Dante, 'The Prophet of Liberty':
The Mainstream Ideological Paradigm in Romantic Britain vis-à-vis Isaiah Berlin's Reflections on Liberty

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British Protestantism and Liberty

It is a well-known fact that Italian literature captivated the English mind during the Romantic age. Dante, in particular, towered in the imagination of the British Romantics. This article argues that there is a core set of ideological values which unites British Romantic intellectuals of diverse backgrounds in their reception of Dante. Ideology is regarded here as a multifaceted domain comprised of two realities—religion and politics—which 'were virtually inseparable' in nineteenth-century Britain, a period when Christianity was considered to be part of the law of the land.1

The anxiety of literary influence is so overwhelming that the scholars who have explored Dantean echoes in British poetry tend to consider ideology as an ancillary dimension to the poetic imagery.2 This is a dubious critical position in that the reception of Dante in Britain has a distinctive ideological edge to it. In other words, the ideological agenda

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of the British Romantics played a considerable role in creating the intellectual climate that led to an upsurge in the critical appraisal of Dante’s work and consequently of his fortunes. However, although ideology may be singled out as a sound avenue of inquiry, one has to bear in mind the caveat that ideological issues and literary themes cannot be entirely disjoined, for they constantly feed into and overlap with each other in the writings of the British Romantics.3

Dante’s popularity reached a peak during the nineteenth century also on account of the fact that Christian values, albeit sometimes in secularised or unorthodox form, fed into the moral and aesthetic thinking of British men of letters. As L. Pellicani argues, while the eighteenth-century rationalists—the apostles of the Enlightenment—welcomed the loss of the Christian faith as a liberation from what they perceived as an overbearing tradition—that is, as freedom from the legacy of Medieval superstition—, the Romantics experienced that same loss as a moral and metaphysical catastrophe. The latter believed that the world, devoid of organised religion, would lose its inherent purpose, the immanent telos which, in their spiritual conception, conferred meaning to human existence. This is why the non-believers sought secularised equivalents to God’s spiritual presence in the world, Hegel’s idealistic philosophy that celebrates the historical progress towards liberty being a case in point.4

Although the Romantic movement is not ‘entirely religious’, most of its adherents—including those who criticise the established, Christian religion—‘make use of a quasi-religious terminology’.5 The resurgence of the evangelical belief in the afterlife affected even the liberal or progressive poets, who ‘could not dismiss the doctrine of eternal punishment, and were, in consequence, more disposed than their eighteenth-century predecessors, to participate in Dante’s “fiction”.’6 Hence, accusations of atheism levelled against intellectuals who strayed from mainstream Christianity are often unfounded. Byron, for one, having

6. Pite, 49.

developed a spirituality of his own, was bewildered by the coeval, disparaging, opinion on his religious beliefs. ‘I don’t know why I am considered an enemy to religion, and an unbeliever. I disowned the other day that I was of Shelley’s school in metaphysics, though I admired his poetry […] I know, however, that I’m considered an infidel.’

Clearly, religious or spiritual feelings take on a variety of hues: whereas Dante’s overriding concern is to celebrate religious orthodoxy, the British Romantics tend to separate moral truth from established religion, thereby flaunting their modernity and veering towards secularisation. Yet there was a perceived common ground. Regardless of minute theological issues, Romantics of all persuasions shared the conviction that Dante’s poetry performs an ethical function. This is one of the qualities that renders a Medieval poet intelligible to a modern readership. As Byron cogently puts it, ‘the highest of all poetry is ethical poetry, as the highest of all earthly objects must be moral truth.’7 Hence, despite their misreading of Dante’s intentions, whereby a modern sensitivity is mapped onto a Medieval text impregnated with orthodox Christianity, even the nineteenth-century non-believers were closer to the Comedy than their classicist forbears.

Clearly, the believers—among whom were Coleridge, Wordsworth, Southey and ‘the translator of Dante’ H.F. Cary—were more favourably disposed towards Dante’s Christian narrative. This is not to say that they uncritically subscribed to the orthodox, Catholic theology underpinning it. In fact, they interpreted The Comedy in keeping with their Protestant-inspired views. The crucial point is that the British Romantics reached a quasi-unanimous consensus on Dante’s contemporary significance, in spite of the fact that they belonged to different political and religious constituencies. The examination of the Comedy’s reception in Britain, then, lends support to the generalisation that a coherent, albeit loosely arranged, Romantic ideology did exist. Its leitmotifs were anti-Roman Catholicism and the cult of liberty. The Protestant ethos, in fact, is a pervasive political-cultural element in Romantic culture—the English of all classes formed in the nineteenth century a strongly Protestant nation.8

Unsurprisingly, then, the British Romantics gave new lease of life to an interpretation that had long been popular in Protestant circles throughout Europe. John Foxe’s *The Book of Martyrs* popularised the view that Dante had nurtured fierce anti-papal feelings well before the Protestant theologians appeared on the scene. Dante had the courage to say that the pope ‘of a pastor is made a woollfe, to wast the church of Christ, and to procure with his Clergy not the word of God to be preached, but his own decrees.’ The Popes, Foxe argued, based their claims to temporal power on the ‘Donation of Constantine’, which Dante ‘refutes’ before it was unmasked as a forgery. In his work *Of Reformation Touching Church-Discipline in England*, Milton too brings Dante’s indictment of a corrupt Papacy to the fore, by translating (and commenting on) *Inferno XIX*, 115–117, where Dante severely criticizes Constantine, the first Christian Emperor, for having ‘endowed the Church with dominion over the western part of his empire’, an act which brought about widespread corruption and would later justify the Reformation.

_Ahi, Constantin, di quanto mal fu matre_,
_Non la tua conversion, ma quella dote_
_Che da te prese il primo rico patre! Inf., XIX, 115–117_

_Ah Constantine, of how much ill was cause_
_Not thy conversion, but those rich damaines_
_That the first wealthy Pope receiv’d of thee._

Milton’s polemic against the Roman Catholic Church relies on the authority of Dante and Petrarch, authoritative poets who, despite ‘professing the Romish faith’, concurred in the—seemingly crypto-

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12. J. Milton in E. Griffiths and M. Reynolds (eds), *Dante in English* (London: Penguin Books), 32. In *Inferno XIX* Dante unleashes his holdest attack against simony, that is, the selling of Ecclesiastical preferment, a sordid practice which, centuries later, would trigger Luther’s wrath. The condemnation of the Church of Rome for its lust for power and temporal dominions is the leitmotif recurring in most Protestant literature. On H.F. Cary’s rendering of *Inferno XIX* see E. Crisafulli, “‘Woe to These, Simon Magnus!’: H.F. Cary’s Translation of *Inferno XIX*,” in E.G. Haywood, (ed.) *Dante Metamorphoses: Episodes in a Literary Afterlife* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), 151–184.
20. Pite, 5.
as a prestigious antecedent both vindicating and supporting Milton’s momentous ideological legacy. Most British Romantics were so imbued with Protestant values that they sought to discover other prophets of liberty besides Milton. Dante, having developed a reputation as a heretic and one of Christianity’s greatest ‘troublemakers’, was eminently well-suited to the role.21 The cult of Dante was instrumental in reinforcing the Protestant tenet that the defence of liberty—the worthiest of causes—was Britain’s mission.

