It’s very pleasant to turn, from the three strange concoctions just reviewed, to this. One’s tempted to say, “At last, a real book”. Maria Schoina has researched her subject with exemplary thoroughness, writes about it with skill, accuracy and first-hand judgement, and gives it lots of space to breathe, without any pre-conceived theories to block the view. All books *should* be like this, but as we see from the last three mentioned, it’s no longer obligatory.

Her themes are firstly the different ways in which Italy was viewed pre-“Romanticism”, and secondly the different ways in which four “Romantic” writers – the Shelleys, Byron, and Leigh Hunt – attached themselves to Italian life and culture, immersing themselves in it, or not as the case may be.

Passing the seventeenth century, when Italy was seen and depicted as an abode of depravity and violence, she looks at the eighteenth. First she describes how each country offered to the other a strange mirror image, shown in for example the London paintings of Canaletto and his imitators, which present “the two mingled into a strange ensemble” (p.45). Over against this identification was the rise of the dilettante, well-summed up by another picture, *British Gentlemen in Rome* (opp. p.39), in which five well-focussed and -dressed bucks lounge before unfocussed images of the Colosseum and the Baths of Caracalla, to which they are paying no attention at all, being more concerned with displaying their own touristic wit – embryonic Hobhouses. Schoina’s ability as an art critic is shown to advantage in this chapter.

Via a section on Madame de Staël’s *Corinne* (the cultural definitions and conflicts in which she describes a bit too charitably), Schoina next gives an excellent chapter on Mary Shelley, who over the years “invents an authoritative identity, as commentator on Italian politics, culture and mores” (p.79).

Her chapter on Byron goes through “his varied attempts to chart his meridian self” (p.91) without recourse to guidebooks – or at least, to guidebooks other than Forsythe (p.99). His efforts to Italicize himself were assisted by his determined hatred of the England which, as he asserted, had ostracised him and ruined his life. Excellent analyses of *Childe Harold IV*, *Beppo*, *To the Po* and *The Prophecy of Dante* occur here; not enough, perhaps, of the way he’d studied and continued to study the Italian poetic tradition of which his work is such a striking continuation.

The chapter on Shelley concentrates on Shelley’s fascination for Sgricci the improvvisatore, on his naïve desire to form a colony of idealists and artists, and on his depiction of Pisa as “a city of fleeting appearances and apparitions” (p.139). Despite this last, his aim was “to create links and bonds with the local social context and township” (p.143). Whether “the Masi affair, the sacrilege at Lucca [and] the Viviani case” (ibid.) showed his success or failure at creating such links, is a point in need of further discussion. Shelley lacked the status and mobility which enabled Byron to adjust instantly to whatever role an Italian city cast him into: in Milan, a famous European writer, in Venice, a willing stud, in Rome, an inspired tourist, in Ravenna, a friend to both beggars and cardinals, in Pisa, a leading ex-pat. Shelley, in life as in art, lacked Byron’s flexibility and street-credibility.

It’s customary these days to treat Leigh Hunt as equally worth consideration. I find that everything Leigh Hunt said and wrote about Italy shows his insularity, his provinciality, his lack of style … his comparison of the Leaning Tower to the Monument (p.159) reminds me of Hobhouse’s comparison of the Hagia Sophia to King’s College Chapel. Hunt was, of Schoina’s four subjects, the least successful Anglo-Italian. Her charitable section on *The Liberal* and its failure soft-pedals the question of Byron’s detestation of Hunt, and his major role in ensuring that the journal never got past its fourth number.

Several things occurred to me as I read Maria Schoina’s excellent book (the arguments in which are more complex than my bare paraphrases indicate).

The need to exile oneself and attempt acculturalization abroad is often a symptom of failure to acculturalize oneself at home; and the four writers here obviously had that problem in different ways. Of the four, Byron seems to have been the one with the mind (and purse) large enough to become almost a full-blooded Italian, without losing touch with the cultural life of London: Hunt had the least success in this respect.
I was surprised to find no reference to Elizabeth, Duchess of Devonshire (Byron’s landlady at Piccadilly Terrace), who not only became a leading sponsor and overseer of archaeological work in Rome, but actually seduced a Cardinal *en route* – a successful case of acculturalization if ever there was one.

On p.147 Schoina has a real find: a description of Byron and Shelley by a Pisan radical, Marco Marchini, who as a student used to frequent a Pisan café called l’Ussero (The Hussar: like Florians in Venice, it still exists). It’s worth quoting her translation of Marchini in full:

‘In those days there were two English dandies, two lords who took their walk along the Arno…They were two grand poets, famous in Europe, George Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley. But the two English noblemen preferred to explore the monasteries and the Pisan boarding-houses rather than frequent the café on the side of the river, which was crowded with students, but which probably looked vulgar and uninteresting to them. The two aristocratic poets were not aware of the fact that in that place were to be found some of the most promising young people of the glory of Italian literature. It is certain that in none of the two poets’ letters which regard the Pisan period do we find a hint about the Ussero café’.

This gives us pause – surely Pietro Gamba (“a regular liberty-boy”) would have known of the company to be enjoyed in such a place? But then we remember a quotation from Mary Shelley on p.60:

Pisa is a pretty town but its inhabitants wd exercise all Hogg’s vocabulary of scamps, raffs &c &c to fully describe their ragged-haired, shirtless condition. Many of them are students of the university & they are none of the genteelst of the crew.

…it’s true too that neither Byron nor Shelley frequented cafés much, and in any case Byron had given up on Italian politics by the time he got to Pisa.

In its professionalism and clarity, *Romantic ‘Anglo-Italians’* makes a excellent change from some of the other books reviewed in this section.