

Beyond the Grand Tour: Unearthly Italy

Jane Stabler

‘I have been between Heaven & earth since our arrival at Venice. The Heaven of it is ineffable—Never have I touched the skirts of so celestial a place’ Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote in in June 1851: ‘The beauty of the architecture, the silver trails of water up between all that gorgeous colour & carving, the enchanting silence, the moonlight, the music, the gondolas.’¹ Her notion of being in touch with both the divine and the earthly provides my way into the ‘Beyond the Grand Tour’ theme for this issue of the *Anglo-Italian Journal*. In this essay, I shall examine the peculiar way in which Romantic writers in Italy are drawn to the figures of enchantment as a way of testing how human craftsmanship might generate—in both positive and negative ways—the otherworldly or the unearthy. I am not, of course, claiming that Italy has a monopoly on ideas of the ‘beyond’: when Ruskin rhapsodises over the Simplon Pass and the Rhone’s ‘uneearthly acqua-marine, ultramarine, violet-blue, gentian blue, peacock-blue, river of paradise blue, glass of a painted window meted in the sun’, he veers joyously between earthly and unearthy images, but he is still on the other side of the Alps.² It is, however, Ruskin’s anticipation of Italy, particularly filtered through the language of Byron, that allows him to envision the Rhone as something at once supernatural

1. Philip Kelley, Scott Lewis and Edward Hagan (eds), *The Brownings’ Correspondence*, February 1851–January 1852, vol. XVII, Winifield KAS, Wedgstone Press, 2010, p. 41.

2. *Praeterita* in John D. Rosenberg (ed.), *The Genius of John Ruskin*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 532.

and fabricated—as ‘the witch of the Alps flinging the spun tresses of it for ever from her snow.’³

Ruskin’s reading of Italy through Byron and summer trips to the continent is part of his solidly middle-class upbringing, rather than being the result of a grand tour. Katherine Turner points out that very few published continental travel narratives are actually products of an aristocratic grand tour; most late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century travelogues record a ‘middling sort’ of experience.⁴ But despite the disparity between their resources and accommodation, grand and not so grand tourists prove remarkably alike in their textual evocations of Italy as a terrestrial paradise. This kinship originates, I think, in a common literary inheritance that informs the various imaginative perceptions of eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century travellers. Enchantment becomes more of a commonplace when, as James Buzard has pointed out, high Romantic poetry was incorporated into later nineteenth-century guide books as a model emotive-aesthetic response. Images of lyrical solitude and enchantment then dictated the terms of appreciation for much of the Victorian and Edwardian periods.⁵

Late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century travellers across the peninsula related the sensation of entering another world when they visited the Alpine glaciers, the crater of Vesuvius and the grottos or caverns that were associated with classical myth, such as the supposed dwelling of the Sibyl of Cumae; as we shall see below, they also found it in the city of Venice—‘this strange Dream upon the water’ as Dickens called it.⁶ The noise of glaciers, the sight of the volcanic wastes of ash over the earth’s central fire, and the subterranean echoes of the grottos all provided an encounter with the Burkean sublime, but less easy to categorise is the ‘sublimity of a different kind’, described by James Fenimore Cooper; a more elusive form of power that connects the Italian landscape with what is beyond.⁷ Cooper wrote about the

3. *Ibidem*.

4. Katherine Turner, *British Travel Writers in Europe 1750–1800: Authorship, gender and national identity*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2001, p. 3.

5. James Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to Culture, 1800–1918*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993, pp. 116–128.

6. Charles Dickens, *Pictures from Italy*, London, Bradbury & Evans, 1846, p. 119. For a perceptive discussion of Dickens’s chapter on Venice, see Michael O’Neill, ‘Venice, Dickens, Robert Browning and the Victorian Imagination’, in *Venice and the Cultural Imagination*, Michael O’Neill, Mark Sandy and Sarah Wootton (eds), London, Pickering & Chatto, 2012, pp. 79–94.

7. [James] Fenimore Cooper, *Excursions in Italy*, 2 vols, London, Richard Bentley, 1838, I, p. 288.

‘unearthly aspect’ of the upper Glaciers; he went on to suggest that ‘even an ardent admirer of Nature’ might weary in time of the Alps; ‘but I can scarce imagine one who could ever tire of the witchery of Italy.’⁸ For Byron, Shelley and their contemporaries that ‘witchery’ was a powerful alternative to orthodox religious mediations between the everyday and the heavenly, and it provided a way of imagining invisible power.

