

Poetry as Vision: “Mont Blanc” by Shelley

Miriam Sette¹

Shelley’s “Mont Blanc” was published in 1817 in *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour Through a Part of France, Switzerland, Germany and Holland*,² a volume jointly compiled by the Shelleys. Shelley’s descriptive journey up Mont Blanc carried the poem upward, toward the summit, tracing a journey through philosophical and scientific concepts that are yet to find a modern vocabulary. Shelley shares the Romantic belief that poetry is neither a merely decorative nor sweetening comfort nor a luxury for a few, but one of the most powerful, strenuous vehicles for investigation and discovery, one of the highest forms of knowledge.

He has the confidence, learnt from his master Coleridge, that poetry, in its most extended sense, “acts upon the imagination” which is in turn the instrument of “moral good,” of man’s capacity to “love,” to “put himself in the place of another and many others till the pains and the pleasures of his species become his own.” Moreover, “[i]n a drama of the highest order there is little food for censure or hatred; it teaches rather self-knowledge and self-respect.”³

Shelley’s concept of the poet and the art of poetry was all at once wide, rigorous, precise, and particular. He saw poetry as an essential means to the development of mankind, as well as a means that could produce infinite forms. When it functioned well, poetry could link history infinitely, through its perpetually revitalised or changing forms in a great chain, in one “eternal poem.” All ages and forms were made by this

¹ Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures; “G. d’Annunzio” University, Chieti-Pescara.

² M. Shelley and P. B. Shelley, *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour Through a Part of France, Switzerland, Germany, and Holland, with Letters, Descriptive of a Sail Round the Lake of Geneva and of the Glaciers of Chamouni* (London: T. Hookham, Jun. and C. and J. Ollier, 1817) 175-183. archive.org/details/sixweekhistoryof00shelrich/page/174/mode/2up.

³ P. B. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002) 509-535.

“eternal poem” exterior to time, and as parts of the main.⁴ The world evoked by *Mont Blanc* - despite all of its distancing effects - appears familiar as it is sustained by an all-pervasive intertextuality, ranging from the Bible, to the ancient and modern men.

The profusion of the literary material in the poem - from Plato to Christian doctrine - has the function of opening up the long perspective of our cultural inheritance (the diachronic dimension of the work) and is indicated by the (increasingly heavy) hints built into the text which brings it all into focus. One of the functions assigned to *Mont Blanc* is to set the action of the poem *sub specie aeternitatis*. Art cannot exist *in vacuo*; it needs a tradition that feeds it continually: the artist cannot “dispense” this tradition and replace it with his own genius or remarkable personality. Or, as Northrop Frye puts it, “literature can only derive its forms from itself.”⁵ Accordingly, Shelley could not write his own poem without drawing from the literary tradition which was part of his cultural background.

Shelley is one of the practitioners of the so called Romantic organicism, namely that cultural and ideological formation derived from the term *organic*, used from the late eighteenth century to designate wholeness, continuity, naturalness. Even the idea of society is that of a natural organism. Romantic organicism opposes the Enlightenment ideal of history as linear and progressive, by positing an ideal of history as growth and decay. My study seeks to position this heritage-cultural canonical production of Shelley within the broad British cultural legacy of the Romantic-period organicism itself. The cultural formation of Romantic organicism also engages the humanist ideals and institutions of cultural preservation. As Coleridge writes: “the members of the learned class, were planted throughout the realm, each in his apposite place, as the immediate agents and instruments in the great and

⁴ The direction of Keats’ thought was analogous, though his means, or types of image or syntax were different, for example in his late idea of distinguishing between “the false beauty, proceeding from art” and “the true voice of feeling.” *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958) II, 167.

⁵ N. Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), 43: “[conventions] can’t exist outside literature.”

indispensable work of perpetuating, promoting, and increasing the civilization of the nation."⁶

