

SOTHEBY'S Coliseum and the Menades: What Drunken Madness!?

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ABSTRACT

This essay, originally presented as a keynote lecture at the 46th Wordsworth Summer Conference held in August 2017 at Rydal Hall, Ambleside, UK, analyses line by line, William Sotheby's Coliseum passage, which forms part of Canto II of "Rome" in *Italy*, published in 1828 as *Italy and Other Poems*. The lines in question are shown to bear marked resemblance to Byron's Dying Gladiator stanzas in the Canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and P. B. Shelley's Maenads and Dionysianism in his "Ode to the West Wind", *Prometheus Unbound*, and other poems. The final part of the Coliseum passage where the bacchanal procession appears is then analysed in depth with reference to Sotheby's own writings, i.e., his translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* and *Georgics*, and other parts of *Italy* where Dionysius first gave wine and mirth to humans. By so doing, the author demonstrates that the Virgilian communal harmony that existed before the Roman Empire survives throughout the Empire with its gladiatorial shows and their spectators drunk with blood. It even survives the Coliseum itself far into the future, and reappears again with bacchanal exclamation quite different from the spectators' roar in the Coliseum, that is, it reappears at the very ending of the Coliseum passage after the forest that grows on the spot of the theatre is gone. This, the author claims, is certainly what Joanna Baillie calls "striking thoughts", and what the reviewer in the *Athanaeum* calls "the contemplation of the grand", all of which places Sotheby in what Byron allegedly classifies as the school of Alexander Pope, or in the tradition of the eighteenth-century imitation poem.

KEYWORDS

William Sotheby; *Italy*; "Rome"; the Coliseum; Lord Byron; P. B. Shelley; the Menades (Maenads); the bacchanal procession; Evøe; the imitation poem.



William Sotheby (1757-1833), chiefly known as the translator of Wieland's *Oberon* and Virgil's *Georgics* is now somewhat a lesser known figure in the literature of the English Romantic period. There is no single-volume biography on him. Fred Burwick's *The Encyclopaedia of Romantic Literature* does not have its entry as a headword. All we have is an account in *Dictionary of National Biography* written in the late 19c by Sidney Lee, plus, several sidelights given by his contemporary acquaintances such as Scott, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Samuel Rogers, Joanna Baillie, and Lord Byron. Donald Reiman's introduction to the three volumes of Sotheby's works in Garland's "Romantic Context: Poetry" series gives us a concise summary of those literary friendship along with Reiman's own sound judgement. His estimation of Sotheby may be summed up in the following words: "Seldom has a poet writing in English both begun and ended the same work with lines outrageously bad as Sotheby's in 'A Tour through Parts of Wales' ... " ¹

Reiman continues,

After that debut, Sotheby's poems had nowhere to go but up. Some of his later poems besides the *Oberon* translation achieve a competence that could easily admit a sociable man with money to literary circles at that time. But to read Sotheby's poems beside those of his greater contemporaries and to know how he was praised or tolerated or imitated by Coleridge, Scott, Wordsworth, the young Byron, and Keats is to recognize anew how far money and social position could carry a *litterateur* in the year 1790-1818 (x-xi).

What I aim to do in this essay is not to give a comprehensive reevaluation of Sotheby, nor to deny what Reiman says. Nor will it be my purpose to build any thesis of my own. I simply hope to add another sidelight to Sotheby's literary achievement by going through the Coliseum passage in "Rome" in *Italy*, line by line, indulging, if I may, in the pleasures of close reading of a poem which seems to have escaped the attention of lovers of English Romantic poetry, and add in passing just a little bit of my own interpretation.

Why the Coliseum? First and foremost, it's because I like it. But there are two more persons beside me, who like it. One is Joanna Baillie, who in her letter to William Sotheby on the 25th of May 1825 says, "The Rome is indeed rich in striking thoughts & discription [*sic.*] and as discriptive poetry...has always taken greater hold of my memory & imagination than the poetry of sentiment...the Coleseum [*sic.*] is excellent, but I remember being struck with it before, so it had not the advantage of novelty ..." (l:212)

¹ What outraged Reiman is this: "A Tour through Parts of Wales" begins: *Maria!* for my simple ear I seize / The pastoral reed with no reluctant lip / At thy command made vocal. Far from thee / While my lone feet o'er Cambria roam ... ; and ends: *Maria!* with delight attend the song, / Blest be my reed and blest the tuneful hours / When my lone foot o'er distant Cambria roam'd. (Underlines added.)

The other person who likes Sotheby's Coliseum is an anonymous reviewer in *The Athenaeum*, No. 35 (June 25, 1828), who, comparing Sotheby with Samuel Rogers under the title "Poems on Italy", says:

Mr. Sotheby's genius is of an entirely different character. It is higher, more imaginative, and better adapted to wander in the wide fields of fancy, than wake the feelings by appealing to them in household words, and with familiar images. The publication which we have before us are strongly marked by this difference of character in the poets' genius. As a wanderer, in Italy, however, Mr. Sotheby had greatly the advantage. His mind was much the better fitted to the contemplation of the grand, or the brilliantly beautiful objects his journey presented. He has, accordingly, far surpassed Mr. Rogers in his different poems, whenever strength of thought or imagination were the chief requisites. (No. 35, June 25, 1828)

And this reviewer goes on to quote at great length exactly the same passage I quote in the present essay (250-387). That's the second reason.