William Beckford was mistaken for the Emperor of Austria as his entourage rumbled through southern Bavaria on the way to Naples, and Percy Shelley was known to Pisan locals simply as ‘L’Inglese malincolico’ as he wandered on foot through the woods outside Pisa, but both of them describe an Italy of dream vision and witchcraft, drawing on the inheritance of English romance that had deep roots in the Italian tradition.⁹ Despite their different modes of physical transport, Beckford and Shelley’s imaginative transports deploy the same language of rapture and swooning fascination, particularly of musical trance. Beckford dreams up a private bower of bliss in St Peter’s where he and his companion will read, draw, and listen to music in ‘the glow of perpetual summer’; Shelley fits up some chambers ‘Looking towards the golden Eastern air’ where he has sent books and music and ‘all / Those instruments with which the high spirits call / The future from its cradle’ for his female companion in *Epipsychidion*.¹⁰ Beckford phantasizes about ‘experiencing a witch’s influence’ near the Mare Morto and eagerly anticipates the ‘enchantments of Circe’: ‘Who knows but Circe might have led me to some other place, in a more secret and retired vale [...] I can imagine her given up to solitude, and the consciousness of her potent influence.’¹¹ Like Beckford, Shelley is ambivalent about whether he should be under the potent influence of captivating songs or composing his own charms to dispel enchantment. In a pattern that would be increasingly commoditized for later nineteenth-century tourists, travels through Italy are nearly always

8. *Ibidem*.

9. E.J. Trelawny, *Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron*, Boston, Ticknor and Fields 1858, p. 74. For the Italian origins of English romance writing, see, for example, Thomas Warton, *Observations of the Faerie Queene*, (1762) and *The History of English Poetry, from the close of the eleventh to the commencement of the eighteenth century* (1774–1781).

10. William Beckford, *Dreams, Waking Thoughts and Incidents*, Robert J. Gemmett (ed.), Stroud, Nonsuch Press, p. 156; *Epipsychidion* ll., pp. 515–521 in P.B. Shelley, *The Major Works*, Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (eds), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003.

11. Beckford, *Dreams, Waking Thoughts and Incidents*, pp. 160–161.

narrated as dreamy, other-worldly escapes. Before this sort of idling in Italy became a cliché, the transformative potential of Italian travel was at its most intense in the Romantic period.¹²

The enchantment of Venice affords a key example of the supernatural potency human craftsmanship could acquire when separated from the orthodox Judaeo-Christian tradition:

I stood in Venice, on the Bridge of Sighs;
A Palace and a prison on each hand:
I saw from out the wave her structures rise
As from the stroke of the enchanter's wand: [...]

I lov'd her from my 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 stamp'd her image in me.¹³

Byron is quite open about the fact that it is the gothic novelist Ann Radcliffe who supplies the magical mood of Venice. The fact that Radcliffe never visited Venice makes it wholly appropriate that she creates what Byron sees (or think he sees). In 1794, Radcliffe instigated a change in the way Venice was perceived and in 2012 Bernard Beatty reconsidered her influence as he posed the testing question: 'When did Venice begin to be enchanting?'¹⁴ Beatty dates Venetian enchantment to the 1780s and his discussion of Byron's Cybele image in which Venice becomes the tiara of a massive chthonic divinity is exemplary. I have a tiny new piece

12. For a later re-casting of the Radcliffe/Byron vision of Venice, see for example, Lilian Whiting, *Italy: The Magic Land*, Boston, Little, Brown, and Company, 1907; 'The first glimpse of enchanted Venice, as her towers and marble palaces rise wraith-like from the sea, is an experience that can never fade from memory. Like a mirage, like a vision invoked by some incantation or magician's spell, the scene prefigures itself [...]. It is an experience outside the boundaries of the ordinary day and daylight world', pp. 389–390.

13. *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto II, stanzas 1 and 18; Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, Jerome J. McGann (ed.), Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980, II, pp. 124; 130.

14. Bernard Beatty, 'A More Beloved Existence': from Shakespeare's 'Venice' to Byron's Venice', in Michael O'Neill, Mark Sandy and Sarah Wootton (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 11–26; p. 20.

of information to add, which helps us to pinpoint the transforming agent that Byron seized upon in Radcliffe's prose.

