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BACHELOR THESIS

Italy, its Culture and Ambience in the Lives and Works of George  
Gordon, Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley

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## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that this bachelor thesis is the result of my own work and that I have used only the cited sources. I further declare that this thesis was not used to obtain another or the same academic title.

Prague, 10th April, 2016

Veronika Skřenková

Signature: .....

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## **Abstract**

The major objective of this study is to investigate how influential was Italy, its culture and ambience on the lives and works of Lord Byron and Percy Shelley. The introduction deals with Italy in English literature in general, focusing on what made the country so attractive to English authors. The first part of the thesis is dedicated to Lord Byron and his stay in Italy, with references to events and experiences that inspired his poetry. It is divided in sections; each section focuses on a different city, with analysis of some of his poems that are connected to the city in some way. The second part of the thesis focuses on Shelley and follows the same pattern of sections as the first part.

## **Key words**

Italy; George Gordon Byron; Percy Bysshe Shelley; Italian influence; Romanticism; Second generation English Romantics

## **Abstrakt**

Cílem této práce je prozkoumat, jaký vliv měla Itálie, její kultura a prostředí, na životy a díla Lorda Byrona a Percy Shelleyho. Úvod se věnuje Itálii obecně v anglické literatuře a zaměřuje se zejména na to, čím byla tato země pro anglické autory tak lákavá. První část práce je poté věnována Lordu Byronovi a jeho pobytu v Itálii, s odkazy na události a zážitky, které inspirovaly jeho poezii. Tato část je rozdělena do několika sekcí; každá z nich se soustřeďuje na jedno město, a obsahuje analýzu vybraných Byronových básní, které se k městu nějakým způsobem vážou. Druhá část práce je zaměřena na Percy Shelleyho a je strukturována stejně jako část první.

## **Klíčová slova**

Itálie; George Gordon Byron; Percy Bysshe Shelley; vliv Itálie; Romantismus; Angličtí romantici druhé generace

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# 1 Introduction

It was almost a moment of revelation, having stood by the bed on Piazza di Spagna 26 in Rome, where John Keats spent the last days of his life, dying but not giving up hope to eventually meet Shelley and, under the wings of his genius and surrounded by the muse that Italy was to him, write a masterpiece (that would finally be good enough for the critics of *Quarterly Review*). Yet it was not until visiting Shelley's grave at the Cimitero dei protestanti and breathing the humid air of the floating city of Venice that I was fully determined to explore further the brief periods of Shelley's and Byron's lives that they spent in the paradise of the Romantics. While the Italy of today is nowhere near the Italy of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is not particularly difficult to be flabbergasted by the grandeur of Roman ruins and monuments, the breathtaking paintings and sculptures in the Vatican museums, the slowly uncovering mysteries of Pompeii or the joy of the Carnevale di Venezia. There is always something new to discover and to try, and so it is no surprise that it was Italy where Byron and Shelley found their home and composed their masterpieces.

This thesis will attempt to trace their steps – both physical and literary – to examine the marks that Italy, its culture and ambiance left in some of their famous poems, as well as to determine how differently they felt about various places through the evidence from their letters and poems.

The aim is to uncover the inspiration for some of the poems they wrote there, to look behind the curtain of their personal affairs and search for the connections between their lives and their works, from the moment they arrived in the country, to the moment they left it. The author will focus solely on the years the two poets spent in Italy, with brief comments from their experience from elsewhere, if necessary.

Among the questions that the thesis will try to find answers to are: “What aspects of Byron's and Shelley's poetic styles were influenced and shaped by their stay in Italy?”, “What inspired them the most about Italy – was it literature, history, politics or lifestyle?” or “How did Byron's Italian experience differ from Shelley's?”

Firstly, there will be a brief overview of the role of Italy in English poetry. Then, a short biographical background of both poets will follow, mostly to pinpoint what made them leave their homeland in the first place. After that, the paper will focus on Shelley first, his stays in various Italian cities and his works connected with those stays. Successively, the same will be done with Byron. Eventually, a conclusion will be drawn, summarizing the findings and evaluating to what point the aim of the thesis was reached.

## 2 Italy in English poetry

Italy has always been a place of interest for British authors, and everyone who has had the pleasure to visit it can see why. It is a land of beautiful art, great writers, turbulent history, breathtaking landscape and pleasant climate. There were many other aspects that contributed to the increased interest in everything Italian, such as travel-narratives, moderately low cost of living, and the fact that Italy was not as restrictive and conservative as England during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, for the Romantics, Italy was predominantly the epitome of the new movement they pioneered – the scenery was perfect, with its wild nature on the one hand and the ruins of the Roman Empire on the other, the tragic fates of some of the most famous Italian authors and the Romantic elements in their works (Brand, 10-11).

The Romantics, however, have no predecessors in such a vivid, realistic and detailed description of Italy in their works. Although numerous writers in earlier periods were influenced by Italian arts and literature, there are scarcely any works describing Italian culture or landscape – a beauty that should not be left out (Mead, 422). Many poets have set foot on the Italian soil, but very few of them described what they saw as eloquently and realistically as the second generation of Romantic poets did.

The lack of interest (or talent) in describing Italian landscape was, in a way, compensated by the fascination with their literature. Italian poets, especially the 14<sup>th</sup> century's Dante Alighieri, Giovanni Boccaccio and Francesco Petrarca, were widely read and influenced many English authors (Fenton, 62). It is almost impossible to overlook the similarities between Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, and it is hard not to think of Dante's *Inferno* from *Divina Commedia* while reading John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Petrarch's unrequited love for Laura in his sonnets inspired English Renaissance poetry, Shakespeare's sonnets included.

It was not just the content of the big Italian works, but also the form. Terza rima, the form Dante used for his *Divina Commedia*, was introduced in England by none other than Geoffrey Chaucer. It soon found its fans and was also used by Thomas Wyatt, later by Byron and Shelley, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century for example by T. S. Eliot and Seamus Heaney.

Another Italian form, used by Boccaccio as well as Luigi Pulci, Ludovico Ariosto or Torquato Tasso, that gained popularity among English poets, was ottava rima, rhymed a-b-a-b-a-b-c-c. As Fenton explains, it is not such a challenging task when writing in Italian, for it is not so difficult to find a rhyme, but it presents a considerable deal of trouble in English and



might not come off as elegant as in Italian, but rather mockingly – which is exactly why Byron chose it for *Don Juan* (Fenton, 67).

The form of the sonnet, typical for Elizabethan poetry, comes from Italy as well. The master of Italian sonnet form was Petrarch – hence the name Petrarchan sonnet. It consists of an octave that rhymes a-b-b-a-a-b-b-a and a sestet, rhyming c-d-e-c-d-e. It was introduced in England by Sir Thomas Wyatt. Other famous sonnet-writers include Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare, both of whom, however, altered the rhyming scheme and laid the foundations of the English sonnet forms – Spenserian and Shakespearean (*Ibid*, 77).

When it comes to actually writing poems about Italy, mainly about the countryside (because the poets did usually not spend enough time there to learn what they would need to be able to compose works on cultural traditions, political disputes or local stories), there is not really much to work with (Mead, 422).

Going chronologically, the Renaissance would be the period to start at. Sir Phillip Sidney lived in Venice for a brief period of time, and although his stay had a certain influence on his work, still there is no poem capturing the spirit of the floating city (*Ibid*, 423). William Shakespeare needs to be mentioned here, although a playwright, given his fascination with Italy was quite profound and he inspired numerous poets. Several of his plays take place in Italy (*The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Coriolanus* to name a few) and many Italian cities are mentioned. As Mead points out, it is believed Shakespeare never visited Italy himself, but he had friends who did and he probably read extensively about it (*Ibid*, 425).

There is very probably only one English poem about Italy from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It was presumably written by Edmund Spenser and it mainly focuses on the history of Rome (Mead, 426). From the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Mead mentions William Drummond's short poem *Upon a Bay Tree Not Long Since Growing in the Ruins of Virgil's Tomb* and Davenant's *Gondibert* (1651), neither of which he considers descriptive or worth reading. The other two examples of Italy in English poetry from the 17<sup>th</sup> century are much more interesting. The first is Milton's *Paradise Regained* (1671), in which he describes the Rome at the time of Christ, and the second is Dryden's translations from Boccaccio, especially *Theodore and Honoria* (1700). There he handled picturing Ravenna and Pineta with a surprising degree of creativity, given the fact he was never there. (*Ibid*, 427).

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the number of poems dealing with Italian topics increased, but the quality was rather questionable. Among the early ones are Addison's *Letter to Italy* (1704) and Alexander Pope's *Epistle to Mr. Addison Occasioned by his Dialogues on Medals* (1715)

– which is surprisingly vivid, considering the fact that Pope never set foot in Italy (Mead, 428).

Those more fortunate ones who had the opportunity to visit Italy (but did not actually stay long enough to fully immerse themselves in the culture) were mostly rich young Englishmen on their grand tour, such as Lord Lyttleton, whose *An Epistle to Mr. Pope from Rome* (1730) was, however, nothing worth much praise (Mead, 429). A more interesting work was John Dyer's *The Ruins of Rome*, written in 1740. His great advantage was the fact that he was not only a poet, but also a landscape painter, therefore his descriptions are more genuine (*Ibid*, 431). He describes the Palatine, the Coliseum, the Pantheon, as well as the Vespasian's Temple of Peace, but as Mead notices, his work is influenced too much by the 18<sup>th</sup> century poetic restrictions (*Ibid*, 432-433). Other writers, many of whom remained anonymous, have attempted to touch upon Italian landscape or even political situation (which was rather exceptional), they commented on the grand tour and on the fascination of young English gentlemen with the ruins of Rome (*Ibid*, 435). Then there were poets like Thomas Gray, who mentions nothing of Italy in his poetry, his personal letters, however, contain marvellous descriptions of Italian landscape and life. From the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Mead mentions three more poems. The first is Oliver Goldsmith's *Traveller* (1764), following Addison's model in describing Italian countryside, and while it was considered quite decent in his time, it was too rigid and dull for the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century readers (*Ibid*, 436). The other two poems are both by William Whitehead, an *Ode to the Tiber* (1757) and *On the Mausoleum of Augustus* (1757) (*Ibid*, 437).

As has been shown, while there were some attempts to capture the beauty of Italian landscape in poetry, very few of them succeeded, which probably led to even fewer poets to try. And so it happened that the real potential of Italian ambiance remained in a way undiscovered until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It appears quite understandable that it was the Romantic movement for which Italy was considered almost the promised land. The landscape, the history, the climate and the refreshing freedom (as opposed to the English stiffness) all contributed to awakening a poet's imagination, as he could leave the eighteen-century restrictions of poetry behind and create with his soul, relying on emotions rather than reason.

The first generation of Romantic poets is predominantly referred to as "The Lake Poets" and they are usually not primarily associated with Italy (unlike their successors). Both Coleridge and Wordsworth, however, visited Italy and were avid readers of Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, and even of Tasso and Ariosto. Wordsworth published a collection of poems from 1837-1842 called *Memorials of a Tour in Italy* and the marvellous descriptions in his letters to

his sister Dorothy capture the beauties of Italy as well<sup>1</sup>. Coleridge and Southey, too, longed for a warmer climate and they even considered moving to the South, with Italy as a preferred option<sup>2</sup>.

Although the first generation of Romantic poets showed some interest in Italian literature and ambiance, it was the second generation that left their marks in almost every major city (sometimes even in the minor ones). The two most famous exiles were George Gordon, Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley; friends and poets of great talent, in many ways similar, but also very different from each other.

Both Byron and Shelley had the opportunity to immerse themselves in the Italian culture and language, as they toured Italy and stayed in different locations. It is assumed, then, that their travels left marks upon their works and influenced their poetic styles as well. The first step to determine that is to understand what they were like before they decided to leave England and how it happened that they did so.

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<sup>1</sup> Shackford, 236-247

<sup>2</sup> Andrews, 87

### 3 Percy Bysshe Shelley: Early life (1792 – 1817)

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born on 4th August, 1792 at Field Place in Sussex, England. Being the eldest son of Timothy and Elizabeth Shelley, with four sisters and one brother, he was in line to inherit the estate of his grandfather's, as well as a seat in Parliament. His future seemed bright and financially secure, but it could not have been so easy for the person Shelley was to become. As a child, he was playful and had a vivid imagination which he used while creating games to play with his friends, or practical jokes (Shelley and Woodberry, xv). In 1802, he entered the Syon House Academy, but was not among the popular kids, and became a victim of bullying, probably because he could not fight back effectively. He focused on his studies instead and discovered an interest in science, which he retained throughout his whole life (xvi). In 1804, Shelley entered Eton College, where he was taunted again, even called "Mad Shelley" and again found alleviation in writing, drawing and reading, for he deepened his love in Gothic romances, as well as the classics (xvii). Along with literature and science, he delved into another big passion that was to accompany (or haunt) him throughout his life – love. His first published work was a Gothic novel *Zastrozzi* (1810), where the title already (and the names of the heroes – Verezzi and Julia) suggests an inspiration – as small as it may be – in Italy (xviii).

The critical reception of his works was in a way rather ironic. His early works were criticised for being too sentimental and nonsensical, whereas his more mature works were often criticised as being too sophisticated and incomprehensible for even a highly educated person. Shelley, though being aware of the possible setbacks of his writing, cared about the opinion of others maybe more than he was willing to admit and the critics that almost never seemed to be satisfied with his works often demotivated him and made him feel unworthy.

Shelley studied briefly at Oxford but was expelled along with his friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg for publishing a pamphlet called *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811). The decision to publish this pamphlet had dire consequences on Shelley's relationship with his family (particularly his father) and his future life in general. The disputes with his father lead eventually to a period of financial trouble for Shelley, but for him it was more important to stand behind the principles he believed in than to succumb to his father's demands (xxiii-xxiv).

In August 1811, Shelley married Harriet Westbrook, a sixteen-year-old girl he met through his sister Hellen. They settled in Keswick, where Shelley met Robert Southey, whose work he greatly admired, but soon became disenchanted with him and focused on meeting

William Godwin, another of his heroes. During the years 1812 to 1813, Shelley with his young wife and their friends lived in London, which brought him closer to many interesting personages of that time. Among those were Thomas Hookham, Thomas Love Peacock, Leigh Hunt and William Godwin. At that time, Shelley was working on *Queen Mab*, in which he reflected his rather radical political and religious opinions, as well as no less provocative comments on the monarchy, vegetarianism, free love, and science (Shelley and Woodberry, 1-2). Meeting William Godwin meant inevitably to meet his daughter Mary, an offspring of two great minds. It was clear then that Shelley became completely infatuated with her, and she with him. Her father and Shelley's wife were less excited about this love, however. Not wanting to live surrounded by gossip and disapproval anymore, Shelley decided to elope with Mary, accompanied by Jane Clairmont, to Switzerland, via Calais and Paris in 1814 (Drabble, 925). Not long after they found themselves in a financial struggle and decided to return to England.

