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## MARY SHELLEY IN ITALY: READING DANTE AND THE CREATION OF AN ANGLO-ITALIAN IDENTITY

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This article analyses Mary Shelley's textual and critical approach to Dante. It focuses on her sources in Mme de Staël's, J.C.L. Simonde de Sismondi's, August Schlegel's and Henry Francis Cary's critical readings of Dante. By analysing Mary Shelley's use of Dante in *Rambles*, it will be shown that Mary Shelley became a mediator and introduced contemporary Italian political readings of his work and anticipated the Victorian interest in Dante's *Vita Nuova*.

Questo articolo analizza l'approccio testuale e critico di Mary Shelley a Dante. Ne identifica le fonti europee nelle letture dantesche di Mme de Staël, J.C.L. Simonde de Sismondi, August Schlegel e Henry Francis Cary. L'analisi dell'uso di Dante in *Rambles* intende mettere in evidenza il ruolo di mediatrice culturale operato da Mary Shelley attraverso l'introduzione in Gran Bretagna delle letture risorgimentali di Dante e la sua anticipazione dell'interesse vittoriano nella *Vita Nuova*.

*Keywords:* Mary Shelley, *Rambles in Germany and Italy*, Dante, orality, Italian language learning

In a letter to Thomas Love Peacock dated 20 April 1818, Percy Shelley wrote about reading the *Divine Comedy* in the Duomo in Milan in “one solitary spot among these aisles behind the altar”<sup>1</sup>. Shelley's eagerness to resume his reading of Dante as soon as he arrived in Italy foregrounds his long-term interest in the Italian poet and his approach to Italian culture. Percy and Mary's journey to the country was both a geographical and an intellectual transfer that prompted them to pursue their reading of Italian texts. As Mary explained in her later travel narrative *Rambles in Germany and Italy, in 1840, 1842, and 1843*, approaching works in the original language was also a means of plunging into and absorbing the culture:

I mean to read a great deal of Italian; as I have ever found it pleasant to imbue oneself with the language and literature of the country in which one is residing. Reading much Italian, one learns almost to think in that language, and to converse more freely<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> P.B. Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, F.L. Jones ed., 2 vols, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1964, Vol. 2, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> M. Shelley, *Rambles in Germany and Italy, in 1840, 1842, and 1843*, 2 vols, Moxon, London 1844, Vol. 1, p. 65.

Dante, and in particular the original text of the *Divine Comedy*, was a constant presence throughout Percy and Mary's four years together in Italy. While Percy's approach to Dante has been explored by critics<sup>3</sup>, Mary's creative use of the poet still requires further investigation. This article will focus on Mary Shelley's reading of Dante and on her creative response to his poetry in her later work *Rambles in Germany and Italy*. It will be argued that her commitment to learning the language was a central part of her Italian experiences. Mary's approach to Dante will be analysed as a central event within her own construction of a 'hyphenated literary identity'<sup>4</sup> that involved studying Italian culture and history and expressing herself in the Italian language.

### 1. *Reading Dante aloud: Mary and Percy's common readings of Dante*

Reading Dante was both an individual practice and a shared event for Percy and Mary. The earliest testimony of the Shelleys' common reading of Dante are Mary's journal entries of 10 and 12 November 1817:

Monday 10<sup>th</sup>  
 Read Dante – call on the Hunts. Papa calls and M<sup>r</sup>. Ollier.  
 [...]  
 Wednesday 12  
 [...] Walk to Hunts – read Dante<sup>5</sup>.

As Mary's *Journals* reveal, Percy often read aloud to Mary, a practice that was still common at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as William St Clair has pointed out<sup>6</sup>. It is important to note that Percy and Mary's reading often included works in the original language as well as in translation. Thus, Dante's *Divine Comedy* could have been read either in Henry Francis Cary's translation of the *Inferno* and of the *Divine Comedy* or in the original<sup>7</sup>. This

<sup>3</sup> See A.M. Weinberg, *Shelley's Italian Experience*, Macmillan, Basingstoke 1991; S. Ellis, *Dante and English Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1983; T. Webb, *The Violet in the Crucible. Shelley and Translation*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1976; R. Pite, *The Circle of our Vision: Dante's Presence in English Romantic Poetry*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1994; and my volume, A. Braida, *Dante and the Romantics*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Mary's adoption of an 'Anglo-Italian identity' has been analyzed by M. Schoina, *Romantic "Anglo-Italians". Configurations of Identity in Byron, the Shelleys and the Pisan Circle*, Ashgate, Farnham 2009.

<sup>5</sup> M. Shelley, *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814-1844*, P.R. Feldman – D. Scott-Kilvert ed., 2 vols, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1987, Vol. 1, pp. 183-184.

