The "Poetry of Politics" in Shelley's and Byron's Italian Works

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Politics and the Romantic Ideology

Traditional literary scholarship has consistently maintained that the Romantic aesthetic existed in a separate sphere from worldly activities and as a result, many canonical critics tended to view the Romantic poets' works as an autonomous body of material linked adventitiously, and therefore not intrinsically, to the socio-political, cultural and geographical context in which it was written. As for the poets, they would mostly be looked on as solitary "dreamers of another existence"[1] and propagators of the German aesthetic and metaphysical tradition, rather than as historical beings, that is, citizens and participants in the rapidly changing world of their time. The Romantic poets' extreme inwardness and self-absorbing introspection, in particular, were characteristics that would corroborate the critics' view of a typically Romantic attitude, that is, a deliberate remoteness from social concerns, a detachment from the real world and actual human experience, from "the agonies, the strife /of human hearts".[2] Other readings, however, and especially more recent historical investigations, have sought to shun or limit idealist concerns and generic qualities of Romanticism, describing and interpreting Romantic poetry in relation to its political, social and cultural context, "as the temporally limited production of a particular complex of personalities, social events and developments, at a certain place and time" (Everest 87). This critical orientation, among other things, looks at the social engagement of Romantic poetry, at its interaction with "the spirit of the age" and by re-setting it in the past, re-evaluates its relation to both the ideal (the poetic) and the actual (the political).[3]

The second generation of English Romantic poets, with which this paper engages, worked in an atmosphere heavily charged with political conflicts, social

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upheaval and the ominous signs of revolution and anarchy. The breaking up of the old stabilities and established order cultivated and carved an awareness of radical change and reformation that were viewed as concurrent with the age. Although it is true that every age can be seen as transitional or revolutionary, the Romantic period "was considered *at the time* to be a momentous epoch" (Everest 48). Consequently, writings of that period are expected to contain a great deal of political and social comment. And indeed they do, but a considerable part of historical critical perspective is cautious about the nature, extent and effect of political content in the works of the English Romantic poets, even about the work of Byron and Shelley, which was more explicitly radical in comparison to the poetry of the first generation. The debate concerning the character and (in)effectuality of the politics of the young Romantics is in fact a reenactment of the controversy between poetry and politics, and it is in the wider context of this contradiction that I wish to examine the two expatriates' attitude towards Italian politics. As it will be shown, Byron's, and particularly Shelley's, Italian work not only reflects on the poetry-and/or-politics dilemma but reflects it throughout.

Whilst in Italy, Byron and Shelley took a strong interest in the social and political state of the world around them, though in their own individual ways. The fact that they had both sought in their self-imposed exile a means of escaping from their problems at home[4] did not result in indifference towards the nagging political issues of post-Napoleonic Europe, at a time when the fear of insurrection was imminent due to the national movements that developed on the Continent, movements that found in the recent spectacle of the French Revolution a source of idealism and inspiration, and in the new culture of Romanticism, passion for freedom and heroic action.

The Romantic poets were deemed the agents of freedom and hope. Every age needs heroes, and for post-revolutionary Europe the concept of the poet-rebel was related to the notion of freedom, idealism and change and was met with extraordinary enthusiasm. That the Romantic poet had a social mission in the world was not a novel conception; the poet had already been assigned a political role in the wider sense of the word, that is, educative and prophetic, by both Wordsworth and Coleridge. In the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth sketches out this new role: "[The poet] is the rock of defence of human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love ... the poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time" (167). The implications in Wordsworth's statement and its emphasis on love and a common humanity are indeed striking because poetry, and arts in general, are (daringly) associated with the idea of human perfection, and all this in an age of aggressive individualism, industrialisation and a rising economy. According to Raymond Williams, the claims made for poetry by the Romantics were largely against the grain of society's direction and scientific progress, against what Shelley called "the calculating principles": "emphasis on the creative imagination ... may be seen as

an alternative construction of human motive and energy, in contrast with the assumption of the prevailing political economy" (Williams 42).

It needs to be pointed out that the power with which the poet was endowed, creative imagination, was the instrument for achieving not only poetic inspiration but political change through the revelation of truth. The Romantic idea of the imagination, according to David Punter, was that of "an alternative system, connecting subject and object, present and future, in a way which does not bind but liberate through the disclosure of real connections" (171). The important detail here is that the Romantic poets could not actually define how a synthesis between the poetic and the political could be achieved. In fact, the alleged social power of poetry and the poet's role in society is a recurrent, agonising topic in Romantic writings and is given full expression in Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*.

In the *Defence*, Shelley makes extravagant political claims for poetry and seeks to establish the indispensability of the visionary and creative imagination in all important human concerns. Despite the occasionally dogmatic rhetoric and circumspection of his arguments and the, at times, irritating self-aggrandisement of the Romantic ideology, Shelley does manage to spell out the problematic relationship between literature and the social world and seeks a deeper understanding of socio-literary processes. Shelley develops two main arguments concerning the poetry-society relationship. The first regards the moral function of the poet, that is, his role as a guide and benefactor of humanity, supporting social advancement and humanitarian causes. Literature, he claims, ultimately performs a social task – indirectly, through its ideas, ideals and symbols. Shelley in his brief review of cultural history uses Homer as the poet *par excellence* who "embodied the ideal perfection of his age in human character" (*Prose* 282) and conjectures that his verses contributed to the moral improvement of its auditors. Poetry, according to Shelley, "acts in another and diviner manner. It awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought" (282). Shelley often reiterates his major thesis, which is that any moral and social betterment of man and the world is contingent on the imagination: "The great instrument of moral good is the imagination" which is "the organ of the moral nature of man" (*Prose* 283). Thus, a poet's essential task is to develop, enhance and sustain people's imagination, that is, the one and only humanising, civilising and creative faculty. At this point he adds that "a man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others" (283).

Shelley does not elaborate on other, more direct and practical ways in which a poet can assist people, especially in times of social upheaval or imminent trouble. However, his personal brief but active involvement in Irish politics, as well as his work *The Philosophical View of Reform,* are in themselves suggestions of how a poet can be more explicitly political and committed to a social cause in order to achieve specific effects, for instance, urge people to react against any form of tyranny. The *Philosophical View of Reform* is a concrete proposal for

reform in England after 1819, in which Shelley not only stresses the need for change but outlines the means for its realisation. In this essay Shelley has already drafted the role of the poet as a legislator and a liberator of enslaved minds, while in the *Defence* he quotes Tasso's famous statement which becomes his motto: *Non merita nome di creatore, se non Iddio ed il Poeta* (295). The poet's onerous duty is counteracted by his universal recognition as a new god – "a poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one ... he beholds the future in the present" (*Prose* 279) – as a prophet and a legislator, who joins the ideal and the real, participating in both, the human principle and the world of consciousness. Shelley's political metaphor, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (297), with which he concludes the essay, points to a new role he envisions for poetry: a conjunctive, reconciliatory force, "being able to mention human actuality and potential in the same breath" (Punter 171).