**Dante, the Prophet of Liberty**

The issue of liberty was crucial to the national identity of the nineteenth-century Whigs,22 who glorified the Protestant Revolution of 1688 ‘as the foundation of their liberties’. Little wonder, then, that the Whigs were at the forefront in articulating and propagating the view that Dante was ‘a pre-eminent apostle of freedom—both civil and religious’23 amidst political tyranny and religious bigotry.

Nineteenth-century international politics was bound to trouble liberals. After the reinstatement of feudal monarchies in the aftermath of Napoleon’s defeat, freedom was trampled over in most of Continental Europe. Italy, in particular, suffered under the yoke of foreign rule. To all liberals who took the cause of Italian independence to heart, Dante appeared as a natural source of ideological inspiration. Prominent writers of the Italian Risorgimento—among whom we find Ugo Foscolo, who had found refuge as an exile in Britain—endorsed the Protestant appropriation of Dante, which became ever more popular in Britain as the political situation in Italy took turns for the worse.

The Whigs’ ‘deeply entrenched anti-Roman Catholicism’24 gained momentum in the light of the Italian predicament, which confirmed that the

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21. There are exceptions to the mainstream interpretation of Dante in nineteenth-century Britain, though. Blake did not concur with his fellow Romantics in the view that Dante was ‘the apostle of liberty’. A. Braida, *Dante and the Romantics* (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 156. Braida quotes an article in the Tory *Blackwood Magazine*, where an anonymous writer makes statements to the same effect (*ibid*). By the same token, Leigh Hunt found fault with ‘Dante’s absurdities and horrors’, which, in his view, ‘represent a historical nightmare, that of medieval Catholicism’, Caesar, (ed.) 548.


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British people had been wise in embarking on the Reformation and severing their ties with the Catholic Church, the seat of religious absolutism and despotic government. Current Italian events afforded incontrovertible proof that ‘Catholicism was politically dangerous, as it rejected the authority of the liberal state.’26 The Popes were illiberal monarchs who did not hesitate to suppress their citizens’ fundamental rights. This state of affairs stoked the ire of British Whigs and Italian patriots alike. The British Romantics, then, were bound to see Dante as the first ‘modern’ poet before Milton who boldly railed against the spiritual yoke of Roman Catholicism, a tyrannical religion that had the added infamy of having stifled the Medieval free communes and subsequently hindered Italy’s aspirations to independence.

The Liberal streak of Protestantism traversed—and binds together—the writings of the major British Romantics. For one thing, it made them receptive to the view that Dante’s *Comedy* is the most powerful offspring of a glorious period of Italy’s history, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when the Medieval free communes flourished and gave a new lease of life to ancient republican ideals. This view was popularised by Sismondi’s *Histoire des républiques italiennes du moyen âge*, the first volume of which appeared in 1807. Not only did Sismondi harp on the notion that the Italian medieval city-states expressed an early ‘desire for political freedom’,27 he also praised the Guelph states of Tuscany, which were loosely allied with the papacy, for having bequeathed ‘the legacy of democratic liberty’ to later times.28 Italy, then, is seen not just as the cradle of Western civilization, but also as a cultural terrain conducive to noble political ideals. And it is Dante’s birth-place, fourteenth-century Florence, which stands out both for its extraordinary artistic achievements and its political vitality. ‘In all aspects of Florentine life, Sismondi finds the imprint of republican values.’29 Sismondi praised the Guelphs, who, he believed, stood for local and self-government, whereas the Ghibellines endorsed ‘the imperial, pan-European ambitions of the autocratic Holy Roman Empire’.30 A republican Dante, which is clearly anachronism, would have been a sworn enemy of the Emperor. Not all
Romantics concurred with this interpretation of Dante’s allegiances. H.F. Cary, for example, portrayed Dante as an all-out supporter of imperial power, strenuously opposing the popes’ political ambitions. Cary’s anti-Roman Catholicism depended upon the Ghibelline paradigm. Coleridge, too, depicted Dante as a Ghibelline. Moreover, his view of fourteenth-century Italy was more balanced than Sismondi’s: the ‘net-work of free little republics’ in Dante’s time was the breeding ground ‘of the flourishing of commerce, and the protection of letters and arts,’ all of which ‘afforded a vast field for the intellect’. On the other hand, fragmentation produced ‘domestic feuds, civil wars, and party spirit’, which, in Dante’s lifetime, led Italy to experience a state of intense democratic partisanship in which an exaggerated importance was attached to individuals, [...] and in which envy, jealousy, hatred, and other malignant feelings, could and did assume the form of patriotism, even to the individual’s own conscience. Sismondi’s conception appealed especially to the more radical and libertarian intellectuals along the Romantic political spectrum.

But Sismondi’s work was immensely influential in all quarters: by conceiving of Dante as an exemplary figure relevant to present political concerns, it justified the Romantic ideological appropriation of the Comedy. Nowhere does this come to the fore more cogently than in Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s Valperga (1823), a novel extolling the free Medieval communes in Italy. The political message is unambiguous: republican liberty, the source of historical progress, is ‘at odds with the recent restoration of autocracy on the European continent’ that took place in the aftermath of Napoleon’s defeat. When the protagonist states that, in the fourteenth century, ‘Florence, in her struggle for freedom, had awakened the noblest energies of the human mind’, we clearly discern Sismondi’s influence.

Perhaps the strongest of all Romantic statements connecting Dante with liberty occurs in chapter 10, entitled ‘Euthanasia narrative’, where Shelley links the protagonist’s own ‘enthusiasm for the liberties’ of Italy to her being a contemporary of an ‘illustrious author’, Dante, and to her profound love for the Divine Comedy. ‘Florence was free, and Dante was a Florentine’, who emerges as a heroic figure ‘shaking off’ the obnoxious ‘barbaric lethargy’ enveloping Italy. 36

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32. Ibid., 441, 443.
34. Shelley, Valperga, 109.
35. Ibid., 109.
36. Ibid.

Byron, who ‘passionately yearned for Italy to achieve political unity and freedom’, constructs Dante as ‘a Prometheus figure struggling to overthrow tyranny’ in Italy, an oracle denouncing Italy’s political ills. Byron wrote The Prophecy of Dante (1821)—which is a hymn to ‘man’s political liberty’—in the hope of awakening Italians to the worthiness of the cause of political independence. Byron has no qualms in recasting Dante in a modern mould that confers ‘authority on his own republican ideals’. 30

Byron was hardly aroused by the Comedy’s medieval theology; it was the passionate partisanship of his politics that engrossed him. Byron’s political vision is steeped in the Protestant ethos of British culture. Byron’s awareness that England is a land of liberty is the reason why he is captivated by Dante’s own ‘dream of liberty, and the resurrection of Italy’. Byron regards Dante as a mentor who prods him on to fulfil a quasi-sacred political-literary mission. Dante is the living embodiment of an ideal that Byron is eager to spread, and to campaign for, abroad: ‘I don’t wonder at the enthusiasm of the Italians about Dante. He is the poet of liberty. Persecution, exile, the dread of a foreign grave, could not shake his principles.’ 43

The British Romantics are so keen on highlighting the link between progressive politics and Protestantism that they turn Dante into a modern prophet of civil and religious liberty. Percy Bysshe Shelley is exemplary in this respect: he ‘relegated even the father of Protestantism to a subordinate role in the history of religious reform when comparing his achievement with that of one great poet in particular’, that is, Dante, who unambiguously appears as a proto-republican and bold reformer of Christianity:

Dante was the first religious reformer, and surpassed him [i.e., Luther] rather in the rudeness and acrimony, than in the boldness of his censures, of papal usurpation. Dante was the first awakener of entranced Europe

