

The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy

Felicia Hemans

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[‘THE French, who in every invasion have been the scourge of Italy, and have rivalled or rather surpassed the rapacity of the Goths and Vandals, laid their sacrilegious hands on the unparalleled collection of the Vatican, tore its masterpieces from their pedestals, and, dragging them from their temples of marble, transported them to Paris, and consigned them to the dull sullen halls, or rather stables, of the Louvre.... But the joy of discovery was short, and the triumph of taste transitory.’—EUSTACE’S *Classical Tour through Italy*, vol. ii. p. 60.]

Italia, Italia ! O tu cui diè la sorte
Dono infelice di bellezza, ond' hai
Funesta dote d'infiniti guai,
Che 'n fronte scritte per gran doglia porte;
Deh, fossi tu men bella, o almen piu forte.—FILICAJA.

LAND of departed fame ! whose classic plains
Have proudly echo'd to immortal strains;
Whose hallow'd soil hath given the great and brave
Daystars of life, a birth–place and a grave;
Home of the Arts ! where glory's faded smile
Sheds lingering light o'er many a mouldering pile;
Proud wreck of vanish'd power, of splendour fled,
Majestic temple of the mighty dead !
Whose grandeur, yet contending with decay,
Gleams through the twilight of thy glorious day;
Though dimm'd thy brightness, riveted thy chain,
Yet, fallen Italy ! rejoice again !
Lost, lovely realm ! once more 'tis thine to gaze
On the rich relics of sublimer days.

Awake, ye Muses of Etrurian shades,
Or sacred Tivoli's romantic glades;
Wake, ye that slumber in the bowery gloom
Where the wild ivy shadows Virgil's tomb;
Or ye, whose voice, by Sorga's lonely wave,
Swell'd the deep echoes of the fountain's cave,
Or thrill'd the soul in Tasso's numbers high,
Those magic strains of love and chivalry:
If yet by classic streams ye fondly rove,
Haunting the myrtle vale, the laurel grove;

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Oh ! rouse once more the daring soul of song,
Seize with bold hand the harp, forgot so long,
And hail, with wonted pride, those works revered
Hallow'd by time, by absence more endear'd.

And breathe to Those the strain, whose warrior-might
Each danger stemm'd, prevail'd in every fight;
Souls of unyielding power, to storms inured,
Sublimed by peril, and by toil matured.
Sing of that Leader, whose ascendant mind
Could rouse the slumbering spirit of mankind:
Whose banners track'd the vanquish'd Eagle's flight
O'er many a plain, and dark sierra's height;
Who bade once more the wild, heroic lay
Record the deeds of Roncesvalles' day;
Who, through each mountain-pass of rock and snow,
An Alpine huntsman chased the fear-struck foe;
Waved his proud standard to the balmy gales,
Rich Languedoc ! that fan thy glowing vales,
And 'midst those scenes renew'd the achievements high,
Bequeath'd to fame by England's ancestry.

Yet, when the storm seem'd hush'd, the conflict past,
One strife remain'd—the mightiest and the last !
Nerved for the struggle, in that fateful hour
Untamed Ambition summon'd all his power;
Vengeance and Pride, to frenzy roused, were there,
And the stern might of resolute Despair.
Isle of the free ! 'twas then thy champions stood,
Breasting unmoved the combat's wildest flood;
Sunbeam of battle ! then thy spirit shone,
Glow'd in each breast, and sank with life alone.

