Violence at a Glacial Pace:
Reading Shelley's "Mont Blanc" in an Age of Melting Ice Caps

"All high poetry is infinite," Shelley writes in his famous *Defense*. "A great poem is a fountain for ever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight" (528). "Mont Blanc" is, of course, one of Shelley's most widely read poems, so much so that Christopher Hitt, writing nearly 20 years ago about the poem's critical heritage, feared that his own scholarship, a "new tributary to this 'vast river' of ink," would "amount to little more than a 'feeble brook'" (139). However, if we take Shelley's claims about poetry seriously, then today's readers should find plenty to say about "Mont Blanc." "New relations are ever developed," he writes. This essay is an attempt to justify that claim.

Many critical readings of Shelley's poem center on the question of the relationship between mind and nature: to what degree does Shelley *see* the landscape before him, and to what degree does he imaginatively create that landscape? The crux of this discussion is in the closing lines, where Shelley asks of the mountain: "And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea / If to the human mind's imaginings / Silence and solitude were vacancy?" (142-4). Recent studies by Andrew Hodgson and Taylor Schey have moved away from attempts to pin down the meaning of these lines, embracing the ambiguity they raise as being appropriate to Shelley's broader philosophical concerns. The openness of the interpretation is, after all, what lends the poem its status as "high poetry." Shelley suggests that it is the "peculiar relations" of the reader that make possible the continual flow of meaning from great poetry. The "peculiar relation" I am most concerned with in this essay is the climate crisis and the unavoidable shift in perspective that readers have experienced in the 200 years that have lapsed since Shelley stood in the valleys

below Mont Blanc. Reading "Mont Blanc" through a 21st-century lens reveals currents of meaning that were most certainly "unforeseen" and "unconceived" by Shelley. Given the unthinkable magnitude of climate change, which we are still struggling to comprehend, we may see Mont Blanc and its glaciers in a very different light than did Shelley, for whom they represented the "tremendous & irresistible strength" of nature (*Letters* 2:62).

Geological Processes

Shelley visited the Chamonix region of Switzerland in 1816, a significant time for both geological processes and the development of Geology as a field of study. The decades leading up to Shelley's visit marked a time of exciting geological investigations that changed the way we think about mountains. Sir Leslie Stephen, an ardent mountain climber and sometime president of the Oxford Alpine Club, describes pre-Enlightenment attitudes toward mountains thus: "Old travelers saw a mountain and called it simply a hideous excrescense; but then they peopled it with monsters and demons; gnomes wriggled through its subterranean recesses; mysterious voices spoke in its avalanches; … [and] the devil haled the ghosts of old sinners to its lakes to be tormented" (21). As scientists and climbers began to venture into the wild recesses of the mountains, these explanations, founded on superstition, began to give way to more rational questions. Thus the geological study of mountains was born. This time period also set the stage for human activity to become a driving force in the planet's geophysical and ecological processes. By the time he wrote "Mont Blanc," Shelley would have been familiar with the budding discipline of Geology, but he could not possibly have imagined the changes in geological processes that would result from the relatively new culture of industrial technology. It is this conjunction—Shelley's position on the very brink of the Anthropocene and the

inconceivability of such a phenomenon from his vantage point— that informs my reading of "Mont Blanc."

One geological question that was most certainly on Shelley's mind during his visit to Chamonix was that of deep time, the possibility that the earth may have a much more expansive history than previously had been assumed. Shelley was well aware of the debate concerning George Cuvier's theory of catastrophism and James Hutton's alternative theory of uniformitarianism. Cuvier had argued that the Earth's geological features were primarily determined by sudden, catastrophic events such as floods, earthquakes, and other natural disasters. Hutton argued that—if we allowed for a vastly extended timescale—the presentation of such features could be better explained by the gradual and continuous nature of geological change. Hutton's theory challenged literal interpretations of the biblical account of creation, which suggested a relatively short timescale for the Earth's history. Shelley's interest in the topic of geological time scales is evident in "Mont Blanc" in the "everlasting universe of things," the "deep eternity" that encompasses the activity of the vale, and the description of the mountain itself in Part 3, where Shelley presents Mont Blanc and its glaciers as a steady, unaffected force quite different from the flickering landscape of the ravine below (1, 29, 27). The mountain is "still, snowy, and serene" (62). Shelley emphasizes this contrast between the rapid cycling—of the seasons, of day and night, of life and death—and the imperceptibly slow progress of the cycles that characterize the mountain and its glaciers. "All things that move and breathe with toil and sound / Are born and die; revolve, subside, and swell," he writes; "Power dwells apart in its tranquillity / Remote, serene, and inaccessible" (96-7).

