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“Complicated Windings”: “Mont Blanc”

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ABSTRACT

“Mont Blanc” is a difficult and rewarding poem because its efforts to make sense of experience are paralleled by the challenges of interpretation which it affords the reader. Shelley’s confrontation with the Alpine landscape is shaded by ironies and counter-perspectives which frustrate any attempt to extract from the poem any stable vision of the mind’s relation with the external “universe of things.” “Mont Blanc” testifies to the power of the imagination through its very willingness to concede its weakness. The essay embarks on the apparently basic task of following the shifts in the poem’s argument over its five numbered sections. It shows how sentences warp and drift under the influence of continually evolving ideas and impressions and suggests, at least implicitly, that the poem’s force and depth owe to a subtlety of expression and imaginative flair which elude the generalizing tendency of critical interpretation.

I

Shelley saw the mountain in the summer of 1816. “It exceeds and renders insignificant all that I had before seen, or imagined,” he told Byron (*Letters* 1: 494). Shelley was prone to statements of that type in his correspondence; still, the letter to Peacock begun the same day suggests he was not exaggerating by much. A description of the journey up the Arve Valley starts with the improbable claim that the “scene resembles that of Matlock,” before the following day’s entry meets the landscape’s “immensity”:

For an hour, we proceed along the valley of the Arve—a valley surrounded on all sides by immense mountains whose jagged precipices were intermixed on high with dazzling snow: Their base was still covered with the eternal forest which perpetually grew darker & profounder as it approached the regions of snow.

Shelley’s cadences stir at the brilliance of the scene. The rhythms rise into a heroic line: “were intermixed on high with dazzling snow.” The clauses bury themselves twice in the insurmountable snow, meeting the limits of vision. As the letter progresses up the valley, phrases and feelings recur, re-approaching and reaffirming what defies belief—“We ascended winding between mountains whose immensity staggers the imagination”—before in the face of the mountain Shelley’s prose takes wing:

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Mont Blanc was before us. The Alps with their innumerable glacie[r]s on high, all around; closing in the complicated windings of the single vale:—forests inexpressibly beautiful—but majestic in their beauty—interwoven beech & pine & oak overshadowed our road or receded whilst lawns of such verdure as I had never seen before, occupied these opening[s], & extending gradually becoming darker into their recesses.—Mont Blanc was before us but was covered with cloud, & its base furrowed with dreadful gaps was seen alone. Pinnacles of snow, intolerably bright, part of the chain connected with Mont Blanc shone thro the clouds at intervals on high. I never knew I never imagined what mountains were before. (*Letters* 1: 495–97)

The prose moves with the effort of apprehension. Shelley steadies himself on empirical fact: “Mont Blanc was before us.” But the vision broadens and the syntactical tissue strains to encompass a scene characterized, like the “untrodden region” of Keats’s mind in the “Ode to Psyche,” by mountains stretching out “steep by steep” (51–55) at its fringes. The gaze returns to Mont Blanc, only to find its solidity dissolving. The surrounding pinnacles transmute reality or transcend the mind’s grasp on it in a way that renders what in the letter to Byron was a convenient cliché as at once an eloquent foundering and a profound glimpse into the interdependence of knowing and imagining: “I never knew I never imagined what mountains were before.”

