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BYRON’S POETRY AND PROSE

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But lo! the dome—the vast and wondrous dome,7
To which Diana's marvel8 was a cell—
Christ's mighty shrine above his martyr's tomb!
I have beheld the Ephesian's miracle—
Its columns strew the wilderness, and dwell
The hyaena and the jackal in their shade;
I have beheld Sophia's bright roofs9 swell
Their glittering mass i' the sun, and have survey'd
Its sanctuary the while the usurping Moslem pray'd;

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But thou, of temples old, or altars new,
Standest alone—with nothing like to thee—
Worthiest of God, the holy and the true.
Since Zion's desolation,1 when that He
Forsook his former city, what could be,
Of earthly structures, in his honour piled,
Of a sublimier aspect? Majesty,
Power, Glory, Strength, and Beauty, all are ailed
In this eternal ark of worship undefiled.

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Enter: its grandeur overwhelms thee not;
And why? it is not lessen'd; but thy mind,
Expanded by the genius of the spot,
Has grown colossal, and can only find
A fit abode wherein appear enthroned
Thy hopes of immortality; and thou
Shalt one day, if found worthy, so defined,
See thy God face to face, as thou dost now
His Holy of Holies, nor be blasted by his brow.2

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Thou movest—but increasing with the advance,
Like climbing some great Alp, which still doth rise,
Deceived by its gigantic elegance;
Vastness which grows—but grows to harmonise—
All musical in its immensities;
Rich marbles—richer painting—shrines where flame
The lamps of gold—and haughty dome which vies
In air with Earth's chief structures, though their frame
Sits on the firm-set ground—and this the clouds must claim.

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Thou seest not all; but piecemeal thou must break,
To separate contemplation, the great whole;
And as the ocean many bays will make,
That ask the eye—so here condense thy soul
To more immediate objects, and control
Thy thoughts until thy mind hath got by heart
Its eloquent proportions, and unroll
In mighty graduations, part by part,
The glory which at once upon thee did not dart,

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Not by its fault—but thine: Our outward sense
Is but of gradual grasp—and as it is
That what we have of feeling most intense
Outstrips our faint expression; even so this
Outshining and o'erwhelming edifice
Fools our fond gaze, and greatest of the great
Defies at first our Nature's littleness,
Till, growing with its growth, we thus dilate
Our spirits to the size of that they contemplate.

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Then pause, and be enlighten'd; there is more
In such a survey than the sating gaze
Of wonder pleased, or awe which would adore
The worship of the place, or the mere praise
Of art and its great masters, who could raise
What former time, nor skill, nor thought could plan;
The fountain of sublimity displays
Its depth, and thence may draw the mind of man
Its golden sands, and learn what great conceptions can.

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Or, turning to the Vatican,3 go see
Laocoon's torture dignifying pain—
A father's love and mortal's agony
With an immortal's patience blending—Vain
The struggle; vain, against the coiling strain
And grip, and deepening of the dragon's grasp,
The old man's clenched; the long envenom'd chain
River'd the living links,—the enormous asp
Enforces pang on pang, and stifles gasp on gasp.

7. "The church of St. Peter's."
8. The Temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the world, which Byron mistakenly took for the ruins that he saw at Ephesus in 1810.
9. The Hagis (or Sana) Sophia at Constantinople, originally a Christian church, later a mosque.
1. The destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Romans in 70 C.E.
2. Referring to an Old Testament idea that no living person may look upon the face of God.
3. The palatial residence of the pope in Rome.
4. A magnificent Greek statue of Apollo's priest Laocoon with his two sons, who were crushed by serpents (Iliad 2.199–227).
Or view the Lord of the unerring bow, the
The God of life, and poesy, and light—
The Sun in human limbs array'd, and brow
All radiant from his triumph in the fight;
The shaft hath just been shot—the arrow bright
With an immortal's vengeance; in his eye
And nostril beautiful disdain, and might
And majesty, flash their full lightnings by,
Developing in that one glance the Deity.

But in his delicate form—a dream of Love,
Shaped by some solitary nymph, whose breast
Long'd for a deathless lover from above,
And madden'd in that vision—are express;
All that ideal beauty ever bless'd
The mind with in its most unearthly mood,
When each conception was a heavenly guest—
A ray of immortality—and stood,
Starlike, around, until they gather'd to a god!

And if it be Prometheus* stole from Heaven
The fire which we endure, it was repaid
By him to whom the energy was given
Which this poetic marble hath array'd
With an eternal glory—which, if made
By human hands, is not of human thought;
And Time himself hath hallow'd it, nor laid
One ringlet in the dust—nor hath it caught
A tinge of years, but breathes the flame with which 'twas wrought.

But where is he, the Pilgrim of my song?
The being who upheld it through the past?
Methinks he cometh late and tarries long.
He is no more—these breathings are his last;
His wanderings done, his visions ebbing fast,
And he himself as nothing—if he was
Aught but a phantasy, and could be class'd
With forms which live and suffer—let that pass—
His shadow fades away into Destruction's mass,

Which gathers shadow, substance, life, and all
That we inherit in its mortal shroud,
And spreads the dim and universal pall
Through which all things grow phantoms,* and the cloud
Between us sinks and all which ever glow'd,
Till Glory's self is twilight, and displays
A melancholy halo scarce allow'd
To hover on the verge of darkness; rays
Sadder than saddest night, for they distract the gaze,

And send us prying into the abyss,
To gather what we shall be when the frame
Shall be resolved to something less than this
Its wretched essence; and to dream of fame,
And wipe the dust from off the idle name
We never more shall hear.—but never more,
Oh, happier thought! can we be made the same:
It is enough in sooth that once we bore
These fardels* of the heart—the heart whose sweat was gore.

Hark! forth from the abyss a voice proceeds,
A long low distant murmur of dread sound,
Such as arises when a nation bleeds
With some deep and immedicable wound;
Through storm and darkness yawns the rending ground,
The gulf is thick with phantoms, but the chief
Seems royal still, though with her head discrown'd,
And pale, but lovely, with maternal grief
She clasps a babe, to whom her breast yields no relief.

Scion of chiefs and monarchs, where art thou?
Find hope of many nations, art thou dead?
Could not the grave forget thee, and lay low
Some less majestic, less beloved head?
In the sad midnight, while thy heart still bled,
The mother of a moment, o'er thy boy,
Death hush'd that pang for ever: with thee fled
The present happiness and promised joy
Which fill'd the imperial isles so full it seem'd to cloy.

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5. The statue Apollo Belvedere in the Vatican.
6. The Titan Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to mankind; Prometheus fire is associated with godlike ability, creativity, and life.
7. This is the first reference to Harold in Canto IV.
10. Princess Charlotte, only daughter of the Prince Regent (eventually King George IV), died after giving birth to a stillborn son in November 1817, while Byron was writing Canto IV; she had been wed for one year to Leopold of Saxe-Coburg (the "lonely lord" of lines 1519–21), and her death caused general mourning throughout England, inspiring elegies by nearly all the poets of the period.