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«A New Race or Sect among Our Countrymen»: *The Liberal* and the Un/Making of an Anglo-Italian Identity

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«A NEW RACE OR SECT AMONG OUR CONTRYMEN»: THE LIBERAL AND THE UN/MAKING OF AN ANGLO-ITALIAN IDENTITY

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Riassunto: «The emigrant English [have] given rise to a new race or sect among our countrymen, who have lately been dubbed Anglo-Italians» («Gli inglesi emigrati [hanno] dato origine a una nuova razza o setta tra i nostri connazionali, che di recente sono stati soprannominati anglo-italiani»), scrive Mary Shelley nel suo saggio del 1826 *English in Italy*, definendo Byron come l'iniziatore, il 'creatore', di una nuova identità letteraria interculturale. La figura dell'anglo-italiano destabilizza le idee tradizionali di cultura come radicata in un solo luogo, rivoluzionando il concetto stesso di identità, ora intesa come prodotto di interconnessione e ibridazione. Detto ciò, Maria Schoina, in *Romantic "Anglo-Italians"* (2009), sostiene che la cultura sia una questione di spazi e afferma che l'anglo-italianità romantica non possa essere compresa al di fuori dei suoi confini nazionali o ideologici. Inoltre, questa nuova identità progressista era profondamente in contrasto con ciò che Marilyn Butler, in *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* (1982), definisce come «the gloomy nativist Christianity of the Gothic norths» («il cupo cristianesimo nativista del Nord gotico»). L'identità anglo-italiana, dunque, non avrebbe potuto essere compresa al di fuori del circolo pisano che diede vita a *The Liberal: Verse and Prose from the South*, il periodico romantico che fu emblema di questi 'anglo-italiani' e del loro attacco al conservazionismo britannico. Attraverso la lente degli scritti anglo-italiani di Hunt, Byron e degli Shelley, questo articolo analizza i contenuti ritenuti immorali pubblicati in *The Liberal* – a cui ella stessa contribuì – nonché la reazione ostile della stampa britannica; in tal modo, si propone di offrire nuove prospettive su come questa nuova identità liberale e interculturale sia stata fraintesa da un pubblico conservatore incapace di comprendere una visione politica rivoluzionaria e, di conseguenza, su come questa incomprensione abbia contribuito alla dissoluzione non solo di *The Liberal*, ma anche dell'identità anglo-italiana progressista forgiata all'interno del circolo pisano.

Abstract: «The emigrant English [have] given rise to a new race or sect among our countrymen, who have lately been dubbed Anglo-Italians», writes Mary Shelley in her 1826 essay *English in Italy*, labelling Byron as the initiator, the 'maker', of a new intercultural literary identity. The figure of the Anglo-Italian destabilizes traditional ideas of culture as rooted in one single place, revolutionizing the concept of identity,

now a product of interconnection and hybridization. That said, Maria Schoina in *Romantic "Anglo-Italians"* (2009) claims that culture is a matter of spaces, and argues that Romantic Anglo-Italianness could not be understood outside national or ideological boundaries. Moreover, this new progressive identity was deeply at odds with what Marilyn Butler, in *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* (1982), defines as «the gloomy nativist Christianity of the Gothic norths». Thus, the Anglo-Italian identity could not have been comprehended outside the Pisan circle that gave rise to *The Liberal: Verse and Prose from the South*, the Romantic periodical that was the emblem of these 'Anglo-Italians' and their attack on British conservatism. Through the lens of Hunt, Byron and the Shelleys' writings on 'Anglo-Italianism', this article examines the allegedly immoral contents published in *The Liberal*, to which she also contributed, as well as the hostile response of the British press: in doing so, it aims to offer new insights into how this new liberal, cross-cultural identity was misconstrued by a conservative public unable to understand a ground-breakingly progressive political vision and, in turn, how this inability contributed to the unmaking not only of *The Liberal* but also of the progressive Anglo-Italian identity forged within the Pisan circle.

Parole chiave: Anglo-italiani, Circolo pisano, identità, cultura, *The Liberal*, romanticismo inglese, periodici inglesi

Key Words: Anglo-Italians, Pisan Circle, Identity, Culture, *The Liberal*, British Romanticism, British Periodicals

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The birth of a new cultural identity: the Anglo-Italians

In her 1826 essay *The English in Italy*, Mary Shelley famously defines the birth of a new cultural identity: «The emigrant English [have] given rise to a new race or sect among our countrymen, who have lately been dubbed *Angflo-Italians*».[1] Byron is explicitly identified as the initiator of this intercultural and interliterary phenomenon: «Lord Byron may be considered the father of the Anglo-Italian literature».[2] These intellectuals are portrayed as 'travellers', a community of people who cannot be rooted in one single place, who find monotony and staticness inherently stifling:

> The Anglo-Italian has many peculiar marks which distinguish him from the mere traveller, or true John Bull. First, he understands Italian, and thus rescues himself from a thousand ludicrous mishaps which occur to those who fancy that a little Anglo-French will suffice to convey intelligence of their wants and wishes to the natives of Italy; the record of his travels is no longer confined, according to lord Normanby's vivid description, to how he had been "starved here, upset there, and robbed every where" […] Your Anglo-Italian ceases to visit the churches and palaces, guide-book in hand; anxious, not to see, but to say that he has seen. Without attempting to adopt the customs of the natives, he attaches himself to some of the most refined among them, and appreciates their native talent and simple manners; he has lost the critical mania in a real taste for the beautiful, acquired by a frequent sight of the best models of ancient and modern art.[3]

1 Mary Shelley, «The English in Italy», *Westminster Review*, October 1826, 6, pp. 325-341: 327 (my emphasis).
2 *Ibid.*, pp. 327-328.
3 *Ibid.*, p. 327.