<sup>6</sup> W. St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, p. 395.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Francis Cary first published a translation of the *Inferno* with facing Italian text (*The Inferno of Dante Alighieri*, 2 vols, Carpenter, London 1805) and a complete translation of the poem in 1814 (*The Vision, or Hell, Purgatory and Paradise of Dante Alighieri*, 3 vols, Printed for the author by J. Barfield, London 1814). Percy read both versions. For the copies Percy and Mary held, see my discussion in A. Braida, *Dante and the Romantics*, pp. 99-101. Feldman and Scott-Kilvert suggest that "Mary probably began her reading of Dante in the translation of the *Inferno* by Henry Cary (1805)" (M. Shelley, *Journals*, Vol. 1, p. 183n).

second possibility is supported by Mary's use of the Italian titles<sup>8</sup>, while Cary translated the *cantiche* as "Hell, Purgatory and Paradise" and renamed the *Divine Comedy* "The Vision".

Mary's *Journals* document her progress with the poem. She started reading "7 Canto's of Dante [*sic*]" from the *Inferno* in Este in September 1818 and she continued till 20 January, when she noted: "Finish the Inferno of Dante"<sup>9</sup>. She must then have proceeded with the *Purgatorio*, which was finished on 20 August 1819, and continued with the *Paradiso* in August and September, with some shared readings<sup>10</sup>. The *Vita Nuova* was approached with Percy at the time of their friendship with Teresa Viviani and she noted: "S. reads the *vita nuova* aloud to me in the evening"<sup>11</sup>.

Reading in the original brought the Shelleys close to Dante's prosody, style and imagery, often expressed through elaborate similes. Like Percy, Mary largely drew from Dante her inspiration for her creative writing: for example, the short story *Matilda* can be described as a narrative experiment based on *Purgatorio*, Canto 28, while in the novel *Valperga* Dante's poetry provides the cultural backdrop of her reconstruction of Euthanasia's court. After having explored the poet's sources in her article entitled "Giovanni Villani", published in *The Liberal* on 30 July 1823<sup>12</sup>, it is in *Rambles* that Mary achieved her own personal approach to Dante's legacy, as will be discussed below.

## 2. Mary Shelley's early readings of Dante and her knowledge of Italian

The entries in Mary's *Journals* are significant as they identify the two important members of Mary's community that shared a common interest in Italian language and culture: William Godwin and Leigh Hunt. While Percy Shelley studied Italian at Bracknell with Mrs. Boinville and her daughter, Cornelia Turner<sup>13</sup>, Mary could benefit from Godwin's impressive library. The sale catalogue of 1836 lists an impressive number of works by Italian authors, in the original and translation<sup>14</sup>. As for Dante, the list includes two copies of the *Commedia*, the 1555 edition with comment by Giolito and the 1819 edition in three volumes edited by Pompeo Venturi, as well as the first edition of Henry Cary's translation, published in 1814 in small format (10 cm), and "Flaxman's Designs to the Divina Com-

<sup>8</sup> For example, Mary writes "read 2 Cantos of the Purgatorio" in her entry for 5 August 1819, and "4 Canto of L'Inferno" in her entry for 10 February 1822 (M. Shelley, *Journals*, Vol. 1, pp. 294, 397).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 226, 247.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 294-297.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 351.

<sup>12</sup> M. Shelley, *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, 8 vols, Pickering & Chatto, London 1996, Vol. 2, P. Clemit ed., pp. 128-139.

<sup>13</sup> P.B. Shelley, *Letters*, Vol. 1, pp. 383-384.

<sup>14</sup> *Catalogue of the Curious Library of that Very Eminent and Distinguished Author, William Godwin Esq., Which Will be Sold by Auction at Sotheby and Son, on Friday, June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1836*, Compton and Ritchie, London s.d. [https://books.google.fr/books?id=x3pdAAAACAAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=fr&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.fr/books?id=x3pdAAAACAAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=fr&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false) (last accessed November 29, 2018). See *Shelley and His Circle, 1773-1822*, 10 vols to date, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1961-2002, Vol. 1, K.N. Cameron ed., p. 335.

media, engraved by Piroli<sup>15</sup>. As for the 1814 volume I would like to suggest that this was bought before the 1819 publication by Taylor and Hessey, since Henry Cary claims that all the volumes of the 1814 edition were sold out and were difficult to find later<sup>16</sup>. Whatever the date of these acquisitions, Godwin had a personal interest in Italian language and culture: he took classes from a teacher named Curioni in 1790-1791 and in 1802 he met Gaetano Polidori and they collaborated for his life of Chaucer<sup>17</sup>. Mary's early knowledge of Italian is also supported by Claire Clairmont's manuscript letter in which she allegedly transcribed Mary Jane Godwin's claim that her daughters were studying "French and Italian from masters"<sup>18</sup>.

