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Spencer Hall
Rhode Island College, shall@ric.edu

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Shelley's "Mont Blanc"

By Spencer Hall

THE extent to which "Mont Blanc" articulates formal propositions about the nature and the objects of the human mind makes the poem atypical in Shelley's mature work. Shelley, however, apprehends philosophical concepts subjectively. In "Mont Blanc" such concepts represent states of mind or perception; they refer continually to the underlying patterns of thought and feeling which afford them their imaginative, poetic life. Thus the poem, despite the overtly technical quality of its speculations, has vital affinities with some of Shelley's best and most characteristic lyrics. Like "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and "Ode to the West Wind," "Mont Blanc" investigates the relationship between the poet and what the poet takes to be a primal universal Power. The nature of this relationship is problematical and has often, I think, been misunderstood.

I

What sort of Power is symbolized by Mont Blanc? Recent critics have tended to see it as some kind of supernatural essence, available to human consciousness only in privileged states of apprehension;[1] but these interpretations do not really fit the skeptical, tentative, and experiential quality of Shelley's thought. The Power in "Mont Blanc" would appear to be, not a transcendental absolute of any kind, but rather a hybrid concept made up by Shelley out of diverse, even incongruent, emotions and ideas. The most important of these are:

[1] See especially, Harold Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking* (Yale University Press, 1959), pp. 11-35 and Earl Wasserman, *The Subtler Language* (Johns Hopkins Press, 1959), pp. 195-251.

(1) the immediate experience of the Alpine scene as an overwhelming and mysterious physical presence (an experience also recorded in the *History of a Six Week's Tour* and in the letters to Peacock of July, 1816)[2]; (2) the affrighted, yet awed and sublime, sense that this overpowering natural force is potentially destructive of human existence; (3) a rationalistic view of Nature as a set of fixed and intelligible laws, affording important moral and social instruction to man; and (4) certain philosophical distinctions best represented perhaps by three passages from Shelley's prose:

The word "power" expresses the capability of anything to be or act. The human mind never hesitates to annex the idea of power to any object of its experience. To deny that "*power*" is the attribute of being is to deny that being can be.[3]

For when we use the words "principle," "power," "cause," &c., we mean to express no real being, but only to class under those terms a certain series of co-existing phenomena.[4]

It is an axiom in mental philosophy that we can think of nothing which we have not perceived. . . . But, it will be objected, the inhabitants of the various planets of this and other solar systems, and the existence of a Power bearing the same relation to all that we perceive and are, as what we call a cause does to what we call effect, were never subjects of sensation, and yet the laws of mind almost universally suggest . . . their existence. The reply is simple: these thoughts are also to be included in the catalogue of existence; they are modes in which thoughts are combined; the objection only adds power to the conclusion that beyond the limits of perception and thought nothing can exist.[5]

But the sheer nature of Power is not the major concern of the poem, for, as I shall try to show, the Power in "Mont Blanc" cannot be

[2]See especially Shelley's note on the poem in the *History*: "The poem entitled 'Mont Blanc' is written by the author of the two letters from Chamouni and Vevai. It was composed under the immediate impression of the deep and powerful feelings excited by the objects which it attempts to describe; and, as an undisciplined overflowing of the soul, rests its claims to approbation on an attempt to imitate the untamable wildness and inaccessible solemnity from which those feelings sprang."

The letters to Peacock attest in particular to Shelley's sense of being overwhelmed by the power and grandeur of Nature: a feeling of inundation in "images" from without which corresponds to the situation described in Part I of the poem. All references to Shelley's letters will be to *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones (Oxford, 1964).

[3]"A Refutation of Deism," included in *Shelley's Prose*, ed. David Lee Clark (University of New Mexico Press, 1954), p. 136.

[4]"Essay on a Future State," *Prose*, p. 177.

[5]"Essay on Metaphysics," *Prose*, pp. 182-3.

separated, as if it were an antecedent ontological principle, from the process of symbol-making dramatized in the work. It is this symbolic activity of the imagination which is primary. To be sure, the poetic imagination has often been thought of as a " means of grace " in " Mont Blanc " on the grounds that the poet discovers it to be a vehicle of transcendental intuition, a means of knowing and, perhaps, of tapping noumenal Power. It seems to me, however, that Power is not an ultimate essence which is intuited, but a concept which is frankly constructed and projected by the poet. " Hence," to quote Earl J. Schulze, " it is necessary to see that the intuition of personal identity [in section two of the poem] anticipates a symbolic projection of Power [in the last three sections] rather than a piercing of ' distilled essence.' " [6]

" Mont Blanc " does not merely record, it *enacts* a process of mind which originates in the poet's response to the natural scene and culminates in his attempt to discover meaning in, or to impose it on, a seemingly ahuman cosmos. The imagination does indeed become a " means of grace " in " Mont Blanc," but not in any supernatural way. It is the agency of an impassioned and creative self-consciousness that is Shelley's humanistic approximation of theological grace. This " grace," which both derives from and results in imaginative acts of perception and projection, constitutes for Shelley his own—and by extension, man's—uniquely human identity in a largely alien natural world.

II

The conceptual framework of " Mont Blanc " becomes clearer with study of Shelley's fragmentary " Essay on Metaphysics " [7]—not because

[6] *Shelley's Theory of Poetry* (The Hague, 1966), p. 87.

