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Dante's Afterlife in Argentina

Heather Sottong

La Italia ha sido la madre fecunda de la civilización moderna. Ella ha dado al lenguaje humano su nota más armónica; a la literatura el más original de los poetas del Renacimiento; a la ciencia el revelador de las leyes del Universo; a la Geografía, el descubridor del Nuevo Mundo; a las Bellas Artes, las creaciones que han dado forma, color y cuerpo al ideal; a la música, las inspiraciones melódicas que hacen estremecer las almas; al derecho humano la abolición de la pena de muerte y al mundo político la Italia Libera e Unita...!¹

(Italy is the fertile mother of modern civilization. She gave to human language the most harmonious of her notes; to literature the most original of the Renaissance poets; to science the revealer of the laws of the Universe; to Geography the discoverer of the New World; to the visual arts the works that gave form, color, and body to the ideal; to music the melodious inspirations that stir souls; to human rights the abolition of the death penalty and to the political world a Free and United Italy...!)

– Bartolomé Mitre, 1902

Bartolomé Mitre (1821-1906), President of Argentina from 1862 to 1868, was an important advocate of Italian culture within the country. An influential legislator, military leader, diplomat, journalist, and historian, he was also the first Argentine to translate the *Divine Comedy*. His translations of Cantos 1, 3, 5, 32, and 33 of the *Inferno* first appeared in 1889 in a limited edition of one hundred copies dedicated to the Academy of Arcadia in Rome. This was followed by the 1891 publication of *La Divina Comedia. Juicios críticos sobre la traducción del Dante por Bartolomé Mitre (The Divine Comedy. Critical Assessments of Bartolomé Mitre's Translation of Dante)*, a compilation of corrections and criticisms of his translation. Shortly thereafter in the same year, the French publisher Félix Lajouane printed a luxury edition of the *Inferno* that was the first to include Mitre's theory of translation, the *Teoría del traductor*. But his work on the translation was far from finished. He would continue to meticulously correct errors, publishing two further texts with emendations in 1891.² In 1893, a new edition of the *Infierno* with over 1,400 corrections was published in Buenos Aires, and in 1894, *La Divina Comedia* in its entirety was published by Peuser. Finally, in 1897, a definitive edition updated with corrections was made available.

As is clear from the sheer number of editions with all their copious corrections, the translation of the *Divine Comedy* was not something that Mitre took lightly. He dedicated a decade of his life to this gargantuan task: legend has it that during the war with Paraguay, he

¹ In Adolfo Mitre, *Italia en el sentir y pensar de Mitre, Cuadernos de la Dante* 15 (Buenos Aires: Asociación Dante Alighieri, 1960), 5. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

² *Correcciones a la traducción del Infierno de Dante. Con notas complementarias* (Buenos Aires: Félix Lajouane, 1891), and *Segundo apéndice. Correcciones a la traducción del Dante* (Buenos Aires: Félix Lajouane, 1891).

spent all his downtime translating. As a famous anecdote goes, one day when combat was halted, an official entered his tent to find him immersed in his work, surrounded by dictionaries and scattered sheets of paper. The curious official enquired:

-Qué anda haciendo, mi general?

-Aquí me ve, traduciendo al Dante.

-Hace bien, a esos gringos hay que darles con todo.³

(-What are you doing, General?

-Just as you see me, translating Dante.

-It is good: you must be hard on those gringos, General.)

The term “gringos”—used at the time to refer to all foreigners—here refers to Italians. The official’s comment thus suggests that Mitre’s translation was butchering the original text so badly as to injure “the gringos” themselves. Although probably fabricated in subsequent years, the anecdote circulated widely. While the location of the exchange (either in a tent near the battlefield or in Mitre’s office) and the identity of the interlocutor can vary, the ending is always the same and demonstrates the mystery surrounding Mitre’s literary labor.⁴ In some versions, the interlocutor is told to wait outside for some time, emphasizing the importance of the translation above and beyond that of the visitor. According to Ángel Battistessa, who followed in Mitre’s footsteps as a translator of Dante, Mitre considered the translation of the *Comedy* more an act of government than a literary endeavor.⁵ Why did Mitre assign such importance to the translation? And what could the translation of an Italian epic poem have to do with Argentine politics? As I hope to show in this article, translating Dante was part of Mitre’s project of filling a “cultural void” that he perceived in Argentina, addressing this cultural lack with the classics of Old World Europe in the hopes of creating a linguistic model to serve as a foundation for a nascent cultural identity. This involved adopting a literary work that Mitre found ideal for creating cultural cohesion among the existing population and incoming Italian immigrants.

In order to better understand the pressure felt by Mitre and other Argentine intellectuals of his generation to respond to questions of cultural identity, it is useful to consider the theories of Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson, and Nicolas Shumway, who coined the concepts of “invented traditions,” “imagined communities,” and “guiding fictions” respectively. In developing the idea of the “invention of tradition” Hobsbawm, along with Terence Ranger, explores cases where new traditions are created while claiming to be old in origin. Although every epoch, they explain, most likely gives rise to invented tradition, the phenomenon occurs more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys previous social patterns. It is witnessed especially alongside developing nationalism, and often involves the dismantling and restructuring of images of the past. It is not to be confused with genuine

³ Anecdote as told by Martin Paz in “El Infierno de los traductores: El noveno círculo,” *Página 12, Radar Libros*, June 15, 2003, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/libros/10-615-2003-06-15.html>.

⁴ In some versions, Mitre’s interlocutor is Lucio V. Mansilla, a fellow diplomat and statesman. Versions of this anecdote can be found in Sergio Waisman, “Foundational Scenes of Translation,” *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de America Latina y el Caribe (Israel)* 21, no. 1 (2010): 60; Giuseppe Bellini, “Dante nella versione di Mitre,” in *Del Tradurre* 2, ed. Teresa M. Rossi (Rome: Bulzoni, 1995), 73-84; and Paz, “El Infierno de los traductores.”

⁵ See Ángel J. Battistessa, “Dante y las generaciones argentinas,” *Boletín de la Academia Argentina de Letras* 30, no. 115-16 (1965): 17, 22. Battistessa translated the *Comedy* in 1972: Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Comedia*, trans. Ángel J. Battistessa (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Carlos Lohlé, 1972).

traditions: “Where the old ways are alive, traditions need be neither revived nor invented.”⁶ Hobsbawm identifies late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe as a place and time when invented traditions flourished. Anderson goes a step further, seeing nations themselves as social constructs, existing only in the minds of those in a community and constructed by political and cultural elites. In his book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Anderson turns this line of questioning toward the emergence of such “communities” in South America.⁷

The concepts of “invented traditions” and “imagined communities” are deeply relevant in the case of Argentina, which, after the War of Independence from Spain (1810-18), had to develop its own national/cultural identity. At the end of the colonial period, Argentina was a largely un-populated land, with an estimated population of around 500,000.⁸ Unlike Mexico and Peru, with their highly developed Mayan and Incan civilizations, Argentina had mostly nomadic tribes which were annihilated over time and excluded from the national identity being constructed by Argentina’s new founders. Shumway explains that during the last half of the 1700s, Argentina was “a land of isolated settlements, autonomist townsmen, nomad *gauchos*, relatively docile employees of *estancieros*, unconquered Indians, minimal economic and political development—and no sense of national destiny.”⁹ European immigration was encouraged and supported to populate the expanses and modernize the economy. The great European immigration wave to Argentina took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and resulted in a heterogeneous population of predominantly Spanish and Italian origin. Symbolic or ideological identification among the population had to be established and *argentinidad* invented.

But according to Shumway, the attempt by Argentina’s founders to invent a collective identity was a failure. He argues that the nineteenth-century intellectuals who first advanced the idea of Argentina were unsuccessful in creating an ideological framework for the nation.¹⁰ Rather than creating a mythology of inclusion, nineteenth-century Argentina gave rise to opposing “guiding fictions” which resulted in a mythology of exclusion. With the term “guiding fictions” Shumway refers to key notions that give individuals a sense of nation, peoplehood, collective identity, and national purpose.¹¹ He argues that from independence onward, two divergent streams of thought dominated Argentina’s guiding fictions: one elitist, liberal, pro-European and *porteña*,¹² and the other populist, nationalist, nativist, and federalist.¹³ Mitre comes down squarely on the former side of this ideological divide, not only as regards his politics, but also as regards his literary endeavors. As we shall see, he minimizes (or ignores) the significance of local literary production treating of nativist topics, instead translating and promoting works of European high culture such as Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

Mitre’s pessimistic views on local literary production can best be seen in an 1887 letter to Señor don Miguel M. Ruíz, addressing the possibility of creating a course on South American

⁶ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 8.

⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

⁸ Nicolas Shumway, *The Invention of Argentina* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, x.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, xi.

¹² Pertaining to the port city of Buenos Aires.

¹³ *Ibid.*, xii.

literature, which was not then taught in universities. Ruíz had written to Mitre asking his opinion and advice on the matter, having heard from a Professor Alió at the *Colegio del Uruguay* that Mitre believed such an endeavor to be impossible. Alió was in agreement with Mitre, who insisted: “no hay material para formar un texto, que sirva para dictar un curso de literatura argentina y americana” (“there isn’t any material to form a text with which to teach a course on Argentine and American literature”).¹⁴

Mitre’s response to Ruíz’s proposal, which he refers to as “un asunto en el cual no deseaba tomar participación directa ni indirecta” (“a matter I didn’t want any part of, direct or indirect”), is less than enthusiastic. Not only, he claims, is there no extant didactic material for such a course, but none could be created even if they wanted to: “la obra no es solo difícil, sino materialmente imposible” (“the matter is not only difficult, but even materially impossible”).¹⁵ Why impossible? Because in Mitre’s eyes, anything that could be labeled under the umbrella term “South American Literature” had yet to be written: “Para dictar un curso de literatura, lo primero que se necesita es una literatura, y en el caso que nos ocupa, no sólo faltan los materiales completos para dictarlos, sino que falta la materia misma que constituye la substancia del asunto” (“In order to teach a literature course, the first thing one needs is literature. In our case, we are lacking not only the complete materials to teach such a course, but also the very material that constitutes the subject itself”).¹⁶ Even after spelling out this opinion in black and white, Mitre then makes recourse to a character from folklore to drive home what he considers an obvious truth: “Hay una receta de cocina muy conocida, que pertenece al número de las verdades de Pero Grullo, y es que para hacer un guiso de gallina, lo primero que se necesita es una gallina” (“There is a well-known cooking recipe among the many truths of Pero Grullo: in order to make a chicken stew, the first thing one needs is a chicken”).¹⁷ Pero Grullo is a folkloric legend known for his habit of stating truisms, always with comical effect. Believed to have been a real person who lived from 1213-27 in Palencia,¹⁸ he entered into the popular imagination through anecdotes and eventually became a literary character. Francisco de Quevedo included him in his 1622 book *Los sueños*, wherein Pero Grullo gives ten prophesies which Quevedo terms “perogrulladas.”¹⁹ Mitre’s mention of Pero Grullo in this context is particularly significant because it draws attention to the distinction Mitre sees between folklore and literature. As the essay progresses, Mitre’s preference for high literature and the classics becomes apparent. At the same time, he concedes that elements of popular culture can also develop into material for high culture over time.

In Mitre’s opinion, although some South American “literary” materials did exist, they were fragmentary, and could not be studied as a fully formed “literature”:

Si por literatura se entiende simplemente cierta cantidad de libros escritos por naturales de una región sobre alguna de las materias que forman el tesoro del arte ó del pensamiento humano, la América meridional puede decir que tiene una literatura suya, pero *fragmentaria incompleta, en germen puede decirse*, pero que

¹⁴ Letter to Señor don Miguel M. Ruíz, Buenos Aires, March 26, 1887, in Bartolomé Mitre, *Correspondencia literaria, histórica y política*, 3 vols. (Buenos Aires: Imprenta de Coni Hermanos, 1912), 3:169.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Cfr. José Godoy Alcántara, *Ensayo histórico etimológico filológico sobre los apellidos castellanos desde el siglo X hasta nuestra edad* (Madrid: Rivadeneyra, M., 1871).

¹⁹ Francisco de Quevedo, *Sueños y Discursos* (Madrid: Clásicos Castalia, 1972).

hasta el presente ha dado más materiales á la bibliografía que al caudal de las ideas ó á la crítica. Si por literatura se ha de entender lo que ella significa, es decir, *un conjunto de obras que abrace el vasto campo del pensamiento humano, que comprenda además de todos los géneros que ella comporta, creaciones originales que señalen un progreso en las letras ó escritores que sin haber alcanzado reputación universal basten para alimentar por sí solos con su medula el genio de una nación*, no: la América meridional no tiene literatura, y la que tiene no constituye ni las simples muestras de sus múltiples formas ó géneros.²⁰

(If by the word literature one understands quite simply a certain number of books written by the natives of a specific region about a few of the subjects that make up the treasure of art or human thought, South America could be said to have its own literature; a literature which is *fragmentary, just budding one could say*, and which up till now has contributed more material to the bibliography than to the wealth of ideas or criticism. If, however, by literature one understands what the word actually means, that is, *a collection of works which embrace the vast field of human thought, which includes, in addition to all extant genres, original creations that mark progress in literature or writers who, without having gained universal renown, nourish with its essence the genius of a nation*, then no: South America does not have a literature. And that which it has does not even include simple examples of the diverse forms or genres.)

His criteria for literature are that a) it encompass the vastness of human thought; b) it include works of all genres; c) it include original creations which demonstrate progress; and/or d) it is produced by writers who are able to nourish the genius of a nation.

The idea that literature must “alimentar con su medula el genio de una nación” (“nourish with its essence the genius of a nation”) is a Romantic one, as is Mitre’s idea of the history of literature, which he defines as “un documento che copia las costumbres que la circundan y el signo de un estado de los espíritus, es decir, el modo cómo los hombres piensan y sienten en un momento dado, reflejando la colectividad” (“a document which records customs and the spirit of a people, the way men think and feel at a given time, reflecting collectivity”).²¹ In the current era of globalization, we tend to think of “national literatures” as a “well-founded fiction,” to quote Pierre Bourdieu.²² For Mitre’s generation (apart from forward thinkers such as Goethe, harbinger of *Weltliteratur*), literature was very much associated with the particularity of nations, and was considered a key factor in the construction of national identities. A history of literature is thus something Mitre perceives as always related to national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries, rather than geographical:

No por esto se le ha ocurrido á nadie hacer por simple razón geográfica una historia de literatura europea, aun cuando abunden y sobren los materiales para formarla, por cuanto esto importaría hacer artificialmente sin orden lógico y bajo

²⁰ Mitre to Ruíz, *Correspondencia literaria*, 3:173; my emphasis.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 170-71.

²² Pierre Bourdieu, “À propos de la famille comme catégorie réalisée,” *Actes de la Recherche en Science Sociales* 100 (1993): 32-36.

un punto de vista muy restringido, la historia de la humanidad entera con la confusión de la torre de Babel.²³

(For this reason, no one has ever thought to write a history of European literature simply for geographical reasons, even though the materials to do so are abundant and superfluous, for doing so would entail writing artificially without logical order and under a very limited point of view, the history of humanity with all the confusion of the Tower of Babel.)

