

BYRON'S PROPHECY OF DANTE AND ITS FORM, TERZA RIMA

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In 1819, on his way to Ravenna to see Teresa Guiccioli, Byron stopped by the Certosa cemetery, where he came upon two epitaphs: "Martini Luigi Implora pace" and "Lucrezia Pinine Implora eterna quiete". They moved him deeply: "it appears to me that these two and three words comprise and compress all that can be said on the subject – and then in Italian they are absolute Music."¹

It was at the beginning of his love affair with Teresa Guiccioli, and the culmination of his love for Italy. From the wild dissipation of Venice and its carnival comedies, Byron was psychologically prepared to go deeper into the Italian soul, and having met Teresa briefly, at one of Contessa Albrizzi's *conversazioni* in Venice, and spoken to her at length two days later at the Contessa Benzoni's salon: on April 2nd or 3rd, 1819, the two declared their love for one another, for they had loved with "these mysterious sympathies (which) shake the soul too much and frighten one," as recalled by Teresa in her posthumously published account and as described by Byron's biographer.²

He found himself engaging completely with Teresa and her culture, physically, emotionally, spiritually and intellectually, all qualities which were bound up in this convent girl who could recite by heart any part of the *Divina Commedia*. She was no less struck by him, and extracted a promise from him that he would visit her at her home at Ravenna. Having heard she had suffered a miscarriage, (not of his child) he arrived there after agonizing delays, on June 10th, the Feast of Corpus Domini, or Corpus Christi, and in the days of her recovery, she requested from him that he compose a poem in honour of Dante, whose tomb was nearby.

He had already celebrated the Italian poet Tasso: now he wanted to pay tribute to the greatest of Italian poets by writing a poem in English in the particular Dantean form of terza rima. Dante by then was being recognised as the foundational poet of the newly reborn Italian consciousness.

Byron was ready to pay homage to a poet who himself had experienced the pain and terror of exile. It seems Byron was ready to turn his back on England, the gossip, the scandals, and the jealousies, and embrace entirely a culture which he was growing to love. As he had been regarded as an outsider in Venice, he was now "inoculated" into the Guiccioli and Gamba families.³

His letters to Teresa show an unByronic conventionality, an absence of his usual flippancy and irony, with a formality, and after initial hesitations, a commitment to stay and obey Teresa "in every respect".⁴

Leslie Marchand in his biography of Byron describes how Teresa recalled that they drove to the forest of umbrella pines that reached from a short distance outside the city to the sea and as far south as Rimini. The sun was setting in an aureole of gold and opal. Teresa wrote that "when they heard from afar the bells of the city it was impossible not to recall the verse of Dante which begin the 8th Canto of the Purgatory".

Purgatorio Canto VIII begins:

Era già l'ora che volge il disio
ai navicanti e `ntenerisce il core
lo di c'han detto ai dolci amici addio;
e che lo novo peregrin d'amore
punge, se ode squilla di lontano
che paia il giorno pianger che si more ...

As translated by Dorothy L. Sayers:

Now – in the hour that melts with homesick yearning
The hearts of seafarers who've had to say
Farewell to those they love, that very morning –
Hour when the new-made pilgrim on his way

¹: Letter to Richard Belgrave Hoppner, June 2nd 1819; BLJ VI 147.

²: Marchand, Leslie. *Byron, A Portrait*, Omega imprint, Futura Publications, 1971, p.296.

³: Origo, Iris. *The Last Attachment* Jonathan Cape, 1949, p.10.

⁴: *Ibid.*, p.11.

Feels a sweet pang go through him, if he hears
Far chimes that seem to knell the dying day –⁵

They evidently saw themselves as pilgrims of love, even as for “God and nothing else I care.”⁶

It was then that Teresa asked Byron to write something on Dante; he began the next day *The Prophecy of Dante* and dedicated it to her. Teresa and Byron read Dante together in the afternoons, focusing on what was already a favourite passage of his, in the *Inferno*, the episode of the adulterous lovers Paolo and Francesca, which held such resonance for them, as Teresa was married to the much older Count Guiccioli, who however, accepted Byron as Teresa’s *cavalier servente*, an Italian custom which allowed married women to have love affairs because their marriages were largely of convenience.

