

Taking leave

Of this glad throng, foot-travellers side by side,  
Measuring our steps in quiet, we pursued  
Our journey, and ere twice the sun had set  
Beheld the Convent of Chartreuse, and there  
Rested within an awful *solitude*:  
Yes, for even then no other than a place  
Of soul-affecting *solitude* appeared  
That far-famed region, though our eyes had seen,  
As toward the sacred mansion we advanced,  
Arms flashing, and a military glare  
Of riotous men commissioned to expel  
The blameless inmates, and belike subvert  
That frame of social being, which so long  
Had bodied forth the ghostliness of things  
In silence visible and perpetual calm.  
—"Stay, stay your sacrilegious hands!"—The voice  
Was Nature's, uttered from her Alpine throne;  
I heard it then and seem to hear it now—  
"Your impious work forbear, perish what may,  
Let this one temple last, be this one spot  
Of earth devoted to eternity!"  
She ceased to speak, but while St. Bruno's pines  
Waved their dark tops, not silent as they waved,  
And while below, along their several beds,  
Murmured the sister streams of Life and Death,  
Thus by conflicting passions pressed, my heart  
Responded; "Honour to the patriot's zeal!  
Glory and hope to new-born Liberty!  
Hail to the mighty projects of the time!  
Discerning sword that Justice wields, do thou  
Go forth and prosper; and, ye purging fires,  
Up to the loftiest towers of Pride ascend,  
Fanned by the breath of angry Providence.  
But oh! if Past and Future be the wings  
On whose support harmoniously conjoined  
Moves the great spirit of human knowledge, spare  
These courts of mystery, where a step advanced  
Between the portals of the shadowy rocks  
Leaves far behind life's treacherous vanities,  
For penitential tears and trembling hopes  
Exchanged—to equalise in God's pure sight  
Monarch and peasant: be the house redeemed  
With its unworldly votaries, for the sake  
Of conquest over sense, hourly achieved  
Through faith and meditative reason, resting  
Upon the word of heaven-imparted truth,  
Calmly triumphant; and for humbler claim  
Of that imaginative impulse sent  
From these majestic floods, yon shining cliffs,

The untransmuted shapes of many worlds,  
Cerulean ether's pure inhabitants,  
These forests unapproachable by death,  
That shall endure as long as man endures,  
To think, to hope, to worship, and to feel,  
To struggle, to be lost within himself  
In trepidation, from the blank abyss  
To look with bodily eyes, and be consoled."  
Not seldom since that moment have I wished  
That thou, O Friend! the trouble or the calm  
Hadst shared, when, from profane regards apart,  
In sympathetic reverence we trod  
The floors of those dim cloisters, till that hour,  
From their foundation, strangers to the presence  
Of unrestricted and unthinking man.  
Abroad, how cheeringly the sunshine lay  
Upon the open lawns! Vallombre's groves  
Entering, we fed the soul with darkness; thence  
Issued, and with uplifted eyes beheld,  
In different quarters of the bending sky,  
The cross of Jesus stand erect, as if  
Hands of angelic powers had fixed it there,  
Memorial revered by a thousand storms;  
Yet then, from the indiscriminating sweep  
And rage of one State-whirlwind, insecure.

'Tis not my present purpose to retrace  
That variegated journey step by step.  
A march it was of military speed,  
And Earth did change her images and forms  
Before us, fast as clouds are changed in heaven.  
Day after day, up early and down late,  
From hill to vale we dropped, from vale to hill  
Mounted—from province on to province swept,  
Keen hunters in a chase of fourteen weeks,  
Eager as birds of prey, or as a ship  
Upon the stretch, when winds are blowing fair:  
Sweet coverts did we cross of pastoral life,  
Enticing valleys, greeted them and left  
Too soon, while yet the very flash and gleam  
Of salutation were not passed away.  
Oh! sorrow for the youth who could have seen  
Unchastened, unsubdued, unawed, unraised  
To patriarchal dignity of mind,  
And pure simplicity of wish and will,  
Those sanctified abodes of peaceful man,  
Pleased (though to hardship born, and compassed round  
With danger, varying as the seasons change),  
Pleased with his daily task, or, if not pleased,

Contented, from the moment that the dawn  
(Ah! surely not without attendant gleams  
Of soul-illumination) calls him forth  
To industry, by glistenings flung on rocks,  
Whose evening shadows lead him to repose.

Well might a stranger look with bounding heart  
Down on a green recess, the first I saw  
Of those deep haunts, an aboriginal vale,  
Quiet and lorded over and possessed  
By naked huts, wood-built, and sown like tents  
Or Indian cabins over the fresh lawns  
And by the river side.

That very day,  
From a bare ridge we also first beheld  
Unveiled the summit of Mont Blanc, and grieved  
To have a soulless image on the eye  
That had usurped upon a living thought  
That never more could be. The wondrous Vale  
Of Chamouny stretched far below, and soon  
With its dumb cataracts and streams of ice,  
A motionless array of mighty waves,  
Five rivers broad and vast, made rich amends,  
And reconciled us to realities;  
There small birds warble from the leafy trees,  
The eagle soars high in the element,  
There doth the reaper bind the yellow sheaf,  
The maiden spread the haycock in the sun,  
While Winter like a well-tamed lion walks,  
Descending from the mountain to make sport  
Among the cottages by beds of flowers.

Whate'er in this wide circuit we beheld,  
Or heard, was fitted to our unripe state  
Of intellect and heart. With such a book  
Before our eyes, we could not choose but read  
Lessons of genuine brotherhood, the plain  
And universal reason of mankind,  
The truths of young and old. Nor, side by side  
Pacing, two social pilgrims, or alone  
Each with his humour, could we fail to abound  
In dreams and fictions, pensively composed:  
Dejection taken up for pleasure's sake,  
And gilded sympathies, the willow wreath,  
And sober posies of funereal flowers,  
Gathered among those solitudes sublime  
From formal gardens of the lady Sorrow,  
Did sweeten many a meditative hour.

Yet still in me with those soft luxuries  
Mixed something of stern mood, an under-thirst  
Of vigour seldom utterly allayed.  
And from that source how different a sadness  
Would issue, let one incident make known.  
When from the Vallais we had turned, and clomb  
Along the Simplon's steep and rugged road,  
Following a band of muleteers, we reached  
A halting-place, where all together took  
Their noon-tide meal. Hastily rose our guide,  
Leaving us at the board; awhile we lingered,  
Then paced the beaten downward way that led  
Right to a rough stream's edge, and there broke off;  
The only track now visible was one  
That from the torrent's further brink held forth  
Conspicuous invitation to ascend  
A lofty mountain. After brief delay  
Crossing the unbridged stream, that road we took,  
And clomb with eagerness, till anxious fears  
Intruded, for we failed to overtake  
Our comrades gone before. By fortunate chance,  
While every moment added doubt to doubt,  
A peasant met us, from whose mouth we learned  
That to the spot which had perplexed us first  
We must descend, and there should find the road,  
Which in the stony channel of the stream  
Lay a few steps, and then along its banks;  
And, that our future course, all plain to sight,  
Was downwards, with the current of that stream.  
Loth to believe what we so grieved to hear,  
For still we had hopes that pointed to the clouds,  
We questioned him again, and yet again;  
But every word that from the peasant's lips  
Came in reply, translated by our feelings,  
Ended in this,—*that we had crossed the Alps.*