Chapter 1

Byron and Italy

The Italian Context

The significance of Byron’s words and deeds to the development of Italian nationalism must be understood within broader contexts that include the political importance of humanist and Enlightenment culture, the widespread impact of the Grand Tour, and the residual effects of Napoleonic rule. British writers like Byron had complex and long-standing relationships with Italy. As early as the medieval and early modern periods, political rhetoric figured England as the inheritor of Rome. In the twelfth century, Geoffrey of Monmouth begins the legendary associations between Brutus, descendant of Aeneas, and the founding of London. In the sixteenth century, Edmund Spenser’s Faerie Queene continues that tradition, claiming that “noble Britons sprong from Troians bold,” and, after discussing the fall of Rome, prophesying that “a third kingdom [i.e., England] yet is to arise, / Out of the Troinans scattered offpring, [sic] / That in all glory and great enterprise, / Both first and second Troy [i.e., Rome] shall dare to equalize” (III.ix.38–44). This classical legacy bears powerful ideological connotations and strongly colored the national culture and character of the British nation as it evolved. From the importance of urban cultures (such as those of imperial Rome and Italy’s medieval communes), to the outward-looking commercial attitudes that fueled international trade (as seen in maritime republics such as Genoa and Venice), to the ideal of political rule by a gentrified, cultured, economic elite (as in Florence), Italy provided Britain with role models. In a discussion of William Roscoe’s book about the de Medicis, a book which Byron owned (Munby), John

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Hale points out that “for a zealous citizen [like Roscoe] the parallel between Liverpool and Florence came naturally... Like the Italian cities... the cities of England are seeing the ‘beneficial influence that commerce and literature have on each other.’” A contemporary of Roscoe agreed, writing that his works came “from this great mercantile city [i.e., Liverpool], as from a second Florence” (qtd. in Hale 73–74).

The influence of Italian culture made itself felt in many ways, frequently in the paintings, architecture, and politics studied by English gentlemen abroad, who then returned home with new ideas and communicated them domestically. European travel writings have a long history, providing guidance about worldly matters like trade, politics, and warfare, as well as spiritual affairs like pilgrimages. These works found a ready audience. Francis Bacon, offering a humanist perspective, saw travel not simply as a physical experience, but as a textual experience as well. In his essay “Of Travel,” he urges young people embarking on the Grand Tour to have familiarity with the languages of the countries on their itineraries and to journey with a knowledgeable tutor, who would direct them to the people and places worth visiting. Along the way, travelers should study guidebooks and maintain correspondence with foreign acquaintances, and, in particular, reflect on those experiences and commit the thoughts they provoke to diaries (Bacon 374–376). Over time, letters and journals such as the ones Bacon recommended evolved into the voluminous discourse of travel writing whose great popularity helped to construct for future generations both the experiences of the journey for visitors, as well as the national identities of those places visited.

Several factors made English travel to the Continent increasingly common during the Renaissance. For one, many considered Continental schools better than those in England, especially for the study of medicine and law, for which Pisa and Bologna attracted students. During the mid-sixteenth century, the University of Padua enrolled six thousand students from Germany alone, as well as those of other nationalities. During the late seventeenth century, at the University of Parma, foreign enrollment constituted 38 percent of its students (De Seta, L’Italia 18). Englishmen like Fynes Moryson, who offered his thoughts in his 1591 An Itinerary, attended the University of Padua, which he found religiously tolerant (Black 62).

Even for those who studied in England, the upper classes saw travel as the capstone of formal education, though the lack of an early modern empire placed constraints on possible destinations. While young men in France and Spain could set off for their colonies in the