According to Leslie Marchand, Byron later wrote his own translation of that part of the *Inferno*. It tied in with his own image of himself, since *Manfred*, of the doomed or damned soul, but the poem itself, *The Prophecy of Dante*, stands almost alone in Byron’s works where he almost made “canticles of his Cantos”⁷ in spite of his avowal not to write in such a manner. Byron himself was very taken with the *The Prophecy of Dante* and considered it his best poem, possibly because of its high seriousness. Such a departure shows how very much he was in love.

The poem begins with a dedication to Teresa, “Oh, Lady”, in the style of the troubadours. A brief overlook at the poem – it consists of four cantos, written in terza rima, in which the poet Dante addresses his audience directly, speaking of his exile, how Beatrice had blessed “my spirit with her light” how the poet wants to gather Florence, which had exiled him, like the Almighty wanted to gather Jerusalem under his wing, but

... as the adder, deaf and fierce
Against the breast that cherished thee was stirred
Thy venom, and my state thou didst’t amerce
And doom this body forfeit to the fire. (I 65-8)

– shows it was not unlike Byron’s own perceptions of his life journey exile, and possible destination.

In Canto the Second, “what the great Seers of Israel” wore within their souls, Byron continues in the voice of Dante, the same spirit that is on them, even though Cassandra-like they will not hear the poet, whose soul is “within thy language”:

But I will make another tongue arise
As lofty and more sweet, in which expressed
The hero’s ardour, or the lover’s sighs,
Shall find alike such sounds for every theme
That every word, as brilliant as thy skies
Shall realise a Poet’s proudest dream
And make the Europe’s Nightingale of Song
So that all present speech to thine shall seem
The note of meaner birds, and every tongue
Confess its barbarism when compared with thine ... (II 23-32)

Then follows a eulogy on Italy as a country whose sky Heaven gilds “with brighter stars and robes with deeper blue” which is the “birthplace of heroes, sanctuary of Saints” and then, a sweep of history

In a soil where the mothers bring forth men:
Not so with those whose souls are little worth;
For them no fortress can avail, – the den
Of the poor reptile which preserves its sting
Is more secure than walls of adamant, when
The hearts of those within are quivering. (II 125-30)

But this can be redeemed by one word, “Unite!” which closes the Second Canto.
The Third Canto begins with the “never-dying ill ...

⁵: Sayers, Dorothy L. (translator) *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri, The Florentine, Purgatory*, Penguin Books, London, 1955.

⁶: Ibid.

⁷: Marchand, op.cit., p.294.

The Plague, the Prince, the Stranger and the Sword ... (III 2)

and its roll-call of evils and atrocities, yet the vision of beauty, which is Dante's legacy, overcomes these. Therefore Canto Three is the victory of beauty over death, where the future is imagined: "from thine ashes boundless Spirits rise / To give thee honour, and the earth delight" and the role of the poet, in bringing about this earthly paradise, and how Dante shows the role of "Art itself seem into Nature wrought ...

By the transparency of his bright dream
The second of a tenderer, sadder mood,
Shall pour his soul out o'er Jerusalem ... (III 118-20)

Thus the ideas of beauty give rise to an idyllic order which can be achieved through the unification of Italy. Byron's radical spirit, evident from his first speech in the House of Lords, is now to be nourished in the fertile soil of Italian culture and revolution.

The final Canto, the fourth, shows Byron's declared ambiguity about the role of the poet in relation to fame, as the best poets have not penned their inspiration, but compressed ...