When Shelley claims that the mountain's voice would be "not understood / By all" but could be interpreted by "the wise, and great, and good" (III; lines 81-82), he draws a similar distinction to that of Wordsworth. Wordsworth and Shelley both insist on the existence of higher minds, viz. poetic minds capable of understanding the world to a degree that the common people cannot. They are minds with especially keen imaginative-creative faculties. In *The Prelude* (1805), Wordsworth distinguishes between "higher minds," which "from their native selves can send abroad / Like transformation [to that which the natural world effected in the opening description]" (Book XIII; lines 93-94), and "grosser minds," upon whom Nature must deliberately exert such transformations. An important difference to note between Wordsworth's and Shelley's portrayals of these higher minds is that Wordsworth's higher minds are not subject to Necessity and intervene directly in human affairs, whereas Shelley's higher minds, are subject to Necessity but do not have any personal concern for human affairs. Nonetheless, the existence of higher minds, chief among which were poets, was extremely important to Shelley. His philosophy of poetry, as expressed in the *Defence*, posits as the principal task of the poet the effort "to bring light and fire from those eternal regions where the owl-winged faculty of calculation dare not ever soar." The poet makes this flight by means of an "invisible" and "inconstant" inspiration that sets him apart from the common man. These "eternal regions" are arguably the supersensible regions that the poet encounters by way of the imagination. The poem involves a subject who is looking out upon a vast but only partially visible landscape that is resounding with the "voice" of a river; the landscape leads the poet into a philosophical musing on the relationship between himself and the natural world. These musings draw

⁶ S. T. Coleridge, *On the Constitution of Church and State* (1830), ed. John Barrell (London: Dent, 1972) 39-40. This Romantic organic model of culture informs influential later versions of Anglo-American criticism, such as those of Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot and Leavis' anti-industrial and anti-populist version of high culture. The preservationism of the organic model, however, is always to some extent anticipated by models of decay and degeneration. Romantics sensed the possible dangers of the poetic principle falling into decay, and saw its sustaining as a necessity for mankind. Hence even Coleridge's formulation of preservationism closes with the figure of a corruptive "over-civilized race" (S. T. Coleridge, *On the Constitution of Church and State*, 38).

him into a state of enlightenment. It is Shelley's poetic sensibility, his ability to "Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel" (III; line 83) the Power of the mountain, his "higher mind" that enables him to undergo the sublime experience.

It is thus a characteristic of the British Romantic poets, and of Shelley in particular, the creed of the centrality of man in the universe. In addition, Shelley was a passionate advocate of the Platonic division between the world of everlasting Forms and the world of Mutability – the ordinary world of change, mortality, and suffering. It is no coincidence that in *Mont Blanc*, Shelley delineates a universe, immersed in a mythical atmosphere, where there seems to be no room for the complexities of everyday life. The mountain is presented as an immutable Form and showing on the surface no sign of social tension: an imperturbable realm mirrored by the narrative shape of long and dense stanzas constructed as compact blocks. In other words, what is being displayed here is the image of a microcosm where the echoes of the great historical events linger entwined round a breeze of inscrutability. The ordinary and the extraordinary are juxtaposed to give rise to a combination of themes, topics and images which call to mind similar syncretic worlds of many Romantic texts.

The poet is standing in the shadow of the highest mountain in Europe, looking up at a landscape that towers over and around him in every direction. The journey begins from Shelley's viewpoint on a bridge over the river Arve, from whence he traces the river's course up the mountain, passing by the "giant brood of pines" (II; line 20) at the mountain's base, and continuing up a waterfall and past caverns until finally reaching the remotest extent of visibility, where the mountain appears to be "piercing the infinite sky" (III; line 60).

On the other hand, down below the mountain, he describes the river "bursting" through the ravine (II; line 18), the trees' "mighty swinging" (II; line 23), and the untameable echoes in the caverns—"A loud, lone sound no other sound can tame" (II; line 31). Power, a common element of the experience of the Romantic sublime, is also a major element of *Mont Blanc*, both in the metaphysical bearing of the Power at the top the mountain, but also in the power of the lower landscape, the landscape below the cloud line. The adjectives used to describe the lower landscape in Stanza II are suggestive of a Power that is counter to the "feeble brook" (I; line 7) of the poet's mind in Stanza I. These suggestions of

Power culminate in the image of the glaciers moving down the mountainside in Stanza IV:

[T]here, many a precipice,
Frost and Sun in scorn of mortal power
Have piled: dome, pyramid, and pinnacle,
A city of death, distinct with many a tower
And wall impregnable of beaming ice.
Yet not a city, but a flood of ruin
Rolls its perpetual stream; vast pines are strewing
Its destined path, or in the mangled soil
Branchless and shattered stand: the rocks, drawn down
From yon remotest waste, have overthrown
The limits of the dead and living world,
Never to be reclaimed (IV; lines 102-114).

