



Going South: Mary Shelley's representation of Italy in *Rambles in Germany and Italy*

Giulia Bocchio

Università degli studi di Trento

giulia.bocchio@unitn.it

This article presents Mary Shelley's *Rambles in Germany and Italy in 1840, 1842 and 1843* as a key text for the perception of Italy in Britain in the nineteenth century. In the age of the Grand Tour, travellers from across Europe visited Italy for reasons of art, culture, leisure, religion, and health. *Il Bel Paese* was regarded by foreign travellers as the emblem of the South and travel writing of the period drew on established patterns of tropes and metaphors to represent the Italian peninsula. This article shows that, in *Rambles*, Mary Shelley got rid of well-established prejudices related to British colonial sense of superiority and engaged in an authentic, often extremely personal, dialogue with the country and its inhabitants.

Giulia Bocchio is a PhD student at the University of Trento and a member of the International Research Doctoral Course in "Forms of cultural exchange", in collaboration with the University of Augsburg. She graduated from the University of Trento in 2018 in *Letterature euroamericane, traduzione e critica letteraria* with a thesis titled "The Apple and the Book: Women Readers in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century". The PhD project she is currently working on is entitled "O Bella Libertà: the Experience of Travel and the Representation of Italy in the Works of Mary Shelley, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot". Her research aims at investigating the physical and emotional implications of travel for nineteenth-century women and the influence of the Anglo-Italian cultural encounter on their writing.



North versus South

For centuries, Italy was regarded by foreign travellers as the ultimate representation of the South. From a Central- or North-European perspective, the Italian Peninsula – with its lush countryside extending from the Alps to the Mediterranean Sea and its sanguine, emotional inhabitants – was schematically opposed to their native land, both in terms of climate and ethnical character. If we acknowledge that nations are defined as imagined communities, as has been proposed by Benedict Anderson (1983), and that national characterisations depend “not to an external anthropological reality mimetically represented, but to an oppositional discursive economy of other national characterizations, most fundamentally along an axis of Self vs. Other” (Leerssen 2016, 16) we should not be surprised that “northern visitors felt the need to promote their own industriousness and ‘European’ character by distinguishing themselves from a ‘backward’ and provincial South” (Luzzi 2002, 49). It was especially in the period of nation-building after the Napoleonic Wars, that a sizable number of British travel writers established a dichotomy between their supposedly rational, progressive culture and the correspondingly irrational, idle, backward Italian society to reinforce their own national identity.

Assuming travel literature as one of the main sources of the image of Italy in ethnographic, artistic, and political representation and looking at much literary production on Italy and the Italians of the period, it is evident that the “national characterisation” or ethnotype often sparked from a limited set of notions about the land and its inhabitants. Italy was literally grounded on the ruins of the Roman empire, yet the fascination for the glory of its monumental past was counteracted by a bitter contempt for the current state of things. Foreign travellers lamented that modern Italy was chaotic and lacked socio-political order; Italian society was corrupt, degenerate and deprived of guidance; Italians were primitive and violent, often to the point of being murderous (Brilli 2003, 48-51). However, thanks to the mild climate which blessed the country, nature flourished without effort, and this allowed Italians to live according to the style of *dolce far niente*. All these preconceptions resulted in a wide collection of stereotypical representations of the Italian Peninsula, both in literature and painting, which drew on established patterns of tropes and metaphors. Italy was often depicted as a tomb and mausoleum, underlying its decaying state; as an open-air museum for its richness in the fine arts; as a fallen woman for its lascivious morality; as a Paradise for its natural beauties; and as a lady in chains for its political subjugation to the Austrian Empire and the Papal States, and its religious dependence on the Roman Church. Although these images often had no link with reality and were, like most ethnotypes, “no more than a product of the imagination, that is, a fiction” (Beller and Leerssen 2007, 11), we should not be tempted to dismiss them as irrelevant. Maria Schoina has indeed shown that while the “Romantic myth of Italy” was being created, British travellers inevitably reflected on their own national identity and cultural background (Schoina 2009, 22). Therefore, it is precisely through these – albeit arbitrary – representations of national character that we may perhaps form an idea of the Anglo-Italian relationship in the nineteenth century.

