Between the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century, the concept of revolution changed, largely in response to the events in America and in France which accompanied a new conceptualization of historical time. Before 1789, the term revolution was used in astronomy to indicate the revolving movement of celestial bodies and was applied metaphorically to changes in the political sphere, which were believed to happen according to a fixed and ever-repeating path of circulation (as for instance in the Aristotelian notion of the cycle of governments, rotating through democracy, aristocracy and monarchy). In the eighteenth century, the term came to acquire more and more the sense of irreversible change and of a single momentous event rather than a process. Moreover, revolution became something that people made, and not just something that happened to them. This paper will consider two poems by Ugo Foscolo and Lord Byron in the light of the conceptual shift in historical thought between cyclical and linear time. Foscolo’s *Dei sepolcri* (written in 1806 and published the following year) and Byron’s *The Prophecy of Dante* (composed in 1819 and published in 1821) present interconnected views on Italy’s political situation as a divided country under despotic and foreign rule, whose resurgence, however, seemed fast approaching. Both authors were clear about the topicality and the political import of their compositions. In response to a critical review, Foscolo explained that the purpose of *Dei sepolcri* is ‘animare l’emulazione politica degli italiani con gli esempi delle nazioni che onorano la memoria e i sepolcri degli uomini grandi’. Byron repeatedly urged Murray and Hobhouse to publish *The Prophecy* as soon as possible, fearing that it would be made obsolete by the outbreak of the insurrection that it

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1 ‘To inspire the political emulation of Italians through examples of nations that honour the memory and the sepulchres of great men’. Ugo Foscolo, ‘Lettera a Monsieur Guillon’, 1807. All translations are mine.
foreshadowed. However, neither text focuses specifically on the present. Instead, both Foscolo and Byron choose to explore the past and make predictions about the future. I am interested in seeing how the handling of the time frames in the two texts compares, and whether the comparison can yield any insight into the connection of the Italian nationalist discourse to nineteenth-century historical thought.

In *Dei sepolcri*, Foscolo illustrates a Vichian theory of history that distinguishes between natural and human time. Natural time is real, homogeneous and infinite, and, in accordance to materialistic principles, forever wears down matter and recombines it into new shapes and forms of life: ‘...e involve/ Tutte cose l’obblio nella sua notte;/ E una forza operosa le affatica/ Di moto in moto...’ (ll. 17-20). By contrast, human time is an artificial creation that brings meaning and motivation into a universe that has none. This ‘illusion’ provides a structure to human experiences of time and supports the organization of social life, leading to the institution of sepulchres. With an anthropologist’s eye for customs and rituals, Foscolo traces this practice back to the origins of human societies: ‘Dal dì che nozze e tribunal ed are/ Dier o alle umane belve esser pietose/ Di sè stesse e d’altrui, toglieano i vivi/ All’etere maligno ed alle fere/ I miserandi avanzi che Natura/ Con veci eterne a’ sensi altri destina’ (ll. 91-6).

The desire to preserve the memory of the dead implies a grasp of concepts of temporal discontinuity and orientation: in other words, the idea that time is not homogeneous but has peaks (notable events, special people); and that it is irreversible and advances towards a future that will be different from what we have known (that’s

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2 ‘The time for the Dante would be now...as Italy is on the Eve of great things’, Byron to Murray, From Ravenna, 17 August 1820; ‘Now is a good time for the Prophecy of Dante; events have acted as an advertisement thereto’, Byron to Hobhouse, Ravenna, 17 October 1820.
3 ‘...oblivion/ envelops all things in its night;/ and an untiring force urges them on/ from change to change’.
4 ‘Since nuptials, tribunals, and altars/ rendered human savages respectful/ of themselves and others, the living have kept/ from the cruel weather and the beasts/ the pitiful remains that Nature/ in infinite succession allocates to other lives’. Cf Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, V, ll. 830-1: ‘omnia migrant/ omnia commutat natura et vertere cogit’ (‘everything passes/ nature transforms everything and forces all to change’).
why it makes sense to remember). Memory and the capacity to empathise with the past lift humans out of the meaningless, indifferent time of nature: ‘...Celeste è questa/ Corrispondenza d’amorosi sensi/ Celeste dote è negli umani; e spesso/ Per lei si vive con l’amico estinto/ E l’estinto con noi...’ (ll. 29-31).

This ‘connection of tender feelings’ across time gives time a new shape, moulded by the consciousness of loss and separation from the past and by the illusion that the gap can be bridged. This is the core belief from which religion first develops and, along with it, the ‘virtù patrie’ (‘patriotic virtues’, l. 102) on which nations are founded, which are cemented and revived by the cult of an imagined common past. Here, at last, is the link to Italian politics. Foscolo lashes out at the Italian, and specifically at the Lombard elites, too taken by their own interests to care about national ideals and incapable even to defend their country from foreign invasion. Echoing the typical anti-Italian accusation of unmanliness, Foscolo conjures up the bizarre image of ‘il lombardo Sardanapalo’, a mixture of Oriental debauchery and sensible husbandry, whose only delight is ‘il muggito de buoi/ Che dagli antri abd duani e dal Ticino,/ Lo fan d’ozii beato e di vivande’ (ll. 59-61).