37. Taylor, 105.
38. Crisafulli, The Vision of Dante, 132.
39. Taylor, 118.
40. Franklin, 261.
41. Ibid., 106.
42. Ibid., 194.
43. Ibid., 195.
Shelley, despite being an atheist, was aware that from the seventeenth century onwards, political liberalism "emerged together with reformed Christianity". He knew that Protestantism planted the seed of liberty in Britain—in a Defence of Poetry, Shelley "recalled "the last national struggle for civil and religious liberty" represented by the Glorious Revolution of 1688, which, as we shall see, British Whigs venerated for being the cornerstone of British freedom. Hazlitt, who was keen on celebrating the "great tradition of English liberty", followed in Shelley's footsteps. Like most of his coeval men of letters, Hazlitt "saw an intimate relationship between the spirit of reformation and that which inspired great literature and was always on the alert when literature was employed for reactionary purpose." This attitude led the Romantics to enlist a gigantic figure like Dante to their cause. Clearly, Dante's vision was not politically progressive, if only because modern categories cannot satisfactorily account for the logic of Medieval politics. But the Romantic agenda required Dante to appear as a harbinger of freedom in the nineteenth-century sense of the term. Coleridge, too, conceives of politics and religion as interconnected dimensions. Hence, he associates "the cause of pure religion and of liberty, of national independence and of national illumination." Great literature is a well-spring, whence gigantic literary figures—Dante amongst them—rush forth as exemplary models of ideological commitment: 'In Pindar, Chaucer, Dante, Milton, and many more, we have instances of the close connexion of poetic genius with the love of liberty and of genuine reformation.' Coleridge goes well beyond a banal comparison stressing Dante's and Milton's mutual 'civic concerns': his statement meaningfully inscribes both enlightened writers within the paradigm of liberty which defines England's identity.

As we shall see, H.F. Cary is another representative intellectual of this school of thought. His translation of the Comedy was successful not only because of its perceived literary merits, but also because it embodied the most coherent expression of the Romantic paradigm whereby Dante is the prophet of liberty.

In conclusion: most Romantics appropriated Dante in order 'to structure and sustain the emotional and intellectual commitment to freedom' that was deeply rooted in British culture. The discourse on liberty is the kernel of the Romantic ideology. And herein is the hermeneutic key which enables us fully to understand the reception of Dante in nineteenth-century Britain. This generalisation has to be explored further. But let us first deal with Dante.

**Dante and Liberty**

It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore the issue of Dante's religious beliefs in depth, or to establish conclusively whether or not the Romantic reading 'over-interprets' the Comedy.

Suffice to say that Dante is far from being an advocate of liberty in any modern sense of the term. The Romantic appropriation obscures the fact that Dante is, essentially, the poet of (Christian) hierarchical order: in the Comedy, Emperors and Popes are chastised only insofar as they betray their God-derived mission. Yet it was hermeneutic openness (that is, the eagerness to venture beyond a literal reading of the Comedy) that ensured the unity of the Romantic paradigm. Had the emphasis been on order rather than liberty, a rupture might have ensued between the believers and the secular-minded or progressive-democrats, among whom were Byron and Shelley. The former supported the establishment (albeit with qualifications), and could identify with the conservative spirit of Dante's vision. The latter, who advocated democracy or atheism, would have found fault with a poet who believes that human government derives its legitimacy from God—democracy, being the government of the people by the people, rests on secular foundations.

46. Hobson, x.
49. Ryan, 39.
50. S.T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life and Opinions, 1 (New York: Leavitt, Lord and Co., 1834), 47.
51. *ibid.*, 123.
52. Braida, 82.
It is undeniable, however, that in the Comedy there are ideological themes—such as evangelicism and invectives against Popes and clergymen—that lend support to the Protestant appropriation, provided this is not taken to extremes. This is unsurprising in view of the fact that Dante was branded as a heretic in Roman Catholic quarters, and editions of The Comedy continued to be censored well into the nineteenth century. Dante's fierce anti-clericalism went hand in hand with the advocacy of a spiritual reform of Christianity, which naturally appealed to Protestants. Dante argued that Church reform could only be accomplished by separating the temporal and the spiritual dominions. He promoted the belief that justice and peace depended on accepting throughout Europe 'the supreme secular authority of an Emperor'.

This political aim is compatible with Catholic orthodoxy. But the British Romantics went so far as to claim that Dante's works unambiguously embody the spirit which produced the Reformation. Byron's awareness that Dante's 'insistence on the separation of imperial and papal power made him seem a proto-Protestant,' was not peculiar to him alone, being widespread in British culture at least since Milton. British Protestants had been so eager to enlist one of the greatest poets of Western culture to their cause that they overlooked any consideration that contradicted their assumptions. They glossed over Dante's unpalatable doctrines, like his unscriptural belief in Purgatory, which could be safely ascribed to a barbarous age that was prone to superstition.

But The Comedy's invectives against a corrupt Church, forceful as they are, fall short of advocating a free Church bereft of the Pope, whom Dante believed to be Christ's vicar on earth. In no way did Dante question, or cast the slightest doubt on, the Catholic tenet according to which the clergy is endowed with the sacred task of interpreting the Holy Scripture, thereby leading humanity to salvation.

Protestantism, conversely, maintains that 'all Christians have a priestly function'. Hence there is no 'official version of doctrine that the believer is dissuaded from questioning.' This perspective runs counter to the Catholic belief in orthodoxy, presided over by an infallible priesthood which is set over and above the lay Christian. Unsurprisingly, then, Dante considers heresy (which, etymologically, means 'choice') a grave sin deserving a harsh condemnation. For Protestants, instead, religious freedom renders the very concept of heresy redundant.

If Protestants are trying to worship God on the basis of scripture, they cannot be accused of heresy. Of course they are prone to error, as we all are: such error is part of truth-seeking. The only real heresy is to try to impose a system that tramples on freedom of conscience and the authority of scripture: Roman Catholicism.

Advocating freedom of conscience would have been anathema for Dante. His Medieval mindset led him to underscore a totally different concept, ethical freedom, according to which human beings are capable of discriminating between good and evil.

The basic premise of Dante's thinking is that human beings have a dual nature, incorruptible spirit and corruptible matter. Our intellectual soul, which, being a direct gift from God, is perfect, has two moral faculties: reason, the capacity to distinguish between good and evil deeds; and the will, which has the function of making the right moral choice. The will, which is unconditionally free, must prevail over the animal-like instincts distracting us from things eternal. Two strands of scholasticism converge in Dante's complex conception: on the one hand, freedom rests on moral choice (in order to be free, human beings must translate the correct choice into action—animals are not free, their behaviour being determined by their instincts); on the other hand, freedom accrues to human beings insofar as they offer no resistance to their natural inclination towards God—the most perfect form of freedom, here, lies in conforming to God's moral order. Angels and souls in paradise are a case in point: having reached a state of perfect harmony with God's grand design, they cannot exercise any kind of choice, which would alter their condition, but are nonetheless the freest entities precisely because they are at one with the will of God.

Our world, being the product of God's loving act of creation, is governed by freedom, not necessity. Whatever the conditions into which we are born, our souls are the direct creations of God and we are

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55. Reynolds, xiii.
56. Crisafulli, The Vision of Dante, 132.
57. Franklin, 261.
58. Hobson, 133. It was Luther who first underscored that all who are in Christ are priests, M. Luther, Concerning Christian Liberty (Forth Worth, TX: RDMc Publishing), 40.
59. Hobson, 130.
60. Ibid., 161–162.
nature is moulded by the stars or the heavens, but our will remains totally free. But the crucial point is that authentic freedom consists in willingly submitting to God’s moral order.