And a third reason for choosing the Coliseum passage for the topic of this essay is that this passage seems to me to exemplify in a typical way what Lord Byron says on Sotheby, or more precisely, what Lord Byron is quoted by Sidney Lee in *DNB* to have said on Sotheby: ... Sotheby, says Byron, "has imitated everybody, and occasionally surpassed his models". I am, however, as yet unable to spot the exact location of this statement in Byron's own writings. I shall come back to this point later on.

Whoever is responsible for this statement, we would like to see whether Sotheby actually surpasses his models or not, if he has any models at all. And by so doing, I hope to show that there is more in Sotheby than just what money and social position can fetch.

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William Sotheby was born in London on the 9th of November 1757, as the eldest son of William Sotheby, colonel of the Coldstream Guards.² He was educated at Harrow, but at the age of 17 purchased a commission and went to France to be educated at the Military Academy in Anger. At that time he succeeded to the estate of Sewardstone, on the borders of Epping Forest, Essex. He retired from the military career after marriage in 1780, and devoted his time to the study of classics, translation of Greek and Latin poets. His first publication was *Poems* (1790) comprising an account of a walking tour which he and his brother made in 1788 through north and south Wales. He soon became a prominent figure in London literary circles, joined the Dilettante Society in 1792, was elected fellow of the Royal Society and of the Society of Antiquaries in 1794. In 1798 he published a translation from the *Oberon* of Wieland, which greatly extended his reputation. In 1800 appeared his

² All the biographical data that follow are based on the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

translation of the *Georgics* of Virgil, whose second corrected edition of 1815, Robert Chambers says (in *Cyclopaedia of English Literature*), “is one of the best of a classic poet in our language”.

Sotheby joined Sir George Beaumont in encouraging Coleridge to bring out a weekly periodical *The Friend* (1809-10). Byron in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809) counts Sotheby as one of “Neglected Genius” and says: “Yet still some genuine sons ’tis hers [Neglected Genius’s] to boast, / Who least affecting, still affect the most; / Feel as they write, and write but as they feel— / Bear witness Gifford, Sotheby, Macneil” (815-18). In 1810 came out *Constance de Castille*, a poem in ten cantos in imitation of Scott’s *Lady of the Lake*.

On the 1st of August 1815, Sotheby’s eldest son, William, colonel in the guards, died. Sotheby was greatly distressed by it, and went on a long tour of Italy in May 1816 with his family and two friends. They returned via Germany at the end of 1817. Sotheby published his impressions of his journey in “Farewell to Italy” in 1818, which was later amply revised and enlarged, and came out in 1828 as part of “Italy”. This is the poem we are going to read today.

“Italy” is made up of twenty-two shorter poems, starting with “Rome” and ends with “Farewell to Italy”. It may be classed with the genre of what Dr Johnson describes as “topographical poetry, or loco-descriptive poetry”, that is, it’s a genre of poetry “of which the fundamental object is some particular landscape ... with the addition of ... historical retrospection or incidental meditation” (7:61). Sotheby seems, in “Italy”, to imitate *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. There are visible verbal signs of Byron here and there. Take his Venice, for instance. Here is Sotheby: —

Mute now the voice
 That, when the fisher dragg’d his net along,
 Lighten’d his labour with familiar song.
 The lute forgets its fingering: — none rejoice:
 No answering gondolier at close of day
 Takes up Medoro’s tale, or sweet Erminia’s lay.
 But could Medoro’s lay, or that soft breeze,
 Which, waking when the sun deserts the sky,
 Ripples the dead lagunes, that round thee lie,
 Fanning them into freshness; say, could these
 Silence thy deep lament?—Why gaze around,
 Ceaselessly weeping on thy shipless sea? (“Venice” 74-85)

Let us compare it with Byron, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Canto IV: —

In Venice Tasso’s echoes are no more,
 And silent rows the songless godolier
 Her palaces are crumbling to the shore,
 And music meets not always now the ear:
 Those days are gone

...
 But unto us she hath a spell beyond
 Her name in story, and her long array
 Of mighty shadows, whose dim forms despond
 Above the dogeless city's vanish'd sway;
 Our is a trophy which will not decay
 With the Rialto; Shylock and the Moor,
 And Pierre, can not be swept or worn away— (4:19-34)

In addition to the overall elegiac mood that is built upon the description of what is absent, Sotheby's "shipless" is clearly reminiscent of Byron's "songless gondolier" and "the dogeless city". Byron's literary allusion is of course to Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (for Shylock and the Moor) and Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved* (for Pierre), while Sotheby refers to Ariosto's *Orland Furiso* for Medoro, and Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* for Erminia. Sotheby here seems to build his poem upon the reader's common knowledge of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto IV published in 1818.