[7] The definition of Power or ultimate Cause in this essay has already been quoted in the text. The essay makes use of certain images which are strikingly similar to those in Part I of the poem, thus suggesting, perhaps, a relationship in Shelley's mind between the two works: " But thought can with difficulty visit the intricate and winding chambers which it inhabits. It is like a river whose rapid and perpetual stream flows outwards. . . . The caverns of the mind are obscure and shadowy; or pervaded with lustre, beautfully bright indeed, but shining not beyond their portals " (*Prose*, p. 186). Clark dates the " Essay on Metaphysics " in the period between 1812-5. James Notopoulos dates part of the essay in the period 1815-6, part in the period 1819-21 (" The Dating of Shelley's Prose," *PMLA* LVIII (1943), 484-6). My best guess is 1815 or even early 1816.

the latter contains a philosophical key to the meaning of the poem, but because it indicates certain ways in which Shelley tended to think and feel. It shows us, for example, the interest in human identity and the tendency to locate that identity in the workings of the imagination, which are also present in the poem.

Metaphysics may be defined as the science of all that we know, feel, remember, and believe inasmuch as our knowledge, sensations, memory, and faith constitute the universe considered relatively to human identity. . . . Most of the errors of philosophers have arisen from considering the human being in a point of view too detailed and circumscribed. He is not a moral and an intellectual—but also and pre-eminently an imaginative being.[8]

The " Essay " recommends, furthermore, the same kind of radical introspection dramatized in " Mont Blanc " :

Let me repeat that in the great study of ourselves we ought resolutely to compel the mind to a rigid examination of itself. Let us in the science which regards those laws by which the mind acts, as well as in those which regard the laws by which it is acted upon, severely collect those facts.[9]

Such an " examination " is obviously undertaken in the poem when, " as in a trance sublime and strange," Shelley turns " to muse on my own separate fantasy, / My own, my human mind " (ll. 35-7). The result of such self-consciousness, in both the poem and the essay, is an affirmation of the creative powers of the mind made with full awareness of the extent to which the mind is dependent upon impressions from without.

The major source of Shelley's thought in the " Essay on Metaphysics " is Hume, with whose works, by the time of the composition of " Mont Blanc " in 1816, Shelley had already been long acquainted. C. E. Pulos, identifiying Shelley's Power with Hume's skeptical conception of Necessity, has objected to I. J. Kapstein's early and still influential reading of " Mont Blanc " as a partially confused statement of materialism:

These lines [the final three in the poem, 142-4] do not express, as Mr. Kapstein believes, a shift of attitude toward Necessity which disrupts the unity of the poem. Rather the lines bring to a suitable climax the scepticism pervading " Mont Blanc "

[8] *Prose,* pp. 185-6.
[9] *Prose,* p. 185.

as a whole; that Necessity is an unknown power and any conception of it must be a fiction, *a creation of the imagination.*[10]

Shelley was unquestionably skeptical about first principles, and it is probably true that " Mont Blanc " owes more to Hume than to any of its other putative " sources "—Berkeley, Godwin, Holbach, Plato. Yet something more needs to be said about the relation between Hume's philosophy and the poet's view of the imagination. For Hume, the ultimate unknowability of cause-effect relationships revealed the mental limitations of men; the fictional creation of causal concepts betrayed the reliance of the human mind on habit and hypothesis, instead of on firm, rational principles of evidence. The concept of Necessity was merely the product of custom, with which the philosopher associated the notion of a " regularizing imagination." The imagination, according to Hume (whose work contains at least two different theories about it), specifically lacks the capacity to produce belief:

And in philosophy, we can go no farther than assert, that *belief* is something felt by the mind, which distinguishes the ideas of the judgement from the fictions of the imagination.[11]

Thus the freedom to construct new forms which Hume grants to the imagination, while undoubtedly influencing Shelley's thought and prose expression, has an entirely different meaning from the " romantic " celebration of that faculty in " Mont Blanc." Shelley picks up what is subordinate and trivial in Hume's epistemology, transforming it into what is essential in his own deepest view. The " suitable climax " contained in Part V of the poem does not consist in a pervasive skepticism about the fictions of the imagination, but rather in an affirmation of, and commitment to, its creative power: "And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, / If to the human mind's imaginings / Silence and solitude were vacancy? " (ll. 142-4).

[10] *The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley's Scepticism* (University of Nebraska Press, 1962), p. 66. Italics mine.

[11] *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding,* Part II, par. 3. On Hume's attribution of freedom to the imagination, see Part II, par. 1: " Nothing is more free than the imagination of man; and though it cannot exceed that original stock of ideas furnished by the internal and external senses, it has unlimited power of mixing, compounding, separating, and dividing these ideas, in all the varieties of fiction and vision."

III

There are some final distinctions to be made concerning the nature of Shelley's vision in "Mont Blanc," the failure to make which has led to misunderstanding both of the poem and of its place in Shelley's development. Like much of Shelley's poetry, "Mont Blanc" is not a totally unified work, either formally or conceptually. One reason is that its view of the imagination, although certainly celebrative, fails to be broadly synthetic. Specifically, there is a disjunction between imaginative activity and other kinds of human value. This disjunction, as a brief summary will suggest, helps to explain the obvious tonal and conceptual differences between Parts I-II and Parts III-V of the poem.