An important criterion for Mitre's history of literature is that it has a guiding thread: "Los cursos de literatura deben tener por unidad, ó bien la lengua ó bien el género, ó bien los enlaces filosóficos" ("Literature courses must have a unifying criteria, whether it be linguistic, genre-related, or philosophical").²⁴ He uses the example of Schlegel's course on dramatic literature, "en que al través del tiempo se estudia la formación de una lengua y el genio de una nación, ó bien el desarrollo de una forma del arte en sus múltiples y análogas manifestaciones" ("which examines over the course of time the formation of a language and the genius of a nation, or the development of an art form in its multiple and analogous manifestations").²⁵

In summary, according to Mitre, the language and genius of a nation are reflected in its literature and develop gradually over time. The study of this development is the history of literature. Mitre believed the literature of South America and Argentina to be in an embryonic state, requiring an incubation period of several centuries for great genius to develop. Not only does he apply this idea to literature, but also to other art forms such as painting, sculpture, and music. Interestingly, he sees the duration of this artistic incubation period as something that can be calculated by modern science:

La ciencia moderna ha podido determinar aritméticamente cuántos millones de hombres y cuántos siglos se necesitan para producir un gran músico, un gran escultor y un gran pintor. Es una elaboración del tiempo, una combinación de afinidades electivas, una evolución que se opera gradualmente y que reconoce por factor principal las facultades hereditarias y la *acumulación intelectual*, que como el capital es producto del trabajo reproductivo. ¿Acaso porque la América ha producido unos cuantos músicos,—uno solo de los cuales ha producido una ópera,—ó cuenta con una docena de buenos pintores y algunos regulares escultores, puede pretender tener un arte musical, pictórico ó estatuario?²⁶

(Modern science has mathematically determined how many millions of men and how many centuries are necessary to produce a great musician, a great sculptor, and a great painter. It is a question of time, a combination of elective affinities, an evolution that occurs gradually and which has as its principal factor hereditary ability and *intellectual accumulation*, which like capital is accumulated over time. Can South America claim for itself a musical, pictorial, or sculptural art when it

²³ Mitre to Ruíz, *Correspondencia literaria*, 3:171.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 172.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 173; my emphasis.

has only produced a few musicians [only one of which created an opera], or a dozen painters and a few sculptors?)

Mitre believed such developments to be impossible in a scarcely populated country such as Argentina, which only a short time before had been a colony of Spain. Throughout South America, he points out, there are significant voids to be filled: “hay muchos vacíos que llenar en su territorio como en su cabeza. La mayor parte del terreno no sólo no está cultivado, pero ni siquiera ocupado, y las colonias literarias carecen hasta de representantes y personificaciones en su suelo profundo pero erial” (“there are many voids to be filled, both territorial and intellectual. The vast majority of the land is uncultivated, and even unoccupied, and the literary colonies lack representatives and personifications to populate her terrain which is profound but yet untilled”).²⁷

The main question Mitre asks is “¿Cómo se llenarían los grandes vacíos que resultan?” (“How to fill the great voids?”).²⁸ Not only must the desert be populated, but also the cultural voids must be filled, while at the same time the nation must break away from the cultural influence of Spain. Mitre’s plan was to fill the void with *non-Spanish* European high culture, in particular that of Italy, which he considered the cradle of civilization (as he would say fifteen years later). In contrast to uncultivated Argentina, Italy stood as the “fertile mother of modern civilization.”²⁹ Until homegrown seeds of genius could develop and intellectual capital could accumulate, it was necessary to adopt foreign texts. And of the great Italian authors, Dante was an obvious choice: the “father of the Italian language,” known for having provided the moral sustenance to nourish the genius of his nation. The *Risorgimento* thinkers considered him the harbinger of Italian unity, and he was widely popular among the Romantic-period poets whom Mitre admired and translated, such as Byron and Hugo.

Mitre’s translations of foreign texts became part of a strong literary tradition of translation in Argentina. As Sergio Waisman demonstrates in his article “Foundational Scenes of Translation,” translation played an important role in the formation of the Argentine nation from its very inception, when it was first used by the *criollos* who sought to break away from the Spanish empire and forge a new literary language.³⁰ Translation in “peripheral traditions,” he explains, is often key to the development of national identity: “The nation, intimately related to but ultimately different from the State, is a cultural and linguistic concept. The nation is formed, and at times dismantled and then reformed, in and through culture and language. Translation in peripheral traditions participates actively in the complex processes of the formation of nations and their subjectivities [...] the act of translation reveals nodes of potential that bring to the forefront issues of identity and representation.”³¹ According to Itamar Even-Zohar, there are three main conditions that set the stage for translation to play a major role within a literary polysystem:

- (a) when a polysystem has not yet been crystallized, i.e. when the literature is young and still in the process of being established
- (b) when a literature is “peripheral,” or “weak,” or both

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.; my emphasis.

²⁹ Cf. Bartolomé Mitre, in *Italia en el sentir y pensar de Mitre*. Cuadernos de la Dante Número 15. (Buenos Aires: Asociación Dante Alighieri, 1960).

³⁰ Sergio Waisman, “Foundational Scenes of Translation.” *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de America Latina y el Caribe (Israel)* 21, no. 01 (2010): 53–75.

³¹ Ibid., 55.

(c) when there are turning points, crises, or a literary vacuum in a literature.³²

All three of these conditions applied to Argentina at the time of Mitre's translations. The independence movement having only just started in 1810, Argentine literature was yet in its infancy. Not only was its literary canon a mere shadow of those of European countries, its people continued to see themselves as existing on the periphery of Western Civilization. Indeed, a key characteristic of the Argentine literature that would follow was its lasting preoccupation with defining its place among other Western traditions. Finally, during Mitre's life Argentina was at a major turning point in its history. The territory had been united, the *caudillos* largely suppressed, and the modernization of the economy was under way, largely thanks to Mitre's own presidency. Mitre continually sought to usher in progress and to "civilize" and populate what had until very recently been a largely uninhabited *pampa*. His translation of the *Divine Comedy* was a means to bring high culture to the country and to enrich Argentinean Spanish by broadening its expressive possibilities. Before further discussing why Mitre turned to Dante in particular, we must briefly investigate why he saw Italian immigration especially as key to the country's development.

Populating the Desert: Italian Immigration in Argentina

Following independence, Argentina's governing elites sought to populate and modernize the vast expanses. The population of the entire Argentine territory at the time of independence from Spain is estimated to have been a mere 400,000.³³ Intellectuals such as Juan Bautista Alberdi, the major political thinker behind Argentina's 1853 constitution, emphasized the importance of adding to this meager population. Like Mitre, Alberdi was a member of the "Generation of '37" literary group, and an opponent of the dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas. Following the battle of Caseros in 1852, when Rosas was defeated, Alberdi wrote his book *Bases y puntos de partida para la organización política de la República Argentina* (*Bases and Starting Points for the Political Organization of the Argentine Republic*). The book seeks to outline a simple and rational basis for organizing the nascent country.³⁴ He points out that the foremost enemy of pure unity in the Argentine Republic is not Don Juan Manuel Rosas, but "the space of 200,000 square leagues in which the handful of our scarce population of one million is diluted, like a drop of red paint in the Paraná River."³⁵ Ten chapters of the *Bases* are devoted to exploring the problem of deficient population and to proposing possible solutions.

Alberdi's primary solution was to populate the desert. He coined the phrase "gobernar es poblar" ("to govern is to populate") and argued that the only civilization on Argentine soil was European: "We do not have a single important city that was not founded by Europeans [...] Even now, after independence, indigenous people are neither important nor numerous in our political civil society."³⁶ Europe had brought to the Argentine territory the notion of order, the knowledge

³² Itamar Even-Zohar, "The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem," in *Papers on Poetics and Semiotics 8: Papers in Historical Poetics* (Tel Aviv: Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, 1978), 23.

³³ Ofelia I. Stahringer de Caramuti, *La Política migratoria argentina* (Buenos Aires: Depalma, 1975), 14.

³⁴ "Bases y puntos de partida para la organización política de la República Argentina," in Juan Bautista Alberdi, *Obras completas de Juan Bautista Alberdi*, vol. 3 (Buenos Aires: La Tribuna nacional, 1886-87). All Alberdi quotes here cited in English are from Juan Baustista Alberdi, "Bases and Starting Points for the Political Organization of the Argentine Republic (1852)," trans. Ian Barnett, in *Liberal Thought in Argentina 1837-1940*, ed. Natalio R. Botana and Ezequiel Gallo (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2013).

³⁵ Alberdi, "Bases," 169.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

of liberty, the art of wealth, and the principles of Christian civilization.³⁷ Everything that Argentina had, he argued, was thanks to Europeans: “If it had not been for Europe, America today would be worshipping the sun, the trees, the beasts, burning men in sacrifice, and would not know marriage.”³⁸ He felt that the native population was incapable of self-rule and that without a rebirth of culture the country was doomed to stagnation and barbarism. He encourages Argentines to recognize their need for progress and “call again for help from Europe for our incomplete culture.”³⁹ The only way to fill the void and bring civilization to the otherwise “empty and gloomy territory” was by encouraging mass immigration from Europe.⁴⁰ The ideas articulated by Alberdi heavily influenced the Argentine constitution of 1853, the Preamble of which invites “all good-willed citizens” of the world to immigrate to Argentina.