This lack of militant nationalism is the consequence of a long disconnection of Italians from their past. According to Foscolo, the rupture occurred when Christianity spread eschatological beliefs that gave rise to irrational fears and superstitions. The macabre imagery of religion made death into something repulsive and terrifying: the custom of burying the dead inside churches meant that those who came to pray were ‘contaminated’ by the ‘stench of corpses’ (‘de’ cadaveri il lezzo’, l. 108), and cities were filled with ‘effigiate scheletri’ (images of skeletons, l. 109). Somewhat inconsistently, Foscolo...

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5 ‘...it is divine, this/ connection of tender feelings,/ a divine faculty in humans; and often/ by its means we live with the departed friend,/ and the departed with us’.

6 ‘...the mooing of the oxen/ that from the chambers of the Adda and the Ticino/ delight him with a life of ease and feasting’.
denounces Napoleon’s edict of 1806, forbidding burial inside the city on hygienic
grounds as a further attempt to disempower Italians by distancing them from the
symbols of their past. We need the inspiring presence of monuments, says Foscolo,
because it is from the sepulchres of eminent Italians that ‘we will take the auspices’
(‘trarrem gli auspici’, l. 188), as in ancient times, before the battle for national
liberation. Christianity and tyrannical rulers conspire to keep Italians outside human
time, immersed in the unvarying flow of mechanistic nature, oblivious of the past and
incapable of imagining a different future. For Foscolo the time of history, human time,
is illusory but is the only one worth living, and Italy must strive to re-enter it to join
other nations, like England, where ancient pietas and sense of civic duty are still alive.
Foscolo thus believes in a set of universal values (pietas, virtus) that characterize
humanity at its best, and depend on the faith that a society has in the power of human
beings to make their own history. Italy has forgotten these values, and they have to be
revived. But before we see how that’s to be done, let us turn to Byron.

Byron’s The Prophecy of Dante tackles the problem of Italian politics with
what might at first seem a more pragmatic attitude. In The Prophecy, the cause of
Italy’s decline is not a matter of transcendental philosophy but a political problem to
be solved with the tools of political analysis and planning. Unlike Foscolo, Byron
doesn’t resort here to the old argument of Italian degeneracy and instead has Dante
pronounce a passionate appeal to ‘brave’ Italians to overcome faction spirit: ‘Are ye
not brave? Yes, yet the Ausonian soil/ Hath hearts, and hands, and arms, and hosts to
bring/ Against Oppression; but how vain the toil,/ While still Division sows the seeds
of woe,/ And weakness, till the Stranger reaps the spoil’ (Canto II, 131-5). Concerted
political action is what is urgently required to win independence and freedom. Yet in
other areas of the poem the programmatic clarity of the statement above is displaced
by a more obscure vision of the Italian situation, tinged with fatalism and historical pessimism. Consider this quote from the first Canto, where Dante contemplates taking his revenge on the Florentine Guelphs who have banished him:

...Revenge,

Who sleeps to dream of blood, and waking glows
With the oft-baffled, slakeless thirst of change,
When we shall mount again, and they that trod
Be trampled on, while Death and Ate range
O'er humbled heads and sever'd necks —— Great God!
Take these thoughts from me—to thy hands I yield
My many wrongs, and thine almighty rod
Will fall on those who smote me,— be my shield!

(Canto I, 113-21).

In these lines action is described as pointless and even wrongful: the ‘slakeless thirst of change’, is led by Ate, the personification of blind folly and delusion, and achieves nothing but useless death and destruction; the political struggle among Guelphs and Ghibelines is one of extreme passion and violence, but is forever caught in a cycle of domination and submission, whereby the winning party crushes the other and undoes all that the other had achieved, and so on ad libitum. Only divine intervention can release mankind from this vicious circle and effect just, constructive change. Ventriloquising the language of Dante’s partisan politics, Byron talks of ‘revenge’ but it is impossible not to read these lines in light of the more recent events of the Terror in France and the wars in Europe (the association of revolution with violent passions such as hatred and revenge is typical of anti-Jacobin rhetoric). Clearly the opinion
couched in this historical analogy is a negative one: revolutions, Byron seems to say, cannot change the course of history but only precipitate the world into anarchy and barbarism.

