

1988

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Recommended Citation

Casillo, Robert (1988) "“The Englishman in Italy”: Free Trade as a Principle of Aesthetics by Robert Viscusi," *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought*: Vol. 2 , Article 40.

Available at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia/vol2/iss1/40>

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**"The Englishman in Italy":
Free Trade as a
Principle of Aesthetics**

By Robert Viscusi

*In Browning Institute Studies [Italy and
the Victorian Imagination], 1984,
pp. 1-28*

During the nineteenth century, and perhaps as a consequence of Mme. de Stael's *Corinne*, Italy's attraction for the rest of Europe came to extend beyond classicism and antiquarianism. Italian politics and society acquired comparable significance, while Italy itself emerged as an alternative or counterpoint to the utilitarian, affectively neutral, and chillingly administered industrial North; that, at least, is a good part of its charm in Stendhal and Burckhardt. To use a perhaps questionable and even dubious distinction once popular in German historical thought, Italy now stood for a beleaguered ideal of "Culture" as opposed to the most forbidding aspects of modern "Civilization."

Italy's relation to the rest of Europe during this period has not lacked commentators. Among general studies in English, one thinks of Van Wyck Brooks's *A Dream of Arcadia*, Kenneth Churchill's *Italy and English Literature, 1764-1930*, J.R. Hale's *England and the Italian Renaissance*, and Paul R. Baker's *The Fortunate Pilgrims*. More specialized studies include books and essays on James, Byron, Browning, and others. In France, long monographs by Genari on Mme. de Stael and Imbert on Stendhal hold a distinguished place, while Italian scholars have produced a body of work on Stendhal, Mme. de Stael, and American writers. Yet given the fact that the rediscovery of Italy marked an epoch in the consciousness of nineteenth-century Europe, with profound reverberations in many realms of culture, this subject demands even more extensive and serious treat-

ment. It is not simply that we need more synthetic works documenting Italy's magnetizing appeal during the industrial age. With the notable exception of Mario Praz's essays, most English and American studies of this subject have been produced by writers who, even when free of condescension or prejudice toward Italy, have nonetheless treated it largely from the outside and from a single cultural viewpoint. Apart from their frequent lack of familiarity with Italian values, these writers have rarely treated the cultural confrontation between North and South with an adequate theoretical grasp of its historical, social, and economic implications. Rather, their studies have been less analytical than descriptive, reiterating the responses of various writers. What this subject needs, then, is a critic at once conversant with bolder interpretive methods and possessed of a double consciousness, at once Anglo-Saxon or American and Italian. Such a consciousness would be able, without sentiment, prejudice, or special pleading, to dissociate Italian realities from foreign prejudices while assessing the cultural and ideological purpose behind the Northern or English interpretation.

As an American of Italian descent, professor of English, and author of a study of the Dantescan underpinnings of Max Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson*, Robert Viscusi seems well equipped to fulfill these requirements, and he has largely done so in a short but provocative essay entitled "The Englishman in Italy: Free Trade as a Principle of Aesthetics." To be sure, Viscusi's study of Browning builds upon a large body of scholarship, and sometimes he only confirms points made by Jacob Korg in his useful, largely factual, but uninquisitive study of *Browning and Italy* (1983). Korg anticipates Viscusi in recognizing Browning's constant poetic reliance on his Italian memories, his fascination with Italy's carnivalistic vi-

