

David Plylar

**The Prophecy
of Dante**

With Commentary by Keats

for Soprano and Chamber Ensemble

Program Notes

“The Prophecy of Dante” is a four-part poem written by George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824), in 1819. The poem is written in English, but is modeled on the cantos of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, both in spirit and in organization. “The Prophecy of Dante” was written in iambic pentameter, but also in terza rima, which is a layered rhyme scheme that takes the form: ABA BCB CDC DED...etc. Byron was among the first to use this difficult scheme in English, and the first to employ it on such a large scale.

There is no way to abridge the work without destroying the rhyme pattern, so my solution was to set the fourth and final canto in its entirety. Some components of the soprano setting of the poem are musical manifestations of the rhymes; perfect rhymes employ the same pitch classes, while imperfect rhymes are slightly altered. This allows for a gradual development of familiar material. Additionally, certain words and word groups (like Genius, Art and Florence) are generally presented using the same intervals, lending such passages a multiform thematic consistency.

While I was composing *The Prophecy of Dante*, I was struck by the similarities and dissimilarities between Byron (the poet and persona) and his oft-grouped-together contemporaries John Keats (1795-1821) and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822). In exploring more of their work, I found that certain themes and trajectories related to “The Prophecy of Dante” emerged, fusing in my mind into an *in absentia* critique of Byron’s work and appeal to posterity. Some of these ideas crept into my setting of Byron’s poem, so that my music was also engaged in a critical reading of the work. I now feel that this critical context is a part of the work, and I would like to share it with anyone who is inclined to explore it with me. With this aim in mind, I have prepared a supplement to *The Prophecy of Dante*; please feel free to read it if you like (now or later)—I consider it to be part of the piece. It contains the main text of the fourth canto of Byron’s poem, along with annotative juxtapositions of poetry and prose by Keats, Shelley, and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. The selected material ranges from sympathetic poetry to reactions to and accounts of the deaths of Keats and Shelley.

The Prophecy of Dante is dedicated to the memory of my grandparents, J. Russell Plylar, Sr., and Elizabeth Ann Plylar, who both passed away during the period I was composing and revising the piece. The opening lines of Byron’s work now have a richer meaning for me.

*Text supplements begin on next page .

THE PROPHECY OF DANTE

“’Tis the sunset of life gives me mystical lore,
And coming events cast their shadows before.”

Campbell

DEDICATION

Lady! if for the cold and cloudy clime,
Where I was born, but where I would not die,
Of the great Poet-Sire of Italy
I dare to build the imitative rhyme,
Harsh Runic copy of the South’s sublime,
Thou art the cause; and howsoever I
Fall short of his immortal harmony,
Thy gentle heart will pardon me the crime.
Thou, in the pride of Beauty and of Youth,
Spakest; and for thee to speak and be obey’d
Are one; but only in the sunny South
So sweet a language are uttered, and such charms display’d
Ah! to what effort would it not persuade?

Ravenna, June 21, 1819

PREFACE

In the course of a visit to the city of Ravenna in the summer of 1819, it was suggested to the author that having composed something on the subject of Tasso’s confinement, he should do the same on Dante’s exile, the tomb of the poet forming one of the principal objects of interest in that city, both to the native and to the stranger.

‘On this hint I spake,’ and the result has been the following four cantos, in terza rima, now offered to the reader. If they are understood and approved, it is my purpose to continue the poem, in various other cantos, to its natural conclusion in the present age. The reader is requested to suppose that Dante addresses him in the interval between the conclusion of the *Divina Commedia* and his death, and shortly before the latter event, foretelling the fortunes of Italy in general in the ensuing centuries. In adopting this plan I have had in my mind the Cassandra of Lycophron, and the Prophecy of Nereus by Horace, as well as the Prophecies of Holy Writ. The measure adopted is the terza rima of Dante, which I am not aware to have seen hitherto tried in our language, except it may be by Mr. Hayley of whose translation I never saw but one extract, quoted in the notes to Caliph Vathek; so that if I do not err this poem may be considered as a metrical experiment. The cantos are short, and about the same length of those of the poet, whose name I have borrowed, and most probably taken in vain.

