



Italian Impromptus: A Study of P.B. Shelley's Writings in Italian with an Annotated Edition

by Valentina Varinelli, Milano, LED Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto, 2022, 278 pp.

Elisa Cozzi

To cite this article: Elisa Cozzi (2024) Italian Impromptus: A Study of P.B. Shelley's Writings in Italian with an Annotated Edition, *European Romantic Review*, 35:1, 187-191, DOI: [10.1080/10509585.2024.2307169](https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2024.2307169)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2024.2307169>



Published online: 28 Feb 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

- The National, Sufjan Stevens, Phoebe Bridgers, Taylor Swift, perf. *First Two Pages of Frankenstein*. 4AD, 2023. CD.
- Ngai, Sianne. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Cute, Interesting*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2012. Print.
- Readings, Bill. *The University in Ruins*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996. Print.
- Reynolds, Simon. “Ecstasy Is a Science: Techno-Romanticism.” *Stars Don’t Stand Still in the Sky: Music and Myth*. Ed. Karen Kelly and Evelyn McDonell. New York: New York UP, 1999. 199–205. Print.
- Sawayama, Rina, perf. “Frankenstein.” *Hold the Girl*. Dirty Hit, 2022. CD.
- Scofield, Tracy and David Tanner, exec. producers. *The Frankenstein Chronicles*. Perf. Sean Bean and Richie Campbell. ITV/Netflix, 2015–17. Television.
- Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein* (1831). Ed. Johanna M. Smith. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2016. Print.
- Slusser, George. “The Frankenstein Barrier.” *Fiction 2000: Cyberpunk and the Future of Narrative*. Ed. George Slusser and Tom Shippey. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2002. 46–71. Print.
- Stein, Atara. *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004. Print.
- Swift, Taylor, perf. “the lakes.” *folklore*. Republic Records, 2020. CD.
- Winner, Langdon. *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought*. Cambridge: MIT P, 1977. Print.
- Winterson, Jeannette. *Frankissstein*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2019. Print.
- Wright, James, and Alexis Luko, eds. *Monstrosity, Identity and Music: Mediating Uncanny Creatures from Frankenstein to Videogames*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2022. Print.

Mark A. McCutcheon
Athabasca University, Athabasca, AB, Canada
 mcutcheon@athabascau.ca

© 2024 Mark A. McCutcheon
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2024.2307167>



Italian Impromptus: A Study of P.B. Shelley’s Writings in Italian with an Annotated Edition, by Valentina Varinelli, Milano, LED Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto, 2022, 278 pp.

In the winter of 1827, the Pisan Lungarno appeared to Giacomo Leopardi, in a much quoted passage from his correspondence, as “a neighborhood full of world, full of carriages and pedestrians: one can hear ten or twenty languages being spoken, and a most beautiful sun shines bright”; to the many brilliant sights and attractions of the town, Leopardi concluded, “is added the beauty of the language” (Leopardi 2: 1400).¹ The landscape of the city is both cosmopolitan and steeped in the purity of the Tuscan dialect, the language of Dante—a linguistic combination reflected in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s literary production after his move to Pisa in January 1820. Shelley’s Arabic, Spanish, Greek, and German translations are dated from the period, as well as an extensive corpus of Italian writings, encompassing original poetry, prose, translations, self-translations, and correspondence that had hitherto never been collated, edited, and discussed in their entirety.

