



Itinerary of the Poets

Gulf of Poets

San Terenzo – Piazza Brusacà

Our itinerary in the Gulf of Poets begins here, where the view sweeps over the wide inlet that opens up before us, along what is now called the "Walk of Poetry", known also as the "castle to castle" walk. It is a path of approximately 2 km that connects San Terenzo to Lerici. Walking along it, we will discover together the origin of the fortunate designation Gulf of Poets.

Lerici is mentioned by three Great people of the Middle Ages. Dante, to describe the steep walls of Purgatory, compares them to the Ligurian coast, identifying, right here, the ideal beginning:

*Twixt Lerici and Turbia,
the most desert,
The most secluded pathway
is a stair Easy and open,
if compared with that.*
(Dante, Purgatorio, canto III)

He is followed by Petrarca who, describing the slender tower of the Castle of Lerici and, in a letter to his family, states: "In Lerici, I was forced to use the sea again...". Struck by the particular conformation of the coast, he mentions it in Africa: "For those who sail the sea, the island and the port dear to Venus rise from the coast, which is contrasted by the very strong Italic Lerici, which retains the name of the Sicilian shore".
(Francesco Petrarca, Africa, Book 6)

Even a character from Boccaccio's Decameron disembarks in the port of Lerici to reach Lunigiana from here: "[...]in a well-armed galliot to Lerici, being there met by Currado (Malaspina), who had a castle not far off, where great preparations had been made for their entertainment feast was prepared: and thither accordingly he went with his whole company".
(Decameron Second Day, Novel VI)

But when did the fortunate epithet Gulf of Poets originate? The conception is attributed to Sem Benelli (1877-1949), a Tuscan playwright who stayed in the octagonal, yellow turret, located inside the park of Villa Marigola. Still today, raising our eyes, we can see it rising among the foliage on the hill separating San Terenzo from Lerici. It is here that Sem Benelli is said to have composed one of his masterpieces, "La cena delle Beffe" (The Jester's Supper). Moved by the passing of his friend and great Darwinian scientist Paolo Mantegazza – who died in San Terenzo in 1910 – Benelli composed the following epitaph: "Blessed are you, o Poet of science who rests in peace in the Gulf of Poets. Blessed are you, inhabitant of this Gulf, who have found a man who will worthily welcome the shadows of great visitors". In 1919, the publication of Sem Benelli's lyrics "Notte sul Golfo dei Poeti" (Night on the Gulf of Poets) in the series "I Gioielli dell'Eroica", definitively established the fame of what was to become a true brand.

San Terenzo - Villa Shelley

Who better than Shelley can describe this house, his last earthly abode, before the tragic shipwreck that caused his death in 1822. "A lovely house closed by the seaside surrounded by the soft and sublime scenery of the bay of Lerici".

The sea lapped against the white columns of Villa Magni, so much so that his wife Mary said, "The sea at our feet, its incessant murmuring and bellowing in our ears". At the time, Villa Shelley was indeed by the sea. The road and the walkway did not yet exist: the former would have been built at the end of the nineteenth century, the latter even after World War II. The building was, at the time, part of Villa Marigola: a dense wood at the back of the house, which is still visible today, was crossed by paths that connected it to the main residence. On the sides of the façade, two plaques bear verses by Shelley, who composed "Lines written in the bay of Lerici" here. Opposite the plaques is an inscription by Italian poet Ceccardo Roccatagliata Ceccardi (1907):

FROM THIS PORTICO IN WHICH THE AGED SHADE OF A HOLM OAK FELL
ON JULY OF 1822 MARY GODWIN AND JANE WILLIAMS WAITED WITH TEARFUL ANXIETY
PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY WHO SAILING FROM LIVORNO ON FRAGILE WOOD
ARRIVED BY SUDDEN FORTUNE AT THE SILENCE OF THE ELYSEAN ISLES
OH BLESSED SHORES WHERE LOVE, FREEDOM AND DREAMS HAVE NO CHAINS
October 27, 1907

