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A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

BYRON'S POETRY AND PROSE



AUTHORITATIVE TEXTS
CRITICISM

Selected and Edited by

ALICE LEVINE
HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY



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Our right of thought—our last and only place
 Of refuge; this, at least, shall still be mine:
 Though from our birth the faculty divine
 Is chain'd and tortured—cabin'd, cribb'd, confined, 1140
 And bred in darkness, lest the truth should shine
 Too brightly on the unprepared mind,
 The beam pours in, for time and skill will couch⁶ the blind.

128

Arches on arches!⁷ as it were that Rome,
 Collecting the chief trophies of her line, 1145
 Would build up all her triumphs in one dome,
 Her Coliseum stands; the moonbeams shine
 As 'twere its natural torches, for divine
 Should be the light which streams here, to illumine
 This long-explored but still exhaustless mine 1150
 Of contemplation; and the azure gloom
 Of an Italian night, where the deep skies assume

129

Hues which have words, and speak to ye of heaven,
 Floats o'er this vast and wondrous monument,
 And shadows forth its glory. There is given 1155
 Unto the things of earth, which Time hath bent,
 A spirit's feeling, and where he hath leant
 His hand, but broke his scythe, there is a power
 And magic in the ruin'd battlement,
 For which the palace of the present hour 1160
 Must yield its pomp, and wait till ages are its dower.

130

Oh Time! the beautifier of the dead,
 Adorner of the ruin, comforter
 And only healer when the heart hath bled—
 Time! the corrector where our judgments err, 1165
 The test of truth, love,—sole philosopher,
 For all beside are sophists, from thy thrift,
 Which never loses though it doth defer—
 Time, the avenger! unto thee I lift
 My hands, and eyes, and heart, and crave of thee a gift: 1170

131

Amidst this wreck, where thou hast made a shrine
 And temple more divinely desolate,
 Among thy mightier offerings here are mine,

6. Remove a cataract.

7. The Colosseum: the grand oval amphitheater in Rome, constructed during the first century C.E., several stories of which were built on arches.

Ruins of years—though few, yet full of fate:—
 If thou hast ever seen me too elate,
 Hear me not; but if calmly I have borne
 Good, and reserved my pride against the hate
 Which shall not whelm me; let me not have worn
 This iron in my soul in vain—shall *they*⁸ not mourn?

132

And thou, who never yet of human wrong
 Left the unbalanced scale, great Nemesis!⁹
 Here, where the ancient¹ paid thee homage long—
 Thou, who didst call the Furies from the abyss,
 And round Orestes bade them howl and hiss
 For that unnatural retribution—just,
 Had it but been from hands less near—in this
 Thy former realm, I call thee from the dust!
 Dost thou not hear my heart?—Awake! thou shalt, and must.

133

It is not that I may not have incurr'd
 For my ancestral faults or mine the wound
 I bleed withal, and, had it been conferr'd
 With a just weapon, it had flow'd unbound;
 But now my blood shall not sink in the ground;
 To thee I do devote it—*thou* shalt take
 The vengeance, which shall yet be sought and found,
 Which if I have not taken for the sake—
 But let that pass—I sleep, but thou shalt yet awake.

134

And if my voice break forth, 'tis not that now
 I shrink from what is suffer'd: let him speak
 Who hath beheld decline upon my brow,
 Or seen my mind's convulsion leave it weak;
 But in this page a record will I seek.
 Not in the air shall these my words disperse,
 Though I be ashes; a far hour shall wreak
 The deep prophetic fulness of this verse,
 And pile on human heads the mountain of my curse!

8. Byron's wife, Annabella Milbanke, and her supporters in their social circle during the separation scandal. Stanzas 131–137 are illuminated by this autobiographical context.