Oh, hearts devoted ! whose illustrious doom
Gave there at once your triumph and your tomb,
Ye, firm and faithful, in the ordeal tried
Of that dread strife, by Freedom sanctified;
Shrined, not entomb'd, ye rest in sacred earth,
Hallow'd by deeds of more than mortal worth.
What though to mark where sleeps heroic dust,
No sculptured trophy rise, or breathing bust,
Yours, on the scene where valour's race was run,
A prouder sepulchre—the field ye won !
There every mead, each cabin's lowly name,
Shall live a watchword blended with your fame;
And well may flowers suffice those graves to crown
That ask no urn to blazon their renown !
There shall the bard in future ages tread,
And bless each wreath that blossoms o'er the dead;
Revere each tree whose sheltering branches wave
O'er the low mounds, the altars of the brave;
Pause o'er each warrior's grass-grown bed, and hear
In every breeze some name to glory dear;
And as the shades of twilight close around,

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With martial pageants people all the ground.
Thither unborn descendants of the slain
Shall throng as pilgrims to the holy fane,
While as they trace each spot, whose records tell
Where fought their fathers, and prevail'd, and fell,
Warm in their souls shall loftiest feelings glow,
Claiming proud kindred with the dust below !
And many an age shall see the brave repair,
To learn the Hero's bright devotion there.

And well, Ausonia ! may that field of fame,
From thee one song of echoing triumph claim.
Land of the lyre ! 'twas there the avenging sword
Won the bright treasures to thy fanes restored;
Those precious trophies o'er thy realms that throw
A veil of radiance, hiding half thy woe,
And bid the stranger for awhile forget
How deep thy fall, and deem thee glorious yet.

Yes, fair creations ! to perfection wrought,
Embodied visions of ascending thought !
Forms of sublimity ! by Genius traced
In tints that vindicate adoring taste;
Whose bright originals, to earth unknown,
Live in the spheres encircling glory's throne;
Models of art, to deathless fame consign'd,
Stamp'd with the high-born majesty of mind;
Yes, matchless works ! your presence shall restore
One beam of splendour to your native shore,
And her sad scenes of lost renown illumine,
As the bright sunset gilds some hero's tomb.

Oh ! ne'er, in other climes, though many an eye
Dwelt on your charms, in beaming ecstasy;
Ne'er was it yours to bid the soul expand
With thoughts so mighty, dreams so boldly grand,
As in that realm, where each faint breeze's moan
Seems a low dirge for glorious ages gone;
Where 'midst the ruin'd shrines of many a vale,
E'en Desolation tells a haughty tale,
And scarce a fountain flows, a rock ascends,
But its proud name with song eternal blends !

Yes ! in those scenes where every ancient stream
Bids memory kindle o'er some lofty theme;
Where every marble deeds of fame records,
Each ruin tells of Earth's departed lords;
And the deep tones of inspiration swell
From each wild olive-wood, and Alpine dell;
Where heroes slumber on their battle plains,
Midst prostrate altars and deserted fanes,
And Fancy communes, in each lonely spot,
With shades of those who ne'er shall be forgot;
There was your home, and there your power imprest,
With tenfold awe, the pilgrim's glowing breast;

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And, as the wind's deep thrills and mystic sighs
Wake the wild harp to loftiest harmonies,
Thus at your influence, starting from repose,
Thought, Feeling, Fancy, into grandeur rose.

Fair Florence ! queen of Arno's lovely vale !
Justice and Truth indignant heard thy tale,
And sternly smiled, in retribution's hour,
To wrest thy treasures from the Spoiler's power.
Too long the spirits of thy noble dead
Mourn'd o'er the domes they rear'd in ages fled.
Those classic scenes their pride so richly graced,
Temples of genius, palaces of taste,
Too long, with sad and desolated mien,
Reveal'd where Conquest's lawless track had been;
Reft of each form with brighter light imbued,
Lonely they frown'd, a desert solitude,
Florence ! the Oppressor's noon of pride is o'er,
Rise in thy pomp again, and weep no more !

As one, who, starting at the dawn of day
From dark illusions, phantoms of dismay,
With transport heighten'd by those ills of night,
Hails the rich glories of expanding light;
E'en thus, awakening from thy dream of woe,
While heaven's own hues in radiance round thee glow,
With warmer ecstasy 'tis thine to trace
Each tint of beauty, and each line of grace
More bright, more prized, more precious, since deplored,
As loved, lost relics, ne'er to be restored,
Thy grief as hopeless as the tear-drop shed
By fond affection bending o'er the dead.