The second argument in the *Defence* deals with the idea that literature responds to social changes and is determined, to an extent, by the social forces or institutions of its age, that is, it flourishes in times of freedom, social prosperity and political reform which generate and promote potential and creativity. Shelley, in order to depict the interrelationship between social and cultural phenomena in literary history, cites the genre of drama, and specifically of Greek drama, arguing that "the highest perfection of human society has ever corresponded with the highest dramatic excellence" (285). As he moves chronologically, Shelley emphasises throughout the great importance, if not the priority, of social factors and institutions for the creation of intellectual spirits, and in order to support this argument he cites some path-breaking social changes in the modern world, such as the abolition of slavery and the declaration of equality by the Christian law which affected the rebirth of literature in the late Medieval period. In the Italian context, medieval Florence gave birth to an unprecedented flourishing of culture and bore Dante, the greatest Italian poet of all ages:

> Dante [was] the second epic poet ... the series of whose creations bore a defined and intelligible relation to the knowledge and sentiment and religion and political conditions of the age in which he lived and of the ages that followed it. (*Prose* 290)

A more in-depth study of the *Defence,* however, and of other works related to this issue show that Shelley often modulates the balance between politics and poetry, society and individual; in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound* he declares that "poets, not otherwise than philosophers ... are in one sense, the creators and in another, the creations, of their age" (*Prefaces* 206). The man who waived for himself the title of the poet-legislator resists a clear-cut, uncomplicated, direct correlation between society and literature, and the more one reads the *Defence* and similar prose works, the more one realises this complexity. It is thus assumed that literature is certainly not political propaganda, but still it does not reside in an ivory-tower, estranged from the frets of this world. Punter

claims, rightly I think, that "instead of the facile idea that revolution is preceded – or accompanied – by revolutionary literature, we have ... the much more problematic concept of a superflux of ideas and energies, and also by implication a cathexis of energies on to ideas, such that thoughts about conceptions of human relations become again significant areas of questioning, loosened from the moorings of ideological control" (171).

As regards the British expatriates, the popular image of the poet as a social rebel and bearer of freedom mentioned earlier was actually blurred further with that of the social outcast and of the solitary wanderer, an idea and an ideal propagated by the Byronic model in works like *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage,* which, interestingly enough, had a huge appeal to audience expectations and met with unprecedented commercial success. Strange though it may sound, in works of this kind, solitariness and detachment were made to be seen positively, promoting the idea, as J. Drummond Bone argues, that "social exile is virtually a precondition of rebelliousness or rebellious social criticism" (168).

Italy, central in English real and imaginary geography of the time, was the retreat of social outcasts from many European countries, the "Paradise of Exiles" in Shelley's ambiguous praise. In addition, being in a state of permanent revolution and turbulence itself, it granted the opportunity to some British voluntary self-exiles to face up to their mission as poets in the Romantic sense of the word and define their political role as expatriates in a foreign country. Italy, in my opinion, was not only a challenge for English Romantic poetics, but a challenge for Romantic politics and for the relationship between the two. Italy, like Greece, because of its historical associations had a strong hold on the English political imagination: the British claimed a special kinship with Italy, feeling that they were heirs not only of the republican virtues of ancient Rome but also of its imperial glories. Nevertheless, in a period when a sense of British identity was forged and the nation was a dominant discourse in post-Napoleonic Europe, it is important to notice that the English constructed an Italian nation in their Romantic narratives and "selectively used the Italian peninsula ... as a way to understand their own historical destiny, their changing roles on the European continent, and, when the need arose, their desire and ability to reinvent themselves as English and/or Italian" (O'Connor 21). Through all these associations, perceptions and inherited views, Shelley and Byron largely reinvented Italy's past (glory) and appropriated it, trying to adjust it to Italy's contemporary politics which they still had to confront.

For Shelley and Byron, exile was marked by a complete change of political scene, as the situation in England after 1816 was very different from that in Italy. After the triumphant victory over Napoleon, Regency England was witnessing a period of internal agitation, as the general climate of repression and conservatism created reaction and protest on the part of the middle classes. In Italy, on the other hand, the restoration of the *ancien régime* ensured that the peninsula remained divided and under foreign rule, mainly that of the Austrians. Italy, though it could pride itself on its cultural superiority and achievements of the past, for the greatest

part of the nineteenth century (at least until the 1860s) was like a pariah among the other European nations, on account of its fragmented political map, its isolationism, and the identity crisis which, according to Christopher Duggan, would lead Italy to a long-standing oscillation "between a desire to emulate foreign models and a frustrated, often angry assertion of indigenous tradition and character" (86). Italy's divided state and the difficulty in defining the character of the Italian people without recourse to images of corruption and decadence made the prospect of an Italian nation appear weak[5] (97) and turned the country on the border of Europe into a loose plot, an unstable ground, a *topos* where presence signified absence or exile. Italy hosted exiles being an exile itself.

The literature of the time stressed the pathos lying over the country through Romantic representations: Italy as a woman in distress, as a mixture of contradictions and tensions, or as "an assortment of oppressive tyrants: the pope, illiberal Austrians, the untrustworthy French and corrupt Spanish Bourbons" (O'Connor 38). One can assert that the change in the political map of Italy that mostly stirred the Romantic imagination was the end of the Venetian Republic. "Venice is crushed" exclaims Byron in *Venice. An Ode,* in which he laments not only the unconditional surrender of the *Serenissima* to the foreign yolk, which is a historical fact, but also the defeat of liberty by tyranny and the ensuing domination of chaos, decadence and violence. One could say that Byron also laments the loss of an aesthetic symbol, the de(con)struction of what seemed to be an asylum of the imagination. Byron engages – and indulges – in a prolonged, dramatic mourning:

> Oh! agony – that centuries should reap
> No mellower harvest! Thirteen hundred years
> Of wealth and glory turn'd to dust and tears;
> And every monument the stranger meets,
> Church, palace, pillar, as a mourner greets;
> And even the Lion all subdued appears,
> And the harsh sound of the barbarian drum,
> With dull and daily dissonance, repeats
> The echo of the tyrant's voice along
> The soft waves, once too musical to song,
> That heaved beneath the moonlight with the throng
> Of gondolas.
>
> (ll. 15-25)

As for the Venetians, Byron is not as sympathetic to them as in other poems, but points to their corruption and slavish character while condemning their apathy towards the moral disintegration of their city. The image of the last two lines is shockingly appalling:

> ... they only murmur in their sleep
> In contrast with their fathers – as the slime,
> The dull green ooze of the receding deep,
> Is with the dashing of the spring-tide foam,
> That drives the sailor shipless to his home,
> Are they to those that were; and thus they creep,
> Crouching and crab-like, through their sapping streets.
> (ll. 7-13)

Venice attracts Shelley's attention too, though not exclusively for its enslaved condition. In his more intellectual and airy style, and through metaphors of light and darkness, he describes in *Lines Written upon the Euganean Hills* how the "Sun-girt city" fell into decadence and misery and, like Byron, portrays its inhabitants in abominable, abject colours in ways that evoke Dantean associations from the *Inferno:* "... human forms / Like pollution-nourished worms / To the corpse of greatness cling" (ll. 146-148). Shelley foresees the city's inevitable death-by-water, its immersion into the Ocean, as a necessary act of expiation and purgation ("among the waves wilt thou be"). Venice can not re-emerge lest Freedom should return. But while Byron sees "no hope for Nations", Shelley, in his cyclical, organic view of history sees the natural law applying to the rise and fall of nations (Weinberg 34) and where Byron mourns Venice's glory "turned to dust and tears", Shelley views this dust as regenerative, life-giving: "From your dust new nations spring / With more kindly blossoming" (ll. 165-166).

The two poets' reaction towards the political decline of Venice is a telling instance of their dialogic poetry on Italy, disclosing two conflicting but equally important attitudes towards Italy's state. Irrespective of motives or intentions and bearing in mind the uniqueness and distinctive quality of each poet's position, which we will elaborate on below, what seems to characterise Shelley's and Byron' s poetic relationship to Italy's revolutionary politics of the time is ambivalence. On the one hand, and initially at least, particular political events that take place in Italy are treated autonomously, that is, by considering their immediate historical context. On the other hand, however, these events tend to gradually lose their specificity, their boundedness in time and space, and by giving way to something less tangible, to perception and subjectivity, they become a springboard to the articulation of a generalised political discourse. The local serves the universal and Italy – its history, politics, culture – becomes a kind of objective correlative for the Romantic poets; Italy becomes "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events".[6] Italy is objectified and is not an objective in itself – figurative Italy, a loaded *topos,* a trope, a topic which helps the British poets to become more eloquent and which can make an emotion, an abstract idea or ideal plausible.

Thus, setting off from Italian history, for instance, Shelley and Byron make an attempt to chart the universal history of what they see as the everlasting strife between tyranny and liberty. Italy becomes the centre of the world and at the

same time is decentralised. Its desired liberation is deemed a signal for the universal triumph of mankind against forces of oppression and violence. Through this largely idealistic perspective, Italy, as we will see in their Odes, is dematerialised and serves as a symbol: *Italy as* rather than Italy. Alternatively, even when Italy is sometimes treated in terms of a solid political realism, as in the case of Byron, the perspective of a free, paradisiac state still comes to symbolise the inner self, and the poets seek their own *risorgimento* in Italy's struggle for political freedom.

For critics of literature this is an issue for debate, as opinions over the character and impact of Byron's and Shelley's involvement in Italian politics are divided. The attitude and course of action of the two poets are, as one would expect, not similar, and Kenneth Churchill, rightly I think, points out that the two poets did share an interest in contemporary Italy but this interest was manifested in different ways. The comment is further instructive in that it implies that both poets, in essence, ended up fighting for something *beyond* Italy and its real problems:

> Byron attempts to involve himself in events, because commitment to the struggle of a people he admires ... is a self-justifying activity. Shelley's approach is more purely intellectual: his concern is much less for the people involved, or the day to day realities of the situation, than for the beauty of the abstract principle of freedom. (50)

Byron's gloomy egotistical approach, being more of an individual characteristic, will be examined in greater detail with reference to his Italian political Odes. At this point, however, it is worth reconsidering the two poets' behaviour towards Italy's politics in terms of the circumstances that defined it rather than in terms of its manifestation, and also trace some of the critical debates over it. First of all, it is important to remember that Shelley and Byron were primarily poets and, as P.M.S. Dawson argues, "their political concerns were shaped by their particular role as poets" (49). As stated earlier, the Romantic poets considered themselves not merely citizens with a heightened perception, but legislators of the world, who could transform it by means of the power of the imagination. Imagination was assigned a political function even in its escapist aspects: "the Romantic poets called on their readers to imagine the world anew in order to transform it.... In a society whose practices and beliefs constituted a denial of human imagination and creativity it was the poet's role to keep open a sense of alternative possibility" (Dawson 72-73). In this sense, the ideal and idealised picture of Italy that the Romantic poets offered was their answer to an unimaginative, miserable world, and through this function only their involvement was believed to acquire a political significance.

Jerome McGann, however, sees the Romantics' idealist escapism as a revelation of a false political commitment, that is, one drained of political progressivism and radical purpose. McGann's main thesis in *The Romantic Ideology* concerning

the poetry of Romanticism is that the grand illusion of every Romantic poet was that poetry and imagination can set one free of the ruins of history and culture; but the only thing these displacement efforts did was to bring about the critique of the ideology upon which Romantic poetry was founded (137, 132). For McGann, the utopian or transcendental signs of Romantic poetry are ideological in the Marxist sense of distortion and false consciousness, and "the poetic response to the age's severe political and social dislocations was to reach for solutions in the realm of ideas" (71). McGann differentiates his position from Louis Althusser's and Pierre Macherey's[7] separation of art from ideology – he calls this separation "a misguided effort which conceals a latent idealism" (12) – and sees in the historical method a means of exposing the ideological illusion of a literary work, through a recognition of the social structures that formed it.

Although McGann's work has been considered path-breaking in recent Romantic studies, his lack of sympathy for poetry has received some scathing criticism. Marc Kipperman, for instance, criticises McGann for his attack on idealist images in Romantic poetry. But one could argue that Kipperman bases his argumentation on a completely different set of precepts, that is, that "art is not itself history or politics, retaining enough autonomy to imagine (ideal) potentialities" and also that "idealization is not ideological mystification if it presents a clarified political choice" (91, 97). Kipperman's aim is to historicise and contextualise Romantic idealism and utopianism, recognising their potential to convey historical progressivism, and thus to privilege art on the assumption of its ability to be both a-temporal and engaged (91).

