Title of Article: Florence as Muse: Byron and Shelley's Tuscan Competition

Journal Name: *European Romantic Review*

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Abstract:

Florence's art and poetry captured the imaginations of Byron and Shelley. During the nineteenth century, the city-state and the surrounding countryside inspired literary tourists and Byron and Shelley were no exceptions. This article focuses on the Florentine dimension of the Byron-Shelley relationship and considers Byron and Shelley's poetry inspired by the art each saw in Florence and before focusing upon each poet's response to Dante and Petrarch's examples. It shows that the influence of Florence's art and Florentine artists was the centerpiece of Byron and Shelley's connection to the city. First considering Byron's stanzas on the Medici Venus from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* IV and Shelley's "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci, in the Florentine Gallery," this article claims that *The Triumph of Life* reveals a sea change in Shelley as he approaches Dante and Petrarch in the wake of Byron's *The Prophecy of Dante*. Shelley rejects Byron's technique of "centring the self" in favor of poetry woven from carefully controlled allusion that places the visionary mode at

its core. Reading Shelley's creative relationship with Byron through their responses to Florentine art shows how Shelley found a distinctive voice designed to counter and even surpass Byron's.

Keywords: Byron, Shelley, Florence, Dante, Italy, Influence

Florence as Muse: Byron and Shelley's Tuscan Competition

After their experience of the "coldest, wettest Geneva summer" of 1816,[1] Byron and Shelley's circle separately relocated to Italy, with both poets seeking and finding in Italy the artistic stimulation they desired. Their shared passion for Italy and its culture was hardly unusual. C. P. Brand anatomizes the "Italomania" that saturated British society, characterizing this "new interest" as "romantic,"[2] where Michael Scrivener notes the "energetic reading and appropriation" that marked British consumption of Italian literature and culture.[3] But the stakes were higher for Byron and Shelley, two poets so often in "a conversation rather than a debate,"[4] as each sought to become the model of the Anglo-Italian artist that would later be vaunted by Mary Shelley in "The English in Italy." Florence became a key site for Byron and Shelley for its art and poetry above all else. Florence, as a former republican city-state, the birthplace of artists that dominated the *trecento* and *quattrocento*, and owing to its architectural splendor, had a magnetic effect upon eighteenth and nineteenth century British travellers: Byron and Shelley were no exceptions. It was Florentine art, both its plastic arts and its literature, which enchanted them and propelled their poetry to new heights. These new heights saw Shelley's poetry shadowboxing with Byron's, as Shelley would read and respond to the poet of whom he wrote: "I despair of rivalling Lord Byron, and well I may; and there is no other with whom it is worth

contending."[5] If Shelley's despair was misplaced, his ambition to contend with Byron was not. Byron and Shelley's Florentine poetry is a duet, but it is a duet in which only Shelley was conscious of performing. When Byron responds to Florence's art and poetry, Shelley responds to that and to Byron's response, finding his Anglo-Italian voice, in part, through his difference from Byron.

The Byron-Shelley relationship has enjoyed much scholarly attention, and William D. Brewer points up the pair's intellectual conversation,[6] while Charles E. Robinson emphasizes the literary character of the dialogue between the two poets. Michael O'Neill focuses upon the vital differences between Byron and Shelley even as he shows how both are united in making and unmaking "poetic identities" that are, above all, "forged in the work."[7] If "Shelley admired much of Byron's other poetry, and seems to have imagined a proprietorial relationship with some of it,"[8] Byron was also alive to Shelley's value, praising him as a man, "surely he has talent—honour—but is crazy against religion and morality," and as a poet, writing that "His Islam had much poetry".[9] But Florence brought out a new edge to Shelley's writing, particularly given that he seemed to be writing in Byron's wake, both in reputational terms and in response to Byron's work. Of course, as Brewer, Robinson, and O'Neill show, Byron also responds to Shelley's writing, but in this context, influence is mono-directional. Though the Shelley-Byron relationship is never simply antagonistic, the "poetic competition" between them saw Shelley eyeing his friend's work,[10] both in admiration and rivalry, particularly in relation to Florentine art and poetry. If, as Mary Shelley claims, Tuscany might stand in for Italy, "in thus eulogizing the country of Italy, our remarks must be understood as being principally confined to Tuscany,"[11] the ultimate "poetic competition" for Shelley might be to respond more perfectly to

Florence's art than Byron, and more than any other writers. This is not to suggest that Shelley's interest in Florence was only in terms of Byron's influence. Studies on Shelley and his relationship with Italy have shown the intensity of Shelley's Italian fascination.[12] This article aims to consider how Byron's example affected Shelley's Italian imaginings.

Mary Shelley would later crown Byron "the father of the Anglo-Italian literature,"[13] given that Shelley died before winning the plaudits for which he longed, but Shelley seemed to aim at the title for his own. This article will consider Byron and Shelley's poetry inspired by art each saw in Florence before focusing upon each poet's response to Dante and Petrarch's examples, showing that the influence of Florence's art and Florentine artists was the centerpiece of Byron and Shelley's artistic connection to the city. Shelley's Florentine poetry was refracted through the lens of Byron's achievements. But Shelley's development is clear; his confidence in his voice grew as his time in Italy and his reading of the Florentine poets deepened. This article will demonstrate that *The Triumph of Life* reveals a sea change in Shelley as he approaches Dante and Petrarch in the wake of Byron's *The Prophecy of Dante*. Shelley rejects Byron's technique of "centring the self" in favor of poetry woven from carefully controlled allusion that places the visionary mode at its core.[14] Reading Shelley's creative relationship with Byron through their responses to Florentine art shows how Shelley found a distinctive counter voice designed to respond to and even surpass Byron's.

For Byron, the city of Florence inspired mixed emotions, at best. He anticipated the Goncourt brothers' later description of Florence as "ville toute anglaise,"[15] and

resented it keenly. But Byron was hiding an earlier fascination with Florence behind his outward disdain where he had seemed more one of the "herd" (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* III. 68: 652) from which he longed to distance himself than a unique individual. Byron had written of Florence in both his juvenilia with "To Florence" and "Stanzas: Written in Passing the Ambracian Gulph," (hereafter "Stanzas") and both poems rehearse familiar protestations of Byron's imagined love for a city he had not yet visited. In "To Florence," Byron avows to his addressee:

> Though mightiest in the lists of fame,
>
> That glorious city still shall be;
>
> On me 'twill hold a dearer claim,
>
> As spot of thy nativity:

("To Florence," 37-40)

Even as early as 1809, Byron seeks a personal claim to "That glorious city," refusing to settle for the same attachment enjoyed by other enchanted hunters of a city "mightiest in the lists of fame." "Stanzas" promises emotional fidelity to the city, "Whilst thou art fair and I am young" (3. 11). There lurks a fear or recoil from being seen to follow the devotion of others where Byron admits both his love and its repetitiousness: "Florence! whom I will love as well / As ever yet was said or sung," (3. 8-9) where the "yet" acknowledges that Byron is late to the Florentine party, despite having not even visited the city, struggling to differentiate himself from Florence's many votaries. Worse still, such personal and apparently guileless expressions conjured the specter of the Della Cruscans, and that "embarrassing resemblance" had to be lived down if not forgotten.[16] To write of Florence at all risked monotony. Byron needed a different gambit.

By the time Byron made it to Italy as a famous poet, Florence would fall foul of his frequently proclaimed wish to avoid all English travellers. Byron styled himself as an exile and a traveller rather than as tourist, and Florence also reminded him of his earlier, less successful attempts to approach the city via a wishful though not accomplished effort of "imaginative geography."[17] Byron deplored "the dirty English at Rome & Florence" (*BLJ* 11, 165), and assured John Murray that he did not follow in the well-trodden paths of the English, "now I have *lived* among the Italians—not *Florenced* and *Romed*—and Galleried—and Conversationed it for a few months" (*BLJ* 5, 180). All that "ever yet was said or sung" ("Stanzas," 3. 9) of Florence was not the only thing to irritate Byron. More crucially, he was wounded by being an undistinguished cipher in a long line of British admirers of the city. Underscoring that he is a man who has "*lived* among the Italians," Byron removes himself from the clichéd realm inhabited by what he considered to be mere tourists. Byron aims, as Will Bowers has it, "to be in Italy without the English,"[18] separating himself from even the memory of his earlier imaginary infatuation with the city, where he was, undoubtedly, all English. But any antipathetic feelings towards Florence were complicated by Byron's clear infatuation with Dante's poetry and his poetic responsiveness to Florentine art. Byron attempted to put an alternative stamp upon his Italian dealings by dissociating himself from the English where he could. Striking a pose as the "anti-tourist,"[19] to borrow James Buzard's term, Byron would not affect to despise Florentine art as a new Smelfungus, but nor would he number himself among the run of the mill tourists, his fellow British admirers of the city's beauties. Byron claims a "hyphenated identity,"[20] neither entirely Anglo nor Italian, not quite a tourist nor a native of the city whose art he would incorporate into his own art. Byron, when looking upon Florentine art and engaging with Florentine poets, might attempt to

become "the poet who had remade travel in his image,"[21] but more importantly, his response to Florentine art and poetry aims to become the ultimate response, the summative judgment of his age upon an earlier age's achievements.