When he was not in the company of Italians, Shelley’s Pisan acquaintances included foreigners who were fluent Italian speakers, writers, and translators. One of them, the Irish Catholic writer John Taaffe, left an illuminating account of his self-taught Italian-language experiments in Pisa in his unpublished autobiography. Taaffe claimed that, in order to “attain correction in Italian,” he “had recourse to a strange expedient—no less than begetting a book in that language—which my friend [Lazzaro] Papi had printed at Lucca—and since it was on an interesting subject it was in the hands of every one”; the reviewers,

Taaffe congratulated himself, “seemed to take it for granted that the book was written by an Italian” (Taaffe, “My Life” 71). Taaffe’s anonymous Italian publication does not survive, and he is now remembered (if at all) as the author of the first critical commentary of Dante’s *Comedy* in English and for his role in the so-called Masi affair.² In a milieu where, as Byron put it, “they talk Dante—write Dante—and think and dream Dante at this moment ... to an excess, which would be ridiculous, but that he deserves it,” Taaffe’s interest in the Italian *Sommo Poeta* is not an isolated occurrence (*Byron’s Letters and Journals* 8: 39). More unusual are his earnest attempts, as a non-native speaker, to publish in Italian and reach a wide readership. Shelley’s motives behind his engagement with the language are comparable to Taaffe’s. Indeed, as Valentina Varinelli argues in her meticulously researched study, Shelley’s Italian corpus testifies to his “attempts to reach an Italian audience and promote his political and artistic views abroad after failing to attract readers at home” (14). Like Taaffe’s, Shelley’s Italian writings, as they emerge from Varinelli’s much needed reappraisal, are a manifestation of the polyphony and plurilingualism vividly captured in Leopardi’s description of Pisa; they transcend national and linguistic boundaries and eschew the overused “Anglo-Italian” label, as a quintessential example of the “truly cosmopolitan dimension” of Romanticism (36). These are the premises of Varinelli’s “revisionary interpretation” of the poet’s neglected Italian production (14).

Italian Impromptus is neatly divided into two halves: the first consists of Varinelli’s critical discussion, articulated into six chapters, and the second is taken up by her annotated edition of Shelley’s writings in Italian rigorously edited from Shelley’s holograph manuscripts (or, when the originals are not extant, from the earliest available copies or transcripts). Firsthand access to the entire corpus of the edited texts offers a nuanced and comprehensive picture of Shelley’s progress with Italian, and the reader is encouraged, throughout, to flip back and forth between the two halves of the book to follow Varinelli’s lucid engagement with the texts. The structure reflects a duality of purpose, where literary criticism and editorial scholarship come together to offer a reappraisal of Shelley’s Italian writings considered as both material texts and vessels of meaning.

The first chapter (“Introduction: P.B. Shelley and the Italian Language”) takes a step back from Pisa and charts the progress of Shelley’s language learning resources and Italian reading practices in England (from around 1813, when, according to Hogg, Shelley’s “favourite studies were the Italian language and literature”) and during the first wandering years of his exile, up to the permanent move to Pisa (15–16). Shelley’s earliest surviving Italian piece (a letter to Marianna Dionigi) dates to late December 1819, and 1820 marks the effective starting point for Varinelli’s study, as it coincides with the moment when Shelley switched “from a passive to an active use of Italian,” which went from being a “language of reading” to “his principal means of communication in society” (24). The introduction also offers a helpful review of the meager editorial and critical history of Shelley’s Italian writings, which have suffered from being routinely excluded from editions, decontextualized, and edited by scholars with insufficient knowledge of the language. When discussed at all, they have been usually presented as mere “eccentricities” or constrained by biographical interpretations (27). Varinelli nails her methodological colors to the mast from the very beginning: her “reassessment of Shelley’s Italian writings started from an independent examination of the textual and material evidence, i.e. the extant manuscripts” (30). Despite their often-fragmentary state, Shelley’s Italian writings are no mere “curiosities” or “by-products” of his major poetry; on the contrary, as Varinelli goes on to show, they are “self-conscious experiments with the language and its literary tradition that stand in an organic relationship to the rest of his oeuvre” while being motivated by practical aims such as reaching an audience and furthering political ideals (35).

