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Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni

BY PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

I

The everlasting universe of things
 Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,
 Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—
 Now lending splendour, where from secret springs
 The source of human thought its tribute brings
 Of waters—with a sound but half its own,
 Such as a feeble brook will oft assume,
 In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,
 Where waterfalls around it leap for ever,
 Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river
 Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves.

II

Thus thou, Ravine of Arve—dark, deep Ravine—
 Thou many-colour'd, many-voiced vale,
 Over whose pines, and crags, and caverns sail
 Fast cloud-shadows and sunbeams: awful scene,
 Where Power in likeness of the Arve comes down
 From the ice-gulfs that gird his secret throne,
 Bursting through these dark mountains like the flame
 Of lightning through the tempest;—thou dost lie,
 Thy giant brood of pines around thee clinging,
 Children of elder time, in whose devotion
 The chainless winds still come and ever came
 To drink their odours, and their mighty swinging
 To hear—an old and solemn harmony;
 Thine earthly rainbows stretch'd across the sweep
 Of the aethereal waterfall, whose veil
 Robes some unsculptur'd image; the strange sleep
 Which when the voices of the desert fail
 Wraps all in its own deep eternity;
 Thy caverns echoing to the Arve's commotion,

A loud, lone sound no other sound can tame;
 Thou art pervaded with that ceaseless motion,
 Thou art the path of that unresting sound—
 Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee
 I seem as in a trance sublime and strange
 To muse on my own separate fantasy,
 My own, my human mind, which passively
 Now renders and receives fast influencings,
 Holding an unremitting interchange
 With the clear universe of things around;
 One legion of wild thoughts, whose wandering wings
 Now float above thy darkness, and now rest
 Where that or thou art no unbidden guest,
 In the still cave of the witch Poesy,
 Seeking among the shadows that pass by
 Ghosts of all things that are, some shade of thee,
 Some phantom, some faint image; till the breast
 From which they fled recalls them, thou art there!

III

Some say that gleams of a remoter world
 Visit the soul in sleep, that death is slumber,
 And that its shapes the busy thoughts outnumber
 Of those who wake and live.—I look on high;
 Has some unknown omnipotence unfurl'd
 The veil of life and death? or do I lie
 In dream, and does the mightier world of sleep
 Spread far around and inaccessibly
 Its circles? For the very spirit fails,
 Driven like a homeless cloud from steep to steep
 That vanishes among the viewless gales!
 Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky,
 Mont Blanc appears—still, snowy, and serene;
 Its subject mountains their unearthly forms
 Pile around it, ice and rock; broad vales between
 Of frozen floods, unfathomable deeps,
 Blue as the overhanging heaven, that spread
 And wind among the accumulated steeps;
 A desert peopled by the storms alone,
 Save when the eagle brings some hunter's bone,
 And the wolf tracks her there—how hideously
 Its shapes are heap'd around! rude, bare, and high,
 Ghastly, and scarr'd, and riven.—Is this the scene

Where the old Earthquake-daemon taught her young
 Ruin? Were these their toys? or did a sea
 Of fire envelop once this silent snow?
 None can reply—all seems eternal now.
 The wilderness has a mysterious tongue
 Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,
 So solemn, so serene, that man may be,
 But for such faith, with Nature reconcil'd;
 Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal
 Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood
 By all, but which the wise, and great, and good
 Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel.

IV

The fields, the lakes, the forests, and the streams,
 Ocean, and all the living things that dwell
 Within the daedal earth; lightning, and rain,
 Earthquake, and fiery flood, and hurricane,
 The torpor of the year when feeble dreams
 Visit the hidden buds, or dreamless sleep
 Holds every future leaf and flower; the bound
 With which from that detested trance they leap;
 The works and ways of man, their death and birth,
 And that of him and all that his may be;
 All things that move and breathe with toil and sound
 Are born and die; revolve, subside, and swell.
 Power dwells apart in its tranquillity,
 Remote, serene, and inaccessible:
 And *this*, the naked countenance of earth,
 On which I gaze, even these primeval mountains
 Teach the adverting mind. The glaciers creep
 Like snakes that watch their prey, from their far fountains,
 Slow rolling on; there, many a precipice
 Frost and the Sun in scorn of mortal power
 Have pil'd: dome, pyramid, and pinnacle,
 A city of death, distinct with many a tower
 And wall impregnable of beaming ice.
 Yet not a city, but a flood of ruin
 Is there, that from the boundaries of the sky
 Rolls its perpetual stream; vast pines are strewing
 Its destin'd path, or in the mangled soil
 Branchless and shatter'd stand; the rocks, drawn down
 From yon remotest waste, have overthrown

The limits of the dead and living world,
Never to be reclaim'd. The dwelling-place
Of insects, beasts, and birds, becomes its spoil;
Their food and their retreat for ever gone,
So much of life and joy is lost. The race
Of man flies far in dread; his work and dwelling
Vanish, like smoke before the tempest's stream,
And their place is not known. Below, vast caves
Shine in the rushing torrents' restless gleam,
Which from those secret chasms in tumult welling
Meet in the vale, and one majestic River,
The breath and blood of distant lands, for ever
Rolls its loud waters to the ocean-waves,
Breathes its swift vapours to the circling air.

V

Mont Blanc yet gleams on high:—the power is there,
The still and solemn power of many sights,
And many sounds, and much of life and death.
In the calm darkness of the moonless nights,
In the lone glare of day, the snows descend
Upon that Mountain; none beholds them there,
Nor when the flakes burn in the sinking sun,
Or the star-beams dart through them. Winds contend
Silently there, and heap the snow with breath
Rapid and strong, but silently! Its home
The voiceless lightning in these solitudes
Keeps innocently, and like vapour broods
Over the snow. The secret Strength of things
Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome
Of Heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!
And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
If to the human mind's imaginings
Silence and solitude were vacancy?

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