

“Rotta è l’alta colonna e ‘l verde lauro” - Petrarch

269. ‘Rotta è l’alta colonna e ‘l verde lauro’

The high column and the green laurel are broken  
that cast a shade for my weary thoughts:  
I have lost what I do not hope to find again  
in north or south wind, from ocean to ocean.

You have taken my double treasure from me, Death,  
which made me live joyfully, and go nobly,  
and the earth cannot restore it, nor empire,  
nor oriental gem, nor power of gold.

But if destiny consents to this,  
what can I do, except display my sad soul,  
wet eyes forever, and my bowed head?

O this life of ours, which is so fair, outwardly,  
how easily it loses in a morning  
what many years with great pain have acquired!

*Note: Giovanni Colonna died on the 3rd July 1348, three months after Laura.*

x



Hugh William, “View of the Forum in Rome”

"Rome, Ruins of the Coliseum" - Lord Byron, from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto IV

CXXVIII

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

1150

CXXIX

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.

1160

CXXX

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 judgements 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: 1170

CXXXI

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

CXXXII

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.

1180

CXXXIII

It is not that I may not have incur'd  
For my ancestral faults or mine the wound  
I bleed withal, and, had it been conferr'd  
With a just weapon, it had flowed 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.

1190

"Rome, Ruins of the Coliseum" - Lord Byron, from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto IV

CXXIV

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!

1200

CXXXV

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.

1210

CXXXVI

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.

1220

CXXXVII

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.

1230

CXXXVIII

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 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.

1240

CXXXIX

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.  
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.

1250

"Rome, Ruins of the Coliseum" - Lord Byron, from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto IV

CXL

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.      1260

CXLI

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!

CXLII

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,  
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.

CXLIII

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:  
It will not bear the brightness of the day,  
Which streams too much on all years, man, have reft away.

CXLIV

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;  
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.

CXLV

'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 spake the pilgrims o'er this mighty wall      1300  
In Saxon times, which we are wont to call  
Ancient; and these three mortal things are still  
On their foundations, and unalter'd all;  
Rome and her Ruin past Redemption's skill,  
The world, the same wide den -- of thieves, or what ye will.

“Rome, Ruins of the Coliseum” - Lord Byron, from *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Canto IV

CXLVI

Simple, erect, severe, austere, sublime --  
Shrine of all saints and temple of all gods,  
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 tyrants' rods  
Shiver upon thee -- sanctuary and home  
Of art and piety -- Pantheon! -- pride of Rome!

CXLVII

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; 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.

**“The Coliseum: A Fragment” in *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Vol. 1**  
**Percy Bysshe Shelley**

AT the hour of noon, on the feast of the Passover, an old man, accompanied by a girl, apparently his daughter, entered the Coliseum at Rome. They immediately passed through the Arena, and seeking a solitary chasm among the arches of the southern part of the ruin, selected a fallen column for their seat, and clasping each other's hands, sate as in silent contemplation of the scene. But the eyes of the girl were fixed upon her father's lips, and his countenance, sublime and sweet, but motionless as some Praxitelean image of the greatest of poets, filled the silent air with smiles, not reflected from external forms.

It was the great feast of the Resurrection, and the whole native population of Rome, together with all the foreigners who flock from all parts of the earth to contemplate its celebration, were assembled round the Vatican. The most awful religion of the world went forth surrounded by emblazonry of mortal greatness, and mankind had assembled to wonder at and worship the creations of their own power. No straggler was to be met with in the streets and grassy lanes which led to the Coliseum. The father and daughter had sought this spot immediately on their arrival.

