

Shelley's Perception of Italian Art

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I realize that the title of my essay, despite its seeming plainness, is actually somewhat ambiguous. 'Shelley's Perception of Italian Art' conveys an inner contradiction, suggesting, on the one hand, a theme that is all too well known – the relationship between the Romantic poet and Italy – while hinting, on the other hand, at something that has not been so widely explored by the critics, namely the relationship between Shelley and the arts. And one might ask whether, in any case, it is relevant to explore such a relationship: in other words, did Italian painting, dance, music, architecture or sculpture really contribute to Shelley's aesthetic ideas and poetic theory, or was Shelley's perception of them simply the consequence of an already formulated poetical theory? I am not going to supply answers to all of this but will simply try to focus my attention on some of the poet's experiences, without hazarding any final conclusions.

Still, the more I analyse the phrase 'Italian art,' the more tantalising I find it. What did 'Italian art' include at the beginning of the nineteenth century? It would have been easier to say what it did *not* include. To the eager eyes of the foreign traveller Italy embodied the arts themselves, or – much the same thing – their most complete manifestation. For centuries, to the enchanted northern visitors who swarmed through the peninsula, Italy represented both a promise and a realization; to them the Mediterranean country was the place where they expected to meet and understand the very secrets of beauty as well as its sources: Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, Winckelmann, Goethe, Madame de Staël, Lady Morgan or Stendhal, all believed in the 'grand tour,' as it was to be called, as a touchstone to their aesthetic quest. Italy was an empowering experience whose effects enriched the intellect and released the imagination, a place where art, like nature, was offered in an extraordinary exhibition of richness and variety: from painting to sculpture, from archaeology to architecture, from drama to poetry, from ballet to music, everything was there to satisfy the visitor's cultural appetite.

All of this, however, came to the traveller in chaotic and disturbing profusion; works produced by ancient ages and peoples – Etruscan, Roman, Greek or Byzantine – were lined up together with those created in more recent times and by later generations: medieval, renaissance, modern. Here was a crazy multitude of ghosts simultaneously speak-

different languages and praying to different gods, a tower of Babel to the ear and to the eye. In this regard, in an article entitled 'Modern Italy,' published in 1829 in the *Westminster Review*, Mary Shelley observed that

The confused mixture of monuments of all ages disturbs the imagination [...]. No line of demarcation is drawn between such dissimilar objects, and yet there is no affinity between them. Modern Rome is the lineal descendant of the ancient city, yet it is impossible to trace the slightest likeness of one to the other; and they form a contrast rendered more striking by their being forcibly brought into comparison. Paganism and Christianity were not more hostile in the days of Julian the Apostate, than is now the spirit breathed from the works of art, children of various eras, that strew the area, which the walls of Rome inclosed.¹

Percy Bysshe would overcome this clashing juxtaposition between the modern and the ancient Italian cities by taking his inspiring walks at night, when the light of the moon would give new life to the antiquities while erasing the interfering shape of modernity.

Shelley arrived in Italy at a particularly favourable time, in March 1818, three years after the re-opening of the frontiers. The country had been off limits to British tourists from 1799 to 1815, and whoever tried to break through the barriers, hoping in a temporary truce, paid a high price, as in the case of Joseph Forsyth, the author of *On Antiquities, Arts and Letters in Italy* (one of Shelley's favourite guide books, together with Eustace's *A Classical Tour through Italy* (1815), Winckelmann *Geschichte der Kunst des Altherthums* (*Histoire de l'art ches les Ancients*, 1798, 1764), and, in a different way, Schlegel's *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, translated 1815). Forsyth, a devotee of the study of the Greek and Roman classics, arrived in Italy after the Amiens peace treaty, only to be arrested by the French on his return journey through Switzerland in 1803, and imprisoned for eleven years. His book, written during his confinement, was a brave attempt to convince the Napoleonic jury to free him on the basis of his 'classicità e italianità,' an attempt which failed so that poor Forsyth had to wait until 1814 for his freedom, only to die a year later.