Byron, as Nicholas Halmi rightly notes, "dissolves the distinctions between Englishman and Italian, between foreigner and native, in stanzas 42-3 [of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* IV],"[22] and he attempts to do so by distancing, though not quite severing, himself from the English aspiration to discover a foreign tourist spot at which to enjoy themselves and even alter to make it conform to their demands. Florentine art would offer Byron the opportunity to demarcate himself from fellow English travellers, but Byron would not "dissolve[s] distinctions" or play the Italian. Rather, Byron positions himself as the ultimate arbiter of taste, where his sensitivity and his celebrity, so carefully displayed in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* III, are sharpened into forming the grounds of his qualifications for writing poetry in praise of the Medici Venus, one of the most eulogized statues in the world.

The Medici Venus was only one stop on Byron's whirlwind tour of the art galleries, and, according to his letters, not his favorite. Writing to John Cam Hobhouse, Byron listed a tiring schedule of viewings that he intended to keep in Florence. He writes of "allowing a day for *Terni*—and one— to-morrow for the Venus of Canova & de Medicis—and the tombs of Machiavel—Michael Angelo—& Alfieri—which is & are all I care to see here—were I to stay seasons" (*BLJ* 5, 216-7), retaining a typical deprecatory attitude to the majority of sights in Florence. But if Byron only stayed a single day in Florence, he made that day count, as his letter to Murray reveals: "I went to the two galleries—from which one returns drunk with beauty—the Venus is more

for admiration than love—but there are sculpture and painting —which for the first time at all gave me an idea of what people mean by their *cant* & (what Mr. Braham calls) "entusimusy" (i.e. enthusiasm) about those two most artificial of the arts" (*BLJ* 5, 218). Laughter gives way to admiration. "Drunk with beauty" but sobering into criticism, Byron begins his appraisal of the arts that lured him to Florence despite himself. As well as the two galleries, Byron also managed to visit "the Medici Chapel—fine frippery in great slabs of various expensive stones—to commemorate fifty rotten & forgotten carcases" (*BLJ* 5, 218) and pass on to Santa Croce, but immediately, Byron makes the parallel with England, calling it "the Westminster abbey of Italy" (*BLJ* 5, 218), where, predictably, because of the analogy, "I did not admire *any* of these tombs" (*BLJ* 5, 218).

Though Byron claimed "the Venus is more for admiration than love," (*BLJ* 5, 218) the distinction seems forgotten in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* IV as the speaker looks upon the statue. Byron frames the speaker as the famous poet speaking *in propria persona* while looking upon a famous statue. He conjures intimacy, as the reader watches his encounter with the statue, and a larger sense of cultural significance of the moment. John Barrell writes, "The hardest case the critic-as-magistrate had to confront was the case of Venus, the goddess whose beauty offered at once the most dangerous threat to manly virtue and the most perfect polishing agent the fine arts had been able to conceive."[23] Byron aims to distinguish himself as capable of appreciating her beauty without imperiling his masculinity. Byron knew himself to be one of a long list of grand tourists, admirers, and writers who had attempted the "daunting" task of encapsulating the statue's significance and beauty in words.[24] But Byron knew how to turn his celebrity to his advantage, and by *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* IV, he

was ready to stake his high profile claim to the city, now no mere acolyte amongst acolytes, but writing as a legend looking upon a legend.

For Byron to give a superlative demonstration of his taste he required the ultimate subject: The Medici Venus. The statue stood for the Uffizi gallery as a whole, representing the glories of Florence's museum. Along with other artworks from across Italy, it had recently suffered a removal in 1802 when Napoleon ordered the transfer of the statue to Paris, and it was only in 1816 that the statue returned to its original location in Florence. Only one year later, in 1817, when Byron looked upon its beauty, its aesthetic power was shadowed with the awareness of how easily Florence's defeat allowed Napoleon to take possession of possibly its greatest aesthetic prize. Napoleon's interest in its beauty must have bolstered Byron's own appreciation, given Byron's fascination with Napoleon.[25] Byron presents his viewing of the statue as an encounter styled as more active than passive, where his view is nothing so mundane as objective, but rather, it is the view of an artist looking upon art. Maureen McCue writes that "While Romantic or poetic connoisseurs like Byron and Shelley might be familiar with the scholarship pertaining to Old Master works, their writings on art tend to offer an exclusively emotional understanding of the works,"[26] and this insight is suggestive of the lyric sensibility that Byron emphasizes. The statue is a work of art, but it is a work of art best appreciated by Byron, who has the "real taste for the beautiful" that distinguishes him from the typical tourist.[27]

Indulging in the Wordsworthian communal "we," where we momentarily flatter ourselves promoted to sharing his discerning gaze, Byron expends five stanzas on his interpretation of the Medici Venus. He asks his reader to make the connection

between statue and onlooker: Byron's singular contemplation finds its ideal referent in the statue's splendor. Both speaker and statue enjoy an elite status in this carefully staged encounter. Byron immediately impresses upon his reader the significance of seeing the statue in person, not as an object to look at in books, but to experience fully. For Byron, Venus "fills / The air around with beauty" (IV. 49: 433-4) as its onlookers "inhale" its aspect as "We stand" (IV. 49: 434 and 438). The statue is not admired simply for what it is. Byron turns our attention to "What Mind can make, when Nature's self would fail" (IV. 49: 439), forcing the reader's acknowledgement of the mind that creates rather than the creation. The parallel between the sculptor and the poet needs no gloss: Byron commands our attention along with his poetry, just as the sculptor is as significant as his masterpiece. Where other appreciators had privately offered their perspective upon the Medici Venus in prose,[28] Byron connects with it as an artist looking upon a work of art who, by virtue of his status as poet, sees the artist behind the statue.

Byron asks us to linger upon the effects of the artist's work, spending line after line exploring how the onlooker reacts to the sculpture, as though leading us through how best to respond. We know of the worth of the statue, Byron seems to say, but we must begin to consider the nature of its effect upon us. The statue's effects are experienced by virtue of being in the presence of its beauty, and possessing the sensitivity to feel its effects. The persistence and corporeal nature of its effect is carefully laid out:

> We gaze and turn away, and know not where,
> Dazzled and drunk with beauty, till the heart
> Reels with its fulness; there—for ever there—
> Chain'd to the chariot of triumphal Art,

We stand as captives, and would not depart.
Away!—there need no words, nor terms precise,
The paltry jargon of the marble mart,
Where Pedantry gulls Folly—we have eyes:
Blood—pulse—and breast, confirm the Dardan Shepherd's prize.

(IV. 50: 442-50)

Repeating a line from his letter to Murray ("drunk with beauty" in *BLJ* 5, 218), the lines sound a similar note to those that Byron would write in *Beppo* in 1817 while at Venice. In *Beppo* his speaker recommends the Venus of Florence in parentheses, before celebrating "Love in full life and length, not love ideal, / No, nor ideal beauty, that fine name, / But something better still, so very real," (*Beppo* 13. 97-99). Here, reality is the effect of art upon the body, where "drunk with beauty," we reel before the real, "Chain'd to the chariot of triumphal Art," without resenting our fetters. The allusion to Petrarch's *Triumph of Love*, and love's "captivating chain" (I. 66),[29] replaces love's violent power with art as the compelling force. We are reminded that "the Dardan Shepherd" and his prize resulted in the abduction of Helen and the Trojan War. Beauty inspires war as well as love, and even when Venus vanquishes Mars in the following stanza, violence shadows the lines.