But deeper into the document, Article 25 specifies that the Federal government will encourage “European immigration.”⁴¹ Julia Albarracin, in her dissertation “Selecting Immigration in Modern Argentina,” demonstrates that notions of ethnic and/or cultural “eligibility” of certain immigrant groups have influenced Argentine immigration policy, shaping the “imagined community” that this policy tried to construct. She argues that although economic factors are important in explaining how many immigrants a country is willing to accept, identity politics tend to dictate who is admitted.⁴² As she shows throughout her study, the conceptions of the ideal citizen were redefined over time, but Argentine immigration policies show a recurrent preference for European immigration.⁴³

While the founders of Argentina were all in favor of immigration, they each had slightly different ideas of what constituted the “ideal” immigrant. Let us compare Alberdi, the so-called “Father of the Constitution,” Mitre (president from 1862-68), and Sarmiento, Mitre’s successor and author of one of the cornerstones of Argentine literature, *Facundo* (1845). As we have seen, in Alberdi’s view, immigration was the only means “for this American desert to swiftly become a world of opulence.”⁴⁴ For Alberdi, the ideal immigrants were Europeans (preferably Anglo-Saxons) who would civilize the extant population by serving as models in their modern work practices and consumption habits. In Chapter 15 of *Bases* he writes: “¿Cómo, en qué forma vendrá en lo futuro el espíritu vivificante de la civilización europea a nuestro suelo? Como vino en todas épocas: Europa nos traerá su espíritu nuevo, sus hábitos de industria, sus prácticas de civilización, en las inmigraciones que nos envíe”⁴⁵ (“How and in what form will the life-giving spirit of European civilization come to our soil in the future? As it has come in every epoch: Europe will bring her new spirit, her habits of industry, her practices of civilization in the immigration she sends to us”).⁴⁶ Alberdi felt that the best way to impart the desired European “civilization” was through the example set by Europeans themselves, rather than through the

³⁷ Ibid., 136.

³⁸ Ibid., 132.

³⁹ Ibid., 134.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 124.

⁴¹ Article 25 of the Argentinian Constitution states that “The Federal Government shall encourage European immigration; and it shall not restrict, limit or impose taxation of any kind upon the entry into Argentine territory of aliens coming to it for the purposes of tilling the soil, improving industries, or introducing and teaching sciences and arts.”

⁴² Julia Albarracin, “Selecting Immigration in Modern Argentina: Economic, Cultural, International and Institutional Factors” (Ph.D. diss., University of Florida, 2004), 2, http://etd.fcla.edu/UF/UFE0008385/albarracin_j.pdf.

⁴³ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁴ Alberdi, “Bases,” 138.

⁴⁵ Alberdi, “Bases y puntos,” 426.

⁴⁶ Alberdi, “Bases,” 137.

educational system. He continues: “Every European who comes to our shores brings us more civilization in his habits, which he then passes on to our inhabitants, than in so many philosophy books [...] A hardworking man is the most effective catechism.”⁴⁷ Because education was insufficient, the *gauchos* and the indigenous population were to acquire culture through firsthand contact. Alberdi argues that even if the *roto*, the *gaucho*, and the *cholo*⁴⁸ were to have the best education system, “in one hundred years you will not make him an English laborer who works, consumes, lives decently and comfortably.”⁴⁹ Although all of the articles of Alberdi’s constitutional project advocate immigration from Europe in general, the fact that he here specifies “English” rather than “European” indicates that the English are indeed the ideal.⁵⁰ Throughout his *Bases*, he mentions the English as an economic example and a model of “liberty,” with the French as the epitome of culture, and the United States, particularly California, as the ideal constitutional model. The Italians go unmentioned.

Sarmiento’s writings reveal a similar bias. In his search for models for Argentine institutional development, he explores the systems in place in Northern European countries. Sarmiento also writes extensively about the United States, having travelled there to analyze political and educational institutions.⁵¹ In his primary literary work, *Facundo*, he contrasts the lovely and orderly houses of the German and Scottish settlements south of Buenos Aires with the “barbarous aspect” of the housing in the city center.⁵² Like Alberdi, he believed immigration from “civilized” nations to be the cure for Argentina’s “barbaric” state, which was largely the cause of the *gauchos* and, even worse, the *caudillos* such as Juan Manuel de Rosas. At the end of the book Sarmiento contrasts France and Argentina, representing civilization and barbarism respectively. Sarmiento predicts that a transformation from barbarous to civil society could be achieved through education, foreign capital investment, and immigration.

Although Alberdi and Sarmiento’s envisioned transformation from a predominantly Indigenous-Mestizo population to one of primarily white European immigrants *did* occur over the next half of a century, the majority of these immigrants came not from English-speaking

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ *Roto* (common Chilean person); *gaucho* (cowboy of the South American pampas); *cholo* (mestizo/ europeanized indian).

⁴⁹ Ibid., 138.

⁵⁰ In Article 21, he declares that “no foreigner is more privileged than another.” In Article 33, that “immigration cannot be restrained, nor can it be limited in any way, under any circumstance, or under any pretext.”

⁵¹ Sarmiento relates his experiences in the United States in a lengthy letter to Don Valentín Alsina in 1847. See “Estados Unidos: Viajes por Europa, África y América: 1845-1847,” in *Obras Completas de Domingo Faustino Sarmiento*, vol. 5 (Buenos Aires: Luz del Día, 1949).

⁵² “Da compasión y vergüenza en la República Argentina comparar la colonia alemana o escocesa del Sur de Buenos Aires, y la villa que se forma en el interior; en la primera las casitas son pintadas, el frente de la casa siempre aseado, adornado de flores y arbustillos graciosos [...] La villa nacional es el reverso indigno de esta medalla: niños sucios y cubiertos de harapos viven con una jauría de perros; hombres tendidos por el suelo en la más completa inacción, el desaseo y la pobreza por todas partes; una mesita y petacas por todo amueblado, ranchos miserables por habitación y un aspecto general de barbarie y de incuria los hacen notables” (“In the Argentine Republic, it makes one feel pity and shame to compare the German or Scottish colonies to the south of Buenos Aires with the towns existing in the interior. In the first, the little houses are painted, always clean in front, adorned with flowers and nice little shrubs [...] The native town is the disgraceful reverse side of this coin: dirty children covered in rags, living amid packs of dogs; men stretched out on the ground, in utter inactivity; filth and poverty everywhere; a little table and leather chests, the only furnishings; miserable huts for habitation, notable for their generally barbaric and neglected appearance.”); Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo* (Madrid: Editorial-América, 1922), 28-29. English translation by Kathleen Ross, *Facundo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 51.

nations, nor from France. Between 1857 and 1900, 2,000,000 European immigrants were admitted, 1,116,000 of whom remained in the country. Among those who remained were 250,135 Spaniards, 106,334 French, 18,240 Austro-Hungarians, 18,095 Britons, 15,521 Swiss, 14,862 Russian Jews, 14,737 Belgians, and 17,989 Germans.⁵³ The number of Italians was 660,392: sixty percent of all European immigrants who arrived during this period. In the following section I intend to show that not only did Mitre recognize Italian immigration as Argentina's reality, but he also saw it as the future.⁵⁴

Mitre on Immigration

Throughout his political career, Mitre advocated for Italian immigration for a variety of economic, social, and cultural reasons. He saw Italians as responsible in large part for the country's economic prosperity, and as the bringers of moral progress. Politicians at the time were divided as to whether the government should adopt a "laissez faire" immigration policy or if official arrangements should be made with other nations and subsidies offered. On September 23 and 24 of 1870 (two years after the end of his presidential term), Mitre delivered four discourses defending the "spontaneous immigration" policies he had advocated during his presidency.⁵⁵ Having studied immigration in the United States and Australia, and because of his experience as leader of the nation, he was strongly opposed to what he called "artificial immigration" (i.e. subsidized or incentivized). Not only was it costly for the nation, he argued, but it also ran the risk of creating a country full of unintegrated minority groups who did not adapt to the host country.