¹ *The Mary Shelley Reader containing Frankenstein, Mathilda, Tales and Stories, Essays and Reviews, and Letters* B. T. Bennett & C. E. Robinson (eds.) (Oxford. Oxford University Press, 1990), 359.

The reopening of the borders was so welcome that an endless number of visitors wanted to benefit from this opportunity, in such large numbers as to displease the more unorthodox travellers. Byron's comments on his travelling countrymen are well known: 'this tribe of wretches;' Rome is 'pestilent with English.' An attitude that never changed, if we credit Shelley's letters to Mary in 1821 when, looking for a city where Byron and his exiled companion, Countess Guiccioli, could stay, he carefully avoided places where too many English people lived.² Shelley himself in Rome, in 1819, observes: 'The manners of the rich English are something wholly insupportable, & they assume pretences which they would not venture upon in their own country.'³

Both Byron and Shelley were going through a process of 'absorption' of Italy, as many British intellectuals had done before them;⁴ in many ways they had become what Mary Shelley would define in 1823 as 'the new sect of Anglo-Italians.' In an article published in the third issue of *The Liberal*, called 'The English in Italy,' she stated:

The preference accorded to Italy by the greater part of the emigrant English has given rise to a new race or sect among our countrymen, who have lately been dubbed Anglo-Italian. The Anglo-Italian has many peculiar marks which distinguish him from the mere traveller, or true John Bull. First he understands Italian, [...] the record of his travels is no longer confined, according to Lord Normanby's vivid description (in *The English in Italy*) 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 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. Upon the whole, the Anglo-Italians may be pronounced a well-informed, clever, and active race; they pity greatly those of their un-Italianized countrymen [...] and in compassion of their narrow experience

² On the Romantic travellers' reaction to Italy and to Rome in particular see T. Webb's article "'City of the Soul': English Romantic Travellers in Rome" in *Imagining Rome – British Artists and Rome in the Nineteenth Century* M. Liversidge and C. Edwards (eds.) (Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery in association with Merrell Holberton Publishers, London, 1996), 20–37.

³ *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley* 2 vols. (Oxford. Clarendon Press, 1964), 94.

⁴ On Shelley's intense response to Italy see Toni Cerutti "'Absorbing Italy": note sull'italianità di Shelley' in *Shelley e l'Italia* L. M. Crisafulli (ed.) (Napoli. Liguori Editore, 1998), 299–309.

have erected a literature calculated to disseminate among them a portion of that taste and knowledge acquired in the Peninsula. Lord Byron may be considered the father of the Anglo-Italian literature, and Beppo as being the first product of that school.⁵

Shelley, as a true member of this new race, arrived in Italy with a thousand expectations and hopes accumulated during the many years spent reading the classics and the Italian medieval and renaissance writers, and indeed during his stay he produced literary works that cannot be read without continuous reference to Italy. On his arrival, the Cathedral of Milan offered him a first example of the grand Italian architecture:

This Cathedral is a most astonishing work of art. It is built of white marble & and cut into pinnacles of immense height & the utmost delicacy of workmanship, & loaded with sculpture [...] is beyond anything I had imagined architecture capable of producing [...]. There is one solitary spot among these aisles behind the altar where the light of day is dim & yellow under the storied window which I have chosen to visit & read Dante there.⁶

His reading of Dante inside the cathedral demonstrates very significantly how resolute he was in attempting to reach, as he will say in *A Defence*, 'a harmony of the union of all.'⁷ Shelley was perceiving a mutual relationship between literature and its sister arts, or, in this case, between the medieval text and the gothic church as if, through a mysterious process of symbiosis, the mind that had created the building could help the reader get closer to the mind that had produced the written work, and *vice versa*.

This view of inner correspondences among the arts and between them and other social or human achievements, or indeed between the past and the modern world, would be cultivated to perfection, through the articulation of an organic theory of art which the poet would achieve in *A Defence of Poetry*, years later. The opera in Milan also helped him in his journey toward a sense of unity. Salvatore Viganò's ballet and his choreography of *Othello ossia il Moro di Venezia* was an exhilarating experience. Writing to Peacock on 6 April 1818, he says:

The opera itself was not a favourite [...]. But the Ballet, or rather a kind of melodrama or a pantomimic dance, was the most splendid spectacle I ever saw [...]. The manner in which language is

⁵ *The Mary Shelley Reader*, 343.

