John Keats and Dante: Speaking the Gods’ Language

At foot
Of a magnificent castle we arrived,
Seven times with lofty walls begirt, and round
Defended by a pleasant stream.
...
We to one side retired, into a place
Open and bright and lofty, whence each one
Stood manifest to view.

(The Vision, Hell, IV, 100–3, 111–13)

The issue of Dante’s precise relationship with Greek literature has been central to Dantean criticism. Giorgio Padoan notes that ‘in Dante’s works there is no single quotation from an ancient author that could stand out for its rarity’.¹ Virgil and the Latin writers, Ovid and Statius in particular, together with the medieval allegories and legends about the classical world, were Dante’s introduction to the Greek heroes and myths, as Padoan explains:

In Virgil’s Elysian Fields one finds Assaracus, Dardanus and their descent ... the heroes, poets, and all those who brought civilisation to humanity with the arts and sciences ... Dante adds on to Virgil’s suggestions, accepting them without any perplexity.²

Like Dante’s, John Keats’s approach to Greek literature was via translation:³ the sonnet On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer, by pointing out the important role of the translator, expresses Keats’s consciousness of the limitations of the process of recovering the past. Likewise, his understanding of the Divine Comedy was filtered and
influenced by Cary’s ‘minute volumes’ first read during a walking tour in Scotland.  

This chapter aims to reassess Keats’s approach to Dante and move beyond readings based on Bloom’s theory of the anxiety of influence. The legacy of this approach is strong, particularly because both Walter Jackson Bate and Harold Bloom chose Keats as the primary example of a predecessor’s haunting presence. As Nicholas Roe has pointed out, Bloom’s reading tends to undervalue Keats’s ‘efforts to forge his identity in relation to the past’. The literary canon, in particular, did not only entice a negative influential reading for Keats, but was itself instrumental in fostering creativity and helping him find his own literary voice. Psychoanalytic or psychological readings influenced by Bloomian anxiety further reveal a quasi-subliminal relationship between reading and writing: composition being relegated to the domain of the subconscious, its relationship with reading become as mysterious as dreamwork. Shelley’s and Keats’s approach to Dante on the contrary shows a close relationship between their readings and their intertextual use of the poet. Both read Dante alongside Milton; they both moved from sporadic Dantean echoes to a sustained intertextuality in their long narrative fragments.

Thomas Medwin, as pointed out in Chapter 4, claimed that Keats and Shelley had entered a challenge: ‘Shelley told me that he and Keats had mutually agreed, in the same given time, (six months each) to write a long poem, and that the *Endymion*, and the *Revolt of Islam* were the fruits of this rivalry.’ While Shelley did read *Endymion*, Keats’s knowledge of *Laon and Cythna* is uncertain. Two letters document his interest: on 22 December 1818 he exchanged a casual remark to Haydon on Shelley’s struggles with the Olliers over the theme of incest and the irreligious tone of the poem; and on 21 February 1818 Keats mentioned to George and Tom Keats that he had not read *Laon and Cythna*, but wished to do so once a copy was sent to him. Textual evidence suggests that Keats must indeed have read *Laon and Cythna* and was directed by Shelley’s poem to explore Dante’s representation of Divine language.

**Keats’s Italian readings: approaching the Divine Comedy**

In the sonnet *Happy is England*, probably written in the winter of 1816, Keats expresses an attitude to Italy that can be described in terms of Said’s category of ‘orientalism’ (italics added):

> Happy is England! I could be content To see no other verdure than its own;