But let us imagine going back to April 1822, when the inhabitants of San Terenzo observed in amazement the arrival of a group of young English individuals, with strange habits, led by the poet Percy B. Shelley and his wife Mary Godwin Wollstonecraft, the young and brilliant author of the very famous Frankenstein (already published at only 21 years of age, in 1818). Impressed, she stated, *"it was too beautiful of a place beautiful, and it did not seem of this land. [...] everything invited my mind to meditate on strange thoughts"*. Mary foresaw something ill-fated, a tragic fate: in San Terenzo she had a miscarriage and was saved by the promptness of her husband who looked after her in the absence of doctors. Sometime later, she wrote, *"...the scene was truly of unimaginable beauty. The blue extent of waters, the almost landlocked bay, the near castle of Lerici shutting it in to the east, and distant Porto Venere to the west"*. The Shelleys stayed in this house for only a few months, but they were so intense and decisive for their lives and the history of the village that they forever left their mark on the memory of the place. In July 1822, Shelley's boat was shipwrecked by a heavy storm on his return journey from Tuscany, where the poet was working with Lord Byron on "The Liberal", a magazine that was supposed to support liberal and revolutionary ideals. The body was found on the beach of Viareggio: his remains were burnt on the spot, according to the law of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany. According to some typically romantic stories, Shelley's heart did not burn it was then collected in a shrine and returned to Mary who, in vain, waited for her husband's return to the villa in San Terenzo. At her death, she asked to be buried with the precious relic at her side. Some interesting facts: when he died, Percy Shelley was not yet 30 years old. He could not swim, and, despite this, he liked to bathe in the waters of San Terenzo completely naked. Alcohol, and especially laudanum, were constant in the lives of these young Scapigliati, therefore, their habits were observed with amazement by the inhabitants: they read books and drank a strange dark liquid, which was simply...tea! Since that distant 1822, dozens of poets, writers and artists, not only Anglo-Saxon, arrived at the Gulf to pay homage to Shelley's last earthly abode, in search of "memories" of the great Romantic poets' sojourn.

San Terenzo - Villa Gregoretta

Continuing on our walk, we stop near Villa Gregoretta, a former railway workers' colony and now a residency for the elderly. A building of considerable importance in defining the landscape of San Terenzo: it is the terminal of the walk towards Lerici, with a curious "bridge-like" part on the road. The adjacent building, to the left of Villa Gregoretta, in the early twentieth century housed the Hotel Miramare (then called Hotel Elisabetta, in homage to the English Queen and the many Anglo-Saxon travellers who frequented it). The writer Virginia Woolf stayed here in 1933. She loved observing the terrace of Villa Shelley from the hotel, imagining Mary waiting in vain for the return of her beloved husband, and wrote:

"Shelley chose better than Max Beerbohm. He chose a harbour, a bay, & his home with a balcony, on which Mary stood, looks out across the sea. Sloping sailed boats were coming in this morning – a windy little town, of high pink & yellow Southern houses..."

Regarding her stay, Woolf also wrote: *"But we slept at Lerici the first night, which does the bay the brimming sea & green sailing ships & the island & the sparkling fading red & yellow night lamps to perfection. But that kind of perfection no longer makes me feel for my pen – It's too easy"*. Let us now return to the road under the "bridge" of Villa Gregoretta: the well-known Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin stayed in San Terenzo in the 1890s. The wife recounts how much he loved walking from there to Lerici, along the sea, and going around by boat, entering the inlets of Fiascherino. Apparently, however, he did not appreciate the construction of the carriage road that would have defiled this almost enchanted place. According to some sources, it was precisely from the Ligurian coast that he drew inspiration for his most famous painting, "L'isola dei morti" (The Island of the Dead) – (on a side note, famous for being Adolf Hitler's favourite work). In reality, the first draft of the work (of which he produced several versions) dates back to 1880 and predates his stay in San Terenzo by a few years. Walking along the "seaside" offshoot of Villa Gregoretta, before continuing the walk, let us pause to read the introductory panel of the so-called Walk of Poetry.