The "still cave of the witch Poesy" (l. 44) in Part II is a resting place (l. 42) to which the mind momentarily escapes from the "unremitting interchange" (l. 39) of sense experience and where it asserts its freedom by actively "seeking" (l. 45)—which is to say, creating—images and symbols. A similar distinction between "thought," which is determined from without by "the secret Strength of things" (ll. 139-40), and "the human mind's imaginings" (l. 143), which seem to represent an autonomous and symbolic activity of mind, is made in the final lines of the poem. Broadly speaking, then, "Mont Blanc" distinguishes two modes of consciousness: the one predominantly determined by "the clear universe of things around" (l. 40); the other, described by Shelley as poetic and imaginative, of a freer, more active kind. It is the latter which, in the logic of the poem, both provokes an awareness of, and esentially constitutes human identity in, an alien natural environment.

The disjunction arises when, in Parts III and IV, Shelley seeks to broaden the implications of his imaginative experience, moving from the process of symbol making, by which he asserts self-consciousness and identity, to questions of moral and social valuation. In *A Defence of Poetry* the imagination is said to have "for its objects those forms which are common to universal nature and existence itself" and to be the agency of the "perception of the value" of "qualities already known." [12] In "Mont Blanc," however, the percep-

[12] *Prose,* p. 277.

tions of value and of universal order (the "but for such faith" passage of Part III and the portrayal of natural cycle and of unity in multiplicity in Part IV) are closer to Godwin's concept of "foresight"— "the capacity of man's reason to become, as it were, an impartial spectator of the universal order"[13]—than to the power of imagination celebrated in Parts II and V.

In Shelley's later thought, distinctions between moral, intellectual, social, and imaginative are largely dissolved and the intuitive aspects of Godwinian reason are subsumed under the power of imagination both to perceive and to create a radical order of beauty in human experience. This is not true in "Mont Blanc," however, and its problematical treatment of the question of value even separates the poem fundamentally from its companion ode, "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty."

"Mont Blanc" is a difficult, sometimes obscure poem. But it is also extremely powerful and manifestly important, a poem whose very difficulties define its meaning as a transitional work in Shelley's poetic life. "Mont Blanc" looks forward to the monumental imaginative synthesis of *Prometheus Unbound,* while it reveals at the same time the still not wholly integrated elements of Shelley's rationalistic heritage. As we turn now to the text, space will make a comprehensive reading impossible. Attention will be paid, however, to all of the interpretive cruxes in the poem.

IV

There is a "deliberate blurring of tenor and vehicle" in Wordsworth's nature imagery, which is meant, according to Herbert Lindenberger, to demonstrate the vital "interaction of man and Nature," the "one Life" subsisting between them.[14] In Part I of "Mont Blanc" there is also a blurring of vehicle and tenor, of inner and outer, but the effect at which Shelley aims is quite different.[15]

[13] Ross Woodman, *The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley* (University of Toronto Press, 1964), p. 8. I am indebted to Woodman's discussion of the intuitive capability of reason in Godwin's theory, although I disagree with his application of this theory to Shelley's poem.

[14] *On Wordsworth's "Prelude"* (Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 89-90.

[15] Unlike F. R. Leavis in his notorious essay on Shelley, I take this "blurring"

> The everlasting universe of things
> Flows through the mind, and 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,
> Such as a feeble brook will oft assume
> In the woods, among the mountains lone,
> Where waterfalls around it leap for ever,
> Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river
> Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves. (ll. 1-11)

The "feeble brook" (l. 7) of the mind and the "vast river" (l. 10) of "things" interact, but they are by no means Wordsworthian "kindred streams" [16] which flow together, losing themselves in living unity. There is no Coleridgean "one Life" in "Mont Blanc" to provide the grounds for union. The only primal unity is that provided by naturalistic Power, and it is Shelley's intention in the poem to dissociate himself—his mind and human identity—from the compulsion of this external force. Even within the perceiving mind and in the act of perception itself, the "everlasting universe of things" (l. 1) maintains its own separate identity, a separateness complemented by that of "the source of human thought" (l. 5). Percept and perception remain distinct even while they interact. ("Human" in line 5 should be read with reference to Shelley's humanistic interest in man's identity, and not as a narrowly—and redundantly—epistemological term.)

The implications of the imagery seem clear. Shelley suggests a "compromise theory of knowledge" [17] in which he pictures the mind

in Part I of "Mont Blanc" to be the result of an intelligible poetic strategy, not of mental confusion. One aspect of Shelley's intention would seem to be to "parody" Wordsworth, whose doctrine of man-Nature relationship he had been preaching to Byron only a week or two before writing the poem. See, for example, lines 100-2 in "Tintern Abbey": "a motion and spirit, that impels /All things, all objects of all thought, /And rolls through all things."

[16] See *The Prelude,* 1850 version, VI, 742-6: "what'ever / I saw, or heard, or felt, was but a stream / That flowed into a kindred stream; a gale / Confederate with the current of the soul, / To speed my voyage." The water image in Shelley's lines may be seen as a prefigurement of the lyre image by which Shelley represents the mind in *A Defence of Poetry.* The lyre's music is not only the product of the blowing of the wind, but of an internal principle as well.