Of these twenty-two poems in "Italy", "Rome", made up of three cantos, is the longest and takes up more than one third of the entire pages. Roughly, Cantos I & II are loco-descriptive, and Canto III ekphrastic, in the sense that the former two cantos are based upon actual places and their historical or literary associations, and the final canto based upon various works of art in Rome. The Coliseum lines, which span from line 250 to 387 in Canto II, in my view, stand out most prominently. But before going straight to the Coliseum passage in the 2nd canto of "Rome", I have to point out, once again, a clear verbal echo of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in another Coliseum passage from Canto I: — "Lo! How her Coliseum's mountain crest / Sublimely tow'rs, ... Trace o'er yon measureless plain / Arches on arches, range by range extending ... " (106-09). This reminds us of Byron's sublime Coliseum stanzas (st. 128ff) that begin, "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 ... " (4:1144ff).

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This is Sotheby's Coliseum in "Rome", Canto II: —

Th' enormous Coliseum's bulk behold: — 250
 Like some lone promontory's storm-rent brow
 That spreads its shadow o'er the deep below,
 And back repels the waves in tempests roll'd:
 A lonely island in the sea of time;
 On whose deep-rooted base *
 Ages on ages in their ceaseless race
 Strike, and break off, and pass in idle foam,
 Forgotten: thus, amid the wrecks of Rome,

The Coliseum lifts its brow sublime:
 And, looking down on all that moves below, 260
 O'er all the restless range,
 Where war and violence have work'd their change,
 Tow'rs motionless, and wide around it throws
 The shadow of its strength, — its own sublime repose.
 Amid the deep arcades, and winding cells, *
 Eternal silence dwells:
 Save when tempestuous whirlwinds, as they sweep
 Thro' chasms yawning wide, huge fragments throw
 From the rock crest, as from a mountain brow:
 Or, mingling with the murmur of the air, 270
 O'er altars, where of yore a shaft of fire
 Rose from the martyr's pyre,
 The solitary pilgrim breathes a pray'r;
 Or grey-stol'd brethren, at the stated time,
 In slow procession float, and chant the deep-ton'd rhyme. *

The Coliseum's resistance to Time is stressed from the beginning as the narrator calls upon us to behold the "enormous Coliseum's bulk", which is likened as "some lone promontory's storm-rent brow", or a "lonely island in the sea of time" that repels back the waves rolled in tempest. The Coliseum, "amid the wreck of Romev (258) stands sublime and has looked "down on all that moves below". The narrator draws our attention to here and now, with the mention of "eternal silence" that dwells "amid the deep arcades, and winding cells", where, following the manner of typical eighteenth-century ruin poetry, the "solitary pilgrim breathes a pray'r" or "grey-stol'd brethren ... chant the deep-ton'd rhyme".

In the next verse paragraph (276ff.), the narrator goes back to the ancient times, just like Byron's *Gladiator* stanzas. But while Byron speaks of "buzz of eager nations" (139), Sotheby's narrator focuses on "silence" or "suspense / Of being" that lay all round the Coliseum "[W]hen agony of pleasure chain'd each sense, / In willing horror bound" (276-79). This suspended silence is most keenly felt as, we know, by the skilful repetition of words, "swarm", "circles", and "arch", that it was the theatre-full of spectators that pay breathless attention to the gladiator dying in the Coliseum. Sotheby's actual description seems closely modelled on Byron's. Let us compare. First Sotheby: —

Not deeper felt that silence, that suspense
 Of being, that here lay on all around,
 When agony of pleasure chain'd each sense,
 In willing horror bound;
 While swarm o'er swarm the gather'd nation hung: 280
 And where round circles widening circles spread,
 And arch out-soaring arch
 Bath'd in the sun-beams its ambitious head,
 Watch'd, as the dying gladiator leant
 On his sustaining arm, and o'er the wound, *

Whence the large life-drops struggled, lowly bent,
 And calmly look'd on earth,
 As one who gradual sinks in still repose,
 His eye in death to close
 On the familiar spot that view'd his blissful birth.

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And here is Byron: —

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I see before me the Gladiator lie:
 He leans upon his hand—his manly brow
 Consents to death, but conquers agony,
 And his drooped 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.

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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,
 Butchered to make a Roman holiday—
 All this rush'd with his blood—Shall he expire
 And unavenged? — Arise, ye Goths, and glut your ire!

Sotheby, compared with Byron, proves quite original at some crucial points. His use of the word “struggle” (286) to mean the congealing blood about to fall from the wound is very skillful in that “the large life-drops”—the grammatical subject of the verb “struggle”—overlaps with the sense subject of the following verbs “bent” and “look'd”, suggesting that both blood and the gladiator are struggling.

Where Byron's gladiator tenaciously clings to his young barbarians and their Dacian mother, Sotheby's gladiator is less persistent and seems to display calmer resignation, which, in my view, comes closer to Winckelmannian sublimity: “noble simplicity and sedate grandeur”(34) than Byron's passage does.