He begins his discourses by stating that he would defend the system of spontaneous immigration that had been in operation throughout his presidency, which began with 6,000 yearly immigrants and ended with 30,000.⁵⁶ The existing system of immigration, he explains, was not born of chance; rather, it was the logical consequence of a clearly conceived idea and a dedication to its development during the course of his administration.⁵⁷ And this idea did not cost the country anything more than "sesenta centesimos por cabeza" ("sixty cents a head"). Furthermore, he argues, the man who comes of his own free will and with his own capital is more likely to find success upon arrival:

El hombre energético que emigra por su libre espontánea voluntad, que elige su nueva patria por un acto deliberado, que viene con sus brazos libres, con su capital propio, puede ejercitar su libertad de acción en campo más vasto, con más medios y mejor resultado que el que obedeciendo á impulsión extraña, viene atado á un contrato, sin contar más recursos que los que la munificencia del gobierno le otorga, ó el interés de la especulación le anticipa.⁵⁸

⁵³ John W. White, *Argentina, the Life Story of a Nation* (New York: Viking Press, 1942), 135.

⁵⁴ Ironically, while both Alberdi and Sarmiento had travelled to Italy, Mitre had not.

⁵⁵ The discourses were first published as installments in 1870 and are included in their entirety in the second volume of the definitive edition of *Arengas*: Bartolomé Mitre, "Discurso en el Senado de la Nación (septiembre de 1870)," in *Arengas de Bartolomé Mitre colección de discursos parlamentarios, políticos, económicos y literarios, oraciones fúnebres, alocuciones conmemorativas, proclamas y alegatos in voce pronunciados desde 1848 hasta 1902*, vol. 2 (Buenos Aires: Biblioteca de la Nación, 1902).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

(The energetic man who immigrates of his own free will, who deliberately chooses his new patria, who comes with open arms and his own capital, can exercise his liberty of action more vastly and with better means and results than he who obeys a foreign impulse, who is tied to a contract, with no more resources than those which the government generously grants him or loans him.)

Who then does Mitre see as this “energetic man” who will bring progress to Argentina? The immigrants in question are the Italians, whose presence in Argentina bolsters Mitre’s defense of spontaneous immigration. Italians, the best on land and at sea, have modernized a formerly backwards Argentina. Mitre praises them as cultivators of the land:

¿Quiénes son los que han fecundado las diez leguas de terrenos cultivadas que ciñen a Buenos Aires? ¿A quiénes debemos estas verdes cinturas que rodean todas nuestras ciudades a lo largo del litoral, y aún esos mismos oasis de trigo, de maíz, de papas y arbolados *que rompen la monotonía de la pampa inculta*? A los cultivadores italianos de la Lombardía y del Piamonte, y aún de Nápoles, que son los *más hábiles y laboriosos agricultores de Europa*.⁵⁹

(Who are the people who have made the ten leagues of arable land encircling Buenos Aires fertile? To whom do we owe the green belts surrounding all our towns along the coast of our great rivers, and even those oases of wheat, maize, potatoes, and woodland that *break up the monotony of the uncultivated Pampas*? To the Italian planters from Lombardy and Piedmont, or even from Naples, who are the *most able and hard-working farmers in Europe*.)⁶⁰

Mitre’s mention of the “uncultivated monotony” of the pampas speaks to what Sarmiento wrote at the beginning of *Facundo*. The book begins with a lengthy geographical description of Argentina and an explanation of how the bleak and featureless geography of the pampas was a major barrier to civilization. Mitre’s solution to the problem of the underpopulated pampas is the Italian immigrant.

Mitre then points to the benefit the Italian presence has brought to the Argentine shipping industry. To these “fellow countrymen of the discoverer of the New World” Mitre attributes the development of Argentina’s coastal shipping fleet, the ease and cheapness of river transport, and the crews of its warships. He notes that despite these contributions, the Italians are “expressly excluded by this scheme from the benefit offered to other races, who, whatever their qualities, have not necessarily contributed to our workforce the way the Genoese have done and still do.”⁶¹ Evidently frustrated by the tendency of his fellow politicians to associate progress only with immigrants from Northern Europe, Mitre speaks out to bring the Italians their due recognition.

Finally, Mitre argues, Italians are good for the banking industry. Twenty percent of the money deposited in the Bank of Buenos Aires belongs to Italian immigrants, “who set the example of capital accumulated through savings.”⁶² Here the Italians set a civilized example for

⁵⁹ Mitre, *Italia en el sentir y pensar de Mitre*, 34; my emphasis.

⁶⁰ Bartolomé Mitre, “Immigration,” trans. Ian Barnett, in *Liberal Thought in Argentina, 1837-1940*, ed. Natalio R. Botana and Ezequiel Gallo (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2013), 254.

⁶¹ Mitre, “Discurso en el Senado,” 112.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 112-13: “que nos dan este ejemplo del capital acumulado por la economía.”

the local population by means of their good habits, the very process by which Alberdi insisted the barbarism of Argentina must be purged.

Mitre devotes much more of his discourse to lauding the Italians than he devotes to any other migrant group. Of the nationalities mentioned, only the Irish and the Italians receive over a page of commentary. To the next largest population group after the Italians, the Spanish, he dedicates only two sentences. To the French, a brief paragraph.⁶³ Although the envisioned ideal of Alberdi and Sarmiento was the English and the French, the reality was the Italian. Not only were Italian immigrants the major migrant group during Mitre's presidency as well as at the time of his four discourses supporting spontaneous immigration—they would also continue to be the dominant migrant group in the following decades. Of the 289,409 immigrants to Argentina from 1882 to 1886, 205,442 came from Italy.⁶⁴ By the time Mitre published the first installments of his translation of *Inferno* in 1889, Italians had long been a permanent part of the fabric of Argentina.

Why the *Divine Comedy*?

Having filled the territorial void with Italians, Mitre intended to fill the cultural void with Italian literature. As we saw in his letter to Miguel M. Ruíz, Mitre believed literature could “alimentar con su medula el genio de una nación” (“nourish with its essence the genius of a nation”). Since he did not believe this sort of literature to exist yet in Argentina, or for that matter anywhere else in South America, his hope was to import it via translation of the literary work best known for having provided the moral sustenance to fuel the genius of a nation. Let us return briefly to Mitre's letter on South American literature to get a better understanding of his insistence that a work of literature be a transcendent “guiding text” of supranational influence.

In his letter, Mitre states that South America contained only a handful of great lyric poets. As far as prose authors, “estos se reducen á algunos historiadores, de los cuales no hay dos que puedan llamarse clásicos” (“they are limited to a few historians, not even two of whom could call themselves classical”).⁶⁵ Furthermore, he says, South America does not have epic literature, nor dramatic literature, nor even philosophical or imaginative writings, apart from its spontaneous bursts of lyric poetry.⁶⁶ Nor can the continent claim any significant philosophers or authors with transcendent ideas that gain renown abroad:

No hablemos de filósofos ni de grandes pensadores en el dominio de las ideas transcendentales, que en sus páginas reflejen en formas literarias, ya que no originales, siquiera como Emerson, los amplios vuelos del pensamiento humano, con alas bastante poderosas para volar, ya que no al futuro, al menos más allá de las fronteras nacionales. Ni aun dentro de estas fronteras han podido caminar.⁶⁷

(Let's not even talk about philosophers, nor of great thinkers in the domain of transcendental ideas, who in their pages reflect in literary forms the ample flights of human thought. It doesn't even have to be as original as Emerson. We do not

⁶³ Ibid., 113.

⁶⁴ Mitre, *Italia en el sentir y pensar de Mitre*, 35.

⁶⁵ Mitre to Ruíz, *Correspondencia literaria*, 3:174.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 3:176.

have any work of literature with wings sufficiently powerful to fly over national borders, and certainly not into the future. Their work couldn't even walk within these borders.)