A maggior forza e a miglior natura
Liberi soggiacete, e quella cria
La mente in voi, che l’ciel non ha in sua cura. Purgatorio, XVI. 79–81

To a greater force and to a better nature [a periphrasis meaning God]
You are freely subject; and that creates
In you the mind which the stars do not have in their charge.

The oxymoron ‘freely subject’ epitomises the paradox inherent in the Christian conception of liberty. However, it must be emphasised, yet again, that determinism has no place whatsoever in Dante’s vision. God, the love of whom pervades all of nature and human history, allows human beings to be masters of their own fate. ‘The notion of an eternal, objective pre-established order of creation, independent of the human will,’ does not preclude—rather, it presupposes—man’s immanent ethical freedom. For Dante, in fact, ‘ethical autonomy means the possibility only of man’s transgression.’

It follows that any act of rebellion against God’s benign order inevitably leads to eternal damnation. Ulysses, who sets out on a voyage to absolute knowledge, thereby trespassing the boundaries God has decreed, is a case in point: his decision to ignore the dictates of religion and tradition, which stress the limitations of human beings, is God-defying. The pre-condition for attaining true liberty lies in accepting the axiological truth that the universe, bearing as it does God’s imprint, is unfolding as it should. Ulysses is bent on self-destruction because he refuses to acknowledge that truth.

Let us now turn to Isaiah Berlin’s theory of liberty, which, if revised critically, will enable us to bring into relief all the nuances of the conception of liberty both in Dante and in British Romanticism.

Berlin’s Reflections on Liberty and the Romantic Ideology

Isaiah Berlin recognises that liberty inevitably bears a multiplicity of meanings, yet he claims that there ‘appears to be a kind of nuclear,
central, minimal meaning which is common to all the many senses of this word and which signifies absence of restraint. This core meaning of liberty also alludes to the ‘elimination of obstacles to something’ in order to be free, I have to neutralise the activities of my fellow human beings which interfere with, or stifle, my own. Liberty, then—staining as it does from the ‘desire on the part of individuals or groups not to be interfered with,’—is ‘in its primary sense a “negative” concept.’ Its advocates supposedly have little, if any, interest in theorising a state of affairs whereby over-arching rules and moral laws dictate our lives.

Berlin, however, at one point, somewhat qualifying his earlier generalisation, states that in Western culture there is a plethora of conceptions of liberty which cannot be reduced to a single nuclear meaning. For one thing, Christian theology is irreconcilable with any philosophy which encourages the individual to remove whatever obstacles hamper his/her pursuit of earthly happiness. The devout Christian conceives of liberty in radically different terms: s/he strives to conform to God’s all-encompassing will as expressed in the laws laid down by the Revelation. This is the ‘positive’ conception of liberty, which underpins Dante’s vision. The modern, individualistic, conception outlined by Berlin, justifies man’s self-sufficiency and self-aggrandisement and therefore would have been inconceivable for a Medieval writer. Seeking to satisfy our selfish, material impulses—heedless of our in-born spiritual inclination towards God—is tantamount to forfeiting our right to being free. Sinful behaviour destroys liberty and leads to spiritual annihilation. This view is common to both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, event though the latter—as we shall see—made a distinctive contribution to the development of modern individualism. Luther was adamant that ‘unrighteousness’ amounts to ‘slavery’, whereas ‘Christian righteousness’ is the highest form of liberty. In fact, ‘to preach Christ is to feed the soul, to justify it, to set it free, and to save it.’

Luther underscores the contradictory nature of Christian liberty: ‘the truly Christian life’, he claims, is the epitome of the ‘freest servitude’, liberty being submission to God’s love. This apparent paradox—whereby ‘spiritual liberty and servitude’ are inextricably bound together—stems from the fact that the Christian religion is entirely governed by the love for God; and ‘love is by its own nature dutiful and obedient to the beloved object. Thus even Christ, though Lord of all things, was yet made of a woman; made under the law; at once free and a servant; at once in the form of God and in the form of a servant.’

The universe, being God’s creation, possesses an inherent rationality, an ethical purpose which should be heeded and respected. Liberty—in this perspective—is ‘inconceivable without submission’ to a higher authority. The emphasis is on obeying—albeit willingly—the moral laws sanctioned by an almighty Being. Christians, in fact, eagerly seek to fulfill a universal (divinely enacted) law; the less resistance one offers to this law, the happier and the freer one will be. This leads Berlin to conclude that ‘the notion of “positive freedom” is certainly founded upon a confusion.’

This article neither endorses nor rejects Berlin’s advocacy of negative liberty and his concomitant critique of positive liberty. Berlin’s categories will be employed here as purely descriptive tools.

While Dante’s conception is unmistakably positive, what type of liberty did the British Romantics endorse? Given their liberal outlook, it is reasonable to assume that they veered towards the negative conception. But the Romantic paradigm exhibits noticeable positive leanings too. The Romantics, being Protestant, were receptive both to liberal and Christian values. They saw no contradiction in this. Modern liberty came of age in the eighteenth century, as political liberalism became a fully fledged ideology. Still, liberalism in a wider sense is the offspring of the Reformation. On the other hand, the fortunes of the positive conception are tied to Christianity’s continuous—albeit intermittent in scope and intensity—presence in Western culture. This state of affairs is conducive to a complex theory of liberty that can hardly be reconciled with Berlin’s water-tight categories. But let us delve deeper into the question.

The fact that Christian spirituality permeated vast swathes of British culture facilitated the encounter with Dante, the greatest mind of the Middle Ages. The Christian legacy manifests itself in the philosophies which posit the separation between spirit and matter, of which Kant’s metaphysics is the most influential expression in the modern era.
thinking is deeply influenced by ‘the Kantian division of the world into that of mechanical causation and the inviolably free inner self.’ All versions of positive liberty, be they orthodox Christian or secular, are founded upon this dualism, which eighteenth-century materialists and sceptics sought to destroy. Positive liberty takes on a spiritual quality that is not susceptible to empirical laws. Authentic liberty cannot thrive in a realm ruled by necessity. ‘Transcendental religious thought has tended to place this world beyond the material universe, as the life after death, or in the Elysian fields, or in the paradise, earthly or heavenly, of the monotheistic religions.’ Kant, who drew inspiration from the ‘Protestant doctrine of the inner light contained within each immortal soul,’ locates this world in ‘the inner citadel of the spirit,’ the domain of perfect liberty. This philosophical view feeds into the Romantic obsession with the inner, spiritual self, the only dimension where liberty and creativity are conjoined in harmony.

Artistic creativity, in fact, becomes the epitome of perfect liberty. This conviction is forcefully expressed by Byron. A seminal concept in The Prophecy of Dante is that freedom is constantly nourished by the human ‘creative force’ flowing from ‘any activity that produces beauty, goodness or understanding’—such as poetry, sculpture, painting, architecture, exploration, and the like. The artist’s ethical responsibility lies in tapping into his talent in order to ‘contribute to mankind’s achievement of liberty, both political and spiritual.’

