"Christ's mighty shrine above His martyr's tomb": Byron and Liszt's Journey to Rome

Paul W. MERRICK
Liszt Academy of Music
Liszt Ferenc tér 8, H-1061 Budapest, Hungary
E-mail: paulmerrick@ymail.com

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Abstract: The influence of Byron on Liszt was enormous, as is generally acknowledged. In particular the First Book of the *Années de pèlerinage* shows the poet's influence in its choice of Byron epigraphs in English for four of the set of nine pieces. In his years of travel as a virtuoso pianist Liszt often referred to "mon byronisme." The work by Byron that most affected Liszt is the long narrative poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* which was translated into many languages, including French. The word "pèlerinage" that replaced "voyageur" is a Byronic identity in Liszt's thinking. The Byronic hero as Liszt saw him and imitated him in for example *Mazeppa* and *Tasso* is a figure who represented a positive force, suffering and perhaps a revolutionary, but definitely not a public enemy. Liszt's life, viewed as a musical pilgrimage, led of course to Rome. Is it possible that Byron even influenced him in this direction? In this paper I try to give a portrait of the real Byron that hides behind the poseur of his literary works, and suggest that what drew Liszt to the English poet was precisely the man whom he sensed behind the artistic mask. Byron was not musical, but he was religious – as emerges from his life and his letters, a life which caused scandal to his English contemporaries. But today we can see that part of the youthful genius of the rebel Byron was his boldness in the face of hypocrisy and compromise – his heroism was simply to be true. In this we can see a parallel with the Liszt who left the piano and composed *Christus.* What look like incompatibilities are simply the connection between action and contemplation – between the journey and the goal. Byron, in fact, can help us follow the *ligne intérieure* which Liszt talked about in the 1830s.

Keywords: Liszt, marriage, Rome, Byron, programme

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> Even Liszt's most conscientious biographers do not seem to have realized that he was in Rome by default. It had never been his idea to be married there, and he had never planned to live there. He stayed on because the alternatives were too painful to contemplate. To return to Weimar, Berlin, Paris, or Vienna would have been to expose himself to questions about the thwarted marriage-service that he was not prepared to answer. And so he lingered. He took apartments at Via Felice (which is today the Via Sistina) 113, not far from the Via del Babuino, which enabled him to walk over to see Carolyne every day and offer her some comfort during this period of crisis. He also engaged a manservant, Fortunato Salvagni, to look after his everyday concerns, and he installed a small upright Boisselot piano so that he could continue to compose. But what the immediate future held, he had no idea.[1]

Is this a true picture of Liszt's life and state of mind in October 1861? Is the whole Roman period an accident? Has it nothing to do with Liszt's development as a composer? Are we to assume that after the travelling piano virtuoso and the Weimar *Kapellmeister* Liszt was at a loose end, and turned to church music *faute de mieux* – because he happened to find himself in Rome after getting entrammelled in the skirts of a rich aristocratic woman?

How and why the planned marriage of Liszt and Carolyne did not take place is certainly a complicated question. But why the whole affair was moved from Weimar to Rome is itself a question. Two separate issues have been confused. One issue is how the wedding was cancelled. The other issue is why the wedding was planned to be on October 22, 1861 in Rome, and not in Weimar, or any other town.

In spite of the huge documentation unearthed by Alan Walker in the Vatican Archives, the document that solves the riddle of the cancellation is missing. The last document is dated October 20, 1861, and is a joint deposition signed by Liszt and Princess Wittgenstein declaring that there were no impediments to their marrying. The wedding was planned for October 22, Liszt's 50th birthday, but of course it did not take place. Walker himself acknowledges that there were no legal reasons for the cancellation:

> …there is no evidence in the Vatican file to suggest that the document of annulment [ratified by Pope Pius IX on January 7th 1861] was ever upturned… The marriage between Liszt and Carolyne did not take place because Carolyne herself lost heart… Thereafter she had many opportunities to marry Liszt, but after October 21 the matter was allowed to subside.[2]

Ultimately, therefore, we do not know who cancelled the wedding, or even exactly why it was cancelled. When Carolyne's Protestant husband Prince Nicholas (who had remarried in 1856) died in 1864 she could have remarried – without

1. Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt,* vol. III, *The Final Years* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 33–34.

2. Alan Walker, *Liszt, Carolyne, and the Vatican. The story of a thwarted marriage* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1991), 17.

the need for the consent of the Church. But there was no wedding. The following year Liszt took minor orders.

