

"L'urne de' forti": Foscolo's Sepulchral Archaeology

No one would dispute the importance of the archaeological metaphor in the writings of Ugo Foscolo. Yet we tend to associate it primarily with the labored and increasingly precious neoclassicism of his last and unfinished work, "Le Grazie," rather than with the more militant poetics of his youth. Without dismissing the political implications of a cultural history inscribed on the pedestal of Canova's *Venere* — commissioned to replace the Medici Venus transported by Napoleon to the Louvre in concrete testimony of Napoleon's own dream of the progress of civilizations — I would like to concentrate here on the role of archaeology in Foscolo's earlier poem, "Dei Sepolcri." It is in this work, destined to become a formative text of the Italian Risorgimento, that Foscolo most vividly represents the life force harbored in the relics of the past.

This may seem an exaggerated claim upon a first reading of the poem. Even the connection with archaeology may at first appear obscure. After all, "Dei Sepolcri" deals with tombs and with their nature and function in society, rather than with specifically archaeological objects or sites. The historical occasion given as pretext for the poem ("Pur nuova legge . . ."¹ referring to the 1806 Napoleonic edict of Saint Cloud, prohibiting burial within cities and at least limiting the possibility of marking individual gravesites), was a fresh political development, a *fatto di cronaca*. The reference to Milan's failure to honor Parini's gravesite was also relatively recent, and equally polemical.² Foscolo's concern is with the immediate moral and political prospects for a society deprived of the right to bury and honor its dead. The question of classical archaeology would appear quite remote.

Yet this essay intends to demonstrate the centrality of archaeology in Foscolo's text on at least two levels. First, by challenging an elegiac tradition of representation (here, the English sepulchral poetry of Hervey, Young, and Gray) and investing its object with

a new political significance, Foscolo establishes the precedent of "politicizing" the monument. The effects of this precedent in the literature of the Risorgimento will extend well beyond the class of objects literally thematized in the poem. By proposing the tomb of Machiavelli as a national shrine and urging Italians to emulate the virtues which it commemorates ("A egregie cose il forte animo accendono / l'urne de' forti . . ." 151-52), Foscolo encourages a similar reappraisal of other objects and sites representing different periods, phases, and personalities in Italian history. Foscolo's tombs and the ruins of Rome potentially serve an analogous function as icons of the Risorgimento movement — symbolic "props" and images to aid the rediscovery of a national identity without which political unity would be meaningless.

But even at an immediate textual level Foscolo's poem deals with the theme of archaeology — a point which deserves clarification. The issue arises in the second half of the poem, and in fact sufficiently confuses the "plot" to provoke complaints of "obscurity" from a variety, and perhaps a majority, of critics.³

In his reply to one unfavorable review, the *Lettera a Monsieur Guill . . . su la sua incompetenza a giudicare i poeti italiani*,⁴ Foscolo explains the function of the archaeological imagery within the text, and claims that rather than a show of useless erudition it is a major source of the poem's power. Furthermore, he locates the poem's rhetorical climax and single most "sublime" effect in the freshly unearthed tomb of Ilus, where the imagery of tombs and of archaeology are — like the layers of history themselves, in any vertical section of soil — dramatically superimposed. By comparing the arguments of Foscolo and Guillon and by systematically tracing the theme of archaeology through the poem, I hope to show the deep vitality and quickening force of Foscolo's "sepulchral" archaeology.

I will first consider the relationship of Foscolo's text to the sepulchral tradition which precedes it. The most famous description of this relationship is found in Foscolo's note # 17 to the *Lettera a Monsieur Guill . . .*; but before considering any such explicit statements of the author's poetic and ideological intent it is only prudent to examine the direct evidence in the text.

Of the major eighteenth-century English poems which had popularized the thematic of tombs, Thomas Gray's "Elegy written in a Country Churchyard"⁵ is the one most explicitly recalled by Foscolo's poem. That "Dei Sepolcri" results from a conscious polemical engagement with Gray's text, is implied by the intertextual references which frame the first section of Foscolo's poem (lines 1-50).

"All'ombra de' cipressi e dentro l'urne / confortate di pianto è forse il sonno / della morte men duro?" Foscolo begins. The metonymic use of "urna" to signify "grave" or "tomb" — which was in fact frequent in the Latin elegiac poets,⁶ long before being canonized by the eighteenth-century sepulchral tradition — nonetheless intensifies the sense of an echo from the "Elegy," where a similar question is posed: "Can storied urn or animated bust / Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?" (41-42).

This reference to Gray has long been acknowledged and is part of the standard critical apparatus of "Dei Sepolcri." In addition to Gray's lines, editors frequently quote Cesarotti's 1772 translation: ". . . Ah l'animato busto / o l'urna effigiata al primo albergo / può richiamar lo spirito fugace?"⁷ This reference (unless provided for the convenience of Italian readers) is not strictly necessary; though the existence of such a prestigious contemporary translation testifies to Gray's reputation in Italy, there is no need to prove the availability of that translation to Foscolo, who at the time of writing "Dei Sepolcri" was himself an accomplished translator of Sterne.

In any discursive context, the question echoed from Gray would seem inevitably "rhetorical." It is a truism that no monument, epitaph, or ritual can literally restore life to the dead. That both poems resist this logic by defending the right of the dead to representation and commemoration in poetry (Foscolo's epigraph, "Deorum manium iura sancta sunt," could have served equally to Gray, who "mindful of the unhonored dead, / Dost in these lines their artless tale relate"), indicates a deeper philosophical affinity between the two texts than would appear from their explicit ideological differences. Perhaps that affinity could be described most simply as the faith in the mediating value of poetry, which is implicit in every poetic act.

Yet it is most important here to measure the *distance* which separates "Dei Sepolcri" from the sepulchral tradition out of which it arises, and to characterize the "difference" with which Gray's echo resonates through Foscolo's text.

The rhetorical function of the question ("Can storied urn . . . ?") in the "Elegy" is to assert the legitimacy of a poetry devoted to a humble milieu ("the short and simple annals of the poor"), by *negating* the privileged status of an heroic idiom serving the wealthy and powerful:

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Await alike the inevitable hour.
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Nor you, ye Proud, impute to these the fault,
 If memory o'er their tomb no trophies raise,
 When through the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault
 The pealing anthem swells the note of praise. (33-40)

In this lofty Gothic cathedral, rejected by Gray as both a figure and setting for his poetry, the reader recognizes Foscolo's Santa Croce, celebrated at the center of "Dei Sepolcri" and traversed there in solemn procession; as each station of a civic *via crucis* is revisited, the "pealing anthem" of Foscolo's Latinate and erudite verse "swells the note of praise."