In relation to such a Power, the human individual is small indeed. There is a slight echo in these lines of the human transience portrayed in poems such as *Mutability*, as Shelley expresses an awareness of his own vulnerability in the midst of a landscape that, by its might and expansiveness, seems to diminish his presence in both time and space. Shelley stretches the pathetic fallacy to Gothic extremes and parallels the fervor of the natural events with the fervor of human sensations. Shelley's Gothic sensibility is essential to the drama of the scene, nevertheless he never falls into a state of fear. Despite the great might of the scene before him, he is able to look, first of all, to the life-giving qualities of the natural scene, as the rivers that flow from the glaciers "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" (IV; lines 123-125), then to the greater Power beyond the glaciers, which "dwells apart in its tranquillity / Remote, serene, and inaccessible" (IV; lines 96-97). This faith, this certainty in a Power is the essence of the Shelleyan aesthetic.

Although the role of the imagination in perceiving a landscape is prominent in Shelley's experience of Mont Blanc, nevertheless in many respects the poem is much more descriptive than *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* (1817). The first few stanzas recount Shelley's visual ascent up Mont Blanc. Due to physical circumstances – Shelley's proximity to the base of the mountain, the clouds hanging over the mountain's summit – only the lower elevations of the landscape are visible. In Stanza V,

Shelley's imagination takes over where his vision fails, and through this transition, we finally arrive at the top of the mountain: "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" (V; lines 127-129). Extremely impressed by a scene such as he had never seen in England, Shelley tried to render in verses the majestic spectacle which lay before him, its shape, its sounds, its mystery, and at the same time to express the strong and possibly unknown emotions he felt at such a discovery. The description is made of three successive views which correspond to three different visions one obtains in Chamonix when looking from left to right.

The first view is that of the Ravine of Arve "dark deep Ravine" (II; line 12) facing Mont Blanc on the left. The second is the astounding apparition of Mont Blanc itself: "Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky, Mont Blanc appears, – still, snowy, and serene" (III, lines 60-61). The third tableau shows the glaciers which "creep/ Like snakes that watch their prey" (IV; line 101) and descend from the mountain like "A wall impregnable of beaming ice" (IV; line 106). Although Shelley does not intend to draw a picture of Mont Blanc for the sake of picturing, since the poem progresses as a dialogue with the mountain rather than as a painting of it,⁷ the evocation resulting from these three views produces a startling resemblance.

The image which is given of the whole scene makes the presence of the mountain so impressive, and it is so close to reality, that someone who has never seen Mont Blanc before but has read the poem could recognize it when seeing it for the first time. However, it is not easy to explain how the poet obtained such an effect. If we try a tentative elucidation, we could say that Shelley uses a kind of cinematographic technique. He describes the mountains as he discovers them, successively, and by huge masses, for instance the "dark, deep Ravine [...] Over whose pines, and crags, and caverns sail / Fast cloud-shadows and sunbeams: awful scene" (II, lines 14-15); the "Bursting" (II; line 18) of the River and its "giant brood of pines around [it] clinging" (II; line

⁷ In the poem, Shelley emphasizes more the majesty than the beauty of the mountain. In his *Letters* he noticed that the Alps: "exhibit scenery of wonderful sublimity" and are "majestic in their beauty." Cf. *The Best Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Shirley Carter Hughson (Chicago: A. C. McClurgh & co., 1892). *Letter to T.L. Peacock*, May 15, 1816, 53 and *Letter to the same*, July 22, 1816, 74.

20); Mont Blanc itself, with "its subject mountains" (III; line 62) that are "heaped around! rude, bare, and high, / Ghastly, and scarred, and riven" (III; lines 70-71); the icy and petrified chaos of the glaciers, and again finally Mont Blanc which "gleams on high" (V; line 127) and inhabits the Heavens in "Silence and solitude" (V; line 144).

Furthermore, what makes the representation so faithful to the original, so vivid, is the intimate unity between the picturing images and the emotions that the scenery itself has provoked. "[A]wful scene" (II; line 15); "Dizzy Ravine!" (II, line 34); "how hideously / Its shapes are heaped around!" (III; lines 69-70); "great Mountain" (III; line 80); "Flood of Ruin" (IV, line 107); "majestic River" (IV; line 123) etc., all these exclamations through which the poet directly addresses the mountains suggest at the same time the shapes, the feelings they produce. Combined with such expressions, the personification of elements and the choice of metaphors – "Children of elder time" (II; line 21); "A desert peopled by the storms alone" (III; line 67); "old Earthquake-daemon" (III; line 72); "city of death" (IV; line 105) etc. – transform the pines, the rocks, the ice into signs and materialized thoughts, and have a strong picturing power. The sounds of words with an accumulation of hard consonants (cf. particularly Part II), the rhythm of the verses, which sometimes clash and overlap each other, as a syncopated music, sometimes become calm, solemn and serene, contribute also to intensify our impressions and express the wild and majestic aspect of the mountain.