Unlike the actor on a theatre,
 Who feigns the wound unfelt, that Roman dy'd:
 He too an actor: and when death drew nigh,
 By Rome's tremendous silence glorify'd,
 Firmly sustain'd his part.
 No sound, no gesture, e'er to ear or eye

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Betray'd the sufferance of the pang severe,
 The hand that grasp'd his heart,
 Save the low pant that mark'd his lessening breath,
 And one last deep-drawn groan — the agony of death. 300
 Shout, then, and bursting rapture, and the roar
 Of myriads — then commingling life-streams ran,
 And Rome inebriate drank the blood of man,
 And swell'd the human hecatomb with gore
 Of birds, and beasts, and monsters of the main; *
 While death pil'd up the pyre — the slayers on the slain.

Too conventional a figure of speech, like life-as-a-theatre metaphor, often proves banal unless one uses it with care. In Byron's case, he succeeds in escaping being banal as he swings the pendulum to the extreme end of satire when he says, "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" (4.139). Sotheby, on the other hand, builds upon this metaphor, saying, "Unlike the actor on a theatre, / Who feigns the wound unfelt, that Roman dy'd: / He too an actor", and by being unmistakably serious, succeeds in glorifying the gladiator as he says, "and when death drew nigh, / By Rome's tremendous silence glorify'd, / Firmly sustain'd his part". Sotheby's gladiator is an ideal actor through and through, and faithfully lives up to the expectations of the audience / spectators. The metaphor of life-as-theatre seems to have gained its force in Sotheby's pen.

Sotheby owes to Byron in his technique of slowing down the speed at the most important passages in the poem. In reading aloud Sotheby's "Save the low pant that mark'd his lessening breath, / And one last deep-drawn groan—the agony of death", we are compelled to put stress on each word in reading "one last deep-drawn groan" (299-300), whatever the scanned metre is. This results in slowing down the speed, just like Byron's passage: "And through his side the last drops, ebbing slow / From the red gash, fall heavy, one by one". With the imperative verb "shout" (301), bursts forth the roar of myriads.

This sudden dramatic change from silence to theatre-full of roar is, in my view, one of the climactic moments of the poem. Let us compare the spectators' shout with Byron. In Byron "... and now / the arena swims around him—he is gone, / Ere ceased the inhuman shout which hail'd the wretch who won", the spectators ARE shouting, but, as suggested by the subordinate conjunction "ere", they are shouting ceaselessly. Whereas in Sotheby, the shout SUDDENLY bursts forth where there is little or no sound. And the effect is even greater as the outburst occurs right after the reading pace slows down in "one last deep-drawn groan". Another important thing to note here is that this sudden outburst is occasioned by the apostrophic vocative of the narrator—the narrator who had been in sympathy with the gladiator, seems, with this apostrophe, to abandon himself on the spectator side, and then the next moment, he turns into a Byronic satirist, saying, "Rome inebriate drank the blood of man, / And swell'd the human hecatomb with gore / Of birds, and beasts, and monsters of the main; / While death pil'd up the pyre—the slayers on the slain"

(303-06). The final moral phrase “the slayers on the slain” clearly directs our attention to the inevitable fact that spectators now shouting will sooner or later must face their own fate. I am not confident if Sotheby here surpasses Byron his model, but at least he equals his model.

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After the dying gladiator lines, comes long, long passage of time.

All, all are swept away,
 Who made the world a gazing theatre,
 Th' arena, thundering to their war career.
 But thou, enduring monument! 310
 Tho' thy Cyclopean stones in Rome's dark hour
 Built up her fort and tow'r;
 And palaces, whose gloomy grandeur vast,
 O'er her proud temples darkness cast:
 Tho' all-destructive Time *
 Has bow'd thy crest sublime,
 And storms, that crush'd the rocks, thy glory rent:
 Tho' the unsparing earthquake, in its ire
 That shook the pillars of the globe below,
 Has rock'd thee to and fro, 320
 Shattering thy mountain base:
 Yet, thou, amid the wrecks of human pride,
 Hast heav'n and earth defy'd—
 The flame-wing'd bolt, and war's insatiate sword:
 And view'd around thee perish, race on race, *
 The Goth, the Hun, the Norman, horde on horde,
 Vanish without a trace;
 All, all who envy'd Rome in flame
 The echo of her name:
 While ages roll'd on ages, circling by, 330
 Grav'd on thy forehead, “Rome's eternity.”

The narrator, the contemporary with the poet Sotheby himself, speaks to the Coliseum as “enduring monument”, which survives the dark Middle Ages when stones of the monuments—that is, Cyclopean stones—were used to build towers and palaces, and which survived all-destructive Time, storms, and earthquakes.