9. See p. 322, n. 3.

1. Aeschylus (525–456 B.C.E.), Athenian dramatist, author of the *Oresteia*, a trilogy about revenge and justice in which the Furies pursue Orestes for killing Clytemnestra, his mother, because she had killed her husband (Agamemnon), Orestes' father; Byron (like the Furies) pronounces Orestes' act an "unnatural retribution" (line 1185) because of the close bond between the avenger and his victim, intending a comparison between Orestes and Lady Byron—though in another poem he refers to her as his "moral Clytemnestra" ("Lines On Hearing that Lady Byron Was Ill," CPW 4:43):

135

That curse shall be Forgiveness.—Have I not—
 Hear me, my mother Earth! behold it, Heaven!—
 Have I not had to wrestle with my lot?
 Have I not suffer'd things to be forgiven?
 Have I not had my brain sear'd, my heart riven,
 Hopes sapp'd, name blighted, Life's life lied away?
 And only not to desperation driven,
 Because not altogether of such clay
 As rots into the souls of those whom I survey.

136

From mighty wrongs to petty perfidy
 Have I not seen what human things could do?
 From the loud roar of foaming calumny
 To the small whisper of the as paltry few,
 And subtler venom of the reptile crew,
 The Janus² glance of whose significant eye,
 Learning to lie with silence, would *seem* true,
 And without utterance, save the shrug or sigh,
 Deal round to happy fools its speechless obloquy.³

137

But I have lived, and have not lived in vain:
 My mind may lose its force, my blood its fire,
 And my frame perish even in conquering pain;
 But there is that within me which shall tire
 Torture and Time, and breathe when I expire;
 Something unearthly, which they deem not of,
 Like the remember'd tone of a mute lyre,
 Shall on their soften'd spirits sink, and move
 In hearts all rocky now the late remorse of love.

138

The seal is set.—Now welcome, thou dread power!
 Nameless, yet thus omnipotent, which here
 Walk'st in the shadow of the midnight hour
 With a deep awe, yet all distinct from fear;
 Thy haunts are ever where the dead walls rear
 Their ivy mantles, and the solemn scene
 Derives from thee a sense so deep and clear
 That we become a part of what has been,
 And grow unto the spot, all-seeing but unseen.

2. Ancient Roman god of doorways and beginnings, having two faces, back to back, and thus a conventional symbol of hypocrisy.
 3. Blame.

139

And here the buzz of eager nations ran,
 In murmur'd pity, or loud-roar'd applause,
 As man was slaughter'd by his fellow man.⁴ 1245
 And wherefore slaughter'd? wherefore, but because
 Such were the bloody Circus' genial laws,
 And the imperial pleasure.—Wherefore not?
 What matters where we fall to fill the maws
 Of worms—on battle-plains or listed spot? 1250
 Both are but theatres where the chief actors rot.

140

I see before me the Gladiator lie:
 He leans upon his hand—his manly brow
 Consents to death, but conquers agony,
 And his droop'd head sinks gradually low— 1255
 And through his side the last drops, ebbing slow
 From the red gash, fall heavy, one by one,
 Like the first of a thunder-shower; and now
 The arena swims around him—he is gone,
 Ere ceased the inhuman shout which hail'd the wretch
 who won. 1260

141

He heard it, but he heeded not—his eyes
 Were with his heart, and that was far away;⁵
 He reck'd not of the life he lost nor prize,
 But where his rude hut by the Danube⁶ lay,
 There were his young barbarians all at play, 1265
 There was their Dacian mother—he, their sire,
 Butcher'd to make a Roman holiday—
 All this rush'd with his blood—Shall he expire
 And unavenged?—Arise! ye Goths, and glut your ire!