A figure, only visible at Rome in night or solitude, and then only to be seen amid the desolated temples of the Forum, or gliding among the weed-grown galleries of the Coliseum, crossed their path. His form, which, though emaciated, displayed the elementary outlines of exquisite grace, was enveloped in an ancient chlamys, which half concealed his face; his snow-white feet were fitted with ivory sandals, delicately sculptured in the likeness of two female figures, whose wings met upon the heel, and whose eager and half-divided lips seemed quivering to meet. It was a face, once seen, never to be forgotten. The mouth and the moulding of the chin resembled the eager and impassioned tenderness of the statues of Antinous; but instead of the effeminate sullenness of the eye, and the narrow smoothness of the forehead, shone an expression of profound and piercing thought; the brow was clear and open, and his eyes deep, like two wells of crystalline water which reflect the all-beholding heavens. Over all was spread a timid expression of womanish tenderness and hesitation, which contrasted, yet intermingled strangely, with the abstracted and fearless character that predominated in his form and gestures.

He avoided, in an extraordinary degree, all communication with the Italians, whose language he seemed scarcely to understand, but was occasionally seen to converse with some accomplished foreigner, whose gestures and appearance might attract him amid his solemn haunts. He spoke Latin, and especially Greek, with fluency, and with a peculiar but sweet accent; he had apparently acquired a knowledge of the northern languages of Europe. There was no circumstance connected with him that gave the least intimation of his country, his origin, or his occupation. His dress was strange, but splendid and solemn. He was forever alone. The literati of Rome thought him a curiosity, but there was something in his manner unintelligible but impressive, which awed their obtrusions into distance and silence. The countrymen, whose path he rarely crossed, returning by starlight from their market at Campo Vaccino, called him, with that strange mixture of religious and historical ideas so common in Italy, *Il Diavolo di Bruto*.

Such was the figure which interrupted the contemplations, if they were so engaged, of the strangers, by addressing them in the clear, and exact, but unidiomatic phrases of their native language: —“Strangers, you are two; behold the third in this great city, to whom alone the spectacle of these mighty ruins is more delightful than the mockeries of a superstition which destroyed them.”

“I see nothing,” said the old man.

“What do you here, then?”

“I listen to the sweet singing of the birds, and the sound of my daughter's breathing composes me like the soft murmur of water—and I feel the sun-warm wind—and this is pleasant to me.”

"Wretched old man, know you not that these are the ruins of the Coliseum?"—

"Alas! stranger," said the girl, in a voice like mournful music, "speak not so—he is blind."—

The stranger's eyes were suddenly filled with tears, and the lines of his countenance became relaxed. "Blind!" he exclaimed, in a tone of suffering, which was more than an apology; and seated himself apart on a flight of shattered and mossy stairs which wound up among the labyrinths of the ruin.

"My sweet Helen," said the old man, "you did not tell me that this was the Coliseum."

"How should I tell you, dearest father, what I knew not? I was on the point of inquiring the way to that building, when we entered this circle of ruins, and, until the stranger accosted us, I remained silent, subdued by the greatness of what I see."

"It is your custom, sweetest child, to describe to me the objects that gave you delight. You array them in the soft radiance of your words, and whilst you speak I only feel the infirmity which holds me in such dear dependence, as a blessing. Why have you been silent now?"

"I know not—first the wonder and pleasure of the sight, then the words of the stranger, and then thinking on what he had said, and how he had looked—and now, beloved father, your own words."

"Well, tell me now, what do you see?"

"I see a great circle of arches built upon arches, and shattered stones lie around, that once made a part of the solid wall. In the crevices, and on the vaulted roofs, grow a multitude of shrubs, the wild olive and the myrtle—and intricate brambles, and entangled weeds and plants I never saw before. The stones are immensely massive, and they jut out one from the other. There are terrible rifts in the wall, and broad windows through which you see the blue heaven. There seems to be more than a thousand arches, some ruined, some entire, and they are all immensely high and wide. Some are shattered, and stand forth in great heaps, and the underwood is tufted on their crumbling summits. Around us lie enormous columns, shattered and shapeless—and fragments of capitals and cornice, fretted with delicate sculptures."—

"It is opened to the blue sky?" said the old man.