The God within them, and rejoined the stars
Unlaurelled upon earth, but far more blessed
Than those who are degraded by the jars
Of Passion, and their frailties linked to fame,
Conquerors of high renown, but full of scars ... (IV 5-9)

Like himself. The poet will be taught by Ruin to revive the Grecian forms and the Roman souls at last shall live again "in Roman works by Italian hands". This Canto reaches an eloquence which few poets have achieved, as in the future the poet will show new wonders to the world:

The age which I anticipate, no less
Shall be the Age of Beauty, and while whelms
Calamity the nations with distress
The Genius of my Country shall arise,
A Cedar towering o'er the Wilderness
Lovely in all its branches to all eyes
Fragrant as fair and recognised afar,
Wafting its native incense through the skies.
Sovereigns shall pause amidst their sport of war.
Weaned for an hour from blood, to turn and gaze
On canvas or on stone: and they who mar
All beauty upon earth, compelled to praise.
Shall feel the power of that which they destroy ... (IV 71-93)

... and Byron, England's greatest and most famous poet of the time, goes on to extol the greatness of Dante, and how Florence will feel Dante's worth,

When Truth shall strike their eyes through many a tear,
And make them own the Prophet in his tomb ... (IV 154)

Doubtless, Byron was also thinking of his own exile, and by this time had made up his mind that he would never return to England. He had briefly considered going to South America, but by the end of the month, had decided he would stay in Ravenna – "Love has gained the victory".⁸

The MS. of the *Prophecy of Dante*, together with the Preface, was forwarded to Murray on March 14th 1820; but in spite of some impatience on the part of the author,⁹ and, after the lapse of some months, a pretty broad hint¹⁰ that "the time for the Dante would be good now ... as Italy is on the eve of great things," publication was deferred till the following year. *Marino Faliero, Doge of Venice*, and *The Prophecy of Dante* were published in the same volume, April 21st, 1821.

The Prophecy of Dante was briefly but favourably noticed by Jeffrey in his review of *Marino Faliero*.¹¹ "It is a very grand, fervid, turbulent, and somewhat mystical composition, full of the highest

8: Ibid., p.318.

9: Letter to Murray, May 8th 1820; BLJ VII 96

10: Letter to Murray, August 17th 1820; BLJ VII 158.

11: Edinburgh Review, July, 1821, vol. 35, p.285.

sentiment and the highest poetry; ... but disfigured by many faults of precipitation, and overclouded with many obscurities. Its great fault with common readers ... will be that it is not sufficiently intelligible. ... It is, however, beyond all question, a work of a man of great genius."

Other notices of *Marino Faliero* and *The Prophecy of Dante* appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*;¹² in the *Monthly Review*;¹³ and in the *Eclectic Review*.¹⁴

In the 1901 edition of the works of Byron, edited by Ernest Hartley Coleridge, and published by John Murray, the introductory essay gives some indication of the scope and form of *The Prophecy of Dante*. This introduction is given without condition in the Gutenberg project of the poet's works, so I give it below for those readers who would like to be acquainted with the provenance of this work and the scholarship that attended it on its publication. Ernest Hartley Coleridge writes:

It would have been strange if Byron, who had sounded his Lament over the sufferings of Tasso, and who had become de facto if not de jure a naturalized Italian, had forborne to associate his name and fame with the sacred memory of the "Gran padre Alighier." If there had been any truth in Friedrich Schlegel's pronouncement, in a lecture delivered at Vienna in 1814, "that at no time has the greatest and most national of all Italian poets ever been much the favourite of his countrymen," the reproach had become meaningless. As the sumptuous folio edition (4 vols.) of the *Divina Commedia*, published at Florence, 1817-19; a quarto edition (4 vols.) published at Rome, 1815-17; a folio edition (3 vols.) published at Bologna 1819-21, to which the Conte Giovanni Marchetti (vide the Preface, post), contributed his famous excursus on the allegory in the First Canto of the *Inferno*, and numerous other issues remain to testify, Dante's own countrymen were eager "to pay honours almost divine" to his memory. "The last age," writes Hobhouse, in 1817 (note 18 to Canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Poetical Works. 1899. ii. 496), "seemed inclined to under-value him. ... The present generation ... has returned to the ancient worship, and the Danteggiare of the northern Italians is thought even indiscreet by the more moderate Tuscans." Dante was in the air. As Byron wrote in his diary (January 29th 1821). "Read Schlegel" (probably in a translation published at Edinburgh. 1818); "Not a favourite! Why, they talk Dante, write Dante, and think and dream Dante at this moment (1821), to an excess which would be ridiculous, but that he deserves it."

