnets in the same order and as they were initially printed in the severely bowdlerized and defective first edition

---

*University*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge, 1784) is at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. It gives a useful insight into the neoclassical translation practices of Cambridge undergraduates towards the end of the eighteenth century and the kinds of neo-Platonic descriptions of beauty which Wordsworth expected to discover in Italian poetry from Petrarch to Metastasio, and which he did discover—not always legitimately—in Michelangelo.

<sup>3</sup>Richard Duppa, *The Life and Literary Works of Michel Angelo Buonarroti* (London, 1806) 216–23. Cf. Mark L. Reed, *A Bibliography of William Wordsworth 1787–1930*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013) 2.1140.

<sup>4</sup>*Letters of Wordsworth* 628–29.

<sup>5</sup>William Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800–1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1983) 143–45. Cf. Reed, *Chronology* 278 and n1.

<sup>6</sup>Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes* 410.

of 1623 produced by Michelangelo's grand-nephew.<sup>7</sup> The Renaissance poet whom Wordsworth and Southey encountered in Duppa had been heavily censored and amended: the pronouns changed, the convoluted syntax somewhat evened out, fragments finished, and the human passions refined into more anodyne and conventional expressions of neo-Platonic feeling.<sup>8</sup> Wordsworth's judgement that Michelangelo's sonnets "do not appear at all unworthy of their great Author" must be seen in the context of these expurgations. The "little room" into which Michelangelo packed his meaning was in fact even smaller than Wordsworth thought.<sup>9</sup>

Guasti's edition of 1863, which paved the way for Enzo Noè Girardi's scholarly edition of the *Rime* in 1960 (which once again derived a new order for the poems), gathered together and reproduced all of the authorial variants (*varianti d'autore*) extant in the manuscripts, making Guasti the first editor to comprehend the unfinished nature of Michelangelo's compositions and to endeavour to account for their provisional status philologically. Guasti also printed the sonnets with their 1623 counterparts at the foot of the page in miniature, from which it is possible to compare what Michelangelo actually wrote with the unsubstantiated versions his grand-nephew prepared.<sup>10</sup> It was the latter which Wordsworth and Southey translated. The numbers Curtis attaches to these sonnets correspond to the system established by Guasti in 1863; tracing them leads to the consultation of a series of poems the exact copies of which Wordsworth and Southey neither saw nor studied. Sometimes the divergences between the texts in these editions are small, but on other occasions the 1623 edition drastically alters both the style and content of Michelangelo's poetry, though Wordsworth, Southey and their contemporary readers were none the wiser.

Modern renditions of Michelangelo's sonnets are based on the text in Girardi's definitive 1960 edition rather than that of the doctored

<sup>7</sup>In Duppa's *Life*, there is an unpaginated note to this effect following the title-page of Michelangelo's *Rime* in the "Appendix." Cf. *Rime di Michelagnolo Buonarroti, Raccolte da Michelagnolo suo Nipote* (Firenze, 1623) 6, 2, 62.

<sup>8</sup>*The Complete Poems of Michelangelo*, trans. John Frederick Nims (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1998) 157–58. Cf. Kenneth Curry, "Uncollected Translations of Michaelangelo by Wordsworth and Southey," *Review of English Studies* 14 (1938): 193–99; 197–98; Anthony Mortimer, "Wordsworth as a Translator from Italian," *From Wordsworth to Stevens: Essays in Honour of Robert Rehder*, ed. Anthony Mortimer (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005) 71–87; 77–78.

<sup>9</sup>*Letters of Wordsworth* 628.

<sup>10</sup>*Le Rime di Michelangelo Buonarroti*, ed. Cesare Guasti (Firenze, 1863) 224, 214, 258. The first study dedicated to dealing with the manuscript variants in the *Rime* has only recently been published; see Ida Campeggiani, *Le varianti della poesia di Michelangelo: scrivere per via di pore* (Lucca: Maria Pacini Fazzi, 2012).