The epicentre of Venice's enthralling poetic power comes in the verb 'rise': it would be difficult to find another verb that (especially at the beginning or ending of a line of verse) had such a defining relationship with the romantic dream vision with its connotations of creation *ex nihilo*.¹⁵ Venice didn't 'rise' in the airy fantastical sense until after *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. For Shakespeare, Venice is a place of sea trade and risk rather than enchantment. For Alexander Pope, Venice is a courtesan; like the Adriatic whore that she also is for Otway, she only rises in the thoroughly material sense of being still connected to a filthy bed. At the start of the eighteenth century, Venice was not unearthly; it was just an oddity. In 1705, Joseph Addison says that Venice 'looks, at a distance, like a great town half floated by a Deluge.'¹⁶ In the 1720s, the antiquarian Edward Wright's *Observations Made in Travelling through France, Italy &c* begins with a distant view of the city, and remarks: 'Tis a Pleasure, not without a Mixture of Surprize to see so great a City as Venice may truly be call'd, as it were, floating on the Surface of the Sea; to see Chimneys and Towers where you might expect to see nothing but Ship-Masts.'¹⁷ Addison and Wright are quoted verbatim by many mid-eighteenth-century travel writers. For Christopher Hervey, for example, 'The expanded surface of placid water broken at a distance by buildings formed an agreeable perspective' but 'At low water the view is not so beautiful.'¹⁸ When Goethe visited in 1786, he calls it a 'grand and impressive sight', but was more interested in the engineering than the aesthetics and called it the 'Beaver Republic.'¹⁹ In Thomas Martyn's guide book Venice is 'one of the *finest* cities in the world; and certainly the most *singular*' and then in Arthur Young's *Travels During the Years 1787, 1788 and 1789* we finally get an unqualified reference to 'beauty':

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15. See for example, William Wordsworth's verse fragment 'The Discharged Soldier' ll. 28–31; 'What beauteous pictures now / Rose in harmonious imagery—they rose / As from some distant region of my soul / And came along like dreams', William Wordsworth, *Selected Poetry*, Nicholas Roe (ed.), London, Penguin, 1992, p. 21.
16. Joseph Addison, *Works*, London, 1721, II, p. 30.
17. Edward Wright, *Some Observations made in Travelling Through France, Italy &c. in the years 1720, 1721 and 1722*, London, Tho. Ward and E. Wickstead, 1730, I, p. 45.
18. Christopher Hervey, *Letters from Portugal, Spain, Italy and Germany in the years 1759, 1760, and 1761*, London, R. Faulder, 1785, III, pp. 463–464.
19. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Flight to Italy, Diary and Selected Letters*, trans. T. J. Reed, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 59–60.

from St Marks', Young writes, 'Nothing rivals the view of the city and the isles. It is the most beautiful and by far the most singular that I have seen.'²⁰ That 'singular' triumph of technology, however, is still some distance from the magical, poetic scene we find in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*:

Nothing could exceed Emily's admiration, on her first view of Venice, with its islets, palaces, and towers rising out of the sea, whose clear surface reflected the tremulous picture in all its colours. The sun, sinking in the west, tinted the waves and the lofty mountains of Friuli, which skirt the northern shores of the Adriatic, with a saffron glow, while on the marble porticos and colonnades of St Mark were thrown the rich lights and shades of evening. As they glided on, the grander features of this city appeared more distinctly: its terraces, crowned with airy yet majestic fabrics, touched, as they now were, with the splendour of the setting sun, appeared as if they had been called up from the ocean by the wand of an enchanter, rather than reared by mortal hands.²¹

Hester Piozzi's *Observations* (1789) is usually credited with being the source for Emily's magical first glimpse of Venice, but the crucial verbal uplift is not quite there and it seems more likely that the image of Venice rising is from the 1776 work by Lady Ann Riggs Miller, who set up the Literary Society in Bath to which Radcliffe would have had access to this during her residence in the 1770s.²² My suggested new source in Miller's encounter with Venice reads as follows:

Venice has appeared before us for three miles past: but now, on our nearer approach, I believe the world cannot produce a more surprising, or more beautiful view; a city rising out of the bosom of the waves, crowned with glittering spires.²³

20. Thomas Martyn, *A Tour Through Italy*, London, A New Edition, C. and G. Kearsley, 1791, p. 416; Arthur Young, *Travels During the Years 1787, 1788 and 1789*, Bury St Edmunds, W. Richardson, 1792, p. 218.

21. Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Bonamy Dobrée (ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1980, pp. 174–175.