The spiritual laws governing liberty are not to be discovered by contemplating nature—this would be tantamount to downgrading them to the same status as ‘the iron laws of nature.’ Nor are they to be conceived as God-given. Human endeavour acquires its fullest meaning when it is set against the spiritual laws created by poets and other artists as they breathe life into sounds and colours. ‘Everything that is noble, great, sublime’, in fact, is generated by the artist-post, a God-like figure who performs the most sacred of all tasks which fall to the lot of man: out of his inner soul, armed only with his own intellect and imagination, and emotional and spiritual powers and creative capacity, he fuses life into the dead material provided by nature, and shapes it into whatever semblance he chooses, and it is convincing, beautiful, permanent, aesthetically valid in the degree to which he succeeds in incarnating within it the ideas, feelings, values, perceptions, attitudes which are the elements of his own ‘free’ inner life.

The secular-minded Romantics, therefore, unwittingly alter the Christian perspective. The inner self, in order to be truly free, must grapple with constraints and impediments which are human, not divine, in origin. Once the act of creation has been de-theologised in this manner, it acquires ‘the form of domination of something by something else.’ This shift towards a secular approach—which bears nonetheless the imprint of Christian thinking—is responsible for the theory of freedom among the romantic philosophers. The free personality is conceived by the romantic writers as one which imposes itself upon the world outside it.

This type of idealised personality, however, cannot permanently dominate the world, be this conceived as an internal (one’s inner self) or an external reality (the political and historical circumstances). One always has to face overwhelming obstacles or dictates. This is why the Romantics, somewhat paradoxically, contend that liberty—for all intents and purposes—is inseparable from submission to a higher order or principle.

The Romantic ideology is shaped by the Christian legacy, which looms large, for example, in Rousseau’s thinking. The Social Contract articulates a view that was to prove immensely influential on the British Romantics, and on Wordsworth and Coleridge in particular: freedom is ‘curtailed by an impersonal, incomprehensible force, by society. Man is still free; if he does not understand why he is enslaved. Thus, if we submit ourselves to the restraints imposed by a society to which we are in that mystic relation known as faith, or loyalty, we remain essentially free. By establishing the perfect spiritual order, one may solve the ‘old antithesis between liberty and authority [...] Submission to authority will be freedom, because that within us which demands freedom is Nature; and Nature will be authority.’ Following this line of reasoning, Coleridge contrasts Luther and Rousseau in order to alert his readers to the possibility of realising ‘the ideal condition of “free and yet absolute” self-government.’

73. Berlin, 173.
74. Ibid., 170.
75. Ibid., 171.
76. Ibid., 168.
77. Taylor, 117.
78. Ibid., 119.
80. Ibid., 174, 175.
81. Ibid., 181.
82. Ibid., 181.
83. Brinton, 52–53.
84. Ibid., 223–224.
Unsurprisingly, therefore, the Romantics believed, just like their Christian forbears, that free activity is necessarily rational, obedient to laws, conforming to a pattern. But how can liberty be reconciled with the view whereby human beings realise their potential insofar as they obey, or are carried along by, a powerful spiritual design? The Christians solve this dilemma by positing a perfect realm presided over by an all-powerful Being. This makes it possible for freedom and submission to meet harmoniously. The Romantics, the ideology of whom is grounded on the polar opposite view, that is, on the dynamics between mutually exclusive realities, regard this dilemma as the source of creative energy. Liberty is affirmed in the context of conflicting yet coexisting impulses. Liberty requires its opposite: clearly-defined boundaries and laws. No wonder, then, that Shelley ‘in the Triumph of Life thought of liberty and oppression, sympathy and selfishness, as inevitably conjoined.’ Shelley epitomises the Romantic conundrum: ‘like Rousseau, he would at once be free and submissive to authority. But that authority must be identical with his own will.’

The Romantics waver between a penchant for rational order coupled with hierarchies and a fascination for the larger-than-life characters who defy prohibitions and limitations. Shelley’s The Triumph of Life epitomises this aspect of the Romantic ideology: ‘Socrates and Christ are praised for being unable to compromise.’ Freedom acquires its deepest significance in the midst of (often hopeless) struggles whereby one attempts to overcome overpowering forces, be they inner impulses or external circumstances curbing one’s will to power.

This philosophical background goes some way towards explaining why the Romantics are torn between conflicting impulses. On the one hand, they celebrate transgression, because they conceive of life ‘as a force that is weakened and eventually destroyed by any kind of constraint. Life must ever attempt the impossible; and fail [...] Law, reason, and convention try to set bounds to human activity, and make life impossible’—one of the constant themes of the Romantic movement being ‘this claim of the individual to emancipation from outward restraint by reason of a natural grace inherent in us all.’ On the other hand, in order for transgression to be a source of spiritual creativity, there has to be a hierarchical, obstacle-ridden or rule-governed reality, against which the individual seeking liberty must constantly fight.

Conflict is a cherished state of affairs that stimulates the heightened consciousness of artists. According to the Romantic ideal, the struggle for liberty is life-defining and never-ending. To live heroically is to create, but creation is a permanent process whereby the gifted individual strives to achieve the unattainable. The liberty to create is the most powerful expression of the individual’s will. It is the spiritual element, the natural grace mentioned above, with which poets and artists are endowed, and which enables them to reconcile the opposing forces troubling the human soul.

The Christian perspective, conversely, values the individual’s inner struggles insofar as they enable him/her to achieve a final state of peace and contentment. The key concept being harmony, lack of conflict—liberty obtains if the soul is in perfect accordance with God’s immutable will. Besides being a desirable condition of the soul, liberty may exist on earth as a divinely inspired political order ensuring peace in all Christendom—this, in essence, is Dante’s vision.

The Romantics vis-à-vis Dante’s Conception of Liberty

The Romantic approach clearly secularises—or, which amounts much to the same thing, modernises—the Comedy. This leads to a misreading of Dante, which either de-theologises a Christian poem or manipulates the views of an orthodox poet in order to bring them into line with Protestant sensitivity. This is not to say that there was no common ground facilitating the meeting of minds between the Romantics and Dante. Even when the Romantics found fault with The Comedy’s imagery—its graphic realism, for example—they could comprehend the depth of Dante’s spirituality in a way that transcended the possibility of the sceptical materialist who viewed the world in terms of mechanical-physical laws.

The believers, for one thing, had ample intellectual tools with which to grasp the Comedy’s core significance. True, their Protestant-inspired conception of liberty is irreconcilable with Dante’s orthodoxy, but their

86. Berlin, 198. For the Romantics ‘to desire at all is to desire to fulfil a plan, to realise a pattern, to obey a law; the absence of law or pattern destroys any possible end or purpose, and leaves the world aimless, in an uncharted sea, at the mercy of every gust of passing wind.’ Ibid., 183.
87. Pite, 167.
88. Brinton, 165.
89. Pite, 183.
90. Brinton, 14, 28.
91. Crisafulli, The Vision of Dante, 112.
Christian perspective makes it inconceivable to advocate a state of affairs whereby the individual is totally free and self-sufficient. Nineteenth-century British Protestants concurred with Dante that authentic liberty must be balanced by authority. Luther himself had firmly criticised those Christians who misinterpreted the newly-found ‘liberty of faith’ he was preaching by turning it ‘into an occasion of license’ on the fallacious assumption ‘that everything is now lawful for them’. According to Protestantism, in fact, ‘it is only a good idea to abolish ecclesiastical power if there is a strong Christian culture that will order people “from within” — without a strict moral order ‘founded on Christian discipline’, liberty lapses into license, and chaos.’