In recent decades, however, literary scholars have highlighted how nineteenth-century women travellers often did not fully adhere to the narrative of Italy as the “anti-image” of Great Britain. Sara Mills pointed to women’s ambiguous status in the construction of British national identity due to their “oppressive socialisation and marginal position in relation to imperialism, despite their general privileged class

position” (Mills 1991, 3). Chapman and Stabler argued that, unlike their male counterparts, women travel writers “frustrate any sense of static and monolithic ‘Italy’” and identify the South as an “imaginative and liberating space of possibilities and revelations, opening up the ‘travelling heart’ to new experiences, pleasures and subjectivities” (Chapman and Stabler 2003, 11). On the wake of these studies, this paper seeks to analyse Mary Shelley’s representation of Italy in *Rambles in Germany and Italy in 1840, 1842 and 1843*, and to highlight her contribution to the perception of Italy in Britain. By looking at the most common metaphors and tropes used to represent and interpret *il Bel Paese*, I hope to suggest that, although Mary Shelley occasionally endorsed Romantic generalizations of Italy as feminine and premodern, more often rejected well-established prejudices related to British colonial sense of superiority and engaged in an authentic dialogue with the country and its inhabitants. A close reading of her text reveals an acute awareness of the socio-political context in which she found herself and a clear intention to “participate in acts of (inter)cultural perception and cultural construction” (Korte 2000, 5). Indeed, Shelley went beyond a mere description of Italian beauties and moved into the realm of social commentary. By doing so, she broadened the scope of travel narrative and explored matters of public importance to provide insight into national ideologies.

In the next paragraphs, I will address three of the most common tropes usually associated to Italy (Italy as Woman; Italy as Paradise; Italy as Tomb) to show that in *Rambles*, Mary Shelley often adopted an ambivalent attitude: on the one hand, she incorporated traditional representations of the South to satisfy the expectations of her readership; on the other, she manipulated the tropes and expanded their meanings to suit her needs of self-representation. According to Elisabetta Marino, Mary Shelley’s writing of Italy can be interpreted as a response to her urgent need to redefine her identity as woman and writer (Marino 2011, 58). In this article, I argue that going South allowed her to come to terms with her past and to envision a future self, more sympathetic and “free [...] from clinging, deadening prejudices” (Shelley 1844, I: 158). Mary Shelley’s rejection of a purely Anglo-centric perspective in favour of a more fluid identity as traveller, and ultimately as “Anglo-Italian”, testifies to the transformative power she attributed to travelling. Hopefully, this contribution will shed new light on Mary Shelley as travel writer and cultural mediator in the Anglo-Italian encounter.

Italy as Woman

Rambles in Germany and Italy in 1840, 1842, and 1843 was published in two volumes in 1844, almost twenty-six years after *Frankenstein*. Mary Shelley was committed to writing a travel narrative that followed the tradition of travel literature, combining the description of places with observations on the socio-political situation of modern Italy. Besides discussing Italian art, cities, and landscape, she addressed “the people, especially in a political point of view” (I: viii). Her aim became “to speak of the state of Italy and the Italians” (I: ix), and she openly declared it in the *Preface*: “In addition, therefore, to being a mere gossiping companion to a traveller, I would fain say something that may incite others to regard them favourably; something explanatory of their real character” (I: ix).

As we have noted, the British readership generally felt a great deal of contempt for the state of Italy and its people. Travel narratives by Grand Tourists were filled with “contemptuous censures of the effeminacy of the Italians – diatribes against the vice and cowardice of the nobles – sneers at the courtly verses of the poets” (I: x). As Shelley

notes in using the term “effeminacy”, the British habitually associated the Italian political subjugation to foreign countries to the image of a beautiful woman in chains. This trope, introduced in the eighteenth century and then consolidated in the 1807 best-selling novel *Corinne ou l'Italie* by Madame de Staël, presented Italy as a passive country and “subtly eroticize[d] power relations between the imperial British and the subject Italians” (Schor 1993, 246). In contrast with this tradition, Mary Shelley’s travelogue aimed at redeeming the country from charges of “superstition, luxury, servility, indolence, violence, vice” (I: x) and advocating the good qualities of its inhabitants:

I believe that no one can mingle much with the Italians without becoming attached to them. Their faults injure each other; their good qualities make them agreeable to strangers. Their courtesy, their simplicity of manner, their evident desire to serve, their rare and exceeding intelligence, given to the better specimens among the higher classes, and to many among the lower, a charm all their own. (I: viii)

Her defence of “the most illustrious and the most unfortunate [country] in the world” (I: xvi) is sometimes so heartfelt that some critics have recognized in her celebration of the Italian culture a coded critique of British society through the Italian looking glass. A few pages later, Mary Shelley criticizes her fellow travellers for applying double standards when visiting a foreign country: “When we visit Italy, we become what the Italians were censured for being, – enjoyers of the beauties of nature, the elegance of art, the delights of the climate, the recollections of the past, and the pleasures of society, without a thought beyond” (I: xvi). This statement suggests that although Mary Shelley recognised that ethnotypes developed according to an opposition of “us” vs “them”, she was nevertheless willing to stress similarities between cultures instead of differences.

Englishmen, in particular, ought to sympathise in their [the Italians’] struggles; for the aspiration for free institutions all over the world has its sources in England. Our example first taught the French nobility to raise themselves from courtiers into legislators. The American war of independence, it is true, quickened this impulse, by showing the way to a successful resistance to the undue exercise of authority; but the seed was all sown by us. (I: xi)

When Shelley invites the English to “sympathise” with the Italians and not pity them, she urges her fellow citizens to renounce their sense of superiority and regard other nations as peers. Schor has indeed noted that in *Rambles* not only does Mary Shelley reveal the ethnic bias implicit in British stereotypes of the Italians, but also denounces the ethos of northern superiority as utterly wrong (Schor 1993, 249). In her words, “Shelley unmasks this disdain as part of the entrenched, tyrannical system of political and economic exploitation” (Schor 1993, 249). This perhaps explains why the author insists that the faults and vices of the Italians are not natural but the direct consequence of their political oppression and lack of education:

The more I see the inhabitants of this country, the more I feel convinced that they are highly gifted with intellectual powers, and possess all the elements of greatness. They are made to be a free, active, inquiring people [...] yet, without freedom how can they? [...] their faults are many – the faults of the oppressed – the love of pleasure, disregard of truth, indolence, and violence of temper. But their falsehood is on the surface – it is not deceit. Under free institutions, and where the acquirement of knowledge is not as now a mark inviting oppression and wrong, their love of pleasure were readily ennobled into intellectual activity. (I: 86-87)

Shelley here draws a parallel between the condition of Woman in the nineteenth century and the state of the Italians. In the gender hierarchies of the Victorian period, it was expected that a woman was morally superior to her husband but that she remained in a subordinate position of obedience. In the same way, English travellers esteemed Italy for reasons of affinity and shared cultural heritage, but they denied her that right to freedom which would lead her to attain a status of equality with the other European powers.

In *Rambles*, Shelley debates the image of Italy as Woman to offer an alternative account of the “state of Italy and the Italians”. She seems to suggest that things will improve only when the country achieves its political independence and when neighbouring countries cease treating it as inferior. Her aim as travel writer is therefore to act as cultural mediator in her own country, voice Italian revolutionary spirit and eradicate cultural prejudices from British consciousness. The purpose of travel is indeed according to her “to enliven the imagination – knowledge, to enlighten and free the mind from clinging, deadening prejudices – a wider circle of sympathy with our fellow-creatures; – these are the uses of travel, for which I am convinced every one is the better and the happier” (I:158).

Italy as Paradise

When Mary Shelley crossed the Alps in the summer of 1840, she felt like she was returning home. Italy was the country where she had lived with her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley between 1818 and 1823, and spent her youth in as a member of the illustrious Shelley-Byron circle. Besides, it was the place where most of her works had been written. Mary had long wished to return to “the country which memory painted as paradise” (I: 3), but various personal and professional reasons had kept her in Britain for almost seventeen years. Now that she was finally coming back, she could not restrain her excitement: “Can it, indeed, be true, that I am about to revisit Italy? How many years have gone since I quitted that country!” (I: 1). The pretext for a new journey was provided by her son Percy Florence, in June 1840. He wished to spend his study holidays with some university friends on the shores of Lake Como and asked his mother to accompany them. The name of Italy itself exerted an irresistible lure on Mary Shelley and she seized the opportunity to re-visit the places which, more than twenty years before, had witnessed the most exciting and the most tragic moments in her life.