"Yes. We see the liquid depth of heaven above through the rifts and the windows; and the flowers, and the weeds, and the grass and creeping moss, are nourished by its unforbidden rain. The blue sky is above—the wide, bright, blue sky—it flows through the great rents on high, and through the bare boughs of the marble rooted fig-tree, and through the leaves and flowers of the weeds, even to the dark arcades beneath. I see—I feel its clear and piercing beams fill the universe, and impregnate the joy-inspiring wind with life and light, and casting the veil of its splendour over all things—even me. Yes, and through the highest rift the noonday waning moon is hanging, as it were, out of the solid sky, and this shows that the atmosphere has all the clearness which it rejoices me that you feel."

"What else see you?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Only the bright-green mossy ground, speckled by tufts of dewy clover-grass that run into the interstices of the shattered arches, and round the isolated pinnacles of the ruin."

"Like the lawny dells of soft short grass which wind among the pine forests and precipices in the Alps of Savoy?"

"Indeed, father, your eye has a vision more serene than mine."

"And the great wrecked arches, the shattered masses of precipitous ruin, overgrown with the younglings of the forest, and more like chasms rent by an earthquake among the mountains, than like the vestige of what was human workmanship—what are they?"

"Things awe-inspiring and wonderful."

"Are they not caverns such as the untamed elephant might choose, amid the Indian wilderness, wherein to hide her cubs; such as, were the sea to overflow the earth, the mightiest monsters of the deep would change into their spacious chambers?"

"Father, your words image forth what I would have expressed, but, alas! could not."

"I hear the rustling of leaves, and the sound of waters—but it does not rain,—like the fast drops of a fountain among woods."

"It falls from among the heaps of ruin over our heads—it is, I suppose, the water collected in the rifts by the showers."

"A nursling of man's art, abandoned by his care, and transformed by the enchantment of Nature into a likeness of her own creations, and destined to partake their immortality! Changed into a mountain cloven with woody dells, which overhang its labyrinthine glades, and shattered into toppling precipices. Even the clouds, intercepted by its craggy summit, feed its eternal fountains with their rain. By the column on which I sit, I should judge that it had once been crowned by a temple or a theatre, and that on sacred days the multitude wound up its craggy path to spectacle or the sacrifice—It was such itself!\* Helen, what sound of wings is that?"

"It is the wild pigeons returning to their young. Do you not hear the murmur of those that are brooding in their nests?"

"Ay, it is the language of their happiness. They are as happy as we are, child, but in a different manner. They know not the sensations which this ruin excites within us. Yet it is pleasure to them to inhabit it; and the succession of its forms as they pass, is connected with associations in their minds, sacred to them, as these to us. The internal nature of each being is surrounded by a circle, not to be surmounted by his fellows; and it is this repulsion which constitutes the misfortune of the condition of life. But there is a circle which comprehends, as well as one which mutually excludes all things which feel. And, with respect to man, his public and his private happiness consists in diminishing the circumference which includes those resembling himself, until they become one with him, and he with them. It is because we enter into the meditations, designs and destinies of something beyond ourselves, that the contemplation of the ruins of human power excites an elevating sense of awfulness and beauty. It is therefore, that the ocean, the glacier, the cataract, the tempest, the volcano, have each a spirit which animates the extremities of our frame with tingling joy. It is therefore, that the singing of birds, and the motion of leaves, the sensation of the odorous earth beneath, and the freshness of the living wind around, is sweet. And this is Love. This is the religion of eternity, whose votaries have been exiled from among the multitude of mankind. O, Power!" cried the old man, lifting his sightless eyes towards the undazzling sun, "thou which interpenetratest all things, and without which this glorious world were a blind and formless chaos, Love, Author of Good, God, King, Father! Friend of these thy worshippers! Two solitary hearts invoke thee, may they be divided never! If the contentions of mankind have been their misery; if to give and seek that happiness which thou art, has been their choice and destiny; if, in the contemplation of these majestic records of the power of their kind, they see the shadow and the prophecy of that which thou mayst have decreed that he should become; if the justice, the liberty, the loveliness, the truth, which are thy footsteps, have been sought by them, divide them not! It is thine to unite, to eternize; to make outlive the limits of the grave those who have left among the living, memorials of thee. When this frame shall be senseless dust, may the hopes, and the desires, and the delights which animate it now, never be extinguished in my child; even as, if she were borne into the tomb, my memory would be the written monument of all her nameless excellencies!"