In "Dei Sepolcri," then, the question ("All'ombra de' cipressi e dentro l'urne / confortate di pianto è forse il sonno / della morte men duro?") serves an entirely different rhetorical function from that in Gray's text. By introducing a discussion of the objective futility of tombs (which passes from the double interrogative of lines 1-3 and 3-15, to the declarative "conclusion" of lines 16-22), it generates a radically pessimistic proposition ("Vero è ben, Pindemonte! anche la Speme, / ultima Dea, fugge i sepolcri . . ."), which it becomes the business of the poem to refute. The heroic scale of the poet's eventual claims for the *subjective* value of tomb-worship to the *community* is dialectically implicit in the apparently ineluctable pessimism of its premise. In both poems, then, the question is part of a complex argumentative strategy; but the "Elegy" argues in praise of obscurity, while "Dei Sepolcri" defends the praise of famous men.

Thematically, of course, neither of these arguments is new. In fact, the "Elegy" and "Dei Sepolcri" might be said to represent two ancient and perennially opposed literary genres: the pastoral "retirement poem" and the militant *poema civile* (which is in turn a structural descendant of the "deliberative" or exhortatory classical oration). Idealization of the secluded rural life, "far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife," is a topos of the pastoral tradition — as are the praise of a life close to nature and conforming to its rhythms ("The breezy call of incense-breathing morn, / The shallow twittering from the straw-built shed, / The cock's shrill clarion or the echoing horn / No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed . . ." 25-28); description of the joys of family life ("For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn, / Or busy housewife ply her evening care: / No children run to lisp their sire's return, / Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share . . ." 21-24); and the praise of manual labor ("Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield, / Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke; / How jocund did they drive their team afield! / How bowed the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!" 25-28).

The regret for talents undiscovered ("Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid / Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire; / Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed, / Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre . . ." 45-48), and beauties unrevealed ("Full many a gem of purest ray serene / The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear: / Full many a flower is born to blush unseen / And waste its sweetness on the desert air . . ." 53-56), is compensated by gratitude for the freedom from corruption in a community both deprived and protected by its "destiny obscure" ("Their lot . . . nor circumscribed alone / Their growing virtues, but their crimes confined; / Forbade to walk through slaughter to a throne, / And shut the gates of mercy on mankind . . ." 65-69). The communal ideal of the *aurea mediocritas* is substituted for the cult of individual distinction; and fear of the corruption inherent in public, political life leads the poet to idealize a sheltering prospect of anonymity ("Along the cool sequestered vale of life / They kept the noiseless tenor of their way . . ." 75-76).

Foscolo's challenge to this ideological position is immediately clear. The *sepolcri* thematized in his poem are those of famous men, who have made unique contributions to literature (Dante, Petrarch, Alfieri), science (Galileo), art (Michelangelo), political theory (Machiavelli), and war (the Greeks at the Battle of Marathon; Achilles; Ajax; Hector). Hence the importance in his text of proper names, which occur in Gray's poem only to signify an absence, a destiny unfulfilled: "Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest / Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood . . ." 59-60).

"Me ad evocar gli eroi chiamin le Muse" (228), writes Foscolo, urged on by his own poetic ambition, his "desio d'onore." Furthermore, the function of the *sepolcri* themselves is to generate emulation of those heroic acts which they commemorate ("A egregie cose il forte animo accendono / l'urne de' forti . . . e bella / e santa fanno al peregrin la terra / che le ricetta . . ." 151-54), just as the contemplation of one tomb (for example, that of Michelangelo, ". . . che nuovo Olimpo / alzò in Roma a' Celesti . . .") seems within the text to generate analogically the vision of another (that of Galileo ". . . chi vidè / sotto l'etereo . . . padiglion rotarsi / più mondi, e il sole irradiarli immoto . . .") and still another ("onde all'Anglò che tanta ala vi stese / sgombrò primo le vie del firmamento . . ." i.e., Newton, born in the year of Galileo's death).

Foscolo's appeal to individual heroism is motivated by an immediate political concern ("Pur nuova legge impone oggi i sepolcri / fuor de' guardi pietosi, e il nome a' morti / contende . . ." 51-52).

To those who might respond to his exhortation he implies the reward of posthumous fame ("... a' generosi / giusta di glorie dispensiera è morte . . ." 220-21). All these themes place "Dei Sepolcri" squarely in the tradition of the Italian *poesia civile* most conspicuously inaugurated by Petrarch's Canzone 128, "Italia mia." Foscolo's text represents a concrete attempt to emulate Petrarch's achievement — to inaugurate a modern school of political poetry ("A noi / morte apparecchi riposato albergo / ove una volta la fortuna cessi / dalle vendette, e l'amistà raccolga / non di tesori eredità, ma caldi / sensi e di liberal carme l'esempio . . ." 145-50, emphasis mine), by uniting Petrarch's own legacy with a modern tradition polemically revised.

Foscolo rejects Gray's characterization of the role of the poet in society as well as the symbolic valence of the central image of his text (Foscolo's *sepolcri* are portrayed as continually generating *life* rather than elegiac meditations on death). For the figure of the poet in the "Elegy" stands in an ambivalent and curiously passive relationship to the society which he portrays; he is a sympathetic observer but necessarily, and somewhat complacently, *apart*. Foscolo too characterizes himself as an exile (a "fuggitivo," forced to lead a "vita raminga"); this is a major autobiographical theme in all his writings. But at the time of writing "Dei Sepolcri" he considers his exile a rational political choice, which will enable him to represent the Italian people more effectively and which will therefore be rewarded by posthumous fame — and an epitaph clearly writ in marble.

Gray's poet, however, in fantasizing his own death and final, peaceful absorption into the community which he has described (with the actual moment of his death gracefully elided and observed by no one), reveals that a vital "difference" remains — both in the perceptions of the "hoary-headed swain" who tells his story to the passerby, and in the words of his own epitaph: "And Melancholy marked him for her own." The implication is that the poet can never be fully integrated into the community, in life or in death. He leads a marginal, strange, and solitary life, "muttering his wayward fancies" on his "customed hill."

