

AN UNPUBLISHED SHELLEY TRANSLATION

By

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The following sonnet occurs on p. 126 of MS. Shelley adds e. 17 in the Bodleian Library. It is embedded in the drafts of « Charles I » and written in a paler ink :

Who ? What is this ? No statue. Yet of stone
That sits a Giant — wonder-work of art
He breathes ! there's life upon his lips, they part
With a most vital utterance — well is known
That form — 'tis Moses — for divinely beaming
The honour of his profuse beard — the rays
Of twofold glory from his brow up-streaming
As from the Mount he comes — his look betrays
More than a reflex of the Deity
He comes as when the Sea was made a bier
Unto his foci — suspending the career
Of its wild waves — an image such as he
Might well have awestruck an idolatrous crowd
Less sin had they to him in adoration bowed.

Mr. G. M. Mathews of Leeds University has kindly helped me to identify this sonnet as a translation from the Italian of Giovan Battista Felice Zappi (1667-1719 (¹) Zappi's sonnet runs as follows :

Chi e costui che in sì gran pietra scolto,
Siede gigante, e le piu illustri, e conte
Opre dell'arte avanza, e ha vive, e pronte
Le labbra sì, che le parole ascolto ?

Quest' e Mose ; ben me 'l diceva il folto
Onor del mento, e 'l doppio raggio in fronte ;
Quest' e Mose, quando scendea del monte,
E gran parte de Nume avea nel volto.

(1) According to the *Enciclopedia Italiana* (XXXV, p. 893) Zappi was educated by the Jesuits and studied law at Bologna. He practiced as a lawyer in Rome and was one of the twelve founders of the *Arcadia Tirsi Leucasio*. He had a flair for poetry, improvising a lot and mixing the languid and facile with the ingenious. He imitated Pindar and went for biblical and pastoral sonnets. In sentiment he belonged to the 16th and 17th centuries. His literary merit was over-estimated during his life-time.

Tal' era allor, che le sonanti, e vaste
Acque ei sospense, a se d'intorno ; e tale
Quando il Mar chiuse, e ne fe tomba altrui.

E voi, sue turbe, un rio vitello alzaste ?
Alzata avete immagine a questa eguale !
Ch' era men fallo l' adorar costui.

(Scelta di Sonetti,... del Gobbi, 1709. iii, 216)⁽¹⁾

The translation is definitely Shelley's — though not at his best. Indeed it is a liberal rendering of the original. For example the meaning of the last tercet in Zappi's sonnet is lost in Shelley's translation, because Shelley chose to drop the calf reference. A literal translation of the last three lines may perhaps run as follows :

« And you, O his (i. e. Moses') tribe, you worshipped a wicked calf ?
Had you raised an image equal to this (the statue of Moses by Michelangelo) you would have been less sinful if you adored it ».

Shelley's departure from the original can almost invariably be explained by his substitution of his favourite words and phrases — and this, of course, confirms his responsibility for the translation.
E.g. ... there's life upon his lips, they part

With a most vital utterance,...

Knowing that « parted lips » is a favourite image with Shelley we can understand why he substituted it for what Zappi's lines originally carried : « The lips are in such a state of readiness that I can hear the words ». Also Zappi's « excelling work of art » became in Shelley « wonder-work of art » because « wonder » was a favourite word. Also such images and phrases as the following come from pure Shelleyan stock :

..... his look betrays
More than a reflex of the Deity.

..... suspending the career
Of its wild waves.

That the poem is not in Shelley's handwriting need not bother us greatly, since the handwriting is Medwin's who occasionally acted as Shelley's amanuensis, especially during his stay with the Shelleys in

(1) As quoted in Byron's *Works* (ed. E. H. Coleridge), IV, pp. 271-2.

Italy⁽¹⁾. But it may be a little difficult to give a reason for Shelley's translation of this Italian sonnet. Zappi's reputation as a poet seems never to have extended beyond his « Arcadia », although at one time Leopardi thought highly of him⁽²⁾. But we find that Samuel Rogers has made a translation of the same sonnet which is a more literal rendering but a worse poem than Shelley's. Here is Rogers' translation :

And who is he that, shaped in sculptured stone
Sits giant-like ? stern monument of art
Unparalleled, while language seems to start
From his prompt lips, and we his precepts own ?
— Tis Moses ; seated on the mount apart,
Whilst yet the Godhead o'er his features shone.
Such he looked, when ocean's sounding wave
Suspended hung, and such amidst the storm
When o'er his foes the refluent waters roared.
And idol calf his followers did engrave :
But had they raised this awe-commanding form,
Then had they with less guilt their work adored⁽³⁾.

Needless to say, Rogers departs drastically from the original in certain places, but it will immediately be seen that he does so for reasons of rhyme and metre.