The Coliseum endured, and has seen all around it Rome's enemies—the Goth, the Hun, the Norman, all who envied Rome—perish race on race, horde on horde. Thus, Rome, and with it the Coliseum, true to its proverbial epithet, remains eternal. The omniscient narrator of Sotheby makes a clear contrast with Byron's narrator in the final part of the Dying Gladiator stanza. Byron's narrator had been a contemporary with the poet, in sympathy with the gladiator all along the Dying Gladiator stanzas down to the 8th line of

Stanza 141: “All this rushed with his blood”. Then the next moment he makes a temporal jump to the ancient Roman period, and cries: “Shall he expire / And unavenged. Arise ye Goths and glut your ire”. He is not a contemporary with the poet Byron. For he clearly does not know at this moment that the Goths and other barbaric peoples of the north would be the cause of the fall of the Roman Empire. His consciousness is WITH the gladiator now dying in the Coliseum, in terms of time. Sotheby’s narrator, on the other hand, is omniscient and calm. He knows that the Goth, the Hun, the Norman came after the Romans, and eventually did vanish, horde on horde.

It rests not on thy brow.
 Tho’ glorying in thy strength, at sight of thee,
 Rome, widow of the monarch-people, raise
 The shadowy sceptre of her sov’rignty; *
 And of the wreck of wrecks regardless, gaze
 Once more exultant on her sev’n-hill’d throne:
 Yet thou, forgetful of thy palmy birth,
 Thou, proudest trophy of triumphant war,
 Shalt lie a wreck on earth; 340
 Stone after stone, the mountain shall descend;
 And a vile weed, in dust and darkness sown,
 A weed beneath thy base the structure rend,
 And reckless of a Coliseum’s fall,
 O’er the recumbent rock spread its sepulchral pall. *

In the next verse paragraph, we are told of some inevitable prophecy, as the narrator looks towards future. Rome WILL remain sovereign, yet the sceptre she wields is somehow “shadowy”. The word “regardless” (336) works very effectively here: Rome now knows that the Coliseum is THE wreck of wrecks, but she fails to pay due attention to this fact, and instead, she remains exultant as ever gazing on (not seated on) the throne. Thus the Coliseum shall lie a wreck, the Coliseum that once withstood the tyranny of storms, earthquakes, and all-destructive Time, now descends “stone after stone” (341), and finally falls, and succumbs to a vile weed, which is not aware (*i.e.*, reckless of) that it is the cause of the Coliseum’s fall. The Coliseum, now fallen and level with the ground, is covered with weeds, being triumphed over by the most fragile of vegetation.

There, in the after time,
 When Nature o’er the mouldering wrecks beneath,
 Spreads the wild wood, and hangs her fragrant wreath
 On bush and bow’r, the mountain pine sublime
 The fury of the tempest shall withstand, 350
 Th’ umbrageous chestnut her bright pomp expand,
 And when the forest mourns its glory gone,
 Th’ undying oak’s dark leaf wave in the wind alone.
 And haply on that grave, where Death of yore
 In unveil’d horror stood, *

And Rome re-echo'd the infuriate roar
 Of myriads, as her nation, drunk with blood,
 To the stern Furies their libation made,
 Far other shout shall ring from Pleasure's festive bow'r.

The narrator moves further on to the "after time" in the next verse paragraph, when the weed that triumphed over the solid stone structure is replaced by trees such as the mountain pine, the umbrageous chestnut, which form a splendid forest. Yet even this forest, as time goes on, will be gone, and in its place the "undying oak" (353) alone waves its dark leaves. This is the place where once victims of gladiatorial combats died tragic deaths, with myriads of spectators shouting around. The whole nation, it would seem, were "drunk with blood" (357). The narrator then goes on to tell of "far other shout" (359) ringing "from Pleasure's festive bow'r".

What this "far other shout" really is, we are to know in the next part of the poem.

There in the jocund season's reeling hour, 360
 When the vines lend to earth a purple shade,
 Gleam o'er the Appian Way, and bloom
 On Scipio's violated tomb,
 The hamlets round, exultant at the call,
 The nectar of their feasts shall bear away, *
 Making th' autumnal moon perpetual holiday.

Hark! hear you not the festive shout?
 Shouts as of conquerors gathering up the spoil
 Bring in the gladsome toil.
 I see the ivy-wreath'd, the revel rout: 370
 Earth widely reels around,
 Rent heaven yields back the sound:
 The roar that swells the choral song, recalls
 The orgies of the god — Evoe's festivals.

Such was the shout that rous'd the Menades: *
 So from their brow was seen to fall
 Flow'rs that wreath'd their coronal.
 Thus the profusion of their streaming hair
 Tangled its glossy darkness on the breeze:
 So flash'd their timbrels trembling on the air, 380
 While, with swoln clusters crown'd,
 They wav'd the thyrsus round:
 And one, far lovelier than the rest,
 The dappled fawn-skin floating round her breast,
 Tim'd to the cymbals' clash her step and song, *
 And led the panther car
 That bore in youth's bright bloom the God of Joy along.

Thus ends the Coliseum passage, and the Second Canto as well. The graphically vivid description of the Bacchanalian procession in the final verse paragraph with the Menades' "streaming hair ... tangl[ing] its glossy darkness on the breeze", will perhaps instantly reminds us of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind", in which "Loose clouds... / Shook from tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean" and "The locks of the approaching storm" are compared to "the bright hair uplifted from the head / Of some fierce Maenad" (16-21).