In 1861 why were Liszt and the Princess in Rome at all? Liszt did not compose the *Gran Mass,* join the Franciscans, and send a copy of the score of his mass to Pope Pius IX in 1859 – one year before the Princess left Weimar alone to go to Rome – because he was planning a wedding. In February1859 Liszt had met the Papal Chamberlain (later Cardinal) Prince Gustav Hohenlohe in Germany and told him of his plans regarding the reform of church music. In September he received a letter from Hohenlohe in Rome inviting him to stay in the Vatican with him. I gave my opinion on this question twenty-five years ago in my book *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Liszt.*[3] Musically Liszt's interest in Rome long pre-dated his meeting with the Princess in 1847. It dates from 1839 when during his stay in Rome he studied the vocal music of 16th-century composers, a subject researched in great detail by Zsuzsanna Domokos in her PhD thesis *The Influence of 19th-century Roman Palestrina Reception on Liszt's Music.* In other words Liszt's move to Rome in 1861 was a *return.* Of course, we do not know at what point if at all Liszt decided to return, but if he did do so, it was before 1861. It may even have been before Weimar. My own opinion is that the affair of the marriage was moved to Rome because Liszt himself wished to be there. In other words, Liszt's journey to Rome in 1861 was intentional. I therefore disagree with Alan Walker.

* * *

The English influence on Liszt was not musical, but literary, namely the poetry of Lord Byron. The posthumous effect of Byron on the young Liszt was so huge that I am tempted to compare it to his real life encounters with figures like Beethoven and Lamennais. I also think Byron had an influence on Liszt's thinking about his life, music and Rome, and here I wish to give my reasons why.

The work by Byron that most affected Liszt is the long narrative poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, which was translated into many languages, including French, in which language Liszt seems to have read the longer works of Byron. Adrienne Kaczmarczyk says of *Childe Harold:* "This powerfully influential work published between 1812 and 1818 may have provided the direct inspiration for the title of *Années de pèlerinage.* Many of Liszt's letters, works and compositional plans show that he felt Byron's poetry and personality to be akin to his own."[4] If this is the case, then "pèlerinage" instead of "voyage" is a Byronic identity in Liszt's thinking. The word 'pèlerinage' in English is of course pilgrimage, and I think for Liszt this change of title reflects something personal and religious –

3. See Chapter 5, "Rome, Cardinal Hohenlohe and Princess Wittgenstein" in Paul Merrick, *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Liszt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 2008), 48–68.

4. "Preface" to *New Liszt Edition, Supplements to Works for Solo Piano,* vol. V (Budapest: Editio Musica, 2007), XXVIII.

connected to his concept of his own art of music as 'programme.' A consideration of the religious aspect of Byron on the part of literary scholars is surely overdue, and I have no intention of doing their work for them here. I merely wish to point out the sympathetic reverberations this side of Byron seems to have found in Liszt at a time when Byron was celebrated for quite opposite reasons. I shall concentrate on the year 1838.

In 1838 Liszt had already composed *Album d'un voyageur* – the first book of the set which at Weimar he changed into the Swiss book of *Années de pèlerinage.* The 1838 pieces were *Lyon, Le Lac de Wallenstadt, Au bord d'une source, Les cloches de G[enève], Vallée d'Obermann, La Chapelle de Guillaume Tell, Psaume,* and the chief element of the change was to put *Chapelle* first and *Cloches* last. This is a tonal concept – a journey of what Liszt eventually expanded to be nine pieces travelling from C major to B major. In an article about Liszt's *Piano Sonata in B minor*[5] I present evidence to suggest that for Liszt the key of B major had celestial associations. In which case the nine pieces here represent a journey from the church on earth of the Swiss Chapel to the church in heaven symbolized by the bells of Geneva. The main theme of *Chapelle* was composed by the young Liszt as an *Albumblatt* in 1825, declared a Holy Year by Pope Leo XII in his encyclical *Quod Hoc Ineunte* of May 24, 1824. The manuscript still survives and is presently held in the Jagiellonian Library in Krakow. On it we can read Liszt's performing instruction *Adagio religioso (Plate 1).*[6]

When Liszt re-worked the *Album d'un voyageur* set of pieces at Weimar, he added two new ones, *Orage* and *Eglogue.* Both have epigraphs in English from Canto III of Byron's *Childe Harold:*