[17] Charles Vivian, "The One 'Mont Blanc'," *KSJ,* IV (1955), 157. Vivian

both as passively influenced by the external world and as making its own independent contributions to consciousness. The imagery is quite explicit, however, in attributing dominance to the "universe of things." The "feeble brook" is tributary to (l. 5) the "vast river"; its sound is "but half its own" (l. 6). Metaphorically (in relation to the larger metaphorical structure of Parts I and II), Shelley suggests at the outset that same threat of inundation in the uncontrollable motion of things which culminates in the Jobean accents of Part IV.

Yet, at the same time, Part I intimates a mode of mental activity quite different from that proposed so far. As the first word of Part II ("Thus") makes clear, Part I is the initial element in an elaborate metaphorical structure. Implicit in the "meaning" of Part I, therefore, is the imaginative freedom inherent in the act of metaphor itself, the freedom through which Shelley transforms his physical view of the River and the Ravine (vehicle) into an image of the flow of sense impressions through the human mind (tenor). While the metaphor itself does not become explicit until the first word of Part II, the process of metaphor-making is implicit in Part I in the very selection of natural images—images, to borrow Harold Bloom's term, which are "looted" from the actual scene portrayed in Part II.[18] In Part II, moreover, the poetic act of "making" becomes an explicit subject of the poem.

V

The major critical misconception about Part II of "Mont Blanc," given currency in different ways by Bloom and Earl Wasserman, can be traced to a note in C. D. Locock's edition of Shelley's poems.

A clear understanding of the opening section is necessary for the comprehension of the stupendous second section. . . . In the first section Shelley compares three physical phenomena with three metaphysical conceptions:—

(1) The Ravine, corresponding with the *universal* mind.
(2) The Arve, corresponding with the everlasting Universe of Things.
(3) The feeble brook, corresponding with *individual human* mind, which borrows its inspiration from the everlasting Universe. This last is the idea developed in the next section.[19]

is mistaken, I think, in holding that the mind and things are portrayed by Shelley as *equal* in their contributions.

[18] Bloom, p. 23.

[19] C. D. Locock, ed., *The Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London, 1911), II, 489.

Locock proposes a precision of metaphorical equivalents and a philosophical orientation that cannot be found in the poem. On the one hand, the notion of a One or Universal Mind, fleetingly and ambiguously present in "The Daemon of the World" and the "Essay on Life," is simply irrelevant to "Mont Blanc." Critics have persisted in reading this idea into the poem; they have not discovered it there. On the other hand, Shelley must be allowed the freedom to explore, and then to drop or to hold in abeyance, the implications of his descriptive details without systematizing them in a manner foreign to the method of the poem. Specifically, the River and the Ravine in Part II should not be "allegorized" as a consistent symbol of mind. They provide an analogy to one aspect of mind, and that analogy, after surfacing in the "thus" of line 12, is quickly submerged, to be called forth again in line 34, where it introduces Shelley's meditation on "[his] own, [his] human mind."

Meanwhile, in lines 15-9, Shelley begins to view the "awful scene" before him as what it is, an instance of natural force. Upon this scene he projects a personified Power, describing it in a favorite image connoting strength, energy, and sublimity, the image of lightning bursting through darkness:

> . . . 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.

One understands how such lines could provoke critical speculation concerning immanence and transcendence, flux and eternality. As frequently in Shelley's poetry, however, what may appear to be philosophical concept turns out to be metaphorical, an expression of the poet's attitude and response instead of a statement about the nature of reality.

The poet's attitude is further revealed in lines 19-29, in which Shelley structures a witty pattern of imagery connoting religious experience. Power comes down from "his secret throne" "in likeness of the Arve," and the Ravine makes its obeisance. Shelley's verbal "wit," as Newell Ford has shown, is a complex and important sub-

ject.[20] In the present case, it expresses a way of seeing and feeling as the poet manifests his sense of the grandeur of the natural scene in the imagery of religious worship. In lines 19-29, he is particularly struck by the everlastingness (" children of elder time," " still come and ever came," " an old and solemn harmony," ll. 21-4) and by the mystery of the Ravine:

> Thine earthy rainbows stretched across the sweep
> Of the aethereal waterfall, whose veil
> Robes some unsculptured image; the strange sleep
> Which when the voices of the desert fail
> Wrap all in its own deep eternity. . . . (ll. 25-9)

With lines 30-3, however, he returns to what is deepest in his response to the Ravine landscape: a sense of Nature's uncontrollable power, conveyed, as elsewhere in the poem, by an appeal to the ear.

> 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.

In Part III, Shelley will try to glean human relevance from his view of the glacial ice-flows around Mont Blanc. His attempt will meet with partial success only; Nature's everlastingness and power will be seen as a threat to man. In Part II, however, the threat to human value is put out of mind by an assertion of human identity, an identity grounded in the workings of the poetic imagination. The suppressed analogy of line 12 reasserts itself in line 34. Shelley's subject becomes thought itself, and the natural landscape is reduced to an object and a metaphor of mind.

> Dizzy Ravine! 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;
> One legion of wild thoughts, whose wandering wings

[20] See especially, " Paradox and Irony in Shelley's Poetry," *SP*, LVII (1960), 648-62, and "The Wit in Shelley's Poetry," *SEL*, I (1961).

