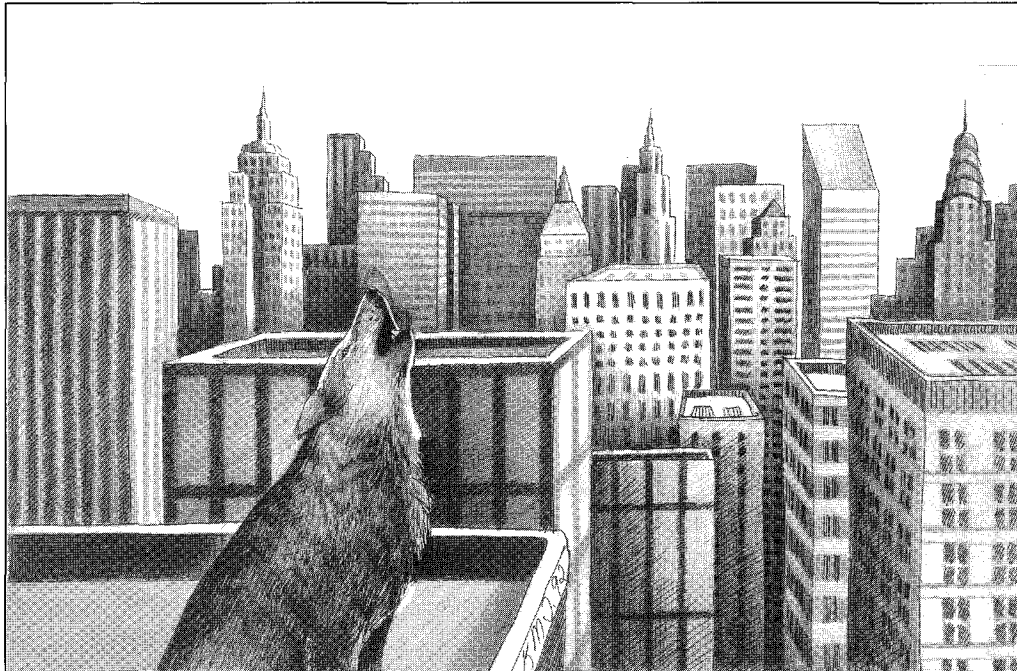


# Gift: The Life of Lorenzo Da Ponte

by David R. Slavitt



Krysztyna Jachimowicz-Zarebski

Not merely a strange place, but the home of strangeness,  
the land stretching away west to vertiginous  
spaces beyond the imagination.  
Philadelphia first,  
then New York, where Nancy is living.

The Grahls have done well, chemists, merchants, physicians.  
Lorenzo and Nancy cross the river, settle  
in Jersey, open a grocery store  
in Elizabeth.

He writes how he laughed,  
“every time my poetical hand weighed out  
two ounces of tea, or cut a plug of tobacco  
for some cobbler or carter.”  
Thus amused, he never notices how  
people cheat him, take his kindness as weakness  
and him for all he is worth—  
going, gone.

And Nancy bears him a son,  
a last child, christened Charles Grahl  
da Ponte  
(Lorenzo will always call him Carlo).

What to do to eat?  
Teach perhaps?  
Italian?  
Maybe Latin?  
Something will turn up.  
There may yet be something good around the corner.

He sells the house  
and they return to New York.

There are more corners there.

\*

You wake from a dream you cannot remember,  
try this setting or that, make odd suggestions,  
but nothing speaks.

That wasn't it. The kernel  
of meaning is gone, and you are the empty husk.

What was there?

The color of lilacs?  
Their scent?  
You let your mind go blank but all you have  
is a blank mind,  
which is all you deserve.

In a bookstore on Broadway . . .  
If he has any church or synagogue,  
if he believes in anything, feels at home  
anywhere, it would be in bookstores.  
In a bookstore then, on Broadway, where he is browsing,  
he enters into a casual conversation  
with a younger man, a stranger.

An idle remark,  
an answer, a joke, perhaps, and then an allusion,  
a reference,  
a password . . .

It is Clement Moore, the poet, later famous—  
he will write “The Night Before Christmas.”

They talk of books,  
even Italian books and writers. Moore,  
in his late twenties, is charmed by the foreign man  
in his middle fifties.

His father, Bishop Moore,  
is President Moore  
of Columbia College.

Clement brings da Ponte  
home, and they start a class there in Italian  
language and literature.

It’s a job,  
a respectable calling. He is the *caro maestro*  
bringing culture, tradition, refinement,  
to these eternally young, impossibly eager  
innocents.

This is not what he wanted,  
nowhere near what he knows he deserves,  
but tolerable.

An end, at least, to the torments  
he hasn’t deserved either.

A remission then?

Stay there, settle, be content,  
we tell him, looking back from the future’s heaven  
where we know what the gods know.

He won’t, can’t,  
has no idea who he is, what he ought to do,  
what he should settle for.

