

Timbuctoo

by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

I stood upon the Mountain which o'erlooks
The narrow seas, whose rapid interval
Parts Africa from green Europe, when the Sun
Had fall'n below th' Atlantick, and above
The silent Heavens were blench'd with faery light,
Uncertain whether faery light or cloud,
Flowing Southward, and the chasms of deep, deep blue
Slumber'd unfathomable, and the stars
Were flooded over with clear glory and pale.

I gaz'd upon the sheeny coast beyond,
There where the Giant of old Time infixed
The limits of his prowess, pillars high
Long time eras'd from Earth: even as the Sea
When weary of wild inroad buildeth up
Hugh mounds whereby to stay his yeasty waves.

And much I mus'd on legends quaint and old
Which whilome won the hearts of all on Earth
Toward their brightness, ev'n as flame draws air;
But had their being in the heart of Man
As air is th' life of flame: and thou wert then
A center'd glory-circled Memory,
Divinest Atalantis, whom the waves
Have buried deep, and thou of later name
Imperial Eldorado roof'd with gold;
Shadows to which, despite all shocks of Change,
All on-set of capricious Accident,
Men clung with yearning Hope which would not die.

As when in some great City where the walls
Shake, and the streets with ghastly faces throng'd
Do utter forth a subterranean voice,
Among the inner columns far retir'd
At midnight, in the lone Acropolis,
Before the awful Genius of the place
Kneels the pale Priestess in deep faith, the while
Above her head the weak lamp dips and winks
Unto the fearful summoning without:
Nathless she ever clasps the marble knees,
Bathes the cold hand with tears, and gazeth on
Those eyes which wear no light but that wherewith

Her phantasy informs them.

Where are ye
Thrones of the Western wave, fair Islands green?
Where are your moonlight halls, your cedarn glooms,
The blossoming abysses of your hills?
Your flowering Capes, and your gold-sanded bays
Blown round with happy airs of odorous winds?
Where are the infinite ways, which, Seraph-trod,
Wound thro' your great Elysian solitudes,
Whose lowest deeps were, as with visible love,
Fill'd with Divine effulgence, circumfus'd,
Flowing between the clear and polish'd stems,
And ever circling round their emerald cones
In coronals and glories, such as gird
The unfading foreheads of the Saints in Heaven?
For nothing visible, they say, had birth
In that blest ground but it was play'd about
With its peculiar glory.

Then I rais'd
My voice and cried, 'Wide Afric, doth thy Sun
Lighten, thy hills enfold a City as fair
As those which starr'd the night o' the elder World?
Or is the rumour of thy Timbuctoo
A dream as frail as those of ancient Time?'

A curve of whitening, flashing, ebbing light!
A rustling of white wings! The bright descent
Of a young Seraph! And he stood beside me
There on the ridge, and look'd into my face
With his unutterable, shining orbs.

So that with hasty motion I did veil
My vision with both hands, and saw before me
Such colour'd spots as dance athwart the eyes
Of those, that gaze upon the noonday Sun.

Girt with a Zone of flashing gold beneath
His breast, and compass'd round about his brow
With triple arch of everchanging bows,
And circled with the glory of living light
And alternation of all hues, he stood.

‘O child of man, why muse you here alone
Upon the Mountain, on the dreams of old
Which fill’d the Earth with passing loveliness,
And odours rapt from remote Paradise?
Thy sense is clogg’d with dull mortality,
Thy spirit fetter’d with the bond of clay:
Open thine eyes and see.’

I look’d, but not
Upon his face, for it was wonderful
With its exceeding brightness, and the light
Of the great Angel Mind which look’d from out
The starry glowing of his restless eyes.

I felt my soul grow mighty, and my Spirit
With supernatural excitation bound
Within me, and my mental eye grew large
With such a vast circumference of thought,
That in my vanity I seem’d to stand
Upon the outward verge and bound alone
Of full beatitude.

Each failing sense
As with a momentary flash of light
Grew thrillingly distinct and keen. I saw
The smallest grain that dappled the dark Earth,
The indistinctest atom in deep air,
The Moon’s white cities, and the opal width
Of her small glowing lakes, her silver heights
Unvisited with dew of vagrant cloud,
And the unsounded, undescended depth
Of her black hollows.

The clear Galaxy
Shorn of its hoary lustre, wonderful,
Distinct and vivid with sharp points of light,
Blaze within blaze, an unimagined depth
And harmony of planet-girded Suns
And moon-encircled planets, wheel in wheel,
Arch’d the wan Sapphire.

Nay - the hum of men,
Or other things talking in unknown tongues,
And notes of busy life in distant worlds
Beat like a far wave on my anxious ear.

A maze of piercing, trackless, thrilling thoughts,
Involving and embracing each with each,
Rapid as fire, inextricably link'd,
Expanding momentarily with every sight
And sound which struck the palpitating sense,
The issue of strong impulse, hurried through
The riv'n rapt brain;

as when in some large lake
From pressure of descendant crags, which lapse
Disjointed, crumbling from their parent slope
At slender interval, the level calm
Is ridg'd with restless and increasing spheres
Which break upon each other, each th' effect
Of separate impulse, but more fleet and strong
Then its precursor, till the eye in vain
Amid the wild unrest of swimming shade
Dappled with hollow and alternate rise
Of interpenetrated arc, would scan
Definite round.