Art's power flexes its muscle in the lines where if the statue compels its observer, Byron's poetry enchains his reader. Scorning any so-called pedantic explication of the statue, Byron nods to the sheer number of works written on Italian art in the early nineteenth century. Between 1800 to 1816 at least eleven works had been published on Italian art and architecture, from the work of Richard Duppa to John Chamberlaine's writings on the Bolognese, Roman, Florentine, and Venetian

schools.[30] With his simple avowal, "we have eyes," Byron wrests aesthetic judgment out of the purview of the art historian and into the realm of the onlooker who, led by Byron, can appreciate the value of the "Dardan Shepherd's" prize. Imagining those "lava kisses," transposed in *Beppo* into an appreciation of the Italian language as like "kisses from a female mouth" (*Beppo* 44. 346), art has a power that seems more physical than mental, acting upon the body through imaginative experience. Byron seems to imagine a more positive version of Florence or Stendhal Syndrome *avant la lettre*. Florence, and the Medici Venus, will not be explained but can only be experienced. But Byron can preserve the experience in his poetry with his verbal dexterity separating him from those lovers of the Medici Venus who claim, "there exists no language in the world that can model so many charms."[31] The final stanza dealing with the statue, stanza 53, jettisons the communal "we" in favor of "I," as Byron tacitly admits what had already been whispered: the statue finds its fullest significance by being looked upon by such an onlooker. Byron's hope to make his own mark upon Florence comes with the realization that it is through the prism of self that Florence's art can be displayed to the Romantic reader.

Byron made a monument of himself looking upon art, but Shelley could not assume anything like the same market for his personal observations. Unlike Byron, Shelley took far longer than a single day to study Florentine art. Mary Shelley reports that:

> [Shelley] has been very busily employed—and besides this he often spends many hours of the day at the gallery admiring & studying the statues & the pictures—There are many divine ones—he says—for my part I have not seen any thing except one peep I took at the Venus di Medici which is not a striking

> statue—both from its size & the meaningless expression of the countenance the form requires study to understand its full merit.[32]

If Mary Shelley had not yet had the chance to study it, Shelley would choose to avoid writing about it. In his notes upon the Uffizi, Shelley does not so much as mention the Medici Venus, an omission that Frederic S. Colwell also finds startling.[33] Its absence may be less jarring when we note that in the same year that Shelley visited the gallery, Shelley had cause to envy the success of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* IV, including its lines on the Medici Venus, as Byron became, in *Don Juan*'s amused reckoning, the "grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme" (*Don Juan* XI. 55. 440). Even Shelley's generous critical imagination suffered staggering blows when he compared Byron's commercial success to his own lack thereof. Shelley wrote in his "Sonnet to Byron," "If I esteemed you less, Envy would kill / Pleasure,"[34] and these lines suggest a lingering, if often soft-pedaled, element of the relationship between the two poets, and in particular, how Shelley responded to Byron.[35] In the final year of his life, Shelley wrote "—I have lived too long near Lord Byron & the sun has extinguished the glowworm; for I cannot hope with St. John, that 'the light came into the world, & the world knew it not." (*Letters: PBS* 2, 424) At this stage, Shelley did not feel quite extinguished but he did not delude himself as to their relative success. Shelley's decision to avoid the Medici Venus, along with the Uffizi Gallery's most renowned pieces,[36] seems calculated to avoid competing with the poet to whom Shelley compared his relationship as "the worm beneath the sod / May lift itself in homage of the God" ("Sonnet to Byron," 13-14). Though his notes on sculptures were never intended for publication, with Daniel Hughes writing, "in truth, his comments on works of art… do not show an exceptional aesthetic awareness,"[37] they allowed Shelley to think through his response to art works upon which Byron had not written.

Shelley would fix upon a Florentine artwork to which he would respond without Byron shadowing his every intellectual and artistic move.

One of those works was the *Head of Medusa*, once ascribed to Leonardo by contemporary authorities, and Shelley revealed his "ekphrastic anxieties" in his response to it in "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci, in the Florentine Gallery."[38] The poem was left unfinished and unrevised by Shelley and no holograph manuscript has been traced. Mario Praz writes that the poem might "give rise to a new sense of beauty" because of "the very objects which should induce a shudder,"[39] and John Hollander notes that terror feels like "petrifying loveliness." [40] Byron's attention to the body's response to beauty, where we are "Dazzled and drunk with beauty" (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* IV. 50: 443) is magnified in "On the Medusa" to make terror and beauty come together in a distinctly Shelleyan sublime. Byron's attention to "the Dardan Shepherd's prize" (IV. 50: 450), precipitating the Trojan War, and the statue's observer's status as "Chain'd to the chariot of triumphal Art" (IV. 50: 445) had already suggested that beauty, violence, and danger could be co-present in art. But Shelley's fascination with juxtaposition was also learned from Dante's example. Shelley mimics the Florentine poet when looking at Florentine art. Writing to Thomas Love Peacock of his disappointment with Michaelangelo from Naples in February 1819, Shelley asked: "What is terror without a contrast —with & a connection with loveliness? How well Dante understood this secret, Dante with whom this artist has been so presumptuously compared!" (*Letters: PBS* 2, 80). Above all, "On the Medusa" is a study of contrast. Carol Jacobs traces its connection with *A Defence of Poetry* to suggest that the loveliness of Shelley's poetry leavens the Medusa's terrifying appearance,[41] for it is the feeling for the play of light and shade, beauty and

terror, which vivifies the fragment. Unlike Byron's rejection of critical observation, as Sophie Thomas shows, Shelley's poem "turns from an account of experience to distanced observation."[42] Though Hughes is surprised that Shelley should light upon the painting given Hughes' own negative judgment of the work,[43] the painting's relative obscurity and less dazzling aesthetic power might have been its selling point. Its lower cultural status befits a poet suffering from a lower estimation by his public. Shelley did not have to feign admiration or intoxication that he might not feel. Rather, Shelley would anatomize his experience rather than only describe it, embodying and reflecting upon the artwork, its effect, and the poet's role, never allowing the poem to give way to unconsidered admiration.

If Byron had ushered his reader into the gallery to imagine the experience of being there and looking upon the Medici Venus, Shelley attempts to erase his surroundings, transporting us into the picture as if within it rather than outside of it. We are not asked to pay any mind to the status of the speaker, but to enter into the picture with the speaker. Without the title, "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci, in the Florentine Gallery," there would be no clear evidence that the poem was ever intended to be ekphrastic in the vein of Byron's stanzas on the Medici Venus.

It lieth, gazing on the midnight sky,
  Upon the cloudy mountain peak supine;
Below, far lands are seen tremblingly;
  Its horror and its beauty are divine.
Upon its lips and eyelids seems to lie
  Loveliness like a shadow, from which shine,
Fiery and lurid, struggling underneath,

The agonies of anguish and of death.

Yet it is less the horror than the grace

Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone,

("On the Medusa," 1-10)

Shelley seems to be equally drawn to both the Medusa's horror and its beauty: both are "divine." Steve Ellis smiles as he notes how the Pre-Raphaelites adored Florence as "a kind of Giotto-Beatrice-Dante Utopia in which... 'Art, Friendship and Love' flourish in mutual interaction,"[44] but Shelley is less deceived: his Florence is the home of the *Inferno* as well as the *Paradiso*.[45] The lines above seem held in readiness for violence to come. Loveliness is "like a shadow", and such loveliness might "lie" as Shelley's punning line-ending suggests, but even that piece of deceit cannot efface what is "Fiery and lurid, struggling underneath, / The agonies of anguish and of death." This art agitates rather than calms and the poet must, as Dante did, find words adequate to the challenge of writing superhuman passion, violence, and beauty. The rhymes are stiff and deliberately fail to harmonize. Rhymes, like "tremblingly" and "lie," witness the strain suffered by a poet who would seek to order the chaos conjured in the painting. His reversal of expectation with "Yet it is less the horror than the grace / Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone," suggests to Jacobs that the poet uses the terms "horror" and "grace" to describe the corpse and the painting respectively.[46] But this division seems too clear-cut. Just as Shelley would often couple hope with despair,[47] Shelley troubles the sense that only horror could ossify its observer, nodding to the diverse interpretative history of the Medusa myth where, as Jerome J. McGann shows, some classical writers thought that it was the horror of the Medusa's appearance that turned the viewer into stone, and others believed it was her

beauty.[48] Shelley learned from Dante in *The Divine Comedy*: grace can entwine with horror, and together, they make the work of art live its aesthetic life most fully. If Byron had leaned on his celebrity to create his stanzas on the Medici Venus, Shelley finds support for his different approach in Dante's example.