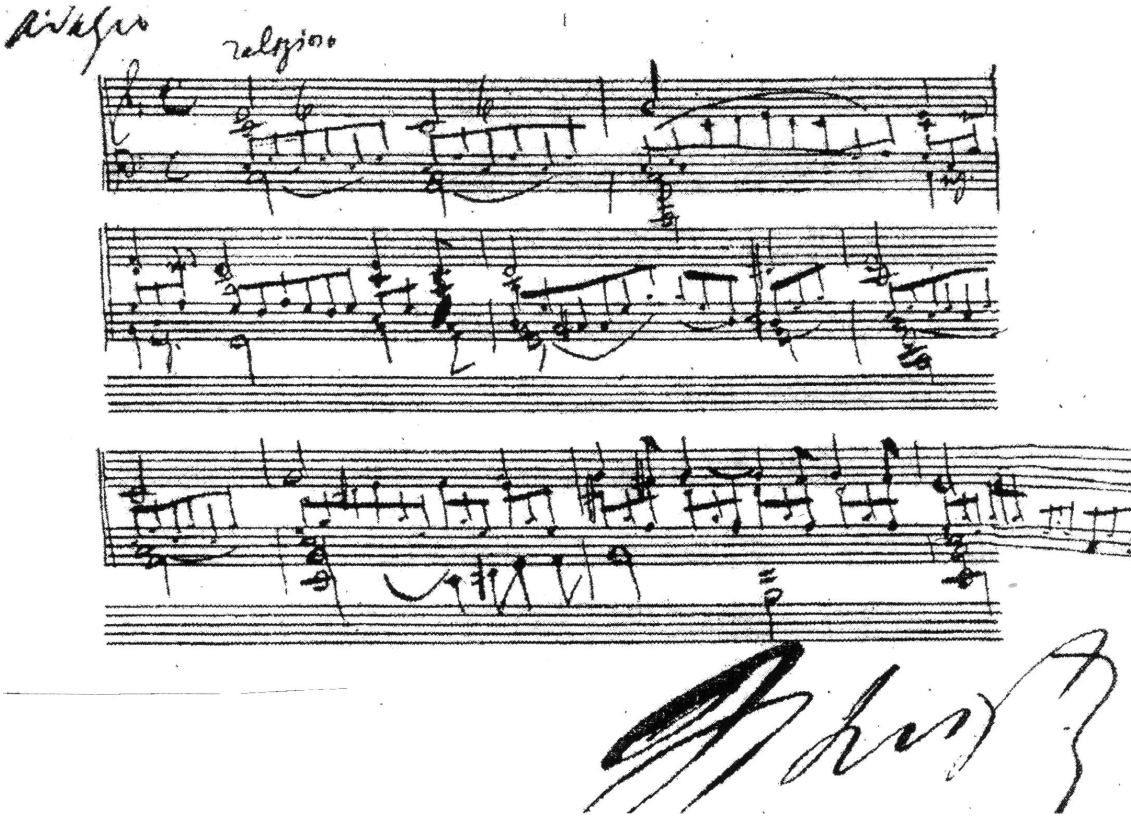
> But where of ye, O tempests! is the goal?
> Are ye like those within the human breast?
> Or do ye find, at length, like eagles, some high nest?
> …
> The morn is up again, the dewy morn,
> With breath all incense, and with cheek all bloom,
> Laughing the clouds away with playful scorn,
> And living as if earth contain'd no tomb, – …

Eglogue is based almost entirely on a three-note motive used in other religious pieces as a symbol of the Cross – sometimes called the Cross motive, or *crux motivum.* In my opinion this was Liszt's musical depiction of the words 'living as if earth contain'd no tomb', i.e. of the resurrection. In which case it is a direct association in Liszt's mind of Byron and religion. It is also my opinion that Liszt's use of the Cross motive in *Eglogue* was what determined the tonal ending

5. See Paul Merrick, "Liszt's 'Teufelsonate'," *The Musical Times* vol. 152 no. 1914 (Spring 2011), 7–19.

6. Reproduced in William Wright, "Master Liszt in England," *Journal of the American Liszt Society* 54–56 (2003–2005), 28.