For Mitre, a true work of literature (whether poetry or prose) must be a guiding text which transcends borders. The South American authors who do get a mention in his letter are those whose names had achieved a certain degree of influence in European literary circles.⁶⁸ In his opinion, one could hardly expect a nascent literature that had only recently emerged from chaos to produce many original works that provide moral and spiritual guidance:

La génesis de la literatura americana ha salido del caos: ha definido sus formas y va asumiendo rasgos originales, pero todavía no han aparecido en su firmamento los astros que deben iluminar sus horizontes. En tales condiciones pretender dictar un curso de literatura americana, y argentina por añadidura, prescindiendo de orígenes, enlaces y géneros fundamentales, es pretender alumbrar al mundo en pleno día con un candil, y este mismo con cuatro de sus mechas apagadas.⁶⁹

(The genesis of American literature has emerged from chaos: it has defined its forms and is in the process of acquiring original characteristics; but the stars that will illuminate its horizons have not yet appeared in its firmament. Given such conditions, to aspire to teach a course of American literature, and in addition Argentine literature, without fundamental causes, connections, and genres, is like wanting to illuminate the world in the middle of the day with a candelabra with four of its candles extinguished.)

Although Mitre sees this in all South American literature, he emphasizes how Argentine literature is still in a very early stage:

Y lo que digo de lo que se llama literatura sudamericana—que no tiene un drama, un poema, una novela, ni un tratado de filosofía de cuenta—lo digo de lo que se llama literatura argentina que recién se va formando, pero que todavía no forma un conjunto que merezca este nombre, ni aun para los simples afectos de la clasificación de los géneros.⁷⁰

(And what I say in regards to what is called South American literature—which has no drama, poem, novel, nor philosophical treatise of any import—pertains as well to that which we call Argentine literature, which has only recently begun to take shape and which still does not consist of a collection of works which merits such a name, and cannot even be classified according to genres.)

⁶⁸ Mitre mentions lyric poets Heredia (Cuban) and Olmedo (born in Guayaquil); the dramatic poets Alarcón (Mexican), Goristiza (Mexican), and Ventura de la Vega (who was born in Argentina but gained fame in Spain); the epic poets Pedro de Oña (Chile) and Ruíz de León (Mexican).

⁶⁹ Ibid., 3:178.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 3:177.

In truth, however, Argentina was not without important and original works of literature. Significantly, Mitre makes no mention of what would become, in the twentieth century and beyond, Argentina's most prized literary classic: *Martín Fierro* (first published in 1872). Many Argentine intellectuals, most notably Leopoldo Lugones, would later tout the work to be the greatest reflection of Argentine national identity.⁷¹ In his 1913 lectures, Lugones declared *Martín Fierro* to be the epic of Argentina, comparable to Italy's *Divine Comedy* or Spain's *Don Quixote*. In what follows, I will argue why Mitre, who acknowledged the nation's need of an epic, chose not to embrace *Martín Fierro*, but instead to translate the *Divine Comedy*, which, for him, was the epitome of national unity, justice, and high culture.

What Did Dante Mean for Mitre?

In order to understand what Dante represented for Mitre, we must return to the latter's youth, long before his presidency, long before the influx of Italian immigration and the publication of his translation. According to Mitre himself in the *Teoría del Traductor* (*Theory of the Translator*), the *Divine Comedy* had been his "libro de cabecera" ("bedside book") for more than forty years, and although he long since believed himself to be "impregnado de su espíritu" ("impregnated with its spirit"), it was not until the 1880s that he undertook its translation.⁷²

Mitre's fascination with Dante dates back to his days in Montevideo, when Argentina was divided by constant internal struggles between the *Unitarios* and the *Federales*. While the *Unitarios* (Unitarians) advocated a unitary state—a centralized government with Buenos Aires as the capital—the *Federales* (Federalists) supported a federation of independent provinces. The provincial *caudillo* leaders constantly vied with one another for power, creating an unstable political situation which Mitre saw as a recipe for continuous internal strife.

For most of Mitre's adolescence and young adulthood, the *caudillo* Juan Manuel de Rosas held control of the Argentine provinces as governor of Buenos Aires Province from 1829-32 and again from 1835-52. Rosas was born to a wealthy family of landowners and grew up in the countryside where he learned the ways of the *gauchos*. His knowledge of rural Argentina would later make him adept at governing its otherwise unruly population. In the areas he controlled, his rule was absolute, and his opponents considered him a tyrant. Not only did he restrict the press, but he also resorted to brutal tactics, using spies and the *mazorca* to discourage revolt among those who opposed his rule.⁷³ His supporters considered him a strong leader who would safeguard the interests of the landowners, the *gauchos*, and the rural population.

For Mitre and the other *unitarios*, Rosas's way of governing was backwards and despotic. Rosas sought to maintain his influence with an iron fist and resisted pressure to create a national constitution, insisting that Argentina was not ready for such an institution. Mitre made it his

⁷¹ Although Lugones insists that *Martín Fierro* is an epic, the work's genre is debatable. Borges describes the work as more of a "verse novel" than an "epic." See Lugones, *El payador* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Huemul S.A., 1972) and Jorge Luis Borges, "La poesía gauchesca," in *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1974).

⁷² "El Dante ha sido, por más de cuarenta años, uno de mis libros de cabecera, con la idea desde muy temprano de traducirlo; pero sin poner mano a la obra, por considerarlo intraducible en toda su intención, bien que creyese haberme impregnado de su espíritu" ("For more than forty years, Dante has been one of my bedside books. I had the idea early on to translate it, without however putting a finger to it, as I believed it to be deliberately untranslatable, even though I believed myself to be impregnated by its spirit") Mitre, "Teoría del Traductor," *La divina Comedia de Dante Alighieri* (Buenos Aires: Latium, 1922) XII.

⁷³ *Mazorca* means "ear of corn" in Spanish, and was the group's symbol of unity. Opponents of the group, however, said that the name should be spelled *más horca* or "more hangings," on account of their brutal tactics.

mission during his earlier career to oust Rosas and pave the way for progress, modernization, and for his own political legacy. Mitre spent his youth in Buenos Aires when Rosas was in power, going into exile with his family in Montevideo in 1837. They were not alone: many other exiled intellectuals lived in Montevideo, a hub of anti-Rosas activity. Newspapers, literary works, and political commentaries became the means for them to stir up further anti-Rosas sentiment both at home and abroad, in the hopes that this would eventually lead to armed uprisings, foreign support, and Rosas's downfall.

The picture that such young Argentine exiles had of Rosas is best summed up by Sarmiento's *Facundo*, which contrasts the barbarism of the *caudillo* dictatorship with the progress and civilization of enlightened Europe. For Sarmiento, Mitre, and other exiled intellectuals, Rosas represented an archaic, provincial mindset, a stagnant world order reinforced by tyrannical rule. It was not until the Battle of Caseros in 1852 that Rosas was finally defeated by Justo José de Urquiza's army of 24,000 soldiers (mostly Argentine, but also coming from Brazil and Uruguay). A thirty-year-old Mitre commanded a division during this, the battle that put an end to Rosas's twenty-year rule over Argentina.

The backdrop of this uprising against *caudillismo* in Argentina shows why the poets and thinkers of "Young Italy" and *Risorgimento* Italy appealed to the romantic generation of exiled Argentines, Mitre among them. While Argentina had been dominated by *caudillismo*, Italy had been dominated by foreign powers. The revolutionary ideas of Young Italy served as a blueprint for Young Argentina and inspired a similar program of liberation. As we shall see later, Mitre was inspired not only by their political vision, but also their patriotic reading of Dante as an emblem of national unity.

Young Italy, Young Argentina

Young Italy (*La Giovine Italia*) was a political movement founded in 1831 by Giuseppe Mazzini. Mazzini's goal was to create a popular uprising against the Austrian Empire in order to bring about a unified Italy, which did not become the Kingdom of Italy until 1861 (just one year before Mitre began his presidency). Having witnessed the failed revolts attempted by the secret society of the *Carbonari* (literally "charcoal makers"), Mazzini's intent was to attract Italians to his independence cause through a broad moral and spiritual revival. Education and then insurrection were the means by which his patriotic movement sought to liberate Italy.