⁶ *Letters*, II, 7f.

⁷ P. B. Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry' in *Shelley's Prose* D. Lee Clark (ed.) Preface by H. Bloom (London. Fourth Estate, 1966), 286.

translated into gesture, the complete & full effect of the whole as illustrating the history in question, the unaffected self possession of each of the actors, even to the children, made this choral drama more impressive than I should have conceived possible. The story is *Othello* & strange to say it left no disagreeable impression.⁸

Shelley's enthusiasm here is far from mere hyperbole, since the Italian choreographer was certainly worthy of his praise. From 1791 to his death in 1821, Viganò's choral dramas had received the warmest appreciations: Humboldt and Foscolo, Rossini and Stendhal, all praised his works and spectacular representations for the magnificent choreography that held together, within a singular and unifying orchestration, masses of interpreters and *figuranti* engaged in a choral dance. This anticipated, in many ways, the idea of a total drama that Wagner elaborated many years later. Viganò, defined by his biographer 'gran poeta nell'arti mute, e di vivi quadri dipintore,'⁹ was in fact experimenting a new form of ballet where the neoclassical rules were beautifully fused with a romantic perception of space and movement. The pictorial *ensemble* and the *tableau vivant* that he created went together with an overpowering musical accompaniment. Viganò's *Prometheus*, staged in 1813, was a memorable ballet performed in many European theatres: performances which the Shelleys must surely have heard of. Viganò's *Prometheus* was a tragic-heroic dance whose epic representation was made even more grand by the opera score taken from the music of Beethoven, Haydn, Mozart and of Viganò.

Bearing this in mind, it would be scarcely surprising if Shelley, writing his own lyrical drama, *Prometheus Unbound*, thought back to Viganò's ballet,¹⁰ whose high symbolism, lightness of movement, and operatic music had struck his imagination: qualities which, perhaps significantly, also characterize his own 'operatic' poem, as *Prometheus Unbound* has been defined. Be it as it may, Viganò's choral dramas were

⁸ *Letters*, II, 4.

⁹ Carlo Ritorni, *Commentarii della vita e delle opere coreodrammatiche di Salvatore Viganò* (Milano, 1838), 4, 19.

¹⁰ On Viganò as a possible source for Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, a very interesting article by Stuart Curran has just come to my attention - 'The Political Prometheus' published in *Spirits of Fire. English Romantic Writers and Contemporary Historical Methods* G. A. Rosso and D. P. Watkins (eds.) (London and Toronto. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990), 260-283.

seen by the Shelleys over and over again during their short stay in Milan. Mary, whose enthusiasm for Viganò was just as great as Percy's, records in her *Journal* five evenings spent at the Opera seeing at least two of Viganò's ballets: *Othello ossia il Moro di Venezia* and *La spada di Kenneth*.¹¹

At a certain point during his journey, Shelley's notes on what he saw of Italian art became somehow more articulate and aware, not in terms of a specialized 'art critique' but as a sort of circumstantial report meant to convey a unity of design and a coherence of taste. This account of his impressions and remarks may be found, as is well known, in the letters he sent to Peacock. In fact, on 15 December 1818, nine months after his arrival in Italy, Thomas Love Peacock had written to Shelley in the following terms:

Since I wrote last I have received your two letters from Bologna and Rome. Your descriptions of paintings are truly delightful; they make pictures more visible than I thought they could be made through the medium of words. I read them to everyone who calls on me – not many to be sure; but the general pleasure they give convinces me that if you bring home a journal full of such descriptions of the remains of art, and of the scenery of Italy, they will attract a very great share of public attention, and will be read with intense interest by every one *che sente il bello*, but who, like myself, is rooted like a tree on the banks of the one bright river.¹²