Readers of Byron are familiar with the contradiction, found especially in his ‘Italian’ works such as Canto IV of *Childe Harold* and the Venetian tragedies, between a theory of history as senseless cyclical repetition and one that valorises human action and the contribution of exceptional individualities. The *Prophecy* too comes up against the same dilemma: is the fate of Italy determined by the pattern of decline to which all civilizations are subjected, or will it be decided by a battle fought by men in the uncertain field of politics? Byron’s concurrent visions of history can be compared to the dualism Foscolo sees between natural and human time: the ever-repeating cycle of rise and fall in Dante’s feuding city-state resembles the natural cycle of life and death evoked with dismay in *Dei sepolcri*; and the rallying of Italians at the end of Canto 2 of *The Prophecy* echoes Foscolo’s exhortation to Italians to re-enter historical time and take meaningful political action. Underneath the loose structure of *Dei sepolcri* hides a solid philosophical core that allows Foscolo to manage the double time frame in a more systematic way, positing one as the natural given and the other as the product of civilization. Byron is less concerned than Foscolo with making a consistent philosophical argument, but he too interrogates history to find an answer to the question of whether Revolution can take place in Italy, and to what extent its outcome is predicated on past events. Put simply, both poets use history to prophesize the future, and do so with a specific political aim. As we have seen, Foscolo believes that Italy’s future depends on the revival of ancient civic virtues. For Byron, civil strife in medieval Italy prefigures the current disunity in the

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nationalist front. Moreover, the sack of Rome in 1527 is prophesised in the present tense (‘lost and won/ Rome...lies bleeding’ II, 75-6), whereas the achievements of the Renaissance are described with future tense verbs (‘Thy soil shall be pregnant with the wise’, III, 43, my emphasis). The two distinct temporal planes indicate the position in which Italy is at present, and where it could be in the future. However, both Byron’s and Foscolo’s prophecies are tinged with doubt, as the once stable relationship between past, present and future was being redefined by contemporary developments in the philosophy of history.

Foscolo’s ideas on the separation of natural and human time resonate with what Reinhart Koselleck has called ‘the temporalization of history’, anticipated by Vico and developed by radical Enlightenment and later by Romantic historicism. Byron’s model of history, especially with regard to the Italian context, is influenced by Gibbon and Sismondi, who can be considered the precursors of nineteenth-century historical philosophy. Historicism and progressivism saw the world set on a linear, ever-ascending path, propelled by revolutionary action and scientific knowledge into regions unknown. Historicism discarded the notion of historical cycles (as well as fate and divine Providence), liberating human energy for change, but in so doing also undermined the direct applicability of past examples to the present and the possibility to learn from history: ‘Since the future of modern history opens itself as the unknown, it becomes plannable – indeed it must be planned. And with each new plan a fresh degree of uncertainty is introduced, since it presupposes a lack of experience’. It seems to me that the combination of uncertainty and purposefulness expressed by both Foscolo and Byron corresponds to the conceptual shift from a future where nothing fundamentally new could arise, to a future constantly in the making, open to

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infinite new possibilities. This set new conditions for historically based prognostications, especially in relation to revolutionary events that cause profound ruptures in the temporal continuum.

Koselleck notes that the philosophy of historical process was first embraced by groups that sought to overthrow the established order, and in its early stages, it was ‘sustained by an audacious combination of politics and prophecy’. Revolutionary discourse is apocalyptic, in the sense that it announces the end of the world as we know it; but in contrast to the Apocalypse of the Scriptures, it requires the action of men, who need to be mobilised and organised. This is precisely what Foscolo and Byron are aiming to do. Their poems hold up the past as a mirror to the future, not to signify the inevitable return of the same but to indicate a way out from the cycles of old history. When Byron draws a parallel between medieval and Renaissance Italy and the Italy of his day, he is not saying that history repeats itself. He is describing a bad continuity that has to be broken: Italy is stuck in a worsening loop of internal strife and foreign occupation because of its incapacity to solve problems that, in Byron’s fiction, had already been exposed by Dante back in the fourteenth century: ‘The most infernal of all evils here,/ The sway of petty tyrants in a state’, which fosters ‘discord, cowardice, cruelty’ among the oppressed citizens (IV, 117-8). Dante’s prophecy will hold true until Italians recognize the accuracy of his political diagnosis and act accordingly – which means, until they cast off their vicious habits and unite to make the revolution. Similarly, Foscolo emphasizes how the passage into human time - that is, history in the historicist sense of a linear development – won’t happen by itself. The ‘brave minds’ of Italy must awake and put an end to the centuries-old state ‘ove dorme il furor d’inclite gesta’ (‘where the ardour for great

9 Ibid., p. 21.
deeds lies asleep,’ ll. 137-9). There is no assurance that this will happen: these are no longer ‘the days of Old, /When words were things that came to pass’ (II, 1-2); the prophecies uttered in Byron’s and Foscolo’s poems do not announce a fate that will overtake humanity but open up a space for political planning and action, which is up to people, in this case Italians, to take up.

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