Dante's influence, the picture's stimulus, and Florence, as "the most beautiful city I ever saw" (*Letters: PBS* 2, 33), see Shelley mold his poetry to respond to Florence's power in a way designed to be both unique and inflected by tradition. This is the first surviving poem that reveals Shelley's attempt to writer strict *ottava rima* throughout an entire work, suggesting that Shelley sought an Italian formal vehicle for poetry to complement an artwork featured in Florence's Uffizi Gallery. But "On the Medusa" also sees Shelley determined not to be overshadowed by Byron's version of ekphrasis. If Byron is an admirer of the Medici Venus, Shelley would rather be a hero:[49] Shelley "goes against the monster with naked eye,"[50] choosing not to vanquish the Medusa, but to "humanize and harmonize" with his unwavering gaze. The reversal is stark: the Medusa is fixed, turned into a monument, by the gaze of the artist and the onlooker. Shelley pinpoints what James A. W. Heffernan calls "the petrifying impact of beauty on life itself."[51] The poem's final lines almost seem to demystify the Medusa, describing its face as "A woman's countenance, with serpent locks, / Gazing in death on heaven from those wet rocks." (39-40) But it is just the appearance of a woman's face, not an actual woman rendered in the painting. Shelley never uses the feminine pronoun and the Medusa remains ungendered and separate from human life. The "ever-shifting mirror" (37) of Shelley's imaginative eye, or the poem itself, sponsors the endless play of "the beauty and the terror," (38) in the stanza, where uncertainty adds to the Medusa's compelling quality. But unlike in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

and its glorious celebration of the poet himself, speaking *in propria persona*, Shelley displaces his own ego in those final lines. Shelley lets the Medusa reveal itself, less as a mere monster than as a hybrid creature, possessing a woman's face with snakes for hair, beautiful and terrifying in proportions never quite defined. *Sotto voce*, Shelley flags the terms of his departure from Byron: when Shelley writes ekphrastic poetry, he need not place himself so obtrusively in the poem as Byron does. Alexander M. Schlutz sees Shelley "aim[s] to undo the representational and ideological structures of power," but there is a sense that his target is rather less broad than this excellent point might suggest. When Shelley takes aim against such hierarchies, Byron might be the ultimate poetic tyrant, responsible or standing in for many of the representational "structures of power," against whom to inveigh. When Shelley chooses to de-emphasize the self rather than letting it blaze in the foreground, departure from Byron's example cannot be far from his thoughts.

Shelley did not publish "On the Medusa" during his lifetime, and the five-stanza fragment remains hauntingly incomplete.[52] Shelley may have lost confidence in his version of ekphrasis in comparison to Byron's, or simply put it aside in favor of other projects. But Dante remained a vital presence in Shelley's immersion in Florentine art, and Dante's importance for Shelley only grew. Byron enjoyed a similarly intense relationship with Dante. In this sense, Florence was a city of ghosts for both poets. Though the Shelley circle "had an ambiguous relationship with other British expatriates," as Paul Stock writes in relation to Pisa,[53] Shelley would imagine his Florentine poetic predecessors so keenly as to live almost amongst them. Shelley writes to Byron from Milan in 1818: "When Dante walked through the streets, the old women pointed at him, and said, 'That is the man who went to Hell with Virgil; see

how his beard is singed.' Stories unlike this, but to the full as improbable and monstrous, are propagated of you at Venice; but I know not wherefore you should regard them" (*Letters: PBS* 2, 11). Shelley must have suppressed a sigh at his tacit allowance that it was Byron, not himself, who won a parallel with their shared poetic idol. Though Shelley pretends to distance himself with "old women" and show sympathy for Byron's notoriety, imaginative vigor sponsors the lines. Dante's footsteps still ring through Florence for a poet more than half in love with the Florentine's imaginative power.

Byron was likewise infatuated. Byron's fascination with Dante would reach its fullest expression when he wrote *The Prophecy of Dante*, and his admiration for Italian pride in the Florentine poet saw him praise them in the Ravenna Journal: "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" (*BLJ* 8, 39). His decision to translate "Francesca of Rimini: Translation from the Inferno of Dante, Canto 5,"" from Dante's original suggests his preoccupation with stepping into Dante's shoes. Though Gregory Dowling might write, "no-one is going to claim that *The Prophecy of Dante* is as important a poem as *Don Juan*," the former might claim higher importance when considering how Dante affected Byron's writing. Nor is it the case that "the influence of Dante on Byron was nothing like as important as that of Pulci, Berni or Casti, or even that of Ariosto and Tasso."[54] Dante became one key element of how Byron would respond to Florence where the Romantic poet would emulate his powerful predecessor. But Shelley would compete with Byron in order to carry the torch of the poet of whom he wrote, "Dante excelled all poets except Shakespeare" (*Letters: PBS* 2, 112). Though Shelley would call Keats the "third among the sons of

light,"[55] next to Homer and Dante, it was Byron who represented the real competition to Shelley's effort to be the ultimate Anglo-Italian or Anglo-Florentine poet. Maureen McCue writes that "Romantic Anglo-Italian writers represented the predilection for Italian art as a return to the wellspring of their own literary tradition, which includes Dante and his contemporaries as much as Chaucer, Milton and Shakespeare."[56] Dante, not viewed as separate from Byron or Shelley by reason of nationality, was fair game to both poets. Shelley strove against Byron's achievements to become worthy of *Adonais*' epithet.

Byron and Shelley had long admired Dante and made translations of his work. Byron not only translated the Paolo and Francesca episode from Canto V of the *Inferno* at the suggestion of Teresa Guiccioli in 1820, but also cast himself in the part of Paolo in a letter to his lover of 22 April 1819, claiming "Rather than Heaven without you, I should prefer the Inferno of that Great Man buried in your city, so long as you were with me, as Francesca was with her lover" (*BLJ* 6, 112). For Byron, stepping into Dante's shoes was the ultimate means of claiming his own portion of Dante's power. Teresa Guiccioli prompted Byron's attempt and her request licensed his presumption. Byron wished to inhabit a time "When words were things that came to pass" (*The Prophecy of Dante*, II, 2), and Dante's persona, combined with his own, might give his words the force of deeds. Byron ranked *The Prophecy of Dante* as his "best thing," implying that any objection would come from its potential obscurity with his hedging phrase, "if it be not *unintelligible*" (*BLJ* 7, 59) allowing for divergence of opinion. If Byron's is "imitative rhyme," ("Dedication," 4) he also insists on the importance of place, praising Teresa's speech with "only in the sunny South / Such sounds are utter'd, and such charms display'd" ("Dedication," 11-12). Byron whispers that his

reader might afford the same geographical significance to Dante's poetry and Byron's own Anglo-Italian identity. Donald H. Reiman shows that Byron joins a tradition, taking on "the role of the artist as patriot and political activist, a tradition long sanctified in Italy," and adopted by British writers such as Milton and Shakespeare and continuing in the Romantic period with Scott and Wordsworth.[57] Mary Shelley was similarly fascinated by the conflict between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines in *Valperga*, and as Stuart Curran writes, "what is at stake in *Valperga* is a conception of republican liberty at odds with the recent restoration of autocracy on the European continent."[58] Jane Stabler notes that Byron senses the "contradiction for English writers," where "the exiled patriot" is still a role viewed with suspicion by an English audience, and even the English poet.[59] But Dante could be another mask for Byron with exile forming the ground of their connection.[60]

Byron, speaking in Dante's voice, achieves a new freedom to write of an exile uncomplicated by his personal circumstances. Byron knew that his own exile was chosen, not ordered by the state. Florence, the most English of Italian cities, stands in for England and is the site where Byron hopes to represent Dante. For Byron's fascination with Dante moves quickly from the heavens and Beatrice's presence, to earth and to Florence's notorious treatment of Dante, of which Boccaccio writes when treating Dante's "singular Italic splendour," as a poet who "was born in our city."[61] Byron's Dante aspires on behalf of his city.