Mazzini's ideas quickly spread beyond the Italian peninsula, resulting in the formation of Young Germany, Young Switzerland, Young Poland, and in 1834, Young Europe. But his influence was not to be confined to one continent. In Argentina, the model established by Young Italy inspired the Romantic River Plate intellectuals to organize themselves politically into the "Asociación de la Joven Argentina" ("Young Argentina").⁷⁴ On the night of June 23, 1837, a group of approximately thirty-five young men founded this new association: Esteban Echeverría, the group's leader, read a credo he had written entitled "Palabras simbólicas" ("Symbolic Words"), and received an enthusiastic response. On June 8 the group gathered once again to give their oath, which was, according to Echeverría, based on that of Young Italy.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ In 1846, they changed their name to *Asociación de Mayo*, after the May Revolution that began Argentina's independence movement.

⁷⁵ Juan Antonio Solari, *A un Siglo del "Dogma Socialista"* (Buenos Aires: [Librería "La vanguardia"], 1937), 18.

1. Juran concurrir con su inteligencia, sus bienes y sus brazos a la realización de los principios formulados en las *palabras simbólicas* que forman las bases del pacto de la alianza; 2. Juran no desistir de la empresa, sea cuales fueren los peligros que amaguen a cada uno de los miembros sociales; 3. Juran sostenerlos a todo trance y usar de todos los medios que tengan en sus manos para difundirlos y propagarlos; y 4. Juran fraternidad recíproca, unión estrecha y perpetuo silencio sobre lo que pueda comprometer la existencia de la Asociación.⁷⁶

(1.They swear to combine their intelligence, property, and manual labor in service of the realization of the principles formulated in the *symbolic words* that form the basis of the pact of alliance; 2. They swear to not give up in the endeavor, no matter what the dangers that may threaten each of the social members; 3. They swear to sustain these principles in every difficult situation and to use all the means at their disposal to defend and disseminate them; and 4. They swear reciprocal fraternity, close union, and perpetual silence regarding anything that could compromise the existence of the Association.)

The group was the Argentine version of a secret society, defining notions of liberty and patriotism and opposing the perceived tyranny of Rosas. They produced a great deal of anti-Rosas propaganda, gaining support from fellow Argentines and Europeans alike. Their dogma, articulated by Echeverría, was first published in 1838 as *Declaraciones de principios que constituyen la creencia social de la República Argentina*, and re-published in 1846 as *El dogma socialista*.⁷⁷ This idealistic and effusively patriotic document bears similarities to the 1832 *Istruzioni generali per gli affratellati della Giovine Italia* (*General Instructions for the Members of Young Italy*) and Young Europe's *Pact of Fraternity*, signed in Berne, Switzerland in 1834. In it, the members of the association declare themselves to be “builders of the sacred mission of defining their nations.”⁷⁸

Mazzinian ideas were further diffused among Argentine exiles in Uruguay, via the journal *El Iniciador*, founded on January 1, 1839 by Andrés Lamas and Miguel Cané. The Italian journalist Gian Batista Cúneo, a man instrumental in spreading the ideas of Mazzini in South America, collaborated with the editors. The Mazzini slogan “Bisogna riporsi in via” (“We must set out on our journey”) was printed on the front of every edition in Italian, along with the Spanish translation “Es necesario ponernos en camino.” Mitre, who contributed to the journal's pages along with other exiled Argentine intellectuals, was by then steeped in the ideology of Young Italy.⁷⁹

Standing as a testament to Mitre's enthusiasm for the Young Italy movement is a poem published in *El Nacional* on November 30, 1838. Although published anonymously, Mitre signed his name “B. Mitre” underneath the poem in his personal copy of the issue, kept in his library (see Figure 1):

⁷⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁷⁷ First published in Montevideo in 1846. There is some discrepancy regarding the exact date of foundation of the Asociación de Mayo. Most sources list 1847 as the date, but others a year later, in mid-1848.

⁷⁸ Esteban Echeverría, *El Dogma Socialista a la juventud argentina, 1837* (Buenos Aires: Biblioteca Virtual Universal, 2003), 6.

⁷⁹ Other contributors include Juan Bautista Alberdi, Juan María Gutiérrez, Florencio Varela, Esteban Echeverría, and Juan Cruz Varela.

¡Italia! ¡Italia! De mil héroes patria,
 Alza tu frente entre la nada hundida,
 Un siglo de existencia carcomida
 Se borra con un día de igualdad.
 ¡Juventud Italiana! La esperanza
 No reneguéis en vuestros corazones,
 Hermanos son los santos pabellones
 Que llaman a la Gloria y Libertad.
 ¡Joven Italia! El mundo te saluda
 Y te saluda el pueblo Americano.
 ¡Desterrados! os damos nuestra mano....
 Ahora los himnos de la unión, cantad.
 ¡Joven Italia! El estandarte santo,
 Alze a tu vez la juventud potente,
 Caiga el tirano, el trono y esplendente
 Se sublime la Santa Libertad.⁸⁰

(Italy, Italy, land of a thousand heroes,
 Raise from the ruins your downcast head,
 A century of existence in decay
 Is erased in one day of equality.
 Young Italy! Do not reject
 The hope in your hearts,
 Brothers are the sacred peoples
 Who strive for Glory and Liberty.
 Young Italy! The world salutes you
 And the American people salute you.
 Exiled, we give you our hand...
 Now sing the hymns of union!
 Young Italy! May the holy banner
 Elevate the powerful youth,
 Let the tyrant fall, the throne, and resplendent,
 Be transformed into Holy Freedom.)

Proclaiming all Americans, and all the world, to be the friends and brothers of the Italians, he calls for solidarity and liberation through battle. While the poem speaks ostensibly in support of the *Risorgimento*, it also implicitly opposes the hegemony of Rosas, cast again as a tyrant preventing the unity and progress of Argentina. In their fight to bring about Rosas' downfall, the members of Young Argentina looked to Young Italy as a model,⁸¹ but beyond Mazzini's political ideals, his views on the power of poetry to inspire patriotism and action were well known to the young Mitre.

⁸⁰ Bartolomé Mitre, "A la joven Italia," *El Nacional*, November 30, 1838.

⁸¹ See Jorge Myers, "Giuseppe Mazzini and the Emergence of Liberal Nationalism in the River Plate and Latin America," in *Giuseppe Mazzini and the Globalization of Democratic Nationalism, 1805-2005*, ed. C.A. Bayly and Eugenio F. Biagini (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

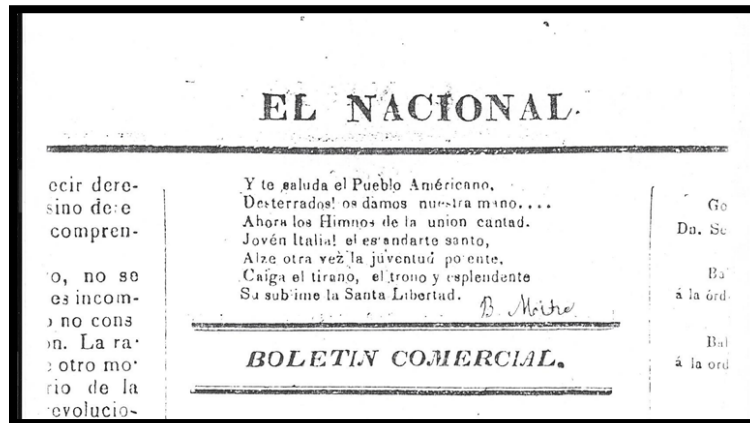


Fig.1. Detail of a page of Mitre’s personal copy of the November 30, 1838 edition of the newspaper *El Nacional*, archived in the Museo Mitre. Underneath the last lines of the poem “A la Joven Italia,”

one can see his signature (B. Mitre) written in ink.

Photographed by the author with the permission of the Museo Mitre

Mazzini’s Reading of Dante

During the *Risorgimento*, Dante was embraced by the intellectuals supporting Italy’s political emancipation. Mazzini especially inspired many patriotic readings of Dante, in so doing eventually converting the poet into a national icon. His first essay, “Dell’amor patrio di Dante” (“On Dante’s Patriotic Love,” 1826-27), concerns Dante’s love for Florence. In “Sopra alcune tendenze della letteratura europea del XIX secolo” (“On Some Trends in Nineteenth-Century European Literature,” 1829), he links Dante’s moral righteousness to contemporary Italian writers. In “Ai poeti del secolo XIX” (“To the Poets of the Nineteenth Century,” 1832), he promotes the use of poetry as the voice of the people. In his 1844 essay entitled simply “Dante,” Mazzini reads the poet in a primarily political vein, using his name as a rallying cry to action.