There was, too, another reason why he was minded to write a poem on the subject of Dante. There was, at this time, a hope, it 'not a clear prospect, of political change—of throwing off the yoke of the Bourbon, of liberating Italy from the tyrant and the stranger. "Dante was the poet of liberty. Persecution, exile, the dread of a foreign grave, could not shake his principles" (Medwin, *Conversations*, 1824, p.242). The *Prophecy* was "intended for the Italians," intended to foreshadow as in a vision "liberty and the resurrection of Italy" (ibid., p.241). As he rode at twilight through the pine forest, or along "the silent shore Which bounds Ravenna's immemorial wood," (*Don Juan* III st.105) the undying past inspired him with a vision of the future, delayed, indeed, for a time, "the flame ending in smoke," but fulfilled after many days a vision of a redeemed and united Italy.

"The poem," he says, in the Preface, "may be considered as a metrical experiment." In *Beppo*, and the two first cantos of *Don Juan*. he had proved that the ottava rima of the Italians, which Frere had been one of the first to transplant, might grow and flourish in an alien soil, and now, by way of a second venture, he proposed to acclimatize the terza rima. He was under the impression that Hayley, whom he had held up to ridicule as "for ever feeble, and for ever tame," had been the first and last to try the measure in English; but of Hayley's excellent translation of the three first cantos of the *Inferno* praised but somewhat grudgingly praised by Southey, he had only seen an extract, and of earlier experiments he was altogether ignorant. As a matter of tact, many poets had already essayed, but timidly and without perseverance, to "come to the test in the metrification" of the *Divine Comedy*, some twenty-seven lines, "the sole example in English literature of that period of the use of terza rima, obviously copied from Dante" (*Complete Works of Chaucer*, by the Rev. W. Skeat, 1894. i. 76, 261), are imbedded in Chaucer's *Complaint to his Lady*. In the sixteenth century Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (*Description of the restless state of a lover*), "as novices newly sprung out of the schools of Dante, Ariosto, and Petrarch" (Puttenham's *Art of Poesie*, 1589, pp.48-50); and later again, Daniel (*To the Lady Lucy, Countess of Bedford*), Ben Jonson, and Milton (Psalms ii, vi.) afford specimens of terza rima. There was, too, one among Byron's contemporaries who had already made trial of the metre in his *Prince Athanase* (1817) and *The Woodman and the Nightingale* (1818), and who, shortly, in his *Ode to the West Wind* (October, 1819, published 1820) was to prove that it was not impossible to write English poetry, if not in genuine terza rima, with its interchange of double rhymes, at least in what has been happily styled the Byronic terza rima." It may, however, be

12: April 1821, vol. 9. pp.93-103.

13: May, 1821, Enlarged Series, vol. 95, pp.41-50.

14: June 21st, New Series, val. xv. pp.518-27.

taken for granted that, at any rate in June, 1819, these fragments of Shelley's were unknown to Byron.

Long after Byron's day, but long years before his dream was realized, Mrs. Browning, in her *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851) in the same metre, re-echoed the same aspiration (see her Preface), "that the future of Italy shall not be disinherited." (See for some of these instances of terza rima, *Englische Metrik*, von Dr. J. Schipper, 1888, ii. 896. See, too, *The Metre of Dante's Comedy* discussed and exemplified, by Alfred Forman and Harry Buxton Forman, 1878, p.7.)

