

# The apologetic letter written by G. B. Piranesi in 1758, translated into English

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## Introduction

The letter by G. B. Piranesi, here translated for the first time into English, was written by order of the governor of Rome, Mons. Caprara, as an apology to Lord Charlemont and his agents, who complained of having been offended by Piranesi, especially in his booklet entitled *Lettere di Giustificazione scritte a Milord Charlemont e a' di lui agenti di Roma dal Signor Piranesi Socio della Real Società degli Antiquari di Londra intorno la Dedicazione della sua Opera delle Antichità Rom[ane] fatta allo stesso Signore ed ultimamente soppressa*, dated 1757 but published in February 1758. The apology is dated only one month later, in March 1758.

The letter was printed in Italian and French, and aimed therefore at an international public. Very few copies now exist. The Italian text was republished by Morazzoni (1921). My translation is based on the Italian copy pasted into Piranesi's *Lettere di Giustificazione* in the British Library [coll. 604.f.33] which is almost identical to Morazzoni's. The letter is addressed in a vague way to a '*Signor mio*', in Italian, and to an undefined '*Monsieur*', in French. This style of address, and the informal salutation at the end 'and I remain with true affection all yours', excludes the possibility that it was directed to a *Monsignor* or anybody of rank, which would have required from Piranesi a more formal title and greeting.

The dispute arose from the failed patronage by Lord Charlemont (1728-1799) of Piranesi's four volumes of the *Antichità Romane* (1756), followed by Piranesi's erasure of the original dedications to Charlemont from each of the volumes, in imitation of an ancient *damnatio memoriae*. The subsequent publication by Piranesi of the *Lettere di Giustificazione* aggravated the situation, for the work is full of accusations and ironic allusions aimed at Charlemont, and his agents, viz. the Abbé Peter Grant, the painter John Parker and Charlemont's tutor Edward Murphy.

The most detailed account of the vicissitudes of this apology comes from the Abbé Grant in a letter sent from Rome to Lord Charlemont, in Ireland,

dated 1 April 1758. In it Grant explains that the governor of Rome required that:

...the fellow [Piranesi] should be obliged to publish in print something by way of recantation, and honorable for those he had injured and abused. There were fifty sketches of the said recantation wrote and sent to the governor, none of which he judged to be satisfactory. At last, one was sent him with notice given him, that if he was not pleased with that, he was to expect nothing further. [Letter by the Abbé Peter Grant to Lord Charlemont, in HMC, p. 241]

The Abbé Grant also adds:

The governor [...] accepted of what [was] thus sent him, and obliged the fellow [Piranesi] to sign it and print it [...] When the thing was brought to the push, the scoundrel [Piranesi] struggled hard before he would sign it. He absconded for five days, and had threatened to throw himself in the river rather than make honorable mention of those he had abused, but at last was compelled to yield. [HMC, pp. 241-242]

Grant, in his account to Charlemont stresses the difficulty of persuading Piranesi to submit to the humiliation of an apology, but seems satisfied with what he had achieved. Grant, however, contradicts himself when he writes in the same letter:

We [Grant and Parker] are not satisfied with the recantation because it contains a false account of the affair betwixt your lordship and the fellow (Piranesi)...[HMC p. 242]

John Parker in his turn, writing to Lord Charlemont's tutor Edward Murphy, expresses more forcefully his discontent with Piranesi's 'recantation' letter, not seeing in it a sincere apology:

Mr. Grant has been too easy in giving his consent to the printing the letter he inclosed, they never had mine...[5 April 1758, HMC, p. 247]

It is evident that Piranesi's contemporaries could perceive the ambiguity present in the 'recantation' more clearly than us, because they were acquainted with its arguments and could recognize its hidden irony. Just knowing about the atrocious treatment Piranesi had reserved for Charlemont's agents in assigning to them an ignominious burial shown in the final vignette of the *Lettere di Giustificazione*, and of the hate Piranesi had conceived for John

Parker in particular, it is not difficult to detect that the following words of the ‘recantation’ ironically mean the contrary of what they assert:

it has not at all diminished in me [Piranesi] the esteem and the opinion I had and will always have of Signor Abbé Grant and of Mr Parker and of Mr Murphy, to whom beside their personal qualities it is sufficient, for any praise, the honour of being esteemed and loved by Milord, who is such an enlightened Gentleman and such a wise judge of merit.

By this increasing use of irony towards the end of the ‘recantation’ letter, Piranesi is finally implying that not only the agents lack ‘personal qualities’ but also that Charlemont is incapable of discerning the true merit of people, including that of Piranesi.

Piranesi is, then, insinuating that Charlemont in failing to sponsor his excellent work had not recognized his ‘merit’ and value, and had therefore failed to be a patron of the Arts, as was his duty, and as he had himself arrogantly boasted. Piranesi instead of apologizing for the *Lettere di Giustificazione* is justifying himself in having erased from the first dedication to Charlemont in the *Antichità Romane* sentences such as UTILITATI PUBLICAE NATO (born for the public good), as well as INGENIIS FAVEBAT (he was protecting-men of genius), and especially ARTES PROMOVEBAT (he promoted the fine arts).