Indeed, the Italian experience of the 1820s left an indelible mark on Mary Shelley’s life: in a handful of years, she changed from the inexperienced young woman, who lived in the shadow of her husband, to the mature and self-reliant author. However, she paid a high price for this transformation. During her Italian residence, she lost two of her children of dysentery and malaria, and her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley drowned in the summer 1822, while crossing the Gulf of La Spezia on board his small vessel. Her close friend, Lord Byron, also died during the Greek Revolution in 1824 and after these tragic events, the group of Anglo-Italian artists who had surrounded the Shelleys for years scattered. Therefore, when Mary Shelley returned to England after five years of residing in Italy, she was bereaved and acutely alone. Contemporary biographers now believe that this perpetual sense of isolation, loss and lack of support ultimately contributed to her development of post-traumatic stress, associated both with depression and anxiety – from which Mary Shelley suffered – and with hypertension, depressed immune response and metabolic dysfunction (Sampson 2018, 244). Around

this period, Mary registers how her “health has been shaken; a nervous illness interrupts my usual occupations, and disturbs the tenor of my life” (I: 2).

For years, the idea of Italy and the memories of her past life provided an escape from the sad state of facts, and a distraction from her poor health. Despite being the place where the “mortal remains of those beloved” (I: 1) were buried, Mary Shelley never ceased being in love with the Italian peninsula, which remained her main source of inspiration and the setting for many of her novels and short stories. She longed so much to travel and to return to her “Beloved Italy”, that she received her son’s invitation to a tour the Continent as a way out of all her suffering. In *Rambles*, Mary Shelley writes that she felt reinvigorated at the prospect of taking a break from ordinary worries and enjoying carefree travelling. She expressed her enthusiasm through striking metaphors, which stressed her sense of liberation:

I was about to break a chain that had long held me – cross the Channel – and wander far towards the country which memory painted as a paradise. (I: 3)

On the shores of France I shook the dust of accumulated cares from off me; I forgot disappointments, and banished sorrow; weariness of body replaced beneficially weariness of soul. (I: 7)

She even comes to suggest that going abroad might work as a medicine: “Travelling will cure all: my busy brooding thoughts will be scattered abroad; and, to use a figure of speech, my mind will, amidst novel and various scenes, renew the outworn and tattered garments in which it has long been clothed, and array itself in a vesture all gay in fresh and glossy hues, when we are beyond the Alps” (I: 2).

In Mary Shelley’s age it was quite common to travel for health. Many nineteenth-century physicians recommended their patients go south and promoted “a change of air” to treat various diseases. This was especially true for tuberculosis patients like John Keats, who were urged to move to Italy where the sun and the mild climate would attenuate their symptoms. Mary Shelley herself spent three weeks at Kissingen spa in Germany “taking the cure” hoping to restore her fragile health. However, her ironical dismissal of the spa regimen and its doctors, and her open criticism against the physicians’ many prohibitions in *Rambles*, seems to suggest that she linked physical healing less with spas than with the opportunity “to wander, to ramble, and discover new scenes” (I: 41). At the beginning of her travelogue, Mary Shelley clarified that the journey to Italy represented a healing process that interested not simply her body but her whole person. The metaphor of the changing clothes in the quotation above is the first clue in the text of the considerable transformative power Mary Shelley attributed to the travel experience. In her words, she witnessed the first signs of improvement even before crossing the Channel: “at the name of Italy, I grow young again” (I: 2).

A further example of the positive influence she envisioned in travelling abroad is expressed through the metaphorical references to insects. Early in the travelogue, Shelley represents her weariness of body and soul through the image of a firefly that can no longer light up. She writes: “we encountered a poor stray fire-fly on our road, flashing a pale sickly light: how it came there who can tell? It looked lost and out of place.” (I: 22). We can easily trace numerous connections between the narrator and the insect: the poor firefly is on the roadside and seems to have lost her way home. The adjective “stray” with its double meaning of being lost, without a guide, and wandering aimlessly, implicitly refers to the travelogue title, *Rambles* – that is walking without a specific

destination (Ożarska 2021, 266). Moreover, just like Mary Shelley was afflicted by the tragedies that hit her family, the firefly seems to be hurt as she is “flashing a pale sickly light”. The author’s identification with insects is reinforced throughout the text by other occurrences. In one of these, the firefly is replaced by a grasshopper but the juxtaposition effect between the author and the animal is the same:

When I returned from Rebenau a week or two ago, I found a grasshopper nestled in my muslin dress, and thoughtlessly I shook it off, out of window. That night the act weighted on my conscience. It was a stroke of adversity for the insect to be transported from the fresh grass and cool streamlets of wooded Rebenau, and cast out to die in the arid, herbless market-place of a big town. [...] However, pining as I am, to repose “in close cover, by some brook”, thirsting to betake myself to some “wide-watered shore”, I hope to be even kinder to myself than to my victim, and in a few more days to be far, far from the dusty Alt Markt, amid more congenial scenes. (I: 257)

In this case too, the insect appears as a “victim” of fate. The narrator remarks that a “stroke of adversity” caused the grasshopper to become entangled in her dress and find itself far from home in a place unsuitable for life. The insect is disoriented, having been forced to leave “the fresh grass and cool streamlets of wooded Rebenau” for “the arid, herbless market-place of a big town”. In the same way, the narrator struggles in her present situation and longs to find herself “amid more congenial scenes”. Mary Shelley seems to imply that her life would easily get better “in close covert, by some brook” or at “some wide-watered shore”. Is she referring here to the waters of some Italian place? Lake Como perhaps or the coasts of the Mediterranean? It would be logical to think so since Italy is often associated with water imaginary and a congenial climate in *Rambles*. Another quote seems to confirm this hypothesis: “We find here a few fire-flies: like the unfortunate Italian exiles, they gleam with subdued brightness in an ungenial clime, and one wonders how they can endure so northern a temperature” (I: 187). By contrast, travelling towards the warm, southern temperatures triggered a metamorphosis that led Shelley to abandon the “poor stray fire-fly” and identify with a bee, happily engaged in the search for honey.

much of the honey of delightful recollections have I, by their means, brought back to my hive. (I: 5)

to fly abroad from the hive, like the bee, and return laden with the sweets of travel. (I: 158)

These examples show that Mary Shelley had great faith that the “sweets of travel” would function as a balm for her suffering mind and body, and that thanks to her Italian tour, she would regain full health.

In *Rambles*, this sense of liberation and rebirth becomes particularly manifest when she describes the crossing of the Alps. For all northern travellers who did not embark from Marseille or Nice, the Simplon Pass and the Mont Cenis were the only way to access the Peninsula. Therefore, symbolically the mountain range of the Alps represented the ultimate border between the cold, rigid, industrious North and the warm, sensuous, bucolic South.

We left the abrupt, gloomy, sublime north, and gently dropped down to truly Italian scenes. (II: 72)

All Italian travellers know what it is, after toiling up the bleak, bare, northern, Swiss side of an Alp, to descend towards ever-vernal Italy. The rhododendron, in thick bushes, in full bloom, first adorned the mountain sides; then, pine forests; then, chestnut groves; the mountain was cleft into woody ravines; the waterfalls scattered their spray and their gracious melody; flowery and green, and clothed in radiance, and gifted with plenty, Italy opened upon us. (I: 60)

To describe the arrival in Italy, Mary Shelley adhered to the canonical expressions of the sublime and the picturesque. Her focus on the three primary natural elements (trees, grass, and water) and the presence of typical adjectives like “ever-vernal”, “flowery”, and “gifted” demonstrate a profound knowledge of the topos of Italy as *locus amoenus*. Traditional representations of the *Bel paese* depicted Italy as an idealised place of safety and comfort, a remote spot untouched by the Industrial Revolution; a beautiful, shady lawn where human beings could lead a rural life sheltered from all evils and in perfect harmony with nature. In *Rambles*, Shelley occasionally clings to the canon as she assimilates Italy to a sort of Eden where “the benignant nature of the climate, and the abstemious habits of the Italians prevent the poor from suffering want” (II: 184-185). However, the metaphorical representation of Italy as Paradise in *Rambles* is not limited to an aesthetic rendering of the landscape or a literary device to address social issues. For Mary Shelley, the symbolic association Italy = Paradise acquires a strong autobiographical meaning as she gradually comes to identify the country with her own private safe place: “my country, my hope, my heaven!” (Mary Shelley’s *Journal* entry of 26 October 1824, quoted in Sampson 2018, 245).