The non-believers—who had no feeling for the niceties of Medieval Christianity—interpreted Dante’s poetic universe as vindicating their aesthetic, fully secularised ideals. Hence, they de-theologized The Comedy to such an extent that its eschatological message becomes somewhat elusive or vanishes altogether. Their position, however, differs from that of the eighteenth-century sceptics and materialists. Shelley, despite being an atheist and a radical libertarian, shied away from crass materialism, which is why he did not dismiss Dante’s inventions as the product of a fanciful and bigoted mind.

The most secular-minded amongst the Romantics were naturally drawn to The Comedy either because they, too, were under the spell of the Protestant ethos or because they adhered to the positive notion of liberty, which, as we have seen, is a secularised version of Christian ethics. According to the Romantics of all schools, liberty unfolds as the individual obeys, or defies, the spiritual laws conjured up by great minds. Because liberty is quintessentially the human endeavour to create, poets take on the semblance of Gods. This is a misreading. In Dante’s medieval perspective, the poet is a humble messenger of Christian truth. He is not a God-like figure endowed with the power to create a spiritual world ruled by arbitrary laws. The Comedy’s structure is mimetic in that it mirrors the reality of God’s will—souls are punished or rewarded depending on their deeds as judged from an orthodox, Christian perspective. Their fate in the afterlife is entirely determined by how they exercised their own free will.

And yet the legacy of Christian liberty, no matter how secularised, was instrumental in bridging the gap between nineteenth-century British culture and Dante’s medieval perspective, according to which souls achieve freedom and happiness insofar as they obey God’s moral laws. Positive liberty, in fact, entails submission to unbinding spiritual laws, whether laid down by God or created by poets-artists. All the Romantics—believers and non-believers alike—found Dante’s imagination congenial to their taste precisely because it conjures up spiritual laws that impose order upon the chaotic vitality of human passions. Even the Romantics who did not share Coleridge’s and Wordsworth’s piety, and discarded any trace of unpalatable Medieval theology in their interpretation of The Comedy, retained its underlying schema or template whereby neither the universe nor human society can subsist without a rational pattern of some sort.

The fact is that the Romantic penchant for tragic necessity and impending doom, the source of sublime feelings, requires an orderly framework of a spiritual kind. Liberty, without which life is meaningless, thrives only if it is projected unto that kind of backdrop. It was this conviction—or general mindset—that led the Romantics to identify with the plight of the souls suffering in Inferno, who are subject to the iron law of contrapasso, that is, of moral retribution, from which all forms of punishment rationally follow. Only in a context of this kind does human liberty make sense.

The Romantic critics were enthralled by the tragic, and therefore emotionally powerful, fate of Dante’s hapless sinners—Paolo and Francesca, Count Ugolino and Ulysses—, whom they perceived as God-defying characters in the grips of an overpowering force. The Romantics, having endorsed the philosophical vision whereby to be free is to overcome one’s limitations, are fascinated by the emotions arising from the predicament of the sinners in Dante’s hell, who hopelessly—yet defiantly—rebel against God’s order. A poetic universe based on moral laws gives rise to spiritual struggles, the outlet of powerful emotions.

But Dante’s sinners are not akin to trapped heroes who constantly attempt to break free of their predicament; rather, they are fallen and forsaken souls who deservedly face the poet’s judgement for having transgressed God’s moral laws in their earthly lives. The plight of Paolo and Francesca is a case in point: ‘the many references to their continuing susceptibility to passion’, which only increases their torment as they are forever bound together in Hell, ‘led many “romantic” commentators to see the episode as a vindication of their love, and of its triumph over their damnation. Dante’s the pilgrim obvious pity for them does not however preclude the judgemental perspective Dante the poet insists on throughout.’

92. M. Luther, Concerning Christian Liberty, 64.
Nevertheless the Romantics, despite their hermeneutical ‘errors’, comprehend a fundamental aspect of Dante’s imagination. They are aware that Dante’s Comedy—Hell, in particular—evokes a sublime scenario because it masterfully foregrounds the creative, liberty-enhancing, interplay between freedom and authority, defiance and submission. In this regard Dante stands out as the most gifted and imaginative poet of Western culture. As Giuseppe Mazzotta argues, Dante creates a “cosmological vision of order whereby all entities of creation cohere in a pattern or design of scaled values”—the Universe being governed by a hierarchy of laws that is willed by God’s providence. As we have pointed out, God, by endowing human beings with moral freedom, did not create a deterministic universe. Even so, there appears to be a simmering tension between man’s free choice and the universe’s hierarchical, and absolutely perfect, order.

Liberty is dangerous because it can distort “the claim of constitutive order in the cosmos” and therefore throws up a theological problem. Is transgression finally subsumed into a paradigm of order until it dwarfs into insignificance, which means that man’s freedom is powerless (or a figment of our imagination) and therefore self-defeating; or is transgression capable of subverting God’s pre-established order, which would point to the self-sufficiency of human beings? The Comedy provides a fascinating solution: order and transgression ‘no longer appear as merely antagonistic terms within the poetic and theological universe Dante forges. Each of them—order and transgression—ceaselessly entails the other in Dante’s visionary poetry.’

The Romantics—who understood liberty as taking shape in the course of a spiritual struggle between forces pitted against each other—were naturally predisposed to grasp the mutuality of order and transgression, the vital force of Dante’s poetic universe. But this means that they had to develop a more complex conception of liberty than Berlin’s dualistic thinking would allow, or indeed can even encompass. This brings us to H.F. Cary, whose translation enables us to disclose all the ideological nuances within the Romantic appropriation of Dante.

Cary’s Anglicanism and liberty

Cary’s epochal translation of the Comedy (first published in 1814)—which was enthusiastically received in mainstream British literary circles—affords a fascinating vantage point for an investigation of the ideology of British Romanticism. Cary’s preface expresses political and religious concerns that resonated deeply in the British cultural milieu: ‘Of what he [i.e. Dante] considered the cause of civil and religious liberty, he is on all occasions the zealous and fearless advocate and of that higher freedom, which is seated in the will, he was an asserter equally strenuous and enlightened.’

Cary here asserts that Dante was a religious reformer—the harbinger of the Reformation, in fact—who, besides opposing a corrupt papacy, was eager to throw off the shackles of despotism. The Roman Catholic Church is the hoard of both religious dogmatism and political oppression. But Cary, an Anglican clergyman, also subscribes to Dante’s Christian theology, according to which liberty consists in conforming to God’s will. This is why he is bound to underscore the importance of free will, a crucial concern for both Roman Catholics and Anglicans.

Cary’s position responds to contradictory impulses: on the one hand, Dante’s concept of liberty is modernised; on the other, Christian metaphysics binds Dante, the Medieval, orthodox poet, and Cary, the Protestant translator. Hence, if we employ Berlin’s hard-and-fast categories it is difficult to understand Cary’s conception of liberty.

Let us consider a textual example of Cary’s Anglicanism.

E ancor questo qua sù si comporta
Con men disdegnò che quando è postpsta
la divina Scritura o quando è torta. Par., XXIX. 88–90 (my emphasis)

And even this incurs less anger up here
Than when the divine scripture is neglected
Or when it is perverted [or: twisted from its meaning] (my translation)

Yet this, offensive as it is, provokes
Heaven’s anger less, than when the book of God
Is forced to yield to man’s authority,
Or from its straightness warp’d. (my emphasis)

Dante is here denouncing those interpreters of the holy Scriptures who distort the biblical truths. The Italian ‘torta’ means ‘wrongly interpreted’.