The first known instance of terza rima is obscure, but it is generally agreed that it rose out of a lyric form, known as the *sirventes*, which was used by the Provençal troubadours. The number three, symbolizing the Holy Trinity, was sacred to Dante, and his use of the three-line rhyming pattern may have its roots in his attempt to create a complete symbolism for the aspiration and journey to Paradise, ending in the perfection of his vision of Beatrice. Beatrice was very young – aged twelve – when Dante met her, and died at the age of twenty-four, but was a life-long source of inspiration for the poet. After Dante, other Italian poets, including Petrarch and Boccaccio, began using the form. The form corresponds to an appearance of order and beauty which is perceptible in the universe.

It is thought that by the time Chaucer in England tried to compose in this form, though he achieved it in his *Complaint to His Lady*, that it was a difficult form to use because of the relative paucity of rhyme words in English.

Indeed, English has in comparison with Italian, a more complex phonology, and though Byron's contemporary Shelley used it in his *Ode to the West Wind* and *The Triumph of Life*, it is believed, as stated above, that these poems were not seen by Byron at the time of his composing *The Prophecy of Dante*. The form had also been used by Milton, though Milton's fame rests on his perfect ear for metre in blank verse.

An explanatory note about the form may be apposite at this point: terza rima is a three-line stanza using chain rhyme in the pattern A-B-A, B-C-B, C-D-C, D-E-D. There is no limit to the number of lines, but poems or sections of poems written in terza rima end with either a single line or couplet repeating the rhyme of the middle line of the final tercet. The two possible endings for the example above are d-e-d, e or d-e-d, e-e. There is no set rhythm for terza rima, but in English, iambic pentameter is generally preferred. In terza rima the a-b-a pattern of a verse is continued in the next verse by making the outer lines of the next stanza rhyme with the central line of the preceding stanza, b-c-b, as in the terza rima or *terzina* form of Dante as quoted above. As mentioned, there has been much inconclusive investigation of the possible sources of the Dantesque *terzina*, which Benedetto Croce in his book translated as *Aesthetics* characterised the form as "linked, enclosed, disciplined, vehement and yet calm." William Baer, founding editor of the *New Formalist* magazine, observes of the tercets of terza rima: "These interlocking rhymes tend to pull the listener's attention forward in a continuous flow ... Given this natural tendency to glide forward, terza rima is especially well-suited to narration and description".

Poets such as Thomas Hardy used the terza rima form in *Friends Beyond* to interlink the characters and continue the flow of the poem. A number of twentieth-century poets also employed the form. These include Archibald MacLeish, W. H. Auden, Andrew Cannon, William Carlos Williams, T. S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, Clark Ashton Smith, James Merrill and Richard Wilbur, and myself, Rosemarie Rowley, whose poem *Flight into Reality* is the longest original poem in terza rima in English and which has been commended by, among others, the late eminent poet Kathleen Raine and by Professor Bernard Beatty of the International Byron Society.

Not surprisingly, the form has also been used in translations of the *Divina Commedia*. Perhaps the most notable examples are Robert Pinsky's version of the *Inferno*, Laurence Binyon's version of the entire *Divina Commedia*, Dorothy L. Sayers's (extract given above) and the recent version by Peter Dale. Other translators such as Mark Musa has found the use of the terza rima in these translations is, on the whole, not successful, that translators "could have produced far better poems if they had not used rhyme".¹⁵

However, Byron did not receive the recognition that *The Prophecy of Dante* was his best poem, nor, indeed has the form terza rima, become a popular one in the time since he composed it, despite the efforts of some major poets.

When Byron wrote that this poem was "the best thing I ever wrote",¹⁶ was it because, perhaps, that for the first time in his life he had achieved a balanced, long-term view of himself and his art, that he was not finally to be doomed or to be a "degenerate modern wretch", that it might have been

15: Musa, Mark. *The Portable Dante*, Penguin Books USA Inc. 1995, translator's note, p.xli.

16: Letter to Murray, March 23rd, 1820; BLJ VII 59.

possible for a man and poet to dream of an eternal love, foreshadowed on earth, just as Dante dreamed and envisioned his love for Beatrice?