The year 1816 was a turbulent one for Shelley. He wrote the poem *Alastor* (1816), his and Mary's son William was born, and he met Byron for the first time. The summer they all spent on Lake Geneva was very productive – Mary began working on *Frankenstein* and Shelley wrote 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' and 'Mont Blanc'. Later that year, Shelley's wife Harriet drowned herself, which meant that Shelley could finally marry Mary. He did not get the custody of his and Harriet's children, which affected him deeply (Shelley and Woodberry, xxxii).

In 1817, he and his new family lived at Great Marlow on the Thames. He kept meeting new, interesting people and made new friends, for example John Keats, Leigh Hunt or William Hazlitt. His financial situation was, however, not ideal, as he was in debts. He was also not very popular among his fellow Englishmen, especially for his lifestyle (being expelled from Oxford, practically driving his wife to suicide by eloping with a sixteen-year-old). All of that affected his health, and Shelley, not feeling there at home at all, decided to relocate with his family to Italy (Drabble, 925).

Such is the story of his early life in brief. There are, however, facts that heavily influenced the direction that Shelley's life took during and after the year 1816, facts that might not be known to those who have not studied his life in detail. Had it not been for the young and rather foolish Claire Clairmont, Shelley might not have met Byron in Switzerland and he would have not probably visited him in Venice in 1818 (Ellis, 62). Their friendship – even though it did not last for very long – was essential for their writing careers and will be addressed in this thesis as one of the factors that influenced their Italian experience.

## 4 George Gordon, Lord Byron: Early life (1799 – 1815)

George Gordon, sixth lord and son of Captain ‘Mad Jack’ Byron, was born on 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 1799 in London. His father left him and his mother not long after, and so Mrs. Byron took her son to Scotland, where, eventually, the father joined them again, only to leave to France to flee from his creditors. Byron’s mother was very passionate and rather moody, and it seems she cared for her son with uneven outbursts of affection and abuse. Growing up in such an emotionally challenging environment, along with the fact he was born with a physical defect – a club-foot – is generally considered to have influenced young Byron’s temperament. Although doctors – some more capable than others – tried to fix the defect, it did more harm than good to both the leg and the boy’s confidence (Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, xii).

He passed through the hands of several tutor and schools, and it is believed he was not particularly ambitious in his studies. He did not like mathematics, was probably not very patient given to his quick temper and stubbornness, but enjoyed sports and history. When he and his mother moved to Ballater, he discovered his interest in roaming around the countryside and his passion for mountainous landscapes (even though he was not prone to climbing because of his defect). Two years later, in 1789, the baron died and young Byron was to inherit the family title. They moved again, south this time, to live in Nottingham, not far from the family estate Newstead Abbey (which was practically in ruins) (xiii).

Byron was sent to a boarding school in London in 1799, where he devoted his time to sports and reading. His mother later came to live in London as well and not being an exactly responsible role model, kept the son from school and introduced him to rather dubious characters. Eventually, Byron was sent to Harrow, where his rebellious nature kept him from focusing on his studies and making the most of what the institution could offer him. The last year, however, he came to like it there, improved his French, and fell in love with Italian, which was the only language besides his native that he truly mastered during his life, very probably because he was so passionate about it. He read extensively histories and biographies, as well as the classics (xv). During his last year at Harrow, he also fell in love for the first time and got his heart broken by Mary Anne Chaworth, an experience that would scar him for the rest of his life.

Byron entered Cambridge in 1805, more or less against his will, for he would have preferred going to Oxford. It appears that most of his friends and professors, even himself, were surprised he finished his studies. His reputation as a student was not one to boast about; he skipped classes and was struggling with mathematics and Latin. His first published

collection of poems, *Hours of Idleness* (1807), is therefore quite aptly titled (xvii). The reviews were harsh, however, and two years later Byron retaliated with *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. During his time in Cambridge, besides not being an exemplary student, Byron pursued his love for sports, particularly riding, boxing, cricket and shooting. He was known to carry about pistols and randomly practising with them to the dismay of bystanders; an interest he retained until his arrival in Italy. At university, he also met many influential people, some of whom remained his close friends until his death. Among those closest to him at that time were Charles Skinner Matthews, Scrope Davies and John Cam Hobhouse (xviii).

In early 1809, he took his seat in the House of Lords and not long after published the above-mentioned satirical counterstrike against the reviewers of the *Edinburgh Review*. Then he decided to leave England for some time and fulfill his dream of travelling. The time before his leave was devoted to a seemingly never-ending goodbye party with his friends in London – a series of debaucheries he engaged in during his time at Cambridge as well (xxi).

Two years of travels followed in which he visited Portugal, Spain, Malta, Greece and Levant. The adventures of those travels gave birth to the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and several of his other poems, *To Florence* or *The Curse of Minerva* and *The Maid of Athens* to name a few. He also became engaged with the idea to help the Greeks win their freedom from the Turks – an idea which would some thirteen years later seal his fate. It was, however, clear that travelling did more for his poetic imagination and his spirit, with its constant demand for excitement and learning, than sitting in the House of Lords would (xxii-xxv).

After he came back to England, he briefly met with his half-sister Augusta, the only relative who he ever cared deeply for (and it is believed there was a more intimate connection between them than there should be). The two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* were published in 1812. In March of the same year, Byron met Lady Caroline Lamb, an ambitious and vivacious woman, with whom he had almost a year-long wild love affair. She was the one who said Byron was “Mad–bad–and dangerous to know”, which apparently did not keep her from seeing him, or might actually be what drew her to him (xxx).

Having survived the affair, he briefly courted Annabella Milbanke, even toying with the idea of marrying her. In 1814, he expressed his wish to leave England and go to Italy in a letter to Thomas Moore, but wanted to postpone it because of thoughts of marriage. He was rather hesitant about it and the decision to marry Annabella Milbanke (who accepted his offer at last) was reckless, which could only result in trouble (xxxi).

Between 1813 and 1814, he published *The Giaour* (1813), *The Bride of Abydos* (1813), *The Corsair* (1814) and *Lara* (1814), all of which were influenced by his stay abroad in Greece and Turkey (Levant). The following year, in 1815, he published the *Hebrew Melodies*. In December of the same year, his daughter Ada, who inherited her mother's enthusiasm for mathematics, was born. A year before Augusta gave birth to a girl that was believed to be Byron's as well, but there is no direct evidence for such claim (Drabble, 157).

Byron's debts were increasing day by day and the rumours about his alleged incestuous affair with Augusta spread fast. His sanity was being questioned, and his wife left him to live with her parents and obtained a legal separation. Resentful and an outcast of the society, Byron felt there was nothing keeping him in England, and decided to finally fulfill his dream of going to Switzerland and Italy, hoping to start afresh and be received in a more welcoming manner. He left England on 25<sup>th</sup> April, 1816, never to return (Drabble, 157).



## 5 Percy Bysshe Shelley

### 5.1 The year 1818: Arrival in Italy

Percy Shelley spent the last four and very eventful years of his life in Italy after he left England on March 12, 1818. Heavily influenced by Madame de Staël's *Corinne* (1807)<sup>3</sup>, travel-narratives, and eager to see Italian art, he arrived in Milan and spent a year and a half visiting the most popular Italian cities, after which he settled in Pisa (Pite, 46-49).

Some of the cities he visited or lived in during those four years earned an important place in his poetical works – Venice, Naples and Rome in particular, whereas some got merely a mention in his letters to his English friends. It is indisputable, however, that Italy changed him, both as a poet and as a person. The nature that he was always so close to shaped his imagination and is perfected in his later poems to Jane Williams. Italian culture and history aroused his curiosity and even inspired him to write a dramatic piece. And last but not least, all that happened in his relationship with Mary and Byron influenced him as a human being and partially came through to his works.

This section, and the following two, will try to discover how and to what extent his new home away from home shaped him and his poetical genius.

There is a line from one of Shelley's letters to Thomas Love Peacock to be found in nearly all articles or books on Shelley and his Italian adventure. It sums up his feelings about England and his reaction upon arriving in Italy:

No sooner had we arrived at Italy than the loveliness of the earth and serenity of the sky made the greatest difference in my sensations – I depend on these things for life for in the smoke of cities and the tumult of humankind and the chilling fogs and rain of our own country I can hardly be said to live (Buxton, 67).

He knew he was in the right place at the right time. Still not in the mood for writing, he decided to visit Milan and Lago di Como, the lake he was hoping to rent a house nearby. Shelley's first impressions of Milan (as of other cities as well) are nicely captured in his letter to Peacock from April 1818. He was especially amazed by the Duomo, the beautiful Gothic cathedral in the heart of the city.

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<sup>3</sup> *Corinne, Or Italy* tells the story of a love affair between a Scottish peer Lord Nelvil and an Italian poetess Corinne. The work is also Madame de Staël's homage to Italian Arts, landscape and culture (Simpson, "On *Corinne, Or Italy*.")

This Cathedral is a most astonishing work of art. It is built of white marble & cut into pinnacles of immense height & the utmost delicacy of workmanship & loaded with sculpture. The effect of it, piercing the solid blue with those groupes of dazzling spires relieved by the serene depth of this Italian Heaven, or by moonlight when the stars seem gathered among those sculptures shapes is beyond any thing I had imagined architecture capable of producing (Shelley and McMahan, 7-8).

Anyone who has ever made his way through the labyrinth of streets only to suddenly find himself standing in front of the majestic white Duomo of Milan may agree that this is a more than suitable description. Shelley was very good at realistic descriptions, with his characteristic poetic spirit, and had he focused on writing a travel guidebook, there is little doubt it would have been immensely popular.



The Duomo of Milan<sup>4</sup>

Not stopping at describing the exterior of the cathedral, Shelley offers Peacock a peek inside the marvellous building and also his spare time:

The interior (...) with its stained glass & massy granite columns overloaded with antique figures & the silver lamps that burn forever under the canopy of black cloth beside the brazen altar & the marble fretwork of the dome, give it the aspect of some gorgeous sculpture. There is one solitary spot among these aisles behind the altar

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<sup>4</sup> <http://italianacademyfoundation.org/index.php/10/sculptures-from-milans-duomo-show-at-eataly-nyc/>

where the light of day is dim & yellow under the storied window which I have chosen to visit & read Dante there (Shelley and McMahan, 8).

Interestingly enough, Shelley chose this sacred place not for praying or visiting the Easter mass, but rather used it as a reading room.

Excited to see old friends of Mary's father (the Gisbornes), Shelley, Mary and Claire Clairmont left for Livorno (Leghorn). Mrs Gisborne (previously Mrs Reveley) was the one taking care of baby Mary when her mother died. Later, she married Mr Gisborne and they left for Italy with her son from the first marriage, Henry. Shelley was very close to both of them, as he shared her interest in Spanish literature and Henry's excitement for boats and sailing as well as technology and science (Shelley and Woodberry xxxvii).

After their stay with the Gisbornes, Percy and the others decided to go to Bagni di Lucca (Baths of Lucca) and rent the Casa Bertini, near Serchio. The next two months were the much-needed vacation for Shelley (Buxton, 71). He went for long walks along the banks of the Serchio, rode in the woods and even wrote a little – but it was nothing compared to what was to come in the other half of the year. He was, however, toying with the idea of writing a dramatic piece inspired by the life of Tasso, of whom Buxton says that “his hopeless love for Leonora d'Este, his cruel imprisonment at the hands of Alfonso, his subsequent madness – made him the very prototype of the Romantic poet, of the man of genius at odds with society.” (72)

Shelley read Byron's *Lament of Tasso* the previous year and mentioned his fascination with the Italian poet to Peacock in his letter from Milan. It was therefore very likely that he would eventually write a piece on Tasso of his own, or at least mention him in some of his works.

Unable to make any progress with the tragedy and not being able to compose anything else, he dedicated his time to translating, hoping that would ignite a spark of inspiration. Everything changed in August, when he arrived in Venice with Mary's cousin Claire. They both wanted to see Byron's daughter Allegra (although Claire's presence had to be kept a secret from Byron<sup>5</sup>), and Shelley was excited to see his friend, who had already been living in Italy for almost two years (74). In his letter to Mary, Shelley said that on the way from Padua to Venice, the gondoliere “without any hint on our part – began talking of Albe – he said he was a giovenotto Inglese with a nome stravagante [English youngster with an extravagant

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<sup>5</sup> Claire Clairmont and Byron had an affair in Geneva (or more precisely she forced herself on him), which, after it ended, left Byron annoyed and Claire pregnant. He decided to take care of his daughter, but never wanted to see Claire again.

name] who lived very luxuriously & spent a great sums of money”<sup>6</sup>, which clearly speaks of Byron’s reputation in Venice at that time. Apart from Byron’s lifestyle, Shelley was deeply fascinated by the city, especially by the “silent streets paved with water”, the Doges palace and gondolas (Shelley and Jones, 42). It almost seems he found it all in Venice – the sun reflecting upon the watery roads, the intriguing stories of the city, “which was once a tyrant, is now the next worse thing, a slave”<sup>7</sup>, the picturesque and convenient gondolas, and Byron’s company, all of which was stimulating and challenging his imagination.

There is no wonder then that his stay in the Veneto region gave birth to some of his best literary pieces. The first one to mention is *Julian and Maddalo* (1818-19), important not only for its descriptive passages of the beauty of Venice and its surroundings, but also as a memento of the friendship with Byron. The story behind the origin of *Julian and Maddalo* might seem trivial at first, but is essential for reading the poem. After going to see Allegra, whom Shelley was very fond of, he met Byron in Venice, and his friend took him to Lido, his favourite spot, to ride on the beach and talk while watching the sun go down.

That is why Shelley decided to write a preface, in which he introduced the two main characters. In his depiction of Maddalo, Shelley offers probably the best description of Byron that has ever been written by his friends, all summarized in just a few paragraphs.

Count Maddalo is a Venetian nobleman of ancient family and of great fortune, who, without mixing much in the society of his countrymen, resides chiefly at his magnificent palace in that city. He is a person of the most consummate genius, and capable, if he would direct his energies to such an end, of becoming the redeemer of his degraded country. But it is his weakness to be proud; (...). His passions and his powers are incomparably greater than those of other men; (...) for in social life no human being can be more gentle, patient and unassuming than Maddalo. He is cheerful, frank and witty. His more serious conversation is a sort of intoxication. He has travelled much; (...) <sup>8</sup>

Here, the reader is presented with the Byron that Shelley knew and saw that summer in Venice. Not an Englishman anymore – even avoiding the English – but a Venetian nobleman. Shelley was looking up to him to such extent that he saw him as a hero, able to save England and help Italy regain its freedom, if only he abandoned his lifestyle of that time. And it was this intoxication by Byron that resulted in the creation of *Julian and Maddalo*.