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### **Piranesi’s Letter**

Rome, 15 March 1758

Dear Sir,

The matter you are asking me about stands in the manner I shall now relate to you with all frankness and truth, because truth is not afraid of light. At the same time as I had the honour of meeting Milord Charlemont, I learned and ascertained that among the remarkable qualities, which adorned, such a grand, such a noble and such an illustrious personality, there was one most praiseworthy, that is, the understanding of the whole of antiquity and a very refined knowledge of the fine arts, and what I most value, the substantial patronage he bestowed on them and on those who profess them; [and] since I

have the privilege of being also numbered among those professors, I was advised to obtain his patronage by honouring him in the manner which I was best able. Therefore, since I had in hand a voluminous Work full of large copper plates entitled *MONUMENTA SEPULCRALIA ANTIQUA*, I thought of dedicating it to him, and he with the utmost benevolence and kindness, attributes peculiar to a Person of his birth and quality, not only gladly accepted it, but furthermore, by one of his manservants, also let me have a brief, but truthful and moderate dedication to be placed at the front of this Work. This increased my commitment and my desire to honour him. And since at the time the said Work was going to the printer, I happened to put the finishing touches to [my work on] all the antiquities of Rome, which I had had ready for a long time, I therefore resolved to increase the said Work, to four large volumes, and to put a frontispiece at the beginning of each, etched in copper in large folio, very rich and of my own invention, with the aim of repeating the dedication in each volume.

But before starting on it, I thought it was my duty to make Milord acquainted with this idea of mine in order to receive his orders; however, either for my misfortune or for some misunderstanding I was not allowed to pay my respects to him during all the time he dwelt in Rome. I then wrote to him directly, and he was so kind as to let me have an answer by his Agent saying he appreciated the increase in size of my Work; and that (the first dedication he had previously sent me no longer being appropriate) I could place at the head of my Work the other dedication he was sending me, which was indeed handed over to me by his Agent, and which was conceived with the same brevity and moderation.

Therefore I started printing the four Volumes as quickly as possible, and issued a substantial number both in Italy and abroad, with the new well designed dedication to Milord Charlemont, though only after having paid my due homage and shown my gratitude to Milord by taking two copies of the Work to his Agent, and offering to deliver to Milord the number of copies he would be pleased to have.

Meanwhile several events occurred, which it would be useless as well as tedious to relate, so that it will suffice to say that these induced his Agent to tell me that Milord no longer wanted my dedication. About this, and other related matters, I immediately remonstrated most humbly with Milord in a letter, and not having received any answer, I wrote my second letter which had the same misfortune; but I, reckoning that such a distinguished Gentleman could reasonably take as an affront to see a Work he had rejected dedicated to him; after much thought, and having made the most diligent efforts, but in vain, in order to discover the truth of the matter, I judged it more fit,

considering my respect for Milord, to remove the afore mentioned dedication from the frontispieces of the yet unpublished Volumes. If my judgement in this was wrong it was due to misunderstanding rather than to intention, which will always be ready to honour him as much as I am capable and able. And it is so true that this can only be a fault due to a misunderstanding that I did it [the removal of the dedication] with the greatest regret, both because I was prevented from giving a most respectful sign of my regard to Milord, and because I reflected that my reputation might be impaired, since the news had spread everywhere, even beyond the Alps and especially in France and England, that I had made this dedication, and since all knew the good heart and the wise and just behaviour of Milord, it might have been suspected that this [removal] depended on me; and each and every reason one could imagine, would redound to my dishonour. All the more so because there were those who with false stories in the public places of Rome, and also with letters written in Italy and outside Italy were damaging me most severely. Therefore I thought of publishing a true account of the whole matter, which I am here relating to you succinctly, and which I defy anyone to contradict if he can; and I did this out of hard necessity and for that right (*jus*) which everyone has to defend oneself, and particularly in a point of one's own honour. Besides one can add, that while defending myself I was also defending Milord, who in the false stories spread around, was to a certain extent being damaged, even though those who were damaging him were not aware of it.

Therefore, if in those writings, which resound throughout with dutiful praises to Milord, and with that respectful veneration, and with that deep reverence which I have always professed for him, and will always profess as long as I live, if some phrases or words might have slipped out which could have been interpreted contrary and offensive towards Milord or towards his dependents, I here state and I will declare to the whole world that this has surely not been my intention, while the veneration which I professed since the very start, and will always profess, for Milord has not diminished; nor has the esteem and the opinion I had and will always have of Signor Abbé Grant and of Mr Parker and of Mr Murphy, to whom beside their personal qualities it is sufficient, for any praise, the honour of being esteemed and loved by Milord, who is such an enlightened Gentleman and such a wise judge of merit. And I again declare to be extremely sorry to have found myself in the grave necessity of justifying my actions, and I would have not wanted to find myself in such an eventuality for all the gold in the world. Now you have been informed of everything, and so do not trouble yourself to look any further; and I remain with true affection all yours etc.

Gio. Battista Piranesi

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