I know not if I shape
These things with accurate similitude
From visible objects, for but dimly now,
Less vivid than an half-forgotten dream,
The memory of that mental excellence
Comes o'er me, and it may be I entwine
The indecision of my present mind
With its past clearness, yet it seems to me
As even then the torrent of quick thought
Absorbed me from the nature of itself
With its own fleetness.

Where is he that borne
Adown the sloping of an arrowy stream,
Could link his shallop to the fleeting edge,
And muse midway with philosophic calm
Upon the wondrous laws, which regulate
The fierceness of the bounding Element?

My thoughts which long had grovell'd in the slime
Of this dull world, like dusky worms which house
Beneath unshaken waters, but at once
Upon some Earth-awakening day of Spring
Do pass from gloom to glory, and aloft
Winnow the purple, bearing on both sides
Double display of starlit wings which burn,
Fanlike and fibred, with intensest bloom;
Ev'n so my thoughts, erewhile so low, now felt
Unutterable buoyancy and strength
To bear them upward through the trackless fields
Of undefin'd existence far and free.

Then first within the South methought I saw
A wilderness of spires, and chrystal pile
Of rampart upon rampart, dome on dome,
Illimitable range of battlement
On battlement, and the Imperial height
Of Canopy o'er-canopied.

Behind
In diamond light upsprung the dazzling cones
Of Pyramids as far surpassing Earth's
As Heaven than Earth is fairer.

Each aloft
Upon his narrow'd Eminence bore globes
Of wheeling Suns, or Stars, or semblances
Of either, showering circular abyss
Of radiance.

But the glory of the place
Stood out a pillar'd front of burnish'd gold,
Interminably high, if gold it were
Or metal more ethereal, and beneath
Two doors of blinding brilliance, where no gaze
Might rest, stood open, and the eye could scan,
Through length of porch and valve and boundless hall,
Part of a throne of fiery flame, wherefrom
The snowy skirting of a garment hung,
And glimpse of multitudes of multitudes
That minister'd around it - if I saw
These things distinctly, for my human brain
Stagger'd beneath the vision, and thick night
Came down upon my eyelids, and I fell.

With ministering hand he rais'd me up:
Then with a mournful and ineffable smile,
Which but to look on for a moment fill'd
My eyes with irresistible sweet tears,
In accents of majestic melody,
Like a swoln river's gushings in still night
Mingled with floating music, thus he spake:

'There is no mightier Spirit than I to sway
The heart of man: and teach him to attain
By shadowing forth the Unattainable;
And step by step to scale that mighty stair
Whose landing-place is wrapt about with clouds
Of glory' of Heaven.

With earliest light of Spring,
And in the glow of fallow Summertime,
And in red Autumn when the winds are wild
With gambols, and when full-voiced Winter roofs
The headland with inviolate white snow,
I play about his heart a thousand ways,
Visit his eyes with visions, and his ears
With harmonies of wind and wave and wood,
— Of winds which tell of waters, and of waters
Betraying the close kisses of the wind —
And win him unto me: and few there be
So gross of heart who have not felt and known
A higher than they see: They with dim eyes
Behold me darkling.

Lo! I have given thee
To understand my presence, and to feel
My fullness; I have fill'd thy lips with power.

I have rais'd thee nigher to the spheres of Heaven
Man's first, last home: and thou with ravish'd sense
Listenest the lordly music flowing from
Th' illimitable years.

I am the Spirit,
The permeating life which courseth through
All th' intricate and labyrinthine veins
Of the great vine of Fable, which, outspread
With growth of shadowing leaf and clusters rare,
Reacheth to every corner under Heaven,
Deep-rooted in the living soil of truth;
So that men's hopes and fears take refuge in
The fragrance of its complicated glooms,
And cool impleached twilights.

Child of Man,
See'st thou yon river, whose translucent wave,
forth issuing from the darkness, windeth through
The argent streets o' th' City, imaging
The soft inversion of her tremulous Domes,
Her gardens frequent with the stately Palm,
Her Pagods hung with music of sweet bells,
Her obelisks of ranged Chrysolite,
Minarets and towers? Lo! How he passeth by,
And gulphs himself in sands, as not enduring
To carry through the world those waves, which bore
The reflex of my City in their depths.

O City! O latest Throne! Where I was rais'd
To be a mystery of loveliness
Unto all eyes, the time is well-nigh come
When I must render up this glorious home
To keen Discovery: soon yon brilliant towers
Shall darken with the waving of her wand;
Darken, and shrink and shiver into huts,
Black specks amid a waste of dreary sand,
Low-built, mud-wall'd, Barbarian settlements.
How chang'd from this fair City!'

Thus far the Spirit:
Then parted Heaven-ward on the wing: and I
Was left alone on Calpe, and the Moon
Had fallen from the night, and all was dark!