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<sup>6</sup> Shelley and Jones, 35

<sup>7</sup> Shelley and Jones, 43

<sup>8</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 152

Of Julian, we get some information, but as Shelley was describing himself, he remained quite modest:

Julian is an Englishman of good family, passionately attached to those philosophical notions which assert the power of man over his own mind, and the immense improvement of which, by the extinction of certain moral superstitions, human society may be yet susceptible. He is a complete infidel, (...). Julian, (...) is conjectured by his friends to possess some good qualities. How far this is possible the pious reader will determine. Julian is rather serious.<sup>9</sup>

It is an interesting self-evaluation, though a short one. There is a third character in the poem, one that was supposed to be in a different poem along with Maddalo – the Maniac. Shelley says: “He seems, (...) to have been disappointed in love. He was evidently a very cultivated and amiable person when in his right senses.” (152) But when Julian and Maddalo meet him, he is a prisoner in a tower. This is evidence enough to assume that the character of the Maniac was inspired by Torquato Tasso. Eventually, he found a way into Shelley’s poem.

The very beginning of *Julian and Maddalo* is really a recollection of that memorable afternoon (and evening) the two poets spent together:

I rode one evening with Count Maddalo  
Upon the bank of land which breaks the flow  
Of Adria towards Venice: a bare strand  
Of hillocks, heaped from ever-shifting sand,  
Matted with thistles and amphibious weeds,  
Such as from earth's embrace the salt ooze breeds,  
Is this; an uninhabited sea-side,  
Which the lone fisher, when his nets are dried,  
(...)  
This ride was my delight. I love all waste  
And solitary places; where we taste  
The pleasure of believing what we see  
Is boundless, as we wish our souls to be:  
And such was this wide ocean, and this shore  
More barren than its billows; and yet more

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<sup>9</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 152

Than all, with a remembered friend I love  
To ride as then I rode (...) <sup>10</sup>

After the description of the scene, Shelley opens up about his love for solitude and places out of civilization (one of the notorious Romantic features) and his fascination with water. This one, in particular, is important because it is present in most of his poems, and it is also a symbol closely connected with several events in his life. This symbol of water will be addressed later in this thesis.

In lines 28 to 50, Shelley recollects the topics of their conversation: “(...) God, freewill and destiny; / Of all that earth has been or yet may be (...)” and hints at Byron’s weakness; his pride:

We descanted; and I (for ever still  
Is it not wise to make the best of ill?)  
Argued against despondency, but pride  
Made my companion take the darker side. <sup>11</sup>

Their talks were very probably quite passionate, and it is possible they argued often as they did not share each other’s opinions on certain things (such as Byron’s Venetian lifestyle), but it was these differences that helped them explore different perspectives on things.

Then, as if Shelley paused the scene and was overwhelmed by the horizon, he celebrates the beauty that surrounds them and is clearly grateful for that moment:

How beautiful is sunset, when the glow  
Of Heaven descends upon a land like thee,  
Thou Paradise of exiles, Italy!  
Thy mountains, seas and vineyards, and the towers  
Of cities they encircle!—it was ours  
To stand on thee, beholding it: and then. <sup>12</sup>

Here is where the famous exclamation about Italy being the “Paradise of exiles” comes from. After this brief pause to admire the view, Shelley gets back to the story. Julian and Maddalo go back from Lido in a gondola and Shelley describes how everything looks more beautiful during sunset – the sky, the sea, the hills. He mentions the Euganean hills, which later earn their own poem. Maddalo takes Julian to a spot from which they have even a better view of

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<sup>10</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 1-21, 152

<sup>11</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 46-49, 153

<sup>12</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 55-60, 153

the setting sun and eventually points his friend in the direction of a bell tower, where the Maniac is being held.

From this point on, the poem shifts from a mere recollection to a record of Shelley's feelings and thoughts, interwoven with hints at Tasso's life. In line 143, he mentions waiting for Byron/Maddalo in his palace, playing with his child. There comes the lovely portrait of little Allegra:

A lovelier toy sweet Nature never made;  
A serious, subtle, wild, yet gentle being,  
Graceful without design and unforeseeing,  
With eyes—Oh speak not of her eyes!—which seem  
Twin mirrors of Italian Heaven, (...) with me  
She was a special favourite: I had nursed  
Her fine and feeble limbs when she came first  
To this bleak world; and she yet seemed to know  
On second sight her ancient playfellow (...) <sup>13</sup>

Shelley loved Allegra so much that Mary thought he loved her more than his own children. Ironically, in order to be closer to Allegra (and Byron), Shelley took his friend's offer to stay at Este, and the journey from Bagni di Lucca cost his daughter Clara her life. She was buried in Lido and the grief Shelley felt is believed to have influenced the poem as well (Buxton, 85).

Towards the end of the poem, Julian/Shelley expresses his wish not to leave Venice and imagines the things he could do there if only he did not have responsibility towards Mary and William:

If I had been an unconnected man,  
I, from this moment, should have formed some plan  
Never to leave sweet Venice, ,—for to me  
It was delight to ride by the lone sea;  
And then, the town is silent—one may write  
Or read in gondolas by day or night,  
Having the little brazen lamp alight,  
Unseen, uninterrupted; books are there,  
Pictures, and casts from all those statues fair

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<sup>13</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 144-157, 154

Which were twin-born with poetry, and all  
We seek in towns, with little to recall  
Regrets for the green country. I might sit  
In Maddalo's great palace, and his wit  
And subtle talk would cheer the winter night (...)<sup>14</sup>

At the end of the poem, he refuses to reveal the Maniac's story and goes back to Maddalo's daughter, now a grown woman. The poet imagines her what she could be like as an adult, not knowing she would never become a woman, as she died at the age of five in 1822. He, however, made her live on in his work.

During his stay at Este, while he continued with *Julian and Maddalo* he also started writing *Prometheus Unbound*. The ambiance of Este – the woods, the monastery and the Castle – worked magic on his imagination and after a trip to the mountains, he composed *Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills* (1818) (Buxton, 92).



I Cappuccini, Este<sup>15</sup>

The poet, looking down from a hilltop, admires the view of “the waveless plain of Lombardy”<sup>16</sup>, which is geographically not very accurate, and he goes even further and remembers Venice (which also would probably not be visible from the spot):

A peopled labyrinth of walls,

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<sup>14</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 547-560, 159-160

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.rc.umd.edu/reference/misc/shelleysites/italy/este/este.html>

<sup>16</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 91, 395



Amphitrite's destined halls,  
Which her hoary sire now paves  
With his blue and beaming waves.<sup>17</sup>

He laments the fall of Venice under the Austrians – a delicate topic for both Shelley and Byron:

Sun-girt City, thou hast been  
Ocean's child, and then his queen;  
Now is come a darker day,  
And thou soon must be his prey,  
(...)  
With thy conquest-branded brow  
Stooping to the slave of slaves  
From thy throne, (...) <sup>18</sup>

Eighty lines later, he mentions Petrarch, as the Euganean hills are surrounding Arquà, Petrarch's final resting place. The thing that burdens the young poet's mind is, however, the fact that these beautiful places – Venice, Padua, the mountains – belong to the hands of the Austrians, and are inevitably changing, which he mentions frequently throughout the poem:

And the beams of morn lie dead  
On the towers of Venice now,  
Like its glory long ago.  
By the skirts of that gray cloud  
Many-domed Padua proud  
Stands, a peopled solitude,  
'Mid the harvest-shining plain,  
Where the peasant heaps his grain  
In the garner of his foe, (...) <sup>19</sup>

Towards the end of 1818, Percy, Mary and Claire left I Cappuccini at Este for a trip to the south, where they were planning to spend the winter. They made a few stops on the way, one of them in Ferrara, the city of Tasso and Ariosto. Shelley visited the Cathedral, the public library, the tomb of Ariosto and the cell where Tasso was imprisoned (Buxton, 93). His letter

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<sup>17</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 96-99, 359

<sup>18</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 115-124, 359

<sup>19</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 211-219, 361

to Thomas Peacock clearly shows that his interest was predominantly in Tasso's life rather than in his works:

I enclose you a piece of the wood of the very door which for seven years & three months divided this glorious being from the air & the light (...) The dungeon is low & dark, & when I say it is really a very decent dungeon, I speak as one who has seen the prisons in the Doges palace at Venice. (...) In the darkest corner is a mark in the wall where the chains were rivetted which bound him hand & foot.<sup>20</sup>

He was apparently so captured by the story and the atmosphere of the place that he had to send his friend a souvenir. Whether Byron took him to the prisons in Doges palace and gave him a guided tour is not clear but certainly possible. What is interesting is the fact that within just a few months of being in Italy, Shelley had already seen two dungeons. Perhaps his Romantic spirit was drawn by the tragic fates and mysteries accumulated in these places.

Bologna was another city they saw on their way to Rome, and although Shelley liked it it did not (similarly to Ferrara) earn a special place in his works. Though he mentions it in his letters he does not give it much space (Buxton, 94).

At the end of November, the party reached Rome and continued to Naples. Shelley was astonished to see how different the south was. Over the course of the winter, which is usually mild in these parts, he found time to climb Mount Vesuvius, see what was left from the Greek temples and of course visited the vanished city, Pompeii (97).

During that time, he was not working on anything major. He started to write a few poems, but eventually abandoned them, for example *Marenghi* (1818), in which he mentions Pisa and Florence and their struggle for freedom, but nothing of his current residence (Shelley and Woodberry, 432-433).

*Stanzas Written in Dejection, Near Naples* (1818) was, however, inspired by the events of the last few months. It starts rather optimistically, with the description of the ambiance, which Shelley loved so much:

The sun is warm, the sky is clear,  
The waves are dancing fast and bright,  
Blue isles and snowy mountains wear  
The purple noon's transparent might,  
(...)  
The winds, the birds, the ocean floods,

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<sup>20</sup> Shelley and Jones, 48

The City's voice itself, is soft like Solitude's.<sup>21</sup>

In the next stanza, the poet is enjoying sitting on the beach alone and looking around, in what seems to be a perfect day. The third and last stanza, however, brings a halt to that as the poet opens up and almost pities himself: "Alas! I have nor hope nor health, / Nor peace within nor calm around, / (...) Nor fame, nor power, nor love, nor leisure."<sup>22</sup>

While there is not much evidence of his stay in the south in his poems, he kept writing to Thomas Peacock, and one of the letters sent from Naples is especially playful and different from others. Shelley is not describing sunsets, ocean or mountains in it; instead, he focuses on Italian women and throws in even a bit of gossip about Byron:

The fact is, that first, the Italian women are perhaps the most contemptible of all who exist under the moon+ the most ignorant, the most disgusting, the most bigotted, the most filthy. Countesses smell so of garlick that an ordinary Englishman cannot approach them. (...) Well, Lord Byron is familiar with the lowest sort of those women, the people his gondolieri pick up in the streets. (...) He allows fathers & mothers to bargain with him for their daughters.<sup>23</sup>

This is a different side of Shelley almost never seen in his works. It tells something about his deep attachment to Nature, though: he was far better with words and birds and water than he was with people. After complaining about the women of Italy, he focuses again on what he likes – sightseeing. He informs Peacock that he was in Rome and lists all the things he saw there and was amazed by. A few days later, another letter is sent, this time to Thomas Jefferson Hogg. Shelley admits in it that Rome delighted him, and then complains about Italian society and, again about Byron:

I saw Lord Byron at Venice. He is practising aphrodisiacs at a great rate and I should think must be as tired as Candide was of the mountains where the Deity is worshipped, but he will not own it. (...) I do not like Italian women; the men are, as the reviews say, below criticism. They eat garlic; and are disgusting with ignorance and prostitution.<sup>24</sup>

The end of 1818 was not ideal for Shelley. Although surrounded by endless inspiration and beautiful nature, he was still adjusting to the new lifestyle, felt rootless, grieved his daughter and doubted himself both as a man and a poet. Nevertheless, he was not giving up hope that it would get better (Buxton, 98).

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<sup>21</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 1-9, 363

<sup>22</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 19-24, 363

<sup>23</sup> Shelley and Jones, 58

<sup>24</sup> Shelley and Jones, 69

## 5.2 The years 1819 – 1820: Roman Drama

If there is a place in Italy every literary, historical or religious enthusiast longs to see it is Rome. The capital of the fallen Roman Empire drew Shelley back from Naples like a magnet. In 1818, he briefly visited it and shared his thoughts in the above-mentioned letter to Peacock:

The Coliseum is unlike any work of human hands I ever saw before. (...) The Forum is the most desolate place you can conceive. (...) Rome is a city as it were of the dead, or rather those who cannot die & who survive the puny generations which inhabit & pass over the spot which they have made sacred to eternity. (...) In Rome, at least in the first enthusiasm of your recognitions of antient times, you see nothing of the Italians. The nature of the city assists the delusion, for its vast & antique walls describe a circumference of sixteen miles (...).<sup>25</sup>

A present-day tourist could probably not relate to Shelley's first impressions of Rome, which is, in a way a city of the dead, but there is much to see of the Italians and the antique walls are often well hidden behind modern high-rise buildings. The surroundings of Coliseum (which is and forever will be, under construction) are a construction site for the new subway line, and the noise from all the bars around the Pantheon does not contribute to the sacred atmosphere. In 1819, however, it was a completely different place, the Mecca of the Romantics in a way: wild, ancient, exotic, mysterious. Shelley called it "an inexhaustible mine of thought & feeling" (Shelley and Jones, 89), which it really was, for in March, he wrote three acts of *Prometheus Unbound* (Shelley and Woodberry, xxxviii). In the preface, Shelley admits where he got his inspiration:

This Poem was chiefly written upon the mountainous ruins of the Baths of Caracalla, among the flowery glades and thickets of odoriferous blossoming trees, which are extended in ever winding labyrinths upon its immense platforms and dizzy arches suspended in the air. The bright blue sky of Rome, and the effect of the vigorous awakening spring in that divinest climate, and the new life with which it drenches the spirits even to intoxication, were the inspiration of this drama.<sup>26</sup>

Although there is nothing specifically Italian about it, it was probably the omnipresence of the spirits of ancient times of Roman empires and mythologies, that led Shelley to focus on a Greek topic.

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<sup>25</sup> Shelley and Jones, 59

<sup>26</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 163

In his poetry of that time, there are actually only bits and pieces about Rome, as he was mostly focusing on Nature. However, in 1819, he wrote a fragment 'Rome', where he stresses the immortality of Nature and compares it to the fallen Roman Empire:

Rome has fallen, ye see it lying  
Heaped in undistinguished ruin:  
Nature is alone undying.<sup>27</sup>

The former glory of Rome is also touched upon in the *Ode to Naples* (1820) and the legend of Beatrice Cenci, of which he obtained information in the Cenci Palace in Rome, inspired him to write his verse drama *The Cenci: A Tragedy in Five Acts* (1819).