In the second half of Part 4, Shelley turns to speculation about the future geology of this region. These speculations were inspired, perhaps, by his first experience of Mont Blanc, during

which his travel party witnessed an avalanche that “smoked” and “rolled” down the mountainside, eventually bursting into the river and causing the displaced waters to flood over the ravine (*Letters*, 1:497). The following day, while visiting *Montanvert*, Shelley recalls watching “masses of ice detach themselves from on high & fall with a loud dull noise into the vale” (498). He thus witnessed firsthand, though on a much smaller scale, the destruction that he describes in his poem. He felt certain, however, that large-scale destruction would eventually come to this region. In a letter to Thomas Love Peacock, he writes,

> It is agreed by all that the snows on the summit of Mt. Blanc & the neighboring mountains perpetually augment, & that ice in the form of glacier subsists without melting in the valley of Chamounix during its transient & variable summer. If the snow which produces the glaciers must augment & the heat of the valley is no obstacle to the perpetual subsistence of such masses of ice as have already descended into it, the consequence is obvious.—The glaciers must augment, & will subsist at least until they have overflowed this vale. (*Letters* 1.499)

In the poem, he imaginatively speeds this slow process to the point of perceptibility: the glaciers “creep / Like snakes” down the mountain, then accelerate into a “flood of ruin” rolling on “in scorn of mortal power” (100-01, 107, 104). The human inhabitants of this indifferent landscape “[fly] far in dread; [their] work and dwelling / Vanish, like smoke before the tempest’s stream” (118-19). Shelley does not go so far as to predict destruction on a global scale, and he directly denies this possibility in his letter to Peacock. Rather, he viewed these destructive cycles, in Huttonian fashion, as part of the self-sustaining mechanisms of the natural world: the earth must undergo cycles of creation and destruction without regard for individual human and nonhuman

lives. By his estimation, while the human actors in this scene are at risk, the mountain and the glaciers will endure.

Violence Distributed Across Time, Space, and Bodies

What is particularly moving about this poem from a 21st-century perspective is the extent to which Shelley goes to establish the mountain and its glaciers as enduring and inexorable. Though he has much to say about the power of the human imagination, the hierarchy of *natural* power that he establishes in the poem presents a clear delineation between the irresistible force of the glacier and the helplessness of the humans, trees, and animals that lie in its path. It is significant that "Mont Blanc" communicates the author's perspective not from the mountain summit but from a place of vulnerability, in the valley below. This perspective contrasts greatly with common trends in mountain literature of that time. Much writing about mountains was composed from the summit, and Peter Hansen identifies in this body of literature "a particular strand of modernity in which modern man stands alone on the summit, autonomous from other men and dominant over nature" (2). The language of domination and subdual is not uncommon in these early accounts. For example, Hereford George, a founding member of the Alpine Club, describes "the climbing spirit" as a love for "exploring the earth *and subduing it*" (197, emphasis added); this spirit is visually expressed in Caspar David Friedrich's famous wanderer above the mists. Shelley disrupts this hierarchy, imaginatively transferring agency from the human observer to the nonhuman world of matter. He effectively decenters the human in his account, such that by the end of the poem there are only tattered remnants of human presence, and the snows atop Mont Blanc continue to fall, indifferent to our destruction.

What tragic irony that some 200 years later, Shelley's "wall impregnable of beaming ice," his symbol for that which is irreducible and eternal, should be on the verge of extinction. Mont Blanc's glaciers have been rapidly shrinking over the past century, and if the current trend persists, they will eventually disappear entirely. Mourey *et al* report that, since 1900, the surface area of alpine glaciers has decreased by 50 percent, with a significant acceleration of melt rates over the past 40 years (176). According to Samuel U. Nussbaumer and Heinz J. Zumbühl, the *Glacier des Bossons* (which Shelley likely had in mind when describing the glacier in "Mont Blanc"; see his description of "Boisson" in *Letters* 1.497) reached its maximum extent in 1818, just two years after Shelley's visit, and has since retreated by a total of 1.5km (301). The cause of this shrinkage is, of course, atmospheric warming—and the cause of atmospheric warming is, of course, *us*. How strange to think of these things when reading Shelley's homage to the "remote, serene, and inaccessible" power of Mont Blanc.

I offer the changes we have catalyzed on the slopes of Mont Blanc as an example of what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence." In his remarkable study of environmental injustice, Nixon defines slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Nixon argues that slow violence often goes unnoticed because it doesn't meet our expectations of what violence looks like. Violence is spectacular. It has clear contours and clear consequences. We think of violence as an instantaneous and isolated action toward an easily discernible target, and for this reason, we may not recognize the changes on Mont Blanc as violence at all. It is easy to understand avalanches as a form of violence; they are characterized by the grand spectacle and obvious destruction that we expect. But glacial melt—even the rapid melting that has been recorded in recent decades—occurs at such a slow

rate relative to our perception that we cannott really *perceive* it at all. Not without aid. The atmospheric changes that have caused these alterations have come about gradually, over the course of decades, so gradually that the connection between specific causal actions and the resulting damage becomes obscured.