The old man's countenance and gestures, radiant with the inspiration of his words, sunk, as he ceased, into more than its accustomed calmness, for he heard his daughter's sobs, and remembered that he had spoken of death,—"My father, how can I outlive you?" said Helen.

"Do not let us talk of death," said the old man, suddenly changing his tone. "Heraclitus, indeed, died at my age, and if I had so sour a disposition, there might be some danger. But Democritus reached a

hundred and twenty, by the mere dint of a joyous and unconquerable mind. He only died at last, because he had no gentle and beloved ministering spirit, like my Helen, for whom it would have been his delight to live. You remember his gay old sister requested him to put off starving himself to death until she had returned from the festival of Ceres; alleging, that it would spoil her holiday if he refused to comply, as it was not permitted to appear in the procession immediately after the death of a relation; and how good-temperedly the sage acceded to her request."

The old man could not see his daughter's grateful smile, but he felt the pressure of her hand by which it was expressed.—“In truth,” he continued, “that mystery, death, is a change which neither for ourselves nor for others is the just object of hope or fear. We know not if it be good or evil, we only know, it is. The old, the young, may alike die; no time, no place, no age, no foresight exempts us from death, and the chance of death. We have no knowledge, if death be a state of sensation, of any precaution that can make those sensations fortunate, if the existing series of events shall not produce that effect. Think not of death, or think of it as something common to us all. It has happened,” said he, with a deep and suffering voice, “that men have buried their children.”

“Alas! then, dearest father, how I pity you. Let us speak no more.”

They rose to depart from the Coliseum, but the figure which had first accosted them interposed itself:—“Lady,” he said, “if grief be an expiation of error, I have grieved deeply for the words which I spoke to your companion. The men who anciently inhabited this spot, and those from whom they learned their wisdom, respected infirmity and age. If I have rashly violated that venerable form, at once majestic and defenceless, may I be forgiven?”

“It gives me pain to see how much your mistake afflicts you,” she said; “if you can forget, doubt not that we forgive.”

“You thought me one of those who are blind in spirit,” said the old man, “and who deserve, if any human being can deserve, contempt and blame. Assuredly, contemplating this monument as I do, though in the mirror of my daughter’s mind, I am filled with astonishment and delight; the spirit of departed generations seems to animate my limbs, and circulate through all the fibres of my frame. Stranger, if I have expressed what you have ever felt, let us know each other more.”

“The sound of your voice, and the harmony of your thoughts, are delightful to me,” said the youth, “and it is a pleasure to see any form which expresses so much beauty and goodness as your daughter’s; if you reward me for my rudeness, by allowing me to know you, my error is already expiated, and you remember my ill words no more. I live a solitary life, and it is rare that I encounter any stranger with whom it is pleasant to talk; besides, their meditations, even though they be learned, do not always agree with mine; and, though I can pardon this difference, they cannot. Nor have I ever explained the cause of the dress I wear, and the difference which I perceive between my language and manners, and those with whom I have intercourse. Not but that it is painful to me to live without communion with intelligent and affectionate beings. You are such, I feel.”

“The Infinite” - Leopardi - 1819

This lonely hill was always dear to me,  
and this hedgerow, which cuts off the view  
of so much of the last horizon.  
But sitting here and gazing, I can see  
beyond, in my mind's eye, unending spaces,  
and superhuman silences, and depthless calm,  
till what I feel  
is almost fear. And when I hear  
the wind stir in these branches, I begin  
comparing that endless stillness with this noise:  
and the eternal comes to mind,  
and the dead seasons, and the present  
living one, and how it sounds.  
So my mind sinks in this immensity:  
and foundering is sweet in such a sea.

Naples, March 6, 1787.

