

## **“The Wilderness Has a Mysterious Tongue Which Teaches Awful Doubt”: Dread and Disquietude in Part III of Shelley’s *Mont Blanc***

Percy Bysshe Shelley’s 1816 ode *Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni* was published as the final culmination of his and his wife Mary’s *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour through a Part of France, Switzerland, Germany and Holland*, and it was the inclusion of this poem that set their travel narrative apart in a literary market which was at the time glutted with similar such accounts of the so-called “Grand Tour”. The poem, within which Shelley recounts his reaction to seeing Europe’s highest mountain, is a quintessential example of a Romantic prospect poem, wherein Shelley draws upon the sublimity of the external landscape in order to express his own internal turmoil. The poem is written in five irregularly rhyming parts, and in this essay, I shall argue that it is Part III of the poem which is the most effective in conveying Shelley’s overwhelming sense of dread and disquietude which the Alpine landscape evoked, with particular attention to the poetic form of the passage, and the way in which Shelley uses the ode form in order to express a tone of desolation and despair, whilst contextualising the section within the rest of the poem.

Within the poem as a whole, Part III offers a subtle shift in tone, as Shelley begins to lean more fully into the dark, despairing and melancholy emotions that the mountain evokes within him.

William Butler Yeats, when criticising the poem, wrote that:

“In *Mont Blanc*, a poem so overladen with descriptions in parentheses that one loses sight of its logic, Shelley compares the flowing through the mind of “the universe of things”, which are, he has explained elsewhere, but thoughts, to the

flowing of the Arve through the ravine, and compares the unknown sources of all our thoughts in some “remoter world”, whose “gleams” “visit the soul in sleep”, to Arve’s sources among the glaciers on the mountain heights.” (Yeats, 507)

Whilst I agree with Yeats (who owed a great deal of his poetic inspiration to Shelley (Merritt, 175)) that the poem certainly has a multilayered, fragmentary nature, I contest his assertion that this causes the reader to “lose sight of its logic”; on the contrary, I would argue that the reader is instead taken on a journey with Shelley as winding and as fluid as the progress of the River Arve, which Shelley likens to “The everlasting universe of things” (I,1), as Shelley grows more introspective and melancholic as the poem progresses. Whereas the first two parts of the poem are mostly preoccupied with following the Arve and its ravine, Part III introduces the mountain, the subject of the ode, for the first time, and as such offers an important tonal shift as Shelley becomes overwhelmed by the emotions which Mont Blanc impresses upon him; Shelley reveals as much in the preface to *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour*, in which he states that the poem 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 claim to approbation on an attempt to imitate the untameable wildness and inaccessible solemnity from which those feelings sprang” (Shelley & Shelley, vi). The fact that the poem takes the form of an ode is significant: odes are historically devotional poems, with Romantic odes traditionally being more spiritual and contemplative than the traditional ode; Shelley’s poem, which has been read both as a response to the tranquil beauty (rather than sublimity) of William Wordsworth’s *Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* and as a defiant reaction against the religious certainties of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Hymn before Sun-rise, in the Vale of Chamouni* (McKeating, 164), takes the ode form to (quite literally) dizzying new heights, as Shelley is utterly overwhelmed by the raw power of nature, rather than merely marvelling at its beauty and tranquillity.

One of the most immediately striking elements of Part III of the poem is the conceit of sleep, and the death imagery which this subsequently evokes, which furthers the poem's dark and melancholic tone, whilst also lending it a certain weariness and despondency. The opening lines of the stanza introduce this metaphor: "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." (III.49-52). Shelley's equivalence between death and sleep is in my mind strongly reminiscent of Hamlet's most famous soliloquy in Shakespeare's eponymous play:

"To die: to sleep;  
No more; and by a sleep to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wish'd. // To die, to sleep;  
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
Must give us pause"

(*Hamlet*, III.i.59-67)

Shelley, like all the highly educated Romantics, was incredibly well-versed in Shakespeare, with the darkly melancholic *Hamlet* being one of the most influential literary works for the Romantic movement (Langston, 163). Therefore, I believe that the echoes of *Hamlet* that Shelley evokes here are not accidental, and the allusion strengthens the sorrowful tone of the passage, as the poet's sense of weariness and despondency are explored. The following lines, "I look on high; / Has some unknown omnipotence unfurled / The veil of life and death?"