Such lengthy comparison of these two poems would hardly be justified by the single intertextual reference given so far in these pages. Actually the Italian poem's most explicit reference to the "Elegy" occurs in lines 49-50 ("Né passegger solingo oda il sospiro [sic] / che dal tumulto a noi manda Natura . . ." cf. Gray, "Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries . . ." 91). This citation itself has a complicated genealogy within Foscolo's earlier work. As editors point out, an Italian version of the phrase ap-

pears in the *Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* ("Geme la Natura perfin nella tomba . . .").⁹ A Latin version, taken from Costa's translation of the "Elegy," enjoys the strategic position of epigraph in that text: "Naturae clamat ab ipso / vox tumulto."

What especially interests me in the various metamorphoses of Gray's phrase is its slight alteration in lines 49-50 of "Dei Sepolcri," where "sospiro" is substituted for the English "cries," the Italian verb "gemere," and the Latin verb "clamare."

Whatever Foscolo's intention, the effect is undeniably ironic. As he prepares to move from the general philosophical meditation of the first section (lines 1-50) — which deals mainly with the private, subjective needs of individuals and does not yet substantially question Gray's orientation — to the body of his political argument, introduced by the issue of the "nuova legge," Foscolo takes leave of Gray's text with one slightly sentimental look back (cf. Gray's own "lingering look behind" of line 88). His "sospiro" attenuates the one truly fervent moment in the "Elegy" ("Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires") and reserves for his own poetic climax of line 283 the expressive violence of the verb "gemere": "Gemeranno gli antri / secreti, e tutta narrerà la tomba." Not the voice of an unspecified "Nature" interests Foscolo, but the historical narrative of a fallen nation which has again been found.

All this textual analysis has perhaps earned me the right to turn to Foscolo's own statement of his poetic and ideological intentions in "Dei Sepolcri," which I have held as strictly classified evidence up to this point. As I mentioned before, the most famous statement of this sort is found in note # 17 to Foscolo's *Lettere a Monsieur Guill* . . . Since this note will not make a great deal of sense out of context, I will first quote in its entirety the specific charge to which Foscolo's note responds. Guillon, halfway through his paraphrase of the poem, is discussing lines 151-end. With its abrupt transitions and rapid changes of scene, this section lends itself particularly to Guillon's chronic tone of mock dismay. The poet's journey from Santa Croce to the plains of Troy is passed over in rapid, antic review:

Ed eccolo in quella chiesa fiorentina ove sono i mausolei di N. Macchiavelli, di Michel-Angelo, di Galileo ecc. E l'urna d'Alfieri riceve i suoi più teneri e rispettosi omaggi. Quindi ad un tratto ritrocede fino ai sepolcri degli Ateniesi nel campo di Maratona, ove aggiungendo le proprie finzioni alle favolose tradizioni che ci lasciò Pausania su questo Ceramico, ei vi ode non solo i nitriti dei cavalli, ma ancora *delle Parche il canto*. Questa è forse la prima volta che si sono intese cantar le Parche. Ritrocedendo sempre rapidamente, ei s'inoltra nei tempi favolosi delle Grecia. Egli è alla tomba d'Achille e di Patroclo; quindi passa a quella

d'Ajace al promontorio Reteo, poi nella Troade al sepolcro d'Ilo, antico Dardanide. Young, Hervey, Gray non fecero tanti viaggi; essi si contentarono di meditar sui sepolcri, che essi medesimi ed i loro compatriotti avean sotto gli occhi; e disser cose più commoventi, e molto più consolanti, perocchè tutti i loro canti sono rallegrati della speranza della futura risurrezione, della quale il signor F. non dice cosa alcuna. (p. 507)

This playful passage comes to rest on a highly 'serious point — the accusation of paganism. This was of course a standard topos of the ongoing polemic against literary classicisms; but it betrays particular anxiety here, since the critic correctly perceives that the only "resurrection" in which Foscolo has faith, is the political resurrection of Italy.

Hence the "voyage" metaphor, derived from the literal voyage mapped out in the text (an itinerary which is in fact difficult even for sympathetic readers to follow). For Guillon the "voyage" signifies poetic and ideological deviance; it is literally a departure from acceptable precedent and a violation of the boundaries clearly set up by a Christian and elegiac tradition. Guillon's repeated complaints about useless "erudition" and complicated itineraries through the Aegean mask a real fear of Foscolo's ideological trespass.

Though his critique purports to be largely stylistic, this greater concern is everywhere transparent. In censoring the macabre image of the decapitated thief, perhaps thrown with Parini into a common grave (lines 75-77), Guillon appeals alternately to poetic precedent (through citations of Virgil, Hervey, and Horace, taken out of context and, according to Foscolo, totally misunderstood) and to philosophical decorum:

L'immagine poi delle testa insanguinata di un ladro giustiziato, è troppo stentata, troppo ispida, e di gusto troppo cattivo, per poter scusarla col *quidlibet audendi* d'Orazio. Essa ripugna, principalmente in un poema che non deve respirar altro che una dolce, religiosa e consolante malinconia. Non c'è alcuno fra i poeti, che hanno parlato di sepolcri, che abbia usato un'immagine sì disgustosa. La loro sensibilità era sempre accompagnata dalla sana e verace filosofia.