Mary pursued her interest in learning Italian in her years with Percy. The journals point out that she read *Pamela*, *Clarissa Harlowe* and Plutarch's *Lives* in Italian translation<sup>19</sup>; according to Timothy Webb, "this and other evidence suggests that her reading Italian was considerably developed when she arrived in Italy"<sup>20</sup>. Evidence of her continued interest in Italian literature is also provided by a reading list of Italian prose works, ranging from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century<sup>21</sup>.

The desire to feel at ease with the Italian language prompted Mary to employ an "Italian Master in the evening", a Signor Mombelli, and references to Italian exercises are to be found again on 25-26 April and on 18-22 May<sup>22</sup>. This commitment resulted in the fre-

<sup>15</sup> *Catalogue of the Curious Library*, p. 289, items 172-174, and p. 296, item 371. It is not clear whether the Flaxman illustrations in the catalogue refer to a volume or to a set of bound prints. See, for example, *Atlante Dantesco da poter servire ad ogni edizione della Divina Commedia, ossia l'Inferno, il Purgatorio e il Paradiso*, Batelli e Fanfani, Milano 1822.

<sup>16</sup> H.F. Cary, *Memoir of the Rev. Henry Francis Cary M.A.*, 2 vols, Moxon, London 1847, Vol. 1, p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> *William Godwin's Diary*, <http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/bibl> (last accessed November 29, 2018). See also Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodleian MS. Abinger c. 36, fol. 71<sup>r</sup>, <http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/online/1500-1900/abinger/images/Dep.c.811.1-09-7.jpg> (last accessed November 29, 2018), which includes a list of Italian authors and "Il Dante La Divina Commedia".

<sup>18</sup> The manuscript, in Claire's hand, is catalogued Cl Cl 26 in the Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle at the New York Public Library. It comprises six letters allegedly copied by Claire. According to Elizabeth C. Denlinger, the existence of the six original letters Mary Jane Godwin wrote to Margaret King Moore, Lady Mount Cashell, should be questioned (E.C. Denlinger, *Horrid Mysteries of Cl Cl 26: A Tale of Mothers and Daughters*, "19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century", 27, 2018, p. none, <https://www.19.bbk.ac.uk/articles/10.16995/ntn.817/>, last accessed April 29, 2019). I thank Elizabeth C. Denlinger for her expertise and for her help in accessing a transcription of the manuscript. See also M. Seymour, *Mary Shelley*, Grove Press, New York 2000, p. 53.

<sup>19</sup> M. Shelley, *Journals*, Vol. 1, pp. 205-206.

<sup>20</sup> T. Webb, *Reading Aloud in the Shelley Circle*, in *Publishing, Editing and Reception: Essays in Honor of Donald H. Reiman*, M. Edson ed., University of Delaware Press, Lanham, MD 2015, pp. 97-132 (p. 102).

<sup>21</sup> The list is in Mary Shelley's hand and is based on Thomas Roscoe's anthology *The Italian Novelists*, as was first pointed out by Jean de Palacio in *Shelley's Library Catalogue: An Unpublished Document*, "Revue de Littérature Comparée", 36, 1962, 2, pp. 270-276 (p. 270n). Alan Weinberg suggests the 1830s as the dating of the list (*The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts*, 23 vols, Garland, New York 1986-2002, Vol. 22, Part 2, A. Weinberg ed., pp. 50-51, 355-357).

<sup>22</sup> M. Shelley, *Journals*, Vol. 1, pp. 207, 210. Claire mentions his name as Mombelli in her journal for April-June 1818 (*Shelley and His Circle*, Vol. 5, D.H. Reiman ed., p. 452).

quent use of Italian phrases in letters written to non-Italian speakers, either living in Italy or sharing an interest in Italian culture, and she also wrote some letters entirely in Italian. Before 1822 the addressees are mostly Maria Gisborne, Marianne and Leigh Hunt, and Claire Clairmont. After Shelley's death, her letters in Italian amount to her request to the Italian authorities to reclaim the boat *Don Juan*, a letter to Vincent Novello, and ten letters to Teresa Guiccioli<sup>23</sup>. It has hardly been noted that at least in two letters she decided to adopt an Italian name by signing "Maria" and "Marina"<sup>24</sup>. While the second example is part of the playful tone of her communication with Leigh Hunt, the use of the signature "Maria" in her request to the authorities in Viareggio could be more clearly ascribed to her intention, explored by Maria Schoina, to adopt an 'Anglo-Italian' identity.

### 3. *Mary and Percy's critical approach to Dante*

Among the readings that preceded the Shelleys' arrival in Italy, four texts stand out as possible sources of their critical approach to Dante: August Schlegel's *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, Madame de Staël's *De la littérature*, Simonide de Sismondi's *Histoire des républiques italiennes*, and Henry Francis Cary's translations. As for the first, Mary Shelley noted in her journal that in France, on the way to Rheims, "Shelley reads Schlegel aloud"<sup>25</sup>. Feldman and Scott-Kilvert suggest that they read the translation by J. Black, *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (1815). August Schlegel, who wrote extensively about Dante and even translated sections from the *Inferno*<sup>26</sup>, expressed a less enthusiastic view about the poet in the earlier *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*: references to Dante are few and in general his approach to Italian dramatic literature is rather critical<sup>27</sup>. A short introductory reference to Dante mentions him as "the father of modern poetry" and praises his capacity to detach himself from his source, Virgil. In his analysis of Romantic literature, he ranks Dante with Cervantes and Shakespeare as part of the triumvirate of modern literature<sup>28</sup>.