Secondly, and with regard to the exploitation of Italy as a symbol of universal values by the Romantic poets, it must be pointed out that Italy had already entered their minds as an entity that had been denied autonomy of signification and a life of its own. Italy had for centuries been defined in terms of what it used to stand for, of what it used to signify – thus the signified had begun to be erased by the sweeping force of the signifiers. Italy was the already-read and the already-written. The Romantic generation had been trained to see the cultural and political achievements of the country's past as a confirmation of human greatness, and this classical perspective enhanced their perception of the decline and decadence of more recent history. As a result, it was difficult to disengage Italy from its long-standing associations and see it as something that signifies itself and not something else. The need to see Italy as autonomous and recover its true history, and not its history as a symbol, arose with the emergence of the issue of its political independence. Up to that time and for many years, Italy was deemed by many a "geographical expression" (Duggan xiii) devoid of all political content. The word *expression* is indicative of the figurative (secondary and non-literal) role it had played in the European theatre of political operations and in the foreigners' imagination. This is, in fact, another instance of inversion or subversion of Italy's presumed hegemony over England and the Western world, and the Romantic poets were witnesses to that. What follows now is an attempt to locate more specifically Shelley's and Byron's readings of political Italy.

The Italy of Poetry and the Italy of Politics

Shelley did not participate actively in the political affairs of Italy as his compatriot Byron did, largely because he did not mix with the Italians and had little faith in their ability to sustain a constitutional government. He believed that the Italian character had been degenerated by years of tyranny and oppression, but he seemed reluctant to excuse this degradation and vice that he saw ruling contemporary Italy. As a result, his faith seemed to be more in the power of "thought-winged Liberty", rather than in the potential of a "savage people", and in the doctrine of Necessity, "an historical determinism that assisted man in his question for perfection" (Gaull 134) and which Shelley had taken from Holbach and in time modified to suit his Romantic ideology. Just before the rising of the Neapolitans in 1821, Shelley reported to Thomas Love Peacock:

> We are now in the crisis and point of expectation in Italy. The Neapolitan and Austrian armies are rapidly approaching each other and every day the news of a battle may be expected ... I need not tell you how little chance there is that the new and undisciplined levies of Naples should stand against a superior force of veteran troops. But the birth of liberty in nations abounds in reversals of the ordinary laws of calculation. (Rhys *SL* 331)

Shelley saw in the Continental nationalist revolts of 1820 and 1821 the outbreak and spread of a great revolution and the installation of a new order in the world and the cause of liberty became identified in his mind with European liberation movements for independence. Shelley responded with two Odes: *Ode to Liberty* was written on the Spanish revolution while *Ode to Naples* on the Neapolitan one. The *Ode to Liberty* begins with references to Spain but the insurgence is hardly treated as an event in itself; it rather comes to designate Liberty, which will set the contagious fire of revolution to other enslaved nations. Shelley's enthusiasm over "the lightning of the nations" that was about to electrify the universe with its discharge of energy – to stretch his scientific metaphor – was so great that a few months after the revolution had begun, he even contemplated moving to Spain:

> If I could believe that Spain would be effectual, I might be tempted to make a voyage thither, on account of the glorious events of which it is at this moment the theatre. You know my passion for a republic, or anything which approaches it. (Jones *SL* 180)

The rest of the Ode traces the history of humanity's long struggle for Liberty. Shelley, in this cartography of the progress of freedom through the centuries, invokes and celebrates the Italian *liberi communi*, the city-states. Indeed, the Italian medieval republics had a strong hold on Shelley's imagination as part of the tradition of liberty:

> And many a warrior-peopled citadel,
> Like rocks which fire lifts out of the flat deep,
> Arose in sacred Italy,
> Frowning over the tempestuous sea
> Of kings, and priests, and slaves, in tower-crowned majesty;
> (ll. 124-128)

Shelley finds retreat in tradition and the past: the ideal of Liberty was nurtured in Ancient Rome and then in the Republics, as he emphasised in the beginning of *A Philosophical View of Reform:* "The republics and municipal governments of Italy opposed for some time the systematic and effectual resistance to the all-surrounding tyranny" (*Prose* 231). Shelley attributed the flourish of arts and culture to republicanism, and this is one of the reasons he admired Dante so much. Dante was the creation of a libertarian state, and so were Petrarch and Boccaccio. The socio-literary processes are again introduced on the scene:

> I consider the three first as the production of the vigour of the infancy of a new nation – as rivulets from the same spring as that which fed the greatness of the republics of Florence and Pisa.... When the second rate poets of Italy wrote, the corruptive blight of tyranny was already hanging on every bud of genius. (Rhys *SL* 292)

Romantic odes to Liberty sought to capture the stirring emotions that the revolutionary age produced and to raise the public morale against forces of tyranny and oppression. The theme demanded a specific diction – the diction of Liberty, one could call it. But it also demanded a basic symbol, and that was Italy. The Italian stanza in *Ode to Liberty* with its five formal apostrophes to the country reads like a compressed but forced version of Shelley's interpretation of Italy:

> And thou, lost Paradise of this divine
> And glorious world! thou flowery wilderness!
> Thou island of eternity; thou shrine
> Where desolation, clothed with loveliness,
> Worships the thing thou wert! Oh Italy,
> Gather thy blood into thy heart; repress
> The beasts who make their dens thy sacred palaces.
> (ll. 204-210)

Italy's antithetical qualities and contradictions are juxtaposed in a remarkably condensed way: the poet seems anxious to squeeze into his poetic language what he sees as Italy's comprehensive fabric, its unique diversity and inclusion of both life and death. Even the choice of metaphors and allusions seems so familiar, if

one has read his Italian poems. The images of Paradise, of nature, of the island and the shrine, all allude to specific ideas with which the country has been vested throughout his poetry.[8] One cannot miss the nostalgic tone in "the thing thou wert"; as Weinberg argues, "Shelley's appeal to Italy to guard its culture against barbaric invasion finds expression within the context of its former glory, re-echoing the patriotic Italian ode" (7). In fact, the invocation of the past, with the explicit contrast between the two Italies,[9] is deemed the best way to raise feelings of nationalism and patriotism.