The Anglo-Italians are painted by Shelley as a community of cultured, sophisticated, British intellectuals, who emigrated to Italy in the years following the aftermath of Napoleon's defeat, during a period in which the Italian peninsula, though politically fragmented and under restored conservative rule, became a cultural and intellectual refuge for several British Romantics. The Anglo-Italians, according to Shelley – who was herself a part of the group – displayed a distinct standard of taste, and a shared vision for cultural reform inspired by strongly progressive, liberal ideals. The works produced by Byron, Hunt, and the Shelleys between 1817 and 1824 vividly portray an insular, inward-looking society that, as Schoina recalls, Butler delineates as an «unconventional, overtly sexual, and politically disaffected "counter-culture"».[4]

As the blueprint for this concept of an Anglo-Italian 'sect' on the peninsula, the Romantics who relocated to Italy and formed the well-known Pisan circle, constituted a laboratory for new kinds of hybridized cultural identities. However, the members of this community of Italianised Britons, as will be examined in more depth later, only offered an illusory sense of unity between the two cultures. In reality, the Anglo-Italians positioned themselves equidistant from both the un-Italianised English and the lower-class, less refined Italians, forming a closed-off group that Percy Bysshe Shelley envisioned as «a society of our own class, as much as possible, in intellect or in feelings»:[5] a hyphenated identity marked by a complex and multifaceted relation with both Italianness and Englishness.

This bicultural identity deeply destabilizes old, conventional ideas of culture as purely rooted in one single place. Traditionally, culture is tied to a specific geographical area and is characterized by its own traditions, values, and practices, which are shaped by the local environment, history, and social structures. However, this group of Romantic intellectuals completely revolutionizes these notions of identity, presenting it instead as a product of interconnection, dynamism and hybridization between two distinct cultures. The Anglo-Italians, in fact, exhibit a profound intimacy with their adopted land, Italy, while still maintaining a distinct sense of belonging to their native country, England.

Other notions of this revolutionary identity are explored in Mary Shelley's 1826 essay *A Visit to Brighton*, where she delineates the Anglo-Ital-

4 Maria Schoina, *Romantic 'Anglo-Italians': Configurations of Identity in Byron, the Shelleys, and the Pisan Circle*, Aldershot & Burlington, Ashgate, 2009, p. 8.

5 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *425. To Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, in Roger Ingpen (ed.), *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, London, G. Bell and Sons, 1914, pp. 902-906: 902.

ian as a cosmopolite: «I had not quitted London for two years. Do not imagine therefore that I am a mere Londoner; I am, please to observe, a traveller».[6] In distancing herself from her metropolitan roots, Mary challenges the notion of identity construction by rejecting the concept of culture as being based solely in one single place.

In relation to this, it is worth noting that Caroline Mills and Peter Jackson have conducted extensive research on the topic of 'cultural geography', publishing two essays in this field of study: respectively, *Place/Culture/Representation* (1993) and *Maps of Meaning* (1989). As Maria Schoina observes, Mills and Jackson have argued that «cultural studies are becoming increasingly aware of the geographies of culture, that is, the ways in which culture is, among other things, a matter of spaces, places and landscapes».[7] Interestingly, Timothy Morton in his essay *Mary Shelley as Cultural Critic*, argues that Mary Shelley, when describing the Anglo-Italian sect, «displays her knowledge that culture constitutes an environment».[8] In this light, Schoina interestingly claims that «Englishness or Italianness can not be understood outside the places they make meaningful or outside the national/cultural boundaries they mark out».[9] According to this perspective, then, Anglo-Italianness – during the brief years of its existence – could not be understood outside the Romantic circle that Hunt, Byron and the Shelleys fostered in Pisa in the 1820s.

In relation to this, as Gross notes, Byron wrote to Thomas Moore on the 4th March 1822, while in Pisa, defining «liberalism as a function of place and position»:[10]

> The truth is, my dear Moore, you live near the *stove* of society, where you are unavoidably influenced by its heat and its vapours. I did so once – and too much – and enough to give a colour to my whole future existence. […] now […] I am living in a clearer atmosphere […] One thing only might lead me back to it, and that is, to try once more if I could do any good in politics;

6 Mary Shelley, «A Visit to Brighton», *London Magazine*, vol. 6, Dec. 1846, pp. 460-466: 462.

7 Maria Schoina, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

8 Timothy Morton, *Mary Shelley as Cultural Critic*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 361-379: 362.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Jonathan David Gross, *Byron, The Erotic Liberal*, Lanham, MD, Lexington Books / Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, p. 158.

but not in the petty politics I see now preying upon our miserable country.[11]

Liberating himself from England and its oppressive government, freed from the «stove» of society, Byron can accomplish self-liberation and forge a new liberal political identity. Following this light of this reasoning, the culture fostered by the Pisan circle could not be fully understood outside its specific territorial context: the progressive South. Consequently, the Anglo-Italian identity would have been incomprehensible to the traditional, conservative England of the time.