A great example in this regard is her recourse to metaphorical images from Dante’s *Divina Commedia*. In a recent article underlining the influence that the work of the great poet had in the writing of *Rambles*, Antonella Braida stated that in Mary Shelley’s travelogue “Dante’s mystical journey is replaced by a physical and spiritual journey through modern Italy, now turned into a personal land of the dead” (Braida 2020, 117). Just as Dante sets out on a journey towards salvation across hell, purgatory and eventually heaven; in the same way Mary Shelley envisions in the journey to Italy the way for her physical, emotional and spiritual healing. Intertextuality and allusions to the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* underlie the narrative structure of the travelogue. At the beginning of *Rambles*, the narrator explains that while descending into Germany, she had to pass through the so-called Höllenthal, or Valley of Hell, and the Dark Forest – a close reference to the dark wood of sin where Dante gets lost at the start of his journey. Later, Shelley’s description of her arrival to Italy echoes Dante’s vision of God in *Paradiso*:

Italy opened upon us. Thus, – and be not shocked at the illustration, for it is all God’s creation, – after the dreary old age and sickening pass of death, does the saint open his eyes on Paradise. (I: 60)

It seems to me as if I had never before visited Italy – as if now, for the first time, the charm of the country was revealed to me. At every moment the senses, lapped in delight, whisper – this is Paradise. (II: 262)

I never saw till I came here, [...] that this is beauty; that here, God has let fall upon earth the mantle of glory which otherwise is gathered up among the angels! (II: 270)

These examples not only reveal a deep identification with Dante's exploration of the afterlife but also show that Mary Shelley understood her journey south in terms of *La Divina Commedia*, namely as a redeeming path that could lead her from darkness to light, from illness to health and from desolation to peace.

Italy as Tomb

We have previously noticed that Italy was perceived as a collective sepulchre in the minds of many Europeans. Nineteenth-century fascination for Italian graves and monuments was deeply influenced by literary works of the time such as Foscolo's *Dei Sepolcri* and Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, which depicted Italy as a gigantic graveyard where the heroes and glories of times past lie buried. Rome was the final and most favourite destination because it provided a "vantage point" from which world history could be perused at once. While approaching *la città eterna*, the narrator of *Rambles* exclaims: "No one can look on this country as merely so much earth – every clod is a sacred relic – every stone is an object of curiosity – every name we hear satisfies some desire or awakens some cherished association" (II: 214). Although this quotation could lead us to think that Mary Shelley simply incorporated the traditional idea of Italy as a mausoleum in her travelogue, a more careful reading of her travel narrative reveals a more original use of the trope Italy = tomb. Indeed, whereas many of her contemporaries were keen on visiting cities such as Rome, Florence or Venice at the discovery of Italian history, she preferred to embark in a journey in her own past.

Taking into consideration Manfred Pfister's statement that "travelling is always a travelling in traces, is always the pursuit of traces to be followed and read, and that the reading of these traces is more of an adventure than the travelling itself" (quoted in Cooke 2009, 20), it is easy to recognise in *Rambles in Germany and Italy*, the author's attempt at evoking and reinvigorating the past by re-treading her own feet. Mary Shelley – now a 46-year-old widow and successful writer – takes the chance to revisit the places of her youth to exorcise the memories of her loved ones and come to terms with her past. In the text, this curative process – which spans the whole travelogue – centres on the trope of the pilgrimage. In religious practices, pilgrims have traditionally sought physical healing and redemption by visiting a sacred place like Lourdes and Santiago de Compostela or the adoration of a saint's bones or other relics. In *Rambles*, Mary Shelley sets out, like a real pilgrim, to visit the "mortal remains of those beloved" (I: 1-2) in search of healing and atonement. Accordingly, her primary destination is Rome, where she visits the so-called Protestant cemetery where John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley and her child are buried:

"What are the pleasures that I enjoy at Rome?" you ask. [...] Besides all that Rome itself affords of delightful to the eye and imagination, I revisit it as the bourne of a pious pilgrimage. The treasures of my youth lie buried there. [...] There is one view from the Coliseum that I am never tired of contemplating. Ascending to the second range of arches, and looking from the verge towards the tomb of Cestius [...] gleaming at a distance, is a resting-place for the eye. (II: 225-226)

This quotation shows that Mary Shelley was not searching for traces of the classics in Rome but something more personally valuable. The symbolic image of Italy as a

collective tomb is substituted in her travelogue by the real spot near the Pyramid of Cestius, where the “treasures of [her] youth” rest in peace. However, the reinterpretation of the metaphor Italy = tomb is not limited to her visit to Rome. The whole travelogue can be read as the story of her pilgrimage to the places of memory in search of peace.

Scholars have noted that Mary Shelley needed to expiate what appears to be “survival guilt”, a term which came into use in the 1950s and 1960s to define the continued suffering of Holocaust victims, who entailed feelings of self-guilt and worthlessness, sparking from the remorse of surviving a traumatic event, while others died. As previously stated, for years Mary Shelley was traumatised by the loss of her family and by the fact that, except for her step-sister Claire, she was the sole survivor of the Shelley-Byron group. This is evident when she describes her return to Villa Diodati – the place where she, Percy Shelley and Byron sojourned in the summer of 1816:

There were the terraces, the vineyards, the upward path threading them, the little port where our boat lay moored; I could mark and recognise a thousand slight peculiarities, familiar objects then – forgotten since – now replete with recollections and associations. Was I the same person who had lived there, the companion of the dead? For all were gone. (I: 139-140)

Just like Lionel, the main character in her novel *The Last Man*, Mary Shelley is left alone to confront her past. Because her former self also died with her beloved, she feels as though “all my life since was but an unreal phantasmagoria” (I: 140), while memory makes her a “companion of the dead”. Once again, the activity of writing offers her some relief because through *Rambles*, Mary can make sense of events and find a purpose in the memorialisation of experiences. In other words, for Mary Shelley, remembering became a way of contributing, as the last survivor, to the posthumous fame of the writers of the Shelley-Byron circle and of reaffirming her identity as a full member of this group of Anglo-Italian intellectuals that she defined as “elected” – “as having made a part of the Elect” (letter to Thomas J. Hogg, 3rd October 1824, quoted in Schoina 2016, 76). Another opportunity to expiate her sense of guilt is offered when her son purchases a small, unsafe-looking boat at Lake Como and she has to confront her worst fears, sparking from the memory of Shelley’s drowning. At first, it seems she will not be able to sustain the pain of her recollections and she exclaims: “I can bring no help, except constant watchfulness [...] I endeavour, in vain, to cast aside the fears which are its offspring; they haunt me perpetually, and make too large and too sad a portion of my daily life” (I: 74). But later, she can come to terms with her husband’s death and dispel her self-accusations, related to the survivor guilt, cowardice, and selfishness:

This evening I had the pleasure of finding that I had become not quite a coward, and that I feared for P – more than for myself. I crossed the lake with Mr. – ; the wind rose, and our little sail was hoisted; but the waves rose with the wind, and our craft is so small that a little breeze seems much. However, I had been scolded, and had scolded myself for my timidity, and would not now display even prudence, but went on; and though twenty times I was on the point of proposing to return, I did not [...] (I: 84-85)

By re-experiencing Shelley’s death, Mary Shelley succeeds in exorcising this painful recollection and getting rid of her fears and feelings of guilt. The force of this expiation emerges in a started moment of enlightenment a couple of pages later in *Rambles*:

This evening my friends are gone to Como, and I sat on my favourite seat, listening to the ripple of the calm lake splashing at my feet; [...] My heart was elevated, purified, subdued. [...] It has seemed to me – and on such an evening, I have felt it, – that this world [...] is peopled also in its spiritual life by myriads of loving spirits; from whom, unawares, we catch impressions [...] whether the beloved dead make a portion of this holy company, I dare not guess; but that such exists, I feel. (I: 93-94)