Allied with these aesthetic qualities, the poem reverberates with a strong symbolical meaning, as well as a deep philosophical interrogation, the key of which is given in the first two admirable lines: "The everlasting universe of things Flows through the mind" (I, lines 1-2). At the very outset we are told, and this claim is repeated in each part of the poem, that nature descends into the mind of the poet who has to be its interpreter: it is the reason why all the poem develops as a dialogue between the mountain and the human mind. The latter tries to penetrate the meaning of the former. From beginning to end, this meaning, according to the poet, remains ambiguous, the universe of things like a river being: "Now dark – now glittering —now reflecting gloom / Now lending splendour" (I, lines 3-4) and the mountain itself being on the one hand the image of sterility, chaos, ruin and death (cf. III, lines 70-73; IV, lines 113-114), on the other the symbol of sublimity, solemnity or even wisdom. The poet constantly hesitates between these two alternatives,

while his thoughts run within himself as the River flows from the mountains. On the one side, the “legion of wild thoughts” inspired by the scenery “float above [...] darkness,” (II; lines 41-42) and everything evokes “a desert” (III; line 67) or an eternal death, where “The limits of the dead and living world” are “overthrown” and “Never to be reclaimed” (IV; lines 112- 114). On the other side, contemplating the river and the serenity of the snowy peak which speaks to the “wise” (III; line 82) and “repeal[s] large codes of fraud and woe” (III; lines 80-81), one hopes to perceive through them the “gleams of a remoter world” which would make “death” only a “slumber” (III; 49-50); above all, one would like to see the Power source and soul of all nature, which inhabits the mountain and reveals “The secret Strength of things / Which governs thought” (V; lines 139-140).

Although the second interpretation seems to be preferred, the poem concludes with a rhetorical question about meaning: “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?” (V; 139-144). The meaning of these last verses is not without some ambiguity. Does the poet mean, as in verses 80-83, III, that only the wise can understand the significance of the great mountain? Or rather, does he mean that if there were no human mind to contemplate and think about the snowy peak, its “silence and solitude” would remain forever insignificant? It is difficult to say. Shelley’s interrogation evokes a chilling kind of hell. God’s absence is no problem. But a “vacancy” that denied imaginative resonance to our perceptions would be the ultimate bleakness. It is almost as if the young poet had foreseen the hollow materialism of a secular age not unlike our own.

The abyss is certainly present in *Mont Blanc* as well as caves (symbols of the infinite abyss) are cited frequently enough as sources of Power as in the cave where:

The echoes of the human world...dim at first
 Then radiant, as the mind arising bright
 From the embrace of beauty...casts on them
 The gathered rays which are reality—

Shall visit us.⁸

It is very well possible that the space referenced by the "infinite sky" (III; line 60) which is reflected in the "unfathomable deeps" (III; line 64) is vast enough to be occupied by the infinite God - yet, Shelley rejects that possibility, leaving a void that must either remain empty or be filled with some other presence. He maintains faith that the mountain has a voice "to repeal/ Large codes of fraud and woe" (III; lines 80-81).

It is important to Shelley's reading of the landscape, however, that the summit of the mountain, the source of Power, is hidden from view – for to see the source of the Power would be to impose a limitation on it. To give a form to the Power, would mean a risk of re-establishing that disliked anthropomorphic deity. The top of Mont Blanc represents, for Shelley, the formlessness and inaccessibility that he associates with the Power beyond the landscape. It is the world beyond the human world, the world beyond the natural world of forests and glaciers, even. The top of the mountain remains unaffected by the change and activity of the world below: "Power dwells apart in its tranquillity / Remote, serene, and inaccessible" (IV; lines 96-97). Shelley describes the continual ebb and flow of the sensory world below the cloud line, the cycle of life and death, the movement of the seasons, and the changing face of the earth. In sharp contrast (to all), "Mont Blanc yet gleams on high [...] In the calm darkness of the moonless nights, / In the lone glare of day, the snows descend / Upon that Mountain; none beholds them there" (V; lines 127-32). The snow falls eternally atop Mont Blanc. The winds there are silent (V; lines 134-135), the lightning, "voiceless" (V; line 137). Shelley removes the mountaintop from the realm of sensory experience. This is clearly an effort to establish the remoteness of the mountaintop and thus eluding human perception. The whole of "Mont Blanc" consists of Shelley's attempt to comprehend a presence on the mountain that "teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild, / So solemn, so serene, that man may be / But for such faith with nature reconciled"⁹ (III; lines 77-79),