The tale of torture and suffering that eventually led to murder and execution of several members of the Cenci family aroused Shelley's interest immediately. He read the transcript of the family history in Livorno, and when he was in Rome he went to see Beatrice's portrait and the Casa Cenci. Deeply moved by the girl's fight to free her family from the tyranny of the father, he wrote his second Italian dramatic piece, hoping it would be one day compared to *King Lear* or *Oedipus*. He was against it being staged, however, as it would be too drastic (Shelley and Woodberry, 207). At the end of the long preface to the work, he describes both the portrait of Beatrice and the Cenci Palace (after explaining the background of the legend), so that the reader gets as much information as possible:

I endeavoured whilst at Rome to observe such monuments of this story as might be accessible to a stranger. The portrait of Beatrice at the Colonna Palace is admirable as a work of art: it was taken by Guido during her confinement in prison. (...) She seems sad and stricken down in spirit, yet the despair thus expressed is lightened by the patience of gentleness. (...) her eyes, which we are told were remarkable for their vivacity, are swollen with weeping and lustreless, but beautifully tender and serene. (...) Beatrice Cenci appears to have been one of those rare persons in whom energy and gentleness dwell together without destroying one another: her nature was simple and profound. (...) The Cenci Palace is of great extent; and though in part modernized, there yet remains a vast and gloomy pile of feudal architecture in the same state as during the dreadful scenes which are the subject of this tragedy. The Palace is situated in an obscure corner of Rome, near the quarter of the Jews, and from the upper windows you see the immense ruins of Mount Palatine half hidden under their profuse overgrowth of trees.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 484

<sup>28</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 209



Guido Reni, "Portrait of Beatrice Cenci"<sup>29</sup>

There was again something Romantic in him that drew him to the tragic characters such as Tasso or Beatrice Cenci. He read about them, visited the places of their suffering, and recorded their stories and his feelings in his works. The atmosphere of Rome seemed to suit him, for he found a diversity of stimuli there. Rome was not, however, only a place of inspiration and a spring vacation residence for the Shelleys. It was forever to be the place where they lost their son, William (Shelley and Woodberry, xxxvii). Shelley was emotionally ruined by that, a state which corresponded with the quiet ruins of the city. The loss of his boy (not long after he had lost his daughter), changed the way he felt about Rome, as he admits in the poem *To William Shelley* (1819):

With what truth may I say –  
Roma! Roma! Roma!  
Non è come era prima!<sup>30</sup>  
(...)  
But beneath this pyramid  
Thou art not – if a thing divine  
Like thee can die, thy funeral shrine  
Is thy mother's grief and mine.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.auktion-huell.de/de/auktionen/archiv/213/Gemaelde-744-857/alle/760/>

<sup>30</sup> [It is not what it used to be!]

<sup>31</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 481

William Shelley was buried in the Protestant cemetery near the pyramid – the very cemetery where John Keats would be buried nearly two years later, and where Shelley himself would have his gravestone eventually.

In the autumn of 1819, the party removed to Florence, a city certainly more optimistic (as it is not in ruins) and a special favourite of Shelley's. In November, Mary gave birth to a son, named Percy Florence, and happiness returned to their household (Shelley and Woodberry, xxxviii). The first time Shelley visited Florence was a year earlier, without Mary, and he described it to her in a letter:

Florence itself (...), I think is the most beautiful city I ever saw. It is surrounded with cultivated hills & from the bridge which crosses the broad channel of the Arno, the view is the most animated & elegant I ever saw. (...) Domes & steeples rise of all sides & the cleanliness is remarkably great. (...) I have seldom seen a city so lovely at first sight as Florence.<sup>32</sup>

During his first stay there, Shelley also wrote the poem 'On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery', which is not necessary to quote, but deserves a mention as it was not his custom to describe static sculptures, but rather the dynamics of nature.

It certainly must have made a difference, coming back to the northern part of Italy after spending the winter in the south, which is considered to have been, at least at that time, somewhat less cultivated. They spent the winter in Florence and while Mary was probably too busy taking care of their newborn, Shelley devoted his time to visiting galleries and writing. He finished the fourth canto of *Prometheus Unbound* and wrote one of his most celebrated poems, *Ode to the West Wind* (Buxton, 110). It was inspired by the winter wind and tempests, typical for the region, as he states in the author's note (Shelley and Woodberry, 367).

The year 1820 was not as productive as the previous two, which might partly be a result of Shelley's health problems. Mary mentions them in her notes to his poems written in 1820:

There was something in Florence that disagreed excessively with his health, and he suffered far more pain than usual; so much that we left it sooner than we intended, and removed to Pisa, where we had some friends, and, above all, where we could consult the celebrated Vaccà. (...) The residence at Pisa agreed with him better than any other, and there in consequence we remained...<sup>33</sup>

The reason behind their leaving Florence and choosing Pisa as their residence is here summed up in a couple of sentences by Mary herself. Pisa was not exactly the dream spot for Shelley

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<sup>32</sup> Shelley and Jones, 33

<sup>33</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 371

at first, as he was not impressed by it when they first visited it (he called it “a large disagreeable city almost without inhabitants”<sup>34</sup>), but the presence of their friends, the renowned doctor Vaccà, along with the fact that it was a quiet town without English tourists, compelled them to stay and eventually, they began to like Pisa. Shelley found everything he needed there – his peace and quiet, the mountains, river, sea and mild climate.<sup>35</sup>

From the works of 1820 *The Witch of Atlas* (which does not have any special connection to Italy, so it will not be analysed in this thesis), *Ode to Liberty* and *Ode to Naples*, and the nature-inspired *To a Skylark* need to be mentioned.

The odes both celebrate Italy and at the same time call for action in regaining its freedom that was taken from it by the Austrians. In *Ode to Liberty*, the poet recalls the times when Italian cities were powerful fortresses:

Then Rome was, and from thy deep bosom fairest

(...)

She drew the milk of greatness...

(...)

IX. And many a warrior-peopled citadel,

Like rocks which fire lifts out of the flat deep,

Arose in sacred Italy.<sup>36</sup>

He continues by pointing out that while Spain rises against the tyrant and Italy is about to do the same, England is not doing anything and does not even seem to come to help (XIII, 1-3). The poem concludes with a beautiful stanza celebrating Italy and urging her to start fighting against the enemy:

And thou, lost Paradise of this divine

And glorious world! thou flowery wilderness!

Thou island of eternity! thou shrine

Where desolation clothed with loveliness

Worships the thing thou wert! O Italy,

Gather thy blood into thy heart; repress

The beasts who make their dens thy sacred palaces.<sup>37</sup>

The political situation in Italy also inspired the *Ode to Naples*. In the author’s note, Shelley confesses that: “The Author has connected many recollections of his visit to Pompeii

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<sup>34</sup> Shelley and Jones, 18

<sup>35</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 372

<sup>36</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 383

<sup>37</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 385, Stanza 14



and Baiae with the enthusiasm excited by the intelligence of the proclamation of a Constitutional Government at Naples.” (Shelley and Woodberry, 395)

This poem is specific in that it not only was inspired by a political event, but because it mentions, besides Naples, five other Italian cities. Such a thing is not to be found in any of Shelley’s other poems. The Strophe 1 celebrates Naples and its step to victory, but reminds that there is still much work ahead of them:

Naples! thou Heart of men which ever pantest  
Naked, beneath the lidless eye of Heaven!  
Elysian City, which to calm enchantest  
The mutinous air and sea! (...)  
Metropolis of a ruined Paradise  
Long lost, late won, and yet but half regained!<sup>38</sup>

The two Antistrophes summarize the state of other Italian cities, waiting for their moment to do what Naples did<sup>39</sup>:

Sea which paves the desert streets of Venice laughs  
In light, and music; widowed Genoa wan  
By moonlight spells ancestral epitaphs,  
Murmuring, ‘Where is Doria?’ fair Milan,  
Within whose veins long ran  
The viper’s palsying venom, lifts her heel  
To bruise his head.  
(...)  
Florence! beneath the sun,  
Of cities fairest one,  
Blushes within her bower for Freedom’s expectation:  
From eyes of quenchless hope  
Rome tears the priestly cope,  
As ruling once by power, so now by admiration.<sup>40</sup>

Unfortunately, Shelley never got to see Italy liberated from the tyrants, but his passion for the concept of freedom was undoubtedly inspiring for the Europeans during the times their own freedom was being threatened.

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<sup>38</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 52-58, 396

<sup>39</sup> Inspired by the revolution in Spain, the people of Naples, led by the Carbonari, revolted against King Ferdinand I.

<sup>40</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 106-121, 397

### 5.3 The years 1821 – 1822: The Pisan Circle

Shelley spent the end of 1820 in Pisa with his wife and new acquaintances, among others Emilia Viviani, Prince Mavrocordato and Sgricci Taaffe. In January 1821, two more members were added to their ever-growing circle: Edward and Jane Williams. They came from England and have quickly become Shelley's favourites (Shelley and Woodberry, xxxviii).

It is possible that Shelley had already in mind the idea of creating an even bigger circle of intellectuals that would mutually support, challenge and inspire each other. Having already invited John Keats to come to Italy, in the hopes of the southern climate's beneficial effects on his illness, there was a chance of something incredible about to be created. Unfortunately, John Keats died in Rome in February, having seen little from the country he so much longed to visit.

His death later prompted Shelley to write his probably greatest work of that year, the poem *Adonais*. In the poem, he celebrates the poet and his talent and mourns the death of poetry itself. Although it is clear that *Adonais* in the poem is supposed to be John Keats, it could just as easily be read (especially from 1822 onwards) as a poem about Shelley, as it celebrates poetry and the character of a poet.

The preface mentions the young poet who died of tuberculosis in Rome, but focuses much more on the place he was buried, which was Shelley's signature move – nature and ambiance over people.

John Keats died at Rome (...) and was buried in the romantic and lonely cemetery of the Protestants in that city, under the pyramid which is the tomb of Cestius and the massy walls and towers, now mouldering and desolate, which formed the circuit of ancient Rome. The cemetery is an open space among the ruins, covered in winter with violets and daisies. It might make one in love with death to think that one would be buried in so sweet a place.<sup>41</sup>

The last sentence, especially, shows the attachment Shelley had to that place. His son was buried there as well, and now his friend. Little did he know that nearly a year later (for *Adonais* was composed in the summer of 1821), a gravestone would be erected for him there as well. If he knew, however, he would certainly not be opposed to the choice of his last resting place.

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<sup>41</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 306-307

Shelley's literary output of 1821 and the events of that year as well, were all influenced by a powerful symbol that has both inspired and haunted the poet his all life – water. As promised in the analysis of *Julian and Maddalo*, a small section will be dedicated to this important symbol. It would deserve a thesis of its own, given the fact that Shelley uses it throughout almost all of his poems from England and Italy, but a few paragraphs will have to suffice here, for not mentioning it at all would be a grave mistake.

In his short but insightful book *I ragazzi che amavano il vento* [The Boys Who Loved the Wind], Roberto Mussapi uses the symbol of water (and wind) and its involvement in the lives and death of Shelley and Byron, as well as to describe their friendship. Shelley has always been passionate about water, but scared of its power as he was not a very good swimmer. In 1816, he met Byron and became friends with him while spending time on a boat on the lake Geneva. It was there, very probably, where Byron taught him to swim (27). Shelley was gifted to see water, its colours and sounds and its movement better than any other poet of his age. He liked to get in the water and study it almost scientifically, pondering about gravity or reflection of sunbeams. Swimming also gave him the opportunity to be alone, one with nature. In a way, it was a sacred element for him, one he feared and respected. In his personal life, water was as powerful a symbol as it was in his works: it brought him friendship with Byron, it took the life of his first wife, and later took his own as well (28). In his poems, the symbol of water is closely intertwined with the symbol of wind, for example in *Julian and Maddalo* (1818), *Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills* (1818), *Ode to the West Wind* (1820), *To a Skylark* (1820), *Adonais* (1821) and *The Boat on the Serchio* (1821), which will be addressed shortly.

In Italy, Shelley pursued his passion for boats and sailing, an activity that made it possible for him to feel the wind and see the water. In her notes to her husband's poems from 1821, Mary says that:

Shelley's favourite taste was boating; (...) he, together with a friend, contrived a boat such as the huntsmen carry about with them in the Maremma, to cross the sluggish but deep streams that interscent the forests, (...) it held three persons and he was often seen on the Arno in it, to the horror of the Italians, who remonstrated on the danger, and could not understand how any one could take pleasure in an exercise that risked life. "Ma va per la vita!" they exclaimed.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 401

His boating experience with Edward William is partly recorded in the poem *The Boat on the Serchio* (1821), in which he calls the two of them Melchior and Lionel. The poem starts at night when everyone is sleeping – the boat as well. The next day, when they go sailing, Lionel and Melchior discuss the boat’s feelings, although Lionel is rather reluctant to think about it. The poem ends with the focus switched to the Serchio and its movement until its waves reach the ocean.

Our boat is asleep on Serchio’s stream,  
Its sails are folded like thoughts in a dream,  
The helm sways idly hither and thither.  
Dominic, the boatman, has brought the mast  
And the oars and the sails; but ’t is sleeping fast,  
Like a beast, unconscious of its tether.

(...)

The Serchio, twisting forth  
Between the marble barriers which it clove  
At Ripafratta, leads through the dread chasm  
The wave that died the death which lovers love,

(...)

At Arno’s feet tribute of corn and wine;  
Then, through the pestilential deserts wild  
Of tangled marsh and woods of stunted fir,  
It rushes to the ocean.<sup>43</sup>

Taking some time off from Pisa, Shelley went to Ravenna in August to see Byron and lure him to Pisa. Byron had already left Venice and had abandoned his extravagant lifestyle and was now staying at Pallazzo Guiccioli – his new girlfriend’s house (Buxton, 144).

Shelley soon adapted to his lifestyle – they got up at noon, ate and talked until about six, then rode horses through the woods, and after they came home they had dinner and stayed up until six in the morning gossiping about everything (144). Shelley also went sight-seeing, especially to see Dante’s tomb and the library, but spent most of the time with Byron, convincing him to come to Pisa. He found him a house there, furnished it, even found a place for his horses and then arranged the transport of Byron’s things and took care of Teresa

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<sup>43</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 449-450

Guiccioli to arrive safely to Pisa. Byron did not oppose to moving, but it still took him months to finally reach Pisa and reunite with Teresa and Shelley (149).

Having invited Leigh Hunt to help them with establishing the journal 'The Liberal', Shelley was in good spirits, being the essential part of the circle, the glue that was keeping them all together (a position which he must have enjoyed). The days were spent with writing and reading, visiting Byron, riding and shooting or playing billiards with him, as well as with fine dining and debates (Buxton, 176).