“Purified” of her sense of guilt and having learnt how to come to terms with her past, Mary imagines that “the beloved dead” reciprocate her affection and participate in her life as “myriads of loving spirits.” The sense of their presence dispels, even if just momentarily, the sense of unrelieved mourning which features in *Rambles*. Unsurprisingly, this moment of enlightenment occurs by water – the element of purification par excellence. Later in the book, she experiences a similar moment of bliss near Amalfi, where the “inland murmur” of a torrent “imparts a quick and living enjoyment akin to the transports of love and the ecstasy of music – it touches a chord whose vibration is happiness” (II: 287). Italian lakes and streams succeed where the thermal baths of Germany had failed, in healing Mary’s body and spirit from painful recollections. Shelley’s pilgrimage comes to an end when she can substitute the metaphorical association Italy = tomb with the image of running water, which implicitly reminds us of the rite of baptism and of Percy’s epitaph from *The Tempest*:

nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
(Act I, Scene 2, vv. 477-479)

Conclusion

Mary Shelley’s *Rambles in Germany and Italy* belongs to a long tradition of travel writing on the Italian Peninsula. However, the representation of Italy in *Rambles* is original because the author profits from existing tropes and metaphors but attributes to them new, personal meanings. Her travelogue reveals that, in contrast to other British travellers who contemplated their surroundings without however being truly touched, Mary Shelley was deeply affected by her experience of travelling. In Italy, she found a place for healing and atonement, and completed a process of self-regeneration. Moreover, in *Rambles*, the actual journey works as a pretext for Shelley to tackle issues that have to do with her own needs of self-definition and self-depiction. Mary Shelley interpreted the South as a transformative space where she could claim greater freedom, express her emotions, and reflect on her identity as a woman writer. To use her own words: “the sun of Italy has thawed the frozen stream – the cup of life again sparkles in the brim” (I: 94).

Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Beller, Manfred, and Joep Leerssen (eds). 2007. *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters: A Critical Survey*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

- Braida, Antonella. 2020. "Mary Shelley in Italy: Reading Dante and the Creation of an Anglo-Italian Identity." *L'analisi linguistica e letteraria, Vita e Pensiero* – Pubblicazioni dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore 17 (3): 107-18.
- Brilli, Attilio. 2003. *Un paese di romantici briganti, gli italiani nell'immaginario del Grand Tour*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- Chapman, Alison, and Jane Stabler. 2003. *Unfolding the South: Nineteenth-century British Women Writers and Artists in Italy*. Manchester/N.Y.: Manchester University Press.
- Cooke, Simon. 2009. "Cultural Memory on the Move in Contemporary Travel Writing: W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*". In *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, edited by Erll, Astrid and Nünning Ansgar, pp.15-30. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter.
- Korte, Barbara. 2000. *English Travel Writing from Pilgrimages to Postcolonial Explorations*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Leerssen, Joep. 2016. "Imagology: On using ethnicity to make sense of the world." *Iberic@l, Revue d'études ibériques et ibéro-américaines* 10: 13-31.
- Luzzi, Joseph. 2002. "Italy without Italians: Literary Origins of a Romantic Myth." *MLN* 117 (1): 48-83.
- Marino, Elisabetta. 2011. *Mary Shelley e l'Italia: il viaggio, il Risorgimento, la questione femminile*. Firenze: Le Lettere.
- Mills, Sara. 1991. *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism*. London: Routledge.
- Ożarska, Magdalena. 2012. "Mary Shelley's *Rambles in Germany and Italy in 1840, 1842 and 1843* as a Digressional Specimen of the Italian Tour Sub-Genre". *Annals of Arts* 60 (5): 263-77.
- Sampson, Fiona. 2018. *In Search of Mary Shelley: The Girl Who Wrote Frankenstein*. London: Profile Books Ltd.
- Schoina, Maria. 2009. *Romantic Anglo-Italians: Configurations of Identity in Byron, The Shelleys, and the Pisan Circle*. London: Ashgate.
- Schor, Esther H. 1993. "Mary Shelley in Transit". In *The Other Mary Shelley, beyond Frankenstein*. Edited by Audrey A Fisch, Anne K. Mellor and Esther H Schor, pp. 235-57. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shakespeare, William. 2011. *The Tempest*. London: Harper Collins.
- Shelley, Mary. 1844. *Rambles in Germany and Italy in 1840, 1842 and 1843*, British Library Historical Print Editions, 2 vols.
- Shelley, Mary. 2004. *The Last Man*. Ware: Wordsworth Classics.