Amongst the inconveniences of authors in the present day, it is difficult for any who have a name, good or bad, to escape translation. I have had the fortune to see the fourth canto of ‘Childe Harold’ translated into Italian versi sciolti, that is, a poem written in the *Spenserian stanza* into *blank verse*, without regard to the natural divisions of the stanza or of the sense. If the present poem, being on a national topic, should chance to undergo the same fate, I would request the Italian reader to remember that when I have failed in the imitation of his great ‘Padre Alighier’, I have failed in imitating that which all study and few understand, since to this very day it is not yet settled what was the meaning of the allegory in the first canto of the *Inferno*, unless Count Marchetti’s ingenious and probable conjecture may be considered as having decided the question.

He may also pardon my failure the more, as I am not quite sure that he would be pleased with my success, since the Italians, with a pardonable nationality, are particularly jealous of all that is left them as a nation, their literature; and in the present bitterness of the classic and romantic ware, are but ill disposed to permit a foreigner even to approve or imitate them, without finding some fault with his ultramontane presumption. I can easily enter into all this, knowing what would be thought in England of an Italian imitator of Milton, or of a translation of Monti, or Pindemonte, or Arici, should be held up to the rising generation as a model for their future poetical essays. But I perceive that I am deviating into an address to the Italian reader, when my business is with the English one; and be they few or many, I must take my leave of both.

[George Gordon, Lord Byron, Dedication and Preface to *The Prophecy of Dante*]

One word more: —for we cannot help seeing our own affairs in every point of view—Should any one call my dedication to Chatterton affected I answer as followeth: ‘Were I dead, sir, I should like a Book dedicated to me’—
Teignmouth March 19th 1818

[John Keats, from the rejected dedication and preface to *Endymion*]

Knowing within myself the manner in which this Poem has been produced, it is not without a feeling of regret that I make it public.

What manner I mean, will be quite clear to the reader, who must soon perceive great inexperience, immaturity, and every error denoting a feverish attempt, rather than a deed accomplished. The two first books, and indeed the two last, I feel sensible are not of such completion as to warrant their passing the press; nor should they if I thought a year’s castigation would do them any good; - it will not: the foundations are too sandy. It is just that this youngster should die anyway: a sad thought for me, if I had not some hope that while it is dwindling I may be plighting, and fitting myself for verses fit to live.

This may be speaking too presumptuously, and may deserve a punishment: but no feeling man will be forward to inflict it: he will leave me alone, with the conviction that there is not a fiercer hell than the failure in a great object. This is not written with the least atom of purpose to forestall criticisms of course, but from the desire I have to conciliate men who are competent to look, and who do look with a zealous eye, to the honour of English literature.

The imagination of a boy is healthy, and mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life between, in which the soul is in a ferment, the character undecided, the way of life uncertain, the ambition thick-sighted: thence proceeds mawkishness, and all the thousand bitters which those men I speak of must necessarily taste in going over the following pages.

I hope I have not in too late a day touched the beautiful mythology of Greece, and dulled its brightness: for I wish to try ounce more, before I bid it farewell.

Teignmouth, 10 April 1818

[John Keats, published preface to *Endymion*]

....

With the last year of the life of Shelley these Notes end. They are not what I intended them to be. I began with energy, and a burning desire to impart to the world, in worthy language, the sense I have of the virtues and genius of the beloved and the lost; my strength has failed under the task. Recurrence to the past, full of its own deep and unforgotten joys and sorrows, contrasted with succeeding years of painful and solitary struggle, has shaken my health. Days of great suffering have followed my attempts to write, and these again produced a weakness and languor that spread their sinister influence over these notes. I dislike speaking of myself, but cannot help apologizing to the dead, and to the public, for not having executed in the manner I desired the history I engaged to give of Shelley’s writings.