4. The Colosseum was one of the arenas where the gladiators of ancient Rome, often slaves or captives, were armed with swords and fought each other (or a wild animal) to death.
 5. "Whether the wonderful statue which suggested this image be a laquearian gladiator, which, in spite of Winkelmann's criticism, has been stoutly maintained; or whether it be a Greek herald, as that great antiquary positively asserted"; or whether it is to be thought a Spartan or barbarian shield-bearer, according to the opinion of his Italian editor; it must assuredly seem *a copy* of that masterpiece of Ctesilaus which represented 'a wounded man dying, who perfectly expressed what there remained of life in him.' Montfaucon and Maffei thought it the identical statue; but that statue was of bronze. The gladiator was once in the Villa Ludovizi, and was bought by Clement XII. The right arm is an entire restoration of Michael Angelo. *Either Polifontes, herald of Laius, killed by Oedipus or Cepreas, herald of Euritheus, killed by the Athenians when he endeavoured to drag the Heraclidæ from the altar of mercy, and in whose honour they instituted annual games, continued to the time of Hadrian; or Anthemocritus, the Athenian herald, killed by the Megarenses, who never recovered the impiety. See *Storia delle Arti*, &c. tom. ii. pag. 203, 204, 205, 206, 207. lib. ix. cap. 11."

6. River in central Europe; it lies near the conquered provinces of the Roman Empire, such as Dacia (line 1266), bordering the Teutonic people ("Goths," line 1269) who would invade Rome during the third to fifth centuries—which Byron suggests is a just revenge.

142

But here, where Murder breathed her bloody steam; 1270
 And here, where buzzing nations choked the ways,
 And roar'd or murmur'd like a mountain stream
 Dashing or winding as its torrent strays;
 Here, where the Roman millions' blame or praise
 Was death or life, the playthings of a crowd, 1275
 My voice sounds much—and fall the stars' faint rays
 On the arena void—seats crush'd—walls bow'd—
 And galleries, where my steps seem echoes strangely loud.

143

A ruin—yet what ruin! from its mass
 Walls, palaces, half-cities, have been rear'd; 1280
 Yet oft the enormous skeleton ye pass,
 And marvel where the spoil could have appear'd.
 Hath it indeed been plunder'd, or but clear'd?
 Alas! developed, opens the decay,
 When the colossal fabric's form is near'd; 1285
 It will not bear the brightness of the day,
 Which streams too much on all years, man, have reft away.

144

But when the rising moon begins to climb
 Its topmost arch, and gently pauses there;
 When the stars twinkle through the loops of time, 1290
 And the low night-breeze waves along the air
 The garland forest, which the gray walls wear,
 Like laurels on the bald first Caesar's head;⁷
 When the light shines serene but doth not glare,
 Then in this magic circle raise the dead; 1295
 Heroes have trod this spot—'tis on their dust ye tread.

145

"While stands the Coliseum, Rome shall stand;⁸
 "When falls the Coliseum, Rome shall fall;
 "And when Rome falls—the World." From our own land
 Thus spake the pilgrims o'er this mighty wall 1300
 In Saxon times,⁹ which we are wont to call
 Ancient; and these three mortal things are still
 On their foundations, and unalter'd all;

7. "Suetonius informs us that Julius Caesar was particularly gratified by that decree of the senate which enables him to wear a wreath of laurel on all occasions. He was anxious, not to show that he was the conqueror of the world, but to hide that he was bald. A stranger at Rome would hardly have guessed at the motive, nor should we without the help of the historian."

8. "This is quoted in the 'Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,' as a proof that the Coliseum was entire, when seen by the Anglo-Saxon pilgrims at the end of the seventh, or the beginning of the eighth, century. A notice on the Coliseum may be seen in the 'Historical Illustrations,' p. 263."

9. Fifth- and sixth-century Britain was invaded by the Saxons, a Germanic people.

Rome and her Ruin past Redemption's skill,
The World, the same wide den—of thieves, or what ye will. 1305

146

Simple, erect, severe, austere, sublime—
Shrine of all saints and temple of all gods,¹
From Jove to Jesus—spared and blest by time;
Looking tranquillity, while falls or nods
Arch, empire, each thing round thee, and man plods 1310
His way through thorns to ashes—glorious dome!
Shalt thou not last? Time's scythe and tyrant's rods
Shiver upon thee—sanctuary and home
Of art and piety—Pantheon!—pride of Rome!