Shelley’s most haunting writing operates at the fringes of apprehension. “Life, and the world, or whatever we call that which we are and feel, is an astonishing thing. The mist of familiarity obscures from us the wonder of our being,” he writes at the start of the essay “On Life” in 1819; but, he concludes, it is well that we are “shielded by the familiarity of what is at once so certain and so unfathomable from an astonishment which would otherwise absorb and overawe the functions of that which is [its] object” (505). “Mont Blanc,” the poem Shelley began among the mountains, is among Shelley’s greatest works for the daring with which it strips away “familiarity” and suspends itself in “astonishment” at a world that “overawes” understanding. It returns poetry to the basic struggle to make sense of the universe. It is English poetry’s most exhilarating dramatization of the imagination’s power to delineate and transcend the limits of knowledge. Supplication to the immensity of the Alpine landscape vies with a nervous audition of the mind’s ability to discover and shape meaning; and if the poem’s coherence and clarity occasionally buckle in the blaze of its “astonishment,” its composition testifies, too, to the resilience of the mind’s powers. On first publication, in *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour* (1817), Shelley presented the poem as having being “composed under the immediate impression of the deep and powerful feelings excited by the objects which it attempts to describe.” As “an undisciplined overflowing of the soul,” he said, it “rests its claim to approbation on an attempt to imitate the untamable wildness and inaccessible solemnity from which those feelings sprang” (vi). The remarks, though superficially modest about the poem’s accomplishment and ambition, unveil much of its force and subtlety. The emphasis on composing under the “immediate impression” of the feelings provoked by the scene (while it exaggerates the “immediacy” of what was—importantly for the poem’s texture—a stop-start process)¹ retains an awareness of the role the poem’s language plays in recognizing and delineating those feelings; the thought of “imitating” the “wildness” of the scene licenses the poem’s irregular, often bewildering rationale, though undersells the reserves of “discipline” which tether “feeling” to argument and enquiry; the concern with the “inaccessible” intimates the poem’s forlorn fascination with a power beyond our reach. “Mont Blanc” thrills, baffles, and astonishes as a poem of encounter as much as description, in which Shelley is nervously aware of the role of his very words

in revealing and generating the reality of a universe that staggers them. As Shelley wrote to Peacock, dizzied by his own creative powers: “All was as much our own as if we had been the creators of such impressions in the minds of others, as now occupied our own” (*Letters* 1: 497).

“Mont Blanc” exhibits the truth of Thomas Hardy’s dictum that “the mission of poetry is to record impressions, not convictions” (408). The poem may, as Donald Reiman argues, constitute “one of [Shelley’s] most extreme statements” on materialistic determinism, spinning around its vision of the Alpine summits an argument for the influence of “inexorable, amoral Necessity” over nature, history, and human consciousness (Cameron, Reiman, and Fischer 7: 42). Certainly, the writing’s fluctuations of aspiration and despair are amplified by its yearning for a salvation that transcends the personal. But to describe the poem as a “statement” misses its drama of doubt and speculation. “How vain it is to think that words can penetrate the mystery of our being,” Shelley wrote in “On Life”; and it is in the poem’s continual uncertainty about the sense it can make of experience, its tonal and argumentative shifts and its representation of a mind’s evolving apprehension of the complexity of its vision, that its human interest resides. Shelley’s arguments are intricate, shifting, and occasionally murky, and I have tried in what follows to trace the poem’s interplay of “things” and “imaginings” in a manner true to the experience it records and affords. I hope that the reader disappointed by the absence of any ground-breaking new interpretation finds some compensation in being reminded instead of the explorative flair and verbal nuance that animate the poem’s fearful and fascinated confrontation with the substance and spirit of the Alpine landscape.

Throughout, arguments evolve as they are advanced; the writing mixes declarative boldness with an openness to uncertainty. Shelley begins in wry defiance of the topological expectations established by his title: “The everlasting universe of things / Flows through the mind” (*Poems of Shelley* lines 1–2).² The earlier version had begun “In day the eternal universe of things,” setting up a dialogue between what is knowable to the senses and what needs imagining that makes a more lucid introduction to the poem’s later concerns; the 1817 opening triumphs through the sweep and suggestiveness that allow it to describe both a specific occasion and a general truth. The universe

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 ... (2–6)

“[R]ivers are not like roads the work of the hands of men,” Shelley had written to Peacock earlier in the summer: “They imitate mind, which wanders at will over the pathless deserts, & flows thru natures loneliest recesses which are inaccessible to anything besides” (*Letters* 1: 491). Comparison with these lines shows the fluidity of Shelley’s metaphorical imagination: no longer an emblem of the mind’s meandering, the river is here an image of the experience that flows through it. As the sentence unrolls, its imagery comprehends the mingled yarn of human existence: now “dark,” the waves embody life’s obscurity or its unhappiness, now “glittering,” its moments of wonder or jubilation. The terms begin to complicate the initial suggestion that the mind is merely a channel

for external impressions: “reflecting gloom,” the universe takes coloring from the valley through which it runs; “lending splendour” it enriches it. The springing of the “source of human thought” in “secret” hints that ideas have an origin beyond empirical observation. Shelley’s punctuation throws up questions: “Where,” for instance, seems momentarily to refer to a juncture at which the “everlasting universe of things” lends splendor to the stream of human thought, but is better understood as locating that tributary in the landscape of “the mind” in general. The “sound but half its own,” given it is compared in the next line to a “feeble brook,” must be made by the mind’s tributary thoughts; but the antecedent of “its” provokes momentary puzzlement, and the fact that you have to discard the illogical notion that the sound belongs to “the universe of things” before the sense settles is likewise characteristic of the erratic energies of the poem’s syntax. Thought and observation warp as they make their way into language.