Athens of Italy ! once more are thine
Those matchless gems of Art's exhaustless mine.
For thee bright Genius darts his living beam,
Warm o'er thy shrines the tints of Glory stream,
And forms august as natives of the sky,
Rise round each fane in faultless majesty,
So chastely perfect, so serenely grand,
They seem creations of no mortal hand.

Ye, at whose voice fair Art, with eagle glance,
Burst in full splendour from her deathlike trance;
Whose rallying call bade slumbering nations wake,
And daring Intellect his bondage break;
Beneath whose eye the lords of song arose,
And snatch'd the Tuscan Iyre from long repose,
And bade its pealing energies resound,
With power electric, through the realms around;
Oh ! high in thought, magnificent in soul !
Born to inspire, enlighten, and control;
Cosmo, Lorenzo ! view your reign once more,
The shrine where nations mingle to adore !
Again the Enthusiast there, with ardent gaze,

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Shall hail the mighty of departed days:
Those sovereign spirits, whose commanding mind
Seems in the marble's breathing mould enshrined;
Still with ascendant power the world to awe,
Still the deep homage of the heart to draw
To breathe some spell of holiness around,
Bid all the scene be consecrated ground,
And from the stone, by Inspiration wrought,
Dart the pure lightnings of exalted thought.

There thou, fair offspring of immortal Mind !
Love's radiant goddess, idol of mankind !
Once the bright object of Devotion's vow,
Shalt claim from taste a kindred worship now.
Oh ! who can tell what beams of heavenly light
Flash'd o'er the sculptor's intellectual sight,
How many a glimpse, reveal'd to him alone,
Made brighter beings, nobler worlds, his own;
Ere, like some vision sent the earth to bless,
Burst into life thy pomp of loveliness !

Young Genius there, while dwells his kindling eye
On forms, instinct with bright divinity,
While new-born powers, dilating in his heart,
Embrace the full magnificence of Art;
From scenes, by Raphael's gifted hand array'd,
From dreams of heaven, by Angelo portray'd;
From each fair work of Grecian skill sublime,
Seal'd with perfection, 'sanctified by time';
Shall catch a kindred glow, and proudly feel
His spirit burn with emulative zeal,
Buoyant with loftier hopes, his soul shall rise,
Imbued at once with nobler energies;
O'er life's dim scenes on rapid pinions soar,
And worlds of visionary grace explore,
Till his bold hand give glory's daydream birth,
And with new wonders charm admiring earth.

Venice, exult ! and o'er thy moonlight seas,
Swell with gay strains each Adriatic breeze !
What though long fled those years of martial fame,
That shed romantic lustre o'er thy name;
Though to the winds thy streamers idly play,
And the wild waves another Queen obey;
Though quench'd the spirit of thine ancient race,
And power and freedom scarce have left a trace;
Yet still shall Art her splendours round thee cast,
And gild the wreck of years for ever past.
Again thy fanes may boast a Titian's dyes,
Whose clear soft brilliance emulates thy skies,
And scenes that glow in colouring's richest bloom,
With life's warm flush Palladian halls illumine.
From thy rich dome again the unrivall'd steed
Starts to existence, rushes into speed,

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Still for Lysippus claims the wreath of fame,
Panting with ardour, vivified with flame.