A second, often ignored source for the Shelleys' approach to Dante and in general the history of literature was offered by Germaine de Staël's works read by Mary and Percy from 1818 to 1822<sup>29</sup>. In *De la littérature*, one of the most significant introductions to European literatures available to British readers before 1818, de Staël highlights the significance of Dante in his own times, but also his "numerous faults", which she ascribes to the times in

<sup>23</sup> M. Shelley, *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, B.T. Bennett ed., 3 vols, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1980-88, Vol. 1, pp. 259, 332-333, 419-422, 442-444, 457-461, 471-474, 552-554, 562-566; Vol. 2, pp. 18-21, 28-29, 35-38, 167-169.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 259, 164. The original of the letter to Leigh Hunt is kept at the Huntington Library, San Marino, CA (HM 2747), and I thank the library for providing me with a copy.

<sup>25</sup> M. Shelley, *Journals*, Vol. 1, p. 198.

<sup>26</sup> *The Dante Encyclopedia*, R. Lansing ed., Routledge, London/New York 2000, p. 267.

<sup>27</sup> A.W. von Schlegel, *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, J. Black trans., 2 vols, Murray, London 1818.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> M. Shelley, *Journals*, Vol. 1, pp. 68, 89, 93, 243, 340.



which he lived<sup>30</sup>. However, de Staël had already included a celebration of Dante in the novel *Corinne ou l'Italie*, in Corinne's performance at the Capitol. In *De la littérature*, while Ossian is the epitome of the modern and Northern sensibility, Dante is the modern Homer. Moreover, there is a political interpretation as he is presented as a soldier, as well as a poet:

Le Dante, l'Homère des temps modernes, poète sacré de nos mystères religieux, héros de la pensée, plonge son génie dans le Styx pour aborder à l'enfer, et son âme fut profonde comme les abîmes qu'il a décrits. L'Italie, aux temps de sa puissance, revit tout entière dans Le Dante. Animé par l'esprit des républiques, guerrier aussi bien que poète, il souffle la flamme des actions parmi les morts, et ses ombres ont une vie plus forte que les vivants d'aujourd'hui<sup>31</sup>.

Like de Staël, Simonde de Sismondi highlighted Dante's participation in the political events of his times in the fourth volume of *Histoire des républiques italiennes du moyen âge*. Mary noted reading Sismondi in January 1819 with Shelley and she recommended his work to Maria Gisborne in February 1819 for its "true picture of Italians"<sup>32</sup>. The text would become a central source for Mary Shelley's *Valperga*, as has been pointed out by Michael Rossington and Nora Crook in their editions of the novel<sup>33</sup>. However, Sismondi's *Histoire des républiques italiennes du moyen âge* mentions Dante only briefly and his role in medieval history is clarified as "only a priore"<sup>34</sup> and not as a major political figure.

Another important source for Mary and Percy's critical opinions about Dante can be found in the paratexts of Cary's translation. *The Vision* includes some critical assessment in the form of an introductory life of Dante. When the biographical narratives are excepted, Cary's most significant contribution concerns his appreciation of Dante's *Rime* and *Vita Nuova*, as the following excerpt points out:

[His lyric poems] abound not only in deep moral reflections, but in touches of tenderness and passion. Some [...] have supposed that Beatrice was only a creature of Dante's imagination; and there can be no question but that he has invested her, in the *Divina Commedia*, with the attributes of an allegorical being. But who can doubt of her having a real existence, when she is spoken of in such a strain of passion as in these lines<sup>35</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> "Mais les défauts sans nombre qu'on peut lui reprocher sont, sans doute, le tort de son siècle." (Mme de Staël, *De la littérature, Delphine, Corinne ou l'Italie*, in *Œuvres*, C. Seth – V. Cossy ed., Gallimard, Paris 2017 (La Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), p. 125).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1031.

<sup>32</sup> M. Shelley, *Journals*, Vol. 1, pp. 247-249, and Ead., *Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 88 (emphasis in the text).

<sup>33</sup> M. Shelley, *Valperga: Or, the Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca*, M. Rossington ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000; M. Shelley, *Novels*, Vol. 3, N. Crook ed.

<sup>34</sup> J.C.L. Simonde de Sismondi, *Histoire des républiques italiennes du moyen âge*, 16 vols, Henri Gessner, Zürich 1807, Vol. 4, p. 187.