1623 edition reproduced in Duppa's *Life*.<sup>11</sup> Southey's incomplete manuscript translation of sonnet 91, ten lines of which survive in a letter to Duppa of August 1805, provides an excellent example of the serious discrepancies in meaning between the original text Southey worked from and the reliable one which Guasti first brought to light in 1863.<sup>12</sup> Before reproducing Southey's work, the two Italian versions of this sonnet are here presented diplomatically side by side below, Duppa's on the left and Guasti's on the right:

Al cor di zolfo, alla carne di stoppa,	Al cor di zolfo, alla carne di stoppa,
All'ossa che di secco legno sieno,	All'ossa che di secco legno sieno,
All'alma, senza guida, e senza freno,	All'alma senza guida e senza freno,
Al desir pronto, alla vaghezza troppa,	Al desir pronto, alla vaghezza troppa,
Alla cieca ragion debile, e zoppa,	Alla cieca ragion debile e zoppa,
Fra l'esche tante di che'l mondo è pieno,	Al visco, a' lacci di che 'l mondo è pieno,
Non è gran meraviglia in un baleno	Non è gran meraviglia, in un baleno
Arder nel primo fuoco che s'intoppa.	Arder nel primo foco che s'intoppa.
Ma non potea, se non somma bellezza	Alla bell'arte che, se dal ciel seco
Accender me, che da lei sola tolgo	Ciascun la porta, vince la natura,
A far mie opre eterne lo splendore.	Quantunque sè ben prema in ogni loco;
Vidi umil nel tuo volto ogni mia altezza:	S'io nacqui a quella nè sordo nè cieco,
Rara ti scelsi, e me tolsi dal volgo:	Proporzionato a chi 'l cor m'arde e fura,
E fia con l'opre eterno anco il mio amore. <sup>13</sup>	Colpa è di chi m'ha destinato al foco. <sup>14</sup>

The octaves of each are substantially the same, with the exception of the first half of the sixth line and the placement of commas. The 1623 description given in Duppa of "l'esche tante" ("the many baits") which lure the poet are, in Guasti's version, metaphorically encapsulated as "visco" ("bird lime") and "lacci" ("snares"), perhaps emphasizing the fluttering, easily-trapped nature of the poet's affections.<sup>15</sup> In any case, this linguistic difference does not affect the complexity of both octaves, in which a series of dependent clauses are governed by a starting sequence of *preposizioni articolate* ("al" / "alla"). These prepositions

<sup>11</sup>Cf. *The Poetry of Michelangelo: An Annotated Translation*, trans. James M. Saslow (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1991); *Michelangelo: Poems and Letters*, trans. Anthony Mortimer (London: Penguin, 2007).

<sup>12</sup>*The Collected Letters of Robert Southey, Part Three: 1804–1809*, ed. Carol Bolton and Tim Fulford, letter n. 1099, *A Romantic Circles Electronic Edition*, ed. Lynda Pratt, Tim Fulford and Ian Packer, Web, 1 August 2015.

<sup>13</sup>Duppa, *Life* 283. Indented lines have not been reproduced in either sonnet to ensure they could be satisfactorily juxtaposed.

<sup>14</sup>*Rime*, ed. Guasti 176. In Guasti's edition this sonnet is numbered "XVIII" and not "91" as in Duppa. The fact that Southey himself numbers the sonnet "91" in his letter to Duppa of August 1805 is further evidence that he, like Wordsworth, was working directly from versions which formed Duppa's "Appendix."

<sup>15</sup>All translations from the Italian are my own.

introduce both half lines in lines one and four and also commence the second, third and fifth lines (and sixth in the 1863 adaptation). The parallelism which this structure generates delays the introduction of the main predicate until the concluding line of the octave. Only at this juncture does each prepositional phrase retrospectively make sense. Until this point, no clause in the sonnet constitutes a complete statement in itself. Rather, each phrase contributes to the mounting suspense of what exactly *does* happen to a person acutely maddened by the intensity of their carnal desires; to someone with “cor di zolfo,” “carne di stoppa,” “ossa che di secco legno sieno,” “alma, senza guida, e senza freno” (“the heart of sulphur,” “flesh of tow,” bones which of dry wood may be,” “the soul, without guidance, and without restraint”).