The challenge with such ambiguous, ill-defined situations, Nixon observes, is to bring visibility to the violence. "To confront slow violence," he writes, "requires…that we plot and give figurative shape to formless threats whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across space and time" (10). He goes on to tell us how this should be done: we need to "intervene representationally," which involves "devising iconic symbols that embody amorphous calamities as well as narrative forms that infuse those symbols with dramatic urgency" (10). Mont Blanc's glaciers, visualized with the aid of technology and poetry, are one of the most powerful icons of global warming we could ask for. Shelley demonstrates well how poetry can help us visualize tragedies on timescales that don't normally align with our perceptual abilities. He describes the advance of the glacier not in real time, but in hypertime. The glacier behaves in recognizably violent fashion—like an avalanche, rolling and smoking down the mountain.

Nixon writes that slow violence is violence that is "dispersed across time and space." It may also be dispersed across bodies. Shelley inverts the physical hierarchy of power and vulnerability by shifting agency from the human observer to the nonhuman material world (and, in the same move, shifting vulnerability from the material world onto the human). By attributing the primary agency in the poem to the glacier, Shelley anticipates Jane Bennett's concept of "thing-power"—that is, "a liveliness intrinsic to the materiality of the thing formerly known as an object" (*xvi*). Bennett describes *objects* as "dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter" that "feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption" (*ix*). By

contrast, the notion of "things" emphasizes "the distinctive capacities or efficacious powers of particular material configurations." Thinking in terms of "thing-power," we can understand that the glacier makes its way down the mountain ravaging the landscape below simply because that is what glaciers do. Glaciers also melt in response to rising temperatures because that is one of their distinctive capacities. Thinking in terms of "things" provides a sense of animation and agency on the part of what might otherwise be mistaken for inert, meaningless matter. However, Bennett notes that the concept of "thing power" has its limitations: "first, it attends only to the vitality of stable or fixed entities (things), and second, it presents this vitality in terms that are too individualistic (even though the individuals are not human beings)" (*xvii*). The problem, then, is that the concept of "thing-power" may distract us from the fact that agency is, in fact, shared and distributed across bodies. Shelley's inversion of popular discourses of domination and subdual—his attention to the glacier's "thing-power"—is remarkable, but what 21st-century readers find is that, in light of climate change, this hierarchy breaks down altogether. It's no longer a case of subject acting upon object, whether we grant subjecthood to the glacier or the human; it's now an *assemblage* of actants simultaneously acting and being acted upon in a vast network of agency—"distributed agency," in Bennett's words (21). The causal influences and the effects are dispersed across bodies: ice melts; rivers flood; the glaciers lose mass, undermining their own structural integrity and causing icefalls; loose rock and sediment are exposed where the glaciers recede, causing landslides and erosion; the tourist economy of the region suffers; and a community loses what has been, for hundreds of years, the center of its cultural identity. It's difficult in this process to tease out the victims of this violence from its perpetrators: we are all complicit, and we are all affected. Shelley could not possibly have anticipated this complex network of causation and destruction.

An Unforeseen Power

Reading “Mont Blanc” at the opposite end of 200 years of climate alteration provides novel ways of meaning-making, indeed. The losses we have already experienced and the threat of what we may lose in the near future are all the more tragic when we read Shelley’s determined account of just how untouchable these forces are. What mighty threat could dampen a power as great as that of Mont Blanc? Knowing what we know today, we cannot help but recognize Shelley’s failure to accurately assess the danger of this scene in practical terms; and yet, we respond to this failure with a sense of awe and dread that is very similar to what Shelley felt while looking on Mont Blanc. A veil has been withdrawn: while the mountain can no longer adequately express the unthinkable power Shelley references, as its glaciers dwindle, the specter of climate change arises, and we, too, feel the precarity of staring down an indifferent and indomitable force of nature. We, too, become suddenly aware of our own vulnerability. Who knows what form this power may take for future generations of readers? Read in this way, “Mont Blanc” is a stunning example of how poetry can flow with eternal and unforeseen currents of meaning. Shelley insists that the passage of time “destroys the beauty and the use of the story of particular facts” and “augments that of Poetry” (*Defense* 515). Though he may fail to assess the scene with literal accuracy, his words are wildly successful as poetry.

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