95. Mazzotta, 201.
96. Ibid., 203.
97. Ibid., 215.
98. Crisafulli, The Vision of Dante, 295.
100. Ibid., 182.
a sense captured by Cary. But ‘posposta’ (‘put after’, that is, neglected) does not mean that the Scriptures are ‘forced to yield to man’s authority’, which is an interpolation. ‘Posposta’ refers to those theologians who invoke the work of Aristotle and other philosophers in order to appear educated, and by doing so end up neglecting the Scriptures. Cary, who was raised believing that the Church of England has always ‘defined its faith as grounded on Scripture alone’, turns Dante into a proto-Protestant who questions the Roman Catholic clergy’s infallibility in interpreting the Scriptures. Christians, in fact, must return, and have direct access, to the ‘pure word of the Gospel’, unhindered by any kind of human authority.

Cary misinterprets Dante, for whom the evangelical reawakening meant something entirely different: the Church returning to its primitive simplicity, not giving up its claims to infallibility. The crucial point is that Cary’s Protestant-inspired interpolation throws into relief a negative view whereby ‘liberty consists in a condition where the fulfillment of a man’s purposes is not interfered with’—the purpose, in the case at hand, being the liberty to interpret the Scriptures as one sees fit.

The heart of the matter is that it would be simplistic to reduce Cary’s conception of liberty to a single meaning in keeping with Berlin’s crude distinction. Cary harmonises Christian metaphysics, which is grounded upon positive liberty (humans beings are free to choose between good and evil; authentic liberty, moreover, lies in conforming to God’s moral laws), with Protestantism, which entails a negative attitude—all Christians must do away with any type of external interference sanctioning or upholding beliefs unwarranted by the Scriptures. Protestants require the rejection of the Roman Catholic Church’s overpowering, and therefore interfering, presence.

Let us dwell on this crucial point. Christians of all denominations believe that spiritual liberty consists in cleansing ‘our hearts free from all sins’. But according to Protestants, the attainment of perfect liberty requires another, crucial step: Christians must break free from the ‘intolerable bondage to human works and laws’ enforced by the erroneous teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Unscriptural teachings threaten the very foundation of Christian liberty. This happens because

‘if works are brought forward as grounds of justification, and are done under the false persuasion that we can pretend to be justified by them, they lay on us the yoke of necessity, and extinguish liberty along with faith.’

The Protestant conception of liberty, then, acquires a new layer of meaning which transforms it from within and sets it apart from traditional, Medieval Christian thinking. Fighting against the bondage of sin will no longer suffice. It is only by freeing oneself from the ‘bondage to works’ that one may ‘come to the recognition of the liberty of faith’.

This means, essentially, that negative freedom is a pre-condition for the fulfillment of positive freedom. It was especially liberal Protestantism such as Milton’s and Cary’s that gave birth to a new conceptual framework in Christian culture whereby negative and positive liberty are conjoined and blended, as it were, and form a coherent whole. A clarification in order, though. Cary’s negative liberty is at odds with the Enlightenment-inspired view that demands total freedom from all impediments. This form of extreme liberalism would have opened up unpalatable avenues for a nineteenth-century Anglican: it justifies obnoxious and relativistic free-thinking, which, in its turn, feeds into atheism, an abhorred and inconceivable philosophy. Cary advocates a specific form of negative liberty, one which, by asserting the individual’s right freely to interpret the Scripture, curbs or severely restricts ecclesiastical power.

The problem is that Berlin downplays the rupture produced by the Reformation within Christianity: he claims that, on the fundamentals of Christian theology, there is no ‘radical disagreement’ between Roman Catholics and Protestants, both of whom conceive of liberty in positive terms, namely as the ‘fulfilment of a universal (divinely enacted) law’.

the central tenet of Christianity being that everybody must conform to God’s authority. But let us quote Berlin more extensively:

There may be passionate and profound differences about how knowledge of God’s purpose is to be obtained – whether through the teachings of the Church of Rome and its priesthood and its sacred writings, or through the interpretation of the Bible alone [...] But the central principle remains inviolable: the universe is guided by God; and to understand its nature and direction is to know how to live, and to know this is to know how to be free.
These observations contain a grain of truth: nineteenth-century Anglicans and Roman Catholics uphold Christian metaphysics since they draw on the same religious sources. Luther, for example, endorsed a core belief common to all Christians when he wrote that ‘the inner man, being conformed to God and created after the image of God through faith, rejoices and delights itself in Christ [...] and hence has only this task before it: to serve God with joy and for nought in love.’

But does this mean that Protestants and Roman Catholics see eye to eye on political issues or that their conceptions of liberty are identical? An affirmative answer would contradict the historical evidence, of which Cary’s Anglican-inspired intervention in the target text is but an example.

Berlin’s line of reasoning blurs crucial differences that cannot be glossed over. The Roman Catholic Church, by claiming infallibility, asserts itself as the sole authority entitled to interpret the Scriptures. Protestantism, conversely, contends that no Church should be allowed to perform a mediating—which is another word for oppressive—role vis-à-vis the Revelation: believers cannot fulfill their spiritual potential and pursue an authentic Christian life as long as there is in place an authoritarian clergy holding sway over Christendom. The Pope and the clergy, by forcing their readings upon the Gospel, the sole guide for Christians, obscure its pure message and therefore block the path to its correct understanding. Luther inveighed against the Roman Catholic Church, whose ‘terrible tyranny’ allegedly destroys ‘the knowledge of Christian grace, of faith, of liberty, and altogether of Christ.’

The Reformation’s guiding principle rests on Luther’s motto ‘the truth shall set you free’—the quest for truth is a Christian duty, but is also a liberating one at that. Luther, after claiming that it is faith in Christ—not good works—that justifies human beings before God, goes on to add: ‘on this principle every man may easily instruct himself in what measure, and with what distinction, he ought to chasten his own body.’ Christian liberty means that ‘we are lords of all things, and may be confident that whatever we do in the presence of God is pleasing and acceptable to Him.’

If the believer is entitled, and even encouraged, to judge the morality of his/her own behaviour, the Church is bound to lose its powerful grip over the lay

Christian. The individual’s conscience becomes the sole source of authority with regard to the Scripture. Every Christian, having finally achieved autonomy, repossesses, as it were, piety.

The central belief of Protestantism is eloquently argued by Milton in The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth:

the whole Protestant church allows no supreme judge or rule in matters of religion, but the Scriptures; and these to be interpreted by the Scriptures themselves, which necessarily infers liberty of conscience.

This is why Protestantism cannot admit of the accusation of heresy, liberty of conscience being the foundation of Christian ethics. Obeying God’s laws cannot imply subservience to human authority. The only submission which is envisaged is that to God’s laws. The Reformation brought about a radical change, not so much in the attitude towards God’s moral laws—positive liberty is endorsed by Christians of all denominations—as in the attitude towards human authority: Christians must escape from the yoke of Roman Catholicism, a spiritual tyranny trampling on Christian liberty. Christianity needs a Church embodying an authoritative, not authoritarian, spiritual guide.

This vision has clear political implications. We have already remarked that Protestants, by conceiving of civil and religious liberty as inextricably bound up, are prone to denounce the ‘affinity between royal absolutism and Roman Catholicism’. Richard Hooker, the supreme Anglican apologist, makes this point in a compelling manner: after emphasising that Protestantism ‘allows for a high degree of freedom of conscience’, he foregrounds, in a typical Protestant fashion, the strong link between politics and religion: ‘an established Church is a relatively liberal one—for religious uniformity becomes a political matter rather than a religious one.’