Most reluctantly, yet, for the sake of good-fellowship, Tischbein accompanied me to-day to Vesuvius. To him—the artist of form, who concerns himself with none but the most beautiful of human and animal shapes, and one also whose taste and judgment lead to humanise even the formless rock and landscape,—such a frightful and shapeless conglomeration of matter, which, moreover, is continually preying on itself, and proclaiming war against every idea of the beautiful, must have appeared utterly abominable.

We started in two caleches, as we did not trust ourselves to drive through the crowd and whirl of the city. The drivers kept up an incessant shouting at the top of their voice whenever donkeys with their loads of wood or rubbish, or rolling caleches met us, or else warning the porters with their burdens, or other pedestrians, whether children or old people to get out of the way. All the while, however, they drove at a sharp trot, without the least stop or check.

As you get into the remoter suburbs and gardens, the road soon begins to show signs of a Plutonic action. For as we had not had rain for “a long time, the naturally evergreen leaves were covered with a thick gray and ashy dust; so that the glorious blue sky, and the scorching sun which shone down upon us, were the only signs that we were still among the living.

*Naples—Ascent to Vesuvius.*

At the foot of the steep ascent, we were received by two guides, one old, the other young, but both active fellows. The first pulled me up the path, the other Tischbein,—pulled I say, for these guides are girded round the waist with a leathern belt, which the traveller takes hold of, and being drawn up by his guide, makes his way the easier with foot and staff. In this manner we reached the flat from which the cone rises: towards the north lay the ruins of the Somma.

A glance westwards over the country beneath us, removed, as well as a bath could, all feeling of exhaustion and fatigue, and we now went round the ever-smoking cone, as it threw out its stones and ashes. Wherever the space allowed of our viewing it at a sufficient distance, it appeared a grand and elevating spectacle. In the first place, a violent thundering toned forth from its deepest abyss, then stones of larger and smaller sizes were showered into the air by thousands, and enveloped by clouds of ashes. The greatest part fell again into the gorge; the rest of the fragments, receiving a lateral inclination, and falling on the outside of the crater, made a marvellous rumbling noise. First of all the larger masses plumped against the side, and rebounded with a dull heavy sound; then the smaller came rattling down; and last of all, drizzled a shower of ashes. All this took place at regular intervals, which by slowly counting, we were able to measure pretty accurately.

Between the Somma, however, and the cone the space is narrow enough; moreover, several stones fell around us, and made the circuit anything but agreeable. Tischbein now felt more disgusted than ever with Vesuvius, as the monster, not content with being hateful, showed an inclination to become mischievous also.

As, however, the presence of danger generally exercises on man a kind of attraction, and calls forth a spirit of opposition in the human breast to defy it, I bethought myself that, in the interval of the eruptions, it would be possible to climb up the cone to the crater, and to get back before it broke out again. I held a council on this point with our guides under one of the overhanging rocks of the Somma, where, encamped in safety, we refreshed ourselves with the provisions we had brought with us. The younger guide was willing to run the risk with me; we stuffed our hats full of linen and silk handkerchiefs, and, staff in hand, we prepared to start, I holding on to his girdle.

The little stones were yet rattling around us, and the ashes still drizzling, as the stalwart youth hurried forth with me across the hot glowing rubble. We soon stood on the brink of the vast chasm, the smoke of which, although a gentle air was bearing it away from us, unfortunately veiled the interior of the crater, which smoked all round from a thousand crannies. At intervals, however, we caught sight

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe  
Excerpts from *Italian Journey, Part II*

through the smoke of the cracked walls of the rock. The view was neither instructive nor delightful; but for the very reason that one saw nothing, one lingered in the hope of catching a glimpse of something more; and so we forgot our slow counting. We were standing on a narrow ridge of the vast abyss: of a sudden the thunder pealed aloud; we ducked our heads involuntarily, as if that would have rescued us from the precipitated masses. The smaller stones soon rattled, and without considering that we had again an interval of cessation before us, and only too much rejoiced to have outstood the danger, we rushed down and reached the foot of the hill, together with the drizzling ashes, which pretty thickly covered our heads and shoulders.