PLATE 1 Liszt, Albumblatt, 1825



of the work to be in B major. Thus the whole musical concept of *pilgrimage* is from Byron.[7]

In October 1838 Liszt was in Padua alone – the Countess d'Agoult was in Bologna. In a letter dated Ocober 1 he wrote to her: "I am again reading Don Juan, in particular the third canto, and its end."[8] The third canto of Byron's *Don Juan* is very long, consisting of 111 verses. Verses 102 and 103 are an *Ave Maria* from which Liszt quoted in his letter in a French translation:

> *Ave Maria, c'est l'heure de la prière ;*
> *Ave Maria, c'est l'heure de l'amour ;*

Byron's English original reads:

7. See Paul Merrick, "The Rôle of Tonality in the Swiss Book of Années de Pèlerinage," *Studia Musicologica* 39/2–4 (1998), 367–383.

8. "Je relis Don Juan – le troisième chant surtout – c'est-à-dire la fin. Vous en souvenez-vous ?" Franz Liszt – Marie d'Agoult, *Correspondance,* ed. Serge Gut and Jacqueline Bellas (Paris: Fayard, 2001), 355.

CIII
Ave Maria! 't is the hour of prayer!
Ave Maria! 't is the hour of love!
Ave Maria! may our spirits dare
Look up to thine and to thy Son's above!
Ave Maria! oh that face so fair!
Those downcast eyes beneath the Almighty dove –
What though 't is but a pictured image? – strike –
That painting is no idol, – 't is too like.

After this in the following verse Byron comments on himself and other people's impression of his religion – which Liszt did not quote but obviously had read:

CIV
Some kinder casuists are pleased to say,
In nameless print – that I have no devotion;
But set those persons down with me to pray,
And you shall see who has the properest notion
Of getting into heaven the shortest way;
My altars are the mountains and the ocean,
Earth, air, stars, – all that springs from the great Whole.
Who hath produced, and will receive the soul.

Liszt was reading this in Padua, where the great Basilica del Santo stands containing the shrine of St Anthony of Padua, a Franciscan friar and priest, who died in 1231 and whom St Francis had appointed to be the first teacher of theology in the new Franciscan order. In August 1810 Byron himself had stayed in an Italian Franciscan monastery at Athens, from where he wrote one of his characteristic letters. Part of it reads:

> I am most auspiciously settled in the Convent, which is more commodious than any tenement I have yet occupied, with room for my *suite*; and it is by no means solitary, seeing there is not only 'il Padre Abbate', but his 'schuola', consisting of six 'Ragazzi', all my most particular allies. … We have nothing but riot from noon to night. …
> I am learning Italian, and this day translated an ode of Horace, 'Exegi monumentum', into that language. I chatter with everybody, good or bad, and tradute prayers out of the mass ritual…[9]

Byron became fluent in Italian, the most famous of his liaisons being with the Countess Guiccioli, with whom he lived in Ravenna, Pisa, and Genoa between 1819 and 1823.

9. Letter to Cam Hobhouse dated August 23, 1810 given in Lord Byron, *Selected Prose,* ed. Peter Gunn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 76.

One of the websites describes Byron as a poet, hero, and bisexual athlete. This is the modern view. In his day and afterwards his influence in Europe was through the very clever *persona* he created in his poetry and plays, the so-called Byronic hero. This was widely copied in Europe because the hero was gloomy and subversive. This is not the Byron we find in Liszt, who I think is the only European artist of genius who sensed the real Byron behind the mask. This Byron is found in the poet's letters published after his death in 1824. Liszt may never have read them, but his musical intuition about the man behind the poetry was correct. An English literary critic has called Byron one of the greatest letter writers in English literature, an epistolary parallel with Liszt, who among composers must surely count as a great writer of letters. The attraction of Byron's letters is that he lifts his mask and we meet him with no play acting. He is probably the best companion one could ever have had. He is adventurous, funny, affectionate, impudent, brave, child-like, brilliantly clever, honest, and idealistic. And a sexual profligate on a scale that makes Hollywood look like a community of enclosed nuns. This last is at first sight another similarity with Liszt, whose legend to this day includes his alleged adventures as a Casanova. But whereas there seems to be little evidence to support this in Liszt's case, Byron was clearly behaving in the traditional aristocratic manner.

Byron lived in Venice from 1816 to 1819 and during his stay paid regular visits to an Armenian monastery on the island of the Lazzaristi. His purpose was to study the Armenian language, as he felt the need for some rigorous intellectual occupation. He prepared an Armenian–English dictionary, the first to do so. The monks in the monastery were Mechitarist Benedictines, founded by Mechitar in 1712.