The answer is not divulged for seven full lines, forcing the reader to recreate through the contortions of the syntax not only the release which the poet craves, but the intricate ethics and contingencies inherent in that release which have to be bypassed to achieve it. By accumulating descriptions in the octave of the poet’s tiring faculties as predisposed to worldly beauty, the syntactical order of the poem obliges the reader to experience the poet’s physical and spiritual anxiety. The real consequence of being incorrigibly prone to lust is reserved for the eighth line: “Arder nel primo fuoco che s’intoppa” (“To burn in the first fire into which one stumbles”). Desperation might make a man take what he can get, even if satisfaction was thought to be sinful (as suggested by an image which blends the fires of desire with those of damnation). Given that Michelangelo dedicated this sonnet to Tommaso Cavalieri, it may reasonably be deduced that the octave’s slow disclosure of sense eventually arrives at the honest recognition that, since the body is weak, and despite knowing what is right, the “bait” of fiery temptation is sometimes too much to resist. In the heat of the moment morality is given the cold shoulder. When guilt is involved in the recompense of sexual gratification, compunction and appetite negotiate for control of the mind’s imaginings; *eros* comes up against *agape*, a dilemma dramatized in the protracted machinations of the grammar, where belatedness carries its own rewards and reprisal.

Southey characterised the quality of his own partial translation as “very bad” and remonstrated that “no person can form any idea of the difficulty of translating Michel Angelo’s poetry unless they were to try at it; – if I had said impossibility it would not be far from the truth.” His piecemeal effort was not incorporated into Duppa’s *Life*. What survives is reproduced below from the original letter in 1805:

When the heart is sulphur, & the bones dry wood,  
 The body flax prepared to catch the flame,  
 The will to pleasure prone & slow to good.  
 The reason weak the while & blind & lame.  
 Without a guide, without a rein, the soul,  
 Should it a wonder in this world be thought  
 If the first flash should set on fire the whole?  
 And yet not thus it was it with me, for nought  
 But perfect beauty kindled me, who take  
 The [MS cut] the splendour that shall make

Southey made a number of important amendments to the original: he condensed the octave into seven lines, which he presented as a question; changed the order of dependent clauses and words within individual clauses; invented a new Shakespearean rhyme scheme for the original Petrarchan octave; and introduced his own conjunctions, verbs and endstopping into the first quatrain to aid the sense and give balance to the poem, though this—together with the other formal alterations—significantly attenuated Michelangelo's *gravità*. Southey exasperatedly likened the labour to a kind of “costiveness”—a vivid analogy for the hard-won poise and patience required to translate a sonnet in which the principal clausal structure shows no obvious signs of materialising at all.<sup>16</sup> It was an excellent if all too graphic image for portraying the translator's problem of faithfully producing a text which does not have an obvious teleology, thus making it a real puzzle to establish what the poet is driving at and consequently what relation the multiple subjects bear both to each other and to their unforthcoming object. Various lines of sense have to be simultaneously maintained and held together in the mind as the tortuous octave prolongs closure.

“Costiveness” also captures a quality constitutive of the poem itself. By deferring the main clause until the end of the octave Michelangelo purposefully contrived *gravità* for his subject-matter, an aesthetic championed in the second book of Pietro Bembo's *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525), though somewhat diluted by the introduction of new commas in lines three and five of the 1623 edition. Bembo advocated that contemporary Tuscan poetry should emulate the logical arrangement of Latin and Greek words to replicate the crabbed seriousness of classic grandeur.<sup>17</sup> To Southey's frustrated mind, such techniques

<sup>16</sup> *Letters of Southey: Romantic Circles Electronic Edition*, letter n. 1099.