The sentence switches track midway, and the associations of the mind with a river’s meandering reassert themselves, so that what begins as a description of the progress of “things” through “the mind” morphs into an account of the mind’s questing solitude as it invests the world with meaning. Yet with characteristic circularity thought gravitates back to the “everlasting universe.” “Human thought” proceeds

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 wood and winds contend, and a vast river
Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves. (6–11)

A good deal of the poem’s success depends upon its ability to humanize its philosophical concerns; and the image lends pathos and quiet heroism to the mind confronted with the universe that “bursts and raves” around it. Readers left feeling like that “mind among the mountains lone” by the writing’s immediate conceptual ambition and syntactical difficulty will be reassured to find themselves in illustrious company. The poem is “an avalanche of nonsense” complained the novelist William Beckford in some marginal annotations (Cameron, Reiman, and Fischer 7: 44); Yeats described it as “so overlaid with descriptions in parentheses that one loses sight of its logic” (85–86). Yet the provisionality and fragile “logic” is crucial to the appeal of the poem’s thinking—and it is the moments of doubt, exhilaration, wonder, and vulnerability that play across the surface of Shelley’s shifting arguments that draw the attention of the observations that follow. “Mont Blanc” teaches us how to feel in the face of a world which both “staggers” and kindles the imagination.

II

Leavis complained of the poem’s opening that “the metaphorical and the actual, the real and the imagined, the inner and the outer, could hardly be more unsortable and indistinguishably confused”: “there is nothing grasped in the poetry—no object offered for contemplation, no realized presence to persuade or move us by what it is” (210). It is as well he did not get on to the second section, in which the difficulties of “sorting” “the real and the imagined” are ever more dizzyingly dramatized. The poetry engages

in a continual struggle to clarify the source, nature, and limits of “the actual” which prompts some of the poem’s most breathless—often breath-taking—writing.

Having sketched a diagram of the relationship between mind and world, Shelley turns to the landscape—reversing the expected pattern of description and reflection.³ The effect of this “curious logical displacement,” as Judith Chernaik observes, is to imply “against the explicit statement of the poem, that physical reality is a function of the structuring imagination that perceives and orders it” (49)—a maneuver typical of the poem’s restless skepticism about its own affirmations and conclusions. Sentences warp under a torrent of ideas and impressions. “Thus thou, Ravine of Arve” (12), Shelley begins, as though to make explicit the comparison between mind and landscape, but the thrust of the address is interrupted by the urge to describe the valley’s features:

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[.] (15–19)

The attentiveness of the description complicates the metaphor. The comparison of the river coursing through the valley with the flow of experience through the mind is plaited against a parallel comparison of the river’s descent from the glacial “ice-gulfs” with the influence of an agency “throned” in the secrecy of the mountains. The simple way to make the second point would have been to say that the river descends from the glacier like “Power” enters the world; to say that power descends “in likeness of the Arve” reverses the poles of the metaphor with the mysterious suggestion that the landscape is only a cloak for power’s workings. The nature and influence of “Power” (as a force at once fearsome and exhilarating) will become one of the poem’s central preoccupations. For now, the sentence struggles back to its leading thought. The address to the ravine is picked up following the semi-colon (“thou dost lie” [19]), but only to inch towards resolution as the lines again drift through a series of descriptions which signal Shelley’s continued sensitivity to the marks of a quasi-divine presence. First, the sight and “harmony” of the “giant brood of pines” “clinging” to the sides of the ravine and visited as though in worship by winds which (in a quiet echo of the poem’s larger vision) create the swaying they admire (20–24). Next, rainbows across a waterfall simultaneously “veiling” and “Robing” “some unsculptured image” (25–27) (Shelley’s language works finely at the limits of apprehension: do the rainbows adorn or conceal the image? Is it, in its “unsculptured” state, evidence of non-human agency or something awaiting human organization?) Last, an image which floats dreamily free of grammatical relation to its sentence, and evokes, for the first time, the poem’s haunted apprehension of “vacancy”:

the strange sleep
Which when the voices of the desert fail
Wraps all in its own deep eternity; – (27–29)

The lines hover between despondency and wonder. They suspend the sentence’s interior logic with a Beethoven-like feeling for the poignancy of attenuated momentum, yielding to a silence which threatens to subsume landscape and observer yet is marked too by a “strange” suggestiveness which might coax the imagination to fill it.

