**Shelley’s Pisan Door Fragment**

In January 1820, the Shelleys left their temporary home in Florence and arrived in Pisa. For over two years they remained in, or stayed near, Pisa. During this time, Shelley composed some of his greatest works, including his elegy on John Keats, *Adonais*, and ‘The Defence of Poetry’. Richard Holmes, in his 1974 biography of the poet, described Pisa as ‘the nearest thing Shelley ever had to a home anywhere since leaving Field Place’ (his childhood home in Sussex, England). Certainly Shelley had moved from location to location, never settling for long, and so Pisa represented a distinct change in this lifestyle. He cultivated an important circle of friends in Pisa, which included Edward Trelawny, who is buried alongside Shelley in Rome, Margaret Mason, pseudonym of Lady Mount Cashell (an aristocratic Irish lady who had given up her legal family to settle in Tuscany with her common-law husband George Tighe) and, from November 1821, Lord Byron. Shelley also wrote to a number of his other friends in England, inviting them to join him in Pisa as he attempted to grow the circle and establish ‘a society of our own class, as much as possible, in intellect or in feeling’.

Writing to his friend John Gisborne in October 1821, Shelley declared: ‘We have furnished a house in Pisa, & mean to make it our headquarters. – I shall get all my books out & intrench myself – like a spider in a web’. Shelley’s curious reference to his home as his ‘headquarters’ reminds us that despite having left England in March 1818, Shelley was still very much engaging with and responding to English and European politics in his poetry and prose. There is also, in his declaration of ‘intrenchment’, a sense of stability which was perhaps absent from the majority of Shelley’s life after leaving Field Place.

The arrival of Byron at the end of 1821 was, at first, a great joy for Shelley; they could resume the intense conversations about literature and politics that they had shared in Geneva and Venice. However, their relationship deteriorated and this was certainly a contributing factor to Shelley’s decision to leave Pisa in April 1822 and move to San Terenzo near Lerici in the Bay of Spezia. The decision to leave Pisa was also in other ways forced, for there had been an unpleasant incident with an Italian Dragoon just outside a Pisan gate which had resulted in the Dragoon being seriously wounded by one of Byron’s servants (a dagger which Trelawny claimed was given to him by a beggar to defend himself during the fight is also on display in the Keats-Shelley House). Only a few months after leaving Pisa, Shelley drowned along with his companion Edward Williams and the boatboy Charles Vivien on their way home from Leghorn to re-join their wives and families.

Pisa was bombed during World War II, and only a fragment of the doorframe of the house where the Shelleys lived now survives. The place, which was called ‘Tre Palazzi di Chiesa’, was on the Lung'Arno Galileo Galilei, overlooking the Ponte Fortezza, and the Shelleys’ top-floor residence, which Mary had filled with potted plants, provided a splendid vantage point over the country down to the sea. They had spent two years’ savings in order to refurbish the place, which now included, among other things, seven beds, bookshelves and work tables, implements for four fireplaces, Mary’s looking glass and bidet, and a *batterie de cuisine*. Shelley had also managed to find a sumptuous place for Byron, the Palazzo Lanfranchi (now Toscanelli) across the river on the Lungarmo Mediceo, still in existence and currently hosting the Pisan State Archives.

Taken out of its museum setting, the fragment is a simple piece of stone, but amongst the other treasures which remember the life of Shelley, it becomes loaded with significance as a memorial of Shelley’s time in Pisa and Italy. It does not have to be a mere curiosity viewed passively, but can provoke us to ask questions such as: who might have crossed that threshold almost two hundred years ago into the Shelleys’ lives? What effect does it have on the way we memorialise historical figures when their physical legacy is damaged or destroyed by wars, by neglect, or by the inevitable effects of time, as Shelley so powerfully explored in his sonnet ‘Ozymandias’? And why is it that Shelley arguably has a more palpable, physical presence in Italy, the country he described in his poem ‘Julian and Maddalo’ as a ‘paradise of exiles’, than he does in England, the country of his birth?

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