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"Ode to the West Wind", however, is not Shelley's only poem in which the Maenads are mentioned. Apart from "Ode to the West Wind", Shelley speaks of the Maenads in "Sensitive Plant" (34), "Ode to Liberty" (92), "Orpheus" (52), and in "The Cyclops: A Satyric Drama" (63). I do not intend to go deep into the Shelley scholarship, but we now all know that Shelley's Maenads were the product of his experience of seeing four sculpted maenads on the altar on which the statue of Minerva was placed in Florence: —

... four figures of Maenads under the inspiration of the God. Nothing can be imagined more wild and terrible than their gestures The tremendous spirit of superstition aided by drunkenness and producing something beyond insanity, seems to have caught them in its whirlwinds This was indeed a monstrous superstition only capable of existing in Greece because there alone capable of combining ideal beauty and poetical and abstract enthusiasm with the wild errors from which it sprung. In Rome it had a more familiar, wicked and dry appearance—it was not suited to the severe and exact apprehensions of the Romans, and their strict morals once violated by it, sustained a deep injury little analogous to its effects upon the Greeks who turned all things, superstition, prejudice, murder, madness—to Beauty.

*From "A Statue of Minerva" in "Notes on Sculptures
in Rome and Florence" (Julian Edition 6:322-23)*

Shelley, in this essay, seems incapable of placing properly this "something beyond insanity" produced by "[t]he tremendous spirit of superstition aided by drunkenness". But he WAS struck with its beauty, even though he finds it difficult to reconcile it with superstition, prejudice, murder, and madness. Timothy Webb cites this passage in an attempt to claim that for Shelley, "it was possible for a statue to present a subject which was morally repellent but, by means of its aesthetic excellence, to transform the material and make it acceptable", and concludes that "[I]n these passages Shelley seems to be softening his characteristically rigorous moral attitude" (Webb 213-14). This essay was first published in the *Athenaeum* for September 22, 1832, and afterwards in Thomas Medwin's *Shelley Papers*, 1833 (Julian Ed., 6:322-23; 377). Sotheby therefore could not have seen it while he was engaged in the 1828 revision of the Coliseum passage. But it is possible, indeed quite probable that Sotheby might have caught some positive hints from Shelley's treatment of the Maenads in various poems I mentioned. Here's J. Raben in his essay "Shelley the Dionysian":

An essential but not widely recognized stratum in Shelle's thought and art is a recurrence of allusions to Dionysus, not specifically by name but by a variety of strong associations to the nature, acts, and attributes of that elemental god In one aspect or another, this power could be recognized as the source of human love and creativity, of revolution in the body politic, and in the physical universe the force that generates and ends, 'Destroyer and Preserver'. (Everest 21)

What Raben terms Shelley's Dionysianism is probably best expressed, apart from "West Wind", in Panthea's words in the Second Act of *Prometheus Unbound*. At the beginning of Act 2, Scene 3, Panthea speaks at the portal of the realm of Demogorgon: —

Hither the soul has born us—to the realm
Of Demogorgon, and the mighty portal,
Like a Volcano's meteor-breathing chasm,
Whence the oracular vapour is hurled up
Which lonely men drink wandering in their youth
And call truth, virtue, love, genius or joy—
That maddening wine of life, whose dregs they drain
To deep intoxication, and uplift
Like Maenads who cry loud, Evoe! Evoe!
The Voice which is contagion to the world.

(2.3.1-10)

Shelley does not seem to take this intoxication, or the voice raised by the maddened crowd, as the absolute evil. Rather it is something that one must experience in order to enter the realm of Demogorgon. It is closely connected with "oracular vapour / Which lonely men drink wandering in youth, / And call truth, virtue, love, genius and joy". In other words, it is youthful idealism in disguise, invested with prophetic quality, "that maddening wine of life". And Shelley or Panthea admits that this youthful idealism may be a contagion to the world. As Wasserman persuasively argues, "This elaborate metaphor of exhalations is carefully ambivalent, since the metaphor of a universe diffusing from a center is designed to imply in itself neither good nor evil The frenzied, Maenad-like state of youth's oracular intoxication may produce drunken savagery like the French Revolution or, if it is immediately succeeded by mature Love, may revoke all that is not truth, virtue, love genius, joy" (Wasserman 345).

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Another feature of the final part of the Coliseum is the word "Evoe", which Panthea mentions in the previous quotation as well. "Evoe", according to *OED*, is defined as "the Bacchanalian exclamation". Shelley's use of it along with the Maenads is partly a result of his encounter with the sculpted Bacchanal procession on the pedestal of the statue of

Minerva in Florence as I mentioned earlier, and partly a result of his reading of Euripides' *Bacchae* as testified in the seventh stanza of "Ode to Liberty", published in August 1820. Yet "Evoe" is a word not very often used by poets, according to *English Poetry 2*. In fact, it was not at all used by Chaucer, nor by Spenser, nor by Shakespeare, nor by Milton, nor by Pope, nor by Wordsworth, nor by Byron.