'Il Colombo' and the futurists' parties

A walkway overlooks Colombo beach, one of Lerici's oldest beach resorts, while on the left we are always accompanied by the impenetrable forest of Villa Marigola. The Hotel San Terenzo stands on the remains of a very famous venue frequented by the Futurists, when Lerici was a meeting place for the movement's most important representatives. At La Spezia, in 1933, the "Premio del Golfo" (The Gulf Prize) painting competition was established, and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti composed the famous Aeropoema del Golfo della Spezia (Aeropoem of the Gulf of La Spezia), dedicated to what he defined the gulf of wonders. Several Futurist parties were held at the Colombo, including a themed evening recited acted performances: for the occasion, Marinetti improvised and imaginary interview with a revived Shelley. Turning towards Lerici, we read the verses that Marinetti dedicated to these places: *"... Obediently he frees himself from the woods and gracefully forces the castle of Lerici to veer like a ship in the sky with its yellow-red procession of houses afloat."*

Villa Marigola

Villa Marigola is an eighteenth century residence which had great importance amongst the literary sites covered by our visit, not only because in its park stands Sem Benelli's "turret", but also because, as we have already seen, in the early nineteenth century the house that hosted Shelley was part of the Villa itself, then property of the nobleman Gaetano Olandini. It was only in 1888, at the same time of the construction of the coastal road, that the fates of the two building separated. Villa Marigola was purchased by an English banker, Sir Reginald Pearse. From then on, it became the crucial centre of the Anglo-Saxon elite who loved to stay in the Gulf of Lerici, following in the footsteps of the great Romantic poets. Parties and gala dinners were held there, attended by illustrious guests such as David Herbert Lawrence, whose footsteps we will follow shortly.

In 1899, the German Empress Victoria Adelaide Mary Louise, eldest daughter of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert of England, consort of Frederick III of Prussia and mother of Kaiser Wilhelm. She wrote, *"Dear Mrs. Pearse, I am anxious to send you my sincere thanks for all the trouble you have taken to making us comfortable in this charming house of yours!"* Frequented and described by Mario Soldati as well, Villa Marigola has hosted, and still hosts, events of great prestige, such as the Lerici Pea Poetry Prize, established in the 1950s. Now used as a conference centre, it boasts stunning Italian-style gardens, included among the Great Italian Gardens.



Walk of Poetry and 'Il Lido' beach establishment

As we continue along the walk that runs alongside the Venere Azzurra, we are accompanied by commemorative plaques, supported by as many lectern, commemorating the poets who won the historic Lerici Pea "lifetime achievement" award. This is the so-called Walk of Poetry, inaugurated in 2019 on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the death of Sem Benelli, to whom we owe the name Gulf of the Poets, and to whom the seafront walk between the roundabout Pertini of San Terenzo and the roundabout Vassallo of Lerici was named. Having arrived in the vicinity of the historic beach resort "Il Lido", opened in 1893, it is worth remembering its glorious past as a dance hall in the 1950s and 1960s, where the most important singer- songwriters of the time performed.

Here, a plaque commemorates the publisher Mario Spagnol (he too had a home in Lerici!), who is considered the discoverer of a very successful contemporary writer: Marco Buticchi, who published his first novel "Le pietre della Luna" with the Longanesi publishing house. The writer is also the owner of "Il Lido". He writes, *"The sea gives birth to stories and characters. When I get lost in it, peering at it from the perch of my resort, I catch a glimpse of pirates, adventurers, researchers, secret service agents engaged in disquieting missions. Without the sea, perhaps, I couldn't write"*.