Tischbein was heartily glad to see me again. After a little scolding and a little refreshment, I was able to give my especial attention to the old and new lava. And here the elder of the guides was able to instruct me accurately in the signs by which the age of the several strata was indicated. The older were already covered with ashes, and rendered quite smooth; the newer, especially those which had cooled slowly, presented a singular appearance. "As, sliding along, they carried away with them the solid objects which lay on the surface, it necessarily happened that from time to time several would come into contact with each other, and these again being swept still further by the molten stream, and pushed one over the other, would eventually form a solid mass with wonderful jags and corners, still more strange even than the somewhat similarly formed piles of the icebergs. Among this fused and waste matter I found many great rocks, which, being struck with a hammer, present on the broken face a perfect resemblance to the primeval rock formation. The guides maintained that these were old lava from the lowest depths of the mountain, which are very often thrown up by the volcano."

Naples, March 18, 1787.

We must not any longer put off our visit to Herculaneum, and the Museum of Portici, where the curiosities which have been dug out of it are collected and preserved. That ancient city, lying at the foot of Vesuvius, was entirely covered with lava, which subsequent eruptions successively raised so high, that the buildings are at present sixty feet below the surface. The city was discovered by some men coming upon a marble pavement, as they were digging a well. It is a great pity that the excavation was not executed systematically by German miners; for it is admitted that the work, which was carried on at random, and with the hope of plunder, has spoilt many a noble monument of ancient art. After descending sixty steps into a pit, by torch-light you gaze in admiration at the theatre which once stood beneath the open sky, and listen to the guide recounting all that was found there, and carried off.

We entered the museum well recommended, and were well received; nevertheless we were not allowed to take any drawings. Perhaps on this account we paid the more attention to what we saw, and the more vividly transported ourselves into those long-passed times, when all these things surrounded their living owners, and ministered to the use and enjoyment of life. The little houses and rooms of Pompeii now appeared to me at once more spacious and more confined—more confined, because I fancied them to myself crammed full of so many precious objects: more spacious, because these very objects could not have been furnished merely as necessaries, but, being decorated with the most graceful and ingenious devices of the imitative arts, while they delighted the taste, must also have enlarged the mind far beyond what the amplest house-room could ever have done.

One sees here, for instance, a nobly-shaped pail, mounted at the top with a highly-ornamented edge. When you examine it more closely, you find that this rim rises on two sides, and so furnishes convenient handles by which the vessel may be lifted. The lamps, according to the number of their wicks, are ornamented with masks and mountings, so that each burner illuminates a genuine figure of art. We also saw some high and gracefully slender stands of iron for holding lamps, the pendant burners being suspended with figures of all kinds, which display a wonderful fertility of invention; and as, in order to please and delight the eye, they sway and oscillate, the effect surpasses all description.

In the hope of being able to pay a second visit, we followed the usher from room to room, and snatched all the delight and instruction that was possible from a cursory view.

Naples, Tuesday, March 20, 1787.

The news that an eruption of lava had just commenced, which, taking the direction of Ottajano, was invisible at Naples, tempted me to visit Vesuvius for the third time. Scarcely had I jumped out of my cabriolet (zweirädrigen einpferdigen Fuhrwerk), at the foot of the mountain, when immediately appeared the two guides who had accompanied us on our previous ascent. I had no wish to do without either, but took one out of gratitude and custom, the other for reliance on his judgment,—and the two for the greater convenience. Having ascended the summit, the older guide remained with our cloaks and refreshment, while the younger followed me, and we boldly went straight towards a dense volume of smoke, which broke forth from the bottom of the funnel; then we quickly went downwards by the side of it, till at last, under the clear heaven, we distinctly saw the lava emitted from the rolling clouds of smoke.