[Mary Shelley, extract from “Note on Poems of 1822”]

The Prophecy of Dante

George Gordon, Lord Byron

Canto the Fourth

Many are the poets who have never penn'd
Their inspiration, and perchance the best:
They felt, and loved, and died, but would not lend
Their thoughts to meaner beings; they compress'd
The god within them, and rejoin'd the stars
Unlaurell'd upon earth, but far more bless'd
Than those who are degraded by the jars
Of passion, and their frailties link'd to fame,
Conquerors of high renown, but full of scars.

Many are the poets but without the name,
For what is poesy but to create
From overfeeling good or ill; and aim
At an external life beyond our fate,
And be the new Prometheus of new men,
Bestowing fire from heaven, and then, too late,
Finding the pleasure given repaid with pain,
And vultures to the heart of the bestower,
Who, having lavish'd his high gift in vain,
Lies chain'd to his lone rock by the seashore?
So be it: we can bear.—But thus all they
Whose intellect is an o'ermastering power
Which still recoils from its encumbering clay
Or lightens it to spirit, whatso'er
The form which their creations may essay,
Are bards; the kindled marble's bust may wear
More poesy upon its speaking brow
Than aught less than the Homeric page may bear;
One noble stroke with a whole life may glow,
Or deify the canvas till it shine
With beauty so surpassing all below,
That they who kneel to idols so divine
Break no commandment, for high heaven is there
Transfused, transfigured: and the line
Of poesy, which peoples but the air
With thought and beings of our thought reflected,
Can do no more: then let the artist share
The palm, he shares the peril, and dejected
Faints o'er the labour unapproved—Alas!
Despair and Genius are too oft connected.

Fanatics have their dreams, wherewith they weave
A paradise for a sect; the savage too
From forth the loftiest fashion of his sleep
Guesses at Heaven: pity these have not
Traced upon vellum or wild Indian leaf
The shadows of melodious utterance.
But bare of laurel they live, dream and die;
For poesy alone can tell her dreams,
With the fine spell of words alone can save
Imagination from the sable charm
And dumb enchantment. Who alive can say,
'Thou art no Poet—mayst not tell they dreams?'
Since every man whose soul is not a clod
Hath visions, and would speak, if he had loved,
And been well nurtured in his mother tongue.
Whether the dream now purposed to rehearse
Be Poet's or Fanatic's will be known
When this warm scribe my hand is in the grave.

[John Keats, *The Fall of Hyperion. A Dream*, Canto I, lines 1-18]

...
Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:

[John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, lines 11-14]

Fragment on Keats
Who desired that on his tomb should be inscribed—

'Here lieth One whose name was writ on water.'
But, ere the breath that could erase it blew,
Death, in remorse for that fell slaughter,
Death, the immortalizing winter, flew
Athwart the stream,—and time's printless torrent
grew
A scroll of crystal, blazoning the name
Of Adonais!

[Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Fragment on Keats*]

...

The Titans fierce, self-hid or prison-bound,
Groan for the old allegiance once more,
Listening in their doom for Saturn's voice.
But one of our whole eagle-brood still keeps
His sovereignty, and rule, and majesty;
Blazing Hyperion on his orbèd fire
Still sits, still snuffs the incense teeming up
From man to the sun's God—yet unsecure.

[John Keats, *The Fall of Hyperion. A Dream*, Canto II, lines 10-17]

Who kill'd John Keats?
'I,' says the Quarterly,
So savage and Tartarly;
'Twas one of my feats.'

Who shot the arrow?
'The poet-priest Milman
(So ready to kill man),
Or Southey, or Barrow.'

July 1821
[George Gordon, Lord Byron,
John Keats]

It is my intention to subjoin to the London edition of this poem a criticism upon the claims of its lamented object to be classed among the writers of the highest genius who have adorned our age. My known repugnance to the narrow principles of taste on which several of his earlier compositions were modeled prove at least that I am an impartial judge. I consider the fragment of *Hyperion* as second to nothing that was ever produced by a writer of the same years.

John Keats died at Rome of a consumption, in his twenty-fourth year, on the —of-1821; and was buried in the romantic and lonely cemetery of the Protestants in that city, under the pyramid which is the tomb of Cestius, and the massy walls and towers, now mouldering and desolate, which formed the circuit of ancient Rome. The cemetery is an open space among the ruins, covered in winter with violets and daisies. It might make one in love with death, to think that one should be buried in so sweet a place.