Similarly, his crude appraisal of the poem's structure seems motivated by fear of Foscolo's "voyage." Having completed his paraphrase of the plot — among whose many inaccuracies I would point out the misreading of the final section, which he attributes to the voice of the poet rather than that of the character, Cassandra — Guillon summarizes:

Sembraci che sia questo un fine ben brusco in un'opera di sentimento. Si direbbe che un simil soggetto avesse troppo stancato la lira del poeta, per poter avanzar di più. L'andamento del suo poema era già diventato penoso quando la sensibilità non animava più la sua musa; e dessa aveva già cessato di spargere le sue bellezze nei di lui versi, *allorché egli dai sepolcri presenti si era trasportato a quelli dei tempi eroici della Grecia*. Questa transizione l'ha condotto a dei dettagli d'erudizione; ora l'erudizione inaridisce il sentimento; e quindi ne viene che questa seconda parte della sua elegia, che ha una certa disparità colla prima, interessa molto meno la nostra anima, e convien molto meno a quella dolce voluttà ch'essa trova ad intenerirsi sulle ceneri dei nostri simili. (p. 508, *emphasis mine*)

Foscolo's letter of rebuttal works at many levels; but I am most interested here, as I promised, in the footnote which specifically refutes the charge first quoted. Foscolo writes:

Per censurare i mezzi d'un libro bisogna saperne lo scopo. Young ed Hervey meditarono sui sepolcri da cristiani: i loro libri hanno per iscopo la rassegnazione alla morte e il conforto d'un'altra vita: ed a' predicatori protestanti bastavano le tombe de' protestanti. Gray scrisse da filosofo; la sua elegia ha per iscopo di persuadere l'oscurità della vita e la tranquillità della morte; quindi gli basta un cimitero campestre. L'autore considera i sepolcri politicamente ed ha per iscopo di animare l'emulazione politica degli italiani con gli esempi delle nazioni che onorano la memoria e i sepolcri degli uomini grandi: però dovea *viaggiare più di Young, d'Hervey e di Gray*, e predicare non la resurrezione de' corpi, ma delle virtù. (p. 518, *emphasis in original*)

Clearly the poet's italics are significant.¹⁰ Foscolo's strategy here is that of the *decadent* who defiantly adopts the language of his critics, converting a term of opprobrium into a positive metaphor of his own activity.¹¹ For Guillon the "voyage" had signified moral digression, aberration, error, and trespass; it compromised the poem's unity; it was a departure from acceptable precedent, a wandering away from the center.

Yet in the act of clarifying the political intent of the poem — surely the crux of his defense of "Dei Sepolcri" — Foscolo meets and accepts the metaphor of the "voyage," not as an image of evasion or digression but as necessary *exile* and *search* for a political poetry adequate to Italy's historical circumstances. The new law literally made obsolete the privileged, central spaces in which communities had honored their dead and preserved continuity with the past — spaces out of which a *poeta civile* might speak. Neither the village *camposanto* nor the cathedral, its urban equivalent, was to be allowed to retain its function as civil shrine and burial-ground. With this decree it seemed that Italy's humiliation was complete. The dispersion of bodies in unmarked communal

graves reflected Italy's own geographic and political dismemberment, its loss of an identity and a name. A writer could no longer afford to stay at home: he must risk a voyage, ranging far in search of exemplary historical and mythical sites long consecrated to a community and guarded with the filial *pietas* which Italy had forgotten.

It is thus that Foscolo's search for *sepolcri* becomes archaeological. In imaginative response to the real constraints of contemporary Italy, the "fugitive" poet reaches back into a heroic and mythical past hoping to demonstrate its essential truth. If the setting of the poem shifts rapidly, it is because the moral basis on which Italy rests is itself continually shifting, and the poet must look farther to find a stable and secure ground for his poem — a plot of "pious earth" once designated as sacred, long cultivated as a shrine, and now perhaps overgrown.

Commentators generally note that Foscolo's account of the origin and function of tombs as a social institution ("Dal dì che nozze e tribunali ed are . . ." lines 91-103) is derived from Vico's *Scienza nuova*. The reader is reminded of Vico's theory of *corsi e ricorsi* in human history by Foscolo's suggestion of the periodic rediscovery of "lost" civilizations — which is in part inevitable and wholly fortuitous, predestined yet disbelieved (as illustrated by the archaeological fantasy of Homer's discovery of Troy, which Foscolo attributes in the poem to Cassandra), and in part a measure of human perspicacity rather than blindness — a reward for deliberate exploration and research.

Troy surfaces significantly in the poem as the primary archaeological scene, continually and ritually rediscovered: "E oggi nella Troade inseminata / eterno splende a' peregrini un loco . . ." (235-36). The reference, as Foscolo's own notes show, is to Lechevalier's recent expedition to Troy.¹² Foscolo not only credits Lechevalier's claim to have identified the ruins of the tomb of Ilus, legendary ancestor of the Trojans, but celebrates this discovery with great ceremony in his poem — finally staging his own rhetorical climax on that same multilayered and historically "over-determined" site.

As the final Homeric fantasy shows, if Troy is the primary scene of archaeology, it is at the same time the primary scene of poetry itself;¹³ and specifically of the heroic political poetry which Foscolo would like to write. The metaphor of archaeology provides access to heroic argument unavailable in a contemporary context; at the same time it concretely *represents* the search for that political content, distant, submerged and hidden from public view.

The metaphors of the "voyage" and of archaeology appear to me then to be interdependent and necessary *chiavi di lettura* for the second half of "Dei Sepolcri." I will try to show this by systematically plotting the poet's journey from Santa Croce to the site of Troy.

"A egregie cose il forte animo accendono / l'urne de' forti, o Pindemonte, e bella / e santa fanno al peregrin la terra / che le ricetta." In turning away from the images and icons of Napoleonic Italy to those of Santa Croce at precisely the center of his poem, Foscolo acquires the perspective of the "peregrin," in search of specific, chosen symbols in a landscape. The visual language of the "bello italo regno" is deceptive; signs of life and death are reversed in ironic *contrapposto* (military decorations to the living betray a "sepoltura già vivo," while funerary monuments reveal themselves as "inaugurate immagini dell'Orco"). The pomp of this society's outward forms — its ceremony, statuary, funerary architecture — cannot, for Foscolo, mask its moral corruption.