The same paeanian mood is to be found in the ode written upon the occasion of the Neapolitan insurgence, *Ode to Naples.* Although in both odes the objective event is interiorised and individualised, *Ode to Naples* opens with a stanza in which the Romantic subject is placed right in the centre of a ruined, deserted city, Pompei. Eveything – the landscape, the natural forces, the ruins, are filtered through the gaze of the individual observer, are actually transformed as they become objects of individual perception: *I stood – heard – felt.* It is notable that the sense of sight and the omnipotent scientific, analytic eye is absent or less trusted, since subjective emotional response is the Romantic way for grasping experience. After a delicate description of the surroundings, the poet begins to reveal the "prophesyings" concerning the fate of the revolt. The poem follows the conventions of a formal ode and its ardent, pompous tone culminates in the "Hail!" exclamations. Naples, the proclaimer of the revolution, is the signal for a general insurrection against anarchy, which will be successful "If Hope, and Truth, and Justice can avail" and if Love, the "Great spirit" methodises and inspires this revolution. Shelley was realistic enough to see the great risk in the Neapolitan uprising, but his deep belief "in the spirit of Regeneration" fed his idealism: the enemies (of Liberty) will be "devoured by their own hounds" while revolution will only have to "gaze on Oppression" and not engage in bloodshed:

> Naples! thou Heart of men which ever pantest
> Naked, beneath the lidless eye of Heaven!
> Elysian City, which to calm enchantest
> The mutinous air and sea! they round thee, even
> As sleep round Love, are driven!
> Metropolis of a ruined Paradise
> Long lost, late won, and yet but half regained!
> Bright Altar of the bloodless sacrifice,
> Which armed Victory offers up unstained
> To Love, the flower-enchained!
> Thou which wert once, and then cease to be,
> Now art, and henceforth ever shalt be, free,
> If Hope, and Truth, and Justice can avail, –
> Hail, hail, all hail !
>
> (ll. 52-65)

The strophe begins with powerful praise of the enchanting beauty of the city which shall regain its freedom in a bloodless, unstained fight. The capital-lettered abstract nouns build up a mood of solemnity and veneration, totally different from the epode which describes the brutalities committed by the invaders, "the anarchs of the North". The most interesting lines of the strophe, in my opinion, are those which relate Italy to the image of Paradise. Shelley specifies at this point his idea of what kind of Paradise this is: a ruined one, "long lost, late won, and yet but half regained". In other words, a Paradise under threat, subject to the flux of life and the law of mutability. This brings back to mind the "Paradise of exiles" characterisation which contains for Shelley the distressing but unavoidable trauma of human uncertainty, the incommensurability between man's desires and man's actual predicament, the idea of an unattainable or lost perfection.

In the end, the ode becomes extremely abstract and philosophical. The natural forces are seen as joining the benign Spirit towards the liberation of the city. The constitution conceded to Naples was short-lived, so when the revolution was subdued by the Austrian forces Shelley was extremely frustrated, as he laconically admits in a letter to Lord Byron:

> This attempt in Italy has certainly been a most unfortunate business. With no strong personal reasons to interest me, my disappointment on public grounds has been excessive. But I cling to moral and political hope, like a drowner to a plank. (Jones *SL* 291)

Alan Weinberg sums up the character of this detachment in the following words: "The freedom [Shelley] cherishes is impartial: it does not favour any one country, nor is it dependent on personal attachments or preferences ... Freedom, once enshrined in Italy, will take root elsewhere, since new nations are born out of the dust of the old" (34).

A question that arises is if Shelley's idealism and detachment from the stark reality of the Italian situation implies a negative political attitude towards the host country, as McGann would probably argue. According to Kipperman, one should adopt a historical perspective on the matter. Talking about *Hellas*, he claims that "in 1821 Shelley's idealism was both atemporal and rooted in historical progressivism in a way that only art and not politics can be" and it also "intensified the sense of the present" (91, 96). Thus, Shelley's circle sensed the cultural crisis of the post-Napoleonic era and thought it proper to adopt timeless, enduring ideals, myths and classical tales in order to convey truths that would have an impact on the present time. Kipperman is right in contextualising Romantic idealism, but two points should be made here. The first is that, despite the cognate classical associations that Greece and Italy had for the Romantic mind, Shelley's actual relation to the two countries was marked by distinct differences, and thus a further historicisation is necessary. Shelley never went to Greece and his act of idealising the country's antiquity and projecting it into a

progressive future seems to be justified because of his lack of first-hand experience. But Italy was the country in which he stayed for four years, his most creative years. Shelley had direct experience of the country and its inhabitants, whose present aspect he did not like. One therefore wonders how Shelley can possibly be intensifying the sense of the Italian present (by continuously idealising its past?) when he rejects this present and how he can avoid ideologically mystifying Italy when he repeatedly presents it through a specific interpretative lens, some inherited, some constructed. Shelley does, of course, reflect through his idealism Italy's nationalist aspirations, but he hardly tackles issues that concern the core of its problem in a more open-minded manner, such as its divided state or, despite his declared antipathy for it, the role of the Roman Church. Instead, Shelley escapes into those aspects of Italy – material or immaterial, past or present – which he finds most agreeable, inspiring and able to sustain his vision. In the odes and in his other poems dealing with Italy's political state, the abstract, a-temporal enduring ideals such as Liberty, Love, Beauty and Justice, which for Shelley are embodied in medieval republicanism, are indeed projected into the future but the political possibilities they suggest for Italy in 1821 are very slim because, in my opinion, Shelley refuses to let Italy go from its past, dispense with the myths, dreams and ideals with which it has been vested and which have defined its character for a long time. Although I do believe that Shelley's idealism remains radical in general, the projection of the desired, idealised past into the future invalidates the viability of the present. And this is a conscious action because Shelley rejects this 'degraded' present and thus, in the case of Italy, idealism is called up to amend the inefficiency of history. Shelley's revolution in Italy – and for Italy – subsists in the sense of turning back the direction of history. Contemporary Italy cannot inspire him enough; Italy's redeeming feature is its (political) past.