It is superfluous to say how flattered Shelley must have been to receive such praise (and an implicit promise to collect his letters from Italy for publication) from a friend with whom he had shared in England lessons in Italian and endless readings of Italian and classic authors. If, in the back of his mind, he had probably cherished since the beginning of his journey the idea of keeping a journal, as Forsyth or Eustace had done – a diary able to shape his contemporaries' taste and views – Peacock's letter certainly gave more relevance and potential substance to his

¹¹ See *The Journals of Mary Shelley* Vol. I (1814–1822) P. R. Feldman and D. Scott-Kilvert (eds.) (Oxford. Clarendon Press, 1987), 203, 205–207. Sunday 5th, Tuesday 7th, Monday 20th, Tuesday 21st, Wednesday 29th April 1818. On Viganò's choral dramas Mary wrote also to the Hunts: 'The corps de ballet is excellent and they throw themselves into groups fit for a sculptor [*sic*] to contemplate. The music of the ballet was very fine and the gestures striking. The dances of many performers which are so ill executed with us are here graceful to the extreme.' *The Journals*, 203, footnote 2.

¹² *Letters*, II, 57, n. 4.

reactions to the Italian artistic and natural world. He was so taken with such a plan that his subsequent letters to Peacock are incredibly meticulous and detailed, as the letter from Naples, dated February 25, 1819, or that from Rome, dated March 23, 1819, clearly demonstrate. This plan may also explain the forethought that accompanies his remarks, aware as he was of his own inadequacy as an art critic. Thus, we may understand his frequent recourse to sentences such as 'It is a scene by which expression is overpowered: which words cannot convey,' or 'the tourists tell you all about these things & I am afraid of stumbling upon their language when I enumerate what is so well known,' or again, 'I have said what I feel without entering into any critical discussions [...].' On the other hand, he probably thought that he was making an effort of some value if, on several occasions, writing to other friends in England, he referred back to his own remarks to Peacock as a more detailed source. In his letter to Thomas Jefferson Hogg from Naples, on 21 December 1818, he justifies his schematic report saying: 'I consider the letters to Peacock as nearly the same things as a letter addressed to you, as I know you see him at certain intervals, and they contain nothing but long accounts of my peregrinations which it would be wearisome to transcribe [...];'¹³ while to Leigh Hunt in a letter dated 20 August, 1819, he says 'I have seen too little of Italy & of Pictures. Perhaps Peacock has shown you some of my letters to him [...].'¹⁴

Unfortunately, the death of Shelley's son William, put an end to this and other plans. After June, 7, 1819, the epistolary exchange with Peacock almost came to an end, and Shelley's attention switched towards other interests and other worries. In his subsequent letters, he deals with more private matters, with politics and, overall, with his own literary work. Shelley's visits to the art galleries, however, did not cease in 1819, on the contrary, over the next three years, whenever he had a chance, he went to the Uffizi where he spent hours in thoughtful contemplation. What really did change was his perspective: his considerations, from being critical and descriptive, became more introspective and intimate. A good example of this, was his response to the Niobe sculpture. In a letter from Pisa to Thomas Jefferson Hogg, dated April 20, 1820, he tells

¹³ *Ibid.*, II, 68.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 111f.

his friend about the winter spent in Florence and about the birth of his son Percy, the only child he was left with:

I spent every sunny day to the study of the gallery there; the famous Venus, the Minerva, the Apollino – and more than all, the Niobe and her children, are there. No production of sculpture, not even the Apollo, ever produced on me so strong an effect as this Niobe. Doubtless you have seen casts of it.¹⁵

And, a year later, on 31 July, 1821, in a letter from Florence to Mary, who was at Bagni di Lucca with the baby Percy, he writes:

I spent three hours this morning principally in the contemplation of the Niobe, & of a favourite Apollo; all worldly thoughts & cares seem to vanish from before the sublime emotions such spectacles create: and I am deeply impressed with the great difference of happiness enjoyed by those who live at a distance from these incarnations of all that the finest minds have conceived of beauty, & those who can resort to their company at pleasure [...].¹⁶