<sup>35</sup> H.F. Cary, *The Vision, or Hell, Purgatory and Paradise of Dante Alighieri*, Peacock, Mansfield and Co., London 1844, p. xxxii.

Cary must have developed a particular interest in lyric poetry as he translated early French poets for the *London Magazine* just after completing his translation of Dante<sup>36</sup>. Conversely, his reading of the *Divine Comedy* emphasizes his difficulty with Dante's realism by comparison with Milton's sublimity<sup>37</sup>.

As it has been pointed out, the Shelleys' timely interest in Dante originated from a common interest in the European cosmopolitan Romanticism created precisely by the texts they had read just before they arrived in Milan. Dante, and indeed Italian culture in general, was approached through these composite lenses that illustrate their sense of belonging to a common 'European' modernity<sup>38</sup>.

#### 4. Retracing Dante in the Italian landscape: Mary Shelley's Rambles

Mary Shelley's reading of Dante resulted in a series of works that have the *Divine Comedy* as a hypertext in common: *Matilda*, *Valperga*, "Giovanni Villani", and *Rambles*. While most of these uses of Dante have been explored by critics<sup>39</sup>, *Rambles* stills requires further analysis.

In *Rambles*, Mary Shelley's numerous references to Dante contribute to her need to negotiate genre, at a time in which travel narratives were becoming increasingly common and tourism-oriented<sup>40</sup>. The book also betrays a political aim as Mary had offered the revenue from its publication to Ferdinando Gatteschi, an Italian exile whom she had met in Paris in 1843<sup>41</sup>. In the years following the first revolutions of the 1820s, Dante's poetry had been extrapolated from his theology to serve the nationalist, libertarian ideology of the *Risorgimento*, and the poet Ugo Foscolo had been at the forefront of this critical reading of Dante. As Joseph Luzzi has pointed out, his poem *Dei sepolcri* "concludes by offering a prophecy

<sup>36</sup> The articles were reprinted as *Early French Poets*, Bohn, London 1846.

<sup>37</sup> "His solicitude, it is true, to define all his images in such a manner as to bring them distinctly within the circle of our vision, and to subject them to the power of the pencil, sometimes renders him little better than grotesque, where Milton has since taught us to expect sublimity" (H.F. Cary, *The Vision*, pp. xi-x).

<sup>38</sup> On the European cosmopolitan tradition and its relations with Britain, see E. Wohlgenut, *Romantic Cosmopolitanism*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2009.

<sup>39</sup> See E. Nitchie, *Mary Shelley, Traveler*, "Keats-Shelley Journal", 10, 1961, pp. 29-42; J. Moskal, *Travel Writing*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, E. Schor ed., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003, pp. 242-258; M. Wollstonecraft, *Mary and Maria*, and M. Shelley, *Matilda*, J. Todd ed., Penguin Books, London 1991; M. Shelley, *Mathilda*, M. Faubert ed., Broadview Press, Peterborough 2017; M. Rossington, *Future Uncertain: The Republican Tradition and Its Destiny in Valperga*, in *Mary Shelley in Her Times*, B.T. Bennet – S. Curran ed., Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore/London 2000, pp. 103-118; L.M. Crisafulli, *Viaggiatrici britanniche nell'Italia pre-risorgimentale: lo sguardo riformatore di Lady Morgan e di Mary Shelley*, in *British Risorgimento*, Vol. 1, L.M. Crisafulli ed., Liguori, Napoli 2013, pp. 81-98; E. Marino, *Letterati e patrioti italiani nella scrittura di Mary Shelley*, *ibid.*, pp. 99-112; Ead., *Mary Shelley e l'Italia, il viaggio, il Risorgimento, la questione femminile*, Le Lettere, Firenze 2011.

<sup>40</sup> See S. Lamb, *Bringing Travel Home to England: Tourism, Gender and Imaginative Literature in the Eighteenth Century*, Delaware University Press, Newark 2009; E.A. Bohls, *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716-1818*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995; B. Colbert, *Shelley's Eye: Travel Writing and the Aesthetic Vision*, Ashgate, Abingdon 2005.

<sup>41</sup> M. Shelley, *Novels*, Vol. 8, J. Moskal ed., p. 49.



for Italy's future that draws its terminology and energy from Dante's *Commedia*, [...] and then translates its Christian doctrine into a suitable nationalist idiom<sup>42</sup>. More importantly, Ugo Foscolo was a member of the exile community who would find in Dante a precursor as well as a means of reaching a wider British audience. As Nick Havely and Maurizio Isabella have pointed out, Foscolo's review articles on Dante published in *The Edinburgh Review* reached thousands of British readers, helped him to establish himself as a writer in Britain, but should also be seen as "the expatriate writer's project to reinvent his poetic and political identity"<sup>43</sup>. Mary Shelley's "Life" of Foscolo for Lardner's *Cabinet Cyclopaedia* illustrates her awareness of the contemporary turn in Dante criticism<sup>44</sup>.