While in Venice, Byron wrote two plays about Venetian doges, *Marino Faliero* and *The Two Foscari.* Both were later made into operas, *Marin Falier* by Donizetti in 1835 and *I due Foscari* by Verdi in 1844. Liszt conducted the Verdi at Weimar in 1856. As we know, the unfinished opera Liszt started to compose at Weimar was based on Byron's play *Sardanapalus.*

Byron's political sympathies, like those of the young Liszt, were republican. Born in 1784, in European terms he grew up intellectually a child of the French Revolution. But we would be wrong to consider him, as some of his contemporaries did, irreligious. Byron's opinions on this question are nowhere presented more clearly than in an appendix he wrote to his play *The Two Foscari.* Omitted from later editions, it is not read today. Fortunately an 1830 edition is available on the internet, from which I have taken this extract.

> It is the fashion to attribute every thing to the French Revolution, and the French Revolution to every thing but its real cause. That cause is obvious – the government exacted too much, and the people could neither give nor bear more. Without this, the Encyclopedists might have written their fingers off without the occurrence of a single alteration. … Acts – acts on the part of government, and *not* writings against them, have caused the past convulsions, and are tending to the future.

> I look upon such as inevitable, though no revolutionist; … Born an aristocrat, and naturally one by temper, with the greater part of my present property in the funds, what have *I* to gain by a revolution? … But that a revolution is inevitable, I repeat. … Mr Southey accuses us of attacking the religion of the country; … One mode of worship is merely destroyed by another. There never was, nor ever will be, a country without a religion. We shall be told of France again: but it was only Paris and a frantic party, which for a moment upheld their dogmatic nonsense of theophilanthropy. The Church of England, if overthrown, will be swept away by the sectarians, and not by the sceptics. People are too wise, too well-informed, ever to submit to the impiety of doubt.[10]

Byron had an affair with Claire Clairmont, the step-sister of Mary Shelley, wife of the poet. Their illegitimate daughter Allegra was born in 1817 in England and died in 1822 in Italy aged five. For part of her short life she lived with the Shelleys, but Byron disliked this arrangement saying he feared she would be taught atheism. (In 1811 when he was an undergraduate at University College Oxford, Shelley had published a pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism,* as a consequence of which he was rusticated.) Eventually Byron sent his daughter to a Capuchin convent in Bagnacavallo, which angered Shelley, who had no time for the Catholic Church. Byron by contrast said he wanted the child to become a Roman Catholic, which he viewed as the best religion. Shortly before her death in April 1822, Byron wrote from Pisa to his friend Thomas Moore in England:

> I am no enemy to religion, but the contrary. As a proof, I am educating my natural daughter a strict Catholic in a convent of Romagna; for I think people can never have enough of religion, if they are to have any. I incline, myself, very much to the Catholic doctrines …
> As to poor Shelley, who is another bugbear to you and the world, he is, to my knowledge, the least selfish and the mildest of men – a man who has made more sacrifices of his fortune and feelings for others than any I ever heard of. With his speculative opinions I have nothing in common, nor desire to have.[11]

After Allegra's death Byron sent her body back to England to be buried at Harrow in the church, writing to a friend:

> I wish it to be buried in Harrow Church: there is a spot in the Church-yard, near the footpath, on the brow of the hill looking towards Windsor, and a tomb under a large tree … where I used to sit for hours and hours when a boy: this was my favourite spot; but, as I wish to erect a tablet to her memory, the body had better be deposited in the Church.[12]

10. *The Two Foscari.* Appendix in *The Works of Lord Byron* (London: John Murray, 1830), 381.
11. Letter to Thomas Moore, Pisa, March 4, 1822, in Lord Byron, *Selected Prose,* 476.
12. Letter to John Murray, Montenero, May 26, 1822, in Lord Byron, *Selected Prose,* 479.

Byron died in Greece in 1824 at the age of 36. His body was returned to England but he was denied a burial in Westminster Abbey. A memorial was placed on the floor in Westminster Abbey only in 1969. The poet was interred in the Byron family vault in Hucknall, Nottinghamshire. In 1824 a funeral procession carried the body through the streets of London, a scene witnessed by the poet John Clare.

