*Odes et Ballades: Third Ode*

The Black Gang [La Bande noire]

An obscure traveler, but religious, all through the ruins

of the fatherland . . . I prayed.

CH. NODIER

**I**

"O walls! O battlements! O turrets!

Ramparts! moats with mobile bridges!

Heavy bundles of frail columns!

Proud castles! modest convents!

Dusty cloisters, antique halls,

Where the holy hymns wailed,

Where the joyous banquets laughed!

Places where the heart stores its visions!

Churches where our mothers prayed,

Towers where our fathers fought!

Churchyards where our pride flares up!

Houses of God! manors of kings!

Temples guarded by the oriflamme,

Palaces kept safe by the cross!

Redoubts of love! arches of victory!

You who bear witness to our glories,

You who proclaim our greatness,

Chapels, high keeps, monasteries!

Walls veiled with so many mysteries,

Walls gleaming with so many splendors!

O debris! ruins of France,

Our love defends you in vain,

Places of joy or suffering,

Old monuments of a race of children!

Remnants, against which time is marching!

From Armorica to Provence,

You who sheltered honor!

Fallen archways, broken vaults!

Vestiges of bygone races!

Sacred bed of a dry river!

Yes, I seem, when I ponder you,

To hear the farewell of the heroes;

Often, in the ruins of the temple,

There shines a sort of divine ray.

My wandering steps seek out the trace

Of those proud warriors whose boldness

Made a throne of a soldier's shield;

Forgetting the passing hours, I ask

The old echo within their lodgings

What is left here of their voice.

Often my adventurous muse,

Drunk on sudden dreams,

Put on the warrior's cuirass

And the paladins' sash;

Taking up arms eaten by rust,

She made off with their abandoned gear

Stolen from the panels of the long corridor;

And, to lend speed to her wingless courser,

Seeking the way to newer lands,

Dared put on the spur of gold.

I loved the manor with its road

Hiding its windings in the woods,

And whose door beneath its vault

Is pressed between two wide towers;

I loved the swarm of funereal birds

That on the roofs, in the shadows,

Marshals its black battalions,

Or, raising sepulchral voices,

Wheels in shifting spirals

Around the delicate pavilions.

I loved the tower, green with ivy,

Rocked by the evening bell;

The steps at the stone cross

Where the traveler finds a seat;

The church watching over the tombs,

Just as we see humble doves

Brooding over the fruits of their love;

The toothed walls of the citadel,

Opening its arms to the valley,

Like the wings of a vulture.

I loved the alarm bells' chamber;

The courtyard where the trumpets sounded;

The hall where, putting their arms aside,

The great nobles assembled;

The stained glass, brilliant or somber,

The cold cellar where, in the shadows,

Under the walls that time is breaking down,

The brave, deaf to the murmuring wind,

Sleep, lying in their armor,

As though on the eve of a battle.

Today, among the waterfalls,

Under the dome of the thick woods,

The pillars, the svelte arcades,

Alas! bend down their tangled brows;

The fortresses now fallen in,

Where wandering goats tread,

Lower their heads of granite;

Vestiges that we love and venerate!

The eagle suspends his eyrie from their towers,

The swallow hides his nest in them.

Like that bird of passage,

The poet, in all weathers,

Sought out, from voyage to voyage,

The ruins and the springtime.

This debris, dear to the fatherland,

Speaks to him of chivalry;

Glory inhabits those voids;

Heroes fill these ruins; --

Though they be no more than shades,

They are the shadows of giants!

O people of France! let us respect these remains!

Heaven blesses the pious sons

Who keep, in their darkest days,

The heritage of their forefathers.

Like a hidden glory,

Let us count every fallen stone;

Let time suspend its law;

Let us give the three Gauls back to France,

Give memories back to hope,

The old palaces to the young king!..."

**II**

--Be quiet, lyre! Silence, o lyre of the poet!

Ah! in peace let this glorious debris fall

Into the gulf where no friend, in his mute suffering,

Will follow it with his eyes for long!

Witnesses that the old days have left to our times,

Guardians of a violated past,

Ah! flee this hostile age!

Crumble, sacred relics, solemn ruins!

Why stand watch longer, you last sentinels

Of a camp now asleep forever?

Or else, --let the march of time be hastened.

What's that? have we no such heroes among us

As drove the kings from their disfigured tomb,

No such as the dead had as executioners?

Honor to the gallants whom our pride admires!

Glory to such courage! Sparta and Rome

Never saw finer exploits!

Glory! They triumphed over these funereal stones,

They broke up bones, scattered dust!

Glory! They banished tombs!

What God inspired these intrepid works?

So gladdened by the void their effort opened up,

Perhaps they wanted nothing but empty tombs,

Since they had only a deserted heaven?

Or, mastering the respect with which death hypnotizes us,

Perhaps their hand struck some worthy shrub

At its roots;

And, rushing hopeful to other slaughters,

Attacked these tombs with such a sublime courage

As would prove itself by defeating a cradle?

Let them come now, may the crowd rush ahead,

May they all come at once, those hardened soldiers!

Here are enemies worthy of their valor:

Ruins and debris.

May they enter fearless by these wide-open doors;

May they lay siege to these deserted towers;

Such a triumph is free of risks,

But they must not awaken the brave within these walls;

These shadows that once triumphed in battle

Would take them for strangers!

This age among them all wishes for solitude.

Come on! bludgeon these walls, that still defy the years,

No, let nothing of the old days remain on the earth;

There is nothing of them now in our hearts.

This immense heritage, piled high with our glories,

For the new peoples that pass,

Is too heavy to bear;

It slows their pace, ruled by a common impulse.

What is the past to us? Of the time God gives us,

We keep only the future.

Let none boast to us of our credulous ancestors!

They saw their duties where we see our rights.

We have our virtues. We cut the throats of priests,

And assassinate kings.--

Alas! it is all too true, the ancient honor of France,

And Faith, sister of humble Hope,

Have fled our hapless age;

Crime has taken the place of the old virtues;

It obscures their pathways, as the briar erases

The doorsill of an abandoned temple.

When France, shorn of her memories,

Alas! has lost her old majesty,

Quarreling even now over some soiled purple rag,

They will laugh at her nudity!

Far from us to profane that sacred mother;

Let us console her tearful glory,

Let us sing of her stars now eclipsed;

For our young muse, facing anarchy,

Refuses to shake clean her banner, white

With the dust of times past.

1823.

[Note re publication dates: The poem was composed in 1823 [the year Hugo published *Han d’Islande*]. Published January 19, 1824, in *La Muse française*, the poem appeared with this note: “On reprochera peut-être au titre de cette ode sa trivialité; mais la *Bande noire* est une des *institutions* laissées par la Révolution ; et en parlant des choses de cette Révolution, la trivialitié est souvent un défaut inévitable.” [Hugo’s italics] (from Laffont, Victor Hugo, *Œuvres complètes*, Poésie I, n. 30, p. 1056, by Bernard Leuilliot)

It was then published as the fourth poem in *Nouvelles Odes* in the 1824 edition. And then in *Odes et ballades* as II, 3.]

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