One would expect that he had everything he needed to find inspiration for his next poetical masterpiece. However, he was having problems with writing, and Buxton suggests it might have been due to the lack of public interest in his works back in England. What he did not know was that the English were actually growing quite fond of him, but his publishers and friends never sent him the reviews. He felt unappreciated, and even though he knew that his poetry was not likely to attract masses, his faith in himself was fading. He was isolated from his audience in England, misunderstood, and in the shadow of the famous Lord Byron.

It was not until December when Shelley took up his interest in Charles I and started writing the long-considered tragedy. At that time, he only had seven months to live (178). Shelley's stay in Italy was not only beneficial to his creative powers, however, and Byron's presence was not always an inspirational stimulus. Shelley decided to temporarily abandon the tragedy about Charles I as a possible result of Byron's success lowering his own self-esteem. His complicated relationship with Byron is also a topic for a whole book, but needs to be at least mentioned in connection with both Shelley's ability and inability to write. While in Venice the time they spent together prompted both to write great poems, their time in Pisa almost seemed to do the exact opposite. It might have been that Shelley's admiration for his friend's genius was transforming into envy and resentment; emotions which were obstructing his imagination. In 1822, he wrote to Horace Smith: "I do not write – I have lived too long near Lord Byron and the sun has extinguished the glowworm." (Buxton, 225) This is to show that Shelley's stay in Italy was not only beneficial to his creative powers. He was, however, still writing short poems, often inspired by the walks he took through the pine forest of the Cascine, alone or with Mary and Jane Williams. The ones in which it is especially clear and which are indeed a pleasure to read, are *To Jane: Invitation* (182) and *To Jane: Recollection* (1822). In the first one, Shelley paints an almost idealised picture of the peaceful solitude he found surrounded by nature (the solitude he needed to clear his mind and maybe regain strength and faith in himself):

(...) Away, away, from men and towns,

To the wild wood and the downs;  
To the silent wilderness  
Where the soul need not repress  
Its music (...).<sup>44</sup>

In *Recollection*, he describes the ambiance once again, in the past tense, in a way that no painting or a photograph would not be able to capture it:

II. We wandered to the Pine Forest  
That skirts the Ocean's foam,  
The lightest wind was in its nest,  
The tempest in its home.  
(...)  
Sent from beyond the skies,  
A light of Paradise.<sup>45</sup>

Water and wind had also found a way into his poems, from which the most famous are probably *Evening: Ponte al Mare, Pisa* (1822) and the fragment *Lines Written in the Bay of Lerici* (1822). In the following extract from the latter, the poet watches boats in a harbour:

I sat and saw the vessels glide  
Over the ocean bright and wide,  
Like spirit-winged chariots sent  
O'er some serenest element  
For ministrations strange and far,  
As if to some Elysian star  
Sailed for drink to medicine  
Such sweet and bitter pain as mine.  
And the wind that wing'd their flight  
From the land came fresh and light,  
And the scent of winged flowers,  
And the coolness of the hours  
Of dew, and sweet warmth left by day,  
Were scatter'd o'er the twinkling bay.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 21-29, 412

<sup>45</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 412-413

<sup>46</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 416

In *Evening*, he focuses on the atmosphere of the evening after sunset, when nature goes to sleep and everything is still and quiet. He observes the city from a distance, as its image reflects on water, with the evening breeze playing gently with the surface:

The sun is set; the swallows are asleep;  
The bats are flitting fast in the gray air;  
The slow soft toads out of damp corners creep,  
And evening's breath, wandering here and there  
Over the quivering surface of the stream,  
Wakes not one ripple from its summer dream.

(...)

Within the surface of the fleeting river  
The wrinkled image of the city lay,  
Immovably unquiet, and forever  
It trembles, but it never fades away.<sup>47</sup>

At that time, Shelley was also working on *The Triumph of Life*, a poem written in terza rima and based on *Divina Commedia*, with Rousseau to replace Virgil in the Inferno-inspired part (Buxton, 228). The circumstances of the poem, and the last weeks of Shelley's life, are described by Mary Shelley:

In the wild but beautiful Bay of Spezia the winds and waves which he loved became his playmates. His days were chiefly spent on the water; the management of his boat, its alterations and improvements, were his principal occupations. At night, when the unclouded moon shone on the calm sea, he often went alone in his little shallop to the rocky caves that bordered it, and sitting beneath their shelter wrote *The Triumph of Life*, the last of his productions. The beauty but strangeness of this lonely place, the refined pleasure which he felt in the companionship of a few selected friends, our entire sequestration from the rest of the world, all contributed to render this period of his life one of continued enjoyment. I am convinced that the two months we passed there were the happiest he had ever known. . . .<sup>48</sup>

Mary was not very happy herself, she nearly died during a miscarriage, she was worried about Shelley's life when he was sailing and about his mental health due to his strange visions of ghosts, naked children emerging from the sea or decaying corpses of their friends. Yet

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<sup>47</sup> Shelley and Woodberry, 207-208

<sup>48</sup> Shelley and Hutchinson, Preface by Mrs. Shelley to the volume of Posthumous poems published in 1824.

Shelley might not have been as happy as Mary thought. He nearly lost her while trying to save her life when she lost their unborn child. Moreover, Allegra died in April: terrible news he had to break to Claire. His subsequent visions made it all worse. In May, Shelley's new boat came from Genoa and was christened Ariel (after Ariel from *The Tempest*), which was finally something to be happy about. Moreover, Leigh Hunt reached Leghorn and the dream of publishing their own journal was soon to become true. Shelley was supposed to meet him, so he set sail in Ariel on July 8 with Edward Williams and a sailor-boy, Charles, even though he knew the weather was not ideal (Shelley and Woodberry, xli). When no one had heard from them or Hunt for days, they organized a search party, Byron had his boat to cruise along the coast and he himself took his horse and rode along the beaches in hopes of finding the wreck or his friends. He only found a few personal things from the boat but no bodies. Shelley's body was found on July 18 and had to be cremated. In his pocket, they found a book of Keats's poems. Trelawny, an old friend of Shelley's, who had to break the news to Jane and Mary, snatched Shelley's heart from the flames and gave it to the widow. The rest was buried in Rome, in the same cemetery where they buried William and John Keats in the previous years. The Pisan Circle began to disintegrate. Two of the major Romantic poets of the second generation were dead and all the hopes were directed to the last second-generation Romantic: Lord Byron.



## 6 George Gordon, Lord Byron

### 6.1 The years 1816 – 1817: An Englishman in Italy

A lot has been, and certainly will be, written about Lord Byron. Hundreds of authors have studied his life with such fascination with which he once studied Tasso's or Dante's. It is nearly impossible to pick only one aspect of his life to focus on, or to try to squeeze everything in a few neat pages. However it is challenging, though, it is also exciting to delve into Byron's adventures from his years in Italy. A legend was created there, immortal lines from letters and poems that still provoke and fascinate their readers. This chapter of the thesis will trace his steps and marks he left in the paradise of exiles, as well as the way the country imprinted on some of his works.

After spending the summer in the inspiring company of Percy Shelley, Byron with his friend Hobhouse went to Italy. Unlike Shelley, who had little idea of where he would like to settle, Byron knew his destination; Venice. Before reaching it, he had to pass through Italy's 'Lake District' and Milan (Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, xxxix).

He liked Milan very much and wrote a lengthy letter about it to his publisher John Murray. Naturally, he mentions the beautiful Duomo and then compares Milan to Seville, the latter of which he liked better (Moore, Vol. III, 299-300). No monument aroused his interest as much as the Ambrosian library, specifically a correspondence of letters between two lovers, Lucretia Borgia and Cardinal Bembo. Byron learnt the letter by heart (because they could not be copied) and even wanted to take some of the hair that Lucretia enclosed to one of the letters. Byron writes about this to Augusta as well, which only shows how fascinated he was by the tragic love story (Byron and Marchand, 134-135).

Milan did not detain Byron for very long. Even though he liked the city and the people, he was, as Mussapi points out, "too restless, childish and melancholic" for Milan (15). His next stop on the way to Venice was Verona, and his impressions of it are once again aptly recorded in a letter, this time to Thomas Moore. He greatly admired the amphitheatre, which he thought was more beautiful than those he had seen in Greece. He also visited the tomb that is supposed to be the final resting place of the Capulets (Byron and Marchand, 152). Byron followed the Romantic tradition of visiting tombs and holding cells, although it is true that it is hard to avoid such places in Italy, especially when the country itself is basically a grave: a grave of an Empire and of Arts.

From Capulet's tomb, Byron took a few pieces of granite to send to his daughter and nieces – similarly to Shelley, who took the splinter of wood from Tasso's cell - they were both apparently very keen on taking souvenirs.

In November 1816, Lord Byron reached Venice and the most exciting and also the most productive chapter of his life had begun. It is essential to focus on the analysis of Byron's relationship to Venice, even though it might mean to give less space to other, less important places of his residence.

Byron's expectations of Venice were high but they were all fulfilled and perhaps even surpassed. Mussapi notes that the first words Lord Byron learnt after arriving in Venice say a lot about the city at that time, as well as the character of the poet. Among those words were 'gondola', 'conversazione', 'mantello' [cloak or coat], 'cavalier servente', 'amoroso' and 'amante' (Mussapi, 15). Byron and Venice were simply a match made in heaven. In one of his letters to Thomas Moore from November 1816, Byron wrote:

Venice has always been (next to the East) the greenest island of my imagination. (...) It has not disappointed me; though its evident decay would perhaps, have that effect upon others. But I have been familiar with ruins too long to dislike desolation. Besides, I have fallen in love, which, next to falling into the canal, (which would be of no use, as I can swim) is the best or the worst thing I could do.<sup>49</sup>

While it took a considerable amount of time for Shelley to adapt to the new environment, Byron got used to the pace of life in Venice in a matter of days. He already loved the language, and he quickly got used to the southern lifestyle, as he describes in a letter to John Murray:

I like the gloomy gaiety of their gondolas (...) Venice – is most alive at night – the theatres are not open till *nine* – and the society is proportionably late – all this to my taste (...) I have got remarkably good apartments in a private house (...) I have got my gondola (...) I go out frequently – and am in a very good contentment.<sup>50</sup>

It seems that in Venice Byron found one of his major themes – ruins and their effect on the wandering Romantic, as well as his freedom. Delving into the legendary lifestyle that even Shelley – the supporter of free love – frowned upon, a new side of Byron-the poet started to surface. Naturally, a place that was so close to his heart had to have a special place in his works. The beginnings were rather modest - there is a short poem from November 1816 'On the Bust of Helen by Canova'.

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<sup>49</sup> Byron and Marchand, 152

<sup>50</sup> Byron and Marchand, 153

In December of the same year, he wrote 'Venice. A Fragment.'<sup>51</sup>, in which he describes Piazza San Marco (St. Mark's Square) at night, and it is the first poem in which he mentions the Doge's palace, the Bridge of Sighs, both of which are repeatedly mentioned in his later poems. There is nothing about the political situation in Venice in the poem.

The restless adventurer could not stay in one place for very long, however. Italy was too exciting and there were many places he longed to visit. In spring 1817, he decided to go on a trip and visit Arquà, Bologna, Ferrara, Florence, Ravenna and Rimini, with Rome being the final destination. Sharing his travel schedule with Thomas Moore, he wrote him that although he desired to see Rome the most, and also Tasso's cell at Ferrara and the Venus in Florence, Venice was "my head, or rather my *heart*-quarters" (Moore, Vol. III, 159). Having originally planned to stop at Mantua instead of Ferrara, he explains his change of heart:

I would rather see the cell where they caged Tasso, and where he became mad and --, than his own MSS, at Modena, or the Mantuan birthplace of that harmonious plagiary and miserable flatterer, whose cursed hexameters were drilled into me at Harrow.<sup>52</sup>

The one day Byron spent in Ferrara inspired him to write *The Lament of Tasso* (1817) the preface of which is quite unrelated to the story, but offers some information on Ferrara and Tasso's cell:

At Ferrara, in the Library, are preserved the original MSS. of Tasso's Gierusalemme and of Guarini's Pastor Fido, with letters of Tasso, one from Titian to Ariosto, and the inkstand and chair, the tomb and the house, of the latter. But, as misfortune has a greater interest for posterity, and little or none for the cotemporary, the cell where Tasso was confined in the hospital of St. Anna attracts a more fixed attention than the residence or the monument of Ariosto—at least it had this effect on me. There are two inscriptions, one on the outer gate, the second over the cell itself, inviting, unnecessarily, the wonder and the indignation of the spectator. Ferrara is much decayed and depopulated: the castle still exists entire; and I saw the court where Parisina and Hugo were beheaded, according to the annal of Gibbon.<sup>53</sup>

Clearly, Byron knew enough of Tasso and it can be assumed he already had an interest in writing a poem about him, but a mere feeling or second-hand information from books was not enough. Byron was particular in that he often worked with factual evidence and took the time to do his research when it came to writing about historical or literary figures (Buxton, 72). On

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<sup>51</sup> Byron and Coleridge, 538

<sup>52</sup> (Moore, Vol. III, 159), The "miserable flatterer" is very probably meant to be Virgil.

<sup>53</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 382

the other hand, there were works Byron did not plan ahead and began them on the spur of the moment.

Another interesting point and a comparison with Shelley not to be overlooked is that for Byron, Italy was a land of history and literature. While Shelley was drawn to the isolated places near the sea and deep forests and delighted in colourful descriptions of the countryside, Byron – probably because he was closer to the culture and to people in general – connected places with specific events or people. It was not merely Venice – it was the place of Carnevale, cavalieri serventi, stories of prisons beneath the Doge's palace and political unrests. For Byron, it was Shakespeare's Venice, Tasso's Ferrara, Dante's Florence and Ravenna, Petrarch's Arquà, Nero and Caesar's Rome. He was interested in the lives and deaths of those famous figures more than he was in the reflection of sunbeams on water or the songs of skylarks. That is not to say that Byron ignored Italian nature, for he loved Venetian sunsets and riding horses on Lido or in the countryside surrounding Rome, but finding refuge in the natural world was rather Shelley's domain.

In May, he finally reached Rome and spent a few days seeing the sights and enjoying the atmosphere. Where Venice suited his lifestyle, Rome was the mirror of his Romantic spirit. Kenneth Churchill aptly observed that "nowhere in Italy could the Romantic traveller feel himself a ruin amid ruins; and in Italy nowhere more than at Rome" (37). Byron's fascination with tragic love stories, suffering and famous deaths brought him to the site of a fallen Empire and it was clear something remarkable was to come out of that. The legendary Canto Fourth of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* practically functions as a separate poem, containing Byron's impressions of Italian cities (Rome in particular) mixed with his historical, political and literary knowledge. It offers a perspective on Italy as Byron saw it: decaying but beautiful, a burial site of beauty, mystery and power.