In contrast, Santa Croce is a welcome and sanctified enclosure. It preserves the tombs of Italian heroes — Machiavelli, Michelangelo, Galileo, Alfieri — from violation by the invaders who have despoiled Italy of all but its memories:

Ma più beata [Firenze] che in un tempio accolte
serbi l'itale glorie, uniche forse,
dacché le mal vietate Alpi e l'alterna
onnipotenza delle umane sorti
armi e sostanze t'invadeano ed are
e patria e, tranne la memoria, tutto. (180-85)

A fantasy of the ultimate violation of the sepulchres themselves appears in *Ortis* (1802), in a famous passage that begins as a topographical "prospect" sketch from a vantage point among the "mal vietate Alpi" themselves:

Alfine eccomi in pace! — Che pace? stanchezza, sopore di sepoltura. Ho vagato per queste montagne. Non v'è albero, non tugurio, non erba. Tutto è bronchi, aspri e lividi macigni; e qua e là molte croci che segnano il sito de' viandanti assassinati. — Là giù è il Roja, un torrente che quando si disfanno i ghiacci precipita dalle viscere delle Alpi, e per gran tratto ha spaccato in due questa immensa montagna. V'è un ponte presso alla marina che ricongiunge il sentiero. Mi sono fermato su quel ponte, e ho spinto gli occhi sin dove può giungere la vista; e percorrendo due argini di altissime rupi e di burroni cavernosi, appena si vedono imposte su le cervici dell'Alpi altre Alpi di neve che s'immergono nel Cielo e tutto biancheggia e si confonde — da quelle spalancate Alpi cala e passeggia ondeggiando la tramontana, e per quelle fauci invade il Mediterraneo. La Natura siede qui solitaria e minacciosa, e caccia da questo suo regno tutti i viventi.

I tuoi confini, o Italia, son questi! ma sono tutto di sormontati d'ogni parte dalla pertinace avarizia delle nazioni. Ove sono dunque i tuoi figli? Nulla ti manca se non la forza della concordia. Allora io spenderei gloriosamente la mia vita infelice per te: ma che può fare il solo mio braccio e la nuda mia voce? — Ov'è l'antico terrore della tua gloria? Miseri! noi andiamo ogni dì memorando la libertà e la gloria degli avi, le quali quanto più splendono tanto più scoprono la nostra abietta schiavitù. Mentre invociamo quelle ombre magnanime, i nostri nemici calpestano i loro sepolcri. E verrà forse il giorno che noi perdendo e le sostanze, e l'intelletto, e la voce, saremo fatti simili agli schiavi domestici degli antichi, o trafficati come i miseri Negri, e vedremo i nostri padroni schiudere le tombe e *disseppellire, e disperdere al vento le ceneri di que' Grandi per annientarne le ignude memorie*: poiché oggi i nostri fasti ci sono cagione di superbia, ma non eccitamento dall'antico letargo. (pp.160-61, emphasis mine)

This passage interests me not only for its direct thematic connection to "Dei Sepolcri," but as an illustration of the continued importance of the Alps as a political symbol in the Petrarchan tradition of *poesia civile*. In the canzone "Italia mia" Petrarch had grounded Italy's geographic identity in its clearly delineated northern border: "Ben provide Natura al nostro stato, / quando de l'Alpi schermo / pose fra noi et la tedesca rabbia."¹⁴ This became a topos of the Petrarchan tradition; Gavazzeni cites the sonnet of the sixteenth-century poet Galeazzo di Tarsia, "Già corsi l'Alpi gelide e canute," and notes that it was anthologized by Foscolo in his *Vestigi della storia del sonetto italiano*.¹⁵

When discussing the topography of "Dei Sepolcri," particularly in the context of European Romantic poetry — for which the Alps become the prototypical symbol of the sublime — it is important to remember that for Foscolo the political connotations of this landscape are never lost. His oleographic description (a' la Salvatore Rosa) of the desolate mountain pass, complete with crashing waterfall, cliffs, caverns, and the crosses of "viandanti assassinati," in turn generates a political meditation. The sensuous enjoyment of landscape, the visual exploration of a terrain, appear a stimulus to Jacopo's political eloquence.

Having already digressed this far, I may as well note that the "eloquence" of this speech inspired Leopardi's canzone "All'Italia," according to the *Zibaldone*.¹⁶ Along with the fragment from Simonides' poem on the defense of Thermopylae (from Diodorus's Latin translation), "La vostra tomba è un'ara" (Leopardi, line 125), Foscolo's phrase, "Dove sono i tuoi figli?" helped to generate Leopardi's text and like a fossil was finally found stranded there (line 41).

To return to "Dei Sepolcri": If Florence is the true center — geographic, political, linguistic, cultural — of Italy (and its privileged

centrality is celebrated in the poem through the topos of the *locus amoenus*, lines 165-72), Santa Croce, temple of the "italie glorie," is the true center of Florence. The focus on the cathedral as a symbolic expression of a nation's history reminds us inevitably, in a nineteenth-century context, of Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* of 1831. In that novel Hugo describes the cathedral as a "chronicle in stone," a concrete, collective representation of a nation's history to be "read" in three dimensions, along the slow axis of its construction and gradual interment by the rising tide of the city's pavement. He compares the great cathedrals to organic, geological formations: "le dépôt que laisse une nation; les entassements que font les siècles; le résidu des évaporations successives de la société humaine. . . . Chaque flot du temps superpose son alluvion, chaque race dépose sa couche sur le monument, chaque individu apporte sa pierre."¹⁷

In Hugo the sense of a "living" architecture is much stronger than in Foscolo — the cathedral of Notre Dame is almost perversely animated through the swarm of descriptive detail (all archaeologically authenticated through Hugo's consultation with experts in Paris); and the hunchback Quasimodo, ranging freely over the facade and through the city, seems a gargoyle detached from that structure. Foscolo's Santa Croce is schematic by comparison, and his own "bird's-eye view" of surrounding Florence obviously more modest than Hugo's famed reconstruction of fifteenth-century Paris from the towers of Notre-Dame. But if Foscolo does not share Hugo's penetrating eye for architecture and urban landscape, he is equally concerned with the issue of restoration — the need for preserving the integrity of the monument. And the image of Santa Croce, last temple of the "itale glorie" left standing in a land despoiled by the enemy, provides a dramatic visual focus in the text comparable in function to Hugo's Notre Dame.

In "Dei Sepolcri" Santa Croce is the symbol of a cultural edifice and collective identity which must be preserved. Each of its tombs commemorates an individual whose contribution is an inalienable part of Italy's heritage. These tombs personalize the concept of history and make it accessible to the common man who comes to the cathedral to worship, just as its frescoes traditionally taught Biblical stories to the illiterate. None of the niches provided in the cathedral must be left empty. Hence Foscolo's anger at Parini's anonymous burial in Milan, and his approval of Alfieri's prompt burial in Santa Croce, with full ceremony and the promise of a tomb sculpted by Antonio Canova.¹⁸ These measures assured that his memory would be honored and his effigy installed in its

proper place among the *marmi* where he himself had often sought inspiration.