22. See Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Observations and Reflections Made in the Course of a Journey through France, Italy and Germany*, London, A. Strachan and T. Cadell, 1789, I, pp. 151, 157, 188 for images of the moon 'rising out of the sea'; an 'effect like enchantment'; 'clusters of houses, churches, palaces, every thing—started up in the midst of the sea, so as to excite amazement' and 'had Venus risen from the Adriatic sea, she would scarcely have been tempted to quit it.'

23. [Lady Ann Riggs Miller], *Letters from Italy*, Second Edition, London, Edward and Charles Dilly, 1777, II, p. 335.

Whether from Piozzi, or Miller or a hitherto unidentified writer, Radcliffe's prose fiction sets in place the decisive verbal patterns of Venice rising and Venice crowned, which Byron converts into even more memorable verse so that after the publication of *Childe Harold* Canto IV in 1818, people who approach Venice across the water always see it rising from the waves. The Radcliffe/Byron image can be seen to inflect accounts of travellers who are standing in the middle of Venice rather than moving closer to it: John Ruskin's view of the way the vast tower of St Mark 'seems to lift itself visibly forth from the level field of chequered stones' and then his sense that 'beyond those troops of ordered arches there rises a vision out of the earth' probably draws on the earlier poet and novelist.²⁴ We can also hear it spreading into accounts of other Italian cities; for example, P.B. Shelley's image of Rome in *Adonias*: 'The grave, the city, and the wilderness; / And where its wrecks, like shattered mountains rise' (stanza 49) or Anna Jameson's account of the illumination of St Peter's: 'the whole of the immense façade and dome, even up to the cross on the summit, and the semicircular colonnades in front, burst into a blaze, as if at the touch of an enchanter's wand.'²⁵ I would argue that long cultural memories of Radcliffe and Byron also lie behind all those futuristic film sequences when a glittering, artificial construction rises out of the ocean, such as the alien invader in *Battleship* (2012) or the Enterprise out of Nibiru Ocean in *Star Trek into Darkness* (2013). Like science fiction, however, Romantic supernatural creativity, has been ideologically suspect for a number of years.

In his great work on representations of Venice from late Romanticism to late Modernism, Tony Tanner looks sternly at the images of Venice perpetrated by Radcliffe and Byron and argues that 'To see Venice as a "fairy city" conjured into existence by the wand of some unidentified "Enchanter" is at once to forget the "mortal hands" that "reared her" [...] To [see] Venice in any way autonomously, magically, "rising" from the sea is, [...] to beg (elude/elide) every political, historical, cultural question. And just such a vaporized and de-substantiated "Venice" has been purveyed by thousands of empty texts and pictures from the end of the eighteenth century to the present day.'²⁶

24. Rosenberg (ed.), *The Genius of John Ruskin*, p. 166.

25. [Anna Jameson], *The Diary of an Ennuyée*, London, Henry Colburn, 1826, p. 322.

26. Tony Tanner, *Venice Desired*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 20.

I want to suggest that the magical Italy drawn by Radcliffe, Byron, Shelley, Leigh Hunt and Anna Jameson (amongst others) is less of an evasion and more of a meditation on power wielded by an invisible hand, the ‘wand of Power’ felt but not seen by chorus in *Prometheus Unbound*. (IV 67). The mortal hands that reared Venice are undeniably present in the prose notes that punctuate Byron’s manuscripts and make up Hobhouse’s *Historical Illustrations*; the enchanter who appears (or rather, doesn’t appear) at the beginning of Canto IV and all the other Italian works by Byron and Shelley allow the reader to feel the full force of a question that troubles all poetry by liberal Romantic writers: ‘in what ways might “the incantation of this verse” resemble or replicate the power of any enthrallment, any tyranny over human minds?’

Byron follows Radcliffe in using simile, the device that draws attention to its own act of drawing a resemblance. Radcliffe makes it clear that the magical city is how Venice appears to Emily; we are told repeatedly that Emily ‘thought herself’ in a fairy scene and that what she could see ‘seemed almost to realize the romance of fairy land.’²⁷ Radcliffe’s description of Venice is framed as the production of human cognitive activity playing between the real and the unreal. Radcliffe herself, of course, was known as ‘the great enchantress’ of a generation.²⁸ The wand of the enchanter indicates Emily’s awareness of an invisible super-powerful will—a version of the artist or Prospero figure who always holds the potential of cold command. Magic is used not only in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, but also in *The Italian* to figure the power of the human mind. As Vivaldi faces the horrors of the Inquisition and tries to make sense of what he has seen, ‘His mind resembled the glass of a magician, on which the apparitions of long-buried events arise, and as they fleet away, point portentously to shapes half-hid in the duskiness of futurity.’²⁹ Far from eclipsing the role of the mortal hands, Emily’s first view of Venice ‘with its islets, palaces, and towers rising out of the sea’, and her subsequent vision of ‘a new heaven and trembling stars below the waves, with shadowy outlines of towers and porticos’ influenced canonical Romantic contemplations on the permanence or not of absolute power.³⁰

27. Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, p. 176.