Proud Racers of the Sun ! to fancy's thought
Burning with spirit, from his essence caught,
No mortal birth ye seem—but form'd to bear
Heaven's car of triumph through the realms of air;
To range uncurb'd the pathless fields of space,
The winds your rivals in the glorious race;
Traverse empyreal spheres with buoyant feet,
Free as the zephyr, as the shot—star fleet;
And waft through worlds unknown the vital ray,
The flame that wakes creations into day.
Creatures of fire and ether ! wing'd with light,
To track the regions of the Infinite !
From purer elements whose life was drawn,
Sprung from the sunbeam, offspring of the dawn.
What years on years, in silence gliding by,
Have spared those forms of perfect symmetry !
Moulded by Art to dignify, alone,
Her own bright deity's resplendent throne,
Since first her skill their fiery grace bestow'd,
Meet for such lofty fate, such high abode,
How many a race, whose tales of glory seem
An echo's voice—the music of a dream,
Whose records feebly from oblivion save
A few bright traces of the wise and brave;
How many a state, whose pillar'd strength sublime,
Defied the storms of war, the waves of time,
Towering o'er earth majestic and alone,
Fortress of power—has flourish'd and is gone !
And they, from clime to clime by conquest borne,
Each fleeting triumph destined to adorn,
They, that of powers and kingdoms lost and won,
Have seen the noontide and the setting sun,
Consummate still in every grace remain,
As o'er *their* heads had ages roll'd in vain !
Ages, victorious in their ceaseless flight,
O'er countless monuments of earthly might !
While she, from fair Byzantium's lost domain,
Who bore those treasures to her ocean—reign,
'Midst the blue deep, who rear'd her island—throne,
And called the infinitude of waves her own;
Venice, the proud, the Regent of the sea,
Welcomes in chains the trophies of the Free ! :

And thou, whose Eagle's towering plume unfurl'd,
Once cast its shadow o'er a vassal world,
Eternal city ! round whose Curule throne,
The lords of nations knelt in ages flown;
Thou, whose Augustan years have left to time
Immortal records of their glorious prime;
When deathless bards, thine olive—shades among,

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Swell'd the high raptures of heroic song;
Fair, fallen Empress ! raise thy languid head
From the cold altars of the illustrious dead,
And once again, with fond delight survey
The proud memorials of thy noblest day.

Lo ! where thy sons, O Rome ! a godlike train,
In imaged majesty return again !
Bards, chieftains, monarchs, tower with mien august
O'er scenes that shrine their venerable dust.
Those forms, those features, luminous with soul,
Still o'er thy children seem to claim control;
With awful grace arrest the pilgrim's glance,
Bind his rapt soul in elevating trance,
And bid the past, to fancy's ardent eyes,
From time's dim sepulchre in glory rise.

Souls of the lofty ! whose undying names
Rouse the young bosom still to noblest aims;
Oh ! with your images could fate restore,
Your own high spirit to your sons once more;
Patriots and Heroes ! could those flames return,
That bade your hearts with freedom's ardours burn
Then from the sacred ashes of the first,
Might a new Rome in phoenix grandeur burst !
With one bright glance dispel the horizon's gloom,
With one loud call wake empire from the tomb;
Bind round her brows her own triumphal crown,
Lift her dread aegis with majestic frown,
Unchain her eagle's wing, and guide his flight,
To bathe his plumage in the fount of light.

Vain dream ! degraded Rome ! thy noon is o'er,
Once lost, thy spirit shall revive no more.
It sleeps with those, the sons of other days,
Who fix'd on thee the world's adoring gaze;
Those, blest to live, while yet thy star was high,
More blest, ere darkness quench'd its beam, to die !

Yet, though thy faithless tutelary powers
Have fled thy shrines, left desolate thy towers,
Still, still to thee shall nations bend their way,
Revered in ruin, sovereign in decay !
Oh ! what can realms, in fame's full zenith, boast,
To match the relics of thy splendour lost !
By Tiber's waves, on each illustrious hill,
Genius and Taste shall love to wander still,
For there has Art survived an empire's doom,
And rear'd her throne o'er Latium's trophied tomb;
She from the dust recalls the brave and free,
Peopling each scene with beings worthy thee !

Oh ! ne'er again may War, with lightning-stroke,
Rend its last honours from the shatter'd oak !
Long be those works, revered by ages, thine,
To lend one triumph to thy dim decline.

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Bright with stern beauty, breathing wrathful fire,
In all the grandeur of celestial ire,
Once more thine own, the immortal Archer's form
Sheds radiance round, with more than Being warm !
Oh ! who could view, nor deem that perfect frame,
A living temple of ethereal flame ?