Shelley's "Sgricci Review," the subject of chapter 2, provides a compelling example of how his Italian writings "stimulated Shelley's metapoetic and metalinguistic reflection" and acted as the seedbeds of ideas later explored elsewhere (35). The unfinished review of a performance of the tragedy *Ettore* by the *improvvisatore* Tommaso Sgricci, titled "Sulla morte," is his earliest surviving holograph work in Italian. Varinelli's deft close reading identifies unmistakable parallels between the review's exploration of themes such as "the nature of poetic inspiration," "the role of imagination," "the social function of the poet," and those in Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry," composed shortly after (53). As a form inherently designed for publication, the Sgricci review also testifies to Shelley's intention to find an Italian audience: as Varinelli argues, Shelley wrote "from the fictionalised perspective of an Italian" and alluded to the cause of Italian unification in spelling out the poet's civic role as a harbinger of political change (55). Varinelli's insightful recovery of the review's unacknowledged function as a testing ground for Shelley's "Defence" sets the tone for all her subsequent readings of his Italian writings, where meticulous attention to the texts is always accompanied by broader considerations of their place in Shelley's oeuvre.

Chapters 3 and 4 are dedicated, respectively, to Shelley's self-translations and translations. Varinelli applies an "evidence-based, theoretically-informed" approach to Shelley's practice as a self-translator, distancing herself from biographical encumbrances and paying a keen attention to Shelley's handling of Italian grammar, syntax, orthography, punctuation, and vocabulary across his drafts (64). Varinelli's ear for the idiosyncrasies of Shelley's Italian, its inconsistencies, errors, "intensification" of style and register, and proto-Joycean coinage of word compounds, reveals a language in flux, both literary and colloquial, where Latinate diction coexists with echoes of Tuscan speech and dialect (70). Fragmentary translations from *Epipsychidion*, *Prometheus Unbound*, *The Revolt of Islam*, and "To S[idmouth] and C[astlereagh]" are discussed alongside Shelley's complete Italian rendition of "Ode to Liberty" ("Ode alla Libertà"), here published for the first time in its two distinct surviving versions. Particularly illuminating is the example of a "creative transformation" Varinelli detects in the translation of the "Ode," where Shelley chooses a different verb in reference to Napoleon: from "pursued" in the original, to "vinto" in the Italian translation, meaning "defeated" (71). Not only does this respond to "a change in historical circumstances," indicating that Shelley heard of the death of Napoleon after composing the original English ode and before translating it, but it also helps Varinelli date the Italian translation more accurately. Different drafts, with their cancellations, corrections, and revisions, illustrate the practical aspects of translation as a "creative process" whose products are "sketches for a literary rendition worthy of publication" (64). Implicit in what Varinelli calls the "unfulfilled potential" of these translations is, once more, Shelley's "revolutionary aim," especially in the case of "Ode alla Libertà," and his ultimate intention to lend public support to a nascent Risorgimento (86). Shelley's theory of translation as a "recreative process" emerges from the discussion of his verse translations in the following chapter. What Varinelli terms "Shelley's Anglo-Italian Doppeldicht," or "double poem," known as "Goodnight" and "Buona Notte," is taken as a transitional text in Shelley's Italian corpus (and in *Italian Impromptus* as a whole), as it brings together the practice of translation and original composition. Dismissed by Shelley as "An Italian impromptu of mine," "Buona Notte" and its English version evolved autonomously as two distinct poems (90). Varinelli's minute comparison of the extant versions and their editorial history provides the ideal ground for a persuasive analysis of Shelley's "view of translation as a rebirth of the source poem in the target language that ... can be fulfilled only by poets" (99).