In this paper I argue that *The Liberal: Verse and Prose from the South*, the periodical that was the emblem of these Anglo-Italians and their attack on British conservatism, experienced a short, complicated life. This was largely because its new liberal, cross-cultural identity was misconstrued by a conservative public, unable to comprehend its radically progressive political vision. This failure of understanding ultimately contributed to the unmaking not only of *The Liberal* itself, but also of the progressive Anglo-Italian identity forged within the Pisan circle.

The Liberal: criticism and illiberality

As the periodical's title suggests, *The Liberal* was meant to be a tool of cultural mediation between the South of Europe (Italy, in particular), and the North, which coincided with Great Britain. The editors aimed to bring the progressive, libertarian ideals typically associated with the South to the conservative North. By choosing to publish *The Liberal* in England, the Anglo-Italian Romantics sought to challenge the British government, and, in turn, to foster revolutionary transformations in the English political and social landscape.

The more conservative, Tory-aligned reviews harshly attacked *The Liberal* and its Anglo-Italian editors from the outset, firmly rejecting their radical ideas. I use the term 'radical' here deliberately: at the time, the word 'liberal' did not carry the same connotations it does today. Rather than being directly associated with freedom and independence, it was often used in political discourse as a synonym for 'radical'. As Jonathan Gross cleverly observes, «Byron's exile began in 1816, just when

11 Richard Lansdown (ed.), *Byron's Letters and Journals. A New Selection*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 407.

Tories began using "liberal" and "radical" synonymously».[12] Similarly, Richard Ashcraft, in his essay *Liberal Political Theory and Working-Class Radicalism in Nineteenth-Century England*, observes that «from its birth, liberalism as a political theory was an unstable compound of radical […] elements». He also asserts that «liberalism as a theoretical expression of social life supplied the values, assumptions, and arguments for both a defence and a radical critique of the existing social order».[13]

As James Fitzjames Stephen demonstrated in 1862, the members of the Anglo-Italian group were among the first to use the word 'liberal' with a new meaning. Although the term had been coined in Europe, it was imported into Britain when «Lord Byron and his friends set up the periodical called the *Liberal*, to represent their views, not only in politics, but also in literature and religion».[14] Yet, the harsh reception of the periodical was also due to the misinterpretation of the term in the conservative North, where 'liberal' was at times interpreted as 'radical', or even viewed as 'against moral principle' or 'morally subversive' by several reviews. As David Craig argues, 'liberal' and 'liberality' were still relatively new terms in the 1820s; he writes: «The Liberal provided the occasion for the emergence of negative views of what it meant to be 'liberal'; it enabled parts of the press to switch it from being a term of praise to a term of abuse».[15]

Unsurprisingly, the reception of *The Liberal* in Britain was extremely harsh. As William Marshall points out, «not even the most radical papers showed support and the moderate whig newspapers were hesitant to make a favourable literary comment in the face of the seemingly extreme political and religious point of view of *The Liberal*».[16] But what were these reviews actually criticising? And was *The Liberal*'s perspective truly as politically and religiously extreme as the reviews claimed?

On 6th October 1822, *The Examiner*, the weekly magazine founded by John and Leigh Hunt in 1808, announced the launch of «The New Periodical from Italy», carefully explaining the reasoning behind its title, *The Liberal*. The name, it stated, «conveys in the most comprehensive manner the

12 Jonathan David Gross, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

13 Richard Ashcraft, «Liberal Political Theory and Working-Class Radicalism in Nineteenth-Century England», *Political Theory*, vol. 21, 2, 1993, pp. 249-272: 249.

14 James Fitzjames Stephen, «Liberalism», *Cornhill Magazine*, V, 1862, pp. 70-83: 70-71.

15 David Craig, «The origins of 'liberalism' in Britain: the case of *The Liberal*», *Historical Research*, vol. 85, 229, 2012, pp. 469-487: 470.

16 William Marshall, *Byron, Shelley, Hunt and* The Liberal, London, Oxford University Press, 1960, pp. 104-105.

spirit in which the work is written, and falls in happily with the general progress of opinion (we do not mean in a political so much as in a general sense) throughout Europe».[17] Here, the periodical defines itself as non-political, echoing Leigh Hunt's *Preface*, which reads: «the object of our work is not political, except inasmuch as all writing now-a-days must involve something to that effect».[18] This suggests that *The Liberal* was purposefully designed to engage with contemporary English political and social issues, but politics was not the sole focus of its editorial agenda.

Hunt goes on to further clarify the significance of the term chosen as the title: «All that we mean is, that we are advocated of every species of liberal knowledge, and that, by a natural consequence in these times, we go full length in matters of opinion with large bodies of men who are called LIBERALS. At the same time, when we say the full length, we mean something very different from what certain pretended Liberals, and all the Illiberals will take it to be».[19] Anticipating the reactions of hostile periodicals, Hunt specifies that they are using the term 'liberal' in the sense of 'liberal knowledge', but also as a way of aligning themselves with the southern, libertarian movements fighting for various forms of national self-determination. However, he also makes clear that they do not intend to be as seditious or radical as the Tory press – and certainly not as extreme as «what certain pretended Liberals, and all the Illiberals»[20] would expect them to be, or better, would make them out to be. In anticipation to such accusations, Hunt argues that critics would likely accuse them of attempting to destroy civilized society, more precisely, to «cut up religion, morals, and everything that is legitimate».[21] Hunt's true aim was, however, quite the opposite: he hoped that his journal would vindicate «true morals, justice and beneficence»[22] and uphold those «laws and constitutions»[23] that held despotism at bay.