One should not underestimate the extent to which Protestantism brought about a revolution in the West; it radically altered Christian culture from within. Henceforth an inalienable and inherently progressive principle—the individual’s autonomy from ecclesiastical interference in

110. Luther, 44.
111. Luther, 41.
112. Hobson, 3.
113. Luther, 45.
114. Ibid., 42.
115. Milton in Hobson, 128. An Anglican apologist in Cary’s reiterated this principle: the Anglican Church, unlike the Roman Catholic Church, ‘disclaims infallibility’ since it ‘recognizes, to the utmost extent, the right of every man to worship God according to his conscience.’ M. Herbert, A Comparative View of the Churches of England and Rome (London: Rivington, 1816), 171.
117. Ibid., 22.
matters of faith—would entitle the individual or lay Christian to resist the encroachment of any overpowering, established institution, be it secular or religious. The Reformation, by providing moral justification for rebellion against tyrannical rule, indirectly contributed to the burgeoning of liberty.

It follows that Protestantism is a gigantic step towards modernity—by rejecting the Roman Catholic Church’s supremacy in Europe, it challenged the legitimacy of absolutism, both political and religious. True, the Reformation, which preached a return to the origins of Christianity, to the ‘pure’ Gospel freed from unwarranted accretions, initially was thoroughly pervaded by the spirit of traditional, Medieval Christianity—‘Luther’s radicalism did not conceive of any compromise between Christianity and modern civilization.’ But Luther’s advocacy of liberty of conscience, a revolutionary concept at that time, was conducive to the growth of an individualistic ethic, the cornerstone of the modern world.

If freedom is to follow no other authority than one’s conscience, then a whole power system grounded on unquestionable authority—which carries with it the right to repress dissent—is bound to collapse. The Reformation planted a seed that would bear fruit in the following centuries as the modern concept of liberty gradually took shape. Protestant free inquiry created a cultural atmosphere conducive to an individualistic mindset, which in turn paved the way for the emergence of the Enlightenment and political liberalism.

After the Reformation, then, the issue of liberty becomes far more complex than Berlin’s categories would allow. For one thing, liberty cannot any longer be one dimensional. Protestantism, by asserting the primacy of untrammelled, free conscience, introduced an unmistakable negative element in a theological conception which, up until then, had been totally positive. The positive schema is retained (God’s laws require voluntary submission), but a new overtone warns the believer that liberty is an illusion while s/he remains subject to the dogmas imposed by all-too-human institutions.

**Conclusion**

Because the Romantics identified with Dante’s ‘sympathy with human imperfections’ and ‘recognition of the humanity of the damned’, it is reasonable to claim that ‘empathy represents the humanist thread running through art which connects writers of the religious past with present-day sceptics.’ Yet the cult of liberty was another—and a more powerful one at that—common denominator connecting Dante and his nineteenth-century British admirers. Intellectuals and writers of the most diverse backgrounds constructed Dante as an uncompromising prophet of liberty, both political and religious. There is no profound ideological rift between the believers and the more secular-minded, all of whom are inspired by the legacy of positive liberty and by the Protestant ethos underpinning British culture. Liberal Protestantism is the coherent ideology embraced, whether unwittingly or not, by most British Romantics. To put it differently: the ideological differences between the various schools of thought or parties in mainstream, nineteenth-century, British culture are matters of degree rather than kind.

Christian liberty does not vanish; it undergoes a transformation and then reappears in the nineteenth century, when it takes on a new—albeit secularised—lease of life. This is where Berlin’s acumen is greatest: he reminds us that the positive liberty of modern times bears the imprint of Christian metaphysics. Religion continues to play a fundamental role in Western culture, notwithstanding the historical progress towards secularism.

In the eyes of the British Romantics, the individual’s behaviour is meaningless outside a rule-governed or patterned spiritual order, whether laid down by God or created by the artist. They did not, however, adopt a purely positive conception of liberty like Dante’s: they grasped its significance, but they could not avoid reinventing it in their own, modern terms. In fact, Romantics partially agreed with the eighteenth-century liberals who believed that liberty consists in throwing off material shackles, overcoming obstacles, and/or doing away with any type of interference constraining the individual’s potential. This is why the Romantics endorse a twofold conception of freedom harmonising its positive and negative overtones. Cary’s translation of The Comedy throws this crucial aspect of British Romanticism into relief. Cary was praised not only for his literary accomplishments but also because his ideological representation of Dante was in keeping with the prevailing, coeval mood in British culture, thereby encompassing a wide array of positions.

Although the believers amongst the Romantics were in a particularly favourable hermeneutic position *vis-à-vis* Dante, their more secular-minded counterparts too were able to capture the core significance of the *Comedy*. The believers subscribed to Dante’s basic tenet, according to which

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111 Pellicani, 114.

110 Franklin, 262.
authentic freedom is voluntary submission to God’s laws; the non-believers—those who were beguiled by the dynamics of submission and defiance or transgression—de-theologise this perspective, but retained its template, whereby liberty only exists in relation to its opposite, constraint and obedience. The believers would have been closer than the non-believers to Dante’s theology, were it not for the fact that they modernise it by reading into it the Protestant refusal of an all-powerful ecclesiastical authority. It is precisely this modern—albeit still religious—attitude that brought together Romantics from different constituencies. It was the Reformation that introduced the negative line of thinking—associated, in its ‘pure form’, with liberalism—into Western culture. If liberalism is the secular offshoot of Protestantism, it follows that the Romantics, in secularising Christian ethics, reconcile tradition (positive liberty) with modernity (liberty of conscience).

In conclusion, Berlin’s thought-provoking reflections enhance our insight into British Romanticism. Berlin picks out the distinct elements which coalesce in the Romantic ideology. Yet the dichotomy between negative and positive liberty is ill-suited to account for the British Romantics’ nuanced conception of liberty. The caveat is that Berlin’s categories have explanatory power provided one reinterprets them in a flexible manner, as ideal-types allowing for crossovers. If one draws sharp boundaries, one fails to detect the grey areas where apparently mutually exclusive concepts meet and overlap. And, as the present article argues, the British Romantics, in turning to Dante, preferred hermeneutic sophistication over dualistic or simplistic modes of thinking.

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The Humanist Petrarch in Medieval and Early Modern England

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In 1906 Peter Borghesi published, in Italy, Petrarch and his Influence on English Literature, a first attempt to offer a comprehensive survey of the topic.1 Mentioned in Harold Bloom’s volume dedicated to Chaucer as ‘an esteemed Italian scholar of English medieval and Italian Renaissance Literature’,2 Borghesi in fact limited himself to an overview of the Petrarchian model present in the works of the Henrician and Elizabethan sonneteers; the few lines dedicated to the first appearance of Petrarch in English literature are, however, significant:

To understand Petrarch it was necessary to be a poet, and this poet was not long in making himself known: it was Chaucer who was the greatest of foreign verse-makers who lived in Petrarch’s time. […] The influence that the Italian lyric writer had on Chaucer was great, although perhaps the former was known to the latter much more through his Latin works than through his sonnets.3

I have opened my essay with this quotation as it exemplifies an attitude that subsequent scholarship has not yet been able to change, in spite of the enormous contributions both of manuscript studies and of literary criticism. For many years Petrarch has lived in popular imagination as an Italian poet (that is, a poet writing solely in Italian), and especially as the author of the Canzoniere. Over the last century, very little heed has been

1. Peter Borghesi, Petrarch and his Influence on English Literature (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1906).