Intertextuality and allusions to the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* underlie the narrative structure of the travelogue; for the incipit Mary chose a quotation from the *Paradiso*, Canto 23 (ll. 67-69):

Non è poggio da picciola barca  
 Quel, che fendendo va l'ardita prora  
 Né da nocchier, ch'a se medesmo parca<sup>45</sup>.

Dante's declaration of inadequacy in the process of retelling his final mystical experience is adapted by Mary to encompass her narration of a physical travelogue that includes a spiritual dimension, as Jeanne Moskal has pointed out<sup>46</sup>. This is evident when the narrator returns to some of the spots Mary had earlier visited with Percy, or indeed in the climactic visit to Percy's and William's tombs in Rome. In *Paradiso*, Canto 23 Dante introduces one of the frequent addresses to the reader, aimed at foregrounding both the intellectual and the poetic challenge represented by his last cantos. The canto is centred on Beatrice's smile (ll. 46-69), before Dante is left to face the deity alone in the last and final section of the poem. The epigraph seems to illustrate, therefore, that *Rambles* represented a new challenge for Mary. In fact, her earlier travelogue and first published work, *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*, was a collaborative production that had furthermore the advantage of breaking new ground both in content and in form: its mixture of prose and poetry, and the unique experience of visiting Europe soon after the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars, were indeed noticed and praised by early reviewers<sup>47</sup>. In *Rambles* the reader is confronted

<sup>42</sup> J. Luzzi, *Romantic Europe and the Ghost of Italy*, Yale University Press, New Haven/London 2008, p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> N. Havely, *Dante's British Public*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, p. 132. According to Isabella, Foscolo's essays on Dante "were not only exercises in literary criticism but also historical essays pointedly discussing the influence of the Church on Italy's politics and culture" (M. Isabella, *Risorgimento in Exile: Italian Emigrants and the Liberal International in the Post-Napoleonic Era*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, p. 205).

<sup>44</sup> Mary Shelley discusses at length Foscolo's "Essays on Petrarch", "one of the most delightful of his productions". She also mentions his unfinished commentary on Dante (M. Shelley, *Mary Shelley's Literary Lives and Other Writings*, 4 vols, Pickering & Chatto, London 2002, Vol. 1, T.J. Mazzeo ed., pp. 353-394). See also A. Braidà – L. Calè, *Introduction*, in *Dante on View. The Reception of Dante in the Visual and Performing Art*, A. Braidà – L. Calè ed., Ashgate, Aldershot/Burlington, VT 2007, pp. 1-16.

<sup>45</sup> M. Shelley, *Rambles*, Vol. 1, p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> J. Moskal, *Travel Writing*, p. 252.

<sup>47</sup> M. Shelley, *Novels*, Vol. 8, p. 4.

with a single, often nostalgic and elegiac voice, whose dialogue with the reader is foregrounded by the use of the epistolary form. As Dante the narrator has been abandoned by Beatrice, Mary Shelley has now been abandoned by Percy and has had to progress alone in her career as a writer and novelist. The epigraph prefigures the nature of references to Dante in *Rambles*. These can be said to respond to two aims: they are both part of her interest in medieval Italian history and culture, and they reveal a deeper identification with Dante's exploration of the afterlife.

In the third volume of *Rambles* Mary Shelley continues her personal approach to medieval Italian culture after the fictional treatment in *Valperga*. As in the novel, she finds in the contemporary Italian landscape echoes of the *Divine Comedy*, as the following passage illustrates:

There is scarcely a spot in Tuscany, and those parts of the North of Italy, which he visited, that Dante has not described in poetry that brings the very spot before your eyes, adorned with graces missed by the prosaic eye, and yet which are exact and in perfect harmony with the scene<sup>48</sup>.

Indeed, the *Divine Comedy* is rich in references to Italian geography as Dante the narrator evokes the sinners' birthplaces or uses Italian scenery in his extended similes or as a backdrop for the depiction of the Infernal or Purgatorial landscape. Mary's appreciation of Dante's topographical realism can be seen to continue the Shelleys' blending of literature and history, and literature and place, that had characterized their journeys to Switzerland. Whereas in *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* Percy and Mary were following Rousseau's traces, in *Rambles* she describes her desire to identify places visited by Dante or mentioned in his *Divine Comedy*.

However, in *Rambles* references to Dante's poetry and its background are part of the move from an aesthetic description of the landscape through art in the line of William Gilpin's "picturesque"<sup>49</sup> to a more conscious appreciation of Italian art. Dante's poetry is thus inscribed into Mary's own discovery of medieval and Renaissance Italian art under the influence of Alexis-François Rio's art history manuals<sup>50</sup>. Thus, reflecting on Titian's *Assumption of the Virgin*, she identifies Dante as the inspirer of Italian religious art:

Such a picture and the "Paradiso" of Dante as a commentary is the sublimest achievement of Catholicism. Not, indeed, as a commentary did Dante write, but as the originator of much we see. The Italian painters drank deep at the inspiration of his verses

<sup>48</sup> M. Shelley, *Rambles*, Vol. 2, p. 139.