Here Shelley's reactions are twofold. On the one hand, we hear a man who speaks of an object of art, the Niobe marble, from his heart, and sees it as a representation, or, we should say, as a projection of his own parental sorrow at the death of his children; on the other hand, we hear the voice of the poet himself who approaches the sculpture as an embodiment of his ideas of art and beauty. In his *Notes on Sculptures in Rome and Florence* (1819) on the Niobe, we read:

The countenance which is the consummation of feminine majesty and loveliness, beyond which the imagination scarcely doubts that it can conceive anything, that master-piece of the poetic harmony of marble, expresses other feelings. There is embodied a sense of the inevitable and rapid destiny which is consummating around her as if it were already over. It seems as if despair and beauty had combined and produced nothing but the sublime loveliness of grief.¹⁷

Here, the man and the poet have become one. If the Niobe had attracted his attention, as his remarks to Mary suggest, because what he saw was a mother desperately trying to protect her only surviving child from imminent death, at the same time he knew that he was discussing precisely the sculpture elected by the neoclassical school as the prototype of perfect beauty.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, II, 185f.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 313. Shelley saw the Niobe marble (by Scopas 395–350 B.C.) in the Uffizi.

¹⁷ *Shelley's Prose*, 352.

Let us try to examine this matter a little further. Going back to Shelley's letter to Peacock from Rome, dated 23 March 1819, one sees how he presents an endless list of things and places that he had visited and he seems utterly overcome by his own intellectual and emotional responses to all. Rome, he says, appeared to him as 'the inexhaustible mine of thought & feeling.'¹⁸ What impressed him, in particular, was classical Rome, the temples, arches, sculptures and other signs left by a past that he had learned to love. If his coming to Italy was obviously an escape from an alien homeland, it may also be taken as a spiritual pilgrimage to what he considered the birthplace of civilization and culture. His reading of Schlegel's *Lectures* while crossing the British channel announced his state of mind, reinforced by his daily reading of Winckelmann's *History of Ancient Art* from December 24, 1818 to March 14, 1819 while he was in Naples, visiting Paestum and Herculaneum, and then in Rome.¹⁹ The grace and the harmony that Winckelmann celebrated in the Greek art of Italy, find in the English Romantic poet's own remarks an interesting echo. In the letter to Peacock just quoted, he recognized the Greeks as 'our masters & creators, the Gods whom we should worship.' The aesthetic principles that moved his admiration are finely registered in his *Notes on the Sculptures in Rome and Florence*. But it is precisely the Niobe sculpture, together with Laocoon, that he appreciated most and to which he dedicated most of the attention in his *Notes*. In both cases, Shelley was captured by the pervasive grief that the two sculptures express, a deep, agonizing pain that was, however, presented in a controlled, almost restrained way. Besides, what he already knew about the Niobe marble, he must also have heard about Laocoon, the marble group discovered in 1506, in Nero's *Domus Aurea*, which had influenced Raffaello and Andrea del Sarto, and which Michelangelo had used for his anatomy study of muscle in a state of extreme tension. Laocoon was also celebrated by Pliny who, in his *Historia Naturalis*, a book dear to Shelley, described it as a work superior to any other painting or bronze.

To Shelley, as we read in his *Notes*, Laocoon expresses 'physical suffering, against which he pleads with an upraised countenance of despair,

¹⁸ *Letters*, II, 89.

¹⁹ See Mary's *Journal*, 246-253.

and appeals with a sense of its injustice, seems the predominant and overwhelming emotion, and yet there is a nobleness in the expression and a majesty that dignifies torture.²⁰ It is precisely this noble stoicism that Shelley admired, this ability of the Greek artist to portray physical pain and extreme suffering while preserving and communicating the human dignity of the subjects. According to Shelley, in fact, the skill of the artists does not lie in the portrayal or staging of violence and pain as they really are or as they are really felt, but in holding back the emotional and physical tension in order not to be prey to chaos and disorder, that freeze the emotions rather than release them. He called for an art able to escape from the paralysing dimension of wild fears and blind terrors in order to leave room for the perception of an inner life, the reality of the soul and of the mind. True beauty, therefore, would spring from a just balance between the energy released and the energy retained, from bodily representation and spiritual insight. This idea of beauty – made of grace, composure and dignity as well as of passion and power – was partly derived from classical art and literature and in modern times was well articulated by Winckelmann, who cited the Laocoon and Niobe as the highest examples of heroism and restraint in art: ‘Niobe’s pain,’ he says, ‘is transmuted into an astonished stiffening, Laocoon’s agony into the stoical repression of the outcry of his entire being.’²¹ It is not by chance, that for the two marble groups, Winckelmann used the metaphor of the sea whose depth remains calm even when its surface becomes rough.