147

Relic of nobler days, and noblest arts! 1315
Despoil'd yet perfect, with thy circle spreads
A holiness appealing to all hearts—
To art a model; and to him who treads
Rome for the sake of ages, Glory sheds
Her light through thy sole aperture;² to those 1320
Who worship, here are altars for their beads;
And they who feel for genius may repose
Their eyes on honour'd forms, whose busts around them close.³

148

There is a dungeon, in whose dim drear light⁴
What do I gaze on? Nothing: Look again! 1325
Two forms are slowly shadow'd on my sight—
Two insulated phantoms of the brain:
It is not so; I see them full and plain—
An old man, and a female young and fair,
Fresh as a nursing mother, in whose vein 1330
The blood is nectar:—but what doth she there,
With her unmantled neck, and bosom white and bare?

1. The Pantheon, domed Roman temple completed during the second century. "Though plundered of all its brass, except the ring which was necessary to preserve the aperture above; though exposed to repeated fires; though sometimes flooded by the river, and always open to the rain, no monument of equal antiquity is so well preserved as this rotundo. It passed with little alteration from the Pagan into the present worship; and so convenient were its niches for the Christian altar, that Michael Angelo, ever studious of ancient beauty, introduced their design as a model in the Catholic church.—*Forsyth's Italy*, p. 137."
2. The opening in the center of the dome.
3. "The Pantheon has been made a receptacle for the busts of modern great, or, at least, distinguished, men. The flood of light which once fell through the large orb above on the whole circle of divinities, now shines on a numerous assemblage of mortals, some one or two of whom have been almost deified by the veneration of their countrymen."
4. "This and the three next stanzas allude to the story of the Roman daughter, which is recalled to the traveller by the site, or pretended site, of that adventure, now shown at the church of St. Nicholas in *Carcere*. The difficulties attending the full belief of the tale are stated in 'Historical Illustrations,' p. 295." In the story of the "Caritas Romana," a woman kept her imprisoned father alive by secretly allowing him to take the milk from her breast; as a reward for her deed upon its discovery, her father was pardoned and freed.

149

Full swells the deep pure fountain of young life,
Where *on* the heart and *from* the heart we took
Our first and sweetest nurture, when the wife, 1335
Blest into mother, in the innocent look,
Or even the piping cry of lips that brook
No pain and small suspense, a joy perceives
Man knows not, when from out its cradled nook
She sees her little bud put forth its leaves— 1340
What may the fruit be yet?—I know not—Cain was Eve's.

150

But here youth offers to old age the food,
The milk of his own gift:—it is her sire
To whom she renders back the debt of blood
Born with her birth. No; he shall not expire 1345
While in those warm and lovely veins the fire
Of health and holy feeling can provide
Great Nature's Nile, whose deep stream rises higher
Than Egypt's river:—from that gentle side
Drink, drink and live, old man! Heaven's realm holds no 1350
such tide.

151

The starry fable of the milky way⁵
Has not thy story's purity; it is
A constellation of a sweeter ray,
And sacred Nature triumphs more in this 1355
Reverse of her decree, than in the abyss
Where sparkle distant worlds:—Oh, holiest nurse!
No drop of that clear stream its way shall miss
To thy sire's heart, replenishing its source
With life, as our freed souls rejoin the universe.

152

Turn to the Mole which Hadrian rear'd on high,⁶ 1360
Imperial mimic of old Egypt's piles,
Colossal copyist of deformity,
Whose travell'd phantasy from the far Nile's
Enormous model, doom'd the artist's toils
To build for giants, and for his vain earth, 1365
His shrunken ashes, raise this dome: How smiles
The gazer's eye with philosophic mirth,
To view the huge design which sprung from such a birth!

5. In one legend, the spilled milk from Hera's breast, when she pushed aside the nursing infant Heracles, formed the Milky Way.
6. "The castle of St. Angelo."