Dryden, however, used it twice. It is not in his original work, though. It is in his translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* that the word "Evoe" appears twice. Let us take a close look at its context. It is in the *Aeneid*, Book 7, where Aeneas, having landed on the land of Italy, is chosen by King Latinus as the future husband of his daughter Lavinia. The word "Evoe" is uttered by the Queen Amata feigning madness in an attempt to oppose the marriage of her daughter Lavinia with Aeneas (543ff.).

Considering the fact that young Sotheby's fame as a translator was established in 1800 by his translation of Virgil's *Georgics*, there is no reason to suppose that Sotheby was not acquainted with Virgil's use of "Evoe" in the *Aeneid*, if not Dryden's *Aeneid*. What is important, however, is not so much the context in which the word Evoe is mentioned, as the fact that the cry of Evoe was already proverbially established as a sign of drunken madness long before the foundation of the Roman Empire by Aeneas. This inebriated state, whether good or bad, in an age that precedes the Roman Empire caught Shelley's imagination in his idea of the progress of "liberty" from Greece to Rome. This is Shelley's Ode to Liberty, 7th stanza: —

Then Rome was, and from thy [=Liberty's] deep bosom fairest,
 Like a wolf-cub from a Cadmaean Maenad,
 She [=Rome] drew the milk of greatness, though thy dearest
 From that Elysian food was yet unweaned

(91-94)

Without unravelling this typically Shelleyan metaphor, two things are clear: 1) the legendary founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus, are drawing the milk of greatness from the mother-wolf Athens; 2) the infant Rome is not yet weaned from the Maenads led by Cadmus' daughter Agave in Euripides' drama. Thus, both "Evoe" in the *Aeneid*, and Shelley's Maenads in "Ode to Liberty" point to a very, very ancient time in history when the Roman Empire was yet to be built.

In relation to the *Aeneid* we might be reminded of Virgil's *Georgics* which Sotheby translated and published in 1800. Its Second Book begins with an invocation to Bacchus, "Bacchus! thy praise now claims the votive strains: / With thee, I join each shrub, and woodland shoot, / And olives slowly ripening into fruit" and later: —

Nor less Ausonian hinds, the race of Troy,
 Sport in rude rhymes, and shout their tipsy joy;
 Grim masks of bark deform the laughing band,
 And, Bacchus! Bacchus! rings around the land;
 While on high pines his waving figures hung,

Float to and fro the breezy boughs among,
Where'er the God his gracious front inclines,
There plenty gushes from the loaded vines,
Down richer vallies fragrant clusters breathe,
And hills grow dark their purple weight beneath.
Then pile the charger, hallow'd offerings bring;
Songs, that our fathers taught, to Bacchus sing:
Lead by the horns the goat, and, duly slain,
Slow roast on hazel spits before the fane. (2:481-94)

This sounds much like the praise of communal festivity in an ancient agricultural utopia rather than Euripidean drunken madness leading to murder. And in Sotheby's Coliseum lines, there is abundance of references to festivity: Pleasure's festive bow'r (359); The nectar of their feasts (365); hear ye not the festive shout (367); Evoe's festivals (374).

Another important thing about Evoe in Sotheby's Coliseum lines, is that it is equivalent with "far other shout". When we stop to think, "other than what", we know that this far other shout is contrasted with "infuriate roar / Of myriads" (356) when the entire "nation [were] drunk with blood" (357). It is here that two pairs of dichotomies emerge: two kinds of shouts, and two kinds of inebriation. On one side is inebriate Romans, shouting and roaring myriads, drunk with blood; and on the other the revel, rout led by the Menades, giving far other shout, crying "Evoe", who survive long after the Romans, the Coliseum, or the forest that grew on its spot are no more.

Sotheby, elsewhere in Italy, mentions "bacchic roar" and "Evoë' song" in other parts of "Italy". This is from "Florence": —

Hail him, the Bard, whose polish'd strain
Sooth'd to melodious sounds the bacchic roar,
And led the Muses from Illyssus' plain,
To plant their laurels by his native stream.
...
Behold yon dancing Fawn: —
So his gay foot, timing th'Evoë' song,
Led the wild Nymphs along:
So lightly bounded on th'Arcadian lawn.
When first the Bromian God to crown their mirth,
Press'd from the purple grape the drop that gladdens earth.
(Florence, 93-116)

Here on the Dancing Faun in the Uffizi Gallery, Sotheby speaks of the faun being placed in the Arcadia when Bacchus, or the Bromian God, gave us wine and mirth.

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Finally let us see once again, as an epilogue³, to Byron's alleged statement on Sotheby quoted in *DNB*: ... Sotheby, says Byron, "has imitated everybody, and occasionally surpassed his models". This statement, having been quoted and re-quoted so many times, seems to have become rather ambiguous. Judith Bailey Slagle, for instance, says in her *Collected Letters of Joanna Baillie*, "Byron declared that Sotheby had only 'imitated everybody, and occasionally surpassed his models'" (1:178) adding her own word "only" to make it mean that Sotheby is considered by Byron as a mere copycat without any originality.