Yet the image of Alfieri's death-mask — its features frozen between hope and certain knowledge of death, as if an emblem of the oxymoron informing the entire text — leads to the poem's rapid dislocation:

qui posava l'austero; e avea sul volto
il pallor della morte e la speranza.
Con questi grandi abita eterno: e l'ossa
fremono amor di patria. Ah sì! da quella
religiosa pace un Nume parla:
e nutria contro a' Persi in Maratona
ove Atene sacrò tombe a' suoi prodi,
la virtù greca e l'ira. (194-201)

We are transported in mid-line from the interior of Santa Croce to a phantom re-enactment of the Battle of Marathon. This is one of the abrupt transitions which prompted Guillon's charges of obscurity, and in fact caused difficulty for many readers. Foscolo's *Lettera* acknowledged the problem: ". . . le transizioni sono ardue sempre a chi scrive, e sovente a chi legge; specialmente in una poesia lirica, e d'un autore che, non so se per virtù o per vizio, *transvolat in medio posita*, ed afferrando le idee cardinali, lascia a' lettori la compiacenza e la noia di desumere le intermedie" (p. 508). His solution was to offer a prose paraphrase to guide the reader safely through the text. I will refer to this *estratto* at intervals myself as, encouraged by his example, I proceed in my own paraphrase of the poet's route to Troy.

Foscolo's transition implies that Santa Croce is a necessary but not a sufficient center for a modern political poetry. The poet's departure from this scene concretely marks the beginning of his search for an alternative "plot" in which to ground his text. Turning from the death-mask of his precursors, as if to demonstrate the risks inherent in the proper emulation of the "forti" he embarks on his own poetic journey.

We discover by the reference to the *navigante* (line 201) that it is a voyage by sea. The tombs described along the way are like the points along a coast which aid a navigator to orient himself. But the waters are basically familiar, both to the poet and to the intended recipient of his poem, Ippolito Pindemonte — both Hellenists and translators, Foscolo of the *Iliad* (his "Esperimento di traduzione della *Iliade* di Omero" was printed contemporaneously with "Dei Sepolcri" by Bettoni in Brescia),¹⁹ and Pindemonte of the *Odyssey*. Foscolo's knowledge of Homeric topography provides a map upon which to trace his poetry of exile.

"Veleggiando quel mar sotto l'Eubea," the first tomb sighted — and the first episode in this nineteenth-century odyssey — is that of the Greek soldier who dies in the Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C. From the aisles and chapels of Santa Croce, with their catalogue of individual tombs to Italian cultural heroes, we have moved to one massive memorial of war (a mound or earth built fifty feet high, filled with weapons and relics which were retrieved during its excavation, which began in 1890). This tomb quite literally preserves a collective memory of its dead by promoting the shared hallucination of the nightly re-enactment of that battle (the popular legend of such a "son-et-lumière" spectacle at Marathon was reported by Pausanias in his *Voyage to Attica*).

From this tumultuous vision the poet maneuvers, via the invocation of Pindemonte, into the Aegean and toward the sites of the Trojan war:

Felice te che il regno ampio de' venti,
Ippolito, a' tuoi verdi anni correvi!
È se il pilota ti drizzò l'antenna
oltre l'isole Egee, d'antichi fatti
certo udisti suonar dell'Ellesponto
i liti, e la marea mugghiar portando
alle prode Retee l'armi d'Achille
sovra l'ossa d'Aiace: a' generosi
giusta di glorie dispensiera è morte;
né senno astuto né favor di regi
all'Itaco le spoglie ardue serbava,
ché alla poppa raminga le ritolse
l'onda incitata dagl'inferni Dei. (213-25)

The tribute to Pindemonte is highly ambiguous. First, Pindemonte's own literal "Odyssey" — actually a leisured eighteenth-century European tour — is set up in potential opposition to Foscolo's own political exile and pilgrimage ("E me che i tempi ed il desio d'onore / fan per diversa gente ir fuggitivo . . ." 226 ff.). More deviously, Pindemonte's chosen Homeric protagonist, Ulysses, is portrayed in the moment of losing Achille's armor to Ajax, who would become the hero of Foscolo's 1811 tragedy: ". . . a' generosi / giusta di glorie dispensiera è Morte. . . ." If it is at all legitimate to read in this episode an allusion to the rivalry between Foscolo and Pindemonte for the "spoglie ardue" of literary success, we can not expect the gift of "Dei Sepolcri" to have much assuaged the previous affronts to Pindemonte to which Foscolo refers in a letter to Isabella Teotochi Albrizzi (Milano, 6 September 1806): "Io . . . intitolò ["Dei Sepolcri"] al Cavaliere [Pindemonte] ricordandomi de' suoi lamenti e de' vostri; e per fare ammenda del mio sdegno un po' troppo politico."²⁰

The fact that the two poets shared an interest in the theme of *sepolcri*, and that Foscolo's text actually displaced Pindemonte's own intended treatment of that theme, increases the probability of the allusions which I have just suggested. To consider all the implications of the rivalry between Foscolo and Pindemonte would lead me too far from Foscolo's text to be useful here; it is more important now to complete my paraphrase.

The tomb of Achilles and Patroclus on the shores of the Hellespont does not appear directly in the poem, "bensì in una *nota* per incidenza."²¹ In the text it is present only through the aural suggestion (which follows the visual hallucination of the Battle of Marathon) of lines 216-18 ("d'antichi fatti / certo udisti suonare dell'Ellesponto / i liti"). This "suonar" is analogically related to the "muggghiar" of the "marea" which restores the arms of Achilles to the "ossa d'Ajace" (a periphrasis which is "archaeologically" accurate since, according to Homer, Ajax as a suicide was denied cremation). This passage has led us through some rough waters ("l'onda incitata dagl'inferni Dei" !), but with the tide that washes the trophy ashore the poet too steps onto solid ground and invokes the Muses:

E me che i tempi ed il desio d'onore
fan per diversa gente ir fuggitivo
me ad evocar gli eroi chiamin le Muse
del mortale pensiero animatrici.
Siedon custodi de' sepolcri, e quando
il tempo con sue fredde ale vi spazza
fin le rovine, le Pimlee fan lieti
di lor canto i deserti, e l'armonia
vince di mille secoli il silenzio. (226-34)

