Bayard Taylor (1825-1878)

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BAYARD TAYLOR
1825–1878

The Torso

I.
In clay the statue stood complete,
As beautiful a form, and fair,
As ever walked a Roman street
Or breathed the blue Athenian air:
The perfect limbs, divinely bare,
Their old heroic freedom kept,
And in the features, fine and rare,
A calm, immortal sweetness slept.

II.
O'er common men it towered, a god,
And smote their meaner life with shame,
For while its feet the highway trod,
Its lifted brow was crowned with flame
And purified from touch of blame:
Yet wholly human was the face,
And over them who saw it came
The knowledge of their own disgrace.

III.
It stood, regardless of the crowd,
And simply showed what men might be:
Its solemn beauty disavowed
The curse of lost humanity.
Erect and proud, and pure and free,
It overlooked each loathsome law
Whereunto others bend the knee,
And only what was noble saw.

IV.
The patience and the hope of years
Their final hour of triumph caught;
The clay was tempered with my tears,
The forces of my spirit wrought,
With hands of fire to shape my thought,
That when, complete, the statue stood,
   To marble resurrection brought,
The Master might pronounce it good.

V.
But in the night an enemy,
   Who could not bear the wreath should grace
My ready forehead, stole the key
   And hurled my statue from its base;
And now its fragments strew the place
Where I had dreamed its shrine might be:
   The stains of common earth deface
Its beauty and its majesty.

VI.
The torso prone before me lies;
   The cloven brow is knit with pain:
Mute lips, and blank, reproachful eyes
   Unto my hands appeal in vain.
My hands shall never work again:
   This fatal wreck shall now remain
The ruined sculptor’s monument.

L’Envoi

Unto the Desert and the Desert steed
   Farewell! The journey is completed now:
Struck are the tents of Ishmael’s wandering breed,
   And I unwind the turban from my brow.

The sun has ceased to shine; the palms that bent,
   Inebriate with light, have disappeared;
And naught is left me of the Orient
   But the tanned bosom and the unshorn beard.

Yet from that life my blood a glow retains,
   As the red sunshine in the ruby glows;
These songs are echoes of its fiercer strains,—
   Dreams, that recall its passion and repose.

I found, among those Children of the Sun,
   The cipher of my nature,—the release
Of baffled powers, which else had never won
That free fulfilment, whose reward is peace.

For not to any race or any clime
Is the completed sphere of life revealed;
He who would make his own that round sublime,
Must pitch his tent on many a distant field.

Upon his home a dawning luster beams,
But through the world he walks to open day,
Gathering from every land the prismatic gleams,
Which, when united, form the perfect ray.

Go, therefore, Songs!—which in the East were born
And drew your nurture—from your sire's control:
Haply to wander through the West forlorn,
Or find a shelter in some Orient soul.

And if the temper of our colder sky
Less warmth of passion and of speech demands,
They are the blossoms of my life,—and I
Have ripened in the suns of many lands.

To a Persian Boy

In the bazaar at Smyrna

The gorgeous blossoms of that magic tree
Beneath whose shade I sat a thousand nights,
Breathed from their opening petals all delights
Embalmed in spice of Orient Poesy,
When first, young Persian, I beheld thine eyes,
And felt the wonder of thy beauty grow
Within my brain, as some fair planet's glow
Deepens, and fills the summer evening skies.
From under thy dark lashes shone on me
The rich, voluptuous soul of Eastern land,
Impassioned, tender, calm, serenely sad,—
Such as immortal Hafiz felt when he
Sang by the fountain-streams of Rocnabad,
Or in the bowers of blissful Samarcand.