At last, Shelley completes the comparison between ravine and experiencing mind:

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! (30–34)

Sonorous with assonance and repetition, the verse retains the capacity to discriminate. The ravine is at once “pervaded with” the river and “the path” that guides it; like the mind, it flickers between subjection to and influence over the force descending through it. “Dizzy”—an enrichment of “Mighty Ravine,” and “Ravine of Arve!” from the drafts—perpetuates the sly crisscrossing of tenor and vehicle that characterizes the poem’s handling of metaphor, and imagines a tentative sympathy between the valley and Shelley as its dazzled observer, and, we might feel, the reader holding on to the argument of the poem.

The exclamation is a pivot rather than a destination. In its wake the poem turns inward. Shelley’s restraint with the word “I,” held in abeyance until this point, is crucial to the variegated scope and texture of his argument. Declarative confidence yields to the poem’s most tentative and exploratory writing as Shelley speculates on the contributions of the perceiving mind to the reality of the surrounding world, and evokes the charged and destabilized sense of selfhood that the encounter engenders:

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[.] (34–40)

Again, the lines complicate the diagram sketched in the first section. “Human thought” there had emerged within the ravine; here Shelley steps outside of his metaphor and amplifies the poem’s sense of the mind’s power and significance: the entire ravine now seems at once mirror and product of his imagination. “My own, my human mind” appears to labor a distinction with the “mind” of the opening line and invites the kind of criticism that makes the poem seem offputtingly dependent upon a pre-established intellectual framework: witness Wasserman’s explanation that the “mind” Shelley describes at the start of the poem “is not the individual mind but the One Mind, which constitutes total Existence, and of which each individual mind is a portion” (223). But “human” does not need to be understood as marking a distinction from earlier manifestations of the “mind,” and the lines read more sympathetically if “own” and “human” are taken in gentle opposition to one another, the specificity of “own” muted by “human” in wavering apprehension of the sense of separateness, perhaps uniqueness, that characterizes Shelley’s encounter. Words accrue slippery suggestiveness befitting their tussle with intuitions on the borders of consciousness. “Gazing” becomes “musing,” with a suggestion of the mind’s imaginative participation in the creation of the scene. The landscape becomes a “phantasy”—at once the creation of the mind, and, the syntax suggests, an image of the mind itself. That mind engages “passively” with the

world around (an adverb best understood as meaning “of its own accord”: Shelley watches on amazed) in a dialogue whose “unremitting” nature suggests a relentless intuitive capacity that both distinguishes the mind and renders it unknowable to itself. “I seem” shrouds the whole passage with an awareness that however persuasively they can be described, the mind’s workings cannot be apprehended with certainty. Poetry, said Wordsworth, “considers man and the objects that surround him acting and reacting upon each other so as to produce an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure” (605). “Mont Blanc” describes and enacts that phenomenon.

The writing becomes ever more elliptical, ever more responsive to the flux of self and world as it probes and dramatizes the imagination’s workings. Several of the sentence’s key terms funnel into plausible apposition to the “legion of wild thoughts” at the head of the next clause:

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! (41–48)

The lines show Shelley observing the workings of his imagination as he writes: they describe the imagination’s embrace of the ravine and its associated “darkness” (its impenetrability, perhaps its menace), and the effort to find images befitting the power it embodies. The argument is intermittently cloudy, courting uncertainty in the ambiguity over the antecedent of “Seeking” and the owner of the “breast” that recalls the images (Shelley? Or some other entity from which his “wild thoughts” derive?). Yet the sense the lines are addressing something ultimately mysterious is also a source of their power. The search for images, they suggest, defeats any willed endeavor: the imagination orders experience in unconscious, unknowable leaps. In this light, the final exclamation—puzzling to the degree that it responds with surprise to the presence of a “thou” Shelley has been addressing for the last forty lines—responds to the imagination’s self-surprising capability. It is a moment akin to Keats’s “Already with thee!” in “Ode to a Nightingale” (35); and just as in Keats’s lines revelation dissolves into realization in the moment of utterance, so Shelley’s encounter with the spirit that governs the universe remains tantalizingly, exhilaratingly fleeting: it is “there,” not “here,” something, as Michael O’Neill says, “discovered, glimpsed in its uniqueness at the moment of its disappearance from language, salvageable only in the form of a brief cry” (45).