> I would have had my Florence great and free:
> Oh Florence! Florence! unto me thou wast
> Like that Jerusalem which the Almighty He
> Wept over, 'but thou wouldst not;' as the bird

Gathers its young, I would have gather'd thee
Beneath a parent pinion, hadst thou heard
My voice; but as the adder, deaf and fierce,
Against the breast that cherish'd thee was stirr'd
Thy venom, and my state thou didst amerce,
And doom this body forfeit to the fire.

(*The Prophecy of Dante* I, 59-68)

Caught up in the conflict that had raged for centuries between the Ghibellines and the Guelphs, which morphed into a struggle between the White and the Black Guelphs once the Ghibellines had effectively lost their power, Dante suffered at the hands of enemies now ascendant in Florence. Now on the losing side as a White Guelph, Dante was accused of a multitude of crimes and on 27 January 1302 was found guilty of corruption, extortion, and misuse of public funds and was finally condemned *in absentia* (having remained in Rome) to the confiscation of his property and permanent exile. If he were to return to Florence, he would be burned alive. His city was lost. In some sense, *Inferno* is dedicated to an explanation of the internecine warfare, factions, and quarrels that rent Florence in two, and Byron was alive to its civic engagement. Byron does not miss his moment to show Dante as betrayed by the city he adored, and he ventriloquizes a poet that, in his mind, stands above Florence as a paternal protector. Though Florence plays the viper, Byron's "Isaiah-like" prophecy does not skip a beat.[62] Byron's Dante loads the poem with his wrongs so as to forgive the lot. The exact nature of Dante's political views was much debated by the nineteenth century, where "for Italian neo-Ghibellines and neo-Guelfs what was at stake was less the true nature of Dante's own beliefs than the possibility of enlisting his figure for opposing camps of the Italian political divide."[63] Byron glides over this

debate, reminding us of Dante as a patriot above all. If Florence dooms "this body," it cannot doom his mind. The mind stays Florentine despite the body's exile and death. Though wearing Dante's mask, Byron's poem of defiance and exile sees him writing in a vein that would be familiar to his audience.

Byron implicates Florentine imperviousness to Dante's worth as a mirror to the treatment he received from an English audience, an audience that would socially doom him even as they continued to whisper about him in the streets of Italy. Byron yokes English gossipy ostracism to Florentine legally enforced exile, and the knowing exaggeration of the gesture does not quite undercut its bitter force. But if Dante could flee Florence, the English were more difficult to escape. Even Claire Clairmont, despite their breach, was alert to how Byron hoped to avoid the English crowds, suggesting to him in 1819: "I think you would be much better at Naples than at Venice, for it is so very large & populous a city that you would find yourself but little incommoded by the English. It is the most delightful place in the world—."[64] Though Florence's government had betrayed Dante, it was Anglo-Florentine society that repelled this nineteenth-century English poet. Florence was the epicenter for English tourism during the period,[65] and Byron's reluctance to be in Florence was at least partially founded upon his hopes of avoiding his compatriots. Conjuring Dante's Florence gave him an ideal and idealized analogy for his own troubles and it offered a means of connecting with the city imaginatively rather than literally. Jane Stabler sensitively writes of how "Dante's art moves us closer to an understanding of his world from the edge of ours,"[66] and Byron draws parallels between those worlds. To speak of Dante and Florence becomes an oblique means of speaking of himself and the English, those at home and those in Florence.

But Byron was very much alive to his own potential blind spots as an "Anglo-Italian" with the accent placed on the first word. Writing to Lady Byron in 1820, Byron insists "you must not mind what the English fools say of Italy—they know nothing—the[y] go gaping from Rome to Florence and so on—which is like seeing England in Saint James's Street.— —I live with the people—and amongst them—& know them—and you may rely upon my not deceiving you, though I may myself" (*BLJ* 7, 256-7). Painfully aware of the possibility that he may flatter himself when it comes to understanding Italy and the Italians, and by extension, Dante and Dante's Florence, Byron runs up against the limits of any hope to comprehend Italy as an Italian might. *The Prophecy of Dante* suggests the frontiers of understanding through formal experimentation, where Byron's *terza rima* sinks and soars as if to draw attention to the very different linguistic features of English and Italian. Stephen Cheeke reveals a major problem for Byron in the poem, where "[t]he danger of translation or imitation, however, is that the notion of an authentic originating voice (that which is the poem's own) may become lost along the way,"[67] and Byron seems to thrust that point to the fore by breaking his own form with calculatedly dangerous rhyme choices, a type of formal sabotage that slyly nods to the problem of translating poetry even as it does so. Byron held that prior to his own effort, the Paolo and Francesca episode of *Inferno* was "*Non tradotto, ma tradito*" (not translated but betrayed),[68] laced with the dark knowledge that all translation might be a form of betrayal. Much like Shelley, a gifted and prolific translator in his own right, Byron uneasily sensed the difficulty of rendering any author's words in an unfamiliar tongue, just as Shelley wrote of translation as casting "a violet into a crucible."[69]

In *The Prophecy of Dante*, Byron uses form to ghost Dante's words, making his reader aware of the slippage between English and Italian:

> The day may come she would be proud to have
> The dust she dooms to scatter, and transfer
> Of him, whom she denied a home, the grave.
> But this shall not be granted; let my dust
> Lie where it falls; nor shall the soil which gave
> Me breath, but in her sudden fury thrust
> Me forth to breathe elsewhere,

(*The Prophecy of Dante* I, 74-80)

Dante's *terza rima*, in Byron's hands, permits lapses, drawing attention to the difficulty of writing Italian rhymes in English. Byron enjoyed anatomizing the proclaimed failings of English in *Beppo*. He celebrates the Italian language by virtue of its un-Englishness, and stanza 44, in particular, celebrates the erotic charge of Italian in a move against Philip Sidney's promotion of the English language at the expense of other European languages, particularly Italian.[70] But even in lines that bemoan English, Byron makes his virtuosity undo his claim. English's "grunting guttural" (*Beppo* 44: 351) attains grace in Byron's poetry. So good a rhymer as Byron would not fail to make his rhymes chime correctly unless by choice. Byron chooses to spoil his *terza rima* in specific places, such as with the rhymes between "have," "grave," and "gave." Byron carefully emphasizes the Anglophone poet's strain to write Dante's meter, and the choice to light upon this particular set of rhymed words underscores how poorly Florence treated its most celebrated son. Byron visited Dante's tomb in Ravenna, and insisted "Dante was the poet of liberty. Persecution, exile, the dread of a foreign grave, could not shake his principles."[71] Isolating these

words allows Byron to break into the poem, where he lets the rhymes crack to reveal his personal outrage at Dante's treatment at the hands of the Florentine government. Florence and Dante are bound together darkly, with the latter, for Byron, the victim of the former. Byron's relationship with the English, so many of whom travelled to Florence hundreds of years later, affords him a parallel that makes his snarl against the city personally felt as well as distanced into poetry.

If Byron made poetic and personal capital out of Florence's political wrongs, at first, Shelley chose to rival him in a similarly politically charged fashion. "Mazenghi,"[72] now often overlooked, is a fragment likely composed in May 1818 that shows Shelley responding to tyranny meted out by what had been a republic before being corrupted into autocracy. Though he was an early adopter of what Rosemary Sweet terms the "idealisation of the republican Florentine past that became so widespread in the Victorian era,"[73] Shelley takes a different tack in "Mazenghi." Alan Weinberg rightly shows that Shelley's focus in the fragment is upon the "sad reality" (Dedication to *The Cenci*, *Major Works*, 314) of Florentine politics, and Shelley's fascination with the relationship between tyranny and poetic power unites "Mazenghi" with his lyrical dramas *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound*.[74] But Shelley chose not to complete the fragment. "Mazenghi," as a narrative poem, seems unusual for and perhaps unsuited to Shelley in terms of its genre at this point of his career. Shelley's first attempt to write of Florentine politics had failed. Shelley needed a different method of attack to rival Byron and claim the primacy of his own connection to Dante.