There is for the first time in his poetry a sustained note of optimism, optimism not only for himself, but for the new order which was coming into being, and which was having its greatest moment in the revolutionary and pure fire of the Carbonari, of whom the Gamba family, including Teresa's brother, were bound as a grand destiny for their country. Belonging to this family – for Teresa eventually secured a separation – meant that for the first time Byron was able to find a harmonious order of love in the universe, a love which would encompass the best hopes of mankind for a future in which individual liberty to live and love was cherished.

Byron even sees the situation in Italy as a kind of apocalypse, the biblical reference and the utopian sweep of the poem shows him in a rare mood of confidence, amid the stated calamities and evils, that these will be overcome. This optimism about the future, and about the role of the poet to make possible the political realities he yearned for, show that at times Byron verges on the mystical and prophetic with a Biblical reference to Jerusalem and how it is protected under the wings of a bird (Matthew 23:37 and Luke I:34) "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing."

Was this a sign that Byron was going to embrace a religious perspective in the remaining years of his life? His conversations later with Lady Blessington about Christ indicate he had thought about these matters deeply.

But the reception to the poem in England remained at the level of rancour, and at the very most, lukewarm. John Galt wrote:

Of *The Prophecy of Dante* I am no particular admirer. It contains, unquestionably, stanzas of resounding energy, but the general verse of the poem is as harsh and abrupt as the clink and clang of the cymbal; moreover, even for a prophecy, it is too obscure, and though it possesses abstractedly too many fine thoughts, and too much of the combustion of heroic passion to be regarded as a failure, yet it will never be popular. It is a quarry, however, of precious poetical expression.

It was written at Ravenna, and at the suggestion of the Guiccioli, to whom it is dedicated in a sonnet, prettily but inharmoniously turned. Like all his other best performances, this rugged but masterly composition draws its highest interest from himself and his own feelings, and can only be rightly appreciated by observing how fitly many of the bitter breathings of Dante apply to his own exiled and outcast condition. For, however much he was himself the author of his own banishment, he felt when he wrote these haughty verses that he had been sometimes shunned.¹⁷

Byron believed, having turned his back on England, that his future, and indeed the worldly future would show humanity's finest destiny, and this I believe caused him to think of the poem as the best he ever wrote – it is certainly the most aspirational and religious of his works. While modern attention has been focussed on his profligacy, promiscuity and polymorphous perversity, very little has been seriously understood in modern times about the Byron who was the whole man, spiritual, sexual, and amorous in his relationship with the Countess Guiccioli.

However optimistic he was at the outset of this relationship, the consensus by Byron's biographers was that the affair with the Countess did not last. As Leslie Marchand writes, "To Teresa Byron was faithful and devoted. He found her quite as delightful a creature as ever, but disillusioned by certain aspects of her character, he had lost the hopes that had filled his imagination during the first months of their liaison of finding in her the perfect companion of mind and spirit. Although from habit he used the language of his earlier passion, his letters and notes suggest that he now accepted her as a fascinating but sometimes wayward and fickle child."¹⁸

In his conversations with Lady Blessington, before leaving for Greece, he admitted he was "worn out in feelings, but at the same time, he added perhaps not without a wry smile, that if he and Teresa could be married they would be "cited as an example of conjugal happiness." This passage in Teresa's own copy of Lady Blessington's book is heavily underscored and in the margin she had written "God bless him!"¹⁹

Fiona MacCarthy's account²⁰ of Byron's last words and sentiments is largely conjecture to support her main argument that Byron was sexually more interested in men rather than women.

17: John Galt, *The Life of Lord Byron* (1830).

18: Marchand, op.cit., p.322.

19: Origo, op.cit., p.14.

20: MacCarthy, Fiona. *Byron – Life and Legend*, John Murray, London, 2002, p.520.