On the other hand, and to return to the introductory remarks of this paper, one should bear in mind "the precarious balance of commitment and withdrawal" (Winegarten 61) that we find in Shelley and other Romantics, and which certainly influenced his political sentiments. For Shelley, the two poles of self-interest and social goals, of the private and the public, reach a schizophrenic point as the dilemma is never actually resolved. His disenchantment with contemporary events and his personal afflictions made him write, a few months after the failure of the Carbonari movement: "My greatest content would be to desert all human society ... and shut upon my retreat the floodgates of the world" (Rhys *SL* 355). Immediately after this, realising perhaps the practical impossibility of such a retreat, he offered a more concrete alternative which, however, would set his relation to Italian society on a new basis: this was the idea for the creation of a colony upon Italian ground. In proposing the colonisation of Pisa by a community of the elect in terms of social status, education and taste, Shelley describes an act of commitment and seclusion at the same time:

> The other side of the alternative ... is to form for ourselves a society

> of our own class, as much as possible in intellect, or in feelings; and to connect ourselves with the interests of that society. Our roots never struck so deep as at Pisa, and the transplanted tree flourishes not. (Rhys *SL* 356-357)

Shelley wrote many political poems in which he elaborated his views on reform, his millenarian vision, radical philosophy and libertinism concerning the replacement of old systems – political, social, moral – with new ones. He had envisioned a thorough political reform for England, and while being abroad he made sure he kept abreast of the political situation at home. Italian politics concerned him to the extent that they posed or rather stood for a very basic problem, that of freedom versus tyranny. And this is how he imagined Italy in his odes, free and mighty, but nothing really beyond that. Shelley wanted to remain an exile, detached, objective, keeping himself out of complications that might inflict and afflict his "green isle"; the division in Italy was clearer in his mind than in Byron's, and though at times he would feel divided himself, it was with "the most sublime and lovely" that he was allied and with which he identified himself – or at least tried to. The less attractive reality, however, never ceased to impinge menacingly on the ideal one, and Shelley could not avoid seeing it. In the disturbing contemporary map of Italy and its fallen state, the English expatriate faced many existential and moral challenges. But his vision for Liberty was too Promethean and universal to let him engage his mind in the contemporary Italian issues which tended to disenchant him and deflate his grand ultra-political plan.

Byron's involvement in Italian politics is difficult to classify because his relationship to Italy was of a special nature. His intimacy with the Italians and their ways of life, combined with his hatred of tyranny and oppression of every kind, made his active participation in the Carbonari intrigues a thing to be expected. However, one cannot say with certainty what Byron expected from this involvement, or rather how he visualised the consequences of his engagement in the Italian cause. The following extract from a letter to his friend Hobhouse has been the site of various contrasting interpretations:

> Today I have had no communication with my Carbonari cronies; but in the mean time, my lower apartments are full of their bayonets, fusils, cartridges, and what not. I suppose that they consider me as a depôt, to be sacrificed, in case of accidents. It is no great matter, supposing that Italy could be liberated, who or what is sacrificed. It is a grand object – the very *poetry* of politics. Only think – a free Italy!!! Why, there has been nothing like it since the days of Augustus.... It is best to hope, even of the hopeless. (*BL* 250-251)

The extract is quoted almost in full and not just the ambiguous and controversial phrase "poetry of politics", which seems difficult to specify outside its context.

Byron indulges in the eventuality of Italy's liberation which, should it take place, would mark the beginning of a new historical era. Byron was not very optimistic about the success of the operations for very specific reasons, but he refused to succumb to desperation and passivity, and therein lay for him the poetry of politics:[10] it was a kind of self-imposed illusion in which he wallowed, to hope even the hopeless. He came to see it as a moral obligation, part of his duty as a poet – and it is at this point that he strikes a common chord with Shelley and his defence of poetry's moral, humanising character. For as Byron wrote in the *Prophesy of Dante,*

> Many are poets but without the name,
> For what is poesy but to create
> From overfeeling good or ill; and aim
> At an external life beyond our fate,
> And be the new Prometheus of new men.
> (ll. 10-14)

Byron was keenly disposed towards exuberance, ostentation and adventure in general which he valued highly: "And yet a little *tumult,* now and then, is an agreeable quickener of sensation; such as a revolution, a battle, or an *aventure* of any lively description" (*BL* 356). There is an inclination towards a poetisation of politics which by many has been interpreted as a deliberate trivialisation of it. One can also see in his revolutionary zeal a love for the romance of risk or a sublimation of his dissipated life in Venice and, for a man who cared so much for his image, a nobilising act, something that would give him a sense of purpose, since he did not like to consider writing his vocation. After the failure of the Neapolitans, Byron wrote the epilogue to his Italian *aventure* by saying: "but, come what may, the cause was a glorious one" (qtd. in Quennell 604). The cause was the driving force that sent him to Greece a year later. The following stanzas, however, are revelatory of the cause and its bearer:

> When a man hath no freedom to fight for at home,
> Let him combat for that of his neighbours;
> Let him think of the glories of Greece and of Rome,
> And get knock'd on the head for his labours.
>
> To do good to mankind is the chivalrous plan,
> And is always as nobly requited;
> Then battle for freedom whenever you can
> And, if not shot or hang'd, you'll get knighted.
> [Stanzas] 'When a man hath no freedom ...'

The piece is not only interesting in what it says but in how it says it, as it subverts what it proposes by mixing two different styles, by mingling dignified diction

and associations with conversational, pragmatic and natural speech. Altruism, self-sacrifice and the personal struggle for the liberation of others seemed equally important to this cause, even if the latter was not to be justified. Byron moralises and nobilises altruistic action, and through this his own attitude and himself, who is the agent of such action, a benefactor of humanity. As Butler points out, Byron "seemed to appropriate his myths to an immensely potent cult of self" while "his rebellion [did not have] any hint of a philosophical dimension. It is drained of ideological content, to a degree actually remarkable in the literature of the period" (119). True enough, since Byron did not have clear or stable ideas about republicanism, radicalism or even freedom. According to Rutherford, the question did not deeply interest him because Byron was preoccupied with the Italian and Greek bids for independence and the issue seemed clear-cut enough: the people were rebelling against foreign oppressors (188-189). Being disillusioned by English politics and refusing to have any further involvement in it, "plans for an Italian insurrection offered him the chance of playing a more dramatic part, and the whole project caught his imagination"(188).[11]

As for his idea of freedom, Byron, according to Bone, "ignored any anatomy of the state of freedom itself ... the accent is on freedom as the opposite of actual limitation, physical, economic, or mental. It is not a question of what the content of the freedom once attained might be, but of the removal of palpable restriction" (166-167). However, for Byron, limitation and restriction are not imposed by foreign rulers only, but by the lack of unity and alliance among the Italians. This is a vein Shelley did not touch, but which Byron elaborated in the *Prophesy of Dante* and for which he was praised by Giuseppe Mazzini, one of the founding members of Italian national independence and a great admirer of Byron:

> ...Yes, yet the Ausonian soil
> Hath hearts, and heads, and arms, and hosts to bring
> Against Oppression; but how vain the toil,
> While still Division sows the seeds of woe
> And weakness, till the stranger reaps the spoil.
> Oh! my own beauteous land! so long laid low,
> So long the grave of thy own children's hopes,
> When there is but required a single blow
> To break the chain, yet – yet the Avenger stops,
> And Doubt and Discord step 'twixt thine and thee,
> And join their strength to that which with thee copes;
> What is there wanting then to set thee free,
> And show thy beauty in its fullest light?
> To make the Alps impassable; and we,
> Her sons, may do this with one deed – Unite!
> (ll. 131-145)

In this poem Byron uses the persona of Dante to exhort the Italians to unite

and rise against oppression. In this way, the call to action gains in effect as it is articulated not by any man but by Dante, "the Poet-Sire of Italy", as Byron calls him in the Dedication. Byron merges the past with the present in a collage of history, and along with the prophesy of doom and subjugation ("Thou must wither to each tyrant's will"), praises Italy which is once more painted in paradisiacal colours:

> Yes! thou so beautiful, shalt feel the sword,
> Thou Italy! so fair that Paradise,
> Revived in thee, blooms forth to man restored:
> Ah! must the sons of Adam lose it twice?
> (ll. 46-49)

Dante was a poet cruelly driven into exile by his own compatriots and Byron would have some reason to identify with him. In fact, one often wonders what exactly was the driving force behind Byron's action in Italy. Michael Foot poses this crucial question in *The Politics of Paradise:* if, in other words, Byron's predominant interest was political, stirred by the movement of Italian liberation, or if he was more concerned with his own exile, or with exile as a state that describes human existence (256). Foot hastens to answer that the dilemma remained unresolved in Byron's mind. This is likely, indeed, but, when talking of Byron, one should remember that any political commitment had to be subjectivised, byronised first; so we rarely see an objective, clear-cut response without the self flamboyantly entering the scene. In addition, his sense of internationalism is also very important, a result of his expatriate, ultra-nationalist stance. Byron had declared himself "a citizen of the World ... able to find a country elsewhere" (*BL* 245) when he was in trouble in Ravenna, and when he had exhausted his staying in Italy. Nevertheless, most of his political references or visions about the future Italy are filtered through his consciousness and through his histrionics; Italy comes to fit the geography of his mind, not the other way round.

A fine instance of this is *Childe Harold IV,* a poem which, despite its notoriously revolutionary character for its time, lacks "in visions of a transformed political order in Italy" (McGann, qtd. in Tanner 34). In this conglomerate of discordant images and interlacing of hope and hopelessness, current events are peripheral, as the aim is not to highlight particulars concerning Italian nationalism for instance, but "to philosophise current politics as part of a greater paradigm" (Kelsall 59). It is only natural that towards the end of the canto, Italy, allegedly the focus of the poem, is literally abandoned and what prevails to the end is the image of the ocean, symbolising eternity – and Byron roaming it. The same act of conjoining local events to universal ones can be seen in Byron's disenchantment at the failure of the Neapolitan risings. The failure is granted dimensions of a world tragedy: "But the Neapolitans have betrayed themselves and all the World, and those who would have given their blood for Italy can now

only give her their tears" (qtd. in Quennell 603-604).[12]

I think that Byron's pungent remark reveals his bitter disillusionment with his own incurable Romantic idealism, rather than his anger towards the insurgents. This is, after all, the character of Romantic poetry, that it produces and projects its own critique, that it is "torn apart by its helpless intelligence" (Levinson 48). The romanticisation of Italian politics, perpetrated by Shelley's and Byron's poetic and political discourse, tears Italy apart in both a figurative and literary sense – Italy as a sum of its parts, divided into congenial "Italies" – placing it in the realm of a precarious idealism while leaving the poetry-and/or-politics dilemma largely unresolved. As for Shelley's and Byron's poetic attitude towards Italian politics, this, in my view, is largely an effort to make Italy readable and writable in Romantic terms. Although both poets supported Italian nationalism, they never entirely disentangled themselves from an ambivalent ideological understanding of Italy as a problematic national and political entity. As Maura O'Connor rightly points out, the Romantic vision of Italy, despite its immense power in shaping English political consciousness, "never quite succeeded in seeing beyond the richly layered perceptions of the place to offer a way out of servitude and the oppression of the foreign rule" (54). The two expatriate poets would opt to see the *perception* of the place rather than the place itself, although in Romanticism the two entities are not always separable.

Notes

Shelley's poems are cited from *Shelley: Poetical Works* edited by T. Hutchinson and documented in the text with first references to each poem listing title and lines and with subsequent references citing lines. Shelley's prefaces to his poems are cited from the same edition and quoted in the text as *Prefaces*. Shelley's letters are cited from *Essays and Letters by Percy Bysshe Shelley* edited by Ernest Rhys, and *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Vol II: *Shelley in Italy* edited by Frederick L. Jones, quoted as Rhys *SL* or Jones *SL* respectively. Shelley's prose works are cited from *Shelley's Prose or The Trumpet of a Prophesy* edited by David Lee Clark, quoted as *Prose*. Mary Shelley's prefatory notes to Shelley's poems are cited from *Shelley: Poetical Works* edited by T. Hutchinson, quoted as *Notes*. Byron's poems and prefaces to poems are cited from *The Complete Poetical Works* Vol. II, IV edited by Jerome J. McGann and documented in the text with first references to each poem listing title and lines and with subsequent references citing lines. Byron's letters and journals are cited from *Lord Byron: Selected Letters and Journals* edited by Leslie A. Marchand, quoted as *BL*.

1. From a letter to Anabella Milbanke, in *Lord Byron: Selected Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie Marchand (London: John Murray, 1982), p. 83.
2. From "Sleep and Poetry" in *Selected Poems: John Keats* (London: Penguin, 1996), ll.124-125.
3. The "turn into history" approach that became apparent in Romantic studies in the 80's sought to amend similar "oversights" committed by the critical tradition by relocating the works of the Romantic era in their particular histories, assuming that the meaning(s) of a literary work reside to a large extent in its cultural, social and political contexts and circumstances. Inherent in the social process is spatial location, as geography

provides a dynamic context for the processes and practices that give shape and form to culture. The materialist emphasis has been particularly advocated by Jerome McGann in his book *The Romantic Ideology* (publ.1983) while three of the most well-known exponents of the so-called historical criticism are Marjory Levinson, Marilyn Butler and Paul Hamilton.