He begins by asking “who was the man whose name belongs to the Italian people?”⁸² He asserts that Dante’s promise of hope for Italian unity was the same as that of the present day. He thanks Dante for the formation of a common language “che rappresenterà un giorno fra tutti noi l’Unità Nazionale” (“that one day will represent the National Unity among all of us”).⁸³ Not only was Dante a great poet and thinker, but he was also a great politician, who “intendendo meglio d’ogni altro la missione dell’uomo italiano, riuni teorica e pratica, Potenza e virtù,—*Pensiero ed Azione*” (“understanding better than any other the mission of the Italian man, he brought together theory and practice, power and virtue—*Thought and Action*”).⁸⁴ The notion of thought followed by action was at the center of Mazzini’s political creed.

⁸² Reprinted as a preface to the 1914 edition of the *Comedy*. Giuseppe Mazzini, “Dante,” in Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia* (Milan: Istituto Editoriale Italiano, 1914), 11-12.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*; my emphasis.

At the end of his laudatory essay Mazzini asks how Italians can best honor this great man who gave them their language and their foundational book. His answer is a call to unity in the name of Dante:

Volete voi, Italiani, onorare davvero la memoria dei vostri Grandi e dar pace all'anima di Dante Alighieri? Verificate il concetto che lo affaticò nella sua vita terrestre. Fate UNA e potente e libera la vostra contrada. Spegnete fra voi tutte quelle meschinissime divisioni contro le quali Dante predicò tanto, che condannarono lui l'uomo che più di tutti sentiva ed amava il vostro avvenire, alla sventura e all'esilio, e voi a una impotenza di secoli che ancor dura. Liberare le sepolture dei vostri Grandi, degli uomini che hanno messo una corona di gloria sulla vostra Patria, dall'onta d'essere calpestata dal piede d'un soldato straniero. E quando sarete fatti degni di Dante nell'amore e nell'odio—quando l'anima di Dante potrà guardare in voi senza dolore e lieta di tutto il suo orgoglio Italiano—noi innalzeremo la statua del Poeta sulla maggiore altezza di Roma, e scriveremo sulla base: AL PROFETA DELLA NAZIONE ITALIANA GLI ITALIANI DEGNI DI LUI.⁸⁵

(Do you really want, oh Italians, to honor the memory of your Greats and give peace to the soul of Dante Alighieri? Affirm the concept that wearied him in his earthly life. Make your country ONE, powerful, and free. Extinguish among yourselves all of the mechanisms of division against which Dante so often preached. These very mechanisms condemned him—the man who most felt and loved your future—to misfortune and exile, while condemning you to a centuries-long impotence that has yet to cease. Liberate the tombs of your Greats (the men who crowned your Patria with glory) from the shame of being stomped upon by the foot of a foreign soldier. And when you have made yourselves worthy of Dante in love and in hate—when the soul of Dante can look inside you without pain and be content and proud to be Italian—we will raise a statue of the Poet on the highest point in Rome, and we will write at its base: TO THE PROPHET OF THE ITALIAN NATION, FROM THE ITALIANS WORTHY OF HIM.)

Mazzini's essay is a plea to “do it for Dante”: he makes Dante a national idol, a point of convergence for all Italians, and thus another model for anyone emulating Young Italy.

Mitre's *Risorgimento* Reading of Dante

Influenced by the thinking of the Italians they encountered in Montevideo, Mitre and his fellow Argentine exiles associated Dante with liberty and political union. Mitre illustrates this association in a letter to Miguel Cané (the younger), written in justification of his *Divine Comedy* translation. Cané was skeptical about the benefits that Mitre's translation could have for the country. He seems dumbfounded that a man like Mitre, so engaged in the formation of a modern nation, would have the “colossal force” to translate Dante's poem.⁸⁶ And for what purpose? Cané

⁸⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁸⁶ Letter from Miguel Cané to Mitre, Buenos Aires, August 29, 1894, in Bartolomé Mitre, *Correspondencia literaria, histórica y política del General Mitre* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta de Coni Hermanos, 1912), 3:318.

doubts even the relative importance of the translation, believing that most Argentines will not actually read the work:

¿Cuántos hombres calcula usted que en tierra argentina han leído íntegra y reposadamente la *Divina Comedia*? No hablo de los italianos, bien entendido, que habitan nuestro suelo. Para ellos, leer el Dante, es cuestión de obligación, cuando aprenden á leer, algo como el sello final á la carta de ciudadanía.⁸⁷

(How many men in Argentina do you figure have read the *Divine Comedy* unhurriedly and in its entirety? I'm not talking about the Italians, of course, who live in our land. For them reading Dante is an obligation from the time they learn to read, something like the final stamp on a document of citizenship.)

His concern, in fact, is that the *Divine Comedy* is a work only accessible to men of letters, and not of much import to the greater population. He refers to the work as “obscure” and “difficult,” suggesting that Mitre’s time would have been better spent writing another history.⁸⁸ Cané calls the translation a “capricho de titan” (“titanic caprice”) and jokingly warns Mitre against deciding next to learn Sanskrit and translate the *Ramayana*.⁸⁹

For Cané, just one generation younger than Mitre, the latter’s undertaking of a translation of the *Divine Comedy* was almost incomprehensible. Perhaps in Cané’s liberal (and un-Romantic) view, the consolidated state of 1894 did *not* need an epic to galvanize the nation. He recognizes, however, that the importance of Dante for Mitre has everything to do with the influence of Italian exiles (such as Cuneo) during Mitre’s days in Montevideo. At that time, Argentine and Italian exiles alike read Dante and dreamed of unity for their sister countries:

Esa *sensación* del italiano, que despertaron en usted, allá en su juventud, los proscriptos italianos en Montevideo, la he tenido también por tradición de hogar. Cuneo, poco años antes de su muerte, me habla de usted y de mi padre, de todo el grupo argentino que hacía brillar á Montevideo en la noche de Plata. Cuneo quería hacerme decir de memoria cantos del Dante y sonetos de Petrarca, como los decía mi padre, en el culto de aquella Italia que ustedes veían entonces triste y encadenada como la propia patria, y que hoy vemos, con secreto dolor, en triples alianzas que repugnan á su índole, á su historia y á su destino.⁹⁰

(The *sensation* of Italian that the exiles awoke in you, back in your youth, I have also maintained as a household tradition. Cuneo, just before his death, spoke to me about you and my father, about the whole group of Argentines that made Montevideo shine in the night of Silver. Cuneo wanted me to recite cantos of Dante and sonnets of Petrarch from memory, like my father did, back in the cult of that Italy that you all saw at the time as sad and enchained like our own country, and that today we see, with a secret suffering, in triple alliances that prove sickening for her sort, her history, and her destiny.)

⁸⁷ Ibid., 3:318-19.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 3:323.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 3:320.

When Mitre responded to Cané, he confirmed that this period in Montevideo indeed held the key to the significance of Dante for his generation. Mitre recalls the deep friendship he formed with Cané's father (Miguel Cané the elder),⁹¹ the two of them united in the fight against Rosas. Mitre thanks the younger Cané for reminding him of “la época lejana en que lo [la *Divina Commedia*] delectaba [...] aleccionado por los proscritos italianos que soñaban con la Italia Unida presentada por el Poeta, a la vez que los emigrados argentinos esperaban la libertad de su patria” (“the distant epoch in which the *Divine Comedy* was observed in great detail [...] chosen by the exiles who dreamed of the united Italy presented by the Poet, at the same time as the Argentine immigrants hoped for the liberty of their country”).⁹² For Mitre, just as for Mazzini, Dante had prefigured Italian unity and was the poet associated *par excellence* with “patria,” “liberty,” and “justice.” He chose to translate the *Divine Comedy* because he saw it as literature that exemplified the transcendence of borders, a work which embodied the same ideas and values that he wished to propagate in the new Argentina.

⁹¹ One of the founders of the journal *El Iniciador*.

⁹² Letter from Mitre to Miguel Cané (the younger), Buenos Aires, 1894, *Corres. Lit III*, 320.