Lerici, Hotel Shelley

Let us continue our walk to the Hotel Shelley, once simply "Delle Palme", which hosted, among others, Henry James, Max Weber and D.H. Lawrence. During his stay in 1877, Henry James wrote: *"This bay is truly enchanting. Surrounded by wooded hills between green and grey, towards his harbour vainly defended by an antique and marvellous castle, leaning out on a bold promontory overlooking the opening"*. After visiting the home that hosted Shelley, he stated: *"It overlooks the beach directly, with its peeling walls and an arched loggia opening onto a small balcony with a rustic parapet which, when the wind blows, is covered in salty spray of the sea. The place is absolutely solitary, scorched by the sun, by the breeze and the frost, and very close to nature, in perfect harmony with Shelley's passion"*. In 1913, it was the turn of Lawrence, who stayed at the hotel, together with his companion Frieda, before travelling to Fiascherino, where the Gambroiser cottage chosen as their love nest awaited them. In a letter to his friend Garnett, he wrote, *"Although this is a lovely hotel - 6 francs of day board, excellent food, wine and the rest included - a large bedroom with a balcony right on the sea, really beautiful. But I want to go to "my" cottage"*. Lawrence then moved to Fiascherino, where he stayed until the end of June 1914.

Lerici, Hotel Croce Bianca - Piazza Garibaldi

Having reached this point, we meet one of the most famous and historic Romanticism: Lord Byron, whose figure is actually less connected to Lerici than one may think. The common imagination tends to associate the presence of the two inseparable friends - Shelley and Byron - in the Gulf. In reality, we have seen that Shelley stayed at San Terenzo with a "merry" brigade of friends, among whom Byron included: there was the young two-and-a-half-year-old Percy, the only survivor of the four children that Mary had by Shelley, Claire, Mary's half-sister, and a couple of friends of the same age, Edward and Jane Williams, with their children. From San Terenzo Shelley wrote a letter to Byron (May 1822), *"You would like La Spezia very much, although the houses are as disastrous as the landscape is divine. The Williams, with all their furniture and no place to sleep, have for the present taken refuge with me. They are a great comfort and consolation to me"*.

We know that Byron met the friend in Tuscany before his death and, according to tradition, witness the burning of his body on the Viareggio's beach. We also know that he stayed in Lerici for a few days at the end of September 1822. Suffering a fever attack while travelling from Pisa to Genoa, he was forced to stay in what he described as "the worst room in the worst inn" in Lerici, giving us a not too positive image of the village. He probably stayed at the Hotel Croce Bianca, corresponding to the yellow building at the end of Piazza Garibaldi, to the right of the ascent to the Castle. Having recovered, he embarked for Sestri and then Genoa, stating, *"the sea immediately revived me - I ate the sailor's cold fish - and drank a gallon of wine"*.

Towards the San Giorgio Castle in Lerici

During this itinerary, which starts right next to the old yellow building, once the Hotel Croce Bianca, let us be guided by the words of Henry James, who climbed as we did, to the Castle of Lerici: *"I recall few episodes of my journey to Italy closer to my heart than that perfect autumn afternoon: the half hour break on the small and decrepit balcony of the villa, the climb up to the ancient castle overlooking Lerici, in a singularly happy way, the meditative walk in the fading light on the vine-covered terrace overlooking the sunset"*. On the way up, we can see a white villa dominating the so-called Poggio di Lerici. It is the "Rupe Canina" cottage that editor Valentino Bompiani chose as his holiday residence. After World War II it was frequented by several artists, in a sort of "new" literary pilgrimage, an ideal continuity with the poets and writers of the past. Among others, Moravia, Piovene, Calvino and Pasolini, who described the Gulf as follows, passed through here: *"Fresh trembled the mountain of Lerici with light blue oils, in front of the boat among the lights of La Spezia, while winter caressed the dawn with hands sweet with breeze, bitter with sun. And Shelley's boat, as in a print where the green fades into the azure, softened the air of Porto Venere as it landed: morning dawned, and all was white..."*