<sup>49</sup> W. Gilpin, *Three Essays on Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape*, London, Blamire 1792.

<sup>50</sup> As pointed out by Jean de Palacio, the French art critic was influential in introducing Mary to Italian medieval religious art (J. de Palacio, *Mary Shelley dans son œuvre: contribution aux études shelleyennes*, Klincksieck, Paris 1969, pp. 550-568).

when they sought to give a visible image of Heaven and the beatitude of the saints, on their canvass<sup>51</sup>.

Mary highlights the interconnections among the arts in medieval culture. This aspect of Dante's poetry is also present in the *Purgatorio*, with its recuperation of his early poetry and its numerous references to poems accompanied by music or sung. In *Rambles* she finds the means to express her appreciation of the *Purgatorio* in terms that reveal her personal synthesis of contemporary European criticism:

But I have chiefly been occupied by Dante, who, so to speak is an elemental poet; one who clothes in the magic of poetry the passions of the heart, enlightened and ennobled by piety, and who regards the objects of the visible creation with sympathy, a veneration, otherwise only to be found in the old Greek poets. I have read the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, with ever new delight. There are finer passages in the *Inferno* than can be found in the two subsequent parts; but the subject is so painful and odious, that I always feel obliged to shut the book after a page or two. The pathetic tenderness of the *Purgatorio*, on the contrary, wins its way to the heart; and again, the soul is rapt by the sublime hymns to heavenly love, contained in the *Paradiso*. Nothing can be more beautiful than the closing lines, which I have quoted in a late letter, which speak of his return to earth, his mind still penetrated by the ecstasy he had lately felt<sup>52</sup>.

The passage illustrates Mary's own preference for the elegiac tone of the *Purgatorio*; moreover, her celebration of Dante as "an elemental poet", with its association with Greek poetry, reveals a debt to Percy's "A Defence of Poetry" and its sources in European criticism. However, Mary Shelley stands out for her acceptance of his theology, an aspect that had been rejected by Percy Shelley and by Friedrich Schlegel in his *Lectures on the History of Literature, Ancient and Modern*<sup>53</sup>.

When Mary Shelley was writing *Rambles*, the British reception of Dante was undergoing a change. In 1826, Gabriele Rossetti had published *La Divina Commedia di Dante Alighieri, con commento analitico*; in 1842 he would publish *La Beatrice di Dante*<sup>54</sup>. Despite his esoteric interpretation of the *Vita Nuova*, Rossetti promoted the interest in Dante's early works in Britain, and his son Dante Gabriel Rossetti would continue successfully this trend thanks to his 1861 translation in the volume *The Early Italian Poets* and his paintings inspired by episodes from the *Vita Nuova*<sup>55</sup>. As Julia Straub and Alison Milbank have pointed out, Seymour Kirkup's discovery of the alleged Bargello portrait of the young

<sup>51</sup> M. Shelley, *Rambles*, Vol. 1, p. 99.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>53</sup> F. Schlegel, *Lectures on the History of Literature, Ancient and Modern*, 2 vols, Blackwood and Baldwin, Craddock and Joy, Edinburgh 1818, Vol. 2, pp. 12, 15.

<sup>54</sup> G. Rossetti, *La Beatrice di Dante*, Printed by the author, London 1842; *La Divina commedia di Dante Alighieri con commento analitico di Gabriele Rossetti*, 6 vols, Murray, London 1826.

<sup>55</sup> *The Early Italian Poets from Ciullo D'Alcamo to Dante Alighieri (1100-1200-1300)*, Smith, Elder, and Co., London 1861.

Dante triggered the popularization of Beatrice and, in Steve Ellis's words, the "Vita Nuovization" of the reception of the poet<sup>56</sup>.

Mary Shelley was at the centre of this change. She met Gabriele Rossetti at least twice, in 1832 and 1833, and she wrote to him twice in 1835, when she was working on the lives of Alfieri and Monti<sup>57</sup>. Although it is not clear which of his works she read, she must have been aware of his work on Dante. Moreover, *Rambles* contributes to the reception of the early Dante by describing the newly discovered portrait in great detail:

One of the most interesting paintings in the world has been lately discovered at Florence; the portrait of Dante, by his friend Giotto. [...] he makes one in a solemn procession and holds a flower in his hand. Before it vanishes [*sic*] all the preconceived notions of the crabbed severity of his physiognomy, which have originated in portraits taken later in his life. We see here the lover of Beatrice. His lip is proud – for proud, every contemporary asserts that he was – and he himself confesses it in the *Purgatorio*; but there is sensibility, gentleness and love; the countenance breathes the spirit of the Vita Nuova<sup>58</sup>.