(III.53-5), are particularly interesting, as they not only appear to question Shelley's well-established atheism by acknowledging "some unknown omnipotence"; but they also suggest just how tenuous Shelley is realising his grip on life to be, as he feels more vulnerable to death than ever before. This awareness of being exposed to death could well be a reaction on Shelley's part to the two near-death experiences he endured whilst staying in the Alps, and which he recounts in his letters to his friend Thomas Peacock which are collected in *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*: once when he and Byron were almost pitched out of their boat whilst sailing on a lake during a storm (an incident tragically reminiscent of the boating accident which would actually take Shelley's life just six years later), and again when the mule he was riding across the mountains stumbled and narrowly avoided casting Shelley over the precipice. The first incident, in particular, seems to have badly shaken Shelley, as he wrote afterwards, "I felt in this near prospect of death a mixture of sensations, among which terror entered, though but subordinately. My feelings would have been less painful had I been alone; but I know that my companion would have attempted to save me, and I was overcome with humiliation, when I thought that his life might be risked to preserve mine." (Shelley & Shelley, 122). What is most striking about this recount of the incident is not the understandable terror which Shelley felt at being almost drowned, but his admission that this fear was "subordinate" to the "humiliation" he felt at the thought that Byron may have to save his life, given that Shelley, unlike Byron, could not swim very strongly. Aside from the suggestions of stubbornly masculine pride and self-deprecation on Shelley's part which this offers, it also reveals that Shelley viewed death as something which should be faced intimately, and in isolation. This furthers my argument that, in Part III of *Mont Blanc*, Shelley is drawing deeply upon the idealised, sublime isolation of the mountain, and the ominous feeling of desolation that this provoked within him; it is telling that at no point in the poem does Shelley mention the fact that the Alpine region was actually

crowded with tourists, betraying his somewhat fanciful vision of the mountains (McKeating, 166).

Throughout Part III of *Mont Blanc*, Shelley's use of language is hauntingly beautiful, as he furthers the foreboding and sombre tone. One of the most effective literary devices which Shelley uses throughout this passage is sibilance: the opening lines of "Some say that gleams of a remoter world / Visit the soul in sleep" (III.49-50) (the emphasis on the applicable words is my own) are given a hushed, intimate, mournful, and almost reverential tone by the repeated "s" sounds which Shelley uses. Shelley's use of the phrase "Some say" is most interesting: whilst Spencer Hall argues that this particular choice of phrasing "indicates the skeptical [sic] tenor of the poem as a whole" (Hall, 212), I would disagree: I would argue that this more hesitant syntax instead lends itself to a tone of great uncertainty and self-doubt, which is exacerbated by the repeated questions which Shelley asks later in the stanza: "Has some unknown omnipotence unfurled / 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?" (III.54-8). The absence of the definite article for "dream" only continues the uneasy, unsure tone of the passage, whilst the irregular rhyme scheme, present throughout the poem, increases the slightly discordant mood. As Richard Holmes states, "The poem is Wordsworthian in its verse phrasing, and its apparent subject matter; yet the tone has a grimness, and a sense of disruptive uncontrollable forces, which is peculiar to Shelley alone. Characteristically, the philosophic conclusions which he tries to draw from his imagery are continuously left suspended in dread or doubt". (Holmes, 341). It is this raw power in the verse that makes this poem both so effective and so unique to Shelley.