Writing so impressionistic as this will always split judgement. O’Neill’s defense of a mode that “involves us in the struggle to capture intuitions and thoughts as they come into consciousness” certainly casts the lines in an attractive light; but if Shelley’s syntax just about holds, and the ambiguities are fruitful, the effort to evoke the machinations of the creating mind allows us to glimpse a state in which the imagination fails, and suggestiveness crumples into confusion. The riddling uncertainties might be “evidence not of bad writing but of Shelley’s struggle to realize elusive experience” (44–45), but you can sympathize with those who judge that the most accomplished poetry wins through its struggles, rather than strewing the path with them.

III

One of the attractive features of “Mont Blanc” is its multivocal quality. Tones and perspectives shift in a manner that dramatizes the transformations of consciousness undergone in Shelley’s dialogue with the landscape. At the start of the third section, the hectic flurry subsides to a voice more in keeping with what Donald Davie called Shelley’s “urbanity,” with its attendant intelligent scrutiny of feeling (114–36). The longing for correspondence with “some other world than ours” that harries the previous section’s introspection is tempered into a cool assessment of its possibility:

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. (49–52)

The lines have the same combination of visionary incandescence and detached speculation as, say, the Vaughan of “The Night” (“There is in God, some say, / A deep but dazzling darkness” [49–50]). “Visit” speaks gently of the solace afforded by these “gleams,” yet Shelley remains noncommittal: he is attracted by what “Some say” without subscribing to it; he stands curiously apart, too, from “those who wake and live.” In a manner typical of the poem’s ebb and flow of inner dialogue, the speculations are answered by a return to the first person that neither simply affirms nor contradicts them:

—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! (52–59)

The lines are expectant yet baffled. They typify the proliferating suggestiveness of the poem’s phrasing in its apprehension of the numinous. Shelley’s questions feint at epiphanies which remain only tentatively realized. The image of a veil being “unfurl’d” suggests revelation. And so the initial question reads at first as an enquiry to which the answer might be yes or no (“I look up; is there anything to see?”), or even one that presumes evidence of some “remoter world” to present itself (“given what I can see, does this imply the hand of ‘some unknown omnipotence?’”). But to “unfurl” a veil might just as well be to cloak as to reveal a “remoter world,” and there is a case that what Shelley sees when he looks “on high” is, as yet, absence. The “or” that follows the first question does not, as we might anticipate, posit alternatives such as “or is there nothing to see?” or “is the vision not in fact proof of an unknown power?” but instead implies that both questions seek reasons for the visionary realm’s inaccessibility. To the degree that they infer a frustrated yearning, the lines recast part 2’s unsettled apprehension of the mountain’s silence as a “failure” of Shelley’s own “spirit.” And yet, as it chases the ever-expanding “circles” that circumscribe the world of sleep, the writing is pregnant with an exhilarating sense of the imagination’s ability to envision what remains “viewless.” And as if in response to Shelley’s searching, the mountain enters: “Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky, / Mont Blanc appears, – still, snowy, and serene –” (59–60). As Shelley described it to

Peacock, the mountain “burst[s] upon the sight”; here the delayed revelation characterizes a grandeur which provokes a perpetually mutating response. Where in the letter the peaks provoke the “extatic wonder” (*Letters* 1: 498) that the lines above quaveringly anticipate, in the poem Mont Blanc appears not as an object of adulation or a source of salvation—nor, as at the parallel moment in Coleridge’s “Hymn before Sun-rise,” as a “dread ambassador from Earth to Heaven” (82)—but at the center of a scene of desolation, the embodiment of a “Power” with scant concern for human affairs:

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 heaped around! rude, bare, and high,
 Ghastly, and scarred, and riven. (62–71)