Lord of the daystar ! how may words portray
Of thy chaste glory one reflected ray ?
Whate'er the soul could dream, the hand could trace,
Of regal dignity, and heavenly grace;
Each purer effluence of the fair and bright,
Whose fitful gleams have broke on mortal sight;
Each bold idea, borrow'd from the sky,
To vest the embodied form of Deity;
All, all in thee ennobled and refined,
Breathe and enchant, transcendently combined !
Son of Elysium ! years and ages gone
Have bow'd, in speechless homage, at thy throne,
And days unborn, and nations yet to be,
Shall gaze, absorb'd in ecstasy, on thee !

And thou, triumphant wreck, e'en yet sublime,
Disputed trophy, claimed by Art and Time;
Hail to that scene again, where Genius caught
From thee its fervours of diviner thought !
Where He, the inspired One, whose gigantic mind
Lived in some sphere, to him alone assign'd;
Who from the past, the future, and the unseen,
Could call up forms of more than earthly mien:
Unrivall'd Angelo on thee would gaze,
Till his full soul imbibed perfection's blaze !
And who but he, that Prince of Art, might dare
Thy sovereign greatness view without despair ?
Emblem of Rome ! from power's meridian hurl'd,
Yet claiming still the homage of the world.

What hadst thou been, ere barbarous hands defaced
The work of wonder, idolized by taste ?
Oh ! worthy still of some divine abode,
Mould of a Conqueror ! ruin of a God !
Still, like some broken gem, whose quenchless beam
From each bright fragment pours its vital stream,
'Tis thine, by fate unconquer'd, to dispense
From every part some ray of excellence !
E'en yet, inform'd with essence from on high,
Thine is no trace of frail mortality !
Within that frame a purer being glows,
Through viewless veins a brighter current flows;
Fill'd with immortal life each muscle swells,
In every line supernal grandeur dwells.

Consummate work ! the noblest and the last
Of Grecian Freedom, ere her reign was past:
Nurse of the mighty, she, while lingering still,

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Her mantle flow'd o'er many a classic hill,
Ere yet her voice its parting accents breathed,
A hero's image to the world bequeathed;
Enshrined in thee the imperishable ray
Of high-soul'd Genius, foster'd by her sway.
And bade thee teach, to ages yet unborn,
What lofty dreams were hers—who never shall return !

And mark yon group, transfixed with many a throe,
Seal'd with the image of eternal woe:
With fearful truth, terrific power, exprest,
Thy pangs, Laocoon, agonize the breast,
And the stern combat picture to mankind
Of suffering nature, and enduring mind.
Oh, mighty conflict ! though his pains intense
Distend each nerve, and dart through every sense;
Though fix'd on him, his children's suppliant eyes
Implore the aid avenging fate denies;
Though with the giant-snake in fruitless strife,
Heaves every muscle with convulsive life,
And in each limb existence writhes, enroll'd
'Midst the dread circles of the venom'd fold;
Yet the strong spirit lives—and not a cry
Shall own the might of Nature's agony !
That furrow'd brow unconquer'd soul reveals,
That patient eye to angry Heaven appeals,
That struggling bosom concentrates its breath,
Nor yields one moan to torture or to death !

Sublimest triumph of intrepid Art !
With speechless horror to congeal the heart,
To freeze each pulse, and dart through every vein,
Cold thrills of fear, keen sympathies of pain;
Yet teach the spirit how its lofty power
May brave the pangs of fate's severest hour.

Turn from such conflicts, and enraptured gaze
On scenes where Painting all her skill displays:
Landscapes, by colouring dress'd in richer dyes,
More mellow'd sunshine, more unclouded skies,
Or dreams of bliss, to dying martyrs given,
Descending seraphs, robed in beams of heaven.

Oh ! sovereign Masters of the Pencil's might,
Its depths of shadow, and its blaze of light;
Ye, whose bold thought, disdainful every bound,
Explored the worlds above, below, around,
Children of Italy ! who stand alone
And unapproach'd, 'midst regions all your own;
What scenes, what beings bless'd your favour'd sight
Severely grand, unutterably bright !
Triumphant spirits ! your exulting eye
Could meet the noontide of eternity,
And gaze untired, undaunted, uncontroll'd,
On all that Fancy trembles to behold.