The poem starts with the traveller finding himself in Venice, standing on the Bridge of Sighs and looking around, while reminiscing about Venice's past glory. In the third stanza, the atmosphere changes, but the poet finds hope again towards the end:

In Venice Tasso's echoes are no more,  
And silent rows the songless gondolier;<sup>54</sup>  
Her palaces are crumbling to the shore,  
And music meets not always now the ear;  
Those days are gone -- but Beauty still is here.

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<sup>54</sup> In a letter to John Murray from July 1817, Byron explains that "formerly the Gondoliers sang always - & Tasso's Gerusalemme was their ballad" (Byron and Marchand, 245)

States fall, arts fade -- but Nature doth not die,  
Nor yet forget how Venice once was dear,  
The pleasant place of all festivity,  
The revel of the earth, the masque of Italy!<sup>55</sup>

In the seventeenth stanza, he accuses England of abandoning Venice in times of need and warns her that the same fate may befall her, despite the water that separates it from the continent:

Thus, Venice, if no stronger claim were thine,  
Were all thy proud historic deeds forgot,  
Thy choral memory of the Bard divine,  
Thy love of Tasso, should have cut the knot  
Which ties thee to thy tyrants; and thy lot  
Is shameful to the nations, -- most of all,  
Albion! to thee: the Ocean queen should not  
Abandon Ocean's children; in the fall  
Of Venice think of thine, despite thy watery wall.<sup>56</sup>

Right in the following stanza, the mood changes again and the poet shares with the reader his feelings about the floating city:

I loved her from boyhood -- she to me  
Was as a fairy city of the heart,  
Rising like water-columns from the sea,  
Of joy the sojourn, and of wealth the mart;  
And Otway, Radcliffe, Schiller, Shakespeare's art,  
Had stamped her image in me, and even so,  
Although I found her thus, we did not part,  
Perchance even dearer in her day of woe,  
Than when she was a boast, a marvel, and a show.<sup>57</sup>

In this stanza, it appears difficult to separate the author's voice from Childe Harold's and the reader could assume it is indeed Byron talking. In fact, in the Preface (which is actually a letter to John Hobhouse), Byron says that since the readers already treat the poet and the traveller as the same person, he might as well go with it and admits the lines are blurred for

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<sup>55</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 34

<sup>56</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 35

<sup>57</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 35

him as well (Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 33). He further admits Venice had always been a place close to his heart and his passion about it was nurtured through the works of famous writers. It is interesting that he admits to love Venice more in her current state (under Austrian rule) than he would have in the times of her greatest glory.

After leaving Venice, the poet travels probably through the countryside of the Veneto region and his thoughts run wild, which culminates in the famous stanza twenty-five, where the traveller practically becomes one with Italy, feeling in the right place at the right time:

But my soul wanders; I demand it back  
To meditate amongst decay, and stand  
A ruin amidst ruins; there to track  
Fall'n states and buried greatness, o'er a land  
Which was the mightiest in its old command,  
And is the loveliest, and must ever be  
The master-mould of Nature's heavenly hand,  
Wherein were cast the heroic and the free,  
The beautiful, the brave -- the lords of earth and sea.<sup>58</sup>

If only a few lines would have to be chosen from Byron's work to describe his feelings towards Italy, quoting this stanza would likely be sufficient. A beautiful, freedom-loving poet that was chased away from his own country – a desolate outsider – found his place in a country that used to be grand and free, but was now a desolate outsider as well.

In the following stanza, the poet calls Italy “the garden of the world, the home / Of all Art (...) and Nature” and idealises its ambiance.

As he travels further, he visits Arquà, where “Pillar'd in their sarcophagus, repose / The bones of Laura's lover”<sup>59</sup>, the first of his literary heroes he mentions in the Fourth Canto: Petrarch. According to the poet, he “arose / to raise a language, and his land reclaim / From the dull yoke of her barbaric foes”<sup>60</sup> and when he died, a tomb was built for him in Arquà, where he is celebrated as their hero, too, even though he was not born there.

The next city mentioned is Ferrara, both famous and infamous for Tasso, the “victor unsurpass'd in modern song!”<sup>61</sup>, whose fate the poet laments. Before he removes to Florence, the poet venerates Italy again, its contribution to Europe and promises its liberation:

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<sup>58</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 36

<sup>59</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 36

<sup>60</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 36

<sup>61</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 37

XLVII.

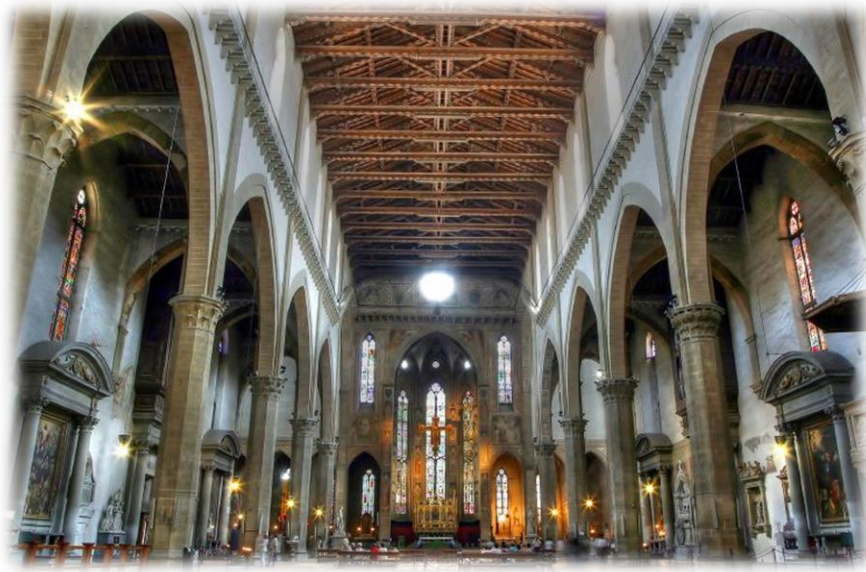
Yet, Italy! (...)

Mother of Arts! as once of arms; they hand

Was then our guardian, and is still our guide;

Parent of our Religion! (...)<sup>62</sup>

In the stanzas about Florence, the poet focuses again on the famous deceased that are buried there and makes a reference to the Basilica of Santa Croce, as it is the burial place of (among others) Michelangelo Buonarroti, Vittorio Alfieri, Niccolò Machiavelli and Galileo Galilei.



Basilica di Santa Croce<sup>63</sup> (with the tombs on both sides)

Stanza fifty-six, however, remembers the three greatest names in Italian literature (Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio) and wonders why their ashes do not lie here in Santa Croce as well, which works as a sneering commentary on what is to come in the next stanza: “Ungrateful Florence! Dante sleeps afar”<sup>64</sup>. Dante Alighieri, although born in Florence, was exiled, and had to be buried in Ravenna. Florence, however, demanded his remains because, by that time, he was a known more as a writer than a political activist, and naturally, Florence knew that burying him there would bring the city eternal fame. This is hinted at in stanza fifty-nine:

And Santa Croce wants their mighty dust,

(...)

Happier Ravenna! on thy hoary shore,

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<sup>62</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 38

<sup>63</sup> [http://www.museumsinflorence.com/musei/museum\\_of\\_opera\\_s\\_croce.html](http://www.museumsinflorence.com/musei/museum_of_opera_s_croce.html)

<sup>64</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 38

Fortress of falling empire! honour'd sleeps  
The immortal exile; -- Arqua, too, her store  
Of tuneful relics proudly claims and keeps,  
While Florence vainly begs her banish'd dead and weeps.<sup>65</sup>

Byron could probably relate to the immortal exile, having escaped his country after being accused of things much worse than Dante once was accused of. Maybe he wanted England to be like Florence one day: vainly begging her banished dead and weeping over Byron's death as well.

The city to get the most space in the poem is Rome. Byron naturally shared Shelley's fascination for the ancient cradle of European civilization. Roman and Greek history and mythology was, along with their languages and literature, taught at most universities in Europe, and Cambridge and Oxford were not exceptions. Anyone who wanted to call themselves a scholar had to have some knowledge about ancient Rome and Greece.

For Byron, Rome was the mother of Arts and Christianity, of power and of crime, and in a way, of humanity. He very much enjoyed walking where Caesar or Virgil used to walk and breathing the dust of the ruins of what was once the world's empire. The poet's fascination turns into nostalgia, which turns into fascination once again when he beholds another monument, a memento of great minds and better times.

LXXVIII.

Oh Rome! my country! city of the soul!  
The orphans of the heart must turn to thee,  
Lone mother of dead empires! and control  
In their shut breasts their petty misery.<sup>66</sup>

In the next stanza, Rome is called "the Niobe of nations", now standing "childless and crownless", desolate and woeful, without its heroes and its fame. Stanza eighty-one then compares Rome to a desert where people stumble over the remnants of its glory. A lament for Caesar, Tully and Virgil follows, as the poet regrets that people will never see the Rome of that time – the free, bustling capital of Europe.

Roaming through the ruins, the poet reaches the Coliseum, and immediately remembers the saying he learnt in England:

CXLV.

'While stands the Coliseum, Rome shall stand;

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<sup>65</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 39

<sup>66</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 41



When falls the Coliseum, Rome shall fall;  
And when Rome falls -- the World.' From our own land  
Thus spake the pilgrims o'er this mighty wall  
In Saxon times, which we are wont to call  
Ancient; and these three mortal things are still  
On their foundations, and unalter'd all;  
Rome and her Ruin past Redemption's skill,  
The world, the same wide den -- of thieves, or what ye will.<sup>67</sup>

From the Coliseum, which fortunately still stands, even though Rome has fallen (but will rise from its ashes), the poet moves to another famous monument:

CXLVI

Simple, erect, severe, austere, sublime --  
Shrine of all saints and temple of all gods,  
From Jove to Jesus -- spared and blest by time;  
Looking tranquillity, while falls or nods  
Arch, empire, each thing round thee, and man plods  
His way through thorns to ashes -- glorious dome!  
Shalt thou not last? Time's scythe and tyrants' rods  
Shiver upon thee -- sanctuary and home  
Of art and piety -- Pantheon! -- pride of Rome!<sup>68</sup>

Once again, from the point of view of a modern tourist, Pantheon – especially its exterior – would unlikely be celebrated as a tranquil sanctuary or home, because as it is squeezed between houses, visited by thousands of people each day, it is one of the loudest and most chaotic places in Rome.

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<sup>67</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 46

<sup>68</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 46



Pantheon (19<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>69</sup>



Pantheon (21<sup>st</sup> century)<sup>70</sup>

Byron cannot, luckily, experience the Rome of today, nevertheless, what he says about it in stanza one hundred and forty-seven was true in his age, as well as in ours, that Rome is a “relic of nobler days, and noblest arts! / Despoil’d yet perfect, with thy circle spreads / A holiness appealing to all hearts”<sup>71</sup>.

In his letters from Rome, Byron was less descriptive than when he wrote about Venice. He probably felt that no words could do justice to the marvels of the city. He wrote to Thomas Moore: “Of Rome I say nothing; it is indescribable (...) As for the Coliseum, Pantheon, St. Peter’s, the Vatican, Palatine, &c. – they are quite inconceivable, and must be seen.”<sup>72</sup> He continues with a joke: “I have seen the Pope alive, and a cardinal dead – both of whom looked very well indeed.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> <https://marcosantiques.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/early-19th-century-view-of-rome-the-pantheon-with-piazza-della-rotonda.jpg>

<sup>70</sup> <http://mediastream.jumeirah.com/webimage/heroactual//globalassets/global/destinations/rome/destinations-rome-attractions-hero.jpg>

<sup>71</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 46

<sup>72</sup> Byron and Marchand, 227

<sup>73</sup> Byron and Marchand, 227

## 6.2 The years 1818 – 1819: The Making of a Legend

In September 1817, Byron returned to Venice, rented a villa at Este and also the luxurious Palazzo Mocenigo on the Grand Canal.



Palazzo Mocenigo<sup>74</sup>

At that time, besides enjoying endless parties and sleepless nights in the company of his mistresses, Byron was also studying Italian writers, Pulci especially, and it was his metre he later adopted for *Beppo*, *Don Juan* and *The Vision of Judgement* (Roberts, 62). At that time, however, he was still working on Canto Fourth and did research on Marino Faliero, whose blacked-out portrait he had seen in the Palace of the Doges (and whose story naturally fascinated him).

Gathering inspiration and enjoying his freedom, he soon became a celebrity in Venice. Unlike Shelley, who needed to be alone and calm in order to think about writing poetry, Byron had to be active all the time. Mussapi explains that Byron's creative mind worked best while he was doing something, such as shooting, riding a horse or making love to a woman. In Venice, there was always something for him to do. He bought his own gondola, imported horses to Lido (a beach near Venice) and went swimming often (Mussapi, 17-18). He was considered the best swimmer of all times and had nicknames such as "the English fish", "water-spaniel" or "sea-devil" (Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, xli). Sometimes, after a party he attended at one of the palaces, he jumped into the canal (fully dressed) and swam home (Mussapi, 22). One of the boatmen of Venice reportedly said that "he is a good gondolier, spoilt by being a poet and a lord" (Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, xli).

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<sup>74</sup> <http://www.canalgrandevenezia.it/index.php/palazzi-canal-grande/lato-destro/159-palazzo-mocenigo>

For Byron, water, which was a sacred element for Shelley (who feared and studied it) was mainly for swimming and washing himself. As Mussapi says, “one knew how to live and swim, the other how to watch and desire” (32). And Byron certainly knew how to live.

Venetian lifestyle, that Byron came to like so much found a way into his works as well. In February 1818, a poem was published that was rather an experiment, but an essential piece in profiling the poet’s style. Inspired by J. H. Frere’s mock-heroic *Prospectus and Specimen of an Intended National Work* (1817-18) and by Pulci, Byron borrowed the ottava rima and found his new poetic freedom in *Beppo, A Venetian Story* (Buxton, 265).

The first step towards the much more acclaimed *Don Juan* is, however, a remarkably marvellous description of the Venetian society, contrasted with the English (which is being slightly mocked). He based the story on an anecdote he heard from Mariana Segati’s husband – an anecdote for which he thanked the man by becoming his wife’s lover (Buxton, 265). Interestingly enough, while the story itself is captivating, it is the lovely initial digressions that make *Beppo* most enjoyable. In fact, it takes the poet twenty-one stanzas to introduce the story.

*Beppo* begins with a description of the atmosphere before Carnevale, and because it is meant for an English reader the poet explains what Carnevale is. The night of the beginning of Carnevale is “the time less liked by husbands than by lovers / (...) and prudery flings aside her fetter”<sup>75</sup>, there is music heard from everywhere and people are dressed in costumes – but they cannot dress as priests, because “no one in these parts may quiz the clergy”<sup>76</sup>. The poet then describes the most notorious tradition of Carnevale, which is fasting (or Lent):

IX.