“Did I tell you that there are troops of wolves among these mountains? In the winter they descend into the vallies which the snow occupies during six months of the year, & devour every thing they find,” Shelley asked Peacock. “No you did not,” wrote Beckford in his copy of *Six Weeks’ Tour*, “but had you told me that there were troops of wild Bores & yourself their Captain, as raving *mad* about Mountains as Hares in March about Love, I should have believed you” (Cameron, Reiman, and Fischer 7: 44). Whatever the enthusiasm of the letter, Shelley’s poem possesses terrifying clarity. Excitement subsides to an awed realization of the universe’s intransigence. The ranges are “rude, bare, and high, / Ghastly, and scarr’d, and riven,” the triple adjectives suggesting the governing influence of the mountain, “still, snowy, and serene” above them. One context for the mountain’s cold authority is Godwin’s doctrine of “Necessity,” which Shelley glossed in his notes to *Queen Mab* as the belief that “the events which compose the moral and material universe” comprise “only an immense and uninterrupted chain of causes and effects, no one of which could occupy any other place it does” (*Poems of Shelley* 375). But the bald precision of the writing gives the impression of a moral vision being discovered, not imposed. The passage is among the most persuasive rejoinders to Leavis’s complaint that “there is nothing grasped in the poetry” (210). The “unearthly” is given bare actuality.

But always in the poem the imagination flows back upon the sceptical, materialist impulse. “Is this the scene / Where the old Earthquake-dæmon taught her young / Ruin?” (71–73) asks Shelley, rebounding into a chain of questions whose self-conscious extravagance tempers their grim sense of human futility. The lines take their intonations from Shelley’s injunction to Peacock, at once an apprehension of the amoral machinations of the universe and an amused invitation to fill vacancy with meaning:

Do you who assert the supremacy of Ahriman imagine him throned among these desolating snows, among these palaces of death & frost, sculptured in this their terrible magnificence by the unsparing hand of necessity, & that he casts around him as the first essays of his final usurpation avalanches, torrents, rocks & thunders. (*Letters* 1: 499)

There follows a line whose sober bareness puts it among the most affecting in the poem, as Shelley allows the imagination to gutter: “None can reply – all seems eternal now” (75). Comparison with the strategies of Keats’s Odes again brings out the writing’s distinctive force. When Keats tells his “little town” its streets “for evermore / Will silent be” (38–39), his sadness at the mute desolation is channeled into a sympathy with the imagined life of the object he is addressing. The contrasting pathos of Shelley’s line resides in its aloneness, and frozen sense of having reached a dead end. Any power behind the landscape will not communicate, and any embers of optimism in “seems” are smothered beneath the toneless generality of the utterance.

Few poets write such dashing chiaroscuro as Shelley, and the succeeding lines wrench hope from the precipice of despair by realizing that if the world will not yield to questioning, we can still coax meaning from it:

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. (76–83)

The lines have an openness attuned to the “mysterious tongue” they describe. The “wilderness” teaches “doubt” or “faith.” Those terms might encompass our trust in ourselves or in the divine. The world, they intimate, is what we make of it, and they throw up their own interpretative cruxes as if to illustrate the point. “But for such faith” is usually glossed as “only through such faith,” so that the “faith” the lines imagine is one that allows a rapprochement with “Nature”; the Scrope Davies manuscript reads “In such a faith.” But the revised phrasing resists this reading, and it is possible, with Bloom, to take it at face value as meaning nature instils a faith whose “mildness” counterintuitively “prevents us from being able to reconcile ourselves” to its own “seemingly malevolent aspects” (32). On Bloom’s reading, the lines provide another instance of the poem’s readiness to warp the course of its own arguments, supplementing its guarded celebration of the imagination’s power to shape and distinguish itself from the material world, and its tentative claims for human virtue. Whatever the case, salvation resides in humans’ response to what nature “teaches,” and the “mysteriousness” of that teaching is preserved in the lines’ ecumenical sense of what it might entail. The last four lines are dismissed by Simon Haines as “a political harangue” in which Shelley claims “wisdom, greatness, and goodness for himself, discerning fraud and woe in others” (125). But this is to misread their tone and blur their phrasing. The accusation hardly squares with the rhythm or direction of the lines, which neither call upon the “great Mountain” to act, nor attribute “fraud and woe” to any individual, nor subscribe to any definition of the “good.” It is true that Shelley dramatizes an aspiration towards “wisdom,” “greatness,” and “goodness,” but such an aspiration is hardly to be condemned; and the final line is marked by the modesty of its ambition, as it retreats from “interpretation” on behalf of others to settle for “deep feeling” on behalf of the self.