The association between the portrait and the *Vita Nuova*, and the qualification of the poet as "the lover of Beatrice", contributed to the later Victorian interest in this aspect of the poet's life. However, while Victorian writers and artists "saw an earthly, historical Beatrice"<sup>59</sup>, as Julia Straub has pointed out, in *Rambles* Mary Shelley reveals her interest in the religious dimension of the *Divine Comedy*, and this enables her to accede to a mystical interpretation of the poem. For example, in the passage cited below, the narrator replaces Dante the pilgrim returned from his heavenly journey:

From such rapt moods the soul returns to earth, bearing with it the calm of Paradise [*a quotation from Paradiso, Canto 33, ll. 58-66 follows*].  
It has seemed to me [...] that this world, endowed as it is outwardly with endless shapes and influences of beauty and enjoyment, is peopled also in its spiritual life by myriads of loving spirits; from whom, unawares, we catch impressions, which mould our thoughts to good, and thus they guide beneficially the course of events, and minister the destiny of man<sup>60</sup>.

Dante's mystical journey is replaced by a physical and spiritual journey through modern Italy, now turned into a personal land of the dead. In this passage, Mary adopts a vague spirituality that is strongly linked to her appreciation of Dante's early poetry. Similarly, in

<sup>56</sup> S. Ellis, *Dante and English Poetry; Shelley to T.S. Eliot*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1983, pp. 102-134; A. Milbank, *Dante and the Victorians*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1998, pp. 150-161; J. Straub, *Dante's Beatrice and Victorian Gender Ideology*, in *Dante in the Long Nineteenth-Century*, N. Havelly – A. Audeh ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012, pp. 204-222.

<sup>57</sup> M. Shelley, *Journals*, Vol. 2, pp. 515, 575, 618-619, and Ead., *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 238.

<sup>58</sup> M. Shelley, *Rambles*, Vol. 2, p. 158.

<sup>59</sup> J. Straub, *Dante's Beatrice*, p. 207.

<sup>60</sup> M. Shelley, *Rambles*, Vol. 1, p. 94.

another passage, recalling Percy Shelley's celebration of Dante in "A Defence of Poetry", she ascribes to his poetry the power of elevation typically attributed to Milton: "The pathetic tenderness of the *Purgatorio*, wins its way to the ear; and again, the soul is elevated and rapt by the sublime hymns to heavenly love, contained in the *Paradiso*"<sup>61</sup>. In *Rambles*, she thus overcomes Cary's criticism of Dante's 'Gothic' realism and brings him close to Milton by invoking the category of the sublime in her appreciation of the *Paradiso* and *Purgatorio*.

### 5. Conclusion

Mary Shelley's reading of Dante in Italian and in translation should be inscribed in her interest in contemporary and medieval Italian literature, culture and history, as illustrated by her creative work. Her approach to Dante is unique in that she bore witness to the major shifts in the reception of the Italian poet in the British Isles that took place during her lifetime. As Maurizio Isabella has demonstrated, the British public's developing interest in contemporary Italy and in its culture was promoted by a community of *émigrés* who were actively engaged in counteracting the negative, stereotypical view of Italy conveyed by the increasing number of guides to the country. Dante was central to writers such as Foscolo, or Santorre di Santarosa, or Francesco Saverio Salfi, because, "in the absence of freedom, the *patria* came increasingly to be identified with the glorious cultural inheritance of Italy, and with its unique contribution to Europe's civilization"<sup>62</sup>. Mary Shelley's interest in Dante benefited from the contemporary surge of publications on Italian literature and culture by Italian exiles, and her articles on Italian authors for Lardner's *Cyclopædia* reveal that she aspired to contribute to their work by becoming a mediator between Britain and Italy. She shared with Percy the enthusiasm for the *Divine Comedy* in the years following the publication of Cary's translations. In *Rambles* she became herself a contributor to the Victorian myth of Beatrice and of the young Dante initiated by the discovery of the portrait in the Bargello chapel in Florence and fully developed by the Pre-Raphaelites<sup>63</sup>. Mary Shelley's appreciation of Italian medieval religious art was key to helping her provide an approach to Dante's theology of love accessible to British readers. Moreover, her interest in Dante and in Beatrice reveals that her journeys to Italy were part of the creation of her identity as a woman writer, claiming the greater freedom of a composite Anglo-Italian identity. Indeed, *Rambles* was the first published work she could sign as "Mrs. Shelley".

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>62</sup> M. Isabella, *Risorgimento in Exile*, p. 9.

<sup>63</sup> On Dante and the Pre-Raphaelites, see G. Pieri, *Dante and the Pre-Raphaelites: British and Italian Responses*, in *Dante on View*, pp. 109-140.