Hunt's peroration is interrupted by an old English conservative gentleman, who claims to be a liberal himself, as he is generous to the poor and avoids confronting and offending any political party. What is particularly interesting, however, is Hunt's response to this gentleman: «we need not

17 «*The Liberal*», *The Examiner*, London, John Hunt, 767, October 1822, p. 633.
18 *The Liberal: Verse and Prose from the South*, London, John Hunt, vol. I, 1822, p. vii.
19 *Ibid.*, p. ix.
20 *Ibid.*
21 *Ibid.*, p. v.
22 *Ibid.*, p. vi.
23 *Ibid.*

say that *he misinterprets our notions of liberality* […] this is *to confound liberality with illiberality*».[24] Inadvertently, Hunt anticipates later critiques of *The Liberal*; indeed, several periodicals misinterpreted the use of the term 'liberal', arguing that the Anglo-Italians were confusing 'liberality' with 'illiberality'. The *Council of Ten* likewise foresaw the periodical's fate, warning that it was dangerous to attach the wrong meaning to such a word, since the abuse of a name «may lead to disregard of the thing».[25]

Blackwood's Magazine is one of the main journals to launch a firm attack on *The Liberal* for its supposed 'illiberality'. First, it asserts that «there is something palpably illiberal in a person's appropriating the name of the Liberal, exclusively, […] to himself or his own party»,[26] thereby firmly rejecting the legitimacy of both the title and the contents of the periodical. The journal further claims that «anything so excessively illiberal could not have had its conception in an English brain», clearly distancing itself from the Southern ideas that the Anglo-Italians sought to introduce to the North. Furthermore, Craig claims that «*Blackwood's* [asserted] that the "liberals" were trying to exploit the traditional associations of the word 'liberal', but in doing so, they were effectively turning the old language on its head [quoting *Blackwood's* itself]: "Were I to define Liberalism to a man versed in our ordinary language, but a stranger to the jargon of parties, I would say that liberalism is exactly the reverse of liberality"».[27]According to *Blackwood's* the original meaning of 'liberalism' and 'liberal' is as follows:

> Formerly, a man who made pretensions to common candour, which is but the lowest degree of liberality, thought it incumbent upon him to do justice to the merits of all men, especially a rival or an adversary; and where the conduct was proper, to suppose the motives and intentions were good; to applaud sincerely and heartily where applause was due; to put a favourable construction on doubtful actions; to overlook small faults where there were great merit and apparent good intention; to make due allowances for great difficulties; and where it was proper or necessary to blame, carefully to abstain from exaggeration and misrepresentation.[28]

24 *Ibid.*, p. 10 (my emphasis).
25 *The Council of Ten*, ii, London, 1822, p. 150.
26 R.S., «The Candid. No. 1», *Blackwood's Magazine*, 13, January 1823, pp. 108-124: 109.
27 David Craig, *art. cit.*, p. 487.
28 R.S., *art. cit.*, p. 110.

However, according to *Blackwood's*, such qualities are nowhere to be found in the Anglo-Italian periodical; as a matter of fact, when asked: «Are these the sentiments that acquire for a man the title of A Liberal?», the response is: «Ask the Liberals themselves».[29]

In *Blackwood's* opinion, «Nothing was considered more low and illiberal than reflections on communities, professions, and bodies of men – the clergy for instance – and the absent and the dead, the helpless and the diffident, had rights which a liberal man held sacred».[30] *Maga* here describes exactly what the contents of *The Liberal* did: reflect on communities, professions, bodies of men, and, more importantly, comment on the clergy, the absent and the dead. Therefore, *Blackwood's* believed that nothing could be considered more low and illiberal than the Anglo-Italian periodical.

In the wake of *Maga*, as Franca Dellarosa states, other publications espoused «the conservative semantic option, considering liberality/liberalism as expressions of values related to the (gentlemanly) private sphere of behaviour».[31] For instance, the anonymous *A Critique on* The Liberal attacked the Anglo-Italian periodical for its alleged abuse of religion and patriotism: «And this is they call Liberalism, the essential of which are candour and moderation!».[32] Similarly, *The Literary Museum* argues: «We do not think it liberal to deny that other parties may contain as good and generous people as that to which we belong […] And we think that the man who could write those brutal Epigrams on Lord Castlereagh … is the last man who should dare to call himself *liberal*».[33] In brief, as Craig cleverly points out, «the conventional meanings of the word 'liberality' – as in generosity and gentlemanliness – [was] turned against their contributions».[34]

None of these reviews focuses on commenting the contents of *The Liberal* that aimed at sharing new, modern, progressive, liberal ideas – the periodical's principal aim; instead, they all blame the Anglo-Italian jour-

29 *Ibid.*

30 *Ibid.*

31 Franca Della Rosa, *Cockney Imprint:* The Liberal *and Its Reception, 1822*, in Lilla Maria Crisafulli, Serena Baiesi, Carlotta Farese (eds.), *Imprinting Anglo-Italian Relations in* The Liberal, Lausanne, Peter Lang, 2023, pp. 35-50: 44.

32 Anonymous, *A Critique on* The Liberal, London, Printed for the Author, by William Day, 1822, pp. 14-15.

33 *The Literary Museum*, 26, October 1822, p. 405.