Reading *The Prophecy of Dante*, Shelley would have been immediately aware of the force of personality present in Byron's poem, where Byron claimed the Dantean

mantle through identification with his great predecessor. This path was no longer open to Shelley, though it seems unlikely that it would have been his own method to connect with Dante. Shelley knew of Byron's interest in Dante, and praising *Don Juan*, paid him the ultimate compliment that "Dante hardly exceeds it." (*Letters: PBS* 2, 199). This accolade not only displays Shelley's admiration but also his discernment as he notes how Byron ranges across levels and modes in his ambitious epic. When turning to *The Prophecy of Dante,* Shelley is less fulsome but still supportive, calling the poetry "indeed sublime" (*Letters: PBS* 2, 347) even as he consoles Byron in terms reminiscent of how he wrote about *Prometheus Unbound*.[75] Shelley wrote, "the subject, no less than the style, is addressed to the few, and, like some of the highest passages in 'Childe Harold', will only be *fully* appreciated by the select readers of many generations." (*Letters: PBS* 2, 347) Even here, *Don Juan* remained, in Shelley's eyes, Byron's stellar achievement as Shelley continued, "'Don Juan' is your great victory over the alleged inflexibility of your powers." *Don Juan*, with its variedness, its speed, and its dazzle, would be the example with which Shelley would compete for the Dantean laurels.

Just as with *Prometheus Unbound*, *The Triumph of Life* profits from Shelley's careful abstraction from definite material history into conceptual modes of thought. In "Mazenghi," Shelley embeds a bitter sense of a cyclical view of history, "So monarchy succeeds to Freedom's foison" ("Mazenghi," 18), with the final archaic word of the stanza reiterating how ancient is the tale of Albert Marenghi and Florence's decision to become a "liberticide" ("Mazenghi," 30). By the time of *The Triumph of Life*, Shelley was more interested in the way those cycles happen. In *The Triumph of Life*, Shelley did not continue to work upon the specific theme of

Florentine corruption, but key ideas persisted as "Mazenghi" and its "topic of heroic resistance in the face of persecution" reached a new pitch and power in Shelley's final unfinished major work.[76] To rival Byron, Shelley would take on Dante's formidable formal bequest with Shelley's *terza rima* reveling in its austere power. Shelley's handling of the form aims to exceed Byron's effort in *The Prophecy of Dante*, learn from the speed and verbal quicksilver of *Don Juan*, and incorporate his ability to render a new world that he had inherited from Dante and Petrarch. Competition would spur Shelley into his final and greatest engagement with Florence's celebrated sons.

It is with *The Triumph of Life* that Shelley takes his engagement with its poets, Petrarch and Dante, to its highest imaginative pitch, as if displaying his deep understanding of them as an alternative vision in comparison to that of his friend and rival. Byron had been living in very close proximity to the Shelleys in Pisa. Only two months before beginning composition of *The Triumph of Life*, Shelley reports to Leigh Hunt, "Particular circumstances, — or rather I should say, particular dispositions in Lord B's character render the close & exclusive intimacy with him in which I find myself, intolerable to me." (*Letters: PBS* 2, 393). Shelley's distress at Byron's presence is clear. Mary, writing to Claire Clairmont, would describe Byron as "one as remorseless as he is unprincipled." (*Letters: PBS* 2, 397). Their friendship had soured. But Shelley's artistic ambition was such that he would still contend with his customary poetic sparring partner in *The Triumph of Life*. Stephen C. Behrendt rightly shows that Shelley reveals "anything but terminal despondence" in the poem, despite it sounding some of Shelley's darkest notes. For the poem never gives in to that darkness, and Dante and Petrarch's examples blaze forth to inspire Shelley with examples of aesthetic brightness won from the gloom. Shelley finds allies that reach

across time to bolster his visionary power and lend credence to his own sense of himself as one of those "inheritors of unfulfilled renown" (*Adonais* 45. 397), working to fulfill such promise as best he can. Out-pacing Byron's Dantean poetry and even including Petrarch, a poet never entirely embraced by Byron, inspires Shelley's imaginative attempt.

If, as Michael O'Neill writes, "it is Shelley's job as a poet to resuffer history, yet redirect it,"[77] that power to redirect history shifts into re-understanding it. Shelley launches into a visionary scene that shifts and alters even as the poet fights to orientate himself within his own poem. Where *The Prophecy of Dante* found its anchor in imagining Dante through the optics of Byron's own personality, Shelley chooses to operate without any clear footholds. The speaker is never explicitly Shelley or not Shelley. The space in which the speaker, with Rousseau, operates is never clearly defined. The reader hurtles through the poem, following the vision unfolding before them, afforded no space to breathe and evaluate the precise terms of engagement set forth by the poet. This, in no small measure, is due to the speed of the *terza rima* in *The Triumph of Life*. Shelley goes toe to visionary toe with his Florentine predecessors to embody fleet of foot mental processes.[78] Shelley shows off the radically new possibilities to which he could turn his *terza rima* stanzas following Byron's efforts. Resisting closure, certainty, and any suggestion of solving and salving bromides, Shelley dispenses with Petrarch and Dante's belief system and Byron's slower meter in favor of poetry obsessed by movement and open-endedness. Bowers writes that "Shelley ranks his English tercets as an equal to Dante's,"[79] and Shelley shows the same pride in his imaginative vision.

Shelley's choice to alter Dante and Petrarch's forms and Christian hallmarks of their visions was not a simple decision to forge a path of his own based on his resistance to Christian doctrine. Instead, Shelley makes us note the radical edge that his reading of Dante and Petrarch has afforded his poetry. Byron seems content to become Dante or to have Dante become him while Shelley insists on pushing further than his predecessors. G. M. Matthews notes "Both Dante and Petrarch affected Shelley as stimuli, upon his invention and style, but the cosmogony, the politics, the religion, the entire imaginative world of the *Divina Commedia* remained profoundly alien to those of 'The Triumph of Life'."[80] This excellent insight led to Matthews abandoning comparison between Shelley's *Triumph of Life* and Dante and Petrarch's works. Yet, it is precisely in those differences that we can perceive the stake that Shelley claims when writing his fragment. Shelley has Petrarch and Dante behave as if they are ghostly presences, summoned to the sidelines of the poetry as Shelley recasts their visionary poems through the lens of his agnostic vision. O'Neill shows that Shelley lacks "the support of a cut-and-dried moral perspective,"[81] and Shelley transforms this absence into bravery, defining the terms of the poem's bravura performance as making use of no "frail spells" ("Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," 29) conjured to explain the inexplicable. Petrarch and Dante are visionaries, but Shelley shares their imaginative skill without their belief systems, out-doing Byron by claiming their gifts not their personalities as his own.

Shelley's engagement with Petrarch has received relatively less attention than his relationship with Dante.[82] Even at the level of the title of the poem, which recalls the Florentine's *Trionfi*, Shelley is fascinated by Petrarch's vision. But Shelley eschews Petrarch's narrative arc where Love is defeated by Chastity, Chastity by Death, Death

by Fame, Fame by Time, and Time by Eternity, even as he alludes to and recasts episodes from the *Trionfi*. Shelley had been immersed in Dante and Petrarch in Pisa,[83] and transforming, not simply alluding to, Petrarch's work is key to *The Triumph of Life*. Anna Hume's translation of *The Triumph of Love* suggests how Shelley uses Petrarchan influence:

> What is our life? If ought it bring of ease,
> A sick mans dreame, a fable, told to please.
> Some few there from the common road did stray;
> *Lelius* and *Socrates*, with whom I may
> A longer progresse take: O! what a paire

(*The Triumph of Love* IV. 65-9)[84]

Shelley carefully singles out that pained disenchantment with life with his line, "Then, what is Life?" (*The Triumph of Life*, 544), and he retools the "common road" with his procession, which also includes Socrates as one of those who strays from the path taken by the multitude. Petrarch's multitude, in Mary Sidney's translation, includes even the rulers of the earth:

> There saw I, whom their times did happie calle,
> Popes, Emperors, and kings, but strangelie growen,
> All naked now, all needie, beggars all.
> Where is that wealth? where are those honors gonne?
> Scepters, and crownes, and roabes and purple dye?
> And costlie myters, sett with pearle and stone?
> O wretch who doest in mortall things affye:
> (Yett who but doeth) and if in end they dye
> Them-selues beguil'd, they find but right, saie I.

What meanes this toyle? Oh blinde, oh more then blinde

(*The Triumph of Death* I. 79-88)

Transforming worldly powers into eternal beggars, earth's glories flee their possessors once beyond the human world. We are reminded, as Dante had reminded us, of Ecclesiastes' promise: "I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit" (Ecclesiastes 1:14). Petrarch asks us to lift our eyes from this world into eternity, the eternity that is God's. But Shelley has no such confidence in Christian doctrine.