4. Shelley's decision to move to Italy was prompted by his failing health, financial difficulties and, as Marilyn Gaull characteristically notes, by "a sense of persecution provoked by his odd opinions and his domestic arrangements" (200). Byron moved to Italy in 1816, leaving behind a broken marriage and rumours of sexual scandals.
5. Even during the Napoleonic governments, opposition was growing among sections of the middle class and was evident in the formation of secret societies, the best known of which was the Carboneria. These societies did not operate under a nationalist banner, nor did they have clearly defined goals. Interest in the Italian national question grew after the 1830s, especially through the vision of unity of Giuseppe Mazzini and Camillo Benso Count Cavour. See Christopher Duggan's chapter "The Emergence of the National Question" in *A Concise History of Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994), esp. pp. 98-104.
6. From "Hamlet and his Problems" in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* by T. S. Eliot, p.100.
7. Louis Althusser differentiated his position on art from that proposed by Marxism, i.e. as having a class function —hence his famous statement "I do not rank real art among the ideologies, although art does have a quite particular and specific relationship with ideology". See his essay "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays,* trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 221. What is implied here is that art does not give us ideology in the form of knowledge but through its aesthetic effect enables us to "see", or rather "feel" something that alludes to reality, thus establishing a distance from ideology so as its operations can be seen at work. Macherey, on the other hand, contends that, through its operations, literature opens up ideology, exposes its contradictions and reveals its fissures. Both critics stress the place of literature within the material conditions of ideology and the state, but they diverge from the classic Marxist thesis of literature as a reflection of objective reality. See Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production,* trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978). For an interesting discussion on art and politics, see Theodor Adorno's "Reconciliation Under Duress" in *Aesthetics and Politics,* Ernst Bloch et al., trans. Ronald Taylor (London: NLB, 1977), pp. 151-177.
8. See in particular *Adonais* ll.433-437, *Julian and Maddalo* ll.54-59 and the *Fragment: to Italy.*
9. Shelley could hardly have described his mixed response towards Italy in a more succint way than he did in a letter to Leigh Hunt in 1818:

   > There are two Italies: one composed of the green earth & transparent sea and the mighty ruins of antient times, and aerial mountains, & the warm & radiant atmosphere which is interfused through all things. The other consists of the Italians of the present day, their works & ways. The one is the most sublime & lovely contemplation that can be conceived by the imagination of man; the other the most degraded disgusting and odious. (Jones *SL* 67)

   A traditional vision of Italy is reproduced through Shelley's lines, although in a more dramatic and critical way. According to Timothy Webb, here Shelley "appropriates a formula which had been used by Chateaubriand to distinguish between classical and

papal Rome and applies it to suggest another kind of fracture which seemed painfully evident to many travellers"(27).

10. Maura O'Connor, citing Byron's famous phrase, insists that there was no separating the two, namely fancy and fact or poetry and politics, in the minds of the English middle class as concerned the Italian cause. She also underlines the fact that "the active process of imagining helped create politics and political meanings in the first place" (9). In other words, politics are not to be seen as outside the forces of cultural imagination and production.
11. In an innovative assertion, Daryl S. Ogden claims that Byron was presented with an irreconcilable dilemma which was liberalism's dilemma: how could English liberals defend the ideal of nationalism in Italy and ignore that ideal elsewhere? In other words, "were he (and England) to treat Italy as an "Occidental" nation worthy of political recognition by London, or was he to regard Italy as a degenerate European entity reduced to "Oriental" status and thus deserving of imperial occupation and control by Vienna?"(116).
12. Byron also wrote two historical tragedies with political content: *Marino Faliero* and *The Two Foscari,* which embody his political ideas, this time infused in local Venetian history. According to Malcolm Kelsall, the two plays, despite their concretely Italian setting, are "home thoughts from abroad at a time of insurrection" (83) and a response to the liberal risings throughout Europe. Neither is concerned with the establishment of an Italian state; the main issue is that of resistance against the corruption of the heroes' own class. See Kelsall's chapter "Venice Preserved" in *Byron's Politics* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1987), pp. 82-119.

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Η «ποίηση της πολιτικής» στα ιταλικά έργα του Σέλλεϋ και του Βύρωνα

Μαρία Σχοινά

Το άρθρο σκιαγραφεί τη «ρομαντικοποίηση» της πολιτικής κατάστασης στην Ιταλία από το Σέλλεϋ και από το Βύρωνα, όπως αυτή παρουσιάζεται σε μερικά από τα «ιταλικά» τους ποιήματα και στις επιστολές τους. Εξετάζοντας το ιδεολογικό κλίμα της εποχής ταυτόχρονα με το πολιτικό σκηνικό της Ιταλίας και της Αγγλίας, γίνεται μια προσπάθεια να ερμηνευθεί ο χαρακτήρας της εμπλοκής του Σέλλεϋ και του Βύρωνα στα πολιτικά πράγματα της Ιταλίας στις αρχές του 1820. Το άρθρο θεωρεί ότι παρά τον ενθουσιασμό τους για τη δημιουργία ενός ελεύθερου Ιταλικού κράτους, οι δύο εκπατρισμένοι ποιητές υιοθετούν μια διφορούμενη στάση απέναντι στην Ιταλία και τη βλέπουν κατά βάθος σαν μια προβληματική εθνική και πολιτική οντότητα. Πιο συγκεκριμένα, η Ιταλία προβάλλεται μέσα από τον ποιητικό λόγο σαν ένα σύνολο αντιφάσεων και αναπαρίσταται μέσα στα γραπτά τους σαν ένα αισθητικό ιδεώδες, σαν ένας λατρευτός τόπος (= τοποθεσία αλλά ταυτόχρονα και ένας μεταβατικός, μεταφορικός «τόπος») από τον οποίο και μέσω του οποίου μπορούν να διατυπώσουν τις πολιτικές τους θέσεις σχετικά με την τυραννία και την ελευθερία. Τέλος, λαμβάνοντας υπόψη την επίμαχη φράση του Βύρωνα «η ποίηση της πολιτικής», υποστηρίζεται ότι η περίπτωση της Ιταλίας αποδεικνύει ότι δεν μπορεί να γίνει σαφής διαχωρισμός ανάμεσα στη Ρομαντική ποίηση και πολιτική, καθώς η αισθητική και η πολιτική της περιόδου τείνουν να είναι αλληλένδετες και όχι αλληλοαναιρούμενες.