Shelley’s notes differ in many ways from Winckelmann’s remarks, however. He does not seem, for instance, so much taken by the two adult figures, Laocoon and Niobe, as by the representation of their children: ‘Their features and attitudes,’ he observes of Laocoon, ‘indicate the excess of the filial love and devotion that animates them and swallows up all other feelings,’²² while Niobe’s child is seen instead as a

child terrified [...] at the strange destruction of all its kindred - has fled to its mother and hiding its head in the fold of her robe and casting up one arm as in a passionate appeal for defence from her, where it never before could have sought in vain, seems in the marble to have scarcely suspended the motion of her terror as though conceived to be yet in the act of arrival.²³

²⁰ *Shelley’s Prose*, 344.

²¹ The English translation is mine. I have here used the following edition: Winckelmann, *Il bello nell’arte. Scritti sull’arte antica* a cura di F. Pfister (Torino, 1988), 29.

²² *Shelley’s Prose*, 344.

²³ *Ibid.*, 352.

This shift in focus may be explained in part, by the attention that the poet had always given to the weak and to the powerless. The suffering and the pathos, that Winckelmann almost erases, are at the centre of Shelley's attention.

Now if one compares Shelley's remarks on the plastic arts with his poetical output, once again interesting coincidences emerge. *The Cenci* proves this in an exemplary way. In the preface, Shelley warns the reader about the 'sad reality' of the story that he is going to represent, but soon after, he states that

This story of the Cenci is indeed eminently fearful and monstrous: anything like a dry exhibition of it on the stage would be insupportable. The person who would treat such a subject must increase the ideal, and diminish the actual horror of the events, so that the pleasure which arises from the poetry which exists in these tempestuous sufferings and crimes may mitigate the pain of the contemplation of the moral deformity from which they spring.²⁴

The tragedy is developed accordingly. Count Cenci's rape of his daughter will not be staged: on the contrary, the two characters will meet only twice in the course of the whole tragedy, just enough to show and portray Beatrice's stubbornness and generosity, gentleness and isolation. Nevertheless, the tension between the two characters is always there, intense and painful. But all we are allowed to see is a highly stylized representation of the sufferings which Beatrice's body, and even more so her psyche, are enduring.

One could offer many other examples, but let me speed towards my conclusion by spending a few words on another relevant aspect of Shelley's response to Italian art. I am referring to his reactions to 16th and 17th Century Italian painting. Again, for reasons of time (and space), I have to limit myself to a particular example, that is, to his visit to Bologna which had occurred earlier. I choose Bologna not because of localism or parochialism, but because it seems to me that his remarks then summarize very well what he would say later on about paintings in Florence, Rome and Naples. Shelley's stay in Bologna took place at an early stage of his journey through Italy, in November 1818. The considerations he expressed during his stay there, however, coincide very much with what I have discussed so far. In a letter to Peacock, dated 9 November, he describes

²⁴ *Shelley: Poetical Works*, Thomas Hutchinson (ed.), new ed. corr. G. M. Matthews (London. Oxford University Press, 1970), 276.