28. Thomas De Quincey, *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, Grevel Lindop (ed.), London, Pickering and Chatto, 2000, II, p. 146.

29. Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, Frederick Garber (ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 320.

30. Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, p. 184.

P.B. Shelley wrote the ‘Ode to the West Wind’ after visiting the Bay of Baie by Naples, but the language in which he envisions the collapse of empire sounds like a memory of Radcliffe’s version of Venice as an underwater world:

Beside a pumice isle in Baiæ’s bay,
And saw in sleep old palaces and towers
Quivering within the wave’s intenser day. (32–34)

These lines are usually attributed to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and to Prospero’s ‘Our revels now are ended’ speech, the point at which ‘The cloud-capp’d towers, the gorgeous palaces’ dissolve and ‘Leave not a rack behind’ [IV. I.151–156]. Radcliffe’s allusive use of Shakespeare in her gothic novels was, of course, a vital part of her artistry and the Venice of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* recalls Prospero’s isle with its noise of music growing on the air—a sound that Shelley would also invoke in ‘With a Guitar. To Jane.’ Radcliffe and Shelley are both aware that the artist may hold his or her audience in thrall, but also be a slave to his or her auditors and both borrow the language of *The Tempest* when they think about imaginative power. Rather than attributing Shelley’s lines about palaces on or under the waves directly to Shakespeare, I think a recollection of Radcliffe’s text helps us bring into focus the unseen presence from whom the leaves ‘Are driven, like ghosts, from an enchanter fleeing’ (3) (Shakespeare does not use the word ‘enchanter’ in *The Tempest*). The figure of a wizard and a vision of a city quivering in the waves also appear in Shelley’s ‘Ode to Liberty’; this magus is, I think, related to the one whose wand also conjures Venice into existence in *Childe Harold* Canto IV.

The enchanter figure who haunts Shelley and Byron’s writing in Italy takes many forms. Growing out of Shelley’s early love of gothic and necromantic fiction, his interest in the magician was fuelled when he was in Italy by his translations of Goethe’s *Faust* and Calderon. Among the manifestations are the quaint witch Memory (‘Letter to Maria Gisborne’, 132), or the witch Poesy (‘Mont Blanc’ 44), or the Witch of Atlas, the ‘weird Archimage’ (106) Shelley imagines himself to be in ‘Letter to Maria Gisborne’, ‘Plotting dark spells and devilish enginery’ (107); the wizard from the Dante sonnet or the Indian enchantress from Shelley’s unfinished drama. Byron’s translations of Medea date from before his residence in Italy, but after he left England in 1816, he too, experiments recurrently with the dramatic idea of calling up spirits in

Manfred and 'The Dream', the Coliseum stanzas of *Childe Harold* Canto IV and *The Deformed Transformed* as well as the fleeting appearance of the witch of Endor in the Dedication to *Don Juan*.

For both Byron and Shelley, the magician is a version of the poet, a human with some divine power—whose visions might have the power of prophecy, and whose linguistic powers have the power of incantation to conjure or curse. The proliferation of these figures in their Italian writing seems due to some strange alchemy of place and romance literature, which warrants further investigation, but is evident in Byron's experience of the 'evergreen forest' and 'immemorial wood' outside Ravenna, which appears in Canto III stanzas 105–106 of *Don Juan* and a slightly less well known account of Shelley in the Cascine outside Pisa to which we shall return. Byron writes of the timeless appeal of Ravenna, lying 'out of the way of travellers':

I was never tired of my rides in the pine-forest: it breathes of the Decameron; it is poetical ground. Francesca lived, and Dante was exiled and died at Ravenna. There is something inspiring in such an air.³¹

Byron's 'mind's eye' sees the 'spectre-huntsman' and 'the hell-dogs' from Boccaccio's fable in *Don Juan* Canto III and in *The Prophecy of Dante* he takes on the mantle of his exiled predecessor and ventriloquizes Dante's address to the people who had cast him out. It is to Dante's converse with other worlds that I now wish to turn.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* is perhaps one of the obvious literary conduits to the beyond in Italy. Like Milton in *Paradise Lost* Dante provides an apprehension of inter-stellar space or, as Shelley wrote in *The Defence*, 'these great poets walk through eternity.'³² As with the accounts of Venice we looked at earlier, English responses to Dante afford another example of a Romantic-period intensification of a text. C.P. Brand and others have pointed out that Dante did not have many admirers in the earlier eighteenth century when he was seen as laborious, whimsical or harsh but that after S.T. Coleridge drew attention to the Rev. H.F. Cary's translation, the *Divine Comedy* became the gateway to another world.³³

31. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. (ed.), *Medwin's Conversations of Lord Byron*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1966, p. 25.

