

**AN ACCOUNT OF SHELLEY'S
VISITS TO FRANCE,
SWITZERLAND, AND SAVOY,
IN THE YEARS 1814 AND 1816**

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An Account of Shelley's Visits to France, Switzerland, and Savoy, in the Years 1814 and 1816 by
Charles I. Elton

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SHELLEY'S VISITS TO FRANCE, SWITZERLAND, AND SAVOY

INTRODUCTION

THE object of this essay is to illustrate the little volume containing the history of Shelley's six weeks' tour, and the letters on Chamouni and the environs of Geneva, which first appeared in 1817 without any author's name, but were eventually recognised as being "Shelley's publication." Nothing, said Mrs. Shelley, who took herself a great share in the work, could possibly be more unassuming than the account of their desultory visits to places which are now familiar to us all. It has ceased to be interesting in itself to hear of a journey up the Rhine, or to the English colony at Montreux, or to receive the last description of the beauties of Geneva or Lucerne. But, after all, the "castled Rhine" will never lose the charm thrown over it by the writer of "Childe Harold," nor Meillerie and Mont Blanc cease to be

transfigured by Shelley's romantic visions. We do not care so much for what they actually saw as for the picture of their eager pursuit of an "inconstant summer of delight." In order to understand that state of mind it is necessary to examine the poems composed in connection with these journeys, including, besides the "Lines to Mont Blanc" and the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," several later poems, and a few more fragments that appear to contain allusions to the original journals and letters. Apart from mere reminiscences of scenery, the thought underlying most of these poems is the idea that the beauty of Nature is the friend and companion of Man: the phenomena of the universe are regarded as existing in the observer's mind, while that mind and all that belongs to it may be viewed apart as one of the forms presented in Nature. We shall find that both Shelley and Byron continually return to this idea; and it seems clear that in their dealings with the subject they both owed something to Wordsworth.

We may be sure that Shelley cared little for the "Excursion"; but it is easy to see that he was influenced by certain portions of its preface. Wordsworth had intended to construct a vast work, for which the "Excursion" was to serve as an introduction, the two being related to each other "as the antechapel to the body of a Gothic church." The

minor pieces, which had long been before the world, were to be referred to the same design, and might be likened to "the little cells, and oratories, and sepulchral recesses." "The Recluse," as the whole work was to be called, never advanced very far towards completion; but its author placed in the preface to "The Excursion" a passage from its first book to serve as a clue to his argument. The description of Beauty, in the form of Imagination, follows his invocation of Milton's "heavenly muse" and Shakespeare's "prophetic spirit" for help in his exploration of the human mind, in which he found the haunt and the main region of his song:

Beauty, a living presence of the earth,
Surpassing the most fair ideal forms
Which craft and delicate spirits have composed
From earth's materials, waits upon my steps,
Pitches her tents before me as I move,
An hourly neighbour.

In Wordsworth's theory we may either say that man's intellect is framed to receive all Nature, or that the Universe itself is "fitted to the mind." The point is recognised both by Shelley and Byron in their pictures of the country round Montreux. In the one case we may refer to the poem on "Intellectual Beauty," and in the other to the Third Canto of "Childe Harold," and its writer's own notes upon the

poem. Byron, one would suppose, gained some of his insight from conversations with Shelley, although the younger man acknowledged the complete supremacy of one whose conceptions rose fast and fair "as perfect worlds at the Creator's will." Shelley certainly outstripped Wordsworth in finding the delicate meanings that underlie the forms of Nature. "What is your substance, whereof are you made, that millions of strange shadows on you tend?" There had been a mightier spirit before them, skilled far beyond their powers in "dreaming of things to come," and in all these thoughts they were in fact depending on what Shakespeare had given to the world :

Hither as to their fountain other stars,
Repairing, in their golden urns draw light.

Let us take Byron's picture of Clarens and the opposite heights. He is dealing with Rousseau, his "self-torturing sophist," who in 1759 had associated his "Nouvelle Héloïse" with the broad lake and the Alps frowning in bastions and parallels :

'Tis lone,
And wonderful and deep, and hath a sound,
And sense, and sight of sweetness : here the Rhone
Hath spread himself a couch, the Alps have reared a throne.

In describing the voyage round the lake he acknowledged that it would be difficult to deny the