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! (ll. 34-48)[21]

In musing thus upon his own mind, Shelley seems to recognize two distinct states of consciousness: the more ordinary, empirical state in which the mind "passively / Now renders and receives fast influencings, / Holding an unremitting interchange / With the clear universe of things around," [22] and an extraordinary state, associated with poetic activity, in which the mind "float[s] above" its own empirical basis and submits the "universe of things" to selective and creative processes which are inherently its own. The "legion" is presumably the highly excited state of Shelley's mind during his trance, as his "wild thoughts" alternatively "float above" the darkness of the Ravine and "rest . . . / In the still cave of the witch Poesy." [23] (Unlike line 38, both the "now's" in line 42 are to be read temporally, as referring to the state of trance: now, during this "trance sublime and strange.") "Thou" (ll. 43, 48) is the Ravine; and the most logical antecedent for "that" in line 43 is "darkness" in line 42, although most commentators have agreed upon "one legion" in line 41.[24]

[21] I follow Locock in placing a dash after "by" in line 45, thus putting "Ghosts" (l. 46) in apposition with "shadows" (l. 45).

[22] The term "passively" as applied to the verb "renders" has puzzled critics. It is most often explained by analogy with Shelley's recurrent image of the aeolian lyre, which involuntarily gives back sound to the impulse of the wind. See also the Notes to "Queen Mab" where Shelley speaks of the mind as being "passive, or involuntarily active." *Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (Oxford University Press, 1905), p. 814. The "interchange" itself is determined, although the mind in the act of interchange has both its active and passive phases.

[23] For Wasserman, p. 85, the "cave of the witch Poesy" (l. 44) represents the ordinary, empirical mode of the human mind: "This cave is explicitly not 'above' the 'darkness,' but in the dark experiential world below. . . ." I do not see that Shelley "explicitly" locates the cave in the Ravine, nor do I think that he would have used the highly evocative "witch Poesy" to indicate any ordinary kind of mental experience. The term "witch" looks forward perhaps to the Witch of Atlas who also lives in a cave, who exercises control over natural forms, and who is often identified with the imagination or poetry. See especially stanzas 2-26 of "The Witch of Atlas."

[24] Vivian, *KSJ*, IV, 60, is, to my knowledge, the only exception.

It is impossible to be sure about the difference, if any, between the "shadows," "ghosts," "shade[s]," "phantom[s]," and "image[s]" in lines 45-7. It is best, perhaps, to view them all as antecedents of "they" in line 48, that is, as sense impressions in the process of modification by the imagination and latent in Shelley's "breast" (l. 48) until entering into the activity of the poetic moment. The word "breast" is probably meant to indicate that poetic creation is allied to emotional states, an alliance whose relevance to "Mont Blanc" is attested by Shelley's note to the poem and by his letters to Peacock.

Although the difficulties of this passage defy final resolution, one point seems to emerge with some clarity. The mode and the meaning of Shelley's perceptions alter radically when he portrays himself as transcending the empirical "interchange" of mind and things to meet the Ravine of Arve in poetic confrontation. The essential lesson taught by this confrontation is a self-conscious awareness of the autonomy of the human mind. This lesson is epitomized by the imaginative "relocation" of the Ravine in the poetic consciousness. "There" in line 48 refers to the "cave of the witch Poesy," and the inflection of the final phrase of Part II, "thou art there," helps to clarify the meaning of the whole. "There," not "thou," should, I think, take the stress; the emphasis should fall, that is, upon the imaginative powers of Shelley's mind which have the capacity to internalize and to recreate a natural landscape which threatened at first to overwhelm it. The mind is, Shelley has affirmed with an emotional and metaphorical intensity "not unallied to madness,"[25] its own place after all.

VI

For the student interested in the phenomenology of Shelley's mind, there are few more salient passages than Part III of "Mont Blanc." In Part III, the poet characteristically attempts to relate his intense personal experience to patterns of general belief, thus forging a link between the truth of private vision and larger schemes of human value. This can be seen in the less personal, if still impassioned, tone; in the clearer syntax; and in the greater reliance upon con-

[25] *Letters,* I, 497.

ceptual statement—all of which mark Parts III-V. Like Wordsworth in *The Prelude,* Shelley turns to a "more universal, time-honored mode of language" [26] in order to elicit philosophical and moral conclusions from his Alpine experience.

In the opening lines, Shelley suggests the quality of his own psychic condition by reference to a broadly understood convention of mystical experience, a convention to which he rather unceremoniously calls the reader's attention at the outset:

> 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.—I look on high;
> Has some unknown omnipotence upfurled
> 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! (ll. 49-59)[27]

One thing needs to be made very clear about this passage. It is not an assertion of a supernaturalist or Platonic metaphysic. The first two words, "some say," not only indicate the skeptical tenor of the poem as a whole but define in particular the conventionalized aspects of Parts III and IV. The grammatical logic of "For" in line 57 clinches the point: the experiential condition to be explained is Shelley's feelings of overwhelming awe as he "look[s] on high." The speculation on sleep and death has been a *means of rendering* that sense of awe in the face of the natural sublime; it has not been a statement of faith in some noumenal world (although the poet's interest, and even his desire to believe, in such a world may be implicit). In "Mont Blanc," as in much of Shelley's poetry, we need to see the Platonic, transcendental, and supernaturalist tonalities as expressing experiential states of being or desire.

The simile in lines 58-9 provides the basis for the major symbolism of the poem by fusing Shelley's sense of "ultimate" psychic ex-

[26] Lindenberger, p. 35.