> While I was in London, the melancholy death of Lord Byron was announced in the public papers, and I saw his remains borne away out of the city on its last journey to that place where fame never comes. … His funeral was blazed in the papers with the usual parade that accompanies the death of great men. … I happened to see it by chance as I was wandering up Oxford Street on my way to Mrs. Emmerson's, when my eye was suddenly arrested by straggling groups of the common people collected together and talking about a funeral. I did as the rest did, though I could not get hold of what funeral it could be; but I knew it was not a common one by the curiosity that kept watch on every countenance. By and by the group collected into about a hundred or more, when the train of a funeral suddenly appeared, on which a young girl that stood by me gave a deep sigh and uttered, 'Poor Lord Byron.' … I looked up at the young girl's face. It was dark and beautiful, and I could almost feel in love with her for the sigh she had uttered for the poet. … The common people felt his merits and his power, and the common people of a country are the best feelings of a prophecy of futurity. They are the veins and arteries that feed and quicken the heart of living fame. …
>
> The young girl that stood by me had counted the carriages in her mind as they passed and she told me there were sixty-three or four in all. They were of all sorts and sizes and made up a motley show. The gilt ones that led the procession were empty. The hearse looked small and rather mean and the coach that followed carried his embers in an urn over which a pall was thrown. … I believe that his liberal principles in religion and politics did a great deal towards gaining the notice and affections of the lower orders. Be as it will, it is better to be beloved by those low and humble for undisguised honesty than flattered by the great for purchased and pensioned hypocrisies.[13]

When this happened in July 1824, the 12 year-old Liszt was in London. He was living in Great Marlborough Street, and had given a concert at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane on June 29 and in July played before King George IV at Windsor Castle. It is impossible he did not hear of Byron's funeral; he may even have witnessed the procession. Surely his awareness of who Byron was can be dated back to this time in London. In which case his knowledge of Byron originated in England, the country of the poet's birth. It also coincided with the Pope's announcement that 1825 would be a Holy Year. If to this we add the Krakow MS of the *Adagio religioso* from 1825, which became *Chapelle de Guillaume Tell,* then Liszt's alteration of a miscellaneous set of travel impressions to a Byronic

13. J. W. and Anne Tibble, *John Clare: A Life* (Southampton: Cobden-Sanderson, 1932), 226–227.

musical pilgrimage may have had a personal biographical background reaching back even to before the death of his father Adam Liszt in 1827.

Byron's *Childe Harold* begins his pilgrimage from England on board a ship bound for Portugal and Spain. He then sails to Albania and Greece. Taking ship again he travels to France, and goes to Belgium, thence down the Rhine in Germany to the Alps and Switzerland. Liszt's quotations in his piano pieces are taken from *Childe Harold* in Switzerland. After Switzerland, Byron takes his hero to Venice and Italy. It is interesting that Liszt inserted a Venetian supplement between the Swiss and Italian books of *Années de pèlerinage*: perhaps he followed Byron. Liszt's third book, also called Italy, is really a Roman book. *Childe Harold* also ends in Rome. Liszt is credited with inventing the piano recital as a concert genre, but the first example dates from his *monologue pianistique* given in Rome on March 8, 1839 in the Palazzo Poli. Liszt's Italian journey of 1838 to 1839, viewed as a pilgrimage, embraced Padua, Assisi and Rome.

When Liszt arrived in Rome, he was in a sense following Childe Harold. In 1839 did he read *in situ* Byron's eulogy of St Peter's basilica that occurs near the end of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*? Perhaps he already planned to return and, like Childe Harold, end the journey of art and life in the Eternal City.

> But lo! The Dome – the vast and wondrous Dome!
> To which Diana's marvel was a cell –
> Christ's mighty shrine above His martyr's tomb!
> I have beheld the Ephesian's miracle –
> Its columns strew the wilderness, and dwell
> The hyena and the jackal in their shade;
> I have beheld Sophia's bright roofs swell
> Their glittering mass i' the Sun, and have surveyed
> Its sanctuary the while the usurping Moslem prayed;
>
> But thou, of temples old, or altars new,
> Standest alone – with nothing like to thee –
> Worthiest of God, the Holy and the True!
> Since Zion's desolation, when that He
> Forsook his former city, what could be,
> Of earthly structures, in His honour piled,
> Of a sublimer aspect? Majesty –
> Power – Glory – Strength – and Beauty all are aisled
> In this eternal Ark of worship undefiled.
>
> (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage,* Canto IV, stanzas CLIII and CLIV)