32. Shelley, *The Major Works*, p. 691.

33. C.P. Brand, *Italy and the English Romantics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1957, pp. 49–57.

Following Brand, Esther Schor has suggested that when Keats packed a copy of Cary's Dante to read on his tour of Scotland in 1818, it was because he envisaged his Scottish trip as a version of the grand tour.³⁴ Building on Schor's suggestion, I would argue that in July 1818 when Keats describes Staffa and Fingal's Cave, it becomes a version of Radcliffe's Venice:

The roof is arched somewhat gothic wise [...] the colour of the columns is a sort of black with a lurking gloom of purple therein. [...] As we approached in the boat there was such a fine swell of the sea that the pillars appeared rising imm[ed]iately out of the crystal.³⁵

Then Keats goes on to describes the work of an 'Aladin magian' (a word between magus and magician) or 'Wizard of the dee' who might have conjured up such a wonder. In July 1818 Keats might be thinking of Byron; indeed his letter goes on to talk about the difference between himself and Byron, but even if he is focusing on *Childe Harold* Canto IV (published in April 1818), my point is that he's also, inextricably, thinking of the textual Italy that is Radcliffe's Venice. Even though Keats has never been to Italy, it has become a memory.

Critical focus about the Romantics and Dante has tended to fall on Dante's tender and human moments such as the Paolo and Francesca episode, but just as important is Dante's role as a human traveller and questioner in the midst those infinite spaces. Shelley's translation of the sonnet by Dante to Guido Cavalcanti elaborates on the idea of the cosmic tour granted by a 'bounteous wizard' (9):

Guido , I would that Lapo, thou, and I,
Led by some strong enchantment, might ascend
A magic ship, whose charmèd sails should fly
With winds at will where'er our thoughts might wend,
So that no change, nor any evil chance
Should mar our joyous voyage. (1–6)

Dante's roving around the heavens was seen both as a feat of dream vision and a challenge to papal and clerical despotism.³⁶ Leigh Hunt, for example,

34. Esther Schor 'The "warm south"', in *English Romantic Literature*, James Chandler (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 224–245; p. 233.

35. H.E. Rollins, *The Letters of John Keats*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1958, I, pp. 348–349.

36. See Schor, 'The warm south', pp. 231–232.

reads the mysterious and potentially threatening inner space of a Catholic church as a version of Dante's aesthetic and compassionate universe. The first of the 'Letters from Abroad' describes Hunt's experience of the Cathedral in Pisa lit with candles for the Feast of the Assumption:

There was a gigantic picture of the Virgin displayed at the upper end, who was to be supposed sitting in heaven, surrounded with the celestial ardours; but she was 'dark with excess of bright.' It is impossible to see this profusion of lights, especially when one knows their symbolical meaning, without being struck with the source from which Dante took his idea of the beatified spirits. His heaven, filled with lights, and lights too arranged in figures, which glow with lustre in proportion to the beatitude of the souls within them, is clearly the a sublimation of a Catholic church. And it is not the worse for it, that nothing escapes the look of definiteness and materiality like fire.³⁷

The idea of 'sublimation' is vital to Hunt because his ideal of the unearthly aesthetic is that it remains vitally attached to the earthly. As he says of Dante's Paradise:

The more unearthly he tried to make it, the less heavenly it became. When he is content with earth in heaven itself,—when he literalises a metaphor and with exquisite felicity finds himself *arrived there* in consequence of fixing his eyes on the eyes of Beatrice, then he is most celestial.³⁸

It was in the religious art of the Campo Santo that Hunt found an artistic equivalence for Dante's most successful visions. Giotto's works, Hunt said,

are of the same fine old dreaming character, the same imaginative mixture of things familiar with things unearthly [...]. As you proceed along the walls, you see gracefulness and knowledge gradually helping one another, and legs and arms, lights, shades, and details of all sorts taking their proper measures and positions [...]. They are like a succession of quaint dreams of humanity during the twilight of creation.³⁹

As in Hunt's brilliant criticism of 'The Ancient Mariner', the meeting point of the earthly and what lies beyond it has the greatest impact on the

37. *The Liberal: Verse and Prose from the South*, London, John Hunt, 1822, pp. 107–108.