The genius of the lamented person to whose memory I have dedicated these unworthy verses was not less delicate and fragile than it was beautiful; and where cankerworms abound, what wonder if its young flowe was blighted in the bud? The savage criticism on his *Endymion*, which appeared in the *Quarterly Review*, produced the most violent effect on his susceptible mind; the agitation thus originated ended in the rupture of a blood-vessel in the lungs; a rapid consumption ensued, and the succeeding acknowledgements from more candid critics of the true greatness of his powers were ineffectual to heal the wound thus wantonly inflicted.

It may be well said that these wretched men know not what they do. They scatter their insults and their slanders without heed as to whether the poisoned shaft lights on a heart made callous by many blows or one like Keat's composed of more penetrable stuff. One of their associates is, to my knowledge, a most base and unprincipled calumniator. As to *Endymion*, was it a poem, whatever might be its defects, to be treated contemptuously by those who had celebrated, with various degrees of complacency and panegyric, *Paris*, and *Woman*, and a *Syrian Tale*, and Mrs. Lefanu, and Mr. Barrett, and Mr. Howard Payne, and a long list of the illustrious obscure? Are these the men who in their venal good nature presumed to draw a parallel between the Rev. Mr. Milman and Lord Byron? What gnat did they strain at here, after having swallowed all those camels? Against what woman taken in adultery dares the foremost of these literary prostitutes to cast his opprobrious stone? Miserable man! you, one of the meanest, have wantonly defaced one of the noblest specimens of the workmanship of God. Nor shall it be your excuse, that, murderer as you are, you have spoken daggers, but used none.

The circumstances of the closing scene of poor Keat's life were not made known to me until the *Elegy* was ready for the press. I am given to understand that the wound which his sensitive spirit had received from the criticism of *Endymion* was exasperated by the bitter sense of unrequited benefits; the poor fellow seems to have been hooted from the stage of life, no less by those on whom he had wasted the promise of his genius, than those on whom he had lavished his fortune and his care. He was accompanied to Rome, and attended in his last illness by Mr. Severn, a young artist of the highest promise, who, I have been informed, 'almost risked his own life, and sacrificed every prospect to unwearied attendance upon his dying friend. Had I known these circumstances before the completion of my poem, I should have been tempted to add my feeble tribute of applause to the more solid recompense which the virtuous man finds in the recollection of his motives. Mr. Severn can dispense with a reward from 'such stuff as dreams are made of. His conduct is a golden augury of the success of his future career—may the unextinguished Spirit of his illustrious friend animate the creations of his pencil, and please against Oblivion for his name!

[Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Preface to Adonais*]

Within the ages which before me pass
 Art shall resume and equal even the sway
 Which with Apelles and old Phidias
 She held in Hellas' unforgotten day.
 Ye shall be taught by Ruin to revive
 The Grecian forms at least from their decay,
 And Roman souls at last again shall live
 In Roman works wrought by Italian hands,
 And temples, loftier than the old temples, give
 New wonders to the world; and while still stands
 The austere Pantheon, into heaven shall soar
 A dome, its image, while the base expands
 Into a fane surpassing all before,
 Such as all flesh shall flock to kneel in: ne'er
 Such sight hath been unfolded by a door
 As this, to which all nations shall repair
 And lay their sins at this huge gate of heaven.
 And the bold Architect unto whose care
 The daring charge to raise it shall be given,
 Whom all Arts shall acknowledge as their lord,
 Whether into the marble chaos driven
 His chisel bid the Hebrew, at whose word
 Israel left Egypt, stop the waves in stone,
 Or hues of Hell be by his pencil pour'd
 Over the damn'd before the Judgment-throne,
 Such as I saw them, such as all shall see,
 Or fanes be built of grandeur yet unknown,
 The stream of his great thoughts shall spring from me,
 The Ghibelline, who traversed the three realms
 Which form the empire of eternity.
 Amidst the clash of swords, and clang of helms,
 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 recognized afar,
 Wafting its native incense through the skies.
 Sovereigns shall pause amidst their sport of war,
 Wean'd for an hour from blood, to turn and gaze
 On canvas or on stone; and they who mar
 All beauty upon earth, compell'd to praise,
 Shall feel the power of that which they destroy;
 And Art's mistaken gratitude shall raise
 To tyrants who but take her for a toy,
 Emblems and monuments, and prostitute
 Her charms to pontiffs proud, who but employ
 The man of genius as the meanest brute
 To bear a burthen, and to serve a need,
 To sell his labours, and his soul to boot.
 Who toils for nations may be poor indeed,
 But free; who sweats for monarchs is no more
 Than the gilt chamberlain, who, clothed and fee'd,
 Stands sleek and slavish, bowing at his door.
 Oh, Power that rulest and inspirest! how
 Is it that they on earth, whose earthly power
 Is likest thine in heaven in outward show,
 Least like to thee in attributes divine,
 Tread on the universal necks that bow,
 And then assure us that their rights are thine?