34 David Craig, *art. cit.*, p. 469.

nal for its seditious, blasphemous, irreligious contents, misinterpreting the term 'liberal' as that of 'radical', 'against moral principle'. It is particularly noteworthy that most reviews and newspaper articles – especially in response to the first issue – focused almost exclusively on *The Vision of Judgement* and *Epigrams on Lord Castlereagh*, while giving little or no attention to the many other contributions in the periodical. The reviewers deliberately chose to critique only the poems that were most socially and politically provocative, ignoring a wide range of other content such as: poetic translations of Ariosto, Alfieri, Politian and Goethe; accounts of the editors' experiences in Italy, like Leigh Hunt's *Letters from Abroad* (1822-1823); historical fiction such as Mary Shelley's *A Tale of Passions* (1823) on the Guelph-Ghibelline conflict; and lyrical poems like Percy Shelley's «Song, Written for an Indian Air» (1823), focused on love and nature. These more culturally and artistically oriented pieces were overlooked by the English press precisely because they did not challenge British political or religious institutions, nor did they express radical views on Christianity. Instead, they were intended to promote liberal knowledge and educate readers in the liberal arts. As Craig aptly observes, «what emerges from these reviews is that 'liberalism' was identified neither with economic ideology nor parliamentary reform, but instead with an assault on religion and the social order it upheld».[35]

The press, therefore, misinterpreted the Anglo-Italian poets' intent to introduce liberal ideas to the North. Instead of engaging with the full scope of the periodical, reviewers focused solely on the compositions that directly addressed the British political scene through a language perceived as politically, morally and religiously subversive. By examining only these few poems, they tarred every composition in *The Liberal* with the same brush, condemning the entirety of the periodical. *The Imperial Magazine* provides a clear example of this: «The Liberal is a publication which assumes this name, because its benevolence is extended to infidelity – to licentiousness of manners – to the open ridicule of what is awful and sacred – and to the destruction of moral principle».[36]

35 *Ibid.*, p. 483.

36 «Review. – *The Liberal, Verse and Prose from the South*. Volume the first, 8vo. Pp. 164. London. 1822. Hunt», *The Imperial Magazine*, 4, January 1822, pp. 1139-1142: 1140.

The Anglo-Italian identity

Another reason why hostile periodicals may have been so critical of *The Liberal* lies in the Anglo-Italian identity itself. This identity has here been previously characterized as a product of cultural interconnection and hybridization; however, a more thorough examination of the members of the Pisan group suggests that their aim was not to merge the two cultures, but rather to distance themselves from both the Italian and the English cultural spheres. As Maria Schoina argues: «the community of Anglo-Italians demarcate their space of action through difference in two directions: "we" versus our "un-Italianized countrymen", and "we" versus the less "refined" Italians».[37] As noted earlier, the Anglo-Italians appear to distance themselves not only from their British compatriots, but also from those Italians they perceived as culturally inferior. This ambivalence is particularly evident in several letters by Byron, Hunt, Percy and even Mary between the 1820s and the 1840s. Indeed, these letters often reveal contradictory attitudes: on the one hand, the writers express admiration for Italy and its people; on the other, they candidly admit to feelings of disdain and a longing to return to England. Simultaneously, they remain critical of their homeland and its inhabitants. The following examples illustrate this complex dynamic.

In 1819, Lord Byron famously declared that his blood was «all meridian»,[38] identifying himself with the Southern European culture – particularly with the Italian life, climate, temperament, and values – in contrast to the colder, more restrained culture of his native England. This statement suggests that Byron felt more Southern than Northern in spirit, having absorbed, or inherently possessed, qualities typically associated with the South: emotional intensity, an appreciation for beauty, openness, and a freer moral attitude. In doing so, he distanced himself from English conservatism and moral rigidity, embracing instead a more cosmopolitan and liberal identity.

In the following passage from a letter dated 21st February 1820, he addressed his English publisher, John Murray, as «ye of the North», asserting that Murray «would not understand» the Italian way of life – implying that Byron himself did, to the extent of identifying with it as a native might:

> Their moral is not your moral – their life is not your life – *you would not understand it* – it is not English or French – nor German … the habits of

37 Maria Schoina, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

38 George Gordon Byron, *Stanzas to the Po*, in Leslie A. Marchand (ed.), *Selected Poetry of Lord Byron*, New York, The Modern Library, 2001.

> thought and living are so entirely different – and the difference becomes so much more striking the more you live intimately with them … after their dinners and suppers they make extempore verses – and buffoon one another – but it is a humour which you would not enter into – *ye of the North.*[39]

Furthermore, as Schoina insightfully observes, «by often using the phrase, "we Venetians" or "our way of life" [in his journals and his correspondence], Byron often boasts his allegiance with the Italians and distances himself from his compatriots».[40]

Even Mary Shelley commented on Byron's natural affinity with Italian culture. In her review essay of James Fenimore Cooper's *Bravo: A Venetian Story*, Shelley engages with modern questions of identity construction, intercultural perception, and representation, using Byron as a case in point. She effectively presents him as an insider within the Italian cultural sphere, describing him as

> one of the few strangers who was admitted, or would choose to be admitted, behind the scenes of that singular stage [of Venetian society]. The money he was willing to squander there, the extreme case with which he acquired and used the idiom of language, and the facility with which he amalgamated himself with, and gave a zest to their customs, by an openness of practice which transcended even their liberality of sentiment, all tended to initiate him into the very arcana of Venice.[41]

She goes on further by discussing Cooper's difficulty into familiarizing himself with the language and into 'Italianizing himself', a struggle that Byron did not have in the slightest:

> Mr Cooper has visited Venice, we imagine; he has probably dwelt there some time, but he has not Italianized himself, nor is he in the slightest degree familiar with the language […] nor does he attempt to lead us into the interior of families, nor to dwell upon the forms of life belonging to the aera he has undertaken to describe.[42]

39 Richard Lansdown (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 351.
40 Maria Schoina, *op. cit.*, p. 106.
41 Nora Crook and Pamela Clemit (eds.), *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, 2, London, William Pickering, 1996, pp. 220-221.
42 *Ibid.*

Yet, at the same time, Byron appears, occasionally, to doubt his identification with Italian culture. In a letter to Teresa Guiccioli dated 3rd January 1820 – written in Italian in her copy of Madame de Staël's *Corinne* – he attributes his indecision about the future of their relationship to his 'non-meridian' heart:

> What does he [Alessandro Guiccioli] want? That I, *a foreigner*, far from *my own country* and from the manners and customs and ways of thought and behaviour of *my fellow-country-men* – that I should decide things for *the people of another land!*...If I see *my country* in danger of destruction – some of my friends arrested – others on the point of being involved in civil war – my family without support – much of my property none too safe – in the conditions prevalent under this insecure government – if in such a moment it seems to you or to others that I am upset – does this deserve the name of indecision?[43]

By referring to himself as «a foreigner» in Italy, describing England as «my own country», referring to the English as «my fellow-country-men», and defining Italians as «the people of another land», Byron unmistakably distances himself from Italy and its Mediterranean culture.

Hunt, too, has a notably ambivalent view of Italy and his inhabitants. In his *Autobiography* (1860), he devotes many pages to admiring the beauty of the country, yet he ultimately writes:

> We have the best part of Italy in books; and this we can enjoy in England […] To me Italy had a certain hard taste in the mouth. Its mountains were too bare, its outlines too sharp, its lanes too stony, its voices too loud, its long summer too dusty. I longed to bathe myself in the grassy balm of my native fields.[44]

His travelogue *Letters from Abroad* (1822-1823) seeks to acquaint a British audience with the adopted land and, in doing so, to educate his un-Italianized compatriots; in Mary Shelley's words, Hunt's purpose is «to disseminate among them a portion of that taste and knowledge ac-

43 Iris Origo (ed.), *The Last Attachment: The Story of Byron and Teresa Guiccioli as told in their unpublished letters and other family papers*, New York, Scribner, 1949, p. 151 (my emphasis).

44 Leigh Hunt, *The Autobiography of Leigh Hunt*, London, Smith, Elder and Co., 1860, p. 334.

quired in the Peninsula».[45] However, *Letters from Abroad* reveals numerous instances of cultural shock experienced by Hunt during his time in Italy, which portray him as unaccustomed to Italian culture. In many respects, he appears to reject it, finding it unfamiliar, unsettling, and ultimately too foreign to fully embrace. In the first issue of *Letters from Abroad*, published in the inaugural number of *The Liberal*, for instance, Hunt is able to describe the Leaning Tower of Pisa and the *Piazza dei Miracoli* only by drawing comparisons with familiar sights in London; he views and portrays them through the lens of a foreigner – specifically, that of an Englishman.

> Let the reader imagine the Monument of London sheathed in an open work of eight stories of little columns, and leaning in a fine open situation, and he will have some idea of this noble cylinder of marble […] With regard to the company in which it stands, let the reader supposed the new square at Westminster Abbey, converted into a broad grass walk, and standing in a much more solitary part of the town.[46]

In the second issue of *Letters from Abroad*, published in the subsequent number of *The Liberal*, Hunt recounts his first arrival in Italy. He describes the pilots of the boat as well-dressed but possessing unfamiliar, even strange facial features; similarly, the other passengers are portrayed as odd and unattractive:

> The boat contained, I think, as ugly a set of faces as could well be brought together. It was a very neat boat, and the pilots were singularly neat and clean in their persons; but their faces! My wife looked at me as much as to say, «are these our fine Southern heads.» The children looked at me: we all looked at one another: and what was very inhospitable, the Pilots all looked at us […] We had scarcely got rid of our ugly men when we were assailed with a much worse sight, a gang of ugly boys […] Never did we see a more striking look of something removed from humanity.[47]

Observing locals sunbathing, Hunt characterizes this Italian custom as an «indecency», remarking that «there is something more than gross

45 Mary Shelley, «The English in Italy», cit., p. 327.
46 *The Liberal*, p. 105.
47 *Ibid.*, p. 271.

in these public expositions of the person».[48] He then continues on further by stating: «I afterwards found that as you ascended among the more educated classes, the faces improved […] In Italy, gentlemen do not look so much like gentlemen as in England».[49]

Similarly, in the third and fourth issue of *Letters from Abroad*, Hunt seeks to substantiate his case regarding the strangeness and alleged degeneracy of the Italians by documenting further instances of perceived decadence in their character, customs, appearance, and culture. These episodes portray Hunt not only as a foreigner in the Italian context, but also as someone who judges the culture from a distance and shows little inclination to integrate into it. The only Italians he appears to accept are those belonging to the upper classes – those he deems more educated and less 'ugly', as he himself suggests. Ultimately, as Maria Schoina observes, «Hunt's accounts, while they profess a comparative disposition, invariably confirm English omniscience and superiority, thus contradicting the conception of liberalism and open-mindedness pronounced by the journal».[50]

