

SHELLEY IN ITALY.

By RICHARD GARNETT.

THE recent erection of a monument to Percy Bysshe Shelley on the Tuscan coast proves that Italy is sensible of the honour reflected upon her by the residence upon her soil of one of the greatest of English poets. For different reasons Italy and England have both been in an especial manner the resort of sojourners and exiles, and have thus respectively gained and given much from and to each other. The occasion seems suitable for reviewing the literary obligation under which Italy has laid England by her influence upon Shelley. This influence was not in the main of a literary nature. It was the more subtle but in the long run more potent action of the interpenetration by Italian feeling derived from habitual intercourse with Italian people, scenery, and monuments of art. Such has, in fact, been the influence which Italy has usually exerted upon English minds for the last century. Dante apart, the fascination which Italian poetry exercised upon Spenser, Milton, and Gray is for the present dormant, and yet Italy is affecting English writers of the highest grade more powerfully than ever before. Byron, Shelley, Landor, the Brownings, and Hawthorne would never have been what they were, or achieved what they did, but for their Italian residence, and would be most grievously impoverished if all trace of indebtedness to Italy could be obliterated from their writings. Shelley's obligation is probably less than that of any of the others, not that he was less receptive of the charm of Italy, but because his stronger and more individual genius was less pliable to foreign influence, as the more impetuous river preserves its waters longest unmixed with the brine of the sea. We could not say of any of his poems, as might justly be said of "Pippa Passes" or "The Marble Faun," that it was written in Italian grape-juice. Still, if not absolutely dyed in Italian colours, he is tinged with them,

and a short survey of his Italian wanderings, with a brief indication of the localities which gave birth to the pieces especially connected with the country, will be no useless contribution to the study of his writings.

Shelley arrived at Milan in April, 1818, and speedily discovered a niche in the cathedral, under a painted window behind an altar, wherein to sit and read Dante. An excursion to Como is enthusiastically described in his letter, and he expresses great disappointment that unexplained circumstances should have prevented his taking up his abode in its "divine solitude." The lake is not expressly mentioned in his poems, but a comparison of the language of the letter with a beautiful passage near the end of "Rosalind and Helen," beginning "And with these words they rose," leaves no doubt that the latter is a description of it. He left Milan on May 1st, and after visiting Pisa, where he was destined to abide so long, but which he then thought "a large disagreeable city, almost without inhabitants," and Leghorn, "a great trading town," took up his quarters at the summer retreat of "I Bagni di Lucca." Here he is enchanted with the Apennine scenery, but his chief enthusiasm is reserved for the atmospheric phenomena—"thunder showers with which the noon is often overshadowed, and which break and fade away towards evening into flocks of delicate clouds," and for the "pool or fountain" in which he was wont to bathe. Here he completed "Rosalind and Helen" and translated the *Banquet* of Plato. In August we find him at Florence, the approach to which is beautifully described, and which he thought the finest city he had seen until his arrival at Venice. It is a great loss that none of his elaborately descriptive letters are written from this latter city, but amends are made to a great extent by the marvellous picture of the Lido and the Venetian sunset in "Julian

and Maddalo." This poem was composed in a summerhouse at the end of the garden of his next halting-place, the villa of I Cappuccini at Este, lent to him by Lord Byron. Here also the first act of *Prometheus Unbound* was commenced, which exhibits but few traces of an Italian

castle, now the habitation of owls and bats, where the Medici family resided before they came to Florence."

On November 7th Shelley left Este for Rome, and from this period dates the series of letters, mainly devoted to description, which he addressed to Pea-