That is to say, if your religion's Roman,  
And you at Rome would do as Romans do,  
According to the proverb, - although no man  
If foreign, is obliged to fast; and you  
If Protestant, or sickly, or a woman,  
Would rather dine in sin on a ragout—  
Dine and be d—d! I don't mean to be coarse,  
But that's the penalty, to say no worse.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 116, Stanza 2

<sup>76</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 116, Stanza 3

<sup>77</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 116

Now that the reader has been instructed about the technicalities, the poet reveals where the story is set:

Of all the places where the Carnival  
Was most facetious in the days of yore,  
(...)  
Venice the bell from every city bore, –  
And at the moment when I fix my story,  
That sea-born city was all in her glory.<sup>78</sup>

It is interesting that he decided to place the story not in the Venice of his time, but rather of the free Venice before the Austrians had usurped it. The description of Venetian society begins with women – an aspect of Venice that Byron was very well acquainted with – and he gives a trip advice to the reader as well:

And like so many Venuses of Tititan's  
(The best's at Florence – see it, if ye will),  
They look when leaning over the balcony,  
(...)  
I said that like a picture by Giorgione  
Venetian women were, and so they are,  
Particularly seen from a balcony  
(For beauty's sometimes best set off afar)<sup>79</sup>

In stanza seventeen something specifically Italian is introduced (at least of that time), that Byron gleefully mentions in his letters and works: that Italian women are allowed to have a lover:

Shakespeare described the sex in Desdemona  
As very fair, but yet suspect in fame,  
And to this day from Venice to Verona  
Such matters may be probably the same,  
Except that since those times was never known a  
Husband whom mere suspicion could inflame

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<sup>78</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 116, Stanza 10

<sup>79</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 117, Stanzas 9 and 15

To suffocate a wife no more than twenty,  
Because she had a “*cavalier servente*”.<sup>80</sup>

The reader might wonder how come there are not more ‘Othellos’ in Venice and how do the husbands deal with such situations – questions which Byron answers in the next stanza: “When weary of the matrimonial tether / His head for such a wife no mortal bothers, / But takes at once another, or another’s.”<sup>81</sup> This revelation explains why Byron got away with his love affairs in Italy and why he got to enjoy so many of them: they simply did not care. Suddenly, as if the poet had just remembered, he digresses and asks the reader: “Didst ever see a Gondola? For fear / You should not, I’ll describe it you exactly”<sup>82</sup> and offers a brief description of the most common means of transport in the city.

He comes back to cavalier servente again to fully explain what it means while he digresses from finally telling the story about Beppo:

Besides, within the Alps, to every woman,  
(Although, God knows, it is a grievous sin)  
‘Tis, I may say, permitted to have *two* men;  
I can’t tell who first brought the custom in,  
But “Cavalier Serventes” are quite common,  
And no one notices nor cares a pin;  
And we may call this (not to say the worst)  
A *second* marriage which corrupts the *first*.<sup>83</sup>

What follows is a stanza about the etymology of the expression, as well as a suggestion of importing the said custom to England. Byron then focuses on describing the cavalier’s duties (doing the lady’s biddings, calling a coach or a gondola for her and carrying her gloves and cape) and calls him a “supernumerary slave”<sup>84</sup>.

After that, the poet digresses yet again and suddenly starts describing his feelings towards Italy and his lifestyle:

XLI.  
With all its sinful doings, I must say,  
That Italy's a pleasant place to me,

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<sup>80</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 117, Stanza 17 – It has already been mentioned on page 47 that thanks to being Mariana Segati’s cavalier servente, Byron received information that would inspire him to write *Beppo*.

<sup>81</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 117, Stanza 18

<sup>82</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 117, Stanza 19

<sup>83</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 118, Stanza 36

<sup>84</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 119, Stanza 40

Who love to see the Sun shine every day,  
And vines (not nail'd to walls) from tree to tree.<sup>85</sup>

This and the two following stanzas also include descriptions of Venetian climate, almost idealise it and compare it to the English one: “I like on Autumn evenings to ride out, (...) / Because the skies are not the most secure; (...) / In England 't would be dung, dust, or a dray.”<sup>86</sup>

From that, the poet shifts his focus on the language, celebrates its beauty and again compares it to English. There is also a stanza dedicated to the veneration of the beauty of Italian women and it all is concluded by calling Italy a Paradise, the beauty of which has been providing inspiration to Raphael, Canova and others and now – to Byron.

What is not usual to come across in Byron's poems is his self-evaluation as a poet. In *Beppo*, however, he makes an exception in stanza fifty-two (which is basically another digression) as he calls himself “a nameless sort of person, / A broken Dandy” and questions his rhyming skills, admitting he has to use a dictionary and would maybe rather write prose, but poetry is more fashionable.

Getting back to his story, he describes the Ridotto, where the characters from the story go dancing, and compares it to the English Vauxhall. He then realizes he made a digression again and acknowledges it to the reader, returning to the Ridotto, only to digress again, putting a note about his evening plans in parentheses that end up occupying the whole stanza.

As the previous four pages have proved, *Beppo* is unlike any previous of Byron's poem. It appears almost undisciplined, as if it was mirroring Byron himself at that time, wild and drifting from one topic to another. This marvellous change that prompted this experiment and later *Don Juan*, would unlikely happen had Byron stayed in England.

In the summer of 1818, Byron wrote another poem about Venice, a more serious one, which celebrates the city as well as weeps for its fate under the Austrians. The ‘Ode on Venice’ begins with a lament over Venice's future, because even though the people should do something, they remain ignorant. Byron basically says: “If I, a stranger to this land, am willing to fight for its freedom as it pains me to see Venice like this, should not you do as your ancestors did and fight to save it?” and then describes that the Austrian tyrant's presence is felt throughout the city:

Oh Venice! Venice! when thy marble walls  
Are level with the waters, there shall be

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<sup>85</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 119, Stanza 41

<sup>86</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 119, Stanza 42

A cry of nations o'er thy sunken halls,  
 (...)

If I, a northern wanderer, weep for thee,  
 What should thy sons do?—anything but weep:  
 And yet they only murmur in their sleep.  
 In contrast with their fathers— (...)

Thirteen hundred years  
 Of wealth and glory turned to dust and tears;  
 And every monument the stranger meets,  
 Church, palace, pillar, as a mourner greets;  
 And even the Lion all subdued appears,  
 And the harsh sound of the barbarian drum,  
 With dull and daily dissonance, repeats  
 The echo of thy Tyrant's voice.<sup>87</sup>

He begins the second stanza with an exclamation “There is no hope for nations!” as he realizes that people do not learn from their mistakes and rather make them over again, wasting their powers on something they cannot change and ignore what should be changed: “the flow and ebb of each recurring age, (...) Hath taught us nought or little: still we (...) / wear our strength away in wrestling with the air.”<sup>88</sup> The ominous final stanza predicts the inevitable loss of freedom of other European countries as well:

Venice is crushed, and Holland deigns to own  
 A sceptre, and endures the purple robe;  
 If the free Switzer yet bestrides alone  
 His chainless mountains, 't is but for a time,  
 For Tyranny of late is cunning grown,  
 And in its own good season tramples down.<sup>89</sup>

In August, Shelley came to see his friend in Venice, and it was a beneficial visit for both poets. The contribution of their discussions and opinion sharing on Shelley has already been made clear. The effect that Shelley’s presence had on Byron, however, might have contributed to the creation of what is now considered to be his finest poem, *Don Juan*. After finishing the Fourth Canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and writing *Beppo*, Byron was

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<sup>87</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 384

<sup>88</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 384

<sup>89</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 385



creatively exhausted and in a need of a new impulse. It is probable that after *Beppo*, he had already had in mind the idea of writing a mock-heroic poem in ottava rima, but it was not until Shelley offered his perspective when Byron put the first lines of *Don Juan* on paper (Buxton, 82).

While the inspiration – be it Italy itself, its writers or even Shelley – is not explicitly mentioned in the poem, without his Venetian experience with the southern society, without being acquainted with Pulci, Boiardo, Berni and Ariosto, and lastly without Shelley’s nudge, *Don Juan* might have ended up a mere idea, or not even that.

In 1819, something changed in Byron, and he decided he needed to change his lifestyle, slow it down a little. In April of that year, he met the sixteen-year-old Countess Teresa Guiccioli, who had been married for three days, and was to become Byron’s (probably) last mistress, a godsend. Shelley said that she was Byron’s “good angel” and from his letters and poems it seems that Byron was truly in love with her – an emotion few believed he was capable of (Buxton, 100). When she left Venice with her husband to go home to Ravenna, she fell ill on the way (in Bologna). Byron, although not very excited to travel in the hot weather, went after her. On the way, he probably composed one of his tenderest poems, capturing his feelings towards his lady, ‘Stanzas to the Po’<sup>90</sup>. While what the poet says is emotional: “River, that rollest by the ancient walls, / Where dwells the Lady of my love”<sup>91</sup>, it is not geographically accurate, for, in fact, the river flows neither through Bologna nor Ravenna, but it is true that the traveller has to cross it in order to get from Venice to either of the two cities. Nevertheless, Byron considers the river to be a mirror of his heart in which she can read, a means of transferring his thoughts and feelings to her:

Her bright eyes will be imaged in thy stream,–  
Yes! they will meet the wave I gaze on now:  
Mine cannot witness, even in a dream,  
That happy wave repass me in its flow!<sup>92</sup>

All mockery is put aside, as well as political issues and pondering over ruins, in this poem, as Byron pours his heart out and admits their love is forbidden because they come from different backgrounds:

A stranger loves the Lady of the land,

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<sup>90</sup> The exact place and time of the composition of the poem is often questioned, as well as the identity of the lady addressed in it. In the footnote to the poem, Nichols and Jeaffreson, however, point out that the poem was, according to Byron himself, written in 1819 and was not meant to be published as it was too private, and thus they assume it was meant for Countess Guiccioli. (Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 450)

<sup>91</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 546, Stanza 1

<sup>92</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 547, Stanzas 8 and 9

Born far beyond the mountains, but his blood  
Is all meridian, as if never fanned  
By the black wind that chills the polar flood.  
(...)  
My blood is all meridian; were it not,  
I had not left my clime (...) <sup>93</sup>

In the middle stanza, Byron basically says that he left England because he did not fit in there, as if he was born Italian and not English. In the last stanza of the poem, desperate from love that does not have future, he expresses his wish to die young, young and in love in Italy: “’Tis vain to struggle—let me perish young— / (...) / And then, at least, my heart can ne’er be moved.”<sup>94</sup>

In a letter to Murray from June 1819, Byron informs him that he is at Ravenna “to see my ‘Amica’” and that in the meantime he rides in his carriage or on a horse in the forest “the Pineta, the scene of Boccaccio’s novel, and Dryden’s fable of Honoria”<sup>95</sup>. He continues with admitting his worries about Teresa’s health: “In losing her, I should lose a being who has run great risks on my account, and whom I have every reason to love—but I must not think this possible. I do not know what I should do if she dies, but I ought to blow my brains out.”<sup>96</sup> He also comments on her husband, interestingly enough with no signs of mockery. The young Countess enthralled him completely – gone was the flamboyant dandy, who made a harem out of his house; Italy uncovered a new side of Byron: a kind, caring and responsible one.

In August, Murray received another letter from Byron, in which he comments on the romance and compares it to Don Juan’s escapades:

I cannot tell you how our romance will end, but it hath gone on hitherto most erotically. Such perils and escapes! Juan’s are as child’s play in comparison. The fools think that all my poeshie is always allusive to my own adventures: I have had at one time or another better and more extraordinary and perilous and pleasant than these, every day of the week, if I might tell them; but that must never be.<sup>97</sup>

It is often a writer’s habit to write about adventures he did not (or could not) experience, coming up with exciting scenarios and events that surpass an ordinary person’s wildest imagination. Byron, however, enjoyed himself more in real life than he let his heroes have

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<sup>93</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 548, Stanzas 10, 11 and 12

<sup>94</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 548, Stanza 13

<sup>95</sup> Moore, 170, Letter 333.

<sup>96</sup> Moore, 171, Letter 333.

<sup>97</sup> Moore, 180, Letter 336.

and even tried to keep it a secret from his readers. In Byron's case especially, it might, perhaps, have been a good idea to keep the spicy details of his private life to himself.

Of the progress with *Don Juan*, he informed Murray again in a letter from August, admitting he has little idea of where he is going with the story: "You ask me for the plan of Donny Johnny: I have no plan; I had no plan; but I had or have materials"<sup>98</sup>, therefore the reader can only assume that he took inspiration from what was happening in his or others' lives (and toned it down). The autumn was spent near Venice, where they resided with the Countess in one of his rented villas (Moore, 201). Towards the end of the year, Byron was planning on going to England, but his plans changed at the last minute when he heard the Countess had fallen seriously ill again. There were rumours about his involvement with the Carbonari<sup>99</sup> (a group of political activists with the goal of revolting against Austria and uniting Italy), which might have been another reason why he decided to leave. Whatever were his other reasons, however, Byron took his considerable amount of movables and left Venice for good to live with Teresa (and her husband) in Ravenna (Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, xlv).

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<sup>98</sup> Moore, 183, Letter 337.

<sup>99</sup> Moore, 241

### 6.3 The years 1820 – 1823: In Good Company

When it comes to works directly influenced by Italy or works on Italian topics, the year 1820 was Byron's last productive in that department (with one exception in 1821). In the spring, he finished *The Prophecy of Dante*, and sent it to Murray along with two of his translations (*Pulci' Morgante Maggiore* and *Dante's Francesca of Rimini*).

Byron got the impulse for writing *The Prophecy of Dante* at Ravenna during the summer of 1819. Having already written about Tasso's confinement at Ferrara, it was suggested to Byron to write a similar piece on Dante - the most famous exile (Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 393). He used terza rima (which Dante had used in *Divina Commedia*), and adjusted the cantos according to Dante's, as he explains in the Preface, being somewhat critical of his skills in "imitating" the famous poet's style (393-394). In the Preface, he is very much aware of the value of Dante and his works among the Italians and he knows that he is entering a potentially dangerous territory:

I would request the Italian reader to remember that when I have failed in the imitation of his great "Padre Alighier", I have failed at in imitating that which all study and few understand, since to this very day it is not yet settled what was the meaning of the allegory in the first canto of the Inferno.<sup>100</sup>

Whereas in his other works, Byron had always in mind predominantly the English readers, here he addresses the Italian ones as well. This, and the courage to "imitate" Dante might suggest that he was planning on starting writing in Italian, for Italian audience exclusively. After almost "predicting" his failure of *The Prophecy of Dante*, he changes the perspective and claims that even if it is successful, the Italians will not be content with it:

The Italians, with a pardonable nationality, are particularly jealous of all that is left them as a nation - their literature; and in the present bitterness of the classic and romantic war, are but ill disposed to permit a foreigner even to approve or imitate them, without finding some fault with his ultramontane presumption.<sup>101</sup>

It would probably not be Byron if he did not subtly offend someone. The Preface is quite long but there is little said about the poem to introduce the matter to the reader. "The reader is requested to suppose that Dante addressed him in the interval between the conclusion of the *Divina Commedia* and his death, and shortly before the latter event, foretelling the fortunes of Italy in general in the ensuing centuries." (Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 244) From this,

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<sup>100</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 394

<sup>101</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 394

Byron digresses and eventually, at the end, realizes: "But I perceive that I am deviating into an address to the Italian reader, where my business is with the English one; and be they few or many, I must take my leave of both."