Mary Shelley's relationship with Italy is notably more complex than that of the other writers in the Pisan Circle. In her writings, Italy often carries a nostalgic resonance, particularly in the years following her return to England. She remembers it as the country where her husband died and where his spirit still lingers. For Mary, Italy also represented the only viable alternative to the sociopolitical decline into which England had descended. Her ambivalent perspective on Italy is especially evident in «The Choice» (1823), where she initially declares: «here let me live & die / In my adopted land, my country, Italy!».[51] Yet, she soon goes on to describe the country in paradoxical terms – both heaven and hell, uncanny and beautiful, a murderess and a healer. Italy, to her, is a place that took from her but also offered restoration; it is where she and Percy found refuge during hard times. As she poignantly writes in her journal entry dated 14th May 1824: «Italy – dear Italy – murdress of those I love & of all my happiness – one word of your soft language coming unawares upon me has drowned me in bitterest tears – When shall I hear it again spoken? When see your sky your trees your streams».[52]

48 *Ibid.*, p. 272.
49 *Ibid.*, p. 273.
50 Maria Schoina, *op. cit.*, p. 154.
51 Cit. in Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert (eds.), *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814-1844,* Vol. II: *1822-1844*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987, p. 492.
52 *Ibid.*, p. 476.

The following excerpt from a letter to Marianne Hunt clearly illustrates Mary Shelley's deliberate navigation between two cultural identities; while she distances herself from the political climate of her homeland, she is equally careful to affirm to the Hunts that this disapproval does not equate to a rejection of her native identity:

> Not that this is a Paradise of cloudless skies & windless air just now the libechio is blowing hurricanes […] but it is so much better than your northern island. But do not think that I am unenglishifying myself – but that nook of ci devant free land, so sweetly surrounded by the sea is no longer England but Castlereagh land or New Land Castlereagh, – heaven defend me from being a Castlereaghish woman.[53]

Despite Mary's deep appreciation for Italy – its language, culture, and landscape – she often expressed disdain for its inhabitants. In her correspondence, particularly during the Pisan years, she voiced frustration at what she perceived as their disagreeable nature, preoccupation with money, and tendency toward gossip. These critical observations were heightened by the personal difficulties she faced, which underscored her sense of cultural displacement:

> Pisa is a pretty town but its inhabitants wd exercise all Hoggs vocabulary of scamps, raffs &c &c to fully describe their ragged-haired, shirtless condition. Many of them are students of the university & they are none of the genteelest of the crew. Then there are Bargees, beggars without number; galley salves in their yellow & red dress with chains – the women in dirty cotton gown trailing in the dirt – pink silk hats starting up in the air --- that mean to look like the lords of the rabble but who only look like their drivers – The Pisans I dislike more than any of the Italians & none of them are as yet favourites with me. Not that I much wish to be in England if I could but import a cargo of friends & books from that island there.[54]

Mary's conflicting feelings toward Italy did not subside upon her return to England. In *Rambles in Germany and Italy, in 1840, 1842, and 1843*, she refers to herself as a «foreigner» and a «stranger»[55] in the south-

53 Cit. in *Ibid.*, p. 137.
54 *Ibid.*, pp. 136-137.
55 Mary Shelley, *Rambles in Germany and Italy in 1840, 1842, and 1843*, London,

ern land. Notably, in the same work, she also states «I love the Italians. It is impossible to live among them and not love them»,[56] a stark contrast to her earlier remark in 1823: «the inhabitants [of Italy] were never favourites with me». In contrast, she identifies as Italian in a letter dated 3rd December 1820, addressed to Leigh Hunt, in which she discussed the figure of Queen Caroline: «Pero credo che voi in Inghilterra son piu duri e aspri che noi» («However, I believe that *you* in England are harder and more severe than *us*»).[57]

Ultimately, in the majority of her writings, Shelley seeks to elicit sympathy and compassion from her readers toward the Italian people and their homeland. She frequently adopts a comparative lens between England and Italy – one that, perhaps inevitably, tends to favour her native country. As she explicitly argues in the *Preface* of *Rambles in Germany and Italy*, *1840, 1842 and 1843*,

> Englishmen, in particular, ought to sympathise in their [the Italians'] struggles: for the aspiration of free institutions all over the world has its source in England […] the swarms of English that overrun Italy keep the feeling alive. An Italian gentleman naturally envies an Englishman, hereditary or elective legislator. He envies him his pride of country, in which he himself can in no way indulge.[58]

Like his wife, Percy Shelley deeply admired the Italian landscape and climate, as well as the nation's rich cultural legacy. Proficient in the Italian language and well-versed in its literature, he also developed a strong interest in the art of improvisation, frequently attending performances by the renowned *improvvisatore* Tommaso Sgricci, whose talent he greatly appreciated. Shelley even composed a piece praising Sgricci's improvisational skill. Although written in Italian and focused on a distinctly Italian artistic tradition, the work was not necessarily intended for an Italian audience, but rather for an Italianized – or more precisely, Anglo-Italian – cultured readership.

Edward Moxon, 1844, 2, p. 126.

56 *Ibid.*, 1, p. 76.

57 Betty T. Bennett (ed.), *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley,* Volume I: *"A Part of the Elect"*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, p. 162.