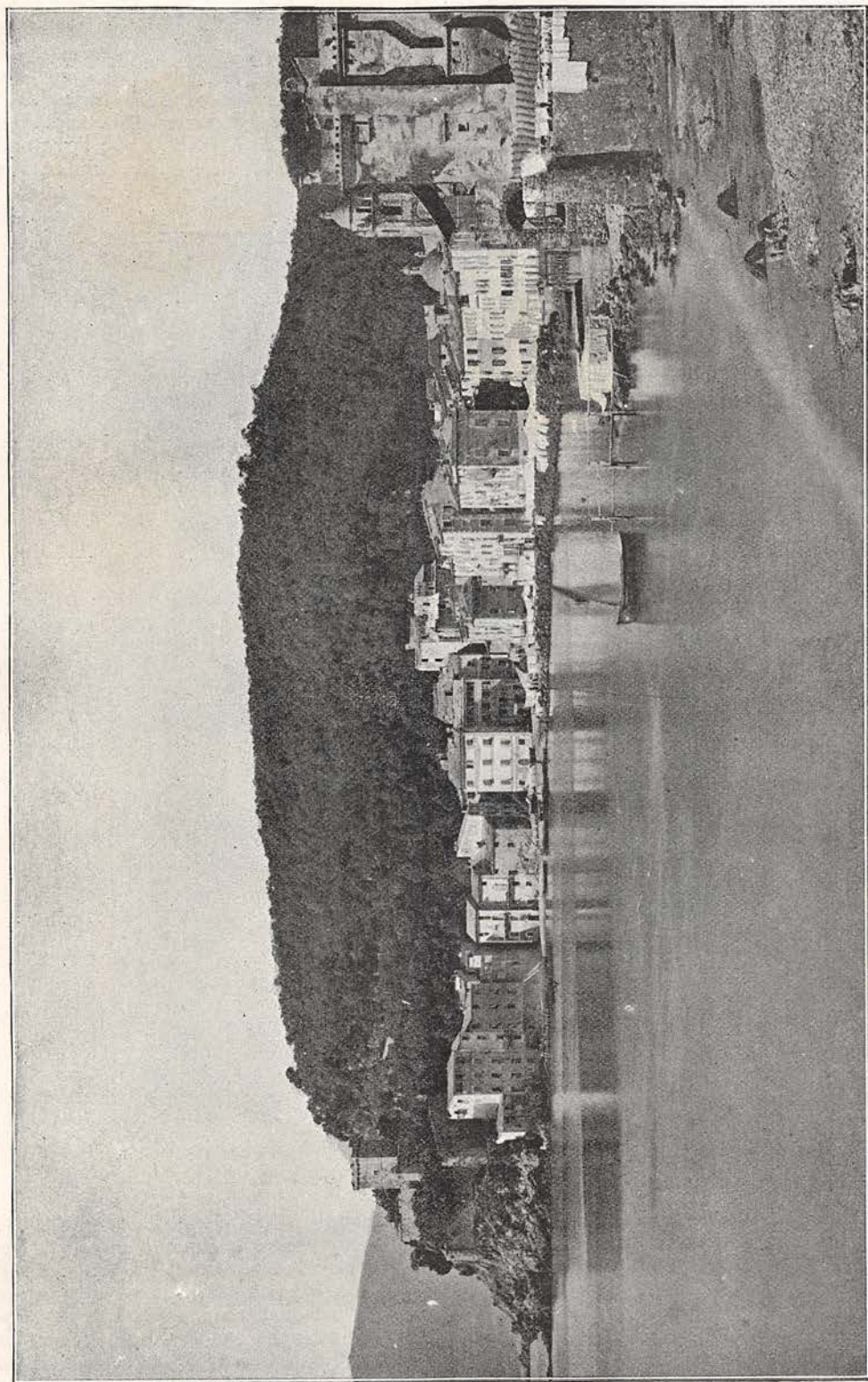


Photo by Magrini, Via Reggio.

THE MONUMENT TO SHELLEY AT VIA REGGIO.

domicile, but here also were written the "Lines Among the Euganean Hills," the first example from him of a descriptive poem entirely devoted to Italian scenery. The "hoary tower," whence the poet could descry "the olive-sandalled Apennine," is called in a letter "an extensive Gothic

cock during the next six months. The two first, from Ferrara and Bologna respectively, have more to do with art than with scenery, and the first letter from Rome is written ere he had seen anything but St. Peter's, and is mainly devoted to "recalling the vanished scenes



SAN TEREZIO : CASA MAGNI. SHELLEY'S LAST HOME, ON THE RIGHT.

through which we have passed, before Rome has effaced all other recollections." Spoleto and Terni appear to have struck him most, and are magnificently described. The next letter, December 22nd, is dated from Naples, and postpones further account of Rome until he shall have returned to explore more fully

depression enough of spirits and not good health, though I believe the warm air of Naples does me good." He must have just written, or have been just on the point of writing, the "Lines in Dejection," which have nothing specially Neapolitan in them, but are bathed in the light and warmth of a Mediterranean winter, the