The dating of Shelley's translation is no problem. As it is in Medwin's handwriting, so it definitely belongs to the period of his stay with the Shelleys at Pisa, that is, to October or to November 1820. The notebook in which it is contained was largely in use at the end of that year and in 1821, though it also contains material that takes it back to 1819 (*The Indian Serenade*) and forward to 1822 (parts of « Charles I »). However, the fact that the poem falls in between sections of « Charles I » at which Shelley worked intermittently after 1819 and that on the reverse side of the notebook Mary Shelley made notes from Giovanni Villani whom she did not start reading until September 1820⁽⁴⁾, may give further support to my conclusion.

(1) That Medwin used to write down for Shelley is also evident in the lines translated from Calderon beginning.

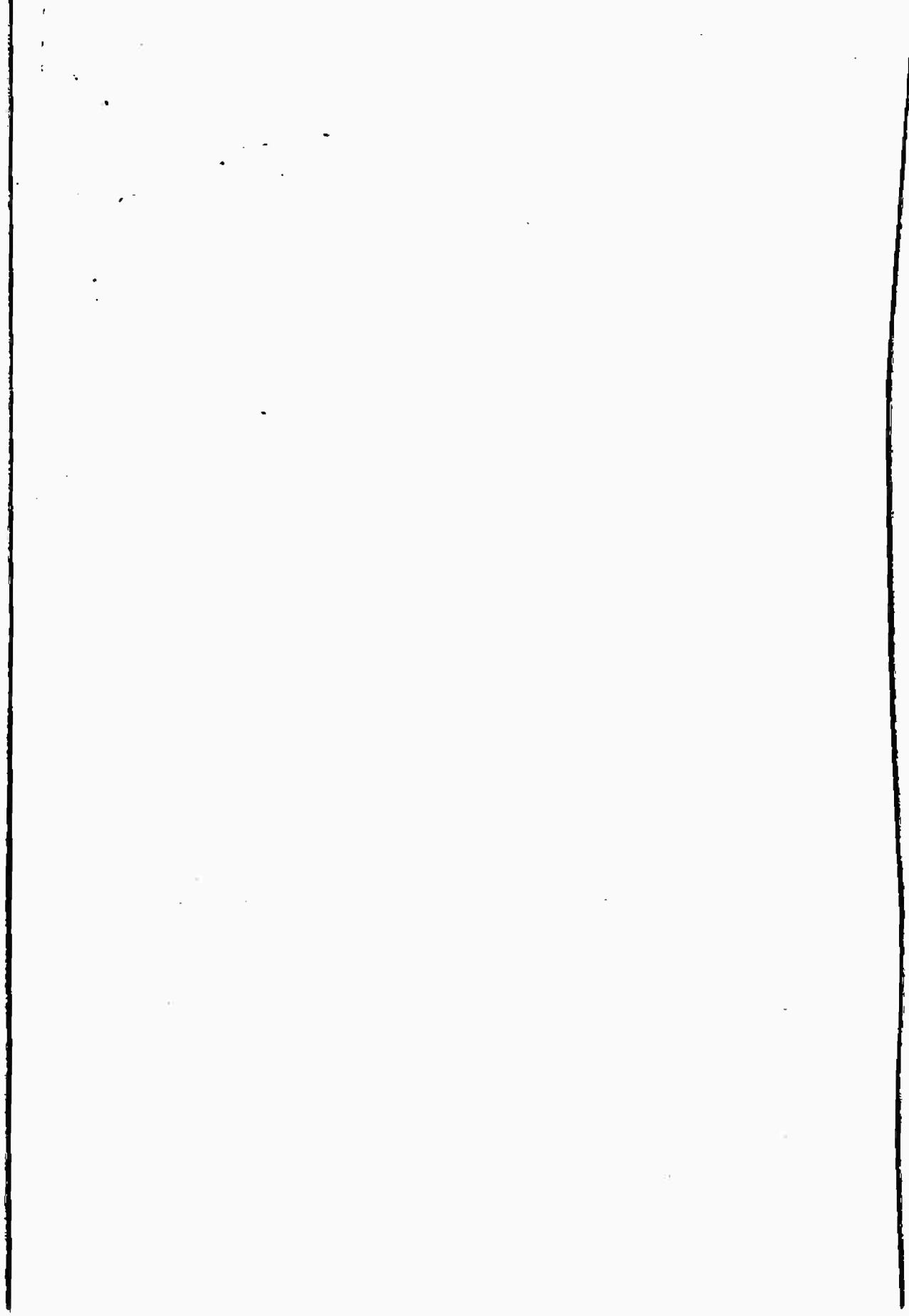
It is a singular world we live in.....