[27] I accept James Thomson's emendation of "upfurled" for "unfurled" in line 53 as obviously in accord with Shelley's intention.

perience with the "ultimate" natural form in the landscape. As we follow the "homeless" cloud upwards to its vanishing point, there at the boundary of visualization stands Mont Blanc:

> Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky,
> Mont Blanc appears,—still, snowy, and serene—.(ll. 60-1)

By a kind of reflex action, Shelley endows the mountain with the feeling of "unknown omnipotence" (l. 53) which entered his own consciousness in lines 49-59. The transference is heightened by a contrast: while Shelley is "driven" by the intensity of his experience, Mont Blanc possesses the equipoise which the poet feels to be the final attribute of Power, whether naturalistic or mental.[28]

The visualization is essential. The natural scene must remain Shelley's point of reference, and "viewlessness" (a kind of "vacancy," l. 144) must be countered; for to escape the possibilities of visual or imaginal representation would be to render useless the very creative powers of the human mind which it is the intent of the poem to celebrate. As suggested by an interesting verbal pattern, Shelley's skeptical allusion to supernatural intuition—"*gleams* of a remoter world" (l. 49, my italics)—must be rendered in terms of the physical landscape, becoming identified first with the "restless *gleam*" (l. 121) of the River Arve and, finally, with the tranquil majesty of Blanc itself: "Mont Blanc yet *gleams* on high:—the power is there" (l. 127).[29]

But with the appearance of Mont Blanc to Shelley's bodily eye, there is an all-important change in tone. In adopting this focus, Shelley adopts also the role of rationalistic philosopher which he had

[28] See Shelley's remark to Godwin about his own poetry: "Yet after all, I cannot but be conscious in much of what I write of an absence of that tranquillity which is the attribute & accompaniment of power." *Letters*, I, 578. As suggested by the repetition of the adjectives "serene" and "solemn" in lines 61, 78, 97, and 128 respectively, Shelley would ultimately like to identify his own consciousness, as in the "Hymn to Necessity" in "Queen Mab," with the calm tranquillity which he ascribes to universal Power. The extent to which this subjective element is present in the ostensibly "scientific" pronouncements of Godwin, Holbach, *et al.* about the tranquillity of Power would make a fascinating study, though beyond my scope here.

[29] Wasserman, p. 234, was the first to note this verbal repetition, although he interprets it quite differently.

assumed in "Queen Mab," although it is qualified now by a kind of Old Testament awe in the presence of physical force, as well as by a good deal of the theatricality often connected with the eighteenth-century sublime: the pleasing fear associated with the contemplation of Nature's vastness and deathful power.[30]

There is a frightening irony in the contrast between the ethereal "shapes" of death in line 51 and the "shapes" of the deadly glaciers in line 70—glaciers referred to later, in a grim biblical parody, as a "city of death" (l. 105). As in the conclusion of "Alastor," the physical reality of death and desolation challenges the mystical death-yearnings of the human spirit. Perhaps the best gloss to lines 62-75 of Part III, and to much of Part IV, is a passage from the letters to Peacock:

> Do you who assert the supremacy of Ahriman [the Zoroastrian god of evil] imagine him throned among these desolating snows, among these palaces of death and 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—and above all, these deadly glaciers at once the proofs & the symbols of his reign.—Add to this the degradation of the human species, who in these regions are half deformed or idiotic & all of whom are deprived of anything that can excite interest & admiration. This is a part of the subject more mournful & less sublime;—but such as neither the poet nor the philosopher should disdain.[31]

After such knowledge, what redemption? In the final lines of Part III Shelley, in the tradition of the *philosophes,* seeks to elicit social, moral, and philosophical lessons from the Alpine scene in order to reconcile man and Nature.

> 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 reconciled;
> 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. (ll. 76-83)

[30] See Shelley's remarks on Buffon's "sublime but gloomy theory" concerning the end of the world in another ice-age. *Letters,* I, 499.

[31] *Letters,* I, 499.

The "awful doubt" taught by the wilderness is plain enough; it refers to the difficulty of believing in the moral purposiveness, or even concern, of Nature for man. The phrase "but for such faith" has become the most famous crux in the poem. I interpret its meaning in accordance with the variant reading in the Boscombe MS: "that man may be, *in such* a faith, with nature reconciled" (my italics).[32]

The spirit of this reconciliation, a "faith" mild, solemn, and serene, would seem to derive from Shelley's acquaintance with the doctrine of Necessity. "A Necessarian," Shelley echoes Godwin in the Notes to "Queen Mab," "looks with an elevated and dreadless composure upon the links in the universal chain as they pass before his eyes."[33] Upon the very indifference of Necessity to specifically human welfare, such thinkers as Holbach had based their skeptical "faiths." If the ultimate Power in the universe is neither good nor evil (in human terms) but simply *is,* then the corruptions of human government based upon false appeals to that Power—"large codes of fraud and woe"—might be repealed by those who "interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel" the truth.

This, then, is one way of looking at a mountain. Beginning in a private revery analogous to mystical states of being (but rendered in a generalized vocabulary), Part III seeks to naturalize and then to rationalize that subjective experience—by dissolving it in the external landscape which was its immediate stimulus and then by eliciting from that landscape a public philosophy with moral and social consequences. For Shelley, nurtured in the climate of eighteenth-century libertarian thought, Mont Blanc as a voice of humanitarian reform held an undeniable attraction and provided one way of reconciling man and Nature.