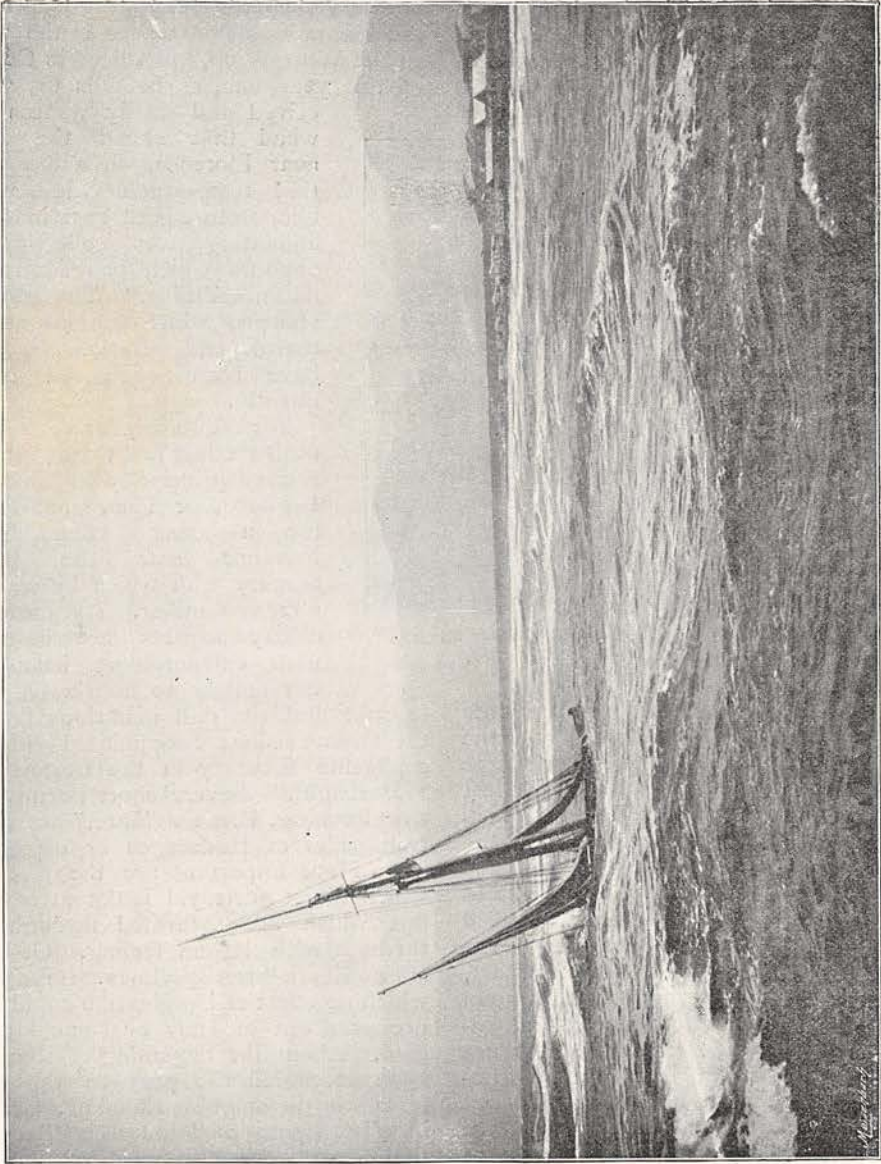
Photo by Magrini, Via Reggio.

A MEMENTO OF THE SHELLEY MEMORIAL.

"its mines of inexhaustible contemplation." Speaking of Naples, he describes with incomparable but unexaggerating magnificence of language his excursions to Baiæ and Vesuvius. "What colours there were in the sky, what radiance in the evening star, and how the moon was encompassed by a light unknown to our regions!" The letter concludes: "I have

melancholy of the poem deriving much of its pathos from the force of contrast.

The next two of Shelley's letters, written in January and February, 1819, are mainly devoted to magnificent descriptions of Pompeii and Paestum. The first act of *Prometheus Unbound* was finished at Naples; none of his minor poems were written there; but the recollections of

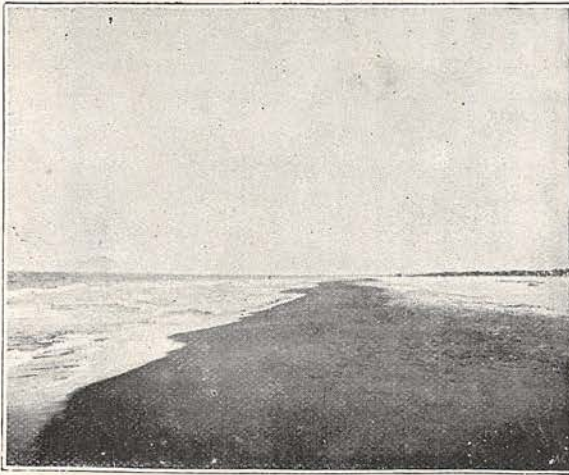


VIA REGGIO, CLOSE TO THE SPOT WHERE THE "ARIEL" SANK.