58 Mary Shelley, *Rambles in Germany and Italy in 1840, 1842, and 1843*, cit.1, p. 11.

Even though he considered Italy a «Paradise of exiles»,[59] he did not hesitate to express his disdain for the Italian people and what he perceived as the nation's ongoing decline. In contrast to Byron, who eventually embraced and even celebrated the cultural contradictions he encountered in Italy, Shelley largely conformed to the prevailing British perception that modern Italy fell short of the grandeur of its classical past. He expressed deep disdain for contemporary Italians, describing them as «a miserable people – without sensibility or imagination or understanding»,[60] and doubted their capacity to uphold a constitutional government due to what he viewed as a degenerated national character. These convictions led him to remain mostly detached from both Italian society and its emerging revolutionary movements.

As per his opinion on his adopted country of residence, in 1820, Shelley wrote the poem *Letter to Maria Gisborne*, an epistle built on a contrast between London and Leghorn. In this poetical work, Shelley enhances the significance of the Italian setting by explicitly rejecting the bleak and inhospitable social realities of contemporary London. He mourns the suppression of natural forces within the city, stifled by the constraints of an increasingly industrialised and urbanised environment. Through its rich connotative imagery, London is depicted as a site of oppressive excess and unfulfilled desire.

His feelings for Pisa are, on the other hand, quite conflicting. In 1818, during his initial visit, Shelley described it as «a large disagreeable city almost without inhabitants».[61] This unsettling impression lingered even upon his return in 1820, when he ultimately chose to settle there. The city's haunting atmosphere is immediately evident in *The Tower of Famine* (1820), one of the first poems Shelley wrote in Pisa, inspired by the Ugolino episode in Dante's *Inferno*. His ambivalent attitude is further reflected in *Evening: Ponte al Mare, Pisa* (1821), a lyric that presents the city once again as eerily uninhabited, ghostly, and grim – haunted by Dantesque spectres and marked by fleeting visions:

> III
> Within the surface of the fleeting river

59 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Julian and Maddalo*, in Thomas Hutchinson (ed.), *Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1914, pp. 314-335: 317.

60 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *300. To William Godwin*, in Roger Ingpen (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 608-610: 610.

61 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *297. To Thomas Love Peacock*, *Ibid.*, pp. 601-603: 602.

> The wrinkled image of the city lay,
> Immovably unquiet, and forever
> It trembles, but it never fades away;
> Go to the …
> You, being changed, will find it then as now.[62]

Despite this uncanny portrayal, Shelley gradually developed an attachment to Pisa. As Richard Holmes notes, the 'desolate' city eventually became the closest thing to a permanent home Shelley had known since leaving London.

The following words of Percy Shelley aptly capture the essence of the Anglo-Italians' experience in Italy: «Our roots were never stuck so deeply as at Pisa and the transplanted tree flourishes not».[63]

Conclusions

These excerpts portray the Anglo-Italians as a closed group that distanced itself from both England and Italy, associating primarily with other English intellectuals or members of the Italian upper class – those they deemed suitable companions for English expatriates seeking to refine their taste and deepen their cultural understanding of their host country. For instance, Byron associated with Teresa Guiccioli, Pietro Gamba, and Francesco Pacchiani, and while in Milan, he engaged with an intellectual circle that included Silvio Pellico and Ludovico di Breme.

This 'narrow-mindedness' of the group and their way of distancing themselves from the two cultures resulted in the creation of a barrier from the English public - as well as the Italian one (for whom they did not write, in fact). The press looked at these expatriates and exiled Britons, who called themselves Anglo-Italians, who believed in their group's cultural superiority, with a particular critical eye, lambasting their liberal periodical and misinterpreting their liberal ideas, because of their resentment towards their home country.

Furthermore, in the letters mentioned earlier, the Anglo-Italians generalized their opinions on England and Italy and their inhabitants, by placing all the English and all the Italians into one single group (for instance,

62 Percy Bysshe Shelley, «Evening: Ponte al Mare, Pisa», in Thomas Hutchinson (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 1184-1185: 1184.

63 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *425. To Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, cit., pp. 902-906: 906.

Percy Shelley defines modern Italians «a miserable people»);[64] the English press, in turn, took a generalized view of the Anglo-Italians' compositions by taking Byron's *The Vision of Judgement* (1822) as the primary and only example of their liberal ideas.

To conclude, after the negative response to the first issue of *The Liberal*, the British press almost unanimously stopped viewing the periodical as worthy of any sort of consideration and started reviewing its contents with less and less consistency, until the fourth and last issue came out quietly, without causing any stir at all. For instance, *The London Literary Gazette* agreed that the new Liberal was «free from those atrocities against feeling, morals and religion, which previously excited so general an abhorrence [but this number was] more dull, if possible of a baser literary quality».[65] The Anglo-Italians started falling apart at the same rate with which the periodical started collapsing, with their members moving away from Italy and, consequently, from each other. As Craig cleverly points out, *The Liberal* offered the editors a chance to demonstrate to the English public the new, progressive meaning of 'liberalism', but, in the end, it «enabled them to cast this new word in a negative light».[66]

In sum, the insularity of the Anglo-Italians contributed to the misinterpretation of their liberal ideals, a dynamic that ultimately played a role in the dissolution not only of *The Liberal* but also of the progressive identity cultivated within the Pisan circle.

64 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *300. To William Godwin*, cit., p. 610.
65 «The Liberal, No. 11», *The London Literary Gazette*, 311, January 4, 1823, pp. 2-5.
66 David Craig, *art. cit.*, p. 483.