According to the bibliography to the article in *DNB*, the author of this article, Sidney Lee, seems to have taken this information from Clayden's *Rogers and His Contemporaries* published 1889 (2:87n), on which I made a search, and traced its source as far back as 1835, when John Galt quotes Byron's letter to John Murray as part of "Some Observations upon an Article in *Blackwood's Magazine*, No. XXIX, August, 1819". Here Byron classifies the entire poets into two groups: the followers of Alexander Pope on one hand, and those against them, on the other. Byron, of course, belongs to the former, while Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey are among the latter. He then enumerates the disciples of Pope: —

The disciples of Pope were Johnson, Goldsmith, Rogers, Campbell, Crabbe, Gifford, Matthias, "Hayley, and the author of the *Paradise of Coquettes*; to whom may be added Richards, Heber, Wrangham, Bland, Hodgson, Merivale, and others who have not had their full fame, because "the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong," and because there is a fortune in fame as in all other things. Now, of all the new schools — I say *all*, for "like Legion, they are many" — has there appeared a single scholar who has not made his master ashamed of him? unless it be Sotheby, who has imitated everybody, and occasionally surpassed his models. Scott found peculiar favour and imitation among the fair sex: there was Miss Holford, and Miss Mitford, and Miss Francis; but, with the greatest respect be it spoken, none of his imitators did much honour to the original, except Hogg, the Etrick shepherd, until the appearance of "The Bridal of Triermain," and "Harold the Dauntless," which in the opinion of some equalled if not surpassed him; and lo! after three or four years they turned out to be the Master's own compositions. Have Southey, or Coleridge, or t'other fellow, made a follower of renown? (716)

There appears, however, in Thomas Moore's *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron* (1831), almost the same passage, except the very name "Sotheby": "Now, of *all* the new schools — I say all, for 'like Legion, they are many' — has there appeared a single scholar who has not made his master ashamed of him? unless it be —, who has imitated everybody, and occasionally surpassed his models" (2:258). Why Moore made the name blank, and

³ The former half of this section where the genealogy of Byron's alleged statement is traced through Sidney Lee, P. W. Clayden, John Galt, and up to Thomas Moore, was not orally given at the Wordsworth Summer Conference.

what happened between 1831 and 1835 to make Galt fill the blank with the name “Sotheby” is yet to be investigated.

If Moore’s blank is properly filled with “Sotheby”, then what Byron means to say in this context is very clear: “Sotheby, who is a disciple of Pope, often imitates me [*i.e.*, Byron] and often surpasses me, even to my own embarrassment; while members of the anti-Popian school are not good at imitating their masters”. Byron here praises Sotheby for his skill of imitation.

Within this context, I am more inclined to place this alleged statement of Byron’s in the Augustan tradition of imitation poetry, which, according to Dryden (“Preface to *Ovid’s Epistles*”), is: “an endeavour of a later poet to write like one who has written before him, on the same subject; that is, not to translate his words, or to be confined to his sense, but only to set him as a pattern, and to write, as he supposes that author would have done, had he lived in our age”, where “the translator ... assumes the liberty, not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion; and taking only some general hints from the original, to run division on the groundwork, as he pleases” (12:14-15). Sotheby certainly did take some general hints from the original, that is, from Byron’s *Dying Gladiator*, Shelley’s *Dionysianism*, and Virgil’s praise of Bacchus, and made them into his own.

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We have seen Sotheby’s *Coliseum* passage line by line, especially its final part, with reference to his contemporary poets, particularly, Byron’s *Dying Gladiator* and Shelley’s *Maenads and Dionysianism*. We also looked into the classical context of the bacchanal exclamatory word *Evoo* in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which Sotheby must have known. Then narrowing the frame of reference to Sotheby’s own writing, we saw references to Bacchus in Virgil’s *Georgics* in Sotheby’s own translation, then we further narrowed down our focus on other parts of “Italy” where Dionysius first gave us wine and mirth. Having considered thus, we cannot help being struck by the extremely long span of time in which Bacchanal festivities continued to exist. We found that the Virgilian communal harmony that existed before the Roman Empire, survives throughout the Empire with its gladiatorial shows, and their spectators drunk with blood. It even survives the *Coliseum* itself far into the future, and reappears again with bacchanal exclamation quite different from the spectators’ roar in the *Coliseum*. Thus communal harmony along with its festive shouts finally triumphs—triumphs over “other shouts” spectators raised at the butchery show, along with its solid theatre that housed it. The *Menades* in Sotheby’s *Coliseum* passage, in short, are the destroyer of the institutionalized combat show, as well as the preserver of the communal harmony that precedes it. This, I should like to claim, is certainly what Joanna Baillie calls “striking thoughts”, and what the reviewer in the *Athanaeum* calls “the contemplation of the grand”.

Neither Shelly nor Byron lived to see this poem. But if they had, they might possibly have said, “Here’s someone that imitates and surpasses me”, or Shelley, finding his own Maenads transplanted and disfigured, might have turned into a Byronic satirist and said, “What drunken madness!?”

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