38. Leigh Hunt, *Stories from the Italian Poets* vol. I, London, Chapman & Hall, 1846, p. 69.

39. *The Liberal* (1822), p. 112.

viewer or reader. Of the spectre woman in Coleridge's poem Hunt wrote, 'To see such an unearthly passage end in such earthliness, seems [...] to turn common-place itself into a sort of spectral doubt.'⁴⁰ The turn from the real to the supernatural is at the heart of Romantic poetry and the same cusp between the earthly and the unearthly defines the aesthetic experience of Italy from the Renaissance onwards.

In the spirit of Hunt's criticism, the art critic and travel writer Anna Jameson locates the magic of Italian art in its connection with the human. Her favourite Madonnas are 'so human, so maternal and yet so unearthly' or "'sweet and unearthly, reminding you of a sibyl.'"⁴¹ Like Hunt, she links her favourite painters with Dante: Fra Angelico's angels, she says are 'unearthly, not so much in form as in sentiment, and superhuman, not in power but in purity'; and, as with Dante, her favourite angels are 'un-human, unembodied creatures, compounded of light and darkness, "the somewhat between a thought and a thing," haunting the memory like an apparition.' Jameson does two interesting things in this discussion of angels: her use of 'un'-prefixes keeps hold of the 'human' and the 'embodied', even as she reaches into a transcendent sphere, and she uses 1818 Coleridge's definition of art as 'of a middle nature between a thought and a thing' to convey the nature of a supernatural being.⁴²

Jameson follows Hunt and both the Shelleys in preferring the feminine genius of Raphael to the more masculine violent sublimity of Michelangelo. As she dwells on Raphael's fresco in the Vatican in which Heliogabalus is expelled from the temple, Jameson articulates a way in which the unearthly can be conveyed in human form:

St Michael, the protecting angel of the Hebrew nation, is supposed to have been the minister of divine wrath on this occasion; but Raphael, in omitting the wings and all exaggeration or alteration of the human figure, has shown how unnecessary it was for *him* to have recourse to the prodigious and impossible in form in order to give the supernatural in sentiment. The unearthly warrior and his unearthly steed [...] are in the very spirit of Dante, and, as conceptions of superhuman power, superior to anything in pictures form which Art has bequeathed to us.⁴³

40. Leigh Hunt, *The Indicator*, London, Joseph Appleyard, 1820, p. 75.

41. Anna Jameson, *Legends of the Madonna*, London, Longman, 1864, pp. 103; 65.

42. Anna Jameson, *Sacred and Legendary Art*, London, Longman, 1848, pp. 42; 49.

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 64–65. Jameson regards Rembrandt as being a magician like Dante, brooding over half-seen forms, and bringing forward unearthly shadows.

The centrality of the human figure to Jameson's view of the super-human helps to explain the crucial ambivalence of the enchanter figure for Romantic poets in Italy. In *Hellas*, Shelley includes a scene of conjuring, which, for all its supernatural incantatory effect, is grounded in human interaction. Shelley's prose note on the nature of this scene takes us into the same territory as Jameson's unearthly warrior:

The manner of the invocation of the spirit of Mahomet the Second will be censured as over subtle. I could easily have made the Jew a regular conjuror, and the Phantom an ordinary ghost. I have preferred to represent the Jew as disclaiming all pretension, or even belief, in supernatural agency, and as tempting Mahmud to that state of mind in which ideas may be supposed to assume the force of sensations through the confusion of thought with the objects of thought, and the excess of passion animating the creations of imagination.