Foscolo's own explication of this passage in the *Lettera* emphasizes its portrayal of the complicity between archaeology and poetry, which arises from their shared responsibility to preserve a nation's memories. "Le muse . . . siedon custodi de' sepolcri"; they continue to guard the monument throughout the phases of its physical decay, perpetuating the memory of a sacred place eventually lost to view . . . until "l'amor delle lettere" leads to its rediscovery as in the case of the recent expedition to Troy. To cite Foscolo's *estratto*:

Anche i luoghi ov'erano le tombe de' grandi, sebbene non vi rimanga vestigio, infiammano la mente de' generosi. Quantunque gli uomini di egregia virtù sieno perseguitati vivendo, e il tempo distrugga i lor monumenti, la memoria delle virtù e de' monumenti vive immortale negli scrittori, e si rianima negl'ingegni che coltivano le muse. Testimonio

il sepolcro d'Ilo scoperto dopo tante età da' viaggiatori che l'amor delle lettere trasse a peregrinar alla Troade; sepolcro privilegiato da' fati perché protesse il corpo d'Elettra da cui nacquero i Dardanidi autori dell'origine di Roma, e della prosapia de' Cesari signori del mondo. L'autore chiude con un episodio sopra questo sepolcro. . . . (pp. 510-11)

Here Foscolo quotes, and paraphrases in impassioned detail, the last forty-one lines of the poem. He argues that far from representing a digression, a falling off from the best interest of the poem, these lines release its greatest power, carefully reserved for this climax ("a me . . . pare, non che il soggetto abbia stancata la lira del poeta, ma ch'egli abbia sin da principio temperate le forze per valersene pienamente in questo luogo").

The strength of this section lies, according to Foscolo, in the unifying image of the tomb of Ilus ("un monumento che superò l'ingiurie di tanti secoli"), which as mausoleum of the Trojan princes is particularly suited to achieve effects of the sublime because of its multiple literary and historical associations. By superimposing in rapid succession on the original image ("Ivi posò Erittonio . . . ivi l'Iliache donne . . . ivi Cassandra . . .") the diverse characters and narratives associated with the site, Foscolo was building a deliberate rhetorical climax: ("le troiane che pregano . . . la vergine Cassandra . . . la preghiera alle palme e a' cipressi . . . gli spettri . . . Omero . . . tanti personaggi, tante passioni, tanti atteggiamenti e tutti raccolti intorno a un solo sepolcro sembrano a lei senz'anima e senz'invenzione?" p. 512).

Defending with equal vehemence the logic of his conclusion, Foscolo explains that he chose to end the poem with the words of Cassandra because she, like the Trojan tombsite from which she speaks, is at the same time a locus of many conflicting emotions — sorrow, pride, solicitude, despair. I might add that as a virgin prophetess she embodies the fundamental contradiction between innocence and experience. Her relationship to the question of genealogies, central to this multiple tombsite and to Foscolo's entire poem, is highly ambiguous and her role as counselor to the young ("e guidava i nepoti, e l'amoroso / apprendeva lamento a' giovinetti") on their filial duties to their ancestors is particularly poignant.

The condensation of so many contradictory figures and affects, Foscolo concludes, is appropriate to effects of the sublime and redeems the apparent obscurity of the poem: "Ove l'autore avesse mirato al *patetico* avrebbe amplificati questi affetti: mirava invece al *sublime*, e li ha concentrati: e credendo a Longino, non tentò più melodia ne' suoi versi. Se non che forse ei non ha conseguito se non se la severità e l'oscurità, compagne talor del *sublime*."

To this eloquent defense I would only add a few remarks further clarifying the logic of the final section of the poem (lines 235-95). I have mentioned the importance of genealogies in reference to Cassandra. Actually the issue first explicitly arises in lines 235-40, where the poet proclaims his arrival (to resume the metaphor of the "voyage,") at the "eterno loco," Troy, by the ritual recitation of the genealogy of the *Giulia gente*, descended from Electra:

Ed oggi nella Troade inseminata
eterno splende a' peregrini un loco
eterno per la Ninfa a cui fu sposo
Giove, ed a Giove die' Dardano figlio
onde fur Troia e Assaraco e i cinquanta
talami e il regno della Giulia gente. (235-40)

The elaborate genealogical periphrasis serves to identify the nymph who lies buried at this "eterno loco" (who is then named in the next line). More importantly, it proleptically clarifies the significance of the site to Italian readers. From the union of Electra and Jupiter can be traced the legendary ancestry of the Italians themselves, through Dardanus, Erichthonius, Tros, Assaracus, Capys, Anchises, and Aeneas. The pathos of the poem's final focus on Hector, last adult survivor of Ilus's branch of the House of Troy (Hector's son Astyanax, according to the *Iliad*, was thrown by the victorious Greeks from the walls of the city) is mitigated by this proleptic vision of survival, pointing directly toward the Italian race.

From this dramatically foreshortened view the poet retreats to an orderly narrative of the death of Electra and Jupiter's consecration of the site ("E fe' sacro quel corpo e la sua tomba," line 253). The rapid passage of time is conveyed spatially now, as the layers of history rise to bury the spot, and it is transformed by new human action:

Ivi posò Erittonio, e dorme il giusto
cenere d'Ilo; ivi l'Iliche donne
sciogliean le chiome, indarno ahi! deprecando
da' lor mariti l'imminente fato;
ivi Cassandra, allor che il Nume in petto
le féa parlar di Troia il dì mortale,
venne; e all'ombre cantò carne amoroso. . . . (254-60)

Cassandra's prophecy elides the day of Troy's destruction, pointing instead toward the survivors' eventual return from slavery in Greece to find the city of their childhood gone:

. . . Oh, se mai d'Argo,
 ove al Tidide e di Laerte al figlio
 pascere i cavalli, a voi permetta
 ritorno il cielo, invan la patria vostra
 cercherete! Le mura opra di Febo
 sotto le lor reliquie fumeranno. . . . (263-68)

But this desolate image is redeemed by the final archaeological fantasy of Homer's rediscovery of Troy and the depths of its legend:

. . . Un dì vedrete
 mendico un cieco errar sotto le vostre
 antichissime ombre, e brancolando
 penetrar negli avelli, e abbracciar l'urne,
 e interrogarle. Gemeranno gli antri
 secreti, e tutta narrerà la tomba
 Ilio raso due volte e due risorto
 splendidamente su le mute vie
 per far più bello l'ultimo trofeo
 ai fatati Pelidi (279-88)

Troy's history of survival enhances its value to the Greeks as a trophy. And like Achilles' armor, the memory of Troy outlasts all historical vicissitudes to which it is exposed; preserved underground and inarticulate in the images of the Penates, it surfaces again to be cast in permanent literary form by Homer:

. . . Il sacro vate,
 placando quelle afflitte alme col canto,
 i Prenci Argivi eternerà per quante
 abbraccia terre il gran padre Oceàno.
 E tu onore di pianti, Ettore, avrai
 ove fia santo e lagrimato il sangue
 per la patria versato, e finché il Sole
 risplenderà su le sciagure umane. (288-95)

The labyrinth of classical allusions ends here. Retrospectively it is not at all easy to orient oneself. With the funeral honors granted to Hector ("E tu onore di pianti, Ettore, avrai"), we have reached the end of the *Iliad*; but it is the end of an odyssey too, for the figure of the poet in "Dei Sepolcri." Foscolo leaves us in any case with a lasting sense of that inviolability of the icon which is archaeology's own most dramatic claim.

NOTES

- 1 Foscolo, "Dei Sepolcri," lines 51 ff. All quotations from the poem are taken from Foscolo, *Opere*, ed. Franco Gavazzeni (Milano: Ricciardi, 1974), pp. 291-327 and are identified in the text by line numbers.
- 2 "A lui non ombre pose / tra le sue mura la città lasciva / d'evirati cantori allettatrice, / non pietra, non parola . . .," 72-75. Parini was buried in 1799 in a common plot in the cemetery of Porta Comasina (Gavazzeni, p. 300).
- 3 Excerpts from the contemporary polemic aroused by "Dei Sepolcri" are reprinted in Foscolo, *Opere* VI, Edizione Nazionale (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1972).
- 4 Ugo Foscolo, *Opere*, VI, Edizione Nazionale, pp. 501-18.
- 5 All quotations from the poem are taken from Thomas Gray, *The Complete English Poems* (London: Heinemann, 1973) and are identified in the text by line numbers.
- 6 Gavazzeni, p. 29.
- 7 M[elchiorre] C[esarotti], *Elegia inglese del signor Tommaso Gray sopra un cimitero di campagna trasportata in verso italiano dall'Abate M.C.* (Padova: Comino, 1772).
- 8 Although it was not published until 1813, Foscolo began work on the *Viaggio sentimentale* as early as 1803.
- 9 Foscolo, *Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1975), p. 110.
- 10 This was recently stressed by Eugenio Donato, to whose article, "The Mnemonics of History: Notes for a Contextual Reading of 'Dei Sepolcri,'" *Yale Italian Studies* 1:1 (1977), 1-23, I am deeply indebted throughout this essay.
- 11 Paolo Valesio, *Novantiqua: Rhetorics as a Contemporary Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 4.
- 12 Lechevalier, J.B., *Voyage dans la Troade, fait dans les années 1785 et 1786*, 2 vols. (Paris: Dentu, 1802).
- 13 Donato, 21.
- 14 Petrarch, *Canzoniere* (Torino: Einaudi, 1964), p. 175, lines 33-35.
- 15 Gavazzeni, p. 313. For the Di Tarsia sonnet, cf. Foscolo, *Opere* VIII, Edizione Nazionale, pp. 135-36.
- 16 Leopardi, *Tutte le opere* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1969), II, 39 (Zibaldone 58).
- 17 Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, I (Paris: Hetzel, 1831), 129.
- 18 Alfieri, who died on September 8, 1803, was buried in Santa Croce. His tomb was completed by Canova in 1810. Foscolo himself died and was buried in England in 1827. His remains were not transferred to Santa Croce until 1871, when Italian unity had been achieved. His tomb there was sculpted in 1938 by Antonio Berti [*Guida a Firenze e dintorni* (Milano: Touring Club Italiano, 1974), p. 189].
- 19 Gavazzeni, in his "Nota introduttiva" to the "Esperimento" (pp. 339-43), stresses the close relationship between "Dei Sepolcri" and the "Esperimento" — their parallel composition and publication. He cites Foscolo's letter to Isabella Teotochi Albrizzi (Milano, September 6, 1806) announcing the completion of both an "Epistola sui sepolcri da stamparsi lindamente," and "alcuni squarci dell'Iliade, e tutto tutto il primo canto." From another letter cited by Gavazzeni we learn that, during the period directly preceding the August 1806 composition of "Dei Sepolcri," Foscolo was so closely at work on the *Iliad* that he kept a copy (along with that other "voyage" narrative of Sterne!) as his constant traveling companion: "Viaggiando per le Fiandre io avea tradotti moltissimi squarci dell'Iliade; perchè tutti i miei libri erano l'Iliade e il Viaggio d'Yorick; quando fui mandato ad esaminare le miniere di ferro nella Valtellina e sul Bergamasco [intorno ai primi di luglio del 1806 — ed.], sono ritornato ad Omero: e mi fu solo compagno . . ." (Milano, November 24, 1806).
- 20 Foscolo, *Opere*, XV (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1952), pp. 142-43.
- 21 *Lettera*, note # 16. Foscolo is referring here to his own footnote to lines 216-18, which identifies one of the "antichi fatti" as the building of the tomb of Achilles and Patroclus, as described in *Iliad* VII, 86 ("Gli achei innalzino a' loro Eroi il sepolcro presso l'ampio Ellesponto, onde i posterì navigatori dicano: Questo è

il monumento d'un prode anticamente morto,") and the *Odyssey* XXIV, 76 ff. ("E noi dell'esercito sacro de' Danai ponemmo, o Achille, le tue reliquie con quelle del tuo Patroclo, edificandoti un grande ed inclito monumento ove il lito è più eccelso nell'ampio Ellesponto, acciocché dal lontano mare si manifesti agli uomini che vivono e che vivranno in futuro"). I quote these lines in Foscolo's Italian translation given in the footnote.