Ultimately, however, this way is insufficient. Part III reconciles man to Nature in the terms of the philosopher, not in those of the imaginative poet—and thus, for Shelley, not in essentially *human*

[32] Several attempts have been made to bring the published version into alignment with the MS by interpreting "but for such faith" to mean "for the sake of such faith alone." The latter phrase belongs to Joan Rees, "'But for such faith.' A Shelley Crux," *RES,* XV(1964), 185. Miss Rees was preceeded in this construction of the line by Rossetti in the last century and by Vivian and Wasserman in this.

[33] *Poetical Works,* p. 811.

terms. For man, as Shelley says in the "Essay on Metaphysics," "is not a moral and an intellectual—but also and pre-eminently an imaginative being." Social and moral lessons may be taught and learned in the hope that "large codes of fraud and woe" (l. 81) will be repealed; but this is far removed from the intense confrontation of mind and natural scene which we have observed in Parts I and II and will observe again, although in an altered, more generalized tone, in Part V.

In that confrontation, it is the nature of human subjectivity, not the inculcation of moral doctrine, the voice of poetic experience, not that of philosophical convention, which is operative. These two voices are present, more or less and in varying degrees of assimilation, in most of Shelley's major poetry; and they are present, in a state of at least partial disequilibrium, in "Mont Blanc." Critical recognition and interpretation of this disjunction seem long overdue.

VII

Part IV may be divided into three sections. The first fourteen lines (section one), which curiously resemble a kind of sonnet structure (the "octave" dealing with natural forms and the "sestet" introducing the "works and ways of man," l. 92), constitute one of the finest reflective passages ever written by Shelley. Their subject is the unending cycle of natural life: "All things that move and breathe with toil and sound / Are born and die; revolve, subside, and swell" (ll. 94-5). In obvious contrast to this continuous process, the "couplet" of these fourteen lines opposes, with magisterial economy, the concept of Power, dwelling apart "in its tranquillity, / Remote, serene, and inaccessible" (ll. 96-7).

Despite their impressive phrasing and solemn rhythms, however, these lines point up a fundamental problem of symbolism in Part IV (and, to some extent, in Part V). This Power, "remote, serene, and inaccessible," is clearly referable to Shelley's visual experience in Part III when he sees Mont Blanc, "still, snowy, and serene" (l. 61), above the dreadful "activity" of its "subject mountains" (l. 62). (The explicit fusion of percept and concept is delayed until Part V.) As long as Shelley works within the framework of imagery imposed

by the natural scene before him, Mont Blanc functions adequately as an image of Power: the River Arve flows down from it (see line 16, " Power in likeness of the Arve ") and the continuum of destruction and creation visualized in sections two and three of Part IV has its source in the ever-falling snow upon its summit.[34] There is, in short, a literal basis for Mont Blanc's symbolic role.

When, however, in the opening lines of Part IV, Shelley universalizes his frame of reference, this basis is lost. Mont Blanc, itself a natural form, can in no *physical* way be thought of as the source or principle of " the fields, the lakes, the forests, and the streams, / Ocean, and all the living things that dwell / Within the daedal earth " (ll. 84-6). It seems clear, in other words, that the concept of Power suggested in Part IV still appertains to the specific natural landscape of Ravine, River, and Mountain; and that this latter, more abstract use of the concept is in part confusing and confused. As I pointed out earlier, Shelley does not entirely succeed in synthesizing imaginative experience and philosophical convention. One result is a dislocation in the symbolism of the poem.

In contrast to " the daedal earth " of line 86, the phrase, " the naked countenance of earth " in line 98, warns us that the second section of Part IV (ll. 98-126) will deal with a starker, more somber truth than the fact of natural cycle. Nature's apparent hostility is feelingly portrayed: like snakes, glaciers slowly stalk their prey, and the elements, " in scorn of mortal power," contrive a " flood of ruin " (ll. 100-5). Appropriately enough, the point is driven home in language reminiscent of Job's complaint, the prototypical lament of man oppressed by oblivious Power:

> The race
> Of man flies far in dread; his work and dwelling
> Vanish, like smoke before the tempest's stream,
> And their place is not known. (ll. 117-20)

The case for " awful doubt " (l. 77) could hardly be put more strongly. Still, the case for solemn " faith " (l. 77) finds expression too, based most probably upon the necessitarian doctrine of indifference. Power, known to the bodily eye only through its effects, is not

[34] See *Letters,* I, 499, for Shelley's remarks on this phenomenon.

hostile, merely indifferent; if it destroys, it also creates—both with equal insensibility. In the third section of part IV (ll. 120-6), therefore, Shelley gives us an image of creation and ongoing life. The "flood of ruin" becomes

> one majestic River,
> The *breath* and *blood* of distant lands, [which] for ever
> Rolls its loud waters to the ocean-waves,
> Breathes its swift vapours to the circling air. (ll. 123-6; my italics)

The verb "rolls" (l. 125) directs us back to the ruinous flood of line 109 (and to the "everlasting universe of things" in lines 1-2), as Shelley characteristically emphasizes his meaning by verbal echoes. Although destruction is "perpetual" (l. 109), creation is also "for ever" (l. 124), since both are aspects of the eternal (temporally unending) Power which abides in its tranquillity.