<sup>17</sup> Pietro Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, *Gli Asolani*, *Rime*, ed. Carlo Dionisotti, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Milano: Editori Associati, 1989) 146. Bembo's injunction was also followed by Giovanni Della Casa in his *Rime e Prose* (1563) and Torquato Tasso in his influential *Discorsi del poema eroico* (1594), which postulated that “nothing makes for more gravity

reminded him less of the magnificent sound of epic diction and more of the unequal tremors of constipation. Wordsworth had it easy by comparison. His own sonnet for Duppa was a relative success because, as he admitted, it was “far from being the best or most characteristic” of Michelangelo’s poems.<sup>18</sup> Wordsworth, unlike Southey, was spared the indignities of stylistically trying to realise Cinquecento expressions of *gravità*.

It is the sestets of the sonnets which, by contrast, provoke distinctly different responses to this tyranny of the flesh in 1623 and 1863. Duppa’s text projects the octave as something to be overcome; the final six lines of the poem build to the idealising declaration that witnessing beauty—exclusively cast as feminine and humble in the edition of 1623—is responsible for the poet’s artistic success. Indeed, the poet contritely hopes his art will last eternally as testament and payment for such earthly revelation. This Platonic conclusion, newly-minted by Michelangelo’s grand-nephew and followed obediently by Southey—“for nought / But perfect beauty kindled me”—shifts the attitude of the poem firmly towards the spiritual and away from the competing pull of the physical. Indeed, for Southey, the extended sestet concedes that the poet was never in danger of falling prey to earthly indulgence in the first place: “And yet not thus it was it with me.” The poet is thus above the common man, looking down from a position of serenely complacent safety on his benighted peers.

In Southey’s reading, which follows the 1623 text, God wins out in the end; everything ultimately reflects His glory. This belies the poet’s actual impulses as uncovered by Guasti, where any suggestion that the *volta* might countenance or enact the poet’s turn to moral rectitude and away from sexual pleasure is denied. Instead, in the words of Glauco Cambon, “the upshot is not self-degradation but self-justification.” Far from atoning for taking great delight in Cavalieri’s looks, the poet ends up “vindicating the inevitability of the sensual conflagration that at first sounded forgivable and therefore neither final nor destructive.”<sup>19</sup> In Guasti’s version, the poet does not praise

---

than placing the thing of most gravity at the end,” or “dwell[ing] on something at length and mak[ing] it almost pivotal”; see Tasso, *Discourses on the Heroic Poem*, trans. Mariella Cavalchini and Irene Samuel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973) 184, 187. These methods influenced the construction of Milton’s sonnets and epic style in *Paradise Lost*; see F.T. Prince, *The Italian Element in Milton’s Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954).

<sup>18</sup>*Letters of Wordsworth* 628.

<sup>19</sup>Glauco Cambon, *Michelangelo’s Poetry: Fury of Form* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985) 31–32. Cf. Christopher Ryan, *The Poetry of Michelangelo: An Introduction* (London: Athlone Press, 1998) 117–18.



God for the beauty He has created, but rather blames Him for his own susceptibility to it. Artistic provision is still deemed to be God-given, but rather than this thought engendering gratitude, God is now the scapegoat for the poet's inability to control his urges, about which he is wholeheartedly unrepentant: "Colpa è di chi m' ha destinato al foco" ("The blame is his who designed me for the fire"). Duppa's poet, based on the modified edition of 1623, translates human yearnings into spiritual ecstasy; Guasti's poet, based on the manuscript recension responsible for the 1863 edition, rejects this transformation in his heated recalcitrance. Art can vindicate God or man, it seems, but not both. These are serious changes. Early nineteenth-century readers of Michelangelo such as Southey and Wordsworth saw sensuality yield to spirituality, providence triumph over passion.

*University of Cambridge*