Shelley's original compositions in Italian, discussed in chapter 5, date to 1821 and amount to fragmentary verses in terza rima and a short prose fable, titled "Una Favola." Anyone with

experience of Shelleyan manuscripts will know that Shelley's average hand is messy. The drafts of his Italian verses, however, are in a whole different league. One is reminded of Don Quixote's thoughts on translations as "setting to view the wrong side of a piece of tapestry, where, though the figures are seen, they are full of ends and threads, which obscure them, and are not seen with the smoothness and evenness of the right side" (Cervantes 879). Although they are not translations, Shelley's Italian verse fragments in terza rima equally expose the knots and threads of a mind translating itself and betray the frustration of channeling poetic language in a foreign tongue. We are in good hands, however, since Varinelli has the uncanny ability to cajole meaning out of the most tormented and illegible drafts. From her unspooling of Shelley's scrawls, the fragments come to life in the shape of a haunting "ghost of a poem" with a distinctly "Shelleyan quality" that contains in embryo ideas and imagery developed in the coterminous "A Defence of Poetry," *Adonais*, and *Epipsychidion* (105, 112). The same goes for "Una Favola," an allegorical prose fable (the only example of this genre in Shelley's oeuvre), which Varinelli reads as a possible "apprenticeship" for "The Triumph of Life" (121).

The sixth and last chapter is devoted to Shelley's epistolary prose in Italian addressed to Marianna Dionigi, Teresa Viviani, and Teresa Guiccioli. Only fragments and three complete letters survive, and the latter two, addressed to Guiccioli, constitute Shelley's last extant pieces of writing in Italian. As such, Varinelli contends, they showcase a particular proficiency with the language and testify to Shelley's intervention in Italian affairs, as they proved effective in persuading the Gambas to move to Pisa after they had been expelled from Ravenna for their Carbonari activities. Once again, Varinelli's reading of Shelley's Italian letters steers clear of biographical interpretations and fetishization, focusing on their aspect as material objects in tandem with the "stylistic and linguistic features of the text" in the context of the epistolary conventions of the time (135). As in the case of Shelley's other Italian writings, his correspondence reveals surprising metalinguistic reflections through which he strived to articulate his relationship with the foreign language and defy the constraints that it imposed.

Italian Impromptus ends a little abruptly with chapter 6, after which Varinelli's critical edition of the texts, preceded by her "Textual Notes," takes center stage. Varinelli's extensive experience as a co-translator of Shelley's poetry and prose into Italian for the superb two-volume Mondadori edition for the Meridiani series (2018) complements her fine English translations of Shelley's Italian writings interspersed throughout the book and appended to each text in the annotated edition. A concluding chapter or a coda would have been welcome, perhaps considering Shelley's foray into Italian as part of a wider Italophone current in the extended Pisan Circle and its wider implications. By giving the floor to the texts, however, Varinelli encourages her readers to fend for themselves and finally get to grips with Shelley's much-neglected Italian works—and this reviewer thoroughly approves.

Notes

1. "una contrada piena di mondo, piena di carrozze e di pedoni: vi si sentono parlare dieci o venti lingue, vi brilla un sole bellissimo . . . A tutte le altre bellezze si aggiunge la bella lingua."
2. *A Comment on the Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri* (1822).

References

- Byron, George Gordon. *Byron's Letters and Journals*. Vol. 8. Ed. Leslie A. Marchand. London: John Murray, 1978. Print.
- Cervantes, Miguel de. *Don Quixote*. Trans. Charles Jarvis. Ed. E. C. Riley. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.

- Leopardi, Giacomo. *Epistolario*. Vol 2. Ed. Franco Brioschi and Patrizia Landi. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998. Print.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Opere Poetiche*. Ed. Francesco Rognoni and Valentina Varinelli. I Meridiani. Milano: Mondadori, 2018. Print.
- . *Teatro, Prose e Lettere*. Ed. Francesco Rognoni and Valentina Varinelli. I Meridiani. Milano: Mondadori, 2018. Print.
- Taaffe, John. *A Comment on the Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. London: John Murray, 1822. Print.
- . “My Life.” 1845. MS 19uu. Honnold/Mudd Special Collections. The Claremont Colleges Lib., Claremont, CA.

Elisa Cozzi
The Queen’s College, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK
 elisa.cozzi@ell.ox.ac.uk

© 2024 Elisa Cozzi
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2024.2307169>