Though tormented once delivered from mortal life, Shelley's giants of the human sphere are punished along with everyone else, not more and not less:

'Frederick and Kant, Catherine and Leopold,
Chained hoary anarch, demagogue and sage
Whose name the fresh world thinks already old,

'For in the battle Life and they did wage
She remained conqueror

(*The Triumph of Life*, 236-40)

Rather than joining with Christian denunciation of the worldly, where Mark has it "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36), it seems that all but "the sacred few" (*The Triumph of Life*, 128) are conquered by Life. In Petrarch's poem, mortal toys would only beguile a "wretch", but for Shelley there is no promise of an afterlife in the mold of Christian heaven, despite any power or qualities possessed by a particular individual. Those glaring exceptions, Socrates and Jesus, only serve to underscore the rarity of freedom.

But he remained convinced that the afterlife did exist, writing that "[t]he right road to Paradise" (*Letters: PBS* 2, 406) comes through a belief in an afterlife that exists beyond our present existence. Shelley's vision of "a captive multitude" (*The Triumph of Life*, 119) retains Petrarch's meter (which Petrarch himself took from Dante), the afterlife, and his complaint of life's cruelty, but excises his hope won through Christian faith.

Though it is fascinating to imagine how Shelley might have developed the poem had he lived, what remains of the fragment develops no cycle or cycles that draw us towards higher truth. We are left bewildered, like Shelley's speaker, and even his guide, Rousseau, who is no rival to Dante's Virgil. But the poem does not sink into a keening lament for the vanity of all things. For Dante offered an alternative possibility. Ralph Pite's impressive analysis of Shelley's debt to Dante's *Purgatorio* shows how Shelley uses his predecessor's work,[85] and Michael O'Neill writes of how Shelley and Byron drew strength from the way in which "Dante puts the poetic self at the centre of a poem, not to indulge ego, but to record experience, especially experience that can be called visionary."[86] Centering the self becomes a means of following in Dante's footsteps where, paradoxically, taking a cue from Dante's individuality allows the Romantic poet to discover his own. But Shelley did so in a way unlike Byron had in *The Prophecy of Dante*. Shelley is "at least half-admiring" of the defiant egotism of Rousseau and his own speaker's occasionally vaunting language, where such admiration offers further evidence of Dante's influence.[87] Rather than writing his biographical self into the poetry as had Byron, Shelley instead chose to focus upon the vanity of Rousseau. Breathing fire despite his fear, Rousseau sets his face against censure, affirming: "'If I have been extinguished, yet there rise /

A thousand beacons from the spark I bore'" (*The Triumph of Life*, 206-7), and Shelley's speaker's response to Rousseau's narration of the fate of the "spoilers spoiled" (*Triumph of Life*, 235) revels in its soaring prophetic power:

'Let them pass',
I cried, '—the world and its mysterious doom

'Is not so much more glorious than it was
That I desire to worship those who drew
New figures on its false and fragile glass

'As the old faded.'—

(*The Triumph of Life* 243-8)

Donald H. Reiman writes that these lines overcome the nihilism that they voice,[88] snatching a mesmerizing though dark version of "abundant recompence" from the jaws of doom.[89] If sentenced to exist in "this valley of perpetual dream" (*The Triumph of Life*, 397), Shelley's speakers find grandeur in resisting and even making aesthetic capital out of agony. These lines swell with knowledge of their own authority, where even as the speaker would reject any "figures on its false and fragile glass," the gorgeous alliteration forces us to acknowledge that even ephemeral power is still power. But Shelley never makes such grandeur infallible or considers it simply admirable. Aesthetic glory might not and does not attempt to efface the "mysterious doom" but it can cast a glamor of its own over bare circumstance. We admire the jaw-set determination to stare into "that verge where words abandon us" into the dizziness of "the dark abyss of—how little we know" ("On Life," 636) and find within it a dazzling affirmation of what "a fine spell of words" can achieve.[90] Those Florentine

poets, Petrarch and Dante, stand behind Shelley, sponsoring his vision and assertion of the power of poetry itself. We see Shelley recast how these Florentine poets can be reimagined in the Romantic poets, not taking any cheap shots at Byron, but producing his own competing standard.

From the time that Byron and Shelley met, their relationship was one that inspired each to new heights, new possibilities, and new ways of imagining poetry. That inspiration was mutual is clear. But Shelley would and could take specific elements from Byron's work. We know that Byron influenced Shelley's rhyming,[91] and here, Shelley is influenced by how Byron treats Florence's artworks and poetry to find his own individual perspective upon the city's aesthetic power. Training his eyes upon Byron's achievements in response to Florence, Shelley creates his own, paradoxically becoming more himself as he studies and engages with his friend and rival's works.

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[1] Gillen d'Arcy Wood, *Tambora: The Eruption that Changed the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 46.
[2] C. P. Brand, *Italy and the English Romantics: The Italianate Fashion in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 3.
[3] Michael Scrivener, *The Cosmopolitan Ideal* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007), 214.
[4] William D. Brewer, *The Shelley-Byron Conversation* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1994), p. ix.
[5] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley,* ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 2, 323. Hereafter *Letters: PBS*.
[6] Brewer, *The Shelley-Byron Conversation*.
[7] Michael O'Neill, "'The Fixed and the Fluid': Identity in Byron and Shelley," *Byron Journal* 36.2 (2008): 116 (105-16).
[8] Peter Cochran, "Byron and Shelley: Radical Incompatibles," *Romanticism on the Net* 43 (August 2006), http:// id.erudit.org/ iderudit/ 013589ar .
[9] Lord George Gordon Byron, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols. (London, 1973-1994), 6, 174. Hereafter *BLJ*.
[10] Brewer, 15.
[11] Mary Shelley, "The English in Italy," *The Mary Shelley Reader*, ed. Betty T. Bennett and Charles E. Robinson (New York: Oxford University Press, 199), 349.

[12] See, for example, Will Bowers, *The Italian Idea: Anglo-Italian Radical Literary Culture, 1815-1823* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Maria Schoina, *Romantic 'Anglo-Italians': Configurations of Identity in Byron, the Shelleys, and the Pisan Circle* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); Jane Stabler, *The Artistry of Exile: Romantic and Victorian Writers in Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Alan M. Weinberg, *Shelley's Italian Experience* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991); Michael O'Neill, "Realms without a Name: Shelley and Italy's Intenser Day," *Dante and Italy in British Romanticism*, ed. Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglass (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2011), 77-91.
[13] Shelley, "The English in Italy," 343.
[14] I borrow this term from Vincent Newey's *Centring the Self: Subjectivity, Society and Reading from Thomas Gray to Thomas Hardy* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995).
[15] Edmond et Jules de Goncourt, *L'Italie d'hier: Notes de Voyages*, 1855-1856 (Paris: G. Charpentier et E. Fasquelle, 1894), 73.
[16] Edward E. Bostetter, 'The Original Della Cruscans and the Florence Miscellany', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 19.3 (1956): 277- 300 (298).
[17] Chloe Chard, *Pleasure and Guilt on the Grand Tour: Travel Writing and Imaginative Geography 1600-1830* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 10. She defines "imaginative geography" using Christian Jacob's definition of the concept of a map "a space of privileged projection for desires, aspirations, affective memory, the cultural memory of the subject." Chard, 10, quoting Christian Jacob, *L'Empire des cartes: Approche théorique de la cartographie à travers l'histoire* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1992), 16 (Chard's translation).
[18] Will Bowers, *The Italian Idea: Anglo-Italian Radical Literary Culture, 1815-1823* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 114.
[19] James Buzard coins the phrase in his study, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to 'Culture', 1800-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), *passim* 80-154.
[20] Schoina, 5.
[21] Buzard, 114.
[22] Nicholas Halmi, "The Literature of Italy in Byron's Poems of 1817-20," *Byron and Italy*, ed. Alan Rawes and Diego Saglia (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 23-43 (27).
[23] John Barrell, "'The Dangerous Goddess': Masculinity, Prestige, and the Aesthetic in Early Eighteenth Century Britain," *Cultural Critique* 12 (1989): 101-131 (105-6).
[24] Chloe Chard, *Tristes Plaisirs: A Critical Reader of the Romantic Grand Tour* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 160.
[25] For more on Byron's interest in Napoleon, see Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend* (London: John Murray, 2002), p. vii.
[26] Maureen McCue, *British Romanticism and the Reception of Italian Old Master Art, 1793-1840* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 78.
[27] Shelley, "The English in Italy," 343.
[28] See Chard, *Tristes Plaisirs*, 185 and 207, in particular.
[29] Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch), *Petrarch in English*, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2005), 8.
[30] See Brand's list, "Appendix D," 246.
[31] Chard, *Pleasure and Guilt on the Grand Tour*, 85, Chard's translation of Charles Marguerite Jean Baptiste Mercier Dupaty, *Lettres sur l'Italie*, en 1785, 2 vols. (Rome,