Baiæ and Vesuvius came to his mind when in 1820 he composed his "Ode to Naples," and are embalmed in the first two stanzas, the finest of all. It is noteworthy that these were not in the original draft; and, having been written to correspond with the metrical arrangement of the two epodes which already existed, received the appellation of epodes also; although an ode can no more begin with an epode than a letter can begin with a

the former, indeed, he has left us some carefully penned notes in the shape of observations on works in the Florentine Gallery. On the other hand, the number of poems professedly descriptive of Italian scenery increases, and more and more of the imagery of his more important poems is derived from Italy. One of the most remarkable instances is the "Ode to the West Wind," produced in October of this year, and, as he tells us, "conceived and chiefly written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, on a day when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once mild and animating, was collecting the vapours which pour down the autumnal rains." The last two stanzas, which contain no meteorological allusions, seem to have been composed subsequently.

For the remainder of his life, until the last few weeks, Shelley resided principally at Florence, Leghorn, or Pisa, and, except for a short excursion to Ravenna, saw little Italian scenery with which he was not already familiar. Its most ordinary aspects are described with extraordinary beauty in the epistle to Maria Gisborne (1820); and the dull malarious flats of the Tuscan seaboard are painted with Pre-raphaelite accuracy in the fragment of "Marengi." Several short poems, such as "Evening, Ponte a Mare," are direct transcripts of landscapes or objects of art. More important are the pieces in which direct portrayal is not attempted, but which are saturated through and through with Italian feeling. Of these "The Zucca" is a specimen. It is a poem which no effort of imagination could have produced out of Italy or some kindred land. About the beginning of 1822 circumstances led the poet to the pine-forests in the neighbourhood of Pisa, and in "The Invitation" and "The Recollection" he did for them what Wordsworth had done for the English lakes. The last few weeks of his life were spent in a region more congenial to him, perhaps, than any he had ever inhabited. Never before had he lived by the sea, "driving along this delightful bay in the evening wind under the summer moon until earth appears another world. If the past and the future could be obliterated, the present



THE SHORE WHERE SHELLEY'S BODY WAS BURNT,
ABOUT 1½ MILES NORTH OF VIA REGGIO.

postscript. Shelley left Naples for Rome on February 26th. His second stay in the Eternal City lasted more than three months, but produced only one—the last—of his great descriptive letters. This contains the celebrated description of the Baths of Caracalla, among whose ruins the *Prometheus* was partly written, and whose influence is clearly to be traced there and elsewhere. The rest of the letter is chiefly devoted to works of art, one of which, exerting a fascination upon him which nothing else had equalled, inspired him with the "Cenci." As not unfrequent with him, he carried the impression away with him, and did not begin to write until settled near Leghorn, where his tragedy was completed some time between August 15th and August 22nd. The death of his boy William at Rome had greatly affected his spirits, and from this time we have no more letters descriptive of set purpose, although little strokes of description are continually occurring to show that his keenness in enjoying and felicity in depicting the beauties of art and nature remained unimpaired. On

would content me so well that I could say with Faust to the passing moment, 'Remain thou, thou art so beautiful.'" Though there is no direct description of this scenery in the "Triumph of Life," chiefly written in his boat at this time, the rhythm of the sea-swell may be traced in the rise and fall of the interlinked stanzas. A more direct influence is discernible in the beautiful lines beginning "She left me at the silent time," where indeed "Music and moonlight and feeling are one."

The above record is sufficient to indicate the influence exerted by Italy upon Shelley, and through him upon many and many an English writer who never saw Italy with his bodily eyes. When it is further considered that Shelley is by no means the most conspicuous example of the action of Italy upon a great English author, and that others among those affected by her charm have exercised an even profounder influence upon English style and thought, it will be apparent how great is the debt which in this respect we owe to "the land where flowers the citron-bloom." On the other hand, the Italian sympathies of Shelley and his compeers must naturally recommend them to Italian readers, and qualify them to affect Italian literature beneficially in their turn. There are ample indications,

of which the Via Reggio monument is the most recent, of Shelley's growing popularity in Italy, which will in process of time more than repay the obligations which he in his lifetime endeavoured to requite by his translations from Dante and his exquisite though unfinished composition in Italian prose, "Una Favola."

Scarcely had the Tuscan waters closed over him when a poet of Italian race—Dante Gabriel Rossetti—was born in England, destined, though he never set foot on the soil of his ancestors, to accomplish far more towards infusing an Italian spirit into English literature than was possible for Shelley. Thus are the flowers of poetry fertilised by the mutual intercourse of nations; and hence, it may be added, the greater variety and flexibility of modern literature as compared with ancient, and its capability of indefinite propagation. In classical times but two literatures existed, one independent, the other imitative. Neither Greeks nor Romans derived any intellectual benefit from intercourse with other contemporary nations, and in the absence of the mutual action and interaction which keeps modern literature stirring and healthy, their literature inevitably tended to assume a stereotyped form, beyond which progress was impossible.