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CANTO IV

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,
And bred in darkness, lest the truth should shine
Too brightly on the unprepared mind,
The beam pours in, for time and skill will couch the blind.

Arches on arches! as it were that Rome,
Collecting the chief trophies of her line,
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 illume
This long-explored but still exhaustless mine
Of contemplation; and the azure gloom
Of an Italian night, where the deep skies assume

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
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
Must yield its pomp, and wait till ages are its dower.

Oh Time! the beautifier of the dead,
Adorer of the ruin, comforter
And only healer when the heart hath bled—
Time! the corrector where our judgments err,
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:

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 B.C.,
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* not mourn?

132

And thou, who never yet of human wrong
Left the unbalanced scale, great Nemesis!* 
Here, where the ancient! 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 incurred
For my ancestral faults or mine the wound
I bleed withal, and, had it been conferred
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 content.
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,' C&PW 4:43).

CANTO IV

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 Janus' 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.*

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.
139

And here the buzz of eager nations ran,
In murrur'd pity, or loud-roar'd applause,
As man was slaughter'd by his fellow man. 4
And wherfore slaughter'd? wherfore, but because
Such were the bloody Circus' genial laws,
And the imperial pleasure.—Wherfore not?
What matters where we fall to fill the maws
Of worms—on battle-plains or listed spot?
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—
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.

141

He heard it, but he heeded not—his eyes
Were with his heart, and that was far away;
He reck'd not of the life he lost nor prize,
But where his rude hut by the Danube lay,
There were his young barbarians all at play,
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 Vinkelen'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 Ctesiubus which represented 'a wounded man dying, who perfectly expressed what there remained of life in him.' Montiasson and Maffeis thought it the identical statue; but that statue was of bronze. The gladiator was once in the Villa Ludovisi, and was bought by Clement XII.

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.

Canto IV

142

But here, where Murder breathed her bloody steam;
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,
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,
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:
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,
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;
When the light shines serene but doth not glare,
Then in this magic circle raise the dead:
Heroes have trod this spot—tis on their dust ye tread.

145

'While stands the Coliseum, Rome shall stand;'
'When falls the Coliseum, Rome shall fall;
And when Rome falls—the World.' From our own land
Thus speak the pilgrims o'er this mighty wall
In Saxon times, 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 a bold. 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.
Childe Harold's Pilgrimage

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

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
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!
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
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 light*
What do I gaze on? Nothing: Look again!
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
The blood is nectar—but what doth she there,
With her unmantled neck, and bosom white and bare?

Canto IV

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,
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—
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
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 such tide.

151

The starry fable of the milky way\(^5\)
Has not thy story's purity; it is
A constellation of a sweeter ray,
And sacred Nature triumphs more in this
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,\(^6\)
Imperial mimic of old Egypt's piles,
Colossal copist 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,
His shrunked ashes, raise this dome: How smiles
The gazer's eye with philosophic mirth,
To view the huge design which sprung from such a birth!

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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 rotunda. It passed with little alteration from the Pagan into the present worship; and so convenient were its nitches for the Christian altar, that Michael Angelo, ever studious of ancient beauty, introduced their design as a model in the Catholic church."—Forster'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 'Carian Roman,' 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.

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."