⁸ P. B. Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002) 202-286.

⁹ Some critics take "but for such faith" to mean "by virtue of such faith." Bruce Woodcock, editor of the Wordsworth Poetry Library's *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Shelley* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2002, XVIII), takes this view, noting that in the earlier draft Shelley had written "in such a faith." The reading of "but" as "except" in the later

while resisting comprehension because of its inherent need to give form to what should, in Shelley's mind, remain formless.

The poet confronts the difficult task of casting his understanding of an infinite, formless truth into a medium that by its nature seeks to define and give form. The conflict between poetic inspiration and poetic medium is very similar to the conflict between the sensory faculty and an object that resists sensory definition. Shelley struggled with this paradox more than Wordsworth did.¹⁰ The non-human world is both concealed and revealed in *Mont Blanc*. The tension that arises from this combined effect concealing/revealing makes in William Rueckert's words, a poem "a verbal equivalent of fossil-fuel (stored energy) ... ever living, inexhaustible sources of stored energy."¹¹ When Shelley engages with his visual ascent up Mont Blanc, he taps into this energy; and in his awareness of the impermanence of the man-made structure in its place within the non-human world, he also illustrates/recognizes the interdependent nature of the world. Poetry inspires as well as instructs, as it is an initiation into the concealed order of the world. Its intense gratification, unrivalled in authenticity and honesty, appeals to human nature and makes ultimate sense of the self, opening the individual to interaction and communication. Poetry ennobles, enlightens and entertains because its expressive boundaries are virtually unlimited. Poetry goes beyond strict localisation and cultural arbitrariness,

version would be possible, but it's more likely that Shelley intended faith to possess a certain healing power at this juncture of his thought.

¹⁰ In her reading of Shelley, Angela Leighton emphasizes the conflict with which he addresses the Power atop the mountain, noting his desire to supply a presence in the infinite space beyond the cloud line and the accompanying concern that to do so is to risk reverting back to the comprehensible, anthropomorphic deity that he is so eager to displace—to form an idea of the Power is to give shape to it. Of course, without an idea of something beyond, we are left only with a prevailing vacancy. "It could be said," Leighton writes, "that, when an aesthetic of the sublime begins to shed its theological import, it still confronts the Miltonic abyss, but finds instead [of the possible presence of God] that it is secretless and vacant. It is this alternative face of the sublime which confronts Shelley...The characteristic of the Shelleyan sublime will be its unbelief, and its recognition, therefore, that what the human imagination confronts in its creative aspiration may be only a vacancy." A. Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems* (London: Cambridge, 1984), 23-24.

¹¹ W. Rueckert, *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism in The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens, GA, USA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 108.

generating a sense of spiritual compatibility and communion between the collective identities of the world.

Poetry, it could be argued, is vision and Shelley's Romanticism in *Mont Blanc* lies in giving absolute priority to the poetic utterance. Whatever else poetry may be – and one could venture many other definitions – it must above all be that. It seeks, against the poverty of fact, to celebrate reality through the illumination of the imagination. The Power that, in Shelley's *Mont Blanc*, hides its true shape and secret strength behind or beneath a dread mountain shows itself only as indifference toward the well-being of men. Nevertheless, the Power speaks forth through the poet's confrontation with it, which is the very act of writing his poem, and the Power, rightly interpreted, can be used to repeal the large code of fraud, institutional and historical Christianity, and the equally massive code of woe, the laws of the nation-states of Europe in the age of Castlereagh and Metternich.