“Some say ...” “I look ...” “Mont Blanc appears ...” “Is this the scene ...” “None can reply ...” “Thou hast a voice”: the third section strives for a dialogue it can never

establish. Questions prompt speculations which spiral into further questions; voices speak past one another. The urgency is unanswered, but the silence inspires the imagination's response.

IV

Mont Blanc's partitions score the poem with silence. David Duff identifies in them Shelley's "mastery" of the "poetic logic" of the ode, which marries "apparent lawlessness" with "underlying artistic control" (255); this is fair, though the gaps are eloquent of rupture as much as composure, and suggest a "logic" aspired to as much as discovered. The pastoral loveliness at the start of part 4 implies a poet readjusting his gaze in search of a more consoling vision:

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. (84–95)

The lines are the most assuagingly beautiful in the poem. Their muted apprehension of transience achieves through its attentive detail and the delayed resolution of its syntax a controlled pathos. The imagery revisits earlier concerns, participating in the poem's kaleidoscope-like revolution of its defining preoccupations: "sleep," earlier a state pregnant with potential, is here a "detested trance" which afflicts the flowers in winter; the "feeble dreams" which visit them meanwhile hold in continued question the creative power of "human thought," whose image from part 1 the adjective remembers. Shelley's rhythms inhabit the heroic line with an assurance that earns the mimetic drama of the final caesura and the quiet surprise of the final affirmation ("swell"), typical of the poem's tendency to find rest on a point of hope. The impression is not, as earlier, of the verse operating at the frontiers of imaginative apprehension, but of a reacquaintance, saddened yet grateful, with an acknowledged truth. Yet the poem proceeds through contrasts, and as Shelley returns to the landscape, the tranquility jars against a renewed confrontation with a power aloof from human concerns: "Power dwells apart in its tranquillity, / Remote, serene, and inaccessible" (95–96). Here is the start of one possible ending, in which Shelley reconciles himself to the indifference of a transcendent "Power." The writing's determination to find redemption is quelled by an uncaring world. The "inaccessibility" and "serenity" which earlier coaxed the mind's approach have been drained of their appeal. The "naked countenance of earth," says Shelley, can "Teach the adverting mind," yet its lesson is now a cold one. "The glaciers creep / Like snakes that watch their prey" (100–01); "Frost and the Sun in scorn of mortal power" have piled up precipices that form "A city of death," which is "not a

city, but a flood of ruin” that “Rolls its perpetual stream” (102–09). The imagery returns us to the beginning of the poem and starts to knit together its metaphorical layers. The destructive progress of the glaciers serves as an image for the “Power” of various sorts—political, divine, fated—that governs human life, but also as a picture of the effect of experience as it passes through the mind, bringing awareness of ruin and suffering. That awareness conditions the toughened voice of this stretch of the poem, but also emerges in flashes of pathos such as the touchingly distraught lament for the “insects, beasts, and birds” whose homes are destroyed by the glacier’s progress: “Their food and their retreat for ever gone, / So much of life and joy is lost” (115–17). Such moments attest to a compassion that sustains the poem’s hopefulness. The section’s closing lines find unexpected consolation in the life-giving waters that flow downstream of the glaciers, which suggests that what the landscape has to “teach” us is not sentimental despair, but a knowledge of light and shade:

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. (120–26)

Verbally, the lines are tired, recycling touchstone words (“gleam,” “restless,” “Rolls”) without refreshing their meaning. Rhythmically, they are vigorous, establishing through their frequent inversions, feminine endings, and placement of disyllabic words across iambic feet a trochaic impetus that roughens the iambic norm, and mimicking in the attenuating syntactical grip of the closing lines the diffuse creative energies of the river. “One would think that Mont Blanc was a living being & that the frozen blood forever circulated slowly thro’ his stony veins,” Shelley had written to Peacock (*Letters* 1: 500); here the writing reaches an unexpected accommodation with “the unsparing hand of necessity” in the acknowledgement that alongside ruin this blood brings life to “distant lands.” Like the glimpse of a far-off settlement on the horizon of a painting, the thoughts both augment and ironize the grandeur of the poem’s vision.