Although it is the subject of the ode, the mountain itself does not appear until Part III, almost halfway through the poem, on line 60: “Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky, / Mont Blanc appears, — still, snowy, and serene” (III.60-1). Shelley again uses sibilance to express his reverence for and awe of the mountain, as well as a triad of adjectives as though to impress the sublime might of Mont Blanc — a technique which Shelley uses several more times throughout the stanza: “rude, bare, and high, / Ghastly, and scarred, and riven” (III.70-1). The blend of asyndeton and polysyndeton increases the fractured, discordant tone, and lends the poem a slightly stuttering pace, as though Shelley is so in awe of the mountain that he is struggling to get the words out. The impression that Mont Blanc made upon Shelley is clear not only in his poetic response but also in his letter to Thomas Peacock within which he describes his initial reaction to seeing the mountain: “Mont Blanc was before us, but it was covered with cloud; its base, furrowed with dreadful gaps, was seen above. Pinnacles of snow intolerably bright, part of the chain connected with Mont Blanc, shone through the clouds at intervals on high. I never knew — I never imagined what mountains were before. The immensity of these aerial summits excited, when they suddenly burst upon the sight, a sentiment of extatic [sic] wonder, not unallied to madness.” (Shelley & Shelley, 151-2). This visceral response to seeing the mountain, and in particular Shelley’s assertion that the sight provoked within him a feeling “not unallied to madness”, strengthens my argument that Part III of *Mont Blanc* is the most powerful in conveying Shelley’s strength of feeling within the poem, as he transforms the powerful emotions he felt when viewing the mountain into poetic verse.

The isolation of the mountain considerably adds not only to the beauty of the verse, but also to the feelings of creeping dread and disquietude within Part III of the poem: Shelley attests to the loneliness of Mont Blanc with the lines “A desert peopled by storms alone, / Save when the eagle brings some hunter’s bone, / And the wolf tracks her there” (III.67-9). The extreme

desolation which this image evokes is striking, with the ringing, lonely echo created by the rhyming of “alone” and “bone”, and the majestic savagery of the alluded to animals increasing the feeling of danger which pervades the valley (Shelley was most impressed to learn that wolves lived in the Alps, writing to Peacock how in Winter the animals “descend into the vallies, which the snow occupies six months of the year, and devour every thing that they can find out of doors. A wolf is more powerful than the fiercest and strongest dog.” (Shelley & Shelley, 172)). The death imagery brought forth by the “hunter’s bone” is similarly foreboding: Kurtz writes that, in *Mont Blanc*, “death has been set in melancholy, or even tragic, antithesis to a great serenity” (Kurtz, 106); I disagree however that Shelley is juxtaposing death and serenity — on the contrary, I would argue that Shelley places these two darkly beautiful images hand in hand, recognising their tragic symbiosis as he grapples with the idea of the overwhelming peace of death, whilst still fearing its unknown finality. The final lines of the stanza appeal to the anthropomorphised mountain, as Shelley laments that “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” (III.80-3). The final emphasis on only those who can “deeply feel” understanding the mountain betrays the heavily Romantic fixation on certain people being more inherently sensitive, poetic and “feeling” (and Shelley most certainly classed himself among this elite sphere); meanwhile, the assertion that the mountain does have a “voice” juxtaposes with the mournful sigh which comes a few lines prior: “None can reply — all seems eternal now.” (III.75), which in turn offers the following lines, “The wilderness has a mysterious tongue / Which teaches awful doubt” (III.76-7) the especially eerie, foreboding quality which pervades Part III of the poem.

To conclude, whilst the mood of creeping disquietude is suffused throughout *Mont Blanc*, it is in Part III where it reaches its crescendo of sorrowful dread, as Shelley surveys the frightening

might of nature in the mountain, and is forced to acknowledge the frailty of human existence, all whilst composing verse which is beautiful in its despondency, and inherently Romantic in its reflection of deep human emotion upon the sublimity of the natural world. McKeating, in his aptly named thesis chapter “Anxiety and Death in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Mont Blanc*”, describes the poem as “an expression of existential crisis wrought with anxiety, vulnerability and a sense of threat” (McKeating, 162), and this is an angle with which I am most inclined to agree, especially regarding the third stanza of the poem, which combines the anxiety, vulnerability and threat with a soaring release of emotion which can perhaps only be discovered by putting oneself entirely at the mercy of nature.

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