It is a sort of natural magic, susceptible of being exercised in a degree by any one who should have made himself master of the secret associations of another's thoughts.⁴⁴

In different ways, Shelley and Byron were both preoccupied with the link between poetry and natural magic in the months leading up to their deaths in 1822 and 1824. They could envisage themselves as heroes who strove to release humanity from a malign spell as in *A Defence of Poetry*: 'Poetry defeats the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions'; or that they themselves were trapped, charmed, imprisoned and needed to be rescued from the spell of an (often female) enchantress who held them in death-like inertia.⁴⁵ Italy could turn English Romantic poets into prophets or impose a state of passive servitude or slumber: 'asleep in Italy', as Shelley describes himself in the first line of 'The Mask of Anarchy.' We can catch a glimpse of a struggle between the two forms of unearthly enchantment in the account Trelawny gives of Shelley in the woods outside Pisa. Trelawny finds Shelley gazing into a dark pool nearly hidden by a fallen pine (we remember that Prospero released Ariel from a cloven pine tree). Shelley's thoughts as recorded by Trelawny seem full of presentiments:

44. Shelley, *The Major Works*, p. 586.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 698.

‘In those three pines the weird sisters are imprisoned, and this,’ pointing to the water, ‘is their cauldron of black broth. The Pythian priestesses uttered their oracles from below,—now they are muttered from above. Listen to the solemn music in the pine-tops—don’t you hear the mournful murmurings of the sea? Sometimes they rave and roar, and shriek and howl, like a rabble of priests. In a tempest, when a ship sinks, they catch the despairing groans of the drowning mariners. Their chorus is the eternal wailing of wretched men.’⁴⁶

According to Trelawny, the scraps of paper that he found with Shelley in the wood contained the draft of ‘Ariel to Miranda.’ Magical sounds of voices singing on or in the air haunt Byron and Shelley in Italy—the music over the water that Radcliffe imagined to be floating over Venice, Ariel’s song to Miranda, the haunted music of ‘Lines Written in the Bay of Lerici’, the magic sounds in the *Triumph of Life*, the strange sounds of the shipwreck stanzas in Byron’s *Don Juan* Canto II, Haidee’s earthly version of the enchanted isle in Canto III, the ‘unearthly music’ that sighs through the arch of Norman Abbey in Canto XIII, the ‘spheres / Singing in thunder’ (III. 182–183) around *Cain*, or Mary Shelley’s description of listening to Byron read *Cain* aloud in Pisa:

To me it sounds like a revelation—One has perhaps stood on the extreme verge of such ideas and from the midst of the darkness which has surrounded us the voice of the Poet now is heard telling a wondrous tale.⁴⁷

All the texts we have discussed explore the ways in which listeners can be moved, how audiences can be swayed, and how the poet might connect with other people. Mary Shelley’s response to Byron’s reading tells us that however divine the poet’s verse, the witch poesy is a sociable creature and that her art cannot take place without human interaction. When considering the effect of art on a public, Italy permitted a greater sense of a collective because Italian audiences for public art and music were always more mixed. William Beckford noticed this in the 1780s and it remained true of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s experience in 1851 when she described being part of a crowd in St Mark’s Piazza: ‘A real Italian crowd, a crowd not of a fashionable class, or of a *bourgeois* class,

46. Trelawny, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

47. Mary Shelley, *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, Betty T. Bennett (ed.), Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, I, p. 212.

or of any other class in particular, but of a good, breathing, living humanity.⁴⁸

Despite the fears of new historicism about canonical romantic texts occluding their political contexts, the most escapist thing to write about—magic—in the escapist paradise of Italy actually makes power visible. For a country that was (unlike Britain) partially under foreign occupation, the mental effects of tyranny and the influence of words on a crowd were an urgent consideration. The wand of the enchanter might be a sceptre or it might be the agent of liberation. Or it might be both. In late summer 1821, Shelley came to visit Byron in Ravenna in order to persuade him to come over to Pisa and work with Leigh Hunt to produce the political journal the *Liberal* the aim of which was to break the hold of the conservative press in Britain and articulate a new agenda from the South. It is not an accident, I think, that as Shelley contemplated ways in which their combined voices might be heard and might from a distance exert an influence on British minds, he imagined Byron's palazzo as a mythical, transformative place: after telling Thomas Love Peacock about all the creatures—servants, horse, dogs, monkeys, cats, an eagle, crow and falcon who roam Lord Byron's rooms and make up his household, Shelley added a postscript:

After I have sealed my letter, I find that my enumeration of the animals in this Circean Palace was defective, and that in a material point. I have just met on the grand staircase five peacocks, two guinea hens, and an Egyptian crane. I wonder who all these animals were before they were changed into these shapes.⁴⁹

University of St Andrews

48. Kelley, Lewis and Hagan (eds), *The Brownings' Correspondence*, XVII, p. 42. See also Beckford, *Dreams, Waking Thoughts and Incidents*, p. 112.

49. P.B. Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Frederick L. Jones (ed.), Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964, II, pp. 330–331.