his visits to churches and galleries and goes into great detail about the paintings that he saw. He mentions, among others, Guido Reni, Correggio, Raffaello and Guercino. His praise is for Correggio, whose *Christ Beatified* he finds 'inexpressibly fine,' and for Guido Reni and Raffaello. He discusses Reni's *Murder of the Innocents*, *Jesus Christ Crucified*, *Samson and the Philistines*, *Fortune and Love*, and a *Madonna Lattante*; and he refers to Raffaello's renowned *St. Cecilia*.²⁵ Strangely enough, he fails to mention the Carracci brothers, although Annibale Carracci will be mentioned later on, during his stay in Rome. Even in this case, Shelley may be said to have been particularly fortunate, since many of the works that he listed to Peacock had only been returned to Italy three years before his arrival. Raffaello's *Santa Cecilia*, for instance, was brought back from France, together with many other works of art stolen by the French Napoleonic army, thanks to Canova's mission to Paris in 1815. Obviously aware of the admiration that the painting had aroused over the centuries, he may have been acquainted with Vasari's reminiscences of it – such as the story about Francesco Francia, who was employed by Raffaello to oversee the transportation to and display of his *Santa Cecilia* in Bologna, and who, when he discovered its superb beauty on arrival, died from sheer emotion. Shelley too describes it in almost ecstatic terms:

You forget that it is a picture as you look at it, and yet is most unlike any of those things which we call reality. It is of the inspired and ideal kind, and seems to have been conceived & executed in a similar state of feeling to that which produced among the ancients those perfect specimens of poetry sculpture which are the baffling models of succeeding generations. There is an unity & perfection in it of an incommunicable kind.²⁶

The poet goes on to enthuse about her 'dark eloquent eyes lifted up,' her 'chestnut hair flung back' and her 'countenance as it were calmed by the depth of its passion & rapture,' 'she is listening to the music of heaven,' 'at her feet lie instruments of music broken & unstrung.'²⁷ Santa Cecilia, known as the patroness of music and art, is perfectly represented by the poet's words. The painting, on which Guido Reni shaped his own ascetic figures, is traditionally recognized as the embodiment of Raffaello's neo-

²⁵ *Letters*, II, 49–53.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

platonian view, and the best well known example of Renaissance 'idealisation,' joining, as it does, through a simple human countenance, earth and heaven. Reading this judgement one may ask if Shelley ever had the chance to read what Raffaello wrote in a letter to Baldassar Castiglione (talking of *Galatea*), in 1516, where he said that the perfect image comes from

una certa Idea che mi viene nella mente [...] per dipingere una bella, mi bisognerà veder più belle, con questa condizione, che, si trovasse meco a far scelta del meglio. Ma essendo carestia e di buoni giudici, et di belle donne, io mi servo di certa Idea che mi viene nella mente.²⁸

This certainly agreed with Shelley's platonian idea of an *epi-psyche* which could come to life from a dream.

Despite his admiration, Shelley cannot refrain – as in *A Defence of Poetry* – from considering painting an art with a shorter life span than literature or even sculpture; an art however, whose beauty will be retained and reproduced by the work of other artists (and other arts) who have experienced it, and so he concludes:

The material part indeed of these works must perish, but they survive in the mind of man, & the remembrances connected with them are transmitted from generation to generation. The poet embodies them in his creation, the systems of philosophers are modelled to gentleness by their contemplation, opinion that legislator is infected with their influence; men become better & wiser, and the unseen seeds are perhaps thus sown which shall produce a plant more excellent even than (than) from which they fell.²⁹

What I find fascinating in this quotation is Shelley's anticipation of his own poetic theory as it will be articulated in two years' time, in the *Defence*. He lays here the foundation for an organic approach to art and knowledge, an approach made of correspondences and unity, of aesthetic beauty and social improvement. In this perspective Guido Reni's and Raffaello's paintings become the blossoms sprouting from a plant that has grown from the seeds of Petrarch's and Dante's writings, and will in their turn lead to the flowering of other arts in an endless line of

²⁸ G. Vasari, 'La vita di Raffaello' in *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori (1550-1568)* G. Milanesi (ed.) (Firenze, 1878), XLVII.

²⁹ *Letters*, 53.

progression and civilization. From this point of view, Shelley is far from sharing a rigidly neo-classical view, as well as a nostalgically romantic view, Winckelmann's, say, or Schlegel's. Shelley's Greek and Roman, or Medieval and Renaissance worlds are not lost in a golden past, but are living spirits politically at work here and now: living forces which Italy contains and preserves, but only to consign them to the better world of tomorrow.

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