This was the loss  
back in Ceneda, that wrenching him from the name  
his mother called him.

Why not take the suggestion  
the country offers, however absurd? The country  
is large, limitless, strange, a great slattern  
welcoming any and all. His in-laws have moved  
to Sunbury, a Pennsylvania town  
but frontier still, on the Susquehanna River.  
Why not go there, trade, sell liquor, grain,  
spices, medicines?

The woods are rich in game,  
the water clear as Como or Garda. They move,  
to start a new life in a new place  
to put down roots and end,  
these vicissitudes, this endless turning over  
of new pages.

The book still reads the same,  
a brief prospering, then the slipping away  
of gains, the always innocent lamb  
swindlers recognize as a gift  
from God or the devil for them to fleece.

A terrible businessman! He folds,  
goes to Philadelphia. She sells hats;  
he teaches, or tries to,

finds two pupils,  
only two,  
while a stern landlady drills  
for the rent, the rent, the rent.

Nothing is changed.

Soon he is selling his books again,  
his clothing . . .

A letter comes  
from Moore, in New York, a reprieve, an invitation  
to come back, teach there.

He has learned and accepts.  
Or is it a temporizing, a compromise,  
a tactical, provisional retreat?

It is hard to say what’s in his mind, but he stays,  
lives in New York for another nineteen years  
and dies there.

But all the time, in his heart  
is the feeling children have  
that none of this is real, or if it is  
then only for now. Something will happen, new  
teeth will come in, bones grow, hair will grow,  
there will be changes: a real self, a real world  
will emerge in which I will be no longer a stranger  
even to myself.

It is 1819.

He is sixty years old.  
That adolescence children wait for  
in snug cocoons of latency has come  
and gone.

There are only disimprovements now  
in body and spirit, a settling  
for what is,  
a recognition that this ill-fitting garment  
is what the wardrobe holds.  
There is nothing to grow into  
but a shroud.

\*

We learn to bear even this, settle, accept,  
who have never scribbled a clever verse and heard it  
set by Mozart . . .

A gift, but also a burden.  
This is what God would demand, if there were a god;  
this is your authentic self, your talent,  
your spirit’s heritage.

Weep, then, weep, and dream unbearable dreams  
of that life you ought to have led, the amazing work  
you ought to have done, the gift you betrayed, and still,  
with every breath betray, deny, dishonor.

Look to an empty sky, leaden and low,  
and wait for some sign, hope for a dispensation  
that has come before and could therefore come again.

It will not come to you.  
You have had your chance.

\*

But Byron’s poem.

Da Ponte's son Joseph has died,  
at twenty-one of consumption.  
Prostrate, all but maddened by grief,  
Nancy goes into a deep depression.

Lorenzo

is not in much better case.

One of his students,  
hoping to cheer him,  
distract him,  
offer him solace,  
hands him a copy of Byron's recent piece,  
in terza rima  
(in English!).

It is a curiosity  
that speaks deeply, curiously, to da Ponte's  
grief—  
"The Prophecy of Dante."

This poem, Byron wrote in Ravenna, where Dante's  
tomb is "one of the principal objects of interest . . .  
both to the native and to the stranger."

An exile from England,  
Byron had been drawn to Dante's plight  
in exile from Florence.  
The wars of griefs and angers, Dante's and Byron's,  
da Ponte knew, how

"sometimes the last pangs of a vile foe  
Writhe in a dream before me and o'er-arch  
My brow with hopes of triumph—let them go!  
Such are the last infirmities of those  
Who long have suffered more than mortal woe,  
and yet, being mortal still, have no repose . . ."

The feeling Byron had of being cheated  
of what he deserved, by rank and talent, he gave  
to Dante, but da Ponte could claim for himself  
a little of that. At his tomb, too, would

"pilgrims come from climes where they have known  
The name of him, who now is but a name,  
And wasting homage o'er the sullen stone,  
Spread his—by him unheard, unheeded—fame."

He'll do it! He'll do . . . what? Translate the thing  
into Italian, into what terza rima  
ought to be. He'll claim the piece for himself.  
And does, throwing himself into the work,  
and writing with tears streaming down to blur  
the words on the page:

"to die is nothing; but to wither thus,  
to tame / My mind down  
from its own infinity, / To live  
in narrow ways with little men,  
A common sight to every common eye,  
A wanderer,  
while even wolves can find a den . . ."  
Oh, yes, *o si, si . . .*

He publishes, and at length receives a letter  
from Giacomo Ombrosi, the vice-consul  
in Florence, who says a copy was given to Byron  
in Leghorn, and the poet

(having taken a villa there for his friend  
the Countess  
Teresa Guiccioli) received the book  
"with much satisfaction."

Si.

\*

He becomes, in 1825, Professor  
of Italian at Columbia College—no  
stipend, but the title is useful. He can  
take in pupils, to Nancy's boarding house,  
and make a dollar—  
he'll lose, of course, as an impresario, bringing  
an opera company over to New York.