However, it may be that there is another explanation, another conjecture, other than that he had grown tired of Teresa – in that Byron was more deeply involved in the secret society of the Carbonari than has been acknowledged. Byron had written his own account of the Carbonari, which he entrusted to his Venetian friend Angelo Mengaldo. But Mengaldo burned the whole envelope unopened on the shores of the Adriatic, and with it all that Byron could have told about the secrets of the Carbonari, and its “atrocious treachery”.²¹ They were known to plan assassinations. The year 1820, when he had been in Ravenna, was also the year of the uprising in Italy, which was suppressed and condemned by the Pope as originating in freemasonry on April 13th 1821. Byron was closely watched all the years he was in Ravenna, when he became drawn into the movement by the Gambas, Teresa’s family.

So along with Byron’s memoirs being destroyed, perhaps the only actual and factual account of his political involvement in Italy remains untold. True, his last love letters to Teresa are perfunctory,²² but they were written in the company of her brother Pietro, who was deeply involved politically with that secret society. While not as extraordinarily intimate and frank as his first letters to her, they nevertheless are signed with the capital letters “A.A. in E.”, that is, “Amico Amante in Eterno” (Friendship and Love Forever). His last letter to her was on March 17th, 1824, when he writes that he has seen a swallow, and that spring is coming. But Teresa’s last letters to him have been lost.

It may have been in order to protect her that he assumed a less engaged tone in these last letters, as from 1820 onwards the Carbonari were suppressed and its leaders murdered.

Byron was wearing a lock of Teresa’s hair, in a locket, when he died on April 19th 1824, which had been sent back by Augusta after his death, and is part of the Gamba archive.

Our age has seen it as important that all aspects of Byron’s romantic life are uncovered, so the Byron legend of promiscuity and faithlessness lives on in a rush to political correctness where there is a definite tendency to protest too much, like the lady in Hamlet’s *The Mousetrap*. As the playwright Shaw wrote in the preface of his complete plays in 1937, over a century later, when Byronism had taken hold, Byron, “by his brooding on perpetual failure, not only of others, but of himself, to live up to his ideals: by his consequent cynical scorn for humanity: by his jejune incredulity as to the absolute validity of his concepts, has acquired a half-tragic, half-ironic air: the mysterious moodiness,”²³ yet Byron has endured in his appeal to public taste longer than Shaw, who is scarcely remembered in Ireland or England, (though still popular in the United States, where the public have not been tested by extremes of left-wing ideology), while every year there are at least half-a-dozen books about Byron and his lasting fame, although some of this is due to a vicarious identification with his love-life, which even in our age baffles and enthrals. *The Prophecy of Dante* is testament to the fact that there is another Byron, a Byron with the best hopes for himself and mankind, for his own future, which he also bound up with the future of Italy.

As this poem makes clear, Byron had a political project, in which love, liberty, order and justice were enshrined, and eventually, since these ideals were not fulfilled in Italy until later, for this new order it was to Greece he turned, and was ready to sacrifice his life.

There has not been an abundance of criticism about *The Prophecy of Dante* in modern times. This is noted by the critic Beverly Taylor in *Byron’s Use of Dante in The Prophecy of Dante*:²⁴ she outlines the importance of the poem in that Byron’s rating of it was consistently high, that its theme and form combined to reflect on the relationship between life and art, what it is to be a poet, the sublimity and torture of the poet, indeed, the future of Italian art and writers, indeed the power art to shape society, to make great nations in the future. Taylor makes the point that it is one of the most neglected of Byron’s works.

The contemporary composer Giovanni Sollimo, born 1962, has composed a five-minute piece based on the *Prophecy of Dante* in a CD of his own works; he has also collaborated with the rock artist Patti Smith. The composition can be sourced on YouTube.

21: Origo, op.cit., p.15.

22: Ibid., p.357.

23: Shaw, George Bernard. *Complete Plays, Preface to Arms and the Man*, London, 1937, p.103.

24: *Keats-Shelley Journal* Vol. 28, 1979, pp.102-19.