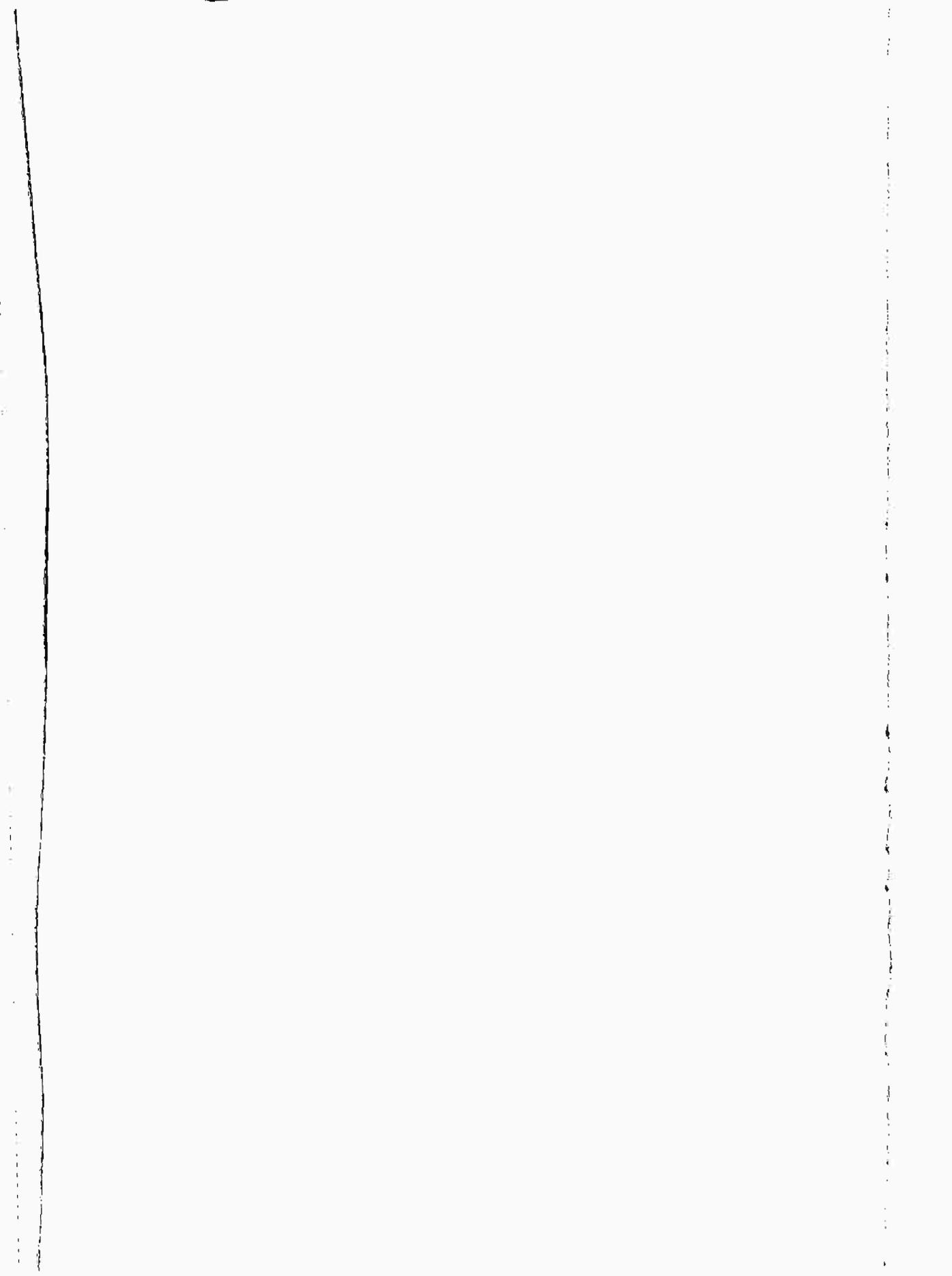
This translation (MS. Shelley adds e 18, p. 60 rev.) is also in Medwin's handwriting (not in Edward Williams handwriting as Mr. Neville Rogers wrongly asserts). This will be the subject of another paper.

(2) I am indebted for this piece of information to Dr. Faithful, of the Italian Department, Liverpool University.

(3) As quoted in Byron's *Works*, IV, p. 272.

(4) Mary Shelley, *Journal*, p. 138.





What is this? No statue yet of stone
That sits a giant in unmovable fact
The breath of his life upon his lips they had
Left a mark of it - a human's will is known
That from the traces - for divinely bearing
The burden of his mortal load - the rage
Of the old gods from his veins up streaming
Upon the ground he comes - his look betrays
More than a matter of the Deity - his
The comes as when the sea was made a
Gate his face - surmounting the career
Of the wild waves - an image such as he
They would have wrought in idolatry
If he had the to him in adoration
Lived.

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