Critics have generally agreed that this recognition of the creative aspect of Power is of substantial importance to the affirmation contained in the poem. I do not believe that it is. Rhetorically, the force of Shelley's verse is all on the side of the destructive, threatening elements in the natural scene. Conceptually, the necessitarian notion of indifference is a negative value only. Indeed, the destructive aspects of nature are the very ones which must be stressed if that negative value is to be accomplished, for its substance is the humbling of man's pride through the recognition of non-human natural force: "in scorn of mortal power" (l. 103).

That the "faith" achieved on this rationalistic level of Shelley's thought is insufficient to account for the tone of the poem need hardly be insisted upon. The poem's deepest affirmation, its truest reconciliation (although "reconciliation" is not finally the best word for what Shelley means) of man and Nature, is a matter of the "human mind's imaginings," not of the rational or philosophical mind and still less of belief in any specific ontology or metaphysic. While the imperative of both the Old Testament and the necessitarian overtones is the subjection of man to Nature, the imperative of the poem is to affirm the creative self-consciousness, and therefore identity, of the human mind. Shelley is a humanist of the imagination, and it is this humanistic faith which "Mont Blanc" is basically meant to celebrate.

VIII

In Part V, Shelley completes the process of symbol-making which organizes the poem. The idea of Power personified in Parts II and IV is now fused with the perception of Mont Blanc recorded in Part III:

> Mont Blanc yet gleams on high:—the power is there,
> The still and solemn power of many sights,
> And many sounds, and much of life and death. (ll. 127-9)

Mont Blanc becomes a symbol of "the secret Strength of things / Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome / Of Heaven is as a law" (ll. 139-41). That this symbol-making is the product of autonomous and creative modes of mental action, not of sense experience, nor of philosophical abstraction, is suggested by Shelley's use of auditory and visual images. The activity on the mountain's summit is available to the imagination only. "None beholds" (l. 132) it with the bodily eye; its processes are silent to the physical ear: "silently" (l. 135), "silently" (l. 136), "voiceless" (l. 137), "silence" (l. 144).

Dramatically speaking, the rhetorical question with which "Mont Blanc" ends may be abrupt, but it is not anti-climactic.

> And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
> If to the human mind's imaginings
> Silence and solitude were vacancy? (ll. 142-4)

As other critics have made clear, "thou" refers to the literal, physical mountain, not to the "secret Strength of things" (l. 139) of which Shelley makes it a symbol. Similarly, the "human mind's imaginings" are different in kind from the governed "thought" of line 140, just as in Part II poetic creation is different from the largely deterministic, empirical mode of perception imaged by the River and Ravine.

The adjective "human" in line 143, as before in lines 5 and 37, bears a specific burden of humanistic assertion. Like old Chaos, the non-human "vacancy" of the physical world yawns hungrily; only the creative power of the mind to make "silence and solitude" into symbols and thus to relate man and Nature "bars the pit" (to borrow Demogorgon's famous words) "over Destruction's strength." The poem itself

originates in and continually refers us back, implicitly and explicitly, to this type of creative, poetic subjectivity. The structure of the poem—from the perception of "Power in likeness of the Arve" in Part II; to the vision of Mont Blanc, "still, snowy, and serene," in Part III; to the statement about Power, "remote, serene, and inaccessible," in Part IV; to the symbolic identification of Mont Blanc with Power in Part V—enacts in a broad and complex way the very kind of imaginative process celebrated in the final three lines. If these lines have appeared contradictory to some, perhaps it is because they have concentrated their attention upon a point in between the poem's center and its circumference. They have been too involved to see its broadest outlines, too detached to perceive its internal organization.

IX

Speaking of the descriptive and metaphorical uses of nature in nineteenth-century poetry, Basil Willey makes this useful statement:

> We need to impose coherence, order or significance upon the flux of experience, and whatever in metaphor, allegory or world-picture suggests a unity, discerns or creates connexions, implies a pattern or a linkage where before there seemed mere meaningless disconnection—whatever does this gives relief and a sense of mastery.[35]

The structure of imagery in Part IV of "Mont Blanc," which is based upon the philosophical speculation contained at the end of Part III, does impose a coherent "world-picture." But the conceptual (in this case necessitarian) implications of that "picture" (like, to an extent, the conceptual knowledge revealed in Ianthe's "poetic" vision in "Queen Mab") are at odds with the very experience of imaginative creation and perception which makes that "picture" possible to begin with.

As Willey says elsewhere, there was a tendency in the early nineteenth century, produced by the scientific movement, "to regard all translations of picture-thinking into concept and law as closer approximations to truth."[36] Shelley, of course, was greatly influenced by this impulse towards scientific abstraction, and this tendency is only imperfectly reconciled in "Mont Blanc" with a poetic and experiential

[35] *More Nineteenth Century Studies* (New York, 1966), p. 76.
[36] *Nineteenth Century Studies*, p. 118.

faith in the powers of the human imagination. A critical problem arises, therefore, insofar as Shelley allows (or invites) us to understand Power in the poem as an independent ontological reality, instead of as a symbolic projection which cannot be separated from the self-conscious activity of the poet's mind. The existence of this problem implies a good deal about the nature of Shelley's thought. It is a stumbling block which should be honestly faced, not disregarded in the service of a specious unity.

Rhode Island College