tality, and his essential remoteness from the Italian people. Nor does Korg fail to note Browning's frequent prejudices toward Italy, for instance, his assumption (largely unquestioned by Korg) that Italians are unreflective and unconscious, that the Catholic religion lacks spiritual dignity (apart from its aesthetic appeal), and that Italians combine aestheticism with cynical brutality (as in "My Last Duchess" among other works). Still, Korg is not much disturbed by these opinions, and he does not seek to penetrate the heart of Browning's ambivalence toward Italy. Viscusi, by contrast, investigates a "dissonant and troubling" (2) fact of Browning's works, one which, perhaps predictably, has been largely ignored by such Anglo-Saxon commentators as Ian Jack and William Irvine. Notwithstanding his long years in Italy and his profound indebtedness to it for the themes and spirit of much of his best poetry, and notwithstanding even his professed sympathy for Italian independence (a cause popular among some Victorian liberals), Browning never ceased to regard Italians from a perspective of "commercial colonialism and settled racism" (2). Although he conceded their past achievements in action and the visual arts, Italians seemed to him essentially unoriginal and incapable of serious achievements in "word" (3) and thought. Indeed, not only did he view them as mere servants or dark-skinned "natives" (9) akin to the blacks of England's expanding colonial empire, he described Italians as eternally mere "stuff for the use of the North" (3), whether as thematic material for poets like himself, or explicitly as objects of Northern domination. This contempt for Italians goes far to explain Browning's confessed sense of solitude in Italy. It also reveals his affinity with those conventional English travelers who, as Stendhal noted, had no difficulty in admiring Italian art yet would have nothing to do with Italians.

Italian Journal

A QUARTERLY DIGEST OF ITALIAN AFFAIRS

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Viscusi rightly offers these passages as evidence that Italy "is *not* the stuff of the North, and that perhaps it is time to attend instead to what it actually is" (3). This statement implies that Italy is more than the sum of our representations of it, that it constitutes a complex and roughly demonstrable social, cultural, and historical reality; moreover, that this reality has often been grossly misrepresented by Northern or at least English and American writers. Hence the many Anglo-Saxon texts on Italy, and the negative figures they contain, may be studied (as here) as a reflection of the Anglo-Saxon mind. There is, though, a weakening critical modishness in Viscusi's exaggerated claim that English commentators have never seen Italy as it really is, that they "never" take "Italy itself . . . [as] the object" (4) of their remarks but instead rely on previous English opinions of Italy amounting to "an incommensurable mass of [literary] inscriptions" (5). One is reminded of Edward Said's defensive and overstated argument in *Orientalism*, which holds that the typically unflattering *topoi* by which the West represents the Arab world tell us nothing about Arabs but everything about Northern bias. The fact is that the English (and French) view of nineteenth-century Italy is compounded of distorting prejudices and incisive critical judgments, and a fairminded critic ought to show where Northern observers attained some degree of accuracy in their evaluation of nineteenth-century Italy. For instance, although Stendhal is sometimes off-base as an observer of Italian behavior, as in his pet theory that Italians are free of vanity, the sum of his insights has led Luigi Barzini to speak of his Italian writings as containing genuine, indeed authoritative knowledge. Similarly, when Browning (in a passage Viscusi quotes) finds the Italians to be lacking in the "word," this statement for all its exaggeration is not just an occasion for outraged national or

ethnic pride. Rather, it should be set in its immediate historical context, related on the one hand to the Northern post-Protestant prejudice in favor of literary culture, but on the other to an almost certain fact recorded by Mme. de Stael and Stendhal, namely, that by the nineteenth-century the largely illiterate Italians had for various demonstrable historical reason failed to produce a sophisticated verbal culture on the order of England and France. In short, Henry James is at least partly justified in saying (in a passage endorsed by Korg) that Browning's Italy creates a "remarkably authentic impression."

However much Browning relies on English inscriptions of Italy, Viscusi would separate Browning's essentially personal notions of the country from those which preceded him. For convenience' sake he enumerates four discrete and distinctly Anglo-Saxon "Italies," the first of which is medieval and Chaucerian, the second is Renaissance-Shakespearian-Miltonic, the third antiquarian and Gibbonesque, and the last and most recent of which is romantic-revolutionary. Browning borrows from all of these, finding them co-present on the Roman Campagna, yet his own conception of Italy is founded chiefly on the tensions of his own dichotomous and baffling personality and is expressed in a typographical-geographical opposition which Viscusi shrewdly summarizes as "italic" versus "Roman." Typographically, italic refers to the slanted, slender, and elegant type-face which in the history of post-Renaissance printing ultimately took a subordinate place to the forceful, erect, and masculine Roman; it applies as well to the underlining (a substitute for italics) which Browning and his wife favored in their powerfully emotional correspondence as a "primitive" (6-7) (and hence to the Anglo-Saxon mind distinctly Italian) way of getting attention. Geographically, italic for Browning means everything in Italy that is not Roman in the