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Bright on your view such forms their splendour shed,
As burst on prophet-bards in ages fled:
Forms that to trace, no hand but yours might dare,
Darkly sublime, or exquisitely fair;
These, o'er the walls your magic skill array'd,
Glow in rich sunshine, gleam through melting shade,
Float in light grace, in awful greatness tower,
And breathe and move, the records of your power.
Inspired of Heaven ! what heighten'd pomp ye cast
O'er all the deathless trophies of the past !
Round many a marble fane and classic dome,
Asserting still the majesty of Rome;
Round many a work that bids the world believe
What Grecian Art could image and achieve;
Again, creative minds, your visions throw
Life's chasten'd warmth, and Beauty's mellowest glow,
And when the Morn's bright beams and mantling dyes,
Pour the rich lustre of Ausonian skies,
Or evening suns illumine, with purple smile,
The Parian altar, and the pillar'd aisle,
Then, as the full, or soften'd radiance falls
On angel-groups that hover o'er the walls,
Well may those Temples, where your hand has shed
Light o'er the tomb, existence round the dead,
Seem like some world, so perfect and so fair,
That naught of earth should find admittance there,
Some sphere, where beings, to mankind unknown
Dwell in the brightness of their pomp alone !

Hence, ye vain fictions ! fancy's erring theme !
Gods of illusion ! phantoms of a dream !
Frail, powerless idols of departed time,
Fables of song, delusive, though sublime !
To loftier tasks has Roman Art assign'd
Her matchless pencil, and her mighty mind !
From brighter streams her vast ideas flow'd
With purer fire her ardent spirit glow'd.
To her 'twas given in fancy to explore
The land of miracles, the holiest shore;
That realm where first the light of life was sent,
The loved, the punish'd, of the Omnipotent !
O'er Judah's hills her thoughts inspired would stray,
Through Jordan's valleys trace their lonely way;
By Siloa's brook, or Almotana's deep,
Chain'd in dead silence, and unbroken sleep;
Scenes, whose cleft rocks, and blasted deserts tell,
Where pass'd the Eternal, where His anger fell !
Where oft His voice the words of fate reveal'd,
Swell'd in the whirlwind, in the thunder peal'd,
Or heard by prophets in some palmy vale,
Breathed 'still small' whispers on the midnight gale.
There dwelt her spirit—there her hand portray'd,

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'Midst the lone wilderness or cedar-shade,
Ethereal forms with awful missions fraught,
Or patriarch-seers absorb'd in sacred thought,
Bards, in high converse with the world of rest,
Saints of the earth, and spirits of the blest.
But chief to Him, the Conqueror of the grave,
Who lived to guide us, and who died to save;
Him, at whose glance the powers of evil fled,
And soul return'd to animate the dead;
Whom the waves own'd—and sunk beneath His eye,
Awed by one accent of Divinity;
To Him she gave her meditative hours,
Hallow'd her thoughts, and sanctified her powers.
O'er her bright scenes sublime repose she threw,
As all around the Godhead's presence knew,
And robed the Holy One's benignant mien
In beaming mercy, majesty serene.

Oh ! mark where Raphael's pure and perfect line
Portrays that form ineffably divine !
Where with transcendent skill his hand has shed
Diffusive sunbeams round the Saviour's head;
Each heaven-illumined lineament imbued
With all the fullness of beatitude,
And traced the sainted group, whose mortal sight
Sinks overpower'd by that excess of light !

Gaze on that scene, and own the might of Art,
By truth inspired, to elevate the heart !
To bid the soul exultingly possess,
Of all her powers, a heighten'd consciousness;
And strong in hope, anticipate the day,
The last of life, the first of freedom's ray;
To realize, in some unclouded sphere,
Those pictured glories imaged here!
Dim, cold reflections from her native sky,
Faint effluence of 'the Day—spring from on high'!