...
 And they were strange to me, as may betide
 With vases, to one deep in Phidian lore.
 ...

[John Keats, *Ode on Indolence*, lines 9-10]

What benefit canst thou do, or all thy tribe,
 To the great world? Thou art a dreaming
 thing,
 A fever of thyself. Think of the Earth;
 What bliss even in hope is there for thee?
 What haven? Every creature hath its home;
 Every sole man hath days of joy and pain,
 Whether his labours be sublime or low—
 The pain alone; the joy alone; distinct:
 Only the dreamer venoms all his days,
 Bearing more woe than all his sins deserve.
 ...

[John Keats, *The Fall of Hyperion. A Dream*, Canto I, lines 167-176]

[I am afraid these verses will not please you, but]
 If I esteemed you less, Envy would kill
 Pleasure, and leave to Wonder and Despair
 The ministration of the thoughts that fill
 The mind which, like a worm whose life may share
 A portion of the unapproachable,
 Marks your creations rise as fast and fair
 As perfect worlds at the Creator's will.
 But such is my regard that nor your power
 To saor above the heights where others [climb],
 Nor fame, that shadow of the unborn hour
 Cast from the envious future on the time,
 Move one regret for his unhonoured name
 Who dares these words:—the worm beneath the sod
 May lift itself in homage of the God.

[Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Sonnet to Byron*]

...
 ...I have not the slightest feel of humility towards the
 Public—or to any thing in existence,—but the eternal
 Being, the Principle of Beauty,—and the Memory of
 great Men—When I am writing for myself for mere
 the Moment's enjoyment, perhaps nature has its
 course with me—but a Preface is written to the
 Public; a thing I cannot help looking upon as an
 Enemy, and which I cannot address without feelings
 of Hostility—If I write a Preface in a supple or
 subdued style, it will not be in character with me as a
 public speaker—I wo[ul]d be subdued before my
 friends, and thank them for subduing me—but
 among Multitudes of Men—I have no feel of
 stooping, I hate the idea of humility to them—
 I never wrote one single Line of Poetry with
 the least Shadow of public thought.
 ...

[John Keats, letter to Reynolds, 9 April 1818]

STEPHEN: If Shame can on a soldier's vein-
 swollen front
 Spread deeper crimson than the battle's toil,
 Blush in your casing helmets! for see, see!
 Yonder my chivalry, my pride of war,
 Wrenched with an iron hand from firm array,
 Are routed loose about the plashy meads,
 Of honour forfeit. O, that my known voice
 Could reach your dastard ears, and fright you
 more!
 ...

[John Keats, *King Stephen. A Fragment of a Tragedy*, lines 1-8]

In a great nation, the work of an
 individual is of so little importance;
 his pleadings and excuses are so
 uninteresting; his 'way of life' such a
 nothing, that a preface seems a sort
 of impertinent bow to strangers who
 care nothing about it.
 ...

[John Keats, from the rejected dedication and preface to *Endymion*]