sense of imperial and stoic—in short, the casually sensuous, rude, anarchistic, and delightfully primitive Italy which Browning loved in such places as Pisa and Asolo (8-9). In more personal terms, the italic stands for the soft and feminine side of Browning, traits identifiable not with Browning's mother but with his highly sensitive father, his delicately emotional wife Elizabeth, and his somewhat epicene and Italianized son "Pen" (Penini, as he was nicknamed) (9-11). Roman on the other hand corresponds to that aspect of Italy with which most modern Britons wanted to identify—not Papal but ancient Rome in its hard-nosed commercialism, bluff extroversion, and confident masculinity. As Viscusi shows, this typographical-geographical opposition closely parallels the oft-noted and baffling contradiction between the introverted sensitivities of Browning the poet and Browning as "social tornado" (11). In "Italy" Browning was quiet, solitary, and meditative; in Rome he hopped from party to party (10-12). Viscusi has thus provided a new Italianate perspective on the paradoxes of Browning's poetic character, a subject which Ross Posnock has recently elucidated in *Henry James and the Problem of Robert Browning*. According to Viscusi, however, the opposition between italic and Roman ended with Elizabeth Barrett Browning's death in 1861, for with her died "the very body of Italy" (10), and Browning, returning to England, became completely Roman and English all at once.

Not content with defining these oppositions, Viscusi wants to explain how Browning could have sustained them along with the numerous other contradictions and paradoxes of his life and thought. More specifically, how could Browning intellectually justify his simultaneous love for and contempt for Italy, at once desiring its freedom and disdaining its inhabitants as mere servants and slaves of his coun-

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trymen? The answer, Viscusi believes, lies in Browning's liberalism, for its principle of free speech not only licensed his constant fidelity to the facts of inward consciousness but allowed him to express a plurality of inconsistent viewpoints as the unarguable right of his personal individuality (13-15). Meanwhile, in accordance with the familiar apologetics of this period, Browning's liberalism led him to accept free trade, in short, the economic philosophy of England's commercial classes and its imperialistic or "Roman" ideologies. Like many post-Victorian critics, Viscusi recognizes the incompatibility of individual freedom with *laissez-faire*, since in practice this economic doctrine grants personal liberty and self-expression chiefly to the successful moneyed classes. Viscusi also agrees with Marx that in a money economy there is no freedom, no self-expression, except through the self-alienating medium of the dollar (16-19). Nonetheless, Browning clung to liberal illusions throughout his long, comfortable, and inexpensive days in Italy (19-21). He did everything he could to deny the fact that his liberal freedoms, including his right of free expression, depended in large degree on unearned income (19), specifically his wife's fortune extracted from the sweat of African slaves curiously similar to the dark-skinned Italians toward whom Browning condescended. This repressed connection is discernible, however, in "An Englishman in Italy," where the Englishman simultaneously enjoys the cheap yet abundant life of Italy and hopes for the abolition of the Corn Laws, the effect of which (in 1846) was to announce the era of free trade and to open up for imperial (Roman) England a market of cheap foreign goods—the fruit, in short, of Italian servility. In his study of this poem, Jacob Korg finds its concluding allusion to the Corn Laws to be inorganic, a spurious attempt at contemporary rele-

vance. But Viscusi shows that Browning as liberal looks forward to Italy's political modernization and hence its entry into the European system of free trade. Yet Italy, owing to its economic backwardness, must thereby also become the object of Northern economic and imperial domination, its easily purchasable "stuff" proving as servicable to English commercial "use" as to Browning's requirements of "free" poetic expression.

As much as this elegantly written and highly original essay illuminates Browning's poetry, its interest extends beyond the sphere of Victorian studies. In its combative viewpoint and diversely sophisticated methodology it provides a useful model by which other scholars will be able to investigate more profitably than in the past the Northern interpretation of nineteenth-century Italy.

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