We may hear an object spoken of a thousand times, but its peculiar features will never be caught till we see it with our own eyes. The stream of lava was small, not broader perhaps than ten feet, but the way in which it flowed down a gentle and tolerably smooth plain was remarkable. As it flowed along, it cooled both on the sides and on the surface, so that it formed a sort of canal, the bed of which was continually raised in consequence of the molten mass congealing oven beneath the fiery stream, which, with uniform action, precipitated right and left the scoria which were floating on its surface. In this way a regular dam was at length thrown up, in which the glowing stream flowed on as quietly as any mill-stream. We passed along the tolerably high dam, while the scoria rolled regularly off the sides at our feet. Some cracks in the canal afforded opportunity of looking at the living stream from below, and as it rushed onwards, we observed it from above.

A very bright sun made the glowing lava look dull; but a moderate steam rose from it into the pure air. I felt a great desire to go nearer to the point where it broke out from the mountain; there my guide averred, it at once formed vaults and roofs above itself, on which he had often stood. To see and experience this phenomenon, we again ascended the hill, in order to come from behind to this point. Fortunately at this moment the place was cleared by a pretty strong wind, but not entirely, for all round it the smoke eddied from a thousand crannies; and now at last we stood on the top of the solid roof, (which looked like a hardened mass of twisted dough), but which, however, projected so far outwards, that it was impossible to see the welling lava.

We ventured about twenty steps further, but the ground on which we stepped became hotter and hotter, while around us rolled an oppressive steam, which obscured and hid the sun; the guide, who was a few steps in advance of me, presently turned back, and seizing hold of me, hurried out of this Stygian exhalation.

After we had refreshed our eyes with the clear prospect, and washed our gums and throat with wine, we went round again to notice any other peculiarities which might characterise this peak of hell, thus rearing itself in the midst of a Paradise. I again observed attentively some chasms, in appearance like so many Vulcanic forges, which emitted no smoke, but continually shot out a steam of hot glowing air. They were all tapestried, as it were, with a kind of stalactite, which covered the funnel to the top, with its knobs and chintz-like variation of colours. In consequence of the irregularity of the forges, I found many specimens of this sublimation hanging within reach, so that, with our staves and a little contrivance, we were able to hack off a few, and to secure them. I saw in the shops of the dealers in lava similar specimens, labelled simply "Lava;" and I was delighted to have discovered that it was volcanic soot precipitated from the hot vapour, and distinctly exhibiting the sublimated mineral particles which it contained.

The most glorious of sunsets, a heavenly evening, refreshed me on my return; still I felt how all great contrasts confound the mind and senses. From the terrible to the beautiful—from the beautiful to the terrible; each destroys the other, and produces a feeling of indifference. Assuredly, the Neapolitan would be quite a different creature, did he not feel himself thus hemmed in between Elysium and Tartarus.

“The Image in Lava” - Felicia Hemans - 1828

Thou thing of years departed!  
What ages have gone by,  
Since here the mournful seal was set  
By love and agony!

Temple and tower have moulder'd,  
Empires from earth have pass'd,—  
And woman's heart hath left a trace  
Those glories to outlast!

And childhood's fragile image  
Thus fearfully enshrin'd,  
Survives the proud memorials rear'd  
By conquerors of mankind.

Babe! wert thou brightly slumbering  
Upon thy mother's breast,  
When suddenly the fiery tomb  
Shut round each gentle guest?

A strange, dark fate o'ertook you,  
Fair babe and loving heart!  
One moment of a thousand pangs—  
Yet better than to part!

Haply of that fond bosom  
On ashes here impress'd,  
Thou wert the only treasure, child!  
Whereon a hope might rest.

Perchance all vainly lavish'd  
Its other love had been,  
And where it trusted, nought remain'd  
But thorns on which to lean.

Far better then to perish,  
Thy form within its clasp,  
Than live and lose thee, precious one!  
From that impulsion'd grasp.

Oh! I could pass all relics  
Left by the pomps of old,  
To gaze on this rude monument,  
Cast in affection's mould.

Love, human love! what art thou?  
Thy print upon the dust  
Outlives the cities of renown  
Wherein the mighty trust!

Immortal, oh! immortal  
Thou art, whose earthly glow  
Hath given these ashes holiness—  
It must, it must be so!