Of Dante, Byron knew a lot (even though, unlike Shelley, he admired his political activism more than his work<sup>102</sup>), but he probably did not do an extensive research prior to writing *The Prophecy of Dante*. There was another work, however, the research of which took Byron a considerable amount of time: *Marino Faliero* (1820). He explains his fascination by the story of the Doge in the Preface:

The black veil which is painted over the place of Marino Faliero amongst the Doges, and the Giants' Staircase, where he was crowned, and discrowned, and decapitated, struck forcibly upon my imagination; as did his fiery character and strange story. (...)

The length I have gone into on this subject will show the interest I have taken in it.<sup>103</sup>

In the Preface to *Marino Faliero*, Byron also takes on the role of a literary critic, pointing out a possible mistake in a work of another English author on the matter: "Where did Dr. Moore find that Marino Faliero begged his life? I have searched the chronicles, and find nothing of the kind; it is true that he avowed all."<sup>104</sup> His research was profound; however, there are some inconsistencies in his work, as Roberts points out: "The Chief of the Ten could not have brandished his sword so dramatically on the balcony which fronts St. Mark's Place, because that facade was not built until nearly one hundred years after the execution. Nor could the gory head have rolled down the Giant's Staircase, which did not then exist."<sup>105</sup>

Byron was originally planning on writing a series of historical tragedies (for one does not have to go far for an intriguing story of love, death and corruption in Italy), an idea that might have been induced due to problems with *Don Juan*. The third and fourth canto, he said he "did not write con amore this time"<sup>106</sup> and thought rather less of them. The problem with *Don Juan* (and at the same time the thing that makes it his masterpiece) was that Byron had little idea of where it was going. There was no (or little) research to do, it did not take place anywhere near Byron's residence and, moreover, Teresa kept discouraging him from writing because she did not like it. So it happened that Byron promised her to abandon *Don Juan* – a promise he would manage to keep for over a year.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Buxton, 228

<sup>103</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 155

<sup>104</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 155

<sup>105</sup> Roberts, 61

<sup>106</sup> Buxton, 136

<sup>107</sup> Buxton, 135

His relationship with Teresa became official after the Pope granted her a separation from her husband. She left the Palazzo in the summer of 1820, but Byron stayed, occupying the top floor. He did not like moving much (which is understandable given the amount of things he owned), and despite the Count's demands to leave, Byron remained in the Palazzo Guiccioli until his departure for Pisa a year later (Buxton, 149).

Byron's abandonment of writing poetry could also have been influenced by the tense political situation in Italy, especially after the revolution in Naples. Byron was involved in the revolutionary movement in Ravenna, along with his servant and friends (among them Teresa's brother Pietro Gamba), and so, naturally, he was under suspicions and had to be very careful. Knowing he would eventually have to leave to stay out of trouble, he needed to figure out what to do with Allegra. Shelley, who always had something to say when it came to Byron and Claire's daughter, offered his help and came to Ravenna (Buxton, 138-139).

He was leaving with an idea of the journal *The Liberal* and determination to get Byron to Pisa as soon as possible. His friend, however, took his time. He was fairly comfortable living in his girlfriend's ex-husband's house, and he was also working on *Sardanapalus* (1821) and *The Two Foscari*, being with *Marino Faliero* another (and, in fact, last) tragedy on an Italian topic. Shelley was house-hunting in Pisa, arranging moving Byron's things, and even taking care of Teresa. Byron finally reached Pisa in November 1821 and was immediately welcomed by Shelley's company (Buxton, 164). Edward Williams said about him: "So far from his being (as is generally imagined) wrapped in a melancholy gloom he is all sunshine and good humour, with which the elegance of his language and the brilliancy of his wit cannot fail to inspire those who are near him."<sup>108</sup>

After a short period of shared creative crisis, both Byron and Shelley started writing again, but because *Don Juan* was still banned, Byron focused on *Werner* instead. Shelley, not wanting Byron to abandon what he saw as a potential masterpiece, persuaded Teresa to lift her ban, and in April 1822, Byron resumed *Don Juan* with the sixth canto.

As has been previously stated, *Don Juan* does not exactly serve the purposes of this thesis, for the story does not take place in Italy and the hero is Spanish. There are, however, bits and pieces of Italian influence spread through the cantos.

In the third canto, the poet points out that romances (love poetry in particular), tends to focus on the courting and desiring more than on what comes (or should come) next: marriage. He suggests that Petrarch would likely have stopped writing sonnets if he had married Laura.

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<sup>108</sup> Buxton, 170-171

Byron then continues with this topic using Dante and Milton as examples, mentioning their unhappy marriages and the fact the heroines in their greatest works (Beatrice from *Divina Commedia* and Eve from *Paradise Lost*) were certainly not based on their wives:

The only two that in my recollection  
Have sung of heaven and hell, or marriage, are  
Dante and Milton, (...)  
But Dante's Beatrice and Milton's Eve  
Were not drawn from their spouses, you conceive.<sup>109</sup>

That further proves that Byron was well-versed not only in the works, but also in the authors' lives. Dante is brought up in the fourth canto again, more specifically the city where he died:

I pass each day where Dante's bones are laid:  
A little cupola, more neat than solemn,  
Protects his dust, but reverence here is paid  
To the bard's tomb, and not the warrior's column.  
The time must come, when both alike decay'd,  
The chieftain's trophy, and the poet's volume,  
Will sink where lie the songs and wars of earth,  
Before Pelides' death, or Homer's birth.<sup>110</sup>

Another famous Italian name finds its way into the fourth canto: the author who probably inspired Byron to write a mock-heroic epic in ottava rima, Pulci. Byron turns to the English reader and explains his choice of the unusual genre and rhyming stanza:

To the kind reader of our sober clime  
This way of writing will appear exotic;  
Pulci was sire of the half-serious rhyme (...)<sup>111</sup>

In the ninth canto, Byron mentions something that is familiar to the readers of *Beppo* (and to Italians, of course), something he himself found incredibly convenient: the concept of cavalier servente:

An English lady ask'd of an Italian,  
What were the actual and official duties  
Of the strange thing some women set a value on,  
Which hovers oft about some married beauties,

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<sup>109</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 490, Stanza 10

<sup>110</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 505, Stanza 104

<sup>111</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 498, Stanza 6

Called 'Cavalier servente?'—a Pygmalion  
Whose statues warm (I fear, alas! too true 't is)  
Beneath his art. The dame, press'd to disclose them,  
Said—'Lady, I beseech you to suppose them.'<sup>112</sup>

Another feature that could have been already spotted in *Beppo* and returns in the fourteenth canto of *Don Juan*, is sightseeing advice, and while in *Beppo* the poet was talking about Venus in Florence, now he mentions Guido's Aurora in Rome: "(...) In Guido's famous fresco which alone / Is worth a tour to Rome"<sup>113</sup>. Two cantos later, Byron quotes a few common Italian exclamations (with which he must have had experience from Venice) that can still be heard there today:

The 'Mamma Mia's!' and the 'Amor Mio's!'  
The 'Tanti palpiti's' on such occasions:  
The 'Lasciami's,' and quavering 'Addio's!'  
Amongst our own most musical of nations.<sup>114</sup>

In the same canto nearly a hundred stanzas later, Byron uses one of the most famous quotes from Dante's *Divina Commedia* (specifically from Canto III in *Inferno*): "(...) Like that of hell. 'Lasciate ogni speranza / Voi che entrate!' The hinge seem'd to speak, / Dreadful as Dante's rhima, or this stanza"<sup>115</sup>. What is interesting in these three lines is that it is neither Dante himself nor Don Juan who 'utters' the sentence, but a creaking door that sounds like it is speaking. The last line contains a bit of criticism towards Dante's terza rima and also towards Byron's own skills.

The works, especially the plays, of 1821-1822 were, however, not well received in England (at first)<sup>116</sup>. Byron, still remembering the admiration that *Childe Harold* had once brought him, suddenly received a couple of bad reviews and got a taste of what Shelley had to go through practically all the time. There is not much information on how he dealt with the hostility, except for a few resentful letters (Buxton, 225).

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<sup>112</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 547, Stanza 51

<sup>113</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 581, Stanza 40

<sup>114</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 596, Stanza 45 (The word 'palpiti' means 'heartbeats', 'Lasciami' can be translated as 'Leave me' or 'Let me go')

<sup>115</sup> Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, 601, Stanza 116 (The correct form is 'Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate', so there is 'chi', not 'che', a spelling mistake suggesting Byron had the quote memorized. The expression means 'Abandon all hope ye who enter' and is frequently used in Italy.)

<sup>116</sup> Buxton mentions that especially *Cain*, *The Two Foscari* and *Sardanapalus* were basically attacked by reviewers and that Byron was furious that the readers enjoyed "the exaggerated nonsense" but do not like what should "not willingly be let die" (Buxton, 225-225).



When Shelley died and the Pisan Circle broke apart (which was also caused by Byron's inability to cooperate with Leigh Hunt, whom he despised), Mary went to Genoa with Jane Williams and Byron told her to find him a house there. He took care of her and kept her busy by giving her poems to copy (240-249). It was Mary who brilliantly captured the sad atmosphere of the late summer of 1822 in a journal entry:

(...) and thus, as I have said, when Albe speaks and Shelley does not answer, it is as thunder without rain – the form of the sun without heat and light – as any familiar object might be, shorn of its dearest and best attribute; and listen with an unspeakable melancholy that yet is not all pain.<sup>117</sup>

A year later, Byron set sail to Greece, probably tired of his lifestyle with little excitement (and if there was anything Byron needed to inspire his creativity it was being active and adventurous). He died in 1824, on a ship on the sea, similarly (but perhaps less tragically) to Shelley (Byron, Nichols and Jeaffreson, lix). Byron died the way he wanted: young, handsome and a hero; a rebellious exile, who was refused to be buried in the Westminster Abbey (which weeps for his bones the way Florence wept for Dante's), and the only one of the second generation of Romantics most likely to become a true Italian had he not died so early. On the other hand, his life and death are precisely what fascinates people the way he was fascinated by Tasso and Dante and makes him immortal just like he immortalized the great Italians and their beautiful homeland.

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<sup>117</sup> Buxton, 247

## 7 Conclusion

The literary journey through Italy with Shelley and Byron is coming to an end and it has certainly been a remarkable one. They both left their homeland drowning in debts, annoyed by rumours spreading about their scandalous lifestyles, with little literary inspiration, seeking a refuge that would accept them for who they were. They found that refuge in Italy, which gave them more than they had hoped for and in return, they immortalized it in their works, journals and letters and contributed to making it one of the most sought-after tourist spots in Europe.

Percy Shelley spent the last four years of his life – from 1818 to 1822 – in Italy and visited all the major cities, yet found that he felt best staying in the peace and quiet of the Italian countryside. He was overwhelmed by the grandeur of Italian architecture and enthusiastically described the monuments, cathedrals and ruins, but what seems to have been closest to his heart, judging from the analysis of his poems, was nature. He loved walks in the forests, enjoying the wind blowing and the birds singing, and was particularly fond of sailing on rivers, nearly studying the effect of light on water's surface. His love for the natural world is captured in many of his shorter poems, for example *Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills*, *Marenghi*, *Ode to the West Wind*, *To a Skylark*, or *Lines Written in the Bay of Lerici*. He was enchanted by Italy's history as well, which led to the composition of *The Cenci*. Last but not least, he was interested in the political situation, which inspired poems such as *Ode to Liberty* or *Ode to Naples*.

It should not be forgotten that aside from the events, the people in his life had a huge impact on his works as well. Firstly, it was his devoted wife Mary, who supported him through everything, including the birth and death of their children, by the latter of which he was deeply shaken and which can be observed in his poems. It was also his friend Byron, whom he admired and envied at the same time and who provided inspiration for *Julian and Maddalo*, and also the members of the Pisan Circle, especially Jane and Edward Williams. It would be fair to also mention the influence of Italian writers on Shelley's works, especially Dante Alighieri and his terza rima, which Shelley used for example in *The Triumph of Life*.

Byron fled England in a hurry in 1816 and stayed in Italy until his departure for Greece in 1823. He was very excited to start over in a new place and almost immediately plunged into the Venetian boisterous lifestyle. Unlike Shelley, he preferred to surround himself with Italians, and was especially fond of Italian women, since he came to Italy

without a wife. In order to gather inspiration for his works, he did extensive research and was particularly interested in love stories and tragic fates of noble Italian families. His fascination with people and the difference between Italian and English society impacted most of his works, such as the dramas *Marino Faliero* and *The Two Foscari*, or the mock-heroic epics *Beppo* and *Don Juan*. He was also quite obsessed with the lives of some Italian writers, Dante and Tasso especially, which led to the composition of *The Lament of Tasso* and *The Prophecy of Dante*, in which he also incorporated his interest in Italian political situation of the past, his present and the future. Along with politics, the enchantment with the history which he shared with Shelley was what made him write one of his best works, the Fourth Canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

It is possible to say that the years Shelley and Byron spent in Italy were incredibly eventful for both of them, as they experienced joy and loss, support and rejection, desire and fear – all of which is in some way combined and incorporated in their verses. Italy supported their rebellious natures and free thinking and nurtured their Romantic souls. It shaped them as poets and helped them find their literary strengths: in Byron's case, it was the mock-heroic genre and Dante's ottava rima, in Shelley's, a more philosophical, nature-oriented and more exclusive type of poetry.

It should, however, be also mentioned, that the way they remembered Italy in their correspondence and works, Italy has remembered their presence too. In Rome, there is the Keats & Shelley House, offering information not only on John Keats and Percy Shelley, but all British exiles in Italy. It is a sacred place visited by hundreds of pilgrims each day, teaching those who do not know about the Romantics and deepening the interest of those who already are captured by the fascinating poets.

All over Italy, there are plaques, busts and sculptures of Shelley and Byron, usually mentioning what they were working on at the time of their visit or stay. For us, Venice will always be associated with Byron and Pisa with Shelley, the way Ferrara was with Tasso or Ravenna with Dante for the Romantics, and eager tourists will trace their steps and take pieces of their doors the same way Byron and Shelley did it when they were tracing the steps of their literary role models. They left something of themselves in Italy, and in exchange, the country offered them refuge, freedom and endless inspiration, and has rightfully earned its place as a significant element in the Romantic literature.

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