In 1828, he becomes  
a citizen—a gain, and also a loss,  
an acknowledgment.

Nancy dies in 1831. Da Ponte lives on  
to 1839. Nearly ninety,  
he fails, fades away, sends for a priest,  
for form's sake at least.

They keep it quiet  
that he, too, is a priest.

"I dreamt of roses and laurels," he wrote,  
"but from the roses I had only thorns,  
and from the laurels bitterness."

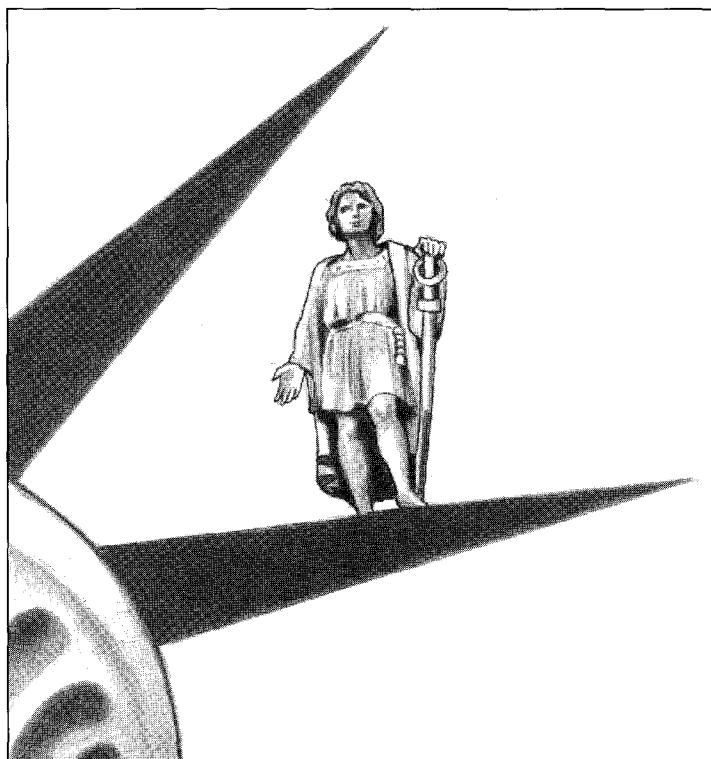
Back in Ceneda,  
by now merged with the neighboring Serravalle  
into Vittorio Veneto, they name  
a street  
the Via da Ponte.





# Blaming Columbus

by Christie Davies



The news that politically correct groups in the United States are greeting the 500th anniversary of Columbus' discovery of America by denouncing the great explorer as an imperialist exploiter has been greeted with incredulity and derision in Europe. After all, had he not discovered America, there would be no tax-fed intelligentsia of progressive Americans to denounce him. They would not, as their own jargon has it, have been called into existence. At the very most the year 1992 of the Christian calendar of Europe might have seen mild protests in Oaxaca about the ritual cutting out of human hearts in the Aztec capital. More outrageously, a debating society in Cuzco might have had the temerity to suggest that the vigorous suppression of unnatural vice under the strict laws of the Inca Empire was an unjust repression of the indigenous traditions of its subject peoples. After all, if you can eat peyote . . . . It is even possible that the Cherokees, if untouched by the treacheries of Jacksonian democracy would have been boycotting Eskimo-carved walrus tusks as a protest against whale hunting by kayak. But enough, Columbus did discover America and it was settled by the Spaniards and the Portuguese, the Swedes and the Irish, the Ukrainians and the Ashkenazi Jews, all of whom would have starved at home had there been no New World for them to emigrate to.

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A movement of peoples on this kind of scale necessarily involves the displacement and disturbance of autochthonous aboriginal peoples, but the whole of human history consists of such movements. Why should we single out Columbus for calumny when we do not condemn the Arabs who erupted from their desert peninsula to occupy and dominate all the lands between Spain and Babylon, or the Chinese who have swamped their less numerous neighbors—the Mongols, Tibetans, Uighurs, and Tartars—by sheer weight of numbers, backed by force? The answer is, of course, that the politically correct liberals of America are racists, and Columbus was the wrong color. Accordingly he is to blame, even for the dire but accidental importation of Old World diseases such as small pox, which decimated the Amerindians who lacked any resistance to them. It was the equivalent of the Black Death in Medieval Europe that killed between a third and a half of the population, after the opening up of trade routes to China permitted the spread of plague. Blaming Columbus for this is like blaming the Africans for unleashing AIDS on the world.

The campaign against Columbus is but the latest manifestation of the long held anti-Catholic and anti-Spanish bigotry that lurks throughout American history. True, Columbus was from Genoa and may even have come from a Jewish family, but his expedition was sponsored and financed by the Catholic rulers of a newly united Spain, and his voyage led to the creation of a Spanish empire in the New World, which