V

Part 4 acquires mysterious force from Shelley’s refusal to moralize or explain. Its reticence insinuates dissatisfaction, and Shelley now returns to the mountain in hope that a more redemptive vision may be salvaged: “Mont Blanc yet gleams on high” (127). “Gleams,” which appears during the earlier speculations about the visitations from “some remoter world,” is here attached to the mountain in a way that grants those visitations a forceful presence in our world. Yet the bald certainty of the statement exists in tension with the recurrence of a word, “there,” whose intimation of barely bridgeable distance acquires increasing force through the final section: “the power is there.” Shelley sketches what this power governs: “The still and solemn power of many sights, / And many sounds, and much of life and death” (128–29). The feebleness of the phrasing carries a power of suggestion—does “much of” imply that there are aspects of “life and death” which elude the power’s influence?—and dramatizes the

momentary foundering of Shelley's hope before the astonishing amplification in profundity that follows:

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! (131–36)

Icily evocative, the lines achieve in their hushed awe a grandeur that outmatches any other moment in the poem. They are, typically, pulled in opposed directions, irreducible to paraphrase. “None beholds them there,” remembering “none can answer,” reaffirms Shelley's distance from the power he hymns; the incandescent images that follow avow poetry's mode of special insight. Awe and wonder, tranquility and despair shimmer as off a diamond turned in the light. The lines share with Coleridge's “Hymn” a fascination with “silence” as a state of latent possibility. As they go on to describe how the “voiceless lightning” “keeps its home” “innocently” in these “solitudes” (137–38), they remember glancingly Shelley's affinity with the “homeless” clouds, and his sense, dignified but saddened, of his own isolation and rootlessness; “innocently” meanwhile half longs for the lighting to activate its restrained potential. The closing lines then address the mountain for a second and final time, with a sense not of complexities being resolved, but of new mysteries being discovered:

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? (139–44)

One source of difficulty and fascination in “Mont Blanc” is that it is always in the process of redefining its terms, so that it is hard to extract from it any stable vision. You can sympathize with Reiman's attempt to bring the moment into line with the poem's earlier phrasing: what the lines say, apparently, is that “the Power that generates *things* and is the law of nature, also *governs things* – that mind is ultimately subordinate to the *remote, serene and inaccessible* force that originates the amoral cycles of Necessity” (*Shelley's Poetry* 93).⁴ Yet efforts to extract overarching coherence make the experience of reading the poem more frustrating than it need be and desensitize the reader to the ever-evolving process of making sense of the world which the lines dramatize; as Jonathan Wordsworth says, “Shelley could have repeated himself, but he didn't, he invented a phrase that was strange and new” (100). The language of “Mont Blanc” glows with the numinous mystery of the experiences it seeks to define. “Things” now no longer describes the accumulated barrage of experience but is redeployed as a label for the possessor of a “secret Strength” that influences human affairs. What this “Strength” is finally said to govern is “thought”: a statement which seems to settle the poem's ongoing tussle between mind and universe in favor of the latter. Yet Shelley blends wonder with a note of encouragement, as though urging the mountain to

realize its own force. And that calm self-possession shapes the poem's closing turn. "And," where we might ordinarily expect a "But," shades with courtesy the poem's pivot into its final question. The effect is to make the lines not a last-gasp proof of the mind's ascendancy over the universe, but rather a recognition of the shared contribution of "things" and "imaginings"—held in a mutually governing rhyme—to our apprehension of reality. Anchoring the exhilaration at the "infinite" is the word "human," appearing for the third time as an adjective for the mind or its workings. "Mont Blanc" invites us to share in a yearning to access a world beyond the "finite"; its power resides in its dramatization of the uncertainties and fears that afflict that yearning.

Notes

1. Bodleian MS Adds e. 16 preserves the workings for what was to become, in its first iteration, "Scene – Pont Pellisier in the Vale of Servox," the fair copy Shelley left in a notebook with Byron on leaving Geneva in August 1816; shorn of access to that version, Shelley went back to his drafts to rework the poem for inclusion in *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*. For a discussion see Brinkley.
2. All "Mont Blanc" quotations refer to *Poems of Shelley* (1: 532–49).
3. The effect differs in the poem's original context in *History of a Six Week's Tour*, where the image seems to take off from the letters describing the Alpine landscape that precede the poem.
4. The note appears only in the first edition of *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*.

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