1788), I. 146. Samuel C. Chew, Jr. notes evidence that Byron had read Dupaty's *Lettres*. See "Byron and Croly," *Modern Language Notes* 28.7 (1913): 201-203 (201).
[32] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, 1797–1851*, ed. Betty T. Bennett, 3 vols. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980-88), 1, 114.
[33] Frederic S. Colwell, "Shelley on Sculpture: The Uffizi Notes," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 28 (1979): 59-77 (62).
[34] "Sonnet to Byron" is quoted from Rossetti's text of the poem. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. William Michael Rossetti, 2 vols. (London: E. Moxon, 1870), II. 362.
[35] See David Ellis, "Who Is King of the Cats? Byron, Shelley and the Friendship of Poets," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 39.1 (2010): 61-75.
[36] Sophie Thomas notes this decision in "Vital Matter(s): Shelley, Herder, and Sculpture," *European Romantic Review* 29.3 (2018): 377-87.
[37] Daniel Hughes, "Shelley, Leonardo, and the Monsters of Thought," *Criticism* 12.3 (1970): 195-212 (195).
[38] "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci, in the Florentine Gallery" will be quoted from Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley: Volume 3: 1819-1820*, ed. Jack Donovan, Cian Duffy, Kelvin Everest, and Michael Rossington (Harlow: Longman, 2011), III. 221-3; W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 171.
[39] Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 26.
[40] John Hollander, *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (London and Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 145.
[41] Carol Jacobs, "On Looking at Shelley's Medusa," *Yale French Studies* 69 (1985): 163-179 (168-169).
[42] Thomas, 383.
[43] Hughes, 195.
[44] Steve Ellis, *Dante and English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 118.
[45] Hughes notes the link to *Inferno* IX: 76-87. See Hughes, 205.
[46] Jacobs, 168.
[47] See, for example, *Alastor*, 639 or *Hellas*, 39. For the complete range of Shelley's use of "hope," see *A Lexical Concordance to the Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, compiled and arranged F. S. Ellis (London: Bernard Quadrich, 1892; rpt. Johnson Reprint Company 1967), 335-6.
[48] Jerome J. McGann, 'The Beauty of the Medusa', *Studies in Romanticism* 11 (1972): 3-25 (3-4).
[49] Grant F. Scott notes the parallels between Perseus and Shelley. See "Shelley, Medusa, and the Perils of Ekphrasis," *The Romantic Imagination: Literature and Art in England and Germany*, ed. Frederick Burwick and Jürgen Klein (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 319-20.
[50] Geoffrey Hartman, *The Unmediated Vision, An Interpretation of Wordsworth, Hopkins, Rilke, and Valery* (New York: Harbinger Books, 1966), 156.
[51] James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 124.
[52] For more on the fragment and why I rule out the sixth stanza accepted by some critics, see Catherine Maxwell, "Shelley's 'Medusa': The Sixth Stanza," *Notes and Queries* 36.2 (1989): 173-4.

[53] Paul Stock, *The Shelley-Byron Circle and the Idea of Europe* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2010), 135.
[54] Gregory Dowling, "The Lament for Italy: Byron, Dante and A. D. Hope," *Byron: Original and Translated*, ed. Innes Merabishvili and Naji Oueijan (Tbilisi: Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University Press, 2017), 223-34 (223).
[55] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Adonais* 4. 36, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford, 2003), 678. Shelley's poetry and prose, unless otherwise specified, is quoted from this edition.
[56] McCue, 61.
[57] Donald H. Reiman, "Byron in Italy: The Return of Augustus," *Byron: Augustan and Romantic*, ed. Andrew Rutherford (Houndmills: Macmllan, 1990), 181-98 (190).
[58] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Valperga: or, The Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca*, ed. and intro. Stuart Curran (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. xxi.
[59] Stabler, 198.
[60] Beverley Taylor, "Byron's Use of Dante in *The Prophecy of Dante*," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 28 (1979): 102-119 (105).
[61] Victoria Kirkham, "The Parallel Lives of Dante and Virgil," *Dante Studies* 110 (1992): 233-253 (242).
[62] L. E. Marshall, "'Words Are Things': Byron and the Prophetic Efficacy of Language," *Studies in English Literature, 1500– 1900* 25 (1985): 801-22 (811).
[63] Antonella Braida, *Dante and the Romantics* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2004), 78.
[64] Claire Clairmont, *The Clairmont Correspondence: Letters of Claire Clairmont, Charles Clairmont, and Fanny Imlay Godwin: Volume 1 1808-1834*, ed. Marion Kingston Stocking (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 127.
[65] See Rosemary Sweet's chapter, "Florence: A Home from Home," in *Cities and the Grand Tour: The British in Italy, c.1690-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 65-98.
[66] Stabler, 2.
[67] Stephen Cheeke, *Byron and Place: History, Translation, Nostalgia* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2003), 136.
[68] Leslie A. Marchand, *Byron: A Biography*, 3 vols. (London: John Murray, 1957), 2, 795.
[69] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 678.
[70] Sir Philip Sidney argues that 'our tongue is the most fit to honour poesy, and to be honoured by poesy'. See Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy*, *Sidney's 'The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. with intro. and notes Gavin Alexander (London: Penguin, 2004), 53 (1-54).
[71] Thomas Medwin, *Journal of the Conversations of Lord Byron* (London: Colburn, 1824), 242.
[72] I retain the spelling "Mazenghi" following the editors of *The Poems of Shelley: 1817-1819*, ed. Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews, contributing ed. Jack Donovan, Ralph Pite, and Michael Rossington (Harlow: Longman, 2000), though I note that Rossetti and Hutchinson change this to "Marenghi." "Mazenghi" is quoted from *The Poems of Shelley*.
[73] Sweet, 65.
[74] See Weinberg, *Shelley's Italian Experience*, 98-100. Weinberg also points out that "Mazenghi" is linked with *The Cenci*.
[75] Shelley claims that *Prometheus Unbound* is for 'the elect' (*Letters: PBS* II. 200)

[76] Alan M. Weinberg, "Shelley's Italian Verse Fragments: Exploring the Notebook Drafts," *The Neglected Shelley*, ed. Alan M. Weinberg and Timothy Webb (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 281-306 (285).
[77] O'Neill, "Realms without a Name: Shelley and Italy's Intenser Day," 84.
[78] William Keach, *Shelley's Style* (New York and London: Methuen, 1984), see, in particular, 187-93.
[79] Bowers, 155.
[80] G. M. Matthews "On Shelley's "The Triumph of Life'," *Studia Neophilologica* 34.1 (1962), 104-134 (105).
[81] O'Neill, *The Human Mind's Imaginings: Conflict and Achievement in Shelley's Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 184.
[82] For other discussions of *The Triumph of Life* and Petrarch, see F. Melian Stawell, "Shelley's *Triumph of Life*," *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association* 5 (1914), 104-131, and Bowers, 145-68.
[83] Mary Shelley, *The Journal of Mary Shelley*, ed. Paula Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), I. 205, I. 248, I. 294, I. 295, I. 333, see Bowers, 226n. 65.
[84] Petrarch, *Petrarch in English*, 23.
[85] See Ralph Pite, *The Circle of Our Vision: Dante's Presence in English Romantic Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 162.
[86] Michael O'Neill, *Shelleyan Reimaginings and Influence: New Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 193.
[87] O'Neill, *Shelleyan Reimaginings and Influence*, 193.
[88] See Donald H. Reiman, *Shelley's "The Triumph of Life": A Critical Study*, Illinois Studies in Language and Literature 55 (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1965). 57.
[89] William Wordsworth, "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," 89, *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 134.
[90] John Keats, *The Fall of Hyperion* 1, 9, *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard, 3rd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), 435.
[91] See Richard Cronin, *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts* (London: Macmillan, 1981), 73.