The paradox of the voiceless silent mountain that nevertheless has a voice implies a potential conflict with Coleridge's reading of the mountain voice in "Hymn Before Sun-Rise, in the Vale of Chamouni"¹² as the voice of God would suggest that in this poem he has, using Shelley's value system, not understood what the mountain said. *Mont Blanc* is a direct response to Coleridge's earlier poem. This is far more Ode-like in character. The tone is consistently elevated and the poet reiterates his belief that the "signs and wonders" of the natural world "utter forth God." The nature of this "power" troubles Shelley. Although Stanza III signals a meditative turn, as Shelley considers the possibility that the unconsciousness of sleep and death is visited by "gleams of a remoter world" (III; line 49),¹³ his rhetorical questions hang unanswered in the vast landscape, and "the very spirit fails" (III; line 57). He has embarked on the poem almost as a test drive, through dangerously sublime conditions, of his own atheism. The concept of

¹² Coleridge had begun the poem after climbing Scafell Pike during a solitary Lake District tour in 1802. He concealed the actual setting because, he said, the poem contained "ideas etc. disproportionate to our humble mountains." Less forgivably, he incorporated the text of a poem by the Swiss writer Frederika Brun, without acknowledgment. S. T. Coleridge, *Selected Poems*, ed. Richard Holmes (London: Penguin, 1994) 317. It is little wonder that the pious declarations sound so jarring and uncharacteristic.

¹³ Shelley is clearly not concerned with the afterlife in a Christian sense, but with a richer source of mental reality, possibly one that today would be equated with the unconscious mind.

mind as a helpless natural force comparable to glaciers, rivers, winds, etc. is a difficult one for an idealistic and reforming imagination such as Shelley's. Towards the end of the stanza, for the first time in the whole poem, Shelley apostrophises Mont Blanc itself. There is a hushed moment of near-religious awe. "Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal / Large codes of fraud and woe" (III; lines 80-81). But it is the political reformer in Shelley who projects on to the mountain a voice capable of abolishing systemic corruption. He can go no further with this idea of a near-divine voice: after that, it is to an ideal of privileged human understanding that he turns.

In *Mont Blanc*, the mountain serves as the abode of Power primarily because of its inaccessibility, and because of the clouds that cover its summit and give it the appearance of boundlessness. If Shelley yearns for an "angel's-eye view,"¹⁴ it is because there is always a place above the clouds, or behind the mist – something beyond human reach. If ever this space is breached by the human mind, the Power will be displaced even further in or out, as the case may be, and this will happen at every advance we make, ad infinitum. For this, Shelley is grateful, for were we ever to achieve a solid understanding of this Power, it would become nothing more than another god-term. This faith, this certainty in a Power is the essence of the Shelleyan aesthetic.

Yes, art functions as a witness, an aesthetic of renewal, a force for change, for re-orientation and awareness. In a world as deeply fractured as ours, this is indispensable, a moral duty even. Thus, the Romantic tradition, and in particular the Shelleyan aesthetic re-surfaces: the Shelleyan Power is still the underlying bedrock that sooner or later will redeem the imperfection.

References

- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *On the Constitution of Church and State* (1830), ed. John Barrell. London: Dent, 1972.
- . *Selected Poems*, ed. Richard Holmes. London: Penguin, 1994.
- Frye, Northrop. *The Educated Imagination*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964.

¹⁴ Cf. James B. Twitchell, *Romantic Horizons: Aspects of the Sublime in English Poetry and Painting, 1770-1850* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983), 166.

- Leighton, Angela. *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems*. London: Cambridge, 1984.
- Rollins, Hyder Edward, ed. *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, 2 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958.
- Rueckert, William. *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens, GA, USA: University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Shelley Mary and Percy Bysshe. *History of a Six Weeks' Tour Through a Part of France, Switzerland, Germany, and Holland, with Letters, Descriptive of a Sail Round the Lake of Geneva and of the Glaciers of Chamouni, 175-183*. London: T. Hookham, Jun. and C. and J. Ollier, 1817. <https://archive.org/details/sixweekhistoryof00shelrich/page/ii/mode/2up>.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *A Defence of Poetry* (1821). In *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 509-535. New York: Norton, 2002.
- . *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). In *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 202-286. New York: Norton, 2002.
- Carter Hughson, Shirley, ed. *The Best Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Chicago: A. C. McClurgh & co., 1892.
- Twitchell, James B. *Romantic Horizons: Aspects of the Sublime in English Poetry and Painting, 1770-1850*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983.
- Woodcock, Bruce, ed. *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Shelley*. Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2002.